



Book One: Hunt

Lily had never held a gun before. The weight felt wrong in her hands. Hands that were more accustomed to a sword or crossbow.

She hoped that it was as simple as it looked. Point and shoot. It shouldn't be too hard...

Point and shoot, Edric had shown her with his crossbow, his gentle hands encompassing hers as he taught her how to fire.

She pushed all thought of Edric from her mind. The Dark Queen may still grieve her husband, but grief would turn to anger. Anger at the Rebel Queen, which would be of no use.

Of course, not thinking of Edric would have been so much easier if she wasn't holding his daughter in her arms.

"That's her!" Lily heard a guard yell as he rounded the corner.

Lily put what little magic was left to her into shielding the newborn in the makeshift sling at her chest before opening fire on the two guards that approached.

Thankfully, the narrow corridor didn't allow for much in the way of misfiring, and the two guards dropped to the ground, riddled with holes.

Lily hadn't anticipated the kickback that sent her stumbling back or the noise of the gunshots that woke her daughter.

"Hey, you're okay, you're okay," Lily assured the baby girl, bouncing her gently as she sighed. "I can't believe this was the best distraction I could come up with..."

“This entire plan was ill-conceived,” a familiar voice said.

Lily sighed as Amber appeared, wearing her usual black tunic and leggings. There was nothing for Amber to fear in this fight; the ghost was already dead.

“Well, I didn’t see you coming up with anything better,” Lily bit back. “And we both know that the Humans cannot be allowed to have my daughter. If they raise an Angel, they’ll win the War.”

Amber didn’t have an answer. She never did. They’d had months to come up with an escape plan, and this was the only one with even the slightest chance of success.

No, the Dark Queen protested from within her, *not the only one*.

Lily just sighed once more, wondering if she would ever feel complete. Maybe allowing her fractured soul to manifest into two separate halves had taken the possibility from her...

Not that it mattered, she reminded herself. It wasn’t as if she was going to see another day.

“How long until the runes finish charging?” Lily asked.

“Just a few moments more.”

“And they haven’t been disturbed?” She’d crudely drawn the runes in blood; she hadn’t had the time or resources for anything more permanent.

“No,” Amber assured her. “They’re still in place.”

Lily nodded, steeling herself. Her resolve was failing the longer she held her child to her chest, but there was no choice, she reminded herself.

No choice but to call Edric, the Dark Queen protested. *He would rescue us. We could be a family.*

Lily pushed those thoughts away. She was sure that Edric was dead, and dead men didn’t mount rescues.

“Almost done,” Amber told her. “Three, two, one...”

Lily did her best not to stumble over the ancient words in her head as she fuelled the spell with every last scrap of her soul.

The world shifted around her and, though she knew that she hadn't moved, she found herself outside.

Except it wasn't outside as she'd last seen it. The dark sky was illuminated only by streetlights, not burning that never ended. No smell of smoke in the air, just car pollution. No screaming, just ambulance sirens.

Ambulances. When had she last seen an *ambulance*?

Lily stumbled, unable to stay standing. She dropped to her knees, doing her best to protect her daughter.

"Hey, are you okay?"

Lily looked up to see a nurse throw away his cigarette as he ran to her. Presumably, he was from the hospital. The hospital that had been converted into an Enhanced Human base in her timeline. The hospital that had only ever been a hospital in this new one.

"Please, my baby, I can't..."

The nurse realised what she was trying to say, taking the newborn.

"Did you just give birth?" he asked, shocked. "You should be back inside. What's your name?"

"Lily Snow."

"And the baby?"

"Freya."

"Just hold on, Lily. We'll get you and Freya seen to right away."

Lily couldn't even find the strength to shake her head as the world turned black.

When she returned to consciousness, she was standing over her own body, the nurse shouting for a doctor.

"Did you bind Amber to your daughter?"

Lily grinned as she saw a familiar face. It had been a long five years in the Shadow Realm, trying to repair her soul. She had missed her family.

“Granddad!” she cried, wrapping her arms around him.

The tension in Death’s frame dissolved as he held her. “Hey, little one. I’m sorry that I couldn’t help when the Humans had you.”

She shook her head. “I knew that you couldn’t. I’d never blame you for that.”

He pulled away, and she saw the concern in his black eyes as he regarded her. “Lily, please answer my question. You bound Amber to Freya, didn’t you?”

She nodded sheepishly. “There was no way I’d leave Freya completely alone in this new timeline. My spell changed so much... And yet so much will stay the same. An Angel will always attract trouble. Amber can protect her.”

“It’s an imbalance,” her grandfather countered. “I let Amber stay to watch over you while the Humans had you in their grasp. She was supposed to move on after that. Now you have put her beyond my reach.”

“For now,” Lily conceded. “Just for a few years... Please.”

Her grandfather sighed before nodding. “It’s not as if I can do anything about it now. And you’re right, you may have created a timeline where there was never a war between Humans and magical beings, but you haven’t halted all conflict. Freya will always draw it, both as your daughter and Edric’s.”

Lily froze at that. “Edric, is he... He died in the Shadow Realm. I killed him. Did he die here too?”

Death shook his head. “He still lives on Earth.”

“How?”

“My best guess? Hope. Hope that he will one day be reunited with his wife and child.”

Lily's heart broke. The Dark Queen had been right.

No, the Rebel Queen told her, we still don't know if we can trust him. Not here.

"Come on," Death said. "It's time to go."



Chapter One

Freya awoke to the familiar sound of her sister screaming. “Alice!” Freya called as she threw her duvet off herself, clambering up the side of the bunk bed. No one could ever accuse Freya of being graceful or dexterous, but she made it to the top bunk, regardless.

Freya pulled Alice’s duvet from her, the chill of the northern night air enough to wake her sister without touching her.

Alice bolted upright, gasping.

Freya waited. There was no point in saying anything until Alice galvanised herself; it would cause her to spend brain power she didn’t have on pushing through her auditory processing issues.

Touching her would only distress her further.

So that just left waiting.

“Sorry,” Alice eventually said, as she always did, brushing her cropped, jet-black hair from her deep brown eyes. The hair and eyes were the majority of what she’d received from her Japanese mother, with the rest of her features Northern European.

Alice wasn’t technically Freya’s sister by blood, but she was the closest thing to family Freya had ever had.

“What was the nightmare this time?” Freya asked her.

“You died.”

Freya no longer flinched at that. Alice saw her dying in her nightmares almost every night.

“What happened?” Freya asked.

“A man stabbed you.”

“What, like a mugging?”

Alice shook her head. “He stabbed you with a sword. And he had long teeth and bright red eyes.”

“Well, that seems like one of your more outlandish nightmares.”

Alice nodded, recovered enough to smile. “I suppose it was. I’m sorry again for waking you. Especially on today of all days.”

Freya smirked at that. “I don’t know, getting fostered kind of loses its ‘special day’ status once you get past the tenth time.”

Alice gave the barest quirk of her lip, but Freya knew that it was her equivalent of a sympathetic smile.

The mental health system for kids might suck, but even the most oblivious, jaded examiner couldn’t deny Alice’s autism. Or her PTSD. Kids didn’t often end up in foster care for happy reasons...

Freya was a different matter. She was quiet, bright, and didn’t cause trouble for those looking after her. That was enough for everyone to overlook her difficulty making friends, her obsessive nature, and her feeling faint in crowded spaces as just ‘quirks’. It was only because of Alice that Freya recognised a lot of her behaviour as stemming from autistic traits.

Not that anyone believed her. Janet, the woman who ran the foster home, just scolded her for daring to compare herself to someone as troubled as Alice when she last brought it up.

“Are you going back to sleep?” Alice asked.

Freya sighed, shaking her head. “I don’t think I’d manage it.” Freya didn’t have nightmares - she didn’t dream at all - but she had trouble getting to sleep sometimes. “I think I’ll just have a shower and get ready.”



FREYA SHOWERED QUICKLY, using her £10 flip-phone as a music player. Counting the songs helped to stop her from losing track of time.

Once she finished, she gave the pile of clothes on top of the closed loo seat a resigned glare. The dress that Irum, her social worker, had picked out for her was one that had been handed-down one too many times. It was a pale pink colour, with faded-white lace around the edges that made Freya itch to no end. All the pale colour did was further wash-out her already paper-white skin, the lack of contrast exaggerated by her long, jet-black hair.

She pulled the dress on regardless, not wanting to start a fight with anyone that morning. The fabric strained around her chest, and she suspected that it would be longer on most girls, but it only just covered her ass. She wore black leggings beneath to cover herself, but they looked more than a little ridiculous under the pink and white.

Freya examined herself in the mirror with a groan. A decent amount of chub covered her tall, bulky frame, and the dress did her no favours. And then there was the fact that she looked exhausted, almost sickly. Her wild green eyes looked dull and lifeless, rimmed with dark shadows. Her wide, full features were pale, with a grey tinge. She looked like a walking corpse, she thought.

Her brush caught in her thick hair, and she promptly gave up on any attempt to get it to look nice, instead scraping it up into a ponytail.

Freya glared at her pathetic bag of make-up, most of it recovered from magazine freebies. She usually never bothered with make-up, but she knew she had no choice today.

Freya smeared on the foundation, cringing at how orange and patchy it looked, but she quickly gave up on trying to smooth it out, switching to applying her eyeliner. She leaned into

the mirror, doing her best to stop her hand from shaking, though it was next to impossible. The black line she was drawing ended up as more of a wonky mess than anything else.

But just as she was halfway through her second eye, she caught the sight of two glowing red eyes behind her.

She jumped, her hand drawing a line across her nose as she spun around to confront the eyes.

But there was nothing there.

She took a deep breath, trying to get her heart-rate back down. It was clear what happened. Her nerves had gotten the better of her, and her mind had run away with Alice's nightmare. That was all.

But she couldn't calm herself, the eyes refusing to leave her mind, as if insisting on their existence.

She wiped away the worst of her wonky eyeliner before smothering the rest in brown eyeshadow to cover up the mess. She put on some lip gloss before deciding to give up, wanting to be out of the bathroom as soon as possible.

"How do I look?" Freya asked as she re-entered her and Alice's room.

Alice looked over from her computer, where she was now sitting. "Nice."

"Do you mean that or are you lying to spare my feelings?"

"Do you have anything else you can wear?"

"No."

"Then you look nice." Alice got up at that, walking over to Freya with a tangle teezer in hand before indicating to her hair.

Freya nodded, allowing Alice to untangle her awkward ponytail.

"I'm going to miss you," Freya said after a few moments of silence.

"The city's not that far," Alice reasoned.

“Yeah, but we’ll be in different schools.”

Alice shrugged. “It’s not as if we ever interacted much at school, anyway. The main school and the sixth form are too segregated. Not to mention how little I’m actually there.”

“Yeah, I know, I just...”

“You’re scared to start at a new school on your own. You need a fresh start, away from the bullies of your old school, but you’re scared that it won’t be any different.”

“Yeah,” Freya said. “That’s pretty much it.”

Alice nodded as she finished untangling Freya’s hair, separating it out into three strands so she could plait it.

“Freya, I’m sure it won’t be so bad. There will be plenty of new people at your new school. Statistically, at least one of them will want to be your friend.”

“And... What if I don’t want to make friends?”

Alice sighed, finishing up with Freya’s hair before moving back around to face her.

“Freya...” she said, her tone sympathetic. Alice knew that it hadn’t been strangers that bullied Freya. It had been girls who pretended to be her friend. “If you don’t want to make friends, then don’t. Just make sure you have a good book to hand.”

Freya smiled at that. She was going to miss Alice.

“Hug?” Alice asked.

Freya nodded, letting her sister awkwardly wrap her arms around her. Alice’s hugs were kind of a mess, but Freya never felt uncomfortable with them like she did when other people hugged her.

“Well,” Freya said once Alice pulled away, “I guess I’d better go downstairs, then.”

“I’ll message you later,” Alice told her.

Freya nodded, picking up her handbag and sticking her phone in before heading out the door.



FREYA HURRIED DOWN the stairs, ignoring all the other kids milling around the corridors. They wouldn't want to talk to her anyway.

She hurried into the kitchen, thankfully finding it empty, and made herself a glass of water, using it to take her pill. She hated that they were kept out in the open in the kitchen, but she wasn't allowed to keep any medication in her room. Not even the pill, despite the fact that the days of the week written along the outside of the packet made it painfully obvious what they were. She'd taken it since she was eleven for cramps, and it had been horribly embarrassing to have everyone assume that she was on it for birth control.

It probably hadn't been helped by the fact that she bloomed early, and she was always tall for her age.

"How are you feeling?"

Freya jumped at her social worker, Irum's, voice, having not noticed her enter the kitchen.

"I'm fine," Freya lied, downing the end of her water.

Irum frowned a little, telling her she didn't believe the lie, but Freya didn't care. She was more than used to playing 'fine' and she knew how to commit to the role.

"Are you nervous to see Margaret and Ryan again?"

"I guess," Freya admitted, knowing that brushing it aside completely would only draw more attention.

Margaret and Ryan were a perfectly average, middle-class couple, who had perfectly average office jobs, and a perfectly average office romance. Ryan had said little when Freya first met them, but he seemed nice and average. Margaret, on the other hand, had talked enough for both of them, telling Freya about how she and Ryan hadn't planned on getting married since she objected to the sexist overtones. However, they decided to

go through with it once they realised that they couldn't have children of their own, hoping that it would make the adoption process easier. But they decided to foster first.

Freya figured that made her a test-run, which she was fine with. It wasn't as if she'd stay with them for that long. She never did.

Irum looked as if she wanted to say something else, so Freya pointedly stared at the little TV on the wall. The TV was mute, but the headline was clear. Two teenagers had died in the city, burned alive. Except they had been in a back alley, and nothing else had caught fire around them.

"Weird," Freya said aloud, making sure that Irum knew that her attention was on the TV. "Isn't that near where Margaret and Ryan live?"

"It's not that close," Irum corrected, but she adjusted her hijab as she spoke, which was a clear tell that she was lying. "The city isn't as bad as the news makes it seem. It simply has a few bad elements, as any city that large has."

Freya nodded, happy that she successfully changed the subject.

Before Freya had the chance to speculate on how they had been burned to a crisp without the surrounding area being affected, Ms Pearson walked into the room. Freya swallowed a groan at that. Ms Pearson was a short, plump, older social worker, who dressed like she was a lot taller than she was. She had come in specially to help Freya find a new foster home away from her current school. There was no way she wouldn't ask Freya how she felt.

"Freya," she greeted. "How are you this morning?"

Like clockwork, Freya thought to herself as she faked a smile.

"I'm fine."

Ms Pearson didn't give her a concerned frown like Irum had, she merely raised an eyebrow.

"Are you ready to see your new home?"

Freya nodded. "Thank you for helping to find it for me," she said, doing her best to steer the conversation away from herself.

Ms Pearson smiled at that. "It was no problem, Freya. I think the city will be good for you. There will be a better mix of people."

"Yeah," Freya said, though her eyes returned to the TV. She figured that Ms Pearson was right about the city having a mix of new people; the real question was if they were people she wanted anything to do with.

"We'd better get going," Irum said, drawing Freya's attention back to her. "Are you ready?"

"Yeah. I'm ready."



Chapter Two

The drive to the city wasn't particularly long, but Freya had never fared well with car travel. She knew she should keep her eyes on the window, to stop herself from getting carsick, but she didn't want to give Irum the idea that she was open to talking. Instead, she kept her eyes glued to her phone, despite the rapidly forming headache and queasiness in her stomach.

Freya lifted her head, however, as she felt a prickle across her skin. She looked up just in time to see the sign, informing her they were now entering the city. Freya looked over to Irum, but there was no sign she had felt anything strange. Freya decided to shrug it off; it was probably a blast from the air conditioner.

It wasn't too long before the car came to a stop in front of an average, two-floor terraced house in a new-build housing estate.

Freya's new home.

"Now, Freya," Irum started, using her 'teaching tone'.

"Irum," Freya replied, mimicking the tone.

"Freya," she warned, "you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar."

"I'm pretty sure I read somewhere that that's wrong," Freya said, still staring at the house beyond the window. "Vinegar actually catches more flies."

"It's just an expression, Freya."

Freya didn't respond, recognising that Irum was getting annoyed with her.

“Come on, Freya. Would it kill you to smile?”

Freya supposed it probably wouldn't kill her, but that didn't make it easy. In fact, smiling was one of the hardest things she did these days. But admitting to that would only make Irum worry, making her think Freya had depression or something. She couldn't afford that.

So, she forced herself to smile, taking a deep breath before finally facing Irum to show her.

“That's better,” Irum said, mirroring Freya's smile.

Freya felt some small relief at not letting Irum down, but it was a minor counter to the numb resignation that forcing herself to smile had caused.

“Come on,” Irum said. “Let's not keep your new foster parents waiting.”

Freya nodded as Irum got out of the car, trailing a while behind her. She was in no real rush.

Irum got her suitcase out of the boot before passing it to her. Freya took the plastic handle before trailing behind Irum as she walked up the driveway, towards the door.

Freya stood as much behind Irum as she could get away with as Irum rang the doorbell, trying not to fidget as they waited. She quickly gave in, however, clicking and unclicking the button on the handle that would allow it to contract.

After what felt like far too long, a short, skinny woman with ice-blue eyes and a short, platinum bob answered the door.

“Irum, Freya,” Margaret greeted with a smile. “I'm so glad you're finally here.”

Freya just kept smiling as Irum took the lead on talking with Margaret. She blanked out their small talk, instead looking around at the living room as Margaret led them through. It was nice, Freya supposed, if you liked white.

“Would you like a cup of tea?”

Freya's attention refocused on Margaret as she realised the question had been aimed at her.

"Yes," Freya said reflexively, although she only actually liked green tea.

Margaret and Irum kept talking, but Ryan came into the room a few minutes later with cups of tea. Freya supposed he must have been in the room when Margaret had asked her if she had wanted any tea, but she hadn't noticed him.

She took the tea, focusing on the steam swirling from it instead of the surrounding adults. They were just chattering about nothing, and she had nothing to contribute. She had learned to stay quiet unless she had something essential to say.

Freya took a sip of her drink, savouring the way the hot liquid warmed her, but the taste was near unbearable. Adding sugar only seemed to make it worse.

Freya kept her attention on the drink, however, as she did her best to zone out until the adults stopped talking and she could leave.



AFTER OVER AN HOUR of Freya doing everything she could to stop herself from pulling out her phone, knowing it would be rude, Irum finally got up to leave.

"You know how to contact me if you need me?" she asked, marking the first time one of the adults had acknowledged Freya's existence since she had arrived.

She nodded.

"Alright. I'll see you in a few weeks."

Freya just nodded once more.

Margaret showed Irum out, leaving Freya sitting awkwardly on her own as Ryan checked his phone. She wondered if that

meant it would be okay if she did the same, but decided against chancing it. Just in case.

Margaret returned to the living room swiftly enough, her hands on her hips as she looked over Freya.

“Alright,” she said. “I suppose we should get you unpacked. We were going to order Chinese for tea tonight. Is that okay with you?”

Freya nodded.

“Are you alright if we just get a random selection of things to pick from?”

Freya kept to nodding.

“Okay, well, Ryan can order everything and wait for the delivery man. I guess I’d better show you to your room.”

Freya got up, silently following Margaret upstairs, picking up her suitcase as she went, concentrating on getting it up the stairs without it banging the walls.

“This is your room,” Margaret said, stepping through the first door at the top of the stairs.

Freya followed her through, seeing another room that was so white that she felt a headache immediately begin to form. The walls were white, the bedding was white, even the desk, bedside table and wardrobe doors were white. The only exceptions were the black desk chair, and the light blue curtains and decorative pillows.

Freya’s new room wasn’t large, but it wasn’t small. It had just enough room for the double bed, bedside table and desk, with the wardrobe being built into the wall.

“I hope everything’s alright for you,” Margaret said, smoothing her black dress as she walked further into the room to stand by the window. “My friend Lizzie said your teachers will expect you to have access to a computer, so Ryan scavenged one from work. He said it’s nothing fancy, but it should do the job. I know

Irum said you like to play computer games. Ryan said he'd help to put in a new... graphics card? Or was it RAM?"

Freya shrugged, knowing it had probably been both. She doubted Margaret would know the words otherwise.

"Anyway, he said to talk to him about it if some of your games don't work. Oh! And I have a spare box in my room. I had meant to bring it through for you so you can store any disks or anything."

Freya nodded, not wanting to explain that all of her games were in her and Alice's shared Steam library.

"Do you need a hand unpacking?" Margaret asked, moving over to Freya's suitcase.

"No, I should be fine."

"Oh... Okay, then."

Freya panicked, internally cursing herself. She could see that her refusal had somehow hurt Margaret.

Crap, crap, crap...

"I guess I'll just stay downstairs with Ryan," Margaret continued.

"I... I didn't mean you had to leave. I ... I can unpack on my own, but you can stay. You know, if you want."

Freya kept her gaze firmly on her suitcase, moving the zipper an inch from side to side.

"I'll stay," Margaret said. "But if you want alone time, you can say so."

Freya nodded as she brought her suitcase up onto the bed, unzipping it.

Freya kept her eyes on her suitcase, pretty much ignoring Margaret. She didn't really know what to say to her.

"So, are you looking forward to school tomorrow?" Margaret asked.

Freya shrugged. "I guess."

“Are you nervous?”

“A little.”

“Well, don’t be. I’m sure you’ll make lots of friends.”

Freya smiled, wanting nothing more than for the line of questioning to end, as she moved between her suitcase and the wardrobe, hanging up her clothes.

“That’s a nice dress,” Margaret commented as Freya pulled out a midnight blue, knee-length number with lace sleeves.

“Thanks. It’s my favourite.”

“It probably would have been mine too at your age.”

Freya smiled as she continued, but it was draining to concentrate on keeping it up so much.

“Oh, before I forget,” Margaret said before hurrying out of the room. She returned with plastic bags, filled with navy jumpers and white polo shirts.

“It’s your new school uniform,” she explained. “You should try it on to make sure it fits.”

Freya nodded, taking the plastic bags full of uniforms as Margaret walked out of the room to let her change.

Freya quickly stripped before fishing out a pair of black trousers from her suitcase. She pulled it on before unpacking one of the polo shirts.

Once the polo shirt was on, Freya turned to the mirror on the inside of the wardrobe door. But it became immediately clear that the shirt was unisex, as it hung from her chest in a way that exposed her stomach, even though the back was fine.

Freya took a deep breath, telling herself it was fine. She didn’t have to tell Margaret. It probably wouldn’t be noticeable under the jumper, anyway.

She reached for one of the jumpers, pulling it on. It, thankfully, made it to the top of her trousers, but the sleeves only made it three-quarters of the way down her arms.

“Are you ready?” Margaret asked.

“Yes,” Freya answered after a moment, her mind blanking on other alternatives.

Her stomach tightened with anxiety as Margaret came in, looking her over.

“Oh, *shi-sugar*,” Margaret said as she noticed the shortened sleeves. “I... I didn’t think to get any bigger ones. That’s a large. I didn’t think there was any way you’d need bigger than a large.”

Freya shrugged. “I have long arms...”

“Well, I suppose it’s not meant to be that cold tomorrow. You could just wear your polo shirt and coat?”

Freya gave an apologetic grimace before pulling the jumper off to show the state of the polo shirt.

Margaret groaned. “This is just like me... I should have thought ahead...”

“It’s fine,” Freya assured her, though her voice was barely audible, her gaze glued to the floor. “I’ll... I can roll my sleeves up and get a bigger jumper tomorrow.”

Margaret nodded. “I guess that will have to do. I’m sorry, I... I can’t believe I’m already messing this up...”

“You’re not messing anything up,” Freya managed. “It’s fine.”

The doorbell rang, and Freya let out a sigh of relief at the distraction.

“I guess that will be tea,” Margaret said, before leading Freya back downstairs.



BY THE TIME THEY HAD finished eating, Freya was past exhaustion. She supposed she shouldn’t be, given she hadn’t really done all that much, but she wanted nothing more than to sleep.

She had dared to tell Margaret as much when she had suggested they watch a film.

“Sleep is probably a good plan,” she agreed, to Freya’s relief. “Tomorrow is your first day at a new school, after all.”

Freya nodded in agreement. “Goodnight,” she said, before heading upstairs.

“Your toothbrush is the blue one,” Margaret called up after her.

Freya headed into her room, quickly changing into a pair of pyjamas before heading back out and into the bathroom, locking the door behind her.

She spent more than a little while scrubbing her face with baby wipes, trying to remove every trace of makeup, but it was no use. Her eyeliner wouldn’t budge.

Freya sighed, throwing away the baby wipe in her hand before picking up the blue toothbrush and covering it in toothpaste. As she lifted it to her mouth, however, she spotted the now-familiar pair of glowing red eyes in the mirror.

She froze in fear. The eyes were no longer on their own. Instead, surrounding them was a man with paper-white skin and teeth as sharp as needles, which he was showing as he smiled. The rest of his features were gnarled and scarred. *Inhuman*.

Freya couldn’t break her eyes from his as her fear kept her from moving. Not even as he reached his hand out to grab her.

“Freya?”

Freya jumped at the sound of Margaret’s voice, spinning around to see she was alone.

“Are you okay in there?” her foster mother asked.

“Yeah,” Freya responded, though her voice cracked just a little. She cleared her throat as she did her best to calm her heart rate.

It wasn’t real. He wasn’t here.

She didn’t know if that was more or less terrifying...

“I’m fine,” Freya said, her voice more level, though she didn’t know if it was her or Margaret she was trying to convince.

“Okay,” Margaret said, seemingly happy with her answer. “Let me know if you need anything.”

“I will.”



Chapter Three

Freya didn't sleep that night. Despite the fact she was sure that he had just been a figment of her imagination, Freya spent all night waiting for the monster to reappear and kill her.

Of course, he didn't, because he wasn't real, but the fear had kept her up all night, regardless.

As soon as her phone's clock ticked over to seven, Freya got up, out of bed. She was exhausted, but she couldn't lie there any longer.

Freya pulled on her uniform before making sure she had sufficiently filled her backpack. She added a couple of mangas she'd gotten for Christmas. She'd read them a thousand times already, but she was sure she could read them a thousand more without getting bored.

As soon as she was sure she had everything, Freya headed downstairs, hoping to reach the kitchen before anyone else was up. She knew drinking coke for breakfast would be frowned upon, but she needed the caffeine, and she detested tea and coffee.

But when she got downstairs, Margaret was already in the kitchen. She wore a dressing gown over her pyjamas and had a mug of coffee in one hand, and a tablet in the other. She seemed to be checking her email.

"You're up early," Margaret noted.

Freya shrugged.

“Too anxious to sleep, huh?”

Freya nodded.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“I’m alright,” Freya assured her. “Just normal first-day nerves. I’ll be fine.”

“Well, okay. What do you want for breakfast? We’ve got bran flakes... or toast. With margarine. Sorry, Ryan and I don’t really have breakfast beyond coffee. I’ll pick you up something on the way home from work. Cheerios, maybe?”

“Coco pops?” Freya asked, hopefully, too dazed from her lack of sleep for her anxiety to stop her.

Margaret snorted. “Yeah, no. Nothing with chocolate for breakfast.”

“Not even Nutella? Technically it has milk and nuts as well.”

Margaret smiled at Freya’s attempt at a joke. “I will allow jam or honey for the toast, or any no-chocolate cereal.”

“Lemon curd?”

Margaret pulled a face. “Disgusting, but allowed.”

Freya nodded with a smile as Margaret gave her an odd look.

“What?” Freya asked after a moment.

“Nothing. Just... You’re more talkative this morning. I’m hoping it means you’re settling in.”

Freya nodded, deciding not to reveal that her talking was down to her being too tired to concentrate on shutting up.



AS MARGARET DROVE FREYA up to the school, Freya couldn’t help but be intimidated by the massive structure. Nothing about it looked inviting. It was old, blocky architecture, all hard edges and fading white paint. Chain-link fences surrounded the building, imprisoning the students.

It looked like a prison.

“Well, this is it,” Margaret said as she pulled the car to a stop outside the gate. “Do you have everything you need?”

Freya nodded.

“Okay, well, the school said to go to reception. They should have everything you need there, just tell them who you are. I’ll be back after school to pick you up.”

Freya nodded once more. “Thanks.”

Margaret indicated to the large doors at the front of the school. “I’m guessing reception’s through there. And you have my number if you have any problems?”

“Yep.”

“Then I’ll see you this afternoon.”

Freya nodded. “Thanks,” she said before getting out of the car. Once she shut the door behind her, Margaret waved, and then drove off.

Freya made sure her backpack was secure, reaching back to check that the zippers were closed before heading towards the school. Bullies unzipping them so her supplies fell out had made her paranoid, but she was used to walking to school and having her bag filled with library books. She needed a backpack to avoid hurting her shoulders.

Freya took a deep breath before heading through the large doors. At the end of a rather large hallway was a desk which Freya figured was reception. She hurried over to it.

“Out!” the receptionist barked at her before she had the chance to speak.

Freya froze up, her jaw clenching shut.

“Out,” the receptionist repeated. “You know you’re not supposed to be in here.”

“I- I’m new,” Freya squeaked. “I was told to go to reception.”

The receptionist rolled her eyes, her look of irritation and disgust not lessening. “*Student* reception. This is *main* reception. Now leave.”

Freya nodded, hurrying back out of the school as quickly as possible. As soon as she was out of the door, she found a corner and hid as she hyperventilated, tears streaming down her face.

She hated that she cried so easily. She wasn’t even really upset, just frustrated and confused. But as soon as she was overwhelmed, the tears would come.

She felt like a baby which only frustrated her further.

Freya closed her eyes, pulling her headphones from her bag and hooking them up to her phone, though her finger fumbled with the wire. She clamped the headphones over her ears, blasting J-rock songs as loud as possible.

Irum always told her off when she did this, telling her she would go deaf one day. Freya couldn’t find it in herself to care. She had to calm herself down, and she would take any solution.

She focused her breathing to the beat, finally grounded once more. When she wiped away her tears, no more came to replace them.

After the third song ended, she put her headphones away. She wiped her eyes once more, knowing they were probably red and puffy, but she was running short on time, and there was nothing she could do about it.

She found herself glad she didn’t wear makeup. Even if her eyes were red and puffy, at least she didn’t have eyeliner smeared across her face.

As Freya left the little corner she had found to hide in, she found there were plenty of other students milling around. She spotted some going into a door at the side of the building and decided to follow. Once inside, she was rewarded with the sight of a

little hole-in-the-wall, with STUDENT RECEPTION written above.

“Hi,” Freya greeted as she approached. “I’m Freya Snow. I’m new.”

The receptionist didn’t look up from her computer.

“Excuse me?”

She finally glanced up. “What do you want?” she asked.

“I- I’m Freya. I’m new.”

“What’s your *last* name?” the receptionist asked, as if that should have been an obvious addition.

Freya’s blood boiled with fury. She had *given* her last name, but the receptionist hadn’t been listening, and she had gotten too inside her own head and tripped over her words.

Stupid bint, Freya thought to herself, despite knowing it was unkind. And kind of sexist and disableist. But she didn’t care. She wanted to tear this woman’s head off.

“**It’s Snow**,” Freya bit back with a glare.

The receptionist’s eyes grew wide.

“**What? Is there *still* a problem? Just give me the stuff I need.**”

The receptionist quickly thrust forward a planner. It had a sticky note on it with Freya’s name and form class on it.

“Thank you,” Freya said, calmer. The receptionist was clearly terrified, and Freya found that fact oddly enticing...

She shook off the thought, wondering what was wrong with her. Usually, she hated seeing people scared or in pain, feeling their pain more strongly than she felt her own. Only this time, she didn’t feel scared. She felt... *replenished*. The night with no sleep seemed like a distant memory, and she was as well rested as ever.

Freya ignored the strange new feeling. There was no making sense of it, so she let it go. There was no use in puzzling over it if it made no sense.



FREYA APPROACHED HER classes the same way she always had. She picked a seat in a far corner, as far away from anyone else as she could manage, and read under the desk.

Not having any friends left her with a lot of free time, and it was easier to study at home, anyway. Whenever she tried to concentrate, she failed, so she had given up on trying long ago.

None of the teachers seemed to pay her much mind, and she figured they probably didn't care as long as she wasn't disrupting the other kids. They would have her high marks on file from her last school, and they had far too many other kids to worry about.

At least, that's what she thought until biology.

She read her manga under the desk, just as she had in her earlier lessons. She was onto her second read-through of the books she had brought with her, but she didn't mind.

And then, out of nowhere, she felt a tugging on her sleeve.

She glanced up at the girl sitting two seats away from her, who had leaned over to tug on her sleeve. The girl in question was pretty, short and skinny, like many of the girls in the class. Though she had her hair pulled back into a plait and was wearing bright pink glasses that somehow perfectly framed her face.

Freya blushed a little, wondering why this girl had caught her attention. Pretty girls didn't really associate with her.

The girl nodded over to the teacher who was glaring at Freya.

Freya's blush deepened, though this time it was with embarrassment.

Before that moment, Freya would have doubted her biology teacher could look intimidating, with his floppy brown hair and young face, but she found herself corrected in that moment.

“Give me your phone,” he told her, holding his hand out as he approached the desk.

Freya raised an eyebrow. “My... phone?”

“Yes, your phone. The one you’re looking at under the desk.”

“It’s not my phone,” Freya said, raising her book above the desk so it could be seen.

“Is that a biology book?”

She shook her head.

“Then it has no place in my classroom. Now, I don’t suppose you can answer the question I asked you?”

Freya stared at him, having not heard the question.

“Where does photosynthesis take place?”

“The chloroplast,” she answered.

The teacher’s eyes widened, but he didn’t miss a beat. “I suppose you already covered it in your last school?”

“No, I read ahead in the textbook.”

Her eyes flew across the room as she spotted movement. Her heart momentarily stopped, expecting to see the man with the red eyes. But all she saw were a group of girls, whispering among themselves as they stared at her.

Freya suppressed a sigh. The last thing she wanted was attention.

“Regardless,” the teacher said, “you can’t learn everything from a textbook.”

Freya wanted to argue, to point out that the textbook did, in fact, contain everything in the syllabus for the exams, but she just nodded. Arguing wouldn’t be smart.

She put her manga back in her bag, giving the girl next to her a smile of thanks, though she had since looked away. Freya pulled

out her notebook, pretending to make notes as she doodled tiny drawings the teacher hopefully couldn't see from the front of the class.



BY THE TIME BIOLOGY finished, Freya was starving. She hurried to the dining hall, hoping to not have to stand in line for too long.

Luck, however, wasn't with her, as her biology classroom was all the way at the other end of the school. By the time she got to the dining hall, the queue was all the way out of the door.

Freya took her manga back out of her bag, keeping her nose buried in it as she slowly moved up the line. The last thing she wanted was for anyone to try to talk to her.

The boy standing behind her bumped into her once, but she responded with a scathing glare before returning to her book. He didn't so much as brush up against her again, allowing her a little relief, though she still felt suffocated between everyone's eyes potentially looking at her, and the oppressive sound of chatter.

By the time Freya got the front of the queue, she bought herself a sandwich and a carbonated apple juice. She wanted something she could eat quickly.

She glanced around the room, finding it full. There were no quiet corners she could see, just cramped spaces jammed with other people.

She eventually spotted the end seat on a table become free as well as the seats next to and opposite as a group of three friends left. She sat on the end seat and put her backpack on the seat next to her. She then wolfed down the sandwich in three bites before downing the can of pop as swiftly as possible.

As soon as she finished, she got up and left, deciding to try to find the library. She wanted a new book to read that afternoon.

Freya left, only to see three girls follow her out. They hurried in front of her, blocking her path and trapping her in a corner. After a couple of moments, she recognised them as the girls that had been whispering in biology.

“Do you need something?” Freya asked, trying to keep her voice calm as panic rose through her.

“I just wanted to let you know,” the ginger girl in the centre said, “you shouldn’t eat that fast. That’s how you get fat, you know.”

The blonde at her right sniggered, and Freya figured it had been a jab at her weight. She rolled her eyes. The three girls in front of her were stick thin, but they were also barely five feet and as flat as cardboard. Yes, Freya was bigger, but that was only because she had a woman’s body, rather than a girl’s.

Or, at least, that’s what she tried to tell herself. But it didn’t stop the twisting in her stomach.

“Anything else, or can I go?” Freya asked, hiding her hurt behind a thick wall of nonchalant sarcasm.

The ginger girl looked a little put out by Freya’s rebuff but didn’t walk away. “So, Mr Thompson seemed to like you in biology.”

Freya raised an eyebrow. She’d thought she’d annoyed him.

“How did you get so smart, anyway?”

Freya froze, recognising the question. It wasn’t a real question, it was a trap. And one Freya hadn’t ever figured out how to get out of.

Freya shrugged. “I just am.”

“So, like, what? You’re some kind of weird genius?”

Freya shrugged once more, wanting them to let it go. They were making her claustrophobic, unable to get away from them. Every time she spoke, it was like defusing a bomb. One wrong move and they’d have all the ammo they needed. If she stayed

silent, they'd accuse her of being rude, which would also give them the ammo they needed.

There was no winning, Freya knew. They would keep pressing until she slipped up, and they had their story about the freaky new girl.

"Well, are you?"

"Maybe?" Freya said, her mind caught between blind panic and trying to figure out an escape route.

The ginger girl snorted. "So you don't even really know? You were going to let us think you were some kind of genius, weren't you? How pathetic."

"Genius isn't even a real term anyway," Freya blurted, her mind latching onto her first thought. "There's no real measurement besides IQ tests, which are notoriously racist and can be gamed with training."

The ginger girl kept laughing. "Sounds like somebody didn't make the cut."

"No, I've never been tested."

"Yeah, like we're gonna believe that. You're just some freak who wants us all to believe you're smarter than you are. I can't believe you're such a liar."

"I am *not* a liar! I haven't told any lies!" Freya's hands were bouncing up and down, and she knew she was shouting.

The ginger girl stepped back, but quickly went back to smirking. "Looks like somebody's off their meds. I can't believe the new girl is crazy. Is that why you lied? Because you're crazy? Was it for attention?"

Freya felt tears prick in her eyes and knew she *had* to run before she started crying.

She strode forward, doing her best to get past the girls without touching any of them. She had enough experience to know even the lightest of pushes would have her excluded for assault.

As soon as she had broken free from them, she legged it to the nearest bathroom, cursing the swing door for not letting her slam it.

Mercifully, the bathroom was empty, and Freya didn't have to worry about anyone seeing her as she paced back and forth, tears streaming.

She was just so *furious*. She wanted to hit something or break something or *do* something to make herself feel better.

Freya jumped at a loud bang at her side. The tap closest to her blew apart, with water bursting forth to soak her.

The next tap went as Freya jumped. Then the next one.

Soon enough, all five sinks were spraying water up across the room, soaking Freya.

Freya knew that should only upset her further. She'd have to change her clothes, and explain to the teachers that it wasn't her fault, despite her being the only one in there. And yet, all she felt was a strange sense of calm. She was almost numb, in fact, as she looked over her jumper, thankful she had bought a new one.

"Are you okay, Freya?"

Freya jumped at the voice, having not heard the door open. As she jumped, several streams of water from the ground jumped up to coil around her, as one lashed out towards the voice.

The owner of the voice dropped to the ground as the water hit her, and Freya recognised her as Ms Pearson.

Before she had a chance to ask why Ms Pearson was at her school, or why the water was acting so strangely, she heard a different voice behind her.

"Well, that's unfortunate."

Freya spun around, another stream of water lashing out at the new woman, but it went straight through her.

The strange, new woman looked to be in her mid-thirties, and she was about Freya's height, though she was much slimmer.

She had brown eyes, olive skin, and black hair tied in a ponytail. She was wearing a green, silk shirt, and black trousers.

The strange woman simply ignored the water, walking back around from Freya to Ms Pearson.

“Well, she doesn’t seem harmed, at any rate,” she said as she looked the unconscious woman over. “You just scared me out of her body.”

Freya frowned. “Who are you?”

“I’m Amber,” the strange woman explained before stepping back towards Freya.

Freya took a step back, the water coming around more to protect her front than her back. Despite the water in front of her, she still got a good enough look at Amber to see that she didn’t even really seem there. She was translucent.

“Freya, I need you to relax,” Amber told her. “Everything’s fine.”

Somehow, Freya believed her. She didn’t know why, but she felt as if she had known Amber her whole life.

As soon as Freya relaxed, the water around her fell back to the floor. A combination of exhaustion and nausea swept over her, and she struggled to stay standing.

“You’re okay,” Amber assured her as Freya leaned heavily over one of the sinks, trying to stop the room from spinning. “You just overexerted yourself.”

“I... What?” Freya asked, thinking over what had happened. What the hell had been up with the water? Why had it sprung up around her? “What’s going on?”

Amber sighed. “I thought this might happen, but I hadn’t realised it would be so soon. I should have predicted the stress of your first day in a new school would speed things along.”

“Speed *what* along?” Freya demanded, tiring of Amber’s vague answers. “You haven’t told me what happened yet.”

“What do you think happened?”

Freya shook her head. She didn't *know* because it was all so impossible. The water had exploded from the taps when she had been angry. And then it had sprung up around her, almost defensively, when she was startled.

And now she was talking to a woman she could see through.

Explanation number one: She was crazy.

While not appealing, it seemed the most likely. Even if the adults around her had brushed off her behaviours as 'quirks', she knew she was probably autistic like Alice. And she also knew getting such extreme anxiety around people wasn't normal. Chances were she was at least a couple of flavours of crazy already. Adding psychosis to the mix didn't seem that farfetched.

Explanation number two: It was some kind of trick.

While usually paranoid that everything was someone trying to hurt her, Freya thought that this whole situation was a little too much effort.

Explanation number three: The water was somehow responding to Freya's needs. She was controlling it.

That was the most absurd explanation. Mostly because it was impossible.

But then, the water had reacted exactly in line with how Freya was feeling. And she was now talking to a woman she could see through.

“Did I control the water?” Freya asked, anxiety pricking at her as she realised how absurd it sounded.

“You tell me,” Amber said with a shrug. “I wasn't doing it.”

Freya reached a hand out towards the water on the ground, willing it to move.

Nothing happened.

Amber gave her a kind smile. “How do you feel?”

Freya frowned at the question. “Exhausted. Like I had to participate in the longest race on sports day with no warning.”

Amber nodded. “You need time to recharge. You’re flexing these muscles for the first time. You can’t expect to run right away.”

“So... You’re saying that I did control the water?”

Amber nodded.

“But that’s crazy.”

“You’re talking to a ghost,” Amber reminded her.

Freya frowned. “Wait, so you’re actually a ghost. Like, a *ghost* ghost? Space Ghost Coast to Coast?”

“What?”

Freya shook her head. “Sorry, that was just... a thing that I do when I’m tired. I said ghost too many times and my mouth just... Anyway, not the point. You’re a *ghost*. As in dead person.”

Amber nodded.

“As in dead person who is still roaming around on earth through supernatural means?”

Amber nodded.

“As in *magic*?”

“How do you think you controlled the water?” Amber asked.

“I hadn’t thought that far ahead,” Freya admitted. “I’m still busy debating whether or not I’m going crazy.”

Amber disappeared, which Freya took as a sign that she had, indeed, been a product of her imagination. One that couldn’t take too much scrutiny.

But then Ms Pearson got up from the ground, brushing herself off. The water had mostly pooled around Freya, so it had barely touched her, apart from the section of her shoulder where the stream had hit her.

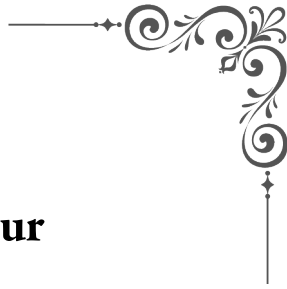
“I can assure you,” Ms Pearson said, “you definitely aren’t crazy.”

Freya blinked, realising what Amber had meant about being scared out of her. Amber was possessing Ms Pearson.

“I mean, I am probably crazy,” Freya replied, too dazed to really acknowledge anything else. “I’m just not currently experiencing a psychotic episode.”

Ms Pearson smiled before reaching into the large pocket of her cardigan, bringing out a bottle of Lucozade.

“Here,” she said, passing it to Freya. “You need to get your energy back up.”



Chapter Four

Ms Pearson left Freya alone, and Freya quickly downed the Lucozade before examining herself in the mirror.

The water seemed to have drained itself, leaving her hair and clothing only a little damp. She figured that wasn't the end of the world, and she'd probably dry off completely before her next lesson started.

As if brought on by her thinking of her next class, the bell rang. Freya threw the empty pop bottle into the bin before heading out of the loos.

But as she hurried out, she ran right into someone else, sending her staggering back.

She glared at him as she struggled to keep her footing. He was a little shorter than her, with paper-white skin and jet black hair that fell to his shoulders. Though it was his eyes that caught her attention. They were brown, but under the fluorescent lights, they looked almost crimson.

As he straightened up, she could see that he had a stout figure, though he stood awkwardly, looking down at the floor with nothing more than a glance at her.

"You... You are the new girl," he managed, finally managing to look up at her. She noted he had a slight accent, but she couldn't place it. "Freya, right?"

Freya nodded, folding her arms tight across her chest. "Why?"

“I just... I saw the other girls corner you. I was going to come over and see if you were okay, but you ran off. Are you? Okay, I mean. Are you okay?”

“Why?”

He blinked, frowning a little. “Because you looked like you might not be. Do I need more of a reason to be concerned for a fellow student?”

“In my experience, yes,” she said. “Now, if you’ll excuse me... Um...”

“Damon.”

“Well, if you’ll excuse me, Damon, I have a class to get to.”

She walked towards her ICT classroom, only for Damon to keep walking beside her.

“Why are you following me?” she asked.

“I have ICT down here now. In room 105.”

Freya suppressed a groan, realising they had the lesson together.

“You know, I am new too,” Damon told her as they continued towards the classroom, dashing any hope Freya had that he would leave her alone.

She didn’t have the energy to analyse why he was being nice to her, and that left her vulnerable.

“I thought we could, you know, be new together,” he continued.

Freya frowned. That didn’t seem like the worst logic in the world, and she had no reason to suspect him of lying. But she still didn’t want to be caught out because she was missing something vital. If she let him get close to her, and he then turned out to have less than pure motives...

“Look, Damon, if you’re new too, I can guarantee you don’t want to be associated with me. It’ll only make it harder for you to make other friends.”

Damon shrugged. "I'd rather start with one friend than none."

They arrived at the classroom before Freya had to answer, and she chose a computer in the corner, right up against the wall. She hoped no one would sit at the one next to her.

Damon, however, came right over, plonking himself down next to her.

She chose to ignore him as the teacher entered, starting the lesson. Thankfully, Damon didn't seem to want to talk, listening to the teacher with rapt attention.

Freya, on the other hand, had spent years listening to Alice infodump about programming. The basics the teacher was going over were second-nature to her at this point.

Instead of listening, she logged onto Facebook, circumventing the school's safety blocks.

Hey, she messaged Alice.

Hey, Alice swiftly replied. *How is your first day of school going?*

Freya found her fingers hesitating over the keys.

How *was* her first day going?

She'd been called out by her biology teacher, already selected as a target by some of the girls in her class, had possibly caused the bathroom taps to explode, had met a ghost, and now Damon was following her around like a lost puppy.

She had no idea how to sum all of that up without sounding crazy. Even omitting the magic stuff wouldn't paint a pretty picture.

Before she had time to consider what she would type, however, Damon nudged her in the side.

"What?" she hissed, just in time to see the teacher coming over.

She minimised Facebook before giving Damon an apologetic look.

“Thanks,” she said.

He shrugged with a small smile. “No problem.”

Before Freya had a chance to return to thinking about what she would say to Alice, Ms Pearson came into the room.

“Can I borrow Freya for a little while?” she asked.

He looked around the room, clearly trying to figure out who Freya was. “As long as she finishes the work before her next lesson,” he eventually said.

Freya quickly typed *Gtg* to Alice before logging off.

“See you,” she said to Damon as she picked up her backpack, heading out to follow Ms Pearson.



MS PEARSON LED HER to an empty classroom, shutting the door behind them.

“Whose classroom is this?” Freya asked, wondering if someone would come in and find them. She still wasn’t sure why a social worker was at the school. Clearly she was supposed to be there. After all, Freya’s ICT teacher hadn’t been surprised by her presence, but Freya had thought they wouldn’t see each other again once she got to the city.

She certainly hadn’t mentioned being at her school.

“Mine,” Ms Pearson told her. “I’m a teacher here. Actually, I’m one of your teachers. I have you for religious studies.”

Freya frowned. “But you’re a social worker.”

Ms Pearson gave an awkward shrug. “That was a deception on my part. It was clear you needed to be relocated, and I figured the city would be the best place for you. Magic can build up in certain areas, especially ones with significant magical history, and this city is one of those places. I figured, once you were here,

you would swiftly break through. I just didn't realise how soon it would happen."

Freya's frown deepened. "And I'm guessing you're not a teacher, either?"

"Freya, I've been a teacher for decades. But... No, not how you mean. I got this job through forgeries. I mean, I'm dead. It's not as if I can actually be qualified for anything."

"Yeah, I still haven't wrapped my head around the ghost thing yet," Freya muttered. "What did you mean by break through? What does that mean?"

"That's what we call it when someone comes into their magic. They break through. It can be... *unpleasant*."

"And you wanted to speed that along?"

"Freya, I only *just* managed to possess someone, and I'm not sure how long I can keep a hold on her. I mean, she's brain-dead. She had to be for me to have control, but that was indicative of greater health problems.

"But before today, you couldn't see me in my ghost form."

Freya frowned. "You mean you've been hanging around me for a while?"

"Ever since you were born. Your mother tied me to you so you wouldn't be alone. Neither of us realised you wouldn't be able to see me until you broke through."

Freya folded her arms across her chest at the mention of her mother. "So... My mother had magic too? That's where I get it from?"

Ms Pearson nodded. "She did."

"But... why? Why did she have magic? Why do I?"

"Because you're not Human."

Freya stared at her for a moment as she wrapped her head around what she was being told. "I mean, last time I looked, I was pretty damn Human."

“Of course you look Human. You have to be able to blend in somehow.”

“Why are you saying *you* instead of *we*? Aren’t you Human too?”

“I was born Human,” Ms Pearson explained. “I was given my powers later in life, but they didn’t change my genetic structure.”

“So, if I’m not Human, what exactly am I?”

Ms Pearson shrugged. “In all honesty, I’m not sure. Your mother was of so much mixed blood, it was impossible to say which was more prominent. And I have no idea who or what your father might have been.”

Freya felt her stomach twist with disappointment. She knew her mother had died, that much was undeniable, but no one had ever managed to track down her father. “You really don’t know about him?”

Ms Pearson shook her head. “That is a secret your mother took to the grave, I’m afraid.”

Freya nodded, trying not to let her disappointment show.

“Anyway, now you have started to break through, it’s vital I teach you how to control your magic. You overextended yourself today and accidentally doing so again may lead to you hurting yourself.”

Freya frowned as she folded her arms. “That doesn’t exactly sound good.”

Ms Pearson tucked her hair behind her ear. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean for it to sound so... *dire*. Simply think of it like working out. If you push yourself too far, you could pull something.”

Freya nodded, but one niggling thought wouldn’t leave her mind. “You said my mother had this magic...”

“Yes.”

“Well, you see, there was never a proper explanation for her death. They just assumed that there was something lingering

from her giving birth, but it wasn't as if she was in any risk groups..."

Ms Pearson sighed. She looked to the ground as she folded her arms, leaning back against her desk. "You're too much like her, you know? She was a late bloomer when it came to magic, so she never thought of herself as smart. But she always had a knack for spotting the things others couldn't. It was probably something to do with being Litcorde..."

"Litcorde?"

"It was originally a term for Witches. They were late bloomers who would often become highly specialised in a certain area of magic. A few decades ago, they realised it wasn't just Witches. Then, once it was no longer being applied to just women, they realised Humans had it too, though they called it autism."

Freya's breath caught. Sure, *she'd* been sure she was autistic, but there was always doubt. If her mother had been as well...

She pushed the thought away, realising that Ms Pearson hadn't answered her original question. "So, how did she die? Was it something to do with magic?"

Ms Pearson took a deep breath before nodding. "Yes. Back in '77, magic was exposed to Humans."

Freya frowned. "Wait, I'm pretty sure I would have remembered that from history."

Ms Pearson gave a weak smile. "Not if history was changed."

"How would history be changed?"

"Do you want me to answer that or to explain things chronologically?"

Freya thought for a moment before answering, "Chronologically."

Ms Pearson nodded. "The revelation quickly led to a war between magical beings and Humans. It looked like there would

be no end. At least, until '82, when a protection spell came out of nowhere. Suddenly magical beings couldn't hurt Humans and vice versa. The War ended, and magical beings and Humans had to learn to work together. That was the world your mother grew up in. One where she didn't have to hide her magic.

"But the spell didn't last. When your mother was thirteen, it was broken, and the War swiftly restarted. It was devastating. Humans had only increased their technological knowledge during the peace, including genetic technology. They managed to put up a real fight.

"Your mother was captured by genetically enhanced soldiers, just a little while into her pregnancy. She managed to conceal it from them, but she didn't have enough strength to escape. She had to get you out of there, so she used a particularly volatile spell. A spell to change the past. A spell of that magnitude requires a life to fuel it, so she gave up her own to ensure magic was never revealed, making all of those events into an alternate timeline, and creating this new, proper timeline."

Freya frowned, trying to wrap her head around what she was being told. The concept of time travel always made her head hurt when she thought about it too hard. Though, usually, she was doing so in the context of trying to figure out why a Romulan ship going in time back and killing Kirk's dad before going into hiding would create a timeline where Uhura knew Klingon...

"Wait, if she used time travel to create a new timeline, how do you remember that there was ever an old timeline?"

"All magical beings do. The spell only works on Earth, and there are other realms that magic is tied to. Of course, with so many magical beings crossing over so often from different worlds, the spell didn't bring back all who were lost. It decimated our numbers as far as I can tell. All the while, Humans get to for-

get and never have to face their losses. The War may be over, but it wouldn't shock me if some magical beings still held grudges."

Freya nodded, leaning back against one of the desks in the classroom as she ran through any number of questions to do with time travel and magic. Any except the one sitting at the back of her mind, refusing to leave.

Eventually, she sighed, giving in to her need to ask.

"Did my mother know that casting this spell would kill her?"

Amber nodded.

Freya's fists clenched so that her nails bit into her palms. If she had better muscle strength, and wasn't dyspraxically weak, they probably would have bled.

All these years, Freya had felt nothing but resentment towards her mother. A stupid teenager who had gotten herself knocked up and had died, probably because she hadn't had a proper doctor through her pregnancy. Or maybe she'd been too ashamed to go to a hospital right away, and that had killed her.

Regardless, it was a needless death that had left Freya alone.

Now she knew it wasn't so needless. And yet, it also hadn't been an accident beyond her mother's control. She had willingly given up her life, knowing it would leave Freya alone.

Freya felt nauseous at the thought, but couldn't pin down the exact emotion behind her distress. It was more like a hurricane within her, begging to be released.

The bell rang, drawing Freya from her thoughts.

"I suppose you'd better get going," Ms Pearson told her. "Though, before you go, Freya it is imperative you tell no one about your magic. After what happened last time magic was exposed..."

"I understand," Freya assured her before picking up her bag. "See you tomorrow, Miss."

"Please, call me Amber."

“And if anyone hears me doing so?”

Amber frowned. “Alright, I suppose you have a point.”

Freya nodded before heading for the door. She was exhausted and hoped that would mean she could actually sleep that night. Though, if the man with the red eyes paid her another visit, she doubted it.

She froze before reaching the door as it suddenly dawned on her that the man might not be a figment of her imagination. Not if magic was actually real...

“Hey, Amber?”

“I thought you weren’t going to call me that.”

Freya rolled her eyes. “Ms Pearson, whatever. Yesterday, I kept seeing a man with glowing red eyes.”

Ms Pearson stiffened. “Where?”

“In mirrors.”

She nodded. “Then he likely wasn’t in the room with you. He is merely stalking his prey, and your mind is trying to warn you. You have an extra sense, a sense of magic that Humans don’t have. Until you can be trained to use it, however, your subconscious will pick up on the most obvious signals around you and try to convey them to you. That is what you see in the mirrors. A warning.”

Freya shivered. “But who is he? Why is he hunting me?”

Amber gave her a reassuring smile. “He’s probably just a low-level Demon. Probably not even pure-blooded. You have protections that prevent others from realising that you have magic. To them, you simply appear to be a Sensitive Human.”

“Sensitive?”

“Some Humans have a few drops of magical blood in them. Not enough to mean anything, but enough to inoculate them against the effects of weak spells not directly aimed at them, like glamours or blanket spells. Many magical beings, including

Demons, can draw magical Energy from the emotions of the people around them, and Sensitives are a particularly potent source.”

“So, he’s only hunting me because he thinks I’m a Sensitive? What if he found out that I wasn’t?”

Amber shrugged. “Honestly, I don’t know. And I think it’s best if we don’t find out.” She took a small chain from around her neck, at the end of which was a key. She leaned down to her desk, using it to unlock one of the drawers before producing a black amulet on a piece of black string.

The black stone of the amulet shone under the fluorescent lights, but Freya could still see the blue pattern carved into it. The shade of blue reminded her of the North Sea on a clear day.

“Here,” Amber said, passing her the amulet. “It was your mother’s, and her mother’s before her. It will help you to focus your elemental magic. There is also a basic protection spell built into it. That should be enough to keep the Demon at bay.”

“Should?”

Amber gave her another reassuring smile. “Don’t worry, Freya. He’s no real danger to you. I promise you that.”



WHEN FREYA MADE IT outside, Margaret was waiting for her.

“How was your day?” she asked.

Freya shrugged. “It was fine.”

“Make any new friends?”

Freya’s mind immediately jumped to Damon, but she squashed the thought as soon as it appeared. She simply shrugged once more.

Margaret seemed to pick up on Freya’s discomfort with the topic, leaving it alone.

“Where’s the car?” Freya asked, desperate to change the subject.

“At home. I can’t drop you off and pick you up every day. You’ll have to walk. So, I figured I would walk you back today, so you knew the route for the morning.”

Freya nodded. “Does that mean I could sign up for after school stuff?” She had no intention of joining any clubs, but she figured she might end up staying late with Amber to learn how to control her magic.

“I don’t see why not.”

When they made it back home, Freya turned on her computer to a waiting message from Alice.

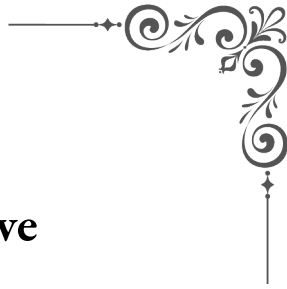
Hey. How are things going?

Freya sighed as she slumped back in her chair.

She didn’t want to lie to Alice. And she really wanted to talk to someone about just how ridiculous her day had been. She was also kind of afraid that, if she didn’t talk about it, it would stop being real.

But Amber had told her not to tell anyone about her magic. Which included Alice. Not to mention, if she was going to talk to her about it, doing so in a way that would leave a digital trail would probably be the worst way to go about it.

Good, Freya eventually typed back.



Chapter Five

“Does it usually take this long?” Freya asked with a frustrated groan as she gave up on her attempt to control the water within her water bottle.

She sat back down on one of the desks, grabbing and opening her bag of crisps. Even if she wasn’t making progress, she was glad her magic lessons with Amber could take place over lunch. It spared her from having to figure out where to eat. Even a few weeks into her new school, she still hadn’t made any friends.

Not that she wanted to...

Amber gave her usual reassuring smile. “You’ll get there in time, Freya. You’re most likely Litcorde, so it’s not surprising it’s taking you a while. Not to mention, the more theory you can learn before you start using your powers, the easier they’ll be to control.”

Freya nodded, though Amber’s words did little to settle her frustration. As much as Amber said that she would finally get a hold of her powers, Freya was afraid she never would. Maybe the incident in the bathroom was just a one-off fluke...

“How’s your school work going?” Amber asked, clearly trying to change the subject.

“Fine,” Freya said, keeping her eyes firmly on her bag of crisps. It wasn’t a lie, she had settled into a routine. It was a routine of reading under the desk, doing the bare minimum to keep teachers off her back, and figuring out what she needed to mem-

rise for her exams after school. But it was still a routine, and it served her well.

“And the man with the glowing eyes?”

A chill went down Freya’s spine at the reminder. “I haven’t seen him since you gave me the amulet.”

Amber nodded. “That’s good. Let me know if that changes.”

“Don’t worry, I will.”

Before Amber had the chance to find something else to say, the bell rang.

Freya groaned, putting her rubbish in the bin before slinging her backpack over her shoulder.

“Are you coming back after school?”

Freya shook her head with another groan. “It’s a long day,” she reminded her mentor. “I have two more classes after this, so I’m going to head home right after to pass out. Or, well, I’ll probably just play Civ with Alice until three in the morning...”

Amber smiled. “Fair enough.”

Freya hurried out of the room, not wanting to be late for English. Three comments in her planner would mean detention, and they would be given for being late, forgetting homework, or forgetting her PE kit. Given how forgetful and bad at timekeeping she was, she often had two comments and was doing her best to avoid her third. Just as she was right then.

She arrived with just a few seconds to spare, heading to her usual seat by the window at the back, next to Damon.

Freya wouldn’t call the relationship between her and Damon a friendship, *per se*, but it was at least an agreement of sorts. They didn’t really talk all that much in lessons, but they always sat next to each other in the lessons they had, so they didn’t have to sit next to strangers. Not that that was as much of a problem for Damon as it was for Freya. He had actually made friends. And yet, he still always sat next to Freya when they had classes together.

As usual, as soon as their teacher started talking, Damon brought out his 3DS and played Pokemon. Freya would have also brought out her book, but she'd never had a DS, so watching Damon play was pretty interesting to her. She'd always envied the kids who could play Pokemon...

Once they were given their work, Freya split her attention evenly. Damon rushed through his before returning to his game. Freya was always astounded at how he blasted through his work so quickly and still got Bs and Cs. Though, she supposed if she gave up her need to get A*s, she could probably do the same.

By the time the lesson was ending, Freya had finished her work and had returned her full attention to Damon's game. He was facing a gym leader and was down to his last two Pokemon.

He leaned forward in concentration, and Freya jumped as she heard a ripping noise. She leaned back to see Damon's jumper was torn. After another moment, she saw clear glue on the back of his plastic chair, which had obviously stuck his jumper to it.

She turned to glare at the two boys behind them, who were now laughing.

Freya's jaw tightened as she clenched her fists. If she wasn't in a classroom, she would have decked the boys, despite her noodle arms.

But before she had the chance, the water bottle in front of the boy behind Damon exploded, the water spurting up into his face.

Freya couldn't help but gape at the surprised look on the boy's face, doing her best not to break into a grin.

She turned back to see the teacher had obviously noticed what had happened. As far as Freya was concerned, no one could blame her for the water bottle; she was more than happy to grab

the teacher's attention and demand they do something about the boys who had glued Damon to his chair.

The bell rang at that point, however, and the teacher turned away, clearly uninterested in dealing with the problem if it would run into the next lesson.

Freya's fists clenched once more, but Damon caught her attention once more by stuffing his things into his backpack. He hurried off out the room, his jumper still torn and covered in glue.

"Wait," she called after him, shoving her own things into her bag before running after him.

But he wasn't heading to their next lesson when she ran up to him. He was heading to the loos.

"Hey," Freya said, running so she was in front of him. "Are you okay?"

He nodded but didn't verbally answer. She could see his eyes were gleaming, and she realised he was trying not to cry.

Her throat tightened in response, the sensation only intensifying as she realised he had glue in his hair as well.

"Come on," Freya said. "Let's get you cleaned up."

He seemed happy enough to follow her towards the loos. The corridors were now empty as everyone else had already made their way between classes. The threat of late comments certainly made everyone hurry.

"Alright, in here," Freya said pointing towards the disabled loo.

He raised an eyebrow. "What if someone needs it?"

"It's last lesson, Damon. When has a teacher ever let someone leave to go to the loo during last lesson?"

"Fair point. But what if someone sees us leave together? They will assume..." He turned bright red, and Freya's face flushed in response.

“No one will be out between classes, so no one will see us,” she reminded him.

He nodded, following her in.

“Okay, your hair is glued to your jumper, so I’m going to try and deal with that first,” she told him after she locked the door behind them. “Is that okay?”

She knew she was projecting her own aversion to touch onto Damon, but it still didn’t hurt to ask, she figured.

He tensed up a little, but nodded. She let the tap run into her hand, finding she could feel the water in her hand as almost an extension of herself.

She moved her hand to his hair, wondering if her control over the water would allow it to break down the glue. It must have been stronger than a Pritt Stick for it to tear a jumper...

As she ran her fingers over his hair, however, she focused on the glue and that seemed to be enough for the water, breaking it down between her fingers.

After a few moments of working, she felt Damon relax beneath her, and she couldn’t help but smile. He didn’t seem as upset or on edge as he had before. Still, the silence was getting to her, so she decided it was time to try small talk.

“Why do you have such long hair, anyway?” Freya asked.

He shrugged slightly, obviously trying not to move too much while she worked. “It is the style back home.”

“Yeah, where is that exactly?”

He shrugged once more. “It is a tiny little country. I doubt you will have heard of it.”

“That doesn’t mean I don’t want to know.”

“And you probably could not pronounce it.”

“I can’t pronounce a ton of English, either. It doesn’t mean I don’t want to know.”

He sighed. “I know, I just do not want to talk about it.”

“Why not?” As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she realised how thoughtless they had been. If he didn’t want to talk about it, he didn’t want to talk about it.

“It does not matter,” he said. “I am more than happy to be here, living with my uncle. That is the important thing.”

“Of course,” Freya said, her stomach churning as she tried to figure out how to word an apology for prying.

“Why did you move here?” he asked, before she figured it out.

Her shoulders tensed, but she forced herself to relax, taking a deep breath. It was only fair since she had asked about him. And she didn’t want to return to silence.

“I got a new foster family,” she told him.

“A foster family? What does that mean?”

“They have agreed to look after me for a little while. I’m an orphan, so I just end up being passed around. And probably will be until I become an adult at this point. No one wants to adopt a teenager.”

“Oh... I am sorry.”

She shrugged. “Don’t be. I’m fine.” At that, she realised all the glue was out of his hair. “Alright. Your hair’s fine now. Your jumper, however, is beyond hope.”

Damon nodded, pulling the jumper off before turning to face her.

“Do you know the name of the boy who did this?” Freya asked him.

“Yes. Jordan Franks. Why?”

She pulled out her phone. “Because I bet he’s one of the idiots who keeps his number on Facebook. Now, how many sales sites do you think we can sign him up for before he throws his phone out of the window?”

Damon smiled. "It is alright, Freya. I would not want you to end up in trouble."

"How? Even if anyone *does* bother to trace it back to me, which I doubt, I'm a non-hideous, eloquent white girl. I could be standing over a dead body and get away with it as long as I cried enough." *And no one realised I wasn't neurotypical...*

Damon's smile widened. "Non-hideous?"

She turned red at his teasing tone. It had sounded conceited, hadn't it?

"Well," she started, stammering a little, "I mean, I know I'm not *pretty* pretty, but my features are pretty evenly proportioned, even if they are a bit big..."

He nodded, his smile not fading. She wished she could tell the emotion behind it.

"You are definitely non-hideous," he assured her.

Her blush deepened. "I- Um, we should... We should go..."

He nodded. "So, I guess we will get in trouble now."

"Oh, I'll tell Ms Pearson and she'll clear us for the afternoon."

"Really? Why?"

Freya shrugged. "She's just really nice."

Damon nodded. "Well, I suppose I'll head off."

"Yeah. I'll go see Ms Pearson now to sort it all out. See you."

"See you," he called back after her as she scurried off.

She let out a sigh of relief as she reached Amber's classroom, finding it empty.

"Amber?" Freya asked as she entered, seeing her behind her desk.

"Come in, I'm just marking papers."

Freya nodded, closing the door behind her before dropping her backpack to the floor and starting to pace.

"I used my powers again."

Amber looked up from her work, raising an eyebrow. “You did? When?”

“Well, we were in English, and the boy who sat behind Damon glued him to his chair, and then I made his water bottle explode in his face.”

Amber frowned a little. “Because you were angry?”

“Of course I was angry! He was picking on Damon! But isn’t this good? It’s been weeks!”

Amber nodded, solemnly. “It is good you finally have access to your powers, Freya, but I had hoped we could develop them in a safe environment. And that anger would not be the trigger used.”

“Why not? It worked, didn’t it?”

“Yes, but anger is volatile. It is not an easy emotion to control. I had feared it would be the only way you would access your magic, given how much effort you have put into building walls around the rest of your feelings, but I had hoped we could find another way.”

Freya folded her arms tightly over her chest. “Those walls are necessary.”

“I’m not saying they haven’t been vital to you, Freya. The problem is that those walls will quickly crumble. Your emotions fuel your powers, Freya. And you’ll generate a higher level of emotion to keep up. Hell, teenagers are over-emotional to start with. Your walls will crumble under this pressure, and you need to make sure your powers don’t spin out of control when they do.”

“Well, it doesn’t even really matter, because it didn’t just stay at anger,” Freya told her. “At least, I don’t think it did... Damon had glue in his hair and I used my powers to get the water to get it out. I don’t know how, but it was definitely my magic. I could *feel* the water as if it was a part of me.”

She pulled out her water bottle.

“See?” she said as she focused on the water within, drawing it out.

“Freya, STOP!” Amber launched forward, leaving Ms Pearson’s body behind as she phased through the desk.

Freya stepped back as she dropped the water, her whole body tensing at Amber shouting, freezing her still. The water she had dropped rose up around her, creating tiny tendrils that moved around her to defend her from Amber.

Amber hesitated, stepping back. “I’m sorry, Freya,” she said softly. “I didn’t mean to startle you. Just, please, you have to stop using your powers. You’re going to hurt yourself.”

Freya nodded, allowing the water to drain back into the bottle. As soon she finished, she slumped forward, feeling completely drained. Her mind was numb, and her stomach queasy.

Freya sat back on one of the desks before giving Amber a weak smile. “Yeah, I think I pushed it there. I... I didn’t realise I had drained myself so much.”

“Of course you had,” Amber said, sympathetically, as she sat down on her own desk as well as she could as a ghost. “The first time you used your powers, you exhausted yourself, and all you did was physically control the water in the most basic sense. Today, you not only did that, but you instigated a chemical reaction with it. That takes a *lot* of concentration and Energy. Then you came straight here, I assume, to tell me. You didn’t give yourself time to realise how tired you were.”

Freya nodded, feeling too tired for words.

“I really am sorry about yelling,” Amber said again. “I just... I worry.”

“I’ll be fine,” Freya managed.

Amber gave her a weak smile. "I know you will, but... I'm too old. I have too many scars and have watched too many members of my family die."

Freya didn't know what to say to that, remaining silent.

"There are these beings, Angels, that are incredibly powerful. Four beings are in charge of Creation. There's Life, Death, and Fate, the Big Three. They are in charge of all of the Humans and magical beings across the realms. And then there's Mother Nature, who is in charge of everything else. But they hardly ever work directly with people. They use Angels as intermediaries. Reapers for Death, Oracles for Fate, Angels of Life for Life, and Elementals for Mother Nature.

"My son was born a Reaper. And, because he got his contrary nature from me, he married an Angel of Life. They had a daughter and she... I'm not sure how, but she had the powers of both Life and Death. They called her the Angel Twilight, and she is generally considered to have been the most powerful being born in the last century.

"Usually when a being of such power is brought into the world, it's for a reason, and my granddaughter was no exception. But once she had fulfilled her destiny... No being can handle that much power. She tried to reject it, to ignore who she was, but the magic simply built up within her and she lost control. She accidentally killed her husband, and then, in her grief, she used her blood to scar the Earth so no more Angels could be born. Killing herself in the process.

"Which is why I worry so much, Freya. I couldn't save my granddaughter. I couldn't save my son, either. Or my husband. There may not be much of a reason to worry - you're just starting out and this is a safe environment - but I worry all the same."

Freya swung her legs back and forth beneath the desk as she tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “Do you really think I could end up like your granddaughter? Or my mother?”

Amber shook her head quickly. “Of course not, Freya. My point wasn’t that you’re in danger of that, it’s that I am over-reactive to such things. My granddaughter and your mother were both unique cases. With the Twilight having scarred the Earth, no more Angels can be born, so there will never be another incident like that. Your mother was stopping a war, the likes of which probably won’t be seen again in your lifetime. We’re too careful now.”

Freya nodded, but didn’t relax. She was sure there was something on the matter that Amber wasn’t saying. Would she really be so jumpy with no reason?

The bell rang before Freya could think on it further, signalling the end of the day.

“Could you cover for me and Damon so that we don’t get in trouble for skipping classes?” Freya asked.

Amber nodded. “Of course, don’t worry about it.”



Chapter Six

“You have paper in your hair,” Damon told Freya as she dropped down next to him.

She sighed. “I know.”

“Why do you have paper in your hair?”

She rolled her eyes as she picked it out. “Michelle was sitting behind me last lesson.”

Damon frowned. “Michelle is the ginger girl who picked on you on the first day?”

“Yeah, how do you not know that?”

“I have no classes with her. I only saw her the once.”

Freya sighed. “Well, I do have classes with her. And she is constantly trying to irritate me into getting angry so she can mock me for lashing out. She’s lucky I don’t...” Freya cut herself off before she said “draw all the water out of her body and leave her as a pile of dust.”

Damon frowned. “That seems incredibly petty.”

“Tell me about it.”

They fell silent as their English teacher started talking.

“I assume you all read *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* last year,” the teacher said.

Freya glanced to Damon, whose wide eyes mirrored her own.

“I read the *Tempest*,” Freya hissed at him, her mind quickly running through all the ways she could deal with the situation without telling the teacher as much.

“I did not do any Shakespeare,” he hissed back.

She raised an eyebrow. “Where did you go to school? Mars?”

He smiled. Accusing him of being from Mars was Freya’s usual go to when Damon lacked common knowledge, and it always made him smile, so Freya had kept it up. She found she liked to see him smile, the sight causing warmth to bloom in her chest. She had mentioned as much to Alice, who had only proceeded to tease her about having a crush. Or, at least, she thought her sister had been teasing. It was difficult to tell with her...

Freya and Damon’s attention, however, was drawn away from each other by the teacher speaking once more.

“Your first assignment for this module is performance. You’ll split into groups and you will be given a scene from a Shakespeare play to perform. You will also write an essay each on your scene. The essays will be due in next week, before half term, and the performances will be after. We will be doing work on *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* after that.

“If you divide yourselves in groups, I will hand out scenes with the appropriate number of actors.”

“Partners?” Damon asked, turning to Freya.

Freya shrugged. “Sure, but we’ll probably need more people.”

Damon’s hand immediately shot up. “Miss?”

“Yes, Damon?”

“Can Freya and I work as a pair?”

The teacher hummed as she flicked through the pile of scripts in her hands. “Well, the only scene I have for only two people is the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet*.”

Freya tensed up, her face immediately flushed with warmth.

“Okay,” Damon said, as if that wasn’t even slightly a problem.

Freya groaned as she realised why. “You have no idea what that scene is, do you?” she asked once the teacher had handed them the scripts and headed off.

“No,” he replied cheerily. “Care to fill me in?”

Freya sighed. “Romeo and Juliet is... Well, it’s not a romance, it’s a tragedy, but it’s got a lot a romance in it. And this scene is pretty much *the* romance scene between the two main characters.”

“So?”

Freya could feel the bright red shade she was sure her face had turned. “So, that’s... It’s... It’s weird.”

“Why?”

“Because we’re just friends.”

“Exactly. It is acting. Or am I missing something here?”

Impossibly, Freya’s face flushed further. “No, you’re not, it’s just... Are you sure you want to do this with just me? What about your friends from music? Wouldn’t you rather be with them?”

“No. I see them enough in music. I would rather work with you.”

“Why?”

He shrugged. “Why not? You are my friend, Freya. Plus, it does not hurt that you are so smart.”

Freya rolled her eyes at his joke, doing her best to let her embarrassment and frustration go. “I’m still convinced you’re as smart as me. You just refuse to put in any effort for some reason.”

“Alright, Miss Critical,” he joked.

She shrugged with a smile. “Hey, that’s *Ms* Critical. And, what can I say? I’m a bitch. Which begs the question of why you hang out with me.”

He responded with a slight frown, his eyes looking her over in a deliberate manner that had her blush returning in full force.

Eventually, he looked away with a shrug, leaning back in his chair. “I guess there is just something about you...”

“That’s not a real answer.”

“What do you want? A spreadsheet?”

She shrugged. "Ideally."

He smiled, shaking his head. "Well, tough. Not everyone is as meticulous as you. Anyway, we will probably have to rehearse this after school," he said, indicating to the script in his hand. "Do you want to come around to mine tonight to go over it?"

Freya froze a little. Damon had never suggested they hang out outside of school before. Even if it was for school...

She rolled her eyes as she remembered they couldn't. "It's parents' evening tonight, remember?"

He groaned. "How could I forget?"

"Will your uncle be there?"

"Yeah, but he is not happy about going alone. He was trying to convince Charlie to go with him, but he is out of town for work."

"Charlie?"

"His boyfriend," Damon explained. "I think Charlie was the main reason my uncle was not upset about having to stay in one place to look after me."

"Stay in one place? Did he usually move about a lot?"

"Yeah, for work."

"What does he do?"

"He does private security."

"For who?"

"My aunt's husband."

Freya frowned. "You mean your other uncle?"

Damon gave an awkward shrug. "Yeah, but I do not really think of him like that, you know?"

"Not really," she admitted.

"Well, it... He is quite powerful. And... intimidating. Plus, he and my aunt are married, but they are not *married*."

"Ohhh kay?"

Damon sighed, picking up on her not-so-subtle confusion. "It is a political marriage. Back home, my aunt's husband has a position of power that is inherited. He married my aunt so she could take over part of his responsibilities."

"Okay." She still didn't really understand, but Damon was shifting from side to side, looking uncomfortable, so she decided it would be best to drop it.



PARENTS' EVENING STARTED not long after school finished, so Freya opted to stay in school with Amber and simply wait for her foster parents to arrive.

"Okay, check this out," Freya said as she moved her hand over her water bottle. The water inside turned to ice. "I am going to make so many ice lollies when the summer comes back around."

Amber smiled. "Have you tried any other variances on freezing?"

Freya blushed, remembering that morning when she had first turned something to ice. Michelle had been loudly telling everyone Freya was on happy pills because she was so unstable. Freya's water had shot forth from its bottle, forming an icy spear. Freya had barely managed to smash it into the wall before anyone saw, or it hit Michelle.

"You know, freezing tendrils and such," Freya muttered as she picked her water bottle back up. She knew that, with a new aspect to her ability, Amber would want her to take it easy, so she wouldn't be allowed to make any further demonstrations.

She understood Amber's reluctance, but that didn't mean the snail's pace wasn't killing her.

"I thought we could go over the hierarchy of Light creatures today," Amber told her.

Freya suppressed a groan. They'd been through all the different Light and Neutral creatures in quite a bit of detail. Amber had also promised lessons on something called Old World creatures, but she hadn't elaborated further.

"The Council of Light rules all Light beings. It's comprised of democratically elected representatives for each Light species—"

"How come you never want to talk about Dark creatures?" Freya asked. "Like Demons."

Amber shrugged. "I am merely working my way through all the different magical creatures in turn. There is no shortage of them, and I have seen no need to skip to Demons. Why are you so interested in them?"

Freya didn't really have an answer to that. Light creatures simply seemed dull by comparison.

"Well, I was being stalked by one for a while," Freya figured. "Know your enemy and all that jazz."

Amber rolled her eyes. "Demons on the whole are not your enemy. The King is interested in maintaining peace with the rest of the magical community, and in keeping magic a secret, as much as Light beings are."

"Wait, Demons have a monarchy?"

"Yes, which we will get to, eventually. For now, just know that the Demon who was stalking you was doing so unlawfully and Demons will police their own. Especially those who hunt Humans. They can't risk being the leak if magic is ever exposed again."

"But he wasn't hunting a Human. He was hunting me."

Amber nodded. "But he thought you were Human. That's the important thing. He probably ran after someone else and was caught. And, even if he wasn't, your mother's pendant is protecting you, so there's no chance of him coming back to hurt you."

Freya suppressed a sigh. She still wanted to learn more about Demons...

“Should your foster parents not be arriving about now?”

Freya stopped herself from rolling her eyes as she got out her phone. There was, indeed, a text from Margaret, informing her that she and Ryan had arrived.

“Yeah, they’re here,” Freya said as she put her phone back in her bag before slinging it over her shoulder.

She headed out of the classroom, towards the main hall, with Amber following close behind.

Margaret and Ryan were by the door, waiting for her. They looked over her shoulder, reminding her that Amber was still there.

“Hey Margaret, Ryan. This is my RS teacher, Ms Pearson.”

“Your daughter is a pleasure to have in class,” Amber told them.

Freya suppressed a wince as she waited for the “she’s not my daughter” correction to come. She knew that it was often said as much out of consideration for her own feelings on the matter as her foster parents’ own, but it still hurt.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Margaret said, skipping over the correction.

Amber nodded with a smile. “If you’ll excuse me, I have to go, or I’ll be late for my first appointment.”

Margaret nodded, turning to Freya. “We’d better get going too. I think your biology teacher is waiting for us.”

Freya nodded, though she felt her shoulders stiffen as she followed her foster parents to Mr Dale’s table. She hadn’t tried reading in his class since the first lesson, when she had been caught, but she feared that incident had left a lasting impression.

There was no surer way to guarantee being sent away than a bad parents’ evening...

Freya sat next to her foster parents, in front of Mr Dale, as stiff as a board. He was definitely going to rat her out for her behaviour on the first day of school...

But, to her surprise, that moment never came.

“Freya frequently scores full marks on both her classwork and her homework,” he informed them, showing them a row of A*s on a chart. “I have no reason to believe she won’t achieve the same in her January exams.”

“So, is there nothing to improve on?” Margaret asked, her words acting like ice down Freya’s back. “Nothing we can do at home to help?”

“Well... While Freya achieves high marks in her work, she refuses to participate in class. It’s clear that she knows the answer, but she never puts her hand up to volunteer it, and when I call on her, she hesitates. It’s not a problem for her exams, but I would like to see her be more vocal in the classroom.”

Freya pulled at the sleeves of her jumper, looking down. She hated that her teacher was speaking about her as if she wasn’t there.

Once they finished with Mr Dale, they realised the next teacher was still talking to someone else. They moved to sit on a few of the chairs in the middle of the room.

“Well, it’s good you’re on top of your school work,” Ryan told her with a smile.

Margaret nodded. “We had been a *little* worried, since you never asked us for any help or anything. We didn’t know if it was because you didn’t need any, or if you were just too shy to ask.”

Freya shrugged. “I’m doing okay.”

“That much seems clear now. Though, it sounds as if you’re shy in the classroom as well...”

“Irum told you about what happened in my last school, right?”

Margaret nodded.

“Well, I’d just rather not draw attention to myself.”

“Maybe that is helpful for avoiding bad things, but you might be inadvertently avoiding good things as well.”

Freya just shrugged once more as Damon came over, having just finished with their ICT teacher. A large hulk of a man, with the same paper-white skin and jet black hair sat beside him. He was covered in black tattoos that were stark against his skin as they peeked out from under his black t-shirt.

“Hey,” Damon greeted. “How is your parents’ evening going?”

Freya shrugged. “Fine. Yours?”

“Apparently I do not put enough effort into my work.”

Freya had to stop herself from rolling her eyes. She could have told him that much.

“At least you’re not failing,” she said with a shrug.

“Exactly!” Damon agreed.

The man next to him rolled his eyes. “But you’re not the one Seph’s gonna kill if she thinks you’re not doing well here.”

“Seph is my aunt,” Damon explained to Freya. “And this is my Uncle Gregor.”

His uncle nodded in greeting.

“These are my foster parents, Margaret and Ryan,” Freya said, indicating next to her.

Margaret tapped her on the shoulder, and Freya had to suppress the urge to pull away.

“I think your next teacher is free,” Margaret told her.

Freya nodded, standing up with her foster parents.

“See you,” she told Damon, before heading off.

“So, that’s Damon?” Margaret asked.

Freya nodded.

“Do you two have any plans for half term?”

Freya shook her head. “We’re friends, but we’re not really the kind of friends who hang out outside of school, you know?”

“Not really,” Margaret admitted.

Freya just gave an awkward shrug, not really sure what else to say.



Chapter Seven

While half term meant a much-needed break from Michelle and her cronies, Freya was lonely by the middle of the week. It was ridiculous, she told herself. There had been more than a few times when she and Alice had been separated due to being fostered. She was perfectly capable of being on her own. She preferred it, even.

And yet, she still itched for company. Not any company, she realised. She was missing Damon. She would want to talk to him or wonder what he was doing whenever she let her mind wander.

More than once, she had found herself on Facebook, wondering if it would be okay if she messaged him. She'd never messaged him before, but there had to be a first time, didn't there?

Thankfully, Alice called and arranged a cinema trip on Wednesday. She was going to take the bus into the city, so she and Freya could hang out.

They ended up going to see a superhero film of Alice's choosing. Freya wasn't really picky when it came to superhero flicks, but Alice had a special interest in comics.

"I can't believe they completely ruined my favourite plot-line," Alice said as they left the cinema. "It's like they don't even understand why people like the characters in the first place. What's with the fixation on gritty plots?"

Freya shrugged, knowing it was best to just let Alice get her complaining out of her system.

“And that outfit! How did her tits stay in place? If I had tits like hers, I wouldn’t so much as power walk without a sports bra on.”

Freya gave an empathetic nod. She knew firsthand there was no way that outfit had stayed in place.

“I need a drink,” Alice said before stomping towards a pub.

“Alice!” Freya hissed under her breath. She indicated to herself, hoping to remind her sister she was underage.

Alice rolled her eyes. “We’ll sit outside and I’ll order the drinks. No one will question you. You look older than me.”

Freya decided not to argue the point. Worst case, she’d pretend she forgot her ID, and they’d get kicked out.

Alice walked up to a pub with a decent outdoor area. “Find a table while I get drinks,” she told Freya.

Freya nodded, finding a small table in the corner without other people around.

While waiting for Alice, Freya pulled out her phone and played Snake. Because apparently her phone was so bad that Snake was still a selling point.

Thankfully, Alice didn’t take too long, returning swiftly with two drinks and a plate of potato skins.

Alice placed a bottle of beer down in front of Freya and a glass of coke in front of herself before placing the potato skins between them.

“Did you get yourself a non-alcoholic drink?” Freya asked, less than amused.

Alice smirked. “No, this has rum in it. But you need to taste the alcohol if you’re getting used to drinking so you don’t go overboard.” She indicated to Freya’s beer. “No mixers or alcopops until you understand your limits.”

Freya nodded, taking a sip of her beer. It wasn’t the worst taste in the world, but she wasn’t particularly enamoured.

“Oh, here,” Alice said, reaching into her bag. “Before I forget.” She pulled out her phone, passing it to Freya.

“Why are you giving me your phone?”

“It’s my old phone. I have a new one.”

“Really?” Alice usually kept phones until they fell apart, but if she was giving Freya her old one...

“My aunt got me a new one,” Alice explained, holding up a fancy phablet.

“Your aunt?” Freya asked with a raised eyebrow. “You don’t have an aunt.”

“Apparently, I do. My mum had a sister.”

“And you’re only hearing about her now?”

“She didn’t know about me before. She said my mum left Japan on less-than-great terms, and she didn’t know that I existed. But then she tried to reconnect with her sister and... Well, that’s how she found me.”

“Huh... Lucky you,” Freya said, trying her best to smile. She really hoped she didn’t seem jealous. “So, how are things with her?”

“Good. I... I’m actually going to live with her.”

“Here?”

“No. I would go back with her to Tokyo. She runs a company there.”

Freya’s stomach froze over as her throat stung. She didn’t want to lose Alice.

“What about school?” Freya eventually asked.

“Well, I wouldn’t be leaving until after the January exams, and I’m so far ahead in my studies that I’m going to take my summer exams early.”

“So, you’ll be finished your A-Levels before the summer?”

Alice nodded. “Yeah. I’ll go as soon as my last exam is done.”

“So, what about work and stuff? I mean, you don’t speak Japanese and you’re pretty bad at learning languages.”

“I’m no worse than you.”

“Yeah, but I at least managed English before I was four.”

“My freelance work is all in English and I can do it from anywhere, and my aunt is going to get me a proper Japanese tutor. I can also work for my aunt, if I want. Which I might actually want to.” Alice grinned. “Freya, it’s just so nice to have someone... Someone so much like me, I guess. She’s autistic too. And we’re alike in other ways. We like the same books, and we both like Nutella ice-cream and... I don’t know. I guess all families must be like that.”

She stopped talking, her hands - which had been excitedly gesticulating as she talked - moved to her lap, clasping each other to keep them still.

“I’m sorry,” Alice said. “I was excited... I wasn’t thinking.”

Freya shook her head, forcing as wide a smile as she could. “It’s fine, Alice. I’m happy for you. Really. Plus, I’ve been doing well here. I’ve been here for over a month and Margaret and Ryan aren’t looking to send me back yet. Though, of course, I’ll say that, and then they’ll send me back, anyway.” She gave her best self-deprecating smile.

“Don’t worry,” Alice told her. “Call it a hunch, but I’m certain you’ll stay put this time.”

Freya narrowed her eyes. “You don’t have hunches.” Alice never liked to suggest anything that she wasn’t a hundred percent certain of.

Alice shrugged. “I just have a feeling, is all.”

Freya nodded, but didn’t believe her. She doubted Alice started saying things based on *feelings* over facts overnight.

None of it mattered, she figured. She would most likely stay put, and even if she didn’t, Amber had wanted her in the city.

Her ghostly guardian probably had some magic to ensure she could stay there.

Freya took a deep drink of her beer. The more she thought of magic, the more she wanted to tell Alice the truth. She was chafing under the need for secrecy. She liked talking to Amber about it, but it was like a dream, almost. The time she spent with Amber, learning how to use her magic was like time spent in another world. As soon as she left Amber's classroom, she went right back to the real world which was too far removed.

Talking with someone else would help her mind to grasp the fact that it was all real, but she couldn't chance it. Amber had been more than clear she could end up in severe trouble if she told a Human about her magic.

But she supposed she didn't have to be *completely* honest with Alice to talk through her feelings on the matter.

"Hey, want to play a hypothetical?" Freya asked.

Alice nodded. "This game is so much better with alcohol. Okay, shoot."

"Alright, well, what if you woke up with magic powers tomorrow?"

"You'll have to be more specific than that. Are we talking Harry Potter or Dragon Age?"

"Neither. Remember that mermaid show you were into a few years ago?"

"*Still* into," Alice corrected her. "It's on Netflix."

"Well, it's like that. Total control of water. And you might be able to learn how to cast spells and create runes and stuff, but that would be much later down the line. For now, it's just water. And you tire easily."

"Oh, easy. I'd become a superhero. Though I would wear a sensible costume."

Freya blinked as her mind mulled over the idea.

What was stopping her from helping people with her powers? Apart from helping Damon to get glue out of his hair, all she'd done was practice parlour tricks with Amber.

Though, Amber worried about her over-extending herself.

“What if you tire too easily?”

“Then what would be the point of the powers? I imagine, unless I got them in some freak mutation situation, the powers would have a purpose. What would be the point of them if they were so weak?”

Freya hesitated once more. Alice was right. Amber had said her mother had the ability to rewind time, and yet she worried about Freya moving around drops of water. Sure, Freya felt a little tired when she did too much at once, but Amber had told her it was like working out. Feeling tired was a sign you were getting better, rather than the barely-breathless Freya got when she did Amber's timid exercises.

Alice smiled at something, but the smile dropped as she raised her hands to her head, her face contorting in pain.

“What is it?” Freya asked, resisting her urge to move closer to her sister.

“I... It's all tangled!”

“What's all tangled?”

“The threads,” Alice gasped as she rocked back and forth in her chair. “They're not... I can't... Why can't I...”

“Alice, please, what's wrong?”

Alice shook her head as if trying to shake something off. “You can't stop it... I can't stop it...”

Freya was wondering if she should try to get Alice inside when her sister finally let out a sigh of relief, slumping forward in her seat.

“Are you okay?” Freya asked her.

Alice nodded before taking a long drink from her glass. Freya was about to suggest that more alcohol wasn't the best idea, but Alice had drained her glass before she could speak.

"What happened?" Freya asked.

"Headache," Alice said.

"That didn't look like a headache."

Alice sighed. "Freya, if we could be honest with each other, we wouldn't be playing hypotheticals, would we?"

Freya froze. Did Alice know about her magic?

"Don't worry about it," Alice told her as she stood up. "These threads don't cross yet."

Freya didn't have a response as Alice slung her bag back over her shoulder.

"I've got to go," Alice told her. "I'll see you later, okay? Definitely before I leave."

"Yeah," Freya agreed as Alice left.

As soon as Alice left, Freya decided to leave too. There was no reason for her to stay, and she would be tempting fate, given she had no ID.

Freya couldn't help but think as she walked, her mind running a million miles a minute.

What had been wrong with Alice? That *definitely* hadn't looked like a headache. And she had seemed to know about Freya's magic. Or, at least, know that Freya was keeping something from her. Something about her hypothetical question. But Freya couldn't think of anything Alice might have thought it was, apart from magic. And then she had suggested Freya use her powers more actively, and that she might be capable of far more than what Amber was teaching her...

How much did Alice know, exactly?

Freya almost jumped as Amber appeared in her ghost form in front of her.

“Get your phone out so people don’t think you’re talking to yourself,” Amber told her.

Freya nodded mutely as she brought out the phone Alice had given her, pressing it to her ear.

“I felt you were troubled and thought I would come and see you,” Amber said.

“Were you watching me?”

“Not as such, but we’re tied to each other. I can feel when your emotions are in turmoil. I figured you might want someone to talk to...”

Freya nodded. “I was talking to Alice. She said something about being sure I was going to stay with Margaret and Ryan. But Alice doesn’t say things just to be nice. Not things that really matter like this. She certainly doesn’t say things if she’s not sure of them. And then she seemed to know about my magic, and maybe suggested I was capable of more than I’ve been doing, though that was all in coded speak. And then she got this really vicious headache and had to leave. She wouldn’t tell me why she got the headache, she just told me she knew we couldn’t always be honest with each other.”

Amber frowned as Freya spoke, her expression only darkening as she went on.

“*Non bonume, meticre nat, ag’ntes sors...*” Amber muttered.

Freya had no idea what that meant, but it was very clearly a curse.

“What language was that?” Freya eventually asked.

“It’s Daemonium. My husband spoke it, and he taught it our son. I was never any good at learning languages, but I picked up the swears well enough.”

“Why were you swearing?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Amber said quickly.

“When it concerns Alice, it does. Come on, what’s going on with her.”

Amber simply gave her a pleading look. “Freya, there are some things you simply aren’t ready to know yet. Things you aren’t yet equipped to handle. Please, just drop it.”

“No. You can’t just say it’s something I’m not ready to handle when it involves Alice. Is she in trouble?”

“She’s not *in* trouble. She *is* the trouble. Freya, magical beings are drawn to each other. We know Humans are different, and Humans know we’re different. We’ll gravitate towards our own kind instead. I wouldn’t be surprised if your oldest friend had magic as well.”

“Wait, so Alice has magic? She’s like me?”

Amber sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Maybe,” she eventually said with a shrug. “But you can’t just start talking to her about magic. Not until you’re certain. If I’m wrong...”

“Even if you are, I can trust Alice. She’d never tell anyone about magic.”

“No, Freya. No Human can ever be trusted with magic. Not again. We cannot risk it.”

Freya nodded, believing her. Mostly because she said *Human* the same way Alice said *Neurotypical*. The same blend of fear and resignation that came from knowing that many hated you, and most saw you as less-than. And knowing it didn’t matter; they controlled your fate regardless.

“Is it really so bad?” Freya asked. “I mean, there was a protection spell once, right? If the same spell could be cast again...”

Amber shook her head. “If you remember, that spell broke. Even if we cast it again, it would have the same weakness.”

“Which was?”

“That it has to be tied to a person,” Amber admitted. “If that person died, or their soul was no longer in their body, the spell would break.”

“How did it break last time? Who was it tied to?”

Amber sighed, folding her arms. “It was tied to your mother.”

Freya’s eyebrows shot up to her hairline. “My mother?” She frowned. “Wait, you said the War restarted when my mother was thirteen. She was nineteen when she died.”

Amber nodded. “It didn’t break because she died. Do you remember what I told you about Creation?”

Freya thought for a moment before saying, “You said it’s divided into seven realms. There are the Old Worlds, the Overworld, the Underworld, and Earth in the middle.”

Amber nodded. “There’s another realm. A sort of sub-realm, in between all of the others. Humans keep all of their soul with them on Earth. But magical beings only have half of our souls that exist on Earth. The other half exists in a place we call the Shadow Realm.

“The Shadow Realm is merely a reflection of the other realms. The part of your soul that exists there can’t do anything that’s not a direct reflection of something you do here. Unless, of course, the rest of your soul joins it. Then your actions in the Shadow Realm can be as real as those on Earth.”

“How does someone’s soul end up in the Shadow Realm?” Freya asked.

“It’s sent there. Due to the nature of the Shadow Realm, things that exist beneath the surface on Earth can be clearer there. Disagreements can be wars, uncertainty can mean you are physically lost, and a fracturing of identity can create two separate wholes.”

“So, what happened to my mother?”

“The latter. She became so conflicted within herself that she lost control of her magic and was sent there to heal her mind. No one realised she had been the anchor for the protection spell. The War broke out once more, and your mother, who would have been one of our strongest fighters, was lost to us. She could only return when she healed, you see. She was gone for five years.”

Freya frowned. “Wait, five years? How quickly after getting back did she become pregnant?”

“She actually came back pregnant. We hadn’t even known it was possible, but it happened.”

“So... That’s why you don’t know who my father is?”

Amber nodded. “I’m not even sure your mother knew. Identities can be difficult to discern in the Shadow Realm.”

Freya frowned as her stomach churned. After seeing how happy Alice was at finding her aunt, Freya’s determination to feel the same renewed.

“But there has to be some way to find him, right? Some spell or other magic?”

“I don’t think that would be a good idea,” Amber said as she crossed her arms across her chest.

“Why not?”

“Your mother was clear she didn’t want to find him. She could have called to him herself when she was captured by the Humans, and she chose to escape on her own. I can think of very few reasons why she would risk that, and none of them are good.”

“Well, who’s to say she was right? And she’s not here now. We are. And I have *no one*, Amber.”

“You have Margaret and Ryan.”

“Who will send me back, eventually. I’m a teenager, Amber. Teenagers don’t get adopted.”

“You have me.”

“You’re a *ghost!* You’ve said yourself you’re not sure how long you can keep possessing Ms Pearson. What happens when you *can’t* help me anymore? Please, Amber, I need to know.”

“And I need to respect your mother’s wishes!”

Freya’s throat closed up, her eyes stinging with tears. “So you really won’t help me?” she choked.

Amber shook her head. “I’m sorry, Freya, I can’t.”

Freya shook her head, hurrying forward, straight through Amber.

“Freya, please,” Amber said, appearing in front of her.

“Go away,” Freya mumbled, a stray tear escaping down her cheek.

“Freya, come on. Let’s talk about it.”

“I said *go away!*”

With that, Amber disappeared, and Freya let out a sigh of relief that sounded too much like a sob for her liking.



Chapter Eight

Freya didn't know whether to be relieved or worried that Amber hadn't reappeared by the time half term came to an end.

On the one hand, she really didn't want to talk with her. She was still angry about her refusing to help her find her father, and she doubted that anger would fade unless Amber changed her mind upon her return. She still needed space, and the fact Amber seemed to recognise that was a nice change from Freya's usual interactions with adults.

But then, it *was* a pretty drastic change from her usual interactions with adults. Adults never understood she sometimes needed time to mull things over on her own. They were always pushing, demanding Freya acquiesce to whatever they wanted. Or at least put on a happy face for them.

Which led to her worry. What if she had pissed Amber off? She didn't expect her to be happy about being yelled at, but she would have expected her to get over that within a couple of days. Even if she only returned to hear that Freya would let the whole thing go.

With Amber's absence, Freya decided to test her powers on her own terms. She wanted to see if Alice was right about how much power she potentially had.

She was still pretty cautious. Amber's warnings hadn't been completely spurned. Freya managed to increase both her control

and stamina, being able to use her powers for over ten minutes straight before feeling too tired to continue, but that was as far as she got. She hadn't discovered any new aspect to her powers, or anything like that.

As she headed downstairs on Monday morning, however, she was particularly glad she increased her control as much as she had. Margaret told her to switch over the washing in the machine over to the dryer the night before, and Freya had forgotten. So, that morning, she found herself pulling a still-wet jumper from the dryer and drawing the water from it.

At least these powers are good for something, Freya thought to herself as she pulled on her newly dry jumper.

"Oh good," Margaret said as Freya headed back out of the utility room. "You had a clean jumper left. I worried they were all in the wash."

Freya's stomach clenched. "I'm sorry, I forgot to put it all in the dryer. I've put them in now."

Margaret nodded. "Just make sure you don't forget again."

Freya knew, unequivocally, that she would forget to do chores in the future. She was terrible at remembering to remember things. But pointing that out wouldn't lead to anything good, so she stayed silent.

"You left your homework on the coffee table," Margaret told her.

"Thanks," Freya said before rushing into the living room to grab it, running back into the kitchen to put it into her backpack.

"So," Margaret said as she finished making her morning coffee, "are you excited to see Damon again?"

"Well, yeah. He's my friend. Why?"

"I... I was just wondering... Well, I was wondering if you and I needed to have a certain *talk*..."

Freya frowned for a moment, wondering what she meant, before turning a deep shade of red as she put two and two together.

“You- I- We’re not dating! And even if we were,” she picked up her pill packet, giving it a wave, “I would be safe.” She looked at the packet, realising she hadn’t taken it that morning, popping it and taking it dry. She’d gotten used to taking pills dry whenever she remembered to take them, otherwise she risked forgetting while making herself a glass of water.

Margaret raised an eyebrow. “You know that only works in one capacity, right?”

“Yes, I didn’t mean...” Freya trailed off, her mind refusing to supply her with a follow up phrase that wasn’t “I was going to ride some dude bareback”, which she was *not* going to say to her foster mother.

“Anyway,” Freya continued, “it doesn’t matter, because Damon and I are just friends.”

Margaret raised her eyebrow once more. “You blush when you talk about him.”

Freya’s blush deepened. “I do not!”

Margaret just smiled, shaking her head. “Alright, whatever you say...”



AS MUCH AS, WHEN FREYA left the house, she felt as if she had won the conversation with Margaret, she immediately blushed when she met Damon at the school’s front gates.

Her breath caught in her throat as her mind started running to situations with him that might have made Margaret’s talk pertinent...

She mentally chastised herself for thinking that way about her friend, but it did nothing to reduce the colour of her face.

Thankfully, she had been running late, so she barely had time to say “Hi,” before she had to run to her form room. She spent most of registration trying her best not to chew her pencil. It was gross, but it was a difficult habit to break, given that she had RS first. She had no idea how Amber would react to her in her class.

Of course, when she got to Ms Pearson’s classroom, no one was there.

Everyone sat down in their regular seat, assuming she was simply running late. Though, Freya knew better. Ms Pearson had her form in this classroom every morning. She shouldn’t have had a reason to be anywhere else. Freya could think of several reasons why she would have darted out of the classroom for five minutes, but as the clock ticked over to ten past nine, all of them seemed to fall away.

The other kids in the class seemed to decide the lack of teacher meant a party; each one seemingly trying to out-do their own reckless show-off behaviour. Freya kept her nose firmly in her manga, doing her best not to completely ruin her pencil.

Eventually Mrs Baum, a substitute teacher Freya had had for maths once, entered the room, silencing the class.

“Alright,” she said as she handed out textbooks. “There are practice questions at the back of each chapter. Work your way through as many as you can before the end of the lesson.”

Freya did her best to suppress her anxiety, which was urging her to keep her hands plastered to her sides. She instead raised her hand.

“Miss?” she asked.

“Yes?”

“Where’s Ms Pearson?”

Mrs Baum shot her a look that very much said “mind your own business,” before saying “She’s ill. I’ll be taking over for her

today.” Her tone was firm, clearly discouraging any further questions.

Freya decided not to try asking any more, trying to focus her attention on her work. Though her mind kept wandering to where Amber might be. Freya supposed the body she possessed might have gotten ill, but Freya figured there must be magical cures for that sort of thing. Not to mention, there was nothing stopping Amber from visiting her in ghost form to warn her. No matter how angry she was with her, Freya couldn’t imagine Amber completely blanking her.

So where was she?



“I ASSUME YOU HAVE ALL met at least once with your groups over half term to rehearse your scene. Remember, there is only a week left before the performances and I don’t want anyone still on script.”

That yanked Freya out of her now-perpetual daze.

“You know,” Damon said as he leaned closer to her, “I never thought I would be the annoying one about this, but we should probably meet up.”

Freya nodded. “Sorry, I’ve been distracted.”

“By what?”

Freya looked away, her hands tightening into fists as she tried to come up with some kind of explanation.

“Hey, you do not have to tell me,” Damon told her softly. “After all, even friends sometimes have secrets, right?”

Freya nodded with a small smile. “Right.”

“Anyway, we should probably swap phone numbers. So we can stay in touch, I mean.”

Freya nodded once more, not wanting to bring up Facebook. If Damon had forgotten they could use it to contact each other

over half term, she would pretend that she had as well. It beat admitting she'd been too scared to message him.

She tapped her phone to his, exchanging their numbers. Even if it was second hand, Freya very much loved her new phone.

"Are you free tonight?" Damon asked. "We could rehearse, and then maybe binge-watch that show you were talking about the other day? *Firefly*? I watched the first episode, and it was great!"

Freya smiled. "Don't say that or I'll start recommending shows to you left and right."

"Well, they have all been great so far, so I would not complain."

Freya shook her head. She wanted to take that as an invitation to be completely open with sharing the things she loved, but years of experience had taught her that her enthusiasm was too intense to ever be valued.

"I can't do tonight," Freya said. "It'll be too short notice for my foster parents. And what about your uncle? Won't he be annoyed at you bringing someone home without warning?"

"No. He made it clear I may bring whoever I want home whenever. I think he wants to make it as easy as possible for me to make friends."

Freya nodded as it occurred to her she really didn't know all that much about Damon's uncle. "You don't really talk about your family."

Damon shrugged, looking away. "I... Being here, with you, is like an escape from... I do not want to ruin that."

Freya frowned, not understanding.

Her confusion must have been clear because he sighed.

“But I suppose that is not fair to either of us, is it? The more secrets I keep... I would rather not keep the ones I do not have to.”

“So?” she asked, extremely confused.

“I do not talk about my family because it is not a pleasant topic. My mother died when I was a baby, and my father... My aunt and uncle had no idea I even existed until recently, and as soon as they did, they immediately got me away from my father. He is... He is not a nice man.”

Freya nodded, in what she hoped was a sympathetic manner. She didn't know how else to respond.

“Anyway, now I live with my uncle, and my aunt and her husband make sure I have everything I need.”

Freya frowned. “It's still weird you don't call your aunt's husband ‘uncle.’”

Damon looked sheepish. “He... He is a rather powerful man. It would be strange for me to refer to him in such familial terms.”

“Even though you're technically family?”

“Technically would be the operative word there.” He picked up his pen, bringing forward his work book.

Freya took the sudden enthusiasm for his school work as a sign that he wanted to change the subject.

“How about tomorrow? For the rehearsal, I mean?” she asked.

He smiled. “Tomorrow it is.”



BY THE TIME THE FINAL bell of the day rang, Freya had completely decimated her pencil.

There was no sign of Amber.

Freya headed back to her classroom. Maybe Amber hadn't wanted to appear in ghost form in front of everyone else just in case Freya reacted to her.

The classroom was empty and unlocked, so Freya headed in, sitting down on one of the desks before pulling out her phone and proceeding to wait.

"Hey, Ms Pearson isn't here," a voice called from the corridor after several minutes.

"Yeah, I'm starting to get that," Freya muttered as she looked up to see Damon's music teacher, Mr Carlton, standing outside the door. "Do you know when she'll be back?"

"Probably not soon," he said with a shrug. "She took ill over half term. Apparently she didn't turn her TV off in her flat all night. A neighbour complained to the landlord, and he found her unconscious. She hasn't woken up since."

"When was this?"

He shrugged once more. "She went to the hospital on Thursday, I think."

Freya's blood chilled as she got up off the desk. Mr Carlton seemed to take that as a sign she was leaving and headed off.

Thursday.

Freya had last seen Amber on Wednesday.

If Ms Pearson had never woken up, it sounded as if Amber never returned to her body.

So where was she?

Go away, she told her mentor.

But there was no way that could have done anything, was there? Just because Amber was tied to Freya, didn't mean some heated words would banish her...

Unless it did.

Freya picked up her bag. She wasn't going to get any answers by sitting still.

She glanced to the desk just as she was leaving, remembering Amber kept her mother's pendant in there. What if she used it to store other magical items in there as well? There could be something that would help Freya track her down.

Freya groaned as she approached the desk, seeing one of the drawers was locked. She remembered the key Amber kept around her neck, allowing her access.

Freya quickly searched through the other drawers, finding various textbooks and confiscated odds and ends, but no spare key.

She glared at the lock, wishing she knew some kind of lock-picking spell. All she had was control of water. She supposed she could pick the lock the Human way, but she didn't have any hairpins.

Freya smiled as a thought struck her. She didn't necessarily need a hairpin. Not if she could mimic the effect she needed by controlling and freezing water in the correct way.

She brought out her phone, quickly searching how to pick locks. She opened an incognito tab, but she was still pretty sure her search might end up with her on some kind of watch-list...

As soon as she had the information she needed, Freya drew a thin stream of water from her water bottle. She closed her eyes, feeling with the water. She carefully pushed, pulled, and froze at just the right times, and to her relief, the drawer soon clicked open.

Freya gave it a yank, hoping to find something of use.

But the only item contained within was a notebook.

Freya quickly picked up the book, rifling through the pages. Most were filled with strange spirals or scratchy markings that she couldn't decipher. Almost at the middle of the book, however, was a page with writing in English, entitled *Invisibility Glamour - Modified*.

Freya gave a sigh of relief, sticking the book into her bag before heading home.



FREYA ALMOST RAN BACK home, taking the stairs up to her room two at a time.

She closed her bedroom door behind her, before throwing her bag onto her bed, opening it to find Amber's notebook.

This time, she didn't rifle through the pages so quickly. Instead, she took her time, making sure she didn't miss anything. Every page of the notebook was crammed with ink, creating mosaics of unfamiliar patterns and languages.

It still took until the middle of the book for Freya to find anything in English. The first thing she found was tucked away in the upper corner of the page, in Amber's familiar handwriting.

Short-term memory spell

I have yet to find a memory spell I have gotten along with. But Rosaline assures me this is the most simple. I have yet to manage it, but she is sure it is simply a matter of time.

Incantation: Auferbulum

Before the incantation is spoken aloud, the caster must completely clear the mind. If they are thinking about anything, those thoughts can get tied up in the spell and stop the amnesia from taking hold. The spell, when working correctly, should erase the last few moments of the subject's memory. Now if I could only get it work...

Freya continued to flick through the book, but found nothing to help her find Amber. The notebook appeared to be a collection of stray pieces of magical knowledge Amber had collected over the years. Early pages contained references to Amber's husband and son, as well as someone called Rosaline, who appeared to have been some kind of mentor to Amber. One of the final pages talked about how Amber had been concerned about

how to go about training someone who had shown a preference for fire when they had broken through. As soon as the page referred to Amber's student as "Lily", Freya closed the book.

After a few moments, however, Freya opened the book once more, determined to double check for any clue as to where Amber might be. But her efforts were interrupted by a knock at her door.

"Come in," Freya called.

Margaret opened the door. "I was just wondering what you wanted for tea. Ryan is going to make pasta later, but there's a pizza in the fridge if you want something now."

"Pasta will be fine," Freya replied.

Margaret nodded, but didn't leave, her expression turning to a frown. "What's that you have there?" Margaret asked as she stepped forward, clearly looking at the notebook which was currently open on the page that laid out how to perform a memory spell.

"Spells?" Margaret asked, worried. "Freya, I don't know how happy I am with you getting involved in some kind of... Wiccan cult or something..."

Freya froze. The last thing she needed was to be sent away over this, especially when Amber was nowhere to be found.

Freya tried desperately to think of some way out of it, some clever lie that would cover her tracks, but her mind remained blank.

Just as she needed to cast a memory spell...

"Auferbulum," she muttered.

Margaret's expression immediately turned blank, and it took a moment for any kind of cognizance to return to her features.

Freya took that moment to close the notebook before showing it under the covers of her bed.

"What were we talking about?" Margaret asked.

“You were asking what I wanted for tea,” Freya reminded her.

Margaret nodded with a slight frown. “Can you smell strawberries in here?”

Freya shrugged, though there was a slight, unmistakable smell.

“Is it okay if I go to Damon’s tomorrow, after school?” Freya asked, wanting to steer the subject away from anything even vaguely related to magic.

“I don’t see why that would be a problem,” Margaret told her. “Will his uncle be there?”

Freya nodded. She didn’t actually know if Gregor would be there or not, but she didn’t want Margaret to forbid her to go over it. Not when, despite Margaret thinking to the contrary, there was absolutely nothing going on between Freya and Damon.

“Alright, I don’t see why that would be a problem. Just make sure to tell me what time you’re expecting to be home. And I want you home no later than eight. It is a school night after all.”

“Will do,” Freya assured her.

Margaret left, doing that thing Freya hated, where she left the door slightly ajar. Freya jumped up to close the door herself, smiling just a little. She couldn’t believe she had actually managed to cast the spell. Especially with no training on the topic.

She couldn’t help but feel a pang of annoyance as she returned her bed, however, reclaiming Amber’s notebook from beneath the sheets. Amber could have taught her how to use spells at any point, and yet in all the weeks they had been training, she had barely even mentioned Freya attempting it.

Freya returned to the notebook, methodically scanning through each and every page, staring at the strange scripts, willing them to make sense. As she went, her annoyance with Amber faded into concern once more.

She had no idea how to get her mentor back, and without her, Freya was completely alone...



Chapter Nine

Freya didn't sleep that night. She only managed to snatch twenty minute naps, from which we she would awake in a blind panic. She would immediately turn on her phone, using it to illuminate Amber's notebook, as she desperately searched for something that would tell her how to find Amber.

As she arrived at school, her eyes were bleary and accentuated with dark shadows. She continued to search through Amber's notebook during lessons, desperate not to be left alone with her thoughts. Whenever she couldn't search the notebook, she found her mind wandering to the same place over and over again.

Why had Amber been so reluctant to let her use her powers to their fullest extent?

The more she mulled it over, the more certain pieces fell into place. Amber's granddaughter had lost control her powers and had killed someone. Of course, since Freya had no relation to her, there was no reason to think she would go the same way. Except for, perhaps, the fact her mother might have had the same problem.

Her "soul splitting in two" was vague enough to mean anything, but sending her away for five years seemed drastic. The fact anyone had resorted to such measures, told Freya her mother had turned into as much of a problem as Amber's granddaughter.

And if it happened to Freya's mother, what was to stop it from happening to her?

It became clear to Freya that Amber's reluctance to teach her had been more out of fear of what Freya might become, than of Freya hurting herself.

It wasn't a thought Freya was comfortable with, so she did everything she could to avoid it.

By the time break came around, she was ready to tear her hair out.

Luckily, Damon was waiting for her.

"Are you okay?" he asked. "You look..."

"Like hell?"

"I was going to say tired."

"I didn't sleep. I guess... I guess I've got some things on my mind."

"You can tell me," Damon told her.

She wished she could, his sincerity causing her throat to sting. "Didn't we agree that some secrets between us were okay?"

He nodded in agreement as one of the older kids walked past, their backpack thumping Freya over the head as they went.

"Come on," Damon said. "Let us go somewhere quiet."

Freya followed close behind as he led her through to the music corridor. He went past the music classrooms, heading around the corner before entering a small room, that only just held a keyboard.

Freya followed him inside the cramped space, and he closed the door behind them.

"Aren't these spaces supposed to be for music practice?" Freya asked

Damon nodded. "Mr Carlton will not mind," he assured her. "He's rarely bothered by such things."

Freya took his word for it, sitting in the corner as she raised a hand to her chest, finding her mother's pendant underneath her jumper.

"Can I assume you do not want to talk about it?" Damon asked.

"It's not so much a question of want, as a question of necessity. I'm sorry, I can't tell you."

Damon nodded in understanding. "Then would you like me to talk at you, in the hopes of providing distraction?"

Freya smiled. "I think I would like that a lot."

"Well, I doubt it is a dilemma of the same magnitude as the one you are facing, but I do have one of my own that I would like an opinion on."

"Okay, shoot."

"So, do you know Nathan?"

"Yeah, he's one of your friends from music, right?"

Damon nodded. "He has informed me Natalie has a crush on me."

Freya blinked at him for several moments, fascinated by the pink tinge of his cheeks as she tried to wrap her head around what he was saying. It shouldn't be surprising other girls had an interest in him. And it wasn't as if he was taken by anyone.

Freya had no idea why it was bothering her so much. It wasn't as if she liked him like that or anything. They were just friends.

"Do you like Natalie?" she finally asked.

Damon shrugged. "I mean, she is nice, and I like her as a friend, but I do not know if I like her like that. You know, romantically..."

"Well, does it matter?"

Damon frowned. "How would it not matter?"

Freya shrugged. "Well, it doesn't seem to matter to a lot of people our age. People seem to get with whoever for the sake of getting with them. And then they breakup in two weeks."

"Are you not generalising? I mean, it sounds as if you do not feel that way."

Freya snorted. "There is a difference between disagreeing with the behaviour and never having the opportunity to engage in it. I am very much in the latter group."

Damon must have picked up on her distaste with the topic because he changed it rapidly. "It occurs to me that you have shared quite a few of your favourite stories with me, but I have not reciprocated."

"Well, as long as they are subtitled, feel free to share as much TV from your home as you want," she said.

"Actually, I was thinking more a kind of legend... I read about it as a kid and it has been on my mind a lot lately."

"Okay, so what's the legend?"

"Have you ever heard of the story of Princess Maltess?"

Freya shook her head.

"Well, at the time, my homeland was ruled over by several different factions, all vying for power. One of the most powerful factions was led by Maltess' parents, until they were killed by their most powerful rival, Viktor.

"After her parents died, Maltess refused the moniker of 'Queen', remaining Princess until she could avenge her parents."

Freya smiled. "Rampage?" she asked, imitating a character from one of her favourite TV shows.

Damon smiled. "Well, it wasn't a rampage as such, but she did eliminate almost all other factions besides Viktor's, easily overshadowing his power. Viktor, in turn, cursed Maltess, hoping to demoralise her into defeat."

Freya frowned. "Wait, he used magic?"

“It is a story, Freya,” he pointed out, seemingly a little perplexed.

Freya nodded. “Right. Sorry. I guess I’m a little tired... So, how did he curse her?”

“The curse he placed on her meant that all those she loved - in a romantic capacity which is actually a different word in my native tongue - would die. Her husband swiftly succumbed to the curse, and Maltess closed herself away in her castle, surrounded by only female advisors and warriors.”

“Was there no chance of her falling for her female friends?”

“No. By all accounts, she was straight.”

“So, did she go on a murder rampage against Viktor?”

“The thing about murder rampages is that they do little to end wars. The fighting went on for another decade or so, and Maltess and Viktor eventually came to a truce, bound by marriage.”

“Wait, she *married* him?”

Damon nodded. “There was no real quarrel between them besides revenge and wanting the throne. By sharing the throne, they created a bloodline that still rules to this day.”

Freya frowned. “You guys still have a monarchy?”

“*You* still have a monarchy,” he reminded her.

“Okay, that’s fair. But it doesn’t seem right that Viktor cursed her and he still got what he wanted.”

“Well, the curse caught up with him in the end. After many years together, it seems Maltess actually found it within herself to fall in love with him.”

“Huh... That seems kind of awful for Maltess, doesn’t it? To fall in love again, after so many years, only for him to die? This story is a total downer. You said you read about this as a kid?”

Damon shrugged. “I did not exactly get out much. That leads to a lot of reading, regardless of whether it is age appropriate.”

“And you said this story had been on your mind. Why?”

Damon shrugged, his gaze flicking to the window. “I suppose the message has always stuck with me.”

“You mean the message that casting curses is a bad idea?”

Damon smiled. “I was thinking more the message that love can be dangerous.”

Freya frowned. “Yeah, that is really not the message I took away from that. And if it was the message it was trying to convey, then it’s a stupid message.”

Damon raised an eyebrow. “Oh? This from the girl who actively tried to avoid me because she was scared of letting someone get close.”

Freya rolled her eyes. “This is different.”

“I do not really see how. Romantic love, friendship, regardless of which you are trying to avoid, you still believe that letting people close to you is dangerous. You have seen how it can be dangerous. I do not think exercising caution in this area is *stupid*.”

Freya folded her arms. “I just... You shouldn’t let things pass you by out of fear. Not if you can control that fear.”

“So, what? Is this your way of telling me I should get over myself and kiss Natalie?”

Freya shook her head, the mention of Natalie stabbing at her. “Look, if you like her, then whatever, all I’m saying is if you like someone, **kiss *them***.”

Freya barely had time to notice the odd, low vibration beneath her words as Damon stepped towards her.

And *kissed her*.

Freya froze with surprise, but quickly melted as she got used to the strange new sensation, growing heady on Damon’s comforting smell.

But after a moment, Damon pulled away, staring at her in shock.

“Freya, what- You- Did you just compel me to kiss you?”

Freya froze, the low vibration suddenly making sense. He had done exactly as she had said.

She had used her magic on him to make him kiss her.

She couldn’t explain it away, and she couldn’t let Damon know about magic.

Could Auferbulum work again?

As soon as she thought the incantation, however, Damon’s face went familiarly blank.

“What were we just talking about?” he asked, and Freya had to suppress a sigh of relief.

One crisis averted without Amber, she thought, though it came with the realisation that having the power to compel people to do what she wanted was a crisis all of its own.

One Amber had never mentioned...

“Hey,” Damon said, drawing her away from her thoughts. “Can you smell strawberries?”



IT TOOK EVERYTHING Freya had not to let her anxiety get the better of her by the time the last school bell rang.

Freya hurried out of the gate, only to see Damon waiting for her. She had completely forgotten she was supposed to go to his after school.

She should tell him she couldn’t go. After all, she had already accidentally used her magic on him. Who knew what might happen if she had to spend more time with him alone? If her powers went out of control, she might actually hurt him, and she didn’t know how she would cope with that.

But she didn't tell him she couldn't go. It would have been the sensible thing for her to do, but then, it felt too much like letting her anxiety win. Or rather, letting Amber's anxiety win. After all, it had just been an innocent kiss. There was no reason to think her powers would become even more of a problem.

Freya watched Damon carefully as he led her to his place. She couldn't help but worry that maybe her memory spell wasn't permanent. Maybe something would trigger his memory. Would the spell work if she cast it a second time?

She was so deep in thought she didn't notice where Damon was leading her. At least, not until she was almost run over by a BMW while trying to cross the road.

She looked around, seeing that she was standing in the middle of a housing estate where every house was a mansion. Or, at least, very close to one. Most of them could certainly fit four of Margaret and Ryan's house within them.

"Where are we headed?" Freya asked.

"The apartment building is just around the corner," Damon explained.

Freya frowned. She doubted there would be any kind of normal housing 'just around the corner'.

And she was right. The apartment building Damon led her to was large, and built out of pristine, pale bricks that seemed four times the size of regular ones. There was ivy artfully growing up the walls, and it seemed as if every apartment had a reasonably sized balcony, with railings of metal and glass.

The building was clearly new, and Freya couldn't help but be intimidated by it. She would guess one of these apartments would cost several times that of Margaret and Ryan's house.

Freya followed Damon inside, giving a meek nod to the doorman as they made their way to the lift.

Damon hit the button for the penthouse, and Freya's anxiety tripled.

"This place is... really nice," Freya managed.

Damon shrugged, pulling a little at the sleeves of his jumper. "Like I said, my aunt's husband is... This was easy enough for him to arrange. It is strange, he already did so much in removing me from my father; anything else feels like something I have to pay back. Even if..."

"Even if?"

Damon raised an eyebrow. "Secrets, remember?"

Freya nodded, knowing she had no room to disagree. Especially in that moment.

The lift finally reached the top floor, and they got out, Damon unlocking the door in front of them.

The apartment was about how Freya had expected it to be, with everything white and glass. But there were signs that it was lived in. A mug sat on the coffee table, a pair of trainers were next to the sofa, and Damon's PE kit looked as if it had been thrown onto one of the chairs the night before.

Freya took comfort in the small signs of home, her anxiety lessening a little.

"Is your uncle in?" Freya asked.

"No," Damon said. "He will not be home until later."

"Is he at work?"

Damon nodded. "My aunt's husband wants to open a regional office here, for some division or another, so my uncle is organising security around him setting up."

Freya frowned. "Regional office? So your aunt's husband is a businessman?"

"I suppose that is as apt a description as any," he said with a shrug.

“So, your aunt took you from your father and placed you with her husband’s top security guy?”

“Well, he is also my uncle.”

Freya nodded, though she was sure that that wasn’t all there was to it. It seemed as if Damon’s aunt was trying to keep Damon safe, presumably from his father. She wondered just how scary Damon’s father must be to elicit that kind of response...

“We should probably get started on rehearsing,” Damon said, opening his bag to produce the script the teacher had given him.

Freya brought out her own script.

“Alright, so, I looked up what this is supposed to mean, so I think I know how I am supposed to say it.”

Damon cleared his throat, looking up from his script to gaze at Freya, her breath catching at the mixture of heat and adoration behind his eyes.

“But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?

It is the east and Juliet is the sun!

Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,

Who is already sick and pale with grief

That thou her maid art far more fair than she.

Be not her maid, since she is envious;

Her vestal livery is but sick and green,

And none but fools do wear it. Cast it off.

It is my lady, O, it is my love!

O that she knew she were!

She speaks, yet she says nothing; what of that?

Her eye discourses, I will answer it.

I am too bold: ‘tis not to me she speaks.

Two of the fairest stars in all the heaven,

Having some business, do entreat her eyes

To twinkle in their spheres till they return.

What if her eyes were there, they in her head?
The brightness of her cheek would shame those stars,
As daylight doth a lamp. Her eyes in heaven
Would through the airy region stream so bright
That birds would sing and think it were not night.
See how she leans her cheek upon her hand
O that I were a glove upon that hand,
That I might touch that cheek!"

Damon stopped, his expression returning to normal fast enough to give Freya whiplash as he asked, "Well, how was it?"

Freya couldn't quite gather an intelligible response. Even if the old English words were a little lost on her, the way Damon had spoken them, with an absolute sincerity of feeling, was not.

She tried to tell herself it meant nothing. He had just been acting. But that didn't stop her cheeks from flushing bright pink.

"It was great," she squeaked, suppressing a groan at her inability to control her own voice. "I actually need the loo," she said, in a desperate attempt to get away. "Can you show me where it is?"

Damon pointed into the corridor. "It is just around the corner."

Freya nodded, quickly hurrying in that direction.

Of course, when she was in the loo, she had no idea what to do. All she had the energy for was freaking out over the way butterflies were erupting in her stomach.

Before she had a chance even begin calming down, her phone rang. She took it from her pocket to see Alice was ringing her.

"Hey," Freya answered.

"*Moshi Moshi*," Alice replied.

"So I see you're finally getting the hang of Japanese."

“No, that’s one of the few things I can actually say. Which is kind of ironic since I never did master answering the phone in English.”

Freya smiled. “So, what are you ringing about? I’m kind of busy right now.”

“Yeah, you said you were going to go to Damon’s house. How is it?”

“It... Well, it’s *really* fancy. I mean, we’re talking football salaries.”

“Yeah, my aunt said that might be the case.”

“Your aunt? What does she know about it?”

“Well, she knows of Damon’s family. Apparently his uncle is quite powerful.”

Freya frowned, before realising Alice had meant Damon’s aunt’s husband, not Gregor. “Yeah, Damon said he was some kind of businessman.”

“And a fairly successful one,” Alice told her. *“So, how are things going with Damon?”*

Freya felt her mouth go dry. “Well, he... It’s fine.”

“Why don’t I believe that?”

“I just- it’s strange. There was a thing today that I can’t get into but it made everything weird. And now I’m here, being around him and it’s just...”

“Strange, I know.”

“Yeah...”

“Would this thing that happened today have anything to do with the fact that you have a massive crush on him?”

Freya blushed. “No I don’t.”

“Yeah, no one believes that,” Alice said briskly. *“Look, just try to be normal around him, and I promise, it will be fine.”*

Freya raised an eyebrow. “It’s not like you to promise something that you can’t guarantee.”

"Who says I can't guarantee it?"

Freya frowned at that, but Alice continued on before she could say anything.

"Freya," Alice said, her tone more than a little hesitant, *"will you just promise me that you'll be careful?"*

"With Damon?"

"No, just in general. I mean, if anything happens... Just... Watch your back."

"For what?"

Alice hung up before Freya got an answer.

Freya sighed, pocketing her phone. She decided Alice's strange remarks were simply down to something going on with her sister, and that it had no bearing on anything to do with Freya.

At least the conversation with Alice had seemed to have calmed her down a bit, she thought, as she looked in the mirror and saw her face was no longer so pink.

She opened the bathroom door, heading back out to the living room, only to find Damon missing.

"Damon?" she called. *"Where are you?"*

Damon's voice came from down the hall. *"I forgot to put some stuff away this morning. I am just doing it now before my uncle gets home."*

Freya followed Damon's voice through to the other room, finding that the room in question was filled with various weapons. They lined all of the walls, except for one which was made entirely of glass.

Freya tried not to look out of the large glass window, more than a little unnerved by how high up they were. Instead, she looked around at all the weapons that were collected, as Damon put a couple away.

“Why does your uncle have room full of weapons?” Freya asked, as she looked around, noticing all the weapon seemed rather old-fashioned. They were all swords, or axes, or even some that looked like spears. But there were no guns or anything like that.

“I told you, he works in security.”

Freya raised an eyebrow. “Yeah, but that usually means guns, not swords.”

Damon quick shrug. “Well... I know... But, still, he likes to know everything about every kind of weapon. Just in case...”

“Just in case someone tries to run him through with a sword...?”

Damon gave another quick shrug. “Look, I have no idea, he just likes them. Plus, he has been teaching me how to fight. You know, to build my confidence.”

Freya nodded. “Yeah, I always kind of wanted to learn martial arts as a kid. But I was a girl, so I got saddled with ballet.”

“Well, I could teach you, if you want. In fact, I am pretty sure my uncle would be glad I was practising. I tend not to outside of our lessons.”

Freya smiled. “I think I would like that.”

“Well,” Damon said, indicating around the room, “take your pick, and I will show you what I know. Do not worry, they are all blunted. Though I warn you, I am not that good yet, so I do not exactly have a lot to teach.”

Freya rolled her eyes. “Damon, you’re talking to a girl who can’t get through a single PE lesson without getting covered in bruises. I’m sure you’ll be better than me.”

Damon rolled his eyes. “That is only because you do not even try to catch the ball when it is thrown to you,” he said. “You just flinch away.”

Freya shrugged. "That's only because I know it's going to hit me."

She made her way towards the swords, deciding to start with the basics.

Damon saw her, and made his own way to the weapons, picking up a sword she assumed was the one that was right for his height and weight.

One of the smaller ones seemed like the smartest choice to Freya as she had no idea which one she would actually be best at handling. But the sword Damon had chosen was nothing to sniff at, and she didn't think one of the smaller ones could stand against it.

So, she picked up one of their larger ones, only to immediately regret it. The weight of the sword was heavy in her hands, and she almost dropped it. But she did her best to find her feet and figure out how to stand correctly.

"So, what?" she asked. "Do I just try to hit you with it?"

Damon nodded. "If you think you can."

Freya awkwardly slashed her sword towards him, stumbling a little as the weight threw her off balance.

Damon easily dodged out of the way of her blow, bringing his own sword down to lightly tap at her side.

Freya became incensed, spinning around wildly. Damon easily stopped her sword mid-blow, however, almost knocking her to the ground.

Freya figured she had to do something to regain her balance. Or at least attempt to keep it for more than five seconds. She quickly cycled through everything she knew about sword fighting, latching onto the TV show she had been watching the previous week.

Stance wide, body lowered.

She spread her feet, and immediately felt improvement to her balance. The next time Damon came in to hit her, she knocked his sword aside. However, just as she was beginning to smile at her small victory, Damon's sword came around the other side, hitting her once more.

"You know, for dulled blades, this still actually hurts quite a bit," Freya said, stepping aside to show that she was no longer interested in sparring.

Damon gave an apologetic smile, putting his sword to one side. "Sorry, I guess I just... I am used to being the one getting hit."

Freya raised an eyebrow. "Your uncle hits you with these things?"

Damon quickly shook his head. "Just gently to show where he hit me. I swear, it is nothing bad. I am pretty durable."

Freya nodded, taking his word for it.

Damon approached her, going slowly so that Freya could see what he was doing.

"Here," Damon said. "I will show you how you are meant to stand."

Freya nodded, allowing Damon close to her. Her heart thundered in her chest as he approached, and she struggled to catch her breath. Her cheeks flushed, and she wondered if Damon noticed anything as he moved his hands to her sides, repositioning her.

The places where his hands touched her skin tingled, and she felt her blush deepen.

He moved back around to her front, and she couldn't help but note how close they were, memories from early in the day flooding back to her.

It would be so easy to close the gap between them, to press her lips to his once more, only this time without magic dictating his actions.

Would he pull away? Or would he reciprocate once more?

Before Freya could decide, however, they were interrupted by the sound of the front door opening.

“That is probably my uncle returning,” Damon said, stepping away from Freya, his face more than little pink.

Freya hoped his reaction was as much to do with attraction as hers had been, but they had been sparring. It could have just as easily been the exertion of exercise, she told herself in an effort not to get her hopes up.

Damon hurried out the room, and Freya moved to put her sword away, quickly glancing out the window as she went. There had been showers of rain all day, and the water left on the window had moved itself into spiral formations that were clearly not natural.

Freya sighed. No accidental use of her magic was good, but at least this hadn't been harmful. And it wasn't as if Damon had seen.

As soon as Freya put the sword away, she went to follow Damon back into the living room. But as she entered, she saw a man in the doorway that clearly was not Gregor.

He was a little shorter, though that wasn't saying much, and he was much thinner, with none of the muscle Gregor had. In fact, he looked almost gaunt. He had the same paper white skin and jet black hair as both Gregor and Damon, but his hair was flecked with grey.

“Who is this?” he asked Damon. His voice seemed like it was trying to be friendly, but there was something in his tone that turned Freya's blood to ice.

“A friend from school,” Damon said stiffly. “She was just leaving.”

Freya frowned. “Damon...”

Damon shook his head. “Freya, please,” he muttered under her breath, and she could feel the fear seeping from him. “It is time for you to leave.”

Freya wanted to argue, but fear had wired her jaw shut, and she found herself robotically picking up her bag before heading towards the door.

As soon as she was in the lift, the doors closed securely, the fear drained from her, replaced by fury.

Goddamnit! She hated herself for her cowardice. Damon had clearly been terrified of his father, and his aunt was obviously doing everything she could to protect him from him.

And Freya had left him there alone.

She let out a yell of frustration, her fist hitting the side of the lift.

While her loss of control brought a rush of shame, even if no one saw, it cleared her mind enough for it to actually think. She looked to see where she had punched the lift, only to blink in confusion at the large indentation in the metal.

“What the hell...” Freya muttered, just as the lift opened at the bottom floor.

Freya let out a sigh of relief as she saw Gregor coming in.

“Freya?” Gregor asked as he saw her. “Are you leaving already?”

She shook her head. “Damon, he— His father! He’s upstairs.”

Gregor took off, taking the stairs instead of the lift and going so fast that Freya could barely see him.

Freya pulled at the sleeves of her jumper as she tried to decide what to do. Should she go back upstairs and see what was happening? Damon had seemed determined she should leave.

But then, he didn't know that Gregor was coming back so soon. And she should be there, shouldn't she? To see if Damon was okay. To apologise...

"You should probably go," the doorman told her, his voice kind but firm. "You're not going to want to be here for the aftermath of this."

Freya nodded, too worn out to contemplate disobeying an adult.



Chapter Ten

Everything was grey when she made it outside. The sky, the rain soaked pavements, even the buildings seemed grey in the dim light.

At least the rain had stopped...

As she exited the housing estate, she pulled out her phone, with every intention of texting Damon to see if he was okay.

But as she reached for her phone, she glimpsed something out of the corner of her eye, freezing her still.

A pair of glowing red eyes.

Freya's chest constricted as she desperately struggled to breathe. She looked around, but saw nothing, finally able to draw breath once more.

She pulled her hand up to her chest, finding her mother's amulet beneath her jumper. He couldn't get to her. Not while she had the amulet around her neck.

Despite that knowledge, her pace quickened and she hurried home.

Soon enough, she saw her school at the end of the street. She was halfway home.

But as she rounded the corner past the school, she saw the pair of red eyes once more. Only this time, they weren't alone. The Demon they belonged to smiled at her, his sharp teeth gleaming in the dim light.

“Amber,” Freya desperately whimpered. She knew that her Guardian was gone, that she wouldn’t be able to reach her, but she was all out of other ideas. Calling out to her was the only thing that she could think of. After all, Amber would know what to do...

“Get home. Be as fast as you can, Freya. Don’t stop again.”

Freya’s head jerked up at the familiar voice, and she jumped, almost forgetting the Demon as she saw the familiar, ghostly form of her mentor.

“Move, Freya!” Amber commanded, and Freya did as she was told, practically sprinting back towards her home.

“Where – were – you?” Freya panted as she ran out of breath, her speed failing. As she slowed, she figured that talking wouldn’t slow her down much more, and she needed answers.

“You sent me away,” Amber told her. “My hold here is tenuous at best. After all, I am supposed to be dead. I *am* dead. And as such, I’m not supposed to exist on this plane. Your mother made me promise to look after you before she passed. That kind of promise has weight, and it’s the only thing keeping me here. I am tied to you. If you send me away, I go. Our bond had almost faded completely until just a second ago, and I would have passed on. Only you fearing for your life like that was enough to bring me back.”

“You could have told me that before,” Freya managed, now walking rather than running, though it was a fast walk. It was the best she could do, with a stitch now assaulting her side.

“I didn’t think that you would send me away so forcefully.”

“You didn’t think the fourteen-year-old you are charged to look after might get angry enough at you at some point to yell at you to go away?” Freya asked, incredulously. As much as she hated stereotypes about people her age, and the condescending atti-

tude of adults, the fact that Amber had completely ignored them was surprising. “Really?”

Amber shrugged at that, looking away awkwardly. “It’s been a really long time since I’ve had to deal with teenagers.”

“My mother was a teenager when you were dealing with her.”

Amber frowned. “And she died due to my fumbling...” she muttered.

Freya was about ask what the hell she meant by that, when she saw the Demon in front of her once more. He was standing at the end of the high street. The direction home.

Freya spun into a car park, hoping to lose the Demon.

As she entered the car park, however, he walked out from behind one of the cars.

Freya looked back, wondering just how he had managed to get in front of her. But she quickly spun back to the Demon as he finally seemed to be ready to acknowledge her.

“You, my dear, are particularly difficult to track down,” he said with a smirk.

“Don’t let him sense your fear,” Amber warned. “He can feed from it to increase his Energy.”

Freya felt the spike of irritation, turning to glare at her mentor. “That’s not as easy as it sounds!”

“Ah,” the Demon said, looking around. “It seems you have a Guardian of some kind. How unusual. I had wondered how a Sensitive Human had evaded me for so long. It seems someone has been intervening to protect you. So, who are they? Some kind-hearted Witch or Guide, or maybe even a Slayer, who saw some use in a little Human. I would suggest a boyfriend, but someone powerful enough to hide you from me couldn’t possibly be your age.” He looked her up and down before smirking once more. “Though, Light beings are never as virtuous as they like to pretend...”

The whole time he had been talking, Freya had been focusing on the cars surrounding them. Specifically, on the rainwater soaking them.

She drew the water into a small puddle, getting it all in one place so she had an idea of how much water she was working with.

As soon as he finished talking, Freya knew that she only had this one chance. She took control of the water, turning it into a tendril, and then freezing it into a spear as she threw it at his head.

The Demon grabbed the spear out of the air, stopping it just before it hit his face.

Freya froze once more, as he twirled the spear around, still smirking.

“Now, this is surprising,” he drawled. “I can’t sense any magic from you. Someone must have you behind protections. And strong ones too... So, what are you? Witch? Guide? Slayer? No... This is Elemental magic. And you can’t be an Angel, but you don’t seem to have a drop of Mer blood in you...”

Freya ignored his words, watching the spear in his hand instead. If only she could do something with it, she would have a chance to escape. But she felt his grip tighten around it.

Though his hand was only on the very outside of the spear, she realised. And there was no reason why the rest of the spear couldn’t move.

She watched carefully, as he twirled it in front of his face, waiting for exactly the right moment before taking control of the inside of the spear, right as the tip brushed past his eye.

An outer shell of ice remained in his hand, as a slightly smaller spear thrust forward, right into his eye.

“Argh! You bitch!”

He grabbed at his eye, doubling over in pain. Freya didn't stay to see if he managed to get it out, instead bolting out of the car park, into the high street.

She kept running, as people around her gave her odd looks, wondering what she could be running to or from.

They all seemed so oblivious...

"Just get home," Amber told her. "You'll be safe there."

Freya wanted to question that, wondering how her home could possibly be safe. After all, the amulet around her neck had meant to keep her safe, and now there was no doubt that had been bull.

But she kept running, refusing to stop, even as her throat and lungs burned, and her legs went numb.

She fumbled with her key as soon as she made it to the house, struggling to get it in the door. She eventually managed to get it open, slamming it behind her.

"Am I really safe here?" she asked Amber.

"Yes," Amber assured her. "There are protections on the house to keep it safe. The same kind that are on your amulet."

"My amulet didn't exactly protect me."

Amber nodded. "It's always weaker in a portable form. But trust me, you really are safe in the house."

Freya let out a sigh of relief at that, her every limb burning with pain as the adrenaline wore off.

She sprinted to the toilet, making it just in time to throw up as her insides protested the sudden assault of pain and exhaustion, as well as the aftermath of her terror.

"To be honest," Amber started as Freya's vomiting turned to retching, "he shouldn't have even been able to get through the protections on your amulet. He must have been aggressively targeting you for weeks to get through."

Freya frowned as she finally stopped retching, her body seeming to get the message that there was nothing else to come up. “Why? Why would he be after me? He didn’t even seem to know what I was.”

“I have no idea... If he hadn’t seemed so surprised by your magic, I would say that it was over your mother’s actions. But nobody knows that you are her daughter. He certainly didn’t seem to, otherwise he would have known about your magic.”

“But even if he didn’t know, you still knew that there might be people after me? That people might want to attack me over things that my mother had done?”

Amber sighed. “I wasn’t certain.”

“But you still suspected! And you were going to let me, what? Live in ignorance until someone came after me? Leave me with no way to defend myself?”

“I was trying to protect you,” Amber defended, crossing her arms. “I have seen too many people overwhelmed by being introduced to magic too quickly. Especially being introduced just after they were told that their life was in danger. It was how I was introduced, and I wouldn’t wish that on anyone. The loss of control that can lead to... I was trying to protect you...”

Freya shook her head as she grabbed a baby wipe, cleaning her face up. “I would have preferred warning over coddling,” she said. “If I had been warned, I would have known what would happen. And you could have taught me how to protect myself, and not just how to wave some water about!”

Freya sighed as her rant came to an end, her mind finally focusing on the real source of the twisting in her stomach.

“Will he be back?” she asked.

Amber grimaced. “I- I believe that he will. I don’t think that, after going to such lengths to get to you, he would simply let you go.”

“But I hurt him,” Freya said as she threw the baby wipe away, leaning hard against the sink. “Won’t he need time to recover?”

Amber gave a grim shake of her head. “He’ll be able to recover enough on his own to be fine again by tomorrow. He’ll need to see a healer to regain full use of that eye, but other than that, magical beings have a faster healing rate than Humans. And he’ll be looking for revenge.”

Freya groaned, her stomach queasy once more. She gave silent thanks that there was nothing left for her to eject.

“Isn’t there some kind of... I don’t know... Magical police or something?”

Amber sighed. “Not since before the War. Ever since, it seems as if magical creatures focused on secrecy above all else. Large organisations don’t lend themselves well to secrecy. The only people who could be contacted to help would be the Council of Light, or the Demon monarchy. Neither of which is an option.”

“Why not?”

“Well, with the Council of Light, I doubt they would help unless you agree to go under their protection. That would most likely be part of an agreement where you would be completely under their control. Freya, I don’t trust them. They’re the ones who sent your mother away, and I don’t think they did it just to help her. There is an organisation that deals exclusively with the Shadow Realm, and the Council of Light didn’t use them. In fact, they did everything they could to keep the fact that your mother was in the Shadow Realm a secret from everyone else. There are few reasons why they would do that, and none of them are good. They are not people you want to call for help.”

“And what about the Demons?” Freya asked. “Surely there is someone more powerful than the Demon hunting me. Someone we can turn to. You said that they weren’t all necessarily evil.”

Amber sighed “I- Demons are- I know I said that, but I don’t think that any Demon would step in to protect you here.”

Freya crumpled against the sink. “So I really am alone here?”

Amber nodded. “I’m sorry. You’re right, I should have done more to prepare you. I thought I was protecting you, but I see now that teaching you how to defend yourself would have been the best way to do that. I promise, once this is all done, I will teach you anything you want.”

“But you can’t teach me in just one night, can you?”

Amber shook her head. “No, I can’t. But there is still one way out of this.”

Before she elaborated, the front door opened, revealing Freya’s foster parents.

“Freya?” Margaret called.

“In the bathroom,” Freya called back.

“Tell her you’re ill,” Amber told her.

“I’ve been sick,” Freya called out as her foster parents went about putting down their bags and coats.

Margaret approached the bathroom, taking the open door to mean she could enter. She gave a quick glance into the toilet to see the remains of Freya’s stomach, before turning back to examine Freya.

“Are you alright?” Margaret asked.

Freya shrugged. “I don’t know, I think I might have a stomach bug. There’s been one going around school.”

“Did you get any on yourself? I can’t see any on you... Perhaps you should hop in the shower anyway, to be safe. That is, if you can manage it.”

Freya gave a quick glance to Amber, who nodded.

“I think that’s a good idea,” Freya said.

“Do you need anything?” Margaret asked. “It looks like all of your food from today is gone. Do you think you can manage eating again?”

Freya wasn't actually sure of that, so she shook her head. “I'll be fine,” she told her foster mother. “I'll take a shower and then try to get some sleep.”

Margaret nodded. “Well, just text me if you need anything. I'm serious, if you wake up in the middle of the night or anything like that, call or text and I'll be right there.”

“Thank you,” Freya said, hoping that her tone conveyed the appreciation that she truly did feel at the gesture.

Freya hurried upstairs, grabbing some pyjamas before heading into the upstairs bathroom, closing the door behind her.

As soon as the door was closed, Amber appeared once more.

“So, what exactly are we going to be doing?” Freya asked.

Amber smiled. “Well, to start, you'll have to pull a Ferris Bueller.”

Freya frowned. “A Ferris who?”

Amber sighed, rolling her eyes. “Okay, now you're making me feel old. You're going to have to pretend to be sick tomorrow to stay off school. You don't want the Demon attacking you while you're there.”

“Okay, but how will I actually defend myself when he does attack?”

“I'll explain once you've had your shower,” Amber said. “It probably isn't a good idea for Margaret to wonder why you are taking so long. She might get worried.”

Freya nodded in agreement, and Amber left her alone once more.



FREYA GOT BACK TO HER room to see that Margaret had brought up her backpack as well as a glass of water that was placed on her bedside table.

She opened her bag, retrieving her phone, remembering that she had meant text Damon before the Demon had appeared.

She felt awful. She had left Damon all alone, simply because she had been scared. And of what? A Human man? What threat could he have been to her?

And yet she had left Damon, another vulnerable Human, alone with him, because she had been scared... What kind of friend did that make her?

Are you alright? she sent to him, anxiously awaiting an answer.

Amber appeared before she received any reply.

“So,” Amber said, drawing Freya’s attention away from her phone, “I’m going to transfer some of my knowledge directly to you. The transfer will be quite a shock to your system, so it will knock you out for about twelve hours. But when you wake up, you’ll have some of my knowledge.”

“Wait, so I’ll just know stuff that you know? Why didn’t you use this to teach me magic in the first place?”

“Because it isn’t permanent,” Amber explained. “It’s also not a particularly pleasant process. As I said, it will take your mind twelve hours to process the new information, and you will only be able to keep it for maybe twenty-four past that.”

“So I’ll have to stop the Demon tomorrow?”

Amber nodded. “You may keep some of the knowledge, if you use it enough for it to imprint itself on your own memory, but it won’t be enough. And once the knowledge is gone, I doubt I will be able to use the spell again. Every time I use magic, it uses up a part of my Energy reserves, which are incredibly low now that I’m a ghost. If I push myself too far, I will lose my hold on

this plane. And even if I don't push myself that far, it will take an incredibly long time for my Energy reserves to replenish. I certainly won't be able to perform the spell again for months, perhaps even years."

"So I only have twenty-four hours to get rid of him?"

"Yes, though..." Amber sighed. "If you cannot stop him tomorrow, even if you manage to keep my memories, I doubt you would even..."

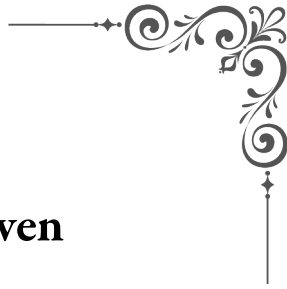
Despite Amber trailing off, Freya could guess what she was going to say. "If I don't stop him tomorrow, I'll probably be dead, won't I?"

Amber shook her head. "It doesn't matter," she said firmly. "This will work. And you will stop him. Now, get into bed."

Freya did as she was told, lying back in her sheets, giving her phone one final glance.

I'm fine, a response from Damon said. Freya let out a sigh of relief, hoping that that meant that Gregor had gotten to him quickly.

Amber came over to her, drawing her attention back to the moment, before kissing her gently on the forehead. As soon as she did so, Freya blacked out.



Chapter Eleven

Amber panted for air, holding up her hands in defeat. The short, skinny girl, with strawberry blonde hair, stepped back, lowering her fists. “Stopping already? I thought you were the one desperate to get better at this.”

Amber sighed. “What does it matter? Even if I do get better, even if I do figure out how to control these powers, you will never let me go, will you?”

The girl - Rosaline - gave her an apologetic look. “I promised I would protect you. Letting you go into a lair of people who have sworn to forcibly remove your powers from you wouldn’t be protecting you, would it?”

“And what about my father? Is he just supposed to rot while you make sure I’m safe here?”

“My job is to protect you, not him. And I think he would agree with me.”

Amber’s throat stung. There was no arguing; Rosaline was right.

“I’m going out,” Amber said.

“That’s not a good idea,” Rosaline told her.

Amber shook her wrist, drawing Rosaline’s attention to the bracelet on it. “I have your protection charm. No one will find me. And I promise, I’m not going far. I need to get out.”

Rosaline, to her credit, didn’t stop her. Amber sighed. It was difficult to stay mad at her friend. After all, protecting her was

her job. Amber couldn't demand she change that, or ignore it. And Rosaline was sympathetic, at the very least, to Amber's irritation at being locked up.

Amber hurried, going to her usual place. She wasn't supposed to have contact with anyone, but she couldn't face being locked up with no one but Rosaline for company. She just couldn't do it.

As she approached the meeting place, she saw Sebastian waiting for her. He smiled as he saw her, but she couldn't help but notice that it didn't quite reach his eyes. His eyes that had dark circles around them as if something had been weighing on his mind.

"What's wrong?" she asked him, oddly reminiscent of the first time they had met. He had asked her something very similar as he had seen her crying. Just after she had lost her father...

He shook his head. "It's not something I can explain," he told her. "I... I don't think we can keep meeting up like this."

Amber frowned. "What you mean?"

"It's just... It doesn't matter. It should be fine. It might be. I hope it is. But... If it isn't... I need you to know I might not be back. Just in case I don't return. I couldn't bear to have left you alone. Not without knowing..."

"Knowing what?"

"That if I don't return, it's not because I don't want to. If I disappear, Amber, I need you to know that it's nothing to do with you."

"Disappear? What do you mean? What's going on?"

"Probably nothing. I just need you to know. I love you."

"I love you too," Amber said, not exactly sure what else she could say. She couldn't help Sebastian if he refused to tell her what was wrong.



AMBER STOOD IN THE collapsing ruin, advancing on Sebastian.

Only, she was no longer Amber. The Ancient that existed within her, that was the source of her power, had now risen to the surface of her mind, so close it now had a name.

Ku.

“*You betrayed me!*” both Amber and the Ancient screamed at once, their voices intermingling.

“No, Amber, please...”

“*Amber isn't here,*” the Ancient said before throwing her arm out.

Though her hand didn't connect with Sebastian, he went flying back into the wall with a sickening crunch.

Rosaline stepped forward. “Why did you do that?” she demanded. “Even you must know that, even with everything that happened, Amber still loves him.”

Amber ignored her, turning to Scarlet, Sebastian's mother, and the Vampire-Demon hybrid who had killed her father.

“You killed him,” Scarlet managed to gasp out.

Amber glared at her. “*You killed my family. You killed my grandmother, my mother, my father... Your son seemed only fair.*”

“I will destroy you,” Scarlet swore as she turned back to Amber. “I will tear that Ancient from your head and take her for myself!”

Amber simply raised her hand before twisting it into a fist.

Scarlet's trachea collapsed, and she died clutching at her throat, desperate for air.

“It's over,” Rosaline told her. “Let Amber go now.”

The Ancient turned to Amber's friend. “*It is not over yet.*”

“How is it not over?! You killed her, and you killed Sebastian. I may not have agreed with their relationship, but you must know this will kill Amber.”

The Ancient rolled her eyes. *“That is being more than a little overdramatic, but you do have a point. She does love the boy, and she has drawn too heavily on my power already in her vengeance. If she continues to draw so heavily upon me, there will be nothing left of her. And yet, she cannot let go. Not after everything he did.”*

“He didn’t do anything! Scarlet confirmed everything he said. Everything he did, he was forced to do, and he’s been helping Amber from the inside since day one.”

“I am aware. And that is precisely why I didn’t kill him.”

She walked over to where Sebastian was lying on the ground, approaching just as he groaned, attempting to pick himself up.

“I guess I deserved that,” Sebastian groaned as he finally got to his feet.

“Scarlet had to believe you had died,” the Ancient told him. *“It was the most fitting punishment for her.”*

Sebastian looked away, but he didn’t argue. “What you said about Amber refusing to let go... You said it was because of me. She doesn’t want to come back because she doesn’t want to see me, does she?”

“She is afraid,” the Ancient told him. *“Amber still loves you, but she is terrified that she cannot trust you. After everything your mother did, can you blame her?”*

“No, I suppose not.”

“And yet your mother’s actions were driven by her not being of a single world. The loneliness of not being fully Vampyre, and yet not being fully Demon, drove her to this.”

“I’m not my mother. My father was a Vampyre, I barely have any Demon blood in me...”

“And yet it is still enough. No Vampyre nest would ever accept someone with blood as tainted as yours. But I can help. I can seal away the part of you that makes you a Demon. I can seal away those powers.”

“You would make me a full-blooded Vampyre?”

“I would make you indistinguishable from one, but I cannot change your DNA.”

“My what?”

The Ancient sighed. *“I forget that this Creation is still young. I cannot change the building blocks of what you are, what your children will be, but I can seal away your demonic powers.”*

“Then do it.”

The Ancient nodded before leaning in, pressing her lips to his.

When she pulled away, the Ancient receded to the back of Amber’s mind, leaving Amber in full control once more as she watched her love writhe in pain.

“Sebastian!” she cried, stepping forward.

He recovered after a few moments, and looked up at her, his red Demon eyes replaced with the golden ones of a Vampyre.



Chapter Twelve

Freya bolted upright, gasping for air. Her mind was in a million different places at once.

Her thoughts slowly began to ease back together, returning some semblance of cognizance.

“Are you okay?” Amber asked, frowning slightly as she looked Freya over.

Freya nodded slowly. “I think- I’m fine. I just- I think that I absorbed some of your memories in the transfer.”

“Which memories?”

“Mostly ones from around when you first got your powers.”

“Yeah, that wasn’t exactly a pleasant time for me. But it was when I learned most of my combat skills, which would explain why they were transferred with the knowledge.”

Freya was about to respond when she was stopped by a knock at the door.

“Come in,” Freya said, making her voice sound a little weaker.

Margaret opened the bedroom door. “Are you up yet? Ryan was about to head out to work. Are you feeling any better?”

Freya shook her head. “I’m still queasy, but I don’t think there’s anything to come out.”

Margaret nodded. “Then you should stay off school today. I’ll take the day off work as well.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Freya assured her. “I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

Margaret shook her head. “Not if you’re throwing up. It’s fine, I can work from home today. I’ll bring you up a glass of water now, and I’ll see if you’re ready for food later on.”

Freya didn’t know what else to do, so she just nodded as Margaret left the room, leaving the door slightly ajar.

Freya didn’t move to shut the door, waiting until Margaret had come back up with the glass of water. Once Margaret left again, Freya shut the door behind her, using a spell that she could remember from Amber’s memories to dampen the sound from the room. She didn’t want to chance Margaret hearing her talking to herself.

“Did you just spell the door?” Amber asked her.

Freya nodded. “I thought it would be a good idea.”

“It was, it’s just that you seemed to cast the spell nonverbally.”

“Well, yeah. Why is that surprising? I have your memories.”

“Because I never quite managed to master that. Your mother, on the other hand, was particularly adept at it.”

Freya tried not to let the mention of her mother bother her, instead focusing on the task at hand. “So, what do we do now?”

“The easiest way for the Demon to get to you, if he can’t get in the house, will be to go after your foster family.”

“If Margaret’s staying here with me, that means that he’ll be going after Ryan?”

Amber nodded. “You have to follow him to work. The Demon should appear fairly soon, and you’ll be able to end this.”

“Will I? I mean, I assume that he’ll have weapons now that he knows what he’s up against. How will I be able to fight him?”

“You’ll have to be smart,” Amber told her. “Now, you’ll have to leave a glamour behind so that Margaret doesn’t get suspicious. Do you know how to do that?”

Freya nodded, going over the incantation in her mind to produce a sleeping version of herself. She hoped that Margaret wouldn't try to wake her up, as the glamour clone wouldn't move beyond the slow rise and fall of her chest. It had the illusion of breath, nothing more.

Freya made her way over to the wardrobe, pulling out a pair of black cargo pants, and a black turtleneck. She would never normally wear them together as an outfit, but it seemed the most appropriate for fighting.

She also supposed that, if this was likely to happen again, she would really have to invest in a sports bra...

Once Freya had pulled on her clunky black boots, she turned back to Amber.

"So, how do I follow Ryan? I mean, it's not like I'll be able to walk behind a car. At least not for long."

"Do you have my knowledge of how to shift?"

Freya closed her eyes, the knowledge quickly coming to her. She nodded, before letting the world around her fall away.

She peered down the street that she had appeared in, just as Ryan's car pulled around the corner.

She kept shifting from one location to another, from the beginning of streets to the ends as she followed close behind the car. By the time Ryan pulled into the car park at his office building, Freya was a little out of breath. She shifted one last time to the roof of the building before letting herself rest.

"I really hope that I keep the ability to shift tomorrow," Freya said, once she was no longer so tired. "I'll never be late to school again..."

Amber smiled. "After using it so thoroughly, I would be surprised if the ability left you completely. Now, do you know how to use your magical senses?"

Freya frowned, doing her best to sense around her with a sense that she had never used before. After a moment, however, she managed to get some sense of a swirling force surrounding her. It wasn't quite sight, and it wasn't quite touch, yet seemed to be somewhere in between the two. As if she could feel something tangible swirling around her with her mind.

"It's just a jumble," Freya said.

"Of course it is. Imagine if you had never used your eyes before. Do you not think that the world would be too bright?"

Freya rolled her eyes. "I think it's too bright, anyway."

"Regardless, this is simply background magic that you are seeing. You will gain perspective over time and this will simply become the magical equivalent of hearing cars on the road. Something you can hear if you listen, but not something you're consciously aware of."

"Again, I think you're speaking to neurotypicals there," Freya said, rolling her eyes. "But I suspect that this perspective will come when the Demon appears, won't it? It's just, if the background magic is this intense, it's going to be quite painful when I sense him, isn't it?"

Amber nodded. "Unfortunately, yes. But you should still keep your mind open. It will give you a warning just before he arrives, which might make all the difference."

Freya decided to simply sit down as she waited, sensing through the background magic to see if she could sense anything else in the area.

Sorting through the patterns, however, did nothing but relax her, allowing more of Amber's memories to float to the surface.

Amber waited outside of her cottage in the woods, feeling awkward. She had left the world behind because she had failed. And yet, here she was, taking on another student. Just waiting to fail again.

Viv arrived shortly enough, with the girl in tow.

Amber couldn't quite bring herself to address her new student right away, instead turning to her teacher.

"Viv!" she cried before pulling the younger woman into her embrace. "I haven't seen you since you were half my height."

Viv smiled awkwardly, tucking her hair behind her pointed ears. She looked every bit the child that Amber remembered.

"Aunt Amber," she greeted. "How have you been?"

You have brought me another student and another opportunity to fail, Amber thought, but didn't say. If there had been anywhere else for Viv to go, she wouldn't be there.

"Fine," she eventually answered.

Amber turned to the girl - Lily - and finally looked her over, figuring that time wouldn't make it any easier. The girl squirmed under her scrutiny, and Amber's anxiety melted just a little. Lily looked terrified, and Amber didn't want to make things any worse for her.

She gave the girl her best smile. "You have your mother's eyes," she told her, "but you're the spitting image of your grandfather."

It was very true. Lily looked very little like her mother, with neither her white skin nor black hair. Instead, she had her grandfather's olive complexion, and blonde hair that Amber couldn't trace. Though her startling green eyes were very much her mother's.

Lily smiled. "That's what he always said."

"You see him much?" Amber asked, trying not to let her conflicting emotions cloud her voice.

"Yeah. He comes by every other weekend..."

Amber struggled to continue smiling at that, but she did her best. "I suppose he would. He always hated how he missed your mother's childhood."

Lily just shrugged at the mention of her mother, and Amber supposed that it was probably a sore topic for the girl.

Amber turned to Viv, deciding that she needed to speak with Lily alone. "Your rooms are set up inside," she said. "Perhaps you should go and put your things away while I talk with Lily."

Viv nodded, leaving Lily and Amber alone.

"So, why don't you tell me why you're here," Amber said.

Lily's eyes grew large at the question, betraying her terror. "Miss Smith didn't tell you?"

"I want to hear it from you."

"I... I was mad."

Amber nodded, listening patiently.

"I'm not good at PE. We were playing hockey and I tripped, and this one girl, a Witch, she fired the ball at my face while I was down. It broke my nose and her response was 'well, you shouldn't be so clumsy.' And I just... I snapped..."

"What then?"

"The next thing I knew, her hair was on fire." Lily pushed her hands further into her pockets as she spoke. "I'd never even managed so much as a spark before..."

"And then what?"

"She put it out before she sustained any serious burns, but her parents made a thing about it and I got kicked out. The Council of Light didn't know what to do with me and Miss Smith suggested that I come to you."

"So now you're here."

"Yup."

"Can you show me?"

"Show you?"

"Your magic. I'm guessing you've only tapped into fire so far."

Lily shook her head in a rapid motion that went on for a little longer than usual. "Nope, nope, nope, nope, nope. Did you not hear me? I set someone on fire by accident."

“You had no idea that you were about to break through. Now you know, it will be more controlled.”

“Right. Because no one with experience has ever accidentally hurt someone with their magic.”

“I’m not Human, Lily. You won’t break me.”

“I would rather not test that theory.”

Amber gave her a firm look, folding her arms. “And you’re not your mother.”

“How would you know?” Lily muttered. “It’s not like you stuck around to see her burn out. Nobody did. How come the five year old girl was the only one not surprised when she broke? I found her weeping over my father’s corpse... Or how about when, a few months later, she topped herself? You weren’t there then either.”

Amber’s stomach stabbed with guilt at Lily’s words. She was right. But dwelling wouldn’t help Lily.

“You’re not her,” Amber repeated firmly. They both had to believe that if this was going to work. “You can control this.”

Lily didn’t answer, shoving her hands further into her pockets.

“But only if you do something, Lily. If you keep just wishing it away, you will turn out like her. I can’t help you if you don’t work with me.”

Lily sighed, bringing her hand reluctantly out of her pocket.

She flicked her wrist and her hand went up in flame. She flailed it rapidly to put it out, her chest seizing up.

“It’s alright,” Amber assured her. “You’re okay. We can work on this.”

Lily nodded, but she didn’t look so sure...

As Freya’s mind returned to reality, she found that part of the memory faded, becoming fuzzy. She supposed that she wouldn’t keep any of these memories once the spell wore off... At least, not in their entirety.

But what she focused on was the way in which her mother had used fire, not water. If her mother could do it, why couldn't she do the same?

Freya opened her palm, and after just a moment, a flame burst forth over her fingers. It only lasted for a few seconds, however, before sputtering out.

Freya turned back to Amber. "What happened?"

Amber shrugged. "You first showed affinity for water. It shouldn't be surprising that fire is the element that you would have the most difficulty with."

Freya nodded with a sigh before conjuring the flame once more. Even if it wasn't particularly powerful, and wouldn't do much damage, it had to be a better weapon than water. Especially when yesterday's rain had all dried away.

Before Freya had a chance to give it much more thought, she felt a sudden burst emanating from the surrounding magic. Almost like a bright light being shined in her eyes.

She rolled out of the way, just in time for the Demon to appear, bringing his sword down right where she had just been sitting.

Freya scrambled to her feet as the Demon shifted back in front of her. He brought his sword down once more, but she shifted back behind him. She ignited her fist in flame before punching him square in the back as he brought his sword down once more, causing him to stumble forward, losing his balance.

He shifted once more, but she anticipated him appearing behind her and dodged to the side. His sword just narrowly missed her, and she hit him once more with her fist. But her knuckles came into contact with metal, not fabric coated skin. She realised that he was wearing a black spaulder that almost melted into his clothes, but now that she'd noticed it, it was more than obvious.

He took advantage of her disorientation as pain shot through her hand. He shifted behind her, swinging his sword before she had a chance to evade. It struck her across the back.

Freya stumbled forward, pain slicing through her.

“Use your magic to dull the pain!” Amber cried, and Freya gathered her Energy to do just that. After all, she knew from Amber’s memories that the Demon would feed from her pain, becoming even stronger.

Freya shifted to the other side of the roof, giving herself just enough time to dull her pain before the Demon appeared before her once more.

Freya shifted away from his attack, doing her best to dodge and evade. Her movement was fluid with Amber’s muscle memory, but her muscles quickly began to protest under the unusual strain. No amount of memories could make up for being unfit.

She brought up her hand a few more times, but flames refused to coat it, making sure that, even when she did hit, she did little damage.

She couldn’t help but wish in that moment that her elemental skill had been with fire, not water. Maybe then she wouldn’t be tiring so quickly.

The Demon grinned at her as he brought his sword down once more, and she barely managed to roll out the way, finding herself skidding across the ground.

He barely looked as if he had broken a sweat.

If only water could be used offensively without any present, Freya thought to herself. There was definitely not a drop of the rainwater from last night, and the sky was now perfectly clear. She doubted she would be able to draw enough moisture from the air to do any harm. And though she was sticky with sweat, she also doubted that that would be enough to do any good.

Nothing more than a frozen needle at most, and she had barely managed to injure him with a spear.

That left the only sources of water as...

Them.

People were basically just large sacks of water after all, and Freya doubted that Demons were built so differently that that wouldn't still be the case.

As the Demon advanced on her, she focused her attention on the water within him, pushing it away from her.

It seemed to be working as the Demon slowed. He seemed to be pushing against the air just to get her.

She pushed even harder, also sending the water up and down, left and right, any direction but towards her.

The Demon continued pressing forward, but she could see that his skin was starting to turn pink, and his eyes were becoming bloodshot. As he came within a few feet of her, blood began to drip from his nose. It was followed closely by blood from both his ears and eyes, and his face contorted in pain.

She gave one final push, with all of her remaining strength, and he screamed in response.

Her vision blurred. She had never felt so exhausted. The Demon, thankfully, seemed to decide that enough was enough, shifting away.

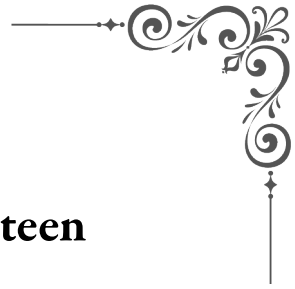
"Freya," Amber said, the anxiety clear in her voice, "you need to get away from here. You need to get somewhere safe to recover."

Freya nodded, though she didn't have enough cognizance to come up with a specific place to shift to. Just somewhere safe...

She closed her eyes before shifting, her consciousness fading.

"Freya?" she heard.

Damon?



Chapter Thirteen

*A*mber looked down at the room full of Demons. There was no way she would get out of this without calling upon the Ancient within her...

The question was whether or not she would make it out of that intact after what had happened the last time she had relied so heavily on the Ancient.

At least Sebastian had managed to get out with the relic. The mission was complete and Rosaline would be happy.

She promised herself, if she made it out of this with her mind intact, she wouldn't take any more missions like it.

Amber took a deep breath, ready to go out there and face the enemies in front of her, but was stopped by the sound of yells from below.

She looked down from her perch to see that the Demons were now fighting with a variety of Witches. Witches from Rosaline's coven.

Before Amber could question her friend coming back for her, a familiar figure shifted to her side.

"You idiot!" she said to Sebastian as he appeared. "You weren't supposed to come back for me. You were supposed to get out with the relic."

"I did," he protested. "It's safe. Rosaline has it. And I would never leave you. You know that."

She smiled. "I know," she told him. "But what about the Witches? Rosaline let them accompany you? That's not like her."

Sebastian shrugged. "Does it matter? We're here and you're safe. You didn't need to call on the Ancient..."

"Sebastian," Amber said in a warning tone.

He sighed. "She sensed the building to see if you were still alive, and she didn't just sense you. She saw two sparks of life here."

Amber frowned. "Do the Demons have a prisoner or something?"

He shook his head. "See for yourself."

Amber did, extending her magical senses, but she came up with nothing but the man in front of her and the Demons and Witches fighting below.

"I can't sense anything."

"Look closer," he told her, his hand extending out to take hers.

She frowned, sensing around her immediate area, only to freeze still as she felt it.

The tiny flicker of life in her abdomen.

"I'm pregnant," she breathed, her heart stopping still for a moment before thundering in her chest.

They were going to have a baby.

"Rosaline agreed to lend me the Witches once she knew. She figured our child deserved to have a mother, not just an Ancient being inhabiting her body."

Amber nodded silently as she took the hand her husband had extended to her.

"Come on," he said. "Let's get out of here."



FREYA AWOKE GROGGILY, struggling to get her bearings as her cognizance slowly returned to her. After a moment, she iden-

tified the surface she was lying on as a leather sofa. After another moment of looking around, she realised she was at Damon's.

How had she gotten there?

She had heard Damon before she had blacked out completely, but she had thought it just a hallucination of her exhausted mind. Just her hoping that her friend would come to her rescue.

But apparently, when she had thought of somewhere safe, it had been Damon that had sprung to her mind.

What had happened? Had she shifted straight into his house? How would she explain that?

Before she had a chance to come up with an explanation, Gregor entered the room.

"I see you're awake," he said with a smile. "I have to say, the kid was rather disturbed to find you in the middle of the road on his way home from school."

"And he brought me here?" Freya asked.

"Well, I was on my way home from work, so he rang me and I swung by to pick you both up."

Freya nodded, as she suddenly became aware of a dull aching at her back. She looked down to see she was wearing clothes that weren't her own. In fact, she was in an overlarge T-shirt and shorts, she figured must be Damon's.

"You changed my clothes?"

"My partner at work, Evelyn, was with me. She patched you up and got you into new clothes."

At that, a tall woman with dark black skin and cropped black hair entered the room. She was wearing black jeans and a tank top that looked almost identical to the outfit Gregor was wearing.

"You're awake," the woman said as she approached.

"I was just explaining to her that you were the one who patched her up," Gregor said.

"I heard," the woman - Evelyn - replied. She turned to Freya. "How are you feeling?"

Freya shrugged. "A little tired, but I'm otherwise fine."

"I don't suppose you want to tell us what happened?" Gregor asked.

Freya's hand went to the amulet that lay under her T-shirt, glad to find it was still there. Her hand gripped it through the fabric of the shirt as her gaze dropped.

"It's not important," she told him. "It's fine. It's over now."

He gave her a look that told her he very much didn't believe her.

Damon entered the room before he asked Freya any more questions.

"Why didn't anyone tell me she was awake?" Damon asked.

"Because she only just got up," Gregor told him softly. "And she lost a lot of blood. Why don't you go to the kitchen and get her a glass of orange juice and a chocolate bar?"

Damon nodded, hurrying off.

While they had been talking, Amber had reappeared, giving both Gregor and Evelyn an appraising look.

"Didn't Damon tell you his uncle worked in private security?" Amber asked. "I've known a lot of soldiers in my time, and he carries himself like one. Though I suppose it wouldn't be that strange for a private security expert to be ex-military." She moved over to Evelyn. "Can you feel that?"

Freya opened her new magical sense and found the background magic had indeed faded since she had encountered the Demon. Gregor seemed to glimmer a little, but nowhere near as much as the woman beside him.

"Look at her belt," Amber told her.

Freya glanced down, and saw that there was obviously something resembling a stick at Evelyn's side, though her top was over it.

"A wand," Amber said. "She must be a Witch. I wonder what a Witch is doing working with a Human... Never mind, the important thing is that she probably used magic to heal your wounds. Hopefully that means they won't scar."

Freya froze a little. She hadn't thought about scarring. Though, it seemed obvious now. Her mind wandered to the large wound across her back that was still giving a dull ache. It had probably been deep, and no doubt would scar without magic. Maybe it would even with magic... Maybe she would carry the events of these past couple of days on her skin forever...

"Freya," Gregor asked gently, "are you in trouble?"

"I'm fine," Freya told him once more. She couldn't quite bring herself to lie and tell him there was no danger to her whatsoever. But in that moment she was fine, so that would have to do.

"Freya, you can tell me anything. I promise. Even if you're in trouble, I won't tell anyone, not even your foster parents. I just want to help."

Freya nodded, more than a little saddened. By all of Damon's accounts, Gregor probably did genuinely want to help. But he couldn't. No Human could.

"You wouldn't believe me, even if I told you."

"I promise I would," Gregor assured her, and she somehow believed him.

But that didn't change the fact that he couldn't help, and she would never forgive herself if he was hurt trying.

"Well, I had better be off. I don't want to be here when the boss finds out you've brought trouble right back home with you," Evelyn said, before turning back to Freya. "I've left you some of

my old clothes in the bathroom. I hope you're right about being fine, but right now all I see is a pup without a pack, and that makes you nothing but prey."

Evelyn strode out of the room, and Gregor turned back to Freya.

"Sorry about her. She can be a bit pessimistic at times."

Freya simply shrugged. After all, Evelyn was probably right.

"I'm sorry for any trouble I might have caused you with your boss," she said, considering Evelyn's words. If Gregor's boss was his brother-in-law, he probably wasn't enamoured with the idea of Gregor bringing girls who had been targeted by Demons right back to Damon. Not when he was trying to protect him.

Gregor shrugged. "It's fine. The boss isn't as bad as everyone says. Plus, it's not as if he has to know everything that happens here."

"If he isn't so bad, why would you keep this from him?" Freya asked, the words escaping from her mouth before she had time to think on whether they were actually a good idea.

Gregor simply laughed. "Well, you have me there. But it's not so much that he would have a problem with me helping someone. It's more that he would worry for Damon's safety, and if you were a threat to Damon's safety, he might try and move him elsewhere. I don't think either of us want that.

"When I first came here with Damon, the kid was constantly in his own head. And I understood why, but that didn't help me to do something about it. Especially not once he figured out that I wanted him to be happy. Then he just wouldn't stop faking it..."

"In all honesty, when he started school, I was worried. I didn't think he was ready yet. And then, one day, the smile was real. He's talking about some girl. And he keeps talking, and eventually it clicks. He thinks I'm here because I have to be. He thinks I care about him because my boss told me to. But no one

told you to. In fact, you made it perfectly clear that you didn't want to make friends with anyone.

"I think he needed that. I think he needed a friend he knows is his friend because they want to be, and for no other reason. If my boss thinks there is danger here, he will make sure Damon is taken somewhere safe, and I doubt you two will see each other again. Trust me when I say that is the last thing I want.

"Freya, I don't care what trouble you're in, beyond just making sure you're okay, so Damon doesn't have to lose his only friend."

Freya nodded. "I promise, things will be fine. I'll make sure they are."

Gregor sighed. He didn't seem entirely happy with her answer, but he also didn't seem as if he was going to start arguing again. "Alright, if you don't want to tell me, fine. Just try not to hurt the kid."

Freya nodded once more. "I won't."

"Don't make promises you can't keep," Gregor told her simply. "Evelyn left those clothes for you in the bathroom. You can change in there."

Freya got up, going to the bathroom as Gregor had suggested. She locked the door behind her, turning back to see that there was indeed a dress and a pair of leggings lying across the top of the closed toilet seat.

Freya ignored the dress at first, instead moving to the mirror.

She knew she shouldn't have been shocked by what she saw, but it was difficult not have some kind of reaction. She was used to being pale, but she was even more so than usual, her skin taking on a sickly shade of grey. Where she wasn't grey, it was because there were flecks of blood dried over the top of her skin. Either that or bruises. Not to mention how her hands were covered in dirt from when she had fallen to the ground.

All the cuts she could immediately see were fairly innocuous. They didn't look pleasant, but they hadn't needed stitches or anything. Her hands and elbows were skinned, but again, it was nothing too severe.

She twisted around in front of the mirror, trying to get a better look at her back. But there was no way for Freya to get a good look at the wound without feeling a hard tugging sensation.

"There are stitches," Amber warned her as she reappeared. "If you keep pulling, they'll tear."

"Stitches? Will I have to have them taken out?"

"No, they look like Witch stitches. They should disappear on their own once they are no longer needed."

Freya nodded. "How bad is it? Do you think it will scar?"

"I won't lie, it doesn't look great. And yes, it probably will scar, though not too badly. It shouldn't be noticeable."

Freya supposed that was the best she could hope for, so she returned her attention to getting dressed.

She gave the shower a longing glance, but no one had specifically said she could use it, and she didn't want to overstep. Though she was covered in dirt and blood and sweat, her hair clumping together in a way that made her wish for a cropped style like Evelyn's.

She experimentally rolled her shoulders, trying to get a sense of how much movement she had with her new injury. The wound actually didn't stop her that much though it certainly did hinder her. What was most noticeable as she moved was how her bra stuck to her skin. She realised that the back of it must have been soaked in her blood, making it stiff.

Unfortunately, there was no underwear in the new clothes she had been given, so she would just have to make do.

Freya ran her hands and arms under the sink, doing the best she could to wipe the grime from her. She tried to move the wa-

ter in a tendril, but quickly gave up. She felt exhausted just trying, and she didn't want to push herself too far. Not when she wasn't sure how badly she had managed to hurt the Demon.

"Do you reckon I stopped him?" she asked Amber.

"The Demon?"

Freya nodded.

Amber sighed. "No, I don't think so. It looked like you hurt him, but it didn't look like something he couldn't recover from."

"I should get out of here, shouldn't I? Before he tries to come after me again."

Amber nodded. "The longer you stay here, the more danger you put them in."

"How am I going to fight him again? I barely managed to hit him this time."

"You *did* manage it, though," Amber said with a smile. "You'll be able to do it again."

Freya tried to smile back, but it didn't quite come. She desperately wanted to mirror Amber's optimism, but she was just too tired.

Instead of continuing to try, she instead inspected the dress Evelyn had left her. She picked it up, only to realise that it was built for Evelyn's large frame. While not exactly small herself, Evelyn was taller and broader, with heavier muscles. Freya figured she might end up looking not dissimilar once she was fully grown -- especially if she kept having to fight for her life -- but for now, the dress was far too large.

"This is just going to fall off me," Freya said as she held the dress up against her torso, the moss green colour contrasting her bright red wounds.

"Don't worry," Amber assured her. "It's a basic defensive dress for Witches. It will reshape itself to fit you."

"Wait, the dress is magic?"

Amber nodded. "It's not specifically designed for use in a fight, they have armour for that, but this is usually worn when you suspect there might be trouble. It doesn't seem badly made either. It seems Evelyn has given you quite the gift. The defensive and healing magic woven into this might just save your life."

Freya raised an eyebrow. "But Evelyn seemed quite sure I was going to die."

Amber shrugged. "I suppose even the most cynical sometimes give in to hope."

Freya pulled on the leggings – which appeared to be made of leather – before pulling the dress over her head, cinching it around her waist with a leather belt that had also been left. The belt had various little pouches and hooks that Freya supposed were for various magical items, but they were all empty. Amber had been right, the clothes had shifted to fit her frame.

Freya headed back out of the bathroom, ready to leave immediately, only to be confronted by Damon, holding a glass of orange juice and a chocolate bar.

"Here," Damon said as he held out the drink and food.

Freya detested orange juice, but she knew it was what she was supposed to drink, and she figured she needed all the help she could get. She downed the glass in two seconds flat, trying not to gag.

"Thanks," she said as soon as she finished, placing the empty glass down on the coffee table.

"Are you okay?" Damon asked. "I know Uncle Gregor probably asked you the same thing, but I was worried... I was walking home from school and... There you were in the street. What happened to you?"

Freya shook her head. "It doesn't matter."

"It matters to me," Damon told her.

"Secrets, remember?"

Damon groaned. "Why do I get the feeling we are going to regret that agreement?"

Freya shrugged. "I suppose only time will tell."

"But seriously, Freya, those wounds... They look like you got into a fight..."

"When did you turn into Sherlock Holmes?"

Damon frowned. "Sherlock Holmes?"

Freya rolled her eyes. "I guess I'll just have to add it to the list of things you need to be caught up on. Though, don't try to catch up on that one without me. I'm very particular about which adaptations are good ones."

Freya opened the chocolate bar before wolfing it down in two bites. When she finished, she passed Damon to throw the wrapper in the bin, but as she did so, she brushed past his side, and he winced away in pain.

"What's wrong?" Freya asked.

"It's fine," Damon said quickly.

"Damon, you don't seem fine. Are you hurt?"

Damon sighed, but brought his hand to his top, lifting it so that Freya could see the bandage beneath.

"What happened?" Freya gasped out as she examined the bandage. It was impossible to get an accurate idea of how bad it was with the bandage covering it, and she didn't want to get too close for fear of hurting Damon.

Damon shrugged. "It- It was my father."

"Yesterday? He hurt you?"

Damon shook once more as he lowered his top. "It's fine. He was here and... It's fine."

Freya shook her head. "That doesn't look fine to me. I... I'm sorry for leaving you. I should have stayed. I should have stopped him."

“No,” Damon said firmly. “Freya, I promise you, if you had stayed, he would have hurt you. He is always looking for new ways to hurt me and hurting you to get me would have been the newest of all. And the most hurtful. I could not bear it if you were ever hurt because of me.”

Freya didn’t know what to say. She wanted to give him a hug, but she was afraid she would hurt him, given his wound.

Damon reached into his pocket, bringing out a small silver charm in the shape of the sword, attached to a black piece of string.

“Here,” Damon said, passing her the charm. “My uncle gave me this. It’s supposed to protect you. But I think you need it more than me right now.”

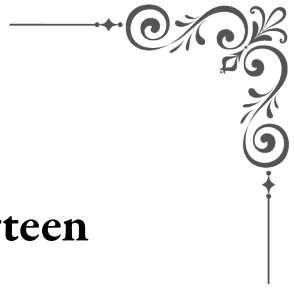
“Damon, I can’t-”

“Just think of it as a loan. Just until tomorrow. Then you can give it back to me at school.”

Freya wanted to protest further, but she didn’t, deciding that would probably be rude. Instead, she took the charm, tying the string around her wrist like a bracelet.

“See you at school tomorrow,” Damon said firmly. “Promise me that I will see you there. And that you will get this back to me.”

Freya couldn’t help but remember what Gregor had told her, about not making promises she couldn’t keep. And yet, she found herself saying, “I promise,” before saying, “I should go.”



Chapter Fourteen

By the time Freya headed back outside, it was getting dark. At first, she simply did her best to get as far away from Damon's as possible. But then she tried to think of how to get the Demon to come to her.

Of course, the Demon coming to her was the last thing she actually wanted, but she didn't exactly have a choice. If she waited too long, Amber's spell would wear off, and Freya would lose her combat skills. She needed to attack him as early as possible if she had any hope of stopping him while she still had a chance.

She figured that Ryan must now be home with Margaret, putting him back under the protection spell. The only other person she cared about enough for the Demon to conceivably target would be Damon. But then, she didn't even know if the Demon had any idea that the two of them had been close. And even if he had, she doubted that Evelyn would leave her Human partner without protections. Especially not after Freya had been to his apartment.

After a little while, she figured the best way to draw him out would be to go back to the car park where she had stabbed him to the eye. He was probably still hunting her, and she figured that the memory of her besting him might be enough to draw him out.

She shifted to the car park to find it empty, but she didn't have to wait long before the Demon appeared before her.

She readied her fists, and coated them in flame, ready to punch him as soon as she had slowed him down by manipulating the water in his body once more.

But before she had a chance to push back at the water within him, he crackled with dark light. He thrust his hand forward, and black electricity jumped forth, hitting Freya square in the chest.

Freya felt a sudden force against her, and the next thing she knew she was on her back.

It took a few more seconds for any kind of cognizance to return, which was just enough time for the Demon to advance upon her, his weapon brandished.

Freya found that she couldn't move, her limbs locked in place by the crackling Energy that still surged through her, keeping her muscles seized up.

Amber's memories told her that the Demon had attacked her with pure Energy. That would have been a difficult feat for even the most powerful Demons as it was a direct drain on their supply.

Freya had a fleeting hope that that would mean that he could no longer access his magic, levelling the playing field if she could just get up.

But then his hand went to a runed stone on his belt. A source stone, Amber's memories told her. Demon higher-ups sometimes charged them with their own Energy and gave them to their underlings, to make sure that they could complete the tasks they were given.

The light of the glowing rune died as the Demon touched his hand to it, draining the Energy. He would be just as powerful as before he had hit Freya.

He smirked as he returned his attention to her. He was taking his time, she realised. He knew that she wasn't going to get

up. Her fingers twitched, as movement returned to them, but it was slow. The Demon had plenty of time before she was a real threat again.

If she could just regain movement in her arm, she might be able to deflect his sword. But only if she had one of her own.

She was out of options, her mind informed her, hit with the sudden realisation that she was in fact going to die.

As the Demon moved to bring his sword down on her neck, frantically twitching fingers brushed up against Damon's charm. She clutched it tightly in her fist, deciding that, if she was going to die, she would do so thinking of her friend.

She closed her eyes, waiting for the blow to hit, but her attention shifted to the charm in her hand, the tiny silver sword expanding.

She quickly yanked up her arm, and the new, full-sized sword within her hand, to knock away the Demon's weapon.

Freya managed to roll to her feet as she knocked him away, staggering upright.

She brought up the sword, and the Demon advanced with his own. Thankfully, Amber's training came easy to her, meaning she was no longer the fumbling girl she had been with Damon just the day before.

She grinned as she got her first strike in, cutting his shoulder. But she quickly realised that she was getting too far ahead of herself as he brought his own sword down to her leg at exactly the right angle to stop her from dodging the blow.

Freya cried out, her leg crumpling beneath her. She barely managed to stay upright on her one good leg, and she was now only holding the sword with one hand, as the other clutched at her side.

The Demon kicked her at the wound, and her sword clattered from her grip as she cried out once more, turning back into a charm as it hit the ground.

She gasped, desperately trying to numb her pain. She could tell that the Demon was feeding from it.

Though, if he could feed from it, she thought to herself as her frustration grew at her inability to completely numb the now excruciating pain, why couldn't she?

She abandoned all attempts to numb the pain, instead letting it crash over her in a way that almost made her vision black-out.

She crackled with Energy, and she thrust out both of her hands, a torrent of black electricity hitting the Demon square in the chest, knocking him down.

He didn't get back up.

She hobbled over to him, her step slow as she kept waiting for him to get back up.

He didn't.

As she approached, she realised that he was still drawing breath, though was barely managing it, and he had a large hole carved straight through his chest.

"I won't be the only one," the Demon managed, wheezing in a way that Freya figured might have been an attempt to laugh.

"What do you mean?" she demanded, desperate to know why this Demon had been attacking her.

"He'll keep sending us."

Freya frowned, figuring that he meant whoever had given him the source stone. "Who? Who would want me dead? Why?"

The Demon spoke once more though this time it was pained. "Sins of the parent..."

Before Freya could demand to know what he meant by that, he gave one last shuddering breath, before he collapsed to the ground, his body limp.

Lifeless eyes gazed back up at her, accusingly, and Freya backed away, suddenly nauseous.

“It’s never easy.”

Freya looked up to see a man standing over the Demon. He was about her height, with the same paper white skin and jet-black hair, though his eyes were black like tar pits. He wore a black suit with a white tie.

“Killing, I mean,” the man continued, failing to look even slightly disturbed by the topic. “I hear it does get easier over time, but the first time is always the worst.”

“I don’t want to get used to it,” Freya said, her mind unable to ask any of the questions it had through her daze.

“I think few people ever do. But the important thing is that you get used to it anyway. After all, he was right. He will not be the only one.”

“How do you know that? Who are you?”

“I am Death,” the man said simply. “I merely came to retrieve the Demon, but it seemed like you needed someone to tell you it’s okay. There is no other way this could have ended, Freya. Believe me when I say it was you or him.”

Freya nodded numbly as she looked around. “Where’s Amber?”

Death looked apologetic. “I’m afraid that Amber tends to leave whenever I’m about. She is too afraid that I will take her to where she truly belongs.”

“I still need her,” Freya told him, almost pleadingly.

Death nodded. “Which is why I won’t take her. Don’t worry, Freya. I promise, you have nothing to fear from me.”

“Said Death,” Freya muttered.

Death grinned. "Sarcasm! That is an excellent sign that you are already starting to recover."

Freya rolled her eyes, though she quickly sobered. "Do you know who sent him?" she asked, figuring that he might have knowledge beyond hers.

Death nodded. "But it is not my place to tell you."

"What do you mean by that? Why can't you tell me?"

"We all have our parts to play. And, as much as I want to, I cannot change mine. All I can say is that you are unique in this world, Freya. You have a choice between Light and Dark, and you were raised among humans. It gives you a unique perspective, but it will also leave you alone."

Freya nodded, having been able to put as much together herself. "Why won't Amber tell me any of this?"

"Because she's desperate for a different outcome this time," he said with a shrug. "We all are."

He disappeared before Freya had a chance to ask who "we" were.

Freya looked over the Demon once more, the armour around his shoulder gleaming under the streetlight.

Freya quickly made her way over to where she had dropped Damon's charm, making sure she didn't forget it. Once she had it, however, she realised that, as soon as she returned it, she would be without a weapon.

She glanced back over to the Demon, and his weapon lying next to him.

Well, it wasn't as if he was using in anymore...

She quickly grabbed the sword, as well as his shoulder armour, doing her best not to cringe as she went. She needed to think practically, she told herself, trying to suppress her revulsion at taking the dead man's things.

When the next Demon came, she had to be prepared...



FREYA SHIFTED BACK to her bedroom, more than a little exhausted.

She dissipated the glamour that was sleeping in her bed and immediately felt as if a weight lifted from her shoulders. She hadn't realised how much of a continuous drain maintaining the glamour had been for her.

She took the sword and piece of armour, walking over to the old wooden box that Margaret had put in her room.

Freya placed the sword and armour inside before grabbing a pen and quickly drawing a rune on the side to keep her foster parents from investigating the contents.

Freya opened her bedroom door, hoping that Margaret hasn't investigated the glamour too closely.

"I'm just going to hop in the shower," she called down the stairs.

"Alright," Margaret called back, her calm tone of voice telling Freya that she hadn't noticed anything wrong. "Are you feeling any better?"

"Yeah, I think I might be on the mend."

Freya hurried into the bathroom with a set of pyjamas and clean underwear, locking the door behind her.

She let out a sigh of relief once she was under the water, scrubbing away the blood and dirt covering her. After half an hour of scrubbing, however, she still couldn't get the feel of dried blood from her skin, even though her eyes told her that it was long gone.

She kept turning up the heat of the shower, hoping that hot water would help it to wash away. After a while, the water became scalding, and the pain cut through the illusion.

Once Freya was out of the shower, she quickly dried herself and got dressed. She looked up at the mirror, to check over the

wounds on her face, only to jump back as she saw something red in the corner of her eye.

After a moment, she realised that it just been strawberry shower gel on the side of the shower, but her heart rate refused to lower.

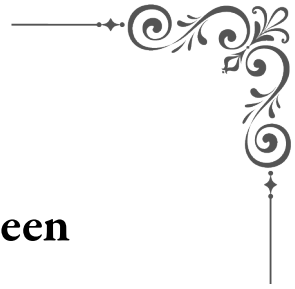
“It’s okay,” Amber said, appearing once more. “He really is gone for good. You don’t have to worry about him.”

Freya nodded, though the Demon’s words about more coming for her refused to leave her mind.

“You did well today,” Amber told her, as Freya left the bathroom and headed back to her bed, quickly burrowing down into the sheets.

“I mean it,” Amber said. “I’m proud of you, Freya.”

Freya didn’t have the energy to respond before her heavy eyelids closed and sleep claimed her.



Chapter Fifteen

Freya awoke sporadically throughout the night, in cold sweats. She once again found herself thankful she didn't dream.

As soon as the first signs of morning light started to leak through Freya's window, she got up, deciding there was no use in trying to get any more sleep.

"I'm sorry," Amber said, as she materialised once Freya had finished getting dressed. "About not warning you, I mean. You were right, you deserved to know. I should have thought to train you. I just... I remember what that was like, and I didn't want you making the same mistakes I did."

"Don't be sorry," Freya eventually said. "Just train me. Make sure this can never happen again."

Amber nodded. "I will, but it will not be easy."

"I was under no illusions it would be. But it has to be better than dying."

"Alright. We'll start on combat magic as soon as you finish recovering."

Freya nodded, looking to the little silver charm that she had placed on her desk. It had to be magic, to grow into the sword as it did. It certainly hadn't been Freya's doing.

"He might just be Sensitive," Amber told her, seemingly figuring out where Freya's thoughts were. "Sensitives are usually from families that have some small amount of magic blood. If

that is true for Damon, it wouldn't be surprising he has some magical relics in his family."

Freya nodded, though she hoped Amber was wrong. The thought that Damon might be like her, that she might have someone she could talk to about this, was more than an enticing idea.

"Regardless," Amber continued, "you will be able to find out for yourself the next time you see him. After all, you can sense for magic now."

Freya nodded. The ability to use her magical senses was one of the few things she still retained from Amber's memories, along with the ability to shift and to use her flames.

Though, what hadn't come from Amber's memories was her ability to use Dark Energy.

"When I killed the Demon," Freya said, "I used the same magic as him, didn't I? How did I have access to that kind of magic?"

"It was Dark Energy, yes, but that's not so unusual. If I remember correctly, your great-great-great-grandmother was half Demon."

"Why didn't you tell me I had Demon blood?"

"Because it's so far back that it hardly matters. Everyone has a bit of Demon blood. I don't think you even would have been able to tap into the Dark Energy if you hadn't been so scared and hurt. Really, Freya, it's nothing to worry about.

"Now, I really must be getting back to my body. After all, we don't want anyone pulling the plug on her. Not least because it might reveal I've been keeping her alive with a magical amulet when I'm not there. Not too sure how I would explain that..."

Freya nodded, realising Amber wasn't going to tell her anything more. "Alright, I guess I'll see you at school."

“Yes, though probably not today. It might take me a little while to get back on my feet. I can still come to visit you like this though.”

Freya nodded once more, and Amber left.



FREYA ARRIVED AT SCHOOL to see Damon waiting for her at the front gate as always.

“Freya, are you alright? You look worse than yesterday.”

Freya suppressed a sigh. She had used a glamour to cover her wounds, so no one would question them, but it seemed Damon saw right through it.

She opened up her magical senses, hoping to find some spark of magic coming from Damon.

But there was nothing but the slightest flicker. Just enough to make him Sensitive, but not truly magic.

Not like her.

“I’m fine,” she assured him. “It looks worse than it is.”

She pulled his charm from her pocket, passing it back to him.

“Thank you,” she told him. “For lending this to me, I mean. It meant a lot...”

She wished she could say more, that she could tell him how he had saved her life, but she kept her mouth shut. She had to keep this secret.

There was nothing she wished for more than that they didn’t have to keep secrets from each other.

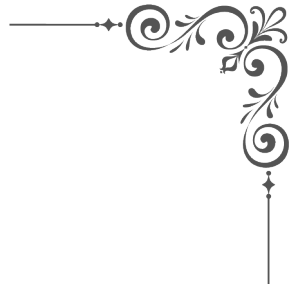
But Damon smiled back, and she couldn’t help but feel he seemed to know exactly what she had meant, though she didn’t know how.

“It was no problem,” he assured her, his fingers brushing up against hers as he took the charm back, sending a thrill up her arm.

Before she could say or do anything, however, the morning bell rang, and Damon stepped away.

She smiled, despite that. After all, things were good. She had a home and a friend and no one was trying to kill her right that second.

She would take it.



Epilogue

Lord Uther stood atop the roof of a church, glamoured so that none of the Humans below could see him.

Across the street, two teenagers walked towards the shops, both standing as close to the other as they dared.

“My lord,” he heard behind him, feeling the magical pressure change of a Demon shifting behind him.

“Do you have word on Manel?”

“Dead,” she said, confirming what he already knew.

“And what did your investigation of the body tell you about what killed him?”

“Well, it obviously couldn’t have been the girl,” Gia said with a shrug.

“No? The subject gave her a defensive charm, and she’s Sensitive, so she could wield it.”

“He was killed by a wound from a sword,” she conceded, “but there was evidence of other magic being used. Specifically, Elemental magic.”

Uther frowned, turning his gaze back to the girl across the street as she laughed with the subject. “A Mermaid?”

“That’s the thing, there was evidence of fire being used, as well as water. Maybe a Mermaid and some form of Dragon teamed up, but that would be unlikely, given their rarity on Earth.”

“And yet the only other option would be equally rare,” he said, taking stock of the girl once more. She had something around her neck that he couldn’t quite make out. He chanced extending his magic out to sense around her. As always, he found that she registered as nothing more than sensitive. But now he could sense the slightest haze around that signature, as if someone had masked stronger power. As he continued to sense, he finally found a source of magic around her neck. A protection rune that reeked of Elemental magic.

“An Angel,” he said, the pieces clicking into place.

“No Angels have been born since the Twilight scarred the Earth,” Gia reasoned.

“But what if the Angel was conceived elsewhere?” he wondered, taking note of the girl’s sheet white skin and dark hair. “Say, the Shadow Realm?”

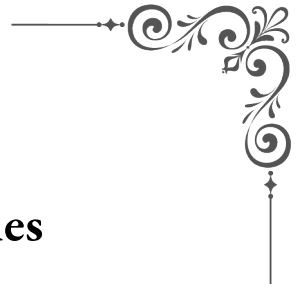
“But the Geni ensure that there is never more than one person in the Shadow Realm at a time, to prevent exactly that.”

Uther nodded. “Which would mean that a power beyond them would be required, such as the King or the Council of Light, and the Council was always friendly with the Twilight’s line. But if we know who the Geni had in the Shadow Realm at the time she was conceived...”

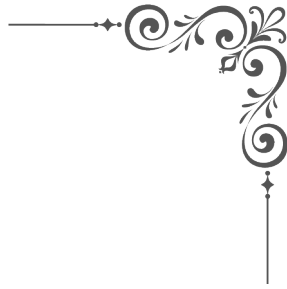
He frowned as worked out the dates, his skin crackling with Dark Energy as he grinned at his answer. “Oh, my sister is certainly crafty. She knew that the subject would lead her right to the Angel.”

Gia blinked. “So, you truly think that she’s an Angel?”

“The first Dark Angel in centuries. Inform everyone loyal to me that I will grant any reward requested of whoever brings me the Angel’s head.”



Short Stories



Family

Alice wasn't amused by the knock at her door. She was in the middle of a multi-player match and didn't want to lose her progress by quitting.

"What?" she yelled through the door, realising too late that her tone had been sharp.

The fact that they had knocked told her that it was one of the adults, and not the children. She was surprised to recognise Janet's voice. They usually ignored each other.

"I need to see you downstairs, Holly."

Alice was used to not correcting Janet anymore. She refused to call her anything but her legal name. She stood up from her game, knowing full well that she would be booted before she returned but not wanting to quite believe it. She straightened her skirt, appreciating how soft it felt.

Ever since her roommate had been fostered, Janet had tried to get someone else to share Alice's room. The problem was that everyone she had suggested had previously bullied Alice. She eventually suggested her own roommate, a young girl with a lisp who the kids also picked on, and Janet had, after a little objecting over their age difference, finally agreed. However, the whole thing had Alice stressed, which of course meant that she was also sleep-deprived. So she had woken up early that morning and had used the time to focus on getting ready for the day, despite the fact that she had nowhere to go. She found it soothing to

spend time drying her hair properly and applying body butter and make-up. Her dress was a soft blue and white, A-line dress which reminded her of her name-sake.

Alice followed Janet downstairs, her hands clasped tightly behind her back, keeping her posture straight. Once they were at Janet's office, Alice did her usual thing of reading the bible quotes on the wall. She found Jesus interesting as a philosophical figure, but it was mostly just an excuse to avoid eye contact.

"Now, Holly, I have a few things I have to discuss with you." She paused, as if waiting for a response, but Alice had no idea what kind of response she might be looking for and so stayed silent.

Janet continued on. "Holly, would you please look at me when I talk to you."

Alice responded by taking off her glasses before turning to Janet, her face becoming a blob of colour.

"Now, isn't that better?"

No, Alice thought, but kept her mouth shut.

"I wanted to talk to you about some of your behaviour issues."

Alice prepared herself for the usual tirade of Janet blowing her few points of non-conformity out of proportion. However, she decided that she was too tired to hear them again.

"What does it matter?" Alice asked. "I'm not far off of eighteen. I'll be out of your hair."

"And that's what concerns me." Her sickly sweet tone had Alice's hackles up immediately. "How are you going to handle the outside world if you can't even cope with the rules here? Employers will not be as generous as I have been."

"You know that I've been working for two years now, right?" Alice liked sarcasm. The problem was that she didn't always re-

member to inflect. But, in all honesty, she didn't care if she confused people like Janet.

"But it's not a real job, is it?"

Alice felt as if her bank account would beg to differ, but she held her tongue, instead asking, "Was that all you wanted to talk to me about?"

"Actually, no. There's... someone here to see you."

"Freya?"

"No."

Alice was confused by that. Freya was the only one likely to ever visit her. "Then who?"

"Your aunt."

"I don't have an aunt."

"Well, apparently, you do. She's your mother's sister. She's been living in Japan since before you were born and has only just contacted us now."

"And she's here?"

"Yes. We verified her identity a couple of days ago. We didn't expect her to immediately jump on a plane and come over here."

"And you didn't think to tell me when she first contacted you?"

"We didn't want you to get your hopes up."

Alice was fuming at that. At seventeen, she was used to disappointment. Every time something was promised to get better for her, it didn't. Even the one time she had gotten fostered, it had been by a woman with a massive saviour complex, convinced that she could 'fix' her. The thing she couldn't handle was having something sprung on her like this. Even the unexpected meeting with Janet had disrupted her idea of how the day was going to pan out, irritating her.

"Do you want to see her?" Janet asked.

Alice was a little tempted to say no. She was spending today in her room alone. She was going to level up her quarian tech and then maybe browse her Steam account for yet-unplayed games. Of course, meeting her aunt would be better, but she hadn't planned for it. If she had, she would have spent yesterday in her room instead of bothering to go to school.

"Okay then," Alice eventually answered. She didn't want to risk offending this new-found family member. She wasn't expecting much, but she would at least like to know more of the mother who had died giving birth to her.

Janet stood up, leading her through to one of the counselling rooms. The walls were decorated with flower stickers and the bookshelf was littered with various toys. There was a desk, but the chair behind it had obviously been repurposed for another room, leaving only beanbags, tiny plastic chairs, and the seat in the bay window, as options for sitting down, though it was occupied.

The woman sitting in the bay window stood up as they entered, revealing herself to be tall for a Japanese woman. Though Alice quickly realised that she was wearing reasonably heeled white shoes, a perfect complement to her white dress. In her arms she held a black duffel coat and her eyes were covered by large bug-eye sunglasses. Her hair was cut into a sharp bob which perfectly framed her features. She looked like she had just walked off the catwalk, making Alice slightly thankful for her unusually good state of dress.

"Would you like me to stay?" Janet asked.

Despite not liking Janet, Alice was a little tempted to say yes. But she took a deep breath before replying, "No."

Janet left, but left the door slightly ajar. Alice felt offended by that. She was seventeen, not a child. She had the right to her privacy. She went over and deliberately shut the door.

“Alice,” her aunt greeted with an almost flawless accent.

Alice would have similarly greeted her aunt with her name, if she had known it. However, she instead simply nodded. After she was sure far too much time had passed, she remembered that “Hello” was also an option, saying it aloud despite its lateness.

Her aunt went to sit back down, placing her coat next to her, though she made no effort to take off the glasses. Alice was thankful of that, since it meant she couldn’t see her aunt’s eyes. It made faking eye contact a lot easier.

Alice decided that she too should sit down, though she wasn’t about to attempt sitting on the tiny plastic or beanbag chairs. Instead, she pulled herself up onto the side of the desk, interlocking her ankles as she let her legs swing back and forth a little over the edge.

“My name is Mitsuki Hino. I was your mother’s sister.”

“I’m Alice.” Only after the words had left her mouth did she remember that her aunt already knew that.

“I’m sorry I could not be here sooner,” her aunt said.

“Why couldn’t you?” Alice wondered if her words had been too blunt but her aunt didn’t seem surprised or offended and didn’t comment.

“It’s a long story. Your mother and I used to be very close. A few years after starting my business, I brought her in as a partner. However, after she met your father, we had a falling out. I didn’t trust him and she... thought my eccentricities made me a bad judge of character. She left for England and told me, in no uncertain terms, not to interfere with her or her family.”

“You were right about him,” Alice figured, though wanted to change the topic as she felt an anxiety attack growing.

“I know,” her aunt said bluntly. “But I obeyed her wishes. Even once she was gone, I was reluctant to interfere. I didn’t even know you existed until a little while ago.”

“How long is ‘a little while’?”

“Eighteen months.”

“And you still didn’t think to interfere?” Alice was marveling a little at the conversation at this point. With anyone else, she was sure she would have offended them. But her aunt just kept on returning her comments with just a few inflections.

“I had my reasons. Ones which I cannot tell you just yet.”

“Okay,” Alice replied, though she was a little confused.

Her aunt leaned forward, perhaps to more carefully regard her, before speaking again. “I have a proposition for you.”

“A proposition?”

“A... blue pill, red pill scenario, if you will.”

Alice smiled a little at the Matrix reference. “Okay.”

“The blue pill option is that I leave for Japan at the end of the week and you stay here. We have as little or as much contact as you like and I’ll give you a little cash as an apology for not being here sooner. Twenty-five million pounds is a good sum for living the rest of your life in relative comfort, don’t you think?”

Alice’s eyes widened at that number, sure she had heard it wrong. “Could you repeat that, please? I think I misheard,” she eventually said, after figuring out how to word her answer without the number in it, in case she was wrong and looked silly.

“You and I can have as much or as little contact as you would like and I would give you twenty-five million pounds as an apology.” Alice didn’t really have an answer to that, but her aunt continued on. “If there is one thing I have learned over the years, it’s that having money makes all the difference for people like you and me. It’s the difference between ‘eccentric’ and ‘crazy’. This is money so that you can educate yourself in whatever you want. So that you’re never looking at things like weighted blankets and wishing they would be cheaper. So that you can have a garden big

enough for a swing and pay someone else to take care of it for you.”

“Thank you,” Alice eventually managed in response, though she was sure that she wasn’t communicating that sentiment enough with her tone or facial expressions.

Her aunt shrugged. “It’s the least I could do after leaving you here.”

“So, what’s the red pill option?” Alice asked as she remembered.

“The red pill option is that I stay here until you turn eighteen and tell you the truth about why I didn’t return before now.”

“What happens when I turn eighteen?”

“You can choose your own path with a little financial help from me, just like the blue pill, or you can come back with me to Japan. I’m always looking for people as talented as you are at my company.”

“What does your company do?”

Her aunt shrugged. “When people have problems, they come to me and I fix the problem for an appropriate amount of money.”

Alice frowned. “That’s just a description of capitalism. What specific problems do you fix?”

“All kinds. Though I do pick my clients carefully. The plus side of variety being that you can focus on doing whatever catches your interest at the time.”

That did actually sound pretty nice to Alice, though she wondered briefly why she got the sense that there was something more to what she was being asked than her aunt had explicitly stated. But she brushed that aside as her curiosity about her aunt got the better of her.

“Then I think I’ll take the red pill.”

Her aunt smiled, standing up. "I was hoping you would. There's a nice restaurant just a little way from here. How about we meet for lunch tomorrow?"

"Okay," Alice said before gritting her teeth as a headache swiftly formed.

"Headache?" her aunt asked, moving towards her.

Alice nodded, unable to unclench her jaw.

"Here," her aunt said, moving her hand to Alice's forehead.

The headache immediately stopped.

"How did you do that?" Alice asked.

Her aunt shrugged as she headed out the door. "Probably some ancient Japanese secret."

Alice assumed she was joking.

"I'll come and pick you up at twelve," her aunt told her as she moved towards the door before pausing and speaking once more. "Alice, if you would indulge me, I was wondering, do you ever feel as if you're... different, I guess is what I'm searching for?"

Alice shrugged with a smirk. "Yeah, it's called autism."

Her aunt smiled as she left the room. "I suppose that may provide an answer, yes."

Alice didn't really have time to think about that before they were at the front door.

"I'll see you tomorrow then," her aunt said.

"See you," Alice replied before heading back inside to return to her multiplayer game.



ALICE STRUGGLED TO find sleep that night, though that wasn't unusual. She woke up every hour or so with her heart pounding, presumably from a nightmare, though she couldn't remember them. At around three in the morning, she gave up on sleep, instead reading on her tablet in the hopes of her tiredness

catching up with her while she was distracted. It didn't, and at four she got up and returned to her computer.

By the time dawn came, Alice was dressed and made-up for the day, anticipating seeing her aunt again.

She finished the game she had been playing at about breakfast time and so went downstairs to investigate the food options. On her way down the stairs, she saw some of the younger kids running down the hallway. She had a sudden vision of one of them placing their hand on the banister to turn, only for their hand to slip on the coat someone had thrown over it. They tumbled down the stairs, their arm twisted.

Alice had no idea where the vision had come from. She supposed it might be an extreme version of her catastrophizing, as she often did when she was stressed, but it had seemed so real. As much as she knew she shouldn't give in to her irrational, anxious urges, moving a coat seemed harmless in the grand scale of things.

However, just as she was about to head back up the stairs to remove the coat, it slipped off the banister and fell into her arms, solving the problem for her. The boy ran down the hall, gripped the banister and didn't slip. It was eerily similar to what Alice had seen, but that didn't mean anything, she assured herself.

Alice slipped into the kitchen and grabbed a piece of toast before scurrying away again, hoping that no one saw and chastised her for taking food to her room. She kept cans of pop under her bed so that she'd never be told off for drinking them in her room, or be told off for consuming too much sugar, but anything better than snack food would require an elaborate set-up. She had sketched up plans for hidden kitchen items, like a kettle and a mini-fridge, but she supposed that none of that was necessary now. Not if she was going to live with her aunt.

Once Alice was back in her room, she carefully went through her wardrobe, eventually finding a knee-length, black jersey skirt and a white crocheted jumper that would have shown her midriff if she hadn't hiked the skirt up to cover her waist.

She looked at the time on her phone, realising that she still had two hours before her aunt even showed up.

She sighed, looking down at her clothes. She didn't want to eat or drink anything more, in case she got them mucky, but two hours was a long time to wait and her throat immediately felt dry at the prospect.

She carefully moved to her desk chair to check her email. She didn't want to do anything that might trigger her hyperfocus for more than a couple of hours, but she needed something to distract herself from her self-imposed ban on food and drink.

Surprisingly, there was only one email in her inbox, a thank you message from her last client. To her annoyance, there were no new requests for work.

While Janet's stab at her freelance work had hurt, Alice had to admit that it was precarious. You never knew when work might dry up, or for how long.

Not that it mattered any more, she realised. By then end of the day, she might have a real job. Or, at least, more than enough money to keep her happy when no one needed a freelance programmer.

She switched over to Steam instead and loaded up the Space Warrior RTS spin-off title. It had been a strange left-turn for the series, but Alice liked it. She chose the race-against-the-clock game mode and set the timer for two hours.



BY THE TIME THE TIMER went off, Alice was already losing spectacularly. Perhaps the pacifist Hath, who had been nearly ex-

tinct by the start of the first main Space Warrior title, hadn't been the best species to play as when going for a conquering victory.

She shut down her computer as she heard a car pull up outside. She assumed that it was her aunt, but decided to wait until she was called instead of rushing downstairs. After all, what if it wasn't her? Alice didn't want to sit waiting in public view. Worse, what if she went downstairs and then her aunt never came at all? What if she waited for hours on end and no one came for her?

What if she had imagined the whole thing?

Before her mind could go any further into a spiral, she heard Janet call her name.

She raced downstairs to see her aunt waiting for her in the hallway, wearing the same black duffel coat and bug-eye sunglasses as the day before, though her dress was different, albeit still white.

"Alice," she greeted with a smile. "I thought we could go into town for lunch."

Alice nodded, following as her aunt led her out of the building.

"Wait," Janet called after them in a particularly shrill voice. "I have to know when you'll be back."

Alice's aunt just gave a slight smile. "I'm afraid I cannot tell you the future. I, therefore, cannot tell you how long Alice and I will spend talking."

Janet fumed at that, but Alice's aunt was out of the room before she could argue and Alice followed close behind.

"You know, she'll probably take that out on me later," Alice pointed out as her aunt got into the driver's seat of a particularly smart look sports car. Alice knew nothing about cars, but this one looked sleek and was an impressively clean shade of white.

“You can stay at my hotel tonight instead if you want,” her aunt said simply as Alice got into the passenger’s side. “I’ll get you a room of your own, for space.”

Alice had to marvel at the frivolous attitude her aunt had towards money. She couldn’t imagine how freeing it must be for her to so easily solve her problems.

“Thank you,” she eventually said.

“It’s the very least I could do after leaving you there for so long,” her aunt replied as she drove out of the driveway and onto the road. They were only twenty minutes from the city centre, but they were surrounded by fields on one side and trees on the other.

Alice sheepishly shrugged as she looked out of the window, focusing on the passing wind turbines in the hopes of avoiding car sickness. “You said you had your reasons,” she eventually mumbled.

“I did, but that doesn’t mean that I am free from guilt.” Before Alice could reply, she asked, “How are your headaches?”

Alice frowned a little. “I haven’t had one since yesterday.”

“And before that, were they frequent?”

Alice shrugged. “I guess. I probably just overloaded myself.”

“Your brain was trying to process new information and it didn’t know how.”

“Yeah, that’s usually how sensory processing disorder works.”

“I didn’t mean sensory information.”

Alice frowned. “Then what did you mean?”

“All in due time, Alice. There are things to explain, but not yet. It’s better to dive into the rabbit-hole head-first, is it not? Otherwise you would never believe the things you see in Wonderland.”

Alice frowned, the metaphor lost on her, but she stayed quiet and decided to be patient. After all, her curiosity had not yet

been sated, and her aunt had made it clear that there was no cutting off point for her turning away.



ONCE THEY PARKED IN the city, Alice's aunt took her down to a small tapas restaurant opposite the theatre. Her aunt asked for a table outside and Alice was thankful for how warm it was, given that autumn was approaching.

Alice had always liked tapas. She always preferred her food in different small portions, all on different plates. Sushi should have also filled that criteria, but sushi rice wasn't the best sensory experience for her. Too squishy.

She chose the meatiest dishes she could. Meat was always the best for her, sensory-wise. Her aunt only chose vegetarian dishes.

As the waitress approached, Alice's head flashed with pain before she saw the waitress trip over her aunt's bag, spilling their food all over Alice. The vision faded just in time for her to see the waitress trip for real.

Her aunt, however, put her hand out, catching the plates deftly before they covered Alice.

"I am so sorry," the waitress said, her face bright red.

"It's quite alright," Alice's aunt assured. "No harm done."

The waitress nodded as she quickly and silently helped them to put the plates down.

"Could we have a bottle of merlot as well, please?" Alice's aunt asked as they finished up.

The waitress nodded before scurrying away.

Alice's aunt turned to regard Alice carefully, causing her to squirm in her seat.

"What?" Alice eventually asked.

"You saw that, didn't you?"

"Well, yes. I mean, it happened right in front of me."

“No, not as it happened. Before it happened.”

Alice shrugged. “I saw that she was approaching and I saw your bag on the floor. They weren’t hard dots to connect.”

Her aunt sighed. “This is why we should never let children grow up with Humans,” she said, seemingly to herself.

“Humans?” Alice asked with a frown.

Her aunt responded by passing her a ten pence coin. “Declare heads or tails and then flip the coin.”

Alice frowned. “Why?”

“You’ll see.”

“Heads,” Alice said before flipping the coin.

It landed on heads.

“I won,” Alice said, wondering what that meant.

“Do it again.”

“Why?”

“You’ll see.”

Alice sighed. “Heads,” she said again.

It landed on heads.

“I win again.”

“Keep going.”

Alice’s frowned again, but she did as she was told.

“Heads.”

Heads.

“Heads.”

Heads.

“Heads.”

Heads.

Alice’s frown deepened as she decided that the coin must be weighted.

“Tails.”

Tails.

She raised an eyebrow.

“Heads.”

Heads.

She looked back up at her aunt. “Okay, seriously, what’s up with the coin?”

“It’s not the coin, it’s you.”

“So, what? You’re telling me that I can see the future.”

“Not exactly. There is no definitive future, just probability. You can see that probability and figure out the most likely outcome.”

Alice sighed as she folded her arms, leaning back in her chair. “That sounds like some Rain Man bullshit to me.”

Her aunt gave a tired smile. “I thought it might. But the real truth is that I don’t know if you were seeing the outcome just then, or if you were influencing it.”

“Influencing it?”

Her aunt nodded. “The ability to influence probability. To make the unlikely likely. It is, perhaps, one of the most boring sounding but powerful abilities out there.”

“Abilities? What are you on about?”

“When the waitress comes back, try to focus on her. Really focus on her.”

Alice nodded as she saw the waitress approach. She didn’t want to seem as if she was staring, but she found that just looking at her was causing a slight headache. It felt as if she needed a new prescription for her glasses, despite the fact that she had gotten new ones just the month before.

Alice tried to blink away the headache, but found that she instead blinked away the image of the woman in front of her, revealing a slightly bulkier woman with golden eyes and sharp teeth. As she placed the bottle on the table, Alice noted that her fingernails resembled claws.

So she's into body modification, Alice reasoned, only to be assaulted by a vision of the woman hulking out of her clothes in the middle of a forest as she transformed into a large wolf.

"How is the local pack doing?" her aunt asked the waitress.

The girl turned bright red again. "We're doing fine, but you already knew that."

"Yes, but it is always polite to ask. And your problem to the south?"

The girl shrugged. "We're pretty sure that there's another pack down there, but we haven't been able to contact them through the usual channels. It's a little concerning. I don't suppose you could tell us anything..."

"There is, indeed, a pack starting to form to the south. But they are all first or second generation Weres."

The girl's eyebrows shot up. "And they're forming their own pack? Most of the turned don't make it long enough."

"It is quite unusual, yes."

"Should we try to contact them? Do they have any contact with our world?"

"They do not right now, but you contacting them would not go well for your pack. They are not happy about being turned, or about passing their nature to their children. Give it another fifteen years for them to cool down. This next generation will learn tolerance."

The girl nodded with a small smile. "You really do look at the long game, don't you?"

"That is the job."

"Of course, Fate."

The girl left as Alice gaped at her aunt.

"Was she... a werewolf?" She felt ridiculous saying it aloud.

Her aunt nodded. "Sweet girl. It's a shame."

"A shame?"

“About next year.”

Alice suddenly saw a fanged man standing over a pale wolf, his chin dripping with blood.

She assumed he was a vampire...

Her aunt poured her a glass of the wine and she gulped it down, hoping that it would make things make sense again.

“Why did she call you Fate?” Alice eventually asked.

“It’s my title, among others.”

“Others?”

“Destiny, Lady Luck... Any belief in a force controlling the circumstances around a person come back to me.”

Alice let out a hollow laugh. “That sounds like the kind of power a god would have.”

“Godhood is so difficult to define,” her aunt answered cryptically. “The Creator, who sculpted this world and the worlds surrounding, is certainly a god by most definitions, but She doesn’t stay to watch over Her Creations. She left the Ancients to do that, and they held a portion of Her power. Then, long story short, their job was taken and bestowed to four mortals instead. One became Death, one became Fate, one became Life, and one became Nature. Four beings tasked with making sure everything continues to run smoothly.”

“And you’re Fate?” Alice asked before pouring herself another glass.

“Not the original. We have those in our employ who help us. They have a small portion of our power and act as our bridge with the rest of the magical community. For Fate, those people are called Oracles. My sister and I were both born Seers – those with the potential to become Oracles – and I was chosen. Soon after, the Fate I served under retired, and she chose me to replace her.”

“Your sister? You mean my mother?”

“Yes.”

“She was a Seer?”

“Once. After I became Fate, I started to miss her, so I made her an Oracle. I didn’t see that the life would not agree with her for long.”

“She left?”

“Yes, after meeting your father. She had been thinking of leaving for a while. He was just the catalyst. She asked me not to interfere in her life, and I complied. I moved the important threads around her so that they would never intersect. Or, at least, I thought I had.”

Alice frowned. “I intersected with a thread, didn’t I? You said that you didn’t know I existed until something came up. That was a thread, wasn’t it?”

Her aunt smiled. “You are quite astute. I wonder, can you see the thread that you were so close to?”

Alice was about to object, saying that she had no idea how to do that, when she was hit by a rush of images.

A bracelet transforms into a sword.

A girl loses a shoe.

A pair of wings.

Herself, standing defiant.

A mermaid in a swimming pool.

An assassin’s blade.

A trident pulled from the depths.

A familiar stranger.

A shadow.

A tattoo.

The world aflame.

Her world aflame.

“Freya,” Alice said as the images stopped. “Freya was the thread you were manipulating.”

“Yes. You’re getting good at this.”

“But... She’s my friend.”

“I know, and I’m sorry, but I play the long game, and Freya is a particularly important piece. If it makes you feel better, you have just seen the most intense parts of my plan for her, the parts that burn the brightest, but there are others. Quieter, happier moments.”

“And the end?”

“Everything ends, Alice. Asking me to change that is asking too much.”

Alice sighed, nodding. “Okay. So, this is the job you’re offering me? Changing people’s fate?”

“Yes. You should have been born a Seer. The Earth was scarred years ago, and no more Oracles could be made or born. However, I don’t think the person who scarred the Earth thought about that power being transferred. Say, from mother to daughter...”

“My mother? That’s why she died when I was born?”

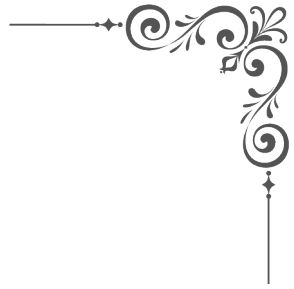
“Yes, but don’t blame yourself. Someone else is to blame for that. The point is, I am now short-staffed, and you have the power to help. However, if you do not want this life, I won’t force it on you. As I told you yesterday, you can still walk away with enough money to live comfortably.”

“Or I could work with you?”

“Or you could work with me. I can teach you how to use your powers. If you go, I will show you how to dampen them.”

Alice took the coin again and thought of it landing on its side before flipping it into the air and letting it fall to the table. It spun in front of her, almost falling from the table, before coming to rest perfectly on its side.

“Alright,” she said. “Show me what else I can do.”



Ghosts

“Hey.” Freya lifted her head from her phone to see Damon approaching. Ever since her encounter with the Demon, they had been meeting up in town at the weekend. Initially, it had been to practice their Shakespeare scene for English, but that had passed and yet they kept meeting up.

“Hey,” Freya greeted with a grin, doing her best not to wince as she twisted her arm wrong in an attempt to put her phone back in her pocket. Her wounds were taking their sweet time healing, though Amber seemed pleased with that development. She kept on using it as excuse for her to go slowly with Freya’s combat training. It frustrated Freya to no end, but there was nothing she could really do about it.

“Are you doing anything tonight?” Damon asked her excitedly.

Freya groaned. She had hoped he wouldn’t ask her that.

“I’m a little old for trick or treating,” she figured, hoping that he would drop it.

“Well, yeah, but Kevin has apparently set up a haunted house. A bunch of us were going to go tonight.”

Freya frowned. “How very American of him.”

Damon sighed, folding his arms.

“Is that a ‘no’? You don’t seem as excited about Halloween as everyone else.”

“Did you just use a contraction?”

“I am trying to be less stilted in my speech. Now stop changing the subject.”

Freya sighed. “I just don’t get the hype. Why are you so invested anyway? If this is your first Halloween, I’ve got to tell you, it’s not as exciting as everyone makes it out to be.”

“We do, in fact, celebrate All Hallows’ Eve back home.”

“I thought only people who practised Wicca called it that.”

Damon ignored that. “The point is that, while we *did* celebrate, you do it differently here.”

“Different? How?”

Damon shrugged. “We have these masquerade balls. Not that I ever got to attend one... But I hear they are nice. It’s said that the veil between the living and dead is thinner, and the dead are scared away if they recognise faces they once knew. Hence the masks.”

“Wait, so they deliberately try to *attract* the dead? *Why?*”

“Why wouldn’t they? If you got a chance to see a loved one who had died, wouldn’t you?”

Freya didn’t really have a response there. Not least because she spent a good deal of her time with a ghost. But Amber wasn’t a *ghost* ghost. She looked like a person.

“If I tell you something, will you promise you won’t laugh?” she asked him as she folded her arms.

“Of course.”

She sighed, bracing herself before admitting, “When I was little, I got really scared one Halloween.”

Damon raised an eyebrow. “Scared how?”

She shrugged, letting out an irritated groan. “I don’t know! I’m sure it was just some trick of the light, or I was just jumpy because I accidentally watched a really scary bit of *Spirited Away*. I just... I kept seeing eyes in mirrors. Or, you know, I thought I saw

eyes in mirrors. Like someone was watching me. I know, I know, it's really silly..."

"That's not silly," he assured her, though he was looking at her with a strange expression that she couldn't place. "So, you won't be coming with me tonight?"

"I... I'm being ridiculous. Of course I'll go with you."

"Do you have a costume?"

She paused at that before shaking her head. "Nope. And I bet the costume shop will be packed."

"I walked by it on the way here. There was a line. And a bouncer."

"A bouncer? *Really?*" She sighed, shaking her head. "You know, I think the jewelry place has masks and wigs, and it's probably not as packed. I can string together a TV Black Canary costume with stuff from there and stuff at home."



FREYA RETURNED HOME for an hour to put her costume on, and found that most of that time was taken applying black eye shadow around her eyes.

"I look like the Winter Soldier and Rocket Raccoon's love child," she complained to Amber as she placed her mask over her face, checking that she had covered all of the skin within the eye holes. She was no longer so worried about talking to her guardian in her room, as Amber had shown her how to make guards which would soundproof the room when the door was closed.

"I don't know who they are," Amber said simply. "It'll look fine once you put the mask on properly."

Freya gave a reluctant hum of agreement as she realised that she was done. The mask had thin ribbon for her to tie around her head, which she knew would be annoyingly fiddly.

“Hey Amber,” she said as she finally managed to get it tied in place. “Is Halloween really a thing? Like, with magic and stuff, I mean.”

Amber nodded. “Death is rather cagey about where you go when he takes your soul after you die, but wherever it is definitely gets closer to this realm on Halloween. Most Humans won’t know the difference, but magical beings, and even Sensitive Humans, can feel a change. It can be... unsettling.”

Freya gave a disgruntled hum. She’d never really given much thought to life after death. When you died, you died. That was it. Obviously, Amber being there should have told her differently, but Amber was different. Death let her linger. For everyone else, she assumed that Death taking them was it. The end of the line. She’d never really believed that she was jumpy on Halloween because of *ghosts*. Not real ghosts anyway. She had assumed they were just figments of her overactive imagination.

She wondered if she should just start attributing everything weird that ever happened to magic from now on.

“When I was little, I thought I saw eyes watching me in mirrors on Halloween,” Freya admitted as she pulled on her blonde wig.

“That’s not surprising. Mirrors are often used as portals or windows between realms.”

Freya pulled a face as she finished her outfit by putting on her leather jacket, inspecting herself in the mirror. “I’m not exactly happy about ghosts watching me.”

“You know that I’m technically a ghost, right?”

“Exactly.” Freya hadn’t exactly been quiet on the fact that Amber watching her before she came into her powers unsettled her. She knew that Amber hadn’t really had another option. She needed to keep an eye on her, and make sure she didn’t attract the attention of other magical beings, but she hadn’t been able to

gather enough power to possess anyone until Freya was already a teenager, meaning that they couldn't interact.

It still weirded her out, though.

"I'm not going to have to fight ghosts tonight, am I?" Freya asked as she put her phone into her pocket, ready to go out for the night.

"I doubt it," Amber assured her. "They will be just as incorporeal as I am. They won't be able to harm you."

"Good to know."

"Though, if they do start bleeding through to this world, you may not be able to call me. I'm technically supposed to be on that side and things can get... *messy* if I get too close to the wobbly bits."

"Wobbly bits? That's what it's called? *Wobbly* bits in the veil between worlds?"

"Well, I'm not exactly well-versed in the correct vernacular on the topic," Amber defended. "So yes, I shall refer to them as *wobbly* bits."



FREYA HURRIED TO MEET Damon, finding him on the street corner by Kevin's house, looking at his phone. He was wearing a black onesie with a glow-in-the-dark skeleton pattern on it. On the wall next to him was a skull mask.

"Hey," she called to get his attention.

He blinked at her for a few moments before recognising her.

"Well, I guess it's confirmed that the mask and wig are good enough to hide your identity," he joked.

She laughed. "Now we just need to find some crime to stop. I guess you could pass as a budget Ghost Rider."

"I'm just here for the skeleton war," he told her as he put the mask on.

“You came dressed as an old meme?”

“I came dressed as a skeleton, who can be considered part of an old meme in certain circumstances.”

“Nerd.”

“She said, while dressed as a comic book character.”

“I’m actually dressed as the TV iteration, I think you’ll find.”

“I rest my case.” He pointed down to the other side of the cul-de-sac. “Come on. Kevin’s house is the one with all the pumpkins and stuff.”

Freya looked down the street and indeed saw that one of the front gardens was filled with pumpkins and skeleton props.

“Okay, I can vaguely understand one person getting overexcited about Halloween, but why is everyone else playing along? This seems too... I don’t know... *Childish* for your friend group. Shouldn’t you all be on the town moor, smoking weed and being too cool for this?”

Damon rolled his eyes. “They are not like that, Freya.”

She made a disbelieving hum, folding her arms as he led her to Kevin’s.

“Also, Kevin’s parents aren’t here, and his brother bought a metric-ton of booze.”

She smirked as it finally made sense.

As they approached the front door, they were greeted by someone covered in a bedsheet, with poorly shaped eye holes cut out of it.

“Oooooooooohhhh, Iiiii’m aaa spoooooooooky ghooooooooost,” she said, waving her arms under the sheet.

“Nice last minute costume,” Damon commented, pushing his mask up to the top of his head.

“Thaaaaaanks,” the ghost said before dropping the voice. “I couldn’t afford to splash out on a costume, so me mam let me

have this old thing.” She turned to Freya. “And who are you meant to be?”

“Black Canary?”

“Who?”

“From Arrow. You know, the TV show...”

The ghost shook her head before turning back to Damon. “If you’re going to bring a date from another school, try to bring someone who knows the difference between Halloween and Comic Con.”

“She is not from another school,” Damon said, seemingly bewildered by the comment. “It is Freya.”

The ghost nodded. “Well, I guess that makes sense then.”

Freya stalked off at that, not wanting to risk using her power to set the bedsheet aflame.

“Gemma is like that with everyone,” Damon assured her as he caught up with her. He hadn’t replaced his mask, seemingly forgetting about it. “Don’t let it get to you.”

Freya sighed. “I’m not. I actually couldn’t care less about her opinion of me. I just don’t have to stand there and listen to it.”

“Fair enough,” he agreed as they moved through the dark rooms of the house. Kevin had seemingly set up various spinning party lights in some of the rooms, with the other illuminated by lamps with paper decorations draped across them. The whole thing looked like a giant fire hazard to Freya.

That didn’t bother her, though. No, what bothered her was the loud, thumping music that was being pumped throughout the house. She was immediately struck by the thought that there had to be a spell or something that could dampen the noise, but she didn’t know it. She made a mental note to ask Amber about it later.

“Let’s get a drink,” Damon said after a moment, leading her through to the kitchen.

He pointed to the array of spirits. "What do you want?"

"Do they not just have beer?" she asked.

Damon spun around before yelling "Kevin!"

A guy in a black cloak with a scythe spun around. "Hey, Damon! You made it!"

"Yeah! Great party, dude."

"Thanks. I can't believe so many people showed up." He turned to Freya. "Who's your friend?"

Freya answered for herself. "It's me. Freya. We have drama together."

Kevin frowned at that, turning back to Damon. "You invited Freya?" he hissed.

"Oh my god, I am *right here*," Freya said, her arms folded tightly across her chest. "But if I'm not welcome, I'll go."

"He didn't mean—" Damon started, but Freya had already stormed off.



FREYA HEADED THROUGH the first door, only to end up in what appeared to be the dining room. She faltered when she realised that there were no decorations and no other guests, telling Freya that this was probably a no-go zone. She didn't care. She was storming out anyway.

She moved past the large mirror, only to stop dead. She caught sight of something out of the corner of her eye. Turning to look in the mirror, she saw that her own reflection had been replaced by that of a pale figure with messy black hair and a swirling black tattoo around her right eye. Her eyes were entirely white.

"*Help me*," the figure in the mirror rasped, causing Freya to jump backwards, into the dining table.

"Amber!" Freya called out, but there was no answer.

Freya spun around, intending to leave, only to see the woman from the mirror was now physically *in* the room. She looked as if the colour had been washed out of her, but she was solid. She was sitting in the corner of the room, her knees clutched to her chest as her jet black hair stuck out at odd angles. She had a black, spiralling tattoo across her left shoulder and the left side of her neck, seemingly spreading out from her heart, matching the one around her eye. All up and down her arms and legs were deep slashes, though no blood was spilling from them. Probably because she didn't have any.

Freya finally found her voice, managing to say "You look like hell," in a slightly strained voice.

The woman jerked her head up to look at Freya, her eyes an identical shade of green to her own.

And then she laughed. It was a little broken, but it was definitely a laugh, as she looked over her arms and legs.

"I can see that," she said as she stood up, quickly looking distraught. "Oh, I really do, don't I? I didn't think of that... What if Lily is the one to find me?"

Freya's mind honed in on her mother's name, though she quickly told herself that Lily was a common enough name.

"Lily?" she asked.

"My daughter... Can you find her and make sure she's not the one to find me? Please? Her full name is Lily Snow. I know it's not a Reaper's job, but please just find her..."

Freya frowned, deliberately focusing on anything but the fact that this was her grandmother in front of her.

"I'm not a Reaper."

The woman blinked at her a few times.

"No, of course you're not," she said after a while, seemingly to herself. "He wouldn't send a Reaper. Of course he wouldn't send

a Reaper... He didn't. I remember now. He blamed himself... But he didn't send a Reaper."

She turned back to Freya with a frown. "How long?"

"How long what?"

"How long has it been?"

Freya shrugged. "A while, but I can't be more specific since I don't know when you died."

"1988."

Freya quickly worked it out in her head. "You've been dead for twenty seven years."

The woman folded her arms with a frown. "If you're not a Reaper, then how do you see me?"

"It's Halloween."

The woman raised an eyebrow. "I have corporeal form. *After* moving on. Even I was never that powerful. I don't think..."

Freya shrugged sheepishly. "I don't know for sure but... I have a hunch."

"A hunch?"

"Shared blood," Freya figured. "You said your daughter's name was Lily Snow?"

The woman nodded. "What of it?"

"Well, that was my mother's name." She pulled her mother's pendant from under her top, where she always kept it. "This was hers, apparently. And, I guess, yours. Amber said her mother gave it to her."

She nodded, looking it over. "It belonged to my grandmother, who passed it down to my mother. Then she passed it down to me. I suppose Lily would have gotten it after I died... You said *was* when talking about her. Past tense. Where is she? And how does she have a fully grown daughter in so little time?"

"Well, I mean, I'm only fourteen. She died when I was born. That was back in 2001. She was nineteen."

She looked Freya over before shaking her head. “She died at *nineteen*? From childbirth?”

“Well, no, they just coincide. She died stopping the war,” Freya explained, shifting her weight from foot to foot. She wasn’t sure how she could feel more uncomfortable.

“Of course she did,” the woman muttered, shaking her head. “You said Amber looks after you now?”

Freya frowned. “I guess. It’s complicated.”

She heard Damon shout “Freya!” at that point, distracting her slightly.

The woman grabbed her shoulders, bringing her attention back to her.

“Don’t trust Amber,” she warned. “She is probably the reason your mother died.”

She disappeared just as Damon entered the room.

“Are you okay?” Damon asked.

“I... I’m not sure,” Freya admitted, her eyes still glued to where her grandmother had been just a moment before.

“I know Kevin was an arse, but it wasn’t about you. Not really. He just thought you might tell about the booze.”

“It wasn’t what Kevin said,” Freya managed after a moment, realising that she was shaking. She tried to stop, but her efforts did nothing.

“Was it ghosts?” he asked, no judgement in his tone.

“Damon?”

“Yeah?”

“Let’s just stay in and watch Cabin in the Woods next year.”



FREYA GROANED, THROWING her mask down onto her desk, as it occurred to her just how difficult it would be to take off all of the black eyeshadow she had on.

Amber appeared as she pulled a babywipe from the packet on her desk.

“You tried to call me before,” Amber said, a little hurriedly. “Was everything alright?”

Freya nodded. “Yeah. I just talked with a ghost.”

“You *talked* with one? How did it get through enough for that?”

“Shared blood. It was my grandmother.”

Amber seemed to pale at that, her eyes widening slightly.

“You talked with Hope? What did she say?”

Freya shrugged, turning her attention back to removing her makeup. “She wasn’t all that coherent at first. She hadn’t realised how long she’d been dead. She asked me to find her daughter and I recognised my mother’s name. Then she recognised my pendant when I showed it to her. She disappeared pretty quickly, though. But not after warning me not to trust you.”

She turned back to Amber. “She said that you were probably the reason my mother died.”

Amber nodded, her arms folded tightly across her chest.

“She was right. I’ve never hidden the fact that your mother died because of choices I made, Freya.”

Freya had to admit that she wasn’t wrong there as she leaned back against her desk.

“I know. It’s just... different to hear someone else say it. She seemed to *really*... She was adamant that I shouldn’t trust you.”

“And she has every reason to think that way,” Amber admitted. “After my husband and son died... I let the Ancient inside me take hold. I didn’t even realise I was doing at first, but I relied on her more and more. She is a being of power far beyond any left in this Creation, and she doesn’t really see people as *people*. They’re just tools. Just part of her equations.”

“And that’s why my grandmother hated you? Because you didn’t treat people as people?”

Amber sighed. “Because I didn’t treat *her* as a person. I could have helped her, and I didn’t. Not when it mattered. I just steered her power towards good use. In the end, I was the only one surprised when she killed herself.”

“She did that to *herself*?” Freya asked, remembering the deep gashes up and down Hope’s arms and legs.

“Yes. I realised what I had become after that, and I removed myself. I lived alone, with little contact with the outside world, until one of your mother’s teachers sought me out. I had hoped that I could help your mother in the way that I couldn’t help your grandmother, but I miscalculated. And we both know how well that turned out.”

Freya raised an eyebrow. “I mean, you died. I wouldn’t exactly call that a ‘miscalculation.’”

Amber nodded, though she in no way looked as if she believed Freya’s words. “Regardless, the Ancient is gone now, and I have no agenda beyond keeping you safe. If you trust nothing else, trust that.”

Freya mulled it over for a moment before deciding to trust Amber until she did something to betray that trust. She had certainly never tried to use her as a weapon in any war.

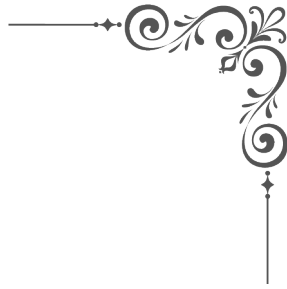
“Okay then,” Freya said simply before returning to removing her makeup.

“What else did she say?” Amber asked.

“Nothing I can think of. Why?”

Amber shrugged. “Just curious. It’s not every day you get to speak to a dead family member.”

“No, I guess not.”



Cold

Freya was pretty sure that it hadn't *really* snowed for years. Sleet, hail and ice? Sure. But no *real* snow. Not even out in the little village where she had been before, so she assumed that the city definitely hadn't seen any.

But this year, on Christmas Eve no less, all she could see out of Damon's window was a constant flurry of white.

Freya's foster parents were up a height, so she had decided that being at home wasn't the best plan. Margaret's parents had come up to see them for Christmas (though they were arriving that night and staying in a hotel until Christmas Day) and Ryan's sister was staying over with her daughter.

Thankfully, Damon didn't celebrate Christmas, so there was no problem with her being round at his while Ryan fussed over any of the food prep he could do early and Margaret panicked about the tablecloth being the wrong colour.

"So, does this mean that you don't get days off for your own holidays?" Freya had asked him when he had wondered what Christmas was.

He had simply shrugged in that evasive manner of his, saying that he "didn't really celebrate any kind of holiday."

Freya's attention was drawn back to the TV as the credits started to roll. She had insisted that they watch *Die Hard*, given that it was Christmas. They had wrapped themselves up in blankets on the sofa and Freya couldn't help but smile when she had

learnt that Damon had *very* precise specifications when it came to hot chocolate.

“What next?” Freya asked. “Oh, I know! We should watch the Muppets’ Christmas Carol!”

Damon didn’t respond. He seemed too preoccupied with his phone. Though, after a moment, she noted how his knuckles were white - or, well, whiter than usual - as he clutched it.

Freya peeked over to the screen. He had been scrolling through a website she didn’t recognise, though it looked like some kind of joke/meme collection. She could see the beginning of a rage comic at the bottom of the screen.

The joke at the forefront of the screen just said “Trigger Warnings - Because I’m a special snowflake who needs to be babied.”

Freya seethed at the “joke”, though she was momentarily confused by Damon’s reaction. His friends regularly found that kind of thing funny, along with “get back in the kitchen” jokes. Damon had stopped using them only when his uncle had heard and scolded him. The scolding, much to Freya’s delight, had come with a reminder that Freya could disarm him in less than a minute when they sparred together.

“You okay?” Freya asked him.

He finally put the phone down, a little more forcefully than necessary, as he answered. “Hmm? Yeah, I’m fine.”

She raised an eyebrow to indicate that she didn’t believe him.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he muttered, picking up the remote and returning to searching through the Netflix Christmas movie collection. After a moment, he gave a frustrated sigh, putting down the remote.

“Can we not watch Christmas stuff?” he asked.

Freya did her best not to flinch at the venom in his voice. She hated how sensitive she was to sharp tones. Especially given that she could take physical damage in battle with little complaint.

“Of course,” she replied. “We can watch whatever.”

He seemed to have realised how unnerved she was, despite her efforts to hide it, softening his expression a little.

“I just... First it was Halloween, and then Bonfire Night, and now this... This w- country is still so foreign to me. It reminds me that this isn’t home... But being away from there... From my father... It wasn’t home there, either.”

Freya didn’t really know what to say to that and so she did the only thing that made sense to her in the whirlwind of emotion, picking up her blanket from around her and wrapping it around him, giving him another layer.

He frowned a little, looking confused, but smiled after a moment.

“Thanks.”

She shrugged as she finally managed to figure out what she wanted to say.

“It takes time to make somewhere feel like home. Trust me on that. You’ve just got to be patient.”

He snorted. “Coming from you, that’s a little hypocritical.”

“What do you mean?”

“Freya, you are the *least* patient person I know.”

She gently punched the mound of blankets, knowing that he couldn’t feel it.

The action was quickly followed up, however, by a sneeze.

“Now I feel bad about taking your blanket,” Damon said as she sniffed a little.

“It’s fine,” she assured, though that was quickly followed by another sneeze.

“That doesn’t sound fine to me,” Damon said. “It sounds like a cold.”

Freya didn’t really have an argument for that. Her distaste for being ill wouldn’t be taken into account by the virus.

They were interrupted by Gregor storming through, the front of his festive jumper soaked. Freya had asked when she had arrived why he was wearing it, if they didn’t celebrate Christmas, and he had told her that it had been a gift from his boyfriend.

“Of course, the plumbing had to go haywire on Christmas. It’ll be impossible to get anyone out...”

“What happened?” Damon asked him.

“The tap exploded out of nowhere! I managed to get it off and then it did it again. It looks like it’s settled now, but we’ll have to call someone out if it does it again.”

He turned his attention to Freya.

“Though, on a different note, it’s getting pretty bad outside. If you want to get home tonight at all, I should probably take you now.”

Freya groaned, not really wanting to leave. She didn’t imagine that things would have calmed down at home in her absence.

“Are you sure it’s not a hassle to drive me back?” Freya asked.

Gregor raised an eyebrow. “In this weather? There’s no way I’m letting you walk home.”



FREYA ARRIVED HOME to her worst nightmare, as her foster parents scurried around the house, finding new things to fix or clean every five seconds.

“I picked out a dress for you to wear,” Margaret told her as soon as she walked through the door, barely looking up as she lit the candles on the mantle. “Go change into it now. Jessica will be here any minute.”

Freya raised an eyebrow. Jessica was Ryan's sister, and all that she had heard from Margaret since Ryan had asked his sister join them for Christmas was that she was some kind of 'hippie' with a poor taste in men, who had been left pregnant without a partner. Her daughter, Nightingale, had just turned five last month.

From what she had heard, Freya doubted that Jessica would care what Freya was wearing when they met. Still, she was no mood to pick a fight with Margaret, so she acquiesced.

By the time Freya made it back downstairs in her lacy black skater dress, Margaret was opening the door to her sister-in-law.

Jessica mostly looked like Ryan, with his stocky build, tan skin, hazel eyes, and short, mousy-brown hair, though hers was streaked with purple. She was wearing jeans and a white t-shirt, with a black leather jacket and matching boots. She had several piercings that Freya could see, making her face sparkle.

"Auntie Mar!" the little girl at her side shouted as she saw Margaret. She looked little like her mother, with much paler skin and blood-red hair.

"Hello there, little one," Margaret greeted with a grin, letting the girl jump into her arms, hoisting her up. "Haven't you grown?"

"I'm not heavy!" the girl protested, out of fear that she might be put down.

"Of course you're not," Margaret agreed, taking the girl through to the living room.

Jessica picked up her bag, throwing it over into the corner before shutting the door.

"You must be Freya," she greeted.

"Yeah," Freya replied. "You're Jessica, right?"

"Yup. So... How's my brother dealing with the cooking stress?"

“He hasn’t left the kitchen since I got home. Though I think he’s finished with stuff for tomorrow and has switched to making mulled wine instead.”

“That sounds like exactly what I need after a three hour drive.”



FREYA WAS SHARING HER room with Nightingale that night, which meant that they both had to be in bed at nine. Freya didn’t particularly mind, but she knew that she was going to be sitting up awake for a few hours. As she brushed her teeth, she wondered if there were any spells she could practice quietly without Nightingale noticing.

As she finished up, she found herself assaulted by another sneeze.

And, as if in response, water exploded out of the tap.

Freya quickly reached her left hand out, halting the spray of water before it coated everything. As she took in the sight around her, she groaned. Of course a cold would cause her magic to go haywire. She was no longer allowed anything as simple as a snuffle-y nose.

Before she managed to redirect the water to the sink, she was caught off-guard by another sneeze.

The water burst forth with even more explosive force than before, soaking her.

A third sneeze came before she had the time to even roll her eyes, and the shower sent water everywhere.

Freya clenched her fists, standing defiantly, as if daring another sneeze to try her.

A fourth sneeze was followed by a fifth, and Freya spent all of the control she had keeping the water from seeping out beneath the door.

Thankfully, that seemed to be the end of it, allowing Freya to direct the water down the drains and toilet, carefully wringing out her clothes and hair of every last drop.

Freya sighed once she was done, glaring at her reflection. There had to be an answer.

She sound-proofed the room before calling out for her guardian.

“What is it?” Amber asked as she appeared in her familiar, ghostly form. She had been distant over the past week, never appearing without being called upon.

“I have a cold,” Freya told her.

“And?”

“And every time I sneeze, the taps explode.”

“Ah.”

“Yeah, no shit, *ah*. There are already four other people in the house, and tomorrow it will be six. If I cause a mess in front of them, I don’t think I can wipe all of their memories fast enough.”

Amber nodded, frowning. “There are potions to soothe a cold, but I doubt you have all of the ingredients in the house. Has Human medicine not advanced to this point yet?”

Freya gave a frustrated sigh. “Ryan had half a pack of lozenges in a kitchen drawer. So far, they haven’t helped. Most places are closed now and, even if they weren’t, the roads are too bad to get anywhere.”

Amber shrugged. “Then there is little you can do, other than try to exercise better control.”

She disappeared before Freya demonstrated just how difficult exercising control was by reactivating the shower out of sheer frustration.



“YOU’RE ILL!” NIGHTINGALE announced after Freya’s third post-light-out sneeze.

“Tell me something I don’t know,” she replied sarcastically, rolling over to bury her face in her pillow, hoping that squashing her nose would solve the problem.

Thankfully, there were no liquids in her room. Nightingale had finished her mug of warm milk before Freya had finished in the bathroom, and Freya had been sure to take any half-finished glasses downstairs earlier. She hoped that would be enough for the night, but she wasn’t entirely confident that it would be. Both she and Nightingale were mostly made of water, after all.

That thought meant that she spent the next little while fending off a panic attack at the thought of potentially causing her kind-of cousin to explode or something.

You’re not that powerful, she tried to assure herself, but it rang hollow in face of the Demon she had blown a hole through.

Despite her best efforts, she sneezed again. This time, despite her managing to hide the sneeze in her pillow, it was accompanied by a large crashing noise.

Freya tensed for a moment before realising that it had probably just been the snow shifting off the roof.

“What was that?” Nightingale asked excitedly as she bounced upwards, going to the window.

Freya quickly followed her.

Well, she hadn’t been wrong about the snow, at least. It had indeed crashed to the ground. What she hadn’t been counting on were the intricate spirals of ice, that were very clearly not natural, budding from the snow mound.

“Wow,” Nightingale said softly before running to the door. “Come on! We have to go see!”

“No!” Freya protested, thankful that the soundproofing charms around her room would keep the adults from being disturbed. “We can’t!”

“Why not?” she asked.

Freya usually thought of herself a rather silver-tongued. It was a talent which had served her exceptionally well over the years, and her sister Alice had always said that it was the only reason anyone else was under the impression that she was neurotypical.

But this was far from her finest moment, she decided as she found herself hissing “Because *Santa!*”

Nightingale thankfully stilled at that.

“Santa?”

Freya nodded. “He was the one who knocked the snow from the roof. But, if you see him, then he’ll leave, and you won’t get any presents.”

Nightingale seemed to think this over for a moment before shaking her head.

“I don’t believe you,” she announced as she folded her arms.

Freya held back an irritated groan just as inspiration struck. She focused her mind, sensing the snow still on the roof.

After a moment, they heard soft, rhythmic thudding noises. Almost as if reindeer were on the roof.

“Still think it’s not Santa?” Freya asked.

Nightingale seemed less sure.

Freya went for one last sound effect, making the snow make another, albeit softer, crashing sound.

“That’ll be him down the chimney. Do you really want to ruin Christmas by going downstairs?”

Nightingale hurried over to the mattress she was sleeping on without any more argument.

“Do you think he’s still there?” she asked, after what couldn’t have been longer than a minute.

“Shh!” Freya told her. “If he thinks you’re awake when he comes up to fill your stocking, he’ll leave it empty.”

That shut her up, and, thankfully, Freya’s nose seemed content to leave her alone as she finally got to sleep.



FREYA WANTED NOTHING more than to sleep. She was sure that she hadn’t been so tired since she had been almost beaten to death.

But Nightingale had no care for such things, a fact that Freya learnt as she awoken to something heavy landing on her as the young girl announced “It’s Christmas!”

Freya had to jam her lips shut with her teeth to stop herself from responding with the rest of the Slade song.

She sat up to inspect whatever it was that had been thrown at her, only to find a bright blue stocking, with a white snow man on it. On the top was a label that said “Freya.”

As Freya looked over, she saw that Nightingale had a similar red one.

Well. She hadn’t been expecting that. She had known that Nightingale would have one - Margaret had told her to distract Nightingale with it if she woke up too early - but she hadn’t expected to have one of her own.

It’s just because Nightingale has one, she told herself. If she wasn’t here, you wouldn’t have one either. You’re too old for them to bother.

Freya decided to ignore that thought in lieu of unwrapping a chocolate lolly she found.

“Is it time to go downstairs yet?” Nightingale asked excitedly, having already up-ended her own stocking to reveal a collec-

tion of chocolate coins, various hair accessories, and odd bits of stationary.

Freya checked her phone, finding that it had just gone eight, which was when Margaret had asked her to keep Nightingale entertained until.

“Yeah. But go wake everyone up first.”

Nightingale ran out of the room as Freya put on her dressing gown, coming back with a disgruntled Margaret.

“I should have said nine,” she muttered.

“I’ll put the coffee on,” Ryan told her as he passed them in the hall.

“Mmm, yes, coffee.”

Freya worried the edges of her dressing gown as Margaret looked as if she was about to follow her husband downstairs.

“Thank you,” Freya managed quietly. “For the stocking, I mean.”

Margaret just smirked as she rubbed her eyes. “Probably want to hold the thanks until you’ve seen downstairs. Ryan gets a little overexcited when it comes to Christmas shopping...”

Freya didn’t have a response to that as Margaret headed downstairs.

She managed to galvanise herself to follow her down after a few moments, though she was halted at the bottom of the stairs by a cup of coffee being branded in her face.

“Here,” Jessica offered. “I made one for you.”

“I thought Ryan was the one making the coffee.”

“My brother is terrible at it,” Jessica reasoned. “He said that you didn’t like coffee, but I think that’s just because nobody here makes it right.”

Freya swallowed her immanent protest, deciding that it would be only polite to humour Jessica.

And she was right. The coffee wasn't as harsh as it had been before, and was far milkier. It was also sweet.

"It's a caramel latte," Jessica explained. "I always bring my own syrup when I'm staying with Ryan. I just wish I had remembered the cream and marshmallows..."

"Thank you," Freya said.

"Are you going to open these or not?" Margaret called from the living room. "We've all got to get dressed and tidy before my parents get here."

Jessica raised an eyebrow. "I hope you're ready for that. Her parents are the best at making passive-aggressive comments."

"I'm sure I'll manage," Freya replied with a smile as she made her way to the living room.

Her smile froze in place as her brain refused to believe what her eyes were telling her. Both of the sofas were *covered* with presents, so the point at which some had to be rested up against them.

Nightingale was already making her way through the red pile, all of which had a little "N" written on the corner in marker. The blue pile all had "F" written on them in a similar fashion.

Despite the "F" and the colour matching her stocking, Freya found herself hesitating.

She almost laughed at herself. Was she really so distrustful of good things?

The fact that her feet were as immovable as stone acted as a resounding "yes".

"Yours is the blue pile," Margaret told her, seemingly sensing her hesitation. "And you'd better hurry to catch up with Nightingale if you want to be showered and dressed before my parents arrive."

Freya nodded mutely before heading to her own pile.

There wasn't a moment where she didn't feel self-conscious, spending every moment painstakingly analysing her expression to ensure that she was smiling enough and that it definitely reached her eyes, despite it not being particularly natural to her.

By the time she had finished, she was pleasantly exhausted, and glad that she hadn't sneezed once.



DESPITE HURRYING, FREYA barely made it back downstairs as Margaret's parents arrived. She was glad that she could use her magic to dry her hair almost instantly, rather than the hours it had taken mere months before.

Margaret's mother looked exactly like her, with the same skinny build and bleach-blonde bob. Her father was taller and had an almost Italian look about him, with a strong nose, light olive skin, and only a few flecks of grey in his thick, black hair.

"So, *this* is the delinquent youth you have taken in," Margaret's mother said, her voice icy.

Freya had to exercise every ounce of control she had to stop an eyebrow from raising.

"We've been over this, dear," Margaret's father quickly interjected, "Freya is apparently a very nice, hard working girl."

His wife snorted. "And yet she doesn't have a *real* name."

Freya was very tempted to make a comment about the fact that she was talked about as if she wasn't there, but Jessica spoke up before she had the chance.

"I don't know, I like Freya. It's a strong name. Very Nordic."

Margaret's mother gave her a particularly withering look. "You'll forgive me if I don't put much stock in the opinion of a woman who named her child... What was it? Songbird?"

Jessica matched her expression with one of equal ferocity. "Nightingale. Her father chose it."

“Ah yes, the man who left you pregnant and alone. I can see why you would give his opinion so much weight.”

Jessica clenched her fists, and Freya could have sworn she saw a few sparks dance around them.

“Who wants something to drink?” Ryan asked, finally interjecting. “Dinner should be ready in just a few minutes.”

As Freya looked over to her foster parents, she saw that Margaret was white as a sheet, moving stiffly as she led her parents through to the dining room.

“This going to fun,” Jessica said with a smirk.

Freya just returned the expression, deciding that she would spend most of the meal refusing to speak, in the hope that she would be ignored.



FREYA'S PLAN, SURPRISINGLY, worked. Jessica seemed to find it fun to goad Margaret's mother, which kept the attention firmly off Freya. Though, as she watched them more carefully, she realised that it was intentional. Whenever the older woman looked as if she was trying to steer the conversation back to Freya or Nightingale, Jessica offered her a different easy target.

It was masterful, Freya decided after the first half hour. There weren't many she felt that she could learn from when it came to twisting words, but Jessica had definitely reached the top of the list.

Of course, there was only so long it could have lasted, especially since all of the adults were drinking pretty heavily.

“So, *Freya*,” Margaret's mother, who Freya had since found was called Barbara, said, finally addressing her directly, “how exactly did you come to be in foster care?”

“*Mother!*” Margaret protested, finally reaching the point at which she drew the line.

“What?” Barbara replied with a wave of her hand. “It’s a legitimate question. I want to get to know this girl who is living in my daughter’s home.”

“I’m an orphan,” Freya replied quietly, her gaze fixed on her plate. “My mother died just after I was born.”

“And what of your father?”

“They were never able to find him.”

Barbara nodded, as if her suspicions had been confirmed. “Probably some benefits scrounger, like Jessica’s man. What was his name? It was something ridiculous as well...”

Before Jessica could respond, Freya sneezed again, the wine bottle on the table knocking over (well, if you looked closely, it had clearly jumped) so that it coated Barbara’s white shirt with a deep, blood red.

“Excuse me,” Freya squeaked as she felt another sneeze’s threatening presence, escaping to the kitchen.

Three more sneezes followed in quick succession, one causing the sink to explode, one blowing the fridge open, and the last causing a small snow cloud to form.

“I knew it!” she heard from behind her as she wiped her nose.

Freya stopped dead still, turning to see Jessica giving the room an impressed once-over.

“I knew I could sense magic around the house. You must have some particularly strong protections for me to not sense any from you.”

Freya was at a complete loss until Jessica pulled a wand from her boot, clearing up the mess she had caused.

“You’re a Witch,” Freya eventually said.

“Yeah, I am.”

“But Ryan...”

“Our father was Human. Our mother decided to keep her magic quiet once she realised that I had been the only one to inherit it. Ryan’s not even Sensitive.”

“And... Nightingale?”

Some of the light in Jessica’s expression dimmed. “I’m not sure. Her father was a Vampyre and she’s too young to show any inclination either way. Well, except her ability to get sunburn after the slightest exposure...”

“Was?”

Jessica gave a frustrated sigh. “He died. He was... He was part-Demon, okay? A group of Hunters came across him and... They didn’t care that he had never lived as anything but Neutral.”

“And you let people believe that he had left you?”

Jessica shrugged. “That level of clean-up is difficult, and no Light Witch wanted to help for someone with Demon blood. I didn’t really know any Dark Witches at the time.” She looked as if she was waiting for Freya to make a negative remark.

Freya shrugged. “I’m the last person to have a go at anyone for having a little Demon blood.”

Jessica regarded her carefully at that. “You identified me as a Witch. So, you have knowledge of magic? Despite not having a family?”

“I... Yeah.”

“You don’t look five pages into your grimoire.”

“My... what?”

“Your grimoire? The repository of your magic knowledge. Normally it’s passed down through family, but if you never knew yours...”

“So, what? Friends of your parents told you what you are, but didn’t take you in or teach you beyond the basics?”

Freya shrugged. “It’s just one person. And Amber’s a unique case. She can’t take me in and sometimes she thinks that keeping me in the dark is the best way to protect me.”

Jessica took a moment to think before asking, “Amber? What’s her last name?”

It struck Freya at that point that she probably should have thought to ask Amber that before.

“I don’t know. She’s just Amber. Why?”

Jessica shrugged. “I was wondering if I knew an Amber, but I could only think of Amber Cohen, which would be silly.”

“Why? Who is Amber Cohen?”

Jessica raised an eyebrow. “The Second Holder of the Last Ancient? The Matriarch of Angels? The Saviour of Creation?”

“Yeah, that would be silly,” Freya said, deciding that those titles were impressive enough for her to not want to be anywhere near them, despite the fact that she was pretty sure that Amber had been the second person to bind with the last Ancient.

Jessica narrowed her eyes. “So, you’re just some lost kid, who no one in any kind of position of power kept track of, despite the fact that you have enough power to start a snow storm with a sneeze?”

“I don’t know that this would count as a storm,” Freya replied, a little sheepishly. It was strange to hear someone other than Amber comment on her magic. Especially when commenting on its strength. Amber was a fan of answering any questions on the subject with vague assurances that everything was fine.

Jessica responded by waving her wand at her.

“Now. The truth. What secrets are you hiding?”

To Freya’s horror, her mouth answered without her consent.

“I don’t know Amber’s surname, but your description of Amber Cohen’s titles makes me pretty sure it’s her,” Freya found herself saying. “She’s a ghost and I’m not always certain that I

should trust her, but that's mostly because the ghost of my grandmother told me not to on Halloween. She had black tattoos extending from her heart and she had killed herself pretty viciously, apparently because of Amber."

Jessica seemed a little stunned at that information, but Freya's mouth didn't stop.

"Not that Amber has ever denied that, it was just disconcerting to hear it from someone else. I don't know... The whole thing reminds me that I'm funny about who I trust. Sometimes I wish I could be as trusting as Damon, but then days like yesterday make me think that might just be an act on his behalf. Damon's my best friend, though I really wish that he could be more than that. I'm pretty sure it's just a childish crush, but sometimes I wonder if I might actually be in love with him. Not that I'm sure I'd know the difference. I'm not great with emotional stuff. I think it's because I'm Autistic, but I spend most of my time in denial about that, because if I accepted it, I'm afraid that I would let my neurotypical mask slip and someone would realise and then I would never be fostered again..."

Jessica gave another wave of her wand at that, shutting Freya up.

"Sorry," she said quickly. "I haven't used that spell in a while. I guess I didn't realise how much more powerful I'd gotten lately..."

Freya didn't respond, her hands clamped over her mouth in an attempt to ensure that she truly had control over it again.

"What was that?" Freya eventually asked, still wary of her mouth.

"A truth spell."

"But... *how*?"

Jessica shrugged. "The truth is that most secrets want to be heard. It doesn't take much of a nudge to make it happen. I'm

sorry, I just wanted to be sure that you had no ill intent towards my family. I didn't mean for you to reveal anything that might embarrass you."

Freya narrowed her eyes, but shook her head after a few moments. Arguing would get her nowhere.

"Can I trust you to keep my secrets?" Jessica asked.

"As long as I can trust you to keep mine."

"Of course. I just wish that I could stay in town. Teach you what I know."

"Why can't you?"

"I'm going to find Nightingale's grandparents. I don't know the first thing about raising a Vampyre. I most likely won't even be in this realm, never mind in town."

Freya nodded in understanding.

"Though, do you want one piece of magical advice before I go?"

"I could use any I can get."

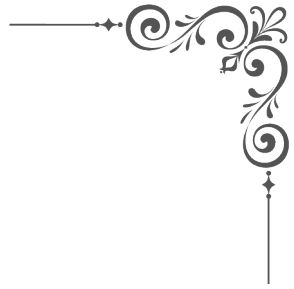
"Regardless of what ghosts say, I would trust the woman who saved the world."

Freya smirked. "I guess that makes about as much sense as anything."

"And here." Jessica reached over to the bench, where her handbag was, and brought out a small vial. "Drink this. It should stop the sneezing."

"Thanks."

"No problem. As much as I love to see Barbara inconvenienced, I don't think outing the both of us is the way to do it."



Candles

The fourteenth of February. Valentine's Day. The most corporate of corporate holidays. And, also, to her annoyance, Freya's birthday.

Well, estimated birthday. That had always annoyed her even more. If they were just guessing anyway, why the hell didn't the hospital give her either the day before or after? Why *choose* to torture her so?

Though, she wasn't sure if she had been more or less annoyed by Amber confirming that it was, indeed, her birthday.

"You don't have to be all cheery," Freya told her guardian after she had awoken to "happy birthday".

Amber frowned at her as she got up and out of bed.

"What do you mean?"

Freya shrugged. "I mean that today might be my birthday, but tomorrow is the anniversary of my mother's death. It never really bothered me, since I never knew her, but I get it if you don't want to be cheery today."

Amber gave her the *look*. She'd been on the receiving end of it a few too many times over the past few months. Freya knew that she had a habit of putting everyone ahead of herself, but it was a survival tactic. If she tried to claim something for herself, it could be challenged, and she could be hurt. Better to never try. Or, if she did, do it in such a way that no one else was the wiser.

Amber preferred to solve problems head-on, and so she would give Freya the *look* every time she thought that she was being too cautious.

“*Today* we will be cheery,” Amber told her firmly. “And tomorrow... I’ll tell you anything you want to know about your mother.”

Freya didn’t really have a response to that. She’d not really asked Amber about her mother because she didn’t *want* to know. She had spent a long time angry at her mother for dying and leaving her without any other family. Freya had always been convinced that *someone* - her father or a grandparent or *something* - must exist out there for her. And now she had Amber, who had been exceptionally firm in telling Freya that her mother had no family, and that she shouldn’t look for her father under any circumstances.

Yeah, Freya had little interest in learning anything more about her mother.

Thankfully, Freya’s phone buzzed in her pocket, giving her an excuse to not answer Amber.

I’m outside, the text from Damon said. Freya couldn’t help grin. Usually she spent her birthday with her best friend, Alice, but Alice was currently living with her aunt in Tokyo, and it was a bit much to ask her to make the 15 hour flight.

This year, she at least had Damon. She checked herself in her bedroom mirror before bounding downstairs to see him.



DAMON REFUSED TO TELL her where he was taking her for lunch, miming sealing his lips shut whenever she asked. She was about to ask him for perhaps the fifteenth time, when she heard his phone go off. Instead of checking it, he seemed to be deliberately ignoring it.

“You can check that, you know,” Freya said to him, feeling a little bad that he might be ignoring something important just for her.

Damon shook his head. “It’s nothing. It doesn’t matter.”

Freya narrowed her eyes at his suspicious demeanour. “Why? What is it?” All she could think was that it was perhaps his father, but if that were the case, she was sure that his uncle would have replaced his phone immediately.

Damon shook his head again as his phone rang once more. “It’s fine, I swear.”

“They will only keep ringing if you don’t answer.”

“She’s not even supposed to be ringing me anyway. She knows full well where I am.”

Freya frowned, wondering who ‘she’ was.

She could have almost hit herself a moment later, when she remembered what day it was.

It was Valentine’s Day, and Damon had a girlfriend.

He had, of course, already assured her that Jamie didn’t mind the fact that he was going to spend Valentine’s Day with Freya. It was her birthday, after all, he had told her.

Freya hadn’t exactly been convinced of that at the time, but when the only other option was spending her birthday alone, she had pretended to believe him. If he had chosen to spend Valentine’s Day with her, after all, that was his choice.

But she wasn’t surprised that Jamie wouldn’t stop ringing.

Damon simply reached into his pocket and turned his phone to silent as they finally seem to have reached the place that he was taking her.

It definitely wasn’t anywhere fancy, but then Freya had never liked anywhere that wouldn’t serve her hefty enough portions, and Damon knew that. So, he had taken her to a burger restau-

rant and, from what she could see through the window, the burgers were as big as her head.

A tall woman, taller even than Freya, bounded over to them as they approached the “please wait here to be seated” sign. She was broad and buff beneath her flannel shirt, her biceps looking large enough for her to bench press five of Freya.

Freya tried not to blush as she smiled at her.

She didn’t *like* like women. She couldn’t. On top of having magic and being probably Autistic, she didn’t need to also be bisexual. It would be one too many things for her to deal with.

But she couldn’t ignore the fact that her face turned fire-engine red as the waitress showed them to a table.

“You okay?” Damon asked, as Freya tried, unsuccessfully, to hide her blush behind a menu.

“I’m fine,” Freya said, though even she didn’t believe it. “Just, you know, dealing with strangers makes me anxious.” She hoped that would explain away her blush.

“Uh-huh,” Damon said, his tone telling her that he didn’t believe her spiel.

“So, what do you think the biggest burger they sell here is?” she asked, in an attempt to change the subject.



AS MUCH AS THEY COULDN’T hear it, Freya was pretty sure that they were both aware that Damon’s phone hadn’t stopped ringing.

When he brought it out to check the time, as they finished eating, her suspicion was confirmed. Before he could change the screen, she saw that he had a few dozen missed calls. There were actually a few less than she would have expected, but maybe that was just her underestimating Jamie. Yes, Freya felt that she needed to calm down a bit, but then, Damon was spending his Valen-

tine's Day with another woman. Even if it was his best friend. Freya liked to think that, in Jamie's position, she would be more relaxed about it, but then she had never been anywhere even near a romantic relationship, so who was she to judge?

"You can go and see her, you know," Freya told him. "It's been really nice hanging out with you today, but I do understand that it's Valentine's Day."

Damon looked, honestly, a little relieved at that. "Are you sure you don't mind?"

She did, in fact, mind, but that was neither here nor there. "Go," she told him. "It's fine, I swear."

Damon grinned before hurrying out of the booth. They had already paid when they had ordered, so we left the restaurant with just a few words to their waitress. Freya assumed that he was tipping her.

Freya picked up her bag, deciding that she would pick up some ice cream on the way home. And maybe a birthday cake. If her foster parents had bought one for her, they hadn't mentioned it.

Before she could leave, however, the waitress made her way over, though she was now without her apron or name-tag. Freya felt a little bad that she hadn't been paying attention to the name on the tag before. It had felt too much like looking at her boobs.

"Hey," the other woman greeted, as she swept her short, blue hair from her aqua eyes. "Your friend told me to bring these over." She placed two plates of chocolate cake and ice cream down on the table. The one directly in front of Freya had a lit candle in it.

"Why two?" Freya asked. "Damon left."

She blushed a little. "He, um... I told him that my shift was ending and he suggested that I should bring you some birthday cake. He also suggested that you might want to..." Her blush

deepened. "You know, hang out and stuff. So I thought I would bring cake for me as well so that you weren't eating alone..."

Freya had to close her eyes with embarrassment for a moment as she was sure that her face was bright red. Maybe even purple. "He told you that I liked you, didn't he?"

"He said you thought I was cute."

"Yep..." Freya managed, not sure what else to say.

The other girl shrugged, looking a little sheepish. "Well, I thought you were cute too."

"I... Really?"

The girl grinned, sitting down opposite her. "I'm Chloe."

"Freya."

"So... I'm guessing it's your birthday," Chloe ventured as Freya blew out her candle and removed it from her cake. "How old?"

"Fifteen."

"I just turned sixteen last week."

"And you're working in a restaurant? Don't you guys serve alcohol here?"

"Yeah. I have to get someone else to pour it, if anyone orders any. My uncle runs the place and I'm just a temp until he finds someone older."

"Must be nice to have the extra cash."

She shrugged. "I'm not complaining."

They lapsed into a comfortable silence as they focused on the cake.

"So, how come you're here?" Chloe asked. "I mean, how come you're with a friend, who isn't your boyfriend, on your birthday? Didn't your family want to spend the day with you?"

Freya shrugged. "What about you? Why are you alone on Valentine's Day?"

“Being gay kind of limits my dating pool. I don’t know anyone who swings my way that I haven’t already dated. Well, except for the ones I can’t stand. I should probably get out more, but the thing about bars is that you can’t get in until you’re eighteen, gay bars included.”

“They should have, like, gay coffee shops.”

“I would actually love that.”

Freya laughed a little as she finished up her cake. To her surprise, Chloe had already finished hers.

“So, you didn’t answer my question. Why are you on your own for your birthday?”

“My foster mother had to leave town for work last minute. My foster father promised take away tonight, but I got the day to myself.”

“Foster parents?”

Freya sighed. “I’m an orphan. I know, I know, it’s terrible and sad, and I should probably start fighting bad guys in spandex, but it’s true.”

Chloe raised an eyebrow. “So, what, you’ve gotten over it?”

“Nothing to get over. My mother died just after I was born and my father was nowhere to be found.”

“You never tried to find him, or...?”

“Once. But it wasn’t a good idea.” Freya cleared her throat. The subject was getting way too close to magic for comfort. “What about you? What’s your family like?”

“Boring and nuclear.”

“Any siblings?”

“Just my little brother. He’s kind of an asshole, but I guess all twelve year old boys are.”

“Sounds nice.”

“Yeah, I gue-” Chloe was cut off by a yawn. “I’m sorry. I’ve been working all day.”

“We could get some coffee.”

“They have coffee here, but I could probably use some fresh air.”

“What about the cafe around the corner?”

“Sounds like a plan.”



FREYA FELT IT THE SECOND they left the building. Like a prickling on the back of her neck.

“Are you okay?” Chloe asked her.

Freya nodded, realising that she had slowed. “Yeah, I’m fine.” She did her best to smile, despite the feeling of dread curling around her stomach.

The dark lightning struck out at her and she lost all sense to the pain.

Her muscles spasmed and she knew that she had lost.

He was going to kill her.

“You don’t look fine,” Chloe said. “You look like you’re about to be sick.”

Freya shook her head, trying to rid herself of the memories of her encounter with the Demon.

She focused on her sense of magic as she realised why that was.

She could sense another Demon.

She can see nothing but the sky and she can’t move.

She knows she’s going to die.

“I’m fine,” Freya repeated, doing her best to ignore the Demon.

It only took her another second to realise that wasn’t going to happen.

She pulled her phone out.

“Sorry, it’s important,” Freya said, pretending it was ringing before holding it to her ear. “Amber?”

Thankfully, her guardian appeared in front of her without hesitation.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Another one,” Freya told her, hoping that she would understand. She couldn’t exactly start throwing around words like *Demon* in front of Chloe.

“Don’t worry,” Amber said with a smile. “It won’t be after you.”

“How can you be sure?”

Amber looked uneasy, pausing for a few moments before answering. “Because this city is crawling with Demons. That’s why the crime rate is so high. There has always been a high concentration of magic in this area, and magical beings are drawn to it. But the Demons outnumber the Creatures of Light, simply because more of them survived the War.”

Freya nodded, though it didn’t help her uneasy stomach. “So, what? I just leave it be?”

“It’s not your fight, Freya.”

“But what will happen? What will they do?”

Amber sighed, folding her arms. “I honestly have no idea. I can’t read its mind.”

“But nothing good, right?”

“I...”

Freya could see her looking for a lie, but it was a search doomed to failure. Freya knew too much to believe her at this point.

“No, nothing good,” she eventually agreed.

“Will someone step in?”

“Doubtful. They’ll only target Humans and the higher-ups will make sure to cover it up. No one’s going to stick their neck out for that.”

Freya bit her lip, her sense of unease only growing.

He brings down his sword and Freya grips the charm Damon gave her.

Thinking of a friend.

Not of the sword, but of her friend.

She never wanted to be in that situation again. Doing her best to make her last thoughts happy ones... She didn’t have the strength to go through it again.

But if she didn’t step up, it would be somebody else.

Somebody else squeezing their eyes tight and making sure that their last thoughts are of the only person who ever made them feel like they belonged.

She couldn’t let that happen.

“I’ll do it,” Freya told her. “Tonight, I’ll do it.”

Amber gave her a disapproving glare. “You’ll be putting yourself in unnecessary danger.”

“I can’t just leave it.”

Amber looked as if she was going to argue, before thinking better of it with a sigh. “You’re going to go no matter what I say, aren’t you?”

“Yep.”

“Alright then. Tonight.”

She disappeared at that and Freya put her phone back in her bag.

“I’m sorry about that,” Freya said, turning back to Chloe.

“Everything okay?”

“It is now.”

Chloe smiled at her. “So, what questions have we yet to answer?”

“Almost all of them.”

“Well, we’d better get to it then.”

“Okay, you first.”

“Alright then. What about-”

Chloe stopped in her tracks, seemingly distracted.

“What is it?” Freya asked.

“Do you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“That music...”

Freya frowned, but Chloe was already heading quickly down a side-alley.

“Hey, going down there isn’t a good idea!” Freya called before hurrying after her.

Quicker than Freya could see, someone jumped down in front of Chloe and hit her so hard that she flew into the wall.

Freya was next, her head hitting the wall painfully as the Demon swatted her away.

“I knew I could lure your friend, but I didn’t think you would be stupid enough to follow,” the Demon sneered as she loomed over Freya.

The world spun a little as Freya strained to get up. Her vision blurred and she assumed that the blow to her head had been bad. She tried to focus her magic in that area, hoping that it would somehow help with the healing.

She got a better look at the Demon and saw that, instead of the red eyes of the last one, this one was looking at her with eyes that were entirely black, except for a slight blue where the outline of her iris should have been.

“You were after me?” Freya managed to ask as she struggled up.

“Of course I was. There are competing bounties out for you. Nothing sanctioned, of course, but they’re there anyway.”

“What bounties? And what do you mean *sanctioned*?”

The Demon sighed, lifting Freya up by her hair, ignoring her cry of pain.

“Lord Uther will be glad to see you dead, but the counter of-fer wants you alive. I wonder which I should take...”

Freya clawed at the hands holding her hair, trying to pry her-self free as the Demon pretended to consider it.

She dropped to the ground as something collided with the Demon. It took Freya a moment to realise that it was Chloe.

“Get away from her!” Chloe yelled, shortly before being lift-ed up by the Demon as if she was a scrap of paper.

The Demon sighed. “Fine. I’ll kill your friend and deliver you alive to the second party.”

“No!” Freya cried, launching herself forward with all of her might, causing the Demon to drop Chloe.

Her muscles refuse to move and she’s helpless.

Freya concentrated her magic into the muscles in her arms and shoulders, focusing her strength in her fists.

He slices across her back and her blood soaks her top.

She struck forward as hard as she could, as if she could punch away the memories.

She’s never been in so much pain...

Something cracked beneath her fists but she couldn’t con-centrate on that.

She couldn’t let them get her.

She refused to be helpless again.

The next thing she knew, she was being hauled up from be-hind.

“Freya! Stop!”

Freya realised that Chloe had pulled her up. She spun around to make sure that the Demon hadn’t gotten back up, only to see that her skull was caved in.

She wasn't getting up again.

"What the hell did you do?" Chloe whispered.

Freya wiped the blood from her hands before dragging Chloe out from the alley and concentrating her magic.

"*Auferbulum*," she said, putting all of her remaining strength behind the spell. It would take everything she had to erase the last few minutes.

Chloe's eyes unfocused for a moment before blinking rapidly.

"What was I saying?"

Freya held back a relieved sigh before answering with a sad smile. "I was actually saying that I have to head off now."

"Aw, really?"

"Yeah."

"Well, how about we see each other again?"

"I... I don't think that's a good idea," Freya said quickly, hurrying off before she would be expected to give an answer.

She shifted once she was around a corner, away from prying eyes.

As soon as she was out of the way, her chest started to seize up, her lungs forgetting how to gather air.

Amber appeared next to her, looking concerned.

"Breathe, Freya. Just concentrate on breathing."

She nodded, but it was hard. She could feel the blood on her hands and it wouldn't come off.

She started waving her hands up and down, as if it would help, as her eyes started streaming.

"She was trying to kill you," Amber assured her. "You did nothing wrong."

Freya had no words. Her mind couldn't find them. She waved her hand, as if to indicate that *she had bludgeoned someone to death with her fists*.

“It was you or her. Or, worse, Chloe or her.”

She was right. Freya knew that she was right.

Her lungs remembered how to take in air.

“Freya, listen to me,” Amber said, her voice urgent as she placed ghostly hands on Freya’s shoulders. “Demons are foul creatures. She would have killed you, or worse. I don’t like you killing, I will admit that. I would prefer that you found another way but... That is out of concern for you, not them. The city is better with them dead.”

Freya nodded. “I’m alright,” she finally managed to say. “I promise, Amber... I’m alright now...”



FREYA STOOD IN FRONT of the bathroom mirror, concentrating on covering her wounds with a glamour.

Her magic was getting easier to use, but she wondered if she would ever feel as if she was out of the magic equivalent of play group.

No more than five pages into your grimoire, is how Jessica had described her at Christmas, and she couldn’t help but agree.

Amber appeared next to her as she finished up.

“You’re getting better at that,” Amber told her.

Freya just nodded. She didn’t have the energy to say anything else.

Amber seemed to hesitate for a moment before saying, “She was one of the strongest people I’ve ever met.”

Freya frowned.

“Your mother, I mean. I promised to tell you about her.”

“Yeah, I remember,” Freya managed.

“She had an iron will. But she was always more likely to use it to defy authority than anything else. She always hated the idea

of being controlled and fought against anything she perceived as boundaries.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Freya eventually asked. She was too tired for a heart-to-heart.

“I’m telling you because I want you to have *some* inkling of what it means when I tell you that she would be proud of you. You’re doing the best you can right now, Freya, and it’s better than most people in your position would be doing.”

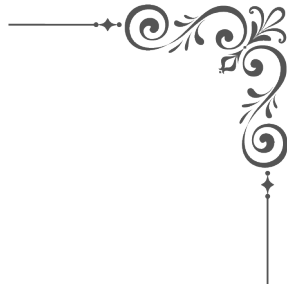
Freya frowned, rubbing one of her hands over the knuckles of the other. “I just punched someone to death...”

“To protect someone you cared about. An innocent Human. I don’t like you putting yourself in danger, but it is so very much like something your mother would have done.”

Freya somehow managed to find it in herself to feign a smile before saying “Thanks. I feel much better now.”

Only she didn’t, she thought to herself as Amber disappeared.

Her mother’s example wasn’t exactly one she was looking to follow.



Test

O “*kay, next one,*” Alice said on the other end of the line. “*Sometimes I have to cover my ears to block out painful noises.*”

No, *Amber taught me a spell for that,* was Freya’s first thought as she fiddled with her bluetooth headset, unable to leave it alone. She didn’t usually use it for actually making calls. Usually it was just so that it didn’t look like she was talking to herself when Amber was in ghost-form.

“Yeah, I guess,” Freya replied as she made her way out of the car park. She was sure that she had sensed a Demon around there somewhere...

“You used to get really upset whenever Janet got the hoover out.”

“I know, I said yes. ‘Now and when I was young’. Why am I doing this again? Didn’t I already take one of these quizzes? It said I was borderline.”

“Yeah, but this one’s more accurate. Trust me.”

“Okay, fine. Next question.”

As soon as the words left her mouth, Freya felt the familiar presence of Demonic magic behind her. She quickly shifted to reposition herself behind the Demon that had tried to get the jump on her.

“It can be very hard to read someone’s face, hand, and body movements when we are talking,” Alice continued, as Freya

brought her sword down to the Demon's back, completely unaware of what was happening on the other end of the phone.

"Same as the last one," Freya said, holding back a curse as the Demon rolled out from under her blade.

Body language and facial expressions definitely weren't her thing, she allowed herself to think before refocusing on the Demon making a renewed attempt at her.

The Demon reached to her side and Freya panicked, assuming that she was going for a source stone to augment her power.

She grabbed the water from the puddles surrounding them, readying it to block a surge of Energy.

Instead, a throwing knife whizzed right through the wall of water, catching Freya's side and allowing the Demon to shift behind her.

The next thing Freya knew, she had been kicked forward and onto the ground, the skin of her chin scraped away by the tarmac.

"I focus on details rather than the overall idea," Alice said as Freya jumped to her feet in one, smooth motion. She thanked the five minutes of ballet lessons when she was six for teaching her that trick.

"Same," Freya replied, the Demon in front of her frowning in confusion.

Freya concentrated on the water once more. Her muscles still needed work, but her elemental magic was coming along faster than she could have hoped.

"I take things too literally, so I often miss what people are trying to say," Alice continued.

Freya sent a cascade of water at the Demon, using it to pin her to the wall before replying.

"I actually don't think I'm that bad for that."

"What about insults?"

"What do you mean?"

“You always used to take insults literally when you were little. You honestly believed that the kids in your maths class thought you were ‘stupid’, despite you being the top of the class, because they called you it.”

“Okay, I get your point, but I don’t do that now.”

“*All right then,*” Alice allowed as Freya made her way over to where she had trapped the Demon.

The Demon spat at her, and Freya was a little impressed with herself to see blood in it.

“The House of Javon will have their revenge,” the Demon yelled at her.

“Hang on a sec,” Freya told Alice, muting her mic before turning back to the Demon. “Yeah, I don’t know what that is.”

Amber appeared at that, seemingly sensing Freya’s questions.

“If I had to take a guess, I would say that the Demon from Valentine’s was from the House of Javon,” Amber figured.

“Oh...” She turned to the Demon, a little sheepish. “Sorry?”

“You will pay for killing my love!”

“She tried to kill me,” Freya defended, but she could see that she was going to get nowhere. “If I release you, will you leave?”

“I’ve been watching you. You killed my love, and I’ll kill yours!”

“Who the hell are you talking about?”

The Demon sneered. “I’ve seen you fawn over him. Damon, I believe his name is.”

“Oh, for the love of- We’re not together! Why do people keep thinking that we are?”

Amber just gave her a pointed look.

“Actually, don’t answer that,” Freya muttered before turning back to the Demon. “If I let you go, you’ll kill Damon, is that the gist of this conversation?”

“I will flay him ali-”

Freya had her sword through the Demon's chest before she could finish.

Amber had that look. The *I don't like it when you kill* look, but Freya was going to continue ignoring it until Amber could actually offer up a viable alternative.

"Damon's a target for them now?" Freya asked her guardian as she let the water that had been holding the Demon disperse.

"Potentially. It may be prudent to change your route so that you patrol closer to his house," Amber told her before fading.

Freya let out a groan before unmuting her mic.

"I'm back."

"Okay, last one. I get extremely upset when the way I like to do things is suddenly changed."

Freya sighed before answering with "Yeah. Now and when I was a kid."

"Okay, that was it."

"What did I get?"

"40."

"What's the lower threshold for Autistic?"

"31."

"Yeah... That sounds about right..."



Book Two: White

“Aunt ‘illy! Aunt ‘illy!”

Tilly tried not to sigh into her coffee as her niece ran back into the house from the garden. She couldn’t remember the last time she had been allowed to sleep in. Or have a night out. She loved her niece, and of course she wasn’t going to leave her without a home in the wake of her sister’s suicide, but she still hadn’t ever imagined herself as a full-time carer for a child at 23.

Or at any point, really. Fae didn’t usually have children of their own.

“You’re covered in mud,” Tilly commented as she looked over the mess her niece had made herself into. “And you’re still in your pyjamas.”

“I didn’t have time to get dressed!”

Tilly gave in to her compulsion to sigh at that point. She had no idea how to deal with misbehaving children – in fact, her instinct was to encourage them – and she was wary of being too harsh with Lily after she had lost both of her parents in such quick succession.

“Why not?” Tilly finally asked before drinking deeply from her mug, ignoring the slight burning sensation.

“The fairies said they wanted to play!”

That was the closest Tilly had ever come to doing a spit-take. She raised an eyebrow, pointing to her slightly damaged butterfly wings. “A Faerie like me?”

Lily shook her head, grinning. “They’re little and sparkle-y.”
“I’ll bet they are,” Tilly groaned, narrowing her eyes. “Stay here.”

Lily did as she was told as Tilly stormed out into the garden. She made her way towards the hedge at the back, noticing the tell-tale sparkles her kind gave off when they embraced their heritage, much like her brother had.

“Get out here. Now,” she commanded.

Speaking of my brother, she thought to herself as one of the Fae landed on the branches of the hedge, just at her eye level. He was about two inches tall, with brown hair, and was clad in leaf-green garb. He looked about 11 years old. The exact age he had been when he had left for the Glades of the Fae, after their mother had been lost.

“Peter,” Tilly greeted, placing her hands on her hips. “To what do I owe this pleasure?”

“I just wanted to play with my niece,” he said, innocently.

Tilly wasn’t buying it. “You’re not taking her.”

“Oh, come on, sis. Can’t you see how sad she is? To have lost both of her parents at such a young age... And she has no friends. You and I both know you’re not suited to this task. Do you not think she would be better off with me?”

Tilly shook her head. She wasn’t stupid; Lily was going to grow up to be as powerful as her mother. This was simply the first of many moves to control her before she came into her power. Tilly knew that Hope hadn’t wanted her daughter anywhere near any of those politics, and Tilly was determined to adhere to her sister’s wishes.

“Do not come back here again,” Tilly warned.

Her brother scoffed. “You rejected your heritage, dear sister. You have not the power to vanquish me.”

Tilly narrowed her eyes, letting a small flame dance across her palm. “I may have rejected the ways of the Fae, but I have spent my time training in combat magic your kind knows nothing of. Do not challenge me.”

Her brother sighed, before disappearing. “I do not wish a fight between us,” his disembodied voice told her. “In the name of family, I shall leave her in your hands. But my offer remains open...”

Tilly rolled her eyes, though let out a sigh of relief. Her brother may be many things, but Fae kept their word.



Chapter One

Freya couldn't help but grin as she headed out of school, knowing that she wouldn't have to return until September. Provided that she decided to come back here for sixth form. Her last GCSE exam - which had, annoyingly, been French listening, which always tripped her up - was over and done with.

Her grin was mostly down to the fact that this marked the end of her frumpy uniform and having to take subjects she hated. Goodbye all language-based subjects. From now on, she would only focus on what she was good at. Not to mention the freedom to leave during lunch and free periods.

Of course, Freya should have known that such things never last long. Just as she was leaving the building, a rat-faced girl with shoulder-length, dark hair approached. Freya recognised her as Jamie, Damon's girlfriend. Jamie *hated* Freya and made no effort to hide it. She seemed convinced that Freya was trying to steal Damon from her and dealt with it by spreading nasty rumours about her around school.

Not that anyone believed them. Freya was known for having no friends, doing well in school, and being a "teacher's pet." No one was ready to believe that at night she headed into town in tight leather outfits and screwed anyone who looked at her.

Though, Freya did suppose that her armour for Demon-hunting was mostly leather. She wondered if she had been sloppy with her glamours and Jamie had seen her one night. It might go

towards explaining the basis for the strange rumour she had generated, Freya decided, despite the usual ones being “crazy.”

“You bitch!” Jamie screamed, before slapping her across the face.

Freya instinctively clenched her fist, but managed to stop herself from igniting it in flame, or using it to remove some of Jamie’s teeth.

“You bloody boyfriend stealer!” Jamie continued, still screaming through tears.

Freya put all of her effort into clamping down on her anger as a crowd began to form. The last thing she needed was to reveal her magic over something as trivial as getting back at Jamie. Also, it would be wrong, but that thought alone probably wouldn’t have stopped her from at least setting the screeching girl’s hair alight.

“I hope you two are happy together, you bloody slut! What nasty little tricks did you use to seduce him, huh? Bloody tramp!”

Freya actually let herself laugh aloud at that. Damon had no filter, and had never really twigged that his best friend being a girl would make talking about his sex life awkward. She knew exactly what Jamie had done with him, and the hypocrisy was hilarious to her.

“**Oh, grow the hell up, Jamie,**” Freya told her, not noticing the low vibration beneath her cold words that had Jamie staring at her like a deer in the headlights.

Freya quickly headed to the front gate where Damon, as always, was waiting for her. He hadn’t had an exam today, so he wasn’t in his uniform. Instead, he was wearing his usual black jeans and black t-shirt, despite the warm weather. Not that Freya could talk, since her own aversion to colour only made an exception for blood red. Plus, any t-shirt that fit Damon like that was

nothing to complain about. The tight fabric showed off the wiry muscles beneath his skin, all across his lanky frame.

Okay, so maybe Jamie's accusations weren't completely unfounded. Freya had always been attracted to her best friend, but it had been made clear to her over the years that he didn't feel the same way. So, she buried those feelings and focused on just being his friend. Especially since his friendship wasn't something she was willing to lose.

He grinned as he noticed her approaching, a few strands of his long, jet-black hair escaping his ponytail to fall across his dark, almost-red eyes. She might have blushed, if her approach hadn't resulted in her inhaling a sudden waft of cigarette smoke. She choked back a cough, as she always did. As much as she hated the smell of cigarettes, she was also kind of glad that Damon had started, since the smell was such a turn-off for her. It made it much easier to not act the fool in his presence.

"What did you do to Jamie?" Freya asked with a raised eyebrow as he tossed his tab to the floor before falling in-step with her as they headed towards his place.

He shrugged. "I broke up with her."

"Why?" She could think of several reasons, but she didn't understand why it had taken so long.

"She told me that I had to stop talking to you. I told her to shove it."

Freya couldn't help but snort. "That might explain why she slapped me."

"Sorry," Damon told her, his tone completely genuine. "So, did somebody call her an ambulance already, or...?"

Freya rolled her eyes. "I held myself back. Barely. I swear, I don't know what you saw in her."

He shrugged, which pretty much answered her question. He was a teenage boy and she was a willing girl he didn't find ques-

tionable. A pretty low bar, which made Freya feel all the worse about him ignoring her. Not that it had been such a bad plan in the past. Freya had mostly been indifferent to all of Damon's other girlfriends. Much like the rest of his friend group, Freya didn't know them too well, and they had made it clear that, while they wouldn't actively bully her, she wasn't welcome to hang out with them. The problem with Jamie was that she had been the only recurring girlfriend, and she was the only one with an active hatred of Freya.

"So..." Damon started once more. "This means I no longer have a date for prom tomorrow."

Freya rolled her eyes, feeling little sympathy. "Join the club." She wouldn't have even agreed to go if her foster mother, Margaret, hadn't found out about it and bought her a new dress, assuming that she wanted to go.

"Well, why don't we go together?" Damon asked and Freya's heart skipped a beat. "You know, as friends."

She almost sighed at herself before replying. "Sure, why not?"



IT ALWAYS AMAZED FREYA how quickly time with Damon seemed to fly. It felt as if they had only just left school when they reached his place.

"Be two minutes," Freya told him as she headed into the bathroom to change into her workout gear.

She wondered, as she so often did, if the girl who had broken into her magic while scared and alone in the school toilets would recognise her now. She hadn't grown any taller, but her physique had changed. She wasn't really thinner, except perhaps a little around her face, but many of her curves were now the result of muscle rather than fat.

Maybe it wasn't that she looked that different, she thought. Maybe it was just that she no longer hated how she looked. The spark of confidence had returned to her wild green eyes and a smile was gracing her lips far more regularly than in the past.

Her workout gear consisted of black joggers and a white vest, with white and pink trainers. It was more practical than fashionable but she didn't think she could really justify spending her pocket money on anything fancier, given how expensive workout gear could get.

Freya moved back through to the training room, where Damon was waiting for her. Damon's uncle worked in private security and had a thing for collecting weapons. He had taught Damon to use modern firearms, ancient melee weapons, and martial arts in what Freya assumed was an effort to grow his confidence after years of living with his abusive father.

For Freya, it was more than convenient. Amber, the ghost her mother had charged with keeping an eye on her, could teach her magic, but there was no way she could teach her the practical skills she needed to accompany that magic in a fight. Not that Amber was too happy with her fighting, anyway.

Her first encounter with a Demon had been an accident. He had latched onto her, thinking she would be easy prey. And she almost was. The second encounter, however, had been a little more down to Freya. She had sensed the Demon, not the other way around. She had been ready to ignore it, but enough pestering got Amber to admit that the high crime rate in the city was a little more supernatural than originally thought.

Though, they had turned out to be after Freya anyway, so it had all worked out.

Freya didn't necessarily go *looking* for trouble, but in this city, it was hard to avoid. Not to mention, she was actually getting kind of good at taking down Demons. She liked it. It made

her feel like she was doing something worthwhile for once, and not just running in place until the next set of exams.

“You ready to get your arse handed to you?” she asked Damon as she approached, picking up two small swords. Damon tended to prefer one longsword, but Freya liked to dual-wield.

“You wish,” he countered with a grin.

She was cautious, as she always was. Damon was Magic Sensitive, meaning that he was immune to spells not directed specifically at him and so often saw through the glamours she used to hide her Demon-related injuries, but he was still mortal, with no knowledge of magic. She had to be careful not to reflexively use her magic when sparring with him.

Damon was quick and he was strong, but she was quicker and stronger. He’d only had a few months’ head start on her and she’d thrown herself into training with more determination than he had.

It wasn’t long before his blade was knocked from his hand, clanging to the floor, and one of hers was at his neck, while the other was at his crotch.

“Surrender?”

He rolled his eyes, lifting his open-spread hands to tell her she’d won.

“I don’t know what it is with you and the knife to the dick,” he said, shaking his head.

She shrugged. “Extra reinforcement to stop you from trying anything.”

As much as Damon might have thought it silly, Freya had found it a particularly effective strategy.

“Want to go another round?” Damon asked, but they heard the door open before she could answer.

“Damon?” his uncle called from the front room.

“Yeah,” Damon called back.

“Freya with you?”

“Yep,” Freya confirmed.

“Good,” his uncle said, entering the room, “because this pizza is a bit bigger than the three of us can handle, I think.” He held up a carrier bag which was straining to contain the biggest pizza Freya had ever seen.

“Wait, three of us?” Damon asked. “I thought Charlie had to stay in Durham overnight.”

“Yeah. Evelyn’s in town. We’re working a job together for the next couple of weeks.”

Freya paled as much as her already milky white skin would allow. She had been avoiding Evelyn ever since they had first met. She was a Dark Witch and had made it perfectly clear that she knew what Freya was. On the one hand, Freya was tempted to ask her questions and figure out if there were any other magic beings in the area. But, on the other, Dark Witches tended to hang around with Demons, just like the ones Freya tended to kill.

“Actually, Margaret wants me home in the next little while,” Freya lied. “She’s planning on getting takeaway to celebrate my last exam.”

“Aw, really?” Damon asked. “I thought we were going to finally finish *Space Warrior: Redemption*.”

Freya shrugged sheepishly. “Sorry. I guess we’ll just have to save it until next time.”

“Are you going right now?” Damon’s uncle asked.

Freya pulled her phone out, pretending to check the time.

“You know, I’d better. It’s getting late.”

“I guess I’ll see you tomorrow, then,” Damon said. “What time do you want me to pick you up?”

“Pick her up?” his uncle asked.

“I, um... I broke up with Jamie,” Damon admitted.

“Again?” His uncle didn’t seem the least bit surprised.

Damon shrugged. "Yeah. So, I'm going with Freya instead."

"You know, you don't have to humour this tool just because he got himself into a mess," his uncle told Freya.

"I didn't have any other plans," she reasoned, making sure all of her stuff was in her bag.

"It's not like I asked her as, like, my second choice. We're just going as friends so that neither of us are going alone," Damon tried to defend.

"Yeah, that sounds completely different," his uncle replied sarcastically. "You need a lift?" he asked Freya.

"Nah. I could use the walk."

"Alright then."

"See you tomorrow at, say, six?"

Freya nodded. "Sounds good. See you then."



FREYA MADE IT HOME fairly quickly. Damon's wasn't that far and she was more than used to the trip at this point.

"That you, Freya?" Margaret, her foster mother, asked as she walked through the door.

"Yeah," Freya answered, dumping her bag and taking her shoes off.

"How was the exam?" Margaret asked from behind her computer as Freya entered the dining room, where her foster mother usually set herself up to work.

"Fine."

"Sounds good. I've got a ton to do here, so..."

"That's fine." She would probably be more upset by how much time her foster parents spent distracted by their work, if it didn't make it easier for her to hide her magic nature. Plus, she had Amber.

"Any plans for tea?" she asked.

“Nothing specific,” Margaret told her. “There are ready meals in the fridge.”

Freya felt a little disappointed at that after the prospect of pizza at Damon’s and her own lie about takeaway, but she did her best to ignore that feeling as she answered.

“Alright, cool. I’m gonna head upstairs.”

“Okay.”

Freya bounded up the stairs, eager to *do* something. Her mind was drained from her exam, but her body still hummed with nervous energy. Her sparring with Damon had barely made a dent in it.

As soon as she shut the door to her room, a tall, ghostly woman, with olive skin and dark brown hair, materialised.

“Hey Amber,” Freya greeted, not fearing being overheard as she had placed a sound blocking charm on her room months ago.

“How did your exam go?” Amber asked, her hands clasped in front of her in a way that ruffled up her dark green shirt.

Freya shrugged. “It was French listening. Anything past *Je suis un tot* was going to stump me.”

Amber looked at her blankly, the Tots TV reference going straight over her head and reminding Freya that she had died in the nineties and had spent the final years of her life removed from society. When she had first met Damon, he too had been far from up to speed on British pop culture, but he had quickly caught up. Amber had not.

“Do you think you passed?”

“It doesn’t really matter,” Freya reasoned. “The worst it’ll do is drag my French grade down to a B. One B isn’t going to kill me.”

The words came out of Freya’s mouth much more confidently than she felt. She knew, rationally, that a B was fine. But that didn’t stop the feeling of terror shooting through her every time

she thought about it. Hell, she still wasn't comfortable when she missed an A* by a few marks.

"Of course it won't," Amber assured her. "I still don't know why you're so hung up on these grades. You just need to do well enough to get into sixth form, which isn't a concern for you."

Freya let out a hollow laugh. She was self-aware enough to know that, thanks to growing up with no friends or family, she equated a lot of her self-worth to her intelligence. Being a genius was the only thing she had going for her. Anything that threatened her idea of her intelligence threatened her very idea of who she was.

Of course, being *aware* of it didn't make it any less of a problem.

"I need something to take my mind off of worrying about the results. I've still got months left before I get them."

She moved over to the box where she kept her magic gear. It was charmed, so that her foster parents wouldn't open it, to keep away awkward questions about why she had a box full of various weaponry and armour.

"I'm going to end up having to charm another box," Freya commented as she took out her current favourites. Whenever she left to hunt, it was in a hodgepodge suit, made out of various armour pieces taken from various Demons, most of which had to be charmed to get it to fit.

"Actually, I was thinking about that," Amber commented. "Some of it's just old and useless now that you've acquired better pieces."

"Yeah, but it seems like a waste to destroy perfectly good stuff just because I've got better ones," Freya said, getting changed into her armour. "I mean, I'm assuming we'd have to destroy it to keep it out of Human hands."

“Oh, I wasn’t suggesting destroying it. I figured you could sell it.”

“What, like on magic eBay?” Freya joked as she struggled with the strap on her shoulder, before pausing to face Amber, more seriously. “Wait, is there a magic eBay?”

“If magical beings ever figured out the internet, it was after my time,” Amber told her. “But, as rustic as it may seem to you, there is a real market in town.”

Freya frowned a little, trying to imagine what that would be like. She knew that there were seasonal markets in town, with stalls set up outside, but she figured that a market for magical beings would have to be hidden.

“Well, I was planning on getting the new Ms Marvel book online, but I guess I could go shopping tomorrow and not have to wait for delivery. We can go to the market then.”

She inspected herself in her mirror before applying a glamour, watching as her features became less distinct and almost nebulous, making sure that no one could recognise her.

“Am I good to go?” Freya asked, turning back to Amber.

“It’s a little early for hunting, isn’t it?”

“Tell that to the suspiciously bloodless bodies found this morning.”

“No, I mean, an attack like that would suggest...?”

Freya sighed. Amber never spared a chance to make something a teaching moment.

“Vampyres, right? Because of the blood draining and the puncture marks on the inner thighs which, quite frankly, just lacks class. What happened to the romantic image of vampires seductively biting into the neck?”

Amber raised an eyebrow. “You mean the image Humans invented because they weirdly romanticise violence?”

“Okay, fair point.”

“But you’re missing something.”

Freya frowned, going through what she had said in her head.

“Oh!” she cried after a few moments. “Not a Vampyre. Vampyres are Neutral creatures. It’s a Vampyre-Demon hybrid. Yeah, I assumed that went without saying.”

“And...?” Amber continued, looking pointedly out of the window.

“Oh, yeah, I know they won’t be up yet. It’s still light out. No, I want to scope out their hideout while they’re still asleep.”

“You want to stake them while they can’t fight back?”

“Oh, come on. I’m not *that* much of a bitch. I just don’t want to be caught off guard by a trap or anything,” Freya said as she charmed her room so that Margaret would forget what she was doing if she tried to enter, before opening her window and climbing out.



THE DAYTIME MEANT THAT Freya had to keep a bunch of glamours going at once. Some to make her armour look like regular clothing and others to make sure that no one recognised her. Of course, as with all blanket charms, it wouldn’t work on other magical beings, or Sensitive Humans. But it was the best she could do.

She had a vague idea of where the hybrid was hiding out and had mapped it out on her phone. She wished the city had an abandoned warehouse district. It would certainly make finding nefarious magic users easier.

Of course, once she got into the general area, it was just a case of sensing for Demonic magic. Though, the fact that it was clouded by Vampyre magic was a bit of a problem. Thankfully, there seemed to be little in the way of background magic to mask him.

“You know, I *could* stake him in the daytime,” Freya figured into the decorative Bluetooth headset. “I mean, it’s the middle of summer. I’ll be waiting hours just to give him some semblance of a fair fight. I’m going to kill him anyway.”

“What about giving him the chance to leave peacefully?” Amber asked her.

“When have they ever taken that? I mean, I understand the need for it, but it’s just a formality. None of them are actually going to stand down. That would mean admitting that they were scared of me and, since they’re causing trouble to start with, they’re clearly not scared of the rest of the magical community. Why would they be scared of me?”

“That will change as your reputation grows.”

“You think I’ve got a reputation?”

“Freya, at this point, I would be astounded if you didn’t.”

She sighed. “I hate when people know who I am. It never leads to anything good.”

Amber didn’t reply as Freya followed the trail of magic to a retail park on the outskirts of town.

“Urgh. I hate when they’re in heavily populated areas,” Freya complained, following the magic through to a furniture shop. She supposed it would be the perfect place to camp out. There was a basement floor which never saw sunlight and the cinema next door was open well into the night, meaning that there was always fresh food around.

“*Alart*,” Freya muttered with a hand wave as she approached the stairs. In response, the fire alarm started blaring, spraying the customers who were now scurrying about in a desperate attempt to leave.

All except for one man, who Freya caught sight of as soon as she reached the bottom of the escalator. He looked lost, as if desperately trying to figure out how to leave without going up-

stairs. All it took was one moment to sense the magic coming from him. The same magic that had been on the bodies she had found.

She was glad he was already awake, solving her earlier problem.

“You needn’t worry,” she told him. “There’s not really a fire.” She ignited her hands into flame. “At least, not yet.”

He laughed. “I have disposed of every bounty hunter who came before you. What makes you think you can kill me when they failed?”

Freya sighed. “Look, I don’t want to fight you. I just don’t want you collecting bodies in my city. If you agree to leave, I’m more than happy to let you.”

“As if you could stop me.”

She sent the flame hurtling towards him with a disgruntled sigh. They *never* took her offer.

He dodged out of the way, rolling to duck behind a row of washing machines.

Freya used her control of the water around him, trapping him with liquid shackles. She shifted so that she was in front of him before drawing her sword.

“Are you *sure* you don’t want to just leave?” she asked as she moved her sword to his neck. “It’ll take forever to clean your blood out.”

He glared at her.

She moved her hand to slice his neck, only it didn’t respond. Instead, her sword slipped from her hand as the water around him dropped back to the floor.

“Eye contact!” Amber shouted, reminding her just in time for Freya to break her gaze from his and shift before he brought his own sword to cut her down.

Freya cursed under her breath as she broke a thin metal pipe from a display sign to use as a makeshift weapon. She couldn't believe she had been so forgetful.

"What was that you were saying about how you barely ever make eye contact anyway?" Amber asked, reminding her that she hadn't exactly been attentive when learning about thralls.

"I was saying that I bet there aren't many Autistic thralls," Freya responded, deciding not to focus on her screw up. She knew better than to make the same mistake twice.

"Uh-huh," Amber said in a tone that very much told Freya that she wasn't fooled by her attempt to change the subject as she folded her arms. "Five o'clock."

Freya spun around just as the hybrid shifted behind her, bringing up the pipe to block his attempted blow. She twisted the pipe around, knocking him off-balance before hitting him square in the chest with the butt.

He responded with a bolt of Dark magic, crippling Freya with pain for a few moments before she could muster a shield. Enough time for him to get back on his feet and charge at her once more.

She shifted away, appearing behind him and striking his back with the pipe. He stumbled before spinning to face her once more.

Freya managed to block his next few blows effectively. He clearly wasn't very proficient with the sword. She wondered if he usually used a different weapon, or if he just relied on making his opponents thralls.

She kept the majority of her concentration on blocking his blows, but moved a little of it to the water beneath them. She kept it out of her way so that she wouldn't slip on the hard floor, while also having it twist around the hybrid's ankles, ready to trip him at a moment's notice.

When the moment came, Freya had the water tug, sending the hybrid stumbling to the ground, where she kicked him hard enough to send him flying into the wall at the opposite end of the room as her sword clattered to the ground. She had the water pick up the weapon and bring it back to her.

She had the water coil around the injured hybrid once more as she approached, careful not to meet his gaze.

“Are you quite done?” she asked.

He responded by spitting blood in her direction.

“Well. Clearly you were never taught manners.”

“Why can’t you just let me feed?” he hissed at her.

She raised an eyebrow. “You don’t need to kill Humans for food. You can get blood easily enough from a hospital. Or, look, I don’t really care all that much if you enthrall them. Just don’t kill them and remind them to take some iron or something.”

“It’s not just the blood...”

She folded her arms. “Again, you don’t need to kill for negative energy. Humans generate enough of it themselves.”

“It wasn’t enough.”

“Let me guess, you’re trying to augment your powers because you want to impress one of your higher ups? The last guy was trying to get enough power to gain an audience with the Demon King. Who is it you’re trying to suck up to?”

He shook his head. “You don’t understand. The Demons won’t accept me otherwise.”

Amber chipped in at that. “You should probably kill him. The last Vampyre-Demon hybrid I met who wanted to prove herself ended up trying to strip the Power of the Ancients from me. You don’t want that kind of trouble.”

“You sure you won’t just leave peacefully?” Freya asked him.

“I will not stop until I have killed the Angel.”

“What Angel?” Freya asked. “There aren’t any Angels around here.”

“The Angel who guards this city.”

Freya sighed. “If you couldn’t even stop me, an actual Angel would be wearing your entrails as a necklace within two seconds. Give up. Go home.”

“*Never*,” he snarled, gripping a source stone on his belt and unleashing a barrage of Dark Energy.

Freya collapsed with pain, grasping at the hurt and holding it tight. Within a few moments, she had channelled her pain into Energy of her own, blasting it back at him before collapsing into darkness.



FREYA AWOKE A FEW MOMENTS later to find herself in the middle of a crater. She groaned, holding her side as she sat up. She was pretty sure her rib was fractured.

“Who keeps giving these arseholes source stones?” she muttered as she focused on weaving magic around her ribs to keep them in place.

“Someone who wants to sow chaos,” Amber said as she regarded the wreckage darkly.

Freya rolled her eyes. “Yeah, I’d figured that much out for myself. I more meant that it has to be against the secrecy codes, right? Even the Demons follow that. I can’t believe the Demon King would be so reckless as to let any arsehole with dreams of grandeur have one.”

Amber shrugged. “Perhaps he doesn’t know. Not all Demons are likely to be happy with the codes.”

Freya nodded as she finally felt well enough to shift home. She was probably going to spend the rest of the night patching

herself up. She just hoped that she wasn't going to have to use too many illusions to be presentable for prom.



Chapter Two

Despite spending her night patching up her injuries, Freya found herself waking early. As annoying as it was, she supposed her body would have to get used to being able to lie in on weekdays. At least it meant that she arrived in town for the shops opening, while it was as quiet as it ever got.

“What’re you looking for?”

Freya lifted her head from the shelf filled with comics to see a shop assistant. She was cute, standing at a little shorter than Freya, with golden brown skin, soft hazel eyes, and a short, bubblegum pink mohawk.

Freya blushed a little, pointing to the shelf in front of her.

“I was just looking. I’m usually a Marvel girl but... I don’t know, I thought I’d have a look and see if there was any DC stuff with... You know, with good female heroes.”

The girl smirked. “You mean, like, Wonder Woman?”

Freya’s blush deepened with embarrassment.

The girl’s smile became kinder. “Well, like any of the female heroes, it’s hit and miss, depending on the run. If you want, I could tell you my favourites.”

Before Freya could reply, the shop door opened once more.

“Freya?” she heard Amber ask, though this time it wasn’t Amber’s voice. It was her tone and inflection, but the voice belonged to Ms Pearson, the old, brain-dead woman Amber possessed in order to interact with Freya in public.

“Hey,” Freya greeted as Amber walked over, though she didn’t turn away from the girl in front of her.

“Is this your grandma?” the girl asked.

“Yeah,” Freya lied for simplicity. She figured “Woman who used to wield the power of the Ancients but disappeared to avoid the political crap within magic society, only allowing contact with my mother in order to train her because she was too powerful and potentially dangerous, but then dying before my mother finished training, which according to her set in motion the events which led to my mother’s death, so she allowed my mother to bind her to me, and therefore the mortal realm, to ensure that someone was there to watch over me when I came into my own power” was a bit of a mouthful.

“Are you ready to get going?” Amber asked her.

“Almost,” Freya said, taking her eyes off the girl in front of her to momentarily face Amber, before turning right back. “I think I’ll just be taking this,” Freya told her, indicating to the Ms Marvel book in her hands.

“Alright then,” the girl said, bringing Freya over to the till as Freya handed the book over for scanning.

“Here, I’ll get it for you,” Amber offered, pulling her purse out.

“Are you sure?”

“Of course.”

“Thanks.”

The girl smiled at her as they left, undoing all of the fading her blush had managed.

“Yo-ou like her,” Amber sang as they left the shop.

“No I don’t,” Freya muttered. “Shut up.”

“Does this mean you’re finally over your crush on Damon?”

Freya sighed. "Look, the only reason I haven't dated anyone since meeting him is that no opportunities have arrived. Not because I'm weirdly hung up on him or anything like that."

"What about Dean? Didn't he ask you out?"

Freya rolled her eyes. "Dean doesn't count. I don't like him like that. Good thing too. After I turned him down, he got all weird and stalk-y. He still sends me Facebook messages every couple of days. Imagine dating someone like that. Urgh."

"Can you not block him?"

Freya shrugged. "Yeah, but then he'll make a thing about it. He insists that he's just being 'friendly'. But then he takes every opportunity to try and touch me and won't stop with comments like, 'You know, if we were dating...' I am so glad we're taking separate A-Levels next year." She paused for a minute, thinking, before asking, "I'm not that creepy around Damon, am I?"

Amber shook her head. "No, as far as I've observed, you keep your feelings to yourself and don't do anything to make him feel pressured to date you. On the second matter, you're right, but on the first... Do you realise that the boy has never *actually* rejected you?"

"And what happens if he does and then doesn't feel comfortable being friends with me?"

Amber remained silent at that, answering her question. Freya had never been particularly good with people, with the exception of Damon. But Damon was Magic Sensitive, which meant that he didn't have that subconscious, primal instinct most Humans had that identified her for what she was; a magical being, and a potential threat. Humans avoided her and so she had no friends. If Damon stopped hanging out with her, she would have no one.

"So... this market?" Freya asked, trying to figure out where they were going as she followed Amber's lead.

“It’s the focal point for the magical community in the city.”

Freya frowned. She had only ever encountered Dark Creatures who were trying to kill her, or at least kill a Human she was trying to protect. Well, except for Evelyn. She was just a Dark Creature who... Had sort of helped her out once? Freya had no idea how meeting other magical beings was going to go. She had tried to ask Amber about there being a magical community in the city before, but Amber had just brushed her questions aside, telling her that she wasn’t ready and that it was best to keep her head down. Freya wondered why she’d changed her mind now.

“So, what can I expect?”

Amber sighed. “In all honesty, I’m not sure. It’s been over twenty years, remember? Just... keep your head down and your guard up. I can’t guarantee your safety.”

“My safety?” Freya asked with a raised eyebrow. “You anticipate a market being dangerous?”

“Just have your guard up.”

Freya nodded as she followed Amber down the street and along into an alley. Freya rarely ventured into this part of town, usually staying in the main shopping area. This part was filled with older, Georgian buildings, a lot of which obviously hadn’t been properly looked after. Many of the shop fronts were empty and the ones which weren’t were occupied by knock-off fast-food chains and bookies.

“Where exactly is this market?” Freya asked.

“Here,” Amber said, indicating to a large, boarded up building. Freya vaguely remembered one of her classmate’s getting nostalgic about it once. It had been a large, indoor market, which had been around for hundreds of years. It had mostly been filled with butchers and haberdasheries and sweet shops. The building had been shut down in the mid-2000s, thanks to it falling into a state of disrepair, though there had been a huge refurbishment

project planned by the government. And then the recession hit. After that, the project had been abandoned, and the building had been left to rot.

“In *here?*” Freya asked, pointing to the hazard warnings posted over the boards.

“Yes. We’ve re-purposed the inside of the building. The signs are just an illusion.”

“So, how do I get in?”

“Disrupt the illusion.”

Freya nodded, sensing the magic in front of her and, much like pulling at a stray thread, she weakened the spell enough to let her step through without resistance.

As she entered, she had to quickly step to the side to avoid a large, hulking beast, wearing a large trench-coat which did nothing to hide its scaly skin.

“Watch it,” it growled at her as it passed, leaving through the entrance she had just used.

“Don’t mind him,” Amber told her. “Wyverns tend to be funny about their personal space.”

Freya wasn’t listening. She was too enraptured by the sight in front of her. She was standing at the end of a long hallway with a high ceiling, a variety of small shops on either side. Some were completely open, with their shelves of stock expanding into the walkway. Others were little more than a single counter, with all of the stock on shelves behind. The shops on the corners seemed to actually have doors and be properly walled off from the rest of the market.

Freya looked over to the next row and could see that there was an open cafe in the middle of the market, filled with a variety of creatures she couldn’t even begin to name. Most were humanoid, though she definitely saw one Centaur among the crowds.

“All of these people live in the city?” Freya asked, disbelieving. She’d encountered enough Demons to know that there was a significant magical element in the city, but this was far more than she had previously imagined.

Amber shrugged. “Probably not all of them. This is the largest market in the area, so a decent number will just be here to shop. But, yes, the majority will live in the city.”

Freya couldn’t help but stare as they passed a shop which seemed to sell potion ingredients. It seemed like an odd mix between a vegan health-food shop and a butcher. Exotic herbs were sitting next to a jar of eyes. Freya hoped they weren’t Human, but they looked suspiciously so.

“Where are we going, then?” Freya asked, indicating to her backpack. She had charmed it to enlarge the inside in order to fit all of her things. She referred to it as the Mary Poppins charm, mostly because doing so annoyed Amber.

“Myrcella’s Goods. She’s always had good prices.”

Freya nodded, following Amber to one of the larger, corner shops. There was a sound of a wind chime when they entered, alerting the elderly woman behind the counter that they had entered, though she was too busy yelling at the lithe man in front of her to notice.

“For the last time, *no*,” she said, clearly struggling to maintain a professional demeanour.

“Myrcella, please, this is a ridiculous rule,” the man protested with an accent Freya couldn’t place. She noted he had long, white blond hair, pulled away from his large and pointed ears in a ponytail. She wondered if he was an Elf.

“Most of my customers are Light magic users. They can’t risk buying tainted goods. So *I will not buy armour made of flesh*. Go try Edgar’s hole.”

“His prices aren’t as good.”

“Because he’s not as discerning.”

Freya examined the shop’s stock, trying not to look as if she was listening in on the argument. There was a variety of swords and shields, but nothing more impressive than she already had.

No, her gaze was drawn by something else altogether. A set of bright white, light armour, with a beautiful, intricate, gold design across it. Freya was so used to her hodgepodge armour that seeing a full set was a thing of beauty.

“There’s no way I can afford that, is there?”

“Hmm? What?” Amber asked. Freya turned to see that she was staring at the Elf, though she was doing her best to look as if she wasn’t.

“You know him?” Freya asked.

Amber sighed. “Once. A lifetime ago.”

Freya didn’t have a response to that, so she went back to admiring the armour in front of her. It looked nothing like the armour the Demons wore, and she supposed it was fashioned for Creatures of Light. It seemed far more fitting for her to wear armour like this set, rather than the Demonic stock she currently settled for.

“There’s no convincing you, is there?” the Elf finally said, folding his arms.

“Sorry, Zed. I can’t make exceptions. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have customers.”

Amber moved over at that and Freya followed, keeping behind her mentor. As excited as she was to encounter new and *friendly* magical creatures, she wasn’t all that eager to draw attention to herself.

“Now there’s a presence I haven’t felt in, what? Fifty years?” Myrcella commented. “Amber, is that you?”

Amber smiled. “In the flesh. Well, not mine, but you know what I mean.”

Myrcella harrumphed. “To my knowledge, the Power of the Ancients doesn’t make you a shape-changer. And didn’t I hear you had died? Or was it that you had moved to another realm? I can’t remember...”

“It’s a long story,” Amber said simply.

“It had better be, for me to not recognise you,” Zed told her, cutting into the conversation. “And for you to have disappeared like that.”

Amber shrugged. “The timeline changed.”

“Ah, my love, you wound me.”

Freya tried not to make gagging noises as Amber blushed.

Myrcella seemed to have no such restraint when it came to breaking up the two lovebirds. “Okay, this isn’t a social space. This is a shop. Trade or get out.”

Amber cleared her throat in an embarrassed manner as she indicated to Freya. “Well, yes. My student here has some things to trade.”

Myrcella nodded, accepting the backpack and pulling a breastplate from it. “Hmm,” she said as she examined it carefully. “Has it had any Demon wearers?”

“The one before me,” Freya said before glancing at Amber. She didn’t know whether or not to mention her own Demon blood. Not that there was a significant amount of it, but she did draw on Dark energy from time to time. She didn’t like to think about it, but if she was being honest with herself, it came a bit more easily to her than Light energy did.

Amber didn’t add any commentary, so Freya assumed that it was fine.

“None of this appears to be *made* from Dark materials. I’ll have to cleanse them before I sell them on, so the price’ll take a hit, but I can take the whole lot off your hands. It’ll take me a while to sift through and decide on a price, though.”

Freya nodded as Amber indicated to the suit of armour. “She was admiring that set. Any chance it’ll cover it?”

Myrcella huffed, blowing her silver, bob-length hair from her face. “That’s huntin’ armour. It’s only worth getting if you’re anticipating trouble. And I mean *real* trouble. It’s Dwarven made, with Elven runes. It was fashioned much like the set the Geni wore during the Elven Revolts back before the construction of Altiva.”

“That’s a ‘no’ then?”

Before Myrcella could reply, there was a shout from beyond the door.

“Cella! I thought you said you were going to widen this thing!”

“Excuse me for two minutes,” Myrcella said to them, before hurrying over to the door. “Yeah, Abigail came by yesterday. She said that it would be structurally unsafe and there’s already too much magic keeping this place held up.”

“Yes, but has she considered that this is actually *illegal*?” the voice, which appeared to belong to a young woman, though Freya couldn’t be certain, replied, sounding tired and exasperated.

Myrcella shrugged. “If you want to try taking Abigail to court, I’d love to see you explain to the Human justice system the presence of a magical marketplace inside an abandoned building in the middle of town. You’d be lucky if the Council of Light only killed you.”

“And Abigail will be lucky if I don’t hex her,” came the mumbled reply, so low that Freya had to enhance her hearing to pick it up.

“If you give me your shopping list, I can get everything together myself.”

“No, no. I could probably use the stretch.” The voice finally revealed themselves as a girl limped into the shop. She had dark scales instead of skin. They were almost black, though they had a slight aqua hue. Her hair was a long, dark blue and tied up in a ponytail, away from her jet black eyes. She was wearing a RWBY hoodie and a denim skirt. She turned back to the door, pulling a wand from her handbag and casting a shrinking charm. She stepped back out before returning with what looked like a wheelchair for a Barbie.

Myrcella walked back over to the counter. “Sorry about that,” she said to Amber and Freya as the other girl limped over to the shelves, having put her chair into her handbag.

“As I was saying, in all honesty, I would *love* to sell you the suit. All the interest I’ve had so far has been from collectors and it would be a shame for it to end up on display somewhere. A suit like that is meant to be *worn*. To be bathed in the blood of your enemies, not locked up and kept pristine. But I run a business. I would sell it to you for a discount, but it would still be about five k.”

“Five thousand *pounds*?” Freya asked.

Amber nodded. “That *is* a hefty discount,” she reasoned. “Assuming my inflation estimations are on point.”

Freya didn’t really have a response to that. She got a £10 a week allowance, which had to cover her bus fare, any games or movies or books she wanted to buy, going out with Damon, and any clothes she needed, excluding her uniform. She had to wait two months to save up enough for a new video game.

“And the stuff here won’t cover it?” Amber asked.

Myrcella shook her head. “Some of it’s good stuff, but most is pretty common. Mass produced for lower Demons. I can’t imagine the whole lot being more than three thousand.”

Freya's eyebrows shot into her hairline. Three *thousand* pounds? Sure, it might not be enough for the shiny suit of armour, but it was more than enough for a shiny new gaming computer.

"Oh well," Amber said, shrugging. "Maybe you'll find something else. Perhaps a potion making kit? It's more than time for you to graduate to more complex ones than you make with the pans in your house."

Freya nodded in agreement, though she was less excited at that prospect than using all of the money for a new computer. Potion making was time consuming and required finer hand-eye coordination than she was capable of for all of the careful steps.

The girl from before walked up to the counter as Freya and Amber stepped away, her arms filled with various items, from flasks to runes.

"So, how come you're doing the shopping this week, Mel?" Myrcella asked her. "Usually it's Allison."

"Yeah, well, Ally's ill. She tried to force herself up, but I told her to stay put. Also, I needed a break from her covering everything in snot."

"Oh dear. You know, I think Brandon might have something for that."

"Yeah, I know, I'm headed there next."

Mel spotted Freya's backpack on the counter and smiled, a little shyly, at the Rooster Teeth logo, pointing at her hoodie as she said "Snap."

Freya grinned back at her. "Yeah," she said, a little lost for words beyond that. She'd never met anyone who recognised her backpack before.

Luckily, before it became awkward, Mel was distracted by Myrcella, who was inspecting a dagger from the bag.

"Oh, hey, where'd you get that knife?" Mel asked.

“I took it from a Demon maybe... three months ago?”

“Why?” Myrcella asked Mel.

“See that insignia?” Mel said, pointing at the pommel. “That’s the Cult of Eden. They’ve been causing a fuss in the city for the past couple of years. They’re convinced that we should all be warring with each other and ignore the Humans. They’re first-class, premium dicks. The Demons put a bounty out on them as a sign of good faith to the rest of the magical community.”

“How much?” Amber asked her.

Mel shrugged. “I don’t remember. I only glanced at it in passing.”

Myrcella passed the bag back to Freya. “Mel has a point about the bounties. If you go to the collection point, they’ll tell you if any of the previous owners were wanted. You can come back and sell them after.”

“Great. Where’s the collection point?”

“I’ll take you,” Mel offered. “I’ve got almost everything I came for.”

Myrcella finished putting Mel’s items through the till. The till itself was a laptop, plugged into a money drawer and scanner. It looked out of place in the otherwise rustic establishment.

“Well, if you girls think you can manage yourselves,” Zed said, turning to Amber, “I would be grateful if you would join me for a drink.”

“It’s the middle of the day,” Amber reminded him.

“Human sensibilities,” he said with a dismissive wave of his hand.

Amber gave Freya a torn look.

Freya shrugged. “I’ll be fine with Mel. You should go. I’ll have to get home in enough time to get ready for tonight anyway.”

Amber nodded. “Alright,” she told Zed. “*One* drink.”

Freya took her backpack and followed Mel out of the shop. The other girl took her chair from her bag and expanded it again, to the annoyance of the people trying to get past. Mel just glared back at them as she got back into the chair, letting out a sigh of relief as soon as her weight was off her feet.

“Need a hand?” Freya asked her.

She shook her head. “No. The thing’s charmed to wheel itself.”

Freya nodded, wondering if it would be rude to ask why she needed it. She decided that it probably would be, instead asking, “So, where is this collection point?”

“Down by the cafe. Which we should visit after, if you’ve got time. They have an awesome sea-shake.”

“Sea-shake?”

“Yeah, it’s about as close to Atlantian cuisine as you can get on Earth. It’s not bad, though.”

“Atlantian...? Oh, you mean like the water realm, right? Atlantis?”

Mel nodded, looking vaguely amused. “Yeah, like Atlantis. Like the home of Mermaids...”

Freya looked at her blankly for a few moments before smacking her palm against her forehead. “You’re a Mermaid. That’s what the scales are about.”

Mel smirked. “Well, I mean, I’m a hybrid. Hence the legs. And the chair.”

Freya just gave her another blank look. “Why would being a hybrid mean that you’re in a wheelchair?”

Mel frowned. “Okay, seriously, what’s up with you? I mean, you’re here, so you must have *some* contact with our world.”

“Yeah, I do, it’s just... My guardian has kept me pretty isolated while I got the hang of my powers.”

“Your guardian? Not your parents?”

“I never knew them.”

Mel nodded. “Another orphan? We’re pretty common around here,” she explained. “The timeline shift wasn’t exactly kind to the adult population and there was a little scrambling after.”

“Yeah, the timeline took my mother. I don’t know who my father was.”

“I’m sorry,” Mel said. “My parents were killed back in Atlantis. I live with my father’s coven here.”

“I’m sorry.”

Mel shrugged. “So, you’ve really never heard of Christian-Anderson Syndrome?”

Freya frowned. “Nope.”

“Oh. That’s what I have. Mer/Humanoid hybrids can change between legs and a tail at will but it’s not uncommon for one of them to have problems. Walking on my legs feels like walking on knives for me. I can’t do it for very long.”

“But your tail is fine?”

Mel nodded. “Yep. Not that I can use it all of the time.”

“Unless you live in Atlantis.”

Mel snorted. “Yeah, no. There’s no way I’d live there. They’re not fans of Humanoid species. Hybrids aren’t exactly treated kindly.”

“That sucks.”

“Yeah, tell me about it.” Mel turned the corner as they approached the cafe, taking Freya into a small, shadowy alcove. There was a small counter, behind which Evelyn was sitting, with a laptop in front of her.

Oh for the love of..

Freya cursed in her mind as Mel knocked on the counter in front of her.

“Hey,” Mel greeted as the Dark Witch looked up.

“You’re one of the kids from the local Light coven,” Evelyn noted. “And the abandoned pup. I wondered if I’d ever see you again. I keep missing you at the kid’s.”

Freya shrugged. “Damon doesn’t know that I spend my nights hunting Demons.”

Evelyn laughed at that. “Oh, don’t worry, pup. I won’t divulge your secret. No, that’s something I am more than happy to let play out on its own.”

“You two know each other?” Mel asked.

“I work with a Human,” Evelyn explained. “Freya’s a friend of his nephew.”

Mel nodded. “Well, we were wondering if the bounty on the Cult of Eden was still active. Freya dealt with one of them a few months ago.”

“Yeah, it’s still open. Got any proof?”

Freya handed her the knife. “Have you got any other open bounties? I might have a few more.”

Evelyn nodded as she inspected the dagger. “Sure, we’ve got a few. Have a look at the board over there.”

Freya looked over at the board and saw a collection of wanted posters. She only recognised one of them. The Hybrid from the night before.

“This guy,” Freya said. “He’s dead now.”

Evelyn gave an impressed hum. “Have any proof?”

“I can tell you where I killed him. I doubt the Humans have done much in the way of clean-up since last night.”

“Good enough.” Evelyn passed her a cheque for seven thousand pounds. “The bounty wasn’t that high on the Cult of Eden guy. It was just a gesture, after all, and there were a few of them. The Hybrid is probably up to ten thousand. He wasn’t too discerning in his victims and he got some Witch. Her parents are pretty well off and they’ve been itching for revenge. You’ll have

to come back in a couple of days once we've confirmed it, though."

Freya nodded, not exactly sure what to do with the piece of paper in her hands. She couldn't deposit this much in her bank. Margaret would know. She'd have to open a separate savings account and magically conceal it.

How did you pay taxes for bounties?

Actually, how did you pay taxes at all?

"Thanks," Freya said before leaving.

"I'm not exactly sure how all of this works with Human banking," Freya admitted.

Mel shrugged. "Don't ask me. I work at my coven's library and I look after some of the kids when their parents are at work, and that covers my food and board. If any of us collect on a bounty, most of the money goes to maintaining the coven, but you get to keep a small cut. I also get a small allowance from my inheritance until I turn eighteen and get it all."

"I hope Amber knows..."

"She probably will," Mel assured her as they entered the cafe area, waving her wand at the chairs to tuck them in so that she could get past them.

Freya looked at the cakes on display and found that she didn't recognise any of them. "Are all of these safe for me to eat?"

Mel shrugged. "I have no idea. Some species can't process some things, but none of it should be toxic unless you're a Pure Blood."

Freya bounced a little on her toes as she argued with herself. She *hated* trying new food. She approached it with the same trepidation she would playing Russian roulette. But there was no way she could refuse to get anything without it seeming odd.

She opted for a pastry with a middle that looked like custard and a “nightmare coffee”. She hoped the name was just a playful piece of marketing.

“That’ll keep you up all night,” Mel warned, indicating to her drink as they found a table.

Freya shrugged. “Good. Tonight is prom, and after last night’s hunt, I’m in serious danger of falling asleep.”

“Urgh, you’re actually going to your prom?”

“Yeah. It’ll be a laugh. Why? Are you not going to yours?”

“It was last week. No one from the coven went. We got drunk at the bar instead.”

“The bar?”

“Our coven is a hotel.”

“Nice.”

“I know, right?”

Freya took a bite of her pastry and found it sickeningly sweet. She quickly turned to her coffee to mute the sugar, but that was like being hit in the face with pure caffeine.

“You weren’t joking about the coffee.”

“Nope. And when you do sleep, you’ll probably have lucid dreams.”

Freya nodded. “So, no watching Five Nights at Freddy’s let’s plays before bed then?”

Mel smirked. “Well, that’s just good advice generally.”

“Yeah, probably.”



Chapter Three

Freya was cutting it fine when she arrived back home and Margaret wasted no time in letting her know it.

“Was it really necessary for you to go out shopping today?” Margaret asked as she yanked a brush through Freya’s newly-showered, thick, black curls.

“Ow!” Freya yelped in protest. She hated other people touching her hair.

“Do you want it to look nice or not?” Margaret asked, her sharp tone making it clear that there was only one right answer.

“Sorry.”

Freya was pretty sure that Margaret’s hairbrush pulled out more hair than it tidied, but soon enough Margaret was pinning it back in a silver hairclip. It was heavy and pinched, but Freya knew better than to argue, so she simply turned to her wardrobe to wrestle with the crimson dress Margaret had bought for her.

The fabric was mercifully soft and, while the cut was low at the top, the skirt didn’t bind her legs and was long enough for her not to have to worry about her flashing her knickers by accident. She could do without the lady-stilts Margaret was insisting on, however.

Margaret, thankfully, let her apply her own make-up. While she could just about cope with someone messing with her hair, her face was a no-go zone. Though Margaret did still continue to back-seat the process.

“Are you *sure* you don’t want to try some of the lip liner?”

Freya knew that the right answer was to concede but she didn’t want to. She didn’t see the point of it and she didn’t know how to apply it. Margaret would have to do it to get it right and that wasn’t happening.

“I’m sure,” Freya told her. “I think my make-up is fine like this.”

Margaret gave a disapproving hum, but otherwise let it go. “Here, let me have a look at you,” she said, pulling Freya away from the mirror. “Oh, you look so beautiful.”

Freya shrugged awkwardly. “Thanks,” she eventually remembered to say.

“Here, let me take a picture.” She brought out her phone. “Smile.”

Freya did as she was told, though she couldn’t help but be self-conscious. Her smile always looked weird in photos. It was fine on video, but photos just seemed to always catch her the wrong way.

“Do I really look okay?” Freya asked nervously.

“Yes, of course you do.”

Freya looked at herself in the mirror again, wondering. She thought she looked good, but then, she thought that every day, and other people didn’t seem to agree.

“Freya, I wouldn’t say it if it wasn’t true.”

Margaret had her there, so she nodded, thankful for the sound of the doorbell.

She jumped down the stairs as usual, though she had to grab the banister to stop herself from going over on her ankle, cursing her shoes once more. Her friend Alice had refused to wear anything *but* heeled boots, and Freya couldn’t possibly imagine *why*.

The doorbell rang again just as she made it down to the bottom of the stairs.

"I'm coming!" she yelled back, hurrying to open the door.

She opened it to see Damon in a rather fancy looking tuxedo. On the one hand, she was struggling to hold back a laugh, but on the other, it definitely wasn't a *bad* look for him.

"I, um..." he stammered after she had opened the door.

"Hello to you too," she said, wondering what the hell had gotten into him.

He nodded, blushing furiously. "I... You look great."

"Oh." It was her turn to blush now. "Um, thanks. You too."

"You'll be back at a reasonable hour?" Margaret asked them. "I don't want you waking me up at two in the morning."

"Yeah, we'll drop her back right after the prom ends," Damon promised.

Freya knew that some of the other kids were planning on heading into town after the prom ended, but she hadn't been invited. She wondered if Damon had and would head out after he'd dropped her off, or if he'd turned down all of his invitations.

"How are you getting there?" Margaret asked and Damon turned, letting her look at the large limo parked outside. "Nice," she commented.

"My uncle borrowed it," Damon explained. "He sometimes doubles as a driver at work."

"Well, have fun," Margaret told them.

"We will," Freya replied as she headed out of the door.

"And text when you're on your way home!"

"I will!"



THE RIDE TO THE SCHOOL was a short one. Freya usually walked the distance, though there was no way she would attempt it in heels, and no way Margaret would allow it after dark. She didn't know that Freya had no need to fear mortal danger.

Though, Freya supposed that her travelling alone after dark might attract opportunistic Demons, and ruining her dress would be a shame.

It actually took them longer to park near the school than to drive there. They ended up stuck in a line of limos, all trying to navigate the tiny car park.

“I can’t believe they’re having this *at* the school,” Damon complained as he slumped back in his seat, his arms folded.

“I know right?” Freya agreed. “Mel says her school booked out a proper place.”

“Mel?”

“Oh, um, she’s a new friend I made.”

Damon raised an eyebrow. “From a different school?”

Freya nodded. “Yeah, I met her in town.”

“Nice,” Damon replied as his uncle finally managed to pull up close to the school.

“Alright you two, have fun,” he told them. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“What if I want to do a girl?” Damon asked as he opened the door.

“Okay, Smart-arse, don’t do anything I wouldn’t do in a gender-neutral sense.”

“That literally bars nothing.”

“Do you want me to pick you up or not?”

“There’s no way you won’t come back. That would leave Freya stranded too.”

“I didn’t say anything about not picking Freya up. *She* has some respect.”

Freya smirked as Damon narrowed his eyes at her.

“You only think that because she’s some kind of evil genius.”

Freya’s smirk widened as she deliberately turned to his uncle. “Thank you for the ride, Gregor.”

“It’s no problem, Freya. Keep him out of trouble.”

“Will do,” she promised as she got out of the car as daintily as she could manage, cursing how she had to be careful how she manoeuvred in her dress to avoid catching it in the car door. She missed her trousers.

Damon shook his head as she closed the door. “I have no idea how you do that.”

She shrugged. “They’re called *manners*, Damon. Please and thank you will get you a long way.”

“I say please and thank you,” he retorted.

“Okay, so, it’s a little more complex than those two things. Do you really want instruction in etiquette or would you rather go inside and see how terrible this is?”

“Inside,” Damon said, outstretching his arm.

It took Freya a moment to realise that he meant for her to take it. She did, concentrating on hiding her blush as she felt his body heat radiate against her, a stark contrast to the cold night air.

Damon walked with her in a way that reminded her of an awful period romance film Margaret had made her sit through. She wondered if he’d ever been to a real dance. Like, an old fashioned one. His family were definitely posh enough for it to be a possibility, though his uncle was pretty laid back and Damon didn’t really spend any time with the rest of his family.

They entered to see that the barriers which normally separated the assembly hall from the dining hall had been removed to make one, large space, which had been filled with bright red balloons. There were multi-coloured strobe lights illuminating the room and a DJ was up on the stage at the end of the assembly hall, playing a recent dance anthem which Freya usually avoided listening to. The lyrics basically boiled down to “I take no as a

challenge, ha ha, isn't rape culture fun?" and she was having none of it.

"I miss the Cha Cha Slide," she yelled over the music at Damon.

"The what?"

"It was the song they always played at the discos in middle school. I never figured out what 'Charlie Brown' meant, but it was still fun."

"I can't really hear you!" Damon yelled back.

Freya sighed, concentrating a bit to weave a sound filter around her. The noise of the music died down a little as Damon's voice became clearer. She wondered if she could do the same for him, but decided against it. She doubted he would realise that the noise change was thanks to magic, but maintaining her own filter was immensely draining on her concentration. She doubted she could keep up a second one.

"I wonder if they have the plastic boxes of juice," Freya said, amplifying her voice a little to be heard.

"Boxes of juice?" Damon asked with a raised eyebrow.

Freya dragged him over to the food table and, as she suspected, there was a selection of clear plastic boxes filled with multi-coloured sugar water. She picked up a blue one with a mix of nostalgia and disappointment. This felt exactly like a middle school disco, and they had always been pretty bad.

"Want to dance?" Damon asked her after a moment as she stabbed the top of her drink with a straw.

Freya hid her flustering behind drinking the neon blue liquid for a little while. "You want to dance with me?"

"Well, yeah. It's a dance."

Freya looked over to the dance floor. Nothing there could really be classified as "dancing". Everyone was bouncing up and down in place, moving their arms up and down in the same,

repetitive movements. It was boring and simplistic. Movement with no skill.

And yet Damon was extending his hand towards her, as if he was about to sweep her into a dance worthy of the Disney renaissance.

She took his hand cautiously, unsure of what exactly he had planned.

He led her further towards the rest of the dancers as the song changed to something a little more sedate.

“You dance much?” she asked.

He shrugged a little as he moved his hands to her waist. She struggled to keep her pale white skin from turning fire-engine red, reminding herself that it was just a dance. Nothing more.

“My aunt insisted that I learn. Don’t worry, I’ll keep it simple.”

“She insisted that you learn how to dance?”

“She, um...” He looked a little flustered. “I told you that her husband’s position was inherited, right?”

“Yeah.”

“They’re probably not going to have kids. She means for me to take it.”

“You don’t sound too happy about that,” she ventured.

“Freya, I...” he started, his gaze meeting hers with an intensity borne of emotion she couldn’t name.

That bothered her. That she couldn’t figure out what was in her friend’s head.

Before she had an opportunity to try to figure it out, she heard a particularly loud “bitch”. She swung her head around, looking for the source, to see a couple of Jamie’s friends standing to the side of the room, glaring at her.

“I... I’m going to get some air,” she said to Damon, not waiting for his response before hurrying outside.



FREYA WAS THANKFUL for the cold night air cutting through the dizzy feeling that had been making her head swim. She let the filter around her head dissipate to allow sound back through.

After a couple of deep breaths, she found herself coughing in protest at the cigarette smoke infiltrating her lungs.

“Oh sorry,” a familiar voice said next to her, and Freya turned to see Jamie waving her smoke away.

“I... It’s fine,” Freya said, at a bit of a loss. Jamie was definitely looking at her, but it wasn’t with her usual scowl. She was smiling at her. Freya stopped being certain it was Jamie, which wasn’t helped by how different she looked out of her uniform. Her dress was black and simple, showing off the freckles around her collar and shoulders. Her hair had been neatly curled, instead of tied back in the severe ponytail she normally wore, softening her features.

“Enjoying yourself?”

Freya was stumped. The question seemed genuine. She tried to see where the trick would be, but she couldn’t sense one. “I, yeah,” she said. “At least, I was. Until Tina started to... make remarks. Presumably because I was dancing with Damon.”

She watched carefully for Jamie’s reaction, sure that she had put her friends up to it. To her surprise, Jamie simply took a tired drag of her tab.

“I’ll talk to them,” she promised. “That was uncalled for.”

“Said the girl who slapped me yesterday.” The words were out of Freya’s mouth before she could decide if they were actually a good idea.

Jamie’s gaze met hers and Freya couldn’t help but blush a little.

"I'm sorry for that," Jamie said, and Freya could detect no dishonesty from her. "You were right, it was childish of me."

"Well, yeah, I guess, but... I don't know. I expected you to be even angrier after Damon brought me as his date."

Jamie shrugged. "Damon was never as into me as I was him. I mean, it hurts, but taking it out on you wouldn't make anything better."

"But you've been doing that since day one!" Some part of Freya's mind knew that she should just accept the good change, but accepting change was never really her thing. Especially when it didn't make sense. "Damon told you that he didn't care about me like that, and you are the only person who didn't believe him. None of his other girlfriends gave me the same problems you did. We just ignored each other."

Jamie gave a disbelieving snort. "That's because none of his other girlfriends saw you as a threat. They're so invested in the high school hierarchy that they were convinced that Damon could never care about you, simply because they were above you in the system."

Freya frowned. "You're saying that you were mean to me because you *didn't* think I was completely worthless?"

"I saw why Damon would care about you. Freya, the way he talks about you... I should have left. I shouldn't have let him make me feel second best. But, instead of doing that, I took it out on you..."

"What caused this sudden revelation?"

"I... I don't know, in all honesty. I just... It hit me how childish I was being. How I needed to grow up."

"Well... that's good then." Freya didn't know what else to say. She had never expected in a million years that Jamie would ever admit that she was at fault. At best, she had hoped that she

would get over Damon and just start ignoring her. An apology had never even entered her mind as a possibility.

"I guess I was never that kind to you either," Freya ventured. She, in all honesty, couldn't remember how she had first met Jamie. Maybe she had been the one to be cold first. She never would have been *mean* to her, but she had to recognise that her jealousy might have shown.

"Yeah, but you're cold to everyone. Five minutes of paying even the slightest bit of attention to you told me that," Jamie said, dismissing Freya's apology.

Freya's stomach flipped with anxiety as her mouth answered, "Well, you know, side-effect of being an Aspie." She never told anyone that, apart from Damon, but her mouth just seemed to have a mind of its own that night.

"Oh. Crap. Well, now I feel like a *complete* bitch."

Freya shrugged. "Don't worry about it."

Jamie gave her a grateful smile. "I don't know what kind of person would have still been nice to me after the stunts I pulled. I'm just glad that you're not holding it against me now."

Freya shrugged. "I have enough enemies without going out of my way to hold grudges."

Jamie smirked. "A sensible attitude."

"I thought so."

"Hey," came another voice as Damon joined them. "You were gone a while. I... I wondered where you were."

"I was just talking with Jamie," Freya told him.

Jamie nodded, putting out her butt with the heel of her boot before heading inside. "We were just clearing the air."

After Jamie had left, Damon turned to Freya. "What was that about?"

Freya shrugged. "Who knows?"



AFTER A FEW HOURS, Freya started to get a headache. She wasn't sure if it was caused by her having to concentrate to maintain her noise filter, or if it was the fact that the filter had started to phase in and out as she got tired, letting through the ear-splitting noise. Either way, she needed a respite.

"Want to get some air?" she asked Damon as he returned from talking with some of his other friends.

"Yeah, sure."

As soon as they were outside, Damon lit up a cigarette and Freya had to wonder how many people her age actually smoked anymore. She knew that Margaret did, though she tried to hide it by smoking out the back door. But she maintained that it had been different when she was young. Everyone had smoked. Freya didn't seem to notice too many others at school trying to light up at break time, so she supposed that Damon's friend group were the outliers.

"You know, before, when you were talking about your aunt," Freya started, trying not to feel sheepish. But she really wanted to find out what was bothering her friend. "You seemed... I don't know. Upset?"

Damon sighed, shrugging. "I just... I don't like my future already being picked out for me. I want to choose it for myself."

"Have you told your aunt?"

"My uncle has. He's kind of mad at her over the whole thing."

"And she hasn't listened?"

Damon shook his head. "My aunt is in charge of the family. In the end, my uncle can do no more than talk to her."

Freya wasn't sure what to say to that. She didn't really understand the dynamics of Damon's family. He'd tried to explain, but it just never added up.

She watched as a taxi pulled up, deciding to change the subject. "Looks like people are getting ready to go home already."

“Or maybe they decided to take the party somewhere better. And with booze.”

“That sounds like the right idea, to be honest.”

“Well, we can probably round up some of the others and head into town. I know a place that doesn’t card.”

Freya shook her head with a reluctant groan. “Margaret would actually kill me if she found out.”

“So she won’t find out.”

Freya knew that she could always magic her way out of any trouble, but being stuck in an unfamiliar part of town at night with Damon’s friends, none of whom were particularly fond of her, sounded like hell.

“I don’t want to risk it.”

He sighed. “This is why the others aren’t fond of you, you know. They think you’re judging them.”

“I don’t care what other people do, Damon. I just... If I mess up, I get sent away. That’s not something I can risk.”

“It’s been ages,” he ventured. “Do you really think they’d send you away?”

Before Freya could answer, a girl came hurrying out of the school, towards the waiting taxi. She stumbled on the stairs, cursing under her breath as she lifted her long skirt up and out of the way, but she kept rushing forward, leaving behind a silver shoe.

She didn’t seem to notice, however, as the taxi quickly pulled away.

“Wonder what was up with her,” Damon said as Freya wondered if they should take the shoe inside to a teacher.

A boy came running out, frantically looking around.

“Hey, did a blonde girl in a long blue dress come out here?” he asked.

Freya nodded. “Yeah. She got in a taxi and left.”

The boy groaned, shaking his head. "I can't believe it. I didn't even get her name..."

"She left a shoe," Damon told him, indicating to the floor. "Maybe if you post on Facebook that you found it, people will share it and she'll see."

"Yeah," he said, picking up the shoe. "I will, thanks."

"That was... odd," Freya said as the boy went back inside. "Do you think he'll find her?"

"Of course he will. Cinderella always has a happy ending."

Freya stared at him blankly as she realised that the events were eerily similar to the tale. "Well, I mean, I guess it depends on your definition of 'happy' and which version of the tale you're talking about."

"Oh. I was talking about the movie one. The one with the guy from Game of Thrones."

Freya rolled her eyes. "Which is based on an animated movie, which is based on a *version* of the original fairy tale. Not all of them were the same. The film versions are usually sanitised from the older stories. Less murder and rape."

"So, less Game of Thrones?"

"Exactly."

"Let me guess, you prefer the originals?"

Freya shrugged. "They're more interesting."

"Yeah, okay, sure."

Freya smirked as he finished his tab.

"Alright, are you sure you don't want to get everyone together and go out?"

"I've only got an hour left until Margaret wants me home," Freya pointed out.

"Okay then. More of the terrible school dance it is."



FREYA ARRIVED HOME exhausted. She'd spent all night filtering out noise while also trying to concentrate on not going over on her ankle.

"Did you have a good time?" Margaret asked her as she entered the room. She was loading up the dishwasher.

"Yeah," Freya answered, and it wasn't exactly a lie. It had been nice. Not exactly the time of her life or anything. But it had been worth going out. Just barely, but it had been worth it.

"Good. Want anything to eat or anything?"

"No, I ate there."

"Alright, then I'm going to head off to bed. Night."

"Night."

Freya headed upstairs to room and found Amber waiting for her in her ghost form.

"Have a nice night?" she asked.

"It was alright," Freya told her as she pulled a nightie on over the top of her dress, before shimmying the dress down underneath. "Could have done without the death-trap heels..."

Amber smirked. "Be thankful you haven't had to live through some of the fashions I have."

"I honestly don't know how you managed. I just kept thinking *what if I get attacked?* You know? I would have probably had to yank them off and try to use them to take an eye out."

Amber didn't smile at her joke. She instead frowned, folding her arms.

"What?" Freya asked as she untied her hair.

"I just... I worry."

"Yeah, tell me something I don't know."

Amber glared at her for the comment before continuing. "But don't you think that you might be..."

Freya frowned. Her guardian wasn't usually lost for words.

“I don’t want you being part of the magical community to rob you of a normal childhood,” Amber eventually admitted.

Freya just gave a dismissive shrug. “Amber, I’m sixteen. I’ve haven’t exactly got much childhood left to lose.”

Amber didn’t reply to that, though Freya felt that it was more out of a feeling that she couldn’t understand what she was trying to say than agreement.

“Amber, I’m not Human,” Freya eventually said. “I never have been. You can’t shield me from that fact. And not knowing... Not knowing was the worst. Not having a reason for *why* I was different, but just *knowing* that I was... By now, it probably would have killed me.”

Amber nodded, her arms still folded tightly around her chest. “I guess I never considered that. I always knew. My mother was Human and she didn’t want me involved in that life but... I think she understood that there was never a choice for me.”

“Do you wish you could have been Human?” Freya asked. She supposed that she always knew that her guardian had coveted a normal life, but she had never asked her about it outright.

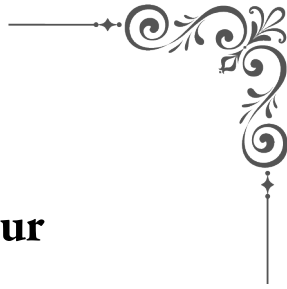
“Yes,” Amber said without hesitation. “I wish that I had been Human, and that my husband had been, and that our son had been. They deserved better.”

“I’m not going to die,” Freya told her as she settled into bed. She knew that that was what Amber had to be referring to. That her husband and son had both died through magical entanglements. “You’ve trained me well. I can take care of myself.”

“So could they,” Amber said simply before disappearing.

Freya let out a groan. She didn’t know how to help Amber. She was clearly upset and clinging to things that had happened decades in the past, but Freya didn’t know how to help with that. Or even if she should. Maybe Amber just needed space or something.

Freya frowned, burying her head into her pillow. She needed sleep. Everything else could wait until morning.



Chapter Four

Freya awoke alone in the castle. She wasn't exactly surprised - Ku and Juni often left with nothing more than cryptic explanations - but she had hoped they would be there. She felt off. Wrong.

Was something messing with her on Earth? Affecting her connection to this realm?

Her thoughts were cut off by the sound of footsteps elsewhere in the castle.

She jumped to her feet silently, grabbing her knives. No one should be in the castle. Juni and Ku had lived there since it had been abandoned and Freya had been the only one to ever find it. Most considered it haunted, but Freya had always been glad for the ghosts.

***"Who dares to trespass here?"** she bellowed, relying on the echo of the halls to surprise the stranger.*

He spun around, revealing a young man, possibly her age, though she didn't hesitate in tackling him to the ground.

She pressed one knife to his throat and the other to his groin as she pinned him, raising an eyebrow to dare him to move.

That was when she recognised him. Both from this realm and Earth.

"Damon?" she asked, before remembering that she'd never gotten a name here. "The boy from the manor, right?"

He gave her a confused look. "You... know my name?"

She shrugged, sitting up as she moved the knives away from him. She doubted he was a threat to her. "Did you think I wouldn't?"

"I... You seemed surprised to find me. When you broke in, I mean. To kill my father."

Freya narrowed her eyes. "Please tell me you're not here for vengeance. Not after I found you hooked up to that... contraption."

He shook his head. "No, no. I... I'm here to thank you, actually. After the trouble you caused, my aunt and uncle actually found out that I existed. I'm training to be a knight."

She rolled her eyes. Knights were the only ones stupid enough to try to reclaim the castle. "Is that why you're here? The spirits who live here aren't going to give up their home. If you couldn't even fight me off, they're going to decimate you."

"No, I'm not here for that," he told her quickly. "I was actually looking for you."

"For me?"

"I wanted to thank you."

She shrugged. "It was just a coincidence. Getting you out, I mean. I was just there for the bounty."

"I know. I know that for you it was just an odd, inconsequential incident. But you saved me. Thanks to you, I went from a test subject to a knight in training, and I don't even know your name."

"I... Freya."

"Freya what?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I've been alone as long as I can remember."

"Alone here?"

"No. Here is new."

"And the castle hasn't tried to kill you?"

She shook her head. "Nope. The ghosts are just after-images of other worlds. And the spirits who live here don't mind me."

“The spirits? They’re different from the ghosts?”

She nodded. “They’re the ones who tend to chase people away. This is their home, after all.”

Freya finally got to her feet, folding her arms. “So, that’s it? You just wanted to know my name?”

He looked awkward at that, blushing. “Well, yeah, I guess. I just... I wanted to know.”

Freya couldn’t help but smile. Apparently some things stayed the same across realms.



FREYA WOKE WITH A GROAN as her phone buzzed at her.

Mel wasn’t kidding about those dreams, she thought to herself. I need to stop playing fantasy RPGs.

She just wanted to sleep. It had become such a foreign concept to her over the last few months. Between frantic, late-night revision sessions and hunting Demons in an effort to retain some semblance of sanity, sleep had become a distant afterthought.

Her body, however, was making sure she got some now. Her limbs felt like lead and her head was killing. She was used to the post-exam stress-crash, though she suspected that this one would take a week or two to get over. She wondered at which point this had been deemed the best way to educate children. Probably back when hitting them was seen as effective punishment, she decided.

She reached for her phone, wishing that the buzzing would stop, only to temporarily blind herself as she turned it on, the light burning her eyes. She buried her face back in her pillow and gave her eyes a few moments to recover before she lifted her head and attempted to look at her phone again. The screen was still too bright, but she ignored it, going to her messages.

“Hey,” one from Damon said. “*End of exams party at the park today. You coming?*”

Freya groaned, cursing Damon as she looked to see that it was ten in the morning. She supposed that his uncle had made him get up early for training, despite the fact that he had been out the night before. She wondered how long he had waited before giving in and sending the message.

“*What time?*” she texted back.

“*One.*”

Freya groaned once more before letting Damon know that she would be there. She rubbed her eyes and pulled her hand away to see that it was now black, reminding her that she had forgotten to take her make-up off the night before.

“Stupid Damon and his stupid social life,” Freya muttered under her breath as she got up, collecting together clean clothes, before heading to the bathroom for a shower.



FREYA WAS GLAD THAT it was sunny. As much as the sun never agreed with her pale skin, and it meant that she had to remember to shave her legs so that she could wear shorts, it was still better than turning up to the park and getting drenched. There had been thunder storms the week before that had made getting to and from her exams a complete pain.

“I have more info on Cinderella,” Damon said by way of greeting, causing Freya to roll her eyes as she approached.

“Don’t you mean gossip?” she asked as she made her way over to the swings. Most of the others were at the picnic benches or lounging on the grass.

“Do you want to hear or not?”

Truthfully, she didn’t really care, but she could see that Damon did. “Alright, who is she?”

“Michelle’s step-sister.”

“Michelle has a step-sister?”

“Yep. The guy put a post up on Facebook, but none of the replies were her. I went through my friends list to see if I recognised her. I found her in Marian’s profile pic. I asked Marian and apparently her name is Bethany. Her mother died when she was born and her father married Michelle’s mother a few years back. Then he died about six months ago in a car wreck. Apparently Bethany’s step-mother is kind of a nightmare and doesn’t really let her out of the house much.”

“Was that why she was running for the taxi?”

He nodded. “Marian said she sneaked out in order to go to prom. She had to get back before her step-mother, though.”

“Weird. Did anyone let him know who she is?”

“Marian said she would.”

“So, not exactly Cinderella then?”

Damon sighed, shaking his head. “Not exactly. But close enough, right? I mean, it’s not as if it could be exact.”

Freya shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe if Marian wasn’t playing a role, it would be closer.”

“Maybe she’s the fairy godmother.”

“There might be versions where the fairy godmother helps the prince to find Cinderella,” Freya conceded.

“I’m gonna go see if Marian’s here. I want to know what happened.”

Freya watched him as he left, deciding to stay on the swings, rather than try to join the others.



TO FREYA’S SURPRISE, it wasn’t long before the swing next to her was occupied once more, though this time it was Jamie, not Damon.

“Hey,” Freya greeted, trying to keep her surprise from her tone. Was this going to be a thing? Were they becoming friends?

“Hey,” Jamie replied with a smile. “I just wanted to tell you that I spoke to the others. They won’t be harassing you anymore.”

Freya raised an eyebrow. “Forgive me if I don’t hold my breath on that one.”

“Yeah, I... I’m sorry. If they start up with any of that crap, just tell me. I’ll shut them up for you.”

Freya was left wondering what to say before eventually settling for “Thank you.”

“It’s the least I could do,” Jamie reasoned. “I don’t want to start sixth form playing the same games. It’s time to grow up.”

“Well, thank you anyway.”

“Are you coming back for sixth form too?”

Freya nodded. “That’s the plan.”

“Are we going to have any classes together?”

“I don’t know. What are you taking?”

Jamie gave a sheepish shrug. “English, psychology and sociology. You?”

“Maths, further maths, physics and chemistry.”

“Wow... That sounds...”

“Incredibly nerdy?”

“Exhausting.”

Freya smiled with a shrug. “Tell me about it. But I’m just better with numbers than anything else, so it just makes sense.”

“Yeah, an awful, twisted kind of sense.”

“Well, maybe I’m an awful, twisted kind of person.”

Jamie laughed and Freya couldn’t help but smile. Her laugh was loud and warm, the kind of laugh which seemed to radiate happiness. It seemed much nicer than the laughs that had been maliciously directed at Freya. She found herself hoping that it was because it was more genuine.

“Me too,” Jamie eventually said as Damon walked up to them.

“Hey,” he greeted with a grin.

Freya briefly wondered if he was happy that they were getting along because he hoped to rekindle his relationship with Jamie. But Jamie had barely even acknowledged his arrival, her attention still on Freya.

“Hey,” Freya replied with a wave. “What’s up?”

“It’s not just Cinderella,” he said excitedly.

Jamie raised an eyebrow. “What is he talking about?”

Freya rolled her eyes. “You know Bethany?”

“I think so.”

“She sneaked out to go to prom, despite her step-mother’s wishes, and she left a shoe behind.”

“Wow, really?”

Freya nodded before turning back to Damon. “So, what do you mean it’s not just Cinderella?”

“You know Anya?”

“Yeah, she was in my biology class.” Freya had always liked Anya. They didn’t hang out outside of class, but Anya’s friend group had an odd number of people, and she didn’t turn up her nose at pairing up with Freya.

“Yesterday was her sixteenth birthday.”

“And?”

“And, well, you know she took textiles, right?”

“No, but okay.”

“She went to collect her final project before prom with Mara. Mara says that she pricked her finger on one of the pins and passed out. They had to call an ambulance and, apparently, she hasn’t woken up.”

“That’s horrible,” Jamie said, kicking at the ground in an effort to still her swing.

“And really close to Sleeping Beauty,” Freya noted, frowning in thought.

Bethany could have been a coincidence. A bit random, but then sometimes things were just random. But Anya made two fairy tales come to life, which was a little more than Freya was comfortable shrugging off as a coincidence. She wondered if there was any underlying magic. Though she had no idea why anyone would cast a spell to make fairy tales come to life. It would take a lot of power and Freya couldn't see the positive, though she wasn't too well versed on magic outside of Demons.

She considered calling Amber and asking her, but she doubted that she would get a straight answer. Amber was so busy protecting her, she didn't realise that all she was doing was putting blinders on her. Mel, on the other hand, would probably know more about the magical community as it currently existed and she wouldn't censor her words.

“I wonder if she has a boyfriend or anything to wake her up,” Damon said.

Jamie rolled her eyes. “It's not literally Sleeping Beauty, Damon. She's ill, not under a sleeping curse.”

“I know, I just... Wouldn't it be cool? If true love's kiss woke her up?”

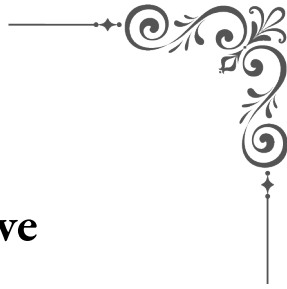
Freya snorted. “Yeah, unless it's the older versions of the story.”

“Why? What happened in the older version?”

“He didn't kiss her, he raped her. She only woke up after giving birth to twins.”

Jamie made a face. “Fairy tales are so creepy.”

Freya smirked. “Exactly.”



Chapter Five

Freya ended up running home, having lost track of time. It was getting dark, which wasn't a good sign, given the time of year. She didn't bother to check the time on her phone. She didn't need to know exactly how late she was. That would just make her anxiety worse.

She upped her speed to just barely more than Human down the last couple of streets, not wanting to push her luck. Her shifting was getting better, but she still lacked distance. Amber told her that it was more of a mental block than anything else and that shifting further didn't really take any more energy, but Freya could still only go a couple of streets at a time. With the energy it would take to cloak her activities, she would have exhausted herself half way home. So she settled for running.

She hoped to sneak in without Margaret noticing and pretend that she had been home for hours, but Margaret came out of the kitchen door as Freya entered, a glass of wine in her hand.

"What do you call this hour?" Margaret asked.

Freya shrugged. "My phone died." A million issues with her lie cropped up immediately, including the fact that she could have asked a friend, that she should have come home as soon as she saw her phone die, and that she could have rang Margaret from a friend's phone to tell her what had happened. But the words were already out of her mouth.

Margaret raised an eyebrow as she walked towards her, swaying a little on her feet. "And what do you think you're wearing?"

Freya looked down at her red and white checkered dress. It wasn't her favourite, but it was good for a hot summer day. She didn't know what Margaret was talking about, though. It was more than long enough and, though the top was tight around her breasts, giving them quite a bit of prominence, it was by no means risqué. Margaret had, in fact, picked the dress out for her. But she did sometimes change her mind about clothes she had suggested that Freya use her allowance to buy, throwing them out when Freya's back was turned.

"My dress," Freya said, unsure of what other answer she could possibly give.

Freya didn't see the slap coming, it was so out of the blue. Her hand ignited into flame in response to Margaret's smug look, but she got a hold of herself enough to extinguish it before Margaret could notice.

"That's for talking back."

"I didn't!" Freya cried, barely dodging Margaret's next swipe. "What is wrong with you?"

"You, you little bitch! Parading around, rubbing my age in my face."

"Wait, *what?!?*" Freya was completely lost. "You know what? I'm heading out. I'll come back when you're sober."

Freya stormed out of the house, fuming. Amber appeared next to her as soon as the door shut.

"Yeah, yeah, there's magic in the house, I know," Freya said as she opened up her senses. "How did Margaret get affected? I thought you had put a protection spell around the house."

Amber shrugged as Freya jumped up to her bedroom window. "It would have to be strong magic, and possibly a blanket spell."

“Like the fairy tales coming to life?” Freya asked as she slipped into her bedroom.

“Possibly. If that’s the case, the magic is probably somewhat neutral. Which might explain how it got through the protection spell.”

“It sure as hell didn’t feel neutral,” Freya grumbled as she changed her dress for her leggings and plain top. She pulled her enchanted chainmail over the top, covering that with a dark purple skirt and a leather jacket. It wasn’t completely protective but she didn’t know how long she would be gone and didn’t want to have to constantly use strong illusions.

She made sure to stick some heavier armour in her handbag, though, along with her best sword. She wasn’t sure when she would be able to come back.



FREYA FOUND HERSELF heading back to the park. Most of the others had still been there when she had left, and she found herself aching for the familiarity of Damon - or, hell, even Jamie - to remind her that the ridiculous turn things had taken was isolated. The whole world wasn’t upside down, it was just a handful of people.

She arrived back at the park to see that Damon had left after her. In fact, there was only a couple of people left.

“Hey,” she heard from behind her.

She turned to see Jamie approaching.

“You came back?”

Freya shrugged, not sure of what to say. *There’s some kind of magic at work in the area and it’s affected my foster mother and I know that I need to figure out where it’s coming from, but I really just need to regroup right now.*

Yeah, because that would go over well...

"I had an argument with my foster mother. I... I just left."

"Crap."

"Yeah..."

"Are you okay?"

Freya nodded. "Yeah. No, it's fine. I'm overreacting." She cursed her voice breaking. This wasn't Margaret's fault, it was the spell. She didn't want to give Jamie the impression that she had some kind of terrible home life. But she *really* needed to talk to someone.

"You're allowed to be upset if you're upset," Jamie told her. "You don't have to worry about what I think."

Freya gave her a thankful smile as she wiped away her tears. "I just... I don't know how to fix it."

"What exactly happened?"

Freya shrugged to buy herself time, trying to figure out how to talk around the magic. "I came home late," she eventually said. "Margaret was really mad and she... She ripped into me. She made comments about how I was dressed and then I... I stormed upstairs, got changed, and left."

"She commented on your dress?"

Freya nodded. "Yeah."

"Why? I thought you looked really nice."

Freya blushed a little at that. "I... I don't know. I mean, she was there when I bought it. But she does change her mind a lot..."

"That sucks. I mean, it sounds like she should be trying to fix this as much as you."

"Well, you've only heard my side of the story," Freya reasoned. "Maybe if you heard just hers, you would think that I was entirely in the wrong."

"Wow, you are *really* trying hard to defend her," Jamie said with a raised eyebrow. "Were you this forgiving when I was being mean?"

Freya snorted. She had *hated* Jamie, to the point at which she had tried to figure out a way to justify hexing her several times.

But, the more she thought about it, the more she realised that it hadn't been an immediate response. Damon had asked her, a week or so into him dating her, if Jamie's cold attitude bothered her. Freya had shrugged it off and reasoned that she might have acted the same way.

Of course, that forgiveness had died a slow death over the months that followed.

"It's a character flaw," Freya admitted.

"Oh good, I wasn't looking forward to the 'being nice isn't always good for you' talk."

Freya shrugged. "I'm very aware of my issues. Actually doing anything about them is a very different thing."

Jamie grinned back at her. "Well, it's late, so my parents will kill *me* if I don't get home. Do you need a place to stay? I can pull out the blow-up mattress."

"Won't your parents mind?"

"Well, they won't be *happy* about it, but they won't kick you out or anything."

Freya shook her head. She might not have any leads, but she needed to start trying to figure out where this magic was coming from, before someone got seriously hurt.

"I don't want to get you in trouble," Freya told her. "Damon's got plenty of spare rooms and his uncle won't have any issue putting me up for the night."

Freya could have sworn that Jamie looked slightly dejected at that, though she quickly covered it with a smile.

"Well, if you ever need to talk, just give me a text, okay?"

"I don't have your number," Freya pointed out.

"I'll Facebook it."

“I...” Freya stopped herself before she admitted that she’d blocked her, remembering that she could simply unblock her as soon as they said goodbye. “Okay then. Thank you.”

“No problem,” Jamie said before heading off.

Freya quickly unblocked her before heading back to the swings, sitting down and focusing her magic to try and sense the same signature that had been surrounding Margaret.

After just a moment, though, Amber appeared at her side.

“You’re tired,” she said simply.

Freya shrugged. “What’s your point?”

“You can pick this up tomorrow. I think you should do as you told Jamie you would. Call Damon and stay at his tonight.”

Freya sighed. “I don’t want to bother him.”

“We both know that he won’t mind. You need to sleep, Freya. You’re still recovering from your fight the other night.”

Freya frowned as her ribs twinged at the reminder. They were still being held together by magic, which was a pretty constant drain for her.

“Fine,” she eventually conceded. “But only because I’m injured.”

She brought her phone out and rang Damon. She was sure that he wouldn’t pick up, given the time, but he did on the second ring.

“Hey,” he greeted. “*What’s up?*”

“I... I had a fight with Margaret,” she admitted.

“*You did? Are you okay?*”

“Yeah, I just... I stormed out. Would-”

“*You can stay here,*” he said before she even had a chance to ask. “*Where are you? I’ll come with my uncle to pick you up.*”

“I’m at the park,” she said after just a moment of hesitation.

“*We’ll be there in five.*”



FIVE MINUTES LATER, Damon's uncle's car pulled up to the park and Damon opened the back door to let her in.

"Thanks for this," she said sheepishly as she entered. "I'm sorry for the inconvenience."

"It's nothing," Gregor told her from the driver's seat, waving his hand dismissively as he started driving back to Damon's.

"Are you okay?" Damon asked her.

Freya nodded. "Yeah. It was nothing. I just freaked out and I think we both need some time to cool down."

To her surprise, Damon moved his hand up to her cheek. He touched it gently, causing her to hiss as she realised that Margaret's nails must have drawn blood when she had slapped her. She had a glamour up to cover her battle injuries, which she supposed must have stopped Jamie from seeing it.

"How did you get this?" he asked gently.

She shrugged. "It's nothing."

Damon didn't say anything for a few moments, just regarding her carefully before eventually saying, "Yeah, I've had a whole lot of nothing in the past too."

Freya suddenly became very aware of Gregor in the driver's seat, listening to them. She pulled her coat tight around herself.

"I'm really tired," she told Damon, hoping that he would drop the subject.

He nodded. "We'll be home soon," he promised.



FREYA WAS THANKFUL that neither Damon nor Gregor asked her any more questions about what had happened, even once they arrived at the apartment.

"Freya's staying over tonight," Gregor told Charlie, his boyfriend, as soon as they arrived.

Charlie, a slim, freckled redhead, simply nodded. "Do you want anything to drink? How about some calming tea? I think we've got some."

Freya nodded as Damon hurried to his room, bringing her back a pair of shorts and t-shirt.

"Here," he said. "You can sleep in these tonight."

"Thank you," Freya said simply, taking the clothes to the bathroom and quickly getting changed.

When she returned, Damon was in his own pyjamas, sitting on the sofa with a pile of blankets. Two cups of dark green tea were sitting on the coffee table.

"Uncle Gregor and Charlie have gone to bed," Damon told her. "I thought we could watch a film for a while, if you wanted. I'm not really tired."

Freya nodded, settling in next to him. She didn't want to go to sleep just yet. She didn't think that she could. Not with her mind buzzing with everything that had happened during the day, her wounds from her fight with the hybrid still stinging.

"Thank you," Freya muttered into the blankets as she snuggled into them.

Damon turned to face her, causing her to blush a little at his proximity.

"Freya, you are always welcome here. I mean it. If you ever need somewhere, I'm here for you."

Freya tried not to cry at that. She was just *so* tired and sore and she was just done. The whole day had been too much for her.

She leaned over, picking up the remote and sticking on Power Rangers in an effort to distract herself.



Chapter Six

Freya woke up to the smell of pancakes, cringing as her ribs objected to how fast she tried to sit up.

In fact, everything protested, making her realise that she had slept awkwardly, entangled in a pile made up of equal parts blanket and Damon, the screen in front of her complaining that playback had timed out.

“Freya?” Damon asked as he woke up.

“Yeah?” she replied.

“Did we fall asleep watching telly?”

“Looks that way.”

“Sorry.”

She shrugged. “It’s okay,” she figured. “I guess we were both just really tired.”

“We had the spare room made up and everything,” Damon said, looking a little disappointed.

Freya found herself laughing a little that, though a little disappointment crept into her heart as she realised that he’d had pretty much no reaction to their rather intimate situation. She, on the other hand, was blushing like an idiot. Though she supposed the blushing was probably the least of her problems. She considered it unlikely that Damon would let go what had happened the day before now that she was awake and ready to talk. Or, at least, he would assume she was ready. She could probably drag this out by feigning distress, but it would probably only

make him even more concerned. The last thing she needed was for this to go on for days, or even weeks, with Damon thinking that Margaret was an abusive caretaker.

Her mind immediately started combing through all the magic she knew, trying to find some way that she could erase the events of the night before from Damon and Gregor's memory. And Charlie's too, she supposed. She stopped herself halfway through recalling something Mel had mentioned about weaving a complicated deception through a Human's mind. She hated having to use magic on people close to her. She was used to the lying, she had done more than enough of it before her magic had shown up, but it wasn't about being *used* to it. She had learnt to do it all too often over the years - "I love trying new things and changing my routine!" and "Of course spending my free time in a noisy room crowded full of strangers sounds like a brilliant idea!" were two of the most common - but lying about magic as well was just one lie too many. The proverbial straw that Freya would rather not deal with.

No, this was just something she would have to convince Damon of without magic. It was probably for the best anyway. The more complex the magic, the more difficult it was to have Sensitives accept it.

"You kids up?" Damon's uncle asked as he entered the room. "Charlie made pancakes."

"Pancakes!" Damon yelled in a funny voice.

Gregor raised an eyebrow at him while Freya couldn't help but laugh.

"Pancakes," Damon said, as if it was an explanation, with a shrug.

"And we wonder why your aunt is worried about you staying here."

"Aunt Seph just doesn't have your great sense of humour."

“Uh-huh,” Gregor said, narrowing his eyes. “Regardless, there are pancakes in the kitchen.”

Damon turned back to Freya as his uncle left the room. “Pancakes?”

“Pancakes sound amazing,” Freya said, her stomach growling in agreement.

Damon got up from the sofa, playfully tumbling out of his tangle of blankets, earning him another laugh from Freya. She realised, at that point, that he was doing it deliberately. He was making a fool of himself in a deliberate effort to cheer her up. If she thought she had been blushing before, it was nothing compared to what that realisation brought. She both hated and loved the gooey feeling in her stomach, wishing that things could just be simple between them. Wishing that either she didn't feel this way, or that he loved her back. Or, she supposed, loved her back and that she had some kind of reassurance that he would understand the fact that she wasn't Human.

She shook the idle fancies from her mind as she followed him to the kitchen. They would do her no good and she had to be careful; getting out of this without anyone calling the authorities on Margaret was going to take some expert lying.

“Are you feeling any better this morning?” Charlie asked her as he plated up some pancakes and placed them in front of her.

Freya nodded. “Thank you. For giving me a place to stay last night. I know I must seem like some foolish young girl to have run away from home like that.”

Charlie looked at her sympathetically while Gregor laughed.

“I don't think any of us can say that we never did the same at your age,” Gregor told her.

“This isn't about...” Charlie started and Freya shook her head, realising what he was suggesting.

When Freya had first started to figure out that she might be bisexual, Damon had been the only one she had felt comfortable talking to. She had even been reluctant to talk to Amber, given how long ago she had died. After a while, it had just sort of become common knowledge around Damon's place, which wasn't really that surprising, given how much time she spent there. She still hadn't had the talk with Margaret or Ryan, though. She just didn't see the point. Let that be a problem when she actually had a girlfriend to bring home. It wasn't her permanent home and there was no use causing trouble over which of the Avengers she fancied.

Charlie and Gregor had differing opinions about this. Charlie thought that she would probably feel better with it all out in the open, no matter the consequences. Gregor thought he was taking optimism a little too far. But at the end of the day, they both agreed that this was Freya's decision, not theirs. For Freya, it was much like the fact that she was pretty sure that she was Autistic; lying by omission didn't kill anyone, and it greatly reduced the amount of crap she had to put up with.

"No," Freya eventually said. "It was just a misunderstanding. She'd had a little to drink, I was tired and overly defensive, and we both said some things that we probably regret now. I know I do."

"So... You think everything will be okay if you go back today?" Gregor asked.

"Should be," Freya said.

"You shouldn't go right away," Damon said, Freya barely understanding his speech through a mouthful of pancakes. "Let her sleep off the drink."

"The kid's got a point," Gregor said. "If you go back while she's hung over, you'll probably only make things worse."

“Unless her worrying about where you are only makes her angrier,” Charlie pointed out.

“I could text and tell her I’m here,” Freya figured. “If she wants me home now, she’ll tell me, but hopefully I won’t accidentally wake her up with just a text.”

“Good plan,” Gregor said as he started in on his own pancakes.

Freya quickly sent the text before turning back to Damon. “So, have you heard any more about Bethany? Or Anya?”

Damon shrugged. “Only a little. Nothing all that interesting, though.”

“Fair enough.”

“I do wonder...”

“What?” Freya asked.

“It’s silly, but... I was wondering, if they were following fairy tales - which, obviously they’re not, because that would be ridiculous - but, if they *were*, I wonder which version they would be following. You did say there were different versions, right?”

Freya nodded, doing a poor job of concealing a smile. This was exactly what she needed to be doing, and now she wouldn’t have to lie to Damon about it, or wait until she left.

“Well,” she said as soon as she had her smile under control, “that’s what the Internet is for.”



IT WAS ALMOST LUNCH when Freya’s phone finally rang. She and Damon were in the middle of watching a film, while looking up fairy tales on his laptop. The research hadn’t been easy, given that every time the story was retold, parts of it changed, and the specifics of most retellings were under copyright. She wasn’t too keen on the idea of forking over money to find out how each of the many children’s publishers varied in

their tellings, not to mention all the animated films. While Barbie as Rapunzel would probably be a fun nostalgia trip for her, she didn't imagine Damon would manage to sit through it.

Freya stopped holding her breath as she realised that it was Mel, not Margaret, ringing her.

"Hey," Freya answered, almost laughing with relief.

"Hey," Mel greeted. "*Have you seen the news?*"

"No. Why?"

"Apparently some kind of plant has overgrown all around the hospital. It's starting to freak people out. My Coven Head wants to investigate, and I was wondering if you wanted to help. You'll be compensated, of course."

"Sounds good. I'll be there in five."

Freya hung up before turning back to Damon.

"That Margaret?" he asked.

"No, it was Mel. I forgot that I'd arranged to meet her today."

"Do you need a lift or anything?"

"No, I'm good," Freya said as she made sure that she had everything she needed in her bag. "And I can head back home as soon as Margaret replies."

"And are you... Okay with doing that? When she calls, I mean. Will you be okay to just... go back?"

Freya shrugged. "I don't know. I'm sure it'll be fine, though. Like I said, it was a one-time thing."

Damon narrowed his eyes folding his arms over his chest. If it had been anyone else, she would have suspected that she was in for a lecture.

"What?" she asked.

"It's not your job to defend her, Freya."

Freya did her best to stop herself from sighing. This was exactly what she'd been afraid of. If not for the magic, Damon would have been in the ring, and she loved him for the fact that

he actually cared about her. But there was magic at play here, and she couldn't hold Margaret responsible for something that she had undoubtedly done herself.

"I know," Freya told him earnestly. "Look, Damon, I don't have an aunt and uncle that I can turn to. If things don't work out here, then I'm out of the city. If I go back and Margaret hasn't gotten over our fight, then I'll start considering it a problem."

"Freya... I meant what I said last night, about you always been welcome here. You have somewhere to turn. Please don't ever think that you're alone."

Freya didn't really have a response for that, her throat closing up on her. After a few moments, she managed to muster a "thank you" before hugging him tight.

"I... I better go," she said hurriedly before grabbing her bag and heading out the door.



FREYA SHIFTED OVER to the hospital, glad that it wasn't too far. As soon as she arrived, she saw that it was covered in brambles, blocking all of the doors and windows.

"Well, this looks familiar," Freya quipped as she found Mel. It took her a few more moments than it should have, especially given that she was the only one in a wheelchair, thanks to the fact that her scales had been replaced with the illusion of pale, freckled skin.

Mel raised an eyebrow, lifting her head from the large tome she had been reading, the words written in a script Freya didn't recognise.

"Really?" she asked. "I can't find reference to anything like this."

"As far as I can tell, there's a curse going around. It's affected a few people I know, forcing them to live out fairy tales."

Mel frowned at the building for a moment before a look of understanding dawned across her features. "This is Sleeping Beauty, right?"

Freya nodded. "A girl from my school, Anya, pricked her finger on a needle a couple of days ago. She fell asleep and hasn't woken up since."

Mel sighed. "And, of course, she was brought to the hospital. That might also explain why no one has tried to get out. Everyone else was put under a sleeping curse too in the story, weren't they?"

"In the Grimm version, yeah."

Mel raised an eyebrow.

"I spent the morning doing research," Freya explained. "There's this Sleeping Beauty, a Cinderella, and another one I haven't been able to figure out yet."

Mel frowned. "A curse like that would take some extraordinary power. Even to change the circumstances around one person wouldn't be trivial. If they were going so far as to mess with free will, especially for longer than a few minutes..."

"I'm getting the feeling that the tl;dr here is that this is very bad."

Mel nodded. "Oh yeah. Like, a large amount of Demons banded together. Slightly fewer if they have access to Ancient power."

"Ancient power?"

"You know, like Angels and stuff."

"I thought there weren't any more Angels on Earth."

"Well, no more can be *born* on Earth. But bar interference, they're pretty much immortal, so the ones from before the Twilight prevented any more from being born are still around."

"And you think they could be involved?"

“Well, no. The only Angels lingering are Reapers, who are too busy ferrying souls to bother with our affairs, and Oracles, who would never go against Fate’s plan.”

“What if this is Fate’s plan?”

Mel shook her head. “Nah. Fate’s got more subtlety than this. You can never trace her work back to her Oracles.”

“And there are definitely no other Angels?”

“The Twilight was the last Angel of Life and Mother Nature hasn’t had any daughters since the Fifth Alternate Timeline, and who can blame her after that mess?”

Freya shrugged. She had no idea what had happened in the Fifth Alternate Timeline. Or, really, about any magical history. “So, how do we get through?”

“I’m guessing that we need a prince. That’s how the story goes, right? The prince cuts through and gets to her?”

“And you think we’ll need to follow the story exactly?”

Mel shrugged. “How did the other stories work out? Did they follow exactly?”

“Cinderella didn’t *seem* to, but then, there were no supernatural elements like a bramble-covered hospital.”

“They might be getting more exact as time goes on. The spell might be getting stronger.”

“Stronger? Wouldn’t that need more Energy?”

“Yep. The caster could be collecting more Energy and adding it themselves, or the spell could be feeding off of the emotional energy it creates. Probably the turmoil of the middle of the story, suggesting Dark magic.”

“It could be Light magic,” Freya added, “if Cinderella has already reached her happy ending. That could be the source of the increase too.”

“Which brings us back to square one. Or, as I like to call it, the ‘we don’t know what on Earth is going on’ square. I don’t like this square. It’s unfamiliar and full of other people.”

“Then we need to get off the square,” Freya figured, a little distracted by spotting someone slipping through the gaggle of emergency services, round to the side of the building. “Follow me.”

“Right, because I’m just the picture of stealth,” Mel said, indicating to her chair.

“You’re a Witch.”

“Fair point,” she replied before casting an illusion around herself so that she wouldn’t draw attention. “I’m not in the field much. Our Coven Head is *super* over protective of the younger members.”

“Tell me about it. Amber probably wouldn’t let me leave the house if she wasn’t dead.”

“Amber?”

“My guardian.”

“Oh. Right. The old lady you were with. She didn’t look dead to me.”

“Possessed.”

“*Possessed?* You are involved in some really weird stuff, you know that, right?”

Freya shrugged. “I thought it must be pretty normal for magic. I haven’t exactly been involved with the rest of the community before.”

“Yeah, no. I haven’t even... I can’t even imagine what kind of power someone must employ to stay on Earth after they die. To just ignore Death like that...”

“Yeah, apparently he wasn’t too happy about it, but she made a promise to my mother. Apparently that kind of thing has weight.”

“Well, yeah, but... Put it this way, if I made another Witch a promise, none of the Big Three would have any issue getting in the way.”

Any response Freya might have had was cut off by her finding the guy who had made his way around the building, now hacking his way through the brambles with an axe.

“How did he get that past the cops?” Mel asked.

“Maybe it’s part of the spell.”

Mel hummed, thumbing her way through the book again. “I guess that might narrow it down a bit.”

“Hey,” Freya called, causing the guy to turn and face her. “I recognise you. You’re in drama, right?”

He nodded. “Yeah. We’ve been in the same class for two years, Freya.”

She shrugged. “I’m bad with names.”

He gave her a blank look and she figured she had offended him.

“You’re not a people-person, are you?” Mel asked.

“You’re just getting this now?” Freya replied before turning back to the guy. “So, what is your name?”

“Richard.”

“Riiiiight.” She vaguely remembered a few terrible jokes Damon had made when she told him that Richard was often shortened to ‘Dick’. “So, do you figure that it doesn’t count as breaking and entering if it’s a plant keeping you out?”

“Any’s in here,” he told her, returning to hacking away.

“Yeah, I know. So, you’re trying to get to her?”

“Exactly.”

“Need a hand?”

He raised an eyebrow, indicating to his axe. “Well, sure, if you’ve got the tools.”

Freya sighed, turning to Mel. "My memory spells aren't good enough for this," she muttered, low enough so that Richard wouldn't hear.

"Even if we tried to use magic, he's probably the only one who can break through."

"We still might have to use magic once we're in."

Mel brought out her wand and pointed it at Richard.

"*Inario*," she said and the wand let out of burst of blue light, hitting Richard square in the back. He didn't seem to notice and continued hacking away.

"What was that?" Freya asked.

"A perception charm. Now he'll just ignore anything supernatural he sees or hears. At least, for as long as the spell lasts."

"And how long is that?"

"We've probably got half an hour."

"Awesome," Freya said as her mind started to run faster than she could keep up, going over all of the possibilities. "So, if I cast this on a Human friend, could I talk to them about magic for a while?"

"I mean, I guess. I don't know how fulfilling the conversation would actually end up being. And it won't work on Sensitives."

"Ah well. Never mind."

"Why? You have someone in mind?"

Freya shrugged. "Kind of. It doesn't matter, though. He's Sensitive."

"Urgh. I don't know how you can hang around a Sensitive. They keep seeing through my glamours. Humans tend to freak out if they realise you've got scales."

"It's not easy. He keeps seeing my battle wounds. There's only so long someone's going to keep believing that you walked into a door. And that the door ran you through with a sword."

"Ran you through? Ouch."

“Yeah, want to see the scar?”

Richard interrupted at that point. “I’m through!”

Freya turned to see that he had, indeed, cut through the brambles to reach the door, though he’d only made a small hole to climb through.

As soon as he was through, Freya ignited her hands, figuring that the spell would probably allow her passage now that the prince was in. She burned the brambles down enough to make a space big enough for Mel.

“Thanks,” Mel said as she wheeled in behind them. “What spell was that? I could probably use a good fire one.”

Freya shrugged sheepishly. “It’s not a spell.”

“It’s not...” Mel looked at her like she was seeing her for the first time. “That’s an innate ability?”

Freya nodded. “Yeah, but I’m better with water.”

“But that’s elemental magic.”

“Yeah. So?”

“So, *I* control water because I’m part Mermaid.”

“Well, maybe I have a little Mermaid in me too.”

“To have the power without any physical attributes is rare. The power doesn’t usually last for more than a couple of generations. But it would have to, because otherwise...”

“Otherwise what?”

Mel shook her head. “I... It’s nothing. There’s no way... I was just thinking aloud. Trust me, if it was what I was thinking, you would *know*.”

“Oookay,” Freya said, unsure of what else to say.

Mel turned her attention to Richard. “So, do we even know where this girl is?”

“Third floor,” he told them.

“Lead the way,” Freya said as they got in the lift.

“So, which version of Sleeping Beauty do you think they’re working from?”

Freya shrugged. “I don’t know. I haven’t been able to figure that out yet. Why?”

“Well, it’s just... Kissing the princess and her waking up isn’t exactly the most climactic ending. Some versions like to punch it up a little.”

“You think we’re going to have to fight something to reach her?”

“I hope not. My combat magic is theoretical at best.”

Freya pulled her daggers from her bag. “That’s what I’m here for.”

“You have so many nice things,” Mel said with envy. “My Coven Head doesn’t let you *near* weapons until you’re eighteen.”

Freya shrugged. “Well, I take mine from dead people, so you probably don’t want to follow my example.”

“Ew, no.”

“You don’t have to say it like that. It’s not as if I can be picky,” she pointed out as they got into the lift. “Before I got the bounty money, I was broke. And I’ve only just started to have contact with the magic world beyond dealing with trouble-making demons. It’s much harder to get weapons in the Human world, especially for someone under age.”

Mel held up her hands defensively as they all got into a lift. “I wasn’t judging! I was just saying, you know, having to deal with dead bodies like that sounds gross and I probably wouldn’t be able to do it.”

“I mean, it’s not really grosser than most potion-making. Especially anything involving eyes. Eyes are the worst.”

Mel shrugged. “I never really make potions. My tail isn’t exactly something I choose to have. I get wet, my body thinks I’m in water.”

“That sounds really inconvenient.”

“Tell me about it. Why do you think I spend all of my time in the library?”

“I just thought you really liked books.”

“Well... That too.”

The lift dinged as they reached the third floor, opening to reveal a few people sleeping in the hallway.

“Richard’s not really much of a talker, is he?” Freya muttered as she and Mel used their magic to nudge people out of their path.

Mel shrugged. “It’s the spell. He’s barely paying attention to anything we’re saying.”

“Fair enough.”

They were interrupted by a roar.

“What the hell was that?” Richard exclaimed.

Mel groaned, closing her eyes. “Please tell me it’s not what I think it is.”

“Are you thinking dragon?” Freya asked.

“Yep.”

“Then it’s probably bad news.”

“*Awesome*,” Mel muttered sarcastically.

“How good are you with protection spells?”

“Pretty decent, why?”

“Make sure lover-boy here doesn’t kill himself when we face it, okay?”

“I can cover you too.”

“Without compromising him? I heal quick, and I don’t know how to wake Anya if her boyfriend is extra crispy.”

Mel glared at her. “I might not know much in the way of combat magic, but I am by no means weak.”

Freya held her hands up in defence. "I was just checking we were on the same page priority-wise. Like I said, I can handle it. *He* can't."

Mel nodded. "If I have to choose, I'll protect him, but I can handle you both."

"Then let's go face the dragon," Freya said, making her way towards the roaring.

She entered the cafeteria and saw that the great, purple beast took up all of the space.

"This might get tricky," Freya muttered as the dragon saw her, dropping into a roll to avoid its flames.

They barely felt warm, and Freya realised that it was the effect of Mel's protection spell.

"Die, beast!" Richard yelled, charging at it with no thought to his attack, his axe raised high above his head.

Freya sighed as the beast batted him away, hoping that Mel's spell kept him unharmed. She moved to the back of the dragon, lashing out against its wings, which seemed the easiest to cut through. If she could hack them off, she'd have more room to manoeuvre, and hopefully the pain would distract the dragon long enough for her get in some more lethal blows.

Freya brought one of her daggers down, but the dragon moved its wing too quick for her, resulting in the blade plunging deep into its shoulder. It responded by rearing up with a roar, causing Freya to lose her footing. She sent out a blast of flame as she toppled to the ground, in an effort to distract the dragon so that she would have enough time to get to her feet.

She had no such luck, with it barely wincing at her attack before swatting her across the room, crashing through into the back wall of the kitchen with a thud, which was thankfully dulled by Mel.

“Fire isn’t going to work on a dragon!” Mel yelled back from the dining area, her tone making it clear that she expected Freya to know that. “Didn’t you say you were good with water?”

“Right,” she agreed, quickly finding the kitchen tap. With a flick of her wrist, she had it spurting at full pressure, spraying water everywhere. She pulled it from behind her, bringing a tidal wave crashing past her, through to where the dragon was.

“Hey!” Mel yelled. “Remember not to get me wet!”

“That’s kind of the point!” Freya yelled back. “It can’t breathe fire underwater.”

Mel nodded, realising what she was doing. “Lover-boy might need to make the final blow.”

“Hey, Richard? You can swim, right?”

“Yes, why?”

“Get ready to swim.”

Mel followed Freya’s lead, bursting the pipes leading into the cafeteria so that it flooded faster. Freya focused on keeping the water in the room and not seeping out under the door or through to where she was in the kitchen. She got one of her daggers and let the tide take it directly to Mel.

“Think you can handle one of these?” she asked as she moved so that she could see through the serving hatch. She quickly realised that her friend had now shed her illusion of Human skin and her legs had merged into a tail.

“I guess we’ll find out,” she answered. “You are *so* lucky I was wearing a dress today.”

At that, the water was at head height and Mel abandoned her chair, swimming up to the dragon as it struggled to breathe in the water. She struck at its neck.

“It’s not big enough to take its head off!” Freya yelled, unsure if Mel could hear her through the water.

Mel seemed to have heard. Or, at least, Freya assumed that she heard from the death glare she gave her before moving off to find somewhere else to stab.

“Go for the heart!” Freya yelled. Not that Freya would know exactly where that was, beyond vaguely in its chest, but Mel seemed to have some idea, moving with purpose towards the dragon’s breast.

Mel plunged the sword deep into its flesh, but that only seemed to make it angrier.

That was the point at which Richard swam forward, his arms swinging as he brought his axe to the dragon’s neck. There was no way it should have done any damage, between the water resistance slowing down the blow and the size of the weapon. But, in complete disregard of physics, the dragon’s head came off in one, clean blow.

Freya gave Mel enough time to swim back to her chair before draining away the water.

Richard flopped like a fish onto the floor, coughing violently. “He’s not going to die, is he?” Freya asked.

Mel shrugged. “Don’t think so.” She brought out her wand and waved it at him. “*Resita.*”

All of the liquid came up from his lungs in a single torrent, causing him to jerk into an upright position until it was done. He kept gagging after it was over, but seemed to be breathing fine.

“You going to live?” Freya asked him after a few moments.

“Yeah,” he eventually replied in a rasping voice. He clammed to his feet unsteadily, clutching his side.

“You hurt?” Freya asked, indicating to where he was holding. “I’m fine,” he told her firmly. “Let’s just get to Anya.”

“It would only take two seconds to heal you,” Freya said, but he was already stumbling off down the corridor.

"It'll be the spell," Mel figured as they made their way after him. "He probably didn't comprehend what you said."

"Yeah, I guess."

Mel sighed, looking down at her soaking dress and tail. "I'm going to have to shift right back to the coven now."

"I'm sorry. It just... seemed like a good idea at the time."

"No, it was an awesome idea. I just wanted to pick up some biscuits on the way home. Never mind."

"Do you think the dragon's it?" Freya asked as they trudged through the corridor.

Mel shrugged. "I don't know. I would think so. I never really read *Sleeping Beauty* as a child. My parents tended to avoid the creepier stories."

"Yeah, we didn't have the book or the video. We had a few of the Barbie films and Anastasia, and the rest of them were, like, Power Rangers."

"Mighty Morphin' or Turbo?"

"Turbo."

"Is that not technically child abuse?"

"I actually liked it."

At that, Richard turned and left the corridor, entering one of the rooms.

Inside, Anya was hooked up to a monitoring machine and an IV. She didn't look ill, just sleeping, which Freya realised probably shouldn't have been a surprise.

"Did you have a plan once you reached this point?" Freya asked, wondering how they would convince him to kiss her. Would the spell make him do it? If it didn't, then it would be a *really* creepy request. Mel's spell might allow him to understand, or it might make it so that he wouldn't comprehend any attempt they made to ask him to follow the story.

"Get her out of here," Richard said simply.

“Isn’t the IV keeping her alive?”

“We can take her to another hospital.”

Freya sighed at that. If they took her to another hospital, the brambles would most likely grow again and another dragon would show.

She exchanged a look with Mel, who just shrugged at her, clearly just as out of ideas as she was.

Richard moved to take out the IV and Freya averted her eyes, trying not to wince. Swords through her abdomen, she could handle. Needles? Not so much. When she turned back, Richard was sitting on the edge of the bed, looking as if he had started to move to pick Anya up, but had stopped mid-way through to brush some hair from her face as he gazed at her with an intensity that made Freya more than a little uncomfortable. It was sweet, she guessed, but this wasn’t the time.

Or, rather, it was exactly the time, she reminded herself just before she would have stepped forward to remind him that they should go. The dragons she could handle. She was good with monsters and weapons. That made sense to her.

This was out of her hands. She couldn’t change the story or stop it from playing out. She just had to help it along and otherwise stand back. She didn’t like sitting still. She certainly didn’t like not being able to control the situation.

Richard didn’t move away from Anya as he finished brushing her hair away. Instead, he leaned forward, hesitating for just a moment before kissing her.

As he pulled away, her eyes fluttered open.

“Richard?” she asked, her voice way too clear for someone who had been unconscious for a few days.

“You’re awake!” he exclaimed before pulling her into a hug.

“We should leave before people realise we weren’t here before,” Freya said, wanting to be away from the couple and their gooey eyes.

“Can we see if the dragon’s still there?” Mel asked. “They’re pretty much non-existent on Earth at this point, and they have *so* many rare ingredients.”

“Really?” Freya asked as they headed out of the room.

“Oh yeah. The blood is good for prosperity spells, and has anti-venom properties. The scales are a great balance between flexibility and strength, making them perfect for light armour. The teeth and bones make great bases for charms... Basically, any part is highly valuable.”

“I don’t know that we’ll have time to cut it up before everyone finishes waking,” Freya pointed out as she spotted a couple of nurses groggily sitting up.

Mel shrugged. “I’ll shift it to the coven.”

“Need a hand with it?”

“Yeah, if you don’t mind.”

At that, Freya’s phone started to ring. Her stomach reacted as if a bucket of ice water had been dumped into it as she fumbled for her phone with clammy hands.

“Hello,” Freya answered, her tone far more cautious than she would have considered ideal.

“Freya, honey, could you come home? I think you and I need to... Well, talk...”

Margaret’s friendly and apologetic tone did nothing to settle Freya’s unease. In fact, it probably made it worse. If Margaret was under some kind of spell, then Freya doubted it would have been broken with nothing but time. Especially given that, while the effects had unnerved her, it hadn’t really done anything, well, serious. The situation was still salvageable. If someone was using magic to get to her, then it made no sense. If they weren’t, then

she didn't see what could have possibly been accomplished so far. The whole thing smelled like a trap to her.

But then, springing the trap was the only idea she had.

"Yeah, okay. I'll be home in five."

Mel gave her a look she couldn't decipher as she hung up.

"What was that?"

"My foster mother."

"Why do you look even paler than usual?"

Freya shrugged. "She's been affected by the spell as well, though I don't know how. I just... I think she's a villain."

"Ouch."

"Yeah."

"Well, you should go. I can take care of the dragon on my own. Call me if you find out anything else about the spell and I'll do some research in the meantime."

"I... Thanks."

"Hey, I'm the one who should be thanking you. I couldn't have taken a dragon on my own."

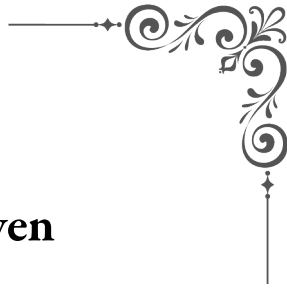
Freya raised an eyebrow. "Mel, you're the one who did most of the fighting."

"Yeah, but... Look, this was fun, okay? You might be involved in some *really* weird stuff, but hanging out with you is definitely not boring."

"Didn't you ring me?"

"Not the point. Just take the damn compliment."

"See you," Freya replied with a smile before shifting away.



Chapter Seven

Freya shifted as far as she could, but only managed to reach the park. She prepared to shift once more, to make it the rest of the way, but she was halted by the presence of familiar magic. The same magical signature behind whatever was happening.

Freya concentrated and managed to pinpoint the signature to the other end of the park, down by the mini waterfall. She immediately shifted over there, only to find nothing. She could sense the magic around her, but she couldn't *see* anything.

And then she sensed the magic again, over at the other end of the park, by the hedge maze.

Once again, she shifted over and, once again, there was nothing there. Just small traces of magic flitting around, seemingly inside the hedges, before disappearing.

This went on and on, making Freya more and more anxious. She didn't want to just abandon the signature here, for fear of never finding it again, but she also didn't want to delay returning home. Making Margaret angry seemed like the worst idea.

Eventually, she grew tired of shifting, and simply walked around the park, hoping to just stumble onto the source.

"Please tell me you have an idea," Freya said to her guardian as she rested on a bench looking over the pond, seriously contemplating just leaving and going home. Margaret was going to

be furious. Or maybe the spell would make it so that it didn't matter when she got back home.

She tried to push her thoughts of Margaret from her mind, wishing that she had some bread for the ducks instead.

"I'm not sure. My main suspicion is that this is a trap or a distraction. But that would mean that whoever is behind this knows exactly who you are. Your classmates and foster mother being targeted may have been deliberate."

"In an effort to get to me?"

"Yes."

Freya groaned. "I mean, I know I'm probably not a favourite of Demons, but you said this was Neutral magic. And it feels like it is as well. There's no ill intent there. It's... Playful, maybe, but not malicious."

"You're getting better at this," Amber noted, sounding impressed.

Freya shrugged. "If I was better at this, I wouldn't have spent the last..." She checked her phone before dropping it back into her bag. "Crap, I've been here an *hour*? Margaret's going to kill me." She shook her head, refocusing. "If I was getting better, I wouldn't have spent the last hour chasing echoes. So, why would Neutral creatures be targeting me?"

"They've possibly been hired by Demons or have some other connection. You did just fight a Vampyre hybrid."

"I thought you said Vampyres usually shunned Demon hybrids."

"*Usually*. Some don't. He might have had Vampyre family members he was close with."

Freya let out a frustrated sigh. "I don't know... This doesn't feel like his magic. I mean, even without the Demonic tones, it's *very* different."

"Then they possibly hired another Neutral party."

Freya hated how little they knew about what was going on. She wondered if Mel might be more clued into the goings on in the magical community.

She reached into her bag for her phone, leaning right into the bag, and its magically extended depths, to find it.

As she leaned forward, a small knife whizzed past her ear, giving her a bit of an impromptu haircut.

Freya immediately rolled down to the ground, staying behind the bench as she slung her bag over her shoulder. She peered around the side of the bench, only to see the Elf from the market approaching.

“Why is Zed attacking you?” Amber asked.

“How the hell should I know?” Freya hissed back. “Though, Old World creatures are Neutral.”

“Ask him.”

“What?”

“He already knows where you are. Ask him why he’s attacking?”

“You’re Zed, right?” Freya shouted at him over the bench. “Amber’s... *friend*?”

“Yes,” he called back.

“Why are you attacking me?”

“I was hired to kill you,” he said simply before hurtling another knife in her direction.

“I haven’t mentioned he’s an assassin, have I?” Amber asked as Freya bolted from her hiding spot. Zed was about to be close enough for her cover to not matter anyway.

“I’m going to attack him back,” Freya warned her guardian.

“By all means, don’t hold back on my account.”

Freya spun around, taking control of the water from the pond, forming a large wave which crashed down over the assassin, trapping him.

The ducks quacked in protest, but the assassin was held in place.

At least, until Freya began to feel the air prickle around her. Within moments her tongue was dry and the water was dissipating, though it was slow.

“What is he doing?”

“The Old Worlds are along an elemental axis,” Amber reminded her.

“Right. Elves control air,” Freya remembered, struggling with a tongue that felt like sandpaper.

She let the water disperse, drenching herself before running towards the tree line.

A spell hit her legs and they crumpled under her. She gave thanks for small mercies as she landed awkwardly on her arm, but the soft grass beneath her caused no injury. She cursed under her breath as she spun around to face her attacker, frantically trying to undo the spell. She was all too aware of the Elven assassin stalking towards her.

“Amber, there has got to be something more you can do!” Freya yelled at her guardian, more than annoyed at her current situation. “He’s your boyfriend.”

“He’s not my boyfriend,” Amber protested with a blush, sounding surprisingly petulant.

Freya was about to tell her that she didn’t have time for her bull, but she noticed that Zed had stopped his attack.

“Amber’s here?” he asked, seemingly conflicted.

Amber stepped towards him before giving a groan, realising that she was still incorporeal. She turned back to Freya. “If you concentrate... You might be able to make it so that he can see me.”

“Wait, I can do that?”

“I don’t know. Just... try.”

Freya did as she was told, abandoning her attempts to unbind her legs. She wasn't exactly sure what she was doing, but after a few moments of methodically poking at the energies around her, she managed to feel out Amber. She was little more than an impression left on the fabric of the world, tied to Freya through a thread of strong magic. Freya stretched out the thread of magic, finding it eerily familiar. She tried not to think about it too hard, so that the fact that this was her mother's magic wouldn't sink in.

As soon as the thread hit Zed, he gasped softly, dropping his weapon.

"Amber. *Dirathan*."

"*Dirathan*," Amber greeted. "You're attacking my student."

"I... I cannot pick jobs, *Yi'thal*. You know this."

Amber's blush intensified at the Elven word he had used. "You don't mean that," she told him. "You can't. I'm dead."

He shook his head. "*Iy athal niran cathi, Yi'tal. Hath no nival*."

"I... I can't be your Rosaline."

"Ah yes, because that worked out so well for those two," Zed replied with an eye roll. "When have I ever given you the impression that I wanted the life my brother had?"

"Every day until I died."

"Yes, *Yi'tal*. But then the timeline shifted."

Amber paused for a moment before simply saying, "Zed..." She leaned in close to him, whispering something in his ear that Freya couldn't hear.

His eyes widened as he looked at Freya, making her even more curious as to what Amber was telling him.

"Truly?" he asked as she pulled away.

"Truly," Amber confirmed.

"Then she is *Irathen Mi'tath*."

Amber grinned at him. "*Hath no nival, Yi'tal*."

“I shall see you again, *Yi'tal*. Even if it must be in the next life.”

Amber nodded just as Freya's concentration failed and the connection to Zed dissolved.

Zed walked over to Freya, offering his hand. She took it, though she remained wary.

“So, no killing me?” she asked as he helped her to her feet, breaking the spell around her legs.

“No killing you, *Irathen*.”

“What does that mean?”

He shrugged. “Elven is difficult to translate. It's... a promise of protection.”

“But you were just trying to kill me.”

“I... I cannot show favouritism. I am *Fin'hathan*. A sword to be used by others. A sword does not choose who it kills. There are some exceptions, however. Such as *Irathen*.”

“But you only called me that *after* you took the job. Is that allowed?”

“You were always *Irathen*, I just didn't know. Before Amber died... She and I were betrothed. She thought that dying ended our bond, but I am not so willing to give up on her.”

“But you always knew that I was her student.”

“Her student, yes. I did not know that your bond extended to protection as well. As her *Yi'tal*, her vows of protection also fall to me. I will not kill you, and I will stop any assassins your foster mother might continue to send.”

Freya gave a tired sigh as Zed confirmed what she had been beginning to suspect.

“Thank you,” she eventually said.

“It is the least I could do, *Irathen*.”

“Could you possibly tell me exactly what she asked of you?”

“She asked me to kill you and to bring back your heart as proof. If you like, I could take her another heart. It might throw her off your scent long enough for you to escape.”

“I... Yeah. Thanks.”

He nodded, turning to leave.

“Just not a Human heart!” she called after him.

“Do you think she will not be able to tell the difference?”

Freya sighed, folding her arms. “Just don’t kill anyone.”

“As you wish, *Irathen*.”

As soon as he left, Freya turned to Amber. “So, Margaret went on a rant about me being younger than her, drove me out of the house, and then sent someone after me with the instruction to bring back my heart... It’s not Margaret the spell got, it’s me. I’m cursed to act out Snow White, aren’t I?”

“It looks that way,” Amber agreed.

Freya let out a long, frustrated groan as she stormed further into the park, determined to get to the bottom of this before she ended up on the wrong side of a sleeping curse.



Chapter Eight

Freya spent a few more hours wandering the park, looking for the source of the magic signature, before she rang Mel.

“Hey,” Mel answered on the second ring. *“What’s up? How did it go with your foster mother?”*

“It didn’t.”

“*Why? What happened?*”

“It’s a long story. How are things with you?”

“*Is that supposed to be deflection?*”

“Yes, and I’d feel much better if you would play along.”

“*Right, well, things are pretty boring here. I managed to get the dragon back, but it was taken off my hands pretty much right away. I’m currently doing research into your fairy tales while I supervise the kids organising the new arrivals in the library.*”

“Anything good?”

“*In my research or in the new arrivals?*”

“Either.”

“*Nothing research wise. I’m currently split between looking at the original inspiration for the tales, in case this is some kind of reincarnation or ancient spirits, and looking up examples of fiction coming to life, in case a similar spell was used.*”

“*Library wise, we got a lot of new YA and children’s stuff for the holidays. Some new spell books as well. Only one ancient tome to decrypt, but I doubt we’ll get anywhere. This one’s been passed around*

the covers forever. And I literally mean that it probably dates back to Eden."

"Well, that beats my encounter with an Elven assassin."

"*You mean, like, a Fin'hathan? What were they like?*"

"You've met him. It was Zed."

"*Zed? Why was he attacking you?*"

"He was hired to."

"*Right. Fin'hathan. Of course. What happened? Did you have to kill him?*"

"No, thankfully not. Something about me being *Irathen Mi'tath*. You wouldn't happen to know what that means, would you? I only got a round-about answer about it being a promise of protection."

"*Hmm... Well, I mean Irathen technically translates to a promise of protection if you do it literally. It's actually a term of endearment for someone younger than you, usually just for family, though there are some exceptions.*

"*Tath means daughter. Or granddaughter. Or great-great-great-granddaughter. The Elven language doesn't differentiate. The Mi prefix suggests a step-daughter, or an adopted daughter, possibly an in-law...*"

"Okay, thanks," Freya said, figuring that he had taken her relationship with Amber as familial. Which was fine by her, if it meant that he was no longer trying to kill her.

"*Was that all?*"

"I also figured out what fairy tale got my foster mother. Or, more accurately, got me."

"*Got you, you said?*"

"Yep."

"*Who'd you get?*"

Freya let out a reluctant sigh. "Snow White."

"*Oh. Who do you think your prince is going to be?*"

“It doesn’t matter. I’ll have figured this out by then.”

“You’re not so big on back-up plans, then?”

“Not when they involve finding someone who’ll kiss me while I’m unconscious. I would rather just punch the source of this in the face.”

She heard Mel laugh on the other end of the line. *“We have to find the source first.”*

“You have any leads?”

“Not yet. This isn’t like any spell I’ve come across before, and there are a bunch of different ways it could be accomplished. It would have to be a powerful source, though, to change a person’s behaviour. Free will is not easy to override. Most magical creatures have the ability to temporarily override the free will of Humans, but to affect other magical creatures, it would have to be a power which stems from the Ancients.”

“What about Vamps?” Freya asked, the memory of dropping her sword vivid in her mind.

“What do you mean?”

“Can’t they enthrall magical creatures?”

“Yeah, but that’s not overriding freewill. It’s more like a confusion and mild sleep spell initially, followed by a lust spell if the eye contact isn’t broken. No thrall is required to act out their master’s wishes, but the process is just about the most addicting thing there is. It is not, however, an override of free will.”

“Good to know,” Freya said, only shuddering a little at the fate she almost endured. “So that just leaves the power from the Ancients, right? Like Amber had?”

“Amber? You mean Amber Cohen?”

“Yeah. The Amber who had the Power of the Ancients.”

“Yeah, Amber Cohen. And, no, not necessarily. The Upper council and their Angels derive their power from the same source.”

“But there were no more Angels after the Angel Twilight died, apart from the ones we’ve already ruled out.”

“Exactly. I’ll continue to look into it, but I’ll probably need more to go on. Give me a call if you find anything else.”

“Will do. Bye.”

“Bye.”

Freya hung up with a sigh as she continued to wander around the trees. The park had quite a few people now and the cafe was still open.

She wondered where she should head next. Clearly the park was a dead end. She considered heading back to the hospital where Anya had been. Hopefully, she could pick up another lead there.

As she approached the park exit, however, she felt a sudden surge of magical energy back at the centre of the park.

She concealed herself and shifted, hoping to finally catch the source of the enchantment.

But, as every other time before, she shifted to find nothing. She let out a long groan of annoyance as she scouted the area, though she knew that she wasn’t going to find anything.

“I’m never going to leave this park,” she grumbled to herself, stopping dead as her words caused everything to click for her.

Of course she wouldn’t leave the park. She was playing Snow White. These were her woods. Snow White didn’t leave the woods to head into town; she stumbled across a bunch of dwarfs in a cottage.

Freya traipsed back through the trees, wondering just where this cottage would be.

She stopped dead, shaking her head. Why was she looking for it? Following the plot-line would only lead her closer to the sleeping curse, and then she would be no use to anyone. Potentially forever.

She couldn't decide if that was better or worse than outright dying, so she simply decided to stop thinking about it, renewing her determination.

As she stalked back towards the exit, she caught something out of the corner of her eye. Something black and fast. She stopped, extending her senses out, feeling the now familiar magic signature threading through the tree line. It was accompanied by a fog of malevolence - an intent to kill that could not be missed.

Freya was surprised to find that it wasn't directed at her, though she quickly realised that she shouldn't have been. She wasn't going to be killed outright by the spell, since the Huntsman was the only direct danger to Snow White, besides poisoned apples.

Which meant that there was someone else affected by the spell in the park. Someone who was in immediate danger.

Freya made her way to the path and saw the target almost immediately. A young girl with curly dark hair and a bright red coat was walking down the path.

"Red Riding Hood," Freya muttered to herself, supposing that the shadow she had seen had to be the wolf.

"Hey," Freya called to the girl, quickly trying to figure out how to not come across as creepy. She gave silent thanks for her gender. "Are you here alone?"

"I'm not supposed to talk to strangers," the girl said, watching her warily.

"I know," Freya said quickly as she finished formulating a lie. "But some of the teenage boys who are on holiday now have been harassing kids on the playground. Some parents ran them off, but they're still hanging around. If they see you alone, they might decide to bother you."

"Oh."

“Do you want me to walk with you? I can make sure they don’t do anything.”

She nodded. “My grandma’s house is just outside the next exit.”



IT WAS ONLY A FIVE minute walk to the grandmother’s house, which was a relief for Freya. She didn’t want to have to keep the girl protected forever.

“Okay, well, I guess you’re good now,” Freya said as they arrived at the front door of the grandmother’s house, eager to go as soon as possible. None of the others had been close to the source of the spell, so chances were that she would get nothing more than a greater sense of the area being affected by the spell by following her.

Freya cursed internally as the girl’s grandmother opened the door as they were walking up the path.

“Who’s your friend, Zoe?” the grandmother asked the girl.

“There were mean boys in the park. She walked with me to keep them away.”

Freya shrugged. “They were harassing other kids and I just wanted to make sure she got home safely.”

The grandmother smiled at her, believing the lie. “Thank you, um, I’m sorry, what was your name again?”

“Freya. And it was no trouble.”

“Do you want to come in and see my books?” the girl asked, practically jumping up and down as she tugged on Freya’s sleeve, dragging her towards the house.

“If you want to stay for a bit, I’d be more than happy to make a spot of tea,” the grandmother said before turning to Zoe. “But if she doesn’t, that’s okay too. She’s probably very busy.”

Freya was about to decline but, as she got one last sense of the area to try and find out more about how the spell was spreading, she was surprised to find that the focal point appeared to be right in front of her, further in the house.

“No, it’s fine,” Freya assured her. “I’ve got a little time, as long as it’s not an imposition.”

The grandmother smiled at her. “Not at all, dear. Come on in and I’ll pop the kettle on.”

Zoe took her sleeve once more. “Come on! I’ll show you my books!”

Zoe led Freya through to the conservatory at the back of the house. Freya stretched her senses and found that the focal point for the spell was at the back of the garden, though she couldn’t see anything but greenery.

Zoe went over to her bookshelf, which was filled with small children’s books, each one a different fairy tale.

As soon as the Snow White book was pressed into her hands, Freya was sure that it was a component to the spell.

“This is one of my favourites,” the girl said.

Freya opened it up and quickly skimmed through, confirming that this was the version of the story she was living through. The step-mother was cruel to Snow because she was jealous of her youthful beauty, Snow ran away, the Huntsman caught up with her and let her go because she reminded him of his lost love, and then Snow stumbled upon the dwarfs’ cottage.

Freya kept going to see what would happen next, only to hold back a curse, just barely remembering her company, as she read. The step-mother managed to sneak the apple in amongst the others in the house, so it wasn’t even as if Freya could just not take apples from strangers. She hoped that the ending would be based on older versions of the tale, where Snow White was only asleep because the apple was lodged in her throat, and simply

dislodging it woke her up, as opposed to true love's kiss. No such luck.

"I also like Cinderella," Zoe continued. "I've got a cousin, Bethany, she's kind of like Cinderella. Her step-mother's horrible." She looked away, folding her arms as she started to whisper. "Grandma says I'm not allowed to talk about her like that but I know she agrees."

"I won't tell," Freya assured her.

Zoe grinned back as her grandmother came into the room with a cup of tea in her hand.

"Here you go," she said, passing the tea to Freya.

"Thank you," Freya said before sipping it tentatively. She did her best not to make a face; she really wasn't a fan of tea.

"You should come with me to see the fairies in the garden!" Zoe said, tugging on her sleeve once more.

Her grandma rolled her eyes, though she was smiling. "Children and their fantasies. Though, I suppose, I did believe the exact same thing when I was her age."

"Come on! Come on!" Zoe said and Freya followed as her grandma returned to the kitchen.

"I'm coming," Freya told her as they headed out into the garden, the stench of strong magic confirming for her that these fairies weren't just childish daydreams. This girl was interacting with something real.

"Grandma never believes me about the fairies," the girl grumbled. "She only stopped believing because her sister went missing when she was little."

Freya was only half listening, her mind instead focusing on the fact that she didn't know much about the Fae. Did they have the same power as Angels?

Amber appeared by her side. "Don't let them know your name," she warned. "Give a false one."

Freya gave a small nod to show that she understood as the girl led her to a secluded corner of the garden. Around the hedges, she could see small, glowing orbs flitting around.

“Peter!” Zoe called as they approached. “Come and meet my new friend.”

One of the orbs moved to a leaf right in front of Freya, dissolving into a tiny boy with amber butterfly wings.

He grinned at her. “It’s always good to meet new friends. Might I know your name?”

“Snow White,” she said, with a smug look. She wasn’t going to pretend that she wasn’t onto them. Hopefully, they would back down once they realised that they wouldn’t be unopposed.

“Clever,” he praised with a genuine smile, confusing Freya. “But do you truly think I would not know my own blood, Freya Snow? I even know names you do not.”

Freya raised an eyebrow. “Like what?”

“The name your mother gave you, Freya Diana Snow.”

“Wait, I have a middle name?” Freya shook her head, trying to focus in on something more important. “Hang on, you said you knew names I didn’t know. As in, plural.”

He nodded. “You have two more. The name your enemies gave you, and the one your father gave you.”

She couldn’t stop the burst of hope at the mention of her father. “Tell me.”

He smirked. “Nothing comes for free, Freya. Not even for family.”

“Why do you keep calling me your family? I don’t know you.”

“Your mother did. And I called her mother sister.”

Amber spoke again at that point. “Fae don’t reproduce. They take children instead. That’s probably their plan for the girl, making fairy tales come to life to convince her to join them willingly.”

“What do you want?” Freya asked.

“Simply that you leave us be. We’ll convince the girl to free you from the spell and you can head on your way with enough knowledge to look for your father.”

Freya looked over to see that other Fae were distracting Zoe.

“And what of Zoe?” Freya asked. “You’re letting her play with magic to convince her to join you, aren’t you?”

“Of course,” Peter admitted. “It’s what we do. We won’t take her if she doesn’t want to come.”

“But what about her family?”

“You mean the parents who aren’t there and the grandmother who probably doesn’t have many years left? We may have an agenda, but that doesn’t mean that this isn’t what’s best for her.”

Freya narrowed her eyes, not buying it.

“You know what it’s like to be an unhappy child,” Peter said. “If Fate didn’t already have plans for you, we would have offered the same thing. Would you honestly not have taken it?”

“Don’t trust him,” Amber told her. “The Fae are tricksters by nature. Do not think that the girl has any real choice in the matter. Not to mention the harm her playing with magic she doesn’t understand is causing. Just because he can convince her to let you go, doesn’t mean someone else won’t be trapped in a sleeping curse.”

“I’m sorry,” Freya told Peter. “I can’t let you keep playing with people like this.”

She stood up to leave. “I need to go, Zoe. I’ll see you, okay?”

Zoe nodded. “Okay. Bye, Freya!”



Chapter Nine

Freya walked straight back to the park without really thinking about it, only realising that she still had the Snow White book in her hand once she was already at the other side. As much as she felt that she should return it, she also wanted to keep it close so that she didn't forget even a single detail of what was supposed to transpire next.

"Did you know about Peter?" Freya asked Amber as soon as she had brought her phone to her ear.

Amber shrugged as she appeared beside her. "What do you mean?"

Freya rolled her eyes. "You know exactly what I mean. Did you know that I had a... a great-uncle out there somewhere?"

"I was aware that your mother had an aunt and uncle. Peter lived with the Fae from being a child, but Tilly stayed on Earth. She raised your mother after your grandmother died."

"Where is she now?"

"I don't know. She died in the other timeline and I was never able to find her in this one."

"But why didn't you tell me about Peter?"

"Because Fae are not to be trusted."

"You say that about all magical creatures," Freya pointed out.

"Fae are different. Trust me, Freya, you don't want to get entangled with them."

"I'm *already* entangled, remember?"

“All the more reason to try to figure out how to break this spell.”

Freya hummed in agreement just before hearing someone yell “Oy!”

She was sure that they weren’t yelling at her, but when she turned to look, she saw a Dwarf standing with her arms folded, glaring at her.

“You’re not very good at this whole Snow White thing, are you?” the Dwarf asked.

Freya shrugged. “Not really,” she admitted. “Let me guess, you’re one of the Seven Dwarfs?”

“Well, I’m not here to screw a rock,” she said, adjusting the strange metal contraption resting on her auburn hair. “I’m Doc. The others are inside.”

The Dwarf led her to a little cottage. Freya wondered if it had always been there. Was it for the grounds-keeper?

“We’ve been waiting here since yesterday,” Doc told her.

“So are you... from the Dwarven Kingdom?”

“Where else would we be from?”

“I don’t know. I just... I thought that the Dwarven Kingdom had been sealed off like the rest of the Old Worlds.”

“It had been. We have no idea how we got here. One minute we were just minding our own business, and then poof. Of course, once we realised there were seven of us, we figured that we were playing out Snow White.”

Freya frowned. “You guys know about a Human fairy tale?”

“It’s one of the few with us in it,” Doc told her. “The question is *why* and how we were brought to a world we supposedly no longer have access to.”

“Faeries,” Freya explained.

Doc sighed, shaking her head. “Of course. They’re the only ones with the power and selfishness to bypass the seal.”

“Selfishness?”

“The Old Worlds weren’t sealed off for fun, girl. The longer we’re here, the more the seal will weaken. We should be fine for the next week or so, but I don’t want to see what happens after that.”

“Why? What will happen?”

“The Shadows will get through.”

“The Shadows?”

Doc sighed. “Do they teach you surface-dwellers nothing? The Shadows come from the between spaces. Some even say they are the Creator’s first children. Or maybe one of Her past Creations became corrupted and they were the result. Regardless, they seeped into this Creation, quickly consuming the Vulcan Plains. Caetlin Cohen was given the Power of the Ancients and used it to seal off the Old Worlds, trapping the Shadows. If that seal breaks, well, we won’t be the first Creation to fall to them.”

“And the stakes keep getting higher. *Great.*”

Doc led her inside the cottage and, inside the living room stood six more Dwarves.

“I found her,” Doc told them.

“Yeah, how did you do that?” Freya asked.

Doc lowered the contraption on her head over her eyes, revealing it to be a bronze visor.

“I used my HoloEye to track the same magic which brought us here. As soon as I saw you, it was obvious.”

“How did you know I was Snow White and not another fairy tale?”

“Have you looked in the mirror lately?” a male Dwarf with a gruff, red beard and heavy armour said, a large axe strapped to his back.

Freya frowned, wondering what the spell had done to change her appearance. She glanced to the mirror over the mantle and

saw nothing unusual. Her pale white skin was unblemished and her thick black hair was still in its ponytail.

Ab, she thought as she realised that she more than looked the part without the spell having to do anything.

“I suppose introductions are in order,” Doc said, moving her *HoloEye* back up to her hair. “That’s Warrior,” she said, indicating to the redheaded man.

He grunted at her nodding.

“That’s Miner,” she continued, indicating to a woman wearing overalls and a hard-hat, along with a belt with white gadgets, lined with blue lights. She looked like Bob the Builder, if he had worked for Apple.

“A pleasure,” she greeted.

“That’s Builder,” Doc said next, indicating to a man in very similar garb to Miner.

“Glad you’re here.”

“Then there’s Lawyer.” Doc indicated to the well-dressed woman sitting on the chair.

“I hope you can get us home,” she said curtly, assessing Freya carefully.

“Merchant,” Doc continued, indicating to the young man with purple hair and piercings.

“Hmm,” was all he mustered, barely glancing at her.

“And, finally, we have Engineer.”

The last woman had short, bright blond hair and was grinning at Freya.

“Hi!” she greeted. “Pleased to meet you!”

“What about you?” Doc asked Freya. “I didn’t get your name.”

“I’m Freya,” she told them with an awkward wave.

“We can talk more later,” Doc told her. “I’ll show you where you’ll be sleeping.”

Freya nodded, not mentioning that it was still early in the day. She'd rather just deal with one person at a time.

"So, you're all named for your jobs?" Freya asked.

"We have names too but... They're personal. We do not disclose them lightly."

"I understand."

"The others will want to talk soon, to figure out how to settle this. We'd rather not be responsible for the end of Creation."

Freya nodded, doing her best to hide her reluctance at the idea of having to deal with a gaggle of strangers. "Of course."



AS SOON AS DOC LEFT her alone in the room, Freya gave a frustrated groan. She hated strangers, so seven of them were a nightmare, no matter how nice they seemed. She didn't have the energy to deal, she decided, as she threw herself onto her bed. She had expended all of it just to approach the girl and talk with her grandmother. And now she had to figure out how to outwit a Faerie.

As soon as she had thought that, a small spark of light appeared at her window.

She sighed, getting up and opening it.

"That had better not be you, Peter," she grumbled, deciding that she just didn't care if it was rude.

What was he going to do? Curse her?

To her surprise, the spark grew to the size of a young boy, instead of remaining small.

"We got off on the wrong foot before," he said, looking sheepish.

She rolled her eyes. "Gee, ya think?"

"I came to apologise."

Freya frowned, folding her arms. “From the way the others were talking, I didn’t think Fae apologised.”

Peter shrugged. “Not usually but... The way you looked at me before you left reminded me of how Hope used to look when she was disappointed with me.”

Freya felt a little awkward at that, sitting on her bed as her hand went up to twist the pendant beneath her top. She always played with it when things got awkward.

Peter’s eyes locked onto it as it became visible and she remembered that it had been her grandmother’s. She had been awkward with him bringing up Hope, and she had immediately started playing with her necklace. Smooth.

“This was hers, right?” Freya asked, deciding that breaking the silence could hardly make things worse.

Peter nodded. “Yes. Our mother gave it to her when she... Just before she died. It was the only thing she had of her own mother.”

“And I should leave it to my child when I prematurely die?” Freya joked, but it fell flat, with Peter wincing in response. “Sorry. I didn’t think...”

“It’s okay. I just...” He shook his head. “I wanted to talk to you about Zoe.”

“You’re going to leave her alone?”

“You know that if I did that, I would have to go and do the same to another child. What are you going to do? Follow me indefinitely?”

Freya bit her lips together into a grim line. She hadn’t really thought about it like that. But, equally, there had to be a million other children in far worse situations than Zoe’s. She had grown up with some of them.

“She has a family.”

“I know. And I know that her spell is going too far. I would have stepped in before if I had known that it would interfere with the seals.”

“And now?”

“Now that they’ve been breached, there are only two options. Either you reach the end of Snow White’s story before the seals are permanently disrupted, or I withdraw my magic from Zoe entirely. She can’t withdraw just you from the spell anymore. Not without stranding the Dwarves here.”

Freya glared at him. “Clearly, I would vote for door number two.”

“I know, but... This isn’t for fun, Freya. There was an incident with some Demons and some of us died. We need to replenish our numbers.”

“Then choose someone else.”

“It takes time. I spoke with the others, and most of them want me to see it through with Zoe. They don’t believe it will take you that long to wake up from the curse.”

“Peter, I have no one to *wake me* from the curse. If you do this, I *will* die. We all will.”

“There was one alternative they suggested.”

“What?”

“You.”

Her mind took a moment to process that as she blinked at him, disbelieving.

“Me?”

“Yes.”

“But you said that Fate wouldn’t let you take me when I was younger.”

“Some of us think that it would be worth Fate’s ire. Your power is not negligible, Freya. You will be used as a pawn if you stay here.”

“And I won’t be if I go with you?” she asked sarcastically.

“Look, at least in the Glades, I can look out for you.”

“I have people looking out for me here. I have Amber.”

Peter glared at that. “And you honestly think that *she* won’t use you as a pawn?”

“Look, Peter, I know the hand she played in Hope’s death. But she has yet to steer me wrong.”

Peter sighed, shaking his head. “I’m just giving you your options, Freya. Either take Zoe’s place, or play out the curse.”

She let out a frustrated groan, gently knocking the heel of her hand up against her forehead a few times. “Just... let me think about it. Okay?”

“Okay. Just don’t take too long. If you’re put under the sleeping curse, then it’s all over.”

He left Freya alone at that.



FREYA STAYED IN HER room for only ten more minutes after Peter left. There was nothing for her to do, and she figured that it was better to just get all of the talking out of the way.

The end of the world wouldn’t wait for her anxieties.

“Hey,” Freya said as she walked downstairs, alerting the others to her arrival. “So, I just had an interesting chat with Peter.”

Doc raised an eyebrow. “He was here?”

“Yep.”

“What did he want?”

“Me, apparently. He said that he would let Zoe go and stop the curse if I took her place as a Faerie.”

“But... Aren’t you too old?”

“Apparently not.”

“It may not be necessary. Not if the story plays out before any permanent damage is done to the seals.”

“Do you think that’s likely?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t know anything more of what’s going on than what you told me,” Doc informed her.

“All we know is that we’re here to make sure your prince gets to you,” Lawyer interjected. “That is our role in the story, is it not?”

Freya sighed, nodding as she passed them the Snow White book. “This is the story the Fae are working from. But we’re going to need a different strategy.”

“Why?” Engineer asked brightly.

“Because the spell requires true love’s kiss to wake me up. I don’t have anyone.”

“That can’t be true,” Builder argued. “What about your parents?”

“Dead.”

“Siblings?”

“In Japan.”

“Friends?”

She sighed. “Just one close one and he... He’s not my prince. Trust me.”

The Dwarves exchanged looks that raised Freya’s hackles.

“Look, let’s just find another way, *okay?*”

“There may not be one,” Lawyer told her bluntly. “You may have no choice but to take the Faerie’s offer.”

“She’s right,” Miner chipped in. “If you fall into the sleeping curse with no way to wake up, we’ll be trapped here. It’ll weaken the seals between the worlds and eventually the Shadows will leak through.”

Freya groaned. “Is there no one who would be concerned by that? Who would step in to stop them?”

Doc shrugged. “We’ve kind of been out of the loop for over a century.”

“Amber?” Freya asked, before turning to the others. “My guardian’s a ghost, I’m not just talking to thin air.”

Doc pulled her HoloEyes down as Amber appeared, nodding at her. “A pleasure to meet you.”

“You too,” Amber replied. “It has been so long since anyone but Freya could see me in this form, and now two in as many days.”

“Eight,” Freya told her, having noted that the other dwarfs had all brought out HoloEyes of their own. “I’ve got to get a pair of those.”

“Dwarven technology was always ahead of ours,” Amber told her. “It’s not surprising that it continued that way.”

“Amber, Doc tells me that the seals between the Old Worlds might weaken as long as they’re here.”

Amber frowned before reluctantly nodding. “I... I do not have the power I used to wield. I can’t sense how well the seal is holding up, but Doc is right. The spell that drew them here is most likely continuous, rather than a separate transfer and return. If that’s the case, then it will weaken the seal.”

“And that means Shadows, right?”

Amber paled. “Freya, I cannot impress upon you how much that cannot be allowed to happen.”

“Is there no one who will step in? Even Fae cannot want this.”

Amber shook her head. “The Fae don’t care, Freya. They feel they have been abandoned. They were originally a... a genetic anomaly. With no home of their own. They don’t care if this whole Creation goes up in flames. You cannot imagine their depths of loathing towards the Creator for not including them in Her plan.”

Freya wanted to point out that they cared enough to offer her the chance to take Zoe’s place, but she didn’t much feel like

telling Amber the things Peter had said about her. Not when there still might be another option.

“Do you think this is deliberate?”

“No. They’re not *entirely* suicidal. But they are arrogant. They won’t believe the worst will come and, even if they do, they will think it worth the risk.”

Freya sighed, nodding. “Alright. I’ll call Mel and see if she can turn anything up with all of the new information we have. If she has nothing by tomorrow... I’ll return to Peter and take his bargain.”

“Are you sure?”

Freya’s fists clenched of their own accord, but she unfurled them carefully, crossing her arms. “We’ve got to think about the bigger picture,” she eventually said, her voice heavy. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll go ring Mel.”



MEL, UNFORTUNATELY, had nothing new to add. She made Freya wait while she told her Coven Head about the threat to the seals.

Her Coven Head’s response was that Freya should stop hesitating and let Peter take the girl, hoping that he would stay true to his earlier word and let her out of the curse. Freya had assured Mel that that was the plan, even though she knew that option was no longer viable. But Mel didn’t need to know that. Not when her Coven Head might want to interfere, possibly at Zoe’s expense.

“Bad news, I take it?” Amber asked as Freya hung up.

“Apparently Witches have no problem with sacrificing innocent girls.”

“I would guess that that’s perhaps a bit unfair, but Witches are nothing if not pragmatic.”

Freya sighed, rethinking all of the information they had. “What about Zoe’s grandmother? She said that she used to believe in fairies when she was young. She might know something.”

“It might be worth looking into.”

“Could you do it? As Ms Pearson, I mean? The age similarity might make her more open to you.”

Amber frowned, looking decidedly uncomfortable.

“I would rather avoid using Ms Pearson right now.”

“Why?”

Amber sighed. “She wasn’t well when I first possessed her. The toll of my magic on her body has only exacerbated the problem.”

“So...?”

Amber folded her arms. “Ms Pearson has a month, maybe two, before she dies. The more I use her, the shorter that time will be.”

“So you would be a ghost all of the time?”

“Yes. It’s why I started to introduce you to the magical community. I wanted to do it while I was still here to act as your guide.”

Freya nodded. As much as it would have been helpful for Amber to talk to the girl’s grandmother, it wasn’t impossible for Freya to do it.

“Okay. I’ll go.”



Chapter Ten

Freya, despite having been given a room of her own, found herself waking on the sofa to the sound of her phone buzzing next to her. She had ended up staying awake with the Dwarves until the early hours of the morning, trying to figure out an alternative to making a deal with the Fae.

Maybe she could find a way to reseal the worlds. Except there was no one left with the power to do it.

Maybe she could find another way to break the sleeping curse. Except that the story was more than clear. True love's kiss was the only cure.

Maybe she could avoid the curse altogether. Except that, try as she might, she hadn't been able to avoid playing out the story so far.

"Want some coffee?" Engineer asked, her voice a little too loud for so early in the morning.

Freya nodded. "Yeah, thanks."

Engineer passed her a mug, along with a slice of toast. "Your communication thing kept buzzing," she told her. "The name was Damon, not Mel, though, so we didn't bother to wake you."

"Thanks," Freya said, checking her phone as she bit into her toast, holding it with her mouth to keep her hands free for her phone and mug. Engineer was right, she had several texts from Damon. And, surprisingly, a couple from Jamie.

She looked at Jamie's first, wondering what she wanted.

Hi! Did you figure things out with your mum? xoxo

Its Jamie btw xoxo

Freya smiled a little, though it faded as she decided that it would just be easier to lie.

Everything is fine now, thanks.

She paused before sending the text, adding an xoxo to mimic Jamie's. Freya didn't like sending kisses in texts, but she supposed it would be rude not to if Jamie used them.

As soon as her reply was sent, she moved to Damon's texts.

Hey you still up?

How did things go with Margaret?

Are you okay?

Freya?

Did she take your phone from you?

If you don't reply I'll come get you

Uncle G says to leave it until the morning

K I'm going to go to sleep if you're not responding

Going to get you in the morning if you don't reply

Hey you up yet?

Leaving now

Freya put her phone down as she finished her toast, trying to decide on an excuse to give him. Eventually, she settled on "Sorry I took so long to reply. I had a long talk with Margaret last night. Everything is fine now. Promise."

"Why didn't you tell the others?" Engineer asked her.

"Tell them what?"

"That you *have* someone."

Freya frowned before she figured out what Engineer was implying. "I don't *have* anyone. Damon's not mine."

"Then why is he contacting you so much?"

"We're just friends," Freya dismissed with a shake of her head. "I mean, I like him, but it's not..."

“Not...?”

Freya sighed. “Look, he’s Human. Even if you *could* convince him to kiss me when I’m knocked out, well... It wouldn’t work. I... I *might* care about him, but the laws of magic are very clear. *True* love is reciprocated. Damon doesn’t care for me like that.”

“You’re sure?”

Freya nodded. “Yeah, I’m sure.” She stood up, grabbing her coat.

“You’re heading out?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you sure that’s wise? Isn’t that, like, asking for trouble? Won’t the Evil Queen find you?”

Freya shrugged. “She doesn’t in the story.”

“This still doesn’t seem like a good idea... Where are you going?”

“I’m going to do more recon. There’s got to be another way to convince the Fae to let her go. Or, at least, force them to. If I can get a better sense of how they’re giving her their magic, I might be able to break their connection. That’ll reverse the spell and the immediate threat will be dealt with.”

“Then you’ll have angry Fae to deal with.”

“That’s why I carry a sword.”

Engineer raised an eyebrow. “You’re really new to the idea of the Fae, aren’t you?”

Freya rolled her eyes. “You’d not even been in the same realm as a Faerie until a few days ago.”

“But even I know that a sword will do you little good.”

“Okay, well, let’s cross that bridge, then blow it up behind us, when we get to it. For now, I just want to see if I *can* stop the Fae without making any deals.”

“I still think you should wait for the others to wake.”

Freya shook her head. "The sooner I do this, the sooner I get back and the sooner we can get you home."

She left before Engineer could say anything more, jogging across the park to the grandma's house.



IT WASN'T LONG BEFORE Freya reached the grandmother's house and she found herself a little nervous as she remembered the time. She didn't want to wake anyone.

Thankfully, as she approached, she saw the front curtains were open and the grandmother was up and dressed, pottering around the living room.

She knocked on the door, deciding to leave if there was no response to the first knock.

There was an almost immediate response.

"Hello - Oh! You're the girl from the other day. Freya, right?"

"Yes. Sorry if it's early. I just... I was in the neighbourhood and I accidentally took this last time I was here," she said, showing the older woman the book.

"Oh, thank you, dear. I'm sure Zoe will be glad to have it back."

"Alright. Well, I just wanted to return it."

"Do you need to be off so soon or do you want to stay for a cup of tea?"

"I can stay, if it wouldn't be imposing," Freya said, eager to get closer to the Fae once more.

"Not at all, dear," the grandmother said, stepping back to let her in.

Freya followed her through to the kitchen as she stretched her magic out, seeking the Fae. She could sense them in the back of the garden as before, flitting about. She kept her senses fo-

cused on them, hoping to glean some insight as the rest of her focused on not visibly zoning out.

“I wanted to thank you,” the grandmother said as she put the kettle on. “Zoe doesn’t see much kindness these days.”

“Why not?” Freya asked. “If you don’t mind my asking,” she hastily added.

The grandmother shrugged. “Things at home haven’t been settled for a while now and she takes refuge in her fantasies. She then takes those fantasies to school and... the other children aren’t kind.”

Freya nodded as the grandmother poured out cups of tea. It tied into what Peter had said about the girl wanting to go with them. She was bullied and isolated and she wanted a different life.

A life where she could bend reality to her will. Where she would have a family and friends. Freya couldn’t help but sympathise.

She tried to ignore the pang in her chest. The Fae couldn’t be trusted. She trusted Amber and she trusted her assessment on that. Not to mention that the Dwarves had backed her up. Plus, how would the grandmother feel if Zoe suddenly disappeared one day?

But Freya couldn’t help but feel that, if she had been given the same deal at Zoe’s age, she would have taken it without question.

What right did Freya have to interfere?

“I just hope things get better for her,” the grandmother said as she placed a cup of tea in front of Freya. “I try to do my best, you know?”

Freya nodded, her resolve to keep Zoe on Earth cementing. “I’m sure things will get better for her.”

“Have you eaten anything today?” the grandmother asked. “I’ve got some new flapjack bars, if you’d like one.”

Freya was about to say that she was fine, she’d had toast before leaving, but her stomach quickly argued with that. “That would be lovely, thank you.”

The grandmother smiled, handing her a bar. “You’re welcome, dear.”

Freya quickly ate the bar, her stomach growling. “What kind was that?” Freya asked, wondering if she could get Margaret to buy them.

“There was a woman who was selling them door-to-door yesterday. Some kind of blueberry and apple, I think.”

Freya predicted the word ‘apple’ before she said it, suddenly feeling very woozy. She made a show of checking her phone, hoping that she had more than a few moments.

“Oh, I’m so sorry! I have to meet my friend. Thank you for the tea and food,” Freya quickly said before bolting from the room, shifting to the Dwarves as soon as she was out of the front door.

She collapsed unconscious as soon as she landed on the cottage floor.



Chapter Eleven

Freya opened her eyes to see the sea above her. Below her? She scrambled to her feet in an attempt to battle the sudden sense of vertigo engulfing her.

She stood to see that she was surrounded by tall, blood-red grass, waving in the salt breeze.

Freya dared to look upwards once more, seeing that the sky had been replaced with a deep green sea. Her brain couldn't really process that it was above her, trying to convince her that it was below, despite her feet remaining firmly planted among the blood-red grass.

"What is this place?" Freya asked, her voice echoing, despite the open space.

She held her arms to herself in an effort to ward off the chill of the sea breeze, realising that she was wearing a scrappy white dress and brown boots, her hair braided behind her.

"What happened?" she asked, trying to ward off the creeping sense of loneliness as nothing but an endless expanse lay before her.

After a few moments of desperate searching, she saw a faint structure in the distance.

She steeled herself and started walking forward.



SHE DIDN'T KNOW HOW long she walked for. Time stopped having meaning. Sometimes it dragged as if for millennia, and sometimes miles seemed to take mere seconds.

Eventually the structure in the distance became more pronounced. After a while, she recognised it as a castle, and later she realised that it was in a state of disrepair. It was by no means a ruin, but it had clearly been neglected for the last decade or so.

The doors and windows were covered with poorly placed planks of wood, with enough space left for Freya to duck beneath and make her way through one of the windows.

"Is anyone there?" she called, the echo from outside now gone.

There was no response, so Freya continued on. The place gave her goosebumps, though not in a bad way. Her feet seemed to know where they were going, leading her through the corridor and to a large set of doors. She felt as if they should be intimidating, though they seemed nothing but familiar to her.

She opened them to find a ballroom, filled with pale blue ghosts. The ghosts were all dressed in extravagant ball gowns and the like, though they had no faces.

As Freya entered the room, the same pale blue clouds which made up the others surrounded her, forming a dress just like the others, along with a small tiara atop her head.

At the top of the room was a large throne, with two more at either side of it. The figure in the centre throne stood up, making his way down to Freya.

He bowed as he reached her and she found herself curtsying in response.

"*I was worried you were going to run late,*" a voice, which seemed to come from all around her, said.

She smirked, her brain having little to do with how her body behaved. "And miss my own party? Hardly."

"I should not keep you from your birthday well-wishers, but don't be too long. Your mother is looking forward to giving you your present."

"Of course not, Father."

He turned to leave and was replaced by a slightly shorter figure.

"Care to share this dance?"

She recognised this voice as Damon's, taking his hand immediately. "It would be my pleasure."

He twirled her around the floor for a while before speaking again. *"Your father is staring."*

"Of course he is. He thinks your interest in me is all some well-engineered plot of your father's."

"I would be lying if I said that he was not scheming."

"Your father is *always* scheming. I am not some pawn to be moved around his chessboard. If he thinks that I am, then he underestimates me. He gains nothing from our relationship and I aim to keep it that way."

"I would indeed say that he underestimates you but... I suppose I do not want you to underestimate him. There's a reason he is as powerful as he is."

"I am simply looking forward to the storm we will have to weather after I announce my plan to marry you."

"I... You have not spoken of this plan."

She smirked once more. "Oh, have I not? It must have slipped my mind. I would very much like to hear your thoughts on the matter."

"I would, of course, never dream of defying yo-"

The ghosts disappeared around her and Freya found the spell broken.

"They were simply echoes," a solid voice told her from across the room.

Freya turned to see that the throne now had a corporeal woman sitting in it. Her skin was jet black, with no colour variation at all. As if someone had just taken the outline of a woman and used the fill tool. The only exceptions were the silver tears burned into her cheeks, the exact same colour as her knee-length dress.

The woman regarded her with jet black eyes. “Do you know where you are?” she eventually asked.

“No,” Freya replied. “What did you mean *echoes*? Who are you?”

“My name is Ku, though mortals better know me as what remains of the last Ancient. This place,” she indicated around her, “is the Shadow Realm. A mirror of your own world where echoes of other worlds are more likely to bleed through.”

“Wait, you’re... You’re the being Amber was bound to, right? That’s where she got her powers?”

“Yes.”

“What did you mean other worlds? That... One of the ghosts sounded like Damon.”

Ku nodded. “I am unsure how much mortals understand of the world now. Amber never paid much attention to such things, and my last host was too much like her in too many ways.”

“You had a host after Amber?”

“Your mother carried me for a time,” Ku told her, as if telling her the time of day. “She did not have much time to adjust to me before her death, however.”

“So, what? You latched onto her after Amber died?”

“Passing me on was the reason Amber died,” Ku corrected her. “After your mother died, I had no host, and decided I didn’t need one. I only took a host to prevent the Shadows from making it to Earth.”

“But what if the seals between the worlds broke?”

"I watched for many years and the seals were never threatened."

"Well, the Fae are threatening them now."

Ku waved her hand dismissively. "If the Earth was in any real danger, Fate would call me back. Though... I suppose sending you here might be her way of doing so." She stood up. "Come. We shall see if the Earth is truly in the peril you claim."

Freya nodded, hurrying after her. "So, the sleeping curse sent me to the Shadow Realm?"

"Yes. Though you come here often in your sleep anyway. I had wondered why this time you did not remember."

Freya frowned. "Wait, I come here in my sleep?"

Ku nodded. "You do not remember when you wake up, but you are fully conscious here, unlike everyone else."

"Everyone else?"

"All magical beings keep part of their soul here," Ku told her. "But it is merely a reflection. Everything here is symbolic of everything happening in the other realms. They cannot make choices which do not reflect the choices made elsewhere. Not unless the rest of their soul is sent here."

"Then they become fully aware?"

"They do not remember their lives elsewhere, if that is what you're asking. You are unique in that regard. Possibly because you were conceived here."

"So... What were the echoes?"

Ku huffed a little. "Every action you take is a divergent point. You know this, yes?"

"Yeah, it's like quantum mechanics, right? Every time you make a decision, the universe splits. Every possibility is played out somewhere. And, somewhere, Spock has a beard."

Ku frowned. "I think I understood that reference. Spock is the pointy eared one from the stories about space, yes?"

“Yeah, that’s the one,” Freya confirmed with a smile. “So, are you saying that those ghosts were from an alternate reality? Like, a regency AU or something.”

Ku’s frown deepened. “I dislike it when language evolves without me. Regardless, I think you are correct. The Shadow Realm is essentially a buffer between these realities and they can sometimes leak through, just as you saw in the ballroom.”

As they lapsed into silence, Freya tried really hard not to think too much about the fact that she had apparently proposed to Damon in an alternate reality.

Ku led her into a room where the walls were covered in mirrors. In the centre of the room stood another woman, though *woman* was perhaps a stretch. She was perhaps best described as a series of branches and vines which wrapped around each other to form the shape of a woman.

“Freya!” the tree-woman cried happily. “I was wondering when you would be back.”

“She does not remember,” Ku informed her. “She was sent here by a curse.”

“A curse? How did that happen?”

“Fae,” Freya told her. “They have me re-enacting Snow White.”

The tree-woman sighed. “The Lost Children. Of course.”

“I’m sorry, but... Who exactly are you?”

“She has the memories of her conscious self,” Ku reminded the tree-woman.

She nodded. “I do not have a name. We are both parts of you. Parts which you have not fully integrated into yourself, but parts nonetheless.”

“You’re both part of me?” Freya asked before turning to Ku. “I thought you said you didn’t have a host.”

"I don't. Not really. You were the nearest compatible host when your mother died, and I have to reside somewhere. However, I sealed myself from you so that we wouldn't bind. You don't require my power, and I am content to remain dormant."

"You might be, but I'm not," the tree-woman protested.

"We usually refer to her as Juni," Ku interjected, "after the ancestor you inherited her from."

"So, why aren't you fully integrated?" Freya asked Juni.

Juni shrugged. "There are rules regarding my power. I am a bridge between nature and the Human world. You cannot fully access my power until you have a sufficient tie to the Human realm."

"Which wouldn't be a good idea anyway," Ku said. "I don't know what Fate thought she was doing when she brought you into the world, Freya, but you're a volatile enough cocktail without adding more Ancient power into the mix."

"Um... Thanks, I think..."

Juni laughed at that. "Ignore Ku. Ancients don't really have need of social graces."

Freya turned as she caught sight of something in the corner of her eye. One of the mirrors was no longer reflecting her. Or rather, it was, but not the her it should be reflecting. Her reflection was dressed in black leather riding clothes, her hair up in a braid.

"What's up with this mirror?" Freya asked as the other her tugged at her clothes, straightening them out.

"These mirrors show you the alternate worlds I told you about before," Ku said. "She's the you from the ballroom."

"The one engaged to Damon?"

"Yes."

"And she can't see us?"

"No, the mirrors are just one way."

That was when Freya heard a voice that seemed to be coming from all around her. *"Fussing with your clothes isn't going to change anything."*

The mirror Freya sighed as another woman came into frame. She was older, with blonde hair and olive skin, though she had Freya's wild green eyes. She was wearing a long black and red dress with so much intricate lacing that it gave Freya a headache to look at.

"It makes me feel better," the mirror Freya replied. *"Nothing I do will change anything anyway."*

"Well, that's not true," the older woman said, putting her arm around the mirror Freya. *"You just don't want to do any of the things that will change anything."*

"I'm not breaking things off with Damon because Father doesn't like Uther. My life is not theirs to play with."

The other woman sighed. *"I never wanted it to be. Part of me wonders if I shouldn't have kept you on Earth, to live a normal Human life as I did."*

"Earth is a smoking crater," mirror Freya pointed out. *"I'm not being some petty young girl who wishes for a different life. Father's letting his paranoia get in the way of realising that I know what I'm doing. He's messing up my plans."*

"Your plans?"

"Uther has been rallying support against me. As soon as I take Father's place, it will be civil war. Damon and I aren't going to let it come to that."

The older woman laughed, shaking her head. *"You know, you could tell your Father about your plan."*

"Ah yes, because he has never been reluctant when it comes to me putting myself in danger."

"Fair point."

They moved away from the mirror so that Freya could no longer see or hear them.

“This place is really weird,” she eventually said to Ku and Juni. “I have to figure out a way to get back...”

“You were saying something about the seals between worlds weakening,” Ku reminded her.

“Yeah. The Fae have brought Dwarves to Earth and, as long as they’re there, the seals will weaken.”

Ku hummed, moving over to another mirror and waving her hand in front of it. It rippled to show a girl who was maybe fourteen, though she had the same butterfly wings as Peter.

“*Ku?*” she asked. “*What do you want?*”

“I’ve heard that Fae are interfering with my seals.”

“*How? Aren’t you in the Shadow Realm?*”

“Freya told me.”

“Hi,” Freya said awkwardly.

The girl in the mirror seemed surprised to see her. “*You’re wrapped up in this?*”

“I got hit with a sleeping curse. It sent me here.”

“*Let me guess, Peter was the one who cursed you?*”

“Yes.”

The girl sighed. “*I never thought he would be this reckless.*”

“Did you know Peter would curse her?” Juni asked.

The girl folded her arms. “*No, but I did know that he planned to see Freya. I’m not sure what his goal was meant to be. To protect her, maybe. He doesn’t like how integral she is to Fate’s plan. That’s never boded well for any other member of our family.*”

Juni sighed at that. “Oh, my child. There is no changing the plan. Even if it means that Freya must bind with Ku to return.”

“*That may not be necessary,*” the girl said. “*I am confident that Peter would not have cursed her if he didn’t think there was some way for her to wake.*”

“Well, I mean, he cursed me to play out Snow White, so true love’s kiss would theoretically wake me. I just don’t have anyone.”

“Peter wouldn’t have cursed you if that was the case. You’re in the Shadow Realm. It might be more obvious to you there than on Earth.”

“Oh, I guarantee that it is,” Ku said. “Thank you, Tilly.”

The mirror rippled once more and the Fae girl disappeared.

Ku turned back to her. “Well, that’s easy enough to solve.”

“Did you miss the bit about me not having a true love, or...?”

Ku shook her head. “The same concerns you have in other realms don’t always exist down here. You should get some rest and then do as you would normally do here in the morning. You’ll probably stumble across your answer.”

Freya narrowed her eyes. “Why do I feel as if you know more than you’re saying?”

“Because you are incredibly astute,” Ku replied. “But first, as I said, you should probably rest.”

Freya frowned, though she did feel tired. “Aren’t I already asleep?”

“You have needs here, just as you do on Earth. While you’re here, you need to take care of *this* body.”

Freya nodded, following as Ku led her to her room.



Chapter Twelve

Freya woke up in her poorly-repaired room of the castle and wondered if the Shadow Realm version of herself lived there all the time. Leaks were patched with odd pieces of wood and only a few patches seemed to have been cleaned.

She wondered why she lived here. Was she just a scavenger? Did she stumble across the abandoned structure and claim it as her own? Queen of a broken castle... That seemed like something she would do.

“Freya? You up yet?”

She froze. It wasn't Ku or Juni yelling for her. Actually, it sounded like Damon.

She ventured out of her room and onto the landing, which looked down onto the floor below, where Damon was standing, waiting for her. Except, instead of his usual clothes, he was wearing a fancy black tunic with silver linings.

“Damon?” she asked.

“Who else would I be?”

She took a moment to organise her thoughts before responding. “I... I'm not the Freya from this realm.”

He nodded. “Okay.”

“Okay? Just okay?”

He frowned. “Of course. You spend a third of your time as the you from Earth.”

“So you... You're aware that this realm is just a reflection?”

“I wasn’t until you told me. What’s going on, Freya? You’re acting like this is your first time here.”

She nodded as she made her way down the stairs to him. “That’s because it is. At least, kind of. I know I’ve been here before and it’s familiar but... I was sent here by a curse, so I don’t remember anything from this realm.”

He seemed caught off guard by that. “Nothing? Truly?”

She shrugged. “Sorry. It looks like I’m stuck here without my memory too, so you’d better fill me in. How do I know you here?”

“You broke into my house.”

She couldn’t help the laugh that escaped her. “I did? Really? Why?”

“You were hired to kill my father.”

“I... Wait, what?”

He shrugged. “As I understand it, you were starving and desperate for work.”

“So, what happened?”

“He wasn’t home and you found me. After that, my aunt stepped in and I became her ward. I used my freedom to track you down.”

“And once you found me?”

He shrugged. “We’ve been trying to find a way to revive the castle.”

“Revive it?”

He nodded. “One of the Ancient bloodline must always be in residence. They’re the only ones with a real claim to the throne.”

“Well, where are they?”

He shrugged. “The Old Queen was dying and her throne was usurped. Most said the usurper killed her, but the rumour was that she lived. After a few years, the Rebel Queen appeared and

claimed to be the Old Queen's heir. The usurper was killed in an unrelated incident and then it was his son, the prince, that the Rebel Queen was fighting."

"And then what?"

"And then the Rebel Queen just... disappeared. There was a fight and the prince was killed. The Rebel Queen and the prince's wife both just vanished mid-fight. No one knows what happened to them."

"So we've been trying to find them?"

Damon nodded. "You've been pretty insistent on it and I agree. The land is dying. One of the Old Blood needs to take the throne again. We were planning on leaving today, actually."

"Leaving? To go where?"

"There's a lake out past the eastern road. It's said to house the spirit of the Old Queen. Your plan was to ask her."

Freya nodded. Ku had said that she should follow things as they progressed here, so she supposed that following Damon was exactly what she should be doing.

"I should let Ku know that we're going," Freya said.

"No need," she heard from behind her.

She spun around to see that Ku was standing there, leaning against the staircase.

"You think I'll find a way to break the curse by going?" Freya asked.

Ku smiled. "I will be surprised if it takes to sunset."



"I GUESS KU WAS WRONG about the sunset thing," Freya said as the glittering of the sea above them seemed to start to dim. "Not that there actually appears to be a sun here..."

"The road is just up ahead," Damon said, marking the first time he had spoken since they had left the castle.

To say that he had been withdrawn would have been an understatement. She supposed that it made sense. She had essentially become a stranger to him. But it was difficult. As much as he wasn't the Damon she knew on Earth, nothing about the way he spoke or carried himself told her that.

"So, how far down the road is the lake?"

"Not long. We should reach the lake just as it gets dark. It is rather fortuitous."

"Why?"

"Legend says that the spirit in the lake will only meet with you at dark."

"Anything else I need to know before we arrive?"

"Lilies are common to the area. You'll need one to give as an offering to the spirit."

Freya nodded, realising that the other her had probably known all of that.

"I know that telling me things that I should already know must be annoying for you," Freya eventually said in an effort to get him talking, "but it would be better than silence."

"I know," he conceded, looking sheepish. "I just... I'm not sure where to begin. And there are some things that I would rather not relive."

"Oh," Freya said, not sure what else to say, though she desperately didn't want to lapse into silence once more.

Unfortunately, Damon wasn't in a talkative mood, and Freya ended up too anxious to find her words.

They spent the rest of the trek in silence and, by the time they could see the lake, she was thoroughly sick of it.

"So, where are these lilies?" Freya asked, thankful for the excuse to break the silence, and Damon indicated a little way off the road.

"I'm sorry for my evasiveness before," Damon said as Freya decided which flower to take. She was glad that there was only one kind. She didn't really pay attention to anything that wasn't interesting to her, which meant that she ended up pretty oblivious to a lot of things, including exactly what a lily looked like.

"It must be difficult for you," Freya sympathised. "I imagine I'm quite different to how I usually am here."

"I... Not exactly. But in some ways, yes. Just a few, but... they're important."

Freya found her gut wrenching at that. It wasn't her fault that she wasn't the other her! He didn't have to sound so god-damn *sad* about it. She cursed her throat for burning a little. He hadn't meant anything by it, he just wanted the other Freya. *Her* Damon would probably say the same if she was replaced by the Shadow Realm version of herself.

"Alright," she said as she tore one of the flowers from the ground. "Where's this spirit then?"

Damon indicated back to the lake.

Freya stormed over, knowing that she should calm down before meeting the spirit, but also kind of not caring. She had been ripped from her realm and forced to adapt to this one, in a move that would probably result in the destruction of Creation, and now she was being made to feel bad because Damon's friend was gone.

She threw the flower at the lake.

"We call to the spirit of the lake," she yelled, making only the most minimal effort to keep the annoyance from her voice.

Her petty irritation at Damon quickly faded, however, as the water began to stir. It rose up from the lake, taking the form of a woman.

A very familiar woman.

“Amber?” Freya said in recognition. “You were the Old Queen?”

She supposed it made sense. Everything here was symbolic, and Amber had been the most powerful being on Earth. So, she was the queen. Which would probably make her successor... Freya didn’t want to believe that it was her, but she was pretty sure that she knew how this was going to end.

“You are not of this realm,” the water Amber said.

“No, I’m not,” Freya replied. “But I have nothing better to do, so I’m fulfilling the quest of the me from here.”

“There is no other. It is always you. You have simply forgotten.”

“I don’t suppose you have a way to fix that?”

Amber smiled. *“True love’s kiss should remind you of what you have forgotten in the trauma of coming here.”*

Freya gave a frustrated sigh. “Why is that always the answer to everything? Alright, fine. Since I’m not getting my memories back, or returning home, can you help us locate someone of Ancient Blood? We want to restore them to the throne.”

“None who are not tainted.”

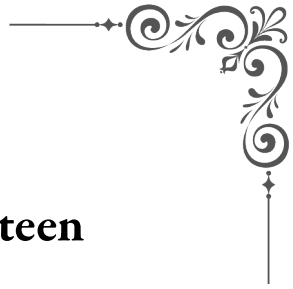
Freya definitely had *not* been expecting that.

“Tainted? What do you mean?”

The water started the bubble beneath Amber as she rose even further.

“The bloodline has been tainted. It should be allowed to die. The people care little for the struggle for the throne. This fighting is a vanity, nothing more.”

There was a clap of thunder and the sea above them began to swirl rapidly. A second after the whirlpool fully formed, a bolt of lightning appeared from the centre, striking Freya down.



Chapter Thirteen

“**F**reya!”

Freya groaned as her senses returned to her. Part of her expected to awaken on Earth, but she opened her eyes to see the Shadow Realm version of Damon hovering over her, his face fraught with concern.

“Think she was trying to kill me?” Freya asked as she tried to sit up. Her chest hurt, as if someone had hit it dead-on with a battering ram.

Damon frowned. “But why would she?”

“If I had to take a guess? I think I might be the ‘tainted’ one she was talking about.”

“What? How?”

“Ku. I’m pretty sure Ancient Blood just means whoever she’s bonded with. First it was Amber, and I’d bet good money on the Rebel Queen being my mother when she was here. And now, technically, me. Except Ku is refusing to properly bond with me, so I’m her host in little more than name.”

“Is that what she meant by ‘tainted’?”

“I have no idea.”

“Freya... Are you sure you’re okay?”

She raised an eyebrow at his concern. “Why do you care? I’m not your Freya.”

“You are,” he said, reminding her of what Amber had told them. “You just don’t remember.”

“And I won’t. Even if I had a true love, which I don’t, their kiss would send me home, not return my memories.”

She sighed, frowning in thought as the gears of her mind turned.

“If I can’t get home, there has to be a way to stop Peter from this side,” she eventually said.

“Peter?”

“The one who cursed me. Ku and Juni seemed convinced that I could break the curse from this side, but I don’t think that I could. Not the way I’m meant to, anyway. But if everyone has a counterpart here, shouldn’t Peter? Can’t I stop him on this side?”

“But we’d have to find him first. Who is he on your side?”

“A Faerie. I’m not quite sure how the Fae work, but he seemed to be something of an authority.”

He shook his head. “Fae don’t have Shadow Realm counterparts. They’re the only beings who don’t, apart from non-Sensitive Humans.”

Freya frowned. “What about the girl he’s trying to turn? What if she’s Sensitive? Could we sever her from his magic?”

Damon thought on that for a moment. “We could maybe bring her here, just like you were brought. You’re fully realised, so you should have the power to enact that kind of change.”

“And that will hopefully break the curse.”

“But we have to find the girl first. I... I might be able to help with that.”

“What do you mean?”

“The prince may be gone, but those who were once loyal to him continue to maintain order. Including my aunt. We could ask her to look at the citizen registry. If you know the girl’s name, we should be able to find her.”

“And she’s not going to raise an eyebrow at you bringing a strange scavenger girl home?”

“Hmm... Think you could pass as a noble woman?”

“I... I guess. If I got some nicer clothes.”

“That can be arranged.”



DAMON'S AUNT'S MANOR was surprisingly close to the lake. Or maybe the strange way that time worked in the Shadow Realm simply made it feel that way.

Damon led her through the servant's quarters, and the way that no one reacted to him as they moved through told Freya that this wasn't unusual for him.

“Weren't we going to sort out clothing?” Freya hissed under her breath as they moved through to what appeared to be the bed-chambers.

“All in due time,” Damon said before leading her into a room.

She doubted that it was his, given that the first thing that caught her eye was the crib by the window, with an intricate mobile of stars above it.

“Whose room is this?” Freya asked, unable to draw her eyes from the purple blanket draped over the side of the crib, with silver stars embroidered across it.

“This place originally belonged to the prince's wife. He gifted it to her just after they wed.”

“And what's with the crib?”

Damon shrugged. “I don't know. This room - *their* room - was sealed after they died. I've never been in here before.”

“So why are we in here now?”

“Because if we steal one of my aunt's dresses, she will recognise it.”

“So we're stealing from the dead instead?”

“Or you could meet my aunt dressed like that.”

Freya looked down at her tattered dress, which was now singed from lightning and covered in the mud she fell into.

“I take your point.”

“I’m just hoping these fit. I have no sewing skill.”

“Me neither.”

Damon passed her a dress that was a deep, blood red, with intricate black lace. Freya gave him a grateful smile as she headed into the en suite, deciding that a fancy dress would be of no use to her if she was covered in mud, sweat and grime.

Thankfully, while the Shadow Realm seemed to lack electricity, magic was commonplace. As Freya stepped into the shower-like space, a cloud formed above her, giving off a low growl of thunder as it pelted her with warm, clean rain.

The cloud was replaced by a warm wind after Freya finally felt clean again, drying her off. Though she had to extract the water from her thick hair herself.

“This is going to take forever,” Freya decided as she examined the dress in front of her. There was some kind of corset involved and several straps in awkward places.

After what felt like an age wrestling with it, Freya finally managed to get herself into the dress, in what she assumed was the correct fashion.

Damon’s eyes widened at her as she left the en suite.

“What?” she asked, her tone a little sharp. The dress was *nice*, but she had liked her scavenger garb too. She didn’t want to be told that this was prettier. It would feel too much like being told that she had to wear it from now on.

“I just... I never thought of you here, with the nobility. Having you look the part is... very strange.”

Freya frowned. She couldn’t tell what he meant by that from his inflection.

“Bad strange or good strange?” she asked, deciding to be direct.

“Both, if that makes sense. I... I don’t always like it here. There’s too much hiding. Too many games played with false smiles. I always liked that you didn’t belong to this world, but you were so far removed from it that being with you and then coming back here... It felt like living in two very different worlds. Having you here closes that gap, but I’m not sure how much I want it closed.”

Freya gave him a reassuring smile. “It’s just until we find Zoe. Then we can go back home.”

He raised an eyebrow and she blushed as she realised that she had just referred to the abandoned castle as their home.

“You know what I meant. I go back to my realm, and you can go back to wherever.”

Damon didn’t lower his eyebrow.

“Aren’t you supposed to be taking me to your aunt right now?”



DAMON TOOK HER THROUGH from the bed-chambers, leading her to the main part of the manor.

“She’ll probably be in her office,” Damon said as he led her up a tower. “Just... Be careful when speaking to her. My aunt is a Seer. If you lie to her, she’ll know.”

“So then why are we pretending I’m nobility?”

“Lying is impossible, but bending the truth is usually okay. And if you’re the Rebel Queen’s daughter...”

“Okay, I see what you’re doing.”

He knocked on the door at the top of the tower as they reached it, taking Freya’s hand before seemingly deciding better of it and letting go.

“Come in,” came the voice from beyond.

Damon opened the door, revealing a round room where the walls were completely covered with books, with just the smallest space for a single window. In the centre of the room was a desk, at which a woman in a beautifully simple black dress sat, with her dark hair tied up in an intricate knot.

“Aunt Seph?” Damon said, drawing her attention from the parchment in front of her.

She smiled at him. “Ah, Damon. Back from your ‘adventuring,’ I see?”

He nodded. “Yes. I actually met Lady Freya while I was away. She wishes to request your help.”

That drew Seph’s attention to Freya, and she appeared to do a double take as she saw her, though she quickly covered it with a graceful smile.

“My apologies, Lady Freya. You greatly resemble an old friend.”

Freya simply nodded, hoping that it conveyed her acceptance of the apology.

“Are you new to these parts?” Seph asked her. “I haven’t seen you before.”

“I live south of the Crossroads and tend not to travel much.”

Seph nodded, seemingly accepting her answer. South of the Crossroads was home to the old capital, and the castle Freya had been living in. Ever since the prince’s death and the Rebel Queen’s disappearance, the whole area had been abandoned, and was generally thought of as cursed. No one travelled through it, meaning that the lands to the south were pretty much cut off.

Freya wasn’t sure how she knew that information, but she didn’t let herself show her surprise. Perhaps her memories from this realm were returning on their own.

“So, what can I help you with?”

"I'm looking for someone. A child. I have reason to believe that she is in danger."

"And you want help in locating her?"

"Damon told me that you keep records of your citizens. I don't want to intrude on anyone's privacy, but I can't sit idly by while someone plots to kidnap this girl."

"And who is this someone?"

"A relative of mine. It's all very embarrassing, you understand. But I wish to ensure that he does not succeed, and I would be grateful for any help you could give."

"Do you have a name?"

"A first name and age only, I'm afraid. Though I also have the name of her grandmother."

"I believe we can work with that," Seph said as she stood up, moving over to the door. "If you'll follow me, I'll show you to the records room and help you to find this girl."

"You keep the kingdom's records in your house?" Freya asked as Seph led them back down to the main floor.

"Of course. I run the entire kingdom from here. We no longer have a palace, so this must act as the next best thing."

"You haven't tried to build a different palace?"

"As no one has a legitimate claim to the throne, there is no point. The bureaucratic systems remain afloat because there is need for them, and, if I may be so conceited, because I am very good at keeping things running efficiently. I would rather not test the waters."

"Have none tried to take the throne by force?"

Seph's lips became a grim line. "There have been... some who would attempt to take it, but it has not quite yet become dire."

Freya looked over at Damon. "Is that why...?"

He nodded.

"But now?"

He shrugged.

Seph sighed. “Damon, I know that you have been on your own little mission to find the Rebel Queen’s heir. Though I have no idea why you would think that there was one.”

He shrugged. “I just thought that there must be someone of that bloodline left. And, since the prince never had an heir, it seemed like the best bet for stability.”

“So,” Seph continued, aiming her words at Freya, “he roped you into these escapades of his?”

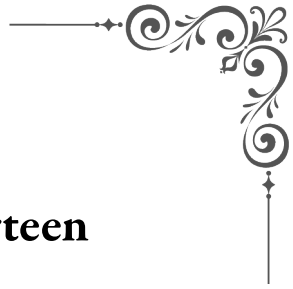
“We’ve been helping each other.”

“I see,” Seph said simply as she led them down to the basement, which was filled with even more books, along with scrolls of parchment.

“Mistress,” a young man said as he approached, bowing his head.

“Xavier. Could you help us find someone in the population records?”

“Of course, just tell me who you’re searching for.”



Chapter Fourteen

Much to Freya's surprise, it only took Xavier a few minutes to find that Zoe lived with her grandmother, a servant to another noblewoman in the town.

"What are your plans once you find this girl?" Seph asked her once they had the information.

"I think I can work out a spell to protect her."

Freya actually wasn't too sure on that point. She knew very few actual *spells*. In the end, she was pretty much hoping that magical theory came as naturally to her as maths did. If someone gave her a complex equation without a method, she could usually figure it out.

"I meant more about after you help the girl. What is your plan going forward? To continue to help Damon to find the Rebel Queen's heir."

"Actually, I think we're done with that now."

"Well, I see that this is urgent, but once you're done, I would very much like to speak with you."

Freya's internal alarm bells immediately started to ring.

"What about?" she managed to ask, thankfully not too bluntly.

Seph smiled at her. "About what your plans are, of course."

She headed back upstairs, leaving Freya and Damon alone once more.

"Should I be worried about that?" Freya asked him.

Damon shrugged. "I'm honestly not sure. But, for now, our focus should be on Zoe," he said before leading her up, back out of the manor through the kitchens.

"Right. If those seals break, your aunt will be the least of my problems."

The town was, thankfully, small enough for the walk to only take ten minutes, though Freya felt very self-conscious in her fancy dress. Not that her scavenger garb would be much better, since most women seemed to be wearing basic, rough wool dresses. Everyone seemed to stare at her and Damon, stepping out of their way as quickly as possible. Every time someone got out of their way, some even bowing, it only added to the uncomfortable mix of unease and guilt broiling within Freya. People acting subservient to her had her in a near-panic. It wasn't how things normally went, so she had no idea how to handle it. She could handle being ignored and being the subservient, because she knew how to manipulate things from that position. From here? Everything was unknown, and nothing was more terrifying to her.

"This should be them," Damon said, indicating to a small cottage that greatly resembled the one from Earth, though the details weren't so modern.

Freya knocked on the door, though she hesitated slightly, unsure of exactly what she was going to say once it opened.

"Oh. My lady," Zoe's grandmother greeted as she opened the door. "What can I do for you?"

"Is your granddaughter in?"

The older woman seemed slightly alarmed by that. "Why do you want to see her?"

"Just to talk with her," Freya assured her. "I've heard that she's a bright girl, and I have made a bit of a hobby of making sure that bright girls have bright futures."

She seemed to relax a little, stepping aside to let them in. “She’s just playing outside. I’ll go and get her, if you would like to just wait here.”

As soon as she had scurried off, Freya turned to Damon.

“When she comes back, can you distract her while I talk with Zoe? I don’t want to alarm her.”

“Do you really think you can do it?”

She gave an unsure shrug. “The way I figure it, the soul exists in two parts, but there is a connection between the two. If I can sense that connection and... pull on it, I guess, like I did to let Zed see Amber, I might be able to draw her into this realm.”

“How confident do you feel in that?”

“I don’t know. It’s flimsy but... I first used a spell without an incantation by accident. I may not be very well educated in the theory, but magic does seem to follow a specific set of underlying laws. It is, to all intents and purposes, a science. And I have always been gifted with science.”

Damon raised an eyebrow, informing Freya of her error.

“Oh crap, that sounded really egotistical, didn’t it?” She groaned. “I’m sorry, but I have no idea how to say that I’m good at something without sounding like an arse. I... I would start listing my grades, but I think that would only make it worse, wouldn’t it?”

“I’m sorry,” Damon told her. “I didn’t mean to imply that I thought you were being an ‘arse’. I just... you have talked to me about science before, but I have never really understood the concept. You didn’t elaborate, once you realised that it would mean starting from the beginning, and I hadn’t realised that it was so important to you.”

“Oh, it’s not. I mean, not really.” She shrugged. “I’m just good at it.”

Before Damon could respond, Zoe arrived, hiding slightly behind her grandmother. She continued to hide as her grandmother led her to a chair, which she sat awkwardly, pulling at the fabric of her dress.

Damon, thankfully, approached her grandmother, leading her from the room.

“I thought I would talk you through some of the options my lady will most likely consider for Zoe,” Freya heard him say as they left her alone with the young girl.

Freya sat down opposite her, but didn’t say anything, choosing instead to focus on sensing her. It felt odd to use her magical senses in this Realm. Wrong. There was too little of some elements and too much of others.

And Zoe was almost a mirror image of herself. Everything was the same but, somehow, backwards, and a little fainter.

Freya concentrated, initially piecing together an image of what her soul must look like on Earth. She had sensed enough to get it mostly from memory, only needing to figure out a few pieces from her Shadow Realm soul.

Though, once she had that image, she wasn’t exactly sure what to do but search for it.

And, of course, she got nothing. She was in the Shadow Realm. How was she supposed to sense something that was on Earth, even if it was connected to the girl in front of her?

“Ummm... Miss?” Zoe asked.

“Just two secs,” Freya said, a spike of anxiety appearing at Zoe’s prompt, making her brain go blank.

How the hell was she meant to do this?

This wasn’t Earth, it was just a mirror realm.

Mirror realm... Not an axis realm...

Freya didn’t really know what the difference was. She knew all of the axis realms, but *mirror realm* was a new one.

Overworld and Underworld. The Old Worlds: Skyreach, Atlantis, Dwiivan and the Vulcan Plains. All axis realms, with Earth in the centre. They required a portal to get to and were very much separate locations.

But the Shadow Realm wasn't like that. It was all of the Realms, just condensed and simplified.

So what if it inhabited the same space?

Freya tested at the fabric of the realm with her senses, trying to sense through the background magic, that she had never really given much thought to on Earth. But the more she pushed, the more something repelled. So she kept pushing. Kept going past the veil that was pushing her back.

And then she sensed it. The other half of Zoe's soul.

Not sure of what else to do, she wrapped her energy around it and tugged.

Zoe let out a gasp, clutching at her head.

"Are you alright?" Freya asked, wondering if she had messed it up.

"Freya?" Zoe asked as she looked around. "Where am I?"

Freya let out a sigh of relief. "Somewhere away from Peter."

"Why?"

"Because he wouldn't let me talk to you alone on Earth."

Zoe frowned. "On Earth? Where am I now?"

"A... A kind of dream world."

"Why did you bring me here? What do you want to talk about?"

"I... I guess I wanted to know why you wanted to leave."

Zoe looked down at the floor.

"I could take a guess. Your grandmother said you had been bullied at school."

Zoe nodded.

“And the fact that you live with her in this realm tells me that your parents probably don’t spend a lot of time with you.”

She nodded again.

Freya sighed, not really sure what to say. If she had been given the choice Zoe had now, she would have taken it in a heartbeat.

The irony of the fact that she now had that choice and was doing everything in her power to turn it down was not lost on her.

“I could tell you that things get better as you grow up, but God knows enough people have told me that for me to stop believing them. I could tell you that you can’t run away from your problems, but why not?”

Zoe finally looked at her with a frown.

“I guess I’m not really being persuasive... I just... Peter isn’t a good guy. He doesn’t really care about you. You’re just a means to an end. Your grandmother, on the other hand, she seems to really care. What would she do if you disappeared on her?”

Zoe looked uncomfortable at that.

“It’s not worth it,” she eventually said. “I *know* it would hurt Grandma, but I can’t stay.”

“But you’ll never grow up.”

“Why do you care?” Zoe bit back. “Why can’t you just let me go?”

Freya sighed, running her hand through her hair before finally deciding to go with the truth.

“I care because I’ve been you. I care because Peter is just using you as leverage, and I don’t trust him to play fair when he’s done. If I give him what he wants, he’ll cut you loose without a second thought. If I don’t, then your use to him is over.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Then let me prove it to you. Stay here, while I return. Without his leverage, Peter won’t get what he wants. I’ll bring you back after he has agreed to never try to make me a Faerie and to never again mess with the seals. If all he ever wanted was you, he will still take you.”

Zoe narrowed her eyes but nodded in agreement.

“I will return you to Earth shortly,” Freya told her as she left the room to find Damon.

“I’m done,” she told Damon before turning to Zoe’s grandmother. “Thank you for letting me speak with her.”

“Of course.”

Freya and Damon left the house at that. As soon as the door was closed behind them, Damon turned to Freya.

“Now what?”

She shrugged. “Now I guess we wait for me to wake up.”



THEY DECIDED THAT THE tavern was the best place to wait for the spell to wear off, though three pints down, Freya had felt no change.

“Do you think it hasn’t worked?” Damon asked.

Freya sighed. “I felt Peter’s magic leave when I brought Zoe fully here. The curse shouldn’t still be in effect.”

“Maybe it isn’t.”

“But I’m still asleep.”

“Maybe it put you to sleep, but it’s not keeping you asleep?”

Freya sighed into her drink. “Great. Well, that leaves me back where I started.”

“True love’s kiss?”

“Yup. I’m going to be trapped here forever...”

Damon gave her an odd look as she finished her drink.

“What?” she asked him, finding herself blushing a little under his gaze.

“Just... It’s strange to have you here. Without your memories, I mean. And knowing that you’ll probably remember when you go back to Earth.”

“Huh, yeah, I never really thought about remembering. Not that it matters when I can’t get back.”

“I just... Normally, when you’re telling me of Earth, you’re complaining about the two of us.”

“What do you mean?”

He shrugged, leaning closer to her.

Her body immediately flushed with warmth at his proximity, the booze making it far more difficult than usual for her to ignore how he affected her.

She almost toppled off her chair as she was suddenly assaulted by a memory from her Shadow Realm counterpart.

The minotaur charged at her once more and she cursed herself for allowing Damon to convince her to accompany him. She shouldn’t have kept contact with him after he had found her at the castle. But her Earth counterpart was so desperately enraptured by him (even if she was reluctant to admit it) and those feelings had seeped through.

So, here she was, risking her life just to spend more time with him.

She threw herself out of the way of the charge, crashing to the ground.

By the time she was back on her feet, it was charging Damon.

“No!” she cried, firing a bolt of pure Energy at the creature, striking it straight through the heart.

Huh, she thought to herself. She’d never managed that in this realm.

The beast didn't lose its momentum, however, still hurtling towards a confused Damon.

Freya threw herself at him, pushing him out of the way in an awkward tangle.

"Hey," Damon said after they heard the creature collapse down dead.

Freya felt a little breathless, in a way that had little to do with the fight, as she was sprawled on top of him.

"Hey," she eventually managed.

"You just keep saving my life."

She smirked. "You'll have to think of a way to repay me one of these days."

To her surprise, his response was to sit up and swiftly catch her lips with his.

She gasped into the kiss, causing him to pull away just a little.

"Did I misread that?" he asked with a frown.

"Not in the slightest," she assured him before grabbing his hair in order to drag his lips back to hers.

"You!" Freya cried, her voice a little slurred.

"What?" Damon asked with a frown.

"I remembered," she told him, her tone accusatory. "I remembered you."

"Okay...?"

*"You and me. *Kissing.*"*

Damon looked sheepish at that. "That was what I was trying to tell you. When you're here... You're constantly annoyed that we weren't together on Earth."

"But we're together here?"

He nodded.

"So..." She trailed off as Damon shifted closer to her, moving a strand of hair from her face.

"I might be able to send you home," he told her.

“And it took you this long to tell me?” she managed to whisper.

“I didn’t want to tell you something you weren’t supposed to know at first.”

“And then?”

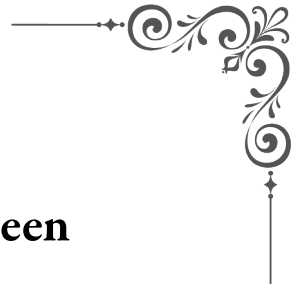
“And then you thought that getting Zoe here would stop Peter as well as get you home.”

“And now?”

He responded by leaning in and kissing her.

The world seemed to shift around her as she kissed him back, and she found herself clutching his shirt in an effort to stay, despite the fact that leaving was exactly what she had been hoping for.

Her clutching did nothing, however, as the world faded from her, the feel of Damon’s lips the last thing to go.



Chapter Fifteen

The Dwarves carefully placed Freya on the sofa before beginning to wonder what they should do.

“Who do we kill to get her back?” Warrior asked, his hand eagerly gripping the hilt of his blade.

“Were you not listening before?” Lawyer asked, rolling her eyes. “This has to play out according to the book. The only way to break the curse is true love’s kiss.”

“Which would be helpful if it existed,” Miner interjected, folding her arms.

Builder sighed in irritation but his expression quickly softened. “Its existence is immaterial given that she has no lover.”

“What about the boy she was messaging?” Merchant asked.

“Damon?” Engineer replied.

“Yeah, him.”

Doc gave Freya a quick glance before seeing her phone stuffed into the pocket of her jeans. She pulled it out before tossing it to Engineer. “Think you can work this device?”

She eyed the device dubiously but eventually nodded. “It’s primitive but I think I have it figured out.”

“Tell him where she is and that it’s urgent.”

Engineer nodded before tapping away at the phone for a minute or two. “Done,” she finally said.

Within two seconds there was a knock on the door.

“Freya?” they heard from outside.

Doc went over and opened the door.

“Hey, I was already in the park when I got your message so...” The boy standing in the doorway spoke quickly but trailed off as soon as he got a good look into the cottage beyond. He seemed to count the Dwarves before seeing Freya unconscious. He paled, despite his already paper white complexion. “I was right, wasn’t I? Fairy tales are coming to life.”

Doc tried not to show her surprise at his apparent understanding of magic. There was no way a Human would realise the truth of what was happening so quickly. “You’d better get in here,” Doc told him, stepping aside to let him in.

He nodded, following her before moving over to where Freya was lying. “So, Freya got trapped in the part of Snow White?”

“Yes. We’ve been trying to help her as best we can, but...”

Damon smiled weakly for a moment, seemingly at some private joke, before frowning. “Wait, how did you explain this to her without exposing magic?” His frown deepened. “And how did you know to text me? How did you know I was magic?”

“We didn’t,” Engineer clarified, stepping forward. “Freya, like all Humans, is too adept at burying her head in the sand when it comes to matters of magic. She’s been ignoring the correlations between what’s going on here and the story.”

Damon’s bittersweet smile momentarily returned as he sighed, looking to his unconscious friend. “Yeah, that sounds like Freya.” He turned his gaze back to the Dwarves, his gaze hardening once more. “But, if you didn’t know I was magic, why did you text me?”

Doc shrugged. “Because we figured you were the prince who would break the curse.”

Damon snorted at that but his face swiftly fell as he realised they were serious. “We’re just friends,” he told them shortly.

Doc rolled her eyes. "Look, if you want to believe that's true, that's fine. But right now, Freya's life is in the balance. One kiss won't kill you. If we're wrong, we're wrong and we'll find another way, but if we're right this might be her best shot."

Damon sighed, shaking his head. "It's not going to work."

"Again, we won't know that until you try it."

Damon relented at that, leaning towards Freya before hesitating, shaking his head. "This is super gross. I mean, she's unconscious. This is just creepy."

Lawyer sighed. "Yes, it's all very creepy and unethical and kind of rape-y but we're not the ones who wrote the story or the ones who cast the spell. This is the only option, so just kiss the girl so that we can all go home."

Damon nodded but still hesitated, speaking up after a moment. "If this does work, which it won't, but if it does... Give me your word that you won't tell her I was here. I'll shift out and you can tell her whatever, just... not that I was here or that I'm not Human."

"We won't tell her if you insist, but I don't understand. I get you not wanting to expose magic, but why not tell her how you feel?"

Damon looked to his friend once more, his expression giving away his love for her, as Doc imagined that he was thinking of what might be between them.

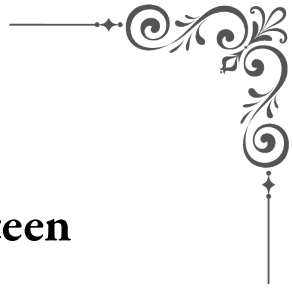
"She can't know," Damon eventually told them softly. "She doesn't belong in this world. She belongs in hers. If my- If anyone were to find out that I loved her, she would constantly be in danger. I couldn't lose her through my own selfishness..."

"Maybe whether or not she takes that risk should be up to her."

"But telling her would mean exposing magic, which would be a death sentence for us both."

Warrior looked over to Doc and she found herself surprised by his soft, pleading expression. Her heart tugged as she felt the same compulsion he did. Telling Damon of Freya's true nature would free them both. Doc finally made the decision to speak up but found her voice just a whisper of breath. Damon had already leaned forward to kiss Freya and the Dwarves were fading.

Damon pulled away as they finished fading from Earth, seeming momentarily dejected before she began to stir. His face immediately lit up with joy before it was swiftly replaced with a look and panic and he shifted away.



Chapter Sixteen

“Well,” Freya said as she sat up, “I guess that was one way to end the curse.”

“What way?” Amber asked her with a frown as she reappeared. “I assumed the Dwarves did something.”

Freya shrugged. “The sleeping curse sent me to the Shadow Realm. It turns out I usually go there when I sleep.”

Amber’s frown deepened. “That shouldn’t be possible. It takes powerful magic to send someone to the Shadow Realm.”

“I don’t know. Ku thought it had something to do with being conceived there.”

Amber’s eyebrows shot up into her hairline. “You spoke to Ku? I thought she was gone.”

“No, apparently she’s rattling around in here somewhere.” Freya tapped her head. “She’s sealed herself away, though. Says that she refuses to let me access her powers.”

“That’s for the best,” Amber said, looking relieved. “So, how *did* you get back?”

Freya blushed at the thought of the kiss she had shared with Damon. It had been so strange to see him look at her like that. It made her insides all gooey. “It turns out, in the Shadow Realm, Damon and I are... together.”

Amber gave her a knowing smirk before looking around the room.

“The Dwarves have gone.”

“Then I did it. The spell is broken. All I have to do now is retrieve Zoe.”

“Retrieve her? From where?”

“The Shadow Realm,” Freya admitted sheepishly. “I might have pulled her soul there to cut her off from Peter’s magic.”

Amber looked a little alarmed at that. “You managed to pull her into the Shadow Realm?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Just the fact that you go when you’re asleep is miraculous enough. Being able to send someone else there...”

“Well... Has it ever been done from that side? I only could because I was there myself.”

Amber frowned. “No, I guess not.”

“Then maybe it’s just easier from that realm. And hopefully it will be easier to get her back from this side.”

“And what if it’s not? What if you’ve trapped her there?”

Freya shrugged. “Well, I managed to get her there when I was in the Shadow Realm, so I might have to push her back from there as well. That just means that I’ll have to go to sleep first.”



FREYA’S LIMBS FELT weird as she walked around the park. According to her phone, she had barely been out for ten minutes. And yet that time in the Shadow Realm... It felt like days.

She wondered if Damon being there was some kind of sign. Maybe he was close enough to magic himself that he would understand. Maybe it would be worth the risk. After all, she *was* pretty good with memory alteration. If Mel could teach her some more complex alteration spells, she could try things with Damon. Give him a few days to adjust to the idea, and erase the experience if it didn’t work out.

Her stomach twinged with guilt at the thought, reminding her of her first kiss. The kiss she had stolen with magic and then made Damon forget.

He wasn't some doll for her to play with. Not to mention, if she messed it up, there could be another war. Her stomach froze the idea of sacrificing herself as her mother had to correct the timeline. Even for Damon.

"Freya?" she heard from across the path. She turned to see Jamie approaching.

"Oh. Hey, Jamie."

"Please tell me you haven't been staying here since you ran off."

Freya shook her head with a smile as she realised that she was in the same clothes. "No. I've been staying at Damon's."

"So, are you two...?"

"What? Oh! No. No, we're not... We're just friends," Freya stammered. "Really, Jamie. Always were, always will be."

"Okay, then I'm lost. You two are *constantly* looking at each other like lost little puppies when the other one isn't looking."

Freya shrugged. "We're just better as friends than we would be together."

"Why do I get the feeling that there's more to it than that?"

Freya shrugged. "It's a long story. Regardless, we're never going to be together. You should try things with him again if you want. I guarantee that I'll never be a threat."

Jamie folded her arms as her gaze became glued to the ground. "It's not him I'm bothered about."

"What do you mean?"

Freya couldn't have been more shocked as Jamie leaned forward, kissing her. Though her hands moved down to Jamie's sides, drawing her close as she kissed her back.

“Please tell me you weren’t mean to me to cover up the fact that you liked me,” Freya joked as Jamie finally pulled away. “That would be incredibly cliché.”

Jamie responded by lightly punching her arm. “It’s not that. I really *didn’t* like you when I was dating Damon. But then I realised how petty I was being, and that I didn’t even really *like* Damon all that much. Then I started actually talking to you and I just...” She pulled away, looking a little confused. “I’ve never kissed a girl before,” she admitted.

Freya shrugged. “Girls or not, I’d be more than willing to bet that you’ve got more kissing experience than me.”

“I... I didn’t think I liked girls.”

“Did you like kissing this one?”

Jamie nodded, her cheeks turning pink. “I... I liked it a lot.”

Freya couldn’t help but blush back at that. She would be lying to herself if she said that she didn’t like Jamie now that she was acting like a decent human being.

“Well, this girl wouldn’t argue with more kissing,” she figured.

She could do kissing. Kissing was just kissing. There was no guilt over not telling Jamie that she wasn’t Human. There might be, one day, the pessimistic part of her brain figured, but one day wasn’t today. Today, kissing was just kissing.

“I think I’d like that,” Jamie said before leaning in once more, her hand moving up to play with Freya’s hair.

Of course, Freya pulled away after not too long. She had things to do. The world was ending and all that.

Kissing could wait until after the Fae were dealt with.

“I actually have somewhere to be.”

“Are you going back home?”

No, I’m probably just going to knock myself out so that I can retrieve the soul of a girl that I sent to another realm.

“Yeah, I am.”

“Alright. I... I’ll see you later?”

Freya nodded. “Definitely.”

As soon as she left, Freya heard a small voice next to her.

“Aren’t you a lady’s woman.”

Freya frowned, turning to see Tilly sitting on the hedge next to her.

“That your prince?” Tilly asked.

“No,” Freya replied. “Just... Someone I can actually be with.”

“Fair enough.”

“Are you here to help me with your brother? Because I already took care of it. The Dwarves were gone when I woke up.”

Tilly nodded, folding her arms. “Yeah, about that. He’s got that whole house under some kind of barrier spell now.”

“What? Why?”

“Because you messed with his plan. Peter doesn’t really want Zoe. He wants you.”

“Yeah, he said, though I’m not sure why. Fae only take children. I’m sixteen.”

“Right. There have rarely ever been teenagers taken by the Fae, but I talked with some of the others. They think another war with the Humans is inevitable. There has been a line of thinking that... Well, that we should let everyone else kill each other. We’d be left to reclaim the ashes of Earth. To claim it from the people the Creator gave it too.”

“You guys *really* hate the Creator, don’t you?”

“How would you feel, knowing that you were nothing more than a glitch in the system? An unaccounted for error? The Creator didn’t just leave the first Fae alone. Her Ancients tried to erase them, and we have not forgotten.”

“Taking over Creation still seems to be an overreaction.”

“Tell me about it. Look, there’s no evidence that the Creator has so much as glanced at this Creation since she finished making it. She gave the Ancients a vague plan and left them to watch it. When they screwed that up, She passed the plan onto the Big Three. What they chose to do with the plan is nothing to do with Her. Including trying to hunt us down.”

“You were awfully chummy with Ku for someone who blames the Ancients.”

Tilly shrugged. “Ku saved my life as a child. She and Amber were there for me and my sister after our mother died. I wasn’t her blood and yet she treated me like I was. I’m not going to forget something like that.”

“So, what does being mad at the Creator have to do with the Fae wanting me?”

“They think you can lead them. That you’re strong enough to protect us and to help us reclaim the Earth.”

“They really thought I would do that?”

“If the choice was you or Zoe? Yes. Peter is especially convinced that you’ll want to join us, so that you can be with family.”

Freya sighed, not really having an argument for that. “Yeah, he didn’t exactly lead with ‘Hey, want to be queen of the Earth?’ when he was trying to convince me before.”

“No. They were going to build up to that over the years.”

“And they thought Fate wouldn’t intervene?”

“She sent one of her Oracles to talk to me right after I finished speaking with Ku. She convinced me to stop them.”

“So, you’re really going to turn on your own people to help me?”

Tilly shrugged, holding her arms tight to her chest. “In the other timeline, when my sister died, she left Lily in my care. I was young and I did my best but... I couldn’t help her when she got her powers. I always thought... If I had only tried to contact Am-

ber sooner or something... I clung too tight to the hope that history wouldn't repeat itself. I was wrong and my niece paid the price. A price you're still paying.

"My brother thinks that making you a Faerie will make up for that. For the fact that he left for the Glades before Lily needed us. He's wrong, though. Your destiny is on Earth. We can't rewrite Creation for our selfish needs."

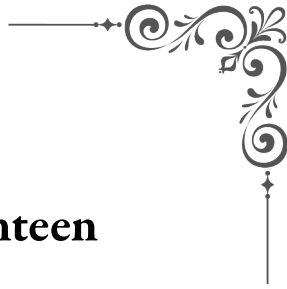
"What will happen to you once we stop him?"

She shrugged. "They'll probably banish me. That'll be new for this millennium. But I've got a few contacts on Earth. I'll be fine."

"So, how do we stop him? Please tell me it involves swords."

Tilly shook her head. "Unfortunately not. How good are you at complex spells?"

"I'm a quick study."



Chapter Seventeen

“I haven’t been this big for... Well, since I became a Faerie,” Tilly commented as she cast an illusion charm to hide her wings and make it look like she was wearing clothes that weren’t fashioned from plants.

“Yeah, when was that?” Freya asked. “And why was my mother left in your care? You look younger than me.”

“You stop ageing when you commit to the life of a Faerie,” Tilly told her. “In the other timeline, I stayed on Earth with my sister after our mother died. Peter left right away. My sister didn’t die until Lily was a young girl. In this timeline, she died just a few years after our mother. Before Lily could ever be born. I joined my brother at that point.”

Freya groaned. “Okay, enough timeline talk. It gives me a headache.”

Tilly laughed at that. “It gives everyone a headache. That’s why we don’t do it often.”

Freya nodded as the two of them headed towards the grandmother’s house.

Once they got there, they were stopped dead in their tracks by an invisible barrier.

“Do you sense the girl inside?” Tilly asked as they approached.

“Yes,” Freya confirmed. “She’s faint, though. Just basic life functions. No soul.”

“Peter hasn’t been able to retrieve her then.”

“So, what now?”

“Okay. So, can you feel the Energy of the barrier?”

Freya nodded. It seemed to almost vibrate in front of her.

“How do we get through it?”

“Brute force will do nothing, even as powerful as you are. But you should be able to phase through it by matching the magical signature.”

“And how difficult will that be?”

Tilly shrugged. “Easier than usual, since you are family, but I won’t lie, it will be difficult.”

“And you’ll follow me in?”

“I can’t. Peter was expecting me to interfere, and he’s familiar enough with my magic to stop me. You’re more powerful than he is, and he is not as familiar with your magic. You are the only one who can get through.”

“And what about after I’m through?”

“Then you convince him to take the barrier down.”

“How?”

“I don’t know. This is petty, even for him. You have him beat. He should let go.”

Freya nodded, sensing the Energy in front of her. As much as Tilly had said that it would be difficult to feel out the signature of the Energy, Freya had it in less than a minute.

She held her hand out to the barrier, shrouding it in Energy at the same frequency as Peter’s, and slipping through.



FREYA USED HER MAGIC to get past the lock and enter the house, finding Zoe and her grandmother unconscious on the sofa. She walked past them to the garden, ready to face Peter.

“So, you return?” Peter asked as she reached the bottom of the garden. “Have you reconsidered my offer?”

“Why are you doing this, Peter?”

He raised an eyebrow. “The protection spell? Zoe fell unconscious and her grandmother began to panic. I didn’t know what had cut her off from my magic, so I raised a barrier in case it was the Demons again, or in case any of the Humans realised there was something supernatural going on.”

Freya folded her arms at that, trying to think of what to say next before her silence became awkward. She didn’t entirely trust that Peter didn’t know that it was her, but she couldn’t deny that it was reasonable that he might not.

“That was me,” Freya admitted. “I didn’t know that I could make it back from the Shadow Realm, so I cut her off from you.”

“Then you have to bring her back so that I can take her.”

She shook her head. “No. Zoe’s not going with you.”

“Then you plan to take her place?”

“No, Peter. I was only going to take her place because the seals were in danger. They aren’t anymore.”

“I can’t go back empty-handed. Come on, Freya, why are you so reluctant? I’m offering you eternal youth and even more power than you currently have. No more rules. No more answering to meddling guardians who won’t even tell you the name of your own father.”

“What’s the use in knowing the name of my father if I can never see him?”

Peter shrugged. “Who said you could never see him? Admittedly, he probably wouldn’t be too thrilled at the idea of you being a Faerie. Though you needn’t tell him. In fact, you could return to him and live with him if you wanted. You have the rest of your life to spend among the Fae, after all. I’m sure he would be

thrilled to know you're alive. He's so worried that you died with your mother."

Freya was caught off guard by that. The suspicious part of her brain warned that Peter could easily be lying. There was no guarantee that he even knew who her father was. It was just a trick to get her to join the Fae.

"Tell me," she said. "As a sign of good faith."

Peter huffed, folding his arms. "Don't you trust me?"

"No."

He smiled. "Smart girl. Though, I don't think I should tell you. I think this is something that should be shown."

"Shown?"

"You wouldn't believe me otherwise."

"I don't know that I believe you *now*."

He tutted, shaking his head. "Now, now, Freya. If you haven't been able to figure it out yet, then it's clear that you're in denial. I have little patience for hand-holding. Agree to my terms, and I shall introduce you to your father myself."

"What do you mean in denial? How would I have figured it out unless I already knew them?"

"Freya, you know plenty. Have you never wondered why you show such skill with Dark magic?"

"A little Demon blood isn't uncommon," Freya replied defensively.

"A little? Is that what Amber told you? She practically sentenced my sister to death, but you she shelters from even yourself. How sweet of her."

Freya shook her head. "You're lying. Fae lie. You're tricksters. You don't know anything more about my father than I do. You're just trying to turn me against Amber so I'll leave her to go with you."

Peter smirked. “What an obedient pet she’s trained this time. You do know that’s what she does, don’t you? It’s in her nature. We’re all here to fight a battle that isn’t ours. All but the Fae. You’re just soldiers in a manufactured arena. She’ll keep throwing you at the problem until one of you solves it. You’re no different. But you could be. This isn’t your fight, Freya. You don’t have to die to protect her.”

“She doesn’t need my protection. She’s already dead.”

“Not Amber,” Peter told her. “She’s just another puppet. A puppet of a puppet of the puppet-master. The master who’s not even here.”

“I’m done here,” Freya said, shaking her head.

“And what about the girl? If you don’t come with me, I’ll be forced to take her.”

“Will you?” Freya asked with a raised eyebrow. “She’s stuck in the Shadow Realm right now. There’s no way for you to bring her back.”

“You have to bring her back eventually.”

“*Eventually* being the operative word. I think I’ll just keep her like this until she’s older. A few years in the Shadow Realm sounds like a better deal than an eternity with you.”

“Then I’ll just find another child, and this time I’ll make sure that the seals *do* break.”

Freya shrugged. “Then I’ll take on the Ancient that used to inhabit Amber. I’ll become the thing you hate to stop you.”

Peter fumed for a moment, but then it faded, leaving him looking disappointed. “Why, Freya? I offered you everything you ever could have wanted. A family, power, adoration. It could have all been yours.”

Freya shrugged. “I dislike being used as a pawn.”

“That’s all you are. She’ll use you up, just like your mother and grandmother. That’s all our family has ever been. We’re all

just pawns in the end. Tilly and I are the only ones to escape. I just wanted that for you too.”

“I know. But burning the Earth isn’t the answer.”

“Then you’re too naive to realise the truth,” he said sadly. “I swear to you, I’ll release the girl and return to the Glades.”

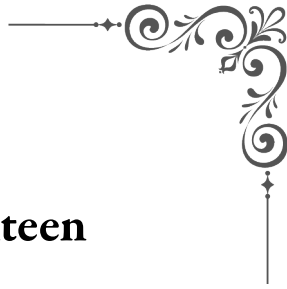
Freya nodded, sighing internally. If she had realised that threatening to take on Ku would make him back down so quickly, she would have done it much sooner. “Thank you, Peter.”

“Keep your thanks. You won’t mean it soon enough.”

With that, he vanished.

“What did he mean by that?” Freya asked, before remembering that she was alone.

She turned to Zoe with a sigh, turning her thoughts to how she was going to return her soul to this realm.



Chapter Eighteen

“**W**here will you go now?” Freya asked Tilly as she walked her home.

Tilly shrugged. “I have a friend in Australia. She can put me up for a while. I’ll probably see about sourcing an ageing illusion. I may be fourteen, but I’ve been that age since ‘78.”

“Oh. You can’t stay in town?”

“I don’t know anyone but you here,” Tilly pointed out. “And you are hardly in a position to help me get on my feet. No, for now, we must part ways.”

“Before you go... What Peter said... About my father, I mean.”

“I wouldn’t take anything Peter said at face value, Freya. He wanted you to join him. He would have said anything to break your trust in Amber.”

“Do you know who my father is?”

Tilly shook her head. “Your mother never told anyone, and there’s no way to know. Unless Peter happens to know your father somehow, I doubt he knows either. He was just winding you up.”

Freya nodded, accepting Tilly’s words, even if they were a little depressing. As much as she didn’t want Peter to be right, she didn’t want the possibility of her finding her father to sound so grim.

They reached Freya's house, which only caused her to sigh. "Do you think my foster mother will remember what happened?"

"What happened?"

"She tried to have me killed. And I assume she followed me to Zoe's grandmother's and gave her the poisoned apple bar. She also implied that I was a slut."

"Ouch."

"Yeah. I mean, it was Peter's magic. But... Yeah."

"You good with memory spells?"

"I've only ever used them to erase a few moments before, but yes."

Tilly passed her a vial of pale blue liquid. "Give this to her. She'll pass out but her mind will remain open. You can more easily manipulate her memory that way. Weaving a complex memory charm is difficult, but I think you can do it. You just need to nudge the memories. No full-blown erasure necessary."

"Thanks. Amber's not really good with the memory stuff."

"Amber's magic could change the very fabric of the world with very little effort. Being taught by a Witch, who was very much bound by the laws of nature, wasn't what she needed. You, on the other hand, need to appreciate the laws. Your Ancient power is mixed up with so much else that you need to respect the balance. You seem smart enough to figure it out, though."

"Thanks," Freya said sheepishly. "Any chance you could come inside and help me through the spell?"

"Alright. But then I really need to go."

Freya nodded, opening the door.

"Look, I know that!" Freya heard Margaret frantically yell.

She crept around to the kitchen and saw that Margaret was on the phone. Her hair was a mess and her eyes were puffy.

“I just need to know where she is! I-” Margaret stopped dead as she saw Freya in the doorway.

Freya waved awkwardly.

“I... Never mind. She’s here.” Margaret hung up the phone.

“Who were you talking to?”

“Damon’s uncle. Gregor. I... I thought you might be staying with him.”

“I was. But then my friend Tilly let me stay with her.”

“Hey,” Tilly said sheepishly.

“Tilly?”

“She’s a new friend. I don’t think I’ve mentioned her. Are you okay? You look tired.”

Margaret stared at her blankly. “You... You’re okay.”

“Yes. Why wouldn’t I be okay?”

“I... Zed... He...”

Freya sighed, realising that Margaret remembered everything. She moved over to the sink and made a glass of water, using a glamour to conceal her pouring Tilly’s potion into it.

“Here, have a drink,” Freya said. “You seem unsettled.”

Margaret nodded, drinking the water. Freya let her magic catch her as she passed out.

“I hate tying up loose ends,” Freya muttered as Tilly helped her move Margaret through to the sofa.



IT TOOK ALMOST TWO hours to correct all of Margaret’s memories and Freya had a banging headache by the time she was done. Tilly didn’t stick around as she made herself some painkillers, though.

“That was impressive,” Amber told her as she finally shut the door to her room.

Freya didn't have the energy to muster a response for a little while, simply collapsing on her bed.

"You've been gone a while," she eventually managed to say.

"You were in good hands with Tilly," Amber figured. "Plus... I didn't know how she felt about me."

"Why? She seemed to hold you in high regard."

"I feared she would blame me for your mother's death. Peter certainly seemed to."

"Yeah, well, Peter also wanted me to help him take over Earth, so I think he just has some issues."

"I suppose."

"How come you didn't tell me about them?" Freya asked. "I mean, you always talk as if my mother's family is all gone."

"After what happened, can you blame me?"

Freya sighed. "I guess not." She yawned, stretching. "I hate when magic follows me home. Margaret shouldn't have to put up with this kind of thing."

"She doesn't remember, at least."

"Yeah, but that doesn't make it right... I don't know. Sometimes I think I should cast an ageing illusion like Tilly and make my living collecting magical bounties. I shouldn't be putting Margaret and Ryan in danger like this."

"Freya... Maybe you should scale back your involvement with the magical community instead. You might not be dragged into so many fights if you didn't make yourself such a target."

"I never *made* myself a target," Freya reminded her as she clutched her pillow to her chest. "The Demons found me without any provocation on my part, and it looks as if everyone else is following their lead."

"Perhaps," Amber said simply, though she shook her head in dismissal. "Never mind. I should let you get your rest."



FREYA AWOKE CHASING the shadows of dreams. Now she knew that she ventured to the Shadow Realm in her sleep, she was eager to remember her journeys. Had she and Damon made their way back to the Manor? Had she found her answers? Were they still together?

All she remembered was looking at the purple blanket, with embroidered stars, while standing beneath the glittering sea.

She decided not to dwell on the Shadow Realm after that. There was no way that had been something good. And even if she and Damon could be together there - even if there were no secrets to divide them - it didn't matter. They couldn't be together on Earth. It would only upset her.

As if caused by her thoughts, her phone buzzed.

Park?

Freya groaned. She would be happy if she never stepped foot in that Creator-damned park ever again.

Okay.



IT WAS SOMEHOW ALREADY hot when Freya arrived at the park. She wondered if she hadn't accidentally shifted to southern Europe. She had only just arrived and her dress was already starting to get sweat patches.

"Hey!" Damon greeted as she approached. "I feel like I haven't seen you in forever."

She rolled her eyes. "It's only been a few days." Though she supposed that it had been less time for her, since she'd seen him in the Shadow Realm. It was odd. She couldn't quite match up that Damon with the one in front of her. The Damon in front of her was certainly not going to start kissing her.

He shrugged. "I know. I just... Are you okay? After everything that happened with Margaret, I was worried."

"It sorted itself out," she assured him.

He raised an eyebrow. "Freya... Are you sure?"

"Yeah. Look, Damon, things might not be perfect with Margaret but... It's better than being sent away."

He nodded. "Okay then."

Freya was glad that he didn't ask for any more explanation or tried to convince her to report Margaret or something. It was a risk, she knew, especially given that Damon himself had come from an abusive home. But it had all been the spell. Margaret didn't deserve the blow-back from the magic Freya had brought home with her.

"You know, I had the weirdest dream last night," Damon said, thankfully changing the subject.

Though Freya prepared herself to be bored as she politely asked "Oh? What about?"

He shrugged. "It was really weird. You were there and we were talking to, like... It was a woman made of water. This lake just rose up to speak with us."

"Weird," Freya said, trying her best not to frown. That kind of sounded like what had happened to them in the Shadow Realm.

"Yeah, that's not even the weirdest bit. She was *really* mad at you for some reason."

"Me? What did I do?"

"Hell if I know. She just said... What was it? '*The bloodline has been tainted,*' I think, and then the sea - oh yeah, the sky was the sea, I forgot to mention that - the sea parted and a bolt of lightning came down and hit you."

Freya stopped dead, doing her best not to show how much Damon's words had rattled her. What he was describing sounded exactly like what she had remembered from when she was cursed.

"And then what?" she eventually asked.

He shrugged. "Then nothing. I don't remember anything else"

"So, what? I should avoid thunder storms?" she eventually managed to joke.

"Well, it is unusually hot and humid today," he figured. "There probably will be a storm later."

She punched his arm lightly. "You're such an asshole."

"It's not my fault what my subconscious dreams up," he defended.

"I mean, it kind of is."

As he laughed, Freya caught sight of Jamie across the path, her stomach doing excited flips.

"Oh, hang on. I need to go speak to someone."

He raised an eyebrow as he spotted Jamie. "Okay, seriously, what's going on with you two? Jamie is acting like she had a personality transplant."

She shrugged, a smile forming unbidden on her lips as she skipped across the grass. "I have no idea. Something good, I hope."

Damon gave her a confused look which she didn't answer.

"Boo!" she said to announce her presence as she bounded up to Jamie.

Jamie smiled back at her. "Hey. I was wondering if you would be hanging around here."

Freya sighed. "Yes, it has become something of a second home recently. I really should fix that."

Jamie's smile widened as she blushed a little. "Perhaps. But it's nice to know that I can always find you here."

"Well, there is that."

Freya, despite being hopeful about whatever was blossoming between her and Jamie, couldn't shake what Damon had said from her mind.

“Hey, Jay?”

“Oh, are we doing nicknames now?”

Freya shrugged. “It just sounded good in my head...”

“Yes, Frey?”

“It doesn’t work as well with my name...”

“Yeah, I’ll think of something better.”

“Yeah...” Freya shifted her weight from side to side, a little awkwardly. “Why did you decide to stop, you know... Being mean to me?”

“We’ve been over this. I decided that it was time to grow up.”

That only served to bother Freya more.

Why does that sound so familiar...

Her blood chilled as she realised why.

She had told Jamie to grow up.

Her voice had done the thing that it did where it got low and made people do things.

Can I seriously only get kissed by people that I compel? Freya wondered in an effort to lighten her dark thoughts. She had no idea how to reverse it. She’d never compelled anyone to such a fundamental degree before.

“I...” Freya sighed, realising that there was only one moral thing to do. She had no idea how to reverse what she had done, but she could at least not take advantage of it.

“Listen, I’ve been thinking. I... Let’s just leave that kiss as that. Just one kiss.”

Jamie looked dejected, but not surprised. “I should have known.”

Freya raised an eyebrow. “Known what?”

Jamie shrugged, folding her arms across her chest as she kept her gaze on the ground. “Freya, I might not have been head over heels for Damon, but it still bothered me that he loved you.

Whatever it is between you two that has you convinced not to be together... He still loves you. And you love him.”

“I-”

Jamie cut her off. “Freya, it’s okay. I get it. In all honesty, I don’t want to be with someone who is pining over someone else. I’m not making that mistake again.”

“Oh... Okay.” Freya didn’t know if she should be offended or thankful for how easily Jamie was taking it.

“So, friends?”

“Yeah. Of course.”

“He’s waiting for you,” Jamie told her simply before heading off, leaving Freya feeling more than a little put out.

She trudged back over to Damon.

“Something good?” Damon asked her as she returned.

She shrugged. “I don’t know. Yeah, I guess. I mean, anything that’s not her leading the charge against me is good.” *And anything other than me taking advantage of her is also good.*

“Yeah. I will be very glad to not be in the middle of that again.”

Freya rolled her eyes at him for making it about him, but she didn’t have the energy to call him on it verbally. Her stomach was too busy twisting itself into knots. Was she really that bothered about Jamie? She hated how long it took her to process what she was feeling.

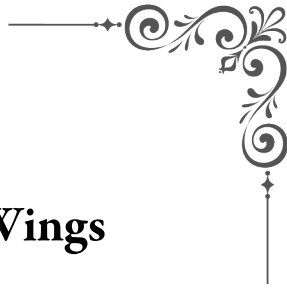
Of course, it was a good thing in the end. If she had started to fall for Jamie, then she’d feel just as bad about lying to her as she did about lying to Damon. Of course, that logic meant that other magical beings would pretty much be her only option. And she was pretty sure that Amber would have an aneurysm (if that was even a thing that could happen to ghosts) if she let herself get so entangled in the magical world.

“Do you ever think things would be so much easier if you were just alone forever?” Freya asked, a little surprised that she had verbalised her thoughts.

“Yeah,” Damon admitted softly, catching her off guard. “It probably would be, wouldn’t it?”

Freya gave him a reassuring smile. “Oh come on. Don’t join me in my pessimism. You’re the cheerful one.”

He grinned back at her. “Well, the cheerful one thinks it’s too hot. There has to be an ice cream van around here somewhere.”



Book Three: Wings

“Good morning,” a sleepy voice greeted as Seph awoke. She mumbled some sort of contented reply, despite the fact that she was acutely aware that she had awoken on Earth. Creator, how she hated this realm. The air was all wrong and it was always either too hot or too wet. Just about the only redeemable feature was the Humans, and even then she’d grown bored with typical feeding patterns. While, intellectually, she knew that those had been dark days for her kind, she still missed her teenage years in the alternate timeline. There had been no rules and regulations then. Everyone had been in agreement that humans were food. Perhaps enemies, if you were being generous.

She by no means agreed with her brother, who made it clear that he wanted nothing more than another war, but she was too busy to make frequent trips to Earth, and that was truly what she needed to be doing to keep her power level high enough to deal with the constant schemes of the nobility. If she could just keep a retinue of Human slaves, however, it wouldn’t be a problem.

But no, for everyone’s safety, she had to be careful. They all had to be. Which meant that she was faced with the challenge of drawing enough energy from Humans, without drawing attention to herself. And she also had to be quick, lest she be away too long. Seph had always been known for her sharp wit and tactical mind, so this wasn’t an insurmountable problem for her - it

could even be fun at times - but mostly it was just annoying and demanded time away from important matters.

“I have to go,” the man beside her said apologetically.

Seph sighed internally as she turned to face him. This was taking too long.

“I have to leave town,” she told him.

“What?” he asked with a frown.

“I’m sorry. It’s my job, I don’t have a choice.”

“No choice at all?”

“I can’t lose this job, Neil. I have to leave today and I don’t know when I’ll be back.”

He responded by leaning into her, his hand caressing her side as he initiated a soft and wanting kiss.

“You could always come with me,” she said softly as he pulled away, adding just enough magic behind her words to make it seem like a good idea.

“I... I can’t just leave my family.”

It took everything she had not to roll her eyes at that. She had by no means used magic to trick him into her bed. He’d had every freedom in choosing both to marry his wife and to betray her. As far as Seph was concerned, she was doing everyone a favour.

“Then I don’t know when we’ll see each other again. Certainly not in the near future.”

“I... I’ll do it,” he conceded as he ran his hand through his ruffled hair.

She rewarded him with a kiss.



IT WASN’T LONG BEFORE Seph felt her power restored, as she sat parked outside Neil’s house, waiting for him. Just the energy from his wife alone would be enough to sustain her for

months to come. She felt bad about causing the innocent woman pain, though she knew that it was better in the long run. She deserved to know exactly who she was married to.

“Are you okay?” she asked as Neil got back in the car. She didn’t really care, but this would be better the more she drew it out.

“I will be,” he assured her. “So, where we going?”

“You’ll see,” she told him simply before heading for a country road. The plan was to ditch him in the middle of nowhere, making it clear that she had never felt any real affection towards him.

She couldn’t help but give an annoyed sigh, however, as she saw a figure in the middle of the road in front of them, causing her to swerve violently to avoid him.

“What the hell was that?!” Neil exclaimed.

She sighed once more as she cut the engine. “My husband,” she grumbled, “who, apparently, has no sense of timing.”

“Your *what?*!”

Neil was cut off at that point by a tall, broad man with long black hair and chalk white skin dragging him from the car.

“What do you think you are doing with my wife?” He growled at the human front of him.

“I... I didn’t know. She didn’t say anything.”

“You probably want to leave,” Seph told him as she got out of the car, leaning casually on the hood. “He killed the last guy I was with, and I don’t much fancy cleaning up your entrails.”

As soon as her husband let go of Neil, he ran as fast as he could in the opposite direction.

Her husband grinned at her. “Well, that was fun.”

“Is there a reason you saw fit to interrupt my feeding?” she asked him with a raised eyebrow.

He folded his arms. “Well, I came home to find no one there. Gregor pointed me in your direction.”

She bristled a bit as she realised that he was unhappy with the fact that she had left. “Maybe if *somebody* was actually home once in a while, I wouldn’t have to be so concerned with keeping my Energy levels up.”

“I am doing important work,” he protested. “There must always be one of Royal Blood on the throne.”

“Which is exactly my point. You have decades, probably even centuries, to worry about an heir, but while you search, the throne is dormant. You married me because you trusted my judgement on these matters,” Creator knew that it wasn’t because he loved her, “so trust me now when I tell you that you have to stay put for a while.”

To no one’s surprise, he shook his head. “No. I... I have to find them. Once I have then everything can go back to normal. It’ll be fine. Trust me. I just have to find them...”



Chapter One

Freya tried not to hyperventilate at the piece of paper in front of her.

Maths - B

Further Maths - B

Chemistry - C

Physics - C

She felt as if she was going to throw up.

She had never gotten below a B before. *Ever*. And a B was a bad thing.

Now it was the best she had managed to scrape together.

In the back of her mind, she could imagine Jamie's glare.

"A B is the best some of us can hope for," she had finally snapped at Freya when she had worried about having missed her grades after the exams.

She had known that she hadn't done as well as she had wanted as soon as she'd left the exam hall.

She had panicked in the middle of the exam and couldn't remember anything from more than halfway through the paper. She supposed that a C was a gracious mark after that, but it didn't feel like it.

"Alright, I think that's it for today," Dr Harris, her chemistry teacher, said, pulling her attention from the slip of paper.

Freya had picked up her marks at lunch, but she hadn't managed to pluck up the courage to look at them until Dr Harris had started talking about the results, and what to do if you had failed.

"Remember," she continued, "if you didn't get the marks you were hoping for, I want to see you after class."

Most people got up to leave, but Freya stayed seated, along with a collection of others she barely recognised.

Freya wasn't really one for paying attention to her classmates.

"Freya?" Dr Harris asked. "I wasn't expecting you to stay."

"I got a C..."

"Ah," she said, nodding with understanding. "Do you mind waiting for a few minutes?" she asked the others, who all shook their heads. She led Freya through to the adjoining lab. "Come on, we should talk privately."

Freya followed her through, but didn't say anything. Her hand moved up to her pendant, which had once belonged to her grandmother, and started tugging at it gently, as she had become wont to do when she was stressed. *Stimming*, Alice had told her it was called. It was basically fidgeting, but a bit more conspicuous, as far as Freya was concerned. Though she supposed that her other habit of scratching up the insides of her forearms with her nails couldn't exactly fall under 'fidgeting'.

"You were expecting an A?" Dr Harris asked.

Freya nodded.

"In all honesty, I was expecting that too. You're easily one of my top students. Do you know what happened?"

"I panicked in the middle of test..."

Dr Harris smiled. "You're not the first student to have this problem, Freya. Let me guess, your parents have high expectations of you and now that these exams might actually change your future, you can't help but freak out?"

"Pretty much..."

“You just need to build your confidence before the exams. Do a lot of past papers. Be confident that you know the content inside and out.”

“I... I did. Do past papers, I mean. But they keep changing the exams.”

Dr Harris sighed and Freya knew that she didn't have an answer. The government thought that too many people were getting good grades, so they kept changing the tests to make them harder. The difficulty Freya could handle. The unpredictability was a different matter.

“Do you want to resit? You can pull this up without them.”

Freya shrugged.

“Alright. Well, think about it, okay? Don't give yourself the stress if you don't think it'll help.”

Freya nodded, unable to speak. Her frustration had drained away now to leave her feeling empty, with her eyes stinging. The last thing she needed was to cry in front of her teacher.

Dr Harris moved back to the other lab and Freya took that as her cue to leave, hurrying as fast as she could to the common room.

When she arrived, everyone else had already headed home, with the exception of Damon, who was sitting with one earbud in, watching something on his iPad.

He looked up as soon as Freya entered, pulling his earbud out and standing up.

“Hey,” he said, though his smile quickly faded as he looked her over. “Are you okay?”

She nodded. She didn't trust herself not to cry if she opened her mouth.

“Did you pick up your results?”

She nodded, unable to stop a tear from escaping.

“Bad?” he asked, though she wondered why he needed to.

As soon as she nodded again, he stepped close to her, opening his arms a little.

She had never really noticed before that he did that. Both of them did. They didn't start touching each other suddenly. They just indicated that, if the other wanted it, they were there.

She'd started doing it after she'd noticed how he flinched away at sudden touches and, she supposed, that he had done the same thing for her.

She wrapped her arms tight around his middle, letting the soft fabric of his t-shirt absorb her tears as the combination of the rhythm of his breathing and the soft warmth of his body heat helped to calm her.

"Margaret's going to kill me," she eventually managed to mumble as he brought his hands up to her back. "Or worse..."

"She won't kill you," he assured her. "And we've been over this. If your foster parents try to send you away, you can always stay with me."

She nodded, but she didn't really believe him. He always said that, but she was sure that his uncle wouldn't really allow it. Or, even if he would, his aunt wouldn't. Not when she was so protective of Damon to start with.

"Come on," Damon said, as she extracted herself from him. "My uncle's been showing me how to use a crossbow. Fancy learning?"

She grinned. There was nothing she liked more than shiny new weapons.



FREYA WAS PRETTY SURE that she talked Damon's ear off about the previous research she'd done into crossbows. She'd never got to use one before herself, but it was always helpful to know how your enemies' weapons worked.

Not that Damon knew that she spent her nights hunting Demons. He just knew that weapons were her Autistic special interest, which went a long way to explaining why she knew so much about them.

By the time they reached Damon's place, Freya was thoroughly exhausted and struggling to stifle a yawn.

"You okay?" Damon asked her.

She nodded. "Just drained from before, and I haven't been sleeping all that well."

"Then maybe we should just watch movies or something."

Freya gave a groan of protest but knew that he was right. She rubbed her eyes in an effort to wake herself up, and Damon frowned at her with apparent concern.

"Are you sure you're okay?" he asked, stepping close to her.

Having Damon this close twice in one day, even when one of those times she had been crying, was pushing it for Freya. Part of why she hadn't been sleeping well was the connection she had to the Shadow Realm.

The Shadow Realm was a mirror of the other realms, where part of everyone's soul resided. Nothing was supposed to happen there that wasn't a reflection of what happened in the other realms, and yet, as Freya had found when she had been sent there by her great-uncle's curse, she and Damon were romantically involved in that realm.

Very involved if her dreams were anything to go by. She didn't remember much, but ever since her first journey, she had started to remember bits and pieces every time she awoke. Either it was bloody carnage that made even her, an experienced Demon hunter, shudder, or it was her and Damon doing things that made her blush at the mere thought, and left her feeling empty and alone as she woke.

Damon's invasion of her personal space didn't make her cringe, as it would have with anyone else. Instead, she felt her face flush, though she doubted it would come with a change of colour. She was so tired, she no longer thought it possible for her face to change from its now permanent shade of light grey.

Damon moved his hand up to her cheek.

"You're really pale," he noted.

Had she had her wits about her, she would have joked that she was always pale, or point out that her jet black hair tended to wash out what little colour she did have.

As it was, it took her several moments to say, "Careful," as she was mindful of how close they were, and how it was causing her heart to thunder in her chest. "What would Annie say?" Her voice came out breathy, and she made no attempt to move away. In fact, she had moved subconsciously closer.

"We broke up," he answered, his own voice low in a way that drew her even closer to him.

"Are you going for the world record of most girlfriends in a single year? At this rate, you'll have gone through every girl in northern England before we finish our A-levels."

His eyes shined with laughter, but it was quickly replaced by a look she couldn't decipher.

"I didn't care about any of them."

"Then why did you go out with them?"

"They were distractions."

"Distractions? From what?"

Damon answered her question by closing the space between them, capturing her lips in his.

If her memories from the Shadow Realm had been at the forefront of her mind before, they were as real to her as her memories from Earth in that moment. Her lips and hands moved with the muscle memory of a thousand kisses between them.

Damon's hands moved to the small of her back, clutching at the fabric of her top as he pulled her even closer. She let out a whimpering moan at the move, but was quickly cut off by the faint smell of burning.

She yanked herself away from Damon to see that their clothing was singed.

"Probably friction sparks," she quickly said, relying on Damon's lack of scientific knowledge to cover up the fact that she had no doubt that the damage had been caused by her magic.

"Yeah," he agreed, though he looked a little unwell. "Freya... I'm sorry."

"Sorry you kissed me?"

"Yeah."

She gathered up all of her courage in order to say, "I'm not."

"I know," he replied, to her surprise. "I've known how you've felt about me for months now."

Freya felt her insides freeze at that. Had she really been that obvious?

"Freya, I care about you, but we can't- There are things about me that you don't know."

"We agreed that secrets were okay," she reminded him. It had been the only reason she had managed to so easily keep her magic from him over the years. Damon's father was a nasty piece of work, and, as a result, Damon didn't like to talk about his past. Hence the acceptance of secrets between them.

"Freya, I can't be with you without telling you the truth."

"Did you tell the several dozen other girls the truth?"

"No, but I care about you too much for that."

Freya glared at him. "Maybe kissing a girl and then telling her you don't want to be with her isn't the best way to cheer her up."

She picked her bag back up at that, and stormed out of the door, shifting away as soon as she was around the corner.

She didn't have the energy to process what had just happened.



FREYA WAS STILL STOMPING her feet when she arrived home, but that had more to do with the fact that her legs seemed to have forgotten how to walk properly than anything else.

That was becoming pretty standard fare for her whenever she was tired, along with almost permanent bruises on her hips from door handles.

She headed straight for the kitchen, deciding that she was in desperate need of comfort food.

Margaret, her foster mother, was rummaging through the cupboards with a carrier bag and, as soon as she saw Freya enter, she quickly threw the carrier bag into the bin outside, as if Freya wouldn't notice if she was fast enough.

Freya just found it vaguely amusing. Margaret had always tried to keep the fact that she smoked a secret from Freya. She had been trying to quit for as long as Freya had known her, which meant the occasional clearing out of her hiding spots.

Of course, it would be more amusing if Freya didn't know why she was forcing herself through another clean out. Her foster parents were having another stab at getting pregnant, with some help from the doctor. They thought that they were being sneaky about it, but the walls in the house were paper thin and even Freya could tell that they were constantly on edge. Something that Margaret giving up smoking probably wouldn't help.

"You're home early," Margaret said as she shut the door.

Freya gave a hum of acknowledgement as she opened the freezer and extracted a tub of Ben and Jerry's Phish Food ice cream.

"Something happen at Damon's?"

Freya nodded as she opened the tub before grabbing a spoon from the drawer and starting to eat. Nothing in Margaret's tone suggested that she was stressed, making it a pleasant change from the new norm. Freya really wasn't capable of tip-toeing around after the day she'd had.

"Bowl?" Margaret said pointedly.

"I'm going to finish it," Freya told her, to which her foster mother rolled her eyes with a sigh.

"Alright, seriously, what happened? Did you two have a fight?"

Freya bought herself time by shoving a large quantity of ice cream into her mouth.

"Kind of," she eventually said.

"Kind of?" Margaret asked with a raised eyebrow. "How do you 'kind of' have a fight?"

Freya shrugged. "I just... He kissed me."

"He *kissed* you?"

"Yeah. And he said that he liked me, and that he knew that I liked him, but then he said that he didn't want to date me because he has secrets and it wouldn't be fair not to tell me them. Whatever *that* means."

"I would take it as a red flag and stay away from him."

Freya grumbled at that. She knew that Margaret had a point, but it wasn't as if she wasn't keeping things from him as well. Not to mention, if they were together, she wouldn't be happy about keeping her magic from him, but there was no way for her to tell him.

"Yeah, you're probably right," Freya finally said as she finished the ice cream. "I just..."

"Really like him?"

"Yeah..."

"That doesn't always mean you'd be good together."

“Yeah, I know,” Freya said with a sigh. “I’m going upstairs to get on with my homework.”

“Speaking of school work, did you get your exam results back yet?”

“*Auferbulum*,” Freya said under her breath, only feeling a little bad about using a memory spell on her foster mother as Margaret gave her a blank look before blinking in confusion.

Freya just really didn’t have the energy to face talking about her results yet.

“What were we talking about?” Margaret asked.

“I asked what was for tea.”

“I’m not sure yet.”

“Okay then,” Freya called back as she made her way up the stairs.



AS SOON AS FREYA MADE it to her room and shut the door, Amber appeared in front of her.

Ever since the Human she had been possessing had died, Amber had taken to appearing to Freya as a ghost more often. Freya supposed it made sense when no one else could really see her, but it occasionally grated on her nerves as it made all of the times Amber dodged and evaded certain topics and questions all the more obvious.

“I almost set Damon on fire today,” Freya said as she collapsed onto her bed, not worrying about her foster parents hearing, thanks to the soundproofing charms on the door.

“Because you were upset?”

“No, actually. Being upset was okay. He kissed me and I must have started to spark...”

Amber sighed. “I have warned you that something like this might happen.”

“I don’t recall you ever saying that kissing was dangerous.”

“No, but I have warned about your ability to control your powers. They’re fed by emotion, Freya, and you have dealt with that by suppressing your emotions behind a veneer of sarcasm and mild irritation. Nothing gets more than an eye roll or groan from you.”

“It’s worked well so far.”

“Yes, it has, but that’s because you haven’t been faced with strong emotions outside of battle since you got your powers. Even exam stress, you vent into fighting Demons. You have no experience with reining in positive emotions of the same force. Once something gets through your walls, Freya, keeping control will not be easy. Most magical beings your age can’t handle having a Human lover without hurting them, and your lack of experience, coupled with your strength, will make it even harder for you.”

“So you have no good news for me today?”

“Behold, the veneer of sarcasm and mild irritation.”

Freya sighed, grabbing her pillow and clutching it to her chest. “It’s better than crying about it,” she muttered into the fabric as she decided to forgo Demon hunting that night.

After all, her sister was arriving back in town the next day, and she didn’t want to be beat up when she saw her again.



Chapter Two

Freya made her way to the high street early the next morning to meet Alice. She quickly found the cafe she and Alice were supposed to meet at, only for Alice to step outside as soon as she arrived, holding two paper cups of coffee in her hands.

“Good timing,” Freya noted as Alice passed her the coffee.

She couldn’t help but almost do a double take at how different her sister looked. Before, she had been a fan of wearing leggings as trousers along with vest tops, as it was one of the only combinations of clothes that didn’t give her sensory issues.

Plus, she then didn’t have to change for bed.

Now, however, she was wearing a smart black dress, though Freya noted that it was still made of soft material, with an a-line skirt that didn’t restrict her legs. She had a white trench-coat over the top, with a belt keeping it cinched around her waist, and she had a pair of comfortable-looking Mary-Jane shoes on her feet.

She was also, surprisingly, wearing make-up, but after a moment to adjust her eyes, Freya realised that it was just a glamour.

“It’s good to see you again,” Alice said as she passed Freya her coffee. “I thought we could walk while we talked. Fewer prying ears.”

Freya nodded. The last time she’d seen Alice, she hadn’t had the ability to sense magic, but now she did and it was obvious that Alice wasn’t Human.

“So, your aunt,” Freya ventured. “Not Human?”

“No. Not Human.”

“And she came to get you just as you broke through?”

“Yes. She and my mother were estranged. My mother had made her promise not to keep track of her in any way and she did as she was asked. She hadn’t even realised she was dead, or that I existed, until...”

“Until what?”

“Until things I can’t talk about. I’m sorry.”

Freya frowned. “So, what are you exactly, if you’re not Human?”

“What are you?”

“That’s not fair because I don’t know.”

Alice frowned. “What do you mean you don’t know? Didn’t Amber tell you?”

“She said I was a mix of different things. How do you know about Amber?”

“But you don’t believe her.”

“What?”

“You said that Amber said you were a mix of different magical bloodlines. But you said that you don’t know what you are. You think she’s lying.”

Freya went to fold her arms, before remembering that she was holding coffee. She settled for clutching it protectively as she pretended to examine its temperature, buying herself time before she eventually replied.

“Yes, I think she’s lying. Amber lies, that’s nothing new. And Mel... Her elemental power is weaker than mine because she’s only half Mermaid. And her spells aren’t as powerful as a pure-blooded Witch’s would be. So if I’m a mix...”

“How are you so powerful?”

Freya nodded.

“And then there’s what your enemies call you. What they suspect you to be.”

Freya narrowed her eyes. About nine months back, she had come across a Vampyre/Demon hybrid who had talked about an Angel protecting the city. Wondering what the hell he was on about, Freya had decided to chase up the rumours, only to find that the feats people were attributing to the “Angel” had actually been things she had done.

“How do you know about that? Have you been keeping tabs on me?”

“Yes,” Alice replied, as if she didn’t see anything wrong with that. “You think they’re right.”

“They can’t be right,” Freya bit back. “The Angel Twilight scarred the Earth when she died. No more Angels can be born, remember?”

“She scarred the *Earth*. You were conceived in the Shadow Realm, to another Angel.”

Freya frowned. “Another Angel? What do you mean?”

Alice gave her what amounted to a dumbfounded look for her, though it was the barest widening of her eyes. “Creator, she has literally told you nothing.”

“Who? Amber?”

“Yes, Amber. Seriously, Freya, what has she told you about your mother? About your heritage?”

Freya shrugged. “She told me that my mother was a mix of different magical beings, like me. She didn’t tell me anything about the rest of my family until I met them. I came across my grandmother’s ghost, and Amber told me that she had died because the Ancient who used to inhabit Amber used her as a pawn. And then I met my great-aunt and uncle, and Amber told me that they had joined the Fae after my grandmother died.”

“And that’s it? She said that Hope died because she was used as a pawn? Doesn’t that, I don’t know, seem vague to you? What does she even mean by that?”

Freya sighed. “Alice, don’t. I know that Amber keeps things from me, okay? I know that every other thing she says is a lie or a half-truth. But the last time I confronted Amber, I accidentally banished her from Earth. I almost died, Alice. I won’t risk banishing her again.”

Alice sighed, stopping still to face Freya. “Look, I’m telling you this because I care about you, Freya. You fall back into observation mode when you’re afraid or unsure of what’s going on around you. But it’s been years. Do you even know what you want at this point?”

“To get through my A-levels without jumping in front of the metro...”

“That’s not funny, Freya.”

“It wasn’t a joke,” she muttered sullenly into her coffee. “Maybe I *don’t* know what I want. But I have no idea what I’m doing! I’m living two very separate lives and I have no idea how this is going to work beyond school. Amber is keeping me in the dark for a reason, which means that there is some kind of ambiguous danger out there...”

“And you’re committing to a Human life because Amber won’t let you get too far into a magical one, or because you really want to?”

Freya sighed. “Let me guess, you know about my results?”

“I’m just saying, you’re putting a lot of focus on Human norms. Do you even want to go to uni? Get a Human job? You’re already making bank as a bounty hunter.”

Freya frowned. She’d never really thought about that. Amber wasn’t happy with her taking bounty work as it was. She couldn’t imagine telling her that she wanted it as a full time job.

And did she? It definitely sounded more interesting than slogging through five more years of education, but it would also probably shorten her lifespan.

“What about you?” Freya asked. “Have you given up university for a magic job?”

“Yes. There are magical beings in positions of power who know how to put our powers to good use.”

“And by ‘good use,’ you mean ‘for capitalist gain?’”

“Have you been on the communist side of Tumblr again?”

“I got sucked into a link-hole last week...”

“Look, I just want you to stop shying away from getting what you want, Freya.”

“And if I don’t know what I want?”

“Because you don’t have enough knowledge?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Then get knowledge.”

Freya sighed. “Why is it that you’re always pushing me to *do* things? It has a habit of making my life much more complicated.”

“Because I’m your big sister and, if I don’t do it, no one else will.”

“Fair point.”

“Now, seriously, do yourself a favour and ask Amber about Hope. She’s keeping things from you and she has no right to. Not when you’ve spent so long looking for your family.”

“Okay, I’ll ask her.”

Alice nodded, taking her phone out to check the time. “I’d better head out if I don’t want to miss my train.”

“Wait, train? You’re leaving? You just got here.”

Alice smiled. “Just for a little while. There’s a storm coming, and I can’t be here when it hits.”

“Could you *be* more cryptic?”

“Yes.”

“Awesome.”

“Amber’s right, you do rely on sarcasm too much.”

Freya narrowed her eyes. “Let me guess, I’m going to be right in the middle of the storm?”

“Attracting trouble *does* seem to be an inherited trait in your family.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ve taken the hint, I’ll talk to Amber about Hope.” Freya tipped her cup upside down to get out the last of her coffee before turning back to Alice. “So, when will you be back?”

Alice shrugged. “That depends on you.”

“Do you have any other advice for me? Anything else you can tell me about this ‘storm’?” She made a particularly exaggerated use of air quotes.

“Don’t let them take your happy ending.”

Alice shifted away at that, just as Freya remembered that she had never gotten to the bottom of what exactly Alice was.

Her phone rang before she could think too hard on it, her screen informing her that it was Mel.

“Yeah?” she answered, only realising that it came off as abrupt after the word had left her mouth.

“*Hey, Freya. You okay?*”

“Why?” Freya cursed herself. That wasn’t right. She took a deep breath before starting again. “Sorry, I meant to say ‘fine’. I’m fine.” After a moment, she remembered to add, “You?”

“*I’m good. I’m just calling to give you a heads up.*”

Freya sighed, assuming that this was the storm Alice had been referring to.

When did her sister get such impeccable timing?

“A heads up?”

“You know how the city has a higher level of background magic than usual?”

“Yeah?”

“Something has tipped the scales and now there’s an excess of magic.”

“Which means...?”

“We’re not exactly sure. My Coven Head thinks it’ll probably be nothing, but your magic might be a little stronger for a while. It might be much easier to tap into, which might mean you’ll use it by accident. There’s also a chance that Sensitive Humans might have access to magic too.

“But, as I said, my Coven Head doesn’t think it’ll cause too much trouble.”

“Yeah, I think she might be wrong on that. Someone I trust just hinted that something bad was heading this way.”

“Any specifics?”

“Annoyingly not.”

“Sounds like you were talking to a Seer. I didn’t know you knew a Seer.”

“Neither did I...”



Chapter Three

Freya woke up the next morning missing the regular ache of healing battle wounds. The sign of a job well done. No, that morning, she awoke to an aching back and neck as she sat up from her desk, realising that she had drifted off over her textbook.

“Can I just drop out and do bounty work full time?” Freya asked as she leaned back in her chair, prompting Amber to appear. Her tone was joking, but she was really trying to test the waters. She wanted to know just how on-the-nose Alice’s observations had been.

“And what if you lose a fight and become seriously injured? What would you do for money then?”

She shrugged, having to admit that her guardian had a point. “Become a magician.”

“The Council of Light would kill you in a heartbeat.”

Freya groaned. “That’s because they’re no fun,” she said as she stood up. “I just don’t get this. I have to get good grades, to spend four years racking up huge amounts of debt before spending the rest of my life working a job I’m not even sure I want, but is one of the handful of careers that might actually allow me to make enough money to own my own home before I’m fifty. Which, again, I’m not sure I want.

“The system is bull and I don’t like playing by their rules.”

Amber rolled her eyes. "So bitch about it on Tumblr and vote for the Green Party when the elections come around. For now, this is the world you live in."

"Yeah, well, I hate the world."

"Wait until you've lived through three dystopian alternate timelines. Then you can complain about hating the world."

Freya frowned. "You lived through two others besides the one my mother ended?"

"The fifth and sixth, yes. And, no, I don't want to tell you about them. They make the seventh look like a stroll in the park."

"You said that if the seventh had continued, all life on Earth would have probably perished, with Creation following not long after."

"Exactly."

Freya shuddered at that. "Right. A-Levels aren't as scary as the apocalypse."

Though, she couldn't help but think that her words weren't entirely truthful. She was pretty sure that she'd prefer an apocalypse. At least they were occasionally vulnerable to swords and magic.

"Speaking of the apocalypse," Amber muttered, folding her arms. "How did your meeting with Alice go?"

"Okay, seriously, what is up with you and her? Why do you get so fussy about me spending time with her?"

"Because... Because I know what she is."

"Yeah, she said. Kind of. She has magic."

"But what kind? Light, Dark, Neutral?"

Freya shrugged. "I don't know. It kind of felt like mine, but not quite. Are you going to keep me guessing, or are you just going to tell me?"

"What do you know of Seers?"

"Um, Mel mentioned them yesterday?"

Amber gave her a disapproving look. "I thought Mel had let you borrow her magic texts to get you up to scratch on the basics."

"She did, but I don't have time to read more than a couple of chapters. So, what's a Seer?"

"Beings who are linked to Fate and can see parts of her plan. When Fate needs a new Oracle, she chooses from the Seers. Some are simply Sensitive Humans, but I would guess that Alice is something else as well."

"And you don't trust Fate," Freya said with a roll of her eyes. Amber's distrust of other magical beings was certainly tiring at times.

"Of *course* I don't trust Fate!" Amber's tone was sharper than Freya had ever heard from her before, freezing her in place. "She manipulates events to serve her needs. And when she needs a powerful warrior? She makes sure that it happens. She gave my grandmother the power to seal away the Old Worlds. She made sure that she died so that I would *have* to take her power, when I was too young and angry to control it properly. She got me out of the way and killed my husband so that we wouldn't be there to protect our son. Our son who she carefully removed from every sensible adult in his life so that there was no one there to tell him how much of an astronomically bad idea it was to marry an Angel of Life! She made sure that the Angel Twilight was born and then, as soon as she was done, she made sure that she died so that she was no longer a dangerous factor. Not to mention—"

Amber cut herself off, shaking her head.

"So, Freya, you're right. I don't trust Fate, or anyone associated with her."

Freya shifted awkwardly. She didn't really have a response to that. She would probably hate Fate too if she'd been through as

much crap as Amber. Though she didn't miss the way Amber had stopped herself halfway through her rant.

"And what about me?"

"What?"

"You don't trust a lot of people, Amber. Where do I fall?"

"What are you talking about? You think I don't trust you?"

"Wouldn't you, in my position? You deliberately keep the truth from me all the time."

Amber sighed, shaking her head. "Let me guess, Alice said something?"

"She said that I should ask you about my grandmother. About Hope."

Amber visibly flinched at that, reminding Freya why she hadn't pushed in the past. Amber blamed herself for Hope's death, and Freya hadn't wanted to reopen that wound. But she was tired of being kept in the dark.

"What is it? What aren't you telling me?"

"Freya, there are some things better left in the past..."

"But it's not *in* the past!" Freya folded her arms. "Alice thinks that the fact that I was conceived in the Shadow Realm means that I circumvent the whole 'no Angels' rule. And she said that my mother had been an Angel too. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because it's so damn *weighted*, Freya. Why do you think your mother lost control? She couldn't deal with the pressure of being an Angel, especially not the daughter of—"

"What? What the hell is it that you're keeping from me? I get that you blame yourself for Hope's death, but it's been years and I deserve answers—"

"And I deserve to not have to relive my granddaughter's suicide!"

Freya frowned as Amber seemed shocked at her own outburst.

“Your... granddaughter? You mean the Angel Twilight? What does that have to do with...”

Freya trailed off as everything clicked into place.

Hope. Hope had been the Angel Twilight.

She had been Amber’s granddaughter, and her mother’s mother.

And she had killed herself when Freya’s mother had been young.

Freya’s mother had been left alone, the only child of the most famous magical being of the time.

It was no wonder she had cracked.

Freya’s veins flooded with fury as she realised what that had meant.

Amber knew that Freya had been searching for her family for as long as she could remember.

And here Amber was, pretending that they weren’t related because, what? She had a few bad memories?

“Get out,” Freya eventually managed, her voice quiet as she kept all of her concentration on dampening her magic.

“Freya...”

“Unless you want me to risk banishing you, I suggest you *leave*.”

Amber nodded before disappearing.

As soon as she was gone, Freya’s hold on her magic failed, causing her radiator to explode out and send shards of metal across the room.

Freya sighed. The use of magic had calmed her, but she had no idea how to even begin fixing the mess it had caused.

She set up a temporary glamour to cover up her loss of control, before making her way out of her room.

She paused at the top of the stairs, her sharp hearing picking up hushed whispers from the kitchen.

“-if it’s the same as before...”

“We won’t know that until Monday.”

“But, Ryan, if it is... I don’t know that I can try again. It’s too hard.”

“I... I know. But we can talk about this on Monday.”

Freya stopped listening at that, heading into the bathroom.

Freya just wanted her foster parents to no longer be so stressed. With everything else, she just didn’t have the energy for it.

I hope Margaret gets the results she wants on Monday, she thought to herself before deciding that the library would be the best place to study, and to take her mind off of Amber, as she brushed her teeth, very aware of how the hushed whispers had gotten louder.



“FANCY SEEING YOU HERE.”

Freya had barely sat down at the library table with her textbook when someone came over to talk to her. She lifted her head to see her friend Jamie.

“Hey,” she whispered back as Jamie sat next to her. “What’s up?”

“Isn’t the next exam period months away?” Jamie asked as she sat down next to her, putting down her small pile of romance novels.

“Extra preparation can’t hurt after the results I got...”

“You think you’ll need to resit?”

“I haven’t decided yet.” She sighed. “Have you ever felt as if your entire life is falling apart?”

“Yeah, but my mum says that half of her mental health referrals are from kids doing their A-levels, so...” Jamie’s mum was a GP. “Can’t you talk to someone? About your autism, I mean.

If they knew, you would get accommodations. If you told them now, I'm sure they'd give you some leeway."

Freya grimaced. "Do you honestly think they'd do anything after the fact? No, chances are, they'll just tell me to resit anyway."

"How come you're studying here and not at home?"

"I... Margaret and Ryan are trying to get pregnant. It's stressing them out."

"I can imagine. You can't study at Damon's?"

Freya snorted, shaking her head. "Definitely not. We..." She trailed off as she remembered that Jamie was Damon's ex-girlfriend. "It's complicated."

"Is that your official Facebook status now? 'It's complicated'?"

Freya took a moment too long to realise that it had been a joke. "Do you really want to talk about it?"

"Freya, I can handle talking about my ex. Seriously, what's wrong?"

"He kissed me and then he told me that he doesn't want to date me because he has too many secrets."

"God, that boy is like a one man drama machine sometimes. Like, too many secrets? What does that even *mean*?"

Freya shrugged. "Don't know, but I don't exactly feel like hanging out with him right now."

"Fair enough."

Freya decided to change the subject. After her fight with Amber, she didn't exactly want to confront any kind of taxing emotion. She wasn't sure that she could keep her magic in check.

She leaned over to pick up one of Jamie's romance books.

"You know fanfiction exists, right?" Freya said as she read the back. On the one hand, it sounded interesting. On the other, she

was pretty sure that she'd read a Mass Effect fic along the same lines.

"I'm not really into any fandoms enough to get into it, though. And the stuff I do like never has any fics."

"Yeah, Damon and I were pretty disappointed at the lack of Con Air fics."

"Con Air?"

"It's a Nicholas Cage movie. We were bored and it was on Film4."

"And then you went on a hunt for fanfiction?"

"Our friendship is based on his enthusiastic responses to my quirky and often questionable ideas."

"You're like the human incarnations of Pinky and the Brain."

"I know, right? It's awesome."

Jamie sighed. "I know you don't want to, and you have every right to be mad at him, but I think you should call him. You two are too good together to let him being an idiot mess it up."

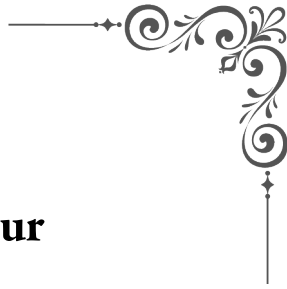
"What if him being an idiot is a red flag?"

Jamie snorted. "Red flag? Seriously? This is *Damon* we're talking about. He's like a cross between a ball of sunshine and an excitable puppy."

Before Freya could say anything else, the librarian yelled "Library closes in ten minutes."

"I guess I'd better check these out," Jamie said, picking up her books.

Freya nodded. "And I guess I'd better get home."



Chapter Four

By the time Freya got to school on Monday, she still had no idea what she was going to do about her school work. What had once come so easily to her now felt like running into a brick wall. She seemed to struggle with the things everyone else took for granted, and the things everyone struggled with came as easily to her as breathing.

She figured that it was probably an autism thing. She decided to ask Alice when she got back to town. She was more than a little annoyed at her sister's disappearing act. She had felt so alone before meeting Mel, even more isolated from her peers than she had been before. And all the while, Alice had known exactly what was going on but had kept it from her, for whatever reason. She wished things were simple, that there wasn't so much secrecy in the magical world, but she understood why it was the case. Though, it turned out that understanding didn't make her any less annoyed with the situation.

She didn't have a free period that morning, which meant that she didn't have an opportunity to see Damon. She wasn't free until lunch, in fact.

Damon usually spent lunch with his other friends, but Freya wasn't having it. She decided that it was time to take Jamie's advice and talk to him, no matter how awkward it would be.

As Freya headed to the common room, she caught her reflection on one of the displays in the hall and stopped still at the

overabundance of white that looked out of place. She turned to get a proper look and almost gave a squeal of surprise. Her reflection looked as it usually did, except for the pair of large, white wings behind her. She turned her head to look over her shoulder and saw that they were, indeed, there.

Thankfully, no one else was in the hallway, and she managed to make her way to the empty bathroom without being seen.

The bathroom mirrors told the same story as the display case had, albeit more clearly. She had a pair of wings. She reached out behind her, tentatively, and felt a sudden surge of nausea at the strange sensation of feeling her hand through her feathers.

Her feathers.

The hand in question jumped up and down, as if trying to rid herself of the sensation, while the wings flexed rhythmically, as if her nervous fidgeting wasn't noticeable enough to begin with.

She pulled out her phone, taking deep breaths to calm herself as she rang Mel.

"Hello?" her friend answered.

"I have a problem."

"How come you never call about fun things anymore? What happened to calling just because you got to the end of Dragon Age?"

"Huh?"

"That was a joke."

"Right, no, I just... I'm distracted."

"What's the problem?"

"Wings."

"Wings?"

"Yup. Big wings. My wings. They kind of appeared out of nowhere. I am so glad I was wearing a racer back top today..."

Before she could say anything else, she heard the door open and had to quickly glamour herself before the entrant got the chance to see her.

"Freya? You still there?"

"Yeah," Freya answered. "I just... I can't stay here. Can't hide it for long."

Mel seemed to have taken her meaning as she responded with, "*You've glamourised and aren't sure you can maintain it?*"

"Not with the risk of running into Damon. It kind of has me all over the place."

"*I could leave the assistant in charge of the library today if you want to meet up and talk it over.*"

"Or I could come meet you at the library."

Mel sighed. "*You know my Coven Head doesn't like strangers knowing where to find us. It's too dangerous.*"

"I know. Okay, high street?" It wasn't ideal but it would have to do. "I can change myself to ill in the school register. Thanks for teaching me that, by the way."

"*Thanks for testing it. My Coven Head still thinks that getting magic and technology to mix is impossible.*"

"Tell that to the Dwarves."

"*That's what I said! She seems to think that their technological ability is completely beyond other races. I think she's just a little exhausted, though.*"

"Exhausted?"

"*Think about the technological advancements that have happened in the last five years alone. We're talking about someone who remembers the Salem witch trials here. She's not used to technology moving so quickly, and she's definitely not used to it rivalling magic. Plus, I think the War made everyone who remembers it wary of technology.*"

"I guess you can't really blame them for that."

"No, I guess not. Alright, I'll be at the coffee shop in ten minutes. See you there?"

"Yeah. See you there."



“I DON’T KNOW WHAT TO tell you,” Mel said with a shrug as she sipped at her coffee. “I’ve never heard of anything like this.”

Freya rolled her eyes. “Did you really drag me out of school to tell me that you don’t know anything? You couldn’t have said that over the phone?”

Mel shrugged sheepishly. “I was bored.”

“Bored? I thought today was the day Ally worked with you in the library. Weren’t you complaining last week about not getting to spend enough time with her?”

Mel looked sheepish, her hands moving to hover over the wheels of her wheelchair. Even Freya, who was completely oblivious to such things, had picked up on Mel’s habit of doing so when she was uncomfortable.

“What happened?” Freya asked.

“Nothing.”

Freya believed her for a second, wondering if she had misread her body language. But no, her hands were still hovering.

“Did you two fight again?” Freya asked, her stomach clenching as her mind screamed at her that she might be wrong.

Mel sighed, realising that she was caught. “We broke up.”

“Again?”

Mel’s glare told her that had been the wrong thing to say.

“I just mean... You two break up a lot. It’ll blow over by next week.”

Mel shook her head. “I don’t want to talk about it. I came out because I was bored and I needed to actually get a look at you and check you for residual magic. Ally had nothing to do with it.”

“So, what about the residual magic? Is there any?”

“Nope. Nothing. Though, the excess could be interfering.”

Freya nodded, drinking some of her own drink before asking, "So you really have no idea why I just sprouted wings?"

"Well, I mean, I have *some* idea, but you won't want to hear it."

Freya narrowed her eyes. "I would rather have the answers and decide that for myself."

"Well, Fae are the only magical creatures with wings."

"Right. But mine don't look like Fae wings."

"I know, but why do the Fae have them?"

"I don't know."

Mel nodded. "No one really does. The Fae are genetic anomalies, born of Angels and Humans, but they're not Angels themselves."

Freya groaned, seeing where Mel was going. "Angels don't have wings."

"Actually, there *is* historical documentation of Angels giving off an aura of light when they fully embrace their power, and the way the aura forms behind them kind of looks like wings."

Freya sighed, shaking her head. "It's flimsy."

She didn't want to tell Mel the truth. Mel was a great friend but she, like all Witches, was loyal to her coven above all else. She would have to tell them if she found out that Freya was an Angel, and Freya wasn't sure that was a good thing. Her coven was aligned with the Council of Light, and Amber had always been wary of them, telling Freya that they had been the ones to force her mother into the Shadow Realm.

"Flimsy is all I've got," Mel told her, not picking up on Freya's bending of the truth.

"Then I guess it's just back to hoping they go away on their own."

"I could keep checking the library and see if there's something I haven't seen before."

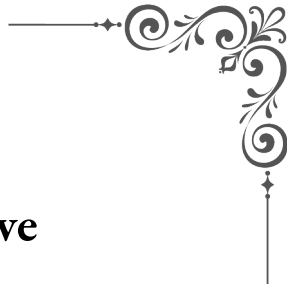
“Even though Ally’s there?”

Mel threw her another glare before saying, “She’ll be gone in an hour or so.”

Freya decided to just shut up about Ally at that, defaulting to her polite and inoffensive demeanour that she usually only wore when she was around people she couldn’t trust. Or people in a position of authority. “I would be grateful for your help. Thank you.”

Mel nodded before finishing her coffee. “It’s no trouble. Though, for now, since you’ve got the rest of the day off, how about accompanying me to find rare potion ingredients?”

Freya shrugged. “Why the hell not? I’ve got nothing better to do.”



Chapter Five

Freya ended up returning home earlier than she technically should have, but she needed to use her computer to study. As she approached the house, she saw that the car was in the drive, so she climbed up to her window, using her magic to make her entry silent.

Her bedroom door was open, to her surprise, though her curiosity was quickly answered by her empty washing basket. She went to close the door, which would cause the soundproof charms around her room to reactivate, though she stopped as she heard voices from downstairs.

“When do you think we should tell Freya?” she heard Margaret ask, prompting her to tiptoe to the top of the stairs, crouching down so that she could hear better.

“Maybe we should wait a bit,” Ryan suggested. “Just in case...”

“In case I miscarry?”

There was a long pause before Ryan answered. “I wasn’t going to say it so bluntly... but yes.”

“I didn’t think this would actually happen.”

“Me neither.”

“I mean... We’re going to have a *baby*.”

“I know.”

“Think about all the things we’re going to have to do now... This house is so small...”

Freya's legs moved without conscious instruction. She hadn't really given much thought to what would actually happen if Margaret actually became pregnant, but now she was facing the stark truth - it had become a very real possibility that she would be sent away. That she would have to leave the city and her friends, along with any contact she had with the magical community. With people like her.

She was out of the window before she had really registered that she had moved.



FREYA JUST WANDERED for a while. She didn't really know what else to do. She didn't particularly have anywhere to go, she just needed her brain to slow down long enough to think.

She pulled out her phone with the intention of calling Mel, but her thumb paused before tapping her friend's name. Mel wouldn't understand, she realised, tapping the phone off. She had grown up in the coven. When her parents died, very little had changed for her. She lived in the same place with the same people she had known since she was a child.

She considered calling Alice, but she doubted she would answer if she did. Freya wondered if her self-exile included phone calls, and quickly decided that it probably did. Alice wasn't one to do things by halves; if she felt she had to be removed from something, she would be impossible to contact.

She turned her attention back to her phone, deciding that why Alice had left was a headache for another day. There was only really one person she wanted to talk about this with. Only one person she felt could possibly understand.

She scrolled down to find Damon in her contacts, but she hesitated over the call icon.

She wanted to talk to him. He was the only one who would get it.

But, after their awkward kiss, she didn't really want to talk to him. It wasn't as if she could just go up to him and pour her heart out. They would have to hash out what had happened and make sure where they stood.

As much as Freya didn't want that, it was that or nothing.

She called him but, as was her luck, the phone rang out.

She realised that he was probably still in school, though he would have been most likely able to talk, given that he had a free period last. She closed her eyes, before shifting back to school.

Freya's hand subconsciously moved to her pendant to tug at it as she entered the common room. She knew that Damon was the only one who would understand, but she hated having to be the bigger person. He was the one who had messed up, so he should be the one apologising.

Not that Freya had any intention of opening with an apology. But still, being the first one to break the silence felt far too much like one.

"Hey," she said as she approached where he was sitting, unsure of exactly what she wanted to say next.

Damon looked up from his iPad, only to do a double-take.

"Freya... Why do you have wings?"

She had to stop herself from cursing under her breath. She had forgotten that he could see through glamours. She couldn't even use a memory spell, as they would still be there after.

He got up and indicated to the corridor. She nodded, following him out and towards the music department.

The practice rooms were about the only place in the school that anyone could get any privacy.

As the heavy door slammed behind them, Freya's wings flinched in a way that was far too real to pass off as costume.

Damon looked her over and Freya noted that his eyes were bright red, instead of their usual slightly-red brown.

“What’s up with your eyes?” she asked.

“My Demon half has become more pronounced since yesterday and I don’t know why.” As soon as the words were out of Damon’s mouth, he looked terrified, clamping his hands over it, as if he was afraid to say anything more.

Freya ignored the signs of a truth spell as she ignited her hands to flame.

“You’re a *Demon*?”

He took his hands from his mouth. “Half Demon,” he corrected.

“Your father?” she asked, taking a wild stab. It would explain quite a bit.

Damon nodded.

“And your uncle? He’s a Demon too?”

Another nod.

Freya filed that away to think on later. Gregor had never been anything but nice to her. She couldn’t really comprehend him being a Demon.

“What about you?” Damon asked with a frown. “You have wings and... flame hands.”

“An Angel, I think.” The words forced their way out of her mouth without her consent, informing her that Damon wasn’t the only one affected by a truth spell.

“An Angel?” Damon asked, his eyes wide. “But there aren’t supposed to be any.”

“Please don’t ask me how,” she pleaded. “Not with a truth spell in effect.”

Damon narrowed his eyes. “Even forced to tell the truth, you still want us to lie to each other?”

“Says the *Demon*.”

“Half-Demon. And you never told me that you were an Angel, so get off your bloody high horse.”

Freya folded her arms. She knew that he was right, but she was still seething over Amber.

“I thought you were Human. I can’t sense magic from you.”

“I have protections. And I couldn’t sense magic from you either. Which I guess makes sense if you’re an Angel. So, what? The Council of Light have been keeping you hidden?”

“They don’t know I exist. No one does.”

Damon nodded, understandingly. “Yeah, me too.”

She frowned. “How come?”

“My non-Demon half.” His face was contorted, telling her that he was doing everything in his power to word his answer so that the truth spell wouldn’t give away something he didn’t want her to know.

“Weren’t you just having a go because I didn’t tell you the truth?”

He sighed. “I know, it’s just... It’s been so long, and I have no idea if we’re on the same side.”

“I’m not on any side,” she told him firmly. “I’m on my own side.”

“Really? No allegiance to Light or Dark magic?”

“They’re just words to me. What about you?”

“I’m loyal to those who took me from my father.”

“So, your aunt and uncle? And they’re Demons?”

“Yes.”

She nodded. “Do they know about the rogue Demons that have been harassing this city? Harassing me?”

“Yes. But they haven’t had the resources to deal with them and the Angel...” He trailed off as he put two and two together. “I guess that was you. You’re the Angel of the North...”

“Okay, seriously? *That’s* what they’re calling me now? Bloody hell, I thought ‘The Angel’ was bad enough.”

He smirked in a way that caught her off-guard. Her heart skipped a beat, reminding her angry brain that this was Damon in front of her.

And she was talking to him about magic.

How the hell had she turned it into a bad thing?

“You don’t like it?” he asked.

She shook her head. “I don’t take too kindly to being named for a giant hunk of metal off the A1.”

“Aww, I like the angel.”

“So do I, but it doesn’t mean that I want to be named for it.”

She sighed, deciding to refocus.

“Seriously, though, now that we’ve figured out that we’re not on opposite sides of any magical blood feuds, what the hell is up with this truth spell? Who cast it?”

“I... It might have been me...”

“You?” Her eyebrows shot up to her hairline. “Why would you risk a truth spell? You didn’t know that I was hiding magic too.”

“Well, I didn’t do it on purpose! I think I tapped into the excess by accident. I just... I was sick of hiding the truth from you. My true nature. I guess the true nature bit is responsible for the wings and eyes as well... But Freya, being around you and not being able to tell you - not wanting to drag you into my world - was torture.”

“Well, I guess you got your wish. Neither of us are hiding now.”

She stepped closer to him without thinking. A subconscious invitation now that the truth was out of the way.

He swiftly closed the gap between them, his hands going to grip her hips as his mouth joined hers.

Memories from the Shadow Realm once again took hold, telling her how to wrap her hands around his sides to make him growl in his throat.

He pulled away, a little breathlessly, as they could once again smell smoke.

Freya looked to see that both of them had Energy dancing across their skin, singeing their clothing.

“Does this usually happen?” Freya asked him. She didn’t exactly have a lot of experience in the kissing department.

At least, not kissing like *that*.

“I can usually keep it restrained, but then, I’ve never kissed anyone I lo-” He cut himself off, looking slightly terrified of what he had almost said, before almost doubling over with laughter.

“What?” Freya asked him.

“I was just almost terrified to say that I loved you, in case you didn’t feel the same way, but I know that you do, Snow White.”

She frowned. Damon had woken her up in the Shadow Realm, so how did his Earth counterpart know?

Except the Shadow Realm was only a reflection of Earth. So, he had woken her in both realms.

“You were the one who woke me up with true love’s kiss.”

He nodded. “And true love is clearly defined by the laws of magic. It has to be reciprocated. You love me back.”

She nodded.

“You never said anything.”

“For the same reason as you. I thought you were Human.”

The bell rang to signal the end of the day and Damon cursed.

“My uncle’s expecting me back home. You could come too...”

“No, I... Damon, I trust you, but I’m not ready for people to know what I am. It will only put me in danger.”

Damon nodded. “I understand. I won’t tell him.”

“Thank you.”

Damon gave her a quick peck before shifting away, leaving her to process everything that had just happened.



MUCH TO FREYA'S RELIEF, her foster parents didn't speak to her about anything of note when she arrived home. It seemed they had decided not to tell her about the pregnancy yet, which she was more than happy about. She needed time to process and figure out what the correct response would be. It would be happy, she assumed. Being happy would be most appropriate. But then what about the implications for her? Would they address that right away? If they didn't, would she have to ignore it until they did, or was there a polite way for her to approach it?

Thinking about it was giving her a headache, so she turned her focus to her combat equipment as soon as her bedroom door shut behind her, wondering which weapon she most felt like using.

To her relief, she didn't feel the almost imperceptible change in air pressure that seemed to occur shortly before Amber appeared. Freya knew that it had been a while, but she couldn't find anything in herself but fury when she thought of her great-great-grandmother.

It was strange to think of Amber like that, but Freya had to admit that she had been a fool not to see it earlier. It explained why Amber had defied Death to look after her. And how a simple promise between her and Freya's mother had allowed her to. Mel had said that a promise between two Witches would mean nothing to Death, but Freya supposed a promise between an Angel and the Matriarch of Angels was a different matter. Especially with shared blood involved.

Freya pushed Amber from her thoughts as she starting getting changed into her armour. Between her, Damon, Margaret,

and Alice, Freya was getting tired of everything blowing up in her face.

She needed a quiet night to refocus. Hunting Demons seemed like familiar enough ground to be comforting, though she struggled with the tricky clasps of her armour.

Freya had never been an elegant person. She was bumbling and clumsy. Usually, it wasn't so bad as to cause her problems. A few knocked over drinks and ugly handwriting weren't the end of the world. Even her fighting style relied on the use of her magic and hacking blows, rather than finesse.

But when she was tired, anything finicky was beyond her, from shoelaces to belt buckles. It didn't help that she had to lace up in an awkward new arrangement thanks to her new wings in the way.

Freya briefly considered not heading out, given how sluggish she felt. Surely, had Amber been there, she would have advised against it.

That was enough to solidify Freya's determination to go.

Freya strapped her sword to her side before heading out of her window.



Chapter Six

It took Freya all of five minutes of wandering to sense a concentration of Dark energy. She sighed. As much as she wanted a fight, part of her always hoped that she wouldn't find anything when she searched. That, for just one night, the Demons would be quiet.

She shifted to their location, immediately finding them. There were two of them, advancing on a boy about her age, who was struggling not to trip over his feet as they manipulated his fear.

Why is it that Demons always insist on acting the cliché? She thought to herself as she drew her weapon.

"Hey, asshats! Over here!"

She sent a barrage of flame their way as they spun around.

They dived in opposite directions to avoid her blast.

"It's the Angel!" one yelled over to the other.

"At last! I thought we would be chasing Humans all night."

Freya barely had an opportunity to ponder just how suicidal they must have been to want to draw her out, before the one who had dodged to the left made it out of the blast unharmed, drawing a sword from his side to strike at Freya. She lifted her own in response, blocking his attack.

She let raw Energy run down her blade, knowing that the display was a little show-offish. Raw Energy was powerful, but draining. She usually used it to encourage her enemies to run

from a fight. The one good thing about her reputation starting to precede her was that it usually worked. This time, however, they seemed too dense to want to live.

The only slight hesitation either of them gave, was when they first noted her wings, but that only lasted a moment.

It was a shame, she thought as she made quick work of the Demon in front of her.

She hadn't been paying attention to the one behind her, only remembering he existed when he yelled to signal his attack.

She spun around, expecting the Demon's blade to meet her own. She realised too late that her weapon wasn't angled correctly. He was going to slice right through her chest.

Only he didn't.

Instead of striking her, the Demon staggered forward. Freya spotted something sticking out of his chest as he collapsed to his knees, revealing Damon behind him, holding a crossbow.

Freya ran her sword through the Demon to make sure he was dead before dealing with Damon. She needed the time to figure out what to say.

"Thank you," she eventually managed.

"I..." Damon seemed a little dazed, staring at the dead Demon. "I didn't think I would find you in the middle of a fight. I only brought the crossbow to show you..."

"I *am* a bounty hunter," she reminded him. "Or, well, a Human protector, to be more accurate. But rogue Demons usually have bounties on their head. So, you know, win-win."

Damon nodded, but still seemed a little out of it.

Freya frowned, wondering what was bothering him. It took her an awkwardly long time to realise that it might have been his first kill.

"Hey," she said, drawing his attention back to her. "Thank you. You saved my life."

He nodded, finally remembering to put his crossbow away. "This is what you do?" he asked. "Kill Demons for money?"

"Yes. Does that bother you?"

"Yes."

She flinched. "I only hunt rogues," she told him, hating how pleading her voice sounded.

Why the hell did she have to defend herself to him? The rogues had gone after her first, and she was the only one who seemed to care about the Humans of the city. Everyone else was too concerned with exposure.

He nodded. "I know. And everyone is thankful that the Angel is taking care of this stuff. I just..." He looked down at the dead Demons once more. "I guess I'm not used to this kind of thing."

"If you want to talk, we should do so elsewhere. I know a good place."

Damon nodded and she took that as an invitation, taking hold of his arm and shifting them to the school rooftop. It gave a nice view of the surrounding neighbourhoods, but she always liked looking at the stars from so high up.

"It's nice up here," Damon said after a moment as Freya sat on the edge of the building, letting her legs dangle off the side. He moved to join her.

"I'm sorry about before," he eventually said. "I would have lied and said that it didn't bother me but, you know, truth spell."

Freya shrugged. "It's okay. It's just weird to me. I was attacked when I first came into my powers, so it's all I've really known of the magical world. I actually meant to thank you. That protection charm you loaned me saved my life. It should have probably tipped me off to you not being Human, but since you could see through glamours, I just assumed you were Sensitive and had some magic blood way back."

Damon tensed a little, shifting his weight. “Would you hate me if I told you that the Demon who attacked you was one of my father’s men?”

“No,” Freya assured him. “He was after me long before I met you. Though, he only got the source stone after your father saw me, so I assume your father gave it to him.”

Damon tensed further, becoming stone. “Do you think my father knows who you are?”

Freya shrugged. “Possibly. But I’ve killed all of the men he sent after me, assuming that they were all of the random Demon attacks against me. What about you? When you found me bloody and near-death, I mean. If you knew that your father’s man had attacked me, how did you think I survived?”

“I assumed that the Angel had saved you. It didn’t occur to me that you *were* the Angel.”

He was smiling, but Freya couldn’t help but notice how tense he still was.

She leaned over to him, resting her head against his bicep. He relaxed just a little at the move, but not much.

“He can’t hurt me. Your father, I mean. His attempts so far haven’t even been particularly good.”

“That just means that he’s only been toying with you. Perhaps, if he doesn’t know who you are, he wants to know why the Angel is protecting you.”

“You don’t talk about him,” she ventured.

He sighed. “It’s difficult enough to talk about without lying, Freya.”

After a few moments of awkward silence, she eventually asked, “What would you have been lying about?”

“My other half.”

“Your non-Demon half? Why? Who was your mother?” She wanted to retract the question as soon as she had asked it, knowing that he had no choice but to answer.

“A Human assassin,” he answered, tensing up once more.

“I’m sorry. I forgot about the truth spell.”

“It’s okay, Freya. I always hated lying to you.”

“Me too.”

He nodded. “What do you know about how Humans fought against us in the last alternate timeline?”

Freya shrugged. “It was technology, right? Their technology caught up to magic and they used genetic enhancements to...” She trailed off, realising where this was going. They had used genetic enhancements. If his mother had been an assassin...

He nodded, realising that she had figured it out. “I’m half-Demon and half-genetically engineered Human, which means that I have genetic enhancements that shouldn’t even exist in this timeline.”

“Are they how you survived the shift to this timeline?”

He shook his head. “The Humans had been experimenting with shields that could work against magic. They had a whole shielded facility that survived the shift.”

“*Had?*”

“My father found out about it and... that I existed.” He let out an irritated sigh. “No one has really told me the specifics. All I know is that I was born at the facility around the time of the shift. A year later, my father raided the facility and killed everyone. He kept me alive because... Because he was curious about the combination of both magic and genetic enhancements. He didn’t want Demons to be caught out again, if it ever came to another War...”

“You were his lab rat?” Freya asked, horrified at the thought.

Damon nodded. "Pretty much. Every day was a different trial. How long could I survive in extreme conditions? Had they enhanced my intelligence as well? How resistant was I to deadly magics?"

"I'm sorry." Freya didn't know what else to say. She'd never understood saying *sorry*. It wasn't her fault and sentiment was no use to anyone. But she remembered that it was the done thing.

What she really wanted, she realised as her insides broiled with Damon's pain, was to track down his father and kill him. Slowly. See how resistant to deadly magics *he* was.

"You can't kill him," Damon said simply and Freya wondered momentarily if he had read her mind, before realising that her fists were clenched and engulfed in flame.

Freya let the fire dissipate.

"I thought about it," Damon admitted. "After he made you a target. It was possibly the worst thing he could have done..."

Damon moved his hand close to hers and she let him as his thumb stroked the side of her fist.

"I didn't know that he was wrong to treat me the way he did when I was little. I didn't see anyone but him, and a few of his most trusted underlings. He had no other heir and couldn't let anyone find out about me. As his oldest child, I would inherit his position if he died, despite my Human blood. If he hadn't wanted to study me, he certainly would have killed me.

"He let me know it too. It was made very clear to me that I was nothing but an abomination. My only value was what I could teach him about my genetic make-up."

"Are you *sure* I can't kill him?"

Damon smiled, though it faded quickly. He ignored her question.

"When my aunt and her husband showed up... They told me that they had only just learned of my existence. They told me that

my father had no right to treat a child the way he had." Damon frowned, shaking his head. "But they made it just as clear that they also just wanted me for my power. Theirs is a political marriage, nothing more. They were never going to have a child, and they needed someone..."

Freya wanted to prompt him but couldn't figure out how to do it without asking a question that he would be forced to answer, so she let the silence continue.

"I don't want to freak you out," he eventually muttered quietly. "I still freak out when I think about inheriting that legacy."

Freya snuggled her head against his arm a little, much like a cat, in an attempt to reassure him. "Trust me, when it comes to terrifying legacies, I think I have everyone beat."

"Oh? You tell me yours and I'll tell you mine."

She took a deep breath. She hadn't told anyone since she had found out.

Suddenly, she had a little sympathy with Amber for keeping it to herself. It wasn't exactly an easy thing to bring up.

"My grandmother was the Angel Twilight."

"Shit... You're right, I think that does beat mine." He was smiling, which eased her anxiety. He didn't seem to be freaking out like she had feared.

"So, what's yours then?"

"My aunt's husband? He's... He's the Demon King..."

"Shit."

"Yeah..."

She tried to give him the same reassuring smile that he had given her, but it was weak.

If Damon was his aunt's husband's chosen heir, that made him the future Demon King.

She was dating the future ruler of all Demons.

Or... *Were* they dating?

The only reason Damon told her that they couldn't be together before had been because he had thought she was Human. And they had kissed. *Damn* had they kissed... And they had straight-up admitted that they loved each other.

She pushed those thoughts away as she realised that she was being selfish. Damon needed the same reassurance he had given her. That *they* were rock solid, no matter their past or future.

"I still beat you," she told him with a smile.

"That you do," he replied. "It's not as if I have Royal Blood or anything. I was just a convenient choice."

"So, if you're his chosen heir, why are you here, on Earth?"

"The King instructed my uncle, his most trusted guard, to watch over me and make sure my father couldn't get to me. Earth seemed like the safest place. And the King couldn't let someone as powerful as me stay in my father's control."

He clenched his fists as he spoke of his father, Dark energy crackling over them. Freya placed her hands over his, ignoring the sting. She could take it.

"They made you think you were just your power," Freya realised. "Your father, your aunt..."

Damon nodded. "Nothing else mattered to them. Even my uncle... He was under orders to care about me.

"But you? No one ever told you to care about me. You had no idea who I was and you still... You still treated me like everyone else."

Freya offered a weak smile. "I seem to remember being more than a little defensive when we first met."

"But you were defensive with everyone," he countered. "And you eventually let me through. That... It meant a lot to me."

"It meant a lot to me too," she admitted.

"I still believed that the secrets locked in my DNA were my only worth. But you made me feel like I mattered. I had never

hated my father, because I never thought what he did to me was wrong. And then he tried to kill you. It gave me the strength to hate him for what he did to me as well.”

“None of this is explaining why I can’t kill the bastard.”

Damon smiled, though it was bittersweet. “You can’t kill him because he never leaves his impenetrable estate in the Underworld. You also can’t kill him because my aunt still uses him for political leverage. Technically, they didn’t take me away. They told my father that they had learned of my existence and they offered to take me in as a ward. It would have been unseemly of him to refuse such an offer from the King, so I got away. But it was all ‘officially’ done with smiles.”

“So, killing him would mess up the power structure of the Underworld?”

“Pretty much. My aunt still relies on him to help her keep everyone in line when the King’s not around.”

“I don’t care,” Freya eventually said after a few moments of thought. “If he ever tries to hurt you again, I’ll kill him.”

Damon smirked. “Is murder always your first course of action?”

She shrugged, taking his joke as a sign that he was feeling better about her bounty hunting. “Not always. Stopping the Fae required me to start thinking outside the murder box, but I still think it’s a valid solution in many cases.”

Thankfully, he smiled at her continuing the joke.

They lapsed into silence and Damon leaned closer to her, his gaze heated to the point that her breath hitched.

“I’m glad I can talk to you about this, Freya,” he said, his voice almost a whisper. “I... I know this is kind of weird and sudden, but I’ve cared about you for so long.”

She couldn’t help but laugh a little. “Yeah, you weren’t exactly alone in that.”

“If only I’d realised you were magic when I loaned you that protection charm. I would have told you then and there that I had fallen for you.”

She closed the gap between them, tentatively pressing her lips to his. He responded with full force and she had to take what little focus she retained to keep her magic from setting his clothing alight. Her own combat gear could take it, but his t-shirt couldn’t.

Her wings flared out as she pressed herself closer to him, shifting around so that she wasn’t straining her neck.

He pulled away after a few moments, only to jump as he looked her over.

“Freya, the ledge!”

She looked down to see what he meant, only to let out a surprised yelp as she realised that she was hovering away from the ledge.

As if by Loony Tunes logic, as soon as Freya realised that gravity should be having an effect on her, it did.

She dropped towards the ground, leaving her stomach behind.

Her arms flew out to try and break her fall, her eyes squeezing shut.

The ground was wet from a brief shower earlier in the day and the water rushed up to break Freya’s fall, but she still heard a crack as she landed on her left arm.

Damon was at her side immediately, having shifted just a moment too late to catch her.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Broken arm, I think,” she told him. “Don’t worry. It’s not the first time.”

Damon helped her to get into a sitting position, passing her a vial from his pocket.

“Here. It’s a healing potion.”

“Meant for Demons?”

“Demons with mixed blood, so it should help a little at least.”

She nodded, moving the water up to hold her bad arm and keep the bone in its proper place as her good one took the vial.

She downed it in one go, giving a cry as, a few moments later, her bone started to fuse itself back together.

After a couple of moments, she let the water dissipate, feeling as good as new.

“I thought you said it would only help a little,” she ventured. “I’ve never had a healing potion work that well before.”

“It shouldn’t have. I mean, it’s a good healing potion, but they can only do so much unless tailored towards you. As I said, that one was meant for Demons with mixed blood. Specifically Human, but it also shouldn’t have hurt, so...”

“But I’m not a Demon,” she told him. “I’m an Angel.”

“Yeah, but ‘Angel’ isn’t an entirely genetic thing. You can have non-Angel traits from non-Angel parents... You always told me that you never knew your father...”

Freya shook her head. “Nope. I am too tired to deal with that possibility right now.”

“Freya, you can’t just ignore-”

“Watch me,” she said, cutting him off as she stood up.

As if to punctuate her saying that she was tired, she yawned so violently that her jaw made a cracking sound.

“I’ve had an emotionally draining couple of days,” she told him. “It’s taking all of my focus just to make fully formed sentences. I need a day off.”

“A day off?”

She nodded. “Tomorrow. You and me. A day off. We’ll do stuff. Couples stuff. Figure out whatever it is we are.”

Damon smiled. “Couples stuff,” he agreed. “Oh, before you go.” He reached around to his back pocket, bringing out another vial. “You mentioned that you were having trouble sleeping before, so I brought you a potion to help.”

“Thank you,” she said, accepting the gift before closing the gap between them to kiss him. “Night,” she said as she pulled away.

“Night.”



FREYA WAS USED TO THE rush of memories from her Earth counterpart at this point, though it had never happened while she was in combat before. Her mind took a moment to register the heavy armour she was wearing and remember that it was familiar, despite the fact that her Earth counterpart usually wore a much lighter and less ornate ensemble.

“Queen Freya!” she heard as she stumbled, a blast of water knocking back the enemies who tried to take advantage of her situation.

She spun around to see that Melody, one of her ranged combatants, had probably just saved her life. She would have to remember to give her a medal if they ever made it out of there alive.

The troops rallied in front of her, giving her a little breathing room, though not much. If they were going to hold the Knowledge Spring, the reinforcements were going to have to arrive soon.

“How do things look?” she yelled at her commander, her hands speaking the words as much as her mouth.

The lanky woman, with dark skin and jet black curls, shook her head. Freya felt that it was a shame that she didn’t know Sarah on Earth, but she was glad enough for her help in this realm.

"Once again, I am going to protest your insistence on being in the field yourself," Sarah told her with her hands. "Though, I doubt you will listen."

"You're right on that account," Freya replied with a smile. "I will not ask of my people what I am not willing to give of myself."

"And when you die, this all will have been for nought."

"We don't have time to rehash old arguments," Freya told her simply. "What if Damon doesn't get here in time?"

Sarah sighed. "Then the battle is lost. Melody and I will extract you, even if it means knocking you out and dragging you from the field."

Freya glared at her.

Sarah returned the glare. "You may be frivolous with your life, but I take my duty to the Queens-guard more seriously than that."

Luckily, before they argued further, there was the familiar sound of the horn, signalling the arrival of their reinforcements.

"I knew he wouldn't let me down," Freya said, more to herself than anyone else, as the forces in front of them directed their attack to the force at their backs.

It didn't take long for them to decimate their foe, even with Melody choosing to focus on unlocking the Spring, rather than help them with the clean-up.

"My Queen," Damon greeted as he finally approached, bowing. She responded by flinging herself into his arms, despite the way their armour clanged, kissing him enthusiastically.

"My Prince," she said with a smile as she pulled away. "They did it."

He raised an eyebrow. "Are you completely ignoring the fact that this was your plan?"

"No, no, I don't mean the battle. I mean on Earth. The other us. They did it. They're finally together."

"And they know?"

She shook her head. "Not everything. Not yet." She sighed. "I hope they figure it out. I don't know how much longer things can go on like this. Until she accepts her heritage... I am all but powerless."

"Hey, we won the battle today," he reminded her.

"But, even with the knowledge of the Spring, we won't be able to beat your father in this war. Not without her."

"The perils of living in a reflection."

Freya grimaced. It was hard, knowing that nothing they did really mattered. That they were at the mercy of the choices made by their counterparts. She used to think that it was so sad that everyone else walked around the Realm with no idea of the lives they were living elsewhere. Now she thought their ignorance must be a blessing. As much as she had needed to share her burden, she hated that she had told Damon the truth. She didn't want to lie to him, but the truth was hard to bear.

"Hey," Damon said softly, realising where her thoughts were.

"You said that they're figuring it out. It won't be long now."

"It had better not be," she said as she held her arms close to her chest. "Right now, my only consolation is that they can't kill me here while she's awake."

"Come on, let's get to the Spring. Once you have found what you need, we can go home."

Freya hesitated with her smile.

"What is it?" Damon asked.

"Ever since Ku and Juni left... I wonder if I did the right thing. The more our home feels like the palace it once was, the less it feels like home."

"We could always leave," Damon offered, surprising her. "We could ride off into the sunset and never look back. We don't have to wear these crowns if we don't want to."

"And what of the chaos that would follow?"

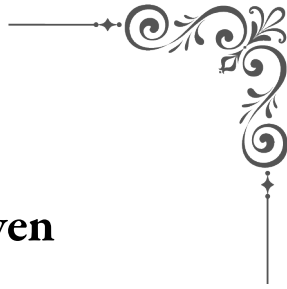
“You don’t owe the world anything, Freya. Especially not your life.”

“I may not have a choice.”

“You always have a choice,” he insisted.

“And what about you? I won’t drag you along if you don’t want to follow me.”

“I’ll always follow you, my Queen.”



Chapter Seven

Freya woke up late that morning feeling more well rested than she had in weeks.

Apparently, neither of her foster parents had noticed that she hadn't woken up before they had left for work, for which she was glad. She still had time to meet Damon, and she had needed the extra few hours.

She flew around her room - literally, for a few moments, until she noticed and dropped back to the floor - struggling to figure out what to wear. She didn't exactly have a lot of clothes that took wings into account. Glamours could make Humans think they weren't there, but they couldn't convince clothing.

After several raids through her cupboard, she eventually settled on a silk black vest, with a back low enough to tuck under her wings, and a black and white striped skirt. She pulled her hair into a ponytail and applied her makeup carefully. She never really had reason enough to put the energy into looking good, and she was happy for the excuse.

She eventually pulled on her leather jacket and black boots before shifting into town.

"I was wondering when you would show."

Freya turned to see Damon waiting for her. He was wearing his usual black jeans, but had replaced his t-shirt with a short-sleeve button-down shirt.

He offered up his arm and she linked hers through.

“You look beautiful,” Damon told her.

She rolled her eyes. “Flatterer.”

He smirked. “I’ve actually been wanting to tell you that for the longest time, so forgive me if I feel the need to note it every now and then.”

She found herself blushing. “Well, then. You look quite handsome yourself. And your arse looks damn fine in those jeans.”

He laughed. “Really?”

She shook her head. “I *may* have stared more than a few times. I can’t help it.”

“Where do you want to go for lunch?” Damon asked her as she realised that it was getting close to noon.

She shrugged before something occurred to her. “Oh! I know just the place! Mel and I helped them with a curse a rival restaurant placed on them.”

Damon raised an eyebrow. “And they’ll serve Demons? Not all Light establishments are kind.”

Freya shrugged. “They’re Płaczka, so it should be fine.”

Damon frowned. “Aren’t they a kind of Fae?”

“Yeah. Dream Fae. They’re not usually the nice kind, but Tesia and her family have been trying to live peacefully on Earth for a while now. Not all of the Fae have been super eager to get behind Peter’s plans.”

“Peter?”

Freya sighed. “My great-uncle. And the one behind the fairy tale mess last year. He’s got a whole, ‘let the other realms burn so we can claim the ashes’ thing going on.”

Damon’s frown deepened. “Shouldn’t someone be keeping an eye on that?”

She shrugged. "Mel's Coven Head told the Council of Light and they promised to share the information with the Demons. She says they all think Peter's just talk."

"And what do you think?"

"I think that I halted his plans, but I certainly didn't stop anything permanently. I have no idea what he's capable of without me in his plans, but I wouldn't want to underestimate him."

"No... I imagine not. Is everything that happens to you so dramatic?"

She shrugged. "Only on particularly bad days. So, want to go to Tesia's or not?"

"Lead the way."



AS SOON AS THEY ENTERED the restaurant, the young woman at the door gave a happy cry.

"Freya! You're back!" After a moment she did a double take. "And you have wings! Why do you have wings?"

Freya shrugged, glad that the truth spell only worked between her and Damon. "Spell gone wrong."

The woman smirked as she tucked her blonde hair behind her slightly pointed ears. She didn't bother glamouring them with her own wings.

"And you brought a friend."

"This is Damon," Freya introduced. "Damon, this is Aurele."

"Oh? Is he your date?"

Freya blushed furiously.

"Actually, I am," Damon told her.

Aurele let out an excited squeal before leading them to a secluded corner, lighting the candles with a wave of her hand.

"Want any drinks?" she asked as they sat down. "We've got a nice merlot."

Freya grinned. One of the benefits of having magic, Mel had told her when they had first visited, was that Human laws could often be taken as simply a suggestion.

“We’re underage,” Damon said, seemingly taken aback.

Freya frowned. “You drink with your friends all the time.”

“Yeah, but more surreptitiously.”

Aurele sighed with an eye roll. “You have Demonic blood, if I’m not mistaken. One glass of wine won’t even make you tipsy.”

“I won’t drink if you don’t want to,” Freya told him.

He shook his head. “No, I just... was surprised.”

“Not used to dining in magical establishments?” Aurele asked him.

He shrugged. “My uncle tends to keep a bit of a tight leash on me.”

“I’ll bring you some wine while you look at the menu,” Aurele said before leaving them alone.

“Amber kept a tight leash on me too,” Freya admitted. “But then she realised that Ms Pearson was going to die and, well, she saw the need for me to be able to interact with other magical beings.”

“Wait, who is Amber? What does she have to do with our teacher dying?”

“Oh, Amber is my guardian. She’s a ghost, and she possessed Ms Pearson to keep an eye on me.”

Damon raised an eyebrow. “A ghost? Trapped in this realm?”

“Yeah. I’m not exactly sure *how* she convinced Death to let her stay. I mean, she made a promise to my mother, but Mel reckons that it shouldn’t have held the power that she claims it does. Especially since her death severed her connection to the Ancient...”

“You mean... Amber is *that* Amber? Our old teacher was the most powerful being of last century besides the Angel Twilight?”

“Well, I mean, is it really that surprising?” Freya quickly glanced around before drawing up a soundproof charm around them. “I mean, I am her last descendant. Not that she told me that...”

Damon shook his head. “Yep, that definitely beats me being the heir to the Demon King...”

“Yeah, I tend to forget who Amber is. Also, it’s more the *Demon* part of Demon King that would probably concern people.”

“Yeah, you haven’t really... Are you sure you’re okay with that?” Damon ventured, clearly nervous.

“You mean, am I okay with the rest of your family being Demons?”

He nodded.

“I... Yeah. I think I am. I mean, I *know* Gregor. The fact that he’s a Demon doesn’t change how nice he’s been to me over the years.”

“And have you thought about my offer? If your foster parents kick you out, I mean.”

Freya blinked, caught off guard.

“Jamie texted me this morning. She knew that you had been upset, and her mum knew that Margaret is pregnant, so she was worried that you might be worried about being sent away. After what you said when you got your exam results...”

“I... You really meant that?”

He frowned. “Of course. I said it, didn’t I?”

“Yeah, but I just assumed you were being nice. I mean, just logistically...”

“Who needs logistics? We have magic. And there’s no way my uncle wouldn’t agree, even if you told him that you’re the Angel. He thinks you’re great. Both versions of you.”

Freya sighed, mulling it over. “What if this doesn’t work?” she eventually asked, her voice barely more than a whisper.

Damon raised an eyebrow before realising what she meant. "Us being together?"

She nodded. "What if we break up?"

"Freya, you've been my friend for years. I'm not going to leave you homeless just because us dating doesn't work out."

She gave a hum to indicate that she didn't quite believe him, but she nodded. It wasn't as if she had much choice, and this seemed like she was perhaps thinking too far ahead.

"Alright then," she eventually said. "Though, I guess we should see how things shake out with my foster parents."

"Have you talked to them about it?"

She shook her head. "They don't even know that I know." She sighed before he could say anything else, deciding to change the subject. "So, hey. There's something I don't get."

"What?"

"I don't know much about the Demon hierarchy-

"Isn't that irresponsible when you fight them?"

"Look, I don't have time to learn *every* aspect of the magical world. That's like trying to learn *every* aspect of global history, geography and politics.

"Anyway, Mel's book said that the King has Royal Blood. It's supposedly this thing where Demons have to obey the King's orders and can't hurt him, right?"

"Right."

"But it's genetic, and not extended through marriage. So, your aunt doesn't have it. That's why she has such difficulty ruling when the King's not around."

Damon nodded. "So what is it you don't get?"

"How will *you* manage it? I mean, you don't have Royal Blood either, right?"

Damon looked away awkwardly at that. "In all honesty, I don't know. My aunt seems to have a plan, but she's not too

forthcoming with the details. I'm pretty sure that means that whatever she has in mind has a high probability of killing me."

Freya's eyes widened.

"There's a reason they needed me, Freya. They need someone as strong as I am. I don't know, maybe she's going to try to recreate the spell that originally gave Royal Blood its powers, though that was lost long ago..."

"But why doesn't your aunt and the King just have a child? I mean, even if it's a political marriage, I'm pretty sure if they never ended in children, the aristocracy would have died out *long ago*."

Damon nodded, leaning in a little, despite the sound dampening charm.

"The King was almost killed years ago. He's dying, Freya. Whatever it is that's killing him stops him from passing his magic down as well. He can't have children."

"And he's really the only one of Royal Blood left?"

Damon nodded. "They keep meticulous records of everyone born with it, and there's no one else left. The War saw to that."

"Damn," Freya muttered.

Damon frowned. "Freya, he's the only thing keeping the Demons in line. *So* many want revenge for the War."

"But the War never happened!"

"It never happened on Earth," Damon corrected her. "The Humans get to pretend it never happened. They all get to live. For the rest of us, it was a genocide."

"So when the King dies...?"

"Most believe that, with the element of surprise, they can enslave the Humans. Make Earth like Eden all over again."

Freya frowned. She vaguely remembered reading about Eden in some beginner's guide to magic that Mel had lent her. It had been the first attempt at this Creation. No other realms, just

Eden, where Light and Dark creatures warred for territory, as well as the Human slaves within it.

If one of the Ancients hadn't interfered, it would have simply continued on like that for eternity. As it was, the Creator came back and created the Earth and all of the other realms as a clean slate.

Freya groaned, shaking her head. "First Peter, now this. It's like the world *wants* to end."

"Well, some theorise that that's actually the case."

Freya couldn't tell if he was joking or not.

"I mean, the Vulcan Plains fell to the Shadows over a century ago. The whole Creation shifted out of balance when that happened. The seal won't hold forever, Freya. And, even if it does, Creation can't sustain itself like this. Something will eventually give."

Freya raised an eyebrow. "This seems like something people should be working to fix."

"Most had faith that the Big Three would handle it. And, when they delivered the Angel Twilight, everyone was sure that she was their plan. That they had manipulated events to bring this woman of astronomical power into being. And she did manage to stop a crack in the seal. But then she killed herself. It seemed as if the Three hadn't put any thought into the toll that kind of power can take on a person."

"And then she made sure no others could follow in her footsteps," Freya figured.

"Well, except for you."

Freya shook her head. "Nope. Day off, remember? No more talk of Angels."

Damon nodded. "I figured as much," he assured her before deciding to change the subject. "I forgot to ask, how did the sleep potion work?"

Freya tugged at her pendant as she realised that she would have to explain about the Shadow Realm.

So much for her day off.

Part of her almost missed Amber's coddling if life was this constantly hectic without it. But then, maybe it was just a build-up of the crap that Amber had spent so long keeping at bay.

"I dreamed," she eventually said.

"And?"

She shook her head. "I normally don't remember much of my dreams. When I dream... I travel to the Shadow Realm."

His eyebrows shot up to his hairline. "The Shadow Realm? I thought that required intense levels of magic. You do it every night?"

She shrugged. "I don't really know exactly how or why. I just do. But I never remember when I wake."

"And you did tonight?"

She nodded. "I have once before as well. When I was under the sleeping curse. I started getting flashes after, but nothing vivid again until last night.

"The how and why don't bother me. I'm more concerned with what I saw there."

"Which was?"

"A war, by the look of things. It was... *brutal*. We were on one side, and I think your father was on the other."

Damon sighed, leaning back in his chair. "And the Shadow Realm is a reflection of this realm..."

"We might not have a choice in fighting him."

"Do you know why we were fighting him?"

Freya shrugged. "He wanted the throne."

"And we were both fighting him?"

“I don’t think it was the Demonic throne. The Shadow Realm seems to have its own throne, which is probably just symbolic on this side.”

Damon nodded. “My father is a pretty strong supporter of starting the War back up again.”

Freya sighed. “Okay, I think I’m done with the gloom and doom talk,” she decided, looking over to see that her sound dampening spell was keeping Aurele out.

“Come on, let’s just eat.”



THEY LEFT THE RESTAURANT with their arms linked, wandering vaguely back in the direction of the shops.

“I’m going to have to head home soon,” Damon told her. “I’ve got combat training.”

“Okay.”

“You know, you could come with. I... I told my uncle that I was out with you today, though I didn’t tell him anything about you having magic. If you told him, you could join me in learning about combat magic.”

Freya nodded. She knew that Gregor would have to be told eventually.

“Not today,” she said. “Tomorrow, after school, but not today. It’s too short notice.”

“Okay. Tomorrow then. We can get pizza.”

“You and your uncle really like your pizza...”

“There’s no pizza in the Underworld.”

“That... is actually really sad.”

“Tell me about it. Anyway, I’d better go.”

She drew him close for a kiss, prompting him to wrap his hands around her hips once more.

She decided, in that moment, that they definitely needed some time alone and away from public before she went up like the Human Torch from frustration.



Chapter Eight

Freya made her way home as she would have done at the end of the school day, a little nervous as she opened the front door. Despite the improbability, part of her worried that her foster parents would know that she had skipped school.

She soon found, however, that she needn't have worried. As soon as she entered, she heard voices from the living room.

"Hey," she greeted as she entered.

Both of her foster parents stopped talking right at that moment, turning to stare at her as if she'd done something wrong. Or maybe they just hadn't wanted to be interrupted. She couldn't tell which.

"Do you need something?" Margaret asked with a sharp tone.

"I, um, no? I just... I'm home from school."

"Okay," Margaret said, still staring at her.

Freya got the sense that there was a social cue she wasn't picking up on.

"I... I guess I'll be upstairs, doing my homework," Freya said before quickly hurrying out of the room, her mind immediately replaying the interaction over and over again to try and figure out what had gone wrong.

Her mind was still cycling through everything she could have done wrong as she put her combat gear on. It was a little early but, as much as the days were getting longer, it wasn't too

long until sunset, and Freya very much felt the need to be on the move.

She hesitated in the middle of buckling up. In reality, she wanted to talk to someone.

She wanted to talk to *Amber*.

But she was still furious, so calling her guardian down wasn't an option.

She refocused on her buckles, refusing to think about either Amber or her foster parents.



FREYA WANDERED FOR a while without a single sign of Demonic activity. Some nights were like that, but it infuriated her when she needed the distraction of the fight.

Long after dark, she headed to the roof of the school and sat down. Sometimes wandering in the hopes of casually running into Demons wasn't the best way to do things. Without focus, she could only sense so far, and even if she stayed moving, there was a chance she could miss something.

She closed her eyes, doing her best to ignore the cold concrete beneath her as she focused on her magic and the extra sense it gave her.

She focused on the Energy surrounding her, looking for any slight variance with the telltale dark shadow of a Demonic presence. More often than not, looking so methodically tended to send her to Demons who weren't actively using their magic, but it was better than nothing.

After a while, she found something promising. Two strong Demonic signatures moving in a methodical pattern down a series of reasonably nearby streets.

Freya shifted to their location to see two Demons, with smart black military jackets over their usual combat gear.

As soon as they saw her, they shifted away.

“Huh. That was easy,” Freya said to herself, wishing that Amber was there once more, though she pushed that thought aside as she refocused.

She closed her eyes, leaning against the brick wall next to her. Knowing what to look for made it much easier to find another pair.

She shifted to them and, once again, they shifted away.

After five more instances, Freya was thoroughly stumped. These Demons probably weren't the rogues she was used to hunting, and probably had no quarrel with her, which was why they were shifting away. But then, why were they in the city?

Freya decided that it wasn't her problem as she shifted back home. She dealt with rogues and rogues alone. Whatever the rest of the Demons did, it didn't involve her, so long as they stayed away from the Humans.



FREYA AWOKE WITH A start, recognising her room at the Palace.

It was her old room, but it had now been refurbished to the point that she barely recognised it. She knew that it was selfish of her to long for the days when she was just a scavenger who had stumbled upon the empty building, and yet she still did. She had liked being alone. She loved Melody, Sarah and Damon, but she was still racked with guilt over what had happened with Ku and Juni. What had happened after they had found the spirit of the Old Queen...

She still had the scars down her back from the lightning, like an upside down tree.

The door opened to reveal Damon, who quickly rushed to her side as she tried to get up.

“Hey, the Spring knocked you out,” he told her. “You need to rest. Taking on all of that knowledge is going to tax you.”

She shook her head. “There was nothing there,” she answered hollowly.

He raised an eyebrow. “Nothing?”

“Just whatever poison knocked me out. I didn’t dream of the lost knowledge that was promised. Only Earth.” She let out a frustrated yell along with a blast of fire. “It’s only ever Earth!”

“Maybe that’s just not how it works,” Damon tried. “It might have been a mistranslation. The texts were ancient...”

Freya stood up, wobbling a little on her feet after so long out cold.

“Maybe,” she eventually allowed. “But, for now, we pushed too far. After so many years... My parents didn’t leave me anything but a target on my back and just enough resources to fool me into believing that I’m not a dead woman.”

Damon pulled her into his arms as he often did when she spoke of her parents. It made her voice take on a bitter tone that was instantly recognisable.

She didn’t unfold her arms in response to his embrace, but neither did she pull away.

“They know,” Damon reminded her softly. “The version of you on Earth will figure it out. We won’t lose this fight.”

“If I decided to abandon all of this tomorrow and chase after Juni and Ku, would you follow?”

“Without hesitation.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too. Never doubt that. The rest of this can fall around us, but I will always love you.”



Chapter Nine

Freya spent most of the next day worrying. She had classes all the way up until the afternoon, and had to use the library for her physics course work at lunch, so she didn't have any opportunity to see Damon.

It was odd, she thought to herself as she rushed out her last lesson, that no matter how strange the rest of her life became, school was the one horrific staple. Like a nightmare she could never quite avoid. She supposed that it probably kept her grounded, but it also probably kept her feeling like crap in a way that potential apocalypses could never quite manage.

"Freya, a moment," Dr Harris said, just as she was almost out of the door.

"Yes?" Freya asked, moving back into the room.

"I just wanted to know if you had thought any more on doing a resit."

I had thought about sacking off university altogether, Freya thought, but kept it to herself.

"I'm sorry, things have been kind of hectic at home this week. I haven't had time to talk it over with my foster parents yet."

Dr Harris frowned, folding her arms. "Is everything alright?"

Freya nodded quickly, not wanting to get Margaret and Ryan in trouble. "Yeah, yeah. It's fine. Just some temporary stress. But..."

Even if I do resit, I don't think it will help. I know the stuff, I just get anxious..."

"Have you thought about going to see a doctor for your anxiety?"

Freya shook her head. "I can't. Not without my foster parents knowing and... I would rather not."

Dr Harris sighed. "Freya, I can't help you if you don't help yourself."

"Then I guess we're both out of luck."



"YOU READY TO GO?" FREYA asked as she approached where Damon was sitting on the sofa in the common room, watching a film on his tablet.

"Yeah," he replied as he pulled his earphones out, putting his tablet into his bag. "What took you so long?"

"Dr Harris wanted to talk to me about potentially doing re-sits." She sighed. "Do you think there's a magic cure for anxiety?"

"Nope. Just herbal remedies that you can get at hippie shops. We have to get over anxiety attacks the Human way."

"Which is?"

Damon shrugged. "It's different for different people."

"Yeah, I figured as much. Whatever. I'm still in two minds about giving up a Human life anyway. That was always Amber's dream, not mine."

"What was your dream?"

Freya shrugged. "I never knew enough about the magical world, or myself, to figure it out. I guess it's time that changed."

"Anyway, I should probably focus on this afternoon."

"You sure you're okay about this?" he asked as they headed out of the building.

Freya nodded. "I am," she assured him. "I mean, your uncle will find out soon enough anyway. I'd rather not hide it."

"And you're still not bothered by the fact that he's a Demon?"

"If it came to a fight between the two of us, who do you think would win?"

Damon frowned for a few moments. "I don't know. I mean, my uncle is one of *the* top warriors in the entire Demon kingdom, but I've never seen you at full power. Even if people just *thought* you were an Angel, to be approaching that kind of power level..."

Freya snorted in dismissal before realising that he was serious. "Angels can't seriously be *that* powerful, right? I mean, even when Amber was at full strength..."

"An Angel at full power could take on an army," Damon told her. "There's a reason the Angel Twilight was so revered."

"And she did everything in her power to stop anyone like her from being born ever again..."

"Yeah," Damon said with a shrug. "She had more than a few screws loose, though. Had to have. She literally tore herself up to do it."

Freya nodded, mulling over the idea that Angels weren't just a *little* bit more powerful than anyone else.

And then, of course, there was the propensity for mental health problems to be genetic. And, if they were counting using your life to fuel a spell as suicide, then her mother counted too. Not exactly a good track record.

"Anyway," Damon said, wisely choosing to change the subject. "Did you use the sleeping potion again last night? What happened?"

"I... I went to the Shadow Realm again."

"And?"

She shrugged. “I didn’t really learn much more than yesterday. Just that... things are bad there. Which I guess must mean that things are bad here. Or are about to get bad...”

Damon gave a hum of agreement, though he didn’t seem to have anything helpful to say on the matter.

“I have plenty of the sleeping potion back home. If you want to take it again, just say the word.”

She nodded, though it was a little reluctant. She wanted to know, but she also didn’t. Part of her just wanted to stop dreaming of the Shadow Realm. She was an anxious enough person as it was without wars in a mirror realm.



FREYA FOLLOWED DAMON up the familiar path to his uncle’s apartment. As soon as the door was closed behind them, Damon called out for his uncle.

“Looks like no one’s home yet,” he said as silence answered him, dropping down on the sofa.

Freya sat next to him, putting her own bag down next to her.

“Oh, hey, we could watch-” He reached over her to get the remote, but paused as he ended up with his nose almost touching hers.

“Sorry,” he managed after a moment, but didn’t move.

Freya found herself equally rooted to the spot. He was so close and warm. Despite their already close proximity, she was gripped by the urge to be closer to him.

She closed the gap between them, kissing him as he shifted so that he was positioned above her, with no risk of falling off the sofa.

His hands moved down to grip her hips, though he quickly moved them away with a, “Sorry, I never thought to ask... I know you’re not always good with touch...”

“It’s okay,” she assured him, her wings gently flexing behind her. “Just... not soft.” She didn’t know if that made any sense, but when Damon replaced his hands, he used them to grip her tightly. Just shy of being painful. She felt any trepidation at his touch immediately relax, melting into his embrace as she brought her lips back up to his, keeping a tight grip of his shoulders to keep her steady.

His grip of her hips caused the fabric of her button-down sleeveless top to strain. The buttons were just the ones that clicked into place, and they popped open in a sudden cascade up her torso, revealing the Batman bra beneath.

He moved one hand slightly further up her stomach, but thankfully didn’t so much as brush up against the bra. Freya understood that her breasts were *technically* sensitive in a good way, but all it usually meant to her was wearing thickly padded bras to stop them from bothering her. She was so used to thinking about them as *problems* when it came to any kind of touch associated with them, that she wasn’t sure that she could relax enough to enjoy anything he might have in mind for them. She would have actually been less bothered at the prospect of his hand going down her pants than beneath her bra.

“Are you okay?” Damon asked after a moment between kisses, and Freya realised that his skin was covered in rippling Dark Energy. Her own was covered in alternating swirls of black and white static, clashing up against the Energy he was letting out to produce small bursts of magic. His t-shirt was even singed in a couple of places.

“Will it always be like this?”

He nodded. “Our powers are fuelled by our emotions, remember? When we get ourselves worked up... There has to be some kind of magical release. It’s more obvious the more powerful you are.”

Freya raised an eyebrow. “How did you manage being with Humans?”

“With great difficulty,” he admitted before leaning in to kiss her once more. “Being with you is so...*freeing*.”

They jumped away from each other, as if electrified, as the door opened.

“Hey, Damon, you in?” his uncle asked, though he stopped still as Freya tugged her shirt closed, her face bright red.

He smirked, though that faded as he spotted Freya’s wings, along with the aftershocks of magic running across both of their arms.

Evelyn, his partner at work, followed him in.

“Pup,” she greeted, using her old nickname for Freya. “I see you finally told the kid about your magic. Good for you.”

Gregor raised an eyebrow at her. “You knew she had magic?!”

Evelyn nodded. “I told you that she had been picking up bounties from the office for weeks.”

“No, you were saying about... Wait...” He turned to Freya, who had used the time allowed by the distraction to re-button up her top. “You’re the Angel everyone has been going on about?”

“I... Yeah, I guess I am...” She still found it strange to refer to herself as an Angel.

Evelyn took the boxes of Papa John’s from Gregor’s arms, moving through to the kitchen. “Perhaps this would be a better conversation to have over pizza.”

As Freya got up, Damon moved protectively to her side, making it clear that he was ready to fight any criticisms his uncle might have of their relationship.

Damon and Freya sat down on the stools at one side of the counter island as his uncle leaned against the fridge on the other side.

Evelyn nudged Gregor out of the way as she got a bottle of pop out from the fridge, making everyone a drink.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Gregor asked Evelyn.

The Witch shrugged. “Freya asked me not to.”

Freya rolled her eyes. “Because I thought they were Human.”

Evelyn sighed. “Look, if you guys wanted to know the truth about each other, the pieces were all there,” she said as she opened up the pizza boxes before taking a slice.

She turned to Gregor. “I mean, honestly. How did you think she survived against the Demon Uther sent after her? Your brother is not one to be stopped by a Human.”

“I thought someone else had stepped in! That was just before the rumours about the Angel started to crop up, so I just assumed that it was her.”

“Well, it was,” Evelyn said simply. She turned back to Freya. “As for you, well, you knew that they had given you a protection charm.”

Gregor butt in before Freya could answer. “I could never sense any magic from her! How did you?”

Evelyn shrugged. “I didn’t. But then, I never did from you or the kid, either. There are spells capable of hiding even the most potent magics.”

Gregor nodded, seemingly finally accepting what he was being told.

He turned to Freya, who was carefully nibbling away at her slice of pizza like an anxious rabbit.

“You’re still an orphan, right? You didn’t make that up?”

“As far as I know. I mean, my mother died at the end of the War and I’ve never been able to track down my father.”

“Tell him about the Shadow Realm,” Damon urged her. “I mean, it’s important, right? What’s happening there affects all of us.”

Gregor raised an eyebrow. “The Shadow Realm?”

Freya nodded. “Yeah, it’s a whole thing...” she muttered quietly into her pizza.

Gregor sighed, running his hand through his hair. “Freya, I get that learning that Damon and I are Demons probably wasn’t easy on you. Especially not when Uther regularly sends his lackeys to torment you. I had no idea why he was so fixated on hunting down the Angel, but now I have little doubt that he knows your identity, and that you’re close to Damon.”

“He wants to use me to hurt Damon?”

“More likely, he wants you captured. He could use you as a bargaining tool to get Damon to go back to him. There wouldn’t really be much Seph and I could do if Damon chose to go back willingly. Using children as unwilling ‘wards’ to keep their parents in line was a tactic often used by the nobility generations ago. They didn’t often do their duty in caring for the kids, though, so it was decided that the children themselves would get the choice, so that they wouldn’t end up as pawns in their parents’ political manoeuvring.”

Freya’s immediate response was to clutch Damon’s hand.

“Promise me you wouldn’t.”

“I won’t promise that.”

She glared at him. “You have to. I don’t care what he does to me, just as long as you’re safe.”

He glared right back. “And you think that I don’t feel the same way? Of course I would trade myself for you. *Especially* when I would be the reason you were in danger in the first place!”

His uncle cut in at that. "She's held off your father's men so far," he pointed out. "And now that she knows, it will be easy enough for Evelyn and I to extend her the same protection we provide you. She's in no real danger, Damon."

Damon nodded, though he didn't seem convinced.

"So, what's this about the Shadow Realm? From the top?"

Freya sighed, before finally deciding where to start.

"My mother was powerful," she told them, keeping her eyes on the glass of pop in front of her. She decided not to go into the Angel Twilight thing. She might trust Gregor, but he still worked for the Demon King. "The problem was that she wasn't in complete control of her powers. The Council of Light, fearing her abilities, sent her into the Shadow Realm in the hopes that she would stabilise while there."

Gregor frowned. "To get the Council of Light involved... How did they keep it under wraps?"

Freya shrugged.

"Edric should have known about this," he muttered, seemingly to himself, before waving his hand for Freya to continue. "Carry on."

"Well, I don't really know much about what went on there. I just know that she came back pregnant with me."

"From the Shadow Realm?!"

"That's what I was told."

Gregor's frown deepened. "And this would have been just before the war ended?"

"Yeah, why?"

"It doesn't matter," he told her, but he exchanged a meaningful look with Evelyn, whose frown matched his. "What does this have to do with the present day?"

"Well... It looks as if being conceived in the Shadow Realm has left me with the ability to travel to the Shadow Realm when

I sleep. I don't usually remember it, but I do when the sleep has been magically aided. Damon gave me a sleeping potion to help with my insomnia and I've started to remember."

"I'm guessing things aren't all sunshine and rainbows over there?"

"There's a war. Damon and I seem to be leading one side, while another is led by his father."

Gregor started swearing under his breath, though Freya only recognised some of the languages.

"Do you know anything else about the war?"

Freya shrugged. "Just, last night, I - I mean, the other me - said something that made me think that it might have something to do with my parents. But that doesn't exactly narrow it down. Like you said, no one knew about my mother. She died when she was a teenager and she had been in the Shadow Realm for years before that. I don't know how she could have started a war with Damon's father."

"What about your father? You always said that you didn't know who he was..."

"And I was telling the truth. My mother didn't want me to know, and so everyone who might have even slightly had an inkling keeps quiet about it."

"But he presumably had to have been actually *in* the Shadow Realm at the same time as your mother."

"I mean, I guess. I'm not exactly sure how that works..."

"Well, it's a starting point."

Freya couldn't help but squirm in her seat as Gregor looked her over, his eyes seemingly searching for something.

"Before, when I came in, you didn't just have Light energy..."

Freya shrugged. "I have a little bit of Demon blood *way* back in the family tree."

Gregor raised an eyebrow. "Would you mind letting me see your Energy? It might help me to narrow it down."

Freya practically started bouncing up and down in her stool with a mix of excitement and nerves. Finding her father had always been something she had filed away under "silly childish day-dreams". After what had happened when she had first broached the subject with Amber, she had always been reluctant to do it again. They each knew where the other stood and that they weren't likely to change their minds. An eternal stalemate. One that Freya possibly could have been able to break, if she had actively tried, but Amber was always lurking, and the thought of disappointing her mentor made her insides go cold.

Or, at least, it had before. At this point, Freya couldn't care less about Amber's opinion of her.

She held out her hand, closed her eyes, and focused her Energy, creating an orb of it in her palm. It was draining, but it was the truest reflection of her soul she could manage.

As she let the orb dissipate, she opened her eyes once more.

"So?" Evelyn asked.

"That's not a 'bit of Demon blood'. Not by a long shot."

Freya's insides churned at that. She had always known that it was a possibility. Why else would her mother have insisted on keeping her from her father? But hearing it aloud was something else altogether.

"Is it... Is *she*...?" Evelyn asked, looking at Freya in a way that made her uncomfortable. Like she was looking at the arc of the covenant.

Gregor nodded.

"After all this time... I thought Seph was being indulgent..."

"Okay, what are you talking about?" Freya asked them.

"I have a hunch," Gregor told her. "I'll follow it up for you tonight, if you want."

“Really?” Freya asked, momentarily wondering if her hearing was working. “You honestly think you can find my father?”

Gregor smiled at her, his frown finally breaking. “Yeah, I’ve got a pretty good idea of where to look now.”

“I... Thank you.”

“It’s really no problem,” Gregor assured her. “Though, it may take me a while to track down the leads, and I would be more comfortable if you stayed here while I did so. The last thing we need is Uther catching up to you now.”

Freya nodded. She wasn’t exactly thrilled with the prospect of being an easy target.

“My foster parents should be distracted enough for me to get away with staying here tonight. I’ll figure out some way to explain, or just magic an explanation, tomorrow.”

“Thankfully Charlie’s out of town, so you two can use magic freely in the house.”

Freya frowned. “Wait, he doesn’t know you’re a Demon?”

“He’s Human,” Gregor told her simply. “I would risk execution by telling him. For both of us. I love him too much to put his life in danger like that.”



FREYA STAYED IN THE kitchen with Evelyn, still picking at her pizza, as Gregor went to pack his things. Damon followed him out.

“You still mad at me for not telling you?” Evelyn asked her.

Freya shrugged. “You weren’t the only one, and you had no stake in this.”

“I suppose you’re right. I just... I didn’t want to be the one to bring this to a head. You and Damon care about each other, that much is obvious, but tensions between Light and Dark creatures are as bad as I can ever remember them being.”

“How long is your frame of reference?”

Evelyn smirked. “It’s not polite to ask someone’s age, Freya,” she chided gently before relenting. “Hang on, let me work this out... Two hundred and seventeen.”

“And you’re a pure-blooded Witch?”

She nodded. “I’ve still got eight centuries ahead of me if I play my cards right.”

“So how come you’re a Dark Witch? I mean, it’s a choice, right? Witches get to choose which kind of magic they use.”

Evelyn sighed. “Because Gregor’s mother saved my life when we were young. I had been part of a Light coven until that point, but Prudence proved what I had always suspected; Demons are not inherently evil. Dark magic is not more inherently evil than Light. In fact, I’ve seen far worse atrocities committed by the latter, especially during the War.”

Freya raised an eyebrow. “Really? Wouldn’t that weaken their power? I mean, they feed off of positive emotions.”

“The most potent source of power comes from inside, first and foremost,” Evelyn told her. “Most had lost friends and family to the Humans and their power waned as their pain intensified. And even getting power from Humans... The best way for Demons to get Dark energy is to cause pain. But the Light creatures? They have to keep the Humans happy and sated. That’s easier to do when you take away their freedom. They might do it with a smile, but I figure it’s better to hurt and be free.”

Freya nodded as she mulled over that thought. She had always known that Amber distrusted all magical beings, but Freya had just thought that she was slightly paranoid.

“I need to call my sister and tell her I’ll be heading back to the Underworld,” Evelyn told her. “Could you ask Gregor how long it’ll be before we head out?”

Freya nodded, though she didn't move. "So, who is the contact Gregor is going to talk to about my father?"

Evelyn snorted, shaking her head. "Freya, trust me when I say that you don't want any answers about this until we know the truth."

Freya found that she did trust Evelyn. She had always been nice to her when they interacted at the bounty office, and she had had her reasons for lying. But then, trust had always been one of Freya's problem areas. She trusted too fast and too much. She had tried not to, after what Gwen had done to her at her first high school, but she found that it was all or nothing. Either she trusted too much, or she trusted no one. And there was only so long someone could distrust everyone around them before they broke.

"I'll go ask Gregor when you're leaving," Freya said as Evelyn focused on her phone.

She found herself hesitating, however, as she approached the study, where Gregor and Damon were, their voices travelling to the corridor.

"So, you're really okay with Freya being the hunter?" Damon asked.

His uncle laughed, though it was a little flat. "Ask me again when I get back."

"I... Okay."

"Why? Does it bother you? It's your father's men she's been killing."

"Yeah, I know. It's not the 'who'..."

"It's the killing that's bothering you?" Gregor asked softly.

Damon sighed. "Yeah, I guess. A little. She just... It doesn't bother her. She doesn't even blink at the thought of killing someone."

“Probably because she’s spent the last couple of years fighting for her life. Fighting like that doesn’t give you an option. It’s kill or be killed. The girl’s a survivor.”

“I know, I just...”

“You’re soft as clarts is what you are. It’s one of the things I love about you, kid, but I can’t help but fear that it’s going to be the thing that gets you killed. Maybe with Freya watching your back, I won’t have to worry so much about it. Unless my hunch plays out, in which case I don’t know where we’ll be...”

“So you’re telling me to get over it?”

“If you care about her, yes. She’s not going to shed her survival skills because they make you twitchy. You can’t expect her to.”

“I... I suppose you’re right.”

“I’m always right.”

Freya waited a few moments before finally entering the room.

“Evelyn wants to know how long it will be before you leave.”

“Ten minutes.”



DAMON AND FREYA FINISHED up the pizza with Netflix on in the background, though neither of them were paying particularly close attention. Freya didn’t know what was up with Damon, but she was lost in thought.

Could Gregor really find her father? If he did, would he be a Demon?

Amber had assured her that her Demonic powers couldn’t be from her father, that they weren’t that powerful. But Freya had always suspected, deep down, that Amber had been lying to her.

And, after all, hadn’t she lied about almost everything else as well?

Freya yawned as it hit nine, the stress taking its toll.

“Ready for bed?” Damon asked her.

She nodded silently before getting up and trailing towards his room.

“I... I was going to offer the spare room,” Damon said sheepishly. “Not because I don’t *want* you in mine, I just didn’t want to assume...”

She sighed, raising an eyebrow. She was too tired for anxious dancing around.

“What do you want?” she asked him simply.

“I... My room.”

She nodded, following him inside. His room was immaculate, which had always unnerved her. What kind of teenage boy kept his room that clean? But then, she supposed that it made sense that a boy who had grown up with nothing would treasure the things he had now.

“Can I borrow a t-shirt?” she asked, before remembering that her wings would be in the way. “Actually, I don’t suppose you have anything without a back?”

Damon nodded, making his way over to his chest of drawers. He pulled out a plain black t-shirt before finding a pair of scissors and cutting down from the neck to give her enough room for her wings.

“There you go,” he said.

“You didn’t have to do that.”

He shrugged. “Unless you wanted to sleep in the top you’ll probably have to wear tomorrow, it was either that or sleeping topless. Now, I don’t really mind the second option, but you would probably get cold.”

She smirked as she stripped off her jeans and shirt before pulling on the torn-up t-shirt. She pulled her bra out from underneath it before turning around to see that Damon was now in

pyjama bottoms, his torso completely bare. Her breath caught in her throat at the sight.

"I'm going to use the bathroom," Damon told her. "If you want another vial of the sleeping potion, I keep some in the top drawer of my bedside table."

"Actually..." she started as she thought about using the potion again. "I was going to say that I didn't want to take it tonight, but I actually think that maybe I should. It couldn't hurt to learn more, right? I just..."

"What if you didn't have to do it alone?"

"What do you mean?"

Damon shrugged. "I don't know how this whole Shadow Realm thing works, but, I don't know, do you think it would be possible to take me with you?"

She hummed in thought. She didn't know what exactly having Damon there would accomplish, but she couldn't deny that the prospect made her feel better.

"I don't even know how I do it," Freya told him. "I have no idea how to extend it to you."

"It wouldn't hurt to try."

She nodded. "Okay, we'll give it a go."



THEY BOTH TOOK TURNS using the bathroom before returning to his room.

Freya opened his drawer to find the sleeping potion next to a bunch of condoms. She couldn't help but wonder how many other girls had been where she was right now. It didn't really bother her that he had been with other people before her, but she wasn't too keen on the reminder that they had spent so long being so completely oblivious to each other. That they had wasted so much time.

She passed him a vial before taking one for herself.

“I don’t know how this might work, but we probably both need to be in magically-aided sleep.”

Damon nodded, downing the contents of his vial as Freya did the same. They put the empty vials back on the bedside table before settling down under the covers. Freya curled up into a ball, as she usually did when she slept - though now it was also a necessity since any other position threatened to crush either her wings or her boobs - only this time she was resting up against Damon’s torso, appreciating his warmth.

“Are you okay?” Damon asked, knowing that they had a little while before the potion kicked in. “You seemed a little... upset.”

“Why would I be upset? I just learnt that Amber has probably been lying to me about my father this whole time and, despite the fact that I knew that she lied when she thought it was to protect me, I still didn’t say anything. I wanted to believe her, and she took advantage of that. So, no, I’m not upset.”

She realised, at the end of her diatribe, that it had been entirely without inflection. Not a hint of sarcasm had been detectable in her tone.

Thankfully, Damon was quick on the uptake, and realised that she hadn’t meant it.

“Freya, the first Demon you met was a man my father sent to kill you. He has been sending these men continuously since then. Of course you didn’t want to believe that your father was one of them.”

“That *I’m* one of them,” she corrected. “This would make me half-Demon.”

“Like me,” he pointed out, a little bit of sharpness in his tone reminding her that anything she said against her situation would apply to both of them.

"I'm sorry," she said softly. "I know that Demons aren't evil. I also know that I'm not exactly a picture of innocence... I heard you talking to your uncle before..."

"He was right," Damon said quickly. "I don't commit myself in a fight, and it's probably going to be the thing that gets me killed."

"I won't let it be," Freya assured him. "Though it's not just that..."

"What is it, then?"

"I just... I wonder who he is. My father, I mean. Does he even know I exist? What if me being an Angel is too much? And what was with Gregor and Evelyn? They sounded like they knew exactly who he was."

"Uncle Gregor might, if he had to have been in the Shadow Realm. That's not exactly a common thing. I mean, your mother was sent by the Council of Light, right? And they kept it all under wraps?"

"Yeah. So?"

"So, they don't usually send people to the Shadow Realm. Usually, only the Geni ever send people there."

"The Geni?"

"They're a group of magical warriors devoted to keeping magic hidden and safe. They transcend any feud between different groups of magical creatures, taking anyone who wants to serve. It's an ancient organisation, but they haven't exactly been popular since the War. It was exactly the kind of thing they were supposed to stop, after all."

"What do they have to do with the Shadow Realm?"

"In order to make sure their warriors don't have any issues that might get in their way, they send them to the Shadow Realm to work through their issues. Usually people join when they have troubles they feel they can't shake. They keep meticulous records

of their recruits and when they were in the Shadow Realm. So, my uncle will just need to find out who was there at the same time as your mother.”

“And they’ll just tell him?”

“He’s worked with Geni before. Your father might even be one of them.”

Freya gave a thoughtful hum as she snuggled further into Damon. If Gregor had worked with Geni before, then she supposed that they couldn’t be so bad.



FREYA WAS SITTING DOWN this time when memories came to her. She adjusted quickly, her attention drawn to the gasping figure next to her. She hurried over to Damon, taking his struggle as a sign that it had worked. Her counterpart had managed it. Damon had his other half’s memories.

“Are you okay?” She asked him as she wondered how she could possibly help.

She couldn’t remember the first time it had happened to her. She had been so young.. It had just always been there, always a part of her. Earth was as real to her as anything in this realm, and she couldn’t remember a time when that had been the case.

“I can’t,” he gasped. “It’s too much. I was here and I was there. I know things that I don’t know! And I don’t know things I do...”

Freya nodded. “You have to compartmentalise it. The you on Earth it isn’t you. Those are someone else’s memories. You have to remember that.”

Damon nodded, as he seemed to regain some sense of equilibrium. “Is it always like this?”

She shook her head. “It’s been so long now, I forgot that this could ever feel strange.”

“He’s so... Different. He’s me, but he’s not. He’s naive, and almost childlike. I forgot what that felt like. Or, rather, I don’t think I ever knew...”

“The war doesn’t exist over there. Not yet. It can’t. I’m the one who started the war, and it can’t start over there while she is being coddled. You went straight from your father’s torture, to becoming my knight. My Prince. Over there, the need hasn’t arisen yet. We both get to be innocent.”

He nodded, a grim look of understanding across its features. “And we pay for their innocence with our blood.”

“I didn’t start the war for fun. She will realise the inevitable soon enough. For now, we buy ourselves time.”

“But we know that they’re here now. They’ll remember this when they wake up. We can tell them.”

“Tell them what? Damon, nothing here translates to over there. Not directly. I have both pieces of the puzzle, and I haven’t been able to figure out exactly what this crown translates to over on that side. Maybe it’s that we’re an Angel. Maybe that’s what being Queen means on that side.”

Damon sighed. “Does that mean that this was all for nothing? You give me memories of the other side, and in the end it won’t mean anything. We’re still where we were before.”

“It was a good idea at least. You might have been able to piece something together that I had missed. Many recognise someone from both sides, but I couldn’t. It had every chance of working, the fact that it didn’t doesn’t change that.”

“You just can’t be wrong. No matter which realm you’re in.”

“I’m often wrong, Damon, I just don’t blame myself when a roll of the dice doesn’t go my way. Gregor is searching for my father on that side. Even if he doesn’t find him alive, his identity will probably be the final piece that I need to figure out how to win this war on that side.”

“The war that isn’t even happening on that side.”

“As I said, nothing translates directly. Just because there isn’t a full-scale war, doesn’t mean we’re all not in danger. Something big is happening, and we’ll all die unless our counterparts can figure out what it is.”



Chapter Ten

Freya awoke to her phone ringing. She leaned over to see the sleeping potion had knocked her out for 12 hours straight. It was fast approaching 10 o'clock. She tried not to think about the fact that she had missed school once already this week, and was currently missing chemistry. Part of her couldn't help but think that it was fruitless to even try going back. It was like throwing herself up against a brick wall over and over and expecting it to crack. All that happened was that she became bloodied and bruised, and all she did to the wall was paint it with her blood.

Margaret was ringing her. She didn't answer. If Margaret had picked up on the fact that she wasn't there, then it would be easier to magic her way out of trouble in person. Still, she was reluctant to leave. Especially not when Gregor had told her to stay. She was sure that, even if Damon's father did send someone after her, she would be able to take them. But she would still rather not take the risk. Especially if it would mean leading them back home.

"What is it?" Damon asked groggily as he sat up.

"Margaret," Freya told him. "I think she realised I wasn't home."

"Do you need to go?"

Freya sighed. "I don't know... Probably. I should. I just... I shouldn't leave. What if your father has men after me?"

“Is that really what’s stopping you from going?”

She gave a humourless smile. “I guess not. It’s funny, I’ve heard the ‘sorry, but you’re going back’ speech so many times, but I’ve never stayed anywhere this long before. I know everything about how it will go, it’s not an unknown factor, and yet I feel uneasy.”

Damon rolled over, closer to her, and wrapped his arm around her middle while he nuzzled into her side.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“If they would let you go so easily, they’re not worth it.”

“A fine sentiment. I just wish I believed it.”

“Hey, this isn’t like the other times. If they give you the speech, you just come here.”

Freya smirked as she turned to face him, resisting the urge to straddle him. For now.

“And be your live-in girlfriend?”

Damon rolled his eyes. “Well, of course it sounds bad when you say it like that.”

“Did I ever tell you about the alternate universe where we’re engaged?”

He raised an eyebrow. “No.”

“Well, this was a while ago. Who knows? We might be married by now.”

“Are you... hinting at something?”

She laughed, shaking her head. “Let’s just see if we can stand dating each other for a few months first.”

He smirked. “*Stand* it? Careful, I might get offended.”

“I’m sure I could think of some way to make it up to you.”

She moved so that she was straddling him, just the two thin layers of their underwear separating them.

Damon groaned in the most delicious way. "Please don't tease, Freya. You have no idea what you do to me..."

"I'm not teasing," she said, really meaning it. She was comfortable and relaxed and touching him was doing nothing but sending little sizzles of pleasure across her skin.

Her phone buzzed once more, causing her tense up again.

She groaned. "I *wasn't* teasing."

Damon smiled. "You should go. I'll still be here when you get back."

She nodded, getting up and making her way over to where her clothes were folded neatly over Damon's chair.

"Or, you know, I could go with you," Damon offered as he sat up properly.

Freya hummed as she pulled on her jeans. "I mean, it's probably best if it's just me. If they want to talk, they'll just kick you out anyway."

"Then I'll wait outside for you. But I'll come if you want me to."

"Yeah. I would actually really like that."

She turned around as she pulled off his t-shirt and put her bra back on. As soon as it was in place, she turned back around to put her shirt on, smirking at the way Damon watched her appreciatively.

She climbed back onto his bed, kissing him as she pressed her torso to his, appreciating his warmth.

"You're way more touchy in the mornings," he noted.

She shrugged. "Things get skewed when I'm sleepy. More... malleable, if that makes any sense."

Damon moved his hand up to her hair, moving it behind her ear. "Well, maybe I should work on getting you sleepy more often." His tone made it clear exactly what he was suggesting.

“No tempting me!” Freya protested. “I need my mind to not be in the gutter when I go home.”

She pulled away, fastening her shirt. “Though it’s probably good that we’re going. I forgot I would need more clothes...”

“We could have just gone shopping for clothes, you know.”

Freya raised an eyebrow. “Yeah, I’m skint. At least, I am without going into my savings, which are for getting me through university and the inevitable unemployment I will face after.”

“I meant using my credit card.”

Freya smirked. “Like some kind of trophy girlfriend? Using my posh boyfriend’s money that he got from his rich, upper-class family? No thanks.”

Damon sighed. “You not using it doesn’t mean that I don’t have it. I’m not trying to buy you or anything, I’m just trying to be practical. If I was trying to be creepy, I would buy you a full wardrobe and tell you that any discomfort you had about it was you being ungrateful.”

“Good to know that you *could* be creepy if you wanted to. That’s *super* reassuring.”

“I’m not the one who chose to watch that terrible vampire movie with the creepy, stalker boyfriend.”

“That was only so that you could truly appreciate Blade.”

“Uh-huh.”

She threw his trousers at him. “Are you going to get dressed so that you can come with me or not?”



FREYA FOUND HERSELF anxiously rocking back and forth on her heels as she knocked on the front door of her house, with Damon’s reassuring presence the only thing keeping her in place.

Margaret opened the front door with a glare. It only intensified as she saw Damon.

“Say goodbye to Damon,” she said sharply, folding her arms. Freya turned to him. “I’ll see you in a bit.”

Damon responded by kissing her, despite the fact that Margaret was right there, causing her to tense up.

“See you,” he said softly before heading back down the street. Freya knew that he wasn’t going to go any further than around the corner, but it still left her uneasy.

“In,” Margaret said, stepping aside to let Freya past. As soon as the door shut behind them, she exploded. “So *that* was it?! That was your reason for not coming home last night? You got yourself a new boyfriend and suddenly a phone call to let me know that you’re not, oh *I don’t know, dead in an alley somewhere* is too much?!”

“I- I didn’t-”

“What? Didn’t *think*?! Because that much is bloody obvious! Otherwise, my only option is to think that you’re callous enough to deliberately leave me worrying about you all night!”

The yelling was too much. Freya was more annoyed at Margaret than upset, and yet she started crying.

“Don’t you dare start throwing a tantrum. You are not a toddler, Freya!”

Freya couldn’t stop the tears. She had no idea how.

“I didn’t think you would care,” Freya reasoned as she tried to swipe away the tears as they fell, though her efforts were in vain.

“You didn’t think I would *care*?!”

Freya shrugged. “Well, I guess ‘notice’ would be more accurate...”

Thankfully, when Margaret spoke again, she wasn’t yelling. “Why would you think that?”

“I don’t know... You’ve just been... preoccupied. It’s fine, I just didn’t think you would be bothered about me staying out.”

Margaret sighed, shaking her head. “You *really* thought that I didn’t care?”

Freya shrugged. “Why would you? I’m a grownup now, pretty much. Your responsibility to look after me is all but formality at this point.”

“You think that’s all you are to me? A responsibility?”

Freya nodded.

“Freya...” Margaret’s eyes were laced with tears at this point. “I mean, I know that things have been... *hectic* around here, but have I really made you think that I don’t care about you?”

Freya shrugged. “I don’t know... I guess I just... I mean, why would you?”

“Why *would* I? Freya, why wouldn’t I?”

Freya just shrugged again, at a complete loss for an answer. She didn’t really have a reason, when she thought about it. She had just always assumed, like she did with all of her foster parents, that they were looking for an ideal that she would never meet. As soon as they realised that, they usually sent her back.

She realised that she had been assuming that Margaret had realised the truth long ago, and had only kept her around out of a sense of responsibility. Not much of a sacrifice to make when Freya was fast approaching eighteen.

Margaret sighed, shaking her head. “This doesn’t excuse last night. Freya, I had no idea where you were, and if I did... I didn’t mind you staying in Damon’s spare room when you two were just friends, but if you two are dating, I don’t know how happy I am with you staying at his overnight.”

Freya folded her arms. “I’m seventeen,” she reminded her foster mother.

“I know that. Look, Freya, I’m not trying to... All I’m saying is that I remember how quickly things can happen at your age. I

just want to make sure you... that you're safe and that you're sure about things."

"I've known Damon for years. I'm not sure how much slower we could have been going..."

"Uh-huh, and how long have you been dating?"

Freya thought on that and was surprised that the answer was only a few days. Had it been so little time? She supposed she could blame her counterpart in the Shadow Realm. She'd spent the last couple of nights syncing her memories back up. Most of it was still a blur, but not Damon. Not how she felt about him.

Plus, they were both magical beings, which meant heightened emotions, especially if they didn't frequently use their powers. Of course they would quickly be head over heels for each other.

But hell, she had mentioned engagement that morning. It had been a joke, and a true fact about their lives in an alternate universe, but now she couldn't shake the feeling that it had been inappropriate. Though it wasn't as if that was something she ever had any sense of anyway.

"If you stay at his, I want to know," Margaret told her. "And I'm not happy about it on school nights. Speaking of, aren't you supposed to be there right now?"

"I... I needed a mental health day..." That was far from a lie.

Margaret raised an eyebrow.

"I haven't been sleeping," Freya defended. "And I... I get so stressed and upset and I can barely read..."

Margaret sighed. She had made it clear that she wasn't happy with how big Freya's workload was. Though, after a moment, she narrowed her eyes.

"This wouldn't have anything to do with the results you were supposed to have back by now."

"A little," Freya managed to mumble. "I... I panicked on the exams. I dropped grades."

"To what?"

"Bs for maths and further maths, Cs for the others."

Margaret sighed. "Bs and Cs? That's not like you, Freya. Maybe if you'd started revision earlier—"

"I knew the stuff!" Freya protested, having to rein in her frustration to stop flames from dancing up her arms. "I just... I don't know. I freaked out and couldn't remember anything once the test was actually in front of me..."

"You should have said something," Margaret told her. "I might have been able to help after the first exam."

"I didn't want to be a bother," Freya mumbled. "And I hoped that it would still turn out okay."

"You're not a bother, Freya. Now, come on. We'll look at your workload and, if you need it, I'll look into tutors."



MARGARET ENDED UP DECIDING to wait until close to the summer exams before looking into the possibility of getting her a tutor, and Freya came away from their conversation with much less anxiety than she had entered with. In fact, she hadn't realised just how much of it had been buzzing around in the back of her head, even with her contemplating leaving her Human life behind.

Now it was significantly lessened and she was facing a sudden wave of exhaustion.

"I was going to watch Strictly, if you wanted to stay down here," Margaret offered. "I know you don't much like the tat that I do, but, well..."

"Um, I actually... I was going to head out."

"To see Damon?"

“Is that a problem?”

Margaret sighed with a frown, clearly indicating that she was looking for some reasonable excuse to keep Freya in the house. At least, for today.

“**I’ve known Damon for years,**” Freya said, not really surprised by the low tone beneath her words. She did her best to ignore her compulsion power when she used it. Or, if not ignore it, focus on the emotions that triggered it and try to ignore them in the future. If she had to use magic to get her way, she usually used a spell. It felt less... invasive. Or maybe she felt like she needed the effort of the spell to keep her in check, so that she wouldn’t start abusing the power for every little thing. She felt guilty, but she didn’t stop the effect. She couldn’t risk staying at home. If Uther sent men after her, they would go straight for her foster parents. No, better that Uther thought she was living at Damon’s permanently.

Maybe, even after everything that had just transpired, it really was time for Freya to let go of her Human life.

“I’m going to stay at Damon’s tonight and indefinitely after that. You will not question it. If anyone asks, I still live here, but I’m spending most of my time with Damon. Laugh it away by saying it’s puppy love. Find some way to explain it to Ryan so that he won’t worry. And if people start to get too suspicious, or strangers start asking about me, call and warn me. Otherwise, keep no contact. If you do call and I don’t respond in a few days... Act as you usually would if I had gone missing.”

Margaret’s eyes went glassy as Freya spoke, her skin paling, as if she was in unmoving terror. The colour quickly returned once Freya was done, however, and her vacant expression was replaced with a slight frown. Freya worried a little at that. She’d never used her compulsion to give such complex orders before.

However, Margaret's frown finally lifted, to be replaced by a smile.

"Have fun at Damon's," she said.

"I will," Freya replied, though she failed to make her voice as bright as she wanted.

She headed upstairs to her room, quickly filling her backpack with the essentials, from clothes to weapons. She had no idea when she would have the opportunity to come back, but she could make do with just the basics for now.

By the time she made it back outside, Damon was waiting for her at the end of the garden, his eyes glued to his phone.

"Hey," she called.

He lifted his head with a frown. "What happened? I tried texting but you didn't respond. I worried my father had gotten to you, but I could still sense you in the house."

"It's okay. Margaret and I just had to talk."

"About her sending you away?"

Freya shook her head. "No. I don't think she's really thought that far ahead yet. There's still time for her to change her mind between now and when the baby comes but... It doesn't matter. I can't continue putting them in danger like this. Not with your father after me. It would be safer for them if I wasn't around until we've dealt with him. And, if Gregor finds my father, then who knows? Maybe I won't have to go back at all..."

Damon smiled. "So, you're definitely staying with me for now, then?"

Freya nodded, though she felt a little uneasy after her talk with Margaret.

"Damon..." she started as they made their way down the street. "Do you... Do you think we're going too fast?"

He raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

“I just mean... Maybe the unrequited love thing has us thinking that we’re further along than we are. Not to mention the whole ‘two magical beings’ thing.”

Damon frowned in thought, shrugging. “I mean... I guess. I hadn’t really thought about it. We could slow down though, if it’s what you want.”

And there was the real question. *Was* it what she wanted, or was she just trying to tick boxes? Was their speed really bothering her, or was the outside perception the problem? But then, wasn’t there a reason for those conventions? Was this an area where the rules were arbitrary, or was she missing their importance?

The real question in the end was, as always, did she trust her own judgement, or the judgement of those around her?

“I’m not bothered,” she admitted. “I just... It’s unusual, and I’m not always good at telling the good unusual from the bad...”

“Well, I didn’t think it was bad until you brought it up,” Damon offered.

“And now that I have brought it up?”

“I don’t know... Most of my other girlfriends were the reverse, you know? Usually we got drunk and hooked up, and then we worried about relationship-y stuff. I don’t really know how it works when I actually like someone.”

Freya sighed. “Neither do I...”

“Then maybe we should just do what feels right for us. I mean, it’s not like we can hold ourselves to either Human standards or... What was that word? The one you use to mean not Autistic or mentally ill or whatever?”

“Neurotypical?”

“Yeah. We can’t exactly go by neurotypical standards, either.”

She smiled at that. “Yeah, I guess not.”

“So, we’ll just do whatever and it’ll probably be fine.”

Her smile widened into a grin at Damon's optimism, only to be quickly wiped away as a unicorn sped past them with a screaming rider on their back.

"Was that-" Damon started, but Freya had already rushed after them. "Wait up!"

Even when she enhanced her speed, the unicorn was too fast for Freya, but she managed to catch up with the rider as they crashed to the ground, unable to hold on anymore.

"Are you okay?" Freya asked them, realising that they were a young girl.

"No," she said as she started to cry.

"What happened?"

"I... I just made a wish and then..."

Freya sighed, nodding. There went the hope that no one had noticeably tapped into the excess.

"We have to get it back before it hurts someone," Damon said.

"Hurts someone? It's a unicorn!"

Damon looked at her as if she'd just said something incredibly naive. Though "naive" was being generous. He was looking at her like she'd just tried to say that dirt was chocolate.

"Okay, what is it? What don't I know?"

"Unicorns are bred by Elves for war."

"Really?"

"Freya, it's a *horse* with a *sword on its head!*"

"Okay, well, when you put it like that..."

"You'll have to tame it."

"Me? Why not you?"

He looked awkward at that. "Well, because, you know, you have to be..."

She raised an eyebrow, not realising what he was saying.

"You know... A virgin..."

She rolled her eyes. "Goddamn Elves..." she muttered, though she was suddenly feeling much better about them having been interrupted that morning.

She was about to launch herself after the unicorn, when she realised that she had no idea what she was doing.

"How do I tame it?" she asked.

Damon shrugged. "I don't know. I assume it would be like taming a horse."

"Yeah, I live in the city. I have only ever seen one horse irl, on a school trip to a farm when I was ten!"

"Ah."

"Can I kill it?"

"You can try."

She nodded, launching after it. Damon followed close behind and she reached into her bag, bringing out a sword for each of them.

Damon seemed surprised by her preparedness, astounding her with how lax his attitude was. How could he be magic and not leave the house with a weapon? Though, she supposed that Mel only ever had her wand with her. But that, at least, could be used offensively.

Damon was very much coddled, she decided as she shifted in front of the unicorn, startling it.

It reared up in response and she shifted back a step before a hoof made contact with her face.

She thrust her sword forward, but the unicorn countered it with its horn.

"A little help here!" she called to Damon as she threw fire at it, only for it to bounce off as if it were nothing.

"I'm trying!" Damon said, his own magic not having much effect.

“Magic’s no use,” she told him as she refocused on distracting the unicorn from him. “You’ll have to try something else.”

“Like *what?*”

She tried not to sigh. She didn’t know how much the unicorn understood, but she didn’t want to give anything away.

“Like something designed specifically to fight magic.”

She could sense the hesitation in his silence, telling her that he understood.

“I don’t... I’ve never...”

“I know,” she said as she narrowly avoided being skewered. “But you have to try.”

She couldn’t see what he was doing, as she kept her focus on distracting the unicorn, keeping its attention away from Damon.

Mid-thrust, the unicorn stopped dead, collapsing to the ground with a painful whimper. As it collapsed, she saw that Damon’s sword was lodged in its side, and his arm was covered in blood.

“Are you okay?” she asked Damon. He seemed even paler than usual.

“I... I nullified its magic...”

Freya nodded, unsure of what to say. He seemed unsettled.

“It felt wrong,” he eventually admitted. “Empty. I felt so *empty*, Freya.”

She approached him carefully, so that he could see what she was doing, before wrapping her arms around his middle and holding him tight.

“You’re okay. You don’t have to do it again,” she assured him.

“You can’t promise that,” he replied as he brought one hand up to her back, and the other to her head. Her hair began to clump together with the blood.

“I know, but I’ll try.”

“Even if I don’t... Freya, it’s still... It’s still *there*...”

She realised then that his uncle had probably been trying to protect him from this as much as anything else. Damon was a weapon designed to be used against himself. The fact that both Enhanced and Demonic abilities could exist within a single person was astounding, but also terrifying.

“I know, love, I know.”

He relaxed at her calling him *love* and she let out a breath of relief. Though it was short-lived as she realised that their fight had drawn a crowd. A crowd now investigating the unicorn with interest.

“I don’t suppose you’re good at heavy-duty clean-up?” Freya asked under her breath.

Damon pulled away from her to assess the situation. “I... I think this might be a job for the Royal Cleaners.”

Before Freya could ask what the hell the *Royal Cleaners* were, she heard a horrific screeching noise, quickly followed by the sound of metal thudding against concrete in rhythmic thuds.

The noise had her immediately grabbing the fabric of Damon’s t-shirt, looking for any purchase.

She threw up a sound barrier around herself, but it took a few moments under it for her to regain her sense of the world.

The fabric in her hands was now ash.

“I’m sorry,” she managed to mumble as she straightened herself back up. “It was the noise...”

“It’s okay,” Damon assured her. “I can always buy more tops.”

She brushed her fingers along his side, making sure that she hadn’t accidentally burned him.

“I’m fine, Freya. I’m pretty durable.”

She nodded, returning her attention to what had made the infernal racket in the first place, only to see that they were surrounded.

“Demons?” Freya asked as she saw them. “Why are they here? For clean-up?”

Damon didn’t answer, but she felt him tremble beneath her.

“What is it?” she asked him softly.

“I recognise one of them. They’re my father’s men...”

“It’s okay, we can take them.”

“Freya, I... I can’t feel my magic... And I don’t think I could nullify theirs. Not again. At least, not so soon.”

She nodded. “That’s okay. It’ll be okay, Damon.”

She retracted the soundproof bubble around them and faced the woman she assumed was in charge of the Demons surrounding them.

She was wearing combat gear that looked quite formal, with fewer leather straps than usual, and a smart black jacket. Just like the Demons that had shifted away from Freya two nights before.

“You here to clean up?” Freya asked, noting how most of the Demons had visible weapons. “Because you’re not exactly doing a good job of being low-key.”

“There is no longer a need for low-key,” the woman informed her. “While the excess is in effect, the Humans are no danger to us.”

“And after? When you idiots have exposed us all?”

“They will be no threat by that point.”

“If you’re not here to clean up, why are you here?”

The woman smiled before turning her head to the rest of the troops. “Kill the girl and take the boy. Uther will want him back.”

They responded by raising their hands, with Freya hearing just the barest crackle before she was engulfed in a flood of black lightning.



Chapter Eleven

“**W**hat the hell happened?” Freya demanded as she stormed through the castle.

“It was Caroline,” Mel told her as she wheeled up. “Uther sent her to capture Damon.”

“Capture him? Where is he?”

Mel gave her an apologetic look. “Sarah did all she could, but they were caught off guard. The only consolation is that Damon was a secondary objective. It looks like he sent her to kill you. Cut off our head, since facing us in battle isn’t going well for him.”

“Dammit it... Do we know where they took him?”

“Lady Persephone has a couple of operatives tailing them, but they can’t get to Damon.”

“But I can.”

“Lady Persephone said you would say that. She insisted that her brother accompany you.”

“Fine. As long as he doesn’t get in my way.”



FREYA AWOKE GASPING for air, every part of her screaming in pain as she sat bolt upright.

“Hey, Freya, you’re alright,” Gregor assured her as she realised that she had been lying on Damon’s bed. “You probably want to take a moment. You were almost dead when we found you. You’d used up all of your Energy.”

“Where’s Damon?” she croaked as the pain began to fade.

“I was hoping you could tell me that. I was in the Underworld and we started receiving reports that a large number of Demons had made their way to Earth, despite the King’s orders to stay put until the excess passes. When I got here, you were gone. Evelyn scryed for you, but couldn’t get a signal on Damon. That’s when we found you in the middle of a crater. I thought you were dead, but Evelyn assured me that you can’t scry for the dead. We brought you back and let you use up the source stones we had around.”

Freya looked down to see that there were several of the stones next to her on the bed, all drained of power.

“What happened, Freya? Where’s Damon?”

“I had to leave to see my foster parents. They were freaking out about me being gone. But, when we left, we saw a unicorn. It seems a kid tapped into the excess and brought one to them.”

“Did you tame it or kill it?”

“Damon killed it. Why?”

Gregor cursed under his breath. “Because a unicorn’s last line of defence is to curse the person that kills it. It’s a particularly nasty curse and very difficult to reverse.”

“But Damon tapped into his Enhanced abilities to stop it. He nullified its magic. Shouldn’t that include the curse?”

“Damon used his Enhanced powers? He’s never done that before.”

“Yeah, it kind of freaked him out.”

“If he did, then he may not have been cursed. So, what happened then?”

“That was when we were surrounded by Demons. Damon said they were his father’s men. Some woman told them to kill me and take him for Uther.”

“And this woman? What did she look like?”

Freya shrugged. "Long blonde hair, tallish? Her combat gear looked more like a uniform. I'm sorry, I'm not very good at taking note of appearances."

"It's okay, Freya. You had other things on your mind."

"Though... When I was out, I visited the Shadow Realm. Damon's gone there, but I was told that the woman who took him was called Caroline."

Gregor's eyebrows shot up. "Caroline? You're sure?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Lady Caroline is one of the noble Demons. She isn't one to throw in with others on ideological grounds. If she's working with Uther, it's because she's convinced that opposing him would be against her interests."

"She said that the Humans weren't a threat to them while the excess is in effect."

"Then Uther is most likely planning to use the excess to attack the Humans. If he can subjugate them now, rather than trying for peace as we did at the beginning of the War..."

"But, if he hadn't had Caroline attack me with magic in broad daylight, there would be no worry of another war."

Gregor shook his head. "Many think that another war is inevitable, Freya. As technology advances, there will only be so long we can stay hidden. And the longer we try, the more chance the Humans will have of being able to wipe us out when we are finally exposed. I may not agree with my brother, but he does this because he feels it's the only way to save us."

"It doesn't excuse starting a war. Or child abuse."

"I'm not saying that it does, Freya. What my brother did to Damon was inexcusable, and I'm going to do everything in my power to keep Caroline from handing him over."

"What exactly are you going to do?"

“Caroline will be leading the forces here in the city. She won’t leave until she’s finished, so Damon will stay with her. I can have Evelyn scry for her, now that we know she’s behind it. It’ll be taking a ridiculous amount of Energy for her to shield Damon, so she won’t bother for herself as well. Not when you were the only witness to her involvement and I would assume that she thinks you dead.”

“If you’re going to get him back, I’m going with you.”

Gregor responded by carefully scrutinising her, before finally nodding.

“Alright,” he agreed. “I have some more source stones. Use them to get your Energy levels back to normal.”

“With how worried I am over Damon, I doubt I’ll need them.”

“Still. And make sure you don’t have any physical injuries to take care of. We’ll leave as soon as Evelyn finds them.”



“CAREFUL,” GREGOR SAID as he drove them to the building Evelyn had tracked Damon to. Evelyn had stayed behind, however, to make sure that someone was there to let Seph and the King know if they failed.

Freya frowned at Gregor, wondering what he meant, only to realise that little sparks of energy were dancing across her skin.

“Sorry,” she said as she worked on dampening them. The last thing she wanted was to short out the car. Especially when it was her fault that they had to take it. She still hadn’t managed long distance shifting and Gregor wasn’t used to shifting with other people in tow. “I’m just worried about Damon.”

“Me too. But we’ll get him back.”

“Yeah,” she replied, though it sounded forced even to her ears.

“We’re almost there. Just try to think about something else.”

Freya nodded, her mind desperately searching for another thing to talk about.

“How did things go in the Underworld?” she eventually asked.

Gregor sighed. “I made progress.”

“Progress?” Freya asked as she sat up a little straighter. “You found my father?”

“It’s... It’s complicated, Freya.”

“What’s so complicated about it? Damon said that he probably had to be in the Shadow Realm, which would mean that he was a Geni. And he said that you knew Geni...”

“Alright, fine. I did find your father. It wasn’t particularly difficult; I already knew him.”

“You did? He was one of the Geni you had worked with in the past?”

“Yes. In fact, when he came back from the Shadow Realm, he was even more torn up than when he left. That’s the exact opposite of how it’s supposed to work. When he came back, he said that he had fallen in love when he was there. He’d gotten married and his wife had been pregnant, but that wasn’t supposed to happen. As far as the Geni knew, no one else was in the Shadow Realm at the time, which meant that he couldn’t have done anything like father a child, since it couldn’t be a reflection of this realm.”

“You all thought he was making it up?”

Gregor shrugged. “We didn’t know what had happened. The smart money was on his wife just being after him for his position, and making up the pregnancy. That could have been a reflection of this realm, only we could never figure out who his wife had been.”

“His position, what do you mean?”

“That’s where it gets complicated, Freya. What do you know of the Demon hierarchy?”

“There’s the king, and then there’s the nobles, and then... everyone else, I guess?”

“Yeah, that’s about right. Look, the nobility are a finicky bunch when it comes to inheritance and heirs. Especially when it comes to kids with mixed blood. Seph will deal with it, but, as you can imagine, things are a little hectic right now with making sure that magic isn’t exposed.”

“Shouldn’t my father be helping? If he’s one of the Geni, I mean.”

“He is, but not all of this fight will be on the battlefield, Freya. Your father was hurt on his return from the Shadow Realm. He’s in no fit state to fight, so he’ll aid Seph in trying to talk down the other nobles who want to throw in with Uther and Caroline.

“You’ll get to meet him, Freya. I promise. But, for now, we have to focus on what lies ahead.”

“Right. Focus.”

They lapsed into silence, still a while away from their destination. Freya tried to focus on what she could see out of the window, but all that did was make her hyper-aware of how there was no one else on the streets. No one driving around.

The Humans knew something was wrong, even if they didn’t know exactly what.

“What’s he like?” Freya eventually asked as her thoughts began to stray dangerously close to Damon again. “My father, I mean.”

Gregor gave her a reassuring smile. “He’s one of the best men I’ve ever known. And a good friend. I knew you were his daughter as soon as I saw your Energy, I just wish you hadn’t been so

well shielded all of these years. He's more than a little upset to have missed your childhood."

"Well, that makes two of us."

"Hey, Freya? He did his best. He kept looking, even when everyone around him said that it was fruitless. It's not his fault you've been impossible to track down."

No, Freya thought to herself. She was very well aware that had been Amber's fault.



GREGOR STOPPED BY A particularly tall building in the City Centre.

"We'll have to shift up to the roof of this building," Gregor told her as he turned off the engine.

Freya nodded, following him as he shifted. Once they had arrived, Gregor looked over the street to the roof of another building.

"That where they're keeping Damon?"

Gregor nodded. "The building will most likely be shielded. We can't shift in because the barrier repels magic, but we could jump across. I can mask my magic in order to pass through and you already have protections doing that."

"So we jump?" Freya asked, looking at the considerable distance between the two buildings.

"Think you can make it?"

Freya concentrated her thoughts on Damon, the aching in her heart causing Energy to bounce around just beneath her skin, ready to be let loose.

"I'll be fine."

Gregor nodded before launching himself across the gap, using a blast of Energy to propel himself the last little way as he started to fall.

Freya concentrated all of her Energy to her legs, propelling herself upwards as far as she could.

She started to fall, just as Gregor did, and created a blast to propel herself back up, but she had misjudged the distance.

She threw her arms in front of her face to cushion her crash into the concrete wall, but no crash came. She opened her eyes to see that she had stopped, her wings flapping gently behind her.

She focused on flapping them just a little harder, hoping that it took her back up. Thankfully, it did, and she managed to manoeuvre herself onto the roof, though it was a little clumsy and involved a lot of her twisting her torso from side to side in an attempt to fly forward.

“Handy,” Gregor said as she tried to figure out how to land.

She dropped unceremoniously to the floor, barely staying on her feet. “They would be if I knew how to use them.”

“At least it’s better than becoming an Angel pancake on the side of the building.”

“Fair point.”

“We’re past the barrier now. Our magic won’t be detected unless someone’s looking for it.”

Freya nodded as they approached the locked door.

“Let me handle this,” she said as she uncapped the vial of water she kept on her belt.

She directed the water to the lock, pushing it around until the tumblers fell into place and the door clicked open.

“Well, there’s definitely something to be said for unconventional training,” Gregor commented with a smile.

Freya shrugged as she moved the water back to the vial. “You learn to be resourceful when you banish your mentor.”

“You what?”

“My mother bound an ancestor of hers to me,” Freya explained as they made their way down the stairs, using a sound-

proofing spell to keep Caroline's men from hearing them. "If I don't want her around, I can banish her. I kind of did by accident when I first asked her about my father and she refused to answer. I barely managed to get her back."

"You haven't mentioned her before."

"I... I got mad at her again. She was keeping too many secrets and I'm afraid that, if she appears again, I'll banish her. So she's staying out of my way."

"I'm sorry," Gregor told her.

Freya shrugged. "I imagine, once I meet my father, I will no longer have use for her. I'll say goodbye before letting her move on."

Freya frowned as she realised she had stopped and made her way to the door of the current floor, instead of making her way further down.

"Wait, how do we know where Damon is in the building?" she asked. "Evelyn's scrying wasn't that specific."

"I was just following you."

Freya frowned at him. "What do you mean 'following me'? How would I know?"

"Just trust me. This will be the right floor," he said. "Can you cloak yourself? So that they can't see you, I mean?"

Freya shrugged. "I've never tried a glamour that heavy before. Not even on Humans, never mind magical beings."

"Well, do your best to stay out of sight."

"What are you going to do?"

"Talk to Caroline."

"If you were just going to hand yourself over, what was the point of sneaking in?"

"Because we were sneaking *you* in. You need to get Damon in case Caroline isn't co-operative."

“And you think that she might be? She tried to kill me. She thinks that she has. And she’s going to hand Damon over to his father.”

“What Uther did to Damon is not common knowledge, and she has no idea who you are. Most people assume you’re allied with the Council of Light. There hasn’t been a Dark Angel for a *long* time.

“So, I’ll hand myself over, and you tail me. I’m guessing she’ll keep Damon close.”

Freya nodded, pulling glamours and illusions around herself, hoping that there wouldn’t be too many guards. In order to fool magical creatures, the glamour had to be aimed at them, and they would start to see through it once they knew it was there.

Gregor strolled quite casually through the door and into a corridor filled with numbered doors, that told Freya that they were in a block of flats.

She followed behind him, sticking close to the wall and making small movements in an effort to take as much strain from her glamours as she could.

“Hello?” Gregor called. “Anyone there?”

Two guards immediately stormed out of one of the flats, both aiming their swords squarely at Gregor. Freya focused her glamour on them as soon as they were within her eye line, and they made no indication that they had seen her.

Gregor raised his hands in surrender. “I’m just looking for Caroline.”

“Lady Caroline is not expecting you,” the guard on the right said.

“Okay, well, I’m pretty sure that she has my nephew, and the King left him in my care, so her not expecting me is entirely her oversight.”

The two guards exchanged a worried glance before nodding.

“Alright,” the right guard said. “We’ll take you to her. But no activating your Energy, or we will remove you.”

“It’s okay. We’re all friends here.”

The guard gave him a look that suggested that he didn’t believe him, but he nonetheless took Gregor through to the flat, with Freya creeping in behind them.

“Lady Caroline,” the guard announced as they entered the living room. “Lord Gregor is here to see you.”

Gregor flinched, but Freya wasn’t paying attention. Her eyes scanned the room and quickly settled on Damon lying on the sofa, unconscious beneath a series of binding charms.

Freya crept over to him and focused on the charms, attempting to unravel them. She hoped that Gregor had the sense to buy her enough time to do so if Caroline wasn’t in the mood for cooperation.

“I do so hate titles,” Gregor said as Caroline looked him over, her hands firmly clasped behind her back as she stood impeccably strait.

“Indeed. You never had much love for politics, just the sword.”

Gregor shrugged. “I just know what I’m good at.”

Caroline smiled but it faded quickly. “I assume you’re here for the boy. Don’t worry, he’s quite safe. I just thought it best to bind him after we dealt with his girlfriend. We didn’t want things getting nasty.”

“Yes, when you killed a girl in broad daylight.”

“Not a girl, Gregor. An Angel. Has your brother told you nothing?”

“We don’t talk much.”

Caroline sighed and looked almost sympathetic. “I’m sorry, Gregor. I had assumed that, with you taking care of his son, you two had smoothed things over.”

“I take care of his son because Seph asked me to.”

“Ah yes, Lady Persephone. Ever the thorn in my side. I suppose she sent you here then?”

“Caroline... What the hell is going on? Why did you kill the Angel? And where Humans could see you, too.”

“Because Demons are dying, Gregor. There are too few of us, and the King’s rebuilding efforts will only work as long as he’s alive. There is no heir with Royal Blood, Gregor. We will surely fall to infighting without that steel hand guiding us; it’s in our nature. Another war is inevitable, so we might as well ensure that we are on the winning side. Taking advantage of the excess will ensure that. Killing the Angel made sure that she wouldn’t interfere, and told her Council of Light to stay clear as well.”

Gregor folded his arms as Freya made her way through the second last binding charm.

“My brother played you for a fool,” Gregor told Caroline softly. “The Angel never had any allegiance to the Council of Light.”

“All Angels align with them eventually. They’re always of Light or Human blood.”

“Not this one,” Gregor told her, stepping closer to her, as if everyone else in the room didn’t have superhuman hearing. “Caroline, she was Edric’s daughter.”

“What- But- He doesn’t-”

“It’s a long story. Let’s just say that she was kept on Earth for her safety and Uther found out. That’s why he asked you to kill her.”

“And I did... Creator, what have I done?”

“Well, you knocked her out for a few hours, but nothing permanent.”

“I... What?”

“Caroline, she’s an Angel and you threatened to take away her Soulbound. She had just enough Energy to protect herself from what you did to her.”

Damon gasped, bolting upright as Freya broke the last binding charm. She gave up on her glammers, given how well things seemed to be going with Caroline, and let Damon pull her close, in what she assumed was an attempt to check that she was real.

“It’s okay, I’m here,” Freya assured him.

“I saw you die,” he muttered into her hair.

“You can’t get rid of me that easily,” she joked, weakly.

“No, I guess not,” he managed, his grip tightening slightly before he pulled away. “You don’t even have a scratch on you.”

“Benefit of being attacked by pure Energy. Though, I think I might sleep for a week.”

Caroline spoke once more as Damon laughed, though her words were soft, clearly meant for Gregor and not to interrupt them. “Persephone is certainly gifted, to have planned this all out so fortuitously.”

“Yes, it does look that way, doesn’t it?”

“I suppose that the King won’t accept ‘no harm, no foul’, will he?”

“No. But then, I don’t have to tell him everything.”

“Gregor-”

“It’s not your fault, Caroline. You didn’t have all of the information, and my brother is very good at playing people.”

“Still, I should have looked closer before blindly following him.”

“You had no reason to be suspicious. Seph goes to great lengths to cover for him because he’s valuable to her. I don’t think anyone outside of our family knows how much of a dick he is.”

“I knew what he had said to you.”

“Yes, but you assumed we’d made up. I guess everyone must think that, with me looking after Damon.”

“Well, no one really knows about Damon, either. Uther only told me to make sure I didn’t hurt him when getting the girl. When he told me that you were looking after him, nothing indicated that he was unhappy with the situation.”

“And you didn’t think it suspicious that he kept his son a secret?”

“Just as Edric has done with his daughter?”

“Fair point. Though that’s, like I said, a long story. She only just found out herself.”

“Really? But who raised her?”

“No one. Edric only just found out too.”

“Poor thing. How is she adjusting?”

“I don’t think we’ve even begun with the adjusting yet...”

Caroline moved away at that point to talk to her men.

“Well, I suppose I had better talk to Finus.”

“Finus shifted out,” one of the other men told her. “Just after Gregor told you that the Angel wasn’t dead.”

Caroline cursed under her breath, shaking her head.

“He was one of Uther’s men?”

She nodded. “He lent him to me to help, though I knew it was to keep an eye on me. I just thought it was because Uther was a controlling bastard, not that he was setting me up.”

“Setting you up?”

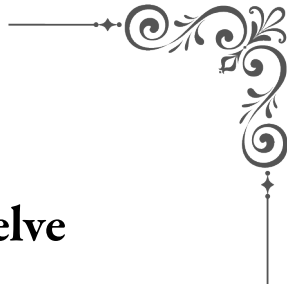
“There’s a reason he didn’t have his own men kill the girl, Gregor. I’m guessing he knows who she is. And while everyone was wrapped up thinking I was a traitor, he would have had the leeway to secure the Earth.”

“Then I’d better head back and tell Seph what’s going on. If Uther knows Freya is still alive and we have Damon...”

“I’ll go with you,” Caroline said before turning to Freya and Damon. “You still at your old place?” she asked Gregor.

He nodded.

She waved her hand and the room disappeared around Freya and Damon.



Chapter Twelve

Freya blinked as she realised that she was back at Gregor's apartment, with Damon sitting next to her.

"Caroline can shift other people?" she asked.

Damon shrugged. "I guess. Some people can."

"Are you okay?" she asked him, looking him over. He was still covered in unicorn blood, but it had long dried and he no longer looked as washed out as he had when Caroline had taken him.

Damon nodded. "I think so. I'm not injured, and I can feel my magic again."

"So it's just temporary when you use your Enhanced ability?"

Damon nodded, but his gaze was distant. "Even if it is only temporary, I still never want to use it again. Being cut off from my magic like that... I can't really describe how awful it was, Freya. It felt like I had been hollowed out."

"So don't use it again," she told him. "No one is making you."

"I... Yeah. You're right." He looked himself over, pulling a face at the dried blood. "I'm going to take a shower."

"That's probably a good plan."



BY THE TIME DAMON RETURNED from the shower, he was looking much better, but Freya was stretching her arms

above her head as she fought off a yawn. The day had been tiring. Or was she hungry? It was one of the two...

“Food?” Damon asked as he made his way to the kitchen.

“Food sounds good,” Freya said, figuring it had a 50/50 chance of making her feel better.

To her surprise, Damon started pulling out actual *food* food as she sat down on a kitchen stool. Fresh vegetables and pasta were placed on the bench, instead of waffles and fish fingers from the freezer.

She frowned. “You don’t have to cook if you’re wiped out.”

“It’s fine. I got more than enough time to rest while Caroline had me under the binding spells. Plus, I like cooking.”

“I’m kind of surprised you know how.”

“My uncle taught me. Why?”

Freya shrugged. “I can only bake. I don’t see the point of putting so much effort in for something that isn’t cake or pie or biscuits.”

Damon smiled, shaking his head. “Well, as much as pie might be nice, I’m thinking something healthier. Like chicken pasta.”

“Hmm... What about making it chicken and *bacon* pasta?”

He narrowed his eyes. “You drive a hard bargain,” he said as he made his way over to fridge, bringing about a packet of bacon.

Freya grinned. “I just like meat.”

Damon raised his eyebrows and she could practically feel the unspoken *That’s what she said*.

“Not what I meant,” Freya told him, though she was struggling to hold back a grin. Especially as he turned around to start cooking the pasta and she noticed how tight his jeans were.

“Sure it wasn’t,” he replied with a smile.

“Food first,” she told him. “Then...” She waved her hand with a blush.

“Then?”

She lost her words at that. She was pretty sure that she had just taken the subtext and made it text, in her usual, awkward manner.

“Are you okay?” Damon asked.

She shook her head, before realising that it would look like it was the idea of sex that was upsetting her, which wasn’t true.

“I don’t have the words,” she tried to explain.

“The words?”

“Um... Scripting.”

“Which is...?”

“It’s how I talk. I memorise phrases other people have said, or from TV, and I piece them together to make them say what I want. But I don’t have any scripts here, so it’s just... blank.”

“Then try to piece together what you can. And don’t worry about it being ‘socially acceptable’ or not. I’m not going to judge, Freya.”

She nodded mutely, trying to figure out what she wanted to say.

“I mean, your uncle’s out for the night...”

“Yep.”

“And we got interrupted this morning...”

“That we did.”

“So... We could try, you know, tonight, to... I mean, we could... Just see if we can...” She mashed her fingers together awkwardly in the hopes that it would better convey what she meant, but quickly gave up with a dejected sigh.

“I suck at this...” she groaned as she rested her head in her hands.

Damon shook his head. “No, you don’t. It’s fine.”

“It is?”

“Yeah. And, you know, you can say the word, Freya.”

“The word?”

“The one you were struggling to avoid.”

She made a noise of protest. “Saying it isn’t sexy,” she eventually said.

“Okay, first of all, I don’t think that’s true, and, secondly, I don’t think you need anything else impeding your communication.”

She gave a frustrated groan. “Fine. I’m referring to screwing, okay? I like you and we’re together, and I want to give it a go. But I’m anxious, not because I don’t want to, but because it’s new and I don’t do well with new. Plus, there’s sensory stuff involved, which is always tricky for me.”

“So, we’ll figure it out,” he said with a reassuring smile. “Go slowly. Use a safe word.”

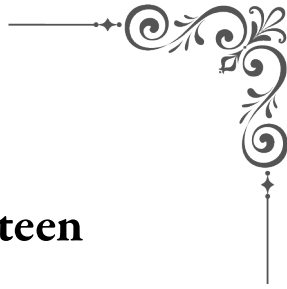
“I thought safe words were just for, like, 50 Shades stuff...”

“Okay, are you honestly telling me that it wouldn’t make you feel much better if you had a word that meant ‘remove all hands, etc. and move at least five feet away’?”

Freya had to give a hum of agreement at that.

“So, anything else you can think of?”

“I, um, no, not really,” she told him. “I don’t know, I might think of something else in a bit...”



Chapter Thirteen

“Well, this is embarrassing,” Caroline said with a sigh as Freya untied Damon. “I suppose you’ll want to execute me now or something.”

Freya just glared at her glib tone. She didn’t execute people, and she couldn’t tell if Caroline was making a jab at that fact, or if it was just her attempt at gallows humour.

“Perhaps you could show mercy in this instance,” Gregor said, interrupting. “After all, Uther did manipulate her situation.”

“She kidnapped the Prince.”

“Whose right to rule has been contested along with your own. There is no need to make an enemy out of a potential friend.”

Freya stood up, having released Damon from his bonds, giving Caroline a critical look over.

“And are you a potential friend, or would I be inviting a viper into my home?”

“I had every reason to believe that the kid wasn’t with you of his own free will and that you were a usurper-”

“I didn’t ask for excuses, I asked where your loyalties lie.”

“My loyalty was to your parents but, since their death, it’s been to my own interests. Right now, it’s clear that it is not in my interests to oppose you. Whether you’re worthy of anything else, well, I guess we’ll just have to see if you live up to your legacy.”

Freya nodded, grateful for the lack of political doublespeak. “I am thankful for your honesty,” Freya told her. “If you wish, you may

accompany us back to the palace as my guest. You can judge for yourself how well I maintain the family legacy."

"You know, I think I will do just that."



FREYA WAS PRETTY SURE that waking up to the smell of ash should have alarmed her, but she was far more interested in snuggling into Damon's warmth as he held her.

Damn. She took back every negative thought she had ever had about him having been with other people while she had been too scared to admit her feelings for him. She was more than happy to trade her angst for his experience.

People had always told her that it would *hurt*. That it would be like someone shoving a jackhammer up there.

All he'll care about is getting his, had been Margaret's version of the sex talk.

But Damon had been careful and considerate and *damn* did he know how to put his tongue to good use.

"Freya?" Damon said, groggily.

"Yeah?"

"You've got ash in your hair."

Freya frowned as she sat up, finally opening her eyes, only to see that most of Damon's room looked like it had been the victim of a Hollywood action movie fight scene. There were scorch marks everywhere, and quite a few things were broken.

"What happened?" Freya asked, though she put two and two together as soon as the words had left her mouth.

Just kissing caused literal sparks between them.

She, admittedly, hadn't put any thought towards dampening her magic the night before.

"Nothing that can't be fixed," Damon assured her. "Though I could probably use a shower to get all of the ash off."

“Same.”

“And then pancakes,” Damon decided as he got up, making no attempt to find any pants. Not that Freya was complaining.

Nope. Definitely not complaining..

“Speaking of showers...” Freya said, wagging her eyebrows so that her meaning wasn’t lost.

Damon simply responded with a grin.



FREYA MADE HAPPY LITTLE humming noises as she ate her pancakes.

“I’m going to keep you around just for your cooking,” Freya told him with a grin.

“I think I can live with that arrangement,” Damon replied.

Freya smiled as they heard the front door open.

“Damon? Freya?” Gregor called.

Freya hopped off the stool and made her way to the living room, closely followed by Damon.

Gregor was there, shrugging off a jacket much like the one Caroline had worn. He looked tired.

“What happened?” Damon asked.

“I went to talk to Seph.”

“And?”

“And, I told her what happened, she immediately got a headache, and then she got that *look*.”

“What look?” Freya asked as Damon tensed up next to her.

“The look she gets when she knows what’s going to happen and knows that she can’t do anything to stop it.”

Freya frowned. “What do you mean?”

“My aunt is a Seer,” Damon told her.

“And a damn good one,” Gregor continued. “But just because she can see Fate’s plan, doesn’t mean that she can change it.” He turned to Freya. “She said to tell you that she’s sorry.”

“Me?”

“Yes. Apparently Fate isn’t going to be too kind to you.”

Freya started to tug at her pendant. “She didn’t give specifics?”

“No. She doesn’t know, she just knows what will happen once we act against Uther.”

Freya sighed, hating herself for the idea that came to her. “She might not know, but I know someone who has been harping on about Fate’s plan for me being bad for some time now.”

Damon shook his head as he realised what she was suggesting. “Freya, if you’re not ready to see her-”

“I am, Damon. I have to be.” Freya turned from him, her hand clutching at her pendant. “Amber?”

Her guardian materialised after a moment and Freya extended her connection to her guardian to the other two, so that they could all see her.

“Are you ready to talk?” Amber asked, looking surprisingly sheepish.

“I need information,” Freya said, sharply. “About the things you’ve been keeping from me.”

“I guess that’s fair,” Amber agreed, before seeing Gregor and Damon. “Why are you talking to me in front of others? And... Did you extend our connection to them?”

“Yes, they have magic. Damon’s half Demon.”

Amber’s expression seemed to soften that. “Is that why you’ve kept me away for so long? You were afraid I wouldn’t approve?”

“I kept you away because I was furious with you. And, well, I mean, you did let Ku mess with your husband’s magic to suppress

his Demonic side. I don't have the power to do that to Damon, and I wouldn't want to even if I could. I don't have the right to mess with his magic like that, not to mention how hypocritical it would be. As much as we both like to pretend that my Demonic magic is simply a byproduct of some distant ancestor, I think we both know that it's too powerful for that."

Amber simply looked sad once Freya finished. It was an old sadness, one that Freya saw peek out from under Amber's teacher mask every so often. Freya could never figure out what exactly triggered it, but every so often it would be there.

"Freya, I have always regretted what I let Ku do in my anger. My husband died because he didn't have access to his full powers. Because I was too young to understand that not all Demons are evil."

Freya frowned. "But... That's not what you say when you talk about Demons..."

Amber gave her an apologetic smile. "Because I wanted to do everything I could to alleviate you of the guilt of killing them."

Freya didn't really have a response for that. Amber was right; she wasn't sure that she would have been so able to make those killing blows if she'd hadn't believed that Demons deserved it. Of course, now she knew that most, if not all, of the Demons she had fought, had worked for Uther. That was enough for her to not be so broken up about it.

Amber turned to Damon. "So, you're half Demon. And what about your other half? Human?"

Damon's gaze dropped to the floor. "Enhanced."

Amber's eyebrows raised up that. "Enhanced? In this time-line?"

"That's not why we called you here," Freya said, cutting her off. "You've been very careful to keep me away from the magical community and you have been vocal about your distrust of Fate."

Was that just paranoia, or do you actually know what her plans for me are?”

Amber fell silent and, to Freya’s surprise, Gregor stepped forward.

“Amber. I’m guessing, by the story about the Ancient, that you’re Amber Cohen?”

“Yes,” Amber told him with a slight glare, as if to reinforce just who he was talking to.

“Well, I guess that answers one question then,” Gregor said with a sigh.

“What question?” Freya asked with a frown.

Gregor didn’t answer her, instead keeping his attention on Amber.

“Can we talk without Freya in the room?”

“Yes, I believe that’s possible,” Amber told him.

“What? Why?” Freya protested.

Amber shook her head. “It’s fine, Freya. There are just a couple of things that we need to sort out.”

They headed into the kitchen, and Freya felt a barrier spell go up behind them, blocking their hearing, but not Freya’s magic.

“What do you think that’s about?” Damon asked.

Freya frowned. “I have no idea, but I’m sure as hell going to find out.”

Maybe she couldn’t *hear* hear, but her magic was still in the room. Maybe she could use that to figure out what they were saying.

She concentrated on the magic threads, connecting her to the two adults. She focused it, sensing the vibrations in the air.

“-but I suspected,” Amber said.

“But you’ve never told Freya? It would have taken all of five minutes for you to have confirmed your suspicions. You let her grow up without a father!”

"It was what her mother wanted!"

"Then her mother was an idiot! The fact that Freya is even still standing is some kind of miracle. She has a target painted on her back for both who and what she is."

"All the more reason for her to hide. If nobody ever found out—"

"Did you honestly think that would work?! All you've done is hurt Freya, and let my brother send his lackeys to try to figure out her weak spot."

"He knows who she is?"

"He sent Demons after her once he realised that Damon cared for her. It didn't take him long to figure out what was going on."

Amber was silent for a time at that.

"I get the what but the who? How did he figure that out?"

"Because Freya is the reason Damon's here. My sister is a Seer and she cast a spell to look for her. All she saw was Damon, so she took him away from our brother and set him up here."

"She saw Damon...? But that would mean..."

"That they're Soulbound. Yeah."

"Shit..."

"What's the problem? Have you seen them? They're happy together."

"The problem is that he's Enhanced and a Demon. And with her being what she is..."

There were another few moments of silence.

"You think Fate's angling for—"

Freya ran out of Energy at that point, collapsing to the floor.

Thankfully, Damon caught her, holding her close before helping her to a stool.

"Are you okay?" he asked as he found a bottle of Lucozade in the fridge and passed it to her.

She downed it in one, thankful for the sugar removing the fuzziness from her head.

“Yeah. I just overextended myself,” she admitted. “I didn’t realise how hard it would be to use magic to replace one of my other senses.”

Damon nodded. “Most can’t even do it for more than a few moments at a time.”

“Benefits of being an Angel, I guess.”

Damon smiled, though it faded as he asked, “So, what did they say?”

Freya shrugged. She didn’t want to tell Damon that the only reason his aunt and uncle stepped in to stop his father was to find her. There was no way that wouldn’t be upsetting.

“What does Soulbound mean?” she asked him, finally deciding what she wanted to deal with.

Damon frowned. “It’s a Fate thing, I think. If she has a plan for two people, she binds them together. It basically turns them into magnets for each other.”

“A plan for them?”

“Usually it’s for if they’re either meant to kill each other, or fall in love in a pretty permanent way.”

And she was Soulbound with Damon. And Amber thought that Fate had plans for them. Plans that had even Gregor concerned. Plans that had Damon’s aunt apologising to her in advance.

Damon was Enhanced and a powerful Demon. Freya was an Angel.

Fate didn’t throw together people like that unless something big was coming.

And then they usually died.

Freya felt ill at the thought. Amber had more than enough experience with Fate’s plan, and it had led to the deaths of every member of her family. Her husband, her son, her daughter-in-law, her granddaughter... All lost because they were powerful. Be-

cause Fate needed them, used them, and then didn't want them to continue to interfere.

"Why?" Damon asked her.

Freya sighed, deciding to be as truthful as possible without hurting him. "That was one of the things they were arguing about. That we're Soulbound."

Damon smiled at the news, but it faded quickly. "Wait, arguing about it? Why?"

"Amber doesn't trust Fate. And I think that us being Soulbound might have something to do with what your aunt saw."

"How is knowing that we're going to be together bad news?"

Freya sighed. She didn't really want to bring up Amber's past, but it was at the forefront of her mind. She would be willing to bet that Amber's son had been Soulbound with the Angel he had fallen for. She also didn't want to get too close to the fact that being Soulbound was the only reason Damon had escaped his father.

"Because, as Amber pointed out, I'm an Angel. That makes me the most powerful being below the Big Three. And you're from one of the most powerful Demon families, and you're Enhanced. Why would Fate want the two of us together, unless she needed us for something big?"

Damon shrugged. "So? Whatever it is, we'll face it together."

Freya sighed, not really believing that it would turn out so well for them. But she nodded anyway, as Gregor and Amber returned to the room.

"Alright," Gregor said, "now that that's out of the way, have any of you checked the news this morning?"

"We're not done," Freya said, folding her arms. "You two can't just run off and talk without us and then say everything is sorted."

"I'm sorry," Amber told her, "but these secrets are no longer mine to tell."

She disappeared at that.

Freya turned back to Gregor, glaring.

Gregor sighed. "Freya, she's right. This is something to be dealt with once things calm down. There isn't the time to talk about it, and it deserves to be talked about properly. Now, the news, have you seen it?"

Freya and Damon shook their heads.

"Uther's not even trying to hide anymore. The Humans are running scared, and it's purely luck that the media hasn't realised the truth yet."

"How do we fix it, then?" Freya asked.

Gregor shrugged. "The Cleaners are formulating a plan now. My contact is going to come and let me know once they have it figured out."

"When will you hear from them?"

"No later than this afternoon."



FREYA AND DAMON FOCUSED on not watching the news or going online for the rest of the morning, instead distracting themselves with video games.

By the time Gregor's phone rang, Freya and Damon had managed to convince themselves that the blasts they heard outside were just background noise in their game, not Uther's men.

"Come on," Gregor had said, his face unusually stoic. "I know where we need to go to fix this."

That was how they ended up in the back of his car, watching out of the window at the silent world

“How could Uther be allowed to do this?” she asked as they sped past several houses that looked almost ghostly in their emptiness.

Gregor shrugged. “He’s using more intermediaries, like Caroline. Seph tried to talk to him, but he’s feigning ignorance.”

“But Caroline was there. She’s a witness.”

“It’s her word against his, and he has more allies than her. To accuse him wouldn’t end well for her. Which means that this all has to be behind closed doors.”

They headed to the outskirts of town, the SUV heading off-road and into a field.

In the middle of the field stood a man in a dark suit, with a black cane.

“Gregor’s contact?” Freya asked Damon lowly, but he didn’t answer for a few moments, instead staring out of the window.

“That’s the Demon King,” Damon eventually told her, his voice a hollow whisper.

“That’s good, right?” Freya asked, not really getting Damon’s fear. Demon King or not, he wasn’t projecting an aura of fear, and just looked like any other young man, though his black hair was flecked with grey that seemed out of place. “We need all of the help we can get.”

Damon nodded silently, clearly not happy, but accepting that there was no real choice in the matter. The Demon King was here, and he was probably there to help.

Freya got out of the car just after Gregor, Damon trailing behind her.

The Demon King grinned at Gregor, greeting him with a slap on the arm. “Gregor! Doesn’t this just remind you of Lord Daven’s rebellion?”

Gregor smiled at him, shaking his head. “I remember saving your arse in that fight, what was it? Five times?”

The Demon King shrugged. "Six. But I saved yours seven, so you still owe me."

"That's not how I remember it."

"That's because you're getting old."

"I'm younger than you!"

Freya couldn't help but smile at that. This was the great and feared Demon King? He seemed far too laid back for that. He and Gregor were clearly two peas in a pod.

The Demon King turned to her and Damon at that point, and his warmth seemed to fade as he examined her. Freya supposed that was natural. He was evaluating the threat in front of him. The potential enemy that he had only heard of second-hand.

But it put her on edge.

Suddenly it wasn't so much of a question why Damon was scared of him. Her hackles raised and, for the first time in years, she honestly wondered if she would be able to beat the person in front of her if it came to a fight.

It wasn't a feeling she enjoyed.

No. Scratch that. It was the feeling she absolutely hated the most.

"So," the Demon King said after a few moments of examining her, "you're the Angel protecting this city?"

Her usual *I'm not an Angel* retort died on her tongue, as she remembered that it wasn't true, and she simply nodded.

"And you're Damon's Soulbound?"

She nodded once more.

"You know that Uther has been after you?"

Another nod.

"Why do you think that is?"

"Damon," she answered simply. "He wants Damon back, and he thinks that he can use me to get to him."

“Partially,” the Demon King said, though he didn’t elaborate. “Do you know why I’ve asked you to meet me in the middle of a field?”

Freya would have answered *no*, but she got the feeling that he was testing her. She concentrated her magic on sensing the space around her, and quickly came up against a magical barrier beneath them.

“There’s something beneath us,” she told him, folding her arms. Testing would grow tiring if he persisted.

He nodded. “An emergency reset. This area has been subject to an unusual concentration of magic for the past couple of centuries. It was only a matter of time before an excess caused problems. My father had the Cleaners set this up, in order to be activated if the worst were to happen.”

“Well, that’s definitely the case now,” Freya figured. “Why do I sense that there’s a ‘but’?”

The Demon King smiled at her. “Because there is. The reset involves annulling all magic in the area for a short while, and then adjusting everyone’s memories.”

“Sounds a little extreme.”

“Indeed. Only someone of great power can activate it, and the path to the spell is not easy. If misused, this could be a weapon.”

Freya nodded. “Alright, so Damon and I will venture in and I’ll activate the spell. I’m guessing I’ll be powerful enough?”

The Demon King nodded. “That is the hope.”

Gregor frowned, turning to his friend. “Are you sure about this? We could-”

“The truth, Gregor, is more important.”

“I really don’t think it is right now.”

“There can be no mistakes. **Not with this.**”

Gregor nodded, bowing a little as any objection died in his throat.

The Demon King turned back to Freya. "Your power will be enough to activate the spell, but the guardian will not recognise you. It will test you, to ensure that you are not using it for your own gain."

Freya frowned. "Test me? How?"

He smiled. "Don't worry. I have every confidence that you'll pass."

"No, you don't," she said, folding her arms. "That's what Gregor meant, isn't it? I'm powerful, but so are you. And I'm guessing, since your father built this place, the guardian would recognise you. You're sending me to test me. Why?"

"You are Damon's Soulbound and Damon is my chosen heir. I need to know that you can be trusted."

Freya's eyes narrowed at that. If he knew that she was Damon's Soulbound, then he knew that she was the very person he had sent Damon to search for.

But challenging that would reveal to Damon why he had been taken from his father.

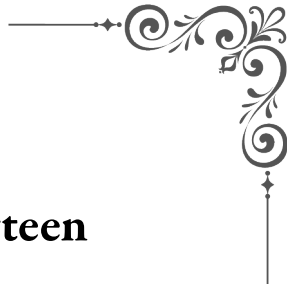
"Fine," Freya agreed. "I'll take your test."

The Demon King tapped his cane on the ground before stepping back as it parted to reveal a round hole.

Freya couldn't see far enough inside to tell how far the jump was, but she supposed that the Demon King wouldn't want her to get a broken leg in the first minute.

Or, at least, she could trust that he didn't want that for Damon.

She jumped with only a moment's hesitation.



Chapter Fourteen

After an eternity of falling, Freya could have sworn that she felt herself slowing down. A little while later, she dropped softly onto what felt like a stone floor, with the faint *thud* of Damon dropping down next to her.

It was pitch black and Freya focused her magic into flames across her hands and up her forearms. The fire dimly illuminated the stone hall, showing her torches on the walls. She threw fire at them from her hands to light up the rest of the room. She sensed around the enclosed space, but found that her senses couldn't penetrate the large, extravagantly detailed steel door at the end of the hall. When she tried, she could sense nothing but a confusing barrage of Energy beyond. She tried to piece it together, but it was like staring into the sun, and she soon found herself tiring.

She pulled herself from the effort, deciding to focus on more immediate things.

"Are you okay?" she asked Damon, moving over to him.

He smiled. "Fine now that I can see you." He leaned in and kissed her, surprising her with how out of place the gesture was, though she couldn't really object when she instinctively returned the kiss.

She pulled away without the usual sparks.

Damon threw her a bottle of blue sports drink from his backpack, for which she was immediately thankful.

“You need to replenish your emotional and physical energy before we get to the tests,” he reminded her. “Who knows what they’ll be.”

“How did you know I’d drained myself?”

He shrugged. “I sensed it.”

“Through my protections?”

He smiled. “Close your eyes.”

She did as he asked. “Okay, now what?”

She felt his hand over hers.

“Try to sense me.”

“I can’t. You have protections. I’ve never been able to sense through them.”

“Because we never knew we were Soulbound. We’re tied to each other, Freya, and that tie can get through any protection spell, no matter how powerful.”

She frowned, searching for a tie. And there, much like the one she had with Amber, but even less perceptible, was a thread stretching out to connect her with Damon. Whereas the thread tying her to Amber felt like her own magic, this one felt surprisingly like Alice’s...

She tucked that thought away for when her sister returned to town, putting the cap back on her drink as a figure appeared at the end of the room, just in front of the door.

“Greetings,” the figure said, stepping forth so that Freya could see a woman with paper-white skin covered by heavy black robes. She looked kind of like Freya, with her thick, jet black hair, only she had black tattoos which curled up her right cheek to surround one of her familiar, wild green eyes.

“I don’t know who that is,” Damon said under his breath.

“I do,” Freya said in kind before raising her voice to ask, “Hope?”

The figure nodded. "I'm glad you remembered me. It's been years since we met, and I was in such a state..."

"Yeah, well, the tattoos are kind of memorable."

"They have made it difficult to hide who I am over the years..."

Damon frowned. "Who is that?"

"My grandmother," Freya explained.

"Like, your mother's mother? Isn't she dead?"

Hope nodded. "Indeed I am, young man. But the veil between here and where the dead rest is thin in this place. Someone is needed to be your guide, and my shared blood with Freya brought me here."

"You know, I always wonder why it's you and not, you know, my mother."

"Because I have more of my father's power than she does."

Freya frowned. "Your father? I know he was a Reaper, but is that enough to let you cross over like this?"

Hope sighed. "You know, Amber's attempts to shield you are growing increasingly absurd."

"Tell me about it," Freya muttered before refocusing. "We need to get past to use the reset spell."

"You are capable of activating the spell, but you are not recognised."

"Yeah, I figured as much. That means that I have to go through some kind of test, right?"

"Correct. Beyond this door are three chambers. Each will determine whether or not you are worthy to wield the power beyond."

"How? I mean, how will you determine that I wouldn't use it for my own gain? How could you possibly test that?"

"You will see," Hope said simply. "But the boy stays here."

"Wait, the Demon King said he could come with me."

“He may see you in the final chamber, but you must face the others alone.”

She gave a reluctant nod before turning to Damon. “You got a lot of bandages in that backpack?”

“Yeah, why?”

“I want to know how much damage I can take.”

Damon frowned. “Don’t take too much, Freya. I want you back in one piece.”

She smiled at his attempt to sound authoritative. The crack in his voice more than ruined the effect.

“I will. I promise,” she said before turning back to Hope. “Okay, let me through.”

Hope nodded, fading as the door started to open.

“I love you,” Damon said as she headed through the door, into the pitch black room beyond.

“I love you too,” she replied as the door slammed behind her, realising that it was the first time she had said it so clearly out loud.



AS SOON AS THE DOOR closed behind her, Freya was plunged into darkness once more.

She ignited her hand in flame only to realise that she still couldn’t see through the abundance of fog in front of her.

Fog. Underground.

Whoever had designed this was a massive drama queen, Freya decided as she made her way through the fog.

“Hello?” she called out, in an effort to alleviate her creeping sense of unease. “I thought I was being tested here.”

A figure stepped out of the fog, holding a large crystal in her hands. It was shining light up to her face to create an eerie glow.

Freya frowned, only recognising Hope as she stepped closer and moved the glowing crystal up towards her face.

“Dramatic much?”

Hope smiled. “I was not the one who designed it,” she pointed out as she handed Freya the crystal. “Here. It will activate the spell.”

“What do I do?”

“It is simply a housing for Energy. You will need something else to activate the reset. Something you will not be given yet.”

“What’s the other thing?”

“Your birthright,” Hope said, cryptically. “But the housing may be broken now and you could use the Energy however else you want.”

Freya frowned. “Why would I do that?”

“You could use it to change your mother’s mistake.”

“Her mistake?”

“Her death.”

The fog shifted around them, fading to reveal what looked like a hospital room. In the centre was two figures.

Lily and Amber.

Lily was wearing plain white cotton clothes and was obviously pregnant. Amber was in a particularly impressive, black ballgown.

Lily paced up and down, fidgeting with her hands much in the same way Freya did when she stumbed.

She frowned. Had her mother been Autistic as well?

“*Thinking of another escape plan?*” Amber asked.

Lily shook her head. “*I don’t have enough magic. Not until the baby is born.*”

“*Maybe not for a full blown escape, but I’ve been thinking, why don’t you try to call to someone on the outside? Let them know you’re here.*”

"I already thought of that. But, if we're thinking that the Enhanced did this to me, then the ceasefire has been broken. Humans and magical beings are no longer incapable of harming each other. Which means I have no idea who is still alive to call to."

"What about Michael?"

"What about him?"

"Don't you think he wants to know where you are. You and the child?"

Lily paused her pacing at that. *"Oh. Michael isn't the father. And I won't ask him to risk himself to free me only to tell him that I'm pregnant with someone else's child. We were never that serious to start with..."*

"Wait, he isn't the father?"

"No... My soul was split in two in the Shadow Realm. One half found Michael, but it was the other half that got pregnant."

"So, what about the father then? Whoever he is."

Lily sighed, seemingly lost in thought for a few moments. *"No,"* she eventually said. *"I'll get out of this myself."*

The scene faded as Hope turned back to Freya.

"She was always stubborn and distrustful. She took after me too much."

"What's the point of all this? You can't change the past. At least, not without a sacrifice."

"The Energy in that housing is enough to offset the need for sacrifice. You could change the past. Just a nudge so that Lily would chance trusting your father."

Freya shook her head as she thought over what that would mean.

Her mother would still be alive, and she would have grown up with both parents.

Unless, of course, her mother had been right.

What if they couldn't trust her father?

Gregor seemed to think highly of him, but there was definitely something he was still keeping to himself on the matter.

Not to mention the fact that her mother never would have ended the War.

No, Freya was smarter than to mess around with time.

“Can we go yet?” Freya asked. “I need to get to the next chamber.”

Hope nodded, disappearing as a door materialised in her place.



AS SOON AS FREYA PASSED through the door, she found herself back at school.

As soon as Freya passed through the door, she found herself back at school.

She quickly sensed to see if it was an illusion, or if she had actually shifted, and she found no indication of glamours around her.

She flattened herself to the wall, just behind a doorframe, as she heard the odd sound of synchronized boots. She pushed herself into the shadows just as a group of Uther’s men passed her by. Freya wondered if they were looking for her and Damon, and her blood ran cold at the thought. She could probably fight them if she had to, but there were other kids in the hallways, and she had no doubt that Uther’s men would use them as hostages.

She focused on her glamours, doing her best to stay hidden from the troops, as she scoped out her surroundings, placing the crystal in a pouch on her belt so that her hands were free. She had arrived in the art corridor, and all of the classrooms were occupied by Demons.

After a quick assessment of the surrounding area, she decided to head down to the music rooms. She figured the tiny practice rooms would be safe enough to hide out in.

She, thankfully, managed to make it without being seen, quickly slipping into the room and letting her glammers fall just as she spotted a figure hunched over in the corner.

“Jamie?” she asked, recognising her friend.

“Freya? I thought you weren’t in. You’ve been off... I’d hoped you’d stayed away.”

Freya frowned. “And what about you and the others? Why is everyone in school when there have been uniformed men with swords marching through the streets?”

“I have no idea. None of this makes any sense. The news and the police have been saying that everything is fine and that they’re just unsubstantiated rumours.” She waved at her phone. “But we know that’s not true! There were pictures and a whole hashtag sprung up. But, I don’t know, it’s like the people who watched the news were no longer capable of seeing the truth.”

Freya cursed under her breath, figuring that Uther had done something to make the Humans even more complacent than usual.

“The school threatened those of us who didn’t show with truancy,” Jamie continued. “My parents forced me to come in.”

Freya moved a little closer, unsure of how to comfort her clearly distressed friend.

“Come on,” Freya said. “I think I can get you out of here.”

“How? And why are *you* here? I didn’t see you at registration, before the sword-wielding weirdos showed up.”

“It’s a long story,” Freya said, sighing as she saw Jamie about to protest. “Do you trust me?” she asked, cutting off any argument her friend might have had.

Jamie looked slightly disgruntled for a moment before nodding. "Of course I do."

"Then stay close."

Before they had a chance to actually leave the room, the door was kicked down from the other side.

Freya drew her sword, but the Demon caught her off guard and was too fast. He grabbed Jamie by the hair, dragging her in front of him and bringing his sword to her neck before Freya could attack.

"Move and your friend dies, Angel."

Jamie whimpered as she struggled to find purchase, her feet just barely scraping the floor.

"Kill her and I'll kill you slowly. I'll break all of your bones one by one before removing your skin in centimetres. I will make you beg for death long before I deign to grant it."

The Demon just grinned. "Careful. Your lover might think he has reason to be jealous."

Freya was overcome with fury. It overflowed from her so that her skin crackled with dark Energy.

The Demon faltered just for a second at that, their sword dropping from Jamie's neck to her chest.

Freya took that as her opportunity, lashing out with enough force to blow a hole right through the Demon.

They collapsed backwards as Jamie fell towards Freya, who quickly reached out to catch her.

As Freya helped her friend, she noted blood on her hand. After a quick moment of inspection, she realised, to her horror, that the Demon had managed to slice through Jamie's chest just before Freya had killed him. The cut was deep and blood was seeping from it rapidly, soaking her top.

"Jamie? Jamie, stay with me," Freya managed, focusing her magic into the only healing spell she knew.

It was too rudimentary, only slowing the blood flow as much as would have been achieved by staunching it. Freya tried to pour more Energy into the spell, but it overloaded with a bang, singeing Freya's hand.

She could try to manipulate her raw Energy into augmenting Jamie's own healing, but she didn't think that it would be fast enough.

The crystal felt heavy on her belt. All she had to do was break the casing and she could save Jamie.

Her fingers moved over the pouch, ready to break it, but she took a deep breath before loosening her grip.

She could save Jamie now, but what about everyone else?

"I'm sorry," Freya told her friend, trying her best not to feel as if she was betraying her. "Try to hold on. I promise I'll fix this."

She stood up, seeing the chamber door reappear where the broken one had been.

She sprinted towards it, launching herself into the next room.



"WHAT IS THIS?" FREYA asked as she realised that the new room was a particularly extravagant bedroom, decorated with black and red silk everywhere.

"Your future," Hope said, reappearing next to her.

"Your father spoils her," Freya heard across the room, causing her to spin around and see a stranger.

Only he wasn't quite a stranger. He was taller and broader, with slightly shorter hair and stubble on his face. He was also dressed in unfamiliar garb, which looked like something royalty would wear to a formal occasion, with a black tunic and red sash.

But it was very much Damon.

Another stranger followed him in, and Freya would have sworn that it was Hope, if not for the lack of tattoos. She had a fuller figure than Freya currently had, and she was missing some of the muscle mass, but it was definitely her. She was in a black ballgown with red lace, but Freya was mostly distracted by the baby future-her was holding in her arms.

“Of course he does,” future-Freya replied with a smile, though her attention was mostly on the child. “He’s still upset about missing my childhood.”

“And did you have to invite Peter?”

“If we want these negotiations to go well, we can’t alienate anyone. Even the Fae. So, yes, Peter had to come. Plus, he’s family.”

“He put you under a curse!”

“That was over a decade ago. Plus, he had us re-enacting fairy tales, and wasn’t refusing to invite a Faerie when introducing the new royal baby the inciting incident in *Sleeping Beauty*?”

Damon sighed, folding his arms. “You know, being married to someone who’s right all the time can get really annoying.”

“I’m not right *all* of the time. Just most of it.” She moved over to him, handing him the baby, who made a little squeal of protest, though it was quickly silenced by Damon bouncing her gently.

“Speaking of the negotiations,” Freya said as she checked herself over, presumably for baby mess, “I had better get going. Sarah and Mel have just returned from Atlantis. The Mer-people are the last magical faction to join us, and I doubt they’ll be easy to convince. They’re so split off from Earth that the Humans are no real threat to them.”

“We’ll miss you,” Damon said in a silly voice from behind the baby’s little tuft of hair. The baby responded by looking confused as Freya laughed.

"I'll miss you too, Katherine," Freya said to the baby with a grin that her younger self found uncharacteristically joyful and uninhibited. "Take care of Daddy for me."

The scene froze as Hope stepped forward, looking at them with a bittersweet smile.

"This is what your future looks like right now."

"Right now?"

"If this reset doesn't work, you'll return to the Underworld with Damon. And this will be your future."

"Okay, but surely that future will be better if we use the reset. At this rate, things on Earth are going to hell. Wouldn't it be better if they, you know, didn't? I mean, if Humans find out about us, then there will be another War. You lived through the first one, at least until the Angel Twilight forced a ceasefire. Or, well, *you* forced the ceasefire, I guess. You know how devastating it was."

"You're right that it was bad, but I don't think that it can be avoided. Reset or not, you've seen first-hand that some of the Enhanced have made it into this timeline. It's just a matter of time."

"But surely it's better to at least try and stop it."

"Just know what you would be giving up to do it," Hope said, waving her hand over the frozen scene of Freya's future. "If you reset everyone's magic that used the excess, it will include Damon's. You'll both lose any memory of the other having magic."

Freya's stomach churned at the thought. The only reason she and Damon were together was that they knew the truth now. If that went away, they would go back to hiding from each other.

"And this future won't happen?" Freya asked, examining the grin her future-self was wearing.

She was happy and had a family.

And Freya was about to throw it all away.

"It will cease to be and a new future will replace it."

“A future where Damon and I aren’t together?”

“You tell me. If you didn’t know the truth, would you ever chance it?”

“We’re Soulbound,” she said, adamantly. “No matter what I do here, we’ll find each other again.”

“Perhaps. Eventually. But you’ll lose your only connection to your father as well.”

Freya gave the scene another wistful look, but the image of Jamie about to bleed out remained at the forefront of her mind.

“I guess that’s just a chance I’ll have to take.”

“Then I hope your faith is rewarded,” Hope said as the scene in front of them melted away, showing the final door.



Chapter Fifteen

Freya entered the last room to see Damon and quickly launched herself at him, hoping that his embrace would help to fuel her Energy back up to normal after her failed attempt to heal Jamie.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“No. But I will be once we’ve activated the reset and got everything back to normal.”

Hope appeared, once more, next to them. “You just need one last thing.”

“What?”

She moved to the side, revealing the hilt of a sword poking out from the stone wall behind her.

“You need to use this sword to channel your Energy and break the crystal. Your Energy, and the Energy from the crystal, will then move along the reset charms, activating them. They will annul any magic that was not yours from the past few days, including any that used the excess. It will also erase any trace of the magic, including memories.”

Freya nodded, pulling the sword from the wall with ease before taking out the crystal.

Damon halted her hand with his before she could activate it. “Wait. Freya, if you do this, it will annul and erase my magic as well.”

“And?”

“And my magic is the only reason we were truthful to each other about what we were. If you do this, we go back to not knowing. We go back to being too scared to tell each other the truth.”

Freya felt her heart freeze at the reminder. The last thing she wanted to do was lose Damon. Not after they had finally managed to find each other.

“We have to,” Freya said, her voice wavering a little. “If we don’t... You’ve seen what it’s like outside. This city is going to hell and the whole world is watching. At this rate, magic *will* be exposed. Twenty years ago, that almost wiped us out. What the hell do you think will happen now? We’ll be droned to hell and back before we can blink.”

Her thoughts went back to Jamie. Activating the reset would erase all magic using the excess, including that of Jamie’s attacker. It might be the only way to save her.

“Then let me do it. If I do it, my magic would be kept.”

Freya’s grip tightened around the hilt of the sword at that. If her magic was erased instead, would that really be better?

What would happen to her and Damon?

Would they just ride off into the sunset? Find her father?

And what about Amber’s concern about Fate’s plan for them?

If it had just been Amber, Freya might have ignored it. Amber had been lying to her from day one, and her paranoia was exceptional at times. But Gregor... She had never heard Gregor anything even near scared until that conversation with Amber. The idea of Fate wanting Freya and Damon together had terrified them both.

And now Freya could stop Fate’s plan in its tracks.

But it would mean giving up Damon.

Freya lowered the sword and stepped towards the boy she loved.

If she did this, everything would go back to how it had been.

They wouldn't even remember.

So why did her heart feel as if it was breaking?

She grabbed the front of his armour, pulling him to her and capturing his lips in hers.

He brought his hands to her hips, crushing her close against him, his grip desperate. As if he never wanted to let her go.

Her eyes were streaming against her will as she pulled away.

"Please don't," he whispered as she finally pulled away, his gaze both pleading and defeated.

"We're Soulbound, remember?" she said as she awkwardly failed to swipe away her tears. "It doesn't matter what we do. We'll find each other again eventually."

"Yeah... I guess we will..."

He didn't sound convinced, but Freya had already raised her sword once more.

"I love you," she said, firing her Energy at the crystal before he could respond.

The resulting blast knocked her to the ground.



FREYA COUGHED HERSELF awake, pieces of stone jutting into her back in the most uncomfortable way.

Where am I? she thought to herself as she used her magic to blow the dust from her eyes. *Oh, right. The reset.*

She frowned as most of the dust removed itself from her face, apart from two trails down her cheeks, originating from her eyes, which seemed to be caked on by water.

Weird, she thought to herself as she wiped away what remained.

She struggled to her feet as she examined the destruction caused by the crystal. Whether or not it worked, it certainly had released an incredible amount of Energy.

She looked around for-

For who? Who was she looking for?

She shook herself, deciding that she had probably hit her head a little too hard. She should probably worry a little more about brain damage than she did, given how often she was knocked out.

Regardless, she shouldn't have been looking for anyone. She had come here alone.

She used what little remained of her Energy to shift back home.



SHE SPUNTED OUT OF her room and to the bathroom after taking off her armour, not wanting her foster parents to see her battle damage before she had showered and glamourised.

As soon as she had gingerly extracted herself from the shower, however, someone knocked on the door.

"Is that you, Freya?" Margaret asked through the door.

Despite her exhaustion, Freya pushed herself to form a very quick glamour to cover her wounds before wrapping her towel around herself.

"Yeah," Freya said she opened the door. "Did you need anything?"

Margaret frowned in confusion. "No, I just... I didn't realise you were back from Damon's."

Freya held back a sigh at that. She *really* didn't want to think about Damon right now. Thinking about Damon would only remind her of the carnage of his room after they had slept together.

How the hell she hadn't killed him was beyond her. And how she had managed to get away without him suspecting anything...

"Yeah, I just came back. I kind of felt like being in my own bed."

"Oh. So, you're staying here tonight?"

Freya shrugged, a little sheepishly. "Yeah. I... I don't think things are going to work out with Damon."

"That's a shame."

Freya nodded, tucking her soaking hair behind her ear.

"Yeah, well, I'm really tired, so I'm gonna stick on my pyjamas and get to bed."

"Alright then," Margaret agreed with a nod. "Are you busy tomorrow?"

"I don't think so. Why?"

"Nothing much. Just, you know, it would be good if you could be around."

Freya nodded, though her stomach clenched as Margaret left. She doubted that was going to be anything good.

Freya removed her glamour and went about the awkward and painful act of first-aid on herself. She would be mostly healed by the next day, but there was one particularly deep cut across her back, joining the intricate mosaic of scars that already existed there.

Once she was done, she pulled on her pyjamas and made her way back to her room.

Amber was waiting there for her.

"How come you're back here?" Amber asked.

"I'm still mad at you," Freya said as she collapsed down onto her bed, her words muffled by being spoken into her duvet.

"You don't sound mad."

Freya sighed against the fabric beneath her before finally gathering enough energy to move under the covers properly.

"I'm tired," she eventually said as explanation, and as an answer to her question, but she knew that Amber was right. She had been mad, and she had liked being mad. It was better than the hollow feeling in her chest and sting in her eyes that she had now.

"Is that the only reason you're back here? That you're tired?"

Freya looked away at that. "Yeah, well... Look, I probably should have listened to your warning about dating Damon. I mean, I was mad at you, and still am, but maybe if you'd been around, then maybe I would have listened to your warning about my magic going mental when I... You know..."

Amber frowned. "And that was a problem?"

"Of course it was a problem! He's Human. He has no defence against my magic, and I don't have the control to not hurt him. I have no idea how he's not dead..."

Amber stared at her blankly for a few moments before letting out a surprised laugh.

"Oh, that idiot!" she exclaimed, shaking her head.

"Umm... Explain."

Amber shook her head. "Nothing, just... It reminded me of something. Never mind."

"Ohhh-kay. Well, whatever it is isn't helping me with the fact that I almost fried my boyfriend!"

Freya pulled the duvet up tight around her chest so that she could barely move anymore. Like a cuddly burrito.

"You know, you don't have to have sex," Amber pointed out.

Freya pulled a face in response. "Yeah, I know. But even kissing had clothing singed!"

"You're just young. And you're used to shutting down your strong emotions in order to maintain control. You can't do that here, but you'll learn."

"Yeah, but how long will it take me?"

“Admittedly, I’m not sure.”

Freya let out another long groan before asking, “I have to break up with him, don’t I?”

“I’m sorry, Freya, but it’s probably for the best.”

Freya sighed, curling up even tighter. “Is there a way to conjure Ben and Jerry’s, or do I have to shift to ASDA?”

“Perhaps you just need sleep. I’ll leave. I know that you don’t want to see me right now, I just wanted to check up on you.”

Freya gave a hum of acknowledgement, but spoke up just before her guardian could leave.

“Amber?”

“Yes?”

“I... Is being related to me really so terrible? Am I really that much of a disappointment as the last of your line?”

“Creator, Freya, no.” Amber moved closer, sitting down on the edge of the bed next to her. “Is that why you thought I’d hidden the truth from you?”

Freya shrugged, but the movement was stopped by the blankets. “I mean, I know that you don’t like talking about what happened with Hope, so I figured that was a part of it, but would it have really killed you to mention who she was?”

Amber sighed. “I kept it from you because my legacy should have died with Hope. I don’t mean that you or your mother should never have been born, and I don’t mean that I don’t want to be related to either of you. I mean that... That pressure is too much for someone. For anyone.

“Hope’s mother tried to keep her out of the magical world, but her father wanted to be a part of her life, and he couldn’t hide his magic. Hope then tried to do the same for Lily. Not even her husband knew that she had magic.”

“She really managed to keep it secret, despite how powerful she was?”

“For a time. But it took its toll. I’ve told you about how Hope caused the ceasefire, haven’t I?”

“During the War, she cast a spell that stopped Humans and magical beings from being able to hurt each other.”

“There were two exceptions to the spell: the caster and the anchor.”

“Hope and my mother?”

“Yes. Hope got into an argument with her husband, as couples do, and she lost control of her magic. She killed him.”

“Is that why she killed herself?”

“Partly. She became convinced that having power like hers was a curse, and sought to make sure that no one else would ever bear it. She scarred the Earth deliberately. She knew that her blood would do it, if she sacrificed all of it.”

Freya curled the duvet tightly around herself once more, very aware that Amber had mentioned her mother being exempt from the ceasefire for a reason.

“And my mother?” she eventually managed. “Did she ever hurt a Human?”

“Yes. It was why she was sent to the Shadow Realm. She was young and afraid and she had been given a legacy that no one should ever have to shoulder. You weren’t much older than her when you broke through, and I was so terrified that you would have the same struggles. So, I kept the past from you. I hoped that, without it looming over your shoulder, you would be able to learn to control your power in peace.”

Freya sighed. She understood why Amber had done what she had, but she wasn’t ready to forgive her just yet.

“Freya, make no mistake,” Amber continued. “I love you, and couldn’t be prouder of you. I hid this because you shouldn’t have to shoulder the responsibility of being my blood, not the other way around.”

“Okay,” Freya said, hoping that the single word could adequately portray the fact that she would think on what Amber had said, and try to work towards trusting her again.

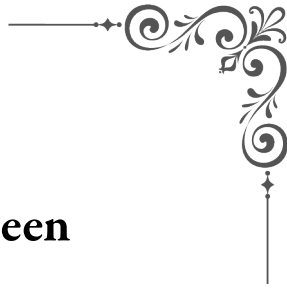
“Is there anything else that’s been bothering you?” Amber asked. There was something off about her tone, but Freya was too tired to pinpoint it. “Your father, for example. I know that you’ve never been happy about me staying silent on the topic.”

“It’s because he’s a Demon, isn’t it?” Freya asked. “I’m not *that* oblivious, Amber. I know that my affinity for Dark Energy doesn’t just come from your mother-in-law.”

Amber sighed before eventually nodding. “Yes. I’m sorry, I don’t know more than that.”

“That’s okay. I hunt rogue Demons for a living *and* I’m an Angel. I doubt any Demon would want anything to do with me...”

“I’m sorry,” Amber said once more before disappearing, leaving Freya to try and sleep.



Chapter Sixteen

“**D**id you honestly think that I wouldn’t realise that you were gone?”

Damon’s voice drew Freya’s attention from saddling her horse.

“I’m bad with goodbyes,” she said by way of explanation.

His heart-broken expression worked to crack her carefully-crafted facade of apathy.

“What is it?” he asked. “What happened?”

“She didn’t do it,” Freya managed, her voice husky as it struggled through her closing throat. “She gave up her chance to find her father. She gave up you.”

“She what?”

“She gave up everything! And that means that we won’t win... Not like this...”

Damon nodded in understanding. “You’re going after Juni and Ku, aren’t you?”

“Yeah... I am...”

“Then I’m coming with you.”

“No, Damon, you can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because this is my mistake. I was so angry at Juni and Ku for not telling me about my parents... I drove them away, thinking that I could win this war without them. I was wrong, Damon.”

“So what do you want me to do?”

"The same thing your aunt was doing before. Stop the kingdom from collapsing in on itself."

"With you gone, my father will most likely sweep in."

"Do your best to stop him and, if you can't... Hopefully Ku and Juni will be enough to allow me to take the kingdom back from him."

"This is a long shot."

"Maybe. But staying is suicide."

He didn't have a verbal response to that, so he simply stepped towards her, brushing a stray strand of hair from her face to tuck it behind her ear.

Her breath caught at the gesture as her chest tightened. She didn't want to leave.

He closed the last few inches between them, softly pressing his lips to hers. His kiss was gentle and wanting, making her crave more. But she stepped away once he was done, refusing to let the tears in her eyes fall.

"Stay safe, my love," he told her.

"You too."



FREYA AWOKE TO A TEXT from Damon, asking her to meet him. She groaned, knowing that she should agree. They should meet and she should end things.

Instead of replying, she spent two hours reading Firefly fan-fiction on her phone, refusing to get up.

Her phone buzzed with another text, this time from Jamie, which filled her with an inexplicable sense of dread. She wondered if it had anything to do with what she had forgotten, before promptly deciding to ignore it until she regained the capacity to cope.

Her procrastination was interrupted by a knock at her door.

“Freya?” came Margaret’s voice from beyond. “I made some fresh coffee if you want some.”

“I’ll be right down,” Freya answered, groggily sitting up in her bed.

She quickly examined her injuries before deciding that they were healed enough to go without a glamour. She reluctantly looked at her phone before typing a quick reply to Damon, promising to see him later.

There was no point in putting it off longer.

She got up and out of bed, quickly running a brush through her mess of hair before heading downstairs for coffee.

She stopped dead in the doorway, however, as she saw Margaret and Ryan sitting at the dining table, seemingly waiting for her, with three mugs and a pot of coffee, along with some scary-looking paperwork.

None of that was a good sign. They *never* used the dining room table. They certainly never all sat down to drink coffee together in the morning.

“What’s up?” Freya asked, a little surprised that her voice was loud enough to be heard.

“Freya! You should sit down,” Margaret told her.

Freya did as she was told as Ryan poured her a cup of coffee. She took a sip immediately, to give her something to do with her hands, and she recognised the M&S decaf blend even through the vanilla syrup.

“We, um...” Margaret started, seeming a little flustered. “I’m pregnant.”

Freya did her best to look happy for them, putting all of her effort into smiling properly. She truly was happy, but she couldn’t shake the feeling that it meant that she would have to leave town.

Maybe that would be a good thing, given what I'm going to have to do to Damon today, Freya figured.

"That's awesome! Congratulations!"

Margaret grinned back before reaching for the pile of paper on the table.

"Thanks, Freya. And, um, we were thinking, well, if you wanted... I know that you're almost an adult, but I was wondering if you wanted to *officially* be a big sister."

Freya was sure that her eyes were lying to her as she got a better look at the pile of paper.

The adoption papers.

"You... You want to adopt me?"

"If you want us to."

"I... Yes. Of course..."



FREYA WAS STILL KIND of dazed when she left the house to meet Damon.

Margaret and Ryan were going to *adopt* her.

They wanted her enough to make her permanently part of their family.

How the hell had that happened?

Unfortunately, her distracted thoughts made the walk to the park, where she had agreed to meet Damon, feel like it took less than a minute.

And then Damon was standing in front of her, looking as heart-breakingly handsome as ever.

He was hers and she was going to give him up because she lacked the self-control to kiss him without setting him alight.

She rarely hated her magic, but this was definitely one of those times.

“Hey,” she greeted, deliberately not getting close. If he kissed her, it would be a toss up between her setting fire to his jacket, or forgetting about breaking up with him altogether.

“Hey,” he replied, his usual smile muted.

“I, um... Damon, I’ve been... I’ve been thinking...”

“Yeah?”

“I... Maybe we shouldn’t do this. Date each other, I mean. It just... It seems like it’s a bad idea. I mean, we’re such good friends, I don’t want to put that in jeopardy.”

Damon nodded quickly. “Right, yeah, no. I was actually thinking the same thing.”

“Oh.” She hadn’t been expecting that. She had thought it would take some convincing or... *something*.

She didn’t know if she should be thankful or insulted.

Was this becoming a pattern with her relationships? Magic got in the way and she decided to call it off, only to discover that they wanted to end it anyway?

That’s it, she decided. I’m remaining celibate forever.

“So, just friends?” Damon asked.

Freya nodded. “Yeah... Just friends.”



FREYA NEEDED COFFEE, she decided.

Well, no. She needed booze. But it was only three in the afternoon, so she would settle for coffee.

She left her local coffee shop with an extravagant drink, filled with flavoured syrup and chocolate and topped with whipped cream and marshmallows.

“You’re going to give yourself diabetes.”

Freya spun around at the sound of her sister’s voice to see Alice approaching her. She was dressed in a fancy black dress and a fashionable white trench coat, with a belt around the middle.

“Alice? When did you get back in town?”

“Last night. I’m sorry, I couldn’t be around while the excess was in effect.”

Freya sighed into her drink. “I don’t suppose you’ll tell me why that is?”

“I... I wasn’t supposed to see you.”

“Why not?”

Alice shrugged. “It wasn’t time. The thing is, it wouldn’t have been that long of a wait. Just another year or so. But I was impatient and... I thought that if I rearranged a few things, I could meet you now. I didn’t realise that messing with things like that would mess with the balance of the city.”

“The excess? That was you?”

Alice nodded. “I didn’t mean to, but it was my fault. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for it to happen like that.”

Freya shrugged. “No harm done.”

“Just because you don’t remember it doesn’t mean that harm wasn’t done.”

“Yeah, it kind of does.”

Alice sighed. “I... I can’t tell you what happened. It would mess things up too much. But... Freya, why would you start dating Damon?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, you were adamant that you couldn’t just a few days ago.”

“And I was right. It was a nightmare. Humans and magical beings are not a good mix.”

“Right! That’s my point. You knew that. So *why* did you start dating Damon?”

Freya frowned. “Wait, are you saying that the excess made me date him?”

Alice sighed. “Okay, Freya, I literally can’t spell it out for you more clearly than that. Yes, it did. But why?”

She shrugged. “Because Damon wanted it and accidentally tapped into the excess, I guess. But then, he didn’t seem all too broken up about me ending things. So, did someone else wish for it? Why would they?”

“I can’t answer that.”

Freya made a frustrated growling noise into her coffee. “How come no one can ever just *give* me answers? First Amber, now you... Even Mel gets tired at answering my questions because the big stuff is still as alien to me as the little stuff.”

“I know, Freya. Trust me, I would give you answers if I could. But I’m bound by something more powerful than either of us.”

“Really? Because apparently I’m a freaking Angel, so...”

Alice just nodded.

“Wait. That would mean... The Big Three. You’re bound to one of the Big Three?”

She nodded again.

“It’s Fate, right? Amber was right, you can see parts of her plan.”

“Amber is particularly paranoid, but that doesn’t mean that she’s not sometimes right.”

“So she was right to distrust you?”

“It depends on your point of view. Though I find it fascinating that you would doubt me over her. Especially when you spoke to Hope so recently. Doesn’t she have a thing against dear old grandma?”

Freya frowned in concentration, trying to remember her conversation with Hope. She gave up after a few moments of frustration, her hands clasping and unclasping rhythmically to help her calm down.

"I don't actually think she mentioned Amber," Freya eventually managed. "Not that she could have much to say. I know what Amber was keeping from me now."

"Really? You truly believe that she has told you everything?"

Freya shrugged. "Close enough."

"This is the same woman who thought that having her legacy was worse than thinking that you had no blood relations who cared."

"Yeah, well, I never said she was perfect. But I guess she's family. Probably the only family I'll know."

But Freya's thoughts were far from her words, as her traitorous mind reminded her that, when she had returned home after the reset, it had seemed as if Amber had known something.

Did the reset work on ghosts, or did she know everything that had happened and was keeping it from her?

Freya let out frustrated sigh as she clamped down on the returning feelings of betrayal.

"Why would you try and push me to hate her?" Freya hissed at Alice. "The last time I let myself get mad at Amber, I banished her from this realm and almost died."

"I know. And you've been letting your fear of losing your safety net stop you from confronting her. You *know* that she bends the truth to her own ends. You know that she's been hiding your father from you, but you can't confront her."

"So why would you push me? What if I banish her again? Permanently, this time?"

"Because you're no longer alone," Alice told her. "Amber isn't your only access to the magical world anymore. You don't have to rely solely on her."

"You said that I should trust you, but why? Peter said that Fate would use me as a pawn in her plan. If you're working with her..."

“Fate uses everyone in her plan. Literally *everyone*. It’s a non-sense question. Be paranoid if you want, but it won’t change anything.”

“Do you know what my part in the plan is?”

“Yes.”

“Can you tell me?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because telling you would change the outcome.”

Freya narrowed her eyes. “This is what your whole cryptic thing is about, isn’t it?”

“I can’t answer that.”

“That’s a yes.”

“I can neither confirm nor deny that.”

“Can you answer *anything*?”

Alice smiled. “I can tell you that you *will* get your answers, I just can’t act as your cheat-sheet and give you them now.”

“Can you tell me who my father is?”

“No. And you not knowing at this point is entirely down to you.”

“More stuff I can’t remember?”

“Yeah.”

“Damn... How weird were those few days?”

“Extremely.”



FREYA RODE FOR AS LONG as she could, wanting to put as much distance between her and Damon as possible before resting. She didn’t want to risk being tempted to return. Or risk Damon being tempted to follow her.

But, a while after dark, Freya stopped for the night. She didn’t want to push her horse too far, or risk injury on the dark road.

She made camp in the woods. She couldn't make use of the inns when she was still so close to home. Too many people who could recognise their queen.

As she lay down her blanket, however, she heard a rustling sound close by. She lit her palm in flame to give her a better look at the surrounding area. Shadows shifted at the edge of her vision, and she spun around to see a cloaked figure approaching.

"Who are you?" Freya demanded, letting the fire flare threateningly.

"Relax," the figure said, lowering her hood. "It's only me."

"Seph," Freya greeted, once she recognised her adviser. "If you're here to convince me to go home, don't waste your time. I can't do any good back there."

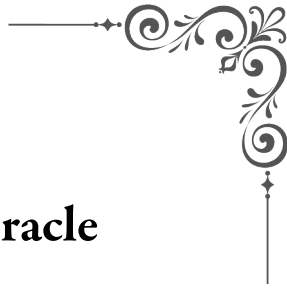
"I know. I'm not here to bring you home, but it's dangerous to go alone. And you still have much to learn of ruling. If you ever intend to return one day, you need to continue learning. And, for that, you need a teacher."

Freya sighed. "I suppose you're right, but I'm not sure I'll ever be able to go back."

"Because your counterpart gave up her memories?"

"I... How did you know?"

"Because my counterpart knew that she would. She knew that no one would remember, so she synced up our memories. We're not connected in the same way you are with your counterpart, but I think, in time, I can help you guide her home."



Book Four: Oracle

If anyone had approached Caetlin months ago and told her that she would be one day sneaking from her home to head into town alone, she would have been appalled.

Doing such a thing would surely ruin her reputation, she would have said. If anyone spotted her going unaccompanied... It was unthinkable.

Now, however, she was bundling up her skirts so that she could more easily slip out of her bedroom window. Town wasn't much of a walk away, and she hoped that the dark would keep her out of sight, even if it might also attract those with less than savoury intentions.

Not that she needed the aid of the dark to conceal her identity, in truth. She was wearing a black mask over her face, which would also help her to blend in with those who would be taking part in the Halloween festivities. She just hoped that Anthony would still recognise her.

She reached their agreed meeting place ahead of him, and so was left waiting. As she waited, she began to worry once more. Not for her reputation, but of what lurked in the shadows. There had been whispers for a while now of people going missing. Usually the people disappearing were those who wouldn't be missed. Vagrants and runaways and drunks.

Until Isabelle.

Isabelle had always been unruly and prone to wanderlust. She wanted to be a pirate, she had told Caetlin, threatening to run away and leave her friend for the sake of adventure. She'd never gone through with it, however. And she never would, Caetlin was sure. They were all just fantasies that would have been quickly dashed by the harsh reality of the situation once she took her first steps. Isabelle knew that, which was why she would never put her fantasies to the test.

But no one else saw it that way. When Isabelle had disappeared, everyone had waved it away, saying that she would be back soon enough. Though Caetlin had seen the strain in Isabelle's mother's smile when she had repeated the words the rest of the family had said over a dozen times at that point. Her eyes had been red, set back in her pale, gaunt face.

Caetlin figured that Isabelle's mother knew what she did. Isabelle had been taken by the shadows.

"Anything the matter, dear?"

Caetlin blinked to see that a woman had approached, catching her completely unaware. The woman was a little shorter than Caetlin, and of a slim build. Her silver mask covered her face so completely that only her long, ink-black hair remained to identify her. Caetlin was sure by the sound of her voice, however, that they had never met before.

"I'm fine," Caetlin assured her with a smile.

"You don't seem sure of that."

Caetlin frowned. Who was this woman? Why was she bothering her?

"I'm quite sure," Caetlin said, her voice more than a little tight.

"It's not wise for a girl so young to be out on her own like this. Not with so many recent disappearances."

Caetlin's frown deepened. "If the alternative is never leaving the house, I think I would rather take my chances with the shadows."

"I'm glad," the woman said, surprising Caetlin. "It would be a shame for this fate to belong to someone who didn't feel the price was worth it."

Caetlin frowned, only for the woman to press a small jewelry box into her hands.

"Here," the woman said. "For when all hope seems lost."

With that, she turned and walked away.

"What does that mean?" Caetlin called after her, but received no reply.

"Who are you talking to?"

Caetlin turned to see Antony standing behind her, with his usual, broad smile.

"A rather odd woman who gave me a jewelry box," she told him.

"How very peculiar," he commented before taking her hand. "Come now, let's go and see what other adventures the night may bring."

"I think I've had enough adventure for one life already," Caetlin commented as she began to feel the night air nipping at her. Even Isabelle had to agree that sneaking out in the middle of the night to meet with her lover was living on the adventurous side. Especially when her parents still had every intention of marrying her off to someone else.

"Then let's go and see what perfectly subdued and not at all exciting pleasures are out there."

Caetlin grinned and, in the depths of the box in her hand, the last Ancient stirred.



Chapter One

Freya had never been held back after class before. Well, with the exception of times when Amber had used her guise as Ms Pearson to teach her magic. But Ms Pearson had been dead for a while now, leaving Amber with only her ghost form.

“Do you have a lesson now?” Dr Harris asked her as she rolled up the sleeves of her lab coat.

“No, I have a free,” Freya replied, doing her best to not tap her fingers against the desk. “Why did you want to see me?”

“It’s about your last practice paper.” She passed Freya the chemistry practice paper that she had done the week before. Freya’s eyes were glued to the large B on the front.

No matter how hard she pushed herself, Bs had become an all too common occurrence.

“Was it a high B?” Freya asked. “Just, you know, a few marks from an A?”

Dr Harris shook her head. “You barely scraped it.”

“Ah.”

“Freya, I’m concerned. I know you can do better. You *did* better for years. Your university choices won’t take you with a B in the subject you want to study.”

Freya groaned. “I would have chosen maths if the requirements weren’t even higher. Plus, Margaret is determined that I do a professional degree.”

“Is everything okay at home? Is that why your grades are slipping?”

Freya shook her head. “No. It’s fine. Great, actually. Amy’s sleeping through the night now, so I’m not even having to stay out as much.” Freya shut her mouth promptly as she realised that she probably shouldn’t have said that. She knew that her nights spent hunting Demons probably weren’t helping her grades, but that wasn’t something her teacher could help her with.

Dr Harris sighed. “Home life isn’t exactly my area of expertise.” She opened the paper to the first page, showing various red scribbles, followed by a 0 at the end of the page. “This is.”

“I... Why are these questions even on the test?” Freya asked before pointing to the third one. “This one isn’t even chemistry, it’s international diplomacy. That one’s history. I understand that there’s context around the science, but it’s only the science I’m good at.”

Dr Harris nodded. “Oh, you don’t have to tell me.” She moved to the essay question at the end of the paper. Full marks. “Your marks don’t make sense, Freya. You’re falling behind kids who aren’t half as good as you are.”

“I... I don’t know how to fix that.”

“Freya, I want you to speak with Ms Wood.”

“Ms Wood?” She frowned. “Doesn’t she work in student support?”

“Freya, I don’t know how to explain your grades. To say they’re inconsistent is an understatement. I also dug up the IQ test the school had you take in Year 10. Your results were all over the place.”

“What does that mean?”

Dr Harris shrugged. “I’m not sure, but it would suggest to me that you might have some kind of learning difficulty. Maybe dyslexia, since you find the maths questions easier.”

“Or autism,” Freya said quietly.

Dr Harris raised an eyebrow.

“My sister is autistic. Well, not my biological sister. But she... We... I’ve known for a while. Talked with some other autistic people online and did some research.”

“And you’ve never pursued a diagnosis?”

“I... I *just* got adopted this past year. I had a hard enough time getting fostered without the stigma. How would a diagnosis help, anyway? It wouldn’t make the questions any clearer.”

“No, but you could get more time in exams, and some of the universities might accept you if you have an explanation for your grades. You would probably fare better with university work anyway.”

“Probably,” Freya agreed. “As long as they don’t ask me irrelevant questions about the Kyoto Protocols.”

“You’ll have to see Ms Wood and talk to her about getting a diagnosis.”

“I... I should probably talk to my fo- my parents about it first. Get their permission and all that.”

Dr Harris nodded. “Alright, if you think so. Though, depending on how you think they might react, getting some information from Ms Wood might be helpful. I think she’s in her office for the rest of the afternoon.”

“Okay, you might be right. I’ll go see her.”



FREYA LET OUT A FRUSTRATED groan as she collapsed onto one of the sofas in the common room.

Jamie glanced up from her laptop.

“What happened?”

“Got another practice paper back. It was a B.”

Jamie sighed wistfully. “I would kill for a B.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t only apply to universities which all ask for As. I did.”

“Did Dr Harris give you a hard time?”

“No. She pulled the whole ‘I’m worried about you’ thing.”

“She ask about your home life?”

Freya shrugged. “A little. She was mostly concerned at how inconsistent my answers were. Struggling with the more vaguely worded questions isn’t usually a sign of a difficult home life.”

“What is it a sign of, then?”

“Autism.”

“Oh, so you had *that* talk with her.”

“Yep. *That* talk. She thinks that, without the official accommodations that come with a professional diagnosis, I won’t get the grades I need. And, honestly, I think she’s right.”

“But I thought you said it takes years to get one. Will it actually be of any help?”

“I have no idea. I have to go and talk to Ms Wood and see if she can help.”

“Want me to come with?”

“No. She’ll just make you wait outside anyway. I just needed a few minutes before going to get my thoughts straight.”

She ran her hand through her hair, just as she spotted Damon entering the room.

“Actually, I think I’ll go now,” she said, getting up. “No point in wasting time.”

Jamie just gave her a glare that said that she wasn’t buying it. “Seriously, Freya, when are you two going to get all over this? You didn’t date for that long and you were friends for years before that.”

Freya sighed. “Yeah, I know, but... I don’t know. I guess it’s easier said than done.”

“No, I really don’t think it is.”

Freya didn't have a response to that, so she just left, heading for Ms Wood's office.



FREYA KNOCKED TENTATIVELY on Ms Wood's door, hoping that she wasn't busy with another student. She didn't know that she could psych herself up for a second time in the same day. Or even the same week. Demons were easy; people were the worst.

"Come in," she heard from inside.

She opened the door to see a young blonde woman sitting there. Freya was immediately apprehensive. She didn't look a year out of university.

"Hey, I'm Freya Snow. Dr Harris asked me to come see you."

"Yes, she sent me a message. Come in and sit down."

Freya did as she was asked, trying her best not to fidget as she concentrated on eye contact. She didn't manage it for more than a moment, however.

"So... Snow? According to my records, you were adopted this year. You kept your birth mother's last name?"

"Yeah, I did. I just... wanted to maintain that connection." It was only after she said it that Freya remembered that she wasn't supposed to know anything about her mother. She wasn't even sure how they had known that her last name was Snow, but she suspected Amber had played a part.

"I thought no one had ever identified your birth mother?"

Freya shrugged. "I did some research and found her a while back."

"And you didn't find any other family members?"

"No. They're all dead." Except for the sixteen year old great-aunt living in Australia, but she supposed that didn't really count.

“What about your father?”

“I never found him.”

“And what about your adopted parents? Do you like them?”

“Of course. If I didn’t, I would have said something when they were just fostering me.”

“And I hear you have a baby sister. That must be nice. Or terrible, depending on your attitude towards babies, I guess.”

“No, no, Amy’s great. I love taking care of her. Not that I have to often or anything! But she’s awesome.” Freya took a deep breath, shutting her mouth. She frowned after taking a minute to think. “Wait, is that really all in my file? That seems like a little too in-depth.”

Ms Wood gave a sheepish shrug. “You caught me, *Angel of the North*. I’m a Seer.”

Freya groaned, rolling her eyes. “Okay, seriously, that name is getting old. I’m not an Angel. I can’t be. I was born *after* the Twilight died. Also, it’s just not that catchy. Or imaginative.”

“I didn’t make it up.”

“So, what are you?”

“A Seer. I told you.”

Freya frowned, trying to remember what she knew about Seers. They were potential Oracles, who had yet to be called by Fate.

“A Human Seer?”

She nodded. “My grandmother was a Witch, but I don’t have her power. I just see parts of Fate’s plan sometimes.”

“Including me?”

“You already knew that you were part of the plan. You’ve known for years now. You suspected that no one was given power like yours without reason and Peter confirmed those fears for you, even if you chose not to listen to him.”

“Peter was lying to me. He wanted me to rule the Earth.”

“He wanted you because he didn’t want Fate to have you.”

Freya sighed. “Okay, great. Fate’s plan is not why I’m here. I’m here about my grades.”

“Of course. You’re here to ask about an autism diagnosis.”

“Yeah.”

“Even if you go through with getting one, it’ll take a long time. You likely won’t have the help you need until university.”

Freya nodded, folding her arms. “I don’t know that I can bring my grades up. I spend all my free time studying already. If I gave up the Demon hunting too... I would burn out. I know it.”

“Maybe you should think about backup plans.”

She shook her head. “I can’t take a gap year. I can’t impose on Margaret and Ryan like that.”

“They’re your parents.”

“Still...”

“Alright then. Have you thought about courses you might be able to get in clearing? Maybe at a university that’s not a red-brick, or on a different course.”

“I... I hadn’t really considered it. Margaret went to a new university and she didn’t like it much. And I’ve never been able to see myself doing anything but science.”

“What about something more... magically inclined?”

“Like what? My Guardian keeps me pretty out of the loop when it comes to the magical community. She has trust issues.”

“Well, have you heard of the Hino Corporation?”

“No.”

“That’s not really surprising. It’s a parent company to lots of little companies. Many of the higher-ups are magical beings, and they know how to put magical talents to use.

“Actually, they have a work experience program for the London branch. I could send a query for you.”

“I... All the way in London?”

“They take care of accommodations for you.”

Freya nodded. “That actually sounds great.”

“Well then I’ll contact them. Would you still like to pursue a paper diagnosis for your autism?”

“So, you believe me?”

“Freya, I’m a Seer. You’re Autistic, that’s not in question. What is in question is whether or not you want a paper diagnosis. It can get you accommodations, but it might prove difficult for you later in life.”

“Difficult in a way that magic can’t work around?”

Ms Wood shrugged. “Possibly. There are too many variables for me to give you a solid answer.”

Freya raised an eyebrow. “Too many variables? You mean you can’t see *everything*?”

“No, I only see Fate’s plan, and she allows for variables. She has to. Even she couldn’t control *every* little detail. And free will is always a factor.”

“Well then I’ll think about it.”

Ms Wood passed her a booklet. “This will have some information for your foster parents.” She passed her another. “And this has some information specific to girls. Forgive me if the question is too intrusive, but you don’t have an eating disorder, do you?”

“Now you’re worried about being intrusive?”

“I couldn’t see this.”

“No, I don’t. Why?”

“We often don’t catch autism in girls until they’re in here for anorexia. The booklet goes into it but... I just thought I’d check.”

“Nope, just regular old autism.”

“And dyslexia.”

“Dyslexia? I read just fine.”

“Your spelling is atrocious.”

“That’s just because I grew up with spell-check.”

“Or perhaps that’s just a rationalisation.”

Freya sighed. “Anything else?”

“Beside your anxiety and mild depression?”

“Yeah, beside those.”

“No.”

“Okay, good.”



Chapter Two

Freya decided to just head home at that point, using Mel's spell to trick the electronic register into thinking she was out on an authorised absence.

"You're home early," Mel commented as Freya walked through the door.

Margaret and Ryan had been struggling to find childcare for Amy in the last month as they had gone back to work, and Mel had been complaining about not getting out much, so Freya had suggested her for the job. Childcare was shared in her coven, so she had the experience, and it got her out of the library, where she worked the rest of the time.

"Stuff happened, so I decided to call it a day," Freya said as she threw her bag onto the sofa, swiftly following it.

Mel wheeled herself over, Amy sitting in her lap with a toy. Mel was a Witch through her father, but a Mermaid through her mother. As was common with hybrids, Mel had a genetic condition. Hers meant that putting weight on her feet felt like walking on knives, hence the wheelchair. She did have a tail when in water but, as Freya understood, hybrids weren't exactly welcomed in Atlantis.

"What happened?" Mel asked.

Freya sighed. "Things aren't looking good for my final exams. Chances are, I'm not going to hit my grades."

"Yikes."

Freya raised an eyebrow at the self-censoring, before remembering that Amy was in the room with them. “Yeah.”

“Do you think you’re going to fall back on your bounty hunting?”

Freya had fallen into magical bounty hunting out of convenience. At first, she had only fought the Demons that came after her as she started to learn of her power. They figured she was an easy target. It wasn’t until later that they realised that she was a force to be reckoned with.

Most Angels were.

As time went on, she realised that no one cared about the odd Demon who preyed on a Human. Secrecy was paramount, not policing. But usually the Demons who went rogue went too far, attacking other magical beings or threatening that precious secrecy. In those cases, someone usually put a bounty out on them, and collecting them had become an easy way to make money.

But Freya was very aware of how dangerous her bounty hunting was, and she knew that she was just one bad injury away from losing that source of income. Or death.

“I’d like that to remain a last resort. It’s spotty at best. Months can go by without a good bounty available.”

“Fair enough. Have you thought about other courses you might try applying for in clearing? Or you could take a gap year. Maybe some resits...”

Freya groaned at the thought, curling her knees up to her chest. “I don’t want to impose on Margaret and Ryan.”

“Freya, they’re your parents. Like, legally. They *chose* to adopt you, so I’m sure they wouldn’t mind.”

Freya sighed. It was easy to shrug off things like that when Jamie said them, because she had two very-much-alive-and-pre-

sent birth parents, but Mel was a fellow orphan, so it wasn't as if Freya could say that she didn't know what it felt like.

"I know, but it still feels like an imposition," Freya said. "And, actually, it turns out that the school counsellor is in on the whole magic thing. She suggested that there might be other ways to make money using my magic."

Mel frowned a little. "Well, I guess, but it tends to be done by species. I can work as a librarian in my coven's library because I'm a part of the coven, which I can only be because I'm a Witch. It's not as if there are any other Angels of your kind around, just Oracles and Reapers."

"Well, I have other things as well."

Angels weren't strictly a genetic phenomenon, with Angels only having a slightly higher chance of giving birth to another Angel. Usually, they were a random occurrence within magical bloodlines.

"You have Demon blood as well," Mel said. "Your mother was an Angel, and her parents were an Angel and a Human, so you'll have nothing relevant on her side. And, as far as we know, all you have on your father's side is Demon, so unless you're going to try to start a new life in the Underworld..."

Freya rolled her eyes at the suggestion. "Well, whatever, but Ms Wood suggested that there was a company called the Hino Corporation who would possibly give me some work experience."

Mel frowned. "Huh, the name sounds familiar, but I can't exactly place it."

Freya shrugged. "Well, whatever they do, I figured I'd give it a shot."

"You might as well. It's not going to hurt anything."

"Well, no."

“And, if you go, you’ll be Damon free for a while.” Mel had a smug look on her face. She had passed being annoyed at Freya for avoiding her ex and had gone to teasing her over it constantly.

“You know that my sixth form has five hundred students, right? It’s not like we’re jammed together. Though I suppose it would still be nice to not have to worry about seeing him...”

Mel rolled her eyes. “Straight people.”

“Hey! Bi-erasure much? Don’t lump me in with them.”

“Oh, you know what I mean. Dating girls gives me none of these problems.”

“Okay, first of all, that is *not* my experience with dating girls and, secondly, you have only dated *one* girl and you and Ally are on and off like a strobe light at a rave.”

“We’re not that bad.”

Freya scoffed. “Yeah, you are. You’re at least as bad as me and Damon.”

Mel rolled her eyes, clearly deciding not to comment. “Are you going to go out for bounties tonight?” she asked instead.

Freya sighed. “I don’t know. Maybe not. I need to talk about this work experience with Margaret and Ryan. It would be down in London.”

Mel pulled a face. “Yeah, I guess that would take a while to talk over.”

“Well, exactly.”

Mel returned her focus to Amy, but she kept moving her head as if she was going to say something else before thinking better of it.

Freya didn’t know how to politely tell her to spit it out, so she pulled her phone from her pocket.

“So, are you going to go out tonight?” Mel eventually asked, just as Freya had pulled up her email.

“You mean for a bounty?”

“Yeah.”

“Not tonight. I don’t want to be too tired in the morning.”

“Oh. Are... Are you sure?”

“Pretty sure. Why?”

“No reason!” Mel said hurriedly before returning her attention to Amy.

“Ohhh-kay,” Freya said, but left it be. Mel didn’t look as if she was about to explain why she had been asking, and Freya was tired to push.



MARGARET AND RYAN ARRIVED home at half six and Mel headed off.

“Um, there’s a school thing I need to talk to you about,” Freya said to Margaret as her adopted mother set up her laptop on the dining room table.

“Is it about your summer exams?”

“No, just... I was suggested for a work experience placement. But it would be in London.”

Margaret frowned, though it lightened as she turned back to the laptop.

“Is it Ms Woods who is putting you forward for this?”

“Yeah, why?”

“She’s sent me an email about it.”

Freya waited anxiously for Margaret to finish reading the email, tugging at the pendant around her neck.

Margaret gave a thoughtful hum as she turned back to Freya, her frown back in full force.

“This does look like a good opportunity, but it’s not exactly chemistry focused.”

“I know, but my grades aren’t getting any better, so I’m more thinking of this as a backup.”

Margaret turned back to the email. "Well, it does say that the Hino Corporation usually hires those who did this experience program after uni, so I suppose it couldn't hurt. My main concern is that they've told Ms Woods that they want you on the train down tomorrow morning."

"They did?" Freya asked, moving to get a look at the email.

"Yeah. I mean, you're eighteen, it's your choice, but it's for two weeks and you'd be at the other end of the country. My parents are within an hour's drive of London, so I can give you their number, and the email says you'll have a young member of staff to shadow, and she's supposed to help you out if there are any problems."



AS SOON AS FREYA SHUT her bedroom door behind her, she felt the familiar push of Amber asking to materialise. Ever since Freya had learnt that Amber had been lying about who she was, their relationship had been a little tense. Freya understood that Amber's legacy wasn't one that she wanted to burden Freya with, but Freya was still furious that she didn't understand how important family was to Freya. How much it had hurt to keep her in the dark about the fact that they were related when Freya was so desperate to find her family.

At this point, Freya was pretty much sure that her entire blood family had been arseholes that she didn't want to associate with anyway.

She didn't put up her defences to shut Amber out, figuring that she should know if the person she was bound to was going to to travel all the way across the country.

"How was your day?" Amber asked.

"I've got some magical work experience starting tomorrow, but it's down in London."

Amber raised an eyebrow. "Oh? How did that happen?"

Freya sighed, bracing herself for some blow-back as she said, "A Seer who works at the school helped me get it."

Amber's eyes darkened. "A Seer?"

"Yup. Though she was Human otherwise."

"Where did she say you would be working?"

"The Hino Corporation."

"*Fate*," Amber muttered, as if it was a curse.

Freya rolled her eyes. She knew that Amber's distrust of Fate would rear its head as soon as she mention that Ms Woods was a Seer. "Yes, yes, you don't like her, we all know."

Amber glared at her. "You didn't either," she said cryptically before disappearing.

"When?" Freya demanded, but got no answer.

She sighed, her mind drifting back to the missing week from the previous year.

The week when she had dated Damon.

Her memories were fuzzy and unclear, and she knew that her own actions had led to the lack of memory. Something had happened that week that had led her to alter everyone's memories.

If only she knew why...



Chapter Three

“K *eeep your hood up.”*

Freya rolled her eyes at Seph’s warning. She had a habit of reminding Freya of basic things, as if she was constantly afraid that Freya would slip up and get them caught. She spent half of the time wanting to remind the noblewoman that she had far more experience staying the shadows than she did.

“It’s been a year and no one expects their lost queen to look like a bounty hunter. Everyone is so quick to forget that I didn’t grow up in a castle.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Seph conceded as they entered the local tavern. “Just remember that we’re only passing through.”

Freya had a tendency to get bored with the endless meetings with Seph’s contacts, hoping to one day stumble across someone who had encountered Ku and Juni.

Or just one of them. Freya’s heart hurt at the thought of them separated. They were, after all, technically parts of her, but then, she had been the one to walk away from them. Them keeping together beyond that almost felt like an unfair thing to hope for.

Freya’s boredom often translated into her taking the odd bounty mission as Seph tried to contact her people. It helped her to feel useful, and was a lot more interesting than Seph’s attempts to teach her the finer points of diplomacy, though Freya didn’t mind her efforts to educate her on strategy in war. Any of Seph’s discomfort at Freya taking the missions was silenced by the fact that the steady

flow of coin stopped Seph from having to delve into her family fortune, making them much less conspicuous.

Especially when her brother was the one hunting them down.

Freya made her way to the bounty board at the back of the tavern and found herself struck by the sight of a familiar sight.

"I know her," she said as she took down one of the posters.

"Here or on Earth?" Seph asked under her breath.

Freya frowned. "On Earth. She's my sister. Well, kind of. It's a long story."

"But you haven't met her here? That's unusual."

"No, I..." Freya gasped as her head flashed with pain.

"Are you alright?" Seph asked, frowning with concern.

"I have two sets of memories crowding my head. It can be... difficult to switch between the two."

"Has it always been this hard?"

"No. It's almost as if the more memories I acquire, the worse it gets. Or maybe my connection with my counterpart has strengthened. She no longer requires magically aided sleep to remember me, you know. The more crossover there is, the harder it is to think of myself as a separate person, instead of just her shadow, and the more her memories have a hold on me."

"Do you think the connection poses a danger to you?"

"Who can say? As far as I'm aware, I am the first person to have this kind of connection to my counterpart. But there's nothing to be done about it. To answer your earlier question, no, I don't know Alice here."

Seph sighed, looking around the tavern. "We need to make the rendezvous in the next town over. We cannot stay for long."

"You go ahead," Freya told her. "I know where you're headed. I can follow once I've found Alice..."



FREYA RESENTED HAVING to be up before the sun at any point of the year. Even in winter, when the sun only showed up for a precious few hours while she was usually locked within the dark, windowless rooms in the middle of the school. But, as summer approached, it was even more of an affront.

Margaret fussed over her bags, making sure that Freya had packed them correctly.

"I know how to pack," Freya protested. "And, even if I didn't, I'm only going to London. I'm pretty sure I can buy toothpaste there if I've forgotten it."

Margaret simply raised an eyebrow. "Have you remembered to pack your menstrual pills?"

"I... was going to pack them as soon as I took today's..."

Margaret folded her arms, telling her that she didn't believe her.

Freya ignored the look as she hurried to the kitchen, took her pill dry, and raced back to put it in her bag, just as there was a knock at the door.

"That's probably for you," Margaret said before heading to answer the door.

The door opened to reveal Ms Woods standing on the other side, just as Margaret had predicted.

"Hello. Is Freya ready to go?"

Margaret nodded. "Will you be accompanying her on the train?"

"No, but I will see her to the platform and her mentor will meet her there."

Margaret nodded with a slight frown, clearly not entirely happy with the information, but not displeased enough to say anything.

"I'll be fine," Freya assured her.

"Is your phone charged?"

“Yes, *Mum*.”

She had meant the word sarcastically, but they were both momentarily silenced by it before Margaret dragged her in for a hug.

“I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you too,” Freya admitted as Margaret finally extracted herself, allowing Freya to pick up her things and head out.



THE CAR RIDE INTO TOWN with Ms Woods was fairly quiet. Freya had no idea what to expect in London, but she had no idea how to put her fears into any kind of question or even words at all.

“Have you ever travelled by portal before?” Ms Woods asked as they pulled up to the station.

“Um... No,” Freya said after racking her brain. “Aren’t they just for travelling between realms? I’ve never left Earth. Well, not unless the Shadow Realm counts, but that’s just your soul...” She trailed off as she realised that she had started to ramble.

“There are a few for travelling long distances on Earth. There’s one at the train station that will take you to King’s Cross.”

“How very Harry Potter.”

“I’m sorry, would you like it to take you to the *other* largest train station in London?”

“It could have taken me to Heathrow.”

“Not since 9/11, I’m afraid. Airports are off limits for magic due to the amount of vigilance the Humans have there.”

Freya nodded as Ms Woods pulled into the car park. They got out of the car, Freya grabbing her bags as she went before following Ms Woods to the entrance of the station.

“So, where’s this portal at?” Freya asked.

"This way," Ms Woods told her before leading her through the station, coming to a stop at a coffee kiosk.

"What can I get you?" the woman behind the counter asked, not lifting her eyes from the magazine she was reading.

Freya's vision started to swim a little before clearing as the glamour around the woman faded, revealing that she was actually a child, easily no older than twelve, with large amber wings behind her.

"A portal ride to London," Ms Woods said. "It should already be booked."

"Name?" the girl asked.

"Freya Snow."

The girl scanned down her magazine before nodding, as if it told her exactly what she needed to know. "The booking is only for one."

"I'm not going," Ms Woods explained. "I'm just here to see her off."

The girl hopped down from her stool before leaving through the side door. Freya moved around in order to see her close the door behind her before opening it again to reveal a glowing blue portal.

"That's not conspicuous at all," Freya muttered as she glanced around.

"There's a glamour on the door," the girl assured her.

Freya turned back to Ms Woods. "Thanks for setting this up and getting me here."

Ms Woods nodded. "Of course. I'll meet you back here when you return."

Freya nodded, picking up her bags and suitcase before stepping through the portal, a flash of blue going over her eyes before she arrived in another, larger train station.

A young woman stepped forward to greet her. She had olive skin and jet black hair that was held back in a clip, with the exception of her fringe which fell to just over her deep brown eyes. She was impeccably dressed in a grey, knee-length dress and matching heels.

“You must be Freya,” the woman greeted as she stepped forward. “I’m Anna.”

“Hi,” Freya greeted, waving her hand awkwardly.

Anna just raised an eyebrow in response, which made Freya feel more than a little self-conscious.

“I’m here to take you to your hotel.”

“We don’t have to go to the office first or anything?”

“No, not until the morning. Ms Hino wants to make sure you’re well rested before you begin.”

“Begin? I’m still not exactly sure what I’ll be doing.”

“Ms Hino will explain everything in the morning,” Anna assured her, tapping her foot a little in a particularly impatient way.

Freya decided to shut up at that, her mouth clamping shut.

“The taxi station is this way,” Anna said, heading away from the trains. Freya took her bags once more before silently following her.



THE TAXI STOPPED OUTSIDE a large, glass building which Freya found oddly intimidating. The people going through the revolving door were all impeccably dressed in suits or smart dresses.

Anna left the taxi, prompting Freya to do the same. She strode forward with a kind of confidence that Freya only ever came vaguely close to when she was in her combat gear, as Freya trailed behind silently.

Anna headed straight through the revolving door, looking as if she belonged there. Freya was immediately sure that she would stick out like a sore thumb if she stepped inside, but then, staying on the pavement outside would probably just make her look like an idiot. Or, at least, make Anna think she was an idiot. Or more of an idiot than she already thought she was.

To Freya's relief, Anna headed to the front desk and immediately started dealing with the woman sitting behind it. Freya had never been in a hotel before. She had been to a hostel once on a school trip, but never a hotel. She had no idea what to do.

After a while, Anna drew Freya's attention back to her by passing her a key card.

"This will get you into your room," Anna told her. "Don't lose it." Her voice had a tone to it that suggested that she thought that was a very real possibility.

"I won't," Freya assured her, feeling even more like a child than before.

Anna gave a slight quirk of her eyebrow, telling Freya that she didn't believe her, before leading Freya over to the lift.

The lift took them up to one of the highest floors, where Anna led Freya to the door of a room, before indicating to the lock.

Freya swiped the key card, her mind in a constant panic that she would mess up even such a simple task.

She let out a breath of relief as the light turned green and the door clicked open. Freya brought her bags and suitcase into her room, dumping them on the bed.

"I'll be back tomorrow morning at eight," Anna told her. "You can order whatever you like from room service; it's been taken care of. Breakfast is also served downstairs in the morning. Again, it's been taken care of, just take your key card."

Freya nodded as Anna turned to the door, but something was nagging at her, and she just couldn't drop it.

“Are you sure you can’t tell me why I’m here?”

“The boss wants to explain in person,” Anna said, in a tone that clearly showed that she was losing patience. “And she wanted to wait until the morning, to give you a chance to rest. Was there anything else you needed?”

Freya shook her head.

Anna left at that, shutting the door behind her.

As soon as the door clicked closed, Freya threw herself onto the bed and kicked off her shoes. After a few moments of just staring at the ceiling, she rolled over to grab the TV remote from the bedside table. She flicked through the channels in a bit of a daze. She never usually watched TV proper. In the end, she settled on a children’s channel that was showing a dubbed anime about an ancient Egyptian priestess whose soul was trapped in a pair of golden dice, which were uncovered by the main character, who, true to the format, had absolutely ridiculous, gravity-defying hair.

As she watched TV, and wondered what she was going to order for tea, the familiar pull from Amber remained silent, for which Freya was thankful. She really didn’t want to talk to her mentor right that second.



Chapter Four

*A*pparently, no one in town had seen Alice. She might have just never visited the town, but something was rubbing Freya the wrong way. She felt as if she was being watched.

Every time she turned around, however, there was nothing there.

Part of her hoped that it was either Juni or Ku, but deep down, she knew that it was futile. They would just confront her if they wanted to. But that brought up the possibility that they were close by and didn't want to see her, which hurt as much as their initial leaving.

"I heard you're looking for Alice," someone said from behind Freya.

She spun around, her hand ready to draw her weapon, only to see Anna, dressed in light combat gear and wearing a rather official looking badge on her chest, though it was no symbol Freya recognised from her own government.

"Anna," greeted Freya.

She did a double-take. "How do you know my name?"

Freya shrugged. "I just do. How do you know Alice?"

"I'm the one looking for her."



FREYA COULDN'T DECIDE if she actually liked being able to remember her time in the Shadow Realm, or if she wanted

to return to her ignorant bliss. On the one hand, events in the Shadow Realm sometimes occurred slightly before their equivalent happened on Earth. On the other, she could drive herself mad trying to figure out exactly how events translated, and she often couldn't rely on her own read of the situation to be accurate.

In the Shadow Realm, Anna knew Alice and was chasing her. But that could mean any number of things. They might actually know each other on Earth, or they might not. Their chase might reflect a metaphorical battle between them, or even between two sides that they represented.

In the end, it told Freya nothing other than the fact that Anna and Alice were probably connected in some way. Which either of them may or may not know about.

She decided to leave it alone as she threw her duvet from her in an attempt to force herself up.

After a few minutes, she started to get cold, prompting her to finally sit up.

She looked around the room as she drew her knees to her chest in an effort to keep her body heat. She knew that she needed to get ready, but her brain refused to organise the steps required.

She eventually managed to move her hands from her knees to the side of the bed, pushing herself off. The quick move gave her enough momentum to get to the bathroom, though she wasn't sure if she had the energy to shower, or if she would just forget what she was doing half way through. She decided that she didn't really have a choice as she looked over how greasy her hair was in the bathroom mirror, setting her phone down on the edge of the sink as it played her anime theme playlist. It would give her a rough idea of how much time had passed, since she could count the songs and knew roughly how long they were.

Once she was finished in the shower, she was faced with the arduous task of rifling through her suitcase, hoping to find something even half as smart as the dress Anna had worn the day before, though she knew that there would be nothing.

She'd never had a need for clothes like that before.

She settled for a plain black skirt and a white blouse, before tying up her hair as neatly as she could manage. She examined her paltry supply of makeup before smearing on some foundation, lip gloss and eyeshadow. She hadn't brought anything else with her.

At that, she quickly glanced around the room, making sure she wasn't forgetting anything, before picking up her handbag and heading out of the room. She hurried downstairs, knowing that she was short on time.

As soon as she got downstairs, she heard the clanking of plates and could smell bacon, leading her to the breakfast room. She showed her key card at the door, allowing her through. There were various hotplates laid out with various components of a full English, and baskets of bread and pastries on the next table. The third and final table had a variety of cereals and milk.

Freya quickly glanced around the room, seeing that it was filled with large tables, clearly meant for families. No one was there alone. Her stomach immediately clenched with anxiety and she decided to just skip breakfast. It was too much hassle and she needed to not be foggy for the rest of the day.

As she hurried back into the lobby, she ran straight into Anna, almost knocking her down.

"You're late," Anna told her. "I've been waiting for you."

Freya frowned. She couldn't have been in the breakfast room for more than two minutes. She didn't argue, however, her jaw wiring itself shut instead. Anna was wearing a pair of perfectly fitted black trousers along with a matching waistcoat that sat

perfectly atop her lilac blouse. Freya reflexively straightened her £12 Matalan skirt.

“There’s a taxi waiting for us outside,” Anna told her, before swiftly heading out of the lobby.

Freya stumbled a little as she tried to catch up with Anna’s swift movements.



THE TAXI TOOK THEM to another glass building, even larger and more impressive than the hotel had been. Freya felt her hands go clammy and tried to inconspicuously wipe them off on her dress. Anna turned to look at her just as she did so, giving her a withering look.

Freya shrivelled up in response as Anna gracefully moved out of the car. Freya followed her after just a moment, feeling clumsy as she struggled to get out without flashing her knickers to the street.

Anna strode into the building and Freya hurried to catch up with her. By the time she reached the other woman, Anna was already at the front desk, retrieving a plastic card that said GUEST, along with a lanyard, from the receptionist.

“Here,” she said, passing it to Freya before striding off again.

Freya quickly pulled it over her head, causing her to stumble a little as she tried to keep up with Anna’s pace. Thankfully, it gave her little chance to glance around, since every time she did catch a glimpse of something, it intimidated her. From the fanciest printers she had ever seen, to the clearly designer clothing a lot of the employees were wearing, everything seemed to scream to Freya that she didn’t belong there.

Anna took her to a lift before hitting the button for the top floor.

Freya focused on the buttons in front of her, since there was a glass pane behind her, gradually revealing the city as they rose. Freya had never been all that bothered by heights, but there were heights and then there were *heights*.

Thankfully, the lift was fairly swift, and she stepped off before she started to feel too nauseous.

There was a single black door in front of them, standing stark against the pristine white walls.

“The boss is waiting for you through there,” Anna told her before stepping back into the lift, the doors swiftly closing behind her.

Freya turned back to face the black door, goosebumps rising as the silence of the corridor roared in her ears.

After several moments of clenching and unclenching her fists in anxious thought, she finally knocked on the door.

The knock was barely audible, even to Freya’s ears, and she silently reprimanded herself for getting so worked up over a door when she regularly faced down Demons.

“Come in,” a voice called through the door, despite Freya’s pathetic knock.

Freya opened the door, her clammy hand slipping a little on the metal handle and leaving an obvious hand-print that made her self-conscious.

Beyond the door was a room that was entirely white. The walls, the floor, the desk, the chairs and the computer on the desk were all the same immaculate shade of pure white.

Except for one wall - which wasn’t a wall, but a large window showing the whole city beyond - and the woman standing in front of it, her back to Freya.

The woman’s dress and heels were white, but her hair was jet black, cut to her jawline.

"I- I'm Freya," Freya eventually managed, wondering if that was the right thing to say. "Anna said you wanted to see me?"

The boss turned to finally look at her, revealing that she was a Japanese woman who was maybe in her thirties.

"Of course," the woman said before indicating to the chair in front of the desk. "Have a seat."

Freya sat down just as the woman did the same on the other side of the desk, before pushing a mug forward, towards Freya.

"Here, have some coffee."

"Thank you," Freya said, taking the mug. She sipped at the drink, finding it hot, but not enough to burn her, with just the right amount of milk.

"I suppose you're wondering just who I am and why you're here?" the woman asked.

Freya nodded.

"I have gone by many names. Destiny, Lady Luck, Fate... Any belief in a force controlling the circumstances around a person come back to me."

Freya blinked at that. She shouldn't be so surprised, she knew - this wasn't her first time meeting one of the Big Three, after all - but she certainly hadn't been expecting to meet Fate herself.

"As to why you're here," Fate continued, "I have a matter that needs to be taken care of and it's outside the expertise of my Oracles. I thought another Angel would be best suited to the task."

"What is it you need me to take care of?"

Fate leaned back in her chair a little, her perfectly neutral mask slipping just a little to show a weariness that Freya wouldn't have thought possible from her before that moment. "One of my Oracles has gone missing," she explained. "My niece, as a matter of fact. I believe the two of you are acquainted."

Freya frowned. She didn't know any Oracles, just a few Seers, like-

Freya could have smacked herself as she realised why her best friend's magic had always felt like her own.

"Alice. Alice is the Oracle that's missing."

Fate nodded.

"But how can she be an Oracle? She's only a little older than me. Not old enough to have been born before Hope scarred the Earth."

"You are not the only one born through a loophole in your grandmother's spell," Fate explained. "My sister, another Oracle, was tricked into believing that the spell meant that she could never bear children. She agreed to a spell that she believed would grant her an ability she already had, but instead it ensured that another Oracle could be born. One magic traded for another."

Freya frowned. "Who would trick her like that?"

"Fae. They saw a way to interfere with my plans and they took it. Anything to get back at the Creator, and those who serve Her."

"So, Alice is missing?"

Fate nodded. "She disappeared a week ago and no one has been able to track her down. I thought, between your bond with her and your unique skill-set, you would have a better chance of finding her and bringing her back safely."

"Do you think it's the Fae again?"

"I uncovered that rock personally, and found nothing. I doubt they are involved."

"Do you have any leads?"

"You'll have to ask Anna that. She was the Oracle in charge of finding Alice before I decided to bring you in, and she was the last one to see her."

Freya nodded.

“You will, of course, be compensated for your time on this job. You’ll find the sum I provide far more satisfying than the paltry amount you make from bounties. After all, I often have need of someone with your unique talents.”

Freya frowned as something occurred to her. “What if I wanted something other than money?”

“Name your price.”

“My memories. From the week last year when the balance of magic in the city was upset. After I altered everyone’s memories, Alice still knew what had happened. Could you give me back my original memories from that week?”

“I could, but I won’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because spells of that magnitude require sacrifice. You proceeded with the spell, knowing full well that you would lose important things if you did so. You deemed it worth the cost. If I returned your memories to you now, it would invalidate that sacrifice, and the spell. People would start to remember.”

“But I’m not sure it was worth it. Can you tell me that much at least?”

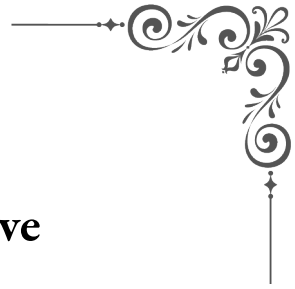
“No. I simply do not know if it was worth it, Freya. Not to you. Only you could ever know that, and only if you held your memories once more. All I know is that, in the moment when you cast the spell, you thought it was. You’ll just have to trust yourself to have made the right decision.”

Freya nodded reluctantly, but Fate’s words did nothing to settle her unease about the situation.

“Do you have anything else to tell me?”

“No, that’s everything I know. You’ll have to talk to Anna if you want to learn more.”

Freya nodded before leaving the room.



Chapter Five

Freya stood in front of the lift, just about to start freaking out about which floor she would find Anna on, when it arrived back at her floor, opening to reveal Anna.

“So,” Freya said as she stepped into the lift to join her, “you’re an Oracle?”

Anna nodded.

“And you were the last one to see Alice before she disappeared?”

She nodded again.

“So, where do you think we should start looking for her?”

“I already started looking before Fate called you here,” Anna snapped at her.

Freya did her best not to wince at that, but didn’t think that she succeeded. “Okay,” she eventually managed, doing everything she could to keep her voice level as her fists threatened to defensively burst into flames. “So, where were you with your investigation?”

“Her last assignment. I think she may have pissed somebody off,” Anna said as they reached the bottom floor.

“Yeah, people really seem to hate you guys. At least, as far as I’ve seen. I don’t know that I’ve met anyone who didn’t have an issue with Fate...”

Anna rolled her eyes as she folded her arms. “People confuse circumstance with free will. We can’t force anyone to make the

choices they make or to put themselves in the positions that they do. All we can do is influence the situation around them. However, people will still hold us accountable for their shitty lives.”

Freya raised an eyebrow, thinking that Anna’s justification sounded particularly hollow, but she kept her thoughts to herself. They needed to be able to work together.

“So, what was Alice’s last assignment?” Freya asked.

Anna pulled a tablet from her bag, scrolling through it for a few moments before saying, “She was on a diversion.”

“A diversion?”

Anna nodded. “Distracting someone so that they don’t interfere with Fate’s plan. Her target was Ulric Rees. A low-level Demon who was threatening to go rogue. From her assignment notes, it looks as if she decided that the best way to stop Ulric from killing his intended victim was to have his Human girlfriend break-up with him to divert his attention.”

“Wait, she had his girlfriend dump him?”

“They wouldn’t have lasted anyway,” Anna assured her. “Human/Demon couples never do.”

“But you think they knew that she was behind it and have decided that there’s a need for some good, old-fashioned revenge?”

“I think that it’s about as good a place to start as any.”

Freya nodded. “Alright, but we need to swing by my hotel room first. I need my gear.”



IT ONLY TOOK FREYA a few minutes to get her gear on and glamour it, so that it looked like plain clothing. As soon as her heavier leather armour replaced her restrictive dress, Freya felt much calmer and more confident.

Anna's withering glare as they met back up, as if to say that she had taken too long at getting dressed, only gave Freya the slightest of pause. Oracle or not, Freya was an Angel, which meant they were essentially the same. Anna could act superior all she wanted, but nothing made her that way.

"So, how do we find this Demon?" Freya asked as calmly as she could, making sure not to let Anna see how much she was getting under her skin.

Anna responded by pulling her tablet out from her handbag once more. "Alice should have recorded his signature in the database."

"His signature? His magical signature?"

"Of course."

"How did you manage to record a magical signature digitally? I thought magic and technology didn't mix well."

"I suppose, for those who are weaker, it would be difficult."

Freya folded her arms at that, but didn't say anything as Anna closed her eyes, her hand hovering over the tablet.

After a few moments, she opened her eyes. "I have the signature. Follow me."

"Wait," Freya said, just as Anna was about to stalk off. "Share the signature with me, just in case."

Anna gave Freya a disgusted look, as if she had just suggested that they performed a spit-handshake or something. Freya knew that sharing the signature would mean lowering their magical guards, but being squeamish about that sort of thing was for times when someone wasn't missing.

"We don't have time to argue, or to risk letting the Demon getting away," Freya reasoned.

Anna finally nodded reluctantly, unable to argue with Freya's logic.

She offered her hand, which Freya took as they both focused their Energy on the joining.

Freya hadn't needed to share anything across her Energy before, apart from when Amber had shared her memories with her and, of course, involuntarily when-

When-

Freya cleared her mind of the vague, fuzzy feelings, realising that she was letting her focus drift from Anna and the signature.

After a few moments, she finally had the signature, allowing her to break off from Anna.

"You're very unfocused," Anna said, not even having the decency to look even slightly ruffled as Freya had to catch her breath from the exchange.

Freya riled, about to snap back at the comment, but she stopped herself as she realised that it hadn't been venomous. Anna was, instead, looking at her with... not concern, but perhaps curiosity.

"Your thoughts are clouded by your focus on your lost memories."

"I know, I know," Freya said with a wave of her hand. "Sometimes something almost slips through and it throws me off."

"How often does that happen?"

Freya shrugged. "I don't know. Sometimes it won't happen for a month or so, and then I'll get three flashes in a week."

Anna gave a hum as she looked Freya over once more, her expression displeased. "Have you tried to prevent them?"

"I've tried to get the memories back, but apparently that would give everyone's memories back, and I must have taken them away for a reason."

"What about reinforcing the spell that's keeping them locked away?"

Freya blinked at that. Would that be better? No longer having the vague sense of something just beyond her memory?

She shook her head. "I'll figure something out," she said with a shrug. "Let's just focus on the task at hand."

"That's what I'm trying to do," Anna pointed out before closing her eyes, presumably searching for the Demon.

After a few moments, her eyes shot open. She put her hand on Freya's shoulder before shifting them across town.

"Hey!" Freya protested, the surprise shift taking its toll on her stomach.

"Time is not on our side," Anna reminded her sharply. "I was attempting to be swift."

"Just give me some warning next time," Freya told her as she scanned for the Demon's signature in the area, quickly finding him walking down the opposite street, coffee in hand.

"Well, this was simple," Freya said, drawing a shadow knife from her belt. The runes on the handle kept it from Human view and quickly drained the Energy from its target.

If her angelic nature hadn't given her larger Energy reserves than normal, it would have completely incapacitated her when a Demon had attacked with it. As it was, it had made a nice addition to her arsenal.

"Wait," Anna said, grabbing her hand and yanking it down.

Freya jerked her hand away.

"We don't have to attack right away. We can tail him, and he will hopefully take us straight to Alice."

Freya nodded as she sheathed her knife once more. As much as she wanted to end things quickly, she decided to let Anna take the lead.

She got the feeling that Anna wasn't too happy about Fate bringing in outside help, and she really didn't have the energy for

a pissing match. As long as they found Alice, Freya didn't care who was 'in charge'.

"He's leaving," Freya pointed out as the Demon approached a corner and Anna nodded.

They moved swiftly to keep him in their sight as they both cloaked themselves in a subtle glamour. Just enough to make them unnoticeable in the crowd and mask their magical signatures. Or, at least, Anna's. Freya wasn't sure if it had been her mother or Amber who had cloaked her own magic, but the cloak was sturdy enough to mask any trace of magical activity, so that she seemed to be nothing more than a Sensitive Human.

The Demon continued to walk around the city for the next half an hour, causing Freya to get more and more impatient.

"How much longer is this going to take?" Freya eventually asked as she checked her phone for the dozenth time.

"I'm not sure," Anna admitted, to Freya's surprise. She was expecting to be shut down.

"Are you sure we shouldn't just confront him?"

"We'll wait until sundown," Anna conceded. "If he hasn't returned to Alice by then, we can assume he won't today, and I'm loathed to wait overnight."

Freya nodded, not entirely happy to wait even that long, but deciding to let it go. Fighting most likely wouldn't get them anywhere.

They followed the Demon down a few more streets, and Freya started to suspect that he was walking them around in circles just as he walked into one of the shops.

"Where's he going?" she asked, but Anna simply charged straight ahead, following his signature into the large department store.

Freya put all of her concentration into tracking Anna's magical signature, determined not to lose her as she purposefully

dulled her other senses. The shop was packed with people, all claustrophobic noise while fluorescent lights assaulted her eyes.

The Demon led them to the stairs, hurling themselves upwards so fast that Anna and Freya had to climb the stairs three at a time so as not to lose distance between them. The Demon made it all the way to the top, ignoring the alarm that sounded as he threw himself through the fire door.

Freya and Anna followed close behind, surprised to find the Demon no longer running once they found their way onto the roof. Instead, he had turned to face them.

“Why are you following me?” he demanded.

“Where’s my sister?”

“Your who?”

Freya lost her patience at that, grabbing her knife and throwing it at the Demon.

He caught it mid-air before shifting behind Freya, bringing it down to pierce her spine.

Freya shifted out from under him, delivering her own blow to his back, knocking him off balance.

He shifted before hitting the ground, appearing behind Anna, grabbing her to use as a human shield.

Or Oracle shield, Freya figured as she let her hand crackle with Energy.

“Hit him,” Anna said, looking pointedly at Freya’s hand.

The Demon smirked. “So eager to die, are we?”

“I don’t have a clean shot,” Freya confirmed as the Energy flared up her arm with frustration.

“Just do it!” Anna yelled, not a trace of uncertainty on her face.

Figuring that it was Anna’s fault if this all went south, Freya did as she was told, firing at the Demon.

And hitting him right between the eyes.

“Holy shit,” Freya said as Anna only had the decency to stumble for a single step after being let go, before righting herself. “That was the luckiest of all lucky shots. Statistically, you should be dead.”

Anna raised an eyebrow as she straightened her waistcoat. “Statistically, you had a 100% probability of hitting him and not me. Luck had nothing to do with it.”

Freya frowned in confusion for a moment before it clicked. “That’s your power. As an Oracle, I mean. You can manipulate probability.”

Anna nodded. “Exactly.”

“It would have been nice if you hadn’t killed him. After all, we still need to know where Alice is.”

“Oh, he’s not dead.”

Freya blinked. “I hit him in the head with a considerable amount of Energy. There’s no way he’s powerful enough to get up after that.”

“Did you?”

“Well, I mean, I should have...”

Anna shrugged. “Everyone has their bad days.”

“So you made me accurate, but also made my attack less powerful?”

“You probably should have eaten before so much running about. Hypoglycemia isn’t good for your Energy levels.”

Freya groaned. “Come on, I have trouble enough with keeping this meat shell up and running, I don’t need you messing with it too.”

“I’m not the one who chose to skip breakfast, I simply filled the room.”

Freya rolled her eyes before approaching the now stirring Demon, taking back her knife before holding it to the Demon’s throat.

“So, Alice,” she said as the Demon regained consciousness.

“I don’t know who you’re talking about,” the Demon claimed.

“Really? Japanese girl, about as tall as me, has short hair and a thing for sky blue? None of this is ringing a bell?”

“You mean the Oracle? What about her?”

“Where is she?”

“How the hell should I know?”

“Well, you clearly know who she is, so you probably know that she got between you and your target. If that’s true, it’s not a stretch to imagine that you would do something ill-advised out of revenge. Say, kidnapping.”

“What, you think I kidnapped her?! What the hell? I know her because she came to apologise about everything. Ancients guide me, you honestly thought I would kidnap someone? Why? Because I’m a Demon?”

“A Demon who was going to kill someone!”

“Yeah, but that was a Human. Anyway, the Oracle explained that the Human was important. Creator, if she had just told me that beforehand, I would have just let it be!”

Freya turned to Anna, who simply shrugged.

“As far as I can tell, he’s telling the truth. Let him go; we won’t get anything here.”

Freya nodded, letting the Demon go as she stood up.

“No hard feelings?”

The Demon just shifted away, muttering something that sounded suspiciously like “Fucking Angels.”

“Well, that was a waste of time,” Anna announced with a frown.

Freya shrugged. “It was a decent lead.”

“But now we have nothing.”

“Nothing and an empty stomach. Come on, we can brainstorm while we eat.”

Anna glared at her, clearly not happy with the idea of doing anything that wasn't working until they dropped.

“I'm not the one who stopped me from getting breakfast,” she defended.

“Technically, you were.”

“Technically, assigning blame won't make me feel any less faint.”



Chapter Six

They shifted back to the street below before Anna asked, “Alright, where do you want to go?”

Freya shrugged. “I dunno. Greggs?”

“Greggs?”

“Yeah, I need something substantial.”

Anna rolled her eyes before bringing out her phone. “The nearest Greggs is a twenty minute walk away.”

“Wait, really? Why? Is there, like, a ban on deliciousness here?”

“No, it’s just not that popular.”

“I’ve gotta say, this city really does not live up to the hype.”

“Because we don’t have Greggs on every corner?”

Freya nodded solemnly. “An underappreciation for Greggs is a sign of heartlessness.”

“Or a dislike for diabetes.”

They finally reached the bakery in question, after shifting a couple of times to shorten their walk.

“Ah, what the hell?” Freya muttered, so that the workers behind the counter wouldn’t hear, as she approached the sandwich fridge.

“What?” Anna asked.

“They don’t have the ham and pease pudding stottie.”

“Well, no. Pease pudding is a strictly northern thing.”

“What?”

“You don’t really get it down here.”

“I hate the south...” She settled for a sausage roll and fudge doughnut, once more irritated as she found that there was no Irn Bru, either. She went for a bottle of coke instead.

“Seriously, this food thing is a real issue,” Freya said as she finished her lunch, but Anna didn’t respond. Her eyes were closed, and she was frowning slightly.

“Anna?”

The Oracle opened her eyes, finally hearing the younger woman. “What is it?”

“Nothing, just, you spaced out for a moment there.”

Anna blinked. “Oh. It was nothing. I was simply attempting to hone in on Alice’s magical signature. I haven’t been able to since she disappeared.”

“Do you think something’s blocking you?”

“Perhaps... However, closeness can play a part in this sort of thing.”

“Yeah, I guess if Oracles work all around the world, you might not know each other that well.”

“That would be a reasonable assumption, but Oracles work in pairs and Alice has been my partner for over a year now. And yet I cannot sense her...”

Freya shrugged. “A year’s not that long.”

Anna looked a little surprised by that answer, making Freya feel self-conscious with the reminder that most other people weren’t as closed off as she and Alice were.

“I mean, Damon is- was my best friend and it took forever for me to be entirely comfortable with him. The problem with being Autistic is that you can be overly-trusting. People take advantage of that trust and you start closing yourself off. It’s a defence mechanism. Probably not a healthy one, but you make do with what you can.”

Anna didn't look convinced. "Thank you, Freya, but relationships are a two-way street. Alice may have been closed off, but I have been no better."

Freya bit back a sarcastic *What? You? Cold? Never*, though it was thoroughly tempting. Unfortunately, her restraint left her with nothing else to say.

Anna took her silence as a sign to continue.

"There is a reason I was the Oracle assigned to be Alice's partner. I was the only one who didn't have one."

"Why not?"

"Because my last partner retired to be with her boyfriend."

Freya felt bad about her probing once it clicked. "She was Alice's mother."

Anna nodded. "Homura left and asked us not to check up on her in any way. I thought I was respecting my friend's wishes, but I was just signing her death warrant. And now her daughter is in danger and I can do nothing because I was too busy mourning her to actually pay attention to my new partner."

Freya had no words to ease the venomous self-loathing that soaked Anna's every word.

But she did have an idea.

"What if I joined my magic to yours. I may not have seen her much in the past few years, but we did grow up together. That should count for something."

Anna nodded, hesitating for only a moment before holding out her hand so that she could merge her Energy with Freya's once more.

As soon as their hands met, Freya was struck by a vision of a woman she couldn't identify, walking up to what appeared to be a council flat. The vision disappeared just as the woman opened the door.

“What the hell was that?” Freya exclaimed as she yanked her hand away.

“That was your mind attempting to comprehend the threads of fate. Visions are the most common interpretation.”

“I think that’s the first time anyone has ever said that anything about my mind is ‘common,’” Freya muttered to herself before turning her attention back to Anna. “So, do you think that woman knows where Alice is?”

“Probably.”

“Probably?”

“Probably is about as good as we going to get right now.”

“Okay, great, but a strange woman entering a generic building is hardly a conclusive lead.”

“Then it’s a good thing I recognised the building. Come on, we have no way of knowing how fresh this lead is.”



ANNA HAD BEEN RIGHT about recognising the building, leading Freya straight to it.

“How did you recognise this? The city’s massive.”

“Because I’ve been here before.”

“With Alice?”

“Yes. We had a mission in the area several months ago,” Anna said as she made her way up the stairs to the flat that they had seen the woman enter in the vision. She banged her fist on the door, startling Freya with her ferocity.

“Maybe nobody’s home,” Freya said with a shrug.

“Police, open up,” Anna yelled to the door.

“Isn’t impersonating the police, like, super illegal?” Freya asked with a raised eyebrow.

“So is killing people, but I don’t see that stopping you.”

Freya stayed silent, not having an answer to that.

“I think you were right about nobody being home,” Anna eventually said. “Think you can knock down the door?”

“I think I don’t have to,” Freya said as she brought a vial of water out from her belt. She removed the stopper for dragging out the water with her power and directing it to the lock on the door. She focused on the water she moved through the lock, feeling for the tumblers and pushing them into place.

After a few moments, she pushed the door open before moving the water back into the vial.

“You know there are spells that will do that for you, right?”

Freya sighed, shaking her head, as she decided to focus on the task at hand instead of answering.

“Definitely no one home,” Freya said, as she moved about the small flat.

“I would suggest waiting for the occupant to return, but I’m loathed to leave Alice any longer. We should try to sense for her signature again.”

Freya hummed in thought as she looked about the flat. Freya wouldn’t have called it messy, but had a certain dishevelment to it. The furniture looked worn, and the paint on the walls had a certain yellow tinge to them that Freya suspected hadn’t been there when they were first painted.

“Surely if we received that vision, this is where we are meant to be,” she said as she turned back to Anna.

“Perhaps, but there is nothing here. There is residual magic, but it’s faint. Certainly not enough to be of any use.”

Freya nodded in agreement. “If magic is no use, we shall simply have to hunt for clues the human way.”

Anna rolled her eyes. “You’ve been binge watching far too much Jessica Jones.”

“Guilty as charged, but that doesn’t make me wrong.”

Anna didn't have a pithy response to that, so Freya assumed she was on board.

Freya made her way to the kitchen, only to see that the bread on the bench was consumed by mould.

"Forget not being here now, I think our mystery woman has been gone for a while."

"Then why would the vision send us here?"

Freya shrugged. "The best way to answer that would be to find out where she's gone."

"And how do you suppose we do that? There's not enough residual magic here to track her down, remember?"

Freya thought on that for a second, before figuring, "The neighbours might know where she went."

Anna gave a brief look of disgust, and Freya had to admit that she wasn't exactly jumping to talk to strangers either. But, if they wanted to find Alice, this looked to be their best bet.

"Fine, the neighbours then," Anna finally said.

Freya nodded, experiencing a brief flash of anxiety at the thought of having to talk to strangers, before she was hit by a flash of inspiration. She closed her eyes, focusing on glamouring her clothes to mimic those of the Amazon delivery woman she had seen the week before. She wasn't sure she had got exactly right, and she couldn't remember which side of her shirt the logo was supposed to be on, but she figured it would be good enough.

She walked up to and knocked on the next-door neighbour's door, as Anna hid around the corner.

The door opened a few moments later to reveal a skinny teenage boy.

"Next-door isn't in, is it okay to leave a package for her with you?"

"I guess," the boy said with a shrug.

“Has she gone on holiday or something?” Freya asked. “It’s just, the system says that there have been a few missed parcels recently.”

“We’ve been assuming that she moved out,” the boy said. “Mum’s been dead mad about it too. There have been a ton of rats in the side alley, all because she didn’t put the bins out before she left.”

At that, they were interrupted by a woman shouting, “Ben, who is at the door?” Before a woman headed out of the kitchen to approach them.

“Delivery for next-door,” the boy said.

“Oh, hang on, she left an emergency address in case anyone came looking for her.”

“Came looking for her?” Freya asked with a raised eyebrow.

The woman shrugged. “She was a paranoid one that one,” she said. “Not all right in the head, I’d say. But she was harmless enough. Just before she left, she gave me an address and said to give it if anyone came looking for her. But not, like, in a normal way like this. It’s like she thought she was in one of those Matt Damon movies.”

“She means the Bourne movies,” the boy explained with an apologetic look on his face.

“Yeah, those,” his mother said. “Like she was expecting spooky government agents to show up and point guns to our heads if we didn’t give up her location.”

“Do you have the new address by any chance? She probably just forgot to change it. One click ordering and all that.”

The woman nodded before reaching to a corkboard behind the door and pulling off a sticky note. She handed the note to Freya, which had an address and a series of numbers on it.

“What are the numbers about?”

The woman shrugged. "I didn't think to ask. Like I said, she was quite twitchy. She only lived here a few months as well. I wonder if she left a bunch of these across the country, one with every next-door neighbour every time she moved."

"Yeah, weird," Freya said. "Thank you for this."

"That's okay. It's so nice of you to try and get the package to her, instead of just returning it."

It took everything Freya had not to crack up at that. "Just doing my job," she finally managed to say, though she suspected that she hadn't quite managed to keep all of the humour out of her tone.

As soon as the door was closed once more, Anna stepped out from her hiding spot.

"Just doing my job'?" Anna joked as they walked away and Freya let her glamour lapse.

"What should I have said? 'Oh no, I'm not really a delivery girl, I'm just pretending to be one because your neighbour wasn't paranoid, she was just probably magic'? Yeah, I could see that going down real well."

Anna rolled her eyes at that, before asking, "So, what were you going to do if she said that you could leave the package with her?"

"Huh?"

"You didn't actually have a package."

"Oh... Um... I guess I hadn't thought that far ahead."

Anna rolled her eyes once more.

"So how are we going to get to this address, anyway?" Freya asked, deciding to divert attention away from her mistake.

"Where is it?"

Freya quickly plugged the address into her phone. "Looks like it's just outside the city."

“Well, if it’s outside the city I suppose we should take my car.”

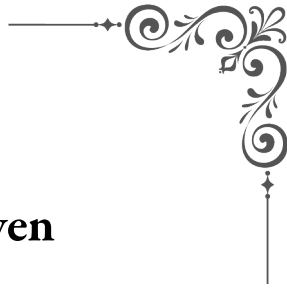
“Wait, you have a car?”

“Sometimes I need to be out of the city.”

“Yeah, but, I mean, you haven’t mentioned that you have a car. Given that we’ve been traipsing around the city, that seems like an important point.”

“Yeah, there’s no way I would drive in the city. I didn’t mention the car until now because this is the first time we’ve had to go out of the city.”

“All right, so where is this car then?”



Chapter Seven

Freya was surprised to see that the address didn't lead them to a house. Rather, they found themselves pulling up to a storage facility.

"I suppose, if she was being super paranoid, it would make sense for her to give an address that wasn't technically her own," Freya reasoned as Anna found somewhere to park.

"She gave this address for a reason," Anna said as she pulled into a parking space. "Presumably, she rents one of these storage spaces."

"Yeah, the only problem is that, if she was expecting trouble, this might all be a trap."

"So, how would we go about evading this trap?"

Freya shrugged as Anna cut the engine, opening her door. "Usually I just spring the trap."

"That seems like a rather reckless approach," Anna noted, as they got out of the car.

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure the biggest benefit of being an angel is that I can take one hell of a beating."

"So, I suppose you have an exact idea of how much damage you can take before you will die?"

Freya gave a sheepish shrug at that. "Not exactly. I just know it's a lot."

“Forgive me if I don’t want to be there when you figure out just exactly how much damage is necessary to make sure that you don’t get back up.”

“Yeah, can’t exactly blame you for that. I don’t want to be there either.”

Anna responded to her joke with a glare.

“Well, if you have a better idea...”

Anna seemed to think that for a few moments, before glaring at Freya once more.

“Can’t think of anything, huh?”

“This is hardly my area of expertise,” Anna defended.

“But it is mine. So let’s spring that trap.”

“Alright then,” Anna said reluctantly.

Freya pulled the sticky note back out of her pocket, returning her attention to the numbers above the address.

“This is probably the number for her storage space,” Freya reasoned. She looked up at the numbers on the sides of buildings before figuring out the pattern. “This way, I think.”

She led Anna down the rows for several minutes before they found what they were looking for.

“This is it,” Freya announced as she examined the sealed shutter in front of her.

“How should we go about getting in?”

Before Freya could respond, they heard footsteps rapidly approaching. They turned just as the woman from their vision rounded the corner.

“Who are you?” she asked, light Energy arcing over her arms. “Why are you following me?”

“We’re just looking for a friend of ours,” Freya said, though she primed her own Energy in anticipation of blocking an attack. “Her name is Alice. Do you know her?”

“I just want to be left alone,” the woman said before throwing her Energy at them.

Freya lunged out of the way, scrabbling up from the ground to see that Anna was still standing, having simply taken a few steps to the side. The woman, however, was paying her no heed, instead focusing her full attention on Freya, presumably because she was the one decked out in combat gear.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” Freya cried.

“I don’t believe you!” the woman snarled, advancing rapidly as she threw another round of Energy.

Thankfully, she missed, allowing Freya to throw her own bolt. She kept it at a low charge, so as not to cause any permanent damage, and was surprised to find that every bolt landed, despite the tendency of Energy to arc in the air.

As she spun to avoid a bolt from the woman, she saw that Anna had stepped back, watching the fight with an intensity that took Freya a moment to identify. She was concentrating on making sure Freya’s strikes landed.

“You won’t take me,” the woman swore before shifting away.

“What? No!” Freya jumped to her feet, trying to sense for the woman.

There was nothing to track.

“What the hell?” Freya asked Anna as the Oracle made her back over with a slight frown.

“She had nothing invested in this fight,” Anna reasoned. “Of course she would run.”

Freya nodded, having to admit that Anna’s logic was sound. She was used to fighting Demons, however, and they were too prideful to back down from a fight.

“What was she?” Freya eventually asked. “Her Energy was Light, not Dark. Like, in its entirety. Witches can’t use raw Energy like that...”

"A Guide," Anna explained. "You've never met one before?"

"No, I thought they were nearly extinct."

"They are, but *nearly* would still allow for one."

"I suppose. So, they're the opposite of Demons, right? They draw on positive experiences to generate Light Energy."

"Correct."

"So, why is she fighting us? Why would she have anything to do with Alice going missing?"

"I don't know!" Anna cried, and it took Freya a moment to realise her mistake. She had been so wrapped up in sorting through the questions she had that she hadn't noticed the way Anna was clenching her fists and jaw, or the way her answers to Freya's questions had had an increasing bite to them.

"I... I didn't expect you to know," Freya said, unsure of what else to say. "I was just thinking out loud."

"Obviously," Anna snarled, "but we are no closer to finding Alice than when we started. We've just been chasing wild geese! Now our only lead has vanished and we have no others."

"Well, I mean, I'm sure we'll think of something... Eventually..." Freya knew that her attempt to reassure Anna had been pathetic, but she wasn't sure what else she could say. Anna had a point, they had reached a dead end.

Anna nodded, regardless, seemingly regaining her composure. That didn't make Freya feel much better, however, as she suspected that it had more to do with her ineptitude reminding Anna that she couldn't afford to stumble, rather than her truly making her feel better.

"She can't be a complete ghost," Anna figured. "Not in today's society."

"Well, this facility must have some kind of front desk or office or something. I'd imagine they must have some kind of record of the people who rent from them."

“And those records may allow us to track her.”

Freya nodded, spinning around to try and figure out the way to the main office. After a few moments of pivoting, she saw a sign, directing them straight there.

It took about five minutes to walk across the facility to the main office. It was a small office, with a woman on her phone at the front desk visible through the window.

“Should we ask first or just sneak in?” Freya asked.

Anna closed her eyes for a moment before saying, “Asking will yield nothing. A simple distraction should be enough to allow us access to the computer.”

“What kind of distraction would work?”

“Hmm... I believe I have an idea.”

A few seconds later, the woman looked around, before scuttling to the loo as quickly as she could in her heels.

“You made her need the loo?” Freya asked, finding it a remarkably low-brow solution for Anna.

“It worked, didn’t it?”

Freya couldn’t argue with that, so she simply headed in, silencing the beep of the door as she went. She headed to the desk, leaning over to get to the keyboard. It didn’t take her long to find a list of customer contact information. She searched for the Guide by her storage unit’s number, quickly finding both her name and phone number.

“So, how do we use this to find her?” Anna asked once Freya got back outside. “Her name would probably only send us on a wild goose chase of addresses.”

“I might know someone who can help.”

“With?”

“With using their number to track the GPS on their phone.”

“Who do you know who is so well-versed in such illegal activity?”

“Well, I didn’t say she was well-versed in illegal activity, I just said she might be able to help. Or she might not. Or she might refuse to engage in ‘illegal activity.’”

Freya pulled out her phone, tapping Mel’s name in her contact list.

“Hey, Freya. How’s London?”

“Underwhelming, given the hype.”

“Aww. Is the job good at least?”

“Well, it’s interesting, I’ll give it that. That’s actually why I’m calling. If I give you a phone number, could you track the phone it belongs to?”

“No, because that would be super illegal and I would never do such a thing. And, even if I did, I wouldn’t admit it.”

“Okay, but if I give you a phone number, could you give me a location? In a completely legal way?”

“Give me the number.”

Freya read it out as Mel wrote it down.

“Okay. I’ll see what I can do, but there’s definitely not going to be anything until the morning.”

“Alright, I’ll talk to you then.”

She hung up before turning back to Anna. “She said it would take until morning.”

Anna nodded, but it was stiff. Even to Freya, it was clear that she was chafing at the delay.

“Come on,” Freya said. “It’s getting late and we’ve had a busy day. We should get something to drink.”



Chapter Eight

Freya, not knowing of anywhere else to go, suggested that they go to the bar at her hotel, and Anna didn't argue. Once they got there, Anna was completely unresponsive, only shrugging when Freya asked what she wanted. At a loss, Freya got a bottle of Merlot for them to share. Usually she drank spirits with coke, unless it was with a meal, but she figured Anna would be a wine drinker.

As soon as Freya put the bottle down at their little table, Anna immediately poured herself a glass.

"You okay?" Freya asked as she poured her own drink.

"I'm fine," Anna said after starting to drink from her glass. She wasn't gulping it down exactly, but she was certainly drinking as fast as could still be considered polite and graceful.

"Are you sure?"

"If I wasn't sure, I wouldn't have said it," Anna bit back.

Freya shrugged at that, before taking a drink of her own in an attempt to match Anna's pace.

"Are *you* okay?"

Freya found herself stunned by the sudden question, almost choking on her wine.

"Of course I am," she managed once her airway was clear.

"Why is that more of a given than me being okay? She's your sister, after all."

Freya blinked. She hadn't *really* thought of Alice as really being in trouble. They would find her, after all. But, as she thought about it, she realised that her stomach had a slight queasiness that wasn't usually there.

She drank heavily from her glass before replying. "We'll find her."

"Then there is no reason for either of us to not be okay."

"Yeah, I guess so..."

They lapsed back into silence as they finished their drinks before Anna poured them both another glass.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Anna asked as she finished pouring. "You're frowning."

"Oh, no, yeah. I was just thinking."

"About?"

Freya sighed, taking another drink. "I was just thinking about Fate and Alice. I mean, Alice is her niece, right? And Fate controls everything-"

"Not everything," Anna clarified. "She can't control free will."

Freya rolled her eyes. "Fine, whatever, free will not included. But she still has a *lot* of influence. So why not save Alice?"

"Save her?"

Freya frowned. "You know, when she was a kid."

"What? Because she was an orphan?"

"She's not an orphan."

Anna mirrored Freya's frown. "What do you mean? She was with you in the foster system, wasn't she? And she told me she was an orphan."

"Well, yeah, I mean, she says that because it's easier. I just assumed, you know, with your powers, that you already knew."

"Knew what?"

"I'm not going to tell you if Alice didn't," Freya said with a shake of her head. "It's not my story to tell."

"If you don't tell me, I'll just use my power to find out."

"Why don't you do that anyway? Wouldn't it be quicker?"

Anna responded by swilling the wine around in her glass in an over dramatic fashion. "It's difficult enough to see things as they are, not as we would wish them to be. All perception is clouded, and alcohol, surprisingly, does nothing to bring clarity."

Freya sighed. "Then I suppose you'll just have to wait until morning."

Anna looked down at her glass at that, swilling the wine once more, though not nearly as bombastically as before.

"Please," she said, so quietly that Freya wasn't quite sure what she had said at first. "Fate wasn't the only one who... Who turned a blind eye. When Homura left, she asked me to let her go, and I did..."

"You couldn't have known what would happen to her."

"No, I couldn't, because I didn't even so much as send a letter asking how she was."

Freya sighed. Anna was right, she could just use her powers in the morning to find out, but Freya still didn't feel right betraying Alice's trust.

"She lies about being an orphan because her father's in prison," Freya eventually admitted.

"Prison? For what?"

"You ever see the scars down her arms?"

Anna went silent at that, simply staring as if trying to comprehend.

After what felt like several minutes, she finally said, "I knew he was an ass, but I never imagined..."

"You had no way of knowing," Freya assured her.

“I had *every* way of knowing,” Anna bit back. “But being omniscient means nothing if you don’t *look*.”

Freya finished her drink at that before pouring another glass. She wasn’t sure what she could do for Anna if she she was determined to blame herself.

“Why did he do it?” Anna eventually asked. “I mean... He always thought he knew what was best for Homura, and he was always trying to stick his nose in her business. Always wanting to know who she was with, where she was... Whenever she tried to say no to anything he said, he would push and push until she caved. But she swore that it was fine. I asked if he was like that when they were...” Anna blushed a little before shaking her head. “She promised me that it was fine. That he loved her. She never said anything else positive about him. Just a list of complaints followed by *but he loves me*. I wanted to slap her... But he never hit her and I couldn’t force her to leave him, so I figured it was fine. It would all work itself out. I assumed, if things went bad, she would come back.”

Freya didn’t know what to say to that, focusing on her drink once more.

“Do you think he hurt Homura, or do think her death did something to him?” Anna asked.

Freya shrugged. “I guess I never really thought about him being abusive in that sense.”

“What do you mean?”

Freya sighed, downing her drink before reaching for the bottle again. It was empty.

“I’m going to get some more wine,” she said before heading back to the bar. The bartender barely blinked at her, not asking for any ID. Freya didn’t know how to feel happy or insulted by that. She’d only been eighteen for a few months, and the rule was to ask if you looked under twenty-one.

By the time she got back to the table and had refilled their glasses, she had figured out how to word what she wanted to say.

“There’s this thing, every March first, called Disability Day of Mourning. I follow a lot of Autistic bloggers - you know, to help me figure stuff out on my own - and they often post stuff. Videos from vigils and the like. The whole point is to remember everyone who was killed by their parents or caregivers. Every year the list is so long that I can’t reach the end of the videos where they list their names. I try... but I just can’t...”

“I never questioned the fact that Alice’s father tied her arms down in such a way that left those scars, because he was doing it to stop her from flapping her hands. You know, like Autistic people do. Despite the scars, that wasn’t even why he was arrested in the end. He nearly killed her with some bullshit homemade cure, that was probably mostly bleach.

“So, no, I never questioned why her father did the things he did. I just considered myself lucky that no one ever tried to do them to me.”

Anna didn’t look either shocked or surprised. She just nodded. Freya realised after a few moments that she didn’t know how old Anna was. Angels lived for centuries at least. She had probably seen some shit, and that was putting it mildly.

“So,” Anna eventually said, “you were wondering why Fate let that happen to her?”

Freya nodded. “I mean, there’s no way that she didn’t know. How would that have even been possible? She couldn’t have arranged everything while being oblivious of a teenage *Angel* running around. And she stepped in just as Alice’s powers showed up. That’s not luck. So, if she knew, why leave Alice there?”

Anna looked away at that. “It could have been for any number of reasons. Any number of threads that she needed Alice to

keep in place or shift..." She downed the rest of her drink, confirming to Freya that that wasn't the whole story.

"Do you know which thread?"

Anna sighed. "If I had to guess, I'd say that the most likely thread would probably be the unguided Angel that she became a big sister to..."

"What-" Freya stopped dead, mid-sentence, as she realised what Anna was saying. "Me. Alice went through all that for me."

Anna shrugged. "Maybe. Or maybe not. Maybe she was needed for any number of threads. Maybe growing up like that was required to shape Alice into the woman she needs to be."

Freya nodded, more than happy to accept that reasoning. The last thing she wanted was to face the idea that her sister had suffered because of her.

"It still doesn't seem fair," Freya eventually muttered into her drink before downing the rest of the glass. She was finally starting to feel a little tipsy.

Anna shrugged. "Life isn't fair. Fate just nudges things."

"You sound like someone who has never been fucked over by her," Freya muttered, thinking about all of the women in her family that had come before. The ones who had all died untimely, and occasionally horrific, deaths, orchestrated by Fate.

Anna glared at her, putting her glass down with a particularly sharp sound that caused Freya to flinch.

"Be careful talking about things you know nothing of," she warned, giving Freya a brief glare before returning her attention to the wine bottle, which was once again empty. "I think I need something stronger. Angel metabolism and all..."

Freya nodded silently as Anna stood up to return to the bar. Part of her was wary of getting drunk when they had to return to their search in the morning, but she also hadn't quite managed

to figure out Anna, so getting drunk seemed like the best way to settle the unease she felt around the other woman.

She really wanted Anna to like her. To approve of her. But she doubted that would happen. Anna was so in-command, even when she was worried about Alice, whereas Freya constantly felt as if she was just stumbling from one random idea to the next, just one slip-up away from irreparably screwing up.

Anna returned with a bottle of whiskey and two more glasses.

“I’m sorry,” Freya said after she had downed the drink Anna had poured for her, quickly pouring another.

Anna nodded. “It’s fine. It’s was just a bit obnoxious of you to assume that Fate was always good to me. She controls everything about the world. Or, at least, has the ability to change things if she put her mind to it. If she wanted, she could end all injustice, and injustice is something I became more than familiar with in my youth.”

“So why doesn’t she do that?”

“Because there are external threats to the world that she had to focus on dealing with.”

Freya raised an eyebrow. “Like what?”

“Like the Shadows. She gave your ancestor the Ancient, and that power allowed her to seal away the Shadows, but that seal won’t last forever. The Angel Twilight managed to repair some degradation to it, but it will start to tire again.

“If Fate focused on other problems, she might not be able to keep the threads where they need to be to stop the next big catastrophe.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Freya muttered, leaning back in her chair. “It just still sucks.”

Anna rolled her eyes at that. “All of those the Angels work for suck. Death sucks, Fate sucks, Nature sucks. Maybe Life

doesn't suck, but she hadn't been seen in so long that most aren't even sure what she does."

"So, basically, you're saying that Fate causes all of the systemic problems in the world, but don't worry about it because she has a plan?" Freya asked with more than a little sarcasm.

"There's a difference between causing a problem and not stepping in to stop it."

Freya raised an eyebrow. "That sounds like terrible logic."

"And yet, it is still true," Anna said. "Fate could, potentially, solve the problems of the mortal realm, but why should she? Especially when it could potentially come at the cost of her being able to stop the next world-ending catastrophe."

"Look, Freya, I get it. You think that I didn't want a single person to blame for the hardship of being a trans girl in the early 1800s? But blaming Fate for everything is worse than pointless. That anger will consume you if you let it."

Freya nodded silently, finishing her second glass of whiskey as she mulled over Anna's words. She had seen how hating Fate had affected Amber. She had become bitter and paranoid, sure that there were shadows around every corner. Freya didn't want to be like that, but it was hard to ignore that she was inheriting a legacy of tragedy, most of which could be easily traced back to Fate.

"So, what about free will?" Freya eventually asked, deciding that the best way to ease her anxieties would be to find out as much as possible about how Fate worked.

"Hmm?" Anna asked, clearly having been distracted by something. Freya briefly wondered how much they had had to drink, before figuring that she felt fine and, since they were both Angels, they probably had the same alcohol tolerance.

"Free will," she repeated. "Doesn't that mess up your plans?"

“It can,” Anna agreed. “That’s why being able to assess people and predict how they will behave in any given circumstance is important. We’re manipulating people as much as we’re manipulating circumstance.”

“Yeah, but there’s no way you can predict every response a person will have. People are too complicated and unpredictable.”

Anna snorted before taking another swig of her drink. “No, they’re really not.”

“Of course they are. There’s no way you could accurately predict the way every single person would react to a situation.”

“Yes, you can. Take you for example. You’ve been so hurt in the past that you used to close yourself off from any possible connection out of fear. You’ve gotten better since meeting Damon, but you can still be overly suspicious of other people being nice to you. And, once someone’s your friend, you’ll do everything in your power to keep them safe and happy, even at your own expense. Even if you’re not even sure there’s a real threat, you’ll throw away your happiness because you’re just a tiniest bit suspicious that trouble may be around the corner. Seriously, you should probably work on that martyr thing you’ve got going. And then, of course, there’s your issue with holding grudges. I mean, honestly, you’ll not even be slightly bothered by something if you can understand why someone did it, but if that understanding is absent, so is any chance of forgiveness from you.”

Freya rolled her eyes as Anna finally finished. “None of that is true. I’m not overly defensive, I’m just careful about who I let get close; I don’t martyr myself - have you met me? - I’m totally selfish and put myself first all the time; and name one grudge that I have ever held.”

“Amber,” Anna answered simply.

Freya rolled her eyes. “Amber doesn’t count.”

“Why? Because she deserves it? Because you can’t understand why she kept you in the dark about your true heritage, and for that you can’t forgive her?”

“Look, Amber’s a liar. Always has been and always will be. You know, after the second time I killed a Demon that came after me, she told me that they were all monsters who barely classified as people, which is hilarious given that she married one.”

“She married a half-Demon,” Anna corrected.

“Not the point. The point is that she lied because she knew that killing didn’t sit well with me. She thought that she was protecting me, but it was only in the short-term. She always thinks that she’s protecting me, and she always ends up hurting me. I’m just not letting her do it again.”

“By holding a grudge because you think that, in her shoes, you wouldn’t do the exact same thing.”

“Of course I wouldn’t.”

Anna raised an eyebrow, as if to say that Freya had just confirmed everything she had been saying.

Freya just glared, not quite able to come up with a coherent answer as to why Anna was wrong. She definitely was wrong, but Freya couldn’t put her finger on why in that moment.

“Fine, Amber doesn’t count,” Anna said, though her voice made it clear that she didn’t consider that to be the case. “What about your mother?”

“What about her?”

“You hold a pretty big grudge for someone you never met.”

“The fact that I never met her is why I’m angry.”

“So, you would have preferred that she hadn’t corrected the timeline?”

“No! Well, I don’t know... Maybe...”

“Well, that was the choice she had,” Anna reasoned. “So either you wish that she had left the timeline as it was, or you acknowledge that she had to die in order to end the War.”

Freya sighed, curling up a little on her chair. She knew that Anna was right - Amber had told her the same thing enough times - but that didn't stop the hurt. Maybe stopping the War had been the right thing to do, but her mother had done it knowing full well that the price was leaving Freya alone.

Being a hero had mattered more to her than being a mother.

“And I suppose you would never do that to your child,” Anna ventured.

“Of course not,” Freya bit back. That had been a vow she had made long ago, and one she intended to keep beyond all else.

“Another decision you can't understand someone making, and another you therefore cannot forgive.”

“Whatever,” Freya muttered into her drink. “The dead can live with my ire.”

“But can you?”

Freya responded with a glare. “Am I going to get to ask invasive questions at some point, or are you the only one who gets to do that?”

Anna looked away little, seemingly at least a little chastised by Freya's words.

“I'm sorry,” the older woman said. “I got carried away. I was just trying to distract myself...”

“Mel will come through for us,” Freya replied dismissively.

Anna nodded, but the worried crease of her brow told Freya that she didn't believe her.

“Come on, this whiskey isn't going to drink itself...”



Chapter Nine

“Where are we?” Freya asked as she traipsed after Anna. The Oracle’s Shadow Realm counterpart hadn’t exactly been happy with the idea of Freya tagging along with her, but she relented after Freya had managed to prove that she had knowledge beyond Anna’s. How exactly she had attained that knowledge was information Freya decided to keep to herself. After all, while she had started to trust Anna on Earth, she had no way of knowing how she would react to the idea of a separate realm here. Not to mention, after the burden it had placed Damon under, she was reluctant to share her knowledge with anyone.

“The ruins of the Tower of the Twilight Princess,” Anna informed her as they passed through the final section of dense shrubbery to find a large patch of open land, a ruined tower standing in the centre.

“You mean like in Zelda?” Freya asked, not really paying attention to her words as she examined the sight in front of her.

“I beg your pardon?”

Freya shook her head. “Never mind. It doesn’t matter. So, this is where you think Alice is hiding out?”

Anna nodded. “According to my information, this is a likely location.”

“So, who was the Twilight Princess, if not Zelda? Or maybe it’s never Zelda, I never really had a Nintendo...”

Anna gave her a look that told her that the Oracle was very much questioning her sanity, which was fine by Freya. Underestimated was always where she was most comfortable.

“The Twilight Princess was the Old Queen’s heir.”

“I thought the Rebel Queen was the Old Queen’s heir.”

“The Rebel Queen was her second, younger heir. The Twilight Princess was her first heir, but she went mad and fled to this tower to ensure that she didn’t hurt anyone she loved.”

Freya frowned, realising that she was probably talking about Hope, her grandmother. “What do you mean she went mad? ‘Mad’ isn’t exactly a helpful, diagnostic label. Was she Depressed? Anxious? Psychotic? It’s kind of important to distinguish?”

“Why? She’s long dead.”

Because I would like to know what kind of shit I’m genetically predisposed to, Freya thought, but kept it to herself. Bothering Anna with her worries about her family would mean revealing who she was, and she definitely didn’t trust her with the information that she was the Lost Queen everyone was looking for.

“Alright, so, Alice,” Freya said, making her way towards the tower.

“Wait!” Anna called, stopping the younger woman dead in her tracks. “If Alice is hiding here, she was probably trapped in the area. Even if she isn’t, the Twilight Princess never wanted to be found. There are probably some enchantments still active that will have a nasty kick to them.”

“So, what do we do?” Freya asked. “I mean, we have to get to the tower.”

Anna rolled her eyes. “We think before storming ahead, obviously. Do they not teach bounty hunters to use their brains?”

Freya shrugged. “I’m pretty durable,” she reasoned.

“Even if you are, it would still be best not to chance anything by being reckless.” She closed her eyes, clearly trying to sense for any traps.

Freya folded her arms, waiting. She had already tried to do the same while Anna had been busy berating her, and she had found nothing except the usual obscuring static. It had a familiar feel to it, and she had quickly come to the conclusion that Alice had reinforced the magic that Hope had already left there.

“I can’t sense anything,” Anna declared as her eyes shot open, clearly frustrated. “Someone is blocking my magic, but it didn’t feel like Alice.”

“You know, I think I’m just going to go ahead,” Freya said, deciding to test a hunch. “You should probably stay here.”

Anna shook her head. “Alice is my charge. I’m not letting some bounty hunter get to her first, even if you have knowledge beyond my explanation.”

Freya sighed. “Look, like you said, there will be traps here. I am more durable than you, and I have immunity from certain magics. I should be able to cross without trouble.”

“What immunity could you possibly have?”

“The kind that relies on blood,” Freya said before sprinting across the field between them and the tower.

She clamped her eyes closed, terrified that she would be struck down by a combination of her grandmother and sister’s magic, but her hands, which she had outstretched in front of her, came up against a solid, stone wall before any magic tried to harm her.

Freya opened her eyes, looking to see that she had, indeed, arrived at the tower.

She turned back to see Anna still at the other end of the field.

“See?” she called. “I was right. Just stay there. I’ll convince Alice to come out.”

Anna shook her head. "Clearly the magic that used to guard the tower has weakened over the years." She stepped forwards to join Freya.

"I really wouldn't do that!"

Freya's warning was too late, however, as Anna became trapped in a stasis spell.

Freya sighed, her stomach flooding with guilt about not being honest with Anna about who she was. She turned back towards the tower, however, figuring that she would need Alice's help to get the other Oracle free.

Freya approached the fallen wall of the tower to climb through, only to be greeted by a faceless spectre.

"Who goes there?" it demanded, in Hope's voice.

"Your granddaughter."

"I have no granddaughter."

Freya sighed, dragging her hand across the rough stone in order to draw blood before presenting it to the ghost. "Blood calls to blood. Recognise me, Guardian."

The spectre placed its ghostly hand over Freya's before fading away.

"You may pass," its voice echoed as Freya wiped her hand on her trousers.

"I hate blood magic," Freya muttered to herself as she climbed through the ruin.

"Alice?" she called. "Come on, I know you're here. I felt your magic outside."

"Here," Freya heard from behind her, spinning around just in time to catch a small vial that had been thrown to her.

"For your hand," Alice explained.

Freya nodded in thanks before dumping the contents of the vial over her wound, closing it quickly.

“So,” Alice continued, eyeing Freya closely. “You’re the Lost Queen.”

Freya shrugged. “I’m just a bounty hunter. Whatever other people want to call me is their business.”

“Why were you accompanying Anna? Were you looking to reclaim your family’s tower? I meant no disrespect by seeking refuge here.”

Freya shook her head. “I didn’t even know the tower existed until we got here.”

“Then you are here for the bounty on my head?”

“No, I just wanted to see if you were okay.”

Alice blinked, seemingly taken aback. “Why?” she eventually managed.

Freya shrugged. “I know things sometimes. I can see things. And I got the impression that you might be in distress, so I accompanied Anna to find you.”

“Oh,” Alice said, folding her arms protectively over her chest. “I... I’m sorry. I didn’t expect anyone to come looking for me. Not Anna, and certainly not the Lost Queen.”

“Who is Anna to you?”

“She’s a priestess at the Temple of Fate.”

Freya found her memories fuzzy for a moment as she tried to remember her knowledge of the Temple of Fate, her Earth counterpart’s confusion clouding her thoughts. After a few moments, she remembered that the Upper Council - Fate, Life, Death, and Nature - all seemed absent from the Shadow Realm. Absent, all except for their temples and the priests and priestesses who attended to them. It hadn’t occurred to Freya that those priests and priestesses were Angels, though it probably should have, given that the Temple of Life had been abandoned for generations.

“My mother left the order when she was younger,” Alice continued. “When she died, they took me in. But I don’t want to be

a priestess. I want my own life. I didn't think anyone would care enough when I ran away to come looking."

"Anna clearly does."

Alice nodded, her eyes gleaming with unshed tears. "Yes, I suppose she does. But... I cannot go back. Please don't make me, Your Highness."

"I won't," Freya assured her, deciding to let Alice carve this path for herself, wherever it led.



FREYA GROANED, GRABBING her pillow and pulling it around her head to cover her ears as her phone blared at her, demanding her attention.

"Tumroff!" she heard from next to her, reminding her that she wasn't the only occupant of her bed.

Freya grabbed her phone only to see that it wasn't an alarm, but, rather, Mel ringing her. She tapped to answer before tapping the speaker.

"Phone," she said, forgetting how to answer.

"Freya?"

"Yep, that's me. I'm here. S'up?" Freya pushed herself up into a sitting position before glancing over to Anna, who seemed to be finally returning to her senses.

"I got that info you wanted."

"You did? You got a location?"

Anna stood up as Freya and Mel spoke, still wearing her clothes from the night before. She wandered over to the bathroom, picking up a glass on the way.

"I did indeed. I'm emailing it to you now. I just wanted to call as well to make sure you got it."

Freya's phone buzzed. She glanced at the screen to see that she had received an email from Mel with an address.

“Got it,” Freya confirmed. “Thank you.”

“No problem.”

Freya hung up as Anna re-entered the room, gulping down water from her glass.

“You feeling okay?” Freya asked. She had given up on matching Anna’s drinking pace after a while, so she wasn’t feeling too worse for wear. The Oracle, on the other hand...

Anna held up her hand, indicating for Freya to wait until she had finished her drink. As soon as the water was gone, she critically examined the other woman for a few moments before asking, “Last night, we didn’t...?”

Freya raised an eyebrow.

“You know... I was very drunk and I don’t remember and we woke up together...”

“Oh, right, no,” Freya said, feeling her face heat up. “Nothing happened. You just drank more than me and weren’t really in a position to get home.”

Anna nodded, seemingly accepting the answer.

“Why?” Freya asked, a small kernel of courage proving to be enough to push past her initial embarrassment in order to tease the Oracle. “Did you want something to happen?”

Anna turned pink at that. “Of course not! I’m two hundred years older than you! You’re barely legal!”

Freya huffed a little at that, feeling infantilised by the reminder of her age.

“Just shut up and get dressed so that we can save your sister.”



“THIS IS THE ADDRESS?” Anna asked as they walked up to the large, concrete parking garage. They hadn’t wanted to take a taxi, since the address seemed to be an awkwardly placed parking

garage not too far from the hotel, and Anna was in no state to drive them.

“Yeah, this is it. Maybe she lives in her car. It would explain a lot.”

Anna nodded in agreement as they approached. “My main concern is this being another dead end.”

“Well, yeah, that would suck.”

“But I suppose we won’t know until we look,” Anna said before giving her a small, brief smile.

Freya returned it as a grin before closing her eyes, trying to sense the Guide. She felt nothing but the magical equivalent of static. It verified that someone with magic was hiding inside, but it shielded the exact nature of their magic. Freya supposed it made sense, if the Guide was one of the last of her kind. She knew first hand how attractive that made you to people with less than pure intent.

“I suppose we’ll just have to wander,” Freya figured with a shrug. “We’re bound to come across her eventually.”

Anna looked less than convinced, but she nodded and followed Freya up through the car park.

They walked up slowly, checking every car for any sign of the Guide. It wasn’t until they reached the third floor, however, that they found anything.

“You should not be here,” the Guide called, her voice reverberating around the concrete walls.

“We just want to ask you some questions,” Freya called back, but she received no reply.

“We should keep going,” Anna told her.

“Leave. Now,” they heard as they reached the fourth floor.

“Please,” Freya shouted. “I’m looking for my sister. I just want to know if you’ve seen her.”

There was no reply until they hit the fifth floor.

“You will not find what you seek down this path.”

“I still have to try.”

“No, you don’t,” the Guide told them as they reached the sixth floor. “You could turn around now. Go home. Forget you ever came this far.”

“Not without my sister.”

The sixth floor was the final one. Continuing upwards led only to the roof.

Freya ran up the final ramp, seeing that the roof was empty except for a single figure, their back to the ramp as they stood looking out over the city. Or, at least, what little of the city they could see while still below so many skyscrapers.

It was immediately clear that she wasn’t the Guide. Instead of the Guide’s long, brown hair, the woman in front of them had jet black hair that was cropped short. She was wearing a matching sky blue pair of leggings and three-quarter sleeve top, with a white dress over the top, matching a white pair of ballet slippers she had on.

“Alice?!” Anna exclaimed, her shock quickly turning to a snarl of fury. “What the hell are you doing here? We’ve been looking for you!”

“I know,” Alice replied as she turned back to face them.

“If you knew, then why are you just standing here?”

“Because you were never meant to keep searching. I thought that you would give up rather quickly.” She turned to Freya. “And I definitely didn’t anticipate my aunt getting you involved.”

Freya raised an eyebrow as she folded her arms. All of her worry over her sister gave way to irritation as she realised that Alice hadn’t really been missing at all. She had run away.

“Well, she did,” Freya said. “So I’d be super happy to know just what exactly is going on and why you went AWOL.”

“That’s not important. Just tell my aunt that I’m fine and then you can go back home.”

Anna stepped forward at that, her composure clearly cracking under the weight of her fury. “Alice, I swear to the Creator, if you run away again, I will hunt you down and tattoo you with a tracking rune.”

Alice shook her head. “I’m sorry, Anna. I didn’t mean to cause you any distress, but you’re too loyal to my aunt. I couldn’t trust you.”

“Trust me with what? Your early-twenties melodrama? Everyone runs away from their family at least once, it would just have been nice to know that you hadn’t been kidnapped and weren’t being kept in a torture dungeon by some vengeful Demon.”

“This isn’t melodrama!” Alice responded, folding her arms. “I knew you wouldn’t get it...”

“Yeah, well, you were right, because it certainly looks like melodrama from where I’m standing. Did you and your aunt have a fight or something?”

Alice shook her head. “No, we didn’t fight. I just... She gave me an assignment I couldn’t complete.”

“Couldn’t or wouldn’t?”

“Does it matter?”

Anna rolled her eyes. “Yes, it does. So tell me, what exactly did she ask that was so reprehensible to you?”

“Fifty dead, twenty three injured, and millions worth of property damage,” Alice told her. “Essentially, she wanted me to orchestrate a terror attack in the hopes of killing a single boy. So, can’t or won’t don’t mean much to me in this situation.”

“So, what? You’re just going to hide?”

“No. I’m going to get the result she wants, just not the way she wants.”

“Alice, don’t,” Anna warned, and Freya found herself surprised by how grave her tone had become. She no longer sounded irritated with Alice, she sounded scared for her. “If you try to mess with the plan, you’ll cause a ripple effect in the threads. There will be consequences you won’t be prepared for.”

“I can mitigate for them.”

“No, you can’t! Alice, I don’t care how much potential you’ve shown, you’ve only been at this for a few years. You can’t account for every thread. No Oracle can.”

Alice shook her head. “I knew that you were too loyal to ask for help. I wanted to, but I knew that you would be like this.”

“You mean like someone who actually takes a moment to think through their actions?! Because, yes, Alice, unfortunately I am like that. If you do this, you’ll regret it, I can promise you that.”

“If I don’t, I’ll regret it more.”

Anna put her hands up, clearly showing that she was giving up and washing her hands of her partner. “Fine. Do what you will, but I will have no part in it.”

“No, you’ll just go back and tell my aunt so that she’ll stop me.”

Anna closed her eyes, pinching the bridge of her nose between her index finger and thumb as she sighed.

“Fine, I won’t tell her,” Anna eventually said, though she looked as if it pained her. “I’ll let you see this through and, Ancients help me, I’ll let you live with the consequences. Frankly, I don’t think you’ll learn if I don’t.”

“Thank you.”

“If you’re thanking me then you’ve not been listening to a word I’ve been saying,” Anna said before turning and shifting away.

Alice seemed a little put out by that, but her frown quickly morphed into a smile as she turned back to Freya, who had been feeling more than a little out of place during their argument.

“Hey,” Alice greeted. “Long time no see.”

“Yeah. I guess that’s what happens when you both turn out to be Angels.”

“Well, quite. So... Fancy helping me change fate?”

Freya shrugged with a smile. “Sure. Why not? I’ve got nothing better to do.”

And you probably need someone to watch your back if Anna was that worried, she thought, but didn’t say. She didn’t want Alice to think that she was in any way siding with the older Oracle.

Alice looked around, seemingly remembering where they were. “We should probably go somewhere that isn’t a car park.”

“Somewhere with heating would be nice.”

Alice grinned. “I think I know just the place.”



“SO,” ALICE SAID AS the waiter arrived with their food, “how have you been?”

Freya couldn’t help the slight raise of her eyebrow at her sister’s question. Ever since Anna had left, it had been nothing but small talk between them.

I’m hungry. Do you fancy going for food?

Italian sounds nice.

You know, I fancy the linguine.

All the while, Freya was desperate to know just what exactly her sister was roping her into.

“Don’t you already know?” she eventually replied, deciding that she should make more effort to steer the conversation back to magic if she wanted answers.

Alice shrugged. “It’s always polite to ask.”

"I've been fine."

"Liar."

Freya glared at her.

"What? We both know that you haven't. You barely ever call Amber anymore, even though you said that you forgave her, and you've stopped talking to Damon, even though you said that you wouldn't let your relationship going bad interfere with your friendship. Not to mention your current academic situation. I wouldn't call any of that 'fine.'"

Freya sighed. "Okay, you're right. Things aren't fine with me, but I'll live. You, on the other hand, seem to have run away from your family."

"I haven't run away," Alice countered.

"Yeah, that's not what you told me in the Shadow Realm last night."

Alice seemed caught off-guard by that, confirming for Freya that Oracles, who were all-knowing about events on Earth, had no link to the realm beyond.

"What did I say over there?"

"That you ran away because you didn't want to be an Oracle."

Alice sighed. "I *do* want to be an Oracle, I just don't think that it has to be as unpleasant as my aunt is making it. I think she's taking the easy course, not the right one."

"Yeah, this whole thing about a terror attack, right?" Freya asked, after bringing up a sound-dampening bubble.

Alice nodded. "There's a Slayer, about my age, and he isn't really committed to the family legacy. He would much rather live a normal, Human life as much as possible. The problem is that this normal, Human life he wants will mean that he doesn't meet his wife."

"Which is important because?"

"I can't tell you."

“Why not?”

“Because you’ll mess it up down the line if I give you too many details. Let’s just say that their child will be involved in some important things.”

“Okay, so, what does this have to do with a terror attack?”

“The best way to spur him into taking his legacy as a Slayer seriously would be to have Demons hurt his younger brother so that he goes on a revenge trip. The thing is, the brief my aunt gave me involves letting a group of Demons, who have a problem with Slayers, blow him up while he’s travelling across the Tower Bridge. I don’t even think killing him is necessary, never mind blowing him and a few dozen others to smithereens.”

“So why would your aunt tell you to let things happen that way if there was another solution?”

“Because it’s easier. I think she’s taking the easy path, and I don’t think it’s right.”

“So you want my help in rearranging things?”

Alice nodded. “I can fix this. I just need a little help. I want to prove to my aunt that we can do things differently. That sometimes we can spare people the hurt that we might otherwise deem ‘necessary.’” Alice looked more determined than Freya had ever seen her at that.

“You really want to save this kid, huh?”

Alice looked away at that. “I want to prove that he can be saved. That others can be as well.”

“Alright. Just tell me what to do.”

“I need you to help me steal a bus.”



Chapter Ten

T*his is ridiculous,” Freya muttered as she followed Alice through the caves, holding on as best as she could to the slick stone walls. “We can’t just sneak into the Temple of Fate. We’ll be seen for sure. Not to mention, I could be recognised.”*

“You said you wanted to help me, didn’t you? This is the only way.”

“You know, burning your name from the scroll of Fate won’t make the other priestesses forget about you,” Freya reasoned. “They could just write it back on.”

Alice shook her head. “You can’t write a name on the scroll if it has been burned off before.”

“Seems impractical. What if two people have the same name? What if there’s a fire?”

Alice rolled her eyes. “It’s magic, Your Highness. It knows the difference between different people with the same name, and it knows the difference between intent and accident.”

“Hmm. Seems this scroll knows a lot. Maybe you shouldn’t be messing with people who have this kind of power.”

“I never would have taken Your Highness for a coward,” Alice teased with a smile.

Freya sighed. “What did I tell you about calling me ‘Your Highness’? It weirds me out. Plus, it’ll only increase our chances of getting caught. And, if you are going to insist on using it, the least you could do is afford me the respect it implies.”

“What should I call you instead?”

“Freya is fine.”

“Okay then, Freya, we’re almost there.”

Freya nodded as she started to hear the roar of a waterfall. She realised that the exit of the cave must be concealed behind one.

Her suspicion was confirmed as they rounded a corner, coming to a small opening, just large enough for them to slip through one at a time. On the other side of the opening, water cascaded down into a large lake.

“Can you swim?” Alice asked her.

Freya nodded. On Earth, her swimming ability had been patchy, thanks to moving around a lot during the years when it was usually taught in school, and her Shadow Realm self had never really encountered it. But, if there was one perk to having a mermaid for a best friend, it was that she insisted on a lot of trips to the beach for a swim in quiet areas. Mel always wanted company, so she had been quick to teach Freya how to swim so that she wasn’t always just sitting on the sand, waiting for her friend to tire of the waves.

“Then get ready to dive in and follow me. We’re going to be under water for a while, so take a deep breath.”

Freya nodded, at which point Alice threw her torch to the ground before diving into the water. Freya followed quickly after, the water roaring in her ears. It felt like home. She cherished that feeling, knowing that, in at least some small capacity, it was part of her connection to Juni, and to the Elemental part of herself. Even if she had left, Juni was never completely gone, the feeling told her.

She let the thoughts of her missing companion subside as she focused on following Alice. The Oracle was making a beeline for the other end of the lake, where large stone cliffs rose up from the water, preventing them from climbing out. However, climbing out seemed to be the last thing on Alice’s mind as she dove deeper into the water, finding a small hole in the cliff, just large enough to swim through.

Alice turned to make sure that Freya was following her before heading down, into the hole.

Freya followed her through into the pitch-black tunnel. She struggled to keep holding her breath as she felt panic begin to rise. She had never really been claustrophobic, and being afraid of drowning when she controlled water would be ridiculous, but being underwater, in an enclosed space, while it was pitch black, without an end in sight, seemed to be the tipping point for Freya.

She moved as fast as she could with Alice still in front of her and, just at the moment that she was sure that her lungs were about to give in to their want to hyperventilate, she saw a light at the end of their tunnel.

The small shaft opened up to a pool, just large enough for Freya and Alice to comfortably stand in together, with the water coming to their shoulders.

Freya did her best to keep her breathing calm as she surfaced, despite the desperation of her lungs for more of the sweet, clean air of the temple.

Alice pulled herself up and out of the pool, the air around her heating up to dry her as she offered her hand to Freya.

Freya took it, climbing out of the pool to join her sister. She, too, was dried by the magic air of the temple as Alice grabbed a couple of white robes, passing one to Freya.

“Make sure to pull it over your clothes,” Alice said. “You stick out like a sore thumb.”

Freya nodded, pulling the robe tightly over herself. The material was light, but still opaque, for which she was thankful.

Alice didn't tie her own robe, only pulling the hood over her face. Freya supposed that meant that Alice's sky-blue wrappings around her upper legs and arms, with a white tunic draped atop them, were the official garb of the priestesses.

“So, where is this scroll?” Freya asked as Alice led her through an empty corridor. “I’m assuming it’s under heavy guard.”

Alice nodded. “That’s why I brought you along.”

“You needed a distraction.”

“Yup. I figured you could just take your hood off. The Lost Queen reappearing should do it.”

“You do know that I’m trying to keep a low profile, right? No one is supposed to know where I am. It would bring Lord Uther’s men right to their door.”

“The priestesses can look after themselves. Trust me.”

“It will also bring him closer to me.”

“If you disappear quickly enough, no one outside will believe that you were really here. It will be nothing more than a rumour.”

“He wants me dead more than enough to follow up on rumours, no matter how unlikely.”

“But probably not swiftly. By the time his men are here, you will be long gone. And you have no real ties to me or the other priestesses. There will be no reason for him to suspect that you were truly here, and there will be no way for him to know where you have come from or where you’ll go from here.”

Freya sighed. “Alright, fine. I suppose that makes sense. So, where do you need this distraction?”

“If you stay in the main prayer chamber when we arrive, that should be enough to draw attention. I’ll then sneak off to the archives.”

“Where’s the main prayer chamber?”

“We’re coming up to it now.”

Freya nodded, though she was frowning. They hadn’t come across a single priestess since they had arrived. Where was everyone?

“It’s awfully quiet,” Freya ventured.

“It’s always quiet,” Alice bit back. “A graveyard would be more lively.”

"I know, but to have not encountered anyone?"

They arrived in a large, circular chamber before Alice could answer. In the centre of the room, beneath the large, glass dome that made up the ceiling, stood a statue that appeared to be of Fate, except she had six faces around her head, each facing one of the entry ways to the chamber.

"You're right," Alice said as they approached the statue. "This room, at least, is always occupied."

Before they could truly assess what was happening, flames burst forth from the ground behind them, closing the entryway behind them.

Freya turned quickly, just in time to see each of the exits to the room go up in flame.

"Well, shit."



"SO, ARE WE SURE THIS is the only way to do things?" Freya asked as they approached the bus station, her face made unrecognisable through a simple glamour.

"It's the best way I've managed to figure out," Alice told her. "Why? Are you freaking out at the thought of doing something illegal?"

"No, I'm pretty sure that the Humans have every right to lock me away and throw away the key at this point."

Alice stopped dead in her tracks, frowning at her younger sister in a way that made Freya's skin crawl.

"What?" Freya demanded, folding her arms.

Alice shook her head, her frown lifting just a little as she resumed walking, though her pace was a fraction of what it had been. "Nothing. I just hadn't realised that you didn't think of yourself as Human anymore."

Freya shrugged. “Well, I mean, I’m not,” she reasoned, though, in truth, she hadn’t realised it either. “Amber was doing her best to keep me anchored to the Human world because she thought that she was protecting me, but I don’t think she was. What if she was tearing me in half instead? Trying to fit me into a space that wasn’t right for me?”

Alice gave a sigh, running her hand through her short hair. “I just... I don’t think the magic world is one you want to jump into so completely.”

“Why not? It’s literally hunted me down and tried to kill me from day one. I figure, either I can keep running, and live a half-way life, or I can embrace the magical world and actually live a life in full, where I’m not keeping a huge part of my identity a secret from all of those close to me.”

“I guess I never thought of it like that,” Alice muttered, seemingly to herself, before looking back up, almost at Freya, but not quite. “Let’s just focus on the task at hand.”

Freya nodded. “Alright. Bus stealing.”

“Everything will be fine, Freya,” Alice assured, clearly having picked up on the nerves in her voice. “We’ve got luck on our side, remember?”

Freya nodded again, but she wasn’t convinced. “Are you *sure* this is the only way?”

Alice gave an exasperated sigh. “Look, stealing the bus will mess with the timetables for tomorrow, changing the way the traffic moves. This will cause a minor pile-up, preventing the boy from being at the bridge at the same time as the Demons. The Demons won’t see him, and their reign of destruction will remain negligible.”

“Why are they causing destruction anyway? Just to replenish their Energy? It seems like overkill.”

“No, it’s not just that. One of the Demon nobles, Lord Uther, has tasked them with causing havoc.”

“Why?”

“Demon politics.”

“So can’t the other Demons sort it out?”

“They will. If we stop the boy from getting to the bridge, by the time the Demons see him, they will be far from the bridge and running low on Energy. Instead of going straight for the kill, they’ll choose to injure him in hopes of replenishing their Energy from his pain. Before they can kill him, however, Lady Caroline, the head of the Royal Cleaners, will arrive and put a stop to their activities before they can risk exposing magic further.”

Freya frowned. “Why does that name sound familiar?”

“Lady Caroline?”

She nodded.

“You met her last year.”

Freya’s frown deepened as she found herself unable to remember the encounter. After a few moments, she realised why. “I met her during the time I can’t remember.”

Alice nodded.

“And let me guess, you can’t tell me exactly what happened because it would cause the spell to unravel?”

“Unfortunately,” Alice confirmed. “Telling you would revert things, and you’re the one who wanted them this way.”

Freya sighed, folding her arms. “I’m just not sure that I made the right decision.”

“How could you be? You can’t remember how or why you made it. Maybe you were pressed for time, maybe you were in distress, maybe you made it without having all of the facts. But worrying over it won’t change it.”

“But you telling me what happened would.”

“Right. But what if you did make the right decision? There would be no way to change things back.”

“So that means that I should leave them?”

Alice shrugged. “It’s a coin flip as to which would be better, so why not leave things as they are? Nothing is *that* terrible, is it?”

“Weren’t you the one getting annoyed with me about letting my happiness slip through my fingers?”

“Yes, but that was months ago. There are other routes to happiness, and they’re closer than going back at this point.”

Freya sighed, realising that she was going to get nowhere with this. “Alright then. Let’s just focus on getting this bus.”

She cloaked herself in shadow before sneaking in through the garage door into the bus station. Alice had given her the licence plate code, which she had written on her hand. Of course, as soon as she raised her hand to check, she remembered that it was cloaked and she had no way of seeing it.

Sighing with frustration, Freya ducked behind one of the buses, away from prying eyes, so that she could quickly decloak and memorise the code. She spent several moments running over the letters and numbers, silently mouthing them aloud, to make sure that she had them before cloaking once more.

She made her way back to the buses, looking at each of the licence plates in turn to find the one she wanted. However, as soon as she got to the third one, she found that she had forgotten the code. She sighed, looking around. People were everywhere, but all of them seemed busy. Too busy to notice her. She quickly de-cloaked her arm to get another glimpse of the code, before cloaking herself again.

No one seemed to react to the sudden appearance, and disappearance, of a disembodied arm, so Freya assumed that she had

gotten away with it. Thankfully, she quickly found the bus in question before she forgot the code again.

She ran up to it, finding the door open. She moved to the driver's seat, hoping that Alice's driving charm would work as she wrapped it around the steering wheel. Alice had sworn that she had never managed to figure out driving, and that she used it all the time, but Freya had to wonder if buses weren't a little different to cars.

The charm, however, glowed once it was firmly secured around the steering wheel, causing the door to close behind her.

"Well done," Alice said as she shifted next to her sister.

"So, are you ready to tell me where we're going to stash this thing?" Freya asked as the charm drove them backwards, bringing about a cacophony of shouts from the worker in the garage.

"Remember where you found me?"

"The car park?"

Alice nodded. "I have charmed an area to cloak anything parked there. No one should find the bus until we're done."

"So... That's it?" Freya asked as the bus drove itself out of the garage and down the road, into the regular flow of traffic, with ease.

"That's it."

"It really doesn't seem like you needed me for this."

Alice shrugged. "I know, but it was this or send you back to my aunt. What were you supposed to say to her if I did send you back? Anything we could have come up with would have been enough to tip her off. This way, we can return together and avoid any such problems."

"Well, I suppose that makes sense," Freya agreed, leaning back in her chair just before she heard the sound of sirens in the distance. "Alice?"

"Yeah?"

“Those wouldn’t happen to be police sirens, would they?”

“That I believe they are, yes.”

“And we just stole a bus. In broad daylight.”

“That we did.”

“You didn’t mention anything about outrunning the police.”

“Right, so, that might have been the other thing I needed your help with. How are your illusions?”

“Usually restricted to glamours, if I’m being honest.”

“Right, well, this isn’t really different, just not on you. And bigger.”

“*Alice.*”

“Look, it’s not that big of a deal,” her sister assured, right as a police car drove in front of them from an adjacent street, in an attempt to cut them off.

The bus swerved, almost throwing Freya out of her seat.

“This seems highly dangerous,” Freya said through clenched teeth.

“You’re durable,” was Alice’s only response as the bus made another swerve. She moved to look out of the back window just as they turned a corner. Three police cars were behind them.

“I hope you have a plan,” Freya said.

“I do. The bus is going to swerve left in a moment. I need you to create a duplicate bus that will continue straight on, leading the fuzz off our tail.”

Freya glared at the slang term her sister had used for the police, as if she was some hardened gangster instead of a girl who had been on track to do computer science at university.

“I’m not sure I got a good enough look at the bus to make a perfect duplicate.”

“They’re Human, it doesn’t have to be perfect. If they see a slightly odd looking bus, they’ll just assume that it got banged up or something. They certainly won’t make the logic leap to

two magical thieves using illusions to send them on a wild goose chase. Not to mention, it only needs to work for a minute or so. Just long enough for us to get to the hiding spot.”

Freya sighed, constructing the image in her head of the bus before layering it over the physical vehicle. She was sure that her attempt was a poor one, but there was nothing she could do.

“Okay, I’m ready as I’ll ever be,” Freya said, keeping her concentration on having the illusion move along with the bus.

“Alright, we’re going to swerve any second now. You need to keep your illusion driving straight for as long as possible, not swerving with us.”

Freya nodded, not entirely sure that she could manage it, but willing to try. “What happens when my illusion runs out of road? Or we move out of range?” Freya had never tested the range of her illusions before. For all she knew, she could conjure them from half a world away. But now didn’t seem like the opportune time to start that testing.

Her sister’s only answer was “Three... Two... One...”

The bus swerved, and Freya threw herself sideways to keep her arms straight, almost as if to throw her illusion down the correct path.

“Just keep it up for as long as you can,” Alice told her as the sound of sirens faded.

Freya nodded, closing her eyes to help her concentration.

She didn’t know how long she had stood like that when Alice finally placed a hand on her shoulder.

“We’re here,” Alice assured her.

Freya collapsed at that, letting her illusion go. She felt tired. Not the same kind of bone-tired that she felt when she used up her Energy - in fact, her reserve was only about half depleted - but a different, kind of mental tiredness that felt much more like she had just sat a particularly rigorous exam.

“Are you alright?” Alice asked her as Freya leaned back in one of the seats.

She nodded. “I will be. I think I just need food and a nap.”

Alice smiled. “That I can do.” She offered out her hand. “Come on.”

Freya took her hand, allowing her sister to pull her up before following her out.

As soon as she stepped out of the bus, it seemed to disappear behind her, just as Alice had said it would.

“Everybody remember where we parked,” Freya quoted, too lightheaded to form her own words.

Alice rolled her eyes. “Star Trek IV? *Really?*”

Freya shrugged. “It’s my favourite.”

“It would be.”

“What if someone drives into it?”

“The bus? We’re only leaving it here for a day. I’ve put wards around the car park to keep Humans away until the boy is safe. Then the cloak will drop and the police should be able to find the bus.”

“And our fingerprints?”

Alice rolled her eyes once more. “As if I would be so clumsy. It’s being magically stripped of all fingerprints and DNA evidence as we speak. Now, come on. Let’s get you some food.”



Chapter Eleven

Freya ended up eating enough tapas for ten people, including a large sharing platter to herself, before she started to regain equilibrium.

“I swear, it’s no wonder that I’ve remained so chubby despite all of the exercise I do.”

“It’s not really ‘chubby,’” Alice reasoned with a smile. “You’re more... *solid*.”

“Like a brick house.”

“I can think of few things I would rather be if I spent all of my time fighting.”

“That we can agree on.”

Alice leaned back in her chair, her smile fading just a little as she regarded Freya carefully.

“What?” Freya asked, feeling unsettled.

Alice shrugged, shaking her head as she sat up once more. “Nothing. I just... I guess I’m just waiting for you to ask about your memories again. Running through the reasons why I can’t tell you what happened, even though I know it’s unfair.”

Freya shifted guiltily, knowing that she had indeed had every intention of approaching the subject again. “They would just be the same reasons as before, right?”

Alice nodded. “But I’m sure you’ve come up with more reasons why I *should* tell you. It only seems fair that I match your effort.”

Freya grimaced at the accuracy of her sister's words.

"You were going to double down on the whole Damon thing, weren't you?"

Freya nodded. "I just... You were the one who was pushing me to be with him. And, even if we have to stay as we are, I still..." She curled up into herself, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear nervously, before leaning over the table and speaking in a hushed whisper. "I *know* that we were... you know, that we..."

"You had sex," Alice said bluntly.

Freya nodded, her face bright red. "I mean, it was only once... Or twice, maybe? I.. I can kind of remember something in a shower, but that can't be right... Not when my powers were so haywire at the time..."

"What's your point?"

Freya's face flushed even further, turning a little purple. "I *know* that it happened and I *know* that my powers went haywire, but it's all fuzzy. It was my first time... *you know*... and I can't remember it properly."

Alice shrugged. "So?"

"What do you mean *so*?"

"I mean, I imagine the majority of people don't really remember their first time. For most people it's usually alcohol related, but just because magic was the thing clouding your memory doesn't make your situation any more unique."

"So you're saying that, after years of pining, I finally got to be with Damon, and me not being able to remember it is just 'tough shit'?"

"Pretty much. I mean, you're talking as if you can never speak to him again. And you've been acting like that's the case too."

"What do you want me to do? I told him that I had a crush on him! We made out and, well, *you know*..."

“And? People do those things all the time and the world doesn’t end.”

“I know, but I can’t talk to him after all that and then dumping him out of nowhere. I mean, how must that have looked to him?”

“Yeah, I don’t buy it. I think it’s far more likely that you’re still upset over the fact that he wasn’t as bothered as you wanted him to be when you broke up with him. He hurt your pride, which is a fair enough thing to not want to be reminded of every day, but at least be honest with yourself as to *why* you’re avoiding him.”

Freya sighed, pouting a little. “So maybe you’re right. I just... I don’t get it. I know my memory is fuzzy, but I don’t remember anything about being with him that would indicate that he *wanted* to break up with me...”

“Well, why did *you* break up with him?”

“Because I couldn’t control my magic around him.”

“Right, but he doesn’t know that. From his perspective, you’d had a crush on him for years and, after finally confessing your feelings and getting to be with him, you changed your mind and called it off.”

“Yeah, but that’s only because I have to keep my magic a secret.”

“So maybe he has secrets too. Or maybe he was just trying to save face. But let’s stop pretending that this search for your memories has any other meaning to it. You got hurt and you’re dwelling, hoping that your lost memories will give you an explanation that you would prefer.”

“Would they?”

“Yes.”

Freya blinked, sitting up. That had definitely *not* been the answer she was expecting.

“But you don’t know what kind of catastrophe you sacrificed your memories to avert. Ask yourself, is it really worth risking something potentially world threatening for the sake of a boy?”

Freya groaned, leaning back in her chair as she folded her arms. Alice was right, and she knew Alice was right. That didn’t mean that she wanted her to be right.

Before she could admit as much to Alice, a waitress came over and asked if they wanted desserts.

“Churros and coffee, please,” Freya said as Alice declined anything. She had only nibbled at a couple of Freya’s dishes, mostly happy to pretend that they were sharing the food for the sake of saving Freya the embarrassment of ordering enough to feed a small army on her own.

“I need to apologise to you,” Freya said, finally addressing the niggling feeling of guilt that had been sitting at the bottom of her stomach since the night before last.

“What for?”

“When you were missing... Anna was really upset about the whole thing.”

“That doesn’t sound like Anna,” Alice said dismissively.

Freya frowned. “I’m serious, Alice. She couldn’t sense you.”

“I know. If she had been able to, my whole plan would have been ruined within five minutes.”

“Well, yes, but it really bothered her. The two of you are supposed to be partners. Working so closely together, it shouldn’t be that hard for either of you to sense the other.”

“That would suggest that our relationship had ever had any kind of depth to it and Anna never would have allowed for that. I, apparently, am a poor imitation of my mother, and she never let me forget it.”

“That’s not... That’s not what she thought. It’s not what she thinks. She truly was upset by your disappearance.”

“Upset that she was in trouble with my aunt, no doubt.”

Freya glared at her sister, furious at her continued dismissal of Anna’s feelings. “I’m serious, Alice! She was *genuinely* upset, mostly because she felt that she had distanced herself from you too much.”

“Well she did, but forgive me if I’m not going to jump for joy over her realising that very basic fact that has been the bane of my existence for the past year. Especially not when I’m hearing it second hand.”

Freya sighed at her sister’s stubbornness. “She really is sorry. She said that she used to be your mother’s partner...”

Alice shrugged as her gaze dropped. “I know. No one thought to *tell* me, but every other Oracle has a partner and has had one for years. Since there could be no new Oracles after my mother’s departure - myself excluded - it made sense that the only Oracle without a partner had been partnered with her.”

“She... She asked about your father and I told her the truth. She was blaming herself for what happened, thinking she should have been able to stop your mother from leaving.”

Alice sighed, shaking her head. “I doubt she could have done anything.”

“I know, and I told her as much, but I think she needs to hear you say it.”

Alice nodded, remaining silent for a few moments before eventually saying, “You know, I’ve been wondering... My aunt said that my mother was never suited to life as an Oracle. I’ve been wondering what she meant. What if my mother didn’t just leave to get married? What if she left because she had the same crisis of conscience I’m currently having...?”

“Does it matter whether she did or not?”

Alice shrugged. "I suppose not. I just... I've never been able to understand her. I guess this might be an opening that would allow me to."

"I've actually been thinking, about this crisis of yours, and about what you said yesterday. About why you wanted to save the boy. You said that you wanted to prove that you could, and prove that you could save others as well. I'm wondering who the other person you're so desperate to save is."

"No one," Alice lied. "It's the principle I'm fighting for."

Freya rolled her eyes. "Alice, please. We both know that's not true. Maybe there are parts of your life that I don't know about, and maybe you have people you care about that exist within them, but, from my perspective, there's only one person you'd go this far to protect." Freya felt her stomach flood with terror at the thought that she was wrong. Empirically, she knew that she wasn't. Alice taking Freya under her wing had been the very thing that had broken her out of her shell when she had first been placed in the foster system. While she wouldn't raise a hand for herself, there had been no lengths she wouldn't go to to make sure Freya was protected. There was a reason bullying had only ever happened within the walls of the schools she had attended.

But there was still a small, nagging part of her that was convinced that Alice didn't really care. That there was no way that she would go to these lengths for her, even when Freya couldn't think of another reason why.

"I can't tell you your future," Alice warned, before Freya even had the chance to ask.

"Why not? If you're trying to change it anyway..."

"I can't because I have to be careful. I have to gently nudge the threads into place. Telling you would be like throwing a sledgehammer at the problem and hoping it fixed itself. It could cause hundreds, if not thousands, of ripples throughout the rest

of Fate's plan. Not to mention, while I want to change the bad, there is still good in your future as well. I wouldn't want to risk erasing that good."

Freya sighed, folding her arms. "So you're really not going to tell me? You're just going to leave me with the knowledge that there is some big, ominous event in my future that's bad enough for you to rebel against your aunt, but with no idea of what it is?"

"I'm sorry. The risk is too great."

Freya narrowed her eyes, debating how worth it it would be for her to give her sister a piece of her mind, when Alice suddenly doubled over, clutching her head in pain.

"What is it?" Freya asked, as Alice clenched her jaw shut, clearly muffling her cries of pain as best she could.

After a few moments, Alice's pain seemed to lessen enough to allow her to speak at least, as she sat back once more, though she was still deathly pale.

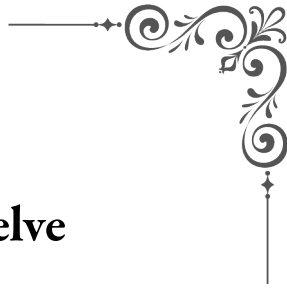
"It didn't work," Alice managed, though her voice was clearly strained. "My aunt has adjusted for our interference. The Demons will find the boy on the bridge once more."

"Okay, well, how do we stop it?"

"I... I'm not sure. We'll have to change things again. I'll have to... to figure out another way to alter the variables. A way that doesn't give my aunt the opportunity to change things."

"Is that even possible?"

"I don't know and I've only got," Alice paused to check a wristwatch that Freya had never noticed her wear before, "twenty hours to figure it out."



Chapter Twelve

I knew you would come back here.”

Alice and Freya spun around as Anna walked through one of the flaming doorways to greet them, completely untouched by the fire.

“I had hoped otherwise, but I knew that you would.”

“Being outside means little on its own,” Alice explained. “It’s not truly freedom if I’m constantly looking over my shoulder, waiting for you to strike.”

“Regardless of your feelings, this mission of yours was foolhardy. Did you honestly think we wouldn’t see you coming?”

Alice looked away at that, folding her arms.

“Arrogant girl,” Anna said, though her voice lost any heat it had previously had. She sounded... sad.

“I thought the Queen would make the difference,” Alice admitted, her voice barely a whisper.

“A throneless queen is no help to anyone.”

Freya felt that like a slap in the face. It hurt all the more because she knew Anna was right. Conceding the throne had been a tactical necessity. She couldn’t have defended it without her counterpart on Earth doing her part. The Shadow Realm was nothing more than a reflection, and right now it was reflecting the power shifts that her Earth counterpart remained blissfully unaware of. Or rather, that she seemed to be ignoring because she didn’t believe that that aspect

of the Shadow Realm would ever come to bother her. Freya hated how adept she was at burying her head in the sand.

“You should leave,” Anna told her. “You can be of no help to Alice here, and it would probably be best if you did not count the priestesses of Fate among your enemies. Not when you already have so many.”

“I’m not leaving Alice.”

“I promise she will come to no real harm. She is young, and we do understand the follies of youth.”

“Stop it!” Alice demanded, stepping forward. “Stop painting my wanting to leave as a mistake I will later regret. Stop patronising me. I might not have lived for hundreds of years, but I understand what I want out of life. I understand that it is not here. I need freedom, no matter the price.”

“Where will you go, Alice?” Anna asked, placing her hands on her hips. “Who do you know who could help you? You don’t have anywhere or anyone outside of this building.”

“I don’t care. I’ll find somewhere, and I don’t need anyone to help me.”

“If you truly believe that then you are even more naive than I thought. This isn’t a game, Alice. This is your life.”

“So let me live it!”

“You’re not suggesting anything resembling a life. You’re suggesting scabbling to survive on your own.”

“Which I’ve already said I would be more than content with, as long as it was on my own terms.”

Freya stepped forward. “She’s not alone,” she pointed out before turning to Alice. “I mean, you don’t have to be if you don’t want to be.”

Alice seemed a little surprised by that, but nodded.

“A throneless queen is hardly a firm foundation upon which to build a new life.”

"I won't be throneless forever," Freya defended. "This is nothing more than a temporary setback."

Anna folded her arms, carefully regarding Freya. After a few moments she turned back to Alice. "Before the Old Queen was usurped from the throne, she always had a priestess of Fate by her side as an adviser. Should you reclaim the throne, we would not be averse to Alice taking on that role for you, provided that she stayed here in the meantime."

Freya nodded. "I would be more than happy to have Alice as an adviser, if she agrees."

Alice looked between them, frowning a little. Freya knew that she was weighing up the likelihood of Freya taking the throne. If Freya failed, Alice would be stuck with the priestesses of Fate forever.

"Alright," Alice finally said. "I agree to stay until Queen Freya ends her exile and retakes the throne."

"I promise I will do so as swiftly as possible," Freya said.

Alice nodded in acceptance as the flames barring the doors disappeared.

"Then it is settled," Anna said before leaving.

"Why did you back me up?" Alice asked once Anna was out of earshot. "Are you truly so generous to those you consider your subjects, or is there something else?"

"I wouldn't be a very good queen if I didn't look out for people," Freya figured, evading the question.

"This was more than just looking out for me. I have no doubt that, if Anna hadn't proposed me becoming your adviser, you would have helped me, no matter the course I chose. Am I wrong?"

"No," Freya admitted. "You're not wrong."

"Why? What makes me so special?"

Freya shrugged. "Because, in another life, you looked out for me more times than I could count. It was about time I repaid that debt."



FREYA AWOKE WITH THE now-familiar feeling of disorientation that sometimes had started to happen after her Shadow Realm dreams. She didn't know exactly why it happened, but her current theory was that it occurred when she woke just as the dream ended, rather than having a small stretch of dreamless sleep in-between. Of course, there was no way for her to prove this theory, but she hadn't been able to find any observable correlation that might suggest why her hotel room felt so unfamiliar, despite it being covered with her belongings.

Freya sat up, trying to run through her memories to distance herself from her Shadow Realm counterpart. It was easier when she was home. Her room was so familiar to her that her own memories quickly rushed to the forefront. Now they were barely a trickle as her eyes desperately searched for a familiar sight. They quickly fell upon Alice, sitting hunched forward in the chair in the corner of the room. Her head was bowed, held up by her clasped together hands, propping her up with her elbows resting on her knees. Her eyes were closed, but Freya could see them frantically searching beneath the lids.

She hadn't moved since Freya had gone to sleep the night before.

"Any closer to a solution?" Freya asked her as she stood up.

"No," Alice replied, her mouth barely moving.

"How long do we have?"

"Two hours, twenty three minutes, and fifty seconds."

Freya nodded, despite the fact that her sister wasn't looking, before pulling on some clean clothes.

"So... How exactly did Fate change things back?" Freya asked, deciding that two heads were better than none.

"A taxi. It will be diverted to the site of the crash, and the pile-up will be avoided."

“So what if we re-divert it? Like, we can just order the taxi ourselves.”

Alice shook her head, though it was barely perceptible and her eyes remained closed. “She’ll just divert it again. She’ll keep on accounting for any change we make to the traffic, unless we time it exactly or work a hundred steps ahead of her. Timing it properly will be impossible, because all she’ll have to do is interfere with the phones, and trying to stay ahead of her is highly improbable, given how much experience she has compared to me.”

“I’m sure you can do it,” Freya assured her.

“Freya, I really need to not be splitting my attention.”

Freya nodded, taking her meaning. “I’ll go for a walk while you think,” she said before heading out the door.

It was obvious to Freya that Alice wasn’t going to come up with a solution on time, but the thought of just leaving things be made an icy void of her stomach. She had to help her sister. She just wished she knew how...



I’M JUST GONNA DO IT anyway, Freya thought to herself as she brought up Mel’s number in her phone. Surely the taxi companies had to have everything automated, which would leave them vulnerable. Vulnerable enough for Mel to shut down for a few minutes at least, she figured.

Though she might draw the line at two illegal requests in such close succession, Freya worried. But then, lives were on the line. That was more important than a few minutes of computer troubles.

“It’s not going to work.”

Freya jumped, her phone clattering to the pavement as her hands went up in flames, the water from the wet pavement coming up to form a shield.

“Calm down before anyone sees you,” the figure beyond the water shield said, and Freya did as they bid once she recognised the voice as Anna’s.

“What do you mean it’s too late?” Freya asked as she bent down to pick up her phone.

“Just that. The driver already has the address. Mel can’t do anything to help.”

Freya shook her head. “There has to be something!”

Anna sighed, folding her arms. “Why are so hell bent on helping Alice with this? Why not just let her fail and return home with her tail between her legs?”

Freya shrugged. “Because I don’t think she will go home. She doesn’t exactly accept defeat well.”

Anna gave a tired huff, rubbing her eye. “No, I suppose she doesn’t. Urgh, I can’t believe I’m doing this.”

Before Freya knew what was happening, Anna had grabbed her upper arm and shifted them to the Tower Bridge.

“What? What are we doing here?” Freya asked, before turning to Anna with disbelievingly wide eyes. “You’re going to help us?”

“Don’t get overexcited,” Anna said with a slight scowl. “I still think that this ridiculous scheme of hers is going to end horribly. In fact, I have no doubt that this is going to come and bite all of us in some kind of cosmically awful way that will having us rueing this day.”

“But?”

Anna sighed. “*But* I can see that Alice needs this. It’s easier to have only had Human family before becoming an Oracle, I think. The first few years are always hard. I think the rest of us forget because there hasn’t been a new Oracle for decades, but it is difficult for everyone. Knowing the fates of everyone close to

you. All of their joys and heartbreaks. How they'll live, and how they'll die. You can see all of it, but you can't *change* any of it.

"At least when your loved ones are Human, it's simple things. Horrific things, like cancer and car accidents and heart attacks, but they feel like they're part of a different world when you're constantly averting the apocalypse and dealing with the ramifications of remnants from alternate timelines." She glared at Freya a little at that. "They're Human and they live Human lives with Human lifespans. It isn't long before they're no longer a distraction. Magical beings, on the other hand, especially other Angels, don't belong in that Human world either. You can't compartmentalise. Day in and day out, your job is make sure that the major actors play their parts just right, but when you're close to any of them... It's not surprising that she has to believe that this won't end badly."

Freya nodded, but she couldn't help a niggling sense of suspicion at the back of her mind. Anna had agreed to her terms in the Shadow Realm, but only because she had been convinced that Freya wouldn't be able to succeed. Did that mean that she was only helping to sabotage here as well?

But she couldn't deny that everything Anna had done was simply what she thought was in Alice's best interests. And she was clearly intelligent, so it made sense that, even if she had been wrong about her approach before, she would start helping them.

"Alright," Freya said. "What's your plan?"

"My plan is to actually account for the one variable Alice has been leaving out of her calculations."

"And what's that?"

"You."

Freya frowned. "Me? But she had me help her with the bus."

"Which was something she was going to attempt on her own regardless. Now that she's had to go back to the drawing

board, she's forgotten all about taking you into account. Which is ridiculous, because you're both powerful and versatile. I kind of just want to throw you at all of the problems that come up."

"I'm pretty sure that's what Fate has in mind for me."

"Which will hopefully make my job much easier in the future. Anyway, you'll need these." Weapons and armour materialised in her hands.

Freya frowned a little as she took them. They were clearly Demon made, though they were devoid of anything that might denote the noble Demon they reported to. In fact, she wouldn't have been surprised to find them on one of the Demons that regularly attacked her.

"So, what are these for?"

"The Demons."

"Oh. So I'm just going to kill them before they get to the boy?"

"That's the plan," Anna said as Freya pulled the armour on.

"But what will happen if he's not attacked at all? Won't that mess up the whole plan with the brother?"

"One step at a time," Anna said before Freya heard another voice behind her.

"Oi! This is our turf!"

Freya rolled her eyes as she turned to face the three Demons advancing on her. Anna, as usual, slunk into the shadows.

"Come on," Freya said as she rolled her eyes. "I'm just passing through."

The leader, a skinny man with a shaved head, scoffed at her words. "No one passes through decked out like that. You're here looking for a fight."

Freya shrugged. "You caught me."

He responded by drawing a sword from his side, which had been glamourised until that point, and rushing forward.

Freya easily blocked him. He was slow, and not particularly powerful. It didn't surprise her that he had felt the need to attack a young teenager to get his kicks.

"Finished yet?" Freya asked with a smile after knocking him back enough to make him stumble.

He seethed at that, turning to look at the girl on his right.

Freya didn't have time to realise what was happening before she was blown back by what felt like a small explosive, hitting the iron supports behind her. She was pretty sure she heard something crack as she fell to the floor, but she focused her Energy into numbing any pain as she shifted to the other side of the bridge, knowing that they would follow, but that she had bought herself time to get up and rethink her strategy.

As soon as she was on her feet, the girl appeared behind her. Freya turned just in time to see her throw something in her direction. Reflexively, water rose from the river beneath, surrounding Freya and absorbing the blast from the magical grenade the girl had thrown.

Right, I'm on a bridge, Freya remembered as the water backed away from her just enough to let her see, while still offering a handy shield. The girl threw another vial from her belt, telling Freya that these were flammable potions. Freya caught the vial in an arm of water, but the blast caused her to stagger back as the arm evaporated. Absorbing the blast had taken more Energy than she had anticipated, and the girl still had a whole belt worth of potions.

I have to get that belt.

Freya concentrated, forming an illusion that occupied the same space that she did. Once it was formed, she shifted behind the girl, leaving the illusion in her place.

Just as she was about to take the belt, however, she had a better idea, and instead threw a crackle of Energy at the vials before

shifting away, quickly sending the water that had been protecting her illusion to surround the girl so that the explosives on her belt didn't cause any damage to the surrounding area.

The blast caused the water to evaporate, and left Freya feeling breathless and sluggish, but the girl had been reduced to a black smudge on the road, so at least she was down one of the three.

"Any chance of help?" Freya asked Anna, who she caught lurking in the shadows out of the corner of her eye.

"I *am* helping," Anna told her.

Freya just rolled her eyes.

"You should stop numbing your pain," Anna reminded her. "You can draw on it for power."

Freya groaned. She really hated drawing on pain in battle. She couldn't deny that it worked, but it meant actually feeling the pain that she would much rather be numbing.

As the other two Demons appeared in front of her, however, she stopped numbing herself, realising that she had done something to her leg. Exactly what, she couldn't say, but just having her weight on it made her want to blackout.

She took the pain, instead, fuelling it into her Energy as quickly and as forcefully as possible. Faster than she could compensate for, leaving the horrid emotional numbness that came with feeding her feelings to her Energy too quickly.

Rather than dwelling, however, she instead lifted her hand in the direction of the leader of the Demons, sending a bolt of Energy his way that sent him flying.

She refocused on the other Demon, just in time for him to disappear. It was a shimmer rather than the blur of shifting, telling her that he was cloaked, rather than completely gone.

She closed her eyes, sensing for his Energy. All she got, however, was static. The next thing she knew, she was stumbling back, a knife lodged in her shoulder.

She shifted away before yanking it out. She then shifted again before focusing her Energy on staunching the flow of blood. Then she shifted once more, determined to keep moving so that she didn't provide such an easy target for the Demon. If she could just stay out of his reach, he would eventually tire of staying cloaked.

The problem was that she was already drained, and she still had the leader after this guy.

She had grown complacent, she decided as her shifting started to feel sluggish. The Demons back home never put *thought* into their tactics. They were mostly just annoyances. Demons at the bottom of the pecking order, who had nothing to lose and everything to gain by challenging her.

But these Demons were smart. Smarter than to attack her under normal circumstances. They probably hadn't even realised who she was.

Not that she felt that she was exactly living up to her reputation at that exact moment. The problem was that Angels, while resistant to many types of magical attack, bled like anyone else. Being able to absorb large amounts of Energy without dying is a rather useless skill while you're bleeding out, Freya decided.

She stopped briefly after her next shift, remembering the words she had memorised from one of Mel's spell books. She didn't have the energy to say them aloud, but she had always had a knack for nonverbal spell casting.

She kept shifting, if quite slowly, repeating the words over and over again, until she eventually heard the crackle of a magical cage erupting. She turned, seeing nothing in the cage, but assuming that the Demon was within.

She took a deep breath before thumping her shoulder wound, letting out a gasping cry of pain before unleashing a

barrage of Energy at the caged Demon, punching a hole right through his chest.

She dropped to her knees, gasping. That had done for her. She hadn't managed to get this badly injured in a while, that was for certain.

"Here," she heard Anna say, looking around to see the Oracle approaching, vial in hand. "The other Demon dropped it."

Freya took the vial, recognising the familiar silver of a healing potion. "Lucky," she muttered as she popped it open before downing the contents.

"There's no such thing as luck," Anna said before returning to the shadows.

Freya nodded as she returned to her feet, putting the vial in her pocket. She knew that she should just drop it, but the thought of littering made her stomach churn.

Her wounds gave one last sharp jab as they mostly-healed. It had still worked better than most healing potions, but it would take rest before she fully healed. She had long accepted the fact that Demonic healing potions worked better for her than any others. It made sense if her father had been a Demon, but she didn't like the reminder.

The pain had moved to a dull throbbing, robbing her of the addition to her Energy. Even letting the trap spells lapse did nothing to stop how depleted she felt. She needed rest. And food. And then more rest, probably.

But, as was her luck, the leader reappeared in front of her, seething.

"You killed my men!"

"You sent them after me," Freya replied, sounding more than a little dismissive in her exhaustion.

"You were encroaching on our territory."

Freya rolled her eyes. “It’s not your territory. At least, not in any kind of meaningful way. We’re not in a gang war, you can’t just declare turf.” She stopped herself, shaking her head. “You know what, I don’t even know why I’m arguing about this with you. I don’t even care. You were about to start rampaging around and killing Humans left and right, and I thought that might ruin my day, so I thought I would step in first.”

He stared at her, dumbfounded. “So, what, you work for Lady Caroline?”

“Who? Oh, right, the head of the Royal Cleaners. No, I don’t work for her. I just don’t think you should go around killing Humans.”

“Who the hell do you think you are, the freaking Angel of the North?”

“Umm... Yes?”

He blinked at that, his eyes widening at her as he finally realised who he was dealing with.

A second later, he had thrown a vial to her feet. As the glass broke, she was enveloped in inky-black smoke, obscuring her sight.

“Seriously?” she called, feeling more than a little put out. She had hoped that they were done.

She closed her eyes, focusing on her magical senses as she hoped that he had only thrown the vial to hide his escape.

To her initial relief, she sensed nothing, telling her that he had left.

But then she realised that she couldn’t sense *anything*. Not Anna, not background static, not anything. Just emptiness.

“What the hell is this stuff?” she asked as she moved her hand in front of her face in an attempt to wave it away. To her surprise, she could see her hand with no problem. No smoke obscured it from her vision. She looked down, seeing that she was

perfectly clear, but everything else, even the ground, was pitch black.

He had somehow cut her off from the outside world.

Before she could put too much thought into how to break through the strange spell, however, Amber appeared.

“Thank the Creator,” Freya said, not having been so happy to see her mentor since she had learnt the truth. “How do I get out of this?”

“You can’t,” Amber said simply, her tone completely disinterested as she regarded Freya coldly.

“So, what, I just have to wait until it fades?”

“No,” Amber said. “It will never fade. The Demon has trapped you within the darkness inside your heart and, well, you have rather a lot of it, don’t you?” She almost seemed to sneer at that point, catching Freya off-guard.

“I... Of course I do. Everybody does. But having a few extra scary corners in my mind doesn’t make me a bad person.”

“Perhaps not, but that doesn’t change the fact that you are a selfish, entitled bitch who never cared about anyone but herself. Look at how far your sister is willing to go for you, how much she is willing to give up. And you’ll let her, won’t you? Freya, the Queen of Rationalisation. There’s nothing you can’t rationalise away. Using other people, stealing, murder... It’s no wonder I wouldn’t admit that you were all that remained of my line. I was the Matriarch of Angels. My son brought the Angel Twilight into the world. She saved the world from Shadows. She halted the war with the Humans. Then your mother stopped the War for good. We were the heroes whose names will live on forever, but you’re just a bounty hunter who will only be remembered for her selfishness.”

Freya felt a strike across her back at that, right where her oldest scar was. The old, mostly-healed skin tore open, and Freya

found herself right back on that rooftop, desperately fighting for her life. It passed after just a moment, showing that she was still in the pitch black tomb, but Amber had now gone, and her wound remained, the blood pouring out to soak her shirt and bra.

“Of course, those victories came at a price.”

Freya spun around to see Hope circling her. The Angel Twilight looked as she had when Freya had first met her ghost, her hair a tangle of dark, matted curls, and her almost translucent white skin was covered in long red lacerations.

“Most know us as heroes,” Hope continued, “but you know the truth, don’t you? This kind of power comes at a price. There is always a breaking point. I may have saved the world from the Shadows, and I may have halted the war with the Humans, but I also scorched the Earth. No more Angels can be born because of my actions. I screwed up the balance of the entire world, just to make sure that another like me was never born. And yet, here you are.

“You think that you can avoid becoming me. You think that staying out of things will mean that you will never break. You can’t pay the price if you’re never the hero, right?” She smirked. “There’s no escaping your fate, Freya. You’ll die just like the rest of us. Only no one will remember you as a hero. You’ll snap and that’s all anyone will remember of you. Freya Snow, she was a selfish bitch who never cared for anyone but herself. I wonder how you’ll go. It’s not as if you can scorch the Earth like I did.”

Freya stumbled once more, more of her old wounds ripping open as a dozen faces flashed before her eyes. All of the Demons she had killed.

When she finally returned to the darkness, Hope had gone. In her place was a girl who barely looked like she had hit puberty. Much like Freya, she looked older than her age, but Freya could

tell that her womanly body was new to her. A sudden change she was still getting used to.

Freya would put her at maybe thirteen.

“Don’t frown so,” the girl said with a smile that looked out of place. She was wearing all black, looking like something out of a nineties TV show, with her Nirvana t-shirt, black skirt, and shiny black Doc Martens. Even her makeup was black, from her heavy eyeliner to her lipstick. It looked out of place with her olive skin and golden blonde hair.

It took Freya a few moments to realise that the girl in front of her was her mother.

“I mean, Hope may be right about you dying horribly,” she continued, still smiling, “but you’re the last of our line. If you die now, all of Fate’s hard work cultivating such a powerful lineage will be lost. No, they’ll wait until you’ve perpetuated the line before they kill you. And you’re already grown up, so it’s not like they subject you to my fate of being forcibly sent to the Shadow Realm when you’re still a child, only to wake up five years later in a body that you don’t remember growing into, pregnant by a man that you’ve never met.

“I guess it’s not really surprising that I killed myself after that, is it? After having to have you, how could I stomach staying? How could I possibly stay when all you remind me of is everything that was torn from me.”

Freya’s skin was nothing but cuts at this point, all leaking with blood. She could feel herself fading with it as it soaked her clothes, the now sticky material clinging to her just as well as the words her dead family were throwing her way.

Her mother disappeared, leaving Freya alone in the black as she fell to her knees, unable to remain standing.

At least I don’t have to listen to them tell me they’re glad to see me gone, she thought as her vision became splotchy.

“Freya!”

She cursed at Amber’s return.

“Go away,” she managed, though it was barely more than a mumble, dampened further by the blood gushing from her forehead, over her right eye and cheek to leak into her mouth. “Haven’t you said enough? Aren’t you happy enough to have me dead?”

Amber kneeled in front of her, gripping her shoulders. “Freya, I could never want that. Please, Freya, whatever you’re seeing isn’t real. You’re hurting yourself.”

“No,” Freya said, with a groggy shake of her head. “This is what you want. Your line was supposed to end with Hope, remember?”

“Not like this. Never like this. I told you, Freya, I just wanted you to be happy and safe. That’s all I’ve ever wanted for you.” At that, Amber wrapped her arms around Freya, holding her tight. It didn’t really feel real, but then Amber could rarely summon the strength to feel corporeal, even to Freya.

“But it’s all my fault,” Freya protested. “My mother would still be here if it wasn’t for me. I’m just a disappointment to everyone. I can’t do anything right. I’m not the hero people think an Angel should be...”

“No, Freya, no,” Amber assured her. “There are many others far more culpable in your mother’s death than you, myself chief among them. And you could never be a disappointment to me. *Ever*. I promise you that. It doesn’t matter if you’re a hero. No one ever truly is. Just please don’t die...”

“I just want it to stop hurting,” Freya admitted, her voice barely more than a whisper as her heart ached with the truth behind the words. “I’m just so tired.”

Amber just gripped her tighter. “I know, sweetheart. I know. But the hurt isn’t forever. It never is. I can promise you that more

than anything else. Just please stop hurting yourself. I can't lose you too."

Freya sobbed at that, and it was like a dam bursting. Amber continued to hold her as tears streamed down her face, mixing with the blood. Freya didn't know how long she remained like that, on her knees as she cried, Amber holding her and assuring her that she was going to be okay.

When her tears finally dried, her vision had cleared, leaving her back on the bridge as passersby gave her strange looks. Her tears had cleared her cheeks of any blood, the old wounds that had reopened having closed themselves, the flow of blood stopped.

"What happened?" Freya managed to ask as she wobbled to her feet, giving a wary glance to the broken glass vial not a foot away from her.

"If I had to guess? Nightmare," Amber told her. "It's an incredibly difficult potion to brew, making it costly to acquire. It's fuelled by the Dark emotions of the victim, meaning that it's useless if a Demon wants to feed. It turns your worst fears against you, turning them into physical hurts. If someone is particularly troubled, it can kill them."

Freya gave a weak smile. "I guess I'm more messed up than I realised."

Amber just gave her a look that made her want to burst into tears once more, but she pushed down that urge as far as she could. She had a job to do.

"Come on, it wasn't that bad," Freya said, putting all of her effort into maintaining her smile. "I just got a little wobbly. Teenage girl drama, am I right?"

Before Amber could respond, Anna appeared next to her.

"Well... That could have gone better," Freya said to the Oracle as she examined her wounds. The ones from the Nightmare

had closed on their own, and the healing potion before that had stopped the others from bleeding, but it hadn't hastened the healing process along any further than that. Freya had never needed a blood transfusion after her fighting. Apparently she replenished faster than Humans, if not immediately, but she did wonder if this particular battle had pushed her too far.

"It also could have gone worse," Anna said as she passed Freya a bottle of Irn Bru.

Freya gasped with delight. "Where did you find this?"

"Believe me, it wasn't easy."

"Thank you," Freya said before downing the entire bottle of neon orange liquid in one go. Amber was giving her a look that said that she still wanted to talk, but that was the last thing Freya wanted, so she pressed on. "So, now what? Doesn't the boy still have to be attacked by a Demon?"

Anna nodded as Amber disappeared, seemingly deciding that it was a fight for another time.

"So where are we going to find a Demon?"

"We already have one," Anna said, looking at her pointedly.

It took Freya more than a few moments to realise that Anna meant her.

"I'm not a Demon, I'm an Angel."

"Those are not mutually exclusive things," Anna reminded her.

Freya sighed. "I'm still not a full-blooded Demon."

"Most Demons aren't anymore. It hardly matters. The boy's brother will still identify you as a Demon, which is all you need."

Freya sighed, wishing that she had another drink. "Alright, where is he?"

"The other side of the bridge."

Freya nodded, sensing for magic and swiftly finding the boy. She shifted in front of him, doing her best to look as menacing as possible.

He stepped back from her, his eyes wide with fear.

“You’re dead meat, Slayer,” Freya growled, swearing that she could hear Anna stifling a laugh from the shadows.

The boy sent a pitiful spark of electricity her way, reminding her that control of electricity was the inherent power of the Slayers.

Freya responded with a weak bout of Dark Energy, knocking him to the ground. It did nothing more than skin his elbows, but Freya still couldn’t help but feel awful about it.

“Jason!” she heard someone yell, drawing her attention to a boy a little older than her.

He ran over before throwing a particularly strong blast at Freya. She could have absorbed the blast with little damage, but she let it knock her to her back.

“I’ll get you next time!” she cursed at them before shifting away.

Anna swiftly shifted to her side, before bursting into laughter.

“I’ll get you next time,” she repeated through her laughing. “Do you think Demons are Scooby-Doo villains?”

“What? That’s usually what they sound like when I fight them.”

“Are you sure that you haven’t just decided that because you never pay close enough attention to them?”

Freya shrugged, feeling a little defensive at that. She had learnt the hard way that the Demons that were sent after her would kill her if given half a chance. She couldn’t afford to hesitate and, even after so long, *actually* listening to them if they said

anything beyond their cliché villain spiel would humanise them enough to make her think twice about striking them down.

Every time she had let that happen, she had been reprimanded in a particularly painful manner, usually leaving some of the worst scars she bore.

“We’ve got company,” Anna warned and Freya readied herself for another fight as she felt a Demonic presence approach. However, Anna said, “You won’t need your weapon for this.”

Freya nodded, lowering her sword as a tall, blonde Demon approached. She was wearing all black, with a military-style jacket that had two small, silver bird pins attached to the collar.

“Would you two like to explain why I now have to deal with over twenty instances of Humans witnessing magic?” the blonde asked with a particularly chilling glare.

“Apologies, Lady Caroline,” Anna said, stepping forward. “We never intended to cause problems for you.”

Lady Caroline narrowed her eyes at that. “You’re an Oracle?”

“Yes, my lady. This entire incident is under Fate’s jurisdiction.”

“She made it my jurisdiction when she dragged a Demon into this,” she said, indicating to Freya before pausing with a frown. “Have we met before?”

Freya shrugged. “I don’t think so,” she said, hurriedly. “I’m not from around here.”

“Be that as it may, surely you must know how important secrecy is. You look too young to remember the War, but you have surely seen its effects.”

Freya gave a grim nod.

“She’s an orphan of the War,” Anna told her, a little sharply. “Of course she knows.”

“Look, I didn’t mean to start trouble,” Freya lied, desperately wanting to move the conversation away from the topic of her

parents. "I promise that I'll do a better job of keeping magic on the QT in the future, okay?"

Lady Caroline sighed. "I'm not one for giving second chances. But, I suppose, this once... Find yourself a mentor, kid. Before you hurt yourself. And not any form of Angel." She gave Anna a pointed look. "Creator knows they cause more than enough trouble for the rest of us."

Freya nodded. "Of course."

"And you won't report this incident to the King?" Anna asked.

"It's not that drastic," Caroline said with a hand-wave. "A few memory spells should do the trick."

Caroline shifted away at that, leaving Freya and Anna alone once more.

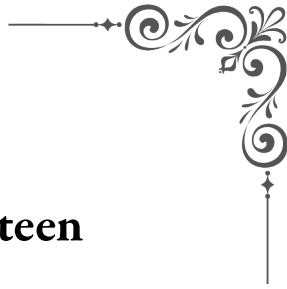
"So..." Freya said as she gave her wounds another prod. "That's it?"

"That's it," Anna confirmed.

"Huh... I kind of expected something... I don't know. This seemed kind of easy after all of the nonsense we went through. Is it really that simple in the end?"

"Freya, nothing is ever that simple."

She shifted away before Freya could ask what the hell she meant by that.



Chapter Thirteen

Freya leaned back against the iron supports of the bridge, letting out the longest sigh of her life as she tried to decide what to do next.

Greggs seemed like a good plan.

And then sleep, she decided. Sleep for a million years.

Actually, given her close call with a sleeping curse in the past, she thought, it perhaps wasn't wise to wish for abnormally long sleep.

Before she could put any real thought into getting her legs moving again, however, Alice shifted to her side.

"You did it," her sister said, her eyes wide with disbelief.

"I had help," Freya said by way of explanation.

"But you still did it. You changed Fate's plan and nothing went tits up!"

"Yet," Freya said, wincing as her injuries gave a twinge. "Can we talk about this somewhere more comfortable?"

Alice nodded, but didn't move. "Freya, don't you understand? We can *change* the plan."

"Yep, I got that bit."

"No, I don't think you did. But then, you couldn't. But it doesn't matter now. It doesn't have to end like that. Don't you see?"

"Not really."

“No, of course you don’t. But seeing doesn’t matter. Just know that I can fix it now.”

“Fix *what*?”

Alice gave an exasperated look at that. “I can’t tell you! But I *can* fix it. *You* can fix it. You were the missing element. I was a fool for not seeing it sooner. *You* can change the plan. And if you can change the plan then it doesn’t apply to you. Not really.”

“Great,” Freya said, but there was no enthusiasm in her voice. Not between her injuries and Anna’s parting words still echoing in her mind.

Nothing is ever that simple.

But it *had* worked, hadn’t it? They had changed the plan. That was what mattered.

So what the hell had Anna meant?

“I’m sorry,” Alice said. “You’re hurt and I’m rambling. Come on... I think it’s time for me to go home.”

“Are you sure? Won’t your aunt be mad?”

“Oh, she’ll probably be furious. But I can’t hide away forever. It’s probably best to just get this over with.”

“Can you shift with me? I don’t think I can do it on my own.”

Alice nodded before taking hold of her arm and shifting them back.



THEY ARRIVED JUST OUTSIDE of Fate’s office, where Anna was waiting for them,

Anna passed Freya another bottle of Irn Bru, much to her delight, along with a pack of heavy-on-the-codeine co-codamol.

“She’s waiting for you,” the older Oracle told them.

Alice gave a grim nod of thanks before knocking on the door to her aunt’s office.

“Come in,” they heard from beyond.

Alice walked in first, with Freya trailing behind, feeling more than a little like an interloper. But Anna had clearly meant that Fate was waiting for both of them, so she stayed close behind her sister as she popped a couple of the pills Anna had given her in her mouth, washing them down with neon orange pop.

Fate just glared at them, and they both shrunk under her gaze.

“Sit,” she commanded, and they both did so, finding that she now had two seats in front of her desk, instead of just one.

Freya had never been sent to the head of year for behaviour but, if she ever had, she suspected that this is what it would feel like, as Fate remained standing at the other side of the desk, still glowering down at them.

“So,” Fate eventually said, her tone dripping with icily sharpened rage. “Despite the fact that *you* agreed to take this job of your own free will after I had explained, *in detail*, what it would mean, you decided to throw a wrench in my entire operation by disappearing. Not to mention how worried Anna and I were for you. And then, not only had you disappeared on us, you had disappeared in order to intentionally disrupt the plan.”

Alice shifted guiltily, but didn’t seem capable of responding.

Before Freya could speak up to defend her sister, Fate sighed.

“I’m sorry,” Fate said, surprising them both. “This is my fault. I thought that you were ready for this, but clearly I was wrong. I should have suppressed your powers for a few more years. In fact, if I could do so now, after your breaking through, I would.”

Freya couldn’t help but flinch a little at how harsh that was. She couldn’t possibly imagine someone suppressing her magic now that she had broken through. It was such an intrinsic part of her...

“But it worked!” Alice protested. “We managed to keep all of the threads the way they should be without anybody having to die.”

“Everybody dies,” Fate admonished. “Do you want us to babysit every single person until old age takes them?”

“No, I just don’t think that it’s always necessary,” Alice said, and Freya got the impression that they had had this exact argument before. “And we proved that it isn’t. We did it.”

“Barely.”

“Aunt Mitsuki, *please*. It worked. I proved that it can *work*.”

Her aunt regarded her silently for several moments, and Freya was sure that Alice was holding her breath.

“Alright,” Fate finally said. “You’re right, you did manage to keep all of the relevant threads in place while saving lives. Perhaps... Perhaps I have been taking the path of least resistance.”

Alice just stared at her, disbelieving.

“The job *was* done either way,” Fate continued. “*However*, I want you to be aware that a day will come when you are not so lucky. When you stretch yourself too far and you fail your assignment because you were too focused on sentimentality. When that day comes, do not expect leniency from me. An Oracle who can’t do her job is of no use to me.”

Alice nodded quickly. “I understand.”

“Then you’re excused.”

Alice got up to go, leaving Freya to wonder if she should leave as well.

The way Fate began regarding her, however, gave her the impression that she should stay.

“I guess you’re mad at me too,” Freya said once the door closed behind Alice.

Fate shook her head, her expression softening. “Of course not. Your job was to bring Alice home. Nothing less, nothing

more. Alice is home now, so I think it's safe to say that you did the job I hired you to do."

"So you're really not angry that I helped her mess with your plan?"

"If you hadn't, I doubt you would have been able to bring her back. As I said, stopping her wasn't your job. You'll find the money I promised you in your account. Your hidden account, of course. After your run-in with Lady Caroline, it would be wise of you to be extra prudent when it comes to keeping your magic away from Human eyes."

Freya nodded. She would have done so regardless. The last thing she wanted was to deal with her parents learning what she did at night.

"I also have something in my possession that I have little use for. I figured you might be a better home for it."

She moved over to the far wall. The expanse of white developed a small, blue light in the centre, which gradually spread out to form a glowing blue hole in the wall, about the size of Fate. She reached within the hole to pull out a large war hammer.

"Here," she said, holding it out for Freya.

Freya stood up to take the weapon. It felt a little heavy in her hands, but not off-puttingly so. She gave it an experimental swing and almost squealed with delight at how good the flow of movement felt to her.

She was going to crush so many things!

"I take it that the weapon is to your liking?" Fate asked with a small smile.

"Yes! Thank you."

"As I said, it was simply gathering dust in my care. Now, I suppose I should organise your return home."

"Yeah, about that. What am I supposed to do about not arousing suspicion back home? If I decide to leave my Human

life behind, I mean. Everyone expects me to go to university next year.”

“Well, obviously, you could cut ties with your Human family and use your magic to ensure that they let you go.”

Freya knew that was the sensible option, but the thought of doing so turned her stomach to ice.

“Or go to university,” Fate said with a shrug. “Education is never a bad thing to have.”

“No, but soul-crushing debt is.”

Fate gave a knowing smile. “Trust me, that shall not be a problem. Just remember, as I said, now that Lady Caroline is aware of your Demon blood, you are her responsibility. She will become involved if you slip up in keeping your magic from Human eyes.”

Freya nodded in understanding. “Thank you,” she said again. “You’re quite welcome.”

Freya moved to the door, being careful to keep her new hammer from damaging the floor, only to pause as her hand reached the handle.

“We didn’t actually deviate from the plan, did we?”

“I beg your pardon.”

“We didn’t deviate from the plan,” Freya repeated, even more certain now that she had said the words aloud. “Alice going off-book was all part of your plan.”

“Whatever do you mean?” Fate asked. “Do you think I would have gone to so much effort to stop her if I wanted her to succeed?”

“If it had been easy, Alice wouldn’t have believed it. Well, maybe she would have at first, but not for long. You made it so difficult in order to sell it.

“Whatever you have in store for me has Alice rattled. She was distracted. As you said, an Oracle who can’t do her job is of

no use to you, and it's not as if you can make any more. So you let her believe that there is a chance to change things. No one in my family has ever been able to escape their Fate. Not Caetlin, not Amber, not Juni, not Angela, not Sparrow, not Hope, and not my mother. So why would I be any different?"

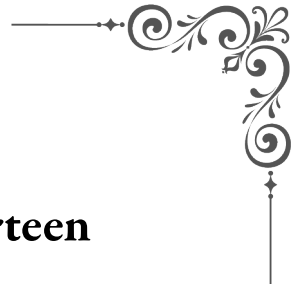
"You underestimate yourself."

"Or I'm just being realistic. Trust me, whatever my future held had Alice *terrified*. I want nothing more than to believe that whatever it is can be averted. But believing that would mean becoming complacent, for both me and Alice. As long as she has the hope that things can change, she won't keep rebelling against you."

Fate just smiled. "Freya, you say that as if hope is such a terrible thing to have."

Freya just frowned, unimpressed with the cryptic answer.

"If you'll excuse me, I have a meeting," Fate said, before shifting away, leaving Freya alone in her office, certain that the last few days had been nothing more than an elaborate set-up.



Chapter Fourteen

Anna returned Freya to her hotel room to let her pack, saying that her parents had already been informed that she would be returning that evening.

Of course, as soon as Freya returned to her room, instead of packing, she immediately passed out on her bed.

She didn't know how long she had been out for when she was awoken by Anna knocking on her door.

"You should be mostly healed now," the Oracle told her through the door.

Freya sat up groggily, looking down at her wounds. Anna was right, they had mostly healed. They would still be sore for a few days, but any danger had passed.

"Right, yeah, I'm coming," Freya yelled back before grabbing the clothes that were strewn around the room and throwing them haphazardly back into her suitcase. After a quick scan of the room to make sure she hadn't missed anything, she opened the door to her room to see both Anna and Alice waiting impatiently beyond. Despite the fact that the two women looked nothing alike, Freya could have mistaken them for twins with their almost identical suits and hairdos. Even Alice's hair, that was cropped so short that nothing could usually be done with it, was slicked back to give her an added air of style and authority.

"All packed?" Alice asked her.

“I think so,” Freya said before shrugging. “It’s all replaceable, if not.”

Anna gave her a disapproving look, but Alice just took it in stride. There came a point with disorganisation where you just had to accept it as a fact of life, and budget around replacing things you left behind.

“Then let’s head to the portal,” Alice said, offering out her hand. “Do you still need help with shifting?”

Anna rolled her eyes. “We’re not supposed to use obvious magic when we can avoid it, shifting included.”

Alice sighed. “Fine, taxi it is.”

“Freya has to check out anyway.”

“I already said fine.”

Freya tuned out their good-natured bickering, wondering how rude it would be of her to just put her headphones on. Her nap might have helped a little, but she still felt wrung out. She kind of wished that she *was* taking the train back. At least then she would have time to snooze.

Once they were in the taxi, she decided to stick her headphones over just one ear. Alice and Anna were still bickering on at each other, and she didn’t have the focus to follow what was being said.

Just as Freya was about to doze off again, they arrived at the train station.

Freya groaned as she climbed out of the taxi, the noise of the station assaulting her. She desperately wanted to clutch her headphones to her ears, but she settled for a dampening charm around her head.

She followed Alice and Anna as they took her through to the portal entrance. She almost didn’t recognise it from this end, since she had left it quite quickly, but she trusted Alice and Anna and so was happy enough to just trail along behind them.

“Well,” Alice said, prompting Freya to drop the dampening charm so that she could hear her properly, “I guess this is good-bye. Again.”

Freya nodded, feeling a little somber at that. She hadn’t realised how much she had missed her sister. “Maybe we shouldn’t wait so long between visits this time.”

“Yeah, let’s not do that.”

Freya smiled. “You see, we’ll say this, but then we won’t end up seeing each other for another two years.”

“Yeah, and it’ll probably be me bringing bad news or something.”

“See, given that you can see the future, I have no idea if you’re joking or serious.”

Alice shrugged with a smile. “Well, maybe it doesn’t matter. Maybe you’ll have changed your own fate long before we get to that.”

Freya felt a knife of ice twist in her stomach at that. She should tell Alice, she knew. She should tell her that they probably hadn’t actually changed the plan. That it was just false hope.

But then, she knew that, if she did, Alice would go right back to trying to alter the plan. And she couldn’t do it. Freya didn’t want Anna to be right, but she couldn’t deny that she probably was. Alice couldn’t alter the plan, but if she kept being a nuisance, Freya didn’t want to put too much thought into how Fate might decide to deal with her.

The last thing Freya wanted was to be the catalyst for that.

So, she kept her mouth shut.

“Yeah, maybe,” she agreed weakly.

Anna stepped forward at that. “Well, I suppose I should say goodbye as well.”

Freya nodded. “Thank you, for all your help. Especially when you didn’t have to.”

Anna shrugged. "I figured I owed it to someone."

Freya was unsure if Anna meant Homura or Alice, but she nodded regardless, figuring that it didn't really matter.

"Remember when I said that you were an overly suspicious martyr with forgiveness issues?" Anna asked, taking Freya by surprise.

"How could I forget? Are you going to take some of it back?"

Anna shook her head. "I just wanted to say that I'm adding hypocrite to the list."

The icy knife in Freya's stomach twisted once more as she was sure that Anna was talking about her keeping the truth from Alice.

"After everything that happened with Amber," Anna continued, "I would have thought you'd know better."

"It's not the same thing," Freya defended.

"Yeah, it is. So either you're right, and Amber was also right, or you're wrong, and Amber was also wrong."

Freya huffed. Anna wasn't right, but it was clear that she wasn't going to win an argument over it, so she left it alone.

"Hey!" the Faerie manning the portal yelled at them. "I've got other customers, you know?"

"Sorry!" Freya called back before turning to the two Oracles in front of her. "I guess I'd better go."

"I'll see you soon," Alice told her. "I promise."

Freya nodded. "I'll hold you to that."

"I'll probably also see you at some point," Anna said.

"Well, bye," Freya said before picking up her suitcase and stepping through the portal, the station dissolving into a slightly different one, with Ms Wood waiting for her.

"Hey," Freya greeted.

"Hello, Freya. You look like you've had... an *eventful* trip."

“Is that your way of saying I look like I had my ass handed to me three times? Because you should see the other guys.”

Ms Wood smiled. “You do look a little on the tired side, but nothing that should arouse suspicion from your parents.”

Freya nodded, thankful for that. She didn’t think she could manage the concentration needed to even summon a glamour, never mind maintain it.

“Alright, then I guess it’s time for me to go home.”



FREYA FOUND HERSELF jolting awake as Ms Wood pulled up back at her house, having fallen asleep in the car.

“Sorry,” Freya said. “I guess I dozed off.”

Ms Wood smiled. “It’s fine. It’s as if we really had anything to talk about. Fate sent me an email to fill me in on everything that happened. We can discuss how you want to proceed with your education once you’re back at school. For now, just focus on getting some rest.”

“Will do,” Freya said, but Ms Wood just gave her a look to suggest that she didn’t quite believe her.

“Thanks for dropping me off,” Freya said as she opened her door. “And, you know, for helping me with this whole thing.”

“It’s no problem. I’ll see you when you get back to school.”

“See you,” Freya said as she got out the car, shutting the door behind her and pulling her keys from her pocket.

“I’m home,” Freya called as soon as she had the front door open.

“Welcome back,” Margaret replied from the dining room, where she was sitting at her laptop. Amy was sat in her playpen on the floor next to her. “Did you have a nice time?”

“Yeah,” Freya said, shutting the door behind her and dropping her suitcase next to it. “It was... educational.”

“So, do you think you’ll want to work there in the future?”

Freya shrugged. “Yeah, I guess. Maybe. We’ll see.”

Margaret raised an eyebrow. “That seems... definitive.”

“I’ve still got time to figure it out,” Freya defended.

In truth, as much as she loved her new hammer and was extremely fond of how the amount in her saving account had doubled over night, nothing about how things had gone down with Alice sat well with her. Part of her was still tempted to pull out her phone and ring her sister in order to tell her truth, but her phone stayed in her pocket.

It all felt futile and pointless.

If she told Alice the truth, her sister would run off to start her doomed mission all over again.

And, if she kept lying, then she was just as bad as Fate or Amber, and Alice would have every right to hate her for it.

“I’m going to go upstairs,” Freya told Margaret. “I need to catch up on my revision.”

Margaret nodded, turning back to her laptop. “Alright. Shout if you need anything.”

“Will do,” Freya said as she grabbed her suitcase before heading up the stairs.

Once she was back in her room, she gave her bed a longing glance, but the nap in Ms Wood’s car had been enough to offset her immediate need for rest, and she had things to do.

Freya was just about to start deciding what to do next, when she felt the familiar push of Amber trying to materialise.

She sighed as she sat down on the edge of her bed, wanting nothing more than to block her guardian out. She *really* didn’t want to talk to her. Especially not when she would probably ask her about what she had seen when she had been affected by the Nightmare, and Freya wasn’t sure if she was ready for that.

But she knew that she couldn't block her out forever, and she would have to talk about it sooner or later. She just wished that wasn't the case. She just wanted to bury those memories down deep and forget that it had ever happened.

Stuff everything down. Build walls around it. Joke, even if you can't smile. Use sarcasm to hide the pain.

She had learnt how to survive her emotions when she had been just a little girl, passed over time and time again. An eternal disappointment. Abandoned and unwanted.

Once she had uncovered her magic, she had relied on the tactic more and more. Letting her emotions get the best of her would mean unleashing her magic, which ran the risk of exposure to Humans. Or worse, hurting someone.

She refused to let that happen.

And now she had seen the fruits of her labour first-hand. She hadn't just been shutting those feelings away, she had been letting them fester. In locking them away instead of dealing with the feeling that she was inferior and inadequate, she had believed it. If she couldn't face it, it must be true. Her jokes weren't to prove it wrong, they were to hide the truth from everyone else. If she was the first one laughing at herself, no one else could start to.

Sarcasm may not win her class clown points, but it was still the same trick with a different coat of paint.

Amber didn't say anything as she materialised, simply sitting next to Freya.

"You saw me, didn't you?" Amber eventually asked. "When under the influence of the Nightmare, I mean. When I showed up, you thought the fake me had returned."

Freya nodded.

"And I told you that you weren't worthy of being the last of my line?"

Freya just nodded once more, her throat closing up on her.

“Did I say anything else?”

It took Freya a moment to speak, and her voice was little more than a whisper when she finally managed it. “You said I was selfish. That I used people and rationalised away stealing and murder...”

“Selfish? You really think you’re selfish?”

Freya let out a slightly manic laugh. “Have you met me? I’m selfish all of the time. There’s a reason I only have two friends, and one of them I used my magic to get. I just use people. I don’t even care about them. Not really. Not like other people care about their friends. I don’t miss them when they’re gone. Not really. I sometimes miss being able to do the odd thing we do together, but never *them*. Not in the way other people do.”

“Freya, that’s normal for Litcorde,” Amber assured her. “Not having the same emotional connections as other people doesn’t make you selfish. And you know what proves that you’re not selfish? The fact that you’re out there almost every night protecting Humans from rogue Demons. No one makes you do that. If anything, I don’t like how much danger you put yourself in. And yet you do it anyway to protect people you don’t even know.”

“That doesn’t count.”

“Why not?”

Freya dragged her knees up to her chest at that, cradling them with her arms. “Because I’m not sure whether I do it to protect Humans, or to hurt Demons,” Freya eventually admitted. “I like the fight. It makes me feel... like I’m not so helpless.”

“So maybe you don’t cope with the fact that someone tried to kill you when you were fourteen in the best way. I don’t know that anyone would deal with that well. And I can think of lots of ways that are worse than using your powers to protect people.”

Freya nodded, not entirely sure if she believed Amber's words. Whether or not she believed didn't matter so much, though. Amber believed them.

She didn't hate her.

"Is that all the Nightmare showed you?"

Freya shook her head. "Hope was there as well. She said that I was going to snap just like her and my mother. Then my... My mother showed up and she said..." Freya swiped at her face angrily as tears began to fall.

"What did she say?" Amber prompted as Freya finished wiping them away.

Freya took a deep breath to steady herself before answering. "She said that she gave her life to correct the timeline because she couldn't... because she couldn't stand being around me."

Amber wrapped her arm around Freya at that as the younger woman failed to keep herself from sobbing.

"Freya," Amber started, her voice choked up, "I won't lie to you. Not about this. Your mother didn't have the easiest time reconciling the fact that she was pregnant when she came back. You have to remember that she was captured almost immediately and the Humans wiped her memory. She subconsciously hid your existence from them, but she had no idea she was pregnant at first. By the time her memories came back and she could begin to process what had happened in the Shadow Realm, she was almost ready to give birth. She had two sets of memories, one from the half of her that had chosen to have you, and one from the half that hadn't. It was difficult for her to reconcile the two.

"What I am sure of, though, is if she hadn't been pregnant, she wouldn't have fought nearly as hard to get her memories back. Even with her trip to the Shadow Realm to reconnect the disparate parts of her soul, your mother still blamed herself for her loss of control. If she hadn't been protecting you, I think she

would have been more than happy to let the Humans erase any trace of who she had once been. To use her as a weapon.

“Yes, she chose to change the timeline for you, but I think she did it because she felt that she wasn’t good enough for you, not the other way around. In her mind, she couldn’t be a mother, so the best thing she could do for you is fix the timeline so that you didn’t have to grow up during the War.”

“That’s so messed up, though.”

Amber nodded. “I know. I wish for nothing more than that I had done right by her. Her and Hope. They deserved better.”

“What if I’m just like them?” Freya asked, her voice barely more than a whisper. “What if I snap one day and hurt someone?”

Amber shook her head. “I doubt that will happen, Freya. Your mother was much younger than you are now when she was sent to the Shadow Realm. She was even younger than you were when you first came into your magic. And Hope... Hope’s predicament was the result of her spending years denying that part of herself. She kept her magic locked away and pretended that she was Human. That would take a toll on anyone.”

Freya nodded, Amber’s words helping to soothe her festering doubts.

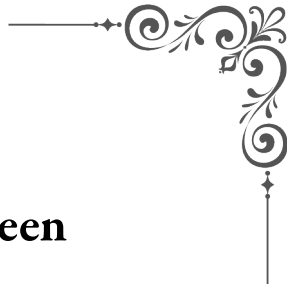
“Freya... I know that I have lied to you, and I know that the fact that I was trying to protect you doesn’t erase the loss of trust between us, I just... I need you to know that you can talk to me. You’re not alone, Freya. You don’t have to shoulder your burdens without help.”

Freya nodded, sniffing a little as her tears dried. “I know. I just... I know. I promise not to shut myself off as much.”

“That’s all I ask. Hell, even if you don’t talk to me, talk to Mel or someone. Just don’t keep bottling it up.” Amber stood up at that. “Well, I suppose I’ll leave you to get some rest.”

Freya nodded as Amber disappeared, but she wasn't tired. If anything, she felt wide awake and wired. A little emotionally wrung out, but she didn't want to sit in her room alone.

She looked over to her desk, seeing the pile of textbooks and worksheets stacked there, but couldn't bring herself to sit down and start tackling it. Instead, she grabbed her new hammer and headed out of her window, into the early evening.



Chapter Fifteen

Freya was barely out of the house when her phone buzzed with a text from Mel.

You back yet?

Yeab, I'm out patrolling, she texted back. *Why?*

You on a flat surface?

Freya frowned a little with confusion before looking down to see that she was, indeed, on a flat rooftop.

Yes. Why?

The next thing she knew, her friend had shifted next to her, wheelchair and all.

“I *finally* got shifting with the chair down,” Mel explained.

“I thought you could always do that.”

“Well, only when I’ve got a clear idea of where I’m going. Like, if I’ve been before. It made it kind of impossible to get up on rooftops, but now...” She spun her chair around with a grin. “Now I can be your backup. You know, if you want. Technically, Witches are supposed to have combat training earlier, you know, to help with defending the coven from attack, but mine has mostly been theoretical. I kind of wanted to get the shifting down first, you know, in case my Coven Head was right and this is a monumentally horrendous idea and I have to bail in a fight, but I want to try proving her wrong.”

“How come you’ve not mentioned this?”

Mel shrugged. "Well, I wanted to get shifting down first. And... I don't know. I was a little afraid you would say it was a stupid idea as well..."

Freya rolled her eyes. "If you were thinking of trying it alone, yeah, I would say it's a stupid idea. Just as I would say that it would be a stupid idea for *anyone* with only theoretical knowledge of combat magic to try testing their skills on rogue Demons alone. Quite frankly, I'll be glad for the company. Plus, if I'm going to commit myself to living in the magical world, I might need some guidance."

"*Some*? You can barely remember the proper names for the Old Worlds."

"I... Okay, yes, you have a point. But that's why you can help me to get up to speed, and I can help you make your combat knowledge less theoretical and more practical." Freya looked over to the gap between the rooftop they were on and the next. "How are you going to get across the gaps?"

"The same way I get over small steps," Mel said, tapping the side of her chair. "Levitation charms. As long as we stay on flat rooftops, I should be fine."

"Then thank the Creator for brutalist architecture."

"Is a phrase I'm pretty sure no one has ever uttered before now."

Freya snorted at that.

"So, if you're committing fully to being in the magical world, I take it that your trip to London went well."

Freya shrugged. "The city didn't live up to the hype."

"Shame. But that's not what I meant and you know it."

Freya sighed. "I don't know. It turned out that Fate was the one I was working for."

“Fate? Really? Huh. Well, I guess that makes sense. I mean, like I said, this kind of work is usually done by species, and you are an Angel.”

Freya nodded. “Yeah. One of her Oracles went missing and she wanted me to track her down.”

“And did you?”

“Yeah, I just... I don’t know. I get the feeling Fate has plans for me that I’m not going to like. Working for her kind of feels like handing myself over on a silver platter.”

“So, you’re not going to work for her?”

Freya sighed. “I don’t know. I might take the odd job from her, but I’m definitely going to see if I can’t expand my horizons.”

“I would offer to introduce you to my Coven Head, but I’ve already told you how suspicious she is of outsiders.”

Freya nodded. “I know. It’s alright. I’m sure I’ll figure something out.”

Before Mel had a chance to respond, Freya’s phone started buzzing once more.

“It’s Jamie,” Freya said as she looked at the screen. “Do you mind if I answer? I promise to be quick.”

“It’s fine,” Mel assured her.

Freya nodded as she answered. “Hey, what’s up?”

“*Hey. I was just wondering how London was going.*”

“I actually literally just got back.”

“*Oh, right. Cool. Are you going to be back at school tomorrow?*”

“I don’t know. I was going to see if Margaret assumed that I was going to be, or if I got a day off to rest after so much traveling.”

“*Okay. Good to know.*”

“So, did you need something? I was kind of planning an early night. I’m a little tired.”

“Right, okay, yes. So... Being away didn’t give you any last minute revelations regarding Damon and any feelings for him you might be suppressing?”

Freya sighed. On the one hand, Alice had had a point. She had been projecting a lot of her fears onto Damon’s reaction when she had broken up with him, and she had been avoiding him because she had been hurt by his apparent lack of romantic interest in her. There was nothing stopping her, however, from recovering their friendship at the very least. And, who knew, there could always be the possibility of more between them in the future.

But then there had been Fate’s warning about Lady Caroline watching her more closely. Freya had only dated Damon for five minutes, and she still wasn’t sure how she had managed to keep her magic from him. Getting close to him again... It would be too much of a risk.

“No, no sudden revelations,” she told Jamie. “I’m fine with the way things are.”

“Oh, okay, good. I was kind of afraid you were going to come back and suddenly be determined to get him back.”

“Why? Is this where you reveal that you two are dating again?”

Jamie laughed at that, before quickly clearing her throat. “*What? No. Of course not. I just... He went home.*”

Freya froze at that, the words not making sense to her. “Wait, he what?”

“He went home. He’s going to come back for exams but otherwise... He and his uncle packed up and went back to... I know it’s terrible, but I can never remember what country he’s originally from. Was it somewhere in Eastern Europe or Africa?”

“Those are kind of vastly different places, Jamie.”

“I know, which is why it’s so weird that I can never remember. Anyway, not the point. The point is that he’s gone and he’s not really coming back.”

“But... I mean...” Freya shook herself, trying to dislodge her thoughts from the jam they had found themselves in. “I need to go.”

“I... Okay. See you.”

“See you,” Freya repeated before hanging up and turning to Mel. “Damon went home.”

“Like, back to his home country home?”

Freya nodded.

“Well... I mean, it’s not like you two were talking anyway, right?”

“No, I know, it’s not that. I’m just... surprised. He was here to get away from his father. Going back... Going back seems kind of risky if he’s still trying to avoid him.”

“Maybe he figured that he can’t hide forever. And, I mean, no offence, Freya, but it’s not as if you’ve been talking to him to know.”

Freya sighed, having to admit that Mel was right. “No, I guess I haven’t.”

“Well, if anything, it sounds to me like you just lost one of the last things keeping you tied to a Human life.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”



FREYA USED HER WALK back to the town to steel herself before Seph’s admonishments. She was aware that every moment she spent “gallivanting about,” as Seph called it, was a moment that she wasn’t learning the things that she needed to in order to not only win her throne back, but to hold it by being a good queen.

Of course, these arguments would always end with Seph sighing, a far away look in her eyes before saying that Freya was truly her parents' child. That would usually guilt Freya into putting her head down for the next week or so at least, and focusing on her studies.

Freya stopped dead in her tracks as she saw something out of the corner of her eye. She spun around to see a dark figure concealed within the tree, crouched above her. She almost prepared herself for attack, but then she realised that she recognised the figure.

"Ku?" she asked, her voice a blend of disbelieving delight. "You're here?"

Her delight quickly faded, however, as she noticed the scowl that the last Ancient was wearing.

"You need to stop looking for us," Ku told her.

"Why? Please, Ku, look, I'm sorry-"

Ku dropped down from her perch, landing gracefully, without so much as a whisper, in front of Freya. "I have no use for your apologies. You wanted to take your course, and you did. In all honesty, we should never have been as close to you as we were. We were never going to bond with you, so having us close was of no use to you. It was only enticing you with a power you couldn't have. This is the right choice for us. Accept that and let us go."

"I don't want to let you go, Ku! I... I miss you. I don't know how to do this on my own."

"You are not alone, you simply do not have the two of us. As it always should have been. Neither of us want to bond with you. Accept that and move on."

"You don't want to bond with me," Freya corrected, "but what about Juni? She always resented your insistence on keeping your distance from me. She always wanted to bond with me."

"That hardly matters now, does it? Your counterpart on Earth has made sure of that."

“What do you mean?”

“How quickly you forget. Juni is a bridge between nature and humanity, not nature and the magical world. The only way the two of you can bond is if you form a real and lasting attachment to the Human world. We always knew that you were too closed off to others for that to ever be likely, and having to keep your magic a secret from everyone hasn’t helped. Your counterpart choosing to walk away from her Human life is the final nail in the coffin. Even if you and Juni both want to bond, there is no way for you to do so now.”

“That can’t be right... There has to be another way...”

Ku gave her a pitying look and that, in the end, was what broke her, tears starting to stream down her cheeks while she mentally grasped at straws, trying to look for loopholes in the system.

“I’m sorry, Freya, but it’s time for you to stop your futile quest to reunite with us. It will bear you no fruit and will only serve as a distraction. Go. Retrieve your crown and take your place as the rightful queen of this land, but do it without us. We don’t want you.”

At that, Ku disappeared, leaving Freya to fall to her knees as she felt nothing but hollow and empty, knowing that she would never truly be whole as even parts of her very soul rejected her.



Book Five: Witch

Rosaline's eyes were dry like straw, but still she kept reading. There had to be something. Some way to wake her friend.

She only stirred at the sound of yelling beyond her door. She recognised the voices. Felicia, one of the Witches in her coven, was attempting to keep Sparrow from the door. The sixteen-year-old boy was not taking it well.

"I just want to see my mother!" Rosaline heard him yell as she finally lifted her eyes from her book. They rested on her unconscious friend and refused to move. She found herself too tired to shift even those tiny muscles.

"We still haven't figured out what kind of magic is at work," Felicia said, her usually gentle voice starting to heat. "We can't introduce new elements. Certainly nothing so volatile as a child Angel in pain."

"Let him in," Rosaline found herself saying, so quietly that she wasn't sure it had travelled through the door.

After a moment, however, the door opened to reveal a scrawny redhead. He had his mother's olive skin, but it was covered in a fine layer of freckles. His eyes were tired and his clothes crumpled, betraying the fact that he too hadn't slept since his mother had been hurt.

"Aunt Rose," the boy said, his eyes glued to his mother as he seemed stuck in place. "What happened to her?"

"I'm not sure," Rosaline admitted, much to her anguish. "My best guess is she had to rely too heavily on the Ancient inside her to survive whatever happened. Your mother and the Ancient have never had a peaceful relationship... I think they're warring inside her head."

"Can you help her?"

"No. I'm sorry, Sparrow. This is a fight she has to win herself."

He nodded, tears streaming down his face as he finally moved to his mother's bedside.

"And Dad?" he eventually managed to ask, his voice no more than a whisper. "Felicia said..."

"I'm sorry, Sparrow, he's gone."

Anything keeping the boy together gave way at the confirmation, and he collapsed into a chair with a harrowing sob.

She moved over to him, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder. She understood, by Human standards, he was technically a man, but he was a small child to her, still taking his first, stumbling steps.

"I wish I was a Reaper already," Sparrow managed through his sobbing. "I should have been the one..."

"Sparrow," Rosaline said as she crouched down to speak with him, "even if you were, you wouldn't have been sent for your father. No Reaper is ever sent for their family."

"Why not? I should... I should have been able to say goodbye..."

"Would you have been able to? I mean, really able to? Able to say goodbye and let go? A Reaper is supposed to be the calming presence that guides a soul on. You can't be that if you're invested in seeing them stay."

"It's not fair."

"Death never is, sweetheart. But your mother is still here, for now. We need to focus on that."

He nodded, but it wasn't until he passed out several hours later that the tears finally stopped.



Chapter One

Freya counted the sheafs of paper left in her hand. Six. How did she still have six left? She'd only started with ten!

She took a deep breath to calm herself as she straightened her skirt. It had seemed like such a good idea that morning. She had enough saved up cash to move out of Margaret and Ryan's, and she felt like staying was imposing, but she had no way to explain to her adoptive parents how she had gotten the money.

"I've taken it upon myself to police the magical beings in the city, since there's no official body to do so, and sometimes I collect bounties for the criminals I hunt down. Also, sometimes Fate calls me with a job, and she pays *really* well."

Yeah, somehow she didn't imagine that going down well. Not least because her very-Human parents knew nothing of magic.

So, she needed a realistic reason for how she had the money. Which would mean a job. She could lie, but it seemed like too much hassle, even with magic. She could drop the job once she had moved out, but for the first few months, it had to be believable.

She hadn't been sure she could manage both a job and her degree at first, but now it was the Christmas holiday, she figured she could easily manage it. So, as she had printed out her last assignment to hand in, she had also printed out ten copies of her

CV and figured she wouldn't go home until she had gotten rid of all of them.

A few hours, and more than a few rejections, later, she was starting to think she should settle for getting rid of five. The other five could wait for another day. Or never.

Maybe an elaborate lie wouldn't be so tricky after all...

She decided to move away from the main part of town, where all of the chains were, figuring she might have a better shot at a small establishment. Or, at least, asking wouldn't be as stressful. Maybe. Maybe it would just be a different kind of stress.

She found a small cafe she hadn't been in before. It looked very hipster, but she entered anyway. She could be hipster, she figured. How hard could it be?

She walked up to the counter, where the barista had her back to her, giving Freya a view of her short mass of black curls.

Freya was about to call out when she spotted a sign on the counter.

Please be patient, it said. The barista is Deaf and lip reading is hard. Get a large coffee for the price of a regular by using BSL (British Sign Language). Any bigots will be banned for life and reported to local police for hate speech. Thank you.

Thankfully, when Freya looked back up, the barista had turned around, revealing herself to be a slim black woman who looked to be about Freya's age. Her makeup was perfectly applied and her skinny jeans and lilac jumper made her look like she had been plucked from the pages of a fashion magazine. Even her glasses had PRADA emblazoned on the side. Freya immediately felt self-conscious about her plain black dress.

"Can I get a large latte, please?" Freya asked, figuring it would be better to ask if they were hiring after ordering something, but she almost stopped mid-question as she found that

her hands, having dropped the CVs on the counter, were asking as much as her mouth was.

Which was odd when she didn't know sign language.

She knew it in the Shadow Realm, but that wasn't the same as knowing it on Earth. Except, it seemed it was.

She could have hit herself as she finally recognised the woman in front of her. Sarah had been one of her commanders in the Shadow Realm, but they had never met on Earth. In fact, they hadn't seen each other in the Shadow Realm for years. Not since the Shadow Realm version of Freya had given up trying to defend the Shadow Realm throne in favour of finding Ku and Juni, the parts of her magic she had never quite managed to integrate into herself.

She marvelled for a moment that sign language in the Shadow Realm would be BSL, before remembering she spoke English when she was there, and there was no reason for this to be any different.

"Sure," Sarah said. "That'll be £1.99."

Freya waved her purse over the machine, her contactless card making it beep, before returning her attention to Sarah, who was now making her coffee.

Once Sarah had turned back to her, Freya asked, "I was also wondering if you were hiring."

"Can you wait a second?" Sarah asked with a smile before turning to the door to the back room. "Riley!"

An older woman stepped through to the cafe, looking a little irritated at being interrupted. She too had dark skin, though it was lighter than Sarah's. Her sleek black hair was cropped and held back with oddly placed clips, and her crumpled, large shirt over leggings made her look like she had rolled out of bed mere moments ago.

"What is it?" she asked, using her hands as well, as Freya had.

“This girl is asking about a job and you said you’d get someone to help me.”

“I said I would think about it.”

“And I said I can’t keep up the number of hours I have been when uni starts again in February.”

“So you’ve got months.”

“But I’ll still need to train her, unless you want to do it.”

The manager rolled her eyes before turning to Freya. “You have a CV?”

Freya nodded, passing one of them over.

The manager read it over before raising an eyebrow. “You took a sharp nosedive at your A-Levels. What happened? You spend too much time partying?”

“No, no, nothing like that,” Freya assured her.

“Then what was it?”

“Personal.”

“What, like, learning difficulties?”

Sarah stepped in quickly. “Riley, you can’t ask stuff like that!” She turned to Freya. “Sorry, she’s got Asperger’s and sometimes is too straightforward. She didn’t mean to ask anything illegal.”

Riley gave her a bit of an irritated look, but let the apology slide.

Freya let out a sigh of relief at the revelation, however. “Actually, my grades suffered because I didn’t have accommodations for my own autism.”

Riley nodded. “Well, making coffee isn’t rocket science, so I don’t really care about your grades beyond being able to count. I am, however, concerned about you being out here if you’re autistic. The acoustics in here can be shite. I don’t want you melting down because the noise is too much.”

“It’ll be fine,” Freya promised, knowing she could always use her magic to filter out any extraneous sounds.

Riley shrugged. "Alright. You start tomorrow. Bring your driver's licence."

Freya nodded as Riley headed back to the back room.

Sarah gave her a bright grin as she passed her the coffee she had ordered. "See you tomorrow!"



"TO JOINING THE PROLETARIAT work force!" Freya toasted as Mel rolled her eyes at her friend.

"I still don't get why you even need the job," Mel said as she knocked back her drink in a particularly impressive fashion. At least, it would have been for a Human.

Thank the Creator for 'Spoons, Freya thought to herself as she made quick work of her own cocktail, quickly refilling the glass from one of the three jugs in front of them.

"I need this job to explain how I can afford to move out," Freya reminded her friend.

"Yeah, no, I know that. I mean, why do you even want to move out anyway? It'll have to be to shitty student accommodation anyway. Sounds like a pain to me."

"Yes, well, not all of us get to live in fancy covens. Some of us have to make do with the Human world. Which means shitty flats in the shitty part of town."

"Or you could, you know, stay living at home."

Freya gave an awkward shrug. "I don't want to be a burden to Margaret and Ryan."

Mel rolled her eyes. "Freya, it's super ridiculous that you still think like this. You're their for-realsies daughter. They signed the paperwork and everything. By definition, kids can't be a burden on their parents."

"Whatever," Freya muttered as she finished her second glass. "I just want my own place. Not to mention, every day I stay there

increases the chance they'll realise I've got magic. Now that the Demon in charge of making sure no Demon ever accidentally reveals magic to Humans knows who I am, it's probably best that I do everything I can to stay under the radar."

"Yeah, you do realise housemates will probably be worse than your parents, right? I mean, you'll be living right on top of each other in terrible student accommodation, and there's no way you can pretend to afford a flat of your own on minimum wage."

Freya huffed as she leaned back in her chair, drinking deeply from her glass before admitting, "You might have a point there."

"Might? Come on, Freya, we both know I'm right, and that you're letting your weird parent hang-ups influence your decision here."

"I just... I wish I could just have a place of my own."

"Well, I mean, you *could*, but you would have to cut ties to your Human family so they wouldn't suspect anything, and that's not something you're willing to do."

"That's not something *anyone* would be willing to do."

"It's something half of my coven *did*, Freya."

"Wait, really?"

"Of course. Witches are mostly women. Even accounting for trans women, pure-blooded Witches are rare. Most Witches have Human fathers. Especially since the Old Worlds have all been sealed off."

"Except Atlantis," Freya said pointedly. If Mel hadn't been glamourised, she would have dark blue scales in place of skin, betraying her half-Mermaid heritage.

"Right, but Merpeople aren't exactly tolerant of mixed-species relationships. My parents were the exception, not the norm. I suppose in Dark covens, they might have as much De-

mon blood as Human, but with the Guides all but extinct, Light covens mostly only mix with Humans.

“If you take into account how many Witches died in the War, a lot of Witches around our age grew up with their Human fathers. What do you think happened once they reached their teenage years and they broke through?”

Freya shrugged.

“Usually, their extended family stepped in and took them in to their covens, meaning they had to leave their Human family behind.”

“That seems... harsh.”

“Not all of us get ghost mentors to see us through our early days. And, as you well know, most of us don’t have parents to do it anymore, either. They’re calling us the Lost Generation of magic. A bunch of kids who had no one to teach us.”

“To being lost,” Freya said, raising what was left of her drink before downing it.

Mel’s phone buzzed at her.

“Crap, it’s my Coven Head. I’ve got to get back. I’m sorry.”

Freya shrugged. Ever since Mel had started accompanying her on her bounty missions, she had become used to the half-Witch being at the beck and call of her coven. It was simply expected of a Witch, no matter how irritating it could be at times.

“Oh!” Freya said, remembering. “I wanted to borrow that book you were talking about from your coven library. The one on the Angel Twilight.”

“Can’t you ask Amber?”

Freya sighed. She and Amber didn’t really talk much anymore. “You know that she doesn’t like to talk about Hope. Too many bad memories and guilt over her death. Anyway, I’m more curious to see what the rest of the magical community thought of her.”

“Alright, I’ll get it for you.”

Freya sighed. “This would be a lot easier if I could just go to the library myself.”

Mel snorted. “Yeah, good one. You know my Coven Head is suspicious of strangers.”

“Oh, come on. I hardly count as a stranger. I’m, like, a local celebrity. And we’ve known each other for years. You are literally my oldest friend aside from my sister. And Jamie, I guess. You and her tie, and she moved away for uni, so she doesn’t even really count anymore.”

“Unless you’re about to marry me tomorrow, she won’t care.”

“I would, but Ally would be honour-bound to fight me for your hand.”

“No, she wouldn’t. We broke up.”

“*Again?* I swear to the Creator, I’m going to duct-tape you two together one of these days.”

Mel smirked. “You can try. Anyway, I’ve got to go. I’ll get you your book, I promise. See you.”

“See you,” Freya called as her friend wheeled away, wondering if it was easier to keep a wheelchair moving straight compared to walking straight after one and a half jugs of ‘Spoons cocktails.



FREYA HAD PRETTY MUCH sobered up by the time she made it home. Being an Angel certainly helped with such things, for which she was thankful, given that it wasn’t even that late; she and Mel had started drinking early.

“Hey,” Margaret greeted as Freya entered the house, sitting in the living room with her two-year-old daughter, Amy, sitting in her lap. “Did you manage to get your assignment handed in?”

“Yep. I also got a job.”

Margaret stopped her idle playing with Amy as she turned as best she could on the sofa to grin at her adopted daughter. “You did! How? Where? What is it?”

“I thought I would go around with my CV and I found a cafe that was hiring. I start tomorrow.”

“Do you think you’ll be able to handle it on top of your uni work? I mean, I’m not trying to suggest you can’t, I just don’t want you to spread yourself too thin.”

“Well, I mean, I don’t have much to do over the holidays. And if it gets too much when I go back, I can always quit.”

“Okay. But you know you don’t have to, right? I mean, if you’re taking it because you feel you have to, just know Ryan and I are more than happy with you staying here. I know I talked about you going away for uni, but that was because I wanted you to have the experience of being in a different city. If you’re home anyway, you might as well be here.”

Freya nodded. “I know. A little extra spending money would be nice, though.”

“Well, I suppose that’s as good a reason as any.” She stood up, placing Amy on her hip. “I’m going to tell Ryan. Would you mind watching Amy for a few minutes? She’ll get upset if I leave during her show.”

“Alright,” Freya said as her mother passed Amy over to her. “Hey there,” she said to her younger sister, who grinned at her presence.

Freya sat back down on the sofa with Amy, who quickly grabbed her juice cup, pressing it into Freya’s hands before watching her expectantly.

Freya rolled her eyes, though she couldn’t help but grin as she quickly looked over her shoulder to make sure their mother was out of the room before turning back to the cup, using her

control of water to draw the juice out, causing it to dance in front of her sister.

Amy squealed with delight, grabbing at the balls of juice as Freya had them dance out of her reach.

Freya sighed as she put the juice back in the cup. "I'm going to have to stop doing this soon, or you'll remember when you're older. Although... your Aunt Jessica says every woman in your dad's family is a Witch, so who knows if you're really Human."

Freya's stomach twisted, Mel's words still echoing in her mind. If Amy was really a Witch, Jessica would probably have to step in as soon as she came into her magic. Margaret and Ryan had wanted to have a child of their own for so long, and now there was every chance that their daughter was going to be taken from them as soon as she reached puberty. Jessica would probably have to take her to a local coven or something...

I'm not going to let that happen, Freya resolved. She would train Amy herself if she had to, she was going to stay with her parents.

"Come on, little one," Margaret said as she re-entered the room, picking up Amy. "It's time to get you your tea."

Freya smiled as they left the room before heading upstairs.

Once the door to her room was shut behind her, Freya felt the familiar push of Amber trying to materialise and she let her before she headed to her box of magical gear.

"Going out tonight?" Amber asked her.

"Yeah, I got a tip from Fate." She waved at her phone. "She says there's a rogue Demon I should hunt down."

"So you're still doing jobs for her?"

Freya shrugged. "I'm picking and choosing. I would probably have gone after this rogue anyway and Fate pays five times my usual rate. Turning her down for this would be setting fire to perfectly good money."

Amber nodded, remaining silent. Freya was glad her mentor was picking her battles now. Or maybe she was actually trusting Freya more than she had in the past. Whatever the reasoning, Freya was thankful.

“Do you have any tips on how to find them?”

She shook her head. “Just a vague description. Not even a magical signature. Should be fun.”

“Call me if you need help.”

“Will do,” Freya answered before heading out of her window.



Chapter Two

T*he majority of Lord Uther's forces have taken refuge within the Howling Castle. How do you take it back?"*

Freya sighed, thinking only for a moment before replying. "I would camp my army to the south of the castle—"

"The east is the best side for mounting a siege," her mentor, Seph, corrected.

"Yes, but I would send illusionists to create false armies on every side. They would assume that the true army is to the east if they suspect illusion, and focus their efforts there. If they don't suspect, they would still focus their efforts there to protect their weakest side. That buys us time. While the army is distracting the forces in the castle, I would lead a small team into the castle through the escape route that was built for my ancestors during the Shadow Rebellion with the sole purpose of finding and assassinating Lord Uther. Once he's dead, his men will fall in line. He has their fear, not their loyalty."

"What if Lord Uther is not in the castle?"

"Then I wouldn't attack in the first place. If Lord Uther isn't there, the castle isn't worth it."

"Even though it acted as the seat of your family's power for centuries?"

"Not for several generations. Barely anyone alive remembers it being used as such. Lord Uther is the target, then I can rebuild power."

"What if you had been told that he would be at the castle?"

“Then I need to get better spies. I wouldn’t start such an undertaking without definite confirmation from someone I trusted.”

Seph nodded, approvingly. “As ever, I am unsure what else I could do to sharpen your tactical mind. Even your courtesies are far more refined than when we first met.”

Freya couldn’t help but roll her eyes at the familiar jab. “If I remember correctly, not long after we first met, it was my sincerity that solidified the support for my claim to the crown.”

“Your sincerity won the hearts of the common people,” Seph clarified. “However, it telegraphed weakness to those in power. Most of your backing came solely from lingering fondness for your parents. Perhaps if you had been more refined, there wouldn’t have been such a fracturing of power.”

Freya felt that jab in her gut, even though she knew that Seph had only meant it as a mild warning. She was right, after all. Of course, there would have been no fracturing of power if Lord Uther hadn’t contested her claim for the throne, but if hadn’t been him, surely some other party would have seen the opportunity to seize power. There had been no real reason to rebel against Seph when she wasn’t claiming the crown for herself, simply keeping everything running for when an heir did appear.

Freya’s arrival had given her enemies that heir, and had given them someone to rally against.

Perhaps the fight had been winnable at that point, but Freya didn’t think so. Not when everything that happened in the Shadow Realm was only symbolic of what was happening on Earth, and Freya hadn’t even really started her fight with Lord Uther in earnest over there.

Freya had thought that her only hope in the Shadow Realm was to piece together the odd pieces of her soul that were fractured off. Not in the nature that her mother’s soul had been fractured. Nothing that was vital to her day-to-day functioning had split off

because of emotional trauma. No, Ku and Juni had been separate because they were supposed to be. Well, Juni was, at least. She was only supposed to fully integrate with Freya when she had a sufficient tie to the Human world. The thing was, Freya didn't really have sufficient ties to anyone, never mind Humans. Even her parents were kept at a distance by both her lies and her fear that they would one day get rid of her.

Ku, on the other hand, was supposed to be integrated with her. But Ku had decided against that herself. The last Ancient didn't want another host, and she definitely didn't want that host to be Freya. Freya thought she could change her mind, prove herself worthy somehow, but she had found just how wrong that was.

No, there was nothing Freya could really do from the Shadow Realm. It was all up to her counterpart on Earth.

Freya was pulled from her thoughts by a knock at the door. Seph quickly strode towards it. Her hand went to the dagger at her back, ready to pull it out and wound any potential attacker.

Freya figured an attacker wouldn't knock, but she could never be too careful.

When Seph opened the door, the only person beyond was the old innkeeper. She gave Seph a distrustful eye, telling Freya that she was probably aware of the dagger.

"Someone is looking for you," the innkeeper told Freya. "She's downstairs."

"You told her we were here?" Seph asked.

"No. She asked for someone with her description, I told her I hadn't seen anyone like that for months. Then she said that she would wait. See her or not, I don't care, I just thought you should know."

"Thank you," Freya said.

"It could be a trap," Seph said as soon as the innkeeper had left.

“If it is, I would rather know who is after me than run from what might be nothing.”

Seph looked as if she wanted to argue, but she simply nodded.

Freya took her own dagger, attaching it to her thigh before hiding it beneath her skirt.

She walked cautiously down the stairs, her eyes scanning the room for anyone familiar. They quickly latched onto the hooded figure in the corner, dark hands peeking out beneath her cloak to hold a drink.

And then she signed hello at her.

Sarah.

Of course their meeting on Earth would mean that they would be reunited in the Shadow Realm, Freya thought to herself as she rushed to meet her friend.



FREYA GROANED AS HER phone beeped at her, and hit snooze on the alarm.

It beeped at her again all too soon, and she rolled over, pulling her duvet over her head to escape the noise. She quickly bolted back upright, however, as she realised that it would probably wake Amy if it went on for too long, and then she would never hear the end of it from Margaret.

She threw herself from her bed to push herself into getting ready, despite how exhausted she was from her fruitless search the night before.

She stomped towards the door before shaking herself awake. The last thing she wanted was to wake everyone up with her elephant feet.

After making sure she was no longer stomping, Freya made her way to the bathroom, only to almost yelp out in surprise as she caught her gaze in the mirror.

Blood red eyes stared back at her instead of green.

She blinked and, as quickly as she had noticed, her eyes were back to green, though they were incredibly bloodshot.

They're just bloodshot, she told herself as she grabbed her toothbrush. *Just bloodshot, never truly red.*

But her thoughts couldn't help but wander back to the Shadow Realm and how certainly Ku had told her that she would never fully connect with Juni as she looked back at the mirror, examining how the red veins encircled her bright green irises.

By some miracle, she managed to throw some clothes and makeup on, in order to get into town by eight, arriving at the cafe just as Sarah was opening up.

"Hey," Freya said. "Is there somewhere for me to put my bag?"

She had put her hunting gear into her backpack, deciding that it would be easier to take it with her and head out as soon as she was done with work.

"Yeah, it can go in the back."

Freya followed her as Sarah led her through to the back room, which actually seemed to be a kitchen.

"Riley bakes all of the cakes and scones in here in the early morning. She's usually gone before I come in to open up. Unless there's a delivery like yesterday, then she'll stay in the back room and do inventory."

"So, can I just put my bag anywhere?"

Sarah pointed over to a stool by a broken coat-rack. "Stick it over there with your coat. That's usually where I keep mine."

Freya popped them over where she had been shown before turning to Sarah, both nervous and not. On the one hand, this was the first day of her first real job. She was scared of messing it up or of being so clumsy or inept that Sarah would decide that taking her on had been a huge mistake.

But then, it wasn't as if Sarah was a stranger. They had known each other for years. She was one of her most trusted Queensguard members.

Except she wasn't, because that wasn't even this realm. Freya might know that they were already friends in the Shadow Realm, but Sarah had no idea. To her, Freya was just a stranger who had wandered into the cafe where she worked one day.

"So," Sarah said, indicating that Freya should follow her back towards the main cafe, "I guess I should show you how to use the coffee machine."

However, once they stepped through to the cafe, they saw that a queue had already formed, waiting for their morning *cafeine* fix.

"On second thought, perhaps we should wait until the morning rush is over," Sarah said, and Freya nodded, stepping back. She tried to watch what Sarah did as she went, taking note so that she would at least have some idea once it was her turn.

"Okay, I think that should be it," Sarah finally said as the queue dissipated after nine. "So, the coffee machine."

"I think I picked up most of it from watching. How about I try, and you tell me if I'm wrong?"

Sarah nodded. "Alright, I could use the break. Let's see your latte skills."

Freya took the filter thing from the machine and tapped out the old coffee before filling it up again.

"So, are you from around here?" Freya asked, curious as to why she had met Sarah so much earlier in the Shadow Realm. Sometimes things like that occurred out of sync, like her not meeting Alice there until last year, but she wondered if there was a reason. "I can't tell from your accent."

"Amazingly that happens when you're Deaf," Sarah said, though it was with a smile.

“Yes, I figured, but the fact remains that I still don’t know if you’re local or not. I mean, I’m assuming you’re a student like me.”

“Yeah, I’m studying medicine. And I moved around a lot as a kid, so I guess I’m not really from anywhere.”

“You moved around a lot? Why?”

She shrugged. “Lots of different reasons. My dad died before I was born, and then my mum died when I was little. I lived with my step-dad and little sister for a while, but then I went to live with a cousin. I moved a couple of times with her and we only really settled when I was in the middle of high school. Then I came here for university.”

“I’m sorry. That sucks.”

Sarah shrugged. “It is what it is.” The way her eyes glassed over as she looked away told Freya that she didn’t really mean that.

“See, this is why I need to start my orphan club idea. I mean, I grew up in foster care, so I guess that’s kind of the same thing, but still, it’s ridiculous how many people I meet outside of that are orphans as well.”

“Wait, you lost your parents too?”

“Well, my mum,” Freya explained as she steamed a jug of milk between hand signs. “No one had any idea who my dad was.”

“And you didn’t have any other family?”

“Not alive.”

“I’m sorry.”

Freya shrugged. “It is what it is,” she repeated, though she meant it more than Sarah had. “Though I totally understand the moving thing. I was moved from foster home to foster home like it was a game of pass-the-parcel until high school.”

“Yeah, it kind of makes it hard to make friends.”

“Exactly,” Freya agreed before finishing her latte and passing it to Sarah.

“I’ll let it cool first,” Sarah said, putting it down on the counter next to her before continuing. “Yeah, I had this one friend in middle school, we were completely inseparable, but I moved away and haven’t seen her since.”

“Couldn’t you stay in contact online?”

Sarah shook her head, her gaze dropping once more. “She wasn’t exactly a model student and she ended up in a lot of trouble right around the time I moved away. She wasn’t allowed near a computer or a phone, and my cousin didn’t really want me to keep on associating with her after that.”

“That sucks.”

“Yeah, but they were probably right in the end. I mean, she was in a lot of trouble all the time. I probably would have ended up in trouble too if I’d stayed hanging around her.”

“Well, yeah, but you can still miss someone who was probably bad news. Especially if you moved around a lot.”

“Yeah, I guess. Did you ever manage to make lasting friends?”

“Not ones I want to remember until high school, I’m afraid, once I stayed put for a while. But now most of them are off at uni.”

“Why’d you stay put?”

Freya folded her arms protectively over her chest at that. “I, um... The entry requirements were lower for local students. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have gotten in.”

“Oh. Well, at least you did get in, though.”

Even Sarah’s bright attitude couldn’t burn away the storm that brewed every time Freya thought about her academic downfall. “Downfall” was perhaps a strong word, given that she still managed to get into a perfectly respectable university, but it

wasn't to do chemistry like she had previously wanted, so it felt like a failure to her.

"Yeah, I did," Freya said anyway, forcing herself to smile as Sarah took a sip of her coffee. "So, how did I do?"

"This tastes like coffee."

"That's... good, then?"

"Yeah, I suppose. Now let's see if we can replicate this for all of the other drinks on the menu."

Freya smiled as she started to make an Americano. "I think I might have this handled."

"Don't get cocky, kid."

Freya gasped. "Did you just quote Star Wars at me?"

"I have been known to occasionally watch pop culture phenomena," Sarah said, still drinking the latte Freya had made between signing.

"No, I'm taking this as confirmation that you're secretly a nerd. You'll have to join my secretly-a-nerd club."

"What is it with you and clubs?"

"I like organising my social interactions to help them make sense."

"Well, I have to say, you have no right to be part of a *secretly-a-nerd club*. You came in wearing a Firefly backpack. Were you even born when Firefly was first on TV?"

"I... was a baby, admittedly. But my older sister liked it. My foster sister, I mean. Kind of. We grew up together."

"And she was old enough to watch it when it was on?"

"Well... no. But she watched *Serenity* on DVD at a friend's house once and got really into it."

"Okay, I guess that makes sense. I never watched it."

Freya did a mock gasp. "Then there is no way you could ever be part of the secretly-a-nerd club without such an important part of nerd lore!"

“This is why I could never be a nerd. There’s too much homework, and I don’t have time for it. Between uni, this job, and ballet-”

“You’re a ballerina?”

Sarah nodded. “It’s the only thing I kept up with even when I kept moving.”

“That is... impressive.” Freya hoped to the Creator that her tone wasn’t as bitter as she felt. She just... She had put so much effort into just getting through school and it was questionable whether or not she had even managed that. She only felt okay with taking a job on a provisional basis because she’d ended up doing a soft subject with next to no contact hours.

And yet, here was Sarah, doing one of the hardest degree courses possible, and holding down a job, and keeping up with ballet.

Freya didn’t think of herself as a particularly jealous person, but there had to be a line somewhere.

She could almost hear Amber reminding her that she was practically revered by the local magical community for dealing with the rogue Demons that were so prevalent in the city.

Of course, Freya’s response to that was always that it didn’t count. She was an Angel; stopping rogue Demons was probably why she had been born, if she had any insight into Fate’s plan, so that didn’t count.

“Nah, it’s- Um- It’s not that impressive,” Sarah said, looking more than a little flustered at Freya’s words. “I’m just doing what I like doing, you know?”

Freya felt any bitterness she might have felt melt away at that. It was kind of impossible to be mad at someone who seemed so sweet.

“It’s still impressive,” Freya told her with a smile.

“Well, you know... Anyway, we should, you know, focus on making coffee.”

“Okay, boss.”



BY THE TIME SEVEN O’CLOCK rolled around and they closed up for the day, Freya was about ready to drop off where she stood. She thought that hunting rogue Demons had physically prepared her for anything, but she couldn’t have been more wrong. Usually her hunts only lasted a few hours. She still had to sleep, after all. Apart from a couple of short breaks, she had been on her feet all day. In fact, she couldn’t actually feel her feet any more.

“You look a little droopy,” Sarah signed with a smile as Freya leaned against the wall by the now-closed door.

“I feel a little droopy.”

Sarah grinned. “On the plus-side, you just made almost sixty pounds.”

Freya did perk up a little at that, despite the number being paltry compared to her bounties.

“Though, working all day like this won’t be the norm forever. Riley doesn’t *like* working out front, but she does it Monday to Wednesday. Then I’ll work Thursday, you work Friday, and we’ll both work over the weekends to deal with the rush. At least, until we can convince Riley to get a third person in to help us.”

“How did you two manage it on your own?”

“We didn’t. There was another girl who used to work here, but she’s in her last year of uni, so she left back in October to focus on her academic work. I’ve been trying to get Riley to replace her ever since. Riley’s niece also stepped in on occasion, but she’s still in school so her mum doesn’t like her working.”

Freya nodded. "I think I can handle three days a week during the holidays."

"Come on, let's get you home before you pass out," Sarah said, then offered her hand.

Freya smiled, pushing herself off from the wall, but not taking Sarah's hand.

"You're lucky that it was quiet enough before close to clean up. That's not always the case, and then we have to stay late."

"Then I am indeed lucky," Freya agreed. She wasn't sure how much more standing she could have taken. Not when she still had a Demon to catch.

"Here," Sarah said once they were in the back room, before picking up Freya's backpack for her. She faltered a little with the heavy bag. "What do you have in there?" she asked once she had passed the bag back to Freya.

Freya shrugged once the bag was on her back. Usually she said LARPing gear, just in case anyone saw the armour and weapons, but she had no idea what the sign for that would be and she was too tired for finger-spelling, so she settled for "Books."

Sarah narrowed her eyes a little, seemingly not quite believing her, but she didn't otherwise comment.

"I'm returning them to the library now that I'm done with my assignments."

"Okay." She still didn't seem convinced, but Freya decided to leave it.

Even if she didn't believe her, it was unlikely that she suspected that she had magical armour and weapons in there.

"Well, I guess I'll see you tomorrow for the weekend shift," Sarah said.

Freya nodded, more than a little exhausted at the mere thought of returning for another full day of work. But if she

could handle Demons, she could probably handle this, she figured.

As soon as they were out of the door, and Sarah had rounded the corner, Freya glamourised herself before leaping up to the roof of the cafe. She quickly pulled on her armour and put her war hammer over her shoulder before shrinking down her now mostly-empty backpack and attaching it to her belt. The bright orange design looked out of place on top of so much black leather and metal, clashing a little with the deep red runes that kept Freya's armour from sustaining as much damage as it would otherwise, as well as healing Freya a little. Not nearly as much as she often needed, but enough to keep scratches from bothering it.

The armour had been a "gift" from Fate after Freya's last job for her, much as the hammer had been a gift for her first. Freya wasn't sure how she felt about the armour. She still didn't quite trust Fate, and so wasn't sure if she should trust her gifts. The armour was of outstanding quality, and it fit Freya perfectly. But it used Demon colours and style. There was nothing on the armour that stated that Freya was loyal to any of the great Demon houses, or the Crown, and it wasn't as if she hadn't used repurposed demonic armour from her first few foes before she had known where to get her own, but it did feel a little like declaring a side.

No Angel was inherently Light or Dark. It was a choice. A choice usually influenced by the fact that Angels could be born into any bloodline, and the kind of Energy they had an easier time drawing from was heavily influenced by their dominant genes. Freya's family had been Humans and Angels on her mother's side for the last three generations before her, and Amber had been before that. Amber had been Human before she had bonded with the last Ancient, so she didn't really count as either Light or Dark.

And then Freya's father had been a Demon.

For all intents and purposes, Freya figured she should be a Dark Angel. She had always had an easier time drawing on Dark Energy, anyway. But the first real friend she had made in the magical world had been Mel, who was a Light Witch. Well, mostly... And Amber had mostly only dealt with Light creatures when she had been alive, so she steered Freya in that direction as well.

It didn't help that the first Demon Freya ever met had been trying to kill her. He had been rogue, acting against orders from the Crown not to antagonise Light creatures or hunt Humans, but it had still left kind of a bad taste in her mouth.

Freya shook herself from her train of thought, knowing that it would go nowhere. It would only leave her confused and frustrated. Who cared what other magical creatures thought? She was just an Angel. No Light or Dark needed. She didn't have the time or patience for their petty politics. She was only concerned with making sure that no one stepped out of line and hurt Humans.

She refocused on finding the Demon Fate had told her about. She honestly wished that she had a better description to go on, but she figured that she would eventually find them if she just kept on hunting rogues as usual.

Patrolling was the usual arduous chore. Freya would find a spot and sense for Demonic activity. If she came across a regular, harmless Demon, they usually just waved to her at this point. They were easy enough to spot by the pins somewhere on them that announced which noble they were pledged to. Freya had even started to recognise a few of them. A bird here, a sword there.

The only one she hadn't seen was the house symbol of Lord Uther. She had spotted it in one of Mel's magic books once. She assumed that it was supposed to be some kind of dog or wolf,

but its neck was twisted around so strangely she thought that it looked like it had broken its own neck while trying to chase its tail or something. Mel had rolled her eyes and told her that she wouldn't lend her any more of her books if she didn't take things seriously when Freya had told her that.

Part of her couldn't help but wonder if, when they weren't harassing her, the rogues that attacked her wore dog pins. After all, it was strange that she had never seen them before when Lord Uther was apparently the most powerful Demon noble besides the King.

With or without pins to identify them, rogues were usually more than easy to spot by the way they would immediately start attacking her as soon as they saw her.

Freya moved through the city, sensing for Demons and then moving on over and over again. She wished that her ability to sense had a longer range, but when she was searching for something as vague as "Demonic Energy", she could only sense a three or four streets at a time, and the city was far from small.

It took hours before she sensed *any* demonic activity, but, when she did, it was like a wildfire burning out of control, clashing against a similar rush of Light Energy.

She immediately rushed towards the fight, wondering who was taking on one of the rogues. Normally the local Light creatures stayed out of it. Guides were so rare that she wasn't sure that there were any in the city, and the local Light coven kept to themselves, so they never showed. Much like Guides, she assumed the lack of Slayers meant that they too gave the city a wide berth, so that pretty much just left Neutral creatures who would never get involved anyway. Or troublemakers like the Fae, who would be more than happy to watch the rogues cause trouble for everyone else.

As soon as she arrived on the scene, however, she saw that the figure fighting the Demon was indeed a Witch. She seemed to be holding her own with a staff, spinning nimbly in and out of reach in such a way that seemed to be aggravating the Demon, making him sloppy.

“Need a hand?” Freya asked as she jumped in, drawing the Demon’s attention long enough for the Witch to get a good hit in.

Freya followed it up with a blow from her hammer, knocking the Demon down. He definitely seemed like he wasn’t going to get up from that.

“I saw him attacking some Humans on my way home from work,” the Witch explained as she retracted her staff into a wand.

Freya looked up, recognising the voice. Indeed, the Witch in front of her was Sarah of all people.

She really had to start checking the people she met for magic...

She let the glamour on her face lapse, returning definition to her features.

“Freya!” Sarah cried with a grin, pocketing her wand so that she could sign instead. “I knew it!”

“You... What?” Freya said, her hands fumbling as she tried to articulate her confusion.

“I *knew* that you had magic. And you aren’t part of the coven, and you don’t have a noble pin so I figured you weren’t a Demon... You pretty much had to be the Angel.”

Freya felt a little nervous at it being that obvious even in her regular day-to-day attire. She’d gotten used to most people having figured it out by now, what with everyone having attributed her early accomplishments to an Angel before anyone really knew who she was, but she didn’t exactly go around advertising

who she was. That seemed like a good way to bring trouble home with her.

“I guess you caught me,” Freya signed with a shrug. She still felt uncomfortable at the idea. Almost like her breathing was becoming shallow...

“I didn’t mean to get in your way if this was one of the rogues you deal with. Just, like I said, I saw him bothering Humans and-”

Freya shook her head. “It’s okay...” she told Sarah, stepping forward, but the move proved to be a little too much for her. All of a sudden the world spun around her, black spots appearing in her vision.

“Freya?!”

The next thing she knew, the world went black.



Chapter Three

They hadn't been able to talk where everyone could hear them, so Freya had brought Sarah to the room she shared with Seph. Seph, predictably, had not been impressed.

"Your job was to stay with the prince and keep him protected," Seph signed, having learned along with Freya when Sarah had first joined her ranks. She had needed everyone able to communicate with each other.

Freya wasn't exactly angry to have her friend with her, but she had to admit to being a little worried about the fact that Damon was now missing one of his guards.

"He insisted," Sarah told them. "He said that there was no need for him to retain the entire Queensguard. And, Your Majesty, it's been two years. He worries about you."

That made Freya's stomach twist. On the one hand, she loved that he still cared. On the other, they couldn't see each other again until she had a concrete plan for taking back her throne from Lord Uther, and she was still far from that point.

Seph shook her head, still clearly annoyed at the situation. "We can barely get by without detection when it's just the two of us. Three will be too much."

"We'll make it work," Freya told her. "We have to. I think Sarah coming here is a sign that things are finally starting to move on Earth."

"You do?"

Freya nodded. "I just met her there as well." She turned back to Sarah. "I failed my original mission. Ku and Juni refused to join us. Our only hope now is to consolidate our forces while things finally move into place on Earth." She turned to Seph. "Our forces include Sarah."

Seph sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose for a moment before finally nodding. "Alright, I suppose you're right. I'll start making arrangements to drum up the rest of our forces."



FREYA FELT AS IF HER body was made of lead as her eyes struggled to open. There was no chance of any of her other muscles moving, but she had to get her eyelids open, if for no other reason than to see where she was. The last thing she remembered was passing out after a fight with a Demon, which couldn't be a good sign. Though Sarah had been there, so she had to believe that she hadn't just left her there.

Unless she was part of a trap to capture you.

Freya pushed away that thought. It wasn't unusual for her to be suspicious of people, but she fought against those instincts. Sarah had done nothing to earn her suspicions.

She finally managed to get her eyes open, only to see Sarah leaning over her.

The rush of adrenaline that came with that realisation was enough for Freya to flinch away, though it was feeble.

"She is Litcorde," she heard Mel say from the other end of the room, her voice sounding a little stilted. "You probably want to be careful about getting in her personal space."

"I know, but I still need to examine her," Sarah responded. "Unless you picked up some healing magic in the last five minutes."

Freya could practically hear Mel smirk at that. “Wow, I do not think I have heard you use sarcasm since you got here. It is a good look on you.”

“Are you going to be snarky or are you going to help? She’s your friend, isn’t she?”

“I *am* helping; I am trying to figure out what happened to her. And yes, she is my friend.”

“But you didn’t tell anyone.”

“She did not want me to. People get weird around Angels, and it is not as if Rosaline was ever going to let her in here.”

“Which is exactly why we probably have to get her back on her feet before Rosaline realises I brought her here.”

Sarah moved back over into Freya’s view as she waved her wand over her, little blue lights snaking down to trail across her body. She turned to Freya at that, assessing her eyes for a moment before seemingly deciding that she was aware.

“Try not to move,” she said, her voice soft and calming. “You’ve been cursed, and we need to figure out what the curse is so that we can lift it.”

“Urse?” Freya managed to mumble, her mouth not quite working.

“Stop moving,” Sarah repeated, slightly more stern than before.

“A curse is just a loose term for any magic intended to cause harm over a long period,” Mel informed her, her voice sounding normal again. “Which doesn’t exactly narrow down what kind of magic this is. We *think* that the Demon that you and Sarah were fighting cursed you, but that still doesn’t narrow it down much.”

Freya could hear the sound of pages frantically turning, and assumed that Mel was looking through some of the books from the library.

At that point, the blue light that Sarah had sent to examine her flew back into Sarah's hand, forming a symbol.

"That can't be right," Sarah muttered.

"What can't be right?" Mel asked.

"The anchor for the curse. According to this, it's locked onto her *Demon* blood?"

"Um... Yeah, that would make sense," Mel said, clearly conflicted.

Freya felt a rush of shame at that, her eyes pricking with tears that she couldn't wipe away. She didn't want Sarah to know that she had Demon blood. Mel was fine about it, but Mermaids were Old World creatures. They didn't have the same distinctions between Light and Dark. Mel might be part of a Light coven, but she wasn't as evangelical with her adherence to Light magic as some Witches could be.

Freya didn't want Sarah to think she was evil.

"Okay, *that* narrows it down," Mel said. "I think I have the curse."

"Are you sure? If I try to lift the wrong one, it could kill her."

Mel snorted. "I *highly* doubt it would kill her. But, yeah, it would probably hurt. Like, a lot."

That did not inspire confidence in Freya. She would have glared at Mel if she was facing the right direction to do so.

"Don't worry," Sarah said as she moved back into Freya's view. "This does actually look like the best bet."

"Ay," Freya managed to say, before realising that Sarah probably didn't know that she had said that.

"This might... Well, it might hurt a little. Just try to hold on."

"Ay," Freya repeated out of habit before Sarah moved her wand back over her, frowning in concentration. Freya had expected her to say an incantation, but then she realised that non-verbal spell-casting probably came more easily to her.

A few seconds later, Freya found out that Sarah had been understating when she had said it might hurt a “little”.

She had been stabbed, had broken bones, and had almost bled to death more than a few times, as well as having her uterus trying to kill her every month for three years before she found a version of the pill that didn't exacerbate her depression, and she had no trouble saying that this was the worst pain she had experienced in her entire life.

If she hadn't still been so weak once it was over, she would have exploded with enough Dark Energy to level the entire street.

Or maybe she would have just thrown up.

Regardless, she simply gave a weak shudder, her muscles finally responding, but desperately not wanting to. They felt as if she had run a thousand marathons in a day.

“Are you alright?” Sarah asked her.

Freya nodded.

“Here,” Sarah said, propping up a couple of pillows to help Freya sit up. “Curses like this take a while to recover from. Your body was trying to break it the entire time you were under it. You used up all of your Energy, and then some.”

Freya went to sign her thanks, but her dexterity was shot, resulting in her hand just flopping down in front of her, barely resembling the proper sign.

Sarah smiled. “It's okay. My glasses are charmed. They give me a little read-out of what people say on the lenses. It's far from perfect, but I don't think you can legibly sign right now.”

Freya nodded, figuring that explained Mel's stilted voice when she spoke to her. “Thank you,” she managed to mumble. She tried to enunciate her words as best she could, but her mouth was sluggish. “I know that your Coven Head doesn't like

you bringing strangers here. I really do appreciate you helping me.”

Sarah gave her a slightly confused look. “Sorry, that wasn’t any clearer.” She turned to Mel.

“She is thanking you for helping her and she is sorry in advance for the trouble you are going to be in with Rosaline.”

“Oh, well...” Sarah said, looking a little flustered. “I wasn’t just going to leave you there. You were hurt. And that Demon was probably bait. He would curse you and then his friends would go and scoop you up.”

Freya nodded, finding the thought disturbing. The rogues that specifically targeted her were nothing more than pests. If they were getting smarter...

At that moment, the door to the room opened, revealing a short, strawberry-blonde, woman-shaped ball of rage.

“Do you two want to explain why you have brought a stranger to my coven,” the woman demanded, and Freya frowned. She could have sworn that she recognised the voice.

“She’s our friend,” Sarah said. “She was cursed by a Demon. We needed the books in the library to figure out how to save her.”

“I don’t care. You know the rules about bringing strangers here.”

“She’s the Angel of the North!”

“She could be Life herself and I wouldn’t care. We. Don’t. Bring. Strangers. To. The. Coven.”

“Rosaline,” Freya finally muttered, realising where she remembered the woman from.

When she had first come into her magic, a Demon had attacked her. At the time, she’d had no skill with combat magic, and her idea of exercise had been the ten-minute walk to school. So that she didn’t get immediately killed, Amber had shared her

memories with her, so that Freya knew how to use both her powers and a sword. At least, until Freya could take down the Demon.

While most of the memories had faded the next day, some had lingered. Including one of Rosaline, the Witch who had trained Amber.

The woman turned to glare at her. She was easily a foot shorter than Freya, but Freya still felt more than a little afraid of her.

“How do you know me?”

“I, um... Amber. Amber told me.”

“Amber?”

“Um... Amber Cohen.”

“Amber Cohen has been dead for longer than you have been alive.”

“I know. She died passing the last Ancient to my mother. But my mother tied Amber’s ghost to me to act as a guide since I’m the last of her line.”

Freya wasn’t exactly sure what she expected, but it certainly wasn’t the burning fury with which Rosaline glared at her at that point.

“Get out. Leave this coven and never come back, or I will kill you. Angel or not.”

“Rosaline!” Mel and Sarah protested together, but Freya just shook her head, stumbling out of bed.

“It’s okay,” she assured her friends. “I’ll be fine.”

She opted to shift out, rather than walk, not wanting to linger for a second longer than necessary.



Chapter Four

Freya didn't quite manage the shift home in her weakened state, only managing to get back to the roof of the cafe. She sighed, lying down with her backpack beneath her head, deciding to just stay there until she recovered enough Energy to shift home. After a few moments, she reached into the side pocket of the backpack, taking out a healing potion. She didn't know that it would help, given that she wasn't physically injured, but she figured it couldn't hurt.

The healing potion gave her a pleasant buzz, and the pain seemed to dull a little, but it wasn't anything close to a real help.

After another few minutes, she brought out her phone, deciding that she needed to know about the curse, just in case the Demons tried to use it again. She couldn't rely on Sarah saving her again. Especially when her Coven Head seemed to want her Witches to have nothing to do with Freya.

She rang the contact number for Fate. If Fate didn't pick up, it was one of her Oracles, but usually Freya got to speak to someone in charge.

After two rings, Anna answered the phone.

"So, the curse?" Anna asked.

Freya smiled. She liked how to the point the Oracles were. "Do you know anything about it?"

"No, but Lady Caroline does."

Freya sighed. "I don't really want to get involved with Demons in an official capacity."

"Do you want to know about the curse or not?"

Freya sighed as she thought, taking a few moments before answering. "Alright, fine, tell me where to go."

"I'll text the address to your phone. She'll be expecting you."

Freya rolled her eyes. "I'm kind of out of commission right now."

"Get some sugar in you and you'll be fine."

"Fine. See you." She hung up before putting her phone back in her pocket.

She tried to sit back up at that point, wincing at the pain. She decided to shrink the bag back down and put it back on her belt, rather than trying to get it on her back. She shifted back down to the street below, though she found herself unable to glamour her armour. It was black and red, so it wasn't *too* outlandishly obvious. It looked kind of... rave-y?

She didn't care, she decided as she wandered into Tesco. No one was going to look twice at her. They would assume it was cosplay or performance art or something.

She quickly grabbed a bottle of Irn Bru and a bag of custard doughnuts. Then she grabbed a snack-size pork pie for good measure.

As soon as she was out of the shop, she ate the pie in two bites before washing it down with half of the bottle of Irn Bru. Anna had been right; it did make her feel better.

She opened her bag of doughnuts as she walked towards the address Anna had texted to her, taking one out to eat before putting the rest of them into her backpack.

She, by some miracle, managed to avoid getting custard all over herself as she ate the doughnut, walking all of the way to the address by the time she had finished, without having to shift.

She wiped her sugar-coated hands on her leather trousers before wiping her mouth on the back of her hand, using her phone's selfie camera to check that she looked okay. Once she was sure that she was presentable, she walked into the building, seeing a woman at the front desk, despite the late hour.

"I'm looking for the R.C.E. office," she said, giving the name that had been on Anna's text.

The woman nodded, indicating to the lift. "They're on Level Five."

"Thanks," Freya said before heading into the lift and hitting five. Within a few seconds, she was outside an office with a sign that said R.C.E. North-East. The door was, surprisingly, open, revealing a bunch of desks beyond, with no obvious receptionist. There were lots of different scraps of paper stuck to the walls, some tied together with string. If she squinted, Freya could see that the subjects of the photos sometimes had wings or fangs.

She knocked on the door, though the office seemed empty. "Hey," she called. "Fate sent me."

A door opened across the room, revealing Lady Caroline. She was wearing the same black military jacket that Freya had seen her in last time, but this time Freya recognised that the silver birds on the collar must be the symbol of her house.

"Hey, my office is over here," the Demon said.

Freya nodded, heading over to her. Once she was in the office, Lady Caroline didn't bother to shut the door behind her.

The office looked sparse, but the bin was filled with various Subway, KFC and sushi wrappers and boxes.

Lady Caroline looked her over, seemingly curious. "You know, when we met in London, I didn't realise you were the Angel of the North."

Freya shrugged. "I don't really like telling people."

"I kind of assumed the Angel would be Light," she said as she made her way to the chair behind her desk. She indicated for Freya to take a seat on the sofa in the corner.

"I'm not Light or Dark. I don't really want to get caught up in politics."

Lady Caroline nodded. "Smart. But that's not why you're here. Fate said you needed information on a curse."

"Yeah. A Demon cursed me this evening. Apparently the curse latched onto my Demon blood. Fate told me you might have some information."

"May I?" Lady Caroline asked as she stood up, indicating to Freya.

Freya assumed she meant using some kind of sensing magic on her, so she nodded.

Lady Caroline closed her eyes for a moment, before opening them again and nodding gravely.

Freya had felt nothing.

"I recognise the curse," Lady Caroline informed her. "It's essentially used for law enforcement. If a Demon is sent to capture another Demon, they wear a charm that activates the curse if they are seriously hurt, incapacitating their attacker."

"How did rogue Demons get such a charm?"

Lady Caroline sighed, sitting down before leaning back in her chair. "What do you know about these rogue Demons?"

Freya shrugged. "They attack me for various reasons. Usually to gain power. I know that their actions aren't sanctioned by the Demon higher-ups, and you guys have better things to do than look after me. I'm not your responsibility."

"Anyone who has Demon blood is our responsibility," Lady Caroline corrected. "And they're not just targeting you because you have the biggest target on your back. What do you know about Lord Uther?"

“Didn’t we first meet after I killed a couple of his men?”

She smirked. “Indeed. Lord Uther has quite the propensity for stirring up trouble. Unofficially, of course. None of his men wear his symbol, and they all swear that they left his service and went rogue whenever we have captured them. But all of the rogue Demons we’re aware of came from his service.”

“But you can’t do anything to stop him?”

“No. We only have circumstantial evidence, and he is the most powerful Demon after the King. Accusing him wouldn’t end well right now.”

“Do you know why he’s after me?”

She shrugged. “Best guess? The King has no heir, so he’s training Lord Uther’s son as a replacement. If you were to claim your place as a Dark Angel, however... Well, the precedent is ancient but it’s there. You could claim the place as heir for yourself.”

Freya snorted. “That’s... Hah! Does he seriously think I would want that? Honestly?”

Lady Caroline smiled. “It’s not about what he thinks you *will* do, the very fact that you *could* do it is enough for him to be pestering you with his men. Trying to get an estimation of your powers, perhaps. Or maybe he’s trying to get you so annoyed with Demons that you turn your back on your Demonic heritage. Whatever his endgame, I’m sure it’s because you’re a threat to his son’s position.”

“Yeah, well, his little posh-boy, boarding school, pig-fucker of a son can keep his precious position. I am not interested.”

“I doubt he would take your assurance on the matter. But I am going to get a counter-charm for myself. Some of his men are being a little too loose with their magic around Humans, and I need to be able to reign them in. I can get you one as well if you’d like.”

Freya narrowed her eyes. “Wouldn’t you have to tell your higher ups who you’re getting it for? I don’t know that I’m comfortable with the Demon King knowing what I’m up to. Or having any ties to me, really. Kind of defeats the whole ‘neither Light nor Dark’ thing I have going on.”

Caroline nodded. “I’ll keep it vague,” she assured. “I’ll say that it’s for one of my other team members. There shouldn’t be any questions beyond that.”

“And if there are?”

Caroline smirked. “Look, the King’s a friend. If I ask him not to ask, he won’t. Happy?”

Freya nodded, though it was a little reluctant. “Why are you helping me?”

“Why wouldn’t I? You’re an Angel and we have a common enemy. In truth, I have begun to suspect that you are only one of the directives Uther has been giving the rogues. After all, the ones in London didn’t seem to know you were there until you stepped in. They seem to be doing their best to reveal magic, without it looking like they were trying to reveal magic. Half of my job is now just cleaning up after them. Having you stop them before they do anything is one of the only reasons they haven’t succeeded yet. Anything that keeps you splitting their attention is good in my book.”

“I don’t want to get dragged into a Demonic conflict.”

“You’re already in it, Freya. And can you honestly tell me that you would stay out of it if the conflict spilt over to the Human world?”

Freya sighed, knowing that she was right.

“Anyway,” Caroline said as she got up, “I had better get going if I want to put in the request for the counter-charms tonight. Write your number down on my notepad and I’ll ring you when I get back.”

With that, she shifted out, leaving Freya alone in her office.

Freya wrote her number on the pad before shifting out herself, going straight home.



AS SOON AS SHE WAS back in her room, Freya collapsed on her bed with a groan. She gave her armour a feeble yank, but it wouldn't budge.

"I take it you had an eventful day," Amber said as she materialised.

Freya nodded. "I am now very tired."

"If you fall asleep in your armour, you'll regret it."

Freya nodded, pulling herself up into a sitting position before starting to unbuckle her armour. "I met Rosaline today."

Freya watched as Amber very clearly froze.

"How?" Amber eventually managed once Freya had gotten her breastplate off.

"She's Mel and Sarah's Coven Head."

"Sarah?"

"The girl who works at the café where I just got a job. She encountered a rogue Demon on her way home from work and I stepped in to help. That was when the Demon cursed me."

"Cursed you?"

"Don't worry, Sarah fixed me up, and I'm in the process of getting a counter-charm so that they can't do it again. But when Sarah was fixing me up, she took me back to her coven. Rosaline then showed up and she was *not* happy. I remembered her from your memories, so I told her who I was, and she got *really* mad before kicking me out."

Amber sighed. "Yeah, that sounds like Rosaline." Her voice was weaker than Freya had ever heard it before. "I'm afraid revealing we were related was probably a bad idea."

“Why? I thought you two were friends.”

Amber shrugged. “We were. Rosaline was assigned to watch over my grandmother when she was first given the last Ancient by Fate. Her job was to tell her about the magical world and help her adjust.

“I knew magic existed when I was growing up, but my grandmother’s power could only be held by one person at a time. My dad never liked the fact that he grew up so steeped in magic when he was Human, and my mother just wanted to live in denial about the whole situation. So, Rosaline befriended me in secret. She was still young for a pure-blooded Witch, so I just assumed we were the same age. At least, I did until my grandmother passed the Ancient onto me to prevent it from being stolen. She died so quickly, and Rosaline scurried me away into hiding...

“I, of course, was a rebellious teenager who thought she knew better. I sneaked out and met my Sebastian. But when the Ancient took over my mind... Rosaline was the one to bring me back. She was my best friend. She stood by my side when I was married, when I had my son...

“But then I fell into a coma. I had pushed myself too far and relied too heavily on the Ancient. We had never meshed well, and so it became a battle in my head. When I woke up, my son was dead, and Rosaline had given up her craft. We didn’t talk much after that.

“The next thing I heard, Rosaline had married and had a child of her own. We talked more after her daughter was born, but we weren’t as close as we had been.

“Her daughter, Viviene, on the other hand, often sought me out for advice. She went into teaching, helping young magic users to embrace their gifts. One day, she came to me with a particularly troubling student. She had set another girl’s hair on fire by accident. No permanent damage had been caused, but this

was during the Seventh Alternate Timeline, when Humans knew about magic. She was expelled from school.

“I told Vivienne that I didn’t take students, but it didn’t take me long to realise that she was talking about my great-granddaughter.”

“My mother.”

“Exactly. Viv brought her to me and I trained her as best I could. Then I passed the Ancient onto your mother, giving up my own life. I thought that the time was right, but we both know how well that turned out.”

Freya nodded. The strain of so much responsibility and power had been too much for her mother. Her soul had split in two under the pressure, and she had been sent to the Shadow Realm until she could recover.

“As you know, just as your mother returned from the Shadow Realm, Enhanced Human soldiers kidnapped her. Viv had stayed with her body through those five years her soul had been away, keeping watch. When the Enhanced took Lily, they killed Viv.”

Freya took a moment before realising what was happening. “Rosaline blames you for the death of her daughter?”

“If I hadn’t passed the Ancient to Lily too early, she wouldn’t have been sent to the Shadow Realm, and Viv wouldn’t have died trying to protect her.”

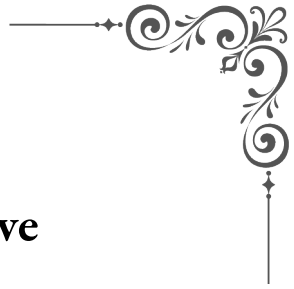
Freya frowned as she finished stripping off her armour. “But that’s not fair. The Humans killed her, not you.”

Amber shook her head. “Rosaline is right. I *am* to blame for that.”

Freya rolled her eyes. “Yeah, but you blame yourself for everything. That doesn’t mean Rosaline should too.”

“I do not blame myself for everything.”

Freya just stayed quiet at that as she pulled on her pyjamas. She had learned when to pick her battles with Amber.



Chapter Five

“What?” Freya asked, her friend giving her an odd look as the two of them sat in Freya’s room, two pints of ale in front of them. There wasn’t much for them to do while they waited for Seph to get back.

“Just... You said that your mission to find Ku and Juni had failed. What happened?”

Freya sighed into her drink before taking a particularly large swig. “It has become impossible for me to bond with Juni.”

“Because of things happening on Earth?”

Freya narrowed her eyes, wondering how her friend knew about that.

“The Prince told me. He couldn’t explain why he was so reluctant to act against Lord Uther otherwise.”

“I didn’t want you to know. It’s bad enough that I burdened Damon with the knowledge, and I don’t think Seph’s Earth counterpart knew the price of syncing her memories with the Seph here.”

“Well, I know now. So what happened with Juni?”

“She... She’s the bridge between nature and humanity. In order to bond with her, I have to have significant Human attachments.”

“And you have none? No Human family?”

“My adoptive parents are Human but... I have been lying to them since day one. It’s difficult to get close to anyone under those circumstances. I... I appreciate them, but I don’t think we have an attachment to them that is significant enough to count for Juni.

They do have a daughter, my little sister. I think my attachment to her would count, but I'm also pretty sure that she's not Human. It wouldn't be unusual for Witch genes to skip her father."

"What about friends?"

Freya snorted. "I'm not exactly a friendly person."

Sarah frowned. "That's not true. You have me and Mel."

"I know but... I have only ever had two Human friends. Well, true friends anyway. I don't even know what country one of them is in, and the other moved away for university. She's so busy with all of her new friends and girlfriend... We don't really talk anymore."

"And I'm assuming you don't have a Human lover..."

Freya snorted once more, even more forcefully than the last.

"No, I definitely do not. I have seen exactly how badly that can go."

"So, what about Ku? If Juni can't bond with you, surely Ku still can?"

"No, Ku definitely won't. She made that clear the first day I met her. She doesn't consider me worthy of her power, and I can't exactly say that she's wrong."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, I'm kind of a screw-up. After my mother screwed up with her powers, it's kind of understandable that Ku would fear me doing the same."

"You're not a screw-up. You've just been given a bad hand."

Freya smiled. She had missed Sarah's endless optimism. "I appreciate your faith in me. I... It's been lonely without you here."

Sarah shrugged with a shy smile. "Of course it has, I'm the best."

"That you most definitely are."

At that, a small black object that Freya initially mistook for a bug flew in through the window, hitting Sarah in the shoulder.

"What?" Sarah asked, looking at her arm to see a dart lodged in there.

Freya turned to the window just in time to see a hooded figure running into the nearby woods. She was about to follow when Sarah grabbed her arm.

Freya spun back around to her friend who had visibly paled.

"I don't feel so good," Sarah managed before slumping forward in her chair.



"I WASN'T SURE YOU WOULD show up," Sarah admitted as Freya entered the cafe the next morning.

"I'm fine," Freya assured her. She definitely wasn't going to tell her that someone had seemingly poisoned her in the Shadow Realm. Everything there was symbolic, but Freya still hadn't figured out how to tell what it meant on Earth.

There was no need to worry Sarah over something that might turn out to be nothing.

"You don't look fine. You look pale," Sarah told her as they moved through to the back room. Freya wasn't sure whether to be offended by that or not, but settled on not. It wasn't as if she was the queen of tact herself.

"I always look pale," Freya retorted before throwing her bag onto the stool next to the coat rack.

"Paler then."

"It's not my fault. Do you know how hard it is to get good foundation when you're this pale?"

"Do you know how hard it is to get good foundation when you're not white?"

"Fair point."

"It's not going to be easy today," Sarah warned. "Saturday never is."

"That is why I came prepared," Freya said before leaning down to reach into her bag, bringing out one of several bottles

of Lucozade. She opened it, but that resulted in the bottle exploding, coating her in sticky orange liquid. The bottle had been shaken in her bag.

Sarah gave her a sympathetic look, moving to help her wipe it off with a napkin, before hesitating a little. She settled for passing the napkin to Freya so that she could deal with it herself.

“What’s up?” Freya asked once she’d wiped herself down. “Scared the scary Demon-blooded Angel will hurt you?”

It had only been a joke, but Sarah looked genuinely shocked and hurt. “No!” she protested. “I just... I know that Autistic people don’t always like being touched, that’s all.”

Freya’s stomach twisted with guilt at that. Sarah had been being considerate, and she had gone and been distrustful of her. “I’m sorry, I just don’t like people knowing that my father was a Demon. My mother’s side of the family was always Neutral, and respected by both sides. I don’t really want to get involved in Light versus Dark politics, which is easier when people only know about her. Once they know I’m half Demon... I’m afraid that everyone will start deciding my side for me.”

“And you don’t want to be too involved with Demons?”

Freya shrugged. “I’m not sure. But I know that doing so will lose me a lot of trust with my Light friends. I mean, you’re a Light Witch. Would you really be okay with hanging around with someone who was heavily involved with Demons?”

Sarah shrugged. “Technically, Witches aren’t really Light or Dark.”

“But you’re part of a Light coven. Isn’t the whole thing of Light covens to be elevated beyond using Dark magic?”

“Well, yeah, but not all Witches subscribe to the Light/Dark thing wholeheartedly.”

“Mel always spoke as if Rosaline was pretty strict about sticking to the whole ‘only using Light magic’ thing.”

Sarah simply shrugged again. "I guess. I've only been here a few months. Anyway, we can't stand here gabbing all day. We've gotta get ready for opening."

Freya nodded, taking the black pinny that Sarah passed her, identical to the Witch's own. She tied it around her waist as she followed Sarah through to the main cafe.

"We've got to refill all of the cake stands, as well as the coffee grinders," Sarah told her. "I'll take the cakes and you take the grinders."

"Just put the beans in the top, right?"

"Yeah. Careful with the one on the left, though. The lid sticks."

Freya nodded before doing as she was told. She spilled more than a few coffee beans thanks to her clumsiness, but Sarah assured her that it was okay.

Sarah finished her work before Freya did, and started hovering. At first, Freya thought that she was keeping an eye on her, to make sure that she didn't mess up, and she couldn't help but feel a little annoyed at that. Surely she had something else to do.

But, once she was done, Sarah asked, "So, how long have you been, you know, doing stuff as the Angel?" and Freya realised that she had been waiting until her hands were free to sign so that they could talk.

Freya shrugged. "I don't really know. People started saying that I was an Angel before I knew that I was. Amber was never exactly forthcoming with information about my heritage. I'd known her for years before I found out that we were related."

"Why didn't she tell you?"

"Because she didn't think I could handle it," Freya replied, a little bitter about that fact still. "She thought that she was protecting me."

"Well... At least you know she cares."

Freya nodded. "I know, it was just hard not to feel untrusted. Anyway, why are you asking?"

Sarah shrugged. "I'm just curious. I've never met an Angel before."

"Few have. And I like to keep to myself."

"So how did you meet Mel?"

"I was a little lost in the market in town. She helped me to get around."

"She doesn't tell anyone that you two hang out. Did you ask her not to?"

"Not outright, but I didn't know I was an Angel when we met. When I found out, I was kind of reluctant for anyone to know. Of course, she worked it out, but I assume she took my reluctance as a sign to keep it to herself."

Sarah nodded. "I suppose that, considering the way Rosaline reacted to finding out who you were, that was a smart move. Do you even know why she kicked you out? I mean, that didn't seem to just be because you were a stranger."

Freya shifted awkwardly at that. "Amber has a bit of a habit of pissing people off," she explained. "It looks like Rosaline was just another in a long list."

Sarah frowned. "It's not fair of Rosaline to blame you for something Amber did. You can't help who you're related to."

"Trust me, I know, but I'm getting used to people's reactions to me being dictated by their relationship to my family, rather than me. Which is one of the reasons why I'm not exactly forthcoming with who or what I am. I'm enough of a freak in the Human world. I don't need it in the magical world too."

Sarah gave a sympathetic nod. "Yeah, the Human world hasn't always been kind to me. Well, the hearing Human world, at least. I've shifted covens a couple of times, but that didn't completely eradicate how important that tight-knit community has

been to me over the years. Like a sanctuary where I don't have to hide."

"Sounds nice."

"It is. I couldn't imagine losing it..."

Luckily, the alarm on Sarah's phone buzzed, signalling eight o'clock and opening time. Freya was sure that Sarah had been starting to pity her, and that was the last thing she wanted.



"AND THIS IS THE TEA cupboard," Sarah said as the work day came to a close, opening a large cabinet above the coffee grinder.

Freya didn't recognise half of the tea that was there. What in the hell was 'Tulsi'? And what made 'spicy chai' different from regular chai?

"That's a lot of tea," Freya signed as Sarah turned back to her.

"I know. Riley has a thing for it. We don't have a proper tea menu, though, and she doesn't advertise as a tea shop. I usually just open the cupboard if a customer asks for tea and show them the labels so that they can decide the blend for themselves."

Freya nodded just as one of the customers came back up to the counter with their tray. Freya frowned a little. Usually they just left the dirty trays on the tables for Freya and Sarah to clear up.

"Hey, don't I recognise you?" the girl asked.

Freya frowned, looking her over. She was a little shorter than Freya, and slimmer too. She was wearing a cute black dress which matched her ink-back hair, the latter of which was shaped into an undercut.

"From Electric," the girl prompted.

Freya felt her face flush at that, remembering the one time she had let Mel talk her into going to a gay bar. She and Ally had

been going through a good patch, and so Mel decided to deal with her boredom by trying to set up Freya. Of course, Freya had quickly tired of using her magic to dampen the constant noise and flashing lights, and Mel had ended up drinking a little more than she could handle.

A drunk Mermaid with siren abilities (that Freya hadn't even been aware of until that point) surrounded by drunk gay girls and a jealous girlfriend was a recipe for disaster. The night had ended with her and Ally screaming at each other in the car park before Freya had taken Mel to McDonald's to sober up.

Suffice it to say, Freya hadn't really gotten around to noticing any of the girls for herself. Though, apparently, someone had noticed her.

"I haven't seen you back there," the girl said with a little pout.

Freya shrugged. "I'm pretty sure we were banned after my friends' performance."

"Shame. I'd dared myself to talk to you if you ever came back."

Freya's stomach flipped at that. To describe the girl in front of her as 'pretty' would be an understatement, and Freya wasn't usually noticed by people. Especially not in a romantic sense.

She quickly glanced around the room to make sure there wasn't a group of other girls huddled, giggling to themselves over how gullible she was.

After seeing no such group and putting her fears down to paranoia, Freya gave the girl in front of her her best smile.

"Well, I'm here now."

The girl blushed before taking a pen from her handbag, quickly scribbling down her number onto a napkin before passing it to Freya.

"Call me sometime," she said with a smile before rushing out.

Aww, she was nervous about giving me her number. Freya's heart flooded with affection for the strange girl as she realised that she didn't even know her name.

Freya turned to see Sarah looking at her with wide eyes, and her stomach immediately dropped.

She was giving her the straight girl stare.

Freya really wasn't *that* open with her sexuality. Her thinking was that it would just cause problems if everyone knew, and she had enough of them between her autism and her magic. Still, she'd quickly become acclimated to the straight girl stare. All straight girls did it. When they realise that you're bi and they're trying to figure out what to say, while simultaneously running through every interaction you've ever had with them and re-contextualising it. Every time you were nice becomes a time you were potentially flirting, which freaks them out all the more.

Freya did have a little sympathy with it. After all, when your only prior experience with people having unreturned feelings for you were men, who came with the chance of turning violent or crying "friendzone!" when you turned them down, it made sense that straight girls would also project that fear onto women who loved women.

It still hurt, though. Freya figured that the only reason she'd never had a prolonged crush on a straight girl was that nothing killed any romantic feelings she might have for someone faster than the straight girl stare.

"I'll go lock the door," Freya signed, once she looked around to see that the girl had been the last customer.

Sarah looked guilty as Freya made her way back, and she realised that she had forgotten to emote in her upset over the stare. She hadn't meant to communicate that she was upset or angry about it. She *was* upset, but she didn't want to make a thing out

of it. If she made a scene every single time, she wouldn't have any friends aside from Mel.

Not that she had any now, but that wasn't the point.

She knew that she had every right to be upset, and she knew that it was unfair that she had to pretend not to be, but sometimes she just had to get on and deal with it. If she cried every time the world was unfair to a bi, Autistic girl, the tears would never stop.

"I'm sorry," Sarah signed. "If I came across like I was judging or something. Because you're gay, I mean. I just... I didn't know and I was caught off-guard."

Freya nodded. "It's alright."

"It's not," Sarah insisted. "I'm a Black, Deaf girl, Freya. I know how much it hurts when people are accidentally shitty to you. I just really want you to know that I'm sorry and I promise to make a conscious effort not to seem weirded out again. I really was just surprised, and I doubt I'll be surprised by it again, but..."

Freya smiled at her friend's rambling, her hands moving so fast with nerves that Freya stopped being able to catch what she was saying. "Thanks," Freya said. "I'm sure I said my own accidentally shitty things to you, I just probably got them out of the way in the Shadow Realm."

Sarah frowned. "Wait, the Shadow Realm? When have you been to the Shadow Realm? Are you a Geni as well?"

Freya shook her head, her stomach turning to ice. The mention of the Shadow Realm had just slipped out. Probably because she had been anxious all day, waiting for something to happen to Sarah here. "That's a long story, which I promise to tell you some other time. Or you can ask Mel when you get back to the coven, I suppose. She knows most of it."

Sarah nodded as they made their way to the back room. Freya grabbed the broom while Sarah grabbed the surface cleaner.

“So,” Sarah signed once they were back through to the main cafe, “are you going to call the girl?”

Freya sighed. “I want to,” she admitted. “But... Well, she’s Human and I’ve had bad experiences with Humans before. It’s too difficult to hide my magic when emotions run high.”

Sarah nodded. “Witches are discouraged from taking Human lovers until we’re at least a hundred. Well, pure-blood Witches at least. Those with shorter lifespans don’t have to worry so much. But the thinking is that we need to understand Human lifespans compared to our own when it’s our friends first in order to make the decision as to whether or not we could go through it if it was a spouse. Otherwise, well, you know what can happen when your emotions get the best of you.”

Before Freya could respond, however, Sarah grabbed the counter, leaning on it as she stumbled a little.

“Are you alright?” Freya asked.

“I, um... I’m just a little...”

Sarah stumbled once more, falling back.

Freya shifted to her side in order to catch her before she hit the ground. At first, she thought that she must have fainted, but a closer examination told Freya that her friend was out cold.

After just a few moments of mulling over her options, Freya shifted them both to the coven.



Chapter Six

Freya had been incredibly thankful that, when she was treated at the coven, they had used Mel's room. It meant that when she shifted back in, it was right in front of her friend.

"She collapsed," Freya explained to a startled Mel. "I didn't know where else to bring her."

"I thought you couldn't shift with other people," was the only thing the shocked half-Mermaid managed to say.

"I- I had to *try*. Also, not relevant right now. I can sense foreign magic on her."

Mel sighed. "Well, she was our main healer."

Freya blinked. "She's only our age."

"Healers are rare. Ally has a little healing magic."

Freya glared at her friend's reluctant tone. "I swear to the Creator, if anything happens to Sarah because you were having a spat with your girlfriend-

"Alright! Alright! I'm going," Mel said before moving herself from her desk to her wheelchair. "You probably want to put her on the bed."

Freya nodded, but Mel was already on her way out of the room.

Mel returned with Ally a few minutes later to find that Freya had moved Sarah to the bed, just as Mel had told her.

Freya moved out of the way to let Ally examine Sarah, going to lean against the wall by the door.

“Someone’s cursed her,” Ally told them. “It’s going to take me a while to find out how.”

“Is she in any immediate danger?” Freya asked.

“I don’t think so.”

Freya let herself breathe a sigh of relief at that, just seconds before Rosaline came into the room. She wasn’t as furious as the last time Freya had seen her, but she looked far from happy.

“You need to leave,” Rosaline said to Freya, barely giving Sarah a glance.

“I’m not leaving my friend,” Freya told her, not moving from her position leaning against the wall. “Not until I know she’s okay.”

Mel wheeled up to them. “If it wasn’t for Freya, who knows when we would have gotten to Sarah. She could have been taken to a Human hospital or anything. She should stay.”

Rosaline frowned at that, her jaw tightening in a way that told Freya that she was clenching her teeth.

“We need to talk,” she eventually said to Freya before storming out of the room.

Freya looked to Mel, not sure if she should follow.

Mel just shrugged.

Freya decided that following was probably exactly what was expected of her, so she hurried after Rosaline.

She hadn’t seen beyond Mel’s room, but once she was in the corridor, it became clear that Mel had been telling the truth when she had said that the coven was situated in a hotel.

Rosaline led her downstairs, before eventually arriving at what had probably been the manager’s office at one point.

Once Freya had entered the room, Rosaline waved at the door, shutting it behind them.

“Do you understand what my job here as Coven Head is?” Rosaline asked her as she folded her arms.

Freya shrugged, wondering if it was a trick question. “To look after your coven?”

“Exactly. My job is to keep every single member of this coven safe and protected. I cannot do that with strangers traipsing in and out every five minutes.”

“Is it because I’m a stranger or because I’m the last of Amber’s line?”

“It is *exactly* because you are related to Amber,” Rosaline told her, surprising Freya with her bluntness. “I cannot allow such a dangerous element close to my girls.”

“Look, just because you have some grudge against Amber doesn’t mean that you get to just kick me out when my friends are in trouble.”

“No, I get to do that because I’m in charge here and I can kick out whoever I want.” She sighed, putting her hands on her hips. “But you want me to take Amber out of the equation? Fine. What about your other great-great-grandmother, Juniper? She subjected the world to a year of unending darkness because she had a spat with a boy. Or what about her and Amber’s children? Sparrow and Angela completely disregarded their respective duties as Angels and brought the Angel Twilight into the world. The same Angel Twilight who was generally regarded as unstable from day one, and who eventually killed her husband before scarring the Earth. And then there’s your mother, who was sentenced to the Shadow Realm after murdering a Human.”

“Amber is far from the only piece of evidence that tells me that *you* are nothing but trouble waiting to happen. As far as I’m concerned, whatever curse Sarah may be under pales in comparison to the danger your mere presence brings to this coven. I lost enough Witches to the War. The lives of my girls trump any consideration I may have for your *feelings*.”

Freya had no answer to that. She wanted to scream that she shouldn't be punished for the actions of her ancestors. But mostly, she just wanted to cry, her eyes stinging with the tears she was doing her best to hold back.

Because she knew that Rosaline was right. In just a few moments she had sliced through to every fear Freya had kept buried deep since she had learnt of her true heritage.

She was dangerous.

She was going to crack.

And those closest to her were going to pay for it.

In the end, she couldn't blame Rosaline for not wanting her around. She wouldn't want her around either in her position.

It still hurt, though.

Freya made a quick move to wipe her eyes before any tears could dare to fall. She had hoped that it would be inconspicuous, and that Rosaline wouldn't notice, but the way her eyes flickered over her as she did so told her that she had very much noticed.

Rosaline sighed, folding her arms once more. "Look... Whatever has happened to Sarah, it's obvious that someone has it out for her. A curse like this... We have absolutely no way to narrow down what kind of magic it is. We don't even know the species of the person who cast it. Ally and Mel aren't going to solve this here. Someone needs to find out if anyone had a reason to want to hurt Sarah, and no one in this coven has any kind of experience with that kind of thing.

"If you can find the person who did this, I will... *consider* allowing you to remain in contact with members of this coven."



WHEN FREYA LEFT ROSALINE'S office, she found Mel waiting for her outside.

“Here,” Mel said, throwing a piece of black fabric at her. “That should be your size.”

Freya frowned as it unrolled in her hands to reveal a bathing suit. “Why are you giving me this?”

“Because I need a swim.”

Freya was too tired after her emotionally draining conversation with Rosaline to ask any questions, so she simply followed Mel through the lobby. They quickly arrived at the entrance to a gym and pool.

“How did you guys get such a fancy place?” Freya asked.

Mel shrugged. “Rosaline bought it. It’s not unusual for Witches with a couple of centuries behind them to just have money. The prevailing theory is that she was sick of living in shit-holes during the War, but she’s not exactly buddy-buddy with the rest of us, so who knows.”

They entered the changing rooms for the pool and Freya quickly pulled off her clothes before putting the bathing suit on. Mel just stripped down entirely. There wasn’t exactly much to look at with Mel when she wasn’t glamoured. While her chest was shaped into breasts, her scales were entirely smooth over them, with no nipples to be seen. Her scales also did an effective job of hiding anything between her legs as long as she wasn’t doing the splits or anything. And, as soon as she hit the water, it would all be replaced by a tail anyway.

Once Freya had finished changing, she offered her arm out to Mel to help her stay steady on her feet until she reached the water.

Mel took her friend’s offered arm, limping alongside her to the edge of the pool. Once they reached it, she quickly jumped in, swiftly swimming back to the surface.

Freya lowered herself into the water gently. Even with Mel’s lessons, she was still a nervous swimmer.

“So, how did it go with Rosaline?” Mel asked her.

Freya sighed, leaning back to float on top of the water. “Terribly. Apparently I’m apocalypse incarnate as far as Rosaline is concerned. She thinks I bring death with me wherever I go.”

“Nah, Death has better things to do than follow you around,” Mel joked, though Freya didn’t laugh. “Seriously, though, Freya, that was awful of her. You don’t deserve that kind of treatment. Not after all of the things you’ve done.”

“I’ve helped a couple of Humans,” Freya said. “If that mattered to the higher-ups in the magical community, someone else would be doing it. It would be an actual job with a salary and risk assessments and stuff. Instead, I clean up on my own time, hope that the rogue Demons I deal with pissed off someone enough for there to be a bounty on their head, and everybody pats me on the back because it makes them feel better to think that they don’t have to deal with it.”

“Yeah, okay, fair point. But you still didn’t deserve that.”

Freya shrugged. “It doesn’t matter if I deserve it, it’s what I got. But she said that, if I help Sarah, she might not cut me off from you guys forever.”

“Okay. So, let’s help Sarah.”

“Well... First we have to figure out who would want to hurt her, which will be difficult. I mean, Sarah is just about the sweetest person I’ve ever met.”

“And you’re definitely not saying that because you have a crush on her or anything.”

Freya splashed her friend at that. Mel just headed underwater, resurfacing on the other side of her.

“I don’t have a crush on her,” Freya said. “She’s straight.”

“Oh right, your ‘straight girl stare’ thing. I swear, I *wish* I knew what you were talking about with that. Crushes on straight girls straight up *suck*.”

“*Anyway*, do you know anyone who might want to hurt her?”

Mel shook her head. “I mean, I don’t know her super well. She only arrived a few months ago. Rosaline was super happy about it, since healers are difficult to get a hold of, but that was about the only significant part of her arrival. She’s been so busy with starting uni, her healing duties, her job, and doesn’t she do theatre or something?”

“Ballet.”

“Right, well, quite frankly, I’m not even sure how she has time to sleep. She definitely hasn’t made any friends here. No one hates her or anything, everyone thinks she’s great, but no one knows her all that well.”

“So it’s not likely to be anyone from this coven.”

“I would be surprised.”

“So, what about her coven before this one?”

“That’s the weird thing. When she first came here, she wouldn’t say what her previous coven had been. Ally asked Rosaline out of curiosity and she told her it was a coven just like ours south of the river. I doubt it would have been anyone from there. But I heard that she had moved covens more than a few times before that. But no one here knows about her earlier covens.”

Freya sighed. “Is there any way to find out about those covens?”

Mel shrugged. “You could possibly trace it back by going to each in turn, but I don’t know how long any coven keeps records of such things. I can’t think of anyone who keeps track of which Witches are in which covens.”

“Well... Fate probably does.”

“Probably.”

“Well, I guess that’s as good a place to start as any.”



Chapter Seven

Once Freya had left the coven, she headed home. She wasn't sure where else to go, and she was both physically tired thanks to her busy day at work, and emotionally tired thanks to everything that had happened with Sarah and Rosaline.

As soon as she was back in her room, she brought out her phone and called Fate.

"We don't have the information you're looking for," Alice said as she answered the phone.

Freya sighed. "Hello to you too."

"I thought you would want to get straight to the point."

Freya nodded, despite the fact that her sister couldn't see her. "I do, I just... What do you mean you don't have the information?"

"Exactly what I said. We can't help you here."

Freya's fist tightened around her phone at that, turning her knuckles white. Or, well, whiter...

"You know, I'm kind of getting tired of all of these arbitrary rules you Oracles have."

"Join the club. But the reason I can't help you is that you have more than enough to get started on your own."

"What do you mean? I have nothing. If I can't figure out what covens Sarah previously belonged to, then my only lead was a dead end."

"I told you, Freya. You already have the resources you need."

With that, she hung up, leaving Freya to resist the urge to throw her phone across the room in frustration.

She sighed, collapsing onto her bed.

You already have the resources you need.

“Urgh, what does that *mean?!?*” Freya demanded of the air.

She took a deep breath, forcing herself to think through her exhaustion.

Her first thought was Amber, but she didn’t know how she would be any help. She had died before Sarah had even been born and almost all of her knowledge of the world from that point had come from Freya. She couldn’t see how Amber would know anything about Sarah’s former covens.

She turned her thoughts to the Witches she knew. Mel was the first to come to mind, and she had already told her that she didn’t know anything. After that, the Witch she knew the best was probably Evelyn, the Dark Witch who had run the bounty office, but she had left for the Underworld about a year ago, so she had no way to contact her. The only other Witch she knew was Ryan’s sister, Jessica, but she lived out of town, so Freya didn’t see how she could possibly know anything about Sarah’s previous covens.

Freya gave a groan, flipping herself over to bury her face in her sheets. She couldn’t believe that she was messing everything up so badly already.

Her phone buzzed, drawing her attention from her predicament.

Meet me at my office. I have your counter-charm. C.

It took Freya a moment to realise that the message must have come from Lady Caroline. She hauled herself back to her feet with a groan before shifting to her office to meet her.



FREYA ARRIVED OUTSIDE Caroline's office to find that she was, once again, the only one there.

"Do you just work here alone?" Freya asked her as she entered.

Caroline snorted at that as she finished sorting a stack of papers on one of the desks. "No, I'm just so understaffed that no one's ever in the office. I'm only here now to meet you. Speaking of." She reached into the backpack on the desk, bringing out a smooth black stone with a red rune on it. It was tied to a thick piece of black string. "I got you the counter-charm." She passed it over to Freya, who brought the string over her head so that the counter-charm sat right next to her mother's focusing charm beneath her shirt.

"Thank you," Freya said. "Did you tell anyone why you needed it?"

Caroline shook her head. "No, no. As I predicted, no one asked which team-member I needed it for. I also asked for it to be kept quiet, so that I didn't lose the element of surprise when dealing with the rogue Demons. So there's no record that we have these. The head of the Kingsguard knows, because I had to ask him for them, but he won't tell anyone."

Freya nodded. "Thank you."

"You know that my superiors aren't bad people, right? Well, I mean, I would be much happier if Lady Persephone had a personality transplant to make her slightly less of a bitch, but even she's not a bad person. We're all on the same side here."

Freya sighed. "I'm sorry, I just... I can't. My policy is to steer as far away from magical politics as possible, be it the Demon Crown or the Council of Light. I'm an Angel. That makes me nothing but a tool to most. A way to gain more power. I'd rather stay away from that if I can."

"It wouldn't be like that. You have my word."

“That’s just not a chance I’m willing to take,” Freya said with a shrug. “Why do you care, anyway?”

“Because I have more than enough hybrids in my line of work who tried to reject their Demonic nature and live among creatures of Light. It *always* takes its toll and, well, I would rather not see you go through that.”

“Because of how much of a mess I’ll make if I snap?”

“Frankly? Yes. But... You also seem like a good kid. I don’t want to see you hurt.”

“Well then I guess it’s a good thing that I’m an Angel, not a hybrid.”

Caroline rolled her eyes. “Do you *really* want to test if the principle still applies?”

“The thing is, though, that if I get heavily involved with one side or the other, I’d be picking that side for good. Tensions are still too high for me to just flit between the two. If I get involved with Demons, that would cut me off from Light creatures, and wouldn’t that take just as much of a toll?”

Freya realised, as the words came out of her mouth that, technically, she didn’t have a drop of Light blood in her. Her mother’s family may have aligned themselves with the Council of Light, but they were all Neutral beings. Whether they drew on Light or Dark Energy was always a choice for them.

Technically, it was a choice for Freya as well, but she couldn’t deny how much easier it was for her to draw on Dark Energy.

“In the end, Lady Caroline, it all comes down to the fact that, rogue or not, Light creatures haven’t tried to kill me.”

Caroline nodded. “Well, I suppose I can’t exactly argue with you there. But my point still stands. Regardless of politics, vehemently denying your Demon blood will only hurt you in the long-run.”

Freya sighed, folding her arms. "Alright, I'll think about it. But I still don't exactly trust Demons on the whole. So let's maybe start at co-operation?"

Lady Caroline smiled. "I think that's the most sensible approach to take."

"A friend of mine, a Witch, was cursed. I need to figure out who might have done it. The problem is that she moved covens a lot growing up and I have no way of tracking down the ones she had previously been a part of. Do you happen to keep any records regarding Witches?"

"That we do," Caroline said, moving to a filing cabinet. "Dark Witches fall under my jurisdiction when it comes to making sure they don't reveal anything to Humans. Of course, covens usually police their own on this matter, but I still keep an eye on things. That includes keeping a list of covens and their members, regardless of affiliation. Witches can switch between Light and Dark so quickly... And then there are Neutral covens, which house both, confusing everything even further."

"So you'll have a record of the covens she used to belong to?"

Caroline nodded, though her face fell a little when she opened one of the drawers only to see a mess of paper. "One of the biggest problems of being so understaffed is that no one has the time to digitise our data. If you give me your friend's name, I'll go through the records and I'll text you if I find anything."

"Are you sure you don't want me to stay and help?"

"No, it's fine. I've been dealing with Human cops all day, so I could use the alone time."

"Alright. Thank you for this."

"No problem."



Chapter Eight

I recognise the poison,” Seph said as she finished inspecting Sarah. “It’s from a vale snake. The only antidote comes from the snake itself, and it has to be the exact same one.”

“The person who poisoned her must have the antidote,” Freya figured. “There’s no way they would risk not.”

“Perhaps, but there is another way. I know that you decided to forgo the ritual when you chose your Queensguard-”

“No!” Freya cut across her so that she couldn’t finish the thought. “I can’t. I won’t. I can track down the poisoner.”

“But can you do so before Sarah dies?”

Sarah sat up at that. “You know, my lip reading may not be perfect, but I think I get the gist. The Heart Fountain would save me, wouldn’t it?”

Seph nodded.

“Sarah, please,” Freya signed at her friend. “You don’t have to do this. There has to be another way.”

Sarah smiled, though it was weak. “Freya, I was ready to drink from the fountain with you the moment I became part of your Queensguard. Every member was, though none of us were ever sure who you would choose... Is that your objection? That I’m not your choice?”

Freya shook her head. “Of course not. It would have always been you, Sarah. But I have no intention of anyone binding themselves to me for the rest of their life. It’s too much.”

“While I appreciated the sentiment, worrying about it now seems pointless. I will die otherwise. Being tied to you seems like a much better option to me.”

Freya shook her head once more. “I’m so sorry that you have to do this.”

“Freya, just shut up and take me to the damn fountain.”



FREYA SPENT ALL OF the next morning compulsively checking her phone every five minutes, waiting for news from either Mel or Caroline. Mel had texted that morning to tell her that Sarah’s condition was stable, though not improving, and promising to tell her if that changed. She had heard nothing from Lady Caroline since the night before.

By the time the clock ticked over to noon, Freya’s arms were crackling with Energy that she was just barely keeping from sparking as her frustration and helplessness overflowed into her magic.

She had hoped that she would have heard from someone by now. The sitting and waiting was killing her. Part of her wondered if there wasn’t something else she could be doing, some other lead she could be chasing, but the alarm on her phone sounded as she made her way into town, reminding her that she had just enough time to get to work before her shift started.

Freya sighed, figuring that helping to make sure that the cafe she worked at didn’t close down due to both of the employees leaving with no notice would be about as helpful for Sarah as anything.

Freya arrived at the cafe to see Riley looking thoroughly exhausted, and just about ready to murder the next customer who dared to approach her.

“How long is Sarah going to be gone?” Riley asked as way of greeting as she tore off her pinny.

“She’ll be back soon, I’m sure,” Freya said. “Her doctors say that she’s not getting worse, at least.”

Riley didn’t seem all that assured by that, but she also seemed to not care about that as much as she cared about the fact that she could leave now that Freya arrived.

“You know, I can pick up more shifts if you need me to in the meantime,” Freya said as Riley headed into the back room.

“No,” Riley called back with a sigh. “The last thing I need is you burning out and quitting. No, my niece is going to pick up some more hours until Sarah is better. I’ll email you if there’s an emergency and you need to pick up more hours, but it should be fine for now.” She left the back room with her coat and bag on before tossing a set of keys to Freya. “The one with the flower cover is for the front door. Make sure to lock up when you go.”

And, with that, Freya was left alone.

Or, at least, as alone as she could be in the cafe. It was quieter than most cafes, even when it was full. Apparently, Riley had learnt sign language at university because she was terrible with spoken language, but everyone insisted that being multi-lingual was important for getting a job. By the time she’d realised that the importance had been greatly overstated, she was already fluent. Then, not long after she had opened the cafe in the summer, she had served a Deaf customer, and he had then posted to a local Deaf Facebook group about the cafe where you could order in BSL. After that, most of the regulars had been d/Deaf.

So, as Freya replaced the soy milk with a new carton, a quick glance around the room told her that at least two thirds of the customers were communicating in BSL. She was thankful for the lack of chatter, but nothing could distract from the clink of plates and cups.

Well, nothing could distract without Sarah there. Without Sarah, Freya was bored out of her mind. There was only so much tidying up she could do. With the boredom, came the want to tear her hair out as her frustration continued to grow over the stalling in her trying to find out who had cursed Sarah.

It was going to be a long shift, she eventually decided as she was about ready to scream, only to turn around and realise that she was just forty-five minutes in.



BY THE TIME SHE CLOSED up, Freya had lost the ability to stop herself from sparking with excess Energy. She was already emotionally wrung-out and she knew that, if she didn't hear anything, she would end up hunting rogues in order to deal with her overflowing magic. Hell, even if she did hear something, she would probably still have to. It was fast approaching nine at night, and Freya doubted she could call on a coven so late and get anywhere. Even if Sarah's life was in danger, she had no idea how much this other coven would care about that over any perceived rudeness from Freya.

Before Freya could give it much thought, however, she turned from the door only to see Lady Caroline standing, waiting for her.

"I thought you said you were going to text," Freya said.

Lady Caroline shrugged. "I was near-by."

"Did you find one of Sarah's old covens?"

"I did. There's a Neutral coven down by the coast. She used to be a member. Here." She passed Freya a piece of paper with an address on it.

"Thanks," Freya said. "I really do appreciate your help with this."

Caroline shrugged. “Those files needed sorting anyway. I wrote my number on the back of there as well, so you can call me if you ever need anything else.”

Freya frowned a little. “Couldn’t I have just saved your number from the text you sent me before?”

“No, my number’s charmed to keep it secure. There are a bunch of people I would just rather not be able to contact me.”

“You’re not a people person, huh?”

“Creator, no.”

“Doesn’t your job require a lot of dealing with people?”

Lady Caroline shrugged. “I owed the King. Taking this job seemed like the best way to make it up to him.”

“Really? What happened for you to owe him that much?”

“You know, the thing is no one can remember. It happened during the whole magic imbalance a couple of years ago. All anyone can remember is that it was treason, but somehow not so severe that execution was ever brought up. I decided a nice holiday to the Shadow Realm was in order until things died down, so I joined the Geni. That then made me uniquely qualified for this job.”

“Huh,” Freya said. She wondered if she had ever met Caroline in the Shadow Realm. She didn’t really meet much of anyone there since she had gone into hiding, and her memories were hazy from before then. “Well, I suppose I’d better follow up on this lead then.”

Caroline nodded. “And don’t forget to call if you need anything. I can’t promise that I’ll be able to go much out of my way without my superiors catching on, but if you’re hunting rogues, our aims should coincide more than often enough for me to be of help. And it seems like you could probably use all of the friends you can get what with the responsibility of being an Angel and everything.”

“Do you want to be my friend, or do you just not want an Angel working exclusively with the other side?”

“Little of column A, little of column B, I guess. But I really did mean what I said yesterday about you seeming like a good kid. And if the rogues are being sent after you, you’re involved in Demon politics already. You can either keep going completely oblivious, or I can lend you a hand. I would rather not have something bad happen to you because I couldn’t be bothered to help.”

“Thanks, I guess.”

“Just don’t forget you’ve got my number. You never know when you might need it.”

Lady Caroline shifted away at that, leaving Freya alone once more.

She sighed, checking her phone again. Ten to nine.

Screw it, she thought, deciding that she wasn’t going to risk Sarah’s life for the sake of being polite. She was stable for now, but who knew how long it would last.



Chapter Nine

Freya arrived at the address Caroline had given her and was greeted by a refreshing rush of salt air. She wrapped her coat more tightly around herself as she stood on top of the hill and looked down to see the sea stretching out to the horizon. The coast was cold enough in the winter, bringing in an icy chill from the North Sea, but on such a pitch black, cloudless night, Freya was left feeling as if her bones were going to freeze and shatter beneath her skin, her teeth starting to chatter.

The address Caroline had given her turned out to be a small block of flats. She approached, not really sure where she should go or what she should do. At least, she wasn't until she looked around, spotting some graffiti on the wall. Most of it was the usual mix of poorly drawn tags, but one was in a series of symbols that looked almost familiar to her. After a few moments, she recognised it as Daemonium.

She groaned, squinting at the symbols. Some of Mel's text books had been in the old Demon language, and Freya had to translate the symbols in order to read them. She hoped that some of it had sunk in as she stared at the symbols, wishing them to make sense.

After several moments, she was fairly sure that it said something about a cat and "inner light".

She sighed, wondering just how she was going to translate it. She brought out her phone, about to take a photo to send to ei-

ther Mel or Caroline, when she heard a small meow coming from the low wall next to her.

She turned to see a black cat approaching her, giving her a curious look.

“I’m guessing you’re the cat,” Freya said, pointing back at the graffiti.

The cat meowed in response.

“Great. So now I just have to figure out the inner light bit.”

The cat responded by nudging its head against her hand. Freya went to pet it, but it moved away before nudging her other hand.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

The cat just sat back down, giving her a pointed look.

“What? Was that supposed to be a hint?” Freya looked down at her hands, wondering just what the cat was trying to say.

After a few moments, she smacked her forehead. “Of course! It means my Energy. You need to see my Energy to get a sense of who I am.”

Freya raised her hands out, producing an orb of Light and Dark magic, though it was mostly Dark.

The cat meowed.

“Does that mean I did the right thing?”

The cat just meowed again.

“I don’t speak cat, but I’ll take that as a yes.”

Another meow.

“What?”

The cat gave an unhappy noise.

“Oh, right, you don’t know why I’m here. I’m looking for someone who used to know Sarah Hale? Apparently she used to be a part of this coven. She’s... had an accident. We need to get some background information. She’s not in trouble or anything, we just need to know some basics.”

The cat leapt off the wall at that, climbing up to a windowsill before heading inside the building.

“I really hope that worked,” Freya muttered to herself, wondering if she had just spent several minutes talking to a random stray.

After a few minutes, however, someone came outside. She was about Freya’s age, with pale pink skin that was only given colour in comparison to her bright white dress and platinum blonde ponytail.

“Hey,” the girl greeted, shivering a little in the cold air. “I’m Hilda. Spot said you were looking for someone who knew Sarah Hale?”

“Spot?”

“The cat.”

“Your cat’s named for Data’s cat?”

“Data?”

“You know, from Star Trek.”

Hilda shrugged. “I don’t know, he’s the Coven Head’s familiar. Anyway, Sarah?”

“Yeah, do you know her?”

“I used to. We were friends when she was part of this coven.”

“Well, someone has cursed her. With her moving around so much, it’s kind of difficult to pin down anyone who might want to do her harm, so I was hoping you could help.”

Hilda folded her arms, her hands attempting to rub warmth back into her biceps. She looked away. “I was always afraid something like this would happen.”

“Something like what?”

“I... Sarah’s new coven is a Light coven, isn’t it?”

Freya nodded.

“I don’t want to get her in trouble.”

“You won’t,” Freya assured. “I promise, anything you tell me will stay between us. I just want to help.”

Hilda seemed to evaluate her for a moment before nodding. “It... You have to understand, Sarah was... Her father died before she could remember, and then she lost her mum as well. Her step-dad was great, but he was Human. She came into her powers early and her cousin had to rip her away from the only close family she had left. She came here when she was just ten. I tried to help her as much as I could but... She just had so much anger...”

“That doesn’t sound like Sarah.”

Hilda smiled. “Then I’m glad. I had hoped that time would heal her hurt, but she wasn’t given that time here. Tensions between the Light and Dark Witches here reached an all-time peak not long after she arrived. Sarah got caught in the middle.”

“Caught in the middle? How?”

Hilda sighed, looking away once more. “I... You have to understand that time for Witches works differently, especially for the older ones. For many, the War feels like it happened just yesterday. The Dark Witches were still enraged over their losses. They... They crossed a line.”

Freya frowned. “What line did they cross?”

“I... I’m sorry, we’re not supposed to talk about it. But things got *bad*. The Head of this coven is a Light Witch. She and the leader of the Dark Witches duelled and... Well, the current Coven Head won, obviously. She kicked out the remaining Dark Witches, including Sarah. But that wasn’t fair. Not to Sarah.”

“Because she was just a child?”

“Because she turned her back on the Dark Witches. The Light Witches were able to stop them from... to stop them from making a huge mistake because Sarah told them what was going on. But she got blamed for her involvement just the same and was cast out with the rest of the Dark Witches. I think she stayed

with them for a while out of necessity, but I remember hearing that she had left as soon as she could. I suppose it would be understandable. They probably blamed her for getting caught and kicked out.”

“So where did they go? Did they join another coven?”

Hilda shook her head. “They actually formed their own splinter coven and went south. I’m sorry, I don’t have an address.”

“That’s alright,” Freya assured her. “If it’s a Dark coven, I know how to get it.”

“I hope you find out how to heal Sarah. She really doesn’t deserve this.”

“Don’t worry, I will. Thank you for your help.”

“It was no problem. If you need anything else, I’ll be here.”

“Thanks,” Freya said as Hilda walked back inside the coven. At that, Freya brought out her phone, searching for the last contact added.



Chapter Ten

“Just keep going,” Freya said to Sarah, cursing once she remembered that her friend couldn’t hear her. Freya’s hands were currently too occupied keeping her friend up to sign anything.

“Can I assume that those vibrations in your chest are you saying something reassuring?” Sarah asked, turning to look at her friend.

Freya nodded.

“Thanks.”

Freya gave a reassuring squeeze of her friend’s arm as they finally reached the clearing in the trees where the small, marble gazebo sat.

In the middle was a small fountain, but not a single drop of water was present.

Freya helped Sarah up the stairs before sitting her next to the fountain.

“Sarah, we can find another way,” Freya signed once she had moved so that her friend could see her.

“Okay, seriously, Freya, why are you so opposed to this? Every Queen in history has had a Heart sworn to them like this. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say that you weren’t all that serious about the crown.”

Freya shook her head. “It’s not that. It’s like I said when I first chose my Queensguard members, no one should tie their lives to any one cause or person. Certainly not me. Because there will come a day when you will want to leave. When this will no longer be so

appealing to you. Everyone always leaves, Sarah. If you're tied to me when that time comes for you, you'll grow bitter and resentful. I don't want to cause you that pain."

"Freya, I'm not going to leave."

"What if I ask you to do something that you don't agree with?"

"Then don't ask me."

"How can you trust me not to?"

"Because you're my friend and I trust you. You know, you're going to be as tied to this as me. What if you decide you no longer trust me at your side?"

Freya rolled her eyes. "I would never do that."

"Then why don't you believe the same as me?"

"I..." Freya sighed, knowing that her friend was right. "How do you have so much faith in people?"

Sarah gave a wry smile. "I figure somebody has to."

Freya had to laugh at that. "Yeah, I am kind of a cynic who likes to surround herself with other cynics."

"And yet you genuinely care about your people, even if you pretend not to. If I was gonna trust anyone, it would always be you."

"And if I was to pick just one person to be by my side throughout all of this, it would always be you."

At that, the fountain sprang to life.

Freya took a small cup from her bag, dipping it into the fountain before passing the full cup to Sarah.

"I swear to protect you and your kin, fight for your causes, and provide sound counsel for you as your sister until the day I die."

Sarah drank from the cup before passing it back to Freya.

"I swear to protect you and your kin, only ask you to fight for just causes, and give you honour as befitting my sister until the day I die."

Freya drank from the cup, bright white light engulfing them for just a moment before fading.

“Well, I would say that worked,” Sarah said as she sat upright, looking a lot perkier.

Freya smiled, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Sarah... I also swear that you can leave whenever you want. I know that you don’t think you will, but you truly can leave if you want.”

“And leave you with one less sworn Queensguard? Without your Heart?”

“I’m serious.”

“As am I. You can only have one Heart.”

“I would be able to manage on my own. I always have.”

“I know. But you don’t have to anymore.”

Freya smiled as she stood up, offering her hand to her friend.

“So, are you going to be like this when you and the Prince finally get married?” Sarah asked once she was on her feet. “Will your vows just be you constantly reminding him that he can leave whenever he wants?”

Freya just rolled her eyes.



CAROLINE WAS MUCH FASTER finding the information on the next coven, which Freya assumed was down to her having organised the files the first time around, texting Freya reasonably early in the morning with the address.

Be careful, a follow-up text warned. *We have reason to suspect that the rogue Demons have been seeking help from local Dark Witches, and this coven is one of the prime suspects.*

Why? Freya texted back.

Honestly? Because we haven’t had the chance to schedule a routine check-up for a couple of years. It’s as much our fault as theirs, but we can’t eliminate them as suspects until we manage that check-up. They have also worked for Lord Uther in the past, and they’re

not currently working for the Crown, which puts them higher up the suspect list than the other covens we have yet to check up on.

Freya took a moment to mull over the information, deciding if she should alter her plan. There was a good chance that at least one of the Witches in this coven were responsible for the curse on Sarah. Maybe waltzing up and asking questions wouldn't be the best approach.

But Freya was out of other ideas, and it wasn't as if Caroline had any proof that the coven was involved with the rogues. She hoped that, even if someone at the coven was involved with the curse on Sarah, not everyone there would be involved. Even if no one there would help her, if she could just figure out which Witch was responsible, she would be much closer to helping her friend.

Freya made her way to her box of magical items, sorting through her armour. She eventually looked to the Demon armour Fate had given her. As much as she didn't often wear anything else, she wasn't sure about wearing it when she was approaching with the intention of just talking. As aware as she was of just how quickly things could go south, she didn't want to look like she was trying to start a fight.

At that, Amber appeared, having probably sensed that she was struggling over something.

"Have you gotten any closer to saving Sarah?" the ghost asked.

Freya sighed as she pulled out her armour. "She was involved in an old Dark coven. There was some kind of incident and she might have made a few enemies. I'm going to go and ask them about it." She held up the armour. "What do you think? Does it scream 'looking for a fight'?"

Amber hummed in thought. "Not as much as it could. It's very similar to the styles worn by the Demon nobility, rather

than common soldiers, so it wouldn't be unusual to wear to talks with another party. And I definitely wouldn't go any more heavily armoured than that. Even if some of the Witches are involved, I doubt a whole coven would advocate the cursing of a Witch as young as Sarah, even if it is a Dark coven. The biggest problem you'll have is the message it sends. I mean, I said this when Fate first gave you the armour, wearing it suggests an allegiance with the Demons that you don't have."

Freya nodded. "I know, but if I'm dealing with a Dark coven, pretending such an allegiance exists may not be the worst thing."

"You have a point, I suppose."

"And it's not as if I'm *completely* unaffiliated. After all, Lady Caroline was the one who gave me the address."

Amber didn't respond to that, so Freya assumed that she agreed with her approach, and pulled the armour on.

"So," Freya said once the leather tunic was over her head, "do you think the coven will help me find whoever cursed Sarah, or do you think they'll protect their own?"

"Given the losses during the War, young Witches are coveted. Especially pure-blooded Witches. I imagine they will see the attack as a risk to their reputation that they would rather not tolerate. Especially if some of them knew Sarah when she was younger."

"Good to know."

"I would also leave the hammer at home," Amber said, just as Freya reached for it. "A small blade should be sufficient to protect yourself without causing alarm."

Freya reluctantly turned away from her favourite weapon, finding an old short sword that she hadn't used in a while. She'd mostly bought it for the sake of having one, and to improve her versatility, but she rarely used it.

"How do I look?" Freya asked.

“Like a Demonic Crown official.”

Freya sighed, figuring that wasn't the worst look in the world for talking to Dark Witches. “And I suppose the blade will have to do, even with the risk that they're working with the rogues.”

“Wait, this coven is working with the people who have been trying to kill you?”

“Well, maybe. Lady Caroline isn't exactly sure on that point. Apparently, they've worked for Lord Uther before and they're not currently working for the Crown. And Lady Caroline hasn't been able to send anyone to check in on them recently, so they could be up to anything.”

“Well, that could just mean that they like their privacy, which wouldn't be uncommon for Witches. And it's not as if most people know that Uther is funding the rogues. They may very well be unaware of that fact.”

Freya nodded. “You're right. I guess I'd just better hope that they don't try to kill me or anything.”

Amber folded her arms, giving Freya a look that told her she very much didn't find that funny.



WHEN FREYA SHIFTED to the address she had been given, she found that it was an extremely large country house. She had shifted to a driveway that could fit four of Margaret and Ryan's house atop it. It reminded her of the X-Mansion.

She ran up to the doorway, knocking as loud as she could.

No one answered.

She looked around for a doorbell or buzzer, assuming that there had to be something for a house so large. They had to have some way to receive visitors, even if that visitor was just the postman with a parcel too big to fit through the door.

After a few minutes of searching, she gave up, thumping on the door once more. She wondered if everyone was out for the day.

She barely had time to register the familiar feel of demonic Energy behind her before a blade came slashing down. She threw herself out of the way, shifting to the other end of the drive just in time to miss the blade.

She turned to her assailant, seeing a Demon without a pin, telling her that he was a rogue.

“Great, just what I needed,” she muttered to herself as she drew her sword.

The Demon ran straight at her, and she couldn’t help but roll her eyes as she shifted behind him at the last moment, bringing her blade down on him.

He rolled out of the way, but she still managed to nick his shoulder.

“Bitch!” he yelled.

“Hey, gendered slurs are uncalled for,” she yelled back, drawing water from the gravel where the rain from the night before had settled into ice. She brought it up into make-shift shackles that held the Demon in place.

He shifted out of her restraints, but she sent them right back to him, slowing him down enough for her to get another good blow to his side.

“Are we done yet?” she asked him. “I really hate it when I get left no choice but to kill someone.”

The Demon shifted away, seemingly for good, and Freya breathed a sigh of relief. It wasn’t often that that worked, and she hadn’t been lying about hating killing. She wondered if now that she was talking to Lady Caroline, there was some way she could turn the rogues over to the Demons to be dealt with.

For the moment, however, she had more important issues to worry about. Namely, the fact that she had been attacked by a rogue Demon on the doorstep of the coven that Lady Caroline had suspected of working with them.

“That was impressive,” a voice said from the doorway.

Freya turned to see a dark-skinned woman, who looked to be in her early thirties, standing with folded arms. She looked completely non-threatening in a pair of blue jeans and a plain white t-shirt that was covered in paint stains, her hair tied back to form a cloud of dark curls behind her head.

Despite her appearance, however, Freya did her best to remember that she had been attacked by a rogue Demon on her doorstep.

“I wouldn’t have needed to be impressive if I hadn’t been attacked.”

The woman nodded. “Ren is half-Vampyre. He comes to us for sun-blocking creams. I have no idea why he attacked you.”

Freya narrowed her eyes. “So you really had nothing to do with it?”

The woman sighed, stepping back, indicating that Freya should follow her into the house.

Freya just gave her a wary look.

The woman stepped forward, offering out her hand. “I shall make a promise of protection while you are under my roof. I will be unable to break it.”

Freya hesitated for just a moment before reaching out her hand.

The woman took it, bringing her wand out to draw a sigil over it.

“I, Lois Frank, pledge to protect-”

After a moment, Freya realised that Lois was looking for her name. “Freya Snow.”

"-Freya Snow while she is under my roof. No harm shall come to her, or my life is forfeit."

The glowing lilac sigil burst into sparks at that, and Lois released her hand.

"So, Freya, would you accompany me inside?"

Freya nodded, following Lois into the house. She led her through to what seemed to be the living room, where the Demon Freya had been fighting was caught in a cage of lightning.

"He tried to shift inside for safety," Lois explained. "I had not granted him the right, however, so the protections on the house trapped him."

Ren spun around to face Freya, snarling at her a little. "Bitch," he spat.

She rolled her eyes. "You know, you really should work on removing that word from your vocabulary."

Lois smirked at that. "Alright, Ren, why did you attack the girl? I thought you were trying to apply for full Underworld citizenship. She looks official enough to not be messed with to me."

Freya decided not to correct that point.

"She's the Angel of the North," Ren told her.

Lois seemed a little surprised by that, before frowning. "Surely that's even more reason for you to keep your distance. The Crown has no quarrel with her."

"No, but Lord Uther does. He's put a price on her head and has said that he'll accept anyone who kills her into his service. Even hybrids."

Freya sighed a little. She knew that Lord Uther must have been offering something like that, given how many hybrids came after her, but hearing it made her heart grow heavy. He was deliberately throwing those he deemed dispensable at her. She knew after her fight in London that he hadn't sent any of his top men after her since her first fight. And even then, she couldn't be sure

that that had been anyone of note, just someone trusted enough to handle a source stone.

“And you tried to take a shortcut, rather than wait for your application to go through the proper channels? Even if the price was a young girl’s life?”

“Come on, Lois. We both know that my application will never be approved through the proper channels. Hybrid applications never are.”

Lois sighed, turning back to Freya. “You’re the one he wronged. You should decide what should be done with him.”

“I... Can you keep him here for a little while? He might be able to help Lady Caroline gather evidence on Lord Uther.”

Lois nodded, moving to one of the doors out of the room, indicating for Freya to follow. “We should talk.”

Freya followed her through to the kitchen, where Lois immediately put on the kettle.

“I’m sorry about this mess,” Lois told her. “I know that we have been neglecting Lady Caroline and that was not our intent. Many of the Witches here prefer their privacy, but we understand the need for the Cleaners and we by no means intended to insult or cause problems for Lady Caroline or the King.”

Freya nodded. “They know. Lady Caroline said that she considered the lack of check-up as much her fault as yours.”

“Well, I suppose her understaffing problem must be greatly lessened by the assistance of the Angel of the North,” Lois said as she poured the boiling contents of the kettle into a mug along with a little cloth bag of what looked like herbs.

“I’m not exactly on her payroll,” Freya explained. “I’m more freelance.”

“That we have in common,” Lois said before taking the cloth bag from the mug which she then handed to Freya. The liquid in-

side was a weird purple colour. "Drink," Lois urged. "It will pick you up after your fight."

"Thanks," Freya said, leaving it for a few moments to cool. "I'm actually here about a friend of mine. Do you know Sarah Hale?"

Lois sighed, nodding. "She's my cousin," she explained. "I did the best that I could for her when she first came into her powers, but she was never suited to Dark magic. She moved to a Light coven in the city for university. Why are you asking?"

"Someone cursed her."

"Is she alright? I mean, obviously she's not, but is she... Will she live?"

"She's stable for now, but we're not sure how long that will last. I've been trying to find information on anyone who might want to hurt her..."

"And your search led you here," Lois realised with a sigh. "I suppose you know about the incident?"

"Just that some Dark Witches crossed a line, or were going to. Sarah told the Coven Head about what they were planning, and they all got kicked from the coven, Sarah included."

"It was... an unfortunate misstep."

"Yeah, everyone is being pretty cryptic about it."

"With good reason. We... How much do you know about how the War was halted the first time?"

"You mean when Ho- the Angel Twilight stopped it?" Freya took a moment to separate out the things most people knew about it from the things that she only knew because Hope had been her grandmother, and then continued. "She cast a spell that made it impossible for Humans to hurt magical beings, and vice versa."

"Exactly. We... We had lost so many people in the War. Even with the timeline corrected, there was always the worry that it

would spark up again, especially with the jumps in technology the Humans have made. So we tried to recreate the Angel Twilight's spell."

"Huh. That actually doesn't seem like too bad of an idea."

Lois gave a wry smile. "Well, not everyone saw it that way. Don't forget, it would stop Demons from being able to hunt Humans as well."

"But the King has had to massively restrict hunting in order to try and maintain peace anyway. At least this way, the rogues wouldn't be able to ruin it for the rest of us."

"That was our thinking. We managed to reverse engineer the spell and we figured that we could mimic the power of the Angel Twilight with enough Witches."

"So what was the problem?"

"The problem was that one of the elements of the spell was an anchor. A *living* anchor. We had managed to reverse engineer the spell, but there was no way for us to know what the effect on the anchor would be. And then there was the knowledge that spells require sacrifice in proportion with their power. Most just use Energy, but others have a steeper cost. There was every chance that the anchor would be the one to pay the price."

Freya frowned a little. "I'm assuming you had a willing anchor?"

Lois nodded. "We did, but... The anchor cannot be the caster. That meant that the caster would have to knowingly and willingly hurt the anchor. I... Witches do not harm other Witches. Our numbers are too few. There isn't a single rule that we hold more sacred. I had taught Sarah that when she had first come into her powers, and I guess I taught her a little too well. Fran, the Head of the coven, tried to reason with us, but we refused to back down. We thought this was the only way to ensure our safety. She challenged our leader, Wanda, to a duel over it."

“Wait, if Witches aren’t allowed to hurt each other, why did they duel?”

“Duels are the one exception and they are only ever used when contesting the right of the Coven Head to lead. Even then, it’s considered a barbaric practice and is rarely used. We usually prefer to talk things out, but we were so stubborn...”

“After Wanda lost, Fran cast the rest of us out. I stepped in to fill the hole left by Wanda and we started this coven. After I saw how terrified Sarah was... How she was still adamant that we couldn’t hurt anyone... I talked with the others and we agreed that we had crossed a line. To even contemplate hurting one of our own... But even with that decision, Sarah was never comfortable here. I had hoped that leaving would help her, but now this...”

“If you agree that you overstepped why did you create a Dark coven?”

Lois frowned, as if she didn’t quite understand the question.

“I mean, wasn’t the spell Dark magic? Why not swear yourselves to Light magic after that mess?”

Lois shook her head at that. “You can’t blame the kind of magic we draw on for our mistakes. Drawing from Light or Dark magic doesn’t measure your character. That’s just Light propaganda to make themselves feel superior. No, some people simply find it easier to draw on the Dark within themselves. Some just have a lot of hurt to draw from, others have anxiety or depression that skews their emotional state. No one should make those Witches feel guilty about finding the Dark easier to draw from out of some false sense of morality. At the end of the day, where the magic comes from doesn’t matter. It’s how you use it.”

Freya felt her stomach give a funny twist at Lois’ words. She found them comforting. Amber occasionally spoke of Dark and Light being a false dichotomy, but her power had drawn from

neither, so her words weren't exactly paramount to Freya. Not when fighting alongside Mel often involved watching her friend push herself to avoid Dark magic at all costs, even when anyone could see that it came easier to her than Light.

"Yeah, I have an easier time with Dark magic," Freya admitted.

"A Dark Angel? Your like hasn't been seen in a *long* time."

Freya shrugged. "I don't really like titles like Dark or Light. I just am."

Lois smiled. "As is everyone. In all honesty, this may be a Dark coven but I'm not strict about it. We don't have any Witches who identify as Light, so we can't be classified as a Neutral coven, but most of us just use whatever is easiest at any given time.

"But you didn't come here to talk magical philosophy."

"No. When you decided not to continue pursuing the spell, did anyone object? Anyone who might still blame Sarah?"

Lois sighed. "A lot of Witches objected. Many felt that we were betraying Wanda by abandoning the dream she died for. We held a vote on the issue and it was incredibly close. I... I would like to think that no one here would be so callous as to still blame Sarah, and especially not to the degree where they would be cruel enough to curse her, but I can't be sure. I'd be happy to help you check the signature of the curse against the Witches here."

"Thank you. I know it can't be easy to suspect your own people of hurting your cousin."

"It's not, but I'm responsible for everyone here, including any misdeeds. Come on, I'll need to examine Sarah to get the signature."



Chapter Eleven

“**A**bsolutely not!”

Freya did her best to suppress a groan. She had returned to Rosaline alone, figuring that asking permission to bring Lois to see Sarah would have been a nice courtesy to show Rosaline that she wasn't so bad after all.

She hadn't expected her to say no.

“What do you mean *absolutely not*?” Freya asked, dumbfounded.

“I mean that I have been very clear about my stance on strangers in this coven, Freya. That applies doubly to Dark Witches.”

“But she's not a stranger, she's Sarah's cousin.”

“Who was in no way involved in Sarah's application to this coven. That makes her a stranger to me, and quite frankly makes me doubt that she and Sarah are on good terms. Sarah has certainly never mentioned her cousin beyond saying that she was the one to remove her from her step-father when she came into her magic. If I had to guess, I would say that their relationship was not a close one.”

“But what does it matter? Right now she might be Sarah's only hope. I don't know her coven well enough to tell if they're hiding their signatures or not. She needs to be the one to check.”

Rosaline let out a frustrated groan. “Curse the women of your family for always dragging me into messes like this.”

Freya very much wanted to remind her that this wasn't her doing, and actually didn't have anything to do with her really, but she kept quiet, not wanting to offend Rosaline and make her decision for her.

"I'm sorry," Rosaline said. "I have to think about the safety of the other Witches here. I cannot just let a strange Witch into this coven."

"Fine," Freya said, a little shortly. "Then I'll just take Sarah to Lois."

"No. Sarah is a part of *this* coven. That makes her my responsibility and the responsibility of Ally and the other healers here. Not to mention, we have no idea what all of the effects of this curse are. We can't risk moving her."

"I moved her here."

"And it took her a while to stabilise. Whether that was because of the curse initially taking hold, or you transporting her, we can't know."

It was Freya's turn to let out a frustrated groan at that. "Well, it has to be one of the two options. Lois has to examine her in order to get the magical signature. So either Lois comes here, or I take Sarah to Lois."

"No, Freya. I'm sorry. I appreciate that Lois wants to help, but Sarah is part of this coven now. We can figure this out on our own."

Freya stormed out of the office at that, more than a little concerned that she wouldn't be able to contain her magic if she stayed.



FREYA HEADED STRAIGHT to the pool, finding Mel alone there as usual. She couldn't be bothered to change, so she just pulled off her trousers, leaving her in just her Wonder Woman

knickers, before sitting on the edge of the pool, dangling her legs into the water.

“How did your talk go with Rosaline?” Mel asked.

“Predictably. She told me that you guys can solve it without outside help, which might have just sentenced Sarah to death.”

Mel looked sad, but not surprised, by the news. “Yeah, that does sound like her.”

“Why do you stay here?” Freya asked her friend. “I’ve seen you in a fight, remember? You weaken yourself by insisting on only using Light magic. You may not have as much Dark in you as I do, but it’s still there. Especially in the heat of battle. And I can’t imagine you love the rules. Not to mention the fact that you have to sneak away to train your combat magic with me because Rosaline thinks you can’t fight in your wheelchair.”

“Okay, maybe not so loud when talking about our late night activities,” Mel said with a pointed look. “And I stay because... Well, this is the only coven I’ve ever known. It was my dad’s coven for his entire life. When my mum left Atlantis, Rosaline gave her a place here.”

“What about her whole thing about no strangers?”

“Well, Witches getting married is one of the areas where she makes exceptions. Though, yeah, she can veto them, and she does insist on meeting our partners as soon as we start getting serious. Plus, I don’t know, I think she was a little more chill before her daughter died. Not that I’m supposed to know about that or anything! No one really talks about it, but my mum did mention it once when I asked her about Rosaline being so strict.”

Freya nodded. “I already know. Apparently Amber might have been kind of responsible.”

“Oh. So that’s why she has a grudge?”

“I assume so.”

“Yeah, that’s the one thing you won’t be able to recover from, then. Like, Rosaline might start to tolerate you hanging around, but don’t expect any more acceptance than that. And it wasn’t just her daughter. She lost her husband in the War too. Apparently it really messed her up.”

“I can imagine... I just... I don’t care. Not if she’s letting it get in the way of Sarah’s life. I can’t just sit by and let my friend die. Not when I know that there might be a way to save her.”

Mel gave her a sympathetic look, but didn’t say anything. Freya wondered if it was because she didn’t have answer, or if she did but didn’t want to say it because it would land her in trouble with Rosaline.

“Is there any way we can sneak Sarah out?” Freya asked. “I can’t just leave her here to die.”

“No. Ally is constantly with her, so there’s no way we could get her out without her noticing.”

“Couldn’t you... I don’t know, *talk* to Ally?”

“That is about the worst thing we could possibly do. Ally isn’t speaking to me right now. If I try to talk to her about this, there’s every chance that she could turn us over to Rosaline. Hell, she might be tempted to do it out of spite. No, involving exes never ends well. If she told Rosaline that you were planning to take Sarah, you would be kicked out of here for good. You definitely wouldn’t be able to keep helping Sarah.”

Freya sighed, having to admit that Mel was right. “We’re screwed, aren’t we? There’s no way left to help Sarah.”

“Well...” Mel said, frowning a little in thought. “I actually think I know of a charm that might help. Help me out.”

Freya nodded, picking Mel up, bridal style, once she had hoisted herself out of the water.

“Have I told you how awesome it is having you around? You’re so strong. It’s kind of sexy.”

“Yeah, it would just be so much easier to carry you if your scales didn’t feel so slimy and weird.”

“See, you had to go and ruin the strong and silent thing by being speciesist.”

“Is that the word?”

“I don’t bloody know.”

“Well, it might not be totally PC, but the feel of scales really icks me out,” Freya said as they reached the changing room, putting Mel down on the bench. She drew the water from her friend’s scales, drying her. At the lack of water, Mel’s tail reverted back to legs, and she pulled her dress back on.

“So, what is this charm?” Freya asked as she dried herself, switching her bathing suit for her skirt and top.

“Well, there’s a reflection charm for magic. Usually it’s used on armour and stuff. It causes the spell to bounce back, but there’s a process to it. It absorbs the spell and then sends it back. It’s never gonna do much in the way of damage, given how the process will weaken any spell sent through it, but I’m wondering if the reflection can hold the signature of the curse, instead of just bouncing it back. If it can, you can take that to Lois instead of taking Sarah herself.”

Freya nodded as they made their way to the library.

It wasn’t exceptionally large, but every available surface was crammed with books, many of which looked centuries old.

“What’s with the mirror?” Freya asked as she spotted it taking up the remainder of the side wall not covered by the desk.

“It’s for scrying for books,” Mel explained as she wheeled herself over to one of the bookshelves.

“Scrying?”

Mel frowned, turning her attention back to Freya from the books. “Yeah, scrying. You know, using reflective surfaces to see things. Basic divination magic?”

Freya shook her head to indicate that this was all new to her.

Mel's frown deepened. "It's an entire branch of magic. How do you not know about it?"

Freya shrugged, looking back at the mirror. "So, could you use it to find someone?"

"I guess. As long as they weren't blocking it with protection spells. Why?"

"Because that would explain why Amber never told me about it. If she'd told me about it, I would have probably used it to try and find my father."

Mel gave her a sympathetic look. "Well, there's nothing stopping you now."

Freya sighed. "Yeah, I guess. Let's just focus on saving Sarah for now."

Mel nodded before waving her wand at the bookshelves, bringing down a heavy tome from the top shelf. It landed gently in her lap before opening itself. As she held her wand over it, the pages sorted through themselves, quickly finding what Mel was looking for.

"Okay, I'm going to need some kind of base. The better the base quality, the better the signature will be retained," Mel said before rolling herself behind the main desk, rifling through the drawers. "Luckily, I still have a souvenir from our first fight." She brought a small, round, white stone that had been polished smooth. "A piece of dragon bone. This should hold the signature for more than long enough."

"Thank you," Freya said, knowing both how expensive and sought-after dragon bone was, and that it would be useless once it had been used for this. Well, unless they had a need to reflect any other spell.

Mel shrugged. "If it saves Sarah, it'll be worth it."

Freya gave her a grateful smile as she brought a couple of other tools from the drawers. First she took some chalk and copied the rune from the book onto the bone.

“Cover your eyes,” she warned before flicking her wand so that the end sparked to a bright white.

Mel then brought her wand to the bone, tracking back over the chalk. As the wand touched the bone, it carved into it, permanently marking it with the rune. As soon as the rune was finished, Mel flicked her wand once more, turning off the sparking. She then quickly grabbed a vial of sky blue liquid, pouring it over the rune. The liquid was thick like custard, starting to glow as soon as it hit the rune. It seeped into the divots of the rune, none of it running off the sides of the bone. Once in place, the liquid set to a hard substance, though it still glowed.

“That should do it,” Mel said. “We should give it a moment to cool, but then we can take it straight to Sarah.”

“What about Ally? Will she report us to Rosaline if she sees us?”

“I don’t see why she would. Unlike abducting Sarah, I don’t see any reason to assume that Rosaline would have a problem with it. Of course, I wouldn’t want to chance asking her, but Ally shouldn’t have reason to think this is behind her back.”

Freya nodded as Mel wrapped the dragon bone in a piece of cloth before putting it into her lap and wheeling it back to the exit.

Freya followed her once more, heading back up to Sarah’s room.

As soon as the door to Sarah’s room opened, Freya felt her stomach turn to ice. Sarah was lying above her covers in the same clothes she had been in when she had first been cursed. She seemed unnaturally still and, after a moment, Freya realised that

her chest wasn't moving as you would expect if she was breathing.

"Are her clothes not dirty?" Freya asked first, deciding that everyone would be far more alarmed if the lack of breathing was anything to worry about. If anything, Ally looked bored.

"No," Ally said. "The curse seems to have put her into some kind of stasis. It's slowed or stopped most of her body functions."

"Like a sleeping curse?"

"Essentially, but it's different from any I've ever seen. Most sleeping curses don't slow the body as much as this one seems to, and needs are taken care of with Energy from the caster. You don't need food or water because Energy takes over those functions. Sarah doesn't need them because her body is doing the bare minimum to keep itself alive."

"So you're no closer to a cure?"

"Well, we're closer than we were when she was first brought here, but we've hit a roadblock when it comes to reverse engineering the spell. We have no idea how this was accomplished, or why they would change the spell."

Mel rolled her eyes. "Clearly they changed it because any Witch worth her salt can break a sleeping curse. You know, as long as it's not the true love variation."

Freya shuddered, far too familiar with that spell than she would like.

Ally responded to Mel's comment with a glare. "Why are you two in here? Rosaline doesn't want people traipsing through."

"We'll be quick," Freya said, stepping between the two Witches.

Mel and Ally continued to glare at each other, Mel passing Freya the dragon bone charm.

"I don't know how to use this," Freya told her.

Mel sighed, finally breaking eye contact with Ally to take the charm back. She pressed the charm to the back of Sarah's hand for a several moments.

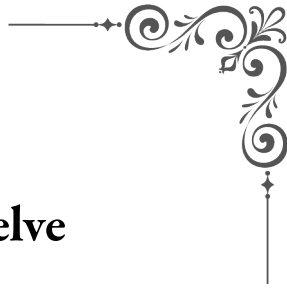
"What are you doing?" Ally demanded.

"Just getting the signature for the curse," Mel said before peeling the charm back from Sarah's skin, revealing that the blue rune was now glowing red.

Ally nodded after giving Sarah a quick once-over with her wand, seemingly happy that they hadn't worsened her condition.

Mel passed the charm to Freya. "I guess you'd better go and put this to good use."

Freya nodded before shifting out.



Chapter Twelve

Freya shifted back to the outside of Lois' coven, this time finding a doorbell at the side of the door where there had been nothing but stone before. She assumed that it was glamoured with exceptions made for wanted visitors.

Freya only had a to wait a couple of moments before Lois opened the door, paintbrush still in hand.

"Freya," she greeted. "Have you spoken with Sarah's new Coven Head? Do you want to head there now?"

Freya shook her head. "Things didn't go as expected. We've had to have a change of plan."

"Oh. Well, come in," Lois said before moving to the side, allowing Freya through. "What happened?"

"Her Coven Head is a little... Well, she's a little paranoid. She barely lets me into the coven, so she drew the line at a Dark Witch."

"If it's a problem, we can set up a meeting between the two of us. The local covens should all be working together as closely as we can anyway."

"Yeah, I doubt that would help. But my friend and I copied the signature of the curse onto a reflection charm. I figured you could use that to identify the caster."

Lois nodded as they arrived in the living room, taking the dragon bone charm from Freya as it was passed to her.

She closed her eyes, cradling the charm in her hands for a few moments before frowning.

“I don’t recognise the signature,” Lois said as she opened her eyes once more, her tone full of apology. “It definitely doesn’t belong to one of my own.”

Freya frowned. “Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“But Sarah is *Sarah*. Aside from this one incident, I can’t think of any reason why anyone would want to hurt her so badly, and all of the people who were involved in this incident are in *this* coven.”

“And I’m telling you that this signature doesn’t belong to any of them, so either none of them did it, or you think I’m lying.” Lois glared at her at that, daring her to prove her right.

Freya was too frustrated to consider backing down, however. “Well, for all I know you are! It’s not as if I know you all that well and you *are* the Coven Head. It’s your responsibility to protect the Witches here, not to help me track down the person that hurt my friend. I mean, Sarah’s current Coven Head is perfectly happy to let the curse run its course, no matter what the consequences for Sarah might be, in order to protect the rest of her coven. How am I supposed to believe that you’ll stick your neck out for a Witch who’s not even in your coven, even if she is your cousin.”

Lois sighed. “Let me make one thing perfectly clear, if your accusations weren’t coming from a place of concern for my cousin, I would cast you out from this coven right now. As it is... I do have to admit that I would rather not find out that anyone in this coven is responsible for this. I would never actively hide anyone, but... You’re right that this is our best lead for finding whoever hurt Sarah.

“Wait here. I’ll call a meeting of the coven. Hopefully that will unearth some new information.”

“Are you sure it’s wise to tell people what’s going on? You might alert whoever is behind this that we’re onto them.”

Lois gave her a stern look at that. “I will not treat my coven with such distrust. It’s worth letting those responsible know that we’re onto them if it gets us closer to finding them. Who knows, maybe knowing how close we are might scare them into making a mistake.”

Freya nodded as Lois left the room.

A few moments later, Witches started piling into the room, all giving Freya wary looks.

It was a minute or two when Lois returned, the room now filled with twenty-odd Witches who were all looking at Freya like she carried the plague.

“What’s this about?” one of the Witches nearest Lois asked. She had light brown skin and inky black hair that fell to almost obscure the fact that one of her eyes was brown, while the other was bright red. “Are we in trouble with the Demons?”

Lois shook her head. “Not the Demons, no. The other local covens, however, are a different issue. Do you all remember my cousin Sarah?” Everybody nodded and murmured affirmative. “Well, someone has cursed her. Now, Sarah’s a good kid. She’s a healer and she keeps to herself. As far as we can tell, she’s only got one reason to have enemies.”

Everyone’s gaze dropped at that, knowing what she meant.

“I’m not accusing anyone, we’re just trying to get to the bottom of this.”

A bulky blonde stepped forward at that. “Lois, everyone here has tried to put that behind us. I doubt any of us would dredge up the past for the sake of what? Punishing a girl who was very much a child at the time?”

"I know, Danielle, but this is the only lead we've got."

"Then compare our magical signatures to that of the curse. Then you'll see that it wasn't any of us."

"I already have," Lois told her. "And it doesn't match anyone here, but that doesn't mean that no one here was involved. Someone may have gotten the help of another Witch to cast the curse."

Danielle scoffed at that, folding her arms. "Then how are we supposed to prove our innocence?"

"As I said, I'm not accusing anyone. We're just being open about the investigation taking place and asking for your help in figuring out who might have hurt Sarah."

"Then why not look at the enemies of her current coven? If she's their healer, anyone who wanted to hurt them would target her first."

Lois turned to Freya, who shook her head. "Her current coven is so isolationist, no one really seems to even know that they're there aside from knowing that there *is* a Light coven in the city. Plus, they have another healer who hasn't been hurt, and she's been there a lot longer than Sarah."

Lois turned back, just as the Witch with the one glowing red eye spoke up. "Lois, not everyone involved with the incident came with us. It could one of the Witches who went their own way."

Lois nodded. "You might have something there... The ones who left right when we were kicked out wouldn't have been around when I became Coven Head. I wasn't familiar enough with everyone to discern their signatures at that point." She turned to the room at large. "Did anyone keep up with those who left?"

It quickly became apparent that, in their desperation to distance themselves from what had happened, the Witches had also distanced themselves from everyone involved who wasn't a part

of the coven. No one knew where they had gone, but they had names at least.

“Will that be enough?” Lois asked Freya.

She nodded. “Yeah, I should be able to track them down now.”



WHEN FREYA ARRIVED in Caroline’s office, she was surprised to find someone else there.

The woman was a little shorter than Freya, wearing smart black jeans and a black top that was covered with intricate red beading around the bust. She was wearing a black leather jacket with a blood red crescent moon stitched into the shoulders. The whole ensemble wouldn’t have been so surprising, if not for the silver tiara adorned with red rubies that sat atop her braided, jet-black hair.

Freya blinked a couple of times before recognising her from the Shadow Realm.

Lady Seph.

“I suppose you’re here for Lady Caroline?” she asked.

Freya nodded, her mouth seemingly wired shut.

“Me too. However, I think that she is deliberately avoiding me. If she appears once I’m gone, tell her that I was here and that we need to talk about her sticking her nose in my brother’s business.”

Seph left and Freya finally felt as if she could breathe again.

She jumped as the door to Caroline’s office opened, the blonde woman peeking out.

“Is she gone?”

Freya nodded as her heart rate slowed back down. “Are you really avoiding her?”

Lady Caroline groaned. “Yes, but it’s not because I don’t like her, I swear. The King and the head of his guard both want me to continue my investigation of Uther. Lady Persephone, on the other hand, would rather just ignore the troubles her older brother causes in order to keep the Underworld stable. And, to be honest, she’s not entirely wrong. But I just work here, I don’t want to get in the middle of this.”

“Well surely Lady Se- Persephone can’t contradict the King if he asked you to investigate.”

Caroline pulled a face. “Well, she kind of can. *I* call her Lady Persephone as a slight. Technically she’s Queen Persephone. Well, she’s the Queen Consort so, yes, the King’s word outranks hers, but the last thing I want is to end up in the middle of a spat between my ex and his wife.”

“Wait, you and the King used to date?”

Caroline snorted. “No. Royalty don’t do ‘dating’. We were betrothed when we were still babies because my dad died saving the old king’s life.”

“So why is he now married to Lady Persephone?”

“Because her parents wanted her to replace me and they were both powerful and horribly underhanded. It... It’s a long story. And doesn’t matter. She’s Queen of the Underworld, and I am only barely a step above disgraced and am now a part of one of the most looked down upon organisations to ever exist in the magical world.

“But we can’t change the past, so I am far more interested in why you are here.”

“I have another lead on who might have cursed Sarah.”

“Oh, speaking of, I thought you’d want to know that I found a local Vampire nest to take in the Hybrid that you captured. They agreed to keep a close eye on him. He’s got a bit too much Demon in his nature to ever be truly happy there, but it’s a tem-

porary measure until we can be sure that his actions were merely Uther preying on his loneliness and desperation.”

“If he won’t be happy in the nest, won’t Uther still be able to prey on him?”

“No, I promised that, if he manages to behave with the nest for a decade or so, I’ll take him into my service and sponsor his application for full Underworld citizenship.”

“Really? You would do that for him?”

Caroline shrugged. “Why not? Technically it’s my job as the head of a great house to make sure that no Demon goes without a place in the Underworld. Of course, so many lords and ladies seem to have forgotten that since the War, too consumed with hoarding their own power. And, well, I suppose no one was really ever kind to hybrids before that. But if it keeps the boy out of Uther’s hands, I am more than happy to do this.”

“What about any rogues I come across in the future? I’ve kind of just been, you know... Well, killing them. I would prefer not to if there’s another option.”

Caroline waved over to the other side of the room, where there was a series of runes on the wall. “If you bring them here, they can be restrained until I deal with them. Of course, if their crimes are severe enough, that will mean execution.”

“I’m not going to say that I’m a fan of the death penalty, but it’s still better than me enacting vigilante justice on the streets.”

“Well, of course. Ideally, I would be staffed well enough to take care of all of this myself, but this office is widely disdained, and the population dip after the War has left me with no one competent.”

“Does that mean I’ve been technically doing your job for you?”

Caroline nodded. “For which I am grateful. Of course, I will pay your bounty rates for anyone you bring here. As most of the

bounties in the city are put up out of revenge, I imagine they all call for those they name to be killed.”

“You wouldn’t be wrong there.”

“Prestige and people I may lack, but money is not an issue. Though it might take some wrangling to keep it all under wraps. Especially if Lady Persephone is wandering around.”

“Do you think she’ll catch onto who I am? Or that I’m working with you?”

Lady Caroline gave a reassuring smile. “Don’t worry, Freya. She might be tricky, but I can be trickier. Or, well, I can just use my friendship with the King and her younger brother to skirt around her.”

“Her younger brother?”

“The head of the Kingsguard. He was the sibling I could stand the best. Well, not always. It was complicated for a while. But he was sympathetic after my betrothal ended. Of course, his parents immediately tried to get the two of us together, as if I would take him as some kind of consolation prize.”

“Do *any* of the nobility marry for love?”

“Rarely. Back in the day it was acceptable to have two marriages. One for political gain, and one for love. That custom died out a couple of generations ago, though, and sparked a lot of nobles in unhappy marriages and a massive increase in homophobia and sexism.

“Anyway, you’re not here for a history lesson. You said you had another lead?”

Freya nodded, bringing out her phone and pulling up the list of names Lois had given her. “These five Dark Witches split off from their coven almost a decade ago. I need to track them down.”

Caroline nodded, heading back into her office and sitting down at the desk, wiggling the mouse to wake up her computer.

“I decided to digitise all of the files for the Dark Witches, so it shouldn’t take long to find them. What were the names again?”

Freya copied them into a text to send them to Caroline.

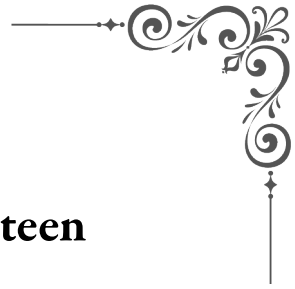
“Thanks for this,” Freya said as Caroline started searching through a spreadsheet.

“It’s no problem. These files needed organising anyway, and it won’t take long now that they are.”

They fell silent for a few minutes as Caroline found the names.

“Alright,” she eventually said, leaning back in her chair. “Out of the five Witches on the list you gave me, only three are still around. One has died and one has left the country. The remaining three are all tagged as being high risk for working with rogue Demons. They’re not part of any covens, they stay isolated, and they’ve all worked for Lord Uther in the past. I have actually been meaning to check up on them, along with several others. I could do so now if you want. Give us a pretext for visiting.”

Freya nodded. “I would be enormously grateful for your help.”



Chapter Thirteen

They found the first Witch on the list in a rather run-down council flat.

“It looks as someone has fallen on hard times,” Lady Caroline mused as they rang the doorbell. “It’s a wonder that they didn’t move into another coven.”

Freya shrugged. “Apparently they all left after something that really shook them. After that, I guess it’s understandable that some of them might want to go their own way.”

“Ah yes, the *incident* that split the Neutral coven. I never got to the bottom of what that was.”

“A Witch thing,” Freya said, not wanting to give details, given how much all of the Witches seemed to want to avoid the topic. “Something to do with them breaking part of their code of honour or something.”

Caroline nodded. “I figured as much when even the Witches who cast them out wouldn’t tell us anything more than that it was an internal issue and that they had broken no Demon laws and hadn’t threatened the secrecy of magic.”

At that, the door opened, though only a little, as a short, mousy Witch peered through, her eyes darting between them quickly.

“Who are you? What do you want?” she asked.

“I’m Lady Caroline,” Caroline told her. “Head of the R.C.E. I’m here for your check-up.”

“No one called to schedule anything!”

“Unfortunately, we have had some problems that have necessitated impromptu visits. Nothing to worry about, we just need to inspect your high-concentration magic areas and ask you a few questions. May we come inside?”

“I don’t have to let you in! You have no right to my house.”

Freya felt that Caroline did an excellent job of hiding any irritation at that, maintaining her pleasant and calm demeanour. “Of course we don’t, but I will have to take your name off of the list of Witches that Demons can legally do business with. You understand, of course, that we have to be sure that Underworld citizens aren’t being exposed to substandard charms or potions.”

The Witch glared at her for several moments before finally opening the door enough to let them in. “Fine. You can come in. Just be quick.”

Caroline nodded, following the Witch into her flat. “Are you still operating as a Dark Witch?”

The Witch nodded. “Just barely enough to still count, but yeah.”

“Have you been having trouble getting clients? We could see about moving you onto the service of one of the nobility if you’d prefer.”

“No,” the Witch said. “I will not be bound like a dog to the whims of a master. I will make my own way.”

“You could leave their service at any time,” Caroline reasoned. “If you felt that they asked too much of you, nothing would force you to stay.”

“Except that they could use it as grounds to strip me from your lists as untrustworthy. I’d no longer have any demonic clients.”

“Alright,” Caroline relented. “Our records show that you were a member of the Neutral coven down at the coast until almost a decade ago. Can you confirm that?”

“Yeah, I was. What of it?”

“There has been an incident. Tell me, do you remember a girl called Sarah Hale?”

The Witch gave a sharp bark of laughter. “I imagine everyone involved remembers that little brat. What happened? Is she in trouble now? Reveal herself as a hypocrite?”

“She has been cursed,” Caroline told her. “We’re searching for the culprit.”

The Witch immediately paled at that. “I- I have no involvement with that kind of thing. I was only... I don’t like the girl, it’s true. She was a spoiled brat who was too young to appreciate what had to be done, but I would never wish harm upon her.”

Lady Caroline nodded. “Of course. We simply need to know if you have had any contact with her recently.”

The Witch shook her head. “Not since I left.”

“And do you know of anyone who might have reason to harm her?”

“Yeah, everyone else who got cast from the coven.”

“Has anyone expressed to you any intention to hurt her?”

“I don’t exactly speak to anyone else from back then any more. Now, are we done?”

“With the questions, yes. We still need to inspect your crafting areas to make sure they’re up to code.”

The Witch seemed to pale a little at that. “I- Just let me clean up a little first. I’m afraid the kitchen is quite a mess.”

Caroline nodded, allowing the woman to leave the room.

“What do you think?” she asked Freya lowly as soon as the Witch was gone.

“I think she’s hiding something.”

“Me too. The question is if it has anything to do with Sarah.”

“You think there’s a chance it might not?”

“I think that the magical community was built around the assumption that Witches lived in covens, with the exception of those who work in service to other species. A Witch alone is vulnerable and it isn’t easy for them to survive while staying committed to their craft. Illicit activities are rife among covenless Witches.”

They fell silent as the Witch returned.

“Alright, it’s... Well, it’s decent enough to be seen, I suppose.”

As Freya followed Caroline through to the tiny kitchen, however, she had to doubt that. The tiles were growing mould and the wire for the kettle - which itself wouldn’t have looked out of place in the 70s - had started to fray, giving Freya flashbacks to the videos she had been made to watch in school about the dangers of electricity, where a little blue gremlin would turn red and murderous when exposed to water.

She still wasn’t entirely sure how that hadn’t been copyright infringement.

Caroline ignored the mess, however, moving straight to an out-of-place wooden table. It had a variety of tubes and jars atop it, all of which housed a variety of liquids of all different colours or odd bits of what looked like hair or wood shavings. A couple glowed, telling Freya that some kind of stored Energy was housed within.

Caroline nodded. “This all seems to be categorised properly, but I think I do recall seeing a table like this before.”

Freya could have sworn that the Witch flinched at that.

“It’s a very common make,” she desperately claimed, setting off Freya’s bullshit meter.

Lady Caroline tapped the side of the table three times before thumping the top.

To Freya's surprise, a little drawer flew out of the side, revealing several more vials.

Lady Caroline picked up one of the vials, which contained a bright red liquid that looked almost like blood. She popped the cork, dabbing her little finger into the vial before licking the liquid off, causing Freya to flinch.

"Human blood," Lady Caroline said as she put the cork back. "Given the hidden compartment, I imagine you are aware that the use of Human by-products is prohibited by the Crown."

The Witch had turned sheet-white, having completely stilled despite her earlier nervous fidgeting.

"I- It was just for personal use, I swear."

"It's still illegal." Lady Caroline glared at her for a moment before looking to her phone. "However, according to my records, this is your first infraction. I shall be lenient this time. A fine is normally the least objectionable punishment in this situation, but given your circumstances, community service seems the lighter punishment."

The Witch nodded.

"I will send someone with the details later this week," Lady Caroline informed her. "And, of course, anything you could tell us about the person who cast the curse on Sarah Hale could go towards reducing your punishment."

"I'm sorry, if I knew more I would tell you."

Lady Caroline nodded. "Then we're done here," she said before heading out, Freya on her heels.

"You put that blood in your *mouth*," Freya said once they were out of the flat. "It could have had AIDS or Zika virus or something."

"Freya, I am an only child and the lady of a great house, with no obvious heirs if I died. Dealing with poisons and blood-borne diseases was taught to me from day one."

“Okay, but it was still gross.”

“Perhaps, but it allowed us to mostly strike her from our list. I think it unlikely that she was our curser.”

“So, who’s the next Witch?”



“HEY, I LIVE AROUND here,” Freya noted as they arrived at the second Witch’s house.

“You know, you probably shouldn’t be so free with that information,” Caroline pointed out.

“The house is warded,” Freya said, dismissively.

“Still. I imagine there would be many who wished to do your family harm. Assuming you have a family.”

“I’m a War orphan,” Freya said, deciding not to mention her adoptive family. “There’s no one to target.”

“I’m sorry.”

Freya shrugged. “It is what it is.”

“I suppose that’s the only way to look at it,” Caroline replied as they walked up the path to the Witch’s front door.

Caroline knocked on the door, and it opened just a moment later to reveal a girl, no older than six, with light brown skin and ink-black curls.

“Is Melinda Stone here?”

The girl just blinked at them.

“Are your parents home?” Caroline rephrased.

The girl nodded before running off, leaving the door wide open.

A few minutes later a middle-aged woman, very clearly the mother of the girl who had answered the door, appeared from the kitchen, still wearing a pink apron covered in flour.

As soon as she saw Freya and Caroline, she visibly paled. After taking a moment to compose herself, she stepped outside

to join them, mostly closing the door behind her, leaving it just cracked open enough so that it didn't lock behind her.

"What are you doing here?" Melinda asked as soon as they were outside, folding her arms.

"Just a regular check-up," Caroline assured her. "You're on our list of practising Dark Witches."

"Then you have made a mistake in your record keeping. I have forsaken my craft. In fact, I did so years ago. I informed the local Demon representative at the time."

"My apologies. Our records haven't been well kept since the War, I'm afraid. If you would show me your wand, I can confirm that you haven't been practising magic and mark you as inactive on our list."

Melinda nodded before hurrying back into the house.

"Do you think she's telling the truth?" Freya asked.

Caroline nodded. "There's no way I wouldn't ask to check her wand, and she knows that. Not to mention, no practising Witch would ever be caught dead without their wand on their person."

"How long does it have to be inactive for you to be able to tell?"

"It starts to go dormant after a year without use."

"Which means that she can't have used it to curse Sarah. Can Witches use magic without their wands?"

"Nothing as powerful as the curse on Sarah. Especially not if they're not using their wand regularly. Their magic stagnates."

Melinda returned at that, holding a wand that Freya first thought was made of stone. As she lifted it up to be inspected, however, Freya realised that it was, indeed, wood, just like Sarah and Mel's, but it had become desiccated. Freya wasn't sure how it wasn't crumbling in Melinda's hands.

Caroline nodded, seemingly happy enough with a glance. Freya quickly sensed, but found no glamour on the wand. In fact, there was only the barest trace of magic that could be sensed.

“We’re sorry to have bothered you,” Caroline said. “We’ll change your status on the lists. When you’re ready to return, just come to my office and let me know.” She held out a card.

Melinda ignored it. “That won’t be necessary. This is my life now.” At that, she turned and headed back into the house, shutting the door firmly behind her.

Caroline sighed, putting her card away again. “She’s going to regret that when she starts practising again. We’re not exactly easy to find.”

“She seemed pretty adamant about staying away from magic.”

Caroline rolled her eyes. “They always are. Every time a Witch falls in love with a Human, she forsakes her craft to avoid the messy ‘living a lie’ conflict. But it doesn’t change the fact that they’re *not* Human. Every time, they outlive their spouses. Then they outlive their children. Then their grandchildren. And then they feel so removed from the family that remains that they take up their wands again. It happens every single time.

“Anyway, she obviously had nothing to do with the curse. I doubt she’s even spoken to another Witch since she left. Nothing gets a Witch practising again like being around other Witches.”

“So either the next Witch is guilty, or our blood-dealing friend was lying,” Freya figured.

“We don’t know that she was dealing blood,” Caroline said. “I imagine her stash would have been larger if she was. But yes, I see your point. If our next Witch is proved innocent, she was most likely responsible. Even if that is the case, though, we shouldn’t go back today. I imagine she’ll be much more talkative

after a night to mull over the consequences of keeping the truth from us.”

“Well, we don’t know that it was her yet. It might still be the next one.”



BY THE TIME THEY REACHED the third Witch’s bungalow on the edge of town, it was well after dark. Freya found herself feeling uneasy as they approached. Even if they were on official business and even if Sarah’s life hung in the balance, it really was rude to bother someone at home so late.

Caroline knocked on the door, but they received no answer.

“Maybe they’re not home,” Freya ventured.

“Then why is the light on?” Caroline said, indicating the far window, which was indeed glowing with light beyond the closed blind.

“Maybe she thinks we’re salespeople.”

“Maybe.” Caroline knocked harder that time.

Just as Caroline was ready to knock a third time, the door finally opened to reveal a tall, thin, ginger woman covered in freckles, dressed in her pyjamas.

As soon as she opened the door and saw them, however, she stared, wide-eyed, for just a fraction of a second before bolting back through the house.

Caroline wasted no time in running after her, Freya hot on her heels.

The Witch ran to her kitchen, making a beeline straight for the back door. Just as she reached it, she grabbed the broom that was leaning against the wall and, to Freya’s amazement, she mounted it, taking off into the sky.

“Shit,” Caroline said as she and Freya tore into the garden, yanking off her jacket to reveal strange runes tattooed onto her shoulder blades beneath her tank top. “Hold on.”

“Hold onto what?”

Freya’s question was answered as the tattoos on Caroline’s back began to ooze black smoke. The smoke quickly formed large wings, looking almost like those of a bat, and Caroline used them to propel herself as she jumped up, remaining hovering just long enough to scoop Freya up, her hands beneath the young Angel’s arms.

“What the hell?” Freya demanded as she was lifted from the ground.

“Don’t look down and don’t throw up,” Caroline told her sternly as they flew after the Witch. “And keep your eyes on the target. We’re gonna have to try and ground her.”

“How?”

“The runes on her broom. If we can disrupt them, she’ll have to land. A small charge of Energy should do it, but your aim will have to be true.”

Freya snorted a little at that. Energy was notoriously difficult to aim, especially at any real distance. It was good for a desperate close-range attack, a low-charge blanket attack, or just frightening your enemies with how much you can produce. Anything else, however, and it was the worst possible weapon.

But Freya didn’t have enough range of movement to use any other weapons.

“Maybe this would have been easier for you to do yourself,” Freya figured, having to shout over the rush of the wind.

“The wings take up all of my Energy,” Caroline explained.

Freya nodded, refocusing on the Witch in front of them. Caroline had managed to close most of the distance between them now, but the conditions were still far from perfect.

Still, Freya allowed her arm to crackle with Energy, trying to figure out the exact angle to curve her arm at. She found herself oddly reminded of trying to play Wii Sports as a child.

Her first strike, predictably, missed, but it caused the Witch to veer sideways to avoid it.

Caroline swerved to keep up with her, causing Freya's stomach to violently object.

Don't throw up, Freya thought, repeating Caroline's earlier words back to herself.

She prepared another strike, but the Witch dodged it again, this time without careening so far off course. She seemed less concerned with the idea of being hit.

Freya huffed with frustration at that. It was unlikely that any of her strikes were going to land, and she had no idea how long Caroline could keep them in the air if she was fuelling the wings with her Energy.

"How small of a charge can we get away with?" Freya asked, struck with an idea.

"Small," Caroline replied. "Just enough to disrupt them so that she's forced to land."

Freya nodded before causing Energy to crack all around her arms and chest, building it up before unleashing it in a wide blast.

The street lights below them flickered as they were hit, and the Witch's broom dropped about a foot before stabilising into a steady descent.

"Drop me," Freya said once they were over her and Caroline did so before following swiftly.

Freya dropped into a roll as she hit the roof the Witch had landed on, bringing up some rain water to shackle the Witch.

Lady Caroline dropped just behind her a few seconds later as the Witch began to struggle.

Freya kept her hands far away from her wand, however, so there was no danger of her getting loose.

“I don’t care what you do to me, I won’t hand them over,” the Witch spat.

“Hand what over?” Caroline asked, seemingly as confused as Freya.

“They are my patients, I won’t just hand them to you.”

Caroline raised an eyebrow. “Patients? Why do you think we’re here?”

The Witch blinked, seemingly realising that there might have been a misunderstanding. “Aren’t you Lady Caroline?”

“Yes.”

“So you’re the one who took Ren. You’ve started dealing with the rogue Demons.”

“Well, yes. But I placed Ren with a local nest for rehabilitation. I have taken over to stop the rogues from being victims of vigilante justice.”

Freya couldn’t help but flinch at the word *victims*, knowing that she had been the one to hurt them.

“And that’s not why we’re here to talk to you,” Caroline said. “Well, I mean, I guess now I’m curious, but you said they were your patients?”

The Witch nodded. “I’m a healer. I didn’t know exactly what they were doing at first, but it quickly became apparent that they had sustained their injuries in fights with the Angel. But I won’t turn them in. They need to know that there is somewhere they can go for safe healing.”

“No, I understand. Healing isn’t a crime, no matter who it is, and I have no intention of using you for information on them. I was merely coming for a check-up and to ask about an unrelated matter to do with your former coven.”

“Oh,” the Witch said, turning bright pink.

“If Freya lets you go, will you cooperate, or will you try to run?”

“I- I’ll cooperate.”

Freya released her at that.

The Witch turned to her, watching her warily. “That was an elemental power, but you don’t seem to have a drop of Mer blood in you.”

Freya shrugged. “I’m an enigma.”

Caroline cleared her throat, drawing the Witch’s attention back to her. “Now that we’re so far from your house, we’ll do the check-up another time. For now, we need to know if you’ve had any contact with Sarah Hale?”

The Witch frowned. “The name’s familiar, but I can’t place it.”

“She was a child in your former coven. Our reports say that her testimony is the reason you were cast out.”

“Oh yeah. It’s a strange world where one young girl can see a mistake where over a dozen adults can’t.”

“So you don’t blame her for getting you kicked out?”

“No, I was an adult, I should have known better. Why?”

“Someone has cursed her.”

“Oh, well it’s quite easy to prove that I didn’t do that.” She pulled up her sleeve to show a rune tattooed on her bicep. “I took a healing oath years ago. It’s physically impossible to use my magic to harm anyone. Or, at least, harm anyone in a non-medically necessary way.”

Caroline nodded. “Alright then. I’m sorry for the misunderstanding. I’ll drop by sometime next week during more sociable hours to check your crafting facilities.”

The Witch nodded. “Okay. Bye, I guess,” she said before hopping back on her broom and heading home.

Freya sighed. “So, I guess it was the Witch who was keeping Human blood in a drawer after all. In hindsight, we should have really seen that coming.”

“Quite. But, as I said, we shouldn’t return just yet. Let her mull over the consequences of not being forward with us. We’ve already shown her leniency, so it might convince her to just come forward.” Caroline held her hand out, her jacket shifting into her hand.

“You can shift objects?”

“And other people.”

“When did you learn that?”

“After my betrothal was called off. There’s this order that live in the mountains of the southern lands. The Wardens of Maltess. Maltess was the originator of Royal Blood, using a spell to give it to all of her children. However, she had been cursed so that everyone she loved romantically died.”

Freya frowned, the story sounding familiar. She wondered if she had read it in one of Mel’s textbooks. “If that was the case, how did she have children?”

“She had a political marriage to a man she hated. Though the curse caught up with him years later. Serves him right, he was the one who cursed her in the first place.

“Anyway, she was straight, so she surrounded herself with women throughout her life. When she died, the women of her council built a tomb in the mountains for her and kept watch so that her enemies couldn’t desecrate it. These were the wisest women in all of the land, so Maltess’ eldest daughter went to them to learn how to rule the land as well as possible.

“It became tradition for the women of the royal family to train with them. Sometimes noble ladies also went, and it was seen as a sign that they took their responsibility to their people seriously. If they were younger members of the family, they

would often remain in the mountains to make sure that there was always someone to teach there. Though only those who earned their wings could stay,” she said, indicating the runes on her back. “Women of lower birth could also go, they would teach anyone of Demon blood, but they often didn’t return, so lots of rumours began to spread. In truth, they simply stay because they like it there.”

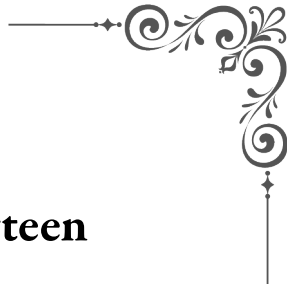
“Did you want to stay?”

Lady Caroline gave a sad smile. “I’ll admit that I did. I had planned to, actually. After my betrothal was called off, there was nothing left for me. My twin brother was going to lead the house after my mother, and everything would be fine. But then, the day after I earned my wings, I felt my heart break in two. I rushed home, but I already knew it was too late. My brother had been killed by Enhanced Humans.

“The timeline corrected itself not long after that, but Byron never came back. I was left as the only heir to my house, so I stayed. My mother died a few years later, and now I’m the only one left.

“Who knows, I might go back after I finally get around to having children of my own to succeed me, but I won’t abandon my duty for now.

“Anyway, it’s getting late and I imagine Lois will want an up-date tonight.”



Chapter Fourteen

Lois sighed and shook her head once they finished telling her that they'd had no luck.

"Do you really think Amanda had something to do with this?" she asked Caroline.

Caroline sighed, folding her arms. "Honestly? I don't know. Using illegal substances in spell casting is a sign of desperation, not necessarily a sign of someone who would willingly harm someone over a mistake they made as a child."

"But if it wasn't her, then the Witches of my coven become the prime suspects once more."

Freya sighed. "Is there truly no one else who was involved? Can you run us through exactly what happened?"

Lois sighed, going to the fridge. She took out three bottles of lager and put them down on the table between them, sitting down on one of the stools as she opened her own.

"Before the timeline was corrected, when the spell that stopped Humans and magical beings from hurting each other failed..." She turned to Caroline. "Do you remember the girl that was hurt?"

Caroline shook her head. "I was already training with the Wardens of Maltess at that point. We didn't even know the War had restarted until months later."

Lois nodded. "Well, the first incident was on a playground. A young boy got angry and pushed over a girl. She fell back and

hit her head on the metal pole of the swing set. She got a nasty concussion, and soon everyone knew. She was a Witch and the boy had been Human. The girl returned home from the hospital to see that magical beings, who didn't even know her, had used her injury as proof that Humans were all monsters and should be killed.

"Her mother belonged to our coven and began to worry for her daughter, so we all decided to research the spell that had originally been used to halt the war, hoping to replicate it before things got too far out of hand.

"The Council of Light and the Demon King at the time, the current King's father, both refused to help us. They saw it as futile and thought that our efforts would be better focused on winning the War. It was pretty obvious to us, however, that we wouldn't win.

"Five and a half years went by before the timeline was corrected, and we had barely scratched the surface of our research, while so many lay dead. About six months before the timeline was corrected... the girl joined the fight. Her father had died and she wanted to avenge him, I guess. She only managed to get herself killed. Her mother, who had been pregnant again at the time, became distant. It was like she wasn't really there any more, even when the timeline was corrected and her baby, Hilda, was born.

"A few of us decided to keep up our research out of a combination of curiosity and wanting a contingency plan, in case magic was ever revealed again. But it was ten years until we were anywhere near close, around which time Sarah came into her magic and I brought her into the coven.

"As time went on, we realised that the spell needed an anchor and, as much as we tried, we couldn't figure out what the effect on the anchor would be. There was a lot of conflict as to whether we should or shouldn't use the spell.

“And then Hilda came to me and a couple of the others. She was only Sarah’s age, the two of them having grown close, but she was older than her years. She had grown up with her mother practically absent, and the rest of her family dead. She offered to become the anchor.

“I was reluctant, but some of the others agreed with using her. No one else had volunteered and everyone was happy with the spell being cast, as long as they weren’t the one to take the risk. Some of us wanted to wait until she was older, but we couldn’t deny after the other timeline that we wouldn’t have any time once magic was revealed again. Waiting could kill us all, we figured.

“We never came to a decision, in the end. Hilda told Sarah of her plan, and Sarah became terrified for her friend. She told the Coven Head what we were planning. It didn’t matter that we had decided nothing. Hilda had told Sarah the plan as if it was for certain, and the Head took her initial confession as gospel. The only thing Sarah hadn’t told her was how involved Hilda had been. Whether Hilda didn’t tell her, or she was trying to protect her friend, I don’t know... But Hilda didn’t kick up a fuss to leave with us, so I figured she had thought better of the situation.”

Freya stood up at that point, sighing. “For the love of the Creator.”

“What?” Lois asked.

“That was very much not the version I was told when I first tried to find out what happened to Sarah. A very upset Hilda told me about how terrible it was that her friend got sucked into hanging out with the terrible Dark Witches, conveniently omitting her involvement. Who wants to bet that that bitch just sent me on a wild goose chase?”

“She might have just not wanted to admit her involvement to a stranger,” Caroline figured.

“Maybe. But it’s damn well more than enough to warrant another visit. I’ll be back soon.”



FREYA SHIFTED BACK to the coven before closing her eyes and doing her best to sense Hilda. She hadn’t spoken with the Witch for long enough to have a great handle on her signature, but she was close enough to recognise it when she scanned the area. Luckily, she was just visiting the local corner shop.

Freya waited outside for her to leave. As soon as the Witch headed out, she called out “Hey there, Liar.”

Hilda dropped her bag and ran at that, pulling her wand from her pocket and aiming it over her shoulder, back at a pursuing Freya.

Freya ducked out of the way of the spell, drawing the water from around them to pull Hilda’s wand from her grasp before shackling the Witch.

“I’m going to take that as an admission of guilt,” Freya said as she made her way in front of Hilda to face her.

The Witch sneered. “You can’t kill me. If you kill me, the curse will never be lifted. It’s not tied to my Energy.”

Freya cursed silently, knowing that Hilda was right. Not that she would have killed her, but she would have threatened to.

“Sarah’s going to sleep for the next hundred years and there’s nothing you can do about it,” Hilda continued.

“Why? Because she ruined your plan to potentially hurt yourself?”

“Because she betrayed me! We were as close as sisters, and then she just left, never to speak to me again. And why? Because I tried to save all of us, her included.”

“She was trying to save you, you arse,” Freya said with an eye roll. “She didn’t turn you over. She protected you from the con-

sequences of your actions. She wasn't trying to stop you, she was trying to save you because, for some reason that is completely beyond me, she actually cared about you."

"It doesn't matter now. She's a pureblood Witch like me. We're all we could ever have. She'll see that when she wakes up. All of her Human and half-breed friends will be gone and she'll see that I'm the only friend she needs. The only one who won't leave her."

Freya sighed. She kind of felt sorry for Hilda. She seemed like a pathetic child more than anything else. But she still needed her to lift the curse from Sarah.

Freya focused on the water within the Witch in front of her, giving it a quick jostle.

Hilda responded by throwing up violently.

"I have control over water," Freya told her. "Do you know how much water is in your body? Now, I'm not a healer or a doctor, but I've been at this for a while. I'm pretty sure I can subject you to some pretty excruciating things without any real fear of killing you. Hell, I could Google waterboarding right now. I hear it's particularly horrific."

Hilda laughed, though that triggered a coughing fit. "I'll never break," she eventually said. "You can hurt me all you want, but all that will do is make you an enemy of my coven. Maybe you can beat me in a fight, but you can't beat all of us."

Freya couldn't help but smile at that, realising exactly what she needed to do. "Alright then. No torture. But your magical signature is all over Sarah. All I need to do is tell your Coven Head and you'll be cast out. After that, I can do anything I want to you and no one will care."

Hilda paled at that, and Freya knew that it was more to do with the idea of the coven casting her out than Freya's threat. She

had been so invested in casting the spell, but she had stayed put when the truth had come out.

“No-No one will believe an outsider over me.”

“Really? Not even an Angel?”

She paled further as Freya sent her Energy out behind her. She'd never done it, but she had heard stories of other Angels being surrounded by light when they were in their full power, forming wings behind them. She figured wings of Energy would be just as good to a Witch who had never met another Angel.

She turned out to be correct, as tears escaped Hilda's eyes. She felt a twinge of guilt for frightening her so, but she also knew that Hilda was only crying because she had been caught cursing someone.

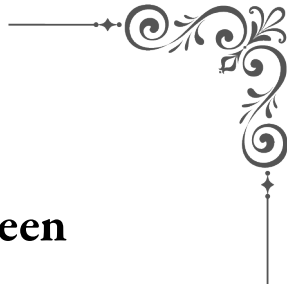
She didn't deserve her pity, Freya tried to tell herself.

“D-dragon's blood,” Hilda said. “I- I'm sorry, but dragon's blood on the eyelids is the only way to wake her up. I swear it's the truth. I can't reverse it myself. I didn't think I would need to, and I used the little I could get my hands on to anchor the spell instead of using myself so that no one could force me to reverse it.”

Freya nodded, knowing that she was apologising because dragon blood would normally be impossible to acquire.

Normally.

“You'd better be telling the truth,” Freya said before releasing her and shifting away. She figured that, if Hilda was lying, she wouldn't get that far before Freya found out the truth.



Chapter Fifteen

“Here,” Mel said, wheeling up to Sarah’s bedside. “This is the last of the dragon blood.”

Freya nodded, taking the vial from her. She uncorked it before dabbing some onto her finger. She then reached over and gently smudged it over Sarah’s eyelids.

Nothing happened.

“I’m going to murder that girl,” Freya muttered, her Energy crackling with anger.

“What- What happened?” she heard a familiar voice mumble beside her, causing her to spin around in time to see Sarah groggily attempting to open her eyes. “And why are my eyelids sticky?”

“Dragon blood,” Freya answered, before remembering that Sarah couldn’t see or hear. She pressed some tissues into her friend’s hand, allowing her to wipe the blood from her eyes.

“Did I pass out at work?” Sarah asked once the blood was gone and her eyes were open.

“Yes,” Freya signed back to her. “You were cursed. You’ve been in some kind of hibernation for days now.”

“I have?” She gasped, bolting upright. “Riley! Does she think I just ditched?”

“No, I covered for you. The slightly more relevant issue is the fact that you were *cursed*.”

Sarah nodded, tugging on the duvet beneath her for a moment before asking, "It was Hilda, wasn't it?"

"How did you know?"

"The curse. When we were younger we would sometimes mess about with spells, coming up with our own variations. We would often create versions of spells that would normally require being tied to your Energy so that they wouldn't. That was one of them."

At that, tears began to fall from Sarah's eyes, quickly followed by a small sob.

Freya frantically glanced to Mel, who just shrugged.

"Maybe she's PMSing?" Mel whispered and Freya glared in response.

Sarah's eyes were mostly closed as she cried, and Freya figured her tears were obscuring what sight was left, making signing useless.

With nothing else left, she placed what she hoped was a comforting hand on Sarah's shoulder.

Sarah responded by turning to her, crying into Freya's shirt instead of her own hands.

Freya stiffened for a moment, caught off guard. She melted after a few seconds, however, her anxiety fading as she focused on comforting her friend. She put her arms around Sarah as she cried it out.

Mel just sat there, looking more than a little awkward.

"I'm sorry," Sarah said, pulling away. She wiped her tears away so that she could see once more. "I just... I thought that all of this was behind me and... I knew that Hilda was upset over it, but it was so long ago... I thought it was over. What if... What if she tries to come after me again? Or worse, what if she goes after my step-dad or sister?"

Freya felt her blood chill. If Hilda's goal had been to freak out Sarah by showing her just how mortal those around her were, killing her Human family would be exactly the way to go about it.

Sarah clambered off the bed, stumbling a little on unsteady feet. "I've got to find her before she does anything else."

Freya rushed in front of her, so that she could see as she signed, "Not alone."

Sarah shook her head. "I can't lose anyone to this mess, Freya. I'll deal with it myself. I couldn't live with myself if she hurt anyone because of me."

Freya rolled her eyes. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure that I've handled worse than one pissy Witch before."

Sarah gave a watery smile at that and nodded.

"I guess I'll just stay here," Mel said, sounding a little defeated.

Freya gave her a sympathetic look, hoping that it conveyed just how much she wanted her friend along, but that would mean telling Sarah that Mel had been training with her.

Mel gave a small shake of her head, and Freya took that as a sign that Mel would rather keep her secret than accompany them.

"It's alright," Mel said. "I'll stay and cover you. I don't imagine Rosaline will be too happy with you leaving so soon after waking up."

"Thank you," Sarah told her with a smile before closing her eyes. She opened them a moment later and said, "All right, I know where Hilda is."



THEY SHIFTED BACK TO just outside the coastal coven. Hilda had seemingly stayed on the steps outside to collect herself after her encounter with Freya.

She jumped up, looking ready to bolt, as soon as Sarah and Freya appeared in front of her.

“You have sixty seconds to explain why in the hell you cursed me,” Sarah said, her hand wrapped tight around her wand as she aimed it at the other girl.

Hilda looked desperate at that. “Please, Sarah,” she signed. “I didn’t mean to hurt anyone, I just... I just wanted you to see the truth! You left me behind and you wouldn’t speak to me anymore. I... We both know that you’re going to lose everyone else. We both are. We’re pureblood Witches. That is so rare, and even most magical beings don’t have lifespans comparable to ours. We’re going to spend the rest of our lives watching everyone we care about dying on us. Everyone but each other. How can we turn our backs on our friendship when we know that?”

“Hilda... I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have cut myself off you like that. I just... I didn’t want to get dragged into another ordeal like the last. Not when I saw how much it cost everyone else. What it cost Lois. I couldn’t do that to her again.”

“But none of them are pureblood like us. It doesn’t matter what they think, they’ll be gone in the blink of an eye.”

Sarah was clearly distressed by that. “It’s not just about what they think. It’s about not hurting them.”

“Why should we care? They’re nothing but flies.”

“But I do care! I care about what happens to my cousin. I care that you tried to take away a chunk of my life from me. And, Creator help me, I care about the fact that you *don’t* seem to care.”

“I just wanted things back the way they were.” Hilda was crying at this point.

“And you thought cursing me for a hundred years would get you that? Forcing me to lose all of my friends and family?”

“You would get over it eventually.”

“How can you...” Sarah shook her head at that, seemingly done.

She gave a flick of her wand and Hilda stumbled forward before collapsing to the ground.

Sarah gave another flick of her wand to cushion Hilda’s fall before turning to Freya. “Come on. I don’t trust this coven to keep an eye on her after this.”



“SARAH!” LOIS CRIED once they arrived at her coven, wrapping her younger cousin in her arms. “I was so worried about you,” she signed as she pulled away.

“It’s alright, I’m okay,” Sarah assured her. “I was actually wondering if you could help out with this.”

Lois raised an eyebrow in question before spotting Freya holding Hilda over her shoulder.

“You cursed her,” Lois figured, seeming a little shocked.

Sarah nodded. “I didn’t know what else to do. She was going on about how nothing mattered, since everyone else was going to die before us. She said that it didn’t matter what she did if she couldn’t be held accountable by them. I just... I figured *somebody* has to hold her accountable.”

“I understand,” Lois told her. “We can keep her here and keep an eye on her when she wakes up.”

Sarah nodded. “I didn’t curse her for that long. She should wake up in a few months.”

“The third room to the left upstairs is free. You should take her up for now. I’ll get in touch with her Coven Head and discuss the issue.”

Freya nodded, heading upstairs. Sarah followed close behind.

Once they reached the room, Freya placed Hilda on the bed. Sarah closed the door behind them.

“You’re quiet,” she ventured. “I mean, I assume. You don’t seem to have said anything since we left the coven.”

Freya shrugged. “This is your fight, not mine. I was just there as backup.”

“I... So you’re not mad at me? Or disappointed? For using the same curse on her that she used on me, I mean.”

“Why would I be? I hardly have clean hands when it comes to dealing with those that have hurt me. A lot of them have ended up dead.”

“But it’s different when you’re in a fight! This was...”

“You getting someone who clearly had no remorse off the street while people figure out how to rehabilitate her?”

Sarah gave a weak smile at that. “I kind of thought that... Well, that you would hold me to a higher standard than that. I mean, you’re an Angel after all.”

Freya rolled her eyes. “I think being raised by your Human step-father has given you one too many biblical ideas.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Sarah figured. “Thank you.”

Freya shrugged. “This only took, like, half an hour. And I didn’t even have to use my magic. It was really no trouble.”

“No, not for coming with me now. I mean, not just that. Thank you for finding out how to wake me. I... If I had been aware, I don’t think I would have expected to wake up. The new girl at the coven without any real friends... Who would have truly committed themselves to helping me?”

“You know, Lois did everything she could to help me. I couldn’t have done it without her.”

Sarah gave a sad smile. “You know, I thought... Me being here, in this coven, caused so much tension. I was sure that she was happy to see me go. Not because she hated me, but just that I wasn’t worth the trouble.”

“I don’t know her *that* well, but I doubt that’s the case. She seemed mostly concerned with you finding your own happiness, even if it had to be out of this coven.”

Sarah nodded, her eyes becoming glassy with unshed tears, though they didn’t fall. “I guess she might have woken me on her own. But thank you for fighting for me anyway. The last real friend I had was Hilda and, well, I guess you know how well that turned out.”

“Well, I’m definitely no Hilda. I promise I’ll never curse you.”

“I know you would never.”

Freya’s heart couldn’t help but warm at that. “Then I think you have a greater estimation of me than most.”

“How could I not? You saved my life.”

“From you, Miss No-One-Could-Ever-Imagine-You-Having-Enemies, that means a lot.”

“Then I’ll be sure to remind you whenever you need it.”

“And I’ll be sure to save you whenever you need it.”

“Hopefully, I won’t need it much.”

“Hopefully. I don’t think Riley’s business model could take it.”

Sarah laughed, though her expression sobered quickly after. “We have to go home, don’t we?”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“Can you possibly imagine a scenario where Rosaline is happy with how this went down?”

“Ah. No, I can’t.”

Sarah sighed. “But I suppose there is no escaping it.”

“No, there’s not. And it can’t be that bad if we face her together.”



IT COULD, INDEED, BE that bad, they quickly realised, as Freya wondered how such a small woman could shout so loudly. She envied Sarah a little as her auditory processing gave up on her, sending a blaring alarm through her brain to get out of the situation to recuperate.

She would have put up a sound-dampening bubble if she wasn’t sure that Rosaline would spot it immediately and become even more enraged.

“She was barely out of bed!” she continued screaming at Freya. “What could have possibly made you think that that was the best time for a revenge trip? Or that any time was appropriate? You can’t just waltz up to another coven and curse and kidnap one of their members before dropping her off with a third coven, that the kidnapped Witch’s coven already has bad-blood with.

“And don’t even get me started on working with disgraced Dark Witches. I told you that I didn’t want Lois near this, and yet you involved her anyway, going against my express wishes.”

“Well, technically, you just didn’t want her in this coven, which she never was,” Freya figured.

Rosaline just glared at her back-talk. “Do you think this is funny? You two *cursed* a girl.” She pointed to Sarah. “I should throw you out.” She then pointed to Freya. “And ban you for good.”

“Look, ban me if you want,” Freya protested, “but Sarah has done nothing wrong. Unless being the victim of a curse is suddenly a crime. I did what I had to do to keep my friend safe, but she is not to blame.”

Sarah looked like she was going to object to that, but Rosaline cut across her before she could. “I don’t care who you thought you were protecting. You have complicated our relationship with our neighbouring covens and drawn attention to us. That is the last thing I wanted to come from this!”

She paused, taking a deep breath.

“But,” she continued, her voice a little softer, “the coastal coven has agreed not to cause trouble over this. They consider it a personal matter that has now been resolved.

“Without anyone disagreeing, I suppose I have to side with their assessment of the situation, which means that no punishment will be brought against either of you. But be warned, I will not be so lenient in the future. You were lucky this time. Nothing more.”

She turned to Sarah specifically. “You may go now. I wish to speak with Freya alone,” she signed.

Sarah looked to Freya, seemingly reluctant to leave her friend alone with her Coven Head. Freya couldn’t articulate her gratitude for that gesture, so she simply gave her friend a reassuring smile.

Once Sarah was out of the room, Rosaline spent a couple of moments carefully looking Freya over.

“You’re too much like Sparrow,” she eventually said. “He would always put his friends and family first. Even when he became Death, the kid put those he loved before his responsibilities.”

Freya frowned. “Sparrow was Amber’s son?”

Rosaline nodded.

“And he’s Death now?”

“You didn’t know?”

Freya sighed. “I have about six generations of magical family history to catch up on and Amber doesn’t much like talking

about the stuff she has bad memories of. Some things fall through the cracks, I guess.”

Rosaline nodded in understanding. “Amber was badly hurt when Sparrow was little more than a boy. His father died at the same time. Amber survived by relying on the Ancient in her head, but the two of them had never gotten along. It took her over twenty years to come back to us. In that time, Sparrow was in my care and... And I failed. He died. It was just luck that the Death at the time wanted to retire. Sparrow replaced him, but... I still failed. I gave up my craft not long after. I expected Amber to hate me... But she didn’t. I could never understand that...”

“Wait, if you blame yourself for Sparrow’s death, why did you blame her for your daughter’s death? It seems you would understand better than most.”

Rosaline stared at her, blankly. “I... I don’t blame Amber for what happened to Viv. I never did. I blamed the Council of Light for leaving her alone to guard the most powerful magical being while we were in the middle of a war. All Amber did was die. No one can blame her for that.”

“Oh. That’s not what she said.”

Rosaline sighed. “She has really blamed herself all these years?”

Freya nodded.

“I... Tell her that’s not the case. That was never the case.”

“You can tell her yourself,” Freya figured. “I can extend my bond with her enough to let others talk to her. Not for long, but for a few minutes, definitely.”

“You would... I... Thank you, Freya. I would appreciate the chance to talk to her again.”

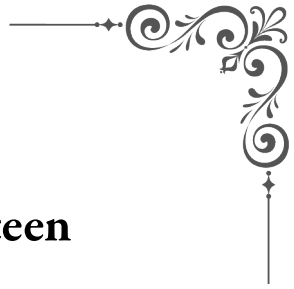
Freya nodded as Amber materialised. She extended the thread between them - the thread of magic that had the bitter-sweet feel of her mother - over to Rosaline.

She knew the second the Witch saw her guardian by the soft gasp she gave.

“I’ll wait outside,” Freya told them.

“Freya,” Rosaline said, just barely turning her attention back to her from Amber, “you are always welcome here. You may come and go from this coven whenever you wish.”

“Thank you,” Freya said before heading out of the room, giving the two friends some privacy.



Chapter Sixteen

Sarah only took a single day off before returning to work. “I get restless when I’m not doing something,” she explained with a shrug when Freya had tried to suggest that she take more time to recover.

At that, Freya left it alone, figuring that Sarah knew her own limits better than she could.

They quickly fell back into their normal work routine, for which Freya was glad. The thing that terrified her most about heading deeper into the magical world was that there would never be a ‘normal’. That one day she would get sucked into an adventure so monumental that she would never get to go home.

Home would always change, she knew that, but she was happy if the pace of that change stayed a steady one.

“You can almost forget it’s winter in here,” Freya commented as the day came to a close. She pulled her jumper off, so that she was left in just her tank top.

“Riley refurbished the place just after she bought it so that it would retain heat better. She figured it would help with heating bills,” Sarah explained.

“What about in summer? Is it not like a furnace?” Freya asked as she made sure that her hair was still in place.

Sarah didn’t answer. Freya refocused her attention on her friend, who seemed to be frowning at her shoulder. Freya turned

to see if she had something there, but saw nothing but her top and bra straps sitting atop her scarred skin.

“What?” Freya signed, wondering if there was something magical that she couldn’t see.

She hoped not. She was truly sick of curses at that point.

“Those scars,” Sarah said. “Some of them look like they should have been fatal.”

“Some of them almost were,” Freya figured. “But I’m pretty durable.”

“Just... I was thinking... Well, you shouldn’t be out there alone.”

Freya kept her mouth shut. She wasn’t alone, really. She hadn’t been since she had come back from London last spring. Mel was with her pretty much every time she went out, but Rosaline had been firm with Mel about her not doing anything even combat adjacent, so it had remained their little secret. While Freya trusted Sarah, it wasn’t her secret to tell.

“I could come with you,” Sarah continued. “I mean, no offence, but you look like you could use a healer to hand.”

“What about Rosaline? Won’t she object to her healer putting her life at risk?”

“I’m combat certified,” Sarah figured. “It’s my duty to protect my coven and, by extension, friends of the coven.”

Freya snorted. “Okay, Rosaline just barely said I was allowed through the doors. I don’t think I qualify as a friend of the coven just yet.”

“Still. Being the most qualified healer in the coven gives me some leeway to do what I want in my free time.”

“You’re already taking one of the most intense university courses, and you do ballet, and you’re the head healer for your coven. Do you really want to spend your few scraps of downtime patching me up?”

Sarah looked sheepish. “Well, I mean, I really don’t want to see you hurt. But... Freya, I have spent so long trying to stay out of trouble since the incident... I don’t want to miss out on anything because I was too busy keeping my head down.”

“You know hanging out with me won’t be anywhere near as glamorous as it might look, right? It mostly involves cleaning up after other people’s messes.”

“If you don’t want me to come with you, you could just say it...”

“No, that’s not it at all! I swear!”

The door opened at that, despite the closed sign. Freya had left it open so that Mel could let herself in when they were ready to go.

Mel carefully navigated the rather narrow doorway before wheeling herself up to the counter and hoisting herself onto one of the stools. “So,” she said, seemingly oblivious to the conversation she’d walked in on, “are you almost ready to go, Freya?”

Sarah frowned. “Wait, I thought you said you were going on patrol right after work.”

Freya looked back to Mel frantically at that.

Mel sighed, glaring at Freya for a moment before asking, “Do you really trust her?”

Freya nodded.

Mel turned back to Sarah. “Rosaline doesn’t let me train in combat magic. So, I sneak out with Freya to go patrolling with her. That way Rosaline didn’t have to know, and I had someone to make sure I didn’t die when I was first starting out.”

Sarah smiled. “That sounds like a great idea. And, you know, Rosaline doesn’t *have* to sign off on your combat proficiency qualification. All you need is another Witch who has been qualified for three years or more to observe you for ten hours of

active patrolling. And guess who's coming up on her three-year anniversary?"

Mel stared at Sarah, seemingly needing a moment to comprehend what she had just said. "You would really do that for me? Rosaline would kill you."

"What's she going to do? Kick out her best healer?"

Mel turned to Freya at that. "Okay, I officially take back every reservation I had. Sarah is now officially part of the squad."

"We're a squad?"

"We are now that there's three of us."

Freya turned to Sarah. "You know, you don't have to do this, right? You can still come along, even if you're not helping Mel."

"Speak for yourself," Mel said, earning her a glare from Freya. Mel's particular brand of teasing was an acquired taste. "That was a joke! Of course you can hang out with us."

Sarah smiled at that. "Well, come on then, what are we waiting for? Don't we have Demons to fight?"



WHILE SARAH WAS MOSTLY healed by joining her lifeforce to Freya's, she still needed time and rest to fully heal, making the walk back longer than it would have otherwise been.

When they arrived back, Seph was waiting for them, looking relieved when she realised that Sarah was fine.

Freya helped Sarah down onto one of the beds in the room, though Sarah propped herself up, rather than lying down.

"I have been thinking while you were gone," Seph said, once Sarah was settled. "About our approach to regrouping our forces now that there's no chance of a miracle coming to help us."

Freya took the jab for what it was. Seph had never believed that Juni and Ku could help them.

“Freya,” Seph continued, “I think we both know that you didn’t just run from the throne. You have never been comfortable with who you are. Whenever anyone mentions your parents, you run from the topic.”

Freya had to admit that she was right there, but she had her reasons. There wasn’t one consistent story about her parents. Their friends swore that they were good people, those who were once loyal to the Rebel Queen called them tyrants, most common people had feared the Usurper - her grandfather - and had extended that fear to her parents.

Freya wasn’t sure what to believe. She was just happy to go along with Seph’s idea of using her as a stabilising force in the kingdom. Especially when it had meant keeping Lord Uther from power.

Seph gave her an understanding smile, and Freya figured that her turmoil must have been clear on her face.

“You don’t have to be them,” Seph assured her. “But you cannot run from them. You cannot run from your heritage.”

Seph pulled something from her satchel at that, and it took a moment for Freya to recognise it.

Her mother’s crown.

She had never worn it. She had always chosen to avoid a crown. But she knew that her avoidance had earned her some scorn. People thought that she hadn’t taken her role seriously.

“It’s yours,” Seph told her, holding it out for her to take. “All of this is pointless if you don’t commit.”

Freya nodded, knowing that Seph was right. And yet, her hand wouldn’t move to take the crown.

“Hey,” Sarah said from the bed, drawing her attention. “You’ve got this.”

Freya’s hand unfroze at Sarah’s words.

She wasn’t alone anymore.

She reached out, taking the crown in her hand. It was heavier than it looked, but Freya placed it on her head regardless, confident that she could handle the weight.



Book Six: Enhanced

The prologue of this book follows a rape survivor in the months following her attack.

As always, the prologue gives historical context to the world that the Freya Snow series is set in, but it is not vital to the understanding and enjoyment of the main story.

(After all, Freya doesn't get to read them.)

If you would like to skip forward to the main story, follow [this link](#), or use your eReader's navigation system to go to Chapter One.

F-04 woke up screaming.

She bolted upright, only to be yanked back by various wires and tubes. She moved to tear them off, but she hesitated as she recognised the sterile, white room she was in.

She was home.

“F-04,” she heard a familiar voice say. She turned to see that Doctor Hamilton had let herself into her room. “Or would you prefer Four? That’s what the others call you, isn’t it?”

Four nodded as she glanced around her room. Unfamiliar medical equipment was placed around her bed, tied to her with the tubes and wires that had held her down.

“Do you remember what happened, Four?”

Much to her despair, she did. “I died.”

The doctor gave her a reassuring smile. “Only momentarily. Most Humans in your position would have died, but you Enhanced are nothing if not resilient. We have, however, been keeping you in a medically induced coma while you recovered.”

“How long?”

“Three months. Tell me, how do you feel?”

“A little stiff,” Four told her with a shrug. “Nothing hurts.”

“And psychologically?”

Four stiffened, wondering if the doctor knew. Maybe they hadn’t checked. Or maybe it had been too obvious to miss.

The doctor moved closer, just a little. She gave Four a sympathetic look, but it was thankfully not a pitying one. “How much do you remember of your mission?”

“It was a trap,” Four said. “D-10 was killed by the rune they used to paralyse me. E-09 took a different route. I didn’t see what happened to her.”

“She’s fine. She was the one who brought you back home.”

Four nodded, grateful to her friend. It would have been safer to leave her.

“What happened after you were paralysed?”

“A Demon appeared. A lord, probably, given his attire.”

“Did he do anything?”

“He used his magic to torture me. He was looking for the usual information.”

“Did you give him anything?”

Four shook her head. “Just the information we already knew they had. Nothing more.”

The doctor nodded, giving her a praising smile, but it faded quickly, telling Four exactly what she was going to ask next.

“And after the torture?”

Four found her fingers digging into the flesh of her arm hard enough to draw blood. “He said that he was going to kill me, but he hesitated. He said I was too pretty to waste, even for a Human. Then he raped me.”

The doctor looked a little disquieted and Four wondered if she had been too blunt. Growing up with the other Enhanced had given her a strange sense of what was appropriate to say. She had learned that much in her brief stints outside with the rest of the Human forces.

“After that he killed me,” Four continued. “Or attempted to, I suppose.”

The doctor nodded. “You’ve been scheduled to have appointments with Doctor Talbot to assess your mental well being after this incident.”

Four’s blood ran cold at the idea of being found incapable of continuing her work. It was what she had been made for. “I’m fine.”

“I’m sure you will be, but this is standard procedure after any serious injury. Not to mention, you may need help processing what I’m about to tell you.”

“Why? What’s wrong?”

“While you were sleeping, our tests of you found an anomaly. You were pregnant.”

“Were?” Four asked as she found her hand wandering to her lower stomach.

“It was decided that the event was likely too traumatic for you, so we removed the foetus and implanted it in one of the prototype artificial gestation chambers. The results of the accelerated gestation have been quite promising.”

“Is it safe?”

“You worry for the safety of the child?”

“For the safety of everyone here! It’s a Demon.”

“It hasn’t even been born yet, and the information it could give us on both Demonic makeup and how Enhanced characteristics present in a naturally conceived second-generation will be invaluable.

“You, of course, don’t have to be anywhere near the subject. It is safely locked away in one of the labs. I am merely telling you so that you’re fully informed of everything that has happened to your body, and the use of your genetic material.”

Four nodded, the information not quite sinking in. They were deliberately keeping a Demon in the facility because they thought they could control it.

They were wrong.



“YOU DON’T HAVE TO DO this,” E-09 told her for the thousandth time.

“I know,” Four assured her. “But... I keep having nightmares. It gets loose and kills everyone.”

“Four, I’ve told you, it’s harmless.”

“I know, but I have to see it for myself. To be sure.”

Eoni, as E-09 was known to her friends, led her through to the labs.

Four never ventured to the labs of her own volition. There was never any need for her to. While as intelligent as any of her batch-siblings, Four had never had an interest in the work being done. Not to mention the way the scientists who worked there looked at her. Her teachers and doctors treated her just as her batch-siblings did - like she was a person. The scientists, on the other hand, looked at her like something from a petri dish. They would occasionally make comments about the Enhanced that they encountered, usually taking note of which genes they should keep for the next generation, and which they should discard.

It was unsettling to have someone comment on her like that. Two of the scientists had once gotten into a spirited debate as to whether or not she was too tall. One felt that it made her unattractive, while the other had argued that it made her a better fighter.

Four wasn't quite sure how a couple of inches either way made any difference, but the argument had continued even after she had left the room.

She's a little on the lanky side, isn't she? Her limbs are too much for her body. We should try to eliminate those genes.

This one has good skin, doesn't she? Clear, and the melanin content is just right. Not too dark, but she doesn't burn easily.

She's not got much shape to her. Where are the breasts and hips? She might as well be a boy. If we do go through with testing a natural-born next generation, she should be struck from the lists.

That's a good nose. Small and cute. We should increase the use of those genes.

Her strength is perfectly average for her batch. There's room for improvement, but it's not so bad to keep her from duty. Her stami-

na, on the other hand, is excellent. We should try to replicate it in the next batch.

She pushed her thoughts away as Eoni led her through the labs, not wanting to accidentally let on that the scientists made her nervous.

If not for them, she wouldn't be there, after all.

"It's just in here," Eoni told her before leading her into a small room.

There was a desk at one end of the room with a computer and a few pieces of equipment that Four didn't recognise. At the other end of the room was a crib made of a mix of white and clear plastic, inside of which was a baby.

Four hadn't been exactly sure what she was expecting.

In her dreams, it was never consistent.

Sometimes it had black scales and wings and glowing red eyes, with sharp teeth and claws that would rip her skin apart.

Sometimes it was made entirely of inky black smoke that would rise up to choke her.

Sometimes it was a pile of small bones that somehow moved on their own, drenched in blood. Blood was flowing from the eye sockets of the skull, flowing and flowing until everyone drowned.

Never was it a perfectly normal looking baby.

A little on the pale side, sure, and his dark brown eyes were almost crimson in the florescent lights, but there was no blood or bones or claws or teeth.

Someone had put them in a green babygown, styled to make them look like a frog.

She turned to Eoni, unable to look at the baby any longer.

It was smiling at her.

"See?" Eoni said. "He's not going to do any damage to anyone. Well, unless he throws up on them..."

She reached over, picking him up and holding him to her chest.

Four averted her eyes once more, back to the crib. She noticed that there was a sign on the side that looked as if it had once read DEMON/ENHANCED SUBJECT 001. Someone had taken a marker to the sign, however, scribbling out everything except for DEMON and changing the E to an A.

“Damon?” Four asked.

Eoni shrugged, looking a little sheepish. “Well, Demon/Enhanced Subject Zero-Zero-One was a bit of a mouthful.”

Four blinked. It was silly, and very Eoni, but she couldn’t quite wrap her head around it.

They had given each other names as they had grown up - names beyond their designations - as a bonding exercise. The scientists had allowed it because it strengthened the bonds between the Enhanced, allowing them to work better together.

Why would Eoni do that with this test subject?

A biological compulsion, she reasoned after a while. Eoni must have had an instinctual reaction to the baby that clouded her judgement. It made sense, Four supposed. Eoni had always had a nurturing nature. Their monitors always relied on her to take care of the other Enhanced around her.

“Do you want to hold him?” Eoni asked.

“No,” Four said quickly.

“Are you sure? Maybe if you do, you’ll realise that he’s not dangerous.”

Four just shook her head, folding her arms tightly across her chest.

“All right,” Eoni relented, putting the baby back in the crib. “But just... spend a little time with him. Please. Just because we never had parents doesn’t mean that he shouldn’t have any.”

Four suppressed a sigh. She didn't see why Eoni couldn't just fill that role if she was already so invested. But she knew that she would never hear the end of it if she didn't at least make a show of bonding with the baby.

She moved towards the crib, entirely unsure of what she was supposed to do.

Before she had to figure it out, the alarm blared, the lights turning red.

"An attack?" Four asked, disbelieving. They had been cut off from the outside world since just after Four had returned. None of their superiors had told any of the Enhanced why, but there was definitely something going on outside.

Eoni frowned. "The shields should still be holding."

"Well, they were only a prototype."

Eoni nodded. "You should stay here. You're still not cleared for combat and we can't let Damon fall into enemy hands. There's too much they could learn from him."

Four nodded, agreeing with that much at least.

Eoni ran out leaving Four with a now screaming child.

Four sighed, cursing the alarm.

She really didn't want to pick up the baby, but the crying cut into her like knives.

She knew that it was a basic biological reaction. Babies crying was supposed to be distressing. That was how babies survived.

Of course, knowing that didn't stop it from irritating her.

She didn't have much time to worry over it, however, as she started to hear screams from the labs beyond, answering her question as to whether or not they were under attack.

She looked back at the baby, her mind running at a million miles a minute as she thought through her options.

There was only one exit. One exit with screaming beyond. The labs weren't built with escape routes in mind, for which Four cursed the designers. It was a scientist buffet for any magical assholes who saw fit to raid the place.

But then, the labs had never meant to expand into the bases the way they had. That had come later, when they had found the key to fighting in DNA.

She could hide, Four figured. Under the desk was the only spot, though, and she would be found for sure.

The baby, on the other hand...

If the enemy got their hands on the baby, it would provide them with the same tactical advantage that the scientists had been trying to glean from it. Information on how Demon and Enhanced DNA interacted. Information on Enhanced DNA in general...

Enhanced DNA didn't keep. Something the scientists had done made it so that it degraded within an hour of death.

The baby was only of use to them alive.

Four had killed before. Plenty of times. That was the nature of war.

And this *thing* was the result of what that monster had done to her.

It would grow up to be just like them.

But looking at it, she didn't see a smoke monster, or black scales, or a blood soaked skeleton...

She just saw a baby.

In that moment, she wished that the scientists had been a little more thorough in stripping away her humanity.

"Shut up, shut up, shut up," she muttered to the baby as she moved it from the crib. This would all be for nought if the screaming gave them away.

Thankfully, the baby seemed to have worn itself out; as Four picked it up, the crying stopped.

She moved it over to the desk, placing it in one of the drawers so that it couldn't be seen, and then stood between it and the door.

She would stop as many of them as she could and, if she was lucky, they would actually kill her this time, before any of them got ideas.



Chapter One

Freya cursed as she was thrown back, glad for the soft grass beneath her to cushion her fall.

The Demon who had struck her advanced quickly, and Freya glared, her anger causing Energy to dance across her arms. She was not having a good day...

Before she could shift behind the Demon and give him a piece of her mind, however, he was lifted into the air by a golden rope of light wrapping around his torso. It hoisted him up, before smashing him right back down, several feet from Freya. The grass around him jumped up into the air, and he groaned. Freya doubted that he was getting back up.

She looked over to the source of the golden rope to see her friend Mel, sitting in her wheelchair with a smug look on her face, alongside her other friend, Sarah.

“Told you you couldn’t take five on your own,” Mel said.

Freya huffed. “I had him!” she protested, making sure to sign as well as speak so that Sarah could understand as well.

Mel shook her head. “Yeah, it did *not* look that way.”

Freya rolled her eyes. “You know, I got on just fine before you two showed up.”

“So you keep telling us,” Mel replied, as Sarah retracted her staff to a wand and made her way over to Freya.

“I’m surprised you’re not out just from blood loss,” Sarah told her as she inspected her wounds, moving her wand over

them to close them up. Freya stood as still as she could, allowing Sarah to work.

“Yeah, I still don’t know how that works,” Freya signed once Sarah was finished. “Maybe Angels just have more blood?” She shrugged. “I’m just glad that they put all this grass up on top of the shopping centre roof. It makes for a much more comfortable landing.”

Sarah nodded in agreement. “I believe it’s part of the city’s CO2 reduction scheme.”

“So, are we done with hunting Demons for the night?” Mel asked as Freya made her way over to the unconscious Demon and cuffed him with some runed shackles she had been given by Lady Caroline, a Demon noble she worked with to keep the city in line.

“Why? Haven’t you mostly been sitting back to see how many Demons I could take?” Freya joked.

Mel rolled her eyes. “Only for that last group. Sarah and I were helping right up until you tried to claim that you would have been happy taking all five of them if you had been alone.”

“And we have the scars to prove it,” Sarah chimed in as got to work on healing Mel’s wounds.

Freya nodded. “Okay, that’s more than fair. And I’m sure you’ll both still be complaining when you have your cut of the bounties, too.”

“Nope!” Mel said quickly. “I’m finally going to be able to afford good VR.”

Sarah shook her head at that.

“What?” Mel asked. “Don’t you want the money too? Maybe you’ll finally be able to quit that barista job.”

“I don’t want to quit,” Sarah said. “I like working there with Freya.”

Mel raised an eyebrow before turning to Freya. “And why are you still working there?”

“For the same reason as I started. I need to have some source of income that I can tell my parents about, otherwise I’ll never be able to move out.”

“Yeah, see, you keep saying that and you’re still living with them.”

Freya shrugged. “I just haven’t had time to figure out renting. It’s full of all the stuff I don’t like, like phone calls with strangers.”

Mel gave her a look that firmly said that she wasn’t buying it. “I think that you just don’t like the idea of leaving your parents behind.”

“Okay, let’s speculate on Freya’s parental issues another day,” Sarah interjected. “She and I have work in the morning.”

“Speaking of,” Freya said, shifting her weight from one leg to the other, “I need a favour.”

“Sure, what do you need?”

“My parents are stuck without a babysitter tomorrow because *somebody*,” she glared at Mel, “up and quit with very little warning.”

Mel shrugged. “I don’t need the money anymore, and hunting Demons means that I no longer keep a regular sleep schedule. Seriously, I have no idea how you operate on so little...”

“So what’s the favour?” Sarah asked.

“Can Amy come and sit in the cafe tomorrow while I work? I promise, she’ll sit quietly in the corner with her tablet.”

“All right,” Sarah agreed with a nod. “If it’s that urgent.”

“Thank you,” Freya said with a grin before they headed off home, Freya to her parents’ and Sarah and Mel to their coven.



AFTER A FEW HOURS, it became clear to Freya that a cafe wasn't the best place for a three-year-old.

Of course, that should have been obvious to anyone, but she'd really hoped that she would have been able to keep her promise to Sarah.

Amy had managed to be her usual, well-behaved self at first, but it had only lasted the first couple of hours. Then she had started to get *bored*.

"Never again," Sarah signed after Amy ran into the back room to hide on the promise that they would try to find her after counting to ten.

Sarah was Deaf, so she and Freya mostly communicated in sign language. Of course, that just frustrated Amy, who hated feeling left out.

"Agreed," Freya signed back.

"Seriously, I get all of the exercise I need from helping you out with your rogue Demon hunting."

"Yeah, tell me about it."

"Speaking of, I know you said you didn't need us for the next couple of nights, but I'd be more than happy to go out if you are."

Freya shook her head. "It's all right. Really, Sarah, I have it handled."

Sarah frowned. "Is that your way of saying that you'll be doing one of your secret missions for Fate?"

Freya sighed internally. Sarah and Mel were Witches - well, Mel was a Witch-Mermaid hybrid - from the local Light coven, as well as her closest (only) friends.

Occasionally, but ever increasingly, Demons were going rogue from the traditional hierarchy, where all Demons served a noble Demon house which was in turn responsible for making sure that they were looked after and kept to the laws. One of the many goals of the rogue Demons seemed to be killing Freya.

How they had figured out that she was an Angel before she did, she had no idea, but the running theory was that they were just pretending to be rogue, while working in the employ of Lord Uther, who saw Freya as a threat to his son's position as the chosen heir of the Demon King.

Freya was still annoyed about the fact that she had somehow become embroiled in magical politics, despite her best efforts to avoid it.

After the first few times killing the Demons who came after her in self-defence, she realised that many of them had bounties on their heads, which she'd started collecting on.

Sarah and Mel now helped out when it came to stopping not only the rogue Demons that wanted to kill Freya, but also the ones that wanted to harm Humans.

On top of dealing with the rogue Demons, however, Freya also occasionally did jobs for Fate. They were usually a bit random, with no explanation for why she was doing them, but she made a lot of money for not that much effort, so she didn't really mind.

But her working on her own every so often over the past couple of months hadn't actually been for Fate.

"Something like that," Freya signed back, not wanting to outright lie to her friend.

"Freya... Mel and I are worried. It's obvious that you're keeping something from us, and not just the usual on Fate's orders stuff either."

Freya sighed, wondering when she had gotten so bad at lying. "It's nothing to worry about. I just... I'm working with a lot of different contacts, and we all know how Rosaline feels about Dark magic users. I would rather not get banned from the coven again."

"You're working with Demons?"

“Just the Royal Cleaners when our needs align. Nothing serious.”

Sarah gave her a look that suggested that she didn't quite believe her. “You know that the Demon nobles will want to use your power for their own gain, right? A Dark Angel after so many years would shift the balance of power.”

“I know, Sarah. Trust me, I know. I just have a contact in the Royal Cleaners. That's all. And they're as neutral as a Demon organisation can get. Their only agenda is keeping magic a secret, which, let's face it, we should all be co-operating on.”

“You've been doing a lot of secretive work for it just being a contact.”

Freya sighed. Her every instinct told her to keep things to herself, but if she couldn't trust Sarah, who could she trust?

“Fine,” Freya relented. “A couple of Demons have gone missing recently. I promised to look into it for Lady Caroline.”

“Lady Caroline?”

“The head of the Royal Cleaners.”

“A Demon noble? That's your contact?”

“She helped me to cure you last year when you were cursed,” Freya told her. “And she's not told her superiors that I'm working with her.”

Sarah seemed a little more accepting at that information, but not completely free of worry.

“I'm ready!” Amy yelled at them through the door from the back room.

“Amy's getting restless,” Freya signed, just as a customer entered.

“I'll deal with it, you see to your girlfriend,” Sarah signed back.

Freya glanced to the door, blushing as soon as she realised exactly who had entered.

“She’s not my girlfriend,” she signed back to Sarah.

“Only because you haven’t asked her yet.”

“Yeah, because knowing my luck she’ll be straight and then it’ll all get awkward.”

“Creator, I honestly cannot take how oblivious you are. She flirts with you *relentlessly*. Ask. Her. Out.”

“She’s just being overly-friendly because she’s American.”

Sarah rolled her eyes at that before heading into the back room, leaving Freya alone.

Freya turned back to the Amazonian beauty who was now approaching the counter.

She was as tall as Freya, if not an inch or so taller, with light brown skin and long, silky black hair that she often tied up into an adorably messy ponytail. Her jeans and vest top hung comfortably over her curves, and Freya was sure that she dressed for herself over anyone else. Not that she needed to dress for anyone else. Freya was sure that she could make a bin bag look good...

But it was her smile that got Freya. Her full lips were almost constantly grinning. She seemed to radiate happiness like the sun radiated light.

“Hey,” she greeted as she got to the counter, with an American accent that was more than a little jarring in the northern English city.

“Hey,” Freya said with a smile. “Do you want your usual?”

She nodded. “That would be amazing. I have had just the worst day at work.” She rolled her eyes, sweeping her hair out of her face, and yet she kept smiling.

“Oh? What happened?”

“One of the sites we were looking into for a refurbishment project fell through. The British planning system is such a mess...”

“Feeling homesick?”

She snorted. “No, the system there was worse. Plus, I don’t know that I would be allowed back. I moved here after a breakup and, well, I think she took the country. Joke’s on her, though, because I got the PlayStation.”

Freya laughed a little at that, her heart skipping a beat at her referring to her previous partner as a she.

“One chai latte,” Freya said as she passed over her drink.

She passed her a filled in loyalty card.

“I guess it’s on the house, then,” Freya said, her smile remaining firmly in place, despite her usual tendency towards frowns. She pulled out another card. “Here, why don’t you tell me your name, and I’ll write it on. So that Sarah or I can write it on your order when it’s busy.”

“Alex,” she said with a grin.

Freya smiled as she wrote the name on the card.

“Do I get to know yours?” Alex asked as Freya passed the card back over.

“Freya.”

Alex grinned, her gaze dropping just a little. “I, um, well, I come in here a lot and I really like the coffee, so I don’t want to make things awkward. But I also like you and think you’re cute, so my number’s on the back of the card I gave you. What you do with it is up to you.”

She left with a little wave.

Freya’s brain didn’t boot back up until Sarah returned from the back room with Amy.

“Did she leave already?” Sarah asked.

Freya nodded. “But she gave me her number. And her name. She’s called Alex. She said she thought I was *cute*.”

“What happened?” Amy asked, annoyed that she couldn’t understand what was being said.

“Freya got herself a girlfriend,” Sarah told her, her charmed glasses having informed her of what Amy had said, her voice teasing.

Freya felt ice rush down her spine at that. “First of all, I don’t. Second of all, Amy isn’t supposed to know that because my parents don’t know that I’m bi,” she signed so that Amy wouldn’t understand.

Sarah’s face immediately fell at that. “Oh Creator, Freya, I’m sorry, I didn’t think.”

“Clearly!” Freya took a deep breath before turning back to Amy. “She means that I made a new friend.”

The three-year-old seemed happy enough with that correction, nodding before heading back to the back room.

“I really am sorry, Freya,” Sarah signed once she was gone. “I just forgot that your parents don’t know. You’re so open with it...”

“Yeah, with you and Mel. Look, my parents are great in a lot of ways, but they complain when contestants on singing competition shows don’t change the pronouns in the songs they sing. Margaret once went off on one when I joked about cutting all my hair off because she said it would make me look like a lesbian. Ryan still thinks using ‘gay’ as an insult is acceptable. So, yeah, I’m not really down for the whole trouble of being open with them. If I get a girlfriend, and we’re serious, I’ll think about it then. Not before.”

“What about Alex? Are you going to tell them when you and her are serious?”

“I... I’m not even sure that I’m going to call her.”

“Why not?”

“She’s Human.”

Sarah gave a grim look of understanding. Dating Humans wasn’t advised for magical beings. They were too fragile, and you’d have to lie to them constantly. The laws surrounding secre-

cy were about the only ones ever enforced, and breaking them often meant death.

“It’s just... You haven’t dated anyone since I’ve known you.”

“You haven’t either.”

“I don’t have the time. Between my job here, being the head healer of my coven, helping you to hunt rogue Demons, ballet, and university, I barely have time to sleep. You, on the other hand, even with working for Fate and Lady Caroline, could manage to squeeze in a girlfriend.”

“I know, I just... You haven’t dated a Human before, Sarah. I have. It’s too difficult to control your magic when you, well, you know... I don’t want to accidentally hurt her.”

“You won’t.”

“Tell that to my mother and grandmother.” They had both accidentally killed Humans they had been close to, and it had broken both of them.

Sarah sighed. “All right, I guess you’re right. It’s a shame, though.”

Freya nodded, very much in agreement with that sentiment.



Chapter Two

Freya glanced around before checking her phone to make sure she had arrived at the address Caroline had given her.

It seemed right. The Victorian terrace looked like any other student house in the area, but it had apparently been occupied by a group of Vampyre-Demon hybrids that had banded together out of a shared feeling of isolation from both the Vampyre and Demon communities. Lady Caroline had kept in contact with them, and had told Freya that they had been more than happy with her keeping an eye on them because she could access greater resources than they could on their own if they had any trouble.

And then they had gone silent the day before.

Caroline was so swamped that she hadn't been able to go herself, and she was reluctant to send any of her Cleaners in case there was real trouble, since they weren't combat trained for the most part.

So, she had asked Freya to go. Freya was more than happy to check it out for her. Lady Caroline had started dealing with punishment and rehabilitation for the rogue Demons that Freya encountered, which finally gave Freya an option other than scaring them into running away or fighting them to the death.

She figured she owed Caroline for that.

Freya knocked on the door of the house, but received no reply.

After several minutes and no response, even to her pounding on the door, she decided to shift inside, hoping that she hadn't just happened to come at a bad time.

"Hello?" she called once she was inside, but received no response.

The hallway she had shifted into was small, with nothing but doors and stairs, but the first thing she noticed was that a couple of the wooden poles holding the banister up were splintered violently, as if someone had given them a good kick from on the stairs.

Freya moved to the first room of the house, finding a living room-dining room combo.

The dining chairs had been knocked over, along with a tall lamp from the corner of the room, its bulb smashed so that glass littered the floor.

There were three half-eaten plates of food on the table, left to go cold.

She moved from that room to the next, which turned out to be a bedroom. The computer was still running, and the desk chair had been knocked over.

The kitchen, in contrast, looked perfectly normal.

She ventured upstairs, finding three more bedrooms, two of which still had computers running. The third had a laptop sitting on the floor, the screen cracked and the battery dead.

The bathroom told a similar story. The wooden door-frame had given way around the lock, leaving the door wide open. The floor was covered in water, and the bath was full, a clean set of clothes and towel sat atop the closed toilet lid.

Freya kept going up the stairs to the attic, finding two more rooms with another left-on computer in one and a toppled pile of books on the floor of the other.

She sighed, unsure what to make of the house. The lock in the bathroom spoke of forced entry, but the front door hadn't. Everybody left in a hurry, and not without struggle, but there was no blood. No clawed off scraps of fabric or hair.

Freya spun around as she felt a flicker of magic, expecting to see the intruders return.

She saw nothing, however, prompting her to open her sense of magic further. There was definitely a magical presence, but it was faint. As if poorly masked.

Freya followed it to the wardrobe of one of the attic rooms, sliding the door back to find a young girl huddled away.

"Hey," Freya said as she kneeled down so that she was on the same level as the girl.

The girl flinched away from her, visibly shaking.

"It's okay," Freya assured her. "I'm here to help. I promise, I came here to find out what happened and help if I could."

The girl looked over her knees at that to evaluate Freya.

After a moment, she nodded, moving to get up.

Freya moved back, allowing the girl to climb out of the wardrobe.

"Here," Freya said, leading the girl over to the edge of the bed, grabbing the blanket to wrap it around her shoulders. "Can you tell me what happened here? Where is everyone?"

"I don't know," the girl whispered, the shaking starting up once more. "I just... My sister was helping me with my English homework and then... It happened so quickly. These *monsters* in hard black armour and masks came rushing in. My sister hid me just in time, but they dragged everyone else away. I wasn't sure if they'd gone, so I just... stayed put."

Freya nodded. "It's okay. I have some friends that can help you." Freya stood up straight and turned to get a better look of

the room, to see if there was anything she should do before they left.

There was a plink of cracking glass, causing Freya to spin back around. The window had a small hole punched through it. She turned back to the girl, who had fallen back on the bed, a dart lodged in her neck.

“What the-” Freya muttered, only to cut herself off in alarm as the girl’s magical signature just disappeared.

Freya checked again and again but each time told her the same thing.

It was gone.

She was gone.

Freya spun around, her skin crackling with Dark Energy, causing the light above her to flicker as she tracked the path of the dart by eye. She knew that it wouldn’t be accurate, but it had to be close enough. She shifted to the rooftop that the dart had most likely come from.

She arrived, however, to find nothing.

She extended her senses to the building below, but it was empty, the tenants presumably out for the night.

The houses either side were also either empty or only home to sleeping Humans. No one even awake to be any threat.

She pushed her senses as far as she could, shifting around the area for the next few minutes, but there was nothing.

Freya felt hollow, Energy crackling around her once more as her stomach tightened.

Someone had killed that girl right in front of her and she hadn’t even been able to find them.

What good is being an Angel if I can’t protect a single girl?

Her throat closed up at that thought, but she pushed it aside. It wasn’t going to help.

She shifted back to the attic, figuring that the body and dart would be useful at least.

But, when she arrived, the room was empty.

As if the girl had never been there.



FREYA PACED AROUND Caroline's office as she told the older Demon exactly what had happened.

Caroline, to her credit, just listened silently, her expression darkening the more Freya said.

Once Freya was done, Caroline sighed.

Freya just kept pacing.

"These disappearances are... *concerning*."

Freya snorted. "I would say they're a little more than that."

Caroline nodded in agreement. "It's the efficiency that disturbs me. Whenever a group of magical beings comes together, it invites challenge. It's not unusual to lose people to fighting. But it's normally messy, analogous to a gang war. This... This was like a military operation. Clean and efficient."

"Who could have done such a thing?"

"That, I'm afraid, is the million pound question. No one group in the magical community is exactly in a position to pull off such an operation. We Demons have *maybe* recovered enough from the War, but it would have had to be the Crown, which it obviously isn't."

Freya raised an eyebrow. "That might be obvious to you, but not so much to me."

"Ah yes, because the smartest thing for the Crown to do if they were attacking their own people would be to get you, the most powerful being around with connections to even more powerful beings like Fate, to investigate."

Freya nodded, having to admit that Caroline had a point. And she had certainly given Freya no reason to distrust her before. “What about Lord Uther?” she asked. “Could he be behind the attacks?”

“It’s not his M.O., not to mention that even he would struggle to pull together the resources for this kind of thing. No, I don’t see how he would benefit.”

“We still probably shouldn’t rule him out, though.”

Lady Caroline nodded. “Not completely, no, but we shouldn’t focus all of our attention on him. Or any at all until we’re sure. He could make our lives hell if he catches on before we can prove anything.”

“He’s already trying to kill me.”

“True, but you’ve already seen how bad it can be when he goes after you with minimal effort. Do you really want to see him go all out?”

Freya felt her stomach churn at the thought. She had reached the point where dealing with the rogue Demons Lord Uther sent after her was a simple chore. But it hadn’t always been that way, and thinking back to those early days was enough to chill Freya’s blood.

“All right, so how do we go about finding other leads?”

Caroline sighed, sitting back in her chair. “Honestly? We wait for them to attack again, and I try to warn as many people as possible to keep them on high alert. There’s nothing more we *can* do. I’ve talked with my friends in the police and every single crime scene was clean. Obviously *something* happened, but there was no evidence of any use. No hair, no blood, no fingerprints... It’s as if no one was there.”

“So we just wait?”

“Unfortunately, yes. I’ll wrangle some more resources. Maybe some Dark Witches can find something we missed... I’ll

ask the King for more people as well. He might not like it, but I can't deal with this while we're so short-staffed."

"Do you think that you'll be able to keep me off of the radar of your higher-ups if you're getting more resources from them?"

Caroline gave her a reassuring smile. "Don't worry, I'm going to keep doing everything I can to keep your involvement quiet. I'm not going to risk our working relationship by outing you.

"Though, I've said it before and I'll say it again, your reluctance when it comes to them is misplaced. They're not bad people, Freya, and you're entitled to your Demon heritage. Rejecting it as much as you do isn't healthy."

Freya shrugged. She was used to this argument now. She had been hearing it constantly for the past year. Lady Caroline meant well, she knew. She had seen a lot of hybrids buckle under the pressure of trying to suppress one half of their nature in an attempt to find a home.

The thing was, Freya didn't really have a home.

She was a magical nomad, as far as she was concerned. She answered to no one but herself and had friends who were both Light and Dark.

If she was seen to get too close to the Demon Crown, it wouldn't matter if she wasn't truly beholden to them, people would name her Dark Angel without her say, and her Light friends - including Mel and Sarah's coven - would become wary of her.

"I won't be used in political scheming, even just through association," Freya said.

Lady Caroline nodded. "All right, all right," she relented. "I guess that's it for now. I'll let you know when I have more information."



Chapter Three

H*ey. It's Freya. I realised you wouldn't know that. Coffee girl.*

“Are you trying to melt your phone with your eyes?” Mel asked, drawing Freya’s attention from her messenger app. “Because I don’t think laser eyes are an Angel power. Though they probably should be...”

“She’s waiting on a text from Alex,” Sarah explained, having just finished cleaning the coffee machine.

Mel jumped up and down with excitement, almost falling off her stool. “You mean you finally texted her?”

Freya nodded, a little sheepishly. “I... I figured texting couldn’t hurt, right? I can’t hurt someone through text.”

“Right, but you do know that the point of texting is for it to evolve into something else, right? Like a date.”

Freya groaned. “I know, I know, but I can only rationalise this one step at a time.”

Mel gave her a sympathetic look at that. “Freya, I know that what happened with Damon was really painful for you, but it was three years ago. You’ve grown since then. You’re more sure of your power now, and you have a better handle on your emotions. I think you could at least give this a try before writing it off completely.”

“I don’t know, Mel. Like I said, one step at a time.”

Freya's phone buzzed in her hand before she could say anything else.

Yay! You texted! I was afraid I'd have to start avoiding you and your delicious coffee.

Freya smiled at that, quickly texting back.

You definitely don't have to avoid the cafe. Unless my friends staring at us and grinning would weird you out...

As soon as she sent the text, she started panicking, thinking that her joke wouldn't land, but she didn't have to wait long for a reply.

Ha! Yeah, your co-worker would always conspicuously move you to the till whenever I came in.

"You know, you are on the clock right now," Sarah reminded her.

"Sorry," Freya replied, putting her phone away.

"I was teasing, but, yeah, I would have gotten annoyed if you'd kept texting all day."

"Aw, come on," Mel said. "It's cute. Plus, Freya has spent enough time criticising my relationship with Ally, I want to prove her a hypocrite."

Sarah bit her lip nervously and Freya struggled to suppress a snort. It was evidently clear to anyone who knew Mel and Ally that they were toxic for each other. But they were the only lesbians of the same age in the coven, so they just kept on gravitating back to each other. It drove Sarah and Freya up the wall, but there wasn't really anything they could do about it other than gripe.

"I am less bothered about Freya's relationship than these disappearances," Sarah said, wisely deciding to change the subject.

Mel shrugged. "The disappearances are only happening among Demon hybrids, though. They're always fighting each other and Werewolves and Vampyres. They've probably just

stepped up their tactics from the gang war stuff they've done in the past."

"I'm not so sure," Sarah signed with a sigh. "I spoke with Lois about it, since some of her coven are Demon hybrids, and she doesn't think it could be in-fighting. She... She got twitchy..."

Mel nodded gravely. "I think everyone got twitchy. But it's not... It couldn't be. We're in a different timeline!"

"I know, but it's just so similar..."

Freya looked between her two friends, feeling as if she was missing something. "Wait, what's similar? What does the timeline change have to do with anything?"

Mel and Sarah exchanged a significant look.

"Some of the details that you gave... They're very similar to how the Enhanced worked in the Seventh Alternate Timeline," Mel explained.

Freya blinked as she processed what Mel had said. "But the War never happened. If the War never happened, then there can't be Enhanced."

"I know, but it's still eerie."

Freya shook her head. "It sounds like everyone still just has collective PTSD. There's no way that they can be here. The timeline shift worked. The War is long over and it technically never happened."

"I know, Freya," Mel said, understanding in her tone. "But there is reason to be paranoid, given how bad things got. And this is *very* similar..."

Sarah shivered. "Okay, let's just talk about something else."



FREYA WENT BACK OUT on patrol that night. Usually she was just on the look-out for rogue Demons causing trouble, but this time she made sure to stay around the city centre, knowing

that that's where the most covens, nests, and packs were clustered.

The night, however, remained silent, leaving her to mull over her earlier conversation with Sarah and Mel.

After an hour or so, she found that she was just thinking in circles.

She decided that she simply didn't know enough about the War to make any definitive judgements, so she called on Amber to see if she had any answers.

Her guardian appeared next to her as she wandered over the business school buildings on the university campus, on her way to check in on the uni wolf pack.

"You okay?" Amber asked. That was usually how she greeted Freya, and the Angel couldn't blame her. She had a nasty habit of only calling Amber when she was in real trouble. It wasn't intentional, she was just forgetful and didn't have the best sense of how long it had been since she had last seen somebody.

"Yeah," Freya assured her, "there's just been some trouble that I hoped you could shed light on."

"What kind of trouble?"

"Disappearances. Whole groups of magical beings just disappearing over night. Apparently people in black armour and masks are dragging them from their homes. It's... scarily efficient."

Amber seemed to pale. "Does anyone know who is behind these attacks?"

Freya shrugged. "Not really. Lady Caroline is doing her best to look into it, but she has no real leads. Mel and Sarah, however, seemed to think that it was the work of Enhanced. I said that can't be right, since my mother corrected the timeline so that there were no more Enhanced, but then I thought maybe it was

copycats or something, looking to use the spectre of the War to rattle people.”

“Freya, your mother may have corrected the timeline, but the Enhanced had been fighting magic for a long time. I wouldn’t be surprised if their technology allowed some of them to slip through the cracks.”

“So, wait, you’re saying that there *are* Enhanced in this timeline?”

Amber sighed. “I’m just saying that you shouldn’t be so quick to rule it out.”

Freya folded her arms at that, feeling the chill of the night air. “So, what? The War will start up again?”

“I doubt it, Freya. We’re stronger now, and they will be weaker. I doubt many are here, even if some are. If they are attacking, why now? Why after so long? Maybe they can’t reconcile being in a timeline without the War. Maybe it’s a suicide run. I doubt we’ll see anything even close to the devastation of the War.”

Freya nodded, feeling a little better at that, though not entirely.

“Though you should be on guard if you encounter an Enhanced. They have the ability to nullify your magic, no matter how powerful you are.”

Freya’s blood froze at the thought. She could fight, sure, but she mostly relied on her magic to keep her safe. If she was no longer able to do that...

The thought of being so vulnerable made her shiver.

“I’ll be careful,” she assured Amber.

Her guardian left at that, allowing Freya to refocus on her patrol.

The uni wolf pack seemed fine, so she decided to make her way down to the quayside, sensing for magic along the way.

Despite her sensing, however, she missed the faint static of someone masking their magic, allowing her to be caught completely unaware by the dagger that came to lodge itself in the side of her thigh.

“Fuck!” she yelled, struggling to stay standing as she sent a barrage of flame in the direction that the dagger had come from.

She yanked the blade from her leg, pulling a healing potion from her belt and pouring it over the wound to staunch the flow of blood.

By the time she was done, a Demon appeared in front of her.

“Oh, for the love of the Creator,” Freya muttered as she shifted behind him, throwing his dagger into his shoulder.

He howled in pain, trying to grasp at the dagger. Once he realised that it was futile, he quickly turned back to Freya, who’d used his distraction as an opportunity to catch her breath.

He turned his pain into Dark Energy, sending a large barrage at Freya.

“Shit,” Freya cursed as she rolled out of the way. Usually they couldn’t generate that much Dark Energy, given how quickly it became draining.

The next thing she knew, however, another figure had jumped down behind the Demon, whacking him over the head with a baton.

He spun around to face this new opponent, his Dark Energy flickering out as he refocused on non-magical combat.

After a few moments, Freya realised that his opponent was a woman, though her figure was flattened beneath black, tactical gear. Her jet black hair had been braided and pinned up, to keep it out of the way.

She fought with a baton in each hand, her technique flawless as she constantly kept him on the defence.

Then she spun around, letting Freya get a clear look at her face.

Alex.

Freya found her mind racing. Alex was Human. She *knew* Alex was Human. After not realising Sarah was a Witch at first, she had gotten much better about checking.

And yet, here she was, holding her own against a Demon.

Alex delivered a kick to the Demon's core, knocking him down to the ground.

Instead of advancing on him, Alex ran over to Freya, grabbing her hand.

"Run!" Alex told her as she dragged her along. "He won't stay down for long!"

Freya did as she was told, still thoroughly confused by what was going on.

Alex kept running with her, zigzagging across the rooftops of the city. After a while, they came across a rooftop car park. Alex pulled her to where a jeep was parked up against a wall, the two of them crouching into the small space.

"What are we doing here?" Freya hissed, unable to find a way to sit where she wasn't touching Alex.

As her adrenaline faded, the place where Alex had held her hand seemed unable to release the warmth of her body heat.

"Hiding," Alex told her. "The Demon will give up after a while."

"Why didn't you just kill him?"

Alex raised an eyebrow, looking a little hurt. "You really thought I would kill someone?"

"Well, I don't know, you just came out of nowhere and started going toe-to-toe with a Demon! It kind of gives me the idea that you might not be who I thought you were."

"I could say the exact same thing about you," Alex retorted.

“Okay, fair point,” Freya muttered.

“You know, all of this negativity is only going to draw him to us,” Alex said, leaning a little closer to Freya.

Freya felt her breath catch at her proximity, her heart thundering in her chest.

“Usually I just let them find me,” Freya said, her voice coming out as little more than a whisper. “Then I arrest them and let the Demons clean up their own.”

Alex gave her an appraising look as she seemed to be assimilating the new piece of information.

“Well then,” Alex said with a smile, “by all means, brood away.”

Freya glared at her. “I do not *brood*.”

Alex’s smile widened into a grin. “You kind of do.”

“Brooding implies unnecessary angst. I have just the right amount of angst for my situation, thank you very much.”

“I’m sure.”

Freya simply continued to glare, though she loosened up after just a moment as she realised that she was only proving Alex right.

Before Freya had a chance to wonder if stopping her glare was allowing Alex to win, Alex closed the gap between them, kissing her.

Freya stiffened momentarily with shock, but she quickly melted into the kiss, her hand going to the side of Alex’s neck, just beneath her hair, allowing her to feel more in control of what was happening.

Alex took that as an invitation, moving her leg over so that she was straddling Freya’s lap, her hands on her shoulder and neck to steady herself.

Freya brought her free hand to Alex’s hip as her body flooded with desire.

Alex moaned into her mouth, grinding against her so deliciously that Freya couldn't help but whimper.

Alex moved the hand on Freya's shoulder down to her breast, palming it through the thick fabric of her sports bra.

Freya gasped at the sudden move, drawing Alex closer.

They jumped apart, however, at the blare of a police siren below, both of them still acutely aware that they were being hunted.

Alex was grinning when Freya turned back to her.

"I knew I could get you to lose the frown," Alex said, causing Freya to splutter.

"Seriously?" Freya demanded. "*That* was what the kiss was about?"

"Well, that and getting the Demon to lose our trail. *You* might want to fight him, but I think I'm done for the night."

Freya rolled her eyes. "You know, this just means that I'll end up fighting him again tomorrow night. And now he knows about you and your... ability to fight Demons?"

Alex's smile faded. "Oh, would you look at the time?" she said before running off in the opposite direction, jumping down a fire escape to the street below.

Freya sighed, deciding not to follow her as her mind combed over everything that had just happened.

Alex's non-magical gear.

Her knowledge of Demons.

The way the Demon's magic spluttered out when Alex had fought him.

"Shit," Freya muttered after several moments. "She's bloody Enhanced."



Chapter Four

Freya spent all of the next morning jittery as she and Sarah worked.

She should tell Sarah about Alex, she knew. With everything going on, it wasn't safe to keep such information to herself.

But then, Alex had given her no reason to believe that she had anything to do with the disappearances. In fact, she had done the opposite. Freya probably could have taken the Demon on her own, but she would have been hurt a whole lot worse if Alex hadn't stepped in to help.

And, as much as Freya didn't want to admit it, she hadn't had a single defence up when she and Alex had been hiding. If she had wanted, Alex could have killed her without a thought.

But she hadn't. In fact, she had seemed offended that Freya had even thought that she might have killed the Demon.

She doubted she had anything to do with the disappearances. But the others probably wouldn't see it that way.

If Freya was wrong, however, keeping the truth from her friends might put them in danger.

Mel came in at lunch time, before Freya had managed to figure out a way to tell Sarah.

Mel wheeled up to the counter and hoisted herself up to her stool. There were three stools at the counter, but no one but Mel ever used them. The only reason there were three was because one for Mel on its own would look strange.

“You want a panini?” Sarah asked.

Mel nodded. “Yeah, thanks. I barely got out today, you know. Rosaline is stepping up combat training for everyone and she tried to keep me in the coven, just in case.”

“How did you convince her to let you leave?” Sarah asked.

Mel showed her a charm around her neck. “Apparently it’ll kill pretty much anyone. Enhanced, however, can survive almost any magic, so it’ll just stun them for about thirty seconds. Long enough to slit their throat.” She then indicated to a dagger at her side.

Freya frowned. “Doesn’t that seem a little extreme?”

Mel shrugged. “Well, it’s like you said yesterday, there probably aren’t any Enhanced in this timeline. But it’s better to take precautions just in case.”

“I know, but isn’t it still a little extreme to jump right to killing them? I mean, even if they’re here, it would probably be in small numbers. They’re probably not a real threat. And if they are here, and are a threat, why haven’t they attacked before now? Maybe they don’t want to restart the War.”

Mel snorted at that. “Freya, they were purpose-built to kill us. They’re not even really Human. They’re lab-created monstrosities.”

Freya turned to Sarah, hoping for a more level-head.

Sarah didn’t look comfortable with the conversation, but she eventually said, “Mel’s right, Freya. They’re born and bred to kill us. I don’t think that it’s possible for them to break from that. We’d be safer with them gone, as unpleasant as that may be.”

Freya felt her throat close up as she was faced with the reality that her two closest friends would definitely kill Alex if they found out who she really was.

Alex had done nothing to hurt them, or to indicate that she was even capable of such a thing, but they were going to kill her for what? Her genes? Because she was born different?

The thought made Freya ill on principle, and she thought her friends would know better. All three of them had genetic disabilities, after all. Mel, like many Mermaid-Human hybrids, had a genetic condition known as Cristian-Anderson Syndrome that made walking incredibly painful for her. Sarah had been born deaf. Freya was autistic.

They knew, first hand, what it felt like to have people judge them for their genetic makeup, and here they were doing exactly the same thing to Alex.

“Speaking of the Enhanced,” Mel said, “how is your investigation going, Freya?”

Freya steeled herself, her stomach turning at the thought of lying to her friends. Sarah and Mel were the only ones she’d never *had* to lie to. They knew everything about her, from her magic, to her sexuality, to the fact that she was an Angel, to her Demon-ic heritage.

But she wasn’t going to put Alex in danger until she knew more about the situation.

“Nothing has come up yet, but I’m doing everything I can to find the real culprits. I’m not going to waste my time chasing ghosts...”

Mel frowned at her. “Freya, I know it’s not likely, but you really shouldn’t treat the possibility so lightly. I know you’re strong, but even Angels can’t stand up to them.”

“She’s right,” Sarah chimed in. “You should be careful.”

Freya nodded, her frustration with them lessening with their concern. “I will,” she assured them. “I’m just not going to put them at the top of the suspect list until we even know that they’re in this timeline.”

Her phone buzzed at that, drawing her attention.

Hey, can we talk? Tonight?

She froze up a little, given how close Sarah and Mel were.

Sure. Where?

Car park from last night?

Freya frowned. Meeting away from other people couldn't be good. But then, if they *were* meeting in public, and things went south, Freya wouldn't be able to use her magic freely.

As much as Freya didn't want to kill Alex on sight, she didn't necessarily trust her.

Meeting either in public or private had downsides. And at least in private, Freya could be armed.

K, sounds good, Freya eventually texted back.

"Who are you texting?" Mel asked her in a sing-song voice that told Freya that she knew exactly who she was texting.

"Alex," Freya told her. "We have a date tonight..."



FREYA ARRIVED AT THE car park in question after a quick detour home once her shift had finished. She hadn't wanted to show up in full armour, decked out in an array of weaponry, but showing up with nothing but her magic to defend herself seemed like suicide. Especially when Alex had suppressed the magic of the Demon they had fought the night before.

So, she wore the hard leather bodice of her demonic armour, a sword at her side, though the look was softened by her jeans, Docs and leather jacket.

Her thoughts still on how easily Alex could cleave her from her magic, Freya arrived with her sword drawn, her posture tense.

Alex, on the other hand, was already waiting, wearing no armour and with no visible weapons. She was wearing jeans, but

they were accompanied by a sparkly red tube-top, a simple black jacket, and a pair of heeled boots. Even her hair was down, framing her lightly made-up face.

She definitely wasn't dressed for a fight, leaning lazily back against a concrete pillar.

Somehow, that only unnerved Freya further.

Alex pushed herself off the pillar, coming to stand upright, as she saw Freya's sword.

"Are we really going to do this?" Alex asked, rolling her eyes, though Freya didn't miss her slight frown. "Fight?"

As Freya walked forward, Alex moved, betraying her mask of nonchalance as a fake as they began to circle each other.

"That depends on you," Freya replied.

"Right. Let me guess, you ask the questions, and if you don't like my answers, you'll kill me?"

Freya's glare faltered for just a moment. Even if the others were right about Alex, Freya wasn't a killer. Not anymore.

"Ask your questions," Alex told her. "I'll answer everything truthfully."

"You're Enhanced."

"Yeah, I figured you would work it out."

Freya frowned. "In this timeline? How?"

Alex blinked, mirroring Freya's frown. "Timeline? So it was some kind of time travel, then?"

Freya nodded. "The Enhanced base here had a prisoner. She knew that she couldn't escape, so she gave her life to change the timeline so that the War never happened." There was no way that she was going to reveal that the prisoner had been her mother, but she couldn't stop her throat from tightening as she dropped her gaze slightly.

Alex nodded. "We figured it must have been something like that," she said, giving no indication that she noticed how un-

nerved Freya had been by her explanation. “I was just a baby at the time, but apparently every base received a distress call from the one here, in the city, and then communication went down. *All* communication. Once we figured out that we weren’t under attack, we sent out scouts and found the world completely different.”

Freya couldn’t help but smirk at the thought of the Enhanced so confused. “I bet that was a shock.”

Alex simply returned her smile. “I gather it wasn’t the easiest thing to come to terms with. I mean, it wasn’t just that we were fighting for so long. We were the weapons. And what do weapons do once the war is over?”

Freya brought her sword back up just an inch. “I don’t know. What *do* they do?”

Alex sighed. “Well, they don’t keep fighting if that’s what you’re worried about. Actually... We’ve just been in a kind of stasis. We were supposed to bring peace, but there was never anything put in place as to what would be done with us once that peace was achieved. I suppose, in the other timeline, there would have always been a need for Enhanced. I mean, I don’t think anyone would have trusted magical beings to police themselves after everything that happened. But that never happened here, so we’re just kind of useless.”

“So, what? You all just hang out in your bases, doing nothing?”

Alex shrugged once more. “Well, we mostly just train. We were never exactly sure how we made it into this timeline when others didn’t, but we had a new type of prototype shielding to protect us from magic. If that was what saved us, then there were other bases with that same shielding that would have made it into this timeline. That’s why I’m here. Apparently there was one nearby.”

Freya frowned. "There was one where the main city hospital is now. It didn't survive the transition."

Alex shook her head. "No, there was another, just a little out of town. Apparently this city is saturated with magic. There were more than a few Enhanced bases scattered around here to compensate."

"So, you think that there will be other Enhanced in this base?"

Alex shrugged. "Maybe. We never did get communications back up. We've spent years just travelling around North America, looking for any others, but our base is the only one that seems to have survived so far."

"What happens when you find them?"

"I don't know," Alex admitted. "I'm just supposed to report in once I know what happened, then I'll get orders on what to do next."

"And what do your orders have to say about the local magical beings?"

Alex's gaze dropped a little. "Well... Technically, I'm supposed to avoid you. But in my defence, I didn't know you had magic at first..."

"What about kidnapping magical beings?"

Alex frowned. "What?"

"There have been several disappearances in the city, all starting around the time you first started coming into the cafe. There is no evidence or witnesses left, but it is nothing if not reminiscent of the Enhanced attacks during the War."

Alex held up her hands, as if in surrender. "I swear, I have no idea about any of this. I've just been trying to figure out the exact location of the base. That info was never kept at our base."

Freya frowned. "Why not?"

“So that losing one base wouldn’t compromise the others. We had communication between them if we ever needed to contact them, but never a location.”

Freya shook her head. “I’m still not sure if I believe you.”

Alex sighed a little, her resigned gaze becoming fixed on Freya’s sword. “Then kill me and when the next attack happens, you can be sure.”

Freya lowered her sword. She wasn’t going to kill Alex, and it seemed that threatening to wasn’t going to get her anywhere, which was more than a little irritating. Freya had to admit that she often relied on her reputation as the Angel to intimidate people into giving her information. It seemed as if Alex wouldn’t be so easy. Unless, of course, she was telling the truth. Then there was nothing for Freya’s sword to help her learn.

Alex gave a small smile. “I have to admit, I half thought that you might actually kill me.”

Freya shrugged. “That was kind of the point.”

Alex laughed a little, pushing her hair back, out of her face. “I suppose it was. So, does this mean that you believe me?”

“It means that I’m not going to kill you just yet.”

“You know, if it’ll put you in less of a murder-y mood, I could help you to find the real culprit. Clear my name and all that.”

Freya frowned. “I said that I wasn’t going to kill you, that doesn’t mean that I trust you at my back.”

Alex rolled her eyes. “Come on, Freya. If I was going to kill you, I could have done it a dozen times over already. Like, maybe, when I was kissing you and you had absolutely no defences up?”

Freya felt herself flush with embarrassment at her slip-up. “Maybe I was trying to lull you into a false sense of security. Maybe I wasn’t afraid of you, regardless of my defences. I’m an Angel. One little Enhanced isn’t going to cause me any trouble.”

Alex raised an eyebrow. "Oh, an Angel is it? And you honestly think that I'd be no trouble for you?"

Freya snorted, but it was short-lived as Alex launched herself across the small space between them.

Freya raised her sword, but Alex dodged out of the way before spinning to catch Freya's arm in her hand, twisting it so that Freya dropped her sword in pain. Even Freya's reflexes and magically-modified strength were no match for Alex's enhancements and skill.

Once the sword was out of play, Alex spun Freya around so that she was thrown back against one of the concrete pillars. Alex then closed the space between them, pinning Freya to the pillar with her own body.

Freya's traitorous limbs began to tingle in every place that Alex touched her, her breath hitching in her throat as she found the Enhanced's lips mere moments away from her own.

"Still think I couldn't beat you?" Alex asked.

A mix of frustration and desire flooded through Freya, overflowing through her skin to form Energy that crackled along her limbs.

Alex didn't even so much as flinch.

"It'll take more than a few sparks to damage me," Alex said.

"I'm not trying to hurt you," Freya admitted, the Energy still flowing. Alex could have hurt her. She could have used Freya's sword against her. And yet, she hadn't. All she was doing was showing Freya that, while she could very easily hurt her, she had no intention of doing so.

Freya didn't want to actually hurt Alex over something like that.

"It just happens when I'm worked up," Freya continued.

Alex raised her eyebrow once more. "Worked up?"

Freya's face and chest flushed bright red as she realised what that had sounded like. She had only meant her frustration, but she couldn't deny that had quickly faded, and that the Energy was very much fuelled by the way Alex's proximity made her abdomen tighten, and nothing else.

"We should..." Freya started, but trailed off. She didn't actually want Alex to leave, but her staying wouldn't be the smartest thing Freya had ever allowed.

"We should," Alex agreed, but didn't move.

After a few more moments, Freya was about to reason that they really should remove themselves from each other, but she was cut off by Alex's lips upon her own.

Freya knew that she should push Alex off, but she instead found herself melting into the kiss.

Alex removed the hands that had been restraining Freya to the pillar. One moved down to the side of Freya's face, while another moved to the small of her back, pulling Freya even closer.

Freya, instead of using her free hands to move away, wrapped them around Alex's waist, keeping her close as she moaned into the kiss.

Freya wasn't sure how long the two of them were entangled before enough reason finally seeped through, and she pulled away.

"What are we doing?" Freya asked with a slight frown, more than a little breathless.

"Kissing," Alex replied with a playful smile.

Freya rolled her eyes. "You know what I mean. Not what are we doing right this moment, but what are *we* doing? What is this?"

Alex gave a slightly sheepish shrug, though her smile didn't falter. "I don't know," she admitted. "I... I wasn't supposed to

have any contact with magical beings. Never mind kissing them... But I like you.”

“I... I like you too,” Freya admitted, despite her feeling that this was a terrible idea. Alex just seemed so sincere... “But what does that make us?”

“I... I don’t know. But do we have to know?”

Freya frowned once more. She didn’t like uncertainty.

Alex leaned forward, tentatively pressing her lips to Freya’s, clearly waiting to see if the move was reciprocated.

Freya gave an internal sigh before pulling Alex close once more.

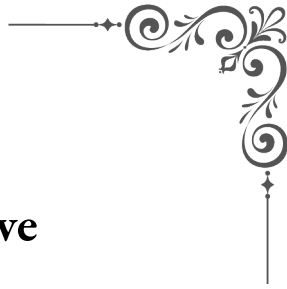
Maybe this wasn’t the best idea, and maybe Freya had no clue what she was doing, but she couldn’t deny that she wanted to keep kissing Alex, no matter what.

Freya’s phone beeped, drawing her attention.

“I have to go,” Freya said.

Alex nodded. “Then I’ll see you, around?”

“I... Yeah,” Freya answered, before heading off.



Chapter Five

“All right, that does it for this module,” Freya’s lecturer said as she shut down her slides. “Don’t forget the deadline is in January.”

Freya stood up, slinging her bag over her shoulder as Amber appeared next to her.

“Did you pay any attention to that lecture?” Amber asked, indicating to Freya’s blank notebook.

Freya shook her head as she stuck the notebook in her bag and left the room, pulling her phone out of her pocket and bringing it to her ear, lest anyone think she was talking to herself.

“It doesn’t really matter,” Freya reasoned. “She was just going over the assignment again, and I’ve already done it. I’m not going to redo it if she had any corrections.”

Amber rolled her eyes. “You know that wasn’t what I was getting at. You were distracted.”

“I’m always distracted,” Freya figured. “Who knows, maybe I’ve got ADHD as well as autism.”

“Freya, be serious.”

“I wasn’t *not* being serious. They’re pretty often comorbid.”

“The Enhanced!” Amber said with an exasperated sigh. “You’re avoiding talking about her.”

Freya sighed. “You know, you were easier to talk to before you became chummy with Rosaline again. How do I know that you won’t tell her about Alex?”

“Because I promise not to.”

Freya folded her arms. Trusting Amber wasn't something she did easily, but then, who else could she talk to? Mel and Sarah would kill Alex if they found out the truth. At least Amber was stuck in her ghost-form, only really tethered to Earth by Freya.

“Fine. Why do you want to talk about her?”

“Because you clearly do, or you wouldn't be so distracted.”

Freya didn't have an argument, so she stayed silent.

Amber sighed. “Freya, why are you letting her get close to you?”

“Why not?” Freya retorted. “I'm supposed to push her away just because of her genes? Isn't that kind of messed up?”

Amber shook her head. “I don't buy it.”

“Don't buy what?”

“Your whole ‘don't judge Enhanced for their genes’ reasoning. She admitted to being trained to kill magical beings. She even managed to show you up.”

“Right, but she didn't actually *hurt* me. She's right, she easily could have.”

“Someone not killing you is a pretty weak foundation for trust.”

Freya glared at her. “And what would be a good foundation in this situation? How am I supposed to tell if I can trust her?”

Amber's expression softened with understanding. “You *don't* trust her, do you?”

“No, it's me that I don't trust,” Freya admitted with a sigh. “Alex has done nothing to make me distrust her, other than be Enhanced. And my gut says to trust her, but then, I've never really been able to trust my gut when it comes to who to trust. So, do I take the chance and trust her, based on my possibly-biased gut, or do I shun her for pretty prejudiced reasons? I... I don't know what to do here...”

Amber sighed, shaking her head. “Freya, I can’t help you here. I haven’t even really interacted with Alex, only seen her when you’ve interacted with her, so I can’t tell you if she’s trustworthy or not. But, you *do* have an omniscient sister. Maybe it’s time to give her a call.”

Freya frowned. “But isn’t that kind of... I don’t know, cheating? I mean, this is a personal thing.”

Amber rolled her eyes. “The fact that you have the hots for the Enhanced doesn’t mean that this is personal. Not when you’re asking if a potential culprit of mass-kidnaping and murder is truly guilty.”

“Right,” Freya said, feeling more than a little stupid for forgetting that more than just her heart was on the line.

She pulled her phone away from her face as she finally made it outside, pulling her hoodie tight around her to ward off the freezing winter air.

She quickly pulled up Alice’s number and called her sister.

“*I can’t tell you if your girlfriend is evil or not,*” her sister said as way of answering.

“She’s not my girlfriend,” Freya replied. “And why not? I mean, I’m not asking for me, I’m asking for Lady Caroline. You know, to see if Alex is behind the disappearances.”

“*I still can’t tell you,*” Alice said, and Freya could practically hear her shrug. “*I can’t interfere with the plan.*”

“What do you mean? How would this mess with the plan?”

“*Telling you would interfere with the plan.*”

“That’s a cop-out and you know it.”

“*Look, Freya, I’m not going to give you relationship cheat codes. Either you trust Alex, or you don’t.*”

“It’s not that simple.”

“Yeah, it kind of is. And if I do tell you, then you won’t know if you trust her or not, and do you really want to start a relationship with someone you don’t trust?”

“Who says that I’m starting a relationship?”

“Oh please, Freya, you don’t do casual. Not with friendships, and not with this. So you need to figure out if that’s something you actually want with Alex.”

She hung up, leaving Freya to groan at her phone.

“Stupid Oracle,” she muttered.

Her phone buzzed.

Love you too, a text from Alice read.

Freya rolled her eyes as she pocketed her phone, deciding that she needed to head out on patrol. That always cleared her head...



FREYA ONLY GOT AN HOUR or so into her patrol when she spotted someone sitting on a roof across from her.

The figure waved as Freya approached, and she quickly realised that it was Alex, smiling at her as she approached.

Freya found herself smiling back, her heart beating just a little faster at the sight, until she remembered that she wasn’t even sure if she trusted Alex yet.

“What are you doing here?” Freya asked after she had leapt over to the roof that Alex was sitting on. “Are you following me?”

Alex gave a sheepish shrug as she stood up. “Not exactly. I just... I wanted to speak to you, and, well, I wasn’t exactly sure that you would answer if I tried calling or texting.”

“So, you did follow me?”

Alex folded her arms protectively over her chest. “I tracked your phone’s GPS. Like I said, I wasn’t sure you’d answer.”

Freya sighed. She had to admit that she wasn't really sure whether she would have answered if Alex had called her.

"I wouldn't have just straight up ignored you," Freya eventually said. "If for no other reason than worry that there was an emergency."

Alex tried to smile, but it was weak. Freya was suddenly struck by how vulnerable she looked, a few strands of her dark hair falling over her downcast eyes.

"I was worried that I had pushed you too far the last time we met," Alex admitted. "That I had been too forward..."

Freya blinked, at a complete loss.

Alex was worried.

Alex was worried that she had been too *forward*.

With *Freya*.

Freya felt her cheeks burn bright red. "I... Too *forward*?"

Alex nodded with a sheepish smile. "I thought you maybe didn't like me. I mean, I figured that you *liked* me, but... Whether you still wanted anything to do with me when you calmed down was a different story..."

"Alex," Freya said, tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear, "I *do* like you. I mean, I like you and I would give anything for this situation to be less complicated. But it is complicated. And yet I still... I still think I would regret it if I completely pushed you away..."

Alex gave a relieved smile, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. "That's sweet, Freya, but this *is* complicated, and you've already said that you wouldn't trust me at your back. You've already been pushing me away."

Freya frowned. "What? Because I don't want you to help with this investigation? Alex, you're a suspect. To just ignore that-"

Alex glared at her, shaking her head. “Stop talking like a cop, Freya. You’re not one. There’s no oversight stopping you from letting me help.”

Freya placed her hands on her hips, her frown deepening. “That doesn’t mean that I shouldn’t take this seriously! Why are you so bothered, Alex? Surely you would want me to do this as thoroughly as possible so that no one can question it. Why can’t you just let it go?”

Alex continued to glare, but didn’t give her an answer.

Freya continued to frown, doing her best to cycle through what she knew of Alex to find the source of her issue.

If Freya was the one accused, would she step down?

No, she realised. Not for just anyone.

“You don’t trust me,” Freya finally said, her frown fading. “That’s your problem, isn’t it? You don’t trust me to clear your name.”

She watched as Alex’s muscles tensed up, her gaze turning hard. “Don’t take it so personally,” she said, her voice sharp as steel. “We both know what will happen if the other magical beings know that I’m here. Even if you prove that I have nothing to do with these disappearances, many will want my head.”

Freya frowned once more. “You’re talking as if I haven’t told anyone that you exist.”

Alex gave a cold bark of laughter. “If you had, I would be dead.”

Freya folded her arms across her chest, not entirely sure what to say to that, or what to do with Alex’s suddenly frosty attitude.

“Look, Freya,” Alex continued, “I like you, but I like living more. I trust you about as much as you trust me, so forgive me for not being entirely comfortable with you holding my fate in your hands.”

Freya didn't know what to say to that, knowing that she would be saying the same in Alex's position. And yet it still stung.

Before she had a chance to figure out what to say, the air around them seemed to chill with the familiar sensation of Demons preparing to attack.

"Shit! Get down!" Freya yelled.

To Alex's credit, she managed to dodge the crossbow bolt that headed straight for her as soon as Freya yelled.

Freya spun around, opening her magical sense as far as she could to allow everything through.

Nine Demons, one of which was very familiar.

The Demon who she and Alex had fought before.

Freya sighed. It was just like a Demon not to back down once they realised that she was an Angel. Many of them seemed to put their pride - or their loyalty to Lord Uther - above their sense of self-preservation.

Freya allowed her irritation to manifest as dark lightning over her skin, hoping to at least intimidate some of the Demons.

The nine seemed to have the same idea, dropping any glammers as they approached in full view.

"See, this is what happens when you let them go," Freya said with a sigh.

Alex shrugged. "It's a first for me."

"Yeah, probably because I don't think they can track you."

"But they can track you?"

"Well, technically I'm cloaked. So, yeah," she turned to the Demon from the other night, "How did you find us?"

He simply smirked. "Not as smart as most seem to think, are you, little Angel?"

Freya glared at him, lifting her arm to send a blast of Dark Energy his way.

The Demon launched himself out of the way, but he still took most of the blast to his shoulder.

Freya's instincts told her to advance while she had the advantage, but her recent battling with both Sarah and Mel told her that she'd be leaving Alex exposed. She instead moved so that she and Alex had their backs to each other, leaving neither of them vulnerable.

"I thought you didn't trust me at your back," Alex said, and Freya could hear her frosty shield dropping to betray her familiar smiles.

"Just shut up and start hitting them," Freya said, rolling her eyes.

"With my batons or with my annulment?"

"Umm... Can you take their magic without hitting me?"

The Demons seemed to tire of waiting for them to attack, with one lunging for Freya with a sword.

She immediately brought her hammer to block the sword, knocking the Demon aside.

"I... Admittedly, there was never a reason for me to test that," Alex replied as the Demon stumbled.

"So you have no idea?" Freya asked as she knocked the stumbling Demon further down with her hammer.

"Nope," Alex said, though it came out as more of a grunt, as Freya assumed that the Demons were moving to engage Alex as well.

"Better stick with just the batons."

"Got it!"

Before Freya had a chance to say anything else, a second Demon shifted right in front of her, thrusting a dagger into her abdomen.

Freya just barely had time to knock the dagger away with her hammer. The Demon didn't move, but his eyes did track the

hammer. Freya used the distraction as an opening, sending Dark Energy through her leg as she brought it up between the Demon's legs, hitting him right in the junk.

The Demon doubled over, and was quickly replaced by two more.

"I was wondering when you would stop taking turns," Freya said as she swung her hammer in front of her, enshrouding the end in flame. "This isn't Assassin's Creed."

The first Demon jumped away, but the second was caught in the side. The blow wasn't too hard, but they hissed in pain at the flames.

Freya took advantage of their pain, sending Dark Energy through her legs once more and delivering a kick to the Demon's middle. They doubled over, and she brought her hammer down on their head.

Seeing that Freya's full attention was on the single Demon, the Demon who had jumped away launched forward, driving their sword in Freya's shoulder.

Freya shifted away, just as the blade hit flesh, causing the Demon to stumble. She reappeared behind them, bring her flame-coated hammer down onto their back.

The Demon slammed forward into the ground, out cold.

Freya looked around, seeing that all but one of the Demons had been taken care of.

The Demon she and Alex had fought the other night was currently engaged in a rapid succession of strikes and parries, with neither of them landing a blow.

Freya watched, transfixed.

Freya was a tank. A brute. A sledgehammer in human - or Angel - form. She'd never been accused of having co-ordination or finesse, but it didn't matter. She could take a beating, and she could deal one out.

She didn't need finesse when her pain only made her stronger. When getting seriously hurt allowed her to produce enough Dark Energy to tear someone in half.

But Alex moved like water. She moved her batons in an intricate dance that Freya could hardly follow.

Freya was broken from the trance as the Demon in front of Alex shifted, causing her to stumble.

Freya stepped forward, but she wasn't fast enough. Alex regained her balance quickly, moving out of the way as she anticipated the Demon appearing behind her, but she didn't dodge his blade entirely.

Bright red blossomed across Alex's arm, and a surge of fury and Energy flowed through Freya, covering her in black lightning.

Both the Demon and Alex turned to Freya, the Demon scrambling away with terror in his eyes.

"Oh no you don't," Freya said, shifting in front of him.

The Demon stopped still at her words, and she grabbed him by the throat with one hand, easily lifting him so that his feet were barely scraping the floor.

"What is it about you Demons that make you want to kill me?" she asked, though her hand was too tight around his throat for him to respond.

"Freya!" Alex called, stepping forward. "You've not killed a single one of these Demons, but if you keep strangling him like that, you will break that streak."

Freya glared at the Demon, her Energy flaring up further. While she had taken great pains to spare the Demons she fought in the past year, some scum seemed to want to test her patience.

But she took a deep breath, before letting go of the Demon.

He collapsed to the ground as she tried to dissipate the Dark Energy around her. It clung to her skin, like an angry aura, but it did seem to slowly be fading.

The Demon coughed, and after a moment, Freya realised that he was trying to laugh.

“Careful,” she warned, hitting the ground next to him with Dark Energy.

He just seemed to laugh harder at that. “Having trouble reigning yourself in, little Demon?”

Freya frowned. “I’m an Angel, remember?”

“Oh, I know Demon blood when I see it.”

Freya groaned, shaking her head. She didn’t exactly want her Demonic heritage to be common knowledge. That would only complicate things for her.

“So, if you don’t just leave them,” Alex said, drawing Freya’s attention, “what *do* you do?”

Freya’s frown didn’t fade. Alex was glaring at her and her voice was ice once more. She had her arms folded tight across her chest, drawing attention to the wound still leaking blood from her bicep.

Ah, Freya realised. She’s in pain.

Freya took a few small shackles from her belt. They were runed to suppress magic, and they would alert Lady Caroline’s people to their use.

She went and shackled all of the Demons before turning to Alex.

“These will alert the Demon authorities to their presence, so we should get out of here.”

“Right, well, see you,” Alex said shortly, before turning to leave.

Freya shifted in front of her.

“Hey,” she said, stopping Alex in her tracks. “You’re hurt. Do you want a lift to the hospital?”

“I can’t go to the hospital. I’ll be fine.”

“What, you’re just going to patch it up yourself?” Freya asked, incredulously.

Alex glared at her. “I can take care of myself.”

“Well, yeah, but that looks like it needs stitches. And while you might be bad-ass enough to stitch it up one-handed, there’s no way it’ll be as well done as if you had help. Trust me, there’s a point at which ‘bad-ass loner’ just becomes ‘idiot.’”

Alex continued to glare, but Freya didn’t back down. She knew that she had reason on her side.

“Fine,” Alex spat. “My hotel isn’t far...”



AS SOON AS THEY WERE in Alex’s hotel room, Alex passed Freya a first-aid kit.

“Here,” Alex said. “If you’re so insistent on helping.”

Freya rolled her eyes. “How come you were so determined to get me to trust you if you didn’t want to trust me in return?”

Alex sighed as she sat down on the end of the bed, allowing Freya to sit next to her as she started to inspect the wound. Freya noted that her irritation seemed to be fading. Or maybe she was just pushing it down, far beneath the surface. That wouldn’t be a new concept to Freya...

“I didn’t say that I didn’t trust you,” Alex eventually said through a slightly tightened jaw. “I said that I trusted you as much as you trusted me. So, Freya, the real question is, do you not trust me?”

Freya dropped her gaze, her fingers hesitating over Alex’s torn flesh. “I... I guess I’m not sure,” she admitted, before shaking her head. “No, that’s not right. I am sure. I *do* trust you, for some

reason beyond my understanding, but that seems rather foolish, doesn't it? You're *Enhanced*, and I still haven't ruled out Enhanced involvement in this disappearing problem. Trusting you doesn't seem like the smart thing to do, and I have always prided myself in doing the smart thing."

Alex gave her a sympathetic smile, the final traces of her irritation finally dissipating. "You're not exactly smart for me, either. I mean, I know that I took you in that fight, but I had the element of surprise. You're an *Angel*. You could eviscerate me before I had the chance to null your powers if I wasn't careful."

"I guess we're both each other's worst enemy," Freya said, managing to mirror Alex's smile.

Alex's own smile widened. "Yeah, I suppose we are. And yet, I find that I cannot entirely distrust you, either."

"If you have any trust for me, then why so much fuss?" Freya said, indicating to the wound beneath her fingers.

Alex sighed, her clenched jaw returning. "It's not that I don't trust you, I just don't need help."

"But you thought that I needed help?"

"Well, you thought *I* was behind this whole kidnapping thing. I'm going to take that as a sign that you don't really know where you're going with this investigation. Quite frankly, I would work to clear my name myself if I had the magical contacts you have."

Freya raised an eyebrow at how quickly Alex's smile had disappeared, replaced with hardened determination.

"So you were just using me?" Freya asked before cleaning out Alex's wound, causing the Enhanced to flinch a little in surprise.

"Don't be so dramatic," Alex said, rolling her eyes. "I'm just trying to make sure that you and your friends don't kill me for what I am. I don't need help otherwise." She glared down at the wound. "I'm better than this..."

Freya frowned a little as she got out the bandages. "Better than what? Your injury?"

"I don't get injured."

Freya rolled her eyes as she started to wrap the bandage around Alex's arm. "Everyone gets injured."

"Not me. They can't injure you if they can't touch you. And before today, they could never touch me."

Freya finished bandaging up Alex's arm and immediately shrugged off her jacket, unstrapping her armour so that Alex could get a look at the huge scar across her upper chest.

"Alex, I'm an Angel. I'm supposed to be this unstoppable machine, and even I have scars."

The ice in Alex's eyes seemed to melt as she looked over Freya's scars. Her fingers tentatively moved up to Freya's chest, lightly tracing the large scar across it, though they paused halfway to follow a different scar. Alex's fingers travelled like that, across dozens of different scars, across Freya's chest and down her arms, for a few minutes before she finally spoke again, all trace of her anger gone.

"How did you get these? From hunting Demons? Some of them look really old..." Alex frowned, looking back up at Freya. "How old did you say you were, again?"

"Twenty."

"But some of these must be at least five years old..."

Freya nodded. "I didn't start out hunting Demons. They started hunting me first. Back before I even really knew about magic. It... It took me a while to learn how to defend myself."

Alex's frown deepened. "I've never not known how to protect myself. I've been training since before I can remember. And I was always the best. I don't think I've lost a sparring match since before I was ten."

“I don’t know which I would have preferred,” Freya said. “Being sure of my ability to defend myself, or the years of innocence I was allowed before I learned of magic.”

Alex raised an eyebrow, leaning a little closer to Freya as she seemed to be evaluating her. Freya suddenly became very aware of Alex’s hand still resting lightly on her arm.

“Your eyes look too tired for you to have ever been innocent,” Alex figured.

Freya smiled, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Well, I suppose things were never all that great before the magic either. But who wants great? That would be boring. I think I prefer the mess of a woman that all of this has made me to the boring person I would most likely be otherwise.”

Freya cursed her voice. She had meant that as a joke, and yet her tone had taken on a flat affect, only broken by a brief wavering as she ended her thought.

She expected Alex to push her away. After all, she didn’t have to deal with Freya’s bullshit.

Only, instead of pushing her away, Alex instead leaned closer, closing the gap between them to capture Freya’s lips in hers.

“I... I don’t want to hurt you...” Freya managed once Alex pulled away, Energy already dancing across her skin.

“Don’t worry, Freya,” she assured her. “I won’t break.”



Chapter Six

Freya needed air. She appreciated how tenuous her position was. She appreciated that many people still doubted her parentage. She appreciated that many still had loyalty to either the Usurper or the Old Queen, rarely to both. She appreciated that it was difficult for people to believe that she could retake the throne that she had willingly let fall into her enemy's hands.

But she grew tired of hearing those facts repeated over and over again.

Seph had done her best to round up those who were most likely to support Freya against Lord Uther, but for the nobles that meant that Freya had to visit their estates to talk to them in person.

She always arrived in her pristine armour, with her crown on her head and Sarah at her side, looking every bit of the part of the loyal Queensguard member.

It hardly seemed to make a difference.

The nobles treated her like a dirty secret, terrified that news of her visit would spread. And then they would start with the protests.

"I would support you but..." had become Freya's most hated phrase.

They all had good reason to stay out of it, it seemed.

And they were all quick to remind her of her failures, leaving her with no doubt that the biggest factor keeping their support away from her was that they didn't think she could win.

And, in all honesty, she couldn't blame them.

She wanted Lord Uther away from the throne because of what he had done to Damon. Because he didn't care for the smallfolk. Because he was just an all-round jerk.

But he was a clever jerk, who knew how to keep those in power happy enough to turn a blind eye to his behaviour elsewhere.

As long as they weren't the ones getting hurt, they didn't care.

So Freya had donned her hunting leathers and headed out of the castle. She didn't actually hunt, but it was vital to keep up the appearance.

Once she was in the forest, however, she just wandered. It was nice to be away from stone walls once more.

She wasn't sure how long she had wandered, but the light started to get dim, telling her that she should return.

She sighed, reluctant to leave the forest. It sometimes seemed as if it were the only place she could think anymore...

Freya jumped as she heard a noise to her left.

She spun around, only seeing trees.

Until one of those trees moved.

"Juni?" she asked incredulously, as the woman made of tree branches stepped forward.

"Freya!" Juni cried, rushing to embrace her. "It's been so long.. I thought I would never find you."

"You've been looking for me?" Freya asked as she pulled away.

Juni nodded. "I knew that you would be ready one day, I just had to be patient. And now that I've found you, that can only mean that you're almost ready."

"Almost ready? For what?"

"To bond with me, of course. I'm a part of you, remember? Being separated like this isn't good for either of us."

"What about Ku? She was pretty certain that I was too powerful already, remember?"

“The problem with Ku is that she thinks so one-dimensionally. I’m not offering you power, Freya.”

“Then what are you offering?”

“A part of your soul that you are missing. Even if you try to bury it down and hide it away, part of you has been and always will be beyond the comprehension of others. They can’t tame you, just as they could never hope to tame me.”

Freya’s heart ached at that, reinforcing Juni’s words. Juni was a part of her, and them being separated physically hurt whenever Freya thought on it.

“What do I have to do to finally be ready?”

“I want this, Freya, but I will warn you that you are older than most when they bond with their true nature like this. Bonding will not be easy or pain-free, and you may not thank me for the change when it is done.”

Freya nodded, but the ache in her heart wouldn’t lessen. Her mind went back to Ku’s words, promising that Juni would make her stronger. “If we bond, will I better be able to protect those closest to me?” she asked, her thoughts very much on the disappearances that had been occurring on Earth.

“Perhaps,” Juni said with a shrug. “The real question will be if it is worth the cost.”



FREYA WOKE UP GROGGILY, only to bolt upright as she realised that she didn’t recognise the bed she was in.

Once upright, she got a good enough look around the room to recognise it as a hotel. She looked down to the sleeping form beside her and let out a sigh of relief.

She was with Alex.

Freya flopped back onto the bed, only to turn and see that Alex wasn’t asleep at all. Her deep brown eyes were almost black

as they watched her, and Freya couldn't help but blush under the other woman's gaze.

"What?" Freya asked, wondering why Alex was watching her.

Alex shook her head, her hand twisting the duvet cover round and round in thought.

"Sorry," Alex said. "I was just thinking."

"Thinking about how shocking it is that I'm so inexperienced for being this good looking?" Freya joked, though there was a slight waver behind it. It had been easy enough to just push aside her insecurities the night before and allow Alex to take the lead, but in the cold light of day her anxieties resurfaced in full force.

Alex shook her head once more. "No, of course not. I was..." She sighed, her gaze dropping. "I enjoyed last night, Freya, but maybe it was a mistake."

Freya raised an eyebrow. "Typically things that enjoyable aren't mistakes."

"Be serious," Alex said. Her tone wasn't sharp. Instead, it seemed almost pleading. "Freya, I like you, and I want to trust you too, but I... We're each other's greatest weakness. Maybe doing this - whatever *this* is - isn't such a good idea. I mean, hell, you're already lying to your friends about me."

"Maybe I should just focus on my own mission, and leave you to focus on your investigation. You won't find me guilty, so..."

Alex's jaw was clenched once more, and she was gripping the duvet in her hand hard enough to turn her knuckles white.

"You don't want that," Freya figured. "You might trust me, but the outcome of this investigation... The stakes are too high for you to be comfortable stepping aside."

Alex nodded. "But as you said last night, it would be better if I wasn't involved."

"Maybe. Or maybe I'll finish it more quickly if you're helping."

Alex frowned, turning back to look at Freya. "Don't just do this because you don't want me to leave."

Freya shrugged. "I'm not. I've become accustomed to working with others, but I can't trust my friends to approach this without bias. Not to mention the fact that their Coven Head wouldn't allow it. I could use the help."

Alex seemed to mull it over for a few moments.

"Freya, I..." Alex's gaze flickered up to her through her lashes, and Freya felt her heart skip a beat. "I doubt that I could keep any kind of emotional distance from you."

Freya shrugged. "Then don't," she said, watching Alex carefully for her response.

Alex frowned just a little, though Freya couldn't tell if she was annoyed or just thinking. After a moment, the frown faded, and Alex repositioned herself, her knees coming up to her chest as she curled up into herself.

"I don't know how to do this," Alex murmured softly, her gaze fixed on the duvet covering her knees, instead of Freya. "I don't know how relationships work out here in the real world..."

Freya smirked, doing her best to hide her nerves. "I'm not exactly an expert on the subject either. But we like each other. That should count for something, right?"

Alex nodded, but then swiftly shook her head. "I can't stay here forever, Freya. I'll eventually have to go back to the States."

Freya sighed. "Alex, we can spend all day going over what can possibly go wrong. In my mind, the only question that matters is how you feel about me. About *us*. We can work out the rest."

Alex raised an eyebrow. “That almost sounded... *optimistic*. Where did brooding Freya go?”

Freya shrugged. “She has to take a break sometimes.”

Alex sighed. “I’m probably going to regret this, but okay.”

“Okay?”

“I’ll help with this investigation and we can... Try to have a real world something.”

Freya couldn’t help but smile at the way Alex was frowning. It wasn’t an angry frown. She was concentrating, trying to figure out how to word what she wanted.

“I think real world somethings tend to go a little something like this,” Freya said before leaning into Alex. She paused, just before meeting the other woman’s lips, allowing her to be the one to close the distance.

Alex smiled before doing just that, and Freya felt the twist of apprehension in her gut relax.

Alex was still smiling when she pulled away, just as Freya’s phone buzzed from the bedside table.

Freya froze.

“What is it?”

“I might have forgotten to let my parents know that I would be out all night. My mum tends to worry...”

She reached over to her phone, letting out a sigh of relief as she realised that it wasn’t Margaret who had texted, but Caroline.

“Do you have to go?” Alex asked her.

Freya nodded. “There’s been another disappearance. Apparently Human cops are all over the scene. My...” She frowned. Was Caroline her boss? “The person I work with is trying to deal with them through her contacts on the force, so she wants me at the scene to investigate.”

“Do you want me to tag along?”

“Sure. I said I wanted you involved in this investigation, didn’t I?”

Alex nodded, her smile remaining. “Then give me five minutes to get ready.”



“WELL, LOOKS LIKE CAROLINE was right about the police,” Freya said as they approached the address she had been given. She had decided to wear the bodice of her Demon armour, which came all the way up to her neck, allowing her to wear her leather jacket over the top of her bare shoulders. She didn’t really anticipate trouble, but it was nice to know that her major organs were protected. “I can glamour myself, but I’m not sure I can manage both of us for long.”

Alex nodded. “Don’t worry about me, I have my own means.”

Freya shrugged, deciding not to ask. She figured she would see soon enough what Alex meant.

She glamourised herself and, once she was sure that she couldn’t be seen, she walked right past the police officers standing outside, ducking beneath the police tape.

Alex just walked right up to them, showed them a badge, and was shown through.

“What the hell did you show them?” Freya asked under her breath once they were out of earshot.

Alex shrugged. “It tells them I’m some kind of government agent.”

“And they bought that? *Nice.*”

Alex nodded. “Credit where credit is due, someone else made my fake IDs. I just use them. Anyway, we’re here now. Should we split up? We’ll cover more ground that way.”

Freya nodded. "We're looking for any clue as to who it was that came in here and took these people."

"All right. I'll take downstairs, you take upstairs?"

Freya nodded, heading up the stairs to look around.

There was less general damage than there had been in the last house, but there were still obvious signs of struggle. The occasional chair knocked over, or bedside table overturned, but nothing was actually broken.

She searched thoroughly, but, much like the last house, there was nothing to suggest who had taken them. No physical evidence left behind, and no magical residue, either.

If not for the signs of struggle, Freya would have wondered if they hadn't just dissolved into thin air.

She shuddered at that thought, the memory of the girl she had failed to save coming to the forefront of her mind.

She knew first hand that there was an actual enemy behind this, she just didn't know who...

She trekked back downstairs after one last look around.

"Hey, Alex," Freya called, shielding her voice from the front door so that the police wouldn't hear. "Where are you?"

"Just a minute!"

Freya waited in the hallway, with Alex coming to join her after a few moments.

"Did you find anything?" Freya asked.

She shook her head. "I thought I had, but it turned out to be nothing."

Freya sighed, feeling more than a little frustrated at their failure.

It wasn't surprising that they hadn't found anything, but that didn't much help the feeling of being useless.

Angels should never feel useless, Freya thought. With as much power as she had, there had to be *something* that she could do.

“You know, if you want, I could talk to some of my contacts in town,” Alex offered. “I mostly made them to help me find the old base, I thought maybe some rogue magical beings had raided it or something, but I could ask about this as well.”

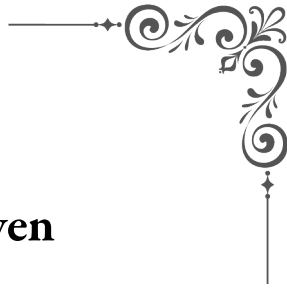
“That would be great. Where to first?”

Alex pulled a face at that. “Freya, I’m sorry, I would love you along, but there’s no way you won’t spook my contacts. Most are Humans with just enough magic blood to know about the world, but not enough to truly be a part of it. If I bring an Angel with me to meet them...”

Freya nodded in understanding, though it didn’t sit right with her. As much as she was happy to have Alex accompany her, she wasn’t sure about just handing over the investigation. But then, Alex was right that Freya would probably spook her contacts.

“I guess I’ll go see Caroline and find out if she has any new leads,” Freya said, resigned. “I’ll see you later?”

Alex nodded. “I’ll text once I’m done.”



Chapter Seven

Freya arrived at Caroline's office to see a couple of her subordinates at their desks. While Freya had been shy around them at first, afraid that they would let slip about her working with Caroline, she had grown more comfortable with them over the last year. They were all so far down the Demonic hierarchy that they were more than loyal to Caroline for getting them jobs in the Royal Cleaners. While it may have been a step down for Lady Caroline, working for the Crown meant security that most Demons couldn't find elsewhere.

They trusted Caroline, and so they trusted that she was doing the right thing when it came to working with Freya.

Even if they wanted to tell someone, Caroline reported directly to the King, and it wasn't as if they could easily tell him that she was working with Freya behind his back.

Or maybe it wasn't exactly behind his back. As best Freya could figure it, Caroline had asked him not to question who her new "friend" was, and he had agreed to do just that. He knew that she was getting help from somewhere, but it seemed that he, too, trusted her to get it right.

How that worked, when Caroline had this job as penance for treason, was beyond Freya's understanding. Regardless, she was glad for it.

"Is Caroline in?" she asked Laila, who was sitting at the desk closest to the door.

The Demon nodded, not taking her eyes from the work on her screen. "Yeah, she just got back in. Had someone with her, too. You might want to knock."

"Thanks," Freya said, before going up to Caroline's office and knocking on the door, just as she had been told.

Caroline came to the door a few moments later, stepping out to meet Freya rather than inviting her in.

"Did you have any luck?" she asked.

Freya sighed. "No, it was the same as last time. Obviously there was a struggle, but there was no sign of who had actually been there."

Caroline nodded with a frown. "I spent most of this morning with the local police. They're as useless as ever when it comes to who might have done this, but another disappearance was reported last night. This time by neighbours as it was happening. As luck would have it, a police car wasn't far from the scene and the kidnappers had to get away in a hurry. They left someone. A Were/Light Witch hybrid."

Freya frowned. "I thought they were targeting Dark magic users."

"They were. Her boyfriend was a Dark Witch. Whether they left her because she's a Light magic user, or because they were in a hurry to get away before the police showed, I can't say. And she won't talk to me. Maybe she'll talk to you?"

Freya shrugged. "Maybe, but I doubt it. The local Light coven probably has the best chance of being able to get through to her. I can take her there, if you think that's best."

"I do, actually. Her dating a Dark Witch doesn't mean that she would have any love for Demons. I suspect she would prefer to be among her own kind."

"I don't suppose we have any new ideas as to who could be behind this?"

“No. And while I am reluctant to point fingers at ghosts... This is bringing back one too many memories.”

“Of Enhanced and the War? Sarah and Mel said the same thing.”

Caroline nodded. “You know, I never fought in the War. It was halted around the time I was born, and only restarted after my betrothal to the Prince was dissolved. I had already gone to train with the Wardens of Maltess. Just as my training finished, my brother was killed by Enhanced. I returned home, the only remaining heir to my house. I didn’t leave the Underworld until the timeline changed. I felt that I couldn’t. Not until I married and produced an heir to replace me if I was killed.

“I never saw the horrors that the others saw. I understand why others are so quick to jump to the Enhanced as the bad guys here, but I am not so easily convinced.”

“Even though they killed your brother?”

“I loved my brother dearly, Freya. We were never apart for most of our childhood. Humans sometimes say that twins are connected, but for those of us with magic it is very much true. Our magic becomes entwined in the womb. A part of me has been missing ever since he died, a part of my magic, but I do understand that we were at war. People die in wars, and seeking vengeance against ghosts won’t bring him back.”

“But what if there really are Enhanced in this timeline?”

“Then I have many questions, the first of which being *why now?* They could have attacked while we were still reeling from the timeline change. Or at any point in the last twenty years.

“Questions like that are ones I would like answered before I decide what action to take regarding these potential Enhanced, which I’m still not sure are really here.”

Freya nodded, feeling a little better at the knowledge that not everyone was so vehemently against the Enhanced that their first thought was killing them.

“I’ve also informed all of the local Dark magic users what’s happening, and I also passed any info we have to my Light contacts for dissemination. Now is not the time for us to let our differences get the best of us.

“If anything happens, they all have me on speed-dial and I’ll let you know immediately. We should hopefully be able to stop these attacks from happening, or catch those responsible in the act.”

“Hopefully,” Freya agreed.

“Do you want a hand shifting with the hybrid?” Caroline asked.

Freya shook her head. “I’ve been getting better at shifting with other people. I think I can manage it.”

“Okay. If you ever want a hand with practice, just let me know. There are some tricks I learnt with the Wardens to help.”

“Are you allowed to tell me that stuff?”

Caroline smiled. “The point of the Wardens is to spread knowledge among the women of the kingdom. You’ve got Demon blood, so you’re entitled to the knowledge if I choose to share it. Which I do.”

Freya nodded in thanks. She knew that this was another of Caroline’s not-so-subtle attempts to convince her to embrace her Demonic heritage, but she didn’t mind all that much. Not when she could learn some new skills that could come in handy in the future.

“You should get the hybrid to the coven,” Caroline continued. “She’s probably just stewing in her shock right now.”

“Yeah. Give me a call if you find anything else.”

“You’ll be the first.”

Freya went into Caroline's office at that, opening the door softly with a quiet knock to announce her presence.

"Hey," she said.

The girl didn't respond or move. She just kept looking forward with a blank stare.

Freya grimaced at that. The girl was about her age, and Freya couldn't help but see what might have happened to her the first time she was attacked.

And it wasn't as if her mental state in the following months had been anywhere near ideal, even by her standards...

Freya moved so that she was within the girl's eye line. Just because she wasn't moving didn't mean she wasn't aware of what was happening.

"Is it okay if I take you to the local Light Coven?" She looked over the girl to see that her hands were bleeding. "They can treat your wounds and make sure you're okay. The people who hurt you haven't been targeting Light magic users, so it should be safe for you there."

The girl didn't respond, causing Freya to sigh internally. She didn't want to just drag her around, but then, leaving her in Caroline's cramped office probably wasn't much better.

"Okay, if you're trying to communicate with me, then I am missing it, I'm sorry. I'm going to shift you over to the coven because they are far more equipped to help you recover than we are here."

The girl stayed silent.



"THIS IS GETTING OUT of hand," Mel said as she and Freya lurked in the corridor outside of the room where Sarah was treating the girl's injuries. "These disappearances have happened so fast... Even if they're just sticking to Dark creatures for now, it's

probably just a matter of time. Especially if the Enhanced are behind it.”

“Caroline agrees that it’s probably not Enhanced.”

“Well, Rosaline thinks that it might be, and I’m going to trust my Coven Head over your Demon friend.”

Freya sighed. “Regardless, we have no evidence either way. Once we do, I’ll make sure to track down whoever is *really* behind this.”

Mel didn’t exactly look happy with that answer, but she let it go. “Once Sarah’s done with the girl, are all three of us gonna head out to figure out exactly who’s behind this?”

Freya froze at that.

If Sarah and Mel came with her, there was no way she could hide Alex’s involvement. And if they found out, there was no way that they would accept that she had nothing to do with the disappearances, despite the fact that she was helping Freya with the investigation.

“What about Rosaline?” Freya asked. “Didn’t you say that she barely let you out of the coven?”

“Yeah, but I sneak out to help you all the time.”

“Most of the time, she’s not hyper-vigilant and scared of ghosts.”

“Have you met Rosaline?”

“Okay, you know what I mean. And if she catches you sneaking out now, it’s not going to be a light slap on the wrist.”

Mel sighed. “I hate it when you’re sensible. Between you and Sarah, it’s insufferable.”

“It’s only because we care.”

“Okay, *Mum*,” she said with a roll of her eyes. “Speaking of Sarah, are you going to take her out, since you’re leaving me all on my lonesome?”

“No, the girl I brought in was catatonic. I think Sarah’s skills will be needed here.”

Mel frowned at that. “I’ve gotta say, I’m not exactly giddy at the idea of you heading out alone.”

“Now who’s being overprotective?”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I. I used to go out on my own for years before you two would come out with me, and I’m not technically alone. I’m working with Lady Caroline.”

“Yeah, because you working with Demons just immediately makes me comfortable.”

Freya rolled her eyes at the sarcasm. “Lady Caroline is my friend.”

“Since when?”

“Since ages ago. She’s actually pretty nice. Unless you get her talking about Queen Persephone, then she will *not* shut up about how much she hates her. It’s like she’s trying to hide the fact that she has a crush on her and is doing it really badly.”

Mel raised an eyebrow. “You know, you should probably be careful who you make that joke to. That sounds like the kind of rumour that could cause problems for Lady Caroline.”

Freya nodded in agreement. Her time training under Seph in the Shadow Realm had taught her that much, but she had figured Mel would be the one person far enough removed that she could make the joke to. “When did you get so savvy about the kind of jokes that you can and can’t make about nobility?”

“It’s just common sense,” Mel replied, a little too quickly. “Anyway, weren’t you on a mission to find the people responsible for hurting this girl?”

Freya took that as a cue to leave, shifting out of the coven before checking her phone to see if Alex had gotten anywhere yet.



ALEX TOLD FREYA TO meet her at her hotel room, where they could be away from prying ears.

Freya almost shifted straight into the room, before remembering that that would probably be too familiar of her. She knew she wasn't great with speed in any kind of relationship. She was very all or nothing, and she was aware that it probably wasn't the best attitude to take with her... girlfriend?

Freya sighed, wishing that things could be simple for once.

She shifted right outside the door to the hotel room before knocking.

"Come in," Alex called.

Freya frowned at the door. "I don't have a key."

"Can't you teleport?"

Freya smiled at her own cock up before shifting into the room. "I forgot. And it's called shifting, not teleporting."

Alex smiled at her, nodding. "Good to know. You know, you can just shift straight in here if you want."

"Really? What if you're not..."

"Dressed? Decent?"

"Well, yeah."

Alex bit her lip, clearly holding back a laugh. "You know, you *have* seen me naked before. And I'm not exactly shy."

"Well, what if you're in the shower?"

"That's just the same issue, and I assume you're capable of waiting."

Freya thought for a second, trying to come up with something even more scandalous. She blushed as she finally said, "What if I catch you watching porn? What if I catch you, you know..."

"Masturbating?" Alex said with a smile. "It's kind of adorable that you can't say it. I'd take you for a blushing virgin if I didn't have intimate knowledge to the contrary."

“My point still stands.”

Alex skipped across the room at that, closing the distance between them before lightly pushing on Freya’s shoulder until she was backed up against the door.

Freya’s breath hitched at their proximity, her skin almost burning with heat where it touched Alex’s.

“And what makes you think I would mind you seeing?”

Freya stopped breathing altogether at that as her girlfriend failed to hold her laugh back any longer.

“Oh, the look on your face! You’re so precious.” Alex closed the distance between them at that, giving her a short, sweet kiss. “I can assure you, Freya, you’re not going to catch me doing anything I would be embarrassed by.”

Freya’s heart rate seemed to slow back down as Alex backed away a little, but it certainly didn’t return to normal.

“Speaking of, you know, us,” Freya eventually managed. “I was wondering... Are we dating? Like, should I refer to you as my girlfriend?”

Alex shrugged. “I guess. Wasn’t that what we agreed this morning? That we’d try dating?”

“Yeah, we just didn’t say the word.”

“So, who were you referring to me as your girlfriend to?”

“Oh, no one. Just, you know, me. In my head.”

Alex smiled. “Then yes, I suppose ‘girlfriend’ would be the apt term. When it comes to other people... Well, I suppose that depends on how dangerous you think telling others will be.”

Freya frowned. “Well, Sarah and Mel already know that you exist, and that we’ve been on dates. ‘Girlfriend’ will probably be easiest for them. After all, there’s nothing about you that makes you appear Enhanced, which I suppose is the point. And that about rounds up the number of people who will care.”

“Really? Not even your parents?”

Freya grimaced. "Yeah, I'm gonna wait a while before I tell them about you, if that's okay."

"Not fans of Enhanced?"

"Oh, they're as Human as they come, so they won't care. No, it's more that you're a girl. I want to delay opening that can of worms for as long as possible..."

"Fair enough."

"What about you? Gonna tell all of your Enhanced friends about the Angel you're dating?"

"God no," Alex quickly said, a trace of real fear just behind her eyes. "Even if you were Human, my monitor would kill me. No, I am leaving you *out* of my reports."

"Probably safe," Freya said, stretching.

"So," Alex said, "did you find anything new from Caroline?"

Freya sighed, annoyed by the change of conversation to something so depressing, even if it was important. "No," she admitted. "Nothing helpful, at any rate. I don't know, it might pan out later. What about you? Did your contacts turn up anything?"

"Yes, actually. Do you know a Lord Uther?"

Freya's fists clenched at that, crackling with Dark Energy.

Of course he would have something to do with it.

"Yeah, he's been trying to kill me since I was fourteen. Why?"

Alex gaped at that, ignoring her question. "Since you were that young? Why?"

Freya shrugged, more than a little caught off-guard by Alex's distress. "I'm not sure. I have a theory, but it's just a theory. It's not that big of a deal. He just sends Demons after me every once in a while."

Alex moved back over to her at that, pushing the shoulder of her leather jacket off. She moved slowly so that Freya could

protest if she wished, but she kept silent, allowing Alex to uncover the bare skin of her shoulder.

Alex trailed her fingers lightly across the large scar that went from right breast to left shoulder, just as she had the night before.

“One of his men?”

Freya nodded. “That was back in the early days. It took me a while to learn how to defend myself properly. To be honest, I’m not entirely sure how I’m not dead. Luck, I suppose.”

Freya shifted uncomfortably under Alex’s continued gaze. She didn’t want Alex to pity her. “It was what it was,” she told the other woman quickly. “I learnt how to fight, and his men are nothing more than a nuisance now.”

“Okay,” Alex said, nodding in what seemed to be understanding. She didn’t press the issue, which Freya took to mean that she realised how little Freya wanted to talk about it.

“So, what about Lord Uther?”

“Just that a large number of his men went rogue and are hiding out in town. My contacts said that would be the best place to start looking for answers when it comes to trouble in this city.”

Freya nodded. “Yeah, they’re probably right. I rarely encounter trouble that he’s not in some way involved with.

“Where did they say this hideout was?”

“I’ll take you there in the morning.”

Freya raised her eyebrow. “Tomorrow? Why not now?”

Alex gave her a confused look. “Because we’ve been out all day. We should rest before we throw ourselves into a lair of Demons. They don’t know we’re coming, so they’re not going anywhere.”

“I don’t like waiting. Seriously, Alex, I feel fine. Heading out now should be fine.”

Alex looked pained at that. “I know, but... I’m tired, Freya. I’m not used to the outside world. It’s busy and noisy and I have

to keep track of so many different things... I wouldn't be my best."

Freya moved towards her girlfriend - *girlfriend*, she thought excitedly - at that, noticing how tired she did indeed look. "It's okay," Freya assured her as she moved a stray lock of Alex's hair behind her ear. "You don't have to come with me."

"I'm not letting you go into the lair of Demons that are trying to kill you alone."

"Like I said, they're nothing more than a nuisance now, Alex. They won't be able to hurt me."

"You don't know that," Alex said with a defiant glare. "If you go, I'm going with you. No question. But if we go now, I won't be my best. If I'm not my best, I might fail." She shuddered at that. "I can't fail, Freya."

Freya got the sense that there was something more. She sounded like Freya did when talking about school work and grades. Even with her uni work, every email telling her that she had marks to collect gave her a panic attack that wouldn't recede until she logged on to get her grade.

It wasn't a stretch to think that Alex's training had had a similar effect on her. Freya had never been graded on her ability to fight. Either she lived or she died. That was the only mark that mattered. She suspected that the same couldn't be said for Alex.

And Alex had been right. The Demons weren't going anywhere, and all of the Dark magic users had been informed of the danger. As long as Freya watched her phone for updates from Lady Caroline, waiting one night shouldn't hurt anything.

"Hey, did you have Netflix on your base?"

"No, what's that?"

Freya gave her a disbelieving look at that. "Okay, give me two seconds to get my laptop. And decide if you'd prefer Indian or Chinese for tea."



Chapter Eight

Freya ended up not just collecting her laptop from home, but also stuffing her backpack full of clean clothes and a little bag of toiletries. Thanks to this, she awoke the next morning curled up next to Alex, wearing a soft set of pyjamas.

Freya propped herself up on her elbow, smiling as she realised that Alex was still asleep. She looked cute when she slept, curled up on her side and drooling a little onto her pillow.

Freya pulled her laptop over to her, clicking off the screen asking her if she wanted to continue watching *Firefly*. She quickly checked the BBC local news site to see how Caroline had gone about covering up the disappearances.

To her surprise, there was nothing about them at all. Not even a vague allusion, as far as she could tell.

Huh, she thought to herself, *those extra resources must be helping already.*

Alex rolled over to Freya, clearly waking.

“What time is it?” she asked groggily as she sat up.

Freya glanced at the corner of her screen. “It’s just gone seven. Sorry if I woke you, I can be a light sleeper.”

Alex shook her head. “It’s fine. I get up around this time every day anyway. At least, I do when I’m not jet-lagged. That was the worst.”

“I wouldn’t know, I’ve never left the country.”

Alex raised an eyebrow. "You're telling me that you have the power to teleport-"

"Shift."

Alex rolled her eyes. "You're telling me that you have the power to shift anywhere in the world, and you haven't even left this island?"

Freya shrugged. "It takes practice to be able to shift that far, and a lot of people never really manage it. Though, maybe I could... Lady Caroline did promise to teach me some secret Demon shifting techniques."

"Really? Why?"

Freya blushed at that, feeling a little awkward. She never really liked discussing her Demonic heritage. There were too many people who took it as a judge of character. Not to mention those who would fear a Dark Angel.

Though it wasn't as if Alex hadn't already heard it from that asshole Demon...

"My father was a Demon," she admitted. "Lady Caroline's been trying to get me to accept my Demonic heritage for a while now. I just... I don't know. I think I would have, once, if it meant the chance to find my father, but not anymore."

"Wait, I thought you lived with your parents."

"My adoptive parents," Freya clarified. "My mother died just after I was born, and no one ever knew who my dad was."

"Why wouldn't you want to find him?"

Freya shrugged. "I don't know, I just figure... Demons are a funny bunch sometimes. He probably won't be too happy to find a daughter who mostly hangs out with Light creatures. Plus, he'd probably try to use my power as a way to gain influence for himself or something."

"You really think he would do something like that?"

“Who knows? I just don’t want to find out. Not with the stakes so high. I mean, if he outed me as part-Demon, people would automatically assume I was a Dark Angel. It could shift the balance of power within the magical community.”

Alex nodded in understanding as she snuggled into Freya’s side. “Come on, we should get dressed. I think you need to fight something.”

Freya smiled. “Agreed.”



THE ADDRESS ALEX HAD was for a run-down ex-council house in the arse end of town. As they walked, they passed at least three groups of lads, all wearing trackies with the hoods up, though their skinheads were still visible. Every time they passed by, they hurled “compliments”, usually about their tits.

“Are all men in the outside world like this?” Alex asked her.

Freya groaned. “Too many for comfort.”

“How is this acceptable behaviour?”

“Because women are seen as less-than. Oh, and definitely don’t try to be physically affectionate with me. Being sexist twats doesn’t automatically make them homo or biphobic, but I wouldn’t want to put that to the test.”

Alex nodded in understanding. “I shall just remain content in the knowledge that I could geld them instantaneously if they tried anything.”

“That’s pretty much how I got through high school.”

They laughed at their joke, Freya more than a little delighted that Alex shared her penchant for humour borne of exaggerated threats.

They swiftly made their way to the Demon hideout, here Freya pounded the door with her fist.

“Open up, it’s the Royal Cleaners,” Freya called.

Alex raised an eyebrow. "The who?"

"Lady Caroline's organisation. Technically they sent us."

Alex nodded as she readied her batons.

"If you don't open up, I'll have to force my way in," Freya called.

There was no response.

"All right," Freya said, after giving them a few more moments to cooperate. "We're going in. Be wary of traps."

She took hold of Alex's arm and shifted them both inside the door.

They were immediately assaulted by a vial thrown at their feet. Once broken, inky black smoke poured from the smashed glass.

"Oh no, not again," Freya said as she quickly brought in a stream of water from the tap in the kitchen, trapping the smoke so that it dissolved into the liquid.

Freya turned to see that they were surrounded by Demons, all of which were pointing swords at them. "Yeah, trying to use Nightmare on me was not a smart move. If anything was going to put me in a less merciful mood, it was that."

She pulled her sword from her side. She wished for her hammer, but the space was too small. It would only get stuck.

One of the Demons charged forward.

Freya responded with a blast of Dark Energy, knocking him on his back.

"Anyone else?"

The rest of them swarmed at that, surrounding both Freya and Alex.

"Do you think you're a better sword fighter than them?" Alex asked as they fought back-to-back.

"I have no idea. Maybe. Why?"

“I could neutralise them, but I don’t think I can focus it. Not with so many. I might end up hitting you too.”

Freya shook her head, more than a little disquieted by the idea of not having access to her magic. “Not yet.”

Freya called forth flames to scorch the enemies in front of her, but nothing happened.

“Have you used it yet?” Freya asked.

Alex shook her head frantically. “You said not to!”

Freya was dumbfounded by that. Why wasn’t her magic working?

As soon as she thought that, however, the Demon directly in front of her fell backwards.

She turned to the rest of them and saw that they were all stumbling, or caught in place.

“What the-?” Alex managed as Freya frowned in confusion.

And then she looked down.

The Demons weren’t just tripping randomly. They were tripping over branches. Branches that had forced their way up, through the floor of the house, to wrap around their legs, holding them in place.

“Are you doing that?” Alex asked as the branches made their way to the Demons’ arms, making sure that they couldn’t swing their weapons.

“I’m not sure,” Freya admitted. “I... I know that there are more Elemental powers that I haven’t tapped into before. This might be one of them.”

“Okay. Well, that’s good then, right?”

Freya nodded, though she wasn’t so sure. She had done her best to ignore the Shadow Realm, but it seemed clear now that Juni was right. She was tapping into her Elemental powers more. They were going to bond...

“I guess they can’t tell us anything now, though,” Alex said as the branches finally stopped growing around the Demons, having wrapped around their faces so that their jaws were clamped shut.

“I guess not,” Freya agreed. “I have no idea how to pull the branches back.” She then clambered over the Demons that had surrounded them to see the one that she had first knocked down.

He was still breathing, though the blast had knocked him out cold.

Freya grabbed a vial of healing potion from her belt and dumped it onto his chest, where she had struck him.

He bolted upright after a few moments, gasping.

Alex lifted her hand towards him, closing her eyes in concentration.

“What is she doing?” the Demon asked, just before his eyes went wide with fear. “Wha- What are you- My magic! Why can’t I feel my magic?!”

Freya’s stomach churned at his obvious distress, but she did her best to keep it from showing on her face. “Don’t worry,” she told him in a cold voice. “It’s only temporary. We just didn’t want you shifting out while we talked. We only want to talk.”

His eyes grew wider. “You- You’re the Angel...”

Freya nodded. “And you’re one of Uther’s rogues. One of the ones he regularly sends to try and kill me.”

The Demon nodded, not attempting to deny it.

“Why? Why does he want me dead?”

“I don’t know!”

“Wrong answer.”

“I swear, I don’t!”

“So, do you really want this loss of magic to be permanent, or...”

“No, seriously, I mean it. Please. Lord Uther never told us anything. He just said that whoever killed you would get an honoured place in his house. Most of us have tainted blood. We couldn’t amount to anything otherwise. In that position, you don’t ask.”

Alex balked. “But she works with Lady Caroline. Doesn’t that make this in-fighting?”

Freya grimaced. “Actually, no one really knows that I work with her. I try to keep it under wraps.”

The Demon frowned a little. “You know, a lot more of us would think twice about Lord Uther’s plan if we knew that.”

“All right,” Freya said with a hand wave. “I think that’s quite enough advice on how to live my life from one of the men who just tried to kill me, thank you very much.”

The Demon had the decency to look chastised at that. “Look,” he continued, “we really don’t know. But... if you’re really a Dark Angel, well, his kid is next in line for the throne. It wouldn’t surprise me if he saw you as a threat to that.”

Freya sighed. That had been Lady Caroline’s suspicion too. “Okay, well, that’s not even why we’re here. There have been disappearances in this city. Other magical beings going missing overnight without a trace. Did Lord Uther put you up to that too?”

The Demon balked. “No, I swear! Creator, we didn’t answer the door because we thought they had come for us too. I swear, we’re just supposed to cause trouble and kill you if we can, nothing else.”

Freya sighed at that. He seemed to be telling the truth, but she couldn’t be sure.

“Is there a magical way to know if he’s telling the truth?” Alex asked.

Freya frowned. There were truth spells, but they could be trained against. And anyone with a secret this big would certainly do so.

But there was one trick up her sleeve. The one that she hated. She had only ever tried it on Humans before. Well, except for...

Except for...

Freya blinked, her memory drifting to her first kiss. The one that she had compelled from Damon. But Damon was Human, so of course that had worked.

Still, she was left with the feeling that her compulsion power would, indeed, work against a Demon.

And it couldn't hurt to try, she figured.

"Tell the truth, do you and Lord Uther truly have nothing to do with these disappearances?"

The Demon became wide-eyed at that, his mouth seemingly moving without his knowledge. "Yes," he said in a monotone. "We truly had nothing to do with the disappearances."

Freya nodded. "Thank you," she said before taking Alex's arm and shifting them both back outside.

"Well, that was almost entirely useless," Freya said, though her thoughts were distracted by her display of new power, rather than focusing on their mission.

"I suppose," Alex agreed. "I'm sorry. My contacts were sure that they had to be involved."

"Honestly, I would have put money on it last night," Freya admitted. "I guess this takes us all the way back to square one."

Alex nodded, though she seemed distracted. "Hey, Freya?"

"Hmm?"

"What was it that you did to that Demon? When you asked him to tell you the truth, I mean. He seemed... a little out of it."

“I don’t really know,” Freya admitted. “It’s some kind of compulsion power, but... It unsettles me. I’ve used it accidentally in the past and... Well, the effects can be pretty drastic. I don’t use it when I can avoid it.”

“Is it one of your Angel powers?”

“I have no idea. I... I’ve never really admitted to anyone that I can do it. And nothing I’ve read about Angels suggests that it’s anything to do with them, though it might just be something that’s been omitted from history. I know that I don’t exactly want people to know that I can do this.”

“Yeah, it seems... Honestly, it’s a little frightening.”

“I know,” Freya said, though it didn’t make Alex’s words hurt any less. She hated the idea that Alex of all people would be frightened of her. “But I barely ever use it, I swear. Only in dire situations like these, where there’s no other choice. We had to be sure that he wasn’t behind the disappearances, and there was no other spell that would tell us for certain.”

Alex nodded. “I know, Freya.” She gave a reassuring smile, though it didn’t quite reach her eyes. “It’s a little unsettling, but I trust you. If you say that you don’t like using it, then I believe you.”



THEY DECIDED TO GO out for food that night, rather than staying in Alex’s hotel room. After a brief discussion, they had both settled on a sushi bar in town.

“So, what’s the next step?” Alex asked as she picked at a bowl of teriyaki chicken. “With the investigation, I mean.”

Freya sighed as she picked up a passing plate of gyoza. “I don’t know. I mean, we don’t have any more leads. Lady Caroline would have messaged if anything came up, but she hasn’t. I suppose that’s a good thing, if none of the attacks have happened

since the night before last. Maybe it's a sign that things are calming down..."

"Maybe the kidnappers got what they wanted."

Freya nodded. "But that still leaves a lot of people missing and no answers as to what has happened to them. They may be dead, but we have no real proof either way, and we can't just stop looking when it's so uncertain."

Alex nodded in agreement. "Well, do you not have any other friends you can ask? What about the Witch you work with at the cafe? You haven't mentioned her giving you any information."

"Yeah, that's because her Coven Head doesn't know anything either, but she's more than happy to point the finger at the Enhanced."

"Ah," Alex said, her gaze dropping.

"Still, I probably should go and visit them tomorrow. They might have some more information for me. And given that I've been working so heavily with Lady Caroline, I should probably at least show my face to prove that I haven't forsaken them for the Demons completely."

Alex nodded. "Sounds like a plan."

Freya smiled as she finished her last dumpling before looking back at the mountain of multicoloured plates they had collected.

"We really do eat a lot, huh?" Alex joked.

Freya nodded. "One of the side-effects of using my power so heavily. And I suppose your metabolism is enhanced with the rest of you."

"It is indeed. Though I didn't realise that until recently."

"I imagine that the world has more than a few surprises for you."

"That it has," Alex said with a smile. "So, are you coming back to mine tonight again?"

"If that's okay with you."

Alex grinned. "It is definitely more than okay with me."

"All right, just let me shoot Margaret a text to let her know where I'll be."

"Have you told her that you're currently out on a date?"

"Well, I decided to tell her that I was going out with my girlfriend. She seems to have taken that to mean 'gal pal.'" Freya passed her phone over so that Alex could see the texts.

Alex smiled, but it quickly faded as she got a far-away look.

"What is it?" Freya asked as she took her phone back.

Alex shrugged, giving a half-hearted smile. "It's nothing. Just seeing the word 'girlfriend' written down like that... I like it. But... maybe I like it too much..."

Freya frowned, wondering what she meant for a moment before it dawned on her. "How long do you think you'll be able to stay here?"

Alex shrugged. "Until this crisis with the disappearances finishes, at least. My monitor seemed perfectly happy with me trying to mend relations with the magical community here when I spoke to them."

"And what about the base you originally came for?"

"I have a solid lead, so I should find it quite quickly once I put my mind to it again. I'll hold off until things have calmed down, though."

"But after that, you think you'll have to go home?"

Alex nodded. "I mean, I'll make a case to stay, of course, and maybe staying here to maintain relations will be seen as important. And who knows what they'll want to do with the base... But this is a very preliminary mission. Not many have been undertaken since the War ended, and none of the others were outside the US. It's not considered safe to be outside for this long. I don't imagine anyone changing their minds on that after just one mission. I'll likely have to return, at least for a while."

Freya gave her a reassuring smile, though her heart ached in her chest at the knowledge that their time was limited.

“Well, then,” she said, “we’ll just have to be sure that we make what time we do have together count.”



Chapter Nine

“**Y**ou’re getting closer.”

Freya tried not to roll her eyes at Juni for that. She loved Juni, and she had missed her, but it had been days. Seph would be furious, Sarah would be worried, and the Lord she had been visiting - whose name escaped her - would probably be offended by her running off like this.

But she couldn’t bring herself to go back.

She had thought about it, but the thought of straying too far from Juni made her physically ill.

That more than anything told her that Juni was right. They were going to bond.

“What exactly is bringing me closer?” Freya asked. “What’s changed?”

Juni just shrugged. “I don’t know. I have no knowledge of your life on Earth. However, I am the bridge between nature and humanity. Presumably, you have grown close to a Human on Earth.”

Freya frowned. “I mean, I have a Human girlfriend. Kind of. But I suppose she still counts.”

“Then there is your answer.”

“But I’ve had Humans that I’ve been close to before. Do my parents not count?”

“Presumably not. Are you honest with them about who you are? About your powers?”

“Well... no...”

“Are you honest with your girlfriend?”

“Yes, but I can be. She already knows about magic, so I’m not doing anything illegal by telling her.”

“Regardless of circumstance, you can let your guard down with her in a way that you cannot be with other Humans, and that has created a bond between the two of you.”

“So, what? Now we just wait? What will the tipping point be?”

“True love’s kiss should do it.”

Freya frowned. “But I’ve had true love’s kiss from a Human before. When I was under the sleeping curse, Damon kissing me woke me up. Does that not count?”

“I do not have an answer for you there. All I know is that we are currently closer to bonding than we have ever been...”



FREYA AWOKE IN THE middle of the night, Juni’s words echoing in her mind. The hotel room was pitch black, despite the curtains being open. The hotel room was so high up that they had never bothered to close them.

Freya sat up, pulling the duvet around her shoulders to conserve warmth as she noticed that she had woken up alone.

“Alex?” Freya asked as she picked her phone up from the bedside table to shine some light around the room.

There was no response.

As Freya looked around the room, she realised that Alex’s coat and shoes were gone, and Freya couldn’t hear her in the bathroom.

Freya wrapped the duvet more tightly around herself, heavy rain pelting the window, making the room feel even colder.

She turned her attention back to her phone, intending to text Alex to see where she was.

Before she could open the messenger app, however, the door opened, revealing Alex walking in with a bottle of water in hand.

“You’re up,” Alex noted as she came to sit on the other side of the bed, tapping the bedside lamp on. “I’m sorry if my leaving woke you. I just wanted some water from downstairs. I would have gotten you something too if I’d known you would be up.”

“It’s fine,” Freya assured her. “I was just wondering where you’d gone.”

“I didn’t want to disturb you,” Alex said as she kicked off her shoes and threw her coat over to the chair. “I thought I’d be back with more than enough time before you woke up.”

Alex settled back under the covers next to Freya and took a drink from her bottle of water. She glanced over to the window. “The rain seems to be easing up,” she noted. “It only started once I got downstairs, I think. It came and went so quickly. Does rain always do that?”

Freya shrugged. “It can. Usually it does in the summer, between short stretches of sun.”

“It doesn’t rain much back home,” Alex told her. “It does occasionally, I think, but not very often.”

“It must be strange to be here, then, where it rains all of the time.”

“I suppose. It’s not too bad, though. Makes for a nice change.”

Freya nodded. “I actually like the rain. Though that’s probably because water was the first Elemental power I mastered. It made it easy to defend myself, having the rain make everything wet all of the time.”

“Yeah, I guess it would suck for you to be in a desert.”

Freya shrugged. “I’ve mastered fire as well now, so it probably wouldn’t be too bad, but I wouldn’t want to test it.”

“So, are the Elemental powers part of being an Angel?”

“Kind of,” Freya explained. “There are four different types of Angel. I’m what’s known as an Angel of Life. There are also Reapers, Oracles, and Elementals. Reapers and Angels of Life aren’t a genetic phenomenon necessarily. They’re just randomly born into magic bloodlines. Oracles are chosen from Seers, but Elementals are actually Mother Nature’s daughters.”

“Wait, there’s actually Mother Nature?”

Freya nodded. “Yeah, don’t the Enhanced have information on the Upper Council?”

“We always thought that the Council of Light and Demon Monarchy were the big bosses.”

“Well, that’s kind of true, but the Upper Council is above them. They’re in charge of all of the really esoteric stuff. Life, death, destiny, and nature. They don’t get involved in wars or politics, other than overseeing that the Earth keeps turning.”

“So, Angels work for them or something?”

“Yeah. Every Angel is tied to one of them.”

“And you’re tied to Life?”

“I guess,” Freya said with a shrug. “No one’s seen Life in millennia, though. And she’s certainly never given any instructions to any of her Angels. We just have to figure out what we should do by ourselves.”

“So, what about your Elemental powers? Are they not, you know, something Elementals have?”

“Well, that’s the thing. Because being an Angel isn’t entirely genetic, I still have traits and powers from my non-Angel ancestors.”

“Like your Demon father.”

“Yes, and like my great-great-grandmother, who was an Elemental. I get those powers from her.”

“Huh,” Alex said, taking a moment to mull the information over. “So you’re related to Mother Nature then?”

“I guess.”

“You guess?”

Freya shrugged. “I kind of became jaded to my family tree a long time ago.” She extracted herself from her duvet so that she could flop back down to lie on the bed. “Creator, at this point my father could literally turn out to be the devil, and I would no longer be shocked.”

Alex smiled. “Good thing there’s not really a devil, then.”

“Well, exactly.”

Alex put her empty water bottle onto the bedside table before turning off the lamp and snuggling back down next to Freya.

“You sound weird when you talk about your family,” Alex noted softly, just enough to be heard over the light drizzle of rain that had started up again outside. “Like... you’d rather be talking about anything else.”

“It’s not exactly my favourite subject,” Freya said, doing her best to sound casual about it.

“Why not?”

Freya gave a small shrug, turning so that she was lying on her back, staring up at the ceiling. “I guess I just always felt a little abandoned, you know? Like, I only knew that my mum had been a teenager and she had died just after I was born. I thought she had died because of having a child so young. I blamed her for making that stupid decision. And I always thought my father had been some other teenager who didn’t want knocking up some girl to ruin his life.

“That’s what I was, a life ruiner. And I hated that their actions and decisions and choices left me feeling that way.”

Alex bundled up some of the duvet at that, tucking it gently around Freya so that she was a little warmer.

“Anyway,” Freya continued, “it turned out none of that was true. My mother had been sent to the Shadow Realm after her

soul split in two, in the hopes that it could repair itself there. She came back pregnant, so that wasn't her fault. And then my father had also been in the Shadow Realm at the time, so I don't even know if he knows that I exist. Or if he's even alive. He seems to have died in the Shadow Realm, which doesn't exactly bode well..."

"So how did your mother die, then?" Alex asked. "Was it in childbirth?"

Freya shook her head. "She was the one who changed the timeline," she admitted. "She gave up her life because we were in danger, and she thought that it was the only way to save me.

"Finding that out kind of only added to the feeling of being abandoned, you know?"

"I'm sorry."

"It's all right. I've had over twenty years to come to terms with this. The fact that I'm still upset over it is ridiculous. But... Well, it doesn't help that I have more than a few immortal relatives who pretty much ignore me."

"You know, I never knew where my genetic material came from," Alex said after a long stretch of silence. "None of us did. And the people who looked after us - the scientists and doctors and teachers - none of them were our parents. Not in any real kind of way. I always figured that the families we were given - or not given - weren't as important as the ones we made for ourselves. I always wanted to go to the outside world and find a family of my own."

"Yeah, me too," Freya admitted, before moving so that she could wrap her arm around Alex's middle.

She didn't say it, because she feared that it was too early or that it wouldn't be reciprocated or that it would hurt too much when they were separated, but as she held Alex close, Freya

couldn't help but think that they should start that family together.



FREYA AWOKE AGAIN A few hours later, feeling much better than she had in the middle of the night. It was no real surprise, she supposed, given that this was a much more palatable time to wake, but she also knew that she had Alex to thank in some part for it.

Alex was already in the bathroom, the shower running.

Freya smiled as she got up, picking up her clothes. The rain had given way to sun, which appeared to be quickly drying the pavements outside.

Freya supposed that might cause her problems if she got into trouble later, but put that thought aside. She would still take her small vial of water with her, so it wasn't as if she'd be completely without it. Not to mention, she would always have her fire, and she now apparently had further abilities that she still hadn't tested to their truest extent.

She heard the shower shut off, and moments later, Alex came out of the bathroom, pulling on a dress.

"So, are you going to go to see your friends in the coven, then?" Alex asked.

Freya nodded.

"I wish I could go with you, but I'm guessing doing so would get me killed on sight."

"Yeah, probably," Freya admitted, feeling awful about that. "I'm sorry. It's just... the older members of the coven still have scars from the War. And even the younger members have grown up very aware of those scars."

Alex sighed. "Here I am, trying to strive for peace between our peoples, but sometimes it just seems so impossible. What if

those who remember can never forgive? What if they can't even forgive those of us who hadn't been born yet?"

Freya shrugged. "I'm not sure. But we can't just give up. I'm sure, once we prove that the Enhanced aren't behind this, we'll be able to have a much more productive dialogue."

Alex smiled. "Look at you with all your fancy diplomacy words."

"I was raised on the Star Wars prequels," Freya explained with a shrug. "Anyway, I'd better hurry up and get over there. The sooner we know more, the sooner we can prove that the Enhanced aren't to blame."

"Okay," Alex told her before giving her a quick kiss. "I'll check in with my monitor while you're gone. Text you later?"

"Yeah, text you later."



FREYA SHIFTED TO THE coven, practically skipping as she went. The joy in her step was halted, however, as she walked up to see that the front door to the building had been smashed in.

"Hey," Freya called into the building, catching Ally's attention. "What happened?"

Ally shrugged, looking more than a little shaken. "Someone broke in last night. We managed to fend them off, but... They still managed to get in, past all of the wards."

"Who was it? A Demon?"

Ally shook her head. "It... They were wearing Human armour, nothing magic. No runes, no charms... Just Kevlar."

"What did they look like?"

"We don't know. They had on a black mask, just like the other attacks."

"Where are Sarah and Mel?"

“Sarah’s still looking after the girl you brought in. I have no idea where Mel is.”

“Thanks,” Freya said, heading inside and making her way to the room where they had put the hybrid girl.

Once she got there, she gently knocked on the open door. She could see that, inside, Sarah was tending to the girl, using some kind of spell that Freya didn’t recognise.

As soon as Sarah had finished, the girl fell back onto her bed, fast asleep.

“Sorry,” Sarah signed as she left the room, closing the door behind her. “I had to finish up with her.”

“How is she?”

“Rattled. I thought we were making progress, but then last night... I’ve never seen her so shaken. Not even when she was first brought here. I put a healing spell on her, but it knocks you out while it works. I would have used a regular sleeping potion, but this way she’s tied to me so that I can be alerted if anything about her condition changes.”

“So, what’s wrong with her? Just shock and trauma?”

Sarah nodded. “Most likely. It’s difficult with hybrids. Witches act mostly as Humans do, though we sometimes rely on our magic in times of stress in ways that aren’t available to Humans. Werewolves, on the other hand, are a completely different kettle of fish. She’s not acting exactly as a Were would, but not exactly like a Witch would, either. It’ll take time for me to figure out how exactly to get through to her. Though... I don’t know, but I suspect the lack of speech may be her wolf brain taking over, despite her remaining in Human form. I would suggest that she try to shift fully, but I don’t even know that she can. Many hybrids can’t.”

“So, what you’re saying is that we’re not getting any information on the attackers from her any time soon?”

Sarah shook her head. "I wasn't fighting last night, I was making sure our guest was safe and away from the conflict, but you might want to talk to Rosaline. She was down there fighting with the others and she might be able to tell you something more. Maybe give you a lead."

Freya nodded. "Thanks," she said before heading to Rosaline's office.

She knocked firmly on the door and heard Rosaline shout "Come in."

Freya entered to see that Mel was in there with her, flipping through a large tome.

"Here," Mel said. "This charm should reinforce the others we had around the entrances."

"Close the door behind you," Rosaline said to Freya before turning back to Mel. "Make sure to guard the windows as well."

Mel nodded, making a note of it on her phone.

"You're increasing security," Freya noted.

"Of course," Rosaline said. "We can't take any chances with Enhanced back in the picture."

Freya decided to let the comment about the Enhanced slide. If Rosaline was still clinging to that explanation, then she clearly thought that the intruder from the night before had been Enhanced, telling Freya that she wouldn't get any good information from her on the matter.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Freya asked. If they were fended off, that meant that the intruder would probably be back. If Freya got the chance to fight them, maybe she could stop them once and for all, and prove Alex's innocence in the process.

"The best thing you can do is find this attacker before they come back," Rosaline told her sharply.

"Well, I would, but no one has any leads."

“They’re Enhanced. That’s your lead. Go to their old bases, ferret them out. I don’t care, just don’t do it here. You have no experience defending a building like this from attack. Your presence will only be disruptive, and it may even paint a larger target on our backs than the one that’s currently there.”

Freya sighed. She’d known Rosaline for long enough to know that she wasn’t going to get a different answer from her. The woman was incredibly stubborn, especially when it came to protecting her coven.

“All right. I’ll let you know if I find anything of note,” Freya said, shifting out.



Chapter Ten

Freya went straight to Caroline's office, figuring that she might have more information where Rosaline didn't. Or that she would at least like to know about the break-in.

She shifted right to outside Caroline's office, the door to which was slightly ajar.

She could hear voices, so she briefly poked her head inside to see if Caroline was free to talk.

"Agreed," a voice said, and it took Freya a moment to realise that it had come from Caroline's speaker-phone. Caroline was pacing across her room, but she quickly spotted Freya, indicating for her to come inside, and placed a finger on her lips to tell her to be quiet.

Freya entered the room, closing the door behind her.

"Both Seph and the King are worried about this," the voice continued. "And I can't blame them. Technically, these people were under our protection, even if a lot of the nobility don't see it that way."

"Sir, to be frank, this isn't my job," Caroline said. "I'm here to watch out for potential breaches in magical secrecy, nothing more. I don't mind having a hand in rehabilitating rogues from time to time, but this is beyond what I can handle."

"I know," the voice answered, sounding more than a little sympathetic. "The sad thing is, under the current system, it's not

anyone's job. They weren't sworn to any houses, which made them vulnerable."

"Most houses won't take hybrids, and you know it."

"I know. The King wants to put in place some kind of house of misfits that would be looked after by the Crown, but the priority right now is restoring order to the city and catching those responsible."

The owner of the voice sighed. *"Caroline, look, I know you asked us to look the other way, and we have, but... I'm no fool. I know that you've been working with the Angel."*

Caroline shot Freya an apologetic look at that. "Just barely. She knows that I can rehabilitate the rogues, and she'd rather that than killing them in the street."

"I understand, but... This is a delicate situation, Caroline. You're given a lot of leeway because we trust you, and you're good at your job. But it's also because you're so separate from anything else we do here. If you make a poor decision in friends, it would rarely affect the rest of us. But this is a situation where it very well might."

"So, I have to ask, is she trustworthy?"

Caroline nodded without a moment's hesitation. "Yes," she said as she watched Freya, presumably for a reaction. "She's one of the most trustworthy people I know."

"Are you sure? A Light Angel..."

"She's not aligned with the Light beings. She's not aligned either way. She just doesn't like to see people getting hurt. And people *are* getting hurt here. Hybrids are getting hurt, and she has a soft-spot for misfits."

There was a long stretch of silence, and Freya couldn't help but feel a little anxious. If that answer wasn't good enough, the best way to convince them would be to tell them of Freya's Demonic heritage. But that wasn't a secret she wanted out just yet, if at all.

“All right,” the voice finally said. “I trust your judgement. I would ask Seph if she could see anything regarding this friendship, but I think we both know she’s the last person who should know.”

“If the Angel is scared of anything to do with working with me,” Caroline warned, “it’s that she’ll be used as a political pawn.”

“I figured as much. That’s why Seph is being kept in the dark here.

“I’m going to send a couple of squadrons of my men to you. They’ll patrol the city and reinforce security for the most vulnerable covens and nests.”

“Thank you,” Caroline said. “I’m also trying to set up a temporary safe house for those who are on their own. I’m a little afraid that gathering people in one spot would only attract attention, but there’s no way to protect them if they’re alone. I would also like to contact the local Light beings, if that’s all right by you. I know that we can’t be sure that they’re not behind it, but this is not the time for letting our differences get the better of us.”

The voice on the other end of the line sighed. *“I wish it were that simple, Caroline, I really do. However, until we have a better idea of who is behind these attacks, we shouldn’t be so quick to share our information. Especially when we’re the only ones who have been hit.”*

“All right, but I’m not dropping this for good.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to. This is a changing situation, after all.”

“I’m also a little worried about these men you’re sending. While they’ll help with security, I’m guessing most will have never stepped foot on Earth. My primary focus is still maintaining secrecy, and these men will only make that job harder.”

“That’s why I’m expanding your team. I’m sending some men from my service, and the King is sending some from his. Not the

strongest, maybe, but many are the smartest. I figured that's what you would need."

"It is, thank you."

"I wish I could be there to lead my men, but I'll have to burden you with that task on top of your regular duties. I cannot leave the Underworld, and I don't trust anyone else to do it."

"Of course," Caroline said with a nod. "Your nephew's training has to take priority."

"It would also be ideal if the Angel worked directly with them. She knows the city, I'm assuming, and it'll help to keep everyone on the same page."

"One second," Caroline said before hitting a button that Freya assumed muted the microphone. "You don't have to say yes if you don't want to," Caroline told her.

Freya nodded, thinking for a moment. "I... I would be willing to try," Freya finally said. "But I would want it to remain clear that I am in no way formally associated with the Crown, and the secret of my Demonic blood must be kept."

"All right," Caroline agreed before hitting the button again. "Okay, she's onboard. But she wants it made clear that she has no formal association with the Crown. She may not be a Light Angel, but she has no interest in becoming a Dark one either. She relies heavily on being able to move freely between both sides."

"Understood," the voice said. *"I'll make it clear to my men."*

He hung up at that, leaving Caroline to sigh before leaning back against the wall of her office.

"So, who was that exactly?" Freya asked.

"The head of the Kingsguard," Caroline explained. "He's pretty much in charge of all military matters, as well as being the King's personal bodyguard, though he got shifted to guarding Uther's son years back."

“I guess he would make a prime target, if he doesn’t have Royal Blood to protect him. Plenty of people must want to hurt him.”

Caroline nodded. “Namely his father,” she muttered before her eye’s widened. “Not that I told you that,” she said quickly.

“Why would Uther want to hurt his son if he’s in line for the throne? Isn’t it a great honour?”

Caroline nodded. “It is, and I don’t think he wants him dead, just... more under his control. He has no love for the kid.”

“But he’s his father.”

“And his son is half Human. Uther hates Humans.”

“So then how does he have a- Nope, wait forget I asked,” Freya said, cutting herself off as she realised exactly how someone who hated Humans could come to have a child by a Human woman.

“Yeah, it’s not a pretty tale, from what little his brother has felt that he can share with me.

“Anyway, we have other things to talk about, don’t we? Do you want to go over the specifics of dealing with the Demons that are being sent?”

“Yeah, but first I actually came to tell you that there’s been a break-in at the local Light coven. It seems someone was looking for the hybrid girl I took there for protection.”

“Is she all right?”

“Yeah. The Witches managed to fight them off before they got far.”

Caroline nodded with a sigh. “Do they have any new information from the attack?”

“No. The Coven Head is still sure that the attacker was Enhanced.”

“Well, that might have a little more credence if she’s actually seen them now, but the local base is definitely no longer there. It’s

a hospital now. Other than that, I'm not sure how we would go about tracking down an Enhanced, and I would rather not give up men to do it when they could be shoring up defences instead.

"Speaking of which, I'll run you through how this is going to work with the new troops being sent."



FREYA LEFT CAROLINE'S office that evening feeling much happier about the ability of the magical community to protect itself, though she wished that they could talk to the Light creatures about it. Still, she had to admit that the head of the Kingsguard had a point. The targets had all been Dark magic users, with the exception of Rosaline's coven, but that might have just been a mission to wrap up loose ends. Which meant that there was still a chance that Light beings were behind the attacks.

Freya didn't really believe that could be possible, but then, she only really knew the one Light coven, and Witches could be insular. Rosaline most certainly was.

And if it had been other magical beings, wearing Kevlar to make themselves look like Enhanced would be a perfect tactic to keep their involvement under wraps.

But they had no real evidence in that direction, any more than they had evidence in any other, so all they could do was shore up their defences and hope for the best.



FREYA SHIFTED BACK to Alex's hotel room, where the other woman was waiting for her. Alex was sitting cross-legged on her bed, watching something on Freya's laptop.

"What are you up to?" Freya asked as she clambered onto the bed, sitting next to her.

“Watching this... podcast? I hope you don’t mind, I pulled up YouTube and you were logged in, so I just started watching the suggested videos.”

Freya nodded. “That’s fine. I think that was last week’s episode.”

“Yeah, I kind of like it, I guess. I mean, they’re not really talking about anything. Just rambling about their lives. But it’s a nice window into the outside world.”

“Yeah,” Freya agreed with a smile. “I think that’s why I got into watching podcasts like these in high school. I didn’t really have a lot of friends, and I guess it helped to fill the hole a little. Wow, now that I’ve said it out loud, it sounds kind of sad and unhealthy...”

Alex smiled at that. “Nonsense. I mean, this little counter here says that hundreds of thousands of people have watched this video. You can’t be lonely and sad for doing something hundreds and thousands of other people are also doing.”

Freya smiled back. “Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

Alex paused the video, put the laptop down, and turned to face Freya properly. “So, how did things go?”

Freya sighed. “Someone tried to break into the coven last night.”

“Is everyone all right?”

“Yeah. They managed to fend off the attacker.”

“Well, that’s good, at least.”

“Yeah. They’re going to shore up their defences, along with everyone else. There are going to be some Demon troops coming into the city to help keep it safe.”

“I know I’m new to this world, but I don’t associate the word ‘Demon’ with ‘safe’, and I don’t imagine a lot of Light creatures would, either.”

Freya sighed. "Yeah, you're probably right. But I'll be working with them, so that should hopefully help to keep them in line. And to give Light magic users a better sense of security about the whole affair."

Alex nodded. "I'm sure it will. So, do we have the night off again?"

"We do indeed."

Alex grinned and kissed her. "Good, because I missed you." She gently pushed Freya down so that she was lying back on the bed, and straddled her.

"Oh?" Freya asked with a quirk of her eyebrow. "I've only been gone a few hours."

"I know," Alex said, kissing down her neck. "But I still missed you."

"I missed you too."



Chapter Eleven

“I know, I know, I’m late,” Sarah signed across the cafe as soon as she came hurrying in.

“It’s all right,” Freya signed back with a smile before taking off her pinny. “It’s only ten minutes. I can handle holding the fort for an extra ten minutes.”

“I know, I just... I’m sorry. Creator, I’ve just been so busy at the coven, and with these new shift schedules... I feel like we haven’t seen each other in weeks.”

“Well, I mean, we haven’t,” Freya said with an awkward shrug. “It’s been a fortnight since I last saw you.”

Sarah’s face fell at that. “Creator, I am so sorry. Things are just so hectic...”

“Hey, it’s all right, I get it. It’s not as if I’ve been just sitting on my hands for two weeks. Things have been busy since the attacks.”

“I know. I had hoped that they would calm down after a couple of weeks without them, but I guess nothing is ever calm for us. And just because things have calmed, doesn’t mean we shouldn’t be vigilant, I suppose.”

Freya nodded. “I know what you mean. I thought that, given how poorly staffed Lady Caroline had been before the attacks, the Crown would be looking to pull back the people they sent over, but there’s not even been a suggestion of it.”

“Is it weird that I feel safer with more Demons around? I mean, I shouldn’t, right?”

“We’re all on the same side here,” Freya reminded her.

“I know, it’s just strange. Even the older Witches, who remember the time before the War when Light and Dark beings really were in conflict with each other, feel better about having them around. I think that’s because they also remember the War, though. Apparently Demons were the only ones who ever stood a chance of putting up a fight.”

“With so much negativity, it would have been difficult for Light beings to draw Energy,” Freya mused, remembering that Amber had once told her the same thing.

“I suppose,” Sarah agreed. “Regardless, it’s nice to know that we’re not sitting ducks.”

Freya nodded before picking up her coat and backpack from the back room. “I’ve got to head off.”

“Really? Are you going to meet Alex?” Sarah asked with a knowing smile. “I haven’t heard anything from you about how things are going with you two.”

“They’re going good,” Freya admitted, doing her best not to show her discomfort at the line of questioning.

“See? Mel and I told you that you’d be better at controlling your powers now.”

“Yeah, you guys were right,” Freya said quickly. “Anyway, I’m not meeting her. I actually have a meeting with Lady Caroline and the Demon squadron leaders.”

Sarah nodded, her smile fading. “Well, good luck with that.”

Freya gave a grateful smile, pretty sure that she would need it.



FREYA SHIFTED TO THE Cleaner office to see that Caroline and the two squadron leaders - Ada and Dex - were already waiting for her, all three of them gathered around a table where a map of the city had been laid out.

“Freya,” Caroline greeted as she entered. “Good to see you.”

Ada and Dex simply nodded at her, neither saying anything. Dex was a hulk of a man, with bright red hair that matched his red eyes. Ada had the more common ink-black hair that most Demons had, and she was tiny compared to Dex, as well as impossibly skinny without looking malnourished. Both of them had the milky white skin typical of Demons, though it was covered in tattoos. Freya recognised some of them as runes of protection and strength, but others eluded her.

“So, what were we talking about?” Freya asked as she approached.

“Patrol routes,” Caroline informed her. “Could you perhaps illuminate us on your usual approach?”

Freya nodded before taking a red marker pen and highlighting certain areas. There were already push-pins in place to denote places that housed Dark magic users.

“These are the places where I usually concentrate my patrols,” Freya said. “It’s a combination of areas frequented by magical beings, where trouble is likely to crop up due to the wrong people mixing, or drunken magic users egging each other on, and areas that Ut- that rogue Demons usually attack, due to the large populations of Humans.”

“Dealing with rogues is not our job,” Dex said, folding his arms.

“Actually, it is,” Caroline reminded him. “Part of your job here is to make sure that the rogues don’t use the confusion as an excuse to cause havoc.”

“That should not be our priority,” Ada chipped in, her voice high-pitched and squeaky.

“I never said that it would be,” Freya snapped at that, more than a little annoyed at how quickly they sought to undermine her. “Caroline asked about my usual patrol paths, and I gave an answer. Ideally, these would be combined with watching out for Dark magic users.” She indicated to the push pins. “We have no other leads, so protection and keeping the rogues in line has to be our priority.”

“You just want us to do your job for you,” Dex commented, his tone snide.

Freya narrowed her eyes at that, letting her Energy crackle behind her. There were stories of Angels that everyone knew. The most prominent of which was that, when an Angel used their full power, they glowed, and that glow formed wings of light behind them.

Of course, Freya had never produced such wings of light, and suspected that it was just a story, given how few people had actually ever interacted with an Angel, especially one at full power. But the fact that no one had seen an Angel do this had given her the ultimate advantage. It meant that she could flare her Energy out behind her, to mimic wings, and no one was any the wiser.

The problem here was that she couldn't let them know of her Demonic heritage, which meant only using Light Energy. Not an easy task when she was seething with rage.

She took a deep breath, however, and focused her mind. Usually, it took more than a little while for her to focus in on something that made her happy, but that was no longer the case. Now, she simply focused on that morning, and how she and Alex had laughed together while they ate pancakes and watched Netflix.

Both Dex and Ada seemed to pale at the bright white wings that surged out behind her, taking a step back.

“I don’t need you two to do my job for me,” Freya told them. “I am perfectly capable of dealing with rogue Demons myself. My only concern right now is the safety of the magical beings in this city and catching those responsible for harming them. I may be powerful, but I cannot be everywhere at once. *That* is why you are here.”

“Okay,” Caroline said, stepping forward. “Both of you, use Freya’s information to come up with a patrol route for your squadron.” She indicated for Freya to follow her as she headed into her office.

Once they were in, she shut the door behind them.

“You did well,” Caroline told her with a smile. “Demons respond well to shows of strength. I had worried for a moment that you would try to argue with just words...”

“You know that they’re only giving you trouble because they despise the idea of working under a Light being, don’t you? That’s why they were provoking you, and why a show of strength worked. Most Light beings wouldn’t have attempted it. It was a very Demon thing to do.”

Freya sighed. “Is this your way of saying that I should tell them that I’m half Demon?”

“I’m just saying that they would fall in line without a whimper of protest if you did. Creator, they would probably be excited to work with you. Do you know how long it’s been since there’s been a Dark Angel?”

“Yeah, people keep telling me.”

Caroline nodded, taking the jab for what it was. “I know, it’s your decision as to who you tell. All I’m saying is that it would bring a sense of hope and unity when one is sorely needed, and

it would help to reduce the amount of crap you have to put up with from them.”

“I know,” Freya said with a shrug. “I just... I don’t want the trouble.”

She couldn’t help but think, however, as she left Caroline’s office, that keeping her secret might just be causing her as much trouble as revealing it would.



ALEX AND FREYA DECIDED to go out that night, choosing a quiet pub Freya knew. Freya was far too tired to maintain a sound-dampening bubble after her theatrical display earlier in the day, and she wanted to go somewhere that wouldn’t trigger her auditory processing disorder.

“So, how did it go?” Alex asked as she made her way back from the bar with two pints.

Freya gave a tired shrug. “It was mercifully short.”

“That bad, huh?”

“I guess... They just don’t want to listen to me, and I can’t blame them. I’m an outsider, as far as they know. And a kid, with no military training or background.”

“But you know the city. Surely they’re willing to listen to your expertise.”

“Only because I low-key threatened them.”

Alex smiled at that. “Well, if it works.”

Freya couldn’t help but laugh. “Yeah, I guess. So, enough about me meeting the Demons. How are things going with your base?”

“I actually found it today,” Alex told her with a smile. “It’s just a little way out of town. I spent most of the morning disabling the cloaking technology, but it’s all sorted out now. I just had time for a brief scout about before I came back here.”

“Nice. Am I allowed inside or is it all top-secret?”

“I’d be more than happy to give you a tour, but I’ll need time to clear out the bodies first.” She shuddered.

Freya frowned. “Bodies? What bodies?”

Alex sighed, her gaze dropping. Her eyes were glazed over with unshed tears when she brought her gaze back up. “The bodies of the Enhanced that had been in the base. It looks like a few Demons got in and killed them all. There were a few left over weapons, small things like arrows and daggers, and they were definitely Demon-made.”

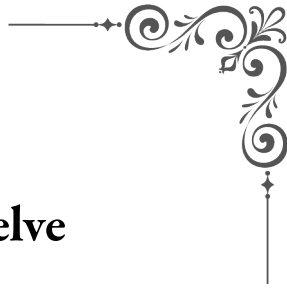
Freya frowned. “But... Why wouldn’t anyone know about it if they had? Surely the Demons would have told other magical beings. And you said that contact with them only went down when the timeline changed, so it must have been after that. So, what? There are Demons out there that know some Enhanced survived the change? Why would they keep that to themselves?”

“I... I can’t be certain, but I went into the labs and... It seems as if they had at least one live Demonic subject that they were... experimenting on. The attack may have been personal.” She looked away again at that. “I’m sorry, Freya. I know that we were at War, but...”

Freya shook her head. “You don’t need to apologise for things that happened before you were born. Or when you were a baby.”

“I know, I just... Today was draining. It was... difficult to see.”

Freya nodded in understanding, taking Alex’s hand in hers. “It’s all right. It’s in the past now.”



Chapter Twelve

In the following weeks, Freya's schedule managed to return to something resembling stable, if not normal. She would go to uni and work whenever it was scheduled, and then she would spend the rest of her time checking in on the Demon patrols, or with Caroline to make sure everything was going smoothly.

At nights, she typically met up with Alex, and they would just do whatever took their fancy. Sometimes they went out for meals, sometimes to the cinema, sometimes they just stayed in and got take-away... It was nice. Nicer than Freya had dared to admit to herself, even with the spectre of Alex having to leave re-treating further and further from the forefront of her mind.

"Freya," Ada greeted as Freya shifted in to meet her patrol.

Freya liked Ada, she had decided. She was no-nonsense, and she clearly put her squad first. She had taken a while to finally get used to working with Freya, but it had happened eventually, for which Freya was glad. It was so much nicer to be able to work with the Demons without them acting hostile towards her. Though the fact that they probably wouldn't do so if they knew of her Demonic heritage never left her mind.

"Ada," Freya greeted in turn. "How are things going?"

Ada gave a sharp nod. "Everything is going fine. No disturbances in this area, that we've been able to see. However, there have been reports of rogues causing problems around here."

“They probably don’t want to pick a fight with you,” Freya ventured.

“According to your information, they pick fights with you often enough.”

“Yeah, but that’s because they seem to want me dead specifically. Otherwise, they tend to hit and run, not wanting a fight with anyone in a position of actual authority.”

“Then perhaps you should patrol with us awhile,” Ada suggested. “Act as bait.”

Freya gave a sardonic smirk at that. “Sure, why not?”

The Demons were silent as they patrolled, but Freya got the sense that it wasn’t the norm. She suspected that it instead had everything to do with her presence.

Even Ada, who had gotten used to working with her and was no longer openly hostile, was silent as they made their way through the street.

Tactically, Freya figured that this wasn’t the best plan. Surely they would have a better chance of attracting a rogue Demon if they made their presence more noticeable. But Freya found her jaw wired shut with nerves at the Demons’ behaviour, so it wasn’t even as if she could initiate the conversation herself.

Eventually, however, an arrow came sailing through the air, striking Freya through the shoulder.

“Bloody hell,” she muttered after stumbling back, just barely managing to regain her balance.

The rogue Demon jumped down in front of her, and the Demons behind her stepped back. Freya could have cursed them for that. She couldn’t use her Dark Energy in front of them, leaving her vulnerable.

She went to grab her hammer, but her shoulder wouldn’t move back that far, causing her excruciating pain when she tried. Pain that she couldn’t even channel into Energy.

She shifted quickly as the Demon made a move to knock her down.

She stumbled after reappearing behind him, feeling a little faint with the pain. She was so used to channelling it into her Energy. She numbed it as best she could, but she was already dis-oriented.

The Demon spun back around to her, striking her across the side of the head, and sending her tumbling to the ground.

She sent out a burst of flames towards him as he advanced, but he simply held up his armoured arm. A rune on the armour glowed for a moment, causing the metal plate on his arm to re-form into a shield.

She cursed at that. Energy would arc around the shield, but she was so frustrated and in so much pain, focusing solely on Light Energy seemed almost suicidal.

She did so anyway, however, doing her best to focus through her pain, trying to fill her mind with thoughts of Alex.

She let out a burst of Light Energy, but it didn't seem to affect him at all, being so weak.

Freya could have cried with frustration at that. She could feel her Dark Energy building, just waiting to be unleashed.

The Demon, however, stopped dead in its tracks. After a moment, Freya realised that a sword was sticking out through his chest.

He fell to the ground to reveal Ada behind him.

"Thanks," Freya managed, hobbling to her feet as she struggled for breath.

Ada just gave her a disgusted look.

Freya turned to the other Demons, seeing them all giving her similar looks, or looks of disappointment.

She was the Angel they had heard so much about, the one that Lady Caroline had seen fit to lead them, and she couldn't even take down one lousy Demon.

"It wasn't my fault," Freya cried out in frustration, her throat stinging with tears. "I can't operate while limiting myself!" At that, the Dark Energy that had built up beneath her skin was finally unleashed, crackling forth in a display that was more impressive than anything Freya had managed in a long while.

Freya struggled to stay standing, her breaths coming short and sharp.

Ada stared at her wide-eyed for a few moments, taking note of her milky pale skin and jet black hair.

"You have Demon blood," Ada finally said, her voice not absent of wonder. "You're not a Light Angel, you're a Dark one."

Freya looked around to see that all of them were giving her the same look of amazement, tinged with more than a little confusion.

Freya shook her head. "No, I'm not."

Ada just raised an eyebrow at that. "Freya, you just proved that you are more in-tune with Dark Energy than Light, and you have the look of a Demon. A hybrid, maybe, but there is definitely Demon blood flowing in your veins."

Freya felt her chest seize up at that, refusing to draw in breath.

She didn't want it to get out like this. Not now.

Part of her argued as she looked at how much the Demons surrounding her seemed to accept and want her as their Angel.

It was a nice change from the cold reception she had initially received from Rosaline.

The thought of the Witches solidified her decision. If she was declared a Dark Angel, Rosaline would never let her near her coven, including Sarah and Mel, ever again.

“No,” Freya repeated, though this time her words had a low vibration to them that caused the Demons to all stand a little straighter. **“I am not a Dark Angel. Forget you saw me use Dark Energy. I took down that rogue Demon using Light Energy, understand?”**

“You took down that rogue Demon using Light Energy,” they all repeated in unison, causing Freya to shiver. It was incredibly unsettling, especially when she knew that she was the cause.

Freya nodded as the Demons seemed to all return to themselves, a little disoriented, but otherwise no worse for wear.

“Good job here,” Ada said as she made her way over to her. “I’m sorry I didn’t help more, but my squad had to see you in action for themselves before they would accept your leadership.”

Freya nodded, her mouth having turned to sandpaper, leaving her unable to give a verbal reply.

Never again, she swore to herself as she finally regained her ability to breathe. *I won’t let myself get into a position where I have to use my compulsion power ever again.*



FREYA SHIFTED BACK to Margaret and Ryan’s house after getting her wound seen to. It was going to take a couple of days to heal, meaning that she’d have to move to one-handed weapons in the meantime. Or, at least, something that didn’t require her to rely on the full range of movement of her shoulder so heavily.

She quickly ran downstairs once she had filled her bag with various weapons, looking for a glass of water.

Instead, she found Margaret in the kitchen, grabbing a can of Diet Coke from the fridge.

Freya realised that it must be later than she thought for her adoptive mother to be home from work already.

“Freya!” Margaret said with a smile. “It feels like you haven’t been home in ages. Are you spending the night back here?”

“Um, no,” Freya said as she shifted her backpack on her shoulders. “I just came by to pick up a few things.”

Margaret just gave her a knowing smile. “So, how are things with this new boyfriend then?”

“What?” Freya asked, more than a little confused.

“Oh, don’t try to pretend, Freya. It’s very obvious that you’ve found yourself a new boy. I suppose you’ve been spending all of your time round at his? Is he a student? Is he on your course?”

“I, um... They’re not a student,” Freya said hurriedly, before realising that that would either suggest that Alex was out of her age range, or not someone who cared about their education. “They graduated early,” Freya lied quickly. “American, you know how behind their system is. You can just skip right on ahead.”

Margaret nodded, seemingly accepting that. “Well, Ryan and I were just talking this morning, and we thought that, since we feel like we haven’t really seen you in so long, we could all go out together for a family meal. You could invite your new boyfriend.”

“Right,” Freya said at that, realising that the jig was probably up.

And it should be up.

That just didn’t stop her from feeling like she was about to throw up.

“I can ask her,” Freya said, waiting for the reaction.

It didn’t come.

Freya didn’t let herself hope, however, instead clarifying, “But she’s not a boyfriend. She’s a girlfriend. Like, she’s a girl and we’re dating.”

Freya was pretty sure Margaret had choked on her drink at that, though she was doing a very good job of trying to hide it.

“You... Well,” Margaret managed once she had finally stopped choking. “They do always say university is the time for trying out such things.”

Freya knew that she should just let it go at that. Laugh it off. Cry it out to Alex later. But something stuck this time, refusing to let her back down. “Yeah, except I’m not experimenting. I... I’ve had girlfriends before. In high school.” That was definitely a stretch, but Freya figured that it was a stretch that needed to be made.

Margaret took a moment to process that. “Oh. Sorry. I just thought... Well, you had seemed so into Damon. But I suppose some lesbians take a while to realise, don’t they?”

“I’m not- I’m not a lesbian. I did like Damon. I like girls and guys and probably non-binary people, but I don’t really know any irl - at least not that are out to me.” She stopped herself at that, realising that she was rambling. “Anyway, I’m bi.”

“Oh, honey, you’re just young,” Margaret told her, with a condescending tone that grated on Freya’s nerves. “Everyone settles on a side eventually. Bi now, gay later, that’s what Gareth always says.”

Gareth was her gay friend at work.

“No, Margaret, I am definitely bi,” Freya told her. “Like I said, I like all genders. That makes me bi.”

“That’s just because you haven’t figured out your preference yet.”

“Even if I had a slight preference one way or the other, the fact that I like more than one gender at all makes me bi.”

Margaret just gave a condescending smile at that. “Well, I guess we’ll see.”

Freya fumed at that, but saw no point in making an argument over it. “All right, fine. I guess I’ll go.”

She stormed out, thinking to herself that, if she ever settled down, it would be in a poly relationship with two people of different genders, just to prove Margaret wrong.



“WHAT’S WRONG?” ALEX asked as Freya came storming in to her hotel room.

Freya threw herself onto the bed face-first, landing just as a crash of thunder sounded outside, followed by a sudden spurt of heavy rain.

“I came out to my adoptive mother,” Freya said into the duvet.

“What?” Alex said. “I can’t hear you.” Alex moved to sit next to her at that, gently moving Freya’s hair off of the side of her face.

Freya tilted her head so that her cheek was resting on the duvet and she could see Alex. “My adoptive mother figured out I was dating someone. I told her that it was a girl and then I told her I was bi.”

“Did she not take it well?”

“I think she was shocked that you were a girl,” Freya said with a shrug. “But I think she would have gotten over it if I then admitted to being a lesbian. No, I told her that I was bi and she got all weird, insisting that I couldn’t be. Because she’s totally down with the gays, don’t you know? Her gay bff Gareth used to take her to all of the gay clubs, and he says that bi people are just confused, so I can’t actually be bi. Fucking Gareth. He’s in his fucking late forties. Just because he’s stuck in the nineties doesn’t mean that the rest of us are... ‘Bi now, gay later’, fucking hell...”

Alex just kept stroking her hair. “He sounds like an ass.”

Freya sighed. “He’s just old,” she eventually said, her anger fading a little. “And, like, I’ve met plenty of gay guys and les-

bians who don't give me shit about it. Like Mel and Ally and my old friend Damon's uncle and his boyfriend. It just hurts that Margaret was so bloody dismissive about it. I mean, I get that some people do date guys and then realise they're a lesbian. My friend Jamie did. But... that's not me. I have and do have crushes on guys, and they're as real as my crushes on girls. Different, I guess. And it took me a longer time to admit that I had crushes on girls, but they're... They're real. They're not just some heteronormative imagination of mine. They're really real."

"And no one has the right to tell you otherwise," Alex assured her. "Not even your adoptive mother. That wasn't fair or nice of her."

Freya gave a weak smile at that, though it was accompanied by tears. "Thank you," she said as she finally sat up, wrapping her arms around Alex in one of her trademark awkward-hugs. "I'm so used to everyone invalidating my thoughts and feelings. It happened for years because I was Autistic. I would try to explain how I felt a certain way, or how something bothered me, and I would just be told to stop being stupid. That's not really how people work, so you can't work like that. And I used to believe them. I'm so used to believing other people when they tell me how I feel, instead of listening to myself... I don't want that to happen here."

"Then don't let it. And I will always be here to remind you that they're talking out of their asses."

Freya's smile widened as her tears finally stopped. She went to dry them away.

"So, I know that I've done a really poor job of making my family seem appealing, but Margaret did invite you to come along to dinner with us, and I don't think that I can do it alone. Not after that performance."

Alex paused at that, frowning a little.

“Do you really not want to go?” Freya asked. “I swear, they won’t be mean to you or anything. And we can leave if they are, but I don’t imagine that they would be.”

Alex shook her head. “No, it’s not that, it’s just...”

Freya butted her head gently against Alex’s bicep in a show of comfort.

Alex smiled at the gesture. “Freya, I just... I don’t have that normal kind of life. I don’t have normal things like parents. I was grown in an incubator from specially selected strands of DNA. I couldn’t even trace my genetic structure to a handful of donors, never mind two. And then I didn’t even have adoptive parents like you, just a group of people assigned to watch over and train me to be a soldier for a war that was long over. I don’t know how to... how to have a normal life. How to do normal things like meet your parents.”

Freya wrapped her arms around Alex at that, holding her close. “You don’t have to have any of that for this. They’ll like you, Alex. It’s impossible not to like you. They’ll like you and that’s all that matters.”

“I know, it’s not... It’s not just that I’m afraid that I’ll mess it up. I’m afraid that I won’t. I’m afraid that we’ll do this normal couple thing, and that... that I’ll start believing that I really belong here. Hell, I’ve already starting believing that, even if I don’t like admitting it to myself. I don’t belong in the outside world, I belong back with the other Enhanced. And they’ll come calling for me eventually. Leaving will hurt all the more if I forget that it’s a possibility. If I keep deluding myself into thinking that I can stay here, with you.”

“You belong here if you want to belong here,” Freya told her firmly. “You don’t have to go back if you don’t want to.”

Alex snorted at that. “Yes, Freya, I really do. If I refuse to go back, they’ll try to bring me back by force.”

“Then I’ll protect you. I’ll stop them from ever being able to get to you. I promise you that.”

“You can’t promise that,” Alex said softly. “They could strip you of your magic. You wouldn’t be able to fight back. And, even if you could protect me, I’d be on my own. An Enhanced on their own would just become a target for those seeking revenge for the War. Even with you here, you can’t guard me twenty-four-seven, Freya. It would only be a matter of time before someone stronger than me took me down...”

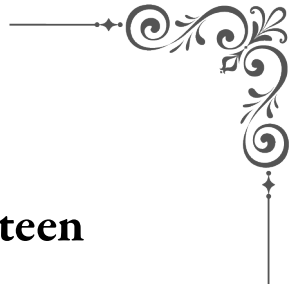
“No. What’s the point of me being an Angel if I can’t protect those I care most about? I can and will protect you.”

Alex shifted out of Freya’s embrace so that they were facing each other. “Freya, let’s just... Let’s just enjoy what time we do have together, okay?”

Freya relented at the unshed tears that were sparkling in Alex’s eyes, nodding in silent acceptance.

Internally, however, she was vowing to prove to Alex that she could protect her. That she could make it safe for her to stay.

“And maybe meeting your parents wouldn’t be so bad,” Alex ventured.



Chapter Thirteen

“Does my makeup look okay?” Freya asked Alex as they walked up to the restaurant.

Alex smiled. “Freya, you’ve asked me that a dozen times since we left.”

“I know, I just... Margaret gets funny if I don’t do my makeup properly.”

“You look beautiful. Stunning, even.”

Freya blushed. “You’re just saying that because we’re dating.”

“Never,” Alex cried with mock outrage before taking Freya’s hand and pulling her so that they were standing mere inches apart. Alex then closed the gap between them, capturing Freya’s lips in hers for just a moment before pulling away. “You look fine.”

Freya just blushed at that, still keeping hold of Alex’s hand as they walked into the restaurant.

“We should have had pre-drinks,” Freya muttered, feeling as if she was about to throw up.

Alex nodded. “It would have been wise, given our increased metabolisms.”

Freya froze at that. “Yeah... We’re going to look like absolute luses if we try to drink enough to get through this.”

“I mean, I’m pretty sure the staff at the hotel already think that we’re alcoholics. I have to smuggle out empty bottles so that they don’t see how many we get through.”

Freya gave a strained smile at that, just as her parents walked into the restaurant.

“Freya,” Margaret greeted before turning to Alex. “And you must be her girlfriend. Sorry, she didn’t give me a name.”

“Alex.”

Margaret, to Freya’s relief, just smiled. “It’s nice to meet you, Alex,” she said, before turning to Ryan. “Right, so, how about we get a table?”



THE REST OF THE NIGHT was actually almost pleasant, Freya thought. Margaret definitely didn’t at any point refer to Freya as *bi*, but she also didn’t say she was confused or experimenting or anything, so Freya figured that was good enough.

Margaret and Ryan seemed to really like Alex, as Freya knew they would. Everyone liked Alex, she figured. She was just so awesome and likable.

The tricky part had been that they kept asking her questions about American culture. Alex had been on training missions to the outside world before coming to England, but they had never been long enough for her to really immerse herself in the culture. She had a tourist’s understanding of America, along with what little she had picked up from TV since being in England.

Freya had prompted her when she had known the answer, but for the most part, the two of them had done their best to steer the conversation away from America and away from Alex’s family.

“That wasn’t so bad,” Alex said as they made their way back from the restaurant to the hotel. It was a nice walk down towards the Quayside, though they did have to briefly pass by the rougher party end of the city.

“Fucking dykes!” one guys at yelled at them drunkenly.

“Fuck you,” Freya had yelled back, her grip on Alex’s hand becoming even firmer.

They walked down through the quieter streets after that, both of them secure in the knowledge that they could handle themselves, should they run into trouble.

“The city’s nice down here at night,” Alex commented as they made their way through a dark alley. “It’s quiet.”

Freya smiled. “Quiet, no adequate light, and no sense of being watched. It’s a mugging waiting to happen.”

“Then we should appreciate the fact that we are in a unique position to enjoy it,” Alex figured.

“I suppose we should,” Freya agreed as they continued to walk down the alley completely undisturbed.

That sense of peace didn’t last long, however, as a figure jumped down in front of them.

Freya quickly enshrouded her fists in flame as she recognised the familiar crackle of Dark Energy in front of them, informing her that this was a Demon.

Alex stood back, though she remained in a defensive stance. Unlike Freya, who had learned from Caroline how to shift her weapons to her as needed, Alex had no way to access her batons, and she hadn’t brought them with her because they wouldn’t have been easy to conceal with her short red dress and small black jacket.

Before Freya had the chance to take down the rogue Demon, however, a familiarly large figure jumped down behind him and ran him through with a sword.

Freya let her flames lapse as the Demon slid to the ground and Freya recognised Dex behind him.

“Commander,” Dex greeted, and Freya’s heart warmed to hear him finally using the title Caroline had tried to bestow upon her.

“Thank you, Dex,” she said.

“I knew that you could handle it, but you’re with a Human,” Dex explained. “Getting blood on your dress would be difficult to explain once you wiped her memories.”

Freya nodded. “Good call,” she said as she glanced back at Alex, relieved to see that the other woman had given up any defensive stance, instead feigning terror.

“Do you need a hand with the memory spell?”

“I am more than proficient in its use, thank you,” Freya said with a smile.

“Then I shall take my leave.” He shifted away.

“Sorry about that,” Freya said as she turned back to Alex.

Alex nodded, her pretend fear now gone, though she still seemed tense, her arms folded tightly across her chest. “What did he mean about the memory spell?”

Freya shrugged. “There’s a spell to make people forget things. And another to alter their memories, but that’s a little more intense. Why?”

“Do you do that often? Just reach into people’s heads and mess with their thoughts?”

“I- I guess so. I mean, you know what the War was like, Alex. We can’t let the truth about magic get out ever again. It would be devastating.”

“I know, I just... It’s unsettling to think that you could just... Freya, please, promise me that you would never do that to me.”

“Okay,” Freya said with a shrug. “I promise. I mean, it’s not like I would ever have to anyway. You already know about magic, so it’s not as if I have to keep it a secret from you.”

Alex just glared at her. “You know, tacking that last bit on the end makes it sound like you would mess with my memories if I didn’t already know about magic.”

“No, I didn’t mean- I promised you, Alex. I wouldn’t go back on that. I just... I thought that knowing that I would never have reason to anyway would help you feel more sure that I wouldn’t.”

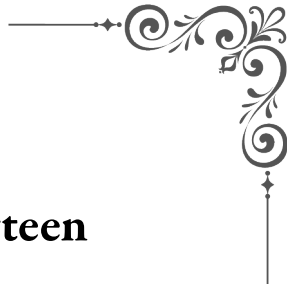
Alex nodded at that, taking a deep breath as her folded arms seemed to loosen a little. “It’s okay, Freya, I get what you meant.”

“I’m sorry,” Freya said sheepishly. “I really did think phrasing it like that would make you feel better... Downside of dating someone with autism, I guess.”

Alex gave her a reassuring smile. “There are no downsides to dating you, Freya,” she said, linking arms with her.

“See, I definitely know that that’s a lie. But I appreciate the attempt to spare my feelings.”

Alex just responded by giving her a kiss on the cheek.



Chapter Fourteen

“You know, they probably think I’m dead now,” Freya told Juni as she looked over her tattered clothing. She was sure that she stank, and she was definitely filthy, having spent weeks in the forest. She had done so before, but she had always been doing something or going somewhere. Never just sat, waiting.

It was insufferable.

“Probably,” Juni agreed, giving no sense that she was perturbed by that fact at all.

“You know, maybe we’re wrong. Maybe we’re not bonding.”

Juni gave her a look that Freya had learned was her equivalent of quirking an eyebrow. It was so hard to tell since Juni was made of branches.

“Yeah, okay, fine, we’re definitely bonding,” Freya agreed. She could feel it. Every time she walked just a few feet from Juni, she felt physically ill, as if her insides were trying to tear themselves out to get back. “But why can’t you just come back with me to the castle?”

“I don’t want to.”

Freya let out a cry of frustration at that. “This isn’t about want! It’s about duty!”

“And that is your problem, Freya. Duty this, duty that. Do you even want the crown?”

“I want to make sure Uther doesn’t get it.”

“That’s a terrible reason to become queen.”

“Yeah, well, it’s the only one I’ve got, so it’ll have to do.”

"You could just give up your quest."

Freya sighed. "And what? Leave everyone to Uther's mercy? Not likely. He's killing the smallfolk."

"And you think you can make things better?"

"I know that I can. Well, that Seph and Damon and Sarah and Mel and I can."

"Perhaps."

"I'll never know if I stay trapped here with you for any longer!"

"You're so impatient," Juni said with a sigh. "Too much like Juniper."

"Juniper? She was the ancestor I got you from, right? She was an Elemental?"

Juni nodded.

"What was she like?"

"She was like all young women. Or maybe she was just like her. It's impossible for me to tell. She broke the world and her daughter had to bend time itself to fix her mistake."

"Wait," Freya said, remembering something Rosaline had told her. "She was the one responsible for the Fifth Alternate Timeline, wasn't she?"

Juni nodded again.

"Amber always said that was one of the worst."

"Amber was most likely correct in that assessment. You will receive my power once you have created a sufficient bond with a Human, but if that bond is tainted, my power can become tainted."

"Tainted? How?"

"Many different ways. Not all love is pure, Freya."

"But how does that taint your power?"

"I am the bridge between nature and humanity, but if I go too far in one direction... Juniper no longer wanted her humanity. The storm and the flood and the drought and the fire and the wind and the trees and the lion care not for humanity. And so, she

stopped caring. She wanted chaotic order, much like nature, and she brought it to the Humans, whether they wanted it or not."

"Okay, so like a Roland Emmerich disaster movie, then?"

"Words that mean nothing will not receive answers."

Freya huffed at that, deciding that she didn't really want to know the details.

"So, what? I might be corrupted by this power? That seems like kind of a high risk. Can we just not bond?"

Juni shook her head. "Unlike Ku, I have always been a part of you. Always meant to be one with you. If you never form a real bond with a Human, and we never bond, then it will be as if you have a growing hole in your heart that you can never fill. It is not healthy for the soul to remain fractured for so long, even if we were intended to initially remain apart. Most Elementals gain their power at a much younger age than you are now."

Freya sighed. "So I suppose we just wait and see what happens?"

Juni nodded.



FREYA AWOKE TO THE familiar sound of the shower.

Alex woke at pretty much the exact same time every morning, and the first thing she did was have a shower. Freya had learned that she didn't need to set the alarm on her phone anymore, as the sound of the shower was enough to wake her.

Freya groaned as she sat up, reluctantly throwing the duvet from herself. One of the many plus-sides of the hotel was that they always kept the heating just right, so Freya never woke up cold like at home.

Plus, sleeping next to Alex always helped.

Freya made her way sleepily into the bathroom, grabbing her toothbrush from the sink.

"Morning," she yelled over to Alex.

“Morning,” Alex yelled back, though Freya could only just hear her over the sound of the shower.

“I’ve got to go and meet with Caroline this morning,” Freya informed her. “But then I’m free for the rest of the day. What have you got on?”

“Actually,” Alex said as she shut off the shower, stepped out, and quickly grabbed a towel to wrap herself in, “I am pretty much finished cleaning out the old Enhanced base. Why don’t I text you the coordinates and you can meet me there this afternoon?”

Freya frowned at that. “Coordinates? Does Google Maps take coordinates?”

Alex shrugged. “I’m sure somewhere on the internet will.”

“All right. Send me the coordinates and I’ll find some way of getting there. I’ll ride in on a chopper or something cool like that. Wearing aviators and a jacket without sleeves. Then we can arm wrestle... I don’t know where I’m going with this. I think it was a Predator reference, but...”

Alex laughed, spinning around to Freya’s other side to get her hairbrush.

“Hey,” Freya said, wrapping her arms around her middle so that she couldn’t spin away. “You came within my personal bubble. You know the tax for personal bubble entrance.”

Alex grinned at that, kissing Freya lightly on the cheek.

Freya pulled her closer, her hands moving down to her backside, but Alex pulled away, making a face.

“You haven’t brushed your teeth yet,” Alex reminded her.

“I haven’t brushed my teeth yet,” Freya agreed, nodding as she turned back to the sink. “But after I’ve brushed my teeth...”

Alex smirked at that. “Oh? Should I not bother putting my clothes on just yet?”

Freya grinned before glancing to the clock with a groan. “O,” she said through her toothpaste-filled mouth. “A caa say fur aa on. A oh ew mee Aroine.”

Alex nodded in understanding, despite her garbled words. She sighed in mock disappointment. “How ever shall I bear dating such a wanted woman? How will we ever have time for each other!”

Freya laughed at that, covering the mirror in a spray of white flecks. She spat out the toothpaste at that, wiping her mouth on the hand-towel before grinning at her girlfriend, shaking her head. “It’s only this morning. It’s not like I’m never here.”

Alex smiled back. “I know,” she assured Freya. “I just wish that everything with the Demons would calm down.”

“It will eventually,” Freya figured with a shrug. “It’s not like there’s been an attack or disappearance for months now.”

Alex nodded. “I know. I just... It would be nice to have more time together.”

“That we can agree on.”



FREYA ENTERED CAROLINE’S office only to see that both Ada and Dex were there.

“Commander,” they greeted in unison, nodding their heads in greeting.

Freya returned the gesture.

“You two are dismissed,” Caroline told the other two, prompting them to leave, then turned to Freya with a smile. “You know, for someone so intent on rejecting her Demonic heritage, it’s surprising. You’ve actually gone out and earned the place that should have been yours by right. You never cease to amaze.”

Freya couldn't help but give a shy smile at that. "I haven't really done anything to earn anything. I just do what I normally do, except with Demons there as well now."

"Freya, you're the only one who has ever underestimated what you normally do. Single-handedly keeping the peace is not easy, regardless of the city. It's certainly not easy in a city with such a vibrant magical community as this one."

"Yeah, it never exactly felt like that."

"Well, I can't speak for the Council of Light ignoring your actions, but the Crown never knew how to contact you to offer to help. And when you ended up contacting me through Fate, you made it clear that you didn't want to be associated with us. Your arm's-length communication is entirely of your own making at this point."

Freya nodded with a sigh, knowing that she was right.

"Speaking of," Caroline continued, "I actually wanted to talk to you about an upcoming meeting. The head of the Kingsguard is coming to visit this week and I thought you might want to be here when he does. You've been invaluable to us here, and he could be an even more valuable friend to you than I have been."

Freya took a deep breath at that, thinking it through. Caroline was right, she did like working with the Demons, and she trusted this head of the Kingsguard if Caroline did. But she feared that such a powerful Demon would instantly be able to tell that she had Demon blood. Hell, most of the others probably would have figured it out if she hadn't compelled them, and she couldn't exactly compel Caroline's boss without her knowing. Plus, there had to be limits. There had to be someone too powerful for her to compel.

"I'm not sure that I'll be able to keep my Demonic side a secret," Freya admitted.

Caroline nodded. "He's not dim, it is likely that he'll pick up on it. But I trust him. I believe that he'll keep your secret, just as he has kept your involvement with us a secret."

"Even from the King?"

"The King is also keeping this secret, Freya. He'd keep the one about your blood too."

"Really? What kind of Demon King wouldn't immediately jump at the chance to declare that a Dark Angel exists? After so many years without one?"

"One who's not all that good at being king."

Freya frowned. "Isn't that, like, treason?"

Caroline smirked. "It would be if he didn't agree with me. Look, the King is a good man. He wouldn't betray your trust like that. Even if Seph found out and wanted to, she would probably hold off so as not to alienate you. You're more valuable as a friend than as a symbol who hates us."

Freya sighed. "I... I'll think about it, but I'll need more than a week."

Caroline nodded. "This won't be his only visit. You can wait until next time to make your decision."



FREYA SPENT THIRTY pounds on a taxi ride to the base's location, cursing the fact that she never learnt to drive. It had just never seemed that important, and she had been busy with other things. And it wasn't as if she could really afford a car. Or, at least, she couldn't fabricate a story for her parents that would explain how she could afford to own a car.

"Alex?" Freya called out as she approached the base, sending her girlfriend a text to inform her that she was there.

She approached what appeared to be the front door. It was made of the same kind of metal as the rest of the building, with a control panel next to it.

Freya peered at the panel, to try and figure out how to get the door open, but it glowed red as she did so.

"Magic users are forbidden from entering this building," a robotic voice informed her.

She blinked, stepping back. After a moment, however, the panel turned green.

"You have been granted guest access," the voice informed her.

Freya pushed the door at that, finding that it opened readily. She wandered inside, only to find that everything was a disturbing mix of white plastic and chrome. It looked too... sterile.

"Alex, are you here?" Freya asked, a creeping sense of dread growing in the pit of her stomach.

"Yep!" she heard from one of the corridors, then saw Alex running toward her. "Sorry," she said as she finally reached Freya. "I had to figure out how to make the security system let you in."

"It's impressive that it's still operating after all this time."

Alex nodded in agreement. "The base was built to last, so I guess twenty years of neglect was nothing. Anyway, come on, I'll show you around."

Freya nodded, following Alex through what felt like endless, windowless corridors. The whole place looked like a slightly more intimidating hospital, which she wouldn't have thought possible before she had seen it for herself.

"These were the labs," Alex said as they reached another identical door, though this one had red tape over it. "I taped it up so that we would know not to go in there. It's where the... Where the Demon subjects were kept. It was more than a little creepy..."

"How much creepier could it be than the rest of this place?"

Alex rolled her eyes. "It's not that bad. It feels like home, actually. But even back home, I never liked the labs."

Freya nodded as she let her senses take stock of the room in front of her.

"There's no residual pain," Freya noted.

"No what?"

"When an area has been subjected to a particularly strong emotion, especially over an extended period of time, you would expect there to be a residual echo in the background magic of the place. Here, I would expect residual pain if they had been experimenting on Demonic subjects. But there's nothing there."

"Huh. Well, that's good, right? I mean, I guess that's less distressing for you if there's no pain to sense."

Freya nodded. "Yeah, I guess."

"Okay, good. Because I can no longer justify staying at the hotel now that I've cleaned this place up. It's been months and it's kind of expensive."

"So, what? You're just going to start living here?"

Alex nodded. "It's not so bad. And I lived in a very similar base my whole life until a few months ago."

"Yeah, but it's... It's a little weird here."

"So? We can make it our own."

Freya smiled at Alex's enthusiasm. "All right, I guess we could do that. So, what is the plan for you now that the base is back up and running? What do your superiors actually want to do with it?"

"I have no idea, I'll have to check in with them and see. But, hopefully, with no recent attacks, I can stay here and use this place as a base while I try and bridge the gap between the Enhanced and the magical community."

Freya smiled back at her. "You know, that sounds like a great idea."



Chapter Fifteen

Freya had never understood the appeal of Ikea. Her adoptive parents always seemed to love going and picking out new bookcases or bedside tables.

It had always been beyond Freya. Surely they just needed something that would hold books. Or a small table that would sit beside their bed. It couldn't be that complicated or exciting.

That was before she and Alex had chosen which rooms of the base they would deck out as their own. After that, she had completely understood the appeal of trying to find something that would make a space feel much more her own.

In the end, they had made a little make-shift house out of one of the kitchen and common areas, along with the bedroom closest to them. There had already been some furniture, but they had added more, and Freya had been sure to add some colour to the place more than anything else.

It had actually ended up feeling quite homey, despite the original look of the place.

On the one hand, Freya loved it, but on the other...

Freya bit her lip in thought as she made herself a cup of tea, Alex sitting across the little island from her on a stool.

"What's wrong?" Alex asked as soon as she noticed Freya's expression.

Freya gave a small shrug, not wanting to sound stupid. “I just... Looking around here... It’s been so long since I’ve been back to Margaret and Ryan’s. It kind of feels like I live here.”

“Oh. Well, I guess you kind of do.”

“No, but, I mean... I just... I worry that between my magic making my emotions kind of intense, and my autism, I can be a little too fast when it comes to relationships.”

“Well, why does it matter? Alex asked with a shrug. “I don’t think that we’re going too fast. I actually like the pace that we’re going. I don’t want or need us to slow down, so why should we?”

“I know, I just... You haven’t got a clear answer from your monitor about staying here other than they agreed to talk about it after everyone’s sure the attacks have definitely finished and everyone’s not so on guard.

“But the attacks are finished now. Like, it’s been months, and the Demons are looking to reduce their numbers in the city once more. Everything is going back to normal. What if, after it does, your monitor tells you to go back home? I don’t... I don’t want us to make that more painful than it has to be.”

Alex nodded in agreement. “I don’t want that, either. I think... I think that you were right. When you said that I don’t have to go back to them if I don’t want to, I mean. I want to stay here, Freya, with you. Even if they tell me not to.”

Freya grinned. “Do you really mean that?”

“I do, I just... I’m scared. I don’t want you to get hurt because of this.”

“I won’t, Alex. You’ll see. We can do this. I know we can.”



“SO,” CAROLINE SAID as she and Freya finished with their catch-up meeting, “have you thought any more about potentially

meeting the head of the Kingsguard? He's coming for another visit next week."

Freya nodded. "Yeah, I have, actually. And... You know, I think I do want to meet him. I mean, just meeting him should be fine. Especially if he is as trustworthy as you say. What would be the harm?"

Caroline grinned at that. "There would be no harm at all, Freya, I promise you that. All anyone in this situation wants is better communication between you and the Crown. Nothing more than talking."

"And I think I can handle talking. And, well, who knows... Maybe someone in this whole mess might be able to point me in the direction of my father."

"Would that be something you wanted?" Caroline asked with a raised eyebrow. "I always thought you didn't want to know who he was."

"I don't know... I kind of don't. I mostly just don't care. No, I guess that's not exactly right. I'm more... ambivalent, I guess. It could be great or it could be awful, so I've just decided not to know. And I'm not saying I'll actually look into it, I'm just saying that... Apart from the rogues trying to kill me, I have yet to meet a Demon that I don't like. Maybe that'll extend to him as well..."

There was a sudden bang, causing the two women to jump in shock, their Energy crackling.

They hurried out of the office to see a figure clad in black, from their tactical gear to the mask that covered their face and head.

The Demons that had been in the office surrounded the figure, all of them crackling with Dark Energy. However, the figure held out their hand and a large chunk of the Demons' Energy simply disappeared, leaving them clearly afraid and confused.

Freya strode forward at that, hurling a blast of fire towards the figure, knocking them back.

They jumped back up to their feet, but Freya already had another barrage of fire ready, knocking them back down.

The figure seemed to realise that they weren't going to win the fight, dropping a gas cannister to the floor.

A gust of wind blew in from the window, quickly clearing the air, but the figure had already gone.

"What the hell was that?" Caroline demanded as Freya brought water from the loos down the corridor to put out what remained of her fiery blasts.

"If I had to guess?" Ada asked, still coughing from the gas. "Whoever had been attacking our people."

"But to attack here? Alone? What did they think they would accomplish?"

Freya frowned. "Maybe they were just looking to provoke. We were looking to downsize the number of Demons in the city, after all. Maybe they wanted us to keep the numbers we currently have."

"But who would stand to benefit from such a thing?" Caroline asked.

Freya shrugged as everyone else dispersed, checking for injuries and damage from the gas.

Caroline walked up to Freya's side as the younger woman finished putting out the fires.

"Did you clear out the gas?" Caroline muttered.

Freya shrugged. "I think so."

"I thought you had only mastered fire and water."

"I know... I think my Elemental powers are getting stronger."

"Well, good. If this attacker really isn't gone, we'll need all the help we can get."

Freya nodded in agreement.

“You should check in with the Witches,” Caroline suggested. “They’re still looking after the girl from one of the early attacks. I want to make sure this wasn’t just a distraction to get to her.”



FREYA SHIFTED STRAIGHT outside Rosaline’s door, knocking immediately.

“Yes?”

Freya stepped inside, finding Rosaline alone.

“There was an attack at the Royal Cleaners office,” Freya informed her. “It seemed to be whoever attacked the coven a few months back. I came to make sure that there hadn’t been an attack here too.”

Rosaline narrowed her eyes. “The offices were just attacked, and you saw fit to come straight here? Are you completely devoid of sense? What if the attacker followed you?”

“I shifted,” Freya said defensively. “And you’re the one who’s so sure that it’s Enhanced behind this. If it is, then how could they follow if I shifted?”

“They could have put a tracker on you.”

Freya held up her arms, spinning around in a circle. “I don’t see any tracker. They didn’t have a chance to touch me, I swear.”

Rosaline examined her for a minute before nodding. “All right, I’ll go and make sure that everyone knows to stay on alert, just in case they do come back for the girl.”

She left the office, and Freya quickly followed behind, though she didn’t accompany her downstairs. Instead, Freya went up to the room where the girl was being kept.

She knocked lightly on the open door, seeing that Sarah was in the room, communicating with the girl in sign language.

Freya send over a spark of Energy at that, drawing their attention to her. “Can I come in?” she signed.

Sarah nodded and Freya stepped into the room; however, the girl quickly scrambled away from her, throwing herself across the room to get away from Freya.

Freya held up her hands and backed into the corridor at that, right into Mel.

“What the hell happened here?” Mel asked as she watched Sarah try to coax the girl out of the corner.

Freya shrugged. “I entered the room and she just freaked out.”

“Weird.”

“Yeah. Do you have any idea why she might have reacted that way?”

Mel shrugged. “I have no idea what’s up with that girl,” she said as the two of them made their way back down the corridor. “No one does. Sarah’s the only one who has had any success getting through to her.”

“Has she told Sarah anything about the attack?”

“Nothing that we hadn’t already figured out. Though, apparently, it was just one person. They used some kind of gas that just numbed everyone and almost entirely paralysed them, apart from shakes that they couldn’t control. They then took them, loaded them up into a van, and drove off.”

“Just one person?” Freya asked, completely astonished.

Mel nodded. “That’s why everyone’s so scared of Enhanced. They don’t really need the numbers when they have technology like that.”

Freya gave a hum, though she still wasn’t entirely convinced that the Enhanced were behind it. If they were, Alex would have to know, and there was no way Alex was lying to her about that.

Freya’s phone buzzed with a text from Sarah as they got downstairs.

Sorry. She said you smell like her attacker.

Freya frowned before showing the text to Mel.

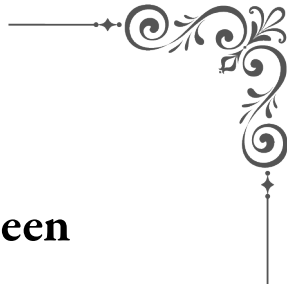
“Well, she does have those heightened Werewolf senses,” Mel figured. “Maybe you two use the same shampoo.”

“But she didn’t react like that before.”

“And you haven’t changed brands?”

Freya shook her head. “I don’t like anything with strong smells, so I usually stick to a brand once I find one that I like.”

“Weird...”



Chapter Sixteen

Freya brought the basket of washing to the Enhanced base's version of a utility room. It was clearly designed for more heavy use than just by Freya and Alex, but the creepiness of the expanse of chrome had long worn off.

Freya sorted out the dark clothes and loaded them into the machine.

"Wait!" Alex called, hurrying into the room. "My hoodie could use a wash as well."

Freya nodded, stepping back to let Alex put her hoodie into the machine and start it. Freya didn't trust herself to know how to work the complicated looking expanse of buttons.

Freya frowned, however, as Alex poured out a small lid-full of pink softener.

"What brand of softener is that?" Freya asked.

Alex shrugged. "I don't know, just the one that was here. There's never really brand stuff on the bases. It's all unique to the other timeline, I think. Why?"

"It's just... I'm sensitive to strong smells, so I usually have a bad reaction when Margaret changes softener."

"Well, I mean, being Enhanced comes with enhanced senses, so they probably took that into account with the washing supplies."

Freya nodded as she smelled the top she was wearing, trying to discern the smell. There was one, but it was faint. Vanilla, maybe?

She said you smell like her attacker.

Freya frowned. As far as she knew, the softener was the only thing that could have changed.

And the attacker at Caroline's office... They had raised their hand just like Alex when she stopped the Demons from using their magic...

"Hey, Alex," Freya ventured, doing her best to ignore the growing nausea in her stomach.

"Yeah?"

"I just... After the attack on Caroline's office, I... There are questions about the attacker."

"What kind of questions?"

"Well, they seemed to dampen magic..."

"Weird, I thought only Enhanced could do that."

"As far as I'm aware, they're the only ones that can," Freya said. "Are you *sure* that there aren't any other Enhanced nearby?"

Alex nodded. "I'm definitely sure. I'm the only one out on a mission right now. Everyone else is back at the base."

"And there weren't any other nearby bases?"

"None that could have survived the timeline shift."

Freya nodded at that, but there had to be something they were missing. "Alex, there isn't anyone else who could have attacked like that. They had to be Enhanced."

"That's not possible, Freya. I am the only Enhanced here, so unless you're suggesting that *I* had anything to do with it..."

Freya hesitated. She was lying to everyone she knew because they would instantly think that Alex was behind the attacks. It wasn't as if it were completely out of the blue...

“Freya, we’ve been over this. I had nothing to do with the attacks. I’m here for this base, nothing more.”

“I know, I just... Everyone else thinks that it was the Enhanced...”

“And what do you think?”

“I... think there are questions. I think that it looks a lot like an Enhanced attack...”

“Freya, just spit it out. Are you accusing me of something or aren’t you?”

“No! I’m not *accusing*, I’m just saying that it looked like an Enhanced attack to a lot of people.”

“And I’m the only Enhanced here, so who the hell do you trust? *People* or me?”

“You, obviously! I mean, you saved my life when I first met you, and it wouldn’t make sense for you to want to hurt magical beings if I took what you said at face value. It’s just that... I can’t just ignore the evidence in front of me, and... well, Enhanced are designed to kill magical beings.”

Freya flinched as tears started to fall down Alex’s cheeks at that.

“So that’s it?” Alex asked her, angrily swiping at her tears. “I’m Enhanced and that’s enough for you to think that I’ve, what? Been *lying* to you? For *months*? That I built this relationship on lies because... Well, I suppose you think I just wanted information from you or something. I haven’t lied to you *once* since I told you who I really was, but I guess that doesn’t mean shit to you, does it?”

“I... I can’t ignore the evid-”

“Fuck you!” Alex cried, cutting her off and storming out of the base, leaving Freya alone in the icy cold, metal room.



FREYA SIGHED AS SHE leaned back against the hard, metal walls of the Enhanced base. After several moments of thinking, she wasn't any closer to a solution.

She opened up her connection to Amber, summoning her mentor to her side.

"An Enhanced base?" Amber asked as she looked around. "This can't be good."

"Amber... I think I really fucked up this time..."

Amber sighed at that, moving to Freya's side. "I know. I know that you don't like it, but I do actually keep an eye on you when I'm not physically around. Not much else for a dead woman to do."

"So, what do you think? Have I made a massive mistake?"

Amber folded her arms. "I think that you've been keeping me at a distance for a reason since you started dating Alex. I think you know exactly what I have to say on the matter."

"That she's Enhanced and I was an idiot for ever trusting her?"

"Something along those lines, yeah."

Freya finally felt a sob escape her at that. It was small, but it was enough. Tears started to fall down her cheeks and she did nothing to stop them.

"I just... I don't believe that Alex would ever hurt me. That she would ever hurt anyone close to me. Or anyone without good reason, for that matter."

"I would have said the same thing about my husband once. Before I knew who he really was."

"Yeah, but you were right about him. He may have been the son of your enemy, but he worked against his mother the entire time."

Amber nodded. "I know. And I was lucky that he truly was on my side after all. You might, despite my misgivings, turn out

to be right about Alex when all this is said and done. But you also might not be, and it's important that you brace yourself for that possibility, instead of blinding yourself to it."

"But how do I figure out if I'm right about her or not?" Freya asked. "She's already mad that I don't trust her. If I spy on her or anything, and just double down on that distrust, she'll only ever hate me."

Amber sighed and shrugged. "I'm afraid that is a question I simply can't answer for you, Freya."



FREYA COULDN'T STAY at the base. She just couldn't. Not without Alex there. It felt as if the walls were closing in on her.

She didn't want to go home, either, where Margaret and Ryan would inevitably ask about why she was home. She didn't doubt that they would quickly realise that something had happened between her and Alex.

With nowhere else to spend the night, Freya headed to the Royal Cleaners' office. When the extra Demons had been sent, they had expanded into the neighbouring offices as well, creating a makeshift barracks. They always had more beds than Demons, though.

Freya entered the barracks, and everyone immediately turned to look at her, questioningly.

"I just need a place to sleep tonight," Freya told them, which seemed to be answer enough for everyone.

"The bed on the end is free," Ada told her, indicating to the bed in question.

"Thanks," Freya replied as she flopped down on the bed. She still had the sense that she was being watched, despite the fact that no one was staring at her anymore, so she curled up into a tiny ball in the corner of the bed, put in her headphones and

started reading on her phone, doing her best to ignore the outside world.

After about half an hour, she felt the bed move, causing her to sit upright.

Caroline had sat down on the end, giving her a curious look.

“What?” Freya asked.

“You never sleep here,” Caroline pointed out.

Freya glanced around the room, seeing far too many potentially prying ears.

“Come on,” Caroline said, standing up. “I have whiskey in my office.”

Freya nodded, pulled off her headphones, and followed Caroline.

Once the office door was closed behind them, Caroline opened a drawer of her desk to reveal a sleeve of plastic disposable cups and a bottle of whiskey.

She poured out two cups and passed one to Freya.

“Classy,” Freya noted.

Caroline shrugged. “There’s no place here where I would want to clean real glasses,” she explained. “So... What’s wrong?”

“Why does something have to be wrong?”

“Because I know for a fact that you’re practically living with your girlfriend. Spending a night elsewhere would suggest that you two had a fight.”

Freya sighed. “You know, I deliberately didn’t go home to my parents because I wanted to avoid this conversation.”

“Hey, look, I don’t care what your fight was about or anything. Your business is your business. I just wanted to make sure that you were okay.”

Freya nodded. “Thank you, but I think I’ll be fine. I guess the attack here just rattled me.”

“Because of the attacker or because of yourself?”

Freya frowned at that.

“I just mean, your powers are still growing. Power growth usually comes in spurts, though it’s unusual for any of them to be this late in girls, and it can always be a bit disorienting when it happens.”

Freya nodded. “It’s not the most pleasant experience in the world. I was so used to having a handle on my powers. I mean, I’m glad that I’m getting stronger. It means that I’ll be able to protect more people, and Lord Uther will have an even harder time getting to me, but I don’t like the loss of control that comes with it. I have used my new powers without meaning to, and I have yet to draw on them consciously.”

“That’s just a matter of practice,” Caroline assured her. “Just like your other abilities.”

“Yeah, I know. I just don’t particularly like the wait.”

“No one ever does,” Caroline agreed.

Freya smiled as she drained the end of her drink, one last question still tugging on her mind.

“Hey, Caroline?”

“Yeah?”

“How likely do you think it is that the attacker was Enhanced?”

Caroline sighed. “As loathe as I am to admit that I may have been wrong to underestimate the possibility before, I am now almost certain that the attacker was Enhanced.”

“I mean, they stopped some of us from being able to use magic. Only Enhanced could ever do that.”

Freya nodded, the feeling of nausea returning. “So... hypothetically, if I knew someone who was Enhanced, but that I was sure had nothing to do with these attacks...”

Caroline frowned. “You’re definitely sure that they weren’t involved?”

Freya hesitated for just a moment before saying, "I am, yes."

"Then I would trust your judgement on the matter. However, hypothetically, if you did have such a friend, I would also want to use their connection to the other Enhanced to find the real culprit."

"That... That seems reasonable..."

"Well, I should hope so. You don't get to where I am without being reasonable."

"Stuck in a shitty job because you're on probation for treason?"

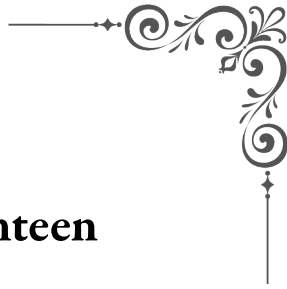
Caroline nodded. "All right, you have a point there. But the important take away was that I wasn't *killed* for treason."

"Yeah, but I've only ever heard you refer to two people as your friend the entire time I've known you - the King and the head of his Kingsguard. They would be pretty shitty friends if they killed you."

Caroline had a fond smile and a slightly far-off look at that. "Yeah, I guess they would be. Big softies the two of them. Lady Persephone would have had my head on a spike. We don't even put heads on spikes in the Underworld, but she would have done it just the same."

Freya smiled at that. "I think it's time for me to go to bed. I'll go and speak to my friend in the morning."

"Good idea. You don't want to be outside tonight. The downpour is ridiculous. I think it might flood." She moved over to the window and opened the blinds, only to be greeted by the lightest drizzle. "Or not. Looks like it's calmed down. Anyway, the morning is still probably the best plan, unless you brought wellies with you."



Chapter Seventeen

Freya awoke the next morning to the unfamiliar clatter of Demons getting ready for the day. She groaned as she sat up, feeling as if she'd had almost no sleep at all.

"Good morning," Ada greeted once she saw that Freya was awake. "Did you sleep well?"

"No," Freya confessed. "I think I had too much on my mind."

Ada gave her a sympathetic look. "Were you just staying here for the night or will you stick around?"

Freya shrugged. "I guess I'll have to see how today goes."

"Well, it's nice having you around," Ada told her. "Even if you're not a Dark magic user."

Freya smiled at that, though it did make her feel bad about not telling them the truth. If the Demons accepted her when they thought she was an outsider, what would they think if they knew that she was one of their own?

I always figured that the families we were given - or not given - weren't as important as the ones we made for ourselves. I always wanted to go to the outside world and find a family of my own.

Alex's words echoed in Freya's mind as she realised that maybe she'd been looking in the wrong place. Rosaline had made it clear that Freya was barely tolerated by Light beings, but Caroline had welcomed her without a second thought.

One thing remained abundantly clear, though. Wherever Freya sought to forge a new family for herself, she wanted Alex to be by her side.

Freya got dressed quickly before hurrying out of the barracks, almost running head-long into Caroline.

“Are you off to see your friend?” Caroline asked as Freya took a moment to regain her balance.

Freya nodded. “Yeah, I am. I’ll let you know how it goes.”

“Thank you. And thank you for trusting me enough to tell me.”

Freya shrugged. “Thank you for being trustworthy enough to tell.”

Caroline nodded. “I had hoped to catch you before you left, actually. The head of the Kingsguard is going to be in town tomorrow, if you want to meet him.”

“Is he... Can I honestly trust him?”

“There’s no one I could trust more,” Caroline told her, seeming completely sincere. “When I had to return from the Wardens to take on my brother’s duty as the head of my house... He’s the only reason I didn’t say ‘screw my house’ and run back to the Wardens. Not because he pushed me to stay, but because he made staying bearable.”

Freya nodded. “If you trust him so much then... Okay. I’ll meet with him.”



THE RAIN WAS POURING down in buckets as Freya made it outside. Usually, she would curse her lack of hood, but she found that she didn’t mind. Her hair and clothes were quickly soaked through, but Freya found that she had never felt more comfortable.

Freya closed her eyes, trying to sense for Alex. She wasn't sure if she could, given that Alex was Enhanced, but she tried anyway.

She quickly found her, walking over the top of a multi-storey car park nearby.

Freya shifted so that she was a few feet in front of her. Far enough away that she could just leave if she wanted to.

Freya prayed that she wouldn't want to, but she had to accept that she might.

Alex just stopped dead as Freya appeared in front of her.

Freya couldn't tell her expression through the rain. Just that she was standing eerily still.

Alex finally indicated to the shelter by the lift.

Freya nodded and followed her to the only patch of dry concrete, under the shelter.

As soon as Freya was out of the downpour, she started to freeze. She wanted nothing more than to be back under the water.

Maybe because she wouldn't be able to see Alex's glare...

"Are you here to accuse me of kidnapping again?" Alex asked, her arms tightly folded.

"I... I never *accused* you of anything..."

"No, you just said that it was an Enhanced. Well, I'm Enhanced, Freya. So you're either saying that it was me, or you're implying that I knew about it and never told you."

"I'm not saying that! I mean... I can't just ignore what I saw, Alex. I don't know anyone who can drain magic, except for the Enhanced. Maybe you didn't know, maybe they didn't tell you, but I *have* to ask."

"No, you know what, Freya? The time to ask was months ago, when everyone else thought it was Enhanced. I told you then that the Enhanced had nothing to do with it, and I, fool that I was, thought that you actually believed me. I thought

that you trusted me. But if you had *asked* then, pushed *then*, I wouldn't... It wouldn't have *hurt* so much, because you didn't *know* me. You had no reason to trust me.

"But you have reason now. Freya, you've shared my bed for *months*. You can't just turn around and say that you don't trust me after all that.

"Do you realise how much it *hurts*, Freya? To have the woman you love reveal that her faith in you is so easily broken? All because you weren't a real girl after all..."

Freya's breath caught in her throat as she realised that it wasn't just rain leaking down Alex's cheeks.

"I'm sorry," Freya said. "I just... I just wanted answers, and I was so scared that I had misjudged things... I didn't think that I had, but... It's not you I don't trust, Alex, it's me. I trust you, and I am terrified that I'm not a good enough judge of character for that to mean anything. Like you said, I should have pushed right away, instead of letting it go so quickly. Anyone with any kind of healthy attitude towards trust would have. But I just trusted a stranger without question. If I do something as stupid as that..."

Alex shook her head. "Whether it's me you don't trust or yourself... It looks the same from here. It looks like you don't think of me as a person. You're just like the rest of them, you see me as a machine made for killing."

Freya gave a hollow laugh at that, briefly bringing a stream of water from the rain to her hand, letting it move between her fingers before evaporating it to nothing.

"If either of us was made for killing, it's me," Freya told her. "And I have killed. I didn't run away after receiving these scars. I stood my ground. And those kind of fights are to the death.

"I don't have room to judge on that, Alex. You were horrified at the thought of killing a rogue Demon, who would have killed both of us without a second thought..."

“They were trying to kill you,” Alex pointed out softly.

“Yeah, that’s what I try to tell myself...”

Alex let out a hollow laugh at that. “God, look at us, we’re so fucked up...”

Freya mirrored her hollow laugh with a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Yeah, we’re kind of a mess.”

They lapsed into silence at that, neither of them really sure what to say next.

“Did you mean it?” Freya asked a little while later, her mind running through their conversation over and over again.

“Mean what?”

“You called me the woman you love. Did you mean it?”

Alex frowned. “Of course I meant it. The fact that I love you is far from being in question.”

“Well, I mean... It kind of is.”

Alex gave her a blank look.

“You haven’t said it before. I mean, I haven’t either. The whole thing has been kind of giving me low-level anxiety for a while now...”

“Oh. Well, I do. I mean it.”

“I mean it, too - I love you.”

Alex looked a little lost at that, shifting from one foot to the other. “So... What now?”

Freya shrugged. “Maybe we do what we always said we would. Maybe we find out who’s really behind this.”

“Because you can’t trust me until we do?”

“No, because I’m worried about my friends being hurt. And I’m worried what it means for you if other Enhanced are behind this.”

Alex stepped closer to Freya, holding out her hand. “Together, then?”

Freya nodded, taking the offered hand. "Together," she agreed.

Before either of them pulled away, however, their hands started glowing softly, surprising them both.

"Are you doing that?" Alex asked.

"I have no idea," Freya replied.

Alex tore her gaze from their hands at that, looking up at Freya and softly gasping.

"What? What is it?" Freya asked.

"You... You have wings."

"I what?"

"You've got wings made out of light."

"That- That can't be. It's just a story. Just a silly story told about Angels to make them seem more than they are."

But even if she couldn't see the wings, Freya could feel them. She could feel the warmth of the glow surrounding her, gently drying away the water that had soaked her through.

Alex smiled at that, her free hand going to tuck a loose strand of Freya's hair behind her ear. "Only you could be the impossible and still a sceptic."

Freya gave a small shrug, her brain mostly preoccupied with how close Alex was. "I'm just wary of buying into my own hype."

The joke fell flat in her distraction, as Alex closed what small gap remained between them.

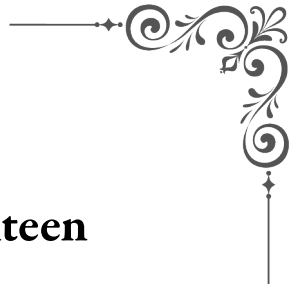
Almost without thought, Freya leaned forward, gently pressing her lips to Alex's.

Alex's grip tightened around her hand at that, her free hand threading through Freya's hair, slightly loosening her damp braid, as she kissed her back.

It felt like eternity before they finally pulled away from each other, the two of them enveloped in light.

“I love you,” Freya repeated once her lips were free. She felt that it bore repeating. She wanted nothing more than to tell Alex that every day for the rest of their lives, in fact.

Before there could be any response, however, Freya felt a flash of pain at the back of her head, just before the world went dark.



Chapter Eighteen

“Juni?” Freya called as she awoke, unable to see her friend anywhere.

She moved around the clearing, looking for her. She was nowhere to be seen, but Freya was no longer feeling the nausea that usually came from their separation. They had barely managed to be more than two feet apart for weeks. So where was she now?

“Juni?!” Freya called again, this time a little more frantically. She cupped her hands around her mouth and yelled once more. “Juni!”

As Freya moved her hands back away from her face, however, she caught a glimpse of something unfamiliar. She looked down to see that her pale, white skin was no longer soft and smooth, with the exception of her mosaic of scars.

No, now it looked dry and cracked. It didn’t look brittle or as if it was about to start flaking, however. No, it was solid still. And her limbs and fingers seemed to still bend easily.

She tapped the back of one hand with the fingers of the other, the sensation striking her as familiar.

Bark.

She had merged with Juni.

And it had turned her to wood. She supposed that she should have seen that coming. Of course that’s what happened. Juni herself had warned that the bonding might not yield pleasant results.

The kiss, she realised. The kiss with Alex must have been enough for her to bond with Juni.

Of course that had been when her wings had shown up. It had been the first time she'd had access to the entirety of her power.

Her happiness quickly soured, however, as she remembered what had happened. Usually when she woke up in the Shadow Realm, her last memories of Earth were of going to sleep. This time she only remembered kissing Alex.

And then a sharp jolt of pain.

Her heart felt as if it was trying to tear itself in two at that.

She didn't want to believe that Alex had betrayed her. Part of her couldn't believe it.

But she also couldn't deny that she had been knocked out right after getting close to Alex again. After telling Alex that she thought that Enhanced had been behind the attacks all along.

If Alex really was involved, then of course she would want Freya out of the way before she told anyone anything important. Like the location of the Enhanced base.

Freya felt herself start to panic at that. Juni had warned her that the power could be corrupted.

Not all love is pure, Freya, she had said, before warning that the corrupted power could mean a loss of her humanity.

Freya felt her limbs stiffen, her legs growing down into the grounds and literally rooting her in place as she realised that she might not wake up as herself.



FREYA AWOKE WITH A jolt, her heart racing.

She glanced down at herself, frantically looking for her skin to make sure that it was still actually skin, and not bark.

What she found, however, was that she was tied down to the metal examination table beneath her.

But the skin beneath the shackles was still skin. Just regular, milky white skin.

Freya didn't feel better at that. She glanced around the room she was in to see that it was made of the same sterile white plastic and chrome as the Enhanced base, but Freya didn't remember this room, and she had been to all of them.

All of them except the labs...

She felt panic rise within her at that, constricting her lungs. She felt for her magic, intending to focus it into her strength in order to break the shackles, allowing her to escape.

However, she found nothing.

She searched within herself frantically at that, but still found nothing.

Her magic was gone.

Not just gone, it felt as if it had been torn from within her, leaving a gaping wound in its place.

She felt *hollow*.

She gasped, desperately reaching for air. She'd never felt so *helpless*, or so wounded before. She couldn't imagine anything else even coming close to being so devastating.

She had been hollowed out and stripped of a vital part of her very being.

If you took the magic away from an Angel, you didn't just get a Human. You got a hollow husk.

She heard a faint crack of thunder from outside the building, grounding her slightly, allowing her lungs to draw air as she noticed the faint sound of rain against the outside of the building. No, not faint. Distant. She was in the heart of the building, on the ground floor, as far from the rain as she could get. But the rain itself wasn't some paltry drizzle. It sounded like it was trying to smash the building through repeated pelting with heavy rain-drops.

The door at the end of the room opened with a heavy scraping noise. Some of the doors on the base did so, and it always caused Freya intense pain. This time, however, she couldn't clamp her hands around her ears or start tugging on her pendant to calm herself down.

Part of her had expected to see Alex walk through the door. But she hoped to see anyone else.

It appeared that her hopes had been answered as a man approached. He seemed to be in his thirties, and he was covered in scars. He was almost as pale as she was, with close-cropped brown hair that was flecked with grey.

"Who are you?" Freya asked as she kept struggling against her restraints. "Why have you brought me here?"

He smirked at that. "I didn't bring you anywhere. No, your little girlfriend did that."

"She would never—"

"Never what? Do her job? Fulfil her purpose? You're awfully naive for a being so powerful."

Freya didn't answer, letting the thunder outside fill the silence for her.

He simply looked her over, unperturbed by her silence. "I must admit, it's nice to have an Angel back in one of our bases. We haven't had one of your kind to examine in a long while."

"Not since my mother escaped and screwed everything up for you," Freya said, taking what small pleasure she could in reminding him that the Enhanced had failed. The War was over. And if her mother could defeat them, then so could she.

If only she believed that...

He simply raised an eyebrow at her taunt. "Your mother? The last communication from the base did say that she'd had a child, but it was lacking so many details... Fascinating. I'm sure

you'll be able to tell us much, then, if your mother was the one who changed time itself."

"I'm not going to tell you anything," Freya spat.

"Oh, don't misunderstand me. I do not require you to talk. No, I doubt you know much about your powers worth knowing. Alex told me all about how you grew up alone, with no other Angels to guide you. I doubt you even have an accurate measure of the true extent of your abilities."

Freya's throat tightened with rage at the truth of his words.

"No, you're not going to tell us anything. We're going to run your body and mind through every trial imaginable until we've learned everything that we possibly can. Then, when you're a worn out husk with nothing left to teach, we'll slice you open and see what your insides can teach us. Dissection is so much easier when you don't have to worry about the subject surviving."

Freya just glared silently, yanking her hands as hard as she could against the shackles.

Nothing so much as budged.

He gave her a pitying look. "You can't access your magic. I've made sure of that. Struggling is, therefore, pointless. You're weaker than a Human like this, so used as you are to relying on your magic. All you'll do is hurt yourself."

He walked away at that, leaving her alone.

She gave one last tug on her restraints before giving up. He was right, she wasn't getting out of this with brute force, and she was only going to tire herself out, if not hurt herself.

She did her best to focus on the rage inside of her, cultivating it. Her magic would come back. It had to. Even if just for a moment.

And she intended to burn this whole place down when it did.



FREYA WASN'T SURE HOW long she was left alone.

All she was sure of was that she would be a burning torch of fury if she had her magic.

If she had her magic, the shackles would fly from her into shards.

If she had her magic, she would tear this building down, starting with the foundation.

If she had her magic...

If, if, if!

Freya gave a cry of frustration at that, burning hot tears streaking down her face as she gave one last useless yank at her shackles, hoping that this time, *this time*, her magic would be back. This time she would break free. If she just had her magic.

If, if, if!

Freya had never felt so hollow and helpless. She tried to fill the hole inside her chest with her fury, but it seemed endless.

She let out a desperate sob, her tears still flowing hot and freely.

The light flickered, as if in response.

Freya blinked her tears away at that, looking up at the lights as the metal of the building creaked loudly. It sounded like the building was trying to tear itself apart.

The door opened once more, and Freya flinched away as the Enhanced from before entered once more.

“Still struggling, I see?” he asked, almost seeming bored by her attempts to claw her way out.

Freya responded by doing the only thing she could to get at him while tied down. She spat at him.

“Now, now, none of that,” he said, moving to the side of her head.

After a moment, she realised that he was bringing a muzzle up to strap over her face.

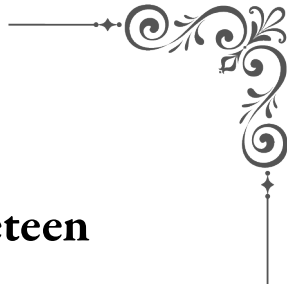
“No! Fuck off!” she cried in protest, trying to yank herself free once more.

That didn’t stop him. He secured her head down with the muzzle, keeping her from screaming at him as he walked over to the other side of the room.

When he came back, he was holding a scalpel.

“Please do stay still,” he told her. “This will only take longer if you resist.”

The building gave another loud moan under the assault of the storm outside as Freya’s body froze with a combination of terror and fury.



Chapter Nineteen

Mel awoke to the unfamiliar feel of paws on her stomach. She bolted upright, rubbing her eyes as she suspected that she might still be asleep.

Her eyes, however, told her the same thing once she had cleared them. A huge, white wolf was standing at the side of her bed, their front paws resting on her stomach as they stared at her with bright green eyes. The most startling thing about those eyes was how human they looked, if you ignored how disconcertingly solid the colour was.

“Freya?” Mel asked, recognising the eyes. “Please tell me you haven’t been turned into a wolf by some weird magic...”

The wolf just cocked its head, as if it didn’t understand the question, before hopping off the bed, nodding towards the door and wagging its tail.

“You want me to follow you?”

The wolf nodded.

Mel sighed, figuring that this couldn’t be good. But she wasn’t about to refuse a wolf whose jaw was the size of her head.

She leaned over to grab her wheelchair, pulling it towards the bed.

The wolf placed her front paws on the chair, shaking her head.

“I need it to get anywhere,” Mel told the wolf.

The wolf pushed away the chair and stood where it had been, nodding towards her back.

Mel blinked, sure that she was misunderstanding, even if the wolf was the size of a small horse.

“You want me to ride you?”

The wolf nodded.

Mel sighed, figuring that there was no way this would end well.

She climbed aboard the wolf, who seemed to take her weight happily.

Mel clung to its neck with a small yelp as it leapt forward, bounding out into the corridor.

The wolf stopped at Sarah’s room, confirming for Mel that this had something to do with Freya.

Mel pushed the door open so that the wolf could enter.

“Go up to her bed and lower your head so that she doesn’t see you first,” Mel told the wolf.

It gave a whine in response.

“Look, my sign language is not that good. If she sees you and freaks out, I don’t know how well I can quickly explain.”

Not that she was sure what exactly she could explain about this situation that would calm anyone down.

The wolf did as it was asked, and Mel shook Sarah’s arm, turning on the bedside table lamp so that she could see better.

“Mel?” Sarah asked as she sat up, grabbing her glasses. “What’s going on?”

“I think Freya’s in trouble.”

“Why? What’s wrong?”

“Well, this wolf seems very insistent that we follow it, and this seems like Freya’s specific brand of weird shit.”

Sarah’s eyes widened at the sight of the wolf, who was now staring back at her.

“Okay,” Sarah eventually said.

The wolf nodded to her back once more.

“I think she wants you to get on as well,” Mel told her.

Sarah nodded, moving a little gingerly as she climbed on behind Mel.

As soon as they were both on, the wolf turned back towards the door, leaping forward.

When the wolf landed, however, it wasn't in the corridor of the coven. Instead, it was in a building that looked like it had been abandoned. Water leaked in through areas where the roof looked like it had been ripped away by a giant. There was a vicious storm raging outside, sounding stronger than the light rain outside the coven.

The sterile white plastic and chrome of the walls caused Mel to shiver. Wherever they were, Mel wanted nothing more than to leave. The only indication of life was a collection of blankets and cushions decorating the chairs and sofa across the room, and a laptop on the coffee table. All of it was soaked in water, however. The blankets and cushions looked ruined beyond recovery, and the laptop definitely wasn't going to dry out.

“Someone was living here,” Sarah noted.

Mel nodded. The question was who.

Sarah got off the wolf, wandering around.

After a few moments, she picked up a backpack by the sofa. Water cascaded from it as it was held up, but it was still recognizable.

“Freya's bag?” Mel asked. She would have argued that anyone could have had that backpack, but she recognised the enlargement charm crudely stitched into the side. “What was she doing here?”

Sarah shrugged before closing her eyes. She opened them a moment later with a frown.

“There’s someone else here.”

The wolf followed Sarah as she headed deeper into the building. Both Sarah and Mel drew their wands.

“Behind this door,” Sarah said as she stopped.

They approached cautiously, the wolf growling lowly beneath Mel.

Once the door opened, however, they saw an empty room, with a small figure huddled into the corner. She appeared to be shackled to the wall.

Mel urged the wolf forward. The figure had long black hair, obscuring their features, and she wondered for a moment if it was Freya. But, as they approached, the figure turned to face them.

“Alex?” Sarah asked, her voice saturated with shock.

As she approached, Mel saw that the figure was, indeed, Freya’s girlfriend. Her dark skin was covered in bruises, and it looked as if her nose had been broken, but she was still recognisable.

What was also recognisable was the Enhanced armour she was still partially wearing.

“What happened?” Sarah asked Alex softly as Mel did her best to appear menacing. Something that was much easier when atop a giant wolf.

“I can’t sign,” Alex said to Mel, her voice strained and dry as she nodded to her shackles.

“I can still understand,” Sarah said, her tone still soft and reassuring. She was wearing her glasses, which would caption Alex’s words for her. They were never perfect, but Mel could fill in any blanks.

“Freya... He took Freya...”

“Who took Freya?”

“My monitor.”

“Your Enhanced monitor?”

Alex nodded mutely.

“Did Freya know you were Enhanced?”

Another nod. “From almost the beginning.”

Mel cursed her friend at that. Of course she had been so reluctant to believe that the Enhanced were behind the attacks when her girlfriend was one.

“Mel,” Sarah warned, drawing Mel’s attention back to the room, where the water was starting to gush in from the corridor.

Mel halted the water, doing her best to calm herself.

“Mel, we said that all of the Enhanced should die,” Sarah reminded her. “You know what Freya’s like, she’ll protect anyone. She went out of her way to save my life after only knowing me for a few days. Of course she would seek to protect her girlfriend if she thought that she was in danger. Even from us.”

Mel just glared in reply. She knew that Sarah was right, but that didn’t make Freya’s decisions any less terrible.

Sarah turned back to Alex. “Why are you chained up? What happened?”

“I... Freya and I had a fight. She said that Enhanced had been behind the attacks, but I thought I was the only Enhanced in the area. I got so mad when she wouldn’t let it go, thinking that she didn’t trust me...”

“I left and called my monitor. I don’t have any friends... I just needed someone to talk to...”

“And your monitor took Freya?”

“Not right away. I hadn’t told him that Freya was an Angel. Just that I was in contact with one of the local magical beings. But when I was so upset... It just all came tumbling out...”

“Why keep Freya’s power from him if you trusted him?” Mel asked.

Alex gave a hollow bark of laughter at that. "Because I think that I always knew that some of the older Enhanced wouldn't be able to abide peace. But I had to hope..."

Sarah stepped back in at that. "So, you told him about Freya. Then what happened?"

"Then he admitted that he was in the country. He said that he hadn't told me because he was only there in case I got into trouble. He said that he'd wanted me to gain confidence with this mission while still having a safety net. He urged me to go and talk to Freya. To patch things up with her. He said that he would arrive in the city soon enough to help me if things went badly."

"So, did you talk with Freya?"

Alex nodded. "She found me and we talked it out. And then she started glowing. While we were distracted by that, my monitor arrived and knocked her out. He had used me as bait to get to her... I tried to stop him, but he overpowered me. Next thing I knew, he had locked me up in here. He called me a defective traitor and promised that he would kill me once he could no longer use me as emotional torture for Freya."

Sarah turned towards Mel, showing her the rune on her arm. A truth rune. If anyone told her a lie, it would turn red, but the rune remained white.

Magical beings could deceive truth runes, but it took a lot of practice. As far as Mel had read, Enhanced couldn't. Not that it had ever been that helpful to them. Enhanced had always been silent when interrogated.

"What happened here?" Sarah asked as she turned back to Alex.

"Freya, I think. I don't know, I haven't been able to get out. But a storm started outside. This building has survived the

weather for the last twenty years, but this storm tore it to shreds. Freya said that her Elemental powers had been growing...”

Sarah and Mel exchanged a worried look at that. Both of them had been well schooled on the Fifth Alternate Timeline.

“We have to find her,” Sarah said.

The wolf yipped in agreement.

“Should we take Alex with us?” Mel asked the wolf. She still didn’t trust the Enhanced, but she might be the only one capable of getting through to Freya if she had given up her humanity.

The wolf yipped once more.

Sarah aimed her wand at Alex’s shackles, releasing her.

Alex stood up, more than a little unsteady on her feet.

“How do we find Freya?” she asked.

“The wolf probably knows,” Sarah figured.

Alex raised an eyebrow. “Yeah, what’s with the wolf?”

“We’re not sure, but it seems to want to help Freya.”

All three of them got on the wolf, which bounded into the corridor. Once more, it leapt forward, only to land outside.

Rain was thundering down as thunder echoed in the distance, everything overshadowed with clouds. Mel threw the water from herself, hoping that she had been fast enough to prevent her legs merging into a tail, as she took stock of their surroundings. Vines were growing up over all of the buildings, but she still recognised them. They were in the middle of the city centre.

Lightning came down from the sky, striking the top of the shopping centre, where a figure was standing, hair flying in the wind as wings glowed behind them.

“Who wants to bet that’s Freya?” Sarah yelled at the other two.

Before they could respond, however, the wolf ran forward towards the vine covered door to the shopping centre, phasing through the vines and door along with the three girls on its back.

“Okay,” Sarah said as she and Alex got off the wolf’s back once they were inside. “We have to find a way up. There has to be maintenance stairs or something for all the grass and stuff.”

“Yeah,” Mel said. “It’s probably just up another level to the regular stairs.”

Alex frowned. “Can’t you two teleport? Or shift, or whatever?”

Mel shrugged. “I just assumed that we couldn’t, since the wolf brought us down here,” she said, as the wolf started to move towards what were presumably the stairs.

The others followed along next to her until they reached the entrance. However, they were stopped by the fact that it had also been covered with vines. Only these vines were being hacked away by a hulk of a Demon, covered in tattoos. To his side was a slim, blonde Demon, tapping her foot impatiently.

The Demons turned to stare at the three girls as they approached, and Mel realised that they must look quite a sight. She and Sarah were still in their pyjamas, and Alex was battered and bruised almost beyond recognition. Not to mention the giant wolf.

“Who are you?” the hulk demanded, holding up his sword defensively.

“I think they’re the Angel’s friends,” the other Demon told him before turning to the girls. “Sarah and Mel, right? The Light Witches?”

“You’re Lady Caroline,” Mel realised.

She nodded. “And your friend?”

“Yours first,” Mel insisted, still wary of the large man, though he had lowered his sword.

“This is Lord Gregor,” Caroline introduced. “The head of the Kingsguard.”

“Freya’s not going to be happy about him being involved,” Sarah signed to Mel.

“I think we need to take all of the help we can get right now,” Mel signed back before turning to Lady Caroline. “I’m hoping that you’re here to help her.”

Lord Gregor stepped forward at that. “Caroline and I have been trying to help the Angel since day one. Ever since we found out that she was a Dark Angel. And whatever she says, I think we all know that she’s got no predisposition towards Light magic.”

“How exactly have you been helping?” Mel asked, more than a little confused. She knew that Freya often downplayed her work with Lady Caroline, but it was clear that she wanted no part in politics. Which would mean avoiding anyone too close to the Crown.

“Mel- Can I call you Mel?” Caroline asked her.

“I’m Lady Melody of House Coral,” Mel said, deciding that she could play with titles too.

“Lady Melody,” Caroline corrected, “how many years has it been since the Council of Light held elections for their leadership?”

Mel shifted awkwardly on the wolf at that. It was true that the Council of Light had called a state of emergency when the War had restarted, and they had never called it off. It was important to have consistency during the rebuilding efforts, they had said, but twenty years had passed, and even the most long-lived Light beings were starting to worry that there was no sign of a return to democracy.

Lady Caroline seemed to take her silence as answer enough. “An Angel poses a threat to their power. Now, thankfully, she rarely leaves the city, so word of her existence hasn’t spread widely yet. Just whispers. As long as it stays that way, the Council of Light are happy. But, after this display, how long do you think it

will take them to use it as an excuse to put her down before she can threaten them?”

“But how have you been protecting her?”

“By keeping her low profile intact,” Lord Gregor explained. “In all honesty, she would be safest in the Underworld, but she wasn’t raised around Demons. We’ve been trying to show her that we’re not so bad.”

“Riiight. *That’s* why you’ve been doing it. Not so that you can have a Dark Angel to rally behind.”

Gregor laughed at that. “As if the King would allow us to use her like that. Ever since he figured out that Lady Caroline was working with her, he’s made it his job to look out for her.”

“Why? What does he have to gain from it?”

Gregor shrugged. “He’s just got a soft-spot for misfits. But whether you believe us or not, believe that we want her to stop drawing attention to magic.”

Mel nodded. “Well, no one could ever accuse Freya of not knowing how to put on a show.”

Gregor frowned at that. “What did you say?”

“That the Angel knows how to put on a show?”

“No, you called her Freya. The Angel’s name is Freya?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Freya Snow?”

“Yes. Why? What’s wrong with her name?”

Gregor pinched the bridge of his nose at that. “Everything from the last six years suddenly makes a whole lot more sense.”

“Why?” Caroline asked him. “Who is she to you?”

“The girl the kid pined after for three years.”

Caroline stopped dead at that. “But that can’t make her..”

Gregor shrugged. “You’re the one who went to the Shadow Realm and figured out that she even existed.”

“Care to fill us in?” Mel asked them.

Gregor shook his head. "It's complicated. Let's just say that we really need to make sure that your friend is okay."

Mel nodded as he returned to hacking away at the vines.

"One thing I don't get," Mel said. "If the Council of Light will go after Freya because she's a threat to their power, why doesn't the Demon King do the same? Surely a Dark Angel threatens his rule."

Gregor laughed at that.

"What?" Mel demanded.

"Nothing," Lady Caroline assured her. "You just don't know how funny that just became. Regardless, the King is dying and has no true heirs. He has been training Gregor's nephew to replace him, but he won't have Royal Blood. No one's sure if he will be able to keep the dissidents in line. A Dark Angel, however, would be a perfect candidate."

"But Freya would never want the job."

"I know. I'm not saying that she should become the next Queen, I'm just saying that, as far as the King is concerned, that would actually be the best case scenario for the Underworld."

"I'm through," Gregor told them, a gap in the vines now allowing them through to the stairs.

Mel led the way, the wolf leaping in front of everyone else. The others followed behind in quick succession.

Once they reached the top of the stairs, the wolf bounded through the door. Mel was careful to anticipate the rain, making sure that none of it touched her scales as they approached Freya.

As soon as they started to approach, the Angel turned to them. Her wings were flared out behind her, and her hair was a matted mess in the wind and rain. Her black, Demonic armour seemed to glow, the runes all looking as if they might overload at any moment. The most disconcerting thing, however, was the pair of green cats' eyes that followed Mel as she approached.

“Freya!” Mel yelled over the rain.

“I no longer recognise that name.”

The wolf beneath Mel whined at that.

“What name do you recognise, then?”

“I have no name.”

Mel groaned. This was going to take a while...

“She’s lost her humanity,” Sarah said, her voice thick with emotion.

Mel took a deep breath, willing Sarah to keep it together.

“So, what?” Mel demanded. “You had a spat with your girl-friend and now you’ve given up on people? Stop being so dramatic, Freya.”

“Leave,” Freya told them. **“I will no longer suffer threats. I will not let them have me or those I love again. Never again.”**

Before Mel could reply, Caroline and Gregor did exactly as Freya said, turning and leaving.

“What the hell?” Mel demanded.

“It’s her compulsion power,” Alex said, marking the first time she had spoken since they had arrived.

“What compulsion power?!” Mel demanded, before figuring that they had more important things to deal with. “If she compelled them to leave, why didn’t it work on us?”

“Because she doesn’t want us to leave,” Sarah figured. “You heard her, she wants to protect those she loves. She hasn’t given up completely. We can still get through to her.”

“I’m the one who activated the power,” Alex said. “And I’m the one she thinks betrayed her. I should be the one to talk to her.”

“She’ll kill you,” Mel said.

“No, I don’t think she will.” Alex stepped forward at that.

“Traitor!” Freya screamed, the sky flashing with lightning.

“I didn’t betray you!” Alex told her. “I was the one that was betrayed.”

“It all looks the same to me.”

Alex flinched. “I know it does, but I’m here now. I didn’t have to come. I could have fled, but I came back for you.”

“So that you could capture me again! He knew things about me! Things only you would know...”

Mel couldn’t quite believe it, but it seemed that Freya was actually starting to calm down, the glow around her fading slightly.

“I promise, Freya, he betrayed me. I had no idea that he would hurt you. You have to believe me!”

“I don’t have to believe anything!”

A bolt of lightning came between them at that, throwing Alex back.

“What the hell, Freya?!” Mel demanded. “You said that you didn’t want the people you care about to be hurt. However mad at her you are, there’s no way that doesn’t include Alex.”

The glow quieted once more, and Mel knew that she was right.

“I can’t trust her. Not after... Not after...”

Alex got back to her feet at that, limping forward once more. “Then use your magic!” she said. “See that I’m telling the truth. Compel me to do so!”

Freya seemed to hesitate at that, the glow around her fading completely as the wind died down.

“You would really let me compel you?” Freya asked.

Alex nodded. “Freya, I don’t want to lose you. I can’t. Please come back to me, my love.”

The wind quickly whipped up at that, though Mel realised that it was actually blowing away the clouds as the glow of Freya’s eyes faded. Tears were now evident down her friend’s face.

“I don’t want to lose you either,” Freya admitted. “I don’t want... I can’t let him get me again. Or you...” Freya shook her head, her hands moving erratically up and down.

Mel winced as the wolf started to plod softly towards Freya, giving Mel a better look at her friend. All of her exposed skin was covered in wounds that looked surgical in nature.

What had they done to her before she had torn the building in two to escape?

The wolf nudged its head against Freya’s leg.

“Juni?” Freya asked, her hands stopping still.

The wolf shook its head.

“Of course,” Freya said, seemingly understanding the beast. “I didn’t think you cared about your daughters...”

The wolf gave a whine at that.

“Thank you,” Freya said, stumbling forward.

Alex caught her, helping her to a sitting position. Mel worried at how sickly Freya looked.

All magic came at a price, and Freya had clearly overextended herself.

“What happened?” Freya asked, clearly disoriented. “I was... I was hurting... And then you three were here...”

Freya’s eyes closed at that and she slumped forward.

“Freya?” Alex asked, her voice more than a little frantic.

Sarah gave her friend a quick once-over with her wand before turning to Alex. “She’s just sleeping,” Sarah assured her, but Mel knew that there was no guarantee that her condition wouldn’t worsen.

“We should take her back to the coven to keep an eye on her,” Sarah said.

Mel shook her head. “No, we shouldn’t.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that the Demons were right. The Council of Light have been suspiciously quiet on the topic of Freya. She’s an Angel, Sarah. We should have at least seen the kind of interactions the Demons have had with her. But there’s been nothing. The Demons were right that Freya could challenge them over the state of emergency, and I think many Light beings would want her to.”

“But no Light beings have said that!”

“Not yet, but most only know Freya as a whisper. This display will have changed that. The Humans may blame global warming, but I think that most magical beings know that a storm like this could only be the work of an Elemental. If the Council of Light want to protect their power, they have the perfect opportunity to get Freya out of the way. They could claim that this storm was too close to revealing herself to Humans and execute her to ensure secrecy.”

“But Rosaline will protect her.”

“Will she? Freya’s not a part of our coven, Sarah. If Rosaline goes against the Council of Light, it would cut our entire coven off from other Light beings. We may be isolationist, but we still rely on trading with other Light beings. Rosaline barely allowed Freya to step foot in the coven. She’s not about to go to war over her.”

“Then what do we do?”

Mel sighed. “If the Demons were still here, I’d let them take her to the Underworld to recover. I think they’re right in saying that Freya would be safest there.”

“But they left, and we don’t know how to contact them.”

Mel nodded. “And I doubt the Council of Light will wait around for Freya to recover, which means we’re short on time.”

“I can take her,” Alex said, speaking up. “I can protect her while she recovers. I need to be on the move, anyway, after be-

traying my monitor. The Enhanced will want to tie up loose ends.”

Sarah frowned. “So you’re suggesting that you take her with you so that you’ll have two groups after you?”

“She might be right,” Mel figured. “They’re two groups that hate each other, so there’s no risk of them working together. Freya has proven that she can stand up to the other Enhanced, and Alex’s Enhanced abilities should protect Freya from the Council of Light.”

Sarah huffed. “If they’re even after her. We’re taking a lot of this on faith. The Demons may have been lying.”

“Maybe, but I’d rather not chance it. Would you?”

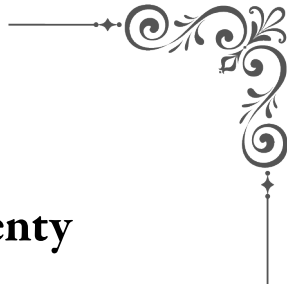
Sarah sighed, clearly still not happy.

Mel found herself surprised by the wolf beneath her walking up to where Alex was still kneeling by Freya. The wolf reached up to lick Alex’s cheek, clearly catching the Enhanced off-guard.

“Well, apparently the wolf thinks she should go with Alex,” Mel figured.

Sarah gave a reluctant nod. “All right. I guess this is goodbye, then.”

Mel looked at her unconscious friend, her heart aching a little. As much as this was the best thing for Freya, Mel didn’t want this to be goodbye.



Chapter Twenty

Freya woke up groggily to an intense feeling of nausea. She sat herself up as she forced her eyes to open, realising that she was lying across the back seat of a moving car.

“You’re up!” Alex cried with relief from the driver’s seat as Freya sat up in the back. “Are you okay? What do you remember?”

Freya groaned, her memories a confusing jumble.

She’d been in pain. *So* much pain.

And then the sky had opened, a bolt of lightning striking both her and the Enhanced. The blast had freed her, but it had reduced him to ash.

Good.

But then... She had been so furious. So angry at Alex for betraying her, and still furious that she had ever been so helpless.

The rest was a blur, right up until Alex was there with Mel and Sarah, pleading for her to come home.

“What did I do?” Freya asked.

Alex looked a little sheepish at that. “You caused a storm. Like, a big one. There was a decent amount of flooding in the city centre, but I don’t think it was too awful. You weren’t going for too long.”

“Why am I in your car?”

“Well... That’s the tricky bit. Apparently, even though you didn’t do too much damage, and the Humans are happy to blame

global warming, the Council of Light might not see it that way. It looks like they might see you as a threat. It was agreed that you should keep your head down while you're recovering."

"Where are we going?"

"Out of town for now. After that... I don't know. I'm thinking as I go here."

Freya nodded. "Pull over."

"Freya, I don't-"

"Pull over!"

Alex did just that, and Freya, feeling sick, yanked open the car door as quickly as possible, but wasn't able to get out before her stomach gave up on her.

"Sorry," Freya said as she finally felt well enough to sit back in the seat.

"Here," Alex said, passing Freya a packet of tissues. "Thankfully, Enhanced are taught to be prepared for anything."

As soon as Freya had finished cleaning any remnants of sick from her face, Alex passed her a water bottle and a packet of travel sickness tablets.

"Take those," Alex said as Freya closed the door behind her and Alex started to drive once more.

Freya did as she was told, the pills quickly making her drowsy once more.

"Go back to sleep," Alex urged. "You still look pale."

"I'm always pale," Freya countered, but she didn't otherwise object as they passed by a sign informing them that they were well and truly out of the area surrounding the city.

Freya lay back down, feeling uneasy at that information before swiftly passing out once more.



WHEN FREYA AWOKE, IT was in a cheap, roadside hotel.

She still felt like ass, but she did her best to force herself to stay awake, pushing herself up so that she was leaning against the headboard of the bed, in a vaguely sitting position.

“You’re awake!” Alex exclaimed.

Freya nodded. “How long was I out?” she asked, her throat raspy.

“Days,” Alex informed her, the relief clear on her features. “I was so terrified when you wouldn’t wake up. I didn’t know if you were just exhausted from using your new powers so extensively, or if you’d had a bad reaction to the travel sickness tablets. And it wasn’t as if I could take you to a hospital. You’re an Angel for Christ’s sake, and that would have been a sure-fire way to get caught. And I didn’t know anyone with magic that I trusted enough to call and ask - kind of a shitty time to realise I had neither Mel nor Sarah’s number, and your phone’s fried - so I just... I just kept driving, hoping that you’d wake up.”

Freya just nodded once more, her brain working slowly to process the sounds Alex was making into words, and then process those words into something that made sense.

She looked out of the window, but all she saw were fields and road. That could have been anywhere in the UK.

“Where are we?” she asked once she finally put her words together in the right order.

“Scotland,” Alex told her. “Inverness is just a little further up the A9.”

Freya nodded once more. She just wanted to go back to sleep, but the danger they were in didn’t completely escape her notice. If Alex had felt the need to drive so far...

“I just kept driving,” Alex told her. “I zigzagged all over the north of England, and then into Scotland, and then back into England again. I decided Scotland would be the best route again this morning. I found places to sleep at night so that I wasn’t risk-

ing an accident on the road, but otherwise I've just been driving, hoping to stay unnoticed."

Freya kept nodding, not sure what else to add.

She was shocked, however, when Alex then burst into tears.

"I'm so sorry," Alex said as she sat down on the edge of the bed, next to her. "This is all my fault. I just... I had no idea the older Enhanced were still so bitter about the War. No one my age ever seemed to care."

Freya leaned forward at that, wrapping her arms around Alex as well as she could in her depleted state.

"It's not your fault," she eventually managed to croak. "You didn't know."

"No, but I should have. I shouldn't have... I was just *so* upset and I didn't have anyone else to tell..."

"I know," Freya assured her. "You can't blame yourself for him betraying your trust. It was all his fault, not yours."

Alex nodded in thanks, snuggling closer to Freya, who just held her tighter.

"Alex," Freya finally said as things seemed to calm, "what about my family? Will any Enhanced try to go after them instead of chasing us?"

Alex shook her head, sitting back a little from Freya's embrace. "No. My monitor was the most senior Enhanced involved in this operation. Protocol says that his death means a swift end to any goals of the mission and a focus on clean-up. They need to retrieve me, or kill me, because I'm a loose end, but the last thing they'd do is piss off a being as powerful as you unless you were standing directly between them and me."

"Which I have every intention of doing."

"They don't know that yet. And let's actually get you standing before you start thinking of standing between an Enhanced and their prey, okay?"

Freya frowned.

“What?”

“You said that like you’re not one of them.”

Alex shrugged. “They *did* try to kill me. Or, at least, one of them did. But I don’t trust that he was acting without orders, Freya. We *don’t* act without orders. Maybe we work around them, like me helping you, but we don’t kill each other unless it’s a specific contingency of the mission. If he tried to kill me for thinking that the War shouldn’t be started up again... I don’t trust the others not to do the same thing. I *know* there are some who agree with me, but I don’t know how many disagree. I won’t go back just to be slaughtered.

“But that means that they’re after me now. And they won’t give up until I’m back or dead.”

“They won’t get you,” Freya assured her. “I won’t let them.”

Alex gave a weak smile at that. “Freya... I brought you with me because you were blacked out and it seemed the best plan while you couldn’t decide for yourself. Now that you’re up, you could go home.”

“What about the Council of Light? You said they’d be after me.”

“Yes, but you’ve got Demon blood. Go to the Underworld while you recover. They won’t be able to get to you there. Neither will the Enhanced.”

“But then you’d be on your own. Humans aren’t allowed in the Underworld.”

Alex nodded. “I know. But, Freya, I’m going to have to stay on the run now. I don’t know for how long, but it might be the rest of my life. I can’t drag you into that.”

“Yes, you can. Alex, I don’t care if we’re on the move, I’m staying with you.”

“But it’s dangerous, Freya! They can strip you of your magic. You know that they can. If they stop you from accessing your magic, they can kill you. And they can do it easily. No fast healing or extra stamina will save you then.”

Freya shivered a little, her hands going to trace the barely healed wounds up her arms.

But she wasn’t leaving Alex, so she gathered up what remained of her bravado in order to shrug and say, “Then I’ll just sweep them away with a flood or something.”

Alex gave a hollow bark of laughter at that. “Like you did at the Enhanced base? Freya, you’ve been out for days.”

“I know, but learning to control a new power always has a few hiccups. I’ll get a handle on it soon enough.”

Alex sighed with a small smile. “You know, I *knew* you would be like this. Or, I guess, some selfish part of me hoped. I spent a lot of the time I was driving rehearsing a speech about why you should go home and forget me, but I get the feeling that you’re not going to let me get to the end of it.”

“You would be right.”

Alex’s smile widened a little at that before leaning forward to kiss Freya.

Freya pulled away before she could, however, with an apologetic smile. “I haven’t brushed my teeth since I woke up in your car and threw up,” she reminded her.

Alex rolled her eyes, moving over and climbing under the covers with Freya, wrapping her arm around her.

“You should get some more rest,” Alex told her.

“We both should,” Freya replied as she moved to lie back down, turning to look out of the window at the grey skies once more. “Hey, Alex?”

“Yeah?”

“We should go south. I’m kind of sick of rain.”

“Yeah, me too.”

Author's Note

So, I thought I'd try something new at the end of the book.

If you're looking for the preview of Book 7, don't worry, it's there. Just skip right on ahead.

But, you know, I miss ANs from my fanfic days and I thought, well, who says I can't have one at the end of the book?

It turns out, literally no one and plenty of authors have them.

So, hey! S'up?

I've been waiting for this book to come out for ages. Finally, I can talk about Alex! Though, of course, as I'm writing this, I've just finished writing the ninth book, so there are now other plot things I want to talk about...

As you may or may not have gathered, this book is a bit of a turning point for the series. I kind of messed it up by adding in another book (this book was supposed to lead directly into what is now Book 8), making it thirteen books overall, instead of twelve, but the series originally divided rather neatly into four trilogies (now it's three and a quadrilogy...), with the end of each trilogy marking a new turn for the series.

The first trilogy was all YA and Freya figuring out her powers. This trilogy has all been New Adult and Freya expanding out beyond the city and school.

This next trilogy is gonna take us firmly out of YA/NA territory and have Freya figuring out these new powers, as well as leading right up to the big bad of the series.

I'm so excited!

Book 7 is called Reaper and will be out in May (2017), so keep an eye out. Or subscribe to my newsletter, and get some free short stories as well¹.

If you haven't heard me excitedly talk about it, there are also going to be five spin-off books coming out in summer/autumn.

1. <http://www.subscribepage.com/m4d2k1>

Two paranormal romances and a trilogy of magical heist novels. From July onwards, there will be at least one new book every month!

Speaking of, I need to get back to editing one of those books. I swear, it's been through ten rewrites and it's just about coming together now.

Thanks to everyone for reading! And super-special-awesome thanks to everyone who has left reviews for any of the books in the series! Reviews seriously help me to keep on writing!

And super-special-awesome thanks and virtual hugs for my beta readers! These books wouldn't be half of what they are without you!

Want to see what's coming up in Book 7? Here, have a preview:

"Where are we now?" Freya asked as she awoke from her nap, cringing away from where her seatbelt was digging into her neck.

"France still, I think," her girlfriend, Alex, told her from the driver's seat.

"You think?"

"Well, we haven't come across any border checks yet."

Freya nodded, stretching as well as she could in the front passenger seat of the car. They spent all day, every day driving. They stopped at a hotel each night, allowing Alex to sleep so they weren't in danger of crashing due to a tired driver. Freya felt bad about not taking a turn behind the wheel, but she had never learned to drive. She knew of a charm that could drive the car for you, but she didn't know how to make it.

The problem with spending all day driving, Freya found, was that she was incredibly prone to travel sickness. In order to keep her lunch in her stomach, she continually used travel sickness tablets, but they knocked her right out. Even when she was awake, she felt incredibly stoned.

That became a problem when they couldn't stop. Alex was being hunted by the Enhanced - genetically engineered Humans from another timeline - and Freya was being hunted by the Council of Light - the people in charge of the Light magical beings.

The Enhanced were limited to Human technology, so Alex could cover their tracks there. When it came to the Council of Light, however, they were able to track Freya via her magic, no matter how much she tried to mask it. There was simply too much to mask on her own now.

That meant staying on the road. Tracking someone with magic wasn't easy, so staying on the move would hopefully obscure Freya from the Council.

Freya didn't really want to think about what would happen if it stopped working.

"Do you need anything from the shop?" Alex asked as she pulled into a petrol station.

"I could use some pop. Something carbonated, I don't mind what," Freya said, then frowned. "Wait, how are we paying for stuff?"

Alex raised an eyebrow. "You're asking that now?"

Freya groaned. "Look, I am pretty stoned on these freaking tablets. Forgive me if I'm not exactly firing on all cylinders..."

Alex rolled her eyes. "Oh great and intelligent Freya, I implore you not to take offence at my words."

Freya smiled, shaking her head. "Okay, but, seriously, can't the Enhanced trace your card?"

"Not if I keep doing my very clever thing that I'm doing."

"What clever thing?"

"Do you want to sit here for two hours while I explain it, or are you happy to wait until I get back?"

"It can wait. But I do want to know."

Alex smiled. "I know you do, but it is pretty complicated."

"I can handle complicated."

"I know you can. It's one of the things I like about you."

Freya grinned at that, leaning back in her chair. "Have I told you how sexy it is that you're so smart?"

Alex grinned back at that. "You know, I wasn't just grown for my brawn."

"Yes, but that is also impressive."

Alex leaned forward at that, giving Freya a quick kiss. "You're so sweet when you're stoned."

Freya laughed at that, though it came out as a weird mix between a snort and a giggle.

“I’ll go and get you that pop.”

Alex got out of the car, leaving Freya alone once more.

She wasn’t alone for long, however, as she felt the familiar tug of Amber - the ghost of her great-great-grandmother who had been tied to Freya by her mother to keep an eye on her - trying to materialise.

Freya sighed. She was drowsy, and just wanted to go back to sleep. But she hadn’t spoken to Amber since before everything had gone down. Since before she had been captured and tortured and lost control of her powers.

Freya concentrated on her breathing, trying to calm the tightness in her chest. It dissipated after a moment, and she decided to let Amber through. It wasn’t fair to drag her around Europe without telling her what had happened, even if Freya very much didn’t want to talk about it.

Amber appeared on the back seat as soon as Freya let her through. Freya unbuckled herself and turned in her chair so that she was kneeling, facing her.

“Do you know what happened?” Freya asked. As much as Freya didn’t like it, Amber did watch her when she wasn’t fully materialised. For once, Freya hoped that Amber hadn’t listened to her when she had expressed her discomfort with it.

“Are you asking because you don’t remember, or because you don’t want to talk about it?”

Freya took a deep breath at that, doing her best to remain calm. She hadn’t thought about the fact that Amber might have seen what had happened when she had lost control of her powers. Her memories from that point weren’t great, and she didn’t know if that was because she had given herself over to her powers or if it was her mind trying to protect itself.

“Both, I guess.”

Amber nodded. “I don’t think there’s anything that you don’t remember that you haven’t been filled in on. You destroyed the Enhanced base in your escape, killing Alex’s monitor. Then you started growing vines around the shopping centre. If given long enough, I would guess you would have built some kind of living fortress.”

“After a little while, Mel and Sarah arrived with Alex and a white wolf.”

Freya frowned. “A white wolf?” That somehow seemed familiar to her, but she couldn’t quite remember.

Amber shrugged. “I don’t know who the wolf was, or who sent her, but she got your friends and brought them to you. They managed to talk you down, and then you passed out. I lost my connection to Earth until you woke up.”

Freya nodded. That about added up with what she remembered, and what Alex had told her.

“So, are you going to yell at me for running away with Alex?” Freya asked.

Amber gave a sympathetic smile, shaking her head. “You were right to trust Alex, Freya. I think that going with her was the only sensible option.”

“Even more sensible than going to the Underworld and hiding there?”

Amber nodded. “I don’t think you could have sat still there. Not knowing that Alex was in peril elsewhere.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” Freya said with a smile. “So, the Council of Light? Alex told me that they’ll probably be after me, but she was delivering the information second-hand.”

Amber looked away, her gaze fixing on something in the distance, through the window. “The Council of Light... I tried to work with them in my youth, but it became clear to me then that

they were only interested in protecting their own power. When your mother was sent to the Shadow Realm and the War with the Humans restarted, they declared a state of emergency. For the Council, that means not replacing members until the state of emergency has ended.”

“And it hasn’t ended?” Freya guessed.

“No, it hasn’t. After the timeline shift, the Light beings had been hit the hardest. From what I managed to find out while I still possessed a body, it seems the Council said that consistency was needed during the rebuilding.”

“But it’s been twenty years.”

“Exactly. Everyone is chafing under the lack of democracy.”

Freya frowned. “I’m kind of surprised that they ever had a democracy at all. I mean, the Demons have a monarchy.”

“Before the current monarchy, Demons fought each other for control of the Underworld. They were as responsible for the depletion of their numbers as anyone else. Under the current monarchy, that stopped, and the Underworld thrived.”

Freya raised an eyebrow. “A benevolent dictator is still a dictator.”

Amber raised her hands in surrender. “I’m not defending it. I’m saying that it arose from a need in the Underworld, and it has worked better for the Demons than any other system.”

“And I imagine it’ll keep working until they get a shit king.”

“Well, given that the current king is dying with no heir, I’m sure we’ll soon find out how well Demons fare without him.

“Regardless, the Light beings don’t need that kind of steel hand guiding them. They existed in small groups and chose their leaders from among themselves. Under the current monarchy, the Demons became far more organised and centralised in their government. You’ve seen how they extend protection to Dark Witches that work with them. The Light beings sought to mimic

that, resulting in the Council of Light, who oversee all of the affairs of Light beings, though the members were still chosen by the beings they would represent.”

Freya groaned, resting her forehead against the headrest. “I’ve spent so long being careful not to take sides. How have I still managed to get dragged into this mess?”

“Well, that might have actually hurt you,” Amber figured.

“How?”

“If you had declared yourself a Dark Angel, the tensions between Light and Dark magical beings would have grown, I have no doubt of that. But the Light beings wouldn’t have had a symbol to rally around to challenge the Council.”

“Do you really think that would happen? Would they really rally behind me after all of the destruction I caused?”

Amber smiled at that. “You’re still an Angel, Freya. You didn’t grow up around magic, so you don’t know what that means, but trust me when I say that people will take your appearance as a sign of change. For many Light beings, they will assume that the change will be in the Council of Light.”

“Well then, I guess running away really was the best idea.”

Amber smiled at that, then disappeared as Alex opened the door on the driver’s side and got in.

“Are you okay?” Alex asked, noticing how Freya was awkwardly leaning backwards against her seat.

Freya nodded as she moved back to sit properly. “Yeah, just tired.”

“Well, go back to sleep.”

“I’ve been sleeping constantly. I feel bad leaving you alone like that with nothing but the French radio.”

“It’s fine, je parle français.”

Freya smiled, shaking her head. “Of course you do.”

“You know, we could take a break from driving. I could mask you from the Council of Light again.”

Freya shook her head. “Nope. If it doesn’t work and they catch up with us, we’ll need you at full strength.”

“All right, then,” Alex agreed with a sigh. “It’s getting late anyway, so we’ll have to stop soon regardless.”

Freya Snow Book 7 is now available! Click here for more info/to get your copy.²

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