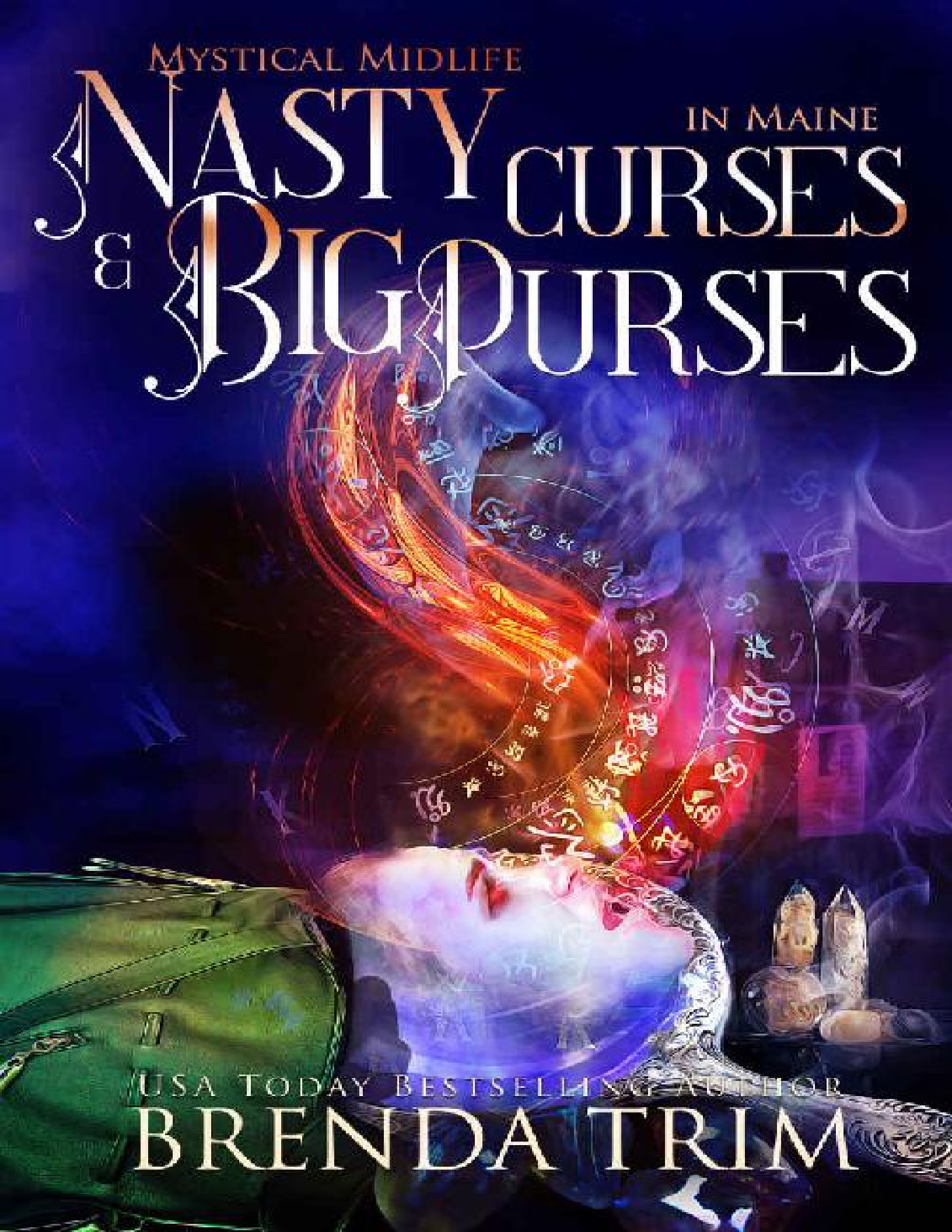


MYSTICAL MIDLIFE

IN MAINE

# NASTY CURSES & BIG PURSES



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# BRENDA TRIM

# NASTY CURSES & BIG PURSES

MYSTICAL MIDLIFE IN MAINE BOOK 6



BRENDA TRIM

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*No family is perfect. We fight, we argue. We even stop talking to each other at times. But in the end, family is family, and the love will always be there.*

## CHAPTER 1



*B*lood seeped from Tarja's wounded belly and covered my hands. My heart hammered against my rib cage, and I couldn't breathe. This was not happening. I couldn't lose my familiar. Not only would it be a major blow to me, but it would also devastate all witches.

I needed her. They needed her. How did this happen? *Your arrogance*. Bile joined the party and pummeled the back of my throat. This was my fault. I'd faced more danger over the past nine months than the entire country.

Yes, there were moments when my survival was in question. I'd had more than one emergency surgery to save my life. I had relied on Clio, the healer in Camden, practically daily. But I survived.

And in my stupidity, I believed Luci, and I could face the phantasms in Stuleros and win. My cell phone rang, jangling my nerves. Nina answered it and told whoever was on the other end what was happening.

"Was that Clio?" I knew the answer before I asked. She wouldn't be calling because she was flying in with Tseki. I begged whatever god was listening that the healer and Tsekani were less than a minute away.

Nina shook her head and dropped the cell onto the coffee table while I held Tarja close to my chest, putting as much pressure as possible on her wounds. Lesson number one thousand. Even beings made of fog or mist and spirits could have razor-sharp claws ready to tear you apart.



“It was Aidon. He’s on his way here now,” my daughter told me as if that would reassure me somehow.

“Where the hell is Clio? I need her here now!” Aidoneus could probably hear me at his house I was yelling so loud.

My mom knelt in front of me and put her hand on my knee. “Tseki is on his way with Clio. She will help Tarja. Everything is going to be okay.”

I lifted tear-filled eyes to my mother. She’d always made me feel better, no matter what happened. This time, her words meant nothing. “How, mom? I can feel her slipping away. She’s dying, and I can’t do anything to stop it.”

“You saved Stella when she should have died after that vampire attack. I know you’re worried, but pull your head out of your ass and try. Duedonne women don’t give up.” Nana stared at me with narrowed eyes and pursed lips.

It was exactly what I needed to stop the spiral. I was a powerful witch, not a helpless mundie. It was still hard to remember that at times, especially when my mind was on my dying familiar.

My heart refused to settle, and I still couldn’t catch my breath, but I knew what I could do. Closing my eyes, I pictured Tarja’s intestines, liver, and spleen and sent energy to her body.

I mouthed the word for barrier and held it tight around her wounds. With my hands on her abdomen, I was able to feel how slow her heart was beating. I couldn’t focus on that, or I would lose my shit, and Tarja *would* die.

I kept pushing my energy into her while holding the last remaining link I had with her. It had broken free and started floating away. I grabbed hold of it in a mental grip made of super glue and iron.

This life was my destiny. Tarja had convinced me of that. She believed in me and gave me the courage to try magic in the first place. She was also part of the reason I hadn’t quit yet.

The main one, if I was being honest. Nana was right. We didn’t quit. But it takes more than that to remain in this crazy, chaotic world. No one could maneuver this without some assistance. She was mine.

Nina crouched in front of me and ran her hand over Tarja’s head. “She’s gotta be okay, mom.”

I needed to be the parent and reassure my daughter. It was impossible to do with Tarja slipping through my fingers. Rather than lie to her, I checked over my shoulder and tried to look out the window.

“Mom, can you check and see if Clio and Tseki are coming, please?”

Tseki, the dragon shifter, had been keeping his distance over the past few weeks. No one blamed him. His boyfriend had betrayed him and tried to kill me. I appreciated his support right now, given that his pain was still so raw and new. It wasn't easy to live with having someone you love hurt you like that.

My mom nodded and got to her feet before she disappeared down the hall. Layla and Selene followed her. Evanora hovered closer than usual, as did Mythia. Thia fluttered near my shoulder and was chewing her lower lip.

The tiny pixie wore her typical punk attire, complete with the smallest combat boots in existence. I'd never seen her so worried. Not even when Hattie was dying, or I was recovering from various injuries.

*She senses how close we were to losing Tarja.* No! I refused to give those negative thoughts consideration. If they wormed their way into my head, I would break down, and I couldn't do that yet.

I heard voices coming from the front of the house. “She's here,” Layla called out.

“Thank God,” I breathed and bent to press my forehead to the top of Tarja's head. “Clio's here, Tarja. Hold on. She's going to help you.”

Her blood was slowing, now barely trickling out of her body. I choked on a sob as I realized it was likely because she'd almost lost all of her blood rather than my attempt to help her.

Her body was turning cold in my embrace, even as I willed my heat to flow into her tiny body. Twenty years of nursing told me how close Tarja was to dying, and it made me frantic.

“Clio! Hurry the fuck up.” My voice cracked, and a tear escaped to roll down my cheek and fall onto Tarja's fur.

“Phoebe! You never talk to anyone like that. Show your appreciation. She is here to help you,” Nana chided.

I glanced up at my Nana and nodded. "I know, but I'm losing her, and I don't know what to do."

Clio hurried into the room and set her brown leather satchel on the floor next to us. "I'm here. Tell me what happened."

I sucked in as much air as I could manage through my closed-off throat and the vice around my chest. "I astral projected joining Tarja, Luci and Zephyrus in Stuleros to try and eradicate the phantasms from that realm. Right away, I knew something wasn't right, so I sent Luci and Zeph back home. Before Tarja and I could leave, the spirit monsters surrounded us, one clawed Tarja. I felt our connection sever, and pulled her home before any more damage could occur. When I came to, she was bleeding out in my lap."

My chest heaved with sobs, but I kept my tears at bay. Now was not the time to lose my shit and break down. I could do that later when Tarja was better. "Fix her, please."

Clio's face lost most of the color, and her lips twitched. Otherwise, she displayed no sign my words were concerning. Clearing her throat, the healer held her hands over Tarja's body.

Her eyes lost focus and her hands heated where they hovered above mine. Her energy was a gentle caress against my skin and smelled like honeysuckle flowers this time. One of the things I loved about Clio was that her power manifested differently each time and always smelled good.

Previously, she'd explained that her ability was earth-based, and she used what was around her to fuel her power. So I hypothesized she was accessing whatever plant would give her the most significant boost. I had a honeysuckle plant on each side of the porch. However, the house was surrounded by hydrangeas, lilies, and roses.

Perhaps Tarja wasn't as injured as I feared if she wasn't using all the hearty hydrangeas around us. Or the massive pine trees, for that matter. My heart skipped a beat, and I found it hard not to get my hopes up.

Clio shuddered a few seconds later, and her mouth turned down at the edges. "Tarja suffered fatal injuries. She's alive, although I have no idea why. Based on the severity and blood loss, she shouldn't be with us anymore."

My heart shattered into a million pieces, and a scream tore from my throat. My eyes were still filled with tears that I refused to let fall. I screamed until I no longer could. I hoped it would make me feel better. All it did was drive the spike further into my sternum.

“No, she isn’t going to die. I refuse to allow that to happen. I’m not letting her go until you fix her injuries and make her better.” My voice was scratchy, and my throat was raw.

Clio placed a hand on my shoulder. “I will do everything I can to help her. But I need you to be prepared for the worst. I’m not certain I can repair all of the damage. You will have to eventually let her go, though, or I can’t do anything.”

“She’s feeding Tarja her life’s energy,” Nana interjected. “She’s saying she will never give up on her familiar. And you need her to continue trying. Without her, you will never have one of your own.”

Clio’s eyes flew wide like an owl. “That’s how you kept Stella alive?” I hadn’t explained the entire situation to her yet and was glad that now I didn’t have to. Tarja was my priority.

I nodded my head. “It is. Although, I could feel Stella, and I can’t Tarja, so I’m sending her far more.”

My limbs were getting heavy, and it was difficult to continue holding pressure on her wounds. But I wouldn’t stop until I fell over. Even then, I would make sure someone else took over. My magic wouldn’t stop either. Every fiber of my being was invested in ensuring Tarja lived.

Clio extended her hands. “You continue sending her your energy. Don’t stop the flow, no matter what happens. I have no doubt you are the only reason she is still alive right now. Mollie, would you put a blanket or towel on the coffee table while Nina clears it off? I need a surface to work on.”

I stared at Clio’s hands and reflexively clutched Tarja closer. *You need to let her heal Tarja.* That was easier said than done. After several checks to ensure my magic had a hold of the chain linking us, I handed my familiar to Clio.

The healer moved quickly and set her on the table. My stomach roiled when I caught sight of her slashed open abdomen. Intestines and at least one organ showed through the bloody furrows in her fur.

When Clio went to her satchel, I went into nursing mode and lunged out of my chair. “What do you need?”

Clio looked at me for a second, then nodded her head. “I need gloves, the betadine, and four-oh vicryl. I’ll use three-oh prolene on the skin. Suturing the wounds when they are this deep will assist the magic.” She explained what she was doing for my benefit, for which I was grateful.

The bag was surprisingly organized, with traditional medical supplies and magical elements. I slapped the latex into her hand and handed her the plastic bottle as soon as her fingers were covered.

She squirted the disinfectant soap all over Tarja then reached for the vicryl sutures I had open and ready. Clio was fast and efficient as she sewed the torn intestine together. Those stitches would dissolve as Tarja healed, so we didn’t need to worry about going in and removing them.

By the time she moved to the skin, I was barely holding onto my sanity. I’d assisted procedures like this countless times and had never lost focus once. Not even when my son had to have his scalp sewn shut.

My connection to Tarja made it impossible to focus on anything but the worst-case scenario. It should help not to see her skin gaping open. It didn’t because she was still a blank inside my heart and mind.

“Phoebe.” My head snapped up when I heard Aidoneus’s voice.

My mom knelt next to me and gestured for me to go to him. I didn’t hesitate. I felt like I was going to fly apart at any second. My arms went around his neck, and I buried my face in his shoulder then I finally let the tears fall.

I wanted to keep it together until Tarja was better but couldn’t. Aidon wrapped his big arms around me and held me close. I ugly cried all over his grey shirt. Snot was leaking from my nose, and my skin was blotchy. The younger me would have been mortified for a sexy guy to see me looking like this.

As I’d gotten older, I realized it didn’t matter. If a man was repulsed by my grief, he could take a hike. With Aidon, I didn’t give it a second thought. He would love me no matter what I looked like. Hell, he’d already accepted my cellulite and wrinkles. He never even

mentioned the stubborn chin hair that I could never seem to vanquish.

My heart stopped in my chest when Aidoneus let me go and ran to the middle of the room. Everything seemed to be running in slow motion. I turned and watched as he scooped Tarja into his arms. He said something to Clio, who held her hands above the cat.

Dark light emanated from Aidon's hands while amber light left Clio's. Their energy was complimentary as it poured from them and filled the room. It took me a second to realize the chain was slipping from my grasp. I redoubled my efforts and sent even more along the thread to her.

As my life force left me and went into Tarja, I felt Aidon's energy surge into me. It traveled along the chain my magic was clutching. It was familiar and comforting. I wavered and almost fell over. Tsekani saved me from face planting.

He steadied me, and wiped my cheeks with his hands. "They've got her."

"I need more African violet, anemone, and chamomile," Clio shouted.

Mythia flew past Layla and Selene as she went to get what the healer needed. There was a green paste all over the wounds on Tarja's belly. I moved closer and stopped next to Aidoneus.

I could smell the mix of herbs this close and picked out the chamomile because I was most familiar with that. Although, I thought I detected plums and persimmons, too.

I tried to pet Tarja, but my arm weighed a hundred pounds, and I couldn't lift it. I leaned against Aidon as my legs threatened to give out again. Mythia pressed the ingredients into Clio's hand and hovered in front of my face. "You need to eat something, or you're going to pass out. You're using too much energy."

I shook my head from side to side. "I can't eat anything. I'm barely holding the bile down, and I'm not leaving Tarja."

Mythia pursed her lips. "You will eat."

I ignored her as she flew away and watched Clio, who was now swaying like a drunk man doing a sobriety test. My arm flopped like a fish out of water and smacked my leg, but I didn't do a thing to help the healer.

My mom was there and had her hand on Clio's arm while my daughter was on her other side. Grams, Layla, Selene, and Tseki all closed ranks. We surrounded Aidon, Clio, and Tarja. I took a deep breath and allowed the love surrounding me to soak into my body.

Their love and concern went a long way to making me feel better, so I shared that with Tarja. She needed to know how much we cared for her and wanted her to fight and get better.

I'd seen enough in the hospitals to know that a person's fight was as important in recovery as medical intervention. It was the only way to explain how a woman with stage four breast cancer that had spread to her brain was able to hold on to see her kids one last time.

Clio dumped the herbs into a mortar Nina held and ground them together. An acrid odor filled the room, along with a sizzle like cooking bacon. I gagged and searched for the source of the funk.

I cried out when I noticed the paste on Tarja's side bubbling and turning black. Her fur was falling to the floor beneath her, and the wound around the stitches was a brownish color.

"What's happening? Why is it turning that color and crackling?" My mind tried to tell me the answer, but I refused to acknowledge it.

"The wounds were fatal, they were spiritual as well as physical," Aidoneus explained. It felt like my heart was sucked into a black hole in that second.

I shook my head back and forth, refusing to believe him. "She's going to live, dammit." I laid my hands over the wounds and forced my power into her body. "*Sana.*"

Clio tried to push my hands away, and I bared my teeth at her. She lifted one eyebrow and pursed her lips. "Let me put the fresh potion on her, and you can continue. I'll join you."

I sighed and moved my hand a couple inches. It was all I could muster. I wasn't moving very far right now for fear I wouldn't be able to reposition them. My arms were heavy. I wanted to drop them back to my sides.

The sizzling stopped when Clio added more paste. The smell vanished, as well. Crisp herbs replaced the sweet decay. I closed my eyes and continued chanting the spell for healing. I knew it didn't do much, yet I couldn't bring myself to stop.

Aidon's magic flared, making me meet his sapphire gaze. "I'm supporting her breathing and her heartbeat while Clio continues."

That meant we almost lost her when he had let go of me. I swallowed the lump in my throat and nodded. I couldn't say anything else. Mythia returned and held a drink in front of my face. I dutifully opened my mouth and took the sip through a straw. The sweet strawberry drink gave me a jolt of energy and eased the pain in my throat.

My mom held one out to Clio, as well. "It's a new energy drink," Thia said when she saw me looking.

The boost didn't last long, and much to my dismay, my hand fell. Layla must have seen what was happening because she jerked me out of the way before it slammed onto Tarja's fragile body.

She set me back in the chair and took the drink from Mythia. I watched Clio and Aidoneus work together for over an hour and was starting to lose hope when Clio backed away and collapsed onto the sofa.

Aidon approached me and handed Tarja to me. Her chest rose and fell on her own when he took his hands away. Her breathing was regular but slow. My tears started up again as I looked from him to Clio.

"I don't know how to thank you both." My words were more sobs than intelligible. They got the gist.

Clio grimaced. "Don't thank us yet. Tarja suffered severe injuries to her body and her spirit. Spiritual wounds are difficult to heal. She will need continued support from you. Even then, she might never fully recover."

"As long as I'm her life support machine, she has a fighting chance. Without you, we wouldn't even have had that much."

Tseki cleared his throat. "Why doesn't Layla take Clio home? I'll be available if I'm needed."

Clio nodded. "That would be wonderful. I have no more energy."

I thanked her again and told her goodnight. Nana and my mom went to bed next, followed by Nina. Aidoneus crouched in front of me when we were alone. "What can I do for you?"

"Get me the herbs to tether a soul to a body. I want to reinforce my bond to Tarja, so I won't stop feeding her the energy she needs."



Aidon opened his mouth then shut it when he caught the look on my face. He knew I would do it with or without him. He did as asked, and I set her back on the coffee table. I cast a salt circle, then performed the ritual while Aidoneus watched.

"Did it work?"

I picked Tarja up and shrugged my shoulders as I collapsed into the chair. "I have no idea, but I feel better knowing I tried."

I closed my eyes and held my familiar close. I focused on her breathing, and before I knew it, my eyes slipped closed.

## CHAPTER 2



The hot water beat down on my head and shoulders doing nothing to alleviate the tension stringing me tight as a bow. If one more thing plucked my nerves, I would fire without warning and leave carnage in my wake.

I should say a prayer to the gods that my daughter wasn't the one to set off my wrath. She was a sixteen-year-old girl with all the drama that goes along with that age. When we were thrust into the magical world, I worried she would lose her childhood.

I had been grateful when she came home last week crying about a boy that she had a crush on and it turned out he liked one of her friends instead. Now, I worry that teenage angst would set me off.

The water was pink as it flowed to the drain. I had always associated pink with happy emotions like love and affection. It would now be forever tainted by the fact that my hubris had nearly killed my familiar.

Tarja lay on my bed, fighting for her life with an injury to her soul. She lost part of herself when she came to my defense. It was because of her that we were able to get out of Stuleros safely along with Luci and Zeph.

Grabbing the soap, I scrubbed and washed my body. Even after the water ran clear, the feel of her blood lingered on my skin. It was a poignant reminder that I could still lose Tarja to her injuries.

I finished my shower like I was headed for a buffet after a long day running around Disney World with my kids. Wrapped in a fluffy

towel, I stopped short in the doorway. My heart warmed at the sight of my daughter sitting on the bed with Tarja.

Nina had no poker face and her worry and fear were etched all over her features. I shouldn't have worried about her teenage drama setting me off. There was no way she would even entertain any of it while Tarja was in danger. She'd matured far more than I ever anticipated when she inherited magical powers unexpectedly. She took the responsibilities that came with it seriously, as well.

"How is she?" I went into the closet and grabbed some leggings and a sweatshirt from one of the drawers. I towel dried quickly and dressed.

"She hasn't moved since you set her down. Is she going to be alright, mom?" Nina's voice broke at the end of her question.

I sat next to her on the mattress and wrapped my arms around her shoulders. Tears stung my eyes and threatened to break the dam. I'd cried myself out the night before in Aidon's arms when he carried me up to bed. It felt like there was a thin layer of sandpaper covering my cornea and my throat was sore from screaming.

I clung to my daughter as hard as she held onto me. "If I have anything to say about it, she will be up and giving us grief in no time. I still haven't mastered that healing potion she was trying to teach us."

Nina sniffed and nodded her head against my shoulder. "We should practice so we can impress her when she wakes up."

Nana walked by and looked in the room then continued down the hall without saying a word. That was odd. What the heck? I let go of Nina and scooped Tarja into my arms. "What's up with Nana?"

Nina was right behind me as I left the room. "I have no idea why, but one second she seems alright and the next she's acting strange."

I'd seen the same since I'd returned home. I scanned the hall when we exited my room but Nana was nowhere to be seen. "Damn, she's moving a lot faster than usual. She's already gone."

Nina snorted. "That's the other thing. She's practically sprinting throughout the house instead of shuffling along."

"That's a good sign. So many her age can hardly move around like she does." Nana had always impressed me. In my line of work

I'd seen too many elderly people unable to walk across the room without assistance, much less in under a minute.

Nina followed me as I headed for the kitchen. It had become the official hangout for everyone in the house. Voices echoed up the grand staircase as we walked down. I kept waiting to hear Tarja tell me how Selene and Mythia were debating the best way to cook ribs. Selene preferred them barbequed, while Mythia liked them slow cooked in the oven.

Tarja's chest rose and fell in my arms, but there was no outward indication she was still in there. It was rare that she allowed anyone to hold her, let alone carry her throughout the house. She was a magical cat, capable of performing simple spells, so she never relied on anyone else.

"So, you still crave ribs? I wondered if that would change after getting your soul back." Nina asked our resident ghoul as she walked into the kitchen.

Nana was nowhere to be seen, but my mother was there. I approached my mom as Selene shrugged her shoulders and replied to Nina. "Yeah. Seems those cravings haven't changed. However, the amount of meat I have needed is a fraction of what it used to be. I also don't feel like I'm always on the verge of exploding. And the emptiness is gone."

I diverted to the living room nearby and set Tarja on the couch, covering her with a blanket before heading back to the kitchen and my mother. Nina was talking to Mythia and Selene when I approached my mother.

"Hey mom. What's going on with Nana?"

My mom cocked her head to the side. "What do you mean?"

"She's been off since I got back." I debated telling her what Nina said and decided against it. I wanted my daughter to come to me with things. Teenagers were temperamental and you never knew what might piss them off from moment to moment.

My mom shook her head from side to side. "You mean how she doesn't talk to you one moment and the next she's scowling or asking a million questions?"

That was interesting. Nina hadn't mentioned anything about questions or scowling. Nana would roll her eyes and shake her head

or purse her lips, yet I'd never seen her with a full-on scowl.

"Yeah. She walked by my room and when she looked at Nina and I, it was almost as if she was looking through us. She kept walking without saying a word. I got up right away to ask if she was alright and when I got to the hallway, she was gone. It looks like she's getting around much better."

My mom continued chopping walnuts. The scent of bananas was heavy in the air, telling me she was making my favorite muffins. For a second, I thought my mom wasn't going to answer. "I think Nana is struggling with the stage she's at in life. It's not easy for those her age to accept what they are facing and they get angry. Lord knows I get upset when I think of how much of my life is already behind me."

My heart skipped a painful beat and I had to take a few deep breaths to keep my voice from breaking. When the pain in my throat intensified, I closed my mouth and poured myself a cup of coffee and grabbed a muffin from the cooling rack next to the fridge. They were indeed banana nut.

Unfortunately, the small bite I popped in my mouth tasted like cardboard and I had to choke it down. "Nana's young at heart, mom. She doesn't have anything to accept or be upset about."

My mom set down the knife and turned to me. There were tears brimming in her eyes. "Nana's ninety years old, sweetheart. She's nearing the end of her life and she knows it. Loving the new life that we've all been given makes it that much harder for her to come to terms with what is just around the corner for her. Frankly, it's difficult for me, too."

A sob caught me off guard and I had to set my mug down before I dropped it. I felt eyes on me and knew the others were now listening to our conversation. "The fact that she can move around better than ever tells me she's got more time than you think." I had no idea why I insisted on living in denial. I'd thought the same things many times since I moved home.

My mom sighed. "Honey, she's not eating much. That's one of the first signs when the elderly pass on. You know this, you've seen it happen when you worked at the hospital."

A sword cleaved my shattered heart into smaller bits that felt like they'd never heal. "Mom." The word came out as a plea and a

reprimand. "I can't lose Nana and Tarja, mom. It's too much."

My mom embraced me and kissed the top of my head. "We need to focus on enjoying her and loving her during the time we have left. It helps no one to wallow and let the depression take over. It only robs you of what little you have left. And Tarja is still alive. Her soul was wounded. That takes time to repair. There isn't an app for that, honey. No instant answer this time."

"You're right." I disentangled myself from her arms and wiped the few tears that rolled down my cheeks. "It's difficult to remember when I can't feel her. She's there in my mind, but it's like a tarnished chain on the verge of breaking to pieces."

Layla walked in the back door and stopped on the threshold. "Please tell me she didn't die."

I picked up my mug and just held it, allowing the warmth from the cup to seep into me. "No, Tarja is the same as she was last night. Alive, but unresponsive."

"Phew. There is so much tension in the room I was worried we'd lost her. Is there anything I can help with?" Layla continued to the coffee pot. "Oh, muffins. You are a true kitchen witch, Mollie. I am addicted to these things."

I smiled for the first time since the ordeal with Tarja. Layla was the best, knowing I needed to get out of my head to move forward. "We need to research phantasms in the library and see if we can locate any information on Tarja's condition. It's going to be all hands-on deck for this one. She is counting on me and I don't have time to dawdle."

Nana entered the kitchen. "What are we doing now?" The tone of her voice was sharp, yet she was here offering to help me.

I approached her and, as I was holding my coffee and didn't want to spill it, hugged her with one arm, grateful for her help. I was officially certifiable. My reasoning made no sense, but I didn't have time to think it through. Tarja's life was on the line.

"We are going into the library and searching for information on phantasms, Nana." I smiled at her and let her go.

She looked at me. Or rather, through me and blinked several times. "Why?"

My mom set aside her ingredients and approached Nana. "Because we need to help Tarja, mom. You know how seriously she was injured last night. She is alive right now and we need to make sure she stays that way. C'mon let's go get started."

Nana turned and I noticed the green Chanel purse hanging from Nana's shoulder. That woman really liked the bag. It was more likely that she was excited about having an authentic designer tote for the first time in her life. We didn't have the kind of money to afford such luxuries before now. It didn't matter that she bought it at an antique store.

Nina and Layla followed my mom, Nana and I were right behind them. The Harry Potter theme song started from the living room and I dashed inside to see who was calling me. I snatched it off an end table, my heart racing when I saw Luci's name.

"Please tell me you found some useful information," I said the second her black hair and green eyes appeared on screen.

Luciana was the Pleiades in Europe, she was becoming a wonderful ally. Tarja had the hots for her familiar Zeph, and I suspected he felt the same way. The two of them had been with us in Stuleros when Tarja had been injured.

"Ciao, Phoebe. I wish I had better news. My search has come up empty but we aren't giving up. We will continue. How is Tarja?" I flipped the camera so they could see Tarja, I gently stroked her head, hoping for some reaction, however small Tears welled up again. I had to walk away. If I started crying now, I wouldn't get any research done.

I switched the screen back and cleared my throat. "She's the same as last night. I barely feel my connection to her. I'm headed to my library as we speak to delve into my own books. How's Zeph? He doesn't look so good."

Luci sat next to Zeph and ran her hand over his head. "He's been better. Tarja's condition is affecting him greatly. His mood is down and he hasn't eaten today."

"I know how he feels. Do you have any advice for me on where to start this search?" Before this happened, we tried to look for phantasms, so I knew that term would likely get me nowhere. I was too new to the magical world to know enough, and it had never

frustrated me more than it did at that moment with Tarja's life depending on me.

Luci picked up a tablet from the table in front of her and tapped on the screen. "I've looked through several Fae creatures and I started on demons before I stopped for the night. I was planning on hitting wraiths next."

I nodded my head and entered the one room in the house that was an oasis to me. Reading had always been my escape. I hadn't had nearly enough time for it over the past decade. I silently made a promise to myself that when things settled down, I would curl up with a good book at least once a week. Of course, it seemed unlikely things would slow down anytime soon.

I inhaled deeply, loving the smell of old books. It was such a unique scent that never failed to fill me with wonder and the desire for adventure. My life now had no shortages of adventure, that was for sure. I had more than I ever bargained for and I loved it most days. Not so much right now. I just wanted Tarja to get better and my Nana to go back to her sarcastic, sassy self.

The main room had three stories of shelves with a wooden ladder to access the higher books. Off to the left there were stacks of books like you would find in a library. When I first started working for Hattie, she had kept the double doors to that area closed and locked. Now, I understood why.

That was where the books on the supernaturals were located. There were some on the top level of the main room, as well. Voices in the other area told me my mom, Nana, Layla and Nina were in the stacks.

I approached the ladder, pulled it to the far right and climbed to the second level. The leather-bound tomes were old and some tattered. I recognized some of the classics and decided to push myself around the room a little at a time as I scanned that level for books that might be useful.

When that search came up empty, I climbed to the top level and searched from left to right this time. I was in the middle of the room when I spotted a promising book. I crossed my fingers as I grabbed the book titled, *Daimons*.



I didn't know ancient Greek like I did Latin, so I was going on the assumption the tome was about demons. Rather than descend, I stood there and paged through the thing with one arm wrapped around one of the ladder's supports.

It might contain something that could help. However, I would need Aidoneus. I couldn't read Greek and it appeared that was the language the thing was written in. I was halfway to the ground when I smelled the smoke.

My heart leaped into my throat and I hurried to reach the bottom. "Mom, Nina! Where are you guys?"

Layla came running out with Nina and my mom in front of her. "There's a fire in the stacks. Get them out of here."

My mom had wide eyes and was shaking her head like her life depended on it. "I'm not leaving Nana. We have to get to her. She can't move as fast as the rest of us." I wasn't so sure about that after what I had seen earlier, but I wasn't going to argue that fact.

I pushed my mom toward the door, handing Nina the book I was still holding. "Get out of here, now. I'll get Nana."

Layla grabbed my shoulders as the room filled with thick, dark grey smoke. There was no mistaking the smell of burning paper. "Get the hell out of here, Phoebe. I will get your Nana. I need you guys out of here, now."

"Alright, but if you aren't out in five minutes, I'm coming in to get you both." I went with Nina when she dragged me out the doors. I stopped with them in the hall, unable to go further.

"We need to find a way to put the fire out," my mom shouted.

The roar of a fire could now be heard where we stood in the hallway and the smoke was billowing out to choke us there. I grabbed my daughter when she moved to open a window. "I've got it. Stay with your Gammy."

She nodded and huddled close to my mom while I unlocked the pane and lifted it up. The smoke was sucked outside and I worried I was feeding the fire.

I stood outside the room between my mom and Nina with my gut in a knot. My Nana's life was on the line. It seemed like fate was determined to teach me she would take my grandmother whether I liked it or not.

I wanted to rant and rail and scream at the unfairness of it all when I was struck with the realization that I was going to lose hundreds of years of magical knowledge. Information that was more than likely irreplaceable.

## CHAPTER 3



I lifted my arm to cover my mouth as the smoke started making me cough. “I have to go back in there. Something is wrong.” Thousands of years of magical knowledge was going up in flames.

“No, mom! You can’t. Layla said to stay here.” Nina looked like she was on the verge of tears, but I didn’t have time to consider the ramifications.

“What the heck is going on in here?” Stella’s voice made me jump.

My breath caught in my throat. “You can’t be here. There’s a fire in the library and Layla went inside to get Nana. Get them out of here.” I gestured to my mom and Nina.

Stella stared wide-eyed into the room filling with smoke. “I can help you.”

Aidoneus joined us next. “Mythia said there’s a fire. What happened?” He never stopped walking toward the room.

I put up a hand, stopping him. “Get my mom and Nina out of here. Stella and I are going to try and contain the fire and save the books.”

Aidon’s eyes were conflicted but he eventually nodded and grabbed Nina’s arm. “You heard your mom. Let’s get you two to safety, so I can return and help her.”

Confident he would lead them out of harm’s way, I hurried into the library with Stella at my side. “The fire is in the stacks. Let’s create a vacuum that sucks the flames inside where they can’t burn anything else.”

“And keeps them there,” Stella added.

“Thanks.” If she hadn’t reminded me to add that detail, the fire would have escaped. Formulating an image of what I wanted was not easy. In the end I went with a giant-sized vacuum cleaner.

Stella grabbed my hand. “This one is too advanced for the Latin you taught me. What should I say?”

“*Et continere nutrientibus.*” As soon as I said the words, my spell activated. Stella repeated the enchantment.

Energy crackled in the air and Layla came running from the stacks holding Nana in her arms. Nana was hitting her on the shoulder telling the shifter to put her down. A few choice curse words left Nana’s mouth making me wince. I had never heard Nana talk that way to anyone.

I couldn’t focus on the two of them with my watery eyes, and the acrid smell of the smoke threatening to knock me over. There was something about the smoke that made it harsher than it should be but I couldn’t put my finger on why. The orange flames licked at the ceiling, soaring toward Stella and I. I didn’t need to see it when I felt the heat of it.

Instinct made us both duck. “What do we do now?” Stella was on all fours in her navy-blue skirt and blazer, blinking rapidly as tears streamed down her cheeks.

My best friend always dresses in business attire. I used to think it was because she was a real estate agent. Now, I knew she preferred to be dressed up where I felt best in sweats and t-shirts.

I lifted the neck of my sweatshirt, swiped my eyes, then settled it over my nose to block as much of the smoke as possible. I coughed so much I swore I hacked up a lung. “We need to put the flames out and clear the smoke. I’m hoping we can salvage some of the books.”

Heat pulsed at the edges of my spell. There was more to the fire than met the eye. I could clearly sense the power behind the fire. My mind raced as I scanned the area. I had enhanced the protections around my property and strengthened them to keep nearly everyone from reaching us in the house.

After I was cursed right before Christmas by an individual asking for help, I had no choice but to increase the spells. It had taken some time to create the right ones. It had been Tarja that had helped me

craft the incantations just right. I couldn't block everyone seeking help.

Assisting paranormals in need was what I did now. I had taken over from Hattie and hung my private detective shingle out, metaphorically speaking. It was the part of my new life I enjoyed most. I didn't care for running the multi-billion-dollar business I had inherited, so I left that to Lilith.

Only someone that sought help for themselves or others could get through. I'd banned any object carrying a curse or weapon. And I'd barred a person not acting under their own volition. I had also asked the pixies, gnomes and brownies that lived on my property to keep watch. To my surprise, they'd happily agreed because it gave them a purpose.

"It's pushing back!" Stella shouted as she got to her knees and thrust her hands out in front of her body.

I shook my head, scolding myself for getting lost in thought and couldn't stop coughing right away. There was no way someone could have gotten into the library to set a fire. My spell would have repelled them.

"Wrap a fire blanket around the books in case the flames escape again," I shouted to Stella.

Aidoneus rushed into the room and stopped next to us. I couldn't see him clearly with my eyes burning like they did, but I knew him better than I knew myself. I would always recognize him, even if I lost my vision.

"I can clear the smoke if you keep the flames locked down." His willingness to help and do what I asked was only one reason I loved him. The fact that he was a sexy god was another.

"That would help." I had to shout over the roar of the fire. It might be contained but it was loud and pissed. There was definitely something supernatural about the fire.

Aidoneus released his black wings then turned to face the window I'd opened earlier. He flapped them several times, creating a strong wind that knocked me forward. I caught myself with my hands.

He sent the smoke out the window, making it easier to breathe. My lungs still burned but my eyes were getting better by the second.

I wanted to scream when I saw the scorch marks on the ceiling of the side room.

Coughing, I kept the containment spell in the corner of my mind and imagined wrapping each book in a fireproof blanket. "*Flamma repugnant.*"

The fire escaped when I split my energy. There was a split second when Aidon's wings sent the flames to the stained-glass window above. He snapped the massive appendages to his sides and the wind stopped.

"I can't put out the flames. They're magical," Aidoneus called out.

"I know. Stay focused on the containment, Stella." I coaxed the fire back inside the bubble Stella and I created and moved it to the middle of the library where the ceiling was three-stories high.

My magic sent feelers out around the flames. Surprisingly, it burned as if my fingers were brushing over them. I lifted a hand and looked at unblemished skin. It was red but not blistered.

Ignoring the discomfort, I continued, searching for a weakness. The magic wasn't familiar. There was anger buried in the spell. So much rage it made me shudder. Perhaps I could counter it with joy.

"*Graulatio.*" I paused to let the joy take effect before I finished. "*Deflammo.*" A loud screech pierced my eardrums. My hands flew up to cover the sides of my head. I kept my intent clear. I bathed the anger in happiness blanketing the flames.

I got dizzy, wavering on my knees. Stella caught my shoulder, making me look over. Aidon's grip was keeping the two of us upright. It seemed we were both being zapped of stamina.

I scrubbed a hand over my face feeling like I was coated in a layer of ash. Leaning back into Aidoneus, I poured more effort into banishing the flames. A coughing fit overtook me. In no time my chest and stomach hurt from so much effort to expel the smoke.

I put as much energy into the spell as possible while keeping the flames contained. It dawned on me that Stella wasn't coughing like I was. "Why aren't you hacking like me?"

Stella had a hold of Aidoneus's arm, she ran her own arm across her forehead. There was soot streaked all over her face, making her look even more tired than I knew she must be. "I magically made a breathing apparatus like firefighters use."

I rolled my eyes. Of course, she did. I'd been focused on the negative energy while she was thinking about breathing. "Next time share that with me."

She chuckled and nodded. "Let's kick this fire's ass."

Having my focus split between my connection with Tarja, keeping the fire from causing more damage, putting it out, and bathing the flames in joy took a crap-ton of energy. My head buzzed like a million bees were swarming around inside it. It reminded me of the noise when the Yearsley sisters were surrounded by them on their plantation in New Orleans. Only this was a thousand times hotter.

It took several more minutes before Stella and I managed to put the flames out. I sagged forward when we were done and braced myself with my hands on my knees. I stood up as I caught my breath.

Well, I tried to get to my feet. Without Aidoneus there to pick me up, I would have fallen. Stella, too. She immediately grabbed my arm and we leaned into each other as we looked around.

My heart ached when I saw the soot covering every surface. Tears filled my burning eyes when they landed on the charred doorway between the two sections. Aside from the smoke damage, the front part was in one piece. The same couldn't be said for the connected room.

Nina, my mom and Layla came rushing inside the library. Nina wrapped her arms around my waist. "Are you okay, mom?"

I ran my free hand over my daughter's back, trying to soothe her. I imagined the incident had terrified her. My life had been dangerous enough lately. I didn't need random fires in our home adding to the situation.

"I'm alright, sweetie. We managed to get the fire contained until we could put it out." I let her go. "I need to see the damage."

"You just spent so much magic trying to put that out. I could feel how much you and Stella were pushing out there. You stay here and rest. I'll go check it out." Nina brushed my cheek before she headed off into the stacks.

I rubbed my chest and took another minute to catch my breath. My lungs burned, as did my nostrils from all the char surrounding us.

My mom handed me a glass of water. “You should have yourself checked at the hospital. You could have smoke damage.”

I took a deep breath and started coughing. After a quick assessment of my throat and lungs, I quickly discovered I had inhaled more soot than I cared to think about. My mom was right, that would need to be treated. If I ignored it the particles could cause heart attacks, bronchitis, strokes, and death.

I needed to get those particles out so I could assess the damage to myself and whether I needed to go to the hospital. I thought about how I wanted to push the particles from my chest. “*Expellere fuligo.*”

My mom caught my arm when I started falling forward. “We’re going to the hospital.”

I couldn’t respond because I was hacking up a lung. The spasms wouldn’t stop. I couldn’t breathe and I was even more dizzy. I coughed uncontrollably until I could feel something traveling from my chest and up my airway.

I panicked and grappled for my mother’s hand with Aidon’s on my other side. My back bowed forward from the force of my hacking. I looked up at them both, doing a great impression of a fish out of water.

Before I knew it, there was a foul taste at the back of my throat, kicking in my gag reflex. The next spasm of my diaphragm brought up a thick black ball of mucus combined with the soot and ash I had inhaled and sent it flying from my mouth. Several more seconds of spitting crap out and the spasms stopped.

“I don’t need to go to the hospital anymore.” I chuckled and rubbed my sore sternum.

My mom ran a hand over my back. “Are you sure?”

I nodded. “I cast a spell to get the soot particles out of my chest, so there’s nothing poisoning me now. Let’s go see what happened.”

We headed to the double doors. There was little left of them but burnt bits hanging on the hinges. I scanned the room as I went. I watched Nana enter the library with a blank expression. She was definitely off.

We paused in the doorway just as Nina exited the right side of the room. There was ash covering every surface. The walls, shelves, and books were barely discernible beneath the stuff.



“We lost three shelves entirely. I moved everything that survived off the top two levels of that bookcase in case it collapsed. There are several other sections with burned edges, but nothing else was taken entirely,” Nina explained.

My mom covered her gaping mouth with one hand. “It looks like the fire was trying to spread too thin and consume everything at once.”

I jumped, and Aidon snarled when Nana started cackling. My jaw dropped to my chest and what remained of my heart broke. How could she be laughing at this loss? “Nana! This isn’t funny in the least.”

“Mother, snap out of it. Whatever you’re going through right now, you need to pull it together.” I hadn’t heard that tone of voice from my mom since I snuck out of the house in the tenth grade to meet Kenny at the park.

Nana shrugged. “This isn’t my problem.” With that, she walked away. Only this time, her movements were jerky and unsteady.

I couldn’t believe Nana’s behavior. It terrified me even more than before. In my experience, many of the elderly underwent significant personality changes later in life. Most often it was because of dementia or even Alzheimer’s. Both conditions were known to make the person meaner.

I just never thought it would happen to *my* Nana. She might have been sarcastic, but she was loving and one of the best people I’d ever known. Now, it was difficult to be in the room with her and that broke my heart even more than it already was.

Major life adjustments didn’t give anyone permission to act like this. It was just plain rude. I shook my head from side to side. “You can be selfish on your own time, Nana. I have a library to recover.”

Aidoneus walked past me and disappeared into the bookshelves. I brushed the sleeves of my sweatshirt and left Nana behind. “Show me the damaged shelves.”

Nina nodded and pointed to the area in front of us as we turned from the main path. “This other side of the bookcase got the worst of it.”

“Did you guys notice anything out of the ordinary when you were looking through here? The fire was magical in nature. Thankfully, it

wasn't witch fire or we wouldn't have been able to put it out." I plucked a book from the shelf on the good side of the bookcase. Or I tried to.

The volume didn't move. It had been melted to the shelf. The spine was charred, making it unreadable. I tried to lift several more. A couple refused to move while the others were fine.

"I didn't see anything. But there was a crackle in the air right before the fire started. That's when Gammy grabbed me right away and dragged me out of the room,"

Leaving those behind, I rounded the corner and coughed at the acrid stench filling the space. This was definitely where the fire started. "Who was working here?"

Nina shrugged her shoulders. "I wasn't paying attention."

Layla came down the aisle and joined us. "I have no idea who was here. But if you're thinking someone got inside, I can guarantee there were no foreign scents in the room."

I gestured to the scratches on Layla's face. I hadn't noticed them before. "What the hell happened to your face?"

Layla grimaced. "It was Nana. She didn't like me picking her up. I had no choice though. She wasn't leaving."

A gasp made me whirl around. Stella and my mom were standing there together. "My mother did that to you? I have no idea what has gotten into her. This is so unlike her."

"Don't worry about it. I could tell that she didn't understand what was happening. It seemed to me like she was disoriented," Layla explained. "Right now though, we need to focus on what happened here and what our next steps are."

Nina nodded her head. "Layla's right, mom. Tarja needs us. I want to try and repair the damaged books in case they have information that can help us. I doubt we can recreate what the fire turned to ash, but we can repair the others."

I narrowed my eyes at my daughter. "How are you going to do that? These were burned beyond recognition."

Nina had been reluctant to use much of her magic yet, so I couldn't imagine she wanted to use it on the books. Although that was the only way we had any shot at recovering them.

Nina shrugged her shoulders and chewed on her lower lip. "I was planning on using spells on them. I figured it would be good practice while also helping Tarja."

Wrapping my arms around Nina. "I think that's a great idea. I won't interfere at all. But first, we need to eat something and get some rest. Everyone needs to be at the top of their game when we start work." I let her go and headed for the door.

My body felt like it weighed an extra hundred pounds. It was a challenge to lift one foot after the other. Fatigue tried to drag me under when Aidoneus met us on our way out. He wrapped his arm around me and held me close.

Ahead of us, Stella joined my mom and Nina. Nana was standing in the library looking around and left with them. I wanted to talk to her myself, to evaluate her, to see if she needed a neurological exam.

I stopped Aidon in the hall. "I have a favor to ask."

He bent and brushed his lips across mine. The gentle gesture made my heart race. I wished we could get lost in each other for hours on end. And I wish I could take a long nap. Both were equally appealing at the moment.

He cupped my cheek and ran a thumb across my jawline. "What can I do?"

"I'm hoping you will visit your father's library and do some research on phantasms and familiars. Tarja needs my help but I can't do any more research until I fix the mess here. I know it's a lot to ask, but I'm desperate."

He gave me his panty-melting smile. "I am more than happy to help. My father would love a visit from me. He might even have information that will help. I have to move some agents around before I leave. Let's get you some food before we do anything else."

I chuckled and lifted onto my toes to press my lips against his. "I love you, Yahweh."

He groaned into my mouth, making my body turn into a puddle as he kissed me passionately. "I love you too, Queenie. We will get through this like we have everything else."

I smiled and threaded my arm through his and continued to the kitchen. I could hear Mythia fussing over the others as Tsekani joined

them. Something happened in the library beyond a simple fire and my mind was too fuzzy to filter through it all.

Aidoneus was right. I would get to the bottom of this and make whoever it was pay for destroying so much valuable knowledge. As soon as I rested and rejuvenated myself.

## CHAPTER 4



"This is delicious, Thia. Better than the gumbo we got in NOLA," Stella said around a mouthful of the spicy seafood soup.

Selene snorted. "Most of that food looked and smelled like it came from the swamp."

I laughed at the ghoul. "You have no appreciation for the finer foods in life."

Selene held up a rib. "Yes, I do. Aside from a New York strip, there isn't much better out there."

Nina cocked her head to the side as she considered Selene. "Did you always like meat this much? Or did becoming a ghoul change your tastes?"

I'd never asked Selene that question before. It had never even entered my mind. Now that Nina asked her, I found myself leaning forward eager to hear what she would say. It seemed like her new status had affected her. She never ate anything except meat.

Selene pursed her lips as she set her rib down. "Honestly, I have always loved a juicy steak and a rack of ribs. However, I used to love seafood and veggies, as well. It seems like becoming a ghoul has changed me because I have no craving for either now."

Stella waved her spoon at the ghoul. "Yeah, but would you dislike fish and asparagus if you ate them? It might be that the cravings have won out, but you still like the taste of other foods."

Mythia hovered close to Selene, beaming at her. "I could make some mahi-mahi with a pineapple salsa for dinner, you can see if

you like it.”

The doorbell interrupted our conversation. My heart skipped a beat, the others stiffened while looking around at each other before turning their gazes on me. As I stood up Aidoneus went to join me. I waved him down.

“I don’t need a bodyguard. Sit and finish your meal.”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “Are you sure about that? Your last lost cause cursed you and someone just set fire to your library. I’m afraid to leave you alone anymore.”

I forced a laugh past a tight throat. He had a point there. It was awful timing to have someone visit so soon after the fiasco with the fire. The house reeked of charred wood and paper.

I shrugged my shoulders and called on my magic. It crackled along my arms rather than tingling. Because I was drained, I had to use more effort to call it up. “I’m not without powers, Yahweh. Just stay back. I don’t need you scaring the delivery man or a potential client.” I refused to think of them as lost causes. They were people that had fallen on hard times or were victims of others.

It was difficult to ignore the echo of more than one pair of footsteps behind me as I walked through the house and to the front. I opened the door, sure to be on the offensive.

My magic receded when I caught sight of the young woman on my porch. She was thin as a reed and shaking like a leaf. Her lips were raw and scabbed as if she had been chewing on them and there were dark circles under her eyes.

“Hello. How can I help you?” I smiled, hoping it would ease the woman. Her fear was an acrid cloud all around her. I wasn’t an Empath, as hard as she was projecting her emotions, I didn’t need to be.

“Are you the Pleiades?” The young woman’s dark brown skin had a pale cast to it.

I cocked one eyebrow and crossed my arms over my chest. That was often a question of clients, but usually not the first. “Who are you?”

She took a deep breath and clasped her hands together. She could have given a martini a good shake at the moment. “I’m Heidi Bell and I need your help. At least I think it’s you. Word is that this is

the house where the Pleiades witch lives and she helps paranormals in need. Only I was told she was older, so I could be in the wrong place.”

I held up a hand. She was obviously distraught. “I am the Pleiades. I do help people. What is it you need assistance with?”

Heidi’s shoulders drooped as she looked around my yard before settling back on me. I took the time to send out feelers, looking for anything nefarious that might be on her person. I was never going to be naïve enough to trust a frightened individual again. I learned that lesson the hard way.

Shit in the magical world did not work like it did in the human one. My new world was violent and brutal. Yet wondrous and exciting at the same time. Never before had I harmed another living soul. Since becoming the Pleiades, I could no longer say that.

It would’ve made me physically ill to contemplate killing a Tainted witch or vampire or demon before. Now, my first thought is how can I kill them before they get me? It didn’t sit well with me, but my will to live won out over my emotions.

It still wrecked me to take a life. Even if they intended to harm me. If I was the one to cause their death, it ate me up at night. I was still coming to terms with it and trying to figure out a way to live with myself. That was the only reason I had not yet confronted Marius for the attack he set up on me when I landed in New Orleans.

“I need you to exorcize a poltergeist that’s taken up residence in my house. I can’t sleep. I can’t eat. I can’t think straight. I need it gone,” Heidi said, interrupting my wayward thoughts.

That was not what I was expecting when I saw her standing on my porch. “Why don’t you come inside and tell me what’s going on.”

I stepped aside and gestured for her to enter before me. She froze as she passed me and her eyes went wide while she started shaking even more. I turned to see what had frightened her.

Everyone in the house was lingering in the entryway. Aidoneus was tall and imposing. Tsekani and Layla were just as menacing. Even Mythia and Selene seemed upset while my mom and Nina were curious onlookers.

I opened my mouth to reassure her and realized she wasn’t focused on any of them. Her brown eyes were locked on Evanora,

my resident ghost. “Nora won’t hurt you. She’s a member of this family and a friendly ghost.” I nearly burst out laughing when an image of Casper popped into my head.

Stella stepped forward. She was disheveled and filthy but all smiles. “I know how frightening poltergeists can be. I’m Stella and I work with Phoebe. You’re safe here. I promise.”

Heidi allowed Stella to guide her inside the room. “Is something on fire?”

Stella shook her head and chuckled. “Nah. Teenagers practicing magic in the house. We really should make a caution sign to hang on the door. You know how it is.”

Heidi swallowed and moved even closer to Stella. “No. I don’t know anything about witches. I’m an elf.” She tucked her curly brown hair behind an ear and I saw the pointed tips.

“No one in this house will harm you unless you do something to endanger one of us,” Stella promised her.

The elf had yet to take her eyes off the ghost. “You shouldn’t let your family stay here as spirits. They’ll go bad eventually.”

I cocked my head as we led her through the house towards the living room. I considered going into the office but discarded the idea. None of my family would leave my side, the kitchen seemed too informal, the living room gave us enough space.

I hurried and scooped Tarja into my arms when we entered, then took a seat in the recliner where I had placed her earlier. I didn’t want Heidi to become even more frightened by Tarja’s unconscious state. “What do you mean she will go bad?”

Heidi stood while everyone else took a seat. Stella patted the sofa next to her and the elf sat down. “The poltergeist in my house built the structure long ago and remained after she died. At first, we lived in harmony but over time she has become more and more agitated. And,” she paused, chewing on her lower lip until the scabs cracked and bled, “violent.”

That got my attention. Thankfully, I was petting Tarja’s back and I focused on the feel of her soft fur beneath my fingertips. It would only make matters worse if I showed my surprise and concern. I needed her to remain calm and have faith in us.



Aidoneus saved me when he leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. “How violent? What has been happening?”

Heidi looked from Stella to him and back again. Stella gave her an encouraging nod. The elf faced Aidon. “Initially, she would move my purse or jacket. It progressed to her moving my keys. And lately when my friends come to visit, she has thrown pens at them. She scratched my girlfriend. Well, we think she did.”

Stella patted Heidi’s hand. “You’re not sure she scratched your girlfriend? What exactly happened? From what I read it is difficult for a ghost to cause physical injury directly to a person. They interact with the world by making small objects move.”

Tears filled Heidi’s eyes. “We were sleeping in my bed and Shauna woke me up when she cried out. We noticed the poltergeist hovering over my bed and Shauna was clutching an arm with four slices across it.”

That was more than slightly terrifying. “So, she’s gotten more powerful over the years you’ve lived there,” I clarified.

Heidi nodded and some of the sadness that had darkened her gaze lifted. “Yes, she has. Ghosts gain power the longer they are on this plane of existence. At least, that’s what I’ve been told.”

Evanora floated through the wall and stopped several feet away from Heidi. “You’re right about ghosts gaining in power the longer they linger on Earth. However, I have never become violent or had the urge to hurt anyone and I have been in this house for over two hundred years. Hattie, the witch before Phoebe made many changes and updates to the residence that zapped my energy. It got to the point I thought I would finally move on. Yet, I never lashed out at her for my discomfort.”

That was news to me. “Changes to the structure impacted you, Nora?”

She nodded her head and drifted closer to me. Nana walked into the room then and scowled before walking out. I’d have to deal with her sooner rather than later. “Yes. This house anchors me here in this world.”

“What makes a ghost become a poltergeist?” Stella asked the question on everyone’s mind.

Nora's head shook from side to side, nearly dislodging her white bonnet. "I have no idea. The other ghosts have mentioned being frightened of certain spirits and warn others to stay away from specific locations without giving more details."

Heidi's head dropped into her hands. "Please, you have to help me. I don't want to lose Shauna. She's my everything and I love her."

My heart went out to the elf. It was clear she was at her wits end. "I'll help you. But I need to shower and clean up before I stop by and see what I can do. If you write down your address, Stella and I will stop by later."

Stella wrapped one arm around the young elf. "That's right. We won't be long. We've dealt with angry spirits before. If this goes like the last encounter did, we will have you sleeping peacefully in no time."

I winced when she promised Heidi we would fix it fast. Stella should know better than to say anything of the sort. The magical world was unpredictable. Besides, I had a feeling this one wasn't going to be so straightforward.

Stella and I stood up after my mom handed the elf a piece of paper so she could scribble her address down. I walked Heidi to the door with a promise to stop by soon. I returned to the living room and set Tarja back in her chair, wishing she was awake to advise me in this situation. She was a fountain of knowledge and might have the perfect solution.

The others had left the room and from the sounds of it relocated to the kitchen to finish eating. I grabbed my phone on the way to the table. "I'm going to call Lilith and ask her if she knows anything about poltergeists."

Stella stood up from where she was bent in front of the wine fridge. "That's a good idea. I'm going to have a glass of wine and clean up, as well. Just as well you suggested I keep clothes here."

I chuckled and held out my empty water glass, wanting some of the chardonnay. "I'm going to have to build you a closet and fill it at the rate your clothes get ruined around me."

Stella poured some into my glass, grinning at me. "That's the best idea I've heard all year. That means we get to go shopping."

“Hello, Phoebe.” Lilith’s crisp greeting wasn’t a sign of how much she disliked me. It was her manner and how she addresses everyone. When I met the witch, it had strained our relationship as I had taken her terseness personally. Now I knew better and ignored the tone.

“Lilith. How’s my second favorite witch?”

A heavy sigh echoed through the tiny speaker. “What do you want, Phoebe?”

I cringed. Did I only call her when I needed something? The answer was yes. In my defense, life kept throwing shit my way that I knew nothing about. “An elf stopped by my house and asked for assistance with a poltergeist. I thought it would be wise to ask you what you know about them before heading into the lion’s den, so to speak.”

“Why aren’t you asking Tarja? I’m sure she has more information than I do.”

Lilith’s question was genuine and normally, this would have been a question for my familiar, but she was still unconscious. I couldn’t tell Lilith that, though. I didn’t want anyone knowing how vulnerable Tarja was at the moment.

“I thought I would show you my trust by coming to you first. We work closely together on so much. Besides, I’ve already told you, I want your guidance with things in this coven. That starts with helping educate me. I hope you don’t mind.” None of that was a lie. It was merely a diversion from her inquiry.

Lilith cleared her throat. I imagined her straightening her suit jacket and looking down her nose at me. “It’s good to see you making an effort with the coven. We have needed a leader to step up and take an active role. As far as poltergeists go, they are aggressive spirits with an axe to grind. Typically, they have claimed ownership of a residence and refuse to share it with anyone else.”

I nearly choked on my wine. Stella might have been right after all. “They’re like those sisters we encountered in the house a few months back, then. Perhaps we can talk this one down from the ledge, as well.”

“Don’t forget, ghosts range from nice to evil. It’s the far right of the spectrum that are poltergeists. That being said, the ones that fall

to that extreme can be tricky to expel or get to cooperate. When individuals leave because the living conditions become intolerable, they often harm the new owners.”

“They can even keep them prisoner and make them their plaything. In ghost lore, a poltergeist is a type of ghost or spirit that is responsible for physical disturbances, such as loud noises and objects being moved or destroyed. They are capable of pinching, biting, hitting, and tripping people.” Lilith’s words sat like a rock in my gut.

“How do we deal with them, then? It sounds impossible, and I cannot go back to Heidi and tell her no before we even start.” I hadn’t been the greatest witch since getting magic, but I persisted, continuing to improve, which was far more important to me.

There was a guy’s voice on Lilith’s end making me wonder what she was doing. I had never seen her with a man and had a hard time imagining her with a boyfriend. “There isn’t any spell to force them to move on if that’s what you’re looking for. Some spells have an effect on the spirits and others don’t.”

I looked at Stella and shook my head. “I had a feeling we got lucky last time. The sisters wanted to share their space with the right people.”

“If those sisters didn’t want anyone in their space, they had gained enough power to keep them out. Only powerful, older spirits can become a poltergeist. And, before you ask, there is no way to know why one turns and another doesn’t. Just like with Tainted witches.”

I sighed and nodded my head even though she couldn’t see me. “Understood. Thank you, Lilith. You’ve been very helpful. I’ll see you this week for our meeting. Call me if you need anything before then.”

“I will. Have a nice evening, Phoebe.” That was the nicest thing Lilith had ever said to me.

“Thanks, you too.” I hung up and turned to face the room.

“That didn’t sound good,” Aidon observed.

I relayed the information Lilith gave me about poltergeists. “We are going to have to play this one by ear when we get there.”

Aidoneus’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t like the idea of you going to face a being capable of attacking you. I’m going with you.”

I put my hand on his chest and was sidetracked for a second by the ripple of his muscles beneath my palm. Refocusing, I smiled at him. "I appreciate the gesture and understand your concern. I've been the recipient of one too many head injuries lately. However, Lilith said poltergeists can pinch, bite, hit, and trip people. I think Stella and I can handle that."

"She also said they can hold you captive," Nina added.

I shot my daughter my meanest 'mom' look, and turned back to Aidon. "I'm not the owner, so she will have no bone to pick with me. I'm just going this first time to get the lay of the land. Nothing more."

Aidoneus pulled me into his chest and wrapped his big arms around me. "You're going to be the death of me, Queenie."

I looked up at him and wanted to erase the fine line between his eyebrows. "You love how independent I am and you know it."

"It is one of the sexiest things about you when you aren't walking right into danger. I will make you a compromise. If you don't call me or return within ten minutes, I am going to pay this spirit a visit and make her wish she never stuck around."

Stella snorted. "If you can do that, why don't you head over there right now and we will finish this bottle of wine?"

I extricated myself from Aidon's embrace and laughed at my friend. "We can't let him have all the fun."

As tempting as it would be to allow Aidoneus to solve all my problems, I believed in standing on my own two feet. Besides, after Miles, I refused to make myself that vulnerable ever again. I needed to know I could take care of matters without a guy backing me up. It was vital for my mental health.

## CHAPTER 5



I parked my SUV on the opposite side of the street from Heidi's house and looked at it through the passenger side window. "It looks like a normal house. Nothing like the one we encountered before. Perhaps this will be easy."

Stella nodded her head slowly. "There is nothing foreboding about the place at all."

I knew her well enough to know something was off. I felt it, but wanted to make sure she was experiencing the same thing. "But you sense something. What is it?"

Stella had been wondering what her special gifts were ever since I accidentally made her a witch when I had been forced to end Lexie. I wasn't certain she had anything extraordinary. Most witches didn't, but she wanted to be unique and I hoped for her sake her magic reflected the distinctive and lovable qualities she had inside.

"I can't explain it other than to say there's a dark aura around this place." Stella practically had her face pressed against the window and her body was rigid. I sensed something was off while she took it a step further.

One of the first things I'd discovered was that most witches had extra talents along the lines of empathy or simple telekinesis, and then there were the rarer kitchen witches. Others could heal injuries and illness. I, on the other hand, was far more powerful than the rest and had abilities in most areas. Unfortunately, none of my magic stood out above the others. I had nothing extraordinary about me aside from the amount of power I had.

“Should we go home and regroup? Look for an offensive spell to put the poltergeist on edge?” I wasn’t so sure that would be fruitful given what Lilith had said. The one thing I’d learned over the past nine months was to listen to my gut, and Stella’s since she was usually with me.

Stella turned to me, shrugging her shoulders. “We might as well go inside. I might be wrong about this and be letting my previous experience get the best of me.”

I shook my head. “Don’t you dare discount your instincts. I really think auras might be your thing.”

Stella pursed her lips like she’d eaten a lemon. “I was hoping for something cool, like telekinesis or psychometry. If it is auras, I will embrace it fully because I’ve learned you have to appreciate what you are given. It’s what you’ve got and no amount of wishing will make it different. You know we’re too old to be miserable wishing for something we don’t have and likely never will.”

I held my hand up and she slapped it. “True that. I like how you think, Stells. That attitude would have come in handy when I was twenty and marrying a jackass. I was wishing for more in life and ended up falling for his deceptively sexy smile.”

Stella chuckled. “I’d wish for a different life for you, but then we wouldn’t be here right now. I think you had to carry that dead weight around for two decades to prepare you to accept Hattie’s magic. You wouldn’t be the same person if you didn’t have to learn to out-manuever the narcissistic asshole. Becoming the Pleiades would have been overwhelming. I think you’d have given the power away at the first chance.”

I’d had similar thoughts over a dozen times, so I don’t know why hearing Stella confirm it affected me like it did. “I couldn’t agree more. He is also why I had enough courage to give Aidoneus a chance.” I opened my door and climbed from the vehicle.

“Without clawing my way back from the bottom, my stretch marks and saggy boobs would have stopped me from getting close to Aidon. I can’t think of anything worse.”

Stella laughed and bumped my shoulder when I met her on the sidewalk. “That god is scrumptious, I’ll give you that. What is our approach?”

I shrugged my shoulders. "I say we go through the front door. Besides, Todd is pretty good looking too. You couldn't have a more understanding and supportive husband going through all this."

Stella's face went dreamy. "He's been outstanding. Never once has he been upset when I've missed dinner or been gone overnight. And he has never looked at me like I'm a freak of nature now."

I scanned the street around us. "Did you ever tell him you were hurt in New Orleans?"

Guilt still wrecked me over the ambush on the tarmac. Thinking about how close the vampires came to killing Stella reminded me I needed to pay Marius a visit. That asshole needed to be put in his place. Part of me wanted to end his miserable undead life while another recoiled at the idea.

Stella gasped and lifted one eyebrow at me. "Are you kidding me? He wouldn't let me leave the house again. There are some things it's okay to keep from your spouse. I don't want him to worry when I'm gone and I don't want to change who I am now. I love my powers as well as our adventures. My life was a boring routine before. Trust me, Todd appreciates it, too. He is always saying that you moving home was the best thing for our marriage."

That was surprising. Most men wouldn't want their wives spending so much time away. "Really? I find that hard to believe. I know you're a good cook. At the least, I would have thought he missed you making dinner each night."

Stella waggled her eyebrows. "Let's just say our sex life has been taken up a dozen notches. It's even better than when we were in our twenties. Needless to say, he doesn't mind taking over cooking meals given the payoff."

I laughed; happy my best friend's life hadn't been another casualty in my magical wake. My kids promised me they weren't upset and their lives were none the worse for becoming magical, however, I still worried. My mom was happier than I ever remember seeing her. I thought my Nana was in a much better place. Now, it seemed I was wrong about that.

Needing to think about something else, I glanced in the windows of Heidi's neighbors as we approached. Families sat around the dinner table talking and eating. One couple sat on their couch in front



of the television not interacting in the least. In another there were young kids running around refusing to listen to their parents. There was nothing magical about any of the scenes. They were all so normal.

“Looks like she’s working on her computer,” I pointed out. “I don’t see any sign of the ghost. Do you?”

We’d paused at the end of the path leading up to her porch. Stella lifted to her toes and tilted her head this way and that. “There’s no sign of anyone or anything but her. I think we’re safe to approach.”

“Keep your senses open. We don’t want to be ambushed.” The tingle of magic rushed up my leg when I stepped onto Heidi’s walkway.

It was similar to what I felt when I visited the pixie mound. There was a wild edge to it that clashed against my magic. It had to be Fae magic. According to Fiona, the Fae wielded power over the elements unlike witches who could cast various spells and enchantments thanks to their tie to the earth.

“What’s that?” Stella shook my arm and jerked her chin to our right.

I followed her gaze to the side yard where there were countless shrubs and bushes and places to hide. I slowed my steps and turned away while trying to track the area from the corner of my eye.

A tiny figure scurried from a dogwood bush to a honeysuckle. I grabbed Stella’s arm, stopping her. “Is that what you saw?”

Stella nodded with a smile. “Yes, it is. It’s so cute.” She crouched down and cooed at the creature.

It had brown skin and was dressed in a tattered green shirt and blue pants. Its hair was wild. “I’m a brownie not an infant.” The voice was far deeper when it spoke and in complete opposition to its appearance.

Stella stood up with a frown. “I’m sorry. I’ve never met one of your kind before. I’m Stella and this is my friend, Phoebe. She’s the Pleiades.”

The brownie puffed his chest out. It nearly made me laugh. “I am Cordum, the baker.”

I inclined my head. "It's nice to meet you, Cordum. Do you live here?"

He shook his head and cast a glance at the house. "No, I live on the next street. I was here to visit my friend. I couldn't get close enough. There is a negative energy here that makes me sick which is why I'm leaving. You'd be wise to do the same."

"We are here to help Heidi get rid of her ghost problem. That awful sensation will go away soon enough," Stella promised the brownie.

Cordum bounced on the balls of his feet. "You're the pair that help our kind. Word is you took on the vampires, so this entity shouldn't be a problem for you."

I winced and started shaking my head. I wasn't a ray of sunshine, all promises and smiles, like Stella. I was a realist and didn't want to oversell it to the brownie. "We do our best. Thank you for letting us know your experience. It helps to have a clear picture of the situation."

The brownie tipped an invisible hat and raced under the dormant honeysuckle. I loved the shrub with its sweet flowers. It was one of my favorites. Gesturing to the front door I said, "shall we?"

Stella nodded and threaded her arm through mine. "Cordum is a perfect example of what I love about this world. He was like a real-life Keebler Elf."

I chuckled. "Don't let him hear you say that."

We were so busy laughing that I missed the warning zap as we climbed the two stairs to the porch. My heart was racing as we crossed the covered area. Where my veranda wrapped around the front and sides of my house, Heidi's spanned about fifteen feet in the front of the house.

Stella had a death grip on my arm as I lifted my fist and knocked on the front door. Correction. I tried to hit the panel. My fist never actually met the wood. Electricity shot from the door along with wind and magical energy and slammed into Stella and me. It threw us off the porch and into the yard behind us.

I landed on the honeysuckle bush, breaking the barren limbs. I hit hard enough to knock the breath from my lungs. Agony shot down my arm as I shifted to check on Stella.

“Are you alright, Stells?”

A groan left her and she rolled to face me. “Ow. That hurt like a bitch. Seems like this is exactly like last time.”

I shook my head and was rewarded with a wave of dizziness. “Not in the least. There was no electricity and I was able to remain near the front door last time.”

I sat up and helped Stella to a sitting position. I scanned the front of the house. Heidi was at the big picture window in front banging on the glass and saying something that I couldn't hear from this distance. It was clear that she wasn't able to get out of her house. The freaking ghost was holding her hostage.

I held up my hand and waved to her. I had no way to reassure her. “The front door is out, it seems. Let's try the side of the house.”

Stella groaned and got to her feet. “At least I have jeans on this time. I would never be able to show my face in this town again if I flashed my panties to the neighbors.”

My head whipped around and focused on the other houses. We couldn't be seen. That would be disastrous. “Who saw us? We would need to wipe their memories and Fiona said she had to use vampires for that in Cottlehill.” I refused to ask Marius for help.

Stella shook her head rapidly. “Oh no. Sorry, no one is watching that I can see. I was musing. Let's tackle the left side first.”

My shoulder ached and my shirt was torn. I pulled sticks from my hair as we walked around the edge of the grass. This time I paid attention to the energy around me. Nausea churned in my stomach. It was low-key at the moment. I could see what the brownie was talking about. That alone would be enough to warn most paranormals to stay away. I wondered if it affected mundies at all.

There was a window that one of us might fit through, on the right side of the house. “You lift me up and I'll try to get through the window.”

Stella sighed. “I can't promise I won't drop you. I'm in better shape now than before you moved home, however, I still have more flab than muscle.”

“Not nearly as much as I do.” I crouched down as we moved forward, as if that would hide me from the poltergeist inside the house.

“Do you think this will work?” Stella’s voice was barely above a whisper.

“I sure hope so,” I replied in an even lower tone.

We managed to reach the side of the house without being thrown back. I had no desire to get tossed into the trees closest to us, so I cast a cushion that would catch us before I stood up and put my hands on the window.

The instant my skin touched the glass, a shock traveled through me that made my heart skip several beats. Heat scored me from the point of contact and caused my lungs to seize.

Stella jerked me away, cutting off the sensations. My heart raced and my chest burned while my arms shook and my vision wavered. I wondered if this was what it felt like to be electrocuted.

I released the cushion spell as we backed away. “That way is a no go. Let’s try the back door and the other side to see if there’s a weakness then we will regroup.”

“I’ll take the back,” Stella offered. “Just be ready to yank me away. That looked painful.”

We kept our distance as we went through the gate to the backyard. I cast the cushion spell just in case and watched as Stella went up to the entrance. There was a window in the top half and I could see Heidi.

I shook my head and waved my arms to the sides to keep her from alerting the ghost. She inclined her head. Stella walked up the three stairs with her fist in the air ready to knock. It never connected because she was flying by my face after a white-blue bolt shot from the metal knob to her chest.

My spell caught her and kept her from being injured again. I hurried to her side and was almost about to suggest we stop trying when I saw Heidi’s tear-streaked face in the window. Stella shook off the blow and stalked around the house.

I followed and caught her just in time to see the same white-blue energy crackle the air around her. This time it was accompanied by a faint smell of decay. I grabbed hold of her arm and jerked her to the ground.

We lay there gasping after I was shocked through my connection to her. “This isn’t working. We need to try something different. Let’s

try sending peaceful thoughts toward the house.”

Stella dropped her head to the grass and draped an arm over her eyes. “It’s worth a try, I just need a second.”

I assessed the house and wondered if the second floor would be any different and discarded the idea. Tseki could fly me up there, but I had to assume it would yield the same results.

Stella popped up far faster than I anticipated. She rubbed her hands together. “Thoughts of a large glass of wine when I get home have recentered me, let’s send this at the poltergeist.”

I joined hands with her. “*Pax et gaudium.*”

A smile spread across my face as the joy lightened my mood immensely. I approached the window again and got another shock that put me on my ass this time. Stella lowered a hand and helped me up. “Well, that didn’t work.”

I shook my head and threatened the poltergeist with harm. This time I didn’t need to approach the window. Instead, the bolt shot out at me. Heidi was on the other side of the pane hunched over with a grimace.

I tugged Stella to the front of the house, deciding I needed to go with force to get inside. I imagined a magical battering ram that would blast our way inside. “*Malleus!*”

My spell backfired, and I felt air whiz past me as I was thrown back again. I braced myself a split second before I landed with a thud on the neighbor’s lawn. A shout echoed next to me as Stella landed next.

“We have got to regroup. I can’t take that again,” Stella complained.

I rolled over and pushed myself up. My jaw dropped when I saw the couple standing there watching us with wide eyes. What the hell did we do now? We couldn’t afford to reveal the existence of the magical world, yet here we had been caught after being thrown by an invisible force.

Stella muttered something as I focused on the couple and a hundred curse words ran through my mind. “I’m so sorry. We’re practicing for a production. We miscalculated our trajectory,” Stella explained smoothly, not missing a beat.

Stella took charge of the conversation with the mundies when it became evident I hadn't yet figured out what to say. It quickly became clear why she was a great real estate agent. She had an open, friendly personality, was a quick thinker and loved to talk.

The woman lifted an eyebrow to her hairline. "That was no miscalculation. I swear it was like magic."

Stella laughed awkwardly. "My husband made the platform and used a more powerful spring than we anticipated. Girl, I told you we should have worn our padding for this one."

I gaped at her and glanced over my shoulder. Sure enough, there was a spring board sitting in the yard similar to the one used with the vault in gymnastics. Thank God because I was too busy being stunned to try and cover this up. "I thought we had the back flips down."

The guy scoffed. "I'm not sure what to think. I could have sworn that wasn't there a second ago."

Stella shrugged her shoulders. "We'll get out of your hair now. I need to have my husband fix that damn thing."

She grabbed my arm and dragged me to the platform where we picked it up and carried it to the back of the SUV. I could feel the eyes of the mundies on us as I drove away a few minutes later.

"That was too frickin' close." I exhaled and lifted my burned hands off the steering wheel. There were red blisters on my right palm that burned like a son of a bitch.

"Closer than I would like. We have to call Heidi." Stella grabbed my phone and dialed the elf's number.

"Is that you Phoebe?" Heidi's voice was frantic as it echoed through the speakers in my car.

I felt lost without Tarja there to guide me. It was worse than trying to design a rocket ship without any knowledge of engineering. She had been there with me from the beginning. Even when I had been cursed a few weeks ago and couldn't hear her, she spoke to me through Nina and the others. Now she wasn't there at all.

"Yes, it's me. And Stella. I'm sure you know, but we weren't able to get to you."

A sob left Heidi's throat. "I know and I can't get out now. Please help me."

A knot formed in the pit of my stomach. We couldn't leave her vulnerable like this, yet we weren't able to reach her, either. My mind raced to come up with a strategy to help her.

"I need you to do something for me. Drag your mattress to the kitchen so I can cast a protection spell around that area. I don't want you confined to your room without food and I don't want to leave you at the mercy of that spirit." I had no idea if this would work, but I was going to try.

"Alright. Give me a minute." Heidi had to have set the phone down because I heard receding footsteps.

Stella nodded her head and gestured to the next street and pointed left. I followed her direction and turned down the avenue. She was pointing to a house and at first, I was confused until I saw a light go on upstairs. We were in the street facing the back of Heidi's house.

There was a loud crash and a scream from the other end of the phone and I fought the urge to rush to Heidi's house. "I grabbed my smaller mattress. Do it now, Phoebe!"

I looked at Stella and nodded then closed my eyes and called up the layout I had seen through the window in the back door. I added a steel door in key locations and cemented that image in my mind. "*Excludo.*"

There was heavy breathing from Heidi as she sobbed. "You did it Phoebe. She's battering against the barrier. I can't reach the bathroom but I don't care. I can pee in the sink. How long will it take you to get back to me?"

My stomach lurched. "Honestly, I have no idea. I need to make some calls and do some research, but I will work as fast as I can. You hang in there and call us if something changes."

Heidi sighed. "I will. Thank you for trying."

The line went dead and I turned to Stella. "I'll drop you at home and we can tackle this tomorrow. I need to check in before Aidoneus heads out here, then I need to take an ice bath."

This day had been a long one and I wanted it to be over already. I had more problems than answers and was covered in bruises. Basically, a typical day in my new magical midlife. I loved every second of it.

## CHAPTER 6



I had to drag my feet across the threshold after parking in the curved driveway in front of my house. I didn't have the energy to walk from the garage round the back. There was a commotion and yelling when I opened the door.

My heart raced and adrenalin dumped into my system, giving me a kick start. I ran toward the kitchen, assuming that was where everyone was. "What's going on?"

Nina stuck her head out of the living room. "It's Tarja, mom. Come quick."

My heart leaped into my chest and my fatigue was forgotten. On fast feet, I practically flew through the house through to the living room where I had left my unconscious familiar.

The tabby cat was curled on the chair I had set her on earlier. She was blinking her green eyes open. My mom stood there with her hand over her mouth and Mythia hovered nearby with tears in her eyes.

I crouched in front of her, ignoring the aches and pains as I went down. "How are you feeling?" I opened my senses trying to feel for her.

My throat closed up when I couldn't feel her presence in the back of my mind. I struggled to keep my tears at bay as my racing heart made me light-headed. . She was alive. Our connection could come next. I needed to stay focused on the positives.

The one remaining link in the chain connecting us was still intact and tarnished. However, there was a new shine to one part of it that



was promising.

I laid my head against hers, sighing. As her green eyes bored into mine, I swear she was trying to tell me something. I scrutinized her for a few seconds watching as her expression shifted to one of frustration.

She lifted her head then tried to stand. I picked her up when she collapsed on her side and held her close to my chest. Her purr started slowly building as I cradled her. The pain in my soul eased knowing she was alive. It didn't vanish because she still wasn't speaking to me. That didn't diminish the relief I felt in the least.

"I will keep you safe and ensure you return to your usual self." I promised her.

Tarja pawed my arm and rubbed her head against my chest. Nina ran a hand over her back, smiling like a loon. "Thank God you're okay. Gammy was right. She knew you'd make it."

I met my mom's gaze and smiled. "Yes, she was right. You'd think I would have learned to trust her more after forty-three years."

My mom laughed and gestured to the kitchen. "I bet Tarja is hungry. Thia made some pâté for her."

Mythia flew past us. "I figured she would need the protein. I wasn't sure if she'd be able to chew right away. She can eat this easily."

Carrying Tarja, I followed the pixie and my mom. I never wanted to put her down. The weight of my hubris pinned me down more than I liked. I'd failed to protect her and almost lost her. I couldn't let that happen again.

Thia grabbed a plate while my mom got a Tupperware container from the fridge. "What did you learn about the poltergeist?"

I sighed, the exhaustion returning ten-fold. I wanted to bask in the joy of having Tarja awake. But I couldn't. I had another emergency on my hands. An elf's life was riding on me.

Nina laid the blanket on the counter. "She might like to have the cushion under her."

I had won the lottery with my daughter. Even before inheriting magic, she was sensitive and thoughtful. Never once did she give me a hard time for the break-up of my marriage, even though the separation impacted her greatly.

She lost her father, her friends, her home, and her lifestyle in one fell swoop. That wasn't easy for any person. Let alone a moody teenager. Yet, Nina handled the change with aplomb and grace. She constantly thought of others, especially me. She had spent weeks making sure I was alright.

I set Tarja on the folded blanket. "Thanks, sweetie. I imagine she will love it. I need to call Luci and Zeph and give them an update on her condition. They've been pretty broken up about it."

My mom set the food in front of her at the same time the backdoor opened and Aidoneus walked through. I hadn't realized until that moment that he wasn't in the house. I'd been sidetracked by Tarja.

He clapped his hands. "Thank the Fates she's awake. How is she doing?"

I sighed and sunk into the arms he wrapped around me. "I'm not sure. I can't hear her yet, but she is awake. Where have you been?"

He reached out with one hand and stroked Tarja's head. "The Underworld. I decided you had the spirit under control and knew you wanted answers about Tarja sooner rather than later."

I snorted. "I wouldn't say I had things under control really. I made a mess and almost exposed the magical world, but Stella and I are both alive and mostly intact."

His brow furrowed and he held me at arm's length as he scanned me from head to toe. Normally when he looked at me, I got turned on. This time I was beginning to feel more like a teenager than a middle-aged woman. This time I felt my years and then some and barely got a rise out of my hormonal system.

"I knew I shouldn't have let you go alone. What the hell happened?" His voice was more growl than anything.

I scowled at him and crossed my arms over my chest. "I handled it. No one died. In fact, none of us were even seriously injured."

"I'd call that progress," Layla pointed out.

Aidon took a deep breath and nodded then surprised me by bending and claiming my mouth in a too-short passionate kiss. I was breathing hard when he broke away with heat in his sapphire eyes.

"You're right, Queenie. So, what happened at the elf's house?"

I recounted the events at the house, including the weird electrical bolts. By the time I finished, Tarja was on her stomach and eating the pate slowly. More of the tension in my shoulders eased and I almost cried for the hundredth time that day.

Aidon crossed to the fridge and grabbed the pitcher of margaritas we had made earlier but never got around to drinking. "Who wants one?"

I raised my hand. "Extra-large for me, please. How was your visit with your father? Did you learn anything useful?"

Aidon poured several drinks and handed me one. "It took a while to find anything. There isn't much information on phantasms. I didn't find anything to tell me what they are exactly or how to get rid of them. But I discovered a text that talked about them feeding off the soul. My father and I surmise the one that tangled with Tarja likely stole some of her soul and that is why she took so long to recover."

"I bet that's why she isn't talking into your mind," my mom blurted.

Aidoneus turned to her. "I'm betting you are right about that."

Nana sniffed as she glared at everyone. She'd been so quiet I didn't know she was there. "You need to keep feeding the parasite your energy."

My head jerked back as an ache renewed itself in my chest. Nana wasn't being mean outright, but she still had an attitude. Aidoneus considered her and shook his head. "Amelia is right, Phoebe. All the information indicated that the one way to recover from such an injury is to be given energy from someone you are closely bonded to, otherwise she will perish regardless of her physical recovery."

I jutted my chin forward and ignored Nana. "I've never been more grateful to have a connection with her. It's daunting to be the only one able to restore Tarja, but it's also an honor."

Aidon sipped his cocktail. "I've never met a more courageous being in my life. You surpass even my Aunt Artemis. She's the best hunter I know, yet you run headlong into situations without any thought for your well-being. Normally, I'd say that's reckless. But I can't deny that your actions make me want to be a better man and a better god. I prided myself on facing dangers most refused to acknowledge. Now I know I was merely doing the minimum."

Tears stung my eyes as he looked at me with more adoration and affection than I had ever experienced. I had no idea what to say to that. I didn't see myself that way. "Are you kidding me? I'm only able to do what I do because of everyone around me, especially you. I look out for those that can't do it for themselves. That doesn't take courage. Most times I don't stop and think about it."

Layla shook her head as she set her empty glass down. "You don't see what the rest of us do. Very few would act without thought for themselves. Trust me, I've seen enough to know most are as selfish as Miles. Damn, sorry Nina."

Nina laughed and waved the comment away. "Nothing to be sorry about. My father is the definition of narcissistic. I submitted his picture to the publisher of that psychological diagnostic manual. He should come with a warning. Jean-Marc and I were blessed by the best mother on the planet. Otherwise, we'd be lost causes, as well. Now, what do we need to do for Tarja? And Heidi? I know both are priorities."

I glanced down and locked gazes with my familiar. She might not be able to talk to me at the moment, but her look told me to prioritize Heidi. I sighed and wrapped my hands around my margarita. I hadn't had very much for fear the alcohol would make me pass out.

"We need to learn everything we can about poltergeists. This one had more power than I was expecting. We can't help unless we can get past the door." My mind looked at the situation from a dozen different angles. "And someone needs to pay the neighbors a visit and ensure they bought Stella's story. The last thing Heidi needs is to be stalked by some curious mundies.

Mythia's wings fluttered so fast I couldn't follow them, yet she remained hovering close to Tarja. "I've been thinking about that. Do you think poltergeists can syphon magic from the house's owners? The lightning sounds like something a Fae with an affinity for water might produce."

My mom cocked her head to the side and watched the pixie. "How does that work? Lightning isn't water."

Thia scooped some more food onto Tarja's plate, though I worried it might be too much this early in her recovery. "Water Fae can cause mini-storms around them depending on their mood. There

is a reason you didn't see me right after Hattie died. I caused a hurricane in my bathroom from my grief. Those with more power than me can create even larger weather patterns around them. It's all about the water in the atmosphere and our loss of control in extreme situations, manipulating it in unpredictable ways. Though we have an affinity for one element, we can still wield the rest of them."

I tapped the side of my glass, breaking the sweat rolling down the side. "That poses an interesting conundrum. Did you come across anything about poltergeists in your research, Aidon?"

"Nope. Granted, I wasn't looking for it, however I doubt it would be a topic my father would gather information about. The Underworld is home to spirits, so things don't work the same way. They aren't bound by the same rules and when they go bad, they are sent to Tartarus. Nothing can escape there. Not even my grandfather who is a powerful god."

"Then we have a big task ahead of us and a damaged library. I'm going to need everyone's help on this. I am worried about Heidi. I've confined her to the kitchen and erected a magical cage that should keep the spirit out. That means it also locks her inside the limited space."

"I've already found a spell and potion in the family grimoire to help restore the books," Nina said. "So, I can work on the damage, then help look for information."

I reached over and squeezed her shoulder. "That is fantastic. Is the potion complex? We will need to make that quickly. I can help you if it's too difficult."

Nina's cheeks tinged pink and she chewed on her lower lip. "I'm, uh, not sure. You know I haven't done much yet."

I nodded my head and gave her a smile. "I'll help. We might blow up the magical kitchen." I chuckled then shifted my focus to my mom and Nana. "Mom, Nana, can you start looking for information in the library on poltergeists? It would help if we don't wait to start the work."

"I'd be happy to help first thing in the morning. We will all be fresh after a good night's rest," my mom replied.

Nana looked straight at me and for several seconds she didn't say anything. My mouth dropped to my chest when she finally

replied. “No. I’m not helping you, lazy bitch.” She stood up adjusting that new purse on her shoulder.

Dark emotions swirled in my gut like a worm on a hook. It was highly uncomfortable and extremely nauseating. It didn’t help that Nana left the smell of black licorice in her wake. I loved the stuff and any Vietnamese dish with anise in it. After this episode I doubted I’d be able to eat the stuff ever again.

I watched her closely and was more unnerved by the blank look in her eyes than anything else. This went way beyond emotional changes as she reached the end of her life. It was almost as if there was nothing there.

Everyone else stared at Nana as she walked out of the room. My mom cleared her throat but couldn’t disguise the hurt that crossed her face. Layla cracked her knuckles and took a step toward Nana’s back. I put my hand on her arm. “Don’t. It’s not worth it.”

“She’s obviously going through something none of us can understand. I’ll try to talk to her,” my mom said and was gone a second later. I knew her avoidance tactics well enough to know she wasn’t ready to face the facts yet. I’d give her a little more time then hit her with my suspicions.

Aidoneus scowled as he watched the exit. “That is not the Amelia I have come to know. I can’t put my finger on it, but she has changed.”

Nina wiped the tears from her cheeks. “She hasn’t been herself since you guys left for New Orleans. At first, I thought it was because mom gave her and Gammy magic and she was feeling better. Now, I don’t think that’s the case.”

Aidon narrowed his eyes on the spot Nana had been moments ago. “She has magic now and it feels similar to yours and your mother’s. I doubt it was anything Phoebe did, though. I’ve wondered if it simply took longer to manifest in Mollie and Amelia given their age. There was more to repair and sort through with them than you, your mom and your brother.”

I loved that Aidon took the time to address my daughter and treat her like she deserved his attention and the information. Nina though, had been wary after how her father treated me. It was clear she was coming around and growing fond of Aidoneus.

“Maybe it’s just that process,” Nina suggested hopefully.

“You could be right, sweetie. We will have to keep an eye on her and see what happens,” I interjected before Aidoneus could say anything else.

Tarja meowed and lifted her body so she was sitting in front of me. I smiled at the progress she made after eating two plates of pate and ran my hand along her back. I needed to keep feeding Tarja energy while also looking into Stuleros and phantasms and poltergeists.

Not only did I need to help heal my familiar and her realm, I had to get Heidi out of her house. I wasn't sure which task was going to be easier. On the one hand, I was facing one powerful angry spirit capable of zapping me with lightning. On the other, I had countless angry spirits to deal with.

That description didn't quite feel right for Stuleros. The more I analyzed what occurred and what we encountered, the more convinced I was that the phantasms were corrupted versions of the familiar spirits.

No wonder I was exhausted. I was going to get started without my mom and the others, but she had the right idea. I needed a good night's sleep so I could tackle my never-ending to-do list.

## CHAPTER 7



The ceiling was mocking me as I lay next to Aidon unable to go to sleep. I was certain the second I laid my head down that I would pass out. After fighting a magical fire then facing off a pissed off poltergeist, I had no energy left in me. I'd walked like a drunken sailor up to my bedroom. And hours later, I had yet to close my eyes.

There was too much running through my mind. I reached for the comfort of my familiar. Tarja was curled between Aidoneus and me. Usually, she slept in her own room. Tonight, I couldn't let her out of my sight. Static shocked me as I ran my hand over her fur.

It was my power misfiring. At least that was my working theory. It had become automatic to send energy to her through our remaining link. With the drain on my resources, I didn't have much left to give, so it seemed the logical reason blue sparks were glimmering between us.

Shaking my hand, I sat up and threw my legs off the side of the bed. It was pointless to continue lying there. A rustle of sheets behind me brought a smile to my face. I'd spent twenty years sleeping next to Miles and had never truly enjoyed it. Honestly, most nights I was annoyed with his snoring and the way he kicked the covers off us both.

It was entirely different with Aidoneus. Perhaps it was because he was a god. Or maybe because he loved me openly and passionately. But having him next to me comforted me like nothing before.



A hand ran up my back in a gentle caress. The man was more in tune with me than I ever believed possible. "Can't sleep, love?" God his voice was sexy when it was rough with sleep.

I turned my head and looked over my shoulder, giving him a smile. "Not even a little. Sorry if I woke you."

He sat up and the blanket fell to his lap revealing rock-hard abs I wanted to run my hands over. *No, Pheebs! Now is not the time to get distracted with carnal pleasures.* I wasn't sure I agreed with my inner Jiminy Cricket. It sounded like a great way to spend the few hours that remained before morning.

"You never have to apologize. Let me make you some tea and we can talk through whatever is foremost on your mind." He was up and pulling on a t-shirt before I could formulate a thought that didn't involve our naked bodies.

I stood and slipped into the robe I had hung over the end of the bed. When I went to scoop up Tarja, he already had her in his arms. After slipping into the furry slippers Jean-Marc had given me for Christmas I led the way to the kitchen, careful to keep the noise to a minimum. The last thing I wanted to do was wake everyone in the house.

I was surprised to see Mythia hovering near the sink and washing a large pot. "Please tell me you don't spend most of the night cooking and cleaning for us. You shouldn't spend that much time taking care of the rest of us."

It was difficult for me to have others doing for me when I had always been the one managing the household. I had insisted on taking over house payments from my mother when I moved in because I needed her to help with Nina and dinner on the nights I'd had to stay later with Hattie.

It had been wonderful to come home to dinner on the table, but the guilt had eaten at me. My mother understood and told me I had to let it go because family took care of each other. That hadn't been the case with Miles.

The pixie gasped and spun around. It was odd to see her in a pink pajama set rather than her combat boots and dark clothing. "I am not up this early often. My mind refused to quiet so I decided to make some green chili to go with dinner. Why are you awake?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "I couldn't turn my mind off, either. There's too much going on right now. It has me twisted in knots."

Aidoneus set the blanket on the island and laid Tarja on top of it. "You've always had this much, if not more going on from the moment I met you. I think whatever is going on with your Nana has upset you most."

Tears burned the backs of my eyes and clogged my throat. He was right about that. I hadn't allowed my mind to go too deeply down that line of thought. Nana was the heart of our family. I loved her more than anyone else.

"It has me upset, that's for sure," my mom said as she shuffled into the kitchen.

"Mom, what are you doing up so early?" I knew the answer but needed her to say something before I started talking about the proverbial elephant in the room.

"Can't stop thinking about Nana, which I'm guessing is the same for you." My mom shuffled to the tea pot and walked to the sink where Mythia was still hovering.

"You're not wrong about that." I took a deep breath, scrubbing my hands over my face. "I'm worried about Nana. Something isn't right. And it goes beyond her reaching the final stage in life. I've worked with enough of the elderly to know they can certainly become angry and mean. There is something else going on with Nana, however."

Mythia waved a bright green chili through the air. I didn't know my peppers but I hoped it was a hatch green chili. They made delicious gravy. The pixie grabbed my wandering mind as she chopped the top off with a small knife that was in her other hand.

"That's what I've been trying to figure out. As a pixie, I am able to detect magic and can say Mollie and Amelia both have developed some powers. Yet that doesn't feel like the reason," Mythos shared.

I tucked my wild hair behind my ears, considering what she said. "I can't sense things like you and Aidon can but I know there is some magical influence on Nana. I think she's been cursed, although I can't imagine where or when it happened."

Aidoneus guided me to a stool and took a seat next to me. "I haven't picked up on anything overt around Amelia. But it makes sense given her complete behavioral change."

My mom's hands shook as she set down a mug. "Is her life in danger like yours was? I mean if you're right and she is cursed? When that happened to you it nearly killed you. We can't let that happen to Nana."

My heart raced and my stomach churned with the thought. I had learned about curses when I was the subject of one, yet I knew there was so much more to discover. "My instinct tells me any curse is a threat to the core of a person. I think the longer someone is under a nasty hex like that it changes who they are at the center of their being. Yet, I don't suspect Nana is in danger of dying like I was. Part of what happened to me was the dangerous buildup of my blocked magic."

My mom's shoulders sagged. "That's a relief to hear. We can figure this out before it destroys who she is. Besides, Nana is too stubborn to make it easy for a curse to erase her personality."

Mythia chopped the pepper and put it in the large pot. "I agree. Amelia is strong. We just need to reach her and get rid of that blank stare."

I shuddered thinking about Nana's expression lately. "I'm glad it's not only me bothered by that. Never in my life have I seen anything so horrifying."

My mom nodded in agreement. "It's because your Nana has always been larger than life. She was sassy and sarcastic even when I was a kid when it was taboo to talk that way. It used to embarrass me. Now, I would give anything to hear her tell us we needed to kick up the green chili a notch or that you needed to have sex to destress."

I grimaced and held up a hand. "It's one thing to hear Nana say that to me, but coming from you, mom, it makes me want to crawl in a hole. And takes me back to high school when you used to warn me away from boys and any such behavior."

Mythia dropped everything in her hands at the same time Aidon jumped from the stool next to me and raced for the archway leading out of the kitchen. I looked at my mom and shrugged my shoulders. "Obviously they heard something. I have no idea what it might be. Did you catch anything?"

She shook her head and followed them to the front of the house. "I have no idea. This house is so big. It might just be Evanora."

The ghost appeared as we joined them at the foot of the main stairs. "It wasn't me. Something burst. There is water everywhere."

I practically jumped out of my skin and my hand flew to my chest. "Shit. Warn a girl when you're going to pop up. Where is there water?"

Nina ran from the east hall calling out for me. "I'm here, sweetie. What happened?" I was halfway up the twin staircase when she gasped and swung her gaze my way.

She paused where she was and looked behind her. "The bathroom between Nana and my room is flooding. My floor is soaking wet and it sounds like a sprinkler is going off in there. I felt static electricity right before I heard the noise. That's what woke me up. I think Nana did magic and it exploded the pipes."

Aidoneus hurried past me. "We need to shut off the water or the floors will be ruined. They're original to the house!"

My mom and I moved as fast as we could. Nina fell into step with him. "Nina, did you notice anything else that would make you suspect Nana used magic?"

Nina glanced over her shoulder. "It's just a suspicion, mom. Nana hasn't been herself lately. I've sensed dark energy surrounding her at times but haven't been able to pinpoint the source. Both she and Gammy have felt different for a while, only this is something more with Nana."

Water started trickling down the hallway, Mythia acted fast and muttered something under her breath. The water lifted into the air. "Open a window. I can move the water outside."

I ran to the end of the hall where there was a small window. I lifted the pane all while trying to figure out how she was managing the feat. My sluggish brain kicked in and I swear I heard Tarja's voice telling me that the Fae's main source of power was in manipulating the elements.

No sooner had I shifted to follow Aidon than the stream of water flew past my head and outside. "I have never been more grateful to have you as part of the family, Thia."

“I couldn’t agree more,” my mom added. “I dreaded cleaning up the mess.”

Nana walked out of her bedroom in sopping wet slippers and passed us without pausing. I needed to help Aidoneus and Nina. “Can you keep an eye on her?” I asked Mythia.

The tiny pixie nodded her head. “I won’t let her out of my sight.”

I held up my fist and she bumped one of my knuckles with hers. “Thanks. You’re a lifesaver.”

“I’ll go with her. Nana will respond to me if we have to stop her from doing something destructive again,” my mom said without taking her gaze off Nana.

I nodded then walked through Nina’s room. A sigh left me when I saw the amount of water soaking the carpet at the end of Nina’s bed along with the clothes scattered around the space.

Water sprayed me in the face when I entered the bathroom and found Nina and Aidoneus stuck along the backwall. My hands came up to protect my eyes as I moved toward the sink and opened doors of the cabinet below.

“Where’s the water valve?” I shouted to be heard over the roar.

Aidon dropped to his knees and crawled my way. His shirt was plastered to his back and his black hair hung wet in his sapphire eyes. “I’ve got it. There was a spell keeping Nina and I from reaching the sink.”

My head snapped around to my daughter. Her hands were shaking at her sides and her eyes were huge. I left the water to Aidon and grabbed my daughter’s wrists. “Did you break the enchantment?”

She blinked a couple of times before a smile spread over her face. “I did mom, it was great. It was a simple barrier that was easy to dismantle. It just crumbled under my might.”

I chuckled and wrapped my arms around Nina. “You’re going to be terrifying one day.”

Her head nodded under my chin. “You better believe it.”

Aidoneus laughed as the water stopped spewing like a broken fire hydrant. “I’ve cut off the water. It looks like the pipe under here has a hole punched in the side of it.”

I released my daughter and scanned the damage. It looked like a hammer broke through the side of one white pipe. I'd need to find a plumber and get that fixed right away. "You can't use this bathroom until we get that fixed, Nina. I should call Mythia back to take care of this water."

There was a couple inches on the floor seeping into Nina and Nana's bedrooms. I slosed to the door and opened my mouth. A scream left me when I heard a voice I thought I never would again inside my head.

Aidoneus had his hands on my shoulders before I could blink. "What happened? Are you alright? Was this a trap set by Amelia?"

I shook my head as tears filled my eyes. "Tarja!"

His eyes widened as he glanced around. Nina gasped. "Is she talking to you?" Nina asked.

I laughed and nodded, sniffing back the emotion that had overcome me. "She is."

Aidoneus practically bounced on the balls of his feet. "What is she saying?"

*"Practice using your telekinesis to move the water outside. It will come in handy in an emergency."*

"Her voice is weak and sounds far away but she's talking to me again. She's telling me to move the water outside." A smile spread across my face for the first time in days.

Aidon inclined his head. "I'm glad she's back with you. I know how much she means to you."

That was an understatement. It had been awful not to feel or hear her when I was cursed. This time had been a million times worse than that because she was mortally wounded and no one was sure she would survive the attack. As it was, she was left with an injury to her spirit which was likely one of the reasons she sounded so far away.

"Thank God," Nina blurted. "I'll get the window."

My daughter dripped water off the hem of her pajama pants as she stood on the tub and opened the window above the toilet. I took a deep breath and shivered when the cold air blew inside, likely propelled by the window in the hall.

I thought about the stream of water Mythia sent through the window and kept that image in my mind. There was no chant with this form of magic which made it much more difficult for me to manage. A ripple in the liquid was all I managed for several seconds.

*“Concentrate on the molecules of the water then pick them up and throw it out the window.”* Tarja’s voice was even fainter. I could hear the fatigue underlying her words. That she even tried to help me use this chance to learn meant she was still fully invested in me mastering magic. Our bond might be rusty but it was still there.

“Easier said than done.” I replied out loud and sent it through our connection, hoping she was able to hear it. Her scratchy laugh was the only reply I got.

I lifted my hands over the water and imagined a bunch of oxygen and hydrogen molecules bonded together. The ripple turned into a wave that drenched Aidoneus. A laugh threatened to break my concentration. I averted my gaze as I waved my arms toward the window.

The liquid rose and sloshed over the toilet then out the window. The wall was drenched along with the carpet and hardwood in both rooms. I stood at Nana’s door and walked the water like a line of soldiers into the bathroom. It took a couple tries to get it outside, but it went.

I repeated the process in Nina’s room. My efforts left a lot to be desired. At least a third of the water remained but I couldn’t move another object. My muscles felt like I had been lifting weights for the past hour.

My shoulders drooped. “I’m going to try a heater spell. I can warm up the room and dry out the rest.”

*“Try one last time. You can do it.”* I didn’t miss Tarja being a taskmaster.

“Alright,” I grumbled and focused on the energy of the water this time. It was easier when I felt the life sparking within it.

I grabbed hold of that and lifted it into the air. Nina clapped her hands and shouted in glee when the remainder of the liquid floated all around us. Keeping my concentration on the energy, I moved it forward little by little until it was all inside the bathroom.

I was heaving and sweating by the time I sent the last of it through the open window. Aidoneus slammed the window shut and grabbed me up in a hug. "I knew you could do it, Queenie."

"I'll grab the window in the hall. It's freezing in here," Nina said when Aidon claimed my lips in a kiss. I knew my daughter was avoiding the public display of affection between us.

"*Well done.*" Tarja didn't have that problem and effectively ended our kiss.

"Thanks. Before you get more rest, I have to ask if you can sense anything off about Nana. I think she's cursed and I don't know what to do about it." I prayed my familiar would have the answer.

*"I'm sorry, Phoebe. I'm afraid I don't have enough energy. She's sitting next to me at the island and I can't sense anything amiss but I am still very weak from the attack."*

"That's alright. Get some rest. We can talk later. It's nice to have you back, Tarja." I wrapped an arm around Aidon and left the bathroom to find my family. Life was a mess, and I didn't have any answers but I had my mom, Nina, Aidon, Stella and now I had Tarja back.



## CHAPTER 8



*A*nger battled with worry and fear as I entered the kitchen to find Nana puttering about making herself a cup of coffee. You'd never know she'd just burst the pipes and flooded the bathroom.

"Do you have anything you want to tell me, Nana?" I held out hope she would explain what had happened. There was no doubt in my mind that she was cursed. I was relatively certain her burgeoning magic flared out of control just now thanks to the curse.

The empty stare Nana shot my way was confirmation enough for me. My hope surged when her brow furrowed. Unfortunately, her expression smoothed out and she shrugged her shoulders. "You're going to need to allow me to get caffeine in me before you start slave driving these old bones again."

For a second there, Nana almost sounded like her old self. Until I looked into her eyes and noted there was no sign of life behind them. I sighed and crossed to the laundry room where Mythia or my mom had laundry folded on the counter. I grabbed a pair of leggings and a sweater along with a sports bra and clean underwear.

I shrugged off the wet robe and dropped my panties. A startled sound made me jump and turn around, covering my breasts and the v between my legs. Tsekani twirled around so fast his shirt billowed around him. "Sorry!"

I wrestled with the bra and ended up twisted in the fabric. It was like playing tug of war against myself to get the thing on. "It's okay. I should have closed the door. I'm distracted and not thinking clearly."

“I wanted to see if you were alright. I’ll catch you after you’re done.” Tseki moved as if his feet were on fire as he left. I couldn’t help but chuckle at his reactions. I didn’t take his horror personally because he preferred men as sexual partners.

Aidoneus was laughing when I emerged a few seconds later pulling down my top and adjusting the back of the bra. Come to think of it, I bet Tseki’s hasty retreat had more to do with the sight of large boobs covered in stretch marks in a fight with neon purple fabric. That was terrifying for anyone to witness.

I smacked Aidon’s chest playfully. “Be glad it wasn’t you that walked in. You’d be running from the house screaming, never to return.”

His smile disappeared and his eyes scalded me as he looked me over from head to toe. “There’d be screaming but it wouldn’t be coming from me, love.”

Nina made a gagging noise. “Stop it, please. I cannot think of my mom and you having sex. It’s too traumatizing!”

My mom set a bowl of oatmeal in front of Nina along with some fresh berries. “Eat your breakfast so we can get started on the research.”

None of us missed the urgency in my mother’s tone. Even Nana glanced her way. Nina smiled and hugged my mom. “Thanks, Gammy.”

I approached Tsekani and Layla. “Not sure if you heard but we had an issue in one of the bathrooms upstairs. A pipe was broken.” I shot a meaningful look at Nana.

Layla’s eyes went wide. Tseki refused to look at me and kept his gaze roaming all over the kitchen, so he didn’t see my implication. “Which bathroom? I’ll get it fixed then join you in the library.”

The offer of help looking through books was surprising because the dragon hated being trapped indoors for very long. His animal demanded he be outside more often than not.

“It’s the one Nina and Nana share. I didn’t know you were a plumber.” That was almost as surprising as his willingness to help.

He shrugged his shoulders. “You pick up a few things when you live as long as I have. Besides, this house is old and always needing

something done, so I learned how to be as helpful as possible. I can do minor electrical fixes, as well. Nothing too elaborate, mind you.”

“You’re one of the hardest working people I’ve ever met. I can’t imagine you being anything less. But it’s good to know we have a resident handyman. I just hope I haven’t scarred you for life.”

That made him smile and meet my gaze. “Why do you wear something that looked like it was trying to strangle you? I can’t imagine anything more uncomfortable.”

“Were you putting on a sports bra, mom?” Nina knew me so well.

I chuckled and nodded. “Sure was. I was mid-battle when Tseki entered the laundry room.”

That made all the women in the room laugh except Nana. She continued eating her breakfast just staring out the window. Tseki and Aidon even joined in before I broke away to grab an energy drink from the fridge.

It had been a long damn day already and it wasn’t even seven in the morning. “I’m going to need the big guns today. I could fall asleep right now.”

Aidoneus rubbed my shoulders while I cracked the can and took a gulp. “That’s what happens when you wake up before the sun is up and have a major magical crisis to boot. Shit wasn’t this crazy in the Underworld.”

I waited for Nana to make a snarky comment about the fear his father instilled in every being living in the realm. My heart broke when she didn’t seem to notice our conversation.

Forcing a smile across my mouth, I tilted my head back so it rested against his chest and I was gazing up at him. “You’re a terrifying god where I’m a new witch without much skill under her belt.”

Layla snorted as she broke apart a muffin. “You were pretty terrifying when you stood up to Marie Laveau. And the vampires for that matter.”

I lifted my can and clinked it with Layla’s coffee cup. “Shall we get started on the library?” Nina was rinsing her bowl, just as my mom was finishing her yogurt.

Tarja was waking up when I tossed my can in the recycling bin, so I picked her up, blanket and all, and carried her with me. Nina

stroked her head as we walked down the hall. I heard my mother encourage Nana to get up and come with us. I was glad because I had no desire to leave her unsupervised.

The smell of burnt paper and charred wood made me gag and twisted my gut. I set Tarja down on the sofa in front of the fireplace and followed Nina to the damaged section. I started skimming through books while Nina repaired the damaged ones.

Aidoneus moved around the space, reading through books and checking on us every few minutes. My mom and Nana were down the aisle from where I was and we all worked in silence for what seemed like hours. My eyesight was blurring. I had to grab my reading glasses so I could make out the words on the page. Aidoneus waggled his brows at me in passing, making me blush. Getting older had its perks and negatives.

The monotony was broken when Tsekani entered the space to inform me he was done fixing the pipe. We were discussing the damage and how far into the wall it went when Nana walked away from my mom.

I grabbed Tsekani's hand and followed Nana. "I need you and Aidon to guide Nana outside on the guise you need practice. I think she's cursed and need to find some information to help her."

Tsekani shook his head. "I was wondering what was going on with everyone this morning. You're right that it was magic that burst the pipes. It left behind a residue that reminded me of Nana. Although, it was slightly different."

"Tarja let me know Nana and my mom have some magic developing. I suspect the curse is causing Nana's to misfire which is why I want to keep an eye on her. I'm pretty sure she started the fire in here yesterday, too."

Tseki was frowning when we reached Aidoneus. I filled Aidon in on my immediate plans. After I was done, the god clapped Tsekani on the back. "Are you ready for some more training, dragon?"

Tseki chuckled and nodded his head. "Don't think pinning me down will be as easy this time around. And you get to lure Nana out back with your allure. She's immune to me."

The two of them kept needling each other as they left the library. I was grateful for Aidoneus's approach to things. After Brody betrayed

Tsekani, I worried the dragon would close himself off and never be the same. Aidon had taken it upon himself to distract him with training and remind him that life goes on and he still had friends and family behind him no matter what had happened. I wasn't positive Tseki would have responded the same to any of my attempts.

When they were out of view, I went to the fireplace and knelt in front of Tarja. "How are you doing? Our bond feels stronger. I see another link has rebuilt."

Tarja tilted her head. "*Another link?*"

I chuckled and scratched behind her ears. "I forget I haven't told you. I picture our connection as being a chain going from me to you. When you were attacked the chain tarnished and fell apart except for one link that I held onto with every cell in my body. Now we have another link."

Tarja sat up on her hind legs and lifted a front paw to lick it. "*No one has ever looked at the witch-familiar bond that way. It's good you did because if you hadn't grabbed what you could, I fear I would have slipped away from you and this plane altogether.*"

My heart skipped several beats hearing her say that. "Can you feel the injury to your soul? Aidon said it was likely the phantasm took part of you."

Tarja wasn't able to groom for long and laid back down. "*I am not whole. That pain is worse than the injuries I suffered. Don't despair though, it eases every hour. The energy you are giving to me is repairing the damage slowly but I worry it is exhausting you unnecessarily.*"

I narrowed my eyes. "I don't know how you can say that. I refuse to allow you to linger in a depleted state when I can do something about it. You're one of the most important people to me. We're a team. I need you back at one hundred percent. Since you haven't been popping into my head through the morning, I know you haven't healed nearly enough."

"*I love you, too, Phoebe. So, where did your god and the dragon go? To keep an eye on Nana?*"

Tears misted my eyes and emotion threatened to choke me. It took a few seconds to clear my throat as I nodded. "I'm certain she is

cursed but I don't know how to figure it out. Could it be a Blood Curse?"

Tarja shook her head to one side before releasing a breath that ruffled the fur of her leg. *"It is unlikely to be a Blood Curse. She would have a distinct scent like you did. If I was in full control of my powers, I could pinpoint the source of the curse. It is likely to be something she rarely parts with. Once you locate the cursed object you can separate it from her. The danger comes when the item is embodied by a spirit. They can travel from the cursed item to the person. Then you'll have a hell of a time getting rid of the thing."*

My jaw dropped to my sternum. That didn't bode well. "What are the chances that is happening to Nana?"

*"Not very high. Attaching to an inanimate object takes great power that most witches do not possess. Your friend, Fiona's grandmother was able to tether her soul to her house because generations of family magic imbued the land and structure and it aided her efforts. You could use a break. Let's go watch your god skirmish with Tsekani."*

I picked up Tarja with a laugh. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you were anxious to ogle some hot guys. Mom, Nina, Layla" I called out into the stacks. "Tarja and I are going out back to watch Aidon and Tseki fight. Take a break and join us."

"Coming!" Nina sounded all too happy to get out of the library.

I waited until they joined us. "How's it coming, Nina? You mastered the spell, but how much energy does it take from you?"

Layla wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "She finished one of the books and it looks like new. Some of the information is missing. Otherwise, it's in impeccable condition."

A smile spread across my face while Nina scrunched up her face. "It's taking forever. One book doesn't even dent what was damaged."

"Never downplay your accomplishments. You fixed something that was burned and would have otherwise been thrown away. That is HUGE. And you're just learning like me." I hoped my daughter heard what I was saying. It would have helped me if I discovered this truth at her age. It would have improved my self-esteem and helped me make better decisions.

“Thanks, mom.” Nina led the way through the hallways. “You know, you should give Tsekani a pep talk, too. I hate seeing him so down.”

“It’s not that easy with Brody’s betrayal,” Layla explained. “Tseki brought him into your mom’s life, so he blames himself for what happened. Your mom has told him he was in no way responsible. Eventually it will register with him. He needs time.”

Mom nodded in agreement. “I love seeing him around so much. Especially now that he can shift into his dragon without fear of being seen. His green scales are just beautiful. It seems like he’s kept Nana occupied which means she hasn’t destroyed anything else in the house. She’s going to be pissed when she hears what she did.”

I sighed and watched as Aidoneus evaded Tsekani’s claws. “I look forward to her sassing us again. Oh! That has to hurt.”

Nina winced and my mom started wringing her hands together as Layla opened the back door for them. “Aidon’s a god. Those scratches will be gone in a matter of hours.”

I choked over her description. “How can you say that when they clearly need stitches?” The wounds were gaping open with blood trickling steadily out of them.

I paused and curled Tarja closer to me as a brisk wind blew through the yard. Mythia was hovering close to Nana who was staring at the guys with so much avarice I thought I might get sick.

My mom clenched her jaw and crossed to Nana’s side. “Mom, you should have a jacket on, It’s cold out here.”

“I’d have a jacket on if I needed one.” Nana’s gaze never once wavered from Aidoneus as he flew through the air. He was shirtless and bloody and I wondered what she found more appealing, his bare skin, or his injuries.

I handed Tarja to Nina and wrapped an arm around my mom. She leaned her head on my shoulder and whispered. “I’m worried we are losing her.”

A vice closed around my chest. Nana was the heart of our family. I refused to give up until we had her back. A strong gust made my mom and I stumble. When I scrambled to keep us from falling, I noticed what Nana had clutched in her hands. It was that damn

green purse. My mind raced as a suspicion started to form in my head.

“We will get her back. How do you think she will deal with having magic when she comes to her senses?”

My mom hunched her shoulders and took a step away from me. “She’ll love it. If she hadn’t burst those pipes, I would doubt your assessment. As it is, it seems Tarja is wrong. I don’t have magic. There is nothing special about me.”

I scrutinized the way my mom paced away from Nana. She was trembling as she gathered up the water bottles from the table and checked if they needed to be filled. I remained where I was, not wanting to push the issue.

“Whether or not you have your own magic, mom, you’re one of the most special women in the world. I’m lucky to have you and Nana as examples to live up to. You are always telling Nina she needs to believe in herself. It’s a lesson you need to listen to, as well.”

Nina inclined her head. “She’s right, Gammy. I hope I’m like you when I get old.”

That broke my mom’s frantic attempt to ignore the issue. She threw her head back and laughed. “Old? I’m a spring chicken sweetheart, that can ground you. Thank you for the sentiment. My mom made me who I am.”

*“There are low levels of magic in you, Mollie. There is a chance it is a residue that will fade, but do not ignore it. That can be dangerous for everyone in the house, but especially you.”*

My mom nodded before she went inside the house. Clearly, this was not a topic she wanted to address at the moment. I kept my eye on Nana while Tseki and Aidon continued faux fighting. Although, there wasn’t much that looked fake about their interaction. Blood dripped from wounds on both of them and they were covered in sweat.

I gave myself permission to enjoy the sight of Aidoneus in what seemed like a primal battle. His muscles rippled while his wings sat gracefully at his back. The god was sex personified and I had a hard time believing he was into me. He could have any woman he wanted



in the world. Yet he had chosen me. For now. I was going to enjoy every second I could until he moved on to someone more his speed.

## CHAPTER 9



I watched my mom move through the kitchen as she prepared the pork roast to add to the green chili Mythia had simmering on the stove top. The house smelled of garlic, onion and spices. It was a warm, homey scent yet it did nothing to comfort me right then.

I was too worried about my mother and Nana. One was under a curse and the other was living in denial. Then there was the elf that had come to me for help. Heidi was trapped inside her house by the poltergeist and I was no closer to finding a way to help her.

I had cast an enchantment around her, ensuring the angry spirit couldn't reach her. I was more grateful than ever I had done so. Because ensuring my family's safety took precedence over me helping others. I refused to feel guilty over that fact. If I was worried about any of them it would keep me from being very effective supporting anyone else.

Selene walked through the archway leading to the kitchen and paused as she took in the scene. I lifted a hand and waved to her. "Good morning. How did you sleep?"

My mother turned a smile the ghouls way. "Would you like some oatmeal?"

Selene's brow furrowed as she crossed to the island. "Is everything alright in here? I heard Tsekani and Aidon outside sparring at the crack of dawn."

I sucked in a breath. "None of us could sleep because we're all worried about Nana."

“Did something happen to her?” Selene focused on the wall separating the living room from the kitchen. Nana was in there watching television with Nina and Tarja.

“Where should I even begin?” I went over my suspicions, as well as the belief she and my mother had magic.

The ghoul’s jaw dropped. “Wow. You have magic, Mollie. Isn’t that great?”

My mom shook her head like she was trying to dislodge spiders from her hair. “Tarja is still recovering from an injury. I don’t feel any different and I certainly can’t do anything cool like light a candle with a whispered word. It’s far more likely that I came into contact with whatever is affecting my mom and it rubbed off on me.”

I rolled my eyes. “Mom prefers to live in denial. Aidoneus sensed something, as well. Although no one is certain if the power will expand or fade away. It’s imperative that you pay attention to changes and not dismiss even the slightest inclination toward magic. As we have learned the hard way, ignoring magical stuff will always come back and bite you in the ass.”

My mother winced and Selene reached out and took her hand. “Are you afraid of having powers?”

My mom shrugged her shoulders. “Honestly, I’ve been vacillating between terror and exhilaration. While I have had more energy and I feel like I did twenty years ago, there is nothing to make me think I have magic that comes from me. It’s just the spell you put on us.”

I got up to retrieve another energy drink as I debated how far to push this issue with my mom. I was already fading. Mom needed to come to terms with this on her own. I got my stubbornness from her and she inherited it from Nana.

“Keep in mind what I said, mom. We need to address it if things change for you. What we can’t put off dealing with is Nana. I have an idea about the source of the curse.”

Mythia dropped the meat mom had already chopped up into the pot with a splash and flew in our direction. “You do? Then we can rid her of this nasty curse and get our Amelia back.”

It warmed me to see how much everyone in the house cared about Nana. She had a way of working herself into your heart. Her

sarcasm and wit had charmed even the devil himself. Hades wasn't prepared for the Duedonne women, that was obvious.

Casting aside the doubt that was riding me, I popped the can open. "Getting Nana back is the goal. I think the key to doing that is taking that damn purse from her. Have you noticed that she carries it with her everywhere now?" What bothered me was how she got it past my increased wards. Cursed objects shouldn't be allowed on my property.

My mom gasped and bounced on her toes. "Holy crap, you're right. Ever since she picked the thing up, she has refused to part with it. And she's been different. It started out with minor changes and grew gradually. I think you're right about it being the source, sweetie. I should have known. I should have never let her buy it."

Selene tilted her head to the side as she considered what we said. "Are you sure? It seems unlikely they would sell a cursed item in an antique store. The owner has to know you'd come down on her for giving the public such a dangerous item."

"*Typically, you would be right,*" Tarja said into our minds as she prowled into the kitchen. I bent and scooped her up when I saw her waver on her feet. "*But that purse doesn't carry the same magical signature as the average cursed item. I can't even sense it, which makes me think we are dealing with a curse cast upon it by a spirit.*"

My heart skipped a beat, and I nearly spilled my grape drink on Tarja's fur. That's why it was able to cross my wards. "What do you mean? Is it haunted? Can purses be possessed?"

Tarja shot her green-eyed glare at me. "*No, they can't. However, as a witch dies, she can use the last of her energy to attach her spirit to an object, using her anger in a last-ditch effort to exact revenge.*"

My mom wrung a towel between her hands. "Is it always anger? Maybe the witch wanted one last fling."

I gave my mom a droll stare. "Does Nana seem like she's out to get one last fling?"

Tarja shifted in my arms, making me set my drink down before I dropped it. "*Spirits need a potent emotion to attach to objects. It is possible for positive ones to be the motivator. However, in this case, I sense rage through Nana. The more I try to get a read from her, the*

*more I pick up on intense fury. Amelia is incredibly strong to have been able to keep the anger I can feel from consuming her."*

"That doesn't sound good." Layla's comment was an understatement. "Although, she is probably the only one in the house that could withstand an angry ghost."

"Could it be like what Heidi is dealing with?" The thought turned my stomach. I couldn't handle another poltergeist since I was failing with the first one.

*"It is nothing like a poltergeist. When a spirit is attached via negative emotions, it becomes a curse, losing its personality, leaving only the anger behind. I don't know much more about it. First we need to determine exactly what we are dealing with before we get worried about the details."*

My mom set the towel down and picked up the butcher knife and continued cutting up the pork. "What do we do? No way is she going to give us the purse to see if you're right, Phoebe."

The woman didn't part with it to go to the bathroom. I wasn't sure how we were going to get the thing away from her. Mythia whizzed past my head, giving me an idea. "Would you be interested in helping with this mission, Thia?"

The pixie stopped mid-air and swiveled to face me. I could feel the excitement vibrating from her. "I'd love to. What can I do?"

"You can sneak into her room tonight and grab the purse. We will neutralize it after that. For this to be successful, it's going to take all of us." I needed to call Stella to ask if she would join us tonight.

She has been at my side throughout most of my magical journey and I wanted her there for this, too. She had a unique take on things and usually had a helpful suggestion or two. Besides, we were each other's cheerleaders. I was falling in love with Aidon. I knew he believed in me, but it wasn't the same as having Stella there encouraging me.

One thing I discovered throughout my life was that friendships should be at the top of every woman's list of relationships she cultivates and cherishes. Aside from my mom and Nana, it was my friends that got me through my divorce and every difficult time in my life.

Mythia started glowing as her wings beat even faster. “I can do that. She won’t see or hear me.”

My mom smiled at the pixie. “You’re fast enough to get away from her even if she does see you. She is still ninety, regardless of any curse.”

I retrieved my cell from the charger and pulled up Stella’s contact information.

“It’s really too bad she’s going to lose the purse. She loves it. And it’s the perfect size,” my mom lamented as I hit the phone icon next to Stella’s name.

I snorted and was laughing by the time Stella answered. “Hey, Pheeb. I take the laughter to mean Tarja is awake and doing well.”

That cut off my humor. I gave Stella the abbreviated version of what had happened. “So, we need your help tonight to destroy the purse after Thia takes it from Nana’s room.”

“You know I’ll be there. Next time, call me sooner. I’d have been there earlier to help with the library.”

I appreciated Stella’s offer, but she had a family and job that I couldn’t keep interfering with. “You have a life outside of my magical problems. I can’t take up all of your time.”

“I did have a big showing this morning, and that was after Todd accosted me in the shower. However, I want you to always call. Helping you with these cases is my favorite part of the day.”

I choked, mentally scrubbing my brain of the image of my best friend with her husband getting busy in the shower. It helped to focus on the last part of what she said. “In that case, I have a proposition. From now on, I want to hire you to help me with the magical investigating. That way, I won’t feel guilty if you lose a sale or two.”

“Normally, I wouldn’t take your money. Seeing as you inherited a major corporation and can afford it, I will allow you to pay me. I want to take the family to Europe next year for a month.”

I laughed, offering the use of my jet for the trip. We hung up a few minutes later, and I put Tarja down so I could grab a snack. I needed to get more research done before we enacted our plan this evening. I considered putting it off for a night so I could get some sleep, but was anxious to have my Nana back. Having an end in sight alleviated some of the stress I was under.

\* \* \*

I SAT on my bed next to Stella and Tarja, listening for the sound of Mythia heading to Nana's room. Everyone had headed to bed an hour ago, so the house was now quiet. Nora, our resident ghost, floated down from the ceiling.

"Is Mythia going in now?" I had recruited the ghost to help spy on Nana to make it easier to pull this off.

Nora shook her head, making her translucent form waver. The bluish color faded with the movement, as well. "Amelia is still awake."

Stella flopped back onto the mattress. "We shouldn't have let her take that nap after dinner."

I shrugged my shoulders. "Nana usually rests for a bit after we eat and is always able to sleep later. Can you check on her again?"

Nora nodded, then disappeared through the wall and was back a second later. "Her eyes are slipping closed. I'm going to tell Mythia. Be ready."

I saluted the ghost and went to the closet and slipped some furry boots on my feet. It was going to be cold outside, which is where we planned on destroying the purse. I was glad to see Nora embracing her role with us. I'd always suspected she wanted to be more involved. I had no idea what was keeping her here, but figured I would have to ask her about it at some point. Just one more item to add to my never-ending to-do list.

A high-pitched squeal made me race from the closet. Stella was leaving the room right before I reached her. Mythia was flying faster than a speeding bullet down the hallway, clutching Nana's big green purse.

Nana slammed into her doorway with a curse and stumbled toward us. It looked like she'd put her finger in a light socket. Her hair was a wild, ratted mess sticking up all around her head, and her eyes were red and bloodshot. Not to mention that she wore a mask of fury on her face.

"Put her to sleep!" I barely heard Mythia's words as she zipped past us.

I shared a look with Stella, who nodded her head. I didn't have much time, so I thought about Nana falling asleep, then muttered, "*Somnum.*"

Nana bounced from one wall to the other, however she stayed on her feet. I didn't manage to put her to sleep, but I had slowed her down. I scooped Tarja up from behind us and ran for the stairs with Stella.

"We need to hurry. What spell are we using to get rid of this thing?" Stella's voice was choppy as we raced across the hardwood.

"I was thinking a simple destroy spell would work. *Perdere.*"

*"That might not work. You need time to figure out what's powering it. It might not be something you can eliminate."*

Nana's hand grabbed hold of the back of my shirt and I started falling to the ground. I tossed Tarja ahead of me so I didn't land on her. She yowled while Stella cursed as she crashed into Nana and I.

The three of us landed in a tangle. A loud crack was the only thing I could hear. I waited for pain to tear through me, but it never came. "Are you alright, Stella?" I didn't bother asking Nana. She wouldn't tell the truth anyway.

Stella jumped to her feet and grabbed my hand. "I'm good. Nana broke something though."

I winced and let her help me stand up. Nana tried to grab my leg. Tears formed in my eyes when her arm flopped around with the wrist pointing in a different direction than it should. It left little doubt that she had a comminuted fracture in her arm.

*"Phoebe, we must break the curse to truly help her."* Tarja was the only one that could get through to me at that moment.

I nodded and continued toward the stairs. I was grateful my mom and Nina knew to remain in their rooms. The last thing we needed was for them to be tangled up in the middle of this.

I hadn't made it four steps when the plaster to the right of my head exploded and bit into my skin. My arms went up reflexively as I turned to see Nana casting spells at us. I'd used my barrier so often that it'd become second nature to me, which was handy because I didn't need to concentrate on it too much.

*"Obice."*



Something sparked off my shield as I dragged Stella with me. Tarja was running in front of us. We were halfway down the stairs when dark red fire slammed into my barrier so hard it made me tumble forward.

I managed to catch myself on the railing. My body swung wildly to the side. It was then that I caught sight of the flames surrounding Nana's hands. I couldn't believe my eyes.

The roar of fire crackled all around us. It licked the stairs, but was mostly feeling its way up my shield. Wind whipped my hair around my face and Stella clung to me from the stair above. "What do we do now? We can't combat her witch fire, can we?"

*"Another witch cannot cancel the fire of another. If Aidoneus were here, he could try. Fortunately for you both, I can take the wind out of her sails, which should stop the flames."*

My heart raced in my chest, and I could hardly catch my breath. "How are you going to do that when you can hardly walk on your own?"

I swear my familiar growled at me before she flicked her tail in our direction, then turned to face Nana. Stella nudged me and jerked her chin at the bottom of the stairs where Mythia and Layla were standing. The pixie had handed the bag off to the wolf shifter.

The flames surrounded us entirely when we tried to descend the stairs. I froze in place and held still. I had no desire to get burned by the flames. Stella followed suit. We were breathing heavily as Nana fumbled and dropped to one knee.

Her dark red flames vanished a second later. She was on her ass at that point but glaring daggers at Stella and I. My hand was over my chest as I tried to keep my heart from leaping through my rib cage.

There was no doubt in my mind that Nana had magic, which likely meant my mom did as well. Being able to wield witch fire wasn't a transient power. It was something unique to the individual practitioner. This development certainly complicated things.

Unfortunately, there was no room left in my head to come up with a plan on how to help them adjust, then train them. I had to destroy the object of Nana's curse, then figure out a way to banish a poltergeist.

## CHAPTER 10



"We need to get downstairs and outside before she recovers."

I was sure my mother and Nina heard what I said behind their closed doors. Yes, I was yelling but I couldn't help myself.

There was a sense of urgency riding me like a case of the clap. That was an incredibly unpleasant thought. Stella was huffing and puffing like a pair of bellows as she put one foot in front of the other as she went down the stairs.

"Should we grab Tarja?" Leave it to Stella to ask the important question.

I glanced back as I made my way behind Stella. "*Don't worry about me. I've used my reserves, so I can't do anything anyway.*"

"What about Nana? What if she uses her fire again?" My throat tightened and my gut twisted.

*"She doesn't have the energy to call it up again. Her magic is stronger than it was before and it isn't an aftereffect of being around it so much. She is most certainly a witch, which is something we can deal with later. First, you need to deal with this."*

I nodded my head and continued. It was difficult to remain on task when I heard Nana wail behind me. "I will make you regret ever taking my purse from me, bitch."

Those words were like a knife through my heart. "I'll get you another one, Nana. One that isn't cursed."

Layla shook her head. "This thing is drawing her to it. It's like a black hole sucking her into its vortex."

I had to remind myself that it wasn't that Nana couldn't afford to buy a new one to begin with. It was the fact that she'd gotten such a good bargain. Nana prided herself on shopping smarter and saving money. She saw no reason to waste it just because you had it. I used to feel the same. Now I wasn't so sure.

"Well, get it outside, away from the house and the rest of the family." I'd given them instructions to remain inside until they were told it was safe.

We didn't need them trying to get in the middle of things. My mom wouldn't be able to help herself. Her worry for her mother would override her common sense. And Nina would be trying to prove she was a capable witch.

Layla and Mythia were in motion before Stella and I reached the foyer. I paused, watching the ugly look Nana shot me as she used her injured arm to get to her feet, then stalk toward us.

Stella yelped and tugged me into motion. My feet felt like lead at the ends of my legs. It was harder than I expected to leave Nana with a serious injury to her arm. I would need to address that right away or this curse might end up with it needing to be amputated. If the blood supply was cut off long enough there was no recovering the limb.

I swiped my phone as we raced through the kitchen. Using the voice commands, I told my phone to send Clio a text that I needed her right away to heal Nana's broken arm, then tossed it on the island.

An icy wind stole my breath the second we stepped outside. I shivered my way to the purse Layla had dropped in the middle of the grass. Stella and I stopped and looked down at the thing.

"Remember the spell we are using?"

Stella nodded and took a deep breath. "I'm ready."

I smoothed my hands down the front of my pants and focused on destroying the object before us. I grabbed Stella's hands and combined our magic. "*Perdere.*" We chanted in unison.

Bright light flashed around us, blinding us for a few seconds. When our vision cleared, the purse was still there and Nana was on her knees, reaching for it. Instinctively, I kicked the thing and sent it flying toward Mythia and Layla.

Layla caught it. My leg clipped Nana on the way back down. I cringed when Nana was knocked to her side and bent to see if she was alright. "I'm so sorry. Are you alright?"

Nana snarled and scratched me with her good hand. My eyes flew wide. I'd never been struck by Nana not in any way and it hurt that she did now. I knew she wasn't herself, yet that didn't matter to the little girl in me. She wanted to curl into a ball and cry. This woman had been a parental figure in my life, all of my life.

"Get something to hide that thing inside," Stella shouted. "That's not Nana, Phoebe. We need to contain her before she hurts herself or someone else."

I crawled like a crab backward, then stood up. "Let's use *contineo*. It'll hold her in place."

"You will regret this. I will enjoy burning your house and everyone you love." Nana's eyes were demon red and her hair made Medusa look good.

The moon shone brightly above us, mocking the mess that had us by the balls. We should be out here sitting by a fire enjoying some wine, not trying to contain my grandmother.

Stella gave me a nod, letting me know she was ready. I pictured a warm circle surrounding Nana, prohibiting her from getting out. "*Contineo*."

Nana stiffened the second the word left our lips. Mine were chattering and I worried it would interfere, but there was no need. A shimmering bubble descended on Nana and surrounded her before it vanished from sight.

She lifted a hand and started banging on the invisible sphere. I sagged, knowing she couldn't do anything while in there. Layla raced to my side. "Are you guys alright?"

"Fine. Where's Mythia? We need to contain that purse. If you give me a few minutes, I can think of a spell to hide its magical signature from Nana."

Layla dropped the thing like it burned her. "She went to get something to hold that, so you won't need to use any of your magic. I doubt you could block it anyway. You'd have to lock onto the curse and it's nearly impossible to detect, although it feels nasty."

Mythia returned carrying a dark metal box that was a hundred times bigger than her. Pixies had enormous strength and could handle more when compared to their weight than any other creature.

The pixie set the box down. "This is lined with lead and should be effective at cutting off the connection between Nana and the purse."

Layla lifted the lid and I dropped the cursed object inside. The second I touched it, I felt like ants were crawling all over my skin. That had to be what they were talking about. It was very unpleasant and made me wonder why Nana would want the thing to begin with. Unless it felt that way because it had bonded with her.

The pounding on the shield around Nana stopped. I looked back to see she was still snarling at us. "What did you do with my purse? I want it back. It's mine."

The sight of her made me think of the movie *Lord of the Rings* and how Gollum and Frodo were with the ring. It sent chills racing through me. That was not Nana at all, and it confirmed the purse was the cursed object. There is no way she would act like a woman possessed if it weren't.

I moved closer, trying to get a look at Nana's injured wrist, but she became frenzied when I got closer to her. "Let's move her inside where it's warmer. As long as she's inside the shield she can't cause problems and my fingers are going numb."

Stella rubbed her hands together. "Good idea."

Layla and Mythia maneuvered between Nana and me. Layla held up her hand. "We will get her inside the kitchen. You two push the table into the far corner."

"We can manage that." I breathed a sigh of relief when we were inside a second later.

Stella grabbed two chairs and pushed them to the opposite wall and I followed suit. When we had all the seats out of the way, we picked up the large wooden table to move it.

Stella grunted, her face turning red. "This thing is heavier than I thought. Hurry."

The two of us likely looked ridiculous as we shuffled rapidly, yet moved very little. I thought my back was going to break by the time we set it down. Just as the legs hit the tile, Layla and Mythia carried a spitting and cursing Nana into the house.

“She’s unpleasant,” Mythia observed.

“Extremely,” I agreed.

Evanora floated into the room and recoiled. “She’s worse.”

Stella sighed. “She’s pissed she can’t get to her precious. Tarja might be right. The curse might involve the anger of a spirit.”

Nora drifted closer to Nana, who had spittle dripping from the sides of her mouth like a rabid beast. The ghost cocked her head to the side and extended her hand through the magical bubble.

I gasped and leaped at the ghost, only to fall through her and land painfully on my hands. She was inciting Nana’s rage once again when her hand dropped through Nora’s arm without making contact. “Stop, Nora. What are you doing? That’s not safe.”

Evanora turned to stare at me with pursed lips. She was dressed the same as always in her apron over a gown with a bonnet on her head. “There is nothing she can do to me. I’m a ghost and she isn’t a Tainted witch. Only one who has muddied her magic can suck the power from me.”

Layla extended a hand to me and heaved me off the floor. “Thanks. Did you feel anything? Are Stella and Tarja right? Is there a ghost inside her?”

Nora’s head shook from side to side, making the tails of her hat swish against the sides of her ghostly face. “There is no sentient entity inside Amelia. Tarja was right about the rage, though. The anger originated in the handbag Amelia purchased. I can sense the way it is searching for the tether that held it in this world.”

Stella gaped at the ghost. “How do you know so much about curses?”

Nora chuckled and waved her hands in front of her form. “I don’t know anything about curses. I know about spirits. And I can tell you this is not a person inside Amelia. However, the rage seems to be an entity in itself. I don’t know how to explain it. I can only say I feel it reaching out and I assume it needs contact with the bag.”

Nana’s chest rose and fell, but she was no longer spitting at anyone. She still looked crazed, but it was fading. My body felt like we had been at this for hours instead of mere minutes, proving emotions took a greater toll on a body than physical exertion.

Stella threw her hands in the air. “What’s the purpose? It seems like an odd cross between a curse and a haunting.”

I nodded my head. “That’s precisely what she is describing. Rage is a powerful emotion. Especially if it allows even weaker witches to attach it to inanimate objects. From what Tarja said, it takes a powerful practitioner to attach their spirit to something that will tether it to this world. Yet, it sounded like their anger could escape and go anywhere.”

Mythia shivered in the air and rubbed her hands over her arms. “All magic requires intent. Anger doesn’t float out of a person and seek a host. Whoever owned this purse before was pissed off and likely hoped whoever used it next would be torn apart by her rage. My guess would be she was mad at someone in her family since that’s who often inherits belongings.”

Tarja limped into the kitchen. *“I never considered a situation like that. It seems both Thia and Nora are right. Now that Nana has quieted, I am not able to sense any sentient being attached to her. I cannot feel the bag anymore to determine if the rage is reaching out for it.”*

I bent and picked Tarja up. “Mythia put it in a lead-lined box so Nana cannot detect its location. I texted Clio to come and treat her arm, but I need to get this rage out of her first. How do we do that? Is it even that simple since it isn’t really a curse?”

*“You cannot remove the anger until the purse is destroyed. It will linger and try to reattach to Amelia until it can get to the bag. It fuels itself and the madder Amelia becomes, the more powerful it becomes.”*

Stella’s face lost the coloring. “Shit. It has to be supercharged at this point. We tried to destroy it and nothing happened. What do we do?”

Layla lifted her phone into the air. “I say we try dragon fire. It’s capable of destroying anything. Unless you think witch fire is a better option, Tarja?”

*“I suggest starting with dragon fire. Witch fire is unlikely to damage the purse because it is fueled by magic which the thing has already repelled.”*

I ran my fingers over Tarja's fur. "Layla, can you ask Tsekani to come help us?"

Layla smiled at me. "He should be here any second."

Tsekani arrived before I could respond. "How can I help? Is Nana alright? Her arm is hanging in an odd direction."

I shook my head. "She hurt herself when she attacked us. We need you to incinerate the purse in the lead box out back so Stella and I can perform an exorcism on Nana."

Tseki's eyes widened. "You what? She's possessed?"

"No, she is not possessed," Tarja said curtly. *"The curse was driven by rage and that anger has transferred into Amelia. We need to get it out of her before it kills her and everyone she loves. It will not dissipate as long as the bag keeping it here exists."*

I almost apologized to Tarja for upsetting her, then decided against it. My description would help Stella and I visualize how to extricate the miasma stuck inside Nana. Tsekani nodded his head. "I'm on it."

He was out the door and the rest of us, minus Nana, were glued to the window as he stripped down, then shifted into his dragon form and took to the air. I wondered if he was going to melt the box, then noticed Layla had followed him and was removing the purse. She tossed the green bag to Tseki, who caught it.

Nana's fury resumed, as did her pounding against the shield. I focused on the dragon, who let loose a stream of his bright orange flames. They immediately engulfed the bag and his claw. I could feel the heat from his fire inside the house.

It seemed like he focused his flames on his claw for an hour before he extinguished it and I saw the dust covering the scales of his paw. With a flap of his wings, he turned and was diving into the ocean to rinse the dust from his body.

Stella sighed. "That heat was nice while it lasted. He's seriously badass. I'm glad he's on our side. I'd hate to face him when he's upset."

I laughed and turned to see blood dripping down the inside of the shield. However, Nana was much calmer. She was breathing like she had just completed a marathon, but no longer spitting and snarling



and trying to get out. She had to have bitten herself because there was a cut on her lower lip.

“Layla, can you and Selene hold Nana’s arms while Stella and I work? I don’t want to try this through a magical shield.” I waved my hands in the direction of the mess on the invisible barrier.

I grabbed Stella’s hand and released the barrier. Layla and Selene jumped on Nana. Layla had a hold of her upper arm, but she was careful not to injure her further. They held her firmly. There was more life in Nana’s eyes, but it was fading in and out. I just knew she was fighting the rage since it no longer had its connection to this world.

“Let’s use *relinquere corpus* with the intent of forcing out the anger boiling inside Nana.”

“*You must work fast. It is trying to get its hooks into Amelia. She doesn’t have much time before it overpowers her will and asserts its own.*” Tarja’s warning was not helping.

My heart was pounding a million miles an hour, threatening to give out at any second. Stella closed her eyes and was taking deep breaths. I followed suit, taking care to imagine what I wanted to happen.

It was easy to picture the rage as a red mist filling her and trying to sink into her muscles. To get a mist out, I imagined the spell as an industrial fan with a boiler attached to the opposite end. The wind fed the flames higher. Next, I added an open door so the mist would be forced inside and destroyed for good.

Certain I had the image firmly in hand, I opened my eyes. I lifted my hand to signal Stella. Together we chanted, “*relinquere corpus.*”

Heat blistered my cheeks whilst wind whipped around the kitchen, rattling the items on the counters and pictures on the wall. Nana threw her head back and screamed, then bent at the waist. Layla and Selene lowered with her. My throat closed up when I saw the fear on their faces.

I continued fueling my spell, keeping my mind focused on the image I created. It took several long seconds before red mist burst through Nana’s skin and flew behind the trio. Layla caught Nana when she collapsed.

My gaze shifted from Nana's closed eyes, the rise and fall of her chest to the red mist that was the anger-curse as it headed toward the wall. I expected a bright splatter that never occurred. A flash of orange followed by intense heat and the rage vanished.

"It worked." I was shocked that the exorcism went as smoothly as it did. I had never attempted such a thing. Then again, I couldn't remember putting so many details into my spell before I cast it. "Are you alright Nana?"

"Better now. Put me down. I'm not a child, Layla." Layla laughed as tears leaked from her eyes, but she did as Nana demanded and put her on her feet.

My smile refused to diminish as I watched Nana gather herself. Nana cradled her arm to her chest and started turning green around the edges. It was obvious the pain was catching up with her.

"Thank you for that. I knew you would suck that shit out of me, Phoebe. Of everyone, I knew you would be the one to catch on and not blame my age. I'm hungry for some of that green chili I couldn't eat earlier. Can you fix me a bowl, Thia, while we wait for Clio to get here?"

The room burst into laughter. I approached Nana. I held Tarja in one arm and wrapped the other around Nana's waist, careful not to jostle her. "It's good to have you back. We sure did miss you."

Most of the tension stringing me tight as a bow vanished with the return of Nana. The rest could wait. Tonight, we were celebrating this small victory.

## CHAPTER 11



“Do we need to take her to the hospital?” I had to refrain from chewing my lower lip with my worry. Clio was making tutting noises as she scanned Nana’s arm.

The fact that I had reached out to her first told me how much I was coming to rely on the coven I headed up. Clio in particular. It was not just because she was a healer. But she was a genuinely nice person and I enjoyed being around her.

Clio set Nana’s arm on the pillow gently. “As you’re aware, it’s a comminuted fracture which, given her age, should be set with a pin. However, she has outstanding bone density. Her magic has developed enough that it will aid the healing that I will use on her. If she can promise to keep it immobile for the next forty-eight hours, it should heal just fine.”

Nana grumped at us and lifted her chin in the air. “If Tsekani and Aidoneus keep their shirtless shenanigans to a minimum, then I won’t have the need to use it to stuff dollar bills down their pants.”

I choked on a laugh and tried to stifle my reaction while Layla and Selene didn’t bother. Their amusement was infectious and I couldn’t hold the giggles in anymore. My mom crossed her arms over her chest and scowled at Nana. “Mother! One of those men is your granddaughter’s significant other!” I hadn’t noticed when she joined us, but was glad she did.

I snorted as I laughed at my mom’s indignation, as well. I waved my hand in front of my face and gathered myself. “It’s okay. I’m going

to get dollars for the next time they spar. It'll be a hoot to see their reactions. But no touching. We can throw it at them."

My mom shook her head while her face split into a wide grin. "As long as it won't offend them. I'd hate for them to feel objectified."

I wrapped an arm around my mom's shoulders. "I think they'd both laugh along with us. But the real issue here is keeping Nana from using that arm. Could you create a magical sling that will keep it in the right position? It would likely provide more support without any of the pressure points that cause the patient's pain."

Nana hissed when she tried to move her arm. "I'm all for no pain. This hurts like a bitch right now."

Clio smiled and nodded. "I've never thought of creating a magical sling before. That's a fantastic idea. I could do the same with a walking boot. The downside is that the spell will make sure you couldn't move either for a few days."

Clio held Nana's hand in one of hers and put her other hand just below her elbow. A soft amber glow emanated from her palms, highlighting Nana's bruised flesh. The pinched expression eased from Nana's face and she relaxed back into the chair. I, however, clenched my jaw and waited for the scream to come.

Clio couldn't heal the bone without setting it first. I opened my mouth to warn Nana, knowing she would be upset if she wasn't told first, and closed it right back. The healer tugged Nana's fingers toward her and shifted her arm, setting the break. Nana didn't even wince when Clio did this.

"You're better than morphine," I exclaimed. "I've had patients on a max dose of painkillers in agony when their bones are being set."

Clio chuckled. "Magic is a wonderful thing, isn't it? I wish I could use it more often at the hospital when treating patients. It would make it so much easier."

Nana's jaw was on her chest as she gaped at Clio. "Taking away pain without drugs would be impossible to explain. It is unreal. I didn't feel a thing."

"Then I did my job right. When I position your arm close to your stomach, don't move it so I can cast the support spell. It might take me a minute because I've never done this before."

Part of me envied Clio for the ease with which she cast spells. It was so hard for me at times, which was frustrating. I was used to learning skills fast and being good at them in no time. Magic could be wildly unpredictable and delicate to use, making it a challenge to begin with. Added to that is the fact that I grew up oblivious to magic or any of the creatures in the magical world.

I might know better now, but I still had to overcome the ingrained way my brain worked. It took effort and concentration to create a clear image of what I wanted before casting a spell. Intent was everything, and my mind had a tendency to wander in a hundred different directions. That was not conducive to being a proficient witch.

*“You need to stop and acknowledge what you’ve accomplished and see how amazing you really are. You haven’t been a witch for a full year and in the past week alone you’ve used your connection to me to help heal the wounds to my soul, worked with the elements, created a spell to suck the anger out of Nana. You are doing far better than okay.”*

My eyes blurred for a few seconds as I listened to Tarja’s praise. I never stopped and thought about it like that. I saw how much I still had ahead of me.

My mom was wiping the counter and watching Clio as she worked. “Tarja and Phoebe said I have magic as well. Can you tell if it’s going to stay? Or if it is because of the spell Phoebe did on us?”

My jaw hit my chest. I was shocked that my mother asked Clio about her magic. Clio smiled at my mom and inclined her head before chuckling. “It’s going to be interesting to see how you and Amelia develop your powers. Your hand stopped moving a few seconds ago, yet the rag has continued running over the marble surface.”

My mom gasped and glanced down. The cloth stopped moving almost immediately while mom’s face went ashen. “Oh my.”

Nina clapped her hands. “I’m so glad you have magic too, Gammy. I’ve been wanting you to share this with me. Now we can practice spells together.”

My mom lifted teary eyes and a smile to me, then hugged Nina. “We’re going to start slow as soon as Nana is better.” Mom looked

over at Nana. “It’s a good thing you have on one of your button-up pajama tops. Otherwise, you’d be wearing the same thing for three days without a shower, mom.”

Nana’s face scrunched up and her mouth puckered. “It feels better already. I can feel the magic holder tingling against my arm. It distracts from the discomfort and makes dealing with this easier.”

Clio placed a hand on Nana’s shoulder as she stood up. “There isn’t a better recommendation in my book. I’ll be using the spell next time I have a broken bone. It’s better than a cast because you can get it wet. I will come back and check in on you tomorrow and do another healing session. In the meantime, no movement.”

““We’ll make sure she stays out of trouble. I think Aidon has some chains we can use to tie her down if need be.” My laugh ended when my mind caught up with my mouth and I heard how bad that actually sounded.

“It’s not surprising that god is kinky. He’s too good looking not to have a quirk or two. At least that one is pleasurable. I bet he’s good in bed, too. I bet he gives you multiple orgasms nightly.” Nana’s sigh said how much she missed sex. It was awkward to think about my grandmother being intimate. However, she was a beautiful woman. I would miss sex if I wasn’t having it anymore.

Clio’s face turned ten shades of red as she said goodbye while hiding her laugh from everyone. I let Layla walk her out while I held my hands out at my sides. “It’s good to be queen.”

Nina was beet red and buried her head in her hands while the rest of us were laughing our asses off. Life was too short to take it so seriously and if the worst my family thought of Aidon was that he tied me up and gave me multiple orgasms, I was fine with that. Besides, it was time my daughter learned life’s important lessons. Great sex was at the top of the list.

\* \* \*

“HEY HEIDI. How are you doing? It sounds calm over there.” I crossed my fingers that was the case. I hadn’t gotten back to her yet

because of the shitstorm here with Nana, so the first thing I did this morning was call her before anything else captured my attention.

The elf's sigh crackled through the speaker on my cell. "The poltergeist tried to get through your spell for about fifteen hours before giving up, so I'm exhausted. Every once in a while, she pops up to give me grief. Please tell me you're calling with good news and that is why you haven't been in touch with me for so long."

I winced at the acid in her tone. "Again, I apologize. I had an emergency with a curse to deal with and haven't had the time to do much investigating."

"Are you kidding me? I have an emergency. I doubt anything can compare to what I am going through. I'm a prisoner in my kitchen and cannot move freely about my house." Heidi's voice pierced my eardrum as she yelled at me.

I was helping her and not getting paid. She could be a bit more grateful. I wasn't omniscient, for crap's sake. I bit my tongue to keep from letting her know how I felt and reminded myself she was indeed going through something terrible.

"My mother and daughter have been working with me to find some answers. We need a clear picture of what we are dealing with before we know how to handle it."

My mom and Nina walked in at that moment, both carrying books. Nina's pile had charred edges from the fire Nana had set in the library. I mouthed *thank you* to them and returned my attention to Heidi who was screaming.

That wasn't out of anger. "Heidi! What's happening?"

She was too busy screaming and shouting curse words to reply to me. I called her name several more times and was about to jump in my car when she finally replied. "That goddamn bitch managed to cut me."

I gasped. "What? Is she crossing the shield?"

"She didn't have to. One of the picture frames she tossed at me made it through and sliced my arm. Shit. Now she's throwing everything she can manage at the barrier."

I grabbed my purse and keys and was about to take her off speaker phone and head to her house when Tarja walked in the room. "*Do not react out of fear, Phoebe. You cannot do anything*"

*more if you go there now. Think this through with me. Hattie used to charge the difficult clients for her help, then donate it to shelters in the area.”*

“Tarja is right, sweetheart. We need more information, so we can develop a plan. Heidi,” my mom called out as she hovered over the phone in my hand. I sent it down as she talked. “Do you know the poltergeist’s name?”

“I have no idea what her name is. She didn’t speak at first and when she started, all she muttered were threats if I didn’t leave her house. It’s my house, dammit.” It was clear Heidi wasn’t shouting that last part at us, but at her unwanted guest.

“We can have Stella look into previous owners of the house. Is her name important? Did you find something?” My heart leaped in my chest with the thought my mother might have discovered an answer. We needed one so badly that I wasn’t sure I dare allow myself to hope for anything.

“Please say yes,” Heidi chanted.

My mom sighed and shook her head from side to side. “I’m not sure if it will mean much in the end, but I think the woman might be a Tainted witch that is trying to find a way to return to the living. I read something about malevolent poltergeists and their ability to suffocate a soul that they have bonded with. Once they kill the essence of who you are, they can take over your body.”

“And you thought some curse was an emergency? You cannot let her suck my soul dry and take over my body! Holy shit, you have to do something. Please.” The elf was reduced to sobbing at the end of her tirade.

“I promise you I am doing everything I can to help you. I am not ignoring you, but I need to go and talk to my familiar and consult some of the other witches in my coven to see if they know more about this situation and how to best handle it. I do have some good news before I hang up. Because of the emergency I just handled, there is an idea brewing in my head, so it is not entirely hopeless.”

“Come over and try your idea while your mom keeps looking. Please, you have to do something.” Desperation dripped from the elf’s plea.



I rubbed my temples where a headache was already forming. “I cannot come over there until I run this past my familiar. For all I know, this will give the ghost more power. Let me look into this and I will get back to you as soon as I can, I promise.”

Heidi’s heavy sigh sounded staticky through the phone. “Alright. Please be fast.” The elf disconnected before I could say another word.

*“What do you have in mind?”*

“How would a Tainted be able to haunt a house like that and try to come back? I thought very few witches could pull off tethering to a house. Fiona’s grandmother could because of the additional power from her ancestors. Heidi’s house didn’t have ancestral magic when I was there.”

*“She might not be a Tainted witch. Mundies become ghosts when they suffer a violent death or have unfinished business. They can become twisted when they aren’t able to resolve their issues. If she is a Tainted witch, she would need to be extremely powerful to bond to the house. If she used Blood magic close to her death, it would be possible.”*

*“In order for her to take possession of a host, she must weaken her so she has no resistance and can kill off her soul. If I’m remembering right, some Tainted can use Blood magic and perform a binding ceremony on themselves well before their death. It used to be a common practice as a way of attaining immortality.”*

“Why did they stop doing that? It seems like anyone willing to destroy another person for personal gain would want to live on, even if it was in another body.” The idea of it made me sick to my stomach and went against everything I believed in.

*“Because it isn’t easy to take possession of another. And it takes a long time for the ghost to build enough power. After death, they are often nothing more than strong negative emotions until they imbibe enough energy from another witch and can become corporeal.”*

That sounded all too familiar. “You mean like the energy from the purse that attached itself to Nana? Could that have been a Tainted witch trying to resurrect herself?”

*“That is entirely possible. Although we won’t ever know that now because you and Stella destroyed the energy.”*

"Is that why you told me to destroy the purse? Because you were worried it might be more than mere anger?"

*"Partially, yes. Anger always has the potential to morph into something truly vile. It's one of the strongest emotions. It could easily have evolved into a poltergeist as it broke Nana down."*

Nana scoffed. "That would never have happened. That thing inside me started the fire and burst the pipes because I was resisting its attempts to control me and break me down. I never shrank back away from it. It had to work double time just to make me put one foot in front of the other."

"So can we get rid of Heidi's ghost by burning her house down, then performing a magical exorcism of the crumbling structure? That's where my mind has been traveling ever since we dealt with Nana last night."

*"I need to research the topic more. You can force her out after she takes over Heidi. Inanimate objects are another story altogether. They don't have sentience to support the spell."*

There was no way I was going to allow that poltergeist to take over Heidi. She'd come to me for help and I promised I would do something. Suddenly, I wanted to scream and punch something. It bruised my pride, but more than that, I felt like I was letting Heidi down. Neither sat well with me. I was a fixer. That's why I had been such a good nurse for over two decades.

"I hate that this is something I can't solve right now for Heidi. She doesn't deserve to be tortured like this."

"Mollie, dear, would you get me an ibuprofen? I need to alleviate some of this pain. You're not a quitter, Phoebe. You've always been stubborn and determined. You will find a solution to this as well. You've solved every case that has come your way, so far."

I smiled at Nana. I'd almost lost her. If I had put her behavior down to her age or had given up and stopped looking or trying, I would have. "You're my grandmother. You have to say that. However, I get your point. To do anything, I need a starting point, though."

*"Patience and persistence are your best friends where magical matters are concerned, Phoebe. You must stay the course and use all your resources."*

Laughter bubbled up from my core when Tarja spoke into my head. "You sound like a helpline."

Tarja's green cat eyes narrowed on me. "*I'm your personal help line. Now, can we call Luci and Zeph? I know you have a lot on your plate with Heidi, but we cannot forget about Stuleros. We need to see about getting more help to repair the realm. I'm anxious to try again.*"

My laughter broke free, and I stroked the fur behind her ears. "I will send Luci a message and ask her if she has heard from the others. She was going to ask them to help us last time we talked."

Nina lifted her head from one of the books she was working on. "Why don't you just call her? You usually hate texting."

I nodded my agreement. I did prefer personal contact rather than the impersonal text. It felt like a memo or email you'd get from work. "Because she lives in Italy and it is nighttime for her. I would feel awful if I woke her up with a phone call."

"I forgot she's in Europe. We should go meet her sometime. We've never been to Europe." Nina looked hopeful.

"After we take a trip to New Orleans. You'll love that city."

"Deal!" A smile spread over my face when she bounced in her seat.

I picked up my phone and shot off a text to Lucianna, asking if she had spoken to the others and if we could set a time to talk.

Setting my phone down, I crossed to the fridge to grab an apple when my phone dinged. "That was fast. I guess she was awake."

"*What did she say?*" Tarja sounded anxious. I'd bet it was because she looked forward to seeing Zephyrus.

"She said yes and that Nissa and Cordelia will be joining us." The three little dots appeared on the screen, indicating she was sending another message. When Luci's second message came through, I wasn't sure I could take the additional stress. "Nissa and Cordelia can meet tomorrow night. Looks like Heidi will have to wait a little longer."

"We don't have a plan yet, Phoebe. You are not ignoring Heidi, we will not let her down. I know that's a big worry for you."

I sighed, wishing the answer to both problems would plop into my lap. "I know. Why don't you show me those books, mom? No rest for

the wicked.”

My feet were lead weights as I rounded the island and took a seat between Nana and my mom. Having them there helping reminded me I wasn't carrying the weight on my own. I was lucky to have the support of my family and friends. Hattie had been on her own when she did this.

That thought was sobering and stopped any complaints I had. Perspective was everything. I wouldn't have handled it well if I had been in Hattie's shoes. She was powerful and talented. I hoped I lived up to her example one day.

## CHAPTER 12



“*H*ello, Queenie. You look lovely this evening.”

My heart started racing and my body heated the second I heard that familiar, deep voice. I spun around with a ridiculous smile on my face, ready to run and jump into Aidon’s arms. No man had ever given me palpitations and made me breathless with a simple compliment.

“What are you doing here? I didn’t expect you today.” I didn’t bother stopping my feet from crossing the kitchen.

Aidoneus met me halfway and drew me into his arms. “I came to check on Tarja and your Nana. And take you out on a date.”

My hands were running up and down the front of his chest. The muscles in his chest jumped beneath my fingertips. For a second, I lost myself in the feel of him and the romantic idea that he had come to whisk me off to a fancy restaurant before taking me home and ravishing me.

I lifted to my toes and pressed my mouth against his. I broke away before I could allow him to get caught up in the passion brewing between us. Sadly, I didn’t have time to indulge in anything of the sort.

“I wish I could go out with you, but there is too much to do here. I have to find a way to sever a ghost’s tie to the elf’s house, then exorcise it. I have a meeting later tonight with a few of the other Pleiades to discuss ways we can save Stuleros so Tarja and Zeph can make some babies.”

*“I am anxious to reproduce for the benefit of witch kind.”* Tarja sounded irritated by my description, which while not intentional, made me want to smile.

I smiled at my familiar as she sat on a stool next to Nana. “Every witch I have talked to appreciates the effort, even if we aren’t able to pull it off. I love that you are willing to put yourself at risk to make life better for witches.”

Tarja rolled her eyes. At least, I think she did. It was difficult to tell with a cat. *“Sweet talking me will get you nowhere.”*

Aidoneus chuckled and gave Nana a one-armed hug, careful of her injured arm. “It is good to see you back to yourself, Amelia. We were all terribly worried about you.”

Nana gestured in my direction with her good arm. “I had no doubt Phoebe would figure it out and banish that nastiness from me. I just had to hold out long enough. Although, I got a broken arm for my efforts. That curse tried its hardest to break me down, but it didn’t know who it was messing with.”

My heart swelled with warmth. I wouldn’t be the woman I was today without her and my mom. Life certainly helped shape me, yet I don’t credit Miles with anything. My time with him taught me a lot about my strengths and weaknesses and what I needed to change to become a better person.

“Damn straight,” I agreed. “Not many would have survived the situation intact. It was exerting an influence over you for a couple of weeks and wasn’t able to take over until the very end. That’s impressive.”

Aidon inclined his head. “I expect nothing less from one of the women that raised such an amazing person as Phoebe. Now, back to the date. You have time. I will have you back here before your call.”

I chewed my lower lip, wanting more than anything to give in and say yes. I rarely had time for myself or did anything selfish like go out for dinner. There were too many demands on me and my time.

It was supposed to be the opposite when you reached mid-life. I planned on cutting back at work and traveling with Miles more often, spending time with other family and friends. One thing that had

exceeded where I thought my life would be was the amount of time I got to spend with my mom and Nana.

I had hoped I'd get a couple of weeks a year. Living with them and having them as such a big part of my magical life and business made it all the more enjoyable. Even the tasks ahead of me were less daunting when I was able to sit with them and go through the material we had discovered. The same applied to Stella and Nina. I only wished my son was able to be there more often.

*"Phoebe, you need to take time for yourself or you will burn out. Even Hattie stopped a couple times a week to refuel her reserves. A witch is only as good as her power and stretching yourself thin makes you weaker. You will not be able to help Heidi if you do not have enough power to cast a spell. The elf is protected as well as she can be. You checked in with her an hour ago."*

Aidoneus took my hands in his. "See, even Tarja agrees."

Nana waggled eyebrows. "You have to go. You've been burning both ends since you left for New Orleans. Besides, you'll feel better after a few orgasms."

I chuckled, my cheeks resembled Rudolph's nose but I couldn't change that. "You're right, Nana. Sex is good for the body and soul and nothing to be embarrassed about. Why do I feel guilty just considering a night off?"

My mom snorted. "Because you lived with a man that treated you like a shitty mother and wife if you didn't spend every free second doing things to make him happy."

My heart twisted and my palms got sweaty. I hadn't realized she was aware of what I went through. Hell, I never recognized how bad it was until he sprung the divorce on me. I had chosen to ignore the obvious.

"Good point, mom. Seems I'm being schooled left and right tonight. If you're still up for it, after all this, Aidon, I would love to go out."

Aidoneus pulled me into his arms. "I'd spend every second with you if I could. Although right now I'm tempted to pay a certain surgeon a visit."

I beamed up at him. "That jackass isn't worth a moment of our time. Take me to dinner, Yahweh."

\* \* \*

I LAID my head on Aidon's bicep as we walked down the sidewalk. We'd gone to dinner at one of the new seafood restaurants in town and had the best meal I've had in a long time. The food was delicious, and the wine was superb. It was my date that made the night priceless, though.

Aidoneus never once looked at one of the dozen young, beautiful women that were ogling him. He had eyes only for me. He asked my opinion on how he could establish a rotation with his other agents, so no one was stuck on Earth or in the Underworld. The relationship I shared with him was the truest form of a partnership I'd ever encountered. Although, I suspect Fiona shared the same thing with Sebastian.

"Thank you for making me do this. Tarja was right. I feel so much better now that I've had a nice meal with a sexy god."

Aidon's chuckle rumbled through his shoulder and vibrated through me. "I will always look out for you, Queenie. I have never felt more at home than when I am with you. I don't know how it happened, but you have become my everything."

Tears filled my eyes, and emotion choked me up. I thought my life was over when Miles left me and his tart destroyed my reputation, forcing me to move back home. All of my energy had gone into creating a picture-perfect life.

It seems absurd that I used to coordinate the kids' clothes with mine and Miles and take pictures in our big house so I could post them on Instagram and impress people from high school. It was a façade that hid my misery. I owe whoever changed my path so it would collide with Aidoneus my gratitude.

"I lost faith in men after Miles left me. When his hussy forced me out of North Carolina, I hit rock bottom. Well, that was how it seemed at the time. Now, I am tempted to call and thank them because it led me to you. I wouldn't change a thing to end up here with you."

Aidoneus stopped me and lifted my chin with a finger. His sapphire eyes burned as he stared down at me. It seemed as if his expression shifted through a hundred different emotions. The air



between us charged with our mutual desire, yet he made no move to close the distance between us.

My breathing turned shallow and my arousal increased along with our body heat. His hands splayed on my lower back, making me want to go to my tiptoes so he was grabbing my ass.

After another minute of him staring into my soul like that, I finally lifted to my toes, unable to stand it any longer. My lips pressed to his, and his groan vibrated against my mouth.

His tongue licked along my lower lip, then it slid inside my mouth when I gasped at the pleasure. It felt as if he had licked my clit. I nearly had an orgasm right then and there. My arms went around his neck and tangled in his short hair.

I was about to lift a leg when voices interrupted the moment. Face flushing, I pulled away from him and pressed my forehead to his chest. His low throaty chuckle had me grinning as I grabbed his hand and dragged him toward the car. We were going to walk around for a bit, but I was eager for the orgasms Nana recommended.

My desire vanished when my gaze landed on a guy at the end of the block. He had pale skin, dark hair and two sharp teeth he shouldn't have. "There's a vampire. I haven't paid Marius a visit yet. I think it's time to fix that?"

I let go of Aidon and practically ran toward the vamp, wanting to give Marius a piece of my mind and make him realize why he should never mess with me. I had been debating how exactly I was going to teach this lesson and still had no plan. I prayed I didn't go in there guns blazing and kill his entire clan. That would go against who I was.

A hard grip on my arm stopped my forward momentum, and I was tugged back into a hard and familiar chest. "No, Queenie. We cannot go after the vampires right now. You need a plan first. I know you have been worrying over what to do because you hesitated in killing him. Do not let this world change who you are. You are a bright light illuminating the darkest corners, and I admire that."

My heart skipped once. "I'm hard to kill, you know. You're right, of course. Not to mention I don't have much time until my call. We'd better get back to my place."

Aidoneus's arm went around my shoulders as we turned in the direction of his vehicle. "I'm not taking you home just yet. I had other thoughts. I plan to see how many of the little deaths I can give you in the next hour."

I hardly had time to process what he said, let alone figure out he was talking about orgasms when he pulled into a clothing store and to their dressing rooms. "Put up a soundproof barrier."

I gaped at him. "Here?"

The smile he unleashed on me melted my panties instantly. "Not here." He walked backward into the handicapped stall. "In here."

I was scandalized, turned on, and anxious as I imagined a soundproof bubble surrounding us. It didn't help that he peppered kissed down the side of my neck. "Wait. I need to concentrate."

The sound of a woman clearing her throat right outside the stall door made me turn fifty shades of red. Appropriate since we were about to engage in fifty shades of dirty. "Our changing rooms are not for private moments. I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

I threw my hand over my mouth to stifle my gasp. Aidoneus opened the door a crack and kept his body blocking me. "You don't need to worry about us. We were never here. There's a customer on the floor that I need you to help."

I was about to shove him out and flee for the exit when the sound of footsteps retreated. She was leaving us alone. I'd never done anything like this. Now I discovered it thrilled me to be on the verge of something new and exciting.

I took a deep breath and recalled the image I had a moment ago, ensuring there were no cracks and adding that no one could see through it, either. "*Obstructionum aspectu.*"

The second my magic rippled around us, Aidoneus shrugged off his shirt before his hands went to the bottom of the cashmere sweater Nana had given me for Christmas. He had it off me a second later.

I unhooked my bra and let it fall to the floor. I was no longer worried about showing him my naked body, but I paused for a second under the glare of the fluorescent lights. They weren't kind to people under the best circumstances.

I glanced down at the stretch marks that glowed under the harsh lights. Aidoneus lifted my head and my breath caught. That hunger I'd seen the first time we had sex was still there. If I wasn't mistaken, it was even stronger now. He truly didn't care about my imperfections.

I shoved my slacks to my ankles, taking my panties with them. After stepping out of them, I lifted one foot to remove the thigh-high boots I had on. Aidon snagged my leg and brought it to his side. It unbalanced me and I had to catch myself on the side wall.

"I can't believe we're doing this here."

Aidon groaned as he ran a hand up the inside of my thigh and ran a finger through my slick folds. "I couldn't wait to get you home. You kiss me like I'm your breath and this will always be the consequence."

I smiled and ran my hand up his chest. "I'm okay with that."

Aidon's mouth was on mine a second later. "Gods, I love you."

I moaned and my mouth became hard and urgent as I kissed him back. Without breaking contact, Aidon had me pressed against him. His knuckles rubbed over my clit as he undid his fly. It was delicious and made me shiver.

"God, yes. More."

His lips curved up against my mouth. "I believe it's Yahweh, love."

I laughed as he picked me up. My heart hammered in my chest, and my blood coursed through me like lava through a volcano. I forgot about the bright lights overhead, the vampire outside and the call I had to get home to, losing myself in Aidoneus's arms.

Nana was right. These moments happened far too infrequently. We needed to do this daily, I decided.

My thoughts fractured when he lifted me. His hard cock pressed against me and my hips immediately started moving as I tried to get the pressure where I needed it. He obliged as he held our bodies together by my ass. It smashed his erection between my folds and my arousal made him slip through as he moved closer to a wall to get traction. The friction was nearly enough to send me over the edge.

My back was against the wall which was cold for a second. The slight discomfort was forgotten when he ran one hand up my side

and over my nipple. Pleasure zinged through me. He broke away from my lips and ran them down the side of my neck while I cried out his name.

I was at the edge of an orgasm as he licked the shell of my ear and pinched my nipple. When he rubbed his cock over my clit, I went up in flame like kindling. My moans filled our bubble, and I spasmed in his hold. I barely felt my head hit the wall behind us.

His hand moved from my breast and he gripped his shaft, then positioned it at my entrance. I lowered one hand and grabbed hold of his dick. He grunted and his hips jerked forward, impaling the head of him inside me.

I let go and put my hands over his shoulders and lifted my head to kiss his nipples. He growled and shoved inside me, balls deep in one swift move. My moan was loud and long and the orgasm that had started waning renewed just like that I was at another peak.

“I’ve never done this, either. Why is it so much hotter where we can get caught at any second?” His words were strained as he held himself still for several seconds.

I loved that this was new for him as well. “Because we can get caught. I’m not an exhibitionist, but the idea is a turn on.”

I moved my hips as much as I could, trying to slam into his pelvis. His eyes blazed and he claimed my mouth as he started moving his body. The feel of him moving in and out of me was unlike anything I’d ever experienced before.

He ruined me after the first time. I don’t know why I fought alone time with this god. I broke the kiss and my head fell back. I needed air. It turned out for the better when he latched onto my nipple and sucked.

He shifted his pelvis and the change made him rub my clit and hit my g-spot at the same time. Aidoneus kept hold of my hips and held me still while he pounded in and out of me. He was breathing heavily like me and I was so close I didn’t care that he was no longer sucking my nipple. My pleasure built quickly and before I knew it, I was climbing to my third peak.

My fingernails dug into the skin of his shoulders as I held on for the ride of my life. I was never this loud when I had sex, yet I couldn’t quiet down if I wanted to. I was beyond rational thought. I lifted my

torso and clung to Aidoneus so we were chest to chest. His love enveloped me, along with his power. This erotic caress was my favorite part of making love to Aidon.

Our movements increased as we chased my climax. He was an expert on me now and knew my signals. His hand snaked between us and he pinched my clit. That was all it took. I shouted his name, jerking in his arms. He wrapped his arms around me and held me tight as his orgasm barreled from him and into me.

We writhed in each other's arms, making more noise than a rock concert. It seemed like our peak lasted forever. When we finally came down, I smiled. "That's two. How many more have you got in you, Yahweh?"

"At least three more." His announcement was followed by him pulling out of me and slamming back in. My head dropped backward, and I let him take me to another climax. Being with this god was one of the best parts of my new life.

And I was determined to appreciate him every chance I had without caring that I was having sex in the dressing room of a store.

## CHAPTER 13



Layla's nostrils flared as Aidon and I entered the kitchen an hour and four orgasms later. My body was done before Aidon reached his goal. I assured him I was happy and more than sated, otherwise, I was sure I would still be there in his arms. Before walking into my house, I had luxuriated in the slump of my shoulders and pleasure still coursing through my body, making it hum.

Now, my cheeks flared bright pink and I had to avert my gaze. "Luci sent me a message saying Nissa and Cordelia are prepared to join the Zoom call in fifteen minutes."

The wolf shifter was having none of the shift in topic. "That's great. We want to hear how your date was, Pheeb? You look relaxed." Layla didn't care that Aidon was present and it would be awkward.

That grabbed Nana's attention. "I see you followed my advice. Good for you. Now, you'll be more effective when dealing with Heidi and Stuleros."

Thankfully Nina wasn't in the room, otherwise she would need years of therapy. I would have hated hearing about my mom's sex life at her age. "Those are the only issues we should be talking about right now. What can you tell me about Nissa and Cordelia?" I directed my question at my familiar and ignored the way Aidon smirked from beside me.

Tarja stretched and arched her back before launching herself to the stool. My heart skipped a beat as I worried that she wouldn't

make it to the seat. She was still recovering. I shouldn't have been concerned. She landed on soft paws.

*"Nissa Cross is the Pleiades in Africa. Her familiar is Naoko. Naoko is a grey tabby and skilled with spiritual magic. Cordelia Nash is the Pleiades in Australia. Her familiar is Giauthi, a black cat that doesn't have one particular strength over another."*

"So not all familiars have a special talent? When you mentioned Naoko's skill, I thought perhaps I had missed something." I grabbed a bottle of water and the iPad with its stand, so I was ready for the Zoom.

*"Few familiars have extra skills. And when they do, it's usually from battles they've had to fight. In Naoko's case, her Pleiades came under spiritual attack several times before the Tainted realized it was pointless because the power needed to be inherited by blood or willful choice. Coercion and theft don't work to acquire the position. As a result, she had to hone her skills on the spiritual plane. It was the only place she could protect her witch."*

I nodded my understanding. "I assume that skill is why Luci asked them to participate."

"I'd say that's a safe assumption," Nana interjected. Her comment surprised me. I'd been so caught up in our conversation that I forgot I was in a room with everyone else.

I smiled at Nana and set the iPad in the middle of the island. "Why aren't there more coming with us? This affects us all. I would have thought all seven of us would go in and help clear the realm."

Tarja jumped onto the marble counter, and I took her stool. *"What you did in discovering you could astral project to Stuleros was never done before. Pleiades are an insular bunch that don't like things they haven't fully investigated. It's understandable given their position and importance to the balance in the universe. The rest clearly need time to consider the option."*

I snorted. "You mean they are waiting for us to report it's all clear and safe to venture there? No one is willing to risk their familiar after what happened to you."

Tarja inclined her head. *"There is that. I was surprised Nissa and Cordelia agreed to join us."*

My mom set a cup of tea in front of Nana and leaned against the counter. “We weren’t able to find any mention of the phantasms in Stuleros. All we discovered is that the health of the realm is connected to the souls of the familiars.”

Nana lifted a finger into the air. “And there was the fact that the number of souls available to be born is finite. It seems there is a system of reincarnation for the felines that support witches.”

That wasn’t surprising, given someone had to create said souls. I couldn’t see a god or goddess sitting around creating all these souls. From what I had learned over the last nine months, gods and goddesses got bored and moved on faster than a car shifted gears. I chalked it up to being immortal and living forever.

The idea of living forever made me think of Aidoneus. It reoccurred to me that he had lived for thousands upon thousands of years and he would survive long after I died.

A vice closed around my heart, freezing it for a painful second. Sweat covered my palms and my chest ached as if the vice had bruised me. Whatever we had wasn’t something that could last. He was going to remain the same while I aged and looked like his grandmother at some point.

Emotion threatened to drown me as I met his sapphire gaze. A ring from the iPad behind me saved me from anything I was going to say to him. I needed to think that through and now was not the time for such a tense discussion.

I hit the button and smiled at Luci who was joined by two other women. One was a black woman with beautiful hair and skin. She had a fresh look that required no makeup and masked her age well. It was impossible for me to tell if she was in her thirties or fifties.

The fourth section of the screen displayed a smiling woman who looked to be in her late thirties with blonde hair and green eyes. She had to be Cordelia because Tarja had told me her familiar was a black cat and there was one sitting in front of her.

“Phoebe. This is Nissa, from Africa.” The black woman lifted a hand and said hi. “This is Cordelia.” The blonde waved and muttered a greeting.

“It’s nice to meet you. I kept telling Tarja that I needed to meet the rest of the Pleiades but life kept getting in the way. Now it seems life



is forcing our hand. I know it isn't under the best of circumstances. And it seems most of us had no desire to join."

"Only the brave have signed up for this journey," Nana interjected.

I turned the screen to face my Nana. "This is my Nana. She's one of the ones I'm lucky to have in my core group."

"I hear you have a dragon, a wolf, pixies and a god of the Underworld on your side too, mate." That had to be Cordelia, given the accent I associated with the land down under.

With the focus back on me, I smiled and nodded my head. My mom, Layla, Mythia, and Aidon grouped behind me. Appreciative looks crossed the witches faces. I made the introductions.

Zeph pushed his head in front of Luci's arm and pressed his faced close to the screen. For a second all I could see in her quadrant was black and white fur before Zephyrus sat down.

*"I am relieved you are alive, Tarja. Are you well?"* The voice inside my head was masculine and made me snap to attention.

"Is that you, Zeph? I haven't met Giauthi or Naoko. Did I say those names right?"

Nissa inclined her head and leaned over out of view. When her torso returned, she was holding a grey tabby cat with fur that looked silky soft. "Yes, you pronounced her name right."

Cordelia smiled. "You did a decent job with Giauthi's name."

*"It is I, Pleiades. I thank you for watching over and protecting my Tarja. I owe you a debt for saving her life."* I knew Zeph had a thing for Tarja and she returned the feeling. I wondered if there were other male cats because if not, Zephyrus was going to have to make babies with the other two female felines on this call.

Shoving that thought aside, I remained focused on the task at hand. "I did what I had to in order to save her life. And I would do it again. Before we head into Stuleros, I need to warn you we cannot allow the phantasms to get a hold of, or injure our familiars. Aidoneus discovered that it causes an injury to their soul. One that takes a long time and constant energy from their Pleiades to heal."

Cordelia's mouth pursed. "After hearing your grandmother say we are the brave ones, I cannot back out. However, I am highly

concerned about going into the familiar's realm after your previous experience.”

My mom leaned her face over my shoulder. “I understand your concern. We all share it which is why we spent the last twenty-four hours combing through our library. Nina discovered a passage that mentioned the unbreakable shield that Pleiades can cast when they pool their resources together.”

I squeezed her hand. “Thanks, mom. They might have already known that, but I didn’t and it helps.”

Nissa shook her head from side to side. “I had no idea. There has not been a gathering of our kind before. Not since the gods were forced to expel the first seven out of their realm. It is said that, at that time, the original seven joined together to cast out their excess power, creating the race of witches. If they hadn’t done that they would have destroyed Earth and everyone living on it. I’m not certain if there is danger in the Pleiades gathering together or not. Regardless, we have not gathered together since that time.”

“It’s time to change that,” I announced. “Did Luci fill you in on how to reach Stuleros?” The other two nodded. “Alright then, let’s get to it.”

Luci held up a hand. “We need to meet up immediately, so that we can band together and shield ourselves should the phantasms attack, so when you arrive, head to the clearing near the river.”

I nodded and laid my head down on my arms. It didn’t take long to focus on Tarja and project my spirit to Stuleros. Power immediately surrounded me, stinging me like a million bee stings. This time it was more painful, closer to Dark energy. My eyes flew open and I began searching for Tarja. Something was different.

It was harder to see through the fog and force my feet to move forward. I couldn’t feel her and had to stop my mind from racing in a million unwanted directions. I took a breath, I noticed the fresh, sweet air was now bitter and tinged with rot. I needed to find Tarja to make the mist clear.

After a couple seconds, I felt my familiar and locked onto her being. I took my first step into the realm and found myself in a meadow the size of two football fields. The flowers and grassy area

weren't as vibrantly colored anymore. Everything was wilted and brown round the edges.

The other three Pleiades and their familiars were already there. I hurried as fast as my feet would carry me to join them. Luciana looked around. "It's different from last time. There is now a grey fog instead of the pure, clean white that used to be here."

I nodded, checking the tree line for any signs of the phantasms. None were visible yet. "It almost feels like it's dead or dying. Why is that?"

"They're coming!" Tarja's warning brought us together in a circle. We ushered our familiars inside then joined hands. I noticed Zeph immediately went to Tarja and twined his body with hers. Tarja greeted him back before brushing against Giauthi and Naoko.

Recalling what my mom said, I formulated an image of an impenetrable shield that would keep the phantasms out. "We need to keep them away from us and watch them. There's no way to fight them without risking our lives."

"*Angustos omnes malos spiritus,*" Cordelia suggested.

"That should work. They feel evil to me," Luci agreed.

Having the spell in mind, I pictured the shield in detail, making sure it covered us above and below, as well as all around. We hadn't discussed how we would cast the spell, yet it was intuitive to chant when Nissa inclined her head.

White light burst around us, blinding me for several seconds. The stinging was replaced by a soothing balm, and the astringent scent turned sweet. When my vision cleared, we were surrounded by an iridescent bubble.

The phantasms screeched a high-pitched sound that brought me to my knees. My hands covered my ears, and I watched as the malevolent spirits bounced off the shield leaving behind a flurry of red sparks. It looked like a fireworks show.

I noticed they weren't focused on us at all, but on our familiars. Every once in a while, I saw fangs flash in the dark grey fog that battered our shield. I was mesmerized by the sight of those things trying to reach the familiars as if their lives depended on it. This had to be the work of the Tainted, but what had they done?

“We need to cast the phantasms out of this realm or incinerate them so we can reclaim it.” Nissa was speaking as she got to her feet.

I grimaced, my gut telling me that would be a mistake. Tarja put a paw on the Pleiades from Africa. “*We cannot kill them. The death of one has caused the damage to this realm we see before us. Stuleros will not survive the death of every creature.*”

Luci looked at Tarja. “That has to mean the Tainted have bonded to the realm. How can we break that bond? We cannot lose Stuleros. Witches everywhere need the return of familiars.”

My mind churned over everything being said. There was something there that niggled an idea I had weeks ago, but I couldn’t put my finger on it. The other Pleiades discussed how to deal with the phantasms as I watched the vile beasts.

Saliva dripped from mouths that I could hardly focus on and burned the grass beneath them. Amber energy trickled from Tarja and the other three familiars into the ground beneath us. I watched the singed grass return to a vibrant green, which in turn, caused the phantasms to launch into another frenzy.

I jumped to my feet. “They’re the spirits of previous familiars!” That’s what was playing at the back of my mind and once I voiced the idea, I knew it was true.

Luciana’s jaw dropped along with Nissa and Cordelia’s. The three witches looked closely at the black fog monsters outside our barrier. Zephyrus lifted his back leg and shook it when he noticed the amber light. “*Phoebe might be right,*” Zeph murmured in my mind. “*I feel a connection to the phantasms.*”

“I feel it as well. That’s how I know killing the last one hurt our realm. I felt it happen.” I reached out and ran a hand over Tarja’s fur, needing the reassurance she was alright. Being back here and facing these monsters was frightening.

Cordelia licked her lips and ran a hand through her blonde hair. “They aren’t spirits I want to bring back to life. They’re evil. I can feel their intent clear as day. The Tainted witches that consumed the energy of these familiars polluted their spirits.”

“I feel it too.” I couldn’t deny the sick feeling in my gut. “But if we kill them, there will be no spirits to replace them. You heard that

there are a certain number of familiar souls to be reborn. We cannot risk being left with nothing.”

So many phantasms had gathered around us that they blocked out the sky and our surroundings. Without being able to see the green grass and blue river, the atmosphere turned desolate.

That impacted me more than I cared to admit. If I wasn't already on my knees, I would have gone to them. Next to me, Nissa and Luci crumpled to the ground. Cordelia never stood up, either.

I clasped my chest and wheezed. “I can't breathe. I'm in my astral form and technically don't need to, yet I feel like I am being suffocated.”

*“My power is being drained.”* Tarja admitted. *“I don't have enough to shield you from them.”* Tarja admitted.

“They really are the dead familiars. What do we do? I don't know of a way to fix them.” Nissa sounded lost and for a moment looked far younger than I guessed she actually was.

Lightning struck the top of our shield, making me scream. My arms went over my head automatically to protect me from harm. When it didn't let up, I snuck a peek at the others.

Luci was holding Zeph. “We need to get out of here and regroup.”

I nodded and picked up Tarja. Nissa inclined her head and picked up Naoko. “We need to conduct more research and talk to the others. This is an issue that will take all of us.”

Cordelia nodded as she cuddled Giauthi close to her chest. “It makes sense. The damage done to these souls is catastrophic. Only the combined power of the Pleiades has any hope of reversing it. If we cannot find a way, there will never be another familiar born. I'd given up hope of that until Phoebe came along and brought a new point of view. Now, I'm not willing to give up. You've proven the impossible is possible. After all, no one ever dreamed we would be able to visit Stuleros and here we are.”

I smiled at her confidence in me. I wasn't a quitter under any circumstances. Even when I had patients on their deathbeds, I was looking for ways to improve their quality of life, and sometimes even save it.

“Let's all do some research and reach out to the other Pleiades. I will contact Alex. She's on the West coast in California, right?”

Tarja narrowed her eyes at me. *“No. She is in Vancouver and presides over Canada and Alaska. You have the United States and some of South America. We have gone over this.”*

My cheeks heated and I chanced a look at the others, expecting to see their disdain. *“I did not include them.”* I nodded at Tarja.

“Sorry, this chaos has me confused. I’ll contact Alex in Vancouver and we can regroup. We need to get out of here.”

I made a mental note to have one of my developers create a platform similar to Facebook where the Pleiades and I could communicate easier. Collaboration could be a game changer in some situations. With that thought in mind, I watched Tarja leave and focused on my body, so I could return to it.

I hated not solving the situation in Stuleros, but was happy to have discovered what the phantasms actually were. That would lead us to the answer.

## CHAPTER 14



*M*y body ached as I rolled over on my soft mattress. After coming back to my body last night, I had gone to the library and started combing through books in hopes of finding something that would help.

My mom helped for a bit, as did Nana. They called it quits before midnight and went to bed. Aidon and Layla stayed with me and we ended up drinking wine and talking about some of the books we discovered. While I found it fascinating that wolves were the first shifters, it didn't help us. In the end we didn't find anything to help with the Tainted spirits of former familiars.

My hand groped over the bed in search of the warm body I had gone to sleep with a few hours before. Aidon's side of the soft mattress was empty and warm, telling me he hadn't been up that long. I sat up and a yawn cracked my jaw. What time was it? It felt as if I had just gone to bed.

It was almost nine in the morning. I should be better at staying up all night and operating on little sleep. For over a decade, I worked the night-shift and stayed up all night caring for patients in the hospital.

Now even mundane tasks that kept me up late exhausted me. To be fair, magic took a lot out of a person. It didn't help matters that I wasn't twenty-five years old anymore.

Throwing my feet over the side of the bed, I went into my bathroom and took a hot shower. I couldn't face the day without being clean with fresh clothes. I reached for my leggings and chunky

sweater, then changed my mind and grabbed some wool slacks instead.

Dressed with fuzzy socks on my feet, I headed downstairs. Halfway there I contemplated turning around and drying my hair when I couldn't shake the chill in the air. Evanora appeared at my side before I could head back, explaining why I was cold. When she lingered in one location, she caused extreme cold spots because she was a ghost.

"Hey Evanora, what's up?"

The ghost flickered as she smiled at me. "I've been thinking about the elf's predicament. I can't tell you how to get rid of the poltergeist, but I wonder if you can weaken its hold on the house by cleansing the space. Sage is an irritant to me, so I figured it might be the same to her."

"I have no idea how it works, but that is definitely the best idea I've heard since that whole mess dropped in my lap. I'll be sure to give it a try." I smiled at Nora.

"What are we trying?" Stella called up as she shut the front door.

I hurried down the rest of the steps and hugged my best friend. "I didn't know you were going to stop by this morning."

Stella shrugged her shoulders. "It's a slow day for me and I wanted to check in on Nana and Tarja. And to ask if there has been any headway with a solution for Heidi."

I shoulder bumped her as we walked down the hall and past the living room. "Plus, you were bored at home."

"I blame you. You take me on these magical adventures, so cleaning the house has lost its appeal. Not that I let my house get messy." Stella laughed as we joined my family in the kitchen.

Nina had already left for school which made me frown. I liked to say good morning to her before she went. "Did Nina drive today?"

We had been trying to get her to drive herself to school for months and she had resisted. Today was different if the wide smile on my mom's face was any indication. "She was reluctant, but in the end she did drive."

Nana snorted. "That's because you let her take that expensive BMW, Mollie. She was eager to make an impression on a certain young man and that car is sure to do it."



I chuckled at the familiar argument and brushed a kiss on Aidoneus's cheek. He'd been spending half of his nights with me and said he'd come to enjoy the banter in the house. He said it was what made my house so warm and welcoming.

I shook a finger at Nana. "You need to back off her or she will never admit she has a crush on Drake or bring him home."

"That's probably a good thing," Layla interjected. "We don't need a mundie hanging around the house. It was bad enough for those months we had to hide when you got here."

"There is that. What are the chances he might be of the magical world?" It wasn't like Nina could come out and ask him about it. "And is there a way she would know for sure? Jean-Marc's girlfriend came out to him when she felt his magic."

*"Most paranormals in the magical world will sense others like them. She will develop an awareness as she is exposed to more. So will you three."* Tarja was referring to me and my mom and Nana.

My mom hadn't mentioned her magical abilities, so I wasn't sure how she felt about them. Now she lifted her head from the book she was reading. "It's harder than I thought it would be. Although, I did lift my eyeshadow pallet from my dressing table this morning."

My jaw dropped open before I snapped it shut. "That's great, mom. I need to go check on Heidi, but I'd love to practice making potions with you and Nana later."

Nana nodded her head in agreement. "We're doing a rejuvenating face serum first. These bags above my eyes need to go."

I couldn't help but laugh. "I don't think there is a potion to get rid of wrinkles and sagging skin, Nana."

Nana narrowed her eyes. "Seems like that nasty curse paid off after all. Although I do miss my big, green purse."

My mom rolled her eyes. "Nina already ordered you a new one. It should be here tomorrow. Now, explain what you mean by the curse of the purse paid off."

Nana smiled and sat up straighter. "It means during the moments I was able to surface, I read about a potion to reverse aging and firm up skin. I bet Tarja knows about it."

Everyone focused on my familiar. Well, my mom and I anyway. Only the ex-mundies in the room understood why that was important. The others had a natural immunity to aging.

*“There are many potions to help with aging skin. And, yes, several of them can reverse dark spots and wrinkles while increasing the collagen and elasticity. They are herbal based, with minor spells cast on them. It will be a good potions practice. Something you have spent too little time doing, Phoebe. Potions can be helpful in many situations.”*

I held up a hand. “Alright, I get it. We will make potions when I get home. You’re welcome to join us, Stella. But first, Nora had a great idea regarding Heidi and the poltergeist. She mentioned trying to weaken the spirit’s connection to the house by cleansing the place.”

Tarja’s head cocked to the side and her aura seemed to pulse bright green. I took that to mean she was excited by the prospect. *“It’s a long shot. Once a spirit reaches this point it is too powerful for such minor witchcraft. However, it is a brilliant idea, Evanora.”* The ghost brightened and inclined her head to my familiar. *“On your way to check on Heidi, you can pick up supplies and give it a try. We will know if it helps pretty quickly.”*

I set the travel mug I had grabbed down and turned my most cajoling smile on Aidoneus. “Are you going to join Stella and I? It seems like a god should be able to do something to the poltergeist. Even if all you do is scare it so we can get Heidi out of the house, it’s worth it.”

Aidon chuckled and kicked off from the counter he was leaning against. “I would go anywhere with you, Queenie. But your faith in me leaves a lot to be desired,” he winked as he grabbed my mug and put it beneath the pod coffee maker.

“This woman adores you and if you can’t see that then you don’t deserve her,” Stella said, defending me unaware that he was teasing me.

Despite the fact that it was totally unnecessary, it brought tears to my eyes to see another friend sticking up for me like Fiona used to. I often wondered if Miles had started having his affair after she moved to England because she was no longer around to call him on his shit.

I smiled as I shook my head at Stella. "Aidon knows how good he has it. He's teasing me. It's alright."

Aidoneus, meanwhile, was busy adding salted caramel flavoring and creamer to my coffee and grabbing a muffin for me. "Phoebe is my everything. I might not deserve her, but I refuse to let her go."

"That's better," Stella said with a smile. "Sorry. I get a little protective of my people."

I snorted and gave my mom and Nana a hug before we headed for Heidi's house. Aidoneus drove this time while I scanned my property on the way out. "Let's go to Last Spell and the grocery store before Heidi's place. Having been stuck inside her house for days, I imagine she needs food and we need magical supplies. I left without going down to my magical kitchen and grabbing some ingredients."

"We could head back to your house. We haven't gone very far." Aidon's offer was sweet.

Stella stuck her head between the front seats of Aidon's SUV. "Can we go to Last Spell? I haven't been there yet and I really want to get my own cauldron. If we perfect this anti-aging serum, I will want to make it on my own."

I laughed and put the address in the map app on my phone. "We could start selling it. I have a company with enough money to produce and market it. We'd be rich."

Aidon snorted. "You're already rich. Besides, you don't need anything to make you more attractive."

I smiled at him before my thoughts went down the path they had taken the night before. The corners of my mouth turned down. "That's easy for you to say. You'll never age. You'll look the same, while I will look like Nana in a few decades. Then you won't feel the same about me."

Aidoneus turned a furrowed brow my way. I shifted focus to Stella, not wanting to have that discussion right now. "Have you set up your sanctuary?" That was what Tarja called my magical kitchen.

Stella bounced in her seat and proceeded to detail how she renovated the guest bedroom into her sanctuary, which Todd and her kids had supported until she started bringing stinky herbs into the house.

“So, I’ve decided to have a tree house built in a few of the large trees in my backyard.”

I couldn’t imagine that being very comfortable or efficient. “Is that a good idea? I mean, it couldn’t be very big and you would have to trek through over twenty yards of snow to get to it during the winter.”

“I’m talking about one of those fancy treehouses that have bathrooms, heat, air and a bedroom. Only mine will be one large space with a kitchen to one side and an attached bathroom. With the exorbitant amount you are paying me, I can have that guy on TV come out and build me one in a couple of months.” She was serious about the idea and seemed more than happy about it. I’d never had this amount of money in my life, so it was nice to be able to pay my best friend what she was worth and see her doing fun things with it.

“I can’t wait to see it.” I looked in the big picture window when Aidon pulled up to the curb in front. “Looks like we’re here.”

Stella was out of the car before Aidon put the transmission in park. We followed suit and walked to the front door. “What’s the owner’s name?”

I adjusted the purse on my shoulder. “Clara owns the place. Her family has operated The Last Spell since the seventeen-hundreds.”

The name of the shop was bracketed by pentagrams. The same tall stool with a massive pink crystal sitting on top of a dark pink cloth was in one of the windows. There was also a table below it with an array of tarot cards.

In the other window the cauldron, jewelry, and knives that had previously been there were replaced with candles, potions, and stones. Stella had a huge smile on her face as she opened the door. The scent of flowers and herbs greeted us. This time, the smell was familiar to me and I could even identify some of the herbs burning.

Stella met my gaze with the look of a child in a candy shop. “I love the purple walls. Maybe I’ll do my sanctuary in this color.”

I chuckled and lifted my hand to Clara. “Hi again. Not sure if you remember me, but I’m back for some cleansing supplies this time.”

The tall woman came out from around the glass-topped counter. Her bangles rattled with each of her steps. “Phoebe, right? I cannot believe I helped you before you became Hattie’s heir. You need sage, black tourmaline and selenite. Anything else?”

It was good she knew which stones would work because my memory was rusty where crystals and their uses were concerned. “Yes, we need all of that. I want to introduce you to Stella, my best friend, who I believe needs some supplies. And Aidoneus. He’s my, uh...”

“He’s the son of Hades. You’re a god. In my store. I must be dreaming.” Clara’s billowy green top matched her eyes, and her red braids bounced as she shook her head from side to side.

Aidon extended his hand and shook hers. “I’m Phoebe’s mate first and foremost, but yes, my father is Hades.”

My grief over our aging differences was momentarily forgotten when he said that. Stella looked over her shoulder and was holding a large black cauldron. “It’s good to meet you, Clara. I love your store. It’s so much more friendly than the one we visited in New Orleans.”

“Did you shop at Solid Solutions? Hollie’s place is as good as mine.”

Stella nodded as she carried the cauldron to the counter. “I prefer your place. The stench on the roads in the French Quarter has invaded her shop. Do you have a starter kit? I’m just furnishing my magical kitchen and need everything.”

I crossed to the table that had black crystals and grabbed what we needed while Clara helped Stella. Aidon and I picked up what we needed, then I pulled out my phone and texted Heidi asking what she needed from the store. I was suddenly anxious to see if Nora’s idea would work.

\* \* \*

AIDON’S CAR slammed into an invisible wall as he tried to pull into Heidi’s driveway. The awful sound of metal crunching accompanied me being thrown forward. My hands flew up and braced on the dashboard. Stella screamed behind me and our packages slid forward in the backend.

Energy surrounded us, cushioning me a second later. It was Aidon’s power. “What the hell was that? You didn’t tell me she has wards around her property.”

I rubbed the back of my neck where it had started to tighten, praying that didn't mean I'd gotten whiplash. "That's because this wasn't here last time. We were able to approach with relative ease. It was when we tried to enter the house that we had a problem."

"The poltergeist is getting stronger. We need to figure this out." Stella wasn't saying something new. It had been weighing on me for days since meeting Heidi and discovering her problem.

"Let's see how close we can get. Can you grab the crystals and sage, Stella? Aidon and I will get the groceries."

Aidon put the car in reverse and backed up a couple of feet. The front end was battered and bent. Glass littered the ground where we had been. I took it as a good sign that there was no smoke coming out of the engine.

We all took bags from the back. Stella removed the sage and other items from hers and held them out with shaking hands. She was confident in her magical powers and never showed the fear she was now.

I nudged her. "You alright?"

She nodded her head. "Fantastic. I'm trying to see if these will help us get closer to the house."

Ah, that made sense. It was a fabulous idea. I focused on sending the cleansing energy toward the house. "*Flare purgatio industria deinceps.*"

A ripple flowed from me and passed Stella, picking up the energy from the items in her grasp and carrying it forward. The crisp smell of sage soothed me. I felt, more than saw, when it collided with the poltergeist's barrier. It spread out in each direction but didn't penetrate it.

"Well, it isn't helping out here. Let's go around back and see how close we can get to drop off the food."

Aidoneus powered up when we were shielded from the street. His power glowed in a dark haze around his body before flowing toward the house. There was a flash like a firework. It made the air smell like sulfur.

"I think we can reach the door." Aidon's voice was strained as he spoke.

I hurried forward and dropped the bags inside the covered porch at the backdoor. Heidi appeared in the window and started banging on it.

A spark threw her backward and made her disappear. My skin prickled and blood dribbled from a cut that opened up on my arm. It was from the pressure of the two magics colliding rather than anything the spirit did.

“Toss your bags inside,” I called out to the others as I backed away.

The black stones flew past me, followed by the sage bundle. Stella must have thrown them hoping if they touched the house, they would bring the poltergeist’s shield down. Aidoneus put his bags down, picked me up then sprinted away from the house. He stopped a few feet away and set me down.

“Sorry, Queenie. I can’t seem to get past the shield.”

I shook my head. “It’s alright. Heidi,” I called out. “Are you alright? Can you get the food?”

The back door opened and she made it three steps before being thrown back inside the house. The groceries were just out of her reach. “No. I can’t make it.”

“You can get the stones and sage. Bring those in with you. They will cleanse your house and hopefully give us an edge. I’m going to see if I can move the bags closer to you.”

I linked hands with Aidoneus and nodded to Stella. “Let’s use *promoveo*. Picture sending the food closer to Heidi.”

I took a moment to create a detailed image of what I wanted to happen, then Stella and I chanted the spell. At first, nothing happened. We continued focusing our intent on the bags and a second later they moved to the backdoor where Heidi bent and scooped them up.

“We are still looking into this. Keep pushing the cleansing properties out to the rest of your house and we will be back in touch. In the meantime, call if anything changes.” My heart twisted when tears fell down the elf’s cheeks.

Heidi nodded and shut the door. Aidoneus ushered me around the yard and to the car. It was yet another failure, but we did manage to get her supplies. I had to hope the sage and crystals would help

us by the time we returned. They were powerful magical items and in the hands of the elf should have an impact.

Back to the drawing board. I was getting sick and tired of not having the answers, but I wasn't giving up. We would find a solution, even if it meant burning her house down and building another one.



## CHAPTER 15



*M*y heart was hammering in my chest as I paced the kitchen, waiting for the next Zoom call to start. This time, all seven of us Pleiades would be on the call together. I had never met the others and was nervous they wouldn't agree with my theory.

I hadn't gotten to discuss it in detail with Nissa, Cordelia and Luci before we all left Stuleros. However, I sensed the doubt clouding their minds. The fact that they didn't simply unleash hell on the realm was a win. Now, if I could convince the others, as well.

Aidoneus stepped in my path, stopping my frantic footsteps. His warm hands landed on my shoulders, grounding me. "It's going to be alright, Queenie. They will listen to you and together you will come up with a way to save the familiars and their realm. You are the smartest among them. They just don't know it yet."

I shook my head. "No, I'm not. I've had some good ideas because I come from a different background. I've gotten lucky is all."

Layla growled and glared at me with her hands on her hips. "If that's what you believe, then you aren't as smart as I thought."

I opened my mouth. Aidon stopped what I was going to say by putting his finger over my lips. "It's true. Each one of the Pleiades are brought up from birth for the job by their mom who was the previous Pleiades. That makes for an insular kind of training and only allows for a certain amount of progress. You have a natural brilliance that you bring to every problem you solve. That and your persistence combined make you something the world has never seen. None of

that is happenstance. Fate had a hand in guiding you to this point. You did the rest.”

My chest filled with emotion that I couldn't afford to think about so close to the meeting. “If I'm so great, how come I have to surround myself with you guys? There is no way I would be able to face this call without knowing you all are in the room with me.”

Tsekani tossed a jalapeno popper into his mouth. “Having us here is part of your brilliance. You know you are stronger with us behind you,” the dragon said around a mouthful. “That takes intelligence and courage to admit. None of them will have anyone except their familiar with them. Using every resource available to you isn't something that can be taught. I know because Hattie used to harp on the idea to these individuals for years.”

“Hold your head high, Phoebe. These women aren't your betters,” Nana informed me. She'd seen one source of my insecurity. I believed they were better than me. They'd been born into this role while I fell into it.

“If they are better than you, why don't they have the answers about the poltergeist? Or the problem in Stuleros? None of them have a clue what is going on. None of them even knew how to enter Stuleros. They haven't even tried to determine that before you came along. They sat back and accepted their fate which has made every other witch suffer.” My mom stood to the side with her arms crossed over her chest.

“You've all made your point. I knew I needed you here for a reason.” My heart slowed a fraction and I smoothed my sweater.

I wasn't prepared for the meeting. I hadn't had a chance to look into anything since last night. We'd barely returned from Heidi's house when I received Luci's text informing me, she had arranged a meeting with everyone.

Tarja jumped onto the counter the second the ring echoed from my iPad. I moved behind her as the meeting began. I lifted my hand. “Hi, Nissa. How are you doing?”

The beautiful black woman was sitting in what looked like a library this time. “I'm frustrated. There is so little information available.”

In rapid succession, the screen split into seven squares, each one filled with a different woman. Luci and Zeph were in one. Nissa and Naoko were in another. Cordelia and Giauthi were in the middle.

There was an older woman with dyed blonde hair and a white cat in the upper righthand corner. Below her was an Asian woman with hazel eyes and a black cat. The final woman had brown hair and blue eyes and an orange tabby sitting in her lap.

"Thank you for joining us," Luciana called out. "Let me introduce Phoebe Duedonne."

I lifted my hand and waved. "Hello everyone."

"Phoebe, the blonde at the top, is Helena Sidorov and her familiar, Sora. Helena is the Pleiades in Russia. Below her is Ashia Sato and her familiar Vergu. Ashia just moved from China to Japan. The last Pleiades is Alexa Wood and her familiar Ense. Alexa is in Canada, above you Phoebe. As you all know, we have come together to discuss the situation in Stuleros."

The other five women all started speaking at once. It was obvious each one of us had strong personalities. I doubted one could hold this position and be a shrinking violet. That was going to make it difficult to get anything done.

A loud whistle pierced the air behind me, making me duck and cover my ears. I glanced back to see Nana standing there with a scowl on her face. "You lot are the leaders of the witching world? If it weren't for Phoebe, I'd be ashamed to be labeled one of your kind. Get your shit together and stop talking over one another. That gets you nowhere."

"Who is that?" Helena was leaning closer to her screen as she asked that in her thick Russian accent.

"That's Nana, my grandmother. And she is right. I don't care how we do it, but we need to listen to what each other has to say."

Most of the women nodded their agreement. "Fair warning to everyone. Phoebe's house is busier than any I've ever encountered. She balances more on her plate in one month than any of us do in a year." It was touching to hear Luci defending me.

Helena lifted her chin. "That's because she is new and being tested by the magical world. Although, I concede she must be special for Hattie to have chosen her." It took me a second to

decipher what the Russian Pleiades was saying. Her accent made it difficult to understand some of her words.

I rolled my eyes. "The compliments are overwhelming."

Tarja's scratchy chuckle echoed through my mind. "*You don't need my guidance in dealing with these witches. You've set yourself up as a formidable and capable Pleiades. It helps that Amelia and your god are making their support known.*"

My brow furrowed. Aidoneus? I was about to ask when I looked at my image on the screen. My god stood behind me with his arms crossed over his chest. He usually kept his power under wraps when he was with me. Now, he let it shine along with his wings.

I saw the moment Helena's eyes landed on the black arches over Aidon's back because her eyes resembled saucers. Luci grinned and waved. She'd met Aidoneus during one of our calls.

"Hello, Aidoneus. I received the call from Grysten. I am still unsure about proceeding. Once this situation is dealt with, I can consider the costs and benefits of such an approach." Luciana must not understand how her opening a hellmouth in Italy could benefit the entire planet.

I wanted to argue the merit of the approach but agreed that we needed to address Stuleros before that could happen. Of course, her comments made everyone else curious.

Ashia ran her hand over her familiar's back. "What is this about? Does it have to do with Stuleros and recovering the realm?"

I shook my head. "No, it does not. As some of you have likely heard, I created a hellmouth in Camden with Aidoneus to exert better control over demons and the types that the Tainted are able to easily summon from the Underworld. To have a more effective barrier between realms, we need more hellmouths throughout the world, but that is a topic for another time."

Alexa nodded her head. "Phoebe is right. I do not care to talk about a hellmouth right now. I want to know how a new witch discovered a way to enter Stuleros and what is haunting the realm."

I bristled at the idea that I shouldn't be able to come up with something new to them. I didn't bother responding to the question of my skill and told them my theory about the phantasms.

Everyone started speaking at once again. All it took to shut them up was Aidoneus shifting his wings. Nissa cleared her throat. "I appreciate your theory, Phoebe, but I cannot say for certain that you are correct."

*"How do you explain the injury I suffered? A Tainted would not be able to steal part of my soul in our realm, regardless of how many there were. Familiars are strongest in Stuleros and able to deflect their attack. And then there is the damage the realm suffered after Phoebe killed the one that had injured me."*

A male voice with an accent similar to Ashia's followed Tarja's in my mind. *"I can sense your loss. There has to be something to what the new Pleiades is saying."*

Ashia looked down at her familiar, then back at the camera. "How do we know this isn't a trick of a demon? We should raze the realm with our fire and start fresh."

Helena scowled. "If Phoebe is correct and these are Tainted souls of the lost familiars, then we will be consigning ourselves to their loss permanently."

"That would be no different from how we have lived for some time now," Alexa pointed out.

"The difference now is that Phoebe brought us hope," Luci insisted. "She discovered a way for us to join our familiars there and I believe it was for a reason."

Cordelia nodded her head. "I agree with Luci, mate. We wouldn't be given this access to destroy something that has existed as long as our magic has. We need to proceed with caution."

"What do you suggest?" Nissa asked Cordelia.

The Australian Pleiades shrugged her shoulders. "I have searched every book in my house and found nothing. This is uncharted territory. I've begun documenting what Phoebe shared with me, so it is not lost and will add to it, but I do not have the answer."

Helena sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. "I have not had a chance to look through my library. Perhaps my ancestors have some information that might help."

Nissa shook her head. "I highly doubt any of us will find a solution. If there was one readily available, I think our predecessors

would have tried to do something.”

Helena, who looked to be the oldest of us, lowered her hand and nodded her head. “We searched high and low for information when we began losing familiars. We got desperate and prayed to the gods for help when only ours remained and never received any information.”

Ashia lifted one eyebrow. “Why did the gods ignore the plea, Aidoneus? Can you give us some insight? Perhaps you have the solution and are keeping it to yourself in hopes that we fail.”

I narrowed my eyes at the Pleiades from China. “Listen here, Ashia. You had better watch what you say to him. He is one of the reasons I am still alive today. He has risked his life time and again to save me and help our kind survive. His father did not want him creating the hellmouth because it inhibited easy travel between realms, yet he did it anyway. And he has put his neck out and looked into everything I have ever asked him about.”

A large hand landed on my shoulder and squeezed. “There is no need to defend me, Phoebe. Ashia is merely ignorant of the truth.” I almost chuckled at his insult. “Not many are worthy of working with a god. And even fewer are good enough to garner our love like you have. What you six need to remember is that we are not omniscient like you might believe. If we were, your kind would not exist because Atlas would have known what would happen when he created such powerful creatures.”

My chest swelled as he spoke. At the same time, I knew I needed to rein this conversation in and refocus it. “We need to focus on the facts before us. When I removed the threat to Tarja and unleashed my fire, it damaged the realm. Gone are the clear blue skies. They are now filled with grey smoke and overcast skies along with dying plants. We must heal Stuleros and the phantasms or we will fail.”

“We can create healing potions and bring them to the realm. Perhaps if we pour them over the phantasms, we can remove the malevolence from their spirit,” Ashia suggested.

Helena perked up and sat forward. “That’s brilliant. I am an excellent potions master.”

Nissa shook her head from side to side. “I’m not so sure that will be possible. When we were there before, we would have been

swarmed if we hadn't cast a shield around us and our familiars."

Naoko lifted a paw on her Pleiades forearm. *"Nissa is correct. There would be no time before they got their venomous claws into us."*

*"When Phoebe and I first visited the realm, we had a few minutes before they approached us. It seems that once we broke the seal, they knew we would be back, and the amount of time before we are surrounded has shrunk each time."*

Their exchange triggered an idea. "I don't believe only using healing potions will be effective. What if we have a two-pronged approach?"

Cordelia sat with her arms crossed over her chest. "What do you mean? Healing a spirit will clear the decay from it."

I cocked my head to the side. "But will it really? It seems to me that we need to simultaneously cleanse the realm of the infection and heal the phantasms. Using both approaches will have the best outcome. Think of cancer. While chemotherapy is the best method of putting it into remission. It is preferable if we can add radiation, and sometimes surgery, to remove the cells as well."

*"Phoebe's approach feels right,"* Zeph interjected. *"When I consider her position about the spirits and how to deal with them, my instinct is in agreement. I see no fault in her logic or approach."*

The support from Luci's familiar seemed to break the ice and each of the others chimed in their agreement. Tarja paced in front of the iPad for several seconds while the other familiars gave their opinion.

*"We must all gather in Stuleros at the same time for this plan to work. It will take the power of you all to pull this off. And any potion you make must be created from herbs and flowers gathered in the astral plane. They will be more potent in that form and easier to transport."*

My heart started racing as I tried to come up with precisely what Tarja meant. "Can you explain that for the newbie? I'm picturing visits to another realm with dangers we will have to avoid."

"Every herb can be harvested at various times of the day and in various forms depending on what you need. What your familiar is referring to is gathering what you need in your astral form under the

light of the moon. This is when the components are most powerful,” Helena explained.

Luci lifted a finger. “But it is difficult to maintain the focus and energy needed. It will take several tries to get everything we need. Let’s plan to have this completed in three days.”

I nodded my head. “Shall we meet on Zoom again before we head to Stuleros, so we arrive together and protect one another when we arrive?”

The others agreed, and we said our goodbyes after finalizing the plans. I hung up, feeling far better now that we had a plan of action. I was positive this plan was going to work. Finally, something seemed to be going right.



## CHAPTER 16



*M*y mom waved her arms at the plants around us as we stood in the greenhouse that was located between my house and the pixie mound. “How exactly are you going to retrieve herbs from the astral plane? You’ll be a spirit and not be able to interact with the world around you.”

I shrugged my shoulders. “I’m not sure. I know it’s possible because the other Pleiades understood when Tarja told us how to collect them. Plus, if that poltergeist can injure poor Heidi, then I should be able to grab some plants and bring them back with me.”

We were surrounded by green leaves and colorful flowers. It smelled like dirt mixed with herbs and plants, with a hint of sweet from the flowers. All together it should be revolting. Instead, it was pleasant. That was likely due to the hum of energy that came from the earth. I could feel the power pulsing throughout the space.

“How the heck are you supposed to make a potion with invisible ingredients?” Nana clearly didn’t believe it was possible. “I have our list here for the wrinkle cream. If you gather these on the astral plane, does that mean the stuff will be even better?”

I shook my head, half listening to her as an idea formed in my mind. “I doubt that’s how it works.”

“The potion Phoebe is making will be used in Stuleros, which is a spirit realm. I’d bet it wouldn’t be effective at all because we aren’t spirits,” Stella pointed out.

“It’s good enough that there is a serum that will help our skin. Don’t push it, mother. You’re a beautiful woman.”

I nodded, agreeing with my mom. “We all are. I admit I’m eager to try it. But I have an idea about how I might be able to help Heidi. Something you said, mom sparked an idea.”

Stella’s eyes brightened and she gestured to me. “Well, out with it. I’m tired of watching that poor elf suffer. I’d just about given up hope after Aidon wasn’t able to cross the threshold.”

I couldn’t agree more. “I honestly haven’t had much time to think about it until mom mentioned not being able to interact with the world around me in the spiritual plane. We’ve been approaching the whole thing from the wrong angle. What if we go in on the astral plane and do something similar to what the Pleiades and I are going to do in Stuleros?”

“If you’re successful in Tarja’s realm then it should be possible,” my mom agreed. “I’m glad I could help. After coming up empty so often, it’s nice to be of some help.”

I placed a hand on her arm. “You’re always helpful, mom.”

*“It’s actually brilliant,”* Tarja interrupted. *“I should have thought of it much sooner. I wish I could blame it on my injury and slow recovery. It honestly never occurred to me. Not even when you mentioned cleansing Stuleros. I was so excited about the prospect of having our realm back along with the souls to create more familiars.”*

I could feel Tarja’s anticipation through our connection. It didn’t surprise me that she’d been singularly focused. It was important to her and her kind. “If we are successful, this time next month you could be pregnant.”

Stella held up her hands. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. First, we need to get supplies for a potion, and then you need to test the effectiveness of the plan tomorrow.”

This was going to work. I don’t know why I was so certain, but I couldn’t deny what I felt. “Good point.” I turned to my mom. “Would you like to enter the astral plane with Stella and me to gather the herbs?”

Nana grimaced and shook her head next to my mom. I hadn’t meant to include her. I wanted to boost my mom’s confidence where magic was concerned. “No, thanks. I’d rather not enter the spiritual plane. They might not let me go.”

My mom cocked an eyebrow. “Is that possible?”

*"Not usually," Tarja interjected. "Some malevolent spirits haunt the spiritual plane searching for a witch to latch onto, however, they are rare. It takes too much power, and those in their astral form are able to overpower the will of the dead because their power is greatly diminished. There is no safer place than Nimaha to practice on the astral plane. Evanora is the only spirit here. Others cannot enter. Hattie cast protections when ghosts kept flooding the house and refused to let her sleep until she helped them."*

I watched my mom chew her lower lip and wring her hands. "I'm not so sure. I don't seem to have as much power as everyone else. It's best if I don't do anything so dangerous."

My heart cracked in half. I'd never seen my mom so vulnerable and unsure. She'd always been my bedrock. I wondered why she wasn't her usual confident self for half a second before it dawned on me. She was in uncharted territory.

All I had to do was think about how terrified I was when I became a witch and I knew what she was feeling. The idea of failing at magic was in a league of its own. The closest analogy I came up with was when I was in the operating room where a mistake was often fatal.

"You heard Tarja, it's not dangerous. Now, let's do this." I was looking forward to doing this with my mom. I would never want her to accompany me on other, more dangerous adventures.

"We can't go in there unprepared, Phoebe. Is there a spiritual basket? Or another vessel that can hold what we gather? And do we need to create the potion on the astral plane, as well?"

"Good point, mom. I hadn't thought about any of that. I got sidetracked."

Tarja's scratchy laugh filled my mind. *"That is not surprising. You've had a lot on your mind. Every witch has an astral basket. Something you would know if you spent more time working on potions."*

"I get it. I need to practice more. In my defense, I've had one case after another or been recovering from major surgery since I got my powers nine months ago. Can you tell me how this works and where I can find our basket?" I scanned the greenhouse but didn't see anything.

I'd never been in the hothouse before. Mythia usually grabbed whatever I needed because I was in a dire situation or facing a horde of demons and didn't have the time. Life had to slow down so I could get to know my magical world better.

*"It is in the room connected to the greenhouse. I had Mythia ask her clan to add three more chairs so more than one can comfortably gather on the astral plane."* I wondered if there would ever be a time when I would know everything and not be surprised by something new. *"You will find the basket when you cross to the astral plane. It has runes woven into it for that specific purpose. The recipe will tell you how to collect the samples. Some will need to be pulled off the stems while others require you to use your athame to cut them."*

My mom held up a paper. "I have the list here."

Tarja was already walking down the main aisle of plants. The greenhouse wasn't as big on the inside as I thought from looking at it as we approached. A light flicked on in a room at the end and I could see four chairs crowded amongst planting supplies.

Mythia was hovering by a bookcase filled with sheers, gloves, vials, and an athame. There was also a basket on the bottom shelf that had a rune on the side of it. I assumed that was what Tarja was talking about.

"This is a fancy setup." Stella scanned the small space before turning back to the main area. "I'm going to claim this for my use. No way do I have the space in my backyard."

Nana took a seat in one of the chairs. "You don't have to have anything this big, you know. You could add a sunroom to the back of your house to keep your plants. Most houses had something like that when I was a kid."

"Something to think about. Having some closer to the house might actually come in handy as we do more potions. In the meantime, you are welcome to use this anytime." I made a mental note to ask how I could build an addition to our house.

Once we were all seated, Tarja jumped into my lap. *"You will want to use a spell this time with the intent of entering the astral plane without going anywhere else."*

Stella wiggled in her seat. "I came prepared this time. Will *proiectura astral* work?"

I chuckled and relaxed against the back of the seat. “That’s perfect. You have the list, mom?”

She held it up. “I do.” Her smile told me I’d made the right decision to include her in this process.

I laid my head against the cushion and focused on projecting my spirit. When Stella nodded, the three of us chanted the spell. My stomach dropped to my feet as my soul was sucked from my body.

The black hole I traveled through lasted no more than a second and left me sick to my stomach. Lights flashed like a strobe light, making nausea churn. Being in this state was incredibly disconcerting and took a minute to adjust.

Gagging drew my attention, and I hurried to my mom as she was bent over heaving. Stella wasn’t doing much better. “It’ll pass in a second. Sorry, I should have warned you.”

My mom ran the back of her hand over her mouth, despite the fact that she hadn’t actually thrown up. “No matter what you said, I wouldn’t have been prepared.” She straightened and looked around. “Can they see us?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “No idea.” I waved a hand in front of Nana’s face. Her head was shifting between the three of us. “Doesn’t seem like they can. Let’s get to this.”

“I have the list and I’ll grab the basket.” My mom was already reaching for the basket.

Stella grabbed the athame from the shelf and held it out. “Do you want to cut?”

I shook my head. “Go for it.” My fingers itched to feel these plants on the astral plane.

We followed my mom into the greenhouse. We all stood there for a second with our jaws on our chests. The sight before us was stunning. The plants all glowed different colors. It was exactly what I always imagined a fairy garden would look like. When I moved my head, I noticed they were translucent. As if they were ghosts.

My mom walked forward and touched a rosemary plant. “It feels like I’m touching bubbles.”

Stella reached for a jalapeno pepper bush. “This one feels like touching the end of a thumbtack. And this one is like water. So, freaking cool.”

I chuckled and joined them. The colors and sensations varied from plant to plant. I think I touched each one before I stopped. "Something is missing and I can't put my finger on it."

"The smell doesn't translate to the astral plane," my mom pointed out. "I can't smell anything."

"You're right. Okay. What do we need to collect?" I smiled at my mom as I bent closer to a lavender bush and sniffed. I didn't catch one whiff of the soothing scent.

My mom bent over the list in her hand. "We need three juniper berries picked from the stem, two echinacea buds cut and five ginkgo biloba leaves torn."

I walked over to the juniper plant. The berries practically jumped in my hand. "Get enough for two batches. I want to be prepared to use one with Heidi."

Stella saluted me and cut more leaves. We dropped our items into the basket and continued moving throughout the greenhouse. The aloe felt very sticky and the primrose oil was slick. The different textures fascinated me.

By the time we were done, the basket was overflowing. Mom set the burden on her lap where her body lounged in the chair. "How do we get back into our bodies?"

My mind went blank for a second and my heart jumped in my chest. I almost started to say I had no idea when I realized it had to work the same. "Focus on your body. The feel of the cushion beneath you and the shoes on your feet. Use the spell *reditus* to return."

Stella chanted the spell first and a second later we saw her blink her eyes open and say something to Nana. I had closed my eyes when I felt my mom's arms go around me.

"Thank you for this, sweetheart. I know you asked me to help out of pity, yet I appreciate it."

"It wasn't pity, mom. I wanted to remind you how important you are to everyone, especially me. And I have to say this went smoother than anything I have done in months. I should take you more often."

My mom laughed at that and shook her head. "I love you and I will help with anything magical here at home. Off premises is out of

the question. I'm in no shape to go running around trying to escape attacking vampires. I'd really be a liability then."

I chuckled and released her. "I don't want you in harm's way anyway. What do you say we get back? You might be sore later."

My mom opened her mouth to ask why when she saw Nana shaking her shoulders. With a sigh, my mom closed her eyes and chanted. I was laughing when I returned to my body to hear my mom telling Nana to stop giving her whiplash.

I set Tarja down and stood up to check out the glow from the basket my mom was holding. "They're still glowing."

Stella picked up a piece of lavender and brought it to her nose. "And they don't smell, either."

*"That's because you gathered them on the astral plane. We need to put the basket under the full moon to absorb the rays before we can make the potions."*

Nana picked up an echinacea flower and giggled. "This feels like a cool breeze. Next time I'm going with you guys."

I wrapped an arm around Nana. "You'll love it. Everything has a unique color and feel on the astral plane."

"What about me? I bet I'm squishy like a marshmallow." Nana laughed at her own joke.

I smiled in response. "We didn't try to touch you or ourselves. I grabbed the chair when I first entered the astral plane to steady myself and it didn't feel any different. Is that because it doesn't possess magic, Tarja?"

*"Correct. Inanimate objects require a rune, whereas living things do not. So, if an object of power doesn't have a rune, you will not be able to touch or wield it when in your astral form. But you could have given Amelia a kiss."*

A lightbulb went on in my mind. "That's why the poltergeist can hurt Heidi. I bet there's a rune somewhere in the house and if she got rid of it, the spirit would have a harder time using the building against her."

Stella gasped. "You're right. Call and tell her to find the rune right away."

I shook my head from side to side. "It's too risky. If she leaves the kitchen, the poltergeist will kill her before she makes it ten feet. But I

am calling her to tell her about our plans.”

Taking the basket from my mom, I pulled out my cell as we walked back to the house. When Heidi answered, I explained about the potion and how I was testing it before I tried it at her house.

“I’m glad you might have an answer, but it might not matter in the end. I’ve been stuck in my house for days and my girlfriend left me. It’s only a matter of time before my boss stops listening and I lose my job, too. Perhaps I should give the poltergeist what she wants.”

“No!” I refused to let her give up. “Don’t worry about your job. I own a company and will hire you if that happens. I’m not going to placate you and say it’s for the better if your girlfriend left now. She obviously isn’t in it for the long haul, so you need to know sooner rather than later. Trust me when I say you want someone by your side that will support you through the bad times and be there for the good. It does no one any good if they’re only there for the fun. Life inevitably throws crap your way. A good support system can be the difference between surviving and thriving.”

“I know you’re right. It’s just impossible to recognize that at the moment. Thanks for keeping me posted.”

I said goodbye then set the basket down where Tarja told me to on the patio table. My mom was telling Nana what the astral plane was like as we entered the back door. Seeing them get excited like that warmed my heart. They were the best part of my support system. I’d do anything to ensure their safety and happiness.



## CHAPTER 17



Nina bounced up off her stool and hurried in our direction. “How did it go? Did you get the herbs you needed?”

I chuckled and grabbed her hand, pulling her outside. She’d been studying with a friend when we went out to the greenhouse. “It was easy. Gammy made the process smooth as butter.”

Nina’s jaw dropped and she turned her head. “You went to the astral plane, Gammy?”

My mom nodded her head. “I did. It was extremely disturbing at first, but I am glad I did. It’s beautiful.”

Nina approached the basket and picked up a piece of aloe that glowed neon green. “Woah. It’s light as air and sticky. Is it lit up because of how you collected it?”

I glanced at Tarja and nodded once. Tarja jumped onto the patio table. “*When a plant is collected on the astral plane, it carries those properties with it and includes them being more potent. Now they must absorb the moon’s rays before the potion can be made. I believe your mother wants to show you and Amelia the astral plane as soon as she is done with her current crises.*”

“I can’t wait. I still can’t believe you and Nana are witches like me, Gammy. It’s so cool. You and Nana and I can do spells together.” Nina practically bounced into the house.

I chuckled and followed behind them. My mom was at the stove, her place of comfort. Some of my favorite memories have been of my mother in the kitchen cooking for the family. She was truly happy there while it was torture for me.

Miles used to complain that my food all tasted the same, regardless of what I made. His snide comments only added to the dread I felt daily when I used to have to think of what to make. I was far happier in the thick of things at the hospital trying to save someone's life or deliver a baby.

"I'm not so sure about doing spells together, Nina." My mom's voice rose an octave as she spoke. "I don't know what I'm doing. I could burn the house down. It's one thing to visit the astral plane and another to try and create a shield or use my witch fire."

Nana narrowed her eyes as she took her seat at the island. She'd added a gel foam cushion, so it wasn't as hard for her to sit on. "You will never know how to do anything unless you practice. We have Tarja and Phoebe here to keep us from going completely off the rails. There is little to be afraid of in this house. I was possessed by an evil entity, setting fire to books and bursting pipes, no one was injured. We aren't left hanging here."

*"You cannot ignore your gift, Mollie. Magic is a tricky matter. You saw what happened when that curse cut Phoebe off from hers. It might not kill you, but it will cause problems that can be avoided."*

Mythia hovered next to my mom's shoulder. "Besides, you're the only kitchen witch we have in the house. Phoebe and Stella could use your skills when they handle cases."

I cocked my head. "What do you mean, she's a kitchen witch? That was mentioned before, but we didn't really discuss it and what that entails."

Mythia shrugged her shoulders. "A kitchen witch makes magic when she cooks. I've eaten cookies imbued with happiness to boost my spirits. I also had cocoa that boosted my stamina. I don't really know a whole lot more than that. Tarja can likely tell you more."

My mom turned away from the stew she had put on the stove before we headed out and was not facing the rest of us. She had her arms crossed over her chest, but her shoulders were back and she was listening.

*"A kitchen witch can literally make magic with her food. The biggest thing to keep in mind is that they use their food as a medium. It's their main outlet of magical energy. It is natural for them to gravitate to sustenance."*

My mom dropped her arms and braced herself on the counter behind her. "I've always been drawn to the kitchen and cooking. That doesn't mean it's what I am, does it?"

*"Do you feel the energy of the food you handle? Do you see meals in terms of how it can improve your loved one's lives?"*

My mom pushed off the counter. "Yes. I always have, though. When Phoebe was a little girl and was sick, I would make her meals that felt soothing to me. It varied, too. It wasn't always chicken soup. But I wasn't a witch then."

*"Those were your natural inclinations rising to the surface. And is the reason Mythia is right about you being a kitchen witch. Like healers, they cannot be created. That specialty is part of who they are."*

"How exactly does it work?" My mom was chewing on her lower lip, likely to hide the smile curling the corners of her mouth.

*"Kitchen witches imbue the ingredients with powers. They can also cast spells on completed dishes. They improve their family's lives through the meals they create. You will be able to make brownies that give Phoebe a surge of adrenalin that could get her out of a jam. Or a cookie that eases Nina's cramps when she is menstruating."*

Nina's face brightened. "Can you work on that first?" She had inherited endometriosis and horrendous symptoms at that time of the month, so I sympathized with her.

"Who's going to work on what?" Aidon asked as he walked in the back door.

I cursed myself ten ways to Sunday for telling him he could enter anytime he wanted, day or night. At the time, it seemed like a good idea because I anticipated him entering my room in the middle of the night to give me orgasms and leave me blissfully happy. Not to enter in the middle of a discussion about menstrual cycles.

"Mollie's a kitchen witch and Nina asked her to work on perfecting her skills to create a brownie to help with severe cramping and bleeding." Normally, I loved Nana's honesty. Today, not so much.

"Ah," Aidoneus muttered as he walked over and pressed a kiss to the top of my head. "A kitchen witch? That makes sense. You're an artist with food. So is Mythia." That was a smooth segue.

My mom's cheeks turned pink. "That's what they say. I haven't tested the theory out, yet."

Nina pointed to the pot of stew on the burner. "You should try it right now. Cast a spell on dinner."

My mom turned around and cocked her head to the side. "Alright. I know food. It's not like I could spoil it. How about a confidence spell? I think we could all use a boost."

"I love that idea, mom. I know I could use it before we tackle the potion and I go to Stuleros tomorrow night."

"You don't need the boost. You're going to do great. All of you. Although you might want your mom to make the potion. As a kitchen witch, she'll have a greater aptitude for making things of that nature."

I looked up at Aidoneus with a smile. He was right about that. "Now I know why I procrastinate so much with potions. I don't care for cooking and it is just like cooking. It will help to have you show me things, mom."

My mom's chuckle was strained. "I don't think I should work on something so important. There's no room for error. Phoebe needs this by tomorrow night."

I put my hands on my hips. "Are you kidding me? Aidon is right, mom. It'll be like making another pot of stew. Besides, we have enough for two batches and if one doesn't work out, then you and Nina can harvest more herbs for Heidi's while I go to Stuleros."

"Let me see if I can enchant dinner before you start having all this faith in me." My mom turned around and braced her hands on the edge of the counter.

Everyone was silent while she stood there like that. After a couple of seconds, she sighed and turned around. "How do I do this? It's not intuitive at all."

Tarja jumped onto the island and sat down as one of those regal Egyptian cat statues. *"One of your biggest hurdles will be getting over your doubt, Mollie. Intent is the key in casting spells. You need to make sure your mind is clear of everything but what you want the spell to accomplish. If you are distracted or let your mind wander thinking of other thoughts, the spell will not work. When you have the image clear, chant the appropriate word in Latin. Some have*

*theorized you can use another language, but I don't recommend trying it until you are proficient."*

I squeezed my mom's shoulder. "For confidence, you say, *confidentia*. And don't get caught up in worrying that you will think about other things. I found it helps when I picture precisely what I want. It clears my mind without me having to shove other thoughts aside."

My mom turned around and faced the stove. When I was in New Orleans, I had to cut myself off from the magical input all around me. Here I did the opposite, so I would be completely open. My mom was quiet for a moment before she chanted the spell.

A blast of power followed her spell. If I hadn't opened myself, I wasn't sure I would have felt it. I wanted to cheer her because I knew she had done it. Knowing she wouldn't want the attention, I kept my mouth shut.

Nana leaned forward, bracing her arms on the island to take the attention off my mom. "What's my affinity? Do you think I have one?"

*"It's difficult to say without having you practice more. However, I suspect you will be skilled with runes. You picked out the basket and athame right away in the greenhouse earlier."*

I leaned into my mother. "You did it, mom. I felt the spell. It was strong."

The smile she gave me made me think of my kids when they mastered a skill or passed a hard test in school. It was authentic and unfettered. And priceless. I loved that magic was giving me a new beginning with my family and bringing us together in a way that wouldn't have happened without it.

"Runes?" Nana's voice caught both of our attention. "Is that because I tried to put out the fire I started when under the curse with those symbols?"

My jaw went slack. "What are you talking about, Nana? What symbols? I never saw any runes in the library."

"My panic was enough for me to override the curse for several seconds after the fire was set. I wrote them in the smoke at first, then used some lipstick to draw them. I have no idea what made me do it. I was acting on an instinct I didn't understand. The entity's rage surged and tossed me back, disorienting me. I think I might have

passed out inside my head for a bit after that. Anyway, I hadn't thought about that until just now."

"We didn't see anything when we scanned the shelves for damaged books. I'd have seen strange characters drawn in lipstick," Nina interjected.

My mom set the bowls down that she had pulled from the cupboard. "I bet the shelves burned up in the fire. There were several that were destroyed."

*"After dinner, we will get a book of runes and test my theory. You have never studied runic magic, so for you to use the symbols in an emergency lends credence to what I have posited."*

Nana nodded. "What can someone with that skill do?"

*"You can cast spells without needing words. Some enchantments will be easier for you because of this. And, if you become a master in runic magic, you will be able to create new runes."*

"The only thing I need to know is if there is a rune that I can tattoo on my hip to get rid of this damn pain," Nana replied.

Tarja's scratchy chuckle coincided with mine. *"There are healing runes. They heal minor injuries and can even stop a mortal wound from claiming a life with a powerful enough practitioner that also possesses a healing ability. For your purposes, you would need to be the one doing the tattooing for it to work."*

"Practice makes perfect, mom. I'll let you start on my lower back. It hasn't been the same since Phoebe cracked a vertebra while I was pregnant with her."

Layla grabbed a roll from a tray Mythia was taking out of the oven. "You could start a business helping middle-aged mundies. Ever since you guys moved here, I've been researching what life is like for them and discovered how their bodies fail slowly as they age."

I laughed and snagged a roll as Thia transferred them to the bowl. "It starts with minor things, like not being able to read your phone and goes downhill from there."

My mom and Nana each added what happened to their bodies as they got older. Before I knew it, we were all laughing and talking. Mythia set a trivet down and people dished themselves some stew.

As my family shared a meal, I watched them laugh and tease each other. I cherished each one of them and couldn't stomach the thought of losing any of them. I sent a silent prayer to the gods that this new magic meant Nana would live longer. She was an integral part of our unit. We wouldn't function the same without her.

## CHAPTER 18



My mom was in her element as she read over the cleansing potion in the family grimoire. The one I had inherited from Hattie. It had more spells and concoctions than I could ever dream existed. Nana was over the moon because she discovered someone in Hattie's line made the wrinkle cream even better. She'd talked for a good ten minutes about how she had been wondering how Hattie's skin was so nice.

"You've got this, mom. You've been awake all-night practicing on Nana's anti-aging serum."

Nana lifted her chin and preened. "My wrinkles are already improving. I can actually open my eyes all the way now, too! You really are a kitchen witch."

Nina hugged my mom around the middle. "Gammy's the best kitchen witch alive."

"If she's this good this early, she's going to be a force in the community," Stella agreed.

My mom's cheeks turned pink and she shook her head. "Alright. That's enough smoke. I don't need to be puffed up quite that much."

She was smiling from ear to ear as she crossed to the small section of my magical kitchen downstairs that she had arranged for herself. "After we are done with this, mom, we need to redo this entire area. I've never really arranged and organized things in a way that would make sense. With you guys using it too, it gives me the incentive I need to get it done."



"It would be nice to have the cauldron set up at a permanent station closer to the sink. We could add some shelves to store the herbs and flowers. Can you start the fire beneath? I'm not comfortable trying that yet." That was because she had refused to try. It was hard not to push her, but I let it go, and set a ball of witch fire under the black pot.

It was easiest to control my purple flames because they were an integral part of me. My mom picked up the mortar and pestle and asked Nina to add the echinacea. My mom ground the flowers into a paste and repeated with a few more ingredients, then added the rest to the cauldron before pouring distilled witch hazel into the mixture.

The last ingredient glowed a bright teal color and turned the entire mixture into a darker version of the same color. I was mesmerized as my mother worked. Watching as she chopped and ground and stirred the potion. When she held her hands over the cauldron and chanted the spell, I felt like I was in a trance. It broke when sparks erupted from the liquid.

I bent over and looked at the iridescent teal mixture. "It's so beautiful."

Nina was next to me and sniffing the air. "It would make a good perfume, Gammy." I hadn't realized there was a scent to this stuff in the real world, unlike the astral plane where there was no notable smell.

"You should open a shop like a witch in that movie about sisters. People would come from all over to buy your stuff," Nana told my mom.

My mom laughed and filled a turkey baster with the potion. "I'm not so sure about that. I wish there was a way to test this before you try to use it in Stuleros. I was so sure I had this mastered this morning when I made the skin stuff."

The spell mom had cast the night before on the stew had worked on us throughout the night and half of the day. Tarja said it was an impressive performance for a beginner. I wasn't surprised. My mom was a rockstar.

I kissed her cheek and accepted the vial of potion from her. "You did great, mom. Better than I could have. I'm still getting the hang of potions."

*"Don't use that as an excuse to keep from practicing potions."*

I shot my familiar a pout. "I'm hurt you would think that." Was it so wrong that I was thinking my mom could be the official coven potion maker? It's not my fault. She was damn good at it.

Nana snorted. "She knows better, Phoebe. You didn't smear my rune, did you? Without it, the vial can't travel with you."

Nana had spent the day practicing her runic abilities and after she had managed to merge a mug with a small plate so they were now one piece, Tarja asked her to write the one needed on the glass.

I held the vial up between my thumb and first finger. "Nope. It's still clear as day."

Nana beamed and nodded before heading for the stairs. She hadn't sat down once since we descended the stairs an hour earlier and was moving smoother than usual. "You didn't tattoo your hip, did you, Nana?"

I caught her eye roll from the side as she continued climbing. "Not yet. I did manage to write a rune in ink that is helping immensely. For the first time in a decade, I don't regret not getting that hip replacement in my seventies."

*"That's one way to do it. I'm glad it's giving you relief. You must be careful what you write. Not everything will come out as you want. It is magic and intent is vital. Distractions with runic enchantments can morph what they do in the hands of a practitioner with an affinity for them. You have the ability to create new and alter existing enchantments."*

Nana stopped at the top of the stairs and shot wide eyes down at my familiar, who was next to me on the step. "You have impeccable timing with information. And likely just saved the house. Damn that confidence boost from dinner last night."

Nana scurried away and I raced up the steps. I caught her furiously wiping something off the bottom of her stool. "What did you do, Nana?"

She rolled her eyes. "It's just an all-you-can-eat rune."

I shrugged my shoulders. "I assume you made it so the calories won't count."

She lowered the legs of the stool and set the rag down. "Of course. It would be a waste of time without that aspect."

I nodded in agreement and moved to the living room. I was going to enter from there to avoid sitting on a hard stool. No one knew how long this would take and I had no desire to end up with back pain tomorrow.

Nina had already set up the iPad on its stand and pointed it to face my chair. Tarja jumped in my lap as soon as I sat down. My family filed in, followed by Aidoneus. I was happy to see him and Tseki, who took a seat next to Selene on the floor. It seemed like everyone was going to watch me this time.

I reached out and hit the link for the Zoom call. The host hadn't started it yet, so I sat back and waited. Within minutes, Luci's beautiful face was smiling as she greeted me. One by one, the other Pleiades joined the call. I recognized them from our previous call and was pleased to feel their warmth when they greeted me. I'd been worried they were angry with me for changing how things worked.

Luciana leaned forward. "Looks like we're all here. Is everyone ready to project to Stuleros?"

I held up my potion, eager to get on with it. "Ready."

Each of the other witches displayed their vials. I wanted to call my mom over so she could see that hers looked as good, if not better than the others. I didn't because Luci moved the call along and before I knew it, she was telling everyone to project themselves to the familiar's realm.

My stomach flipped as I leaned my head back and closed my eyes. I clutched the potion in one hand and stroked Tarja with the other. I'd gone to Stuleros enough times that it was easy to project my spirit there.

The same twisted power as last time surrounded me, stinging me like a thousand wasps. I was sure that I could sense a touch less darkness this time. Tarja wound around my ankles as I tried to focus and find the other Pleiades.

The fog, however, was just as thick, and I had to force my feet to move forward once again. I lifted the vial, relieved it had made it intact. Tarja and I moved through the mist, unable to see anything in front of us for several seconds.

When our vision cleared, we were in the giant meadow. With the vibe being less depressing and the air slightly less acrid, I was sad to

see the flowers and grass hadn't improved.

Luci and Zeph were already there, along with Nissa and Naoko. Tarja took off and I ran to catch up. When we reached them, the other three Pleiades and their familiars started showing up.

Nissa's brow was furrowed as she scanned our surroundings. "It's changed again. It's a damn good thing we came when we did. We cannot allow it to progress any further."

Helena's eyes were like round bouncy balls as she took it all in. "I didn't believe it was possible to reach this realm. I thought you were mistaken. I see now that I was wrong."

The familiars all started gathering in a circle. I closed the distance and grabbed Luci's arm. "We need to act fast."

"It's too late. They're coming!" Tarja's announcement made the other three Pleiades screech while Luci, Nissa, Cordelia, and I formed a circle that was open on one end.

"Get over here," Cordelia growled. Helena, Ashia, and Alex rushed forward.

Helena grabbed my hand, and Alex grabbed Luci's. We had the familiars in the middle of us. We had to buy time to gather our focus before we tried to cast the cleansing spell. "Do not let them get a hold of your familiar. They injured Tarja and took part of her soul. She would have died if I hadn't latched onto our bond and continuously fed her energy. I'm still sending it her way."

"Are those the phantasms?" Ashia's finger pointed to the group of black smoke monsters hovering at the lines of trees.

I nodded my head. "It's difficult to see past the twisted mess they've become, but I know they are the souls of previous familiars."

Helena's hold on me tightened. "What do we do? I can't focus for shit right now."

"We shield ourselves until we have a game plan. Use the spell, *angustos omnes malos spiritus*," Cordelia replied.

Luci shifted from foot to foot. "We need to work fast."

I instantly recalled the last time we did the spell and imagined the same details, certain to make it surround us again. The energy built within our circle between one blink and the next. I didn't need Luci's nod to know when to cast. The magic wanted out of me.

Our voices rang out through the realm. The spell had no sooner left our mouths than blinding white light burst around us. I covered my eyes, but that didn't lessen the burning or strobe effect. The air sweetened, and I knew we were surrounded by an iridescent bubble.

"They're hovering outside the shield," Helena observed.

I nodded. "Last time they ran into the barrier and screeched so loud it sent me to my knees."

"They created pretty red sparks, too. Seems like they learned from their previous mistakes." Luci extended her hand, passing it right through the bubble. The closest phantasm made that ear-piercing sound.

My hands flew to my ears at the same time she snatched her hand back to our side. That started them darting around the sides of the bubble and over the top. It was like a roiling black miasma. The sight and sound of it made me sick to my stomach.

Last time they had been focused on our familiars. Now they were in a frenzy without focus. I looked over Luci's shoulder at her hand. "Are you alright? Did they get you?"

Luci took a shuddering breath. "I'm fine. They didn't touch me."

Alex moved closer to us. "They have fangs. They're not even recognizable any longer. Is this cleansing going to be enough?"

Luci nodded. "We are the seven Pleiades. Our ancestors had enough power collectively to destroy the god's realm. We are the only ones capable of fixing this mess. I just wish it were as easy to clear the planet of the Tainted so they cannot do this again."

*"You seven should cast the cleansing and use the potions while they are distracted. Now that Luci has proved you can reach through, put the potions on the ground beneath us."* I glanced down at Tarja as she spoke, not at all surprised to see the other familiars behind her.

I knelt on the ground and clasped the vial between my palms as I started to create the image I wanted for this spell. I considered restoring the realm to what I first saw, then dismissed it. I wanted to clean every ounce of malevolent magic from the realm and its inhabitants. I needed to see the dark mist leaving the spirits little by little until they were a healthy, bluish glow.

I lifted my head and noted the others were on the ground with me. “Do we do anything special for this?”

Luci shook her head from side to side. “Remove the stopper from your vials. It’ll be better if we’re touching, so our power works collectively. Put a hand on the shoulder of the woman in front of you.”

I removed the cork from my vial and laid a hand on Nissa’s shoulder. The second we were all joined, the energy reached a crescendo. I shoved my hand through the barrier beside us. “*Defeaco*,” the group chanted in unison.

I tipped the vial and spilled the bright teal liquid out. The second it hit the ground, the phantasms stopped moving. For a moment, they were nothing more than black fog. Lightning flashed all around the sky above, hitting the creatures, trees, river, and ground.

The smell of ozone was heavy in the air. When the lightning hit the spirit closest to me, the black smoke vanished. In its place was a stone cat. There was no way to discern color or hair type. As I watched, lightning continued to hit each of the dark spirits around us, removing the black smoke, leaving a small stone cat statue in its place.

The barrier vanished, and the familiars darted from our circle. We stood up and watched as they prowled throughout the macabre garden statues. My heart sank to my gut as I worried, I had demolished any chance we had of having more familiars.

*“You have done it. Your spell is clearing out the realm. You must leave now before you are caught up in the magic. We do not know if you would survive such a thing. This entire situation is new.”* Tarja’s voice was urgent and undeniably excited.

“What about you?” I refused to leave her. If these statues cracked and set the phantasms loose again, I could lose her.

*“Do not worry about us. We need to remain and ensure the spell removes all the negative energy. We will return soon.”*

I nodded and waved to the others before focusing on my body and the feel of the chair beneath me. I was getting the hang of astral projecting and was back in my body a second later.

My mom jumped up. “Did it work?”

I stood up and set Tarja on the chair and turned the Zoom call off. I noticed everyone else had already closed out. "I'm pretty sure it worked like a charm. Tarja sent us away when the lightning started. She didn't want us to get caught up in the transformation."

"Were the phantasms still there?" Nina asked from her position on the couch.

I jogged my head from shoulder to shoulder. "Not exactly. The potion turned them into stone. Tarja was confident they wouldn't return twisted. You should have heard her excitement. She was like an entirely different cat."

"I bet those other Pleiades are feeling foolish now," Nana added. "Who wants some salted caramel ice cream?"

Nina jumped up and joined Nana. I chuckled. "As long as it's spiked with rum, I'll take a scoop."

Aidoneus crossed the room and closed his arms around me. "You've given the witching world a gift that will turn the tables for them."

I patted his chest. "You're getting ahead of yourself. We don't know it's done yet. But we do know we should try this with the poltergeist."

He chuckled and pressed a kiss to the top of my head. A weight had been lifted off my shoulders, allowing me to focus on the most urgent tasks still on my list. First was helping free Heidi, then verifying Stuleros was healing and making progress. And finally, I would be paying Marius a visit and make him regret the bullshit he orchestrated in New Orleans.

## CHAPTER 19



“*R*un through this with me one more time.” I wanted to kiss the scowl off Aidoneus’s face.

Not that I didn’t understand his point of view. I got why he hated the plan Stella and I had concocted. It involved her and I going into Heidi’s house in astral form and using the cleansing potion before banishing the spirit to the Underworld.

That last part was Stella’s idea. In her opinion, the spell was more likely to work if we had a direction to send the poltergeist. Without that, she was right. We couldn’t keep it from reattaching itself to Heidi’s home.

“Stella and I will be astral projecting into Heidi’s home where we use the cleansing potion to weaken the poltergeist’s connection to the building. Once we are certain she no longer has her hooks in the rafters, we will banish her to your father’s realm. Easy peasy.” I smiled at him to punctuate my confidence. I should have had the leftover stew then I wouldn’t be faking it right now.

Aidon cupped my cheeks and pressed his lips to mine briefly. “I don’t like it. I hate feeling useless. I don’t want you waiting in there for the cleansing to work. You’re too vulnerable.”

I wanted to argue for half a second before I realized I could and should compromise. I’d been a doormat for Miles and conceded any and everything I wanted to do. It didn’t matter what I thought or felt. If he didn’t like something, then it wasn’t going to happen. For over twenty years, I believed that was what it meant to compromise. How



naïve I had been. That was being steamrolled and stepped on. Miles didn't respect me.

"That's a deal. We will drench the house in the potion and come right back to wait it out." It was actually for the best because Tarja returned within an hour to let us know the stone was cracking to reveal healthy spirits. I figure we should at least give it an hour before trying to banish her.

A hiss across the lawn made me turn my head. Tsekani was shaking a hand covered in green scales and talons. "This bitch is pissed. Are you sure you don't want me to burn it down?"

Layla slugged him in the arm. "Of course, she's sure. Heidi is a victim in this and inside the house. We can't get her out until we banish this poltergeist."

Tseki shrugged and jogged back to the cars parked along the curb. I got back in the back next to Stella and lifted my vial. She did the same before closing a hand around it. My mom had insisted on dividing the potion into two vials so we had better coverage.

Aidon leaned in the rear passenger door and pressed his lips to mine again. "Be careful, Queenie."

I nodded before leaning my head back and closing my eyes. I had already arranged with Stella that I would squeeze her thigh when I was entering the astral plane so she could follow, so I reached out and laid my hand on her leg.

I pictured my spirit leaving my body with the potion. When I had a clear image of my astral form in my mind, I signaled Stella and chanted the spell under my breath. I laid my head against the cushion and focused on projecting my spirit.

I thought I was prepared, but it was different when I didn't go to another realm. Once again, my stomach dropped to my feet as a powerful vacuum sucked my soul from my body. That I was prepared for, so I didn't have to block the instinct to protect myself.

The black hole was as fast as last time and just as dizzying. My stomach roiled as lights flashed around me like a strobe light. I stumbled on the sidewalk, where I manifested next to Aidoneus, taking a moment to appreciate his sexiness. I was a lucky damn woman. *What happens when you are an old lady and he still looks like this?*

I was saved from having the now-familiar internal battle by the sudden appearance of Stella. She gagged and coughed for a few seconds before she straightened her spine and brushed back her ghostly hair.

“Can we travel through the walls? How are we going to get inside?”

I stopped in the middle of the path leading to Heidi’s front door. “I sure as hell hope so, because I have no idea.”

Stella shrugged and continued. “We can always ask Tarja if we can’t, ah!”

I ran to her side. “What is it?” I reached for her hand and let out a scream of my own. It felt as if a thousand knives were cutting my limb to shreds.

I yanked it back at the same time Stella did. “Shit, we can’t even approach the house.”

I trained my gaze on the house. “I have a feeling this bitch knows we’re on the spiritual plane. Let’s keep trying. There has to be a weakness. No way is she going to beat us.”

Stella scowled and marched like her life depended on it. We took turns testing the barrier until we were able to get close to the house. I crouched below a window and pointed above my head.

Stella nodded and shoved the hand holding the potion through the wall. Her hand disappeared, answering two questions at the same time. “No way are we going in this way.” She swallowed and eyed the side of the house. “Are we really going to test every inch of this place?”

I grimaced. “We don’t have another choice. I’ll do it.”

Stella scoffed. “Like hell, you will. I’m a fully-fledged member of the Backside of Forty and the Mystic Circle coven. We’re partners.”

I wrapped one arm around Stella’s shoulder and continued. “Damn right we are.”

It took forever to make our way down one side of the house before we turned to the back of the house. I was getting used to the pain, which wasn't a good thing. In fact, I had checked out until Stella's shout changed in tone.

“What is it now? Is she out here with us?”

“I have no idea where she is, but we’re about to find out. We can get through here.”

That perked me up. Going to my tiptoes, I looked through the window and noticed we were near the kitchen. Heidi was huddled in a ball on the mattress in her kitchen. She had dark circles under her eyes and looked like she’d lost weight.

I ran to the back door and walked through. My movement seized and if I had been in my physical body, I would have cracked my jaw, it clenched so hard. I looked back and glared at my best friend. “You could have told me it was going to hurt.”

Stella had the decency to look sheepish. “You moved too fast for me to get the words out. Hey, we’re inside!”

The loud screech of a pterodactyl made my hands fly up to cover my ears. I lost my hold of the potion and had to dive and catch it as it fell. I was no athlete, yet luck was on my side and I caught the vial before it hit the floor.

The poltergeist got Heidi’s attention. I wanted to reassure her, but I needed to act fast. I stood up and came face to face with the vile entity, causing Heidi so much grief. The spirit had ratty flyaway hair, red eyes, sharp teeth, and dark stains on her tattered dress.

“We are going to need to do this on the other side of my barrier. Remember to use *defaeco*. Take a moment and get a clear picture of how you want the potion to permeate the floorboards and spread throughout the house and clear away any negative energy. Get back to your body as soon as you cast your spell.”

Stella nodded her head while keeping her gaze on Heidi. It was a smart move and I did the same. If I looked at the spirit, I might not be able to go through with this. Stella was moving before I was, which propelled me into motion.

I ran with all my heart toward the poltergeist. Neither of us knew if we could fly, so we stuck with what we knew. A claw raked across my shoulder, making my arm go limp, while fire spread like lava through my non-existent veins.

Thankfully, it wasn’t the one holding the potion. I ignored the pain and ran to the living room. Pulling my arm back, I threw the vial at the fireplace and screamed the spell.

The sound of liquid splashing preceded Stella dumping her potion. Her words were further away, but white light flared from the floor, and lightning shot from the ceiling. I stopped in the doorway to the kitchen, unable to believe my eyes. The spirit had Heidi in her grasp. Her fingers were digging into the elf's upper chest, causing blood to trickle from the wounds.

"What do we do?"

I didn't look at Stella as I answered her. "Get back to your body. I'm going to free Heidi. I don't have time to argue, so I am going to assume you will listen to me."

With that, I let loose a war cry and barreled into the poltergeist. One arm was numb, which was a blessing because the pain from the impact was lessened. The spirit flew into the stove and disappeared inside.

I turned in a circle, wondering where she was going to appear. Stella paused long enough to make sure Heidi ran out the backdoor before she followed. I was halfway around when claws dug into my back.

I held back my scream and tried to call up my witch fire. I would rebuild if I burned down the house. Unfortunately, my purple flames never manifested themselves. My mind scrambled to find a way out of this.

Lightning continued in the living room. It wasn't damaging any of the furniture or floor, which made me wonder why black smoke rose with every strike. It had to be forcing the dark energy out of the woodwork.

Using that, I reached behind me and latched onto the poltergeist's neck. I pressed as hard as I could, wanting to hurt her and make her remove her claws. Instead, she shoved them further, stealing my breath in the process.

I walked while holding the spirit, trying to force her into the living room. She wasn't cooperating. Instead, she kicked me in the back and sent me flying across the kitchen. My hands went up to protect my face from colliding with the door frame. I staggered, taken off guard when there was no impact.

The lightning was moving throughout the house. I needed to help it along. I called up an image of the bright teal potion dripping down

the stones surrounding the fireplace and imagined it growing and flowing to cover the rest of the house. "*Replicare et propagationem.*"

The magical blast that followed my attempt to replicate and spread the cleansing serum blew both me and the poltergeist off our feet. I hit the wall then the floor hard enough I saw stars. My back was on fire and my abdomen felt like it was split in two.

I rolled over and got to my hands and knees, expecting to see blood, but there was none. I prayed that meant my body was alright, as well. The spirit lunged for me and was hit by a bolt of lightning. They had doubled.

The poltergeist might have flickered for a second, but she kept coming at me. Her fingers sliced four furrows across my chest. My heart skipped a beat and I couldn't breathe. I didn't even have the energy to flee.

I had to banish her now, otherwise I might not make it. I'd been imagining sending this creature to hell so often, it didn't take much to firm up my intent. "*Et emittam te ad inferos.*"

The bitch stopped attacking and threw her head back to cackle at me. "You can't banish me from my house. I will have your power and the elf's, then no one will be able to stop me."

"Wanna bet? Time for you to leave." Aidoneus's wings were out and, his chest was heaving as he said something in ancient Greek. The spirit's red eyes flew wide as he approached and drew one of his runes on her forehead with a silver dagger.

There was a loud pop before the poltergeist vanished. I sagged to the ground and pictured my body, telling my soul to return. The world went black as pain tore through me.

Strong arms wrapping around me made me open my eyes. I hissed, and Aidoneus put me down. "Are you alright?"

My breathing was shallow as I looked down at my chest. There were no visible injuries. "I'm not sure. I hurt everywhere. Why didn't you do that before? It would have helped at the beginning, Yahweh."

"*You've suffered injuries to your spirit. As you know, those take time to heal, but yours will not kill you. I've got you, Phoebe.*" Knowing Tarja was there to help made me feel a lot better.

Aidoneus kissed my forehead. "I couldn't do anything until I got inside. I wasn't even sure my powers would work until I got a sense

of the spirit. UIS agents can only send certain energies to the Underworld.”

I nodded at Aidon and thanked Tarja, promising her tuna for a week. I lifted to my tiptoes and claimed Aidon’s mouth in a kiss. I poured all of my love for him into the contact, hoping to convey how grateful I was that he was able to help after we had weakened her.

I broke the kiss and turned to the others. “We make a damn good team,” I told them before addressing the elf. Heidi was visibly shaken. I doubted she would recover anytime soon.

“She’s gone and will never return.” I could see she doubted my reassurances. “The potion is still cleansing the house and eradicating any connection that might linger. I’d go stay in a hotel for a bit if I were you. Give your house time to clear out.”

Tears filled Heidi’s eyes. “It’s really over?”

I nodded. “She’s never coming back.”

I couldn’t believe we’d done it. It freed me up to face Marius. Later, I decided, when Aidon had to lift me into the car after we said our goodbyes. Tsekani was staying behind to help Heidi get settled into a room. He didn’t want to leave her while she was vulnerable. I sank into the seat and closed my eyes. I’d rest for a little bit, then see about Stuleros and the familiars.

## CHAPTER 20



Clio lifted her hands from my chest and pursed her lips. “I think this is your worst injury yet. How do you get yourself into these messes? I never had to treat Hattie this much.”

I rolled my eyes. The witches of the coven weren’t shy about comparing me to Hattie, and it was irritating. “That’s because I’m unlike anyone else. I’m not Hattie and never will be. Her shoes are too damn big to fill. Besides, I have no desire to try and be her. You don’t have to like me and you don’t have to help me. I can get another healer to relocate here to treat me and my family.”

Clio’s hazel eyes widened and her mouth moved but no sound came out. I didn’t have the energy to take it back. Not to mention that I’d turned over a new leaf where I danced to no one’s tune. If she didn’t like me pointing out the truth, that was her issue to get over, not mine. It wasn’t as if I snapped at her or used a harsh tone.

The healer shook her head back and forth. “I guess we haven’t been the most welcoming group. I can’t change the others, but I can alter how I see things. I want to thank you for diving in and going above and beyond to keep us safe. I was used to how things worked with Hattie, and I shouldn’t expect it to remain the same. I honestly enjoy coming over and helping you and your family. I thought we were becoming friends. Now I see I was mistaken.”

I sighed and leaned my head against the chair cushion. As apologies went, that was one of the best. It wasn’t filled with fake platitudes. She noted her mistakes, and it was clear she would attempt to move past them. I couldn’t ask for more.

“Being my friend is dangerous. Is there anything I can do to speed the healing process along? I need to visit Stuleros, then confront a vampire about almost killing my best friend.”

Clio whistled. “You weren’t kidding when you said being your friend was dangerous. You’re one of the lucky ones. Tarja is helping to heal your spirit. It will take time, but the wounds are already better. I wouldn’t confront Marius before you’re back to one hundred percent. He’d exploit your weakness and he might actually win with the severity of your wounds.”

That was more relief than disappointment. I wasn’t ready to kill the asshole, yet. I didn’t know if I ever would be. Thankfully, they were considerations I could put off to another day.

“It’ll be good for him to worry about when I’ll attack, anyway. Thank you, Clio. I have grown to rely on you and your expertise. I only hope you begin to trust me in return.”

The healer smiled at me. “There’s no one I’d rather have at my back than you and your team. It might not seem like it, but your reputation is growing. Soon enough it will reach the west coast and they’ll lose their attitude. That’ll help win the rest of the coven to your side.”

“What are you talking about?” My mind went over a hundred different things at once.

The one that stuck was the fact that I hadn’t given the area a thought because I assumed Alex was somewhere on that side of the country. I had no doubt my neglect created a mess of epic proportions. Tarja had told me the most important aspect of doing magic was intent. They weren’t even a blip on my radar, so it followed that whatever magic I wielded over witchkind must feel absent to them.

Clio grimaced. “The witches are running amok performing magic in front of individuals they shouldn’t because they’ve lost the oversight of the Pleiades, and there is no one to stop them.”

I dropped my head and clutched fistfuls of my tangled brown hair. “I was operating under the assumption that another Pleiades had that side of the country. I was mistaken. Mark my words, that ends now. I can see why so many are angry at me. For the record, I have only known about the magical world for nine months.”



“You lot should be kissing the ground she walks on,” Nana insisted as she shook a finger at Clio from her recliner next to me. “Her transition has been fraught with danger. She’s almost died more times than I can count, and yet she has managed to construct a hellmouth to minimize demonic activity. She also ferreted out corruption within your council. Not to mention the fact that she took out a Tainted witch and made a strong alliance with a god. What have you done? Healed a few cuts?”

When Nana laid my last nine months out like that, it was damn impressive. “They do appreciate me, Nana, but thanks for sticking up for me. I think Clio’s point is that there are reasons people are skeptical. It doesn’t matter that none of it is my fault. All we can do is move forward. However, they could cut me some freaking slack. I don’t see any of them being attacked by demons and vampires.”

Clio inclined her head. “That is true. Most would pee their pants if they came face to face with a demon. Let me know if you need anything. In the meantime, take it easy. Your body needs rest.”

I assured the healer I would and said goodbye. By the time I got back to the living room, I was ready to check Stuleros to see if our plan had worked. I wouldn’t be able to sleep well until I knew. If it hadn’t worked there, then I might need to do something more to ensure the poltergeist never returned.

I clapped my hands together and smiled. “You ready to see how your realm is faring?”

My mom gave me her disapproving look. The one that always made me feel bad for letting her down. “Are you sure that’s a good idea? Maybe you should get more rest.”

I hugged her before taking my seat. “This isn’t taxing, mom. I promise. We need to check in and see if the cleansing worked. Besides, Tarja would never let me go if she thought it would be dangerous.”

*“I would never do anything to endanger your life. My purpose is to ensure your safety and help you with your magic. I am ready if you are certain you don’t need a nap first.”*

“Absolutely. I will be back before you know it. And I promise to return if I get any weaker, mom.”

My mom sighed the way she did when she wasn't thrilled with something but wasn't going to argue her point further. "I'll have a snack ready for both of you when you return."

That perked me up. She was getting better and better with her cooking. The entire house had become excited about trying her latest creation. This afternoon, it was scones that provided clarity of thinking.

"Can't wait, mom." I assumed the position in the chair I preferred to use for astral projecting. As soon as I closed my eyes, I focused on Tarja while pushing my astral projection out of my body. I didn't even need to chant the spell anymore.

That was a huge deal for me. I was getting better at my magic. I never thought I'd get to the point where I didn't need to chant my spells. Seemed Tarja was right, that there would be certain spells I wouldn't need the words for.

I stopped patting myself on the back and focused on my movement. The first time I visited the realm, it felt like being pulled through a tube of toothpaste. It was the same dizzying black hole, except I went through far faster than ever before.

Familiar energy surrounded me. This time, it was warm and welcoming. It made me want to snuggle up with a good book and a cup of cocoa. My senses returned and I could feel my body again. My eyes opened and a smile broke out across my face.

The white mist was gone. I was standing in a gorgeous green field filled with flowers. The trees swayed in the breeze and were fuller and healthier. The stream in the distance glistened in the bright sun.

Tarja sat a few feet in front of me, watching the spirits of cats frolic throughout the space. The phantasms were gone. In their place were bluish forms of familiars. Their energy was happy and carefree. It was a major difference to what I felt on my earlier visits.

"We did it, Tarja. Your realm is beautiful. The flowers are the sweetest I've ever smelled. And the sky is pristine. I would never want to leave here if I were you."

"I never thought I would see this again. And it's all thanks to you. If Hattie hadn't given you her magic, there would be no hope. Now, witches everywhere will live better lives."

Emotion closed my throat. I sat down next to her and gathered myself before I became a blubbing idiot. Two tiny spirits raced through the grass in front of us. One of them lowered its head and chest while wiggling its rear end. A second later it pounced on the other that had been distracted by a butterfly.

"I know you said we cannot assign witches a familiar. Is there any way we can discover who they will go to? I'd like to tell Kaitlyn when she might get hers. She's got it rough living in the same city as Marie Laveau and I'd like to see her get help sooner rather than later." The pressure on me to give every witch a familiar was immense. I knew this was likely a stupid question, but I had to ask it.

*"I am sorry, Phoebe but we cannot direct familiars. They choose who they go to, not us. I'm not even pregnant yet. None of us are."* Tarja's head suddenly turned to the left and her ears twitched. *"Luci and Zeph are on their way."*

"Did he tell you? Or can you sense them approaching?"

*"We all know when a familiar is traveling here."*

To punctuate her words, the spirits stopped what they were doing for a split second and focused to the left. A second later, Zephyrus appeared and the activity resumed. Tarja was up and crossing the grass.

I stood and followed behind. I lifted a hand to Luci when she appeared a second later. It was nice to see a familiar face. I imagined my expression looked a lot like Luciana's, open-mouthed joy.

Luci returned the gesture before she turned in a circle, taking everything in. "Zeph assured me our cleansing worked. I can't believe the changes that have already taken effect. This is life-changing. While I miss Hattie, I have to admit you have brought a much-needed breath of fresh air to the witching world."

"I'm just glad it worked. And, I'm grateful we don't have to select who to give the new familiars to. I thought I wanted the ability to distribute them because there are a few I know that are in dire need. As I have had more time to consider how many need them, I see the pressure of that responsibility. The gods or familiars or whoever can take care of that."

Luci's laugh cut off, and she nudged me with her elbow. "Speaking of new familiars. I think it's time for us to leave."

I followed her gaze and chuckled when I saw Tarja and Zeph with their necks intertwined. It was intimate, and I felt like an interloper. This wasn't our realm. "I'd say you're right. Let's chat in a few days. Tarja, I'm heading home. I will see you later."

With a smile on my face, I focused on my body and concentrated until I felt the weight of my flesh and bones. I opened my eyes to find Nina crouching in front of me with wide, panicked eyes.

I gasped and surged forward, grabbing her biceps. "Nina, what is it? Did something happen to Gammy or Nana?"

Nina's head shook frantically from side to side. "No, they're fine. Someone called your cell phone to report a murder!"

I jumped to my feet. So much for getting any rest. "What did they say? Who called? Who was killed?"

"I have no idea! They hung up without telling me anything else when I said you were unavailable." Nina was practically hyperventilating.

I stood up and pulled my daughter with me. "It's gonna be alright. I will handle this." I wrapped her in my arms and held her tight. Perhaps I had thanked the gods prematurely. This is not what I needed right now. I wanted time to heal the injury to my spirit.

[Download the next book in the \*Mystical Midlife in Maine\* series, \*Fae Forged Axes\* and \*Chin Waxes\* HERE! Then turn the page for a preview.](#)

EXCERPT FROM FAE FORGED AXES  
AND CHIN WAXES BOOK #6

“Mom! I think someone murdered dad!” My body jackknifed to a sitting position the instant I heard Nina’s words.

Aidoneus was out of bed a second later. “Does she mean your father? I thought he died a long time ago.”

My heart hammered in my chest as I got up and slipped my feet into my slippers before grabbing my robe. “No, she means her father. Shit, shit, shit. I bet it was those damn vampires thinking they were hurting me by killing the asshole.”

Aidoneus had his jeans on and was in the process of pulling a short over his head. He looked at me with misery in his expression. “We will find out who did this and make them pay.”

He was the best partner a woman could ask for. It was clear getting revenge for the death of my ex-husband hurt him in ways I could understand, but that didn’t stop him from being at my side and promising to help make the culprit pay.

I shook my head. “First of all, we don’t know that’s what happened. And if someone did kill Miles, I’m tempted to give them a gift basket.”

He chuckled and wrapped an arm around my waist. “I’m coming!” I shouted to Nina making my mom and Nana come out of their bedrooms.

Nana smoothed the wayward silver curls on her head. “Why is she shouting across the house instead of coming to get you?”

I shrugged my shoulders and looked down at my daughter who was halfway up the main staircase when we reached it. “What

happened?”

Nina thrust my phone into my hand when I reached her. “You got a call from an unknown number. The guy said there was a dead body you needed to investigate.”

One of my eyebrows rose to my hair line as my mouth compressed into a thin line. Nana spoke before I managed a response. “Child, you never make a huge fuss over an anonymous call about a dead body. You have no way of knowing that was your father. Sweet, Jesus. Raising the alarm like that and scaring an old woman like me out of a deep sleep could have given me a heart attack.”

Nina’s cheeks turned pink as I walked past her with Aidon at my side. “But, Nana, you don’t understand. The guy said the body was found in the same park where dad goes running every morning. What are the chances someone calls you about a dead guy in North Carolina in the *same* location I know dad was an hour ago.”

I stopped at the bottom of the grand staircase and looked back up at my daughter. There were fine lines around her mouth and eyes which had the shine of unshed tears in them. I reached for her hand and squeezed. “We will get to the bottom of it. Let’s get some coffee, so my brain is fully functional and we can go from there.”

I walked into the kitchen to find Mythia flitting around the space. Flour covered her dark burgundy goth clothes and the island where it looked like she was making crepes. “I figured you could use some breakfast now that you’re all up. Do you think it’s true? That someone killed your ex-husband?”

There was more to the pixie’s worry than her concern for Nina or even me. If I had to guess, she was worried about people being killed that were connected to me. It was a significant concern. I had enemies coming at me from every direction. Most of whom I didn’t even know existed. It was the price of my position in the magical world.

“I have no idea, Thia, but I’m going to get to the bottom of it.” I opened my phone and pulled up a phone number I never thought I would use again. My hand shook as I held it to my ear.

Aidoneus handed me a cup of coffee and stood pressed against my back. I took a sip while the phone rang. The hot liquid got stuck

in my throat and I had to force it past the knot.

“Are the kids alright?” I exhaled the breath I was holding when my ex-husband answered my call.

A smile spread over my face as relief made me slightly dizzy. I was not looking forward to having to explain his demise to my kids. Not to mention people would think me cold when I didn’t mourn his loss.

“The kids are fine. Nina was worried about you and, uh, I told her I would make sure you were alright,” I explained, not having thought up another excuse for my call.

“I know you’re not calling for our daughter, but I’m not surprised you miss me,” Miles replied.

There was a split second where I was back in our marriage and he was telling me not to wear leggings because my cellulite was visible. Suddenly, I was a millimeter tall and the incompetent wife that didn’t know how to dress herself or take care of the kids properly.

*Forget that shit. You are a freaking rockstar, Pheeb!*

I shoved aside the doubt those thoughts brought on and snorted into the phone. “You no longer own real estate in my mind. Not when I have Aidon who is your better in every way. Here’s your daughter.”

I thrust my phone at Nina she could talk to her lunatic of a father. I would never keep my kids from speaking to him, or seeing him when they wanted but I was not subjecting myself to anymore of his abuse. I did my duty as a parent and made the call, in the event there was bad news. I would always protect Nina and Jean Marc from as much of the shit in life as possible.

Focusing on the good in my life, I turned to Aidon. “Would you text Stella and ask her to come over since Nina is on my phone? I want to know why someone is calling about a dead body in North Carolina.”

He grabbed his phone from the charger on the desk built into one corner of the kitchen. “I don’t like that this body was located so close to a park that Miles frequents. This could be a message to you.”

I inclined my head as I watched Nina to make sure she didn’t hear his comment. “That’s what I’m afraid of. I’m tempted to ignore it

and let the jackass be injured. His ego is bigger than your father's which is saying something."

Nana pursed her lips like she'd just sucked on a lemon. "Now, you're just insulting Hades. Miles is an idiot that doesn't know his head from his asshole and should never be in the same sentence as a powerful god. Even if said god thinks he's the center of the universe."

I chuckled and took a seat on one of the stools. "Fair point, Nana. There is a chance this is just another case for me to handle. Do we know where the closest paranormal police officer is located right now? If I'm getting called about this, the victim is likely one of us, so we can't allow the mundane authorities to get ahold of the body."

Selene and Layla walked into the kitchen from the backyard. Both were covered in sweat from the training they'd been doing together early each morning. "What happened?" Layla's expression went from relaxed to alert in an instant.

I explained about the call and our theories as to why I was called. Layla blew out a breath when I finished and shook her head. "Aidon's right. Your ex might be a target and this was a warning shot."

Nina's gasp made me cringe. She'd hung up the phone in time to hear Layla's comment. There was no way I was going to sugar coat it or give her false reassurances. The last thing she needed was for me to tell her something I couldn't guarantee.

*"Set aside the personal element to this case. Treat it like you would anything else. And start your investigation by trying to trace the phone call."* I looked around searching for my familiar. She was perched next to my mom on a stool. I hadn't seen her join us.

Selene jumped up and grabbed her laptop from the desk. It turned out she was a whiz with the thing. She could find just about everything on the internet, as well as, create apps to help keep me organized. A simple calendar didn't work for me with running a multi-billion-dollar corporation while trying to juggle cases involving demons, evil witches, and other supernatural creatures.

"I can hack into the cell towers and locate the caller," Selene said as her fingers flew over the keyboard.



Layla leaned over her shoulder. “Once you find him can we continue to follow his movements? It’ll take us time to make arrangements and get to North Carolina.”

Selene was entirely focused on what she was doing, so I didn’t think she was going to respond. “Once I get his number, I can find him anywhere in the world. That’s the beauty of technology.”

Aidoneus shook his head as he put a crepe on a plate and added fresh strawberries. My stomach rumbled at the sight of the delicious food. “That’s terrifying. Magic isn’t as effective at following people. The longer I’m here the more I understand why paranormals are afraid of being discovered. Mundies are capable of some truly terrifying things.”

The ringing of the doorbell interrupted our conversation. I was about to answer it when Aidon put the plate in front of me then kissed my lips and loped off bare foot to answer my door. My heart melted with the love and affection he showed me daily. It wasn’t something I had before, but I would never settle for less. Of course, I didn’t see myself ever leaving Aidon.

I groaned after shoving a bite of the crepe and fruit into my mouth. “This is the best I’ve ever eaten, Thia. Between you and my mom, I’m going to weigh a ton by the time the holidays roll around.”

“You’re too busy running from Tainted witches and demons to gain that much weight,” Stella teased as she and Aidoneus joined us in the kitchen. “You need all this delicious food to keep your sexy curves.”

I smiled at my best friend, grateful we reconnected when I moved back home. Stella and I had been BFFs since kindergarten. We drifted apart after college when I married Miles. Years later, Facebook brought us back into each other’s lives, but it wasn’t the same as living close to one another.

I couldn’t have picked a better partner to go through my magical makeover with. Stella was optimistic, sunny, upbeat and always put together. I was apprehensive, sarcastic and more often than not saw the negative side of things.

“I’m in no danger of losing these hips.” I patted the cushion of flesh on my sides.

Aidoneus grabbed me around the waist. "I love your body. You are perfect in every way. You could gain or lose weight and you would still be the sexiest woman alive."

Nina scrunched up her face and stuck her fingers in her ears. "Nah, nah, nah, nah. I'm not hearing this."

"You need to hear this, daughter. You should never settle for someone that doesn't completely adore you. Life is too short for anything less." I gave Nina a smile then lifted my face to Aidon for a kiss.

Breaking away before our lip lock got me too heated, I focused on my crepe while sharing the details of the morning with Stella. She fixed herself a crepe and stood at the end of the island where I was.

Nana bit into the crepe and widened her eyes. Her gaze shifted to my mom. "Is this whipped cream made with one of your experimental recipes?"

I cocked my head, watching my mother's cheeks turn pink. "Yeah. I infused the cream with a potion designed to enhance flavors. I've got chocolate chip cookies that have an energy boost bigger than if you had a quad shot espresso."

Mythia waved the tool that looked like a knife used to spread frosting on cakes at my mom. "Don't forget about your cheerful cherry pie or blissed out blueberry pancakes."

My mom's eyes lit up. "I came up with another last night. Chill out cheesecake."

My jaw dropped while Nina squeaked. "Were those cookies in the pantry yesterday, Gammy?"

"Yes, I made them the night before and put them in the Tupperware bin before going to bed," my mom replied.

Nina covered her face with her hands. "Oh no. I gave a baggie of those to my English teacher trying to get on her good side. No wonder she was practically running around the school at lunch time. What do I do?"

Nana threw her head back and laughed. "You do nothing. It is temporary and won't hurt her. Your Gammy would never make something that would harm anyone else. Besides, that tight-assed woman needed them. Although the chill out cheesecake would be a better choice next time."

“Nana is right. The cookies likely wore off by the time she got home and won’t hurt her,” my mom added.

Selene paused in her typing and lifted her head. “I might need some of those if this guy remains as elusive as it seems right now. The park Nina told me about had very few pings that early in the morning. Whoever it was seems to be hiding from us.”

Stella cocked her head as she popped a blueberry into her mouth. “Do you think we could scry for this person?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “It might be worth a try. But first, I need to find out if my company has any connections in the coroner's office. I want to make sure the body doesn’t fall into mundie hands.”

Aidoneus swallowed the massive bite he'd shoved into his mouth. “Let me work on that. I can have one of my agents intercept the mundane authorities if the body has been found.”

“Thank you, Yahweh.” I ran a hand down his chest before he walked out of the room to make his calls.

Layla lifted her fork. “Tseki has some friends in that area. I’ll go wake him up and ask him to give them a call. They live there and should be able to get to the scene right away.”

“Won't it be suspicious if a bunch of odd-looking people try to take the body from police? We will need a vampire to erase any memory of a murder in a park.” Stella visibly shuddered as she spoke of the creatures that almost killed her not long ago during our trip to New Orleans.

I squeezed her hand. “I’m hoping no one has found the person yet. Go ask Tseki to call his friends while we try and scry for the caller.”

Layla nodded and took off out the back door. She had become a close friend since she tried to save me from Myrna all those months ago. She was also invaluable in helping me adjust to this new life. I could always count on her and Tsekani. They had been Hattie’s bodyguards and were now mine. Although they both did so much more for me.

My mom chewed on her lower lip. “Are you sure you should look for him? It’s more than likely he killed this person. Otherwise, how did he know to call us?”

Nina set her plate in the sink then turned to look at me. "It's probably a moot point, Gammy. We don't have anything of the callers to use for scrying."

Stella picked up my cell phone and pressed on the phone app. "What if we use this incoming call? It's the closest thing to his person that we have."

My mother set a pan on the island. "I'll grab the herbs from the work room downstairs. What do we need again? Fennel, basil, clove, hibiscus, meadow-sweet, orange and lavender?"

"Yep. I'll start the water, so it boils faster." I filled the pot with water from the tap but Stella stopped me when I went to put it on the stove.

"Let's use magic to heat it," she suggested.

I smiled back at her. "I'll hold the pot while you use your fire." Stella was a natural with magic. Everything came easy to her where I had to study and practice for days before I was able to do the simplest thing. Having her use her fire was safer than my mom or Nana and allowed me to stir the mixture while it boiled.

Nina was carrying the black candles when she and my mom came back into the room. My mom added the herbs while Nina set the candles around the bowl on the island.

Nana rooted around in the big green purse I'd bought her online to replace the cursed one we had to destroy. It was a designer bag but didn't compare to the Gucci she'd bought at the antique store. "Aha! I'm going to add our question in writing, as well. I read in our family grimoire that burning it over the water will add to the power of the scry.

Stella tapped her lip. "Do we need the jasmine incense?"

Nina held up a brown cone. "I've got it."

"I have two agents heading to the park now. They're an hour away," Aidoneus said as he came back in the kitchen.

Layla entered the backdoor at the same time. "Tseki is calling his friends who are in town. He'll be here in a bit. What are we doing?"

"Scrying for the caller and possible murderer," I explained as I poured the heated scrying water into the bowl.

Nana grabbed a lighter and held the paper over the bowl then lit it. She dropped it right away and Mythia flew forward and used her

control over the air element to keep the burning paper floating.

I held the desire to know the location of the caller in my mind and shoved all other thoughts aside. "Mihi quid quaero."

The water turned opaque as my magic built around us. The air crackled with power and lightning flashed across the surface of the water for several seconds until it cleared to show me my favorite coffee shop not far from my old house.

Nina gasped. "He's still there. We need to leave."

I held up my hand. "I'm not entirely certain how we are going to handle this but we aren't going in without a thorough plan. We can't chance this being a trap. I've built enough of a reputation for going the extra mile on cases that an enemy could use a report of a dead body as a way to get me in his clutches."

Aidoneus inclined his head as he looked at me. I could see the pride shining there. I'd learned a lot from him. In fact, more and more I heard his voice in my head when I faced situations. It was nice to have someone believe in me and give me knowledge I needed to succeed without him. That was a sign of true love in my opinion.

## AUTHORS' NOTE

Reviews are like hugs. Sometimes awkward. Always welcome! It would mean the world to me if you can take five minutes and let others know how much you enjoyed my work.

Don't forget to visit my website: [www.brendatrim.com](http://www.brendatrim.com) and sign up for my newsletter, which is jam-packed with exciting news and monthly giveaways. Also, be sure to visit and like my Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/AuthorBrendaTrim> to see my daily posts.

Never allow waiting to become a habit. Live your dreams and take risks. Life is happening now.

DREAM BIG!

XOXO,

Brenda

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French Quarter Fae

## **Bramble's Edge Academy:**

Unearthing the Fae King

Masking the Fae King

Revealing the Fae King

## **Midnight Doms:**

Her Vampire Bad Boy

Her Vampire Suspect

All Souls Night