

REALM HOPPER PROJECT: OUT OF OFFICE, INTO HELL

by

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ABSTRACT

BRANDI MAULDIN: Realm Hopper Project: Out of Office, Into Hell (Under the direction of DR AJ HARTLEY)

Cato and Remy are two demons forced to form an alliance when Cato's life is on the line and Remy has no choice but to repay an old debt. They embark on a quest to find the Fates, the only ones who can set things right again. As they journey through an untamed land battling giant snakes, wandering spirits, and a team of ruthless assassins, they struggle to define the relationship that is growing between them. . Things only escalate when they realize that not everything about their quest is as it seems. They find clues along the way and realize that the quest is just a set-up. The real danger is still waiting for them when they return to the city, and she is ready to kill Cato and claim his title for herself.

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Critical Introduction

Prior to the project, my habit when planning and writing stories was to avoid endings. Every single book I set out to write started with an outline which included sequels. The endings for each book would involve cliffhangers to be continued in the next book. To be fair, my very first offer for publication was a contract for one of those series, so at first I felt like I had done well. I had figured out how to write, and that was that. Then I realized my plans had led to an endless spiral where most works would go uncompleted for years. I had written myself into a rut, and I needed to find a way out. However, I'm stubborn, and I wasn't about to let go of a series without someone having to pry it out of my hands.

While I recognized my problem, I also saw that the majority of the most popular books in the middle grade and/or young adult genre all followed the pattern: *Percy Jackson*, *Harry Potter*, *The Mortal Instruments*, and so on. All of my favorite novels across genres are parts of series, and I realized that I am more inclined to like popular fiction than perhaps literary pieces. In particular, I am drawn more to a series or what has the potential to become a series than a stand-alone.

I don't believe wanting to start writing with the intention of making a book into a series is the worst thing. Marvel alone has proved you can go for decades following the same characters, and the vast majority of people will not complain. It is just that to get to the point where people would want to invest in characters or a world for the long-haul a writer first has to prove that they are good enough to be invested in, and I haven't proved that yet. I decided what I needed to do was to find a middle ground where the book I

wrote could stand on its own feet but that it could also have a companion book or two in the future if the opportunity arose.

For this project, I wanted to force myself to give a complete ending for the characters but to not avoid an ending to the world itself. Heavily inspired by Terry Pratchett's technique of building a world and then delving into the lives of the different characters who inhabit it, I decided I would first build a world and then decided who lived in it and what was their place in the world before writing the story. By the end of the book, I wanted the characters to be in a place where I would be satisfied leaving them permanently.

I took a world I had started to build in a workshop class, and I added to that world. I set in place the rules of who could exist in the world, how they could travel throughout the world, and anything else that would have a direct influence on the characters. The first book in the Realm Hopper Project is called *Part-Time Demon*. The inspiration came during a class I took on fairytales. While reading "The Devil with the Three Golden Hairs" I started to wonder why so many modern fairytale retellings neglected the stories about demons to instead focus primarily on the princess tales. Then I started to wonder what it would look like if a boy from today happened to find himself going on a fairytale style quest against a demon, and that resulted in the first book's existence. What I didn't expect was to find a background character, whom I had created for the story and had a grand total of five sentences devoted to his existence, somehow managed to catch my interest in a way that I couldn't stop focusing on trying to build his background and think of how he would react in certain situations.

When I went to start planning my thesis, that character would not leave my mind, and so I decided that my thesis would revolve around him. Remy became one of the two main characters of the story for *Out of Office, Into Hell*. I knew I had to find a way to fit him into the fairytale theme that had existed in the first book in the project. I mapped out several possible plots and tried to figure out what short-comings he had in his personality that could be used in progressing a plot. This caused me to expand my world further. I wondered why I was restricting myself to fairytales when I had already established the fact that demons were a part of the fairytale world. In that case, where did people draw the lines between fairytales and mythology? If in the real world, we have several religions and deities coexisting alongside each other, then why could my fictional world not be the same?

Rick Riordan, Neil Gaiman, Kieron Gillen, and Jamie McKelvie became my guides as I studied the ways they connected multiple religious figures to all exist in one world and along one plotline. In Rick Riordan's case, he has built a world where one character is the daughter of a Greek goddess while her cousin interacts with the Norse gods. Neither plot contradicts the other, but they exist in harmony and at times make appearances in each other's books. Neil Gaiman pulls from multiple religions for his characters in *American Gods*, and Kieron Gillen and Jamie McKelvie's *Wicked + Divine* is fully built around the idea that all deities are real and can exist at the same time and interact with each other regularly. For *Out of Office, Into Hell*, I placed the Fates from Greek mythology into the Underworld, and I surrounded them by demons from many religions. In addition, Remy and Cato themselves are demons with Remy being the

descendant of Beleth, a figure who appears in *The Lesser Key of Solomon* and Cato regularly interacting with Dantalion, who is also from *The Lesser Key of Solomon*.

With the world I built not being solely restricted to deities, I decided to treat demons, fae, and all the other beings who inhabit it not as different “creatures” but instead have them act as people from different countries. They might have different belief systems or laws, but none are inherently good or evil. They are all just doing their best to live their lives and are bound by the laws of whatever location they are currently in. For the Realm Hoppers Project 2 which is now titled *Out of Office, Into Hell* the plot follows just two of the inhabitants of the world. Cato and Remy begin the book with a problem which is wrapped up neatly at the end. Their relationship ends in a happily ever after. It is in no way reliant on the other book, but there are some aspects of it that are better appreciated if read with the other book.

I have to admit that when it comes to the craft of writing, it has not been something I approach by thinking about intensely. I have never tried to emulate any style. I’m afraid that outside of classroom settings, I don’t pay much attention to how other authors craft except to think “oh, that was clever”, so when I approached working on this thesis, it was something I tried to pay attention to when I began writing.

My main focus was on the style and tone I was using. I have discovered while working on this thesis and also workshopping other stories in classes, that readers find my style of writing to be humorous. This made me take a second look at tone and style I was writing with, and for *Out of Office, Into Hell* I decided to lean into the more humorous aspects and embrace the dark humor that others were saying stood out in my writing. It was important to me to balance the humor with the more serious aspects of the

book. In the words of Terry Pratchett, “If a book is nothing but funny, then it is nothing but funny. There is no contrast and it's hard to take anything seriously. It's hard to worry about the fate of a character. You do need those moments when you bring people down to Earth.” (White)

I didn't want to make the scenes themselves very humorous. I did not want to rely on silly situations or slapstick. I wanted the humor to come from tight writing, something I am still working on improving, and I wanted the humor to come from the characters who themselves are somewhat dark and flippant and who try to cope with what is happening by burying it under humor. However, when something serious occurs, I let the characters feel it. While their dialogue might often be tongue-in-cheek, I wanted to show through their actions and their inner thoughts that they feel fear, anger, and hurt. I practiced knowing what situations required humor and which ones needed the characters to directly acknowledge the seriousness of the situation.

In this case, I turned to Terry Pratchett and Rainbow Rowell. In particular, I focused on Rainbow Rowell's *Simon Snow Series*. I found that her humor is similar to what I want to achieve with my own writing where the focus of the novel is on the adventure with the humor popping through subtly and where a large chunk of the humor comes from the character's dry wit when recounting their own circumstances.

Another thing I focused on was how to write in a first person point of view while having two different narrators. I tried experimenting with writing straight through the book and switching between Remy and Cato when it felt right to switch based on which character had the better view of the events happening. Then I tried going through and reading strictly one from character's point of view before going through the other's point

of view to make sure I was putting their personalities into their narration. Here again I turned to Rainbow Rowell's books. As Rainbow Rowell is someone who also identifies as a woman but who is writing a male point of view, I tried to take note of did that change the humor in any way. When Rainbow Rowell writes from Simon's point of view, his train of thought wonders and breaks off at places, and he swears liberally.

"I can't, damn it." I was waving my sword around—I was pretty good with a sword already at 15—but the chimera wasn't corporeal. (Which is my rough luck, pretty much always. As soon as you start carrying a sword, all your enemies turn out mist and gossamer.) (Rowell, 2)

Rainbow Rowell's use of dashes to show the character cutting themselves off rather than having ellipses to express wandering thoughts and also her use adding extra little details matches my own way of thinking. It is also similar to how I imagined Remy would think.

Remy's point of view operates very similarly to my own way of thinking. I gave him aspects of my own ADHD where sometimes he seems to jump from one point to another, and it can take a moment to connect how he got from point A to point B since there were five points in between that seemingly connected in no way.

In contrast, Cato's way of thinking is very logical, and he explains how he reaches certain points. Their ways of thinking alters so much from their way of speaking because of this. While Remy's thoughts jumps around, his dialogue is a bit clearer. He knows people cannot follow his thoughts without explanations, and he compensates for that by overexplaining the points he wants to get across. Basically, he uses a lot of words to say very little. Meanwhile, Cato assumes that others think about things the way he

does, and so when he speaks, he cuts down anything unnecessary and trusts everyone else to piece together what he means from small clues.

Writing split point of views allowed me to really think through how much personality has to go into narration, and I found myself looking at multiple first person point of views novels and taking at least two different characters written by the same author to see how the author differed between writing one character and another.

With the plot itself, I wrote straight through and hoped for the best the first time I wrote. I had tried writing clues and details into plot as I went and found that it caused me to linger too long on some points or to forget how to tie them in later. This time I experimented with moving backwards. When I reached a point where I knew a character would see a clue, I wrote the clue into that scene, and then I went back to an earlier place in the novel and found a spot to place the clue where it would be noticed but would not stand out in too much detail. Objects like the paintings and the potions both got inserted into the novel through this method.

With the romance aspect of the novel, it was not as important to me as the plot itself, so I wanted it to progress slowly. Also, since the characters were in a life or death situation that had a clear deadline, I didn't want to slow down the pace of the plot to give them time to focus on that romance. Instead I want it to sneak in when there was a natural moment. While the characters are young adults and it's established that Remy is on the more experienced and also experimental side when it comes to his romances, his relationship with Cato progresses very slowly and innocently due to his own fears of not only their situation but also the fact that it is his first time experiencing the kind of feelings that he feels when he is around Cato. Meanwhile, I wanted Cato to be more

concerned with possibly dying, and I wanted that to play a part in how he misinterprets Remy's feelings throughout the plot.

What I completed this semester is something that I am satisfied with as a first draft. It is something that I am certain I can turn into a finished work that I am satisfied with. I plan to take the notes I am given by my chair and committee and edit the book accordingly. I also plan to continue writing other books set in the same world that I have built as well as others that exist purely on their own. Moving forward, I plan to spend more time tightening the delivery of my writing and also making sure that I am not head-hopping but instead remaining consistent with my characters and their points of view. I plan to continue working on this project after graduation and to see how it challenges my writing in the future.

Chapter 1

Remy

Five. Six. Seven. Watching my newest boss practice shifting from his human eyes to his demonic diamond eyes over and over had not been on my to-do list for the day, but it was more interesting than watching the clock or actually being productive. I was waiting for the moment he finally succeeded at an instant transition, something most demons mastered around the age of five.

Nic shifted a few more times, coming close but not quite managing the instant change. With each successful attempt in his appearance, his eyes went wide. His mouth formed an “o”. It was a bit like watching a baby notice their own reflection for the first time. Just not as cute.

On his last try I heard the click of his camera app go off, and then he finally put his phone away and turned to me. With any luck my sunglasses had kept him from noticing just where my attention had been, one of the few benefits of having been born with hypersensitive red eyes that required almost constant protection from any lights. I put down the form I had finished checking over twenty minutes ago and picked up another, pretending it was a totally normal thing for me to read papers by holding them six inches from my face like a middle-aged man who won’t admit he needs reading glasses.

“Let me try this again. Demons are born-or formed- with nine lives?” Nic spoke louder than necessary. Even after months of working together, he had yet to grasp that when I have my earbuds blasting music at full volume, I can still hear what anyone in the

room is saying with ease. Hypersensitive eyes apparently came packaged with hypersensitive ears in my case. There was never a reason for someone to raise their voice to get my attention.

“We are not cats. Not most of us anyway. It’s ninety. Not nine.” I corrected him and waited for the follow up questions. Nic always had follow up questions, and I enjoyed the way his eyebrows disappeared under his messy hair each time he got an answer that he couldn’t quite believe.

“How does anyone possibly use up ninety lives?” he asked.

I shifted in my chair. The dagger strapped to my hip thudded against the armrest. The urge to demonstrate rather than explain crossed my mind, but Nic had just added another two weeks of paid vacation to my annual contract. He really was too nice of a guy, especially for someone who was now a demon. It would be unnecessarily cruel to stab him outside of self-defense.

So instead of turning him into a pincushion, I simply reminded him of the most recent death to occur in our office. “Jezebel stabbed one of our clients through the heart the other day because he sneezed in her direction without covering his nose. Happened so fast she used a letter opener rather than one of her precious babies.” It turned out the letter opener made more of a mess than the usual dagger, at least when you had to pull it back out of someone’s chest. The dry cleaning bill for the client’s shirt had not been pretty to look at either. There was no way Nic could have forgotten that.

He sighed heavily. “You have a point,” he said. Of course, I did.

He turned his phone over. I hadn't heard any notification chimes in the past fifteen minutes. There would be no unread messages, but Nic stared at the screen as if to summon some. When none appeared, he continued with his questions.

"What's so important about the first death then if you have eighty-nine more?" he asked.

The first death, one of my least favorite topics to discuss, but Nic was new to the Underworld and demonhood. Someone besides his overpowered bestie had to explain how things worked to him. After all, how could someone who was basically immortal ever get across the point of just why it was so important to not die?

"The first death binds you to the Underworld. No more visits to the mortal realm. No fae realm. No mage realm. No any other realm. Just stuck here in hell for all eternity. Or at least until you use up all ninety lives and reincarnate as an entirely different person."

"I see." Nic mumbled. He chewed at his bottom lip until I was tempted to throw a chapstick in his direction. "I better hold off on that first death for a while then."

Nic's time as the biggest reality show star of the year meant that every demon was well aware that he would do nearly anything to ensure he could see his family and friends whenever he wanted. Loyal. Nic was the loyal type, willing to put his own life at risk to save someone he loved. Willing to burn down a realm to keep them safe. I had dozens more friends than he did, but if you had asked me which ones I would be willing to die for, I was pretty certain that list would be empty. Burning down a realm for someone, I would have considered that, but dying for someone? That was too great of a cost.

“Well, what’s a good way to keep from dying then?” Nic leaned forward on his desk like an eager student as he waited for me to answer his question. The problem was I was still trying to figure out that answer myself. After all, who could really control such things?

Nic kept staring at me. I knew he wasn’t going to let the topic go until he got some kind of answer, so I gave him the only advice I had ever considered to be true. “Just be sure to watch your back.” The first lesson I had ever given him. “Even among the people you think are your friends.” The second lesson, and the one he was most likely to ignore.

The room went quiet again. I flipped through some of the papers on my desk. Most were requests from the deal-makers for paid leave for some reason or another, and Nic always approved those without question which made my part of things simple enough.

. Check the type of form. Check that the signatures had been put in the right places. Store it in the right folder. Repeat. Catch myself staring at the wall mid-daydream. Try again.

At one point I stopped trying altogether to instead fidget with my bracelet. I rubbed at the piece of thread that intertwined with the leather straps and that held a key charm, an “S” charm, and a charm that was supposed to be an “R” but that in my opinion looked more like a “B” from certain angles with how the one edge looped back.

It was impossible to feel bad about the lack of effort that day when every time I glanced up it was to find Nic still staring blankly at a notepad. He’d tapped a pen against the notepad a few times. The rhythm had matched with the song blasting through my

earbuds, and I wondered if I had the volume turned loud enough for him to hear across the room, but when the playlist switched to the next song and he kept tapping the same beat as the first I chalked it up to a coincidence. The iron clock's second hand completed seven more full circles and a notification sounded on his cell phone before Nic spoke up again.

“Should we call it a day? It looks like it's going to storm.”

I followed Nic's gaze to the large window that overlooked the main city of the Underworld. The perpetually overcast skies did look darker than usual, and the vultures that circled the area had retreated to their nests in the niches of the baroque buildings. Soon it would be pouring rain. More than that. A storm was in the air. If the two of us left the office right then we would be caught in the worst of it, but I never turn down a shortened work day.

“I'm ready if you are.” I gathered the files from both his desk and mine and took them over to the ornate cabinet tucked away in the corner of the room. The magic that maintained the piece of furniture was centuries old and too advanced for me to fully understand how it worked, but at least it was easy enough to operate. All a person had to do was use one finger to trace out the name of the file onto the cabinet's surface and then wait for the right drawer to appear, tuck the paper inside, firmly close the drawer so it could disappear, and then repeat. Simple and repetitive: the two words I associated with most of my required work tasks.

Nic had turned his attention back on his phone while he waited for me to finish up. “It's my week in the mortal realm, but you should contact me if there's an emergency.

Or text Adeona if you can't get me. You know she'll help." Every other week he said the same thing. It had become a part of our Friday routine.

"I have things handled," I insisted. I wanted to tack on a "kid" at the end of the sentence just to give a subtle reminder that while Nic was the boss, I was nearly two years older. Not to mention that unlike Nic, who had only just become a demon, I had been born one.

Nicolas "Nic" Dupont, despite his obliviousness, was the best boss I had worked for. He cared about the job and his employees. However, he was also a barely eighteen year old who had only just won the title of Demon of Deals less than a year ago, and he hadn't made the best impression when he spent the first several of those months in the Underworld Court arguing the legalities of his title.

Actually, I had rather liked that part. The Demon of Deals should be good at arguing and fearless enough to go up against some of the most powerful demons in the realm. If he'd sucked at it, I would have looked bad as well. Demons who worked for incompetent bosses are far more likely to end up dead in a crossfire. It had been a pain though listening to Jezebel's daily complaints about the situation, and she had been extra stabby those first months.

Nic had gotten his way, and ever since then he had been doing his best to divide his time evenly between the mortal realm and the Underworld. Occasionally, that meant he took shortcuts here and there, and those shortcuts caused me to sometimes have to pick up the slack, especially with it being November and Nic having entered something called a "senior year". Still, I was lucky to have any position in the Underworld above that of a minion, so I didn't complain. Not much anyway.

Nic shrugged on his coat. “I know you have things handled, but really, text if you need us. It’s why you have the human phone.”

I plucked my gold name tag off, the one that listed my title as first assistant to the Demon of Deals, and tossed it into the bowl on my desk that contained paperclips, suckers, and the so-called human phone. I made a point of scooping up the device and sliding it into the pocket of my leather jacket. If I didn’t, Nic would keep going with the “reminders.” In an attempt to distract him, I asked about one of his favorite topics of discussion: his friends. “Is Adeona waiting for you downstairs?”

Nic nodded. The smile on his face was brighter than before. “Yeah. She should be.”

I gestured to the door. “Then you should go first. You don’t want to keep her waiting.”

Nic opened the office door just a crack then froze. His shoulders tensed as he caught sight of the demon sitting just on the other side. “Why is she-?” He whirled around. “You’re going to use me as a distraction,” he whispered.

“I am.” I even took a few steps back to make sure Nic would be taking the brunt of Jezebel’s disappointment.

“I was the distraction last time!” Nic whined. The tone of it was so irritating that I had to turn up the volume of my music ever so slightly.

“And you’re going to the mortal realm for a week, so she’ll have time to cool off. I, on the other hand, will be stuck here. With her.” I looked over Nic’s shoulder to where the second assistant to the Demon of Deals was visible through the crack. While I had

heard her return from her meeting a half hour ago, Nic had apparently not been aware of her change in plans.

Jezebel was a demon well into her thousands with the appearance of a woman in her thirties, and even if I was technically her supervisor, I had never quite been able to shake the feeling of fear I got whenever she leveled her glare in my direction. The large stash of knives she kept in her right desk drawer had me keeping my distance.

At that exact moment she had two of the daggers on the table in front of her. She held onto a third one, absentmindedly polishing it as she read over a report. She was in a mood. Again.

“You said to tell you if I needed something,” I reminded Nic. “I need you to take the blame for this. It was your idea in the first place.”

Nic grumbled something under his breath, something I’m not even comfortable repeating. Then he spoke up, “Fine. I’ll take the blame this time.”

He led the way into the common space, which Jezebel had taken to using more often than her personal office for occasions exactly like this one. She turned her attention to us. Her plum-colored eyes narrowed. Her lips, coated in a black matte lipstick, pressed together tightly enough that they nearly disappeared. “Gentlemen,” she said. “Neither of you have a meeting today.”

“It’s about to storm. I thought we’d all take an early weekend,” Nic explained while I inched my way toward the exit.

“Is that so?” Jezebel leaned back in her ergonomic chair and crossed her arms. The one dagger remained clutched in her manicured hand. This was when we were

supposed to give her a convincing excuse, but neither of us seemed to be able to say a word. “Well?” she prompted.

“Actually, we’re not taking an early weekend. We’re meeting with a Royal of Hell. It was last minute. Building some connections. Networking.” Nic was throwing out all the buzzwords. He’d apparently been listening during my training sessions. “You know. Like you always encourage me to do. Didn’t want to tell you about it because it’s one you don’t like.”

“I don’t like any of them.” Jezebel replied.

“Exactly. That’s why we didn’t tell you. I was just going to fill you in after, so you wouldn’t have to be in a bad mood for as long.” Nic might have managed to get the words out, but the stammer was obvious. For someone who dealt in legal contracts for a living, Nic could be a startlingly bad liar. “So, we’ll just go do some...networking.”

Jezebel scoffed at his lie. “Spending time with Adeona is not networking. Even if she is a Royal.”

“But it is.” Adeona said as she strolled into the room. She was always one to make a perfectly-timed entrance. Her pastel pink, blue, and purple hair was damp and beginning to frizz even while tied in two long braids. Her Doc Martens left behind a trail of wet footprints on the wood floor that made Jezebel’s left eye twitch. “I’m in need of some advice, and only the Demon of Deals can provide it.”

Jezebel frowned, but we all knew she wasn’t going to contradict Adeona. Even I felt intimidated by Adeona at times, and we had practically grown up together. It didn’t help that our relationship had shifted drastically over the past two years.

Like Nic, Adeona had also come into a lot of power while only seventeen years old, much more than Nic actually, and she had done so violently. I had watched with my own eyes as she had killed her father on live tv. Her father had been a Royal demon of one of the highest ranks, the Royal of Wealth, and by killing him, even just temporarily, Adeona had successfully claimed his title for herself. It had been something of a scandal, and ever since the former Royal had resurrected, he had refused to comment on the fact that his own cambion of a daughter had defeated him so easily.

Everyone knew the truth though, the cameras had managed to capture the aftermath: one Royal demon corpse strewn in pieces on the floor while Adeona, covered in blood and guts, strolled about the vault assessing her new power. Jezebel might have wanted to prevent the two of us from leaving, but she stood no chance if Adeona wanted us to go.

Adeona held out her hand for Nic to take. “We should get going. The others are waiting on us,” she said. They linked arms, looking far too smug in the process. I tried to squelch down the brief envy. It wasn’t that I particularly wanted to be a part of their inner circle. I just didn’t like being on the outside of any group.

Jezebel did protest that bit. “Surely, you do not require Ramiel’s presence.” I flinched at her use of my birth name. I had never liked the sound of it.

“Oh, but we do. Remy’s wisdom is invaluable. He always gives us the best advice,” Adeona insisted. “Don’t you, Remy?” She offered her hand to me, similar to how she had offered her hand to Nic.

I hesitated a moment before accepting. “Absolutely.” The only things I had advised her on lately were choosing drinks and music.

“Jezebel,” Nic called out as Adeona dragged us all toward the exit, “you should go home early too. Don’t work so hard.” Of course, he could tease. I was the one who was going to be in for an earful when Monday afternoon came around.

We took the staircase rather than the elevator. Adeona leapt down so fast that it was obvious she was flying at times even with her wings tucked away. I tried to match her pace, but the first misstep had me grabbing onto the bannister. First death by staircase would be pathetic no matter how many flights a demon rolled down first.

Once we were out on the sidewalk and sheltered under an awning, Adeona finally looked at me, really looked at me. For a moment I wasn’t sure if she was trying to meet my gaze or study her own reflection in my sunglasses. Finally she gave a little huff before asking, “Do you want me to teleport you somewhere before we go to the labyrinth?”

The moment the words left her mouth, a sharp clap of thunder sounded above our heads. The rain hit the ground so hard that it splattered back up to dampen our ankles. I could feel it slipping inside my boots.

I stepped away from the puddles until I was pressed against the side of the building. “No. It’s fine. You two go on. I won’t melt,” I assured.

“I don’t mind waiting for her to take you home,” Nic offered. “I’d do it myself-”

“But you still haven’t learned how. I know,” I interrupted Nic before he could start on the explanation. I had heard it so many times over the past few weeks that I had it memorized. “It’s really not a problem. I’m not going home yet as it is. I have places to be.” A little storm wasn’t going to interrupt my Friday night plans.

Nic's expression fell. "Please don't cause too much chaos at the bar again," he pleaded, nearly convincing enough for me to feel slightly bad about my plans. "They've been leaving voicemails about some contract our company has for damage liability there. I don't even know what they're talking about, but Jezebel is always in a mood for days whenever we have to sign another check over to them."

I threw up my hands in mock surrender. "You see," I started, putting on my best innocent tone. "Most of those situations weren't my fault. I'm just a good friend who puts my friends' charges on my tab." The fact that my tab was also the company's tab thanks to a deal I had made with the former Demon of Deals didn't hurt matters.

Nic clicked his tongue. "Maybe next time don't put the cost of a chandelier on your tab then. Think you can handle that much?" Nic's tone rarely hit that kind of annoyance, but I knew when he started to sound like that, it was best to end the conversation as soon as possible. Otherwise, he'd mistake me for his younger brother, and I would be on the receiving end of one of his long winded lectures.

"No promises." I really couldn't guarantee Nic anything. "Adeona, don't you two need to be going?" I urged. She was in a good mood because she took pity on me and grabbed for Nic's wrist to teleport him home. Their bodies turned shimmery until they disappeared altogether, leaving behind the strong scent of eucalyptus that Adeona's teleportation always caused. They would land at the labyrinth that would allow them to pass from the Underworld and into the mortal realm while I remained on the sidewalk, now alone.

The downpour showed no signs of letting up any time soon, and the force of it was enough to crush an umbrella. The rational move would be to step back into the office building and wait until there was a lull, but when choosing between a little lightning or Jezebel's anger, I would choose lightning any time.

I kept close to the side of the buildings and darted out from under an awning over to a protruding door frame then to the underside of a balcony. By the time I reached the bar, the two space buns I kept my hair pulled up in were beginning to droop, and the strands had gone from their normal gushing blood red to something more resembling a blood clot. All heads still turned in my direction when I entered. What can I say? I'm a handsome guy.

The bartender took one look at me and threw me a bar towel. "Dry off before one of them decides you look good enough to actually eat," she instructed. "I'm not in the mood to clean up another of your messes tonight."

"Thank you, Morgen."

Morgen gave a dismissive wave and started making me a drink. She had never once asked me what I wanted. As far as I knew, she had never asked any client what they wanted. That wasn't how things worked in Bottled Lethe.

I nodded toward her horns. "The green looks good by the way." Perhaps if I complimented her enough she'd be extra generous with the drinks.

"I painted them last night." She tossed a half dozen more cherries into my glass before sliding it my way.

“Stunning.” I wasn’t just trying to flatter her. I really did mean the compliment that time. The green brought out the small emerald flecks in her otherwise chestnut eyes.

As usual, she brushed it off. “Says the same man who once flirted with the local hecatoncheires.”

I laughed. “Three of their heads were very charismatic. Not to mention one of their voices was this most delicious bass. Could send chills up the spine.” I shivered at the memory.

“Only you would say such a thing.”

I took a sip of the drink. The mix of bourbon, lime, and cherries hit my stomach with a punch and reminded me that I hadn’t eaten since breakfast. It was going to be a fun evening. Hopefully, I would remember at least a part of it.

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Cato

The sensation of thousands of tiny needles being jammed into my skin erupted through my knees the moment I shifted my weight. The circulation to my legs had been cut off quite some time ago. How long had I been staring at the herbs in front of me? An hour? Three hours? My brain felt as hazy as the literal fog that filled the room. The cloud drifted around all our heads acting both as a deterrent should anyone try to cheat off another competitor and also acting as a challenge in itself with its mind-altering effects.

I could remember Dantalion had made some kind of announcement about the goal of the test, the room filling up with a light odorless vapor, and then...What had happened after that? When had I tossed so many of my herbs to the side?

I dug my nails into my thighs hard enough to nearly tear the fabric of my pants and leave behind an imprint on skin. A bit of the confusion left my brain, but the room was still as smoky as ever. The scent of lemongrass came from the small table to my left. Another of the challengers had added the ingredient to their brew. A mistake. A fatal one. While normally harmless, when lemongrass was combined with both pine and the deirrun plant harvested from the fae realm it became a potent poison. I swallowed down the urge to warn the other. This was a test only one person was allowed to pass, and I needed to be that person. Still, the clatter of a bowl followed by the thud of someone collapsing to the court floor did not bring me much joy. I had lost track of how many competitors had already fallen. I thought it must have been several, but the magic kept me from looking away from my own table.

I shook off a bit more of the daze and then went back to work. I muddled another of the mint plants. The scent cleared out my sinuses with its pungency. I let my eyes tear up and did not hold back my sniffles. A runny nose was a mere inconvenience. Everyone else around me was in the same state, at least those who hadn't killed themselves yet. The only person who was taking note of our appearances was seated on the low throne at the front of the room.

Dantalion, one of the oldest Royals of the Underworld, had had his chin propped on his palm every time I risked a glance in his direction. Before he had started the test he had given us an introduction to his courtroom, an exclusive tour of the legendary court of the Royal Demon of Art, Science, and Love.

According to his history of the place, the throne room had remained largely unchanged since its last renovation a few centuries ago. Michaelangelo's muscular women stared down on the court from where they had been painted up on the ceiling. Unlike Michaelangelo's paintings in the mortal realm, his artwork that had found its way into the Underworld was infused with magic from Dantalion himself that brought life to the images.

The stronger an art demon was, the more movement the paintings could be capable of, and as one of the most powerful art demons, Dantalion's magic could bring the figures entirely out of their homes whenever he summoned them. He had been kind enough or cruel enough to give us a demonstration, pulling a few of the figures from their flat dimension to walk among us before locking them away once more. Everyone had marveled at the sight, until one of the figures had grabbed hold of a competitor and slammed him into the wall.

Dantalion had chuckled at that. "You see. They are not just there to look pretty. They have their functions, like weeding out the imitations."

The competitor, who had been slammed into the wall, never uttered a word, so Dantalion continued. "One twin testing on the first round. The other twin testing on the second. Or am I mistaken? Is there a third sibling for the third round? Triplets rather than twins? This is not a team test."

The competitor had shoved himself up and raced from the room. A few of the guards had started to follow, only to be stopped by a dismissive wave of Dantalion's hand. "I suggest," Dantalion started, his voice far more serious than the other times he had addressed us since the beginning of the event, "that no one try to cheat again. I won't

be as lenient next time.” Then he clapped his hands together. “Now. Let’s begin the next round of tests.”

The goal of the tests. We were supposed to make something, something that smelled like raspberry tea. That was it. It had to smell and look like raspberry tea. It didn’t matter what it tasted like. It had to...It had to wake us up. I dug my nails into my thighs again trying to wake myself up enough to well...wake myself up. When that did not work as well as it had the first time I pounded my fists against the sides of my knees until my memory sorted itself.

“Taste does not matter. Only the scent must be that of raspberry, and the drink itself must be consumed with no ill side effects. If you get it right, you’ll receive life. Steep it wrong, and well, you’ll get death.” Dantalion had rattled off the instructions himself. He had been doing so during the entire testing period. It was an anomaly for a Royal to entertain such a large group of ordinary demons for such an extended period of time, but everything about the testing experience had been an anomaly.

A Royal choosing to retire and seek out an heir through a series of trials was a rare occurrence. Many had answered the latest summons. More than half had failed the first round when they had been tested on art. Now more would be eliminated in the second round.

I chose two more herbs from the table. One was a bright orange weed with long spiraling leaves. It was found everywhere but easily overlooked. I knew though that it worked as an adrenaline booster, something I needed if I was going to get myself alert again.

The second plant I had only read about before, but I would still have to use it. It was the only plant with a stabilizing element out of the selection we had been given. It did not grow naturally in our realm, but it was one that more advanced potion brewers were known for keeping a supply of in their essential supplies. Its blue petals gave the illusion that they were glowing.

I crushed the orange plant in my hands. My palms would be stained for a few hours, but it would give better results than crushing it with any other methods. Then I carefully plucked the blue petals from their stem and took only the whole ones. I added the two plants to the ones I had prepared earlier before I had slipped into one of the drug-induced dazes. The water in my kettle had just reached the point of simmering. Small bubbles gently rose to the side. I didn't remember when I had put the kettle over the flame, but once the water boiled I would have to make my final choice as to what would be going into my tea.

Another thud sounded a few seats behind me. Another contestant had chosen wrong. The simmering of my kettle turned to a rolling boil. It was time. I added the mixture of plants to the water. The color would be the first sign. The scent would be next. If either of those were wrong, it would be a guaranteed fail. If they were right then I still had a forty percent chance of not having produced something lethal.

The glass kettle allowed a perfect view of the liquid as it slowly turned to a reddish hue. I tried to recall all the steps I had taken. Trying to pull up the memory of crushing the first few plants was like trying to recall a childhood memory of an ordinary afternoon. I knew I had somehow completed the first few steps, and supposedly I had felt confident in what I was doing at the time. However, I could not recall enough to be

certain that that confidence was deserved. I had only three options: forfeit the test, toss out my blend and try to redo the entire test in the very limited time period, or take the risk and hope for the best. The tea's scent floated up. It at least smelled of raspberries.

I removed the kettle from the flame and poured out a cup of the brew. If correct, the brew was an antidote, a powerful one that cured most poisons. If someone healthy consumed it, they might have a slight buzz from it but would be unharmed.

I risked another glance up at Dantalion. His gaze flickered over me, and I thought I saw something like approval on his face. It was just a moment, and then he was back to gazing over the group with the same bored expression as earlier.

I blew on the liquid. The tea rippled in the cup and looked like a bloody sea, so I did the only thing I could think of: I swallowed the ocean. I forced the tea down my throat before my own self-doubt could kick in again.

The roof of my mouth was definitely scalded, but my heart was still beating. That was likely a good indicator of success, but I still waited for any sign of failure. A few more moments passed, and I continued to feel fine. Another thud sounded a few rows back. Then the fog around the room began to dissipate.

A chime sounded, signaling the ending of the test. I had passed. I shifted out of the uncomfortable kneeling position and fell back to rest on my palms.

"Go ahead and move the rest," Dantalion said. Still seated on his throne, he stared straight ahead as his guards picked up the last few fallen corpses off the stone floor and carried them over to join the line of bodies that now spanned from one end of the throneroom to the other. They had seemingly been retrieving them throughout the testing period. In the daze I had not noticed.

I tried to keep my attention forward, but my gaze kept getting drawn to the bodies. Each one looked different from the next. Some faces were bloated. Others had blood dripping from their lips and down their chins. A few looked normal, but a sickly sweet smell drifted off of their corpses now that the fog was no longer blocking the senses or confusing the mind. From the appearances and scents alone, I could pinpoint where each of them had gone wrong in the recipe. Everything suddenly seemed so easy without the fog.

“How many will resurrect?” Dantalion spoke for the first time since the test began around an hour earlier.

“All but two.” The guard’s answer sent a chill down my spine. Permanent deaths were rare in the Underworld. Other than running out of lives very few things could cause a demon to die a final death, but when it did occur, the death stripped the demon of their demonic status. It sent their spirits spiraling down into the untamed lands of the realm where the gods of death would wipe their memories and toss them in line with the other souls waiting for a chance at reincarnation.

“Very well.” Dantalion pushed himself to his feet. He glided his way over to crouch down in front of me. “Young man,” he started. “It seems the demons who recommended you were the only ones with sense.” His face shifted going from that of a man in his prime to a face set with deep wrinkles and eyes that though cloudy were no less seeing. “There are only a few tasks left until this ends. Are you certain you want to proceed?”

“I am certain.” I had passed both the first and second round. There were no other competitors left. If I could complete the last tasks, I would have the throne. Dantalion had been searching for an heir for centuries, and I would be the one to prove my worth.

“Then we continue. Come with me.”

I stood, ignoring the pins and needles feeling that erupted in my knees again as I did. We passed between two of the corpses and through a small door that led outside. The fresh air quickly dissipated the smell of rot and poison. We would have been hit by a downpour of rain had Dantalion not summoned a magical barrier to cover us. The barrier kept us dry, but it also amplified the sounds of the storm. When Dantalion spoke again, he had to nearly yell for me to hear him.

“Some of them will begin resurrecting soon. It is best for us to relocate for this next task. I don’t want to deal with any of their whining, and we are in need of witnesses outside of my staff,” He pulled what looked to be a watch or perhaps a compass from his pocket and after a moment of consulting it, nodded. “Yes. Yes. The bar will do.” He turned back to me. “You cannot teleport.” It was less a question than it was an observation.

“No. I cannot.” I confirmed. I was not a Royal, nor was I a child of a Royal. I had a relation to one, but I was so far down the line that it barely benefited me. I also held no position where teleportation was required, and so I lacked that particular ability like most demons.

“You’re also not very talkative.”

I did not respond to that remark, and Dantalion grinned. “This will be interesting.” He teleported us to a bar. We landed just inside the entry and had to quickly sidestep to avoid being bumped into by people darting through the doors with their wet umbrellas.

The bar resembled the final product of a group project where none of the participants had bothered to speak to each other: medieval stone walls, industrial staircases, glossy maple bars, a jukebox, and lighting that was too bright in some areas and too dim in others. It was the type of place I would never choose to enter on my own.

“This way,” Dantalion led the way to the bar. The bartender’s eyes widened at the sight of us, but then she was moving. She pulled a bottle from the top shelf and poured some of the liquid from it into a glass which she handed over to Dantalion with perfect care.

“It’s good to see you again,” she said by way of greeting. From the strange looks the others at the bar gave her, I guessed that wasn’t her usual way of speaking with customers.

Dantalion did not seem to notice. He clasped one of her hands between his own. “It is good to be back. There’s nowhere quite like this place after all.”

“Well, without you and your little club, this place might not even exist. Every Friday, strolling in right at opening and not leaving until we closed. You kept us going. Those were my favorite days.” The bartender’s smile was bittersweet.

“Mine as well, but all things must change. That is how time goes,” Dantalion replied and released her hand to pick up his drink.

It was impossible to miss how his gaze went from her to the framed photographs behind her. He focused on one in particular, and I studied it as well. The photograph had been taken in the bar itself years ago. Dantalion, in one of his younger faces, sat at a booth with four friends. All five held their glasses together in cheers. The caption listed them out: Vapula, Beleth, Murmur, and Astaroth. I might not recognize the faces, but I certainly recognized the names. The Royal clique. The demonic gods of mechanics, music, philosophy, and handicrafts. That was a club anyone would have loved to have frequenting their establishment.

“Speaking of change, I see you have a new companion tonight,” the bartender noted.

She looked me over and released a heavy sigh. “You are lucky to be handsome.” It was the first thing she said to me. She grabbed the coffee pot and poured a mug. “Not even iced.” She handed it over to me with a look of disgust. “Enjoy. If that’s possible.”

The coffee was hot but perfectly bitter, and it did exactly what I wanted it to. It got rid of the medicinal taste of the “tea” I had had to brew for the task earlier, and it warmed me up. Thankfully the burned roof of my mouth had already healed, but I was careful not to repeat the mistake from earlier.

Dantalion wrapped up his conversation with the bartender and ushered me into a booth where the two of us sat and sipped our drinks. Dantalion rambled on about his favorite artists. I gave one word answers where it seemed polite to do so, but the conversation just kept going. I had run out of social energy hours ago and wanted nothing more than to sit alone in a quiet room, but I forced myself to sit and analyze each word to see if I was missing some kind of code. I took note of each artist mentioned in case of a

quiz. No matter how hard I tried I could feel my attention drifting further from the conversation with each word that Dantalion uttered. There had to be something more. Just as I was about to give up, Dantalion paused.

“Hm. Ah yes, I could discuss art for hours, but I realize you must have some questions for me,” He said after what felt like an eternity.

I had several, but I felt only a few were safe to ask. “Have many people gotten this far?”

“No.” Dantalion confirmed. There was a strange look in his eyes. “Fewer than six, and each of them failed in their own ways when it came to the next part of the test. Next question?”

“Why did you decide to even have these tests to find an heir?”

Dantalion nodded. “An excellent question. It was a decision we made as a group. Astaroth, Murmur, Vapula, Beleth, and myself. We have existed for nearly as long as time itself. We have seen many things, and we know that at some point it is time to move aside and let the next generation take over. We just wanted to find the right people to do so, and since we had no particular heirs in mind we decided to make it as fair of a competition as possible.”

“And none of you had children?” My knowledge of the royal family lines was a bit lacking. I had never followed any of the news of weddings or births. When the breaking news forced its way onto our screens I tended to distract myself with other matters.

“Some of us have children.” Dantalion confirmed and sat back. “But being someone’s descendant does not always make you suitable for their role. Each of us set up our own tests, and if our children wanted to attempt them, they could. We made that an option. These are good questions you have by the way. Keep going.”

“Is there a reason that we’re here?” Why a bar of all places?

Dantalion held up his hands and gestured around. “What is your opinion?”

Perhaps there was something in the bar that I was missing. I searched my surroundings for a possible clue. Plenty of people were swing dancing on the dance floor. Some were drunkenly stumbling about while others moved with the grace of professionals. Other than the usual daggers strapped to thighs, ankles, or hips, none of them had any more weapons on them than usual. Was that a part of the test? Was there someone in the crowd I was supposed to be noticing?

A demon with fox features fluffed up her tails and spun around. Her partner caught hold of her and lifted her into the air. When her feet hit the ground again, they did so without any sound. She was in complete control. It was more than just dancing abilities though. She was someone trained for combat. Could the next part be combat? Dantalion was not one of the masters of combat, but it was expected that a royal be able to hold their own in a fight.

There was only one other demon on the dance floor who came close to the fox demon’s talent, but he was far from graceful about it. His movements were wild, and his partner’s face kept switching from mildly terrified to delighted. I had to admit that it was entertaining to watch.

“Do you want to join them? We have time,” Dantalion said.

I recoiled at the thought of going out on that dance floor myself. I shifted in my seat and tried not to watch as the red-haired demon left the dance floor and made his way over to a table. “No, I am not in the mood at this time,” I assured.

“Do you dance?” Dantalion seemed surprised by the thought.

“I know how.” I knew the basic mechanics of it.

“Is that so?” Dantalion grinned. “Are you one of the types who is picky about his partner then?” He whispered as if we were children sharing some secret.

A large demon appeared and steered the red-haired demon away to the other side of the bar and out of my line of sight.

“Yes. I am a bit picky about dance partners.” I was picky about many things.

“I see.” Dantalion had taken notice of the same person that I had. He had a smile on his face. I might dare to say he looked approving. “You should be picky. It’s safer for a person to be picky in that regard.”

I was growing tired Dantalion’s games. “What comes next?” I asked.

Dantalion tapped his finger against his glass and looked around the bar as if taking in every detail of the place. The corners of his lips turned upward, ever so slightly. He took a final sip of his drink before he answered. “Now it is time for you to kill me.”

Remy

It didn’t matter that I was five drinks in or that Dantalion had stepped into the bar while wearing one of his lesser known faces, I knew a Royal of the Underworld when I

saw one. I hadn't spent years studying family lines and keeping track of any major news for nothing. If you wanted to live well in the Underworld and not worry about being murdered in your sleep or poisoned at dinner then you had to know who not to piss off.

Dantalion was one of the better Royals if there was such a thing, so I didn't immediately flee the area. I didn't bother greeting him either. If everyone else in Bottled Lethe was going to go on pretending he was just another demon then I'd do the same. He couldn't attack all of us after all. Well, he could, but he wasn't known for being that type. Either way, I twirled my partner around and kept on dancing.

While I could ignore Dantalion's presence, his companion, on the other hand, was impossible to ignore. The moment I heard the raspy baritone voice, I knew I had to get a look at him, and so as soon as the dance ended, I took the chance to go to one of the empty standing tables nearby. I leaned my elbows on it while pretending to catch my breath. From what I could tell, the companion was close to my age, possibly the exact same age or even a year younger.

With his black hair, black and yellow eyes, and pale skin, he stood out from the rest of the demons who formed a sea of bold colored horns, hairs, and tails. He had a sharp nose that made his unamused expression look even harsher. His lips seemed frozen somewhere between a frown and the tiniest bit of a pout, if one squinted hard enough at them anyway. It took me quite a bit of professional-level staring to determine that the stranger's demonic feature, at least the only one he was not able to fully hide away besides his eyes, were a small pair of fangs that became visible only when he was speaking.

“You’re drooling,” Balt said. I jumped at his warning. When had he even arrived? His arm settled heavily around my shoulders with its usual comforting weight, and he steered me away from the dance floor and back to the bar even as I did my best to try to sneak another peek at Dantalion’s mystery companion.

Balt kept a hand on my back as I climbed onto one of the stools, something he only did when he thought I had had a few too many drinks. The featherlight touch disappeared the moment I was stable, and Balt took the seat next to me. It creaked under his muscular frame making me cast a glance downward to make sure it wasn’t about to collapse out from under my friend.

Balt caught my concern. “Don’t worry. It’ll hold up. Worry about yourself falling off a chair instead.”

I stared at Balt until his features stopped looking blurry around the edges. “When did you get here?” I asked.

Balt snorted. “Not long ago. Nic said you’d be here, so I decided to join you.” More likely Nic had put him on babysitting duty.

“Don’t you have work soon?”

Balt was one of the six guards of the door to the Underworld realm. Technically he only worked for an hour each day, but he was constantly on call for any time a Royal of the Underworld decided to summon the door outside of its usual operating hour. Only Royals could summon the door outside the veil hour, but few of them bothered to use the privilege that often. The only one I knew who took advantage of the ability was Adeona, who summoned the door for both herself and Nic a few times a week. I’d be lying if I

said I wasn't jealous each time they made their way through, and I was left behind on this side of the realms.

Balt laughed. "It's not even ten." And the door didn't open until three in the morning. "I have plenty of time to enjoy a few drinks myself and to make sure you don't put another disaster on your workplace's tab."

"Really?" That couldn't be right. It was only ten? It felt like it was nearly closing time. Ten was when I usually got off of work for the day. "Is it still raining?" I tried to see if I could hear the noise, but the bar was magically soundproofed to keep from disturbing the neighboring businesses.

The live band played loud enough that I was even able to mute the music in my earbuds for most of my time at the bar and not have to worry about a possible sensory overload from the other noises occurring around me.

Balt's laughter continued. His tenor pitch was familiar and had an attractive tone to it. It mixed nicely with the saxophone. "Yes, it's still raining," he said. "Baaz said he might join us later. Maybe during the next lull in the storm."

I nodded and flinched when my head went slightly too close to the bar's surface. Morgen appeared in front of me with a glass of water and a basket of fries fresh from the kitchen.

"Do not puke in my bar." Morgen's voice was startlingly clear for someone of her rough nature: mezzo soprano with the ability to ring over others. It was harder for me to meld her voice with other noises, but it was perfect for someone who might need to yell over a crowd.

“Thank you,” I said and shoved a handful of the fries into my mouth. They always tasted better after five drinks.

Balt pushed my water glass toward me. He tapped on it until I picked it up and took a sip just to stop the irritating sound. He would use one of my annoyances against me. “The guy you nearly dropped your jaw to the floor for, is he a Royal?” he asked as I sipped at the water.

Definitely not. I would have remembered if there were any Royals who looked like him. Would have made it to the top of my list. “I don’t recognize him.”

“He looks higher ranked,” Balt noted. “Morgen, do you know who the pretty prince over there is? Or perhaps we should call him a thief for stealing all of Remy’s attention.”

Morgen snorted. She slung a towel over her shoulder. “He’s not for you, Remy.”

Balt rolled his eyes. “Not what we asked, Morgen.”

Morgen looked up and down the bar. “There are never customers when you want them,” she muttered. She leaned forward. “He is Cato. He is not a Royal, but he is a descendant of one. Not a child of one, but a grandchild maybe.”

Someone high enough to have never had to worry about being someone else’s minion then. Morgen continued. “He’s not wearing any amulets either, so he’s not a potential heir in his family. Probably pretty far down in his sibling line.”

“That, or he’s been disowned,” Balt murmured over his drink.

I peeked over at Cato again. With the water and fries, I was already beginning to feel a bit more clear-head, and I was pleased to find that when I honed in on the other’s

voice again it wasn't just the alcohol making it sound that sort of pleasant. It was rare for someone to have a voice I found impressive. "What do you think my chances are?"

"He was staring at you on the dance floor," Balt offered.

Morgen poured herself a shot. "Probably out of shock."

"My beauty can unsettle someone," I replied. I scrunched up my face until my dimples were at their deepest. No one was immune to my dimples.

"It's more likely your mouth that unsettles people." As usual, Morgen made it her job to try to pull me back down to the ground, not that it ever worked for long.

I downed the rest of my water and stood to judge my own steadiness. Yeah. It could work. I wasn't currently at risk for falling on my ass. "I'm going to chance it."

"Do it," Balt encouraged.

"He really isn't your type," Morgen called after me.

"I like to learn the hard way."

Cato

Dantalion placed the dagger on the exact center of our table with the blade pointing toward himself. "You will use this to kill me," he instructed.

Daggers were a popular accessory in the Underworld. I had collected many during my childhood. They were convenient for carrying around, and they came in a variety of styles that suited each person's individual taste. It was more unheard of for someone to not be carrying one on them at all times. It was strange though for Dantalion to be handing me a dagger when he had to know I already had one on me.

“Is there something significant about this dagger?” I had not yet touched the weapon. A shadow flickered across our table as more dancers joined the dance floor, and for a moment I could have sworn a face glared out at me from the dagger’s gem.

“You could say that I am very fond of it.”

Logically, his excuse did make sense. People tended to have a favorite among their weapons. It would be understandable for someone to prefer being stabbed by their own blade for a temporary death. There could be comfort in the familiarity. Perhaps I was simply assuming the worst.

Few curses could actually be activated through just touching an object, despite what all the childhood stories liked to claim. There was always more to it than that. Most of the time blood had to be involved. If not blood there were other bodily fluids or specific body parts that had to be included to activate a curse. The odds were in my favor that at that moment at least, I was safe. If anything, it would be Dantalion who would be in danger, and no one sane would put his own existence at risk like that.

I picked up the dagger. When nothing out of the ordinary happened, I allowed myself to relax just the slightest amount. If there was something more to the test than just killing Dantalion, I had not figured it out yet.

“Ready then?” Dantalion stood and stepped out of the booth.

I took a deep breath. Temporary deaths were just a part of the Underworld life, and while I had never experienced any kind of death myself, I had had to kill before in defense.

Still, my nerves did not agree with my logic. My heartbeat sped up. My grip felt too weak. This was my first time killing someone who was not directly attacking me. I stepped over to the side where Dantalion waited and where more people could see us. Dantalion had said he was choosing the bar because he needed witnesses. Now I knew he had meant witnesses for his death.

“Straight through the heart,” Dantalion encouraged. “And please do try to get it right on the first attempt.”

I adjusted my grip on the hilt again and took a moment to size Dantalion up, looking for where the cleanest strike would be. Then I lunged. The dagger pierced straight through his chest, and after a moment he fell to the ground. The blade remained firmly in his heart.

“The fuck?” The redhead demon from earlier stared down at Dantalion’s body then back up at me. He stepped back. His sunglasses had slipped down to reveal glittery red eyes that were shaking ever so slightly. He was scared. He was afraid of me. I could not recall anyone being afraid of me before. I opened my mouth to explain that it was all just temporary and that Dantalion had requested it, but before I could speak, he ran off.

After a moment of shock, the rest of the crowd drew closer. Gasps and murmurs filled the bar, but I did not bother trying to explain. I could not. Dantalion’s power was transferring to me, changing me into one of the Royal demons, one of the gods, a master of the Underworld. The force of the power overwhelmed me and knocked me to my knees. Wings formed under the surface of my back. Cartilage grew and wedged itself behind my ribs, and it felt like my bones would snap under the pressure. I had to bite

down on my lip to keep from screaming out. Blood trickled down my chin as my fangs pierced the flesh there.

“A new Royal,” someone murmured. Hands grasped at my arms, and I tried to pull away. I was in too much pain to do much at that moment, and the grip was too tight for me to escape.

“Easy.” It was the bartender from earlier. She shielded me from the crowd, and the bar’s security team appeared in full force to surround us. “You need to get out of here. Go to Dantalion’s estate. It’s yours now, and the guards will keep you safe until you recover,” she said as she tried to pull me back to my feet.

I protested. “But Dantalion...he has not yet resurrected.”

The bartender frowned. She glanced over her shoulder at Dantalion’s body. “He’s not going to. You should hope he doesn’t anyway.”

“But I-”

She stopped me. “That’s a cursed dagger you lodged into his heart. I can feel the magic flowing off of it. He’s not coming back. Not until the curse is lifted, and you don’t have time to be thinking about that right now.”

That could not be possible. I could not have killed someone permanently. I would never give someone a permanent death.

“Someone on his staff will probably be able to explain more, but you need to go. Now.” She shoved me out a side entrance and into the rain. It took a moment to get my bearings. I was a Royal now. I was one of the highest ranked demons. I could teleport. I should teleport back to the estate. They could help me there. I concentrated. I tried

imagining myself appearing in the throne room. Nothing happened. I was still in the rain, and I was getting soaked.

I could...I could fly. I had felt the wings form. They were there. I tried moving them. The sensation reminded me of when I was a child and would pull both my arms into my shirt and then free myself again. It was not painful. It was just restrictive. I felt the edge of the wings slip out from beneath my skin. There was a chilling sensation as it felt like all my bones and organs rearranged again when the wings finally freed themselves and moved to their new position outside of my body. Then they were stuck under my shirt. I had forgotten that part. Clothes had to be fitted to accommodate wings. Mine, of course, were not.

I stripped off my jacket and shirt and clenched my teeth as the cold rain pelted down on my skin in full force. I stretched out my wings and gave them a test flap. It felt a bit like waving my arms if I had attached five pound weights to both wrists first.

I tried flying up only a bit first. Just high enough that if I happened to fall, I would not break a limb. The rain pelted into my wings, but I managed to keep myself up in the air. Each lightning strike made my breath catch, and I could not keep from imagining that the singed smell in the air was coming from the tips of my wings.

The flight from the bar to the estate took a harrowing half hour, and when I landed I fell to the ground in exhaustion. I did not care that the the mud was soaking my pants and coating my arms. I just wanted to breathe.

The estate staff raced outside to collect me. They got me back on my feet and ushered inside in moments. One talked me through guiding my wings back into a resting

position on my back, so that I could easily fit through doorways. Another staff member showed me to a bathroom and handed me a pile of warm clothes.

“Do you need assistance?” she asked. Her eyes darted from my abs to my chest and then finally up to meet my eyes.

“Ah, no. Thank you,” I replied and quickly stepped inside the bathroom and closed the door behind me before anyone else could offer their help.

I washed up and changed into the clothes. A new staff member was waiting for me when I stepped out of the bathroom. He silently led me to a small room. I found myself shoeless, wrapped in a sea of blankets, and seated in front of a large roaring fireplace in what I guessed was a private library or office of some sort.

The room was like most of the residence or at least what I had seen of it so far: neutral colored walls but covered in artwork from different eras and realms. A few statues were positioned here and there. Those features were all very tasteful. The furniture, on the other hand, was unlike anything I had ever seen before. It was more artistic than functional, and I resigned myself to sitting on the floor until I learned whether I could redecorate the place. Was I supposed to redecorate? Was it fair to redecorate the home of the man I had just murdered?

The guards and staff had disappeared as soon as I was settled. “Rest for now. We will attend to Dantalion’s body first,” the last one had told me before stepping out of the room.

I supposed someone would provide more detailed explanations after they retrieved Dantalion’s body. If not, I guessed I could just find someone to ask. I had not considered these things before, redecorating, moving, or anything that would happen after

really. Those things had not seemed important before. Dantalion was supposed to resurrect. I had planned to ask all my questions then. I was going to have a list. There was supposed to have been a training period of some sort.

A swish of fabric against the doorframe jerked my attention away from my spiraling thoughts and over to the entry of the room. A demon stood there just staring at me. Her hair was in a braid that reached all the way to her ankles. Her cheeks had three blue stripes stretching horizontally across them. Three vertical stripes marked her forehead. Unlike the other staff, she was dressed informally. Her overalls and white t-shirt were covered in paint splatters and like me, she was not wearing shoes.

“Hello,” I said.

“Hi.” She crossed the room and took a seat on the floor not too far from me. “I’m Tullie.”

“I’m Cato.”

Tullie grinned. “I know.” She reached into one of her overall pockets and fished out a sealed letter. “I am supposed to give you this.”

I slipped an arm out from beneath the many blankets and took it. The letter was made of thick parchment. It had been sealed with both a gold thread and wax seal that I broke open with a claw.

Successor; The letter started.

“He wrote it in advance to save time.” Tullie explained. She grabbed one of the extra blankets and wrapped it around herself. “Go on. Keep reading.”

Successor,

By now you have stabbed me through the heart. Excellent. You may have noticed that while you gained some of the abilities of a Royal, you did not gain all of them. That is because your final task is not complete. You proved your mastery of the arts and science, but you have not yet proved that you are worthy of becoming the demon of love. Once you have proved this, you will gain the rest of the abilities and officially become a Royal of the Underworld.

Your final task is one of great risk. You must travel to the Fates and change the tapestry. The fate of one person must change to bring them a greater reward than they were originally intended to have. You are clever. You can factor what that entails.

If you think you might just continue with the way things are, I have already planned for that as well. The dagger in my heart is cursed. It will cause a permanent death if not removed in twenty days. Do not worry. It is something I have waited for for centuries, a chance at moving on. However, the permanent death is not restricted to me. The curse is no ordinary one. Should you fail to accomplish this final task in twenty days time, the dagger will fall from my heart and enter yours instead.

Regards,

Dantalion

A wax stamp was next to the name. Dantalion's mark was one of the few things that could not be forged. He had written the letter, or at least he had written a part of it. Still, I struggled to make sense of the instructions. "Is this a joke?"

Tullie tilted her head from side to side. "Possibly. He always did have a strange sense of humor," she said.

"And who are you?" I had a few guesses, but I wanted to hear it from her.

"I am the only child Dantalion ever had, so at least you don't have to worry about others popping up to kill you for the role."

"You do not want his title?"

Tullie snorted. "Of course not," she replied. "I was born of two art demons. I have no desire to fight or lead. If you do succeed and keep me on as your advisor, which I hope you do because I really really like this house, but if you do, you will find that I spend most of my time up in the west wing. My rooms are there as are my studios. In fact, you won't even notice I'm here."

I read the letter over again trying to make sense of it. "Why do things this way? Why not just send me on the quest and wait here to see if I return?"

"He knew you would need at least part of the Royal abilities to survive a trip through the untamed zone, and you were going to have to kill him for the role anyway."

"Not permanently though."

Tullie picked at the corner of the blanket. “My father has been tired for a very long time. He’s thousands of centuries old, and he has seen so much. He wanted a new start as soon as he found someone suited to take his position,” she explained.

“But why did he need to make the permanent death a risk for the contestants?” I could not come to terms with it.

That time she did not hesitate before answering. “To keep the unworthy from trying again. Originally the same people would show up for each testing period. No matter how many times they failed, they would come back hoping to win on a fluke rather than because they had taken the time to study and improve. My father started making it more unappealing to weed them out. Once the news of the newest testing factor got around, we saw a huge decrease in return candidates.”

That news had somehow not reached me, but then it was only my first time attempting the test, and now it would be my last time. Either I would succeed, or I would die trying.

“So, you should really try your best,” Tullie encouraged. “I’ll try to help you where I can, and not just so you’ll let me stay if you win.”

I shrugged. “If I succeed, and if you do not try to kill me, you can stay.”

“Really? It’s that easy?”

“I think you are the type to stay regardless, so it would be better to give you permission and hope that will keep you from trying to murder me in the future.” I did not like explaining my trains of thought, but sometimes it was necessary.

Tullie slapped lightly at my knee. “You’re a funny guy too. That’s great. Dad would be happy to know that.”

I was funny? “You are not...upset...at his passing?” I asked.

Tullie’s mood shifted instantly. She picked at a piece of dried skin on her lips. “Well, either he passes, after having lived thousands and thousands of years, or your failure brings him back. I don’t want to mourn before things are official. Besides, you have plenty of other things to worry about right now.”

She hopped up and paced around the room. Her braid swished behind her with each step. “You won’t be able to use the staff or the guards. Not for the final task anyway,” she said. “Everyone will keep doing what they do around here though, so you don’t have to worry about this place. They can help you pack, but that’s about it. You’ll need a ton of supplies. Really, a ton. There is nothing out there in the untamed zone.” She started rambling off a list of supplies, counting them off on her fingertips like someone planning what snacks they wanted from the grocery store.

I nodded and pretended I was following along. I knew I should be getting up and planning. Twenty days was not nearly long enough to travel to the Fates and convince them to change a thread. The odds were against me. I was going to die permanently before I even turned twenty.

If I made an attempt, I was likely to die alone in a wasteland or a jungle, whichever I ended up making it to by the deadline. My corpse would likely rot away there or be devoured by some wild creature. I would be forgotten. Would it be better to accept my fate and instead try to appreciate the moments I had left? What moments were

there to appreciate? Would I not just be forgotten if I died here in the middle of the city as well?

Tullie stopped listing things and stared down at me as I shifted around again in an attempt to find a more comfortable position. “There’s a guest room in this wing with a normal bed in it. I’d advise using that room until you get things sorted. If you survive, you’re going to want to redecorate. Dad never had the best skills at interior decorating. It’s why I never let him redo my part of the house,” she said.

I nodded yet again causing Tullie to sigh. “You really don’t talk much, do you?” she asked. “Well, at least you seem less arrogant than the last one who tried. That’s promising. I can see that not much of what I’m saying is actually sinking into that brain of yours right now. We’ll try again later.”

She strolled to the door. “I’ll be getting to bed then. You can find that guest room by going up this staircase right out here and to the third floor. The room is the second door on the left. You can’t miss it.”

My head started the familiar movement, but her stare made me freeze. I forced my lips to move instead. “Thank you. I’ll remember that.”

Tullie looked down both ends of the hallway. Then she leaned forward and in an exaggerated whisper added, “You know, whenever Dad was trying to solve some problem, he always said that the best place to concentrate in this house was this room here. Especially that chair with the end table next to it. The only end table with a drawer.”

I glanced over to the chair she was talking about. “I believe I have understood your clue.”

Tullie scrunched up her nose. “Was I too obvious?”

“Very.”

“Ah, you’ll have to promise not to tell on me. We might both get into trouble if anyone thinks I’ve favored you.” She gave a little wink. I believe it was a wink. It was possible something had just gotten stuck in her eye.

“Why would you favor me?” I asked.

“Maybe I’m just tired of waiting for someone to finally succeed, and so I root for anyone who seems not entirely like an asshole.” She shrugged and spun around to leave.

“Anyway, it’s too late to take it back. Best of luck on not dying.”

Remy

Blood streamed from Dantalion’s body to form a small pool next to the dance floor. It reminded me of the third drink I had had that night. Something with pomegranate in it. The sight made my stomach churn. I swallowed hard to keep from spewing the drink onto the corpse.

I looked to Cato, hoping for some sign of some kind of emotion: fear, regret, anything that would indicate he had only killed in self-defense, but his face was blank. Whispers sprung up around us. Too many of them confirmed my theory: Dantalion had just been speaking, Cato had pulled out the dagger, and then Dantalion was gone. A classic power play. Cato was just another demon cheating his way to the top.

Not everyone was in a state of shock. Typical of the Underworld, if one demon seizes power, there are five more standing behind them just waiting to steal it for

themselves. Some of the very demons I had been dancing with not too long ago started whispering together.

One of the couples standing next to me weren't wasting any time. "Quick. Get him before he gets the power. It'll shift to you instead," the one muttered. His partner, a fox demon I had seen around a few times before, gave a nod of agreement. They started moving toward Cato. Their claws and fangs glinted under the dance floor lights.

I bolted. Not a heroic move, but I was not the heroic type. Things were about to get messy, and my only goal was to not become a casualty in someone else's chaos. I ran toward the exit and crashed straight into Balt. I was not a particularly small guy, but Balt was built like a brick wall. He felt a bit like one when I ran into him too. The impact knocked me dizzy for a moment, and Balt had to catch me before I fell to the floor.

"Where are you going?"

Morgen stepped out from behind the bar and toward the growing crowd. "Take him home. He doesn't handle death well, and I've got to handle this mess," she instructed Balt. I would have been insulted by that if it weren't painfully true at that moment.

"Ah shit." Balt wrapped an arm around my shoulders. All guard demons were taller and wider than the average demon, and Balt used that mass to shield me from the others in the bar. "Right. Let's go. My car's not even a block from here," he said as he cleared a path for us to the closest exit.

I let him drag me along, trusting him to lead me to wherever we were going. It was only once I was in the passenger seat with hot air blasting me from the vents that I realized we had walked through the rain again.

“You good?”

“Peachy,” I mumbled.

“Do you want to go to my place? Baaz can play bartender if you want a few more drinks.” Balt dangled the idea in front of me. He’d done the same on other occasions, enough that we both knew what his actual intention was. He didn’t necessarily want to have an afterparty at his place. He was just judging if I was okay to be left alone and giving me an opportunity for company without having to say that was something I needed.

I didn’t need company though. Not then anyway. “No. Thanks. I’ll just go to my place if you don’t mind.”

There was a moment of quiet. Balt was studying me, judging just how much babysitting I might require that night. His gaze kept darting away from the road to instead burn a hole in the side of my face. Figuratively. Not literally. Balt didn’t have laser eyes. “Your place it is,” he finally agreed.

Balt drove down the narrow streets of the Underworld city. The bars and restaurants were packed as usual. Demons of all sorts huddled together under umbrellas and jackets as they darted into bars. Most would brave a storm before missing out on a Friday night’s events, and the establishments would only get busier as it grew later. Despite still being anxious from earlier, a part of me wished I was still joining them.

“So you’re still afraid of death? At your age?” Balt’s questions shook me from my thoughts. “I thought you got over that a few years ago.”

I glared at him. How could he not understand? His job forced him to constantly peek into the other realms but to stay just outside of them. Was he truly not tempted to visit them and finally see them for himself? “Excuse me for not wanting to get trapped in only one realm for all of eternity.”

“Ah yes, you need to explore. How could I have ever forgotten? Look, it’s a nice dream to have, but if you do happen to die before then, just know that’s not so scary after the first time.” Balt had switched to his serious voice, a rarity in itself. “Just so you know, I had my first death at around your age. You’ll be surprised by how much your mind has already prepared you for it.” He had been my age around two hundred years ago. The odds of his remembering his first death that well were slim.

“Thanks. That’s so reassuring.” I pulled at my seatbelt. “You can let me out here. You’re not going to be able to find any parking at this time of night.”

Balt started to protest, but I interrupted. “I’m just going to go to bed. I’ll even call you in the morning.”

“Fine.” Balt stopped the car where we were.

I hauled myself out of the vehicle and ran through the rain to get inside my building. I stopped in the downstairs market long enough to grab some snacks and a few more bottles of beer. The store employee glanced at the wet trail I left behind and plopped down a wet floor sign at the worst of the mess before he moved behind the register to ring up my order. Loaded down with my midnight snack, I climbed my way up the stairs and to my apartment. The sound of a few tvs trickled out into the hallways. At least I wasn’t the only one stuck inside on a Friday night.

My apartment was on the small size, barely big enough for one person and their things to coexist peacefully. Each piece of furniture was pressed firmly against the next, and to cross the living room, I had to take six cautious steps through a carefully crafted pathway. I navigated my way around the path to put on the kettle and set my snacks on the coffee table.

In an attempt to make the space look less like a box, I had covered the walls of each of the tiny rooms with maps, paintings, and photographs of places I wanted to see. I had run out of space only six months after moving in and had started expanding the collection to the ceiling, and as I collapsed onto my couch with the first bottle of beer I was greeted by the sight of the hidden realm of Atlantis staring back at me. “At least I have an excuse for not visiting you yet. Since no one can even find you,” I told the painting. I didn’t have the same excuses for the other places.

At least I could catch up on my dramas if I wasn’t going to be having a night out. The kettle whistled. I dragged myself up to pour some water into the ramen bowl and set my meal in front of the tv. This wasn’t so bad. Beer, ramen, junk food, and a good show. It was far from the best way to spend a Friday night, but it was also far from the worst way as well. I flicked through the streaming services to find the latest drama I had been trying to watch. Just as the opening theme finished playing, the screen flashed red. Breaking news. Only the Underworld would require that everyone watch the breaking news.

To be fair it was always a big deal whenever the Underworld determined something to be breaking news. The last time it had been when Nic had somehow defeated Mephisto at deal making. I was sure whatever the news was would be something

interesting, something that I would need to know about, but I really didn't want to deal with any potential life-changing information right then. I just wanted to watch my show, eat my noodles and chips, drink my beer, and forget about everything that had happened that night.

Breaking News: The Royal Dantalion has been killed. The new Royal of the Underworld is now Cato.

Cato's disgustingly handsome face flashed across the screen. I threw a chip at him.

No one has been able to reach the new Royal for any formal statements about why he killed Dantalion or what his plans are for his coronation. However, we have gotten word that another demon may be able to shed light on this situation. We believe him to be either the friend, partner, or a potential rival of the new Royal, but we will attempt an interview with him now.

Whoever it was that they had decided to interview was one unlucky bastard. The Underworld National Communications weren't known for taking a "no" for an answer when it came to their interviews, and they'd take any opportunity to make an interviewee look ridiculous.

A knock sounded on my door. "Underworld National Communications! Could we get a statement?" Oh. I was the unlucky bastard then.

I tossed the chips aside and pulled myself to my feet. "If I see that asshole again, I'm going to punch him in the face."

Cato

After studying the drawer for several minutes and looking at it from every angle, I had determined that it was safe to open. Tullie's willingness to share information was unusual, but so far, it appeared that she was sincere. Once I pulled the drawer open, it was obvious which object she had intended for me to find. There was an entire journal devoted to different aspects of the untamed zone in the Underworld. There were even lists of things to pack and things to avoid as well as suggested books to read beforehand and more to take along for a successful journey. It was a study guide before the exam.

I put all those neatly to the side, but I kept digging through the endtable drawer in search of anything else that might be of help. Most of it was random items, including a few pieces of trash, but there were two manila envelopes that caught my interest. I pulled them out and held them as far from my body as I could manage. As an extra precaution, I even shielded my mouth and nose with the corner of one of the blankets I had kept wrapped around my shoulders.

There were no visible traces of any poisons or explosives on the envelopes themselves. There were no strange smells or unusual sigils. If there was anything dangerous to them, it would be beyond my skillset.

One envelope was clearly marked "Favors Owed". The other had "Favors to Collect" scrawled across it. In the Underworld "favor" was really just another way of saying debt, and debt was what made the Underworld function, like most corrupt societies. In the case of the Underworld, debt made the realm function so well that when a demon killed another one, they inherited that person's debt. Dantalion's debts were now my debts for better or for worse.

It made little sense for Dantalion to store his most valuable information inside a random drawer along with an assortment of sudoku puzzle books and a pile of glitter coated pencils. He was the demon of arts and sciences. He was basically one of the most creative and logical beings to exist. Why would he leave some of the most important information about himself in an unguarded drawer for anyone to find? Maybe I would understand Dantalion's way of thinking once I became a full Royal, if that ever happened. At the moment I was just grateful that the enveloped marked "Favors Owed" did not feel even half as full as the one marked "Favors to Collect".

I risked a glance at the Favors Owed envelope. It was better to know what kind of debts I was now responsible for repaying. There were only three slips inside: Lilianne, Beleth, and Sam. Three inheritance debts was not the worst outcome. Some people accumulated dozens or even hundreds. As long as none of them turned out to be life-debts, they should be a simple matter to handle.

I placed the slips back into the drawer. I would get to them one day in the far off future, or Dantalion would have to handle them himself when I died. Either way it was a situation to handle on another day. As for the "Favors to Collect", those could actually prove useful.

I settled into the chair. The cushions sank under my weight until it felt like I was trapped in quicksand, and yet despite the softness of the pillows, the chair kept my spine perfectly straight. If I somehow survived, the chair would be the first piece of furniture to go.

I opened the envelope and started reading. Each paper listed who owed Dantalion, what they owed him, and in most cases why they owed him. Those that did not include the “why” instead had the word “confidential” listed on the blank. One by one I had to place the favors to the side as none of them were big enough to be repaid by a trip to the untamed zone of the Underworld. With each paper I put aside, my hope dimmed a bit more.

Technically, I could request a new favor, but that would be difficult to do in a short time-frame. The process of finding someone willing to take on such a task would likely cost me more than even my eternal existence.

“Sir,” a guard’s voice pulled me from my thoughts. I recognized her from the throne room. She had been the one to announce how many of the dead would not resurrect. She was still wearing some armor: her chestplate, her armguards, and her shin guards, but she had put aside her helmet and her more obvious weapons.

“Yes,...what is your name?” I asked.

“Olivia. Head of staff.” That explained the casual appearance. For someone to be the head of staff in a Royal Demon’s household, they would have to be powerful enough to not rely on weapons or even regular training. Olivia picked up a remote from the desk.

“You are on the news.”

I adjusted my blanket cape around my shoulders trying to appear more dignified than I felt. “What are they saying?”

“They have little information on you. However, they are interviewing a witness.” She clicked her tongue. “Perhaps ‘interviewing’ is the wrong word. ‘Interrogating’ seems to be a more apt description.”

That was unsurprising to hear, but I could not help feeling slightly guilty for whomever I had unintentionally put into such a position as to become the interviewee of the UNC. “Who is the witness?” There had been so many people in the bar.

“It is a redhead. I believe his name is Remy if I interpreted his...rantings correctly. He seems to be displeased.” Olivia pointed the remote at one of the paintings. It turned into a television, and a very familiar face flashed across the screen. The interviewee had his apartment door barely cracked and was screaming every curse he could think of at the reporter and also at me. I do not think I had ever been cursed out in such a manner before that day. Most of his suggestions were not even physically possible.

“Displeased may be an understatement,” I noted as I watched the ranting continue.

Olivia gave a nod of agreement. “Do you think he might come here and confront you himself? He seems annoyed. If you believe he might be a threat, I can have the guards sent to look for him.” Olivia’s tone was cautious.

While Remy was calling me every name in the realm except for my own, he did not appear to be the violent type. “No need. I do not think he poses any true threat.”

Olivia’s shoulders relaxed. “If you say so, sir.” She turned as if to leave, but I stopped her.

“Do you have a minute?” I asked.

“Of course,” she replied.

“Could you tell me if there are any safety features in this room?”

Olivia did not hesitate to answer. “There are security systems in place, but most would be controlled only by the Master of Art himself.” She gave a nod over to where a pile of blank canvases were stored in a corner. “I wouldn’t take those out of the room.”

“Is there something special about them?”

“They’re very durable. Dantalion...” She paused for a moment. “He always said they were to be used sparingly and only by the Master of Art in the most dire of situations.”

I added that information to the growing list of puzzles I had to solve. Olivia glanced at the screen again where Remy had switched to asking the reporter if he was aware of just which demon he worked for. Then her attention was caught by the pile of papers I was holding. “I see you have found not only Dantalion’s truth chair, but also the Favors Owed envelope. That could be very useful for you. Good on you for finding it. No one else had managed it before.” She tilted her head. “Did you find anything else?”

I held up the journal and the letter that Tullie had given me. Olivia gave a nod of approval. “That letter has frightened a few of the competitors with its contents, but you seem to be doing better than most of our past participants. At least you haven’t run screaming yet.”

“Running would be pointless.”

“You know, it is truly impressive how many demons owe the Royal Demon of Art, Science, and Love. Even the Demon of Deals is in his debt,” she said, and I knew that like Tullie, Olivia was handing me a piece of advice on a silver platter.

“The Demon of Deals owes Dantalion?” I repeated. While not a Royal, the Demon of Deals had nearly as much power as one at least when it came to having the upperhand on something.

“Technically the Demon of Deals owes you now, but yes. Someone like that is good to have in your pocket.”

For the Demon of Deals, the unrivaled expert of negotiations and contracts, to owe someone rather than be owed, Dantalion would have had to grant him a huge favor. I flipped through the papers until I found the correct form. Even just a glance at what was owed was enough to assure that not even the Demon of Deals would be able to get out of going to the untamed zone of the Underworld if I requested it of him. He could be my one hope.

I grabbed one of the pencils and notepads from the junk drawer. “Olivia, do you happen to know where the Demon of Deal’s office is located?”

Chapter 2

Remy

At two in the afternoon on Monday, I arrived at the office. Actually, I arrived seven minutes after two and sped walked past Jezebel's office in hopes I could avoid any lectures about being tardy. I went straight to my desk, flung my backpack to the floor, and slammed my forehead down on a pile of folders Jezebel had already left for my attention. My weekend had been a complete loss.

It had taken hours to get the reporters away from my apartment. Some of the other patrons had caught me staring at Cato and told the reporters if anyone would have seen anything that happened that night it would be me. The liars.

For as many friends as I had, I had nearly an equal amount of enemies. At least my enemies tended to not actually want me dead and instead just resorted to childish pranks. They were always more annoying than actually dangerous, and if I did get sick of it, Adeona always liked the occasional fight.

As it was, Adeona had seen the breaking news and sent some of her staff to help me out. The small army of protectors had arrived, escorted the reporters out of my building, and then returned to guard my tiny apartment for the remainder of the weekend. While they had been doing that, Nic had managed to get some kind of restraining order on the press arranged. They had acted out of their kindness, but it had been nearly as frustrating as just having the reporters there.

The protection detail had been overkill. They had kept me away from the windows and searched the entire place for hidden cameras. They had hovered obnoxiously close to the point that I could hear every sip of water and every one of their

sniffles during those two days. Three of them had even surrounded me as I made my way to the office. I'd had to message Adeona to get her to call them off before I could enter. O

I was just enjoying the first few minutes of true alone time in the past several days when the door to my and Nic's shared office opened and then closed again. Jezebel's heels clicked against the floor in their usual forceful manner. My forehead felt glued to the papers, so I didn't bother looking up. "I'm not in the mood, Jezebel." I tensed in preparation for a blade to pierce my shoulder. Jezebel was polite enough to not kill me, but there was nothing stopping her from inflicting a few minor injuries. When no blade struck, I knew the matter was serious.

"We have a visitor. A Royal," she announced.

I groaned. "Do they have an appointment?" I turned to look at her. I had never seen her look so pale before, and with my hypersensitive hearing I could pick up the unsteadiness of her breaths. "Jezebel?" I prompted.

"He does not have an appointment." She kept glancing behind her as if the Royal was going to barge his way through the door. "He is insistent that he meet with Nicolas today."

"Nic isn't here though. He's in the mortal realm." There was nothing to be done about that. He wouldn't come back early for anything other than an emergency, and a spoiled Royal was far from being a time-urgent matter in his book.

"I informed our visitor of the situation. He then informed me that we are to summon the Demon of Deals now." Jezebel twisted her hands together. I'd never seen her do that before.

“Why are you so nervous? It’s not like you to be afraid of anyone.”

Jezebel changed immediately. Her hands went to her side. Her spine straightened. Her chin tilted upward ever so slightly until she was glaring down her nose at me. “He is young, and he has quite a bit of power that he doesn’t know how to use. If we upset him, he could not only kill us temporarily but possibly permanently all without even intending to do so.”

I was just about done with all the Royals. Any other day I would have been the first to run from anything or anyone powerful enough to frighten Jezebel, but I was still too frustrated by the weekend’s events to be thinking clearly. Besides, I was the one who got called in whenever a client needed some reassurance or when things had to be smoothed over.

I summoned my flute. It was my weapon of choice. When I focused my energy into it, I could do many things, but the most important one for the office was lulling clients into a docile state. I never did enough to trick them into signing something against their will. I merely calmed them enough that they wouldn’t burn down our building with us inside of it just because they didn’t like the terms and conditions of their arrangement.

“Let me see if I can charm him and then talk some sense into him,” I said.

“Where is he?”

Jezebel pointed behind her. “In my office.” That was why I hadn’t been able to hear him. Jezebel had soundproofed her office the day after I had been hired.

I led the way through the shared space. Jezebel was quick on my heels. “Any chance we know what kind of offerings this one likes?” I asked. Might as well go the whole way.

I had my hand on the door to her office and was already pushing it open when Jezebel replied, “No, he’s a fresh Royal. No one knows anything about him so far other than his name. It’s Cato.”

The door opened the rest of the way, and I got a look at the demon waiting inside. My plans to lull and charm him went out the window as I launched across the office to attack.

Cato

Contrary to what some people perhaps thought of me, I did not live under a rock. I was well aware that Mephisto had been replaced by a “Nicolas” from the mortal realm. The Demon of Deals being a mere eighteen year old boy and a former human did put a damper on my plan, but I would just have to make some adjustments to compensate for Nic’s lack of experience. First, I would have to set the terms of the favor to be that the Demon of Deals lend me at least a few of his employees for the journey. He should have several on hand. Most of them would be better suited to go on the trip than the actual Demon of Deals himself, who, as everyone had witnessed on the broadcast just a few months ago, could barely even hold a dagger properly never mind actually defend himself with one.

I had even looked into how many employees were under the Demon of Deal's command. He had an army of deal-makers. The deal-makers originated from all different realms, were of all different ages, and most importantly, were all equipped with a variety of skill sets.

It was not that I needed many of them. It was more that I needed some that were skilled in numerous things from fighting to healing to surviving in the wild and to even just having common sense. I wanted people who could watch my back and who would not add to my ordeal through incompetence. What I had not accounted for was being told that I could not meet with the Demon of Deals, at least not in a suitable enough time frame.

I gripped at the arm of the chair as the second assistant read off a list of potential dates. "It would take some work. I would have to move some appointments around, but how about next Monday at two?" Jezebel asked when I did not respond to any of the other options.

I had already wasted two of my twenty days waiting for the office to open up. If I had to wait another week, I would never make it to the Fates in time. "Impossible. Summon him now," I demanded.

She closed the planner and ran a hand over its cover. "I cannot." Her voice was calm, but as she slid the planner to the side, she picked up a dagger in its place.

I tensed at the sight of the dagger. "He owes me," I insisted.

Her neck shot up so fast that I thought I heard some of her discs crack. “Let me remind you that I am merely the second assistant to the Demon of Deals, and as such, there are limitations to what I can do.”

“You indicated that you were in charge of-”

“Second assistant,” Jezebel interrupted. Under her breath she added, “Thank the Universe. I am not paid enough to deal with these Royals.”

I pretended not to hear the remark. I did need her help still, and any moment wasted on anything other than contacting the Demon of Deals was too reckless. A ping sounded. A box lit with the word “lobby” on it lit up, and Jezebel shoved away from her desk.

“That should be the first assistant now. I’ll get him for you. Please wait here.” She left the office and closed the door firmly behind her.

I fought the urge to tap my foot against the leg of the chair as I waited for her to return. It was impossible to tell who might have eyes on the room, and if they knew I was nervous, it was likely they would exploit that weakness.

The Demon of Deals would have been a powerful ally, if I had the time to actually form an alliance with him. More than likely I was about to try to force him into doing something he did not want to do, and I would have to watch my back around him in the future. I had no other options. My situation did not allow for any other options.

I was trapped, and the office I sat in was doing nothing to alleviate that feeling. The artificial lighting inside Jezebel’s office was brighter than anything the Underworld’s actual sun could produce. Not that I could compare at that exact moment. The walls in the room were all covered with thick tapestries making it impossible to determine if there

even were any windows in the room. There could be traps or cameras hidden anywhere beneath the fabric, and I would never know.

I wanted to stand and search behind the tapestries until I found a window and could get a glimpse into the outside world, but I did not want anyone to think I was snooping. Knowing the Demon of Deals and his employees, there was probably some kind of catch to everything. Touch the wrong pen, and it could be considered the same as signing over the next century of your life. Touch a curtain and find out that written on the seams was an agreement that whoever touched the curtains would be responsible for washing all of the windows of the building daily. The last demon to hold the title had been no better than a trickster in that regard.

When the doorknob clicked, and the door to the office started to open I breathed out a sigh of relief. I stood, hoping that a good first impression would help my case. Perhaps I would be able to better explain now.

The door froze for a moment, and then it flew open. A red blur flew across the room and straight into my chest. I hit the ground with a thud. For a moment I thought I had died, that someone else was trying to claim the title for themselves through my death.

Then I got my bearings. I was alive, but I was under attack. I got a leg around my attacker and flipped him over, slamming him into the ground with a bit more force than necessary. My hand was already on my dagger when I realized who I was about to stab.

The shock of recognizing my attacker made me freeze again, and Remy (I remembered he had very loudly corrected a reporter about his name during the interview) twisted around until he once again had the advantage.

My fingers lingered just above the dagger I had tucked into the inner pocket of my gray peacoat. Remy had his own weapon in hand, a steel flute, the end of which was sharpened into a sword. He was a music demon, a rare type to be found outside of a Royal family. Remy raised the flute to his lips, and I braced myself for the blow.

“Debts!” Jezebel shouted.

Remy paused. He sighed and jumped back up to his feet. “Luckily for you, I’m not power-hungry enough to actually kill a Royal and end up with whatever shit deals come attached,” he remarked. I doubted he would have remembered that fact if not for Jezebel’s sharp reminder. Remy twirled the flute around a few times. Each time the sharp edge narrowly missed slicing open my hand.

I pulled myself up and brushed off my outfit. “Most people would say that the debts are worth it for a Royal title.”

“Most people don’t work for the Demon of Deals.” Remy paced the room a few more times. “What is it that you want again?”

“I want to speak with the Demon of Deals.” How many more times would I have to repeat myself?

Remy plopped down into Jezebel’s chair and leaned as far back as it would allow. Jezebel glared at him from the doorway, but then she turned and left. She made quite a bit of noise out in the open space. I took it as a reminder that while we might be in a soundproof room the door had been left open, and she could hear us.

“Jezebel already informed you that the Demon of Deals is busy. Perhaps since you’re new to the Royal lifestyle, you haven’t realized that it doesn’t come with the power to make everyone follow your orders,” Remy said and put on a smug smirk.

“That’s not why I-” I bit off my words. “I would not be this insistent if it was not a time-urgent matter.”

Remy spun in the chair. His combat boots came dangerously close to scuffing the floor. “Doubtful.”

“Could you let me-”

He cut me off. “No. I told you. Nic is not available until next week. There are no exceptions to that. Jezebel can pencil you in for Nic’s first meeting as soon as he’s back, but that’s all we can do. Now if you’ll follow me, I’ll see you out.”

Remy brushed by me on his way out of the office. Everything was happening so fast, and I needed it to stop. Without thinking about it, I reached out and grabbed hold of his shoulder. He was back on edge instantly, grabbing hold of my arm and twisting it around. Once again I let my anxiety get the best of me and struck him in an attempt to break the hold. We launched into an even match.

Punch versus punch. Kick versus kick. Neither one of us reached for our weapons in some unspoken agreement that neither of us wanted to kill each other at that exact moment. We were both more than willing to take out our frustration on each other though.

Remy slammed me into Jezebel’s desk. A vase of flowers tumbled to the ground. Jezebel’s screech echoed through the office. “Stop it! You’re destroying my things!” She called out from the safety of the doorway.

I shoved Remy back. He stumbled and dragged me with him. We both fought to get our feet back under us. Remy managed it first. He pulled back his arm to land another blow. I was really tired of getting punched. I hunched over and barreled into Remy planning to pin him against the wall until he had cooled off.

We crashed into the tapestry. Rather than the thud of our bodies impacting with a wall, there was a crunch of glass breaking. Then there was the feeling of weightlessness. We were falling, plummeting to the ground and wrapped in a thick tapestry. I had witnessed enough deaths by falls to know that if we were still alive when we hit the ground, it was not going to be fun. We were not mortals whose hearts typically went out before the impact. No, we would feel every bit of our bone-crunching, organ-exploding deaths, and I had no desire to experience that. I would not have my first death be due to a fall from a window.

I summoned my new wings, throwing the tapestry off of us and halting our fall with a sudden jolt. For a moment I thought about dropping Remy. He was a demon. Demons were used to dying, and possibly he'd be more reasonable when he resurrected. That or he would be even more stubborn. I glanced down and was surprised to see Remy's face had lost all color. His grip on my arms had turned from aggressive to desperate, and I knew at that moment that Remy had never died before. I could use that to my advantage.

"I will fly you safely to the ground if you promise to summon your boss," I offered.

Remy scoffed. “Drop me, and I’ll make sure he never speaks a word to you.” He tightened his hold until I was certain I could feel his nails digging through my many layers of clothing and directly into the muscles of my biceps. It would be like ripping off a tick or a leech if I tried to drop him at that moment.

“You lack that kind of power. He has made a deal. He must honor it. He will not sacrifice his reputation for an assistant,” I was almost certain of that.

“There are no time limitations on deals between demons. If I tell Nic to make you wait centuries, he will,” Remy threatened. “No questions asked.”

I grunted. “Doubtful.” I had seen the way most high ranked demons treated their employees. I knew none who would grant their employee that much of a say in things.

Remy shifted to get a better hold on my arms. I could feel the bruises blooming, and he had definitely broken the skin in one place. “For your information, I happen to be an extremely talented assistant,” he remarked.

It came to me then. Somehow while listening to Remy ramble about his own importance and while trying to keep us both in the air, I remembered a very simple fact. I was a Royal and had nearly all the abilities of one. Likely, I could cross the realms myself. There was a chance that, like teleportation, it was an ability still locked until I had completed the last test, but I had to try it.

Besides, I had seen the show Nicolas had competed on when he first became the Demon of Deals. Everyone in the Underworld had seen it. The show had tracked Nicolas through the realms, including his precious mortal one. I knew exactly the places the Demon of Deals went when he was in the mortal realm.

“Are you really that important to your boss?” I asked.

Remy seemed to realize his mistake. He closed his mouth and turned his head to look down.

“That’s fine,” I replied to his silence. “If you’re not going to bring him to me, then let us go straight to him.” I was not proud about what I was about to do. “We will see which is more important to him: his free time or preventing his assistant from experiencing his first death.”

Remy

It could have been a fun experience, hovering over the city and taking in the twinkling lights that cut through the overcast sky. Instead all I could think of was the many ways I could die if I suddenly plummeted to the streets below. There was a small chance I wouldn’t die. Demons could survive long falls, but we were just high enough to make it a risk. Jezebel had once described how it felt to die by falling. She had listed every excruciating detail down to the organs popping open. I’d had nightmares for a week after.

Cato flew higher. The wind cut through my jacket, the one that would now have to be replaced if the window shards poking into my back were any indication. I tightened my grip, and Cato returned the action. Both of us would be left with bruises by the end of the flight.

We had just reached the gate to the city when Cato suddenly swooped to the left. One of his wings flapped wildly while the other remained stationary. I swore. “You don’t

even know how to fly yet, do you?” He might kill me without even intending. What a way to go.

“Something is pulling me,” he gritted out the words. He tried gliding for a bit then flapped his wings harder.

Rather than regaining our altitude, we dropped lower. I glanced around to see what could be causing it. As soon as I realized our location, I knew what was happening. “It’s the labyrinth. No one can fly over the labyrinth. You can only walk or drive through it.”

The labyrinth connected the mortal realm to the Underworld realm. The outer wall was made of stone while the inner walls were garden hedges hiding deadly obstacles, a few rare beasts, but mostly other demons waiting to jump any unsuspecting adventurers. As we flew closer, I could hear some of the beasts release growls of excitement.

I had traveled through the maze several times to pick up Nic after his week away and take back to the city. Of course, each time I had either had Adeona with me or my motorcycle, and I had gone as fast as possible through the maze. Never had I walked the path alone.

“You really want us to die today, don’t you?” I asked.

Cato ignored my remark and set us both down just outside the door to the labyrinth. He kept a firm hold on my elbow. “Do you know the path?”

“Perhaps.” Maybe if he thought I didn’t know it, he wouldn’t risk going through it. Then we could just go back to the office, reschedule him a meeting with Nic, and I could live another day.

“We are entering either way. If we have to wander around because you lie, your chances of being killed increase,” Cato warned. His grip remained firm on my elbow. If I tried to run, he would likely kill me. The only option was to go along and let Nic deal with the Royal himself.

“Fine. I know the way.”

Cato summoned his sword to his hand. “Then summon your weapon and lead us,” he said.

“To summon a flute, I need to use both my elbows.” I positioned his arms the way one would when they played a flute. Of course, with Cato still holding onto the one, I couldn’t quite reach the correct position. I had a secondary weapon, a set of drumsticks, but those would never work inside the limited paths of the maze, and the less Cato knew about my abilities, the better of an advantage I had.

“If I release you, and you run, I will hunt you down and kill you. We will continue doing that until you come to your senses, even if it takes all ninety of our lives.” He was lying. I could tell by the tone, but I couldn’t tell which part of the threat he was lying about. Either way my first priority was to not die.

I gave him my best shit-eating grin and jerked my arm free. “You and I, my friend, need to have a discussion about setting healthy boundaries and how not to be a stalker.”

“Weapon.” Cato snarled. “Now.” He turned to the large double doors that allowed entrance to the labyrinth. I tagged along. Now that my feet were back on the ground, and it was clear that Cato wanted to keep me alive for some kind of hostage thing, I felt I could relax a little. The feeling of complete terror transformed into a mix of annoyance, amusement, and just a bit of anxiety. Not much anxiety. Just enough to rival whatever happened when I had an energy drink on an empty stomach. Once I was able to think clearly, I found my odds were actually pretty good.

Sure, I was being held hostage, but it was also very likely I would get a front row view for whatever Adeona was going to do when Cato stormed into Nic’s high school and started making demands. She always made great masterpieces out of spilled blood. Not to mention Nic’s other friends would be there. I had seen them on the show and had met them briefly. They weren’t violent, but they were protective.

I led the way through the maze and to my shock, not a single demon or creature tried to attack us the entire journey. A few of them rustled around in the hedges, but they didn’t do more than peek out at us. Perhaps they could sense Cato’s frustration. I could certainly feel it. It sucked in all the warmth from the area, leaving behind a bitter chill. Of course, that could also just be the autumn season preparing to shift over to winter.

When we reached the end of the maze, Cato paused. He stared into the nothingness for several long moments.

“You have to summon the door for it to appear,” I told him.

“I know,” he snapped.

It didn’t seem like he knew.

He cleared his throat. Possibly I imagined the nervous glance he shot my way as he tried to call it.

“Door to the mortal realm,” he ordered. His order sounded a lot more like a guess, and to my delight, the sad song playing on my playlist at that moment matched the vibe perfectly. The laughter on the tip of my tongue vanished as the door appeared in all its gory detail.

I had seen the door dozens of times, but each time the sight of it sent chills running up and down my spine. A thick reddish black substance oozed down its surface as always. Some claimed it was blood taken from the mortals who had been sent down to the darkest depths of the Underworld. Others claimed it was sap from the tree the door had been carved from. A few claimed it was the blood of whatever entity created the Underworld in the first place. No one was willing to actually touch it or test it to find which of the guesses were true.

Besides the ooze adding to the aesthetic, sharpened antlers stood in the place of handles. The guardians of the door wore special gloves whenever they had to touch the things to avoid slicing open their palms on the jagged edges. The final decorative touch to the door were the warnings about entering either realm carved into its surface in hundreds of languages. Alongside the door appeared six formidable looking guards, including my friends Balt and Baaz.

Balt stiffened at the sight of us. “That’s the one,” he murmured, and Baaz’s grip on his spear shifted from defend to attack. I gave them a grin hoping to calm them.

“If you want us to attack him, take two steps back,” Baaz whispered. He had pitched his voice low enough for me to hear but not for Cato to pick up on. No one without my enhanced hearing could have heard him.

“It’s fine. Everything’s fine,” I reassured. Royals weren’t known for sparing staff, and even though both Baaz and Balt had died many times already, I was unwilling to let them risk possibly their last chance at resurrections over this. “We’re just going to go see Nic.”

The concern on Balt’s face was replaced with amusement. “Is that so?” He gave a little bounce. “A little visit to Nic and friends is it? Say hi to the gang for me. You know how to get to them right?”

I pulled the human phone from my pocket. I hadn’t had a chance to dump it on my desk before Jezebel had stepped in to tell me about Cato, and the phone had somehow managed to stay in my pocket despite our crashing through a window and flying over the Underworld. Perhaps it was more useful than I had initially thought.

“This should work. Nic put a location app on here, and he said I could use it.”

I ignored the way Cato tried to peer at the screen. No doubt he already knew the general areas where Nic would be. Rather than waste my time being dragged from location to location until we found Nic I would just go ahead and take him straight to him. If the app would just work anyway.

I tapped impatiently at the icon while it did its best to not load. No wonder humans were so angry when their technology was so mediocre. Finally the app connected, and I clicked on the directions to Nic. “Got him,” I announced, keeping the screen just out of Cato’s sight to annoy him some more.

“We will be here when you are ready to return.” There was a glint in Baaz’s eyes when he looked in Cato’s direction.

“We’ll be back.” I glanced over to Cato. “Won’t we?”

Cato

The guards opened the door for us, and we passed from the Underworld and into the mortal realm. Remy’s new compliance had me on guard once more. He no longer seemed concerned for what happened when I met with the Demon of Deals. Perhaps he had used the mortal phone to send him an alert and there would be some army waiting for me, ready to kill me or worse, trap me for all eternity. I kept trying to reassure myself that he would not have been able to use the phone prior to our arrival at the door, and I had watched carefully while he accessed the app. He had not appeared to be able to alert him then either.

Dry leaves crunched under our shoes as we entered the forest that acted as a barrier for ForestBay, one of the many sanctuary cities for the supernatural who had to hide among the humans in the mortal realm. To the mortal eye the forest looked like any other, but the protective magic of the barrier confused any humans who happened to wander too close to it. If the confusion was not enough to guide the humans away, the magic would play at their nerves. It would hike up their fright and send warnings that they needed to flee for their own safety, and the longer they resisted, the stronger the hallucination would grow. If all that failed, the barrier would actually harm its intruders.

The only way for a mortal to safely pass through would be to acknowledge the barrier's presence and present it with a peace-offering and a promise to do no harm within its territory.

Even if the Forestbay barrier was meant to protect us rather than harm, its unfamiliarity set my nerves on edge and raised goosebumps along my arms. My anxiety grew as the barrier's protective magic took in our presence. It sparked, shooting off little blasts of its power until the air felt as if it were filled with static electricity. The feeling clung to my wings. It made my heart race until it felt like it was going to rip out of my chest. After it determined that I was one of the supernatural it was built to protect, the barrier settled around me and took me under its protection. I let out a slow exhale.

I glanced at Remy only to find him watching me with amusement. "That was quite a cardio workout you did there," he remarked.

He had heard my heart racing. He had that enhanced hearing that some music demons were born with. It was not that necessarily that they could hear that much better than the average person, but that their ears naturally picked up every sound and translated it into notes, chords, and beats. They could hear both higher and lower pitches. Muffled words became clearer to them, allowing them to hear what others could not. For him to pick up my heartbeat under the sounds of the forest and his own blasting music meant that his ability was exceptionally strong. I would have to be careful.

"Which way?" I asked. I would not respond to his teasing. I wanted to get out of the barrier wall and into the center of the town where its effects should not be felt. Remy did not respond. He had apparently found something of interest in the trees.

“Which way?” I asked again. Possibly he was experiencing a delayed reaction to the effects of the barrier’s scrutiny.

He acknowledged me the second time I called him. He dragged his gaze from our surroundings and to his phone. Then he pointed to the left. “That way.”

“And how far?”

Remy clicked his tongue. “About three miles. Looks like a mile through the forest, and then another two miles to the school.”

Too far. I stepped toward Remy intending to grab hold of him, so I could fly us to our destination. He flinched back. His hands went up. “Excuse you.”

“I am going to fly us there,” I explained.

“I don’t think so.” He took another step away from me. There was a squelch as his heel sank into a patch of mud, and we both grimaced at the sound.

“You want to walk that distance? In a forest filled with trolls?” I gave a nod over to where there were faint but distinct footprints of a troll not too far from where we were standing.

Remy wrinkled his nose at the sight and dropped his hands. “You could still ask first.”

I leaned forward with the intention of scooping Remy up. “Not that way,” he said, stopping me again. My eye twitched. I inhaled slowly.

“Then how?”

Remy chewed at his bottom lip. He nodded after a moment. “Got it.” He darted behind me then jumped up onto my back. His arms encircled my neck in what felt like a chokehold.

I did not immediately throw him off, mostly because I was stunned. However, my lack of immediate protest apparently signaled to Remy that I was okay with his plan. He had about the same amount of muscle that I had, so he barely fit between my wings. I gave a test flap to make sure I could fully move them and decided that was good enough.

Not wanting to waste even more time arguing with him or trying to find yet another way to carry him, I took off into the air. I did grab hold of one of his arms and drag it away from my throat long enough to issue a warning.

“If I pass out from being unable to breathe, we will both fall to the ground.”

Remy

I didn’t have a playlist for flying, so while Cato focused on keeping us up in the air and out of the way of the tree branches, I tried sorting through songs to put something together. Two flights over two cities in one day had to be a sign from the universe that my music library was not as well stocked as I had assumed it was.

Well, ForestBay was more of a town than a city, but it still provided a beautiful sight. While the sun was too bright in the mortal realm for there to be any lights on at the moment, the forest itself was an ocean of orange and yellow leaves. From our height, it was easy to see how the trees circled the town like a giant wreath. Their circular spacing gave the rushing through them a unique whistle. I don’t know if anyone besides me would be able to hear it though.

The town itself was filled with cobblestone roads and whimsical cottages. Seasonal banners celebrating the upcoming Yule festivities fluttered in the breeze. Despite it being a part of the mortal realm, the mages who had hid it away within the protective barrier had also magicked it to carry a certain amount of aesthetics.

The high school we were searching for was in the center of the town. It was clearly marked with a large wood sign: ForestBay Academy - Educating Children from Preschool through High School. The moment we landed, I jumped away from Cato as quickly as I could, but Nic was already waiting outside for us on one of the swings. He had seen our flight. He glanced between us and raised his eyebrows in question. I faked gagging in reply.

Nic stood from the swing. “When I said to call if there was an emergency, this is what I meant.”

“How did you know we were coming?” I hadn’t had time to call or message him.

“Jezebel also has my number,” Nic replied. “She thought it might be useful if I received a warning. She also wanted me to tell you that the repairs for her office are coming out of your next paycheck.”

“Are they?” I asked.

“Of course not.” Nic gave a dismissive wave of his hand. “I think we have insurance for those things or some kind of repair savings account.”

Cato cleared his throat. Loudly. “If we could just-” Before Cato could finish his sentence,

Adeona appeared at the top of the slide. The usual scent of eucalyptus that appeared whenever she teleported filled the air, forcing us to breathe easier.

“You two certainly took the long way. Why not teleport from the realm door? It is so much easier than flying here,” she said and slid down the slide before hopping to her feet.

I glanced at Cato. Adeona had made a good point. For someone who was as in a rush as Cato seemed to be, he had not taken the fastest route. “Yeah. Why didn’t we teleport?” I asked.

Cato crossed his arms. His brow furrowed in anger, but there was a blush on his cheeks. “Never mind that.” He looked to Nic. “I need to speak with you.”

Nic chuckled. His expression went dark in a way that I had only ever witnessed when he thought someone was threatening someone he cared about. “You have taken my fr- employee hostage, and you expect me to just agree to speak with you?”

“I had no other choice.” Cato’s voice cracked. Just slightly. Just enough that I was able to catch something vulnerable there. Then the brief moment of vulnerability disappeared. He straightened up to his full height. “I am a Royal. I am the Demon of Science, Art, and Love. You owe me an inheritance debt, and I have come to collect.”

Nic’s eyes darted over to me and then to Adeona. “Is that so?” He widened his stance and dug his heels into the playground mulch. He was going to fight. He would end up dead if he did. I had seen Nic try to fight. Keyword: Try. I had to stop him. Before I could, Adeona put a halt to everything.

“Wait. I smell blood.” She poofed over to my side, grabbed hold of me, and spun me around. “You are injured.” She prodded at my back.

“I’m fine.” I had been too busy worrying about possibly dying to pay much attention to my injuries, but now that someone had pointed them out and poked at them, the pain was all I could think of. There were shards still stuck in my back. I could feel them shift with each breath. The cuts burned, and now that I was concentrating, I could feel the blood trickling its way down my back.

“Adeona, take him to the house, and I’ll get Sehrish,” Nic said. “Cato, right? Well, Cato, you can ride with me. We’ll talk there.”

“Nic, don’t you think we should travel together?” I asked. I didn’t like the idea of leaving him alone with Cato. For all I knew, there was probably some hidden clause that if someone managed to kill the Demon of Deals he would inherit that role the same way Royal titles worked, and the last thing I wanted was for Cato to become my boss. Who knew though. No one had ever been desperate enough to risk inheriting all the potential debts that would come with the title, but I felt as though if anyone were going to do it, it’d be Cato.

Nic shook his head. “Go ahead to the house. Please.” He tacked on the last word with a bit more force than usual.

“Nic will be fine. The group’s all here. They will watch over him,” Adeona promised. She nodded over to the parking lot where three familiar faces were watching us. I wasn’t sure how I had missed their presence. Probably the blood loss had something to do with it. Now that I was paying attention I could feel how quickly it was pouring out of me.

Adeona sniffed the air again. Her nose crinkled. She took hold of my hands. “We really do need to go,” she said. “You’re starting to smell hollow.”

“Let’s go,” I agreed.

She teleported me away from the school and into a cottage. It was Nic’s family’s house in the mortal realm. Anyone who had been watching the many breaking news reports of the realms over the past year would recognize it instantly. The kitchen had been a featured location as Nic and his friends had used it as their makeshift headquarters while prepping for the trials.

Adeona pushed me to sit sideways in one of the kitchen chairs. She grabbed the kettle and put it on the burner. I really hoped that she was just wanting a drink and not planning on using the boiling water to try to clean my wound or something.

While she worked, I glanced around taking it all in. I had finally gotten to step foot in another realm, but all I was seeing of it looked so similar to the Underworld. Except for the sun. The sun was so bright in comparison to the Underworld. It flooded through the windows with an intensity that at times forced me to squint even with my sunglasses on. I wanted to venture out and see everything there was to see. It was probably the only chance I’d have to travel to another realm, and I couldn’t even enjoy it.

“I’m not sure if we should take off your jacket.” Adeona interrupted my thoughts. She poked at my wound again. “Sehrish will be here soon. Healing’s not her specialty, but she’s better at it than the rest of us. I’ll fix you something to drink in the meantime. Might help with the blood loss.” She gave me a pat on the head. “Don’t worry. Nic can handle this, and if he can’t, I’ll handle it.”

Cato

I had never thought that when I went to visit the Demon of Deals, I would find myself in the parking lot of a mortal realm high school. I especially had not imagined that I would end up packed in the backseat of a mortal car filled with four teenagers. Nic had proclaimed himself the driver. As he drove, his fingers gripped at the steering wheel tightly enough to force all color from them, and he swore under his breath at every red light.

A fae, who was Nic's girlfriend according to the ramblings of the teenagers, had climbed into the passenger seat. She introduced herself as Sehrish then followed it up by adding, "You know, over the centuries, the fae have become quite adept at making potions that work on demons."

I deduced that she meant the harmful kind of potions rather than the healing kind. I had never had much problem with fae before despite their rivalry with the Underworld, but I did not doubt that with many of their elders still holding on to that hate, it would leave bad impressions on the younger generations.

At their insistence, I had squeezed into the car between a deal-maker and a former Huntsman. Both were technically mortals, but both had enhanced supernatural abilities. Both were also Adeona's boyfriends as well as each other's boyfriends. At least that was what Henri, the deal-maker, told me as he continued to fill me in on all the drama that I had never asked to hear about.

I had learned that mortal teenagers enjoyed sharing many details of their personal lives as Henri, who was also Nic's younger half-brother- another part of the "need to know information", continued to ramble on from topic to topic over the short drive.

"Henri, you realize that he threatened Remy to get me to have a conversation with him. Right?" Nic interrupted just as Henri started discussing the results of the class elections. With that kind of attitude, I was going to go ahead and assume that Nic had not ended up winning the presidential role.

Henri nodded. "Yes, yes, Cato here made a mistake. Desperation does that to people. We all know that."

Nic locked eyes with me through the rearview mirror. "You think I should listen to him?" It took me a moment to realize he was speaking to his brother.

"Doesn't hurt to give him a chance," Henri replied. He patted me on the knee as if we were old friends. "I know you're stressed," he told me. "But Nic listens to people better when they don't threaten people he cares about."

Henri might have good intentions, but I had no interest in trying to explain my situation when I was outnumbered. I remained silent even as we pulled up to a quaint cottage.

Sehrish was first out of the car. Her bag of potion bottles rattled around with each step she took. I thought she might be shaking it a bit harder than necessary as if to remind me of her warning. Adeona, whom I recognized as the new Royal, the Demon of Wealth, greeted Sehrish at the doorway with a quick kiss to the cheek.

“Are you planning on staying in this realm tonight? We can have a slumber party,” Sehrish asked the question as if it were just another day.

“I have a meeting in the Underworld, but I’ll just use this situation to get out of it,” Adeona gave a nod in our direction to indicate exactly what situation she was talking about. “Oh. I gave him some things for blood loss, but he still looks like he’s going to collapse soon.”

I had not realized Remy had been so injured by our fall. He had given no indication.

Sehrish sighed. “I’ll do what I can. Make sure I don’t get any more patients please.”

“I’ll do my best,” Adeona promised. Sehrish disappeared inside. Adeona stepped up to the car and opened the door on one side.

“Hello, boyfriends.” She greeted the two cheekily. Henri grinned.

“Hello, girlfriend. Levi and I have missed you.”

“I was only gone a few days.”

“That’s too many days,” Levi replied.

I shuddered at being so close to all the intimacy. I did not like being in the middle of this group when they were all gushing over each other. I doubted this was their normal routine and instead was their twisted way of making me uncomfortable and distracting me from my mission.

Adeona gave me a knowing look. “Boyfriends, please go help Sehrish. Remy wants to see you both as well.”

Levi and Henri both hopped out of the car. “We’ll be just over there,” Levi announced.

“Call if we’re needed.” Henri turned to Nic, and to my surprise, gave him a serious look. “Please keep an open mind. He really felt that he had no other choice.”

Before I could enjoy the new space in the car, Adeona reached in and tugged me out. I went along with her because fire demons weren’t exactly known for having patient natures, and her hands were already warm. Nic had taken a seat at the patio table. He gestured at one of the chairs. “Join me.”

I sat down across from him. I was about to negotiate for my own life with an eighteen year old in his yard, surrounded by wildflowers and with a basketball court a few feet away. To add to the ambiance we had an entire group of teenagers eavesdropping on their conversation. Adeona wasn’t even hiding that she was listening in. She had taken a seat on the nearby swing where she could leap into action at any moment.

“Before we start anything, I want proof of this inheritance debt you say I owe.”

I reached into the inner pocket of my jacket and took out the folded papers. I carefully smoothed them out and slid them over.

As Nic looked over the forms, the pupils in his eyes shifted until they resembled diamonds. “These are official,” he confirmed. He gave a heavy sigh and scrubbed at his face with his palms. His eyes flickered back to normal. “Okay, so what exactly do you want me to do to get this debt cleared?”

“I need to travel to the untamed zone of the Underworld, and I need assistance.”

Adeona let out a hiss from her position standing guard. “That’s a suicide mission. The permanent kind of death. Not the temporary kind.”

“What’s so dangerous about the untamed area of the Underworld?” Nic asked. It was another painful reminder that my only hope rested with someone who barely understood our realm.

“Fire rivers, demon-eating creatures, very violent assassins, and poisonous plants.” Adeona listed them off. “Just to name a few of the permanent killers.”

Nic’s eyes were wide. It was good he had powerful friends with how often he left himself vulnerable. “I see.” He turned back to me. “And you want my help with getting there? I can barely survive in the safe part of the city.”

I was painfully aware of that. “I do not want you to personally come with me. I want you to supply me with some of your more competent employees.”

“I can’t.” He had not even hesitated before responding.

“You have command of at least one hundred deal-makers. I need only a handful of them,” I insisted.

Nic placed his hands palms up on the table to show what he was about to say was honest. He was picking up on some of our mannerisms at least. “And I can’t make them go with you to the untamed zone. When I became the Demon of Deals, I adjusted all the contracts of the deal-makers as much as I could. None of the deal-makers are bound to follow my orders beyond what is reasonable. Most of them already have clauses stating that I cannot put them in any situation I know is harmful. Even if those contracts didn’t say that, I wouldn’t be willing to risk people like that. They’re not pawns.”

He had picked up on our mannerisms but not the mindset. I did not know whether to find that admirable or pitiful.

Remy

“If you’re going to be that obvious, you might as well just go out there,” I said. The trio stopped fighting each other for a view out the kitchen window and turned back to me.

“We have to at least pretend we’re not spying. We’re not Adeona,” Henri said and shoved at Sehrish. “I was here first.”

“Because I was patching him up,” she replied.

Levi stepped in between them to keep them from fighting. “Shush. I can’t hear what they’re saying. Since when is this house so soundproof?”

“Do you think he will explain why he’s so desperate? He really does not seem violent or like he wants to hurt anyone. He just ...he doesn’t seem to know what else to do.” Henri explained. He twisted his hands together and pressed them briefly against his chest.

“Nic didn’t tell me you were an empath. You need stronger blockers if you’re feeling his emotions that strongly,” I told him. Either his ability was well out of control, or Cato was far more desperate than I had thought.

Sehrish went from snarking at Henri to speaking up for him. “It’s new. Everyone’s still adjusting. I think it can take a backseat though to whatever is happening out there.” She glanced back out the window.

“That Royal out there has to go to the untamed zone of the Underworld, and he wants Nic to provide him with a team to help him,” I relayed the information to them.

“Nic’s not going to make someone go. He would never.” Henri chewed at his bottom lip. “And he’s not going to go himself. Right?”

“No, he’s not going.” I pushed myself up from the kitchen chair and managed not to wobble as I got to my feet. Sehrish had gotten all the glass out of my back and even a thread from one of Jezebel’s fancy fabrics that I was going to keep as a souvenir of the whole ordeal. Sehrish had stitched the worst of the gashes closed and put some kind of potion on the wounds that made my skin tingle but numbed most of the pain. There was still a small twinge when I moved too quickly, but that was nothing I couldn’t handle.

“Then how is he going to fulfill the inheritance debt?” Sehrish mumbled.

I brushed by them. “Excuse me.” I stepped outside to where Nic and Cato were still talking. They were going back and forth. Well, Nic was doing most of the talking while Cato just kept reminding him of the inheritance debt.

I stopped their little debate with a sharp whistle. “I can go,” I told them when they both looked my way. “I’m one of Nic’s employees, even if I’m not a deal-maker, but he is not contractually obligated to keep me safe.”

Nic spluttered out some protest, but I knew my contract. There had never been a need for a protection clause. If I went it would still count as Nic sending an employee on his behalf but it wouldn’t break any of his existing contracts.

Cato cleared his throat. I expected him to question my competence or to flat out refuse on personal grounds. Instead, he nodded. “I would want a contract between us drawn up.”

I grinned. “You don’t trust me?”

“I trust your fighting abilities. I also trust you would use them to stab me in the back if given the opportunity,” Cato replied.

I was going to take that as a compliment. “Nic could make us a contract.”

“No.” Nic stood. “Absolutely not.”

“What’s the problem, boss?” I was careful to keep a smile on my face. “This would solve our problems. You’ll pay off your inheritance debt, and I’ll get a break from Jezebel for a few days.”

There was that frown that meant Nic was disappointed in something I had done. “It’s not funny, Remy.”

“No, it’s not, but it is the best solution.” I reminded him.

The others had come out from the kitchen. While they didn’t look thrilled, I could clearly see the relief on their faces that Nic would not be the one to have to go. Adeona, who did actually understand how sensitive my hearing was, pitched her voice low.

“Don’t do this,” she whispered.

“Do you see another option?” I muttered under my breath. Her hearing was not as sensitive as mine, but it was much better than everyone else’s in the area. Adeona twisted around in the swing but didn’t push the matter. She didn’t like going round and round in debates.

I didn't need to look at the paperwork Cato had brought as his proof. Dantalion had had several dealings with my former boss, and I was familiar with how the two of them were when they made a deal. Any arrangement between the two of them had always been ironclad. There had been no loopholes or hidden clauses. The only option was to adhere to the agreement as it was.

"Nic, either you help us draft up the contract, or I'll do it myself," I warned.

Nic's eyebrow went up. "Can you do that?"

"I'm your first assistant. I'm aware of how to draft a contract, and I have the authority to act in your place if you've already had a hand in the agreement." I handled most of his work still, so I wasn't surprised to find he didn't quite know how much power I held in the company.

"If he goes with me, I'll clear the inheritance debt. His attitude is not the best, but he has the skills I require," Cato offered.

Nic inhaled slowly then released a long breath. "I don't want you to do this," he told me.

"I know."

He tapped at the table. "This is our only option isn't it?"

For a moment, something that looked like guilt passed over Cato's face, but it was gone as quick as it appeared. I wouldn't let myself be moved by that, or by Henri's earlier revelation. Cato was just another power-hungry demon, who had killed to get himself a title. Probably any desperation he had was due to trying to escape an inheritance debt of his own, and now he had dragged us in to clean up his mess.

With more confidence than I was feeling at that moment, I made my way over and sat down across from Cato. The others all stepped closer in response. It was cute how they thought they could actually defend us if Cato were to attack. Well, Adeona could defend us. I glanced over to Nic. “Well, Boss, are you going to help us out? I think perhaps our friend here-” I practically spat the word ‘friend’ out. “Might be on a bit of a deadline. Is that so?”

“Yes.” Cato clenched his jaw so tight that I could hear teeth grind together.

“You’ll have to give Nic the specifics if you want this contract done properly,” I told him.

Nic settled back down at the patio table. He summoned an entirely blank contract. It was an unusual action since he rarely started from scratch, but it was necessary in this case. He wrote down the day’s date. “Let’s see what kind of deal we can make.”

Chapter 3

Remy

The contract had been written and signed. I would be Cato's plus one on a trip to the untamed zone. I would have to guard Cato's life to the best of my abilities as long as it did not put me in danger of experiencing a permanent death. Nic had spelled that part out very clearly and put it in bold.

In return, Cato would clear the inheritance debt Nic owed him, even if we didn't succeed. Also, if Cato happened to die a permanent death, the contract stated the inheritance debt would be automatically cleared so no possible heir could try using it again.

Cato had added protections of his own. I could not intentionally harm him, and I could not intentionally delay the quest to cause Cato to fail.

"You don't want more?" I asked when he listed just those two stipulations.

"No." Cato replied. "This is sufficient. We leave now." He pushed his chair back and stood. The metal legs scraped against the cement, and my nerves tensed in reply.

Once I recovered, I held up a hand. "Hold up. We're going to need supplies."

"We will get them at the estate. We have to go now." Cato reached toward me then stopped. His hands hovered in the air for a moment. "Could I fly with you?" It seemed like he had learned from our previous conversation. That was promising.

Adeona popped up next to us and wrapped an arm around my waist. Despite her earlier poking, she was careful to not put any actual pressure on my injuries since they'd been treated. "You need a ride back?" She asked. "Teleporting can be difficult at first." She extended a hand to Cato. He stared at her palm for a beat too long, so she took hold of his hand first. She linked her fingers with his. "Like this," she told him.

"Make sure he doesn't die," Nic warned Cato one more time. Cato gave a short nod.

Nic addressed me next. "And be careful. No unnecessary stunts please."

"Yeah. Will try." I didn't really want to risk dying either.

Adeona teleported us away from Nic's house and back to the middle of the forest where the door to the Underworld could appear. "Baaz, Balt,other guards. Let's go!" she shouted. Cato jumped at the sudden outburst and nearly slipped on a pile of slick leaves. I laughed. Loudly.

"You've really taken to this Royal thing," I teased Adeona as we waited.

"It'd be so much better if we didn't always have to stop here at this door in the first place," she said. "It takes forever."

Just as she made the comment, the door appeared in all its gory glory. Baaz, Balt, and the other four guards that I had never bothered to learn the names of stared back at us.

"You're alive," Balt noted.

"Have you been alive the whole time?" Baaz followed up.

“Yes, no worries. He intends to keep me alive as I am very useful to him.” I patted Balt on the shoulder as I stepped past him. “Sorry that I can’t talk longer, but we’re in a bit of a hurry.”

Adeona assured them as well while Cato shot me a look of approval. It made my skin crawl. I didn’t want approval. Not from him. I wanted to torment Cato to the fullest extent the contract would allow.

As soon as we passed through the door connecting the realms, Adeona grabbed hold of us again and teleported us to the estate that belonged to the Demon of Art, Science, and Love. Cato went straight into the manor as soon as Adeona dropped his hand. She did not release mine.

“I’ll be inside in a minute!” I called out after him.

“Every minute counts,” he grumbled in response, but he still went on inside without me.

I smiled down at Adeona. “You should get back to your boyfriends and your friends soon,” I said.

Adeona wasn’t smiling. It was rare for her to look so serious. “I could take you hostage and hide you away until after he’s failed.” Her hand was warm on my arm, making up for the loss of my jacket. Fire demons made great heaters.

“No, we can’t. It’d be bad for Nic,” I reminded her.

“You don’t owe him.”

“He’s one of your best friends.”

“You don’t owe him. You don’t owe anyone,” she said. Her heartbeat was steady. She believed what she was saying.

I wrapped my arms around her. I soaked up as much warmth as I could get. Under the usual minty teleportation scent, she smelled of bergamot and plums. It reminded me of the tea parties she would invite me to when we were children and my mom would take me to work with her at Adeona's dad's estate. While my mom appraised whatever treasures Mammon had obtained that week, Adeona would steal me away to play in the playroom or the gardens.

Back then there were whispers about the two of us. People would place bets that we would grow up and fall in love. It had never happened. We had gotten older, Adeona's father had banished her to the mortal realm to live with her mother, and we had gone from best friends to occasional penpals. We'd both had girlfriends and boyfriends, and as far as I knew, neither of us developed more than friendly feelings for the other. Still, she remained one of the only people I knew I could trust.

"I have to do this," I insisted again.

Adeona pulled back and pressed a kiss to my cheek. "Come back alive even if it's after your second or third death. Just come back."

"Understood."

Cato

The few staff members I passed by barely bothered to greet me as I made my way through the manor. Instead, they kept to their tasks. A small group huddled together sorting a giant pile of books did glance in my direction but did not approach.

"You really believe this one will succeed?" The whisper came from one of the guards, and in the otherwise silent building, it echoed its way down the hall, sounding

much louder than a normal whisper. They would have had to be complete fools to think I could not hear them.

Another guard replied. His voice was louder than the first's had been, so I took it that he intended for me to hear him. "He's gotten further than the rest, but that's no guarantee."

Either they were truly fools, or despite their words, they doubted I would return. To my frustration, they were somewhat right. I did not have the time to deal with them then. I had to ignore their whispers for the time being.

"Olivia!" I called out. One of the other staff members pointed upwards before disappearing around a corner. With no other clues to go on, I bounded up the stairs and began peeking into each room. "Olivia?"

I stopped short at the sight of a painting at the end of the hall. The painting was an unusual desert, painted in several shades of blue. Clumps of the sand floated above the desert's surface. The clumps had been painted with a technique that gave them the illusion that they were floated out of the painting. Having seen Dantalion's ability to bring images out of the artwork, I reached out to confirm for myself that it was all just an optical illusion. My hand met with air, and as I stepped closer I could see that the sand was very much trapped within the frame. It really was a most impressive use of *trompe l'oeil*.

The manor was filled with hundreds, possibly thousands, of paintings, but that particular oil painting called out to me in a way none of the others had. Whoever had

painted it had been an art demon. They had mixed complex emotions into the paint itself. Possibly I was getting to see one of Dantalion's own creations.

I stepped even closer to study it better. The closer I got, the more absorbed I became in it. The texture of the paints, the detail on the sand, the way there had to be dozens of different shades of just the blue colliding together on the canvas: it all caught my attention, but it was the emotions that sucked me in. I felt cold despite an anger slowly boiling up inside of me. I longed to grasp at ...something. That part was missing. Something was missing. If I could just look closer then maybe it would reveal itself.

"Olivia's in the storage. She's already packing some things for your journey." Tullie's voice snapped me out of the trance. I backed away from the painting to study her instead. Her nails were covered in pottery clay rather than the paint from before. She tapped them against the doorframe as she leaned out of a nearby room that I had not gotten to yet in my search.

"Do you like my painting?" she asked.

I glanced at the painting again, careful not to look anywhere but the bottom corner where a signature should be. "Did you paint this?"

"I did. Call it a teen angst phase. I read all the stories of the untamed zone and wanted to see if I could capture their descriptions."

I finally tracked down the signature. It was small, barely noticeable at all actually. Her name was nearly hidden among the clever brushstrokes. "It is...powerful."

“That’s nice to hear.” She swayed against the doorway. “I would tell you all about the process, but I know you’re in a hurry. Did you find some companions?”

“Yes.”

“Hm... The Demon of Deals? His dealmakers?” she asked.

I thought back to Remy. Hopefully he was still downstairs and hadn’t run off. “His first assistant,” I replied.

Tullie’s lips twitched. “Is that so? No one else?”

“He is sufficient. He is loud, but he is sufficient,” I admitted.

“You should let Olivia know she’s packing for two. Just go right up that staircase over there. The spiraling one. It leads to the tower, and the storage room,” she said. She started to duck back into the room.

“I thought you seldom left your part of the house,” I said before she could completely disappear again.

“Someone had to oversee the staff,” she replied. “This job is all yours the moment you return as the official Royal of the house. You would not believe how much it is really cutting into my art time.” She patted me lightly on the arm as she passed by. Her fingertips lingered for a moment on my bicep, fluttering just above the bruises Remy had caused during our first abrupt flight through the window.

“You think I can succeed?” I managed to ask the question even though the last thing I wanted to hear was my own doubt repeated from another person.

“I think you’re probably the only one who can do it, and I’m known for being good at predicting these things. Don’t go ruining my reputation by failing. Okay?”

Tullie’s voice was just as cheerful as ever. At least one person had faith in me.

“Oh my! Is that a hint of a smile I see?” she teased. “I didn’t think you were capable.”

“Cato!” Remy’s voice echoed throughout the manor. Music demons were always too loud. I marched over to the banister and glared down at him. I did not bother to yell back and instead replied in a normal indoor voice. “Up here.” I had no doubts that he would be able to pick up the sound and trace it back to my location.

He appeared after a few moments. He stood at the bottom of the staircase and tilted his head upward in my direction, but he made no movement to join me. I imagined there was a glare under his sunglasses. The only time I had actually witnessed the glittering ruby eyes they had been staring at me with horror.

“Remy. This is-” I broke off the introduction when I realized Tullie was no longer next to me. She had mentioned not being fond of meeting new people, so she had likely slipped off when she heard Remy’s voice. That was fine. If I was succeeded, I would see her again after the trip. If I failed, well, I would be dead so any budding friendships would be a waste. “The supplies are stored up there.” I said instead. I gave a nod toward the spiraling staircase Tullie had pointed out to me.

Remy traipsed up the stairs. His boots made just as much noise as his mouth. “Lead the way.”

Inside the storage room, Olivia was sorting items and checking things off a list she had written out. First aid kits, blankets, non perishable foods, and a tent all spanned from one end of a long table to the other. Several other items were mixed in as well.

“I took the liberty of getting a head start on your packing.” Olivia informed me as we stepped into the room. She looked over my shoulder and at Remy. “How many others will be accompanying you?”

“Just him.”

“Oh.” Olivia’s grin did not falter. “That certainly makes things simple.” She placed the clipboard she had been using on the table. “Remy. Right?”

“The one and only,” he replied.

“It’s nice to meet you.” She seemed sincere about that strangely enough.

She turned the clipboard in my direction. “I printed out a list of what sort of items one might need while traveling to the center of the Underworld,” she explained.

“However, you should look it over and see if anything else might be needed. While you are doing that, I will go and pack clothes for the both of you. I’m sure we have plenty of durable camping clothes in both of your sizes. I will grab a sweater first.”

I started to ask what the sweater was for, but then I saw the goosebumps on Remy’s bare arms. His jacket and shirt had been too shredded to salvage, and the baggy tank top he had borrowed from one of Nic’s crew was far from warm.

“It’s not a problem,” Remy started to insist. In a bold move, Olivia reached out and grabbed Remy’s hand. “Your skin is freezing. I will be back with a sweater shortly.”

Remy peered down his long lashes at Olivia so forcefully that I had to look away for a moment. “Then I guess I’ll just say thank you.”

Olivia rolled her eyes. “You’re far too young to be using that sort of charm on me.”

Remy laughed. “It never hurts to try,” he said.

Olivia tapped lightly at his cheek. “You are an amusing one.”

“Well, if you won’t accept my flirting then at least take my admiration.”

“That I can do.” Olivia’s blue and green skin turned several shades brighter in her delight until it was impossible for her to camouflage herself anywhere in the room. Chameleon demons only did that when they trusted their company, but I could not figure out how Remy had so easily won her over in just that brief of an exchange.

Remy’s own skin had broken out in goosebumps once more, and unless I was mistaken his lips had taken on an unnatural hue for the music demon. With my luck, I’d lose my companion to hypothermia before we ever even got started on our journey.

“Olivia, be quick about that sweater please.”

My request had Olivia darting back and away from Remy. The brightness of her skin dulled down once more. “Of course,” she said. The laughter in her voice was gone,

and she was back to a strictly professional tone. I made a note to apologize to her later if I had upset her with my request

Remy waited until Olivia was out of the room to glance at the supplies. “Do we have everything?”

I handed over the list for Remy to look over. He patted at his pants pocket and pulled out a pen. Then to my disgust he pulled the cap off with his teeth. He scribbled down some notes, humming to himself as he did. When he finished he handed the clipboard back. “We’ll need those as well.

I glanced over the new additions, expecting to see ridiculous items like a drum set or a camper. Instead everything he had added to the list was reasonable. Some of them were even rather insightful. “I’ll have Olivia add these.”

“Olivia’s busy packing clothes for us,” Remy pointed out.

“I think you can take over that part yourself. If you can find her.”

Remy took one of his earbuds out. His ear twitched a bit up and down. “Yeah, she’s not far from here. I’ll see to our outfits then. Do me a favor and don’t poison my water supply.”

Chapter 4

Remy

The Underworld was a series of mazes and large doors. Each area of the Underworld had been sectioned off. Most of us demons lived in the main city. It was filled with lights, noises, and constant energy to the point that even the buildings seemed alive.

Not too far from the city were the Royal residences. Sectioned off into their own region, only those of royal blood or royal connection could enter the area without prior permission. Large estates with sprawling lawns stretched as far as the eye could see, but it was rare to see anyone out and wandering around. Everyone kept to their own grounds. It was basically the ultimate gated community, and the ancient demons and their few spawns they allowed to live with them tended to want to keep it as closed off as possible.

The untamed zone was the farthest off, and it had the smallest population for many good reasons. I'd never been through the door that led to the untamed zone of the Underworld. It was the only place in all the realms that I had never wanted to visit, so of course, I would find myself standing in front of it, with a giant backpack strapped to my back in preparation of not only entering it but having an extended stay in the place.

The door to the center of the Underworld acted as a warning sign. Literally. It was even worse than the door that connected the mortal realm and the Underworld. After enough people disregarded the "abandon all hope" message over the centuries, more warnings had been added.

If you enter, you are very likely to get eaten by more than a dozen types of beasts.

Rivers of Fire- Not Figurative- They will burn you. Very hot!

Inconsistent weather.

There were no guards to the untamed zone of the Underworld. The spirits inside could not exit the doorway, and it had long been decided that any demon actually willing to enter it should be allowed to make their own poor life choices. Other than some of the ancient beings, a few researchers, explorers, and questionable tourists, the majority of the demons who resided inside were criminals, even by demonic standards.

I tugged at my backpack straps. “You’re sure this is what you want to do?” I asked and not for the first time since we had arrived there that morning. The night before I had managed to convince Cato we needed a few hours of sleep at least before we risked our lives, and he had just pointed out where he thought a guest room was located and said something about leaving at first light. We had left at ten in the morning.

Cato didn’t answer my question. He brushed past me and pushed on the door.

“Guess so,” I muttered.

The door slowly creaked open to reveal miles of wasteland. Red sand glowed under the bright sun. Beyond the red sands was a desert of blue. There was a clear division between the two types of sand. No gradual change. Just an abrupt shift from one to the other. According to the maps, the limestone mountains would be waiting beyond

the blue, and somewhere on one of those mountains there would be a tunnel of sorts that led to the hall of the Fates.

“Great, so we burn first and then...what? Freeze?” I asked as I looked over the desert.

Cato had already taken off. A trail of footprints decorated the sand behind him. I adjusted my sunglasses. I had switched to the sunglasses with the peripheral protection, but my eyes were already watering. “Personally, I think I’m going to prefer the freezing. What about you?”

“Watch for sand snakes.” Cato replied instead.

“Your conversational skills are already improving! I can only imagine how great they’ll be by the end of our journey.” The contract said nothing about how much I could tease or annoy Cato along the way.

Cato came to an abrupt halt. He turned to glare at me. For a moment I could hear his teeth grind together. “I have a deadline, and you seem to not enjoy the thought of dying. Let us work together to accomplish our goals. Now be quiet, and watch for sand snakes...please.”

Cato

Remy had stopped talking, but I found his quiet sulking to be just as distracting. He had turned up the music on his earpods, and I could make out a bit more of the actual

instrumentation. It was too early to tell if that was an improvement compared to only hearing a bit of the bass. Either way I found it just added to my own discomfort.

My clothing was all new and custom-made to accommodate my wings, so that I no longer had to disrobe or rip the fabric to fly. However, the fabric had a certain stiffness that irritated my nerves. There was no way I could move without something feeling wrong.

The backpack I carried was also designed to accommodate wings and had an unfamiliar feel to it. Rather than the bulk being on my back, the straps resembled a harness which led down to two messenger bags, one on either side of my hips. “Saddle bags,” Remy had said when I first put the gear on. Then he had grinned and made a comment about rides, most of which I managed to block out through sheer willpower. I thought between myself and the staff that every possibility had been thought of and planned for, but I was constantly finding where things could be improved.

The desert was just as stifling as the clothes and bags. Every few minutes, a gust of air would blow by, giving the illusion that things would cool off. Instead, it would just sweep some sand into my eyes before disappearing as quickly as it had arrived. Another particularly strong but warm breeze blew past us. I closed my eyes, but that made it worse. The grit scratched at my corneas.

“Here.” Remy tapped something against the back of my arm. After a moment where I forgot how to function, Remy sighed. “It’s just a pair of sunglasses. Take them.”

I allowed him to slip the sunglasses into his hand. I started to put them on when Remy stopped me. “Tilt your head back, and I’ll put some of these eye drops in for you.”

“It is fine.”

“It’s going to make it really hard for you to finish this journey if you damage your eyes as soon as we start out.” Remy made an annoyingly good point.

I allowed him to rinse my eyes. As soon as most of the sand was gone, I slipped on the shades. “We should pick up the pace.”

Remy sighed and adjusted his bag. “Lead the way.” We had only taken a few steps when Remy spoke up again. “Are there any other creatures we need to be watching for out here?”

“There are only snakes in the red sand to be concerned about. Everything else is relatively harmless.” I tried not to be annoyed that he had already forgotten the warning I had given him. Not even two hours had passed since we entered the desert.

“Ah...is that so? Snakes...” Remy had stopped walking. His attention was on the ground. He plucked out one ear bud and appeared to be concentrating on something. “Out of curiosity, how big do you think the sand snakes might be? Like, are they the small but very venomous ones? Or more of the large and able to swallow you whole ones?”

I shrugged. “Large. I assume.” Pulling from what I had been taught about the untamed zone of the Underworld from back in my school days and my own more recent

brush up on the subject, I recalled mentions of both kinds of snakes. However, only the large snakes tended to frequent the red sands while the smaller ones preferred the blue sands.

“Large as in about the size of a train?” Remy asked.

“Possibly.” Few people who encountered the snakes at a close distance lived to write about them, and the few accounts from survivors tended to either be vague or embellished.

Remy flung himself at me. His arms circled my neck. “Fly. Now.”

“Why would I-?”

Then I felt the vibrations under the sand. Something was coming toward us. I summoned my wings and leapt up into the air with Remy still clinging to me. We had just gotten off the ground when the snake pierced through the sand’s surface. A train was actually a great comparison for the snake. Its fangs alone were the size of the average demon. It arched up to snap at us.

I got us up in the air and hopefully out of its reach. As soon as we were up we went sailing back down. I tilted us to the left and barely avoided colliding with one of the sharp fangs.

“Flap your wings!” Remy screamed.

“I am trying!” It felt like some kind of pressure was pushing down on my wings. No matter how much effort I put into making them move they couldn’t catch the air. My

feet hit the sand, and I pushed off. Again, something forced me back down. I did the math. “The air currents are wrong.”

“Of course they are.” Remy summoned his flute to his hand. “Can you shield?”

“No. I am a wolf demon.” Wolf demons didn’t have shields. We had agility, night vision, and deadly claws. We were predators not prey. Offensive rather than defensive.

The snake slithered through the sand. I had to run and jump, catching the air with my wings long enough to avoid being eaten before falling back to the ground.

“Drop me on that dune thing there.” Remy pointed to a spot about twenty feet away. “You distract it. I’ll try to lull it to sleep.”

“Not kill it?”

Remy made a sound of disgust. “It’s just trying to eat. I’m not going to kill it for that,” he said.

“For someone who wants to live so much, you have poor survival skills,” I pointed out.

“Whatever. Just drop me.”

I dropped him onto the dune. Remy immediately ducked down and rolled to hide behind the ridge. The snake either didn’t notice or had decided I was the more tempting prey. It swiped at my leg. A fang narrowly missed piercing my left wing.

I kept running and jumping. Each glide felt as if it were growing shorter, and with each take-off, I found it was getting harder to breathe. My only hope was that Remy's plan would actually work.

When the first notes sounded, the snake froze. I used the momentary distraction to switch directions and stretch the gap between me and the creature. After the initial shock, the snake began to pant. It jerked its head back and forth. Its fangs glinted under the sunlight.

Then it rushed toward Remy. Remy played faster. The notes matched the snake's frantic pace. I summoned my sword and prepared to attack. Despite Remy's feelings, I would do what was necessary if it meant keeping us alive.

When the snake was only a few feet from Remy, I readied myself to deal it a blow. Then the music changed. It shifted from the frantic pace to something mesmerizing. I swayed forward, nearly falling into a trance along when the music was not even aimed at me.

The snake slowed its pace. Its head bobbed back and forth as it slithered the last few inches forward, and the music continued. The snake finally came to a stop just before it collided with Remy. Its nostrils were so close to him that each slow exhale it released interrupted Remy's own breathing, and the notes he was playing went from smooth to choppy. Thankfully, it was not disruptive enough to break the magic's hold. No, what Remy was playing at the moment was far too powerful of a song to be easily cut off. It was remarkably strong.

The snake's eyes closed. Remy allowed the music to grow softer. He paused between measures. Then he finally stopped playing altogether. The snake was finally asleep.

Remy stepped back and nearly stumbled. When he righted himself, he chuckled. The sound turned into a cough as he crouched down. I kept one eye on him as he dug out a bottle and gulped down some water. I kept my other eye on the snake. Once I was certain the snake was truly knocked out and no longer posed a threat, I climbed over its neck to get to Remy's side.

He grinned up at me. Water dripped down his chin and fell to disappear in the sand. "That was a fun start."

I kept his eyes on the snake. Remy had just saved us from an inconvenient death, so I bit back any rebukes I had about his lack of seriousness.

"Don't worry. He's out for at least three hours," Remy said. He packed the water back up and pulled himself to his feet. "So, I take it that flying is out of the question?"

"Can only glide," I confirmed.

"Of course. We should have planned for that." Remy spun around a few times before stopping. He pointed straight ahead. "It's this direction? Right?"

Remy

It had been a mistake to not take off my backpack before playing. I would have to remember that next time. Playing magical pieces was the equivalent of shoving three

weeks of practice into one session. I ached from the base of my neck all the way down to my fingertips, and the backpack straps squeezed at the sore muscles. I really wanted to make it Cato's problem, but I was too busy trying to convince myself not to faceplant straight into the sand for a nap.

A few steps ahead Cato stopped to look at the map and compass again. I took the opportunity to check for any sound vibrations coming from beneath the sand. I couldn't feel or hear any more snakes, so I let myself rest for a moment. I switched from my EDM playlist to my R&B one. I matched my breathing to the singer's until I felt a bit more of my energy returning.

Cato put away the map and started walking again, and just like the past few times, I followed a few steps behind. We walked for hours. The sun never moved in the desert, so occasionally I walked backwards to try to even out the tan I could feel sinking into my skin. We ran into more creatures as they walked. All were harmless to demons just as Cato had said earlier. All were tiny as well. There were a few scorpions scurrying across the ground. A handful of hares darted by us at one point. All were heading toward the shadows of the blue sands like we were.

"I'm starting to miss the snake," I muttered. Cato whirled around. He was still wearing a pair of my shades, but I just knew his eyes were narrowed under those lenses.

"Do. Not. Jinx. Us."

"Yes, your Majesty." I gave a grand bow.

Cato stormed off again. I could see it becoming our own pattern. I annoy, Cato stomps, and I follow. Then repeat.

We went back to walking in silence. I switched playlists every hour. I even created a few new ones inspired by the desert. Eventually my vision began to blur. Each blink lasted longer than the one before. I shook myself awake. In front of me, Cato was listing a bit to one side with each step.

“We need a break. A real one,” I called out. I prepared for a protest.

Instead, Cato nodded. “Only a half mile until we reach the blue sand. We can rest there,” he offered.

The desert switched abruptly from the searing sunlight of the red sand to a chilling air of the blue. It was possible to stand with one foot in the sunlight and the other in the shade. I played around with it a bit. In my exhaustion I found it more amusing than it probably would have been otherwise.

Cato didn’t even react to the change other than to pull off his backpack and drop down onto the sand. I jumped back and forth a few more times then did the same.

“We will rest for a half hour. Then we must move again,” he said. He slid his sunglasses up and took a look around. Then he closed his eyes and slid them back down.

I collapsed on the sand. I moved my arms and legs to make a sand angel then settled. With my ears so close to the ground, I would be able to hear anyone approaching

well before they would be of any real threat to us. “What do you think will attack us next?” I asked.

Cato grunted. “Resting.”

“Resting.” I mimicked. I clicked my tongue. The cold sand felt good against my sore muscles, and despite otherwise unpleasant surroundings, the air actually smelled fresher than in the city. If there wasn’t a chance of something popping out of the sand to eat me at any moment then it would have been relaxing. Even then, I couldn’t keep from falling into a light doze despite the potential dangers.

It felt like I had only just drifted off when I heard the sound of Cato standing back up and pulling on his backpack. I forced myself awake and back on my feet. Cato waited until I was ready then he led the way.

Cato’s silence was what bothered me more than anything. It made an ugly feeling twist inside my chest. Cato was treating me the same as another tool on his journey. We didn’t have to be friends. I wasn’t sure if I even wanted us to be acquaintances when this all ended, but at the very least we should be treating each other as people while stuck in this whole life-risking situation.

So I did what I do best. I started talking. I blabbered on about the way the various shapes the shadows made on the sand, the diet of the average snake, and then about how Jezebel always wanted to order coffee first thing in the afternoon even though she always arrived with a fresh cup in her hand. I continued on about every subject I could think of

while Cato silently made his way across the desert. Eventually I resorted to asking random questions. “How many siblings do you have?”

There was that shift of the shoulders. I waited for the usual dismissal. Instead I got a question in return. “Why do you want to know?” he asked.

“Just wanted to see how many next of kin I might have to reach out to if you happen to fail at this mission of yours.” The lie came a little too easily, but if it was something Cato was actually interested in answering then I wanted to hear more.

“I have eighteen siblings.”

That was not abnormal. With the long lifespans, demons tended to have more than a few offspring.

“Where do you fall in that line?”

“Lucky number thirteen,” he replied. The words almost sounded playful if I listened hard enough.

“How’s that then? You were already practically a Royal yourself even before you...” I trailed off for a moment. The reminder of Cato killing Dantalion in cold blood had soured my mood again.

“I am the grandson of a Royal. Child of the second child. Legal marriage.”

Legal Marriage. A rare act for a legacy family. Cato mentioning that much was the equivalent of holding out an olive branch, practically a peace offering. I knew not to ask more.

“And you?” Cato asked.

The question slammed into me. I had expected a return to our silence, not an actual continued conversation. “I’m my mother’s only child,” I replied once I found my words again. “Not sure about my father or who he might be.”

Cato hummed. “Not a low tier demon,” he said.

“No. Not a low tier demon,” I confirmed. My abilities were proof of that. Thankfully, Cato returned the favor of not pushing the subject further.

Walking on the blue sand was much better than walking on the red sand. It was a comfortable temperature. The light no longer plagued my eyes. There was no heat threatening to burn the back of my neck. It also seemed that giant demon-eating snakes were not as abundant in the blue sands. Knock on wood or whatever.

In fact, it was rather eerily quiet out on the blue sand. The clumps of sand that floated only a few feet above the ground, somehow defying the zone’s unusual gravity, were the only issue, and even those were easily swatted away. “Where do you think the creatures went? The scorpions and hares?” I asked.

“Not something for us to be concerned about.”

That surprised me. Cato was smart. He would know the many reasons we should pay attention to the local inhabitants. “They know this area better than we do. If they’re not here it’s for a reason.”

Cato took a few more steps before responding. “The only thing we can do is keep moving forward.”

Cato

We had only been in the untamed zone for a few hours, and we had already faced a potential death. That was far from a good omen. At least Remy had proved his value again. His skills were impressive. I kept falling back on that word. It was better than the “eclectic” that had been my first instinct to use.

It seemed though the impressive feat had come at a price. Remy had managed to exhaust himself already. Even the break we had taken had not been long enough to restore his energy. I could tell by his steps, and the way his pace kept changing from a confident gait to a slight stumble. I was surprised he when he did not complain about it. He had seemed like the type to whine.

I do not think I would have blamed him if he had been whining. I could feel my own exhaustion setting in as well. It was not just the encounter with the snake. The change of air pressure, the heat, and even just walking on sand was making things harder than expected.

I made up my mind. We would stop as soon as I found a safe enough spot or whatever constituted a safe enough spot in that area. We would set up their camp and sleep for a few hours before continuing on. The only problem was that we were far from any safe areas. With even the native creatures fleeing the area, it was too much of a risk

to sleep anywhere. We would likely get eaten before we could even finish setting up the tent. I pulled out the map again and studied it as if it would suddenly show the closest campsite.

“What about a river?” Remy appeared behind my shoulder. He pressed in so close that the concept of personal space completely disappeared. “This one’s not made of fire.” He jabbed at a thin line on the map. By my estimation, we would have to walk another mile before they reached the river, but it was not too far off our course.

“Why a river?” I asked.

“The river’s here are deep,” he replied. That was an understatement. The rivers were infinite in their depths, cutting all the way to the core of the realm. “We would only need to watch for snakes from one side. Unless they are the swimming kind.”

“I...I do not think they are.” I scrambled for one of the five guide books I had packed. I flipped through until I found the section on snakes. The whole time Remy kept watch on our surroundings. “Not the swimming kind.” I confirmed after a few moments.

“Good! Then should we go to the river?” he asked.

“Yes. ...good idea.”

Remy smiled, revealing deep set dimples. “I have good ideas on occasion. You’ll learn.”

We managed the mile in a good time. The river was wider than I had imagined even after seeing it on the map. It actually could have passed for a small ocean. It was far

too wide for a snake to cross, even a snake as large as a train, so just as Remy had thought, we would only have to watch one side of the camp closely.

We set up the camp quickly. I got the tent set up. Remy placed some general protection wards around the area we had claimed. The wards probably weren't strong enough to keep away any truly powerful creatures, but they would act as a loud alarm and give the two of us time to get up and armed.

We ate some kind of packaged camping rations Olivia had packed for us. We had nicer options, but both of us were too tired to bother setting up a fire or boiling water. Instead we shoved bland dry bars of nutrition into our mouths, washed them down with lukewarm water, and then climbed into the tent.

Remy passed out immediately. His snores filled the tent. They were not particularly loud, but it was unsurprising to find that even in his sleep he could not be silent.

I could not drift off with the same ease. I was exhausted, but every time I closed my eyes my brain reminded me of the fifty-four different species that called the untamed zone their home and how thirty-four of those fifty-four different species were all considered life-threatening if they happened to attack. Then there were the plants we would soon encounter in the mountainous areas. Several of them were noticeably sentient and had no problem with poisoning, eating, or strangling any unsuspecting demon who wandered into their territory.

I was playing through various scenarios in my head of how I could fend off each of the different types of plants when I realized that Remy's snoring had stopped. A pair of fake eyes embroidered onto a sleep mask peered directly in my direction, and then Remy hummed. He only hummed a few notes, but I could feel the magic being directed into them. Remy was trying to force me to sleep.

"What was that thing about asking permission?" My question came out around a yawn.

Remy suddenly stopped. He pushed his eyemask up, and I was given a glimpse of his actual eyes. They shimmered, even in the darkness of the tent. "Sorry." He muttered. "Was half-asleep myself and didn't think... Won't do it again."

"No, it is fine. You may use your ability on me." I needed the rest, and it seemed the only way I would get it was with an outside force.

"Really?" He looked surprised.

"Yes. Do it please," I requested.

"Okay then." Remy resumed his humming. I probably should not have let him. He had already exhausted a lot of his energy earlier against the snake, and this little session was just keeping him from recovering that much longer. However, I needed the sleep too, and even though Remy was not the actual worst demon I had come across, I had to remember that in our situation I had to put my own needs first if I was going to survive.

The gentle clang of a lid being placed on top of a pot woke me a few hours later. For a moment I did not move. I could not remember the last time I had actually rested. Before this journey I had been researching and planning for the trip. Before the research, I had been trying to solve Dantalion's list of tests. Before the tests, I had studied and trained intensively for months in preparation for the tests.

Thirteen more days. In thirteen days I would become a Royal or I would die a permanent death. Either way, I would get some rest after.

There was rustling outside the tent. The smell of a campfire wafted through the air. Something like a stick was thudding in a rhythm of some sort against the sand, just barely loud enough to hear. Eventually I shoved myself up and began rolling up my sleeping bag before I could climb back into it. I stumbled out of the tent to find Remy cooking some of the better food we had packed.

"That bar from earlier is still fighting its way down my throat," he said in lieu of a greeting.

"What is that?" I lifted my chin toward the pot.

Remy shrugged. "Don't know. Not a bar though." He picked up the packaging and glanced at it again. "Says it's a breakfast porridge, but I've never seen one this color before."

I took a seat on the sand. The feeling of impending doom took the opportunity to claw its way into my stomach. From experience, I knew it would not go away until I had completely taken care of whatever was bothering me. Nine more days. That was all.

“Here you go.” Remy shoved a bowl of the mystery food into my hands. “Eat then hike some more. Yeah? We’ve got a schedule.”

Remy ate quickly. I forced my own food down. It shoved at the doom feeling in my stomach. Both of them fought for the space, and I had to swallow hard to avoid having the food come right back up.

“It’s not bad,” Remy remarked. He had put enough red pepper flakes in the bowl that he had probably lost all sense of taste. “You should finish yours. You don’t know when we’ll be able to stop again.”

He hopped up and began packing up our gear as I tried to finish the food. When he leaned past me to pick up some of the stuff he had used to make breakfast, I could just barely hear the music he was listening to, but I recognized the song. One of my sisters and I had danced to it at a party when we were very small. Dance was probably a generous description. It was more like we had spun around on the dance floor, bumping into each other and possibly a few others before speeding up until we got so dizzy we fell over. It had been worth the lecture we got after and the two extra months of etiquette training even if we never danced like that again.

I finished my bowl of porridge and managed to keep down the contents. Then I took over packing up our gear. Once Remy and I were sure we had everything, we left our site and decided to walk upriver. I had checked the map and confirmed that if we decided to keep close to the river while walking we would still be going in the right direction and not taking up any extra time.

We walked for hours that day. It wasn't unpleasant. The blue sand was easy on the eyes. The river bubbled with a relaxing sound, and after a bit, we finally spotted a few of the friendlier creatures resting on the sands in the distance rather than fleeing. The sight of them added a reassurance that I had not realized I needed. Perhaps I could store it as one more pleasant memory, even if it also ended poorly.

Remy

The thing about the Underworld is that once you let yourself relax completely, things will go wrong. Between the sights and my stunning playlist, I made the mistake of relaxing, and of course, that's when shit hit the fan again.

I might have had good hearing, but it seemed Cato had good vision. He halted just before I heard the wailing. Spirits. What sounded like hundreds of mourning spirits were heading in our direction.

"Just keep walking. They should not do more than annoy us," Cato instructed.

I wasn't entirely sure that was true, but there was little else we could do at that moment. The spirits had already spotted us. I could hear their shouts about strangers. If we ran, we would just be putting our backs to the potential danger.

"In the case that they do try to do more than annoy us...how do you fight a spirit again?" I asked. I hadn't exactly paid attention to that lesson in school. After learning what spirits could do, my plan had just been to never ever go where the spirits were.

“Preferably you do not fight them.” Cato stopped and dug something out of his backpack. He showed me the bag filled with gold coins. “We will start with bribery.” That was good. Bribery was definitely something I was familiar with.

Once upon a time the gold coins had been considered valuable, but they had become useless in the city of the Underworld where everyone knew that all they could buy was a shortcut ride on the death ferry to a nicer spot in the reincarnation line.

The spirits in the untamed zone had once been humans, fae, mages, and even demons. They could have been mistaken for the living if not for the slight transparent state of their bodies. Too bad the transparency had nothing to do with how they interacted with their environments.

While their appearance looked hazy, their touch was just as solid as ever. They could no longer use magic or shape-shift, but spirits who had lingered too long before moving on were known to have adapted to their new states and be a threat to wanderers.

Some of the spirits in the back of the group continued their wailing. The sound sent goosebumps down my arms. I changed my playlist to adapt to the noise before it could send me into a sensory overload. My opera playlists were not as long as my other ones, but I had a few ballads that could blend well. With the music to guide the rest of the sounds around me, I could concentrate again.

At the front of the group of spirits was a human spirit. He had died an old man with deep set wrinkles and age spots. Unlike some of the others who had visible reminders from whatever had caused their death, he was untouched.

“The living. The living,” he called out. “Greetings to you, my young friends. What a beautiful sight to see those full of life. You may call me Peter.”

The pitch was off in his voice. Too tight. Too forced. He approached us with his arms spread wide. I grabbed hold of Cato’s wrist. My instinct was to run. Cato apparently disagreed as he jerked away from my hold.

He stepped toward the spirit but kept just out of his reach. “Greetings. We are just passing through.” He started to walk forward through the crowd. I scrambled to catch up while wondering if this could be considered a violation of our contract. It definitely felt like purposely walking through a giant group of spirits was putting me in direct danger of death.

Peter swayed and turned. “Why so fast? We have time. We have all of time. All of eternity.” The other spirits moved to surround Cato. Two sets of hands grabbed hold of my arms and forced me to a stop. They were separating us.

“Cato!” I tried to direct his attention to the two circles forming.

“What do you want from us?” Cato played with the straps of his backpack, pulling them inward. It looked like he was going to summon his wings. Not that wings would help us when Cato couldn’t fly. What was he going to do? Bounce us over the crowd? “Name your price,” he said.

Peter smiled “Not a price. No. Anything you give us is a gift. A gift between friends. What can you give to your friends?” He approached Cato again. His hands were outstretched to catch hold of anything Cato might be willing to part with. Cato wasn’t

having it though. He summoned his wings. They unfurled with a strong gust of wind that made even the spirits freeze for a moment. He spun around, and the spirits jumped back to avoid being hit. They might have already been dead, but they could still feel pain.

I fought against the ones who still had a grip on my arms, but they were built like statues. From their appearance they had probably been half-trolls or gargoyle descendants when they were alive. With each twist and tug I was just giving myself more bruises. Even if I could summon one of my weapons right then, I wouldn't have been able to play.

Cato circled around again. His fingers elongated into claws. His fangs dropped lower. I thought I could see a paralytic saliva coating them. Might have just been regular saliva though. He pulled out the bag of gold coins and rattled them. "A gift." He mocked Peter's earlier words. "Let us pass."

The spirits pushed and shoved at each other. Even the ones holding me loosened their grip to fly at the coins. Before Cato could release the them, a roar sounded over the crowd.

A demon spirit, who had died by decapitation if the stitches around his neck were any indication, pointed at Cato. "He's a Royal!" He clambered forward. "No need for coins and waiting if one of us can kill him."

Right. The dead demon was very right. If any one of them could kill Cato they could become the Royal. At least that was what they believed. They had no idea about the tasks Dantalion had set, and they probably wouldn't believe us if we told them. All they knew was that if you kill a Royal, you become a Royal. Then they would have no need

for collecting coins for centuries and hoping to bribe away whatever deed had gotten them banished to wander in the first place. I could see the look in the spirits' eyes. It was going to be a bloodbath. Everyone would kill —rekill? ...anyway, everyone was going to take out everyone else until they were the last one standing with the Royal title. It would be a Battle Royale, and I would be the very unfortunate victim stuck in the middle.

I fought harder against the hold. I was not going to die. I couldn't die yet. They weren't planning to go for a nice temporary death for us. They were going to skip all ninety of my lives and go straight for oblivion. They could chop my head off. They could use one of the seven effective poisons. They could separate my heart from my body and trap it in one of those cursed jars, the jars that weren't supposed to be created or sold anymore, but I had definitely seen them on some of the sketchier websites. Not that I made a habit of frequenting those, but sometimes you just mistyped and then you went down a rabbit hole. Whatever. I had to not die.

A thud. A spirit went sailing over my head and hit the ground with a force that seemed impossible for someone who was halfway transparent. Oh. Cato was fighting. While I had panicked, Cato had decided to take on a hundred spirits. That was probably more effective for our current situation.

I cleared my throat then quietly began to hum. It wouldn't be super effective. My vocals were strong, but without an object to channel my energy into and to help amplify the attack, my body would take the full brunt. I would be left exhausted much faster.

I focused my attack on the two spirits holding onto me. I hummed the same thing I had for Cato the night before. I put more force into it to make it work faster. Spirits weren't able to sleep, but with enough magic, they could be sent into a similar state.

The fingers pressing into my arms loosened, and I stepped back. The two spirits who had been holding me swayed on their feet then slowly dropped to their knees before slumping to the ground. Their eyes remained open, but they couldn't move at least.

The other spirits had their attention on Cato, all of them were greedy for his power. Most were trying to get close enough to attack him. A few, who seemed out of their element when it came to fighting, moved toward the back of the group and looked to be waiting for the others to take care of each other. Then they would likely swoop in to pick off whoever remained once the competition was injured and exhausted. I had seen it before.

Cato was defending himself. That was all he was doing though. He couldn't go on the attack with all the claws and weapons flying toward him. He could only block or dodge each blow.

I summoned my drum sticks. Flutes were better against a single target. Drums worked better on a crowd. My plan was to help defend Cato but from a safer distance. According to our contract I had to protect him. More than that I actually did want to help the guy out some, but I knew better than to step into that crowd.

I counted off a beat with the drumsticks and used my power to gather the sound. Then I aimed just to the side of Cato. The attack shot through a group of the spirits like a

pyroclastic blast. Several fell to their knees in search of breath they didn't need. They clutched at their own skin. It would feel like they were on fire. At least that was what my teacher had said. I had never experienced it firsthand, and I had no plan to.

My attack gave Cato the chance he needed to gain some ground in the fight, but it left me vulnerable. I had never actually launched such a large attack before. I had never had a need to, and now I knew why my teacher had warned against using the technique unless necessary. My heart felt like it was forgetting a few beats as all my muscles spasmed from the force of the attack.

I readied my drumsticks for another attack, a smaller one. My hands were shaking. Cato raked his claws across a spirit's face. There was more wailing. I tried to gather the wails and combine them with the music blasting in my ears. If I could pick out the power in the notes, I could recharge myself. Get steady again. I took a deep breath and readied myself to attack again.

All that preparation went out the window as claws dug into the back of my neck. More hands joined them. They pulled at my arms. At my legs. They dragged me to the river. "Drown him. Drown him!"

I had my own fanclub. Great. I twisted and turned in their hold. They had my wrists again. Someone in the party apparently knew how to handle music demons. They made sure to not let the drumsticks touch anything. Someone even tried to pry at the earbuds in my ears.

A shriek of pain sounded as the earbuds shocked the person who tried to remove them. If I made it out alive I was really going to thank Adeona for having the earbuds magically enhanced for my birthday present. Not only were they waterproof and had an eternal charge to them, they could not be removed from my ears unless I wanted them to be, and if anyone dared to touch them, they would get pain for their efforts. Unfortunately, the shock didn't delay the spirits long. They were still going to drown me.

"Cato! Cato!" I screamed. Cato turned to glance my way, but he made no move to save me. He just turned his attention back to his own fight. In fact, I was almost entirely certain he moved further away from me.

The spirits dragged me into the river. "Drown him! Drown him!" They chanted. My head was forced under the water. I kicked and squirmed.

Thankfully, the spirits had a problem with loyalty as one tried to drown another, and a momentary panic broke out as everyone quickly checked that no one was about to grab them. The brief scuffle allowed me time to grab a breath, but then I was forced right back down again. Water went straight up my nose the second time. It burned, and the shock of it caused me to release the little breath I had gotten.

This was it. I was going to experience my first death. I would never get to travel the realms. I would never move up in the Underworld. I would spend the rest of my ninety lives...now eight-nine being a minion for those who had been born into better situations. That's if I managed to resurrect at all.

A demon could resurrect from drowning, but this wasn't exactly a normal river. If I couldn't get out from it, my body would remain dead and travel down the eternal stream for well, eternity. If I couldn't resurrect in a week, I would die permanently. That would be it. Go straight to the reincarnation line. Do not pass Go. Do not collect two hundred dollars. Whatever that monopoly saying was.

I kicked out again. My feet hit legs and bodies. My lungs burned. Black spots appeared at the edges of my vision. No. I wasn't ready. I didn't want to die. Not for a spoiled Royal brat.

A warm feeling bubbled in my chest. I didn't know what was happening, but I trusted that feeling. It traveled up to my throat, and I opened my mouth to release it into the world.

I was screaming. Or not screaming. I was vocalizing. The sound traveled through the river. The hands that had been holding me released. The spirits flew back. Even the water parted, and for a moment air filled my lungs. Then the water flooded back, and without the spirits' hands on me I was swept away by the current. Whatever had just happened, stopped. It felt like I had left my body. I thought I heard a splash, but by then the black spots had won. I was out.

Cato

The sound coming from the river startled everyone. The power surrounding it ran over all of us. I was far enough away that I only got knocked to the ground. The strongest

of the spirits who had been in the river with Remy were sent sailing into the air. They hit the bank then fled in fear. The weaker ones dissolved right there in the river.

Everyone who had been knocked down like me just froze, uncertain of whether to run or to continue fighting. I waited for Remy to emerge from the water, but he did not. The water dragged him away. I caught sight of his face. It was abnormally pale. His lips were blue, bluer even than when he had been cold back at the estate. I jumped to my feet.

With the spirits all distracted, I raced along the bank of the river until I was a bit in front of Remy. Then I dove in. The water was stronger than I had thought it would be. I struggled for a few moments to right myself.

Remy was just floating along. The backpack with our supplies was weighing him down and causing him to sink lower into the river. I swam against the current until I could grab hold of him. Once I had a grip on him, I tugged him closer. I got our heads above the water, but I could not get us out yet. The current was still too strong.

I tried using my wings, but all they did was weigh me down more. Once again they were proving to be more a hindrance than a help. I put them away and focused all my energy on swimming us toward the bank. It took so long. My arms, legs, and lungs were aching, but finally I reached a point where I could stand. I dragged Remy up onto the bank. He was still unconscious.

I pressed my ear to his chest and listened for a heartbeat or for the sound of water in his lungs. I braced myself for the possibility of having to do CPR, but Remy was breathing. Slight breaths with just a little bit of wheezing made their way out of his

mouth. The water had not gotten into his lungs then. I still tugged the backpack off of him and rolled him into recovery position. I removed his sunglasses, so that I could get a better look at his face.

Then I sat next to him, just watching him breathe. The color returned to his lips and to his face, but he still showed no signs of waking.

“Remy.” I called softly. I knew better than to shout with the other’s enhanced hearing. I placed a hand on his arm and shook him slightly. “Remy.”

Remy’s eyelids fluttered. Finally they opened. He did not seem to be alert. His gaze went through me. Several moments passed. I tried to wait patiently for Remy to pull himself together, but I needed to find us another place to shelter. The longer we waited, the higher the chance of the spirits finding us again. After a moment Remy made a small noise.

“Are you-”

Remy pushed himself up and back onto his feet. “We need to move,” he said cutting off my question.

“Right,” I replied.

Remy reached for his backpack. He nearly toppled over in the process. I darted forward to take the backpack instead. I could carry it until we found shelter anyway.

“Don’t.” Remy bit out. He shoved his sunglasses back in place. Then he struggled into the backpack. “Are the spirits gone?”

I glanced back. The river had swept us quite a distance from the spirits. Even with my vision, I could barely make out any. “They do not appear to be following us.”

Remy turned. “Let’s go. We need to find shelter and see which of our supplies we can salvage.”

“If we can get to the mountainous area, we will be safe from the spirits,” I offered.

Remy gave a short nod. “Then we’ll walk until we reach the mountainous areas. That should take... what? An hour?”

“Yes. I believe so.”

Remy wasn’t looking in my direction. His voice was tense. He turned his music louder than usual, and once we started walking, he did not make any of his usual attempts at conversations. The trek was not pleasant like before. We just walked. A few hours passed as we made our way through the blue sand and toward the mountains, but it did not take nearly as long as the walk through the red sands.

The one good thing the river had done was shorten our walk across the blue sand. It had swept us so far and so fast that it had saved us another hour of walking, possibly two hours.

On the downside, my new stiff clothes felt worse while damp. I wanted to stop and change, but Remy did not seem to be in the mood for a break even if he needed one. When I opened my mouth to make the suggestion, he turned his music even louder, and I knew better than to try again.

The moment the sand turned to solid ground under our feet, Remy collapsed. I watched him a moment to make sure he was not about to lose consciousness. He seemed to be fine but just tired.

I turned to study our surroundings. There were no immediate signs of danger. The area was filled with trees, growing denser the further they were from the desert.

Remy started sorting the supplies in his backpack.

“Do you think we should wait to do that until we find a place to shelter?” I asked.

“You look for shelter. We already left the supplies for too long,” Remy replied.

I rocked back on my heels. “Are you angry?”

Remy slammed down a can of meat-like substance. “Am I angry?” he mocked. “Why would I be angry, Cato? After all, you were just going to let those spirits drown me. What’s a little drowning after all?”

I recoiled. Remy had put a bit of power into those words, and they pricked at my skin like tiny needles. I was not even sure Remy noticed what he had done.

“I tried to save you,” I pointed out.

“That’s not what it looked like to me.”

I could feel my own anger building. I could not tell though if it was actually my anger, or if Remy was unintentionally using his own powers again. If he could cause someone to feel sleepy, perhaps he could cause them to feel various emotions as well.

“Calm yourself,” I instructed. I needed to see if the feelings I was having were his or my own.

“Don’t tell me to calm myself!” Remy jumped to his feet. He threw one of the spare maps, damp from the river, at my chest. It bounced off and flopped to the ground. “You organize the supplies. I’ll go find shelter.” Remy stormed off into the trees.

I took a deep breath in then let out a slow exhale. I glanced down at the backpacks. There was no point to sorting the supplies before we made camp. I would just have to put them right back in the bag to get to wherever the shelter would be. I still agreed.

“Okay. Scream if you need help,” I called after him. I ducked and avoided the pinecone that was thrown at my head in reply.

Chapter 5

Remy

The trees were so tall they seemed to go up forever. I stared up at them, trying to focus on their appearance instead of the anger that was boiling in my chest. I switched playlists to something better suited for the scenery. Then after a moment, I reluctantly turned the volume down just a bit. After all, I was still contracted to help Cato even if I very much wanted to stab him myself at that moment.

There were a few paths in the forest worn down from people walking on them. I knew that there were some who called the forest home and lived there despite the dangers. Off the grid demons mostly. I would never understand their reasoning, but to each their own.

The area was safe for now, but I could tell that would change swiftly. I could already hear the forest's inhabitants taking shelter. Some were scurrying into their homes deep in the ground. Some were taking to the trees, climbing into the safety of their nests in the high up branches. A good portion of them were heading up the closest mountain. It wasn't a particularly high mountain. Not like the ones in the distance, but it was wide. We would have to cross it anyway to get to where we were going, and if that was where the animals thought it was safest to be then that was where we would have to go.

I doubled back. Cato was sitting quietly by the bags. He had taken out the few paper items that couldn't be salvaged and put them into a disposable bag. Everything else had been in waterproof bags. There had been little point to taking everything out of the

bags and then putting everything back in since we couldn't actually unpack until we made camp, but it had given us a few moments away from each other. That time away was what we had needed.

"We'll have to go up the first mountain before we can set up camp," I told him.

Cato stood up and pulled on his backpack.

"Not going to question me?" I did keep a bit of the anger out of my tone that time.

"No." Cato replied. "I trust you."

That was new. I pulled on my own backpack. I knew I would collapse as soon as we made camp. A snake could eat me, and I would probably sleep through it with how exhausted I felt. I wasn't going to let it show though.

Cato was staring at me again. "Do you want to change first?" He gave a nod at my damp clothes that were clinging to my skin.

I laughed at that. "Now you're concerned that I might be uncomfortable?"

Cato shrugged. "I just..." He huffed. "Never mind. Did you see an easy way up the mountain?"

"Yeah. There's a trail. This way."

Barely ten minutes into the walk, I started to regret that I had not changed my clothes when Cato had made the suggestion. The mountain air was cold. Unnaturally so. Every few feet, the temperature plummeted another five degrees. I was shivering before

we even reached the halfway point. Annoyingly, Cato either didn't feel the cold or was much better at controlling his body's reactions to it.

He kept shooting glances in my direction. He kept opening his mouth then slamming it shut. He was probably worried I would get angry at anything he said. That was fine. Let him be worried about that.

We still had about a mile to go when I just couldn't take it any longer. I came to a stop and threw my backpack to the ground. Cato caught on to what I was doing and did the same. We both dug through our bags until they reached the first outfit packed away tightly in waterproof bags. We stripped out of our wet clothes and tugged on the dry ones. Both of us were moving too fast for there to be any awkwardness about changing in front of each other for the first time.

I shoved my wet clothes into the bag the dry ones had come out of. I didn't want anything else getting damp in the bag, and I could just dry them at the campfire when we finally made camp.

I sniffed. My nose was still frozen, and I wished for a scarf to cover it with. "Well then. Let's get going. The caves should be somewhere up here after all," I started in one direction then froze. I turned. I glanced over at Cato. He pointed to the left and bit back the smile I could tell was forming on his lips.

The first several miles of mountain range were well-documented. It was only after that, that the details became a bit more fuzzy. Not as many people survived the trips further into the center of the Underworld, and the few who did were only able to

document the small bits of it they had seen. Most of those documentations included a lot of notes about not going into the areas.

The caves were just where the maps indicated they would be, which was good because my thighs felt like they were on fire by that point. It was actually good to be experiencing some kind of normal pain rather than magical exhaust.

Cato took charge of the campfire while I darted into the cave. I pulled out my bedroll, tossed it onto the floor, and stretched out on it. Just for a moment I told myself. Just long enough to give my muscles a break. I was woken up by Cato softly calling my name again.

“What?” I asked.

“Food.”

My stomach grumbled at the word. I forced my way up and crawled out of the cave and to the campfire. Cato had prepared one of the more solid meals. Good. That was good. I crammed spoonfuls into my mouth so fast I could barely taste any of the flavors. Ration food all tasted the same any way: either bland or packed full of salt. Cato as usual ate at a slower pace.

I caught the way he would wince every few bites. I hadn’t been able to tell if he was that put off by the taste or if it was something else. I knew better to assume it was just a case of his being a picky eater.

“Make sure you finish it,” I told him. It seemed every time we ate, I would have to give him the reminder. Otherwise, the guy would probably take three bites and be done. Then he’d end up starving to death, and I would be left to try to make it back out of the untamed zone of the Underworld by myself. I finished my food. I washed my bowl and utensils and tucked them away while keeping an eye on Cato and making sure he at least ate enough to keep himself alive.

I considered sitting with Cato until he finished his entire meal. It was considered good etiquette. Then I remembered we were camping, Cato wasn’t exactly a people person, and oh yeah, Cato had almost let me die, so after checking that he had eaten enough that I would not have to drag him around tomorrow, I went ahead to bed without another word.

Cato

After Remy went to bed, I sat and replayed our encounter with the spirits. I tried to remember all my words and actions to see how Remy had ever gotten the idea that I had been willing to let the spirits kill him. While I had not been able to fully protect him, I had not just stood by and watched while he was attacked either.

I forced down the last few bites of food and cleaned up after myself. I left the fire going with a charm to watch over it. The warmth from it floated into the cave while the smoke floated off into another direction, thankfully dissipating before it could alert too many people or creatures to our location. Unlike the red sand and the blue sand, the forest had actual days and nights. Rather than the light coming from the Underworld’s sun it came from the tops of the trees themselves.

At night the lights of the larger trees went out and plunged the forest into darkness, but that was when some of the smaller trees woke. Their branches held small twinkling lights that resembled stars. I watched them for a while. I considered waking Remy so he could see them, but we would be in the forest for several more days. He would have the opportunity to see them then, and I really did not want to risk making him grumpier than he already was.

After a little more tree-gazing, I climbed into the cave. I spread out my bedroll a few feet from Remy's and stretched out. The fire's glow cast shadows across the cave's ceiling. In a way it was just as nice as the twinkling lights outside. I rolled over to glance at Remy. I knew I should bring up our argument. We were already in a high risk situation, any further complications or tension just put us more at risk. I wanted to clear the air between us. The problem was I did not know how. Did I just apologize? Why was I apologizing though?

If I did not know what I was apologizing for then it would not be sincere, and I did not want to offer an insincere apology. The thoughts kept swirling around my head until finally I muttered the only thing I could think of. "I am sorry I did not make it clear that I would save you." I thought perhaps those were the best words. I fell asleep waiting for a response that never came.

Neither of us woke up until late the next morning. We washed up as best as we could. We knocked into each other as we tried to fix a breakfast. We were already falling into a routine of sorts even if it was a bit clumsy.

Remy seemed less angry than he had the night before. His music still played a bit too loud, but he was not frowning every time he glanced in my direction. That seemed like a bit of an improvement. I tried to bring up the subject a few times, but Remy squashed it immediately by asking a question about the journey or by pointing out another task we needed to do before we left the camp.

He had taken control of the map that morning and kept glancing over it. “Pretty straightforward today. Just follow the mountain until we get to the bigger mountain.”

I nodded in agreement. I had decided that as long as he went in the right direction, I would pretend to let him navigate. At least until he was in a better mood again. That day was probably the easiest day of our journey. We trekked up the mountain. I studied some of the trees. Remy chatted about the different kinds of wildlife. At one point I saw him try to chat with the wildlife.

“They respond about as much as you do,” he defended when he caught me watching him. I thought I responded a bit better than a squirrel. I would have to give my social skills some consideration if I lived long enough to be using them again.

The path was not too steep, and since we had changed and dressed for the cold weather, it was actually a comfortable temperature for hiking. We hiked between the tall trees. Occasionally we had to scale up the side of a small rock. Every sudden noise had me scanning the surroundings for signs of any potential danger. I was not sure what I was supposed to be looking for. The guides for this area were sparse, but I decided anything that looked hungry should be avoided.

We managed to not fight or run from anything the whole day. When we settled in to set up camp, the atmosphere was back to matching the weather. Remy's earlier mood took another plunge as we set up a tent and started a campfire. He only spoke directly to me when it was necessary. He paid more attention to his music and complaining under his breath about the poor excuse for food.

I took the hint and kept quiet. I was too lost in my own thoughts as it was. The next day went the same. There was more walking. Remy's mood was improved whenever he tried to chat with an animal and now plants, but he continued to monologue rather than speak directly to me. I considered trying to start a conversation, but I could not think of any topic he might enjoy discussing and that I would not embarrass myself speaking about.

We had just scaled another short cliff when Remy suddenly paused. His lips formed a small surprised "o". "Is that...?" His head tilted as he searched for some noise. "People?"

I glanced around to see if I could find whoever it was that he was hearing. It took me a moment, but then I saw it. Off in the distance and peeking out from a bunch of tree branches was a sign. Its chipped burgundy paint spelled out "Purgatory Inn". An arrow pointed into the trees. The distance painted above it. The distance wasn't in miles or kilometers. It was some ancient form of measurement that was basically useless to us. I still pointed it out.

"There is an inn. I am not sure how far."

Remy's ear twitched. "It's not far. I can hear pots and pans."

"We have pots," I pointed out.

"We have one pot. And rations. They take Underworld currency here right? Or the gold? You're a Royal. You can afford either. Let's stop for a meal at least."

"It is getting dark again." We had made good time. With nothing attacking us we had had the energy to hike the entire day without any breaks. Even our lunch had been granola bars that we had eaten while walking on a particularly easy path.

We could take advantage of it and get to the hall of Fates even faster than I had planned, but the tension in Remy's jaw had fled for the first time in nearly twenty-four hours at the idea of eating an actual meal. I also liked the idea of sleeping in a bed if only for a few hours, and I had planned some cushion time anyway just for all the problems I thought might delay us.

"We can stay. For one night."

Remy let out a whoot and took off. He ran forward then stopped and cocked his head to the side. I bit back his laughter at the sight. He looked like a golden retriever or an overly excited kitten as he tilted his head with his ears in search of various noises. He pointed to the right. "It's about a mile that way. Not too far off our path."

He took off once more. I watched him for a moment. Then I straightened my backpack and took off running after him.

Remy

The last half mile to the inn was well worn. The sounds of living people called to me like music. There weren't many. Maybe twelve that I could hear, and that was definitely the sound of a cocktail being shaken. I nearly tripped over my own feet. Behind me, Cato let out something that sounded like a noise of amusement.

The inn was plain and rather small, but it looked beautiful after camping out in a tent for the past few nights. We both slowed our pace just before we reached the small gate that surrounded it.

"Travelers, welcome to Purgatory Inn!" A snake demon waved at us from where she was sprawled out on a lawn chair and basking in what little sunlight was left. "I am Lucy." She pulled herself up and stretched. Her skin had patches of scales that shimmered in the lighting. Several spots without scales had scars likely gained from exploring the local wilderness areas rather than fights. She had no hair on her head, instead her scales formed a design that looked a bit like she was wearing a crown.

"I suppose you are wanting to stay a few days," she added.

"Just the night," I replied.

"Just the night?" She raised one eyebrow as she took in our appearances. "If that's what you wish. Let's get you checked in."

She led us into the lobby of the inn where she stepped behind a desk. She took out a book and flipped a few pages in. "Just sign your names here. We can negotiate payment."

Cato reached for the pen. I grabbed his arm. "I'll read that first. Just in case." I was the first assistant to the Demon of Deals after all. I could at least make sure we weren't signing away our souls or something.

"It's just a sign in sheet and general agreement," Lucy assured. "But feel free to take your time with it." Her forked tongue darted out for a moment before she smiled.

It was pretty simple. We just had to agree to pay for any damages if we happened to cause any. It even stated that all forms of currency would be accepted, and the prices would be based on the average estimate for each item. There was no risk of being charged too much and having to work off the labor. We both signed our names. Lucy flipped the book around. "Okay, Cato and Remy?" She glanced at us again. Well, she glanced at Cato.

"Are you the one who killed Dantalion this time?" she asked.

Cato nodded slowly, and I sighed, already mentally preparing myself for another fight or to be tossed by out in the forest. Instead Lucy just flashed her smile again. "It's great to meet you and best of luck on your journey! I'm rooting for you. We need some new blood holding all these ancient positions."

"And Remy," she thought for a moment "Now I remember. You're the one that attacked that reporter when he showed up to interview you. That was hilarious."

"You attacked a reporter?" Cato asked.

"Like you weren't watching," I muttered.

“I missed that part.”

Cato ended up negotiating the payment. He bargained away a few of the gold coins and some actual currency. It turned out that the residents who lived in that area had use for both.

“I will say we only have one room left. You came during the tourist season.” Lucy turned and plucked a key from a nearby drawer. It had a neon pitchfork keychain hanging from it with the number “7” etched into it.

“Tourist season?” Cato echoed.

“Ever since Dante, we get all sorts of people wanting to make the place.”

I picked up one of the brochures and flipped through it. “But Dante didn’t even come here. He went to the Demon of Hallucinations’ room-to-room house party and had an extremely bad time.” Every demon knew that, except the few who believed in conspiracy theories.

Lucy shrugged. “People believe what they want, and we don’t correct them. It’s good for business, and most don’t make it back to tell the others it’s a bit of a letdown for a tour.”

Someone in the next room put on some music. I flipped my own off to listen to the unfamiliar song. It was the kind of song meant to be played at a beach bar. I knew where I would be heading next.

“Your room is upstairs. Third door on the left,” Lucy explained. “We have a cook who can make almost anything you want as long as we have the ingredients. Just pop in the kitchen and ask. Our bartender’s usually in the bar or in the hammock outside. He’s always up for company, so don’t feel bad about waking him if he happens to be asleep. We have a laundry room, but it’s do it yourself style. Anything else you need, just let us know.”

I started toward the bar, but Cato grabbed hold of my backpack. “At least drop your stuff off in the room first.” He had a point.

I followed him up the stairs and to our assigned room. I didn’t even get a good look at it. I just dropped my backpack on the floor right inside the entrance and then bounded back down the stairs. “You know where to find me. Don’t start any fights,” I told him. I still wasn’t thrilled with Cato, but sulking would just make the trip harder, and I was getting tired of trying to ignore him. Plus, it did seem like he was trying to be less of an asshole at least.

The bar had a garish rainforest meets beach theme to it. I loved it immediately. The bartender, a muscular-looking dragon demon, was already behind the bar. He was tossing bottles up into the air and catching them with ease while a group of guests sat on stools, sipping at colorful cocktails and cheering him on.

I slid onto one of the empty stools and leaned my arms on the bar. The bartender immediately turned my way. “A new guest? Hello. I am Chimei. Not the original Chimei, of course, but I am named after him.”

“Hi, Chimei. I’m Remy. Named after no one but myself.” Well, if you ignored the fact that my given name was Ramiel anyway, which I did.

“What would you like to drink, Remy?”

It took me a moment. People tended to just hand me drinks, and I drank them until the room began to spin. “What do you recommend?” I asked.

Chimei’s whiskers lifted upward with his grin. “How about the special?”

I shrugged. “Sure. As long as it won’t kill me.”

Chimei twirled to the bar’s music. His scaled tail swished in time to the drums. He grabbed a fishbowl and placed it in front of me. Then he began to layer. The first bottle he flung straight up. It twisted in the air three times before it landed in his palm. He poured out a bright pink syrup that smelled of vanilla. He popped open another bottle. The lid flew across the room to hit a dartboard right on the bullseye setting off a winner’s bell. Meanwhile a bubbly liquid spewed from the bottle and into the fishbowl. A sugary lemon scent filled the air.

Chimei reached for a third bottle. He balanced it on the tip of one finger then flipped it up. This time he caught it with his nose. A purple colored pineapple liquor became the third layer. The last bottle was twirled about like a baton. At one point, Chimei tossed the bottle at me only to grab it back before I could panic about possibly dropping it. Then he carefully added the final layer: red vodka filled the fishbowl up to the brim while the cherries and pomegranate seeds Chimei added caused it to nearly slosh over.

He garnished it with a red straw. “It matches your lovely eyes.”

I realized then that while watching the show, my sunglasses had slid down just enough to reveal the color of my eyes. The lighting in the bar was low enough that I hadn’t been bothered by the lack of shades. I still pushed them back up and into place. I felt too exposed without them. “Thank you.”

Chimei showed off a few more of his bartending skills to the patrons then yawned and stretched. “Time for my break. I’ll be back in twenty. Don’t burn the place down,” he told us.

He disappeared out a side door where I could see him climb into a hammock just in time to get settled before the sunset. I was left alone with the few other guests and my cocktail. The demon two stools down from me stirred her drink with her straw. She peered over at me from beneath eyelashes that resembled spider legs.

“Dante fan, adrenaline junkie, or researcher?” she asked. Her friend peeked around her. His ears perked up in interest.

“It’s complicated,” I said. “What about you two?”

“Researchers,” she replied. “We’ve been camped out a few mountains west of here for the past month. We just got back to civilization last night.”

That explained why she didn’t recognize me. They wouldn’t have seen any of the breaking news reports if they had been out in the wilderness for that long.

“We were looking at bugs,” her friend added.

“He means we were researching some of the insects that are native to this region. We got several samples. Some unintentional,” the woman admitted. They both chuckled at their inside joke.

“Fascinating.” I spun around on the stool to face them better. “I bet after all that research, you both are wanting some fun. How about a round of darts?”

A fishbowl and three rounds of darts later, I realized that alcohol hit harder after hiking. The room spun pleasantly and my body felt relaxed. Regardless, I kept a watch around me. It wasn’t safe to be completely at ease in a strange location and while surrounded by strangers.

That was why I didn’t flinch when a hand landed on my shoulder. I had sensed it coming.

“Food.” Cato’s rumbling voice had me dropping my guard for a brief moment. I put it back up as soon as I realized what I had done. The guy had let a group of spirits almost kill me just two days ago. I couldn’t be relaxing and trusting him to watch my back even though he was no longer a stranger.

“What’d you say?” I asked.

“We should get food.”

Food did sound good. I turned to my two new friends to let them know I was leaving, but they were both staring at Cato. “Oh yeah. Cato, these are my new friends. ‘Rachne and Gary. ‘Rachne, Gary, this is my- this is Cato.”

Gary sniffed the air then scratched at his cheek. “New,” he mumbled to himself. “Nice to meet you,” he said a bit louder.

“Yes! Nice to meet you,” ‘Rachne extended her hand.

Cato did not take hold of it. “Pleasure.”

“He’s not rude. He just doesn’t speak much or like touching people.” I explained when I saw ‘Rachne’s expression fall. “You should eat with us!” That suggestion was the alcohol talking.

Gary perked up, but Cato cleared his throat. I turned to him. “We agreed you would practice your social skills,” I whispered. I thought it was a whisper. Cato gave me a blank stare, and I realized I couldn’t remember Cato actually agreeing to that. He should though. His quality of life would improve, so I was just going to help him with that. “It’ll be fun.” I added.

“Fine,” he agreed. He did not sound excited.

I grinned at him then turned to the other two. “You’ll join us? Right?”

‘Rachne and Gary nodded. Their cheeks were flushed red, probably mirroring my own. They each took hold of one of my arms clinging and giggling together while Cato led us to an actual table on the other side of the bar room.

While the three of us dropped into chairs, Cato grabbed menus. He slid them in front of us. “I’ll pay.”

Rachne cocked her head. “He seems like a good friend actually,” she directed the statement at me.

“I never said he was awful. I just said he doesn’t talk a lot.” I didn’t know why I was suddenly feeling defensive on Cato’s behalf. Maybe it was the fishbowl talking. I changed the topic before the conversation could get heated. “There are too many options that sound good.”

“Order anything you want.” Cato assured.

“That’s the most dangerous thing you’ve done since this whole journey began,” I told him.

The left side of Cato’s lips quirked up. I thought I saw the faintest hint of a dimple. One thing we had in common then. Though my dimples were still cuter.

“I can order anything?” I asked just to be certain.

Cato nodded. “Yes. Anything.”

A short time later I sat with three dishes in front of me. I had refrained from ordering the entire menu if only to have some room for desserts after. I happily munched at the food that had not come out of a can or a box and nodded along while Cato, surprisingly, kept up the conversation with our guests.

While he wasn’t exactly being talkative, he was asking them questions about their research, and in their tipsy state the two were happily recounting both the best and worst of what the experience had been like and what they had found. I had tried to contribute at

first, but then they started using all the scientific terms for things. That made my head spin. It didn't matter. I was content to see and listen to the happiness in their tones and the way it blended with the background music still playing from the speakers above the bar.

I tuned back in to the details when Cato took out a pouch. It was a pouch only Royals carried. It had access to their funds and could summon their money to them no matter where they were. He was paying the bill. 'Rachne and Gary were both half-asleep by that point, and I was beginning to feel the effects of the day as well. I didn't protest when Cato tugged me up out of the chair.

"The others..." I pointed in the direction I thought 'Rachne and Gary had moved to.

"Don't worry. They are fine to get to their rooms on their own. Chimei has offered to keep an eye on them," Cato assured. He helped me up the stairs and to our room. I stumbled through the process of getting my shoes off and getting to the bathroom. Showering and going through my night routine all occurred through muscle memory. When I stepped out of the bathroom with actual pajamas on and damp hair that smelled of my favorite cinnamon shampoo, Cato was seated at the desk in our room looking over the map again. Some of the guide books were sprawled around him. Bookmarks poked out of all of them. Cato had ink on his jaw where he had been resting his chin on the same palm that was holding a pen.

At first I could only stare. He looked so young right then. I knew he had to be close to my age, but he acted so much older. Right then though, I could see it wasn't that he was naturally more mature. It was just his circumstances forced him to act that way.

“Bathroom’s free,” I told him. The shower had sobered me up some, but I was still feeling some of the effects as I plopped down on his bed. Who cared about potentially dirty sheets. After camping on the ground, the inn’s sheets looked pristine.

I changed my music over to one of my favorite sleep playlists. I heard the bathroom door open, and the sound of the shower starting up. Then I fell asleep.

The cracking noise could have easily been mistaken for someone balling up a piece of paper, so in my exhaustion, I ignored it at first and let myself drift back off. The noise didn’t stop. In fact, it picked up in pace until it sounded like hundreds of balls of paper being crumpled at once.

I sat up, slipped my eye mask up my forehead, and searched the room for the source of the sound. My eyes refused to focus at first, but then I was able to make out Cato asleep in his own bed. The sound was definitely coming from his direction, but Cato was fast asleep. He was curled up in a ball with one hand clutching the comforter. He wasn’t moving though. Not enough to be making those kinds of noises anyway. I turned down the volume of my music and concentrated on the sound.

“You’re sure those two won’t find what you hid in their room? You know what will happen if we’re not successful with taking down this Royal.” Gary had the TV on in their room, and I could make out the old news report about Cato.

“Shh!” ‘Rachne’s hiss was shrill. “That one might be able to hear us.” From her tone it sounded like they had had a few more drinks after I had called it a night. For a

moment their tones did drop low enough for me to only catch part of a sentence when one of them slipped up.

Knowing I was going to regret it, but also knowing that the two were likely talking about us, I fully turned off my music and removed my earbuds. For several painful moments, the sounds of the inn clanged all together in my ears without any structured chords to guide them into place.

The TV from the downstairs bar mixed with Lucy and Chimei's conversations. They were discussing something about the next shipment of supplies. Patrons slurped their drinks through their straws at a disgusting decibel. Someone was showering in the room next to us. She kept swearing and scolding the water stream for being too cold then too hot then too cold again. The creak of the faucets being adjusted felt like they were tearing directly into my eardrums. I would probably never be able to forget the sounds I heard coming from the throuple in the room at the end of the hall. Nor would I ever be able to look at a dagger in the same way again.

Even though my ears felt like they were bleeding and the feeling of an oncoming headache was already pulsing at my temples, I finally managed to focus. I honed in on 'Rachne and Gary's voices. The rest of the sounds floated momentarily into another part of my brain to be processed later.

"At least those ants are useful now. That one bite almost made my leg fall off. How many bites do you think it will take to kill him?" Gary asked.

I tossed the blankets off my own bed and searched the sheets for any signs of insects. When I didn't see any, I let myself relax for a moment, but I didn't put the blanket back on the bed.

"Probably not more than ten bites." 'Rachne replied. "Depends though. He seemed strong. Didn't he seem strong?"

"He did," Gary agreed.. "But what about that Remy guy? He seemed nice."

"He seemed loud," 'Rachne replied. "Besides, you can buy some new friends with the money we're going to inherit." Great. They were placing me in harm and insulting me.

"We can fund our own research instead of schmoozing for money," Gary said dreamily.

'Rachne scoffed. "Who gives a shit about research when we're going to be rich?"

Gary took a bite of something crunchy. I nearly hurled as the wet chewing noises reached my ears unfiltered. "How long will the eggs take to hatch?" Oh disgusting. I could practically hear the food flying out of Gary's mouth as he asked the question before swallowing.

"If you would stop talking and let me concentrate on summoning them, I'd already have them hatched. It's not exactly easy for me to control insects, you know."

'Rachne's tone made it sound like they had had the conversation many times before

"Right right. You're much more of a spider person," Gary said.

Eggs. The ants were in eggs. I glanced around, looking for any sign of an egg in the room. The eggs were hatching. They were cracking. Oh. I jumped out of my bed and over to Cato. “Get up!” I put some force into my tone to shake Cato out of his slumber. “Now!” The use of my power got Cato up, but I could tell I had been too late as a particularly loud crack echoed through the room.

I jerked Cato out of the bed at the same time as choked on a scream. Even half asleep he was careful not to show signs of weakness. He fell to the floor and clutched at his leg. I didn’t give him a chance to recover. I couldn’t. I dragged him across the room. Fire ants the size of my fist crawled out from beneath the mattress.

I summoned my flute and played a trance melody. The ants didn’t respond. “Okay, they’re immune to music powers, and I don’t think you’re in any shape to unleash some wolf kickass on them. Looks like we’re going to have to run!”

I tugged Cato up. We hopped over a few of the faster ants and out the door which I slammed shut behind us. That would deter them for a moment at least. Cato fell to the floor in the hallway. His face was twisted in a grimace. His hand went right back to his leg. His breath came out in short pants.

I knelt down beside him and took a moment to slip both my earbuds back in. The last thing we needed was for me to be knocked out by a sensory overload, especially when Cato couldn’t move on his own. “Let me see,” I said.

Cato tugged his pants leg up. His calf was already red and swollen. The skin was hot to the touch. The actual spot where he had been bitten was blistering up. Cato leaned his head against the wall. He was trying to control his breathing.

“We can fix that.” I tried for a cheery tone, but I wasn’t quite successful. A new crunching noise sounded. The ants were eating through the door. “We’re going to have to run a bit more first.” I hauled Cato up onto my back. The pain from the bite had to be intense because Cato didn’t complain or try to strangle me. I raced to get him downstairs.

“Lucy!” I called out. With any luck she would know how to deal with bites from the local wildlife.

Lucy and Chimei both ran from the bar at my shouts. I could hear a few people stirring in their rooms upstairs, but I didn’t care. They would need to run anyway if ‘Rachne had not managed to lock Cato as the ants’ target, and from the conversation I had overheard it hadn’t sounded like she had that much control over the insects.

“What’s wrong?” Lucy’s eyes were wide. Chimei rushed forward to help me with Cato.

“Demon fire ants! Huge! Very bitey!” I blurted out.

Lucy raced behind the check-in desk and pulled at an alarm. The siren would have ruptured my eardrums if not for my earbuds. As it was, I had to turn the music volume all the way up to balance the noise and to keep myself from absorbing too much of the high pitch. Everything grew even noisier as the other guests raced down the stairs.

“Outside. Go!” Lucy ushered everyone out of the inn. As Chimei guided Cato and me out the doors, I caught sight of Lucy gathering a large bag labeled “chalk”.

“You two wait here.” Chimei guided us to Lucy’s lawn chair. “Lucy and I can handle fire ants,” he promised.

I searched the crowd of mostly pajama-clad guests. Some people were panicking. Others were staring curiously trying to seek out the cause for the alarm. It was easy enough to spot ‘Rachne and Gary in the group. ‘Rachne was one of the only people not staring at the inn and instead was peering in our direction. I hadn’t had time to grab my sunglasses. It didn’t matter much since it was night, but it did make it noticeable to ‘Rachne that I was watching her.

She tried to play it off. She gestured at the inn and gave a laugh that was too staccato. “The one night we finally get to sleep inside, and this happens. What do you think is the problem?” she asked.

“I think you know exactly what’s happening,” I replied. Cato had a grip on my hand. He was squeezing it with each pulse of pain. Either he was hurting badly enough to risk admitting it to me, or he was in so much pain that he didn’t realize what he was doing. Both possibilities stirred up my anger toward the duo.

Gary at least had the decency to act somewhat ashamed. His ears plastered down on his head.

“What?” Cato grunted out.

“They planted the ant eggs in your bed. ‘Rachne here controlled them to hatch and sent them after you,” I told him.

Cato stopped clutching at his leg. He pulled himself to sit straight up. His eyes narrowed. “Perhaps I should repay her.”

“It wouldn’t even have been a permanent death!” ‘Rachne screeched. It drew all attention her way. “It would just have been one of your ninety! Just enough for me to get the crown! I deserve the crown!”

Cato forced himself to his feet. His limp was barely noticeable, but from the sound of his heartbeat and his labored breaths, I could tell how much pain he was in. The onlookers, getting their first good glimpse at Cato under the decorative lanterns, began to whisper. The word “Royal” was on repeat. I heard a few things about myself in the mix, but I shoved them aside for the moment.

Cato’s fangs grew. His claws sharpened. He released his wings. The flap they made sounded like thunder in the otherwise quiet area.

‘Rachne jumped back. Her two legs snapped and popped. Each leg divided itself into two. Her arms did the same. Four arms. Four legs. She pulled out four daggers. Each one was engraved with a web pattern that traveled from the hilt to the tip of the blade.

“And she’s ambidextrous. How delightful.” I muttered. I glanced over at Gary to see if I would need to keep him occupied while Cato and ‘Rachne fought.

Gary wasn't preparing to fight. He had dropped to the ground and curled into a ball. If he'd had a tail it would have been tucked between his legs. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Won't do it again. Never again. Promise. Promise."

I sighed. "Well, come over here where you won't get in the way of fighting then." I gestured to a spot that he would keep him far enough away from possibly interfering, and if he should happen to change his mind, place him in a position to where he would have to go through me first, something I doubted he could accomplish.

"Cato wouldn't permanently kill you anyway. Maybe use up one of your ninety lives, but that's all. I doubt he would even do that actually," I told Gary, and I was surprised to find that I believed what I was saying.

Gary scrambled over to the spot I had recommended. Cato watched everything without moving. "You've decided I won't kill him?" he asked me.

I shrugged. "He's kind of pitiful."

Cato snorted. He pulled out his own dagger and twirled it around. "Pack up and leave, and you won't have to die either," he told 'Rachne.

"Screw you!" She raised all four of her arms in a stabbing position. She couldn't even make a move before Lucy and Chimei stepped back outside. Both were covered in spatters of chalk.

"Ants have been handled," Lucy announced. She studied the crowd. "And just what is happening now?"

“Cato’s going to kill ‘Rachne because she and I were the ones who planted the ant eggs in his bed, and then ‘Rachne forced them to hatch and gave them orders to attack. I am very very sorry by the way.” Gary blurted everything out before anyone else could respond.

“You hatched fire ants in my inn?” Lucy whirled around to face ‘Rachne. “You put my guests in danger? You put my staff in danger? And you did this to kill one Royal when you do not even have a chance of becoming the next in line yourself.”

“If I kill him, I’m the next Royal. That’s how it works.” ‘Rachne sounded so certain of herself.

“Not for someone taking over Dantalion’s role,” Lucy said. “He was one of the originals. The Master of Science, Art, and Love since their inception. He had millenia to put extra rules into place in order to safeguard his role. Even beyond that, what kind of person could kill an ancient one without their permission? If Cato had managed to do so, I wouldn’t want to try to take him on.” Lucy made a good point.

‘Rachne faltered. I couldn’t blame her. Put that way, I was beginning to see myself that Cato had likely not killed Dantalion in cold blood despite how it had looked at the time.

‘Rachne sized Cato up again then looked to Gary to see if he would be of any help to her. She let out a wail. Webbing shot out of her hands and up to the branches of a nearby tree. She swung upwards on it. She bounded from one tree to the next until she was out of our sight.

“Wait for me...Never mind.” Gary flopped back onto the grass. “I knew I couldn’t trust her,” he mumbled to himself. “Didn’t even want to go on this trip in the first place.” I could empathize with that last bit.

Another choked off noise from Cato had my focus back on him. His left leg was trembling even as he shifted all his weight to the right. We would have to get that wound treated if he was going to survive, not to mention actually finish the journey.

“Everyone, please feel free to return to your rooms for the night. Apologies for this incident. We’ll prepare something special for breakfast to try to make up for things.” Chimei shooed everyone back inside while Lucy marched toward us.

“You,” she pointed at Gary. “Are you going to be any more trouble?”

“No. I promise. Really. I can make up for it. How can I make up for it?” he asked. He bounded up on his feet.

Lucy sighed. She glanced back at the inn. “Do you have money to pay for the damages?”

“Some. It’s ‘Rachne’s. She left her bag here. Upstairs. It’s not a lot though.”

Lucy nodded. “Okay. You can work here for a week then. Help out the staff with some chores, and we’ll call it even.” She was being too generous.

Gary’s ears perked back up. “Yes. Okay. I can do that. I can!”

“How about you start with helping Chimei to clean up the mess from the ants?” she suggested.

“Yes! On it! Going now!” Gary trotted inside. His ears flapped with every step.

Since it was only the three of us left standing there, I approached Cato and pulled his arm over my shoulder. “Sit down before you fall down,” I muttered. Cato didn’t fight me on it. He allowed me to guide him back to the lawn chair. We both knew he wouldn’t make it all the way inside without collapsing, so neither of us brought up the idea of trying it.

I tugged at the hem of Cato’s pants until I could see the wound again. In just the short amount of time since we had last looked over it, it had gotten much worse. The blister had expanded to the size of my currently useless human cell phone. Every bit of skin that wasn’t a blister had turned a crimson shade. I didn’t have to touch it to feel the heat flooding off of it.

I looked up at our hosts. “Any chance one of you knows how to treat this?”

Cato

“I can’t say I know how to treat it off the top of my head, but I’ve got books we can consult.” Lucy was already turning to get the books when I held up my dagger.

“I need this boiled in water. I also need a handful of mint leaves, a small jar of honey, an ice pack, and clean gauze,” I told her. If one knew the source of a venom and why it caused the symptoms it did, it was relatively easy to figure out an antidote.

“You don’t need anything else? Like some magic options or blessed charms or I don’t know...a doctor?” Remy asked. He had not moved from his spot where he had

kneeled on the ground by the lawn chair. He was looking at the wound with an expression on his face like a kid who thought something was gross but who still really wanted to poke it. I drew my leg closer to myself. I was well aware of Remy's lack of impulse control.

The movement made the pulsating pain increase. Rather than a throbbing sensation every six seconds, it quickened to every three. I sucked air through my teeth.

"No. Only those," I assured. My pain was too obvious. There was no way I was able to hide it. Still, I could help but feel defensive when Remy asked the next question.

"What about some pain-killers? Can't you take some of those?" he asked. "Or we could get you drunk."

I shook my head. "Not necessary."

Lucy rolled her eyes. "Will pain-killers make anything worse?"

I thought for a moment. "No."

"Then I'll get you plenty of pain-killers. Think we can get you inside to where we can treat this wound under better lighting?"

That was probably wise. "Perhaps."

The two of them worked together to lift me up. Remy tried to get me to climb on his back again, but I wanted to walk. If there were any others wanting to take out a Royal, I could not risk being spotted with any obvious weaknesses. It was bad enough I could

already see curious eyes peeking out from behind curtains and watching as I limped along.

“I’ve got an office. We can hide out there until your room is cleaned up,” Lucy offered.

The office was thankfully not too far inside the inn. It had no windows which allowed for extra security. They helped me into a patched up but comfortable armchair. Even walking just that short distance had left me winded. At least the winded feeling was just from pain from infection rather than venom. The likelihood of the others finding a correct antidote in one of the books and then managing to gather the ingredients and make it before it could kill me were slim.

Lucy clapped her hands together sending up a cloud of chalk dust. “I’ll get those items. You two just rest here.”

I leaned back into the chair. “Explain,” I said once Lucy was out of the room.

“Explain what?” Remy sat on the edge of the desk studying a collection of postcards and polaroids tacked up on one of the walls.

“How did you know?”

“The sound of the eggs cracking woke me up. I didn’t know what was making the noise at first, so I took out my earbuds. That’s when I ended up overhearing the disaster duo talking about their plans to kill you,” he replied.

“You still chose to save me?”

Remy shrugged. "I'm pretty sure our contract states that I am not allowed to just stand by when I know you're in mortal danger and can do something to help. I'm only allowed to sit out if it's obvious that whatever it is could lead to a very permanent death."

I had nearly forgotten that. It did explain things though. Remy had no other reason to want to save me. I had managed to ensure that myself, even if it had not been my intention.

The sound of a footstool being pushed across a wood floor filled the room. I would have actually been startled by it if I would have had any energy left to react with. Remy took my ankle in his hand and lifted my leg to rest on the stool.

"Elevation is important for these kinds of things," he said. I didn't bother to correct him that with a demon fire ant bite, whether the injury was elevated or not did not matter.

Remy went back to fiddling with some things on the desk. He picked up a pen and twirled it around. He hummed a bit under his breath. I waited a moment to see what effect his voice would have, but Remy was just humming. He was not using his powers at all in that moment. He was once again without his sunglasses, and in the dim lighting of the office, his face looked softer.

"Thank you for earlier. Even if you were contracted to do it," I offered.

Remy fumbled with the pen, just barely catching it before it hit the desk. He went back to twirling it around. "Yeah well. It would have been a shit way to go." He glanced over at another wall making it impossible for me to see his face any longer.

“It would have,” I agreed. I closed my eyes. I inhaled through the next wave of pain. I could feel the pulse thumping in my leg. This was not going to be fun.

The door to the office opened again, and Lucy barged her way inside carrying a tray loaded down with all the necessary supplies. Remy hurried to help her before she dropped anything. They got the tray onto the table, and I pushed myself to sit up straighter. Before I could lift my leg from the stool, Remy shoved me back down with a hand to my shoulder. “You’re the supervisor. Just tell us what to do,” he said.

“Crush the mint and blend it with the honey. Hand me the dagger and that emesis basin there.”

“Why do you need the basin-, this is going to be gross isn’t it? It’s going to be gross.” Remy at least kept stirring at the same speed that he ran his mouth. He moaned and whined some more about his sensitive nose and stomach, and rather than finding it annoying, I focused on the words as a way of distancing myself from what I was about to do.

Lucy paused while handing over the dagger. “I could do it,” she offered.

“I prefer to do it myself,” I assured.

She took another look at my leg. “If you change your mind, just let me know.”

I took a moment to examine my dagger. It felt like mine. The bond was there. Bonds could be tampered with though. There were other ways to examine it. I checked

the weight and balance. I ran my fingers over the custom hilt and searched the blade for the nearly invisible engraving I had hidden on its surface.

Then I checked for any signs of a curse being added. Remy's hand appeared in front of me, and I handed over the dagger without a word. Remy did his own examination then handed it back. "It's clean," he said. He had known what I was searching for, and having him double check put me at ease.

"You two don't trust easily, but then, after tonight, I suppose I can see why," Lucy said. She crouched down. "Let me at least hold the basin for you even if only to spare my floors from any more mess tonight."

"Thank you. I am sorry for all the chaos we have brought to your inn tonight," I apologized. It seemed because of my own reckless decision I was bringing trouble to more and more people each day.

Lucy gave a dismissive wave. "Don't be sorry," she said. "You can't control the actions of others. Besides, this place can get a little monotonous at times, but you certainly managed to shake things up."

I leaned forward in the chair and nodded for Lucy to press the basin right under my leg.

"Wait! Wait! Verbal instructions please!" Remy's face had gone a bit pale. "I need some warnings."

I sat back up. “I am going to take this dagger and cut open the wound to get out the infection. It is going to have to drain for several minutes. I might have to apply pressure to get some out, but I will go until only blood is being released. Then I will rinse the wound, apply the salve, wrap it, and finally ice it.”

Remy seemed surprised I had actually taken the time to explain, but then he turned back to face the desk. “Well then, I’ll be staring in this direction until that first part is done. Best of luck though.” He started stirring the mixture again even though it had to have already been perfectly blended. As long as it kept him distracted, that was fine. I did not want to be dealing with him puking or fainting while I was trying to perform minor surgery on myself.

As soon as I was sure he was actually looking away, I angled the dagger and stabbed into the edge of the wound. I cut around the edges. Clear liquid poured out of the cut and into the basin Lucy was holding. The smell of infection filled the air until I nearly choked on it. Remy coughed then started humming again.

When I had opened the wound sufficiently I wiped my dagger off with a clean towel and placed it aside. Then I leaned back in the chair and waited for the pain to ease and the liquid to finish draining.

Lucy worked quietly beside me. There was more liquid draining from my leg than I had expected there to be. The emesis basin was close to full in moments. Lucy had to reach over and grabbed a nearby trashcan, dragging it into place where it would catch everything. She dumped what had already gone into the basin into it. “I think we may have underestimated how much was going to come out,” she stated the obvious. “If it

looks like it will overflow the trashcan, I'll just grab a second one." We both knew that was not possible, but from the gagging noise Remy made, he did not.

I checked on him again to distract myself. Remy had stopped stirring and was holding onto the desk's edge. His knuckles were white.

"Sit down before you fall down." I echoed Remy's earlier comment.

Noticing the situation, Lucy slid a chair over to him. He plopped into it and put his head down on the desk.

"Not a healer, I take it?" she asked.

"He can handle certain aspects of first aid," I offered.

"Not pus." Remy choked back another gag.

"Not pus apparently."

"How long do you think that whole draining thing is going to take?" Remy swallowed so hard, I could hear the action. I wondered if that was how things normally worked for him. If he could always hear people swallowing or chewing. If so, I could not blame him for keeping his music playing.

"Ten minutes. Approximately," I told him.

"There's an extra bowl here if you need to puke," Lucy tapped a purple bowl against the desk's surface. It was small, but it would hold that much. Thankfully she had not offered him the emesis basin.

“No, I’ll be fine.” A few quiet minutes passed before Remy managed to look up, but he still refused to look in our direction. “That’s an interesting painting.” He had found himself a new distraction. To be fair, it was a good one.

The painting behind Lucy’s desk showed a depiction of the Fates, the same ones we were supposed to be finding. The three women had been painted with sharp angles. Their faces were covered in shadows except for the cruel smirks on their faces. In the middle of the three hung a tapestry. The threads of the tapestry were perfectly neat while one of the Fates held another thread and was twisting it into a knot. The other two were holding another strand between them while one of them clutched at a pair of scissors.

“One of our visitors painted it for us about twenty years ago.”

Remy got up and moved to stand right in front of it. “Is the painter someone famous? The style looks familiar.”

The style did look familiar now that he had pointed it out. I searched my memory of all the paintings I had ever studied: both mortal and demon painters. It was unlikely to be anyone from one of the other realms considering the only people who had ever made it to the Fates had been mostly demons and only a handful of mortals.

Lucy shrugged. “I didn’t recognize her as anyone famous. Seemed like another upper-tier demon who wanted to do something exciting for once. She stayed here only a day the first time she passed through. Barely said a word to anyone. She ate then went up to her room for the night, and she checked out first thing in the morning.” Lucy paused for a moment as if gathering her memories.

“I believe it was about a week later that she came back through, but then she wasn’t in a hurry. I guess whatever she saw out there did a number on her. She booked a room for two weeks. She didn’t speak a word that whole time. She just sat outside and worked on that painting nearly all day every day. When it was finished she took off and left the painting behind. We kept it in case she ever came back for it. Occasionally we display it out in the main room to add to the charm of the place.”

Remy stepped back then forward as he took it in. Meanwhile, the liquid from my leg took on a pinkish tint then finally there was a sluggish red. All the infection was finally out.

“Time for the next step,” I announced.

Lucy picked up the trashcan and put down the smaller bowl and a towel to catch whatever of the saline or salve we might spill. “I’ll empty this then come back and help with the bandaging.”

Remy turned toward her. He kept his gaze up and away from the trashcan and emesis basin. The lack of sunglasses made his expressions far too easy to read, and I could see he was up to something.

“Thank you for everything.” Remy’s voice came out thick and too sweet, like the honey we had just blended into a salve. “But we can handle this from here. Why don’t you go rest?” There was a hint of melody to his words, more noticeable toward the end of the sentence.

Lucy’s eyelids drooped. “I am tired.”

“Go rest. Please. Don’t let us keep you longer,” Remy continued.

“Yes, I’ll rinse these, and then I’ll go rest,” She said and left the room.

“What was that for?” I asked.

“She looked tired, and we needed a chance to look at the painting without her.”

Remy took a seat on the floor and started rinsing out the wound. He worked steadily and with the expertise of someone who had done this kind of task before. “Whoever painted that painting is beyond the normal amount of talent. Looks almost like a Royal amount of talent,” he noted.

“Almost but not quite,” I agreed.

“Not quite,” he echoed. “And being that close to something but still unable to reach it might drive some people to take extra risks.”

“Such as going to the Fates. Like us.”

He nodded. “Like us.”

It seemed we were of the same mind.

Remy finished rinsing out the wound. He patted at it lightly with a clean piece of gauze to dry it a bit. When I winced he paused, but he did not bring it up or apologize. He waited a moment then continued his actions.

“What is the likelihood of another Royal demon setting up this same task for his own heirs?” he asked.

“Not high.” I did not bother to calculate the actual odds. That was not necessary in this case.

“What are the odds of someone attempting this same quest of yours before you and failing?”

Even the first two rounds had been enough to eliminate the other competitors, but Dantalion had been looking for an heir for centuries. Others would have had to have made it to the final stage at some point. From the murmurings I had overheard, at least a few had made it to this stage.”

“Possible,” I admitted. “But if whoever it was would have been doing this quest then she obviously failed, and if she failed, that means she’s dead.”

Remy froze. The honey salve slowly trickled down the applicator to drip onto the towel. “One of her ninety right? She would have died here in the untamed zone, resurrected, and then came back annoyed.”

“Not one of the ninety. To fail this quest is to die permanently,” I replied.

Remy inhaled sharply. His lips pressed together into a tight line. His touch was gentle as he applied the salve and then again when he wrapped the wound with gauze and handed me the ice pack to hold against it. He put up the entire first aid kit and the rest of our supplies before he spoke again.

“If you would have just told us your very existence was on the line to begin with, we could have planned an even better way to help you, you absolute drama king!” Remy did not hold back that time.

I felt as though I should probably remind Remy that other people in the inn were attempting to sleep, but also I felt that I should keep my mouth shut at that moment. Remy seemed to remember that others were sleeping as his next words came out much softer.

“It’s a curse right?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“You made some kind of verbal agreement?” Remy dug his fingers into his hair. He had freed it from the buns he normally put it in when he had showered and gotten ready for bed, so he had plenty of loose hair to grab onto. For a moment it looked as if he would yank a chunk of it out with the way he was tugging at it.

“I believe so,” I replied. There was a possibility that agreeing to the terms of the test could be considered a verbal agreement. Remy stared at me in disappointment. I felt like a scolded child.

“Okay.” Remy took a deep breath. “All curses are basically contracts. As the Royal Demon of Deals, Nic probably could have found a loophole. At the very least he could have gotten you more time and resources.”

He paced in circles around the small office as he listed off of all the ways we could have had an easier trip if I had just mentioned the consequences. He paused a moment to pull out the phone he had used to track Nic and checked it. “Still no reception,” he muttered and went back to pacing.

He looked like he was just getting started with his tirade, so I went against every instinct I had and decided to play up my pain, if only to get out of the lecture and get back to bed. Even if he did not particularly care about my well-being, he would be smart enough to want me to survive because otherwise he would have to trek back through the desert on his own and without any backup.

I groaned and made sure to channel some of my real pain into it. He would know if I was faking. The obvious admittance of my pain stopped Remy in his tracks, and he turned. For a moment I thought I saw real concern on his face. I kept making that mistake though, thinking I saw affection where there could not possibly be any.

“Right. Bed for now. We’ll continue this discussion after we both get some sleep,” Remy said.

We trekked back to our room. I found that I did actually have to rely on Remy to make it up the stairs. It was not just the pain in my leg. The infection had left me feeling weak. I needed a few hours of sleep if I was going to recover. Thankfully, everyone else seemed to have finally called it a night as well, and we were able to make it all the way to our room with no problems and no witnesses.

The room had been cleared of the ants. There was a lingering scent of chalk, but that was more likely a precaution to keep out any other pests away than because of a lack of cleaning. The door had even been swapped out for one without damage. None of our stuff had been touched, not that I was in a mood to do a close examination at that moment.

Remy propped me up against the doorframe and began his own search of the room. He held up a finger to his lips to signal for me not to talk, not that that would be an issue. He took out his earbuds and padded silently around the room. He lifted up the fresh sheets and pillows Chimei had made the beds with and searched under the mattresses and under the beds themselves. He opened drawers and peered into the wardrobe. He even looked behind the curtains.

“All clear,” he assured. I hopped over to my bed and fell onto it.

“Are you going to be able to walk tomorrow?” Remy asked. I could hear him climbing into his own bed.

“I will be fully healed in ten hours. It is a late start.” The detour had ended up taking up more time than we had planned, but up until the fire ants, it had been worth it.

“A late start with a healed leg is better than starting too early and doing damage that’ll slow you down in the long run,” Remy remarked.

“I agree.” I trusted he could hear my muffled response even through the pillow.

Remy started talking about how we were going to have a conversation in the morning. Only Remy would launch into a conversation about a conversation we had agreed to wait to have, but once again, his voice was soothing. I would not realize until late the next day that Remy had not been using his power that time, and I had just gotten accustomed to his voice.

Chapter 6

Remy

We were celebrities at breakfast. All the other guests had their eyes on us, but none of them were whispering anything too bad. Word had gotten around about just how good my hearing actually was, and no one wanted to risk the wrath of a Royal or his equally handsome and powerful companion. I had overheard that remark. I had liked that remark, but the demon who made it had noticed when I heard it and ran off with a blush on their face before I could thank them. That had been the last of the comments about us that morning.

Cato's leg was better as he had said it would be. He hadn't stumbled or winced once when taking the stairs down to the dining room, and I had been watching and listening for even the slightest sign of pain. The injury seemed to have fixed his appetite as well. He was digging into his breakfast as fast as I was.

"Ready to talk about that deal you made?" I asked.

"It was not a deal." Cato said, then he shoved another forkful of egg into his mouth. "We should pack some pastries for later today."

"Are you changing the subject?" I wondered if my eyebrows were visible above the rims of my sunglasses. It felt like they had jumped that high. "That is my tactic. Thank you very much."

Cato rummaged in his pocket for a moment and drew out an envelope with a letter inside. “The night I killed Dantalion he asked me to stab him. I did. I didn’t know he wouldn’t get back up. When I went back to the estate, they gave me this letter. You can read it. It will explain.”

That was much more like Cato. In just that short explanation alone he had probably already used up his daily word count. I picked up the letter and read the note for myself while Cato kept eating.

The letter wasn’t what I had been expecting. I read through it twice. Cato had twenty days after killing Dantalion to get to the Fates and get them to...what? Change someone’s fortune for the better? If he didn’t he would die permanently and Dantalion would come back and try finding another heir. It made no sense. “Dantalion wrote this?”

“That’s what she said.” He looked at the bacon on my plate, and I slid it over for him to take.

“Who said?” I asked.

“Tullie. His daughter.” He said and helped himself to the bacon.

“Tullie?”

“Do you know her?” Cato asked.

“I know of her.” Adeona had mentioned her when we were children, and she had decided that if she had to memorize all the Royal lines, I would have to as well. Despite Tullie looking around our age, she was actually nearly one hundred. Once demons hit

twenty, they physically aged one year for every one hundred mortal years they experienced, give or take a few youth potions and the occasional botox session.

“She’s not been seen much.” Similar to how Adeona had been raised rather isolated, and how I had been one of her few playmates, Tullie had also been the only child of a Royal and had been carefully guarded until her adulthood when she decided to branch out. “She travels quite often trying to find inspiration for her paintings. I don’t think anyone’s seen her in the past five years or so.” I tried to recall the last time I had heard anyone speak of her. “She’s really been at home this whole time?”

“There is a painting in the manor of the blue sands. She painted it,” Cato said instead of answering.

I was able to piece it together for myself though. “And you think she might have painted the one in Lucy’s office. That she might have been the one to come through twenty years ago. Any chance you got a-”

Cato had already pulled out his communicator, a much superior device compared to the mortal phones even if it also got no reception in most of the untamed zone. He unfolded the device to set it at its largest screen setting and pulled up his gallery. “I took a picture on the way out.” He handed it over for me to study.

There were no doubts about it. The heaviness of the brushstrokes, the way the shadows were depicted, and the 3D effect were the same in both paintings. There was the same texture to the paint, the same sharpness to the shadows. Even the hovering clumps of blue sand appeared to be floating out of the frame in the same way the threads on the

painting in the office seemed to be pulling themselves from the canvas in an attempt to strangle the viewer.

The paintings could be part of a set they went together so well. If someone like me who had just barely passed high school art could tell the similarities then Cato, who was the new Royal Demon of Art, should have no doubts. Here he was though asking for my opinion, like it mattered.

“You’re the one who is supposed to be the Royal Demon of Art.” I called him out on it. “What’s your opinion?”

Cato put his communicator away and took the letter back. He folded it up, placed it back in its fancy envelope with the ribbon and seal, and tucked it into his pocket. “It is hers, but why would she have been here?”

“I would say taking a trip for inspiration, but with how Lucy described her stay here, it had to be more than that. I think she wanted the title for herself.”

“No. She said she never wanted it,” he said, as if it were that simple. As if everyone meant exactly what they said. For someone so smart, Cato could be clueless.

“Everyone wants power,” I corrected.

Cato stopped eating and started pushing his food around on his plate. He dragged his fork through a runny egg yolk and drew out a design with the yellow liquid. That royal power of his was already kicking in. He had even made a plate of eggs look like

artwork. “If Tullie had come through in an attempt to claim the title, she obviously failed. She should be dead.”

“Maybe Dantalion hadn’t put that clause in yet, or maybe he made an exception for his daughter. Did she ask you for anything or say anything that might...” I waved my hand about. “Anything that might be a clue?”

“She asked that if I succeed I let her remain at the manor. I told her I would,” he said.

“You didn’t sign anything?”

“No, just a verbal agreement.”

I exhaled. I didn’t think about why I was so relieved that Cato hadn’t locked himself into that kind of contract. “Since you aren’t technically the owner of the estate yet, a casual verbal agreement for something like that won’t hold up in most cases. You’re safe if she does happen to have some kind of agenda.”

Cato continued turning his food into an art piece. “I want to think she just wants to stay in her home. I do not want to think she is plotting something.”

“Benefit of the doubt then.” It was easy enough to agree to that train of thought for the time being. At that moment there were too many possibilities and not enough evidence for any of them. “Who knows. She could have just been out here helping set up something for her dad’s plan,” I said. Cato relaxed at those words and even managed a few more bites of food.

We set out to hike again not long after our late breakfast. Lucy and Chimei saw us off.

“Succeed at whatever it is you’re trying to do and then come back here and celebrate. I’ll make drinks in your honor and put them on the menu.” Chimei wrapped me in a warm hug.

“Counting on it,” I told him.

Chimei held his arms out to hug Cato as well. Cato allowed a brief side hug. Lucy gave us both a firm handshake. “I’ll be waiting to hear about all your adventures, at least what parts you can share of them,” she said.

“We’ll be back.” Cato didn’t sound so sure.

“We’ll be back.” I echoed. “Count on it.”

Three hours later it became apparent that neither one of us were actually any good at hiking. Trekking across the sand had just been walking. The first part of our mountain climb up to the inn had apparently been some kind of beginner’s level version of hiking. Now we were out in the actual untamed zone.

The trails had disappeared two hours earlier. Everyone had been so determined to avoid what had happened to the unlucky ones before them and instead find their own “safe” way through the wilderness that there were no worn down paths. There were barely any signs that any kind of demon or mortal had ever wandered through. We were forced to scale up large rocks, squeeze between tree trunks, and on the rare occasion, pull

each other out of animal burrows. Okay, that last thing had only happened once, and yes, I was the one who fell into the burrow. I had been distracted by a particularly hungry looking plant.

We traveled on that way for two more days. I found that I was a little less inclined to bother Cato and a bit more inclined to try to move our relationship from purely professional and begrudging into something closer to friendship. We were already close to it. I could tell. Cato didn't seem opposed to the idea either, but he still wasn't making it easy.

When we set up camp for the third night since the inn, we were both bruised and scraped up. It was nothing too harsh, but it was enough to be uncomfortable. Cato had gone back to his silent mode while setting up the camp, and I- I was done. I was finished not knowing where I stood with Cato. I was tired of Cato wandering about with a sullen expression as if he was counting on us to fail. I was going to fix it.

While he got the fire started to cook our meal, I pulled out a bottle Chimei had generously gifted me before we left. "We get one night to sulk, and then we're done with it."

Cato glanced at the bottle of demon brew that I was waving around. "We don't have time for that."

"We do." I assured. "Whether we succeed or lose, we should have at least one last night of fun."

"You've been saying that about a lot of things," he replied.

I shrugged. “What can I say? I enjoy enjoying things.” I poured out a cup of the alcohol. There was no need to measure when the point was to get us both wasted, and there was no alcohol more effective for that than demon brew.

I held the cup out. Cato stared at it for several long moments, but then he accepted it. “If something eats us tonight, and we resurrect, the first thing I am going to do is kill you a second time,” he warned.

I paused with my cup pressed against my lips, and Cato chuckled. It was a real chuckle. I was so shocked that I nearly dropped my drink. “Did I miss something?” I asked.

Cato downed his cup and reached for the bottle to pour himself another round. “You know, if something does eat us, I think it will be better to be drunk than sober after all.”

“Good for you for looking at the bright side of things.” I was impressed. Maybe he was gaining a sense of humor.

I downed my own. The brew burned all the way down my esophagus and hit my stomach like lava. I poured a refill, but while Cato was already sipping on his second round, I held mine. I waited for the tension to leave Cato’s shoulders before acting on my plan.

“What’s your real age by the way?” I started with something simple. Something safe.

“I will be twenty in January. If I live that long”

Back to the death topic, and I thought I was bad. I concentrated instead on what information he had given. “You’re younger than me then,” I said with some glee. “I turned twenty in October.” Maybe we were a bit old to be bragging about such things, but I couldn’t help it. I had assumed he was older for so long that finding out the opposite was quite amusing. “You’re so young,” I teased.

“Guess so.” Despite his nonchalant words, his tone was warm, but that might have been the demon brew’s influence.

“Okay, now you ask a question,” I instructed.

“Why?”

“That’s how the game works.”

“The game is to just take turns asking each other questions?” he asked. From his tone I could tell he was not impressed.

“Yes?” I offered.

Cato shrugged. “Why are you so afraid of a first death?”

Not easing into things then. “I just don’t want to be trapped in this realm for all of this existence.” I took another sip of the brew. It seemed I was going to need just as much as Cato to get through this. “Why did you want to become Dantalion’s heir?”

Cato winced at that. He stared down into his cup as if searching for the answer. “It was a good opportunity. Take a Royal demon’s title without having to steal it. No bad blood.”

I could see that. “If he hadn’t had that offer, would you have tried to kill another Royal for his role?”

“It is my turn to ask a question,” Cato protested.

“You’re right. Go ahead.” I poured him another round in apology.

“What kind of demon is your mother?”

“Was.” I corrected automatically. I could see the “sorry” already forming on the tip of Cato’s tongue, so I continued talking before he could say it. “Her name was Samara. She was a key demon.” I saw Cato’s gaze drop to my bracelet, and the key charm that was threaded on it.

Key manipulation was a coveted power in the Underworld. Not only could they lock or unlock objects, the most powerful could lock or unlock parts of the mind. My mother had been powerful. I had several memories of Royals seeking her out for her abilities during my childhood years. I’d had to watch from hiding places around the house whenever they visited. She said it was too dangerous for them to know who I was. She had only trusted Mammon to know about me because she said he owed her and would never betray her.

Unfortunately, it was also her power that had likely been what got her killed in the end. I didn't know for certain. One day she had been fine, and the next I had come home to find her body on the kitchen floor. Like nearly all permanent deaths, her death had been caused intentionally. That much had been obvious. Adeona's father had had his own staff look into it as a final parting favor, but they had been unable to solve the case entirely.

The only thing they could find was that possibly someone who wanted to break into Mammon's vault had decided that she was the best in, and when she refused, whoever it was had taken it personally and killed her for that.

"What about your family?" I quickly changed the subject before I could dwell on it again. I had long ago accepted that I would never know all the details of my mother's death, but it wasn't something I liked to think about.

Cato thought for a moment. "My father is a haunting demon. My mother is a plant demon. She is the one with the Royal connection, one of Bifron's children." Bifron was known for his large family. He had at least sixteen children already and each of them had over a dozen themselves. It would be a war for inheritance once he finally showed signs of weakening, and as far as I was aware, Bifron had no interest in giving up his title without a fight.

"That's a big family."

Cato shrugged. "About average."

Royals seemed to have only two ways of doing things when it came to parenthood. Some had only one child that they planted all their hopes into and to whom they willingly handed their title over once they were ready to move on. If that child disappointed them, like Adeona apparently had with Mammon, the child would be banished until another offspring could be had, and then if child two wasn't a disappointment, child one would usually be eaten or dismembered. Whatever got them out of the competition for the throne.

In those cases, the child could either go into hiding or strike first. Adeona had never liked hiding and hadn't bothered to wait to see if she would have any competition. She had struck at first opportunity.

If child one didn't prove to be a disappointment but just didn't want the title, then the Royal would have a competition to find an heir if they did not want to wait around until they had another child and they grew up to prove themselves worthy or unworthy. Those cases were rare, but apparently it was what had happened in Dantalion's case with Tullie.

Most Royal families though were like Cato's. They delighted in the chaos that inheritance brought about. They had as many children as they could and let them fight amongst themselves for the title. The mentality passed on with most generations, and so each child would have dozens of children of their own in hopes of having their own amusement once they successfully claimed the throne.

A stick shifted in our bonfire, sending up a higher flame. It caused shadows to dance across the tent we had set up for the night. For a moment we were both distracted. Then Cato found his question. “How did you get your position as first assistant?”

“Luck.” It was the same answer I gave every time I was asked.

“Are we allowed to lie in this game?” Cato refilled my glass. He poured until the liquid sloshed dangerously close to the rim.

I chuckled. “Isn’t any circumstance all just luck really? Right time. Right place. All it is, is just luck.” I carefully brought the cup to my lips and took a sip until it was no longer in danger of spilling all over me.

“It was luck that my mom got the job she did working for Mammon, and that she did something so impressive he owed her. Then it was luck that his daughter happened to be Adeona, and she happened to like me. It was luck that she was too bored to study on her own, so she made me learn the things someone in her circles needed to know. It was especially lucky that even after she got banished by her father, he thought I still deserved a chance so he introduced me to Mephisto and told him that if he hired me, he would never regret it.”

It was even more luck that I had only had to work for Mephisto for just over a year before Nic came along and stole his title, becoming the new boss of the place.

“So you see,” I continued. “I am not lying. I got my position through luck. That is all.”

Cato

The demon brew had a fairly unpleasant flavor profile, but it did what it was meant to. That was all that mattered. I rarely drank with company despite the fact it was a popular pastime in the Underworld for as soon as a demon reached sixteen. Of course, I did not do a lot of things with company, mostly because of a lack of company.

Remy was quiet for a few moments after answering the last question. I worried I had pushed him too far, but then the strange look passed from his face. It was replaced by his usual smile.

“My turn again,” he cheered. He downed another cup. When he leaned forward to grab the bottle for a refill, he tumbled off of his small camping stool. For a moment he sat stunned on the ground. His mouth was open in shock. His eyes, once again shadeless, were wide. He glanced over at the overturned stool and burst out in a shocked laugh.

I did not even know I was laughing along with him until I had to gasp for a breath. The wheeze I made silenced Remy, whose amusement turned to amazement.

“You laughed. The chuckle was shocking before, but that was a full laugh you just did.”

“I laughed.” I was shocked by my own reaction. I could not recall the last time I had laughed so hard that I had to struggle for breath. I liked how it felt.

Remy's smile turned softer. "You should do that more often. You have a nice laugh."

I felt his cheeks grow red. How was I supposed to respond to a comment like that? Was I supposed to respond? To keep from looking rude, I busied myself with setting Remy's stool back upright. It had rolled farther out than I had thought. I stretched my arm out and nearly toppled over as well. It was some really good demon brew. I caught myself before I could land on my face. However, it was a close call. I slid to the ground next to Remy. "This seems safer."

"It does," Remy agreed.

We sat there for a moment. Remy shifted closer, and I fought down the instinct to tense up. He tilted a bit like he was going to lean his head on my shoulder, and my breath caught in my throat. Just before Remy touched me, he jerked upright. "Right. It's my turn again."

"Yes." I licked at my lips and searched for the bottle of demon brew. "It is your turn."

Remy hummed. "What's your favorite drama to watch?"

That was an easy question to answer. "I do not have time for dramas."

"Now who's trying to tell a lie?"

"I occasionally watch that one about the sorceress on the space train," I admitted.

“Oh! I love that one! It’s based on real events, you know.” As Remy launched into a detailed account of all the things he loved about the show, I found that my eyes kept drifting to Remy’s lips, his eyes, the way he flung his hands about as he spoke.

“Oh. Sorry.” Remy paused. “We were playing a game not rambling.”

“I do not mind.” I assured. I really did not mind. Maybe it was because Remy was a music demon, but each time he spoke, I found that I wanted to hear even more of his voice. “Is it my turn to ask a question?”

“Yes. Go ahead.”

“What are your hobbies?” I asked.

We went back and forth: hobbies, favorite musicians, favorite colors, foods we liked, foods we hated, all the things that could let someone get to know someone better but not with any pain attached.

At some point we had both scooted back to sit against the trunk of one of the large trees surrounding our little campsite. Both of us were too dizzy from the brew and too tired to hold ourselves up. Remy was the first to drift off. His empty cup slipped out of his hand, and his head tilted again. This time he did not jerk back awake. His head landed on my shoulder with a soft plop. Once again, I felt like I could not breathe. Remy was warm. His empty hand made it look like he was reaching for something in his sleep, probably the missing cup. More than likely the missing cup, but all I could think about was how perfectly his fingers would fit with mine.

I inched my hand closer bit by bit. I froze each time Remy shifted. After several agonizing moments, my pinky brushed against the back of his hand. That was good. That was enough. I would not risk more. Remy's hand twitched, and then he pulled my hand into his grasp. He linked our fingers together.

“You’re thinking too much,” he said.

Chapter 7

Remy

There were blank spots in my memory the next morning. I didn't remember when we finally put out the campfire and climbed into the tent. What did stick with me was the feeling of Cato's hand in mine. Something had changed between the two of us, but I wasn't sure either of us knew exactly how to define the change. Whatever it was, we would have to worry about it later.

Cato stumbled over a tree limb. I just managed to grab the strap of his backpack to keep him from landing face first. "Careful."

Cato nodded. "Sorry." The word came out weakly, like he couldn't quite catch his breath.

"What's wrong? Are you hungover?" I wasn't someone who really got hangovers. I tended to forget that others did.

"No. Took something for that."

I stopped walking. "Then what's wrong?" I asked. "Be honest. If you're hiding something I won't be able to protect you."

For a moment I thought he wasn't going to answer, but then he sighed. "I do not know. I just feel...wrong."

"Is it the curse?"

“Maybe,” he replied. “Not sure.”

“I thought we had more time.”

Cato had stopped walking as well. He had his gaze on the ground and looked to be moments away from kicking at the dirt. “We do. We have not been in any courts, so there are no time jumps we could have encountered. Unless, the deserts have their own time jumps.”

“No. I can sense time alterations through soundwaves. I can’t do anything about them, but I can at least tell if we’re in one,” I told him.

Cato stared at me again like I was some kind of specimen. “You know that is not something a lower tier demon can do. It is not even something a mid tier demon can do,” he said.

I hadn’t actually known that. I had never met another music demon. Our kind were a rarity, especially among the mid tier and lower tier demons which made up most of my social circle. “Fluke of genetics or something, I guess, but we don’t have time to worry about that right now. We have to figure out what’s wrong with you.”

“I will be fine,” Cato insisted.

I couldn’t believe him. “Now is when you choose to be positive?”

“Why not now?”

Because now was when we were actually in trouble. If he was weakening as quickly as he appeared to be, we were never going to make it to the Hall of Fates in time.

Cato would be dead, and I didn't want that. I really didn't want that. I couldn't say that though.

"Here. Let's switch bags. Mine is lighter. It'll be easier for you to handle," I said instead. I slipped my own bag off. Cato wouldn't be able to summon his wings with it on, but his wings had proved to be fairly useless in the untamed zone. It wouldn't make a difference.

"Why would your bag be lighter?" he asked.

"Because I packed all the pots and pans in yours when you overslept again." I tugged his bag off of him and fastened it around myself. If this was the kind of fashion you had to endure for having wings, then I didn't think I ever wanted them. Once I had the bag on, I helped Cato into his. "This is only temporary by the way. I expect you to do all the heavy lifting on the way back."

As I adjusted the straps to fit him, Cato glanced up to meet my eyes. Our foreheads nearly brushed together. I hadn't realized how close we had gotten while I had been helping him put on the other backpack. His nose somehow looked even sharper that close up. His lips were chapped, but they still had a softness to them. I really wanted to touch them.

"I will do it."

I blinked and jerked back. "Do what?" I asked.

"Carry the heavy bag on the way back."

“Oh.” I hoped my chuckle didn’t sound as awkward to Cato as it did in my own ears. “That’s great because I wasn’t planning to give you much of a choice about it.”

Cato smiled. “We should keep going,” he said.

The hike that day was rough. The incline was steeper than before, and at times we were climbing again rather than hiking. Within three hours though, there was already a noticeable difference in Cato. His breathing had gotten easier. His pace sped up to the point that I was having to put in some effort to keep up with him.

“I need a break,” I called out. I took a seat on a rock. Cato took a drink from his water bottle.

“Let me know when you are ready to start again,” he said.

“You seem to be feeling better.”

“Yes. The hangover cure must have taken longer than usual. This climate might have an effect on the potency of certain herbs,” he noted. I doubted that was the case, but he did look much better than before. Either way I would have to take him at his word. Potions had never been my strong suit.

The mountain we were on was beautiful. The trees were thick and full, so we were under a comfortable shade most of the time. Every so often we would hit a small clearing, and when we were in those we could usually catch sight of the other mountains and of both deserts. To my surprise, Cato took a moment to point out how the colors beautiful contrasted in a way that somehow fit perfectly together. He used a bunch of

artistic terms that I would have to look up later, but the sound of his voice as he described how someone could capture it all in a perfect painting made my skin break out in pleasant goosebumps.

If Tullie had made the same journey and not been inspired to capture that in one of her paintings, then she had definitely been in a rush. What a missed opportunity.

Along the way we had also passed by hundreds of plants and flowers that I had never seen before. They were all colors, shapes, and sizes. One orange flower had petals the same size as our heads. Another plant was taller than us and lean like a sunflower. It had something that resembled pink ribbons dangling from each of its many leaves. In fact, it took me a moment to realize that one of the pink ribbons was actually a thread and not a part of the flower. It had probably come from an earlier traveler who had passed through and gotten tangled in the plants. I carefully plucked the ribbon off the flower and tucked into my pocket. I had a feeling there could be far worse consequences for littering in the untamed zone than in other places.

If we didn't have to keep such a rough pace then it would have been a nice hike. I had already caught Cato eyeing a few of the plants, and his hand going toward the journal I knew he used for notes and sketches. Maybe on the way back, we could take our time and actually appreciate our surroundings. Maybe we could even get a few photos. That's if we had a trip back. If we failed, it would just be me going back. Alone.

The fear that clutched at my stomach at that thought had me folding over. Each time I considered Cato possibly dying, the pain grew stronger. It couldn't just be pure

concern. Something else had to be happening. Cato sent a concerned glance my way, but I waved him off. “It was a cramp. It’s already gone.”

Cato’s concern didn’t fade. “You need some electrolytes.”

He searched through the side pocket of the bag for one of the electrolyte packets. I took the moment to try to get my head together. I still accepted the packet and downed it. I couldn’t let that happen again. I had to be the positive one. We did not have time to dwell on what could possibly go wrong. We had to get to the Fates. I pulled myself back up.

“Much better. Let’s go.”

Cato

After eight more hours of walking and a close encounter with a demon-nibbling plant (it nibbled at the skin of demons but did not actually eat them, a fact that had made Remy so amused that he had stuck his arm in front of it multiple times during our short break), we stopped for the night.

I did not feel like I needed to stop yet. I actually felt more energetic than ever. I could probably hike another three hours at least. I chalked up the earlier lethargy I had felt that morning to being a side effect of the demon brew. It was the easiest thing to blame it on, and it allowed me to not stress over the curse. Despite my own energy, I still insisted we stop. Remy clearly needed a break.

I had not missed how strange he had been acting that day. Nearly every time I had glanced at him, he had had a dazed look on his face. It was noticeable even with the sunglasses he wore. He had not spoken nearly as much either. Everyone had days like that though, so I tried not to worry. After all, it did not seem as if I had managed to anger him again.

We had our actual meal of the day, the one that was not a dry bar of food or similarly dry tasting snack mixes but instead was something that had to be heated and eaten with a utensil of some sort. No matter what the food was, it always tasted better after a day of hiking. That night had been no different, and I managed to clean my bowl even with the familiar anxiety roiling around my stomach.

We did not drink that night. Instead after we had eaten, Remy crawled into the tent and fell asleep. I remained awake for a bit longer. I spent some time checking over the maps again. From the knowledge I had of the previous travelers and my own research, we should reach the Fates in the next three days. Once we was there though, I would still need to convince them to change the thread. I had no idea how long that would take, or even if I could manage it at all.

A twig snapped off in the distance. I froze. I listened for any sign of an animal heading toward us, but I could only hear the usual small creatures who were climbing up the trees and scurrying around the forest floor. I waited a few more moments just to be sure. I was tempted to wake Remy and have him listen as well, but I did not want to disturb his rest. Besides, if it were serious I was certain Remy would have already woken. I took his sleeping state as a sign that we were safe.

As a precaution I still checked the protection wards again. All of them were still functioning as they should. I finally settled into the tent next to Remy and after tossing and turning for a few minutes, I fell into a dreamless sleep.

The next morning I woke to Remy fixing a quick breakfast. The meal was nicer than what we had been eating for most of the trip. He had obviously been up for a few hours. He was humming to himself as he stirred the food in the pan. The tune was not a familiar one, but it was pleasant, comforting even.

“Good morning,” he greeted.

“What is wrong?” I replied. He was not the only one who could tell when something was wrong.

Remy kept his gaze down on the pan. “What do you mean?”

“You are up early. You were quiet yesterday. What is wrong?”

“I was tired yesterday, and then I had some weird dreams last night. That one flower, the one that looked like a cheese wedge, I kept dreaming it was chasing me and trying to make me into a grilled cheese sandwich. Not sure why a cheese plant would want to eat a grilled cheese sandwich to be honest, but it did seem very determined.” He rambled on as he scooped the food out of the pan and onto our plates.

He was lying, but I gave him the courtesy of not calling him out on it at that moment. To be honest, I was surprised I had even gathered up the guts to ask him what was wrong in the first place when I knew he was unlikely to share the truth. For someone

who talked so much, he revealed very little. It would be easier just to keep an eye on him and help him where I could.

“Anyway, I thought since I was already up thanks to that dream, we should have a better breakfast, and then we can walk longer today.” He handed me one of the plates. The meal had a decent amount of cheese on it. Maybe what he had said about having a strange dream had not been a total lie. Somehow that was more disturbing.

I thanked him for the meal and took a seat. I skipped the stool and instead just sat on the ground. It was more comfortable anyway. I noticed Remy did the same. “We do not have to walk longer today. We have been keeping a good pace,” I assured.

“I don’t mind.” Remy’s strange attitude continued through our meal and through the first part of our hiking. He wasn’t solemn any longer, but he kept his pace fast. Anytime I slowed for even a moment, he would prod me. “What’s wrong, old man? Can’t keep up?”

“If you are older than I am, then does that not make you an even older old man?”

“Yes, but I don’t act my age, so no one would ever know,” he said.

We reached a level area, and Remy started singing as he skipped along. Occasionally he would spin around to face me. “Let’s go. Let’s go. Let’s go!”

I knew I should not be thinking about how beautiful Remy looked strolling through the forest. I did not have time to consider romance when I was likely going to die in a few days. Not to mention that even if I did survive, it was unlikely that Remy would

return my feelings. Remy had plenty of offers, and once we were no longer in danger he would be reminded of that fact. Whatever had happened between us that night we had gotten drunk had just been the result of demon brew and having to be reliant on each other during the journey.

Remy was singing something about a girl waiting at a harbor when his words suddenly cut off. He placed a finger to his lips before I could ask what was going on. Then he tilted his head to the side. After a moment, he summoned his flute. “Someone is coming.” His voice was barely above a whisper.

I summoned my sword. “What direction?”

Remy shook his head. “I can’t-they’re surrounding us.”

“Who?”

“Rachne...and there are others with her.” Remy put his flute to his lips. He released a crystal clear note that flew through the trees. The wildlife around us stilled then they quickly scurried out of the area.

“Did you just put up a perimeter?” I asked.

“I don’t like when animals get hurt,” he replied.

“Fair enough.”

I searched the area for any sight of the others. If Remy could hear them, then I should be able to see them. I caught a shadow of movement. “There.” I gestured with my sword.

Remy sent a trill of notes in the direction. A shriek replied back. “Injured, but not enough,” Remy muttered.

Something shimmered above our heads. I launched myself at Remy moments before dozens of shuriken flew down from the trees and toward us. We rolled up against the trunk of one tree, and the blades dug their way into the ground where we had both been standing just moments before.

‘Rachne’s friends were dangerous. That was certain. I searched the tree limbs and spotted the owner of the shuriken. “I will handle this one.” I scaled the tree with ease. The other demon was a shadow demon. He flickered in and out of the darkness, but I had already locked onto him. He would not have an easy time shaking me off his trail.

“Great. I’ll just be down here. On the ground. Not on the very breakable limbs,” Remy called back.

A shuriken flew past my face. I dodged, but the edge managed to catch my cheek, leaving behind a cut. Blood welled up to the surface, but I wiped it away before it could drip down. My sword was useless in a tree. My dagger would not be much better. Luckily, I had my claws. I forced them out with a flex of my hands.

The shadow demon jumped back a branch and crouched down. A grin appeared on his face. “Wolves don’t belong in trees.”

Remy

Standing on the very firm, very solid ground I ended up face to face with ‘Rachne herself, and she had all four of her arms out. “Holding a grudge is not a good look on anyone,” I remarked in greeting.

‘Rachne’s fangs were elongated. A clear liquid dripped down their surface. I could hope it was just regular saliva, even as gross as that was, but I had a feeling she had gone a bit more venomous. A drop hit a leaf and caused it to sizzle. Definitely venomous. Or acidic. Either way it was not something to be touched.

“I brought some friends this time,” she replied.

I nodded. “I can see that. You are aware that wolf demons- like Cato-can see shadow demons clearly. Right?” For someone who worked as a researcher, she was proving to be horrible at the research part of her job.

“Silence!”

She was close to entering beastmode, a state where a demon went into a rabid rage letting their more animalistic instincts take over their humanity. Once a demon went into beastmode and rid themselves of their humanity, they could never return. They became the creatures who lived in the labyrinth or who hunted in the untamed zones.

“Maybe you should take a moment to breathe. We can talk all this out,” I suggested. She might be trying to kill us, but I didn’t think she was that evil. Misguided, but not evil.

One of the shadow demons up in the branches let out a howl. I glanced up to see Cato had his claws piercing the demon's side. 'Rachne's gaze shot upwards as well.

She clicked her tongue. "I'm afraid I don't have time to play with you myself, but my friends will be more than willing to keep you entertained," she said.

Hands shot out of nowhere and wrapped around my body, clinging to my wrists, my ankles, and my waist. Fucking shadow demons. I had forgotten how quiet they could be. 'Rachne turned and headed toward the trees. Her four legs and four arms scurried up the trunk of one tree in the direction of where Cato was fighting with the other shadow demons.

I would just have to trust that Cato could handle things on his own, because I was a little preoccupied with making sure that I was not going to be killed. It was getting to be a bit embarrassing how often I had let people sneak up and grab me since entering the untamed zone.

The shadow demons, it felt like there were three of them, pulled me back toward a group of shadows being cast by the trees. If they got me there, they would have the advantage. I twisted around. Their fingers dug into my skin. They wouldn't try anything until they got me fully out of the light, so I had some time. I couldn't get my flute to my mouth, and I couldn't switch out for my drumsticks either. It was becoming a frustratingly familiar problem. I would have to use my vocals. Again. That sucked. That really sucked.

I searched for the right note then took a deep breath. Before I could release the pitch a hand crammed a balled up piece of fabric into my mouth. It tasted like dirt and a bunch of substances that I didn't want to think too closely about. It blocked my abilities, but the shadow demon's sudden movement did give me one opening. Before the demon could jump back into position behind my back, I twisted the flute around and jabbed.

The sharpened point of the flute hit something. I thought maybe it was one of their legs. Either way the grip loosened on my one wrist until I was able to twist away. The other two demons kept their hold on me, but their shock at my sudden movement allowed me to stumble forward, dragging them along until we were back to the lit area of the clearing.

The exposure to the sunlight weakened them, not a lot, but enough for me to shove one to the ground while I stabbed the other through the chest with my flute. The one I stabbed fell back against a tree and slid unconscious to the ground. I stabbed the one on the ground through the heart as well. I killed quickly when I had to kill. It didn't make it any less pleasant.

I had only temporarily killed them. They would resurrect eventually, hopefully later than sooner, but it would just depend on which of their deaths they were on. I searched the branches for Cato again. Before I could locate him, a shadow demon's corpse fell to the ground. Like the others, he was fully visible once he was dead. A moment later a second corpse fell to land on the first. 'Rachne must have taken out a debt to be able to afford so many minions.

In the tree branches above, Cato stood. Blood dripped from the feral grin on his face. What appeared to be a piece of flesh, dangled from one of his fangs, which were longer than I had ever seen them be. The sight was chilling.

“Cato? You’re still in there, right? You didn’t go beastmode did you? Huh, Bud?” I tried to make a joke out of it. No way someone as logical and calm as Cato could have shifted so easily, but the crazed look in his eyes scared me. “You’re still with me. Right?” I prompted again. I could hear the shakiness in my own voice, and apparently Cato could as well. His grin disappeared. He wiped at his mouth with his sleeve, removing the torn flesh and blood until only traces were left.

“I am here,” he promised. “You did not get hit?”

I relaxed. “I’m fine.”

“Keep safe,” he said.

I didn’t know if that was an order to keep myself safe, or if Cato was promising he would keep me safe. Either way, I was rather touched by the words even if I couldn’t say so right then.

“Rachne’s up there somewhere. Watch your back,” I warned.

Cato nodded. “I am ready.”

‘Rachne wouldn’t attack alone, not when she knew how strong the two of us were. She had been confident moving while her shadow demons were around her, but the

moment we dropped a few of them, she had likely hidden herself away to prepare for a sneak attack

A rustling sound caught my ear. Not a spider demon. “There are more friends,” I called up to Cato. “They’re trying to sneak up on us.”

Cato crouched on the branch. “So they are. Do you think they like music?”

“I can find out.” I flicked my flute, clearing the excess blood off the end to prevent it from clogging the sound. I played a swift tune, aiming it out toward the area the rustling had come from but low enough that it wouldn’t hit Cato on its way. A loud swear erupted. I kept playing. I had caught my target.

As the tune continued, footsteps drew closer until two more demons danced out to the clearing. Unlike the others, they weren’t shadow demons. Instead one was an elephant demon. He didn’t much look like an elephant in his small form. He looked rather ordinary, but the bracelet on his wrist made his status clear. All elephant demons wore their symbol on their bracelets. The bracelets grew with them when shifted into their giant elephant form and shrunk again once they returned to normal.

I couldn’t quite tell what abilities the other demon had. She had no symbols or clear identifying features. I could tell though that she was not moving precisely to the beat. My manipulation ability was not my strongest weapon. I could control others’ movements, but only if they lacked self control. Often even then, I could only maintain it for a limited period of time.

Whatever abilities the second demon had, she was powerful. It was a common trait for those who could easily pass for mortals. The more mortal a demon looked in their relaxed form, the more powerful their ability. I had seen several giant demons cower at the sight of Adeona and her cotton candy colored pigtails before or Jezebel and her manicured nails. I knew better than to let my guard down in front of this new enemy.

I slowly ended the tune. I would need my drumsticks for this round, especially if the elephant demon decided to shift. I would have a few seconds where the one would still keep dancing. Enough time to switch out the instruments at least. It was the mystery demon though that had me worried. She would launch immediately, and I didn't know how fast she could move.

A soft thud sounded behind me. "Me." Cato informed before I could startle and accidentally turn my eyes away from our attackers to check. I took advantage of the backup to send away the flute and instead switch to my drumsticks. I slid my right foot back. My right arm went up into position.

Cato summoned his sword back to his hand. "You take the one on the left." That would be the elephant demon. "I will take the right."

"You don't know-" It was too late. Cato had already rushed forward to attack. As Cato raised his sword against the mystery demon, I turned my attention to the elephant demon.

"You got a name?" I asked.

"Jai. And she's Solar."

“Okay, Jai, let’s go.”

I needed to lead him away from where Cato and Solar would be fighting. Otherwise, we’d likely all end up accidentally mauling our own partners. Luckily, despite the fact that Jai was very much planning on trying to kill me, he was agreeable when it came to changing locations. I should have realized there was a reason for that.

‘Rachne’s incompetency at planning was apparently contagious. The moment Jai was out from between the trees, he grinned and grasped at his bracelet with his other hand. “It really is nothing personal,” Jai assured. “It’s just a job, and I wasn’t going to pass up on one that had such a good commute what with it already being in the untamed zone.”

Mercenaries tended to live out in the untamed zones. If they lived in the city of the Underworld, they would have too many people out for revenge, and their ninety lives would disappear in no time. Surprisingly, for a society where killing was rather normalized, mercenaries were still looked down on due to the fact that they killed solely for profit and not for revenge or a title. They took too many lives at too high of a rate for other demons to be comfortable with their presence.

“Yeah. A good work deal. I don’t personally know what that’s like. Work tends to suck for me. However, I support you taking a more positive approach to your own career goals.” As I rambled, I watched as Cato clashed with Solar. “What’s your friend’s...Never mind.”

A blood demon. Cato was fighting a blood demon. She had already focused on the cut on his cheek, and small droplets were floating out of his face and into the air. I started to shout a warning, when I was hit in the stomach. The breath flew out of me. My head bounced off the forest floor with a sharp smack.

“Oh shit,” I grunted the moment I could breathe again.

Jai jumped to his feet first. He tugged at the bracelet again, and his limbs began to grow.

“Shit. Shit. Shit.” I muttered. I scrambled to get back to my feet while Jai grew larger. I slipped and tripped to get out of the way. Jai stormed closer. His footsteps shook the ground. The tree branches bounced in time with each step.

Jai stood over me in his elephant form. He lifted one massive leg into the air. It was nearly the same size as the tree trunks surrounding us. He brought it down with a swift movement. I waited and at the last second rolled out of the way.

I grabbed my drumsticks, brought them up in front of my chest, and hit them against each other in a quick $\frac{3}{4}$ beat. The soundwave it sent off was enough to shake Jai but not enough to bring him down. It did give me just enough time to gather myself though, and that was all I needed to turn the fight.

I started a steady rhythm then switched to the actual beat of a song. Something with a rock edge felt suitable for the occasion. Jai stumbled back. He nearly fell on Cato and Solar causing me to let out another swear.

“Watch your six,” I shouted.

Cato leapt out of the way, narrowly missing getting slapped in the face by an elephant tail in the process. I swapped out the drumsticks for another attempt at the flute. I would have to try the manipulation song again to prevent anyone from getting squashed during our skirmish. I started the tune.

To my relief, Jai started following the sound even in his elephant form. It wasn't super effective. All I could do at that moment was just distract him from attacking the others. While I had to maintain the tune I couldn't actually attack either. I would have to wait until I got Jai settled a good distance from everyone else so I could make a quick attack, or I could hope that Cato would be able to spare a moment from his own duel to launch a strike in Jai's direction.

The latter didn't seem very possible as Cato and Solar kept chasing each other up a tree. I put more force into the song. Jai stumbled to the side, and thankfully away from the tree where Cato and Solar were fighting. Then Jai slumped. If he would just fall over, I would have enough time to put him down. A temporary death wouldn't stop him for long. I would have to knock him out and put a sleeping charm on him if we were going to get far enough away for them not to be an issue.

Cato and Solar were howling and screeching at each other like a pair of cats fighting. The sound grated at my ears. I tried to block the noise out long enough to switch keys to something stronger. A stirring on the ground alerted me to a shadow demon's resurrection. I put all my power into the next few measures. Jai tumbled to the ground where he released a loud snore. That would likely last longer than a resurrection at least.

I whirled around and sent a shrieking trill at the first resurrected shadow demon. The demon hissed at me and jumped back into the shadows. “That’s it? Going to run and hide?” I taunted. I tried to hide the exhaustion in my voice with a biting grin. “What’s your favorite genre? I’ll do you the favor of playing something you might like as I knock you back out.”

The shadow demon’s face flickered from concerned to amused. I had missed two of the others resurrecting. They were already scrambling up the tree trunks to grasp at Cato. Out of the trees came a larger body. All eight limbs were stretched out as ‘Rachne flew over my head on a thread of webbing. She was heading straight for Cato. Her venomous fangs glinted in the light.

Solar launched an attack at that exact moment. She used her powers to pull at every open wound on Cato’s body. The blood began to flow out. If he didn’t stop her quickly, he would pass out from the blood loss. ‘Rachne and the two other shadow demons were already heading toward him as well. I would have to get there fast if Cato was going to stand a chance.

I launched another note at the shadow demon. It sent him falling to the ground clutching at his head in pain, and my own head rang in empathy. I didn’t have enough energy for another long range musical attack, and I didn’t have the time to waste waiting for myself to recover. I had to run for it. I raced toward one of the trunks and used it to propel myself up to the lowest branch and then jumped from that branch to the next one. I was surprised by how easily I scaled the trees. I hadn’t really tried climbing trees much before, but it seemed I was good at it.

I was faster than the shadow demons at least. I reached the section of the tree they were at and used one of their shoulders as a step. Their attention went from Cato to me immediately. They grasped for my legs and nearly caught hold of my boot. I landed neatly on the next branch up where I had just enough time to find my dagger before they joined me.

“C’mon. Let’s have a stab at it.” I wiggled my dagger at them. “Get it? Stab?”

At least the one looked amused if pained by the corniness. The other one just got angrier. That worked too. They dove toward me, their forms glinting in and out of sight. One of them came dangerously close to locking down my shadow and trapping me in place. That was my mistake for assuming none of them would be powerful enough to call on such a skill.

“It’s just a little death for you. Only your friend will get the big one.” The shadow demon who had the sense of humor tried catching my shadow again. If she could get hold of it I would fall into an unpleasant trance until she either tired or decided to set me free.

“I don’t want any death at all today. Thanks though,” I replied. My dagger felt unfamiliar in my hand. If I happened to survive I would have to start practicing with it more often.

The no nonsense shadow demon struck again. He darted forward with his dagger aimed at my throat. His friend was a half step behind him. The three of us chased each other about on the branch. I focused on their movements. Their steps were not vivace but presto, a true feat for having to balance on the edge of a branch.

I, on the other hand, wasn't a runner, and I had trained in all the forms of fighting that allowed me to stand still for the most part. I didn't rely on being swift. I relied on being patient and efficient.

The moment one of them slipped, their pace going from the two hundred steps per minute down to a comfortable one twenty, I stepped forward and drove my dagger into his chest. I just barely remembered to keep a hold on it as the demon fell backwards from the branch, but it remained in my grip. I wouldn't have to worry about retrieving it. I was so proud of that fact that I missed the humor-appreciative demon driving a dagger into the flesh just above my hip until the pain erupted through my body.

"You absolute asshole!" I yelled out. That had hurt. It really really hurt. Caught off guard by my swear and the magic I had put into it, the shadow demon laughed again, and as she did, I flipped my dagger around and drove it through her throat. "We're even now," I said.

I jerked the dagger free. Her body dropped to her knees and then toppled sideways out of the tree and back onto the ground, much like when Cato had killed the two of them earlier. They would resurrect again and even faster than the last time. Cato and I needed to take care of the others quick, so I could put a sleeping charm on them and we could both get clear of the area.

Cato was still fighting between Solar and 'Rachne. His face was coated in sweat that had a pinkish tint to it. He had managed to stave off the blood attacks at least. In fact, it looked like he nearly had the fight finished when suddenly he stumbled. 'Rachne opened her mouth to deliver a venomous blow. I didn't think. I didn't have time to think.

My body acted without my control, and I jumped, flying from one branch over the other, almost as if I were gliding with wings.

When 'Rachne's fangs pierced my neck all I could think was how I had never seen Cato look so scared.

Chapter 8

Cato

I had not been watching. If I had been watching, Remy would have never been able to jump between me and ‘Rachne. I would have shoved him out of the tree first and hoped he would survive the fall. At the worst he would have had just his first temporary death. Instead I had taken my eyes off of him for just a moment and given him the opportunity to act recklessly, and now I was sitting at the base of a tree with Remy’s weakening form sprawled across my lap.

A short distance away was a line of corpses. I had killed all of them but the elephant demon, who was still in the trance Remy had locked him in. Seeing ‘Rachne’s venomous fangs in Remy’s neck had caused me to lose control. I had summoned some kind of Royal ability. I was not certain quite what it was. There had been no artwork for me to call on. I did not think it was one of Dantalion’s logic-related abilities either. The only connection I could make was that it could be a love-related attack. Perhaps that would explain why I found myself standing with their hearts literally in my hands.

I had not meant to permanently kill them, but I was not sure that I regretted it either. Remy had not yet died, but the venom was coursing its way through him. He was going to die, and it would not be a temporary death. ‘Rachne’s venom was too potent. The only thing that could save him was an antidote.

“I need help.” I whispered. I did not know who I thought might hear me. There was no one around and anyone who was around would likely be unwilling to help us.

Remy stirred for the first time since I had gotten him to the ground. He brought a hand up to cover mine.

“You good?” he asked.

I inhaled. My breath caught in my lungs. “I am fine.”

“That’s good.” Remy struggled to get a breath. “I don’t think I’m good.”

“You will be fine.” It was a lie, but I had heard that some people found comfort in those.

Remy laughed. “Unless you’ve got some kind of mystery cure on you, I’m not sure I will.”

A mystery cure: the words struck something. I shifted my hold on Remy. “I know what to do.”

Dantalion’s voice from what seemed like years ago now came to my mind. “*If you get it right, you’ll receive life.*” That knock-off raspberry tea smelling concoction had been a cure for most venoms. It was not a guarantee, but it was a chance.

I had some of the items needed for the tonic in my bag, all the ordinary base ones and the one rare one that was almost impossible to find. I just needed to gather the rest, and we were in a forest that happened to have a generous variety of plant life.

I gently slid Remy off my lap and worked quickly to get our tent set up. I used every protective barrier I knew to make it virtually untouchable. If my planned failed, I

would be left alone and unprotected for the rest of my journey. I was fine with that. It would be what I deserved.

I carried Remy inside the tent and got him settled as comfortably as I could manage. “I am going to have to leave you for a little while, but you will be safe here,” I told him.

By then Remy was too out of it to understand my words. That was fine. It was probably better that way. I lingered only long enough to fiddle with the little bracelet Remy used to switch his music playlists. It was on the opposite wrist from where he normally wore the charm bracelet. The charm bracelet had been broken during the fight. I had gathered up the pieces and put them aside until I could wake him up.

At least the other bracelet had made it. It might not be as sentimental as the lock one, but it was the one that controlled Remy’s music, and he needed music right then. I used the controls on the bracelet to flip through his music collection and selected the list called The Dreaming. Hopefully, it would work to keep Remy relaxed until I got back. I had only two days at most to gather what I would need and produce the tonic before the venom could kill Remy.

“I promise I am coming back,” I told him again. Then I went out in search of the plants I would need. I remembered seeing one about a mile back, so I started off in that direction.

Walking through the forest without Remy was not the same. There were no clever quips. There was no faint music to reassure me that someone was watching my back.

Then again, that was how we got into this situation. Remy had been willing to sacrifice himself to save me, and if Remy died because of that, I did not think I would ever forgive myself.

It took hours of nonstop searching to locate all the plants. I had had to consult one of my guide books a few times to try to guess the environments of some of the herbs. I did not stop to eat or rest. I just went from place to place gathering what I needed. As the hours passed, it got harder to keep up the pace. I tried to write it off as exhaustion from the earlier fighting and killing, but I knew that was not all it was.

It was the same feeling I had had the other day when I had tried to blame it on having a hangover. The feeling washed over me again until my limbs felt as if I were wading through water. It reminded me of when I had had the flu as a child. Only this time it was a reminder that I was running out of time, and I would soon be in as much danger as Remy currently was. It did not matter. I would save Remy even if it came at the cost of my own life.

After nearly fifteen hours of searching the area for plants, I found everything I needed and returned to the camp. I paused only long enough to check that Remy was still breathing. His expression did not look too pained. That made it somewhat easier to leave his side again as I prepped what I hoped would be the cure.

I set the ingredients out. It should have been easier than when I had made it during the test. I had my new Royal abilities making me a little more intuitive than before, and there was the lack of daze-inducing fog filling the air to disturb me. But my hands were shaking as I set out each herb.

I followed the same order as last time. At least I thought I did. Nearly three hours of muddling, mixing, and steeping passed by. No wonder Dantalion had looked bored. The task was excruciatingly long, especially when my time was already limited.

Finally the scent of raspberry tea greeted me. I checked the color again, holding it up to the early afternoon sunlight. Then knowing the risk of what would happen if I had screwed it up, I took a small sip and waited. The taste was exactly the same as before, both minty and medicinal and nothing like the raspberries it smelled like. I did not die or feel sick, so it was a success.

I poured it into a mug. It would have to work. It was my only hope. I climbed into the tent and lifted Remy up to lean against my chest. He was not waking, and someone with his kind of self-preservation skills woke when moved.

“Remy. Wake up please,” I tried. Again, he did not respond.

I changed his music to something a bit more energetic in hopes that maybe his abilities would take over if he was not consciously able to do it himself. As the thrumming sounds of EDM played through the earbuds, he stirred slightly. He let out a groan and turned his face from the sunlight coming in from the tent’s opened doorway.

“No.” I grasped Remy’s chin and turned him to where he could not hide. “You have to drink this. Then sleep.”

I pressed the mug to Remy’s lips. The first sip dribbled back into the cup. I tried tilting his head back. Hopefully, he would not choke. If I managed to cure him before he

permanently died but ended up causing him his first temporary death in the process, he would probably hold a grudge against me for the next century.

“Careful,” I kept warning. It took nearly half an hour to get him to drink the whole mug.

Once I got the tea into him, I removed the bandage from his neck. I took a damp cloth and wiped at the wounds. At first there was no difference, but then I could see the color changing. The worst of the redness began to fade. The rotting smell began to dissipate. Remy fell asleep again and unlike before, this time it was noticeably peaceful. He stirred again trying to bury his face back into my chest, and this time I allowed it. I even switched the playlist back to the softer music. My own exhaustion was too difficult to ignore any longer, so I maneuvered us both down onto our sleeping bags with Remy still curled up against me where I would know if he suddenly stopped breathing. Then I finally let myself rest.

Remy

I had always liked waking up with my ear on someone’s chest. I had dreamed of one day connecting with someone enough that I could even remove one of the earbuds while sleeping with a person and have just their heartbeat be enough to keep the chaos away. Despite that, waking up on Cato’s chest was definitely not how I expected to start my morning. I twisted around to where I could see his face. There were bruises under his eyes from exhaustion.

I tried to remember what had happened since the fight but only bits and pieces would come to me. I thought I recalled Cato forcing some kind of foul tasting beverage down my throat, and the strange taste that lingered in my mouth seemed to confirm that.

I pulled myself up and started to crawl out of the tent. Who knew how much time I had wasted being unconscious? A hand on my arm stopped me. “Where are you going?” Cato’s voice was rough from sleep. It sounded even better than usual.

I catalogued it in the back of my mind to revisit later. “To get us some food started, so we can go back to walking,” I replied and tried for an easy tone. Cato tugged at my sleeve.

“We have time to rest. We should rest.” He pulled me back down to his chest. Cato was a cuddler. Who knew?

“But...we have to find the Fates,” I tried.

“We will. Rest first.”

He made it all sound very appealing. Was this how people felt when I used my ability to encourage them to do something? My manipulation charms only worked if someone already kind of wanted to do the thing. Did I just want to cuddle with Cato? Was I also a cuddler? It would seem so.

The next time I woke, Cato was still asleep. The few extra hours of sleep had done wonders for the logic operating part of my brain, and I could see that we really needed to get our asses up and moving.

“C’mon.” I shook Cato’s shoulder. “We’re going to go find the Fates, and then we’re going to go on a vacation or like a staycation. You’ve got that nice manor waiting for you. I’m sure it’s got some cozy rooms and probably a spa and movie theater or something inside it. The least you can do after all this is invite me over to enjoy it for a week or two,” I rambled on in an attempt to keep him from falling back asleep.

Cato gave a very tired smile. His gaze went to my neck. Oh right. The wound. He was checking where the wound had been.

“You can have the manor if you want. It is the least I can do,” he offered.

A cuddler and a charmer. My almost dying had brought out so many new sides of the man. “Don’t be like that. You would have jumped in front of a spider demon to save me too.” I scrambled up and out of the tent before he could throw me even further off balance with his remarks. “C’mon. Let’s move. We’re wasting time,” I insisted. This wasn’t how things were supposed to work. I was supposed to be the confident and fun one. He was supposed to be the one blushing and stuttering.

I got our breakfast sorted while Cato finished waking. “Want to fill me in on what I missed?” I asked him once we both had a plate of food in hand. “What happened to ‘Rachne and crew?’”

Cato wouldn’t meet my eyes at first. “I killed them. Permanently.” His voice came out in a whisper. “I am sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing? They tried to kill us first,” I replied.

“You do not like death.”

“I don’t,” I admitted. “But if it comes down to us or them, then I’ll choose to keep us alive. So don’t apologize. You did what you had to do.” I glanced around the area.

“Where are the bodies though?”

“The elephant demon. I did not kill him. He took their corpses when he woke and left.”

“Jai,” I said, remembering his name. “When did he wake?”

“Sometimes between when I cured you and when you woke. I watched him leave.”

My trance had held as long as I had intended. That was good. “And how am I alive?” I remembered ‘Rachne’s venomous fangs digging into my neck. There had been no anesthetic effect. I had felt every bit of her teeth digging through my skin and muscle.

“Dantalion’s test. For one of the rounds we had to steep a specific tea. Apparently, it was a cure-all for most venoms,” Cato explained.

“What are the chances?” I muttered. “How could he have predicted ‘Rachne?’”

Cato poked at his food. “I do not think he did. He simply had us learn the most useful cure based on ingredients we can find here in the untamed zone.”

“And after that it was just luck?”

“Odds actually. Not luck,” Cato corrected.

My hand went to my wrist, but there was no charm bracelet there for me to fiddle with.

“It broke when you were lunging at ‘Rachne,” Cato explained as I stared down at my bare wrist. “I gathered all the pieces for you,” he added before I could get too upset. He pulled them from his pocket and handed them over. I had had to tie the bracelet back together a few times before, but this time the thread that ran through it had been split. I had to tie it back together, and the new knot made it too short.

When Cato saw my problem, he acted quickly. “I think I have something.” He pulled Dantalion’s letter from his pocket and removed the thread that was wrapped around it. “Here. Use this to lengthen the other one for now.”

I accepted the thread. It would work perfectly. I started to tie one of the threads to the other. The moment the threads touched, something grabbed hold of me. I went flying out of the forest and through space.

When my eyes focused I found I was no longer in the forest. I had landed on the plush carpeted floor of an unfamiliar room. A few feet away, Cato lay sprawled out, looking sore but otherwise unharmed.

“Any idea where we are?” I asked. It looked like some kind of personal study.

After a moment Cato spoke up. “We are at Dantalion’s manor. This is his study.” His attention was on a chair in the room with an end table next to it.

Voices sounded, and a group of five men entered the study. I recognized them instantly. Dantalion, Beleth, Murmur, Vapula, and Astaroth were a group no one could forget, and I had seen their photograph over the bar for years. The group walked right past us as if we weren't there.

"They're supposed to be dead," I said.

"They are," Cato confirmed. "This is just a memory replay."

Dantalion sank into the chair by the end table. He opened the drawer and pulled out a pen and notepad. "Murmur, it is your idea. You must be the one to explain it to them. I will take notes."

"Let me put on the music first. I feel like this will be another of his longwinded spirals." Beleth with his cat ears twitching went straight toward the vinyl collection in the corner of the room. He wasted no time in plucking out one of the records. "I bet the mortals will figure out this technology in a hundred years or so. Finally. They're really taking quite a while to progress their music these past few centuries. It's been disappointing to be honest." The record he chose began to play at a low volume, and Beleth collapsed onto a sofa. He moved his hands about like a conductor.

"You hear this harmony? It's perfect. I know you all don't quite get it, but a perfect harmony- it does something for those of us who are the Royal Demon of Music. Really runs through the body. You can't truly be the Royal Demon of Music if you haven't found perfect harmony. You're just kind of at half power. You get it?"

“No, and I’m not sure we want the details.” Vapula climbed into a rocking chair. He had a bottle of scotch in his hand and was swirling it about. “We should have grabbed a few more of these then.”

Astaroth chuffed. He grabbed the bottle from Vapula’s hand as he walked by and took it over to the desk where five glasses were set out. “I’ll just serve the rest of this before you can serve it to the floor.” He handed out the drinks then took his own seat on a beanbag chair in front of the fireplace. He remained decently perched on its surface for all of three seconds before he slid down to the carpet.

“What was that about serving floors?” Vapula teased.

Murmur ran a hand through his curls. “I just think we need to have a plan. Vapula was almost killed yesterday, and he’s only got three lives left to lose.” He plopped down into a fluffy reading chair and put his feet up on the footstool.

“Dantalion has gotten rid of all those chairs now,” Cato noted. “He replaced the one he is sitting in as well.”

“It’s good to redecorate regularly,” I remarked. We both knew interior decorating wasn’t the reason for the change.

“I think the important thing is that I didn’t die.” Vapula pointed out.

“But you nearly did. At any point one of us could die permanently. Some of us are close to using up our extra lives, and what are the rest of us going to do when that happens?” Murmur asked.

They all went quiet after that. The only sounds in the room were the music playing softly still and the sound of liquid sloshing around in the glasses.

It was Dantalion who spoke up again. “If one of us dies, then it’s time for the rest of us to go as well. It’s that simple.”

“Are you serious about that, Dan?” Astaroth asked. “Because I don’t mind the sound of it.”

“We can’t just agree to die if one of us dies. We have responsibilities. If we are to all die at once, then there will be a void. None of us have children to inherit, and anyone willing to kill us at random is not going to be someone we want to inherit our titles.” Murmur was acting as the voice of reason even if he had been the one to bring up the subject in the first place.

Vapula rocked back in his chair. “If one of us dies permanently, the rest of us get our affairs in order, and then we join him. We will pick someone worthy and hand our titles over to that person.”

Murmur raised his glass to his lips. “Says the person most likely to die first and to not have to deal with the actual planning.”

“But how are we going to pick suitable heirs?” Beleth asked. He had somehow flipped himself upside down on the sofa. He kicked at the air with one foot.

“We can design tests for them. Whoever passes the test should be worthy of taking our titles.” Astaroth said. He held up his hands, and Dantalion tossed him another

notepad and pen. “We can make the tests about our specialties. Make sure the person knows enough about what they will be ruling over, so that when our powers transfer to them they won’t be overwhelmed.” He started scribbling on the pad.

“Are we really doing this then?” Beleth asked. He looked around at the others from his upside down position.

Murmur groaned. “Yes. I do believe we are.”

“Well then-”

Before we could hear the rest of the plan, Cato and I were catapulted out of the room. There was the sensation of being flung around through space. Then we landed back on the forest floor at our campsite.

“What was that?” I asked. I ran my hands over the dirt to make sure it was real.

Cato stared at the threads that had landed next to us. “I believe we may have acquired some of the Fates’ threads,” he said.

I pushed myself up. “Maybe yours could have come from the Fates. You did get it from Dantalion. I’ve had mine for years. Way before I ever got involved in all...this.”

“The Fates are not bound by time,” he reminded me. His hand hovered over the threads for a moment, before he picked them up. He was careful not to touch them together this time.

“Do you think that they somehow planned this? That we have some kind of destiny?” I asked him.

Cato gave a small shrug. “I do not know what to think,” he admitted. He offered me both strings. I took them. A glance at my watch showed that that little trip we just took had taken no time from our present.

“Should we try again?” I asked. We could probably spare a minute to check.

Cato nodded. He reached over to take hold of my elbow. “Just in case,” he said. He had a point. We could not risk getting separated. I scooted closer to him to let him get a better grip on me. Then I eased the threads together with all the caution of someone handling electrical wires. I brushed the two threads together again. Nothing happened.

Cato and I glanced at each other. I tied the threads together. Again, nothing happened.

“Perhaps the magic is limited to one trip when not in the Fate’s hands,” Cato suggested.

“Yeah, maybe.” I reassembled my bracelet and got it back in its place on my wrist. I ran fingers over it, checking that each charm was secure. My head was still spinning from the unexpected trip through time, and it took me a moment to remember what exactly had happened for me to find end up waking with my head on Cato’s chest.

“About that fight yesterday...” I started.

“Two days ago,” Cato corrected.

I froze. Two days ago? “How long was I out?”

“Eighteen hours until I gave you the tonic. Then we slept for another eight.” He glanced up at the sky. “Maybe we slept for ten.” He started to search his pockets for his communicator.

“We wasted an entire day? And you were going to let me sleep in again?” That was too much time for us to be losing.

“I planned for extra time.” He assured. Our food and drinks were still where we had placed them before our trip in time, and he reached for his plate to resume eating.

“And how much of the extra time have we used now?”

“All of it.”

“So from this point, we can have no distractions, no detours, no nothing? We have to trek straight through.” I needed to know just what we were working with.

“We can still eat and sleep,” he said.

I nodded. “Well, we’ll cut down on sleeping time then and no more wasting time cooking. We’ll eat while walking and cut all our breaks in half.” I needed to build up more cushion time again. I wasn’t going to lose him.

“We do not have to do that.”

I was already on my feet and cleaning up our campsite. I ignored the stinging residual aches and pains running through my body from the venom. “I don’t know what came over you while I was out, but this is not the time to go into a whole ‘at one with the universe’ state. Now is the time to work harder.”

Cato's gaze followed me as I moved around, and it sent an unfamiliar but not unpleasant chill up my spine. "You almost died," he said.

It almost sounded like the whole ordeal had scared him more than it had scared me. "But I didn't. Let's not make my efforts go to waste. Yeah?"

Cato tapped his spoon against his plate. I recognized the tune as one of the songs from my favorite playlist.

"As you wish," he said after a moment. He grabbed for his backpack and began packing it up. It became a game of sorts, one we both knew we were playing but wouldn't admit to. Both of us tried to sneak glances at each other, and when we caught each other, we came up with excuses. "Do you know where the soup pot went?" "Should we redistribute some of the weight again?" "Good thing we grabbed extra supplies at the inn." Questions that didn't need to be asked, and comments that were redundant.

Once we were packed, I took the lead, trusting Cato would keep pace. I knew if I let Cato lead right then he would take it easier than we should out of concern for my recovery. I couldn't handle that right then. I couldn't handle a lot of the things that were occurring at that moment. I had nearly died, and not just a first temporary death, a real one, a permanent one. The thought made me light-headed and made me just anxious enough to be wary of a panic attack happening.

So I decided to ignore that trail of thought and consider the next biggest revelation. Cato seemed to have feelings for me, and I couldn't deny that I felt some kind of something in return. Now I had to deal with the possibility that there was a very strong

chance that even if we did have feelings for each other, Cato wasn't going to live long enough for us to see if anything could come out of it. Okay. That was not a great train of thought to be following either if I wanted to avoid anxiety.

I tried thinking about anything else. The plants, the cute bunnies hopping by, who Jezebel might have stabbed in the office this past week without me there to stop her. Nothing worked. All the stress, anxiety, and hope mixed together, and suddenly the sounds in the forest seemed louder than ever. I couldn't pull my attention away from one particular panda who was chewing his food at an unholy decibel. The smacking noise fought against the other sounds. Then the leaves were rustling off beat. And one of the birds was chirping in too sharp of a key.

"Turn your music up." Cato's hand was around my wrist where one set of the controls were for the earbuds. He tapped at the volume button. The sounds of an electric guitar soon blocked out at least a few of the annoyances. I concentrated on the chords and counted out the measures. I matched my breathing to the beat until I felt like I was no longer in danger of passing out.

"That is better," Cato said. He didn't ask me about what had just happened. He just took up the lead himself acting as if he wasn't the first person to ever dare touch my music while I was fully conscious.

"Come on," Cato tried imitating my tone from earlier. "We have a deadline."

After another day of walking and only a few minor incidents with some vicious plants, we came to a part of the forest where there was a clear path for the first time in days.

“This is the tunnel?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Shouldn’t it be more...elusive?” I asked. Cato had taken out the map and was checking it over again. I kept studying the path itself. “Is it a trap?”

“Maybe,” Cato replied. He put the map away.

Even if it turned out to be a trap, we had no other option but to follow the path. There was no way to move forward. Except for the pathway, the trees grew so close together that it was impossible to squeeze through them. Their branches were dense enough that nearly all of the sunlight had been blocked out, and I had to remove my sunglasses to get an idea of where I would be stepping.

I adjusted my backpack. “Well then. Let’s go see what kind of games the Fates like to play.”

The trail was so steep at certain points that we had to grasp at the trees to pull ourselves up. At other points the path took a sharp descent to where we had to nearly slide on our butts to make it down without any bruises. We encountered no traps at least. Not on the first day anyway.

That first night in the tunnel also helped with my plan of our sleeping less and eating only the packaged foods until we met with the Fates. There was no room to set up the tent or start a fire. We had to squeeze our sleeping bags between the trees on the most level part of the path we could find. Even then we both woke hours earlier than usual and to numb arms and legs.

By the second day on the trail, no light was breaking through the tree branches. I could just barely make out the general outline of the path, and I only managed that much because of my enhanced eyes. Sadly, they were nowhere near as sensitive as my ears.

It felt like the path would never end, but we still kept trudging forward. One step after another. Sometimes we talked. Sometimes I listened to my music while Cato enjoyed his silence.

We were in one of our no-talking periods when my boot caught on the root of a tree. I stumbled forward but caught myself with the tree trunks before I hit the ground. Still, the experience left my heart racing. Funny how that worked. I had survived giant snakes, near drowning, demonic fire ants, venom, and stabbing, but nearly tripping and falling on my face in the dark still managed to shoot my blood pressure up.

I was about to turn down my music and try guiding myself through the path by sound. Echolocation was a skill I was still working on building, but I could manage it. Just as I started to do so, Cato spun around. His eyes were glowing in the darkness. “Hold my hand?”

“Yeah. Sure. I guess that could work.” I thrust my hand forward for Cato to grab hold of. I wasn’t about to pass up such a rare opportunity. Who knew how many people had ever had the chance to hold hands with a sober Cato? It had been a feat in itself when we had been drunk. And yes, we had cuddled, but that was after a near death experience. That didn’t count.

Cato’s hand was cold again. I would have to make a few more attempts at hand-holding to confirm, but I was starting to think he just ran colder. Maybe a pair of gloves would be a good gift, if I ever got to buy Cato a gift. If we survived the journey. And if we managed to survive with our hands attached. There was still a possibility that if we made it out alive it might be minus a few limbs.

If that happened, I would have to decide whether to be without hands or to just go ahead and die a temporary death and resurrect with a new pair. That was a hard one. Hands or traveling. If it was just one hand then that would be doable. If it were both hands that would be a bit more difficult. Of course, I needed both hands to play the flute and drums, but there had to be some instruments that only required one. Maybe the drums could just be adapted.

Cato giving my hand a small tug jerked me from my thoughts.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“There are two paths ahead of us,” he explained.

I peered ahead. I thought I could just make out where there were two openings in the trees, but I could have been imagining it. “Yeah? What does the map say?”

“The map does not show two paths,” he replied. Obviously it didn’t. Cato wouldn’t have been commenting on it if it did, but I was having trouble concentrating again.

“Have you ever thought about making a map before? Like, how do they measure things before they draw them? Are they just out with tape measures going over the path? That would be a pain. I tried measuring my apartment once for a couch. My place isn’t even that big. But the tape measure just kept flopping over, and then it would snap back all of a sudden. Have you ever tried to measure a room on your own before? Isn’t it annoying?”

Cato’s glowing eyes narrowed. Not angrily. I wasn’t picking up anger. That was probably confusion then.

“What’s confusing?” I asked him.

He blinked. I could tell because his glowing eyes disappeared then reappeared. “You are.”

“Oh. I have heard that before.” I had heard that one and several other interesting adjectives about myself.

“No,” Cato was quick to explain himself. “You are not acting like yourself right now, so I am confused.”

I squeezed his hand. “That’s so nice. Usually people mean it in a very different way.”

That time the narrow eyes did mean anger, but I decided I liked that kind of anger. It made me feel warm, like a campfire. Like the campfire we had when we got drunk and then we held hands. That had been a lovely campfire.

Cato sniffed at the air for a moment. I bet his nose was doing the cute scrunching thing. “Let me see your other hand,” he instructed.

I held out my other hand in an area where I assumed Cato could see it. Cato very gently switched his hold over to that hand making sure not to touch my palm but instead just cradled the back of my hand in his two. After a few moments he giggled. I wished I had recorded it. No one would ever believe me if I told them.

I joined in with the giggling. It was a lot like that night we had gotten drunk together.

“What’s so funny?” I asked.

“It is catnip. That is all. You have catnip on your palm, and it is affecting you. You must have picked some up when you touched the tree earlier.”

“Oh!” I pulled his hand away from Cato and held it up to my own face. I inhaled deeply and smelled a grassy mint scent. “Is that what catnip smells like? That’s nice!” Cato tugged my hand away from my nose.

“If you inhale too much, you will be high all day.”

Was I high? “How can I be high? I am not a feline demon.”

“No, but you might be part one.”

“Huh. Well, isn’t that a life-altering revelation to be having in the middle of a dark path and while high on catnip.” The catnip really did smell nice. “Why are you not affected?”

“I am a wolf. Not a cat. We should wash your hand off.”

Cato

Scrubbing the catnip off Remy’s skin would not help immediately, but it would at least keep him from staying high as long. As I tried to scrub it off his skin, he rambled on about what order he would like to visit the other realms in. “Would you travel with me? You seem like a pleasant travel companion because if we can get along on this kind of journey, don’t you think we would get along so much better on a journey where we stayed in like a spa?”

“If we make it out of this, I will go anywhere you want to go for the remainder of our existences,” I said. I wanted to think I was just humoring him, but I knew there was some truth to my statement.

“Promise?” He had his lower lip jutting out just slightly.

“Yes, I promise.”

“I’m going to hold you to that. Remember, my boss is the actual Demon of Deals. When we get back, I’m going to have him make us a contract and everything. And Nic will do it. Nic’s a nice guy. He’ll make all the contracts for me that I want.”

“If that is what makes you happy, I will sign it,” I assured.

Why was it that it was so much easier to say things to him when he was too drunk or high to remember them later? Actually, that was the entire reason. Knowing that he would have no memory of our conversations later made it so much easier for the words to flow from my lips. It was not that I didn't mean what I was saying. I meant every single word. The fear that while I might mean it but Remy might not reciprocate it is what usually kept me choking on my words.

"You're what makes me happy," Remy blurted out. I was no longer certain I was breathing by that point. Thankfully, he kept rambling. "And the french fries at Morgen's bar. Those make me happy too."

"Good to know," I said. Once I was certain Remy had no more of the catnip on him I went back to studying the fork in the road. I could not make out a single thing down either path. All that stared back at me was pitch black darkness. Even my wolf eyes could not see through it. I glanced back over at Remy to see him playing with a new string.

"Remy?" I called to get his attention.

"Yes?"

"Where did you get this string?" he asked.

He paused. "It was on a pink flower," he replied after a moment.

"Remy, do you want to see if that could possibly be another thread from the Fates?"

Remy pursed his lips. He dangled the thread around for a moment. “Yeah. Okay.”
He started to press the string against his bracelet.

“Wait!” I stopped him until I could get back to his side. Once I had a good hold on his arm, I nodded. “Go ahead.

Remy pressed the strings together, and once again, we went flying through space.

This time we landed in an art gallery of some kind. My eyes watered at the sudden brightness of artificial lights after having been in the dark tunnel. Once again, Dantalion was the focus of the memory replay. He was standing alone and admiring a painting. A woman approached him. Her hair was piled up in a towering updo. She fiddled with the pearls around her neck. “What do you think?” she asked.

“Stunning. These angles...”

The woman laughed. “Do you mean I managed to impress the very Royal of Art himself?”

“You’re the artist?” Dantalion asked.

“I am,” she confirmed. She smiled. Her upper teeth shyly bit down on her lower lip. From the expression on Dantalion’s face, he seemed to be charmed by the action.

“Then may I properly introduce myself? I am Dantalion.”

“Julia,” she replied.

Julia's eyes flashed purple. It sent warning signals rushing through my brain, but Dantalion did not seem to notice. Whatever Julia had been trying to do, she had apparently been successful.

"Julia, I suddenly feel the urge to take you out for a cup of coffee," Dantalion remarked. He extended his arm toward her.

She linked her arm with his. "Well, that's convenient because I suddenly feel the urge to drink a cup of coffee."

There was a sudden jolt. I thought we would find ourselves back where we started, like the last time. That was not what happened. After we were sent traveling through space, we landed back in Dantalion's manor and were met with a gruesome sight.

Beleth stood over Julia's body. She had transformed into beastmode. Her claws and fangs were dripping in venoms. On the other side of the room, Dantalion stood clutching a small child to his chest. By my estimate, we had landed in time about three years after the scene in the gallery.

Beleth sent away his guitar and raced over to Dantalion's side. "Is Tullie okay? She didn't get scratched or bit, did she?" he asked and tried to look the baby over for himself.

"She's fine. She didn't even wake. We're both fine," Dantalion replied and took a shaky breath.

“Let’s go into another room,” Beleth encouraged. “Your staff will clean this.” He was right. A staff member was already entering the room with cleaning supplies in his hands.

“Please sir, go with Beleth. We have this handled,” the man said.

“See,” Beleth assured. “They have this handled. Let’s go into another room. You and Tullie do not need to see that.” He led Dantalion out. Remy and I followed after them as they went back to Dantalion’s study. Astaroth’s beanbag and Vapula’s rocking chair were gone. Remy clung to my sleeve.

I had not thought about how he might handle a trip through time while high, and this was not the best of circumstances for him to be watching. “You can turn up your music,” I told him. “I can listen for us. You do not need to.”

Remy shook his head. “I can handle it.” he said. “I want to see.”

“How could I have missed the signs?” Dantalion asked and placed a sleeping baby Tullie down on the plush reading chair. He made sure there was no chance of her rolling off before letting go of her.

“It’s not your fault,” Beleth said. “None of us could have guessed she was playing a longcon on you.”

“Why did she wait? Why have a baby and then decide that now was the time to attack?”

“Your guard has been down since Tullie was born. Before...you would let Julia close to you, but you never once let down your guard completely. When she confirmed you were doing so, she just waited for your guards to be distracted. Then she took her chance.” Beleth was explaining things softly but clearly, the way a person did when they knew the other person already knew exactly what they were telling them but were unwilling to admit it to themselves.

Dantalion sank into his chair. He buried his face in his hands. “Things haven’t been the same since Astaroth...Then Vapula found his heir so fast. I haven’t even had Murmur’s chair removed yet.”

Beleth gently removed Dantalion’s hands from his hair before he could tear at it longer. “He only left us a year ago. You don’t have to move so fast,” he said. His gaze went over to Murmur’s chair then jerked away. Despite his reassurances, it seemed he was not really comfortable with the reminder.

“And now I can’t move at all,” Dantalion said. “I have a child to raise before I can even think of keeping our oath. How could I have been so selfish?”

“Selfish?” Beleth scoffed at the word. “You have never been selfish in your life. It would serve you better if you could learn to be a bit selfish actually.” Beleth moved to kneel in front of Dantalion. “None of us blame you for having a life. It took you awhile, but you managed. We all know our destinies are tied. Some day, in some way, we will all find our way back together. So what if it takes us a few different lifetimes to accomplish it? What’s a few centuries to us old farts?”

Dantalion laughed at that and scrubbed at his eyes. “I never want to be the last one.”

“I know. We were all planning on it being Murmur. Always assumed he wanted to see what it would be like to live a few years peacefully on his own and away from our chaos.”

Another wet laugh forced its way from Dantalion’s throat. I was surprised to find my own eyes burning at the sight. Their friendship was admirable. It was enviable. I glanced over at Remy. A few tears had escaped the cover of his sunglasses and made their way down his cheeks.

“Well, how about you and I go together then? We’ll raise Tullie, and then we’ll go,” Beleth suggested.

Hope filled Dantalion’s eyes. He nodded. “It’s a deal.”

That time when the Fates’ magic kicked in and sent us through space, we did land back in our own time. We stood in the darkness of the tunnel for several moments without speaking. Sniffles came from Remy at first. I did not know how to comfort him, so I just stood there holding his hand. I tried to think of why we were being sent through the memory replays.

Remy’s tears dried up after a few moments.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he replied. “We should move again. You said something about a fork. But first-” he tapped the string against his bracelet. The magic in it was gone. It was back to being a string for us. “Out of power,” he announced. His words were casual, but he still sniffled.

Even with the reassurances, It took me a moment to release his hand. When I did, he went back to playing with the string. I tried to go back to studying the fork in the path. I still had no idea which one was the right one. I thought perhaps there could have been a clue in the memories we had witnessed, but no matter how I thought it over, I could make no connections between the memories and whether to pick left or right.

“Their voices are so nice,” Remy said and held up the string that he had turned into a crochet chain.

“What did you say?” I asked just to confirm that he had said what I thought he said.

“The Fates. Their voices are very nice. They have good harmony.” Remy dragged me closer to the fork. “I want to hear them better.” Rather than going down either of the two choices he slid between two of the trees. He tried to at least. His bag kept getting caught. The third time he tried to shove his way through, I stopped him.

“We have to go this way.” Remy insisted. He was close to whining. I saw his leg twitch in a way that indicated he would be stomping the ground like a toddler if I did not allow him to go in that direction. Whatever catnip was in the first was strong.

“We are going. We have to remove the bag first,” I told him.

Thankfully, Remy saw the sense in that statement. I tugged the backpack off for him. Even off our backs, the bags were so large it would be difficult to wedge them through the narrow space.

Remy glanced down at his bag then he tried sliding back into the tight space. He managed it with ease. “Much better,” he agreed. “This way.” He sashayed a few feet though the path.

“Will you be okay? Since you can’t see?” I asked him.

“I don’t need to see. My ears can do the work.”

That was interesting to know, especially after I had just spent the past distance leading him about because I thought he could not see to make it through.

“Want me to hold your hand this time?” He asked and waved his hand around for me to take. I took hold of it and let him lead the way.

We squeezed through the hidden path for over a mile. By then the catnip had started to wear off. Remy was still conducting a mostly one-sided conversation but the number of words per minute had decreased significantly, and he was no longer getting his bag caught on the tree trunks every few feet. Finally we reached an opening where a little bit of sunlight was able to trickle through the tree branches and light up the area. Remy took in our new surroundings and gave a pleased nod. “I think we’ve arrived.”

Remy

As the catnip wore off, it was replaced by an overwhelming feeling of embarrassment. It was hard for me to even glance in Cato's direction. At least I had found the path. I tried to focus on that instead of the overwhelming urge to hide myself under a rock for the next century or so.

"Come to us, travelers. Come sit at our table. Join us for a spell. Come, Cato. Come, Ramiel. Come learn what we hold for you." The Fates' voices were truly enchanting with the mix of ranges floating together in harmony. I could feel the age coming off of them. Their magic was not limited to only them, it covered their surroundings, making the whole area pulsate with power.

The manor had been carved straight into the mountain itself. Nine columns stretched as tall as the nearby trees. Dates had been carved into their surfaces, but every so often the dates would shift. The numbers would morph. Some would disappear. Others would randomly appear.

To help with the lack of sunlight, torches hung around the outside of the building. They flickered in a nonexistent wind, casting shadows on random surfaces. Giant stone doors stood open allowing anyone entrance to the manor itself. It seemed the deserts, the mountains, and the itty bitty tree paths were enough of a security precaution for the Fates to not bother with actual locks.

The courtyard itself wasn't bad either. It was a little greyscale, but the flowers themselves looked healthy, almost artificially so. The three fountains were impressive. Their shapes seemed to defy gravity, and as they slowly spun about, the characters on them appeared to move and interact with each other.

I took it all in as I stretched my legs and swung my arms about, enjoying the sensation of no longer being trapped in the narrow pathway.

"This has to be it. Right?" I could swear the Fates were calling us from inside the manor. They knew we were coming, and their calls didn't feel like another trick or test. They felt like a genuine welcome.

Cato nodded. "Has to be."

"You gotta wonder why they didn't move to the civilized areas like the others. Why stay here?" There weren't even any stores around here.

"Many people would like to talk to the Fates."

"Good point. Living out here is probably the only way for them to get some privacy." I rocked back and forth for a moment. "Do we...just go in?" I asked.

Cato was frozen. His eyes were wide. His face was pale. Well, paler than normal. He was scared. That wouldn't work. "Right. You're an introvert. I'll lead the socializing part then," I said. I grasped Cato's wrist. "We'll go in. I'll make the introductions. You take over when you think you're able to. Will that work?"

Cato nodded. "I will be fine." He tilted his head. "I can hear them. I think."

“This is your first time hearing them?” My hearing was well above that of the average demon, but I didn’t think it was that much stronger than Cato’s. Especially in the quiet of the tunnel, he should have been able to pick up at least a few of the words they were saying.

“Yes,” he replied. “I did not hear them before.”

“They’ve been calling both of us. For awhile now,” I told him.

“He wasn’t meant to hear yet. I had some things to see.” The youngest sounding voice of the Fates called out.

“Our sister likes to play games. Please do come in.”

I looked to Cato only to find him already staring back at me. “This is it,” I said.

“This is it.”

We climbed the few stairs to the manor and entered the already open doors. Three women were waiting inside. The Fates. Without being told, I could already guess which sister was which from the necklaces they wore.

The oldest of the three sisters wore a necklace with a thin horizontal rod in place of a charm. Her black dress had a simple but elegant design. Timeless. Classic. Much like Lachesis herself was rumored to be. She certainly presented herself that way. She was regally sprawled on a chaise with a book abandoned nearby. I hadn’t known it was possible to sprawl in a regal manner before, but now I had seen with my own eyes.

The middle sister's necklace had a spindle for a charm. Clotho, the Fate rumored to be temperamental, paced around the room. Her dress changed from gray to silver to a mix of both then back. The cut of her dress changed at a slightly slower pace. Supposedly her mood changed as rapidly as her outfits. She smiled at us first then when she spun around, she glowered in our direction. I stepped back from the sheer force behind it. With any hope she would not be the one whose favor we needed.

The youngest sister Atropos had a pair of scissors for her charm. She wore a pure white romper that shimmered under the light. At that moment she was drawing. Her fingers were smudged in charcoal. The sketch on the pad in front of her was something that I could not begin to comprehend. From the way Cato was staring at it, it was beyond his understanding as well.

There was no sign of the threads anywhere. I knew rationally that not even the Fates sat and weaved constantly. That would be ridiculous. Still, it was a bit of a letdown to have the first impression of the Fates be without the legendary threads.

"It is nice of you to visit. We rarely have visitors." It was Atropos who greeted us. She placed aside her sketchpad and stood up. Her bare feet made no sound as she crossed the floor to greet us. "Won't you come in properly? It is awkward to have you stand at the doorway."

We took a few more steps into the room. Despite the fact that the Fates had welcomed us inside, it was hard for me to let my guard down. I knew Cato had to feel the same. I could feel it in the way his hand, while no longer holding onto mine, still brushed against my knuckles with each step we took.

“Please have a seat.” Lachesis gestured to a chaise next to hers. We sat on the edge of the furniture. I half expected a dagger to come through the cushion and pierce me in the back.

“For someone to travel this far, you must have something to request of us?” Clotho wasted no time in getting to the point. I was grateful. We didn’t have a lot of time as it was.

“Hm. Yes, the one is running out of time faster than he should be.” Atropos summoned two spindles and held them in her hands. The threads stretched from the spindles themselves to travel over her shoulders, through a doorway, and then out of our sight. While the one spindle was spinning very slowly and releasing thread at an even pace, the other spindle kept changing in its speed. One second it would travel as slowly as the one next to it. The next second it would spin out of control. “It looks like I will have to use my shears on this one very soon unless something changes.”

Her casual tone irked me, but I bit back the insults I wanted to spit out. We had to be cautious if we were going to be successful. Next to me, Cato was picking at his pants. There wasn’t a loose thread for him to pull at, but if he continued that way there soon would be.

“So I am guessing that you are here to see us about whatever this situation is.” Atropos tossed aside the normal functioning spindle. I very strongly assumed it was my own. It spun away, following its thread. She held up the remaining spindle for the other Fates to have a better look. “Yes, see. This is not normal.”

“I wasn’t aware Fates guessed at things,” I said.

Atropos giggled. “We are not omniscient. Even if we were, destinies change so easily. Didn’t you know that most things are not set in stone?”

“And even stones can be changed by tides.” Clotho did not sound as delighted by that fact as her sister. “Everything is changing. Constant motion. All the time. War and peace and love and hate and round and round as people repeatedly make the same mistakes. It is dizzying. Why must it be dizzying?”

“Take a break, sister.” Lachesis instructed. “You will make yourself sick with that.”

Clotho halted in her steps. Her dress, long again, swished across the floor. “I believe I have halted on peace. They are quiet for now.”

“Good. Come help us with our visitors then,” Lachesis said and reached out for her. “They seem to require a different kind of assistance than our normal sort of visitors.”

“Yes. They have both made deals of sorts, and now they must abide by them.” Atropos had moved to sit on the chaise with her sister. Clotho came up behind them. Her nails dug into the back of the chaise as she leaned over and studied the spindle.

After a few moments of the three of them watching the thread closely, Clotho directed her gaze at Cato. “Tell us in your own words what you want from us. Let’s see what you say this time.”

Cato

That was when I understood the loose threads. The Fates were not bound by time, and that meant my and Remy's interactions with them were also not bound by time. For the Fates, this was not our first trip here. Who knew how many variations of our lives they had already seen? Atropos grinned at me. "Well," she prodded.

"My only goal at this point is not to die a permanent death when I have only just started this life," I replied.

"A tale we have heard before." Lachesis noted.

"A tale we will hear many more times." Atropos added.

Clotho stepped around the chaise to take a seat between her sisters. She leaned forward with her chin resting on her palm. I could make out the flecks of colors in her eyes even as she puzzled over me. "You see we are familiar with this tale. The outcome is almost always the same. We are interested in the cause and the possible solutions," she said.

"The cause of all this was a Royal who decided to play games when picking an heir." Remy interrupted. It was the first time he had expressed actual displeasure with Dantalion's role in everything.

His words seemed to amuse the sisters though. Lachesis rose from her seat and strolled in the direction of the threads. "Oh yes, we know that one. We've seen his game before as well, and not just with the two of you. Though you two are the most frequent ones we see. Let's see if the right lesson has been learned this time."

“We don’t have time for riddles,” Remy complained.

“No time for riddles? If that is the case, you really can’t be sitting down. How lazy of you two.” Clotho grabbed at our hands and pulled us both up.

“But can’t you see? The game’s been changed.” Atropos’s words were aimed at her sisters. “Loose threads must be mended to change a tapestry.”

“What do you mean?” Remy asked.

Atropos ignored Remy’s question, and Clotho led us further into the house. “Yes, yes, this is one with loose threads,” she agreed as she escorted us through her home. “This time they found them. No one left them behind.” The rooms were all the same black marble floors, gray stone walls, and white furniture. The room we were led to, the largest of all the rooms, had the same color scheme. The lack of colors in the rest of the decor made the colorful tapestry circling the walls stand out all the more.

The sight before us had me stopping in my tracks. The tapestry stretched horizontally and wrapped around the large room. Then it tilted down to do a second lap, a third, a fourth, a fifth, and so on until it reached the point of the tapestry that was still connected to the loom stationed in the exact center of the room. Baskets and baskets filled with spindles covered the floor. Several were piled on top of each other. Their contents were close to spilling out.

“Take a moment and look around,” Atropos encouraged. “It’s not a sight outsiders see often.”

I turned to the walls to get a better look at the beginning of the tapestry, the beginning of time as we knew it. Remy did not join me. He was already easing his way through the baskets and to the loom itself.

No images of people were depicted on the tapestry. People were represented by the threads. The images on the tapestry instead showed history in its largest scope: the formation of the realms, the first appearance of love, the first of despair. It showed times of war, peace, and creativity. The longer the tapestry went on, the more variations of thread colors appeared. It would take a lifetime itself just to glimpse the tapestry from one of its ends to the other.

“That Dantalion... a clever one.” Clotho murmured. Her eyes were on Remy. The look on her face sent a warning signal down my spine, so I only glanced at the tapestry a few more moments before navigating my way through the baskets and back to Remy’s side.

“May I?” I allowed my hand to hover over Remy’s. Remy glanced down and then linked our fingers together.

“You have blanket permission for the future...for hand-holding I mean.” There was that teasing grin, and I had to wonder how Remy, after sleeping on the ground for two nights and having had no time to clean up, still managed to capture my attention even when standing in a room with possibly the most impressive piece of art of all time.

“Understood,” I replied.

“Look here.” Remy pointed to where the threads were being added to the tapestry. There were billions of them all moving at different speeds. I searched for what particular element Remy might be pointing out about them and realized that some of the threads were unraveling and tangling together with other threads before forming themselves into stronger threads.

“Soulmate threads,” Atropos popped up next to us. “They make up only a small percentage, but they’re some of the strongest sections. It can be just two threads. It can be many more.”

The other sisters joined us at the loom. “The tapestry can tell us where we’ve been.” Lachesis ran her fingers over the threads. “It can tell us where we come from.” She leaned close enough to Remy that they were nearly kissing. I pretended to trip over one of the baskets and not so gently bumped my shoulder against hers until she was out of Remy’s face.

“What does it matter where someone’s from?” Remy stepped away from the tapestry.

“You don’t want to know where you come from?” Lachesis asked.

“It wouldn’t change anything,” he replied.

“Then you don’t want to find out if you’ve got a soulmate joining in your thread either?” Clotho was the invader of space that time, but Remy was quicker to remove her hand from his chest himself.

“If I'm meant to find out then I will.” Remy said.

“You don't think that perhaps your being here is supposed to be your way of finding out?” Clotho prodded.

Remy was getting annoyed. It was rare for him to become truly annoyed, but I knew exactly how fierce he could be when those rare occasions came up. “We are on a deadline,” I reminded the Fates. The sisters' attention went from Remy to me.

“Spoilsport,” Clotho hissed. She had unpaused herself, and her mood had shifted along with the length of her dress.

“They really do have to hurry.” Atropos reminded the others. “His spindle is moving fast, and if his spindle goes out then the other one's becomes much less interesting.”

“And we'll see them again,” Clotho said.

“I wouldn't mind seeing them again,” Lachesis added.

Atropos glanced at her. “I'm ready for them to have a happy ending. Finally. You two never see the outcomes.”

Lachesis sighed and turned our way. “Then, go on. Ask us the official question if you do not want to lose the last bit of your thread,” Lachesis encouraged after a moment.

“Will you change someone's thread? Give them better than what they are supposed to get?” I asked.

Lachesis laughed. “You always ask the same thing. That part is amusing at least. No, we are not going to change the tapestry,” she said. “That is not what we do.”

“Please just tell me the cost, and I will pay whatever it is, whether that is money or part of my own thread,” I promised.

Remy let out a dramatic groan. “Those are exactly the words we do not say ever. You can’t make deals like that.” As Remy grumbled to himself, the sisters watched him with amusement. It was better than the predatory gazes from before at least.

“It’s like Dantalion could read the threads himself,” Atropos remarked.

The sisters’ comments, that were definitely being said for the benefit of us hearing them, were only confirming what I had already suspected. There was more to Remy’s heritage than either of us knew, and whatever it was was important enough to play a large part in Dantalion’s grand plan. In fact, it was becoming clearer and clearer that Dantalion’s plan was not intended to be just a way to find an heir, but something altogether different.

My mind flashed back to the envelopes I had found in the end table drawer on my very first night in Dantalion’s manor. The “Favors Owed” envelope with only three names inside: Lilianne, Beleth, and Sam. The more I thought it over, the more obvious it became that I had managed to be oblivious while panicking. Beleth. It was a common name in the Underworld. People liked to name their children after Royals, even if the child would likely end up going by a nickname instead. The likelihood of Dantalion owing some random demon a favor was just too small. The Favor Owed would be to the

original Beleth: The Royal Demon of Music himself. The Royal demon who was also part feline. Just like Remy.

“Look at that! He’s found one of the puzzle pieces.” Atropos tapped her fingers together in a mimicry of applause.

Clotho sighed. “Too bad he still doesn’t know how to put them together,” she said, and her voice sounded tired again rather than sharp.

“But that’s why they’re here. To learn,” Atropos insisted. “If they’re successful this time, that is.”

“What are they talking about?” Remy asked.

I could not tell him then, not when I did not know for certain. “It is nothing important for now,” I replied. “They are right. I still do not know how to put any of these pieces together.”

“Maybe I could help. Tell me what you know so far,” Remy insisted.

“We gave you all the pieces,” Lachesis said. “You just haven’t finished looking at them all.”

“And we can’t put them together for you,” Clotho clarified. “Like my sister said, we do not change the tapestry.”

“The letter though-” I started.

“The letter just stated that the tapestry must be changed,” Lachesis cut me off. “It did not state that it had to be by our hands.”

Atropos waved her finger. “Don’t you get it yet? You have billions of possible outcomes waiting on you to determine which of them will come to fruition. You must decide.”

Lachesis plucked at some of the threads. “We each granted you a piece. Now you must put them together.”

“The thing is. We want you to succeed,” Atropos revealed. “It is in our benefit if you succeed. It is in the Universe’s benefit. However, if you are to succeed, you have to fix what was unraveled. That is the only way you can change the tapestry.” She looked between the two of us. “It’s the only way you can change your destinies for the better.”

Remy still seemed uncertain. “And how do we do that?”

“Simple. You put the threads back in their place.” Atropos held out her hand for Remy’s bracelet. “Everything must be returned,” she told him.

Remy hesitated. Then he tore at the bracelet, pulling the threads from the leather straps and the charms. He handed over just the threads, including the pink one he had been playing with in the tunnel. “The charms belong to me,” he said.

“They do,” she agreed. “But these,” she held up the three threads for both of us to see. “Belong to the Universe.” In her hands they glowed and shifted to new colors. She

reached for her shears, and right in front of us, she snipped each of the threads in half.

“And now it is time for you to put them back in their places.”

She handed back the six new threads. “I would hurry if I were you. You have a tight deadline.”

Chapter 9

Remy

I had a handful of threads, and I wasn't liking what that meant.

"Do try to not unravel the entire universe," Clotho said as the Fates left us alone in the room.

I looked at Cato to see if he knew what had just happened. "Do they really expect us to find where these go? In this room?" I asked.

"It would appear so," he replied. He plucked half the threads from my hand. Then he paused. "I could take them all," he offered. "You do not have to help with this."

"We are way beyond that point," I told him and clutched my three threads to my chest before he could try to take them as well. "Let's start looking."

We started climbing back over the baskets of spindles. The tapestry loomed over us. Pun intended. The threads we held had to fit somewhere in it all, but the problem was Dantalion's life had stretched over thousands of years. The threads could possibly fit in any part of the tapestry.

"Maybe if one of us start at each end..." Even as I said it, I knew it would still take longer than two days, but it was our only hope.

Cato still nodded. "You can start at the loom. I will start on the other end."

I put on some music that would help me focus and started studying the threads in the tapestry beginning with where they met at the loom. There were over one hundred hues making up the tapestry, and I had trouble telling some shades from others. Even after I removed my sunglasses, the colors were still muted in some places. I hoped Cato was doing better than I was.

I kept searching the threads even though I wasn't sure what it was that I was looking for. I assumed there would be a knot of some kind to show where the piece had been removed, but everything looked smooth. After so long, my eyes began to grow tired. I took a step back and stretched my legs. I checked my wristband. I had already been staring for an hour, and I hadn't even covered an inch of the tapestry.

I focused on Cato, hoping that he had just been quiet about his success and had actually already matched all of his pieces, but I knew from how his breaths were hitching in places that that wasn't the case. He was getting frustrated. He was losing hope, and this time there was nothing I could do to make it better.

I went back to searching. Time passed in a blur as I examined thread after thread. At one point, Lachesis entered. There was a clink as a tray was placed on the floor. "Don't forget to eat," she said. Then she took her leave again. The door clicked closed behind her while the smell of french fries and brownies along with a few other items wafted throughout the room.

I stepped back from the tapestry again and nearly stumbled. My head was spinning.

“You should eat,” Cato said. I glanced over to find him staring at me.

“We should eat,” I corrected. “We won’t get anywhere if we both pass out.”

Cato looked back at the tapestry again as if taking a mental snapshot of where he had left off. Then he joined me at the food.

Half of the options on the table were some of my favorites. The other half I assumed were Cato’s from the way he started picking at them first. Cato barely looked at me as we ate. His eyes were on the threads. I couldn’t blame him. It was his life on the line. I was anxious enough at the thought of failing. I couldn’t imagine what it must have felt like for him.

He had only eaten a few bites of food before he was back on his feet and crossing the room. “Take your time,” he told me. I ate three more bites then stood. I wiped my hands on my pants and made my way back to the loom and back to the threads.

More hours passed. I could not find any clue in the threads. My vision started to blur, and I had to step back again. When I did, I found I had to sit down or risk falling down. I checked my wristband again. Five hours had passed this time. We had worked through most of the night.

I took one of the loose threads and looked it over while I sat. Maybe the clue was in the loose thread. I pulled it tight and examined the color of it. It would have been easier if this was a musical task rather than ...whatever this was. I appreciated visual arts, but I didn’t have a gift for them.

Speaking of music, I started flipping through my playlists again to try to find one that would give me some energy. During the temporary silence between songs, Cato brushed against one of the threads in the tapestry. It released a soft sound.

I left my music off. That was it. I had figured it out. “Cato!” I called over to him. “Come to the loom. I need your help.”

Cato didn’t hesitate. He was by my side in an instant. “Hold one of your strings tight for me.”

He picked a random green thread from the pile and held it taut. I reached up and plucked it. It released a clear note. Cato’s eyes widened. I went over to the loom to where the threads were first entering and hadn’t been fully woven in yet. I plucked them until one gave the same sound as the thread Cato was holding.

“It’s this one,” I told him. Somewhere along that thread would be the place where our piece belonged. The problem was that thread stretched for miles.

“This is where I help,” Cato said. His eyes darted along the path of the thread, somehow tracing the color changes and the intricate pattern through the tapestry until he found a spot only a few feet from the loom. “Here. The exact shade of this green,” he announced.

I glanced at it. “How is that green any different than this one?” I asked.

“It is,” Cato said, already moving to that spot. “I have twelve photoreceptors now, so I can see the difference in colors easily. I just needed to know which thread to follow to narrow it down.”

I joined him beside the tapestry. He held the loose piece up to that spot in the tapestry. The strings glowed for a moment, and then the thread absorbed it.

Just like when we had touched the thread together Cato and I went flying through space and time. We landed in a painting studio that I assumed was in Dantalion’s manor. I just had context clues to go off, but sometimes that was enough.

“One piece down,” I whispered, even though I knew that the people in the room could not hear us.

“One piece down,” Cato echoed.

The blue desert painting Cato had seen in person and I had seen in the picture he took of it was on a nearby easel. A hollow-eyed Tullie sat in front of it adding the final details. She was clutching at a paintbrush so hard that I was sure it was about to snap in her hand. Dantalion stood a few feet behind her.

“It is okay to be upset,” he said.

“I know that,” Tullie gritted out between her teeth. “I know it is okay to be upset that I failed to get my own father’s title.”

“You made it further than anyone else. Be proud of that.”

“I am,” Tullie said. She didn’t sound proud.

“Good. Then perhaps you could leave these rooms,” Dantalion suggested. “You have been back for a year now. I am afraid that you plan to spend a century locked away at this rate.”

A guard stepped into the room. He was dressed as the head of staff, but whoever it was was not Olivia. He was another demon, much older than Olivia.

“Who is that?” I asked.

“I have not seen him before,” Cato replied.

“Excuse me, but the new applicants have started to arrive,” the other head of staff announced.

“I’ll be there. Just a moment,” Dantalion replied.

“Yes, Sir.” The guard swiftly left the room. His gaze didn’t leave Tullie until he had fully exited the room.

Dantalion’s attention was focused on Tullie. “You must go out and explore if you are going to find your path. After all, the fact that you were unable to claim my title for yourself might just be because you’ve been destined to have someone else’s title. There are many out there, and you would suit so many of them.” He kept trying to encourage her, but with each word, she just seemed to grow more brittle.

“I don’t want another title.” Tullie whispered the words so softly that I was certain I was the only one to pick them up. After a moment she put her paintbrush down and

stood. She pasted a smile on her face and turned around. “You know. I think you’re right. This painting was my last bit of that chapter. I think I’m ready to move on.”

“Excellent!” Dantalion clapped his hands together. “How can I best help you do that?”

“By being understanding in the fact that I don’t personally want to be here while you’re having other people test for your title.” Tullie moved to a table and began cleaning her paintbrushes.

Dantalion nodded. “Do you want me to have them tested in another location?”

“No,” Tullie assured. “I think I’ll take one of my little trips. It’s been a while. Perhaps what I need is to just be able to immerse myself in my art again. I might spend a few weeks at the shore. Or perhaps I’ll go to my apartment in the city and meet up with some friends.”

Dantalion perked up. “All of those sound like fantastic ideas,” he agreed.

“Then I’ll just be going.” Tullie took a moment to stop and hug Dantalion on her way out. “I’ll show destiny exactly who’s in charge,” she promised. Once again, Dantalion missed a pair of eyes flashing purple. It seemed Tullie had inherited her mother’s gifts.

We were thrown right back into the Fate’s weaving room. “Next thread,” I said. Cato held up an orange one. We went through the pattern again until we found its place in the tapestry.

I decided I was becoming fond of flying through space and time. The initial nausea was gone, and I was even getting good at sticking the landings. Both Cato and I stayed on our feet as we were thrown into the next location. “Do you know this place?” I asked as we hurried to find whoever it was we were supposed to be watching.

“It looks like Beleth’s. Possibly.” Cato nodded over at the collection of instruments in the room.

“Yeah, you’re right. Well, I guess that’s the most obvious assumption given this storyline we’re following. Doesn’t this all remind you of a drama?” I asked. Cato gave me a blank look. “Right, you only watch the one.” I decided I would change that in the future. I couldn’t have him not understanding my pop culture references. Those made up half of my dialogue in non life threatening situations.

“I don’t get why they’re having us see these people. I thought we could only see stories of those directly tied to Dantalion’s life or possibly our own lives,” I said. “You know, since we’re supposed to be changing our destinies.”

“These are connected to us..in a way,” Cato replied.

Before I could ask him why he thought that, a child’s piercing shriek had both of us turning just in time to see Beleth enter the room. He had a toddler in his arms, but the child was definitely not Tullie. We had just seen an adult Tullie for one thing, and it seemed that the pieces of threads were being revealed to us in timeline order. For another thing, the toddler had red hair, nearly the exact same shade as my own.

“Happy days. Happy days! Mommy has finally agreed that you, my darling, my honey, my little treble clef, are finally going to get your first instrument today,” Beleth cooed at the toddler, and the toddler shrieked in delight in response.

“What is this ‘finally’? He’s not even two yet!” An extremely familiar voice yelled through the room. The laughter that followed the shout made my heart stop for a moment. Then the owner of the voice stepped into the room, and I had to grab hold of Cato’s arm to keep from collapsing.

“It’s my mom. That’s my mom!” I said. There she was, looking almost exactly how I remembered her. Her own red hair was loose and swinging around her waist. Her dimples were at their deepest as she laughed at Beleth and...apparently the toddler version of myself. She was even wearing her key locket. It had been a gift from her parents when she was a child. After she had died, I had taken the locket and had it placed onto a more durable bracelet that I kept on my wrist just above my music band.

I brought my wrist up to my chest to where the locket was pressed against my heart. I cradled it there as I watched the small family move about the room. When they finally reached the area where we were standing, I couldn’t take it any longer. I let go of Cato’s hand and reached out for my mom. I wanted to touch her just one more time.

My fingertips met with air, and she kept going, oblivious to my presence. Cato took hold of my hand. “I have you,” he said.

“What do you think, Sam? Any bets on what our child’s first instrument will be?”

Beleth was spinning around with baby me in his arms. He was following the beat of the child’s delighted cries. Good to know I had perfect rhythm even back then.

Samara laughed. “You’re not even certain that he is a music demon yet. What if he turns out to be a key demon or something else entirely?”

Beleth blinked and held baby Remy out in front of him. “You’ve heard him scream. He’s definitely a music demon.”

I tightened my grip on Cato’s hand. We watched together as the baby version of myself was handed instrument after instrument to see if he...I...he... would express a fondness for any particular one. At the moment toddler Remy was slobbering all over a flute.

“Do you think this is when they found out?” I asked if only to keep myself from being embarrassed that my crush was getting to see this particular memory. I searched my own memories for any trace of this moment, of this place, of Beleth, but there was nothing. Nothing about what I was being shown was familiar in any way, but then I had very few memories from my childhood.

“Let us see,” Cato replied. For his part, he seemed highly amused by it all.

Beleth and my mom were both reaching for another instrument on the wall despite baby Remy still refusing to release the flute, when the door opened and Tullie stepped inside.

“Sorry to interrupt. I’m going on another of my trips, and I was hoping to talk to Uncle Bel before I left.” Tullie’s eyes flickered over to the young Remy. My mom must have sensed the same thing that I did because she wasted no time in stepping towards baby me and scooping him up. She sent a worried gaze over to Beleth, but he still looked calm.

“We were a bit busy,” Samara tried.

“It’ll only take a moment. I promise.” Tullie’s eyes flashed. It was just a flicker, enough for me to catch as an outside observer, but not enough for the ones in the memory to notice.

“It’ll only take a moment,” Beleth echoed.

“Julia must have been a persuasion demon. Tullie seems to have taken after her,” Cato noted.

“Yeah.” My mouth was dry. “And Tullie’s got an extra power up from being half Royal.”

“Seems like,” Cato agreed. Persuasion demons were normally not particularly powerful. They were persuasive as their name suggested, but no more persuasive than a few glasses of wine. You were still aware of what you were doing. Your inhibitions were just lower than usual. With Tullie though, it seemed her ability was more like a handle of demon brew, strong enough to even influence some of the most powerful demons in the Underworld.

My mom took baby Remy and left with him. I wanted to run after them. I didn't want to lose sight of my mom. Who knew whenever I might get another chance to see her? My feet stayed glued to the floor though, and even if they hadn't, Cato's grip on me was firm. I was grateful for the grounding sensation. It was the only thing keeping me from falling apart entirely in that moment.

We remained in the room with Tullie and Beleth. I studied Beleth, the demon who was apparently my father.

"Do you think I look like him?" I asked. Beleth and Tullie were talking about possible places to go. Beleth was picking up some of the instruments. Tullie was pulling at her cuticles. I knew it was the calm before whatever storm we were supposed to be witnessing, but since there was nothing I could do about anything, I tried to focus on other details.

"You move like him," Cato replied. "You look more like your mother."

"The red hair?"

"The beauty."

Cato might be a demon of few words, but he certainly knew the few words to use.

"I don't understand any of this," I admitted. "I don't know how I could be the son of a Royal. I don't know why my mom said she didn't know who my father was."

“I think that is why the Fates wanted us to watch,” Cato replied. “By restoring the missing pieces, we are restoring our own destinies.” He was right. Of course, that’s when things became much harder to watch.

Tullie had pulled out her communicator in order to show Beleth something. Beleth had stepped toward the girl to get a better look. He never saw the dagger coming. He never suspected his niece’s betrayal, and that was how she managed to stab him.

Beleth sank to the floor as my mom burst back into the room. Her eyes were wild. She was clutching at her chest. My parents weren’t just in love. They had had a soulmate connection, and she had felt Beleth being stabbed.

Tullie released her hold on the dagger. It remained lodged in Beleth’s chest as he fell to the floor of the room.

“Guards!” Samara screeched, but she was already moving herself. Powered by her soulmate bond and with Tullie currently missing her dagger, Samara easily got her hands on Tullie’s head. Her fingertips glowed, and Tullie dropped to the floor just as the guards arrived. She was conscious but just barely. A handful of guards burst into the room, clad in their armor and with their weapons drawn. They surrounded Tullie with their spears, pressing one into her back where with an easy push, it would go straight through her heart.

“Beleth,” Samara gasped. She scrambled across the floor to him. Her hands hovered over the dagger. “A healer. We need a healer.”

One of the guards spun on her heel and raced out of the room. Another guard dropped to her knees next to Samara and Beleth. “We need to stabilize him if we don’t want the dagger to fully kill him.” She and Samara worked together to get Beleth into a position where the dagger would not shift. The remaining guards circled around Tullie. As she began to stir, they worked together to bind her.

The guard who had left returned with a healer racing after her. The healer joined them on the floor, but the moment his eyes landed on the dagger, all hope fled from his face.

“What? What is it?” My mom asked.

“The dagger...it is cursed,” the healer explained.

Samara’s claws popped back out. “Then we will find a cure to the curse. Torture her until she tells us everything.”

Tullie, half conscious by that point, laughed. “Do you really think I wouldn’t have thought this all out thoroughly before acting? I am far from foolish.”

“No, he’s not dying,” My mom insisted. “We will fix this.”

Beleth’s eyes fluttered open. His breaths came out in strained huffs. He grasped for Samara’s hand. “She is right. My power is fading.”

“No. You will survive this.”

“He won’t.” Tullie assured. “The curse on that dagger has no cure. I made certain of it. Even if you remove it and bandage him up, he will die. It might take a few minutes.

It might take a few days, but he will not come out of this alive.” She turned to the guards.
“You might as well release me now. I will soon be the Royal you serve.”

The guards hesitated.

“If I were you, I would be eager to get on my good side. I think I can already feel his power transferring over to me. Imagine exactly how powerful I will be,” Tullie taunted.

“None of you move an inch!” Samara shrieked.

Beleth’s head rocked from side to side. “Sam, kill me. Before she wins.”

“I can’t do that. Please don’t ask me to do that,” Samara pleaded. I had never seen my mother look so helpless. I had never even seen her cry before.

“Sam, please,” Beleth tried again.

Samara pressed her forehead to Beleth’s stomach. “I cannot be a Royal, my love. I cannot pass your tests. We both know that. It is why we work.”

“Remy.” I froze as Beleth said my name. He couldn’t mean what I thought he did.

Samara inhaled sharply. “You want me to...”

Beleth smiled. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth and down his chin.

Samara let out a wet gasp. “Bring me our son,” she demanded. The same guard who had fetched the healer raced out of the room again. She came back with baby Remy in her arms. As she stepped past us again, I thought there was something familiar about

her. The helmet she wore covered most of her face, but I thought I recognized her eyes and the distinct freckle at the corner of the left one.

“Isn’t that the guard from Dantalion’s manor? Olivia?” I asked.

Cato stared at her for a moment. “Olivia,” he confirmed. “She has changed.” Not physically though. Not enough time had passed for her to have gained even one physical year. There was a a clear difference though in the way she held herself.

I tilted my head to the side as I watched how naturally she carried the baby version of me across the room. “Huh. No wonder she didn’t want to flirt with me back at the manor,” I remarked. I had to distract myself from my mom’s tears, my father bleeding out, and the apparent realization that they were about to make me a Royal when I was seemingly not even two. Humor was my favorite coping mechanism. That and denial.

Thankfully, Cato understood. “Is that the only reason you think she did not fall for your charms?” he teased.

“Are you saying there would be any other reason for her to not want to flirt with me?” I asked.

Cato remained silent at that, but he couldn’t hide his amusement. Sadly, the humor could only put off the inevitable for so long.

Samara held out her arms, and Olivia passed the child over. Baby Remy didn’t seem to understand what was happening, but he seemed to know that something was

wrong. He was no longer shrieking or babbling. He was quiet as he chewed on one of his fingers and took in the sights around him.

“Come here, my baby.” Samara gathered Remy onto her lap. “I want you to give Daddy a good night kiss. Can you do that?” Baby Remy nodded and leaned forward. He pressed a wet kiss to Beleth’s cheek. Why couldn’t I remember him? Shouldn’t I have at least a few memories?

“Hey, my baby,” Beleth brushed at baby Remy’s hair. “You’ve got to be good.”

Baby Remy grinned. Beleth looked over to Samara. “Hide him. Until he is ready.”

“I know. I will,” she promised.

Beleth nodded. “It’s time. Do it now.”

Samara placed Baby Remy’s hand on the dagger. “I need you to hold this, Baby. Hold it tightly.”

“What do you think you are doing?” Tullie shrieked. She pushed upward. The spear driving in her back kept her from moving too far. Another spear was driven through her shoulder. It didn’t kill her, but it did pin her to the floor. It only shut her up for a moment. Then she was ranting again. “The title is mine. I am the one who killed him. You all saw me stab him.”

“Silence her!” Samara’s voice was sharp. Olivia took a cloth from a nearby basket. It was a cloth used to clean the inside of a flute or piccolo. She shoved it into

Tullie's mouth. Then she took another longer piece and tied it around Tullie's head to where she could not spit out the first cloth. Tullie's rantings were finally muffled.

The guards had caught on to the plan, and they would not risk their futures when the Royal power transferred.

Just as Samara was about to guide Baby Remy's hand to push down on the dagger and finish what Tullie had started, she paused. "I'll see you on the other side."

Beleth chuckled. It was a wet noise. "See you on the other side."

Samara pressed the dagger the rest of the way into Beleth's heart. At the last second she jerked her hand away, so that only Baby Remy was touching the dagger when Beleth took his final breath.

Baby Remy screamed. The power was flooding from Beleth and into the toddler. Small wings sprouted from his back. They fluttered under his shirt, but they were clearly there.

"That's...I don't have wings." My free hand went to my back to double check. Everything felt normal. No trace of any wings. "What is this? What are we being shown?"

"There must be more," Cato replied, but he didn't sound surprised at everything he had just discovered.

I had learned that Beleth was my father and then I had seen him die in only a span of a few minutes. I was surprised to find that it had had an effect on me. I pushed down

my feelings though. The death had occurred nearly twenty years ago. Waiting a bit longer to mourn would make no difference.

Samara had stopped crying. Her face was perfectly expressionless as she held Baby Remy through his transformation. Once she was certain that he was fine, she placed him down and stood. She crossed the room to where the guards were still holding Tullie captive. “I should kill you,” she said.

Tullie smirked around the gag the guards had found for her. She mumbled something that sounded like encouragement.

“I should kill you, but I’m well aware of your debts. You’ve made certain that anyone who kills you will be punished for far more than what your miserable little life is worth,” Samara continued. “Remove her gag,” she instructed the guards.

One of the guards yanked at the cloths. Once freed Tullie laughed and spat on the floor. “I always cover all my bases,” she said.

Samara tilted her head. “Is that what you think? It seems you have already failed. Remy will have his father’s title, and you, once again, will have failed to be handed something that you never deserved in the first place.”

Baby Remy was toddling about with his wings. Olivia had helped him out of his shirt, so that his wings could move about freely. Another of the other guards, a man who looked to be the youngest of the group, was keeping him distracted from his father’s body. He kept shooting nervous glances over at Samara. Remy knew what he wanted was

to remove Baby Remy from the room altogether. The guard didn't seem comfortable with himself being there, never mind a small child being in the room.

"You think I don't know that Beleth set restrictions on his title? I am well aware of what my father and his friends have set up for their inheritance restrictions. That child will have many years before he can complete all the requirements, and I'll have plenty of time to kill him before then," Tullie said.

Samara released a humorless laugh. "Is that what you think? Stupid child, did you forget who I am?" She stepped up and placed her fingertips on Tullie's temple. "I might not be able to kill you, but I can do much worse. You won't be able to kill my son because you won't have a single memory that he ever existed."

I had never witnessed my mom using her abilities on someone's memories before. The scream that Tullie released made it clear exactly why that was. As Samara locked away each of Tullie's memories of our family, the girl released another shrill scream. Baby Remy and I reached up to cover our ears at the same time.

The guards stepped back in terror. "Now now," Samara warned. "Don't any of you be running off either," she warned. Tullie eventually collapsed to the floor unconscious. "We'll have to remove her. We'll send her away on one of her precious trips."

"The Royal Dantalion-," One of the guards started to say.

“He is a problem we must worry about another day. We can’t be sure he was not aware of this and allowed it.” It looked like it hurt my mother to say those words. I understood. She had to be cautious.

Olivia, standing to the side with her weapon sheathed, was the only one to look unbothered by everything that was happening. “Your son will be in danger until he completes the transition and even after that if he doesn’t come into his powers well.”

Samara nodded. “I will do what I have to do.” She looked to Olivia. “Will you help me?”

“Of course. Whatever you need,” she promised.

“Assemble the staff.”

Once everyone who worked for the manor was assembled. Samara sent Olivia to drop off Tullie. Olivia took Baby Remy with her, so that he would be out of sight of the staff while Samara did what she had to do. Over the next hours, Samara locked away every memory the staff had of me until none of them could recall I had ever existed. As she finished each one, she sent them back to their regular tasks. By the time she finished with the last one, Olivia had returned with Baby Remy.

“You can bring him back inside,” Samara called after she dismissed the last staff member. Olivia carried a sleeping Baby Remy. “Thank you,” Samara said. “For everything.” She took her child into her own arms again.

“Where will you go?” Olivia asked.

“I know some safe spots.”

“I can come with you,” Olivia offered. “My duty is to protect the Royal Demon of Music, whoever that might be.”

Samara shook her head. “I’m going to need someone here to look over things. If anyone’s memories start to unlock, I’ll need someone who can contact me before things get out of control.”

“She erased every single staff member’s memories of me,” I said. I couldn’t quite believe she had managed such a feat.

“I do not think that is all she erased,” Cato replied.

With the staff taken care of, except for Olivia, who seemed to be the only person who had my mother’s complete trust, Samara turned to Baby Remy. “I am sorry, my darling, but I will have to store away some of your memories as well. Do not worry. They will come back when it is time, and they will be so much more beautiful and precious when they do return.” Baby Remy did not scream when his memories were locked. He only fussed a little as his wings disappeared into his back.

I was having trouble keeping myself upright by that point, and when we landed back by the loom I didn’t rush straight to the threads like the last time. “I am ready for this to be over.”

“I know,” Cato replied. “We can take a break,” he offered.

I shook my head. “No, let’s get this over with. What’s the next thread?”

I had handed all of mine over to Cato at that point since we had to work together. He pulled another from his pocket. This time it was pink.

When we got the pink thread into place, we were flung through time but not space. “This isn’t amusing any more,” I yelled up the sky. I plopped down on the floor in Beleth’s manor. Beleth’s corpse was gone. Any signs of Tullie’s attack had been washed away. A new rug covered the floor. The instruments were free of dust, but they had a look to them that I knew meant people had not been playing them more than perhaps to tune them. That was confirmed when Olivia stepped inside the room and ran her fingers lightly over the ivory piano keys. She pressed just hard enough to draw a slight noise.

I picked up the sour sound even without any chords being played. Olivia seemed to as well. She picked up a clipboard and made a note on it. Then she moved to the next instrument. Samara stepped into the room. Her arms were wrapped around her waist and tucked into the folds of her baggy sweater, and she leaned on the doorframe watching silently as Olivia continued to check each instrument.

I tried to place when in time we were, but I had no memories of my mom ever styling her hair in that short of a cut. I had seen her with that hairstyle only in photographs, all taken before I had even reached the age of three. Perhaps we had only gone a few months ahead then. I didn’t think that was the case though.

“Something is... off here,” I said.

“What do you mean?” Cato asked.

“I’m not sure,” I admitted. “I just feel like something is wrong about what we’re seeing.”

“It’s so nice how much care you put into the instruments,” Samara remarked.

Olivia spun around. “Hey, Sam. I wasn’t expecting you to drop in today.” Her smile faltered as she took in Samara’s appearance. “Are you okay?”

Samara shrugged. “I’m fine. I had a change of plans.” She took a seat at the piano bench. Similar to Olivia, she placed her fingers on the keys, but she didn’t press hard enough to draw any real noise from them.

Olivia continued to stare at her. “Did you need to pick up some more of your things?”

Samara gave her a curious look. “Why would I need to pick up things from here? No, ...no,. I’ve been having a dream about this room, but when I have the dream, there are pieces missing. I thought maybe if I came here, I could find the parts that are missing.” Samara glanced at the wall. “That guitar looks familiar.”

The guitar she was staring at had been Beleth’s preferred instrument and weapon. We had already seen it ourselves in one of the other memories. It was a guitar Samara should have known like the back of her own hand.

Olivia was across the room in seconds. She knelt in front of Samara, a plea on her face. “Sam, tell me you didn’t lock some of your own memories.”

Samara clutched at her knees. Her eyes darted from side to side in search of answers. “Why would I lock my own memories? Olivia, what has happened?”

“What can you remember? Tell me what your dream was about,” Olivia encouraged.

Samara chewed at her lower lip. “We were here in this room. There was blood on the floor and on my hands. Others were here. I can’t remember who. I think one of them was you. Right? Were you here?”

“Yes. I was here. Can you remember anyone else who was here? Tell me who was in the room,” Olivia prompted

She shook her head. “I can’t...” her voice faltered. “Whose blood was on my hands?”

“Beleth’s,” Olivia whispered the name.

Samara laughed. “A Royal. Why would I have royal blood on my hands?”

Olivia flinched at Samara’s description of her own husband. “Yes, he was a Royal.”

Samara sobered. “I killed him...didn’t I? Why would I kill him? I’m not that type.”

Olivia gave the slightest nod. “Yes. And no. There was no other option.”

Samara nodded slowly. “I had no other option,” she echoed. “She would have killed him first, but who is she? Not Tullie right?”

“Yes, Tullie.” Olivia opened her mouth to say more, but then paused. It seemed she knew as well as I did that something was wrong.

Samara tapped her fingers on the edge of the bench. “I think I locked too much. I think I locked parts I didn’t need to lock. I don’t even know how I knew to get to this place. I just was in a cafe nearby, and then I started walking. I can’t even remember where I have been staying.” She clutched at Olivia’s arms. “Can you help me? I’m so scared.”

Olivia nodded. “You’ve been staying at your old house. The one you lived in before you and Beleth met. The one on the edge of the city. Do you want me to call Ramiel for you and let him know what’s happening?” She had used my birth name. Not my nickname. Olivia was giving her own test.

“Ramiel? Who is Ramiel?”

“That’s not my mom.” I whispered at the same time a look of realization came over Olivia’s face. She stood quickly.

“Ramiel’s one of the guards here. You’re good friends with him, and he’s been to your place for lunch several times.”

“She’s lying,” I said even though I knew Cato had to have caught on as well. Ramiel was a common name in the Underworld, but Samara had never had any friends

who had the name. The lies flowed easily from Olivia's lips as she added a few more details. Not enough to be obvious, but enough to make it look like she was trying to help her friend's memories.

"She knows she is not Samara. She does not want to risk you being found out," Cato agreed.

Olivia pulled out her communicator. "Actually, why don't I just send Ramiel a message and let him know that I'll walk you home myself? He can see to things here while I'm with you."

I reached toward my own communicator even though I knew there would be no message. Olivia probably wasn't even messaging me in that time. I had no memories of ever meeting the woman prior to when she was packing our supplies at Dantalion's manor. Even if Olivia had had my number, the message would have gotten to me years ago.

Samara, or whoever was posing as Samara, was on her feet and moving toward Olivia in the blink of an eye. "Oh Olivia," she cooed.

Olivia startled. The communicator dropped from her hands to land on the floor. The momentary distraction was all that the imposter needed. With Olivia not aware of her surroundings, she missed the painting behind her coming to life, and the figure's arms reaching out to grab hold of her. They pulled her flush against the frame. She had no chance at grabbing her own weapon, and the fake Samara wasted no time in summoning her own dagger and stabbing Olivia through the shoulder.

Olivia grunted in pain, and I winced in empathy. Shoulder stabs, while not fatal, were agonizing. It was one of those things where each breath made the pain worse. Olivia though seemed angry rather than pained. Her lips were tight. Her fingers twitched with the urge to do damage.

“You’re lucky I only have a few cursed blades left.” The imposter shifted, changing from Samara to Tullie. “I’ve got to save them for the Royals. I can’t go around wasting them on nobodies like you.” She twisted the normal dagger around in Olivia’s shoulder, causing more damage to the muscles. “Did you know you can only get the items needed for one of those cursed blades out in the untamed zone? I’ve been to that hellscape twice now. I don’t recommend it. The first time I failed my father’s test. The second time I went to gather what I needed to make sure I never failed again.”

Olivia opened her mouth to scream, but the figure from the painting covered her lips, muffling any curses or potential cries for help. Tullie sighed. “Imagine my surprise when I found myself back in my room, and my father is asking me what happened to my trip? I realized I couldn’t quite remember things clearly, but that was okay. I had planned for that. My father’s the Demon of Logic, and I inherited at least part of that intelligence. I had left all sorts of notes for myself. All kinds of plans and backup plans. I am prepared for anything. Always,” Tullie bragged.

She summoned a second dagger and stabbed it in Olivia’s other shoulder. “It took me a while to piece together who had taken the title,” Tullie admitted. “Beleth was dead. I knew that much, but I had none of his powers. I had to look for clues. And then I started to get an idea. My father hasn’t talked about Beleth much since his death. He’s a bit

depressed you know, but see...my father keeps his own notes. All I had to do was read up on his journals and some of those notes to put together who was missing from my memory that should be there. Then it was obvious. How could I not know my uncle's wife? My uncle, who came by for every birthday, every holiday, and almost every single special occasion that came up, but for some reason I couldn't remember his wife."

Tullie summoned a third dagger. "Who else would have been present during my attempt to kill Beleth? Who else would have had the support of Beleth's staff to not only finish Beleth off but then help erase my memories and take me to another location? After that I just made another little trip to the untamed zone and got what I needed for another cursed blade. It looks a lot like this one, but you know, way more lethal. Then I used a picture to help me know how to shift. I tricked you into confirming. You weren't even that difficult to trick, and you even gave me the real Samara's location. And the rest, well, maybe I can catch you up after I finish my plan." She pressed the tip of the blade to Olivia's chest.

She stabbed the third dagger through Olivia's heart, killing her at least temporarily. She wouldn't resurrect until the dagger was pulled out of her. Tullie had formed a simple but effective plan.

When we landed back among the baskets of spindles, I couldn't move at first. "We still have three threads left. Right?"

"Yes," Cato confirmed. "We still have three left. Let me do them alone."

I shook my head. "It won't work. It has to be both of us."

I had figured out why Dantalion had set this for his test of love. My and Cato's destinies were tied together. Any choice one of us made would affect the other. I was being tested along with Cato because Dantalion had wanted to ensure that the next Demon of Love was not someone who would be betrayed by it. Dantalion had unfairly decided that the last test could not be completed by the Demon of Love themselves but only by the person who loved them.

"We do not have to finish," Cato offered.

"I'm not going to let you die," I replied. "Next thread."

Cato pulled a thread that was the color of the one that had been in my bracelet. I plucked it and then found the matching one. Between the two of us we found its location in the tapestry. When the tapestry absorbed it, I waited to be hurled through space and time again. Nothing happened.

"Maybe because we have already seen the memory that goes with it," Cato offered.

I nodded, feeling a bit braver. Maybe we had passed the worst of the test, and the last three would just have to go into their places. The next thread was still the golden color it had been on Dantalion's envelope. It too was absorbed into the tapestry without any further trips through time or space.

It was when Cato held up the last thread, that I knew I would not be able to finish the test without more pain. I hadn't recognized it before in my haste. After all, how many

people would think a string looks familiar? But after the memories we had been through, it was impossible not to connect that shade of blue with any memories.

Cato must have caught the expression on my face as his own grew concerned. “What is it?” he asked. I shook my head.

“Don’t worry. I can do this,” I told him. We went through the motions again until we found the place for the blue thread.

It was our final trip through space and time. We landed inside a place I recognized too well. The house was small. The kitchen allowed for a view of the city skyline but also of the somewhat struggling home garden in the house’s backyard. I could navigate the place in my sleep. There were three bedrooms, the smallest of which was used as a makeshift music studio. I wished it would be a good scene, something beautiful. One of those moments that I had wanted to relive because my own memory of it was a bit too blurry around the edges.

The sight of the half-dead ficus in the corner told me all I needed to know. I was about to see a scene from my nightmares. “I can’t see this.” I pulled away from Cato and started shouting. “Lachesis, Clotho, Atropos, let me out. I don’t want to see this. Do not make me watch this!”

Cato followed behind me. He kept enough space between the two of us that I did not feel overwhelmed despite my new shadow. Samara entered the room. Her hair was piled up on her head in a messy bun, secured with a blue ribbon. She had on one of her

favorite sundresses. The last time I had seen that sundress, it had been covered in her blood.

“Do not make me watch this!” I shouted again. Samara paused at the refrigerator and read over the note that was being held up by four mismatched magnets. I remembered writing that note. I had gone out with some of my friends that day and had left a reminder of where I would be and also a request for dumplings for dinner. My mom had always been worried whenever I went out and found the notes to be reassuring. Now I knew why.

She plucked the note off the refrigerator and laughed to herself over it. “Dumplings? Again?” She was already moving to set out the ingredients. I wanted to shove them all back into the cabinets. As each item ended up in the position that I would find it in later, I realized we were only moments away from watching her death.

She was in the middle of making the dumplings when I saw the shadow. It was Tullie. When Samara turned to face her, her expression was perfectly calm. “Hello, my dear, what are you doing here?”

Tullie stared back at her for several long moments. “What memory did you lock?”

Samara kept folding dumplings. She was the picture of grace, but I could make out the sound of her heart racing in her chest. “Tullie, did something happen to you on your travels? You are acting quite strange,” she commented.

“Why aren’t you at the estate?” Tullie asked.

“I wasn’t aware that your father needed my services today. Does he need me at the estate?” My mom studied the shape of the dumpling she was forming and gave it a pleased smile.

“Not my father’s estate. Your estate,” Tullie replied.

Samara set down another dumpling. “My dear, I really am concerned for you. You are making no sense. I do not have any estates. I just work at them.”

“I can remember bits and pieces. Your powers...you must have used them on too many people at once. There are gaps. ...I don’t like when people play with my memories,” Tullie said. Her tone was growing angrier.

Samara was quiet for a moment. The note I had left her was crumbled up and hidden in her apron pocket. I realized why we never had pictures of ourselves on our walls, why my mom insisted that all of my things be put away neatly in my room and never left in the public areas of the house, why Adeona and I had been told that I could only be her playmate if we promised never to tell anyone who my mother was. If Tullie knew Samara and I were related, she would be able to piece together what had happened. I had been in hiding my whole life and only just now realized it.

“You see I know what my goal is, and I can remember that there was someone else. There was someone who could have given me exactly what I wanted, and now suddenly I find out from my father that that someone is dead. Gone. My father doesn’t know how he died which is strange. Because you would think that my father would know how his best friend died.”

Tullie circled around the kitchen. “And you see my father is very confused because he knows his best friend’s wife. He considered himself quite close to her actually, but apparently she just disappeared from his memory. None of that added up. Your plan had too many holes in it, so I just put it all together. I killed...or nearly killed your husband, and then you finished the job. You erased parts of my memory and hid yourself away so I couldn’t find you, but why would you need to hide from me if you yourself are a Royal?”

Samara exhaled. “Exactly. Why would I be hiding from anyone if I were a Royal?” she asked.

Tullie giggled. The sound was far from humorous. “Because your husband had the same idea as my father and put restrictions on his title,” she replied. “And you’ve not managed to fulfill the requirements, so you don’t have access to all of the powers. You were hiding because you knew if I found you and killed you, all those powers would go to me.” Tullie skipped over to Samara’s side. “Did I get it right?”

I reached for weapons that wouldn’t come to me. I could feel my heartbeat speeding up. My breathing was becoming erratic. Cato grabbed onto me. For a moment I struggled against his hold, but then I gave in. He spun me around until my face was pressed to chest. He hit the volume controls for my music until it was as high as it could go. I clung to him.

I tried to focus on the music playing out in my earbuds, but no matter how loud the volume was it didn’t completely block out the sounds of crashes and screaming. It took me a while to realize my own wails were mixed into the sounds. Cato continued to

hold me even as I screamed into his chest. He slowly started backing us away from the kitchen. He wouldn't let me turn my face.

Finally, there was the familiar jolt. We were ripped one more time from our location and dropped back with the Fates. Our trip through time was finally over.

Chapter 10

Cato

I would chop off the heads of all three Fates if I thought it would make a difference. The feral part of me was fighting its way to the surface, and it was only the possibility of hurting the person in my arms that held it back. I swayed back and forth for a moment trying to calm Remy. My eardrums were still ringing from his wails, but they would likely recover. Remy had gone silent once he realized where we were, but he was holding to my shirt so tightly that his fingers had to be cramped from the effort.

He took another moment then pulled himself together. He used my shirt as a handkerchief. As disgusting as it was, that action reassured me more than any words would that Remy was going to be okay, even if it took some time.

The Fates joined us in the weaving room. They stood to the side and waited for us to address them.

“Tullie did all of this,” I remarked. I struggled to come to terms with how at first I had just fallen for her act without any bit of suspicion. Remy pulled away from my embrace. He swiped at his eyes underneath his sunglasses.

“Dantalion?” Remy asked. His voice was hoarse.

“He did not know. He suspected her, but he could never get the evidence. Your mother never revealed anything to him out of fear that he had something to do with Tullie’s plan. She knew what things a parent was capable of doing on their child’s

behalf,” Lachesis said. She reached out to pat Remy on the shoulder, but he jumped out of her reach.

“Don’t.” He bit out the warning. I wouldn’t put it past him to try to fight the Fates at that moment. I prepared to summon my sword if things took that turn. If Remy wanted to fight three of the ancient ones, he was not going to do it alone.

“Dantalion and his staff never saw Tullie after she left that day, not that they knew anyway. Once she realized that killing Samara had gotten her no closer to holding a title, she retreated back into hiding to plan her next step. She decided it would be easiest to simply wait for someone else to succeed at her father’s plan and then kill that person and take the title from them before they had the time to set up another round of tests,” Lachesis explained.

“That is why she was so helpful and wanted me to succeed,” I had put that much together. “But if she did not know Remy existed...”

“She had nothing to do with Remy. That was Olivia, Dantalion, and us to a degree,” Clotho summoned their spindles again. “Your threads have been woven together from the beginning.” We followed the lines to where they were currently being added to the tapestry. True enough both threads were meeting together and combining before joining the others.

I stared at them. I understood in theory what they were telling me, but I could not quite grasp it.

“We’re soulmates,” Remy said. It appeared it had taken him much less time to process.

“Could be.” Clotho confirmed. “You could also just be bound. Intertwined threads only means that your destinies are reliant on each other. Two people can hate each other, but if their destinies are reliant on each other, their threads will still be tied.”

“No, we’re soulmates,” Remy said without any hint of doubt. “It was why Dantalion set his test of love as he did.”

“Then you chose correctly this time,” Atropos told us. “You did not always choose to recognize your connection during your other visits.”

That time I caught on quicker. After all, all the pieces were there, and I had inherited Dantalion’s logic. Dantalion had set the test of love not to test whoever would become the Demon of Love but to test whoever happened to love that person. He had not wanted the next person in his role to be betrayed the same way Julia had betrayed him. After all, how could someone be the Demon of Love if they did not believe in its existence?

Besides, the revelation that our threads were tied together only confirmed the feelings that had been nagging at me since the first day that I met Remy.

Lachesis didn’t give me long to ponder on the subject. She dragged us back to the point of our visit. “After Samara’s death, Olivia was the only one who knew the truth of what had happened. She went to Dantalion, and while she didn’t tell him everything, she offered him her service, promising that by allowing her to work for him, she would be

better able to keep Remy safe in her own way. While Dantalion was not pleased to not know exactly why he could not communicate with Remy, he did love Beleth and Samara enough to never do anything that might harm their child.

Atropos nodded. “Dantalion came to visit us himself after that. We allowed him to see the tapestry, but he had only wanted to see Remy’s spindle. He found the thread that connected to it, and he decided he would make the test impossible to pass for anyone other than the person who was tied to Remy. Still, he did not know exactly who was the owner of the thread. He could only guess, and Cato still had to prove himself in the other tasks.”

“And after that, everything else had to rely on the choices the two of you made along the way,” Clotho added.

Remy’s eyes were hidden behind his shades. I was a bit surprised he had not crushed them or bent them when he had had his face pressed so tight against me. With his cold tone, it was almost impossible to imagine that he had been screaming just moments ago.

“What kind of debt does Tullie have that makes everyone so afraid to kill her and risk inheriting them?” Remy asked.

“She purposely angered Hades himself. She owes him a favor of his choosing, and if she should fail, her soul will be forced to wander with the lost souls for all eternity. And she made sure to get it arranged to where anyone who might murder her before that time will face the same destiny,” Atropos explained.

“She did all that for a title? That’s obsessive,” Remy muttered.

“That is certainly one word to describe her,” Atropos agreed.

Killing Tullie was out of the question in that case. No one had ever successfully repaid a debt to Hades in all of history. “She will be waiting for me when I return,” I said. I had no doubts about what her next moves would be.

“She will.” Atropos agreed. “Her plan is to kill you the moment you return to the city.”

“If I’ve succeeded.”

“You have already succeeded. By placing the pieces back in the tapestry, you changed both your destinies for the better. You will not be surprised when Tullie attacks you this time, and if you succeed in your fight against her, Remy will not lose his soulmate,” Clotho said. She held up my spindle. It was no longer switching between rapid spinning and slow. It was going at the same steady pace as Remy’s. “You see.”

“That’s it?” Remy questioned “There are no other catches?”

Atropos spun around. “It is, but it isn’t.”

“I do not like boring riddles,” I remarked even though I knew I risked insulting the Fates. They deserved a few insults at that point.

Atropos and Lachesis maintained their positive personalities, but Clotho frowned. Despite her mood swings or perhaps because of them, she seemed the most human of the sisters. “We may have saved your life. Show some gratitude,” she scolded.

“The key word there is ‘may’.” Remy said. His eyes were on me. “Do you feel any different? If you don’t then we can’t know if you’ve actually succeeded. They could be tricking us with the spindle.”

“You don’t trust us?” Atropos’s bottom lip pouted out. The look of disgust on Remy’s face said it all.

“Enough of all this,” I said and stopped them before they could launch into an actual brawl. “What else do I have to do?”

“Nothing,” Lachesis assured. “You have fulfilled everything, and when the test ends at midnight, you will get your reward. For now, you may rest here and be our guests.”

“That’s all?” Remy asked. “We don’t have much time. If we didn’t succeed then we need to be figuring something out.”

He was right. Unlike in the forest and tunnel, our recent trips through time and space had played in real time. We had spent an entire day putting the threads in place and watching other people’s memories and only had about an hour before the time was up.

“There is nothing left for you two to do,” Lachesis confirmed.

“Would you be willing to sign a contract stating that?” he asked.

All three sisters sighed. “This is why we don’t help out people often,” Clotho said. “It’s always a hassle.” Still, they signed a contract that Remy produced stating that to their knowledge we had fulfilled all the requirements of the test and that if they

happened to be lying about it, they would meet with unpleasant consequences themselves.

The sisters then took us back to the main room, saying we could stay there until the deadline before excusing themselves to go check on the tapestry now that it had been mended. When we got to the main room, Remy collapsed onto the chaise.

“How are you?” I asked.

“How do you think I am doing?” He looked exhausted.

“Not well,” I admitted.

Remy shoved himself up to a better sitting position. “That’s about right.” He scrubbed at his face, pushing his sunglasses up on his forehead in the process. “But that is once again a problem for another day.”

I joined him on the chaise. Remy stared down at where our thighs were pressed together, but I dared to remain where I was. Remy smirked. “You want to talk about it. Don’t you?”

“You are the one who said we should be more vocal about our feelings,” I reminded him.

“Was that me? I don’t recall that,” he replied with a grin.

I leaned my head back. “It was nearly a lifetime ago.”

Remy tapped at his chin. “Before the inn and the spider demon?”

“Around the time of the snake.”

Remy chuckled. “Truly a lifetime ago.”

The sound of the loom moving floated in from the other room. “It seems like they’re working on it,” he said. “They’re bickering with each other too. Not about anything important, but about who should have to sit there and do the weaving.”

We fell back into silence a few moments. Remy played with his music controls. The volume went down until I could no longer hear it. I thought he was searching through playlists with how long he kept playing pressing at the wristband.

“I am sorry that you had to go through all of that for me,” I said.

“You’re worth it.”

I pulled his hand in mine and rubbed my thumb over his knuckles. I could feel the drummer calluses on his hand.

“You’ve gotten bolder. You think because our threads are intertwined that means I belong to you?” Remy asked.

I dropped his hand immediately, but Remy was quick to grab hold again. “It’s okay. I was just teasing. It wasn’t a good joke though. I can see that now.” He laced our fingers together. “Even if our threads weren’t together, I think we both have realized by now that there is something between us.”

“Yes?”

“Yeah.”

Remy leaned forward. I braced myself. His lips were centimeters from mine when the pain suddenly shot through me. I fell to the floor clutching at my chest. Remy’s swearing filled the air as he hovered over me.

“What’s wrong? Are you dying?” He asked.

I shook his head. I tried to tell Remy that it was the opposite. I was not dying. I was finally becoming a full Royal, but the power transfer was too intense. My wings forced their way out. Thankfully I had already become accustomed to that feeling. It was the other feelings i was struggling with. I focused on trying to steady my breaths. Remy was humming. I couldn’t make out the tune, but I could feel the effects of it. Remy was trying to block my pain. It dulled it somewhat but not entirely. The agony continued on for several long moments.

When the pain stopped, it stopped instantly. There was no easing off. It simply went from all-consuming to nothing. It still took me a few moments to gather myself and get back upright. Remy hovered around trying to help.

“Are you okay? Of course, you’re not okay. Are you-are you dying?” Remy looked close to crying.

“No, I think I am finally not dying actually,” I said.

Remy sank down onto the floor next to me. “It worked?” he asked.

I could feel the new power coursing through my veins. It was like a steady thrum of electricity, a bit like a tickling sensation. “I believe it worked.”

The sisters returned to the room. All three looked decades older than before. “Don’t worry. This is merely temporary. Our youthful appearances will soon return to us,” Atropos assured.

“We weren’t worried,” Remy replied.

“You are a most ungrateful child,” Clotho complained. “I have to say that I am quite looking forward to seeing you leave.”

Remy looked up at her. “Trust me. I’m excited for that myself,” he assured.

Lachesis held up our threads. “If it makes you feel better, it looks like you will have a safe trip back to the city.”

“Thank you for your help in this,” I said. I might be angry, but I still had manners. I also knew that I would perhaps not be taking everything so personally if I had not spent the past few days sleeping on the ground and eating tasteless camping food and if we had not just pulled an all-nighter.

“You are welcome,” Lachesis assured at the same time that Clotho remarked, “Don’t make it a habit to return.”

“It was nice to meet some of our favorite characters though,” Atropos murmured dreamily. “But you do have to get going if our drama is going to continue.”

Remy

That was it. That was the big meeting with the Fates we had spent the past several days journeying toward. We had accomplished what we set out to accomplish. Now Cato was a Royal, and I had more questions than I had ever wanted to have about my own heritage.

The sisters had seen us out with very little fanfare, and we were on our way back to the city. Thankfully, we had Cato's new Royal powers to keep us a bit safer, even if the teleportation didn't work in the untamed zone. I was relieved by it. Cato still seemed uncertain.

His gaze kept wondering over to me as we walked along. I told myself that he couldn't resist my good looks, and not that he still doubted that we were safe.

We were back on the small path with very little light. I was careful not to touch anything that could potentially have catnip on it even if the thought of being high or drunk at that moment sounded extremely appealing.

The eighth time Cato cleared his throat and didn't follow up with any kind of comment, I whirled around. "I am fine. I am fantastic. I found out my entire life has been a lie, and I am apparently the next Royal of Music - if I can ever figure out how to pass that particular test that my father set and unlock the rest of my abilities. Like I'm supposed to somehow know what my father intended for me to know despite the fact that I didn't even know who my father was until a few minutes ago. Actually, really the only thing that's changed in that regard is that now I know where I got my musical abilities from. But it's fine. I'm fine. Everything is absolutely peachy," I announced.

Cato took a deep breath and slowly exhaled as if he had been the one to go off on the tangent. I found myself mimicking the move which is probably what Cato had intended to happen.

“You are fine.” Cato agreed. “There is no limit on how long you have to unlock your full abilities, so nothing has changed for you.” It sounded so nice when Cato said it, like things really were okay, and I really was fine and not trying to lie to myself.

“Good. Glad we are agreed about that. Did you have another question or comment to make?” I asked. Cato prepared for everything. He predicted every problem with could come across. It could have something to do with Tullie. It could be something about us. I braced myself for the answer.

Cato nodded. “Yes. Chimei packed us supplies for s’mores. Perhaps we can have them when we get back to the open area.”

“That’s...” I paused not quite believing what I had just heard. “That’s what you wanted to say?”

“Yes. I like s’mores.” Cato said as if there was nothing strange about his statement.

“Okay. We’ll have s’mores then.” I turned back around, so that Cato could not see my expression. Apparently, Cato was still strange even without the imminent threat of death hanging over his head, but he was just strange in a different way. “We should hurry, so we can have the s’mores faster,” I suggested. I liked s’mores myself, and we had a few

days to just enjoy ourselves before we had to face the next potential death threat. We might as well enjoy them.

Cato had been serious about the s'mores. The moment we were in an area where we could actually set up camp again, he pulled out the supplies. "I think there is more alcohol too," he added.

"You're not worried about Tullie? And what we're going to do with her when we get back?" While I was safe, Cato still wasn't. I couldn't forget that.

He started setting up the campfire. "Either Tullie will succeed in killing me, or I will find a way to stop her."

"You can't kill her. If you inherit her debt to Hades you might as well sign over your soul immediately. He always asks the impossible from those who owe him." I had seen some of the contracts Hades arranged. Other than the Demon of Deals himself, Hades was probably the most creative when it came to making his arrangements, and he knew how to get more value out of a deal than it was actually worth.

"There are other ways." Cato sounded so confident about it. I really couldn't pinpoint if the change in his behavior was because he had the confidence of a Royal or if it was how Cato always had been when he didn't have a deadline to worry about.

"You seem to have a plan," I said. I wondered if he would tell me, or if it was something that needed to be private for now.

Cato smirked and handed me a stick that he had carved the end of. Then he handed over the bag of marshmallows. I took one and stabbed it. I trusted that Cato hadn't handed me some kind of toxic stick, and even if he had, I knew he would find a cure. Cato apparently decided it best to roast a handful of marshmallows at once. "I have the advantage of knowing Tullie's plan and her abilities. I have the upperhand. If I do not rush, things should work," he explained.

"We," I corrected. Cato's smile was soft in response. "You're not even going to pretend to be surprised by my willingness to help you?" I asked.

"I am shocked," he said. He was not shocked. The liar.

"Just because our threads are connected does not mean that I have to help you, you know. I am doing this fully out of the generosity of my heart," I waved a chocolate bar in front of his face as I reminded him of that fact.

"I know." The corners of Cato's lips traveled upward with each statement I made.

"So do you have a plan for how to get Tullie out of our lives without anyone having to take on her debt?" I asked.

"Not yet, but it is a long walk back. Plenty of time to find one." He seemed entirely unconcerned about the matter.

That was that then. Cato spent the rest of the evening happily putting together s'mores and eating them until I worried we would have to deal with an entirely different

type of hangover in the morning. As for me, I found the leftover bottle of alcohol and was finishing it off while eating the s'mores Cato made for me.

The warm campfire, the sweet desserts, and knowledge that we were safe for the first time in possibly ever made my head spin pleasantly. The urge to reach over and kiss Cato taunted me. I really wanted to know what that would be like. Not even the traces of sticky marshmallow on his lips were currently acting as a deterrent. What did stop me though was that once again it seemed Cato and I were on two entirely different pages.

“Do you want to stay at the inn for a few days?” he said, suddenly standing to grab his water bottle from where he had left it by our packs.

“What?” I asked.

“You seemed to like it when we were there. At least when we weren’t being attacked. I thought you might want to have time to rest before we go back,” he offered.

There was something I was missing, but I couldn’t put my finger on what it was exactly. “You really want to stay at the inn for a few days?”

“You could stay. Your safety is guaranteed until you reach the city again,” he replied. The Fates had told us we would make it to the city in one piece, so he was right about that.

All the pieces came together. “You want to leave me at the inn until you take care of Tullie.”

Cato somehow looked even more invested in his s'mores. "Your safety is guaranteed until you reach the city," he repeated. And my safety was not guaranteed after that. That was the part he was doing his best not to say.

"Yeah, no. we're not official yet, and even if we were, I'm not the type of boyfriend you leave behind just because you fear a little danger," I replied. I poured a shot for him.

He took the glass when I offered it. "Good to know. If we do become official," he said.

"The odds for things working out for you are very good."

He chuckled. "That is a first."

Cato

Any plan I had to potentially leave Remy in a safe area while I took care of Tullie was tossed out of the window during the conversation over s'mores. I briefly considered sneaking out once we got to the inn and continuing on ahead, but I had a strong feeling that all that would result in was Remy power-walking through the desert and maiming me himself.

Remy treated the rest of our trip like an actual camping expedition. He took his time studying the different plants and observing the animals. He did not wake as early as he had been waking up. Often he would just be climbing out of his sleeping bag when I

opened my eyes in the morning. We cooked all our meals. We had plenty of the better supplies thanks to having relied on the instant bars during the days in the tree tunnel.

Remy kept glancing at me whenever he thought I was not paying attention. I could feel his eyes on me even through the shades. There was definitely no way to sneak away without his noticing.

I“‘You two made it! You’re alive! Or at least you’ve resurrected!’” Lucy welcomed us both with open arms the moment we made it back to the inn. “Chimei has been planning for your return. He will be so happy to see you.”

“I heard my name!” Chimei came running toward us. “Look who it is!” He had Remy wrapped in a hug before I could blink. I managed to hold myself still long enough for Chimei to grant me a half-hug. “Were you successful in your goal?” he asked.

“We did what we set out to do. Then we found out we had more to do, but that’s just kind of how life goes, isn’t it?” Remy replied.

“That does sound familiar.” Chimei steered us inside to the check-in desk where Lucy was already checking their room availability.

“Luckily for you two, we are not at capacity this time around. You can both have two of our nicest rooms to yourselves this round.”

“One room is fine,” Remy assured. He took a step back toward me and laced our hands together. “It’s fine right?”

I nodded. There was no way I could speak after a question like that. If I said anything it would come out as an embarrassing squeak.

Lucy stared at our hands. “Oh yeah? Should I be asking if you have a preference for one bed or two this time?” she asked.

My cheeks were hot, but Remy did not seem embarrassed at all by the implication. In fact, he looked rather proud about it. “We’d like two beds, but could you make them larger beds? Just in case.”

We ate with Lucy and Chimei and had a few drinks. Remy carried most of the conversation. He recounted our adventures with his usual flair, but I noticed he was careful to not share anything about Tullie. I relaxed, trusting Remy to know what information had to remain private and let myself enjoy the company. It was actually one of the most pleasant evenings I could recall ever experiencing, and that was actually kind of sad now that I thought about it.

Despite the pleasantness of the evening, we both decided to head up to our room earlier than we normally would. The room did have two beds as Remy had requested, and to my relief he did not make a big deal about them. He did not really mention the set up at all actually other than to give it a little nod of approval as he tossed his bag down in the corner.

He washed up first. I could not help but notice that unlike the previous times he was not singing while he was in the shower. He was quiet like he was expecting me to take off and disappear at any moment.

I made a point of unpacking and then repacking the pots, pans, and any noisier items in our bags while I searched for clean clothes and toiletries. By that point, Remy seemed to have relaxed because soon the familiar sounds of his singing trickled through the bathroom door, and things started to feel somewhat normal.

Eventually Remy finished with his night routine, and I got the bathroom to myself. I did not take nearly as long as Remy had, but I still took longer than usual. I could not remember the last time my hair felt perfectly clean. When I exited the bathroom, Remy was sprawled across one of the beds and fiddling with his bracelet again. He was trying to make a new style out of just the leather straps and charms.

I looked between the bed Remy was sitting on and then the other bed. I stiffly sat on the edge of the unoccupied bed. Remy seemed to be having the kind of thoughts that required a bit more space than usual.

“I always thought the ‘R’ looked more like a ‘B’ than an ‘R’,” he said. I took a look at the charm.

He went silent for another moment. He had sorted the bracelet, but he still needed to tie it on. I reached over to help him.

“I was thinking,..” Remy said as he held his arm out to me. “That maybe I do have a clue to unlocking my own Royal abilities.” I remained quiet. Remy would share his thoughts at his own pace. When Beleth-my dad-was dying, my mom said that she couldn’t become the Royal. There had to be something to the test that she knew she

wouldn't be able to do." He plucked at the key. "But that's impossible because my mom could do anything."

"Music?" I asked. I did not want to ruin his perception of his mother, but I doubted she had the same musical ability as actual music demons.

"The test is never solely about the abilities though. What were the tests you had to do for Dantalion's challenge?" he asked.

"First was an art test," I said.

"Not one that you needed to be an art demon to pass though. Right?"

It had been difficult, but it had not something that required a Royal's ability to pass. It had just needed preparation. "Correct," I confirmed.

"Then what happened next?" he asked.

"Science test. Venom cure. I used it for you."

Remy's mouth formed a circle. "Oh. Well. That was a good test."

I nodded. "It was useful."

"And then?"

"The test they made you do." The way they had made him confront his own worst memories to save my life.

Remy cocked his head to the side. "That's how Tullie failed."

“What do you mean?”

“Tullie didn’t take anyone she loved with her. She didn’t have anyone who loved her enough to go and do that.”

It all made sense.

Remy continued. “Beleth seemingly did not give a time frame for his test, so it seems the tests themselves do not have to follow a certain structure. But tests like this can't just be made up on the spot. There has to be a set standard that could hold up in a court if necessary.”

“Contracts?” I asked.

“I think there has to be a contract of sorts,” he said.

“It is convenient that you work for the Demon of Deals.”

“Yeah,” Remy mumbled. “Convenient. Really convenient actually.” He hopped up and started pacing the room. “How much do you think that others have screwed with our lives? How many things did we think came from our own efforts or luck but were really just set up by others who are playing with our lives like we’re some kind of toy in their game?”

I thought back over the threads. “How much control do any of us really have?”

Remy froze. “Did you just go existential?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

Remy stepped toward me. He stared down at me for a moment. “Could we share a bed tonight?”

My tongue felt like a stone.

“Just sleeping,” he assured before I could embarrass myself. “Kinda like in the tents, but in a much softer bed.”

I nodded. I hoped not too eagerly. Remy’s face lit up, and he climbed onto the bed. I turned off the lights and climbed onto the other side of the bed. As soon as I had settled down, Remy rolled my way. Then his head was on my chest, and I found that I really did not mind.

Remy

Cato’s heart thumped under my ear. When I first put my head on his chest, the heartbeat had been a bit erratic. It had taken all of my willpower to not laugh at the idea that I had so easily flustered the new Royal. It only took a few seconds for his heartbeat to settle.

“Thank you.” Cato said the words so low that without his enhanced hearing, I would have missed them entirely.

“Is there anything in particular you’re thanking me for?” I asked.

“You haven’t killed me. You’re still trying to help me. You did way more than you were required to do. Because of you I am now a full Royal. Thank you.”

We both went quiet for a few moments. I counted out his heartbeats and thought over what we had been shown a few days before. “I just can’t think of anything I could do that my mom wouldn’t have been able to do herself. If she had just become the Royal she might still be alive.” Tullie was powerful, but without her tricks she had few ways of actually killing a Royal.

“I mean you saw how many threads there were, and how they kept shifting. Everything we say or do can shift our stories. Wouldn’t it make sense that there would be more ways for her to save herself than for her to die?” I asked.

Cato made a small noise. It was a careful neutral sound, the kind one made when they weren’t certain what to say or when they thought that whatever they said wouldn’t be well-received. “There were so many threads there that also ended, and once they ended a new spindle appeared with a new thread to take its place. That thread was playing its own part in the tapestry.”

“I just don’t see why the threads cannot go on forever. Why do we need new ones?”

“Dantalion and his friends- they were not just afraid of losing each other and having to go on without the others. They were tired. We demons outlive many others. The mortals never come close to the years we have, and even they at times grow tired. Sometimes I am tired even now, and I cannot imagine how I will feel in one thousand years.”

I wanted to make a joke about he would never be tired now that he had me, but I knew it wasn't the time. "And what about those of us who get taken before they are tired? What about the ones who are just starting and have that path taken from them?"

"I do not know. I think there must be a reason, but I think it is beyond our understanding," Cato said.

I gripped at his shirt. Cato's hand came up. It hovered over my back for a moment before finally settling there. It pressed against the scar tissue that had not quite faded from when he had crashed into me and sent us flying through Jezebel's window. It was strange thinking about how much had changed in just a few days.

"You know. I never predicted this was how we would end up." I tried to steer the conversation to a more pleasant conversation. "Did you?"

Cato chuckled. "I was hoping that you would not break your contract and try to kill me before we made it back."

"Was I that obvious about it?" I thought I had done a slightly better job of hiding it.

"Yes. I was awake that first night when you sat up and started telling me all the ways you could potentially kill me with a flute."

I had not known that. "You didn't say anything," I pointed out.

"It was an interesting list. I wanted to hear the end of it," he admitted.

I laughed at that. “Well, I am not planning to kill you any longer. As long as you don’t plan to kill me either.”

“Never,” Cato promised.

“Good. Then we shouldn’t have to worry about either of us killing the other.”

We stayed at the inn one more night, enjoying our short vacation. Neither of us could fully relax when we knew what was waiting for us. It was difficult to say our farewells to Lucy and Chimei. I at least got to exchange numbers with the two, and the inn had some reception at least, unlike most of the rest of the untamed zone. I even sent off a few messages of my own, hoping that they would make their way to Nic and Jezebel faster than we would make it back to the city.

We crossed both the blue and red deserts as quick as we could, not bothering with detours or lingering in the sand. Even though the Fates had said we would make it safely back to the city, we did not want to take any unnecessary risks.

Despite our precautions, we ended up having to fight another snake, but with Cato’s improved strength and our prior experience with battling sand snakes, it was a little easier the second time through.

Stepping back into the city was like stepping out of a dream. There was no longer any guarantee of safety. There were people who knew us. Camera drones, shaped like bugs, descended on us immediately. A reporter ran up behind the cameras with his mic in hand ready to greet Cato.

“Cato, Royal of Science, Art, and Love, why take a journey to the untamed zone so soon after your inheritance? Why risk your title in such a way?”

Cato stared blankly at the reporter. He swatted away one of the camera bugs. The reporter nervously licked at his lips. “I see.” His gaze darted about then landed on me. There was a flash of recognition. “You?” He straightened. “Ramiel.” The reporter shoved the mic into my face, and the camera bugs swarmed away from Cato and over to me. “What exactly is your relationship with the Royal? Are you the Royal’s future spouse?”

“What?” I rocked back on my heels. Spouse? As in marriage?

Cato gently pushed aside the reporter. “He does not have time to speak with you now.” He pulled me to his side. “I hope I do not embarrass myself.” He whispered the words to where only I could pick them up.

“Why? What exactly are you about to do?” I had no interest in being embarrassed either.

Cato adjusted his grip around my waist, and then there was a sensation not too different from when the Fates were sending us through time and space. Cato was trying out his teleportation powers for the first time ever and with a passenger. A few dizzying moments passed before we dropped onto the manor floor. I could already feel bruises forming from landing on the camping backpack.

“Still alive?” Cato asked.

I belted out a laugh. “Yeah, I am. Not bad for a first teleport by the way.” I sat up and pulled the backpack off, glad to finally be rid of it.

Cato tossed his own camping gear aside. “Thank you. I am pleased with how it turned out as well.”

No staff were around. If they were still following protocol then they would be on vacation while Cato was out, only checking in occasionally to see if he returned. As head of staff, Olivia would still be staying in the manor since that was her permanent house, but she could be out running errands or visiting friends.

“So, did you happen to think of how we were going to deal with Tullie?” I asked. I assumed he had some kind of plan given how we had gone straight to the manor where she was most likely to be waiting to kill at least Cato if not the both of us.

“I have an idea.” Cato stretched. “We will need to set some things up. We will have to be careful to avoid Tullie in the process. She has been hiding here, somehow avoiding the staff noticing her presence.”

The manor was huge. The staff kept to schedules. If someone had grown up in that setting and knew the schedules, knew the security features, and knew the layouts, then it would be easy for them to live there unnoticed. Then you had to add in the fact that Tullie could shift to make herself look like any member of the staff. It was unlikely anyone other than Dantalion would be able to see through her disguise if she was impersonating someone she knew well.

“Right. You said she was the one to give you the letter. Do you think the letter was even the real thing?” I asked.

“I cannot be certain. Either way, we need Olivia. I think she is the only one who can help us figure out what else we are missing. I do not have any right to ask this of you, but do you think you could help me again?”

“I already told you that you can’t leave me behind.” I summoned my flute. If Tullie suddenly came out and tried to kill us, we had to be prepared to kill her first even if it meant taking on her debt in the process.

“Any idea where she normally stays when she’s here?” I figured Cato would at least know what areas typically weren’t frequented and would make for good hiding spots.

“She has her own wing. That is what she claimed. She seems to sneak around quite a bit,” Cato said. That was better than I had expected.

I nodded. “So we need to find Olivia and make sure that we don’t run into Tullie while we’re doing that.” I flipped the flute and caught it smoothly. Cato looked suitably impressed, so that was one mission accomplished. “We’ll split up then? We can each take a wing that we know Olivia frequents. Stay away from the one where Tullie likes to hide.”

“Yes. That could work.” Cato sounded distracted.

“If you see her, just teleport away and yell for me. I’ll be able to hear and get to you quickly,” I said, sounding more confident than I felt.

“What about you? What if you run into her first?” he asked. He had a point. I swapped out my flute for my drumsticks. “I can knock her off her game long enough to get away, and we already know to watch out for paintings.”

“You can also run to a safe spot and send me a text.” Cato held up his communicator and nodded to where mine was stored away in my pocket. They hadn’t been of any use in the untamed zone, and I had almost forgotten I even had one.

“Good point.” I reached for the device. “This wouldn’t be your way of getting my number would it?”

Cato smirked. He plucked the device from my hands and entered his number. The look on his face as he sent himself a message from my communicator was enough to make me almost blush.

“You know without the stress of almost dying hanging over you, you’re a bit of a flirt,” I told him.

Cato handed the communicator back over. “Let us tie up loose ends, and then you can find out exactly how good of a flirt I am.”

We parted ways. Each of us took a map of the layout of the house. According to Cato, Olivia had given the map to him shortly after he had moved into the manor. It was a

map they gave to new staff members to help them find their way around since the manor was basically the size of a museum and just as confusing as one.

The map even had notes on it to help. Apparently, the center of the house, where we had landed earlier, was mostly just a gallery of sorts and at times open to the public. The east wing was the actual residential area, exclusive to the family, the necessary staff members, and the few people the family invited into the space. The south wing was the hosting area of the house with things like ballrooms, larger dining rooms, and apparently more museum stuff. The north wing mainly served as housing for the staff who chose to live there, and the west wing was supposed to be mostly storage or studios. A note had been added that certain of the rooms were for Tullie's use only. That note had been scribbled out then rewritten and then scribbled out again multiple times.

I checked the map again as I turned toward the north wing. It was strange to think people lived like this. It was even stranger to know I was supposed to have grown up in a house like this. How could such a small family actually use a house large enough to require a map?

The north wing, much like the rest of the house, was covered in artwork from different eras. What before had seemed like just an appreciation for the arts now felt like a heightened security system. I treaded carefully to avoid getting within arms' reach of the paintings. For good measure I also steered clear of the statues.

I made a note to ask Cato if he thought he might have developed the ability to bring artwork to life after his transformation into a Royal. That was probably something we should have thought of before splitting up.

The first few rooms were easy to navigate. They were on the larger side, so there was no need to worry about getting too close to the paintings that hung on all the walls. The statues in those rooms were spaced far enough apart that I could easily make my way through them while maintaining my safety bubble. That space gradually disappeared as I went deeper into the north wing and to the residential areas within it. The rooms grew smaller. They were larger than anything in my childhood home, but they were far from the size of any ballrooms.

I had been walking for a while, listening and looking for any sign of Olivia or Tullie, when the realization hit. Under the thrum of the music coming from my earbuds, there was an eerie quiet. It wasn't the normal quiet caused by an absence of other people. It was a heavy silence. There was no ticking noise coming from the grandfather clock in the corner. When I thought back over it, the refrigerator I had passed by in the kitchen a few rooms back was no longer making a humming noise, and even though I could feel warm air blowing through the vents, I couldn't hear the breeze or the typical rumblings of the pipes behind the walls.

I tapped at my wristband to turn off my music and realized that it wasn't just that the room was silent. The rooms had been filled with negative decibels. It was the kind of quiet that could drive a person to a breakdown within less than an hour. A sound-vacuum charm had been broken. They were common security features in some manors, common enough that I knew I couldn't have set one off accidentally. Someone else had activated it.

Another tap to my wristband proved that the magic had already reached me. My earbuds were useless. As a last ditch effort I tried screaming out a warning for Cato. My voice was swallowed by the silence. I couldn't hear anything. I tossed my drumsticks away. They would be useless. At least the flute had a blade on the end, and just like every demon over the age of two, I had my dagger on me. I wasn't completely defenseless, but I wasn't a threat either.

I spun around slowly taking in my surroundings. Someone else had to be in the area, and I wasn't about to have someone sneak up on me just because I couldn't hear. Another turn, slower the next time, luckily timed so that I caught the door to the room slowly inching its way open.

Cato

While Remy went off to explore the north wing, I went straight to the east wing. With it being the section of the house I was most familiar with, my hope was to either find Olivia quickly or to establish she was not there so I could go help Remy with the north wing.

The first place I checked was Dantalion's office. Seeing it in person again for the first time since we had taken the trip through the past was jarring. What had looked like a warm study before, suddenly held a coldness to it. The single chair where I now knew there used to be five stood as a symbol of Dantalion's loneliness. Stepping inside now felt like invading someone's privacy.

Olivia was not in the room, but I still lingered in the doorway. There was something nagging at me, telling me I had missed an important detail about the space. It was funny to think that only a few days ago, I had been sitting in that chair and trying to find a way to save my own life.

I backed out into the hallway then froze. That was it. We had discussed it, but I had pushed it all to the back of my mind in my rush to avoid death and then to avoid death again. Tullie should be dead. She had failed to complete the first test, but she was still up and walking and up until a few weeks ago Dantalion had been as well. If the cursed blade was real and if it was a true exchange, then Tullie should be dead, as in the permanent kind of death.

I searched my pockets for Dantalion's letter again. Olivia had called that chair the "truth chair", and while I had not noticed anything about it other than how uncomfortable it was the first time I had sat in it, perhaps it had a function that only worked for whoever was the Royal.

As before, the cushions sank under my weight, dragging me down like quicksand. I ignored that sensation to the best of my abilities and turned my attention to the letter. I had folded and unfolded it so many times that the creases were close to pulling apart entirely. It threatened to fall apart in my hands.

The letter looked the same as the first time I had read it. It listed out the requirements to fill the third part of the test. It spelled out the possibility of my death. If it had not been for Olivia confirming I was supposed to have a letter I would be doubting it

entirely. Then again, had that even been the real Olivia? Had any of my encounters with the supposed Olivia really been her and not Tullie in disguise?

Before I could stress over that possibility for too long, the ink on the letter began to transform. Some words faded entirely. Others reappeared. I read it again with the changes.

Successor,

By now you have stabbed me through the heart. Excellent. You may have noticed that while you gained some of the abilities of a Royal, you did not gain all of them. That is because your final task is not complete. You proved your mastery of the arts and science, but you have not yet proved that you are worthy of becoming the demon of love. Once you have proved this, you will gain the rest of the abilities and officially become a Royal of the Underworld.

Your final task is one of great risk. You must travel to the Fates and change the tapestry. The fate of one person must change to bring them a greater reward than they were originally intended to have. You are clever. You can factor what that entails.

~~If you think you might just continue with the way things are, I have already planned for that as well.~~ The dagger in my heart is cursed. It will cause a permanent death if not removed in twenty days. Do not worry. It is something I have waited for for centuries, a chance at moving on. However, the permanent death is not ~~restricted to me.~~ guaranteed. The curse is no ordinary one. Should you fail to accomplish this final task in

twenty days time, the dagger will fall from my heart, and ~~enter yours instead.~~—will have failed the test. Your strength will fade, you will weaken and temporarily die, when you resurrect, you will return to your prior state from before the testing, and you will be forbidden from making another attempt.

Regards,

Dantalion

The fact that I had been tricked into believing I was going to die sunk in. The spindle at the Fates had been tracking my existence. It had been spinning out of control not knowing whether I would die temporarily and live as an ordinary demon or if I would survive and become the next Royal. I knew I should not be mad at myself. Even the Fates had not been able to correctly read my future.

Still, I had trekked through the untamed zone and endangered Remy's life all because I thought I had no other choice. Remy had endured what he had because he thought I would die otherwise. I had let anxiety eat away at me and tried to come to terms with what it might mean to fail, and even though I had ended up successful, the anxiety still had not quite faded. The things I had said and done were going to stick with me.

All of this had happened because of one person's selfishness. All because Tullie could not live with her own failure. Now we had to deal with her, and the fact that she had managed to tamper with Dantalion's letter meant she was stronger than we had originally considered.

The door to the office opened. I braced myself then relaxed as Remy stepped inside. I tried to hop out of the chair, but the cushions pulled me back. “What is wrong?” I asked.

“I thought I heard something coming from this direction, so I hurried back,” he replied.

Like with the letter earlier, the chair began working. Not that I needed it to do so in this case. The moment he spoke, I knew that the demon in front of me was not Remy. The way he held himself, and then the slight uncertainty to his tone. Even the music pulsing faintly from the earbuds was not the right beat for the occasion.

Not to mention, if Remy had truly heard something, he would be easily able to track it to its source and not be wandering about around the wrong room. Tullie had failed again. Possibly the mind block put on her by Remy’s mother had stopped her from being able to observe Remy well, but also it could have just been too difficult for her to be able to pick up many of his mannerisms when all she had to go off were his brief visits to the manor and the two times he had been on the Underworld’s breaking news recently.

While I had already managed to spot the deception myself, the chair was working overtime to make sure I noticed. The closer Tullie came, the more I could see her form as a mask. Her face flickered from Remy’s to her own and back again.

Apparently unaware of the chair’s abilities, she kept moving forward. “You didn’t hear anything did you?”

“No. I did not. My hearing is not as good as yours,” I replied.

Tullie smiled. Even that was wrong. Remy only smiled like that when he was caught off guard, not when he was doing it intentionally.

“What about before you heard the noise? Did you find anything while searching?” I asked. I placed both hands on the armrests and used my upper body strength to escape the chair’s hold. It did not want to release me while I was in the presence of an imposter. I had told Remy I would teleport to him, but if I moved fast I could get the upper hand on Tullie. I pulled out my communicator, sent off a quick text, and kept circling the room.

“I didn’t see anything of interest.” Tullie’s hand was resting on her dagger. It was a common habit of those who fought with them often, but she had completely failed to understand Remy, who tended to lose his dagger more than use it. “What about you?” she asked.

“A few more clues,” I admitted. I wanted to see what it would take to get her to break her character.

Even under Remy’s sunglasses her gaze followed me. She was studying me, searching for signs that I had succeeded. Once she knew I had actually finished the test and become a full Royal, she would strike. I knew I could hold her off, at least for a bit. I knew her tricks and how she moved. The only problem was I could not kill her. I had to trap her if I was going to avoid inheriting her debt to Hades.

I moved toward the center of the room and away from any of the artwork while Tullie immediately stepped closer to the paintings. We both seemed to know that we had just made obvious mistakes.

There was a moment where we waited for the other to attack first. “You’ve figured it out then?” Tullie’s face morphed to have a twisted grimace that was neither hers nor Remy’s in its entirety. “Perhaps you did have the potential to become the true Royal of Logic,” she admitted.

“Your plan was not well-executed. Perhaps you should take that as evidence that you were never meant to hold this title and move on,” I said. I took another look at her. It would make it harder to strike her if she was wearing Remy’s face. “And drop the disguise, Tullie. No one is fooled by your little games.”

Her disguise faded to reveal her true appearance. She released a scream.

“I read that primal screaming is therapeutic,” I commented.

That made her angrier. She flung a dagger at my head. I dodged out of reflex, and she summoned the figure out of the painting closest to me. She could not bring the figure entirely out of the frame, but the many arms on the woman in the painting were able to reach out to me. Fingertips brushed over my skin leaving behind an oily residue. I jerked away and crouched down on the floor to avoid the painting’s reach.

“Does that not damage the paintings in some way?” I asked. I had never been much of one to banter while fighting, but it seemed the method would be highly effective against someone with Tullie’s temperament. I swiped at the trace amount of paint on my bicep and only succeeded in spreading the color around more.

Tullie seemed to have realized her anger would not get her anywhere. She took a deep inhale then pasted on a fake smile. Her eyes glowed purple. “You don’t want this

title. You don't know the kind of work that goes into it. You know it belongs to me. I grew up seeing what it takes. I grew up preparing to take it on."

"And yet you failed the tests," I pointed out. Her persuasion could not work on me when I was watching for it. I also had no interest in handing over the title to her, not even at my most subconscious level, so there was nothing she could use to manipulate me to hand it to her.

"Not everyone is good at taking tests."

Well, she did have me there. "That is true, but it is also true that I passed. I earned the title. I now hold the title."

"But you can give it to me." She knelt down in front of me. To anyone who was not aware of what she was capable of, the move would have looked innocent, like a gesture of someone trying to make peace. I could see all the possible ways she could strike me from such a position. "You can hand over the title. You just have to let me kill you. It doesn't even have to be a permanent death."

"I am not going to agree to that." Who knew what she would do with the power of a Royal? She had killed plenty of demons already, several of whom had been innocent.

Tullie clutched at her knees. Her stained fingernails dug into her corduroy pants. "You're a selfish dick."

"And you are a bloodthirsty monster who should never be trusted with the power of a Royal."

She scrambled across the room on all fours. She was nearly feral in her state of anger. I summoned my sword and held it in front of me to keep her from getting too close. In a move I had not predicted, she tossed her own dagger up to the painting. The hands emerged and snatched the blade. She summoned another dagger and tossed it to the painting as well. "I've got more," she said.

"Go ahead and summon them all. It will not matter," I told her. It would also keep her distracted until Remy returned, hopefully with Olivia right behind him. I had a plan, and if I just had a few extra hands it would be simple enough to make it work.

Tullie summoned another dagger and tossed it to a nearby statue. She kept her eyes on me as she acted. "You really are just going to sit there and let me arm every piece of art in this room, aren't you?" She tilted her head to the side. "You think I'm irrational. That I'm foolish. Blinded by my own desires." A laugh of disbelief fell from her lips. "Do you think I haven't been planning for this? You're waiting on your little friend to come help you, aren't you? Sorry to tell you, but he's not going to be able to help you this time."

I forced myself to remain calm. "I doubt he fell for any of your plans."

"Did you know that to weaken a music demon, all you have to do is put them in silence?" she asked.

"He has his earbuds." Remy always had his earbuds.

"And the right charm can shut those down," Tullie said. "Your faith in him is what will get him killed. While you sit here trusting that he can survive, he's crumbling under

the weight of negative decibels, slowly losing his sanity and soon to fall victim to one of my friends.”

I could not stay calm after that. Forget my plans. Even if it was just a bluff, I was not willing to risk Remy’s life. I tried teleporting to the south wing only to be jerked back down to the floor.

Tullie laughed. “You really underestimated my ability to plan ahead.”

I tried again to teleport. Once more my body slammed downward. I caught myself on my palms to keep my chin from hitting the floor and shattering. Tullie pointed upward. There on the ceiling was a perfectly painted seal. The paint had dried, probably days earlier. I could kick myself for having missed it.

I got back on feet, keeping my distance from the paintings and statues and Tullie herself. I picked up my sword. Tullie’s eyes glazed over as she focused her abilities on all the paintings in the room. Arms, vines, all sorts of things shot out of the frames. Each clutched to some kind of weapon, whether it was a common dagger, throwing knives, or even a few varieties of bludgeons.

“You really did plan ahead,” I admitted. There was little chance I could get out of the room unscathed, and if Remy really was in danger, then I could not afford to wait any longer. I had to do whatever it took to stop her, even if that meant killing her and spending the rest of my existence indebted to Hades.

Remy

The stranger approaching me was familiar: chiseled cheekbones, chapped lips, and frost-tipped hair: as in actual frost on the tips and not a dye job. It took a moment, but then I placed the face from one of Adeona's lessons on Royals and their lineages. The demon standing in front of me was Gale, one of Ugallu's grandsons. The Royal of Storms had a large line of descendants, and Gale was one of the many who had inherited an elemental nature. If I recalled correctly, he was just as obsessed with one day inheriting his grandfather's title as Tullie. It wasn't surprising to see that the two of them had formed some sort of alliance.

Gale covered the floor in a coat of ice. If we had not been standing in a negative decibel space, I imagined I would be able to hear the cracking of the ice as it froze into shape. I sucked in air between my teeth. I couldn't hear the noise, but the brief feeling of cold hitting my gums took away some of the panic that had been settling over me because of the sensory deprivation.

Instinctively I opened my mouth to make a comment. Insert a witty comment here. Throw out an insult disguised as a backhanded compliment. That was how I operated. There was nothing I could do though. Until I could stop the sound vacuum or find a way out of it, I was stuck.

Realization jolted through me. I pulled out my communicator. Missed notifications littered the screen, but before I could read any of them, the device was sent flying out of my hand by a blast of icy air. It slid across the floor and to the other side of the room.

I released a few curses that went unheard. I turned to Gale. “*Do you read lips?*” I tucked my flute under my arm and tried signing. “*Do you sign?*”

Gale’s face remained blank. Apparently he did not read lips or sign. There would be no negotiations then.

Gale dropped into a speed skater stance. He zoomed across the room. His speed was incredible, and I would have been impressed if all of that talent wasn’t currently being channeled into harming me. I slammed the heel of my boot down to try to break up the sheet of ice covering the floor. It barely cracked. I tried again, forcing all of my weight into the movement. The crack grew and shot across the room. It threw Gale off course for a moment, and I swung out with my flute, aiming the sharpened edge at Gale’s stomach.

Gale darted to the side, avoiding any stabbing. He managed to brush his hand against my arm. A burning sensation shot up from my wrist to my elbow. I pulled away, dropped to the ground, and tried to slide well out of Gale’s reach. The exposed part of my wrist that peeked out from under my jacket had turned a painful red.

Before I could see how much damage had actually been done with that one move, Gale started toward me again. I had no long distance attacks I could use that didn’t rely on sound. If I threw one of my daggers, I wouldn’t be able to use it again, and with the way Gale was gliding across the ice, it was unlikely any of them would hit him. Close range attacks put me in too much danger of getting either a severe ice burn or possibly being frozen into a statue, and while I would make a stunning ice sculpture, it wasn’t on my list of things to do that week.

I scrambled up to slide in the direction of my communicator. If I could get Cato's attention, maybe he could teleport me out of this negative decibel prison. I wasn't foolish. I knew I stood no chance against Gale or really most demons if I didn't have access to my music. The best I could do was to keep dodging.

I nearly had the communicator in hand when a tug on the back of my jacket sent me gliding backward. I kicked upward, catching Gale in the stomach with my boot while making sure to keep any of my skin out of his reach. Gale's face twisted into a grimace. A soundless grunt appeared to leave his lips. The white shirt he was wearing had marks of dirt on it that my boots had left behind. To be fair, they would have been that dirty if I hadn't just gotten out of the untamed zone. While Gale was distracted, I stretched until I had hold of my communicator. That was as much as I could do in that moment. Gale, who looked extremely pissed by that point, had summoned a spear made entirely of ice and was very determined to stab it through some part of my body.

I rolled. I kept sliding across the ice while Gale chased after me, slamming the ice spear into the ground every few feet. This would not go down in my record of impressive fights. In fact, if I survived I was going to have to fudge a lot of the details if I ever recounted this fight to anyone because I just looked embarrassing as I rolled about trying to avoid being stabbed while also trying to send a text to Cato.

I shot off some message, an assortment of jumbled letters that I hoped would make enough sense for Cato to come looking for me. I got it through just in time as Gale whipped the communicator out of my hand again with another well-placed icy blast. The only good thing about those blasts is that they seemed to have no effect on a living

person's skin, unlike Gale's touch which had definitely burned me. The burning sensation was actually increasing as time passed, and I hated to see what my skin would look like once I got a chance to patch myself up.

Gale skated toward me one more time, and in some burst of luck I managed to get hold of my dagger and stab it right into Gale's ankle. Some blood trickled out onto the ice. Gale went down with a silent scream. I got to my knees and twirled my flute around to make another stab.

I really hoped Gale had already had his first death because I did not want to be the one responsible for that. First deaths, titled deaths, and permanent deaths all came with too much debt for my taste. I got ready to stab him through the heart and put an end to the whole thing when pain erupted through my back and stomach. Gale had used his powers on his spear. It was no longer a straight spear but a hook, and I was caught on it like a floundering fish.

Gale smirked up at me and started to push himself up. He was so proud of himself that he didn't even notice when I rammed my flute upward and pierced him through the heart. I watched as Gale fell to the ground again. The ice quickly disappeared out from under us as he lost not only consciousness but one of his lives. Gale's face slammed into the ground, and then I braced myself to fall as my own vision began to darken around the edges. I didn't know whether to feel hopeful or doomed when a pair of legs appeared in front of me and a hand rested on my shoulder.

Cato

Tullie's bracelet snapped. A clear bead fell to the floor where it melted. Tullie sneered at it. "Incompetent," she muttered. Whatever had just happened had left her furious. She was seething.

Mirroring her mood, the paintings and statues all began to swing their weapons wildly. I crouched in the little space I had just out of all of their reach and tried to plan. I was the new Royal of Logic, Art, and Love. I should be able to come up with something, at least an escape route.

I was the new Royal of Art. I had the abilities that came with that position. I hoped I did anyway. I stood, narrowly missing having a chunk of my hair chopped off by a flailing dagger in the process.

"Stop!" I bellowed out the word, putting all of my effort into it. Verbal magic was always easier than nonverbal, so I would give myself some leeway. "Stop!" I yelled again. The paintings and statues slowed their movements until they came to a complete halt. My body felt as if I had just gone seven rounds with one of those desert snakes. I was still too new at the position. I would need time to build up my abilities.

Tullie let out a huff. She pursed her lips. Her hands tightened into fists. "Follow the orders I gave you." The paintings and statues jerked back to life, but their movements were noticeably slower than before.

I did not need to try to know I would not be able to put a stop to all of them again. I did not have that kind of energy. Instead I focused on the statue in the middle of the

room. It was a Winged Nike but with all of her body parts intact, unlike several copies of her up in the mortal realm.

Tullie had armed her with small stiletto daggers that had been unnoticeable until the statue moved. The winged goddess had a good reach. Positioned where she was, it would be difficult to pass by her without getting some kind of injury.

If the paintings and statues had been displayed with the intention of not only being beautiful to look at but also to function as a security system, then there were flaws in the layout. There were gaps where someone could easily retreat and be out of arm's reach of the figures, like I was currently doing. In fact, the only way they would be entirely effective was if they were not limited to their current positions.

Tullie started to cross the room. The paintings and statues moved their weapons out of the way to allow her to pass, but there was a wariness to Tullie's eyes. I had shaken her with my brief control over them. I could no longer use her overconfidence to my benefit. The wariness did not seem limited to the artwork itself. There was something else, and as I pieced all the clues together, I thought I might have figured it out.

I focused on the same Winged Nike again and after a pause to gather my energy, I whispered. "Help me." The statue lowered her arms. "Help me now," I whispered again. It was working. Not only was Nike turning her eyes to Tullie, the statue's legs were starting to move. The statue took heavy steps off her base onto the floor. Dantalion had been able to free his artwork for a limited amount of time, and I had inherited that gift.

Tullie's eyes went wide. She risked a glance over her shoulder giving me the moment I needed to pull myself together. The statue kept walking until Tullie was trapped. With the statue's daggers at her back, and my sword against her chest, there was nowhere for her to go. She inhaled. The blade of the sword pressed deeper. I could see a trickle of blood staining her shirt. I kept my hand steady.

"Go ahead and kill me. You can be a servant of Hades." Tullie raised her finger to the sword and dragged it along the edge of the blade. The skin broke, and more red cloated the blade. "It's just a little inheritance debt."

"You know what to do." Olivia's voice carried through the office. "And make sure you do it quickly. We have other more important matters to attend to." She stood at the door of the room with Remy's unconscious form in her arms. "He's breathing. For now," she told me.

"But hurry." She urged. She did not dare to step in the room while Tullie was still controlling most of the artwork. She shifted her hold on Remy and cast another look at the statue and then at the blank canvases in the room. I followed her gaze. She had just confirmed why those canvases were where they were.

I concentrated on the statue, urging her forward. The statue threw down her daggers and wrapped her stone arms around Tullie's body. Tullie struggled in her grip. For a moment the rest of the artwork stopped moving.

"I do not have to kill you," I said. "I have other ways to stop you."

I started toward the canvases only to see Tullie throw herself sideways, taking the statue with her. They slammed into the wall, one of the statue's arms broke off and Tullie escaped her hold.

"Then you'll find yourself dead." She aimed a punch at my face, intending to throw me into the reach of a painting. I let myself be pushed back, switching my control from the statue to the painting behind me. I could not do much that quickly, but I managed to get the figure in the painting to return to its canvas. Hitting the wall knocked some of the air out of me but did not do any more damage than that.

I grabbed hold of Tullie's arms and flipped our positions until she was the one pressed against the wall. "Just got back from the untamed zone. You are not that scary."

It was something I thought Remy would say, and I instinctively looked in his direction to see if he had reacted. He was still out, and I could tell even from the distance that he was far too pale. Olivia had put him down on the floor safe out of the reach of any possible artwork attacks. She was holding something tight against Remy's stomach and back. For all I knew, she was the only thing currently keeping Remy's organs where they belonged. Her gaze kept darting over to me. She might not be able to jump in and actually help, but she was another set of eyes to watch my back.

"He'll make it." She assured again when she saw me looking at them. "I'll make sure he does."

Tullie shoved me away. A mace from a nearby painting grazed my cheek. The Nike statue caught me with her remaining arm, keeping me from falling into the reach of another statue who was still under Tullie's control.

"Thank you. I will fix your arm as soon as all this is cleared up," I promised the statue. I thought the statue looked happy at that statement, making it easier to take my attention off of her once again and instead turn my attention and abilities to one of the paintings.

I summoned the strongest looking figure from the canvas. The warrior braced his hands on the edges of the frame and climbed out. The armor covering his body took on a new shine as he stepped into the room's lighting. The floor vibrated under his steps. Tullie's eyes took on a crazed look. Her fangs extended. Her claws sharpened.

"Careful. You might go feral," I warned.

She swiped at me leaving claw marks down my cheek. I returned the favor, summoning my own claws to leave a bloody trail across her collar bone. She shrieked and swung at me wildly. She really was at risk of going into beastmode and losing all control of her logic. I ducked and dodged to avoid the blows. Tullie got in a few more swipes, but I managed to match most of them.

The figure kept lumbering towards us. For as slow as he was moving, he better be useful. Tullie would not be able to break an oil figure like she had a statue. They could be dissolved but not broken. When the figure was close enough, I darted behind him to use him as a shield. My wounds were burning more than the average cuts. Tullie had mixed

some kind of chemicals into her nail polish. Nothing fatal, but enough to really sting. I urged the figure toward her. Finally he was close enough to attack her.

Tullie clawed at the figure, but her attempts were wasted. All that happened was that specks of oil paint were splattered about the room with each of her attacks. The figure was slow but strong. I ordered him to grab hold of Tullie.

“Not this again.” Tullie struggled in the figure’s hold like she had with the statue, but the oil figure was more than strong enough to keep her from freeing herself. I raced over and grabbed one of the blank canvases. Tullie let out a chuckle. “In the mood to paint?” she asked.

I held the canvas up. “Your father didn’t teach you what these were for?” I asked her.

Tullie scoffed. She squirmed in the figure’s hold. “My father didn’t paint much. Not his medium. There was nothing he could teach me about that topic that I didn’t already know.”

“These come from the logic part. If a Royal can take a figure out of a painting then obviously they can put something into one. Equal exchange,” I told her.

The color drained from Tullie’s face. Her attempts to free herself grew stronger. “You wouldn’t! You bastard!”

“You are far from the first person to call me that,” I replied. I positioned the canvas next to the oil figure. “If you are really nice I might try painting some scenery for

you when I get some free time,” I told Tullie. I nodded for the oil figure to place Tullie on the canvas. The moment she touched the surface, I had to split my focus between controlling the oil warrior who was helping me and forcing the canvas to absorb Tullie. The sensation felt a bit like I was ripping my own body apart. Slowly though Tullie’s body began to merge with the canvas. Her skin took on an oily tint. Her screams went from piercing to muted.

Around the time Tullie was waist deep in the canvas, I found it hard to breathe. At least the artwork around me had stopped taking swings at me. Tullie was too distressed to be controlling them any longer, so I was able to lean my weight against the wall before I collapsed. I could not stop there. If I stopped, Tullie would go beastmode in an attempt to save herself, and then she would kill all of us in some likely very permanent ways.

A hand slid into mine. The drummer calluses told me all I needed to know. “Keep going.” Remy’s voice sounded pained, but he was speaking and that was enough for the moment.

Olivia grabbed hold of Tullie’s upper body. She dug her fingers into Tullie’s shoulders. “I’ve got her. You can let go of the other painting,” she said.

“You nobody! You piece of dirt!” Tullie screamed in Olivia’s face. Olivia just scoffed.

“The canvas won’t absorb you?” I asked Olivia.

“No,” she promised. “It will only take who you tell it too.”

“I can back her up,” Remy assured as if he did not have large patches of blood coating both sides of his shirt.

I dropped my control on the oil warrior. Without my attention split, I could take deep breaths again. My head cleared, and I was able to focus on trapping Tullie in the canvas. She sank into it as easily if it had been a pool of water. Her screams muffled as she fell deeper. Finally we were left with a painting of Tullie’s screaming face.

For several moments we all sat in silence just staring at the painting. After we determined that Tullie wasn’t about to climb out of it, Olivia stood. “Excellent job, Sir. Would you like me to move the painting to the vault?”

Remy chuckled nervously. “There’s a vault in here with these kind of paintings.”

“Yes. Dozens,” Olivia replied. “Only the Royal and the Head of Staff can access them.”

“Good to know,” Remy whispered.

I gave a nod. “Take her there please.” Olivia was quick to pick up the canvas and carry it away. I turned my attention to Remy. I eased him down to take a seat on the floor and tugged at his shirt to try to get a look at the wounds.

“It’s fine. I’m fine. Olivia’s really good at healing magic,” he said.

The wounds were stitched together. Any sudden movement would likely pop them open and require another round of sutures, but he was not in any danger of dying. I still

was not satisfied. I reached for Remy's communicator and also the human phone he carried.

"Your boss should have connections with stronger healers. We should call-"

Remy reached over to stop me. "I doubt there's a need for that. One of Adeona's staff probably saw us return on the news, and she'll be on her way with Nic as soon as they tell her. Let's just take a moment for ourselves." His head found its way to my shoulder. "It's finally over."

I leaned my head back against the wall. "Seems like it."

Remy

Adeona and Nic arrived just as I had predicted they would. They found the two of us asleep on the floor, but they were nice enough to wait for us to wake up rather than tearing us from the necessary rest we were finally getting.

I woke first, more from having fallen asleep with the wrong playlist on than because I had actually gotten enough rest. I found Adeona watching me from her spot sprawled across a familiar looking beanbag chair.

"You two seem close," she greeted

I didn't bother to deny it. "Yeah. Funny how that worked."

Nic had taken up a seat in a rocking chair, also familiar looking. He had one leg thrown over the armrest. He had the other where legs were actually supposed to go on a rocking chair, and he was rocking himself.

“Both parties agreed to everything?” Nic’s gaze was still not the warmest when he looked at Cato.

“Yes. Very agreeable. Very willing,” I promised.

“Fine then.”

Nic did relax at that which was good because I didn’t have the energy to spend on reminding him that I was the older one and the more experienced one, and I didn’t need a teenager playing my protector. Even if it was starting to seem a bit more cute than annoying.

At the sound of their voices, Cato stirred. He opened his eyes. His attention first went to me and only after did he take in the rest of our surroundings.

“You didn’t have enough chairs in this room,” Adeona told him. “I asked Olivia where some extra furniture might be, and she pointed these out.”

I had no doubt that Cato recognized the chairs as well. Likely, just as I had, he couldn’t help but feel that they belonged in the room. “Looks nice,” he said after a moment.

“While you two were sleeping, Olivia filled us in some of what happened” Nic told us. “It seems the contract has been fulfilled.”

“It has,” Cato agreed.

“Do you want us to help you home?” Adeona asked me. “You look tired.”

Nic frowned. “He should stay at one of our places, at least while he recovers,” he insisted. I cleared my throat to remind him of how I felt when people talked about me like I wasn’t in the room. “Sorry,” he muttered. “But you should really move in with one of us. That apartment of yours is too small, and we both have more rooms than we know what to do with.”

I started to protest, but even Cato felt the need to comment on my living situation. “He will stay here. At least for a while. Right?” I couldn’t get over how nice Cato’s voice sounded after my time in the negative decibel trap. It had sounded nice before, but now it made me feel drunk. “I did promise that this place was yours, at least for two weeks,” he said bringing up one of the many promises he had made while we were in the untamed zone. He had promised me the manor was mine entirely, but that didn’t matter. I only wanted it if he was going to be here with me.

“You’ll stay here for a while?” he asked again.

The sound of his voice and the words he was saying made my heart flutter. I wasn’t used to people being able to make my heart flutter. “Yeah, I’m going to stay here for a while.”

Nic sighed. “Fine. I’ll call to check in on you.”

“I’ll pop by to check in on you.” Adeona shot a toothy grin at Cato. “And you.”

“You can both see me at work.” I protested. Adeona might not work with us, but she was there nearly as often as we were.

“No, take two weeks off. At least. There is so much blood on your shirt. People should not be losing that much blood,” Nic said. He looked squeamish.

They stayed a few hours longer. Adeona checked over the manor’s security and handled some of the other things that apparently Royals were supposed to know how to do to keep their estates safe. She left notes behind for Cato, but they didn’t make much sense, so she promised to come by at another time to explain it better.

Nic mainly just made sure that I was actually okay. He also wanted to hear stories about our time in the untamed zone, but he stopped asking for more details when we both kept yawning during our storytelling.

We had to promise to call one of them if we needed anything before the two agreed to leave, and then Olivia popped in long enough to tell us she would be retiring to the north wing to get some rest herself. Finally we found ourselves alone and truly safe.

“You are really going to go back to work?” Cato asked.

I shrugged. “What else would I do?”

“You are a Royal. You have a title and a manor of your own.” Oh yeah, I did have my own manor. I could look into that another time.

“I’m a Royal that no one is supposed to know about.” We hadn’t even told Adeona and Nic that part, just that I had found I was the son of one. I plucked at my pants

leg. I should get up, go shower, and find a clean set of clothes to change into. “I’d be a sitting duck if I announced myself before I had abilities.”

“If we were together, you would be a Royal by partnership too. No one would question that, and no one would dare to attack you.” Cato offered.

I chuckled. “We haven’t even kissed yet, and you’re talking about partnerships.”

“Do you want to kiss?”

It was ridiculous how nervous that question made me. I had done far more than kiss in my lifetime and with more people than I could count, but the idea of kissing Cato sent that fluttery, butterfly feeling through me again. It was maddening. What was worse was the fact that I didn’t entirely hate the sensation.

Cato kept staring at me, and I realized I should give him some sort of answer.

“Yes,” I blurted out before Cato could mistake my silence for rejection. Cato leaned forward. “Wait!”

He froze. I took out one of my earbuds placed it in his ear. I flipped to a song and let it play. “We needed the right atmosphere,” I told him. Cato laughed and pressed his forward against mine.

“Now?” he asked.

“Now,” I told him.

He pressed his lips to mine. It was not an extraordinary kiss. It was rather tame. More sweet than anything else, and yet it made my breath catch, my head spin, and my whole body go warm. This wasn't normal. It couldn't be normal.

Cato pulled away after a moment.

"I think I love you." We both blurted out the words at the same time, our voices perfectly in sync. A perfect romantic movie ending, and I didn't even get a moment to fully appreciate it.

A burst of power shot through my body. Cato's eyes went wide. His hands hovered to try to help.

"It doesn't hurt," I assured. It didn't. It felt a bit like being on a roller coaster while it was going around a tight corner. Not the sick anticipation on the way up or the plummet of the drop, but further along on the ride when the adrenaline had already kicked in but there was no longer any worry over dangers. After a few moments, the sensation stopped, and I was left with a fully healed body and feeling more powerful than I ever had before. Wings sprouted from my back, ripping their way through the back of my shirt.

"I think I just became a full Royal," I said.

Cato nodded. "I think you did." He took my hand in his. "Perfect harmony," he echoed Beleth's words from the memory we had seen.

I laughed. “Perfect harmony. Oh man, my dad was a hopeless romantic. I really hope that’s not hereditary.”

Cato laughed. “I hope it is.” He dragged me back into another kiss, and unlike the last one, it was far from tame.

Epilogue- Remy

I glared at the last reporter as they finally left. The questions for the interviews with the new Royals of the Underworld had been far from creative, and it was only Cato's arm around my waist that had kept me from grabbing the microphone and throwing it across the room.

"Freedom," Cato whispered. We had finally finished up with the last of the formalities and could actually go back to just living our lives. He leaned in to kiss me. "We could...go home. Put on our playlist." It turned out Cato was way worse than I was when it came to romance, but I didn't mind.

I pressed a finger against his lips. "We have game night with Adeona, Nic, and all their friends. Baz and Balt are coming as well."

"We could cancel. Olivia found a way to get out of it."

I laughed. "They'll show up to get us anyway. Adeona said we can't be hiding away in a honeymoon period when we haven't even gotten married yet."

Cato let out a heavy sigh, but the smile on his face was too obvious. Even if we did enjoy our time alone together, we both also enjoyed the time we got to spend with our friends.

"When are we supposed to meet up with them?" he asked.

I checked the time. "We've got another hour."

“Perfect. Then you have time to open this.” He rummaged in his pocket and pulled out a rectangular box.

I wasted no time in pulling at the ribbon to get the box open. Inside the box was just a slip of paper, but it was what was on the paper that was important. “Coordinates?” I asked.

“You wanted to visit all the realms right? I thought that could be our first trip.”

“We have the time?”

“We’ll make the time.”

I pulled Cato into another kiss. “Let’s call that a deal.”

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