

Oaken Heart Trilogy

Book One

Echoes of the Past

By

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Chapter 1

As the taxi pulled away from the curb and aggressively claimed its place in the flow of traffic, Seraph settled into the backseat with a sigh. She took a moment to simply enjoy not being in an airport. One hand rested on an oversized duffle bag on the seat next to her. Unconsciously, she wrapped her fingers around its strap. Turning her attention to the city speeding past the window, Seraph got caught up in the familiar sights of the streets she grew up on. A small smile graced her lips. She recalled running down the sidewalk with her brother as her parents followed behind, yelling for them to slow down.

Then the cab turned a corner, and Seraph's memories clashed with reality. Instead of the arcade where she had wasted the hours and quarters of her childhood, there was now a gas station.

Everything changes. Her childhood home had changed, her family had changed. She looked down at herself, dressed in fatigue pants and an old uniform shirt, her short brown hair had grown out past her ears, and she was sitting next to all her worldly possessions. Even she had changed.

After six long years in the Marines, she could hardly be the same stupid eighteen year old she had been going in. But now she was out, now her changes were hers to control, the decisions hers to make. Hers. Not the Marines', and certainly not her father's.

Pulling herself firmly away from that line of thinking, Seraph took a deep breath to center herself. A song she hadn't heard in years started playing. She smiled again. The radio was always a good way to distract herself.

As the music ended and the DJs started yammering, the cab left the city proper and moved into residential housing. Almost there. She turned her attention back to the radio.

"... and that's traffic! Back to you, Dave!"

"Thank you, Mike! Coming up at the top of the hour, Mayor Ervans commends North Enterprises for funding the new low income housing project. A local dog show had trouble when half of the contestants escaped! Asking the question, who let the dogs out? (laughs) Police Chief Simmons calls a press conference to discuss the increased troll attacks in the rural areas. Then, rising energy costs and what you can do to save! We talked to experts..."

The taxi stopped outside a neatly kept bungalow. Seraph quickly paid the driver and jumped out. The cab sped away as she glanced curiously at the car parked in the driveway. She wondered about it as she walked up the ramp that had been built over the front steps. Perhaps she should have called first, but it was too late now. She rang the doorbell.

It did not take long before she heard footsteps on the other side of the door. She frowned, was this the wrong house? The door opened revealing a fidgety looking young man with glasses. He was wearing faded jeans and a t-

shirt with some cartoon character on it. He shifted from foot to foot and ran his hand through unkempt hair before speaking.

"Can I help you?" His wary voice seemed to indicate that he did not find it likely.

"Hello, my name is Seraphim. I'm looking for Gabriel Hunter. I was told he lives here?"

"Oh," the young man pulled out of his slouch. "Yeah. He's here. Uh, want to come in?" He shuffled out of the way, holding the door open for her.

Seraph pulled her duffle bag higher up on her shoulder and stepped inside. The entry way opened up into a clean but worn living room. An old sofa sat next to a mismatched chair in front of a beat-up, particleboard coffee table. The centerpiece of the room was a very nice, very expensive looking entertainment center, which spoke loudly of the homeowners' priorities. Beyond the living room, separated by a half wall, was the kitchen. On the far side of the living room was a hallway that led further into the house.

"I'll, uh, get him," he stammered. He shuffled across the room, leaving her standing just inside the doorway. He barely made it to the hallway before shouting for Gabe. Seraph shook her head and closed the door behind her. She dropped her bag near the sofa and stood waiting. She did not wait long. Her brother appeared in doorway and stopped, staring at her in shock.

"Seraph? Holy crap," he said, moving further into the room. "Why didn't you tell me you had leave coming up?"

She met him half way and kneeled down in front of his wheelchair to give him a hug. "I wanted to surprise you."

"Well, I'm surprised!" He laughed. "How long are you in town for?"

"As long as I like. I mustered out." She waited a moment for that to sink in. "So... can I crash here tonight?"

"Really?" Gabe looked stunned. "Of course! You have to sleep on the couch though, that cool?"

"Yeah."

"Well come on and have a seat, and we can talk." Seraph stood and followed him into the kitchen. "Want something to drink?"

"Sure, um, I can get it..." she started.

Gabe turned and pointed an angry finger at her. "No. Sit your butt down. I can serve drinks in my own home."

Chastised, she sat. He wheeled over to the fridge. "I got coke or water." Opening the refrigerator, he pulled out a soda for himself. "Or beer. Which ya want?"

"You have beer in the house?"

Gabe shrugged and looked away. "It's my roommate's. I don't mind."

"Oh. Um, coke's good," Seraph said. "So that was your roommate?" She nodded towards the hall.

"Yeah, Brad. He'll come back out of hiding later. Probably."

"Not a social butterfly?"

"Only if you're on the other end of a computer," Gabe said, returning to the table with their drinks. "He's not a bad guy, just a bit of a nerd."

"You're one to talk. You still work for Double Vision Games?" Seraph teased.

"Nope!" Gabe sat up straighter and took a sip of his coke. "I have a respectable job now. I work for Systel Devices."

"Oh?"

"I do mostly the same things, only for higher pay and better health."

"Well, that's good," Seraph said.

Putting his drink down, Gabe gave her a pointed look. "So, stop stalling. Why did you decide to get out? I thought you were career."

Seraph stared at her drink wondering what to say. Honestly, she had thought she was in for life too. "Well, when it came time to re-enlist, I didn't," she said. "I was sitting there looking at the papers trying to *want* to fill them out. I couldn't make myself." Seraph paused to take a drink, and shrugged. "I guess I don't regret the time I spent in service, but it wasn't what I wanted to do with my life." That was true enough, though she wished it hadn't taken her six years to figure it out.

"Does Dad know?" he asked.

She winced. "Yeah. He knows."

Gabe paused for a moment, thinking. "So, what do you want to do?"

"That's the question isn't it?" Seraph mused. "I don't know. I just know I don't want to keep doing what I've been doing."

Gabe laughed. "You sound like me before I went to college. Maybe you should go back and talk to our high school counselor."

"Bah," she snorted. "Why go to a counselor for bad advice when I have you?"

"Fair enough, but have you thought about tooling around in a community college? Take some classes that look interesting, see what sticks."

"Eh," Seraph sat back in her chair, an annoyed look on her face. "I know that I will probably have to get a degree at some point, I just... I don't want to spend another four to six years getting ready for life, you know?"

"I can see that, but since you don't know what you want to do, what can it hurt? Hell, the government's paying for it, might as well give it a shot."

"I guess." That didn't mean Seraph had to be happy about it. She slouched in her chair and frowned at her drink, as if it were hiding the answers from her. Did other people have this much trouble? Didn't kids grow up wanting to be something? Despite what he said, Gabe seemed to fall into computers quickly enough after the military was no longer an option. Seraph tried to remember having dreams of her future from her childhood, and came up with nothing.

"Well, you know," Gabe said, his voice breaking into her brooding, "you don't have to figure this out right now. Who knows when school even starts? Why don't you go on a vacation for now, see if you don't get an epiphany about

what you want to do in the meantime. Like an Australian walkabout thing. Go away and find yourself."

"Should I learn to meditate, see a shrink to talk about my mother, and sit around a campfire singing kumbaya too?"

"Punk. Get out and try to have fun for once. Who knows, you might get a flash of inspiration. Although with you, it would have to be driven in with a lightening bolt to your head."

"Hey, that would solve the problem. I could make the talk show circuit if I survive getting hit by lightening."

"If you're going on the talk show circuit, it's probably best that you don't go to college after all."

Seraph stuck her tongue out at her brother.

Gabe just laughed. "So?"

"It's a good idea." She agreed. "I've missed camping, maybe I'll take a couple days to chill in the woods, even if all I find are trees and bugs."

"Of course it's a good idea. It was mine."

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The sun rose over Baxter State Park to a chorus of bird song. The brilliant reds and oranges of the sunrise were reflected in the fall leaves of the sweeping woodland. The waking forest moved and breathed, coming to life under the light of the new sun. Within all of this, in a small clearing just off the trail, was an even smaller campsite with just one lone tenant.

Seraph sat wrapped in her sleeping bag enjoying the peaceful clamor of nature. A mug of coffee warmed her hands, its fragrance working to wake her up even before her first sip. It was nice to have nothing that needed doing. Even crashing at her brother's, she needed to be suitably awake and dressed before Gabe and Brad woke up and wanted to use the common areas.

Not that Seraph had any intention of bumming around her campsite in her PJs, but it was nice to know that she could if she wanted to. It was nice to get up early, just to watch the sun rise. Taking a sip of coffee, she held it in her mouth for a moment, savoring the flavor before swallowing. Its warmth slid down her throat and into her stomach where it radiated out to the rest of her body. She half closed her eyes and hummed. Even instant coffee tasted better in the mountains.

The sun was fully up by the time the coffee was gone and Seraph broke camp. She had put out the camp fire before bed, but she kicked more dirt onto it anyway. Her backpack lay a little bit outside of the campsite under the tree she had hung it from last night. While Seraph enjoyed getting close to nature, inviting a bear or a gremlin into her camp was a little too close. Everything was packed quickly and neatly, and Seraph double checked the clearing to make sure it was clean.

Once satisfied, Seraph shouldered her pack and headed down the trail. She loved this area. It held some of the last good memories she had before her family fell apart. The park itself had remained the same since her last visit, and was true to her memory. She was happy to learn that she remembered this park as it was and not through the rose tinted glasses of nostalgia. But the past was not why she was here- she should be thinking of her future.

The quiet did give her time to think. Unfortunately, it did not give her answers. Her savings would keep her afloat for some time, longer if she continued to leech off Gabe. Not that that was an option. But even her larger than average account would buckle under the strain of unemployment. She didn't want to get some low level grunt job just to pay the bills. Which would mean getting a degree. Seraph sighed. At this rate she should just make a list of all the options and cross off what she didn't want and see what was left. So far all she knew was what she didn't want.

Maybe she could work here. She tilted her head back to take a deep breath. That was a nice idea.

Seraph sat down on a large rock by the side of the trail. She wasn't at all sure what was involved in becoming, or even being, a park ranger. But it would be good to look into. And if it turned out not to be what she hoped, she could always try something else.

A weight was lifted from her shoulders, now she had a plan. It wasn't much of one, but at least the feeling of being lost was finally gone. Seraph grabbed a snack bar from her pack before setting off once more.

A game trail grabbed her eye. It crossed the well marked path right in front of her and wandered off into the trees. Seraph stopped and looked. It was a bad idea to leave the trail. Any number of things could happen, not the least of which being that she could get lost. And there was a lot of park to get good and lost in. If she got hurt it would be tremendously difficult for help to find her. Which is why it would be stupid to go off on some random game trail for no reason.

Which is why Seraph was a little surprised to find herself walking down it.

She grinned wryly to herself, wondering if this new found bit of rebellion was going to make itself a permanent part of her personality. The trail was likely to simply end after awhile, so as wilderness exploration went, this was more foolish than adventurous. Not that it bothered her much, Seraph felt strangely excited to get off the beaten path and explore.

The game trail did not end quickly. It went on long enough for Seraph to wonder if it would be this easy to follow *back*. But still she followed. A loud bird call made Seraph jump. Right above her head a large raven sat glaring down at her. It cried out again, just as loudly as before, sounding almost mad at her. Suddenly the bird launched itself from the branch in a flurry of angry flapping. Seraph ducked as it flew right where her head used to be. Its large wings beat the air carrying it past her and back into the sky. She turned to watch it go. It threw one last caw over its shoulder before it was gone.

"O-okay..." Seraph said.

All said, the behavior of the raven wasn't all that out of the ordinary, birds were known to attack people who ventured too close to their nests. And certainly, nothing was too terribly frightening in the afternoon hours of a sunny day, but something about the whole thing set Seraph's nerves on edge. Resettling her backpack, she quickly turned and continued walking.

She was so distracted she didn't see the clearing until she was in it.

The clearing was roughly circular and about fifty yards across. The ground was covered with a deep carpet of fall leaves, but was otherwise clear.

Except for the tree.

The tree stood dead center in the middle of the clearing. It was a massive oak, rising up far enough that Seraph couldn't see the top through the tangled branches. The trunk was so large that she didn't think she could put her arms around it if there were ten of her. The branches were thick with leaves, despite all the ones that had fallen onto the ground. Sunlight barely passed through them, leaving the ground dark in midday twilight.

Seraph felt a sense of calm overtake her. She walked slowly towards the tree. Absently, she unclipped her backpack and let it fall from her shoulders. She was drawn forward, and moving as a sleep walker, she went.

Standing before the tree, Seraph placed both hands on its trunk, feeling the rough bark under her fingers. She leaned forward and rested her forehead against the great oak. She left out a shuddering breath, unable to understand what she was feeling.

Then the whispering started.

It rose up around her like a tide. She jerked back and fell away from the tree. The whispering became louder without becoming clearer, echoing in her ears.

"Who's there?" She shouted.

There was no one. She was as alone now as she was when she first entered the clearing. She crawled and kicked her way back from the tree, looking around her wildly.

"Who's there!?" She cried.

A voice answered her, not from someone else, but from inside her own head.

Seraph clapped her hands over her ears, but it did nothing to silence the voice that now spoke so clearly to her.

Bring it... You must... Now... Find... You must...

Chapter 2

A glass of ice cold water thrown in her face brought Seraph to full stuttering consciousness. She open her eyes then immediately slammed them shut as light stabbed right into her brain. A groan that would not have been out of place on a dying animal fell out of her as she threw her arm across her face.

Warily, she tried opening her eyes again.

Gabe sat next to her bed, glaring at her. "Gabe? Jesus, what the hell are you doing?"

"What the hell are you doing? That's a good question." He waved his hand, gesturing around the room. "Just what the hell *are* you doing?"

Seraph's motel room was trashed. The run down Motel 6 would never be the Hyatt, but what little order the room had was lost under trash and empty beer bottles. Filthy clothes were scattered everywhere and the lone chair in the room lay on its side.

Seraph didn't look- she knew what state the room was in. She pushed her self up onto her elbow. At least some of those filthy clothes were on her. This whole confrontation would have been even less fun naked. She glanced at the bedside clock before returning her bloodshot to glare back at her brother.

"It's only six in the damn morning! Just in the hell how did you get in? How did you even know I was here?" She asked.

"You called me remember?"

Seraph blinked. She didn't remember doing any such thing, and trying to just made her head hurt more. "What?"

"Don't remember?" Gabe snorted. "Figures, you were too piss drunk to talk straight. I had to star-six-nine your ass."

Seraph groaned and fell back on the bed. She didn't need this right now. "Fine. I'm sorry I called you. I don't even care anymore about how you got in. Just go away."

"You left the door open."

That made her pause. She was making unremembered drunk calls and leaving the door open to the world while she was passed out? Shit. "Good catch. Be sure to close it on your way out."

"Goddamn it Seraph! I am not leaving. What happened to going camping and figuring out what you wanted to do with your life? Huh? Did you even go or have you just been shit faced this whole time?"

"I went. I'm back."

"And so this is what you decided? You want to grow up to be a drunk?" He snarled.

Sitting up and swinging her legs over the side of the bed, Seraph sat for a moment waiting for the sick feeling to go away before standing. Pushing herself up, she moved quickly behind her brother and grabbed the handles on his chair. She had him turned towards the door before he had time to react.

"Son of a bitch!" Gabe frantically grappled for the breaks, setting them before Seraph could push him more.

She grunted when the chair stopped. Furious, she knelt by the wheel to unlock the break. He fought her, holding tightly onto the lever and shoving her away. She stood up suddenly, frustrated and outraged.

"I can drink myself into oblivion every night if I damn well choose to! Who the hell do you think you are to come here and lecture at me? You think you're Dad now? Well you're not- and there is no reason why I should have to pay for your mistakes." Seraph wished the words back as soon as she said them. Gabe flinched as if she had slapped him. He turned away from her and balled his hands into fists in his lap. Silence rang in the air for long painful moments.

"Shit." She closed her eyes and sank back down to the floor. She leaned against his chair, putting her head on the armrest. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't of..." she whispered.

He lowered his head, but wouldn't turn to look at her. "I don't want to see you ruin your life too," he said softly.

A rush of emotions overwhelmed Seraph. Guilt, fear, anger, shame built up and poured out as tears. It was already too late, her life was ruined. Drinking would do nothing- it was simply a way for her to run from her problems. But it would not work. There was no getting away.

Not from this.

"Gabe... I... I'm not..." She began.

It started softly, rising from the depths of Seraph's mind. Whispered pleas and commands that had tormented her for the last month returned, as they always did. Seraph cried out, clapping her hands over her ears, and closing her eyes she fell to her knees.

"SHUT UP! SHUT UP! SHUT UP!!" Seraph screamed.

Gabe twisted in his seat, trying to turn around. He pulled himself off his chair and tumbled to the ground. He frantically pulled himself around to his sister, dragging his useless legs behind him.

"Seraph!" She did not respond. "Seraph! What's wrong?" He grabbed her arms and shook her. "Seraph, talk to me! What's happening?"

Seraph whimpered but would not answer him. She could hear that he was shouting through the noise in her head, and heard the panic in his voice, but she could not understand the words. The voice commanded her attention and would not let her know anything else.

For a moment it stopped. Seraph sat in the blissful silence of her mind shivering. The reprieve would be brief, before it would start all over again. Slowly she opened her eyes. Gabe sat in front of her, with his hands still wrapped around her forearms. The fear and confusion in his eyes begged her to explain.

The words were thick in her throat and would not easily come. Seraph had to swallow before she could force them out.

"I'm hearing voices."

The simple statement hung in the air between them. The seconds lasted lifetimes. This was the first time she had said it out loud. With the admission she had made what was happening to her real. There was no way to take the words back, and no way to hide anymore.

"W...what? When? When did this happen?" Gabe asked brokenly.

"It started when I went camping," she said. "I..."

It hit her again without warning. The pattern of the attacks was now familiar to her. Seraph never knew when an episode would hit, but when they did, they were always the same. They came in two waves, broken up by a misleading moment of lucidity. First, she heard a voice, that damn voice, which would command her to do what it wanted. The second part one came with visual hallucinations as well, but was mercifully silent. Both paralyzed her while they held her in their grip.

The attack left Seraph once again weak and trembling. She gasped for breath and tried not to be ill. She was sitting with her back against the bed. Gabe was no longer holding her. He had pressed himself against the wall, as far from her as he could get in the small space.

His reaction did not surprise her, but it hurt just as much as she feared it would. She looked away but could not stop herself from crying again.

"What the hell just happened?" he demanded.

Seraph paused, confused, she thought it was quite obvious. "I get attacks, which I guess is better than hearing her all the time, but still when it happens I... I can't do anything else, it's like a seizure-"

"*What happened to your eyes?*" Gabe interrupted her rambling.

Seraph stared dumbly. "What happened to my eyes?" she repeated.

"They were glowing!"

"What are you talking about?"

"Just now," he said. "Your eyes started... *glowing*, like damn flashlights."

Glowing eyes? Seraph clamored to her feet to look in the mirror on the other side of the room. Her eyes were glowing?

"They're not doing it *now*." Gabe grumped, then sighed. "Help me back into my chair?"

"Yeah... sure." Seraph moved the wheelchair so that it faced Gabe before trying to put him in it. Squatting down, she wrapped her arms around him in a big bear hug. Lifting him was easy- getting him into the chair was the tricky part. She hadn't had to help with this since before joining the army, but it still gave her a nicely familiar feeling, something grounded and sane.

When Gabe was settled, Seraph sat on the edge of the bed. She was at a loss, every attack left her physically weak and just a little dazed. Forcing thoughts threw the fog in her head was a daunting task.

And the hang over wasn't helping much either.

"What, exactly, do these voices tell you?" Gabe asked, breaking Seraph out of her daze.

"Uh, she wants me to get something for her." Seraph had to think about it, she had not stopped to consider what the voice had asked of her before, because she had been setting all her will to *not* listening. "A crown, um, the Erlking's crown. From some cave."

Gabe blinked and sat forward. "What? That's... really weird."

Seraph laughed then winced at the resulting flash of pain. "So it wasn't weird before? Only just now?" She asked, giving her brother a look.

He ignored her and asked, "Is that all the voices want? Is that the only thing you hear? No warnings that the government is out to get you, or aliens are trying to read your mind?"

"No, that's it." Seraph frowned, "she just says the same thing each time."

"She?"

Seraph shrugged. "Yeah, it's just a woman's voice, with pictures of what she is talking about."

"Seraph, that's not usually how schizophrenia works."

"It's not?"

"You don't know?" Gabe asked, surprised.

"I really wasn't interested in learning more about it." She said, looking away.

Gabe looked down for a moment, collecting his thoughts. Finally he spoke, "Seraph, I think this might be magic."

"Magic?" Seraph snorted.

"Yes magic. Crazy doesn't normally make your eyes glow, you know."

Seraph crossed her arms over her chest. It would be so wonderful if she could believe she was not crazy. "But who would cast magic on me? And why? If someone is powerful enough to mess with my head, why can't she get the damn thing herself?"

"I don't know, I wish I did, but I don't." Gabe said. "Maybe... maybe we should go to the police?"

Seraph stiffened. "Christ, no way. They'll put me in an institution and have other magic-slingers do God knows what to my head, I'd be better off crazy." Even when someone was truly, clinically crazy they are not forced into care, but the same cannot be said of someone whose mind has been taken over by magic. The authorities do not wait for the person to prove a danger to themselves or others, a victim is assumed dangerous. Minds do not get invaded for benign reasons.

"I know, I know. You have to do *something*. This isn't going away on its own."

Seraph's shoulders slumped, "I know." For a moment neither spoke, each lost in their own thoughts.

"Have you-" Gabe cleared his throat, "have you thought about trying to find this crown? Maybe if you do what it wants, it will leave you alone."

Seraph stared at her hands as she clenched them into fists. She did not want to do anything the voice demanded of her. What right did it have to force

its will on her? She wanted nothing to do with the whole thing. It killed her to think that she would have to give in, to bow once again to what someone else wanted from her.

It killed her that she did not know what else to do.

"We could try that." She said softly.

Gabe leaned forward and took her hand in his. "You're not alone in this. You know I will be here to help you."

Seraph squeezed his hand and offered a weak smile. "I know. Thank you." She took a deep breath to steady herself. "But before all that, I need coffee, clean clothes, a shower, and aspirin and I don't care much about the order. Aspirin first."

"Don't forget to brush your teeth, too," Gabe laughed, "Please."

Seraph punched him in the shoulder.

The tiny hotel bathroom was just large enough for everything in it and one person, provided that the person wasn't overweight. Seraph caught sight of herself in the mirror and winced. Bloodshot, brown eyes squinted in the harsh overhead light. Her usually tan skin had not seen enough sun, making her look ill, and her hair, which, while never fashionably cut, normally was at least clean and brushed, now stood up on one side. She ran her fingers through it to no effect- its shaggy ends had not seen scissors since she had left the Marines and was sticking out in every direction. Sighing, she put the cleanest clothes she had on top of the toilet and climbed in the shower, while Gabe waited in the main room. The water pressure left a lot to be desired, but the warm water was refreshing none the less and went a long way to making Seraph feel human again.

While she was showering, Gabe called Brad to let him know that Seraph would be taking Gabe home, since Brad had been the one to drop Gabe off at the hotel before skipping off to let them have some privacy. Seraph felt guilty and embarrassed that Gabe had made Brad drive all the way down here to pull her out of a drunken stupor, she wondered if she would be able to look him in the eye next time she saw him. Oh well.

There was nothing she could do about it now except not make the same mistake again.

Chapter 3

Seraph glared at the intersection. She had been driving for hours, following whatever *force* was driving her. Unfortunately, it did not account for where roads were, where roads were *not*, buildings, fences, dead ends and dozens of other obstacles that would keep someone from traveling in a straight line. After driving around in circles just to get out of the city, Seraph had found a street that was going exactly the way she wanted to. Until it ended. Now she could go right or left, but not forward. Damn it.

Gabe sat in the passenger seat with a map spread out over his legs. "Maybe we should get out and walk?"

Seraph turned to glare at him. He seemed to find this whole thing a lot funnier than she did. It was really annoying.

"Come on, it's supposed to be in a cave, right? We knew it wasn't going to be in the middle of downtown Portland," he said.

She sighed. "It just feels like it's close, and all these road blocks are driving me crazy."

"How close?" Gabe looked around, as if trying to see the cave from where he sat. "Maybe you really should get out and walk."

"No, not that close... eh, what does the map say?"

Gabe spent a few minutes studying the map before sighing. "Well, to the right the road goes west again, but there aren't any cross streets for a long time. It looks like there is a park or something after about a mile. To the left the road goes straight before turning back the way we came."

"Right it is then," Seraph said.

Soon the fields gave way to trees that closed in on both sides of the road. Seraph felt strange being in the middle of a forest again, even with the insulation the car gave her. Since she returned from her disastrous camping trip, she hadn't left the safety of paved roads and cement sidewalks with their concrete structures that had no interest in sending her on lunatic errands. Truth be told, she was apprehensive about returning to even this small patch of wilderness. She had not had another attack since agreeing to follow the voice's commands, but she still had a nagging fear that the trees would set it off again.

She kept one hand on the steering wheel while the other nervously played with her new cell phone- tapping it against her leg and rubbing it like a worry stone. Gabe insisted that she get one before she went traipsing off into the woods again. Never one for gadgets, she had managed to avoid getting one until now. The look on the salesperson's face when he learned that she really, truly had never owned one before was almost worth the hassle of picking the damn thing out. It seemed they did not sell phones that were just phones- hers had a camera of all things in it. At least she had managed to avoid getting one with access to the internet. She couldn't imagine looking up something on those tiny little screens. Who really used their phone for that?

The road turned as the map promised and before long the trees on the left side ended. In their place was what looked like a small summer camp. Several low buildings surrounded a lawn filled with picnic tables and a totem pole. In front of the main office building was a flag pole with both the current US flag and the old colonial flag with its circle of thirteen stars. Tourists and children came and went from the buildings or sat at the tables. Separated from all of this by a turn off from the main road was a dirt parking lot. It was by no means full, but it still held a respectable number of cars and even a yellow school bus.

Seraph took the turn off and pulled up to the parking lot kiosk. A woman wearing khakis and a red polo shirt walked over to them. Seraph rolled down her window as the woman came closer. She leaned towards the car with a thousand watt smile and a nametag that declared her name to be Bethany.

"Welcome to Pine Grove Park. Can I help you?"

"Yeah, what is this place?" asked Seraph, nodding to the cluster of buildings.

"Pine Grove Park is a Native American history museum," Bethany bubbled. "We have all kinds of exhibits that are fun for the whole family! Each building focuses on a different Native American tribe. And we also have a nature trail that leads to an authentic recreation of a real Native American village!"

Seraph understood 'fun for the whole family' to mean aimed at kids, and only vaguely informative. The kind of place that was great because it meant no school for the day. She eyed the woman and forced a smile onto her face. "Sounds fun," she said, ignoring her brother's loudly cleared throat.

"Oh, it is! And only fifteen dollars for adults," she volunteered.

"Is the village handicapped accessible?"

"Oh," Bethany's eyes widened and flicked to the wheelchair folded in the back seat of the jeep then to Gabe before moving back to Seraph. "Oh! Yes. Of course. It shouldn't be a problem. Right, of course." She smiled nervously.

Seraph wordlessly handed over the money in exchange for a parking pass and a polite command to have a great day. She pulled into the dirt lot and had parked her rental jeep before Gabe spoke up.

"What are we doing here?"

"I think this will be the best place to park," she said. "Before getting out to walk."

"You really think it's near here?"

"Yeah," Seraph said, eyes distant. "Anyway, I've paid for it, might as well take a look. Maybe they have arrow heads in the gift shop."

Gabe rolled his eyes and sighed dramatically as Seraph got out of the car. She ignored him once again as she pulled his chair and her new messenger style backpack out of the backseat. She quickly had the wheelchair on the ground and Gabe in the wheelchair and both across the parking lot with only minor grumbling. Once across the turn off, the museum itself had paved walkways, which were easier to rollover and Gabe had no trouble moving himself once there.

Each building was indeed dedicated to a different famous tribe, the Navajo, Lakota, Cherokee, Pueblo, and others. The exhibits that Seraph saw were pretty much what she expected. Broken pottery and stone tools were displayed along side artist's interpretations of everyday life- each with its own small plaque that proudly explained how bows and arrows were for hunting and that *these* pots held food while *those* pots held water.

Seraph stopped in front of a small exhibit for a leather pouch and thought that it was too bad that she could not stick around and explore the place some. *A Medicine Bag was usually the property of a tribe's Shaman, and held items of magic or supernatural power, and spell components-* the plaque read. As vapid as the museum came across, it was still a little bit fun, and reminded her of her childhood interest with Indians.

"You think they have arrowheads in the gift shop?"

"You want to shop?" Gabe asked in disbelief.

Seraph laughed. "No, not really. Just wondering."

Behind the buildings was the paved 'nature' trail that lead to the mock camp. Seraph and Gabe followed it past the first bend and stopped.

"I'm going to take off. You'll be fine here?"

"I'll be bored out of my skull here. Do you think this is going to take long?" Gabe asked.

"It shouldn't," Seraph said. "But I'll walk real slow so you can have extra time to enjoy our field trip."

"Punk. Get out of here. I want to be home in time to watch *Lost*. If you're not back, I'm leaving without you."

Laughing, Seraph stepped off the trail and into the woods.

The difference in speed between a car driving on paved roads and a person walking uphill over broken ground is directly proportional to the level of irritation that person will feel every time she gets hit in the face with a branch. That is to say, it was taking Seraph much longer than she thought it would. The sun was beginning to set and she still had not found the cave. The relief and even the excitement she had felt setting out from the park died when she failed to find the cave immediately, and it was buried when she was led right through every tree and bush on the stupid hill.

And it was getting cold.

Seraph knew somewhere in the back of her mind that she should turn back. Pine Grove was unlikely to stay open very late and Gabe would get kicked out. While this was not as bad as it could be, Gabe had a hand control device that would let him drive and she imagined that someone would help him into the jeep. Although, it would be hard to explain her absence. The last thing she wanted was a search party to come looking for her because she had wandered off the trail.

The ground inclined sharply in front of her, and after a few feet it became impossible to walk forward. Seraph stared at the almost vertical slope- about a dozen feet up, was the cave. Above the mouth of the cave, the ground continued

at a much more reasonable degree, and directly in front was a small patch of level dirt. But between the cave and Seraph was an impassable rock wall. The only way to get to the cave that Seraph could see would be to climb down from above. With a long suffered sigh, she turned and started walking. Hopefully she would find a way up before next year.

Trailblazing quickly lost its novelty and Seraph was gratified and surprised to find a suitable way up just a few yards to the right. It led up and past the cave mouth to the gentler slope above, from there it would be easy to get to the cave entrance.

Seraph was feeling almost giddy. After weeks of ignoring or drinking away the... *compulsion* to come to this place, she was finally here. She slipped her bag off her shoulder and dug inside it for her flashlight and compass. Standing right in front of the cave, she put her back to it and checked the direction. If it was a straight line here, it was a straight line back, it would be good to know which way she needed to go because she doubted that the force leading her here would be considerate enough to lead her back. Once noted, she stuffed the compass back in her backpack. She had rope and other supplies there as well, but she knew next to nothing about spelunking, so she hoped she would not need them.

Luckily, the cave appeared to be a simple tunnel leading deeper into the hill. Seraph flicked on her flashlight and set off. The bright LED light cut through the gloom, casting the tunnel floor into bright relief and deepening the shadows. The cave went farther than Seraph had thought it would and widened so much that Seraph would have had to stretch to touch the walls. All the while the cave headed steadily down. She could feel the nearness of her goal, she was almost on top of it, just a little bit further and she would reach it.

Abruptly, the cave ended.

Seraph stared in disbelief at the rock wall in front of her. There was no way forward. Swinging the flashlight from side to side, she searched the dead end for any way deeper, but there was nothing. The stupid cave just ended, as if someone had been digging the cave out, but had become bored and simply left, leaving a smooth featureless barrier between her and her goal. The crown was on the other side. Just on the other side, by a few feet at most, and she had no idea how to get to it. Had she missed a branching off somewhere behind her? No, the cave hadn't been that wide, she would have seen one, wouldn't she?

"Damn it!" she swore. Bringing her foot up she kicked the wall to vent her frustration. And almost fell on her ass as her foot hit only air.

She brought her flashlight up to shine on the target of her anger. It looked much the same as the rest of the cave. Carefully, Seraph touched the wall, it felt solid. Sliding her fingers over the rock, she started to tell herself that she had been imagining things when her hand disappeared. It felt like plunging her arm in ice cold water, almost painful, definitely unpleasant. She pulled her hand back out and examined it, wiggling her fingers. Other than still feeling cold it seemed unharmed. Transferring the flashlight to her mouth, she used both

hands to feel the wall. The 'hole' was about four feet high and two to three feet wide. Seraph took a step back and picked up a pebble, with an underhand toss, she sent the pebble flying through the hole. She listened for it to hit, but there was only silence. She frowned, did that mean there was a pit fall on the other side? Or something else? Maybe the illusion blocked the sound?

Seraph considered the fake wall for only a second before squaring her shoulders and stepping forward. She wasn't *not* going through the fake wall. She had not come this far to balk at this. Stalling would only waste the daylight she would need to get back. She would face whatever was on the other side when she found it. Ducking down she put a hand out to find the top of the opening and with deliberate steps, ducked into the illusion.

The shock of cold was not unexpected, and she went forward without breaking stride, and then she was on the other side.

The space on the other side of the fake wall was not at all what Seraph expected, which was rapidly becoming a familiar occurrence. Animal skins covered the floor- deer, wolf, bear, mountain lion and a small brown skin that Seraph believed might have been a coyote. On top of these were a pallet and a low bench that had a few scattered bits of pottery on it. A makeshift shelf was pressed against the left wall. It, like the bench, held pottery as well as dried herbs and animal bones. All of this Seraph saw instantly as she swept her flashlight across the room before the light fell on the object of her quest.

There, on the far wall, on a natural rock ledge, the crown sat waiting. Seraph absently put her flashlight on the bench, letting it shine on the crown while freeing her hands.

The Erlking's crown was a large medieval style helmet, bucket shaped with a Y cut out of the front for the eyes and mouth. It might have once been ornate, but now it was filthy and stained, covered in layers of dirt. But none of that detracted from the ancient crown's most predominate feature. Two magnificent five-point antlers rose from just over the eyes. Perfectly symmetrical and free from dirt, they gleamed in the dim light. Slowly, Seraph reached out and traced her fingers over the smooth bone. Touching it sent tingles up her arm and she started breathing again. She had not realized that she had been holding her breath since first seeing the crown.

It seemed as though the crown was sleeping, like a great hibernating bear. If left, it would continue its rest indefinitely, but once woken, it would be powerful and fierce. Reverently, Seraph pulled the crown from its place on the wall. Dirt fell away from where she touched it. For long moments, she simply held it, before turning it over and lifting it slowly above her head. Her eyes slipped closed as she brought it down.

Then her cell phone rang.

Jerked back from her trance, Seraph almost dropped the damn thing. She was breathing heavily as she crammed the crown under one arm so she could fumble the phone from her pocket.

"Yeah?"

"Seraph, you find it yet?"

"Um, yeah, I found it." Had she really almost put it on? "I'm on my way back now."

"You okay? You sound weird."

"I'm fine," Seraph said.

"Well, hurry back, they're shutting this place down soon."

"I will."

Seraph closed the cell without saying goodbye and grabbed her flashlight. She hurried from the strange room, trying not to think too hard about the crown still tucked under her arm. It was much larger than she was expecting and there was no way it would fit in her bag. She would have to carry it the whole way. She didn't blink as she passed through the cold of the fake wall and out into the cave proper.

The flashlight beam bounced off the walls and along the floor as she jogged along. The park would be east southeast, but she hoped there would be enough daylight for her to find the trail. Up ahead, she saw dim sunlight from the exit, so she turned off her flashlight but didn't slow down. It looked like the sun was going down.

Suddenly, the light went out. Seraph blinked in surprise and stopped. There was a man standing at the mouth of the cave.

He stood in front of the setting sun. The red light was not enough to reveal his features, but it outlined him nicely. He was tall, taking up almost the whole entrance, and wearing some sort of hood. But anything more than that, Seraph could not make out.

"Hello?" Seraph called out.

He did not answer, or give any indication that he had heard her at all. Shifting so she was holding the crown behind her, Seraph raised her flashlight and turned it on.

She stared, dumfounded. Before her was an Indian in full tribal dress. He wore leather moccasins and pants, and a wide leather belt held a bone handle knife on one side and a pouch on the other. Across his shoulders was a cloak made from a whole bear skin, its paws crossed over his bare chest and the flap of its face resting over his forehead. A small, leather medicine bag hung from his neck. He was glaring at her.

"Um... hi?" she tried again.

It was then that the man noticed the crown under Seraph's arm. He snarled wordlessly at her, his lips pulling back from large sharp teeth that didn't belong in a human mouth. In seconds, his whole face transformed with rage, taking on the façade of a rabid animal. The last of the sunlight disappeared behind him, leaving only Seraph's flashlight. His shoulders hunched forward and his bearskin seemed to flow over him. Seraph stumbled backwards, falling to the ground, the beam from her flashlight danced wildly over him, showing only small snatches of what was happening. A hand curled with claws. Dark fur moving like

water over skin. Horrible shifting of bones under skin. A snarling muzzle filled with teeth. Growing taller, wider.

Seraph scrambled back up into a crouch, steadying her flashlight to shine on the monstrous bear that now filled the cave mouth. Its eyes glinted red as it opened its huge mouth to roar.

Chapter 4

The softest whisper of moving cloth was the only sound as Queen Kaelyndra walked down the corridor to her chambers. The late afternoon sun shone through the windows, throwing warm light over the stone walls and casting a golden aura around her. The delicate carving of vines interlaced with flowers and wildlife trailed along the wall while engraved birds flew frozen in stone clouds upon the ceiling. The two honor guards, who stood on either side of the doors to her rooms, clasped fists over their hearts as she drew near. She acknowledged them with a nod of her head before entering her chambers.

The large doors swung open at her barest touch and once through, they closed quietly behind her. Inside her outer rooms, the walls were adorned with intricate tapestries depicting great hunts and famous battles, even a particularly morbid one illustrating the fall of Atlantis. Those walls not covered by tapestries were hidden behind bookshelves filled with histories and important texts. Soft rugs were laid out over the floor, warming the otherwise cold room. Sets of chairs sat in front of the fire place or under windows. Small tables stood near them, holding vases with fresh flowers or half-read books. The whole room was illuminated by a steady warm light that emanated from where the glowstones were recessed into the corners.

Kaelyndra pulled one of the cords that hung near the door to summon a servant, before walking into the room. She was halfway to her favorite chair when the door opened again, admitting one of her handmaidens. The young fae woman waited silently while Kaelyndra retrieved her book and sat down with it.

"I will take my tea here, today," she said without looking up.

"Yes, Majesty," the servant murmured as she curtsied. She slipped out of the door as quickly and quietly as she had entered.

After hours of listening to the nobles squabble with each other over every possible thing they could disagree on, Kaelyndra was more than ready for the temporary shelter her rooms offered. Every last highborn faelord was in the palace as this summer would see the first solstice celebration since the fae had fled their homeland. Most nobles, having no land to tend to, had stayed in the new city. They resented faelords that had already been granted land, and the faelords with land complained about everything else— from native humans trespassing on their territory to unruly goblins. Some of the highborn did not want to hold the solstice now that the ritual would be wholly symbolic, while others felt that casting off the tradition would be yet another mark of decline. The only thing that they all agreed on was that Kaelyndra was not handling things the way her father would.

The door opened, drawing Kaelyndra back from her brooding. Her tea was placed on the table beside her, but her handmaiden did not immediately leave. Kaelyndra looked up from the book she was not really reading to regard the young woman.

"Majesty, if it pleases you, Countess Inaldel requests an audience."

"Oh?" Kaelyndra sighed inwardly— even her rooms were no longer safe. "Of course, send her in. And bring more tea for the good Countess."

"Yes, Majesty."

Countess Inaldel was one of the less demanding of the landless nobles. An older matriarch, she was mostly content to live out her days in the comfort the palace had to offer, and leave the carving out of territories to those with youth left. Even better, she only occasionally compared Kaelyndra's rule to her father's, a rare trait that was almost impossible to find amongst the older generation. This may have been in part due to the somewhat close relationship Kaelyndra used to have with Inaldel. When she was still a child, Kaelyndra would often summer on the Countess's lands, which were beautiful that time of year, and she had come to call her Aunt Inaldel.

Once more the door to Kaelyndra's room opened. The noblewoman who crossed the threshold was very similar to the woman in Kaelyndra's memories, only the silvering of her hair and eyes indicated her age. Kaelyndra stood and held out her hands palms down, "It is good to see you well, Countess Inaldel, to what do I owe this visit?"

The countess stepped forward and grasped Kaelyndra's hands, "Thank you for seeing me, Majesty. I know that your leisure time is rare and it means much that you would take the time to see me."

"I hope to always have time for old friends. Come, let us sit and you can tell me what troubles you."

Kaelyndra reclaimed her seat while Inaldel settled herself. More tea was brought and the countess busied herself with smoothing her skirts before taking a sip, then another. Folding her hands in her lap, Kaelyndra waited patiently for Inaldel to gather herself.

"'Tis my son, my youngest," Inaldel said. "He's missing."

"Missing? Truly?"

Inaldel nodded. "Virsard was to return a week past, he wanted to be here for the solstice... When he did not arrive as on time... I sent messages... He had left his post as planned, but nothing has been heard of him since. This is not like him."

"I see," Kaelyndra said. "He was working under Lord Eldryn, was he not?"

Marquis Eldryn was the faelord charged with keeping the goblin lands and trying to bring them back under control. When the faelords had been forced to flee the sinking Atlantis, they had brought as many of the lesser and wild fae as they could, among them the goblins. At the height of faelord power the goblins had served in their right and proper place as the foot soldiers in the faelord's armies, but ever since coming to this New World the goblins had become increasingly unruly. There was concern that the goblin's dissent would spread to the other lesser fae, so it was doubly important that the goblins be put in their place as soon as possible. However, lesser fae or not, the goblins had always been willful. The task set before Lord Eldryn was proving to be no small feat.

"I fear that something... dreadful has happened. I did not want him to be working with the goblins while all this bother was going on, but he wanted a military command, and he felt this... duty would set him apart from his peers."

As an adult and faelord in his own right, Virsard had every right not to return to his mother's household if he wished, but Kaelyndra did not think that was what happened here. Kaelyndra had not spent a great deal of time playing with Virsard as a child but she recalled the eager young boy who was always trying to grow up quickly so he could be like his older brothers. A third son would not hope to inherit much from his parents in the best of times. As such, a solid command would mean a lot to someone in Virsard's position, and he would understand how easily he could lose it. He would know that even actions made off duty would be judged, with so many applicants keen to take up the task, why give responsibility to someone who is responsible only half the time? If Virsard had said that he would be home, surly he would have done everything he could to keep his oath. Not to mention what simply disappearing without word would do to his mother. No, it did not seem likely at all that he had vanished of his own will.

Kaelyndra despaired over the reasons a young fae officer would go missing in goblin lands.

"Inaldel," Kaelyndra said, "I fear that I too share your concern over your son's absence."

"Yes, I knew you would."

Kaelyndra reached forward and grasped Inaldel's hand. "I swear to you that I will do all in my power to find your son."

Tears shined in Inaldel's eyes as she squeezed Kaelyndra's hand in her own. "Thank you, Kaelyndra."

The emotional exchange was interrupted by the door to Kaelyndra's chamber opening once again. Kaelyndra looked up at her handmaiden in surprise— Inaldel stiffened in her seat and turned to glare at the young servant.

"Goodness, you foolish girl, can you not knock?" Inaldel scolded, wiping tears from her face.

Kaelyndra pulled her hand back and sat up straighter in her chair. "Amira? What is the matter?"

"Begging your Majesty's pardon, Countess," Amira hastily curtsied. "I thought your Majesty would be pleased to know King Follyn has returned."

A smile lit Kaelyndra's face. "Thank you. Indeed, I am very pleased to hear this." She turned back to Inaldel. "This is good news for you as well, Follyn knows more of the goblins than I. He is just the person to go to."

Inaldel smiled as well. "I am sure. I know you wish to see him, I will not keep you."

Both rose from their chairs at the same time. The countess smoothed out her skirts as she stood and Kaelyndra offered her hands once more. As Inaldel took them Kaelyndra spoke softly. "I will come to you as soon as I have news."

"Thank you, your Majesty. I cannot express how grateful I am." Inalidel said as she bowed her head in respect. With that the countess quickly left the room, brushing by the handmaiden on her way out.

"M-majesty?" Amira asked timidly as Kaelyndra made to follow the countess out the door. Stopping, she raised an eyebrow in question at the young woman.

"I am sorry I didn't knock," she said quietly, staring at the floor.

A half-smile quirked Kaelyndra's lips. She gently placed a hand on Amira's shoulder. "'Tis no matter."

The girl blushed as Kaelyndra squeezed her shoulder before turning and striding quickly from the room. Follyn would still be in the grand hall talking with his advisors about his journey. Hopefully he would have better news than she did.

Kaelyndra barely noticed the servants and nobles she passed as she walked quickly forward, only giving cursory acknowledgements of their bows, curtsies, and murmured words of deference. Her mind was only on her destination, anything else was not worth her notice as her steps carried her to where she needed to be.

Through the last door the grand hall opened up before her. It was an awe-inspiring testament to the might of the faelords, that even in exile the fae lived in splendor, the grand hall was breathtaking. Stone pillars wrought to mimic trees held the ceiling high above their heads, which itself was fashioned to look like a dense canopy of leaves. Precious stones were interwoven with the canopy's silver and gold leaves— the gaps between were filled with either crystal glass to let in sunlight or glowstones, so the hall was always lit. Colored glass windows lined the walls, casting rainbows upon the tiled floor. Not all the flora was carved from stone, living vines crawled up the stone pillars and flowers grew sheltered within crevices in the walls. All of these were fed by fountains that ran down from the ceiling over bumps and grooves to the floor, filling the hall with the beautiful music of running water.

All of this was lost on Kaelyndra as her eyes fell upon Follyn.

Kaelyndra saw only Follyn as she made her way across the hall. She had not yet made it halfway to him when he stopped and turned to her. She did not know how but he could always tell when she was in the room. Ignoring the men around him he turned to her and waited, smiling, for her to come to him. They embraced and simply held each other for long moments, under the indulgent smiles of the advisers, content with the simple contact that reaffirmed that they were together again.

A more meaningful welcome would have to wait for later.

Finally they parted, although only so far as to stand next to each other, with Kaelyndra's arm held securely in Follyn's.

"My Queen, I was just telling our lords of my journey."

"Then I shall not stop you, I wish to hear of it as well," Kaelyndra said.

Follyn nodded to Ashther, his head advisor. "Let us then retire to the counsel chamber."

The royal counsel room was off the grand hall in the southwest wing. While much less opulent than the grand hall, it was still as beautiful as everything the fae built. It did not take long for everyone to gather and take their place at the long table that was the central fixture of the room, with Follyn and Kaelyndra at the head, the advisors to the right, and the other members of the royal party that had traveled with the king to the left. Kaelyndra frowned as she noticed that someone was absent from the left side of the table, she gave Follyn a questioning look. He lifted his hand in a gesture that asked her to wait and Kaelyndra fell into a speculative silence. Follyn began speaking once everyone was in their place.

"The tribal leaders of the Abenaki are concerned about our expansion. We are bordering some of their sacred places as it is and they fear that we will cut off their access to them, or worse, desecrate them, if we continue to grow at the rate we should like."

Follyn took a map from one of his companions and rolled it out on the table as he continued speaking. Kaelyndra listened with interest, even though she had little say over the expansion of fae lands or treaties with neighboring peoples. Such outside relations were the bailiwick of the king. However, once the lands were theirs, they would be her responsibility and she would be the one to decide which, if any, faelords would be granted the land. The counsel went on for some time. Eventually servants came with the evening meal, and the sun set, leaving the glowstones as the only light. After Follyn had finished, his companions added anything they thought might be useful before the discussion opened to the advisors. As it looked like everything that could be talked about had been said, Follyn rolled the map back up but motioned that his advisors should stay.

"My friends, I am afraid that I have troubling news from the goblins lands," said Follyn.

Kaelyndra sat up straighter in her seat. Did Follyn already know of the missing Virsard?

"Northmen have landed and established a colony, called Vinland. Their leader, Leif son of Eric, has been treating with the goblins."

"Northmen? Humans treating with the *goblins!*?" Ashther exclaimed. "They have not the right!"

Follyn nodded, his expression guarded, "I believe that the Northmen simply did not know the goblins place as lesser fae. Even then, it would not be their responsibility to see that the goblins do not over step themselves. No, 'tis not the Northmen that concern me. The goblins know their place and are willfully ignoring it."

"Something must be done and done now, before this gets any more out of hand," said one of the advisors, to the muttered agreement of the table. "Did Lord Eldryn not know of this?"

"Of course he knew. He informed me as soon as he learned of it. I have sent Sylvendar to the Northmen's settlement."

With the knowledge of her cousin's fate, as he had been the one missing from the return party, a sense of relief fills Kaelyndra. It was a good decision to send Sylvendar to the Northmen. He had met with them in seasons past and had overseen the trade that allowed the fae to have the ships needed to flee the home lands. Moreover, as a member of the royal family, he had authority where another envoy would not.

The advisors nodded their approval of Follyn's actions and Kaelyndra was filled with pride at the sight.

"We must indeed do something, and I fear something drastic, to bring the goblins to heel. I wish for suggestions from all of you in this matter. I want something we can give to Lord Eldryn when he returns to court for the solstice."

It was a simple dismissal, but little was needed. Kaelyndra and Follyn stood as the advisors gratefully took their leave. A small sigh escaped Kaelyndra once they were alone, for the first time since Follyn had left, three weeks ago. She turned to her husband as he turned to her, their kiss a silent reaffirmation and a long awaited welcome home. They were both silent for long moments after the kiss ended, Kaelyndra with her head on Follyn's shoulder and Follyn with his arms wrapped loosely around her.

With another soft sigh Kaelyndra pulled back from the embrace, lifting her face to look him in the eye. Before she could speak, however, Follyn smiled at her and used his fingers to smooth away the wrinkle between her brows.

"What dreadful news have you kept for me that makes you frown so?" Follyn murmured.

Kaelyndra almost smiled at his words— somehow he always knew when she was upset. "I fear that my news is dreadful, 'tis about the goblins."

Follyn's easy smile slipped from his face. The last thing he needed right now was more bad news about the goblins.

"A young faelord has gone missing from goblin lands. He was to come home, but he never arrived. I fear that he has met with foul play."

"Another?"

Kaelyndra stands stunned. "*Another?*" she managed finally. "This is the only one I know of!"

A grimace twisted Follyn's features. "Lord Eldryn informed me of three missing officers in his reports of the Northmen. Two had been traveling the borders of the goblin lands and the territory of some of the more hostile natives. It was possible that the goblins had nothing to do with the first two, while the third was perhaps... too harsh with his treatment of the lesser fae and his disappearance could have been an isolated case, if, in fact, the goblins had anything to do with it. But with yet another gone... it would be foolish to give the goblins the benefit of the doubt."

He sighed and looked out one of the high windows as if searching the night sky for answers. "I had hoped to have more than speculation before

informing the counsel. They will call for blood, and with four lords missing, perhaps dead, blood may very well be the answer."

Chapter 5

Seraph gaped at the apparition before her. Where moments ago the man had stood, a gigantic bear filled the mouth of the cave with its bulk, and it looked pissed. It roared at her again as it lifted itself off of its forelegs to a half-crouch that mirrored Seraph's position. With a meaty paw tipped in cruel claws, it swiped at her. Seraph ducked under the swing, going almost to her stomach against the ground.

Staying in the cave was a death sentence— she needed more space. Gathering her legs behind her, she pushed herself towards the bear before it had time for a backswing. There was not enough space between the wall and the bear for her to get by, but she shoved at the bear, muscling through the space before the bear could react to her unexpected maneuver.

A few more feet and Seraph was clear. The twilight gloom was bright enough for her to see the drop off at her feet. Pivoting, she made to sprint up the hillside when the bear finally got itself turned around.

The blow caught Seraph under her ribs, stealing her breath and sending her flying back over the small cliff. Hitting the unforgiving rock hard kept her from regaining her breath as she tumbled down, where she managed, by some miracle, not to drop the crown or the flashlight. Painful air burst into her lungs as she was finally able to gasp in much needed oxygen. Above her the bear stared down with hate filled eyes.

There was no way she could fight this monster and win. She had no weapons and getting into a fist fight with 500 pounds of irate bear would be suicide. Seraph struggled to her feet and took off down the hill.

Behind her the beast bellowed its rage. The thunderous sound of an impact alerted Seraph that the bear had followed her short cut down from the cave mouth. The hill was not steep, but without sunlight the forest floor was a mass of snare traps grabbing at her ankles and threatening to bring her to the ground. With no time to screw around with her flashlight, Seraph gave herself up to luck and pelted head long into the night. She needed to get away— she could not simply out run the damn thing. Maybe if she climbed a tree... could bears climb trees? She couldn't remember. And it was not just a bear that she needed to escape from— somewhere in that monster was a human intelligence that, for whatever reason, wanted her dead. Seraph clutched the crown tighter.

She felt the bear behind her before it hit, its outrage a tangible force that pressed against her back. She lurched forward before it struck, almost ducking the blow.

Almost, but not quite.

Its claws caught her backpack and jerked her back. Turning with the momentum, Seraph brought her elbow down on its snout, throwing her whole upper body behind the blow. It reared back, dragging her with it. She dropped the flashlight and grabbed the strap on her pack. Lifting it up, she slipped out of it and the bear's hold. In a flash she was running again.

Something had to give. She turned sharply to the right. She could not just keep running. Unable to turn as quickly, the bear slid several feet before righting itself. She needed a weapon. With its footing regained it charged her again. She needed a place to make her stand. She ducked to the left.

Something gave.

A tree root jumped up and seized her foot, bringing her down. She crashed down on top of the Erlking's crown, impaling herself on the sharp prongs of its antlers. A harsh cry of pain was ripped from her throat. The sharp points were agony, but she could not afford to stay still. Adrenaline gave her the strength she needed to surge back up to her knees, but the hesitation was all the bear needed to catch her. Its claws tore into her back, and Seraph swallowed another scream. A second blow hit her and she turned with it, allowing it to roll her over. In one smooth movement she was on her back with one hand still holding the crown. The bear surged forward bringing its teeth towards her unprotected face and neck.

Seraph hit the bear with the crown as hard as she could— bringing the full weight of it down across its head. The sharp points of the antlers ripped into the bear's face as easily as its claws had ripped into her. Reversing her swing, Seraph brought the crown back up for a backhand blow, snapping the bear's head up. Pushing herself up, she used both hands to hit it again. Even as the bear backed off she followed after it— raking the prongs across its eyes and snout.

Suddenly it reared up, jerking its head out of Seraph's reach. With a savage roar the bear lashed out and struck her arm, knocking the crown out of her hand. It flew off into the darkness. It could only have gone a few feet, but it could have been miles for all that Seraph could reach, leaving her completely unarmed.

The bear dropped to all fours and lunged at her again, all teeth and rage. Seraph brought both hands up and hit the bear under its jaw, forcing its mouth closed and its head up while pushing herself further under it.

This was a bad place to be.

As it moved to reach her, the bear shifted, bringing her face to face with the medicine bag that hung from its neck. No conscious thought or plan entered into Seraph's mind— she simply seized the bag with both hands and pulled. The leather thong gave easily and Seraph clutched her prize to her chest.

The reaction was immediate. Howling in pain, the bear leaped away. Up on its hind legs it stumbled back, still screaming. Seraph pushed herself up onto her elbows to watch its retreat. As it shrank back from her she realized that the bear was not just backing away, it was *actually* shrinking. The monster was slipping back into the skin of the man that had first confronted her in the cave. The animal cries of pain merged with human screaming as the bear's form twisted and writhed into unnatural and agonizing shapes. With a final wail, the man-beast turned and fled into the night.

Seraph struggled to her knees then up onto shaking legs. She stumbled drunkenly over to where the crown had landed before dropping to her knees again. The medicine bag slipped from her fingers as she reached for the crown. She grabbed it and hugged it to her chest, cradling it as a frightened child would hold a beloved stuffed animal.

She sat there for endless moments trying to ignore the pain and the cold before reality set in. Reluctantly she set aside the crown and took out her compass and cell phone. With the flashlight lost to her mad flight down the hill, Seraph used the glow of her cell phone to check the direction on the compass.

Now pointed in the right direction, there was nothing to do but start walking. Picking her protesting body up once more, Seraph shambled down the hill. She wasn't aware of time passing— the only thing that broke through the fog in her mind was the weight of the crown in her arms and the pain that throbbed throughout her body. The darkness around her seemed to stretch forever with no possibility of ending. She would stop sometimes, to check the compass and make sure she was still going the right way, but the night remained unchanging no matter how far she walked.

Seraph almost missed the glow between the trees in front of her. There was light ahead— it was dim with distance, but it *was* light. She stopped short to stare, disbelieving.

Then she was running. It was a shambling, stumbling run, but as the glow solidified into an overhead security light, it was only her body's unwillingness to cooperate that kept Seraph from jumping for joy. She almost did anyway when she stepped free of the trees and onto the dirt parking lot.

It was like stepping between one room and another. The parking lot was so far removed from the night seeped forest that Seraph could practically feel a door closing behind her, sealing off the darkness.

The rental Jeep sat by itself in an almost empty parking lot. A few cars that must have belonged to employees waited closer to the buildings, but the school busses and family cars were gone. Seraph could see lights on in the buildings as she made her way to the Jeep. A few of the buildings were still lit and Gabe was probably in one of them, but he would not be alone. Before she could talk to any strangers, she had to put away the crown. She could not risk that it would be taken and she had no good reasons to keep it. Or even how she could have found such a thing in the middle of the woods.

Seraph's movements and thoughts were mechanical as she walked to the car. The crown would have to go in the Jeep— there was no other place for it. She unlocked the car, grateful that she had stuck the keys in her pocket instead of in her backpack. The car's dome light hurt her eyes. There was a blanket there— she could use that to cover the crown. She slumped into the backseat. The crown would not fit in the wheel well, so it would have to go in the back.

Twisting to accomplish this reminded Seraph of the severe lacerations that covered her back. She panted for breath, swallowing back the pain. She was so close to being done, she would not stop now. The crown thumped

unceremoniously into the back before being covered with the thick wool blanket. She stared at it through blurry eyes. It looked covered enough. Probably no one would be looking back there anyway.

She took a moment to catch her breath before pulling out her cell phone once more and numbly dialing.

"Where are you?" Gabe demanded in lieu of a greeting.

"I'm at the car."

"It's about time! Pull around and pick me up, I think I've overstayed my welcome."

"I can't."

"What do you mean you can't? What's wrong?" Gabe asked with concern lacing through his irritation.

"I'm hurt. I think I need help." Seraph didn't want to have to explain, she just wanted the pain to stop so she could rest. "I think... I need an ambulance."

"*What?*"

"I was attacked by a bear."

Stunned silence, then "Holy shit!"

Seraph could hear Gabe arguing frantically with someone in the background. She watched as a red stain spread out from under her across the seats. It took her a moment to realize it was blood, and that she was covered in it. Inexplicably it occurred to her that she was going to have to pay for damage to the rental car. For some reason she found it incredibly funny. She was almost giggling when Gabe came back on the line.

"Seraph? We're coming out to you, okay? Hold on."

"M'kay." Her back didn't hurt as much anymore. That was good.

Gabe continued to talk, but Seraph had stopped listening. She rested her head on the front seat and waited for help to come.

Chapter 6

Pain makes for a terribly efficient alarm clock. You cannot argue with pain, you can't turn it off or reset it and it has no snooze button. When pain says that it is time to wake up, it's goddamn time to wake up. Seraph woke up with every part of her body hurting. She lay on her side— sleeping on either her back or her front was no longer an option— in Gabe's bed. He had not wanted her sleeping on the couch while she was hurt, and being pleasantly stoned on Vicodin made it hard for Seraph to remember why she would have argued about it.

At least she wasn't in the hospital any more. With a dozen lacerations on her back and right forearm, a hand full of puncture wounds to her front, too many bruises to count, and a twisted knee to top things off, Seraph had spent a fun filled Friday night in the ER getting herself cleaned, stitched, and bandaged. An officer from Animal Control had questioned her at length about the unusual attack while scolding her about wandering off a trail alone at night. The officer was at a loss for why she was attacked, and Seraph was unwilling to recount the whole event. The working theory was that the bear must have been rabid, which prompted the call for a rabies vaccine.

Despite the obvious disapproval of the attending physician, Seraph had managed to avoid that fate. She was sure that of all of the things that might or might not have been wrong with the monster that attacked her, rabies was the least of her concerns.

She was kept over night for observations. All told, her injuries could have been a lot worse. She did not have any broken bones or a concussion, the puncture wounds had missed anything vital, and she had not needed a blood transfusion. So they simply patched her up and the next morning she was released.

A soft knock on the door brought Seraph back to the present. Slowly sitting up, she tugged her t-shirt down and called for the person to come in. She sat back then quickly forward as her body reminded her that her back did not want to be touched right now. By the time the door opened, she was already shaking pills into her hand. Gabe closed the door behind him and rolled over to the bed while Seraph downed a few capsules with water.

"Morning."

Seraph grunted a greeting and replaced the glass and pill bottle on the nightstand.

"How ya feelin' today, Sunshine?" Gabe asked, perkily.

His apparent good humor earned him a scowl. "Like crap."

"At least you feel like you look."

"At least I don't feel guilty about stealing your bed anymore. What's got you in a good mood?"

"Well, now that we know you're going to live, it's really funny."

"It is *not* funny."

"You got beat up by Smokey. You should've just promised to do your part to prevent forest fires."

"Yeah, well, like Mitch Hedburg said, Smokey's a lot more intense in person."

Gabe let out a bark of laughter before sobering. "Seriously though, do you feel up to talking?" he asked, the teasing gone from his voice.

"Yeah, sure." Seraph waved a hand. "No time like now, I guess."

Gabe looked down at the blanket covered object next to the bed. Seraph started. She had not realized it was so close. She must have been asleep when Gabe brought it in. Now that she saw it, she could almost feel it— drawing her to pick it up.

"I looked that thing up while you were out of it," Gabe said. "How much to do you know about fairies?"

Seraph stared, not quiet believing the question. "Fairies? Um, like Disney?"

"No, real fairies, historical ones. The fay."

"Not a whole hell of a lot. It's been a while since my last history class, but they up and disappeared didn't they? When Atlantis sunk?"

"Yeah. But there're a bunch of different theories on where they went. The generally accepted theory that schools teach in most places is that they all sunk with Atlantis, but there is one theory that all of 'em jumped ship and came over here."

"If they came here, where are they?" Seraph asked.

"Supposedly, once they got here they died of something else."

"Sucks to be them."

"Yeah, it's kinda silly. The idea comes from Leif Ericson's— he's the Viking guy who made it to America before Columbus— chronicles of his time in Newfoundland. He talks about meeting them and their disappearance."

"Does he say what happened to them?"

"Nope. Just 'poof' gone."

"Well, that's not helpful."

Gabe chuckled as he sat back in his chair. "Without any physical proof we don't know what happened. Either they magicked away, or they were never here to begin with."

Seraph looked down at the crown. Carefully she leaned down and picked it up. It was lighter than it looked, and warm in her hands. "So the Erlking is the fairy-king?"

"More or less, the two fay courts fought over the title a lot. Apparently it was all the fighting that sunk Atlantis in the first place."

Silence fell over the room as both were lost in their own thoughts. Seraph slowly reached over and picked up the crown. It was lighter than she remembered. She set the crown in her lap and ran her hands over it— studying it as she puzzled over why she was sent for such a potentially powerful artifact. It was still dirty but in the light of day she could make out the engravings that

covered it. The intricate design was mesmerizing and Seraph found herself entranced by it. Pain forgotten, she lifted the crown up...

"What are you doing?"

"What? Nothing."

"Were you going to put that on?"

"No." Seraph was saved from any further interrogation by a knock on the bedroom door. Quickly, she dropped the crown back on the floor and pulled the blanket over it. "Come in!" she called.

Brad poked his head in. "Hey guys. What's going on?"

"Nothing," Gabe said. "Just talking."

Brad paused for a second, looking between Gabe and Seraph. "I mean, why is Seraph all messed up? Did ya get into a bar fight or something?"

"You think I look bad, you should see the other guy," Seraph said with a straight face.

"Did you really get into a bar fight?" Brad asked, incredulous.

"Nah," Seraph waved her hand. "I got mauled by a bear."

"Look, if you don't want to tell me, just say so. I was only asking because I was concerned," Brad said, glaring down at the floor. He turned to go.

"Brad, wait," Seraph called. "I really was attacked by a bear. Swear to God."

"She wandered off a trail sight-seeing and a bear took offense to it," Gabe added.

Brad stared at them, his expression slowly morphing from hurt to stunned disbelief when he saw they were being sincere. "Damn! Are you okay?"

Seraph smiled crookedly at the inane but always asked question. "Yeah, I'm fine now. The bear got bored and wandered off after I played dead."

"Shit."

Which, Seraph had to admit, was more or less how she felt about the whole situation herself.

"Sorry man," Gabe said. "I should have said something when we got home. Didn't mean to make you worry."

"Well," Brad said, affecting a magnanimous air. "I suppose I can forgive you just this once." He waved a scolding finger at them. "But next time someone gets attacked by irate wildlife I want to be the *first* to know."

A smile quirked Seraph's lips. Suddenly it hit her. She had been beat up by an irate *magic man-bear*, and it really was kinda funny. Seraph started to snicker, then laugh. Unfortunately, her revelry was cut short by a racking cough—reminding her that she had holes in her chest and that laughing was ill-advised at best.

"Oh hell, are you okay?" Brad exclaimed, stepping into the room.

Seraph waved Brad back as she tried to get a hold of herself. "I-" she coughed again. "I'll be fine. Don't make me laugh."

"I'm sorry!"

Seraph knew Brad would just keep apologizing if she let him and she felt far too wasted to put up with such a well-meaning annoyance. Besides, she still needed to talk to Gabe and she wasn't willing to take Brad into her confidence just yet. Perhaps the influence of the magic had infected her somehow, but she wanted to play her hand close to her chest.

"Don't worry about it. I'll live." Seraph slumped back onto the bed, careful to land on her side. "I just popped some pills so I'm kinda tired. I think I'm going to crash soon."

"Alright, well, if you need anything..."

"We will be sure to ask you," Gabe said reassuringly. Seraph smiled.

Brad ducked out of the room, leaving the siblings alone again. Seraph closed her eyes briefly, she really could feel the meds kicking in, but she needed to tell Gabe about what really happened. Seraph opened her eyes and looked at her brother.

"Gabe?"

"Yeah?" Gabe put his hands on his wheels, ready to move his chair. "Want me to leave you alone?"

"No." Seraph grudgingly sat back up. "I need to tell you about last night. I wasn't attacked by a bear."

"What? Jesus, what happened then?"

"Well it was and it wasn't." Seraph put her hand to her head and spoke slowly. "It was a shapeshifter."

"Holy *hell*, you were attacked by a *werebear*?"

"Yeah— what? *Werebear*?"

"You know, like a werewolf but a bear... You don't think you got infected do you?"

Seraph stared at him. "There are no such things as werewolves."

"Yeah, but..."

"I had sure as hell better not. I have enough shit to deal with right now." Seraph let out an aggravated breath. "I'm pretty sure he used magic. I don't know what magic, but it was some how tied to the medicine bag he had."

"Oh. How do you know the medicine bag had anything to do with it?"

"He turned back when I ripped it off."

"Wha-what? You ripped it *off*? From a bear?"

"He attacked me when he saw me with the crown. He wasn't going to fall for me playing dead. He wanted to kill me." Seraph looked down at her hands. "I got lucky."

Gabe sat quietly as he absorbed this revelation. Finally he cleared his throat. "Nothing quite like finding out about danger after its past, huh? All the anxiety and nothing you can do about it."

"I'm sorry," Seraph said. "Would you've rather I hadn't said anything?"

"No, I guess not." Gabe said, frowning in thought. "You said he attacked you after you took the crown? Do you think he is going to try and come for it?"

"I... don't know. I guess he might come if he knows where to find me. Let's hope he doesn't."

"That's very reassuring."

"That's all I got."

"I guess we will just have to burn that bridge when we get to it." Gabe sighed. "What now?"

"About the crown? I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"You know everything I know."

"But..." Gabe pinched the bridge of his nose. "You haven't... heard anything since you got the crown?"

"No." Seraph shrugged. "Maybe someone will come for it now that I stole it from the shapeshifter."

"That's even less reassuring."

"Christ, I just don't know right now." Seraph fell back onto the bed once more. "I'm tired, can we talk about this more tomorrow?"

"Sure, okay. We can't really do anything right now anyway. Get some rest then."

Seraph closed her eyes as Gabe left the room. She hoped whoever was sending the visions did show up to get the crown. Then maybe she could beat some answers out of them. For now she just wanted to not have to think about it anymore.

The next day, the visions started again.

Chapter 7

Seraph wished she had put on socks before walking across the kitchen floor. The cold traveled straight up through her feet and made her shiver. She usually didn't mind the cold, but her injuries were making her irritable, so the cold was getting to her more than normal. A warm cup of coffee would be just what the doctor ordered, so she started up the coffee maker and grabbed the newspaper off the table. Alone in the house with both Gabe at work and Brad with his friend, Patrick, Seraph planned to buckle down and get some serious job-slash-car-slash-apartment hunting done. The classifieds were the first step.

At this point almost any job would be better than living off of her savings. She couldn't afford to keep being so picky. There was nothing saying that she had to stay with a job she hated, but putting off work while trying to find her 'calling' would only hurt her in the long run. She also promised herself that no matter what she would take at least one class at the local community college. While it was still true that the idea of becoming a student for the next several years was daunting, learning was never a wasted effort. Even if she didn't continue her higher education it would be time well spent.

The coffee machine buzzed that her breakfast was ready. She grabbed a mug and stood with her hip resting against the counter, gazing out the small window above the kitchen sink. The backyard needed to be raked. Maybe when she was feeling better she would take care of that. She took a sip of her wonderfully warm black coffee. Or maybe she would make Brad do it.

The whispering started softly but quickly grew, swelling up around her like a rising tide. The mug slipped from her numb fingers and crashed unnoticed to the floor. This time there was no separation of voice and visualization.

The damned voice murmured its commands, as demanding as ever. It showed her a dark, man-made room. In this room was her new task, retrieving the Emblems of the Seasons— the Arrow of Winter and the Horn of Summer. There was something else hidden in the room, Seraph could *feel*/this hidden thing like a hole in her memory. Like something she knew she had forgotten, and had no hope of remembering. The knowledge clawed its way inside her head and dug in, overwhelming everything else.

Seraph sank to her knees as tears ran down her face. It wasn't over.

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Seraph heard the sound of the front door opening and the carpool driving away. She didn't move as Gabe wheeled into the kitchen and headed for the refrigerator.

"Look who's up. Feeling better?" Gabe asked.

"No."

Gabe stopped half way into the kitchen and turned to her. Without speaking he moved back towards the table.

"It happened again," she said.

Gabe sighed and put his hand over hers. "What does it want this time?"

"It wants me to get something else for it," Seraph shrugged. "Whatever it is, it feels closer this time."

"You're not going for it now?" Gabe exclaimed. "You... you're still all injured! What if you have to wrestle another bear?"

"Gabe, jeez, chill. I'm not on my way out the door."

"Oh." Gabe shifted in his seat. "Well, good."

"And before I go out again I'm going to get a gun."

"*What?*"

Seraph looked up at her brother. "What, what? Since when are you freaked out about guns?"

"I'm not, I just don't think..." Gabe trailed off.

Seraph's eyes narrowed. "You know, I may have handled guns in my *military career*. You know. Once or twice."

"Yeah, I know that. It isn't that I don't think you know how to use a gun."

"Well then, what is your problem?"

"It's just... that was before..." Gabe waved his hand vaguely. "this."

"This?" Seraph asked, her voice quiet. She sat up straight in her chair. "I am not crazy."

"I know you're not crazy. I wasn't saying you were." Gabe said defensively.

"Then what are you saying?"

"I don't know," Gabe sighed. "Nothing, never mind."

Gabe wouldn't meet Seraph's eyes as she glared at him. Finally she looked away and pushed the newspaper out in front of her. "Before... I was looking at want ads. I need a job if I want to move out and get out of your hair." Seraph laughed a little. "Don't get me wrong, it means a lot that you've let me stay here, but I'm going a little stir crazy. I need a place of my own."

Gabe was silent for a moment before looking up at her with a pensive expression. "Not to piss you off again, but do you think you can move out while... this is happening? I mean, how well can you hold a job right now?"

Seraph couldn't move as Gabe's words sunk in. It was true. She couldn't leave. There was no way to tell when an attack would happen— there was no way she would be able to hold down a normal job. Without income she wouldn't be able to rent an apartment. She was stuck here, completely dependent on her brother's hospitality for as long as this curse lasted. Her hands tightened into fists as the realization set in.

"No... I guess I can't." Seraph said softly.

"Hey," Gabe reached across the table and grasped her hand. "It will be alright."

He didn't know that, not for sure, but she felt better anyway. It was a strange thing. She sighed. Someday— someday *soon*— she promised herself, *she* would be the one making the decisions in her life.

"You're right. I shouldn't go half cocked after 'something', that's 'somewhere' like I did last time."

Gabe blinked as he took a second to re-align with Seraph's train of thought. "Uh-huh."

"First I should figure out where the damn thing is. Instead of driving around in circles, I should just triangulate it. It feels like it's in the city, shouldn't be that hard."

"Sounds like a plan."

"Mmhm. I can do that tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? You sure?"

"Yeah," Seraph said. "It'll be fine. I'll just be driving around. I won't get into any trouble. I promise." Seraph cocked her head to the side. "Think Brad will let me borrow his car?"

"Maybe," Gabe shrugged. "If you don't bleed all over it."

Seraph just ignored him and continued talking. "I'll get one of those big maps that they have at AAA... I still have my compass... Yeah, that'll work."

"Sounds good."

"I'll give it a couple of weeks, to get ready and to get better."

"Sounds better."

"Besides," Seraph said as she stood up from the table. "There's a two week waiting period before I can get a conceal-carry permit."

Gabe just shook his head and sighed.

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The wind ruffled Seraph's hair, blowing it into her face. She pushed it out of the way while keeping one hand firmly on the folded map in her lap. It had been a long time since her hair had been long enough to get this annoying, and it was still too short to tie back. Once the wind died back down, Seraph adjusted her sunglasses before returning to the task at hand.

She could feel the pull of the emblems, directly south of her, which was easy enough to mark on the map. She drew a line straight south from where she was past where the last two marks intersected. Seraph sat back on the park bench and regarded her work.

The three lines on her map, each drawn from a different part of the city in the direction she felt the phantom pull, met where the emblems were. Or at least where they should have been. Seraph glared down at the map. Instead of connecting over a building, the lines clearly marked a major street.

Seraph rubbed her chest. Of all of the things wrong with her right now, the punctures hurt the worst, stabbing her with every breath. Since she had driven, she hadn't been able to take anything for the pain and it was making it hard to think.

There was no way these things could be in the middle of the street. Not only did that not match her vision, but surely something as large and unusual

wouldn't be left out in the open like that. Perhaps they were in a car? Seraph was certain that she would be able to feel them moving, but if the items had been moved to a car at some point while she was not paying attention, and if the car was parked while she was driving all day, she might not have noticed.

Of course, that all seemed really unlikely to her.

What other possible way could the items be in the middle of the road? They would have to be under it and that would mean...

Shit.

Seraph put her head in her hands as she cursed God, fate, the powers-that-be, and whatever else she could think of to blame. Of course, it was simple, she just hadn't wanted it to be true. The emblems were in the sewers.

The emblems were in the goddamn *sewers*.

Slowly, almost grudgingly, Seraph stood. She had other things she needed to do today. She put the map away, shoving it into her backpack harder than she needed to. It was the second backpack she had had to buy since coming home. Remembering what happened to the first made her scowl. Focusing on something she could do something about, Seraph pulled a marked up AutoTrader out and scanned the listing she had circled for the address she wanted.

A serviceable Nissan pickup, which was miraculously in her price range, was Seraph's next stop. She would feel better once she had her own car. She had been able to borrow Brad's car, but she couldn't count on having it whenever she wanted. The rental had been fine— if expensive— while she had it, but she had needed to give it back. Not to mention the rental company was less than pleased about her bleeding all over it.

Seraph scowled again as she thought back on the bleeding and the bill. She sighed, at least with her own car, even if she couldn't control where she went, she wouldn't have to rely on others to get there.

The attack happened with a suddenness the drove her to her knees. Images of the dark room, the arrow, and the horn paraded behind eyes. All the while the voice repeated its demands, seeming to condemn her for her hesitation. Seraph gritted her teeth against the mental invasion. Then just as quickly as it started, it was over, leaving Seraph trembling on the cold ground.

"Are you alright, miss?"

Seraph jerked her head up at the unexpected question. An older man stood over her with genuine concern in his eyes. Other passersby were stopping to stare as well. She must look like a lunatic, on her ass in the middle of the sidewalk.

An attack had never happened to her in public before. Even during her week long bender right after this whole mess started. They had always happened in relative privacy. Intellectually she knew that this could happen, but like someone who always left their front door open and is surprised to come home and find the place ransacked, Seraph felt both terribly idiotic and numbingly violated.

"Do you need help?" the man asked, reaching out his hand towards her. Seraph flinched back.

"I'm fine," she mumbled, scrambling to her feet, ignoring her screaming ankle and clutching her things. Seraph darted around him keeping her head down as she desperately avoided eye contact.

"Hey!" the man shouted after her. She simply ignored him as she fled to her car. She felt the eyes of the gathering crowd boring into her back. Humiliation fueled her flight and quickly she was in her car and peeling away from the curb.

This was not okay. If she was not careful some well meaning stranger could get her locked up in a magic ward. She would have to hide until she was well enough to go into the sewers.

Not that anyone was ever *well enough* to go into the sewers.

Seraph fumed as she sped down the road— her heavy breathing was making her chest hurt. The kaleidoscope of emotions running through her was refining itself into anger. She slammed on the brakes, almost running a red light. Her anger felt good. It was simple and easier than fear and confusion and pain, but she couldn't afford it right now. Impotent outrage would only cloud her judgment and in this already foggy situation she couldn't let herself become blinded. She closed her eyes and took several deep breaths. A car honked behind her, jerking her back into the here and now. She pulled forward slowly and resumed driving at a pace that was much less likely to annoy police officers.

She didn't drive far. A store front caught Seraph's eye and she quickly pulled into its parking lot. She hadn't planned on doing this today, but she wasn't going to pass by the opportunity when it jumped out at her. Nobody looked twice at her as she approached the store. Seraph limped through the heavily gated door under the sign that proudly proclaimed 'Leather Goods and Firearms'. She knew she should start filling out paper work and applying for her permit *now*, not later.

It was best to try and get her gun before the voices made that too difficult.

Chapter 8

Seraph bolted upright. A thin sheen of sweat covered her, making her tank stick to her skin. Her breath came in ragged, whimpering pants. The details of her vision— or nightmare, she wasn't sure which— were still holding her hostage. She was still in the dark room. The shadows closed in around her, cutting off her air, trapping her. She struggled to free herself from the sheets that had wrapped themselves around her legs. She needed to get out, the room was too close, too tight, too cramped.

The house was dark and completely silent as Seraph stumbled out of the bedroom and into the hallway. She blindly walked with one hand on the wall towards the living room. The dim light from the kitchen windows acted like a beacon, drawing her outside.

Fresh snow covered the yard and Seraph fell to her knees on the icy ground. For long moments she simply held herself and shivered. Slowly, she calmed down. The cold helped her find herself, let her think.

It had only been a week since the attack at the bus stop. The attacks had become so frequent that Seraph hadn't even been able to come out of Gabe's room for the last few days for fear of having an attack in front of witnesses. Again. While she was sequestered an early snow fall had hit. Seraph had watched the snow from her window, feeling cut off from the world.

Seraph would have to break her promise to Gabe. She couldn't wait another week to obey the voice— she couldn't even wait another day. She had to go *now*, before she completely lost her mind. Without a gun, she would need to improvise a weapon. Her eyes fell on the wood pile.

And the axe that rested next to it.

Inexplicably, Brad had spent the morning after the snow fall chopping wood. Seraph would've thought they would just crank up the heat or even buy a Duraflame log if they wanted a fire so bad. But it seemed that Brad cut fresh wood every winter, claiming that it wasn't a real fire otherwise. However strange it was to think of Brad lumberjacking it up in the backyard, she was glad that he had found something to keep him occupied and his attention off of her. He had grown increasingly harder to keep in the dark and his well meaning prying proved more and more difficult to avoid. He knew something was wrong, and while he seemed to be buying Gabe's excuses for now, he was always asking what he could do to help. Well, he could start with loaning Seraph his axe.

She climbed to her feet. The wet snow soaked through her socks, reminding her that she wasn't dressed for high adventure. Slipping quietly inside, Seraph made sure not to wake her brother, who was sleeping in the living room. She dressed in the dark, not wanting to risk waking anyone and having to answer questions. Jeans, a long sleeve shirt, a fleece jacket, her steel-toe boots and she was ready to go— it felt good to be doing something at last. She hated the waiting.

The truck Seraph bought last week sat in the driveway. Considering the safest time from an attack was right after one, she had not waited to purchase the truck. Instead of looking the truck over and getting it taken to a mechanic as she had planned she just bought it outright. It wasn't her only purchase that day either; while she wasn't able to get the hand gun she wanted, that didn't stop her from going on a shopping spree. She bought everything she thought she would need for this, including a crowbar, a new hands free flashlight, and a big first-aid kit.

She would *really* need a job after this.

Putting the truck in gear, she took off. She knew exactly where she wanted to go, an old alley behind a liquor store with a manhole that you couldn't see from the street. If she got back out before morning, she should be good. *If* she got out. She was going into the sewers after all.

The sewers were home to every last monster and boogey that wanted or needed to hide from daylight. Nobody could say for sure what all lived down there, as the kinds of creatures that *did* had a habit of eating visitors and census takers. One could only speculate as to whether or not fava beans and chianti were involved. Even the brave and hardy sewer workers only went down in teams of ten. Seraph didn't know if working around human waste was worth the prestige of being a monster hunter. It took all kinds, she supposed.

The streets were nearly empty the whole trip and Seraph was able to park right in front of the alley. Turning off her truck, she sat for a few moments. This wasn't the closest manhole to where she felt the items were, but it was the most hidden. It wasn't particularly legal to go into the sewers. Hopefully people wouldn't notice right away if she didn't get out before morning. Of course, hopefully if she didn't get out before morning— that didn't mean she wasn't getting out at all. She checked once more to make sure she was the only one out at this hour before grabbing the crowbar off the passenger seat and ducking down the alley.

Manhole covers and sewer grates were one of the few instances of magic being used consistently in a commercial setting. It wasn't that magic wasn't reliable, it just wasn't practical. It took decades to train someone to use magic, and not just anybody could be trained, you had to be born with the ability. Only about one out of every five thousand people were born with that potential. While that meant there were tens of thousands of magic users in the US alone, it also meant that most people could go their whole lives and never meet one. Magic could be mixed with technology, to a point, but once again it just wasn't practical. Why put a magic battery in a cell phone when you could just put in a normal battery? It didn't help that each piece of magic had to be crafted by hand, precluding any kind of mass production.

Really, the only sensible use of magic was to combat other magic. On the off chance a bogle manages to get in your house, nothing from Home Depot is going to be able to help you.

Seraph hefted the crowbar and fit it into the groove on the manhole cover. The cover was heavy, and lifting it was backbreaking work to Seraph, who felt the strain along every stitch in her back, but it did move.

The sewers tended to be their own deterrent. And for a long time the combination of monsters and sewage was enough to keep everybody that didn't *need* to go down there, out. But now lots of states were making new covers— not just with spells to keep the monsters locked in, but also to keep people, who didn't have the right charm from opening them. Even though most of the monsters seemed content enough to stay put, it only took one stupid teenager on a dare to open the thing and get eaten. As important as it was, she was glad that the precaution hadn't made it to Maine yet. Locks made breaking and entering so much harder.

Finally the cover pulled free. Seraph straightened and tucked the crowbar into her belt, and walked back to the truck to get the rest of her things. She debated bringing her bag, since it didn't have anything extra in it that would help her and could slow her down if she needed to get through tight spaces in a hurry— which she almost assuredly would— but then so would carrying the horn and arrow by hand. She took the pack anyway, as being slightly encumbered was better than not having a hand free when you really needed one.

Her flashlight went into the breast pocket of her jacket and she turned it on. The axe was the last thing she needed from the truck. She felt conspicuous and couldn't keep from looking around to make sure no one was watching— a move that screamed 'I am doing something bad' to anyone who happened to be looking her way. Luckily, she was just as alone as the last time she checked.

There was no putting it off. She walked back to the manhole. It was now or never. Looking down, she could see light below her. So. This was it. Taking a deep breath, Seraph climbed onto the ladder and went down.

This was going to suck.

Chapter 9

The counsel chamber hummed with the anger of its occupants— even as silence reigned. The ranking fae lords sat rigidly in their chairs. News of the disappearances had unsurprisingly angered the lords, and now the whole counsel sat in attendance with each member hoping to make his voice heard. Kaelyndra mused that they looked *almost* as upset as when they were called before her to discuss taxes.

The chamber was shaped as an oval cut in half— with the thrones along the flat wall opposite the doors. The counsel members themselves sat along the curving walls on either side facing the center. From the doors, steps led down to the center of the room, which was open for those who wished to speak. Duke Eonsahr held the floor.

"But we cannot say with certainty that the missing are dead, let alone that the goblins are responsible. Wantonly killing them will only prove to alienate the loyal and further the discontent of the dissenters. It is the guilty that must be found, so that the lesson is clear," Follyn said.

"The lesson should be that we still have control," replied the duke. Eonsahr stood ramrod straight with his arms crossed over his chest and a perpetual scowl upon his face. One of the oldest counsel members, Kaelyndra could not remember a time when he was not on the counsel— or a time when he was not annoyed at something.

"But not control over ourselves and our anger?" challenged Duke Thridi, one of the more outspoken in support of the king.

"Every minute that we do not act is not seen as mercy or prudence but as more proof of our weakness," said Eonsahr.

"What control do we show when we blindly react?" asked Follyn.

"What if we never find the guilty?" called Duke Forhin from his seat.

"Indeed, are we to let this act go unpunished?" asked Eonsahr.

"Surely you are not suggesting that we punish the innocent?" Kaelyndra cut in.

Eonsahr's back stiffened at the rebuke. "All of the goblins are guilty of rebellion."

"Be that as it may, good Duke, we are not here to discuss executing them for insurgence." Follyn replied mildly. "It is folly to demand such rash measures when we do not possess all of the information. We must wait for Lord Eldryn's report before we act." Follyn stood and walked to the center of the room. Eonsahr fell back before him and reclaimed his seat.

Follyn took a quiet, deep breath before continuing to speak. "My lords, is it truly believed that the goblins would be intimidated by the killing of but a handful of their number? They were our soldiers in the oldlands, they are no strangers to death. It will anger them, no doubt, but would it really cow them into submission? I believe not." Follyn paused then, to look every noble in the eye before continuing. "We must not go into this as blindly as some unthinking,

angry *badger*. By the shining sun we are the *endless lords* and there is always time for us to plan. The time is early yet. At the very least we must wait until Lord Eldryn's return. I called you here to share with you this news and to hear your thoughts. I have. I call this counsel ended."

The counsel muttered for some moments, but obeyed. The nobles slowly began trickling out of the room in twos and threes or held back to talk amongst themselves. Once the doors opened, one of the palace messengers, a slyph boy-child who stood a scant two feet tall, darted between the legs of the lords and raced up to Follyn.

"What message, boy?" Follyn asked.

"Lord Silvendar has arrived with the human emissaries."

Follyn nodded and the child ran off, his tiny wings shimmering as he ran. "I must meet with their leader to make sure they settle before I am lost in my duties. Do you wish to attend the meet?" Follyn asked.

"I would, though I am not free to until the day is late."

"Then we shall have a late meet. It will give the emissaries time to rest after their travels."

Kaelyndra nodded her thanks and farewell as another claimed Follyn's attention. There were always many who needed to speak with the king after such counsels and Kaelyndra left him to it.

As she exited the counsel chamber the sweet ringing of a bell floated through the air. The time-tower could be heard throughout the palace during the day, but at night the sound stayed outside so that people might rest. It now gently informed Kaelyndra that she had spent more bells than she had wanted in the counsel chambers. She had time before her next meeting but not enough to eat as she had hoped.

Kaelyndra needed to meet with the Stonemason Guildmaster. The festival had brought to light the deplorable state of the roads within the fae lands, and they simply could not handle the amount of traffic that the solstice caused. This was a new problem for the fae lords— more than merely an issue of creating a whole new network of roads— in the homelands roads were only used by lesser-fae and then only to transport goods. Personal travel among the higher fae meant the use of fairyrings, which could transport them anywhere they wished. But, as with much of the fae lord's magic, it was now lost to them.

Stepping out into the hallway, Kaelyndra found Silvendar waiting for her. Her cousin looked none the worse for wear after his extended journey, his clothing was free from travel dust and his hair was neatly braided. Even though he must have been tired he stood straight and his golden eyes held no weary shadows.

"Silvendar," Kaelyndra said warily. "'Tis good to see you returned to us safely." She held out her hands in welcome.

"'Tis good to be returned." Silvendar took her hands and squeezed them briefly before releasing them. "Cousin, 'tis troubling news that I arrive to. Is it truth that we do nothing about the goblins?"

"There is nothing to be done. We do not yet know all we need to know."

"All one needs to know is that a dozen fae lords are dead—"

"Four." Kaelyndra interrupted. "There are only four and they are missing, not dead." Silvendar looked startled. "I do not know where you heard such rumors but it is beneath you to spread them. This situation is bad enough without people making up stories."

"Four or forty. It makes no difference. Something needs be done."

"And something shall. Follyn will do what needs be done, when it needs be."

"You know as well as I, Follyn is not from a... high bred family as you and I." Silvendar said quietly.

"He is lord enough to *command* the lesser-fae." Kaelyndra reminded Silvendar angrily, hackles rising at the insult. All of the high-fae, the noble and beautiful race that had ruled over Atlantis, held dominion over the many breeds of lesser-fae. But only the most royal of the high-fae, the fae lords, could *command* the will of the lesser-fae. A fae lord had only to make his wishes known to one of the lesser-fae and they would be compelled to obey. This was how the fae lords controlled the more headstrong of the lesser fae, and in the past the fae lords could *command* whole armies of goblins on the battle field. It was the mark of the right to rule.

Silvendar waved his hand dismissively. "A baron can *command*, it means nothing."

"It might not, but my father made me his heir— and Follyn my husband. And you, cousin, forget your place."

Silvendar's face became pale and still. Without a word he nodded and stalked off.

Kaelyndra stared after him, feeling a pang of regret. It troubled her how their relationship had fallen apart— they had not always been at such odds with each other. She regretted her harsh words already and only wished Silvendar didn't feel the need to condemn every action Follyn took. He was bitter, she understood that. Before the war had destroyed their home he had been the heir-apparent and betrothed to the princess of the Winter Court. The marriage would have put him on the throne and ended the war peacefully. But fate was cruel and even the best laid plans can fall apart. When the war started again in earnest her father made her his heir, preferring that his own blood follow him now that he did not need a male heir. By this time she was already married to Follyn.

The oracle, one of the greatest treasures now lost to the fae, was known to tell the truth of the past, present and future. No one commanded the oracle, it told what truths it chose only when it chose to. It was attended night and day lest any revelation be missed. On Kaelyndra's eighteenth birthday, the oracle blessed her with the name of her soulmate— Follyn, a minor lord from a minor family.

It was not often that the oracle would single out individuals in such a way. Kaelyndra had never dreamed that she would marry for love, she was a princess and as such, she was to be wed to politically. But even the king would not ignore a gift from the oracle. Soulmates were too rare and too blessed to simply be dismissed, thus Kaelyndra and Follyn were allowed to wed.

When the war between the courts ended with the Summer Court triumphant, Kaelyndra became Queen and Follyn became the first Erlking in three generations— almost five hundred years.

Follyn's rise was not without its detractors. While it may have been true that uniting soulmates was a sign of good fortune, few lords were happy with the idea of one barely more than a commoner being elevated above them. Many wanted Kaelyndra to appoint a regent for the duties of the king, as her father had appointed one for the duties of the queen when her mother had passed. She had almost given in to the pressure because without the support of the counsel her ability to rule would have been crippled, something that she could not afford while trying to re-settle her people. But with the madness of the flight from the oldlands there was never time to find someone suitable enough and Follyn simply slipped into his position and proved himself to be a far better ruler than anyone could have expected.

Kaelyndra continued on her way once Silvendar was out of sight.

The Guildmaster waited for her in the west wing of the castle, the quickest way was across the western courtyard. Kaelyndra's steps carried her quickly through the corridors to the busy, sun lit grounds.

A large human male stood in the yard brushing a horse while the brownies that worked the stables watched. He was as bulky and over muscled as his breed were wont to be, and he wore thick traveling leathers. He had thick blond hair that was loose but held many small braids, as did his beard. Kaelyndra paused, her curiosity piqued— she rarely interacted with non-fae. It would be a welcome distraction from her melancholy thoughts. He did not notice her approach.

"Good day to you, emissary."

The man looked up, startled from his work. He quickly stepped away from his task and bowed deeply from the waist, his right hand pressed to his chest. "Good day to you, bright lady."

Kaelyndra smiled at him, for though she doubted he knew who she was, he was still greeting her as nobility. "You need not trouble yourself with seeing to your mounts, our servants are very skilled and I am sure you must be wary from your journey."

"I be sure of the ability of the wee ones to care for my horse, that be not the reason I do this. Swift carried me all the way here, the least I can be doing is look to him myself."

"How conscientious." Kaelyndra smiled.

"Thank ye, I do try to see to my responsibilities as best I know." He pulled himself up. "I be Hjorleifr, bright lady, at your service. It be a blessing to be visiting yor graced lands again."

Kaelyndra frowned. "Again? You have been a visitor in our lands before?" That was not possible, she would have known of any northmen to cross their borders.

"Da, when I was very young... before, ah, before ye bright ones moved to this new land. My father be one of the few who sailed yor lands. Mine and Ivan's, he be leading our troupe. His father met with yor king more than once. That be why m'lord sent us."

"I see." Kaelyndra remembered that her father had met with humans before, although she did not know for what reason. She had wondered at the time why her father would bother— for he had never much respect for them. Believing them weak and not just a little stupid, as easy to control as any lesser-fae only not as useful. "What business did your father have with the king?"

"Oh, my father was not but a sailor, only Ivan's father be the one meeting yor king."

"I see."

"Da. He... oh, he be there." Hjorleifr pointed.

Kaelyndra turned— behind her another human male was crossing the grounds towards them. He was slighter in build than Hjorleifr and had a scholarly air about him. Where Hjorleifr was fair, Ivan was dark, but his eyes shone with intelligence. As he approached his eyes raked over Kaelyndra, assessing her. He nodded quickly in greeting before dismissing her and turning to Hjorleifr.

"Be ye done with yor beast yet?"

"Not yet m'lord, I be talking to... ah, I be sorry lass. I know not yor name."

"I am Kaelyndra a'Thagon." Ivan's eyes widened and snapped back to her at this. "Well met Hjorleifr, Ivan."

"It be an honor yor majesty." Ivan bowed deeply, his black hair falling over his shoulder to almost touch the ground. "I met yor esteemed husband just a moment ago, before I came to fetch my comrade."

"Yes, Hjorleifr was just telling me of your fathers' journeys to the oldlands." Kaelyndra said, smiling. Hjorleifr coughed and looked flustered.

"Da, my father was known to travel to many lands." Ivan said modestly, giving Hjorleifr an unreadable look.

"Ah," Hjorleifr spoke up, still looking embarrassed. "I did not mean to be seeming... familiar with ye... I..."

"Worry not, I was not upset by your words."

"I hope not," Ivan said. "It would not do to anger yor highness before we even begin peace talks," he smiled. It seemed to Kaelyndra that his smile did not quite reach his eyes. He reminded Kaelyndra of some of the more jaded counsel members, a politician at his core.

"It was most pleasant to meet you both," Kaelyndra said. "I regret that I have duties that I must attend to, but I pray that you find your time here fruitful and as enjoyable as your last."

"I be sure that we shall at that, yor Majesty." Ivan said politely, while Hjorleifr murmured his agreement. "I do be sure at that."

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Marquis Eldryn stood in the center of the counsel room before the royal seats. He was pale and road worn. As soon as he had entered the city, he had requested an audience, forgoing any rest from his journey. The counsel was quickly gathered, all wanting to hear Eldryn's report.

Kaelyndra compared the Eldryn before her to the Eldryn she remembered from when last she saw him. He had been a well-kept and confident lord that bore little resemblance to the haggard, worn man that now addressed the counsel.

He bore terrible news.

"My lords, in the last week before my coming, another eight men have disappeared without a trace." Stunned disbelief answered Eldryn's declaration. "Afetim, young Foromuil, Aelgon, Sir Legmas, Normuil, Sir Thas and his brother Falenian, and Anihian. Each of these lords— while noble in spirit— lacked the power to *command*."

"What?" Kaelyndra spoke first, breaking the tableau. "How could this have happened?"

"We do not know my queen, each vanished when they were doing some solitary task and was not missed for several bells." Eldryn paused. "No one is allowed to go alone anymore," he all but whispered.

"And what of the goblins? What have they to say?" Kaelyndra demanded while Follyn remained mute beside her.

"They claim to know nothing, my queen. Nothing of how nor why... only..." Eldryn trailed off and for the first time looked uncertain.

"Only what?" Kaelyndra prompted, trying to keep the impatience from her voice.

"It strikes me that the timing of the disappearances... they happened in the day before and after the humans were brought through the province. I believe this... attack was retaliation for halting the treating between the goblins and the northmen."

Kaelyndra stopped, her mind racing. Were the humans involved? How? Even the weakest of the fae had magic, it would take a human years of training to reach the lowest level of power. Of course, it was possible for one empty of magic to defeat a magi, and the lords *were* alone when they went missing. But how would the northmen know which high-fae could *command*, and why would they care? The fae could not *command* humans. And for the love of the silver moon, *why*? Why would the northmen attack? Kaelyndra remembered her

meeting with Hjorleifr and Ivan the day before. Could they really have attacked and then come under the guise of peace? She could not conceive that Hjorleifr would be capable of such deceit.

However, it would be like the goblins to try and throw suspicion onto the humans.

"This is monstrous!" shouted one of the lords. "It would be madness to let this continue! I call that the goblins be put to the blade now!" Quickly the other lords took up the cry.

Follyn stood, and slowly silence came over the room as every eye was on the king. "It is clear now to me that goblins are more than merely discontent. This act of treason must be answered swiftly. The goblins shall be culled."

A murmuring broke out, but before it had time to grow Silvendar stood and stepped forward, throwing the room into silence once more.

"My lord," Silvendar said, bowing. "At your word, I will go to the goblins myself to see that this matter is put to an end. I would leave on the morrow, so that the shadow of this specter does not hang over the Solstice and the celebration of the Longest Dawn."

It did not surprise Kaelyndra that Silvendar would volunteer for this task, he craved the popular approval of the peerage. Even should Follyn not give him command of mission, he would undoubtedly join whoever was charged.

"No," Follyn said. "It is far past the time when I should take a more personal hand in this. I shall over see the culling myself."

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"No one would think less of you for sending another in your place. You've only just returned home, after all."

Kaelyndra watched as Follyn finished donning his armor. They had not spoken of his leaving since his declaration the night before. She knew that there was no changing his mind now, even if he was of mind to stay, he could not go back on his decision without appearing weak. It was not to challenge him that she spoke, it was to question. She needed to hear him tell her *why*.

Follyn stepped towards her and pulled Kaelyndra into an embrace. "That is not the reason I need go." Follyn ran his fingers through her golden tresses and pressed his lips to her crown. "I have let the counsel corner me into this, it is my responsibly to see it through 'til its end." He sighed. "I do not like this."

"Of course you don't. Executions are not meant to be liked." Kaelyndra pulled away to look him in his eyes. "You would be a poor king if you enjoyed watching even the least of your people die."

A small smile touched the corner of Follyn's mouth. "Indeed, I have taken many an opportunity to express my distaste of what is to come. No, I meant I do not like being forced in this way. I have never cared to be told what do to."

"Then it is good that you are king after all," Kaelyndra smiled.

Follyn laughed quietly. "No, I have learned much since I first took the crown. Above all things a king must do as needs be done, not as he wishes... Or you and I would only concern ourselves with dancing the festival, and leave this trouble far, far behind. I fear that I have no power over this fate at all."

"I am sorry, my love. I know you never wished for this power, but it is better that you wear this mantle than another that does not hold your wisdom."

"You need not be sorry," Follyn kissed her lightly on the lips. "Being king is a small price to be by your side."

Laughter spilled from Kaelyndra's lips. "How lucky I am that you would take such a sacrifice," she said, hitting him lightly on the shoulder.

Follyn swept her back into his arms, laughing with her. They held each other for long moments after their mirth gave way to silence.

"I will do my utmost to return to you before the Longest Dawn," Follyn vowed.

"You had better."

The ringing of time-tower sounded through the room. Their time together had come to an end.

"Walk with me?"

"Do you really think that I would not see you away?" Kaelyndra asked.

Follyn just smiled in response. Kaelyndra retrieved his crown from its resting place on the table. She followed him through the castle out into the busy front courtyard where his entourage— of a half a score of guards and Silvendar—awaited him.

Almost all that called the castle home stood where they could best see the king. There was a festive mood in the air that belied Follyn's grim bearing. His citizens saw only that their king was off to punish unruly goblins— that this would require innocent blood was not something they would see, so they paid it no mind. And Follyn did look the hero they wanted to see, he stood tall and his armor shone bright white and silver in the early morning sun. He easily mounted his horse, a pure white stallion. Kaelyndra went to his side and presented him with his helm. He bent slightly to reach for it, caressing her hand as he grasped the crown. Donning the silver helm, Follyn guided his horse to the front of the small precession. He looked fierce— adorned for war, with the imposing mask of the Erlking and at the head of the elite guard. One of the guards sounded the horn and they all marched forward to the cheers of the crowd. Kaelyndra returned to the steps and turned to watch Follyn pass under the gate. She stood vigil until he had passed from her sight. He did not look back.

Chapter 10

Oh god, it *smelled*. Seraph put her arm over her nose and mouth. This was even worse than getting chased through the woods by a bear. On the bright side, the sewer was, well, brighter than Seraph had pictured. Apparently the designers had not opted for the 'dank and poorly lit death trap' look that was so popular with Hollywood. Bright florescent lights were spaced so that no area was shadowed, and LEDs were placed at the openings of the smaller tubes that poured into the main water way. A low guard rail stood between the water and the walkway, even on the mini-bridges that crossed every so often. The floor was free of broken tiles and absolutely no live wires hung from the ceiling.

Seraph flicked her flashlight off. If it weren't for the choking smell, the terrible lurking monsters, and the omnipresent aura of dread that permeated every pore of this hellish pit it wouldn't be such a bad place.

Her palm sweated around the handle of the axe. It was surprisingly warm down here as well, and her fleece jacket was uncomfortable in the heat. Still, she was reluctant to take it off, wanting the extra layer between her and what was coming. She could only imagine how this place got in the summer.

It was also quiet. Seraph stood for long moments just looking and listening. The rush and drip of running water faded from her awareness leaving a sullen silence that rang in the air. Even the sound of her boots on the concrete was muted as she took her first steps.

The pull was slightly off from straight forward. It was likely that the emblems were in a room right off of this hallway. She knew she was lucky in that she didn't have a layout for this place, and a single wrong turn could leave her hopelessly lost. As she walked the weight of the *need* to act lifted slightly. Even as the oppressive atmosphere of the sewer became more claustrophobic, Seraph began breathing easier. She hadn't noticed just how bad the steadily worsening sense of compulsion had become until she was free of it. With the freedom came the realization that what she was doing was stupid.

Perhaps less what she was doing, and more how she was doing it. She knew there were monsters down here. Everyone knew that there were monsters down here. Not to mention that she had encountered one pissy shapeshifter on this... *quest* already and she would bet money that some nasty was hanging around the Emblems too. While one didn't make a pattern, it would be stupid to just assume that this item wouldn't be under guard as well. There was no way she would make it out of here without having to run or fight. There wasn't a lot of space to run, and she wasn't equipped to fight. At least, not to fight most of the things she would find down here.

The smartest thing right now would be to turn back. She could come tomorrow night if she needed to. She shouldn't be here with only a wood axe and a crowbar.

But she couldn't go back.

As much as Seraph knew she should, as much as she understood how much more she should have prepared before coming here, she couldn't leave. She could not turn around any more than she could walk through walls. Once the voice had her here it wasn't going to just let her go.

The overhead lights flickered, grabbing Seraph's attention. The light panels all looked like typical florescent lights, except the one right above her. Between the two main bulbs was a third that flashed red. As she watched, it stopped flashing and just glowed a steady, unsettling crimson. A small splash that was quiet even in the prevailing hush drew Seraph's attention away from the odd lighting. Almost against her will, she stepped to the rail and looked down.

Staring out of the murky water were the eyes of a dead horse. It floated in the foul water strangely unmoved by the current. The filth of the sewer had stained what once might have been a white coat. Its mane twisted independent of the water's flow, the hairs writhing like snakes and tangled with debris. Seraph imagined this is how Death's horse would look. There really wasn't any way that a horse could come down here by accident, and Seraph could think of no reason to bring one down here on purpose. Despite being completely submerged the horse was untouched by injury and decay, looking almost alive in its watery grave. Which meant that what she was looking at probably wasn't really a horse.

Seraph backed away from the edge of the water and the horse followed. Its head soundlessly broke the surface of the water and its eyes began to glow with a sickly, malevolent light. Behind it another head surfaced, then another, and another still. The water way filled with a herd of the monsters, all of them focused on her. Turning, Seraph sprinted down the walkway as she heard the first horse leap free of the water and over the guard rail to give chase. It screamed, a terrible noise that drove nails thought Seraph's brain, making her wonder if her ears might start bleeding.

Okay, *this* was worse than getting chased through the woods by a bear.

The walkway branched— she could take one of the bridges over the horse-monster infested water, or she could turn a corner. She turned the corner at full speed. Ten feet ahead of her the walkway ended in front of an access panel. Screeching to a halt before she slammed headlong into the wall, Seraph mentally cursed. Screw these damn sewers, screw the monster horses, and screw prophetically named dead ends!

Red lights flickered on over her head. Seraph snarled and set herself to fight. Would the axe be enough? Some monsters were picky about how they die. She pivoted on her left foot, swinging her body around. Did she need silver? Holy items? Magic? She gripped the handle like a baseball bat. Would a simple axe kill it? She supposed she was going to find out.

The first of them was so close she could almost feel its fetid breath. Seraph shouted defiantly at the thing as she slammed the axe across its face, catching it under its eye and smashing it into the wall. It kicked as it died.

Another monster was in the water to her right, but she couldn't get the axe free. It was stuck tight in the first horse's head.

The creature in the water lunged up under the guardrail from the water. It opened its mouth wide, showing off huge sharp teeth that didn't belong in a normal horse's mouth. Seraph struggled with the axe, desperately working it loose of what ever was holding it.

The horse darted forward just as she pulled it free. She jerked back letting the monster bite the air where she used to be. It turned its head towards her just as she raised the axe. Its spiteful eyes locked onto hers. Seraph brought the axe down right into the center of its forehead, killing it.

Another of the damn things burst from the water to climb onto the walkway behind the body of the first monster. And the axe was stuck again. Seraph desperately pulled, but the damn thing was just *caught*. She had never used an axe to kill something before, but should it have really been this hard? She stomped on the creatures face and bracing herself she was able to yank the axe free. The third monster finished pulling itself up to the walkway and Seraph set herself to fight— and stumbled. Her foot was stuck to the face of the horse monster.

Seraph slipped. The dead weight of the monster she was glued to was sinking back into the water and pulling her with it. Their strange shrieking cry ripped through her head, hurting her. The stabbing pain almost made Seraph drop her axe and clap her hands to her ears. She clenched her teeth until they felt like they would crack and kept her eyes on the monster. It charged.

The dead horse under her foot shifted again, dragging Seraph off her feet. She landed hard on her side just as the third creature attacked. Its vicious teeth snapped right above her head. Seraph slashed up, catching the thing in its neck. It was a solid hit, but not a killing blow. The horse screamed again and reared back, ripping the axe right out of Seraph's hands.

Shit.

Seraph threw herself back as the monster kicked and collapsed onto the corpse of the first one. It thrashed as it bled to death, almost hitting her with its massive hooves. Great gouts of blood splashed all over the wall and the corpse, while the creature was visibly getting weaker. She struggled to free herself- why was the damn, stupid thing *gluey*? She finally kicked free of her boot just in time to see yet another horse coming out of the water right next to her.

The axe gone, Seraph pulled the crowbar from her belt as she struggled to her knees. Filthy water splashed over the walkway and her. The horse was still pulling itself out of the water, its front legs on the walkway and its back in the water. Seraph shouted and lashed out, swinging the crowbar across its face. The crowbar didn't stick— it slammed into the creature's head, knocking it aside. The horse screamed again, a harsh cry of pain and surprise. A blistering, sizzling, bright red burn flowered across the monster's skin. It looked like it hurt.

Seraph blinked and the monster slipped back under the water. She scrambled to her feet with her back against the wall, still clutching her crowbar.

The only sound she could hear was her own panting. The walkway was empty, so was the water. There were more creatures- she had seen at least a dozen in the waterway before. Where they coming up with a new attack plan? Seraph glanced up- nothing. She didn't think they had a way to stick to the ceiling, but when you find yourself in a horror movie cliché it didn't hurt to check. What the hell were they doing?

Movement brought her attention back to the water. One of the monsters held its head just out of the water to stare at her. Seraph's grip tightened on her weapon as she prepared for an attack.

None came. The horse turned away from her and slipped back underwater. After about a foot Seraph couldn't see it anymore, but the ripple it made in the water told her that it was leaving. Other ripples followed it. Seraph stood tense and ready, not quite believing that it was over.

The red lights flickered again then turned off, leaving everything slightly green. Seraph finally relaxed.

A splash sent her right back into fight mode. It was just the body of the monster that had attacked her from the side finally slipping the rest of the way into the water. Seraph swallowed her heart back down into her chest and stepped to the railing to look down. The body was gone. And so was her boot.

Well that was that then. Seraph slowly limped back to where her axe was embedded in the now dead monster and worked it free. This had been fun, but she had a job to do. Even if the job sucked and she didn't want to do it.

Unfortunately, it looked like she was trapped. The dead end walkway was blocked with the bodies of the monsters and Seraph on the wrong side. The bodies weren't crammed so tight that they should have been a barrier- there were only two of them- normally Seraph could have climbed right over them with no problem. But the monsters were still gluey and she wasn't about to go scrambling over them only to get trapped. She could just imagine getting stuck so bad she would have to wait for the sewer workers to come rescue her.

Yeah, she wasn't doing that.

Seraph walked back over to the guardrail. She couldn't see anything in the water. Well, she couldn't anything that was going to jump out at her. A glance assured her that the red lights weren't coming on any time soon. With a sigh Seraph stuck the crowbar back in her belt. It wasn't like she had a lot of options, and it was as safe as it was going to get. It was easy enough to get over the bar. She wasn't worried that it was going to be difficult to strafe past the corpses. It was just that the way her luck was running she was going to get half way before the lights turned red and something jumped out to bite her in the ass.

Seraph quickly sidestepped past the monsters, balancing with her free hand on the rail. Once she was past them and back on the right side of the bar Seraph finally started to relax. That had been pretty bad, but she came through mostly unhurt. Now she just needed to get the emblems and get out. How many more monsters could there be?

No! Bad thought! Seraph started jogging down the hallway. She needed to hurry before she started doing something really stupid. Like wondering out loud if things could get any worse.

She felt something that wasn't sweat trickle down her back. Great, she must have pulled some stitches during the fight. Now that the adrenalin was wearing off, Seraph could feel little warning pin-pricks of pain. She pushed it from her mind— she would have time to hurt tomorrow.

A rat ran out of a small crack in the wall and darted ahead of her. It occurred to Seraph that this was the first rat she had seen since coming down here. She wondered if there were too many large predators down here for a large rat population.

A few minutes and several rats later, Seraph was rethinking her theory. Maybe the rats just knew better than to hang around crazy ass horse monsters.

Seraph continued running along with the rats for another few yards until she came to a door. The pull had been drifting more off center for a bit and it was now tugging at her through one of the non-descript doors that sporadically dotted the walkways. This one looked a little abandoned. Most of the others had electronic keypads while this one sported only a simple lock right in the handle. The paint was peeling and there was a good sized hole in the bottom of it.

It concerned Seraph a little that all the rats were racing through the hole into the unknown room. Maybe the rats weren't the safety barometer that she had hoped— they might even be part of a worse problem. Too bad Seraph couldn't think of any rat themed monsters. When she got out of here, she was buying a field guide and memorizing it.

Seraph twisted the handle hard, breaking the lock. The room turned out to be an empty storage closet. It was unlit, leaving the far left wall completely in shadow. Rats rushed around her feet and towards the darkness. Seraph turned on the flashlight and followed. She tried not to step on the rats, but they were everywhere and they didn't seem to be inclined to move for her. As she got closer her flashlight revealed that the wall wasn't shadowed so much as it was gone. A tunnel of what looked like natural rock lead away from the small room. It sloped down and curved so that she could not see where it ended, but Seraph was not worried that she would have to follow it into the depths of the earth. What she wanted was close now.

The tunnel twisted around in a u-turn so she was heading back behind the storage closet. As it went back the ceiling drastically lowered, until Seraph wondered if she was going to end up crawling with the rats. Luckily before *that* could happen, the tunnel ended in a large hole. It was a little smaller than a manhole and Seraph could see the bottom. She did *not* want to jump into a mystery hole, but it wasn't as if she had a lot of options at this point. At least it wasn't a long drop. If the rats could do it, she could. More importantly, she was pretty sure she could get back out.

Seraph hit hard and swallowed a curse. She had forgotten about her lost boot and had landed awkwardly. Testing her weight on her ankle she decided that she hadn't twisted it, but she probably shouldn't do that again.

"Welcome to my hall, tall one," rasped a high-pitched voice behind her.

Seraph turned to face voice. Sitting on a throne of tiny bones was gremlin. He was small— maybe a foot tall— and a rat lay at his feet like a large dog. He looked unhealthy, even for a gremlin. His oversized ears dropped from his bald head and his watery yellow eyes blinked against the shine of her flashlight. Pale skin was stretched thin over his spindly limbs which were all cord and bone. There was not one bit of fat on him, not even the small belly that people get when all their muscle atrophies away.

More importantly, he had the emblems. The Horn of Summer was mounted on the back of the throne and the Arrow of Winter was held like a spear in the gremlin's small fist. He grinned at her, showing off his mouth full of sharp yellow teeth.

"Well, tall one?" he hissed. "What business brings you before the Rat Lord?"

Chapter 11

"Are you the Rat Lord?" Seraph asked uncertainly.

"I am. And just who are you, to stand armed as you address me?" he asked, glaring up at her.

"Oh... um, sorry?" Maybe towering over the guy was a little rude. Seraph knelt down, bringing her head to about his level and placed her axe on the ground next to her.

"Better." The Rat Lord stroked his hairless chin as if he had a goatee while he regarded her with narrowed eyes. "How are you called, tall one?"

"Seraph."

"Well met." He tried to throw out the pleasantries off handedly, like it was an often used response, but something in the way he acted made it unsettling.

"Why are you called the Rat Lord?"

The gremlin smiled with a mouth filled with needle teeth. He pulled himself up as far as his bent spine would allow and rapped the end of the arrow on the ground. The rats stopped milling around and turned to stare at him.

"The rats are beholden to me. They do as I command."

As one, the rats turned to stare Seraph. A knot of fear settled in her stomach even as she kept her face impassive. A single rat, or even a single dozen rats, wouldn't have posed any kind of threat to her, but she could see at least four dozen in the glow of her flashlight alone and she could hear even more in the darkness surrounding her.

"They do as I command," the Rat Lord repeated. "They are my hands and eyes in the outside world. They are my hounds in the outside world." He looked deliberately off to the side, into the shadows. Seraph couldn't help herself— she looked.

Bones.

Piles of bones picked clean of soft tissue and arranged against the wall. Most of the bones were animal or monstrous, but human bones clearly held their place in the mounds. It was possible that the rats only brought back bodies that they had found, a sewer worker that had died in the line of duty, a homeless person that had died forgotten in the streets, or a body savaged from a graveyard. Possible... but there were a lot of bones.

Seraph turned back to the Rat Lord. He was watching her closely, looking for signs of weakness and fear. She kept her expression politely blank, as if she were standing at attention.

"I see your rats are very skilled," she said evenly.

The Rat Lord looked surprised but pleased. "Yes, they are." He sat back in his chair and stroked the head of one of the rats that sat at his feet while he regarded her. "Why have you come here?" he asked finally.

Seraph put the bodies from her mind— they were beyond her help. She had to focus on what she had come here for.

"Well, honestly, I'm here for those." Seraph gestured at the Emblems.

"Ah, of course." He said thoughtfully as he stroked the arrow. "What other possession of mine would be of interest to one such as you?"

"You're taking this well."

"I did not say that you could have them."

Well, damn.

"That puts us in an awkward position."

"Indeed," he said. "What do you want with them? You have not the smell of magik about you," he sniffed the air as he spoke. "Not that any *human* could use fey magik to its full potential."

"They're fairy?"

The Rat Lord just looked at her.

"Okay, yes, I figured out the first thing I retrieved was fairy related, but that doesn't mean everything I'm going to be sent after will be. I just don't know anything about what the hell is going on. It would be nice to have a little... insight about what's happening to me." Seraph let out a frustrated sigh and glared at the Rat Lord. "A voice in my head told me to come get them."

"You are in an unenviable position," the Rat Lord snickered.

"Yeah, no kidding."

"More is the pity for you," he said. "I will not give you what is mine. My life would be cut short for it, in more ways than one. The great dark one from whom I took my prizes would find me. And it would not be pleased."

"More ways than one?"

"They give me the endless life of the Highborn. I have had them for millennia." He leant back in his chair, sitting as arrogantly as a two foot tall gremlin is able. "So you see why I will not just give them away."

"I could just take them."

"You could *try*," he snarled.

"If you're hiding, you're doing a bad job of it. It was easy to find you. Your front door is huge..." Seraph eyed him, "for someone your size."

"The entrance to my domain changes as it will, in its appearance and its location," the Rat Lord said with a wave of his hand.

It took a moment for the implications of that to sink in. "It moves? Shit!" Seraph jumped up. She would not be trapped down here, she needed those Emblems.

"It has not moved since you've come," he said hastily.

"That just puts a time limit on getting the Emblems." She didn't have time for this.

"Sit you *down* tall one, I will not be robbed by the likes of you."

"I don't want to hurt you, but I don't see both of us walking away from this happy. I think I'll take my chances."

"Wait!" he screamed.

Against her better judgment, Seraph hesitated.

"Why not have a contest for them?"

"Like what?" Seraph asked.

"Riddles," he said, settling again.

"Riddles?" Seraph couldn't believe her ears. "Really? Riddles? What are you, Gollum?"

"I do not know 'Gollum'."

"He's a character in an alternative-history book." Seraph paused. "And a movie."

"Movie?"

"Yeah, Lord of the Rings."

"I do not know these things."

"You don't know what a movie is? You must not get out much."

"I have not left my domain since I came to power. My rats bring me what I need."

"You haven't left this place for a thousand years?" Seraph was astonished. She would have been bored out of her mind. Who would want that kind of immortality? "You speak modern English pretty good for a shut in," she observed.

"I do not speak your English at all," he returned. "It is one of the many powers of the Emblems that we speak now. And one of the many powers that *you*, human, will not be able to use."

"Well I... wait," Seraph shook her head. "This is off track. I want the Emblems."

"Yes, and you must play a game of Riddles first. If you win, I shall give you the Emblems. But should you lose, I get your life."

"What!" Seraph shouted.

"You came down here to steal from me," the Rat Lord snarled. "What reason do I have to offer you this chance if I get nothing? Your corpse will feed my people for a long time."

While she was still apprehensive about the entrance moving on her, a moment to think about it had calmed most of her concerns. If she became lost in the sewers she could always find a manhole and make her way back on surface streets. "What kind of riddles?"

"Any riddle."

"Any riddle at all?"

"Yes, yes." The Rat Lord hissed. "But! Once asked, the other may only speak the answer."

"Fine."

"Your *oath*, tall one."

"My what?"

"Your *oath*. Swear that you will abide by the terms of our agreement."

"Alright, I swear." A chill raced up Seraph's spine and wrapped around her throat, freezing her in place for a brief moment. The Rat Lord smiled a wicked little smile and Seraph had the feeling that she had walked into a trap. It was magic, of some sort, Seraph would have bet her life on it.

"Very good. I will go first," he said smugly.

Seraph narrowed her eyes but said nothing.

"There are four brothers in this world that were all born together. The first runs and never wearies. The second eats and is never full. The third drinks and is always thirsty. The fourth sings a song that is never good."

Okay, running. Probably not an animal... what else ran... water. So, a river? Does the mouth of a river 'eat'? No, it must be something else. Fire? Oh, that's easy. "The elements?"

The rat lord hissed at her. "Yes."

"Alright, my turn." Seraph thought for a moment. "How can you fit five elephants in a compact car?"

"What?" The baffled look on his face almost made her laugh out loud. "What is a car?"

"I'm sorry," Seraph said "That's not the right answer."

There was a moment of pregnant silence as understanding slowly sunk in. The Rat Lord's face twisted as with rage as the nature of her trick became stupidly clear to him. He snarled and launched himself at her.

Seraph threw up her arm in front of her face just in time to keep the Rat Lord from her throat. He caught onto her forearm with claws and teeth, hanging from her while his feet kicked the air. His ragged teeth ripped into her skin and he shook his head tearing bits of her arm right out. The rats all started screaming and running, the floor of the hall becoming a chaotic writhing furry mass. She reached for her axe but small snapping teeth kept her from it.

She surged to her feet and, snarling, Seraph grabbed the Rat Lord by the back of his head and ripped him off of her. Tiny claws dug into her jeans as the rats climbed up her legs. He thrashed and spat at her. With a quick movement of her wrist, she swung his body around by his head quickly and cleanly breaking his wretched little neck.

Seraph stared down at the small body in her hands, feeling strangely ambivalent. She really hadn't wanted to hurt him, even if he didn't feel the same about her, but she had been prepared to do what was necessary. Seraph dropped the body of the Rat Lord to the ground.

Like the Crown, the Emblems felt warm in her hands. Seraph tucked them into her backpack. Blood dripped from the bite on her arm, but she didn't take the time to wrap it. At some point this room was going to move and she wanted to be gone when it did. Picking up her axe, Seraph left.

The rats had fled as soon as their lord had died. Luckily they seemed to be using some other exit so she wasn't crawling through them on her way out. The tunnel seemed unchanged but Seraph didn't fully relax until she walked out into the same storage room. A soft sound like a sigh came from behind her. The tunnel mouth was gone. Either she had got out just in time, or the room had closed because she removed the Emblems. Seraph decided it really didn't matter either way— she had what she came for.

There was nothing waiting on the other side of the door and the red lights were off, so Seraph started down the hallway at a trot. Her arm throbbed in time

with her back but Seraph continued to ignore them. She would have time to deal with her injuries when she was safely out of this damn place. She started running.

It came from behind her. The red lights came on one after the other until the entire hallway glowed crimson. A horrible, suffocating oppression filled the corridor she could almost taste the dread.

Seraph didn't stop, she just ran faster. She didn't need to see it to know it was bad. There was a crash from behind and then the light above her shattered, throwing down broken glass. Seraph flung up her arms to protect her head from the sharp rain. Single lights exploded up and down the hallway with the sound of gunfire.

Now she looked behind her.

Not all of the lights had gone out, most still shone on valiantly. Their light should have been enough to show her what was coming. It showed her nothing.

A solid, living darkness filled the entire hall. It rolled and moved and shifted in place. It hurt Seraph to look at. She wanted to see a form, something physical, in that blank space- but the darkness defied her ability to comprehend it. It was not a *thing*, like the bear or horses or gremlin had been. No, it was more like a taint that the light refused to touch. Wisps of shadow floated out towards her like smoke in water. A cold dread choked Seraph, chasing her thoughts from her head and freezing her in place. She had never felt a fear like this before. It crippled her.

Seraph stared for an endless second. Suddenly the smoky tendrils sucked back into the main mass and the whole thing surged forward. The movement shocked Seraph out of her paralysis. She ran.

The remaining lights exploded in a wave from behind her, leaving only a dim glow far down the hallway for her to run for. She couldn't hear it chasing her, but she could feel it against her back. Her lungs burned and her thighs ached. Even when she was at the height of her physical fitness, she never enjoyed sprinting. After the last two months of near inactivity, she was not at her height.

Seraph had not turned off her flashlight and its light bobbed and jerked ahead of her, doing little to help her see but offering more comfort than the forgotten axe in her hand. She passed the hall with the dead monsters and kept running.

The ladder was right in front of her. She leapt, catching on to it halfway up. She dropped the axe. Blood ran down her back, mixing with her sweat. She hauled herself up the rungs and shoved against the man hold cover. It lifted, and she flung her pack through the opening and crawled after it. The cover fell back against her shoulders and pressed along her back as she pulled herself out of the sewers by her fingers. The cover was heavy and sent waves of agony through her, beating the injuries on her back, weighing down against her knees and calves, almost cutting off her feet. Then she was out.

Something slammed into the cover.

The blacktop cracked and the cover jumped up. It fell and spun on its rim before slipping back into place. Silence.

Seraph stared but nothing else happened. Whatever had been down there had been stopped dead by the magic guarding the sewer. Thank God for the department of water and sewage. Those were some really great spells. Seraph lay on the ground until she could breath again before picking her bruised body up and dragging it to the truck. Half way she stopped, turned around, and picked up her backpack, then got into her car. As she drove she idly wondered how she was going to explain herself at the hospital.

Chapter 12

Seraph sat in her brother's kitchen feeling sorry for herself. A new bandage covered her arm and new stitches covered her back. After sitting in the ER waiting room for three hours she sat through a lecture from a nurse, then later from the doctor. This time she had blamed a stray dog and claimed that she had hurt her back fighting it off and trying to get away. She didn't know if they believed her but they didn't push it so she didn't care. After another half hour spent filling out paper work she was free to go. She was beginning to deeply dislike hospitals.

Three new prescriptions sat on the table in front of her. She ached everywhere and felt overly tired. Still, she considered throwing the pills out. When she was hurt the first time they had been a welcome relief but now she just hated how they seemed to fill her head with cotton, dulling her senses and slowing her thoughts. Even now, coming off of whatever they had given her at the hospital hours ago, she felt foggy. There was enough wrong with her head as it was, she didn't need drugs blurring what little reality she had left.

Seraph played with one of the bottles, absently reading the warning labels. Amoxicillin. On the other hand it was probably a really stupid idea to throw out her antibiotics. She put those aside.

"Look what the cat dragged in."

Gabe wheeled into the room, barely glancing at her. Seraph hadn't heard him come home. He wasn't exactly the master of stealth; she must be slipping. In her mind it was another mark against the pills.

"I thought you were trying to stay home?" Gabe grabbed a soda from the fridge before facing her. He took in her appearance for the first time and promptly forgot about his drink. "What the hell happened to you?"

Seraph stared blankly down at her hands then back up at her brother. "You should see the other guy."

"You went out to get those... things," he accused.

Seraph frowned. "I had to. It was getting worse."

"So you just took off without telling me?"

She flushed with remorse. It had never entered her mind to wake up her brother and tell him. In fact, she had actively not wanted to deal with him right then. But if she had died down there...

"You could have been hurt, or worse! And I wouldn't have known what happened to you!" Gabe shouted, following her thoughts. "How could you-"

"Gabriel," she said, cutting him off. He glared at her and she waited until she was sure he was going to let her talk. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you. It was irresponsible of me not to at least leave a note. I didn't mean to hurt you." She reached over and took his hand. "But Gabe, try to understand. I couldn't take you with me. You couldn't have helped me down there." She gave him a crooked smile. "Not to mention I *did* survive six years and a war without checking in with you," she gently chided him. "I did learn to take care of myself a little."

Gabe slumped in his chair, his anger draining and taking his strength with it. "I know. I just... I don't know. I feel useless." He thumped the armrest of his chair with his fist. "I can't even help my little sister."

"What? You've helped me! Jeez Gabe, if it wasn't for you I would have drank myself to death, if I hadn't just landed myself in a magic institution by now." She sat up straight in her chair. "Hell, just having someone believe I'm not crazy helps me... stay *sane*."

"I guess," he said, sharing her half smile.

"I promise to tell you next time."

"You better. Or I'll start charging rent."

Seraph laughed and felt better than she had in days.

"So," Gabe said. Finally opening his abandoned coke. "How does the other guy look?"

"He looks dead." Seraph launched into her encounter with the Rat Lord, glossing over the horse monsters that she first met and stopping before the darkness that chased her from the sewers. It didn't take long and Gabe didn't interrupt her with lots of annoying questions. After she was done, he sat quietly for a moment.

"Wait, he said the place moved?"

If the thing he was running from was what she ran into, yeah, she believed he moved all over the damn place to keep away from that. She would.

"Well, the place disappeared after I left," she said.

"But didn't you find this stuff last week?"

Seraph sat, stumped. Had the Rat Lord lied? Why would he? What would he gain from it?

"I don't know," Seraph shrugged. "Maybe he didn't move a lot. Maybe he only moved once a month, or even a year." It hadn't sounded like that to her, but it could be.

"Maybe," Gabe agreed. There was a brief moment of tired silence between them before Gabe spoke again. "You don't think this is over, do you?"

"I don't see why it would be. If nothing else, there is no reason why anyone would want *me* to have these damn things, so whoever is doing this to me needs to come get their shit." Seraph tried not to let on how concerned she really was, hiding behind a mask of relative indifference. In fact, try as she might, Seraph could think of no benign reason why someone would do this. At best she was being used to steal for someone who wanted an extra layer of deniability between themselves and their crimes and was someone who would see these items for mere profit once they had them, leaving her alone. At worst, she was helping a cult summon something really nasty and really old and would kill her once they didn't need her anymore.

So it was an all around kind of suck.

"Are you really just going to wait for them to come to you?"

Seraph shrugged. "They have the upper hand." Damn it. "And I can't go to anyone for help. Right now there really is only one thing I can do."

"What?"

"I need to know as much about the Crown and Emblems as I can. Maybe there is a clue somewhere about why someone would want them. If I know that, it's a step closer to knowing *who* would want them. You researched the Crown before. Do you think you could do this for me too?"

Gabe's eyes lit up. "I can sure try."

"Great," Seraph said, reaching across the table to steal his soda. "Would you really charge me rent?"

"Huh?" It took him a moment to follow the conversation shift. "Oh. Yeah. I sure would. A million dollars a month. Plus utilities."

"I'm serious. I'm here, using your stuff." Seraph insisted. "Power, water—"

"My coke."

"—I even kicked you out of your room."

"Can you afford rent?" Gabe asked.

"For a bit, I'm sure." Seraph sighed and rubbed her forehead. "What I really want is to move out."

"Ah. You don't love me anymore?" he joked. Seraph snorted. "I don't know what to tell you. You need a job first."

"Yeah."

"Do you really think that is important right now? With everything that is going on?"

"Life doesn't stop just because I have problems. Weird ass problems for sure, but somehow the rest of the world doesn't care."

"No rest for the wicked." Gabe sat quietly for a moment, thinking. "Okay, well..." He began slowly. "I have an idea. There is a data entry thing at my job. It just opened up, I could bring home the stuff, and you enter it here."

"Data entry? I... can't really type," Seraph said doubtfully.

"If you're working from home, you can take as much time as you need. It's not going to be a lot of work but it would make you a couple bucks at least. I can talk to my boss about it, but yeah."

"I can't turn down a gift like that." Ah, sweet nepotism.

"Great." Gabe smiled for the first time today. "You need to talk to my boss, of course. We should do that tomorrow before anything... new starts to happen."

Seraph sighed to herself. Last time, she had had two days before the visions started, so tomorrow she should be fine. Even so, with gainful employment on one side and indefinite imprisonment on the other, she didn't see the need to toe the line. With this new plan it felt like a weight had been lifted from her chest. She might not be able to fix all, or even some, of her problems, but this was one thing she could do.

In the next heartbeat Seraph stood in a bedroom she did not recognize. Colors were washed out and the room looked insubstantial as if reality was too tired to maintain the vibrance and the substance she was used to. The room felt old and lived in. Blurry pictures hung on the walls

and hazy mementos were displayed. She turned— next to her was a bed and next to that was a nightstand. On the nightstand, a jewelry box. It looked real and in this unreal world it stood out as not belonging. Without walking she moved closer. The box opened and everything faded away like so much smoke, leaving Seraph alone with what lay inside.

You will go to this place, the voice came to her softly.

The Ring of Joining.

You must find my ring, the voice whispered in her mind. You must retrieve it for me.

It shone as the only source of light in a nothingness that threatened to swallow Seraph whole. Made of two bands of metal, interwoven in a strange pattern, the ring burned into Seraph's mind, leaving a mark that nothing would erase.

Go now, and find it. The command was stronger than Seraph's ability to resist, and she fell into it.

Seraph blinked and was staring up at the popcorn stucco of the kitchen ceiling. She was laying on her back in her brother's kitchen with one leg still up on her chair. A nice throbbing pain bounced around in her head from where it kissed the linoleum. It was also really cold.

"Seraph!"

Gabe was all but falling out of his chair with a frantic look in his eyes. Seraph opened her mouth to answer him but coughed instead. She rolled onto her side and grabbed Gabe's leg, squeezing it to calm him down until she caught her breath.

"Fuck," she said once she could speak.

"You said these wouldn't start again for a few days!"

"That's what I thought. That's how it worked last time." Seraph said flatly.

Inside Seraph was seething with white-hot anger that burned away her fear and confusion. What right did this whoever was behind this have to take over her life and use her as their personal damn puppet? Deliberately she picked herself up off the floor. She ran her hands through her hair and looked at her brother who was watching her with tension written in every line of his body.

"I'm sorry but I want to be alone right now." Without waiting for him to respond she walked into the master bedroom and shut the door behind her.

She felt like she was going to explode. She wanted to scream until her throat gave out. She wanted to punch and kick until her knuckles bled and her legs wouldn't hold her up. She wanted to destroy something.

In the closet under a spare blanket was everything she had almost killed herself getting. Pulling them out, she knelt on the carpet and arranged them in front of her. Running her fingers over all of them, she finally picked up the arrow and clutched it in her white knuckled fists.

It would be so easy to break.

If she destroyed these she might be able to put an end to all of this, maybe even hurt those who were hurting her. She wanted out and she didn't

care if she hurt her puppet master on the way. Her vision was red around the edges and her breath came in sharp pants through clenched teeth. She closed her eyes and set the arrow down.

She hated being controlled. Hated everything about what was happening to her, but lashing out without understanding the consequences, particularly with magic consequences, was stupid at best. The damn thing might just blow up in her face. She needed to be patient, watch and plan. There would be an opportunity, an instance when she could strike. She needed to bide her time until that moment came. So, she would wait.

For now.

Chapter 13

"Whacha watchin'?" Seraph stopped in the middle of the living room, car keys and street map in hand. Tracking the ring had not been hard, it was inside a private home in a neighboring town, but Seraph wanted to know what she was going up against before blindly knocking on a door. She glanced at the TV then back at Brad who was sprawled out on the couch. She raised an eyebrow. "Antique Roadshow? Really? *Really?*"

"Hey! This show can be fun," he protested. "Patrick showed it to me. You can learn lots of cool, random history stuff and sometimes the people who bring stuff in are funny. It's like the History Channel meets reality TV."

"Why would you want to combine reality TV and the History Channel?" Seraph threw herself down next to Brad, intent on giving him shit over it.

He stuck his tongue out at her and didn't rise to the bait. Seraph rubbed her arm. The bite wasn't healing well at all and it was really starting to itch. She thought about what else she had planned for the day and finding herself with truly nothing better to do at the moment, Seraph watched. The show was simple enough, an appraiser—slash—spokesman would introduce an antique and its owner, talk about the item's history, and then attach a price tag to it. It was pretty mind numbing. Clearly Brad needed to be made fun of some more. Just as she opened her mouth to speak, a new antique filled the TV screen and her taunt died in her throat. An intricately carved jewelry box sat on a table in front of a fussy, old woman. Seraph could only stare— it was the box from her vision.

"...reminiscent of Old Scandinavian..."

The appraiser went on about the quality of the carving and the kind of wood used while asking the little, old lady what she knew about it. Seraph didn't pay them much attention. She could almost see the ring through the wood.

"...now when we open it, we see it lined with silk..."

The ring was not in the box. It was jarring for Seraph to see something ripped perfectly from her mind, and yet wrong. Of course anyone bringing a jewelry box to show off would take *out* the old, valuable, irreplaceable, magic rings.

"Do they sell the stuff they bring on the show?" Seraph asked.

"The owners? I guess some do, but not on the show itself," Brad answered.

"What if you wanted to buy something you saw?"

"It's not the home shopping network," Brad laughed. "That's not what this show's about."

"Oh."

The appraiser rambled on, he claimed the box was several hundred years old, and interesting in that it was carved in an even older Norse style. If it hadn't been repaired at some point in the past, it would have been worth a pretty penny.

"...thank Susan Miller for sharing with us..."

Seraph studied the woman. She wouldn't need to know the woman's name to track the ring down, since she already knew where it was, but this little, old lady was its keeper and knowing *her* was crucial. Her short hair was a natural white and not one of the strange colors that Seraph had seen some of the elderly sport. Simple, comfortable clothing in earth tones complemented the woman's scholarly appearance. She didn't look like a monster to Seraph, so why did she have the ring? How did she get it? Half formed plans and ideas swirled around in Seraph's head as the TV droned on. She ended up sitting through the rest of the show with Brad, only snapping back when he turned off the TV.

"So, what'd you think?" he asked.

"It was more interesting than I thought it would be." Understatement.

"Beats pissing off stray dogs as a pastime," he quipped.

~ ~ ~

Susan Miller, current owner of the Ring of Joining, gave no indication that she was anything but what she appeared to be, a nice, old lady who lived alone and liked antiques. She could have been a banshee in her spare time, but if she was, she hid it well.

Seraph found herself with no plan. A fact that did not sit well with her at all. Going into a situation blind was a good way to get dead and the headache pounding behind her eyes didn't help either. Seraph was really feeling off her game, and her arm still hurt. Another vision had driven her out into the cold before she felt she was ready. This time it was just an hour shy of nightfall, not the best time to go up against a potential magical, probably irritable, unknown enemy. Seraph wondered what the point was in repeating the damn visions so many times. She got it already, she knew what she needed to do. Sure, she didn't hop right to it when she first started getting them, but by now the voice must have figured out that she would jump when told to jump. She didn't need to be told what to do everyday. Every. Single. Day.

Opening the truck door, Seraph stepped out into the cold. In her back pocket she had an envelope with every dime she could spare. Five thousand dollars in cash to exchange for the ring— she hoped that it would be enough, just as she hoped that Mrs. Miller was interested in selling her the ring at all. Snow crunched under her feet as she made her way up the unshoveled walkway to the front door. The doorbell was met with silence that made Seraph want to fidget and she had to resist trying to look through the stained-glass panels that flanked the door. The ring was inside this house, so close it made her brain itch and her palms sweat. The soft sound of footsteps quieted her nerves slightly and she fixed a smile on her face as the door opened. A face Seraph remembered from the strangely fateful TV program peered around the edge of the doorframe.

"Mrs. Miller? My name is Seraphim, I was hoping I could take a moment of your time?"

Mrs. Miller peered at her over silver, horn-rimmed glasses— clearly she didn't know what to make of the strange woman randomly showing up at her door. In jeans and a fleece jacket, Seraph didn't much look like a sales person or a door-to-door missionary, nor was dusk their prime time for visiting. In a move that must have been motivated by curiosity more than anything else, Mrs. Miller stepped back and held the door open.

Seraph gratefully passed the threshold into Mrs. Miller's parlor. Bookshelves filled with books, ranging from old leather bound works to new textbooks, and with a few paperbacks sprinkled throughout like seasoning, lined the walls. Two overstuffed chairs sat on either side of a small table and faced a lit fireplace, that dominated one wall despite being flanked by two more bookshelves. Above the fireplace was an oil painting depicting pixies dancing in a moonlit grove. It was whimsical and gave a brighter, warmer feel to the room that would have seemed austere otherwise.

"Have a seat, young lady. Would you like a cup of tea?" Mrs. Miller asked.

"Yes, please."

Seraph took her seat and waited as Mrs. Miller bustled off down the hallway, presumably towards the kitchen. Staring at the fireplace and listening to a grandfather clock, which was just out of sight, tick away the seconds, Seraph began to relax. The room smelled like books and old people, and was warm from the crackling fire. It was a room for wiling away the hours just reading and staying in from the cold while the rest of the world waited until you were good and ready to rejoin it. While she couldn't say she truly felt better— none of her pains went away— she did feel more rested.

Mrs. Miller returned carrying a china tea set. Seraph jumped up to help her but Mrs. Miller wouldn't hear of it.

"Sit down, young woman, I can still serve guests in my own house."

Once the tray was safely deposited on the end table, and tea properly served, Mrs. Miller took her own seat.

"You have a lovely home," Seraph said.

"Cluttered you mean," Mrs. Miller laughed.

"No, really. I like this room. I've never seen this many books outside of a library."

"Thank you. When you get to be my age, your hobbies tend to take over your life and your home." Mrs. Miller smiled and took a sip of her tea. "So, what can I do for you... Seraphim was it?"

"Please, call me Seraph," clearing her throat, she plunged right in. "This is going to sound a little strange. I'm here because I'm hoping to buy a piece of jewelry from you, if you're willing."

Mrs. Miller looked completely nonplused. "My dear, I think you have better luck at a jewelry store."

"No, they won't have what I need."

"What makes you think I do?"

There was the question she had been dreading. "I would rather not say, it's... personal. It's nothing bad," she hastened to explain. Actually, it most likely was something very bad, but that wasn't very reassuring. "It's just something that I don't feel comfortable answering right now, if... if it's all the same to you."

It did not look all the same to Mrs. Miller. A tight frown twisted her lips and the look in her eyes was similar to the one in Seraph's Drill Sergeant's eyes just before she had to do push ups. Seraph wondered if she would be scolded or simply thrown out.

Surprisingly, Mrs. Miller did neither. She set down her tea and smoothed her skirt before standing up. "Well, if you excuse me one moment?"

"Of course," Seraph answered.

Leaving through the door way opposite the direction of the kitchen, Mrs. Miller disappeared into the back of her house. Seraph waited while sipping her tea, which was really good, and looked at some of the photos that hung on the bits of wall not covered by books. There were snapshots from all over the world, mostly places in Europe, but a few other locales as well.

Seraph wasn't given long to admire them— soon she felt the ring move. It was being brought to her, Mrs. Miller reentered the room carrying the jewelry box.

"I never spent much time on things like jewelry, and I certainly don't go out all fussed up these days. This is all I have, the box is worth more than what's in it."

Seraph wondered if she was lying or simply didn't know about the ring. Either way she was grateful to have gotten this far. She accepted the box gingerly with a whispered thank you, and waited for Mrs. Miller to sit down again before opening it. One thing she had been telling the truth about, she didn't have very much jewelry. Some necklaces, a few rings and a single bracelet hardly filled up the box.

The Ring of Joining was tucked inside as if it was simply another bauble in a forgotten collection. Carefully, Seraph pulled it from its place and set the box aside. It looked to be made from two types of metal that Seraph couldn't identify— each band of metal had its own pattern that was separate, but complemented the other. It was a unique and beautiful piece.

"I'm sorry," Mrs. Miller said softly. "But I can't let you have that."

Seraph looked up at her, not quiet believing this turn of events. "I'll give you five thousand for it."

"No, it's not the for sale, not for any amount."

For a moment Seraph considered running. She had the ring in her hand, she could be out the door and in her truck before the old lady could finish calling 911. Her body tensed for flight, but she couldn't quite bring herself to do it. Not yet.

"You don't understand," Seraph pleaded, turning her eyes back to the ring. Mrs. Miller began to shift towards her as if anticipating what Seraph would do if she couldn't buy it. "I need—"

The ring came apart in Seraph's hands, leaving her stammering in surprise. The two bands had separated creating two rings.

"What did you do?" Mrs. Miller cried, rising out of her seat.

"I—" Automatically Seraph tried to put the pieces back together. "It came apart—" To her relief and surprise the pieces fit back into one easily. "Oh good," Seraph said, holding it for Mrs. Miller to see. Putting her hand to her chest, Mrs. Miller fell back into her chair. Seraph took a moment to examine this new aspect of the ring— splitting it and putting it back together a few times. "Ring of Joining, indeed," she said to herself.

"What did you just call it?"

"Um," Seraph looked back at Mrs. Miller, startled. She hadn't meant to say that out loud. Well the cat was out of the bag now, if that had ever needed to be kept secret in the first place. "I called it the Ring of Joining."

"How did you know that name?"

Now that was a secret. Seraph simply shrugged in reply, unable to offer an explanation.

Mrs. Miller took off her glasses and rubbed her eyes, sighing. Slowly she rose from her chair and stood in front of the fireplace, with her back to Seraph. Her head was tilted back as if she were studying the painting but Seraph wondered if she was really looking at anything at all.

"I've changed my mind," Mrs. Miller said finally. "You may have the ring."

"Really?" Seraph asked. She was overjoyed at Mrs. Miller's change of heart, but wondered why. "If you don't mind me asking, Mrs. Miller, what made you change your mind?"

Instead of answering right away, Mrs. Miller returned to her seat and poured another cup of tea. "I didn't know the ring came apart," she said, stirring in some sugar. "In all the years I've owned it, I've never seen it do that."

Seraph waited, knowing there must be more to it than that and also knowing that Mrs. Miller would not be rushed.

"That ring has been in my family for generations. The story of how we came to have it has been lost to time, I fear. I was told, when I was a little girl, that my family had been entrusted to keep that ring safe for its true owner, who would some day return for it. Now you're here, and I... I have no children to leave it to." Mrs. Miller leaned forward to grasp Seraph's hand in her own and squeeze it. "If you don't take it, I don't know what will become of it. I suppose this must be fate."

"Thank you," Seraph whispered.

"You're welcome, child." Mrs. Miller sipped her tea before glancing coyly at Seraph. "I was also told it was a fairy ring. Would you be able to tell me anything about that?"

"Fairy? Um, yes, I have reason to believe it is," Seraph hedged.

Mrs. Miller cackled, her face lighting up. "I knew it. I could never prove it, but I knew it." She sat back looking as self satisfied as a cat. "I've spent my whole life studying them. Looking for answers."

"All of these books are about fairies?" Seraph asked looking around her in amazement.

"Enough of them are. History and folklore in all of its many forms. My life's work. I studied anthropology in Oxford with a focus in mystic history before coming back home to teach here between trips to archeological dig sites."

"Wow," Seraph said, unsure how to react to the revelation. She wasn't the proper owner of the ring that Mrs. Miller had searched for, and was disappointed that she couldn't be who this kind woman wanted her to be. "I can't imagine, you... must have a lot of stories."

"Oh, I've picked up a few," Mrs. Miller chuckled.

"What were you able to learn about the ring?"

"Nothing," Mrs. Miller sighed. "There is no record of such a treasure that I could find. But there is so much of the fay histories that are lost to us."

"I confess that I don't know much about their history. Just what I learned in high school, and it wasn't my greatest subject. "

Mrs. Miller looked disappointed, she must have been hoping for answers that Seraph couldn't provide. She might have been worried about giving herself away, but she could see that Mrs. Miller had committed herself to believing that Seraph was the one her family had waited for, and there was little that could change her mind now.

"Well, you know that Atlantis sunk and took the fay with it?" she asked. Seraph nodded, prompting her to continue. "The reason that it sunk was a civil war. The fay came in two breeds, which they called the Summer Court and the Winter Court. Both drew their power and long life from the seasons, but where the Summer Court pulled from the summer growth and sun, the Winter Court pulled from the winter rest and nights."

"Summer Court was the good court, right?" Seraph asked.

"It isn't so simple to say one was good and one was bad. Much of history is colored by the opinions of the people writing it. The Summer Court certainly liked humanity more, and so was more popular on that front, and the Winter Court was, somewhat mistakenly, associated with death."

"Oh."

"Once the courts worked together, but at some point they split apart. And over time the separation led to animosity between the two factions. War broke out. We know that the Summer Court ultimately won the war, but the nation was crippled. The popular theory is that the Winter Court cursed the Summer Court with the last of their power, which led to Atlantis' destruction. Wilder speculation believes that this curse persists even now, causing the decline of the lesser fay to this day."

"But curses don't really work like that, right? I mean, my knowledge of magic is even worse than my knowledge of history, but don't curses kinda die with the person doing the curse? You would need to still have Winter Court fay running around holding a grudge to do that."

"Human magic works that way. But fay magic? Who knows?"

Seraph was doubtful, but didn't want to argue the point. Mrs. Miller was very passionate about the subject, and obviously there was a lot that she could teach Seraph, if she was willing to learn. And she was.

"Do you know anything about the Erlking?" Seraph asked.

"Why yes, the Erlking was the Monarch of the fay before the courts broke up. He led the Wild Hunt, one of the things that affected the humans they came into contact with quite a bit. Everything that was out the night of a Wild Hunt was fair game. If you didn't want to find yourself as prey in the early BC and Roman Empire, you should stay in at night and keep your doors locked. Of course, he did more than that. He would have been like a god to us mere mortals. Both courts tried to raise an Erlking before they went to war, but the oracle would not accept anyone brought to it. Without the oracle's blessing no one could assume that title. The details of this selection was never recorded, at least by us. We weren't really invited to that party."

Seraph smiled at the joke. "Do you know anything in particular about the crown?"

"It was large, with stag horns attached to the front. I've seen some illustrations of it, it must have cut a very imposing figure at the time."

"What about the Emblems of the Seasons?" she asked eagerly.

Mrs. Miller frowned. "I can't say I recall. No, nothing that I can think of off the top of my head."

"Oh. Is there a book you could suggest?"

"A book!" Mrs. Miller laughed. "How about a few dozen?"

"Maybe just a good book for beginners, then."

"How about the text book I wrote for my class?"

"That sounds like it would work."

Once again Mrs. Miller left Seraph to her own devices in the parlor. Seraph let her head fall back against the chair and rubbed her arm. It did remarkably little to help with the burning itch. She was still worrying at it when Mrs. Miller returned once again.

"I hate to cut this short, but I just saw the time. I'm afraid that I have other things I must attend to tonight," she said handing Seraph the book.

"Please, don't apologize. You've been incredibly helpful. I don't know how I can thank you."

"Think nothing of it. That ring was meant for you."

Their goodbyes were brief as Mrs. Miller walked Seraph to the door. Seraph tucked the ring into her pocket and tucked the book under her arm as she made her way to her truck, with a small skip in her step. She climbed in and was off, excited at having completed the voice's command without needing a follow up trip to the ER.

Feeling a small blossom of hope in her chest Seraph put the truck in gear and headed home. Even now she didn't trust the voice— she still had every reason to hate it and what it was doing to her life. But until now she really had thought that she would have to fight monster after monster until she either

finished or perished. Now she had a hope, a small hope, but a hope, that she could survive this.

It was amazing how a little kindness could make the bleakest situation seem better.

Seraph fingered her phone in her jacket pocket and considered calling Gabe with the good news, but decided to wait. A little longer wouldn't kill him, besides she hated drivers who paid more attention to their cell phones than the road.

The vision came as it always did, without warning. Seraph's body seized as she lost her senses and control of the truck. Trapped inside her own head, she never saw the lamppost.

And then she saw nothing at all.

Chapter 14

Seraph sat alone in the deserted school parking lot, class having let out over an hour earlier. Idly, she imagined that tumbleweeds should be rolling across the street as she played with the straps on her backpack. She hated this, being left with nothing to do but think.

Finally, a beige sedan pulled in the parking lot and drove over the painted lines to the front steps. Seraph stayed where she was. After a moment, Gabe climbed out of the driver's side and glared at her with bloodshot eyes.

"Well? You waiting for an invitation?" His words slurred ever so slightly.

"You're late," she told him as she stood up.

"Yeah? Well, I'm here now." Gabe snapped at her.

She could smell the alcohol on him from where she stood. Ever since Mom left, Gabe had started hanging out with kids that could get him beer. Seraph understood it even as she hated it- he didn't want to think either.

She climbed into the car and buckled her seat belt.

Gabe slammed his door shut and burned rubber out of the parking lot heading home. Once on the road he turned on the radio to blasting volume, making Seraph's head hurt. She rested her forehead against the cool glass of the side window and closed her eyes. Lifting her hand, she absently ran her fingers over a still healing scar on her upper arm, just under her sleeve.

It was a subtle feeling, but it made Seraph open her eyes. The car was drifting across the lane. She sat up straight in her seat and looked at her brother, he was messing around with the radio and not paying any attention to the street.

"What are you doing? Watch the road," she said.

"Hey," Gabe snarled turning to her. "I could be doing something else right now instead of picking your dumb ass up. So shut up and leave me alone."

"Gabe!"

They blew through a red light into the path of an oncoming truck. Seraph screamed and Gabe swore. The truck hit Gabe's door and the impact sent the smaller sedan rolling. Seraph threw her arms up over her head, still screaming. The world was spinning. Everything was flying through the air. The seat belt cut into her. Something slammed against her arms, her face.

Then it stopped.

In the distance, Seraph heard sirens...

"Ma'am?"

She lifted her head from the steering wheel and blinked her eyes clear. Her head throbbed and the fiery pain in her shoulder was blinding. She couldn't remember what happened or where she was. Slowly, she turned her head toward the voice.

"Don't try to move, ma'am. Can you tell me your name?"

Her throat felt like it was lined with sandpaper. She tried to speak but no sound came out. Her eyes started to get heavy and she fought to keep them open. What was going on?

"Ma'am, can you hear me?"

Her vision turned blurry and gray and she felt hands on her. Someone touched her shoulder, and her vision turned from gray to red and she screamed. Mercifully, she blacked out once more.

~ ~ ~

The incessant bleeping of an alarm clock was the first thing Seraph heard. She couldn't remember why she had to get up and wanted nothing more than to shut the damn thing off, but she couldn't make her body move. It seemed as if sleep was unwilling to let her resume control of herself once again. A moan, like the sound of a bear rising from hibernation, joined the alarm, helping to bring Seraph back. Only after she heard it did she realize that it had been her own voice that made it. Her throat hurt as she tried to swallow. Her head hurt too, and so did her shoulder. In fact her whole body hurt *and* it was too cold. To spite her, the beeping continued.

Seraph opened her eyes, which immediately teared up, forcing her to close them again. It took her several tries before she was able to make them work and even then she needed to squint in the bright light. What she finally saw made no sense. She wasn't where she went to sleep, she wasn't—

Where had she gone to sleep?

Two thoughts came to her almost at the same time, so that later she could not remember which she realized first: one, that she could not remember where she had gone to sleep, or anything after leaving Mrs. Miller's house, and two, that she was in a hospital.

As if in answer to her thoughts, a nurse carrying a tray with a pitcher on it opened the door and slipped inside her room. Seraph tracked her movement with her eyes, unable or just unwilling to move her head as the nurse first checked the monitors that Seraph was hooked up to before finally turning to her. Opening her mouth to speak, Seraph found the lower part of her face was covered by an oxygen mask. The realization that she had missed something right in front of her face, or in this case, literally *on* her face, was more upsetting than being in the hospital for some unknown reason. These kinds of holes in her perceptions and memories could put her life in danger.

"Hold on, let me get that for you," the nurse said. "It's nice to see you awake and back with us, Ms. Hunter."

Seraph's first attempt to talk resulted in little more than a croak. "What happened?" Seraph tried again, her voice rasping so much she wouldn't have recognized it if it hadn't been saying the words she meant to say.

The nurse held a spoon with ice chips up to Seraph's lips. "I don't have the details," she answered as Seraph gratefully sucked on the ice. "But I do know you were in a car accident. The police will know more."

"Police?"

"Don't worry, it's standard with any accident."

"Don't remember."

"That's normal too, with head injuries," more ice was offered and taken. "The doctor can tell you more, would you like me to go get him?"

"Mmmm," Seraph hoped the noise was affirmative enough— it hurt to speak.

"I'll get him then," said the nurse. Leaving the ice tray where it was, she walked to the end of the bed and quickly wrote a note on the chart there before leaving Seraph to her thoughts.

The last thing she remembered was leaving Mrs. Miller's after getting the ring— The ring! Where was it? She had put it in her pants pocket— now she was wearing a standard issue hospital green paper apron. Also it looked like her arm was strapped to her chest. Seraph felt disoriented and confused, she needed to take stock of the situation.

Looking down at herself she saw her left arm was in a sling and immobilized against her side. Luckily her right arm looked fine, with only an IV line taped to her wrist. She couldn't see her legs through the thin blanket but they didn't hurt and she couldn't detect the bulge of a cast either. As hurting went, she felt like crap all around, but the greatest sources of pain were her arm and head. The hospital room she found herself in was nothing interesting.

The lights that had seemed so blindingly bright when she first woke up were actually dimmed. Her bed had guardrails which had bed controls next to her hand, which Seraph used to move up into a halfway upright position so that she could see better. An empty chair was to one side of her and the pressboard nightstand, with the ice tray and an old corded phone, to the other. A curtain, hung from a track along the ceiling and pulled forward to hide half the room, was almost but not quite blocking a wall mounted TV. On the far wall was a clock, which Seraph could only barely read in the poor light. If her room had a window, Seraph could not see it.

For the life of her, she could remember nothing of the accident. Now she found herself without the Ring of Joining and no way of finding it— if it was really lost. She could never *feel* an item once she found it— would that change if it was no longer in her possession? Seraph dismissed that train of thought. The ring might be with her other personal property, if the hospital knew her name, they must have her wallet— that was *somewhere*. And if it turned out she had lost the ring, there was nothing she could do about it now.

Did her brother know where she was? How long before the hospital tried to contact him, or the police?

No matter how many times they happened, Seraph was never prepared. Like an earthquake, the visions came without warning and left only destruction in their wake. She saw a room filled with more strange things than she could hope to identify, and displayed among them was a bright purple-green jewel cut like a flower the size of an egg. The Rose of the Queen.

When Seraph came back to herself she was still alone in her hospital room, but now she remembered. She had been shown this before. The crash. She had driven off the road because of the vision.

"Hello, Ms. Hunter. I'm Dr. Sumtin. Glad you could join us, we were getting worried about you," the doctor said in a cheerful voice with his best bedside manner. He picked up the chart and read it while he continued to talk. "You've been through a lot tonight haven't you?"

Seraph could only stare. If he had come in just a minute sooner he would have walked in on her while she was in the throes of a vision. She would have been found out. She would have been sent away.

"It looks like you've got quite a laundry list of hurts here. Let me ask you first, do you remember anything from the accident?"

As a matter of fact, she did. "No," she said.

"Well, that's not unusual with head injuries. Your tox-screen came back clean, which we always like to see. We'll have to wait for the police to finish their investigation."

She hadn't been driving drunk, but she might as well have been. How could she have been so stupid? She should have foreseen this possibility before even thinking about driving a car, let alone buying one. She could have killed someone— oh god—

"Others?" She croaked out. "Was anyone else..."

"No, no one else was involved in the accident."

She closed her eyes, saying a prayer to whatever gods might care to listen, thanking them for small miracles. Nobody should suffer from her stupidity except her. "What's wrong with me?" She managed to ask.

"As I was saying before, memory loss, at least of the trauma, goes hand in hand with head injuries and you've got a whopper of a concussion. Headaches are the most common side effect. How is your head?"

"It hurts," Seraph said, and Dr. Sumtin noted it on her chart. He listed off the other side effects writing down what Seraph indicated that she felt. He checked her eyes for light sensitivity and double vision as well as running a few other small tests. Once finished, he warned her about the other, non-physical symptoms. "...difficulty focusing and irritability, which are all normal and should pass. In addition you've dislocated your shoulder here. You've got a nice bruise on your chest from the seat belt. One thing you have that *isn't* from the accident is a mild fever from an infected bite wound on your forearm."

Seraph spared a moment to hate the Ratlord.

"We would like to keep you overnight for—"

"No," Seraph interrupted.

"Excuse me?"

"I don't want to stay here," she said. There was no way she could stay in the hospital and not get caught.

"Ms. Hunter, you're really hurt. With your concussion and infection—"

"I don't care, I don't want to stay here," Seraph insisted. She sat up, gritting her teeth against a wave of dizziness and pain. She popped one of the sticky monitors off her chest.

"Ms. Hunter!" the doctor exclaimed, putting his hand on her good shoulder to restrain her. "Please, you'll hurt yourself."

Seraph stopped, breathing heavily. She *was* hurting herself, but it didn't matter. "Look," she panted. "I'll sign whatever you need me to sign, but I'm checking myself out. I need a phone so I can call someone to come get me."

Dr Sumtin's lips were compressed in a thin line of displeasure, but finally he nodded and pressed the call nurse button. He checked the chart once more and scribbled a note before flipping it shut.

"The police will need to talk to you," he said flatly.

"Am I being arrested?" The doctor shook his head. "Then I'm leaving, I'm sure the police will be able to find me." It was a terribly stupid idea and seemed suspicious as hell to run out of a hospital after driving her car into a light-post, but it wasn't as if she had a lot of viable options.

A nurse came in then, a different one this time. "Rose, Ms. Hunter will be checking herself out, could you get the paper work ready?"

"And my stuff," Seraph added.

"You'll have to sign it out from the cashier at the administration desk."

Seraph closed her eyes both in irritation and against the growing headache. "I need to make a call," she said.

"You can use the room phone," he said.

"Fine." Seraph didn't open her eyes as the nurse left, nor as the doctor finished doing whatever he was doing and finally left too. Once finally alone Seraph reached for the phone and dialed Gabe from memory. It only rang twice.

"*Hello?*" Gabe said, his voice sounded strange and far away on the old receiver.

"Gabe? It's Seraph."

"*Christ, where the hell are you? You couldn't call? I was beginning to think you were dead—*"

"I'm in the hospital."

There was a moment of static filled silence that followed her statement that stretched on long enough that it started to make Seraph uncomfortable.

"*Are you okay?*"

"No, not really. I was in a crash and I need someone to come get me."

"*How bad are you hurt?*"

"Goddamn it! I'll tell you all about it when I get home, alright? Just fucking wake up Brad and get him to get his fucking ass over here!" Seraph snarled into the phone.

"Whoa! Okay, okay!"

"I—" Seraph took a deep breath. "The doctor said irritability was a side effect of a concussion."

"Must be."

"I'm sorry I snapped at you."

"I'll get Brad up and over there. Be nicer to him, 'kay?"

"Yeah."

"Seraph?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm glad you're safe. Please try and make it home in one piece, promise?
For me?"

"I will. Thanks, Gabe," Seraph said, smiling weakly.

"See you soon."

"Sure thing," Seraph placed the phone back in the cradle. All she could do now was wait.

Dr. Sumtin had turned off the heart monitor, or at least the noise from it, so that the only sound was the ticking clock. Even though they came at unpredictable intervals, one fact had remained true throughout her ordeal, they never came *slower*. Seraph stared at the twitching hands that counted down to her fate. It was twelve-twenty a.m., and she had left Mrs. Miller's house at a little after eight.

She had less than four hours until her next vision.

Chapter 15

Garlands of fresh flowers hung between every column and lined every rooftop, filling the air with a sweet perfume that carried far beyond the walls of the city. The summer solstice was upon the new faylands at last.

Pre-dawn gray lit the cloudless sky as Kaelyndra stood on the raised dais just outside the palace. She wore a long dress that was a green as the leaves of the oak tree that stood behind her, with gold thread woven into the hem and up the sides. All of the people gathered wore the green and gold of summer and many had flowers braided into their hair.

Though the celebrations truly did not start until the first golden rays of the sun stretched across the sky, people had started gathering hours earlier, so that all were in their place. Once begun, the festival lasted all day and all night, when the lanterns lit with starfire were hung from the garlands, unlike the great bonfire that marked the winter solstice.

In bygone days, before the exodus, the solstices were of the utmost importance, marking the height of their court's power. Kaelyndra remembered celebrating this day at her father's side. It was a day that the fay nobles could gather the magik granted to them by the longest day and give it back to the people and the land. It was a day of fertility and birth. Humans might celebrate these things in spring and the Winter Court in winter, but for the Summer Court it was the summer solstice that would see their celebration of life.

Kaelyndra stood alone before her people. Follyn had failed to return before the solstice as the days when the fay could travel over all their lands in the time of a heartbeat were lost as so many other things were.

As the sun rose, the light hit the jewel in her necklace where it hung between her breasts and changed its color. It was the only piece of ornament she wore on this day. Despite the fay's fall from grace, the necklace was still a powerful focus. It grabbed hold of the sun's light, casting it about the assembly, filling them with warmth as Kaelyndra lifted her voice in a song of its praise. Soon her voice was joined by the rest of her people as they too sang a greeting to the morning light. Like the scent of the flowers, the song traveled far into the lands beyond the city reaching the ears of those who could not make it. The song gathered in strength as the sun climbed higher, visible now over the trees in the distance— it rose and soared, gathering into a grand crescendo when the sun became fully realized above the horizon.

The last notes fell from Kaelyndra's lips and she turned back to her people who had assembled before her. From the highest to lowest they had gathered in the clearing that spread out from the steps of the palace. There was a moment of silence when the fay seemed to bask in the golden light before they broke apart with no evident command or dismissal, because one was simply not needed. Lesser fay servants would now bring long tables and chairs for everyone. There were many events that would take place on this day— fertility blessings would be bestowed upon young married couples, youth that were

coming of age would be recognized as adults. In the afternoon there would an athletic competition and people would split into small groups or go off by themselves to meditate and reflect. Of course, at the sun's zenith Kaelyndra would preside over the quickening. After the sun was finished, a vigil would last the night, although many of the youngest children would fall asleep before the night's end.

But for now, the feasting would begin, at least for most. Kaelyndra would also take this time to speak with those who were not always given the chance. Standing among, yet apart from the others, were two such individuals. Stepping down from the dais, Kaelyndra made her way towards two of the human dignitaries.

"Gentlemen, I pray you are enjoying the festivities so far?"

Ivan and Hjorleifr broke off their conversation at her approach and bowed deeply at the waist. "Rest assured yor highness, we be overwhelmed by yor hospitality, and enjoying er'selves even more now that we be graced with yor illustrious presence," Ivan said.

"You speak with such honeyed words, emissary. It must make your food unbearably sweet," Kaelyndra replied with a smile.

"He speaks only the truth, yor highness," Hjorleifr offered.

"Indeed, I find truth be a powerful tool, and one I be using often," Ivan said enigmatically. "I must beg yor indulgence. I see the feast be starting, and I be feeling weak with hunger, might we walk that way?"

"I fear that I still have duties that I must attend, but do not let that be a reason why you can not take this time to eat. Go, with my blessing."

Ivan bowed once more before making his way through the gathering, leaving Hjorleifr behind. Kaelyndra turned to him and raised an eyebrow. "Will you not join your companion?" she asked.

"I be not one who has seen so much magik that I can quickly turn mine thoughts to simple things," Hjorleifr replied. "If ye find it not to hinderin', I would walk with ye?"

"I would be pleased to walk with you, emissary." Kaelyndra said offering her arm. Hjorleifr bowed once before taking her arm in his.

"Yor song from this morn, t'was beautiful. Can ye tell me of its meanin'?" Hjorleifr asked.

"All things have deeper meaning, even more when one is dealing with magik. The song praises the coming of the sun and the life it brings, t'was also about... parts of our life that are now behind us." Kaelyndra fell silent. Hjorleifr, showing the tact that must have helped him in earning his place, did not press her.

"Is the Sun the greatest of your gods, or be there another, and this day simply his?" he asked instead.

"We do not worship the sun, we are merely grateful for all that he has given us," Kaelyndra explained. "Human gods are not for us, we are one with the world and it's cycles of life, death and rebirth. That is what we celebrate today."

"I see," he said while stroking his beard, obviously thinking over her words.

Kaelyndra visited guild masters and lords and ladies of all stations as well as taking the time to talk to those of her people without rank. Rare was the event that brought her among them and those that proved brave enough to approach her were not turned away. Their traveling brought them to the outer edges of the revelry.

"Why does that place be not adorned as the others?" asked Hjorleifr nodding to a street that led off between closed and shuttered buildings. It alone of every place he had seen this day was not decorated with garlands and filled with celebrating people. In fact, only one person was to be seen, standing in the shadow of a building. Garbed in black with her steel gray hair pulled back from her face, she held her arms crossed over her chest as if guarding the empty road against the gayety before her.

In a way, Kaelyndra mused, she might have been.

"That is where those that remain of the Winter Court reside," she said. "They do not celebrate the sun's day as we."

"The Winter Court? But be not they your mortal enemies?" exclaimed an astonished Hjorleifr.

"Our peoples warred, yes, but we were once one. And so should we be again. We are not so great now that we can turn them from us, as the war cost us much that we must work to reclaim," Kaelyndra said. "Do not fret yourself over them, they are beaten and will not look to upset themselves soon."

Kaelyndra watched the Winter Court faywoman, and now that they were closer, she recognized her. Standing sullen against the joy of the day was the former Princess of Winter, Rhairén.

She had been at the forefront of Winter's armies after the peace talks fell apart with her elder sister's death. Rhairén had claimed Summer responsible for the tragedy, and she had vowed that they should pay. Across the space between them, Rhairén's eyes met hers. Kaelyndra felt a chill run down her spine, for there was no emotion in Rhairén's eyes, and the lack made Kaelyndra's blood run cold. For reasons all her own, Rhairén turned from her vigil and walked away.

Kaelyndra turned back to Hjorleifr and graced him with a smile. "This is not a day to dwell in painful history. Come Hjorleifr, I have seen to my duties enough for this day. Let us join the feast."

As they walked back into the heart of the revelry, the cold feeling would not leave her. It merely moved to her chest. There it grew until she felt she could not stand it any more. Kaelyndra collapsed to her knees with a pained scream. She heard the crowd of people moving around her and she felt Hjorleifr's hands catch her as she fell, but all of it was distant compared to the agony she felt.

Then, mercifully, everything went dark.

~ ~ ~

Kaelyndra blinked open her eyes in the afternoon light. She was in her bedroom, attended by the royal healer, Avanphor. Upon seeing that she was indeed awake, elder Avanphor slowly walked to where she rested and placed his hand over her brow. The soothing rush of his healing magik flowed through her, but it did not chase away the lingering effects of whatever struck her down. A frown creased his serene features and the magik grew stronger, but still it did not touch her pain. Finally Avanphor withdrew. "Forgive me, Majesty. I know not what ails you. I can see it but I fear there is nothing do for you."

Kaelyndra was shocked. Avanphor was the greatest healer of his generation- there was no illness, nor injury beyond his knowledge or ability. Kaelyndra sat up. There was still pain, but it was more the memory of a hurt that had passed.

Nonetheless, she moved with great care as she rose from her bed.

"If it is no sickness nor physical injury that struck me then it must be magik," Kaelyndra spoke slowly. She lifted her eyes to her handmaiden, who stood quietly in a corner. "Amira, go to the high scholar and bring him here."

"Your highness, do you have some idea as to what or whom attacked you? The palace guard has been on alert, but they know not what for."

"I am not sure it was an attack on my person, honored healer. I feel... something has happened, I know not what," Kaelyndra said softly.

Avanphor bowed his head in acknowledgement.

Kaelyndra looked out her windows. The sun was past its zenith, more than half the day she had laid abed. Even more troubling, this was not just any day which she might forgo her duties.

"Who lead the *quickenings* in my absence?" Kaelyndra asked.

"No one, Majesty."

Kaelyndra turned away from the window to stare at Avanphor until he looked down once more. "Please Majesty, without the Oaken Heart... There was no reason."

The *quickenings*. Once, a few from the sacred Anchorite Order would return to the capital, to become the Voice of the Heart- by the blessed power of sun itself, through the ruling monarch. It was looked upon as a rebirth for those chosen- from separate lives to becoming part of a greater whole, as they would act as one while filled with the Voice and remain within the Oracle's Grove. So empowered, the Voice would advise or simply pass prophecies as it saw fit.

Of course, the Oaken Heart, the Oracle's Grove, even most of the Anchorite Order, were all lost to them. Kaelyndra had planned to simply appoint the leader of the order as an advisor, but Avanphor was right, without the Oaken Heart it did not matter when or how or even *if* the Order was appointed.

There was a timid knock on the door. Kaelyndra frowned. Amira could not have returned so quickly. "Enter," she commanded. A small page boy that Kaelyndra did not know, so young that his hair was still the copper of youth, slipped in through the door. He stayed in the opening and bowed so deeply that

his head fell below his waist and Kaelyndra wondered that he simply didn't topple over.

"Your Highness," the page said. "I come with a message from my Lord Castellan, he sent me to inform you that Lord Silvendar has returned and wishes to speak with you at once."

"Silvendar?" That made little sense. "What of Follyn?"

"I don't know, your Highness."

A terrible feeling came over her, too horrible to put to words, too unthinkable to be true. Without a sound she swept forward and out the door, barely seeing the young boy stumble out of her way.

The hallways were a blur as she sped through them, ever faster. People went unseen and their voices unheard. They were unimportant. She could not find the air to fill her lungs, but that was unimportant too. Queen Kaelyndra ran through the passages of her palace as if running away from a dreaded thing, instead of towards it.

The door before her flew open and she saw Silvendar. He stood, torn and bloody and exhausted, in the middle of the room. His eyes, bleak and empty, met hers— and then she saw what he held. At first she could not believe, would not believe, the truth. But she knew it to be, had known it since she collapsed from the shared pain of his death.

Silvendar held Follyn's crown.

"Cousin... Kaelyndra... I'm so sorry... We were ambushed..."

Kaelyndra didn't wait to hear the rest of his halting explanation. She stepped into the room and simply took the crown from his unresisting hands. She held it to her chest, curling around it like a dying flower, lowering her head to let golden hair fall forward to cover her face. She didn't speak, didn't cry, didn't make any noise at all. She stood in a well of silence and stillness so deep it seemed that she had become as stone, that she would be trapped forever inside an abyss of sadness.

When she spoke, her voice was empty. "What happened?"

"We were returning from the goblin's lands. We rode hard. My Lord wanted to make it back for the solstice... t'was already late, but we rode as fast as we might." Silvendar stared down at his boots. "The goblin gave us naught in resistance for our journey there, nor our task. When it came, it was to the surprise of us all. This morn, we were set upon... we..." Silvendar had to stop again to steady himself. He shifted his weight and one of the servants brought forth a chair. "They came from all sides, many to our number, t'was chaos... We had no time to try to *command* any of them. I... I did not see him fight. But I heard. The goblins let up a cry and fell back. I saw him then, and went to where he fell... I rallied the men and gave chase to the fleeing cowards." His voice took on the true emotion since he had arrived. "We were able to *command* them then and those we did not put to the sword we bound. They await the crown's mercy, though I imagine they wait in vain."

Through all Silvendar's telling, Kaelyndra moved not at all, giving no sign that she heard his words. Even after he finished, for long moments she did nothing at all.

"What of his body?" She finally asked with painful calm.

Silvendar looked up at her, then back down at his boots. He opened his mouth but did not speak. A helpless air came over him and he closed his eyes tight against it. "Forgive me," he whispered. "We... I was unable to find his body."

"What?" She did move then, unfolding herself from around the crown slowly. As trembling energy filled the void of her soul, her eyes pierced Silvendar. "What did you say?"

Silvendar threw himself from his seat to his knees before her, his head bowed and his hands clasped in supplication. "Forgive me, when we returned for him after subduing our attackers, he was not to be found."

"How could you let this happen?" Her voice did not rise above a whisper but Silvendar flinched as if she had screamed and beat him. He said nothing to her accusation, having no words to defend himself.

"Your prisoners, they are here? In the holding?" Kaelyndra demanded. He simply nodded, unable to raise his eyes from the floor to look at her. Kaelyndra turned her back on him then, and strode from the room. Her long steps carried her quickly down the hall before anyone in the room could react. The guards raced to catch up with her and Silvendar leapt to his feet to follow as well.

Once again her passage through her home was marked with her focus on her goal to the exultation of all else. The holding had only one entrance under the northern most tower and was deep under the earth. In this time of peace and rebuilding the prison saw few guests, but it was always kept up, for when it was needed, nothing else would do. Guards, four real battle-trying soldiers, flanked the door. Marking the holding did indeed fill its purpose once more. If the guards were surprised to see her, they did not show it. Two broke off from their standing duty to join the guards that had followed her. Silvendar had managed to place himself behind his cousin, looking stern despite his injuries.

The holding was dark, not because there wasn't enough light, but because this place had never and would never see the sun. If one were to put out all the glowstones it would plunge the holding into a darkness so complete one might begin to forget what the light was. Kaelyndra had always found the place unbearably ugly. Unlike any other place in the whole of the palace, the holding was without carvings of any kind. The walls and floor and ceiling were a dull, lifeless grey, and the doors were simple things, made of metal bars and several bolts. Kaelyndra waved forward the guard with the keys.

"How many of them are there?" Kaelyndra asked.

"There are five still living, your majesty. Kept in separate cells," the guard answered.

"Their leader fell when we took them, but their second, Tougath, lies just down this passage here," Silvendar said.

Kaelyndra took the turn and it was not long before she stood in front of an occupied cell. She looked to Silvendar, who nodded that this was the correct cell, then called to the occupant. When there was no immediate response, she called again.

"Tougath! Stand as a man, if you are one, and answer me!" Kaelyndra yelled into the close space.

A shadow at the far end of the cell pulled itself free and moved to the door and into the light. The goblin Tougath was everything a goblin should be. His snout was wide and fit between the tops of his tusks where they jutted up from under his lower lip. Ears that seemed too large for his head were pointed and flared, and twitched this way and that. His deep green skin was marred by cuts that remained untended but his yellow eyes were bright as they regarded the queen.

"I know you," Kaelyndra said softly. "You're chief Tregoth's boy."

"Aye, dat I am, Bright Lady." Tougath replied. "All us here are kith and kin of da murdered chiefs."

"As I am kin to a murdered king, no doubt you find that just."

"Were it just, I would not be in this fine cage, Bright Lady."

"Surely you knew that your life was forfeit the very instant you took up a blade against your king."

"My life might be forfeit for any reason 'tal. Whether it just or no makes no difference."

Kaelyndra refused to be drawn into such a debate. "Do you know who struck down King Follyn?"

"Hardly seems to matter. Your king were set to die before he ever dipped his hand in our blood."

"Have you no understanding of respect, you cur?" Silvendar snarled, unable to hold his temper. Kaelyndra silenced him with a look.

"The king was your greatest ally," Kaelyndra told Tougath. "He fought for you until your crimes forced his hand."

"It did not save us or him in the end, Bright Lady. I can't say I saw the king's death, I know not who landed the final blow."

Kaelyndra stepped forward and wrapped one hand around the bars— she still held the crown in her other hand— and met his eyes unflinching. In the end it was Tougath who turned his gaze first. "Where his my husband's body? What did you do with it?"

"His body?" Tougath brought his eyes up once more. "Seems to me you have more pressing concerns than a piddling little thing like dat. You should worry about your own self. You bright ones are not the gods you always thought to be."

"You go too far!" Silvendar shouted, pulling his weapon. The goblin, perhaps feeling protected by his bars or just singularly unafraid of death, barely blinked in the face of Silvendar's righteous fury.

Kaelyndra raised her hand, once more silently commanding him to stand down. Silvendar looked rebellious, but obeyed. Tougath was not acting like a political prisoner prepared to martyr himself for a cause, he was acting as if he had something to hide. Kaelyndra was not in the mood to play games with him. "You are in a poor place to make threats. I will not stand for this outrage. You will be judged and made to face your crimes. Tell me everything and I will consider sparing you, or keep your silence and I will take your life."

Tougath kept his silence.

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The windows were covered and the glowstones darkened, leaving the room in an early twilight. Outside, the sun was finishing its journey across the sky, but few paid it its due. The city was rocked with the knowledge of the king's death. Any celebration that managed to survive Kaelyndra's collapse was thoroughly put down by the news. Inside, Kaelyndra had retreated from the world and all its wretched workings.

She sat unmoving, hardly breathing, simply living through each heartbeat and not caring if the next ever came. Thinking was only met with agony, so she remained as empty in mind as she felt in soul.

A knock, an unthinkable intrusion, came at the door. Kaelyndra lifted her head to the noise but made no command for the visitor to enter, nor to leave. The knock came again and again Kaelyndra gave no answer, as if she had forgotten what the sound meant. Kaelyndra simply watched as the door opened and Countess Inaldel entered. Closing the door softly behind her, Inaldel navigated the dark room to Kaelyndra's side.

Kaelyndra's eyes tracked Inaldel's path but she did not otherwise move. Inaldel sat in the same chair she used the last time she was in this room and pulled Kaelyndra's hands into her lap. They were wrapped tightly around something, and Inaldel merely stroked them, trying to instill some warmth.

"I can't find him," her words came slowly as if she were entranced. "I tried to bring him home, but he's gone and I can't find him." Kaelyndra opened her hand to reveal her necklace.

"You're tired. You should rest and try tomorrow," Inaldel said gently.

"I can't," Kaelyndra said. "I can't rest until I find him."

"If you cannot find him, have you looked for something that he has? Something that he would have kept with him? You could bring that here, and use it as a link."

Kaelyndra closed her eyes and wrapped her hands around the focus once more. Between one breath and the next Kaelyndra's face relaxed and her breathing evened out as if in sleep. A small light, a glow that did not even reach past the seated figures, appeared before her. It flashed once before collapsing in on itself to form a ring that hovered in the air, spinning slowly. Kaelyndra opened

her eyes and her hand. The ring fell from the air to land gently in her palm. It was Follyn's marriage ring.

Her hand closed around it in a white knuckled fist and the first tears rolled down her cheeks. Her breath caught with a sob as she finally broke down. Inaldel caught her as she fell forward from her chair.

There was nothing Inaldel could do but hold Kaelyndra as she cried, so she rocked the younger woman and stoked her hair. "It will be all right," she whispered to Kaelyndra in a soft tone. "It will all be all right." But Kaelyndra knew the soothing promise was a lie. Nothing would ever be all right again. Follyn, her husband, her mate, her love, was dead.

Chapter 16

With the release forms signed, Seraph was spared the annoyance of having to use a wheelchair while inside the hospital. She stood at the cashier's desk in scrub pants and a paper shirt. It had taken her over an hour to get to this point and she was getting antsy. After checking Seraph's wristband, the woman quickly exited the office-like area behind the large wrap-around desk through a kind of back door. She tried to stay patient. Good lord, what was taking so long?

When the woman finally returned she carried a large blue medical ziplock bag and Seraph all but snatched it from her hands. Grunting something that might have been a 'thank you' or an 'about time', Seraph clutched the bag to her chest with her good arm and walked away.

She needed to go through the bag like she needed air. It hurt to be so close and not take that last step. But privacy was equally important. She needed to be alone to deal with whatever she found... or didn't.

A deserted stairwell provided her the sanctuary she sought. She sat on the stairs and ripped past the seal. Stuffed inside was her jacket, shirt and pants (cut up and ruined), her cell phone (miraculously still working), her boots (dirty and bloodstained) and finally her wallet and keys. That was it.

There was no ring.

Seraph felt her heart stop. No. No, it had to be here. She turned the bag inside out. Shook out her jacket. Her shirt. Dug through her pants' pockets.

There. Seraph's fingers brushed the metal band and she let out a gasp of breath that sounded a lot like a sob.

The ring glinted dully in the unforgiving florescent lights of the stairwell. She couldn't risk letting it out of her sight again. Taking a deep breath she slipped the ring onto the middle finger of her right hand. It fit perfectly.

Almost immediately she felt better. A weight lifted from her chest and her headache receded to a nearly ignorable level, along with the pain in her shoulder. The fog her concussion cast over her thoughts cleared so quickly that there was no chance that her relief didn't come from the ring. Careful testing of her shoulder proved that she was still injured, so the ring didn't heal her exactly, but it certainly pushed back the pain. This type of magic was rare— not to mention costly. Healing magic was the most difficult of magic to master. While middle level healers could be found in every hospital, there were few master healers. Seraph didn't know how many of those could also enchant, which was a completely different field of magic, but she figured there weren't that many.

Seraph was pulled from her thoughts by the ringing of her cell phone. She flipped it open without even checking the display. "Hello?" she answered incredulously.

"Seraph? I'm here. What room are you in?"

"Brad?"

"Was someone else coming to pick you up?" he asked.

"I guess not, but why are you calling me?"

"So I can find you and bring you your clothes?"

"I didn't have my cell phone until just now."

"Oh. Well, you have it now and I'm in the parking lot. Where are you?"

"Never mind, meet me in the front lobby."

It took her a few minutes to stuff all of her things back in the bag and work her way down to the first floor where she found Brad waiting for her with some of her clothes in his arms. It was clear that he had been woken up for this, dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt with his hair unbrushed, but his eyes were alert and he seemed in a good enough mood once he saw her.

"Whoa, look at you! Maybe you should take up a safer sport than bear wrestling, huh?"

"You're never going to drop that, are you?"

"Why would I?" he asked as he handed her clothes. "I didn't know you broke your arm or I would have brought a button down. Also I wasn't going to go through your underwear, so you have to go without."

"That's fine, just give me a minute. Thanks for coming, by the way," she said.

"No problem."

She gave him her bag to hold and ducked into the public restroom by the front doors. Changing her clothing in a stall with one hand was a new and frustrating experience. She ended up not even trying to push her hurt arm through the sleeve, just pulled the shirt over the top of the whole mess. It was warmer at least. Brad hadn't brought her new shoes and she really didn't feel like fighting with her boots, so she just left the paper booties where they were. They wouldn't be fun, but it hadn't snowed today so they would get her to the car— that was good enough.

"Ready now?" Brad asked when she emerged from the bathroom.

"More than, I just want to be home in bed."

She went through the bag, taking out her things and stuffing them into her pockets, as they walked to the car. He had managed to get a close spot since the parking lot was mostly empty at this time of night. Seraph tossed her scrubs into the back and settled gratefully into passenger's seat while Brad cranked the heat. Despite the painkillers she had been given before she left and whatever the ring was doing for her— her arm was starting to throb along with her head. Brad carefully pulled out into the lack of traffic on the highway and headed home.

"You know, you have the worst luck I have ever seen in a person outside of a sitcom. I wouldn't be surprised to hear about you getting hit by lightning next. Has your life always been this interesting, or is this new?"

"Please, I don't want to talk about it." Seraph turned her head to stare out the window. The last thing she wanted to do was try and come up with good explanations about all of the shit that was happening to her. Understanding that this wasn't the best time for questions, Brad drove in silence. Normally Seraph

would have been happy with this, but the silence gave her time to dwell and she found herself with the strange urge to fill the void with chatter. "Hey Brad," she said, not turning to him. "Tell me about yourself."

"What? Why?"

"It's too quiet and we don't get a chance to talk a lot, I hardly know you."

A pause. "Come on, I'm not asking for your biography. I just want something to take my mind off my arm."

"Okay, fine," he said. "Um. What do you want to know?"

"I don't know... Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"Yeah, three brothers and a sister. I'm right in the middle with two older brothers and a younger sister and brother."

"Wow."

"Yeah. We lived on a ranch. I think my parents had us so they would have someone to do all the chores. I was always having to feed something, chickens, llamas, dogs, whatever."

"Llamas?"

"If you're going to make fun of me, I won't tell you anymore."

"No, I'm sorry. I don't find llamas funny at all, I swear." Seraph raised her good hand in a pseudo boy-scout salute. "I've never heard you talk about them, you're not close?"

"Not like you and Gabe. My family is very orthodox in their worship of Jehovah and they didn't approve of me being seeing Patrick. I don't talk to them a lot."

"Wait, you're dating Patrick?"

"Um, yeah, you didn't know?"

"I thought he was just a friend. Now I just feel kinda stupid."

Brad just laughed. "Well, neither one of us is big on PDAs. I'm sure you would have figured it out if we had made out in front of you," Brad offered, still snickering.

"I guess. Still, this seems like it's coming out of left field. I've been living with you for over a month, you would think I would have noticed that. I guess I've been... really caught up in my own shit." Which was more than true. With a curse invading her mind, being attacked by magic monsters at every turn, having a long list of injuries that never seemed to get better, Seraph guessed she was lucky that she noticed her brother even *had* a roommate. "Your family's not talking to you because you're dating Patrick?"

Brad shifted uncomfortably, probably embarrassed over his extremist roots. It was impossible to deny Christianity's status as the predominate faith in this country or influence on the nation's history— manifest destiny, anyone? These days, however, separation of church and state wasn't just an ideal, it was a stringently enforced law. Gods had a tendency to manipulate their followers through politics whenever they had a chance, manipulations that ultimately led to wars and a lot of innocent people dead. To say nobody needed another world war or holocaust would be a gross understatement. The American government

had taken those lessons to heart and politicians weren't allowed to have an allegiance to any one particular god. Fanatical religions, monotheistic or otherwise, had been out of vogue for a long time. Hatred for minorities of any kind wasn't *goneby* any stretch, but it was certainly rare that a modern church would publicly condemn them. This wasn't true for the whole world, but it was true for Seraph's experience in it.

"My family's faith has always been important to them," Brad said finally.

"And you? How do you feel about it?"

"I... mostly don't think about it."

"Fair enough," Seraph said.

Personally, she had never really had all that much use for gods. They were quick to pass down commands, but impossible to pin down for answers. What little they did pass down tended to conflict with other religions, if it didn't outright conflict with their own older doctrine. It couldn't all be true, so how could you trust any of it? Particularly when the gods in question tended to think the best way to settle the dispute was by throwing an army of followers at it. Seraph suspected gods told mortals what they thought mortals needed to know, and kept the rest to themselves. They might be powerful allies, but they still had their own agenda.

"Also," Brad said, "my family was never really all that close. Patrick was the straw that broke the camel's back for my parents. I do still talk to my siblings, just not a lot."

"How long have you been together?"

"Three years last month."

"Wow, that's great." Of course it also brought to mind that it had been just about that long since the last time Seraph had been on a date. It wasn't hard to find like-minded women in the marines, but that didn't mean it was easy to have a relationship with one while on duty. Easier than trying to date *now*, certainly, but at the time it hardly seemed worth the effort. Seraph thought back, her last relationship had been with Maggie, at the time another corporal. It had been good while it lasted, but it had ended abruptly when Seraph had been transferred overseas.

It was time to change the conversation to something less depressing.

"Llamas. Really?"

"What did I tell you?" Brad said both annoyed and amused. "I should—"

Whatever revenge Brad would have chosen to threaten or inflict would remain a mystery as the voice chose that moment to come to her with another vision. This time it was different— the jewel was out of its display instead it sat in a small box on a table in what might have been a run down office, but had decorations layered over the poorly kept room. Seraph was given no explanation for this change, the voice only demanded its recovery. *You must retrieve the Rose of the Queen... Quickly... You must...*

Seraph knew she was in trouble when she came back to herself. The car was pulled over on the side of the road and Brad was on his cell, telling whoever

was on the other end to come quick. Twisting in her seat, Seraph snatched the phone away from him and closed it, but not before hearing a man's voice saying that an officer was on the way.

"Shit! What did you tell them?" Seraph demanded.

"Jesus, what the hell just happened to you? Are you all right?"

"What did you tell them!?" Seraph screamed.

"I said that something magical was attacking you! Oh my god, your eyes were glowing."

The sound of a siren coming closer drove Seraph from the car. She popped open the door and was running down the street before Brad figured out what was happening. She heard him scramble out of his car and scream after her but she didn't look back.

Seraph ran as fast as she could, as far as she could, deep into the freezing night. Away from the sirens and friends that would help her by locking her in a cage. She turned down a dark alley and the sirens passed behind her. She couldn't hear Brad behind her— either he hadn't followed her or had stopped to flag down the cops, but she couldn't stop moving. They wouldn't stop looking for her.

She made another turn onto another deserted street. This late at night there was no one out on the streets, which meant no crowd for her to blend into and disappear. Distance would be the only shield she had— while the police had to search for her in every direction as well as the way she had originally fled, she would pick a route and fly right out of their radius.

While her beaten body wasn't happy with her, this wasn't the first time she'd had a forced march while injured. She focused her mind solely on taking the next step and fell into the rhythm she had first learned in boot camp.

The uneven sidewalks cut into the bottom of her feet as the booties did nothing to protect them. But the silence they gave her in return let her hear cars coming with enough time to hide. At first there were cop cars among those she dodged, but as she covered more time and distance they became fewer. After almost an hour of walking there were few cars still on the road and no people.

Seraph leaned against the side of a building to rest. She was shivering non-stop and sweating, not good signs. On top of that, her feet were completely numb. Looking around, she saw that she had run into the warehouse district and she was alone. This was a worst-case scenario and she had no idea what to do now. Maybe Gabe would have an idea, or at least a friendly word. Reaching into her pocket for her cell phone— a shiver like a ghostly finger ran down her back, the rose was moving and it was close. Very close. She had thought that she had been running without direction, but now she saw that she had been heading straight for the rose without even realizing it.

Further down the service road, not more than ten minutes from where she stopped, was an abandoned warehouse. It's windows and doors were boarded up and there were no lights lit on the outside. Circling the building, Seraph was confused. This place didn't match her vision at all. Turning a corner,

Seraph almost ran right into a massive guard standing next to the only door that wasn't boarded up.

"I think you might be lost," the man said with a voice strangely soft.

Seraph took a step back to get a better look at the guy. His eyes were hidden behind sunglasses despite the night, he had biceps the width of his head, and no neck, with part of a tattoo just visible above the collar of his shirt. A utility belt held his gun as well as a flashlight. He was dressed like security, but he sure didn't look like someone you wanted to meet in a dark alley. Or behind an abandoned warehouse.

"I might be," Seraph said, backing up a step. "I think I'll just move along then." Getting into a fight with this guy right now would be new kinds of stupid. Clearly this item was guarded too. Damn it. Seraph found herself really missing her axe.

"No, I must insist that you stay. This is a dangerous place to wander around by yourself. I'm sure my employer would let you use the phone." While Seraph could hear him clearly, it seemed as if his voice never rose above a softly sibilant whisper. He remained in the same stance he had been in when she found him— feet shoulder-width apart, hands clasped in front, back straight and shoulders relaxed— the picture of a guard at ease. She managed another step back with no reaction from him before she had to stop. Just like before, the voice wasn't going to let her leave without getting what she had come for.

She had no weapons and was only still standing by virtue of being too tired to find a place to lie down. Seraph looked at the guard and met him in square in his ridiculously-sunglassed-eyes. She had taken on a freaking werebear thing barehanded— a human guard with a speech impediment was nothing compared to that.

"Yeah, I could use a phone," she said.

The guard smiled and opened the door, standing to the side so she could go through first. As she passed him, he reached out and took hold of her good arm. It was a hold designed to guide and control, the same way someone would escort a prisoner in handcuffs or a captive already cowed into submission. Seraph struggled with herself not to tense under the touch.

It was poorly lit inside the warehouse, but not so dark that Seraph couldn't see. Most of it was simply one large open space. In the middle of the room were two sections of stadium seating, three levels tall, that formed quarter circles around an empty circular space. The floor was covered with a large steel plate that was ringed with razor wire. It didn't take a genius to figure out bad things went down in this place.

Across the space was a staircase, if the rickety death trap could be called that, that led up to a office that would have been on the second floor if there had been anything under it but steel support columns. Seraph walked up the steps in front of the guard, who had let go of her now that there was nowhere she could go but forward. At the top of the steps he stopped and reached around her to knock on the door. He waited several long moments as if

anticipating a response before his breath hitched and he opened the door. Before taking her first look at whatever was inside, Seraph had a second to wonder if there really had been no answer, or if she had missed something.

The door opened to the room from her vision only this time it was not empty. A woman sat at a desk at the far side of the room. She had just hung up the phone when the guard opened the door. Sitting back in her chair the woman regarded Seraph with a smile that came nowhere near her eyes. There was an Asian cast to her features, magnified by the oriental cut of the dress she wore. She was thin, which might have given the impression of frailty if it wasn't for the predatory gleam in her eyes. A thick mane of black hair framed her face and bled into the black of her outfit. She was gorgeous and completely out of place in an abandoned warehouse.

The room itself made a lot more sense to Seraph now that she was seeing it outside of her vision. It really was an old run down office that someone, the woman or more likely an employee of hers, had filled with expensive furniture. The small space had been transformed into a cross between an office and a living room, with a large black lacquered desk with matching filing cabinets dominating one wall. The rose was there, behind the woman and inside the wall. If Seraph had to guess, she would say there was a wall safe behind the one landscape painting that adorned the wall. The middle of the room focused on a very low coffee table. Pillows on the floor indicated where someone should sit on the ground. The gray concrete walls were mostly hidden behind oriental screens, and plush rugs almost covered the dirty tile floor. There were windows on the wall that looked out and down at the rest of the warehouse, doubtless for a supervisor to keep tabs on employees, but curtains now covered them. It didn't matter— Seraph had seen enough of the warehouse coming up. Everything was oriental in theme and style, not that Seraph had the first idea which of the Asian countries the décor came from. With dark colors and a lot of black, edged in gold and silver, Seraph thought the room just this side of being tasteless.

It gave her the creeps and so did the woman who owned it.

Seraph wiped the cold sweat from her forehead with her shirtsleeve. She felt the presence of the guard behind her but she was reluctant to step into the room. The smile remained in place as the woman gracefully rose from her seat and extended her hand as if in welcome.

"Ms. Hunter, you're still alive. How wonderful," she said. "I was beginning to wonder if you would make it this far."

Chapter 17

Seraph didn't budge from her spot by the door. "How do you know my name?" she demanded.

The smile slipped from the woman's face and she cocked her head to the side, as if examining something troublesome. "I make it my business to be aware of... shifts... in the status quo. It is only prudent that I know about you."

"Oh? What else do you know?"

"Many things," the woman waved her hand dismissively.

"Do you know about what's happening to me?"

"Of course."

This confirmation was all Seraph needed. She leaned her upper body forward, just enough to give her good leverage, before taking a step back and slamming her head backward into the face of the guard. The impact hurt, but it came with the satisfying crunch of cartilage and she whipped around to face him. He held both hands to his face, covering his broken nose, which left him nicely open. With her good hand she ripped the gun from its holster before he could react. He was recovering, but not fast enough. Seraph lashed out with her foot, catching him in the solar plexus. It wasn't a hard blow, certainly not enough to injure him, but it was just enough to send him back a step. That was all she needed. As the guard tried to regain his balance he brought his foot down on the empty air above the first step. He managed to catch the rusty guard rail, but the corroded metal was in no condition to support his weight and broke off in his hand. Down he went, tumbling ass over teakettle straight to the ground.

Seraph slammed the door shut and locked it. To be safe she grabbed a tall end table, knocking down the vase that sat on it, and wedged it under the door handle, effectively barricading the door should the guard prove tougher than he looked. It was all over in less than a minute.

Gun at the ready, Seraph turned towards the woman once more. She had not moved, but she was smiling again. Seraph took several steps into the room so that the door was not immediately at her back and trained the gun straight at the woman's head.

"Now," Seraph said. "You're going to tell me what's going on."

The woman threw back her head and laughed. The sound tickled down Seraph's spine and made her shiver. The laugh was intimate, as if they had shared something special that Seraph had managed to miss— deeply sensuous and vastly inappropriate. Seraph had a hard time remembering the last time she had found something so wholly unsettling.

"Marvelous," she said. "This will do wonderfully."

Before Seraph could respond something crashed into the door. Seraph's makeshift blockade held... at first. The second blow broke the table's legs and it was crushed behind the door as the guard slammed through it. Once in the room he homed in on Seraph. At some point during his fall he had lost his sunglasses and Seraph saw why he had been wearing them.

His eyes were inhumanly blood red. But it wasn't just the color of his eyes, no, the irises were huge, leaving barely any white around the edges and the pupils were slitted like a snake's. He opened his mouth to hiss at her, showing off long thin fangs and a forked tongue.

Of course the guard wasn't human— that would have been too easy. Seraph swung the gun around to point at him as he bunched his muscles to lunge at her.

"Stop that at once."

Seraph obeyed without understanding why. Perhaps it was the way the guard froze in place at the woman's command, perhaps it was something that Seraph didn't want to think about too hard. The guard's freakish unblinking eyes were focused over Seraph's shoulder, making her spine itch with the need to glance behind her even though she already knew what was there.

"Go back to your post, I'll deal with you later."

The forked tongue slipped out from between the guard's fangs while the rest of him remained unmoving. For a moment Seraph wondered if he was going to disobey and she wondered if the gun would do anything to stop him if he did. But slowly the guard began to back out of the room. Once out of the doorway, he turned his back on Seraph and was soon was out of sight. Seraph didn't lower the gun until she heard the last of his footsteps on the stairs.

Seraph turned back to the woman, who was still smiling. The smile was not a pleasant one— it remind Seraph of a cat playing with a mouse. All curiosity and malice.

"Please have a seat. We need to talk," she said, gesturing to the low table with its pillows. "And do put the gun down, it's incredibly rude." Seraph looked back and forth between the table and the woman, simply staring.

"Lady, I'm not sitting down or putting the gun away until I get some goddamn answers."

The woman's eyes narrowed and she made a sharp gesture with her hand. Pain exploded in Seraph's head.

When she blinked her eyes open again she was lying on the floor. Her head felt like she had just come off a three week long bender. Again. Carefully she sat up. The gun was gone, but it was becoming painfully apparent that it wouldn't have helped her much anyway.

The pillows were at least as soft as they looked. Seraph had an idea there was a way she was supposed to sit at the table, but she couldn't be bothered to figure it out, she just sat in a way that hurt the least.

"Would you like some tea?"

Seraph eyed the woman, unable to figure out if her desire for pleasantries steamed from sadism or insanity.

"Who *are* you?" she asked finally.

One elegant eyebrow rose at the question. "I suppose we did skip the introductions didn't we? I apologize. You may call me Celeste."

Seraph shifted in her seat. Celeste was clearly a mage. And one with dubious morals, to say the very least. While that didn't make her an impossible opponent, it did make her one Seraph was unprepared for. She would have to play along for now if she wanted to get out of this. It was a strategy that Seraph was sickeningly familiar with.

"What did you want to talk about?" Seraph asked carefully.

Celeste clasped her hands together and sat back in her chair. "You. You are in quite an interesting position. I'm sure you would like to know all about it," Celeste smiled. "Unfortunately information like that isn't free, and you simply don't have a way to pay for it. I know you well enough to know you have nothing I want. But I do have something *else* you want."

"The rose," Seraph said.

"Yes, the Fairy Rose. Such a valuable item simply cannot be parted with for free and I am sorry to say that you couldn't possibly pay for this either."

She sure didn't look sorry. Mage or not, Seraph was tired of being played with. It didn't escape Seraph's attention that Celeste's name for the rose didn't match the name given in her vision. "If you're not going to sell or give it to me, why the hell do you want me here?"

"There is another option. I am willing to gamble for it."

"Gamble for it?"

"You may have noticed the particular set up of this warehouse. What did you make of it?"

"It looks like a theater of some kind," Seraph said. "Maybe an arena."

"Very good. It *is* an arena. A pit-fighting arena, actually. The hole is simply covered for now."

A cup of tea appeared on the short table in front of Seraph, placed there by a green hand. The hand was attached to the most bizarre looking creature Seraph had ever seen. It looked like a mutant cross between a duck and a turtle. About as tall standing as Seraph was sitting, the creature stood upright on stumpy little legs and held the tea tray with webbed hands that came out from the shell that encased its body. A stumpy, slightly curved bill took up most of its face. Dead fish eyes blinked wetly at her just above the mouth and below... the rest of the head. Where the dome of the skull would have covered the brain of a person, this creature had a concave bowl. Filled with water. It licked what would have been its lips with a sharp black tongue.

"What is *that*?" asked Seraph, completely taken off guard by the strange monster appearing from thin air.

"That is a kappa. Foolish creatures, easy to ensorce. Competent enough if you don't need anything too complicated."

Seraph stared at Celeste, suddenly losing interest in the kappa. "You're a witch."

Seraph blamed her head injury on how long it took her to figure it out. Celeste didn't reply to Seraph's obvious non-question, she just smiled her scary cat smile and took her tea from her creature before waving it away. It vanished

with no more apparent effort than it had appeared. Either Celeste had teleported it away with a gesture and a thought, which made her powerful. Or it had teleported on its own at her bidding. Being a servant, it would be much weaker than her, which made her *very* powerful.

People with magic were very rare, but not so much that Seraph had never met one before. In fact, there had been a minor mage in her platoon that Seraph knew well enough to go out and drink with. A minor mage could give people a boost of energy like a caffeine high, light up a dark area with magelight, or start fires with a snap of their fingers. Small things. Useful things. A witch was not a minor mage. A witch was much more than that.

Closer to a greater mage in power, witches did not, as a rule, use their magic to help those around them or even as means to gainful employment. They used their power to gain more power, both magical and otherwise. Laws and morality were mere suggestions, easily ignored. *Being* a witch was illegal enough, there really wasn't any good reason to obey prohibitions against stealing if *existing* was enough to warrant execution. So, they used their magic in whatever way benefited them most— usually to the extreme detriment of someone else.

Such as raping the mind of a kappa and forcing it into slavery, for example.

People with magic talent were born with a certain level of innate ability— a certain level of power. Years of training might teach a mage to better focus their power, to use what little they had to larger effect, but they could never increase their power.

At least, not naturally.

However, if someone was an amoral psychopath, there were lots of ways to increase your base power level. You could sacrifice an innocent to an illegal god, you could steal the power from another magic user by torturing it out of them, you could do a number of other horrible things that Seraph didn't know the specifics of. If someone did that, they could become much more powerful— and a witch.

Seraph knew, academically, that whoever was doing this to her was likely a witch, what with lawmakers tending to frown upon using compulsion on another person, but that was an altogether different reality than finding oneself drinking tea with a witch in her lair. A witch who knew the answers to all of Seraph's questions, if she was telling the truth. A witch who may even be the one behind all of this, for her own inscrutable reasons.

Seraph took a sip of tea to cover her fear and calm her nerves. Alright. This wasn't the worst situation Seraph had been in. Sure, Celeste may be the most powerful enemy Seraph had ever faced alone, but... uh... shit.

Her best chance, her only chance, was to play this as smart as she could. She set down the tea and faced Celeste again.

"You run a pit-fighting club?"

"Sometimes. It's more of a hobby. My real enterprise is much more varied and global."

"Why here? Wouldn't it make more sense to have it some place more... metropolitan, with a large criminal underground? New York or Los Angeles?"

"Normally. But this is a special event."

That... didn't sound particularly reassuring. "Why would you gamble for the rose?" Seraph asked.

"Because whether you or I have the rose benefits me. So I will give you a chance to complete your... quest."

"Alright," Seraph said, considering her options. They were depressingly few. "So, you want me to what... bet on one of the fighters?"

"Oh no. You will be one of the fighters, facing off against one of my oni, my ogres if you will." Celeste finished her tea and set the cup aside. "To the death."

Chapter 18

"Thank you guardsman. You may go," Kaelyndra said.

The guard she had dismissed saluted and bowed deeply to her and the council before taking his leave. He was the last of the surviving soldiers that had been with Follyn. All of them had testified before the council. Even Silvendar, who now sat behind Kaelyndra, had recounted his memories of the attack.

"There can be no question as to the goblins' guilt," said Eonsahr said, echoing his words of the past. "They must be put to death."

Kaelyndra watched the council, feeling outside of herself. It reminded her of the last time she sat in this room to decide the lives, and deaths, of the goblins. She could almost hear Follyn advising patience and had to close her eyes against the memory.

"I agree," Kaelyndra said. "They will be put to the blade before this day ends." No one spoke after her announcement. After a trial in the royal court she might take hours or even days to rule as there were no small matters brought before her. Never before had she so quickly ordered someone's death. Whether the silence was surprise at her speed or for some other reason, Kaelyndra found that she neither knew nor cared.

There was nothing more to be said or done here, so Kaelyndra stood and walked from the room, past Silvendar who scrambled to keep up with her and past the startled council whom she had not bothered to dismiss. There was a slyph servant just outside the double door and Kaelyndra waved him over without pausing her step. Silvendar had followed her from the room but wisely kept silent. Behind him, Kaelyndra could hear the council breaking up and talking amongst themselves, but Kaelyndra paid them no heed.

"Find Lord Eldryn and have him meet me in one of the smaller council chambers." Kaelyndra said to the servant when he caught up to her. "I want to talk to him as soon as he is able." The boy ran to obey.

"May I sit in on your meeting, your highness?" Silvendar asked. He had become as a shadow to her, always there but rarely drawing attention to himself. Kaelyndra suspected that he blamed himself for failing his duty. She found herself equal parts angry at and grateful for his support. Normally she could she would take the time to wonder at her feelings, but she was not in the mood for introspection of late.

"No," she told him. "I want you to oversee the preparation of the execution." Her choice was grounded in logic. For her own task, she would not need him and if she decided later she wanted him to know, she could tell him then. Silvendar was a competent commander with an eye for detail— knowing what needed to be done as well as who needed to do it. But then, so did the guard captain she had already tasked with this. Silvendar's lips compressed in displeasure, but he nodded and left her.

The smaller council rooms were not far from the grand council chamber and soon Kaelyndra was inside one. She didn't have to wait long for Eldryn to

join her— slyph made excellent messengers and none would presume to make her wait. He did not look much better than he had when he had first returned. Dark circles under his eyes showed his lack of sleep just as his pallor and thinness spoke to his general ill health.

"Please sit with me," Kaelyndra said, taking a seat herself. She waited for Eldryn to take his place before speaking again. "I have brought you here to talk about your spies with the goblins."

"I swear, your Majesty. I never heard anything about plans on the king's life. Of course I would have told you immediately—"

Kaelyndra silenced him with a wave of her hand. "I believe you. Follyn certainly never heard of this either." As the king it was Follyn's duty to find and maintain an information network independent of any his vassals might have. He had done this well, if not as well as Eldryn, who had immeasurably more direct contact as well as only needing to manage a single network. Follyn's contacts, as well as the latest reports, had been locked in his desk and Kaelyndra had gone through them all before the trial.

"I don't believe that this strike was planned long before hand. No, it seemed very rushed. They may have killed the king, but all their number ended up captured or slain. That could not have been their goal."

"Yes," Eldryn said. "It makes sense that this was all an impulsive act in response to the culling."

"No, I do not believe that to be the truth either," Kaelyndra said.

"My lady, I do not understand."

"Have you spoken to the prisoners? No? I have. And they do not act as though they have a political motive. A revolutionary would not keep his thoughts to himself. Spreading his message is the *point*. How can he rally people to his cause or force us meet his demands, if none knows what he hopes to gain?" Kaelyndra paused to take a breath before going on. "Whatever reason Tougath and his companions had, they are not speaking to it. This tells me there is something more at stake here. I mean to know what that is."

"Your reasoning is faultless, your Majesty. What would you have me do?"

"I will give you access to Follyn's spies. With these in addition to your own, you will find what conspiracy lays at the heart of this," Kaelyndra command.

"What of questioning the prisoners?"

"If you believe there is anything to gain from them while they yet live, feel free to question them as you will. Otherwise you can wait until the death speakers have them."

Lord Eldryn shuddered. Death speakers were a dark thing even by Winter's standards. Even with his distaste clear, Eldryn said nothing against her, and none would. If ever there was a just cause to use such magic, it was this.

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The execution would take place on the same dais that the queen had used to sing of the raising sun the day before. Kaelyndra was pleased with the efficiency of Silvendar's work. She had been far too busy to oversee, or even check on, such matters that she could delegate. Even the death of a king could not bring a kingdom to a halt and now Kaelyndra's responsibilities had doubled. It was not something she could ignore for the sake of her fury, not even for the sake of her grief.

The crowd that had gathered was very different. Gone was the summer green garb, replaced by mourning gray. Kaelyndra saw more of the lesser among the sidhe as well. She stood watching over her people while waiting for the condemned when Rhairen approached her.

"You wished to see me, my queen?"

Kaelyndra turned to regard the other woman. Rhairen, the Winter Court princess, stood tall with her head unbowed as if she was a high-ranking member of Kaelyndra's council and not the simply the governor of what was left of her people. She was dressed appropriately in gray and even though Kaelyndra searched she could find nothing mocking in her carefully blank expression or tone. Even so, Kaelyndra had never felt at ease in her dealings with her and always wondered at Rhairen's preferred choice of honorific. Few called Kaelyndra 'my queen' and rarer still that one of Winter should so claim her.

"Thank you for coming so quickly Lady Rhairen," Kaelyndra said. "I did have a request of you, to do with this," Kaelyndra waved her hand at the dais. An expression did steal across her face then, wariness. Rhairen said nothing so Kaelyndra continued. "I wish that your Death Speakers take the goblins and question them. I want to know why they took my husband's body. I want to know why they attacked."

"Why they attacked? Was it not in retribution for the deaths of their chiefs?"

"In part, I am sure it was. But I believe there is more than that. I would know what it is."

"Wouldn't it be easier to question them while they still live?"

"While they still live they may still lie. Even if the law didn't demand their deaths as soon as possible the Death Speakers ensure truth and speed."

"Death Speakers are not a sure thing, my queen. What if the goblins are reborn before the Speakers can reach them?"

When the living passed into death, their souls lingered for a varying period of time on the other side, before being reborn. Of course once reborn, they were beyond the reach of the Death Speakers. Some were reborn right away, while others might wait over a century for their rebirths. There were scholars that theorized that the time spent on the other side was much like another life, as those that lived might grow to old age or die shortly after coming into this world, those souls on the other side might return quickly or slowly.

"I know of the risks," Kaelyndra said. "But I find it hard to believe that they should all be reborn so quickly. You will have seven opportunities after all."

"It is... a cruel thing to use Death Speakers. Are you certain this is something you wish?"

"Yes," cold anger infected Kaelyndra's voice as she grew impatient with Rhairen balking. "I am certain."

Rhairen nodded her head respectfully then paused, seeming unsure. "My queen, I wish to express condolences for your loss."

Kaelyndra was nonplussed— she had simply not expected sympathy from this front. It could have been insincere, but once more she could find no trace of mockery- or any emotion at all- in Rhairen's sentiment. Lacking the strength to do more than take Rhairen's words at face value, Kaelyndra bowed her head and whispered a thank you. She did not raise her head until after Rhairen had walked away.

The drums started- the prisoners were being brought out.

In step with the pounding of the drums, each goblin hobbled, their feet shackled together, beside one of her personal guard and carried a dagger at their side. Third or fourth sons of high-ranking nobles were her guards. They were highbred, but unlikely to inherit, making them perfect to their task. Every member of her guard could *command* and they each enforced their will upon their hobbled prisoners. The more powerful the sidhe, the more of the lesser fay they could *command*. Her guards could only *command* the individual prisoners at their side— while lords such as Silvendar, could *command* dozens at once. When a sidhe lord *commands* one of the lesser fay, they move as puppets— their actions bound to the whim of their sidhe masters, but not their desires or their thoughts. Trapped inside bodies that they were unable to control, the goblins seemed passive as they marched to their deaths.

Kaelyndra awaited them atop the dais as they climbed the same steps she had just used. On the platform they lined up before her with their backs to the gathered people while her soldiers moved to stand behind her. The drums went silent.

"You all have been found guilty of murder," Kaelyndra said, her voice traveling so that all might hear her words. "Not just any murder, but murder of your king. An act of treason so foul, there can be only one punishment. You are to die by the same traitorous hands that took King Follyn's life."

As one the goblins raised the daggers they held and pressed the points against the large veins in their necks. In one swift movement they all shoved the blades home, their lifeblood spraying across the dais and falling just short of Kaelyndra's feet. Blood pumped out over hilts and hands and the goblins crumpled to their knees, dying.

It was over quickly, in a handful of moments seven lives bleed out before the fay nation. Kaelyndra watched the grisly spectacle without expression and when it was done she ordered the bodies taken away with a mere gesture.

She walked through the blood and down the steps out into the field, followed by her guards. The sidhe among them would stay until the bodies were removed. They would be buried in the sky— their bodies would be staked out on

a mountainside and flayed open for the carrion birds to take— a painful end for one of the sons of the earth. The death speakers would take what was left.

But Kaelyndra need not stay for it. Her part here was done.

Her people parted to let her through and she passed them as if she were a ghost, among them but wholly apart. In her wake she left footprints of crimson, but she paid them no attention.

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While Kaelyndra longed to return to the sanctuary of her chambers once more, there was work still to do, and so she was still in her study. Her handmaiden slipped into the room and walked to her desk where she stood silently waiting for acknowledgement.

"Yes?" Kaelyndra said once she had finished the report.

"Duke Thridi awaits outside for Your Majesty's attention, if it pleases Your Majesty."

"Very well," Kaelyndra waved her hand. "Send him in. And this," she gave the young woman a sealed message folio, "needs to go to Lord Erudil." Amira bowed her head instead of answering and Kaelyndra dismissed her by turning back to her work.

The soft sound of leather hitting the floor brought Kaelyndra's attention back to her maid— the folio lay at Amira's feet. Kaelyndra had never seen her drop anything in all her years of service— and what's more, she did not immediately reach to retrieve it. Instead she stood staring at her hands. "Majesty?" she whispered, her voice filled with fear.

Kaelyndra stood and swept around her desk to her handmaiden's side, who looked up at Kaelyndra with wide, terrified eyes. "Amira?" Kaelyndra said, raising her hand to touch the woman's shoulder.

Her hand passed through Amira's body without meeting any resistance.

Amira cried out and brought her hands to cover her mouth, hands that were now translucent. She took a step backwards and fell. Kaelyndra instinctively tried to catch her with no more success than her first effort. Amira collapsed to the ground as the substance of her body faded away. Kaelyndra gathered her personal magic and cast outward with a disruptive force that stopped cold all the power in her study— it even rendered the glowstones dark. Voices exclaimed from outside as the disruption pass through them and beyond, destroying long standing spells in its path.

But it did nothing to stop what was happening to Amira.

Ancient words spilled from Kaelyndra's lips, probing and questioning the atrocity at her feet and finding no answers. All she felt was Amira's life being drained away, but for no reason that Kaelyndra could grasp. In a desperate last attempt, Kaelyndra poured healing magic into Amira, enough that it should have brought her back from the very threshold of death, but it was useless— it was as if Amira was simply being unwoven from the tapestry of reality, and there was

nothing she could do to stop it. Before Kaelyndra's eyes Amira faded from this world.

Kaelyndra sprinted for the door and ripped it open, shouting at the top of her lungs, "Guards!"

Chapter 19

Seraph blinked slowly as Celeste's words sunk in. She was going to be one of the fighters. She was going to be fighting an ogre. Earlier she had wondered if Celeste was crazy or sadistic. Now it was obvious; she was both.

Good to know.

"Can I still bet on the other fighter? I'm pretty sure I'm going to lose."

"So pessimistic," Celeste said with a smirk.

"Well, let me think. My feet are cut to hell and I still can't feel my toes, I'm running a fever and I have a concussion, my shoulder is *dislocated* and my 'good' arm has a festering bite wound. So yeah, I'm not at the top of my game," Seraph finished bitterly. Celeste might be able to smite her where she sat, but right now Seraph didn't much care.

"And yet, you still managed to best my nagakin."

"I didn't best him. I caught him by surprise and pushed him down the stairs," Seraph replied. "I won't have surprise or stairs in a pit."

Celeste waved her hand as if dismissing a trivial matter. "Enough. As amusing as it would be to send you in as you are, I'm afraid the fight would be too short to please my customers. No, you may stop fretting. I will see to it that you are healed. You will also be given a weapon."

"A gun?"

"A sword."

"I don't know how to use a sword."

"I have every confidence that you will figure it out. Or die. Or figure it out and then die."

Seraph glared but Celeste's cool poise never wavered.

Then Seraph's cell phone rang.

Celeste sat back in her chair, clasping her hands in front of her and arching one sculpted eyebrow. "Please, feel free to answer. I'm sure it's important."

Seraph flushed with embarrassment and anger, but fumbled the phone out of her pocket. It was one of the only things she had taken with her. The small read out told her that it was 2:15am, it had been only an hour since she had bailed from Brad's car. Funny, it felt longer. The caller ID flashed with Gabe's name and number. Seraph wasn't surprised, even if he hadn't learned what had happened with Brad yet, she should have been home by now.

Despite, or because of, Celeste's condescending reassurance, she gave serious thought to not answering. It would not be a pleasant conversation no matter what he knew or didn't. The phone rang again. Then again, this might be the last time she got to talk to her brother. A third ring. Of course, nothing she could say would change or help the situation and she might make it worse.

One last ring before voice mail.

Seraph hit the answer button and brought the phone up to her ear. "Hey," she said softly with Celeste looking on.

"Seraph? Oh God, are you okay?" Gabe's voice sounded like it was coming down a long tunnel. "Where are you?"

"I'm okay. Or as okay as I can be," she answered. "Brad saw me." Maybe if she was vague enough Celeste wouldn't know what she was talking about. If Celeste didn't have super hearing or something equally stupid.

"I know. The police were here to question me, he came home in the middle of that after they were done with him."

"Why did they question you? And what did you tell them?"

"I didn't tell them anything and Brad didn't know anything. Everyone seems to think this is some sort of attack and they wanted to know if you had any enemies or money. That kind of stuff. We're supposed to call them if you show up."

"Great. That's great." Seraph let her eyes close and sighed. "You think there is any chance that you can talk him out of that?"

"I don't know... I don't think so," Gabe said. *"Where are you?"*

"I... I'm getting a magic thing."

"Another one!?"

"Yeah. Looks like."

"Goddamnit."

"Gabe, I..." Seraph covered her face with her hand, blocking out the reality around her. "I can't talk right now. I'll see you when I get home, alright? We'll figure out something then."

"Alright," he said finally.

"Great." For a long moment she sat silently, simply holding the tenuous connection to her brother. She no longer cared what Celeste heard or what she thought about it. "Gabe?"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you for being there for me... I love you."

"Come home safe."

Seraph disconnected the call.

Behind her desk, Celeste had a subtle smirk on her face. "Wandering around in the snow without shoes, but you still have your cell phone. It's good to have priorities."

Not having a good answer Seraph sat in sullen silence.

"I'm afraid that, as delightful as our conversation has been, you are not the only thing I need to attend to. I trust it should not be too much of a problem for you to wait in one of the spare rooms? You could even take the time to rest."

Once more Seraph said nothing. It didn't seem to matter. Celeste waved her hand and the door opened. Mr. Nagakin-the-security-guard was back. He had gotten a new pair of sunglasses at some point. Maybe he had a stash somewhere.

"If you don't mind, you'll need to leave your phone with me... and be searched for anything else that might complicate your time here," Celeste said.

Seraph did mind, but didn't think there was any point to objecting, so she handed her phone over and let Celeste's guard-snake search her. If he held a grudge, he didn't show it, and the pat down was professional and surprisingly painless. The whole thing was over quickly, because there wasn't anything else to find, and soon Seraph was following the guard out of the office. He led her back down the stairs and across the warehouse floor, opposite the direction she had entered. There were a few doors on that wall that she had overlooked before. The main arena had been somewhat distracting.

He took her to a non-descript metal door amidst other non-descript metal doors and unlocked it. Inside was what looked like a storage closet converted into a jail cell. A tiny cot, sans sheets, was pushed into a corner and a 100 watt bulb glared from a light fixture bolted to the ceiling. That was it. The room didn't even have a window. Taking a step inside, Seraph felt like she was being placed in solitary confinement, except prison probably would have been nicer. The door closed and locked behind her with a very decisive click that felt like a period being typed at the end of a short, unhappy story.

Seraph sat on the cot. Waiting for something bad to happen was not a new sensation. Years in the military during a time of war, and before that living in her own home, had given her plenty of time to become acquainted with the feeling. It was so familiar that it almost became a comfort in itself.

She would most likely die here. True, she had come face to face with threats on her life often enough, and a whole lot more than normal just recently, but this was hitting her worse than before. She felt cut off. Before, she had always had some support, someone or something to help her. Here now without that, Seraph found herself feeling... frail.

Seraph sighed. Hell, maybe she was just tired. Tired of having her arm trapped, Seraph pulled off her shirt and took off her sling. The shirt went back on, but the sling was tossed to the ground. Either she would be healed like Celeste promised, or she wouldn't, but she would want to be able to use her arm in any case. The cot was about as comfortable as the floor, but she had slept on worse. Swinging her legs up, she stretched out. There was just enough room for her to lie down without having her feet hanging over the edge of the mattress. How long would they keep her here?

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The sound of the door unlocking jerked her upright. It felt like she had just closed her eyes, yet her body was stiff and sore as if she had been sleeping for days. How much longer would this night go on? Hadn't this day started with her visiting Mrs. Miller? It felt like that had happened months ago.

The security guard was at the door again. He held it open without saying anything. Not that he needed to. Seraph understood; it was time. Seraph stood, hissing a little in pain as her feet hit the cold concrete floor, and followed him out to the arena.

Celeste was there. She stood well away from the pit by what looked like an open trap door. She was talking to two people and not paying the first bit of attention to Seraph. As Seraph limped closer she focused on the newcomers. They were short, very short, a full two heads shorter than her, and dressed in elaborate flowing robes. They also had fox tails. At first Seraph had thought they were just part of the strange outfits they wore, but they twitched and moved with minds of their own, clearly attached to their owners. Closer, she could see the two pointed, furred ears that topped the duo's heads. Their features were so fine and their clothes so loose that she couldn't tell what gender they were. Seraph idly wondered what they were, and if Celeste had any humans in her employ. One bowed and scampered away just as Seraph stopped a few feet from Celeste and the trap door.

"We will begin shortly," Celeste said without turning around. She was writing on a clipboard in her hand. "A sword is waiting for you in your starting place." A final mark, and the clipboard was handed off to the remaining fox person, who ran off with it.

"You said you would heal me." Seraph didn't hold high hopes that this would really happen, but she didn't want to go injured into the fight simply because the witch had forgotten.

"So I did." One of the fox people returned then and Celeste took its hand before approaching Seraph. One hand stayed on the fox person while the other rested on Seraph's shoulder. At first, Seraph didn't feel anything. Then, slowly, the pain seemed to drain away, like pulling the stopper from a full tub.

It felt wonderful.

Seraph's eyes slipped close as the burning left her arm, as the ache left her shoulder, as the throbbing left her feet. Not being in pain felt amazing and Seraph would have collapsed in relief if not for the strength that flowed into the spaces the pain left behind.

Then a sound, the tiniest whimper of a wounded animal.

Seraph's eyes snapped back open and she stared down at the crying fox person. It had fallen to its knees, one hand still clutching Celeste's. On its forearm Seraph could see red spots where blood had seeped through.

"Stop it!" Seraph screamed, ripping free of Celeste's touch.

Celeste blinked at her. "What?"

"What?" Seraph repeated, unable to comprehend the surreal cruelty. She shook her head, not wanting to. "I don't want anymore... *healing*," she spat the word. "I'm fine now."

Celeste simply shrugged one shoulder as if Seraph were acting silly.

The second fox person had come back. "The guests are starting to arrive," it said in a musical voice.

Celeste clapped her hands together. "Early and impatient. I knew they would be. Come." Celeste stepped away from Seraph to stand near the trap door. "Please, if you could take your place, we can get started," Celeste said with

all the grace and emotion of a hostess asking her guests to take their seats for dinner.

Coming closer Seraph saw that there were steps leading down and towards the pit. This must be how the fighters entered the arena. Seraph lifted her chin and walked down the steps. They were oddly large and awkward to a human stride; she guessed there weren't a whole lot of human fighters that used them. The doors slammed shut above her.

She stopped for a moment, but there was no going back, not now. So she went forward. There was a little light ahead of her; it was dim, but still bright enough that she could navigate the stairs without breaking her neck. Wouldn't that be a ridiculous end to this madness. Surviving monsters and magic only to die after tripping over her own feet.

The stairs ended in a wide landing. There was no wall on the opposite side, just a large set of double, steel doors that were at least eight feet high. Light came through a metal grate in the ceiling, and through it Seraph could see the factory ceiling, but nothing else. Sound came through too, and Seraph could hear people starting to arrive.

Propped up against one of the walls was the promised sword. It was a little longer than her forearm and heavier than she thought it would be, with a one handed grip. It was sharp, not exceptionally so, but Seraph figured it probably didn't need to be. Experimentally she swung it from side to side like a machete. There was a shield too. Seraph *really* had no idea how to use that. But she wasn't about to turn down anything that might help.

Time passed. She didn't know how long, but it was long enough that the adrenaline began to wane and boredom replaced it. She sat down on the last step to wait.

Waiting sucked.

Okay, well, she had the time, might as well do something with it. Seraph started stretching. Not only was it a good way to prepare, but it also gave her a good idea of the condition her body was in. There was still a heavy twinge in her shoulder when she tried to move it too much, but everything else seemed to be working.

The white noise of the crowd above, which had steadily grown louder while Seraph was working out, went silent suddenly. Seraph looked up but her small window to the upper stairs didn't show her anything new. A low feminine voice was projected over the arena, too low for Seraph to make out the words, but she recognized it as Celeste. Whatever she was saying was greeted with applause and a metallic grinding.

The door was opening.