

Wild Wonderland

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Chapter One

The house seemed hollow without Uncle Ted in it. I looked around the rambling Victorian mansion and wondered how he had made it feel so warm, so homey. Now, it felt like a mausoleum; a place haunted by the past.

I was entirely alone.

My parents had died when I was a child; some awful car accident that I don't remember. Uncle Ted was all the family I had—was the only company I had—period. He had looked after me, raised me, and saw to it that I had a good education. Most importantly, he had loved me.

Yeah, he was a little strange; a fact that I hadn't realized until I had begun to attend school. Then I discovered that not all little girls learned self-defense at age three, or swordplay at five, or jujitsu at seven. Well, maybe the last one, but I'm not certain of that. Most parents didn't have a laboratory in their basements either, nor did they warn their children about touching mirrors or the dangers of unknown holes in the ground.

My childhood may have been a bit lonely, but it had also been magical. Uncle Ted told me stories about imaginary worlds where men could turn into animals and where kingdoms were divided by the suits of playing cards. In Uncle Ted's world, caterpillars smoked hookahs, mice drank tea, and rabbits wore waistcoats (whatever that was).

Uncle Ted would have tea parties with me when I was a little girl, warning me that drinking too much would shrink me down to the size of a pea, but eating the cake would restore me. He admonished me to always tread lightly through flowerbeds because

you never know when the flowers might be napping, and how would I like it if someone tromped through my bed and woke me up? He taught me the value of time and instilled a deep respect for it in me. I knew never to waste it or take it for granted because that was very rude as well. Ted had been the best man I'd ever known, and now, he was dead.

I dropped to my knees and sobbed, covering my face with my hands. I'd never made any friends, mostly because Uncle Ted discouraged it. As much as he was a kind and generous man, he was also extremely paranoid. Ted didn't trust anyone and had hammered that same sense of distrust into me. I was angry at him for that because now that he was gone, I had no one. I had buried him without a service since there had been no one there to mourn him except for myself, and then I had come home to this empty house. We were wealthy people, which was probably why Uncle Ted was so paranoid, but money is nothing if you have no one to share it with.

“Well, it's about damn time!”

My head jerked up at the sound of the masculine voice. There, on the stairs before me, stood a man. He was about my age, with pure white hair and pale skin. He wore an old fashioned suit without a jacket, but with a lovely tapestry vest, from which he pulled a gold pocket watch. He peered at the watch, then at me.

“I was expecting you thirty-three minutes ago,” he chided me.

“Who are you?” I asked him as I stood. “And what are you doing in my house?”

“This isn't simply a house, my dear.” He grimaced. “It's a gateway.”

“A gateway to what?”

“To where,” he corrected me. “And I suppose that was

inaccurate as well. The gate lies *beneath* the house. The building itself is merely a disguise. Subterfuge for the subterranean entrance to Wonderland.”

“I know jujitsu,” I warned him.

“Yes,” he drew out the word as he narrowed his eyes on me. “I assume that's some kind of warrior training that Theodore taught you.”

“You knew my uncle?” I gaped at him.

“Alice, dear,” he huffed. “I knew your whole family. I was present at your birth.”

“Well, how was I supposed to know that?” I nearly shrieked.

“Didn't Theodore tell you?” The man scowled. “That was remiss of him. Perhaps he left you a letter somewhere?”

“A letter? Telling me that a man was going to meet me after his funeral?” I rolled my eyes. “Sure, it must be here somewhere.”

“A letter telling you who you really are, Alice Wild,” the man said sternly.

“Wild?” I asked. “My last name is Turner.”

“By all that's bloody, it is not!” The man appeared deeply offended. “What an awful name. I suppose Theodore thought it was amusing—turning away from Wonderland or something silly like that. Turner is an action, not a name, and it is *not* yours. It belongs to an earther, one of *those* people.” He waved his hand toward my front door. “You are a Wild, the last Wild in all existence, and heir to the throne of Wonderland.”

“Oh, wow.” I blinked at him. “You're bonkers, completely mad. There's a crazy person in my house.”

“As if that has any bearing whatsoever,” he huffed. “Now, I assume that Theodore would have left something for you in his laboratory. Shall we?”

“How do you know about the laboratory?”

“Alice, do keep up,” he snapped. “I know you and your uncle. I've been here several times to check on you and receive progress reports for Their Majesties. The Card Kings of Wonderland are very concerned for your safety.”

“The Card Kings?” I asked as I followed him downstairs to the basement. “You just said that I was the heir. Maybe you should rethink your delusions.”

“Ugh.” He rolled his eyes. “I don't have the patience to explain all of this to you, just hurry up!”

“Where are we going?”

“To Wonderland!” He stopped and turned to stare at me in bafflement. “Are you a bit slow? Theodore never told me you were stupid.”

“I am not stupid!”

“All right then,” he growled, “let's go.”

“I'm not going anywhere with you! I don't even know your name.” I stopped midway down the stairs.

“I am Warren White.” He bowed. “At your service, Queen Alice.”

“Oh, now I'm a queen.” I chuckled. “I can't believe this day.”

“You must!” Warren declared. “If you do not believe, we are all lost, Your Majesty.”

“All right, easy now, Warren.” I held up my hands. “It was an exclamation. Although, I’m not too sure what you want me to believe in.”

“Why, in yourself, of course! And it would be foolish not to since so many others already believe in you. Truly; how much belief does one woman require?”

“Who believes in me?”

“Nearly all of Wonderland,” Warren growled. “Enough of this! Let’s go, Alice! We’re already late!”

“Okay, Warren.” I rolled my eyes and followed him down to the basement.

I know it sounds crazy, but I was just happy not to be alone. I didn’t care if the man was a lunatic, at least I didn’t have to think about Theodore lying dead in the ground while I laid in an empty house. Anything was better than that.

“Aha!” Warren was in my uncle’s laboratory, at his desk, and had found an envelope in the drawer. “Here it is. I knew he’d leave word for you.”

Warren handed me the envelope, and I saw that it had my name scrawled across the front of it in my uncle’s handwriting. I scowled at it a moment before I tore open the sealed envelope and read it aloud.

“Alice, my sweet girl, there is so much that I haven’t told you, but I’m sure that Warren will explain; either him or Nicholas. You can trust them completely, as well as the Card Kings. They all have your best interests at heart because your best interests are also theirs. Things are about to get topsy-turvy for you, Alice. I wish that I could be there to help you, but if you’re reading this, it means that time has come to an end for me. It runs here, not like over there, and I have lost track of it, it seems. But your time is now, Alice. I have done the best I could for you. I have given you the

tools you'll need in the days to come. Fight, my sweet girl; fight for Wonderland and her people because both belong to you. You are the last of the Wilds, and Wonderland needs you. Remember what I've taught you; all the stories are true. Keep your heart and mind open; love is not always what we expect it to be. All my love, Uncle Ted. PS Follow the white rabbit."

"Okay, are you ready now?" Warren asked impatiently.

"No, I'm not ready now," I huffed. "What does this mean? Wonderland needs me? I'm the last of the Wilds? Follow a damn rabbit?"

"That last bit would be me," Warren said. "But first, we need to make you small enough to follow me."

"Will this start making sense soon?"

"Absolutely not," he declared primly. "Sense is for earthers; wonderlanders know that the best sense is non. Ah, yes, here it is!" He took a crystal bottle down from a bookshelf and handed it to me. "Just one sip. Too much and you'll be the size of—"

"A pea," I finished as I took the bottle.

"He did tell you! Excellent. Drink up."

"This is absurd," I said as I took the bottle. Then I noticed the label tied to it. Again, my uncle's handwriting. I read, "Drink me, Alice." I grimaced at the bottle. "Well, that's to the point. Oh, why not?"

I uncorked the bottle and took a sip.

"Hurry; hand it over before you drop it," Warren said as he snatched the bottle away from me and tucked it into his vest.

His voice seemed to echo around me as my world grew, or I shrunk, rather. I jolted in shock as I stared up at Warren's massive

body. His legs were like redwoods.

“All right, in you go.” He waved his hand behind the same bookshelf that he had taken the bottle from. “Don't worry; I have the cake.” He patted his vest pocket.

I went to the edge of the bookshelf and peered around it. It was pulled out just enough for a small animal to crawl behind it, or a very small Alice. And there was a hole in the stone wall.

“Come on, Alice. I don't have all day,” Warren huffed.

Then Warren's body shimmered and shrank. I leapt back as he became a fluffy, white rabbit. All of his clothing disappeared except for his tapestry vest, which shrank along with him. Warren the White Rabbit hopped past me and into the hole.

“Follow the white rabbit,” I whispered to myself. “What the fuck is happening to me?”

“Hurry up, Alice!” The White Rabbit called.

So, I followed him into his hole. At the point, I really had no choice.

Chapter Two

A few feet into the hole, the ground dropped out from under me, and I started to fall. I screamed for awhile, and then I realized that I was floating more than I was falling. I opened my eyes warily and saw the root-veined earth slowly shift into raw stone, and then into polished marble. I ran my hand along the side of the tube I fell through and found myself slowly approaching it as my point of gravity altered. Everything turned around on me, and the walls of the tube became the bottom of a shaft until I was sliding down the slick stone and out into a circular room. My butt skidded across the marble floor, losing momentum, and then I came to a squeaking stop.

Warren was still in his rabbit form, waiting for me near a curved wall, tapping his foot impatiently.

“Hurry up, Alice!” He hopped over to one of five doors that were spaced around the room and kicked it open.

The door Warren chose was the only rabbit-sized door in the place. The other doors were of a size more appropriate for the average human. Since I was still a miniature version of myself, I didn't concern myself with the other doors, but I did note that they each bore a symbol from a deck of playing cards; the heart and diamond were both red, and the spade and club were black. I hadn't caught the symbol on the back of the tiny door, or if there had been one at all, and I didn't think about looking for it until after I was through.

Then I had other things to concern myself with.

At first, I thought we were in a forest; then I realized that the monstrous trunks, slick and green, were actually flower stalks.

I had stopped to stare up through the cover of their enormous leaves, at the vibrant petals above me, and Warren hadn't noticed. He just kept hopping ahead, all Little Bunny Foo Foo—until the flowers attacked me.

With a trumpeting sound, a daffodil knocked me off my feet. Then a tiger lily growled and undulated its stalk down to... well, stalk me. I shrieked and rolled into a fighting stance, ready to punch out some petunias, when Warren doubled back and placed himself before me protectively.

“This is the Wild Heir, you foolish flowers!” Warren shouted as he thumped his back leg. “Do you not know your queen?”

The flowers froze, then lowered their heads to brush me with inquisitive petals. I straightened out of my crouch, looking at the monstrous blooms warily. By the time they were done inspecting me, I was covered in pollen, but they seemed satisfied. The blossoms bent double as if they were bowing.

“Now, if you don't mind,” Warren said primly, “we're expected at tea. I swear, the hurrier I go, the behinder I get!”

The flowers eased back, properly chastised, and Warren and I continued up the path.

“Do not tarry, Your Majesty,” Warren snapped. “Tulgey Wood is full of many dangers, and we've only just entered it. We still need to pass by the Bandersnatch burrow before we reach our rendezvous point.”

“Who are we meeting?” I asked.

“The others,” he said. “You'll know them when you meet them.”

“Obviously,” I huffed and trudged after him. “Can't we get big now? Then we wouldn't have to worry about joining the War

of the Roses. Also, I can't believe I just said that.”

“What have I said about belief, Alice?”

“To have some?” I was baffled.

“Absolutely,” he said approvingly. “We cannot grow right now. It's easier to get by the bandersnatch when you're small.”

“What's a bandersnatch?”

“A frumious creature with a long neck and snapping jaws,” Warren said gravely.

“What the hell does frumious mean?” I gave him my bewildered face.

“It is the concise word for the bandersnatch's fuming and furious character,” Warren instructed me. “Don't you have words that combine other words into one, much more simpler word?”

“Uh-huh sure.”

“The bandersnatch is very quick, but pays no mind to small creatures such as we are currently.”

“Why not?”

“Well, what sort of meal would we make?” Warren huffed. “We aren't worth the effort. If he paid us mind, he'd have nothing left to give the larger creatures.”

“Oh, I see.” I veered around a pebble the size of a boulder and scowled at my black dress. “Maybe I should have changed before we left. You might have warned me about the terrain.”

“You did change”—he glanced at me with a frown—“you're much smaller than you were.”

“I meant my clothes,” I snapped.

“Oh.” Warren stopped and looked me over. “Yes, I see. Nothing to be done for it now. Perhaps we can find you something more colorful at the tea party. Come on; we're late.”

“Yes, so you've said.” I rolled my eyes. “Colorful, indeed. Yes, that's the problem with my outfit; it's not colorful enough.”

Creepy cries echoed through the woods around us, and the underbrush we journeyed through shivered as if it were afraid. I was tense, searching this strange place as we walked through it, uncertain which direction trouble would come from, but sure that it would come. Through the swaying blades of grass, I could glimpse massive tree trunks looming above us. They seemed too large to exist and made horrendous creaking noises that hurt my ears. Beetles the size of a VW bug scampered up to us, startling me, but Warren just huffed at them, and they hurried away.

“How much farther?” I asked. “You realize that I'm wearing heels?”

“Heels?” Warren narrowed his beady rabbit eyes on my feet. “Now, why would you do that?”

“I just got home from my uncle's funeral!”

“Keep your voice down,” Warren hissed. “We've only just passed the bandersnatch.”

“You said that he wouldn't bother with us.”

“You don't seem like you'd be a bother,” a voice purred from above us. “No bother at all.”

“Cat!” Warren cried. “Well met.”

“Yes, well, indeed,” the voice intensified as a feline face parted the grass to peer at me. It was a dark gray tabby with green eyes that glowed. “You two are late.”

“I keep telling her that, but she doesn't seem to hear me.”

Warren gave me an annoyed look.

“I can hear you just fine.” I rolled my eyes. “I just can't walk very well in these shoes.”

“Why did you put them on if you can't walk in them?” The cat asked.

“I didn't think I'd be walking through the woods today.”

“Hmm, not much of a planner, are you?” The cat sniffed me. “But you are a Wild, that much is certain.”

“Of course she's a Wild,” Warren snapped. “I fetched her myself. This is Alice.”

“Then I am at your service, Your Majesty,” the cat said.

“Who are you?” I asked it.

“Interesting question,” the cat murmured. “I knew who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have changed several times by then.”

“I don't need you to give me some esoteric bullshit on your inner you,” I huffed. “Just tell me who you are.”

“Do you want my name, rank, or affiliation?” The cat asked as its head turned in a complete circle.

I gaped at it until I realized that the cat was floating and his whole body had turned along with his head. Oh yes, a floating feline is so much easier to accept than a fully rotating head.

“This is insane,” I whispered. “Utter madness.”

“Don't worry about that,” the hovering cat said. “We're all mad here. I'm mad, you're mad, he's mad.”

“How do you that I'm mad?” I huffed. “We've only just

met.

“You must be, or you wouldn't have come here.”

“Oh, fantastic,” I said dryly. “And to answer your earlier question; just a name will suffice.”

“That's no fun,” the cat pouted. “How can I show off my prowess to my new queen if she doesn't allow me to give her my rank and affiliation?”

“Then why did you even ask me?”

“I was being polite.”

“Would you just tell her who you are already so that we can get on with it?” Warren grumbled.

“I am Nicholas of the Order of Cheshire, Knight of Wilds,” the cat bowed. “And I shall see you safely to tea, Queen Alice.”

“I am seeing her safely to—oh, never mind.” Warren started hopping away. “We're late enough as it is. I can't find my damn gloves either,” he kept muttering as he went.

“My uncle told me to trust Nicholas,” I said. “Is that you?”

“Yes, I knew your mother's brother well. I knew all of your family. If you will climb onto my shoulders, Your Majesty?” Nicholas said as he lowered himself before me. “I shall carry you to the rendezvous point faster than you can walk.”

“Thank you, Sir Nicholas.” I climbed onto his shoulders and took huge handfuls of fur.

“Call me Nick,” he said and shot through the air.

“Do not start the meeting without me!” Warren shouted after us.”

I clung to the flying cat as Tulgey Wood whizzed by, but soon, he was slowing down to circle a clearing. In the center of this clearing there was a little house, and in front of the house, there was a long table set haphazardly with all manner of porcelain plates, teacups, saucers, and eating implements. An enormous cake sat in the middle of the table, with smaller cakes surrounding it, and several teapots ranged down each end. Three individuals sat around the table: a man, a brown rabbit, and a mouse.

“A mouse drinking tea,” I whispered, thinking of my uncle's stories. “The stories really are true.”

“I'm sure they are,” Nick said. “whatever you're speaking of. There's usually a grain of truth in every word uttered. It's just that sometimes you have to search harder to find it. Once you do, however, you can make some lovely bread.”

“You cannot make bread from grains of truth,” I said.

“Of course you can.” Nick smoothed his whiskers sagely. “Truth bread is the tastiest, but it can be hard to swallow.”

“Then you should eat cake!” The man at the table declared. “Where's the cake?”

“It's right in front of you, Hatter.” Nick rolled his eyes and himself, taking me along for the ride. “I prefer bread and butter.”

“Is that she?” The man asked as he stood so violently that his chair crashed back onto the Persian carpet that had been laid over the grass.

Hatter; well, he did have a large hat on, so his name seemed appropriate. It was a garish green hat, with a paisley band about it and a flat brim. A card tucked into the band read: In this style 10/6. Whatever the hell that meant.

“Yes, this is Queen Alice,” Nick said as he floated down to the table.

“You're awfully small for a wild queen,” Hatter noted. “I seem to remember the Wilds as being much more magnificent in stature. Much more muchier. Have you lost your muchness?”

“She took some of Theodore's potion so that she could come through the gate,” Warren panted as he hopped into the clearing. Then he shifted into his human form, regaining his lost clothing, and smoothed out the wrinkled fabric. “I will rectify her size immediately.”

Warren strode over to me as I slid off of Nick's neck. He took a petite four out of his pocket and placed it on the table beside me. I stared at it in consternation.

“I don't think—” I started to say, but was cut off by Hatter.

“Then you shouldn't speak!”

I rolled my eyes and began again, “Please tell me that you don't expect me to eat all of this.”

“Of course not,” Warren cried. “You're not a pig, are you?”

“Pig!” The brown rabbit exclaimed, spilling his tea as he jerked in fright. “I hate pigs! They have a disturbing tendency of turning into babies.”

“Shut up, March Hare!” The mouse squeaked as it jolted out of its teacup. It had fallen asleep over the rim. “There aren't any pigs or babies here.”

“Oh, yes, quite right, Dormouse.” Hare settled down.

“Just take a little nibble, dear,” Dormouse said to me. “The more you eat, the bigger you get, and we don't want you squishing us.”

I followed her instruction and took a bite. Tingling spread through my body, and I fell over the edge of the table as my form grew. My feet touched the ground before my butt could hit, and I

stood to my normal height.

“That's better.” I sighed. “I've imagined being little before, but that was so much worse than I'd thought it would be.”

“Never imagine yourself not to be otherwise than what it might appear to others that what you were, or might have been, was not otherwise than what you had been, would have appeared to them to be otherwise,” Hatter said sagely.

I gaped at him.

“Ah, yes, I see the resemblance now.” Hatter peered at me with dark eyes as he settled his jacket more firmly about him. “You look like your mother.”

“She does, actually,” Nick said with some surprise. “Striking resemblance.”

“Why is that shocking?” I asked the floating cat, who was paddling through the air currents on his back.

“It's not.” Nick smirked. “What's surprising is that the Mad Hatter noticed it.”

Then Nick's form shimmered like a heatwave on a highway, and the blur of his body grew. When he came into focus again, he was a sleekly muscled young man with short, dark hair stripped horizontally with gray. He wore a soldier's uniform; leather boots, cotton pants, a sword belted at his waist, and a tunic emblazoned with a small gold jester's cap on its breast.

“Your Majesty.” Nick gave me a more formal bow.

“A wild card,” I said as I noted the emblem, which was positioned inside the outline of a playing card, like a coat of arms.

“Your family's heraldic device.” Nick waved a hand to the emblem.

“A Jester?” I chuckled. “How fitting. This feels like a joke.”

“Do you mean that it feels like a laugh?” Hatter asked. “Because a joke has no feeling.”

“Yes, I suppose I did.” I shrugged.

“Then you should say what you mean,” the Hare chided me.

“I do.” I scowled at the rabbit. “At least, I mean what I say—that’s the same thing.”

Dear God, now they had me talking like them.

“Not the same thing a bit!” Said the Hatter. “You might as well say that ‘I see what I eat’ is the same thing as ‘I eat what I see!’”

“You might just as well say that ‘I like what I get’ is the same thing as ‘I get what I like,’” added the March Hare.

“You might as well say,” Dormouse added as she drifted back to sleep, “that ‘I breathe when I sleep’ is the same thing as ‘I sleep when I breathe!’”

“Yes,” I agreed. “The jester is fitting because I’m surrounded by fools.”

“The fool can do anything,” Hatter said sagely, “because he doesn’t know that he can’t.”

“Okay, zen master,” I muttered.

“I am absolutely a master of then,” Hatter declared. “Or is it now?” His face fell.

“*Then*; it’s definitely then,” Hare helped.

“No, you simpleton, it's now,” the mouse argued.

“Do you know what they're talking about?” I asked Nick as I eased away from the table.

“It's the curse,” Nick said soberly. “Hatter once tried to sing for the Queen of Hearts, and she accused him of murdering time.”

“She sentenced him to death,” Warren said as he joined us.

“Off with his head!” Hatter shouted.

“But Hatter escaped,” Nick added. “He's almost cat-like in his ability to slip away.”

“He escaped?” I lifted a brow, pointedly looking at the man who was currently trying to fit an entire slice of cake into his mouth.

“He may be insane, but it's a mad genius,” Nick said. “It's why we chose to include him in our alliance.”

“All right,” I gave in. “But what is the 'then and now' all about?”

“Time got angry that Hatter was not punished for his murder,” Warren explained.

“Excuse me?” I blinked at the serious men.

“Well, to be fair, Hatter *was* convicted,” Nick said.

“Of murdering time,” I added.

“Yes, *Father Time*,” Warren said.

“Time is a person?” I asked.

“He is a being,” Nick clarified. “But that's neither here nor there.”

“How can it not be here or there?” Hatter asked. “If it can be anywhere, it must be in one of those two places.”

“Just so,” Nick agreed and then returned to his explanation. “Time was angry that Hatter escaped, and when he confronted Hatter about it, Hatter, being Hatter, made a few jokes and recited some poetry.”

“Oh,” I murmured.

“How Doth the Little Crocodile,” Warren said.

“How doth he what?” I asked.

“No, that was the name of the poem Hatter recited.”

“I prefer Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Bat,” Hare said.

“Or The Mouse's Tale,” Dormouse added.

“Yes, both are lovely.” Warren grimaced. “But Father Time does not like poetry.”

“Time halted himself in respect to the Hatter and his favorite companions, cursing them to forever live in the hour of 6 PM.”

“Tea time,” Warren said grimly.

“Forever stuck having tea,” I said. “I would grow tired of cake.”

“Cake? I love cake!” Hatter said, splattering cake crumbs everywhere. “You can never have too much cake or tea. Though I do enjoy little sandwiches now and then.”

“What is it; now or then?” Hare asked.

“Dear me! I don't know!” Hatter declared. “I think it's forever now, but it could be forever then. How long is forever?”

“Sometimes, just a second,” Hare said.

“A second! Yes, I’ll second that second,” Hatter cried as his eyes started to get larger–crazier.

“George,” a deep voice came from behind me, “easy now, old friend. You are both now and then. All the seconds are yours.”

I turned to see a hooded man walk into the clearing. He had a warrior’s build, and a sword buckled to his hips that cemented my initial impression. His hands were thick and calloused, but a gold signet ring adorned one of them. He walked quietly, and so did the men who accompanied him. I barely noticed that they were there until they surrounded us.

“Relax,” Nick said as I tensed. “It’s the King of Spades; he’s on our side.”

The King of Spades laid a hand on Hatter’s shoulder. Hatter–George–went still and stared up into the shadows of the hood. His eyes softened, and he calmed.

“Thank you, Jaxon,” Hatter whispered.

“Of course,” Jaxon, the King of Spades, turned to face me as he pushed back his hood.

I swallowed convulsively and prayed that I wouldn’t make a fool of myself, despite it being my family crest. King Jaxon was the most gorgeous man I’d ever laid eyes on. And that includes in movies. No celebrity could hold a candle to this Card King. He had features that looked as if a love goddess had personally sculpted them to be the most perfect example of mankind. His lips were lush but not too soft, his nose was regal but not too slim, and his brow was noble but not too high. And in the middle of all of that was a pair of eyes bluer than the Pacific on a hot day.

I felt a little dizzy. Was I going to faint? Oh, please don’t let me faint. That would just be the cherry on top of my sundae of

insanity.

“Queen Alice?” His voice was like honey over hot stones; sweet and steamy.

“Yes,” I squeaked, and then cleared my throat. “Yeah, that's me, I guess.”

“You guess?” His brows lifted. “You should never guess about something so important.”

“I just found out about all this today, Spade,” I growled. “Give me a fucking break.”

I nearly smacked my hand over my mouth. I had a tendency of being a bitch to attractive men. Maybe it was bitter grapes over knowing that I could never have them. Whatever it was, it was subconscious, and I had no control over it.

“Did you just call me 'Spade?’” His lips twitched.

“Yep. You want me to call you Jax instead?” I asked. “I don't know the etiquette between monarchs, and frankly, J-Spade, I don't give a damn. I've been shrunk, fell through a hole, assaulted by flowers, and forced to tromp through the woods in high heels today—my patience is wearing thin.”

King Jaxon burst out laughing, and the soldiers standing around us, dressed all in black and very menacing in appearance, stared at their king in shock. I stared at him in open longing. Laughter made him ten times hotter. Ugh, I was going to get really mean, I just knew it.

“Charming,” King Jaxon whispered. “Just like your mother.”

My face fell. I had very few memories of my mother, and they were all hazy. First Hatter had said that I resembled her, and now this guy made another reference. On top of his untouchable

hotness, it was too much. I'd just buried my last family member that very day, and I had reached my breaking point.

I turned around and walked out of the clearing.

“Alice?” Nick called after me.

“I need a minute,” I called back, waving my hand over my shoulder absently. “Don't worry, I know about the bandersnatch burrow.”

I wandered just a few feet away and found a convenient tree to lay my forehead against. The rough bark felt real, more real than this place had a right to be, and I placed my palms against it for good measure. Then a pair of strong hands folded over my shoulders. I was so startled that I swung about and flat-palmed a punch into my attacker's solar plexus.

Except he wasn't attacking me. The King of Spades had been trying to comfort me and had not been expecting me to attack him. Nonetheless, he responded with impressive speed; deflecting my punch with his wrist, and using my momentum to pull me off balance.

I teetered, he caught me, and I wound up in his embrace, staring up into his stunning eyes. I was so close that I could see striations of indigo and amethyst in them. Jaxon stared back at me, his eyes going liquid and his arms tightening. His smell hit me then: cedar and musk. I breathed in deep.

“Duke Theodore taught you well,” he whispered, his stare falling to my lips. “But I'm your ally, Alice. I swear to you; you're safe with me.”

“I know,” my voice had dropped to a low purr. “You just startled me.”

“My apologies, Your Majesty.” He smiled. “I only wanted to offer you some comfort.”

“I’m good.” I pushed out of his arms, even though it was the last thing I wanted to do, and his eyes betrayed his disappointment for just a second. “It’s been a rough day. I simply needed a few seconds to process.”

“I understand,” he said crisply. “Are you ready to return now? We have much to discuss.”

“Sure.”

I took King Jaxon's arm and let him escort me back to the Mad Tea Party

Chapter Three

“How much do you know about what's happening in Wonderland?” King Jaxon asked me as he held a chair out for me.

“Very little,” I admitted. “Someone was rushing me.” I gave Warren a pointed look.

“We were late.” Warren sniffed.

“Late!” Hare shouted, waking up the mouse.

“Eh, now, stop with all the shouting,” Dormouse mumbled, then curled back up in her teacup.

“Dormouse is always tired,” Hatter whispered dramatically to me.

“Because you louts are exhausting,” Dormouse muttered.

“Wonderland is divided into four Card Kingdoms.” Jaxon ignored the banter and poured me a cup of tea. “Spades, Clubs, Diamonds, and Hearts,” he said the last scathingly. “But we were ruled over by one royal family; the Wild Cards. Your parents kept the peace between the kingdoms, directing our talents into their best employments, and making Wonderland into a safe and prosperous environment for everyone.”

“Until the Queen of Hearts set her eyes on your father,” Hatter growled, his eyes narrowing. “Pin your heart to the cat's tail and watch the kitty wail. Why is a cat like a chessboard?”

“Easy, George,” Jaxon said. “We have King Altair's daughter here, remember? We will right this wrong.”

“Yes, yes, I remember now.” Hatter focused on me intensely. “You’re home, at last, Alice.”

“Am I?” I looked around the strange place and my even stranger dining companions. “Is this where I was born?”

“You were born in the Wilds,” Jaxon said.

“I was born in the wild?” I asked in horror. “I thought I was royal?”

“The Wilds is the name for the castle your family lived in.” Jaxon chuckled. “It’s just there.”

Jaxon pointed above the trees, and I looked in the direction he indicated. There was a magnificent castle of black, red, and white stone perched on a cliff above the forest. Its sleek towers were topped with gold poles, but no banners flew from them. The castle was empty, I could tell that, even from this distance. It exuded an air of abandonment.

“Tell me more,” I looked back to the King of Spades. “What happened to my parents?”

“As George here said”—Jaxon sighed—“the Queen of Hearts developed an affection for your father. He did not return it. He was still mourning your mother, who died when you were only two.”

“My mother died before my father?” I asked. “Uncle Ted told me they were in an accident together. All three of us, but only I made it.”

“Well, it’s obvious that your uncle didn’t want you to know of your lineage until it was necessary,” Nick said as he balanced his chair back on two legs. “Smart man; Ted was not as flighty as the rest of us. Though he did take flight with you, so perhaps he was *more* flighty than the rest of us.”

“Queen Julia, your mother,” Jaxon went on, “did have an

accident. In a way. There was a dangerous beast who used to terrorize the villages and your mother tried to conquer it, using her Wild magic.”

“Wild magic?” I asked.

“Every royal has an ability that they are born with,” Warren explained. “A magic that is passed down through their line. The House of Spades are magnificent warriors.” Warren paused to bow to King Jaxon, and Jaxon nodded back regally. “The House of Diamonds has a talent for amassing wealth. The House of Clubs has healing magic, and—”

“Healing?” I interrupted. “How is healing relevant to a club?”

“The club symbol is actually a clover,” Jaxon said patiently as Warren huffed indignantly over my interruption. “It represents nature and the power of plants to heal. Most clubbers have a talent for potion making as well. King Bevan taught your uncle the art.”

“Oh, okay.”

“May I continue?” Warren asked.

“You interrupted my story first, White,” Jaxon reminded Warren.

“Oh, quite right, Your Majesty,” Warren stammered. “My apologies.”

“Then you won't mind if I take over?” Jaxon smiled, shooting me a conspiratorial wink.

“Not at all.” Warren bowed out, literally.

“Let's see,” Jaxon murmured. “Oh yes, last there is the House of Hearts, with the power of love.”

“But you didn't tell me about the Wild magic,” I reminded

him.

“Yes, the Wild.” Jaxon sighed. “The reason the House of Wilds ruled Wonderland was that they possessed all of those other magics along with an additional, unknown power that each Wild child was born with. There are several wild magics, but so far, only five have manifested; Cut, Shuffle, Deal, Fold, and Front. Your father was not born a Wild; he married your mother and became king in that manner. It was your mother who had the true power in Wonderland. She was born with an ability to cast illusions, also known as Fronting.”

“Illusions?” I frowned. “Like hallucinations?”

“Queen Julia could make you see and believe whatever she wished,” Jaxon said. “She had the best poker face around and could put up a good front. Combined with her deadly skill with a blade, it made her nearly invincible.”

“Nearly,” I whispered.

“Yes,” Jaxon said grimly. “Her Majesty may have been a bit overconfident. She had the best intentions when she went to face the Jabberwocky, but she insisted that she didn't need any help. She bade your father remain at the castle with you while she handled the beast.”

“What's a Jabberwocky?” I asked.

“Jabberwocky!” Hare screeched, jumped up, and ran across the table, disrupting the Dormouse again and overturning several small cakes.

“Where?” Dormouse asked.

“Beware the Jabberwock,” Hatter growled, “the jaws that bite, the claws that catch!”

“It's a terrible monster with fiery eyes and skin as thick as

an elephant,” King Jaxon said gravely. “Similar to what earthers call a dragon.”

“My mother tried to kill a dragon?” I asked.

“And instead, it killed her,” Jaxon said gently. “Your father was devastated, but the Queen of Hearts didn't care. A mere year after Queen Julia's death, Queen Rina tried to seduce King Altair.”

“The foul succubus!” Hatter screamed as he grabbed the still bouncing Hare and set him in an empty seat; of which, there were several.

“Foul,” Hare agreed and then snatched up a chicken salad sandwich. He inspected it and proclaimed again, but with a different meaning, “Fowl!” He ate with gusto.

“The Queen of Hearts failed to seduce King Altair,” King Jaxon said. “It was the first time that her magic had failed her, and it was a bit of an embarrassment as she had been public in her flirtations.”

“Do not tell me that this bitch killed my father because he wouldn't fuck her,” I growled.

King Jaxon's eyes went wide, and his lips twitched. “You are most assuredly your mother's daughter. I now fully believe Duke Theodore.”

“You believe what?”

“Your uncle, the Duke,” Jaxon explained. “He would send us reports on you—updates giving us hope that someday the last Wild Card would be put into play and take back her throne. I was uncertain that you would be strong enough to face Queen Rina after being raised an earther, but now, I see that I was wrong. You fight with fists *and* words. You are the Queen of Wilds.”

“Tell me what happened to my father.” I waved aside his

praise.

“The Queen of Hearts murdered him,” Jaxon said simply. “Without Queen Julia to hold the Wild throne, and you only a babe, the House of Wilds was vulnerable. Queen Rina exploited that vulnerability. Love can be a very powerful magic; people will do horrible things in the name of love, and the Queen of Hearts used it to coerce some Wild knights into betraying their king. They opened the castle to the Heart army.”

“How did I escape?” I asked.

“There was just enough time for your uncle to snatch you out of your bed and run with you,” Nick answered. “I led him through the escape tunnels myself.”

“Why didn't my father escape with us?” I asked.

“Your father knew that they were there for him,” King Jaxon said. “If he had gone with you, you both would have perished. Altair chose to make a stand and give you the time you needed to flee.”

“And none of you other kingdoms did anything?” I narrowed my eyes on King Jaxon. “You just let this bitch get away with murder?”

“The Wild knights were not the only traitors.” Jaxon grimaced. “While your father battled for his life, our kingdoms faced similar situations. Queen Rina planned a coup, not just of the Wilds, but of Wonderland in its entirety. We *all* lost our kingdoms that day. The King of Diamonds also lost his queen.”

“I'm so sorry,” I whispered. “Did you lose someone too?”

“Several of my men were killed,” Jaxon said. “But I had no wife to lose. I've been a bit of a bachelor, like the King of Clubs.”

“So, there are three kings left and one queen,” I mused.

“Two queens, Your Majesty,” Nick pointed out. “Two queens facing each other across a chessboard.”

“But only one of them has a kingdom,” I noted. “So, even the magnificent warriors of Spades couldn't stand against this Queen of Hearts?”

“Not when half of our men turned on us,” King Jaxon growled. “The Card Kings are in hiding, the remnants of our armies with us, and we have all been waiting for your return, Queen Alice.”

“Why me? What can I do?”

“You can bring the Wild magic back to Wonderland,” Jaxon whispered fervently. “What is your talent, Your Majesty?”

“Did you not catch the part where I was raised on Earth and had no idea that I'm some kind of magic princess?”

“Queen,” Warren corrected. “As soon as your father died, you became queen.”

“Whatever.” I rolled my eyes.

“I understand that you have little knowledge of our world.” Jaxon held up his hand. “But magic has a way of making itself known. You should have felt something by now, even in the human world.”

“Nothing.” I shook my head. “I haven't felt anything magical.”

“You just need some time.” The King of Spades said gently.

“Time!” Hatter snapped. “I hate Time, that manxome fiddertwatch!”

“Time can kiss my furry brown arse!” Dormouse woke up

to exclaim.

“Time for tea!” Hare shouted.

“I can see why you wanted to meet here,” I said dryly. “I never want to leave.”

Chapter Four

“This is not the meeting,” Jaxon said with a sideways smile. “Hatter serves as a decoy.”

“A decoy?” I asked.

“Should the Queen of Hearts send soldiers into Tulgey Wood, they will encounter the Hatter and his frozen tea time. Most don't bother with George.”

“He can try the patience,” Warren said affectionately. “Try and try again, Hatter never gives up.”

“Which patients?” Hatter narrowed his eyes on Warren. “Are you here for a check-up?”

“We need a doctor!” Dormouse exclaimed.

“I am a doctor,” Hatter said airily.

“What's up, Doc?” Hare asked.

I burst into laughter, and the men stared at me in surprise.

“It's a human thing,” I waved off their curiosity. “Where is the real meeting, King Jaxon?”

“In Hatter's house.” Jaxon stood and gallantly helped me out of my seat. “Or beneath it, rather. If you will allow me, Your Majesty?” He held out his arm to me, and I took it. “This way.”

“We'll meet you inside, Your Majesty,” Nick said. “We're going to scout the area, just in case the Queen's men are lurking about.”

“All right,” I agreed.

King Jaxon led me to the tiny cottage behind Hatter's chair, and Hatter watched us go longingly. Right; he was stuck at tea forever. How sad to never be able to enter your own home.

“Take point,” Jaxon said to the soldiers that followed us in.

The men nodded and hurried up a small staircase. Jaxon led me further into the house, and then into the kitchen. He went up to a tall, slim cupboard and opened the door. It had a broom hanging on a peg, but that was all. King Jaxon pushed against the back wall of the cupboard, and it moved inward, revealing a set of stairs. He went in first, then offered me a hand. I climbed in after him, and he shut the cupboard door, then the false panel.

“Sneaky,” I said. “I like it.”

“Oh, we've learned to be very sneaky indeed,” he purred.

There was only one lantern, halfway down the stairs, burning a low flame, and the stairwell was narrow, putting us in close quarters. Jaxon's stare roamed my face, but then he held his arm up between us, and I laid my palm on it. He smiled as he led me downstairs, but it looked a little self-conscious.

The stairs curved and then let us out into a rectangular room full of soldiers. They were already armed with assorted weapons, their stares set on the stairwell and our approaching footsteps, but when they saw King Jaxon, they relaxed and bowed. Jaxon nodded to them and led me through the room, to a door on the other side. I noted the insignias on the chests of the soldiers: playing card outlines with red diamonds and black clubs.

We entered a sitting room. Two cozy chairs were placed before a small fire, and behind the empty seats, two men sat at a table with the remnants of a meal between them. They looked up at our entrance.

One was more beautiful than handsome, with heavy-lidded bedroom eyes in the deepest shade of green, and sensual lips. His hair was dirty blond and disheveled in a sexy way, as if he'd just gotten out of bed... and he hadn't been there alone. He wasn't as large or as muscular as Jaxon, but there was an air of authority about him that screamed "king," and he looked like he could fight for his crown if he had to.

The other man looked harder, but only because he was more aggressively masculine than his companion. Shoulder-length, dark-brown hair was pulled back from his face and tied with leather at the nape of his neck. The firelight turned the strands of his hair auburn, but I wasn't sure if that was truly its color. His eyes, though, those were definitely dark, nearly black, but there was a kindness in them that, when paired with the rest of his competent looks, made me want to trust him immediately.

Both men stood.

"Queen Alice," Jaxon said, "these are Their Majesties, King Draven of Diamonds"—he indicated the blond first and then waved to the brunette—"and King Bevan of Clubs. Men, here is our long lost queen."

"Queen Alice," King Draven snatched my hand and kissed it lingeringly. "It's an honor and a pleasure to meet you at last. We've all waited a very long time for you."

"Lay off her, Draven," King Bevan growled as he came around the table to shake my hand. "I am most relieved to have you with us, Your Majesty. We have been waiting, some of us more patiently than others, for this day to arrive."

"Twenty-two years, if I'm not mistaken," I said.

The men blinked at me.

"Queen Alice," Draven said, "we have been in hiding for over forty years."

“Forty?” I looked them over. “You all look as young as I am.”

“Time lives in Wonderland,” King Bevan explained. “Because of this, he has more power here, and as an incentive for the rest of us to allow him to wield his power, he stops the residents of Wonderland from aging, once we reach an acceptable maturity.”

“But, my uncle,” I whispered.

“Duke Theodore sacrificed a lot to see you safe, Your Majesty,” King Jaxon said softly. “And he will be remembered for it.”

“He died for me?” I asked as tears filled my eyes. “I just buried him today, and you're telling me that he died instead of bringing me back here.”

“He wanted you to be as prepared as possible.” Bevan gave me a sympathetic look. “If he didn't try to return with you sooner, he must not have felt that you were ready.”

“Which brings to mind the question of if you are, in fact, ready.” Draven frowned. “What sort of magic do you possess, Queen Alice?”

“She hasn't come into her power yet,” Jaxon answered for me.

“You haven't what?” The King of Diamonds shouted.

“Calm yourself,” Jaxon snapped. “She has been in the human world. She probably needs some time to connect with Wonderland.”

“You'll be fine.” The King of Clubs smiled supportively. “Your mother was one of the strongest women I've ever met; there isn't a moment's chance in the sea that you were born without

the Wilds in you.”

“We should take her to see the Caterpillar,” Draven said.

“That hookah smoking hypocrite,” Jaxon growled.

The other two men just stared at Jaxon.

“Fine,” King Jaxon huffed. “But we need to take her further into the Underland then.”

“The Underland?” I asked.

“It's a hidden community beneath Wonderland, where we've been regrouping our forces and hiding the refugees.”

“Refugees?”

“The Queen of Hearts didn't just betray the other kingdoms when she took Wonderland,” Jaxon explained. “She betrayed her own magic, turning love into a weapon. Spaders are meant to be the warriors of Wonderland.”

“And the Order of the Cheshire,” Nick said as he came into the room. “We are warriors as well.”

“My apologies,” Jaxon nodded to Nick. “The Order of the Cheshire is in a class of its own.”

I lifted a brow at Nick as he nodded to Jaxon.

“We were the protectors of the Royal Wilds,” Nick said proudly. “Shapeshifters and soldiers. But I am the last of the Cheshires.”

“What?” I whispered.

“The rest of my order died in defense of our king.” Nick held his chin high, but his eyes glistened. “I was charged by His Majesty to see you and the Duke to safety, or I too would be dead.”

“Thank you for saving my life, Nick,” I said softly.

He blinked in shock, then gave me a brilliant smile. “It was the greatest honor of *my* life, Your Majesty. And I hope to continue to guard you, now that you have returned to us.”

“I can think of no one I'd rather have guarding my back,” I said immediately.

Nick, the last Cheshire Cat of the House of Wilds, beamed at me.

“Now, what were you about to say, King Jaxon?” I looked to the King of Spades. “About the Spades being the warriors?”

“My House handled any military matter in Wonderland,” Jaxon said. “The House of Diamonds looked after our wealth, the House of Clubs healed our sick and crafted our potions, and the House of Hearts was meant to bring love into our world. Queen Rina turned the magic into something it wasn't meant to be, and that has poisoned it and her. She has gone even madder than poor George, and she inflicts her insanity upon the people of Wonderland.”

“Thus, the refugees.” Bevan waved his hands out. “We dug a network of tunnels and hidden homes beneath the earth, like this one. The tunnels have never been discovered, and Underland is the only place in all of Wonderland that is safe from the Queen of Hearts.”

“Sounds good.” I sighed. “Honestly, I just want a place to lay my head down for a few hours.”

“I'm sure that we can help you with that,” King Draven smiled wickedly.

“Shut up, Draven,” the other kings said in unison.

Chapter Five

George the Hatter's cottage wasn't connected to the rest of Underland. It was a precaution in case his eccentricity drew too much attention instead of dissuading it. So, we had to trek back into Tulgey Wood to find an entrance to Underland. At least this time, I didn't have to drink anything.

The entrance was under a rock, and all sorts of jokes popped into my mind when I first saw it. But the timing was inappropriate, everyone looking over their shoulder's anxiously, so I kept my humor to myself. Beneath the rock was a spiraling set of stairs which we took down to a tunnel. After about an hour of navigating the maze of tunnels below Wonderland, we finally came to a settlement.

An empty room was located for me, and I was escorted into it by all three kings. They bid me goodnight at the door, and then I shut it on their handsome faces. I just couldn't take anymore strange. I bolted the door for good measure. Then I went straight to the bed and fell into it, fully clothed.

I woke up hours later, though it seemed like mere minutes. My mouth tasted like something had died in it, and my hair was as wild as my elusive magic. I stumbled across the room to the bathroom to remedy both matters. A hot shower and some aggressive gargling later, and I came out into the bedroom refreshed and ready to take on the world... a world I had never even known existed.

I was about to get into my dirty dress when a knock interrupted me.

“Your Majesty, I have a change of clothes for you,” a

female voice came through the door.

“It's safe, Queen Alice,” Nick called out.

I opened the door wrapped in a towel, and Nick quickly turned his back. There was a woman holding a stack of clothing, and she just smiled, bobbed a curtsy, and came into the room. I shut the door behind her.

“I'm Beth, Your Majesty,” the girl said. “The King of Diamonds has sent these to you with his highest regard.”

“Oh, well, if it's his *highest* regard.” I rolled my eyes, and Beth giggled.

“His Majesty hasn't given any woman his attention since the Queen of Diamonds was killed.” Beth cast me a sideways glance as she laid the clothing on the bed.

“Oh, damn,” I huffed. “Thank you for reminding me. I completely forgot that his wife was killed. I probably would have said something insensitive and then felt like a horrible ass.”

Beth's eyes went wide.

“Yeah, that was probably the wrong thing to say too,” I muttered.

“Not at all, Queen Alice,” Beth hastened to reassure me. “I was just surprised at how much you sound like your mother.”

“You think so too, huh?” I frowned, wondering about that whole Nature versus Nurture thing.

“Oh, yes. You look a lot like her as well.” Beth smiled. “It's no wonder that you have the kings in such a state.”

“The kings?” I lifted my brows. “You think they like me? Like, *really* like me? Oh, God, what am I saying? Don't answer that, Beth. I've just lost my uncle and have tumbled down a rabbit

hole into a weird world where I'm evidently queen. The last thing I need is a romantic entanglement.”

“Or three,” she added helpfully.

“Yes, quite right; or three.” I blinked. “As if I could have a relationship with three men at the same time.”

“Oh, but don't you know?” Beth asked. “The original wild queens were always married to four men; her Card Kings. That's how Wonderland is meant to be ruled. Queen Julia, your mother, broke tradition and married your father, who wasn't a king at all. It put Wonderland into a tizzy and had all sorts of repercussions.”

“Like what?”

“Oh, like the kings choosing their own wives,” Beth said. “I hope that you don't think that I'm speaking ill of your mother, Your Majesty. Queen Julia was a wonderful queen, but if she had only stuck to tradition, the Queen of Hearts would never have risen to power.”

“Go on,” I urged. “Tell me it all.”

“Well, once the Queen of the Wilds announced that she'd only be marrying one man, and he, a Cheshire Wolf, no less—”

“Hold on,” I interrupted her. “I'm half wolf?”

“Oh no, Your Majesty.”

“So, my father wasn't a werewolf?”

“Yes, he was,” Beth said, “but wild queens are born wild, that's all. Wild trumps all other races.”

“Of course.” I grimaced. “Go on; I'm sorry for interrupting.”

“It's quite all right, Your Majesty.” Beth shook her head.

“I'm happy to explain anything you'd like. But back to your parent's marriage; the Card Kings were divided in their reactions. Two of them married women of their own choosing, and two remained bachelors. The King of Diamonds chose well, and his queen was kind to their people, but the King of Hearts chose one of his duchesses, and she wasn't so kind.”

“That's Queen Rina?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Beth confirmed. “Just a year after he was married, the King of Hearts grew ill.”

“But I thought that people who live in Wonderland don't age,” I said.

“We don't.” Beth nodded. “Sickness does occur but fatal disease is rare, and the King's illness shocked all of Wonderland. Many of us believe that it was Queen Rina's doing, that she was already twisting the Heart magic into something dark, even back then. We think that Queen Rina found a way to steal King Henry's magic, and she kept taking it until he died.”

“That's fucking evil,” I whispered as I slid into the clothing that Beth had brought me; some soft leather pants, boots, and a cotton tunic.

“Yes,” she agreed. “And disruptive to Wonderland. For the first time in all of Wonderland history, a queen sat on the Heart throne alone. The Card Kingdoms are masculine in nature, and they require a king to rule them. The Kingdom of Hearts became unstable under Queen Rina's rule, but no one could do anything about it. Upon King Henry's death, the crown should have passed to his brother, Duke Kyran, but the Duke of Hearts went missing shortly after his brother's death, and so, Queen Rina remained on the throne.”

“Suspicious,” I growled.

“Yes, it was.” Beth grimaced.

“You said that the Card Kingdoms are masculine?” I asked.

“Yes, as I mentioned, Wonderland is meant to be united by a sacred marriage between the Card Kings and the Wild Queen. The Card Kingdoms are masculine, but they come together under the feminine Wild Wonderland. It is a delicate balance.”

“That my mother fucked up,” I noted as I pulled on the boots.

“Yes, well, we all do crazy things for love. Do you know the rest of the story?” Beth asked.

“About Rina trying to sleep with my dad?” I asked, and Beth blushed. “Yeah, I know the rest.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you,” Beth said. “I only meant to explain to you that not only *could* you be romanced by all three of the Card Kings, but they’re also most likely hoping that you’ll follow the traditions of Wonderland and encourage them to pursue you.”

“And then what; marry them all?” I sat back on the bed heavily.

“Yes, of course.” Beth frowned at me. “You don’t like the thought of marrying the Kings? I would give my left toe for one night with them. With any of them.”

I barked out a laugh and then covered my mouth with my hand. “Sorry, I’m just a little overwhelmed.”

“It’s perfectly reasonable, Your Majesty.”

“It’s nice to finally find some reason in this world,” I mumbled.

“Your Majesties, the Queen of Wilds is still dressing,” Nick’s voice filtered through the door. “Please allow her a few moments, and then I will announce you.”

“And the madness returns,” I whispered.

Chapter Six

“Thank you, Beth,” I escorted her out of my room, and then waved the waiting kings in. “Get in here, now!”

The gave me shocked looks as they hurried in, and I slammed the door behind them.

“When were you fuckers going to tell me that you intended for me to unite the kingdoms by marrying all of you?” I nearly shouted.

“Well, I guess we don't have to find a way to tell her,” King Bevan said to the others. “She seems to have discovered it all on her own.”

“So, it's true?” I gaped at them.

“It's tradition.” Draven held his hands out to his sides like there was nothing he could do about it.

“A tradition that could save Wonderland,” Jaxon said gently. “The magic of Wonderland wants us to be together. Tell me that you don't feel attracted to us; that you don't feel something binding us together.”

“I don't feel ...” I choked on the words, then shook my head, and growled, “I will not be influenced by magic!”

They all burst into laughter.

“What's so damn funny?”

“This is *Wonderland*, darling,” King Draven purred. “Saying that you won't be influenced by magic here is akin to

saying that you won't breathe the air. It's impossible.”

“My mother chose her own husband,” I snapped.

“And you see where that got us,” Draven's sensual features hardened suddenly, and his eyes narrowed on me. “I tried to accept Queen Julia's decision, and in the end, I was punished for it. My Lara was taken from me because I went against the magic and married her, instead of waiting for the princess who I was meant to be with.”

“What?” I whispered.

“Your mother's choice sent ripples through the very foundation of Wonderland,” Bevan explained. “Wonderland had to recalculate. Jax and I felt it, and we told the other kings to wait, to be patient, that the land itself would correct the imbalance.”

“But we didn't listen.” Draven shook his head sadly. “We saw the chance to choose our own way, and we took it.”

“A few years later, you were born.” Jaxon's stare warmed on me. “You are Wonderland's gift to us, her way of repairing the rift your mother made.”

“You guys think that I was born to be with you?” I asked in shock.

“We know that you were,” Bevan corrected. “At the moment of your birth, we all felt your magic reach for ours.”

“I don't even have any magic,” I huffed.

“Oh, honey, yes you do.” Draven smirked. “I remember it well; a burst of energy across my skin that soaked into my heart. Even Henry felt it. We think it's the reason Rina killed him.”

“So, you believe the rumors of Rina stealing Henry's magic?”

“We do.” Bevan nodded. “There's no other way that a Duchess could do the things Rina has done. She had to have taken Henry's power.”

“Poor Kyran,” Jaxon whispered. “She probably killed him as well. And he had nothing to do with his brother's choices.”

“We don't know that for certain,” Bevan said. “Kyran could still be alive.”

The other men stared at him until Bevan looked away sadly. The possibility of Rina letting one brother live while killing the other seemed slim.

“And you guys want me to fight this woman?” I asked.

“Alice”—Jaxon took my hand—“you will not be alone; all of us are with you. But I remember the moment you took your first breath and the magic that rushed through our world with it. I swear to you; you have magic more powerful even than your mother's. You just need to find it.”

“And how am I going to do that?”

The men looked at each other and smiled.

Chapter Seven

“I thought you said that this guy was a hookah-smoking hypocrite?” I reminded Jaxon.

“Well, desperate times.” King Jaxon grimaced as he pushed past a low-hanging branch.

A family of rocking-horse flies flew off the branch, whinnying in affront. He frowned after them.

“The caterpillar has ways to squirm past a person's defenses,” King Bevan said. “I go to him when I need help working out a particularly difficult potion.”

“Potions,” I huffed. “I don't have to get small again, do I?”

“No, I'm certain that won't be necessary,” Draven assured me, and then he looked to Bevan. “Will it?”

“No, there's no size requirement for finding your magic,” Bevan said.

“Good.”

The woods suddenly opened up, and a set of marble steps were revealed. I strode up to them with Nick and the kings as their retinues held back. The steps went up so high that I couldn't see where they ended.

“Oh, hell no.” I groaned.

“At least you have a sturdy pair of boots now, Your Majesty,” Nick offered. “A good pair of boots on your feet are worth five in a closet.”

“Yes, fantastic.” I rolled my eyes. “The caterpillar lives on top of a monument?” I asked the kings.

“He has a fear of being stepped on.” Jaxon sighed.

“Him and the mome raths,” Draven muttered.

“Well, he is a caterpillar,” Bevan said.

“Wait”—I looked over at them in shock—“he's really a caterpillar? That wasn't just a code for something else?”

“Nope, he's a caterpillar.” Draven chuckled.

“What the hell is a bug going to do for me?” I asked them.

“He's a very smart bug,” Bevan said.

“Too smart for his own good,” Jaxon muttered. “He should lay off the weed.”

“He can be a bit rambunctious,” Bevan admitted. “Please be patient with him; he may be the only one who can help you release the wild inside you.”

“Wonderful,” I muttered as I started climbing the steps. “I have to be nice to a bug so that he will help me find my magic so that I can marry three men and unite a magical kingdom.”

“If you don't mind.” Nick winked at me and then shifted into his cat form. He began floating up the pyramid steps.

“No fair,” I grumbled. “Maybe I should have gone small again.”

The climb wasn't as far as it seemed, and soon we were striding through a proper English garden in full bloom, laid across the flat top of the marble pyramid. The pyramid rose high above the treetops, giving an incredible view of Wonderland. I stopped and stared at the Wilds, the castle I'd been born in, but my gaze

was quickly lured away to the rest of the landscape.

The woods trickled out into lush farmland, and then there were several villages, most of which showed no sign of life. Hills rolled up into mountains, and in the far distance, I saw a crimson castle cloaked in storm clouds. Lightning flashed around it, making it seem more menacing than it should have.

“Heart Castle.” Jaxon followed my gaze. “Even the air around it knows that something is wrong.”

“Where is the Spade Castle?” I asked him.

“That way,” he pointed closer to the Wilds. “You can't see it from here, but it's in the East. Club Castle lies to the South, and Diamond is in the North. Hearts lies in the West; you can always find your way with the castles as your guide.”

“Humph, the Wicked Witch of the West.” I stared at the storm. “How appropriate.”

“I'm sorry?” Jaxon frowned.

“Never mind. How do you rule a kingdom and have a relationship with a queen who lives in the Wilds?” I lifted a brow.

“We stack the deck.” He smiled.

“You what now?”

“You came through a stacking room to get to Wonderland,” Nick explained. “It's a circular room with five doors.”

“Right,” I agreed. “I remember. Each door had a different symbol on it.”

“There are similar stacking rooms in every kingdom,” Bevan said. “Several are sprinkled throughout the land, but every castle has its own. It's the easiest way to travel between kingdoms, and especially between castles.”

“So, the doors link the kingdoms?” I asked.

“They stack them,” Draven explained. “You step inside a stacking room, and Wonderland is layered before you. You chose the kingdom you wish to visit and step through the appropriate door. Then the land spreads out again.”

“When I came into Wonderland, I entered a tiny door.”

“The Wilds door.” Jaxon nodded. “Wilds is the most important kingdom in Wonderland, and as such, must be guarded more avidly. The stacking rooms which connect to Earth feature only little doors to Wilds. That way, only those with magic can come through.”

“Stacking rooms,” I said and shook my head. “Damn, I need a stiff drink.”

“Who are you?” A voice boomed around us.

I flinched and looked around the garden.

“It's us, Barnabus!” Bevan called out.

“Who is 'Us?’” The voice echoed around me.

“Does he have a sound system, or what?” I asked Nick.

“Tubes.” Nick waved a paw at a fluted tube set in a flower bed on our right. “Barney likes a bit of drama.”

“It's the god-damned Wizard of Oz,” I huffed. “Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain.”

“The Card Kings are here with the Queen of Wilds,” King Bevan called out as he took my hand. “Queen Alice, if you'll come with me, please?”

“Sure, why not?” I let Bevan lead me down a crushed shell path, amid fruit trees and waist-high flowers.

The rest of the men followed us up to a clearing with a circle of mushrooms in the center of it. The mushrooms were colored brightly; crimson, daffodil, and violet. In the center of this ring was one gigantic mushroom about the size of my head. It had a pure white stem and a golden cap. A blue caterpillar as big as my forearm was curled upon it. He had silk pillows beneath his head and a large hookah bubbling away beside him. The caterpillar took deep puffs on his hookah pipe and blew the smoke out in impossible shapes. He also wore a fez upon his head with a golden tassel hanging down the side of it. When he saw me, he undulated up, to peer at me curiously.

“Is this Princess Alice?” The caterpillar asked.

“Queen Julia is dead, remember, Barney?” Draven said. “Her daughter is now *queen*.”

“Queens need a queendom to rule and magic to rule it with.” The caterpillar crawled to the edge of his mushroom. “Come inside the circle, Princess Alice.”

“My uncle told me to never step into a fairy ring.” I eyed the garish mushrooms warily.

“Ah, your uncle was a wise man,” Barney, the caterpillar said. “But I am offering you my hospitality. As such, the ring will have no power over you.”

I looked at the kings, and they nodded. I stepped over the ring of mushrooms.

“Please, have a seat,” Barney waved several arms toward the grass.

I sat down, and it put me at eye-level with him. His eyes were bulbous and black, so glassy that I could see my reflection in them.

“Hello,” I said.

“Hello, Your Highness,” Barney replied. “Do you want to rule Wonderland?”

“I suppose.” I shrugged.

“‘I suppose’ is not a good answer for a queen,” he eased forward. “Queens should be certain in demeanor and speech. I’m certain that your uncertainty is a problem.”

“Fair enough.”

“What is your magic?”

“I’m not sure of that either. I may not have any.”

“Oh, you do,” he assured me. “I recall your birth vividly.”

“You’re not the only one.” I shot a look over my shoulder at the kings.

“Yes, yes, the Card Kings were bound to you upon your birth,” the caterpillar said, “as it should be. As it has always been. But you do not seem to be bound to them. You are... attracted but not really interested. Curious but not determined. A princess, not quite a queen. You are in between.”

“The guys said that you might be able to help me find my magic,” I said.

“Find it?” Barney rose up higher and looked around the garden. “Has it run off?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Then why am I looking?” He dropped back down. “If it never left, then you must know where it is.”

“Actually, I don’t,” I huffed. “I don’t feel anything.”

“Ah, not feeling is different than not finding,” Barnabus

declared. “You should have said so immediately.”

“Sorry?”

“Yes, you are,” he agreed. “But I will help you with that too. Take a piece of mushroom from the left of the cap. Beneath it, if you will.” He tapped his pipe toward the left side of his mushroom.

“All right,” I leaned over and pulled a chunk of pearly mushroom from the soft bit beneath the cap. “Now what?”

“Eat it, silly girl!” Barnabus huffed. “What else would you do with a mushroom?”

“Sit on it.” I looked pointedly at him.

“Humph, yes, well, only caterpillars do that.”

“This isn't psychedelic or anything, is it?” I narrowed my eyes on Barnabus.

“Eat the mushroom!”

“All right!” I shoved the mushroom into my mouth.

The flavor of forest and soil ran across my tongue as I chewed the spongy thing and then swallowed. I couldn't believe I was doing this; eating a damn magic mushroom inside a fairy ring in the middle of an English garden on top of a marble pyramid in the center of a make-believe world that I was a princess—potentially a queen—of. I felt like I was going to wake up at any moment.

And then I did.

The mushroom melted into magic, and that magic burst out into my body with a trembling effervescence that felt like bubbles under my skin. The world was suddenly clearer, brighter, and sharper, as was my mind. I was finally awake. I sucked in a deep

breath and pulled in the power of my world with it.

My Wild Wonderland.

It had me then; inside and out. I could feel it racing through my blood, filling my bones and mind as it simultaneously flowed across my skin. I looked down at myself and watched the magic dance across my arms in sparking waves of gold. I began to glow, brighter and brighter until I had to close my eyes against the glare. Once my eyes were shut, I could see the magic inside me.

A deck of cards shuffled in my mind and then were cut into four. A king sat atop each pile, one for every kingdom in Wonderland, and they stared at me steadily. I knew what they wanted, what they needed, and as soon as I acknowledged it, I saw a golden shimmer flicker over the cards. The kings climbed out of their cards and came toward me, each of them encased in a golden aura... my aura. I was a part of them, had been since my birth, and I was the only woman who could unite them.

The truth settled inside me, and I accepted it. My life on Earth took on the dream-like qualities of a distant memory, and this life became more real. Wonderland had been wounded, and the strike had come from my mother. Queen Julia had paid the price, but I was the one who had to heal our world.

And I had been born with the power to do so.

My head fell back on a gasp as the magic shook off the last of its slumber and shot through me, energizing me with power and a deep awareness of my world. I knew them all—*felt* them all. From the gryphons to the bread and butterflies. I heard the call of the jubjub bird and the roar of the bandersnatch. I smelled the perfume of the living flowers and tasted the salt of the sea. Then I saw the citizens of Wonderland; the dodos and the mock turtles, the lizards and the lobsters, the fish and the frogs, the mome raths and the borgoves. On and on they went, shuffling through my mind like pages in a picture book. All of those who had suffered while I grew

to adulthood in a different world. While I trained to become strong enough to return to Wonderland and save the world of my birth.

“That bitch is going down,” I whispered as I opened my eyes.

“Yes, I believe she is.” Barnabus the Caterpillar smiled. “Now, *Queen Alice*, tell me; what is your magic?”

I felt the men tense behind me, all of them eagerly anticipating my answer.

“Wilds,” I declared.

“Wilds, yes, of course,” Draven muttered. “But which of the wild magics do you hold?”

“She answered truly, King of Diamonds,” Barnabus said. “Queen Alice holds the Wild magics—all of them.”

Chapter Eight

“Where is my mother's sword?” I asked as I stepped out of the ring of mushrooms.

“My work is done.” Barnabus sighed and laid back on his mushroom to enjoy a good smoke.

“How did you... ?” Bevan stared at me in shock. “I'm sorry, but is it just me or is Queen Alice even more beautiful than when she stepped into the mushroom ring?”

“It's the Wild in her emerging,” Jaxon said with wonder. “You are most striking, Queen Alice.”

“That's all very good,” I said crisply. “But where is my mother's sword? The Wild says that I will need it to win back Wonderland.”

“The Vorpel,” King Draven stepped forward. “That is the sword you speak of. It was taken by Queen Rina when she subdued the Jabberwocky.”

“The Queen of Hearts was able to subdue the Jabberwocky when my mother couldn't?”

“Well”—Draven exchanged a heavy look with the other kings—“in a manner of speaking, yes. Queen Rina used her love magic on the Jabberwocky and bound it to her. The creature has become another source of power for the Queen of Hearts.”

“After the King of Hearts died, she needed a new battery,” I huffed.

“Yes, precisely,” Jaxon said. “Queen Rina needed another

magical being to feed off of. The bond she created has subjugated the beast and turned the Jabberwocky into Rina's personal predator.”

“And the sword?” I asked.

“The Vorpel was abandoned, allowing Queen Rina to claim it,” Draven said.

“But she cannot wield it, Your Majesty,” Nick added as he stared at me intensely with his green cat eyes. “Only a Wild Queen can use the Vorpel.”

“Then we must get it back.” I headed down the pyramid, and the men followed.

“Queen Alice”—Nick floated up to me—“we'll need to sneak into the Kingdom of Hearts before we march on it.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because you'll need the Vorpel in your possession before you fight the Queen of Hearts,” Jaxon said as he came over and gripped my upper arms. “Take a deep breath, Alice. You were just hit with a world of magic and information. You need to acclimate before you make any decisions.”

I blinked at Jaxon and realized that he was right. I felt a little lightheaded and tingly. I needed to sit down. So, I did. I took a seat on one of the marble steps and looked out across Tulgey Wood and over to the Wilds. I remembered it now. I could see its soaring ceilings, gilded in gold. I recalled walking through its echoing hallways and playing in the vast gardens. It was more home to me than Uncle Ted's Victorian, and I suddenly wanted to be there. I wanted my home back.

I took another deep breath, knowing now, that this was just the magic settling inside me. I had a lot to filter through, and I needed more than a few seconds to figure things out. But I did

know that I needed my mother's sword. It was a driving force lodged low in my belly, urging me to move.

“How do we sneak into the Kingdom of Hearts?” I asked the men, who had gathered around me.

“Stacking rooms are out.” Nick rolled through the air. “Rina blocked her doors.”

The kings looked at each other and began to smile.

“We burrow beneath the castle,” Bevan answered. “Underland will save us again.”

“So be it,” I agreed. “We'll tunnel beneath the Heart Castle and steal back my sword, and then I'll return to battle Rina with the Vorpel firmly in hand.”

“You'll need to practice those new magics of yours too, Queen Alice,” Draven said. “We need you to know exactly what you're capable of when we finally march on Hearts.”

“What I'm capable of,” I whispered as I looked over the three kings. “And what *we're* capable of.”

“You feel it now.” Bevan smiled softly at me, and I couldn't look away from his sweet face.

Bevan's eyes were warm and kind, but his lips were strong and determined. Next to Jaxon, Bevan appeared slimmer, but he wasn't a small man. The curves of his biceps pressed against his tunic, and a sleek expanse of solid chest could be glimpsed through the V neck. He blinked long-lashed eyes, and I took another deep breath.

“Queen Alice?” King Draven laid his hand on my shoulder.

I looked over at his hand. Long fingers attached to a soft palm; this was the hand of a hedonist, a man who knew how to give and take pleasure. I looked up into his bedroom eyes and

licked my lips. The motion made his stare drop to my mouth, and I saw him swallow convulsively. The column of his throat was fair and pampered, but I traced the line of it to his wide shoulders and knew that Draven hid more power than he revealed. He would let his enemies believe his mask of lazy sensuality until they were right upon him, and then he would strike.

“Alice!” Jaxon snapped his fingers in front of my face.

My stare jerked to him and widened. All of these gorgeous men were mine. I knew it now with complete certainty. These were my Card Kings, and I could play them as I saw fit. I stood abruptly and grabbed Jaxon by his tunic. His eyes darkened to indigo as I jerked him forward and set my lips to his.

Our kiss was as wild as my magic—a triumphant reunion with the man I was meant for. Did I love him? I didn't know. But did I want him desperately? Yes, I did. I wanted them all, and I put that desire into our kiss. Jaxon's hands went to my waist and pulled me tighter to his solid chest. I groaned and ground myself against him, luxuriating in the feel of him hardening between us. Magic tingled along my tongue, and he drank it down.

Then I felt the other kings surround us.

Jaxon eased back, heavy-lidded and happy as Draven came forward. I turned to my Diamond King with a smile and drew him against me slowly, sliding my hands up his chest. He inhaled sharply and closed his eyes, basking in the attention. My hands crept up his neck and bracketed his face as I began kissing his sharp jawline. I nuzzled his face as he moaned and then brushed my lips over his.

“Alice,” Draven whispered just before I claimed his mouth.

We sank into each other sensuously; an erotic dance of hips and hands, of licking and nibbling. His fingers threaded through my hair, massaging my scalp as he made love to my mouth. Where Jaxon's kiss had been conquering, Draven's was pure pleasure. It

was over too soon.

But then there was Bevan.

He smiled softly as I went into his arms, one gentle hand going to my cheek. Bevan just looked at me for a moment, taking in every nuance of my face before he laid his forehead against mine. We breathed together as he took my palm and placed it over his heart. Then he laid his hand on my chest.

“I’ve waited so long for you,” Bevan said.

Then he covered my mouth with his and kissed me with all of that longing. He stoked the fire of my desire steadily until I was pulling at his shoulders and slashing my lips over his. But Bevan pulled away just as gently as he had begun, and smiled into my hot gaze.

“Welcome home, Alice.”

Chapter Nine

It took us a week to burrow beneath the Heart Castle, but during that week, we planned. First, I needed to get the Vorpall sword; then I needed to slay the Jabberwocky. The Vorpall was the only weapon that could slice through Jabberwocky hide. Once the beast was dead, it would weaken Queen Rina enough for me to kill her with my wild magics.

Not only did we plan, but we also talked. I got to know the Card Kings, and I quickly began to care for them. Each man had special qualities, and they seemed to compliment each other. Jaxon was a man of action, but he was also a strategist. He knew when to fight and when to stalk his prey.

Draven loved the finer things and believed that every day should be lived to its fullest. I would have thought that a man like him would fare poorly in hiding, but Draven also had an indomitable spirit, and nothing could dampen it. He had lost a wife and a kingdom, and yet he could still find the beauty in a sunrise or pleasure in a glass of wine. The King of Diamonds knew how to treasure every moment and hoard them in his heart forever.

Bevan, on the other hand, loved in a deeper and wider manner. A healer at heart, Bevan was at his finest when he was helping people. He truly cared about every living thing in Wonderland. When a patient was brought to him, he looked after them as if they were family and checked up on them often. He knew everyone's name and the names of their children. When he wasn't healing, he was experimenting with potions to be used to heal or help others.

They were all wonderful, but I felt incomplete. We were

missing one king, and my heart knew it. It made me ache and also made me angry. I wanted to hurt the Queen of Hearts, not just conquer her. I was looking forward to killing the woman who had murdered the lover that I would never be able to love. My King of Hearts.

“Are you ready, Alice?” Jaxon stood in the doorway, staring at me curiously.

“I’m ready.” I went over to him and kissed him gently.

“I’d rather you just stay here—”

“Jax,” I growled, “we’ve been over this.”

“You’re not to leave my side, Alice,” he said firmly. “Just you and I are going in there, so don’t run off, not at any moment, or for any reason.”

“I understand, Your Majesty,” I teased him.

“When this is over, I shall show you my kingdom,” he whispered. “The mountains so tall that they seem to spear the sky—”

“And an ocean as blue as your eyes,” I interrupted. “I’ve seen it already, through the wild magic, but I look forward to experiencing it with you.”

“I love you, Alice,” Jaxon said softly.

I didn’t even hesitate; the words were already waiting upon my lips.

“I love you too, King of Spades.”

“Yes, that’s very sweet,” Nick said. “But, Your Majesties, I really must protest once more. I should be attending Queen Alice. I am the last Cheshire left, and the man her father, King Altair, appointed as her guardian.”

“And my last living relation,” I added with a smile.

Nick gaped at me. “You know?”

“I know.” I tapped my heart. “Why didn't you tell me that you are Uncle Ted's son?”

“I didn't want you to feel as if I had expectations of you.” Nick lifted his chin. “I have a duty to protect you—”

I pulled him into a hug and cut him off.

“Family is more important than duty, Nick,” I whispered. “Thank you for looking after me, but this time, you're staying behind.”

“Your Majesty—”

“Nick, call me Alice.” I kissed his cheek. “And the answer is still; no.”

Jaxon and I headed for the tunnel that was finally finished, the one that would take us directly below the Heart Castle grounds.

“Your Majes... Alice”—Nick hurried after us—“I'm at least coming into the tunnel with you.”

“Fine, Nick,” I tossed over my shoulder. “But you're waiting there. We can't draw any attention to ourselves. Two people sneaking in is already pushing it.”

“Have you forgotten that I can turn invisible?” Nick huffed, and we stopped walking. “Ah, now you see my point.”

I looked at Jaxon.

“No,” Jax snarled, “I am not being left behind, Alice.”

“It seems that Nick would make a better companion in this instance, Jax.”

“No.”

I grabbed Nick's hand and pulled him along. Nick smiled brilliantly as Jaxon sputtered in indignation.

“I am the King of Spades,” Jaxon huffed as he hurried up to us. “I am the finest warrior in all of Wonderland. You need me beside you when you infiltrate Heart Castle.”

“Actually, darling”—I stopped and kissed Jaxon's cheek—“I don't need a warrior today, I need someone sneaky. Someone like a cat.”

“Damn it all!” Jaxon cursed. “How did I become the man waiting in the tunnel?”

“Thank you, Jaxon,” I said sweetly and walked on with Nick.

The tunnel grew smaller the further in we went until there was only enough space for one person to crawl through it at a time. That didn't bother Nick at all, who simply turned into a cat and floated ahead of me. Then we reached the end of the tunnel. It sloped upward into a night alive with the flashes of lightning and the booms of thunder.

“Stay here a moment, Alice”—Nick went invisible—“I shall scout ahead.”

I sat beneath the hole anxiously until Nick's head appeared, hovering before me.

“It's clear”—he floated upward—“this way.”

“I'll be right here,” Jaxon said. “Do not tarry.”

I looked back at him and nodded before I climbed out of the tunnel. I came out into a garden. Oddly enough, there was no rain, although lightning illuminated the beds of sleeping flowers and hedges trimmed into the shape of hearts. A fountain was off to

my right and beyond it was a gigantic chess board. Before me, there were rows of roses planted behind low stone walls. Some of them seemed to be bleeding.

I frowned and stepped closer. When I touched a flower, my finger came away with a thick substance coating it. I rubbed my fingers together and scowled at the tacky feel as the smell of paint hit my nose. Who the hell would paint roses?

“This way,” Nick was a floating feline head again. “Follow my tail.”

His head disappeared, and the tip of his tail popped into view. I followed it carefully down the line of rose bushes, then into the castle. Men in white uniforms with red hearts emblazoned on their chests came striding by us several times, and I had to press myself into dark corners to hide. Nick just went completely invisible. It was a shame that he couldn't hold the Vorpel in his cat form, or I would have just sent him in to fetch it.

We edged around another corner and then down a set of steep stairs. As soon as my feet hit the stone floor, I felt it. The Vorpel sword was nearby. I started walking faster, passing by Nick's flicking tail.

“Your Majesty,” Nick forgot to use my given name, “please wait. There will be locks to circumvent ...” he trailed off as I held up a hand and then slashed it down.

The door in front of me swung open.

“*Cutting*,” Nick whispered. “You've mastered that magic, Alice.”

“Thank you,” I whispered as I headed into the room.

The Vorpel sword was placed horizontally across a stand that was set upon a stone pedestal at the far end of the room. I took one step into the room and felt the other traps the Queen of Hearts

had laid. I smirked and lifted my hands. With a flinging motion, I *shuffled* the mechanism she had placed beneath the floor, sliding its gears out of place. Then I *dealt* a card of energy out toward the trap set beneath the sword itself, springing it and destroying it at the same time.

I walked across the floor unimpeded and picked up the sword triumphantly. I was about to say something terribly witty when I felt something else. One more precaution that the Queen of Hearts had taken... stolen, in fact.

“What is it?” Nick asked as he popped into view. “And also; well done, Alice!”

“I feel him,” I whispered and rushed out of the room.

“Him? Who him?” Nick floated out after me. “Whoever he is, stop feeling him. I don't imagine your lovers will be happy with it.”

“He's near,” I went further into the subterranean level of the castle, and it became clear that it was a dungeon.

“You there! Halt!” A guard had been lounging across a table, having his dinner, when he spotted me.

I turned my hand and *folded* him in upon himself. He gasped as he tried to draw enough breath to speak.

“Easy now,” I said as I approached him. “It will wear off soon, but do not anger me, or I will use another wild magic against you.”

The heart soldier nodded. Satisfied, I reached down and removed the keys from his belt. Then I turned toward the cell he'd been guarding. Nick stared at me with wide, kitty eyes as I opened the thick door. Inside the cell was a man laid out on a spartan bed. He turned to me in shock when I entered, then stood to face me.

He had deep mahogany hair and eyes that shifted from green to gold in the torchlight. His body looked malnourished, but he still had thick muscles giving it definition. His cheeks were gaunt, displaying bone structure that was elegant and masculine, all at once. He swallowed with some difficulty and wet his cracked lips before he spoke.

“Alice?”

“Kyran?”

And then he was in my arms, my missing king. Henry had not been meant for me, after all. It had been his brother, Kyran, who Wonderland had chosen. When I had bonded with the other kings on Barnabus' pyramid, my magic had surged out seeking Kyran too... and it had found him. I just hadn't realized it until I was close enough to feel our connection.

“I saw you,” he whispered. “I felt you inside me, but I didn't dare to hope. You found me, you actually found me.”

“Yes, this is wonderful,” Nick exclaimed from the door, “but perhaps we'd best save the reunion for later. Perhaps when we're not standing inside a dungeon? No one wants to hear that bitch scream 'Off with their heads!'”

“We'll return and restore your kingdom to you,” I promised Kyran. “But for now, the Cat's right; we need to leave Hearts.”

“I go where you go, love.” Kyran smiled at me, and just like that, my heart was his.

Chapter Ten

The look on Jaxon's face when Kyran jumped into the tunnel after me was priceless. I had to push Jax out of the way so that the diggers could come in behind us and fill in the hole. We didn't want a heart soldier to stumble across a tunnel into Underland.

“Kyran!” King Bevan said as soon as we cleared the miners.

“Bev!” Kyran hugged the King of Clubs tight. “It's good to see you, my friend.”

“The sight of you is not so good,” Draven drawled as he set a hand on Kyran's shoulder. “What happened to you?”

“That bitch killed my brother and then she tried to drain me,” Kyran growled. “I didn't fall for her love magic, though: my heart was meant for another.” Kyran looked over to me and smiled. “So, Rina threw me into the dungeon and left me to rot.”

“Until Queen Alice found him,” Nick declared proudly. “And that was after she used her magics of Cut, Shuffle, and Deal to get the Vorpals sword. Then she used Fold to subdue a guard and free His Majesty.”

“His Majesty?” Jaxon lifted a brow.

“Kyran is the true King of Hearts,” I said. “My magic bonded to his. It's how I found him.”

“Well, then welcome to the deck, King Kyran.” Jaxon held out a hand to him.

“Thank you,” Kyran said sincerely.

“Now, let's get you back to your former stature,” Bevan declared. “Come with me, Kyran.”

Kyran cast another long look my way as Bevan led him down a hallway, and I smiled softly at him.

“You've done it now, Queen Alice,” Draven purred.

“What's that?” I asked.

“You've got your four kings,” Jaxon explained. “An unbeatable hand in Wonderland, especially when you add the Wild card.” He tapped the Vorpall sword which I'd strapped to my hip. “As soon as Kyran recovers, we're taking back Wonderland. It's a sure bet.”

“But for now”—Draven slid up behind me and set his hands to my waist—“I think we should celebrate.”

“Just the three of us,” Jaxon agreed with a wicked smile.

The King of Spades pressed forward, kissing me as he eased me into the arms of the King of Diamonds. Draven's mouth went to my throat as his hands roamed my body, and soon, we were moaning and writhing together.

Someone cleared their throat as they passed by, and we broke apart guiltily.

“Right,” Jaxon said, “perhaps a room would be more appropriate.”

“As long as it has a bed in it.” Draven picked me up and carried me down the hallway. “In fact, I know the perfect place.”

“Draven, your room is too ...” Jaxon strode after us.

“Too what?” Draven smirked at Jax. “Too fine for the likes

of you? Yes, I know, but our queen deserves the very best for our first time together.”

“Shouldn't we wait for the others?” I worried at my lip.

“Do you truly want to make love to four men at once?” Jaxon asked as Draven opened his bedroom door.

“Valid.” I grimaced.

“At least not for your first experience,” Draven amended, and I set my wide eyes on him. “Trust me, Alice, you'll want the four of us together once we marry. I've been told that there's no experience quite like the mating of the Deck.”

“The Deck?” I giggled. “That sounds a bit naughty.”

“Oh, it can be,” Draven purred as he laid me on his velvet swathed bed.

Jaxon closed and bolted the bedroom door behind us.

“The Deck is the name for the married royals of Wonderland,” Jaxon explained. “We were one short before, but now it's full. You will have the four kings to support you.”

“Ah, double meanings.” I smiled. “I like that.”

“You'll like this even better,” Draven vowed as he unbelted the Vorpel.

“Be careful with that,” I warned him.

“I have it,” Jaxon took the sword and placed it on a nearby table. “Relax, Alice.”

Then Jax pulled off his tunic, and I nearly fainted. Jaxon's chest was wide and sculpted perfectly, with a golden tan accentuating his thick muscles. He undid his pants and dropped them without artifice, stepping clear of them as if he stood nude

before me every day. I whimpered.

Draven glanced at Jaxon and huffed, “Yes, he's built like a soldier. But I know how to make you feel like a queen.”

Draven had removed my clothing while I was distracted by Jaxon, and he eased me back onto the bed gently. I slid over the luxurious velvet and sighed as I watched Draven remove his clothes in a much slower manner than Jaxon. My breath caught as Draven eased his tunic up over the taut muscles of his stomach, drawing his long fingers over his chest as he pulled the material over his head. Then he untied the drawstring on his pants and slowly, ever so slowly, eased them over his hips. His erect member jumped free and reached for me, its smooth tip flushed and anxious.

Then Draven crawled across the bed and eased between my thighs as Jaxon climbed up beside me. Jaxon slid his arms around me, pulling me in tight against him as he kissed me. Draven spread my legs and began nibbling his way up my thigh, stopping to lick and nuzzle every couple of inches. He massaged my calves and drew his hands up, beneath my knees, then drew my knees up and to the sides. I felt his hot breath on my intimate flesh and then the angle of his jaw rubbing into me.

Draven's chin split me and then his tongue drew up my center. I screamed into Jaxon's kiss, and the men shivered with pleasure. A golden glow began to rise around us, just a faint haze, but I both felt and saw it. I reached out a hand to trail within the magical current before I pressed my palm to the back of Draven's head and urged him closer. He growled against me and slid a slim finger into me. I arched, and Jaxon transferred his kiss to my breasts.

Ecstasy took hold of me as I was loved thoroughly by two of my kings. Emerald eyes flashed up at me, a sexy taunt as Draven gave me another long lick before he began to suck. Then Jaxon's deep blue stare claimed my attention as he bit at my breast.

I writhed between them and moaned for more.

“I had the first taste,” Draven lifted his head to say to Jaxon. “I’ll give you the first thrust.”

“Generous of you,” Jaxon said with some surprise.

“I intend to teach Alice other things while you work.” Draven smirked.

“It’s hardly work,” Jaxon switched places with Draven and set himself between my thighs. “Alice, have you done this before?”

“No,” I whispered.

“I’ll try to be gentle,” Jaxon said as he took hold of himself and eased into me.

I moaned and angled my hips upward.

“Easy now,” Draven purred and then bit my ear. “There will be another bite below. Let Jaxon work up to it.”

And Jaxon did. He slipped a little in and then out, easing me open slowly. I cried out in frustration as he went halfway in and stopped against the barrier of my maidenhood. I tried to push up against him.

“Here, my love”—Draven slid up further onto my pillow so that his manhood was level with my face—“focus on this for awhile.”

I licked my lips and then him, drawing my tongue over his tip. He cried out and trembled, his hand going to my hair. I gained confidence from that and took him fully into my mouth, savoring the taste and feel of him. I eased down his shaft and then drew up it, firming my mouth around him. As Draven moaned, Jaxon drove into me fully, and I cried out. Draven drove himself in deeper too, and I was overcome by the sensation of having them both filling me.

I worked Draven more ferociously as Jaxon began pumping faster. Hands went to my breasts and kneaded them as one of Jaxon's thumbs rubbed over my most sensitive spot. We became one mass of bucking, undulating, moaning pleasure. And then that pleasure broke, and we went crashing over the falls of ecstasy, diving into rapture so deep that I was certain I would never surface.

Chapter Eleven

It took another two weeks for Kyran to recover fully. During that time, I learned more about him and the other kings. Kyran, despite his rugged appearance (which was becoming more intimidating every day), was a romantic. I suppose he'd been born to be. Each of the men had taken to courting me in their own ways, regardless of the fact that our relationship was secured. We were still becoming familiar with each other.

Jaxon's idea of winning a woman was showing her his prowess. So, I sparred daily with him, training with the Vorpal sword and my magics. Our training sessions inevitably ended with us on the mat, sweaty and panting for other reasons than swordplay. I loved our time together; it was always an adventure with Jax, and he was the most inventive when it came to new positions.

Draven wined and dined me. I have no idea how he found such luxuries in Underland, but when we spent time together alone, he always had a lavish meal prepared and a gift waiting for me. I had a jewelry box full of treasure, and the man had only been wooing me for a few weeks. And always, after draping me in jewels and satisfying my hunger, he'd fulfill me in other, more erotic ways. Sometimes he wouldn't even wait until the meal was over... and he always had me leave the jewelry on.

Bevan was more subtle in his affections. Neither he nor Kyran showed any jealousy over my being with the other two kings first. In fact, Bevan was happy to have his chance at an intimate interlude between us. For our first date, he took me out of Underland and up to one of the lookout stations. It was a perch, high in a Wonderland oak, just big enough for us to stretch out on

and look up at the stars. He had brought a jug of wine with him, and we drank it together and talked about what we wanted our lives to be.

“I want a child to share my knowledge with,” Bevan said to me. His hand crept into mine. “Do you want children?”

“I don't know,” I said honestly. “I wouldn't be against the idea, but I'm not sure how to raise a child. My uncle did a rather unusual job of it with me.”

“And you turned out brilliantly,” he noted. “There's no correct way to raise children. We all do what we feel is right. When we're children ourselves, we think that our parents know everything, that they have wisdom which others don't possess; the secret of guiding and protecting us. But, really, they're just following their hearts.”

“I think I can manage to follow my heart,” I purred.

Bevan's eyes were even darker in the moonlight, and his face seemed sweeter; a fairy prince with sleek, alien features that somehow remained masculine. He'd pulled his hair back into a low club; appropriate, I suppose. It made his face come into stark relief, and his beauty even more evident. Bevan rolled to his side and angled over me, laying a hand gently on my cheek. We stared at each other, and I will forever remember his shadowed face above me, half-lit by moonlight.

Bevan drew his hand slowly down my throat, then over my chest, skimming my breasts, all while holding my gaze. I watched his lips part, his breath coming faster, as his hand undid the bodice laces of my dress. He parted the material and finally looked down on me. Bevan's face went soft as he lightly trailed his palms over my skin, hardening my nipples with little rubs. Then he lifted his hand and made a grasping motion. A flowering bough flew into his grip. It was a thin branch, bending beneath the weight of little white flowers that had a sweetly delicate scent. He brushed the

blooms across my flesh, around my breasts and up the column of my throat. I sighed in delight, the scent surrounding me as shivers raced over my skin.

Then he tossed the branch into the air, and it hovered above us, spinning. I watched it in surprise, and Bevan took the opportunity to slide between my legs, easing my skirts up around my waist. I looked down at him with a smile, and he returned it, holding my gaze again as he lowered his mouth to me. As he brought me to ecstasy in an agonizingly slow manner, petals drifted over us like falling stars.

Later, when I laid limp from fulfilled desire, Bevan eased up above me and finally brought us together with one swift plunge. I cried out, and he moaned into my throat. Then Bevan began to move with deliberate thrusts, driving to the hilt with each one. I wrapped my legs around his hips, and he smiled wickedly as he slipped his hands beneath my back and pulled. I held onto his sleek biceps as he lifted me up and sat us back so that I was spread over his lap. We embraced each other, kissing languidly as Bevan rocked me forward and back onto himself. The motion was just enough to drive him deeper and rub me right where I needed it. The pleasure built up steadily until we began to glow golden, and as our bond solidified into something unbreakable, we cried out in unison to the heavens.

That had been romantic, but Kyran was the King of Hearts, and he had romance in his blood. Romance and other things.

He sent me gifts, but Kyran's gifts were different than Draven's. Kyran went above ground to pick me flowers, and then he'd write me a poem about how my beauty outshone them. He'd run me a bath and leave a note with a glass of wine beside it, saying that he wanted nothing more than to take care of me. He'd leave me a book outside my door, and later tell me that the heroine had reminded him of me. He was good, damn good at the romantic stuff. So much so that I never even suspected the way he'd seduce me.

Since he was still recovering, I didn't think that Kyran could fully make love to me yet, but I still wanted to spend time with him. So, I accepted his invitation to visit him one evening, just to keep him company and talk privately with him. He answered the door in a velvet robe and a grin, and after he had shut the door behind me, he handed me a matching garment.

“Are we going to... ?” I looked him over.

Kyran's face was full and healthy, as handsome as I'd expected it to become. His body had begun to fill out too, but it seemed as if it had a bit to go before it was as robust as it should be. In short; he looked better, but not well enough for something as strenuous as sex.

“There is more to making love than a basic joining,” Kyran purred. “Go into the bathroom and put the robe on. I want to savor unwrapping you.”

“Unwrapping me?” I lifted a brow at him as I headed into the bathroom.

When I came out, clad only in the velvet, Kyran had a glass of wine ready for me and a blanket spread before the fireplace. A fire was a luxury in Underland, where ever chimney had to be carved up into a vent that led above ground, but Kyran was a king now, and he was entitled to the best. He helped me down onto the blanket and then sat beside me.

“Will you let me feed you?” He asked me.

I just nodded.

A plate of berries was set on a tray before the fire. There were some candles burning behind it, as well as a few bottles; one was definitely wine. Kyran picked up a berry and brought it to my mouth. I bit it in half, and he rubbed the other half over my lips, coating me with juice. Then he licked it off. Slowly.

“I love your lips,” he said. “Full and as ripe as this fruit. And your eyes, so expressive. I can almost feel your desire just by looking into your eyes.”

“I feel yours too.”

“Odd, isn't it?” He asked me. “We've only known each other a short time, and yet I've never felt closer to another person.”

“Yes, exactly,” I agreed. “I know you—I can feel the love you have for your kingdom, and the ache that your brother's death left. I know you're honorable and strong”—I trailed a hand over his sleeve—“when you're at your best. I know that you respect your magic and want nothing more than to heal Wonderland. But I don't know how you take your tea, or if you even drink it.”

“And I know that you have a deep well of passion inside you,” Kyran said. “I feel your love and gratitude for your uncle, but also the loneliness that you experienced throughout childhood. I sense that the return of your memories and the release of your magic has altered you, but in the best ways. You're stronger, more confident, and determined to right the injustice that has been done here. But I have no idea what your favorite color is, or if you prefer a sunrise to a sunset.”

“Those are all answers that time will bring us,” I whispered as I memorized the angles of his cheekbones and the burst of green spikes over his golden irises. “We can find pleasure in getting to know each other.”

“But for tonight, let us find pleasure in more physical ways,” Kyran said softly. “I can feel each turn of the card, each king laid out before you, and I know that we need this. Our magic needs this final piece to be placed so that your deck is truly complete.”

“So,” I leaned forward until my lips hovered just above his and kissed my words across his mouth, “you want my deck to be complete? That's all?”

Kyran closed his eyes and breathed my words in, then the tip of his tongue darted out and tasted my lips.

“There is so much that I want from you, Alice,” Kyran said. “I want to help you win back Wonderland, but I also want you for myself. I want to know what you taste like—your lips, your throat, your breasts”—his lips rubbed gently over mine as he spoke—“your thighs and the silken petals between. I want your smell on my skin and your hands on my body. I want to see you screaming above me and moaning beneath me. I want you to conquer me, and most of all”—he pushed me roughly back onto a pillow—“I want to conquer you.”

I stared up at him, my breath trembling in my throat, as he undid the belt of my robe. With a brisk movement, he yanked my hands behind my back and tied them with the velvet belt. I tried to move them, and he tightened the cord into a knot.

“Let me tell you how it's going to be between us, Alice,” he purred into my ear as he laid over me, holding me down with his body. “Out there, you will rule, but in here, with me, I am your king.”

“Is that what you think?” I smirked.

“It is what shall be.” Kyran wrapped my hair around his hand and pulled my head back. “You are mine from this moment on—mine to love and adore, to worship and bring to pleasure when I choose, but also mine to punish and discipline. When you come into my chambers, you will undress immediately and don whatever I wish for you to wear.”

“Kyran, this is going a little too—”

“Let go of your control!” Kyran snapped, grasping my face in both of his hands. “Give me your trust as well as your love, and I will take you to heights of ecstasy that you can only imagine.”

I gaped at him, and then I let go.

“Good, that's very good,” he said softly as I went limp beneath him. “For that, you deserve a reward, Queen Alice.”

He eased my body into a more comfortable position, and the slowly peeled open my robe, baring me completely. Kyran's gaze roamed over me as he sat back on his heels. I watched him avidly, waiting anxiously for what he'd do next. He opened his robe and cast it aside. I took in the thick muscles that stood out starkly on his healing body. Kyran was nearly as big as Jaxon, and this was half-starved. His shoulders were wide and gleamed golden in the firelight, his hands were large but elegant, and his eyes were hotter than the flames beside us. He lifted that intense stare to my face.

“So beautiful,” he whispered as he laid beside me. “Creamy skin, flushed like the sunset. I'm betting that it will flare pink with every strike.”

Kyran trailed a finger down the valley between my breasts. I sighed as he moved it lower and lower, then he abruptly turned it around and brought it back up. I frowned in disappointment, and he chuckled.

“Did you want more, my love?” Kyran took a nipple between his fingers and pinched it hard.

“God-damn it!” I hissed. “What the fuck, Kyran?”

“Shh.” He placed his fingers to my lips. “You have to feel a little pain to experience pleasure truly. Trust me; I won't really hurt you.”

I settled back but watched him warily. Keeping his stare on mine, he lowered his mouth to the same nipple and sucked it in. I moaned as he laved it with his tongue and then began to knead the flesh of my breast. Kyran's kisses ranged out, around the mound, and then he rubbed his cheek against me. My hips were writhing, and my eyes were shut in ecstasy by the time he made it to the other breast. So I didn't see him reach for the candle.

Warm wax dripped over my belly, and my eyes shot open in surprise. It didn't burn, in fact, it felt wonderful, I just hadn't expected it. Kyran was watching me carefully, his hand holding the candle high above my body. When he was certain I had enjoyed it, he moved the candle lower, dripping wax as he went. Splash, a drop on my hip. Splash, one on my thigh. His hands parted my legs and pushed them apart.

“No,” I whispered.

“Oh, yes.” Kyran moved between my legs and lifted the candle higher. “Trust me.”

He turned the candle over, and wax dripped onto my most intimate flesh. Rapture zinged up my body, and I cried out. Kyran blew out the candle and rubbed the wick down into the hot wax. My eyes widened as he lowered the taper to me and eased it across my womanhood. He lifted a brow, but I didn't protest, so he lowered himself onto his elbow and laid his cheek on my thigh. My legs fell further apart as he settled around me, continuing to rub the candle over my flesh.

I could feel the hardened drops of wax falling off me, and I was just starting to relax into the pleasure of the warm candle against me when Kyran plunged it into me. I gasped as he immediately set his mouth to me as well, pushing the candle in while he flicked his tongue furiously. I screamed in ecstasy, my body arching up all on its own.

But then he pulled back before I could crest, and I shivered in need. Kyran smiled and picked up a bottle from the tray. He pulled the stopper and poured a thick liquid into his palm. After he had replaced the bottle, he began to rub his hands over me. Oil, he was rubbing oil into my skin. I sighed as he kneaded my muscles into relaxation. Then his hands went up my belly, pushing off any remaining wax, and covered my breasts. His pelvis pushed into mine, and I felt him hard above my womanhood, but the candle was still inside me. He eased forward and pushed it in deeper with

his thigh as he worked his hands up to my nipples.

I cried out as he massaged his hands down me again and drew away, allowing the candle to slide out. Both of his hands went to my wet, intimate flesh, and one began to rub my clit with slow but intense pressure while the other began working the candle again. I screamed so loud that the sound echoed throughout the room.

When the tremors finally died down, Kyran laid down beside me and removed the candle. He tossed it aside and started casually rubbing me with his thumb. My legs couldn't move, they just flopped open as he worked me expertly. Then he kissed his way up to my face and slid his hand around my neck.

“Do I have your trust now?”

“Yes,” I whispered.

Kyran kissed me passionately, his hand pulling me tight to him as his fingers kept rubbing me below. He hooked a finger into me and angled it forward into a new sensitive spot. I cried out again, into his mouth, and he drank down my pleasure. Then he slid his hands gently behind my back and undid the cord. As I brought my arms forward, he pushed the robe off me completely and then laid back in the pillows.

“Now, Alice,” Kyran said, “I regret that I haven't the strength to love you as fully as I should. Instead, you will learn how to love me. Come here.”

I started to ease over to him.

“No!” He held up a hand. “Crawl.”

Something shivered through me, an immediate desire to protest, and he saw it. He sat up abruptly, grabbed me around my waist, and spread me face-down over his lap. His manhood was pressed hard into my belly as his palm came down firmly on my

ass.

“Are you seriously spanking me?” I gaped up at him.

“I told you that you were mine to punish,” Kyran said calmly. “Obey me, or this is what you'll get.”

Another slap, this one even more stinging than the last.

“Kyran!”

“How do you approach me?” Kyran smacked his hand down on me even harder.

“You son of a bitch,” I started to push myself up, but he was surprisingly strong for a guy who was still recuperating.

“Do not make me strain myself, Alice,” he warned, “or it will go even worse for you later.”

“Later?”

“When I have access to my toys,” he purred as lengths of cord floated out of the shadows and wrapped around my ankles. My legs were yanked apart, and when Kyran's palm came down again, he hit me even more intimately. “I have to make do with what's at hand, but when Wonderland is restored, I'll show you all of the lovely things I've had made for us. I've spent hours dreaming of ways to pleasure you, and ways for you to pleasure me.” His palm smacked against my ass again, leaving a warming sting, but then his fingers trailed down and began rubbing furiously. “Now, how do you approach me, Alice?”

“I crawl,” I moaned.

“Very good.” Kyran pushed me away from him as the cords released my ankles. “Try it again.”

I got up on my hands and knees and crawled to the King of Hearts. Kyran inhaled deeply, appreciatively, and it made me

suddenly feel as if I were the one in control. He spread his legs and gestured me forward. I crawled between them, and he eased my head down until my mouth hovered over his tip.

“Take me into your mouth,” Kyran commanded. “Take me in all the way.”

I slipped my lips over him and eased him inside me until my mouth was pressed to his pelvis. Kyran groaned, his hands pressing me down firmly. He ground his hips up into me, shoving himself even deeper, and cutting off my air. I made a panicked sound, but Kyran looked down at me and shook his head. So, I relaxed and trusted him. He smiled and eased back enough for me to breathe.

“Very good, Alice,” Kyran purred. “Now, suck me as greedily as I licked you.”

I moaned over his flesh, sucking at him and moving over him rapidly.

“That's it.” Kyran groaned.

He moved his hand out and gestured. I heard someone come up behind me, and I froze.

“Don't turn around,” he ordered. “Keep worshiping me and trust me to take care of you.” I saw Kyran look at whoever was behind me and nod.

A pair of hands grabbed my thighs and pushed them apart. I felt a pressure at my entrance, and then I was being filled again, this time by flesh. I cried out around Kyran, and he pushed my head down on himself.

“Use your hands, Alice,” Kyran said. “And angle your hips so that you can be more accommodating to our guest.”

I moaned and did as he ordered, working him and angling

myself up so that the man behind me could slip in deeper.

“Fuck her hard,” Kyran said to the other man. “Push her onto me.”

The man obeyed, thrusting into me so firmly that I was rocked onto Kyran's cock. I moaned, scared and delighted all at once. I tried to glance behind me, and Kyran grabbed my hair and yanked my face forward. He thrust himself deeper down my throat.

“Fuck her harder, and spank her for her disobedience.”

The stranger slammed into me, making me choke on Kyran as his hand slapped my ass. I moaned, and Kyran held me to him tight. The stings of the slaps seemed to magnify my pleasure, and I shivered on the cusp of coming. Kyran was already there; a golden glow flashing over his skin as he came in my mouth, continuing to hold me down until he was spent and I had swallowed everything. Then he eased out of me but continued to hold my face so that I couldn't look behind me as the stranger finished. I came as I stared into Kyran's eyes, the glow spreading from Kyran to me. Then the stranger pulled out and came across my back. Kyran finally let go of me with a satisfied smile.

Shame washed over me as the magnitude of what we'd done sank in.

“Damn you,” I whispered. “How could you seduce me into being untrue to the others? You fucking bastard.”

Kyran chuckled and said, “Turn around, Alice. I would never betray you or the other Card Kings.”

I finally looked behind me and saw Bevan, sitting back on his heels with a dopey grin on his face.

“Your Majesty,” Bevan purred, “please tell me that we'll be doing that again.”

Chapter Twelve

While Kyran had been recuperating, the armies of the three Card Kingdoms gathered. The Spades may have been the best soldiers, but that didn't mean the other kingdoms couldn't fight. We marched upon the Heart Castle with thousands of men and women backing us.

Now, we waited on the plain just outside of the castle for the Queen of Hearts to make her move. Thunder boomed, and lightning flashed in the ever present storm surrounding Heart Castle, but my unicorn mount wasn't bothered by it. We were at the head of three armies with my Card Kings. They were also astride unicorns, but theirs were black where mine was the purest white. On my hip was the Vorpel sword, and it was vibrating as if it could sense the coming battle.

An army finally came marching out of the Heart gates, a woman at its head. She was riding a beast that I would have called a dragon except that its neck was longer than any representation of dragons I'd ever seen, and its wings were wider. Its snout was more like a crocodile than a horse, and its eyes were round, fully black, and empty of any emotion. Except for maybe fury. The beast looked furious.

“The Jabberwocky.” Jaxon nodded to the animal. “Remember; you must kill it first, then go after Rina. Do not allow her to taunt you into engaging her or the beast will kill you.”

“Got it.” I nodded.

“Fools,” the woman riding the Jabberwocky hissed at us. She had bright red hair pulled back into a braid and skin so pale that I could see her veins through it. “You cannot win against me.”

Then she spotted me. “So, it's true, the Heir to Wilds has returned. Alice, is it? What a shame that you've come all this way, only to die.”

Behind her, her heart soldiers set their shields into the ground, forming a barrier. The shields were in the shape of playing cards, enameled white, with red hearts in their centers. The men behind the shields looked apathetic and tired. They stared at their queen as if she were the one they'd rather be fighting. I had no desire to kill those men.

“I challenge you, Queen Rina!” I called out, shocking my kings and making Nick hiss. “A battle between you and I to determine who rules Wonderland.”

“You cannot,” Jaxon growled. “I told you; we must kill the Jabberwocky first.”

I gave him a quelling look, and Jaxon snapped his mouth shut and shook his head.

“I accept!” Rina said gleefully. “You and I, Alice!” She jumped off the Jabberwocky and strode forward into the space between the armies.

I dismounted as well and walked forward as I drew my sword.

“I wondered why the Card Kings would want that thing.” Rina narrowed her eyes on the Vorpal. “I knew that none of them could wield it.”

“Not too bright, are you?” I asked her.

As her eyes widened at my insult, I rushed past her and stabbed the Jabberwocky in its chest. The Vorpal flashed white and cut through the tough hide easily. Blood gushed, and the monster screeched. It drew back as Rina screamed in protest. I angled to the side as the Jabberwocky charged me, its wings whooshing out

angrily. The tip of its barbed tail struck the earth beside me, and I scampered up an embankment. Another ear-splitting screech came as the Jabberwocky jumped up the hill, and I scrambled away. Clods of dirt went flying next to my face as a wing tip stabbed the ground. I rolled away just before its jaws could close around my arm, then I stared up at it.

I felt the strangest sense of familiarity, but I shoved it away as I sent out a cut of magic. The magic was deflected of its rubbery hide. Still, it was enough to distract the Jabberwocky, and I was able to crawl out from beneath it and run further up the hill. From my vantage point, I was able to direct the magic better, and I angled my hand down as I folded. The Jabberwocky bent in two and roared, but it only lasted a moment. I dealt out thin cards of magic and only managed to knock its legs out from under it. I shuffled, and it tripped, falling on its flat face. Then I fronted, throwing up an illusion of a wall of fire.

The Jabberwocky drew back in terror, rolling a little down the hill. I chased after it and lifted my sword. Just as I was about to bring it down on the Jabberwocky's neck, Queen Rina shouted for me to stop.

“She is your mother!”

I froze, looking up from the beast to my kings. They shook their heads, as confused as I.

“I swear to you,” Rina declared, “that the Jabberwocky is Queen Julia.”

“No,” I whispered.

The Jabberwocky started to move, and I laid my blade at its throat. It stilled, staring up at me with an intelligence that was beyond any beast, even one of Wonderland.

“You lie!” Draven shouted at Rina. “Queen Julia went to kill the Jabberwocky, but it killed her.”

“Do I lie?” Rina chortled. “You idiots! The Jabberwocky wasn't the threat against that village; it was I, my magic that was shrieking in the night, scaring the villagers. I knew that Julia would come to conquer the monster hunting her people, and I laid a spell in the very earth, just for her. Julia fell right into my trap. She cast her illusions and sprung the spell I aligned with her magic. It altered her own Fronting magic, using it to turn an illusion into reality. Instead of killing a monster, she became one. It made her the Jabberwocky and bound her to me. A wild queen to power my magic.”

“Mother?” I stared deep into the Jabberwocky's dark eyes, and something flickered within them.

“You must kill it, Alice!” Jaxon shouted. “Your mother is gone. Even if that is her, it is not Julia anymore. Kill the beast!”

“I'm Alice Wild,” I said to the Jabberwocky. “Do you remember me? I'm your daughter.”

The Jabberwocky closed its eyes, and a tear trickled out. I stood up, removing my blade from its neck. That was enough of a confirmation for me.

“Alice, no!” Kyran shouted. “It's a trick!”

The Jabberwocky drew up, wings spreading behind it, and opened its massive jaws. A roar rent the air as it lifted its head to the sky, but to me, it didn't seem like a challenge, it sounded like despair.

“Kill her!” Rina screeched at the Jabberwocky. “Kill Alice!”

The massive wings lowered, and its head undulated down to mine. Reptilian lips drew back as it snarled and started edging forward.

“Mother, it's me,” I said urgently as I backed up. “It's Alice.

I know you're in there. Please, fight the magic.”

My boot went out over empty air, and I threw myself forward just before I fell over the cliff behind me. I hurried to my feet and glanced back at the ravine full of jagged rocks below. It must have been thousands of feet high.

The Jabberwocky roared.

The Card Kings rushed forward on their mounts; shouting in fury and fear. But they were too far away, they'd never reach me in time.

“Alice!” Kyran screamed in denial.

“Strike now!” Queen Rina had stalked up the opposite side of the hill, confident in her victory. She was just a few feet away from us now, pointing arrogantly at me. “Kill Alice!”

I stared up at the Jabberwocky, and it focused on me intensely. Then I, very deliberately, sheathed my sword.

“I won't hurt you, Mother.”

“Kill her!” Rina shrieked again. “Do it now!”

The Jabberwocky's face seemed to soften, and it lowered its cheek to mine. I felt the wet trail of its tears as it nudged me gently. Then it reared back and struck with the speed of a shark. Wind rushed by me as Rina shouted for death, and the Jabberwocky took hold of its enemy within its strong talons. *Our* enemy: Queen Rina.

The Queen of Hearts lifted her hand to fight back, and I slashed out blindly with my magic. All of it.

“Alice, we are here for you!” Jaxon shouted.

A golden energy pulsed out from my Card Kings and encased me. It flowed into me and then out of me. A full deck of

energy shot from my hands in the form of playing cards. They whistled through the air and embedded themselves in Rina. The Queen of Hearts bent over on a huff of air, and the Jabberwocky folded itself around her. A greasy green glow filled Rina's hands as she struck out at the Jabberwocky blindly, but the beast—my mother—only held Rina tighter as she rolled them to the edge of the cliff... and over it.

“No!” I screamed as they fell.

I ran to the edge and watched the Jabberwocky draw its wings in against its back so that it would hurtle faster downward, and then it turned its body so that Rina would take the brunt of the impact. The earth trembled with the force of their fall.

“Mother!” I cried as my kings rushed up the hill to me. “Mother.”

“There was no returning for her,” Bevan said gently. “She made the best choice available to her; she decided to save you.”

“I am so sorry, Alice,” Kyran added as he stroked my hair gently.

“Queen Julia has righted her wrongs,” Jaxon murmured. “She has taken a hero's stand and died with honor.”

“Come here, sweetheart,” Draven pulled me into a hug. “Just breathe. I've got you. We've got you and will never let go.”

The other men closed in around us, and they held me as I mourned the mother I had lost, and found, and lost again.

Chapter Thirteen

Wonderland was restored, the imbalance corrected, and her monarchs were united in marriage.

Our wedding took place in the Wilds, and all of Wonderland attended, even George the Hatter, the Dormouse, and the March Hare. Time had been so impressed with the way I'd handled the Queen of Hearts that he had granted me a favor and released his hold on the Hatter's tea party.

Underland was emptied, and the people returned to their homes above ground. So, my Wild Wonderland was full of life and beautifully vibrant when I strode out onto the main steps of our castle to introduce my people to their ruling deck. The Card Kings and I were joined, at last, uniting Wonderland and all of her magic in the way that had been intended.

I danced in the Wilds ballroom, across a checkered floor, with each of my husbands individually, and then all of them together, in a joyous dance where I was swirled back and forth between them. I drank tea with Barnabus, who I'd sent a special carriage for, and found a spot for the sleepy Dormouse to take a nap. I ate lots of wedding cake and kissed my kings whenever the clocks chimed the hour (a Wonderland tradition) ... which happened more often than hourly thanks to Time himself, who turned out to be a bit of a prankster.

A new retinue of Cheshires stood guard at the palace, commanded by my cousin, Nick. They looked very smart in their uniforms and very proud to have been chosen to serve. Warren White was my new chatelaine, and he bustled about the Wilds, tapping his pocket watch at people, and telling them where they

needed to be. In short, the celebration was a success, and in the center of it all stood a massive statue of the Jabberwocky.

I intended for Wonderland to remember my mother's mistake and her sacrifice to correct it. Hopefully, it would save us from repeating the past.

“Are you ready for the mating of the Deck?” Kyran purred in my ear.

“I've been looking forward to it all night.” I headed for the stairs, and my Card Kings fell into step behind me.

Once we were ensconced in our new suites, and the doors barred behind us, they set upon me. Clothes were gone in moments, and I was lifted off my feet; mouths and hands roaming my body as the men carried me to the massive bed in the center of the room. It was circular and draped with gold curtains. Pillows were piled on one curve, and the men eased me down upon them.

Bevan laid beside me and kissed me, his hand threading through my hair as Jaxon lavished attention on my breasts. Draven began massaging my thighs apart while Kyran slid between them. I felt Draven lean across my belly, his tongue darting out to tease my most sensitive place. Kyran worked me lower with his fingers, easing my response from me until I was wet with desire. Then, as Draven continued to lick at me, Kyran slid into me.

My legs were lifted, and the men resettled around me, tongues licking and fingers grasping. I was lost to the luxury of four men loving me at once, my head rolling on the pillows. Jaxon slipped beneath me, holding my legs apart with his own as Kyran continued to slam into me, taking us quickly into rapture. Flesh filled my hands as Kyran came with a shout. I rubbed my palms over Jaxon and Bevan's rods briskly as Draven took Kyran's place.

We climbed higher toward pleasure as Kyran rubbed himself back to eagerness beside us. He was already beginning to glow, so he was more than prepared when the rest of us crested

again, and the golden aura burst around our bodies, uniting us all, at last. Our pleasure revved up even further with the glow of our completed deck, and we came screaming together, Kyran joining us as we shook through ecstasy until it left us panting and staring at each other in wonder.

And that was only the beginning. We shuffled our Deck over and over, folding into new positions and dealing out pleasure as if we had an unlimited supply; which it seemed that we had. The myths were true; there was nothing like the mating of the full Deck of Wonderland.

But as I lay in bed later that night, surrounded by an amazing amount of love, I hoped that my Card Kings and I would live forever. Because I was certain that if we ever had a daughter, she would choose love over loyalty to her land, every time... and those damn Cheshires were seriously cute.

“Remind me to change the Cheshires's uniforms,” I murmured to Jaxon, whose head was just above mine on our pillow.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” he murmured, then scowled and opened his eyes. “Why?”

“Because they're too handsome for their own good.”

“Barely married a day, and already she's already checking out the Cheshires,” Draven growled as he pulled me over his chest. “Are we not enough for you, Alice?”

“More than enough. More than I could have ever hoped for. I love you, my Card Kings,” I said to them, and they declared their love for me.

As crazy as my adventures had been, I was finally playing with a full deck, and my Wild Wonderland was at peace.

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Chapter One

“There were of old certain men versed in sorcery, Thor, namely, and Odin, and many others, who were cunning in contriving marvelous sleights; and they, winning the minds of the simple, began to claim the rank of gods.”

Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 13th century

When someone asks if you're a god, you say yes!

Those were the words going through my mind the first time I met Thor. In my line of work they should have been words to live by... literally. At least they would have been had I remembered them in time. Unfortunately, Bill Murray's voice taunted me inside my head mere seconds too late. Thanks a lot, Bill.

My forgetfulness left me facing the distinct possibility of an early and creatively painful demise. If only I'd remembered the movie wisdom sooner. Yes, movie wisdom. Scoff all you want but it may surprise you how much useful information is hidden in movie dialog. At least that's what I tell myself so I can feel better about thinking in movie quotes half the time.

“So, Thor,” I smirked up at the giant, gladiator-muscled, Viking while he glowered down at me through a fall of his shimmering copper hair. “What's it gonna be? Hammer? Lightning? Fists of fury? Lightning might singe the rug a bit. Odin might not appreciate that, it looks kinda old.”

Maybe it wasn't a good idea to taunt a god but hey, what did I have to lose? He'd caught me red handed, bent over the new *Make War, Not Love* campaign plans I'd found in the Human Relations room of Valhalla. I hadn't even heard the loud-mouthed God of Thunder coming in, if you can believe that. Loud-mouthed didn't automatically equate to loud-footed, evidently. Then to make matters worse, he asked me if I was a god. Like maybe I was a newbie or something, and what did I, the ever quick-witted one say? I said no. Yeah, I wanted to smack myself silly for that one.

Then again, maybe I should cut myself some slack. It's a little shocking to be face to face, well face to chest, with what had to be close to seven feet of gorgeous, vibrant, leather-clad Viking godliness. Did I mention gorgeous? And the leather? I don't mean that yuppie silky lambskin either. I mean hard core, I'm gonna bust your ass if you look at me wrong, well worn but still strong enough to wipe the floor with your face, leather. Just seeing the way it teased me by gripping all that muscle, made me want to rip it to shreds and teach it a lesson. Bad leather, Viking gods should be naked.

"You wanna see my hammer?" Thor's eyes took on a wicked gleam as he looked slowly up and down my body, which took longer than it should have for all five-foot-three (and a half) of me.

"Whoa there, Viking," I leaned back further on the table he'd previously planted me on like I was a misbehaving child. "Raping and pillaging days are in the past. You gotta catch up on the times." I snapped my fingers in his face. "Nowadays there are laws on the treatment of prisoners."

"Not for gods," his lips twitched. It was just a slight movement but I caught it and it gave me the smallest glint of hope that I might actually make it out of this mess alive. Get 'em laughing, then run while they're distracted. It's not the best plan but it's worked for me before.

“Hey, like I always say, gods are people too,” I smiled my best P.R. smile. *Gods are great, they're not at all out to manipulate mankind, really, and I'm definitely not here to foil their evil plans.* I smiled bigger.

“No we're not,” the frown was back and he set an intimidating fist on the table next to my hip for good measure. A fist that was nearly the size of my face.

The leather around his forearm creaked at me gleefully.

Okay, that was more like it. I could handle an angry god better than a horny one. I congratulated myself on the sharpness of my tongue until I felt his thumb scrape lightly over my jeans. I went still, listening to more creaky leather commentary as Thor leaned in closer and I found myself wondering how much strain the stuff could take. Maybe he'd bust his seams before he had a chance to bust my face. I can't say the prospect didn't have its own appeal, even without saving me an ass kickin'.

The glimpse of chest I had through the V of his leather tunic was something straight out of a male calendar. Made for women to drool over, the kind of sculpted, smooth, perfect chest that looked airbrushed. It was mere inches from my face, rising and falling with his deep breaths, and I had an overwhelming urge to lean forward and rub my cheek against it. Then there was that smell. This close to him, I was practically enveloped in it. It was like standing in the middle of a storm while lightning struck nearby; a wild, exciting aroma of rain and electricity. Of freshly washed man.

“Now, now,” I chided him like a school teacher as I tried to focus on his face. “You mustn't forget your own history. Shall I refresh your memory?”

“Try me,” he made a sound halfway between a sniff and a snort, “let's hear what you think you know of gods.”

“Well for one thing,” I poked my finger into his massive

chest, “I know you aren’t gods at all, so you can just stop with the holier than thou attitude, buster.”

A thick eyebrow arched up and Thor’s lips went into mini spasms.

“For another thing,” yes, I was still poking him, “I know where you’re from, Atlantean. I know your god abilities are nothing more than technological and magical advances your kind kept from humanity in an attempt to rule the world. Advances that ended up destroying Atlantis but still you all didn’t think that was any reason to stop practicing them.”

“Practice does make perfect,” his eyes started to spark with the very magic I’d referenced and I knew I had only one shot to get out of there alive and un-hammered as it were.

“I know something else too,” I whispered and cast my eyes side to side conspiratorially.

He couldn’t help it; his smile finally broke free as he leaned in closer, “What’s that?”

“I know if I do this,” I kicked my leg out as hard as I could and caught him where no man likes to be kicked, “god or not, you’re going down.”

I jumped off the table the minute Thor landed, groaning and cupping himself on the thick carpet. Then I bolted past him and out the door, already chanting the spell that would get me through the wards of Valhalla and out into the Aether. I felt the magic rush over me like a hot, tickling breath as I ran down a long hallway to the tracing room. It sparked eagerly across my skin, urging me back to where I’d come from. Everything in its place and all that.

As I crossed the threshold, I was pulled through the tracing point and into the Aether. The tracing point sealed behind me with a low murmur of magic and a pressurized pop in my ears. But that

physical sensation lasted only a moment before my body became a mere memory with a tingling, freeing ecstasy. I flowed through streams of pure magic, my spell propelling me along to my destination so I didn't have to navigate the waters myself. With another pressure-pop that announced the reformation of my ears, I exited the Aether and felt my body reluctantly become physical again. Gravity was the worst; a jarring, sucking sensation that took a few moments to readjust to.

My momentum sent me straight into a wall. A dirty, alley wall. I pushed off it immediately and swung around to automatically crouch into a fighting stance, just in case Thor had managed to follow me through. Tracing was a rush, add the adrenaline of the chase to it and it left me panting for breath and shaking. My pulse beat heavily in my ears, the thudding drowning out the traffic I could see in my peripheral vision. I was holding my kodachi before me and I hadn't even realized I'd drawn the Japanese shortsword.

Remnants of magic sparked blue and drifted to the ground in a roughly circular outline but the wall across from me remained the same; no ripples, no blurring, no sign of Thor at all. I stood slowly, leaned back, and felt my heart rate start to decelerate as I slid the sword into its scabbard.

“God damn Buffy! Freakin’ vampire slayer gets all the props,” I muttered. “Vampires, please! Bunch of melodramatic parasites. And werewolves? I'd fight one of those puppies any day rather than a god. At least they can't pull magic out of their furry butts. Now faeries, I might not be thrilled to meet one of them in a dark alley... a dark alley kinda like this one.” I shoved myself quickly away from the wall and power-walked towards the street, still bitching about a fictional vampire hunter under my breath.

“Vampire Slayer,” I grumbled, “Try killing a god sometime and then get back to me. Blondie wouldn't last a day. She'd be whining to her mommy about the unfairness of it all within minutes. Oh, and falling for your prey... total amateur. You don't

poop where you eat and you don't kill where you sleep. Or sleep with who you kill. No wait, that's necrophilia,” I frowned and then shook my head. “Oh whatever, it's just dumb to let your prey seduce you.” Thor's striking face flashed through my mind, his ocean eyes sparkling with magic, and I decided to just shut the hell up. That guy Spike was sweet to Buffy, in a psycho kind of way.

Ugh. I threw my hands up and shook my head at myself. Staring death in the face can have an odd affect on people. Especially when death's face was that of a Viking god. I had to let it go and stop acting like a crazy person, muttering to myself about vampires and werewolves in an alley. This was just another day hunting gods, nothing special about it.

You might be wondering how someone gets into the god hunting business and all I can tell you is: hell if I know. I pretty much stumbled face first into it. Like hitting a rock when you're riding a bike at full speed; I went flying and landed in a thorn bush. A burning one. A talking, burning one that proclaimed it was god in a booming voice.

I never really was the religious type. I'm more of a hands-on kinda girl. I've practiced witchcraft my entire life, which I kinda look on as a religion of the self. I do mean witchcraft by the way, not Wicca. I know that's a religion but I don't practice it, I just do the spells. Wicca's a little too peaceful for me, though I do like the clothes.

Well, I guess I haven't practiced witchcraft my *entire* life but pretty damn close since Mom was teaching me spells in the cradle. Most babies got *The cow jumped over the moon*; I got sung to about drawing it down. Not that I'm complaining since it's really helping me out these days but I've just never seen the gods as a big part of my life.

Boy has that changed.

I walked out of the alley, into the bright Hawaiian sunshine,

and held a hand up to shield my eyes. Well where did you expect the gods to live? Okay, so they don't all technically live in Hawaii but quite a few do and those that don't, seem drawn here. The land is still filled with old magic, practically spilling with it since there isn't much land to begin with. So it's a nice place for a god to go on vacation. Whatever, it's my home and I have to say I'm getting a little tired of sharing it with them. They have their own realm to live in, they need to go there. Or they can go to Hell for all I care... which also happens to be in the God Realm. In fact, from what I understand, there's a few of them. They can take their pick.

About five years ago, I truly started developing a relationship with the gods and I'm not talking in the *Do you have a relationship with God?* Jimmy Swaggart sense. I'm talking about a deep understanding of how truly evil they are. Read your history books, kiddies; most gods were revered mainly because they were so damn scary.

For me it all started with sex. At least it would have if my chosen partner for the evening hadn't been planning on killing me as a sacrifice to the Hawaiian God of War, Ku. You think you've got some bad date stories.

My young, Hawaiian escort for the evening was everything every female tourist (and some males too, I'm sure) fantasized about on the plane ride over. He was tall, dark, handsome, and built like a brick... well you get the picture. He also had green eyes, courtesy of some white ancestor who got lucky with a wicked wahine. Green eyes have always been a weakness of mine.

He took me out on a romantic date, ending with us drinking an entire bottle of champagne at a Heiau (a Hawaiian temple). This particular Heiau was dedicated to none other than, Ku. Now I know that doesn't sound too romantic but take into account that the Heiau was situated on a mountaintop overlooking Waimea Bay and the sun was setting. A deep pumpkin sky painting the cerulean sea pink as it crept into a verdant valley spotted with the flight of tropical birds. Can you see the sexy factor yet?

I may have been tipsy when we started. I'd just turned twenty-one so give me a break on the alcohol consumption, but when I looked up and spotted a large local man watching us from the tree line, I sobered up quick. I shot him a nasty look but he was focused on my date so he didn't see it. Something in his gaze set off warning sirens (definitely sirens, not bells) and I turned back sharply to find a large *Crocodile Dundee* knife plunging towards me.

I had seconds to roll to the side before the blade ended up embedded in the ground, merely nicking my upper arm instead of going through my chest. I rolled back towards the knife, effectively removing it from my date's possession and my bleeding arm, as I kicked upwards. I don't know if I hit him *there* or not but he howled like he was in serious pain.

"Ku," he managed to choke out, "Na waimaka o ka lani." He launched himself at me and in those few moments I saw more than you'd think was possible.

I saw the local voyeur come striding to us, hand extended, face rapturous. I saw my hand gripping the blade and turning it. I saw the look of shock on my date's face as the knife slipped into his neck. Internally I shouted "That's not a knife, *this* is a knife," Australian accent and all, and I almost started to giggle hysterically. It's amazing what the mind will do to protect itself and, like I warned you, I think in movie quotes a lot.

My mind had definitely needed some protection. I used to think those horror movies with blood spraying from neck wounds were ridiculous and inaccurate. I don't think that anymore. You hit a guy in the neck with a big blade and he bleeds. A lot. All over you if you just so happen to be beneath him at the time. It was extremely messy, to say the least, and potentially mind breaking.

I think the only reason I didn't start screaming was that someone else beat me to it. The scream I heard was a terrifying mix of rage, frustration, and pain. It yanked my attention to the

left, where I found the local man on his knees. He was right next to me. Way too close for my comfort. He reached for me and I didn't think. I just reacted. I didn't aim either. I just shot the knife out straight and followed through with my body.

I was suddenly grateful for all the self-defense classes Mom had insisted I take. The biggest advantage training can give you is faster action... automatic reaction. Your body moves before your mind has a chance to process things and it saves you precious, life granting seconds.

The man was suddenly gasping beneath me, the blade buried in his chest. He started to murmur some words in a language unfamiliar to me. Surprisingly, it wasn't Hawaiian. I panicked and stabbed him again. I knew a spell when I heard one and I also knew that any spell this guy managed to cast would not be beneficial to my health. He kept going and I kept stabbing, shutting my eyes to block out the carnage. I felt like I had a starring role in *Psycho*, the original not that stupid Vince Vaughn remake. All that was missing was the shower curtain and that ridiculously horrifying music. Although, the sound he made was even more horrific. I didn't open my eyes until he went silent.

The Heiau was gone, replaced by an elegant room in what must have been a multimillion dollar home. That's when I realized Ku had been chanting a spell to open a tracing point, a doorway to the Aether. The Aether, or the Astral as some call it, is a place of pure consciousness. It's also the link between our world and the realm of the gods. Think of reality as a spiritual sandwich. The Aether would be all the tasty filling packed between the bread of our worlds. If you wanted to go from one slice to the other, you had to get through the tuna salad first.

Okay, now I'm hungry.

Anyway, the Aether is also where magic happens. As a witch, I use it for crafting spells. I can tap into it with my mind and create new realities there. It's called spellcraft. Of course it's not as

simple as it sounds. There's a lot of work and usually a few ingredients necessary for magic but once something is made in the Aether, it manifests on the physical plane.

When I was little, my mom told me stories of people who could travel the Aether, a practice called tracing, but the ability was lost to history. The spells had become scarce and unreliable, the destinations vague, the potential risks high. To take your physical body, make it pure consciousness, and send it shooting through the Aether to another location was a mind boggling concept to me. Yet there, beneath me, was proof it could be done. This man could trace, had in fact taken me along for the ride... and I just killed him. Great.

The body was a bloody mess. I'd nearly decapitated Ku in my blind attack. I didn't know it at the time but it's one of the few ways you can kill a god. Don't laugh, there are monsters out there who can put their head back on and keep going without missing a beat. Or just sprout two more. Can you say Hydra? Beheading doesn't always work. I repeat; *beheading doesn't always work*. Remember to take the heart too. Oh and burning is usually quite effective as well but with gods, the head is the most important part to take. But I digress.

After I stopped screaming, (I was actually thankful I'd been able to delay the screaming portion of the evening for that long) I tried to wipe away the blood in a very Lady Macbeth fashion. Out damn spot, out. It was useless. I found the bathroom, not even caring that there could be someone else in the house, and went into the shower fully clothed. I can't even remember what the bathroom looked like. All I recall is the way the water ran bright red and how I stared at it, mesmerized as it swirled down the drain. It was the first time I'd ever killed, as in anything. Well, except bugs but I think we can all agree that they don't count.

I stood under the spray and my body began to shake so I kept adding more hot water. It never occurred to me to take my clothes off. I just sluiced the water off them when I was done and

patted myself dry with towels. I remember leaving the towels on the floor like I was an obnoxious hotel guest. What did it matter? I think any attempt at manners had been lost when I'd left a corpse in the living room.

I came out of the bathroom to complete silence. I don't know what I'd been expecting. Shouting. Screams. Policemen waiting to gun me down. There was no one. I was totally alone... in the home of a god. It all sank in. The man praying to Ku. The Hawaiian in the trees. The Aetheric Plane. I had killed Ku. One of the main gods of the Hawaiian pantheon was lying on a white tile floor with his head barely attached because of me. What the hell kind of karma had I just racked up? Would it matter that it was clearly self defense? I decided it did. Then I decided to snoop around.

I mean I didn't even know where I was. Like I said, I knew about tracing but had been warned at a very early age to never attempt it. So I had no idea if I was still in Hawaii or even on the same plane of existence. I had just traced! I could've been anywhere. Tartarus. Niflheim. Minnesota. Oh please, don't let me be in Minnesota. Well, then again, there is that big mall there.

I crept through the god's house and hoped he was a bachelor. The last thing I needed was the Mrs. walking in. What's the proper thing to say in that position? "Hello Mrs. Ku, lovely home you have, sorry about the corpse of your husband. Oh and for making your husband into that corpse." That was one conversation I didn't want to have.

The place was deserted though. I walked past room after room filled only with modern Hawaiian furniture (go figure). The golden gleam of Koa wood merged with Hawaiian textiles everywhere. High ceilings were crossed with wood beams. Creamy white walls were a stark contrast to dark, hand carved tikis placed artfully around the place. The Hawaiian statues looked like they were museum quality and they were all of the same god. Guess who... yep, him.

A set of sliding glass doors opened to a wide expanse of yard. That in itself screams money when you live in Hawaii, which I was relieved to find myself still inhabiting. Coconut trees crowded the edges of the well manicured lawn like gossiping socialites at a cocktail party, snubbing the shorter kukui nut trees around them. A retaining wall penned them all in, preventing any suicidal snubbed kukuis from leaping over the cliff beyond. The house overlooked Waimea valley. I couldn't see it but I knew the Heiau was below and to the right.

You'd think a god would have an ocean view.

Relieved that I wasn't stranded somewhere impossible to return from, I headed back inside. My brain had started to function again and it was reeling from the reality of my situation. I began to search in earnest, not with thoughts of thievery but simply out of plain curiosity. It wasn't long before I found the one room that seemed special. The big *KAPU* (Hawaiian for sacred – don't touch) written across the door might have given me a bit of a clue.

For lack of a better word, I'll call the room a study. It was full of books and gadgets I'd never seen before. There were weapons everywhere, not just hanging decoratively on the walls but scattered on the floor, as if they'd been tossed there after a long day at the office, if you catch my drift.

As if that wasn't disturbing enough, a wave of magic washed over me, prickling up my arms. When I turned in its direction, all I saw was a massive book. It sat enthroned on a lectern, watching me with the curiosity of a bored tyrant. Covered in dark brown leather instead of luxurious silk, this book wasn't a bejeweled Emperor but a barbarian King. Completely unadorned by gilt or lettering, he needed no crown to proclaim his dominance. Power was decoration enough and this literary monarch wore it like a battle-honed sword, sheathed but still obviously dangerous. I approached it cautiously and it chose to be benevolent, granting me access to spells I never knew existed and information on a race of people who had come from Atlantis. No, not the resort, the actual

lost continent.

With new knowledge came renewed fear. It would be wiser to appease my curiosity somewhere else. Somewhere safer than the home of a god I'd just decapitated. So I ran through the house, grabbing up a large bag (a piece of Ferragamo luggage to be exact, Ku had excellent taste) and hurried back to the study. The book went into the bag and then a couple of the more interesting gadgets on top. I told myself I was not a thief, I took them in the interest of knowledge and besides, Ku did try to kill me. To the winner go the spoils right?

By the front door I found a set of keys sitting in a koa bowl. I grabbed them up and continued my panicked flight right out the door, hoping the spoils included a getaway vehicle. I paused to get my bearings for a moment in a huge, circular, covered drive and located the garage set back to the left. A sleek, black Jaguar with an *Eddie Would Go* bumper sticker peered out at me indolently.

Eddie being Eddie Aikau, surfer and local hero who was last seen paddling away from the stranded Hokule'a canoe in an effort to fetch help. I shouldn't have been surprised to see that little bit of homage to local culture but I was. I mean damn, I'd just found out the gods were real; picturing them purchasing motivating bumper stickers was just a little too much for me. Then I noticed the vanity plate. *KuKuK'chu* stood out against the rainbow background of the Hawaii license plate. Hmph, Ku was a Beatles fan and, evidently, he was also the walrus.

I spared one second to giggle, nearly on the verge of hysterics, and then jumped in behind the wheel. In no time, I was zipping down a private drive and breaking with a squeal when I came to an imposing iron gate. I looked around frantically and finally found the remote clipped to the passenger side visor. With shaking hands, I hit the button and hit the road.

I haven't dated a local boy since.

Chapter Two

So that was how this whole thing began. That's how I scored this thankless fate that I can't even tell my best friends about for fear of them getting me committed. Or even worse, freaking them out so badly that they'd never be able to live a normal life. Kinda like me.

“I wouldn't wish that on anyone,” I sighed and trudged into the welcoming artificial cool of one of the millions, no make that billions, of ABC stores in Waikiki.

I grabbed myself a coke, thoughts still on the book I'd acquired that horrible day. Not only did I learn how to trace from the Good Book (hey, it's done me a lot of good) but I also learned about the origins of the gods, the power gods got from sacrifices, and what constituted a sacrifice. It turned out that not only did they receive strength from direct offerings but also indirectly, from any death resulting from battles fought in the name of gods. Most wars have some kind of tie to the divine, even if it's just plain rage (yes, there's a god of rage). Also, any god in on the deal could share in the power surge.

So basically it paid off for deities to encourage their followers to fight instead of keeping them safe at home. Why settle for an occasional human sacrifice when you could get it on a mass scale constantly? Most of the gods didn't even have followers anymore, so this was their only energy source. With the downfall of the older religions, war became more necessary and the gods had to come up with bigger and better plans to create bloodshed. The book didn't tell me that part. The flier I found tucked into the book did:

We will survive!

Come learn how to create panic and discord among the humans!

April 20 at 8 pm, Valhalla

Special speakers: Odin and Huitzilopochtli

Potluck to follow. Gods whose names begin with:

A-G bring appetizers or salads

H-L bring main dishes

M-Q bring desserts

R-Z bring drinks

After I stopped laughing hysterically, I decided to begin my career as a god-killer, or human liberator as I prefer to be called.

I paid the cashier for my drink and left the artificial air behind in exchange for the natural ocean breeze drifting sluggishly across Waikiki Beach. It wasn't a fair trade in my opinion but the salt air did help clear out those old memories. I plopped down on an only slightly crumbling stone wall and stared out at the Pacific as it battered the golden sand under its frothy fists.

Generally, I hated the beach but breaking out of Valhalla can be exhausting and I needed a breather before I headed home over the Ko'olau mountains. The sound of the ocean can be comforting and the waves are pretty to look at, even amusing when you catch a tourist trying to learn how to windsurf. However, at that moment all it did was remind me of how blue Thor's eyes were: deep sapphire with a touch of green, like Caribbean quartz.

I loved light eyes. My own were dark brown and boring as

far as I was concerned. They'd been green when I was born but had changed at nine months. My mom told me that she'd bet a friend they wouldn't change and she'd lost. Let that be a lesson to all of you ladies; don't tempt fate when it concerns your child. I shook my head and took another swig of coke. Must be the heat melting my brain. At least I wasn't bitching about Buffy anymore.

I rubbed at the ache in my neck as I pondered a new dilemma along with the old one of how to keep sand from getting all over me when I'm at the beach. Was it just me or had Thor let me go? I mean he didn't even try to chase me. Yes, I'd laid him low but it shouldn't have taken him that long to recover. He was a big, strong, creaking-leather clad god. He should have been up almost instantly. I shook my head. Thinking about Thor was only making the ache in my neck intensify so I gave up and turned my full attention to the sand.

I hate sand. It's probably one of my biggest problems with beaches. Don't laugh, I'm also not overly fond of sun or surf either. Sand, sun, and surf, the SSS, it ranked right up there with the KKK for me as far as evil acronyms went. For those of you who have never seen a beach, much less a Hawaiian one, let me explain.

Sand sticks to you like an alien fungus that believes you're its only hope of survival. Wet or dry it will attach itself to any part of your anatomy it can reach and those cool ocean breezes everyone loves so much? They are in cahoots with the vicious, alien-fungus sand and will happily fling a fine mist of the powdery annoyance all over you while simultaneously lulling you to sleep with its salt-laced caresses. Result? You wake up hours later to find not only has your sunblock died defending you but you're now coated with a thin layer of sand, saltwater, and suntan lotion that has dried to a sticky crust. After you painfully scrape away the crust, you'll find the red glow of your newly crisped skin beneath. The beach is evil, I tell you, evil.

So how could I love my home so much and not adore the

pristine glory of the white sand beaches which make Hawaii such a tourist attraction? Well, first of all, I enjoy the beach just fine... through the window of an air-conditioned room with a Li Hing Mui Margarita in hand. Secondly, there is more to these islands than beaches. There's the incredible weather where even the rain is warm and I never ever have to worry about digging my car out of the snow. There's the rich melting pot of cultures and of course, there's the food. Nothing compares to the flavors of Hawaii.

I was just about to get up and sample some of those flavors from a nearby Shave Ice truck when a dark shadow passed over me, sending a shiver down my spine. No, the shiver wasn't because of the sudden relief from the sun. It was magic, strong and confident magic, almost cocky actually. I knew that magic, had in fact kicked it in its balls quite recently. I turned my head slowly, muttering a protection spell under my breath while reaching for my stash of powdered mullein.

"That's not necessary, witch," Thor's previously resonant voice was severely toned down for his foray among the humans.

"I'm nothing if not cautious," I smiled at Thor like he was an old friend as I jumped to my feet.

My legs itched to run but it wouldn't do any good. The crowds around me were thick with vacationing families and honeymooners. If at all possible, I wouldn't involve innocent bystanders and I was hoping he wouldn't either.

"I'm not here to harm you," he grimaced.

He'd taken the time to change his clothes before following me. Maybe he was afraid the leather lace-up pants of his previous ensemble would have made him stand out on a Hawaiian beach. Instead, he wore a pair of khaki pants and a tan silk Aloha shirt. He looked like a local businessman on his lunch break. A local businessman with golden-red hair streaming past his shoulders, bone structure that would make a Roman statue weep, and a body

that looked like it spent more time in a gym than a boardroom.

I kind of missed the leather.

“No, you’re here to wow me with your literally classic good looks and your modern Hawaiian fashion sense,” I looked him over pointedly, just to let him know that I found his outfit amusing. That’s it. Really.

“Would you join me at the closest drinking establishment for a cocktail?” His lips didn’t so much as twitch, even though his eyes sparkled a bit.

“I’m sorry, I think I have sand in my ears,” I shook a finger vigorously in my left ear. I wouldn’t have put it past the alien-fungus. “I thought for a second there that you asked if you could buy me a drink.”

“I did,” his smile spread over his face like a cat stretches in the sun; slowly and sensuously, as if it had all the time in the world and was fully expecting a good scratch beneath the chin later.

I stood gaping for a moment before trying to recover. “Uh... why?” Yep, that’s me, Lucy Loquacious.

I thought seriously about extending the knives from my gloves. The gloves I wore were part of the loot I’d made off with that day at Ku’s. They had 3” long daggers resting inside them, flat against the backs of my hands until a sharp, downward movement would trigger their release. Then they extended over my fingers like lethal claws. I felt like Wolverine when I wore them but more importantly, they were deadly, turning every punch into a four-way stab.

They were also a little showy for Waikiki Beach.

So was my kodachi which, for the moment, was camouflaged with a slight blurring of magic that made it blend into my leather pants. Maybe I could go for the dagger I kept down my

top. The kodachi and dagger were just of human make but I'd embedded them with magic for increased damage potential. The sword was perfect for taking a god's head. The curvature of the blade gave me the extra oomph I needed to make it a clean cut but I wasn't about to behead Thor in the middle of Waikiki. The dagger would probably be the best choice for the situation. Maybe I could throw it at him and run away screaming.

"I'd like to talk to you," his eyes strayed to my cleavage and I told myself it had nothing to do with the hidden knife and everything to do with my 36 double Ds. Call me vain but I'd rather have him checking me out than knowing where my weapons were hidden. Mae West said it was better to be looked over than overlooked. Well, I needed him to do a little of both, look me over and overlook my knife. It was a survival issue and had nothing to do with him being hot.

I know, I sound full of it even to myself.

"Do I need to bow my head and clasp my hands first?" I backed up slightly and took a quick look around, trying to find a possible escape route.

He laughed, wild and rich, like drumbeats after midnight. It caused a visceral reaction in me, calling to something primitive in my blood and making me sway towards him. People stopped and turned to look at him. Hell, even I stopped scanning the area and just stared at him in shock. The tourists, however, looked at Thor eagerly, as if he were some kind of celebrity they might recognize if they stared long enough. In a way, I guess he was.

"For you, I'll make an exception," he reached out and I tried to back up but the rock wall brought me up short. His hand dropped but his smile stayed put, "Just one drink."

"Fine, follow me," I turned and walked down the sidewalk casually, like it was just another beautiful day in paradise and I wasn't still a little shaky from that sexy laugh. The sun was

shining, children were splashing in the waves, and a Norse god was about to buy me a drink. Yep, everything normal here. I dropped my empty coke bottle into a trash can marked *Mahalo* (it means *thank you* not *trash*) and kept walking.

He didn't say a word while we walked, which would normally creep me out, but I was a little too busy freaking out about everything else for it to matter. Was I really going to do this? Sit down and have a drink with an Atlantean? This *so* wasn't part of my job description. What the hell was going on? The only interaction I had with gods was done at the end of a blade. Plus, in my experience guys didn't offer to buy you a drink after you kneeed them in the groin. Maybe it was that whole divine forgiveness thing? I glanced back at Thor and he grinned devilishly.

Nope, wrong god.

I led him up the shaded drive of the first building at the end of the beach. We headed up the wide white stone stairs and through an airy lobby to the bar of The Hau Tree Lanai. Very posh. I don't get a god offering to buy me a drink every day, might as well make it a good one.

I found a little table near the rear of the bar and sat down with my back against the wall so no other hot er... *dangerous* gods could sneak up on me. Thor slid in across from me, almost completely blocking the view. I peered around him for a second and then gave up. I figured I could make do with the view I was left with. Mainly him. Hey, I can be accommodating.

"Nice choice," he glanced over his shoulder at the open-air restaurant which ended abruptly in a short wall and then gleaming beach. It was too early for dinner so the patio was empty, wrought iron dining sets waiting patiently for the night's excitements. A mynah bird cawed and took flight from the tree in their midst.

"Robert Louis Stevenson's house was right there," I pointed to the Hau tree, floor tiles imprisoning its small circle of

earth. "There's a picture of him lying beneath that tree."

"Interesting. Do you come here often?"

"Really?" I shook my head and pushed a frizzy strand of hair behind my ear. Damn humidity. I had my waist-length dark hair in a tight bun at my nape. Usually, I wore it up when I went out hunting but it was baby fine and was always trying to escape my evil clutches. "That's all you got? I expected better lines from you Thor, you being so... experienced and all."

"Unbelievable," he laughed again as he leaned back. "It's been a long time since I've met someone so entertaining when they're so scared, Ms...?"

"Miss is good," I smiled again. I wasn't about to repeat my stupidity so soon, "and I'm not scared."

"Then you have the advantage of me, Miss," his eyes gleamed as he leaned forward, completely disregarding my lie. "Concerning my name I mean."

"I'll take every advantage I can get," I looked up at the sudden appearance of a waitress.

"What can I get for you two?" She stared only at Thor.

I couldn't blame her, though it made my lip curl in distaste. Guys as good looking as Thor always came with an attitude to match. Add to that, his "godhood" and you have a grade A, egotistical bastard. Give me a nice average human male over Mr. Gorgeous any day. The only problem was, Mr. Average wouldn't understand my hobby.

"I'll let the lady order for us," he smiled at her, nodded graciously, as if he were accepting his just due, and then looked at me expectantly. I shook my head, suspicions confirmed.

"A bottle of Patron Silver and two shot glasses please," I

smiled sweetly at the poor woman, who obviously hadn't learned to be more wary around the hotties.

The waitress raised her eyebrows but just asked if we needed limes and salt along with. Very professional. Very used to rich alcoholics. After she sauntered off, I looked back at the god incognito seated across from me.

“I thought you only wanted one drink,” he was smiling again. Did he never stop or was it just a clever way of lulling me into a false sense of security?

“I didn’t say one, you did,” I leaned back and crossed my legs, not to be ladylike but just to have an excuse to be a little further away from him. I had no idea what he was up to and I wanted as much room as possible to reach my weapons if necessary.

“Alright,” he did that head incline thing royalty does but he did it better. “Good choice, I wouldn’t have pegged you for a tequila drinker, though.”

“You’ve known me all of thirty minutes,” I smirked, “part of which you spent on the floor groaning. You shouldn’t have pegged me for anything other than a woman to guard your goodies around.”

“I don’t know,” his eyes went suddenly still. “I think I could hazard a few guesses.”

Maybe it wasn’t wise to remind him of the specifics of our introduction but hey, I just couldn’t help wanting to bring him down a notch. Cocky guys put my teeth on edge.

“Try me.” I narrowed my gaze on his twitching lips but then noticed how his eyes remained solemn.

“I’d say first of all that you’re some kind of an artist,” he leaned in even closer as he spoke, “you paint and your favorite

subject is people.”

I went quiet and as still as his eyes were. The statement was accurate, too accurate. I started to wonder how much the gods knew about me until I noticed the spot of oil paint on my pinky. Phew, I smiled.

“Very observant,” I shook my traitorous finger at him.

“How would I know about your subject preference?” He smiled and leaned back for the waitress to deposit our order on the table between. She poured us each a shot before leaving and I was grateful for the Twix moment.

“Lucky guess,” I reached for my glass and eyed him suspiciously over the rim as I sipped. I only shoot tequila when I either; A. Want to get drunk, B. Want to act tough, C. Want to get someone else drunk, or D. Any combination of the above.

He shot his and poured another.

“Tell yourself whatever you want, Miss,” he saluted me with his glass and downed it.

Show off. I was *so* not going to rise to the challenge. He was a god. He could probably process alcohol in a heartbeat. Of course, I'm part Japanese and could do a fair amount of alcohol processing myself. I'm told it's an allergic reaction a lot of Japanese have but basically, it results in me being able to drink with the big boys but look as if I'm embarrassed the whole time (my face turns pink). I didn't want to let him play on my insecurities but then again, I'd been the one who ordered the damn bottle in the first place.

I threw back my shot and pushed it toward him. Oh well, I'm only human, put me down for B. Want to act tough.

“What do you want, Thor?” I pulled my glass closer after he refilled it and lifted it to my lips.

“You,” he smiled serenely.

I sputtered and almost wasted good tequila. I said *almost*.

“Excuse me?” My hand hovered mid-air, unsure whether to continue with the drinking program or just give up in favor of open-mouthed confusion.

“I think we’re after the same things,” he reached over and gently nudged my glass upwards. I drank the rest of the shot without thinking and without taking my eyes off him.

“I barely know you,” I turned the glass over this time. “How could you possibly know what I’m after?”

“You were trying to steal the same information I was,” he shot a quick glance around the bar.

“Trying?” Questions flew around my head like annoying gnats. Was he sent to get the plans back? Oh, did I mention I had the forbearance to grab said plans while I was kneeing him? Well, I did and now the Norse God of Thunder sat across from me drinking tequila and talking about wanting me due to our similar goals. Why hadn’t he just killed me and taken the plans if he wanted them? Why all the games? What the hell was going on?

“You *do* have them,” he smiled like a cat that had just found a fallen bird-feeder... still full of birds.

“Why would *you* be trying to steal them?” I ignored how sexy his smile was. I am a professional after all.

“Not all gods are as horrible as you think,” he downed another shot, his eyes narrowing briefly under his furrowed brow.

“Yeah, that’s what the Christians keep telling me,” I smirked. “Can’t say for sure though, never met Jesus, just a few Mexicans with delusions of grandeur.”

One perfectly formed eyebrow winged upward over the

swirling blues and greens of his eyes. Was it the tequila affecting me or were the colors really flowing together like mist? I pushed the shot glass away from me and sighed. It wouldn't do to get all sloppy drunk with a god. Who knows where I'd wake up. Or *if* I'd wake up.

“Some of us don't agree with the majority,” he pretended to misinterpret my signal to stop drinking and refilled my glass before placing it back in front of me. I stared hard at it for a second so it knew who was boss, then picked it up and took a resigned sip.

“What do you mean you don't agree?” I looked around and faintly realized the sun was setting. Oh great, time for the rest of the monsters to come out and play.

“I don't think we need people to die for us to give us power,” he frowned at my distraction and I settled my attention back firmly onto what he was saying. “Most of us believe it's the only way to raise as much power as the freely given blood used to bring but I don't agree.”

“The blood?” I smirked at him and shook my head. “You mean sacrifice, specifically human, don't you?”

“I believe that's what I just said,” he sighed. “There's no way around the fact that blood holds life and life is magic. When people sacrificed to us, we gained their magic and there's nothing like it. The sacrifice of animals was good too but it was only due to the magic imbued into the blood by human intention and it never came close to the power of a human life. It's that rush of magic that my fellow deities are striving for. They plot to bring war among your kind so you'll kill each other in their name again, this time on a mass scale, and they'll all share in the waves of energy it brings.”

“Yes, yes,” I waved a hand imperiously. “I know all that. What I don't know is why you, the God of Thunder, God of War, God of the Vikings who were known for their viciousness, would

suddenly grow a soft spot and decide you don't want us to fight anymore.”

“Trust me, I have no soft spots,” his lips twitched a little. “I just don’t think mass destruction is a good idea. You know about us, you know we need followers to grow in strength. The more people remember us and respect us, the more we thrive. Some of us have grown immense in ability. What you might not know is that we don’t need any more power to survive. Our talents are old and our magic will sustain us until the earth crumbles away and is nothing but so much debris. Even then, we may still survive to find another suitable planet. And by the way, I’m not just a god of war; I also rule the sky, all storms, sea-journeys, and justice.”

I could feel my eyes grow round at his candor. I had no idea they were strong enough to survive eternity without our sacrifice. I'd always assumed that without humanity the Atlanteans would have died out long ago. I knew their magic was great but I had no idea it was comic book, super villain great. My own magic seemed a poor shadow of it, although Ku’s book held enough of their spells to bring me a little closer to their level. Without that book, I'd already be dead.

“Impressive résumé,” I found myself shooting tequila again. Damn it, I had to stop that. “It still doesn’t explain why you’d choose to miss out on all the extra power.”

“Like I said, I don’t think the current course of action is wise. The way things are heading, your kind could blow the whole world apart and I like it here.”

“Cause it's where you keep your stuff?” I smirked.

“Some of it,” he smirked back.

“So what do you propose?” I could feel the stolen documents crinkling against my waist. The black silk of my top was already limp from the heat so it was a good guess he knew where said documents were. I reached to pull them out but his

hand flew across the table and grabbed mine.

“Not here,” he caressed my hand along the line of the glove, where the leather was cut to leave my fingers bare. I assumed he was trying to make it appear, to anyone who might be watching, that affection had been his true intention. “You wisely chose a public place to speak with me but if we go any further, we need privacy.”

Privacy. Go any further. The words seemed to curl in my gut and try to snake their way lower. I wasn’t sure I wanted to be alone with the Nordic giant. It had been awhile since I was alone with any man in a non-killing sense, and the last time hadn’t turned out so well.

“What do you have in mind?” I slid my hand out from beneath his and he turned his head to the side, a little wrinkle appearing between his brows.

“I have a boat up at the Yacht Club,” he pulled his hand back and used it to refill my glass. The wrinkle disappeared.

“Like I’m going to follow you onto your boat,” I huffed.

“Do you have a problem with boats?” His eyes crinkled at the corners and just for a second, I wondered exactly how much he knew about me.

“You think you know me?” I narrowed my eyes at him and tried to look as fierce as possible, which is difficult when you’re built like I am. Oh, I worked out but I wasn’t what you’d call ripped. My love of food prevented that and normally I preferred it that way. A woman should look like a woman. Unfortunately, my lack of height on top of my lack of obvious muscles didn’t exactly make me Amazon warrior material. What it did do was make it hard for me to look terrifying. I was about as scary as an angry Poodle.

“I do know you, Vervain,” Thor smiled when my jaw

dropped. “Did you think I wouldn’t know the Godhunter when I saw her?”

“Godhunter?” My whisper was almost a whimper.

“Were you unaware that you’d made a name for yourself?” His eyes showed a little surprise too. Well, yippee-kai-yay, I wasn’t the only one in shock.

“I didn’t realize I was known to the gods at all,” I had hoped my kills had gone unnoticed or at least unaccounted for by the rest of the gods.

“Oh, you’re known,” his smile returned. “Did you really think you could kill gods and no one would notice?”

“Well, it’s not like I left my business card.” Grisly scenes passed through my head. Images I tried hard not to dwell on and which I sometimes needed large amounts of alcohol to banish. I hunted gods, it wasn’t like I was going to give them a fair fight if I could help it. Most of the time I felt like an assassin, sneaking up on my unsuspecting victims and leaving bloody crime scenes in my wake. I never worried about getting caught since most of their homes were in the God Realm. It’s not like the police would be investigating. So I never thought to cover my tracks. Maybe next time I’d torch the place when I was done.

“A few of the gods you killed had surveillance systems,” he smiled as the blood drained from my face. Gods with security cameras. No, I hadn’t counted on that. “You also left your scent everywhere. As soon as I smelled you, I knew who you were.”

“What, are you part Bloodhound or something?” I didn’t like being in the dark but then I was still fairly new to this game. Maybe I should cut myself some slack just this once. I’d have to be way more careful in the future though. Fire, definitely fire. It would take care of any trace evidence I left behind and be a double guarantee on death. If only I could burn the memories as well.

“We have very acute senses,” he licked his full lips and I couldn’t tear my gaze away. “Taste, hearing, touch, sight, and smell, they’re all heightened on us.”

“Well woopdee-diddley-doo,” I couldn’t help it, I was getting turned on and I needed to cover it up with something. Sarcasm won out as usual.

Thor did that godly laughing thing again, which did nothing for my efforts to tamp down my libido. Maybe I needed to start dating. Going five years without getting some lovin’ was not good for god-resisting. I made a mental note to go out that weekend.

“I forget how amusing humans can be,” he was laughing so hard he actually had tears in his eyes.

“Okay fine,” I sighed, “I’m funny and I stink. No matter how much you flatter me, I’m still not getting on your damn boat.”

“I didn’t say you smell bad,” he was getting that confused look again but at least the laughter had stopped. “Why don’t you accept compliments like a normal woman?”

“There is no normal here, *Thor*,” I said his name as if it explained it all. “Lots of interesting things going on but none of them are normal.”

“Point taken,” he licked his lips again, the bastard. “I’m intrigued.”

“No you’re not,” I put my pointer finger in his face, “you’re amused, remember? And the answer is still no.”

“I offer you my blood as safeguard,” he pulled a tiny blade from his pocket and cut his thumb with it. If the situation hadn’t been so serious, I would have laughed to see such a big man with such a tiny knife. But then if you’re that big, you don’t really need a large weapon, do you? He made Mr. Dundee seem like he was overcompensating.

I stared at the blood welling up on his thumb and didn't have a clue on how to proceed. I had the weirdest feeling he was offering me an extreme compliment and I probably shouldn't insult him by refusing, but what was I supposed to do? I couldn't remember coming across this in Ku's book. Did he want me to cut my thumb and press it to his or what? Was I going to be blood brothers, er... blood siblings, with a god? The confusion must have shown on my face because he smiled and suddenly went all deity. He looked at me as if he was bestowing a blessing on me and I had to shake off the sudden urge to kneel.

“Will you accept my protection?” He lifted his hand and his thumb hovered over my lips. The bead of blood seemed to shimmer as it welled up.

Oh damn. Was he going to put his blood on my mouth? Gross. I couldn't even bring myself to say yes, I just nodded and he instantly lowered his bloody thumb. I blinked as the shockwaves coursed through me. Tingling, biting power ran inside me like needle-legged spiders as I felt his blood melt into my skin. I absorbed it and knew immediately that his offer of protection was eternal. I was under Thor's protection. A god protecting the Godhunter. What irony.

“Why did you do that?” I rubbed at my lips and stared at the vanishing cut on his thumb, his body just kinda sucked the blood back in.

“We need you with us,” he slammed back another shot and his hand shook for just a second as he put the glass down. “We can't fight both you and them. Now, do you accompany me to my boat or not?”

Chapter Three

I don't mind boats. As long as they stayed afloat and kept me out of the water. It was the ocean I had a problem with and I blame my paranoia on my mother. She'd been a young woman when she had me and instead of staying home, wasting her youth, she took me out with her. I loved my childhood and will physically assault anyone who dares to say my mother was a bad parent but sometimes it's not the best idea to cart a kid along.

One of those outings had been to a yacht party. I don't remember much about the festivities but I remember the boat. When, as an adult, I'd mentioned the memory to her, she had nervously asked what else I remembered. I pressed her to elaborate. She said there was a small space of time when I'd gone missing and they had finally found me overboard. I was three. She sees no connection to my fear of the ocean.

To be completely honest, I must admit that Jaws played a small part in my terror of the deep blue as well, and an even bigger role in me not taking up surfing (I don't like feeling like bait, thank you very much) but I had no thoughts of killer sharks when I boarded Thor's floating behemoth. I didn't think about the water at all actually since the boat... ship... whatever, was so big, I forgot the ocean was even there. No small feat when dealing with me and my paranoia.

Thor took my hand to help me across the gangplank and didn't release it. He pulled me casually through the interior of the thing, passing room after room of shining mahogany paneling and gleaming steel. I caught glimpses of plush carpeting in dark blue and matching curtains fluttering in the warm salty breeze. The boat must have been specially made for him because even with his bulk, he didn't look cramped at all. In fact, we were walking down the

corridor side by side and his head didn't even come close to brushing the ceiling.

We stopped at a stairway and went down into the belly of the beast. Maybe not the best description under the circumstances but it fit. At the bottom of the stairs was a large open room. The carpeting down there was crimson, the massive center table was black lacquer, and all the décor had an Asian feel. Not what I expected from a Norse god. Shouldn't there be coarse wooden tables and battle axes? Maybe a buxom wench with blonde braids named Brunhilde?

Instead of axes, there were swords. Katanas and the shorter wakizashis were protected in shiny ebony sheaths and displayed proudly on the walls. There was also a brilliant white wedding kimono dominating the wall opposite us, with hand embroidered gold cranes all over it. The walls themselves were covered in soft gold wallpaper with more cranes flying across the expanse, so subtly done that you had to concentrate to see them. On my right was a suit of Samurai armor, complete with a bright red, demon face mask. I swear it was smiling at me and not in a good way, more of a *It'll be fun to eviscerate you* sort of way. I ignored it on principal.

In the center of the table, a delicate white orchid bloomed in a shiny black pot, colored subtly by light shining through the red and gold lacquered paper parasols above it. The parasol lights gave a pink tint to the room, like the boat was blushing in the face of unexpected company. It shouldn't have worried though, the place was immaculate. Any conquering warlord would have happily dripped blood onto the conveniently colored carpet before shucking off his armor and calling for a geisha. I know, that was terribly white of me but I'm only a quarter Japanese and I've never even been to Japan, so you're gonna have to forgive me my clichés. Plus, I think it's an apt description. The room was fiercely beautiful but even with the kimono and orchid, it was supremely masculine.

To the right of the kimono, a door opened into the galley. I was very pleased with myself for remembering the correct name of a ship's kitchen. I was not so pleased to find a stunning woman standing in the doorway. My pleasure went down, even more, when she smiled and poured a warm, welcoming wave of magic out towards me. She wasn't blonde and I highly doubted her name was anything even close to Brunhilde but I had no doubt as to why she was on Thor's boat. My sudden jealousy was as embarrassing as it was ridiculous.

Did I really think I was special because he held my hand? Sheesh, what was I, sixteen? I'll tell you what I was, I was an idiot. I dropped Thor's hand like it was on fire.

"I'm Persephone," the newcomer said as she reached a hand toward me.

Her hand enveloped mine and I suddenly felt like the world was a fresh, wondrous place full of new things to discover. I was a little girl again, peering under rocks and crawling through the grass in search of tiny treasures. I shook my head a little and Persephone smiled brighter, her small mouth looking almost too childish for such a sultry face. She had long dark hair the color of rich soil and green bedroom eyes like morning leaves still shaking off the night. A porcelain doll but one that was made for men. She laughed as I continued to gape at her and I felt her power tickle me.

"I'm Vervain," I finally managed to choke out my name and pull my hand from hers. "Persephone, as in the cause of winter, that Persephone?"

"Well I hardly think it's my fault Mommy had a fit because Hades abducted me," she actually pouted a little and I heard Thor sigh heavily behind me.

"Hey, I've never been one to blame the victim," I held up my hands placatingly. It's never a good idea to aggravate the crazies. "I was just repeating what I remember of the myth.

Frankly, I always thought Hades must be a bastard if he had to kidnap a woman to get a date.”

Persephone’s smile returned to its former glory immediately “Well it’s a little more complicated than that but thank you. I just knew we’d be the best of friends! You’re named for a plant after all and I’m a goddess of growing things.”

“It’s a herb actually,” I hated always having to explain my name. It’s the same questions every time and always the same replies. It’s Vervain, not Vivian. Yes, I know it’s unusual. No, it’s not a flower. Sigh.

Mom had thought it fabulously witty to name a baby witch after a herb with great magical benefits. Vervain was used for love, money, protection, peace, purification, and even youth. You couldn’t ask for a better mix of powers. However, most people were not witches or even versed in our folklore. So I spent a lot of time explaining what vervain was and why my mother would name me after it. If you think that’s bad, my middle name is Alexandrite, not Alexandra but *Alexandrite*, like the gem. People at the DMV are constantly trying to correct the “typos” in my name. There is no creativity allowed in the DMV.

“Yes, I know,” she wrapped an arm around me and led me to the table as I cast a *help me* look over my shoulder at Thor.

He smiled broadly and spread his hands as he shrugged. Great, so much for his protection. Meanwhile, Ms. Happy Face pulled me down into a seat beside her. I wondered if she was also familiar with our local herb. Maybe she had smoked some back in the galley. It would explain the permagrin.

“Interesting that you pronounce the H in herb. Were you raised in England?” She went on.

“No,” I smirked, pleased to get to use my favorite Eddie Izzard line. “I say herb because there’s a fucking H in it.”

“Oh, well, um,” she obviously wasn't an Izzard fan. “I've heard so much about you. You're awfully brave for a human girl.”

My eyes narrowed as I looked at her and I heard Thor's strangled laugh. Was this innocent child routine all an act? Boy, she was good if it was. No problem, I can throw down with the best of them.

“And you're awfully naive for someone who sleeps with the Devil,” I smiled, waiting for the barb to slide home but she only giggled and lightly pushed my shoulder.

“You're funny too. Hades isn't the Devil, he's the Lord of the Underworld,” she flicked her thick hair back. Hair-flickers really annoy me. She was probably one of those people with motivational quotes written on Post-its all over her bedroom.

“So I've heard,” I looked pointedly at Thor. “What the hell is this Thor, a meet and greet?”

“Pretty much,” he slid into the chair on my right and I couldn't help the little jolt of pleasure I felt because he'd chosen to sit beside me instead of Little Miss Sunshine. And I'm back to being sixteen again.

“Is this it?” I looked from him to her and back again. “Just you, me, and your girlfriend here?”

Persephone hooted with laughter but Thor just raised an eyebrow, turned his head to the side, and casually slung an arm over the back of my chair.

“He's not my boyfriend,” Persephone giggled again. “I thought you understood; I'm with Hades.”

“You only see him three months out of the year if the stories are true,” I leaned towards Thor so I could get a better look at her, and yes, it was the only reason I leaned closer to him. It had nothing to do with that refreshing scent of his.

“Uh-huh, Mom’s a little controlling,” she was really starting to get on my nerves with the baby voice.

“So one thing I’ve learned is that the stories of gods are partially based on fact but are mostly fiction. By accepting the power humanity’s worship gives you, you accept their beliefs and allow that power to change you into all they hold true. You are in effect transformed by the thoughts of humans.” I waited for her to nod politely. “However, you still possess free will and can basically do as you please. You are transformed by us but not completely restricted by us.”

“Yes, that’s true,” she murmured and looked away.

“What am I missing?” I looked to Thor for an answer.

“Hades is pretty powerful,” Thor’s lips pressed together. “He’s also pretty jealous. I doubt he’d put up with any competition.”

“So you let this guy rule your life even when you’re away from him?” I couldn’t believe she was that submissive. Well then again.

“Not completely,” her bottom lip pushed out. “I just don’t want to consort with anyone else. Besides, no one wants to get Hades mad either. I’m not worth it.”

Holy crap, it was a goddess with an inferiority complex. The surprises just kept on coming. I looked over at Thor and he shrugged again before running his thumb down the back of my neck. I sat up straight and realized I was effectively trapped between the two of them.

“Back off, Boy Thunder,” I growled between clenched teeth.

Maybe Persephone wasn't his girl but she'd given me a much-needed wake-up call. I was out of my league there, playing

with the big gods and that was probably all Thor was doing with me... playing.

Thor laughed and leaned in to say something else but before he could speak, the air in front of us shimmered and a figure coalesced. When it was fully formed, there was a striking Indian man standing before us (Indian with a dot, not feather). He was under six feet tall but well muscled and his dark skin shone softly against the vivid red silk of his dress shirt. He had on black pants, a thin leather Gucci belt, and matching shoes. His ebony hair curled around his collar and eased some of the harshness from his features but the close cropped-beard added a hint of menace. Great, now what?

“Brahma,” Thor nodded slightly, “thanks for coming.”

Hmph. I knew a little about Brahma. Hindu God of Knowledge; four heads, four arms, red skin, thought himself into existence. He gave new meaning to the term *I think therefore I am*. I counted his head again. Yep, still only one and a measly two arms. I was a little disappointed.

“Of course,” Brahma nodded back but then dismissed the Viking entirely and focused on me. “You have a human with you?” He pulled out a chair across from us and slid into it as he inspected me. “She has power too,” he closed his eyes and breathed deeply, then shivered, “delicious power.”

Okay, that was creepy. I stiffened and looked around me, trying to find the quickest escape route. I had no intention of being this guy's next combo meal. I was keeping all of my energy, thank you. Before I could bolt, Thor's hand came off of the chair and settled on my shoulder. He rubbed gently, then clamped down firmly. I was really starting to worry about his so called protection.

“Remember, I gave you a blood oath,” he whispered, “you've nothing to fear when I'm with you.”

“You gave her blood?” Brahma sat back as his dark eyes

rounded. “Who *is* this woman?”

“She’s the Godhunter,” Persephone piped up merrily.

“You?” Brahma leaned in again, turning his head from side to side as if he could catch some previously missed detail if he just got a better angle.

“I’m rather unremarkable no matter how you look at me,” I sighed.

I knew I was no great beauty. I’d call myself passing pretty if I had to label it, pretty enough to pass by without gagging. Sitting next to a goddess didn’t help. Then there was that whole lack of muscles thing, so I didn’t even have the warrior babe look going for me. I told you; angry Poodle. Especially with my humidity-frizzed hair.

“I wouldn’t say that,” Thor’s whisper was so close to my ear, it tickled and made me jump at the same time.

Brahma laughed and leaned his face into one palm. “I wouldn’t either. You don’t have the perfection of a goddess but perfection can be tiring. Your looks are unique, even for a human. I see a charming mix of ethnicity in your face.”

“Yep, I’m a mutt.”

“I’d wondered about your people,” Thor looked down at me intently.

“I’m *human*,” I smiled sweetly, “they’re all my people.”

Brahma chuckled. “Oh, I like her.”

“You’ve already got your hands full, Brahma,” Thor narrowed his eyes at the Hindu god. “Are you still cheating on Sarasvati?”

“I’m a god,” he drew himself up; “I must attend to my

followers.”

“I’m sure your wife finds that comforting,” Thor snorted.

“We’ve gotten off subject,” Brahma spread his hands in a *let’s not fight* gesture. “I’d still like to know which people you’re descended from, Godhunter.”

“Call me Vervain, or V if you prefer,” I squirmed. Why were we talking about me? “I’m Irish, English, Dutch, French, German, Japanese, Cherokee, and Blackfoot.”

Thor’s eyes widened. “All of those?”

“I like to think of myself as a preview of what the world will be like someday,” I shrugged. “In the future, we’ll all be so mixed up, there will be only one race; Human.”

“Very noble,” Brahma grunted, “but it will never happen. You people take too much pride in what separates you. Look at me for example,” he waved a hand over himself. “Do you think I was born this way? No. Humans are so egotistical, they want their gods to look like them. Man was made in God's image, my ass! Man made gods in their own image. It's why Christ looks like a white man, even though history says he was Jewish. He's neither actually, he's Atlantean but when he first became a god, he looked Jewish because those were the people he chose to align himself with. But the Jews didn't want him and when Christianity spread, the white people wanted him to look more like them. With the change in belief, Christ's appearance changed. Actually, it was pretty funny. We used to tease him all the time about how he looked whiter each time we saw him. *My but you're looking awful white this morning*, we'd say.” Brahma chuckled as I gaped at him. “Kind of like Michael Jackson but that's a different story entirely. What I'm trying to say is that your pride in your differences is your people's greatest weakness. It’s what the other gods use to their advantage. There will always be one race who thinks they’re better than another.”

“There’s still hope for us,” I didn’t like the bizarre but truthful ring to his words. “I’m living proof.”

“That you are,” Thor played with the baby hairs around the nape of my neck and it sent tingles over my scalp. “You’re also the best mix of all of your ancestors. I like the blending of you.”

“Ah, that’s precisely what I was trying to say,” Brahma smiled widely, showing off even white teeth.

“Well aw shucks, boys,” I smirked.

I wasn’t entirely sure if they were just messing with me or not, so I felt safer to just go with the old standby sarcasm. Both of the “boys” seemed equally baffled and amused by my attitude but we were once more interrupted by an arrival. This time they just used the stairs.

A Native American couple strode in, hand in hand. I guess Thor wanted to represent both types of Indians. Maybe it was because of my heritage but I preferred them to Brahma instantly. The Hindu god was just a little too slick for my taste.

The man had on a crisp, white, dress shirt tucked into dark blue jeans which were in turn tucked into cowboy boots. His long, black hair was pulled back tightly in a ponytail that caught the light with blue shimmers. He had golden brown skin that practically glowed, high cheekbones, and a generous mouth. Almond shaped eyes, rimmed thickly in long lashes, glittered like chipped obsidian as they settled on us and the man smiled.

“You found the Godhunter,” he bowed slightly at the waist and I was shocked to realize that he was bowing to me. “It’s a great pleasure to meet you, little warrior. I’m Tsohanoai of the Navajos. This is my consort Estsanatlehi.”

The woman moved forward and with her came a warm breeze smelling of rain. She smiled and her long black hair flowed around her hips in a sudden breeze. She was slightly darker than

her husband or maybe it was just that his skin was so bright, it made her look darker. Her cheekbones were just as high as his but her lips were fuller and were a deep red, like she'd just gorged herself on blackberries. She was dressed as simply as Tsohanoai, in a cotton dress of light blue.

“I’m sorry our son will not be joining us,” her voice was as sweet as her face but there was an underlying strength to it. “Nayenezgani receives the prayers of the warriors before battle and he believes his power is only in war.”

Tsohanoai came up behind her and pulled out a chair. She sank into it gracefully, slipping her long hair over the back so she wouldn’t sit on it. I was mesmerized and silently hoped she would be the end of the beauty parade for the evening. I didn’t think my ego could handle much more.

“Nice to meet you both,” I stammered. What was the correct greeting for a god anyway? Where was Miss Manners when you needed her?

They smiled at me warmly and Tsohanoai put his arm over the back of his consort’s chair, mimicking Thor and I. The reminder of how intimate I must look with Thor made me wince and sit straighter. I could practically feel him frowning at my movement. I turned and looked over my shoulder... yep, big Viking frown. I think I preferred it to all the smiling he’d been doing anyway.

“Is this everyone?” I was still a little ticked off at being so out of the loop and having to blunder my way through all the surprises. These were beings I hunted for the good of humanity, I didn’t expect to be having tea with them and I still wasn’t convinced they weren’t all evil. The only thing that kept me from bolting was the power of Thor’s blood. I could still feel it zipping through my body. I knew deep down that he’d made a true oath and he wouldn’t harm me. That didn’t prevent others from attempting it though.

“We’re waiting on two more,” Thor had a little crease between his eyes and I was thoroughly enjoying his discomfort. “Ah, here they are.”

There was a loud screeching followed by a muttered oath and the sound of crashing. Thor didn’t seem the least bit concerned. In fact, he had a little of his smile back. An average sized man walked in waving his arms about his head furiously. A large falcon swept past him and landed on the armor in the corner.

“Curse you, Horus,” the man griped. “Watch where you’re flying.” He noticed the group of us staring at him finally and smiled brightly. “He can be such a birdbrain.”

A loud screech filled the room as the falcon launched himself at the man, who then dove for cover. The falcon stopped short and hovered with great flaps of his wings. Bird-form blurred and elongated until it was no longer a bird but a man dressed in a black, short-sleeved shirt and slacks.

“The falcon is one of the wisest winged creatures there is,” the ex-bird-now-man looked down his long nose at the other, who was climbing to his feet.

“Then why do they even have the term *birdbrain*?” Mr. Average stretched his neck up so he could poke his face impudently into the taller man’s. He was dressed more casually, in torn jeans and a yellow shirt which read *Everyone panic, I’m here*. They looked like two opposite sides of the social spectrum.

“It’s a ridiculous term made by humans who know nothing of the amazing avian mind.” The ex-bird was as regal looking as he sounded and I was back to staring again. His skin was the light gold of a falcon’s feathers and his nose was just a step away from the beak it previously was. There was more intelligence in his brown eyes than warmth and his bearing was so grand, my knees buckled with the urge to curtsy. Good thing I was still seated.

“No one knows the avian mind because they have no mind.

Their brains are about the size of a pea.” The smaller man batted at his curly brown hair which kept falling into his eyes. It seemed to want to play as much as he did. It was kind of charming. In fact, the more you looked at him, the more charming he became. His lips seemed to be constantly on the verge of smiling, even when he was fighting with the bird. His hazel eyes held even more merriment than his lips and his face ended in a pointed chin like an elf. To top it all off, I caught a glimpse of little horns hiding in all those curls.

“Pan,” Thor’s voice rumbled out, making the name into a warning.

“Pan?” I couldn’t keep the disbelief from my voice. Both men turned to me, Horus with a frown and Pan with a radiant smile. “Pan, as in reed pipes and wood nymphs?”

“The one and only,” he bowed gallantly and left Horus sputtering behind him. “And you are Lady...?”

“Vervain,” I said as I smiled. Why was I smiling?

“Ah,” Pan’s smile turned sensual, “I love flowers, they have such sweet nectar in their depths.”

“It’s actually a herb,” I said but Thor spoke over me.

“Pan,” Thor’s voice was a low growl and the potted orchid on the table actually shook.

“My mistake,” Pan backed away still grinning. “I didn’t know this bloom was already plucked.”

“There’s been no plucking,” I shot a nasty look at Thor, hoping he caught the message that I didn’t appreciate this type of protection. What; did he think it would make it easier if everyone thought we were an item? Not like he could be seriously into me or anything and not like I cared... much.

“Hmmm,” Pan moved forward again, this time he claimed a chair next to the Navajo goddess. “Which is it then, Thor, plucked or un-plucked?”

Tsohanoai moved his wife closer to him as he eyed Pan.

“She’s spoken for,” Thor leaned forward to glare at Pan.

“Hey now,” I shrugged Thor’s arm off. “There’s been no plucking or speaking of plucking and there will *be* no plucking period. Can we find another word for plucking, one that doesn’t rhyme with plucking?”

“Enough,” Horus walked stiffly to the table and sat in one of the end chairs like he was about to bring the meeting to order. Big surprise there. “We’re not here for you to play your silly games with a human, Pan. I would like to know what she’s doing here though.” He looked pointedly at Thor.

“I caught her stealing the same information I went to Valhalla to collect,” Thor leaned back and let that tidbit sink in before continuing. “When I realized who she was, I decided to ask her to join us. I think she’ll be valuable and besides, it’s the humans’ fight too.”

“And *who* is she? What makes her so valuable?” Horus crossed his muscular forearms and the short sleeves of his linen shirt rode up to expose a detailed tattoo of a falcon in flight. Too detailed in fact. I’d never seen ink like it. It was like a real bird had been miniaturized and pressed into his skin. Kinda creepy actually.

“She’s the only human who has ever managed to kill our kind,” Thor spoke very quietly but the words seemed to ring out.

Horus and Pan sat forward with a gasp. Evidently, I was known by sight to only some of the gods. I felt like I had just had my superstar status revoked. Oh well, there goes my fifteen minutes. Fame can be so fickle.

“The Hunter?” Horus lifted his head and scanned me dubiously. “*This* is the Godhunter?”

“There’s no need to get nasty now,” I didn’t know what was worse, having a nickname among the gods or not living up to it.

Horus narrowed his eyes. “You don’t look strong enough to kill gods.”

“Well you don’t look like an asshole but there you go,” I almost clamped my hand to my mouth.

I had no filter; the words went straight from my brain and out my mouth. It made me a horrible liar and got me into heaps of trouble. I think the only thing that saved me was the immediate laughter of all the other gods.

“Come on, Horus,” Thor clamped a large hand down on Horus’s shoulder and I saw him wince. “Admit it, that was funny... and you deserved it.”

Horus did no admitting and no laughing but the tension did seem to ease from his shoulders. He sat back, nodded, and that was that.

“Okay,” Thor said, “let’s get started then. Vervain, the documents please.”

I leaned back into the chair so I could reach down into my jeans, which also put me further into Thor’s side. His breath was in my hair, his scent suddenly stronger, and I quickly yanked the papers from my pants. He took them from me and smoothed them gently on the table. I watched his touch linger over the paper and had a brief moment of imagining those fingers somewhere else. What was it I said about amateurs falling for their prey? I was starting to feel like a supreme moron. Thor turned abruptly and stared at me, slowly raising an eyebrow.

“What?” It came out a little harsher than I intended. Nerves have a habit of turning me into a bitch.

“Did you want to look this over with me?” Thor’s eyebrows shot downward and I felt even worse for being paranoid. So, of course, I got snappier.

“Why, do you only read Old Norse?” As soon as the words came out, I felt like an ass. “Sorry, I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“I could hazard a guess,” Pan piped up from across the table but was shushed gently by Estsanatlehi.

“It’s forgotten,” Thor hadn’t even glanced at Pan. He started to skim over the document. “The next strike will be in Washington DC; they’re going to instigate an attack on a peace rally through some al-Qaeda terrorists.”

“Well, that’ll put a damper on the party,” I leaned in closer to see it for myself.

“Even the protesters will back the war after being shot at,” Horus twisted his lips into a mockery of a smile. “Nothing like murder and mayhem to beget more murder and mayhem.”

“So what do we do about it?” I looked around the table and the whole thing took on a surreal quality for me. These weren’t just people I was talking shop with, they were gods.

They all looked at me, the lone human in their midst, and I’m sure more than a few of them wondered how I could possibly help. Hell, I wondered it. I was more of a surprise ambush kinda girl and even then, I had to psych myself up every time I got ready to hunt. I guess all warriors have a battle cry to help bolster their spirits. Mine went something like: I don’t wanna diiiiiie! Well, it was more of an internal battle cry.

“So we go and we stop them,” Brahma looked bored. In

fact, he was paying more attention to the minuscule pieces of dirt beneath his fingernails than he was to us. When he finally looked up and saw our expressions, he huffed. “What? How hard could it possibly be?”

Fairy-Struck

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Chapter One

Once upon a time, isn't that how all fairy tales begin? Except this isn't your average fairy tale. There are no charming princes or wicked witches within these pages and the fair maidens are more deadly than any big bad wolf. This is a fairy tale in the truest sense of the words; a story about fairies... the real story.

My name is Seren Sloane and I'm an Extinguisher. That will mean nothing to you, I'm sure, so let me go back a little further. No one knows the true origins of the fey, I don't think even the fey themselves remember, but theories abound. One has them evolving alongside us but where we advanced in groups, banding together to become stronger, the fey morphed out of those outcast predators who were too wild for a pack. Those who don't believe in evolution, think instead that the fey issue from divine creations, angels fallen from God's grace. Yet another tale insists they were gods themselves, or demi-gods, led by a mother goddess named Danu.

A final theory suggests they were not gods or angels or outcasts, merely nomads from an advanced civilization. The Scythians or Sidheans, from which the word *sidhe* originates. Myths tell of these talented Sidhe coming to Ireland where they flung about their magic and generally wrecked havoc until the aggrieved locals fought back and forced the fey to retreat into their raths, holy shrines now known as fairy mounds. History has disguised the raths as burial mounds even though originally, they

were thought to be royal palaces for portal guardians. Although I cannot validate the rest of the tale, I do know this; the fey don't live under mounds of dirt. The original descriptions strike closer to the truth. The raths shrouded portals not corpses. Hidden paths to the fairy world, a realm laid parallel to ours and not at all underground.

Anyway, we did just fine living side by side with them until humans started destroying the environment around those entrances to Fairy. Fairies don't like it when you mess with nature and when they stroll from their magical abodes to find that mess strewn all over their backyard, they get even more pissy. So they began to fling the mess back. All those old stories about fairies stealing babies and striking people with wasting diseases, stem from this time period. Things got real bad, so bad that those of us who had the gift of clairvoyance and could actually see fairies, joined together to defend the human race.

The first Human-Fey war erupted across Eire, now known as Ireland, and the losses on both sides were staggering. After the third war, a grudging truce was finally attained and councils were created to mediate between the races and support the truce with laws approved by both sides. A good start to be sure but laws flounder and fail if they can't be enforced. Both councils conceded jurisdiction over their people to the other, agreeing upon the penalties to be meted out should someone be found guilty of a crime. Rules for determining guilt and administering justice were set into place and military units were sanctioned to carry out the verdicts of the councils.

The fairies created the Wild Hunt. They gathered the fiercest, most terrifying of their people and trained them to stalk the shadows of our world, watching us like guardian angels until one of us breaks the law. Then the angels become devils who do much more than watch. Trust me when I say you don't want to ever meet a member of the Hunt.

To police the fey, we created the Extinguishers. Formed of the five great psychic families who originally defended humanity,

the Extinguishers inspire a fair amount of fear as well. Armed with clairvoyance among other talents which varies by person but can include; telekinesis, pyrokinesis, telepathy, and psychometry, we also have some serious combat skills. Most humans don't have the ability to see a fairy unless that fairy wants to be seen, so both council members and Extinguishers must at least possess clairvoyance. The Council keeps an eye out for humans with exceptional psychic abilities so they can recruit more into their fold but Extinguishers are born into the job. I'm one of those lucky few.

Kavanaugh, Teagan, Sullivan, Murdock, and Sloane. The first five psychic families of Ireland. Over the centuries we've become a secret society so big it spans the globe, gaining strength by breeding only within the five. This has virtually guaranteed powerful psychic gifts in our children. I'm the product of a Sloane and a Kavanaugh. Over thirty generations of contrived breeding(not inbreeding, thank you very much) has given me abilities which rank me as one of the top ten Extinguishers of all time.

I was trained from childhood to become what I am; an Extinguisher, a hunter of fairies, remover of the light of the Shining Ones. Childhood wasn't horrible for me but it was definitely not what most would consider to be normal. Bedtime stories were non-fiction accounts of Extinguisher heroism and instead of receiving platitudes that monsters weren't real, I was told most emphatically that they were and that when checking beneath my bed at night, I should always have an iron blade in hand. My only friends were children from other Extinguisher families and every game or toy had an ulterior motive behind it. Like the dolls my mother made me which showed what each type of fairy looked like... and had their weaknesses written on their backs in red ink.

Still, I was a child and I knew nothing else. Life seemed magical to me, not just in the way that life is magical to all children but in a literally magic way. I was taught to move objects with my mind, create fire in the palm of my hand, and make things

materialize anywhere I wanted them to (that's called apportion in case you're curious, not teleportation which is a thing of science fiction). When I got older, I was taught to fight and finally, to kill.

Despite all of that, I wasn't raised to hate fairies. Quite the contrary, I was taught to care for them and protect them if need be. The job of an Extinguisher exists first and foremost to protect the peace. We kill fairies only when they disrupt that peace and then we do it in the most efficient and merciful way possible... after we receive a warrant of execution approved by the Council. We are, essentially, peace keepers.

That changed for my family when my mother was torn to pieces by a pack of pukas. I know, it sounds funny, doesn't it? A pack of pukas. In reality a bunch of fairy dogs the size of ponies, with teeth sharper than a shark's, shredded the flesh from my mother, gobbled down every last bit of it, and then gnawed on her bones till they could suck out the marrow. That reality killed all the mercy in my father and a lot of the compassion in me as well.

We immersed ourselves in the job, taking every warrant issued for criminal fey we could get our hands on until the Head Extinguisher himself finally noticed and called us to heel. We were sent to a small territory where very little fey crime occurred and where we were supposed to get our shit together. Most humans would love to live where we do now and when I tell you where we were put, I'm sure you'll roll your eyes but let me assure you that this place becomes a slow death for an Extinguisher. Peace keepers need a certain amount of action to keep us sane and Hawaii has very little of that on the fey front.

Yes, I've been exiled to paradise and for someone with my fair Irish skin, Hawaii imitates Hell in so many ways. Sure beauty abounds and the people here embody that tropical temperament of almost Gaelic hospitality but when you're itching for a fight, you don't want to be scratching at your peeling, sunburned skin too. Plus, the only fey to be found, the little local variety called menehune, frolic about causing mischief but never mayhem. Yep,

Hawaiian fairies exist. Does that shock you? It shouldn't, I've already mentioned how the Fairy Realm lies parallel to ours. Fairy Mounds connect more than merely Ireland to Fairyland, they form bridges between Fairy and places all over the world. The fairies who frequent these paths seem to be influenced by the culture they cross over into.

And the fairies don't just visit. Ever since the creation of the Councils, a lot of fey have moved into our world in an effort to support the peace. There was also the issue of the numerous entrances to Fairy which needed to be guarded. So several fey council members have very human jobs with very powerful positions. I think you'd be pretty damn surprised if I told you which companies secretly belong to the fey.

We don't have any of those powerful companies here in Hawaii because, as I mentioned before, this place isn't all that important in the whole fey-human interrelations department. So my life has become a constant preparation for a battle it doesn't look like I'll ever be allowed to join, in a place whose beauty only feels like salt in my wounded heart. I will admit that my anger has lessened over my time here, as the memory of who my mother was slowly overshadows the memory of how she died, but for my father, this exile has only served to make him even more bitter, more vicious, and more intent on killing the entire fairy race.

Chapter Two

“No way,” I looked down at the fax in my hand with amazement. “This can't be right.”

“What is it?” My dad walked into our office, his sea blue eyes narrowing on the piece of paper in my hand like a hawk who's spied a mouse.

It was a small office with just a cheap particle board desk littered with all the necessary items; a computer, a phone, a fax machine, and a copier. There was an old desk chair in front of it, a cracking plastic mat beneath that to protect the boring beige carpet, and a beat up filing cabinet to the right. That was it and with us in the room, the tiny space was almost full. Still, it fit our needs. The office was purely for communication with the Council and for record keeping. The bulk of our work was done outside these bare walls.

“A warrant of execution,” I handed the fax to him. “From the Fairy Council.”

“The *Fairy* Council?” His narrowed gaze transformed into surprise which returned some vigor to his sorrow-lined face.

“When's the last time you saw one of those?” I asked.

“Never. To get one here is...” he looked up at me, a lock of his black hair falling into one eye. He brushed it away distractedly. He hadn't bothered with a haircut in awhile. Things like that tend to get neglected when you're on a quest for vengeance.

“Suspicious?” I lifted a brow.

“Fortunate,” he began to grin.

“Dad, doesn't this make you at all wary?”

“I get to kill a fairy,” he shrugged, “that it's a request of the fey themselves is simply a bonus.”

“Maybe we should contact our council first,” I glanced at the picture included with the warrant.

A willowy woman with huge mossy eyes and long, hair the color of young pea pods, smiled back at me. Her skin was a deep tawny umber and in combination with that hair, I knew her to be a dryad. So she was probably a member of the Seelie Court. Not that it made any difference, Seelie or Unseelie, Light or Dark, all of the fey were dangerous and her sweet looks could be hiding the heart of a monster. Still...

“It says she murdered a sidhe male,” I held out my hand for the warrant and he handed it back to me so I could read it again. “Dylan Thorn. Aren't the Thorns one of the stronger fey families? The Unseelie King is a Thorn, isn't he?”

“Which is probably why they want this bitch killed,” Dad grinned. “She murdered a royal, they take that very seriously.”

“But *how* did a dryad kill a fey royal?” I stared at the picture again. “Dryads are generally timid and their magic is low class compared to that of a sidhe, much less a royal sidhe.”

“You should know better than anyone that the amount of magic a person holds has nothing to do with their capability for murder,” my father was already pulling out his Extinguisher gear from the little closet in the left wall.

He laid a mini crossbow on the desk and followed it up with a quiver of iron-tipped arrows and an iron knife. Guns were dangerous around fairies, even when filled with iron bullets. A lot of fey magic was born of the elements and fire used in a particular way, such as igniting all of the bullets in a gun at once, could make the weapon explode, harming the wielder more than the intended

victim.

Non-combustible iron weapons were the way to go with fairies. Something about the chemical composition of the metal reacted to their blood and if they were actually struck with a piece of the stuff, it would burn their skin. If they were shot with an iron arrow or cut with an iron knife, the iron would poison their blood and without purification, they'd die. So iron was the metal of choice for Extinguisher weapons and when we used it in combination with our psychic abilities, we did pretty well against the fey.

“Why aren't you getting ready?” Dad asked pointedly.

“So we aren't calling the Human Council?” I tried one more time.

“Not necessary,” he strapped a specially made flat quiver to his back with practiced movements and then layered his coat over the top as I tried to push my unease away.

It wasn't that I didn't want to kill the fairy. I would have no problem extinguishing any fey I had a warrant for. The problem was, this warrant came from the fey themselves and if our Human Council didn't approve of it, we shouldn't be executing. It could get us into a lot of trouble and frankly, if this was just some high up fairy wanting someone else to do his dirty work, I'd rather not help him out.

My Dad began to hum an old Irish tune as we headed out the door. Yeah, getting in trouble with the Human Council hadn't been an issue with him for a long time.

Chapter Three

You'd think hunting fairies would be difficult. Beings with magic at their disposal and the ability to become invisible should be hard to track but when you're an Extinguisher, you're trained to use their magic against them. All magic leaves traces of energy and when combined with the powerful aura of a fairy, the resulting glow reaches up and around its host like the Northern Lights.

Still, you had to find the right sky to search in order to see those lights and tracking the murderess took most of the day. We finally found her hiding amid the crowds of Ala Moana, a massive, outdoor shopping mall on the outskirts of Waikiki. I thought it a strange place for her to be hiding, she would have fared much better up in the mountains, but maybe she'd thought she'd be safer in a crowd.

"I'll circle around behind her," my dad whispered to me. "You grab her and we'll get her out of here so we can kill her without witnesses."

"Alright," I agreed.

Even though most humans couldn't see fairies, when one was killed, they lost their magic, starting with their invisibility. That wouldn't be the issue with this particular fairy, though. She was completely visible, her oddly colored hair tucked up into a baseball cap and her large eyes covered with a pair of celebrity sunglasses. That wasn't too surprising. Using invisibility magic ironically made a fairy even more visible to those of us with the sight. Magic was energy and energy burned brightly to clairvoyants. So if she wanted to hide from Extinguishers, using the least amount of magic was her best option. She hadn't seen me yet but I had no doubt she would soon. Fairies could see Extinguishers almost as well as we did them. All those psychic

gifts made our auras stronger than most humans.

She was sitting on the edge of a long, oval shaped, cement planter set in the center of one of the open pathways between the shops. Plants rose up behind her and one of her hands was laid against the slim trunk of a palm tree. The fey liked to be close to nature but that touch was a clear sign that she was scared or at least nervous. Her slim body was hunched in on itself, as if she were pulling away from the humans sitting around her, and her lips were pressed into a thin line. A baby cried and she flinched.

It made sense that she would be scared but usually, a murderer has some kind of plan. They don't just sit in the middle of a group of humans and touch plants. Was she waiting for someone? Maybe she had an accomplice. This could be a lot more complicated than we'd thought. My steps slowed as I searched the area for signs of another fey but there weren't any to be found.

I was about five feet away when her head lifted and she looked unerringly in my direction. Her hand released the plant with a blur of movement and she stood, looking as if she didn't know which direction to run in. I tensed for the chase as her gaze flitted over her shoulder, where I knew my father was coming up behind her. Then she took a deep breath and started walking calmly in my direction.

I was so startled, I froze for a second and a Japanese tourist bumped into me from behind. It jolted me back into action. I pulled the fey handcuffs from my pocket and opened them with automatic ease. They were iron but lined in silicone so they wouldn't burn her, just prevent her from using her magic. When I reached her, she gave me a nod and held her hands out submissively. I put the cuffs on her with complete bafflement.

“Aideen Evergreen, I have a warrant of execution for you from the Fairy Council,” I took her arm and started walking her through the crowds. She was taller than me, as most fey are, probably around six feet. I was five-five and although I was leanly

muscled from all the training I did, I'd inherited my mother's curves and next to Aideen's willowy, fragile form, I must have looked like an Oompa Loompa.

“Asylum,” she whispered and I jerked to a halt.

“What did you say?” My eyes slid over to her with the slow slide of incredulity.

“I ask for asylum with the Human Council,” she stated more firmly. “I have information that could lead to the destruction of the entire human race.”

“What?!” I turned to the side so I was facing her. The flow of foot traffic split around us with irritated murmurs. “Did you say...?”

“I'm talking about the extermination of your whole race, Extinguisher,” she hissed. “Now get me to your Council.”

“Yes, Ma'am,” I swallowed hard and started ushering her more quickly through the shoppers, using a combination of telepathy and telekinesis to nudge them out of our way. Possible extermination called for excessive measures.

The Last Lullaby

Book 1 in the Spellsinger Series

Chapter One

I hunched my shoulders in an attempt to lift my coat collar a little higher around my ears. The weather in Seattle was dismal in December. Hell, in my opinion it was dismal during most times of the year. I longed for the kinder climate of my home, where even the rain was warm. But I couldn't go back to Hawaii yet, I still hadn't met with my client, and the payday for this job promised to be worth a little discomfort.

I finally made it to the top of the ridiculously long driveway, my eyes scanning the area surreptitiously behind the cashmere confines of my coat. I'd had the taxi drop me off a little ways down the street so I could do a bit of surveillance on my approach. Even in the gray, grim weather, there were at least eight guards spaced around the front of the house. One of them moved to intercept me, and I acted as if I hadn't seen him.

“Hold on, Miss. This is private property,” the overly muscled man in combat pants held a gloved palm out to me in the traditional “stop” gesture. I saw the gun on his hip, but he hadn't drawn it. That was mistake number one. I was in the driveway already, that made me a threat.

Bad guard, no biscuit.

“I'm expected,” I could have announced myself right then, but I wanted to test Adam MacLaine's security team.

That was my client, MacLaine, or he would be soon. If this

guy was an accurate representation of MacLaine's security, it was a wonder the man wasn't dead already.

“Do we have a guest arriving today?” Mr. Combat Pants asked a little microphone clipped to his shirt.

He had to open his leather jacket to access the mic, giving me a flash of the knife he had secured to an inner pocket. Damn this guy was dumb. He even turned away from me to talk into his comm. Like he couldn't conceive of a woman being a threat. I could have killed him three times already. I suppose I should have berated him for his bad habits, but I hated doing other people's jobs. And it was definitely someone else's job to whip this guy into shape. The mere thought exhausted me. I do not suffer fools.

“Name?”

“What?” I asked, completely distracted by his ineptitude.

And the spaghetti stain on his shirt. It was nearly invisible from a distance, but now that I was up close and personal, I could clearly see the crusty red mark on the black fabric. So, a fool and a slob. Definitely not the type of man I'd have chosen to protect me.

“What's your name, Miss?” the slob asked.

“Tanager,” I said, whispering to see if he would make the mistake of coming in closer to hear me.

“What was that?” he sure did. He leaned in close enough for me to stab him in the throat.

Of course I would never deign to dirty my hands in such a manner. My mother raised me better than that. I killed like a lady.

“The name is Tanager,” I said more clearly. “And I'm cold.”

Whoever was on the other side of the microphone heard me, and must have barked something into the muscle-head's ear.

He flinched, then straightened.

“Sorry, Ms. Tanager,” he stammered and gestured to the looming house. “My team wasn't notified. Go on in. Someone will meet you at the door.”

“Thank you, Mr...?” I drew it out into a question.

“Ah, you can call me Jake, Ms. Tanager,” he stammered.

“Thank you, Jake,” I walked off, striding quickly to the beckoning warmth of the open front door.

A woman stood within the golden light of the doorway, her features as stern as her severe bun, and her eyes razor sharp. She nodded to me, and shut the door behind me after I entered.

“May I take your coat, Ms Tanager?”

“Yes, thank you,” I slid out of it and sighed.

I had worn my usual getup to greet clients, pencil skirt and modest blouse. But instead of heels, I'd chosen knee-high boots. It was just too cold outside to go without something covering my calves. The woman looked over my prim outfit, and nodded in approval. With my long, dark curls pinned up, I looked very professional.

“I am Mrs. Chadwick,” the woman introduced herself as she hung up my coat. “Mr. MacLaine is waiting for you in his office. I'll take you there now.”

I followed Mrs. Chadwick down a corridor much too wide to be called a hallway. It was lined with expensive artwork, and the sounds of our footsteps were muffled by a silk carpet runner that looked as if it had taken years to weave. It was nice, but I'd seen all of this before. Done better, to tell the truth. My clients were the wealthiest people in the world. They had to be in order to afford me.

“Mr. MacLaine, she's here,” Mrs. Chadwick said as she walked through an open door.

“Thank God,” a man's voice groaned.

It was a pleasant voice, and it matched the office I entered. Not nearly as pretentious as the rest of the house, this room was more personal. It held framed family photos, an old chair that must have come from a time when MacLaine wasn't so wealthy, a wide desk made for function instead of form, and several sitting areas; one before the desk, one before a picture window to the right of the desk, and one in front of a modest fireplace. That's where MacLaine had been, at the fireplace enjoying its comfort instead of working at his desk. In the crowd I normally contracted with, that said a lot.

Adam MacLaine was around forty, with a trim build that suggested he didn't spend all of his time making money. His oak-brown hair was lightly sprinkled with white at the temples, and his skin had a healthy tan, but not the sunbed tan so prevalent in Seattle. His skin had seen real sun. Blue eyes crinkled as he smiled in relief, and came to meet me halfway across the room, hand extended.

“Thank you for coming, Ms Tanager,” he shook my hand firmly. “Could you close the door on your way out, Mrs. Chadwick?”

“Of course, Sir,” she smiled a little, showing a hint of affection for her employer. That said a lot too.

“Would you like something to drink?” MacLaine offered as his hand swept to a sideboard where several bottles waited. Not decanters, mind you, he had straight up liquor bottles out on display. The social elite would be shocked.

“No, thank you.”

“Alright then,” he looked unnerved by my refusal. “Would

you care to have a seat?”

“Yes,” I slid into the chair across from his, and he relaxed a little, coming over to join me.

“I don't know how-” he started to stammer, and I held up a hand.

“Mr. MacLaine, who wants you dead?” I cut through the pussyfooting.

“I believe it's a man named Jonah Malone,” he sighed, and sank back into his chair. “His company was failing, and I bought it up at a... well, for a song, really.”

“Uh huh,” I chuckled at the song reference.

With the exception of his ironic wording, my client's stories were always so similar. Someone got the better end of a business deal. Or they were cheating on their spouse. Or cheating on their mistress. Or cheating on their taxes. No, that last one doesn't require my intervention. Not usually. But the issue was often about someone screwing someone else in some form or another.

“I assume you've compiled a dossier on him?”

“Oh, yes,” MacLaine fumbled with something on the floor beside him, and then handed me a manila folder.

“What exactly do you want me to do to Mr. Malone?” This was the line I asked all of my clients. I needed to be very clear with them. A lot of them assumed I was purely an assassin, but that wasn't the case. I thought of myself more as a fixer. I could kill when necessary, but that was the most extreme result I offered.

“I...” he gaped at me. “What are my options?”

Just as I'd thought. Cer hadn't told him. My old friend was having a laugh at my expense right about now. MacLaine had doubtless been referred to me by one of his friends, but he'd had to

go through *my* friend, Cerberus Skylos, before he could arrange a meeting with me. Cerberus made sure the client was someone I'd want to work with before he passed on the info. And he usually did me the courtesy of explaining who I was, or at least, what I could do, to my potential customers.

“Do you know what I am, Mr. MacLaine?” I asked gently.

“An assassin,” he whispered, as if he might be overheard.

“No,” I shook my head. “I have killed people, but that's not who I am. Or *what* I am.”

“Uh,” he started to look confused. “Are you a vampire?”

“Good guess,” I chuckled, “but no.”

The mere fact that I was sitting there, facing him, meant that Adam MacLaine knew about the supernatural world which existed in the shadows of the human one. “The Beneath”, or just plain “Beneath” is what we, the denizens of said community, called it. So, MacLaine knew of it, but it was very doubtful that he knew the scope of the situation. He hadn't even known the correct term for a vampire- blooder. The wrong titles would give away your ignorance in a heartbeat.

Humans who were aware of the Beneath usually knew about the forerunners of paranormal society, the obvious races; loups (don't call them werewolves, they hate that), other shapeshifters, and blooders. Sometimes they knew about fairies, but the Shining Ones were really good at covering their tracks, so that was rare. What was even more rare was when humans were acquainted with the other races; gods, witches, demons, dragons, angels, and so forth. Things that went bump in the night, and did a fair amount of rabble rousing during the day as well. We just knew how to hide our supernatural gifts better than the shifters and blooders.

“A friend of mine told me about you. He said you were the

best. That you never failed,” MacLaine's face started to fall into the sharp lines that always preceded my revelation of the Beneath. It was like they could sense I was about to tell them something which would change their entire life. Or at least their ability to sleep through the night.

“That's true,” I agreed. “So you know about vampires. What else do you know?”

“What else?” he scowled. “The shapeshifters, of course.”

“And that's it?”

“There's *more*?” MacLaine's eyes widened.

“Oh yes,” I smirked. “There's quite a bit more. But that's not for me to reveal. I only have the right to tell you about my own kind. Now, do you know what a siren is, Mr. MacLaine?”

“Like in the *Odyssey*?”

“Yes, exactly,” I smiled, relieved that I wouldn't have to explain everything. “My mother's people are considered to be a class of god. They were minor deities, more like an entourage to the more powerful gods, but still considered a divine race.”

“Are you seriously telling me you're descended from gods?” he started to stand.

I quickly sang the lyrics from Hollow Point Heroes' *Sit Down Shut Up*.

I had a whole arsenal of quick-draw lyrics just like this one, ready to be shot out like a bullet when necessary. I didn't even need the song to say exactly what I wanted to accomplish. All that I needed was one word to work with; sit, dance, die. You know, the usual. And then I could visualize, and direct the magic from there. This particular lyric just happened to work really well. And you'd be surprised how often I employed it.

MacLaine froze, his eyes going wide with horror as his body disobeyed him, and plopped back into the chair. He leaned forward onto his forearms, and regarded me intently. Giving me his full attention, just as I'd commanded.

“Good,” I pushed down the power that rose whenever I began to sing. “Now, don't look at me like that. You're perfectly safe. I simply needed to demonstrate what I could do before you wrote me off as insane. I put no permanence into the spell so the effects will wear off momentarily.”

“What did you just do to me?” Adam strained to push his words past the weakening magic.

“I'm getting to that,” I smiled. It wasn't often that I got a chance to talk about my heritage. “As I was saying, my ancestors were minor deities, companions of the Goddess, Persephone. You do know who Persephone is?”

“Yes,” he sighed deeply as the effects of my spell wore off. “I didn't think she was real, but yeah, I'm familiar with her myths.”

“Oh, she's very real,” I laughed to think of what Persephone's reaction to his disbelief would have been.

She just couldn't accept that people didn't believe in the gods anymore. I told her she was in denial, and she told me there were several rivers in the Underworld, but the Nile was not one of them. The Greek Goddess has a silly sense of humor.

“When Hades did his little abduction routine, Persephone's mother, Demeter, enlisted the aid of my family to find her daughter,” I said. “She gave them wings, and bid them to search the world for Persephone.”

“I've never heard that part of the story,” he was relaxing more and more now that it was apparent that I wasn't going to attack him. “They never found her, I imagine.”

“No, Persephone wasn't in the world. She was with Hades, in his domain. So my ancestors failed,” I confirmed, “and Demeter cursed them for it. They were turned into sirens. Women who sing eternally to their missing mistress, begging for her to return home.”

“I thought the sirens were mermaids who lured men to their deaths.”

“They're closer to birds than mermaids, but they do lure men to their deaths,” I said. “Their song is so beautiful, few can resist its pull, but it's also tragic. And tragedy can only create more tragedy.”

“Are you saying that you're a siren?” MacLaine cocked his head at me, fascinated, when really, he should have been afraid.

“No, only part,” I shook my head. “The other part of me is witch.”

“What? Like a Wiccan?”

I burst into laughter, and he scowled at me.

“No, Mr. MacLaine,” I got my humor under control. “Real witches are nothing like those tree-hugging, circle dancers. They're a separate race entirely, grisly and powerful. People you should hope to never encounter. My mother lured one of them to her, but he was strong enough to withstand the pull of death in her voice. In fact, he decided he quite liked her, and her music. He married her.”

“You're the child of a warlock and a siren?” MacLaine's voice rose in shock.

“The word 'warlock' means liar. Oathbreaker, from the Saxon waerloga. Male witches are still called witches.”

“Oh.”

“Yes.”

“So you're the daughter of a siren and a witch?”

“Yes.”

“Oh. Um,” he chewed at his lower lip a bit. “What does that mean exactly? What does that make you?”

“It's makes me rare, Mr. MacLaine,” I smiled slowly. “Very rare.”

“And you can sing people to death?”

“I can do much more than that,” I decided to put him out of his misery. “My kind, though rare, have been born before. We are called spellsingers. We can transform songs into enchantment, bring lyrics to life.”

“Like how you made me sit down,” he whispered.

“And shut up, yes,” I laughed. “There are a lot of races living among humans. Spellsingers are only one variety, though we are, admittedly, one of the most dangerous.”

“Other races?” MacLaine looked as if he couldn't take much more, so I took pity on him once more.

“Don't worry about that right now,” I waved a hand. “They aren't the ones who want you dead.”

“Jonah,” MacLaine growled. “I can't believe he's taken it this far.”

“Mr. MacLaine,” I said carefully, “my kind have toppled kingdoms, burned cities, changed the history of the world. I can do anything to Jonah Malone that you wish... for the right price.”

“So, from conqueror to mercenary, eh?” MacLaine chuckled.

“I have no desire to destroy monarchies or watch Rome

burn, that was my Grand Aunt Adelaide's thing," I rolled my eyes.

"Wait, the burning of Rome, where Nero supposedly fiddled..." he exhaled roughly. "A relative of yours did that?"

"Nero didn't own a fiddle," I grimaced. "That instrument wasn't invented till much later. He played a cithara."

"A what?"

"It looks kind of like a lute... never mind that," I was terrible with tangents once I got talking. "Nero wasn't in Rome at the time of the burning. He hired Adelaide, just as you're hiring me. Someone else played music for her while she set Rome ablaze."

"Someone else... you can start fires with your song?"

"I told you," I huffed. "I can do anything the words permit me to do. If I sing about fire, stuff burns. If I sing about water, someone drowns. Sometimes, a whole continent," I shook my head. I wouldn't tell him about Uncle Eilener and Atlantis. He still got flack over that fiasco.

"So what? You're- wait. Nero hired someone to burn Rome?"

"Sure," I shrugged. "Everyone hated him. After Rome burned, Nero came in with food and supplies, opening his own gardens to house people. He polished up his image while secretly deciding on a spot to build his new golden palace. It was good PR, and smart property management."

"What a bastard," MacLaine winced.

"Yeah, Aunt Adelaide regretted working with Nero. That's why I'm a bit more choosy with my clients," I smirked. "But what do *you* want, Mr. MacLaine? What result would you like, concerning Jonah Malone?"

“I'd like for him to just back off,” he huffed. “But I don't see how...” he trailed off as he saw me smiling. “You can do that? Just make him change his mind? Permanently?”

“Absolutely,” I inclined my head. “And it's even cheaper than killing him. Only two and a half million.”

“Two and a half *million*?” MacLaine huffed. “That's more than I paid for the company.”

“Your acquaintances did warn you about my price, correct?”

“Yes, but,” he frowned, “that's when my life was in danger.”

“Your life is *still* in danger,” I stood. “I haven't agreed to take your case yet.”

He gaped at me for two seconds before standing, and offering me his hand again. “Two point five million is just fine, Ms. Tanager.”

“Wonderful, then we have an agreement,” I shook his hand, then started heading for the door. “And just a suggestion,” I stopped, halfway there, and looked back at him, “fire your security team and get some professionals. Even without my magic, I could have killed them all within ten minutes. Especially the one called Jake.”

“You... what...” he blinked, and then recovered. “Alright, I'll do that today.”

“Smart man,” I smiled. Maybe he would live long enough to pay me. After all, he hadn't hired me to do his-

“How much for you to head my security?”

“No,” I shook my head. “I don't have time for that, and you don't have enough money to pay me.” His face fell. “However,” I

pulled a card from the pocket of my skirt, and handed it to him. “This man will help you.”

“Cerberus Security,” MacLaine read, and then looked up at me. “This is the guy I called to arrange our meeting.”

I nodded.

His eyes went wide, “Please tell me this isn't the same Cerberus who...”

“Guarded the Greek Underworld?” I laughed. “That was a giant dog, Mr. MacLaine. With three heads, I believe.”

“Oh,” he laughed, but it sounded strained. “Just a reference to the protection skills then?”

“Yes, exactly,” I smiled. Nope, I wouldn't tell him that he had guessed correctly.

Cerberus was actually a shapeshifting god with a fondness for practical jokes and dangerous women. I'm unsure which had cost him his job. I've known him for centuries, and he still hasn't told me. I know that Hades personally kicked his old, guard dog out of the Greek Underworld. Gave him the fiery boot. So now, Cerberus watched over humans. Humans who could pay him enough to soothe his wounded, puppy pride. Cer was damn good at what he did, but he was better at defense. He lacked the subtlety for a proper offense. If you told Cer to kill someone, he would probably just punch them in the face, really hard. I doubt he'd even stop to ask if the guy needed killing to begin with. So he kept to the security side of the business, and he called me for anything beyond that. Conversely, when my clients had a bunch of buffoons guarding them, I sent them to Cerberus.

“Ms. Tanager?” MacLaine stopped me again.

“Call me Elaria,” I smiled at him.

“That's lovely,” he grinned. “You must call me Adam then. I was just wondering... isn't tanager a type of bird?”

“Why, yes it is, Adam,” I was still smiling as I left. It was always nice when someone appreciated the subtleties.

Chapter Two

Jonah Malone was a gangster. Or a mobster. Probably a whole lot of words that ended in “er”. He had clawed his way to the top, and then discovered that he didn't actually have a head for business. All of his enterprises were failing, not just the one MacLaine had purchased, and Jonah was reverting to his old thug ways to handle the frustration.

It had been a simple thing to schedule an appointment to see him. I simply sang to the receptionist over the phone, and she found a spot for me that very day. Then I walked into Jonah Malone's office, closed the door, and sang to him. In five minutes, he had completely forgotten why he wanted to kill MacLaine. He also decided to sell off his remaining businesses, and get out while he could. Perhaps meditate more. I figured why not help improve the guy while I'm messing with his head?

I walked out feeling relaxed, and satisfied with a job well done. I had video taped Jonah's “change of heart”, and sent it to Cer, who would pass it along to MacLaine as confirmation. Within ten minutes, MacLaine had transferred my payment into my account. I could finally go home. Maybe I'd have a Mai Tai on the plane as a special treat. Hell, maybe I'd have two.

I was on the way to the airport, when Cerberus called.

“Got another one for you, El,” Cerberus didn't bother with a greeting.

“I'm tired and cold, Cer,” I sighed. “Give it to someone else. I'm going home.”

“No one else can handle this. It's bad.”

“How bad?”

“Blooder army bad.”

“That's pretty fucking bad,” I made a face at the phone.

“Yes.”

“Fuck.”

“Yes.”

“Whose army?” I asked.

“Some guy named Lincoln,” Cerberus' voice had a shrug in it.

“Like the president?”

“Yep,” he didn't offer anymore info.

“Where is this army going? What do they want? Who's the client?” I huffed. “You wanna give me anything without me pulling your fucking canines to get it?”

“Whoa, easy now,” Cer chuckled, “you're turning me on, Elaria, sweetheart. You wanna stop in Denver, and make good on some of your promises? We can fly to Kansas together after your failed attempts at pulling my pearly whites.”

“Kansas?!” I nearly screeched, causing my driver to look back at me in concern. “It's fine. I'm fine,” I told the driver. To Cer, I said, “I'm not going to Kansas. Who do you think I am? Dorothy?”

“You'd look cute in a little gingham dress,” he offered.

“The only way you'd get me in gingham is if you put on a collar and let me call you Toto,” I shot back.

“For you, baby? Anytime.”

“Great,” I rolled my eyes, “now we have our next couple's costume planned.”

“No, really,” I could hear Cerberus smirk. “I look good in a collar.”

Cerberus and I had been playing this mating game since we met, back when I was sixteen, and we'd never concluded it. Part of me wanted to see if he was as good as he implied, but the other part of me knew our friendship was worth too much to risk it. Plus, we did business together, and everyone knows that saying about mixing business with Percocet. Or something like that.

“Look,” Cerberus got serious. “The guy is an old friend of mine. He's a blooder, a gheara, but he keeps his people in line, and they don't cause any trouble. He's one of the good ones.”

“I don't know about a blooder being good, but I'll believe the bit about him keeping his people in line,” I chuckled. “It's not like you hear a lot of vampire stories originating in Kansas. I didn't even know that Kansas had a Beneath. I thought they'd all flown away to Oz.”

“Banning's a tough one. He fought his way out of Europe, and now the fuckers are coming for him,” Cerberus didn't even acknowledge my jokes on the Beneath, aka the paranormal community. Which he knew irritated me. I put effort into my comedy, the least he could do was acknowledge it.

“Lincoln doesn't sound European,” I noted dryly.

“He's not,” Cer finally laughed. “He's a local hire. Mercenary.”

“Ah,” now that I could relate to. “So the guy is just doing a job. I can't hold that against him.”

“Yeah, but he contracts with the Falca all the time. Those elitist bastards wouldn't even bother to come to America, and kill

Banning themselves,” Cer huffed. “Lincoln, what kind of stupid merc name is that?”

“So what do you want me to do?” I rolled my eyes, something I did a lot when I talked to Cer. He had a thing about names, especially professional ones, and was always going on about them. And the fact that I didn't have one.

“Ma'am? We're here,” the cabby called back to me.

“Hold on, Cer,” I stuffed my phone into my purse, and pulled out some cash for the driver. I hurried out of the cab, and over to a semi-secluded bench, then pulled out the phone again. “You there?”

“Why do you always shove your phone in your purse when you put me on hold?” Cerberus grumbled. “Just press the fucking hold button. You think I like listening to all your lady loot knocking against the mic?”

“I'm going to hang up,” I threatened.

“Fine,” he growled. “I can get you ten million for the job.”

I nearly dropped the phone. Ten million was twice my assassination fee. But then I thought about it. An assassination was one person, and Cerberus was asking me to kill... wait, how many blooders *was* he asking me to kill?

“How big is this army?” I asked.

“I'm not sure,” he muttered.

“How big, Cer?”

“Big enough that a gheara blooder can't handle it with his entire gura backing him,” Cerberus snapped.

Blooder, as I mentioned before, is the correct appellation for a vampire. Kind of obvious, I know, but that's how those names

usually came about. I mean look at my race, the spellsingers. Well duh. But the word gheara was a little more interesting. It was Romanian for “fang”, and it indicated that this particular blooder was a big deal, akin to a king, maybe even bigger than that. There were usually hundreds of blooders in a single gura; that's the group of vampires who kiss the gheara's pale patootie. In fact, most people call them a kiss, but the blooders don't like that. Probably because of the ass-kissing thing. The polite term is gura, which is yet another Romanian word, meaning “mouth”. Then there was the Falca, which were the elite blooders who controlled everything in the blooder world. Falca meant “jaw” in Romanian. Yeah, I guess all the names were obvious, they just sounded less so in another language.

Anyway, if this guy had an entire gura looking after him, and Cerberus still couldn't help him without me, then there must be a whole lot of mercenary blooders coming after Cer's friend. Crowds were tough, it was much easier to weave a spell around a single mind. To alter the free will of thousands of people at once was nearly impossible. So I would probably have to go another route. I could sing a spell to affect the environment, and attack them physically, leaving them their free wills. Or I could enchant a few of them at a time, and force those to attack the others. Possibly even a combination of both. It would be exhausting, and probably take me multiple songs to complete. I wasn't even sure I could do it.

“Ten million per song,” I said to Cerberus.

“What?!” Cer shouted into the phone.

“An assassination usually takes a few lines, half a song at most,” I explained my reasoning. I never arbitrarily picked a price. “And I charge five mil for a kill. So ten million for an entire song is a bargain, especially when you'll be wanting me to kill hundreds, possibly even thousands, of blooders. You know I'll need to sing more than one song to take out an army, so your friend can pay per song. If it gets too expensive, he can tell me to stop singing, and

handle the survivors with his gura.”

“Gods damn you, Elaria,” Cerberus snarled. “You have the mind of Archimedes and the cold calculation of Hades himself.”

“Thank you,” I said primly. “But you know as well as I that you were trying to dick me over on this one, Cerberus, and I’m not happy about that.”

“He’s a friend, El,” he sighed.

“Yeah, that’s why I’m letting you slide,” I acknowledged.

You’d think immortals would end up having tons of friends, what with our extensive lifetimes. But it’s actually the opposite. When you live as long as we do, you end up breaking most bonds. Family is usually the exception, but even they can drive you crazy enough to make you avoid them for a few decades. When you form a friendship that lasts, like mine and Cer’s, it means something.

“So, are you meeting me in Kansas?” I finally asked him.

“You’ll do it?” Cerberus asked with a measure of surprise.

“Of course I’ll do it,” I rolled my eyes. Again. “Any friend of yours, and all that heroine bullshit.”

“Thanks, El,” he said sincerely.

“Of course,” I said just as sincerely. “Now, where in Kansas am I going?”

“Head to Lawrence,” Cer said. “Check into the Springhill Suites, it’s one of the nicer hotels there. A Marriott.”

“Well as long as I can stay at a Marriott,” I teased.

“I’ll book a room for you,” he promised. “Under your usual alias.”

“Florence Nightingale,” I agreed. “Perfect.”

“And I'll come and get you after I arrive.”

“Alright,” I agreed. “See you in Kansas, Toto.”

“Bring your sexy red heels, Dorothy. I'll pack my collar,”
Cer laughed as he hung up.

Chapter Three

Ah, Kansas. It was actually kind of pretty. Lawrence was a bustling town, but not quite as busy as Seattle, and not nearly as cold. It was November, so there was a nip in the air, but something about that breeze coming off the water in Seattle, made things so much colder there. Lawrence was more mellow with its chill, like Seattle's hippie sibling. Autumn had painted the city in its vibrant colors, and there was the smell of the season on the breeze; dry leaves and cooling earth. I breathed deeply of it as my cab drove me out to the Springhill Suites.

As promised, I found a room already booked, and paid for, under my alias. I showed the surprised clerk my Florence Nightingale ID, and he handed me the keys with a twitching smile. I gave him the standard line; my folks had thought it was a great joke to name me Florence, what with our last name being Nightingale and all. The clerk let his lip twitching take the shape of a proper smile.

I went up to my room, threw my bag on the bed, and started digging around for a change of clothes. I needed a hot shower, and something more comfortable than my secretary get up. I found a pair of jeans and a cotton blouse with bell sleeves. Perfect to relax in, and maybe go grab some dinner. Then I headed to the bathroom. When I came out, dressed but still rubbing at my damp hair, my phone was ringing. I snatched it up and answered.

“There's no time for me to meet you,” Cerberus said urgently. “Get over to the Crouching Lion Country Club now,” he rattled off an address.

“What?” I glanced out of my picture window at the night

sky. It was still early, the stars hadn't even brightened yet.

“Now, Elaria!” Cerberus roared. “They're here!”

“Fine,” I snapped and disconnected him, muttering to myself, “Crouching Lion. What is it, a kung fu country club?”

I grabbed the essentials and rushed out of the room. When I got to the street, I paused, not really knowing what I was going to do. I didn't have time to call a cab, and I couldn't exactly show up at a blooder battle with an innocent human in tow. So I needed to grab some wheels of my own. I scanned the road, where a steady stream of cars drove by. I was considering running out to flag one down, when a red sports car pulled away from the pack, and screeched up to the hotel. A smarmy guy got out of the car, and I smiled at him.

“Excuse me,” I ran over before the valet could reach him, and then leaned in close.

“Hello, pretty lady,” he leaned closer.

I began to sing and his face went blank.

“Here,” he handed me his keys, “I think you need to borrow my car. I'll be at the bar when you get back.” Then he walked past the stunned valet, and into the hotel.

“Some people are so nice,” I gave the valet a sweet smile before I climbed in the... what the hell was it? Oh damn! A Ferrari. Talk about luck.

I squealed away from the hotel, and hit the convenient GPS on the dash. Within minutes, I was pulling up the tree-lined, private road of the Crouching Lion Country Club. As I approached, the night brightened until finally, florescent flood lights illuminated the outskirts of a blooder horde. They considerately stayed off the road, too intent on crossing the massive golf course to bother getting in my way. It was the straightest path to their

goal.

A line of blooders stood before the main building of the country club. They posed in the aggressive manner employed by determined defenders throughout history. There were quite a lot of them, all armed despite the fact that they were blooders, and could have been considered weapons themselves. But I suppose when you faced an army of your own kind, your talents, no matter how impressive, negated themselves.

At the head of this fierce flock stood Cerberus, towering over Banning's gura. His massive muscles looked a little too He-Man next to the more mundane physiques of the previously-human blooders. Cer's long, dark hair was pulled back in a no-nonsense ponytail, and his even darker eyes were narrowed on the oncoming army. Until he saw me.

Cerberus smiled, an altogether chilling thing to see since it showcased a set of prominent canines that were a little thicker than your average blooder's. He let out a triumphant howl, and the line of mercenaries paused to look around at what had excited the shifter-god. When they saw only me, a woman in a sports car, they went back into attack mode. Obviously I wasn't a threat.

A guy at the center of the horde paused a little longer than the others, watching me carefully as I sped past him. I had my chosen playlist on pause, my iPod hooked up to the car's stereo, and I hit the button as I raced alongside the golf course. Music blared, Fall Out Boy's *My Songs Know What You Did in the Dark* going into its long intro. I shot up the drive before the club, and pulled the car to a screeching stop right in front of Cerberus.

The door slammed open with my violent shove, and I leapt out. Music blasted out of the vehicle as I jumped on the hood. I could feel the beat of it in my bones, vibrating through the metal beneath my feet. I glanced back at Cerberus and winked, my eyes briefly catching the shocked expression of the man beside him. He was blonde and a blooder. Had to be Cer's friend, Banning. Not

that it mattered. I turned back around just as the lyrics began pelting my ears.

I started singing absently as I thought out my battle strategy. I knew I'd have to rein in these mercenaries as fast as possible, so that they didn't make a run for it before I could get to them all. I couldn't leave any alive to make a second attempt. That's just sloppy work.

Fire would be perfect for forming a blooder-proof barrier. But I had to work up to it, wait for the words in the lyrics which would magnify my intent. So I started with the poor sods in front. My hand lifted to them as words shot from my mouth like bullets. Aggression blaring in my ears. Tension coiling in my thighs. The stuttering strength of the song cut through the cold air. Every blooder I pointed to exploded as if I'd blown their heads off with a missile launcher.

The crowd behind me started muttering as Cerberus chortled.

“Isn't she wonderful?” Cerberus sauntered up to lean over the top of the car and watch me work. “An artist. A true artist,” he laid his chin in his palm.

I continued to slam out the vicious verses, ignoring Cer. The song was filling me, becoming a part of my being, and the strength of the spell was rushing around me. A tornado of charged molecules clambering for motivation. Waiting for me to give them a direction. An objective. I felt glorious, powerful enough to make all those mercenaries mine. And I did, I snatched up their minds. Their will. Then I used the next line to vent the brewing musical malice. The blooders before me turned on their companions, and started tearing them to pieces.

“Holy fucking hellfire,” the blonde man moved up beside Cer.

I sensed him there, felt his intense stare on me, but didn't

have the time to look at him. Still, his face flashed in my mind; a picture of aloof male beauty. Strong jaw, regal nose, eyes glowing green in the shadows. Nice.

“I told you!” Cerberus laughed harder as I continued to pour my lyrical rage over the mercenaries. “She's worth every penny.”

The chorus came, giving me what I needed to manifest fire. I angled my hand flat, bringing it down like a blade with every sharp word. Each slice brought a line of flames surging up around the faltering army, causing many of them to shriek in terror and stumble back into their companions. The hand motions were more for me than the magic, like a conductor directing his symphony. But this symphony didn't need me to conduct it. All the magic required was for me to picture the result I desired, and sing. That was it. So I let my arms fall limply to my sides as I screamed the cataclysmic conclusion to the chorus, and my fiery prison penned the blooders in. The ring closed, and the magic surged through me, responding to the triumph I felt.

“Oh my god, I think I'm in love,” I heard one of the blooders behind me groan.

“Of course you are,” Cerberus called back to him. “For fuck's sake, I'm rock hard right now.”

The blooder who had watched my approach more carefully than the others, rushed forward. He snaked through the terrified mass, but he wasn't trying to calm them, he was simply trying to reach me. I was obviously his biggest threat, and he was obviously a take action sort of guy. It had to be Lincoln, coming to kill me before I could slaughter his entire army. It was a smart move, probably the best option available to him. Cut the head off and all that.

Too bad it was useless.

The song turned truly tragic, as if sensing my need. I

looked right at Lincoln, directing the destruction at him alone. The merc leader flared up like a torch, blooders pulling back from him in horror. But the bonfire didn't last long. It burned so hot, so intensely, that it turned Lincoln into cinders within seconds. He exploded into sooty snowflakes, swirling down over his army. Blooders cringed away from the remains, hardened soldiers turning into bawling babies.

The song surged on, and I spread my arms out in welcome to it. It was a confession now. A baring of what I had been born. A show of the hand which life had dealt me, and what I had done with it. What I had become. A creature of nightmares. A sorceress of songs. The villain no one could escape. The lyrics couldn't be more perfect for me. It was a declaration of pride in my own monstrosity, and a deep, secret fear of it. I let them see me.

And that's when the real screaming started.

It went on for another two songs, during which I killed every mercenary there in various lyrical ways. The blooders behind me were cheering, some of them singing along with me, and some even mimicked the motions I made. I had blooder backup dancers. Maybe we could take this act to Vegas. A song, a dance, and some magic. We were perfect for Sin City.

By the time I ended the third song, I was trembling, on the verge of passing out. But it was okay, the threat had been eliminated. My fire-oriented playlist had kept the heat up, ensuring that no one escaped, and those within the ring were dead or dying. I let the flames die down as well, until the only illumination originated from the building behind me and the scattered lampposts. The soft glow gently lit a field of corpses, slowly turning into the ash of the undead. One thing good about killing blooders; there was very little clean up involved.

The next song started to play. My shoulders fell in exhaustion. I turned to Cerberus, and held my arms out to him like a little girl. Even with me standing on the hood of the car, he was

still nearly as tall as I was, and he easily picked up my five-foot-four frame. Cer set me down on the road, but held onto me long enough to make sure I could stand on my own. He gave me a concerned look, blocking my shaking body from the cheering crowd. We never let others see our weaknesses. I nodded that I was alright.

Cerberus gave me a kiss on the cheek, and backed away, “Thanks for coming, El.”

“No problem, honey,” I smirked, then looked to the blonde.

“I’m Banning Dalca,” the blooder held his hand out to me.

“Nice to meet you,” I went to shake his hand, but he did that suave, old-school vamp thing, and kissed my hand in a way that was so much more sensual than a human could make it.

“Thank you for your assistance, Ms. Tanager,” Banning smiled slowly at me, his eyes lingering over my face.

“Just make sure my payment goes through by tonight,” I said abruptly as I pulled away.

Banning's eyes widened, and he looked as if he was going to say something more. But I was too tired to deal with him. I needed to get out of there before I passed out.

“I gotta run,” I looked back to Cerberus. “I’ll wait for you at the place, babe.” I spoke vaguely on purpose. The last thing I needed was for an entire gura to know where I was crashing for the night.

“Of course,” Cer said with a smirk, as if we were an item.

I smiled back, it was our routine when some client flirted with me. Cer acted like I was his, and the guy usually backed off. This guy didn't buy it nor did he back off. As I slid into the front seat, and turned down the music, Banning Dalca followed me. He

leaned in, his eyes fading to mint under the car's interior light, and gave me a very unsettling look.

“Please don't leave, Ms. Tanager,” he whispered. “I'd dearly like to speak with you.”

This seemed way past some mere flirtation. It was weird, and it sent chills racing down my spine. The guy was hot, but I didn't sleep with clients, and I especially didn't sleep with blooders. Blooders were bad news.

“Maybe another time,” I tried to reach past him for the door handle, but he didn't budge.

“Please,” he said again.

“Get away from the car, Mr. Dalca,” I said in a dangerous tone.

“Ban,” Cerberus growled. “What the fuck, man?”

“Five minutes of your time,” Banning tried once more.

“No,” I snapped. “Now are you going to back away or do I have to make you?”

“Alright, Ms. Tanager,” he sighed, but produced a business card, and stuffed it into my hand. “Please call me after you've rested. I promise you, I have the most honorable of intentions.”

“Uh huh,” I slid the card into my bra. “Thanks, I got it.”

Banning sighed again, then eased away, shutting the door for me. I gunned the engine, and yanked the car about, but I couldn't help looking back at Banning as I drove off. He stared after me like I was breaking his little, undead heart. But the strangeness didn't stop there.

Just as I hit the border of golf course turning into forest, I saw a movement in the shadows. A flash of skin. I was instantly

alert, despite my exhaustion, and angled the car enough to shine the headlights into the area. There he was, a gods damned fairy. One of the fucking Shining Ones was standing in the trees of Lawrence, Kansas, watching me like some otherworldly peeping tom. Instead of hiding when I my lights hit him, he held up a hand in greeting.

I nearly drove off the road.

I didn't though. I veered back onto the asphalt and kept going. If a fairy waves at you from the forest, you don't stop for him. Heading over for a little chat is a great way to get yourself abducted. The Fey were generally considered to be the perverts of the paranormal world. They'd fuck anything, anywhere, anytime. A fairy's interest wasn't flattering, it simply meant you had a heartbeat and were within reach.

Okay, so maybe that was a bit of an exaggeration. The lesser fey; pixies, leprechauns, trolls, goblins, those sorts, would mount you in a heartbeat if you let them. Most would try even if you didn't let them. However, the elite sidhe, those who were known as the Shining Ones, were a bit more discriminating in their choices of bed partner. That didn't make them any less terrifying. In fact, the Shining Ones had all sorts of seductive spells on their side. They might not technically be rapists, but with that kind of magic, the technicalities blurred. And once they got you, they tended to keep you until you were completely used up. I've heard stories of all manner of debaucheries going on in Tír na nÓg. So it didn't really matter, lesser or greater, fairies were freaks.

It was that whole hedonism thing. No one did it better than the Shining Ones. They lived every moment of their immortality to the fullest, believing that you shouldn't do anything you didn't want to, and conversely, you should do everything, and *everyone*, that you did want to do. They ate the best food, drank the finest wine, and wore the most luxurious clothes. They loved to mix it up too. They didn't care who created the item, if it was the best, they wanted it. Several of them lived this side of the Veil for that very

reason, the luxury.

The Veil is what we call the border between worlds. Planes of existence. Realms. Again, take your pick. These places were laid on top of each other, separated by an invisible sheet of magic. If you were sensitive enough, you could feel the magic, and in some places the Veil was thick enough that even people who weren't so sensitive could feel it. But to cross it, you had to either be magically powerful or know someone powerful enough to take you through. Which meant that the fairy dude standing in the forest, waving at me like it was just another casual night in Kansas, was powerful. And very pale.

I have good eyesight, okay? I caught a lot in that glimpse of flashing headlights. Though I didn't really need my advanced perception. The guy was really white. His hair was white. His skin was white. I couldn't see the color of his eyes, besides them being pale, so maybe they were white too. His delicate features nearly hid the fact that he was a guy, but that slim figure was definitely masculine.

Not that his looks mattered. What mattered was what he was doing in those woods. Had he been watching me? Listening to me sing? Or had he been there for Banning? Maybe he'd been the blooder's backup, something more subtle to go in afterward, on the off chance that the army of blooders didn't succeed. I almost turned around, but I knew I was too exhausted to be of any help. So I kept driving, and left the Shining One to Cerberus. If the dog-god couldn't handle one fairy, he might as well give up protecting people for good.

About the Author

Amy Sumida is the Internationally Acclaimed author of the Award-Winning Godhunter Series, the fantasy paranormal Twilight Court Series, the Beyond the Godhunter Series, the music-oriented paranormal Spellsinger Series, and several short stories. Her books have been translated into several languages, have made it to the top seller's list on Amazon numerous times, and the first book in her Spellsinger Series won a publishing contract with Kindle Press.

She was born and raised in Hawaii and brings her unique island perspective to all of her books. She doesn't believe in using pen names, saving the fiction for her stories. She's known for her kick-ass heroines who always have a witty comeback ready, and her strong, supporting male characters who manage to be sensitive and alpha all at once.

All she's ever wanted to do since she was a little girl, was to write novels. To be able to do so for a living is a blessing which she wakes up thankful for every day. Beyond her books, she enjoys collecting toys, to keep herself young, and cats, to keep herself loved.