

SNOW SO WHITE

URBAN MAGICK
& FOLKLORE
♦ BOOK 1 ♦



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
♦ C. GOCKEL ♦

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Urban Magick & Folklore Book 1



C. GOCKEL

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ABOUT THE BOOK



ONCE UPON A FUTURE-TIME, in a city of steel, concrete, and Magick, a wicked queen trapped a mighty warrior with a curse ...

In the tiny village of Somer, far from the city, Cherie knows nothing of the evil spell. Her home is a safe Magickal place. The Fae travel freely along its roads, Magickal humans and animals are welcome, and everyone is hidden from the Queen's sight by Jack Frost, the local ghost, who blurs the Queen's mirror with snow and ice.

But when Jack's spell begins to crack, the Queen's eyes fall on Somer. Nothing will keep her from abducting all of Somer's Magickals, not even a war with the Fae.

To avert a war, save her village—and herself—Cherie strikes a perilous bargain. Aided only by Jack and her own small Magick, she'll set off on a quest ... If she fails, she'll lose more than her life.

A retelling of Snow White with Urban Magick, plenty of folklore, a Princess Charming, and a touch of romance. Perfect for fans of Naomi Novik's Uprooted and Spinning Silver.

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CHAPTER 1



*Mirror, Mirror on the wall,
Have I all the Magickals?
My Queen you control all I see
But there are places unknown to me
Look you to the land of snow
That is where I cannot go*



Pain screamed up Cherie's arm and shoulder, and she was flung against the bus with teeth-rattling force, breath rushing out of her, knees going weak from the shock of it.

"Where do you think you're going?" the driver asked. There was the click of a safety, and something metal and cold was pressed against her temple. It was not so cold as the charm Nnenne had given to her, and the cold of its Magickal warning of *danger* biting at her throat.

He shook her, rattling her teeth again, wrenching her arm higher.

Think, think, think ... Cherie told herself. But she couldn't formulate anything in the haze of pain.

"Did you hear somethin'?" the driver's companion asked.

The driver's hold slackened, and with it, the veil of Cherie's agony and fear.

"You're imagining things," the driver replied.

The charm's Magickal cold became like a lance, shooting through Cherie's layers of clothing. She knew with sudden, crystal-clear clarity, there was something more dangerous than the driver and his friend out there. Something more dangerous than the Queen and her guard chasing her. Something more dangerous than the cold and thickly falling snow. Cherie forgot to be afraid of the man holding a pistol to her temple, even forgot her pain. "Have to get away," she whispered, trying to warn the man who had trapped her, who was *hurting* her. She could bargain with the two of them later, convince them she was Magickal and could help them ... or something ... to keep them from harming her, but they had to get away, *now*.

Mistaking her meaning, the driver wrenched her arm, making her cry out. Yanking her away from the bus, he hissed, "You're not going anywhere."

Back to them, standing in the headlight beams, the other man said, "I'm sure I heard somethin'."

There was a murmur in the night, like that of a gentle breeze, a sort of sigh, and then a thud. The charm on Cherie's neck made her chest feel as though it had turned to ice, and she screamed.

The driver shook her. "Be still now, girl! Bobby, get over here."

Cherie whimpered, but not with pain. The driver pushed her toward the front of the bus, using her body as a shield. "Bobby? Bobby, what the hell are you foolin'?"

Cherie bit her lip, the cold spreading from her charm to her limbs. They rounded the front of the vehicle, and in the headlights' glow, she saw what looked like a bundle of rags with a man's lower torso and legs protruding

from beneath it. A shadowy stain was slowly spreading across the snow like spilled ink.

It was the driver's turn to whimper. "What?"

And suddenly the heap of rags had eyes that were human but shone in the night and a bloodstained maw for a mouth. The pistol left Cherie's temple. Shots rang out, leaving her right ear ringing.

The driver flung Cherie aside, and she found herself staring down at "Bobby" without the bundle of rags covering him. His shotgun was bent and useless. His eyes were wide open, and his throat was a deep red-brown gash in the headlights. The stain in the snow bloomed around him, crimson where the lights touched it.

Cherie's heart stopped. For a moment time seemed to halt, too. Only the snow moved, fluttering and sparkling through the headlight beams.

The whole horrible day flashed through Cherie's mind. When it had begun, it had almost been ... normal. She swallowed.

They'd warned her she'd face monsters.



It could almost have been any other morning. Ember lights flickered faintly above Cherie as she entered the grocer. From outside came the muffled sound of cars and trucks splashing through slush. The morning was storm dark, but the Ember lights' Magick glow burnished the wood floor and shelves with a warm, orange hue.

Stomping off her boots, inhaling the familiar scents of garlic and old wood, she reminded herself why she'd come. Food. Jack had told her she had to eat, even if she didn't feel like it. Usually, she loved coming to Natalie and Frank's grocery. It was where the town came to congregate—so much so that Frank had set up a diner in the back, because, "If they are going to stay and chat, they can at least buy a coffee, too." But she didn't

want to see anyone today. She was exhausted. Relieved. And ashamed of being relieved. Ducking her head, she moved through the aisles, Ember lights flickering faintly in her wake. In the produce section, Cherie heard her grandmother, her Nnenne's voice, in her head. "Always eat your fruits and vegetables, the fresher the better." Cherie swallowed. She was never going to hear Nnenne's voice again, and even the lone pint of strawberries held no appeal.

She almost dropped her bag and left, but then from the back of the store came Natalie's voice. "Cherie!"

The store was only a few dozen paces end to end, and there was no escaping. She wanted to disappear. The thought was so alien that for a moment she froze. It was like she was watching herself from the outside, and she didn't recognize the person she was seeing. Cherie loved her neighbors, she loved her town, and she never hid from anyone.

She straightened, tried to smile, and failed.

Wiping her hand on her apron, Natalie approached her, the lines in her forehead etched deeper with care. "Jack told us. Oh, honey, I'm sorry."

Natalie looked so solid, so real. She wasn't Magickal, and the lights didn't flicker for her.

"I ..." Cherie wanted to cry but couldn't.

Natalie put her hands on Cherie's shoulders and said, "The whole county is going to miss her." There were tears standing in the other woman's eyes. Cherie should cry, too, but it seemed like she'd cried for weeks and weeks, and she'd been cried out. She nodded numbly, and Natalie pulled her in for a hug.

"Tell Cherie to come eat!" Frank shouted from the back, in the same tone you'd expect someone to say, "Hey, ya cheatin' me!"

Pushing a curling wisp of gray hair behind her ear, Natalie took Cherie's arm. "He's from New York, what can you do?"

Frank wasn't really from New York. His people had come from that way after the Change, when Magick and Ember had swept over the world and the old electric technologies had failed. But Somer County wasn't particularly cosmopolitan, and most families had lived here forever—like Cherie's great-great-grandfather's family, the Shaws, had. Where your grandparents were from was where you were from. Of course, Nnenne had come from a place farther than New York, back when dragons didn't hunt the skies and sea serpents didn't swim in the oceans. That was before the Change, so it *counted* as *forever*. Also, Nnenne wasn't loud.

"Come now." Natalie gave her a soft tug. Cherie was too exhausted to resist, and the *real* Cherie—who loved people and company—wouldn't have resisted, so she let Natalie lead her to the back.

Frank was behind the diner counter, salt-and-pepper hair partially covered by a white cap, his face red from the heat of the stove. Scowling, he set a plate down with so much force Cherie was surprised it didn't crack. "You need to eat!"

Her lips twitched in an almost-smile. Frank being loud and overbearing was normal ... but Nnenne was gone, and nothing would ever be normal again. She gulped, but her eyes stayed dry.

A shadow emerged across the counter. Cherie blinked at a mouse, his bewhiskered nose twitching in her direction. A Magickal light on the table flickered madly beside him, like a candle in a stiff breeze.

"Even Ghengis Khan says you should eat," Frank said.

Ghengis Khan, the mouse, stood up on his hind legs, motes of ambient Ember sparkling around him like a halo.

"See!" declared Frank. "Pick him up; he's worried about you!"

Ghengis Khan was adorable, but not normally a *friendly* mouse to anyone but Nefertiti, the cat next door. He was too busy surveying and expanding his kingdom, keeping other mice away, and, according to Frank and Natalie, keeping away evil Magick of all kinds.

“Go on,” said Frank. “I know Ghengis.”

Natalie gave Cherie a nudge. Cherie held out a hand, and the mouse scampered into it. For the first time she could remember, he was still and allowed her to stroke him between the ears. He was warm, tiny, incredibly soft, and fragile—and Cherie slid onto a stool and finally wept.

Natalie patted her shoulder. “There, there, let it all out.”

“We’re real sorry, Cherie,” Frank said.

For a while, the world was a blur with her tears, but then Ghengis began to squirm. She put him down and wiped her eyes. Frank pushed the plate toward her. “Mr. Frost had me make this for you, and he’ll probably freeze our pipes if I don’t make you eat it.”

Frank knew Jack couldn’t freeze things.

From behind Frank came the sound of Jack clearing his throat.

Natalie tsked, but from the front of the store came the sound of the bell, and she went off calling, “Ms. Starling!”

Chortling at his own wit, Frank moved down the counter, revealing the mirror behind him. Instead of her reflection, Cherie saw Jack, staring down at her with his arms crossed, his expression unreadable, a snowstorm, dark as the one in Somer, swirling behind him.

Jack was the most handsome man Cherie knew, if you counted a Magickal reflection of a ghost as a man. He was lean with broad shoulders, had high cheekbones, and a strong jaw. His eyes were startlingly blue in his pale face, framed by jet black hair. He wore the armor of one of the Vampire Hunters from the war, and it was form fitting, with the faint luminance of Ember. Once upon a time, just looking at Jack would warm her to her bones, and she would have been thrilled to have him paying attention to her. But since her grandmother had gotten sick, Jack could have been anyone.

Uncrossing his arms, Jack sighed. “You haven’t eaten since yesterday’s breakfast. Eat, Cherie.”

She stared at him. Nothing. She felt nothing.

“Your grandmother would want you to,” he said.

She glared. He glared right back. Her lip began to tremble, not because of Jack’s nagging, but because Nnenne would have wanted her to eat. Picking up a knife and fork, Cherie attacked the croissant, sawing off a piece and shoving it in her mouth. It was still warm, the cheese inside still gooey. The taste of butter and tang of the cheddar exploded on her tongue, and suddenly she was devouring the meal, barely noticing Frank nodding in approval and setting some juice beside her.

She didn’t look at Jack. No need for the nagging ghost to feel triumph.

Wiping down a glass, Frank lifted his chin to the front of the store. “Snow this late in the season. Huh.”

It wasn’t a particularly late snow for Somer County. Somer was the highest village in Pennsylvania, and even before the Change, the town records had snow falling and accumulating in June. There’d been over a dozen March snows in Cherie’s memory, but she nodded politely and turned to the snowy scene just in time to see Mr. Ottis, the postmaster, bursting through the door. An instant later, he was exclaiming, “Did you hear the news? The Queen is recruiting in Somer County.”

Cherie froze, not sure if she’d heard correctly, but the postmaster continued, “Hear Her eyes are seeing this far north now. They’ll be taking any promisin’ kid who’s fourteen or more.”

The hair on the back of Cherie’s neck rose. She looked in alarm at Jack. Gaze on Ottis, Jack narrowed his eyes and muttered, “She hasn’t seen through *my* mirrors.” That was how the Queen found you from down in the Southern Cities of the United Magickal States; she saw you in reflections.

“Will they be taking Magickal animals, too?” Natalie asked, and Frank scooped up Ghengis with a glare in Ottis’s direction.

Ottis huffed. “No one will want your Magickal mouse.”

Nostrils flaring, Frank kissed Ghengis on the head. Smooth as a water drop, the mouse wove out of his grip and up his shoulder. Puffing out his fur, he raised his tail and joined Frank in glaring at Ottis.

Cherie was certain they'd never take Ghengis; his size made him hard to catch. She doubted they'd take Missy's cat, Nefertiti, either. Cats, Magickal or not, were hard to control. Nor would they take the other *wild* Magickal animals around town, or the Brownies that had settled into some of the houses. But would the mayor's dog Chance be safe, Iben the donkey, or Roxie the cow? They were all terribly useful. She gulped. She'd heard of donkeys being used to carry ammunition under fire and dogs to find Ember bombs.

Ms. Starling said, "Why should they call us to their wretched war? They do nothing for us. There are Fae constantly harassing unwary travelers on our roads and will-o'-wisps lighting up our forests."

Cherie shifted nervously. The Fae weren't *constantly* harassing travelers, although they *frequently* used the roads. But they weren't so bad. There were other Old Magickals that were worse: harpies, griffons, and anger eaters from Italian and Greek lore; djinns from Arabia; giant serpents and angry ghosts from *everywhere* ... Her friend Geoff had a theory that the Fae near Somer kept the nastier things at bay. They did, on occasion, cause trouble, especially for strangers, but not *constantly*.

Giving the counter a vicious wipe, Frank said under his breath, "Queen wants our Magickals 'cause the war is going badly."

"There are still vamps in Mexico," Mr. Ottis said. "A vamp anywhere is a threat to everyone everywhere."

Frank grumbled, "More like the Southern Cities want Mexican Ember."

Cherie glanced at the Ember light above her, and it winked faintly in response. Ember made non-Magickal things Magickal: cars and lights and telephones, everything. It *noticed* people and animals who were Magickal. People like Cherie, even though she was too weak to have a particular

talent. She wasn't like Lydia, who was thin as a whip and only average height, but was the strongest person in Somer County, and probably further.

Cherie glanced at Ms. Starling. The woman's lips were pinched. She was good friends with Lydia's mom. Lydia wouldn't mind going south to join the war effort. She'd planned to anyway, but her mom had made her promise to finish high school first.

As if reading Cherie's thoughts, Mr. Ottis said, "That lass Lydia is sure to be picked. She'll bring great honor to this town, mark my words!"

Cherie noted he didn't mention Cillian or her. Maybe Ottis thought she was too weak, but everyone knew Cillian was Magickally strong. Cillian's talent was charm, but he could do so many other things as well: start fires and end them, make ice, create will-o'-wisp lights, and more. But then Ottis probably didn't think Cillian could bring "honor" to Somer. Still ... she glanced at the mirror and mouthed Cillian's name. Jack met her eyes, nodded, and disappeared in a blast of snow. With Jack gone, the mirror showed her own reflection, but faintly, as though she were looking into a window that was dark on the other side. Even in the dim view, there were circles under her eyes, and her hair was unkempt. She looked away.

"Lydia's only fifteen," Ms. Starling replied. "She's too young."

Cherie was twenty. Her nails bit into her palms. She couldn't claim youth as an excuse. They couldn't want her; her Magick was weak and barely useful.

"Nonsense," said Mr. Ottis. "You're never too young for fame and fortune!"

Clucking her tongue, Ms. Starling pretended to study some strawberries.

Ottis looked around the shop. Cherie ducked her head before he'd made eye contact, but she saw him waving out of the corner of her eye. "I need to go," she blurted. She needed to feel cold air, even if it was tinged by soot and the spent Ember from the traffic on Main Street.

Frank picked up her plate. She reached into her pocket. "How much?"

“Put it away,” Frank rumbled.

“At least let me pay for my gro—”

“Put it away,” Frank said again, tossing a box across the counter in her direction. He scowled. “The strawberries and oranges you didn’t finish.”

“But—”

Natalie’s soft, cool fingers were on Cherie’s hand a moment later. “You think we’ve forgotten what you did when our granddaughter was born?”

Cherie hadn’t done anything. Her grandmother had delivered that baby that terrible night three years ago. Cherie had only been there to help, as she’d been doing in her grandmother’s clinic since she was a girl, holding hands when children got their shots, or talking about nonsense when Nnenne mended bones. Delivering a breech birth baby with an umbilical cord wrapped around her neck had been the first *real* medical procedure Cherie had attended. But all she’d done was hold their daughter’s hand. Her grandmother said Cherie had a knack for helping people forget about pain and strife ... Cherie wasn’t sure she could do even that anymore. The last few days, it seemed her grandmother had never not been in pain ... until she was beyond pain completely.

Her stomach knotted, and she felt like she couldn’t breathe. She was off of her chair before she knew it, already backing away. Natalie hugged her before she could escape, and then pushed the box of fruit into her hands. “Go now,” she said.

Mumbling woefully inadequate thanks, Cherie ducked her head and did. Giving a timid wave to Mr. Ottis, she pushed through the door with its garland of garlic and painted silver symbols to ward off evil. There hadn’t been a vampire spotted in Pennsylvania in over a hundred years, and evil things and mean spirited Fae tended to avoid Somer, but Frank and Natalie didn’t take any chances with their customers’ safety, even though they swore by Ghengis.

The cold she'd craved hit her in a blast. She looked up at the flakes, falling at a dizzying rate. The snow, soot, and spent Ember hid the rolling mountains and hills that ringed the town. Shoving her free hand in her pocket, Cherie headed for home. She cut through Memorial Park with its statues commemorating Somer's veterans of the Old Wars and the Ember light sphere that commemorated the veterans of the more recent Vampire War. The sphere sat atop a pole of steel and silver. It should have been a bright beacon, but its light was soft and dim in the tumbling snow. On the other side of the park, she passed the butcher and the dry goods store.

All the shops had silvery wards painted on their windows. The recruiters would laugh at them; Southerners always did, but Nnenne said that the symbols worked, even for non-Magickals. Cherie bit her lip. Nnenne also said, "The symbols aren't a failsafe. They only protect from Magickal creatures wishing to do harm. There are plenty of people without Magick that cause evil enough, and some Magickals bring evil thinking they're bringing salvation."

Cherie shivered. The recruiters were coming for Magickals even in Somer County, to take them to "fame and fortune." Cherie's great-great-grandfather and Lydia's father might have enjoyed fame and fortune for a while after their recruitment, but neither survived in service longer than a year. Lydia's father hadn't lived to see nineteen.

In her pocket, her nails bit into her palms. She hoped that Jack found Cillian. Her lips turned down ...

... and then Cillian would flee, and Jack would try to assist him, slipping further and further away from the mirrors of Somer.

... and then she'd probably never see Jack or Cillian again.

CHAPTER 2



Contrary to popular belief, Jack wasn't a ghost. He was imprisoned in a dream.

He couldn't escape, but one of the advantages of dreams was that you could shape them. Jack had built a house within his prison. The house sheltered him from the storms of his thoughts and gave order to the surreality of his dream. His house had many rooms, and in the rooms, he'd put mirrors. His stepmother had taught him how to look through mirrors in the real world, and he'd found, in the dream world, the trick still worked ... most of the time. He wasn't fully in control. As in "real" dreams where he could fly one moment and was earthbound the next, in his prison the mirrors sometimes fogged over or shattered. Sometimes a person on the other side would break the mirror. Sometimes, a Magickal would see him and try to control him. In those times, Jack drew back behind a veil of snow. His powers of cold and storms never left him, at least on his side of the mirrors.

His vision into the real world wasn't reliable—or maybe it was more accurate to say dreams weren't reliable. His view warped and wavered, he was forgetful, he lost track of time, and he had trouble returning to the same place more than once ... until he'd accidentally found himself peering

through a mirror into the village of Somer, and a bubbly five-year-old girl had seen him and asked, “Are you haunting our house?”

“No,” he’d replied in that first encounter. He’d sounded surprised even to himself. His tone should have been sharp, or at least foreboding and authoritative. He was a powerful Magickal, a leader, a warrior, and a slayer of vampires—or at least, he had been.

She grinned and said, “Then you are a friendly ghost! Would you like to join my tea party?” He blinked, took in the room she was in, and mistook it for a library. The walls surrounding the cozy sitting area were packed with books. He blinked again and found the child had placed a tiny porcelain teacup on the mantle below him. Spinning, curls bouncing, she issued an ear-splitting holler. “Nnenne, we have a friendly ghost!”

“Nnenne” was Igbo for *grandmother*, though he hadn’t known that then. But he recognized that the woman who entered the room an instant later, eyes flashing, was the child’s kin. Although the child was of indeterminate ethnicity, and Nnenne’s skin was a rich mahogany and, at a glance, she was of African descent, they had the same wide set, slightly hooded eyes, and their lips were the same shape. Beyond those, the similarities ended. The girl’s skin was a light tan, her hair fell in loose gold curls, and her face was not as classically shaped. Her grandmother’s hair was tightly coiled, white and short, haloing her doll-like features. Most noticeably, the ambient Ember in the room crackled about the old woman; the girl’s glow was very faint.

“What are you doing in my house?” the woman asked him crossly.

Ignoring her grandmother’s understandable ire, the girl smiled, cheeks dimpling. “This is my Nnenne,” she volunteered proudly. “She is over two hundred years old. She came *before* the Change in an aero-plane.”

“That can’t be ...” he replied, confused. She looked much younger, and was the girl implying that the Change had been over two hundred years ago? In Jack’s reckoning, it had only been decades. He hadn’t suspected

until then that he'd lost track of time in his prison, and that centuries had flown by seemingly in hours.

"It's 'cause she's a doctor! A real doctor, from *Harbard* Medical School," the girl explained, bouncing on her toes. "She is Magick, and she understands telo-mirrors and nutrishun." She added in a schoolmarmish tone, "You probably don't know what those are."

"I was born before the Change, too," Jack had replied, eyes riveted to Nnenne's. She still appeared suspicious, with a protective hand on the girl's shoulder, but she didn't demand he leave.

Nodding sagaciously, the girl said, "But you died and now are a ghost."

It was close enough to the truth. He wasn't quite dead, but the condition he was in wasn't one they could remedy, and he wanted to talk to her grandmother. Talking to anyone, so long as they didn't try to do something ridiculous like demand wishes of him, was an anchor to sanity. He bowed. "I didn't mean to intrude. I was passing through, and your granddaughter invited me to tea."

At that, Nnenne sighed. "She does that."

"I have the best tea parties," the girl declared, bobbing her head. She frowned. "But today my other friends can't come. It's wonderful that you can stay ... mister ... What is your name?"

In that instant, he forgot his name, as sometimes happened in dreams. "I'm called Jack Frost," he replied. It was only a nickname, given to him as a child, when his Magick manifested in frosting drinks and dew-damp leaves. It was the name of a mostly harmless sprite—he was harmless in his prison.

"I am Cherie," said the girl, bouncing again. "And this is Nnenne."

Sighing, Nnenne said, "You may call me Dr. Anna. If you have nowhere else to go, you're welcome to stay."

And he had. Dr. Anna became a friend after that simple offer of tea.

Cherie soon introduced him to the entire town, and perhaps it was *Doctor Anna's* recommendation, or the enthusiasm of a child, but wonder of wonders, they accepted him as their resident "ghost." For some, the acceptance was grudging ... Still, that he was tolerated at all was exceptional. In most places beyond the enclaves of power in the Magickal States, Magickals were not welcome, unless they were there to slay monsters.

Jack wondered if it was the high level of ambient Ember in Somer's air that made them obliging toward Magick. The town certainly attracted a fair number of Magickal beings. Somer tolerated them, sometimes even loved them.

In return for their acceptance, Jack fogged Somer's mirror with snow, hiding their Magickals from the Queen's eyes, and he covered their mutterings against the regime with the wail of wind.

One of the local Magickals Somer accepted was Cillian. One day Cillian might be foolhardy, ambitious, clever, idealistic, and Magickally strong enough to set Jack and his people free ... A tiny voice whispered on the breeze that swept through his mind, *"But if you're freed, you'll still have to deal with the Queen."*

Jack silenced the breeze with a thought. The possibility of freedom was still too remote to contemplate its dangers. For it to be even remotely possible, Cillian needed to not get sucked into the Queen's orbit. That could be dangerous for what was left of Jack's people, Somer's populace, and Cillian himself. And the boy still needed to learn. To do that, he needed to not die.

Each home in Somer had a corresponding room in Jack's house. Jack's house wasn't to scale, but it was somewhat orientated as the town was. Cillian and his mother occupied a lonely cottage at the west edge of town. Their room was connected to the rest of Jack's house by a corridor lined with windows. Jack tried to keep them closed and curtained at all times, lest

he be distracted by the storm of his thoughts outside. It would have been better for there to be no hallway, and no windows, but Jack didn't seem to have the concentration to manage that feat. It was a reminder that he wasn't completely the master of himself.

He was halfway down the hallway after hearing Ottis's pronouncement—the hallway seemed especially long; the landscape and architecture of dreams was always changing—when a blast of wind erupted behind him. He turned back to see the curtains of one of the windows billowing inward—it had been opened in the seconds since he'd passed it.

It was not good to allow such a chink in his fortress. Returning to the offending window, he couldn't block out the sight of the world outside—it was a blizzard world with drifting snow in every direction. Closing his eyes, he braced his hands on the sill ... and heard a woman's voice, light and lilting, *"Who creates the storm I think I know, let me see through his veil of snow."*

It had been over a century since the curse had trapped Jack and all his people in sleep. For a moment, a heartbeat, a long breath, Jack didn't recognize the woman who had cursed his people. But then he did, and every hair on the back of his neck stood on end. His lip curled, and he focused his Magick on a rebuttal. *"Wicked Queen, you cursed us, but you'll curse no others. Your cynical designs don't become you ... Mother."*

Rhymes weren't necessary for Magick to work, but they focused the mind, and focus gave Magick power. The window slammed shut, and an industrial steel shutter materialized in thin air and slammed over it.

Backing away, Jack made sure the window was truly closed. He heard no more of her voice. The only noise was that of his own storm raging outside.

She had never been to Somer. That she was coming now ... it had to be related to Dr. Anna's death. Spinning, Jack ran down the hall.



Jack wasn't sure how long it took him to reach the Joneses' house. Dreams, even one as carefully managed as Jack's dream of Somer, ran on their own twisted version of time. It might have been seconds, or it might have been hours when he reached the room that reflected the house that belonged to Cillian and his mother, Samantha.

The Joneses had the smallest house, and it occupied the smallest room. If Jack spread his arms, he could touch either side. There was a water stain on one wall that Jack could not will away, a reflection of their leaking roof. There was only one mirror to Cillian's side, cracked into four distinct panes. One of the top two panes looked into Cillian's room, and since it was early morning—or had been—Jack knocked on that one first. There was no answer, nor any other incriminating noises. He wiped a hole in the frost and peered through. The bed was empty but unmade. That meant nothing; Cillian rarely made his bed. Still, the house seemed eerily quiet. Jack dropped his gaze to a trapezoidal shard of glass that was one of the bottom panes. He removed the frost and looked past an ornament on a bookshelf to a living room with a sagging threadbare sofa. He could see no one, even pressing his face to the glass, and peering side to side. In a last-ditch effort, he lifted his head to the second largest pane that looked out through the medicine cabinet in the bathroom. He knocked, announced himself, and when there was no reply, he swept away the frost, closed his eyes, called out, "Cillian, are you there?" and held his breath. Samantha Jones didn't shout and throw something at the medicine cabinet. Cillian didn't grumble about being watched while he took a piss. Opening his eyes, Jack peered through the grimy cabinet door on the other side. The sink and bathtub faucets were dripping, possibly in an effort to keep the pipes from freezing, but there was no sign of Cillian or his mother.

Jack pondered the matter. He could search the entire town, or he could go to the person most likely to know where Cillian was. He strode from the Joneses' room to the room that looked into the house of Mayor Evans. The walls of this room were covered in gray-blue silk wallpaper with a faint fleur de lis pattern. There was a chandelier with sparkling lights that blended with occasional snowflakes that fell from the ceiling, and a bookshelf filled with tomes on astronomy, chemistry, physics, and magickology. There were many mirrors; Jack went to the largest ... and hesitated. The Evanses had always been welcoming, but as Dr. Anna had reached the final stage in her illness, the attitude toward Magickals in Somer had been starting to change for the worse. Jaw tightening, he knocked anyway. His shoulders loosened when he heard, "Come in, Jack."

Wiping away the accumulated frost, Jack found Mr. and Mrs. Evans in their study, sitting at desks opposite one another, mugs of steaming coffee and accounting books before them. There was a bay window with a view over evergreen shrubs, a birdfeeder hosting brilliant red cardinals, and a lawn dotted with trees that descended into what Cherie called, "The best sledding hill in Somer." Within the room, bookshelves lined the walls, and gold lettered spines of encyclopedias shone in the fire light. It was a room that wouldn't have been out of place in Dr. Anna's house, although the furniture was plusher and the scale grander.

The couple were a picture of what friendly domesticity and public service were supposed to look like. Both were in their late forties. Mr. Evans was pale and rounded, with bright blue eyes below straight blond hair turning to white. Mrs. Evans was trim, her skin a deep tan, her hair hanging in long, ash brown curls, turning to gray. They had always been polite toward him and solicited his opinion on town matters, particularly the Fae. They'd welcome him to instruct their son and Cillian, "practically their adopted son," on history and Magick. Now, Jack found himself hesitating, afraid of how his news would affect them.

Rising from his desk, Mr. Evans wore an expression of sympathy. Tucking her cardigan around her, Mrs. Evans stood, too. “Jack, we heard about Dr. Anna; we’re so sorry.”

Mr. Evans added, “Whole town’s going to miss her, but ...”

“Dr. Anna was a special friend to you,” Mrs. Evans finished.

Dr. Anna was Jack’s friend. Or had been. He hadn’t confessed the nature of his curse, nor had she pressed, but she’d shared with him all knowledge she had of Magickal comas. She’d taught him about the local Magick lore: the power of wards and symbols even when drawn by non-Magickals, and she’d taught him the power of names. Through her, he’d learned that the people of Somer calling him Jack Frost attached his nickname and its implications to him more firmly. All things unknown when he’d first been cursed. Though their Magick was very different, Dr. Anna had been his Magickal equal. Although perhaps he was flattering himself thinking that. Maybe when he’d been free, he’d been her equal. Now ... he was a ghost in a mirror.

He wasn’t sure he could classify what he had with Cherie as friendship. Their relationship was ... complicated. But because of his friendship with Dr. Anna, when she’d asked Jack to look after Cherie, he had, even knowing it was unhealthy for Cherie, and maybe for him. “Her mooning over a ghost,” Dr. Anna had said, “is not as bad as her caring for me alone.” Whether Dr. Anna had been wise or foolish, he still wasn’t sure.

The Evanses were waiting for him. “Yes, I ... I was there.” Not that Dr. Anna had recognized him in the end. She hadn’t even recognized Cherie. When Dr. Anna had first admitted that she had cancer, she’d said blithely, “Well, I’m going to pay for dodging the bullet for over two centuries.” A bullet would have been a mercy.

Outside, the wind howled, and snow spattered against the windows.

Mrs. Evans put a hand to her throat. “It’s not just that.”

“No,” Jack admitted, and he told them about Ottis’s announcement.

“No one under fourteen,” Mr. Evans whispered. “That’s a mercy. Ruth and Tommy will be spared.”

Jack wasn’t sure how much he trusted that mercy. Ruth’s parents had come from the South because it was common to take Magickal children away from non-Magickal parents much earlier. He would go to those families as soon as he was done here.

Despite her brave words, Mrs. Evans put her hand to her mouth and began to cry.

“Mom, don’t cry.” The voice was their son Geoff’s, out of Jack’s line of sight. He entered the study moments later. Geoff wasn’t Magickal; ambient Ember did not dance around him. However, he was a hard worker, hungry for knowledge, and interested in every subject under the sun. He already showed promise as a technomage. Dr. Anna had adored the boy. So did Cherie. Which shouldn’t bother Jack but did.

Geoff turned to the mirror. “Would you let Cillian know?” He flushed, glanced at his mother, and then back to Jack. “He’s with Audrey.”

For a moment, Jack was confused. “I thought Audrey was—”

Geoff winced. Mr. Evans cleared his throat. For a moment, exasperation overwhelmed Mrs. Evans’s sadness, and she muttered, “That boy!”

Married to Roger Hughes. “Right. I’ll check the Hughes place,” Jack said.

Pulling away from the mirror, he heard Mrs. Evans take a deep breath, as though restraining a sob. Geoff had been accepted to a few Southern schools but had always planned to leave with Cillian if the Queen’s agents ever came to Somer. Jack had believed it was with his parents’ blessing. Geoff said, “Mom, you lived down there. You didn’t want me to go South —” And then the boy’s voice grew faint behind him.



At the mirror that looked into the Hugheses' living room, Jack caught Cillian creeping to the doors on his tiptoes, shoes in one hand, coat thrown over a shoulder, ambient Ember whipping around him. Cillian looked at the mirror, hissed, "Don't judge," and then scowled. "Did you watch?"

"I'm not judging." A lie. "I didn't watch and never do." The truth. "The Queen is sending recruiters to Somer." The point.

Cillian's eyes widened. "Thanks," he said.

"Go to—"

"Geoff's," Cillian finished. He took a few steps, and then looked up at Jack. "Is uh ... my mom home?" he asked.

"No," said Jack.

"Yeah." Cillian rolled his eyes, but his shoulders fell as he headed for the door.

Samantha Jones had been there for her son for eighteen years; that she wasn't there now said nothing of her character. Cillian himself wasn't home.

Jack shook his head. Something Cherie had said came to mind. "'Cillian expects to leave home, but have it frozen in amber behind him, his mother with it.'"

There wasn't much that Jack could do. There was never much he could do. Spinning, he left the mirror in a flurry of snowflakes.

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CHAPTER 3



Cherie ran up the steps of her grandmother's rambling English Tudor. One of her neighbors had already shoveled for her. She opened the door carved with the normal symbols to ward off evil along with a triquetra and a ram. The Welsh triquetra was in her grandfather's honor. The ram was a symbol of Amadioha, an Igbo deity of thunder and lightning, and protector against undetected criminals. Amadioha was to honor the folklore of Cherie's grandmother. Neither had protected her in the end.

Still ... Cherie's hand went to her throat. Around her neck she wore a charm in the same design of Amadioha's ram. It had been her grandmother's until almost the end. Her grandmother had pressed it into Cherie's hands when she was still bright and lucid ... that had been weeks ago.

Pushing aside the memory, Cherie opened the door and stepped into a foyer lined with pictures of people she'd never known—her parents and extended family. Nnenna's children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and great-great-grandchildren had emigrated south for opportunities in the new cities. Cherie resembled all of them and none of them. Like most of the Southern people, their faces were more varied than the ones in Somer—East Asian, South American, African, and European. Somer was almost

exclusively ethnically Northern European and had been since long before the Change.

Just inside the door, in the gaze of her ancestors, she paused out of habit, trying to be quiet in case her grandmother had managed to slip into some precious, painless sleep. The same habit sent her gaze to the mirror by the door. For a while, before Nnenna got sick, Jack had always been in the mirror when she entered the house. In a brief time when she thought there could have been more between them, he would have greeted her with a sly wink, and she would have fumbled fast with a compact mirror, desperate to take him somewhere private, beyond the eyes and ears of her grandmother. He'd visit her in any mirror; all she had to do was speak his name. They'd talked about everything and nothing. For a short while, she would have called him her best friend and *more* ... but then he'd broken off whatever fragile thing they'd had, and no longer came when she called.

When Nnenna got sick, he'd haunted the house again, but it had been different. No long talks, no gazes that made her flush with heat, no fingers pressed against the mirror with Ember, warmth, and more flowing between them. After Nnenna got sick, and he came back, he didn't feel like a friend. More like a witness.

Now he wasn't even that. There was the stormscape and her own reflection. No Jack.

... because Nnenna was dead, Cillian was leaving, and Jack would leave, too. Again. Her stomach felt so hollow she thought she might throw up.

Skin heating, she kicked off her boots and dropped her keys into the tray on the foyer cabinet with too much force, trying to crush the silence. Once the house had been filled with the voices of guests. But lately ... Her shoulders tensed, her imagination conjuring Nnenna's voice. In the last days, Nnenna had called out a lot to her husband Ben, dead so long ago, and then more and more frequently to "Andrew."

Benjamin Shaw had been Nnenne's husband. Cherie didn't know who Andrew was. She shivered, because the house was cold and because of the memory.

Cherie had spent Nnenne's last days sleeping beside her. When her grandmother had woken, Cherie had used her Magick to take the pain away. Toward the end, her Magick had never seemed like enough.

It had been weeks since they'd had their last real conversation. Her nails bit her palms, remembering Nnenne sighing that day, sinking into the pillows, a tear on her cheek, bright against her skin dulled by illness. "Cherie ... I'm sorry."

"For what?" Cherie had asked, even though she knew Nnenne hated Cherie having to watch her suffer.

Her grandmother lifted a brow, a familiar look that said she knew Cherie knew exactly what she was talking about. It was so like Nnenne's normal self, Cherie had actually laughed.

"What's funny?" her grandmother asked, and Cherie could only shake her head.

Nnenne sighed. "You've only brought me joy, and I—"

"You're lying," Cherie replied. "I cause you a lot of trouble." And she remembered inviting all her neighbor playmates *and their parents* over for a tea party to meet Jack Frost without consulting Nnenne.

"It was good trouble," Nnenne answered. "You brought me out of myself."

Cherie stared at her feet. That party had been one of many. Her grandmother used to grumble sometimes that, as a doctor, she already saw more of people than she wanted to—but she also never forbade Cherie's frequent gatherings. In fact, she'd become a "co-conspirator" in those endeavors. Cherie liked to cook—with Nnenne—and play hostess, decorate the house, and bring the people from around town together, young and old, rich and poor, farmers and the mayor, people of different faiths. Decorating

and art weren't her talents; her friend Missy was better at both. Cooking wasn't her talent; Frank was better at it, and Mrs. Evans, the mayor's wife, was a better hostess. Parties weren't Cherie's talent. Cillian's parties were "the best." Something outrageous always happened. The mayor always had the "most important people" over, but when people came to Cherie and her grandmother's house, they always seemed happy. Conversation buzzed along with music on their windup record player.

They hadn't had a party in almost a year.

"You give me peace," Nnenna said in that last conversation, and Cherie thought of all the mishaps in the house—broken glasses, a broken lamp, a lasagna that crashed on the floor, and the couch that broke when too many people sat on it, Red Rebel, the Magickal squirrel that had invited himself in through a hole in the screen, soon followed by the Magickal owl ...

Nnenna insisted, "You're a natural peacekeeper, Cherie."

Cherie supposed she could give peace of nerves and make pain go away, for a while. Nnenna had taught her a lot of the craft of medicine, but Cherie wasn't as good at it. Nnenna's patients, until just recently, had always gotten better. She could seal deep wounds with a touch, and they never got infected, mothers never died in childbirth, babies were healthy, cancer was unheard of ... until Nnenna got it. People in the village of Somer died of old age, from one breath to the next.

Cherie's fingers fluttered at the edge of her sweater. Magick people usually had one particular talent, but they could *learn* to do other things. Cherie had studied, and cajoled Geoff, the smartest boy in Somer even if he wasn't Magickal, to help Cillian and her find a cure, Magickal or otherwise. Annette, Geoff's girlfriend, also not Magickal, but the smartest girl in town, had helped. But no matter how hard they'd studied, or what they'd tried, they hadn't been able to find a cure or make Nnenna better.

"Sometimes death is peace," Nnenna said the day of that last conversation.

“Shh ... Nnenne—”

Nnenne snapped, “There’s a lot I haven’t told you. A lot I *need* to tell you.”

It sounded too much like she was saying goodbye. “No, Nnenne, you told me everything I need.” And that was true. Cherie wasn’t a real doctor. She didn’t have a medical degree like Nnenne, but she could set bones, sew stitches, and deliver babies. She also knew a lot of herbal medicine. Harvard, where Nnenne had gotten her degree before the Change—or the Breakdown, or the Mixup, or whatever people liked to call it—hadn’t taught that, but Nnenne had taught herself and then taught Cherie.

Nnenne grabbed her hand. “No, listen, Cherie, some things I was afraid to tell you. If you repeated them, it would get you in trouble. Like telling Lydia your true last name.”

Cherie flushed. She’d been a bit tipsy and told Lydia that her last name was Shaw, and it was an Ellis Island misinterpretation of the Welsh word for “red.” In the Provinces, you didn’t tell anyone your full name, and you tried to keep as many bits and pieces of it as possible private. Cherie’s grandmother went by her maiden name or first name; she was Doctor Atuegbu or Dr. Anna. Few knew that she had accepted her husband’s last name, Shaw, too, and no one but Cherie knew that her real first name was Adanna. It was regular to add to your name—all the better to confuse the Fae or a Magickal human meaning to do you harm. Cherie’s entire name, original and additions, was Charmaine Min Peacekeeper Atuegbu Shaw. “Peacekeeper” was given to her by her teachers because Cherie had made peace between two cliques that were being horrible to each other and making things horrible for *everyone*. Nnenne had made it official by writing it in silver ink on a blank page in the back of her bible. She’d then torn it out, tossed it in fire, and said a prayer in the language of the Igbo, which Cherie had sworn Nnenne had also claimed she’d forgotten.

“Cherie,” Nnenne wheezed. “I *can’t* fight with you. Listen, please. You know about the Vampire War after the Change.”

Everyone did. Those *decades* were taught in school. People didn’t blink one day and find everything electronic broken. It came in gentle waves at first, and in those first gentle waves, some people and animals slowly became Magickal. Nnenne began not to need X-rays, MRIs, CT scans, or the hundreds of other tests, she just knew what was wrong with people. And then she began to know when the tumors were malignant, and when they were benign. Gradually, she was able to coax the body’s own immune system to remove them. Later, she could calm overly agitated immune cells, and convince them not to flood lungs with cytokines, or trigger complacent cells to attack invaders.

Her grandfather, an engineering geologist, stopped needing to use a computer for calculations, and he could *feel* fault lines beneath his feet. As he became Magickal, he knew when Pennsylvania’s mines were going to collapse. Later, he could sense veins of Ember.

At the same time her grandparents were becoming more useful, some people were rising from the dead. If they were old, they gradually de-aged. If they were scarred, they healed. They remained noticeably themselves, but a long crooked nose became a long straight nose, thin lips became perfectly balanced. They became, over time, mesmerizingly beautiful, charming, strong, swift, and almost immortal. They rose to prominence in entertainment and, eventually, politics. The price was human blood.

“You heard.” Nnenne coughed. “Vampires demanded blood sacrifices.”

Cherie remembered the bile rising in her throat. “Orgies of blood sacrifices,” she’d heard it described by Cillian.

“That is all true ...”

And it had only ended when the Magickals had risen and led the ordinary people against them. “Nnenne, you don’t have to tell me this. We

learn it at school.” She’d rather talk about Ghengis and his hopeless love for Nefertiti, and how the mouse would take morsels of cheese to the cat.

“I *can’t* fight you, Cherie. Listen, please. It was all true, and true that vampires loved Magickals’ blood most of all, but—” She broke off in a coughing fit. “Not ...”

“Nnenne, you need something to drink.”

Nnenne’s hand had closed tightly around Cherie’s. “Sometimes ...”

“I’ll get you water,” said Cherie. She ran into the bathroom, wishing her grandmother hadn’t hurt herself trying to tell Cherie something everyone knew. Nnenne did know things about vampires that weren’t common knowledge: that stakes through the heart were only temporary, and things about genetics and the environment, and the delicate interplay of both in the living, ordinary and Magickal, and in the undead.

Cherie returned with the water. Nnenne took a sip, but it was obvious she was trying not to cough ... the cough she contained, the moan of pain that ended in a whimper she did not. Cherie fell to her knees and grasped her grandmother’s hand. With ambient Ember in the air, *everyone* always had Ember in their bodies, in every single cell, according to Nnenne, but only Magickal people and animals could *use* it. Cherie wasn’t very Magickal and needed every last molecule she could get. Bowing over Nnenne’s hand, Cherie closed her eyes and took a deep breath, trying to pull as much Ember within herself as she could. And then she called on the new Ember in her lungs and the Ember residing deep inside her, and willed Nnenne’s rapidly firing nerves into peacefulness and quiet.

When she looked up, dizzy and gasping, Nnenne was already asleep.

Soft pattering on the window drew Cherie back to the present. She looked outside. The snow had turned to rain.

That conversation with her grandmother had never been finished. She told herself it didn’t matter.

CHAPTER 4



It was only after visiting Mr. and Mrs. Fischer, the parents of Magickal Ruth and her Magickal sister, “Golly”, and Magickal Tommy’s family, that Jack entered the room in his prison that looked into Dr. Anna and Cherie’s house. He paused and let out a breath in a frosty cloud. On his side, it was a room crammed with books: books on every mythology that belonged to Cherie and her grandmother, medical journals and non-fiction that were mostly Dr. Anna’s, and novels that were mostly Cherie’s. They had all been read to him at one time or other. The two women had the mistaken idea that he was a bookworm and a natural scholar. He was not. He was simply very bored, and almost anything that was not his own mind’s churning was a relief. Every cranny in the room had a mirror. On their side was a quintessential country doctor’s house: large, and nothing like impoverished, but not opulent. Dr. Anna was often paid in eggs, cheese, or trade.

He swallowed. She *had been* paid in trade.

Snow whipped around him. Dr. Anna was gone, and as bad as that was for him, it was worse for Cherie. He had to be there for Cherie for Anna ... His stomach knotted. And when Cherie was safe, he had to let her go again. He could not let her waste her life and love on a ghost.

He had vantages to every room except Cherie's and Anna's bedrooms and the bathrooms ... Although, more recently, Dr. Anna had put a mirror in her room, so that Cherie didn't have to be there all the time. It hardly had been necessary; Cherie had barely left it.

He didn't go to that mirror now.

He went to the one that overlooked the breakfast nook, knocked, and got no answer. He peered in. Cherie wasn't in that particular room, but the ambient Ember in the place sparkled a little more than it did everywhere in the strange village of Somer. Cherie didn't create a sharp halo like her grandmother or Cillian; instead, she existed in a fainter cloud of it that was weaker, yet spread farther. Dr. Anna said that Cherie's Magick was focused outward, not inward, and that was the cause for the "diffusion." Jack thought the villagers were right, that Cherie's Magick just wasn't very strong. Her only talent, if she had one, seemed to be a certain ... peace ... a pleasantness.

That had been strong enough to tie him to the village ...

But that tie was to Anna's Magick ... and if pleasantness had tied him too tightly to Cherie, that was because he was lonely and lost, and maybe after a life of war, he wanted a little ... pleasantness.

None of that mattered. Anna was gone and Cillian was leaving. Without the two strongest Magickals in the town as an anchor, his view of the place would grow hazier. If Cherie fled with Cillian and Geoff, he would probably lose her to one of them.

He reminded himself that she deserved a life in the real world.

Roaming between mirrors, he knocked, and then peered into the living room, the library, and the guest room. He began to worry, afraid she was somewhere huddled up and alone, crying. He moved more and more quickly, his knocks shorter and more perfunctory, his sense of his ineffectualness and helplessness growing.

Retracing his steps, he found her in the library, on her knees, half-hidden behind the arm of the sofa. Raised in a place where outdoor pastimes were the norm, Cherie had always been the picture of health, but she'd lost weight in the last few weeks. She was tall, but at the moment her shoulders were hunched, and her body bowed. The loose curls that crowned her head, light brown now, verging on dark blond in the summer, hung limp. Her gold skin that appeared sun kissed even in winter was marred by dark circles beneath her eyes. Her grandmother, who'd raised her since birth, was dead. She hadn't slept, not really, in days.

"Cherie ..." he whispered, wishing he could offer more than his voice.

He expected sobs; instead, not turning from whatever she was doing, she said in a business-like tone, "Find Cillian?"

"Yes."

Holding a slip of paper before her eyes, she said, "Good." With a jerky movement, she tossed the slip aside, bent out of his view, and reappeared again with a scrapbook. She flipped through a few pages, scowled, and began flipping at a more furious pace.

"What are you doing?" he asked, gently, because he knew what she was *really* doing. He'd seen enough of death and its aftermath to recognize the jerky movements and focus. She was avoiding her thoughts of Nnenna's death and fear of the Queen's agents.

"Who is Andrew?" she asked. "Do you know?"

It took a moment to place the name as the one Dr. Anna had called for in the past few weeks. "I don't." Cherie knew that. She'd asked him before. "I knew your grandmother for fewer years than you did."

"She didn't tell you?" Cherie demanded, attention still on the scrapbook.

"No," Jack replied. Dr. Anna had lived on her own in Somer for over a century before Cherie had been born. Dr. Anna was a beautiful woman even in old age. It wasn't hard to imagine she'd had a lover.

“You were friends with her,” Cherie muttered. “Better friends with her than you were with me.”

It was grief talking. The trouble was, Cherie and he had become something more than friends. It wouldn’t have happened in his former life. He admired the beauty of young women, but he avoided romantic attachments to them. He didn’t want someone he could manipulate. But his feelings had snuck up on him. When they’d met, Cherie had been a *real* child, and he’d barely noticed her. He didn’t dislike children; he just found them uninteresting. But at some point, he’d looked through the mirror, and Cherie was no longer a child. She wasn’t afraid of him, she didn’t begrudge his presence, and she wasn’t overly awed by him. He was older than her. It was his fault she had developed a crush. His fault she’d been hurt ... He’d hurt, too.

In the present, Cherie demanded again, “Did. You. Know. Andrew?”

He’d been fading, being drawn from her reality into the rambling maze of his mind.

She was tired. She was grieving. He kept his voice calm. “No, Cherie, she never told me about him.”

Tossing the scrapbook aside, Cherie half moaned, half shouted, “Why didn’t she tell me? Wasn’t I her *friend*? Or was I only a child to her too?”

Cherie wasn’t a child to Jack, which was the problem.

Kneeling beside the scrapbook, Cherie wrapped her arms around herself. Jack reached out to the glass, and then dropped his hand. “Cherie, I miss her, too.” Cherie didn’t move or seem to have heard.

“You deserve time to grieve, and you need to sleep, but you don’t have time. You need to get ready to leave. The Fischers have already left.” He’d gone to warn the Fischers, the parents of Magickal Ruth and Golly, the golem playmate she’d created, just after finding Cillian. As he suspected, they hadn’t trusted Ottis’s pronouncements that no one under fourteen would be taken. He hadn’t suspected how quickly they were ready to go.

They asked if Cherie was prepared to leave, offering to take her, but when Jack had said she'd need a day to prepare, they'd said they couldn't wait, they couldn't risk the Queen getting hold of Ruth or Golly.

Cherie rose from the floor and glared at him, her face crumpled in a look of unmitigated rage. He'd seen that look only once before.

"You get to decide what's best for me?" she demanded.

She'd said those words before, too.

"Cherie, this is different. This isn't about—"

"Us?" she asked.

"There isn't an us," Jack replied. "There never was." As the last left his lips, he instantly regretted it. Cherie paced toward the mirror. "Every day. Every day you were in my life, and then one day you just left—" She held up her hand before he could protest. "And don't say it isn't true. Seeing you in the company of other people isn't the *same*."

It wasn't the same. It was *safer*. "We've been through this—"

"You come back into my life because my grandmother is dying. You came back for *her*, and now you think you have the right to order me around?"

"I am not trying to order you around. I am trying to save your life!"

"You've told me over and over I can't save you, but you can save me?" Cherie jabbed her finger against the mirror. He followed it with hungry eyes and almost pressed his fingers to the glass, craving the connection, even if it was through the glass, even if she meant it only in fury. That craving had caused her pain before. Snapping his hands behind his back, Jack explained, again, "Trying to save me would be your death!" He flung out his hands in exasperation, and from his fingertips flew sluagh, the crimson-black birds that were the devourers of souls. Their long, curved beaks clacked in laughter. They filled the space between him and the mirror, oozing into his dream like ink onto paper, obscuring his view of Cherie.

His dream disintegrated, and he was alone, outside, in swiftly falling snow, no slough or his house in sight. His voice still echoed, and it was only then he realized he'd been shouting.



Clouds of vicious-looking black birds filled the mirror. They weren't ravens or crows; their feet were too hand-like, the attached nails too long, curved, and red. Their feathers turned to crimson at their tips, and their beaks were curved like birds of prey, with wicked serrated edges. Cherie backed away. The beady, glowing red eye of one of the birds fell upon her, and it flew at the mirror.

Cherie gasped and dove behind the arm of the sofa.

"Pretty, pretty, soul! I will eat you all up!" Laughing, it collided with the mirror and gave a shriek of rage. Cherie dared to look over the sofa, just in time for it to scrape its beak along the glass with an ear-splitting screech. She threw her hands to her ears. Other birds shouted, "Let me try, let me try!" There was a great flapping of wings, screeching, a squawk, and then silence.

Grabbing a poker from the fireplace, Cherie approached the mirror. Scratches marred its surface. There had been a handful of times that she'd seen other ghosts in the mirrors. A woman she was sure was Jack's sister, but every time Cherie tried to say hello, she vanished like smoke. And there was a brown rat, who once or twice had stood on his hind paws adjusting a tiny bow tie, muttering, "Have to look respectable. Can't look like you carry the Black Death, Nimm!" When Cherie had assured him he did look respectable, he didn't hear and ran off. This was the first time she'd been *seen*. She touched the glass and found it unnaturally cold—that was not unusual—but the claw and beak scratches weren't normal. She swallowed. She recognized the birds from the mythology books Nnenne had insisted

she study; they were sluagh, soul eaters, from Irish myths. Had Jack's soul been captured by sluagh? Was that why he was a ghost?

Was he really a ghost or even dead? She knew a lot about Jack. She knew his mother was one of the first to die by vampire. She knew his father had moved to the South with his stepmother and had died while Jack was deployed. He'd had a powerful Magickal fiancé named Bianca, and a friend named Nevin who wasn't Magickal at all. Bianca had been killed by vampires, as had his friend Nevin. Cherie knew about his childhood at the beginning of the Change, and knew he had a half-sister, Mizuki, who'd survived the wars. He was very close to her—or had been. Cherie knew nothing about how Jack died, or even if he had died. Nnenne said he was more likely cursed. Ghosts tended to be trapped near their place of death, and Jack certainly wasn't from Somer. With the armor he wore, most people assumed he died a violent death in the Vampire War. Jack always said he wasn't much more than a pencil pusher in that conflict. Sheriff Easterman, himself a veteran of the more recent war with Mexico, always said, "That not wanting to talk about it shows he's seen real action."

"Trying to save me would be your death!" Jack had just said.

Which led Cherie to believe there was some way for him to escape his curse, but he didn't think Cherie was capable of rescuing him. He was such an arrogant, bossy ... she growled and considered throwing the scrapbook at the mirror, but Nnenne's voice whispered in her memory. "Just because someone is disagreeable doesn't mean they are wrong."

She closed her eyes.

From the front door came a familiar pound. She didn't need to look to know who it was, but as she passed the front window, instead of seeing Cillian's motorcycle, she saw Lucky, Geoff's pickup truck. Her footsteps picked up speed.

When she threw open the door, her heart sank. *Lounging* beneath the awning was not Geoff, but Cillian, Somer's golden boy—at least in the

literal sense. Ambient Ember was sparkling along the blond locks curling above his eyes. Two years younger than Cherie, Cillian was nearly a foot taller and ten years more confident. That came with the magic of charm, Nnenne said.

Cillian pulled away from the wall. "You look like the undead!"

Sometimes his charm-talent went on the fritz.

"Thank you, Cillian," Cherie replied.

Color came to his cheeks, and he bent over and picked up a parcel and glass milk jug at his feet. "Looks like your neighbors left you some things."

Cherie blinked. They had. She recognized Mr. Brown's handwriting on a card on the parcel that was probably soup. The milk would be from the Smiths' Magickal cow, Roxie, and would never go bad. She held out her hands, but Cillian pushed past her. "I'll bring them in. You look like you could eat something." He kicked off his shoes and went to the kitchen. "Did you hear the news about the recruitment?"

Sighing, she shut the door and followed him. "I did."

"I'm not staying. They're not getting me."

Cherie exhaled. "I'm ... glad." And she was. No matter how annoying Cillian was, she didn't want him to *die*. He didn't always use his Magickal charm ethically, but she always got the feeling that he didn't *mean* to be unethical. He didn't seem to chase women, human and possibly Fae, so much as they chased *him*.

"Are you going to hole up with your cousins up north for a few days?" Cherie asked.

"Nah." He went to the cupboard where the pans were kept. Cillian had long ago learned to make himself at home in any kitchen. He was constantly hungry and feeding him was a village project. "I'm going to Canada."

"Canada?" Cherie gasped. It was so far. If he went, the chances of him coming back were ... she gulped. Non-existent. The thought made her

unaccountably sad. Cherie didn't know how to categorize Cillian. She didn't trust him precisely, but he was part of Somer, part of her town, and him leaving unraveled something in the community fabric. Even if he was the troublemaker, maybe every community needed one. She massaged her temple. "How will you do that? On your motorbike?"

The look he gave her told her how idiotic he thought the question was. "We're going in Lucky and taking Chance." Turning to the stove, he lit a match and turned on the gas.

"Lucky won't drive for you," Cherie protested. Lucky was powered by Ember, and the thing about Ember powered machines was that after a while, the Ember got into their gears and gave them, if not precisely sentience, definitely personality. Lucky was a very old truck and had a lot of personality. It would tolerate Cillian, but not without Geoff.

"Didn't you hear me? Geoff's coming with me." He set the pan on the stove and stirred.

Belatedly, Cherie realized he'd said, "We." She rubbed her eyes, dry from lack of sleep. "Why so far?"

"Because Magickals and technomages are welcomed in Quebec," Cillian said.

Cherie looked through the foyer, to the window in the front door. She could just see Lucky's flatbed. Geoff had pieced the truck together from abandoned parts, some of them so old they weren't Magickal, but he'd made them work. Mr. Ottis had called it sorcery and a dangerous eyesore.

Massaging the tension from her brow, Cherie whispered, "You're welcome here."

Inclining his head, Cillian regarded her, his eyes soft, almost pitying. She hated it when he did that. He looked caring and wise. He could *care*, but Cillian was one of the least wise people she knew. Wisdom rarely got you a back full of buckshot from a cuckolded husband or had a Fae lord pacing the county limits promising that if you ever poked your nose into

Fairy again, he'd turn you into a pig. Cillian swore the last was a complete misunderstanding. Confront him about it, and he'd say he'd never *purposely* open a portal into Fairy. Who would?

Cillian would. When they were children, Cherie had watched and waited with bated breath as he'd opened one such portal and then, with other children, followed him over. Even though he was younger than her, she'd been under his sway, if not in love with him, like everyone else. They'd gotten so terrified after what they'd done, they'd all—even Cillian—charged back home, screaming.

He was still staring. "What?" Cherie asked.

Cillian briefly touched the three entwined triangles at his neck. It was a Valknut, the symbol of Odin, the Norse "warrior-wizard" king. Odin was the model Cillian aspired to—learned and wise, but also skilled in warfare. Odin had suffered a great deal for his wisdom. Cherie didn't think Cillian had suffered, buckshot and angry Fae husbands notwithstanding. She was a little afraid of him and for him.

She blinked. Ambient Ember was gathering more thickly around Cillian. Cherie saw it as a faint halo around his head, a sparkle of light at the tips of his fingers, and a flash of his eyes. She steeled herself and prepared for his charm.

"You know, Cherie," he said softly. "Magickals are not wanted most places."

"What are you talking about?" Cherie said. "Everyone loves you, despite all the trouble you cause." Even the Fischers had forgiven him for coaxing the then five-year-old Magickal Ruth into creating a golem. It hadn't been the wisest thing, considering the destruction at least one legendary golem had caused, but Ruth hadn't wanted a powerful protector. She'd wanted a playmate, and since the intention hadn't been violence, even of the protective sort, the results hadn't been violent. Also, the results were smaller and cute. Little "Golly" was a member of the community. Mr.

and Mrs. Fischer were glad she'd been created, since they'd had Ruth late and weren't able to have any more children.

"I'm loved in Somer." Cillian took a step toward her. "Just like you, Ruth, Golly, Tommy, Lydia, Chance, Ghengis, Roxie, and Nefertiti ... even Eben."

"I'm sure your cousins would—"

"No," Cillian said, "they wouldn't take me in. I make them uncomfortable. I make some people uncomfortable here."

Cherie sighed. "I'm sorry, but that is on you, Cillian." Golly may have turned out okay, but it had been dangerous, as had been trying to lead them off to Fairy, and there was a reason he had buckshot in his shoulder, and that reason was married.

Cillian smiled. "Point taken." His face became serious. "But they're also uncomfortable around you."

She wanted that to be true. That would be the perfect excuse for her foolishly falling for a man in a mirror. But that was only her wishful thinking. "That isn't true, Cillian."

"They love you," Cillian persisted. "They do, but they are uncomfortable around you."

Cherie started to protest, but Cillian held up a finger, so close to her face her eyes crossed. "Have you ever been kissed, Cherie?"

Not in the real world. She flushed. "That's not—"

Cillian dipped his chin. "Relevant? Of course it is. People are afraid of us, and that is proof."

"How can it be proof when you kiss everyone?" Cherie said.

His face got very serious and ambient Ember sizzled in the air around him. "Women like a man with aspirations."

He was so close that the words whispered across her forehead in a soft breeze, and she breathed in the ambient Ember he gathered about him. It tasted vaguely of ozone, pine, and Fairy. Everyone wanted to kiss Cillian ...

shouldn't she? Because that was what he was getting ready to do, wasn't it? She'd seen that look once before through a mirror ...

A tiny part of her brain, traitor or savior, whispered that not *everyone* wanted to kiss Cillian. He'd once tried to kiss Annette, the smartest girl in town, and she'd slapped him. Debbie Smith, who wasn't very smart but terribly sweet and in love with the farmer who owned Roxie, hadn't fallen for him, either. Love and brains protected someone from Cillian, Nnenna said, even if they didn't have Magick.

Cherie had no love, and she wasn't as smart as Annette. Cillian closed the distance between them. She felt numb, no butterflies, and no heat, like she'd once felt staring into a looking glass, but she swore the ambient Ember that danced around him was pulling him toward her like gravity, and like in a bad dream, she couldn't get away.



It was easy to get lost in dreams. Dreams didn't respect time or place. They were the worst types of maze, the maze of the mind. Thrown from his carefully constructed Somer House, Jack turned in place, willing the storm to stop, or at least slow, but the snow only fell more fiercely.

He didn't know how long he'd been there. It felt like days.

How had he gotten here?

By telling Cherie she could not rescue him, which was only the truth. Cherie couldn't come to him because he had never told her where in her world he was. He hadn't told anyone. There was no one in Somer who was strong enough to fight the sluagh or the sleep. Why had the sluagh come into his dream? Was the spell weakening? Or had his subconscious summoned the birds, trying to warn Cherie of the danger she would face?

Whatever the reason, the sluagh had come, and Jack was lost in a storm. He was no longer the master of his dreams.

Raising his head, hands curling into fists, he gave a shout into the nothingness.

The nothingness answered with a howl ... and then a bark.

Jack spun in place. "Chance?"

Another bark, to his left and behind him, and the sound of paws on metal. Jack plowed through the snow. "Chance!"

There was a whine, and through the veil of snow, Jack saw a snow drift. A gust of wind blew snow away, and he was looking at a snow sculpture of a pickup truck. Running to an icy side view mirror, Jack rubbed his hand against the glass and saw a familiar golden retriever-Irish setter mix wagging his shaggy tail. Magickal Chance was a finder and retriever of lost things.

"Jack?" said Geoff, peeking in the mirror, smacking a stick in his hand.

"Where are you?" Jack asked.

"Outside Cherie's house. Trying to give Chance some exercise before the trip." With that, he flung the stick, and Chance leaped after it in a red-gold blur.

"How long has it been since we last spoke?" Jack asked.

"That was this morning," Geoff replied, not surprised by the question. Ghosts weren't expected to have a firm grip on time.

"You're leaving already?" Jack asked, stunned, both by how time had seemed to stretch much longer on his side, and by how quickly the boys were ready to go.

"Yep," said Geoff, frowning. "Been packed for a while. The Fischers convinced us it was always good to be packed."

Jack blinked. When he'd encountered the Fischers, they'd said, "We're Jewish. We've got more than a millennia of experience being prepared to leave."

"You have everything?" Jack asked.

Geoff rattled off their supplies: shotguns; Magick ammunition that would pierce a dragon, troll, or ogre's hide; rations; camping gear; flares; and Ember to recharge Lucky's batteries and to barter with if they needed to. Geoff finished, "I even convinced Cillian to say goodbye to his mom." Geoff's eyes narrowed, as though he were surveying something in the distance. "Cillian's taking too long."

"Too long for what?" Jack asked.

"To convince Cherie to come with us." His jaw got hard, and he muttered, "He's blowing it." His reflection surged out of Jack's sight.

Jack looked beyond the mirror, willing himself to see more than snow. The wind swept by in a mournful moan, revealing a door supported by nothing. It had a Welsh triquetra and a stylized ram carved into it. Before it could vanish, Jack ran forward, yanked the handle, and rushed inside.

He found himself in his Somer House, in the room that was Dr. Anna and Cherie's home. His eyes went to the mirror that looked into the kitchen. Cillian was leaning over Cherie, his expression predatory—though that might be Jack's own bias. He was a ghost jealous of the life of the living and too fond of a girl who couldn't help his people or him. His lip curled, and two things happened simultaneously: there was a bang from the front of the house, and Cherie pushed Cillian back, though not very hard. Cillian barely budged, but her voice had strength her arms did not. "Do you realize that my grandmother died? Yesterday. The undertaker staked her in front of me."

Geoff was in the kitchen moments later, Chance behind him. Jerking his thumb back to the foyer, Geoff said, "The door blew open." Geoff's gaze cut between Cherie, looking tired and agitated, to Cillian, and to Jack last of all. Geoff rolled his eyes. Jack realized he was scowling, and his hands were balled into fists at his sides.

Cillian put distance between himself and Cherie—her words had done what her shove couldn't. He looked sheepish. Arms wrapped around

herself, staring out the window, Cherie looked lost. Maybe she was remembering begging the undertaker for more time before the stake was planted in Dr. Anna's heart. Magickal people could not become vampires, but all new bodies were staked, Magickal or not, whether or not the family was ready. Jack had enforced the same policy, once upon a time.

"You're going to Canada, too?" Cherie asked Geoff.

"Yes," Geoff replied. "I hope you'll come with us."

Jack found himself pressing his hands against the glass. Remembering the look in Cillian's eyes just moments ago, and the covert looks he'd seen Cherie cast at Geoff, Jack wanted to tell her not to go. He lowered his hands. It wasn't about his jealousy; it was about her life. There were far worse people than Cillian. A muscle in his jaw twitched. And not many better than Geoff.

Cherie picked at her sweater. "I was thinking, if I had to leave, I'd go to Maine. I have relatives there."

"If the Queen's agents are serious, they'll be watching the trains, Cherie," Geoff said.

Her eyes shot to Cillian. "When ... *if* I leave. I will drive myself—"

"That's a horrible idea." The words burst from Jack without him thinking.

"Gotta agree with Frosty, there," Cillian said.

Spinning, Cherie pointed a finger not at Cillian, but at Jack. "I've driven it before. My car is well warded, newer, and more reliable than Lucky—"

"It's not *smart* like Lucky," Geoff protested.

Cherie continued. "Not every road is like I76 with its dragon, especially closer to the coasts."

"Where you're more likely to run into Queen's agents," Jack replied, leaning toward the mirror, distantly aware that he was shouting.

Geoff murmured, "Jack ..."

Cillian interjected, “Last time you drove to Maine, your grandmother was riding shotgun. *She* was powerful and—”

“Cillian, hold on,” Geoff said.

Cillian continued, “—you’re not. You can’t travel on your own.”

Cherie rounded on Cillian, and Jack couldn’t help but feel a twinge of satisfaction.

Cillian jutted his thumb up the stairs. “Pack your bags, Cherie. You’re coming with us.”

Jack’s skin heated. “*Respect*, Cillian.”

“Easy,” said Geoff, laying a hand on Cillian’s shoulder. “Cherie, I know you’re hurting, but we don’t know when the Queen’s agents will arrive. We should leave now.”

Cherie’s attention shifted to Geoff. “We just heard. We’ve got a few more days.”

“You don’t know that,” Geoff said. “I know it’s the worst possible time —”

“You can’t defend yourself against the Queen’s recruiters,” Cillian snapped.

“Like you could?” Cherie demanded.

“No, he couldn’t,” Jack said, both his hands pressed against the mirror again. He didn’t remember putting them there.

“I would have a better chance,” Cillian said, stepping closer to her.

“If my Magick’s so weak, why would they even want me?” Cherie retorted.

Jack stared helplessly at the scene.

Geoff held up his hands between Cherie and Cillian.

Cillian roared at Cherie, “They will take you, because they are the Queen’s Magick Recruiters. The ones that come for you won’t even need to be Magickal to do it. *Anyone* could take you!”

Jack shouted, “Cillian!”

A growling Chance raced into the kitchen.

Before Jack could blink, Cillian pushed Geoff aside, hauled Cherie up onto his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, and started for the door.

“Cherie!” Geoff shouted.

“Put her down!” Jack ordered.

Chance lunged for Cillian’s heels, and caught the hem of his pants. With Cherie hanging limply on his back, Cillian turned and shook his leg, trying to dislodge the dog. “I’m just showing her that—”

Jack leaned further into the mirror. His body went hot, but frost exploded across the glass. Cherie’s front door burst open in a flurry of snowflakes. At the next instant, Cillian screamed and dropped Cherie to the ground. Pointing at Cherie, he shouted, “You gave me a wedgie!”

Cherie sprang up, face as livid as Jack felt. Chance danced around her legs, growling at Cillian. Or maybe the growl was from Jack.

Cillian roared, “Giving the Queen’s agents a wedgie is not going to work!”

Chance barked, Jack did growl, and Geoff shouted at Cillian, “Get out of here, you *overbearing ass!*”

Cillian’s jaw fell open. He blinked at Jack and then at Geoff. His body sagged. Backing toward the door, he dropped something in the key tray. “Keys to my motorbike. It’s in your garage. Hope you let it stay there. Thanks.” Turning, he stumbled outside, not bothering to close the door behind him.

It was so quiet Jack swore he could hear the grandfather clock tick in the study. And then, in a tone that echoed Jack’s own disbelief, Cherie asked, “Does he expect me to store his motorbike in my garage?”

Geoff rubbed the back of his neck. “Motorbikes are dangerous. His mom threatened to set it on fire if she ever got the chance. My mom repeated the same threat.”

Jack and Cherie blinked at each other.

Jack asked, “So he is leaving it here because ...?”

Geoff winced. “If Cherie leaves and none of us come back, he figured one of her neighbors would eventually clear it out without any preconceived malice.”

Jack and Cherie blinked at Geoff.

Shrugging, Geoff sighed. “It’s old enough to have *personality*, and he doesn’t want it to be hurt.”

The grandfather clock chimed the hour. Jack attempted to return focus to the thing that mattered most. “Cherie, you’ve more important things to consider. You need to think rationally about their offer.”

She met Jack’s gaze. “You’re going to make decisions for me *again*?”

His skin flushed, but he held his ground. “I’m not making any—”

“Go!” Cherie shouted, and the window shrank, as though yanked away by an invisible hand.



The front door banged open again, and frigid wind whipped into the house, carrying snowflakes with it. Chance whined.

Geoff closed the door, and then came back to the kitchen. He hadn’t once said, “You *have* to come with us.”

Cherie liked Geoff ... however ... “I can’t go with Cillian.” Her lip crumpled. “Don’t tell me that he isn’t a rapist, that he won’t physically hurt me. Those are true but he is dangerous.”

She thought of the Ember that had swirled around her before the almost-kiss. Even though she hadn’t wanted to kiss him, the shove she’d given had been ineffectual. It was only her words that had made him desist. Grief was a defense against Cillian’s charm too, apparently, but for how long? He *had* desisted, but then he’d picked her up, so easily, and flung her over his shoulder. She saw her life with Cillian, her spirit being slowly crushed ...

It occurred to her that Geoff hadn't responded. Hadn't denied anything or made any apologies. He was too smart for that.

"Aren't you afraid that you'll be a slave to his charm?" Cherie asked.

"I've never thought his talent was charm," Geoff said.

"What does that mean?" Cherie asked, scratching Chance's slightly damp fur.

Geoff shook his head. "It doesn't matter. Cherie, I think your magic is stronger than people think."

She studied him. Geoff was her first crush—or rather, her second, but the first of flesh and blood. He was under Cillian's sway like everyone else. Or was he? He'd been the only one Cillian had listened to just now. Her mind felt groggy, and she felt vaguely sick. Geoff was going to Canada with Cillian ...

"I don't know if I should wait—" Geoff said.

"I'm not traveling with Cillian," Cherie said. She could feel her pulse fluttering in her neck.

"I know," Geoff said. "I wonder if I should travel with him now or stay for you. They will want you, Cherie."

Her lips parted, and her gaze snapped to him. Lots of people in town called Geoff Cillian's shadow, but that wasn't fair. Geoff was slightly shorter, not as broad, but no less handsome. And his mind was hungry. Maybe Nnenna and Jack had gotten her used to people like that. Cherie wasn't an intellectual; she did well at school because it was expected, but if given a chance she'd read romance and suspense novels rather than the dry tomes of non-fiction that Nnenna, Jack, and Geoff enjoyed. But she enjoyed it when they discussed the things they read. The three of them knew something about everything, and she liked how they always made her see the world differently.

Geoff was the first person to suggest that allowing the Fae on the county roads protected them from more dangerous creatures—not a popular

opinion ... at least not at first. During one of Cherie's parties, he'd put colored pins in a map of Pennsylvania where trolls or harpies had attacked, where dragons had made their dens, and where demonic possessions, poltergeists, and others had occurred. Somer had been notably free of all such scourges.

Cillian said it just went to show Geoff was no fun at parties. Cherie thought it had been brilliant and said so. Geoff's father and mother, and members of the town council had thought so too, though maybe that had been the free-flowing wine and beer. Or maybe it was because Geoff had been so ... non-confrontational, expounding on this "crazy idea" he had, in such a humble and excited way, that somehow everyone had bought it.

Now Geoff was offering to take *only* her. To leave Cillian behind. She felt like she was floating. Her stomach twisted though, thinking of Nnenne ... she still had to pick out the clothing for the viewing, and she still had to find out who *Andrew was*.

"Every time a good idea comes to Somer, it starts here," Geoff said.

"What?" Cherie asked, feeling her train of thought slip from its proverbial rails.

"Or at least gets discussed here." Geoff's gaze was intent on hers. "Not every town coexists peacefully with the Fae, despite their obvious benefits. Not every town allows itself to be haunted by a ghost."

"Jack is friendly and helpful. Not allowing him to haunt us would be cruel and silly." No matter how cruelly his ... indecision ... had hurt her. She took a breath. "Coexisting with the Fae is only logical."

"Logic and kindness are rare things." Geoff rapped his hand against his side. "My father always makes a point to announce his intentions to run for office here first."

"He's a very good mayor," Cherie said, her eyes feeling dry, her mind completely missing whatever trail of thought Geoff was trying to guide her to.

Geoff smiled proudly. “Yes, he is.” And then the smile vanished. “My parents think your talent might be cooperation ... or maybe peace itself. I think they might be right.”

It came to her attention that Geoff still hadn’t said, *Let’s run away together, just you and me*. Which she wanted to hear or *needed* to hear. It would be nice to have a crush on a real person.

“Fat lot of good it does me,” she muttered.

“Of course it has done you good. Magickals aren’t welcome everywhere,” Geoff said, brow furrowing. “If the Queen got you—”

“The war would end? She’d be kinder?” Cherie suggested jokingly.

“Peace isn’t always kind,” Geoff said.

His eyes flicked to the foyer. He was probably thinking about Cillian. They’d been bound at the hip since kindergarten. It was probably because of Geoff that Cillian did well at school; it would have been too much for his competitive spirit to have his best friend leave him behind. It was probably because of Cillian that Geoff was as accomplished in sports as he was. Cillian dragged him everywhere ... Cherie thought of something her grandmother had said. “Heaven help us if the Queen got Cillian.”

It was somewhat of an ego boost that Geoff was thinking of taking only her, but ... “What about Annette?” she asked casually.

Geoff ran a hand through his hair. “She’s not Magickal. The Queen’s spies will have no interest in her. As soon as I get settled, I’m going to send for her. She can catch the train. She won’t need to hide along the back roads.” He winced. “She wanted to get married here, but we’ll have to do it there.”

And there it was. Cherie swallowed down a lump in her throat. “I’m happy for you,” Cherie said, trying to be. There’d been nothing between Geoff and her except friendship. Really. Her eyes slid to the mirror. She’d spent too long with a crush on somebody else. She forced her gaze down, clutching her arms to herself. “Get Cillian out of here,” she whispered.

“Do you think that is best?” Geoff asked, too eagerly.

“Yes,” Cherie said. “Don’t wait for me. I will drive myself, and I’ll be fine ... if it even comes to that” What sort of good would a peacekeeper do in a war?

“They’ll want you, Cherie.” He stared at her. “But I think you will escape.” He smiled. “If you meet an ogre or a dragon on the road, you’ll probably wind up the best of friends.”

“Har, har ...”

Before she was ready for it, he hugged her. He hadn’t taken off his coat, and he smelled like spring and snow, and the cold of the outdoors clung to him. It was probably the only time he’d hugged her. It should have felt momentous. Instead, it was only sad. “Be careful,” she whispered.

“I’m sorry about your grandmother,” Geoff said, pulling away, Chance wiggling to his side.

“Me too,” said Cherie.

“Maybe I’ll see you in Canada?” he said.

She feigned a smile. “Maybe.”

... And then he and Chance were gone, along with Cillian and Lucky, too. Something was broken, but Cherie wasn’t sure what it was. Her life? Her town? Her world?

She stared at the door. She should pack. But packing felt like taking something that was broken and crushing the shards into dust. She couldn’t do it.

And who was Andrew? The answer seemed important, like it could somehow mend the fracture in her life. Part of her whispered, “You’re trying to not think of the inevitable,” but she ignored it.

She started toward the study, and then it occurred to her that Nnenne had never told Jack about the mysterious Andrew. It might be that she couldn’t for some reason ... her brow furrowed. But why couldn’t she? Cherie couldn’t imagine her grandmother having an affair while her

grandfather was alive. Maybe Andrew was a Fae? She wasn't sure Nnenne would be ashamed of having a tryst with a Fae ... although ... Nnenne was very urgent in her directives that Cherie never be in debt to a Fae or to have a Fae in debt to her. "You never know how they'll try to pay up, but it will be self-serving if you're lucky, a curse wrapped up in a blessing if you're not."

Maybe Nnenne's frequent admonishments were the result of some painful experience, but one not wholly negative? Hence the fondness for Andrew ... But what sort of Fae name was Andrew?

Her lips pursed. Nnenne wouldn't keep something she hid from Jack in a place where Cherie could find it. She'd have been afraid Cherie would "overshare." So, if there was evidence, where would she keep it?

Cherie's hand went to the charm around her neck, suddenly knowing where it was. Racing up the stairs, she ran into her grandmother's room, carefully not looking at the bed, trying not to think of the staking, or the weeks of pain her grandmother had suffered there. She kept her eyes on the closet door, smaller than the others, with a brass knob that was older than the Change and maybe even automobiles.

Opening it, she fell down onto her knees and reached beneath the clothes hanging neatly above. She pulled out an ashwood box, just two-hands wide, yellowed with age, the silver brackets protecting its corners and its lock mottled with tarnish. The scent of Ember came with it. She stared at the box, lifted it, and studied the lock. It looked simple, like something easy to break, although it wasn't easy. She'd tried, much to her shame, when she was a little girl, before she'd understood privacy. Nnenne had let her play in her old dresses and raid her jewelry box. It seemed inconceivable to Cherie's younger self that Nnenne would mind if she opened the box she'd found not in the closet, but among the eaves, in the passage that wrapped around the house there, one entrance of which was right behind this closet door. Such passages weren't uncommon in the country houses with rooms

under the slant off the roof. Protective charms could be painted or carved there and not be erased by UV light or children's games—although that last was somewhat fanciful since the first thing any child wanted to do was know where the secret passages of any house could be entered.

Nnenne had managed to keep the passageway hidden from Cherie until she was five and hidden the ashwood box there behind the closet wall. As soon as Cherie found the passageway, she found the box and had spent hours trying to open it before Nnenne had found out and asked her to leave her special treasure alone.

Nnenne had moved it from the eaves to the closet then since Cherie knew about it anyway. Cherie hadn't been able to contain her curiosity very long. She'd tried again and got found out again ... and again ... and again. It was only after she'd started to see Jack as *handsome*, and not just as an "old person" who was her grandmother's friend, that she'd stopped wanting to know what was inside.

It was enchanted, of course, and she needed the key.

Her hand rose to the charm. Was it her imagination, or did it feel exceptionally warm? She slipped the necklace from her neck. The charm was a stylized ram. The chain went through an upside-down drop shape at the charm's top. On either side of that was twisted horns. From the bottom of the drop protruded the ram's nose. It was far too long a nose to be realistic and had toothy edges on either side of it, which Cherie had always taken to be merely an element of African design. But looking at it and the lock ...

Hesitantly, she slipped the charm into the lock. It clicked with a slight flurry of Ember, and the lid lifted. The first thing she saw was what looked like a dog's collar. Picking the object up, she saw a tag with the name "Boxer" engraved on it. She knew about Boxer; her grandmother had told his story. He was the first dog she'd gotten with Cherie's great-great-something grandfather, Benjamin. That had been in the days at the

beginning of the Change, when vampires were still a “conspiracy theory.” The monsters were walking freely through the streets from sunset to sunrise. Boxer had sniffed out a vampire who’d tried to charm her way into the house when Nnenna was alone with her eldest child. The woman had knocked at the door, claiming car trouble, and asked to be let inside—vampires had to be *invited* inside, of course. Boxer had lunged through the door and bit the woman. She’d flung the dog aside, as though he’d weighed nothing, and in that moment her fangs had extended. The vampire turned back to Nnenna and roared. It was the first time Nnenna knew the conspiracies were real. She’d called 911 and grandfather on her “cell phone”—the satellites still worked then, though electrical devices on Earth had been becoming increasingly unreliable. The sheriff—a proper “good ol’ boy,” had shown up with a crossbow with stakes as ammunition. He’d believed the conspiracies. Cherie shivered at the near call of it and set Boxer’s collar aside with gentle reverence.

Cherie returned her attention to the other contents. There were three loops of hair tied with bows—two blue, one pink—one for each of Nnenna’s children. There was a scrap of blue flannel with yellow flowers that looked vaguely familiar. Picking it up, Cherie’s eyes misted. It was a corner of the blanket she’d carried until she was three.

Beneath that was an envelope addressed to Adanna Atuegbu; the return address was Benjamin Shaw. Beneath that was a stack of photos. The top one was a pale boy with a bright smile and hair that was decidedly red, even with the fading ink. She flipped it over and read, “*Benjamin, age 5.*” There was a picture that had to be Nnenna’s parents, a picture of Nnenna and her sisters in their early teens, and a picture taken at Nnenna’s wedding, where Nnenna was laughing, head thrown back, smile wide. Nnenna had told her, “I didn’t mean to laugh so much, but I was so happy, Cherie, I couldn’t help it.” Cherie didn’t think she’d ever seen Nnenna that happy. There were a few more pictures of her grandmother and grandfather—his smile still

bright—with their children, of Boxer, and then of her grandfather in an army uniform, his bright smile gone.

Beneath that photo was one more. It featured Nnenna and a strange man. In it, Nnenna looked older than in any pictures with Cherie's grandfather, but younger than Cherie had ever known her. Her hair was in long braids, and the front two braids were gray. Nnenna was laughing in the photo, head thrown back, and smile wide. Happier than she'd ever been in Cherie's presence, happy like she'd been in her wedding photo.

Cherie's eyes slid to the man, and in an instant, her pulse went wild, and her body went cold. If this was Andrew, she knew why Nnenna had never told Jack about him.

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CHAPTER 5



“C herie!” Jack called into the snow. Heat raced through him, and the walls of his carefully constructed house drew around him, but snow still covered his feet and fell gently from the ceiling. He found himself facing the mirror overlooking Cherie’s kitchen—he was not lost! For a moment he was lighter, but then he realized she was not there. How long had passed on her side of the mirror? He could never know without asking. “Cherie!” he called again.

The mirror frosted over, and a shadow not his own fell upon it. Spinning, he found himself not alone in his prison. He’d been joined by his savior and jailor, his younger sister, Mizuki.

He’d been told, time and again, that Mizuki looked exactly as he would had he been born a girl. He wondered if he came off as quite so imperious. “What is bothering you, Big Brother?” she asked, lifting her chin. She wore a knee-length, quilted silk coat against his storm. It was cut in a western style, but the pattern was from a Japanese silk kimono: navy blue, swirling with shapes that were jellyfish or clouds and had shimmering trails that might be stars. Her black hair was tied at a bun at the nape of her neck, but strands of it were whipping free in a wind that was her agitation or his. Below her coat, her body faded into nothing.

“Nothing, Little Sister.” He lied and tried to smile. She wouldn’t be here long. His sister’s talent was dreams. She kept him and his people safely trapped in sleep, but dreams were personal things that belonged to the dreamer; in his, she was a passing phantom. He wanted to reach out to her, to keep her here, ask her how to break free, but neither *asking* nor *demanding* that had gotten him anywhere in nearly two centuries, and touching her would guarantee she’d fade away.

“Liar,” his sister said. “You desire her, yet she is displeasing you.”

He wasn’t surprised she’d seen Cherie. Her mother, Jack’s stepmother, had taught her to see through mirrors, too ... but she didn’t even need that. She could walk in and out of anyone’s dreams.

“She is being a fool,” Jack muttered.

Mizuki touched her chest and said in a voice that was an imitation of his own, “I don’t suffer fools, Mizuki.”

“Why do you ask questions when you know the answer?” he asked.

She curtsied. “To be polite.”

“And why should I respond?” Jack asked. “I’ve asked you a thousand times *politely* how to get out of this—” He waved an expansive hand. “And you’ve never answered.”

His sister tilted her head. “Every time you ask, I tell you. For us to escape the dream, you must wake up.”

“And I beg you, dear sister, how do I do that?” Jack asked, for the thousandth time.

“How would I know? It is your dream. I only sent you here,” Mizuki replied.

Jack reached out, as though to grab her shoulders, but then clenched his fists and dropped them to his sides. “And on behalf of all our people, Mizuki, I thank you. You saved us in our darkest hour.” He swallowed bile in his throat. Mizuki had always teased him for his pride, and so he confessed, “My leadership brought the curse; I know it.”

Mizuki blinked her pale blue eyes at him. “You did not steer us wrongly, Brother. I agreed with your decision, don’t you remember?”

Had she? He *didn’t* remember. They’d argued about so many other things.

“I knew the risks,” Mizuki said. “Your people knew the risks. Don’t deny us our sacrifice.”

Jack held up his hands. “Forgive me.”

Snow whipped *through* his sister, and she faded. She was leaving him again.

“Mizuki, wait,” Jack said, holding out a hand, but not touching. She became opaquer, but he belatedly realized he had no idea what to say. They were going in the same circles they always did.

She saved him from having to speak. “You always told me you could never love a fool.” She tilted her head. “So, I guess the real question is if you love her?”

In love with a twenty-something child? Impossible. Fond of, attracted to, yes, he could admit that, but he was not, could not be in love with her. Still ... “She’s going to get herself killed.” And he hated the thought of that, even more than he hated the thought of Cillian and Geoff perishing. If Cillian and Geoff died, they would die for something greater than themselves. Even if they could never rescue Jack’s people, they were escaping, taking their skills and talents with them, escaping not just servitude but also the evil they would do as the Queen’s servants. It was the same choice Jack had already made.

The Queen wouldn’t find much use for Cherie. Cherie wouldn’t hurt anyone, but she would be a slave and would die in the battles for Ember deposits in Mexico. If she ran, she’d die, too. Cherie dying would be a waste, an unnecessary, pointless wrong. She wasn’t like the women Jack had chased once, Magickally powerful, worldly-wise. Cherie’s Magick was

incidental, and her greatest ambition was to have a home and a family. In a war, she'd be a flower crushed under a boot.

Mizuki purred, "But Brother, the vampires this side of the Rio Grande are dead. You saw to that. Surely she will be in no danger?"

Jack's skin went hot, and at his sides phantasms of vampire victims spread out like wings, their throats steaming with blood and gore. Closest to him on his right was Brianna, his fiancée, on his left was his mother. The walls of the room melted, and thousands of others spread out beside them.

"And how many did we kill, Brother?" From Mizuki's sides spilled more phantasms, their mouths grimacing in pain, revealing their fangs. All of them were amorphous, their faces blurred. Only one was just recognizable, with dark blond hair and green eyes. It was his once best friend and Mizuki's lover, Nevin. "You were willing to ally with the Fae, but not with the vampires," she hissed.

She'd agreed that fighting the Fae was immoral and dangerous, and in the beginning, she'd fought vampires alongside Jack and Nevin. When Nevin turned, his sister had become ... grief stricken. Unreasonable. His nails bit into his palms. Could he fault her for that? If Brianna had turned, would he have been able to resist her pleas? Could he say he was that strong? He growled. This was just another circle they'd spun around too many times. Wind rising around them, Jack stepped away from the argument. "There are still dangers out there for a young girl—"

"She's more than a *young girl*," Mizuki said. "Or you've become more depraved in your confinement than I'd imagined."

"—who is only weakly Magickal and not trained in the art of monster slaying," Jack continued. Mizuki glowered at him, becoming opaquer. He thought he almost saw feet.

From somewhere in Jack's house there came a shriek and the sound of breaking glass. Mr. Ottis's voice, sounding like it was coming from a

hundred tiny speakers, whispered into the room. “Good riddance, I never liked Frost always being able to peek in.”

Jack blinked around in confusion. The sound of shattering glass seemed to be coming from everywhere at once, and then above the commotion, came the voices of Natalie, Frank, and Mayor Evans. “Jack, Jack, are you there? Jack, we’re in danger!”

“Go to your people, Jack,” Mizuki said.

He hesitated. She was one of his people.

“Your waking people,” she amended as though she’d heard his thoughts—which perhaps she had. He couldn’t protest. She’d already faded away.



Cherie stared down at the picture and decided that the elongated teeth she saw in the man’s smile were a figment of her imagination. He looked too ... normal, too happy, and too *good* to be a vampire. He had a light dusting of stubble on a handsome face that admittedly would be considered pale. His eyes were a light blue—hair a light brown, though some of that might be fading ink ... which might explain his paleness, too. Vampires were famously decadent, but he was wearing a worn, plaid flannel shirt. It was open at the front, displaying a gray undershirt that, from its buckled weave, was obviously long underwear. The background appeared to be a cabin. She could make out a wood burning stove with a kettle. On one side of the stovepipe, coats hung on the wall the way cabin folk did to make sure their clothes were warm. On the other side of the stovepipe were shelves that, even though they were blurry, clearly held tins of tea and earthenware mugs, bowls, and plates.

Vampires didn’t eat, besides blood. All they imbibed in was wine. She frowned. That’s what they said in school. Nnenne always said they had to eat. “Blood doesn’t have a lot of calories; they need to supplement,

obviously. Although,” Nnenne had added, “they prefer simple things: milk, yogurt, eggs, cooked fruits, and meat. They don’t tolerate fibrous plant material and get the nutrients they miss from those in blood.” It was an oddly specific, detailed insight.

But Nnenne wouldn’t take up with a vampire. A vampire had tried to kill her, and vampires had been behind the horrible civil wars that swept the world after the Change. In North America, humans had prevailed, but thousands had died. Whole cities—and the armies that had defended them, had perished, like in Chicago and Houston.

Jack had lost his fiancé and mother in that war. They’d been murdered by vampires ... how could Nnenne take up with anyone who could do that to Jack?

Her brow furrowed. Nnenne hadn’t known Jack when this picture was taken, and there hadn’t been much of the Vampire War in Somer. It just wasn’t the sort of place vampires would want. It was too small to disappear into if they wanted to kill humans without being noticed. Not that they had to kill—Nnenne had been clear about that. Still, in Somer, everyone knew everyone and would notice a person avoiding the hours between sunrise and sunset. Vampires *could* walk during the day, but it was exhausting for them, and they had to cover every inch of skin or be burned and had to shield their eyes or be blinded.

Of course, they could avoid drinking human blood by drinking animal blood, according to Nnenne. “It just isn’t nutritionally complete and leaves them peckish.” Cherie swallowed. Again, it was an oddly specific detail—or, at least, it was a rather benign way to put it. “Peckish” was the desire for a snack, not the desire to rip out a human throat ... Which they didn’t have to do, Nnenne always said. “It was just a twisted thing some did to instill fear.”

Heart beating in her throat, Cherie stared at the picture. She couldn’t believe it. Glancing down at the inside of the box, she reassured herself it

was only one picture ... and her eyes fell on a folded newspaper clipping, so yellow it blended in with the yellow of the aged wood. For what seemed like an eternity, she sat motionless, and then she carefully lifted the newspaper clipping and unfolded it. There was a picture of the same man as the photo, but in this the background was grayish, possibly metal, and it looked like it was taken from above while he was lying down. His eyes were open and hazy, lips parted as though he were taking a breath. The headline read, “Vampire Caught and Staked Outskirts of Henry. Public Cremation Before Sunset.”

Henry was just over the Somer County border. Cherie skimmed the article. A vampire that had been occupying a cabin in the foothills between Somer County and the next county over. He had raised sheep and goats as “a cover.” There had been no recorded vampire attacks in Henry or Somer, and they theorized he must be going farther afield, perhaps even to Pittsburgh, but it just went to show how important it was to stake all the dead and cremate their bodies. The article gave thanks to the Queen’s agents who’d come all the way up from the South to stake him, sparing the community from his plague. The name the vampire had gone by was Andrew Berg.

In the picture, the vampire—Andrew—looked surprised. Not vicious, not evil. But wasn’t that the true evil of vampires, that they could appear so human? They’d been human and knew how to play human emotions; even the Fae were not as gifted. Cherie’s gaze switched to the picture of Andrew and her grandmother, and she couldn’t peel her attention from Nnenna’s laugh. Nnenna wasn’t perfect. She wasn’t a natural extrovert like Cherie. She could be cantankerous, she could be judgmental, and she wasn’t particularly good at hiding her judgment ... but Nnenna wasn’t foolish, and was, in Cherie’s estimation, a very good judge of character. She couldn’t have been fooled into that happiness ... could she?

There was a date above the article. It was a few days before Cherie's birth, and a memory came to her, of asking Nnenne if she ever thought of leaving Somer. "I did ... for a while, Cherie. A friend ... died ... and I, well, I didn't think I could bear staying here. I went down to see you when you were born, and I was thinking of relocating there to be close to you, but then the fire took your parents and I ... I knew whether you became Magickal or not, you'd be safer here."

Had Andrew been *that* friend? A vampire? She'd never asked more about that particular death because Nnenne had lost so many friends to old age. All the stories of "old people" had blended together in Cherie's young mind. Now she realized how horribly shallow that young attitude had been.

Cherie felt a jolt of cold against her collarbone, and her hand flew to her neck. The charm-key she'd unconsciously slipped back on was like ice beneath her fingers. She plucked it out and let it lay against her sweater to protect her from its cold bite but swore the fabric did nothing. From the front door came a loud *thump, thump* ... and she thought she heard more footsteps around the back.

From outside came a bellow. "Open your door by order of the Queen!"

Cherie gulped, imagining soldiers barreling into her home. Stuffing the picture and clipping in her pocket, she raced to the window and threw it open to the cloudy afternoon. Her heart was beating like a hummingbird's wings. "I'm upstairs, just a minute!" She tried to sound sweet, not afraid or angry.

There were five men on her front lawn, dressed in gray uniforms, pistols at their hips, and a great black dog at one's side. A man with red stripes on his shoulder looked up at her, and Cherie saw ambient Ember gathering around him. He touched his cap. "We don't mean to frighten you, Miss, but we would appreciate it if you opened the door."

"I'll be right down," Cherie promised, and then pulled back fast and slammed the window shut.

She turned to the mirror that showed her dim reflection and swirling snow and put her head in her hands. “Jack, you were right. What am I going to do?” The shriek of a winter storm blasted into the room, and the hairs on the back of her neck rose, though not because it had gotten colder. Cherie dropped her hands. For a moment, the mirror was still only her reflection and snow, and then a shadow in the storm drew closer. A hand thumped against the glass, and Jack’s face emerged in the gloom, eyelashes filled with snowflakes. “Cherie, they’re in town. You must go.” From behind him came the sound of breaking glass. Cherie’s eyes went past his shoulder.

“The Queen’s troops are breaking mirrors,” he said with a grim smile.

Natalie’s voice whispered through the storm. “Jack, are you ready?” and Cherie heard Mayor Evans say, “Jack, don’t leave us now—”

“What’s happening?” Cherie asked.

Jack’s lips pressed into a thin line. “The soldiers have captured a Fae. They have taken over the courthouse and have him in irons there.”

Cherie gaped and her heart dropped. The thought of the men outside flew from her mind. If the Fae retaliated, there would be no Somer, and its inhabitants might wind up worse than dead. Silver wards painted on windows would do nothing to save anyone if the Fae decided to create a wall of thorns around the town or curse every road and path to lead into their lands where humans would be killed or enslaved.

“Jack?” Natalie’s voice whispered again, wavering and afraid.

Answering her unasked question, Jack said, “I’m going to help the prisoner escape.”

“Go!” Cherie shouted, before she’d thought about it.

Jack’s hand pressed against the glass. “Are you—?”

“They’re not here,” Cherie lied, giving him a weak smile, still not even thinking, just reacting.

“You won’t—”

Cherie took a deep breath and imagined her neighbors, the Worleys—Greg Worley had probably been the one to shovel her walk—they had a new baby, a perfectly magical—not at all Magickal—girl, and four-year-old boy who loved Chance and filled the sidewalk with toy Ember trucks in the summer. She imagined them dying, slowly, as the town was cut off from the rest of the county. “I won’t go with the Queen’s forces,” she said, not knowing if she was lying or not. “I’ll leave now.”

“Jack?” Frank’s voice whispered through the mirror.

“Take a compact mirror,” Jack said. “And I’ll try to catch up with you.”

“Go, Jack, please,” Cherie said.

His Adam’s apple bobbed. “I wish I could give you cover.” And then he disappeared in a swirl of snowflakes.



The mayor’s office was in the courthouse, and Mayor Evans had prudently come in that morning and deposited “any compact mirror my wife and Natalie could find into every nook and cranny before the Queen’s goons arrived and kicked me out.” It had been prudent because the regular mirrors had already been shattered, the pieces swept away.

So, in the room of Jack’s house that was the mayor’s office, Jack looked through those tiny, hidden mirrors. Mayor Evans had managed to hide several behind the books on the bookshelf, behind the curtains, under his desk and under one of the plush upholstered chairs situated by the wall. There were also several hidden underneath radiators in the hallway just outside. In the mirrors’ fragmented view, Jack spied no fewer than seven of the Queen’s Guard patrolling the office and hall. The mirror that Jack stared out of wasn’t facing the guards; it was facing a hole in the wall. Jack hoped he wasn’t too late, that his sense of time hadn’t been distorted between here and Cherie’s home. He swallowed reflexively and reminded himself that

they hadn't found her yet. She was safe. Maybe she was even correct that they wouldn't want her.

Liar, a tiny voice in his mind whispered. You know they'll want her. They raided Ruth's home and Tommy's. They'll take Cherie, too.

His jaw tightened. She still had time, but if he didn't succeed in his mission here, she would be in worse danger. The whole town would be if the Fae retaliated. He shouldn't be worrying about Cherie. Once upon a time, he'd been able to compartmentalize his feelings.

In Somer, the wind howled, and the Queen's men complained. "The weather here must be cursed. Snow this late in March!"

"Think that Magickal kid is really out hunting in this blizzard?" another asked.

"Aw, sure, nothing will keep the local yokels from hunting season, and they start them young."

Thankfully, that was true. Tommy and his father had not been captured.

"Heard there are two more," said the first guard. "Two girls ... don't know if they've found them yet."

Jack's nails bit his palms, and the storm outside echoed his rage, rattling the windows. Once, he could have literally blown the guards away. Now, he could only wait for the real hero of the day.

At that thought, a bewhiskered snout peeped from the hole in the wall, and Ghengis Khan emerged. Strapped to the mouse's back, as though it were a sword, was a dull, cream-colored bone, no longer than Jack's little finger, one end carved into a ring, the other carved into symmetrical teeth. It was a skeleton key and the literal "key to Somer." It was Magick, and could open any lock in the village, even if that lock didn't originate here.

Ghengis bobbed his head at the mirror. Grimly saluting the valiant rodent, Jack turned to one of the other mirrors and contained a sigh.

"How," Jack had asked his fellow conspirators earlier, "can I possibly help?"

Sheriff Easterman with Red Rebel the Magickal squirrel on his shoulder, the mayor and his wife, Natalie and Frank, and even Ghengis, perched at the time on Frank's head, had all blinked at Jack.

"By haunting them, of course," Frank had declared.

Scratching his balding head, the mayor had added, "You're a ghost, right?"

Stifling his pride, Jack leaned close to a mirror just outside the mayor's office. "Booooooooo ..."

One of the Queen's men shouted, "Go check on that!" Jack went from mirror to mirror, saying "boo" and mocking the guards. It was effective. While they were tearing books from the shelves and ducking beneath the desk, Ghengis slipped along the wall and then under the door to the closet where the Fae prisoner was held. The confusion was still going on when a Fae man with curly black hair and shining green eyes emerged from the makeshift prison. They'd stripped him nude—Fae armor and raiment could make them nearly invisible. Dark bruises and welts crisscrossed his body, one of his pointed ears was bleeding, and he had a black eye. Still, he was as stealthy as a breeze; the guards didn't notice him creeping along the wall. The Fae seemed to know exactly what mirror Jack was peering through, because he smiled at Jack and lifted a hand to his face as though he was going to blow a kiss. The weeping red blisters from the irons he'd worn distracted Jack from what the Fae clutched in his hand, but then his heart seized at the sight of a helplessly writhing Ghengis. Jack of all people should have remembered that having the Fae owe you a favor was only slightly better than owing a favor to the Fae. Eyes on Jack, the Fae man kissed the mouse on the head.

"No!" Jack exclaimed. The window in the mayor's office burst open in a gust of wind, and the Queen's men spun in alarm. The Fae man was gone before they'd finished shouting, "He's escaped."

... And then all the mirrors that were left in the room shattered. For a moment, Jack's world was completely obscured by snow ... but then, through the gloom, came Missy's voice, "Jack, Jack?"

The veil of snow disappeared, and Jack was in the room that viewed Missy's living room, facing Missy herself, Nefertiti clutched in her arms.

"Jack," Missy said, blue eyes wide, "Will they take Nefertiti?"

The cat hissed. Like Ghengis, Nefertiti understood far more of human speech than a typical animal; Cherie believed that was why Ghengis was in love with the cat. "No other animal is smart enough for him," Cherie was fond of saying.

"Will they, Jack?" Missy asked again. "I heard Magickal animals were sometimes drafted in the Vampire War."

Jack's attention snapped to the present, and then slingshotted back to the past. Rats had been essential in his victories, and one particular rat especially ... God, Jack missed Nimm. Missy's room started to fade, and he remembered the bowtie-sporting rat in question ...

"Jack, you were there," Missy said, coming back into focus.

"Never cats," Jack said hastily. "Cats are too independent to be ordered about."

Nefertiti purred on Missy's shoulder and cast a smug smile in Jack's direction.

Missy gulped. "Do you think they'll take Cherie? I know her Magick's not very strong but ..."

He'd heard the Fae's guards talking about taking Cherie; he had to get to her. He looked around frantically, but the door from Missy's room had inexplicably disappeared, trapping him inside. "She said she'd try to escape," he reminded himself, forgetting he was speaking aloud.

Nefertiti hissed, and Missy exclaimed, "We have to help her!"

They would only put themselves in danger. Jack spun back to the mirror, only to find Missy and Nefertiti had already vanished. Once more he

felt his helplessness. It twisted and coiled to rage within him. With a snarl, he willed the door from Missy's home to appear. From his side of the mirror and theirs came the eerie shriek of the wind.



"Coming," Cherie called to the men outside the front door, but she didn't hurry. Clutching her key charm at her throat, she tried to think.

One of the men outside said, "Look at the symbols on the door. Superstitious provincials. Useless effort."

She scowled, touched the doorknob, and caught her expression in the mirror through the haze of Jack's storm. She tried to smooth the furrows in her brow and to manage a smile. The smile was impossible, and the furrows didn't quite disappear. Maybe it was exhaustion ... or Nnenne being gone, or the soldiers in her yard.

Taking a deep breath, she opened the door. There were two men on the stoop, both standing with their hands behind their backs. The man with the red ribbon on his chest looked at her, and Ember gathered around him in faint twinkling specks. "You must be Cherie."

"Yes," Cherie said, trying to appear intimidated and non-threatening. It wasn't much of an act. It was always odd seeing strangers in Somer ... much less armed strangers, both tall as Cillian and Geoff, but rigid and unsmiling.

The man with the ambient Ember and the ribbons said, "You are hereby ordered to report to the Queen's service. We will be escorting you."

Bewildered, Cherie looked up at him, wondering if they were going to drag her bodily from her home because she couldn't make her feet move forward. Behind the men, snow flurries danced cheerfully.

The man with the ambient Ember turned to the other soldier and inclined his head to the lawn. The man without Magick stepped away from

the stoop. The Magickal returned his attention to Cherie, and his expression softened. "It will be all right. They'll treat you better than they do here. In fact, the situation will be reversed; no more second-class status, no more being accused of being a witch."

For a moment, it was like he was speaking a different language. Accused of witchcraft? Her? She thought of Natalie's hug, of the snow on her walk being shoveled, her parties, and the thousand tiny kindnesses of her neighbors.

"There the normals have to respect *us*," the man said, and the words crawled up her spine like a snake. She thought of the gift of soup on her stove, and her teachers, and her friends, and felt nauseated. In a sudden moment of clarity, she realized she'd almost thought of giving up and going with these people. Conflict was something she actively avoided. She was tired, her feet felt rooted to the spot, and just letting them drag her out seemed ... easy. Maybe even right. Maybe if she went, someone else would be spared? Maybe there was some quota? And she wasn't Cillian; she couldn't be turned into a weapon. If she went with them, they weren't getting anything really.

But the picture he was painting of the world was so wrong it made her skin crawl, and she couldn't trust anyone whose sight was so fractured and untrue.

Somewhere on the lawn, one of the men said, "Did you hear they caught a Fae?"

"Probably pressing him to the irons now." There was a chuckle.

It was a good thing she hadn't been able to smile. It would have vanished at those words and been conspicuous.

"Am I allowed to bring some clothes?" she asked.

"We recommend three days' worth," he replied.

Heart hammering, Cherie managed a mumbled, "Great." She shut the door, and at the same time, her free hand flew to the key tray, and her

fingers wrapped around what they found there. The door stopped just before the lock snicked. Cherie stuffed the keys hurriedly into her pocket as the man pushed the door open again. "I'll have to wait inside," he said, a wry press to his lips.

"Sorry," Cherie said. "My grandmother just died and I'm not ... I'm not ... No sleep lately."

The smile vanished. "We heard about that. I am sorry for your loss."

"There's no chance I could stay for the cremation?" she asked.

His shoulders actually lost their hard edge. "I'm sorry, no. We have orders."

The refusal heated something within her, resolve, maybe. She felt stronger all of a sudden; her vision cleared. Turning on her heels, she headed up the stairs.

Another set of footsteps joined the officer in the foyer, and the officer said, "I don't expect any trouble, but go stand by the back door. Her grandmother just died; she might do something unadvised."

Her nostrils flared. Unadvised to want to be there at her grandmother's cremation, to wish Nnenne's ghost farewell one last time? Her fingers curled around the sharp shape of the keys in her pocket.

Boots tramped through the kitchen to the back door. More footsteps, heavier than the other, and she felt the crackle of ambient Ember at her back. The Magickal officer had followed her to the upstairs landing. She pictured what he saw, five doors all ajar: Cherie's and Nnenne's rooms, the guest room filled with books, the bathroom, and the laundry room. There was one door he wouldn't see—the one at the very end that was "disguised" by a bookshelf. It wasn't really disguised; there had been no more room for their books, and so Cherie and Nnenne had gotten creative. Behind it was a storage room and an "exit" he wouldn't see, either.

Cherie went into her grandmother's room instead of her own. She plucked a compact mirror from the dresser, opened the top drawer, and

pulled out her grandmother's stash of dollars and Ember. She went into the closet where her grandmother's spare winter coats and boots were. A person acquired a few in two hundred years, especially when country people paid in goods. She slipped on a pretty white down stuffed coat that reached past her knees and a pair of utilitarian boots of drab olive green rubber and worn leather. Glancing over her shoulder, she surveyed the mirror on the wall. Jack wasn't there, and despite everything, she felt her heart clench. It clenched again as she looked at her grandmother's empty bed, stripped of everything, even sheets. She didn't cry, though; her eyes were too dry—or the soldiers in her house had put her someplace past tears.

Ducking her head, she pushed through the clothes in the closet, gently opened the wood panel that led to the passage beneath the eaves, and left Nnenna's room. Setting the panel back in place, she crept as quietly as she could through the frigid, cramped space. The floorboards creaked, but she knew from experience that no one would be able to pinpoint the exact location of the noise. She passed by what was her own room and paused. There was a pounding in her ears, and her mouth tasted like metal. This was her house. They were taking her away from her home, *her* town, where all her memories of Nnenna were, and all her confused memories of Jack.

Swallowing her fury and the urge to peek into her room one last time, she crept until the passageway ended. She moved aside the panel there and entered the coldest room of the house. Light filtered in through a window-sized grate in the wall. The house had been designed for a large family, and this room and its grate was designed for drying clothes. But with just Cherie and her grandmother, they'd never needed anything but the laundry room. They used this room for old furniture, more books—mostly books about electronic technology that no longer worked in an Ember world—and linens. On top of a pile of those was a long tangle of sheets, knotted together by Missy and Cherie years ago during a game of hide-n-seek tag. Missy had been set on “death before dishonor or at least before being

tagged by Cillian.” Cillian had just told Missy that she would never be a fashion designer, and Missy had wanted to beat him at “*something, anything.*”

One end of the sheets was tied to the leg of a heavy wooden desk with a massive top of broken marble. Cherie gave a tug. The knots still held. Every other upstairs room in the house had a rope ladder because Cherie was afraid of fires—it was a fire that had killed her parents, after all. During that high-stakes, hide-n-seek game, they’d discovered the store room did not have one, so Missy had improvised, and then the rope had never been unwound, because Cherie was still afraid of fires, and the rope ladder that Nnenne had ordered to fix the first oversight had never come ... Cherie’s nostrils flared. Another memory of her house, her town, and her “normal” friend that the soldiers were taking from her.

Carrying a coil of the improvised rope, she went to the grate. It faced the side of the house and had a screen on the inside and shutters on the other. There were hinges that allowed the screen to be opened for cleaning since birds and bats liked to nest beneath the shutters. The slats of the shutters were easy to remove for the same reason. There was no window below, and the trees hid the view from the back and the front.

“The perfect escape route,” Missy had declared that day long ago, a look of determination on her then-pixyish features.

Opening the screen and the grate, Cherie threw the rope of sheets down, and it fell nearly silently.

“Better than a noisy ladder,” Missy had also declared that fateful day. Feeling a burn of fury, Cherie grabbed hold, and slid to the ground, touching the sides of the house only lightly with her toes. The snow was falling faster, and it was beginning to stick. Beneath the snow was ice from the earlier rain, and it crackled beneath her feet. She froze, but no one shouted, and no dog barked.

She heard the soldiers talking around the corner in the backyard. “Place is infested with Fae, and there is a dragon on the interstate,” and in the front, “The lieutenant says there’s an unusual level of ambient Ember.”

Her eyes slid toward the back. The garage was at the far edge of the backyard. The alley that cars traversed to the garages was blocked by high wooden fences and hedges. She wouldn’t be seen there, and Nnenne’s car’s Magick engine was nearly silent. But first she had to get to the garage without being seen. Besides a few trees, there was no cover before here and there.

She turned away from the wall and almost screamed. A person was standing too close and too quiet.

It took a moment for her heart to return to a more normal speed and to recognize Missy. Missy wasn’t wearing a coat, just a pink silk dress cinched at her narrow waist and opened low over her generous cleavage. Instead of boots, she was wearing tiny matching slippers with kitten heels and pom-poms on the toes. Nefertiti was an elegant black shadow at her feet. Hugging herself in the cold, Missy put a finger to her lips, painted a color just slightly darker than the dress, and she gave Cherie a brave smile.

Missy wasn’t a ninny, but strangers sometimes mistook her for one. She had exaggerated proportions, naturally white blond hair and big blue eyes, but she was an artist and shrewd businesswoman. She *had* become a fashion designer. She’d lived in Philadelphia for a few years and still went back two times a year to purchase new fabrics, but she lived in Somer. “I outsourced myself,” she’d explained. “I still have my Philly customers, but it’s cheaper to live here. Also, would you believe, some people there seemed to think Nefertiti is bad luck?”

Hairs on the back of Cherie’s neck rose at the memory of the last observation, but before she could dwell on it, a shout came from the front of the house. “Hey! Are you collecting Magickals?” It was Lydia. Missy’s and

Cherie's eyebrows rose, and Nefertiti's ears perked. They all looked at each other, and then toward the front.

Outside their line of sight, Lydia proclaimed, "'Cause I'm way stronger than Cherie! Watch me lift your truck!"

Cherie heard her front door open, and heard the Magickal officer shouting, "Now wait a—"

Putting a hand on Cherie's shoulder, Missy whispered, "It's her decision. Now quick, while she's distracting the fellows out front."

It was Lydia's decision, but she was only fifteen. Cherie cast a worried look over her shoulder but allowed Missy and Nefertiti to lead her to the back of the house. Nefertiti peeked her head around the corner, and then turned and slow blinked at Missy, snowflakes catching in her whiskers.

"We'll distract them," Missy whispered, and she nodded at the cat.

Lashing her tail, Nefertiti lowered to her haunches and slunk out of sight.

In the front of the house, Lydia shouted, "See! No one in Somer is stronger than me! You have to take me to the Queen!"

The Magickal officer laughed. "You're hired!"

Lydia whooped, and Cherie could picture her bouncing the truck on her shoulders—just as she'd done with Geoff's truck, Lucky, one unfortunate afternoon. Lucky still honked in fear whenever Lydia got too close.

"Can you put it down?" asked one of the soldiers.

"Sure! Uh ... Without *damaging* it?" Lydia asked, and Missy put her hand to her mouth. Cherie stifled a snort.

From the back came a howl, a bark, and a shout of, "Rufus smells Magick!"

At the same time, from the front came a crash, and Lydia's, "Sorry, sorry ..."

"Give me one minute," Missy whispered, and then she took off around the corner, waving her hand, "My kitty! My kitty!"

Cherie counted down sixty seconds. In the front, Lydia was saying, “I could put it down in that drift over there maybe ...”

Cherie peeked around the rear corner and saw Missy by a tree that was just around the other corner of the house. She was jumping up and down, a spot of bright color and warm skin in a cold bleak landscape. “Niffy! Oh, Niffy! She’s stuck.”

Nefertiti meowed mournfully, and a dog howled and whined just out of sight. There was a guard still at the back door, but his back was turned, his eyes riveted to Missy. Cherie gulped. Missy and Nefertiti were brave and geniuses, and Cherie had to make the most of the chance they’d given her. Ducking low, she dashed down the lawn, fumbling with the keys in her pocket. Her fingers clumsily drew out Cillian’s motorbike key. She scowled, put it back into the pocket, and fished out her own key ring. Not looking behind her, she slipped the key into the lock, turned, and entered the garage, shutting the door as gently as she could. The dog gave a long howl, and Cherie peered through the window in the door, expecting to see the dog lunging against its lead, tearing down the lawn, but it was completely hidden beyond the tree, Missy, her admirers, and a decorative shrub. Cherie turned around and breathed in the scent of garbage, Ember, and oil, and realized her mistake. She wasn’t going to open the overhead garage door without the soldiers hearing it. She’d have to run. There was a door wide enough for the garbage bins to the side of the overhead door, and Cherie headed for that, and then stopped, her eyes falling on Cillian’s motorbike. Her hand slipped into her pocket and wrapped around the key.

Even with the key, the motorbike didn’t want to move, of course. It was Cillian’s bike, and any bike of Cillian’s was bound to be stubborn, but she whispered to it, “We’re going to play a trick on the Queen’s Guard,” and then it rolled easily enough out the door.

A few minutes later, she glided silently on the motorbike down the alley, listening to Missy laughing with the soldiers, the dog’s happy bark,

and someone saying, “Rufus really likes your kitty.” From the front of the house, she heard Lydia shout, “I can lift it out of the drift!” and an answering shout of, “Don’t touch it!”

The alley was clear except for the snow that was falling faster and faster, but Cherie cut through a neighbor's hedge and across their lawn. The bike, undoubtedly inspired by the unconventional route, practically drove itself—and Cherie found herself speeding along much faster than she normally would have dared. As a child, the neighborhood had been her playground, and Cherie eschewed the roads, instead weaving through yards, dodging trees and fences. She only stopped for a moment at the back of the Darnays’ property and the edge of town. There she opened a gate to trees and a barely visible forest path shrouded in snow. For a moment she paused, and her hands shook. If the Fae prisoner was still held in Somer, she was likely to face dangers far worse than the Queen’s forces in the woods.

The bike rolled itself through the gate before she could stop it. With a deep breath, she closed the gate behind her and jumped back on. It was all uphill for the next few miles, but the bike was stubbornly plucky and kicked itself into a lower gear and barreled upward.

They hadn’t gone far when somewhere in the town below, a dog’s howl echoed, and angry shouting arose. Cherie gritted her teeth. A trained dog could track her for miles, even on a bike. She told herself the dog and its handler couldn’t keep up with her through the snow and over the rough terrain, and Cillian’s bike would know every trail through the hills for twenty miles at least. They would never catch her. She almost grinned, and then she glanced down at the Ember gauge.

Her smile dropped. “Empty ... Typical, Cillian, typical.” The bike puffed a cloud of spent Ember, probably in agreement.

CHAPTER 6



The house that Jack had built was shrinking. It already seemed no more than a large room, though it was impossible to say; snow fell too thickly to see the walls. Drifts were accumulating on the floor, and shards of mirrors crunched beneath his feet. From the shards came whispers:

“With the mirrors gone, that horrid ghost can no longer spy on us!”

“Grandmother, don’t say that! He was the one who summoned Dr. Anna when you got sick.”

“Good riddance to that Lydia girl. A girl has no business being that strong.”

“Boy, what are you talking about? She hauled your pickup out of a ditch ...”

They were the sorts of discussions Jack would have expected in other places. In Somer, they were shocking. In Somer, everyone got along and had gotten along for as long as Jack had visited the town. Had the peace and tranquility between Magickal and non-Magickal folk died with the powerful healing influence of Dr. Anna?

“They’re at Cherie’s house, now ... do you really want Cherie taken?” Ms. Starling asked, voice tremulous.

Jack jumped in the direction of that whisper and began digging through the blanket of snow.

“No ... yes ... I don’t know. She’s Magickal. You can’t trust them.” Was that Mr. Ottis? The voice was too faint. His fingers encountered a shard. Lifting it and wiping away the snow, he called out, “Cherie?” But only saw himself—not Somer—nor even the slightest hint of the town’s ambient Ember.

Clutching the shard, Jack bowed his head, closed his eyes, and *focused*. “*Vanish blinding snow, it is Cherie you must show.*” It was a piss-poor spell if ever he’d uttered one. Lifting his head in frustration, he growled, “Cherie!”

His own voice echoed back at him. He opened his eyes and saw only darkness. Still clutching the shard, he threw out his hands in frustration ... and found cold, wet, uneven stone on either side of him. He cursed. He knew exactly where he was. Cherie had better not be there.

“Jack?” Cherie whispered, somewhere behind him. “Are you there?”

“You’re in the Ember mine,” Jack grumbled, picturing the ancient timbers and the piles of rock from cave-ins.

“Close enough. I’m in the cave that connects with it.”

“Just a minute,” Jack muttered. Closing his eyes, he imagined the outdoors again. This was *his* dream. He could *control* it.

“Ah! I can see!” Cherie exclaimed.

Jack opened his eyes and was once more in a storm, but at least now he could see—and Cherie would be able to as well. The shard of glass he held was now perfectly round, echoing the shape of the compact mirror she no doubt carried. He found himself staring up at Cherie, her face faintly illuminated by the light of his side of the mirror. The faint ambient Ember of Somer he’d just been missing haloed her.

Cherie’s face was very close, and it reminded him of another time when he’d provided the only light. It had been near midnight, and she’d been

reclining on her living room sofa, her hair gloriously loose ... not pulled back as it was now. Her face had not been pinched by worry and fear, either.

Pressing her lips very close, she whispered, “I have to turn the mirror around.” For a moment, it was as though they were about to kiss, and then the angle changed, and he was staring into the cave. Cherie was jumping over boulders and crags in the floor, and the view bounced wildly.

He wanted to ask, “How did you get as far as the mine?” but didn’t want to distract her. The mine was miles from the town. It was a dangerous place—and the cave it intersected with was even more dangerous, which had seemed to draw all the Somer children like moths to a flame.

He shook his head in disbelief. She’d traveled those first hundred meters of the mine in complete darkness? Of course she had.

By her age, he’d enlisted to help fight against the vampires and had done things even more deadly. However, *before* that training, he’d never done anything near as dangerous as what she was doing now. He felt like he was staring across a vast divide in experience and culture. For the Somer kids, raised after televisions shut down and the internet collapsed, things like exploring ancient Ember mines and caves was *fun*.

He’d remarked to Dr. Anna about how dangerous it was, “Even if there are no more vampires in the world.” She’d frowned at him and then replied, “It’s better than the drug crisis that seemed to be everywhere when I was raising my children.”

He’d had to concede it seemed better than the ennui of the rich and the hopelessness of the poor that had fueled those addictions. Still, when he found himself staring at what seemed like a sheer rock face on her side of the mirror, he couldn’t help muttering, “I wish you’d gone with Cillian and Geoff.”

Cherie growled. “Done this lots of times.”

Jack wagered she hadn’t done it in a heavy winter coat.

Far off in the distance, he heard a dog’s howl echoing.

“Shutting you. Please don’t go.” The compact mirror snapped shut, and Jack was alone, outside in the storm. The wind howled, or was that just a memory of the dog's howl? He willed her to be safe.

“I’m back,” Cherie gasped after what seemed like too long, and he was staring down at a hole in the ground, dark and steaming between snow drifts. The dog might get through it, but only after the handlers pulled it up the rockface.

Cherie panted. “There is a bus ... travels down the mine ... road.”

He’d been there the first time they’d found their way out of the cave and remembered the jubilant shouts of Cherie, Missy, Cillian, Geoff, Lydia, and other tweens when they’d discovered they were close to the bus route. “We don’t even have to walk back.” He remembered at the time, he’d been shaken, worried that he was going to have to report the children being lost in a cave to their parents, but the whole day had been a delightful adventure to them, even though they’d had no real caving gear, they’d gotten lost, and they’d wound up summoning him in Missy’s compact for light because Darryl Smith’s Ember flashlight had gone out.

“Should I cover the hole first?” Cherie asked.

He heard the echoes of a dog bark and a shout.

“Run and catch that bus, Cherie.”

The world spun, and Cherie ran, plunging through the snow. Behind her, the dog howled louder. Jack swallowed. She was never going to make it.



Cherie heard the dogs barking and getting closer. Glancing back into the swirling snow, Cherie fought the urge to run. She was sweaty beneath her grandmother’s coat, out of breath, and her heart was racing with equal parts hope and fear. She was at the bus stop, demarcated by a sign nailed to an oak tree next to the one lane gravel road. She could see the lights of the bus

—really just a pickup truck like Lucky with the back extended and covered over—bouncing as it slowed to pick her up. Above the passenger compartment, goods were stacked precariously under a lumpy tarp.

She swore she could just see the shadows of dogs and handlers approaching when the vehicle skidded to a halt just past her. Heart in her throat, Cherie raced to the rear, opened the back door, and hauled herself inside. She was assaulted by the scents of wet clothes and sheep. The bus was already rolling before she'd shut the door, and the sheep, actually a lamb, bayed plaintively. Past the passengers seated on benches on either side—eight members of a family she recognized vaguely from the edge of Henry County, and two women she'd never seen before—there was a narrow sliding window between the back and the cab. The window slid open, revealing the man in the cab's passenger seat. She could just make out the shotgun he held between his knees and saw the ambient Ember around it. It was a Magickal weapon and could pierce troll hide. "Payin' in Ember or dollars?" he asked.

Reaching into her pocket, her fingers wrapped around a bag of Ember. Grasping an overhead handhold, she went forward and held the packet to him. He held a glass sphere the size of a marble up to test it. When the sphere glowed, he said, "You're good," and snapped it from her hand.

Cherie squeezed herself onto a seat. Her head jerked at the sound of a baying hound. A boy, maybe fourteen or so, whistled. "Who would go hunting in this weather? Snow's too heavy to shoot past your nose."

One of the older women snorted. "I hear they're hunting Magickals in Somer."

"Good riddance," muttered another.

Cherie's jaw dropped, and then she drew deeper into her battered coat, eyes darting to the side. But no one was looking at her. Non-Magickals couldn't see the ambient glow of Ember as well, and there were no Ember lights to flicker and give her away in the passenger compartment. The lamb

bleated, and the Good Riddance woman said to the boy holding it, “That’s a fine ewe there. You takin’ her to the market?”

“No ma’am, we’re taking her home. Got her from our cousins in Fayette. These ewes make milk that’s next to Magick.”

The conversation became cheerful and normal, and Cherie found herself smiling. There was a vent piping heat from the cab to the back. She was warm, despite the sweat under her coat and the dampness of her trousers. She leaned back in her seat. She’d outrun the Queen’s soldiers with a motorbike, a trip through an Ember mine, and a country bus, all with no sleep. Jack had doubted her. She smiled to herself, and her eyes drifted shut for just an instant.

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CHAPTER 7



Cherie woke up with the side of her face pressed on the bench of the bus. The only light was indirect, from the headlights, but she was warm enough. She was alone, and the other passengers were gone.

The engine was on; she could feel Magick thrumming through the vehicle, and yet something wasn't right, something had woken her. She blinked, licked her lips, and lifted her head, wishing she had some water to clear the cotton from her mouth. The bus had stopped. Thickly falling snow was coating the windows, except for the front windshield, where the wipers swished back and forth. She listened but heard nothing from the driver and his companion. The bus had probably gotten stuck, they were probably shoveling it out. She put her head back down ... and cold so sharp it hurt pierced the skin just below her throat. Clawing at the pain, her fingers became tangled with her grandmother's charm, and the icy burn transferred to her fingertips. Hissing in shock, she pulled the charm away from her skin, but felt its chill even through her scarf. She gulped. The faintest shimmer of Magick touched the air around the charm of Amadioha, the Igbo deity of thunder and lightning, protector against undetected criminals. Cherie slowly slid her eyes to the bus's cab, and then to the world beyond. They were parked on a narrow forest road, and the driver and his

companion were outside, standing in the headlights' glow. There were no shovels in sight, but the driver's companion had his shotgun resting against his shoulder. The driver was leaning toward him, and from his gestures alone, Cherie knew he was trying to convince him of something.

The charm's chill pierced through the scarf like a knife, and Cherie shivered ... were they the unknown criminals? What should she do? Creep out into the night? She had no idea where she was; she'd probably freeze to death.

There was something in the driver's sharp smile as he jerked his arm back in her direction that frightened her as much as the charm's Magickal chill. Her heart beat faster, and her pulse beat in her neck. She had a sudden impulse to steal the bus ... Her face crumpled. If she stole the bus, the driver and the other man might die ...

Her eyes slid into the bus's cab. The rearview mirror was dark. Jack wasn't nearby. He was probably looking for her, but if she called him, the driver might hear. The keys were still in the ignition, but she couldn't reach them from where she sat, and the tiny window was too narrow to crawl through.

She felt oddly ... relieved. She didn't have to think about driving away and leaving them, since that was obviously impossible. She bit her lip. And maybe the charm wasn't warning her about *them*, maybe there was some other danger. She shouldn't steal based on intuition. Most people were good; that was a fact.

Still, she wished Jack was in the mirror, she wished she could ask him for advice, but she had to solve this on her own. Twisting the charm's chain, she formulated a plan. She went to the door at the tail of the bus, opened it gently, braced herself against the cold's onslaught, and then stepped quietly onto the snowy road. Despite the assurances she'd given herself, she was still afraid—of the cold night, of the icy charm, and the drivers. Without shutting the door for fear of alerting them, she crouched down so she

wouldn't be seen and rounded to the passenger's side of the bus. The snow was the sort that was made of thick, fat flakes, and it was coming down hard, muffling the night. As she got closer to the front of the vehicle, she heard the driver's words. "But the mines are paying good money!"

She blinked. That didn't sound sinister. Although she didn't know of any mines in the vicinity ... all the coal, gas, and Ember had been stripped from Pennsylvania long ago. Maybe they meant some place out west? Granted, that was far from where she needed to go, but not sinister in and of —

"She's too cute to sell to them mines."

Her hands started to shake. She squeezed her eyes shut. She must have heard wrong.

"You can have some fun with her, and then we can sell her to the mines, Jake ... long as you don't break her arms or nuthin'."

For what felt like an eternity, Cherie crouched motionless, a deer frozen in the light of headlamps, not believing what she'd heard. But as they continued, arguing over how much Ember she'd buy, there was no doubt. Still, she hesitated.

She pressed her head into her hands. What would Nnenna say? "You're allowed to fight if someone is going to physically hurt you, Cherie."

But how did she fight? She wasn't particularly strong even for a woman, nor skilled, and there were two of them.

Nnenna's voice came to her mind so sharp and clear, her ghost could have been whispering in her ear. "Your mind is your most powerful ally. When you are afraid, be calm and *think*."

Her eyes slid to the keys inside the bus across the seat on the driver's side.

One of the men said sharply, "So you're suggesting we tie her up then?"

Cherie forced herself not to listen. Backing up, she reached the door handle. She'd slide across the seat and drive off. They deserved to die of

cold. Her steps were snow-quiet, and she reached the handle without drawing their attention, and then she lifted the latch. There was the tiniest of clicks, and yet it sounded like a thunderclap in the hush.

The driver turned around, saw her, and pulled something from his waistband.

Turning back before she could see what it was, Cherie lifted the handle more forcefully ... nothing happened. Fast, heavy footsteps charged toward her, and she spun, prepared to flee. Pain screamed up Cherie's arm and shoulder, and she was flung against the bus with teeth-rattling force, breath rushing out of her, knees going weak from the shock of it.

"Where do you think you're going?" the driver asked. There was the click of a safety, and something metal and cold was pressed against her temple. It was not so cold as the charm Nnenne had given to her, and the cold of its Magickal warning of *danger* biting at her throat.

He shook her, rattling her teeth again, wrenching her arm higher.

Think, think, think ... Cherie told herself. But she couldn't formulate anything in the haze of pain. Nor could she concentrate and use her Magick to make the pain stop.

"Did you hear somethin'?" the driver's companion asked.

The driver's hold slackened, and with it, the veil of Cherie's agony and fear.

"You're imagining things," the driver replied.

The charm's Magickal cold became like a lance, shooting through Cherie's layers of clothing. She knew with sudden, crystal-clear clarity, there was something more dangerous than the driver and his friend out there. Something more dangerous than the Queen and her guard chasing her. Something more dangerous than the cold and thickly falling snow. Cherie forgot to be afraid of the man holding a pistol to her temple, even forgot her pain. "Have to get away," she whispered, trying to warn the man who had trapped her, who was *hurting* her. She could bargain with the two

of them later, convince them she was Magickal and could help them ... or something ... to keep them from harming her, but they had to get away, *now*.

Mistaking her meaning, the driver wrenched her arm, making her cry out. Yanking her away from the bus, he hissed, "You're not going anywhere."

Back to them, standing in the headlight beams, the other man said, "I'm sure I heard somethin'."

There was a murmur in the night, like that of a gentle breeze, a sort of sigh, and then a thud. The charm on Cherie's neck made her chest feel as though it had turned to ice, and she screamed.

The driver shook her. "Be still now, girl! Bobby, get over here."

Cherie whimpered, but not with pain. The driver pushed her toward the front of the bus, using her body as a shield. "Bobby? Bobby, what the hell are you foolin'?"

Cherie bit her lip, the cold spreading from her charm to her limbs. They rounded the front of the vehicle, and in the headlights' glow she saw what looked like a bundle of rags with a man's lower torso and legs protruding from beneath it. A shadowy stain was slowly spreading across the snow like spilled ink.

It was the driver's turn to whimper. "What?"

And suddenly the heap of rags had eyes that were human but shone in the night and a bloodstained maw for a mouth. The pistol left Cherie's temple. Shots rang out, leaving her right ear ringing.

The driver flung Cherie aside and she found herself staring down at "Bobby" without the bundle of rags covering him. His shotgun was bent and useless. His eyes were wide open, and his throat was a deep red-brown gash in the headlights. The stain in the snow bloomed around him, crimson where the lights touched it.

Cherie's heart stopped. For a moment, time seemed to halt, too. Only the snow moved, fluttering and sparkling through the headlight beams.

The whole horrible day flashed through Cherie's mind. When it had begun, it had almost been ... normal. She swallowed.

They'd warned her she'd face monsters.

All the books on folklore and myths her grandmother had made her read came to her mind, and all the deadly ilk of the Old Magicks: adze, kelpie, phagi, red hats, and more. But adze, kelpie, and phagi consumed the whole of their victims. Red hats cut off their heads. The gash to the neck, the blood, the glowing human eyes, the speed ... and the maw. That had just been a mouth smeared with blood, hadn't it?

A single word bubbled up from her heart to her lips. "*Vampire.*"

More shots rang out, and Cherie ducked to the ground, crawling around to the front of the vehicle, trying not to think of the corpse. There was a muffled cry, another thud, and a noise that sounded suspiciously like lips smacking. The charm on her neck was still radiating cold. She felt it all the way to the end of her toes, brighter and sharper than the cold of the snow between her fingers and under her knees.

She thought of her grandmother and the picture of Andrew. Maybe not all vampires were evil, but obviously this was one of the other kind. She reached the driver's side and scrambled to the door. Could a bus outrun a vampire? She remembered its speed when the driver had shot at it while it hovered over Bobby. A bus could probably not outrun the beast—she heard another slurp—however, it was occupied.

Ducking low, she reached the edge of the driver's door, exhaled in relief, blinked, and found herself staring at boots and rags. The cold of the charm became so sharp she was immobilized. She couldn't even speak ... And yet as she was frozen in fear, her mind raced. First with curses she couldn't move her lips to utter, but then with Nnenne's words, "Your mind

is your most powerful weapon,” and “Read your folklore. Someday it might save your life.”

She had no stories to save her from vampires in this situation. She might offer her blood and lie with it until dawn, and let it die in sunlight; however, that wouldn't necessarily kill it and would definitely kill her. Another story of a Native American woman facing off against a different undead monster came to her. The woman hadn't fought the monster; she'd called it “grandfather,” invited it to her family campfire, and tamed it.

It seemed a slender hope, but Nnenne's voice came back to her. “It isn't over until it is over.”

Cherie forced her eyes up ... and found the creature staring down at her. One side of the vampire's face was hidden by white hair that spilled down her shoulders in a spider nest of tangles. It was a her. Or had been. The narrowness of her face, the sharp angle of her chin, and the slightness of her frame all attested to it, though the boots she wore, spotted with blood, looked like she'd stolen them from a man. Cherie tried not to think about that. Gathering all her Magick to ward off the pain in case she should fail, Cherie whispered, “Grandmother ...” She licked her lips, dry with cold, searching for words. “You look cold.” It was the truth, what with the shabbiness of the rags the vampire wore. In some places, there was no fabric at all, revealing skin so pale it might be bone.

The vampire tilted her head, and the frigid bite of Cherie's charm became merely chill. Cherie fell back to her haunches, gasping for air, the sudden release from the charm's grip making her lungs expand.

“Granddaughter ...” the beast said, voice raspy, as though her throat was dry. “Death is better than where I come from.” The vampire turned her head to the body of Bobby. “They may come here.”

Cherie had no idea what she was talking about—the grave or Hell—but she put her hand on the bus still humming with Magick. “We have an escape vehicle.”

The beast merely stared at her.

“It’s warm,” Cherie added.

Pivoting on her heel, the vampire regarded the driver’s side door And then there was a crack like thunder, and the vampire wasn’t there.

Giving a soft prayer, Cherie rose slowly to her feet. She was free, free only to run, but she didn’t have the driver and his companion, or the vampire to contend with, and she felt light and hopeful.

The engine of the bus revved, jerking Cherie’s attention to the cab. Her stomach fell. Glowing eyes gazed out at her from the driver’s seat. She hadn’t seen or heard the vampire move or enter the vehicle, just the confusing thunder. She stifled a curse, remembering something Nnenne had told her. “Vampires move fast. Not through strength in their bones and muscles, but by their Magick. They move through the realm between the living and the dead, a place not quite out of time. In our realm, it equates to speed ... faster than sound, maybe as fast as light.”

Biting her lip, Cherie touched the charm. It was still cold and didn’t warm between her fingers.

The vampire bent to the side and the passenger’s door opened. “Get in ... *Granddaughter*.”

Cherie looked out into the night. Through the veil of snow and trees, she couldn’t see any sign of a farmhouse or of a highway. The charm’s chill remained, but it didn’t burn her fingers.

The vampire’s voice came from the cab, dry and hoarse. “If we don’t hurry, the snow will cover the tracks to the main road.”

Cherie had no idea what the “main road” even was.

“I’m full. I won’t kill you,” the vampire added. Cherie stifled a gasp of alarm, and yet something else kicked in, memories of Nnenne of all things, being cranky. In the same tone Cherie used when Nnenne grumbled about not helping Mr. Ottis with a toothache because he was “an idiot,” Cherie said, “What a silly thing to say, Grandmother. Of course you wouldn’t do

such a thing.” Resolutely trudging to the passenger’s side, Cherie only hesitated a moment before getting in.

The charm was chill, but not painful as she settled in, trying to observe the vampire without looking like she was trying to observe her.

The lines in the vampire’s face were very deep. She must be a new vampire. Perhaps she’d died alone of old age, without being staked? The vampire switched off the headlights, and Cherie shivered in the darkness.

“Do not be afraid,” the vampire said. “I don’t need them, and I think it would be better if we are harder to see.”

“Who’s a-fraid, g-g-grandmother?” Cherie said, flushing at her stammer.

Scowling down at the controls, the vampire muttered obscurely, “Manual ... well ...” She grabbed the gear shaft and expertly put them into reverse. The bus didn’t resist, which wasn’t terribly surprising. Cherie had a feeling that the driver hadn’t taken very good care of it. There was no reason for it not to take the path of least resistance.

The vampire backed them up for what felt like a few hundred yards along the road. If it *was* a road, it was only one lane wide. Glancing up at the rearview mirror, the vampire muttered, “The rearview mirror is fogging.”

It was fog, not Jack. Cherie told herself it was a good thing. How would she explain him to her or her to Jack? He was a vampire hunter or had been; she could imagine him berating her foolishness for taking up with the creature.

The vampire reversed suddenly to the side, making branches snap against the back of the bus and Cherie duck instinctively. The bus halted, Cherie fell against her seat belt, and then it jerked forward, and she crashed back into her seat. They traveled a few more meters, and then there was an open space spreading on either side of them. It took a moment for Cherie to

realize it was a proper road, at least two lanes wide, though there were no headlights or taillights in sight.

“Which way?” the vampire asked.

“North!” Cherie declared. And then swallowed, realizing that she had no idea which way that was. The vampire closed her eyes, and then flipped on the right-hand turn signal and guided the bus slowly onto the road in the deepening snow. On the road, she shook her head and muttered, “I’m trying not to be seen, and I turned on the turn signal like an idiot.”

Cherie tried to smile, but her lips only twitched. “I’m very grateful you’re a safe driver.” She looked outside, as though everything was perfectly normal. As though she weren’t escaping the Queen’s forces. As though she wasn’t trapped in a vehicle with a vampire. “Especially in the snow,” she added. The snow was still falling thickly, and the vampire was driving very responsibly, slowly, with frequent readjustments of the wheel.

The vampire brought the bus to a halt. She turned to Cherie and said, “If they catch us, I will kill you before I let them take you.”

Cherie touched her charm. It was still chill. She didn’t want to appear to be afraid. “What a thing to say, G-G-Grandmother! Would you like me to k-k-kill you if they caught us?”

Cherie’s free hand was suddenly wrapped in a hand cold as ice and strong as a vice. “Could you? Would you?” she whispered.

Cherie wasn’t sure where the vampire was afraid of going and wasn’t sure she wanted to ask. “Let’s try not to be caught,” she suggested.

The vampire released a breath, released Cherie’s hand, and set the bus in motion, northward into the storm.



“Why is the rearview mirror gray?” The old woman’s question startled Cherie from a doze. She blinked. The words hadn’t been spoken by an old

woman; they'd been spoken by a *vampire*. She'd fallen asleep in the presence of a vampire. Oh, Gods, Jack was right, she wasn't cut out to be out on her own.

The vampire lifted her hand to the mirror, and Cherie's eyes went wide at sight of the creature's fingernails. They were too thick and too long, almost like a cat's or a dog's, and they were very sharp. Cherie found herself leaning against the door, trying to press herself as far away as she could.

Not looking at her, the vampire scowled, and her pale fingers with their wicked claws tapped the rearview mirror. "That isn't right."

She stopped the bus in the empty road, and Cherie's heart stopped. The vampire turned her head, putting her face a few inches closer to Cherie's ... but all she did was look out the back window.

Cherie followed her gaze. All she saw was snow falling upon the back windshield. The vampire abruptly put the bus in park. The gasp that Cherie had been holding came out in a rush.

The vampire's eyes met hers, eerily light in her pale face. For a moment, the creature stared at her. "I am not hungry. Only curious. Why are the mirrors glowing?" She pointed up to the rearview mirror, and for the first time, Cherie realized she *could* see, and that the only reason she *could* was the "glow," a *familiar* glow. "Jack!" she called.

From the mirror came a distant, "Cherie?"

"I'm here! I'm here!" she said, grasping the mirror and turning it toward herself.

A moment later, an ungainly shadow emerged in the gray. It grew darker and larger, and then she saw Jack plowing through a snowdrift. He reached out and touched the glass on his side, and on her side the mirror became warm.

"I thought I would never find you." His eyes were soft. She thought for a moment he might kiss the mirror between them.

“It’s a telephone?” the vampire murmured. “That doesn’t seem safe.”

Jack cocked his head. “Did someone say something?”

Cherie gulped. “I caught the bus.”

The vampire tsked. “Having a video call in the rearview mirror is more dangerous than texting.”

“Who is with you?” Jack asked, his voice dropping to a whisper. “Is it safe for them to see you talking to a ghost?”

“A ghost?” said the vampire, eyebrows rising, leaning closer to the mirror.

Could Jack tell that she was a vampire just by looking at her? Maybe not, but the vampire’s tattered clothes and ragged hair would immediately let him know something was amiss. Cherie tilted the mirror in her direction. “A new friend.”

“A new *friend*?” Jack asked, eyes narrowing.

“I don’t think *she* minds me talking to a ghost.” Cherie put the emphasis on “she.”

Jack’s shoulders might have relaxed a fraction at that declaration. The vampire made a noise like, “Pffft,” and put the bus into gear.

“Why aren’t you on the bus now?” Jack asked, eyes sliding in the vampire’s direction.

Technically, Cherie was on the bus, but passengers didn’t usually ride in the cab.

Cherie swallowed. Jack wouldn’t like the truth. Her eyes slid to the vampire. The monster was leaning forward slightly, intently studying the road, hands making deft corrections to the wheel, the caricature of a careful driver, despite the claws.

“Cherie ...” Jack said. “Has something happened?”

“I am safe.” Cherie said, and the monster tilted her head, as though she were considering that statement. Cherie decided to stay close to the truth. “I had some trouble with the bus drivers—”

The wind outside *screeched* like a living thing, and the bus wavered in its gust. Eyes widening, looking up fearfully, the vampire put her foot on the brake, and the bus slid to a halt.

“What kind of trouble?” Jack demanded, and the wind moaned.

“Creepy,” muttered the vampire, edging the bus slowly forward.

“Creepy trouble,” Cherie said. The wind outside shrieked. “But my friend, *she* intervened.” And brutally murdered them. “And offered me a ride.”

The wind subsided. Jack’s chest heaved. Cherie noted his hands were in fists at his sides. “Does your friend have a name?” he asked.

“She’s—” The bus hit a bump, and then another. Cherie bounced in her seat, teeth rattling.

The vampire winced, licked her lip, and said, “Ow.”

“Cherie?” Jack asked.

“Unexpected turbulence,” the vampire said enigmatically, at the same time Cherie said, “Bump in the road.”

“Your friend is very old,” said Jack.

Wondering how he deduced that, Cherie merely nodded. She cast a furtive glance at the vampire. She was leaning closer to the steering wheel and squinting into the night. “I can’t see the potholes with all the snow.”

They hit another jaw-rattling bump. Wincing, the vampire muttered, “Stupid fangs.”

Cherie looked back at the mirror. Jack didn’t seem to have heard; if he had, he’d be shouting at her to get away.

“What is her name?” Jack asked again.

“I ... I ... didn’t ask,” Cherie said.

Jack’s jaw sagged.

“You should call me Grendel,” said the vampire.

“Grendel?” asked Jack, and there was no mistaking the suspicion in his voice.

Cherie bit her lip. Grendel was the name of a monster who'd crept into a king's hall and ripped out the throats of men.

In a voice like acid, the vampire said, "You're not familiar with the epic saga of *Beowulf*?" She sighed theatrically. "The state of education these days. Tsk."

"We know the story of *Beowulf*," Cherie said, her voice conveying a bit of the insult she felt. Every school child knew the story. It was regarded as potentially being a historical record of Second Wave Magick that scholars believed had swept the world around 100 BCE. *Beowulf* was the titular hero who had slayed Grendel. "I think I will keep calling you 'Grandmother.'"

Grendel glanced at Cherie, her shoulders fell, and she looked out again at the road. Against Cherie's chest, the charm went from cool to warm. In the mirror, Jack was leaning close, as though trying to peer to the driver's side.

"I'm glad you found me," Cherie whispered, and his eyes snapped to her. At that moment, she realized she was tracing his outline with a finger. Jack touched the glass where her finger rested, and her heart felt heavy and full at the same time. The bus bumped over a few more potholes before she realized there was more she needed to know. "What about everyone else?"

Jack frowned. "Lydia was taken."

Cherie nodded. "I ... know ... she wasn't taken so much as she volunteered. She was at my house when I left. She lifted their truck to show off. I think she dropped it in a snowbank; it might have helped in my escape."

Jack grimaced. "She did that trick again?"

Cherie tried to smile. "It always was Lydia's dream to escape Somer. Now she has."

Jack sighed. "I wouldn't call it an escape." He gave her a grim smile. "Everyone else has gotten away. Ghengis even managed to free the Fae they captured."

“That’s good news,” Cherie said, a real smile coming to her lips, but Jack wasn’t smiling. “What aren’t you telling me?”

Looking away, he rubbed his temples. “I can’t find them.”

“Them?” Cherie asked.

Jack shook his head. “I heard the soldiers complaining that they haven’t been captured, but I can’t find Ruth, Golly, or Tommy, or Cillian or Geoff.” He met her eyes again. “It doesn’t mean they have died or even that they’re lost. It’s just that I can’t find them.” He squinted into the nothing. “They left Somer, and I get lost in the snow when I try to follow them.” His eyes became distant. “All the mirrors in Somer are broken, and I can’t find my way back there anymore.”

Cherie nodded, guessing what had happened. “Cillian has gone and ...” Her fingers twisted together on her lap. “Nnenne’s ... gone ... without their Magick.”

In a voice that was very hesitant and not like himself at all, Jack murmured, “Cherie ... I don’t know ...”

“Lights ahead,” said Grendel, drawing the bus to the side of the road. “Not headlights.”

Cherie peered into the dark. Ahead a dome of light crowned distant trees.

“If it is a town, the Queen’s agents may already be there,” Jack said. “They are at least as far as Punxsutawney, maybe even the I80 by now.”

Cherie’s brow furrowed. “We can keep to the old Ember routes.”

“That would be best,” Jack agreed. “Where are you?”

Cherie winced. “I’m not sure. The bus got ... turned around.”

Jack’s eyes widened a fraction, and then he asked, “Your friend Grendel doesn’t know?”

“I am completely lost,” Grendel murmured in a way that sounded fearful and human.

Jack's brow furrowed, and Cherie could practically see the worry and suspicions running through his mind.

Grendel added hastily, "We were both taken off guard by the drivers." The vampire looked over at Cherie, as though looking for approval for the verbal evasion. Cherie wanted to smile, to encourage her, but then she remembered the corpse in the snow.

Jack said in a very matter-of-fact way, "The first thing you must do is find out where you are."

Cherie nodded. Cocking her head, Grendel said, "Granddaughter, I can go very quickly to the town, up there." She gave Cherie an odd look. "There will be signs, won't there?" Shifting her hands on the wheel, she cleared her throat. "The literal kind?"

Cherie blinked. "Yes?"

Grendel's lips pursed.

"Yes," Cherie said with more surety.

Grendel unhooked her seatbelt in a flurry of rags. The scent of tilled earth and leaf piles wafted through the cab. Cherie supposed she wouldn't have been able to sleep if the creature had smelled like blood and gore.

Grendel whispered, "May I talk to you outside the truck?" Her eyes went to the back. "Err ... bus?"

"Sure," said Cherie, unhooking her own belt. Before Jack could protest, she whispered, "I'll be right back." He frowned, but if he had something to say, he didn't before she slipped out into the cold. The snow was up past her ankles.

Grendel stood in front of the vehicle. As soon as Cherie's door shut, the vampire said, "Am I right to assume you are facing worse dangers than the men who drove this thing?"

Rubbing her hands together, Cherie nodded, trying to read the vampire's expression, but only her faintly glowing eyes were visible.

“Who is the Queen? Is she some sort of gang leader?” the vampire asked.

Cherie huffed in shock, and a cloud of breath dissipated in the air between them. “The Queen is the Queen.”

Rolling on her feet, the vampire wrapped her arms around herself. “She ... or her agents will hurt you if they find you?”

“You don’t know the Queen or her agents?” Cherie whispered.

The vampire drew back. “I get the feeling I should.”

For a moment, Cherie could only stare. “Yes.”

“They will hurt you,” Grendel said.

“Not at first,” Cherie admitted. “But they will force me to join them in their war.”

“And me?” she asked.

Cherie couldn’t answer.

“They’d kill me,” Grendel suggested.

Cherie nodded.

“They *can* kill me?” the vampire asked.

Cherie remembered Grendel’s speed against the men in the forest, but she also remembered things Jack had told her about Magickals who were masters of fire and could set vampires alight on sight, or those who were masters of ice and could freeze them solid. Also, the armor Jack wore was designed to counteract vampiric speed. Jack had explained that “on contact, it draws the wearer into the vampire’s realm, time, or some call it ‘phase.’ A vampire’s punch would only be a normal punch, not a punch at the speed of sound.” She hadn’t seen the Queen’s agents wearing that armor—it was expensive, and all the vampires north of the Rio Grande were supposedly dead. But ... She looked up at the falling snow. A non-Magickal with a crossbow had been enough to kill the vampire that attempted to kill Nnenne. “Yes,” she whispered. “They’ll have silver bullets which will hurt, stakes that will ...”

“Turn me into a stuck bug. Yech.” Grendel smirked. “Your boyfriend in the mirror would try to kill me.”

Cherie flushed. “He’s not my boyfriend.”

“Pfft,” the vampire replied, waving a claw. She cocked her head. “But you have not even *tried* to kill me.”

“I can’t kill you,” Cherie said.

The vampire blinked, and then she inclined her head in a way that was decidedly serpentine. And yet ... Cherie gulped down her fear. “And now that I know you, Grandmother, I wouldn’t want to. You seem ...” She remembered the strange comment about turbulence. “... funny ... and ... and nice.”

There was a flash of white that Cherie realized with a shiver was a glimpse of fang.

Grendel pointed a claw at Cherie. “I am funny, but I am not nice.”

Even though her heart was pounding, Cherie raised her chin and gave a defiant, “Pfft,” mimicking Grendel’s own nonchalance.

Grendel rolled back on her feet. “Your boyfriend’s suspicions are not ... a mark of poor judgment.” She sighed, and her breath formed a cloud. “It might be better if you take the car, bus, truck-thing and go.” She leaned ever-so-slightly closer. “Your blood ... it sings.”

Cherie had the urge to lean away, but she didn’t. Despite Grendel’s words, her charm was still warm. “I will be here when you get back, and we can decide what to do.”

Grendel stared at her with eyes that really should have blinked a few times. Cherie’s own eyelids surrendered to the cold. She blinked, and Grendel was gone.



Ambient Ember swirled in the mirror, like it did in Somer, before Cherie left, but he couldn't see her.

"Cherie," he murmured, not expecting her to reply, but she did.

"I'm here." A door slammed, and her gaze met his. Her coat was filthy. Her hair was askew.

He swallowed. "Grendel has gone off to discover what is ahead?"

She nodded, gaze distant.

"You trust her?" Jack asked. Jack didn't. No one whose intentions were noble gave themselves the name of a monster.

Cherie's focus returned to Jack. He didn't like how she didn't respond immediately.

Her fingers played with Dr. Anna's charm, in the same thoughtful way Dr. Anna had once touched it, and he felt a pang for his old friend.

"I barely know Grendel." Cherie smiled at him wryly. "I have a feeling you want to point that out."

He shrugged. Of course he would have. She knew him well.

Studying a point in the distance, Cherie said, "I trust her in the immediate crisis. You can trust some people in some ways, and not in others, right?"

So, she didn't trust Grendel particularly much. Good. "She's Magickal?" Jack asked.

"Oh, yes." Cherie shivered, and both of Jack's arms rose, as though he could fold her into them ... He wanted to hold her and hold onto his connection to her world.

Cherie started to speak. "I can see why—"

There was another slam of a door, and Jack heard Grendel's voice. "It's a ... well ... I guess a service station, not a town. There is a single man inside the service station. I couldn't go in, but it had a shop with maps."

Cherie's eyes met Jack's, and then she looked back at her mysterious companion. "Yes, of course, your clothes would cause suspicion."

Jack bit back his questions at that comment. He was glad that Cherie was suspicious, but their suspicions being known might put Cherie in danger.

“I suppose you’re right,” Grendel said. “Should we go there?” There was the faint hum of an engine, and a barely perceptible increase in the ambient Ember in the air. Cherie leaned over, peered at the dash, and groaned. “I’m afraid we have to get more Ember.”

“Ember?” whispered Grendel, as though she had no idea what it was. Jack blinked.

“I have money ... and even some Ember, but not enough to run a bus for very long,” Cherie replied. Behind her was the suggestion of motion, a blurring beyond the vehicle’s windows, but it was too dark for Jack to see clearly. The only illumination seemed to be the mirror he was peering through.

“And we can get it at the service station,” Grendel murmured, as though she didn’t quite believe it.

“You should turn on the headlights,” Cherie said. “We don’t want to scare them.”

Turn on the headlights? How was the other woman driving if they weren’t on? The hairs on the back of Jack’s neck began to rise. For long minutes, the bus continued to bump along. Much longer than the time it had taken Grendel to visit the place.

“How far is it?” Jack asked casually.

“About a mile and a half,” Grendel replied.

“You move very quickly,” he suggested.

“Yes,” Grendel replied.

“She’s very fast,” Cherie said. “That’s how we got away from the bus drivers.”

The mention of turbulence—a reference only someone familiar with air travel would make, video calls and texting, and Grendel’s apparent speed

sent every alarm bell in Jack ringing. Grendel was as old as he was. Magickals did live longer than ordinary humans, but how did she not know that such things no longer existed? Something was very, very wrong with Cherie's companion.

Once, Jack would have confronted Grendel immediately. But once Jack had a body of flesh and blood. Once he could freeze his enemies with a thought ...

"Learning restraint at last." The words were Mizuki's, and they came from directly over his shoulder. He spun to look, but she was already gone. He turned back to the mirror ... and that was gone, too.

The wind howled around him, in a blizzard of his own making.

Damn.

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CHAPTER 8



“H e’s gone,” Cherie whispered.
“Bad reception?” Grendel suggested.
Cherie stared at her. Did vampires have a vampire language?

“What?” asked Grendel, pulling them into the service station. It was just like Joe’s station in Somer: heavy vaults that held pressurized Ember, with hoses to pump into the Ember box in the engine core, a garage, and a shop for travelers to get supplies.

“You’re just funny,” Cherie whispered, because funny was better than saying “strange.”

“You’re not laughing,” Grendel replied. “Why does this place sell Ember and not gas, and what is Ember, and why do you keep talking about it? Why are the pumps so big and scary?”

Cherie’s eyebrows lifted at the irony of a vampire calling anything scary ... and then her lips parted as a whole bunch of threads began to knit together in her mind, but there still were quite a few knots. Grendel talked like a very old vampire, but with her wrinkles and white hair, she looked newly turned. Cherie remembered something of the vampire lore Nnenne had told her. “Vampires sleep like the dead, Cherie; sometimes that sleep lasts decades. They will wake up disoriented and lost. I once knew ...”

“And they wake up hungry, right?” Cherie had pressed at the time, hungry herself for thrilling tales of days and monsters of yore. Oh, sure, there was a dragon off I76, orcs under bridges on the trip to Maine, and Fae outside the town limits, but vampires had been *everywhere*, and were so human, which made them so much scarier.

“Cherie?” the vampire asked. “What do I do?” Her hands shifted nervously on the steering wheel, and she didn’t look particularly scary, but definitely human. “Where is the gas tank?”

“Were you asleep for a long time, Grandmother?” Cherie asked.

Grendel’s fangs glinted in the light, and Cherie drew back before she realized Grendel was just gaping at her. Hadn’t Nnenne told Cherie that they learned to hide their fangs after a while, to retract them so they were less noticeable? Grendel hadn’t learned that yet.

“I ...” Grendel stammered and turned away. “I was very tired. I found a cave ... and the trees outside were saplings, and then they weren’t.”

Cherie nodded, surprised she’d guessed right, and feeling oddly knowledgeable with this creature that was far older than she was. The lights of the service station flickered overhead. They didn’t have time now for this discussion, but she assured Grendel, “We can talk more about it on the road. Right now, we need to get fueled up and get away as fast as we can.”

Grendel nodded, eyes wide.

Unlatching her seatbelt, Cherie said, “Pull up to the first pump there. It doesn’t matter which side. I’ll go in and pay and then fill the engine.”

With that, Cherie hopped out of the vehicle and headed into the shop.



Clink, clink.

Years of experience had taught Jack to recognize the sound of a tap against glass. It cut through the blizzard of his thoughts like sunlight.

“Hello,” he called out, hoping to hear Cherie, but knowing he’d be grateful even to find it was just Ghengis tapping a nail on a shard of mirror.

The answer came from Grendel. “Hello?”

His skin crawled, still he said, “Keep talking, so I can find you.”

“Find me?” Grendel asked. “Is there some sort of analog dial? Can I help on my end?” She continued to ask a series of questions about FM and AM bands, each filling Jack with a deeper certainty that she was as old, if not older, than him. That was not necessarily dangerous—Dr. Anna had been older than him, and although decidedly powerful, she was not a threat.

Closing his eyes, he seized upon the sound of the woman’s voice, and his desire to see Cherie, to assure himself that she was safe. He reached with his hands, found the cool surface of glass, and pulled himself closer.

“Ah, there you are,” said Grendel. He opened his eyes to see a long nail withdrawing from the frame of the glass. Her speed, the comment about not being able to enter the service station, and her age had all made him suspicious. But seeing her claw made it impossible not to know what she was. Jack stilled, and he studied her, nearly forgotten instincts kicking in quickly. Vampires all shared certain immutable characteristics, but that didn’t mean they weren’t individuals; knowing their individuality made them easier to kill.

Her hair was long, tangled, matted, and white, her face lined, like she was newly turned, though that didn’t add up with her comments about FM and AM bands and analog tuning devices. She was weak, defective in some way, and could only be alive because her own kind had not found her. Vampires were more effective at pruning the weak from their ranks than any human army could be. She was a lone wolf. Most likely slightly unstable and unpredictable. That made her more difficult to predict and more dangerous, despite whatever vulnerability hadn’t allowed her to de-age.

These thoughts flew through Jack’s mind between one and two blinks of the vampire’s faintly glowing eyes.

“Uh-oh,” she whispered.

He cocked his head. Was she making a play of vulnerability? Trying to appeal to his sympathy?

“Where is Cherie?” he asked. Ambient Ember hovered in the vehicle the way it did in Somer, or had, before Cherie had left. Would it continue to halo her if Cherie was ill ... or worse?

Grendel pointed a claw to a point outside of Jack’s line of vision. “She went into the service station.”

There was no way to tell if she was lying. If Cherie was dead or tied up in the back of the vehicle to be slowly fed upon. Except ... Jack spun from the mirror, about to charge into the nothingness and find a mirror in the store to warn Cherie, if she was still alive.

He found himself face to face with Mizuki instead. “Do you think Cherie is a fool?” his sister hissed. “Do you think she wouldn’t notice she is a vampire?”

From behind Jack came Grendel’s whisper. “She knows.”

Mizuki put a finger on Jack’s chest. “Go on. Tell Cherie to run from the creature. Go on and tell her how to live her life one more time.”

Jack seethed. With a hysterical laugh, Mizuki faded away, leaving only echoes of her laughter.

“I’ve already told her she should leave me,” the vampire said.

Jack turned back to the fiend.

Picking nervously at her rags, the vampire said, “I’ll try to be good, I promise.”

“I’ve heard enough of the promises of your kind to know they mean nothing,” Jack replied.

“Really?” The vampire looked stricken, but they were excellent actors, or all half mad, he’d never decided which.

He was facing off against the beast through a mirror. He was helpless, but it might not know that. “I can set you alight just by looking at you. Hurt

her, and I will.”

Wind whistled in Jack’s ears, and the creature drew back fearfully, but then she blinked. “If you could do that, I’d already be dead.”

His hands curled helplessly at his sides. “I will not be trapped here forever, and we are both very long lived. I will find you,” Jack promised the creature.

Grendel bit her lip, and then winced and rubbed her cheek. “That is ... useful incentive, yes. I am the first to admit, I am not, I think, reliable, and you have to admit she is delicious. Don’t you think so?”

“You fiend,” Jack hissed.

She raised her claws, palms out. “Sorry. I’m just hungry, and so yes ... questionable in the dependability department when it comes to not biting.”

“You’re mad,” Jack whispered, his gut twisting.

Grendel nodded. “Quite possibly. Everything is so strange.” She leaned closer to Jack. “And frankly, you telling me that you would set me on fire makes me think you are crazy. But I’m a vampire, and they don’t exist. However, I do, so maybe superpowers do, too.”

Jack could only stare at her in growing alarm.

She looked about wildly. “Everything is wrong. I think I see the hatch to the fuel tank directly in the front, where the engine is. That is not where it goes, and then there is—” Her eyes narrowed. “Is that man glaring at Cherie?”

The hairs on the back of Jack’s neck rose again.

Grendel snarled. “I’ll kill him.” She was gone too swiftly for Jack to protest. Without another option, he gripped the mirror in his hands rather than risk severing his one connection to Cherie and the real world. Mizuki appeared at his shoulder. “Not so great to be the helpless one, is it?”

Not releasing his hold, he twisted to her, but she was already gone.



Like Joe's Service Station in Somer, this one sold food. Remembering Nnenne's words about vampiric eating habits, after picking up a paper map from the revolving carousel, Cherie made a beeline for the refrigerator section. As the refrigerator light flickered above her head, she emptied it of every jar of yogurt that remained on the shelves. At the soft drink section, she pocketed some straws, idly noticing that the man running the shop was eying her suspiciously. She couldn't blame him; Joe said that strangers were more likely to steal from his shop, "On account they don't feel the same shame if they get caught."

Making her way to the counter, she tried to give him a reassuring smile, but he only glared more. Maybe he was tired. The clock ticking at the wall put the time at just past ten o'clock. Not terribly late, but late to be working. Outside, the wind shrieked and great fat flakes of snow hurled themselves at the window. Cherie shivered. The poor guy would probably have to make his way home through that storm. Of course he was cranky.

Setting the goods on the counter, she said, "I'll take these, and a kilo of Ember from the first pump." She put two bills emblazoned with the Queen's face on the counter, to show she wasn't a cheat.

Not taking his eyes off her, the man bent and retrieved a bag woven from fibers of pre-Change plastic. "Unnatural weather we're having," he grumbled.

"It's not unusual to have snow this late," Cherie replied automatically. "In Somer, snow has accumulated as late as June."

He lifted an eyebrow. Cherie had been smiling, but it slipped from her face. She wasn't in Somer anymore.

The man put the items in the bag. Above her, the lights flickered. He glanced up at them and down at her, eyes narrowing.

"You think I created the storm?" she asked in disbelief. "I can't. Everyone knows—" She caught herself. He didn't know her.

The man thrust the bag at her. “Just take your things and get out of here, Magickal.” His lip curled in disgust or fear, and his hands dropped below the counter.

From the door came a thump. Cherie thought she saw a flutter of rags and a flash of white hair outside, but in another instant, both were gone. Through the glass doors came a barely audible snarl, almost drowned out by the scream of the wind.

Taking the bag, she hustled from the shop and found Grendel waiting, fangs bared. “He was going to pull a shotgun on you! I couldn’t get inside!”

Without thinking, Cherie grabbed Grendel by the wrist and pulled her toward the car. “He’s scared.” She was scared, too. Grendel would have killed him if she’d been invited in, Cherie was sure. She told herself it was good to see evidence that wards worked.

Not resisting Cherie’s tug, Grendel asked, “Scared of you?” The dubiousness in her voice was impossible to miss.

“No one is more surprised than me,” Cherie muttered.

“But you’re so sweet,” Grendel protested. “And I don’t mean that in a weird way.” She licked her lips. “Not really.”

“Of course you didn’t, *Grandmother*,” Cherie said, filling the words with every ounce of feeling, willing them to be true and herself not to be terrified. “Now let’s fill up.”

Thrusting the bag into Grendel’s hands, she went to the pump. The shop keeper had unlocked it—maybe out of fear—and she breathed a sigh of relief. She released the nozzle, stepped toward the bus, reached toward the refill cover, and then Grendel said suddenly, “I hear dogs ... and engines ...”

“Dogs?” Cherie said, worry sparking up her spine like a lit fuse.

Face lifted to the sky, Grendel said, “Howling dogs, excited dogs, like they’ve found something. Is that normal at night ...?”

“How close?” Cherie asked, hand poised above the cover.

“I don’t know—”

But at that moment Cherie heard them and the engines.

She dropped the nozzle. “We have to go, now!”

Grendel didn’t breathe a word of argument. She was gone, and the passenger door was suddenly open. From the driver’s side, the vampire called, “Get in.”

Cherie left the nozzle hanging and jumped into the seat. Grendel had them rolling from the lot before her door was closed.

“Which way and should I have the lights on?” Grendel asked.

“Right, that is north, and no, no lights,” Cherie said.

“Are they looking for you or me, Granddaughter?”

“Both, probably, Grandmother,” Cherie said, searching the darkness, and too quickly spying a line of lights ahead and perpendicular to their path.

Grendel hit the accelerator.

“I think we’ll pass them,” Cherie said.

Jack’s voice suddenly filled the cab. “You’d be safer with the Queen.” Cherie hadn’t even noticed him still being in the mirror.

Cherie’s nostrils flared. “They took *my* town from me, Jack. They took *my* life. They can’t have me.”

His eyes slid to Grendel and back to her. “You’re traveling with death.”

Something snapped in her, and she lashed out. “Cillian and Geoff will be facing danger, too, but you didn’t tell them to turn themselves in. You’re perfectly fine with them risking their lives!”

“Because I can’t stand the thought of you dying!” Jack shouted. The wind screamed, the bus rocked, and Grendel fought the wheel.

Cherie’s lips parted, trapped in Jack’s icy gaze. He’d never actually said he loved her before ... was that what he’d just admitted to? His face was very close to the mirror. He was gripping the edges fiercely, and his fingertips were white. She placed her own fingers on the glass. The mirror

was warm. She was barely aware of the headlights passing over her face, and the sound of dogs growing closer.

Grendel cleared her throat. “I hate to interrupt what is obviously a romantic reconciliation, but we just passed a line of five trucks that look like troop carriers to me, and they turned the other way. I think we escaped!”

At just that moment, headlights swept into the cab from behind.

“Well, shit!” Grendel muttered.

Before she could stop herself, Cherie blurted, “Grandmother, language!”

Jack’s eyes widened and slid in Grendel’s direction.

In a sing-song voice, Grendel amended, “Well, shoooooot.”

A dog howl wormed its way into the bus, muffled by windows and snow, but noticeably excited for all that.

“They’ve caught your scent,” said Jack.

Turning off the lights, Grendel put her foot on the gas, glanced at the mirror, and said, “Can I kill them?”

“Grandmother!” Cherie said.

“Would they kill you?” Grendel asked, rolling her eyes.

“No ...” Cherie said, without much conviction.

“Not right away,” said Jack.

“They’re just doing their job,” Cherie mumbled.

Grendel sighed. “On the cosmic scale, I understand that they are pawns on some vast chess board whose plays I’ve managed to sleep through ... on the Earthly scale, you ...” She huffed and her voice got thick. “...are my *granddaughter*, and I’ve got very long teeth and nails to protect you with, my dear. Also, when I do my move-really-fast-thing, I get hungry, and I’m hungry *now*.” Even in the dim light of Jack’s mirror, Cherie could see that the vampire’s fangs had descended even further.

She gulped. In befriending ... or allying herself with Grendel, she imagined she’d tamed her. But that wasn’t right, was it?

Jack spoke, in a frustratingly dispassionate, oh-so-rational voice, “There are typically twenty men per carrier. I doubt there will be more than one dog, but it's a Magickal animal. Its training will have included identifying the presence of vampires and Magickal humans. There will be at least one Magickal human in the carrier. It is likely that you, Grendel, are the first vampire they've ever encountered since there hasn't been a vampire infestation in the Northeastern Magickal States in over one hundred years.”

“Infestation? Don't worry about sparing my feelings,” Grendel said dryly.

“I won't,” Jack replied, voice equally dry.

Cherie thought of the photo in her pocket and the newspaper clipping. “Maybe not so long as that.”

Grendel's eyes darted to her, but quickly returned to the road. “So you're saying they're inexperienced, and I will be able to slaughter them all in a heartbeat and then drain them dry at my leisure?”

“Not at all,” Jack hissed.

Cherie's skin heated. “Grandmother! Could you not be so flippant about human death!” The outburst surprised even herself.

Grendel's lip curled, but she muttered, “Fine.” The vampire glanced at the side mirror. “They aren't gaining.”

Cherie looked back. Indeed, the troop carrier seemed to be at exactly the same distance as it had been before. “They can't move faster than us in all the snow.” She smiled at Jack.

Jack sighed. “It will come down to who has more fuel.”

Remembering the Ember meter, Cherie's smile dropped. “That probably won't be us.”

Jack said, “As much as I don't like Grendel's flippant attitude toward the taking of human life—”

“You compared me to vermin,” Grendel snapped.

“—If you don’t want to be taken by the Queen, Cherie, it may come to that,” Jack finished.

“I’ve already seen two dead men,” Cherie said. “I don’t want to see more.”

Jack went very still.

“They were talking about rape and slavery, and I don’t regret it at all,” Grendel said.

Jack cocked his head, but his eyes stayed on Cherie. “In that case, neither do I.” Outside, the wind howled, and the bus rocked.

“We should not sink to the level of our enemies,” Cherie retorted, but her words sounded hollow even to herself.

“That is the sort of philosophizing that only people not being shot at can afford,” Grendel snapped.

Jack huffed. “Agreed.”

“We’re not being shot at *now*,” Cherie said.

“They haven’t run us to ground yet,” Grendel said. “So, I can’t kill them all, Jack?”

Jack put a hand to his chin and looked heavenward as though he were actually considering it. “A lot depends on the Magickal and what his or her skills are.”

“Jack—” Cherie said.

“Grendel has already said she’s hungry, Cherie,” Jack said. “I would prefer it not be you.”

“I forgot! I have yogurt!” Cherie exclaimed.

“Yogurt?” said Grendel and Jack at once.

Already lunging for the bag, Cherie pulled out a glass bottle. “It’s the kind you can drink.” She stabbed the foil lid with a straw.

“I don’t think ...” Jack said.

“That actually smells good,” Grendel said.

“It’s strawberry,” Cherie supplied, handing it over.

Grendel took a tentative sip. Eyes growing wide, she exclaimed, “This might be my second favorite thing.” She took a longer, louder suck.

“I know nothing,” Jack said, sounding utterly lost.

Cherie gave him a triumphant smile.

Releasing the straw, Grendel smacked her lips. “I think you actually know a lot about troop carriers. And I think you have a strategy.”

Jack’s face became so serious, it was almost unrecognizable. “The best thing to do would be for you to keep driving north as far as you can. The Queen’s forces aren’t well established in that direction. Eventually, you’ll need to get out and run. Someplace with cover, where they have to go on foot would be ideal.”

“Gotcha,” said Grendel. She lifted the yogurt. “Can I have another of these?”

Cherie replaced it with a blueberry flavored one, trying not to shiver when Grendel’s claws brushed her hand.

“Thank you, Granddaughter.” Grendel took a long slurp.

“You’re welcome, Grandmother,” Cherie replied, glad that she had never called Nnenna “grandmother.” Grendel was not Nnenna.

She caught Jack’s eyes going nervously back and forth between her and the vampire.

Jack continued, “Obviously, if their Magickal talks to trees, you’re better running through a ravine and not a forest.”

Grendel’s head popped up from her snack. “They can do that?”

“Some,” Jack replied.

“Is there any way we can find out what the Magickal can do?” Grendel asked.

“I might be able to spy on them and find out,” Jack said. For a moment, the only sound was the windshield wipers.

“Thank you, Jack,” Cherie whispered. He had confided in her that it was difficult to find strange mirrors, especially ones that were in motion. She

swallowed. “Don’t get lost.”

Jack stroked the mirror, as though he were stroking her face. “I think ...”

“That we are running out of time?” Grendel suggested.

Lips pressing wryly, Jack said, “The fiend is right.”

“I resemble that remark,” Grendel replied. “May I have another one of these, Granddaughter? They take the edge off.”

“Call to me if it seems like I’ve been gone too long,” Jack said.

“I will, I promise,” Cherie said, meeting his gaze in the mirror. His Adam’s apple bobbed, his chest rose and fell, a veil of snow swept before him, and then—

“He’s gone,” said Grendel.

Cherie sighed, turned, and looked back the way they came, wishing that her Magick was stronger, and that there was some way she could help Jack find his way.

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CHAPTER 9



Closing his hand, Jack collapsed the mirror between his palms. At least in the real world, the truck was directly behind Cherie, which meant it would be directly in front of him ... if he could only make this dream orient itself. He took a few steps but saw nothing but snow. If he kept walking, he'd lose himself in the storm ... he stopped. Waited. *"I'm in your path. Come to me,"* he whispered. The glint of ambient Ember shimmered through the storm, and a man's voice rumbled, louder with each syllable. "I cannot reach the court. Too much snow in the mirror." Jack blinked and saw a stalagmite, broad as his torso, rising from the drifts and advancing toward him, as though it was on an unseen track. He didn't question the dream logic, he just grabbed hold of it, gritting his teeth from the cold.

From just above his head another male voice said, "Ambient Ember levels are high here, like in that weird town."

Jack glanced up to see a square mirror just above him. It was exactly the size of the ones the Queen used for her communication devices. At his precarious angle, he could only see the darkness of the truck's interior ... that and the glimmer of ambient Ember.

"Wasn't weird. Was fucking haunted. Cursed. We should have done more than broken the mirrors. We should have set the place on fire."

The first man grunted. “The ambient Ember levels in that town are dropping to normal levels. Breaking the mirrors and getting rid of the Magickals was enough.”

Jack couldn’t ponder the words; he was struggling to maintain his hold on the icy stalagmite melting beneath his grip. The conversation continued. He’d thought he gathered just enough when Cherie’s voice whispered through the blizzard, “Jack, Jack, come back.”

The stalagmite shattered; its pieces slid from his grip. Jack smacked his hands together, and the glint of ambient Ember shone through them ... The same abnormally high levels of ambient Ember that the Queen’s Guard had spoken of, the same level of Ember that had filled the town of Somer, but now no longer did. That level of ambient Ember was here. Was it following Cherie, who barely had an Ember halo at all?

Or had Cherie’s halo been all of Somer? He froze in place, hands still together, the glow of Ember seeping through his fingers. “But Cherie’s talent is ... is ... only ... pleasantness ...”

He wasn’t sure if he had spoken the thought aloud, but Mizuki appeared, floating above the snow. “She seems to be getting along pleasantly enough with the vampire.” His sister tapped her lips and looked heavenward. “Do you think Cherie is being held captive by the vampire, or is it the other way around?”

Jack glared at his sister.

“Maybe her talent is taming monsters?” Mizuki continued. “It would explain how she gets along with you.”

For a moment, his vision went white—from snow blindness or simply rage—but then he heard Cherie calling, and ambient Ember lit the air. The snow cleared, and Mizuki vanished with it.



“Jack, don’t be lost,” Cherie whispered into the rearview mirror. Minutes before, she’d been annoyed with him, but the thought of him wandering aimlessly in the snow left her bereft.

“So ...” Grendel said. “Your boyfriend is a ghost?”

“Grandmother, he’s not—”

“Pfft,” said Grendel.

“—my boyfriend anymore,” Cherie finished. “If he ever was.”

Grendel’s hands shifted on the wheel. “He doesn’t look like any ghosts I’ve seen.”

“You see ghosts?” Cherie asked.

“Sometimes. Maybe. When I move so fast time seems to stop,” said Grendel. “I thought it was because I’m dead.”

Blinking at the rearview mirror, Cherie didn’t know what to say, but then she was distracted by what she saw behind them. “They’re slowing down! Stopping!”

The bus hit a gigantic pothole, and she laughed for joy, even as her jaw rattled, and her neck cracked.

“They’ve given up?” Grendel asked, sounding innocent and happy, not like she’d contemplated killing everyone in the troop carrier just minutes before.

“They must have!” Cherie exclaimed.

“They haven’t given up,” Jack said, his ghostly form in the mirror obscuring the world behind them.

“Oh.” Cherie swallowed. “I’m glad you found the way back to us.” She brushed the mirror, and Jack put his own fingers on the glass against hers. It didn’t fill her with lust like it once had, but there was something else, a connection that felt almost more frightening. She pulled her fingers away.

Jack put his own hands behind his back. “Finding you wasn’t as hard as it should have been.”

“What does that mean?” Cherie asked.

His lips parted. "I'm not—"

Grendel interrupted him. "If they haven't given up, what are they doing?"

His expression became serious. "They're dropping off a fire team. They know you have a vampire; one of their Magickal dogs was vampire trained in the Mexican war. The fire team will carry the message that a vampire is keeping a Magick hostage."

"They think Cherie is innocent in this?" Grendel asked.

"Yes," Jack replied. "She'll be rescued. You'll be staked, decapitated, and burned ... after you are tortured to find out where you came from."

Cherie gulped. "He's right."

"You could run, Grendel," Jack said. "You're faster than they are. They have silver bullets, but no vampire armor."

Grendel dipped her chin, and her expression became mulish. "Grandmothers don't abandon their granddaughters. We'll stay together as long as we can, and if we get caught, Cherie can just throw up her hands and scream, 'Help me! The vampire is going to eat me.'"

Jack's jaw dropped open and then snapped shut.

Cherie whispered, "That would be a lie."

Grendel made a wavy, noncommittal motion with her hand. "Ehh ..."

Jack massaged his temple. "Cherie ..."

Nnenna had always said, "People can talk their way into thinking almost anything."

Cherie felt a sudden certainty that she could not let Grendel think she was capable of killing her. "Grandmother, what a *delightful* sense of humor you have."

Grendel scowled into the night.

Jack sucked in a breath. "Their Magickal is a rock talker."

Cherie gulped.

"A what?" said Grendel.

Cherie whispered. “Someone who can talk to stones. He’ll be able to track us over anything but open water.” Cherie’s mind whirled. “If we can reach one of the Northern Lakes ...” She bit her lip. She had no idea how close to those lakes they were.

“How much Ember do you have left in the engine?” Jack asked.

Cherie leaned toward the gauge and told herself she did not hear the vampire’s lips smack. “It’s nearly empty.” Which was a bit of an understatement, but Geoff and Cillian always claimed there was more Ember in an engine than the gauges showed.

“There’s something ahead!” Grendel said.

Cherie squinted but saw nothing but snow and darkness.

The vampire smiled. “It’s a covered bridge. The troop carrier won’t fit.”

Cherie exclaimed, “It will delay them.”

Nodding, Grendel chanted, “We get across it. We pull over out of sight. We run. I find something to eat.” She added unconvincingly, “A rabbit or something.”

In the mirror, Jack growled.

Beneath Cherie’s feet, the floorboards that had been subtly vibrating the entire journey became still, and the bus began to slow. Grendel leaned forward. “I’m pressing on the accelerator, but nothing is happening.”

“We’re out of Ember,” Cherie whispered.

Grendel looked over her shoulder. “We get out. We run—”

Cherie put both hands on the dash. “Bus, I know you’ve never been treated well, and we haven’t had time to make it up to you, but if you have it in you to get across that bridge, we would be so grateful.”

Grendel blurted, “What are you—?”

The bus’s engine revved, and it trundled forward. It had taken so little ... it struck Cherie that her plea might have been the only kindness that it had ever known, and she felt terrible for ignoring the vehicle for so long.

Grendel exclaimed, “How?”

“Magick,” said Jack.

Cherie rubbed the dash. “Thank you, Bus. We don’t deserve it.”

It honked faintly in reply, and then the tires hit the wooden boards of the bridge. Bus gave itself a mighty rev, and they sped through to the other side ... and then the engine stalled, but thankfully, the tires continued to roll down a slight downgrade.

“Now?” Grendel asked.

“I’m sorry, Bus, we have to leave!” Cherie said, rubbing its dash. “Thank you.” There wasn’t even the faintest honk this time.

In the mirror, Jack shouted, “Go now!”

Flinging open the door, Cherie dropped down into snow that was wet, sticky, and nearly calf deep.

Bus had stopped at the edge of an intersection to a road no wider than a deer path. Cherie looked over her shoulder. The troop transport was sliding to a halt just on the other side of the bridge. Shouts and a dog’s howl rang out through the night. Shadows plunged from the troop transport’s cab and rear. “Cherie,” Grendel hissed, somewhere, “run!” Cherie threw her hands over her head and darted toward the front of Bus.

She heard gunfire, the crack of bullets, and the splintering of woods and tree limbs. Grendel screamed, “Cherie! What’s happening?”

... Which was when Cherie realized there was no longer snow beneath her boots. The world was lit by strange stars and a too-large moon, and it smelled of ozone and Ember. She’d only been to Fairy briefly once or twice, but she recognized the place immediately.

Before she could answer, she was viciously yanked to the side and pressed against Bus’s bumper. The scent of leaves and soil surrounded her. “Cherie, what is happening?” Grendel cried.

“We’ve been sucked into Fairy for some reason,” she replied, frantically patting her coat pockets, seeking her mirror to call Jack.

“Fairy? What does that mean?” Grendel asked.

“Another world parallel to our own,” Cherie replied.

Grendel whined piteously.

Cherie patted her pockets, frantically searching for her mirror. She had to reach Jack. Jack had just recently tried to help free the Fae, and he’d mentioned having dealings with them long ago, too. He’d also mentioned how those dealings had nearly been deadly; their hallmark “mutual incomprehension.” She pulled her mirror from her pocket, but before she could open it, someone shouted, or sang, “Get out of the way, damn you!”

There was an ear-ringing clang to the right of them, and Grendel pushed Cherie closer to the ground. There was another clang on the left. Raising her eyes, Cherie saw thick coppery ropes were on either side of them, hooked to Bus’s bumper.

The singsong order rang again, “Get out of the way before you’re crushed!”

Grendel growled, and for the second time in less than twenty-four hours, Cherie was lifted over a shoulder and hauled like a sack of potatoes. Grendel’s shoulder should have been bonier than Cillian’s, but Cherie felt oddly light. There was no sound. The world was colder. The soldiers pouring through the Fairy gate on either side of Bus were no longer moving. They were frozen in place, in mid-air in some instances. Cherie inhaled sharply, remembering Grendel’s describing moving so fast time seemed to stop. She was pulling Cherie through time with her. At that moment, Grendel leaped impossibly high. Cherie held her breath, expecting the landing to hurt, but the landing was barely different from the flight. She blinked, and she was being flung from Grendel’s back. She hit the ground on her butt, suddenly heavy and hurting. Bullets rang, men and women shouted in English and shout-sang in the language of Fairy. In the moonlight, Grendel’s fangs were long and ivory. Her claws dug into Cherie’s shoulders, pinning her in place, and her face bent to Cherie’s neck. “Don’t move,” she hissed, the syllables serpentine, her breath humid and

heavy against Cherie's skin. Cherie went stiff with fright. For the first time, *understanding* at a level deep as her bones that she'd been given the choice of Slavery or Death. She had chosen Death.

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CHAPTER 10



The strange stars were completely obliterated by Grendel's shadow. And then Grendel was gone. Cherie's shoulders stung where the vampire's claws had been, and her charm was icy cold against her skin.

The stones on the ground began to bounce and rattle, creating a sort of whisper, like voices from another room that Cherie could understand if only she could hear them better. Gunfire cracked behind her and to her left and right; shouts of Fae and men rang through the night.

Her compact mirror was gone, it had fallen from her hand when she'd seen the blood lust in Grendel's eyes. Searching the ground frantically, her fingers only encountered dancing rocks that bruised and scraped her skin, and she cowered back each time a missile whistled past her. Men shouted, "Arrows!" The stones at her feet hopped and skipped more fiercely, another human shouted, "The Magickal's there!" Rocks and stones everywhere began to leap, sounding so much like a downpour Cherie looked to the sky. Through the shadow of branches she saw the enormous moon and two bright orange stars.

One source of gunfire diminished, another, and another ... The whistling became more fierce. Cherie half-rose, deciding to peer around the

tree, but a screeching whistle and a *thunk* in the trunk above her made her dive down again.

A shout of fear and panic, from a human or Fae throat, came from not ten paces away, and then the rocks abruptly stopped their dance.

A Fae shouted something that sounded like an order, even in their singsong tongue, and a huge, lumbering beast was led onto the road. It wore silvery chainmail around its beak-like snout and the flare of its neck. Plates of armor shrouded its body, and doubled as a harness. Coppery ropes were attached to the beast, and it began to pull the bus down the road. Bullets occasionally connected with the animal's hide, and it paused and shook itself, but then resumed. A human shouted, "The gate will close as soon as the vehicle's through! Retreat."

There were cries of surprise and pain and retreating boot steps, and then only the calls of strange night birds.

A twig snapped beside Cherie. She gasped, and found that the two orange-red stars had moved closer. A figure materialized before her, as though he'd cast aside a cloak of shadows. He was a man, or at least man-shaped at that particular moment. When he smiled, he had sharper teeth than Grendel, and they seemed to cast their own light.

"Don't worry, you're safe. For now." She caught sight of her compact mirror in his hands. He slipped it into his pocket, and she knew better than to ask for it back.

There was a breeze to her left, and suddenly Grendel was squatting beside her, eyes on the red-eyed man.

His gaze shifted to the vampire. "Clever, Little Sister, to catch the bullets in a rag. Silver and steel would be uncomfortable for us both, but did you have to kill all of the Queen's men?"

Grendel shrugged. "Seemed efficient."

"Grandmother!" Cherie exclaimed in dismay. "Was that really necessary?"

“I couldn’t very well keep them hostage,” Grendel hissed, dropping a bundle to the ground. It spilled open to reveal a pile of bullets.

More Fae emerged from the trees, and again, Cherie had the feeling that they wore the shadows like clothing. “It was so unsporting, Little Sister,” said one with eerie, glowing, blue-green eyes.

“We wanted to *play* with them.” That came from an amber-eyed female, and it was directed at the red-eyed man. Cherie shivered. Grendel hissed and edged closer to Cherie. All of the Fae began to speak to the red-eyed man in their own language.

Grendel leaned close to Cherie. “Why does he call me ‘Little Sister’?”

Cherie had heard theories about vampires being “mutated Fae,” but one of the female Fae raised a wickedly sharp eyebrow in their direction, and it didn’t seem like the time to relay that. “I’m not sure,” she replied.

“Am I right in assuming that we are in worse danger than we were before?” Grendel asked.

All of the Fae stopped speaking and craned their necks in their direction. Red Eye smiled. “We are certainly more dangerous than your human Queen. But you are quite safe with us.”

A man with hair so black it was blue took a step toward Cherie. “If we hurt her in ways that leave no outward harm, isn’t that still safe?” He reached out a Magickal-mechanical silver hand to Cherie. It disappeared in a gust of wind. Before Cherie could take a breath, the man was screaming, backing away, cursing in his Fae tongue, and Grendel was on Cherie’s other side, holding the silver hand in skin that was audibly singeing. “You will not touch my Granddaughter!” With a hiss, she threw the thing aside. Without thinking, Cherie reached up and took Grendel’s injured hand, willing the burn not to hurt. Grendel’s fingers, cool and dry, bony and clawed, wrapped around her own.

Red Eye barked something at the man who’d had the silver hand. The man, clutching his amputated arm to his chest, picked up the silver arm and

slunk away. Red Eye smiled again. “But where are my manners, my Charming Princess Peacekeeper?”

“You’re a *princess*?” Grendel whispered.

“Of course not!” Cherie whispered back, genuinely offended. Being a princess would mean being related to the Queen. “It’s just a play on my name.”

Smiling in Grendel’s direction, the Fae man said, “Cherie is short for Charmaine, which means Charming Princess, and she is also Peacekeeper.” Cherie had not given her name to the Fae—if she had, he’d own her—but even still, she felt each syllable like a tug in her heart.

He held out his hand to her, but kept his eyes on Grendel, as though daring her to attack. Cherie took it with her free hand but didn’t relinquish her hold on Grendel’s claw.

Red Eye said, “Fear not, no hurt that you do not desire will befall you here.”

The Fae woman said something that made everyone laugh, except Red Eye who merely appeared smug, and Grendel, who growled and looked like she would like to rip off a few more arms.

“Dawn is approaching,” Red Eye said, gently guiding Cherie’s hand to his elbow. “You must be tired, Charming Princess Peacekeeper.”

“I’m fine,” Cherie lied as he guided her forward. Cherie squeezed Grendel’s hand to make sure it was still there.

She heard the vampire ask, as though from a great distance, “So, Big Brother, does being safe mean that we can leave whenever we like?”

“Oh, no, Little Sister, that wouldn’t be safe at all,” Red Eye replied.

Her charm was chill against her collarbones. Cherie wanted to say something, to prove she was still able, but her eyelids were growing heavy, and despite Red Eye’s promise of sunrise, her world was rapidly going dark.



Jack stood, snow whipping around him, gripping a rectangular mirror, the image on the other side, and the ambient Ember fading fast. A member of the Queen's Guard shouted, "The bus is holding open a gate to Fairy! They've taken the Magickal!"

Another shouted, "Don't let the Fae have the human!"

And then ominously, "I have reception with the Queen."

As if on cue, a familiar lilting feminine whisper rose in the breeze. "*Mirror, Mirror on the Wall, take me to the Lost Magickal.*"

There was a response, masculine, and deep, "*My Queen the trail dies at a Gate of Fae, perhaps due to the Traitor's sway.*"

Jack's jaw ground at the word "traitor."

The whispered words of the woman lost their rhyme and became a shout, "Take me to him!"

There was a sound like the sharpening of knives, and Jack spun to the source. Not four paces away, the snow rose, forming a perfect sculpture of a nine-foot-tall oval mirror on a stand.

Oh, no ... she couldn't come here ... could she? Jack took a step back. Since the curse, he'd barely heard from the Queen, not until the Ember in Somer had declined. But she could enter dreams—she was Mizuki's mother, after all. But she could only do so through mirrors, and she couldn't maintain the connection for as long. Normally, it was harder for her to pinpoint her target, but in this case, she and Jack were both Magickally spying in the same location, the gate to Fairy. Still, she had to be using immense amounts of Magick.

For a moment, he saw his own reflection in the mirror, and he hoped he was wrong, but then the mirror's surface flashed, and Jack saw not himself, but a woman. She looked to be in her mid-twenties. Her black, wavy hair was upswept in a style that gave the impression of effortless elegance. Her

face was perfectly symmetrical, her skin glowed, her eyes sparkled beneath long lashes, and her lips were stained just a few shades rosier than her complexion. She appeared every inch a natural beauty.

Maybe she had been once.

Jack gave her a grim smile and fought his unease. “Hello, Mother.” She was his stepmother, but she’d insisted he call her that when she’d married his father. He had no doubt she’d prefer he call her “Queen.”

Her nostrils flared. “What have you done? You betrayed your family—”
“Mizuki would disagree,” Jack countered.

For just a moment, the hardness in her face slackened. Mizuki was Jack’s half-sister, his stepmother’s biological daughter; that Mizuki had sided with Jack had to have been a blow to her ...

“I do not believe you,” she said, lips twisting in a way that managed to be ugly even in her beautiful face.

“Deny it all you wish.”

Her voice rose to a shout. “You killed my daughter, and now you are endangering all of the Magickal States with another vampiric infestation! I thought you were better than this.” She waved a hand. “All your noble words about sparing the Fae and humanity from war meant nothing. What mattered to you was power.”

Jack sighed. “You think so because that is your primary motivation.”

Her eyes glinted. “You are a traitor—”

“—not to my conscience.”

“Your alliance with the Fae will rekindle the undead threat.” She lifted her chin. “I will not let you win. I will not.”

She spun away in a swish of long silk skirts. The break in the clouds grew larger, a bolt of sunlight landed on the Queen’s mirror, temporarily blinding Jack. When his vision returned, the icy device had melted into a pool at his feet.

Mizuki appeared by his side. “I’m sorry I made you face that alone.”

Jack's eyes remained on the puddle. "Don't worry about it." Mizuki's relationship with her mother had been more intense. The Queen had given Mizuki much more attention—of both the positive and negative kind. Jack had run interference when he'd been alive. Why should now be any different? Kneeling beside the puddle, he whispered, "She thinks that the Fae deem me an ally."

Jack's hand went protectively to his throat. Mizuki vanished, and snowflakes morphed into smoke and falling ash. The snowscape was replaced by a scene from his memories. A mansion set on massive grounds smoldered before him, and in the background was the lake— bright, blue, and oddly peaceful. It was the scene of the ending of the last infestation on the city's North Side. The infestation that had claimed Nevin.

Rising, he tried to escape the dream-memory, but it was too late. His feet retraced the steps he'd taken that day, to the coach house they'd commandeered for headquarters. It would have been considered a mansion by Somer standards. Jack had gone directly to the library that had become his office, passing guards and leaving still more at the door, his mind intent on a drink.

His nostrils had been filled with the scent of soot and the too-human reek of burnt vampiric hair and skin. He sat down in the leather chair behind the commandeered desk and poured himself a shot of whiskey. Tipping back the shot, he tasted peat and silk on his tongue, felt the burn at the back of his throat, and a cold blade against his neck.

"Go ahead and scream," a voice sang near his ear. "That would be entertaining."

At that moment, six Fae emerged from the shadows, seemingly from thin air: four male, and two female. They smiled at him, their faces unnervingly beautiful, their teeth unnervingly sharp and pointed.

He didn't scream. It would have been a waste of time. One of the women purred, "Oh, he doesn't respond. How boring."

Another pulled out what Jack first mistook for incense sticks and said, “If I stuck these beneath his nails, he’d scream.” She fanned out the sticks, which was when Jack noticed they were needles.

“How did you get here?” Jack demanded as much to give himself time to prepare for the needles as from any hope for an answer.

Smiling, one of the Fae men waved a hand. “Here, there ... don’t you know that Fairy is everywhere?”

Throwing back her head, a woman with long, emerald hair laughed. “Above the soles of your feet and below the top of your head.”

All of them laughed, except one, a man with golden hair and glowing red eyes. Jaw tight, he demanded of Jack, “Do you think you are my equal?”

Fleeting, it occurred to Jack that he might try turning them all to ice. He’d kill at least one of them, the noise would raise the alarm to his guards, and they’d force the Fae to retreat in a hail of iron and lead. But he didn’t, and a distant part of his mind wondered if Nevin’s death had given him a death wish. Attacking would have been his first instinct just months earlier.

Still, beyond the split-second of fear, they hadn’t harmed him ... yet. It struck him that maybe that was why they were here, to frighten him, to show him who was in control. Jack decided to let them have control, or the illusion of it, out of curiosity or the death wish. Meeting the Fae man’s red eyes, Jack replied, “I wouldn’t dream of considering myself the equal of an immortal.” He thought about adding, “a virtual god,” but decided that might be laying it on a bit thick.

The answer had seemed to partially mollify the red-eyed Fae—or, at least he stopped advancing. “Do you seek to have me in your debt?” the Fae man hissed.

“No,” Jack replied. The chill of the knife’s flat edge pressed more firmly against his throat, and he bit his tongue, refraining from saying, “I’d seek to have nothing to do with you.”

The red-eyed man leaned forward with nearly vampiric speed. “Then why do you disobey your Queen? Why do you not invade?”

“Because it would be an unnecessary, hopeless slaughter of my people,” Jack replied.

The Fae man smiled. “Yes.”

The man pressing the knife to Jack’s throat whispered, “He resists because he’s a traitor and a coward.”

Jack had been called a “traitor” many times by many people at that point. He’d questioned the wisdom of invading Fairy—privately, but the Queen had let it be known publicly. The press, her mouthpiece, had blasted it across headlines from the edges of Northern urban wastes to the sparkling Southern Cities. The Senate that served as the Queen’s chorus threatened to have him discharged. The only reason they hadn’t was because of the last, deadly vampire infestation in the North. Jack knew with the end of the last infestation he would be arrested. Soon the Magickal inquisitors would have their knives in him—*ostensibly* to drive out the vampiric or Fae charm that *had* to be the reason for his lack of loyalty. He’d lost his father, his real mother, his lover, and too many other friends in the Vampire War. He’d killed Nevin ...

... No, that wasn’t right. Nevin had turned.

After all that, what was one more baseless accusation of treason and cowardice? Power rushed through him, through the knife, and along the arm holding it into a surge of frost like a tide. The man holding the knife screamed. The blade fell away ... and so did the division between Fairy and Earth.

The coach house study disappeared. Jack found himself crouching on a forest floor, his former opponents still in their same relative positions except for the man who’d been holding the blade to his throat. He’d fallen back and was cursing and whimpering, clutching the arm Jack had turned to ice.

Jack snarled at the red-eyed Fae. “I am not a traitor or coward. I value human life more than I value my name. Want to see the truth of my words? Come fight me now, to the death if you wish!”

The Fae man tilted his head, the hint of a crease between his brows. “You say you value human life and yet you are prepared to give your own?”

“All humans are mad,” said one of the women.

“Maybe you are lying, human? We know you do that,” said the other female.

One of the men came forward, a knife pulsing with Magick in his hand. It cut through the ambient Ember in the air and would probably cut through any gale Jack threw the man’s way, but he was slighter than Jack, and Jack had trudged into vampire lairs thick with fiends at midnight. He wasn’t wearing armor, but that just meant he would be faster, he’d jump higher, and he’d have better range of motion.

“One of you is nothing,” Jack spat. “Bring more if you truly want to test me.”

The man hesitated.

More Fae emerged from the trees on every side, all but invisible but for their faces and hands; their clothing blending with the forest behind them. They advanced, whispering in their language, holding blades that cut Magick and bows and arrows that shimmered with ambient Ember. Jack knew the arrows would always find their mark, even around a tree or stone.

Terrified and exultant, his lips quirked up. It occurred to him that he did care about his name after all. He chuckled and dropped into a fighting crouch, picking his first target. One of his Magickal officers had taught him a trick for turning pain into a signal that didn’t have a value, a signal like color. Jack sent the power that thrummed in his veins into his nerves and sent more to his muscles. A Fae shouted, and Jack leaped ten paces, spun, and grabbed the knife arm of his intended victim. Instantly, his back flared with three splotches of purple as three arrows struck him. He continued his

assault on the first startled Fae, making the blotches of purple spread into his body as his movements mercilessly drove the arrows deeper into fascia and sent one deathly close to his lung. He gained control of the knife just after another arrow lodged in his shoulder, only missing his heart because he'd pivoted at the last moment, spinning the slighter Fae man around to be a shield. Holding a knife to the Fae man's throat, Jack dragged him backward toward a tree trunk, so his back was protected. The other Fae shot their comrade in the gut, and the man Jack was using as armor slumped, not quite dead, but dying, ambient Ember that had been thick around him fading. His death enraged Jack. With a growl he'd only recognize later came from his own throat, he summoned a gale-force wind. It blasted through the Fae who didn't have Magick-slicing knives, sending them tumbling backward, but Fae with knives quickly surrounded him, the red-eyed Fae among them.

Jack cursed and shook the dying Fae in his arms. Or tried to. He was dizzy with blood loss and Magick loss, too. "This is a waste." He tried to shout, but the words came out a pant. "This is the fate I wanted to avoid for my people. I have no idea why you don't value yours."

The Fae advanced closer, and Jack sank to the ground. He didn't hurt. That might not have been Magick, but his encroaching death, the arrow edging nearer to his lung, cutting deeper, the other wounds bleeding more fiercely with his every move.

"Halt!" It was one of the women who spoke.

The soldiers drew up short and parted for her. Kneeling beside Jack, she whispered, "You did not defy your Queen in exchange for a debt from Solien." She said it like it was the most incomprehensible thing in the world.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Jack dropped his Fae shield and put his hands on his knees. "There is no debt."

Kneeling, she laid a hand on the man he'd dropped. "Maybe not for this man. Solien's own killed him."

"Solien?" Jack mumbled, slouching forward, barely able to stay upright.

The red-eyed man sat down on his haunches and sneered. "I am called Solien, and since you had the gall to disobey your Queen of your own volition, and spare me a war, I owe you a debt." The Fae's lips continued to move, but Jack couldn't hear anymore. Jack was laughing too hard, because he was low on blood or because the Fae had said "I owe you a debt" like he would say, "I will kill you," which was deeply hilarious as Jack was dying. He laughed so hard he fell over.

He'd awoken in his chair, in the coach house office, with guards pouring in and someone screaming for a medic. Later, he was told the pound of his head hitting the desk was the only reason they'd known something was amiss.

"Jack?" Mizuki drew him from the memory—a dream inside a dream? To the present ... another dream.

Had he truly been that man in the memory? So unafraid, so wild? Had he been a gentle ghost for so long he'd forgotten what he was, and the debts he'd incurred or unknowingly issued? Was Cherie now receiving his "payment"? That might be an eternity of servitude in Fairy.

"She's in Fairy ..." Jack told his sister, his vision blurring. Fairy was everywhere, just as the Fae had said. So were all the other Old Magickal worlds, according to the mathematicians and the physicists, but it could only be reached where the fabric between here and there was weak, and only if a Magickal opened the portal.

If Fairy was everywhere, it was in dreams as well. With the way Fairy worked, maybe it was easier to access from dreams?

"I have to get to her," Jack said. "I have to talk to Solien."

Before Mizuki could respond, Jack dove headfirst into a snow drift. Instead of hitting the ground, he hit water. Cold, dark depths sucked him

down.

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CHAPTER II



Nenne cried, writhing in her bed. “Andrew, you promised. You promised you’d be here for me!”

Falling to her knees beside her, Cherie wrapped her hands around Nenne’s arm, willing her Magick into Nenne’s nervous system, willing her grandmother’s excited neurons to be still, but it didn’t work.

Cherie awoke with a gasp, in light so bright it was blinding. For a moment, she thought she was dead, too, and in heaven. For an instant, she felt an overwhelming sense of relief ... but then her vision cleared, and she found herself lying in bed. In contrast to the dream, a bright bolt of sunlight was falling on her. Her room was north facing ... had she fallen asleep in Nenne’s rooms again? But then she realized that she was still wearing her clothes from the day before, the belt loops of her jeans were making her uncomfortable, and the air was thick with the scents of ozone and Ember. Every hair on the back of her neck rose as the events of the day and night before came rushing back.

Nenne was dead, and Cherie would never see her again.

It was only her second thought that she was in Fairy, and potentially in danger. At the moment, the danger had no teeth. Nenne was dead, she couldn’t go back to her town, and what was the point? She was numb to the danger being in the Fae realm posed.

But even as she thought that, she thought how upset Nnenne would be by her numbness. Nnenne had lost more than Cherie had ever known, and she'd kept going, and because she had, Cherie had a life. She couldn't give up so easily what Nnenne had worked so hard for.

Forcing herself upright, she surveyed her surroundings. The room appeared to have been carved out of an unfamiliar, pearly-white, living rock. Her mattress was made of moss, the pillows and coverlet ivory silk, and the bed itself appeared to be carved from an enormous tree stump, its shape irregular, its jagged headboard and footboard showing signs of fire, though they'd been smoothed down and oiled. Her coat hung on the wall; her boots neatly tucked beneath it.

Besides the bed, the only other furnishing was what looked like a bowl, large enough for two people to sit in, its exterior surface rough and vaguely green. Above it, a shelf was carved in the rock wall, and upon that were towels. There were two doors, one enormous and made of copper, green with age. There was a relief molded on its surface, of men or Fae on horseback, hunting various animals. The relief appeared to be moving in slow motion. There was no handle that she noticed. The other door was smaller, made of wood that had been oiled, but not stained. There was a relief carved into it, too, of a tree with boughs heavy with leaves and pears, animals and birds peeking from its branches. That picture too seemed to shift, the birds and animals disappearing behind leaves, and the branches catching in a faint breeze. It had a silver handle. There were no mirrors. No way to contact Jack.

And there was no Grendel. She raised her hands, letting the sunlight burnish them in red-gold light, the same color of the Fae leader's eyes. Of course there wouldn't be a Grendel.

There were no degrees of evil—her teachers had taught her in school—and all vampires were evil. That was what she'd been taught her entire life. Still, she found herself wishing the vampire was with her. Leaving the bed,

she went to her coat. It was noticeably cleaner than the night before, and smelled like Ember, not sweat and fear. She searched the pockets. There was no sign of her compact mirror, but she found the remainder of her money, her keys, and the photo and the newspaper clipping. She withdrew the photo, half thinking she'd imagined its revelation. But it revealed Nnenne looking joyous, and a vampire whose name was Andrew, looking happy and good. Cherie carefully returned it to her pocket, and then went to the wooden door. On the other side was a bathroom with what was noticeably a toilet, although there was a pull cord instead of a lever flush and a gargoyle face over the tank. It was so banal, recognizable, and almost ordinary, Cherie laughed. Just to be sure, she pulled the cord. The gargoyle spouted water from its mouth, which fell atop the tank, which turned out to have a drain at the bottom of it so it was almost like a sink atop the toilet. It was only after the water had run for a bit that there came the familiar flushing noise from beneath. She blinked. You used the water above to wash your hands so that the water that provided the flush was used twice. She thought of the tree stump bed. Whatever the Fae's other faults, rapacious use of resources wasn't one of them.

After leaving the bathroom, a flash of red in the corner of her eye caught her attention. When she turned to look, she saw no one, just the enormous bowl. Her ears perked, hearing a gurgle of water from within it. Looking inside the bowl, she gasped. The interior swirled with bright colors of purple, blue, and green, like a polished abalone shell, and it was filling with water. There was a flash of red again at the periphery of her vision, and the whisper of a feminine voice speaking another tongue. When she turned to look, a bar of soap had appeared at the bowl's edge. She suspected she was meant to take a bath, and it was unwise to offend the Fae ... also, she felt as though she had a cave's worth of grime covering her skin. Removing her clothes, she slipped into the rapidly filling water. It was just on the verge of being too hot. When Cherie glanced back, her clothes were gone.

She leaned back in the shell. There were no mirrors. Was that to keep away Magickal spies and ensure her privacy? Would she care if Jack saw her in the bath ... once, the thought would have warmed her deeper than the water, made her heart pound, and left her breathless. Now?

He was still infuriatingly bossy. He was also still handsome, and when she was mad at him, he still came to her aid—lighting her way in the cave and spying for her.

She flicked her fingers through the water. He'd also as much as said that there could never be anything real between them. She wasn't sure if their relationship could be more than unrequited if she'd want it. That last acknowledgement brought grief, not like the grief that was the loss of Nnenne, but grief nonetheless, and she found herself lingering in the tub too long.

When she got out, her clothes had been returned, and they were clean.

As soon as she dried off and put them on, the heavy copper door swung open, and the charm-key at her neck got cold. A Fae woman stood in the doorway's arch, flanked by another woman and a man.

"Good afternoon," said the woman.

It was the first time Cherie realized it was not morning. She glanced at the window, and noticed it was slightly darker than when she awoke.

"Good afternoon," Cherie said, trying to keep their interactions equal, determined not to owe even a salutation. Yet, she did owe them: escape from the Queen's forces, a night and a day of perfect sleep, the cleaning of her clothes, and the bath. The Fae never did anything without some exchange.

"We are to escort you to Solien." There was something about the way she said it, a cold light in her eyes, a sharpness of her smile, that made Cherie think she might have just said, "And now I will pull out your fingernails."

Survival instincts came rushing back to her. Squaring her shoulders, Cherie didn't thank the Fae woman or even incline her head in acknowledgement.

The man smiled. "Well met, Princess Charming." Which made the two women smile, like he'd told a great joke ... a joke Cherie was the butt of.

Cherie almost sagged, but then she remembered Grendel ripping off the silver hand of the man who'd tried to touch her.

"Where is my grandmother?" she asked.

Their smiles slipped.

"My grandmother, the vampire?" she asked as sweetly as she could.

The three drew back. The woman's lip lifted in a way that Cherie suspected was supposed to be disgust, but actually looked a bit like fear. She glanced to the bed. "She insisted on remaining with you. She's under the bed."

Cherie's eyes followed the Fae woman's glance. Past the tree-stump bed's lion claw feet were deep shadows from which emerged the faintest whisper, a sigh, or a growl. Cherie would never have thought knowledge of a vampire sleeping under her bed would make her feel relieved, but it did.

"She will join you later," said the woman, scowling.

A hiss came from beneath the bed. "Yesss, I will."

The Fae shivered.

Cherie stood taller. "Lead away."

They passed through corridors, some lined with doors, some not, some half-open to a garden, where the scent of flowers almost overwhelmed the scents of Ember and ozone. Sometimes they passed what might have been mirrors on the walls, but they were all draped with cloth. Reflexively, Cherie's eyes went to them anyway. After Jack had declared they could never be together, she'd tried to train herself not to look for him in every mirror she passed. She'd failed, obviously.

Past when Cherie thought the building they were in could no longer go on, they entered what she thought was a courtyard garden, except when Cherie looked up, she saw a ceiling with ribs of silvery metal with what may have been glass in between. Through two lines of trees, at the end of a pathway of gray stones, was a throne of wood. Like the bed she'd slept on, the throne seemed to have been carved from a tree stump, and like the bed, there were indications of fire at the ragged edges of the throne's top. Sitting on the throne was the Fae man with the red-orange eyes.

Her escorts walked with her until she stood just before him. One of them bowed and gestured to the throne. "Charming Princess, I present you to King Solien," and then they all literally vanished. The chill of her charm vanished with them.

Cherie blinked up at Solien. Except for his seat upon the throne and the imperious nature all Fae seemed to have, there was nothing in his clothing or manner that suggested he was a monarch.

Solien smiled. Rising, he cocked his head. "My Charming Princess Peacekeeper. I trust your rest was ... safe?"

"Yes," she said, biting her tongue just before adding, "Thank you." Sometimes such simple niceties were scorned by Fae, especially if what they had done they hadn't done for you at all, or if they had only done what they were obligated to do. She nervously touched the charm-key, reassuring herself with its warmth. Despite his sneer and haughtiness, this Fae meant her no harm.

Still, she did not know him, and he was Fae. He hadn't done anything out of the goodness of his heart.

"I am much relieved." His lips lifted in a sneer. "I have a debt I must repay, you see."

"I am certain you are in no debt to me," Cherie suggested.

Solien tilted his head. "True. My people have enjoyed using the roads of Somer when they were shorter than our own, but as we keep away the

dragons, trolls, and other ilk, we are even. As your *friend*, Geoff, has so often pointed out.”

Cherie’s stomach pinched. He knew Geoff? If he knew Geoff, what else did he know?

His jaw grew tight. “No, I refer to another debt.”

Cherie blinked.

Rising, Solien flicked his hand. There was a click, and through the trees, a door opened. “Seeing to your protection means seeing you eat. Come, I have some friends you’ll want to see.”

“Grendel?” Cherie asked in confusion, as she had no friends in Fairy. But no, that couldn’t be right. Sunlight was streaming through the door, filling the space with Ember laden light. It should have warmed Cherie; instead she fought a chill.

Guiding her to the door, Solien asked, “You would call the vampire your friend?”

She bristled. “I’d call her my grandmother.”

Solien laughed aloud. “And that is why you are the Charming Princess Peacekeeper.”

There was the name again. She felt its pull deep in her gut.

“I was not aware that I have friends in Fairy,” she said as they strode through an open-air garden. Above the treetops, she saw they were completely surrounded by a sort of fortress, or maybe a palace, that was carved from the living rock she’d noticed earlier. It wasn’t precisely one building, but many linked together by a spider web network of enclosed halls and terraces.

Solien spoke conversationally. “Well, they are in Fairy now. I have to keep them safe, you see.” The last words he bit out, and all the hairs on the back of her neck rose.

Stopping suddenly, Solien cocked his head as though hearing a far-off sound. “I regret I will not be able to guide you the rest of the way myself.”

He clapped his hands, and a man emerged from the surrounding trees. He was like all the Fae that Cherie had seen so far: lovely and ethereal. He didn't look wicked, but Cherie's necklace grew cold again. "My steward will take you the rest of the way," Solien said. And, with that, he vanished.

The Steward nodded infinitesimally at her, and without a word led her through the garden. Cherie didn't know what to do but follow. They crossed a stream on a bridge of stones, through grasses as high as her head and by an enormous tree, its trunk covered in rich green moss. The weather was perfect, neither too hot nor too cold, and the garden was lovely in its semi-wildness. Above Cherie's head the birds sang in what seemed to be the most perfect melody.

They came to a break in the trees and a wall of the same living rock as the other buildings. It had an archway of the same material, laden with blooming roses. The blooms smelled especially sweet, but Cherie noted wickedly articulated thorns even from a distance. Through the archway came the sound of familiar but frightened whispers. Cherie felt all the blood draining from her face. The Steward turned back to her and smiled.



Jack sank into the dark waters, seeking the path to Fairy. His lungs were bursting ...

No, he was in a dream. He shouted, "I am the master of my dreams!" Each word rose in a bubble to the unseen surface. Glimmers of light arose from the depths, broadened, and lengthened, and Jack found himself staring at the scales of fish standing on their tail fins. Their scales shined as bright as mirrors. Swimming close to one, he saw a long hallway, but a curtain fell over the scaly reflection. The water abruptly drained away. Jack was standing on a slippery, wet, gray, slate floor. The fish morphed into mirrors, and he was surrounded. He was in a hall of mirrors, but all of them were

covered on the opposite side. Some of the coverings appeared to be linen bed sheets; others were more exotic: gauze-like spider silk, sheets of moss, feathery wings, or woven tapestries and sophisticated embroidery—Jack saw the backs of those, where the threads were delicately knotted, the images in reverse. The images, always of Magickal creatures, appeared to move. Jack saw himself reflected faintly in the mirrors, sometimes recognizably, oftentimes distorted: stretched, shrunken, fat, thin, upside down, or wavering between options.

He shook the water from his body. The moving tapestries, the maze of the place ... he was definitely “seeing” into Fairy. While he moved down the hall, he knocked on each mirror and called out, “Cherie?” And he heard his own voice echoing back to him, “Cherie? Cherie? Cherie?”

He tried poetry. “*Cherie, Cherie, where are thee? Cherie, Cherie, come back to me.*” The echoes of the rhymes became tangled. “Cherie, Cherie, come, Cherie, back ...”

He reminded himself in a chanting singsong, “*Dreams are prisons of the mind, and I am the master of mine.*”

“Mine, Mine, Mine ...” his echo replied.

But maybe he wasn’t the master here. He hadn’t been the master last time he was in Fairy; why should this time be any different? Jack closed his eyes, found the core of his own Magick, and let it explode outward in a tornado of rage. Mirrors crashed around him ... and others rose to take their places. He marched on.

He didn’t know how long it had been when he reached a room within the house of mirrors. It was lit with flaming sconces set in stone walls that were gray and unremarkable; he could have kissed them for their solidity and normalcy after his distorted reflections and the backward tapestry scenes. He kept his distance, though. There were three mirrors in the room, and he was wary. Each one was taller than Jack and as wide as his shoulders, but their frames were different. The leftmost one was gilded and

ornately carved, and Jack's reflection within it appeared to be in an unlit tunnel and the image was dim, as though the mirror's backing was peeling away. Something about the scene was familiar, and Jack found himself walking toward it. A man whispered from somewhere outside Jack's line of sight, "Jack, it's still me, it's still me," and the whisper echoed over and over again, blending with echoes of dripping water. Every hair on the back of Jack's neck rose. In the mirror, his reflection turned away and was suddenly clasping a sword. In the dream of Fairy, Jack's right hand clasped empty air, remembering the blade. It had been made with Ember added in the forging process.

In the reflection, Nevin whispered, "Jack, please," and his face appeared over the shoulder of Jack's reflection—pale in his newly turned state, fangs extended in hunger. There was a stain in his chest from a bullet wound, and a gash on his neck where he'd been bitten. Nevin had been shot in an alley and dragged into the sewers. It had taken three days to find him, and they hadn't been able to stake him in time. The scene wasn't quite right, though; in the real version of the scene, Nevin had been limping. That was why he hadn't been able to use his vampiric speed, and likely why he hadn't attacked. The newly turned were especially ravenous and vicious.

Backing away from Jack, no limp in sight, Nevin held up his hands in surrender—which also wasn't right—he'd lunged at Jack in reality. "I'm still me. Please don't, Jack."

Jack's skin crawled. This wasn't what had happened; this was what Mizuki claimed she'd seen happen in her own dreams. This wasn't real. It wasn't. He was certain.

The Jack in the mirror flung out his free hand, turning the water at Nevin's feet to ice, trapping him in place. In the next instant, his blade swung, severing Nevin's upper torso from his body.

That had really happened, and in the real scene, Nevin's arms had been above his head, palms open, face frozen in shock, just as they were in the

mirror scene. Jack had severed his head, and then crashed onto his knees in the sewer's slurry.

In the stone room, Jack turned away from the scene. It was a warped view of the past, just like the mirrors in the hallway were warped versions of himself. That was all. Nevin had been limping. His hands had thrust toward Jack like claws; he hadn't lifted them in surrender.

Jack wiped his eyes and found himself facing the mirror on the other side of the room. This one had a thick, rectangular frame that looked suspiciously like titanium.

Instead of his reflection, Cherie was there, running toward him. "Jack!" she called out. "Jack, help me!"

He was at the mirror in a heartbeat, hands pressed against it. Cherie was still running toward him, but her steps brought her no closer. "Jack!" she called again.

"I'm here!" he called out. "Cherie!"

If she saw him, she gave no sign. She looked over her shoulder, eyes wide, and then she was plunging to the floor, a shape decked out in familiar rags upon her back. Wicked claws swiped across Cherie's neck before she could even scream. Grendel looked up from where she crouched on Cherie and smiled at Jack before pulling Cherie's head up by the hair with so much force Cherie's spine cracked. The vampire dipped her head to Cherie's neck while Jack watched helplessly.

Grasping the frame, Jack shouted, "Cherie, no!"

Grendel looked up at him and licked bloody lips.

Jack shouted something wordless and full of despair.

"Jack? Jack? Are you there?" the voice was Grendel's, but it wasn't the Grendel in the mirror who was crouched over Cherie; it came from the final mirror.

Whirling to it, Jack threw out a hand, coating the mirror and its simple, silver frame with frost.

In the mirror, Grendel blinked. She was holding a linen sheet that was half draped over the reflection. Pulling it down and tossing it aside, she said, “Nice to see you, too. Look, I know you don’t like me, and I get that, I do, but—”

“What sort of trick is this? You killed her,” Jack shouted, rushing the mirror.

Grendel jumped back. “No, I didn’t! I can’t even find her, so I couldn’t kill her if I wanted to, which I don’t! I fell asleep under her bed—” Jack growled, and Grendel drew back, eyes wide. “To protect her! I was trying to stay close to protect her!”

At that moment, Jack realized that his hands were sparking. He blinked ... He shook himself, looked at the second mirror. In the reflection, Grendel was still there, bent over Cherie’s corpse.

From the last mirror, Grendel whispered, “Jack, Cherie and I fell through a rabbit hole, and I think she’s got worse problems than me. Tall, pointy-eared problems.”

He returned his attention to the Grendel who asked the question. She was in a hallway carved of living rock. Behind her was a window filled with the crimson colors of sunrise or sunset, and the walls seemed to catch the colors and glow.

“Fairy,” he whispered. “You’re in Fairy.” A land of Ember and dreams. He glanced at the mirror where Grendel crouched over Cherie’s body. The Grendel there lifted her head and smiled a smile of bloody fangs. Gore dripped from her lips. But was it just a nightmare?

“Yes, I know,” said the other Grendel. “Can you help me find Cherie? And tell me how to get us out of here? The Fae discuss torture like other people discuss board games.”

The first mirror had shown a fear from his past. The second had shown a fear for the future. The last mirror ... he turned back to the mirror with Grendel in the hallway. A fear of the present?

“Are you real?” he asked.

Pursing her lips, Grendel glanced furtively from side to side and laced her claws in front of her stomach. “That is a very philosophical question, and not very helpful when I’m trying to save a person we both care about. Can you help me find her or not?”

Jack stared at the vampire.

“Well?” Grendel asked.

Nevin’s voice whispered in Jack’s memory, or in the mirror. “Please, Jack, it’s me ...” He had said that in real life. But he had been limping, he had to have been limping, he had to have lunged ...

In the mirror, Grendel growled. “I’ll find her myself.” Spinning, she went to the window. In less than a blink, she’d vanished, and all that was left was the sound of a single pair of hands slowly clapping, growing louder.

Jack’s hands curled into fists; he was certain he knew who was contributing the applause. Sure enough, Solien walked into the mirror view, continuing his slow clap. “Thank you. Thank you, Your Highness.”

Jack’s nostrils flared at his mocking applause and mocking title. He was not royalty. Royalty hadn’t existed until his stepmother crowned herself Queen at the end of the Vampire War. She’d cursed Jack, not given him a title.

“That performance was most illuminating,” Solien continued, pausing his applause.

“What do you want?” Jack growled.

“Out of your pathetic mortal debt,” Solien hissed back.

“I’ve told you, you owe me no debt,” Jack replied.

Solien flushed. “Do you think it can be discharged so easily when all of Fairy knows what you did?”

Jack fought the urge to massage his temples. Grendel’s description of Fairy as “down the rabbit hole,” was incredibly apt. “Please,” he said. “Just

let Cherie go. Then I will be in your debt.”

Solien rolled his eyes. “You are a king—”

Jack shivered. He’d had a nickname, “Storm King,” but it was only that, a nickname given to him by his troops. He hated kings and queens and royalty and the path his stepmother had set the country on. Knowing that his stepmother had crowned herself soon after his nickname had become common knowledge deepened his disdain for the moniker. She’d been threatened by his popularity and power, according to Mizuki. “I’m not—”

Solien roared, “You are a *king*.” His voice dropped to a whisper. “Of storms and of men. You cursed yourself for your People’s sake. Your fate is their fate. Your debts are their debts. Your failures and your victories, too. You. Are. A. King,” Solien sighed. His shoulders fell, and for a moment, he looked almost human. “And I am a king as well. My life and my people’s lives are intertwined. I would take on far greater debts for their sake.”

If dreams were metaphors, and Fairy was a land of dreams, perhaps Jack needed to accept all that Solien said as truth, just wrapped in symbolism. “Wouldn’t your people feel that your debt has been paid if you let Cherie free?”

Cocking his head, Solien batted his eyelashes. “Curious that you don’t add her vampiric grandmother to that request.”

Jack managed to keep his expression neutral, but only just.

Solien smiled sadly. “Kings do have favorites among our subjects, don’t we?”

“Cherie’s not my—”

Solien snorted. “Favorite? Oh, come now.”

“—subject,” Jack finished.

Solien smiled.

Jack sighed and reiterated, “I’m not a king in the human world.”

Solien raised an eyebrow. “If that’s what your enemies think, then they are wrong. How convenient for you.”

Jack closed his eyes and felt the flicker of frustrated electricity at his fingertips. He uncoiled his hands and let it go.

From over his shoulder came the faintest of whispers. “Jack, it’s Missy! They’ve stolen Nefertiti, and I don’t know where they’ve taken her. Please help me; I have to get her back!”

Jack opened his eyes to see Solien wave a hand. “So ... will you continue to be useless on your Favorite’s behalf, or will you try to assist your other subject?”

For a moment, Jack stared at the other man.

Solien huffed. “You cannot help your Charming Princess while she is here, and while she is here, she is safe. You *may* be able to help the other one. She is not here, nor is she safe.”

Fae didn’t lie. Jack felt ill, but he spun away from the mirrors, and all of Fairy crashed around him, shattering into shards that vanished under snowdrifts.

Jack closed his eyes and heard a plaintive *meowing* and Missy’s urgent, “Jack, help me find her. They’re on the highway!” He focused on the direction of Missy’s voice, whispered a rhyme under his breath, opened his eyes, and, for a moment, was mute with shock.

He was in a dream version of the Queen’s fortress in the Southern Magickal states, within the walls, in the garden ... was this his imagination or ...

There was the grating noise of sharpening knives, and a full-length mirror rose from the ground.

No, she couldn’t be doing this again ... he cursed, realizing they were once again sharing the same focus—this time it was Missy and Nefertiti. His stepmother stepped out of the glass. “You’d fight me for a measly *cat*?”

She was fighting over a cat and expending prodigious amounts of Magick to do so. Jack was too furious to point that out. He felt he might self-combust, and lightning sparked from his fingers. Nefertiti was a bit of

Somer, a place where the paths of Magickal and non-Magickal intersected, lived, and loved in peace. Or, at least, they had.

The Queen sneered at his hands. “I’ve had time to learn your tricks, too, Yukio.”

Jack shook his head, the name slipping through his mind like sand through his fingers. Yukio ... that was part of his given name.

The Queen raised her hands, and a ball of lightning formed between them.

He should have been afraid. Jack’s lip curled, and he shook his head. “She’s not *just* a cat, and in a just world she’d have a say on whether or not she joined you.”

He heard Solien’s voice above his stepmother’s cry of rage. “Spoken like a true king,” but he was too busy dodging lightning to do more than snarl.



Bowing to Cherie, the Steward indicated the archway with his arm. Cherie followed the indicated direction into a meadow with a long table laden with food. She was vaguely aware that it was sumptuous and grand, but barely looked at it. Her eyes were drawn to the people sitting at the table: Ruth, Golly, and their parents, Geoff’s parents, Cillian’s mother, young Magickal Thomas with his father and brothers dressed in hunting gear, Roxie’s owners, Eben’s owners, Natalie and Frank, and even Sheriff Easterman. A donkey brayed in a nearby corral with fence posts made of what looked suspiciously like gigantic rib bones. “Eben!” Cherie gasped. Roxie the cow lowed beside the donkey, and Red Rebel, the Magickal squirrel and crasher of more than one of Cherie’s parties, chattered anxiously in a tree. Somewhere she couldn’t see, there was a flutter of feathers and a soft *hoo-hoo*. There was no sign of Cillian, but his motorbike was leaning against

one of the fence posts, and Bus was parked in the field among some wildflowers.

Natalie rose from the table first. “Oh, Cherie, we’d hoped—”

Frank took Natalie’s hand, and from his shoulders came Ghenghis’s ferociously loud squeak.

Almost every one of Somer’s Magickal community, creatures and their respective families, was at the table. Even Sheriff Easterman was there—he’d often referred to Red Rebel as “Deputy Red,” when he wasn’t just calling him “Red” and “Varmint.” The only people missing were Geoff, Cillian, Chance, Missy, and Nefertiti. At that thought, from the other side of the table came a soft, “Oh,” and there was Missy with Nefertiti clutched in her arms, guards of Fae melting out of sight beside her.

Missy’s eyes fell on Cherie, and she said, “Thank goodness, you’re safe.”

Somewhere behind Cherie, the Steward chuckled, but when Cherie turned, he’d faded from sight.

Mr. Fischer, Ruth and Golly’s father, peered at Missy over his glasses. “We aren’t allowed to leave.”

For a moment, Missy’s cheeks paled, but then she lifted her chin. “They probably have a task for us to perform. We’ll manage.”

A horrible thought occurred to Cherie. “How will Somer manage without all of you?” Her eyes flicked to Geoff’s parents. Mr. Evans was the official Mayor, but Mrs. Evans was a force—for the good, in Cherie’s opinion—in town politics as well. Who was keeping order if Sheriff Easterman was here? Ms. Fischer was the town’s only lawyer; Mr. Fischer taught math to middle schoolers and high school students.

Sheriff Easterman smiled grimly. “The Queen will fill our positions in our absence.”

Cherie gulped and swore the temperature dropped. The Queen’s forces would chase away the brownies that were so helpful with housework and

farming and close the gates to Fairy, which might bring nastier creatures to Somer. They'd also close the portals where those creatures came through.

Missy lifted her chin. "Not if we get back sooner rather than later. In the meantime—" She eyed the table. "We should eat." It was so practical, and so Missy, Cherie smiled.

Mr. Evans, Geoff's father, said, "That is the most sensible suggestion anyone here has had."

His wife raised an eyebrow at him, but Cherie said, "I think Missy's right. They must want *something* from us." Something to repay that mysterious debt. "Whatever it is, I don't want to face it hungry." She joined them at the table. Everyone slowly began filling their plates. Just to make conversation, Cherie asked how the Fischers had wound up in Fairy. The table exploded with stories.

Officer Easterman said, "Red stole my honey roasted peanuts, and I chased after the little varm—ow!" He rubbed his head, and an acorn clattered on the table. Red erupted into angry squeaks above them.

Mrs. Evans, Geoff's mom, said, "We thought we heard Chance barking. We went down the garden path, and then couldn't find our way back."

There was a rush of other stories, but Cherie's attention was caught by Mr. Fischer. He was sitting beside her, and said so softly, he might have been talking to himself, "We were almost stopped at a checkpoint."

No one except his wife and Cherie seemed to have heard. Tommy's father was describing a Magickal white stag they'd seen. Everyone knew white stags could grant you wishes and wanted to hear how they followed it. But Cherie remembered how her heart had raced as the Queen's forces had pursued her the night before, and she kept her focus on the Fischers.

Mr. Fischer continued. "We could see them on the road up ahead. We didn't know what to do, but—"

Just out of sight, Golly said, "I could have taken them."

Nine-year-old Magickal Ruth Fischer, creator of Golly, was sitting in between her parents. Despite her journey, she was the picture of decorum. Her thick chestnut hair was brushed back and held with barrettes, her clothing was neat and tidy, her cheeks healthy and pink, and her eyes held no sign of fear. “She could have.”

Cherie gaped. Golly was a golem, made of clay, like the famous golems from Jewish mythology. Not all golems from Jewish myth were violent; however, there were tales of murderous rampages, and the Fischers took great care to make sure neither Golly nor Ruth believed in violence as the first or even second resort. Mrs. Fischer whispered, “Girls, that isn’t how we handle things.”

Golly peeked her head in between Cherie and Mr. Fischer. She’d been made of Pennsylvania kaolinite clay and was a gentle buff color, nearly white. Once she’d had a simple round head and clumsy ovals for her body and limbs, but over the years, Ruth had added more clay and more details. From afar she could pass for a slender child of two or three. “But I could have,” Golly insisted.

Ruth stuck out her chin. “Golly is very strong. Bullets don’t hurt her—I know ‘cause when we were in Franklin, she got shot at by some farmer who thought she was possessed, and if she loses an arm or somethin’, I can just put it right back on.”

“But we’re very glad you didn’t have to do that,” Mr. Fischer said.

Ruth and Golly looked at each other and shrugged.

In all her years, Cherie had never seen Golly have any inclinations toward violence. “You wouldn’t really want to hurt them,” Cherie said, smiling with cheer she didn’t quite feel.

Golly met her gaze. “I ... Well ... If I think very hard about it ... I ...” She looked away. “They might have taken me away from Ruth. I couldn’t let that happen, but we’re together now so I don’t have to.” Golly turned to her parents. “May I go play with Eben while you eat?”

“Be gentle,” Mrs. Fischer said.

“Of course I’ll be gentle,” Golly said. “It’s Eben.” And she waded through the grass and flowers that were waist high next to her petite body.

Mrs. Fischer said, “She seems more like herself now,” not sounding at all convinced.

The other side of the table was still in a rollicking conversation about the white stag, but the corner where Cherie and the Fischers sat was quiet. The quiet seemed to reach Missy too, because she turned away from the others and looked at them with concern. “How did you get here, Cherie?” Missy asked.

Cherie froze at the question.

Sheriff Easterman said, “That’s the old Ember road bus over there, isn’t it?”

“Yes, I came by that bus, actually,” Cherie replied, not wanting to tell the whole story and hoping that would be the end of it.

“Tommy said it had bullet holes in it,” said Mr. Evans from the center of the table. When did he start listening?

“Ah ... well ... some of the Queen’s Guards followed us into Fairy,” Cherie said.

“Where are the drivers?” Mrs. Evans asked. “And the other passengers?”

Cherie took a sip of whatever was in the fluted glass beside her plate to try and avoid answering. She remembered blood blooming from the driver’s body. “They, um ... got off earlier.”

“Did you escape all alone?” Ruth asked, eyes becoming enormous. She ripped off a too-huge hunk of bread and stuffed it in her mouth. She couldn’t quite close her jaw, and it puffed out like a cloud. As the girl chewed, it shrank and disappeared. Her parents, normally sticklers for such things, were too focused on Cherie to notice her manners.

“You said ‘us’ ...” That was from Ms. Jones, Cillian’s mom. You could see some of Cillian in Ms. Jones. Their features were the same shape. However, other than that, she was the opposite of her charming Magickal son in almost every way. She was a tiny, sparrow-like woman, not particularly short, but very thin—everyone said with Cillian in the house it was no wonder, she couldn’t possibly get enough to eat. Her hair wasn’t brunette or blond; her eyes were a muddy hazel. Not only was she physically unimposing, but she was also shy. Cherie had never heard her raise her voice.

Ms. Jones straightened slightly. “Were you with Cillian and Geoff?” There was such a look of hopefulness there; Ms. Jones’s cheeks were flushed, and her eyes were unusually bright. Cherie hated to quash her hopes. “No, I’m sorry,” said Cherie. “They left before the Queen’s men arrived in Somer.”

Ms. Jones’s shoulders fell.

Mr. Fischer said, “Be grateful. We may be stuck here.”

Ms. Jones tilted her head from side to side. “I know, I just ...” And for a few moments Cherie’s side of the table was talking about Cillian and Geoff.

Taking a bite of her food, Cherie breathed an inward sigh of relief. The questions about her journey to Fairy were over. She didn’t know how she’d explain Grendel. But then Ruth—gulping down the last of the bread—said, “So you didn’t come with Cillian and Geoff, but did you come alone?”

And everyone’s attention was on her again.

“Cherie?” said Mr. Evans.

A memory came to Cherie, cold and clear, but fragmented, like a piece of a story ripped from a newspaper. She remembered being a child, at a school function with Nnenne. She’d been clasping Nnenne’s hand, and from behind she’d heard a whisper, “I can’t believe the doctor came back to Somer. I heard she was a sympathizer.”

Sympathizers were people who didn't believe that humans and vampires should be at war. They were generally viewed in nearly the same way as vampire groupies. Had Nnenne ever publicly spoken out? Cherie couldn't remember.

"You look like you might cry," said Mrs. Evans.

"I was thinking about my grandmother," Cherie admitted.

That earned her pitying looks. Mrs. Evans took her hand. "Oh, Cherie, we forgot how doubly hard this must all be for you."

"Was my grandmother a sympathizer?" Cherie blurted.

Mr. and Mrs. Fischer's eyes went wide. Tommy's father choked on whatever he was eating. Ms. Jones put down a glass with a trembling hand. Flushing, Mr. Evans sputtered, "Oh, well, now ... there was talk about that ..."

"A long time before you were born!" declared Mrs. Evans.

"But they were just rumors, I'm sure," said Mr. Evans, recovering fast.

Giving Cherie a strange look, Missy turned to the others with a practiced smile. "No one has asked how Nefertiti and I came to Fairy."

There were murmurs around the table, and from her seat next to Missy, Nefertiti *meowed* as though for emphasis.

"Nefertiti was taken prisoner by the Queen's men," Missy continued.

Ghengis gave an angry squeak and puffed up to twice his normal size.

Missy went on, "I tried to contact Jack to see if he could tell me where she was being held, but he wasn't in Somer's mirrors anymore. I had to follow the Queen's convoy in my car—I had no idea which truck she was in, though. Luckily, Nefertiti managed to escape on her own."

"Is escaping her talent?" Tommy asked.

Nefertiti huffed and licked her shoulder.

"That's every cat's talent," Tommy's dad replied to general laughter.

Nefertiti purred.

“I saw a black shadow beside the road, and there she was!” Missy continued.

The conversation turned to Missy and the lack of Jack in the mirrors. Cherie’s hand went to the pocket of her jeans ... where, of course, there was no compact mirror. Jack had confessed to Cherie more than once he could get lost in the “storm of his own thoughts.”

Once he’d even confessed she helped him be found. That was before he’d told her there could never be anything real between them, before he stopped talking to her alone, before she began to see him only distantly in other people’s mirrors ... before Nnenna had gotten sick, and she barely saw him even when he was there.

There was so much and so little between them. Still, she found herself desperately wishing that he wasn’t lost in his storms now.



This was the reason why they called me King of Storms. It was a fleeting thought. Lightning was ripping from Jack’s fingertips, crackling around his stepmother in wicked whips, driven not by focus but by fury. She’d destroyed his home out of paranoia not once, but twice. He roared and thunder rumbled through the courtyard. New streams of lightning burned from his fingers.

Crying out, his stepmother backstepped, throwing up her hands and conjuring a mirror that sucked the lightning into its depths just in time. Jack cursed. He wanted to keep her busy, not drive her back through her mirrors—which was surely her next move—but Magick was flowing through him, and it felt good and right. He had to believe even in the real world his hands were sparking ... He’d done this in the real world, before he was cursed, before he was only Jack Frost the gentle neighborhood ghost ...

His stepmother panted, and Jack clenched his fists to keep from hurling another attack at her, to give her a chance to recover, to keep her focused on him and distracted from the real world.

It was a mistake.

Mirrors shot up around him on every side, much like they had in the Fairy hall of mirrors, but these mirrors were occupied. In one, Cherie was walking down her upstairs hallway, wearing only a nightshirt ... he hadn't meant to see her like that. He turned away and saw himself tutoring Geoff and Cillian in Magickal Theory at the Evanses' place as Mrs. Evans read in the background, laughing to herself at something the boys had said. Jack spun away again ... and found himself in Cherie and Dr. Anna's house at a party, where Jack had chatted with the sheriff about, of all things, classic pre-Change automobiles. The sheriff had talked to Jack without fear or any sign of loathing, as though Jack were a *real* person. Off in another corner, Cherie glanced over her shoulder at him and beamed.

With a growl, Jack threw up his hands and threw lightning at the mirrors. They shattered at his feet, and his stepmother laughed. "Pathetic." She had a ball of lightning growing between her hands, nearly as wide as her arms spread. With a shout, Jack flung lightning from his fingers. It only made the sphere she held grow larger, and his stepmother tossed it in his direction with a grin.

He almost prepared to catch it. But then he remembered. He was the King of Storms. Electricity still leaping from his fingers, Jack rushed into the sphere of lightning. His skin went hot, his muscles jerked, and for a moment he was pain ... but it was a *dream*, and he willed it away as he let more lightning flow through him, growing the sphere she had created, until it exploded outward.

He caught sight of his stepmother, mouth wide in shock, slipping back into a mirror ... and then he collapsed on all fours in a snow drift, the courtyard gone, his stepmother vanished. If only she'd been so easy to push

from his real life ... of course there had never been a chance for an honest battle in the real world. He remembered her telling Mizuki once, in a light chiding voice, “Never announce to your enemies that you want to destroy them, dear. Just do it.”

Jack hadn’t considered himself his stepmother’s enemy, even though voicing his opinion against going to war with the Fae was loyalty, not treason. He hadn’t truly understood she was his enemy until the curse.

The wind howled around him. Climbing to his feet, feeling drained, and as though he might slip from the fray into a deeper slumber at any moment, he stammered a quick bit of not-quite-rhyme into the gale. “*I am your sovereign, tell me what happened to Cherie’s friends!*”

He kept his eyes closed as the voices rose again. “Girl and her cat slipped into Fairy, just like the donkey and the damned cow and the others!”

The others? Jack swore under his breath. Had all of Somer moved to Fairy? Blindly plunging into the snow, he imagined the last mirrors he’d seen in the Fae realm.

The moaning wind vanished. The scent of snow was replaced by dust. Jack opened his eyes and found himself once more in the Fairy room where Nevin still implored, “I’m still me,” and Grendel laughed above a dying Cherie. He kept his attention straight ahead. The mirror of the present had changed. Jack found himself looking up the nose of a man with a long white beard wearing a tall cone-shaped red cap. The man’s gaze fell to Jack and his brows shot up. Lifting the mirror, the man said something in his own tongue, and then Jack was looking up at Solien. The man in the pointed cone-shaped cap was obviously very short, because Jack found himself staring up at the Fae lord from the level of the lord’s knees.

Solien smiled down at him. “You’re back. You’ll be pleased to know I helped your subjects while you distracted the Queen of your Southern Lands. They’re safe.” His smile dropped. “For now. I can’t say how long I can keep them from some of my people who have—from what I understand

—rather different ideas about hospitality than humans do. It has come to my attention that your kind might even call it torture.” He huffed. “Mortals. Bother.”

“You could let them go,” Jack suggested.

Solien scowled into the distance. “As I’ve said, they wouldn’t be safe if I did that. But I’m working on it.”

On the Fairy side of the mirror, birds called. The Fae man looked down at Jack again. “Are you so determined to be useless that you’ll peer through a serving platter?”

Was that the reason for the odd angle? Jack blinked and surveyed the mirror on his side. It had been full length; now it was only as long as his forearm.

Solien sighed. “I can allow you to watch; it might even be helpful eventually, but I can’t let you interfere.”

Jack glared at the Fae man.

Solien raised an eyebrow and twirled a finger in the air, whispering words in his own tongue. Ending the verse, he pointed in Jack’s direction and gave him a grim smile. “You may be King of Storms, but I am a king of Fairy.”

Jack’s mouth felt as though it were stuffed with cotton. He tried to speak, to shout, but no words came out. And then it hit him. Whatever Solien was about to do, was something that would make him want to scream.

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CHAPTER 12



Cherie didn't recognize herself. In the garden in Fairy, at the table beneath the trees, her friends and neighbors chatted and laughed. It might have been the food, which was excellent, or the surroundings, which were beautiful, but despite the fact that they were prisoners, the people of Somer were becoming increasingly cheerful.

She tried to smile and appear just as happy but found her thoughts turning inward. She felt guilty, like she was betraying Grendel by saying nothing of the vampire's help in keeping her safe. And as the last of the sunlight faded away, she became increasingly worried, not that Grendel would appear, but that she wouldn't. Which was wrong. Grendel admitted she was dangerous, and that she wasn't entirely to be trusted. But if an untrustworthy person—or vampire, or whatever—told you they were untrustworthy, didn't that make them trustworthy? No, that didn't seem right. But perhaps there were degrees of trustworthiness?

Closing her eyes, she massaged her temple.

"Cherie," Missy whispered.

Cherie started. Missy wrapped her hand around Cherie's and gave her a gentle smile, and Nefertiti gazed at her with what, in a cat, might be concern. The conversation at the table didn't lull; everyone was focused on some story Tommy's father was telling.

“I’m so sorry,” Missy said.

Cherie stared at her blankly.

Missy gave her fingers a gentle squeeze. “You look like someone who is trying to smile, not like someone who is happy. This has been a difficult time for everyone, but it’s been worse for you.”

Cherie’s lips parted. It *had* been worse for her ... how did Missy know?

Missy continued, “Losing your grandmother ... *and* all this.”

All the air rushed out of Cherie. She’d lost Nnenne, too. For a few minutes, she hadn’t precisely forgotten, but her mind had been elsewhere. She wondered if it was very usual for people to bury unpleasant truths of their real worlds with existential meanderings. She didn’t quite laugh; the sound that came out was a sort of burble.

The conversation stopped.

Missy pulled Cherie to her in a hug. “You still have us, Cherie.”

“Of course you do, Sweetheart,” said Natalie.

“Oh, Honey,” said Mrs. Evans. “Of course you do!”

Murmurs of assent went up around the table. Frank voiced his anger at Cherie not being allowed to stay for her grandmother’s cremation, and Natalie her sadness for the same, and others chimed in. There were many assurances that, as soon as the Queen’s recruiters left Somer, it would be safe for Cherie to return—everyone seemingly having forgotten that they weren’t allowed to leave Fairy. Mrs. Fischer said when Cherie was ready—because certainly Cherie had experienced a tremendous shock and needed a chance to mourn—she could ply her trade as a midwife and general surgeon. Officer Easterman agreed—everyone knew Cherie could deliver a baby, set a bone, and sew neat stitches, and she could do it without the patient feeling the slightest twinge of pain. They reminded her she didn’t have to worry about being destitute. She was a member of their community, *one of them*, and if she needed anything, all she had to do was ask.

Cherie's eyes became blurry with tears. She felt incredibly loved, like she did really belong. For a few minutes, she imagined that her life really would go back to being *almost* normal. The journey of the last day—the death, the threats of worse—she almost forgot. Missy took her hand. The conversation returned to other things. In the trees, Somer's Magickal owl hooted, and torches all around the table flared to life, lit by invisible hands as the last bit of sunlight vanished over the horizon ... and then from somewhere beyond the torchlight, Grendel cried, "Cherie!"

All conversation stopped, and heads turned. All that was visible of Grendel were two glowing eyes.

For a moment, Cherie sat paralyzed along with everyone else. In the next moment, she was disgusted with herself. Rising, she called out, "Grandmother, come to the table. You must be hungry." There was one last empty seat at the table, and she gestured to it.

Grendel came forward slowly, ducking her head. She was cleaner than she'd been the night before. Her white hair was braided in a single neat plait. It looked like the same invisible servants who had cleaned Cherie's clothes had also cleaned and mended her rags. She didn't look quite so frightening; the hollows in her cheeks seemed not so deep. But her eyes still glowed, and where she clutched her rags, Grendel's nails were claws.

Cherie turned fast to her neighbors. "Everyone, this is Grendel ...". There was a chorus of exhales at the name. Cherie hastily continued, "My other grandmother, who helped me escape the Queen's recruiters, and worse. I ... I ... had some trouble with the bus drivers."

A twig cracked just behind Cherie. She felt Grendel's presence there, and every hair on the back of her neck stood on end. She might have shivered.

"Errr ... hello ... everyone?" said Grendel, sounding like a sweet old lady.

There was a moment of absolute silence. Her neighbors' eyes were wide, but Cherie thought it was going relatively well ... when Frank suddenly stood up, shouting, "Cherie, look out, she's a vampire!"

Chairs tumbled to the ground, and shrieks filled the air as the table cleared. Cherie held her ground. "Everyone, she's my friend! She saved my life."

"By bringing you to Fairy?" Mr. Fischer exclaimed. "She's one of them."

"I can break the monster, Father," said Golly, somewhere out of sight.

Mrs. Fischer cried, "Golly, no!"

And Ruth said, "Why not?"

There was a whistling through the air just by Cherie's ear, and a *thwack* against a tree behind her. Cherie blinked in that direction and gasped. There was a knife, still vibrating, embedded in the trunk ... but no Grendel.

At that thought, from below the table the vampire whispered, "Maybe I should leave?"

"No," said Cherie, at the same time Solien's voice rolled through the garden like low thunder. "Excellent, you're all here."



Jack was staring mutely at the people and animals of Somer through the serving plate. It hadn't taken any time for the people of Somer to realize what Grendel was. Which was a relief on the one hand, but on the other, when Tommy's brother plucked the carving knife from whatever the roast meat was and threw it in the vampire's direction, it passed far too close to Cherie's head.

And Jack could do nothing about it. He was useless, as Solien promised he would be, and yet he stayed ... and he saw something curious. Fairy had much more ambient Ember than Earth, even more than Somer, and it was

growing thicker as Solien approached. It also grew thicker around Cherie as she looked at her gathered friends and neighbors and declared, “Grendel saved my life, she hasn’t hurt anyone here, and we must treat her with kindness.”

“What would your real grandmother say?” Natalie gasped, at the same time Frank said, “Get away from her, Cherie.”

“My grandmother would say the same thing!” Cherie declared with odd conviction. Jack’s jaw fell, and then he found himself silently shouting, “No, she wouldn’t.” He gripped the mirror in both hands and fought the desire to shake it. Cherie was obviously grieving, and her grief was making her delusional.

Solien was very close to the table now, one of his eyebrows was cocked, and he wore a bemused smile.

Mrs. Fischer said, “Cherie, Honey, just step away from it. Your grandmother died, and you’re hurting, but you’ve chosen the wrong replacement for that hole in your heart.”

Tommy’s father muttered, “Even the ghost in the mirror would be better.”

“This is fascinating,” Solien declared, quite loudly, and the people of Somer glanced at the Fae king, but then Grendel poked her head above the table, and all attention shifted back to the fiend. Cherie put her hand on the vampire’s head and smoothed down her hair. Jack swallowed bile and noted that the people of Somer had grabbed knives and forks and were brandishing them like weapons. They remained fixated on the vampire, even when Solien spoke. “I would love to see if the Charming Princess Peacekeeper could convince you to trust my Little Sister but, some of you have expressed a desire to leave.”

That got their attention, and Jack’s, too.

“The problem is,” Solien said, raising a hand and pointing a finger. “I can only send you back if you can be safe, and the only way you can be safe

is if your Charming Princess here performs a quest—”

“What?” Jack tried to say, at the same time Grendel said, “I’ll go with you ... granddaughter.” And Missy said, “Charming Princess? Cherie?”

Solien waved a hand. “It’s a very dangerous quest that might kill her.”

Jack shook the mirror and cursed. Solien let his gaze meet Jack’s across the meadow before returning it to Cherie. “But ultimately the only way for you to be truly safe,” the Fae King continued, “or at least, as safe as you can *mortally* be, is for her to journey to the Land of the Dreaming Dead and wake up the one you know as Jack Frost.”

Jack threw himself against the mirror. “No!” He shouted the word, and made not a sound, but Solien seemed to have heard. The Fae King smiled at Jack, revealing sharp teeth.



“Wake Frost, break the curse, and I will set your people free,” the Fae King finished.

Cherie’s mind spun. Jack was cursed, as Nnenne suspected. He was not trapped in mirrors, but the “Land of the Dead.” There were many lands of the dead. There was the Heaven and Hell conceived of in Christianity, there was the Hel of the Norse, the Hell of Buddhism, and the spirit worlds of Japanese Shintoism and of her own Igbo ancestors.

But no, Solien had specified “Land of the *Dreaming* Dead.” She wracked her mind, but couldn’t recall any such place.

With a name like “Land of the Dreaming Dead,” maybe Jack was cursed *and* a ghost?

She swallowed. In Greek and Native American mythology, trying to retrieve ghosts from lands of the dead and spirits went badly.

She clasped the Amadioha charm-key at her neck; it wasn’t cold ... no matter how ominous the task sounded, Solien was not trying to cause her

harm. To set her people free, she needed to go to The Land of the Dreaming Dead ... whichever land of the dead that was.

“Cherie?” Missy said. “But she is hardly more Magickal, than, well, me.” A line flitted between Missy’s brows, and Cherie thought she could see Missy thinking, “And she’s even less resourceful.” Which was probably true. Missy had saved her from the Queen’s agents not once, but twice the day before, if you counted the rope ladder.

Missy scooped up Nefertiti and narrowed her eyes at Solien. “Sending Cherie to the Land of the Dead, or Dreaming Dead, would be a death sentence.”

“It has to be the Charming Princess,” Solien replied, gazing at Cherie.

“Why?” asked Cillian’s mom.

Chuckling, Solien said, “Because it is as it is foretold in your tales.” Which was no help at all, but before Cherie could ask for clarification, Tommy blurted, “Does she have to go alone?”

“Golly and I will go with her,” Ruth declared, and Mrs. Fischer gasped.

Missy stood straighter. “You, Tommy, and Golly are children, Ruth, but Nefertiti and I can go.”

“And Ghengis Khan and me!” declared Frank.

“Oh, not without me!” Natalie exclaimed.

“Red and I are coming,” said Officer Easterman, and at his words, the Magickal Squirrel leaped from the tree, directly to his head.

“We’ll go too,” said Tommy’s father and older brother. A moment later, Mr. Fischer, and Roxie and Eben’s owners had volunteered to come, too. Eben brayed from the fence in what might have been a complaint at being left out. Golly crossed her arms and declared she wasn’t too young, because she wasn’t a girl, but a golem, an ancient creature, and Ruth should come because her Magick was stronger than anyone else’s even if she was only nine. “That’s true!” Ruth said before Mrs. Fischer told her to hush.

Cherie bit her lip to hold back the tears threatening to fall. With all the people that loved her, perhaps she would have a chance. Holding out her arms, Cherie went to Missy. Setting Nefertiti down, her friend caught her in a hug, whispering, "It's okay, I understand. You were alone. We forgive you."

Cherie's arms went slack. Forgive her for what?

Behind her, Grendel murmured, "The more, the merrier."

"She doesn't need you, Fiend," Frank declared.

"See?" Missy whispered. "All forgiven."

Cherie gulped. She was being "forgiven" for Grendel, who'd saved her.

"I'm going anyway," Grendel replied. "Errr ... right, Cherie?"

Cherie broke away from Missy.

Officer Easterman approached them. "We're not taking the vampire with us. Let the elves deal with her."

"She'd help us," Cherie protested.

"She'd bite us as soon as our backs were turned," Natalie whispered.

"Your backs are turned now," Grendel observed.

Which made everyone spin to the vampire fast ... but Grendel was gone.

"Is it gone?" whispered Mrs. Fischer.

A flicker in the corner of her eye made Cherie's gaze dart in the other direction. Grendel winked from behind her neighbors' backs, and then declared, "Your backs are still turned."

Everyone jumped, except Cherie. She scowled at the vampire. "This is not the time to joke, Grandmother."

Everyone took a step back from Cherie, except Golly, who came closer so she could stand in front of Ruth.

Grendel vanished, and then huffed beside Cherie's shoulder. "If you can't laugh in times of stress, what can you do?" Louder, Grendel declared, "See, I haven't killed any of you."

“And I haven’t ripped your arms off,” Golly growled at the vampire.

Grendel’s jaw fell. With seeming earnestness, she asked, “Can you do that? Would they grow back?” It reminded Cherie that Grendel didn’t seem to be all in possession of her faculties or was at least still disorientated. Where did that disorientation put her on the trustworthy scale?

“I don’t know if yours do,” Golly replied matter-of-factly. “Mine can be reattached with a spritz of water and Ember.”

“Golly,” cried Mrs. Fischer. “Don’t talk to it!”

The rest of Cherie’s neighbors swarmed around Mrs. Fischer and the girls. Behind them, Ruth said, “The vampire seems all right to me!”

“Yes!” said Cherie, casting a furtive smile at Grendel.

The vampire returned it, revealing her fangs. Cherie blanched, and Grendel pressed her lips together and winced.

“She is not all right!” cried Mrs. Fischer, and Officer Easterman said, “You go with it, or you go with us, Cherie!”

Cherie looked helplessly between her neighbors, who’d so recently warmed her heart with their friendship, and the vampire. Grendel shrank. “I will do what you want.”

How could she choose? And why did she have to? “This isn’t like exploring the cave near the Ember mine,” she found herself whispering. She wasn’t offering a grand game or a great gift—she was offering danger, maybe death. She was going to the Land of the Dreaming Dead to rescue Jack because Solien said that she was the most likely to be able to do it—it wasn’t even a sure thing. She was Magickally weak. She wasn’t especially resourceful. They might fail, but if she didn’t try—

She looked over her shoulder at the path she’d recently tread, remembering the Steward and the Fae who’d led her to Solien, and the chill of her charm as he did so. There were enemies here.

“Well?” asked Solien. The Fae was at her left, Grendel was at her right, and all the people of Somer were before her.

“You can’t keep them safe here ...” she whispered.

Solien replied just as softly, “Not ... in a way you would consider safe, no. I am a king, with many subjects, and we royals can’t be everywhere at once. As you have already seen.” As gentle as his voice was, his eyes were hard, and a muscle in his jaw jumped.

There was danger here, for all her people, and she needed to go to a place that was even more treacherous. “Grendel,” she said, before she’d thought about it completely. “I’ll take Grendel.”

Her neighbors withdrew with gasps and low words. Officer Easterman said, “You’ll regret that, Cherie.”

Grendel turned to her neighbors and bowed. “I swear to you, if she has any regrets, they will not be because of me.”

“You have no honor worth swearing on!” Frank bellowed.

Grendel backed so quickly behind Cherie there was a breeze. “Last time I give a respectable speech.”

“Cherie, don’t do this,” Missy said.

“I have to,” Cherie said, and realized she did. Grendel was stronger than any of them, except *maybe* Golly. But Golly was a child, despite her protests. The Land of Death was no place for children. Grendel didn’t fill Cherie with feelings of love and belonging. Despite the brave face Cherie showed for her neighbors, the vampire still scared her. And yet, Grendel was more likely to survive and save her friends.

“Excellent,” Solien declared, turning on his heel. “We’ll leave right away. Grab your coat.”

The coat Cherie had left in her room appeared suspended in midair by invisible hands. Grendel sprang to follow Solien, but Cherie hesitated. “Wait, no time to say good—” She looked back at her neighbors; they’d drawn farther away. “—Bye.”

Solien called out from the trees. “A princess must sometimes do what is good for her people even when they disapprove.”

Grabbing her coat—seeing the hint of a tall cone-shaped cap as she did—Cherie spun to find Grendel had paused and was waiting for her. Solien was still walking. With a sigh, Cherie threw her coat over one arm and jogged to catch up, declaring, “I am not a princess!”

She thought she heard him laugh.



Soaring up through blankets of snow, Jack burst from the dream of Fairy. Crashing down and landing on all fours in his own dream, he roared, slammed a fist, and blew a crater around him in the snowscape.

“Well, that is a lot more like the brother I used to know,” said Mizuki.

“What is that supposed to mean?” he snarled.

Surveying the crater, Mizuki replied, “Your temper is back. I can’t decide if that is good or bad.”

For a moment, he scowled at her, but a wind rose cold and sharp, chilling the anger that had heated his words. He had had a temper a long time ago, hadn’t he? Or PTSD. A hair trigger, definitely. It had saved him a number of times and gone off at the wrong time in others. But in the last decade or so, he’d been ... a friendly ghost in a mirror.

Solien had called Cherie, “Princess Peacekeeper.”

He remembered the last conversations he’d overheard in Somer, how the populace that had been so accepting of Magick had changed after Cherie had left.

Had Jack underestimated Cherie’s talent as a mere “pleasantness” when it was something more than that? He rubbed his eyes. Of course, it had been more than “pleasantness.” When she’d left, his connection to the town had dimmed.

Another thought occurred to him ... Had he been enchanted along with the rest of them without even knowing it? For a moment, his anger flared,

but then it fled. Whether there was truth in that or not, Cherie hadn't known. He was sure of it. Cherie could be circumspect, but she wasn't deceitful—maybe peace, in the long term, was dependent on a certain degree of openness.

“I should have guessed the strength of her talent sooner,” Jack muttered. It was difficult to recognize abstract Magickal talents. Gifts for storms, fire, or strength were easy to see. A gift of wisdom, luck, creativity, synthesis, or diligence was more difficult to discern. Those abstract talents were often also the strongest, maybe because they were easily overlooked.

Mizuki raised her eyebrow at him. “Cherie is ...?”

“Destined to wake me up, according to a Fae king.”

Mizuki smiled. “Finally. Don't worry, brother, Fae don't lie.”

Jack couldn't return the smile. “Pleasantness” might be helpful in a small country town, but it was not the weapon to fight the sluagh or the other dangerous creatures that surrounded his prison.

Fae could not lie.

They could *misunderstand*, and they could be *wrong*.

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CHAPTER 13



Cherie had a thousand questions to ask Solien.

Grendel asked the most important one ... but to Cherie, “Why you?”

“I don’t know,” Cherie responded, watching Solien as he strode a few steps ahead. They were walking through a tunnel of trees, but the Fairy moon was incredibly bright, and the insects were luminescent. For a few steps, she stared hard at his back, dappled with moonlight and the glow of iridescent moths, willing him to answer the vampire’s question. He didn’t. Or maybe he already had in a way. He’d said she was the most likely to succeed, based on “folklore.”

“If Jack is dead,” Grendel asked, “if you wake him, will he be like me? That could be dangerous.”

“No, he won’t be a vampire,” Cherie said.

“How do you know?” asked Grendel, and Cherie remembered how little the vampire knew about the world ... or even herself. It felt good to know something, and she found herself explaining, “Because Magickals never turn. They’re immune.”

“So can any non-Magickal turn?” Grendel asked.

Cherie shook her head in the negative. She recited what she’d learned from Nnenne. “It’s a sort of epigenetics. That is when genes and

environment combine together. There are a certain set of conditions that have to be met to become a vampire. You must have the vampiric gene. You must also have been bitten by a vampire. And you must die. But not everyone who carries the genes and is bitten turns. My Nnenne believes that it probably wasn't one gene, but several, like eye color or even Magick. Both were first believed to be simple inherited traits—determined by only two genes—but they are dependent on many, and can be influenced by stress and diet, and maybe Ember for Magick. That isn't known.”

“Nnenne?” Grendel asked.

“My grand—my other grandmother,” Cherie said, tripping over a particularly large stone. “She is a doctor.”

“She is worried about you, I think,” Grendel murmured.

Regaining her balance, Cherie replied, “She is dead.”

An insect trilled.

“So am I,” Grendel replied.

Ahead, Solien disappeared. Cherie gasped.

In the next instant, he reappeared facing them, in the glow of dozens of the luminescent insects spilling from his upraised hand. The moonlight somehow didn't extend to Solien. She took another step. Her foot connected with flat stones, a cold gust of air hit her, and she understood—they'd crossed into another realm ... Earth ... or somewhere else. She threw on her coat.

Grendel snatched Cherie's hand as soon as it was through the sleeve. The gesture might have been protective, but the vampire's fingers were bony, and her nails were sharp. Cherie shivered, and hoped Grendel would think it was only with cold.

Solien said, “This is as far as I can take you. Go to the highest tower that yet remains. You'll find him there.”

“What tower?” Cherie asked.

He scowled. “The highest.”

“How will I wake him?” Cherie asked.

“I don’t know,” Solien replied. “That is something you must discover yourself.” His head jerked in the direction they had come. “I have to go.” He stepped away and vanished into thin air. The insects that had lit the air around him dimmed and fell to the ground.

There wasn’t a sound, not even the wind. Cherie found her fingers squeezing Grendel’s. She tried to survey their surroundings, but it was too dark. There was only the faintest glow of the moon and stars in a patch of naked sky between heavy clouds. In the dimness, she made out the skeletal line of trees.

“Can we go back that way?” Grendel asked.

Cherie shook her head. “I can’t open doors between worlds.” Or do anything useful with Magick, really. Cillian at least could start a fire to keep warm.

The vampire’s eyes glowed. “I can scout quickly, but I will need to release your hand. Do you mind?” Jerking her chin upward, she added urgently, “I’ll only go as far as the top of that tree.”

Peering up, Cherie saw inky branches so densely packed she couldn’t distinguish where one tree ended and another began.

“I’m sure I’ll be fine,” Cherie reassured her. Grendel didn’t move, though, and it took a moment for Cherie to realize that Grendel couldn’t move—Cherie held the vampire’s hand in a death grip. Releasing her fingers, Cherie tucked her hands into her pockets, and mumbled, “Oops.”

Before she could blink, Grendel was gone. Overhead, a branch cracked. Cherie thought she made out a Grendel-shaped stain against the sky and heard a whispered, “Oh, my God.”

And then there was silence. Cherie dug her hands into her pockets. Her fingers found her compact mirror, and she sighed in relief or maybe fatigue. She should contact Jack—but she was exhausted. Giving in, she leaned against a tree and slowly lowered herself to the ground. Leaning back, she

closed her eyes, barely registering that her charm necklace was becoming chill.

The night vanished. She was warm—except for that spot at her throat where her Nnenna's charm lay—and she was bathed in sunlight. Nnenna leaned over her, haloed in the brilliant light. "Cherie, wake up. Wake up."

Cherie's heart was light as she beamed up at Nnenna. "No, Nnenna." She took her grandmother's hand.

"Cherie, wake up!" At her throat, her charm necklace grew so frigidly cold it burned. Cherie opened her eyes and found the vampire squatting beside her, nose just inches from Cherie's own, and hand so tight in hers the nails bit flesh. Cherie swore she saw the glint of fangs.

Grendel licked her lips.

Cherie's pulse fluttered wildly, and a chill deeper than the night seeped to her bones. "Grandmother?" Cherie dared to whisper. "Is everything all right?" She blinked. The burning cold of her necklace had vanished.

Pulling Cherie to her feet, Grendel said, "I know where we are."

Cherie wished for some light so she could read her expression. "You're not happy about that," Cherie guessed.

"It's ... dead. There should be lights. There should be people, no matter what time it is," Grendel replied, releasing her hand.

"Where are we?" Cherie whispered, yawning behind her hand.

"Chicago—"

Cherie inhaled sharply.

"—or what is left of it," Grendel finished.

"That's very bad," Cherie whispered, touching the cooling charm at her throat.

Grendel sniffed. "People always think that, but Chicago has never been *that* bad if you know your way around." It may have been Cherie's imagination, but she swore the vampire sounded defensive. Or maybe Cherie was just sleepy and imagining things.

“Many of the old cities are dangerous. They’re nothing but empty wastelands,” Cherie said, blinking and yawning, but not bothering to hide it this time. “Too many people, too many mythologies, too long a history for them to be eradicated; they all mixed together and fought with humans and each other.” Somer’s inhabitants had been German, Irish, some English and Welsh, with a shared history of the Fae.

“Oh.” The vampire slid her hands beneath the edges of the rags she wore.

Cherie shivered, because of her charm or because of the danger. “But Chicago is the worst—”

“Hey, now—”

“No one who comes here ever comes back,” Cherie said.

“I suppose we’ll find out why,” Grendel said, sounding far away.

“Worst battles of the Vampire Wars were here,” Cherie mumbled, yawning again.

Grendel grabbed her wrist, and not gently. “Don’t fall back to sleep, Cherie,” Grendel said. “You frightened me when you fell asleep.”

The vampire’s grip was painful, and Cherie could feel her pulse beating madly beneath her grasp.

There was a moment of that impossible silence. Grip slacking, Grendel huffed. “I suppose we—the vampires—lost?”

Gulping, Cherie admitted, “Yes.”

She expected a deluge of questions. She wouldn’t have been surprised by anger, but Grendel only sighed. “What do we do now?”

Stifling a yawn, Cherie massaged her temple. “I don’t know. I don’t know how we’ll even find Jack.”

Releasing Cherie’s hand, Grendel huffed. “I know where the tower is ... the trouble will be finding what floor he’s on ... also, it would be good if we had a car. It’s about twelve miles to our destination.”

Cherie grimaced and then lost her battle with another yawn.

Grendel rubbed her chin. “I saw plenty on the road, wrecked, but if we go a ways in the *wrong* direction, there are houses. We might find an unwrecked car there. We’d have to steal it, though.”

“We can’t steal a car,” Cherie protested weakly. Her eyelids felt heavy. She lifted her hand from her charm with a hiss. It was so painfully cold again. Maybe Grendel was going to eat her. She was too tired to care.

Grendel replied, and her voice sounded thick, like she was talking through water. “We already stole a truck ... bus ... thing, and I don’t think there is anyone here to mind us stealing.”

“Can I sit down a minute and think about it?” Cherie asked, leaning against a tree, knees folding. “I’m very tired.” She fumbled with the damnably cold charm—she’d rip it off so she could sleep.

She was jerked upright by her other hand.

“I don’t think you should sleep, Cherie,” Grendel said, too close, her fangs gleaming.

Cherie was wide awake and terrified. She almost tried pulling away, but then she caught herself. The blistering chill of her charm was gone.

“Lead on,” she whispered. Grendel almost released her hand, but Cherie held on to it tightly. “I don’t think you should let me go.”

“All right.” Grendel nodded and guided her from the stone path to a trail. Judging by the crunch beneath their feet, it was paved only by leaves. A bubble of hysterical laughter wanted to burst from Cherie’s chest—she was letting a vampire lead her deeper into the forest. For too long, the only sounds were the leaves beneath their feet and the occasional *thwack* of a branch against their arms. Cherie reminded herself that her charm wasn’t cold, and Grendel had done nothing but protect her. Still, the silence weighed on her, as did the memory of the vampire’s fangs, and the knowledge that Grendel had not eaten at the Fairy table. “You’re very quiet, Grandmother.” Cherie meant for the words to be cheerful and light, but they came out a frightened whisper.

“Has it been a very long time since they used gasoline in cars?” Grendel asked.

Cherie blinked, taken off guard by the direction of the vampire’s thoughts. She’d been taught that the creatures were consumed by thoughts of blood. “Yes.” It had been two hundred years. Gasoline itself wasn’t the problem, Geoff had explained to Cherie. The problem was the spark plugs, the electric fuel pump, the electric power steering, and the electric cooling fan, air conditioning, etc. Now Ember fulfilled those functions. Ember cars were, according to Geoff, closer to “the electric cars,” that were becoming popular when the Change began.

“Long enough ...” Grendel might have sighed or it might have been the wind. “... that my ... other ... grandchildren would have died?”

The pause between the phrases was so long, it took a second for Cherie to tie them together. That was how long Grendel had been asleep? It certainly explained a lot, and yet ... that was such a long time. “Some of your grandchildren might be alive, if they were Magickal,” she suggested, and then wondered if she was being, as Nnenne said, “an infernal optimist,” raising false hopes.

The crunch of leaves was the only sound. Cherie realized she wasn’t even breathing.

Grendel said at last, “It is a lot to take in.” She waved a hand. “Can you give me the distilled version of what happened while I was playing Rip Van Winkle, dear?”

So Cherie did, or tried her best. Explaining about the slow seeping of Ember into the world—Grendel, like a non-Magickal human—couldn’t see it, but the vampire did say, “Some humans’ blood sounds different. Like yours. And one of the soldiers ... the officer.” She licked her lips. “He was uniquely satisfying.”

Cherie jerked to a halt, pulling Grendel to a stop beside her. “Grandmother, that was not a nice thing to say.” She couldn’t let the

vampire speak casually about killing people; she knew that somehow deep down.

“But it is true, and probably why I’m not ravenous right now,” Grendel replied with a huff, pulling her along. Cherie scowled at the vampire’s flippancy.

Grendel said, “So ... there was a Vampire War at some point?”

Cherie sighed. “Yes. A second Civil War. I’d thought there were no vampires left afterward until I—” Until she found the photograph now in her pocket. Almost to herself, she murmured, “I thought all vampires were vicious and unredeemable.” Andrew couldn’t have been that. Was Grendel that?

“I’m redeemable?” Grendel said, mistaking the direction of her musing. “Well, there is a thought.” The moon emerged from behind the clouds, and when the vampire released a breath, Cherie could see mist rising in the air. The vampire wasn’t cold inside. Vampires were supposed to be cold—literally and figuratively.

Grendel spoke, “I may be redeemable, but I am not redeemed. Don’t trust me too much, Granddaughter.”

Cherie shivered. She was supposed to say, “Don’t be silly, Grandmother,” but she couldn’t.

They left the trees, and the surface beneath her feet changed abruptly. Cherie blinked and found herself in what looked like her neighborhood in Somer, with houses set back from gentle, curving roads. Grendel kneeled and put a bone white hand on the ground. “I thought you said that the cities are wastelands.”

“This is no city,” Cherie said. Unless the darkness was deceiving her, the homes were generously spaced apart. The styles were familiar, and most wouldn’t look particularly out of place in her hometown.

“We are in Chicago’s city limits,” Grendel replied, rising.

Cherie looked about doubtfully.

“The lawns are manicured, too,” Grendel said, leading her to the nearest house, a two-story affair with a very high peaked roof. There was a car parked out front. It was boxy, with huge “Ember pipes” along the side—one of the first post-Ember models. Grendel paused and pursed her lips. “Strange car.”

“It’s a post-Change classic,” Cherie replied. She wasn’t much of a car person, but if she lived to tell the tale, this would be a part of the story that a lot of the folks of Somer would want to hear. The thought made her smile despite herself. Peeking into a side view mirror, she saw her own reflection without Jack’s veil of snow, and her smile dropped.

Grendel ran her fingers along its hood. “It’s been used recently. The tires aren’t flat; it isn’t rusted”—she scanned her fingers—“or even dusty.”

“But if we’re in the city, it hasn’t been cared for,” Cherie replied. “The cities mostly emptied out with the Vampire War—”

“This neighborhood is tougher than it looks. They wouldn’t leave for anything.”

Cherie continued, “After the war, the continued presence of the intersecting mythos was just too much. New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and other cities, too—humans couldn’t live in them anymore.” Her voice took on the schoolmarmy tone of her eighth-grade teacher, Mrs. Griffith. “Most of the country migrated south and west, to previously sparser inhabited areas where human Magickals could block or destroy the intersections of the mythological realms.”

“Well, no one is here, but it doesn’t look or sound like a war zone,” Grendel replied. Dragging Cherie away from the car, she went to a neat barrier between the hedges surrounding the house and the lawn, picked up one of the hand-sized decorative stones that demarcated the barrier, and threw it through the front window.

Glass shattered, but there was no Magickal alarm. No barking of dogs. No human cries of fear or anger. In the silence, Cherie couldn’t help noting

how neat the hedges were.

“This place is creepy,” Grendel remarked.

Forgetting herself, Cherie teased, “You would know.” And then she froze, wondering if sustained terror was making her slap happy. She prepared for the vampire to round on her and treat her to a terrifying show of fangs and claw.

Lifting her chin, Grendel grinned. “Thank you for recognizing my expertise.”

Tugging Cherie along, she went through a break in the hedge and over to the window she’d broken. She began smashing away the jagged edges.

“What are you doing?” Cherie asked.

“I figure we’ll go inside, steal some keys, steal the car, and then drive to the tower.”

“We can’t just steal the car. That’s a good way to get cursed,” Cherie protested.

Pausing, Grendel turned to her, glowing eyes wide. “Really?”

Cherie nodded vigorously. Where she was from, everyone protected their property with wards which cursed the violator. Although she hadn’t seen any of the wards painted on the vehicle.

Grendel’s glowing eyes squinted at Cherie, and then the vampire made a raspberry. “Not getting to the tower before sunrise will be a worse curse.”

“We’ll have to return it when we’re done at least,” Cherie persisted.

Grendel kept breaking the glass. “Let’s worry about you surviving first.”

Cherie’s shoulders fell. She tried to joke, because that was what you did when you were lost in a cave, made the mistake of trying to kayak in the creek when it was flooding or had just been thrown from Eben or Roxie’s back. “But, Grandmother, what sort of role model are you being?”

Snorting, the vampire said, “What a delightful sense of humor you have, dear.”

Feeling lightheaded, Cherie retorted, “And what long teeth you have, Grandmother.”

Grendel cackled, and Cherie stood up straighter. It was like all those adventures in Somer ... just with higher stakes and a vampire instead of her usual partners in crime. She contained a wince.

Grendel stood back and surveyed the hole in the window. “You’ll never make it through without cutting yourself. Wait here, Granddaughter.”

Cherie opened her mouth to warn her that she couldn’t go inside, but before she’d spoken a word, her hand was empty, and Grendel had vanished. It was briefly confusing and then terrifying, but then she found her eyes becoming heavy. Yawning, she leaned against the house. Her charm was burning with cold, but even the pain wasn’t enough to keep her awake. Her legs began to fold, and she saw sunshine behind her eyelids and Nnenne. She reached out to take Nnenne’s hand. Their fingers connected, and then Nnenne whispered in Grendel’s voice, “Wake up, Cherie!”

Her eyes bolted open. There was light coming from somewhere, and Cherie could see the vampire clearly in her full fanged glory. She tried to recoil, but Grendel dragged her upright. The vampire’s hands were shaking, and she whispered urgently, “In the house ... Something here is very, very wrong!”

Cherie stared at her. “You went in the house?”

Grendel’s brow furrowed. “Yes?”

“You shouldn’t have been able to go in without an invitation.” Cherie swallowed. A whole city where humans weren’t safe even in their homes.

Leaning forward, Grendel whispered, “But ... but ... I did, and the people ...” She tugged on Cherie’s hand. “Come, you have to see.”

Cherie had a sinking feeling that the curse was much larger than Jack.



Cursing, Jack frantically dragged his hand through the snow drift, sculpting towers nearly as tall as him, and shorter buildings, trees, and parklands.

Solien could not bring Cherie to his prison—Jack was at the heart of downtown, surrounded by iron and steel, but even if that weren't the case, Chicago wasn't some small town with a single dominating mythos. It had been—was—a sprawling metropolis with distinct ethnic enclaves—not every portal opened to Fairy.

Unbidden, one of his professors from University and a former officer from the Magickal Corp sprang into existence. The two men, who had never met in real life, spoke in unison in the dream. “We’re not sure if it is the collective consciousness of humans that summons their respective mythologies and portal intersections, or if the barriers between the worlds of their respective mythos were weak in places to begin with, and their mythos bled through and summoned human believers to them.” Finishing that remedial lecture, the officer casually stepped on a tower Jack had built. The professor sat on another.

“I know!” Jack shouted. “Begone.” He blasted them with snow, and they vanished.

Solien would have to have taken Cherie to a place where the barrier between Fairy and the human world was weak enough to open a portal, and it would be in a place where the local humans had experience with the Fae. There were the German enclaves on the North Side and the Swedish in Andersonville. There were also the Irish neighborhoods. He'd read that Lakeview to the north had the largest number of Irish residents. But you couldn't say “Irish in Chicago” without mentioning the smaller communities of the “Southside Irish.” They'd been in Mt. Greenwood, Morgan Park, and Beverly. He seized on Beverly, mostly because his brain immediately recognized the rhyming potential. There was a park near there, the Dan Ryan Woods. He'd only driven past and mostly knew the area as a vaguely hatchet-shaped slab of green on a map, but he frantically began

shaping snow into rolling hills and trees. He chanted ... *“Cherie, Cherie, you must be in Beverly ...”*

But was she? How much time had passed in her world? He was asleep, and time passed strangely in sleep. The “Somer house” he’d built had ordered his mind, kept him more reliably to a schedule that mirrored the real world, but now he was lost in the endless snowscape of dreamtime. He hadn’t realized he’d been asleep for nearly two centuries until he’d found his way to Somer. As much time could have passed again. And it could take days for Solien to reach Chicago from the portal that he’d opened in Pennsylvania. Or not. The worlds did not lie upon one another like neatly stacked sheets of paper; they were more like—

The professor and the officer reappeared. “—like loose piles of blankets.”

The officer continued, “Which is why order is so important in our own world. If this world is disorganized, the chaos is even greater.”

That had been the official position of the military, his stepmother ... him.

And then there had been Mizuki. “A loose pile of blankets is better when things are too hot or too cold. You can kick off a few, burrow into others. A tightly made bed is a straitjacket that leaves you freezing or boiling and only half aware of it, not quite able to sleep or wake.”

Had that been her position before Nevin or after?

He wiped a hand crusted with snow across his face. The tangle was in his own mind. A thread of realization uncoiled from the knot. If Cherie was in Beverly, she was close to the edge of the city. She could escape before it was too late. Kneeling in the snow, he called out, *“Be in Beverly, Cherie. And Gods, somehow, let it be now.”*



Grendel led Cherie to the front door of the house. It was ajar, and Ember light flickered out into the night. Cherie checked the door for wards—there were none. That wasn't surprising. It had taken a while for folks in her town to believe in the power of the old talismans, and in the Southern Cities, they still weren't used. Still ...

"You shouldn't be able to enter a house uninvited," Cherie said. "Even without wards. Unless the home—"

"Cherie!" Jack called, his voice echoing from a room to the right. Cherie turned and gasped with horror. There was a perfectly nice living room there, with a couch and chairs and carpet not as worn as the one in her own home. There were also toys on the floor, and two young children sprawled beside them, in strange, contorted positions, as though they'd collapsed where they sat ...

"De ... de ... dead?" Cherie stammered. "Is that why you can come in? Because the owners are dead?"

"They're not dead," Grendel replied. "Only sleeping."

"Cherie," Jack called, his voice very close. "I hear you."

"They need blankets," Cherie whispered.

"I don't think so," Grendel replied. "It's freezing in here, but they are warm."

"How ... how ... do you know they're warm?" Cherie stammered, her heart clenching.

Squeezing her hand, Grendel said, "I checked them for pulses, Granddaughter. Theirs are normal, neither fast nor slow for sleep."

Cherie closed her eyes and exhaled, her heart beating again. Grendel hadn't bitten them—what could Cherie have done if she had?

"I wouldn't eat children," Grendel hissed, and Cherie's eyes sprang open. Beneath flaring nostrils, Grendel's fangs were bared.

Somewhere in the house she heard Jack growl.

Heart hammering, Cherie held Grendel's gaze. "Of course not, Grandmother."

Grendel drew back a step, and her gaze fell. "They stirred when I touched them ... but not now." She inclined her head to a mirror that hung above a fireplace. "Maybe Jack will know what is going on."

Forcing herself not to be distracted by the children, Cherie went to the mirror. Before she could see Jack, he was already saying, "Cherie, you must leave. It's very dangerous here."

"You know where I am?" Meeting the gaze of his reflection, Cherie said, "Grendel says we are in the city of Chicago, but it doesn't look like a city to me ... except ..." She glanced back at the sleepers. They were adorable; children always were when they were asleep, Nnenne said. And they were helpless. "Except it is cursed ..."

Jack spoke sharply, his words rhythmic and precise, like a military officer giving orders. "You are at the outskirts of the city. You are still able to leave."

"Grendel says we should borrow a car—"

"That is a great idea," Jack said, pressing his hands to the glass. "Steal a car and get out of this place."

Grendel got so close to Cherie, she could feel the vampire's breath beneath her ear. "I actually said we should *borrow* a car and rescue you."

Jack's focus shifted to the vampire. "You cannot rescue me."

"According to the elves, not me, no," Grendel replied.

Jack's attention returned to Cherie. His jaw was set. "Cherie, I don't know how you're still alive or even still awake. The fate of anyone in this city is an inescapable sleep or death. You must. Get. Out."

Cherie's thoughts raced ... right out her mouth. "Whenever Grendel lets go of my hand, I fall asleep."

The vampire said, "I have no urge to sleep." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I'm already dead. When a human walks hand-in-hand with a

vampire, is it the same as being dead?”

Cherie gulped, and her eyes slid to the vampire.

“I’m sure it’s close to it,” Jack growled.

Grendel’s hand slackened in Cherie’s.

Tightening her own grip, Cherie turned to her. “There are worse things than death. Stay with me, Grandmother.” Being alone would be worse.

“Cherie ...” Jack rumbled.

Grendel’s glowing eyes met Cherie’s, and she nodded. “As long as you wish.” Her tone was grandmotherly, her fangs were not. Containing a shudder, Cherie returned her attention to Jack. “Solien said I have to wake you up or the people of Somer cannot leave Fairy.”

Shaking his head in the negative, Jack spoke, the words coming at her in rapid fire. “Cherie, you can’t be responsible for them. You can’t. Your Magick isn’t the kind that—”

“Is useful to anyone?” Cherie suggested, a lump forming in her throat.

Jack leaned closer. “I didn’t say that.”

But he might as well have.

“Look, Cherie, there is *hope* for your friends in Fairy,” Jack continued. “There is nothing but death, or worse, for you here. You have to escape.”

“You want me to abandon my friends ... my neighbors?” Cherie asked, her skin heating.

“It’s not a matter of *want*,” Jack retorted.

Cherie huffed. “I’ve heard that before.” When Jack had said, “*It’s not that I don’t want to be together ... it’s just that it is impossible.*”

Jack cocked his head. “Cherie ...”

“You want me to betray them!” Cherie accused, her voice echoing through the house.

Jack turned to Grendel. “If you care about her, as you say, you will steal a car and drag her out of town.”

Grendel might have replied, “So destroy her spirit to save her life?”

Cherie barely heard; she was too angry to even see straight. “It is always about what you want!”

Jack pressed himself to the mirror. “I want you not to die!” he shouted, and for the first time since they’d entered the city, there was a noise—a howl, rising outside the house, eerie, sharp, and mournful. Expecting a giant beast, Cherie turned toward the window. “What is that?” She was hit by a blast of frigid air that ruffled her hair and lifted the curtains. “Is the wind Magickal?”

“No,” Grendel said. “It’s always been like this. It picks up suddenly on the plains.”

The hairs on the back of Cherie’s neck prickled.

A crack split her eardrums. Grendel jumped. Cherie gasped and spun back to the mirror. It was broken. Jack was gone, and the glass was completely frosted over, radiating cold sharper than the gale. She exhaled ... and the mirror shattered, the pieces slipping from the frame to the mantle and the floor, a waterfall of sharp edges and fractured reflections.

Cherie gripped Grendel’s hand tighter, and the vampire gave her fingers a squeeze. Neither of them moved, and again, the silence was oppressive. Taking a deep breath, Cherie prodded a shard with her boot. Her face crumpled. She wanted to be angry; she wanted to say, “Typical of him to leave when we start to argue,” because it was true, and his convenient exit left the bitterness of fury on her tongue. And yet, she could feel the cold of the shard, even through the hard rubber. Jack had done this from twelve miles away, hadn’t he? She was awed. Fearful. The Jack she knew could not do this. This was the sort of Magick only the most powerful could do. The Queen, for instance ... her eyes slid to the sleeping children ... or whoever cursed the city.

Studying the shards beside Cherie, Grendel mused, “He cares about you and is very worried.”

Remembering Jack's demand of the vampire, Cherie froze. "You won't drag me away, will you?" she whispered.

The vampire raised a silvery eyebrow. "How would that be different than draining you against your will?"

Cherie's mouth fell open.

Grendel's lips pressed into a thin line. "I need to eat."

Cherie gulped.

"There's a kitchen this way," the vampire said, tugging her to a hallway.

Cherie pulled her up short, a sliver of a new worry edging into her heart. "I still have to wake Jack up."

Grendel nodded. "Of course, I understand that."

Cherie licked her lips, glanced at the shards of freezing glass, and then back to the vampire. "Grandmother, Jack fought in the Vampire Wars, and I thought ... he always said that his role was more in support, not in combat. Sheriff Easterman, in my town, he said that Jack was in combat though, and the fact that he didn't brag about it was proof—" She bit her lip, realizing she was babbling.

The furrows in Grendel's brow grew deeper.

"He might kill you," Cherie said.

For a moment, Cherie saw fear flash across the vampire's face. But then Grendel sighed and studied the children. "Will waking Jack wake them?"

Cherie straightened, considering. "Solien said waking Jack would break *the* curse. Curse was singular ... so it's possible ... quite possible that it will."

"Then I must help you," the vampire said and pulled Cherie down the hallway.

They entered a kitchen. Sitting at a table were a man and woman, heads pillowed in their arms, eyes closed, mugs of coffee beside them. Grendel ran her hand over one of the cups. "It's not warm, but the milk in it hasn't gone bad."

“We had a Magickal cow in Somer, and her milk never went bad, either,” said Cherie.

Grendel raised a frosty eyebrow in response, making the crags in her forehead that much deeper ... and yet, perhaps not quite so deep as the night before. The vampire regarded the sleeping couple. “*‘Grim death, how foul and loathsome is thine image.’*” Shaking her head, she said, “That is Shakespeare.”

“I know,” Cherie replied. Nnenne and high school had made her read all of the bard’s work. “He was saying that sleep is death’s twin.”

Grendel’s eyes got very soft. “They don’t look loathsome, though.”

“No, they look very peaceful,” Cherie agreed.

Gazing past Cherie’s shoulder, Grendel said, “Death is very close in this place.” Cherie looked but saw nothing. Grendel pulled her over to the freezer, opened it, and took out a box that declared its contents to be “All-Natural Vanilla Ice Cream.” Placing it on the counter, Grendel wrested off the lid one-handed. Peering into the container, Grendel gave a sniff. “It’s fine,” she said. “There’s not even a layer of ice.”

She proceeded to fumble in a drawer beneath the counter.

“Why are you helping me?” Cherie asked, surprising herself with the question.

Grendel withdrew two spoons and pressed one into Cherie’s free hand. “I woke up in a dark place. I don’t think I left until you called me ‘grandmother.’”

Cherie squeezed her hand. “Thank you.” She plowed her spoon into the ice cream and popped a scoop into her mouth. It was rich and creamy.

Seemingly forgetting the ice cream, Grendel looked past her to the sleeping couple. “I could drink from them.”

Cherie’s grip on Grendel’s hand went slack.

In a musing tone, Grendel continued, “I wouldn’t have to take so much that they would die ... at first. Everything here seems to be in some sort of

suspended animation. That has to be an amazingly delicate balance. Would drinking their blood destroy that balance?” The question was chillingly clinical. Her eyes met Cherie’s again. Grendel’s eyes were exceedingly pale, even paler than Jack’s. They seemed to have almost no pigment at all. Cherie had heard eyes were the gateway to the soul. If so, Grendel’s soul had been drained from her.

Grendel tilted her head, and Cherie realized that the question was directed at her. Cherie exhaled, imagining these sleeping people being slowly drained, their lives literally being sucked away, with them completely helpless. Shivering, she whispered, “Please don’t drink their blood, Grandmother.”

Grendel took a bite of ice cream, casually as if they were discussing the weather. “If I can drink from them, Granddaughter, any vampire can.”

Cherie held the vampire’s pale gaze. “We have safeguards to keep vampires from rising again.”

Grendel raised an eyebrow, and the implication was clear. Those safeguards hadn’t kept her from rising.

Cherie gulped. “We need to wake Jack.”



Jack knelt in the snow over shattered pieces of glass. All were black. For a few moments, the only sound was the howling of the wind. And then his sister whispered, “What is it you’re really afraid of?”

The shards of glass began to sparkle. They did not reflect the house where he’d found Cherie, but other places and other people: a taxi driver slumped over his wheel, a bus full of sleeping passengers, a restaurant with all the patrons folded over tables, an office, a factory line, and countless homes. He saw all the men and women in his tower, his “army” of technomages, and he saw soldiers of the newly minted Guard of the

Magickal States, sent to help keep the peace in one of the worst hit cities of the Vampire Wars.

But to sleep, perchance to dream. Were the dreams of his people peaceful? Or were they fraught like his?

“It’s not your fault,” Mizuki said.

Launching himself to his feet, Jack went to his sister. “It’s not yours!”

Head falling, her lips began to tremble. “If I had told her I was not going to obey her summons, if I had openly defied her, if she had known I was here, she would not have ... she could not have ...”

“Mizuki,” Jack said, lifting his arms to embrace her, but then lowering them, afraid she’d vanish. “If you were not here, we’d all be dead.” He thought of the slugh and their power to steal souls. “Worse than dead. It’s better that you are here, and we are safe in our dreams.”

Mizuki lifted her head. “I keep trying to say, we’re in *your* dream. You have to wake up, Jack.” She did vanish then. He was alone in the blizzard of his thoughts, and Cherie was going to go through Hell, literally, to find him. She was sweet and too trusting, she was about to be eaten alive, and he was helpless to do anything about it. His fists curled. Sometimes he wondered if Mizuki had designed their prison and their refuge to make him powerless as punishment. Before the curse, she’d accused him of becoming too powerful—as though casting a sleeping spell over a whole city was not equally strong, or even stronger.

... It was always the Magickals with the seemingly weak talents that were the most dangerous. Closing his eyes, he pressed his hands to his temples. Why hadn’t he remembered that when dealing with Cherie? Why did he keep forgetting?

If she was powerful, maybe she could slip through. Maybe. But even if she did, how would she wake him? Her Magick, if powerful, was unfocused. Besides an ability to mute pain, she didn’t have a Magickal skillset.

He dropped his hands. This was all speculation. Hoping Cherie might slip through was just that. Hope. She had the wrong type of Magick, and he was avoiding the thing he didn't want to witness. Would he be so much a coward that he wouldn't be with her when she died, however useless he might be? Could he stand watching her travel the abyss? With a growl, he stretched his hands to the snow at his feet, closed his eyes, and imagined a mirror in them, focusing on the weight of it, the chill of it in the blizzard.

He opened his hands, and a piece of ice shaped like a rearview mirror appeared between his palms. He almost exhaled in relief, but then the ice erupted into flames. "No!" he shouted, knowing where they headed ... or might already be.

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CHAPTER 14



“**T**his is what I imagined a city to look like,” Cherie said, gazing through the passenger side window.

Her left hand lay on top of Grendel’s right hand, which gripped the stick shift. The vampire was driving because if Cherie lifted her hand from the vampire’s even just to scratch her nose, she immediately yawned and felt the urge to rest her head and her eyelids, despite there being so many excitingly alien things to observe.

The night was cloudy overall, but occasionally, moonbeams pierced the clouds, revealing burnt out homes and shops. The houses still didn’t look much different than homes in Somer—single-family affairs on small plots of land. The shops looked very different. They were single story, often clustered together, with parking lots in front. They were almost universally empty. “Strip malls,” Grendel called them.

“The other neighborhood wasn’t burnt out and empty like this ...” Cherie mused. “I think this must have happened before the sleeping spell was cast.”

“Do we know who cast this spell?” Grendel asked.

“No,” Cherie said, attention on the world around her. The strip mall shops had lots of signs out front made of *plastic* that were very different than the wooden signs that hung outside shops in Somer. They were in

strange shapes and were horribly exotic and interesting, even if they were often cracked and many were unlit. Had the signs been lit before the coming of Ember by electricity, with its even, dependable glow?

Grendel murmured almost to herself, “It was never this bad.” She exhaled. “There aren’t even sleeping people here. I’ve only seen a few snoozing coyotes and rats.”

“The cities cleared out with the vampires and then the Intersections that opened,” Cherie reminded her. They reached an intersection of the human-road kind, and ahead of them, the road rose and then ended in a craggy ribbon of blasted tar, rebar, and concrete. It was as though a bomb had gone off beneath it, and it was completely impassable.

“Welp,” said Grendel. “The freeway isn’t going to work; looks like we’re going up Halstead.” She turned left and then said, “What are ‘Intersections’?”

“Portals, intersections ... they are the same thing ... Like the one we ran through into Fairy.” She tapped her chin. “But any we encounter won’t be Fairy, or I don’t think they will. Solien said the park was as far as he could go, and Fae don’t lie. I’m not even sure they *can* lie.”

Ahead, painted letters on a sign shimmered slightly. Cherie squinted. Was she imagining things? Was it a trick of the moonlight? Was the first word Abaddon or Abandon? At her throat, her charm became chill.

Grendel said, “So at any time this hellscape of burnt out strip malls might be replaced by—”

“Hell,” said Cherie, the shimmering letters now legible, and a distinct shade of crimson.

She thought she heard Jack’s voice, but it was cut off. The car came to a screeching halt. Cherie was flung against her seatbelt. Gasping, inhaling the stench of sulfur and soot, she raised herself. Flames whipped up from strip malls on either side of them. The road ahead and behind disappeared into walls of fire and smoke. There was a single, rusted street sign at the

intersection of the main road and the driveway to a strip mall parking lot declaring they were at the corner of Despair Boulevard and Hopelessness Circle. Out of the malls rushed men and women, running too fast and smiling too broadly. Some wore suits and ties. Some wore casual wear and golden tans and not much more. They surrounded the car in every direction.

“Should I run them over and make a getaway?” Grendel asked.

“Run them over? That’s a little extreme, don’t you think, Grandmother?”

Revving the engine, Grendel wrinkled her nose. “No.”

Appealing to humanity didn’t seem to be working. Cherie whispered, “Don’t, Grandmother. We’ll only wind up farther from the Intersection and the way home.” The people didn’t look that dangerous in Cherie’s opinion, and she wondered if they were only in purgatory and not in Hell as she originally thought.

Grendel gave her the side-eye but took her foot off the accelerator.

The denizens of purgatory swarmed the car. A man wearing a casual polo shirt, jeans, and a thousand-kilowatt smile approached Cherie’s window. The smile was slightly dimmed by the number of sharp teeth. Cherie gasped. This might be Hell after all.

Knocking on Cherie’s window, he shouted, “Can I interest you in a loan? No money down!”

Grendel growled but didn’t run over anyone ... and Cherie hoped she wouldn’t regret that advice.

Over the first man’s shoulder, a woman in a sharp business suit shrieked, “I’ll loan you a million in Ember or dollars, no questions asked!” Winking at Cherie, the man spun and punched the sharply dressed woman, sending her flying backward through the air. Returning his attention to Cherie, he said, “I’ll triple her—” His eyes bulged out, and a forked tongue burst from his mouth. Blood welled from gashes in his neck where sharp talons wrapped. Over his shoulder, the shrieking woman said, “I’ll

quadruple it!” and proceeded to beat the first man’s head against the car, leaving a face-shaped indentation in the roof. Cherie pulled back in horror. In one of the back passenger windows, a woman held up a chocolate cake. “You’ve never tasted better! The secret is rainforest destruction and child slave labor!” By the back windshield, a woman appeared who looked distressingly human—middle-aged, slightly graying, and afraid. Around her neck was a collar. Yanking the collar, a man smiled. “Forget distant child labor! Indulge your sloth with your own personal slave!”

Licking her lips, another woman held up an adorable toddler with cherubic cheeks. “Or go for the gold and buy your own personal child slave. They’re delicious!” Grendel hissed. Cherie put her hands to her mouth. “We have to save the ba—” The toddler belched. Blue fire came out of his mouth and shot directly at the demon holding him. Face melting, she screamed and tore his head off. Cherie’s horrified gaze shifted to the middle-aged “slave.” Licking the car with a long, forked tongue, she winked. “I’m very obedient, promise.”

Cherie shrank into her seat. Grendel murmured, “Is her saliva making the paint peel?”

“Hey, baby,” said a familiar voice before Cherie could check. Jack appeared in the rear driver side window. At least, Cherie thought it was Jack until he smiled, revealing long white teeth, and asked, “Wanna make luuuurrrrvve?” He began to pull off his shirt, revealing a muscular torso that under ordinary circumstances would have made Cherie’s mouth water, but the pointed red tail that might have been his own, or someone else’s, caressing his neck diminished his appeal. She looked away fast, and another demon said, “You know, I can kill that girl who’s dating that boy you kind of like.”

All around the car, the “men” and “women” beat on the windows, the hood, and the roof, offering sex, money, slaves, and food. Cherie huddled closer to Grendel.

The vampire whispered, “They’re too thick to run over now. What do we do?”

It was the driver’s side window that broke first. A man-shaped demon with wavy white hair and distinguished features stuck his head in. This demon was not smiling. He hissed at Grendel. “After two centuries, you could bring us someone with more potential! Do you know how *blessedly* short we are on our quotas?”

Cherie blinked. He’d said “blessedly” like a curse.

The back window shattered. A hand with a pen and rolled-up piece of paper shot through. “Just sign here!”

“Should I start ripping heads off?” Grendel whispered.

The demon man hissed. “If you want acid blood to eat your fangs, Dracuella. Look, I’ve got no time for games. If you want to play, bring me a decently damnable soul!”

“This *is* Hell,” Grendel whispered at the same time Cherie shouted, “I know how to escape!”

The demon-man leaning in the driver’s side smiled at Cherie. “Just sign a contract, and we’ll let you go.”

Cherie narrowed her eyes. “Not until I speak to your boss.”

The demon blew a raspberry.

“Do you want more souls?” Cherie asked. The shouting turned to murmurs. “Does Beelzebub shit in a fire pit?” someone asked, and someone else muttered, “Archangel Gabriel’s balls, don’t talk about the big boss like that.”

Cherie chose her next words carefully. “All the souls above are sleeping —”

There were grumbles. “Tell us something we don’t know!” And, “Why do you think we are behind quota in this quadrant?”

Cherie ad libbed, hoping she wasn’t lying. “I may be able to wake them or wake one of them, which might start a chain reaction that breaks the

curse, at least according to an Elf King. But you'd have to let us out for me to try."

The murmurs outside the car turned to fierce debates—many of which were violent. A woman's head careened through the rear windshield and bounced on the back seat. The seat sizzled and dissolved where its blood dripped. Moments later, a headless body sent a hand through the window to retrieve said head. The demon set her head on her body—backward—and grinned at Cherie before withdrawing and ripping off the arm of another demon.

Cherie almost swore. "Oh, Go—"

There was instant silence. Heads spun in her direction, sometimes in excess of 180 degrees.

"Oh, Gosh," Cherie finished weakly. Taking a breath, summoning all she knew of Abrahamic traditions, she said, "I am calling on your boss, Abaddon."

Nothing happened, but the demons whispered among themselves.

"Abaddon," she said again. The demons definitely became nervous, shifting on their feet and rolling their eyes. "Abaddon," Cherie shouted.

All the demons ran screaming, except for the gray-haired one poking his head in Grendel's window.

"Well, that doesn't seem good," Grendel said, clasping Cherie's hand more tightly.

"Not good?" The demon glared at Cherie. Behind him rose a buzzing, and over the flames and the smoke, a darker cloud began to rise. Hissing, he ran around the back, dived through the rear windshield, and crouched in the back seat, shouting, "Angels in Heaven! *Not good* is the understatement of the last century. If I wasn't so behind in my quota, it might be manageable, but as it is—" His gaze shifted to Cherie. "However, if I kill you—"

Grendel's hand unclasped from Cherie's and the vampire just ... wasn't there. For just a heartbeat, Cherie's gaze met the demon's. His eyes may

have glinted maliciously, or that might have just been Cherie's imagination, but then the demon wasn't there either. The buzzing grew louder, and the sky grew darker.

"Cherie, you're still awake?" Grendel shouted, appearing suddenly behind the car.

Cherie nodded. Grendel had bundles under each arm, but Cherie couldn't see what they were and was afraid to ask.

"Pop the trunk!" the vampire ordered.

Cherie hastily did so. Although Grendel wasn't holding her hand, she wasn't at all sleepy—and she didn't think it was just fear. Solien had called the place where Jack was trapped, "Land of the Dead." Sleep and death were cousins; ergo, "We're no longer in the Land of the Dead," she exclaimed. "I'm not going to fall asleep here!"

The trunk slammed. "We're in Hell, Granddaughter, not much of an improvement." Grendel vanished again. She reappeared a second later in the driver's seat, arm out the window holding something aloft ... straining. Cherie peered out, saw what it was, and put her hands to her mouth. It was the head of the demon. Grendel was hoisting it by the hair. Turning to Cherie, Grendel smiled. "Did you know, if you strike fast enough, you can use a street sign like an axe to sever a head?"

Cherie gaped, glanced, and noticed that the street sign was indeed gone. Cherie had seen none of it. She gulped. It was one thing to know about vampiric speed, but it was something else to witness it, or rather ... not to witness it.

Outside, the buzzing was becoming as loud as thunder, and the sky almost completely black.

"You're going to regret this," the demon's head shouted over the ear-splitting roar.

"Shut up, and I might give you back your body," Grendel yelled back.

“You think putting my body in the trunk will stop me?” replied the demon.

Pounding arose from the trunk at his words. A locust landed on the demon’s face. “Ew, ew, ew!” it cried, trying to blow it off. There was a splat against the window, another, and another.

“Ew!” Grendel echoed, plucking a locust from her hair.

Cherie felt the same way, but, gulping down her nausea, she turned to the vampire and patted her clawed hand reassuringly—partially so she wouldn’t have to look at the frightening cloud. “This is good,” she told Grendel. Grimacing at a tickle on her lip, Cherie grabbed a bug before it crawled into her mouth. “Locusts generally accompany Abaddon, Demon of Destruction.”

Grendel’s jaw fell open, but then the vampire’s attention snapped to the front of the car, and she hunched back into her seat. Summoning her courage, Cherie slid her eyes in that direction. Not twenty steps away the cloud of locusts was boiling and churning madly, but within the chaos of the frothing mass of insects a shape was coalescing: a giant man with horns, wings, and eyes of flames.

“This is good.” Cherie nodded, trying to reassure herself. “Exactly who we want to see.”

“And I thought I was creepy,” Grendel mumbled.

The humming, buzzing, and thunder of locusts became words. “Bernie, what is the meaning of this? That soul is not one of ours. What is she doing here?”

The demon—Bernie?—cried, “It’s like you always tell us, Boss, always be closing. She isn’t one of ours, but we thought maybe we could make a last-minute deal.”

The flames in the demon’s eyes rose higher. “That isn’t what I always say, Bernie. Until you realize that, you will never move on.”

“Might have been something I said when I was alive,” Bernie mumbled.

The locust head bent over the hood. It was larger than their car, and up close, Cherie could see the fire that was its eyes was being fueled by the bodies of locusts. They struggled to be free of the flames, and their charred forms fell like tears, exploding into sparks where they landed on the car's hood. The monstrous cloud appeared to be studying Cherie.

Dropping Bernie's head, Grendel hissed at Abaddon, the Demon of Destruction, "She belongs to me; you cannot have her."

Cherie wasn't sure if the possessive was frightening or if the unspoken threat was endearing. It was maybe both. But although Grendel had terrible speed and had decapitated "Bernie," Cherie had no doubt that even the vampire was outmatched by Abaddon.

The demon's fiery eyes changed from orange to blue, and more burning locust tears fell. In a smoky, oddly soothing voice, it said, "Indeed, she is not ours. But she isn't yours to keep either, Death. You'll have to give her away someday. Why not now while her soul is unburdened by a life of difficult choices, when she won't have any doubts of her place in the cosmos, when she'll ascend directly to her vision of Heaven?"

Grendel snarled, "You'll only get her through my dead body."

Bowing closer, the demon whispered, "You're already dead." Sparks crackled in the air and danced down the windshield.

Grendel leaned forward, as though she was about to jump out of the car again. Cherie grabbed her arm. The vampire glared at her but sank back into her seat.

Lifting her chin, Cherie met the demon's smoldering eyes. "Abaddon, I have a deal to make with you."

The demon blinked. Through the buzzing, churning cloud of locusts, Cherie thought she glimpsed a man, skin the color of flame, features so perfect it hurt to look upon him. Cherie dropped her gaze.

"Little Peacekeeper," Abaddon said, his voice thunderous and yet gentle. "You cannot offer me your charming soul. Unless you were to do

something truly hideous— murder, molestation, torture, or lies on such a grand scale they result in same—I would not be allowed to keep it.” The locust cloud swelled and collapsed in on itself, as though in a sigh. “However much I might prefer your company to the likes of the damned, like Mr. Madoff there.”

“Don’t know why. I’m a mensch, a charmer, a fucking genius,” the damned soul that might have been Bernie Madoff grumbled. Abaddon reached out with an enormous, locust-cloud hand and flicked Bernie Madoff’s head off into the smoky distance. The trunk exploded, and Bernie’s body jumped out and raced after it.

Abaddon reached a massive locust hand around the car and gently closed the trunk.

“He wasn’t a demon?” Grendel asked.

Abaddon’s focus went to the vampire. “Of course not. You could not rend a demon so easily asunder, Death. We are masters of all your tricks.”

Cherie felt the vampire’s arm tremble beneath her hand.

Clearing her throat, Cherie tried to meet the demon’s eyes. “Sir, Abaddon, I was not going to offer my soul. I was going to offer my very best.”

Grendel made a noise that sounded suspiciously like she was choking on her own spit.

“Your very best?” The locust cloud cocked its head. He didn’t say it in a sneering way, just a curious way, and that gave Cherie hope. As Nnenne always pointed out when discussing the Abrahamic traditions, it wasn’t until the 2nd Temple period that the devil was viewed as “evil,” and that was political, not divine. Perhaps the same went for demons?

Cherie plunged on. “I will offer my very best effort to wake up Jack, which *may* wake up the sleeping people of the city.” She fidgeted her fingers and was honest. “I don’t know that I can actually wake him, but Solien says if I do, it will break the curse, which I presume is the city being

asleep. I understand that is destroying your quota for this quadrant.” Cherie gulped. It had sounded lamer than she had expected—she *might* wake him; she presumed that would break the curse. She felt her stomach flip-flop with another worse thought. Was waking the sleeping so that some might come to Hell evil?

“It’s not evil to wake them,” Abaddon said.

Cherie’s eyes went wide. He’d read her mind? Or had she said that aloud?

The demon rumbled, “I do not steal souls. I only take what is rightfully mine and keep them so long as they persist in evil. There are things which do not abide by that covenant. Things you will face. You will have to confront them to free the man you know as Jack Frost,” Abaddon stated.

Cherie sat up straighter. “You know him?”

“I know him and the names of all the human souls that are, were, and may be, Princess Peacekeeper. But you may not be able to wake Jack,” Abaddon replied. “And the creatures you will face to reach him will attempt to steal your immortal soul. Do you really wish to risk it?”

Cherie shivered, but she also thought of the people of Somer trapped with the Fae and the sleeping family in the city, vulnerable to vampires. If she let them die, helplessly in the case of the slumbering, and possibly in great pain in the case of those in Fairy, wouldn’t her soul be damned anyway?



Jack couldn’t save Cherie. Not in Hell, where he knew she had to be after the flaming destruction of his last mirror.

Still, he held a new mirror in his hands, closed his eyes, and inhaled. “*Show me Cherie, wherever in Heaven or Hell she might be—*”

She appeared, huddled and alone in a burnt out, literal hellscape, nervously looking over her shoulder, but she didn't see the shadow behind her.

"Cherie!" he shouted. Her eyes met his, wide and alarmed. That was the moment the shadow pounced. It ripped off her coat and bent her over. Jack screamed. A tongue, snake-long and forked, whipped from Cherie's mouth and caressed the shadow's neck, and they laughed at him.

Jack growled, his body felt like it was fire and then ice, and then both poured out of him. The damned couple flew backward as though blasted by an invisible force—an invisible force like the type Jack had once commanded ... and in the air of Hell, Jack swore he saw a few snowflakes.

Was he imagining it? Jack strained to see, but steam erupted in the hellscape, and in Jack's hands the mirror sizzled, cracked, and melted into a puddle at his feet. Jack stumbled back.

"Is the wind Magickal?" Cherie had asked in the Chicago home, right before he'd gone cold, realizing the path their argument was taking and realizing his helplessness. The cold he'd felt within had spread to the glass, super freezing it, making it crack.

But if he'd just blasted a cold wind into Hell ... Was he more than useless beyond the realm of dreams?

"Jack?" Cherie's voice came from his right. He hesitated. Cherie? Or another demon playing tricks with him?

"He wasn't being very helpful, before." That was Grendel, to his left, and snippy. "I don't want to lose my rearview mirror."

"But I think I saw him in it right before we went into Hell," Cherie responded, maybe to his left, or in front of him, "and you said we need him."

Grendel harrumphed.

Jack almost laughed with relief, almost, and then remembered a vampire could be trusted only a little further than a demon. But it had to be

them. Cherie's innocent concern, Grendel's curmudgeonly retorts ... he couldn't believe the damned could feign either. He plowed through the snow in their direction, and concentrating, he smacked his hands together, drew them apart ... and saw only snowflakes and the drifts beyond them. Jack put his hands together again and whispered, "*Snow, you've protected Somer from the Queen's sight, but don't keep me from Cherie, her power and her light.*"

He slowly drew his hands apart, and a mirror of ice formed between them. It reflected night ... and ambient Ember. He exhaled, and a claw tapped the mirror, changing the angle. He found himself facing Grendel.

"Speak of the devil," the vampire said.

Cherie gasped. "Grandmother! I don't think you should speak of devils so cavalierly."

Grendel pursed her lips. "At least, I probably shouldn't use the term in a derogatory way. If they are tormenting Bernie Madoff, they are doing God's work." Almost to herself she continued, "I didn't think the Jewish faith had a Hell, but maybe Bernie wasn't welcome in their own afterlife?"

Jack's thoughts spun for a moment. He remembered that name from somewhere.

"Listen, Jack," Grendel said tiredly, "don't break the rearview mirror. I've got to drive."

Jack blinked. "Break the mirror?"

He blinked again. They weren't moving. They were sitting in the middle of a boulevard with burnt out buildings on either side.

Grendel frowned at him. "You didn't mean to break the mirror?"

"What mirror?" Jack asked.

Out of view, Cherie exclaimed, "Never mind that. We just got back from Hell!"

Grendel scowled into the distance. "That sign says, 'Abaddon all Hope.'"

“That’s how I knew who was in charge,” Cherie said, and Jack could *hear* not just her smile, but the way she nodded her head when she’d done something she was proud of—like going on an unplanned spelunking expedition with her friends in an Ember mine and finding a cave, getting lost, being terrified, but then promptly forgetting the terror and only “how pretty the stalagmites and stalactites were” as soon as they’d found the exit.

“‘Abaddon all Hope’ is a horrible pun.” Grendel’s lip curled in disgust.

Cherie giggled, but it had a frantic edge to it. “I think it is funny. And if it weren’t for the sign, I wouldn’t have known who to call.”

She’d called on Abaddon? The Demon of Destruction? And survived?

“Cherie, can I see you?” Jack touched the mirror, not quite believing it.

“Go ahead,” Grendel said, hunching her shoulders. Jack’s perspective tilted, and there was Cherie. Her hair was in much more disarray than when he’d seen her in the house and it had a few stray leaves caught in it. Her eyes were a bit too wide, her expression slightly dazed.

Leaning closer, Jack whispered, “You called on Aba—”

Cherie put two fingers to the mirror over his lips. He wanted to kiss them.

“I don’t think you should mention his name,” Cherie said. “I called on him three times, and he came to our rescue.” She shrugged.

“Rescue?” Grendel snapped. “His first inclination was to kill you!”

“To send me to Heaven, Grandmother, which I don’t think he recognized as a punishment,” Cherie replied.

Jack gaped.

Cherie shook her head, and some of the “leaves” in her hair went buzzing out the back window. Grimacing, Cherie plucked one remaining “leaf” from beside her ear. “Ew ... locusts.” Her focus returned to the mirror. “Really, Bernie Madoff and the damned crew were much worse than You-Know-Who.” She smiled weakly.

She was leaving something out. “*How* did you survive?” Jack whispered.

Playing with a lock of hair, Cherie said, “Oh, I made a deal with him.”

“You offered him your soul?” Jack swallowed.

Grendel snorted. “He wouldn’t take it. Too pure.”

“He couldn’t take it,” Cherie said. “He did say he’d enjoy my company more than the damned.” She shivered. “They were icky. He actually seemed lonely.”

Grendel snorted.

“What did you offer?” Jack whispered, his heart picking up speed.

Cherie bit her lip.

Grendel huffed. “Her very best effort to set you free. Look, Jack, we’re heading to the Sears Tower—”

He didn’t recognize the name, and then he did—it was the original name of what had once been the tallest building in the world. It was the right place, though it hadn’t been called the Sears Tower in a very long time, except by people so old that was the name they grew up with.

Grendel continued, “It would help if we could avoid more ungodly gateways to other worlds. We’ll have enough trouble with any monsters loose from those worlds—which Cherie tells me happens—without having to deal with escaping those worlds ourselves.”

The scene behind them was a blur. “Turn around. Go back,” Jack wanted to say.

What Cherie had done and was doing was madness. As though reading his thoughts, Grendel said, “She must do this, Jack. She gave her word to a demon she’d ‘do her best.’ That was the deal she made.”

Her best? And that was binding? How many times in another life had Jack said, “Your best isn’t good enough”? The best hadn’t been good enough in the end. Jack had done his best to protect his people. He’d failed.

“It’s not just about my word to a demon.” Cherie turned away from Jack and seemed to grow fainter. To the vampire, she said, “More is at stake than that. People’s lives are at stake.”

Harrumphing, Grendel said, “Jack, where are the otherworldly intersections?”

“That would be very helpful,” Cherie echoed, her eyes returning to his. The scene in the car became clear once more.

She’d made a deal with a demon. What he wanted didn’t matter anymore. Grendel was right; Cherie *had* to go through with it. She could not renege on a pledge to Abaddon.

He tried to think of her not as Cherie, but as a soldier. “Where are you?” he asked. “Do you know your heading?”

“We’re on Halstead, heading north, coming up on Chinatown,” Grendel said.

Jack swallowed. “You won’t have to worry about crossing over into the Diyu,” he said, using one of the many names for the Chinese version of Hell. “The gateway is in the Chinatown Mall, off Archer and Cermak.”

“I know it,” Grendel said, “and will stay well clear.”

“You know Chicago well?” Jack asked, his skin starting to crawl. Had he met this vampire before? Was it a member of one of the covens he’d destroyed? Was it out for vengeance, using his feelings for Cherie as a weapon?

“I did, before it was Magickal,” Grendel replied.

Cherie glanced at the vampire, and he thought he detected a glimmer of fondness in her eyes. He wanted to shout into the mirror, “Cherie, be careful! She is a vampire!” But he bit it back. When Cherie returned her gaze to him, her eyes sparkled. She lifted her chin—was that defiance he saw in that expression? —and she smiled at him.

“Grendel is from *before* the Change—or the very cusp of it.” Cherie had always been fascinated by the pre-Change world and had asked him many

times for descriptions of airplanes that “didn’t fall in love with dragons or griffins and fly off after them,” and “typewriters” that you could use to endlessly correct essays, help with math homework, and look up words and subjects in seconds. Jack was woefully poor at satisfying her curiosity. The Change had already begun when he was a boy. Cherie continued, “She slept through *everything*, the failure of electricals, the Vampire Wars, and didn’t even know what Ember is.”

Jack’s mind spun. Could it be true? Vampires did sleep for long periods of time. He’d never heard of a vampire sleeping for two centuries ... but then, they hadn’t existed for two centuries when he’d fought them.

“Are there any more gateways on this route, Jack?” Grendel asked.

Closing his eyes, he imagined their path. “There is a gateway to Hades just south and east of Jackson and Halstead. The CTA tunnel.”

“Sea-tea-ay?” asked Cherie, and she looked at Grendel, not at him, and it made something in his stomach twist.

“It’s a train,” Jack and Grendel replied simultaneously.

“I know the area,” Grendel added.

“Jack.” Cherie’s attention returned to him. “Aba—the Demon said that there are things in the path that will strip away my immortal soul. That is the sluagh, right?”

He pulled away from the mirror. “How did you know?”

“They flew out of your hands,” Cherie said.

“What?”

“Back at my house.” Her lips twisted wryly. “The last time we fought.”

He squeezed his eyes shut and had a hazy memory of the event. “It’s like a dream ...” His heart started pounding. When things got hazy in dreams, it often meant the dream was ending. He opened his eyes, afraid that Cherie would be gone, but Cherie was still there. He almost forgot himself, almost leaned forward and kissed the glass in relief ... or old feelings.

“What are sluagh?” Grendel asked, and he remembered himself and resented her for the interruption.

“Birds,” said Cherie. “They are like ravens, but with crimson-black wings and red eyes. They are larger. They have feet like hands and beaks like birds of prey.”

“They feast on souls,” Jack heard himself say. He dug his fingernails into his palm, trying to stay focused. “There are millions of them.”

For a moment, there was only the sound of the wind whistling through the car on their side.

Grendel declared, “But did they take care of the pigeon population? That is what I want to know!”

Cherie’s lips pursed. Jack stared.

Clearing her throat, Grendel said, “That was a poor attempt at deflection, sorry. I don’t suppose you can tell us what floor you’re on?”

“What floor?” Jack asked dumbly.

“Of the tower ... it has over 105 floors, right?” the vampire said.

“Over 100 floors?” Cherie asked.

It had been a long time since Jack had thought about where his physical body was. For nearly the past two decades, for all intents and purposes, he’d “lived” in Somer. Jack closed his eyes, trying to remember where he’d been when the shadow of the sluagh had stretched across downtown Chicago. “I’m in the lab.” He rubbed his forehead.

“What floor is that?” Grendel asked.

“It’s on the 102nd floor,” Jack replied. His brow furrowed. “I was inspecting one of the Dwarfs ...”

“Dwarfs?” said Cherie and Grendel at the same time.

Jack shook his head. “Not real dwarfs. We just called them that. They’re robots ... Ashwin’s creations.” Ashwin was not Magickal, but he was an incredible technomage. Like Nevin had been. He pushed away the memory creeping at the edge of his consciousness. His eyes fell on Grendel. This

was the real test. “They were designed to detect vampires in a fifty-meter radius and destroy them.”

Cherie inhaled sharply. “Grendel, you don’t have to—”

“But you do,” the vampire snipped, narrowing her eyes and glaring into the distance. “How well do they work?”

Jack’s jaw fell open. “I ... we ... they weren’t tested in the field. All the vampires were dead by the time he’d completed the prototypes.”

Grendel’s torso rocked, as though she were nodding with her whole body. “I’m still coming.” Her jaw got hard. “And Jack, I swear I’ll do everything in my power to see that Cherie comes through this with her soul intact, in her chest, and with her still beating heart.”

For just a moment, Jack forgot Grendel was a vampire. But then it came back to him, in a flash of fear, and his view of them wavered like a mirage. Cherie and Jack couldn’t afford to forget what Grendel was. He heard himself ask, “Why are you doing this?”

“Because I’m still me,” Grendel replied.

... And in the mirror, Cherie’s face was replaced by Nevin’s. “I’m still me, Jack.”

The mirror cracked and shattered in his hands.



“He’s gone,” Cherie whispered, running her fingers over the mirror.

“At least he didn’t break the mirror this time,” Grendel grumbled. “Terribly reliable, that boyfriend of yours.”

Cherie didn’t bother trying to correct her. There had been more between Jack and her once; maybe that meant there was still more between them. What that meant if she woke him, she wasn’t sure. If she woke him, the city might wake. Would he want anything to do with Cherie then?

Her mind wandered back to a memory. She'd been in her early teens, two rooms away from where Nnenna and Jack had been discussing something—Ember veins in the midwest, if Cherie remembered right. Hearing their voices, Cherie had wandered closer. She wasn't really friends with Jack then. *Nnenna* was friends with Jack, and Jack was *old*. Not old like Nnenna, but too old to be fun and too old to be handsome ... or at least, he *had been* too old to be handsome, but around that time, Cherie had found herself riveted to the mirror whenever he talked to Nnenna, or Mayor Evans, or Officer Easterman, and she often found herself entranced by Jack's voice, so lovely and deep—even if he talked about boring things like the intricacies of detecting and determining the power of Old Magicks, the known history of Fairy and how to negotiate—or not—with its denizens, and about Ember deposits. She didn't want his discussion with Nnenna to end. If Jack saw her, he would inevitably say, “Oh, hello Cherie, so nice to see you again,” but he wouldn't sound like he meant it. Then he would say to her grandmother, “Dr. Anna, I know you want to speak to your granddaughter. I'll leave you two now.” He'd vanish in a swirl of snow, and Cherie would have to hide her disappointment as Nnenna turned to her, beamed, and asked about her day or her trip to the store and how such-and-such friend was doing. So, Cherie crept closer, but quietly, and when she reached the next room, she leaned against the wall and listened as Nnenna said, “My husband always felt that there was a powerful vein of Ember in Southern Illinois. It was his talent, and I don't doubt he was correct.”

“He was powerful, I bet,” Jack had said.

Nnenna had been non-committal. “He did all right.”

Jack had made an indelicate noise. “I'm sure he was strong, and you probably wouldn't have been interested in him if he wasn't.”

Nnenna retorted, “*Child*, I married him when Magick didn't exist. It was never one of my considerations.”

Jack hadn't backed down. "It wouldn't have worked out if you both weren't strong. Trust me. When you're strong in Magick, only a strong Magickal partner will do."

Cherie had been instantly saddened by his words. But she'd been barely a teenager, and she'd been unfamiliar with the sensation of having a crush, so she hadn't understood why she was sad. She remembered Nnenne responding with something like, "That's foolishness." And Jack saying with utmost confidence, "I speak from experience."

Later, when she was older, and things *changed* between her and Jack, she'd almost teased him about those words ... but hadn't quite had the nerve. She'd been afraid that the slightest misstep would shatter their fragile ... whatever it was. Heated gazes through a mirror, fingers touching glass that should have been cold but was warm? She'd been right, it had been fragile. Jack had unilaterally decided to end whatever it had been. It was pathetic really, and the full extent of her romantic experience. Cillian had been right, the boys of Somer were afraid of her because she was Magickal—she'd always known it deep down. But if she freed Jack, he still might not want her because she was too weak.

It was a good thing she wasn't doing this for Jack. The realization made her more resolute. It didn't make her happy.

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CHAPTER 15



“I *am the master of my dreams. I am the master of my dreams.”*
Nevin’s voice whispered on the wind. “I am still me. I am still me.”

In the blizzard, Jack’s hands balled into fists at his sides, turned to ice, cracked, and dropped from his wrists.

“No,” he said. “Not now!”

His icy hands flew up from the snow, reattached to his wrists, shocking his system with their cold, but he imagined them warm and whole. He flexed them, and they responded. How to help Cherie ... did he search for her? It might take hours or days, and then he’d be useless. He’d already delivered what intelligence he knew of the “intersections” that would be close to their path ... And in any event, the real danger was the sluagh.

He needed intelligence on the sluagh. He hadn’t studied the creatures in years, but they usually roamed the entirety of the city; that Cherie and Grendel hadn’t run into them suggested they’d amassed in a single place.

Closing his eyes, Jack brought his hands together and whispered, “*Magick, let me take stock of the city’s murderous flock.*” He spread his hands, opened his eyes, and snow rose before him into a single sheet of ice, wide as his arms spread wide. It was a mirror that looked into a corner office, with windows that on the South and West Sides.

For a moment he feared that the light of his dream would shine from the mirror through windows, and alert the sluagh, even though his dream was storm dark. Fortunately, the real moon in Chicago's sky was startlingly bright, though it was occasionally obscured by swift moving red-black clouds of sluagh. The moon's brightness, shining on the windows, turned those windows into mirrors on the outside of the building, and obscured the comparatively dim light of his dream. Confirming that thought, a sluagh hovered before one of the windows, turned its head from side to side, preening for a moment, before being knocked out of the sky by one of its brethren.

From his view of Cherie, Jack had mistaken the night as entirely cloudy. He glanced to the side, keeping his body very still—birds had very good eyesight, and even with the building's windows currently acting as mirrors, he didn't want to push his luck. It was cloudy to the south, the direction Cherie was coming from.

He let go of a breath. There had to be millions of the creatures. The sluagh flew above and below the floor he was on. Every now and then birds would collide in the air. They'd scream, thrash, and plummet, while other birds jeered or joined in. Their crimson eyes glowed in the night, seemingly gateways to the literal Hell, but Hell was better than what the sluagh offered: a painful end and eternal death.

From his mirror view, he saw the tops of surrounding buildings, and for a moment, he thought that somehow, in his sleep, they'd been damaged by fire. Their roofs, once pebbly gray, were black. And then he noted the surfaces were writhing. The rooftop of every single building in the loop was covered by the birds. Occasionally, one of the birds in flight would drop down on its fellows, fights would erupt, and inevitably some birds would be pushed off the side. The creatures would have been something out of farce, except their numbers made them deadly. There was no one target, but millions. A hydra might regrow its heads, but at least it had a single heart to

slay. The sluagh infestation in Chicago had millions of hearts, millions of heads, and only a few dozen of the creatures could strip a man to the bone. It wasn't flesh they were ultimately after, though; they devoured souls. The sluagh took their time when they ate, the agony of slow, terrifying, disfiguring death being "more delicious." Jack knew this because the beasts could talk, and last time he'd spied on them, they'd told him.

A tremendous battle erupted between the building and the moon, completely blocking the orb's light, making the windows mirrors no longer. He'd barely comprehended that when some of the birds on the outskirts of the fray spotted him and hurtled toward him in a swirling black mass. The windows shattered. "Soul of a King! Soul of a King!" they shrieked, surging forward, beaks and claws crimson. Jack roared, blasting a whirlwind of snow around himself. What remained of the windows exploded outward; the birds—and the dreamscape—went with the shards.

Jack found himself in the blizzard landscape again. The bodies of birds surrounded him, frozen through, except for one. It whistled and laughed. "Hiding your souls between life and death in sleep only makes us *hungrier*."

Jack blasted it with a bolt of lightning. As an afterthought, he blasted the corpses of its brethren, too, just for good measure. He stood above them, panting. Sleep was only halfway between life and death; he wasn't completely invulnerable from the birds in dreams ... which was one of the reasons he didn't regularly survey the city. He had done so, more often, when they'd first been cursed. He'd even mapped out a route for whatever Magickal eventually came to rescue them, one that would keep the would-be rescuers out of sight. He'd need to see if the route was still clear ... but he hesitated. Dreams were tangled things; he wouldn't be just treading a physical path, he'd be treading a path of very dark memories. It was a path that might spare Cherie's life and her soul ... or at least preserve both a few more minutes.

Closing his eyes, Jack plunged into darkness.



The moon had disappeared behind a cloud, and without Jack in the mirror and the snowy scene behind him, the interior of the car was unlit. So was the world. Grendel was driving without lights, which was probably wise, but that meant there wasn't even the faint Ember-light illumination of the dials on the dash. The only light was the occasional flash of the vampire's eyes. Cherie was very aware of the vampire's hand beneath her own, the skin papery with age. Cherie could feel the vampire's bones and all the tendons, especially when Grendel squeezed the stick tighter while shifting gears. Sometimes the vampire would sigh or make hushed exclamations of surprise. "That wasn't here before!" But mostly Grendel was eerily quiet. In the silence, Cherie remembered what Grendel was, what she could do, and her long fangs and claws. Cherie's mind conjured up the head of the damned soul of Bernie Madoff, dangling from Grendel's grip, and Cherie remembered Grendel killing the Queen's Guard. She shivered.

"Are you cold?" the vampire asked solicitously.

"A little," Cherie replied, because it was true, even if it wasn't the reason for the shiver. The back windshield was broken, and the heater wasn't enough to counteract it, even going full blast.

"I wonder if it has heated seats," Grendel said, and then, "A-ha!" There was one click, another, and then the vampire said, "Hopefully you'll feel better in a minute." She chuckled. "And me, too."

Cherie began to feel a slow warmth growing beneath her thighs, and that was nice, but it was quiet again.

"Is it my imagination, or is it getting darker outside?" Cherie asked, sure she was imagining things, but needing a thread of conversation to pull her from her uncomfortable thoughts.

“It is,” Grendel said. “There is fog ahead.”

“Is that normal?” Cherie asked.

“Mmm ... it isn’t *unusual* for fog to cover the city.” There was something too careful in the vampire’s reply.

“I sense a ‘but,’” Cherie said. It was an expression Nnenne was apt to use, and she surprised herself with how much like Nnenne she sounded.

“I didn’t see the clouds over the lake earlier, and that is usually where these low clouds come from,” Grendel replied. She continued, sounding wistful, “The tower we’re going to, the very top is often above the clouds in weather like this, but when it is clear, you can see all the way across Lake Michigan.”

“The other side of the lake is very far?” Cherie asked, because she was curious, and because when Grendel spoke, she forgot about her speed and her fangs and the long claws that were at the end of the fingers beneath Cherie’s own.

“Oh, yes,” said Grendel, beginning to sound enthusiastic. “All of the Great Lakes are really freshwater inland seas. In the summertime, there are places along the shore that can be mistaken for the Mediterranean. In winter, it can look like the North Pole. Some years, Lake Michigan completely freezes over, and then it isn’t summer until July, because the city is sitting next to an enormous ice cube, basking in its chill. I remember walking out on the ice one winter—the waves had frozen high above the water level, they were like icy dunes ...” She sighed. “That was a long time ago.”

There was so much love and longing in Grendel’s voice, and it was for something that was so wholly innocent. Grendel was nothing like what Cherie had been taught vampires were, and even Nnenne admitted those stories of their evil weren’t exaggerations. But some of the supposedly wicked ones must have been like Grendel. She remembered the smiling

vampire in the photo with Nnenna, and *knew* Grendel wasn't the only one. Cherie squeezed her hand. "Maybe you'll see it again."

Grendel turned her palm up and squeezed back. "We'll both see it."

Cherie was beginning to have her doubts. Maybe it was the darkness, or maybe it was the knowledge that in centuries no one else had managed to wake the city suddenly catching up with her. She remembered Nnenna on her deathbed, telling her, "There's a lot I haven't told you. A lot I *need* to tell you."

And suddenly Cherie found herself babbling, because there were things she needed to tell Grendel. "If I don't survive, there are things you need to know. Not all vampires are like you. Some were needlessly and terribly cruel, and when nice vampires tried to sue for peace, their own kind killed them. My Nnenna told me that and so did Jack, and so I think it must be true, because Nnenna would know, and Jack—well, it was something I don't think he would lie about, and you must be careful, Grendel. Not just of humans."

Grendel growled, "You're not going to die."

Cherie glanced in the direction of their joined hands, still too dark to see. The only reason she was still awake was because she was holding the hand of Death. Holding the hand of Death made her, in a sense, dead, or nearly to it. She remembered something Jack had said about "Vampire groupies" and how they were, to a one, "disturbed individuals with death wishes." Cherie didn't want to die, and for an instant, she had a nearly irrepressible urge to pull her hand away. But she'd promised Abaddon, and the people of Somer, and herself, so she held on, tightening her grip.

Grendel slowed the car. Cherie heard her gulp. "I can barely see," Grendel admitted. "The mist is so thick. This isn't natural, Granddaughter. Do you know what it could be?"

"I—"

A blinding light split the night. Cherie covered her eyes. Grendel shrieked and ducked behind the dash.

A low, serpentine hiss whispered in a language like a song.

Shaking the door handle, Grendel cried, “We’re trapped inside!”

The car jerked to and fro and *up*. Head bouncing against the headrest, body flung side to side, Cherie couldn’t reply through her rattling teeth as the car rose in the air. The voice hissed again, and this time, in English. “Death, you have brought something to me, but you haven’t finished the job.”



The first thing Jack needed to do was to survey his physical prison to see if the path between himself and the ground was clear. That was what he told himself, but something in the back of his mind whispered, “You’re just avoiding the inevitable.”

It was true, but this part of his mission was important as well, and perhaps, reorienting himself with the tower would be beneficial later. If he could cause a gusting snow laden breeze in Hell, he might be able to do the same in the tower. He remembered the mirrors in the tower and went to the last he’d been in front of. He closed his eyes, opened them, and found himself meeting his own eyes in the men’s restroom. He’d just splashed himself with cold water, and it was running down his face. The night before the sluagh attack, he’d gotten very little sleep.

“Hiya, Jack,” said Raab, pushing up a pair of wire rimmed spectacles with one hand and tossing a paper towel into the trash with the other. His voice was so strong and clear, for a moment, Jack thought Raab had wandered into his dream in the real sense, that they’d be able to talk, really talk, and Jack would have the benefit of Raab’s advice. Raab was an engineer. He’d helped Ashwin and Nevin create the prototypes for the

Ember Activated Robotic Force. He wasn't Magickal, nor had he ever been a soldier, but he was hardworking, honest to a fault, and razor sharp. But then Raab said, "I don't like the wild fluctuations in the ambient Ember today. Overall concentrations are still rising. I've never seen anything like it. It's not natural." Those were the exact words Raab had said to Jack the day the sluagh arrived. Banging out the door, he'd shouted on his way out, "Not that we know what is natural when we've only had a few decades experience with this shit. I need more data!" By "shit" he meant Magick and Ember.

The higher Ember concentrations and the wild fluctuations, those were the first signs they'd had of the sluagh's arrival. They'd just barely cleared out the vampiric infestation, their Ember Activated Robotic Force never even having been put to the test—or tuned to sluagh. They'd been useless. His brow furrowed, thinking of the robots, something nagging at him, but there was nothing else to see here. Jack closed his eyes, remembered the path he'd chosen to follow. He conjured up memories of the hallway, and the troops that filled it. Their faces were blurry in his recollection. He felt his concentration slipping away and peeked in through the mirrors in the elevator. This time he was fairly certain he was seeing the real world. The scene was only lit by the glow of his blizzardy scene, and there were two men in full vamp-resistant armor asleep on the floor, halfway in one of the elevators, and halfway in the hall.

From the elevator, he could see the secure stairwell with the two men who had been standing guard outside it slumped on the floor, sound asleep. Beyond that was the entrance to the lab where his body lay. The mirrors in the lab didn't look over his body—most looked up into microscopes. He couldn't verify if his body was still there, or that the way was unobstructed.

He willed his mind through the steel fire-door of the stairwell ... and saw the world bloated and distorted through the mirrors at the stairway corners designed to let his men see around corners. The scene was lit by the

light from his dreamland, but in the daytime, it would be lit by sunlight that was piped in through reflective cables. He slipped down level by level all the way to the ground floor—and there he could go no farther. The stairwell to the coal tunnels that crisscrossed beneath Chicago's streets had been covered by multiple layers of steel. The place was too attractive to vampires or had been before they'd been exterminated. Cherie and Grendel would have to come through the front door. He slipped to a Magick mirror above the security desk in the lobby that would reveal the presence of vampires and other dangerous things. Two other guards were lying behind the desk. There were civilians and troops in the lobby as well. Outside, a few dozen of the sluagh were fighting, shedding crimson-black feathers, others looking on and jeering. Jack withdrew from the mirror before he was seen. It was time to go where he dreaded most.

Teeth grinding, he imagined the mirror that looked out over Lower Wacker Drive, a semi-subterranean causeway that should have been closed after the Change—it was a magnet for trolls and others of that ilk—but it was too large and too useful. The businesses that used it had pledged to help secure the place. To be fair, they had mostly been successful.

He peered through a loading dock mirror at a world distorted by the mirror's convex shape. It gave him a wider angle of vision, and nowhere he looked were there any sluagh, but it was definitely the present he saw and not a regurgitated memory—there were a few cars, their drivers slumped, sleeping at the wheel. He whistled to draw attention, in case the sluagh were simply roosting in the cement rafters of the drive. There was no response. Hadn't he learned from someone that birds relied primarily on sight? Perhaps his whistle wasn't loud enough? In a flash of inspiration, he imagined a break in the cloudy dream sky behind him. Light spilled over his shoulders and became a wide searchlight in the bowels of Lower Wacker. Still there was no response. If Cherie could get to Lower Wacker, she could come within a block of the tower without being seen.

His jaw ground again. If she did that, she'd have to pass through the place he dreaded. He closed his eyes. It shouldn't do this to him. The place wasn't like that anymore. He was the master of his dreams, and he wouldn't see memories; he'd see the present. He would.

With a breath in through his nose, held for ten, and released slowly through his mouth, he left the mirror that looked from the loading dock and went to a side view mirror of the truck parked in the dock itself. There was a gap between the truck's trailer and the loading bay, just wide enough for a man to slip through if he turned sideways. Cherie and Grendel might not even need to twist, and the narrow gap between the truck's trailer and the loading bay wall might slow down the slough if they were in pursuit. The loading bay entrance was about four feet above the ground, but there was a ladder for drivers and unloaders to climb. Cherie's trip through the Ember mine and cave demonstrated she was still a scrappy and adept climber.

His fists curled ... he just had to verify the rest of the way was still clear. The mirror before him did not change. He was delaying the final part of his inspection.

He had experience with this particular building and its underground loading bay. There was a mirror just within.

"I am the master of my dreams," Jack said. *"Only the present will I see, and I must see this for Cherie."* He closed his eyes and followed the meaning of his hastily constructed rhyme. He opened his eyes to darkness only alleviated by the faint illumination of his dream. He was in another convex mirror designed for the loaders to see around corners in the loading bay with its many shelves of goods for All Ember Office Supplies, as their logo stated, "The premier manufacturer of Ember powered copiers, printers, and typewriters." There was a miniature Ember powered forklift midway down one of the aisles, its driver slumped at the wheel. There were human men and women in coveralls prone between the aisles, innocently asleep. The door leading to the stairwell that went up to the ground floor was open,

propped ajar by a brick. Two men with a crate between them were asleep just past it. Could they have slept so soundly under Mizuki's spell if they'd known what had happened in the warehouse before All Ember Office Supplies had taken up residence? The entire building above had been controlled by businesses owned by vampires, and the loading dock had been known as the "meat locker."

"I am the master of my dreams," Jack reminded himself. But his traitorous brain supplied a rhyme that whispered on the wind of his snowy landscape. *"I cannot forget their screams."*

The shelving units, the shadows of office equipment, and supplies disappeared. The aisles were demarcated not by shelves, but by bodies of humans, naked, strung upside down, most of them dead, waiting to be disposed of.

Most dead. The shadows grew longer. The smell of decaying flesh made him want to vomit, and the sharp cries of the newly captured and the moans of the dying echoed from his memories into his dream.

He screamed so loudly he was surprised he didn't wake himself up.



The spotlights winked, and Grendel screamed with fury and maybe pain, not from beside Cherie, but from outside the car.

"That was a very dishonorable move, Little Death," hissed the deep serpentine voice. The dual spotlights winked again. Lowering her hand, Cherie realized the bright beams were enormous, golden eyes with dark slits for pupils, and Grendel was in the grips of an enormous, silvery, scaled claw.

Banging her fists against the scales, Grendel shouted, "You can't have my granddaughter."

Cherie fought back a yawn behind her hand.

The eyes were momentarily obscured by clouds. “It is very irresponsible of you to put your granddaughter in such danger. I shall eat her and spare her your foolishness.”

Despite the words, Cherie’s necklace was not cold. Whatever danger this was, it wasn’t an enemy. Struggling to stay awake, she murmured, “Grandmother, please—”

Grendel growled and bit the claw. Its owner turned its bright gaze to the vampire but did not release her. Grendel screamed and hid her eyes.

Cherie rolled down her window, each turn of the knob a labor against her desire to sleep. “Grandmother.” She yawned and shook herself. “Please stop. We have found another friend!” The night’s cold was intensified by the dampness of the fog, and it made her shiver back to semi-alertness.

Hiding her eyes from the light of the brilliant eyes, Grendel demanded, “When did we meet our *first* friend?”

“Surely you have not forgotten Abaddon!” Cherie replied, biting back her burgeoning yawn.

Grendel grumbled, “Like I could.”

“My Go partner?” hissed the voice, and a puff of clouds briefly concealed the creature’s eyes.

“Go?” Cherie asked.

The creature huffed, “You probably know it as Chinese Chess, but that is frankly insulting. It has much more room for creativity and—”

The creature droned on. Cherie reminded herself her necklace wasn’t cold and cataloged what she knew of their new “friend.” It played “Chinese Chess,” had human-sized claws, fog, and it hadn’t eaten her right away. It could be a dragon ... and not all dragons were human eating. Although it had suggested eating her. Her treacherous brain said, “better to be asleep for that.”

Her eyelids sank, but she managed to mumble, “We’re in Chinatown, yes?”

The maybe-dragon hissed, "Close enough to it."

If she was near Chinatown, there was hope she would not be eaten. Forcing her eyes open, Cherie said, "Honorable Sir, I don't know Chinese."

There was another puff of clouds. "I noticed."

"Nor am I Chinese," Cherie added.

Sounding a bit sympathetic, the probable dragon replied, "Not everyone can be, though they certainly would be, if they could."

"But the honor and wisdom of China's dragons is known far and wide," Cherie continued, silently thanking Nnemme for making her read every book on every nation's mythology that could possibly be had in the post-Change age.

There was a puff of clouds, which Cherie was suspecting was breath from an enormous nostril. "We certainly aren't like those indiscriminate, human-eating European vermin," the creature Cherie was now certain was a dragon replied.

"*You* threatened to eat her!" Grendel retorted.

The dragon's eyes glowed brighter, and Grendel ducked her head. In the brighter light, Cherie could see that it was indeed a dragon. It had a prodigious snout, its eyes were forward on its head, and it had a great many whiskers, like a catfish. Its body was long and snakelike, though gigantic of course, and it had spines along its back. Its scales were sky-blue and silvery white, like a sky filled with gentle clouds. It was so beautiful she just wanted to close her eyes, and ...

"I'd only eat her out of *mercy*, Death!" the dragon retorted, making Cherie's eyes bolt open. She pinched herself to stay awake.

The dragon continued, "Shame on you for being weak willed and not killing her yourself!"

Cherie gulped, and for a moment, she was very awake.

Great clouds puffed from its nostrils. "The only reason she hasn't been spotted and de-souled by the sluagh is because of the cover of my mist!"

Ahh ... that was why they hadn't seen any sluagh. Cherie tilted her head to the side and found the windowsill surprisingly comfortable.

Grendel growled, "Very convenient mercy. If you were so worried about her soul, you could just let her sleep."

A wonderful suggestion; Cherie's eyes slipped closed.

The dragon retorted, "If I did that, you'd only wake her up again, and maybe when I am not around to defend her from the sluagh."

"Eating her is not a mercy killing!" Grendel shot back.

Cherie's eyelids only rose to half-mast for this declaration.

The dragon hissed, "I would never waste her meat. I'm a Buddhist." The dragon's pupils slid to Cherie. "Technically, I wouldn't be killing you for me, but for you, so it would be allowed, nay, even encouraged."

Nodding, Cherie tried to smile as though she understood that twist of theological tenets. Also, she tried to keep her eyes from drooping further ... but the windowsill was so comfortable, even with the door lock jammed into her neck. She jerked herself up in time for another burst of clouds. It hissed at Grendel. "Kick and scratch all you want; I shan't let you go."

Cherie bit her lip, pinched herself, and shuffled her feet, trying to stay awake. Fearing she wouldn't be able to stay awake much longer, Cherie cleared her throat. "Honorable Dragon, I do appreciate your gracious and generous offer—"

"'Tis truly sad when a child is wiser than her elders," the dragon interjected. "I will make it quick, Dear Child." A long pink shape darted at the windshield, shocking Cherie into alertness. It took a moment for Cherie to realize the pink thing, wide as a python, was the dragon's tongue.

Cherie stammered hastily, "Honorable Dragon, I must decline, for I am honor bound to end the sluagh's infestation."

The dragon snorted. "You'll fail. Better to be eaten and go straight to the desk of Ten Thousand Yama Kings." Cherie blinked, fairly certain he was referring to the Chinese judge of souls, however ... "Honorable Sir, I

thought there were only ...” She yawned behind her hand. “Ten Yama Kings.”

“We needed more, what with the population growth and outward migration.” Its tongue flicked out again, and Cherie shrank back in her seat.

“The elf king believes she can do it!” Grendel retorted.

“Solien is a baby!” chuffed the dragon. “Never could manage a decent game of Go.”

“And Abaddon,” hissed Grendel.

Cherie leaned back against her seat just for a moment. Through half-closed eyelids, she saw the dragon’s head jerk in the vampire’s direction.

For a moment, she was weightless, as though she were flying ... and then her body was bouncing in her seat, her head ricocheting back and forth, and her seatbelt just barely restraining her as the car bounced on the ground with such force the doors opened. Cherie gasped, wide awake.

“Abaddon?” the dragon blinked, its spotlight eyes winked, and sleep was tempting again ... and then something warm and moist flicked against Cherie’s cheek, and she woke. The spotlights in the mist returned, and Cherie could see the dragon’s tongue, long, pink, and covered in tiny ridges, right beside her. Throwing her hand to her mouth, she bit her lip so as not to shriek.

“Deliciousssss,” whispered the dragon.

Grendel gave a ferocious cry. Cherie didn’t see what the vampire did, but the dragon switched Grendel from one enormous claw to the other. “*Āiyō!*” it hissed, shaking the claw that the vampire had previously occupied. “Was that really necessary?”

“I’ll do worse if you eat her,” Grendel hissed right back.

“You could try,” the dragon replied, narrowing its eyes at the vampire, but then it sighed. “But I am not sure I *should* eat her.”

“Of course you shouldn’t!” Grendel retorted.

Cherie kept her mouth shut. Arguing with the dragon seemed like a bad idea. It was obviously older, and the best policy with older folk was flattery and persuasion ... after a nap.

Continuing as though the vampire hadn't spoken, the dragon said, "She might indeed be able to wake the city ... I can certainly taste the *delicious* possibility."

The smack of his lips made Cherie's eyes bolt open. She found the dragon looking at her in the same sort of way Nnenne, a horrible sweet tooth despite her medical degree, would surreptitiously eye the last piece of cake. Sighing again, it averted its gaze, and with the immediate threat seemingly over, Cherie's eyes sunk closed again. Somewhere, far off, she heard the dragon saying, "... definitely be able to destroy the sluagh ... I am limited, you see, to the domain of my people. If I wander too far, the sluagh slip into Diyu, to where the Yama King in this quadrant judges the dead. The sluagh have very nearly succeeded in devouring some of our people's souls." He huffed. "Not because we are incompetent in protecting them. Cerberus has the same trouble, I've heard."

"Cerberus?" Grendel said. Cherie knew she was dreaming because she saw Nnenne, sitting on the dragon's claw, right next to Grendel, and Grendel and Nnenne were both haloed with a heavenly glow. Cherie did not want to wake up. Nnenne might disappear. She had been accused of talking in her sleep before, so she tried to now. "Guardian of Hades, Greek underworld," Cherie replied. In her dream, she was a child again, sitting on Nnenne's lap, a book with an illustration of the enormous, three-headed dog from Greek mythology spread out between them. Cherie sank into her grandmother's lap, feeling incredibly safe and protected. She would never

"Wake up, *Wàiguó rén*." A sharp poke to her cheek made Cherie open her eyes. Withdrawing a claw from the car, the dragon said, "Cerberus used

to spend his time keeping the dead within Hades. Now he must focus on keeping the sluagh out. It's terribly inconvenient."

Cherie summoned her courage and all the alertness she had left. "Well, then, despite the difficulty, and the sadness I feel in being unable to accept your gracious offer, I really must attempt to wake him," she managed to mumble groggily.

Lowering its head, the dragon flicked its long tongue, and it twisted inside the confines of the car, jolting Cherie awake.

"Are you sure?" it hissed. "It really is unfair to ask so much of you, a lowly human, and not even Chinese!"

"I must," Cherie said, trying to sound both humble and resolute. "I gave my word to Abaddon that I would do my very best."

The great dragon sighed. "Foolish child, bargaining with an angel." A great puff of clouds exited his nostrils. "And my Go partner no less." He put Grendel down and shoved her toward the driver's side. "What route do you plan to take? I'll give you the cover of a fog bank."

Dusting herself off, Grendel glared at the dragon, but replied, "We'll continue north until Roosevelt, and then cut east cross the freeway and travel north to Canal before turning east on Jackson."

The street names were all gibberish to Cherie, and her eyelids were getting heavy.

She might have dreamed the dragon nodding at the vampire. "Yes, yes, that is a good plan. Stay away from the Loop as long as possible. The sluagh are denser there. They seem tuned to their leader, almost as though they've gotten a taste of his soul." The dragon peered skyward. "I'm sure they must have had a taste. The only way to attack someone as strong as he is to possess a piece of his soul."

For a moment—a blissful eternity—Cherie's world was dark and warm, but then cool, skeletal fingers with papery skin intertwined with Cherie's, and she was awake again, but barely.

“How long was I asleep?” Cherie whispered.

Outside the car, the dragon had turned away, the spotlights of its eyes focused upward.

“Only a few minutes,” Grendel replied.

There was a scraping noise that might have been nails on pavement, and in the indirect light of the great beast’s eyes, Cherie made out enormous blue and white scales rising up and away.

“Well,” said Cherie, trying to look on the bright side. “We have another friend.”

“You have a curious definition of ‘friend,’” Grendel remarked. Shifting them into gear and setting them in motion through the mist-shrouded night, the vampire’s voice became a low grumble. “Then again, you have me, so I probably shouldn’t complain.”

The comment was self-deprecating and curmudgeonly, and the tone so like Nnenna, Cherie squeezed her hand. “You’re not my friend.”

The acceleration halted, and the car coasted forward. “I’m not your friend?”

“You’re my *grandmother*,” Cherie said. It did not fill the gaping hole in her heart that was Nnenna, and yet Cherie wanted to believe her own words. Grendel was a grandmother that could *eat* her and had confessed the temptation to do so. Grendel was the Big Bad Wolf in grandma’s clothing ... and yet ... and yet ... she hadn’t eaten Cherie, and had stuck with Cherie, literally through Hell. On this terrible journey, Grendel had put her safety and comfort, if not her life, on the line for Cherie. Perhaps, in terrible times, Death was not such a bad companion to have.

But what about good times? She thought of the table in Fairy, and all her friends from Somer drawing away from the vampire. Could they ever accept her? She glanced up at the rearview mirror. She doubted Jack could accept Grendel. How did she remain friends with people who would not accept Grendel, who wasn’t evil, even if she wasn’t good, but was

definitely scary? Morally, was it wrong to tolerate such ... such ... intolerance?

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CHAPTER 16



Jack was running through the bodies in the loading bay, trying to escape its grisly stores. He tried to free a few of the living, hoping they could help him find his way out. But anytime he tried, they died at his touch.

A familiar man's voice whispered in the gloom. "They were homeless, junkies. We're cleaning up the city for you."

How did Jack know that voice?

Jack turned down another aisle and saw an immaculately dressed vampire in a three-piece suit. His blond hair was swept back, his features were too even, and his skin was so pale it was nearly glowing. He was familiar. Why did Jack recognize him?

The man's hair became white and lengthened, his face became narrower and more feminine, the suit became rags, and his youthful skin sank into lines and hollows. Grendel smiled at him, and it was like looking at a skeleton with sharp fangs.

"This isn't real," Jack said.

"I'm real," Grendel replied, approaching him, long nails dripping blood. Jack took a step back and then another.

... But wait, Grendel had never been here ...

Regaining control of his dream, his memory, his nightmare, Jack replied, "Not here. The man you replaced; he was real. I met him before. Here. That day."

"I'm *here*," Grendel hissed.

Jack snarled. Cherie was out there; he needed to find her. "I am the master of my dreams!"

"I am the master of Cherie," Grendel replied easily.

Rage had a wonderful capacity to squash fear. He clapped his hands, rubbed them together, and let the Magick within him grow between his palms. "*You are a figment of my imagination, you vile cow. I will see the real Grendel now.*"

The loading dock warehouse vanished, Grendel with it, and Jack found himself in deep snow, surrounded by mist so thick he could not see five paces. But he didn't need to see far. He spread his palms, and a rearview mirror appeared between them. The scene within it was dark, but in the faint illumination from his side, he saw ...

"Grendel."

The vampire looked up. The deep lines between her brow became deeper still, and her gaze quickly returned to the road without a word. It felt like a dismissal. The hairs on the back of Jack's neck prickled. "Where is Cherie?"

Fingers tilted the mirror away from the vampire. "I'm here."

Jack swallowed, and she must have seen, because she said, "We're all right. We even made friends."

Grendel interjected, "We met a dragon who threatened to *eat* you."

Jack gaped. A dragon of European descent in the city?

"So did you for the same reason," Cherie said.

"What?" Jack exploded.

Rolling her eyes, as though Jack was being silly, Cherie said, "They both *offered* out of mercy."

Grendel snorted at the same time Jack erupted. Electricity danced from his fingertips, and the interior of the car was dazzlingly bright. For a moment, he saw the vehicle in perfect clarity: the burns on the upholstery in the back seat and individual shards of glass on the back dash. In the same instant, Grendel screamed, “Are you trying to blind me!” and Cherie lurched toward the steering wheel.

“The dragon’s a friend!” Cherie protested.

“Like Grendel?” Jack demanded, the electricity fighting to explode from his fingers burning his flesh.

“I’m her grandmother.” Grendel sniffed.

“The dragon is covering us with fog,” Cherie said, “and we are grateful.”

The electricity in his fingertips snuffed out. “The Feilong?” asked Jack, in wonder and shock.

“Is that how you say their name in Chinese?” Cherie said, eyes sparkling. “Nnemme was never sure of the pronunciation, and I just referred to him as a dragon and Honorable Sir.”

Grendel snorted.

Jack cast a scowl in the vampire’s direction. “They are noble creatures —”

Grendel snorted again.

“—by most accounts,” Jack continued. “And we never had cause to complain about his proximity before the curse. We wanted to form an alliance with him.” Jack heard his sister whispering behind him. “You’ll make an alliance with any monster except vampires.”

He looked over his shoulder, but there was only snow.

“Jack,” Cherie whispered. “Is something wrong?”

It was a memory of something Mizuki had said, not her in the moment, now. Massaging his temple, he faced Cherie again. “We knew the dragon

came through the portal in Chinatown on occasion, but all our overtures were declined.”

“We?” Grendel asked.

“The soldiers controlling the city after the war,” Jack replied.

“Hmm ...” Cherie’s youthful face became thoughtful and somber. In a strange moment of clarity, he saw what she would look like when she was old, her face more angular, her hair white ... the apparition of her future self was not frightening, except in how much she looked like Dr. Anna—wise and searching, but kinder, without the edge of cynicism Dr. Anna had possessed. Cherie said, “Well, I believe the sluagh have forced the Feilong’s hand.” Her eyebrow rose wryly. “Or claw. The sluagh are slipping across to his realm and trying to steal souls.” The words were surprising in the depth of the observation and the source. Cherie sounded like that older woman he’d seen just seconds before, not like the Cherie he knew who was kind and sunny, with simple dreams, who’d once told him her greatest aspiration was to have a happy family in Somer like her Nnenna had for a while. Jack had never thought of Cherie as simple in the head, and yet, he hadn’t thought of her as insightful or shrewd. He’d definitely thought she would die if she’d existed in his time in his world. Yet she was navigating his world now, in times even more difficult.

“Jack?” His name brought his focus back to the present, back to her, but her focus was not on him, it was on some point in the distance. She looked older again, or perhaps *wise* was the better word.

“Yes?” He wasn’t sure why he whispered.

“Did Cerberus ever give you trouble?”

“On Earth, no,” Jack replied. A forest had sprung up in the university campus between Greek Town and Little Italy, and it had been filled with wood nymphs and fauns. Cerberus had sometimes been spotted cavorting with them, but whenever approached by humans, the dog vanished with

speed that rivaled a vampire, while the nymphs and the fauns would melt—perhaps literally—into the trees.

She frowned. “Is the gate to Hades close to the tower?”

“Not particularly,” Jack replied.

“Over half a mile,” Grendel added.

Cherie’s frown deepened. “Oh, I’d hoped I would be able to ... *form an alliance* with him ...” She said the words as though tasting them on her tongue. “Since Feilong and Abaddon have been so helpful.”

“Helpful?” Grendel harrumphed.

Cherie whipped her head toward the vampire. “The dragon is hiding us from the sluagh with fog—”

“—and making it impossible to see,” Grendel retorted.

“And Abaddon let us go free, Grandmother!” Cherie replied.

Jack’s heart started to pound. She’d made alliances with a demon and a Feilong dragon ... and ambient Ember followed wherever she went.

“Abaddon should have never captured us to begin with,” Grendel argued, as though demons should be expected to abide by Earthly laws. But of course demons did no such thing, nor did dragons, nor giant dogs who guarded the gates to Hades ... and yet ... Cherie had won over two of the three already.

He didn’t know her. He’d never known her.

His mind pictured the location of the portal to Hades and of Lower Wacker. Hades didn’t intersect with Lower Wacker precisely, however. “There was a troll attack on Lower Wacker. The troll ripped through the street to what should have been the Blue Line tunnel, but instead dropped us by the River Styx.”

“How do you know it was the River Styx?” Cherie asked.

Jack swallowed, remembering a simple wooden sign with mysterious characters carved in it—it hadn’t been mysterious to all of his team. “There was a sign that Petrakis was able to read.” He remembered Petrakis

cracking, “All those years my parents sending me to Greek Saturday school haven’t been wasted.” Jack shook himself. “Also, Cerberus was there ... Not as shy as he was on Earth.” Jack hadn’t been able to see much more of the beast than three glowing sets of eyes. The dog—dogs—had growled, and from three different throats it had rumbled more ominously than thunder. Jack had ordered his troops not to attack; potentially angering Hades and Persephone had seemed unwise. “Cerberus herded us to another portal that opened at the University of Illinois Halstead Station. The portal between the Styx and Lower Wacker wasn’t Magickally sealed.”

“What are you saying?” Grendel demanded sharply.

Jack couldn’t believe the plan he was about to suggest. He suggested it anyway.



“The mist is getting thinner ahead,” Grendel remarked, though Cherie could see no difference. Grendel drew the car to a halt, which Cherie felt rather than saw. The illumination from Jack in the mirror was too faint beyond the car.

Jack asked, “Where are you?”

“Corner of Halstead and Taylor,” Grendel replied, peering out the window to the west for what felt like too long. Did the location mean something to the vampire?

“How much farther to the Intersection to Hades?” Cherie asked.

“Not far,” Jack replied, holding his gaze on Cherie in the same way Grendel was gazing off into the mist.

Turning to the vampire, Cherie asked, “You know this place well?”

“I used to live near here,” Grendel replied.

“You’re Greek?” Cherie asked.

“Italian?” asked Jack at the same time.

“No,” said Grendel, facing forward, glancing west again ... but then setting the car in motion at last.

They hadn’t driven very far when Grendel said, “There are a lot more trees around the university than when I was here last. It’s almost a forest.”

Beyond the interior of the car, Cherie couldn’t see anything but shadow. Jack was silent, and the darkness and the lack of conversation made Cherie think too much about the slough and what losing her soul would mean ... she wouldn’t see Nnenna again if that happened. The thought of seeing Nnenna in “her version of Heaven” hadn’t been a comfort a day ago, but now it was the only comfort she had, and losing it was staring her in the face. To think of other things, Cherie asked, “Why were you in Pennsylvania?” before remembering that what she was asking was when Grendel had died. Was that an impolite thing to ask a vampire?

“A wedding,” Grendel replied. “I was driving home ... and ...” Grendel shook her head. “We’re getting close.” She stopped the car suddenly. “Jack, we’re at Harrison now, and the road is overrun with trees.”

Jack’s brow furrowed. “There weren’t trees in the road when the curse began.”

“And nothing else has changed since then,” Grendel said, her eyes going to Jack’s. For a moment, Cherie thought that they might be thawing toward one another, but then they both scowled and averted their gazes. Cherie didn’t sigh.

“So, they are Magickal trees,” Cherie surmised, glancing at the mirror. “I think we should get out and walk. Jack, will you come with us?”

“Of course,” Jack said. “As long as I can.”

Cherie patted her coat pockets. “The Fae gave me back my compact mirror, but it might take a while for you to find me.”

“It’s hard for you to switch mirrors, Jack?” Grendel asked.

“It is,” Jack replied in a voice that hinted he wasn’t pleased to admit it.

Grendel's hand suddenly wasn't beneath Cherie's. Before Cherie could blink—or yawn—the mirror was in her lap, wrenched off the windshield, and Grendel's hand was on hers again. Jack blinked up at her. Smiling at Jack, Cherie opened her door ... and Grendel was just there, on Cherie's side, offering her hand, which was good because Cherie was already yawning.

"There are almost no ghosts here," Grendel whispered as Cherie got out of the car. "I don't like it."

"The sluagh would devour any ghosts that showed themselves," Jack replied. "They're souls, even if they are lost."

"I don't think they all are lost," Grendel replied enigmatically.

At Cherie's throat, the charm became icy cold. In the distance, she heard the flapping of wings. "Shhhh!"

Grendel went quiet. The light in the mirror winked away, but Jack whispered, "I'm still here."

"Do I hear a soul?" asked a voice like nails on a chalkboard.

"Maybe! Maybe!" another voice croaked. There was a furious flapping, and Grendel yanked Cherie forward, dragging her at a dead run. Thankfully, the pavement beneath her feet was even. The flapping grew louder and louder, as though more and more birds were pursuing them. Cries rose in the night, louder and closer, more and more throats joining the cacophony.

"We'll take shelter in the trees!" Grendel whispered—or maybe even yelled—she was just audible above what was rapidly becoming a roaring of wing beats and scream of birds. The vampire pulled urgently on Cherie's hand, and something odd happened: Cherie was airborne; her feet could find no purchase on the ground. She screamed in shock, but no sound came from her lips. There was no sound at all ... not her scream, not the thunderous wing beats of the sluagh, or their raucous cries. Her foot touched down, lighter than was possible, and she took another step that sent her soaring, and another, and another. It was pitch black.

And then there was light: the shimmering figure of Nnenne illuminated by tall stately trees. Cherie ripped her hand from Grendel's without thinking, as though she might catch her grandmother ... and she wasn't airborne anymore. The ground rose up to meet her, and she landed harder than she expected. The pavement was no longer flat and even, and she spilled onto the ground. The thunder of wings and the screeching of the sluagh behind and above filled her ears. Tiny red spotlights illuminated cracked pavement. A bird landed in front of her, and she realized the spotlights were the glow of crimson eyes. Feathers fell around her and brushed against the back of her neck and in her hair, gentle and shiver inducing, like cobwebs. She braced for the tearing of claws and beaks, but something cold and dry fell upon one of her outstretched hands, and she was weightless again. She lifted her head. All around her, sluagh appeared suspended in midair. Their eyes were still glowing, but not as brightly. Grendel's bony, papery-skinned fingers squeezed her hand. Pulling Cherie to her feet, Grendel led Cherie past the silent, suspended sluagh and into the deeper shadows beyond. The pavement was rough and buckling beneath Cherie's feet, and she thought she made out the naked, skeletal branches of trees. Grendel stumbled, and it was Cherie who held her up ... and then the pavement disappeared and was replaced by sod. Overhead the sky was suddenly lit by an enormous alien moon, its surface oddly smooth. It was bright enough to see that they were standing beneath a stone archway that opened into a clearing in a wood of gigantic trees, all decked out in the full foliage of summer. Within the clearing stood impossibly lifelike statues of men with the legs of goats, centaurs, and women with ivy and water for hair. All of the statues bore weapons glittering faintly with Ember, and they were poised to attack, their spears and arrows aimed at Cherie and Grendel.

Like the world they had just left, this one was eerily hushed. Stumbling, Grendel led Cherie between the chillingly lifelike forms. Beyond them, Cherie thought she saw Nnenne again, but then Grendel released her hand,

and Cherie had weight, the moon overhead was brilliantly bright, the statues came to life, and *sound* crashed into her like a wave. The sluagh were screeching in fury, and once again, their wingbeats were thunder. The statues were shouting furiously in return, hoofs were beating upon the earth, and the eerie whistle of arrows, shriller than all else, split the night. Grendel lurched away. Cherie tried to follow, but a woman wearing armor of bark and ivy shoved Cherie to the ground. Cool undergrowth was beneath Cherie's hands and cheek, and the scent of warm summer earth and mint assaulted her senses. She struggled to rise, but the woman above her gave an order in a language that Cherie knew, without knowing how, was as ancient as the trees. The words made her shiver at the same time she felt instantly in her heart, "Stay down! We don't wish you to be hurt."

There was an enormous boom, and then a clang, and a loud cheer along with the shrieking of a few sluagh that was quickly silenced.

The woman who'd been on top of Cherie rose and offered her hand and words in her eerie language. The words made the hairs on the back of Cherie's neck rise. At the same time she knew they meant, "Rise, you are safe now."

Cherie leapt to her feet and tried to go in the direction that Grendel had gone. But the woman—a dryad perhaps—put a hand to her chest. Another woman, with liquid hair and eyes, grabbed her wrist. The dryad's language was of ancient trees; the woman with the liquid eyes had a language like rushing water. But Cherie understood them both. "Leave the vampire be. She is very hungry, and you must remain strong."

"She is my friend!" Cherie protested, struggling against them.

The dryad spoke and once more, Cherie felt rather than understood her meaning. "Of course she is! That is why she goes."

The other woman, a nymph most probably, added, "Magickals and vampires make strange bedfellows."

The dryad's laughter was like a breeze rustling through leaves. "Strange how often they are bedfellows!" The nymph made a sound like water tumbling through rocks that Cherie knew somehow was laughter.

Cherie looked at them in confusion. "She is my grandmother."

Their laughter ceased, but before they could say anything more, heavy hoofbeats pounded close behind. The two women turned Cherie around, and she found herself blinking at the midriff of a man at the level of her nose. The torso merged into the front quarters of a horse. Above her, the owner of said torso cleared his throat. Craning her neck up, Cherie found herself facing a man—or rather, the man half of a male centaur—who, if he had been human, she'd guess was fifty or so. He had a full beard that was nearly white in the moonlight, and his short, curly black hair was also streaked with white. His face, though lined, still had hard angles, and his eyes were very sharp. He held a spear that glittered with Ember. Impaled on it was a sluagh, its eyes still glowing.

"How did you get here?" the centaur asked in a booming voice. He spoke in heavily accented English.

"We drove," Cherie said dumbly. "Until just a few minutes ago, when we ran." She looked at the archway they'd just entered; it was no longer empty. There were two metal doors drawn shut within the arch, and a huge bar of timber holding them closed. The archway had no wall or building attached to it. It was just an archway in a seemingly endless wood.

"Hmm ..." The centaur's brows drew together, and he glared down at Cherie.

The wood nymph rustled. "He means, how did you get past the sluagh and the Fae, Hell, Huitzilopochtli, and the dragon?"

"Huitzilopochtli," gasped Cherie, recognizing the name of the Aztec sun god. His followers worshipped him by splitting open the chest cavities of captives and offering their hearts and blood to the god.

"You came from the south, didn't you?" asked the dryad.

“But it’s nighttime on the other side of the arch, too,” the water nymph whispered. “And Santo Romo always kept Huitzilopochtli’s visits limited anyways.”

“Ah, yes,” said the first nymph, tapping a finger wrapped with ivy to her lower lip.

“How did you get past the Fae and the dragon?” growled the centaur, “and the damned souls?”

“The Fae brought us here, and we, ahh ... met the other two,” Cherie said.

“The damned let you go?” the centaur demanded.

“Oh, no, Abaddon let us go,” Cherie replied. “The damned were ...” She winced, remembering Bernie Madoff. “... not as accommodating.”

Leaning over her, the centaur roared, “Abaddon is *not* accommodating.”

Cherie jumped back and squeaked, “He thought that I might be able to wake up my friend Jack and end the curse on the city.”

The centaur drew himself upright. Whispers arose in the glade in languages like the wind, leaves, and streams. “Who is Jack?” One of the centaur’s eyebrows rose. “Why does Abaddon think that?”

Cherie shrugged hopelessly. “Because Solien seems to think so.”

There were more whispers.

“Solien, eh?” said the centaur, absently scratching his beard. “Never heard of this Jack fellow.”

“Solien was one of the few who met the human leader.”

“We should have sent someone.”

“Oxhead and Monkeyface didn’t take him up on the offer, either.”

“It would be nice if the cafes on Halstead were open again. I miss espresso and baklava.”

The last was said in perfect English and seemed to infuriate the centaur. He shot a withering look at a faun. Sheathing a short, Ember-infused sword,

the faun crossed his arms and sniffed. “Well, I do miss them. And Italian ices, too.”

“This is why we never sent a representative,” grumbled the centaur.

“Pardon?” Cherie asked.

The faun hopped excitedly. “Major Yukio DeWitt wanted a truce with the Old Magickals. Every Magickal realm with an intersection with Chicago was invited to send their own representatives to be part of the City Council. It was so exciting. So new!”

Cherie nodded as though she knew who he was talking about. Jack would know Major Yukio DeWitt maybe.

“The Athenians had representative democracy and look what happened to them,” grumbled the centaur.

“That was over 2,000 years ago, and they never invited us to join them, did they?” the faun protested, stepping closer to Cherie into a particularly bright beam of moonlight. He was a very handsome faun, with expressive features, and dark eyes with long lashes. Bands of silver spiraled up his horns. “Surely with the aid of your great wisdom, Timoleon, such a fate would never befall the new city?”

The centaur narrowed his eyes. “Flattery will get you nowhere, Spiros.”

The faun, Spiros, touched his hand to his chest, as though to say, “Who me?”

Shaking his head, Timoleon said, “And besides, how could we believe the Storm King would want a representative democracy?”

“His temper was too ... stormy ... for compromise,” a woman with ivy for hair said to Cherie. This was another person Cherie did not know, and politics she didn’t understand. She nodded politely though, as though she was keeping up.

Timoleon shifted his narrow-eyed glare to Cherie. “We can’t help you, girl. It’s all we can do to keep the sluagh from invading our lands—our souls may not be edible, but there are some here that are.” Shifting his

hooves, he sighed. “Though I suppose I can let you stay for the rest of your natural born life if you wish.”

“You’d be welcome in my cave anytime,” declared Spiros, looking Cherie up and down and giving her a smile that wasn’t quite lecherous, and yet made Cherie unaccountably nervous. “I love humans. Our babies would be adorable. Don’t worry, we’re born without the horns.”

Cherie gulped. All right then, not *unaccountably* nervous. Struggling to maintain her manners, she said, “Thank you for your, err ... generous offer ...”

Spiros beamed beatifically.

Cherie continued, “However, my people are trapped in Fairy—”

Spiros gasped. “Among those sadists?” There were a few other murmurs of concern, all making Cherie feel more uncomfortable about the situation.

“So, I must decline.” Cherie gave a clumsy curtsy. “Grendel, my grandmother, and I were on our way to seek Cerberus. The entrance to Hades and a secret route—a shortcut—to the Tower come close to intersecting, and we were hoping we might pass through Cerberus’s domain ...” She looked back at the archway.

It was then she realized that all the whispering of wind, streams, and leaves had stopped.

Stamping a huff, Timoleon sneered, “There is no such short cut.”

“How do you know?” Spiros asked.

“I know, faun!” snorted Timoleon.

“No, I don’t think you do,” retorted the faun. “In fact, I think that you’re just saying it doesn’t exist because it is something you don’t know, and you can’t abide not knowing anything at all.”

The centaur shook the sluagh from his spear and aimed the weapon at the faun’s heart. Spiros had his own short sword up, ready to parry the blow in an instant, but the weapon looked horribly inadequate, as did Spiros

against Timoleon's great height and mass. But giving the centaur a grin that was almost giddy, Spiros said, "My blade won't miss you, Timoleon."

The centaur gave the spear a quick jab. "I'm warning you."

Not falling for the feint, Spiros replied, "And I'm warning you, Timoleon."

The centaur reared back. "Take her to Hades yourself then!"

Bowing, Spiros said, "Thank you. I will."

Timoleon snorted, but Cherie barely heard it above the whispers that rose again in the glade.

"How dare he?"

"Spiros will have us united with the humans!"

"It will be a disaster!"

"It will be marvelous!"

"The girl's going to be worse than dead."

"Nothing will come of this at all."

Spiros skipped a step and bowed to Cherie, holding out a hand. It had claws like Grendel's. She couldn't help noting that his horns were sharp, and with the spiraling silver that encircled them, might be dangerous to the vampire. "Madam? Shall we?"

"I must wait for my grandmother," Cherie said, looking nervously to the nymphs, fauns, and centaurs disappearing into the trees. Spiros took her hand. Eyes meeting hers, he kissed her knuckles. His lips were very warm, and the warmth snaked from her hand all the way down her spine. The air felt strangely heavy, the night was too warm, and Cherie wanted to slip off her coat. Her legs felt weak. She could lay her coat down on the ground, and then lie upon it, among the mint sprigs ... with Spiros beside her. The faun rose from his bow, still keeping her hand very close to his mouth. "Oh, I wouldn't worry about your grandmother finding you. You're the most delicious thing here." His breath smelled like fresh mint, and it drew Cherie's eyes inexorably to his lips. She hadn't noticed how perfectly

formed they were, how full. She'd never been kissed before, but she imagined Spiros's lips would be perfect for it. They seemed to be pulling her own lips to them. She found herself rising to her tiptoes—

Grendel's voice whispered through the night. "Cherie—"

Heart sinking, Cherie stepped back. Spiros snorted.

To her left, Grendel said, "Oh, dear, excuse me."

Turning to Grendel, Cherie found the vampire had tightened her braid and straightened out her rags, but the shadows below her faintly glowing eyes appeared especially deep. It might have been Cherie's imagination, but the tips of her nails appeared stained. Her appearance frightened her, and yet, at the same time, the night felt cool again, the air no longer seemed heavy, and her mind felt sharp. "There's nothing to be excused for," Cherie assured her, taking another step away from Spiros.

Spiros's goat-like ears flattened against his skull. He narrowed his eyes at Grendel, and then his nose wrinkled, and he hopped back. "You killed a fawn!"

Cherie's eyes went wide. "I'm sure she—"

Grendel wiped a hand across her mouth. "Do I have blood on my face?"

"—didn't," Cherie finished. Her heart fell. Grendel had killed before, but never someone who hadn't been going to kill Cherie. "You didn't, Grandmother, did you?"

"I was hungry," Grendel said, her expression becoming hard, the lines around her mouth growing deeper.

"How can you consort with such a foul fiend?" Spiros asked, stepping close and slinking an arm through Cherie's, the touch turning her legs to jelly. The air became heavy again. She wanted to turn to the faun, bury her face against his neck, run her hands across the panes of his chest and torso, leave Grendel ...

She did turn, and a sparkling smile, cold as starlight, cut across Spiros's face.

The smile made her jerk her arm away and step back.

Spiros's lips pressed into a thin line, and his ears flicked. He looked all together ... put out, and Cherie's brows drew together. When Grendel had killed humans, even ones who'd tried to kill her, Cherie had not responded with smiles, or been put out; she'd been horrified. "What type of fawn did you kill, Grandmother?"

"I'm not really an expert," Grendel said, the words spilling fast, as though the vampire were nervous. "It looked like the ones in Pennsylvania. Spots. Fluffy tail. It was the only thing I could catch when I was so weak." Her voice became more resolute, even defiant. "I am glad that it wasn't the mother, though. A fawn without a mother is as good as dead."

"I see." Cherie narrowed her eyes at Spiros.

The faun of mythological descent snorted. "You're fine with that? How hard hearted are you?"

It's not that Cherie didn't feel sad for what she was sure was an adorable, innocent creature, but it still wasn't the same as what she had briefly imagined.

Stamping his feet, Spiros sniffed. "To think I was going to cure your virginity before you died."

Cherie flushed, and then her lips parted in recognition. "You were using Magick to ... to ... seduce me!"

"I can kill him," Grendel suggested.

Spiros's sword was out in an instant, and the ambient Ember in the air glinted around it. Dropping to a crouch, eyes flashing, he declared, "You can try. But Aletheia never misses its mark. Not even vampires."

Cherie threw up her hands and stood between them. "No one is going to kill anyone."

Grendel hissed.

Spiros spat.

“You said you’d take us to Cerberus,” Cherie said. “Were you being truthful, or do we need to find him ourselves?” She glanced at the archway.

Not lowering his blade, Spiros sighed. “Aletheia doesn’t allow me to be anything but truthful. I just thought you might enjoy a diversion before your untimely death.” He rolled his eyes and lowered the blade. “If you’re determined to die without properly living, I suppose I can take you there now.”

“We would appreciate that,” Cherie declared. She glanced at Grendel. The vampire had dropped low in a strange stance, her body sideways, hands extended, one low as though beckoning the faun forward, the other high and held back. Sometimes, when Grendel wasn’t spooking her, Cherie found her very grandmotherly. She didn’t look grandmotherly at that moment. She looked too strong and too flexible, a dangerous creature wearing an old woman’s body. Cherie gulped. Which was precisely what Grendel was.

Rising too easily for the elderly woman she looked to be, Grendel eyed the faun warily.

Spiros gave her a sharp smile. “This way,” he said, hopping into the trees. “It’s not far. We grew the forest on Persephone’s request, moving the portal farther from the entrance to Hades with that Lady’s great Magick and grace. Persephone and Hades are protective of the souls in their care, and the slough were too much for poor Cerberus alone.” He smiled grimly. “We forest folk were drafted into protecting the portal.”

“The archway we came through?” Grendel asked.

Hopping into the trees, Spiros gave her a one-eyed glance that said that was obvious.

“Yes,” Cherie clarified, following the faun. “The archway.”

A few minutes later, the ground began to descend sharply. On either side were trees with narrow white trunks at oddly regular intervals.

“This slope isn’t natural; it is a ramp,” Grendel said, wandering over to peer between a pair of trees. Following, Cherie peered beside her. They

were on a ramp, though it seemed made of hard packed earth and natural stones, not any human building material Cherie was familiar with.

Halting, Spiros snorted. “It is natural, but it is *also* a ramp. Queen Persephone blended the reality of Earth with our world on Charon’s behest. Our side is prettier, but I do miss the cafes on yours.”

Peering into the shadows, Cherie made out a narrow canyon below them. There appeared to be train tracks.

“Charon?” Grendel asked.

“The man who ferries the dead,” Cherie explained, since Spiros was studying his nails and looking disinclined to answer. “Cafes?” Cherie asked.

Spiros lifted his head as though to answer Cherie’s question, but Grendel answered first. “The university campus is just south of Greek Town and west of Little Italy. There are lovely cafes in both directions.”

Spiros’s eyes softened, and his ears sagged. “Just so.” Squinting, he appraised Cherie. “Solien really thinks you might end the curse?” Before she could answer, he spun on his hooves and led them down the incline. At the ramp’s bottom, there was a raised bit of sod between two “canyons.” The narrow trees continued on either side, and lightning bugs drifting down from their branches bathed the area in soft orange light.

Grendel looked around. “It’s the Halstead L-train platform. But it’s ...”

“Natural,” said Spiros.

Grendel gazed down the canyon’s length. “There is the tunnel!”

Cherie followed her gaze, and at first saw only darkness, but then a tiny pinprick of light appeared in the distance and grew larger fast. “Their Majesties know you are here,” Spiros declared, raising an eyebrow at them. His lips continued to move, but the clatter of wheels on tracks covered his words. More lightning bugs dropped from the trees and swarmed around what Cherie expected to be a city train the likes of which she’d seen before in movies of pre-Change cities—something rectangular, boxy, and metal. Instead, what approached them was a long, narrow, uncovered wooden boat

with *wheels*. A spherical Ember light was mounted on its bow. Sparkling veins of Ember exited the glowing globe and trailed down along the body of the boat to the wheels. In the middle of the boat sat a three-headed dog as large as a Clydesdale. The dog had short gray fur, and a powerful body that was squat relative to its height. Its ears were pointed, and its eyes—small for its size—glowed red. It could only be Cerberus.

“Watch out!” Spiros shouted over the boat-train’s rattling wheels. “He has three mouths!”

Grendel was instantly in front of Cherie, demanding, “Will it bite?”

Spiros shouted, “Worse! He—”

With a woof, the great animal leaped from the car onto the platform, shaking the ground and setting upon Grendel, Cherie, and Spiros with three enormous tongues. Even with Grendel shielding her, spittle rained down on Cherie.

Ducking to no avail, she heard Spiros shout, “Ugh! Stop it!”

Grendel, on the other hand, was cooing, “Oh, who is a nice doggy?”

From the boat-train, a man said something curt and incomprehensible, and Cerberus pulled back with three unhappy whines.

“What a good boy you are!” Grendel said, clapping her hands. Cerberus panted and frantically wagged his tail, repeatedly striking the nearby trees, shaking out lightning bugs, leaves, and branches.

Spiros grumbled, “You could control your dog better.”

“I could,” said a man, standing at the edge of the boat. With wavy, black hair, eyes that seemed to swirl between green, blue, and brown, and features carved out of soft golden stone, he was the most beautiful man she’d ever seen. Cherie took a step toward him, blinked, and he was hideous, his face a skull; his hands, skeletal. She blinked again, and he was handsome once more. “Charon?” she whispered. He nodded. For a moment, his eyes were as black as the night sky between the stars.

Spiros jerked a thumb at Cherie. “The girl says there is a second portal to Chicago somewhere around here.”

Cerberus chose that moment to flop down on his back. Face lighting, Grendel gushed, “Does he want a tummy rub?” Three tongues lolled from three mouths and Cerberus’s tail whipped up dust devils. Grendel grinned up at Cherie. “Most animals are afraid of me!”

“I wonder why, fawn-breath?” Spiros muttered.

Coming to stand at the edge of the bow, Charon spoke with a voice like rocks falling down a mountainside. “Who told you there is another portal, Girl?”

“Jack,” Cherie said. “Jack Frost.”

Charon and Spiros exchanged a glance, and then Charon said, “I don’t know him.”

“He was stationed here during the Vampire War,” Cherie supplied. “Solien thinks if I wake him, he’ll be able to lift the curse, and Abaddon thinks so, too.”

At that, Charon’s chin lifted. “Solien and Abaddon I know. How did this ... Jack ... tell you about the portal?”

Cherie hastily pulled the mirror from her pocket. “He talks to me through mirrors—” Glancing down, she saw that it only showed a swirling snowstorm. “Sometimes.”

Hopping over, Spiros peered down at the mirror. “The mirror isn’t magic ... but the image is. How curious.”

“Hmm ...” Charon rubbed his chin.

“I would think it would be Major Yukio DeWitt she’d have to wake,” said Spiros.

Charon shrugged. “This Jack seems to be a master of communication ... perhaps once he wakes, he can wake DeWitt and the others?”

Cherie bit her lip. Jack always said he wasn’t a master of mirror communication, and Charon’s explanation didn’t feel right. She didn’t

know enough to contradict him, though.

“I must go to the Se-ers tower,” Cherie said. “Jack’s there. I need to find him first; that is what Solien told me. And Jack told me the portal in the See-Tea-A will lead me to Lower Wacker, where the sluagh don’t fly as much.”

“Curiouser and curiouser,” Charon said, his eyes swirling with stars.

Spiros stomped a huff. “Is there another portal, Charon?”

Charon blinked, and his eyes were a normal brown. “Yes, halfway between here and Hades. But not many knew of it, human or otherwise.” He gazed at Cherie, his eyes shifting into the orange-yellow of sand dunes. “Because I trust Abaddon and Solien ... and Cerberus hasn’t devoured you —”

“He would never do that, would you, Sweet Boy?” Grendel cooed, scratching the giant dog’s tummy.

“—I know you are not lying about their faith in you,” Charon continued. “I will take you there.” Charon gave a command to Cerberus. Making unhappy sounds, the dog rose to his feet and hopped in the boat. Charon beckoned to Cherie. “Come.”

Cherie walked to the edge of the platform. It wasn’t like a normal train platform; she had to step down—just as she would from the dock in the river back home. She hesitated just a moment, and in that moment, Spiros hopped into the car. Turning to her, he bowed and offered a hand. “My lady.”

Grendel was in the boat in less than a blink. She held up her hand as well—without the flourish of a bow. Pretending not to see either of them, Cherie stepped in and gazed down at the mirror. It showed only the snowstorm, and something about the snow tickled her memory, but that tickle was overwhelmed by more urgent matters. Where was Jack? Would she be able to navigate this Lower Wacker place without him?

CHAPTER 17



“S till no sign of Jack?” Grendel asked Cherie.

The vampire was pinned between two of Cerberus’s enormous heads. The dog was leaning into ear scratches on either side, eyes half-lidded, expression blissful.

“No, he’s a ghost ... they get lost in time and space,” said Cherie automatically, brow furrowing. You couldn’t wake ghosts, though. He was cursed. The Greek demi-gods and Magickal creatures didn’t know who Jack was, but theorized that maybe he could wake Major Yukio Dewitt. The Greeks had also mentioned the Storm King ... someone else Jack could wake? “Something about the name Yukio DeWitt sounds familiar to me,” she said to no one in particular.

Scratching Cerberus beneath his chins, Grendel said, “DeWitt means ‘the White,’ and it was the name of a Dutch politician who was murdered and then had his liver roasted and eaten. Maybe you know him from history class?”

Cherie’s jaw fell open.

Spiros snorted. “Leave it to a vampire to remember the disturbing details.”

Kissing Cerberus’s noses, Grendel appeared not to have heard.

Cherie gazed at the tunnel. It was dreary rock, like the cave near Somer, but more regular. The regularity of it felt oppressive. She took a deep breath ... and inhaled the scent of strawberries. She sniffed and caught sight of Spiros, plucking a berry from a satchel at his hip. Lifting one to his lips, he raised his eyebrows. "Want some?"

"I do," said Charon.

Spiros rolled his eyes, but hopped over to the ferryman and offered him some berries. Then the faun winked at Cherie and licked his lips.

Cherie drew back.

Swallowing a berry, Charon said, "They're not enchanted. He just can't help but flirt."

Spiros's ears dropped and he muttered, "You make me sound so base."

Charon shrugged, and popped another berry in his mouth.

Grendel said, "Take some, Cherie. It's harder to feed you than me." She looked pointedly at the faun.

Spiros grimaced at the vampire and handed Cherie the entire satchel without any flirting whatsoever.

Cherie took out a handful of berries. Taking a tentative bite of one, she found it, if not enchanted, magical. It was everything a strawberry should be, sweet, slightly tart, and very juicy. Or maybe she just hadn't realized how hungry she was. She ate the fruit, nibbling off every bit of flesh from the green stems as the tunnel went on and on.

She wasn't sure how long they'd traveled when Charon said, "We're almost there."

Cherie glanced at her mirror. There was still no Jack, just the blurry gray of a snowstorm.

"Ghosts don't get lost," Cherie whispered to herself, that should have told her that Jack wasn't one. Nnenne had told her Jack was cursed, not a ghost, but Cherie hadn't pressed him or her grandmother. Why? Because it was easier, because she'd been keeping the peace.

“Ghosts are lost between worlds by definition,” said Charon. He was standing at the front of the boat, hands on a long wooden bar that she suspected controlled their movement. “But usually, they remain fixed in a particular spot.”

“Or affixed to a particular person,” said Grendel, pausing her affections toward Cerberus for just a moment. Cerberus butted her with two heads, and the vampire cooed, “Who is the best boy? You are!” The dog wagged its tail with such vigor the boat-car rocked.

Spiros gave Cherie a worried look. “You sure you don’t want to take me up on my offer?” he asked.

Grendel hissed at the faun, and the dog, perhaps taking the vampire’s cue, growled in the faun’s direction.

Spiros sniffed. “Grandmothers don’t send their granddaughters off on suicidal quests.”

“Cherie’s grandmothers do,” Grendel replied. “Sometimes the way to safety is through the fire.”

Hopping over to Cherie, Spiros sat beside her. At Grendel’s hiss and Cerberus’s growl, he scooted so he was not too close. “I cannot go with you,” he said. “But I hate to see anyone die a virgin.” He began unbuckling his scabbard. Grendel hissed louder and Cerberus’s growl deepened.

Ears flattening, Spiros sniped, “I’m going to offer her my sword, you overprotective monsters!”

Charon said, “Isn’t your sword what you’ve been offering her all along?”

“Ha, ha,” Spiros replied dryly, holding the scabbard and blade to Cherie. The ambient Ember around it crackled. “Take it,” he said, not looking at her.

Cherie hesitated. “I don’t know how to use a sword.”

Spiros sighed. “‘Aletheia’ means truth, and with it, you don’t really need to *know how* to use a blade ...”

“Convenient for Spiros,” Charon commented.

“You’re a fine friend,” Spiros said to the boat-man, or maybe it was engineer?

“The very best,” Charon agreed, focus somewhere down the pitch-black tunnel.

“Yes.” Spiros sighed again, and then he sniffed. “Aletheia always hits its mark.”

“I can’t take it if you need it,” Cherie protested, remembering the battle with the slugh Spiros had just been involved in.

“I don’t need it.” Spiros smiled tightly. “You know I speak the truth because with Aletheia I can’t lie.”

Cherie hesitated. She could tell it was a powerful weapon. The ambient Ember flickered madly around it, even while it was sheathed. It was priceless, perhaps the most priceless object she’d ever had the opportunity to touch. The Ember weapons of the Queen’s Guard were nothing compared to it. It was a weapon that should go to royalty, not an orphan girl from a village that no one had heard of. She glanced up at the faun. His gaze was on the weapon, expression somber. A few moments ago, she would have characterized him as merely lecherous, but he was bestowing this priceless gift.

“It could probably deflect bullets,” she whispered.

“Oh, yes,” said Spiros. “It can even strike down vampires.”

“Take it,” said Grendel.

“Listen to your grandmother,” said Charon.

Still, Cherie hesitated. “I could never repay you for such a gift.” As soon as she said the words, she flushed, expecting Spiros’s response to be ... intimate.

Instead, the faun said, “Then consider it a loan. Bring it back to me when your task is done.”

Gulping, Cherie slid the mirror away and held out her hands for the blade. She tried to think of words to properly express her gratitude. “Thank you, Spiros. With this, how can I fail to defeat the sluagh?”

“Oh, no, you’re most likely going to die. You won’t be able to aim the blade at the millions of sluagh that are going to descend on you and rip your skin and muscles from your bones as they try to render your soul from your flesh. I’m never going to get my blade back.” With those words, he pressed the blade in its scabbard toward her.

Gasping, she pulled back and gaped at the faun, a chill racing down her spine.

Wincing, Spiros said, “That is the thing about truth. It’s sharp, and it hurts.” With that, he shoved blade and scabbard into her hands and smiled sadly. “I don’t miss it at all.” The smile brightened. “Ha, but it does feel good to be able to lie.”

The boat-car’s wheels began to slow, and the faun sprang to his feet. “Are we there yet?”

Charon brought the boat-car to a full stop in response. Without the clacking of the wheels, Cherie thought she made out the soft lapping of waves. She gazed down the tunnel, saw Ember light reflected on a gently moving river, and caught the scent of water in the air. It smelled crisp and fresh, not swampish and like decay. She remembered that the River Styx wasn’t just the crossing for dead souls, it was also where the Greek Gods made oaths. She supposed dank, polluted waters wouldn’t be the place you swore binding pledges. For a moment, she was transfixed by the dancing reflections ... the river looked inviting. Peaceful.

Charon said, “It’s not your time.”

Cherie’s eyes snapped away from the dancing water lights and fixed on a wooden sign with strange letters. That must have been the one Jack’s ... friend ... had seen. Her brow furrowed. If he’d been following trolls, he couldn’t have had a desk job.

“Lots of ghosts above the water,” Grendel said.

Cherie blinked, but before she could gaze on the river again, Spiros said, “There’s your portal,” and pointed. A few feet ahead of the boat-car, the living rock of the wall was patched with finely carved, white marble stones, mortared together. Obviously, the Greek demi-gods hadn’t wanted trolls on the road to Hades and had ensured the accidental crossover would never happen again.

“How will we get through?” Cherie asked.

Cerberus’s three great heads swung toward her.

Charon clucked at the beast, and the dog leapt from the boat-car, turned sideways—he just fit—and began to dig. The marble and mortar gave way as though it were sod.

“I’m glad he’s friendly,” Grendel said.

A few minutes later, there was a *whoosh* of air into the cave that was colder than the gods’ realm. Cerberus backed away from the tunnel wall, revealing an opening at the level of Cherie’s waist and not quite the breadth of her shoulders.

Cherie strapped Aletheia’s scabbard to her waist and hastened to the edge of the boat. Grendel was already on the gravel beside the track. “Good boy,” she whispered to Cerberus, who answered with a furious wag of his tail. “I’ll miss you,” she added, giving one of his heads a scratch. All the vampire’s attention was on the great beast. Cherie had an odd sense of *déjà vu*. It was so much like when Nefertiti would visit, and Nnenne would lavish attention on the cat, often ignoring Cherie in the process, although Nefertiti was dainty, delicately mannered, and beautifully adorable. Cerberus was none of those.

The big dog gave Grendel a lick, and she disappeared into the opening in the wall with a sigh.

“You know,” said Spiros. “The offer of babies still stands.”

“Err ...” said Cherie.

Grendel's head emerged in the opening. "This is Wacker, and I've found Jack."

Cherie jumped from the boat, gravel crunching beneath her feet.

Charon said, "Hopefully I won't see you anytime soon."

"Hopefully I will," said Spiros.

Cherie barely had time to reply, "Thank you both!" before sliding through the opening.

From behind, she heard the sound of Cerberus digging. She looked back and saw the hole in the tunnel wall vanish ... and then she was in gloom as deep as a tomb.



Ambient Ember flowed past the convex traffic mirror in a faint, gentle, undulating wave, and Jack held his breath, hoping it wasn't just wishful dreaming. He'd recreated the scene of Lower Wacker on his end, forming the columns that supported Upper Wacker of solid ice, and the medians between north and southbound traffic of packed snow. The truck in the loading dock was made of both. The scene was nearly as shadowy as the real Lower Wacker Drive. He hoped that the solidity on his side would help him stay focused. He couldn't drift off; his mind couldn't go on a hazy, dreamy, or nightmarish diversion. He needed to be present ...

Grendel's whisper echoed through the tunnel. "I didn't want to bite Charon, Cerberus, or the faun, elves, or damned at all. It was ... relaxing."

Lightning sparks jumped from Jack's fingertips. The implication was clear: humans, like Cherie, were tempting. Cherie was a Magickal human, and therefore even more enticing.

"Where is Jack, Grandmother?" Cherie whispered. Was her voice faintly tremulous?

Jack whispered, "Good, Cherie, be afraid. Don't forget what she is."

“I saw him just ahead,” Grendel replied. “Or one of his mirrors, anyway.”

Jack hadn’t seen her, and for a moment, he had a stab of fear. But then they appeared in the faint illumination he cast.

Grendel said, “Look up!” and Cherie did, grinned, and bounced on her toes, and opened her mouth as though to say something, but the croaking voice of a sluagh cracked through the tunnel. “I smell a soul!” She abruptly put her hands over her mouth. Grendel pushed her down and looked over her shoulder. Jack beckoned Cherie forward, and she nodded. A moment later, both women disappeared from his sight, and the glowing red eyes of a few sluagh entered his field of vision. His heart nearly stopped, and then he flushed, and his lip curled. Cherie could not have made it so far to die. With a snarl, he swept his arm to the side. The birds were caught in a sudden gust of wind and blown from view. He blinked. He couldn’t have done that. Could he? He held his breath. But the birds did not return. Pulling away from the mirror, he rushed back through his snowy replica of the scene outside his real prison, slipping on ice as he did.



Cherie reached the top of a short ladder, and Grendel pulled her into a space that was pitch black. Wind shrieked behind them, and Cherie looked over her shoulder to see ambient Ember sparkling in the gust. The wing beats of sluagh were gone, but Cherie raised Aletheia anyway. Her arm shook, but not with its weight. It was so dark.

Grendel’s hand, gentle until that moment, tightened in Cherie’s. “What is it?” the vampire whispered, so close that Cherie felt her breath on her neck. She shivered and not with cold. A faint light emerged from above, and she saw Jack, stumbling over ice. He mouthed her name; at the same time, Grendel’s grip tightened on her arm. “Sluagh,” whispered Grendel.

Jack scowled, and Cherie heard the vicious birds' voices. "I heard something! I heard something!"

Jack's eyes locked with Cherie's. "This way." He beckoned them forward and to the right. "There is a fire door you can close."

Grendel pushed Cherie forward. "Hurry!"

Grendel didn't have to urge her; the raucous voices of the sluagh were right behind them. Cherie threw out a hand and moved as fast as she dared. Jack's mirror's illumination barely cast a glow in the deep darkness. Wings whispered above and on either side, and suddenly crimson beams from the eyes of the birds were piercing the dim, but all were focused on the mirror Jack inhabited. "You!" a bird screamed, and its eyes blazed. For a moment, Cherie froze, able to see clearly for the first time. She was in some sort of warehouse, and around her were shelves piled high to the ceiling. The next instant, Grendel yanked Cherie forward, and Cherie's body had no weight. Her steps carried her too high in the air, but her weightlessness made the landing as light as a feather. Sluagh were suspended in the air around her. In the mirror Jack appeared frozen. Grendel was the only thing moving in the strange world that was like a freeze-frame from the movies they showed in Somer's school auditorium.

Grendel pulled her sideways and into a shadow where the sluagh's crimson eyes cast no light, and Cherie could not see Jack's mirror. The vampire shoved Cherie down to one knee, and, lifting her head, Cherie almost cried out, not in pain, just shock, but flickering in front of her was Nnenne, holding out her hands, palms out, as though to urge Cherie to stay down, or stay calm ... Cherie did both.

Grendel's hand disappeared from hers. She had weight again. The knuckles of her hand clutching the sword scraped against the floor. There was a sound of shuffling and a clang. Grendel shouted, "Call Jack! I think we're safe here but I'm not sure for how long."

"Nnenne?" Cherie gasped. "She was here, she was here!"

Grendel panted behind her. “She follows you everywhere, Cherie. I see her every time I slip through time around you.” There was a bang, like something hitting metal. “She’s your friendly ghost, but you *must* call Jack now!”

Cherie yawned. There was another bang. Grendel growled and took Cherie’s hand. “Jack!” shouted Cherie, whipping out the mirror in her pocket. “I’m here! I’m here!”

The mirror in her hand did not light; instead, she found Jack in a mirror above her, his face distorted in its curve. In a distant part of her brain, she recognized she was in a narrow room with a fire door in front of her and one presumably behind her. But her eyes were focused on Jack. His lips were parted in shock or fear. “Cherie?” he whispered. “You’re there?”

Cherie rose from her crouch. “Yes.”

“You have a sword,” he said.

“Yes,” said Cherie, trying to smile. He looked more afraid than she felt. “It’s a very nice one. Guaranteed to never miss.”

Grendel demanded, “What do we do now?”

Jack’s expression changed, morphing from wonder to so serious in an instant. “The building above is less than a block from the tower. You will be safe enough—”

There was a bang against the door and then another.

Jack lowered his chin. “—safe enough inside the building if you leave through the side exit. Once you leave the room you’re in, you’ll be in a service hallway. There is an elevator, but take the stairs that say ‘Exit,’ instead. You’ll come out at a secondary entrance about a block west of the tower. Grendel will know.”

Cherie nodded. “I’ll find you, and we’ll wake Major DeWitt.”

The hardness and confidence left Jack’s face, but there was no time to reassure him.

“Do you know the tower, Grandmother?” Cherie spun, and then withdrew with a shriek.

Grendel was still holding Cherie’s hand ... she was also simultaneously hovering over a sleeping man, and her fangs were buried in his wrist. Cherie raised her sword. “Don’t!”

Growling, Grendel released him. In the dim light, the blood on her chin was a brownish stain. “I need blood if I’m going to pull *you* through time!”

Another sluagh banged against the door. Cherie lowered the sword.

“Take my blood then!” Cherie growled, pulling off her coat.

“Cherie, no!” Jack shouted.

“Just don’t kill me,” Cherie said to Grendel, rolling up her sleeve.

Grendel tilted her head and half rose, her eyes alight, claw-like hands flexed, appearing like every nightmare of a vampire Cherie had ever seen. Biting her lip, Cherie prepared for the bite of the vampire’s fangs, but Grendel drew back, threw her arm over her eyes, and slunk down to the floor again. “No, you need to be strong.” She sounded like she was close to sobbing.

There was a bang again, and Cherie gasped. An indentation, as though the door had been struck on the other side by a powerful fist, marred its surface. “We have to go!” she exclaimed. “Grendel, now.”

There was another bang, and Grendel looked back, startled. Cherie swore the imprint of sluagh feet and beaks were visible in the metal.

“What monsters are these?” Grendel whispered, rising fast and taking Cherie’s hand again. Together, they ran through the next door and slammed it shut. It was the same heavy metal as the first, but Cherie doubted it would hold the sluagh for very long. They were in a service hallway, just as Jack had said, and Cherie pulled Grendel to an Exit sign.

“The man I drank from isn’t dead,” Grendel said.

Cherie didn’t have time or breath to explain that she very well might have killed him. If he woke up with vampire bite marks on his arms, he

might unwittingly reveal them and be killed by superstitious neighbors, coworkers, or even friends worried about him dying and turning before they had a chance to stake him. “Don’t drink people’s blood without their consent,” she answered, voice harsher than she intended.

There was another bang behind them, and another, but over the din, Grendel growled, “I can’t ask when they’re asleep.”

There was a snarl ... and Cherie realized it was her own. Cherie bit it back. They had no time; they’d passed an elevator and reached another door with a sign that said “EXIT.”

Behind them, there was a shriek, and the sounds of slugh impacting with the door that led into the service hallway. “Run,” Grendel said. Cherie did. Throwing open the door, she raced with Grendel up the metal stairs beyond. They were four steps from the landing when slugh erupted from below with ear-piercing shrieks and a carrion stench that made her gag. Cherie threw herself up the last stairs, and completely by accident, took four steps at a time, her body as light as a feather, the world eerily silent again. Her heels came down without a jolt on a large landing. It might once have been something other than the top of a stairwell, because there was a sign on one wall advertising sandwiches, and the wall with the door marked “EXIT” looked like it had once had windows that had been filled in. Grendel reached the door first. As the vampire gently pushed it open and peered through the crack, Cherie looked back.

And wished she hadn’t. Caught in slow motion, the slugh were so densely packed they seemed a single entity with a multitude of claws and talons.

Grendel met Cherie’s eyes, and she mouthed a word, but no sound came from her lips. Cherie stared at her blankly. The vampire’s eyes were bloodshot, and her brow was gleaming with perspiration, though it was cool inside the building. She hadn’t quite managed to wipe all the blood from her face, either. Grendel twisted around Cherie’s body, not releasing her hand.

The vampire grabbed her other wrist, raising Cherie's arm and the blade. Grendel's lips moved silently again, and this time Cherie read them. "Be ready."

Spinning around, Grendel shoved the door once ... and it didn't budge. Lip curling, the vampire threw her whole body against the door, still keeping Cherie's hand in a vise-like grip. Grendel had always held her hand when they were "time stopped." Cherie had heard this place "beyond time" described as "The Vampire Plain" and the "The Realm of the Undead." Grendel couldn't let go—and needed help. Awkwardly gripping the sword and squeezing Grendel's hand, she leaned her weight against the door and helped push. It was hard, as though something heavy was blocking it on the other side. But with Cherie's push, the door opened just enough that she and Grendel slid out ... and every hair on the back of Cherie's neck rose, but not because she'd left her coat behind. Sluagh had been blocking the door. The sky was choked with them. Their bodies, suspended mid-wing beat, surrounded her and Grendel on all sides above and below. She could not see the sky or even the ground. Pushing Cherie into the eerily motionless, silent throng, Grendel knocked at them with an arm and kicked at them with her feet. Cherie hacked at them with the sword, slicing them from the air to the pavement. Their bodies crunched sickeningly beneath her boots and their feathers filled her nostrils, making her choke. A few times Grendel fell to her knees, and the birds seemed to come alive again: their eyes would find Cherie, their beaks would part, and their claws would come forward, but then Grendel would rise, and they'd be motionless once more. Despite the cold, Cherie was sweating.

It felt like forever before the cloud thinned. The ground fell away beneath Cherie's feet unexpectedly, but only for a few inches, and her featherlight body did not fumble with the shock. She looked left and right and realized they were on a street, sloping gently downward. Her eyes followed the decline. There was a bus, a real city bus, big as a semi-truck,

just like Cherie had seen in movies. It was motionless, of course. She could make out the shadows of passengers, because the horizon was ever so faintly pink. Sunrise was coming. Grendel pulled Cherie toward the brightening sky. Cherie gulped. After sunrise, Grendel would need a place to sleep ... and Cherie would be left to face the sluagh alone.

They threaded their way through the sluagh, still numerous, but not as tightly packed as before. Grendel sank to her knees. Time did not speed up. Her grip on Cherie's hand grew tighter. The vampire's chest was rising and falling rapidly, and Cherie had a feeling that it was only her grip on Cherie keeping her aloft. Grendel had used her left arm to knock the sluagh aside, and Cherie noted that the rags on that arm were shredded, and the vampire's flesh crisscrossed with red welts.

Grendel wasn't going to make it as things were going. She needed blood. She'd said that, hadn't she? But if Cherie was to give her some, it couldn't be out in the open—at that thought, Cherie had weight again; the birds surged toward them. Grendel cried out, tightened her hand on Cherie's ... and the birds stopped. Making an executive decision, Cherie sheathed the sword, twisted around so that her back was to Grendel's front, and their joined hands were awkwardly across her body, then pulled the vampire onto her back.

Time resumed. Cherie found herself under Grendel's true weight. She told herself it was like the bags of sand she had once helped haul when the creek almost swamped the Smiths' farm. The sluagh screamed; their thousands of wings were like thunder. Gritting her teeth, Cherie put one foot in front of another and nearly fell over as the sluagh beat against Grendel's body. Cherie's legs bowed, she almost dropped, but then sound stopped, and the weight on Cherie's back was nothing. Keeping herself close to the ground, Cherie ran forward to the closest shelter she could think of—the bus.

She reached it without time resuming, struggled to lower the vampire in a way that didn't disengage their hands, and then fought to open the door. It wasn't blocked by sluagh and gave more easily than Cherie had expected. Grendel staggered to her feet, and they entered the bus together. Cherie turned and shut the door, and they climbed the steps. Cherie rolled up her sleeve, and Grendel's eyes slid to her arm. She crouched, pulling Cherie with her, and they had weight again. Outside the bus, the sluagh were shrieking, "Where is the soul? Where is the soul?"

Face just centimeters from Cherie, Grendel hissed, "Stay down. I won't kill anyone." She released Cherie's hand and vanished. Cherie looked around in alarm. Daring to raise her head—*forcing* herself to do so, yawning behind her hand—she spied Grendel bent over a sleeping passenger, and the horror of it forced her to alertness.

"No, you can't," Cherie whispered, fighting the urge to sleep. A sluagh flew so close to the bus its wings scraped a window. The terror it instilled kept her awake, and Cherie crawled toward the vampire and her sleeping prey.

"I can, and I must," Grendel hissed, vanished again, and reappeared a few seats down, lips on the wrist of another passenger, a woman who looked like she was in her early forties. She had a bright box that held a toy of some kind under one arm—Cherie could see, "Hours of Fun for Little Ones," printed on its side.

"Grandmother—" Any more words failed her. Cherie, wanted, needed, to close her eyes.

Grendel raised her head and hissed, "This is the sort of compromise that Abaddon talked about weighing down your soul. This is your choice!"

Cherie's lip twisted. "No."

Grendel's lips curled back, revealing long fangs. "I will not let you stop me." She dipped her head back to the passenger's wrist, and the woman moaned. Her eyes fluttered.

Desperately seeking an alternative, Cherie looked back, and her eyes fell on the driver. If Grendel didn't have to carry her through time, she wouldn't need to feed. Crawling back the way she came, she yawned and fought to stay awake. Even the terror of the sluagh wasn't working anymore. She remembered something Jack had told her about reciting spells just being a way to focus the mind, and any rhyme would do. "*I have to stay awake, I have to keep my mind, for Somer's sake, save me with this rhyme!*" It was silly, but her hands and knees propelled her to the front of the bus. She pulled the driver from his seat—he murmured slightly—but did not rouse. She managed to raise herself up into his former place, started the bus, and aimed it eastward, chanting her rhyme the whole time.

"What are you doing?" Grendel shrieked.

"The soul! The soul!" shrieked the sluagh. Against the sides and roof of the bus, and every window, they hurled themselves like hail.



The sluagh exploded in Jack's mirror view in a writhing avalanche of inky feathers and snapping beaks and claws. A few caught sight of him and launched at him with angry cries. Their bodies cracked the mirror of ice in his dream, and Jack withdrew fast. He found himself in a snowscape, marred by blood and black feathers.

He had to find Cherie, even if it was to watch her die; he would be with her until the end. Had he vowed that once to his soldiers and this city? The train of thought felt familiar. His focus slipped—and he clapped his hands together to stay present. "*Let me see Cherie, the one who is dearest to me.*" The conviction behind the clumsy rhyme was a shock, but between his palms ice formed, hard and cold, without a hint of melt. He drew back his hands, and a sheet that was wide as his forearm and the height of his hand was before him. He was staring down at Cherie, and she was bowing over a

steering wheel, obviously fighting sleep. Her lips were moving, but her words were an indistinct whisper, and her eyes were half-mast. The vehicle—a bus, maybe; he thought he saw seats in the back—was being attacked. The sluagh's bodies crashed against the vehicle like artillery fire. "Sleep, Cherie," he said. "It's the only way to escape the sluagh."

She glanced up at him, and her lips curled, even as her body sank against the wheel. There was a crash behind her and the screech of birds. Bolting upright, Cherie looked over her shoulder and pulled the sword from her hip. She slashed at the crimson-black shadows with one hand, and drove with the other. There was a clear divider behind the driver's seat and the rest of the cab; it cracked, but the shatterproof glass did not give. Wicked talons and beaks tried to thrust through the cracks and screamed. The air behind Cherie became so black with birds, Jack couldn't see clearly, but he thought he saw Grendel, fighting off more of the winged vermin. Cherie fell forward against the steering wheel, and there was another crash. Jack's world shook. In an instant, he saw the sluagh descend on Cherie. He prayed she was asleep, with her soul safe in dreams and the space between life and death. But then he heard her scream.

The mirror in his hands crashed to the ground and disappeared into the snow. Diving, Jack dug furiously into the bank, but dream time and logic had taken over, and it seemed to take hours. At last, a jolt of pain shot from his fingers. He pulled his hands from the snow and pulled an ill-shaped piece of mirror to his eyes. He saw only himself. Cursing, Jack demanded, "*Show my love not of my blood.*"

Again, time seemed to stretch. He told himself it was an illusion. Time always bent in dreams. It wasn't too late ... it couldn't be too late ... His reflection dissolved, and he saw a sluagh with a long, curling, dark gold lock of hair in its beak. At the end dangled a strip of flesh, oozing blood. "Such a delicious soul! Let us into your mirror, and we'll let you join her."

Magick rushed through him. There was a blood-curdling shout of rage.
He was only half aware it was him.

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CHAPTER 18



Nerves on Cherie's arms, legs, and scalp were singing with the pain of scratches and cuts. Worse, the back of Cherie's head and her right forearm were on fire. She screamed, and somehow, in the frenzy of her exploding nervous system, found her Magick and willed the pain to relent. There was still sensation. The air was too cold in the places where the pain had been, and yet something wet, warm, and sticky was oozing down her neck and her elbow. She was covered in sluagh. Her nostrils and lips were filled with their pin feathers, and if she wasn't weightless, she wouldn't have been able to move from their mass. But she was weightless. A cool hand was around her throat, making it difficult to breathe. She told herself that in the throng of sluagh, Grendel had probably just reached out and grabbed the first naked area of flesh she could find. Grendel's hand was protecting her jugular, for which she should have been grateful, but she choked, soft, silent coughs wracking her body. Grendel's hold slackened but was still uncomfortable. Cherie knocked a few of the sluagh out of the air with her blade. Her movements felt sluggish and uncharacteristically weak. At her right side, the sluagh were disappearing, being plucked from the air one-by-one. Another hand wrapped around her neck, this time sliding along from the back, beneath the painful, cold spot, and through the sticky ooze. The hand around her throat disappeared.

Halting her swing, Cherie looked to the side and found Grendel crouching beside her. Surrounded by the angry curtain of gleaming crimson eyes, bloody talons, and beaks, the vampire's pale face with its spider-web cloud of disheveled white hair was almost beatific, even with the smear of blood across her lips and chin. Grendel pressed her hand more firmly against Cherie's neck, urging her to rise. Cherie's body moved slowly, as did her thoughts, like honey lazily slipping from a spoon.

Grendel led her down the bus steps. The vampire had to push backward through the sluagh, and it was obviously difficult for her. The birds filled the air, and having to keep her hand behind Cherie's neck impeded her range of motion. Reaching back, Cherie wrapped her hand around the vampire's and pulled it between them. Grendel glared at her, as though she were doing something wrong, and in the strange, silent world that was out of time, Cherie couldn't ask what she'd done. Scowling fiercely, Grendel drew their hands to her mouth, and Cherie realized the vampire's palm and fingers were smeared with Cherie's own blood. Grendel began to lick her bloodied hand. An instinctive spasm of revulsion swept through Cherie—a need to get away—and she almost pulled back, but Grendel was scowling so fiercely at her, she caught herself. The vampire expected her to be afraid, or revolted, so she wouldn't be. Cherie had offered her blood before and Grendel had refused; now the vampire had momentarily shocked Cherie, that was all. Steeling herself, Cherie stifled the instinctive urge for flight. She would not be who or what the vampire expected. She shook her head in feigned exasperation and actually managed a smile. Grendel's angry scowl melted into an expression of befuddlement. When Grendel finished, the vampire pushed through the cloud with renewed vigor. Cherie did her best to help, and together they opened the door. Just outside the bus, the birds were in a cloud as thick as inside, but Grendel and Cherie plowed through, and an instant later a light so bright it was blinding shone from overhead. Blinking, Cherie realized it wasn't so very bright, just bright after the night

and the cloud of birds. It came from Ember lights inset in a ceiling high above her head—the lights hadn't been on before—perhaps they were “motion sensitive,” like in movies. Immense tiles were beneath her feet, and there was a long central desk ahead; beyond that was a marble stairway. Her lips parted in shock. They were in a lobby fancier than she'd ever seen, and she'd driven the bus right through the front-doors-wall ... it was all made of glass. She desperately hoped it was the right lobby.

Beside her Grendel staggered, snapping Cherie out of her awe. The vampire was weakening fast. Not having a better idea, Cherie half-dragged, half-guided her behind the desk. There were two men in guard uniforms lying there, sound asleep. One was smiling slightly. Grendel crumpled beside Cherie, and Cherie had weight once more. Terrified, she dropped behind the cover of the desk, but the sluagh above saw her and gave raucous, triumphant cries. Drawing her sword as they dove at her, Cherie found her first and second target, but more were coming and—

There was a crash and a moan that could have come from a giant. Frigid air ripped over Cherie's scalp, whipping her hair from its ponytail and twisting it into her eyes and mouth. A sudden drop in pressure slammed her back into the desk, rattling her jaw and sending shocks of pain up her spine. The sluagh screamed in rage. Looking up in dread, she saw them sucked backward and out of view. The inhuman moan got louder, the air vibrated, and Cherie swore a tornado was raging through the lobby.

The guard by Grendel roused slightly, muttering, “Arnie, Major Storm King Dewitt's made another twister ... must be under attack.” Cherie's eyes widened. There was that name again. The guard fumbled for his sidearm but slumped back down. The moan turned into a scream. Spitting hair from her mouth, Cherie peeked over the desk. The glass wall was no more. Outside sluagh were spinning madly through the air, being swept up in a whirlwind, along with glass shards, dirt, bits of trash, and road signs. She gaped. It was a tornado ... her eyes slid to the guard, and for the first time,

she noticed that Grendel had pulled his wrist to her mouth. The vampire looked up and licked her lips. “I’m refreshed, and he’s not dead.”

Cherie narrowed her eyes.

Grendel hissed, “If you don’t make it to Jack, the city doesn’t wake up, and other vampires might not be so accommodating.”

Cherie’s ire turned to worry, and she gulped.

The roaring moan dropped in volume, and she heard cries from the sluagh. “In the tower! In the tower!”

Grendel yanked Cherie out from behind the desk and pulled her madly up the stairs.

“Where are we going?” Cherie asked.

“To the elevators! I’m not hiking up a hundred flights of stairs.”

Which was odd, as they were running upstairs already, but Cherie decided to trust the vampire. “We’re in the right tower? Yay!”

Without breaking stride, Grendel glared back at her. “We’re not safe yet!” They reached a landing, and Grendel skidded to a stop in a hallway lined with immense, sliding silver doors and pressed a button on the wall that promptly lit up. Cherie blinked. It was an elevator. She’d only been in one once before—and it had been one of only two. Here —she looked around—there were more than four!

“Cherie, sluagh!” Grendel shouted. Spinning, Cherie raised her blade and slashed at one shadow and then another. And then she was weightless again. Grendel pulled her backward into an elevator walled with mirrors, with fancy recessed lights in the ceilings, and marble tiles on the floor. Cherie had weight, again. Grendel pressed a button, and the doors started to close, but sprung open as a sluagh flew in. Before Cherie could blink, there was another, and another, too many for her to target, just as Spiros had said there would be.

“I need your blade!” Grendel shouted.

Cherie could not respond. The sluagh were upon her, pain was racing up her thigh, and more at the back of her head. The blade clattered to the floor, and Grendel cursed just before she let go of Cherie's hand.

In half a blink, the sluagh in the elevator vanished—and so did Grendel. But it didn't matter, all Cherie wanted was sleep. She closed her eyes expecting darkness. Instead, she found herself in a wonderland of sparkling snow. A young woman she'd seen from afar in mirrors—black hair, blue eyes, and fair skin—Jack's sister—held out her hand to Cherie. Cherie took it and smiled. "You see me at last!" Cherie said.

Jack's sister—Mizuki, Cherie remembered—smiled back, but did not speak. Around them, shining Grecian columns made of ice rose from the ground, and clouds lowered atop them to be the roof. Cherie knew she was in a dream and that she'd fallen asleep. She also knew there was something dangerous about sleeping, but the scene was so beautiful and peaceful, she didn't want to leave. Mizuki drew Cherie through the columns ... and there was Jack, his back to her, standing in a crowd of people she'd never seen before.

"Jack, have I found you?" His body stiffened, but he did not turn. "Jack?" she whispered.



Jack wavered on his feet, staring at the ice mirror between his palms, his throat raw from his scream of rage, his Magick spent, his fury gone, burned away in the furious whirlwind he'd launched at the birds. There were hundreds, maybe thousands, of dead sluagh lining the streets, but they still swarmed the tower. The icy mirror flashed, and he saw his reflection and one more—Nimm, his rat advisor, was on his shoulder, smoothing his whiskers and straightening the tiny bow tie he always wore. "Can't look like the plague when I'm meeting the major!"

“I never, ever, looked at you and thought of the plague,” Jack said.

Nimm gave no sign of hearing. Scratching behind his ear, he squeaked, “Ach, can’t scratch. He’ll think I have fleas!”

“I know you don’t have fleas.”

But Nimm was scampering down his side, chanting, “Can’t be late! The reputation of all Magickal rats is at stake!” The rat scampered between a pair of combat boots. Jack lifted his eyes and found himself face to face with Nevin. His friend’s eyes didn’t glow, and his skin was tanned. “You’ve had a bad day,” Nevin said. Jack was dreaming, obviously, and it was the kind of dream he didn’t want to end. Nevin was here, Nevin was forgiving him ... or something.

Another voice said, “At least we killed all the vamps.” That was said by Bartleby, the first man who’d turned in Jack’s ranks. Jack had been forced to kill him. His mother appeared with Bianca on her arm, though in real life his mother had long been dead when Jack had met his fiancée. The engagement ring he’d given Bianca glittered on her left hand. The depths of his memories must have been dredged, because their faces were clearer than they’d been in two hundred years. “You did your best, Yukio,” his mother—his real mother—said.

“It wasn’t enough,” Jack replied, and Bianca smiled sadly. Around him, the ghosts of all the dead appeared, all the men and women he’d lost in the war, and a few he wasn’t sure he had—they were sleepers, weren’t they? Jack couldn’t remember if they were alive or dead, but if they were all asleep, wasn’t that the same? The mirror he held crashed in the snow. The phantoms of his memories crowded around them, none speaking. And then from behind him came Cherie’s voice. “Jack, have I found you?”

His body went taught like a bow. Cherie was here? She was safe? No, she couldn’t be. If she’d found her way here, and she saw and was talking to him, she was a memory, a ghost, a dream like Nevin, his mother, and Bianca. Only Mizuki was “real” here.

“Jack?”

Ghost or not, dream or not, he couldn't keep his back to her. Jack turned, and there she was. Her hair was disheveled by her journey; her clothing was ripped and torn. She'd lost her coat and her sword—or he'd forgotten them in his dream logic. His dream logic was twisted and cruel. There were weeping gashes on the side of her thigh and on her arm where her flesh had been ripped away, and blood was visible on her neck.

She'd been in his dreams before. He went to her, and, as he had in other dreams, he lifted her leg up to his hip and cradled her head in his hand. Though his motivation for this touch was different than those other dreams. His fingers encountered gaping wounds in her scalp. Dream logic was the only reason she wasn't displaying pain, or maybe his subconscious was connecting that Cherie could ease pain ... pain of all sorts. It had been her Magick, not Dr. Anna's or Cillian's that had allowed him to remain so long in Somer. It was in Somer that he had found peace and friendship after a life of war and centuries of cursed loneliness.

Cherie's ability to curb pain had limits, and such deep wounds were dangerous.

The dream of Cherie whispered, “I've found you?”

He had Magick again—maybe it had never gone, or maybe it was like it was in battle when you went on long after you thought you possibly couldn't continue—he couldn't save her, but he could save the dream of her. He gave his Magick to Cherie, whispering, “*Cherie, my dove, be well my love,*” so close that he caught the faint scent of strawberries on her breath and if his lips hadn't been moving ... well ...

Whatever truth was behind those words—was she his love, as the powerful, restrained, and beautiful Bianca had once been?—her wounds, at least in the dream, healed. Jack wasn't a doctor, but he had plenty of experience with battle injuries and Magickal First Aid.

She was whole, and well, and in his dream. Jack's lips almost touched hers, but Cherie's gaze went over his shoulder. Her eyes widened in terror, and she vanished.

Jack was left alone with empty hands and ghosts.

Cherie was dead, and dreams of ghosts was all he'd ever have.



One moment, Cherie was sitting in the fetal position on the elevator floor, screaming, trying to dislodge the slugh that were piling atop her, jolted from her dream of Jack by pain. The next moment, the slugh's bodies were broken and lying in bloody piles. The marble tile was red with gore and slick with fluids. She'd thrown her arms over her head, and sticky hot blood was trickling down those limbs, but her old wounds ... she blinked ... the one on her leg and the one on the back of her head no longer hurt. She almost fell asleep with relief, but Grendel snarled.

Cherie gulped and looked up. Grendel was standing, feet wide, rags more torn than ever, sword in her grip. The elevator doors were closed, they were rising, and gentle music, completely out of step with the scene, was piping in from somewhere.

"I'm sorry," Grendel said.

"For what?" Cherie asked drowsily. She licked her lips, remembering her dream and Jack holding her. Fire had spread from everywhere he touched, and when his lips brushed hers she'd caught the scent of Fall-ripe apple on his breath. She wanted to go back ...

Grendel snatched her hand. "I'm sorry for letting them harm you." She shrugged to the doors hopelessly. "I had to slip through time and kill enough of them that there would be time for the elevator door to close ... but some got through in the last minute. I thought you would fall asleep."

Cherie shook her head. “I was asleep ... for a bit ... I think I have to be more deeply asleep to be immune to the sluagh.” The city must have fallen asleep well before the sluagh’s arrival.

Grendel licked her lips. “You still seem delicious to me even when you’re sleeping.”

Cherie was too tired—or shocked by everything else—to be frightened by that. She sighed. “Maybe you don’t steal my soul, Grandmother.”

“I don’t think I do,” Grendel replied. “Souls pass through me on their way. Some stay long enough to say goodbye, you know, depending.” She released Cherie’s hand.

“Mmm ...” Cherie managed, too tired to question “depending.” Her head slumped to the side. She closed her eyes and smiled at the sight of familiar snow—

Her eyes bolted open. Grendel was sitting beside her, and a papery hand wrapped around Cherie’s own again. Cherie gasped, the memory of snow still fresh in her mind. “‘Yukio’ means snow! I’m almost sure of it. Like Yuki Onna, the Snow Woman, from Japanese mythology!”

Grendel snickered. “So Major Yukio DeWitt is Major Snow White?”

Cherie’s lips parted, an idea forming in her mind, one that would have been unbelievable a few days before ... when Jack had been Jack Frost, a gentle ghost, with a Magickal ability that was sprite-like and charming—turning dew to sparkling frost—rather than frightening. Creating whirlwinds and tornadoes ... because that had been him too, hadn’t it? The guards had called it the work of the Storm King and the Major ... She was an idiot. Of course, if Jack was the key to the city’s curse *and* could help protect the people of Somer, he was *really* powerful. Maybe even as powerful as the Queen.

Before she could run any of these thoughts by Grendel, there was a ding, the elevator came to a halt, and the doors slid open to shadows. “A hallway,” Grendel said, rising and pulling Cherie with her out of the lift.

The doors slid shut, and Cherie's eyes adjusted. There were bodies on the floor. "Sleeping," Grendel said. There was a man whose body was propping a door open just visible by the faint light of the approaching dawn. Without discussion, that was where Cherie and Grendel went. Before they entered, Grendel paused to read a plaque beside the door. "Laboratory."

For a moment, they were both motionless, as though finding themselves at the end of the journey was more frightening than the journey itself.

Grendel smiled and whispered, "No psychotic robotic Dwarfs have attacked me. They must not work!"

Cherie gulped, realizing that for Grendel, this moment might be genuinely terrifying. Yet she was still here. She squeezed the vampire's hand, and without a word, they stepped into the room. Gliding shadows swept in the periphery of Cherie's vision, and she ducked behind a high table that had cabinets but no legs.

Joining her, Grendel hissed, "Sluagh."

Cherie nodded.

For a moment, they sat motionless. "The only thing I can hear is your pounding heart," Grendel whispered, perhaps wistfully. The vampire still held the sword, and she had to be hungry after slipping through time. Heart rate increasing, Cherie shivered and raised herself carefully to peer over the edge of the table. The laboratory was large, filled with tables like the one they hid behind, atop of which were contraptions the likes of which she'd never seen before, and a few more recognizable microscopes, too. More machines lined the aisles between the tables. At some tables were men and women slumped forward in chairs, heads pillowed on their arms.

At least from Cherie's vantage, none of the sleeping people appeared to be Jack, but the light was so scant she wasn't sure she'd be able to recognize him unless she got close. It would be too dangerous to turn on the lights. On two sides there were enormous windows, past which sluagh

drifted lazily on air currents or fell onto each other in teeming masses of crimson eyes, angry shrieks, and raining black feathers.

She slipped back down and whispered, “Jack might be in here, but we’ll have to be careful not to let the sluagh see us.”

“Is that an apple?” Grendel whispered, pointing a blood-stained claw down the aisle.

Purposely not thinking about the blood, Cherie peeked in the direction the vampire was indicating. At the far edge of the table just to the right of theirs, sat an apple with a single bite taken out of it. The exposed flesh was fresh and white.

“Maybe it belongs to the Major Snow White everyone is talking about?” the vampire whispered with a smirk.

Cherie’s gaze dropped to the foot of the table with the apple and noticed a booted toe peeking out into the aisle. Since they had to start somewhere, Cherie half crouched, half crawled toward it, her right hand and Grendel’s left still intertwined. “Do you want your sword back?” Grendel whispered.

“Keep it,” Cherie said distractedly at the intersection between the desks. Peering around the corner, she could see the sluagh through the window, the birds’ attention focused on the ground. Holding her breath, she dashed to the shelter of the other desk, keeping her gaze on that booted toe and Grendel’s hand firmly in her own.

They reached the corner of the desk and peered around the other side.

There was a man stretched out in the aisle. He was lying on his side, and from her angle, she couldn’t see his face, but she could see pale skin and very dark hair. He wore close-fitting Magick armor with veins of Ember running along it that seemed to highlight the breadth of his shoulders and the well-proportioned musculature of his limbs. He’d fallen asleep before one of the room’s odd contraptions, a machine that was vaguely pyramid shaped, with a globe that might be an Ember light on top.

Cherie dared to raise herself for a better peek. Her breath caught at the sight of a face she'd never seen from this angle, but the long black lashes kissing high cheekbones and full lips were familiar. It was strange to see him like this. On the one hand, he looked physically more powerful than in a mirror. She didn't think she'd quite comprehended how broad his shoulders were. His reflection didn't reveal the muscles in his arms so well, and she'd never seen the strong planes of his back. In the mirror, he'd seemed older, world weary even. Asleep, he looked no more than her age and impossibly vulnerable. The shadow of a sluagh made her duck.

Leaning forward, Grendel smacked her lips. "Oh, his blood is a damn orchestra."

"It's Jack," Cherie whispered, body flushing. "You can't drink from him."

Grendel scowled and transferred her hand to Cherie's cheek. "Fine, but you stay down. I'll wake him. I seem to be the key to staying awake here. Why in God's name did they send you? I may have to kill that elf for endangering you."

Gripped by sudden alarm, Cherie smacked her hand on top of Grendel's. "Grandmother, elves don't lie. If Solien says I must wake him, I must. Don't worry, I'll stay low. The sluagh won't see me behind that contraption."

"But—" Grendel winced and rubbed her jaw, awkwardly with the back of the hand gripping the sword.

Cherie recognized that wince. "You bit your lip."

"Stupid fangs," Grendel muttered. She glanced at Cherie guiltily. "I'd only take a little bit."

"Grandmother, let me try to wake him." Remembering how the vampire had snuck a bite of the guard at the front desk without her noticing, she added, "You wait here."

"You'll fall asleep," Grendel countered.

“Fear of Jack staking you as soon as he wakes up will keep me awake,” Cherie replied.

Grendel frowned.

Cherie smiled to show she was joking, though she wasn't sure she was.

Grendel muttered, “All right, go then. I'll wait.”

Biting her own lip, hoping the pain would keep her awake, Cherie dropped to all fours and crawled out into the aisle, maneuvering over Jack's feet and legs. He was a lot taller in real life. She hadn't realized before how much he dwarfed her. She reached the level of his arms, and her hand brushed his. She stared down at their fingers, and for a moment, was confounded by how much larger his hands were. She laid her hand against his. Palm to fingertip, his hand spread was an inch longer than her own. She wanted to wrap her fingers into his, crawl between his arms, and rest, just for a moment.

“You're falling asleep!” Grendel hissed.

Cherie blinked. She was. She'd already begun to shift, to lie down beside him. How often had she dreamed of just that simple thing? Of course she'd had lustful thoughts about Jack, though not after he left, not after Nnenne got sick. But even then, she'd sometimes wished he were real, just so she would not be alone. She'd fantasized about just being held. When he woke up, who knew what would happen? Seeing him in his fancy armor, the tower around them, the city outside, made her realize just how different their worlds were. Once, when she'd been a child, before he was more than a curiosity to her, and she hadn't known any better, she'd asked him how old he was when he'd become a ghost. He'd replied dryly, “nearly thirty,” and Nnenne had piped in, “practically ancient!” and Jack and Nnenne had both laughed. The not-yet-ten-at-the-time Cherie had wondered what was so funny; thirty had seemed ancient to her. Not so much now, at twenty. Closer, in the light of the approaching dawn, he appeared older than she'd thought a moment ago or appreciated in the flattened, two-dimensional

vantage of Somer's mirrors. He was no less handsome than before; in fact, he was perhaps *more* handsome—or more “attractive” was perhaps the right word. He was alive, breathing—she could see the gentle rise and fall of his chest, smell the apple on his breath, and his breath was warm—he was real. And yet, she had a feeling, seeing him stretched out in armor before her and the strange machines all around, that those ten years difference between them might be larger due to hard lived experience. She'd never find a place in his arms when he awoke. This was as close to him as she'd ever be, as intimate with him as she would ever be, and she didn't want him to wake. Only the thought of her people trapped in the land of the elves, and of the people sleeping in the city, vulnerable to Grendel's kind, made her act. Gently shaking Jack's shoulder, Cherie whispered, “Jack, Jack, wake up.”

Nothing happened, except that Grendel sighed theatrically.

“Just kiss him, Princess Charming!” Grendel hissed. “Or I'll come out and kiss him *myself*.”

Something hot and angry coiled in Cherie's belly. She narrowed her eyes at Grendel—or, at least in the vampire's direction. She couldn't see Grendel in the shadows.

Grendel sniffed. “That woke you up. Kiss him. It's how it worked in Snow White.”

“This isn't that story,” Cherie whispered.

“There's a Queen, there's an apple. The only thing missing is seven bloody dwarves.”

Cherie yawned.

Grendel's eyes flashed in the gloom. “Hurry before you fall asleep, and I have to come after you.”

The vampire was right; Cherie was getting sleepy and running out of time. If she didn't act, Grendel was going to attempt to wake Jack herself, but not until after a snack. That thought did not fill Cherie with dismay as it had with the other victims; it filled her with anger, hot and seething. The

anger flowed through her blood to the very tips of her fingers, and she curled them unconsciously into fists. She leaned down and brushed Jack's lips with hers. The angle was strange, the gesture unfamiliar—her first kiss with a man who was asleep, who might not even want it—and she pulled back self-consciously just in time to see Jack's eyelashes flutter on his cheeks, and the muscles in his arm coil.

“Jack?” Cherie whispered, but Jack's body relaxed, and his eyelashes went still.

Grendel snorted. “You call that a kiss?”

Cherie glared at Grendel, and then gently took Jack's head in her hands. She felt stubble prickle beneath her fingers in a sensual bite that she didn't deserve. Turning him to her, exposing the full breadth of his mouth, she bent down and kissed him stiffly, self-conscious and embarrassed. She almost pulled away, but a warm hand slipped around the back of her neck and held her close, and the lips beneath hers began to move. For a moment, stars went off behind her eyes, and she forgot the sluagh, Grendel, and that this kiss was stolen. For a moment, she was only amazed. *This* was a kiss. Her lips were moving as though they knew what to do even if her mind did not, and the heat of something delicious was burning away all conscious thought. She was kissing Jack, and it was better than she had ever imagined, because she could never have imagined his stubble's subtle burn, the weight of his hand in her hair, the taste of tart apple on his tongue. When she pulled away, she was gasping, gulping down cool air that struck like a blow. Bowing her head, she closed her eyes. For a moment, she'd been more than herself, or outside of herself, but now would be the reckoning. She waited for him to wake and say, “Cherie, what are you doing?”

His eyes flickered open, just for an instant, and then shut. “Don't leave me this time, Cherie.” His forehead was nearly touching hers; his fingers were weaving through her hair.

“I won’t,” she promised, falling into his arms as she’d first envisioned, pressing her lips to his again without hesitation. He pulled her to him, a leg sliding between hers, his other hand sliding along her back, making her shiver, gasp, and press her face to the space between his shoulder and neck, where something ominous waited for her ...

“You’re falling asleep, Cherie!” a woman called, her voice slightly raspy with age, but Cherie must have been imagining it, because around her and Jack there was no one else, just a world of pristine white ...

A strange voice, like an echo in a tunnel, declared, “Dwarfs engaged!” but it was far away.

Cherie and Jack were standing in a snowscape of Grecian columns carved of ice holding up gentle clouds—how had they come to be standing? She could barely think of that, because the world around her was so pure and Magickal ... and yet strangely familiar. There was a scream and the tinkling of a thousand bells. Cherie searched the Magickal snowscape for the source, but there was nothing but sunlight on snow—luminous, heavenly, and terrifying—sliding in sharp beams from between the clouds that were the ceiling, sparkling like daggers on the columns. Why was sunlight terrifying? What had Cherie hoped to see? Or was it a who?

“Cherie, look at me,” Jack whispered, his voice urgent, worried, and she returned her gaze to his. He was a shadow, his back to the sunlight and the shining, dreamlike icy columns.

Dreamlike ... “Am I dreaming?” Cherie asked. She shivered, though it was not cold. There was something about dreams she had to be wary of, and yet she could not remember what.

“Definitely dreaming,” Jack replied, his fingers warm against her cheek, and terribly solid for a dream. She was going to ask who had screamed and where were the bells, but his lips were on hers in a moment, and her mind went blank at the same time her body came alive.



“Jack,” Cherie’s voice whispered into Jack’s dream.

Closing his eyes, he balled his hands into fists, felt the hard, cold floor of the lab beneath him, and felt a soft brush against his lips. It might have been a kiss.

He gritted his teeth. He was just imagining it. Just moments ago—or was it ages, he couldn’t tell—he’d looked at the lobby through a mirror. A half-dozen sluagh had been sitting on the front desk.

One of them had opened its beak and whispered, “Jack, my love,” in Cherie’s voice. Three of the sluagh fell from the desk with raucous laughter.

“We can speak what we eat!” cracked one of the sluagh, and Jack noticed the blood and gore on the beak of the bird that had spoken.

“If you love me, join me in real death!” said the bird with Cherie’s voice. And then they flew at him.

Jack threw up his arms and whipped snow at the birds with such fury he knocked himself over. Instead of falling into a snow drift, he fell upon a hard, flat surface. He blinked, and found himself in a dream of the lab, exactly where he’d fallen the day the sluagh came.

He’d haunted memories of the place when he’d first been cursed, retracing his steps, as though he could walk backward and awaken. He’d taken a bite of an apple that day—in his dream, the apple was on top of one of the lab tables, just as he’d left it. He’d set it down, then sat down on his heels to inspect one of the Ember powered robots they’d created to sense and neutralize vampires. Nick-named “Dwarfs” for their stature, the boxy, pyramid-shaped devices were small to conserve Ember. At their apex, each had a full-spectrum light that could temporarily blind and weaken vampires. Within their bodies they housed stakes that could then be used to incapacitate and trap them. Burning was the only way to assuredly destroy a vampire—although there was some thought that if given enough time,

blood, and a high enough percentage of ash, even that could be undone—but the Dwarfs were not smart enough to know when burning wouldn't, say, set a whole building on fire. He'd inspected the stakes, shut their compartment, licked the juice of the apple from his lips—tart and sweet—glanced up, seen an ominous dark cloud in the distance, and then he'd felt sleep coming over him, its draw inescapable.

At first, he'd wondered if his technomages had misspelled the Dwarf to cause sleep—but then he couldn't wake up. He was too strong to be bound by anything but love, and he did love his sister, maybe even more so knowing she'd only been trying to save the city, tying its fate to his because she wrongly believed he could save them all.

He'd long since turned away from dreams of the lab. Perhaps simply in despair. It was a memory of what had once been, an almost Magickal renaissance, a marriage of Magick and old technologies, a return to the old ways before the war, of democracy and freedom. Instead of fighting the Old Magickals in Chicago, they were going to join them. Just as the City of Chicago had opened up its government to all the various ethnicities and neighborhoods to give them a stake, so would Major Yukio Dewitt open this new Chicago.

And then they had been cursed.

He closed his eyes ... And soft fingers—or a dream of soft fingers—took his face in his hands and gently turned his face upward. He felt what were definitely lips—or the dream of lips—press against his own. They tasted faintly like strawberries. Hesitantly, afraid to open his eyes, he lifted a hand and remembered slipping his hand behind Cherie's earlier, the brush of her curls, the weight and the warmth of her. If this was a dream, so be it, he'd take it. The lips he was dreaming were oddly still against his own, until his own lips began to move, and then the kiss ended too soon.

Jack opened his eyes and found Cherie—or a dream of her—bowed over him. "Don't leave me this time, Cherie," he whispered.

Her eyes met his, and it was proof he was in a dream. No other dreamer saw him in dreams except Mizuki. He was seen only by the dead.

“I won’t,” the dream Cherie promised, slipping into his arms. The next moment, they were standing in sunlight, its glitter blinding on the snow drifts.

There was shouting somewhere far off in the distance. A woman’s voice, and a robotic voice ... Cherie looked toward the sounds, a look of horror on her face.

“Cherie, look at me,” Jack implored. She couldn’t be like the rest of his memories, the rest of his ghosts. She had to *stay* with him and see him.

She met his eyes again, and his body unwound with relief. “Am I dreaming?” she asked.

“Definitely dreaming,” Jack replied, right before pressing his lips to hers.

His mind conjured in glorious detail her weight, and the exquisite curve of her hip beneath his fingers. He’d dreamed of her since the night he’d seen her in her nightgown. She’d been too young at that first gaze; she was always too young. But dreams were only dreams. He’d tried to save her real self from an illusion of love, but he wasn’t so prudish he’d restrain himself in dreams.

His hands went to the bottom of the simple knit shirt she was wearing, and he began to lift it, his knuckles brushing against the soft skin of her belly and the curve of her breast beneath a silky bra.

Cherie gasped, and her hips ground against him. Pausing, he laughed against her lips, because he was deliriously happy. He wasn’t sure if he should continue bothering with the shirt. Why not just will it away?

Cherie’s hands went to his chest. She pushed him back. “Jack, wait.”

He stilled. Wondering if this was misguided chivalry on the part of his subconscious, his gaze dropped. For the first time, he noticed that her forearms were crisscrossed with gruesome scratches, chunks of her flesh

were missing, and the shirt in his hands was a bloody rag. His subconscious was reminding him she'd suffered—for him, and in vain. Were she alive, without Magick, she'd need stitches, and with stitches she'd be scarred. Catching her hands in his, he bent to kiss her palms, closing his eyes and willing her flesh to knit together and the dream of her to heal.

Cherie gasped again. He opened his eyes to find her staring down at her arms in wonder. "You made my other cuts go away, too."

He frowned. "Cuts" made the deep gouges of flesh sound trivial.

Her brow furrowed almost imperceptibly, and she gazed down at her arms. "I could stop the pain, but not heal them. You healed them from far away in a dream. No one is that Magickally strong ... are they?" Her eyes met his. "What else can you do from a dream, Jack?"

Snowflakes fell around them, softly as down, but they were warm in this place beyond life or death. He kissed the side of her neck just below her ear. "Everything."

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CHAPTER 19



There was something gnawing at the back of Cherie's mind, but her thoughts were skipping off in too many different directions. Jack was Magickally strong enough to heal deep wounds from afar. But of course he would have to be strong; he was the one who the elves said could—could what? She couldn't quite remember. There was danger. The necklace at her throat was too cool, but it wasn't burning her skin with cold. What had the elves said he could do? What was the danger? The sky was clear and blue, no danger in sight. But it wasn't Somer's sky. There were no gently rolling hills, no curling wisps of smoke. Where was she? How did she get here?

Why was there a necklace around her neck? Why was it cool?

"Everything," Jack whispered, his breath on the side of her neck. His lips pressed there, and she shivered. "I never wanted to say goodbye, Cherie, I never wanted to, but it was unfair to you. I never should have said I wanted you. I slipped. I'm sorry. But now I won't let you go, not this time."

She couldn't remember the last few hours—or was it days? But that old hurt, she could remember. How long had she waited to hear him say, "I'm sorry" and that he wouldn't let her go? How long had she waited to be in his arms?

And yet ... she was afraid to look away from him, lest she see something she didn't want to see. There was something stalking her. Something terrible and frightening that made her shiver, and made her eyes dart to the side. A monster's name almost came to her lips.

"What's wrong?" Jack asked, gaze intent, arms strong and warm, a barrier between her and the world. The world was out there, waiting to sneak in, and she didn't want it to.

"Something's out there," she replied, not saying the monster's name. If she named it, it could get her.

"You're safe here," Jack promised. "Safe forever."

But how could you be safe forever? "Somer was safe ..." she whispered, but no, that wasn't quite right. She wasn't in Somer anymore, but she couldn't remember why. Everything was confused, a jumble.

"We can be in Somer," Jack said, "if we just imagine it."

His words put Somer in her mind, and Cherie did imagine it, and suddenly, instead of a sunbright snowscape, they were in her room, on her bed, their legs a tangle. Jack's lips were on hers again an instant later, and it was everything she'd wanted, everything she dreamed of ... and more. She melted into him, her heart light. At last, everything was coming together. She and Jack ... her world ... her home. His hands were sliding along her sides, her back, pushing them closer, and not close enough.

Jack rolled her on top of him and drew away just for an instant. His expression was somewhere between elation and disbelief. He groaned. "You feel so real."

So did he. She'd dreamed of him before, of course, but this dream was incredibly realistic. She drew back, just a fraction. "You taste like apple." She'd never dreamed that before, and something about it niggled at her, making her shiver ... there was something about an apple she had to beware of.

Jack smiled, his hands slipping along the edge of her shirt, as though to pull it up. “And you taste like strawberries.”

Cherie put her hands atop of his, halting them. When had she eaten strawberries? The memory came sharp and fast, of being on a boat, with wheels, clattering along a train track heading toward ... death. No, that couldn't be real.

“A dream, all a dream ...” Cherie whispered. That's what the memory had to be.

Jack's expression became serious. “Yes, a dream, but a dream we are safe in.” He lifted himself, and she smelled the apple in his breath.

The scent of apple ...

Cherie's eyes went wide. The last few days came rushing back to her, and she knew she'd failed. “The apple—the kiss has poisoned me, too.”

Jack shook his head, and a cold breeze lifted the curtains on Cherie's window. “No, no ... the apple was a normal apple. It wasn't poisoned. I took a bite just before my sister, Mizuki, put the city to sleep to save us when her mother—” His lips drew into a grim line. “—the Queen sent the sluagh.”

Cherie's mind whirled, putting that together. “The Queen is ... your stepmother.” He didn't deny it. She was shocked, but she shouldn't be, should she? The Queen saw through mirrors, and Jack had seen through the mirrors of Somer, too.

Jack pulled her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles. Heat raced through her; for a moment, conscious thought receded.

“Asleep, I am safe, my people are safe.” His Adam's apple bobbed. “And the dream of you is safe.”

Cherie's brow furrowed. “I'm not a dream, Jack. It's the real me.”

He stared at her, and then he frowned. “The real Cherie died. I saw the sluagh devouring her.”

Cherie rolled off of him and tried to push herself up to her elbows—as though space between them and height could give more weight to her words.

Catching her shoulder, Jack said, “Wait. Stay. Don’t go. Even the dream of you ... I’m yours, Cherie. Stay.”

Cherie froze. How long had she waited for him to say something like that? He was in her bed, in Somer, and if it was a dream, maybe she could will her town to be here, and Jack to be here, and she could have everything that she ever wanted. Jack kissed her neck, and like Magick, electricity surged through her once more. He pulled her toward him, and it was a trap she wanted to fall into. She didn’t want to face the sluagh again, didn’t want to leave Jack’s arms or her room, but the people of Somer were trapped in Fairy, and the people of the city were in danger because of ... Grendel ... terrifying Grendel.

Why wasn’t Grendel waking her? Something had happened to the vampire. Something terrible. Cherie knew if she didn’t find a way to wake up, this dream would turn into a nightmare. But to wake up, she had to wake up Jack, and he didn’t believe she was real.



The dream of Cherie gazed at Jack with wide, startled eyes. But she didn’t vanish. And her shoulder felt solid and real beneath his hand.

She gulped. “Stay here ... be yours?” She smiled tentatively. “I ... Jack, I don’t even know your real name.”

“Real names” were a thing for the real Cherie, and all the people of Somer and the provinces. That the dream of her would ask made her more real, and he couldn’t deny her, even if she was a ghost. He frowned, his real name slipping away from him, caught in the swiftly moving current of dream logic, but then he said, “Yukio ... Yukio DeWitt.” The Japanese of

his great grandfather's first name and his Dutch surname felt awkward on his tongue.

She smiled at him. It was a sad smile, and he was afraid he was losing her, but she did not fade, and instead asked him, "Major Yukio DeWitt? The Storm King?" A crease appeared between her brows. "They are the same people, right?"

His lips curled in disgust. "Storm King ... I hate that nickname. I don't believe in royalty. My stepmother seizing a throne, creating an absolute monarchy, conspiring to attack Fairy, and then cursing my city hasn't warmed me to the concept."

Her eyes went wide, and her hands went to his. He was still gripping her shoulder, perhaps too hard. He loosened his grip and slid his hands down to her wrists. The mood had soured, and he wanted to turn it but wasn't sure how. He gazed down at her hands and imagined that her pulse was beating madly beneath his thumbs.

"Snow White?" Cherie asked.

His head jerked up. Trying to be cheerful and reclaim the mood, he smiled. "Have you been talking to Ash?" Ashwin, one of the cheeky engineers in the lab, had often called him that. It might have been motivation for the naming of the robotic "Dwarfs." Nevin had called him Snow White, too. His smile dropped.

"Grendel called you that," Cherie said. She pushed herself upright. "Something has happened to her."

Jack shook his head, not wanting to think of the vampire.

A familiar rat in a bow tie crawled up onto the bed, stood on his hind paws, and nervously groomed his whiskers. "Oh, I need a mirror. Where is a mirror? I can't meet the major looking like the plague!" Cherie's lips parted in an O of shock. Nimm scampered off.

"He can't see us," Cherie said.

“No one can see us; they’re trapped in their own dreams,” Jack said. “Why do you think I spent so much time in Somer?” It had been the only place he’d been seen.

Her lips pressed together in a thin line. “You have to wake up, Jack.”

“No,” Jack said, frowning. “Even if I succeed in destroying the sluagh, the Queen will know if we wake. The sluagh and the sleeping spell protect us from her. We have a regiment. She has an army. She has a homeland where all the Old Magickals had been conquered, where her army can regroup in safety. We have a city where demons and dragons lurk ... Sparing the civilians from her war with the Fae, just to drag them into war with her ...” Jack closed his eyes, remembering a lesson his stepmother had given to Mizuki. “Always destroy the evidence, Dear, don’t keep mementos.” She’d laughed when she’d said it.

Jack shook his head. “She will not allow surrender. That she sent the sluagh proves how little she values the lives of ordinary people.” The room around them dimmed. The window blew open, bringing a dusting of snow with it. “She can’t last forever,” he whispered. “Someday, someone will waken me ... hopefully when her power has waned.”

“Grendel is out there,” Cherie said.

“She can’t hurt you here,” Jack assured her, but the words felt wrong.

“I’m not worried about her hurting *me*,” Cherie said, but she shivered.

“You’re afraid of her,” Jack noted.

“Yes,” Cherie whispered. “But ...”

“There is no but,” Jack hissed, wondering why he was arguing in a dream. Why not just make this conversation end? “She’s a vampire.”

The wind whistled through the window, and a shadow fell across the bed. Jack didn’t want to look ... but he did. Nevin stood in the half-light of the brewing storm outside, eyes glowing, fangs glinting. “It’s me, Jack, it’s Nevin. I’m still me, Jack, I’m still me.”

“No,” Jack whispered. “No.”

An icicle stake shot out from Nevin's heart—as though he'd been speared from behind. Nevin sank to his knees. Behind him stood a doppelgänger of Jack himself. Nevin and the doppelgänger faded.

"Jack," whispered the dream of Cherie. "Did you ... did you ... kill Nevin?"

Jack couldn't answer; he could only stare at the place his friend had been.

"I thought he was your best friend ..."

"He was," Jack replied.

"But then—" Cherie began.

Striding from the shadows beside her armoire, wiping blood-stained lips with his sleeve, Bartleby, the first turned that Jack had been forced to kill, interrupted her. "I didn't mean to kill them, Lieutenant, but I was hungry." Behind the nightmare of Bartleby, lay the bodies of two women in party clothes. Bartleby smiled at the gaping Cherie and reached toward her. Another doppelgänger of Jack staked him from behind with an icicle, and then the doppelgänger and Bartleby disappeared.

"That is why," Jack whispered, "you can't trust them. You can't ..."

"Nnenne did," Cherie said, clutching a sheet to her chest. "She's why I trust Grendel."

Jack's skin heated. He wasn't superstitious, not really, but to speak of the dead with disrespect, especially Dr. Anna, rankled. "Don't talk about your grandmother like that."

The door to Cherie's room blew open, and a fantastically beautiful woman with mahogany skin, the undertones too warm to belong to any but the living, stood there. Next to her, gripping her hand, was a man whose Caucasian complexion was ashen. His gaze slid to hers, and when she smiled at him, his cheeks became ever so slightly pink.

"It's Nnenne," Cherie whispered, just as Jack recognized the younger version of Dr. Anna himself.

Cherie continued, “The man is Andrew. He was a vampire. He was who Nnenne was calling for when my Magick wasn’t strong enough to keep the pain away ...” Her breath hitched. “He was murdered a long time ago.” Andrew faded. “He couldn’t ... couldn’t ... help her, and ...” Her voice broke down into a harsh sob. “... and ... *neither could I.*” Dr. Anna vanished.

“Cherie, Cherie,” Jack whispered, trying to pull her to him. She resisted and wiped her eyes with the bedsheet. “Jack, I *am* afraid of Grendel, but I *trust* her.”

Jack shook his head. She couldn’t. She shouldn’t ...

“I want to stay here, Jack.” Cherie wiped her nose. “I want to be safe and be with you, and I want Nnenne to be alive again.” She sniffed.

“Then stay,” Jack said. “*We’ll* stay here and be safe. The whole city will be safe.”

Cherie shook her head. “No, Jack.” Her voice hitched again. “Grendel said—”

“To Hell with Grendel,” Jack retorted, wishing he’d never heard the name.

Cherie put her hands on his chest. “Death is out there, Jack. Grendel said that if she exists, other vampires do, too. Eventually they will find this city, and they will slaughter everyone. I believe her. Solien says if I wake you, you can save the city. And the others said if anyone could save the city it was Major Yukio DeWitt or the Storm King. And you are both those people, so you have to wake up.”

Jack wasn’t sure he was breathing in the real or dream worlds. Outside, the dream sky became cloudy, and a shadow swept across Cherie’s face. She leaned forward and kissed Jack. He caught her and held her tight. She broke the kiss but did not pull away. Her face was just centimeters from his. He could feel her breath against his lips as she spoke in a voice that was hers, and completely unrecognizable—it was too strong, too fierce. “You

said I'm yours, and I'm saying to you, Jack Frost, Major Yukio DeWitt, Snow White, Storm King ... You. Must. Wake. Up!"

The wind screamed through the windows, taking the peaceful world of Somer with it. And then the howl was replaced by the screeching of sluagh.

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CHAPTER 20



Cherie's warm, safe, sunlit bedroom was replaced by darkness, cold, and screams. Great black shapes flew above her, screeching, "Their souls have returned! Their souls have returned!"

The next thing she knew, she was flat on her back on a hard floor, her teeth rattling, pain shooting along her spine, and Jack was above her. The screeching came to a halt, and the bodies of black birds large as eagles, with wicked beaks and claws, crashed around her. Gasping, she blinked at one that landed by her shoulder. The sluagh's crimson eyes were frosted over, and its body radiated a frigid chill from a foot away.

"More will come," Jack said, brushing her cheek. He sat up. His eyes went down her body and widened. Cherie looked down. Her clothing was rags and coated in blood, though all her wounds had been healed.

"Cherie ..." For an instant, he met her eyes, and she thought he might speak, but a new wave of sluagh burst into the lab's enormous shattered windows. Jack roared, and a new storm of frozen sluagh tumbled to the ground. Jack turned and punched a strange machine sitting on the desk beside them. Ember spewed everywhere, all over him, and all over Cherie. Leaping to his feet, he jumped over Cherie. The next wave of sluagh froze mid-flight, and more plummeted before they'd even flown through the

windows. Still, she heard, “Souls awake! Souls to take!” and the frantic beat of wings.

Facing the window, Jack spread his arms wide, and a wind rose outside the tower and howled past the windows. Wave after wave of sluagh tumbled in that fierce wind, and Cherie shivered. No one could be that strong ... could they? If there were Magickals that were so powerful, no wonder non-Magickals feared them. Jack was as terrifying as ... Grendel.

Cherie’s eyes went wide. “Grendel?” She thought she heard a cough. Rising, gritting her teeth at the pain in her back and dulling her nerves, she stumbled over the frozen bodies of sluagh, hearing them crack and shatter beneath her feet. She called again, “Grendel?” Around her, lab workers still slept, unbothered by the corpses of the sluagh fallen among them.

From behind a mass of machinery came a raspy, “I think you had better stay away from me.”

Skipping in that direction, across the broken bodies of birds and sleeping bodies of men, Cherie heard a familiar vampiric hiss. Cherie yanked a machine back—it was about the height of her thigh, wide as her body, vaguely triangular, with a light atop it—the same sort of strange device that had been just beyond Jack. The light on top of the machine flashed so brightly it was painful. Cherie turned her head, and Grendel whimpered. A tinny voice said, “Dwarf engaged!” and a long spike emerged from a door in the machine’s midsection. Cherie gasped, but the machine quickly dimmed, and the machine shuddered. Cherie shoved it aside. Landing sideways, a glow arose from its underside, and it shot across the floor, sending sluagh feathers flying.

“Damn things levitate if they’re upright,” Grendel muttered, her white hair just visible over the tops of the six remaining, strange machines. “You should really go away now, Cherie.”

Cherie knocked five more of the Dwarfs over. Some came to life, some just fell to the side, lifeless and dark. At the last one, she hesitated. Grendel

was sitting on the ground, head bowed, legs stretched out on either side of one of the machines. It was poised between her legs, a long metal spike from its torso pinning her to a cabinet.

Somewhere, Jack shouted, “Guards, get up! I need your assistance!” Ember in the air swirled at his words. There were startled intakes of breath, and moans of, “Where am I?” and then boot steps, hesitant and then firm. The shrieks of wind and slough were joined by gunfire.

Once, in Somer, an arrow had gotten stuck in John Smith’s shoulder in a bow hunting incident, and he’d left it in rather than trying to pull it out before making his way to Nnenne. If Cherie pushed the robot-thing away, would Grendel bleed out completely and lose all her strength?

Grendel hissed. “Go away! Obey your grandmother!”

Cherie’s jaw got hard. Rolling up the remains of her sleeve, Cherie turned off the nerves in her wrist. Sitting beside the vampire, she thrust her exposed arm in Grendel’s face. She’d been prepared to convince Grendel to bite her, but Grendel’s fangs pierced her flesh before she could blink, or breathe, or speak.

It might have hurt if Cherie hadn’t turned off her nerves. She’d expected it to sap her strength, but it didn’t do that, either. She’d given blood before. It was like that, although not so neat; the sucking pulled at her skin. It would leave a scar. Cherie bit her lip, wondering just how much blood the vampire would take, and wondering when she should pull away.

Grendel’s hair hung between their two faces like a white curtain, and the vampire looked sickly and frail. Cherie’s eyes fell to the enormous stake and filled with furious tears. While Cherie had been with Jack, Grendel had been helplessly pinned and in pain. Cherie had never thought of herself as the type of girl who would forsake all her other friends for a man, and yet she had, in a spectacularly horrible fashion.

Grendel’s hands, weak as butterflies, fluttered up to the stake, and, not releasing her bite, tried to push it away, to absolutely no effect.

Raising her leg, Cherie gave a ferocious kick, pushing the Dwarf and the terrible stake away from Grendel. Its light didn't turn on, and Grendel gasped briefly, but her lips quickly dropped back to Cherie's wrist.

Cherie exhaled and glanced at the vampire's chest. Her eyes went wide; it was visibly closing. Clicking gears made her attention snap back to the robot, just in time to see it shoot toward them, stake out. Grendel cried out and released Cherie's wrist. Leaping to her feet, Cherie seized the machine by the stake and pitched it sideways. Its underside glowed, and it shot across the floor into another one of the devices, and they sparked, clicked, and whirred. Not that anyone noticed. Compared to the gunfire, shrieking wind, and angry sluagh, it was trivial.

Falling back beside Grendel, Cherie lifted her wrist again, but in her frustration, not high enough. Grendel's head sagged, but her fangs didn't meet Cherie's flesh. The vampire's arms hung limply at her side again, and her legs hadn't moved. Cherie's back hurt, but she was too mad at herself to stop the pain. A sob wracked through Cherie. "This is all my fault."

Grendel's voice was a sigh. "No, don't say ..."

Cherie lifted her wrist to the vampire's mouth, and Grendel's fangs were on her arm in an instant. Cherie's concentration had shifted, and it hurt ... and then it didn't. Without any effort on Cherie's part, the pain vanished. So had the pain in her back. She huffed a bitter laugh, remembering Nnenna saying, "Sometimes people didn't realize they'd been bitten by a vampire. I think their saliva might be an analgesic—that's a drug that relieves pain, dear." Another oddly specific bit of Nnenna wisdom that should have tipped Cherie off to just how well her grandmother knew vampires.

She huffed. Grendel's bite *should* hurt more; Cherie deserved it. It should drain her more. Grendel had slaughtered the men in the forest. She was just sipping from Cherie, and Cherie wished she'd take more, wished for unconsciousness. "I left you here, while I ..."

While she'd been kissing Jack. She'd gotten distracted and then trapped in a dream.

Grendel released her wrist and mumbled against Cherie's skin, "It was the curse, Granddaughter. You couldn't help it."

But couldn't she have? Cherie had been so entranced that she'd let Grendel—who was frightening and terrible, but loyal, and unselfish—be hurt. Cherie dropped her free hand to Grendel's and tried to squeeze, but the vampire cried out. Looking down, Cherie stifled a cry. Even in the dim light of the approaching dawn, she could see that the vampire's skin was badly burned. The lights on the Dwarfs must have been full spectrum. Full-spectrum lights could blind and burn vampires.

Afraid to touch it, even to remove pain, Cherie choked, "What have I done to you?"

Grendel paused. "Saved me."

Cherie shook her head and brushed back the vampire's hair. Grendel's face was burned too, and yet, watching carefully, Cherie thought she observed the blistered skin healing, becoming red, and then pink.

Grendel lifted her head and leaned back against the cabinet. "I don't think I should drink more."

"Can you move?" Cherie asked.

"I don't think so," Grendel said. "Remind me not to get staked by robot sunlamps ever again."

Cherie glanced uneasily around them. She could see the heads of the men firing weapons over the high laboratory tables and the jumble of machinery. They were soldiers of the Vampire War.

"I don't think it would be good if they found you." Cherie lifted her wrist. "Drink more."

Grendel winced and turned her head away. "Don't think that's a good idea. Maybe ... too much ... already ..."

A shadow appeared on the opposite side of the vampire, and a woman said, “Drink my blood, then.” The shadow dropped, and Cherie was staring at Jack ... if Jack had a female form. Pushing up the sleeve of a midnight blue coat with a swirling pattern of stars, the woman extended one pale white wrist to Grendel. Dipping her head to the offering, the vampire didn’t protest. The woman winced but didn’t pull away.

“I’ve seen you somewhere ... in a dream,” Cherie whispered. “Are you —?”

“The one who cursed the city to sleep,” the woman said.

“—Jack’s sister, Mizuki?”

Eyes downcast, the woman nodded. “That too.”

“You didn’t send the sluagh,” Cherie said, remembering what Jack had said. “That was the real curse.”

Mizuki’s lips pressed into a thin, quavering line, and her head bowed lower. “No, but it was my mother who did.”

Cherie shivered. To have the Queen as your mother ... or even your stepmother. Her gaze slipped over the corpses of the sluagh. Even she hadn’t realized how ruthless the Queen could be. Jack had known and had hidden Somer’s mirrors with snow to protect her town. She bit her lip, thinking of the last late snowstorm that had followed her entire journey. He might even have sent the snow.

There were shouts around them, more gunfire, and Jack’s voice. “Ember, I need more Ember!” A sluagh crashed to the ground at her feet, impaled on an icicle. Cherie gulped.

Mizuki’s voice startled Cherie from her musings. “My mother knew she couldn’t kill Jack, so when he defied her, as punishment, she tried to kill everyone else ... his troops ... civilians. It would be more than death, the sluagh would steal their souls. She did that all because of his defiance. If you know Jack, you know that the loss of so many innocents would be worse for him than the loss of his own life.”

Cherie remembered Jack describing how everyone would be safe if they stayed asleep, and his descriptions of the odds they'd face if they faced the Queen. She believed his sister. The death of his people would be worse for him than being a ghost.

Mizuki continued, "I tried, of course, to put the sluagh to sleep, but it didn't work ... maybe because they don't dream, and my Magick is tightly bound to dreaming ... so, I tried to protect the city *for* him. I wanted him to remain awake, with a core group of his troops ..." She glanced toward the window. "Like is happening now. I tied everyone to Jack; he alone could awaken the city ..." She said in a sing-song voice, "*When the danger is no longer great, the people of the city, the Storm King will wake.*"

Cherie's heart dropped, remembering what Jack had said in the dream. The Queen would come for the city. If Jack was right, the danger to the city was still great. That might have kept him from waking until after Cherie alerted him to the danger of vampires—specifically Grendel—that was imminent and ordered him to wake with his real name. She didn't want to point this out to Mizuki, though.

His sister looked over Grendel's head at Cherie. "I imagined they'd clear the sluagh pestilence block by block, and he'd wake others as they went. As people awoke, Jack's army would grow larger and more powerful. But I didn't know he was *here* in the lab. There was so little time—I could see the sluagh pouring from the clouds—and I panicked ... miscalculated, the spell was too strong. I put everyone to sleep, even Jack, by accident." She scrunched her eyes shut. "Or that is what I tell myself." Her body shuddered. "Because of me, the city has slept for nearly two hundred years."

Cherie could only gape at her. Two hundred years of helpless sleep, during which time the people here might have fallen prey to vampires—but then Mizuki and Jack had thought all vampires were dead. And perhaps enough were; Grendel and Cherie had not seen signs of others. Still, the

citizens of the city might have wanted a choice in whether to sleep or fight. Even without Magick, humans weren't helpless. They had minds, and in Somer, they had guns and silver bullets. Anyone who had slept had lost whatever friends or family they had beyond the city limits. No wonder non-Magickals hated Magickals. Cherie's fingers wound into fists. She was practically non-Magickal herself and had fallen under Mizuki's spell. Anger on behalf of all the weakly Magickal and non-Magickal beings rose within her.

Grendel lifted her head. "It's hard to make decisions in the heat of the moment. You both saved my city, and now I've drunk the blood of peace and dreams, so thank you."

Cherie blinked at the vampire. Grendel's skin was completely healed, and her hands, which had hung limply at her side, lifted in a blur to Mizuki's wrist and hungrily pulled it to her mouth once more. Mizuki winced but didn't pull away.

Cherie watched the vampire's lips move. Mizuki was giving what Cherie had also given willingly, but Grendel had drunk the blood of more than willing hosts, and Cherie hadn't done much to stop her. Cherie had never denied Grendel's company, had even welcomed it, because she needed Grendel, and because in the turmoil of events, she hadn't had time to formulate any other options.

Mizuki's intentions had been the best sort. Nnenne had a saying about best intentions paving the road to Hell, and Abaddon had said souls were compromised by difficult decisions. Cherie wasn't an authority; she couldn't judge Mizuki. She let her anger go, unclenched her fists, and, reaching across the vampire, extended a hand to the other woman. In that gesture, for the first time Cherie noticed the livid, crimson puncture marks on her own wrist.

Bootsteps sounded behind her. "Cherie, I ..." Jack called.

Cherie turned to him. Jack's eyes were wide and focused past her, his lips parted. The next instant, his hands were out, and a blade of ice was shooting toward Cherie. She screamed, but there was no sound: no sluagh, no gunfire, no screaming wind, and she was weightless. Jack and all his men were frozen in place, and the blade of ice hung in the air just over Cherie's shoulder—it would never have hurt her; she hadn't been its intended target. It had been meant for Grendel. It was then Cherie felt Grendel's hand on her own. The vampire reached her free hand up and flicked the ice blade with a single, bloodstained claw. The blade shattered into a thousand pieces without even a whisper. The humans in the room were still frozen and none-the-wiser. Grendel half rose, and Cherie tried to rise with her. But Grendel held up a hand for her to remain and smiled down at her beatifically. Grandmotherly. The vampire pointed the same bloody claw to Cherie's left, and Cherie followed with her eyes. There was Nnenne. The lines in her face were no longer etched deep, the hollows beneath her eyes were gone, and she glowed in every sense of the word. Giving Cherie that same beatific, grandmotherly smile, Nnenne reached forward and put a ghostly hand on Cherie's cheek. In the freeze-frame world, Cherie's tear slipped down her cheek in real time.

Grendel's hand left Cherie's, and she had weight again. Nnenne—or the ghost of her—was gone. Jack was shouting, "Cherie! Mizuki!" and running and falling to his knees, but Cherie was looking past him to Grendel, standing in the shattered northern window, arms out wide. With a wink, the vampire fell backward. Cherie jumped to her feet, twisting from Jack's grip, heedless of the soldiers, the sluagh, and the screaming gale rushing against her.

When she reached the window ledge and gazed down, Grendel was gone.



Jack's hand closed on empty air, and Cherie was past him. For a moment, he was paralyzed, confused, uncertain. Grendel had been bent over Cherie and Mizuki. Blood had been everywhere, and yet, Cherie was racing through the lab, agile and as swift as a doe, and it was as if he moved in slow motion or was hypnotized, his mind catching on how the sunlight sliding through the eastern window was making her hair glisten like gold. Regaining himself, he tried to follow, but Mizuki caught his arm. "Wait!"

Jack couldn't wait. Cherie was hanging over the ledge. Jerking from his sister's grasp, he raced to Cherie and pulled her back. He hadn't imagined the blood. It was everywhere: across her forehead, across her neck, and her wrist.

Cherie spun to him, golden curls whipping through the air. "You almost staked her!"

Jack stared. She'd been in his arms, for a while they'd been happy, and then he'd shielded her body with his as the sluagh attacked. She'd looked up in shock and confusion. Now her face was livid with fury.

"Grendel tried to kill you!" Jack protested. Just like he'd feared she would do from the first.

"I *gave* her my blood," Cherie shouted over the wind Jack had whipped up to hold the sluagh at bay.

Jack lifted his hand to the crimson streak across her brow, but Cherie jerked her head away before he could heal the evil-looking gash.

"Let me—" he began.

"You have blood all over you, Cherie," Mizuki said from behind Jack. "That's why he thinks Grendel tried to kill you."

Cherie's eyes widened.

Mizuki continued, "When you pushed back your hair, it got on your neck, and your forehead, and it's smeared across your wrist."

Cherie's eyes dropped to her wrist, and Jack's followed. What he'd thought was a long gash was a long smear, but in that swathe of crimson

were deep angry punctures.

Cherie's brows knit together, and she glared up at him. "I gave her my wrist."

Holding out his hands, Jack said, "Let me heal them."

For a moment, the hard lines in her features softened, but then Cherie pressed her lips together. "No, I'll be fine."

It was as if she'd slapped him. Jack's stomach fell.

Cherie turned away.

"Sluagh coming!" The shout came from Ash, raising a rifle and dashing to the window. Which was when Jack realized the gale he'd whipped up was fading to only a breeze. Guards from every corner of the building opened fire again.

"Cherie," Jack began, and was cut off by a ferocious shriek of a sluagh. He touched her arm. "I can't talk right now, but Mizuki can help you." He cast a pleading look in his sister's direction.

"Come with me, Cherie," said Mizuki, coming to his rescue.

Someone had lined up some spare rifles on a lab table, and Cherie's eyes fell on them; she could shoot, she was from Somer. How well, he wasn't sure. She never talked about it enthusiastically. Still, for a moment, he thought she was going to demand to stay. But then, clutching her wrist, she said, "I should get these bandaged up."

Mizuki put a hand to her shoulder.

Jack said, "The building, at least, is secure."

Nodding, Mizuki guided Cherie toward the door. Without thinking, Jack stroked Cherie's back as she went by. She gave no sign she'd noticed. As the two passed where Grendel had been, Cherie bent and retrieved the sword she'd acquired on her journey. It sparkled with reflected sunlight and ambient Ember. Jack couldn't marvel on it—his attention was seized by the crimson droplets falling from Mizuki's wrist. Grendel was old, which made

her strong, and she'd just drunk the blood of one very powerful Magickal, which would make her stronger.

A rifle was thrust into his hands.

"Who was the new girl?" Ash asked. "She's Magickal, yeah?"

"Cherie, yes, she's Magickal. She broke the curse," Jack answered lamely, closing his eyes and willing a whirlwind outside.

"How?" Ash asked over the revived screeching of the wind.

"By traveling through Fairy, through Hell, and then some," Jack responded. She'd picked up the sword *somewhere*. From the Gods of Olympus or their creatures?

Ash's whistle was pitched high enough to be heard over the wind. "And she made it past the sluagh! She must be as strong as you and Mizuki."

For the last dozen and some odd years, Jack, and every citizen of Somer, if they mentioned Cherie being Magickal, would add automatically, "but Cherie's Magick is weak." Despite the revelations of the last few days—the connection to Somer that severed with Cherie's vanishing, the relative ease he'd had in finding her when he hadn't been able to find Cillian—Jack still almost added that "not very Magickal" disclaimer. The sword had sparkled with more ambient Ember than Cherie, but non-Magickal Ash didn't depend on Ember to perceive Magick, and he had just summed up in seconds what had taken Jack more than a decade to understand.

"Her Magick might be stronger than mine or Mizuki's," Jack said.



"I saw you," Cherie said to Mizuki as they trod down the unmarked, windowless hallway. "In the first dream with Jack."

Walking beside Cherie, footsteps so soft they lent a surreality to the moment, Mizuki said, "Yes, it was I who enabled you to speak to him. Most

people can't cross dreams. I pushed you into Jack's dream, so you were able to wake him up."

Cherie's skin heated, and she licked her lips nervously. "You were with me the second time?"

"Oh, no, I couldn't manage it. I wanted to be. I wanted to explain to you what was happening. I was afraid without me there, you wouldn't realize it was a dream."

Cherie smiled wryly. "I didn't realize it at first."

Mizuki opened a plain white door, and they entered a windowless room where Ember lights sparkled on without any encouragement. A woman wearing a lab coat lay asleep at a desk, and the walls were lined with cabinets.

Mizuki went over to one and retrieved some bandages. "I don't know first aid Magick like Jack."

"It's no problem," said Cherie. Nnenna could have healed such things in the same way Jack could, but Nnenna hadn't always been available for such minor ailments, and Cherie could care for them in the conventional sense. She went to the sink. "We should wash—" In the mirror above the sink she caught sight of her reflection, and restrained a gasp. If anything, Mizuki had downplayed the extent of the mess Cherie was—there was blood on her forehead, on her neck, on her cheek, and in her hair. The hurt look on Jack's face when she'd rebuffed his offer of help suddenly replayed in Cherie's mind.

"Right," said Mizuki, joining her. Cherie turned on the water and dipped her wrists in the flow.

"How did you wake him?" Mizuki asked.

Cherie considered, watching the blood from her wrists flow down the drain. "I asked him for his real names, got them, and then told him to wake up using all those names. I also warned him about the threat posed by Gren

—vampires. Not sure which worked.” The apple was just an apple, and she wasn’t sure the kissing involved meant anything.

Mizuki put her own wrist beneath the spigot. “We were always taught that the power of names was just superstition. I was desperate enough to try anyway. It didn’t work for me.” She glanced at Cherie. “Perhaps some of the Magick is in who says the words, and the bond between the speaker and the subject?”

Cherie didn’t meet her eyes. She remembered Jack declaring, “I’m yours.” Such words would give the Fae your life no matter the “relation.” Cherie wasn’t a Fae. She wasn’t even very Magickal.

She watched the water in the sink turn clear. Solien could have told her all the names from the beginning, but hadn’t, and she understood why. She’d needed to learn them herself from Jack for them to be the most effective.

“I’ve long wondered what held him back,” Mizuki said. “I think he must have had a mental block.”

Grabbing a paper towel, Cherie wiped the worst of the blood from her neck. It hadn’t just been his names. “He wanted to keep everyone safe.”

Mizuki nodded. “The Queen will be angry when the city awakens. Jack disagreed with some of her plans.”

“Her plans to invade Fairy,” Cherie said.

Mizuki nodded. “He didn’t even disagree with her *publicly*. Just the prospect of insubordination was enough for her to retaliate.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “She’ll strike again. She didn’t know last time I was here. I lied and told her I was on my way south ...” She gulped audibly. “Still, I think she will strike ... she’ll be too angry ... She’ll strike even if she knows I’m alive.” Taking a deep breath, Mizuki added, “But now we have you among our city Magickals—there are others here; you’ll meet them as they awaken. None as powerful as us maybe, but still terribly useful and not ...” She winced. “Not terrible in other ways.”

Shaking water from her hands with too much force, Cherie shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. Jack tried to kill Grendel. I won’t stay if Grendel can’t.” She attached the bandages over her punctured wrist, and then, feeling as though her legs would give out, braced her hands against the counter. Remembering lying in Jack’s arms, she thought she might cry. His promise, “I’m yours,” and a thousand vague and hazy dreams of a future with him that long ago became lodged in her heart despite their impossibility. For a moment, they had seemed possible. But Nnenna always said you couldn’t sacrifice your morals for your dreams, that led to losing both. Cherie wasn’t sure if Nnenna was right, and yet, it was the only star she had to go by.

Affixing her own bandages, Mizuki said bitterly, “He was willing to work with the Old Magickals, but not the vampires.”

Cherie blinked. Hadn’t Jack once said that his friend Nevin had been engaged to his sister before he was “killed by vampires”? Her lips pressed together. What an evasion that had been. Nevin had been killed and turned, and Jack had killed ruthlessly and remorselessly ... or had it been remorseless? Jack still dreamed of Nevin. Was it more accurate to say he was haunted by Nevin? She remembered the nameless vampire from their shared dream, stepping over corpses, with the shallow excuse of “I was so hungry.” Jack was haunted by more than one vampire.

“They can be terrible,” Cherie murmured. Even Nnenna said they could be vicious, that all the tales of their malevolence were real.

“So can Magickals,” Mizuki protested. “Some are kind; some, like my mother, curse.”

For a moment, the only sound was the water running in the sink. They were so deep within the building, there wasn’t even the crack of guns or the moan of the wind.

Cherie swallowed. There was only one question that mattered. “Will Jack hurt Grendel?”

“I don’t know,” said Mizuki.

Cherie turned toward the door. “Then I must find her.”

Mizuki caught her arm. “You can’t go anywhere until the slugh are destroyed, but neither can Jack.”

Cherie met her eyes.

Mizuki conceded. “Well, he could, but he won’t. The slugh must be dealt with first. Anyway, Grendel can’t go anywhere right now, either. She will have gone to ground for the day.”

Cherie put her hand on top of Mizuki’s. “If Jack finds her before I do, would he kill her as part of ‘securing the city’?”

Mizuki’s shoulders fell. “I think almost everyone will push him to. Sympathizers like me are rare.”

Cherie gently detached her hand. “I don’t think his views on vampires have changed.”

Mizuki bit her lip. “But Grendel knows she’s in danger here. Perhaps she’ll leave?”

“No, she’ll stay to see that I’m safe,” Cherie replied, not even having to think about it. How much easier it would be if Grendel would run; but would Cherie really want to stay with a Jack who would kill the vampire? She would not.

“Maybe ...” Mizuki tilted her head. “Maybe if you just asked him, he wouldn’t?”

Cherie stared at her.

Mizuki shrugged. “You convinced him to wake up. Maybe you can convince him to grant her an exemption?”

Ultimately, Cherie had woken Jack by pointing out how dangerous vampires running amok in a city of sleepers would be. Cherie was too tired to raise the point.

Echoing Cherie’s exhaustion, Mizuki yawned behind her hand. “In the meantime, we should sleep.” She inclined her head to a door. “There are

beds in the back.”

Cherie didn’t move. “I need to find Grendel before Jack does. I have to warn her before I try to get Jack to exempt her.”

Mizuki yawned again. “Excuse me, pushing you into Jack’s dream was hard. If you let me sleep, I’ll be able to find Grendel for you.”

“Through mirrors?” Cherie whispered. Like the Queen ... like Jack?

Mizuki lifted an eyebrow. “No need for that. Even vampires dream.”

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CHAPTER 21



Jack's dreams were haunted by vampires: Nevin and Bartleby, the mysterious Andrew, a thousand anonymous faces, and Grendel. But eventually, those dreams were supplanted by deep and blissfully dreamless sleep.

He awoke in semi-darkness, at first not sure if he was in another dream or the real world. But then he heard boot steps and shouts in the hallway, even his name, "Major DeWitt" and his nickname, "The Storm King," in too many voices and combinations for him to have conjured them all. His imagination, he'd been forced to recognize since the dream with Cherie, wasn't that awe-inspiring.

He fell to sleep again. And woke again. He had to talk to Cherie. They'd fought the sluagh for nearly four days—three days in which he'd barely slept. You'd think that after two centuries of slumber, the citizens of Chicago wouldn't need to sleep for a few years, at least. But it was not so. In that time, he'd seen her only a few minutes in passing. He'd tried to talk to her, even though he wasn't sure what he would say. *I'm sorry I came on strong in a dream.* That would be a lie. *Thank you for alerting me to a resurgent vampire threat that makes slumber a greater threat than waking me.* That would be the truth. It would also be unsatisfying.

Fortunately—or unfortunately—every time he'd found his way to her over the past few days, something had happened—they'd run out of supplies, and he'd had to organize expeditions for food, ammo, and medical supplies. They'd awoken someone in the midst of a medical emergency without the means to aid them and needed an expedition to a hospital for them and for mounting injuries. During all of his brief meetings with Cherie, he'd found her administering first aid of the mundane kind to the injured. Once she'd turned him away while setting a bone, another time while Magicking away the pain of a man in surgery when they'd run out of anesthesia.

And then a second wave of sluagh had emerged from the coal tunnels that ran beneath the city—somehow they'd gotten stuck there in the past two hundred years. Another grim flock had been caught in freight cars. More in a theater. Each new wave had caused a new wave of panic. There might still be more pockets of the soul-stealing vermin, but Jack had awoken enough troops and enough Magickals that he'd finally had a chance to sleep. He'd tried to talk to Cherie before his nap, but she had been sleeping. It had seemed wrong to wake her, and he'd been falling over exhausted, only having grabbed a total of four hours of sleep since his initial waking.

Running a hand through his hair, he sat up on a cot in what had formerly been a copy room, though the copiers were long gone. It was windowless; no sudden pocket of sluagh could make a surprise visit. The door wasn't shut all the way, and a crack of light shone through. Ash was on another cot closer to the door. Jack's friend was awake and sliding on his armor. "Hey, Jack," he said with a nod.

Jack threw his legs over the bed and fumbled for his armor. "Hey." He noted that the ambient Ember in the air was more prevalent than he'd ever remembered it being in Chicago. Cherie's Magick was here. He lifted his

hand and watched the particles slip around his spread fingers. He still didn't know precisely what her Magick was.

"What are you doing?" Ash asked. As a non-Magickal, he wouldn't recognize the rise in Ember without instruments. Before Jack could explain, light poured through the doorway, and he and Ash threw their arms up to shield their eyes.

The doorway was empty.

"What?" said Ash.

Before Jack's heart rate had a chance to elevate, a tiny voice piped up from the floor. "Major, you're awake!"

"Nimm!" Jack exclaimed, eyes adjusting to the light. "I'm glad to see you. Any chance you know where Cherie is?"

Scurrying across the floor, the rat rose to his hind paws. "Miss Cherie, the one who woke us all up?"

Jack nodded.

Nimm ran a paw over his whiskers. "Oh, no need to worry, sir, Miss Cherie is with your sister."

Shoving a foot into a boot, Jack sighed with relief. Trust Nimm and his network to know something like that.

Straightening his bow tie, Nimm said, "I am so glad you are awake, sir. You slept so long I was beginning to fret."

"How long have we been asleep, Nimm?" Ash asked, shrugging on the top portion of his own armor.

Jack put on his own boot, wincing, preparing to hear as long as four, or six, or even eight hours.

"Oh, I should say about twenty-four hours, sirs," Nimm replied.

Ash leapt from the cot. "What?"

Jack stared, dumbfounded, at the rat.

Nimm hopped on all fours and ran around in a circle. "The human physician assured me that after such a long time awake, and under such

duress, that such an extended sleep was not dangerous. Oh, forgive me, sirs! Forgive me.”

Shrugging on his last piece of armor, Jack picked up the overexcited rat. “Nimm, we’re not angry with you. But where are Mizuki and Cherie?”

“Oh, well, I don’t really know, sir. They left the tower, but since they were together, and both are Magickal, and the sluagh are mostly gone besides, no one—”

“Guards, bring me a mirror!” Jack shouted, striding toward the door.

A guard shouted, “Yes, sir,” and there was the sound of fast, retreating footsteps.

Nimm chirped. “They went for a walk ... I heard them mentioning something about a family member of Miss Cherie ... her grandmother ...”

“Grendel,” Jack muttered. Ash stepped in front of him, blocking the door.

Attempting to step around him, Jack said, “We have to get to them before—”

Shutting the door and blocking Jack’s path, Ash flipped on a light switch. “This doesn’t have anything to do with the vampire in the lab?”

Jack reeled back. “You saw her.”

Squeaking, Nimm leaped from Jack’s hand, scampered up Ash’s shoulder, and cowered behind Ash’s neck. “Vampire?”

Ash’s eyes narrowed. “No, but my Dwarfs had been activated. There were other signs.”

Jack remembered the blood on Cherie and Mizuki's bleeding wrists. If anyone suspected that Mizuki and Cherie gave blood willingly to a vampire, they would be shunned, at best. At worst ... his free hand clenched. He wouldn’t let “worst” happen.

“It’s a long story,” Jack said.

Nimm peeked from behind Ash’s neck. “It’s hours before sunset. I think you have time to tell us.”

Jack backed up. He could, of course, escape. His fist unclenched, and the static of budding lightning bolts buzzed at his fingertips. But then who would he be? Nimm and Ash were both sharp, both were loyal. They trusted him with their lives, even now by standing in his way. He had to trust them with Cherie's and Mizuki's lives.

Retreating, he didn't so much sit down as fall back down onto the bed. "So, let me tell you about the town of Somer, Cherie, and Grendel, the vampire that—" he shrugged helplessly, "—helped her rescue us."

When they left the copy room, there was a good hour and a half until sunset. Jack was resolved. He had discovered Cherie and Mizuki's relative location in a mirror. Nimm's nose would be able to track them when they got closer. He—they—had a plan for Grendel at least, but not Cherie.

"You're not too drained for this?" Ash asked him as they waited for the elevator.

"No," Jack replied, puzzled by the question. He'd just slept for over twenty hours. "Why?"

Ash's eyes slid to Nimm, and the rat looked back at the engineer. Grooming his whiskers, Nimm coughed. "No reason."

Before he could ask, the elevator doors opened, revealing one of the civilian scientists. "Doctor, Major, sir!" he exclaimed. "There's a cloud coming from the south!"

"More sluagh?" squeaked Nimm.

The man's eyes were wide. "No! Locusts!"

... And Jack knew all his plans were shot to Hell ... probably quite literally.



The street in Chicago's Little Italy was lined with trees, tiny, neat lawns, and stately buildings, three to four stories tall, all seemingly built of the

same, heavy, gray stone. The day was warm, and Cherie had thrown her recovered winter coat over her arm. They'd walked from the tower, and although it hadn't been far as the crow flew, it had taken a while. They'd stopped at the Magickal forest at Halstead and Harrison, where Cherie had returned Spiros's sword.

The sun had set behind the buildings, but there was still a warm glow to the sky. The warmth and the light were incongruous with the naked trees, the absence of human life, birds, and insects.

Beside Cherie, Mizuki sighed. "I created that spell so hastily I gave Jack control of waking up *everyone* and *everything*. It was so stupid of me."

"Hasty of you," Cherie suggested diplomatically. She was awed and intimidated by Mizuki's power. Even the plants were asleep, hence their lack of buds on the trees so late in the season.

"It might be for the best that this neighborhood is still asleep," Mizuki said. "A vampire in their midst would terrify the neighbors."

"Mmm ..." Cherie replied, flexing her right hand. The empty streets were eerie, and she found herself missing Spiros's blade. "You're sure this is the right block?" She kept expecting to see a sluagh or another monster.

"She's on this block somewhere," Mizuki said. "Though I'm unsure of which house."

Cherie paced a few nervous steps. She'd spent the past few days with Chicago's wounded, and she'd come to a few conclusions. The most important of which was that Grendel could not stay here. The Vampire War was yesterday for these people. Everyone, it seemed, knew someone who had been slaughtered. On waking, the most common question was, "Did the Vampires send the sluagh?" Here, hatred of vampires was *personal*.

If Grendel couldn't stay, she couldn't stay, either.

Scanning the street and its more than twenty buildings, each with more than one dwelling, Cherie broke down and shouted, "Grandmother!"

The wind ruffled through the trees, making naked branches snap.

“Grandmother!” Cherie called again. This time louder, as she would in Somer when seeking someone in the woods.

“Granddaughter?” The word, called from above, made Cherie jump. Grendel was leaning out of a bay window three stories above them. She’d tied her white hair back into a neat bun and exchanged her rags for a soft pink blouse that gave a healthy glow to her skin. She no longer looked ancient, more like a healthy woman in her late sixties or early seventies, and like an archetypical grandmother. “How did you two find me?”

“Magick, Grandmother,” Cherie said.

Rolling her eyes, Grendel muttered, “Figures.”

It was so curmudgeonly, it made Cherie smile despite herself. But only for a moment. “Jack will find you, too, and I’m not sure what he will do. I had to reach you first.”

“Oh, I see.” Grendel looked between Cherie and Mizuki. “Would you like some tea?” Before Cherie could respond, Grendel declared, “We’ll take the back stairs to the kitchen!” Cherie hadn’t even blinked before the vampire emerged from a narrow, worn, brick-paved alley that ran between two of the stately buildings. “Right this way!” the vampire declared with a fangy smile, beckoning Mizuki and Cherie to follow her.

“It might be dangerous for us to stay, Grandmother,” Cherie said, skipping to catch up.

Pausing at an open, outdoor stairway, Grendel turned back, eyes glowing faintly. “For you or me?”

“You,” said Cherie.

Nodding, Grendel continued on again. “In that case, tea first.”

Cherie tried to protest; she didn’t want to stay another moment, she didn’t want to get settled and feel comfortable or even think about staying. Not that she knew where she’d go—Somer was impossible—or how she’d get there. Before she could express any of that, or even take a breath,

Grendel had climbed up three flights of stairs and was waving to them from an open door. The next instant, she'd disappeared.

Cherie glanced at Mizuki. The other woman shrugged. With nothing else to be done, they ascended the stairs.

A few minutes later, Mizuki and Cherie entered a kitchen filled with ancient appliances of black glass and steel. The sharp acrid scent of a match hung in the air. Sitting on the brushed steel eye of the stove was a tea kettle, a burner alight beneath it. Opposite the kitchen was a dining room and a pile of laundry folded neatly on the table.

Grendel set a box of matches down on the counter. Gazing at the tea kettle with a look of consternation, she commented, "The igniter doesn't work for some reason."

Cherie had no time to explain post-Change electrical failures, because Mizuki whispered, "You shouldn't be able to enter a human house without invitation."

Grendel cast her a quizzical look, and Cherie replied, "Grendel was able to easily slip into the houses of the sleeping."

Mizuki put a finger to her chin. And then, wincing, declared, "Oh, the '*sleep as of death*' line in my spell. It kept us safe from sluagh—"

"But it will not work against vampires," Grendel replied, walking assuredly over to a cabinet and retrieving some mugs. Almost shyly, she said, "However, I would have been able to enter this home without invitation. The key to the back entrance was under one of the bricks in the alley, and well, it's mine." She looked around sadly. "My children should have sold it."

Noticing the dust in the air and on the floors for the first time, Cherie glanced down the hallway and saw other rooms and furniture covered in sheets. She looked more carefully at the "fresh laundry" on the table. As neatly folded as it was, it was filthy; it was furniture coverings, hastily removed and folded.

Grendel ripped open a silvery package and put tea packets in each of the mugs. “I hope you don’t mind white tea, no milk.” She lifted the silvery package to her eyes. “My son assured me that these packets can maintain freshness for a thousand years in complete vacuum. They developed it for one of the space programs.”

Cherie’s mind stuttered on the words “space programs.”

Mizuki sighed. “There are no space programs anymore.” There was real sadness in her voice, and Cherie remembered that once upon a time, before the Change, humans had been aiming for the stars.

“Ah,” said Grendel. “That is too bad.” She poured water into the mugs. Grendel smiled, lips closed, grandmotherly again. “We’ll have our tea in the parlor. I like the view better there this time of year.”

“Grandmother,” Cherie said, “I think you should be more concerned about being found.”

Grendel shrugged. “I can always run faster than you can.” But then she frowned and waved a clawed hand. “Or do you want to leave? Do you have to go back to Fairy for your people? Will Jack keep you from that?”

“No,” said Cherie, knowing it was so, just as she knew Grendel wouldn’t leave Chicago without saying goodbye.

Grendel tilted her head. “Well, then, we’ll wait to see if he will kill me —”

“He *already* tried to kill you,” Cherie protested. “How can you give him another chance?”

“You were covered in blood. It’s completely understandable, as are his natural suspicions.” Grendel handed out the mugs. “After we rescue the people of Somer, what then?”

Cherie’s shoulders fell. Could she go to Maine, or would the Queen be there? Her relatives wouldn’t turn her in, but a neighbor who didn’t know her ... possibly. Actually, very likely. Grendel couldn’t go to Maine, either.

Maybe, *maybe*, they could go to Canada. Grendel wouldn't be welcome there, though. No matter where they went, Grendel would be hunted.

Gazing at Cherie, Grendel frowned and nodded. "As I suspected. Come." Waving a hand, she led them down a hallway, and then stopped before a pair of glass double doors, through which was another room with furniture draped by sheets. Pausing, Grendel said, "Mizuki, if I detected an interest in the space programs, you might find this room interesting. It's our study, and it is packed with mementos from NASA and other private ventures. You're welcome to have a look." The vampire cleared her throat. "I'm ... not hungry ... Cherie is safe with me."

Cherie hadn't realized how downcast Mizuki had been until her features brightened at the invitation. "Yes, I'd like that very much," she said and left them without a backward glance.

Minutes later, Grendel and Cherie were sitting at opposite ends of a couch situated in a beautiful bay window. "If you tell me all that happened, would that help you decide what to do?" Grendel asked before taking a slow sip of tea.

It was something Nnenna would say, and it was said in exactly the same tone Nnenna would use—though Grendel's nails stood out in stark relief on her mug in the deepening shadows. Cherie began to speak, her voice hushed. "I have to go get the people of Somer tonight, but after that ... I don't know what to do." She almost smiled—she didn't mean about Jack—and that was almost funny. He'd occupied so much of her thoughts for so long. She'd seen him lead an army against the sluagh, seen him wiping flocks of sluagh from the sky with a wave of his arm, shoot lightning from his *hands*, and attempt to drive a stake of ice through Grendel's heart. The relationship she had with him was never real; it had always been a dream. And from the short time she'd spent here, she knew the waking people of Chicago came from a very different world, one that she wasn't sure she'd fit

in. She was worried about what to do for the rest of her life and about Grendel's unlife.

She told it all to Grendel.

The sky had been dark for hours, and Grendel was patting Cherie's hand reassuringly when Cherie heard a thunderous sound below. It was a sound she'd become accustomed to a lot during the past few days in Chicago's tower.

The sound of boots pounding up stairs.



At the top of the stairs of the three-flat, Ash flattened himself against the wall and raised a pistol. Just as they'd planned. The pistol had a full-spectrum light mounted on the barrel and could incapacitate a vampire.

On his shoulder, Nimm's whiskers trembled. "This is it! I smell a vampire, Miss Cherie, and Miss Mizuki."

Taking a deep breath, Jack approached the heavy wooden entranceway. They'd cased the building and noticed that the back door that opened to the fire escape was ajar. He was hoping coming to the front door was a better decision. He raised his hand, reminded himself Mizuki wouldn't let Grendel hurt anyone, and knocked. Just as they'd planned.

Jack willed the electricity that wanted to jump from his fingers to still. From inside the unit came the sound of swift, soft footfalls and then silence. The silence set Jack's mind on uncomfortable trajectories.

"You're actually going to knock?" Ash had asked him when they'd planned this, back in the copy room.

"You don't think I should?" Jack had replied.

"No, I think you should ... I'm just surprised that *you* think it is a good idea," Ash had replied, attaching the full-spectrum beam to his pistol.

Jack blinked. “Why?” In the hallway beyond the copy room, boot steps echoed.

Ash exchanged a glance with Nimm. The rat paused his nervous “nesting”—ripping up bits of copy paper into tiny little pieces and dropping them in a box lid he’d situated himself in. The rat squeaked. “Because it is much more in character for you to blow the door down. You’ve been ... err ... different since you’ve been back.”

“Kind of surprised you didn’t blow down the door and us with it a few minutes ago,” Ash added, referring to when they’d first woken, and Jack had first wanted to find Cherie. Ash’s expression wavered somewhere between wary and defiant.

“How am I different?” Jack asked.

“You’re calmer,” Nimm replied.

“Not so stormy.” Ash smirked, and Jack was certain there was wariness in his friend’s features, as though Ash was waiting for Jack to snap at any moment. Because Jack had been stormy before, hadn’t he? His nickname was about more than literal storms.

The rattle of the three-flat’s doorknob snapped Jack’s attention back to the present. There was a click, and the door opened. His sister stood within the threshold, a candle in her hand, darkness beyond. Her eyes went immediately to Ashwin. “Are you going to kill Grendel?” she demanded.

“That wasn’t what we hoped,” Jack said.

Nimm squeaked. “But we had to be prepared. If you know ...” He rubbed his nose.

Ashwin grunted. “If you were dinner.”

Mizuki narrowed her eyes at Jack.

Refusing to be repentant, Jack glared right back.

Sniffing the air, Nimm whispered, “I don’t smell any *human* blood.”

Grendel’s voice came from the shadows behind Mizuki. “Oh, let them in.”

Stamping a foot, Mizuki scowled. “Fine, but put the gun away, Ashwin. She doesn’t bite.”

Ashwin began to lower the pistol.

In the darkness, Grendel coughed. “That’s not technically true ...”

Giving Jack a worried look, Ashwin raised his pistol again.

“Grandmother, stop it! You won’t bite them,” Cherie admonished.

Jack’s heart leaped at her voice, and he found himself squinting into the dim to try to see her.

“At least not if they didn’t ask me to,” Grendel replied.

Ashwin blinked rapidly, Nimm’s whiskers twitched, and sparks threatened to leap from Jack’s fingers.

Cherie huffed. “Grandmother, why are you being difficult?”

“I am trying to be honest!” Grendel protested. “If I say I don’t bite, and then my fangs come out, they won’t trust me.”

The pistol sagged in Ashwin’s hands. His brow furrowed, he looked into the dark, and then he looked at Jack.

“Grendel is always like this,” Jack said. “I still haven’t decided if it makes me trust her more or less.”

“You shouldn’t trust me!” Grendel said.

Mizuki’s lips pursed.

“Grandmother.” Cherie sighed.

“Let them in,” said Grendel.

Shaking her head, Mizuki rolled her eyes. “Fine, but put the gun away, Ash.”

“He can leave it out if it makes him feel more comfortable, dear,” Grendel said.

Pulling back from the doorway, Mizuki retorted, “It’s not polite.”

The two began to bicker, but Jack barely paid attention. In two long strides, he was into the house and through the small foyer to the room beyond. He paused at the entrance to a room, lit by candles, most of the

furniture covered by sheets. The place smelled like dust. He didn't see Grendel, just a large plush chair in the direction of her voice. He only glanced at it. His attention was caught by Cherie. Standing with her arms crossed in front of her, the air around her didn't crackle with Ember, but Ember flowed around her as a soft diffuse halo ... a halo that Jack knew extended for miles. At the moment, she was wearing worn winter boots, and clothes he recognized instantly as belonging to his sister—they were too short in the arms and legs and too snug in the hips and at her breasts. Despite the poverty of her attire, she stood straight and tall, her chin defiantly high, and she looked in that moment to Jack like a Queen. The air between them crackled with something that wasn't Magick. He'd felt chemistry in their dreams they'd shared. In the frenzy of the last few days, he'd wondered if he'd imagined it. Evidently not. Everything he had planned to say fled from him.

Raising an eyebrow, Cherie asked, "Do you plan to chase her out of the city?"

Jack swallowed.

"It might not be politically possible for me to stay!" Grendel said, her voice coming from behind the chair.

It might be political suicide. Jack exhaled. "No, that wasn't what we planned."

Cherie's arms unwound, her lips parted, and for the first time since he'd entered, she looked uncertain.

At Jack's side, Ashwin cleared his throat. "Um ... I am putting my pistol away, ma'am."

"Finally," muttered Mizuki.

Glowing eyes, framed by a head of silver hair, appeared behind the chair.

"You look old," Ashwin gasped.

"Charming," said Mizuki.

“Even I know better than to say that to a lady—even if she is a vampire,” hissed Nimm.

Bowing slightly, Ashwin coughed. “I only mean, in the lab you moved so quickly, I assumed you were an old vampire, and they look young, so I’m ... confused?” he finished weakly.

“Grendel was asleep for a long time,” Cherie said to Ashwin and Nimm. “We think since the Change—your time.” Her voice was gentle, yet sure, and pitch perfect for a tense situation.

“Oh,” said Ashwin.

“You most likely have more in common with her than you do with me,” Cherie added, her eyes firmly on Jack’s. He found his heart sinking, though it shouldn’t. It was an honest observation.

“Well, nice to meet you, ma’am,” Ashwin said. Taking a deep breath, he extended a hand. Grendel blinked at it from behind the chair. And then with vampiric speed, she was in front of Ash, hand extended. “Nice to meet you, too—”

Nimm shrieked, “Murderer! Murderer!”

In a flash, Grendel was behind the chair again. Ash’s hand went to his pistol. Cherie and Mizuki gaped.

Dancing on Ash’s shoulder, Nimm screamed, “You drained three rats this very evening! I smelled their blood before and blamed a cat or a coyote, but it was *you*!”

“I can’t eat rats?” Grendel’s voice trembled from behind the chair.

She sounded so frightened that, God help him, Jack had pity on a vampire. “You can eat rats,” Jack grumbled, shooting a glare at Nimm.

Plucking Nimm from his shoulder, Ash pointed a finger at the squirming rodent. “You asked Jack and me to kill a rat for you this afternoon.”

Nimm sniffed. “It was a mouse, and it attacked me! *Vicious* creature.”

“I told you not to make advances on the cat,” Jack said, not looking at the rat, but at the dawning look of comprehension on Cherie’s face.

“But Nefertiti is the most exquisite female of any species that I’ve ever encountered,” Nimm squeaked. “I have no idea what she sees in that *lesser* rodent.”

Cherie’s eyes went wide.

Jack said, “Yes, they’re here.”

Her gaze swept to the window, and he corrected himself. “I mean they’re at the tower. Perfectly safe. Solien let them through, and then Abaddon let them cross through his domain as a favor to Solien for helping end the curse—something about a quota? We escorted them the rest of the way, and then just the three of us came here.” It was part of what had taken him so long to arrive. There was another thing. “And Geoff, Cillian, Annette, Chance, and Lucky are in the city, too.”

“How?” Cherie asked, her head tilted. “And Annette too?”

“Annette met Geoff and Cillian at the edge of Somer with her bags packed and joined them. They got sidetracked on their way to the border by the Queen’s agents. They wound up in Michigan.” Jack glanced at his sister. “Apparently, they had dreams telling them to come to Chicago ... as did a ferryman there.”

Mizuki beamed. “It worked!”

Cherie put a hand to her mouth, but he could see the wondering smile behind it. He found himself smiling in return, though of course he shouldn’t. They were all going from the frying pan into the fire. Still, it was good to see Cherie happy.

Grendel hadn’t emerged from behind the chair, and Jack remembered how Cherie’s friends had reacted to the vampire’s presence in Fairy.

“We weren’t planning on announcing your whereabouts immediately, Grendel,” Jack said.

The vampire poked her head out again. Jack noted, for all her talk of honesty, Grendel didn't want her location being known. As well she shouldn't. By day, a child could kill her. He also noted that Cherie had begun to look worried—maybe realizing Somer's inhabitants' fear of the vampire. He wanted to reach out to her but snapped his hands behind his back and continued with the rest of The Plan. "The Queen is going to attack again. We need allies."

Back in the copy room, when Jack had first told Cherie and Grendel's story to Nimm and Ash, they had been surprisingly open to not staking Grendel.

When Jack had pointed out that no one had ever succeeded in forging peace with vampires, Ash had countered, "Whenever a vampire suggested that, they were slaughtered by the other vampires." Ash had been sitting on the copy room floor, back to the door. Voice contemplative, gaze on his boots, the technomage creator of the vampire-destroying Dwarf force, added, "Now that most of the vampires are dead, maybe it can be different ... and if we have vampires on our side—"

"—it might tip the scales in the upcoming war!" Nimm chirped from his box top resting place, throwing shredded copy paper into the air like confetti. "If we don't do something, I'm going to wind up cat food, and you, my friends ..." His voice broke into a dismal squeak, and he began chewing on the box.

"The vampire's dangerous," Jack pointed out.

"So are Magickals," Ash replied, wiping copy paper shreds from his knee. He gave Jack the same wry smirk he'd given before.

"It's a huge political risk for one vampire," Jack said as his final defense.

Nimm sniffed. "Vampires are like rats. If there is one, there are more. Maybe not in Chicago ... vampires I mean, there are plenty of rats ... but if

the others hear that vampires aren't being staked in our city, they might come to us. They might fight for us."

"Do you want to stake her?" Ash asked, raising his eyes to Jack, who was still sitting on the cot, elbows on his knees. Jack put his head in his hands. "Yes." Because if he staked her, he'd never have to question if what he'd done to Nevin was wrong. "No." Because if he didn't give a creature that had saved Cherie and his city a chance at redemption, wasn't it the same as being guilty of Nevin's murder?

In the third story of the three-flat, Jack took a deep breath and said again, "We need allies." Grendel wasn't being given unconditional amnesty. She needed to understand that.

Lifting her chin, Grendel declared, "I stand with Cherie."

Not on the side of truth or freedom, not with the city, and not with him. With Cherie. It occurred to Jack, that with Grendel at her side, even if the worst befell the city, Cherie might escape. "That's good enough."

Grendel glanced at Nimm and back to Jack. "I *can* eat rats?"

"You can eat rats," Jack said, carefully avoiding the elephant in the room. "And any other wild animal." The city was infested with rabbits and coyotes as well as rodents.

"Hmpf," said Nimm.

"You've eaten other rats, Nimm," Ash pointed out.

Cherie's mouth fell open, and her nose wrinkled. She looked at Jack in alarm. Jack winced. Nimm was a wonderful adviser, capable of speaking any language, and he had the rat-sensitive nose that made him better than a bloodhound at tracking. But he was a rat, bow tie notwithstanding.

Nimm sniffed. "It's the principle of the matter."

"What if I don't eat Magickal rats?" Grendel suggested.

Nimm sniffed. "Fine." And then his tone became conniving. "But you're welcome to eat a Magickal *mouse*, his name is Ghengis—"

"Nimm!" Mizuki exclaimed.

“I’m too busy helping you humans to take care of the competition myself!” Nimm snipped.

“What happens when animals are not enough?” Grendel asked.

And there was the elephant. Cherie bit her lip. Mizuki gulped audibly. Jack’s fists clenched, and a cold breeze whipped into the house. The back door slammed.

Grendel sighed and massaged her temple. “Cherie, I will have to eventually.”

“We talked about this,” Ash said.

“If she can eat rats, she can certainly eat people,” Nimm chirped.

Grendel’s eyebrows shot up.

“If they give willingly,” Jack said. “And you must not kill them.”

Cocking her head, Grendel raised a clawed hand. “If I’m out alone at night and someone were to, say, attack an old woman, would I be permitted to—”

The back door slammed again. A frigid wind lifted the curtains and the sheets still covering furniture in the room.

“Only the willing,” said Jack. “And if they die, you may be tried for murder.”

“Sometimes the very sick or the very in pain ask me to kill them,” Grendel replied.

Mizuki put her hand to her mouth. Ashwin rolled back on his feet and looked to Jack. Jack’s nails bit into his palms.

Cherie whispered, “That’s why Nnenne kept calling for Andrew.”

Jack’s head jerked to her in alarm.

Cherie took Grendel’s hand. “My other grandmother had cancer. My Magick couldn’t keep the pain away. Andrew was a vampire, and she kept calling for him.”

Grendel put her other hand atop Cherie’s. Her eyes were glistening when she responded. “Oh, child, I’m so sorry.”

Jack's shoulders fell, remembering those last terrible days and how hard Cherie had worked to help ease Dr. Anna's pain. Mizuki's sleep was probably keeping some people from pain. There were some people who'd been close to death and hurting when the slugh had come; they'd wake up to the same condition. There were rumors that vampire bites took pain away temporarily, and death was a final release from pain. Jack shivered and then shook his head. "You can't do that, Grendel. We're going to have enough trouble convincing people not to stake you without any more moral quandaries." Even suggesting the vampire could drink from the healthy and the willing was going to be a battle.

Grendel studied a spot on the floor and then said, "I understand."

The chill in the room seemed to lift.

"Would anyone like some tea?" Grendel asked.

"Please," said Mizuki, smiling at Ash and adding, "It's in pre-Change space program packaging."

Ash, like most of the frustrated-by-the-Change scientists Jack knew, was a huge admirer of the former space programs—public and private. "I'd love some," his friend said.

Grendel tapped her chin. "I might have some hermetically-sealed graham crackers, too. If you'd like them, Nimm?"

Standing on his hind paws, Nimm chirped. "Does a sewer smell like Heaven? I'd be delighted, ma'am!"

Grendel smiled, lips together, Jack noticed. She gestured with a clawed hand. "This way," and began leading them through the house. Mizuki stepped behind her, and then Ash with Nimm, and Cherie started to follow.

"Cherie," Jack said, hanging back.

She turned back to him, looking almost cross.

Jack realized at the last moment that he still hadn't decided what to say.



When Cherie turned to follow Grendel and the others to the kitchen, she felt Jack's gaze on her back like a ray of sun, it warmed her from the top of her head to her feet. She wanted to escape; there was nothing she could do with that heat.

"Cherie," Jack called.

She should have kept going, but her name stopped her, as though a cord between them had been drawn taut. The power of a name?

She turned, prepared to be confident, to say something she'd wanted to say for days with her chin held high, but his expression wasn't that of the serious, commanding Jack she expected. Instead of that expression—the one he'd worn when he'd declared they shouldn't see each other alone—his lips were parted, and there was the faintest of creases between his brows. His hands were behind his back, and he rolled slightly on his feet.

She was suddenly very tired. She'd half expected Jack to arrive stake in hand. The other half had expected that at best, he'd give Grendel a few minutes to leave the city. Cherie had planned to go with her. Where they'd go, Cherie wasn't sure, north probably, some place no one would know either of them. Some place rural. Cherie could offer herself up as a medic, and Grendel could play grandmother, hunting in the evenings and sharing her prey so Cherie never would have to earn much. They'd remain in that town until someone noticed Cherie's grandmother was growing younger, never came out at night, and that her eyes glowed, and she had fangs. Grendel had said it was a terrible plan, one that didn't give Cherie an opportunity to *live*.

Terrible or not, that plan was shot to heck.

Now here was Jack, asking her for her time, drawing her into a room with him alone, making her flush and making her yearn for something she couldn't have. She was annoyed. She said what he wanted to say before he could say it, "You don't have to apologize for anything. I kissed you first, without your permission, so if anyone should be sorry, it is me."

Jack gazed at a point on the floor. "I hope you aren't sorry about that. I'm not."

Her cheeks flushed. She wished he'd come closer, wished he'd kiss her again, and at the same time, wanted to scream.

"You don't look happy to be staying," Jack said, taking a step toward her, and then drawing up short. "I mean, that you and Grendel are staying ... you are staying, right?"

She frowned. "You're not happy that Grendel is staying. You don't like Grendel."

"No," said Jack, frowning.

At least he was honest. Cherie swallowed. She and Grendel hadn't found a home, just a temporary reprieve.

"But you will stay?" Jack asked.

"Grendel wants to," Cherie replied. When they'd talked, Grendel said if she was allowed to stay, this was her home, and she'd want to remain. Grendel had also said even if she was driven out at stake-point, it might not be the *worst* option for Cherie to remain. "You have friends here," Grendel said. "You have Jack. You could have a life."

Jack took another half step toward her. "But you don't want to stay."

Cherie shook her head. "I don't think we can. For people here, the memory of vampires is so much *fresher*. They'll trust her less than the people of Somer would."

"Their memories are fresher, and some will trust her more," Jack said, gazing at nothing.

Cherie tilted her head.

He met her eyes. "There were more sympathizers in my time. Not everyone was comfortable with their vampiric friends and relatives being immediately staked and burned."

He'd never talked about that before, but... "Grendel said that might be true," she whispered.

Jack raised an eyebrow.

Cherie answered the unspoken question. “She’s spent the past few nights gorging on rats and reading at the public library.” Grendel had also told Cherie, “Some experts were of the opinion that the Universal Staking Mandate was the ‘final stake in the heart of the Republic and the last nail in the coffin of democracy.’” In Cherie’s lifetime, there had been no controversy surrounding the ending of democratic rule. Her textbooks all said democracy was too messy for an ongoing war with the vampires and conflicts with Old Magickals; that it led to too much division. It was strange to learn that the old Republic’s passing might have been mourned.

“It wasn’t Grendel I wanted to talk about,” Jack said, rubbing the back of his neck.

She wasn’t going to listen to him give her a speech on the impossibility of a relationship between them, not a second time. Sighing, she shook her head. “Look, I get it. We come from two *very* different worlds.”

She squeezed her eyes shut and massaged the bridge of her nose. The past few days had hammered that lesson into her. It wasn’t just a matter of rural and urban. The people of Chicago were different. They called the Queen by her first name, *Rana*. No one in Somer dared do that. Ever. Lest they draw *Rana*’s attention.

And Cherie didn’t know the laws. Before they let her help with the wounded, they demanded to see her “license.” Which of course she didn’t have, and no one would ask for in Somer or any rural place. She doubted she’d be allowed near patients after the emergency was over. “I don’t belong here.” How could she make a living?

“But your town is here now,” Jack said. His voice was so close, she opened her eyes in surprise. He’d taken a step closer and caught her hand before it could fall. He smiled slightly. “Or approximately half of it is.”

She glanced at their joined hands, and her heart beat fast as a hummingbird’s wings. She wanted to say, “Don’t tease me. I know your

interest isn't serious," but somehow what came out was, "I'm Magickally weak," which was the same thing, she supposed, but the more pathetic version.

"No," said Jack, his breath warm on her knuckles. "You're strong."

Startled, she glanced up to find his focus on the air above their heads. "Look at the Ember," he whispered.

The ambient Ember around them looked like ambient Ember anywhere, except close to Jack, where it became denser; a halo of gold for those who could see it.

"I don't know what you mean," she said.

Meeting her eyes, he inclined his head. "I suppose it looks the same as always to you. Your Ember halo is ... less concentrated but spreads farther."

She huffed. "So, weaker."

"Maybe it depends on the task," Jack said.

"What does that mean?"

Jack brought her hand to his chest and cradled it in both of his, interlacing her much smaller fingers with his. It sent a jolt of heat through her, and she wavered on her feet.

Jack didn't seem to notice. "I can create a downpour so heavy it decimates fields. The best thing for crops though is a slow, gentle rain."

She closed her eyes, afraid to look at him. "I have no talent for growing crops."

"I don't think you grow crops, either," Jack said.

Her brow furrowed. "Then what do—?"

"I think you grow people," Jack whispered, his breath soft and warm against her brow. "Peacekeeper." Jack's fingers found her cheek and traced a trail of fire to her chin. "I was wrong about you all along, Cherie. Your Magick is strong. I didn't hide the people of Somer from the Queen with snow—or it wasn't my storms alone—it was your Magick, too, making my Magick stronger. When Anna got sick, you spent so much Magick on her,

the Magick that had kept Somer in peace began to waver. When you left, it shattered ... with all the mirrors.”

For a moment, Cherie wanted to believe it, but then she huffed. “You’re wrong. Bus’s drivers wanted to ...” She couldn’t finish. Jack’s fingers tightened around hers. She released a breath. “And the shop clerk at the Ember station reached for his shotgun.”

Jack’s grip relaxed. “Hmm ...”

The vibration of his hum sent sparks through her fingers.

“Destruction takes an instant. Peace and growth take time,” he said, his breath brushing her brow, and despite herself, Cherie leaned into him as though he were the source of gravity. She could hear her heartbeat in her ears, and her breathing was a storm. His fingers brushed her chin and tilted her face up to his. She knew he was going to kiss her. She knew this was a bad idea. And knew that she wanted it.

A howl rang in her ears. Jack’s hand dropped. Cherie’s eyes went wide. “What?”

There was another howl, and Jack said, “It’s coming from downstairs.”

Sparks, the literal kind, jumped around his hands, and he took a step toward what Grendel called her “front door” even though it opened into a stairwell.

The howl came again, and then an excited bark that was very familiar.

“Chance!” said Cherie.

A familiar voice said, “She must be here!”

Jack’s jaw got hard. “Cillian.” The sparks dancing around his fists vanished.

Geoff’s voice followed, fainter. “I’m sure she’s fine.”

Coming down the hallway from the kitchen, Mizuki said, “What in the world?”

Following her, Ashwin said, “Trouble?” and raised his pistol.

Rolling his eyes, Jack said, “Not the sort you need to shoot.”

A second later, Chance burst into the room, banging the front door against a wall. Cherie smiled, but the dog's focus instantly went to the back of the house, and his hackles rose. Lowering to a crouch, Chance growled, and in the next second he tore back toward the kitchen, weaving around Ashwin and Mizuki, barking and snarling so fiercely spittle flew.

Cherie almost called out to Grendel, but then caught herself. The dog wouldn't catch the vampire, and if she revealed the vampire's presence to Cillian—

"There you are!" Cillian said, bursting into the room, slightly out of breath and nearly drowned out by Chance's furious barking in the kitchen. There was an ear-splitting screech, and Chance was silent. Nimm's voice squeaked from the rear of the home. "Listen, I'll explain in your language, Doggo." The rat proceeded to *bark*. Chance whined in response but was otherwise quiet.

"What is this place?" Cillian asked, surveying Grendel's home.

"It belongs to family," Mizuki said with a quick glance at Cherie. She gave Mizuki a grateful nod for the ambiguity of that statement. Her friends would be suspicious if she said it belonged to Cherie's family.

"What are you doing here?" Jack asked Cillian.

Geoff and Annette entered the room. "Sorry about this, Cherie," Geoff whispered. Annette rolled her eyes.

Cillian came over to Cherie, but he spoke to Jack. "You didn't tell us she was in thrall of a vampire."

Annoyance fizzled through Cherie so sharply, she was surprised no smoke came out her ears.

"Cherie is in no one's thrall," Jack rumbled.

It was good he'd answered; Cherie was too mad to speak.

Cillian gave Cherie an appraising look. "Mr. Evans said you came here with a vampire."

"Cherie is too sensible for that," Annette protested.

“Cherie broke this city’s curse,” Jack said, glaring at Cillian.

Cillian scowled at Jack, and his lips curled in an expression of fury that lasted only for a flash—was that jealousy? Cillian turned back to Cherie. He hadn’t shaved in days, and there were dark circles under his eyes. He was wearing the same clothing he’d worn the last time she’d seen him in Somer. It was ripped now, and his jeans were soiled at the knees. She glanced at Geoff and Annette; they were both in similar states. They’d had adventures, too. Adventures that hadn’t gone as they’d planned—certainly not as Cillian had planned. Cherie found her fingers at her throat, clutching her grandmother’s charm. It wasn’t cold. Cillian wasn’t her enemy. He was just ... himself.

“Is it true?” Cillian demanded. For all his disheveled state, Ember around him danced as fiercely as ever.

Geoff sighed. “He is actually worried about you.”

For a moment, Cillian’s shoulders fell, but then he demanded, “Well?”

Cherie blinked. He’d dragged Annette and Geoff all the way from the tower, after a long journey to ask that? She remembered something Nnenna always said, “That boy can’t abide not being the center of attention.” It occurred to her that Cillian wasn’t jealous of Jack; he was jealous of *her* or what she’d done—she was Magickally weak, but she’d set a city free. Also, she was accompanied at the moment by Mizuki and Jack, both of whom radiated power, and Ashwin, who was a skilled technomage and had a quiet authority about him, even if he wasn’t Magickal. Cillian might be worried about her, but he also felt left out after he’d failed in his own quest.

“Tell me it isn’t true, Cherie,” Cillian said in the same domineering tone he’d told her she was coming with him and Geoff.

Cherie’s skin heated. She was a terrible liar. “I did come to Chicago with a vampire.”

Cillian’s eyes went wide, and Annette put a hand to her mouth. Geoff just blinked.

Lowering her chin, Cherie spoke carefully so she wouldn't shout. "She helped me lift the curse, but then she vanished." There was no way she was letting Cillian know this was Grendel's house. Outside, the wind moaned.

Cillian stared at her.

Annette put her hands on her hips and blew a stray bang from her face. "That counts."

A slow smile spread across Geoff's face. "Yeah, I think it does."

Cillian turned away from Cherie. "No, it doesn't."

"You owe us money," said Geoff.

Cillian huffed. "The bet was that Cherie would befriend a dragon or a troll. I don't owe you squat."

Waving a finger, Annette said, "Nope. The bet was she'd befriend a monster, a dragon or troll or something."

"Vampires are human shaped," Cillian protested. "They don't count."

"They do too!" Annette said.

Cherie sighed and rubbed her temple.

Ashwin and Mizuki were glancing at each other.

Jack edged closer to Cherie's side. Surveying the other three, he said, "A bit like old times?" His arm brushed hers, and Cherie didn't think it was like old times at all.

Chance trotted into the living room, Nimm astride him. Straightening his bow tie, Nimm said, "Well, it is my—"

Cillian's eyes bulged at the sight of the talking rat, but he recovered quickly. "You don't count, rodent, you're too small."

"Why I never!" Nimm declared, and Chance growled.

A muscle in Jack's jaw jumped. "Cherie did befriend a dragon."

"As I was going to say!" Nimm squeaked.

"You lost. Pay up, Cillian," Jack finished.

"Ooooooooooooo ..." said Geoff and Annette in unison. Clapping their hands, they began to chant, "Pay up! Pay up!" It was something they did in

Somer. Usually, Cherie joined in.

Cillian cast a scowl at Cherie. The ambient Ember around him whipped like angry snakes. “I can’t believe it was *you*.”

Jack hissed, and Mizuki gasped. Annette and Geoff kept chanting. Cherie decided Geoff was right. “Charm” was not Cillian’s talent. Turning his back to Cherie, Cillian held up his hands to Annette and Geoff. “All right! All right!”

Geoff and Annette just chanted louder. Which should have been funny and should have felt like her world was knitting back together, but Cherie couldn’t join in. His jibe had thrown her mind back to the journey. She was seeing visions of blood on snow, hearing the shouts of the Queen’s forces following her into Fairy, and the Fae’s gleeful hopes for torture. She barely managed to smile. She didn’t fit in with the people who loved her anymore; she suspected she’d fit even less when she started championing allyship with Grendel. The memory of fear, the recognition she’d never be the same, and that her world would never be the same, left her empty inside.

“It gets better,” Jack said, his hand going to her back.

Cherie started, almost asked what he meant, but realized she already knew. Cherie had seen his nightmares. She looked up at him. His expression was as severe as it had ever been, but his hand was firm against her back, and she didn’t think he was preparing a “we can never be together” speech this time. Something had changed between them. She didn’t know if she was elated or terrified.

Ashwin emerged from the back, carrying a small mirror. Cherie hadn’t seen him leave the room. “Jack,” he said. “There’s a pocket of sluagh in a warehouse on Fulton.” Nimm squeaked; Ashwin picked him up and draped the rat around his shoulder.

“I’ll see you soon,” Jack promised Cherie, and then he was gone.

Those last words sharp in her mind, Cherie decided she was elated *and* terrified.



There were slough on the Near West Side, and as Jack took the stairs two at a time, he almost laughed. Something had happened in the minutes after Cillian's arrival. He watched Cherie stand her ground, neatly avoiding revealing Grendel's location and keeping her cool during the whole ridiculous situation. She could handle dragons, demons, and idiots. She was perfect. "I'm going to marry Cherie."

Eyeing him, Ash replied, "She's a great girl," and opened the door to the building's front stoop. His friend's expression clouded. "But the Wicked Queen won't let us go so easily, Snow White."

A cold wind moaned through the trees, and Jack remembered something Dr. Anna used to say.

Real fairy tales often had grisly endings.



*Mirror, Mirror on the wall,
Am I the most powerful?
My Queen, none can usurp your reign,
But the game begins to change,
The Charming Princess slipped your grasp,
Powerful Magickals will seek her path.*

∞ ~% FIN ~% ∞

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