

Desert Breeze Publishing, Inc. Presents

*Amor Immorati Book One*

# IMMORTALLY YOURS



J. MORGAN

**Amor Immorati**

**Book One**

# **Immortally Yours**

**By**

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## Foreword

The book you hold in your hands has had a long road to get to the point it's at now. I started *Immortally Yours* in December of 2006. It was an exciting time in my life. My first novel had come out in October, the same month I lost my grandfather, who had been the rock I'd always depended on. He lived to see me published before passing away, and for that I will be eternally grateful. I had also signed my second contract with the same company who had published my first book. So, I guess you could say I was riding high on a wave of emotions at the time. Authors write for a lot of reasons, and when I started *Immortally*, I think it was as a coping mechanism to help me deal with the death of my grandfather.

Between December and April, I wrote the first fifty or sixty pages of the book before my life took another turn. The company I had been with at the time went under and it wasn't pretty. Five months later, on the verge of my third book coming out with another publisher, it went under as well. During all this, *Immortally* sat relatively untouched and sadly unfinished. My heart had gone out of wanting to write anything. Luckily for me, my very good friends wouldn't let me quit. So, I got picked up by a third publisher and went onto having two more stories come out. I dabbled with *Immortally* but my heart never really got back into it.

Then, a very good friend who'd read a chapter or two, asked -- no, demanded to know -- when I was going to finish it. Honestly, she nagged me for two years. She wasn't the only one. So, I finally dusted off my third computer to have the manuscript partially on it and went back to work. A few drafts later, I thought it was finished but wasn't ready to sub it. I let it sit for another year before doing another draft and let it sit again.

Fast Forward to 2009. I was talking to the incomparable Gail Delaney, and told her about this manuscript I had sitting on my computer that was unlike any of my other books. It was a bit darker and had very little funny involved with it. She went "Mmm... let me take a look at it". I sent her the doc and a couple days later she comes back with "I'm sending you a contract". Who was I to say no? Because, you just can't form the word, when it comes to Gail. The result is as soon as I quit running off at the mouth, you get to read the final product.

I know this seems a tad longwinded, but I feel the need to tell you the reader that this book has turned into a labor of more than love, but determination to tell a story that wouldn't turn me loose. Now, nearly four years and eight drafts later, it's done. I guess I can shut up and let you get to reading it. Apparently, I've got a couple more books to write and Gail hopes it doesn't take me four years to do it.

Happy Reading,  
Jmo

## **Dedication**

This book belongs to my grandfather, who never stopped believing in me and always kept me grounded when my head would get too big for my britches, but never stopped my imagination from going wherever it led me.

I also want to thank some very special people who kept me going. Debbie, you can stop hounding me. It's finished! Morgan O., thanks for taking the time to read through each draft and keeping me from hitting delete on more than one occasion. Helen Ravell for fueling my Greek muse on Chase's past. Jenn for being the best wife and sounding board in the world. Finally, thanks to Gail and Jenifer at Desert Breeze for being more than my publishers, for being family.

## Chapter One

"Close the door, ya ignorant sum batch!"

Ignoring the owner of the voice, Chase Michaels walked into the smoke hazed bar, instantly knowing every head would turn in his direction. He lived for the thrill of that first moment of uncertainty that fueled the beast within him. The thrill of the hunt excited him, but nothing like the split second of fear that greeted him when his game face slid into place. It was almost worth the hell that always followed. Almost. Of course he kinda liked the hell part, too. Now, that gave life meaning. Intimidation was one thing, but the thrill of heated battle gave him a rush like no other.

Sadly, it was a pale substitute for the life long dead to him. Perhaps, he, himself, was already dead and only the ghost of that life kept his soul from crossing over to whatever reward or damnation awaited him. Until he found out for sure, he'd take what he could from this existence. Small pleasures to be sure, but ones he felt no need to abandon just yet. He'd abandoned his soul already, whatever powers held sway over this pitiful mudball owed him this, at least.

Of course he'd given up philosophy a long time ago. His life couldn't find meaning in the Socratic Method. The ancient law of tooth and nail still worked in the modern world, and he saw no reason to dig deeper than that to give significance to what he did to make ends meet. Brutality and he were no strangers. In fact, they were long time lovers. So what if he couldn't look himself in the mirror at the end of the day. Mirrors didn't put a roof over his head, or fast cars in his garage. When they decided to be so willing, he'd give a rat's ass what they thought.

For the time being, he had a job to do, so he could get back to both of those things. Not to mention the new fifty-two inch flat screen he'd just had delivered. Maybe if there wasn't crap on the tube later, he'd debate the issue with himself. He doubted it. The BoSox looked good this season, so that should at least hold him occupied 'til October when they took a crap in his punchbowl.

Turning his brain back to the project at hand, Chase fixed the hard case firmly into place and eased himself into the room. His stride told everyone who called this den of iniquity a second home that the baddest mutha on the planet had just come calling. He almost chuckled at his clichéd persona. Hell, if it worked for Clint Eastwood, who was he to buck lessons taught by the master. The only difference between him and Clint was he didn't need a camera to walk the walk. He'd lived every agonizing minute of it. If these poor slobs didn't believe the package he showed them, they had damn well better be ready for the torment that followed in his wake.

Tonight was just one more trip down that road, one the Fates themselves had laid before him. That was why his face betrayed none of the excitement crowding his brain. Warriors, even obsolete ones, kept their emotions in check. Until it was time to let them out to play. A part of him hoped -- no needed -- tonight to be just one of those times.

Allowing only a glimmer of interest to mar the masquerade, he stepped into the room. A glance gave him the lay of the land and it was one he knew well. Aside from the rustic décor he could only describe as early dump, he could scarcely tell the difference between it and the hundreds, if not thousands, of other low end dives where he'd had the misfortune to find himself. Even the people huddled together around watered-down beer with no connection other than the

need to anesthetize themselves against the harsh reality of life were a welcome reminder of mortality at its finest. How else could he feel comfortable surrounded by what could best be termed the dregs of society. After all, they were his kind of people. At the thought, Chase allowed a hint of a smile to crease his mouth.

The door finally swung shut behind him, issuing a rattling bang throughout the crowded bar. It was enough to send the weak hearted scrambling to keep hold of their seats. The game had begun. A full blown grim smile broke the ragged seams of his face at the number of heads shooting up from their piss-warm beers and tired conversations to take in the sight of him. Chase hoped the picture he painted would be enough to let the braver ones keep their heads down and stay out of his business. A badass might try to take him down on general principle, but he could handle it. Should some asshole get it in their heads he might be alright with a game of crap in my cornflakes. If the hard-case didn't get the job done, the 9mm strapped to his thigh would be more than enough to curb even the stupid ones from trying anything.

Chase never let it get that far. He'd never been one to push for a rough and tumble. Not that he wasn't able to handle himself. The proof of that fact could be counted in the bodies of the men left in his wake who thought different.

From behind the vintage Ray Bans, he scanned the room searching for that whisper of trouble. The only thing greeting him were dead eyes, grown accustomed to the cheapness of life before quickly flickering back to their meaningless existence. He didn't know whether to feel hurt by the apathy, or sad that the time of real men had passed into the mists. The beast locked away in the deepest recesses of his soul almost regretted finding nothing to make his teeth itch. Despite reason telling him to get the job done, his body thirsted for a little action, something to take the edge off the buzz pounding in his ears. Finding none, he smoothly took off his shades and sauntered toward the bar.

The usual motley collection of bikers, rednecks and assorted rejects from the rest of humanity gave him little notice as he crossed the room. Another sign that his time had finally passed. When even the modern warriors grew civilized and complacent, what did that say of him? Was he the relic that should die quietly in shame of what he once had been? If only he could be so lucky. Still, Chase pondered the irony of the situation. If it had been any other time, he could have sat down, enjoyed a beer or two before ending the night with a good old fashioned bar fight. Tonight wasn't the first time he'd wished like hell he hadn't been on the job, and likely wouldn't be the last.

Then again, all the blame could be laid squarely on his shoulders. He knew before he took it, the damn thing would end up rubbing a raw sore into his already well-chewed ass. Luckily, he and common sense weren't known to be frequent drinking buddies. His decision to throw his crappy morals out the window to take the case proved that beyond a doubt. As a rule, runaway spouse cases ranked right up there with prostate exams. Real pains in the ass. As a general rule, he tended to avoid both. Even the bad feeling in his gut hadn't stopped him from taking the cash and saying morals be damned. In the end, the pot had been just too sweet to pass up. Besides, the new Shelby hit the showroom floor in less than a month. Hot cars didn't just buy themselves.

Chase was just glad Caern, his partner, had decided to go wave hopping this weekend. Otherwise, he would have had to share the bounty on this one. He loved the guy, but new car smell overruled friendship every damn time. The rat bastard already had a mean machine. His partner's vintage Camaro might have a few years on it, but the car could still eat up the road.

More importantly, it drew in the women. Not that he gave much thought to women. They had their uses, but tended to be more trouble than they were worth. At least in his experience.

Besides, envy or lust didn't suit him. His tendencies leaned more toward the biggies when it came to the Seven Deadlies. Even then, Chase wasn't proud to claim ownership of so human a frailty. He'd worked too hard to weed any form of weakness out of his system to fall prey to them now. Chase could only find one thing to say in his defense. Caern's influence would be the death of him one day. Too bad he didn't die that easily, or he'd see how far he could push that option.

Rubbing a hand across his jaw, he pushed the inner psycho-babble from his mind. He'd already wasted enough time. There would be plenty of time later to ponder those mysteries of life. Seriously, the trace's old man must be desperate to get her back if he willingly forked out the payday Darkside Investigations demanded. Even for a bride gone wild, the best PI firm on the west coast didn't come cheap. For the most part, he and Caern mainly handled big corporate cases and the rare advisory job with the local or federal enforcement agencies.

But divorce cases were something he'd thought they'd put behind them a million years ago. Chase tried not to think about how strange the case sounded on paper. In instances like this, most men with John Gardner's social standing wanted evidence of infidelity to squelch a nasty divorce settlement. When the guy said all he wanted was for Chase to "Bring her home, so we can talk things through", he had to fight to keep the surprise from exploding onto his face. The man didn't seem the type to moon over a woman, even one as hot as the one in the picture Gardner had given him. The man had to be pushing fifty easy, and the wife looked barely out of her teens. Even for a trophy wife, this seemed to be a bit extreme.

At the time, Chase thought it was just a case of burnt pride motivating Gardner to hire him to bring the woman home. He'd seen it before in men like Gardner. The more he thought about the man's demeanor, the more Chase had a nasty suspicion that the man's emotions ran to something more than simply wanting a spurned spouse back where she belonged. Chase couldn't shake the need he saw in the man's eyes, telling him this woman was important to him for a different reason than the one he'd given. His gut overruled Chase's idea that the whole thing amounted to a case of bruised ego.

Then again, in Chase's experience, some men were just gluttons for punishment. If Gardner wanted to play the fool, who was he to stand in his way. Let him throw all the money he had at her if he wanted. One divine truth was self evident. If they left once, they tended to make it a habit. It was one of the reasons Chase didn't keep a woman longer than it took to take care of business and see them to the door. What few friends he had tended to call him jaded when it came to women. Chase liked to think of it as being realistic.

Women knew all the rules when it came to love. Hell, they made them up as they went along, so why even try to figure them out. A lifetime of watching their games had taught him one thing. Never trust a woman with anything, especially your heart. Some men said to keep your friends close, and your enemies closer. Wrong. Chase had one standing law he kept no matter what. Keep your lovers closer than your enemies. After you make sure they're not armed, of course. He had seen more men brought down by a lover's blade in the heat of passion than by an enemy's hand. Those type of life lessons sort of put things in perspective.

This Belle Gardner must have something special to make a man spend a king's ransom on a woman who obviously didn't want him around. Chase had made it crystal clear to the man he'd find her, but wasn't going to force her to stay. A woman's right to haul ass was divine truth as far as he was concerned, and one he wasn't about to mess with it. If Gardner couldn't keep her, it



sure as hell wasn't Chase's fault. This was a one-time gig paying cash for a flashy car, and to hell with who gets the girl when the credits roll.

A shift in the bar's atmosphere brought the daydreaming to an end. A sixth sense tickled his brain, telling him something was up. He shifted his gaze toward the back of the room. A slender shape weaved through the group of rowdies crowded around the pool table set between the oak bar and back wall. Through a break in the crowd, Chase caught sight of his trace. Guess he'd have to cough up the other half of Paulie's snitch fee.

Chase settled down at the bar and watched her. He signaled the bartender for a beer and leaned back on the cracked and pitted bar. The woman was so out of place, he would have to have been blind not to notice her. She was definitely too upscale to be haunting this bargain basement. Belle Gardner was everything the picture promised -- and more. Velvet curls danced around a cherub's face. Her features hinted at a heritage he couldn't quite place. Eyes the color of rich, fresh-brewed coffee twinkled amber sunbeams, as the shooter sank a bank shot worthy of a professional.

The girl wore a loose fitting white blouse opened just enough to give him a peek at a pair of ample assets he hadn't had a chance to see in her picture. A pair of black jeans hugged hips begging to be center stage in a rap video. He had to admit she was a looker, not a hundred thousand dollar looker, but a major piece of talent nonetheless. If things were different and she wasn't a trace, he might consider breaking his own rules. Keeping her for longer than one night might not be the best of ideas, but damn if he didn't like the idea.

The professional in him knew he wouldn't, but he could enjoy the show. She definitely worked the room with her *Redneck Woman* act. Chase almost regretted what the circumstances forced him to do. Then again, his conscience wasn't tightly wrapped enough he couldn't feel the hand-tooled leather wrapped steering wheel in his hands. Mercenary of him, he knew, but damn, sometimes the beast had the right idea. This time, his dark half definitely was on top of things and he needed to listen to it before he lost his edge over this piece of fluff. Belle Gardner was the job and the job never got personal. Chase fought to keep that in mind, as he left his beer untouched on the bar to saunter toward her.

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Even standing in the back of the bar, Belle felt his eyes on her the minute he entered the room. She'd done her best to ignore him, for all the good it did her. Men like that were nothing more than a complication. Or an irritation, depending on your point of view. The fact he had worked up the courage to desert the bar and walk toward her didn't surprise her. Worried her maybe, but surprise didn't figure into the equation. Even from across the room, Belle could tell the guy smelled like trouble. Just what kind of trouble he'd turn out to be had her wishing she had a gun handy.

In spite of that, Belle couldn't stop herself from taking a good long look at him from the corner of her eye. Before she realized what she was doing, her tongue traced the fullness of her suddenly dry lips. Cursing herself, Belle knew what kind of trouble she wanted him to be. Whoever he was, the guy definitely had the bad boy routine down to a science. Every move of his body appeared calculated, measured to give just the right message, and the message was 'I'm not the guy you want to screw with'. Belle could definitely go along with that. In theory, at least. Her inner slut had different ideas, but Belle knew acting on them would be a different matter altogether.

If he wasn't so damn hot, she might have even been able to rein in the little voice. Just her luck, the guy had the build she loved to see on a man, muscular without being over the top, more than athletic but not so bulky as to be grotesque. His face had the mandatory five o'clock shadow all men should cultivate, with eyes the color of pale ice on a frozen pond. Belle found herself lingering on them far longer than she should have, but didn't care. With his sandy blond hair cropped short to his scalp, he was a vision to behold. The guy looked like something right out of a photo shoot.

Too bad she knew the type. He reeked of an aging, down on his luck football hero, who relived his glory days with slick clothes and a badass attitude. She'd seen it so many times the act became laughable. It was almost as funny as the fact the bar full of people bought into his charade.

But, something about the man nagged at the back of her mind. The little voice suddenly switched gears and began a litany of 'Beware of this man!'. She chose to ignore her obviously wrong little voice -- both of them. How could she be frightened of anyone wearing a faded Jimi Hendrix shirt under a ratty trench coat? Her survival instincts be damned. She wasn't about to lose what little sense she had left and go running into the arms of such an obvious cliché. He was a bum, a well dressed one but still a bum -- or even worse, a leech. Well, whatever he turned out to be, she could handle him.

He weaved his way through the crowd finally positioning himself directly across from her on the other side of the pool table. For the first time since he showed up, she managed to control herself -- a harder task than she imagined. Choosing to ignore him, she spared him the barest of a glance. Unlike the bodyguards on either side of her, who openly glared at the intruder. Belle found it reassuring to see her nerves weren't the only ones on edge. She lifted a finger from the ragged felt lining of the table, letting them know to take the testosterone levels down a notch. A bar fight was the last thing she needed tonight.

She couldn't help but notice the stranger's eyes never left her, even though he made it a point not to look at her directly. Belle wondered if she had perhaps jumped to the wrong conclusion about him. A closer look told her that her first impression had been way off base. The man might appear to be a lecherous bum, but the fear knotting in the pit of her stomach screamed that he was something much worse.

Shifting to her left to line up her next shot, Belle let her gaze wander over the cut lines of his face. Unable to prevent herself from doing it, she flinched at what she saw beneath the hooded breadth of his brow. He had the eyes of a hunter. The way they took in everything in the room without moving told her this was a man used to danger. With a chance glance, he captured her in his stare. Something in that one look froze her in place. Try as she might, Belle couldn't tear her eyes away. The thrill of his mental touch sent a buzz racing through her. Trapped in the moment, Belle got the idea that maybe her little voice had been right the second time. This was without a doubt a man to beware of. Too bad she couldn't exactly pick up and leave.

If she could, her booty would be out that door in a New York minute. She'd worked too damn hard to set this meeting up to blow it off, just because a case of the jitters had her jumping at shadows, or hot men. Her whole life depended on what happened in the next hour. She hadn't gone to all the trouble of getting away from John just to fold at the first sign of danger. Belle knew well the risks before she started on this course of action. Covering her tracks, she had thought herself safe from John's reach. In spite of what her heart, or whatever had taken over her thinking for her, this man could not be here for her.

The table opened up, forcing her to bring her thoughts down to a manageable level. Not daring to give the stranger another glance, she took the cue stick from the loser while one of the bodyguards that Ronald had loaned her for the evening slipped a stack of quarters in the table. Belle looked up to see the stranger racking the balls at the other end of the table with a cue stick tucked haphazardly under his arm. Catching her eyes on him, he curled his upper lip into a smile while shuffling the balls before setting them in place with a loud clank.

"I don't remember seeing you win the last game." She set the stick in the curve of her thumb and forefinger without so much as giving him the satisfaction of a look.

"Because I didn't," he said, smoothly.

She had to give him props. The guy had style. Belle eased back on the stick. Bending her head up until she faced him, she gave him the barest hint of a smile. "You've got balls. I've got to give you that." She slammed the stick into the cue ball and sent the rack flying around the table. Belle smiled as he flinched, the nine ball banging into the pocket next to him.

"I was wondering when you'd notice." He chalked the end of his stick. "What gave it away?"

"That makes me stripes." Choosing to ignore him, Belle skirted around the table, and pushed him out of her way to take her next shot. "So how'd you convince the guy to give you the stick?" She really wanted to know the why, but wanted to set him at ease for the moment.

He grinned. "Amazing what an open ended bar tab will do to convince a guy to go away."

"Do you make it a habit of picking up women with tired lines like that?" Belle sent the two ball clipping off the eight ball into the corner pocket.

"Maybe." He deftly shuffled out of way. "Do you make it a habit of taking risky shots so early in the game?"

"What's life without a little risk?" she answered, lining up her next shot.

"Touché." He bowed, causing her to miss the next shot. "Believe you left me an opening."

Belle barely heard him. A motion at the door caught her attention. Ronald, with a couple more bodyguards, stood in the doorway to the offices in back. Fun and games time was over. It was time to blow this guy off.

"Sorry, stud, but game over." She handed the stick to one of her protectors. "Carl, finish the game for me?"

The stranger moved to block her. "You can't just walk out in the middle of a game."

She smiled as Carl thrust his arm across the man's chest, barring him from getting in her way.

"I think you'll find that I can." She spun and left him standing behind the bulk of her bodyguard.

The stranger's eyes bore a hole through the small of her back. The intensity of his stare frightened her. The feeling that there was more to him than he let on grew stronger by the minute. She didn't have time for this crap. In less than five minutes she'd let the man get under her skin. Perhaps when she finished her business with Ronald, she might come back and finish this, one way or the other.

Ronald met her with a polite nod before ushering her through a door leading to a narrow hallway. Taking the lead, he walked past them until he came to the last door on the left. Belle caught him casting furtive glances behind them, but Ronald didn't mention the stranger or comment on just how dangerous it would be if the two of them were seen together. For that she was grateful. The fact he agreed to meet with her at all amounted to a minor miracle. John's grip

was almost absolute and not many would risk his anger. Belle guessed she had been lucky. Ronald hadn't gone running to John when she approached him. She thought that was a testament to how many were dissatisfied with John. Otherwise, John would already have her back under his grimy thumb.

Small favors being what they were, Belle wasn't about to look this gift-horse in the mouth. If that's what it was. She couldn't help wonder, had been wondering all night in fact if she had invited herself into a nice tidy trap. It wasn't outside the realm of possibility that Ronald planned to hand her back over to John in hopes of moving up a notch in the hierarchy. People had been betrayed for less -- a lot less. A part of her wished she could knock the paranoid voice in the mouth, because it had given her a hopping case of the heebie jeebies. All these voices were about to get on her last freaking nerve. As bad as things were, she had to trust that Ronald's support was on the up and up. If it wasn't, she was seriously screwed, and there wasn't a damned thing she could do about it anyway.

Ronald came to a stop in front of a nondescript door, and motioned for her to enter as he opened it. Belle had to squeeze between him and the door frame to enter the dimly lit room. Well, she could tell Ron wasn't trying to impress her with his decorating skills. If the bar looked like a dump, this place came off as early cesspit. A single table sat in the center of the room. The smoldering remains of a recently smoked cigarette blazed briefly in an ashtray sitting on a collection of today's papers, littered with stray butts. Wishing she'd had a tetanus shot before she came here, Belle skirted to the right side of the table while Ronald waved her toward a vacant chair beside her.

"You know what I want," she stated not waiting for him to take his seat.

He frowned, but she hadn't expected him to come into this happy. "Yes, and it is suicide."

Gripping the table, Belle tried not to lose her cool. She had to keep her head clear if she expected this to work. Ronald would only respond to reason. An emotional outburst would earn her a one-way ticket out the door. "Not if you convince the others to join us."

"John would never allow such a large gathering of the Shazhium." He shook his head. "You know this as well as I. Your father's death has fractured us beyond even your power to bring us together. Without him to guide her, Myrandia has let us become scattered and weak. She allows your stepfather to guide us along to his own agenda, and any that oppose him find themselves, shall we say, no longer around." He looked grimly toward the floor. "For the sake of my people, I can't bring his wrath down upon them. What you ask of us is impossible."

"You are right. We are weak, but I can change that--" A loud crash from the hallway snapped her attention toward the door.

"What the hell?" Ronald exclaimed as he jumped from his chair.

Belle winced, already knowing the answer. Dammit to hell! The stranger had been sent by John, after all. She hated to be right all the time.

"Did you bring a weapon?" She turned to Ronald.

"Of course." Ronald patted a lump next to his right arm.

"Give it to me." Belle didn't even look to see if he did as she asked. Her whole attention centered on the door and the banging coming from outside it.

The sounds of battle died down, but Belle knew a man like the stranger wouldn't let himself be bested so easily, even by Ronald's trained bodyguards. She glared at Ronald and palmed her hand in the air between them.

"I said give me your gun," she demanded, not willing to take no for an answer.

"Whatever mischief you've brought to my house, handle it quickly." He reluctantly slipped his hand under his jacket and eased the cold weight of a 9 mm into the palm of her hand.

Steeling herself to do what needed to be done, Belle tensed and waited. She didn't have to wait long. Barely having time to click off the safety, Belle turned as the door slammed open. The man from the bar walked in like he owned the room. She glimpsed a brief view of Carl lying in a heap through the crack of the door.

"Belle Gardner?" the stranger asked.

Before he could move Belle brought the gun up and pumped three rounds point blank into his chest. The man gave her a quizzical look as a spray of warm crimson splashed across her face.

"Hope that answered your question, shit for brains," she growled as he slipped lifelessly to the floor.

## Chapter Two

Trying to make sense of the drifting shadows that peppered the broken and muddy terrain, Belle stared into shifting darkness. She'd given up even trying to guide the SUV down the deserted road. All her hope for getting to her destination alive hinged on the belief Silvian watched over fools, and women who shot first and asked 'Why the hell did I just do that?' later. Least Belle prayed the goddess felt so disposed on her behalf. If not, she was seriously screwed.

Belle flinched as low hanging branches brushed the top of the vehicle. The scratching of the winter dead branches made her eyeteeth itch. It sounded like the ghosts of her ancestors tearing at her soul. The morbid thought consumed her until a deep rut tossed the four wheel drive into the air. The SUV fishtailed across the uneven road, and she scrambled to hold onto the wheel, for all the good it did her. The glorified truck spun wildly in a circle, each new circuit bringing her closer to the strangled line of trees guarding the road on either side.

Finally, her memory brought up her driver's education course. Turning into the spin, and taking her foot off the brake, Belle managed to let her fear slip away so she could focus on riding out the tornado. Once or twice she felt the SUV tilt wildly on two wheels, as the vehicle fought her every inch of the way to decelerate before coming to a mud-drenched stop. Letting out a groan, she dropped her head to the wheel. Her chest heaved as she hyperventilated her relief at being alive toward the floorboards.

Silvian's merciful girdle! Belle tried not to think about how things could've have gone. It was a sign the goddess had at least turned her head in Belle's direction for the time being. Fighting the urge to bang her head into the dash, she looked up to see that, in spite of her stupidity, the vehicle still more or less pointed in the direction she'd been heading. Small favors would be the death of her, at this rate.

This whole thing was pure lunacy. She should be at the safe house tucked into bed, not carting a dead body out to the middle of nowhere. Damn, John for causing this mess. No, like Ronald so nicely pointed out, this was her mess. John might have been the bastard that got the ball rolling, but he hadn't been the one who put the gun in her hand. The responsibility for that outbreak of stupidity fell squarely on her shoulders. She'd acted impulsively. There was no denying that. What other choice did she have? No way would she have let the hunter take her back to John. Killing the man amounted to self defense, as far as she was concerned.

That didn't help her any with the problem at hand. Still, she couldn't believe Ronald refused to help her get rid of the hunter's corpse. Like she knew how to dispose of a dead body. Hannibal Lector she wasn't. The least he could have done was let Carl and the other guy come along to help. No, he went ballistic. Told her to clean it up herself. 'Your mess, your problem' had been his exact words, to be precise. They still reverberated in her mind like a silent slam to her ego.

Belle had to admit, in hindsight, he had a point. Something less fatal would have served her better. It would have saved her a trip out to the middle of nowhere. That was for damn sure. Yet, the heat of the moment dictated she did the right thing. The man, whoever he was, had to be one of John's henchmen. If in her gut, she hadn't known for sure the guy planned to haul her butt back home, it might have turned out differently. Belle hoped if she kept telling herself that she might even believe it someday.

She doubted it. For all her bravado, that single act marked her first act as a killer. The fact, no matter how noble the intentions, sickened her. A man was dead because of her. She could lay as much blame on John's shoulders as she wanted, but in the end, a small part of her had become what she hated most in the world. The stranger could have worked for him, but did that justify what she'd done? The answer haunted her, because nothing would justify what she did. Belle would find atonement for her actions when time allowed her the luxury. Until then she would live with it, and pray to Silvan her first time would be her last. Again, Belle found herself doubting it would be the case.

Finding the courage to make another attempt at the road, Belle started the SUV and eased it back onto the groove-riddled path. It felt sacrilegious considering the dead body lying in the back, but she flipped on the stereo to drown out the awkward silence oppressing her. Anything to take her mind off all the thoughts boiling over in her conscience. Finding something loud and thrashing, she gunned the vehicle into four wheel drive and hit the muddy trench faster than she should have. The need to get this over with consumed her, as the weight of her thoughts broke through the music blaring in her ears.

A mile or two later, the road leveled out, giving her a breather from all the banging around. Seeing the end of her macabre journey nearly at hand, Belle rested her head against the back of the seat with a sigh. Another hour or so and all this would be thankfully behind her. Even though things should have turned out much differently, tonight's debacle did have a bright side. Ronald hadn't totally freaked out and left without promising to approach the Peoples on her behalf. He agreed to mull over her proposal. He made no assurances that he would side with her, but like she said, he hadn't laughed in her face and walked away either. That was something at least. Not much, but a glimmer enough to give her hope.

He had been right about one thing. A true leader would know how to deal with things like this. If she wanted to gain Ronald's confidence she would just have to deal with this. Then again, Belle didn't want to think about the fact a true leader wouldn't have landed herself into this situation in the first place. Still, if she wanted to prove herself, this was the perfect chance, even though it felt five shades of unsavory.

The road turned bumpy again, forcing her to concentrate on keeping the vehicle on the muddy track. The last thing she needed was another tailspin. Only the next one might send her into a ditch, or worse. Getting herself killed would be the perfect end to this debacle. The irony of killing herself with a dead body in the back did not escape her. Belle eased the bulky weight of the SUV along the muddy tracks, praying it wouldn't bog down before she got to the spot Ronald told her about.

For the first time since leaving the bar, Belle allowed herself to notice the weight shifting in the back with each jar the vehicle took. Sure, it had been occupying her mind, but the reality begun to truly set in. The thud of the stranger's body against the sidewall sent shivers down her spine. The squishy sound it made as it rolled around made the shiver grow into full blown case of the willies. Man, this couldn't be over with quick enough. Another hour of this and she would be ready for a padded condo on the other side of crazy -- way on the other side. If Ronald's directions were right, she didn't have much farther to go. The cabin had to be around here somewhere.

Doing her best to ignore the ick factor going on behind her, Belle peered through the gloom to see the road ahead dip before curving slightly to the left. Ronald had mentioned this curve. Not that she could tell the difference between one curve and the next, but if this was it, the cabin should be just ahead, a quarter of a mile at the most. Belle held off giving a whoop for joy.

That could wait until the corpse was safely in the ground and she had returned to civilization, or the nearest place that offered a cup of hot coffee. At the moment she would settle for a warm beer and a Xanax.

Unfortunately, both of those were about fifty miles in the other direction. The Shazhium under Ronald's protection owned this whole area, which is why he suggested her problem might disappear in these woods. Belle felt begrudgingly grateful for the morsel Ronald tossed in her direction. Still, since all the property for over a hundred miles around fell under Ronald's control, there was little chance the body would be discovered. An electronic gate back at the turnoff prevented unwanted visitors from prying, in any case. By her estimate, she'd been driving for three quarters of an hour after entering the Shazhium's holding. Thanks to the terrain, it'd been slow going. Even at her creeping pace, she must have traveled twenty miles into the wilderness.

Since she hadn't been busted for carting a dead body around all night, Belle tossed a big thank you to Silvian for watching over her. While she was at it, she threw a 'Praise Silvian' that Ronald owned the bar where they'd set up the meet, otherwise things could be a whole lot worse than they happened to be at the moment. Thankfully, the background noise from the bar had covered the shots. It had been relatively easy for them to get the body out through the back, thereby avoiding anyone from noticing. Using the ID from the man's wallet, Carl had found his vehicle sitting in the parking lot and saw to getting rid of the last bit of traceable evidence tying the man to Ronald or the bar. Once Belle handled her own slice of nastiness, she should be in the clear. John could have the pleasure of worrying about where his goon had disappeared to. Maybe that would keep him guessing long enough for her to turn enough of the Shazhium to her cause.

Yeah, like that was likely to happen. Ronald was the most modern thinking of the bunch and that wasn't saying much. Without the support of the Shazhium, she didn't stand a chance of thwarting John. First, she had to get this out of the way.

A few yards up the road, Belle caught sight of the hunting shack sitting back in the folds of the forest just where she'd been told it would be. Dropping the transmission into second for better traction in the muddy earth, she pulled the SUV into the nonexistent driveway and eased around to the back of the rundown building.

As she turned the key to turn off the motor, a low groan escaped from the back of the vehicle. She froze. As impossible as it sounded, somehow, against all reason, the man had to be still alive. The sound of her racing heart throbbed in her ears. No, her imagination had decided to play games with her. He couldn't be alive, not after taking three direct hits to the chest. Her mouth went dry, as she eased her head around to peer into the back.

The bundle of lifeless flesh appeared to be little more than an unmoving lump of darkness amid the shadows hiding from the bluish light filtering through the windows. See, it had been her imagination after all, but that sound had to come from somewhere. Since she hadn't picked up any hitchhikers along the way, it had to have come from the back of the SUV, which pointed a long accusing finger at her corpse. Three shots to the chest should have sent the man to whatever hell awaited him. Unless she had a reanimated corpse back there, that meant her first attempt at murdering someone hadn't done the trick. Sweat beaded on her upper lip as she tried to work up the courage to turn around for a look see. Amid visions of every horror movie she'd ever seen, reality set in. All those wasted hours of vegging in front of *Dr. G, Medical Examiner* came rushing back to her. A very scientific explanation calmed her fears. The body was simply going through rigor mortis. The sound was nothing more than his body giving up the ghost, so to speak. A bout of the giggles exploded from the depths of her chest as relief washed over her. A niggling moment of uncertainty overcame her and Belle checked the rear view mirror. It showed exactly



what she'd seen with her own eyes, an unmoving lump sitting against the rear door. The ride had shifted the body from where Carl and Ronald had originally placed it, but she saw no signs of life evident in the body. Her nerves were on edge and this was an indication of how strained they were becoming. The best thing to do would be to get the whole mess over with, and haul her butt back to civilization before she started seeing zombies behind every tree.

Resolved to do just that, Belle hit the release catch of the back door and slipped her hand over her own door handle. The driver's side door swung open, letting a brisk rush of cold airflow into the stale interior. Shivering, she hugged her jacket tightly around her exposed face and neck. Belle knew the effort amounted to a waste of time, by the time she finished cleaning up her mess, odds were she'd be a helluva lot colder and a whole lot nastier. A pleasant thought to end her night.

Through the growing fog, Belle spotted a tool shed leaning precariously toward the forest on the side of the shack. Rounding the SUV, she hoped she'd find a shovel in the decrepit building, and if anybody up there loved her, a wheelbarrow to cart around the body. Throwing her back out lugging it around didn't appeal to her one bit, like any of this did to begin with. The way tonight was turning out, Belle sincerely doubted she'd be that lucky.

The hoot of an owl brought her head swinging back to the front of the glorified truck. A fine sheen of white steam drifted across the mud-splattered hood, all but obscuring the owl's pale eyes shining from the darkness. Belle jumped as the SUV rattled with the death throws of the cooling engine. Drawing in a deep breath, she wondered how much more her frazzled nerves could take. With her heart still pumping through her chest, she fell against the Escalade's door. Damn, if she was going through this again. Next time, Silvian help her, she'd shoot to wound.

Belle had nearly recovered when a soft thump came from the back of the vehicle. She blew a thin veil of white frost into the night air, sure that any minute now she would give herself a heart attack. Forcing herself to calm down, Belle realized she was simply jumping at shadows, but the thought did little to help. That's what she got for playing 'hide the body in the middle of nowhere'. Using the last of her courage, Belle reached for the latch on the hatchback. The heavy metal and glass door flew up before she had the chance to turn the handle.

She scampered back, the door narrowly missing her. Giving the door a suspicious glare, she cursed yet another heart attack blooming in her chest. The damned things never opened that easily when she had her arms full of groceries. Forget trying to figure out the logic involved to that mystery. Scratching her head, Belle summed it up as yet another freaky moment in, what could only be called, the worst night of her life.

Turning back to the Escalade, the dome light glared into her face momentarily blinding her. She blinked to clear the black spots from her eyes. When she opened them, a strangled gasp escaped from the center of her soul.

"This was my favorite frigging shirt." The dead guy plucked a blood soaked Jimi from the center of his chest, as he unfolded himself from the SUV's open doorway.

Belle did the only reasonable thing a woman in her position could do. She fainted into the nearest mud hole she could find.

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Chase stepped from the cramped back-end with an undignified grunt. Plastering himself against the open door, he did his best to not fall flat on his face -- or ass depending on which way the wind blew. The way he felt, Chase knew which way he'd probably end up. You would have

thought sooner or later this dying thing would've gotten easier. Nope, it still hurt like a direct line to hell and back again. That was the price of the penance he paid -- among a few other nastier things he tried not to think about sober. At the moment, he opted for not at all. As soon as his body stopped decomposing, he might consider it, but wouldn't be passing any bets on it.

The urge to toss his guts through his nose had passed, so Chase felt confident enough to stand. His first priority was to check on the girl. With the luck hanging out in his corner tonight, his sudden reappearance among the living had given her a fatal coronary. Somehow he knew she would faint -- they always did -- but hadn't expected her to be so dirty about it. Though if he said so himself, the lovely Mrs. Gardner did look hot covered in mud. Idly fingering the bloody bullet hole, he pried his mind away from the whirling mass of impure thoughts crowding his brain. This wasn't how he pictured the evening ending when he'd left the agency. Then again, nailing a trace was never anything if not interesting.

One look at the girl splayed out on the ground told him she wasn't likely to be going anywhere for a while. He might as well see how much damage she'd done. He frowned at the three holes dotting Jimi's 'fro, trying not to think about how long he'd had the damn thing. Monterey seemed like a hundred years ago, now his only relic of that day hung from his shoulders, blasted to hell and back. Chase should be glad that aside from the pin-holed shirt, he was okay. In spite of his continued existence, he almost wished the bullets had done their job, but knew it would take more than a couple ounces of lead to take him out.

After a few thousand years, he'd come to the conclusion nothing could end his misery. The bitches who controlled his life weren't likely to suddenly go all goodness and gravy to forgive him for his sins. No, they wanted him to suffer until the end of time. The sour thought brought a flood of memories he'd just as soon stayed away. Chase pushed them aside with an ease that only came from years of practice. He had more important things to worry about than ancient history, even if it was his own. Like getting his ass back to civilization and earning his payday. Since he had stopped bleeding all over the place, he might as well load up the girl and hit the road before someone else decided to take a potshot at him.

A roll of thunder fractured the eerie silence, closely followed by another. The crackle of light splashing the darkness drew Chase's gaze skyward. An ugly mass of gray and black cotton candy swam across the starlit void. The subtle hint of blue fire along their edges turned to fingers of light streaking toward the earth. Chase frowned at the first drop of rain splashing against his forehead. As if he didn't have enough crap to worry about.

Water rapidly pooled around his feet as the sky let loose its fury. He might need a shower, but a cold ass one he could do without. Then again, the way the Gardner woman set his blood on fire, a cold shower might be exactly what he needed. To hell with that. Bloody and soaking wet didn't appeal to him one bit. With a none too silent curse, he dropped to his knees beside the unconscious woman and dug in her pockets for the keys to the SUV.

Her eyes fluttered as he lifted her up enough for the rain to pelt her face. Despite the downpour, she settled back into the semblance of unconsciousness and made no other sign of waking. The dim light from the interior of the vehicle shed a pale light over them. Mixed with the flashes of lightning crackling against the sky, he had ample light to search her for the keys. A plea for damnation rumbled from his throat as he came up empty.

Scampering to his feet, Chase dashed back to the open driver's side door, vainly hoping he'd find them still dangling from the ignition. Coming up empty again, Chase wiped the rain from his eyes in frustration. The silly twit must have thrown them into the brush when she fainted. Dammit to hell! The car was so new he doubted he could even hotwire it without

electrocuting himself, or frying the car's computer in the process. Just great! Screwed didn't even begin to cover the shape he was in.

Damn, just earlier this evening, he had been in a nice warm bar with a fully intact vintage Jimi shirt. How in the hell did he end up trapped in the middle of nowhere? Oh yeah, how could he forget he had Annie Oakley to thank for this steamy slice of hell. Well, he sure wasn't planning to stand around all night thinking about all the ways tonight had gone to shit. Whatever he did, Chase knew he needed to figure it out before he caught pneumonia to go along with the gunshots she'd given him to remember her by.

It wasn't like he had too many options open to him, if he didn't find the keys, aside from getting drenched. In any case, he couldn't do a damn thing until daylight. By then, knowing his luck, the rain would probably wash the keys away, and from the looks of the sky they were in for a gully washer. The thunder had become one continuous drum roll across the sky with the rain gradually picking up intensity by the minute. Yep, he was screwed. Without the keys, they were stuck here for the duration. The hunting shack might look like a piece of crap, but at least the thing had a roof over it.

Looking at his would be murderer, Chase's first impulse was to leave the bitch in the mud until morning. Common sense won out. If he left her out there, sooner or later she'd wake up. The woman wasn't stupid -- impetuous, but not stupid. The minute she came to her senses, nothing would stop her from high tailing it out of here leaving him the job of finding her ass all over again. Bringing him all the way out to this godforsaken place, it was a safe bet she knew the area. Nope, it looked like they were roomies for the night. A good length of rope would make sure she stuck around.

Her mud hole had turned into a small lake by the time Chase made up his mind. Lifting her like she weighed nothing, he stormed toward the shack. A sliver of an overhang covered the broken walkway leading to the door. The only thing Chase could say about the rundown place was that it would at least shield them from the slanting downpour -- just barely.

Reaching the slender piece of plywood masquerading as a door, he didn't have the time to fumble with her and grope around for the prerequisite hidden spare key. One good kick took the problem out of his hands. Chase winced as the wood splintered around the worn sole of his boot. Surprisingly, the majority of the door held solid except for a chunk of the door jamb that jutted outward and would need replacing. Since his name didn't appear anywhere on the lease, he didn't think it worth his effort to give a damn. Let whoever owned the place try to sue him if they had the balls. He had three slugs rolling around in his aorta he'd be more than happy to shove up their ass if they tried.

The interior didn't offer much in the way of creature comforts, but it'd do. The mood she'd put him in, Chase would have spent the night in an outhouse if it got him out of the fucking rain. He spotted a twin bed sitting in the far corner of the one room house that would solve problem number one. Gentler than his emotions dictated, he set the girl on the dusty quilt covering the bed, glad to be free of the soaking weight filling his arms. He couldn't help but smile as the girl grunted once before promptly curling up in the center of the bed.

Chase could relate. He was freezing straight to his soul. Before the rain, it had been nippy but now it was getting downright cold. The wet clothes probably weren't helping, but there was little he could do about that. Then again maybe he could. If he hadn't been imagining it, the fireplace nestled against the far wall might be just the thing to take the bite off the cold. A stack of firewood even sat conveniently by the door. Finally, somebody up there had decided to cut him a break.

He had a roaring blaze going a few minutes later. Blocking the door as best he could with an old table that had seen better days, Chase returned to the fireplace and sat down, shoving his arms nearly into the flames. Once the room warmed up a little above freezing cold, he shucked the jacket along with his ruined shirt. Setting them over a chair to dry out, he toyed with losing the pants, but decided against it. They would dry out soon enough with him squatting in front of the fire. Call him weird, but the idea of being totally naked in the same room as the woman who just killed him didn't sit too well with him.

Suddenly remembering her, he flicked his head to the side to check on his murderess. She had finally uncurled from the fetal position. Her face had taken on an ethereal beauty he hadn't noticed -- not that she wasn't smoking hot before. If he had to call the look anything, he'd have to say she looked almost angelic. Good thing he knew there were no such things as angels. Only thing he knew for sure to exist were demons. He had enough of them haunting his ass to know that for damn certain. Still, Chase found it hard to remember she just blew not one, but three holes through him.

Chase scooted around with his back to the fire letting the raw warmth rush over the bunched muscles. The heady mix of popping hickory and maple filled his nose. He drank it in, relishing the rustic memories the scents evoked.

Feeling almost human again, he let his eyes wander back to the sleeping woman. He marveled at how easily she slipped from unconsciousness into slumber. Her face had a peaceful quality about it, showing none of the tension it revealed in while awake. The soft curl of her lips captured him. A sudden yearning made his heart skip a beat. He wondered how it would be to taste those lips and everything they promised.

Chase shook his head to clear the intruding thought from his brain. The heat was definitely getting to him. He couldn't remember the last time he allowed himself such diverting daydreams. Looking at her, he found himself trapped by what he saw. She was beautiful. Something about the woman called to him, and in spite of everything, he found himself wanting her. The thought made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

This was not the woman to be lusting after. Not that he was averse to taking a woman when the need arose. He didn't claim to be celibate by any stretch of the word. He had the pleasure of knowing his share of women over the years. A lot of women, if the truth be told. But in all that time, he had never had someone whom he could call *the woman*.

Honestly he'd never tried to find that mythical being, yet here he couldn't help but think that exactly what he was looking at. Somehow it didn't even matter the woman in question was someone who just tried to commit murder in the first degree, using him as the victim of choice. He rubbed the pressure from between his eyes and tried to make sense of this sudden outbreak of insanity. As hard as he searched for the reason, Chase couldn't.

Dammit, man! Belle Gardner was just a woman. She might look like a million bucks but he couldn't lose sight of the fact that she had an iceberg of a heart beating under all that beauty. Why else would she leave her old man, emphasis on old, and end up playing Diva in a run down bar? He wouldn't even get into her shooting him in cold blood. This bitch was definitely not the type of woman to be contemplating picket fences and a dog named Bruno with. In spite of the obvious, he couldn't help but feel that something more lurked under her surface. Well, besides the smoking package.

That did nothing to change his mind. Come morning he planned to take her back to Gardner. A pretty face had never interfered with him making a payday and he wasn't about to start changing the rules of the game now.

## Chapter Three

John Gardner did not like loose ends. Having his detective suddenly drop off the face of the earth amounted to one big loose end -- one he didn't intend to let stay loose for long. His men had lost Michaels at Ronald's low-end dive. Oh, yes, he'd known about the man's predilection to treachery all too well. Gardner only wished his agents had been able to deal with them at the bar, instead of letting Belle slip through their fingers. Honestly, he had hoped the detective would prove capable enough to find her. Now, he had not only a missing girl to worry about, but the errant detective as well. Then again, he knew it had been a mistake to trust half-breeds to do the job without screwing it up. If he could have trusted anyone else to handle the job, he would have. As it stood, he'd been forced to use what he had but at least they were loyal to him.

He wished the same could be said for those within the hierarchy. After nearly two centuries, they still refused to accept him into their exclusive club. That had been their first mistake. When the world turned, they would pay for that slight. His allies would see to it.

For some reason, the thought didn't ease his mind. In spite of everything, he played a dangerous game. If the Peoples discovered just how far he had sunk to achieve his goals, the outcome would almost be as bad as what would happen if he failed to appease his allies. Not that he considered himself fool enough to trust the dark ones to adhere to the letter of their agreement. The Nespharillium had their own agenda. Gardner knew that only too well. The dark Peoples were taught treachery from the cradle. A lesson he learned well in their company.

The best course he could follow would be to get Belle back home where she belonged, firmly under his control. Only she represented a threat to him now. Finding her would serve another purpose besides the obvious. Thanks to Michaels, he'd already routed out one of many dissenters in the ranks of the hierarchy. Gardner had known she would run to one of the Peoples. Ronald had been a safe bet, but then again the man had been one of his brother's staunchest supporters. Gardner rubbed his temples, wondering who would be the next to fall. The anticipation was almost worth the trouble Belle continued to put him through.

One of the half-breeds came through the door, but Gardner chose to ignore him. These mongrels needed to be constantly reminded of their place. Let the man stand there wondering what he'd done to earn his master's displeasure. Oh, the fool had done nothing, but the bead of sweat glistening on the mongrel's brow cheered his foul mood. Alas, as with all things, Gardner knew to prolong this flight of fancy would serve no practical purpose.

He glanced up from the papers on his desk, but didn't allow the man his full attention. "Yes?"

"Uh, Mr. Gardner--" The man stumbled the rest of his words into nothingness.

"Spit it out." Gardner looked up, this time leveling a burning glare at the sniveling creature before him. "I don't have all night to listen to your fumbling attempts at speech."

"Michaels seems to have disappeared." The half-breed's head shifted to his right, the perspiration completely coating his face.

"How can a man walk into a bar and just disappear?" His fingers gripped the desk, as he stared into the fool's face. "Surely, you incompetents had all the exits covered."

"Damn if I know, sire. Jackson and Telmar had the rear covered while Sirius and I kept an eye on the front. Unless the guy can turn invisible, he never left the joint."

Gardner allowed himself to smile as he saw the fear creeping into the man's face. The mongrel wasn't lying. Dammit to hell. Ronald and the girl had taken Michaels out. It was the only answer that made sense.

"Are your associates still at the bar?"

"I left Jackson and Telmar. Sirius is waiting for me outside." The man looked toward the door, like it was the gates to heaven.

"Good, tell them to keep an eye on the place and report if anything strange happens." Gardner hoped they had enough sense to recognize strange when it slapped them in the face.

"Uh... What about me and Sirius?" A nervous tic developed under the man's right eye that amused Gardner to witness.

"I want you two to go to Darkside Investigations. There are two entrances." He held two fingers up to illustrate the number in case this one proved to be the imbecile he appeared to be. "The front is obvious. Let Sirius handle that one. Michaels has a bolt hole located at the rear of the building in a seedy bar he believes I have no knowledge of. I want you to set up close by and keep an eye. If Michaels shows up, call me."

The half breed rubbed his toe into the carpet, nervously. "And if he doesn't?"

Mulling over the question, Gardner flipped through his planner. His last meeting ended slightly before three. That should be a good enough deadline for this affair. "I'll give the man until three tomorrow. If he doesn't return, I'll pay his offices a visit. A little pressure on his partner may shed some light on his whereabouts."

The man opened his mouth to speak, but Gardner waved him off. The stooge knew well enough that ended his audience. Gardner watched him shuffle to the door, slamming it in his haste to get away. John smiled. If only all his associations ended with such blind obedience.

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Chase came awake to the sound of thunder. Wondering if he'd passed out, or if he actually had been able to make a solid night of it, he rolled over to see the first hints of false dawn pressing through the crack in the makeshift door. At least he thought that's what it was. With the storm still raging outside, it could be lightning for all he knew. Without the benefit of a cup of coffee, he wasn't about to place bets either way.

The biting cold eating its way through his body told him the fire had played out sometime during the night. He grunted at the stiffness running through his body and shifted to his knees, grabbing a poker from beside the fireplace to steady himself. His bones screamed for heat. Jabbing the coals, the embers started a slow burn beneath the thin layer of ash. As it caught, he quickly added some of the smaller logs from the pile he'd placed beside the fireplace until the flames sent out enough warmth for the ache to ease from his damp joints.

Thankful for the warmth, Chase nearly forgot he'd gained a roommate the night before. A moan from the bed brought the memory of last night leaking back into his frozen mind. Turning around, he saw the girl still safely tucked into slumber. Lucky her, he thought sourly. Relaxing his guard, he sat back down in front of the fire. He couldn't stop himself from taking another peek at her sleeping body nestled in the folds of the quilt. Shaking his head, Chase turned away before he convinced himself to do something stupid, like care. She was the job. Nothing more. The minute he lost sight of that, he might as well... He wasn't sure what that might as well meant, but it made his skin crawl just thinking about it.

Dragging a hand through his hair, he went back to poking the struggling fire. Last night, everything had seemed so clear to him. When morning came, Chase would wake up and after a nasty verbal debate, which he'd win, he'd carry her ass back to her husband. Now, he wanted to do everything in the book *but* deliver her into Gardner's hands. What the hell happened to 'the bitch shot him' not ten hours ago? He'd like to go back to that and forget about this mushy crap.

Too bad he saw no chance of that taking place. Even asleep, everything about her drove him to distraction. The gentle rise and fall of her chest intoxicated him. The rhythm of her slumber only served to draw his eyes the slope of her neck and up to the soft pillows of her lips. His mouth went dry with the thoughts of running his finger over them, tasting them, devouring them. No, he had to stop thinking about her like she was a steak dinner after a month of bologna. Of course her staring at him like that didn't help one bit.

Oh, shit! Chase flailed back first into the fire.

Hot embers scorched his skin as he scrambled to get to his feet, patting his hands furiously to extinguish the flames licking their way up the seat of his pants. He stopped short of running out into the driving rain, but only just. Finally, the giggles that came from the bed stopped him from making a total fool of himself.

He froze like a deer in headlights and looked at the source of the laughter. Belle was sitting up in the bed with the biggest smile on her face he'd ever seen in his life. The sight of her there hit him like a beacon of sunshine filling the room. Chase couldn't believe this could possibly be the same woman who ruthlessly put three bullets in him last night. The minute she saw him staring at her, the woman from last night snapped her mask into place.

"I thought I killed you." Her voice displayed none of the laughter he had just witnessed.

"Join the club, toots." Chase reached for his shirt. He felt a chill in the air that had nothing to do with the cold.

"I'm not going back." She shifted, pushing herself to the edge of the bed.

He felt a moment of respect for her defiance. "Wish you the best of luck, but I'm being paid a fortune to make sure you do."

"Blood money. John is a total bastard. If you take his money, you might as well be slitting my throat yourself," she growled.

Chase stepped back. The expression on her face told him she actually believed her old man would kill her if he took her back. The bad feeling smacking him around when he took this case came slamming back home. Gardner didn't seem the type to moon over a woman, but he did feel like a man who didn't like to be played. Dammit to hell! He let the payday blind him to what should have been obvious to anyone with a lick of sense.

He pulled the shirt over his head. Chase fell back into the chair and looked her over. She didn't seem to be afraid. Instead, he sensed the raw power of righteous anger coming off her. Okay, he'd been wrong. Even though it meant kissing the Shelby goodbye, he couldn't take her back to Gardner. That didn't mean he planned to fall for the first sob story of the morning, either.

"Let's say I believe you." He rubbed his chin while watching her. "He's still your husband. Running away isn't going to solve your problems."

"That son of a bitch isn't my husband." She leapt from the bed. "Is that what he told you?"

"Yeah. So if he isn't your husband, what the hell is he?" Chase couldn't help but feel this case had rapidly turned into a frigging soap opera.

"He's my stepfather." She spat the words at him.

Chase snarled. Things just turned ugly. He'd worked enough of these cases to know domestic disputes were the nastiest of the nasty. He saw two possible reasons the old man would want the kid back. The first was money. The second, he didn't want to think about. If he did, somebody was going to get hurt. And, Chase had a name, address and a soon to be canceled check in case he forgot who to take out.

The problem as Chase saw it was that men like Gardner didn't give up. If he wanted this girl bad enough to lie to his own P.I. to get her back, he'd turn up the heat on his next try. As much as Chase wanted to, he couldn't walk away. The next guy Gardner hired might not have the high moral fiber that he did.

"I believe you," he said finally. "But, whether I believe you or not isn't going to change the situation. Your step-daddy wants you home. He's not going to stop trying just because I shove his check up his ass."

"Let me worry about him. It isn't your problem." He could tell she meant it. Bad for her, he was too stubborn to care what she thought.

"Strange thing is he made it my problem. I don't like being lied to."

She gave him a look that could have shattered steel. "I don't need your help."

"No, I don't think you do," he laughed. "But you're going to get it anyway."

"What makes you think I need help from someone who just tried to drag me back to the one man I'd rather kill than look at." She stuck out her chin, daring him to answer.

"Because you owe me for a vintage Jimi Hendrix tee shirt." He smiled, fingering the evidence.

"Yeah, mind explaining to me why you're still walking around." The intensity of her gaze startled him. "I pumped three rounds into you. I saw the blood, so don't try to bullshit me with a bullet proof vest story."

Chase let his head droop. He'd wondered when she'd finally get around to bringing up his sudden return to life. It had been a long time since he told anyone the story. Frankly, he didn't think he had it in him to tell it again. After nearly three thousand years, the pain had settled down into a comfortable niche where he could deal with it. That might have worked if the voices tickling the back of his mind weren't so hell-bent on making sure forgetting was the one thing he never would be able to do.

"I am an immortal." His voice shook as the half-truth flew from his mouth.

Chase looked up to see her reaction to his statement. Her face betrayed nothing. At first he thought he'd been speaking too low for her to hear. Then her eyes flicked over him. He could see the appraisal running through her brain. Yeah, he'd think he was crazy, too, but the proof starring both of them in the face threw crazy out the window.

"You aren't one of those deluded vamp wannabes, are you?" she asked, the skepticism oozing from her voice.

"No, I am not a creature of the night or any of the other drivel the popular media attempts to foster upon the unsuspecting," Chase snorted, wishing his life could be so simple.

"Then what the hell are you?" Her eyebrow shot up, giving him a clear view of the scorn she carefully hid behind her disdain.

"I am cursed." This time his voice was so low, he doubted even God could have heard him utter it.

"You expect me to buy this. Last time I looked, people who are cursed don't survive gunshot wounds. They tend to end up dead rather than living forever." Her disbelief was more



than evident in the tone of her voice. He couldn't blame her, but he wasn't about to change the truth to suit her concept of how the world should function.

"Frankly, you can believe what you want." Chase grunted, finally. "My life isn't open to historical revision by you, or anyone else."

"Let's say for one minute you're telling the truth. Why don't you explain to me exactly how you were cursed? I think you owe me that, at least." She tucked her legs under her and leaned forward. "I'm all ears."

"I don't owe you shit, lady. You were the one who shot me. If anyone owes anybody any damn thing, it's you." Chase fought to keep himself in check. He didn't know why her question set him off, but it did.

*'Tell her, Brechashe. Tell her how you slaughtered us, delighting in the warmth of our blood running down your arm, as you plunged the sword into our breasts.'* A chorus of voices sang into his brain.

"Shut up. Can't you give me a moment of peace?" Chase turned his head, cursing the voices' timing. Why did they have to pick now to stop minding their own damn business?

*'No, warrior, such is the price for the follies of your misspent youth.'* Their answer slammed a dull throb into the base of his skull.

"I am not the same man as I was then." Knowing the woman must be looking at him like he'd taken a ride on the crazy train, he grimaced. "You think you could cut a guy a break"

*'That truth does not change the fact we are still in this limbo of your creation.'*

"Then, feel free to rot there!" He clawed his hands into tightly wound fists. "I can do no more than I already have to atone for my crime."

*'There is no atonement. There is only retribution.'* The choir chimed back before fading to silence.

Chase knew, from long experience, how right they were.

## Chapter Four

"Hey, you still here?" The girl's voice carried across the room but it barely registered in his brain.

Silent echoes of his tormentors' cries still played through his head. The voices had been quiet for so long, he had almost convinced himself they had forgotten about him. The dream of having them no longer dogging him on his long journey to hell had become just that, a dream. Chase knew he'd just been deluding himself. It had only been a matter of time before they decided he hadn't suffered enough. And like a bad penny, their voices were back stronger than ever.

In spite of all his efforts to forget his damnation, his brain turned back the musty pages of his memory. With the effortlessness of a favorite movie flashing across the screen, he saw that day replaying in his mind. As hard as Chase tried to block out the memories, he knew the images wouldn't stop until they had played out to their undeniable conclusion.

*The clang of his armored boots on the hard marble floor echoed as the only sound shattering the silence of the darkened chamber. The respite from the cries of the dying offered a welcome change from the past half hour. Brechashe didn't think about the bloody victory he'd just gained his lord and master. There would be time for that later, when guilt came calling. After one last chore, he could be free of this hell hole.*

*Alexander asked too damn much of him. Slaying warriors in the heat of battle was one thing, but this senseless slaughter was another matter altogether. Killing women did not sit well with him. If anyone but the Macedonian had asked this of him, Brechashe would have split his skull as a reply. Instead, he played well the role of butcher, all in the name of securing a pass that, in all likelihood, they'd never even have to defend. Asia beckoned and this hidden valley represented the last step toward greater glory. Or so Alexander would have them think.*

*Rebellious thoughts crowding his mind, Brechashe forced himself to push on through the darkness. Thanks to the pale light of flickering torches he could see paintings adorning the walls depicting scenes of women. They varied, but each of the murals had one central theme -- the worship of some unknown goddess. The sight filled him with revulsion at what he had done. In the span of less than an hour, an entire civilization had disappeared from the face of the earth. When he left this building, not even it would remain to mark their passing. Alexander would see to that.*

*The passage ended abruptly. Brechashe halted just inside the arched doorway. Overhead azure skies broken by stygian night peeked back at him, as the light from a jeweled skylight filtered throughout the room. He took in a flight of nymphs in flowing white tunics soaring across the domed ceiling. In their hands were sacrifices of fruits and grain to the heavens.*

*He was so captivated by the sight, Brechashe missed the object of his quest standing in the center of the shrine. She was no taller than a child, wizened with age. A violet headdress joined her head to her body. A robe of the same hue lent her a gray face in an ocean of purple and gold. The woman saw him and stepped from the mists. Behind her a marble idol of her goddess watched with cool detachment the tableaux unfolding beneath her gaze.*

*"This place shall be your downfall, warrior," her voice rang out like a clap of thunder from the hand of Zeus himself in the dead stale air.*

*"Woman, your mysteries mean nothing to me. Give me what I come for and I'll..." Brechashe gripped his sword. The blood coating his hands made it difficult, but he held on.*

*"You'll what? Let me go? Slay me as you have my sisters? Your threats are nothing, as are your promises. The forgotten goddess bespoke your coming, and my death. It is her will that works in this temple, not yours." The old woman let a grim smile crease the folds of her face.*

*"Then it is your goddess's wish for you to die before her altar, not mine. Strange is the wisdom of gods and fools."*

*"Both of which are present in this place. Come warrior, end my destiny while you fulfill yours." She spread her robe, revealing a body more ancient than he thought.*

*"So be it, woman. Tell you goddess you served her well, and in the end steel was the only god who mattered." He rammed the blade between her sunken breasts.*

*"With this blood you have sealed your doom. My sacrifice is complete. My goddess is your goddess. Until the end of time shall you wander with the voices of my sisters as the lullaby your ears shall always hear until true love breaks the bindings of your soul." The woman's voice was a ragged whisper, yet Brechashe felt it burning itself into his brain. The sound still echoing in his ears, as life fled her fragile form.*

*He fell to his knees. Pain scoured his chest. Looking down, he saw blood pouring from a cut in the exact place he had stabbed the crone. Above him the goddess smiled and he knew no more...*

Chase shook his head, clearing the images of that long ago day from his eyes. The chamber gone, the damp cold hunting shack took its place. Tears ran from the depths of his eyes. He gazed at the woman sitting on the bed, and saw his pain mirrored on her face.

"I cannot tell you what you want to know." He wiped a hand across his dry mouth. "Believe me if you wish, or not. Either way, I don't give a damn."

Without another word, he rose from the chair and walked to the door. Staring out into the rain he wondered if this, too, was the will of the nameless goddess. How strange it seemed that rain could cleanse the world of its sin, but tears would never clean his soul. In the end it didn't matter. He was truly damned for all eternity.

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Belle couldn't take her eyes off the man. The sadness inside him tore at her heart. She didn't want to like him, but couldn't help herself. Something about him called out to her. Even last night while they were at the bar, she felt drawn to him. The way things turned out totally contradicted the feeling, but didn't make it any less real or true for that matter. Belle couldn't shake the feeling that this man belonged in her life. Just to prove it, not even death could keep him from her.

Waking up to find him alive, and not some figment of her imagination, only reinforced the sensation. Everything told her she should be freaked out by his story, but she wasn't. Her own sordid past acted as ample proof there existed more strange crap under the sun than most people realized, or more importantly, wanted to know about.

In spite of the things her heart whispered in her ear, Belle couldn't allow herself to completely trust him. If not for her own benefit then for that of her people. She had to keep him,

and everyone, at arm's length. The heart was no stranger to being deceived. Life had taught her people were not always what they seemed. Her mother loved John. Didn't she? She and the Shazhium were still paying for that mistake. After all the bastard had done to her, Belle's mother, the once strong Myrandia Gardner, refused to see him for what he was. What more proof did her mother need to convince her?

The stakes were just too high for Belle to trust anyone, let alone a stranger, and especially one who worked for her stepfather. But, could she totally abandon the idea of accepting his offer? Belle needed help, but willingly allowing someone who worked for her stepfather into her life seemed like a big mistake.

She jumped when a loud bang came from the front of the shack. He stood in front of the ruined door. A pile of splintered wood that may have once been a table lay at his feet. Rain blew past the man and soaked the wood planks of the floor all around him. A sigh swelled in her chest. Everything told her to go to him and make that pain bunched between his shoulders go away. That would be a mistake. Men like him needed to brood. Once they finished wasting time on that, they'd see reason, or as close as a man could come to seeing that impossible goal. Until then, she needed to tread cautiously. Still, the silence between them demanded she say something.

"Look, I don't even know your name," Belle called to the door, not sure what she hoped to accomplish.

"Chase Michaels," he grunted without looking back. Another wave of crashing rain washed through the opening, soaking him. He didn't even seem to notice or care.

"Okay." Belle felt she should walk to him, or something. Instead, she continued to watch him until even that became too much. "Chase, I'm not saying I totally trust you, but I guess I could use your help."

He nodded, but didn't say a word. Belle fought the urge to go to him, wrap her arms around him and tell him that whatever happened to him wasn't important now. She'd already decided to let him work through this on his own. Instead, she held back. They knew nothing about each other. To go to him would be another awkward moment in a long line of them since he'd appeared in her life. Shooting him had been a bad start to this strange relationship. Complicating it more would just be another mistake.

This whole thing was way to the other side of bizarre. She was crazy for considering his offer to help her. Belle felt even crazier for actually accepting it. She'd only known him for less than nine hours, and for four of those she thought he was dead. That didn't mean she would trust him totally. If her neck had been the only one on the chopping block, Belle might be willing to open her heart to this man and tell him everything. Unfortunately, her secrets were not her own. The lives of her people depended on her discretion.

Keeping him in the dark wouldn't make her situation any easier, but time restricted her from going through other avenues for aid. Ronald wouldn't be much help, and neither would any of the other Houses, if his reaction had been any indication. Belle needed to get things moving before time ran out and John latched onto a hunter without Chase's moral fiber. To do that, she needed help the Peoples weren't prepared to give until she proved herself to them.

Belle didn't know how long she could depend on lies and half truths to keep Michaels satisfied. Sooner or later, he would find out she was hiding a big hunk of truth from him. Until then, she would have to play things close to her chest. The safety of the Peoples came first. The minute she forgot it, she was no better than John.

"So where do we go from here?" Belle asked when the silence became too much to bear.

He shrugged and turned around, his face glistening with the cold rain. "For starters, we need to keep you hidden from Gardner."

"What do you think I've been doing for the past six weeks?" Belle snorted, trying to ignore the urge to taste the rain from his lips.

"Not too damn well. I found you. Didn't I? Gardner has the money to hire men a helluva lot better at finding people than me." He spun around and stalked toward her. "When I call to tell him I'm dropping the case, he'll have another bloodhound on your trail before the hour is up."

"We could stay here," she offered weakly.

He shot her idea down quicker than she could get it out of her mouth. "No good. I need access to a computer, and to call my partner to let him know what's going on."

Belle slumped onto the bed. There had to be some way to keep John in the dark long enough for her to get the Peoples to band together against him. Then it hit her.

"This may sound crazy, but don't tell him you're dropping the case." It was the perfect solution.

"Huh?" Chase raised his eyebrow.

"Think about it. If he thinks you're on the case, he won't go looking for anybody else to find me. With him in the dark, we can contact the people I need to get in touch with, so he'll never be able to have me under his thumb again." A slightly edited view of her reasons, but all she could give him for the moment.

His smile nearly made her regret her decision.

"You know, for a wee thing you have a devious mind." His smile deepened until the dimples almost popped from his cheeks. "And a damn good shot, too."

"Uh, I'm really sorry about that." Belle blushed.

"Don't worry about it. I'm just glad you weren't packing a shotgun." Chase chuckled, wiggling three fingers through the bullet holes. "Splatter shots are a bitch to heal."

"How can you joke about it?" Belle still found his attitude confusing. He joked with her about killing him. By all rights, the guy should be pissed and yelling his head off, instead of being so charming about it.

"Because, after an eon or two, it's not worth the effort of worrying about a little thing like getting shot. Now, a claymore through the chest, that's a total pain in the ass." The grin faded to a somber grimace. "Immortality is a curse. Take it from someone who knows."

"Be serious." Belle sighed. How could immortality be a curse? Look at him. He looked hot as hell and couldn't die. Sounded like a good deal to her.

"I'll make you a promise. When you start trusting me with the rest of your story, I'll start acting serious." His gaze pierced her. "Sound like a deal?"

"Chase, I really want to trust you, but you have to look at it from my side of things." The look on his face made her want to tell him everything. If only she could.

"I am, believe me. I work for your stepdad, who isn't a very nice man. For all you know, this could all be a ploy to lull you into a trap. Sister, I wouldn't trust me either." His face softened. "All I'm asking is for you to give me a chance, and I'll earn your trust. 'Til then, you're stuck with what you got."

"Deal." Belle nodded with a smile.

"Since the SUV outside isn't the same one you drove to the bar, and my hunk of crap isn't outside, I take it your buddies at the bar ditched mine somewhere permanent." Chase pointed toward the lake in the front yard. "And, the one outside belongs to the guy you were meeting."

"Sorry." Belle rolled her shoulders and looked sheepishly at the floor. "And, you're right. The SUV belongs to Ronald."

"No prob, but I'm adding it to the shirt. That's two you owe me." He wiggled his two fingers at her to emphasize the point. "It also means we need a new ride. I'm guessing since the chunk of Detroit's finest outside belongs to your pal, you don't have a spare key anywhere handy. Don't answer me if you don't want to, but I need to know if this Ronald guy knows Gardner. If they do, it's not a stretch of the imagination to say Daddy Dearest has him under surveillance, especially if he thinks you two are in cahoots with each other. Which means Gardner will be on the lookout for anything that could lead him to you, and that SUV would sure as hell do it."

Belle thought about it. He was right. John would recognize anything belonging to Ronald. She might not like ditching the vehicle, but it needed to be done. They could leave it somewhere safe, then she'd leave Ronald a voice mail telling him where he could pick it up. Until a better idea came along, it was the only option.

"They're what you might call business associates." Belle bit her lip at the outright lie, and knew he recognized it as one. 'I'm sorry' was almost to her lips when he lifted his hand.

"The trust thing will come." He winked. "We can take the SUV back to the end of the road, but we need something untraceable to get back to civilization. Gardner looked the type to have me tailed to hedge his bets on finding you."

"He would." Belle agreed. "Then have you killed to make sure nobody found out what he was up to."

Michaels slipped his hand under his shirt and poked three fingers through the rips her nine had left. "Good thing I'm not easy to kill."

"John won't take this sitting down when he finds out you double crossed him." She frowned. Damn, why did she have to like him? It would make lying to him so much easier.

"I can handle whatever he has to throw at me." Chase paused, the levity leaving his face. "Belle, I'm not asking you to trust me with whatever you're hiding, but trust me to keep you safe."

"What are you asking me?" Belle gave him a wary look.

"I can't do this on my own, and your allies don't seem to be much help. I can help you, but I can't do it alone. I need to call in my partner." He waited for her reaction.

"Okay, call who you need to," Belle said, tentatively. At the moment Chase was all she had. So far he had been up front and honest with her about things she could tell hurt him to reveal. If he could trust her, maybe she should do what he asked -- simply trust him with her life. Secrets had their own way of protecting themselves.

"Good. I'll try him as soon as we get someplace with some signal." He shot her a smile that threw her heart into a permanent flutter. "You've managed a fine piece of nowhere to dump us into."

"Seemed like a good idea at the time." Belle shrugged.

"I bet it did." He laughed before turning back to the open door.

Belle watched him peer into the gloom for a few minutes until the sudden silence overwhelmed her. "I'm sorry."

"Excuse me?" he asked, turning his gaze toward her.

"For... you know... shooting you," Belle said, even though she knew it sounded lame as hell.

"No problem." He waved her off. "I deserved the wake up call. Consider it a life lesson I needed to relearn."

"You're taking this remarkably well." Better than she deserved.

"When you get as old as I am, you'd be amazed how mellow you get." He crouched down next to the shattered doorway.

"Still..."

"Forget it." He peered through the doorway. "Looks like the rain is letting up. We better hit the road while we still can. Which brings me back to the question you neglected to answer. Hope you have a spare key to that thing."

"No." Belle reached into her pocket and came up empty. "I guess I lost them last night when you popped out of the Escalade."

"Well, I had hoped you had stashed them. Since we can't go anywhere without them, we're going to have to dig around for them in all that slush."

"In the mud?"

He let out a chuckle. "Yeah, in the mud. Unless you know a better way."

Belle shook her head. She hated doing it, too. Last time she checked, she was a little old to be playing in mud holes. Even though, suddenly the idea of him covered in mud down on his hands and knees sounded like something she'd like to see first hand.

"You coming," he called from outside the door.

With that vision floating in her head, Belle walked out into the fine mist to join him.

## Chapter Five

"I'm slipping!"

Chase looked up just in time to see Belle go shooting through the mud, her arms flailing around her head, as she tried to stop her forward momentum. It would have been funny, if the woman hadn't been heading directly for him. Not seeing any way to avoid the impact, Chase threw his leg back to brace for the collision, but it was too late. With a high pitched scream, she hit him like a steamroller, throwing both of them into the soggy lake the storm had made of the yard. The air rushed from his lungs, as he was pancaked between the oozing earth and the squirming woman, who damn well intoxicated the crap out of him. Any other time, this might have been a pleasurable endeavor. Who was he trying to fool? It was one *now*.

Her body writhed deliciously against him. The feel of her slick flesh set his manhood afire. Chase tried to ignore the pressure of his backstabbing body part as it strained against the worn denim of his jeans. Belle shifted atop him, her hands struggling vainly to gain purchase in the soft mud. For all her attempts to get up, she couldn't get past falling down. He didn't mind it one bit, either. She found the most delightful places to fall back onto. If she kept it up, neither one of them would be leaving this mud hole any time soon. At least not fully clothed.

Chase knew any minute now he would lose what little cool he had left. The mixture of mud and the feel of her warm skin drove every once of control from his mind. He'd never been one to let a woman get the best of him, but damned if Belle Gardner wasn't well on her way to making him do just that. He had to do something before he totally lost it.

She succeeded in sliding off, saving him the trouble of hasty explanations about his delicate condition. Better yet, somewhere in the middle of their slapstick routine, Belle managed to come up with the keys. She gripped them in her right hand, clinched so tight mud oozed down her wrist like chocolate ice cream off a kid's cone on a hot summer day. Chase grinned at the glee washing off the woman. Even covered in wet earth, she looked beautiful. Damn if keeping her at a safe distance wouldn't be harder than he thought.

"So, are we going to sit here all day and play patty cake, or get the hell outta here?" Belle asked, the grin still locked firmly in place.

"I don't guess you have a change of clothes handy. Your friends might not appreciate us ruining their interior if we left like this." Chase held up a mud encrusted arm.

She pointed to the rear of the SUV. "Yeah, I have a bag in back."

"That must have been what smacked me upside the head, the whole way out here." Chase rubbed the back of his head, grinning. "That takes care of you, but I'm going to have to settle for a quick wash down and a soggy ride back to civilization."

"This is Ronald's getaway. I'm sure he has some clothes that will fit you inside the house."

Chase cursed himself for being a fool. He'd spent the night cold and wet for nothing. It never occurred to him to check out the place. Maybe he was getting too long in the tooth.

"Tell you what, you go first in the shower and I'll dig around for something," he grunted, wishing like hell he could do a quick adjust before she noticed the tent he was sporting.



"Sounds good to me." Belle rose from the soupy mess and walked toward the house. She stopped and looked back. "The bathroom door doesn't have a lock, so I hope you will be a gentleman."

Chase nodded without looking up. "You can count on it."

The last thing he wanted was to be a gentleman. The minute she entered the house, visions of her wet and soapy flooded his brain. What the hell was wrong with him? After three thousand years, all these juvenile impulses should have been burned from his system. He hated to admit it, but in all his lifetimes, a woman like Belle Gardner had never entered his world. Chase had been around strong women before, but none like her. She had a fire that burned straight from her soul. There was a kinship between them he hadn't felt with anyone since hooking up with Caern. Not that his partner compared to this woman. For one thing, she was naked not more than thirty feet from him. For another, Chase didn't feel the overwhelming urge to jump Caern's bones, which would make his partner happy to find out.

Chase grinned at the thought of his partner even discovering he'd been having this mental debate. Damn, he was losing it. He needed to get a handle on his hormones before he turned into a raving Frat boy. It looked like he signed up for the long haul with Belle Gardner, and getting emotionally involved was the last thing he needed to do.

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In spite of his promise to himself, Chase was ready to chew nails. By the time he and Belle finally stood in a deserted doorway across the street from his building, his body had gone into open rebellion against his brain. Between the return of the voices and the way Belle had been making his head spin, he was ready to call it a day. Better yet, he should just crawl into bed until he came to his senses. Of course, if Ms. Gardner wanted to join him, all the better. There, he went off the deep end again. Not even the driving rain had cooled the fires she ignited inside him. Then again, if the rain hadn't dogged them all day, he could have gotten some breathing room between them.

Anything to get away from the way she made him react to her. That was the rub. She made him feel human again. His mind couldn't process the last time he'd allowed himself that luxury. Letting himself contemplate the remote chance he could function in the normal human world would lead down a road to heartbreak he wasn't ready to go down. If he ever would. Chase didn't want to go into all the touchy feely crap you'd see on Oprah. Sure, he knew somewhere in the deepest recesses of his brain, a part of him thirsted for the punishment he lived on a daily basis. Needed the pain that came with it, the way some men thirsted for women, money or power. To let a glimmer of hope enter his head that he could pass himself off as anything remotely human would be foolhardy at best. No the best thing for him to do was to get a grip and deal with the job at hand. Then he could remove Ms. Gardner as far from his life as possible.

A shaft of sunlight struck the sidewalk in front of them. Chase held back on the sigh of relief he felt at seeing it. Finally, the weather had taken one of his problems away for him. The rain might have stopped for the moment, but the ray of light was just a reprise. One look at the sky, and the grey swirling mass he saw threatened the return of the rain. The downpour had done little to cleanse the city of the reek of burnt ozone, and the clingy scent of too many people gathered together beneath its protection. He felt saddened as the light blinked out of existence, the angry sky bloating its promise away just as quickly as it had appeared.

The gloomy darkness was his friend and Chase had almost let himself forget that. Call him paranoid, but he couldn't shake the feeling that Gardner had the place under surveillance. Which meant they needed to get inside before somebody saw them. Keeping a watch on the street, he shifted in the cloistered doorway across from the back entrance to his offices. The doorway might be cramped, but until he made sure no one was waiting with any nasty surprises for him, his willingness to risk exposing them overruled any claustrophobia he might be feeling.

For a second he almost believed his own weak lie. For all his brave talk, one simple truth prevailed. He liked being this close to Belle. He enjoyed the warmth of her body pressed against his back. Her chin tickled the back of his neck as she craned her head to look out into the street. Chase knew he should have listened to the little voice in his head, but he couldn't help but be aroused by the closeness they shared. She was a dangerous commodity in his life, a woman who could make him crazy. More than that, she was unofficially a client, which meant off limits by any definition of the word.

He wished like hell Caern would show up to put some professional distance between him and the woman. After three hours of trying to get a hold of the bastard, he'd finally given up. Knowing his partner, the P.O.S. was probably laid up somewhere neck deep in women with his cell turned off. It would be just like him. Never around when you needed him, and underfoot when you didn't.

After ditching the SUV, they'd been lucky enough to catch a ride, otherwise it would have been one long ass walk in the rain. A bumpy ride in a church van hadn't been his idea of an idyllic mode of transportation, but it beat drowning or muddy feet. He could stand a few choruses of *That Old Rugged Cross* if it got them home in dry clothes. Belle didn't seem to mind, either. Her lilting voice had been the hit of the long drive.

The relaxing morning had lulled him into a sense of security he found unnerving. Lifetimes of training taught him to never let down his guard. In the span of one day, he found himself forgetting those time worn lessons. Chase wished he could blame it as a side effect of being shot, but he knew the real reason behind his newfound stupidity, and she was standing right next to him.

What else could he call the way he was acting? Coming to Darkside could amount to one whooping big potential mistake. Gardner more than likely had the place staked out waiting for him to show back up. Good thing Chase wasn't as stupid as he acted at the moment.

A little known fact existed that very few individuals were privy to. Darkside Investigations as a whole was comprised of more than simply a detective agency. The place had a life of its own. Hell, thanks to Caern's business sense, it could best be termed as a virtual conglomerate. He and Caern owned the entire building housing Darkside Investigations, as well as several other buildings on the block. The building acted home to a variety of businesses, but the bottom floor belonged solely to the monster that was D.I. incorporated. And, nestled in the back, Orpheus' Dream. What started out as a quiet place for him and Caern to hang out and get blasted turned out to become a nice neighborhood bar, and the ideal back entrance to the agency. More times than not, they had used it as a bolt hole for Caern to escape jilted lovers, or more often than his partner would like to admit, an irate husband or twenty.

Today he thanked heavens for the bar. The safest way for Chase to get some much needed information without letting anyone see him meant crossing through that beaten and scarred door. The bar office's computer operated as a backdoor into D.I.'s database. He had to stash Belle somewhere until things settled down. They kept safe houses on permanent standby, but he could never remember where the damn things were. If he could have gotten hold of Caern,

this little side trip could have been avoided. Now, not only was he wasting valuable time, but it placed Belle into the very danger he promised to keep her from. Damn, if fate hadn't decided to play the fickle bitch again.

Well, it could screw itself. Fate had screwed him long enough. It was time for some payback, as far as he was concerned. And, now was as good a time as any to get started on that project.

Chase gave the street one last check. Except for a mangy cat digging through a trash heap, the coast looked clear. Still fighting the niggling at the back of his neck, he eased out of the shadows. This way, at least, he'd be the only one taking the bullet. Cheery thought, but he'd survive a lead-induced ventilation. She wouldn't. That fact alone made him feel like a hero, even if it was a lie. Heroes were just murderers until the history books said different, and that about summed him up.

He felt Belle's eyes boring into his back. Guess she was as on edge as him. He couldn't blame her. His ass itched like crazy, and he was used to this crap. Stretching back into the shadows, Chase pulled her onto the sidewalk and motioned for her to stay close on his heels. Chase moved nonchalantly -- or as nonchalantly as a pair of soaked refugees could manage -- across the street. The last thing he wanted to do was draw attention to them. Running like a fool through the rain was liable to draw some major unwanted attention. Two dumbasses trudging across the street in the rain screamed normal. At least, for Cascade Falls it might.

Chase tried to ignore how he'd been soaked to his very soul, until they finally reached the canopy above the entrance to the bar. Even then he tried to shut out the emotion, he'd been too busy being grateful they made it without somebody shooting him to care. Belle reached for the door, but instinct put his body in front of her. The street might have been clear. The same couldn't be said for the bar. Either way, he put her in danger. His instincts told him somebody had them under their eyes. For the time being, he trusted the street more the bar.

Chase held her behind him as he pushed open the door. A hazy combination of smoke and heat rushed out to greet him. He wrapped his senses around the familiar odors. It smelled like home, or as close as he could come anymore. The usual band of gypsies lounged around the room, lost in their private miseries. Just a normal day in the homestead. That didn't mean he was ready to let it all hang out. He hadn't lost it that bad. Yet. He stared down each and every one of them, daring one of them to lift a head in their direction.

With no danger in sight, he finally allowed the tension to ease from his shoulders and shoved it to a place where he could call it back at will. Waving to a regular, whose name escaped him, Chase pushed Belle toward the long oak bar. He was wet as hell, and needed a drink. From the looks of her, a good stiff one wouldn't do her any harm, either, but he'd have to settle for giving her a drink. Sexist thing to think, but just because he'd developed a soft spot for the girl, didn't mean he wasn't still a male chauvinist pig at heart.

Smokey, the bartender, stood at the other end of the bar. Catching sight of his boss, he grabbed a bottle from under the counter. Chase smiled at the man for knowing him so well, and motioned for him to bring two glasses. The bartender nodded, reaching for two dangling overhead. The man set the trio in front of them with a knowing tip of the head to Chase before sliding back down the bar.

"What was that all about?" Belle smirked.

Chase poured her a shot of the eighty-year-old scotch, wincing at her question. "You'll have to forgive Smokey. He has a warped sense of humor."

"Are you sure? Seems to me, he's used to you bringing women to the bar." She took a sip of the scotch, letting a satisfied sigh escape her. "Damn, this is smooth."

"It should be. The bottle is older than dirt. I found a case of the stuff at an estate auction about twenty years ago while I was in England, and had to have it." Chase beamed. "The agent swore it once belonged to the private collection of Wellington. I tended to believe him, since I drank enough of the swill while serving with Welly back in the day."

"I would love to hear your old drinking stories in depth, but first I need to know where your ladies room is." Belle smiled with a hint of sarcasm in her voice.

Chase gave the room another once over before pointing to the right side. "It's through those doors."

He sat with his back against the bar, watching her walk away. Chase let the gentle sway of her hips lull him into a euphoric trance. The woman definitely could make a man forget his own name, he thought to himself as he fumbled for his glass.

"Well if it isn't the elder C in *C and C Detective Factory*," a voice whispered in his ear.

The scent of dry leaves and rich forest loam filled Chase's senses. He flicked his eyes to his right. A shimmering haze of a man leaned over the bar. The man's golden hair blended perfectly with a halo of leaves and twigs he wore around his head so that it appeared to be a part of him. A long sweeping nose slightly upturned at the end dominated his face that ended in a pointed chin jutting out over his chest. Huge almond eyes the color of a fall day twinkled with mischief from the ghost's leafy brow. The rest of him continued the motif with a rainbow of leaves that ran the gambit of autumn before fading to a mist below his waist.

"Sebastian, what have I told you about hitting the jukebox classics for your lame ass jokes." Chase reached through the ghost to put his empty glass on the bar, just to set him off.

"It's not my fault. If Caern hadn't shot the TV during the Super Bowl, I would still be quoting quirky Britcoms." Giving Chase a hurt look, Sebastian brushed closed the hole in his torso.

"Care to explain to me again why I keep you around." Chase smirked. He knew very well Sebastian stayed around because the spirit couldn't go anywhere else. As a Dryad, or rather a ghost of a Dryad, he was forever tied to the hunk of cracked wood Chase leaned against. The long oak bar had been carved from the Dryad's tree over three hundred years ago, effectively stranding the ghost in the bar for all time. The damn thing had been another one of Chase's estate sale finds. Still, Chase couldn't pass up the chance to give the ghost a hard time.

"Because you're too damn cheap to put in a decent security system. I figure my being here saves you about thirty grand a year." Sebastian huffed. "And what do I get for my trouble. I'll tell you what, nothing but derogatory comments and no TV."

"I told you last week, I've got a fifty inch plasma on order. As soon as it comes in, they'll be here to install it." Chase rubbed his temples, feeling a headache brewing.

"Make it LCD and you've got my attention, but I'm only giving you until the end of the week. Then I'm sticking the jukebox on ABBA until you have *Dancing Queen* coming out your ears."

Chase flinched, knowing the specter meant it. "If it's not here by then I'll get you something to watch in the meantime." Chase shivered as the chorus started playing in his head.

"Good deal. So where'd you pick up the Puck?" Sebastian asked.

"The what?" Chase scratched his head. The ghost was going loopy on him.

"The Puck. The elf. The Fae. You know, Legolas and all that shit." Sebastian leaned over and flicked his finger at the bathroom door. "And if my nose isn't mistaken, your missy is royalty to boot, an honest to goodness Sidhe. I haven't seen one of those since I was a sapling."

Chase whirled on the ghost. "What in the hell are you talking about?"

"The girl you came in with is a member of the Sidhe court." Sebastian backed away from him. "From the looks of her, I'd say she was a major roller. Maybe in line to one of the thrones, but that's just a guess."

Chase's head went into an instant migraine. Like he didn't have enough on his plate, as it was. Some days it didn't pay to come back from the dead.

## Chapter Six

Belle idly brushed the hair out of her face and looked into the cracked mirror. The haggard woman glaring back mocked her. Somewhere in that tired ragged face, she lurked, the real her. The one who lived in luxury, even if it was her prison, but damned if Belle could find herself in that reflection. She laughed softly. Good thing looking like hell wasn't a crime, or she'd be America's Most Wanted. The sudden wish for a butt load of concealer to hide the dark bags under her eyes brought another laugh to her lips. Okay, consider it official. She had seriously lost it. With people chasing her, let's not forget putting her trust in a man she'd barely known a day, who also just so happened to have been on her stepfather's payroll, her biggest worry had become the irrational urge for a total makeover.

Sighing, she settled for a splash of cold water to ease the burning from behind her eyes. The rusty tap spitted something close to water, if brown and runny counted as water, into the dingy porcelain sink. Not wanting to think about how unhygienic the thing looked, she waited for the flow to turn to a sludgy tan before sinking her face into the basin. Her doubts notwithstanding, it was just what the doctor ordered. A few seconds later she lifted her head, the cobwebs cleared somewhat from her head.

Insane! That was the only word to describe this entire situation. Honestly, Belle had to admit hiding out in a rundown bar just so happened to be the sanest thing she'd done in the past day. Being the heir of Summer, she thought she'd seen it all. After meeting Chase, Belle reluctantly admitted to herself she still had a lot left to learn.

The immortal had certainly been proof of that. Belle wondered what the fates were thinking when they set her on this road. She usually didn't adhere to a preset destiny involved in her life, but his appearance bespoke of something peculiar going on. Belle found it strange at the exact moment in her life she needed a hero, one pops up. Bonnie Tyler had to be the current soundtrack to her crazy life. If that wasn't the fates at work, serendipity certainly deserved overtime pay for how it screwed with her life. In spite of her doubts, she gladly put herself into Chase's hands. And she'd come back full circle to insane.

Trusting Chase might not have been the wisest choice, but it felt too right to start second guessing the decision now. Something about the man called to her. Belle knew, without even thinking about it, Chase would not let her down. When the man said he would help her, no strings attached, he meant it. Belle believed him. More than that, she *wanted* to believe him with everything she had. The thought scared her.

Her childhood had taught her well people were not always as they appeared. Life in the court of Summer consisted of subterfuges within subterfuges. As a result, it had taught her only one prevailing thing. A divine truth if you will. The only thing you could trust was to trust nothing. The lessons she learned in her youth left her guarded to the point of becoming jaded. Who was she kidding? If there were a poster child for paranoia, she'd be it. Then why did she reveal as much as she had to the man? Granted, it hadn't been enough to put the Peoples at risk, but it still treaded a fine line. One she normally didn't cross. One she planned to never cross. Yet, in one moment of weakness, she did, and the reason why still eluded her.

Belle slipped back from the mirror, hating the truth glaring back at her. She was lonely and had reached out in blind stupidity to the first lifeline thrown her way. If only she could

convince herself of that gentle lie. True, her years of isolation had made her so reserved she had locked out all contact with anyone on a personal level. She only had John's influence in her life to blame for making her a prisoner inside her own mind.

How could she trust anyone? His spies had been everywhere. It only took one slip of the tongue to bring his wrath raining down. She could still remember the pain of discovering that her own playmates were nothing more than pawns set in place to keep him informed. In the end, she had just withdrawn into herself, which suited her stepfather just fine. A sullen princess was easier to explain than one openly advocating rebellion. Belle wished she could have seen his face when he discovered her disappearance.

Escaping from his clutches hadn't been easy, but by the Unseen she'd done it. With Chase's help Belle planned to do even more. If she could rein in these foolish emotions infecting her, she might be able to bring John down from her mother's gilded throne. Somehow, she doubted ignoring the way Chase made her feel would be as easy as it sounded. Belle had been around men before, so why did just being close to Chase drive her to distraction? Over the years she'd had her fair share of men come parading past her door. Every one of them saw her not as a woman, but as a throne to be had, or a steppingstone to John's ear.

Even after a single day, Chase Michaels woke feelings in her none of them ever had. Just being close to him made her heart race like some silly schoolgirl. The sudden outbreak of hormonal insanity aside, Belle couldn't deny the attraction she felt toward Chase. Back at Ronald's cabin, she would have gladly sacrificed her people to have been able to stay there with him. Her body tingled from the memory of him pressed against her in the mud. The image had been indelibly etched into her scrapbook of moments she'd never forget. Her flesh had tasted, him but her body wanted more than a taste. It wanted the whole meal.

Moving toward the door, Belle admitted to herself the thought scared her even more than trusting him. She had too many things in her life pulling at her without adding another, especially one as distracting as Chase Michaels. Opening the bathroom door, Belle promised herself he would be one distraction she would avoid like the plague. Somehow, the task seemed more impossible than evading John long enough to stay alive.

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Chase let the words sink in. Seb wouldn't try to lie to him about something this crazy. If he said the girl was a frigging elf, she was an elf. Chase had heard rumors for years about them, but had never run across one. In a couple thousand years, you would have thought he would have seen at least one of the buggers.

If his memory didn't have any lapses from the gunshots, the Sidhe were secretive by nature. Except for veiled references throughout his life, he thought they were nothing more than another myth. Yet, it all fit. Ever since he saw the girl, he could tell something didn't ring totally kosher about her.

Now that Chase knew what he was dealing with, he needed some answers. Luckily, he had the answer man standing right behind him. "Seb, mind enlightening me on the subject? I seem to have forgotten my mythical history."

"Your ignorance never ceases to amaze me." The ghost smirked and settled his spectral body next to him. "How you got to be as old as you are without dying of stupidity, I'll never know."

"I sacrificed virgin ghosts on the altar of Diana. Now cut the chatter and give with the info," Chase hissed.

"Touchy." The ghost waved his fingers. "Let me see if I can condense it down before she gets back. The Fae come from beyond the veil, like most of the magical beings who still roam the earth. Unlike the rest of us they are the elite. Not that we think it, but they do."

Chase leaned back, knowing Sebastian had geared up for a long speech despite his earlier statement. Hurrying his friend along would save him from the bother of Bill Murraying the ghost into the next life. "Could you speed this up? I'm not sure her bladder will hold out for the entire mini-series."

"Anyway," Sebastian grimaced. "They're matriarchal by nature. So if this girl is really a Sidhe, she could be next in line for ruling one of the main two courts of Faery."

"Shit!" Chase snarled. Well, now he could figure out the rest of the story for himself. Gardner wanted Belle back so he could control whichever ruling body he happened to be a member of. For the Fae to survive this long without being outed, they had to have kept a closed lid on their existence. It explained why Belle had been so secretive and quick with a gun.

"Are you going to confront her about it?" Sebastian asked, looking him in the eye.

"No, she's obviously protecting her people. If I came out and told her I knew what she was, she'd be out the door quicker than you could say boo. I agreed to help her, and I plan to." Chase looked back to the bathroom doors.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Sebastian offered.

"You already have." He gave the ghost a smile. "But, if you could find out which court we're dealing with, I'd have a better handle on what I'm up against."

"Sure thing. There's a water sprite who comes in on the weekends. She gave me her number last weekend. She might be able to find out." Chase thought he caught a hint of a blush to his ghostly haze, but decided to keep the observation to himself.

"Yeah, but can you keep the particulars under your hat? We need to get the information, but I don't want it getting back to anyone looking for someone nosing around." Chase hoped he was getting through to the Dryad. On the whole, earth spirits tended to be a bit chatty.

"Like I'm not the soul of discretion." Sebastian looked hurt, but Chase knew it to be an act. "Your disparaging comment will cost you."

"Name it," Chase said.

"I want you to update to voice recognition on the computer in back."

"Deal." Caern was already planning to do it anyway, but Sebastian didn't need to know it.

"She's coming back." Sebastian pointed.

"Disappear." Chase brought his head around.

She was just exiting the doors. He couldn't get Sebastian's words out of his head. Belle was an honest to goodness fairy princess. It was almost comical. Here he was, faced with the ultimate in clichés. His client was a damsel in distress. In spite of that, somehow he just couldn't picture himself as the type to come riding in on a white charger to save the day. Yet, he was about to be forced into doing just that very thing.



## Chapter Seven

Belle couldn't help but notice the strange way Chase looked at her when she came from the bathroom. He looked like a wild animal on the hunt. His eyes bored a hole straight through her. She twitched as his gaze brought warmth flooding into vital parts. It had been forever since a man looked at her with such intensity. J.G., as he liked his friends to call him, had all but kept her a prisoner for the last ten years. The only contact she had with the male of the species was either gushing adoration, or outright fear at who she one day would be. For so very long she wished for someone to look at her like Chase did at that exact moment. Belle couldn't help but be attracted to the man. Hell, a dead woman would jump up to flirt with him. Just looking at him made her go weak in the knees.

Belle shook her head. She didn't need this right now. Everything depended on her keeping things on an even keel. One mistake on her part, and the whole thing would fall apart. Letting her baser instincts take control would definitely be a mistake. As hard as she tried not to, Belle could see herself falling for him. If she didn't watch herself, she would do just that.

"I was just about to go looking for you." His smile made her forget all about the indecision she'd been feeling.

She laughed. "I didn't fall in, or anything. If that was what you were worried about."

"I'd hate to think what would happen to my insurance premiums if you had." He handed her another drink. "They frown on us getting hot women stuck in the porcelain."

"Thanks, I think." Belle took the glass, feeling a sudden thrill at hearing him call her hot. Something changed while she was in the bathroom. She couldn't put her finger on it, but he was acting decidedly different. "Did you get the information you were looking for while I was away?"

"I wanted to wait for you to get back."

Belle got the feeling there was more to it than that but that went back to different.

Well, she could ignore the issue as well as he could. "Okay, what have you got in mind for the rest of the day?"

"First off, I'm going to find someplace safe for you to hide." He drained his drink and set the empty glass on the bar. "Then, after we get you tucked away, you can tell me what exactly you need me to do."

She thought about how he worded his announcement. There was no hint of resentment because she hadn't been ready to completely trust him yet. He was willing to accept whatever trust she gave him. Belle hoped what she had to give equaled the faith he'd put in her.

"Sounds like you're the man with the plan." Belle tipped back the glass, letting the amber liquid slide smoothly down her throat.

Chase laid a gentle touch on her arm. "And the plan is to get our butts out of here as quick as possible."

Belle took a step back as he rose to lead the way. They made it two steps when the bar's door slammed open. The driving rain washed around a figured silhouetted in the pale light filtering in from outside. Chase's hand tightened around her wrist, pulling her behind him.

His wide shoulders blocked most of her view of the newcomer. Chase's back tensed as the door shut. She ignored every instinct telling her to keep hidden and peeked around for a clear view.

The man standing in the doorway looked easily as big as Chase, if not wider through the shoulders. A well worn brown leather jacket hung from his shoulders like a second skin. Silver eyes pierced the darkness lurking beneath his brows. Jet black hair washed back from his forehead and fell behind his shoulders, stray strands tickling the side of his face. His gaze never left Chase.

"You got a lot of nerve showing up now," Chase rumbled.

"Kiss my ass. You're the reason I'm here in the first place," the newcomer growled.

"Am I supposed to lick your boots just because you drag your hairy butt in here?" Chase brushed his hand across his chin.

"Damn straight!" The man grinned. "I leave a sunny beach and string bikinis because you're too fucking lazy to leave a voice mail. Excuse me, if I expect a little gratitude for my trouble."

"Caern, you're about three hours too late." Chase walked to the man and slapped him across the shoulder. "But damn. Am I glad to see you."

"What the hell have you gotten yourself into now?" Caern grumbled, then his eyes settled on her. "Oh, it's like that, is it? Mind introducing me, Chase old boy."

Belle saw a moment of hesitation fill Chase's face. An almost animalistic snarl haunted his lips for a split second before he finally spoke. Belle couldn't help notice by the look on his partner's face she wasn't the only one to see it.

Chase begrudgingly waved his hand between them. "Caern, I'd like you to meet Belle Gardner."

"Bella suits you better, my beautiful one." The man slipped his hand under hers and lifted it to his lips.

Under normal circumstances, Belle would have been captivated by such a gesture, but she couldn't tear her eyes from the look in Chase's eyes. The want she had desperately been attempting to deny was written all over his haunted face. He devoured her with it. Every inch of her felt his need and she knew it well, for it mirrored her own.

Belle shook her head to clear the vision. Her feelings were immaterial. Stopping J.G. was all that mattered. Her childish lust after a man she barely knew amounted to just that -- childish. She was a grown woman beyond such teenage fantasies. Chase was a means to an end. With his help, she could reclaim what had been stolen from her. He wasn't some knight in shining armor, or any of the other hundred clichés springing to mind. Belle was strong and smart enough to realize if she started thinking about him in those terms, she might as well let John have it all.

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Chase tried like hell to push the anger from his mind, but the sight of his partner pawing Belle gnawed a jagged hole in his gut. His head knew that Caern was his friend, and the idea of him innocently kissing Belle's hand shouldn't be affecting him like this. He'd seen the man do it to enough women over the years, he should be used to it by now. The man was as leery of lasting relationships, as he was. Chase knew there was a story behind it somewhere, but had never pressed Caern to find it out. The pain he saw on his friend's face from time to time, had been enough to tell him a woman had to be involved. Whatever had happened, she had slashed a path

across Caern's heart that had yet to heal. Chase had known him for over two hundred years, and that was a long time to nurse a broken heart. Over the years, Chase had watched his partner play the same game with anything in a skirt or anything that looked like they belonged in a skirt. But, those other women weren't Belle. Belle was his!

He growled at the thought. Dammit to hell! Since when did he decide to go all soft in the head? She wasn't his. He barely knew her, and she sure the hell didn't want anything to do with him. At least she wouldn't if she had any sense. From all he'd come to know of the woman, Belle Gardner was too damn smart to even consider a man like him. So, the sooner he got these crazy thoughts out of his head the better. Besides, Chase knew his friend to be too guarded to allow a woman close to him. Flirtations and one night stands were the extent of Caern's relationships. Chase knew the reason for it, too.

Caern was cursed as much as Chase. Birth, not deed, had been the man's downfall. His partner was Dhampyre, or for the less initiated to the dark side of how the world truly operated, the result of a human/vampire mating. Caern had never divulged the particulars of his early life, but Chase knew enough not to push him for answers the man wasn't willing to give. Two centuries of friendship stood between them. In all that time, Chase came to know what mattered. There was no one alive he would rather have at his back than the man in front of him. That fact was the only thing keeping Chase from ripping his heart out of his chest for touching Belle.

His sudden outbreak of homicidal tendencies didn't stop him from worrying about his friend. Caern thought Chase hadn't noticed his friend's actions. The constant battle to keep the dual nature of his life in check had been slipping. Chase had seen the blood beast come out to play in the heat of battle all too often, as of late. It wasn't a pretty sight. He had seen for himself the daily struggle Caern went through to keep the midnight monster at bay. Chase also knew the man's biggest fear, one day the Dhampyre wouldn't be able to stop the darkness once it had been loosed.

To that end, Caern might let a woman into his bed, but would never let one into his heart. The loneliness in the man's life was plain for his friends to see. The number of people on that list was mighty short. Namely, one. Chase. Unless you counted the ghost. There were times Chase thought Sebastian had the inside track. The two seemed to understand each other, in ways he and Caern didn't. Seb had a way of bringing out the human in the Dhampyre that Chase had never been able to do. Maybe it came from having a soul. Something Chase had stopped believing in a long time ago.

The sound of Belle's giggles broke the spell his melancholy musings had placed him under. Chase looked up to see Caern's arm twined through Belle's. Caern whispered something in her ear, evoking another peel of laughter. Red fury blossomed again in his heart. He quickly damped it down, seeing the stupidity in it. The last thing he needed was for Caern to see the state she'd put him in.

Belle looked back and shot Chase an amused look. For some stupid reason, he ducked his head to avoid revealing the emotions playing across his face. Even before the curse, he never acted like this around women. The reason for his newfound insanity could only be lust. At least, he hoped that was the answer. As screwed up as he felt, Chase dreaded the alternative. He might actually care for her. And, that could lead to a word he feared more than living forever, one his mind refused to let him utter, even silently.

"Chase, are you going to spend the rest of the day in la la land, or do you plan to join us?" Caern snickered.

"Kiss my ass." He growled, pushing past them to open the office door.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" Caern grinned, then gave him a peck on the cheek.

"What the hell was that for?" Chase stumbled back, sputtering.

"Don't play hard to get. You were the one who wanted the hawt Caern of love." The Dhampyre burst into laughter and ducked, barely dodging a right hook from Chase.

Chase threw his hands up in disgust. "Dammit, Caern! Can't you be serious for one minute? We don't have time for this shit."

Chase chose to ignore the wink Caern shot at Belle. He knew the P.O.S. well enough to know not to push it any further. They had already wasted too much time as it was, without letting Caern play the class clown.

"Okay, boss. What's the down low?" Caern blew past him and fell into a tattered arm chair in the corner.

Chase waited for Belle to take the chair before he made a move to the desk sitting against the far wall. A computer, less than a month out of the package, sat on the left side of the desk, allowing him an unobstructed view of Belle as she fidgeted in her chair. He glanced to see Caern hiding a smirk behind a false cough.

Chase eased back in the chair, fighting the urge to wipe that smirk off his friend's face. He had a bigger problem now than dealing with jerk-offitus. Like how to explain the situation he'd landed himself in to his partner without revealing what Sebastian had told him. More importantly, how to do it with Caern rolling around on the floor with a broken jaw. Because, if the fool didn't stop mouthing, *Chase and Belle k-i-s-s-i-n-g in a tree*, behind his hand, that's just what would happen.

Luckily, Belle solved one of his problems for him. "My stepfather hired Chase to find me using a bogus story. After hearing my side of things, Chase agreed to help me."

"You turned down a payday for a pretty face!" Caern howled in disbelief. "I think I'm teaching you bad habits, my friend."

"In his defense, I did have to shoot him before he agreed." Belle gave Chase a wink.

The change in Caern was instantaneous. All sign of mischief left his face. He turned to look at Chase.

"She knows." Chase bowed his head, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"How much?" It was almost a growl.

"Enough, but not all." Chase hoped his friend caught his meaning. He might be free with his secrets, but his Caern's were his own to tell.

Caern nodded, but gave the woman a grave look.

"I won't betray him, if that's what you're worried about," she assured him.

The flirt had left the building, leaving a taste of the nightmare Caern usually kept in check in its place. "You'll have to excuse me if I'm not ready to believe you, just yet."

"I trust her, so the matter is settled." Chase ended it.

"Good enough for me." From the sound of his voice, Chase didn't believe him. "Mind giving me some details about this thing we're about to do?"

Chase quickly caught Caern up to date on most of what had happened, carefully leaving out Sebastian's revelation. He hated lying to his friend through omission, but until he could get Belle to trust him, he wasn't about to send her running off half-cocked. He'd give Caern the whole story once he had a chance to catch him alone. Until then, Chase would do what he thought best. With the update out of the way, he outlined his plan, drawing nods from both of his captive audience members.

"Any place you take her in town will be an easy target for anyone with a computer and a reasonably good hacker. All our safe houses are bought through our corporate holdings," Caern stated, effectively blowing his plan out of the air.

"She can't hide here. So, what do you have in mind?" Chase could see from the glint in his partner's eye, the Dhampyre had something up his sleeve.

"Raiz."

"Are you out of your freaking mind?" He leapt from his seat, slamming his fist on the desk. "If you think I'm trusting that psycho with her you've got another thing coming."

"Think about it for a minute." Caern waved his hand, rolling back in the chair. "He has no affiliations with D.I. Hell, I'm not even sure his place is in this time zone, let alone on a map."

"Still, he's not the most stable person in the world." He rubbed his chin. Caern did have a point. Raiz was seven foot of solid muscle and mean as a bear woke up early from hibernation. Literally. His place sat smack dab in the middle of nowhere, far from Cascade Falls.

"It's not like she'd be there alone. You would be with her," Caern stated, making up his mind for him.

"Try to get a hold of him, and we'll leave as soon as I can get some information from this stupid machine." He gave the mouse a half hearted push, bringing the screen to life. The sudden appearance of two women doing something that would have disgusted even Caligula, startled him. "What the fu--"

"You'll have to excuse him. He is a complete Neanderthal when it comes to technology." Caern reached over and clicked the mouse, exiting the screen. "You don't want her seeing all the porn you have on there, now, do you?"

Chase's hand closed over Caern's hard enough to hear the bones pop. "It's your damn computer."

"And how should I feel about your perversity polluting my property?" Caern grinned.

"You son a bitch," Chase growled.

"Hey, boss." The intercom crackled beside him.

"Which one?" Chase forgot his anger to snap.

"I guess you. There's a Mr. Gardner here to see you."

The room went silent.

"Tell him I'll be out in a second." Dammit to hell. He had been right. Gardner was having him tailed, or at least, knew about his connection to the bar. He had to think fast before Gardner got antsy, and decided to come back looking for him. Smokey might be able to stop a human, but he had no idea how the old biker would fare against one of the Fae.

"What's the plan?" Caern eyed the door.

"Take her to Raiz. You can try to reach him on the way, but I doubt you'll get him. I'll be along as soon as I can. Take the underground exit." Chase turned to Belle. "You can trust Caern to take care of you."

"Okay." She nodded.

Caern pointed her toward a panel in the back of the office. He slapped a sconce hanging on the wall and the panel slid open. Belle gave Chase a look and slipped through the door. Before Caern could join her, Chase grabbed him by the arm.

"I mean it. Don't let her out of your sight."

"I'll guard her with my life. You just make damn sure you stay alive. I know there's more to this than you're telling me, but we've been friends long enough for me to trust you." He

squeezed Chase's arm. "Now let me get out of here before we get all mushy and you want to kiss me or something."

Chase released him, and watched them drop into the darkness as the light from the open panel faded at the bottom. He turned back to the desk, wondering just what the hell he had gotten himself into. Whatever it was, it didn't matter. The minute he agreed to help Belle, he landed neck deep into the deep end.

"Okay, Smokey. Send him back." He clicked the intercom and didn't wait for an answer before releasing the button. It was time to give the devil his due.

## Chapter Eight

"Get in." Caern snarled pushing her toward a black GTO.

Belle barely noticed they had made it to the car. She'd been too busy looking back. Despite the fact she had only known Chase for less than a day she missed having the warmth of him beside her. The idea sounded ridiculous to her, but it sat there nonetheless, like a stone in the pit of her stomach; one that had her staring off into space, until someone shouted at her loud enough to wake the dead

"Belle, we need to hit the road." Caern banged the palm of his hand against the top of the car and glared at her. "He'll be fine. There isn't much Chase can't handle."

"He's never faced anyone like J.G. before." She winced as the thought slipped through her lips. Catching herself before she said anymore she ducked into the car.

Caern got in without a word to disprove her fears. If he was curious about her obtuse statement, the man made no mention of it. Belle couldn't deny a certain relief for his silence. Things had happened so fast, she hadn't yet had time to process it all. The minute her butt hit the seat, it all came rushing into her head.

J.G. actually planned to kill her. For years the threat had been there, but his fear of what the Peoples would say had kept him in check. Belle saw now that by leaving, she had opened the door for him to finally make his move. It would be so easy for her to have a convenient accident, or at least that's what her stepfather would call it. A fiery car crash would cover a lot in the way of evidence. Sure, all those C.S.I. shows wanted you to think the police could solve anything, but Belle knew one hard cold fact TV didn't want you to know. Money could buy a helluva lot of look-the-other-way. John had enough cash to buy more than the average millionaire. He might even give Donald Trump a run for his money, when it came to power brokering.

When the bastard had her mother shipped off upstate to a sanitarium, Belle should have seen the writing on the wall. At the time, she'd thought maybe some time away would help, but that turned out to be just another slice of delusion. Her mother had never been the same after the death of her father. Most people deal with grief in stages. Her mother skipped straight to the top of the list and never looked back. As her sanity slowly slipped away, her mother's power waned. Sometimes it happened to the older ones, especially to those who had lost their mates. They became lost without someone to anchor them against the ravages of age coupled with youth eternal. Growing up, Belle thought her mother was made of stronger stuff, as all children do. Seeing the disaster left in the wake of her father's death, to her ultimate regret, she had been sadly mistaken. The People were a long lived race and that regret would haunt them all for a long time to come.

Even though Belle looked no older than twenty, her years were numbered much older than her appearance. The People aged differently than the mortals who had taken over their world. This June past, Belle drew near her third century. In three more months, the customary time for her to assume her place in the hierarchy would take place. Then, her power base would be set. Once inducted into the hierarchy, J.G.'s hold on her would be at an end. It surprised her that he hadn't tried something sooner. With her mother's incapacitated state, many saw her birthday as the perfect time for a change in rule. Herself amongst them.

Her stepfather was afraid of what that would mean. John used her mother's grief to weasel his way first into her fragile heart, thereby insinuating himself into the court. Her emotional state made it all too easy for the bastard to wrest control of the Summer Court from her doddering fingers. As nothing but a child, Belle had been too young for consideration to replace her mother. In the intervening years, the broken woman had become nothing more than a figurehead. J.G. wielded the real power behind the throne, and had for nearly two centuries. Now, his stranglehold on the Shazhium would soon come to an end. That scared Belle almost as much as it must him.

She wished the crown would fall heavy on someone else's head. Belle would trade it all for one chance to know the one man who existed forever out of her reach. She was too young to remember her father. At a hundred, she had been little more than a nymph floating from place to place with no idea that there was such a thing as mortality among the ageless. Her father had been the Knight of Spring and seldom graced the court with his presence. As a result, what little remained of him in her mind was nothing more than passing images in her mental scrapbook. To her immortal shame, Belle couldn't even remember his face. As a child, those things didn't seem to matter. Now, with the winds of change blowing through her life, she wished like hell she could remember even was the man's eyes, her mother once said in one of her lucid moments, stared from Belle's face.

Belle, as an adult, saw why her mother had lost it. Living without love for so long, Belle dreamed of having a love as great as her parents. The love of a mother wouldn't have hurt, either. Maybe more to the point, she envied her parents a love that burned so purely that death couldn't erase the emotion from the heart. Honestly, their marriage had been a miracle among the Peoples, one born both in love and duty. His passing had ripped the heart from their queen, and ultimately from the Peoples as well. Without her to rule them, the Peoples drifted apart and became lost.

While the other kingdoms of Fae grew in strength, theirs fell into turmoil. The world suffered without Summer to gently guide the season. Summers became longer and harsher. Disasters -- which should have been avoided -- became commonplace. Even Winter felt the fall of Summer. The other kingdom exploded with fury, only to quickly fade into Spring.

Belle knew in her heart that a new age would be born if something wasn't done soon. One where the old ways would be forgotten, and slowly the Peoples would fade into the light, or become assimilated into the human world. Already half-breeds walked the land, when as a little as hundred years ago these castoffs would not have been allowed. It would have been unthinkable for one of the People to merge with mortals.

The thought made her mind drift back to Chase. What would it be like to love him? No, she couldn't allow herself to even consider the possibility. The Peoples would never accept a queen whose consort was not one of them. Let alone one who would assume the role of Knight of Spring.

Belle turned to the window. Her face smiled grimly back at her. She knew what her fate would turn out to be. When she became queen, her consort would be named as the Knight of Spring. If someone did not defeat J.G. in the *Mêlée le Ascension*, he would be named her consort, as he had been her mother's. She knew her people well enough to know no one would openly oppose him.

It was the reason John wanted her dead. He knew she would never accept him as consort, or allow him the control her mother had. With her dead, and her mother no longer able to perform her duties as queen, he could petition the other courts for a replacement from within the



Peoples. Someone he could control. Belle could not let that happen. Her place and her duty rested with her people. J.G. had scattered them, and by Silvan she would bring them back together.

Amid all the heavy thinking, Belle caught herself yawning. The steady drum of the motor roaring down the road almost put her to sleep. Slipping up in her seat, she stared out at the road speeding toward them. Riding with this guy certainly spiced up an evening. Caern guided the car through a maze of traffic with the skill of a man who knew what he was doing. It went against everything Belle had been taught, but she trusted him to see her to safety. Not only because Chase said she could, another sign she no longer had a firm grip on her mental facilities, but because she sensed him to be a man of honor. Like Chase. In her humble opinion, the whole world was in sore need of men such as them.

"So, how long have you known Chase?" Belle asked when she realized her thoughts wouldn't allow her the sleep her body screamed it needed.

An absent snarl turned his face into an agonized mask as Caern whipped his head toward her. She wasn't sure if he would speak, or not. Belle could tell his loyalty to his friend was absolute, and figured she'd end up with dead silence for her trouble. Belle watched the indecision played across his face, then it just drifted away.

"A long time," he finally grunted out.

"Are you like him?" The question slipped out before she could stop herself.

"No, I'm different," was his only answer.

"So, you're human?" Belle wanted to slap her mouth shut. It would get her in trouble before this ride was over.

Belle watched him fight some inner battle. He kept his eyes on the road and didn't look at her. Biting her bottom lip, she waited to see if she had overstepped herself. Belle was about to apologize when he spoke.

"I am Dhampyre." The words came out like a whisper of pain.

Belle let a hiss escape her at the words. She knew it was the wrong thing to do, but couldn't stop herself. The dark ones were figment of nightmares told to frighten both human and Fae children. Never had she thought to actually meet one of their numbers. She knew of their existence, but the Peoples sheltered themselves away from contact with the other magical creatures who survived through the centuries.

Like the Fae, the Dark Ones -- Or as they were better known in the human -- Vampires and Weres -- were secretive by nature, never venturing into the light of day. They thrived on speculation and fiction to conceal them from view. One day the world would change enough that hiding would no longer be an option for any of them. Science made their outing an eventuality, not a possibility. One misstep by one of them would be all it took to reveal them all to the mortal world.

The silence became an awkward weight between them. His revelation needed to be answered. Belle just hoped she hadn't already offended him with her silence. "I am sorry for not speaking, but you caught me by surprise. I didn't mean to be so rude."

He grinned weakly. "It's okay. At least you didn't jump out of the car screaming."

"Takes more than a vampire to send me running for the hills." Belle knew instantly she had revealed too much with her seemingly innocent reply. Caern, despite his actions, couldn't be mistaken for stupid.

"You're not human, are you? I can smell the difference, so don't deny it. You reek of magic. For Chase's sake, I didn't say anything, but whatever you are hiding could get him killed."

Yes, he can be killed. It just isn't easy to do. So, lady, just what the hell are you?" He wasn't asking. The demand rang out in his steely voice.

She could tell he meant to have the answers he wanted.

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"Where is my wife, Mr. Michaels?" Gardner demanded before Chase even had a chance to open his mouth in greeting.

Keeping his eyes firmly glued on the man, Chase reined in his emotions. This man had lied to him. The concept stuck like a dagger in his mind. If he let the thought go further, and contemplated how the man tried to kill Belle, he would have ripped the man's throat out with his bare hands. It would definitely solve a lot of problems. If it wasn't for the muscle outside the door he would do just it.

*'Do it, Brechashe. Allow your true self to reveal itself as we know it wants to do.'* The choir returned with a vengeance.

He ignored them. Their paltry attempts to bait him would do them no good. Every thought, every instinct he had told him killing Gardner would be the right thing to do. Belle's life would be in danger as long as the man was alive. A short push would be all it took and they knew just the right chains to yank. Well, they could kiss his ass. He was through taking orders from a bunch of damn ghosts.

*'Then kill him for her. What is one more death to your black soul? Surely her life is worth another mark of damnation.'*

*'Shut the fuck up!'* He snarled before turning back to Gardner.

"Mr. Gardner, I have no idea where she is." Fixing a friendly face into place, he answered the man.

The man's lips were a tight slit across his face. "I think you are lying, Michaels."

"What reason do I have to lie to you?" Chase could think of one off the top of his head, but Gardner didn't know that.

"I'm going to be honest with you. I know for a fact you traced her to an out of the way bar over on 16<sup>th</sup> Street." Gardner sat back in the chair, giving him a knowing smirk.

"You had me followed?" Belle had been right.

"Of course. Men, such as myself, don't get to be where they are by trusting others to do their jobs. You are a tool, Michaels. A means to an end." Gardner folded his hands together in front of him. "Nowhere does it say I must trust you to do what is asked of you."

The man was becoming a bundle of joy. Chase's first impression of him had been wrong. Doing his best not to look obvious, Chase let his eyes wander over the man. Gardner was a big man, not fat but had the body of a man who worked for everything he had. By all appearances, the P.O.S seemed to be in his late forties or early fifties. His body was not as tight as it might have been when he was younger, but Chase couldn't deny the sure sign of muscle lurking beneath the middle-age spread. He wore his hair long, swept back behind his ears. A hint of gray peeked from under the blond, but otherwise he had a youthful air about him. His eyes were a vibrant green beneath his brooding brows.

Despite the physical evidence, Gardner was smarter than Chase had given him credit for. Now Chase found himself paying for that mistake. He just hoped it wouldn't be Belle who came due next.

"If you had me watched, then you should know what happened. Your darling wife lured me into the back of the bar and had me jumped by some boys she'd picked up. They knocked me unconscious. I woke up this morning in a dumpster. Who the hell knows what they did to my car, but I'm adding the cost of it into your bill. So, before you jump up my ass looking for answers, you need to go find your watchdogs and see what they were doing while my ass was getting kicked." The lie fell easily from his lips, and he played it up just enough to make it believable. Besides, he loved that car, so he felt he nailed it just right.

"Are you trying to tell me you allowed a young woman to overpower you?" Gardner snorted. "I find that hard to believe."

"No, I'm telling you she convinced five bikers that it would be in their best interest to beat the crap out of me while she got away." Chase slammed his hand down between them. "Quite frankly, you can take your condescending ass and leave. Consider me off the case."

Gardner pursed his lips. Chase waited. This had become a game between them now. He refused to let his eyes leave the man's face. Chase knew it was a gamble. If he could stay on Gardner's payroll, it would mean the man wasn't suspicious. They needed the edge. Until Belle decided to trust him with what was really going on, he would need every advantage he could get.

"Your withdrawal is not necessary. I believe you. My..." He paused. "Wife is quite adept -- at making men do things for her."

"That's where you're wrong. My withdrawal is necessary. If I know you're having me tailed, I can't do my job. Some of the people I use as informants depend on my discretion. I won't use them if I know you have someone looking over my shoulder." Chase stood and pointed toward the door. "My advice to you is to go find some other pigeon to be your fall guy."

Gardner made no move to leave. Chase refused to look away. After a moment, the man flicked his wrist in surrender.

"What will it take to keep you on the case?" He had him.

"No more shadow men, and I call you when I find something. You don't contact me for anything. Got it?" Chase knew he would agree to all of it, but doubted he would mean it.

"Anything else?" Gardner sighed.

"Yeah, you owe me a car." Chase smiled. Hey, somebody did and since he had been on the man's dime when they dumped it, he saw no reason it shouldn't come out of money bags' pocket.

"Agreed. You can call my office and leave whatever make and model you want with my assistant. He will have it delivered before the day is over," he stated absently, as if he just offered Chase a piece of gum.

That was one phone call he would enjoy the hell out of making.

"Then our business is done. You will be hearing from me soon." Chase ushered him toward the door.

Chase closed it behind him, grateful Gardner had left without demanding more from him. He was either very lucky, or stupid for trusting Gardner for a second time. Somehow, he thought it was more stupidity than anything.

The important thing was to get everything in motion here, so he could meet up with Caern and Belle. He took a dubious look at the computer. There was no way in hell he could find any answers there without a thirteen year old kid to do it for him. He might as well bite the bullet and call in reinforcements. He reached for the phone and dialed the office.

He started talking before she had a chance to answer. "Della, this is Chase. I need you to get some info for me. Have Jared get me everything he can about John Gardner, Gardner

Industries and Belle Gardner." He paused, so she could catch up. "Got all that. Good. While he's doing the search, I need him to look for any ties Gardner may have to other businesses. Not holdings, but anything to link him to the owners."

"I'll get this to Jared and have him get started right away," her smoky voice assured him.

"Another thing. For the next few days I'm going to be out of pocket. Try to push any meetings back until at least the first of next week." He mentally ran down his checklist.

"Should I let Caern know about this?" Della asked. He could hear her wheels turning now.

"No, I've already let him know. He's still down the coast, so it shouldn't be a problem." He hated lying to her, but the less people who knew he'd involved Caern the better. He'd have to remember to let Caern know when he called to check in. "Look, I've got to run. Talk to you later."

He hung up the phone, not waiting for her reply, and dialed in Caern's number before the dial tone had the chance to warm up.

Shuffling papers absently across the desk, he growled under his breath until he heard his partner pick up. "Caern, where the hell are you?"

"Nice to hear your cheery voice, too. I guess this call means everything went alright with Gardner." Caern's voice sounded distant, distracted.

"Yeah, I'll fill you in when we meet up. You and Belle okay?" The tone of his friend's voice set off about dozen warning bells in his head.

"We're good. Traffic's just heavy. It's hard to concentrate on the road and talk to you."

"Okay, I won't keep you long. I need an untraceable car. Do you still have the Mustang downstairs?" While he asked, he dug through the desk drawer for the keys. He found them about the time Caern answered.

"It's there. Look we're about an hour from Raiz's place. If we have signal, I'll let you know when we get--" The phone went dead on the other end.

Willing the signal to come back, Chase tightened his hand and stared at the impotent device. He squeezed until he felt the raised buttons dig into his palm. He had bigger things to worry about. Dropping the phone on the desk, he let out an anguished howl. Thanks to Gardner, Belle and Caern were a good hour ahead of him. That shouldn't bother him, but the burning desire to see the woman consumed him. Another nail his coffin. If it were possible, Belle Gardner would prove to be the death of him. His mind had already come up with a couple sinfully delectable ways she could do him in, neither of which, he planned to let happen. He hadn't totally lost his frigging mind -- yet.

One of those ways picked that moment to run through his head. Fighting the urge to settle back for a good old fashioned pervy look see, Chase focused his brain on the job at hand. He needed to get his ass in gear if he wanted to reach Raiz's place before dawn. The silence pressed down on him and the need to move around drove him to his feet. He glided his hand over the wall behind him. Pressing a hidden button, Chase stepped back as the shelves slid aside, revealing a gun cabinet. Chase had never been a firm believer in the adage 'the weapon makes the man'. He was more of the 'Guns don't kill people, I do' type of person.

He grabbed a couple extra clips, sliding them into his jacket pocket. He pulled out a matching set of 9 mms, adding them to the other pocket. They weren't his Glocks, but they would get the job done in a pinch. He tossed in a couple Kabars. The value of a sharp blade had never left him. The serrated military knives were the finest in his collection, and old friends he

seldom left home without when he was on a tough job. Slipping them into the sheaths hidden in his boots, he felt ready for just about anything.

Closing the cabinet, he stalked to the secret passage Caern had taken earlier. The panel leading to the underground exit opened to his touch. Taking one last look behind him, Chase stepped into the darkness. After being cooped up with his thoughts, he was ready for the long drive. More than that, ready to see Belle again.

## Chapter Nine

Caern shut the phone, and something inside Belle ached as the blue light went dead. She knew the man had been talking to Chase. A small part of her wished that he had asked to speak to her. Stupid, she knew. Why would he? For one thing, they barely knew each other. Let's not forget the whole shooting him thing. Like she could. Belle knew she had to face the fact this was nothing more than a job to him. She was crazy if she thought any different. Of course, after the past couple of days, sanity had stopped applying to anything she'd done or planned to do. To save herself the bother of seeking therapy on this form of loopy, she decided to go back to pestering the only person in striking distance.

"So, are you going to answer me, or what?" His eyes flared toward her in the darkness.

The blind hope he had forgotten all about getting his answers had been too much to ask for. The set of his face bespoke pure determination. If his lips had been drawn together any tighter, Belle doubted even a crowbar would have pried them apart. One thing was for certain. The man wouldn't settle for less than the whole truth. Something she wasn't prepared to give him.

"I'm not patient at the best of times, lady, so I'd get to talking before it runs out." He jerked the wheel, throwing the car amid a shower of loose gravel and dirt onto the shoulder. "I gave Chase my word I'd keep you safe, and I will, but this car ain't moving until you decide to open up."

She stared through the windshield. Twin halos of red rocketed past them. Belle counted the heartbeats between each passing car. Still the answers he wanted couldn't work their way to her mouth. The Peoples depended on her to keep their secrets. He might be scary as hell, but when it came to them, her safety didn't matter.

"I can't tell you what you want to know. I wish I could, but I can't," she said finally.

"That's not good enough. Chase might be soft in the head when it comes to you, but I'm the realistic type. That means, in case you're wondering, I don't have to put up with your shit. Let me give you a dose of reality. Your silence is putting everyone in this mess in danger. We can't help you unless we know what exactly what you've gotten us into. I don't know what kind of hold you have over Chase to make him blindly follow you, but it's not a condition I'm suffering from. He wants me to keep you safe, so I'm keeping you safe." He shifted in the seat until his face was next to hers. "That doesn't mean dying fits into my plan to do it, so start talking."

She didn't flinch from his hot breath on her cheek. He could threaten her all he wanted. She wouldn't betray her people, not yet. Belle could see herself telling them the truth, but not now. She wouldn't be bullied by him, or anyone. When she was ready to tell them everything, she would and not a minute sooner.

"You can sit here until this thing rusts to the ground. I won't betray those whose care is entrusted to me," she spat at him through gritted teeth.

Belle watched the emotions play across his face. For a moment she thought he might toss her from the car and leave her sitting high and dry in the middle of nowhere. Then she saw resignation flash into his eyes.

"I hope like hell Chase knows what he's doing." He slammed the car into first and fishtailed back onto the road in a hail of gravel.

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Belle drifted off to sleep. The peace it should have offered ultimately eluded her. Her mind floated amid visions of Chase. Belle wished she could have called them welcome visitors, but she would have been lying to herself. Each fragment of her subconscious brought a new horror rushing into her feverish brain. Just when the latest slice of hell became too much to bear, the scene shifted. She found herself in a strange temple.

Twisting her head, Belle attempted to make sense of this newest figment of her psyche. Darkness prevailed around her. Through the shifting shadows, she saw painted images of women in ancient dress. She took a hesitant step forward, her fingers brushing the blackness covering the images. It felt so thick, Belle feared her fingers would come back ink stained. Belle thought the dreams had moved onto yet another round of scare-the-crap-out-of-me again. This felt different, almost peaceful but lacking the familiarity she normally associated with the emotions hitting her.

The darkness suddenly cleared, like a blast of sunlight had cleaned the place in a heartbeat. Finally able to take in her new environment, Belle couldn't remember ever before seeing something so vivid in her dreams. The place was absolutely ancient. The writings on the wall were obviously another language, but the origin was beyond her understanding. In the center of the room, a raised altar looked out onto the cobbled stone floor. Behind it a statue of a woman watched over all those who came forward. Belle shivered as a sensation of déjà vu hit her.

A shuffle of feet alerted Belle she was no longer alone. Looking in the direction of the sound, she expected to see another variation of Chase waiting for her. Instead, a wizened old woman smiled back from between the massive legs of the statue. The woman beckoned her forward with a wave of her tiny gnarled hand. Amazing enough, Belle walked toward the figure without hesitation. Normally, that would be the last thing she'd do. Trust issues had always been big on her priority list.

The gentle fold of wrinkles covering the woman's face captured her gaze. Everything about the woman emitted a feeling of love, safety and for some unexplained reason, home.

"Come sit. Lay your burden down. In this place, it has no hold on you." The woman motioned to a spot in front of the altar nestled between the legs of the colossal statue.

Belle nodded as she neared the altar. She crossed her legs and sat down as the woman came around to stand in front of her.

"Daughter, long have we awaited your coming." The woman smiled and patted her on the hand.

"Who are you?" Belle whispered, afraid to break the holy silence prevailing in the room.

"Simply a woman, such as you." The scent of honey and wine washed over Belle, as the woman flapped her robes and sat beside her.

"Are you real?" A dreamlike voice came from Belle's mouth. She barely recognized it as her own.

"Once upon a time it could have been said of me, but no longer. I am a memory that has waited for you," the woman said, mysteriously, like Belle should understand.

"Then, this is a dream?" The confusion defused as Belle tried to reassure herself soon she would wake and this would all be a fading horror.

"Dreams are but truths the waking mind denies. Now hush, time is short and I must impart some of those truths to you before your companion reaches your destination." The old

woman put two fingers up to halt Belle's next words. "Your birth was foretold, child. This temple around us once existed as a stronghold of the Peoples. We, who lived within its walls, were their servants and the chosen of the gods they served."

"How is it there is no record of this place?" Belle asked in spite of the woman's demand for silence.

"The answer to that question is now a part of your present. Know this, child. Your destiny is to bring the past and present together. The Peoples are dying." The old woman leaned forward and touched Belle's brow. "You know this. Don't you?"

"Yes, ma'am. What can I do to change it? The elder ways are forgotten. My stepfather..." The woman placed her hand over Belle's mouth.

"Gardner is known to us. We see his ambition today just as it was seen long ago, but we prepared for it. Yes, we did." The woman cackled. "Child, the Peoples must adapt. There is no going back to the old ways. They are as dead as we are."

"What am I supposed to do? I am only one person" Belle cried.

"You will do what you were born to do. Guide them into the future."

"How?" Belle asked, tears running down her face

"Cleave to the warrior. He is the way."

Belle gasped as the woman vanished before her eyes, only the whisper of air to make her passing.

"But, which warrior you... you daft old... Yoda!" Belle shrieked, jumping to her feet. "If you haven't noticed, there seems to be an overabundance of them in my life."

"Daughter, you already know the answer," a voice swirled around her. "Now, get your head out of your butt and wake up. Silvian protect us from the foolish and hardheaded."

Aside from the snarly retort at the end, Belle was just as confused as before, only now she had a name to go with this half-assed prophecy. Not that she hadn't already figured out the old woman had been talking about Chase. But, how did all this fit into the here and now. Just because she was of the Shazhium, it didn't mean she believed in prophecies, or whatever had just happened. The world may have operated like that back in the old days, but the modern world had its own rules. John had taught her that lesson all too well.

The vivid world of the dream turned to mists around her, allowing half glimpsed views into nothing, and things best not dwelled upon. Belle lifted her head to the statue towering over her. As the world slipped away, she swore the statue smiled at her with her mother's face. Reaching up toward the fading vision, Belle felt a keen pain that she'd denied herself for a long time. With a sob, she collapsed on the floor and prayed she had the strength to shove the emotion back behind the walls. Or, she feared it would consume her.

Tears streaming down her face, Belle snapped awake to the sound of silence and the dull throb of rain hitting the roof. Her time in the dream world haunting her, she tossed her head against the back of the seat, willing herself to wake up -- anything to drive away the pain. Belle calmed down as some semblance of consciousness asserted itself. Yawns fought to take her back to slumber, but she resisted the urge. The weird dream had left her confused enough without adding a headache into the mix, which would happen if she tried to sleep another minute in this poor excuse for a bucket seat.

Disorientation seeped through every fiber of her body. Belle forced herself to recall every nuance of the dream, but it was slipping away second by second, as if her conscious mind pushed the experience from her brain. Still, her eyes played havoc, trying to discern reality from dream. The edges of her vision were blurred as she tried to recall the experience. All she got for her



trouble were fragments, and even they were fading fast. Her mother's face flitted into her mind for one brief second, but the connection between the two escaped her. Perhaps, it was nothing more than her subconscious playing tricks with her. Silvian knew her brain was addled enough after the past couple of days, a mental breakdown didn't fall outside the realm of possibility.

In spite of that, she knew it had only been a dream, but a deep part of her wanted -- no, needed to remember what had taken place. Something inside her told her it was important that she know every detail. It frustrated her that she couldn't. The last vestiges of it escaping her grasp, she let out a groan. Belle fought the urge to bang her head against the dash. A concussion sure the hell wouldn't help her remember anything.

Knowing it wouldn't do her any good to agonize over something she couldn't change, Belle scooted up in the seat. Her neck protested the sudden change, and straining around to see where she was only made the dull ache worse. Amid the nagging pain, it took her a minute to notice Caern wasn't in the car. In fact, the car wasn't even running. She really must have been out of it to miss them reaching their destination. In her defense, the last day had been hectic, and what little sleep she had gotten could best be described as unconsciousness rather than actual sleep.

The rain had returned while she slept. The sheets of tiny droplets glimmered like a waterfall outside the car. A light sheen of steam coming from the hood mixed with it, and made ghostly images dance across the front of the car. Through the haze, she could just make out the outline of a cabin at the edge of her vision.

She didn't know who this Raiz person was, but he must love his peace and quiet. This place made the boonies seem like the suburbs. She really couldn't say for sure if they were still in the States. From what little she could see of the cabin, it could best be described as rustic. A dump might be too harsh of a statement but it certainly fit. From all appearances the cabin, or shack depending on your point of view, had been constructed out of trees from the nearby forest. The porch running the length of the house had logs the size of redwoods holding it aloft. It must have taken a crane to get those things set in place.

A single light shone through a window to the left of the house. Belle plastered her face against the glass, vainly hoping to see some sort of movement inside, but the rain prevented her from seeing much of anything. Still, someone had to be inside. She couldn't see Caern leaving her out here all alone, despite his earlier mood. If nothing else, Chase had bought her that much consideration from the Dhampyre.

If Caern had deserted her, this Raiz guy at least had to be inside. Chase hadn't been too hot for them to come out here, but he wouldn't have told Caern to bring her here, if he didn't trust the guy. As much as she hated the idea of just walking up to the place, she'd just go knock on the door to find out what was going on. Like that idea didn't smack of gore fest horror movie insanity. From the looks of the place, this Raiz character probably time-shared it with Jason Voorhees. Cheery thought to be having out in the middle of nowhere.

She watched the rain drizzle down the glass, hoping for a break in the downpour to make a dash for the door. It sounded like proactive procrastination to her, but who was she to look a gift weatherman in the face. Waiting in the car all night did not seem an unreasonable option. Insane maybe, unreasonable no. As long as the rain continued to pound she had an excuse for her hesitance to move. Even if it was a flimsy argument, her fluency in self denial as a second language once again prevailed.

All too soon, the rain slacked. It was a sign. Seeing no way to get out of it, Belle unbuckled the seat belt and reached for the door handle. A sudden jerk sent the door flying from

her shaky grasp. Her heart thumping against her rib cage, she looked up expecting to see Caern coming back to get her.

The mountain leaning his bulky frame into the car could in no way be called anything close to Caern. The pale radiance coming from the dome light revealed a monster of a man. The face, cast in harsh shadow, sent a cold chill down her spine. Glaring red eyes peered from a mockery of a face, dominated by a scar that ran the length of one cheek, neatly cutting the right side of the man's wretched countenance almost in two.

There was no way Belle could stop the scream when it erupted from her mouth. It was too much. Caern had betrayed her. She couldn't bring herself to think Chase could be involved in this, yet blindly she told herself to keep on trusting him.

The creature reeked of the wet forest surrounding them. He had an almost feral scent to him. Belle might not recognize a vampire when she saw one, but she knew a child of the beast when one snarled into her face. The beasts carried an undeniable odor of fell magics that could only be traced to their origins during the Darksome Wars that splintered the Peoples eons before she had been born. Most of the nightmare races had died out as canon fodder, but a few remained, notably the Children of the Beast, or Weres, as the modern world knew them. The abominations had been created by the foulest of magics, under the watchful eyes of the dreaded worshipers of Dréwl, by combining animals and the newborn race of man. Those few that remained were little more than playthings of the other courts, pets to be prodded and beat into submission. Summer refused to enslave so pitiful a race. Seeing the face looming in the window, Belle could only assume this to be one of J.G.'s boogie men. She had heard rumors of that he cultivated them as enforcers, but never truly gave them credence. Now the proof stared her in the face. Only her stepfather would be so bold as to send one of the nightmare creatures to do his dirty work. Looking into those demonic eyes, Belle's every instinct told her that she was about to die.

A meaty paw ripped the door completely open. Knowing she'd been right, Belle scampered back to the other side of the car. She wasn't fast enough. Like she weighed nothing, the thing grabbed her by the arm and dragged her toward him. She beat her hands furtively against solid corded muscle that didn't know an ounce of give to them. The man-beast stopped when he dragged her close enough to feel its hot breath washing across her face.

"Сумасшедшая женщина. Что имеет Преследование, полученное меня в теперь?" It growled.

Belle let out another shriek knowing it would do her no good. She was as good as dead. The beasts were obedient to the core. If J.G. wanted her dead, this creature would make sure she ended up yet another nameless corpse in some policeman's filing cabinet.

The last of her strength left her as the beast pulled her from the car. Her feet dangled a good two feet from the ground. She flailed about, her hands slamming into the thing's head and chest. It was like beating a brick wall. The creature howled, shaking her.

"Оставленная борьба, Вы глупая сука! Я должен здесь помочь Вам," it screamed into her face.

Belle's eyes went wide, as the beast's massive jaws came straight for her neck.

## Chapter Ten

Chase slapped the cell phone shut with a satisfied grunt. His call to Gardner's assistant went better than he thought it would. His new Shelby would be at the office waiting on him by six o'clock that evening. Too bad he wouldn't be there to drool over the car when it arrived. Then again, it wasn't like he planned to drive it until the business with Belle had been taken care of. Knowing Gardner, the thing would be jacked up with enough electronics to track the speedster from the other side of the universe.

He idly tossed the phone on the passenger seat. With that chore out of the way, he was past ready to get this trip over with. Driving to Raiz's place amounted to a pain in the ass on the best of days. The man lived out in the middle of nowhere. Chase knew the man liked his privacy, but shit. It was easier to get into a toy store on Christmas Eve than getting through all the defenses, and that was once you drove to the other end of the Devil's crap-shoot just to get there. Honestly, the drive itself wasn't too bad. Once you hit the interstate, it was almost a straight shot. After a left turn or five hundred, you might actually find the entrance to Chez Raiz. Last time Chase went for a visit, Raiz had changed things around and it had taken him two hours to find the new road leading up to the cabin. Yeah, the man brought agoraphobia to new heights of bat-shit crazy.

For someone who loved the rustic outdoors, Raiz had certainly turned into a regular techno junkie. The man had been dangerous enough with old school booby traps, deadfalls and a pit or two thrown in for good measure. Now, he'd upgraded to laser sighted mini-scuds, touch sensitive landmines that didn't even leave enough ash for an enterprising CSI to get DNA from, and some things the government didn't even know were missing planted all along the road leading up to his place. Chase would have worried about innocent bystanders, if Raiz didn't own the whole damn mountain. Last he heard, Homeland security was too afraid to look into the big Russian's dealings. Chase was his friend and he tried not to ask too many questions. Immortal didn't mean indestructible. The idea of healing back to life from a speck of ash held very little appeal to him.

If the 'NO TRESPASSING' signs didn't scare off the lookie loos, the man's reputation did. About five years ago, some hikers made the mistake of thinking they could go wherever they wanted. Raiz taught 'em different. By the time he ran them off his place, everyone got the idea Raiz's place was not someplace you wanted to visit. Chase had to call in all the favors several very important people owed him to keep the man out of Federal prison. Since then, things had been quiet on Raiz's mountain. Until tonight. Chase hoped bringing Belle there wouldn't change that. He'd made a promise to never bring trouble to Raiz's doorstep. Tonight was the first time he'd ever broke his word to the man.

He sighed, dreading having to explain all this to the Russian. His eyes drifted to the rear view mirror, and spotted headlights hanging back a good twenty yards, just close enough to make the hair stand up on the back of his neck. Experience had taught Chase to always watch his backside. For the past twenty some odd miles, he'd been the only fool stupid enough to be on the road at this hour of night. The turnoff to Raiz's place should have left him the only car on the road. Those twin beams meant despite Gardner's assurances, somebody followed him. Technically, he'd been on Raiz's land since the last dirt road about five miles back. Unless they

were lost and using him to get where they were going, Gardner's men had done a fine job of trailing him. The dirty son of a bitch!

Chase saw only two options open to him. Turn around and try to lose them or stop the damn car and tell them to turn the hell around. He had already lost too much time screwing around with Gardner so the first option was out. Besides, they were keeping steady with his speed, another dead giveaway they were a tail. Where did Gardner get these rubes? Assassins R' Us? Well, he'd better get this over with. Otherwise this game of fox and hound would go on all night. Chase smiled. Time to work out a little of the aggression that'd been brewing ever since he set eyes on Gardner back at the bar.

Giving the wheel a hard twist to the right, Chase slammed on the brakes. The car tittered on two wheels for half a breath. Chase grimaced as his muscles protested the strain of keeping the car from tipping over. With a howl, he brought the car screaming around to face his pursuers. Smoke billowed from under the car, but Chase wasn't ready to let the Mustang die on him just yet. Caern might kill him for the thought racing through his head, but dammit, if he wanted to put the fear of Chase into these assholes, he only saw one way to do it. His training had taught him nothing if not that intimidation only worked if you were the one dealing it.

And, he was about to deal a big heaping dose of it. Gravel sailed from the back tires, as he bore down directly on the approaching car. The other driver was either very good or crazy. Chase couldn't figure out which. He honestly expected the unknown driver to hit the ditch, so imagine his surprise when the guy poured on the gas and kept coming. Knowing they were both going too fast to avoid slamming into each other, Chase braced his back against the seat. Through the windshield, he saw his tail's eyes go wide and his hands fly over the steering wheel in a mad bid to turn the car before they hit. Chase could have told them it was too late. Instead, he winced as the car clipped the left front fender of the Mustang and went sailing toward the side of the road. The squeal of bending steel tugged at Chase's ears. Caern would kill him but he didn't have time to imagine the ass whooping coming his way. The near miss sent the Mustang into a spin, and his whole attention was focused on not ending up a mangled corpse waiting for a raging case of resurrection to bring on the pain.

Amid the tornado whirling outside the windows, Chase fought for control of the car. Tightening his grip, Chase growled as the steering wheel threatened to come off in his hands. A chunk of anybody's guess shot through the driver's side window, slashing a ribbon of blood across his forehead. Through a haze of crimson, he saw the other car coming around for another go at his body work. The muscles in his arms bunched as the Mustang smacked the other car again, sending them both spinning in the opposite direction. Finally, momentum worked in his favor. The Mustang came around and slammed into the side of the other car bringing both vehicles to a dead stop in the middle of the deserted road.

Chase shook the vertigo from his head. If he wanted to get the drop on the other guys, he had maybe five seconds to exit the car. Whoever got out first would have the advantage, and he planned to be the one on top when the bullets stopped flying.

The door resisted his first attempt to pry it open. Warped metal glared back at him through the broken window. Chase wasn't ready to play dead yet. Throwing his body behind his next blow, he hit the door, smashing it open with a high pitched scream of ripping metal.

Chase dropped to the ground and rolled to a crouch, somehow managing to get his guns into his hands without dropping them, or throwing up in the process. A rock solid concussion pounded through his skull. The rain mixed with the blood pouring into his eyes, giving him a piss-poor field of vision. Yet through it, he could make out no movement coming from the other

twisted hunk of metal. The driving rain rang out so loud he couldn't even hear the pop and sizzle of the flames leaping off the abused motor of his car as it exploded into a halo of fire. His ignorance in no way saved him from being tossed to the ground from the blast.

Dazed and damn near a corpse for his trouble, Chase struggled to hold on to his feeble grip on consciousness. When the heavy hands fell on his shoulders, it came as a complete surprise. Fumbling to bring his weapons up, he found himself hurdling into the air, his guns errant missiles flying from his hands. Chase twisted his body, trying vainly to brace his body for the impact, but it was a useless effort. The sound of his collarbone shattering echoed in his ears, letting him know he was well and truly fucked.

Water and blood flooded his eyes, as his face sunk into the muddy road. Chase rolled his face around, feeling a pop somewhere in the back of his head. He mentally added an embolism to the rest of his injuries. He figured he had another three, maybe four, minutes before death took a short hold on him. Chase wanted to laugh at the irony of his curse. He could embrace death, his unrequited lover, but only for so long. If he wasn't invincible, he'd be worried. Then again, maybe he'd luck out, and they'd think he was dead and take off. If they stuck around he was in trouble.

"You jousting well, mortal, but were no match for one trained in the sport," a voice taunted from the edge of his consciousness.

"Kiss my ass." Chase coughed through the blood filling his mouth and nose.

"So brave in death, little man. It makes me regret having to kill you," the voice answered from a dream.

"Gardner wouldn't like that. If you didn't get the memo, I'm off limits." Chase tried to move but numbness held a firm grip on him from the neck down. Fractured spine, he jotted down in his virtual medical record. This might be a record for him.

Laughter filled the rain soaked air. "You think we are from Gardner. Stupid human." The figure landed a kick to his gut that Chase didn't even feel, making him want to join his murderer in his laughter. "You face not the simpering Knight of Spring, but the Consort of Winter."

Chase let his mind wrap around that one. Okay, so Gardner wasn't the only one looking for Belle. It complicated things to say the least, not that his impending sojourn in the Dead-time didn't.

"What do you want?" Chase gasped, as he felt his spine begin to knit back together.

Laughing boy hunkered down in front of his mud washed face. "We want the daughter of Myrandia."

"No clue, asshole." He winced as his lower vertebra popped back into alignment. "Have you tried a nifty Google? I hear that works wonders nowadays."

"We think you are lying. In fact we know you are." He could see the flash of white teeth in the darkness. "Sabot, teach Mr. Michaels what we do to liars."

Chase glanced up just in time to see a fist coming right for his face. He felt the bridge of his nose give way to the brass knuckles on the man's hand. Blackness swam over what little strength he had left. As it claimed him, he smiled. At least he wouldn't be awake for the rest.

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The sound of voices broke through the darkness, waking her. Belle had grown tired of waking up in strange places. She guessed she should be grateful to be waking up at all. In the past two days, she'd dodged death on two separate occasions, three if you counted her first

meeting with Chase. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out her life expectancy hung on a precarious balance. Though from the way she kept landing herself in these situations, maybe she needed one hanging around to advise her.

In her heart, Belle knew she'd relinquished control of her life the second Chase had walked into it. Really, long before that. When J.G. sent Chase after her, she'd started living on borrowed time. She had just been lucky Chase had been the one he hired, and not some homicidal freak-like the one who landed her on another trip to La La Land.

Howls erupted, shaking the very air, and again nearly sent her flying from the bed. It took everything Belle had to keep still and not run screaming out of wherever they'd put her. If they thought she was still knocked out, her life might last longer than the next few minutes. Wondering how long that piece of stupidity would last, Belle lay still, listening to the heated conversation. The blur of their words eased into her head. Gradually, she discerned the voices behind the yelling. One belonged to the beast. The second voice could only be Caern's.

"What the hell were you thinking?" Caern demanded.

"You told me to check on the girl while I was getting more firewood. How was I to know she would freak out?" Belle discovered what she had mistaken for growls to be a really heavily accented voice. The beast was Russian.

"So you attacked her to calm her down! Smart move, asshole," Caern snarled.

"You came to me, little man. If you were so damn worried about her, you should have gone out yourself!" he shouted back.

"It's raining." Even though her half-closed eyes she could see the disgust on the Were's face.

"Вы - не лучше чем женщина, маленький вампир." The Were snickered.

"If you're going to insult me, you big Russian oaf, do it in English!" Caern shouted.

"You are not worth the effort. If it were not for Chase, I would send the both of you down the mountain in bite size pieces." Belle lifted her eyelids enough to see a wide grin split the creature's face, revealing a perfect white smile.

Belle's breath caught in her throat. Aside from the scar, which didn't look so bad in this light, he was gorgeous. He was no Chase, but he definitely deserved a healthy gander. The guy had to be seven feet tall with shoulders just about as wide. Long brown hair shot through with natural blond highlights flew about his head in shaggy tufts like a lion's mane. Hidden under the wild hair, his face revealed more of the human than the nightmare creature.

"I wouldn't suggest you try, Raiz old buddy. Me, he might forgive, but the girl he'd kill you over," Caern laughed.

"You lie."

She snapped her eyes shut as the man whipped his head around to look at her.

"Believe it. He might not know it yet, but he's fallen for her."

Belle couldn't believe what she was hearing. The only interest Chase had expressed in her direction had been as a client. Her feelings might be otherwise, but Chase had been pretty straightforward about his. The only reason he agreed to help her in the first place had to do with how John had treated him. As much as she wanted a different response from him, the truth stared her in the face. When he finished helping her, he would disappear into the sunset or whatever cliché fit the moment. Even as Belle thought it, something tugged at her memory telling her she was wrong.

"You are the playboy. *Nyet*, Chase would never let a girl come between him and the job."

"You'd think that. Why else would he turn down a six figure payday to help her out? Face it, comrade. The old dog is learning new tricks." The smugness in Caern's voice made her want to bolt from the bed and slap the taste out of his mouth.

"It does not seem like Chase, but he is a complicated man. If honor is involved, you may be mistaking that for something more." Raiz's gravelly voice seemed doubtful.

"I've seen the way he looks at her. He's smitten."

The words cut through her like a knife. Chase was smitten. With her! Belle couldn't believe it. She had been having enough trouble keeping her emotions in check, thinking she was the only one with a bad case of the hots. How would she cope if the possibility existed that it might be reciprocated on his part?

Caught up in her fevered thoughts, Belle missed the fact their conversation had dropped in timbre. It wasn't until the words, 'She is awake, my friend' hit her ears that she realized her job at playing opossum had betrayed her.

"Do you think she was listening?" Caern whispered.

"If not, it would be a miracle." Raiz snorted.

"I heard," she answered, since the jig was obviously up.

"Caern is a fool. Pay no attention to his ramblings, little one," Raiz said, taking a step toward her.

Belle flinched back onto the bed at his approach.

"Do not be afraid. This one means you no harm. Outside was a misunderstanding." His voice offered her an assurance she couldn't deny.

"I'm sorry. I did not mean to offend you, Niegilium." She bowed her head, flinching at the effect the name had on him, as he let out a throaty growl.

"You are Shazhium." Raiz hissed.

Belle bit her tongue. The old language had slipped from her tongue before she knew what she was saying.

"What the hell is that?" Caern pushed in front of the other man.

"He does not know?" Raiz directed at her.

"No, and neither does Chase." She wilted under his gaze.

"Would one of you please tell me what the hell you are talking about?" Caern demanded.

"You wanted to know what I am. Well, here it is. I am of the People. What you call the Fae. That is the mortal word for us. There are others, but that one should suffice to answer your question." In the span of five seconds she had just betrayed her people.

Caern looked at her like she was from another planet. Belle couldn't blame him for his reaction. She was a creature of myth, even more so than he was. Belle just hoped his reaction didn't offer a preview of Chase's.

"Before you lose your cool, I have a question," Raiz interrupted.

"What?" Caern snapped.

"When you arrived, you said Chase was an hour behind you. It has now been over two hours since you and the girl invaded my home." Belle could see Raiz waited for his words to sink in. "If that is the case, where is Chase?"

## Chapter Eleven

Chase let out a grunt, as the last segment of his spine slid into place. He buried the scream the unnatural realignment called into being, as far down as he could manage. His effort earned him a muffled whimper. Chase would be damned if he gave his captors the satisfaction of hearing him wail like a baby. It'd take more than a broken body to make him break.

Gritting his teeth, he willed his eyes to open to thin slits. Consciousness slowly returning, Chase estimated he had been here for at least five hours, if the condition of the repair job on his body gave him any indication. Most of it had pretty much fixed itself, which told him more than any clock would have. Looked like he'd have enough strength to live through whatever they had planned for him next. On the bad side, any hope of his immortality remaining a secret had just flown out the window. When his jailers realized what he was, whoever had him would stop at nothing to get what they wanted out of him. Torture would be too nice a word for what they'd do to him to find out where he'd hidden Belle.

Chase knew from experience just how long a man could suffer before the wish for death took hold, and for him, the knowledge was that death would never come, no matter the pain. For a man who could heal any wound he took, the idea was not a pleasant one. Chase was not some weakling. He had lived long enough to take the pain that he knew would come once his captors returned. For Belle, he would take whatever they had to throw at him.

He'd be more worried, but knew Caern would look after her. Aside from doing it himself, there was no one he trusted more than his partner to make sure no harm would come to the woman. They both knew the risks and the consequences of failure. Even though Chase couldn't say exactly how long he'd been out, he hoped Caern had the sense to see his delay as a sign things were not going to plan. Chase didn't delude himself into thinking Caern would come in, guns blazing, and rescue his ass. He hadn't gone that soft. Besides, they both knew he could handle himself without needing the calvary to come running in to save the day. The important thing was to keep Belle safe. If Caern had half a brain, he'd have ditched Raiz's place hours ago and hauled ass to somewhere else. The main thought rolling around in Chase's brain was if these bastards could trace him down, then Caern and Belle would become fair game. Not even Raiz could save them, if his suspicions were right.

His memories from last night were hazy but he definitely remembered Laughing Boy mention Winter, and not as a seasonal time of year. He'd been stupid. From what Sebastian told him he should have expected an attack from left field. Now, he paid the price for that stupidity. Chase just didn't want his friends ending up doing the same because of it.

His muscles burned as blood flowed through them again. Using the pincushion pain as incentive, Chase tested his renewed strength against the chains holding him to the wall. After a few seconds of futility, he had managed a rattle worthy of the Ghost of Christmas Past, but the thick links showed no signs of give.

His head clear enough to finally think, Chase scanned the room, hoping to gauge just how screwed he was. His cell looked to be a bedroom, but whose he didn't want to think about. The Marquis De Sade sprang to mind. Threw a great party, but was hell on a first date. Chase chuckled to himself.



The room itself was pretty nondescript. In fact, it bore a striking resemblance to a motel room with its single bed and dressing table. Even the carpet resembled something cheap and cheesy you'd find in one. All it needed was a crappy painting of flowers, and he would have been in a Motel 6. The only difference, Chase had never seen a torture rack featured in a motel room, but then again he tended to stay out of Vegas.

Knowing he might as well relax, Chase eased his body back against the wall. The sound of cracking vertebra let him know he hadn't developed a sudden immunity to the effects of pain. The chains bit into his wrist, but the pressure on his back and arms wasn't threatening to rip him apart anymore. He had to laugh. People paid good money for shit like this, and here he was getting it all for free.

The sound of footsteps outside the door brought his head back to the mundane. Chase found it hard to believe they'd left him alone this long. By his best guess, they had been waiting to see if he lived through the night. Well, screw them. The bastards were in for a surprise.

His muscles tensed when the door opened. Even though chains held him in place, his body reacted from years of hard learned experience. There was little he could do, but his body didn't know that. Bondage couldn't change the fact that it was the most dangerous weapon he had ever wielded.

"You may relax. I mean you no harm." The voice that came to him flowed through the air like honey poured over arsenic.

Chase glared at the woman standing in the open doorway of his prison. Tall and willowy with the whitest skin Chase had ever seen, she smiled and moved into the room. He couldn't shake the sight of her pale form from his mind, her flesh glistened like new fallen snow, matching the long curly locks that framed her face so perfectly, he had trouble telling where her flesh ended and her hair began. Wearing little more than a fur coat that matched everything else about her that hung down to her slender ankles, the ethereal woman glided across the floor. Chase stared mesmerized by the swell of full breasts peeking from behind the wash of mink that barely covered her assets. A gossamer fall of sheer fabric hung from her waist, pooling around her feet and he couldn't stop himself from letting his eyes linger on the shadowy promise nestled behind it.

Chase watched her -- measuring her against the image forming in his mind. For all her appearances, he knew that the woman represented more than this masquerade of sex standing before him. He'd seen the type enough to recognize this woman as a dangerous creature -- one he should avoid at all costs. Too bad there was no chance in hell of that happening. Every subtle movement bespoke the power the woman wielded so completely. Through the pain befuddling his thoughts, Chase's mind clicked on the facts. He'd landed himself an audience with the Winter Queen, herself.

When the woman finally spoke, it sent a cold chill across his spine. "Mr. Michaels, I find you not as near death as I was led to believe."

He held his tongue. Speaking would reveal too much. For now he saw no value in letting her get even the smallest of handholds into his psyche.

"Your silence intrigues me. Does your tongue refuse to work for some reason attributed to the care of my knight, or does your own obstinacy prevent you from even the most civil of greetings." Her smile was a façade he recognized all too well.

"I didn't know prisoners were allowed to be civil to their captors," Chase growled, in spite of himself.

"So, the lion has a tongue after all." The woman ran her fingers down his bicep, bringing a hint of frost across his flesh. "Perhaps he should curb it, before it leads him to mischief."

"Lady, get over yourself. You may be holding all the cards, but you don't scare me. Just get to the point or torture me." Chase looked into her face and smiled. "You're going to anyway, so why don't you just start there and save my ears the fucking trouble."

Her mask slipped and he got a look at what he was truly dealing with. The beauty queen face melted away, revealing a frostbitten monstrosity better suited to a corpse than the woman standing in front him. Huge lifeless eyes bore into him, freezing him to his core. In that instant Chase came to know fear.

"Little man, I am Kylanndria Dhivay, mother of darkness born in the heart of winter. What are you but a speck to be lost in the wake of the blizzard of my displeasure! You will tell me where the girl is. Whether you suffer before, or after, is entirely up to you." She took his chin in her hand, freezing the flesh. "But tell me, you will."

The gnashing of her mouth revealed row upon row of ragged teeth as her glamour continued to fade before Chase's eyes. He knew he should be afraid, but couldn't bring himself to be. Belle's face bore a hole through the fear he felt taking hold. For her, he would find the strength to screw this bitch's world to hell and back. In spite of her appearance, he could see the fear she desperately tried to conceal. He didn't know what the hell was going on, but anything that could frighten someone as powerful as a Sidhe had to be pretty bad.

"Cut the bullshit. I don't know where she is, so you can huff and puff all you want." He hoped Caern had enough sense to make that the truth.

Her clawed hand pinched his cheeks until a thin line of blood flowed down each side of his face. "Come now, paltry lies ill suit you. You were seen with her just this morning and it is well known that you are in Gardner's pay."

"She gave me the slip. I was running her down when your assholes ran me off the road and brought me to you." He eased back in the chains, as he saw her doubt replace the mask on her face.

"How do I know you aren't lying to me?"

"Frankly, I don't give a shit if you believe me, or not. This job has been nothing but a pain in the ass since I took it." Chase was amazed how his half-truths were rapidly becoming outright lies and the fact she seemed to be buying it. "So, feel free to kill me whenever you want. I'm just tired of being a puppet in this game."

"This is no game, Mr. Michaels. I'm not sure what Gardner has told you, but your life holds no meaning to me. I want the Heiress of Summer, and neither you nor he will stop me from getting her." Chase jerked back as she raked her hand across his cheek, drawing more blood. "Don't be alarmed. If I meant to truly harm you, your life would be forfeit."

"Then thanks for the love tap, bitch," Chase growled.

"No, thank you. Blood is a binding much stronger than words." She dipped her lips to the blood covered finger and took it into her mouth. "Hmmm... very interesting. You are much more than you appear, Mr. Michaels -- much more."

"Yeah, I'm the son of a bitch who's going to kick your ass." Chase threw himself into his chains, sending the woman reeling back. Chase smiled as he watched her try to regain her composure. "Now, who's the scary mother fucker? Not so fun to be on the receiving end, now is it?"

"You're quite mistaken. You don't even know the meaning of the word scary."

"I might surprise you," he said, falling back into wall.

Chase watched her from the depths of his furrowed brow. For one brief second, he saw a flicker of fear flash through her eyes. It vanished so quickly, he couldn't tell for sure that he'd seen it.

"You just might." She moved beside him again. "But that isn't the issue at the moment. The heiress is."

"Are you deaf, or just plain stupid? I told you I have no idea where she is," he screamed into her face.

Chase didn't even flinch when she slapped him across the cheek. "You forget your place, little fool. I am the mistress here. Your life continues because I wish it to do so."

"Then kill me, and get it over with!" Chase was tired of this bullshit. If this was how they tortured people, he'd die of boredom before anyone finally got around to killing him -- not that they'd have any luck. Fate had screwed him out of that release.

"Not when you are more useful alive. Your blood has sealed you to me." Chase didn't like the sound of that one damn bit. "Soon you will sleep, and when you wake your soul will belong to me."

Chase started laughing. The sound of it rang through the room.

This time she threw herself into the slap that sent him slamming into the wall, rattling the chains that held him. "What is so funny?"

"You can't own what I don't have. My soul was lost to me so long ago, the emptiness is a barren memory," Chase said, through another round of laughter.

"Then, your heart will suffice."

Her fist snaked out, grabbing his chest. Chase let out an anguished cry, as the hand melted through flesh and muscle. Cold bit him, freezing the warmth from him. His heart went icy and hard inside his ribcage. Every single part of him went numb and screamed from the feel of her touch running through his body. From the blackness of approaching oblivion, he heard her words through the blizzard raging in his body.

"I am Winter itself and you shall know how cold it is inside my world. Can you feel my kiss coursing through your body? You are mine, and not even Summer's touch can free you," she said, then it was her turn to laugh.

The sound of it haunted him all the way to the void she sent him to.

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A shiver ran down Belle's spine. In spite of the warmth radiating from the fireplace, the cold permeated her to her very soul, like someone had dropped an iceberg on top of her. She turned her head to where her companions were huddled in conversation to see if they showed any signs of the sudden drop in temperature. They appeared, for all intents, unaffected. Then again, one just so happened to be a were-whatever -- she hadn't figured out the 'whatever' yet -- and the other was a Dhampyre. Neither were accurate gauges for the way she felt. Grabbing a heavy quilt from the bed, she wrapped it around herself and moved closer to the fire. She doubted it would help, but it sure couldn't hurt. Even then, the memory of the feeling froze her to her core.

As impossible as it sounded, every fiber of her being screamed at her that the cold came from Chase. Belle didn't know how, but she knew without a doubt Chase was in mortal peril. She looked into the fire, denying the truth eating at her brain. Only paired mates were supposed to have this sensation. Chase was many things but he couldn't be her mate. She had only known the man for less than a day. Paired mates did not suddenly fall in...

Belle let the unwanted thought slip away before she went insane from the implications. In any case, paired mates were a thing of the past. As far as she knew her parents were the last ones. The Peoples had succumbed to the human trait of falling in love, instead of the age old magic of the Salouq Tuo. After seeing the wreck her mother had become following father's death, Belle could understand why. The Salouq Tuo called for both souls to become entwined, so that even death could not part the pair. For the past fifty odd years, her mother lived between life and death, as her father's spirit called from M'morte Sequestior L'dar, the waiting fields. Her uncle had used the devastation of that fact to weasel his way into her mother's bed.

Bad memories still didn't solve the mystery of how sure she could be that Chase was in trouble. Could some twist of fate have made them paired mates? Truthfully, she'd never studied the texts enough to know. She never expected to fall in love, let alone meet someone to enter into Salouq Tuo with. Dredging through her faded memories, she remembered her mother once telling her that feelings didn't matter. The sharing of souls happened whether you wanted it or not. Where the heart was blind the soul always knew the one who completed it.

Belle gazed into the fire. The hypnotic flickering did little to alleviate the mounting fear taking hold on her. She didn't know what disturbed her more, the thought Chase could be in trouble, or that there could be some unknown connection between them. Whatever the case, sitting here wasn't an option. She had to do something.

"Caern, Chase is in trouble," she said, looking away from the fire.

"No shit. If he wasn't, his ass would be here by now." Caern walked toward her with a look that drew a line of sweat down her back.

"It's more than his absence." She peered into the man's eyes. "I can feel the danger surrounding him. We have to find him."

"We don't have to do anything. I'll go find him. Chase wanted you safe. That means you're staying put, sister," he said, turning to Raiz. "Keep an eye on her 'til I get back."

"Da, but bring me back a bag of Fritos. Chili Cheese, none of that twangy ranch crap," Raiz called from the kitchen.

Belle followed Caern to the door. "You're out of your mind if you think I'm going to sit here while Chase is in danger!"

"Lady, the reason he's in danger is because of you!" Caern yelled from the doorway.

"Don't you think I know that!" Belle fought back the tidal wave of tears she desperately wanted to release. She wasn't about to cry in front of him. "But, I'll be damned if I'll sit here, while he's out there."

"She has a point, my friend," Raiz said, as he entered the room.

"Like hell she does. If something happens to her, are you going to be the one to tell Chase?" Caern spun on the man.

"*Nyet*. This is your problem -- or rather, Chase's problem," Raiz grunted.

"You're a lot of fucking help," Caern snapped.

"I think I am. I didn't ask you to bring her into my house. It is the fact that I consider Chase to be my friend that she isn't dead already. Her people enslaved mine since time before time. Da, I think I lot of fucking help."

"I don't give a damn." Caern cross his arms over his chest. "She can't go."

"Then, she stays. I don't care either way." The Were gave her a look of supreme indifference as he plopped into a chair.

"Thanks so much, but I'm going." Belle was tired of being talked about like she wasn't here.

"It isn't safe. If you're right and someone has taken Chase down, I might not be able to protect you." He threw his arms into the air.

"I'm a big girl, Caern. This is my decision," Belle said.

"No, it's your life." He slammed his finger into her face. "And I gave Chase my word that I'd take care of you."

She raised her hand for him to stop. "Caern, there are no guarantees. You could leave me here and my stepfather's goons could show up the minute you left. If you want to protect me, the only way is to take me with you."

Raiz let out a growl, making her jump. "You two make me sick with this emotional display. It is like shitty Lifetime movie. I will come to watch your back, if you promise not to go touchy feely about it."

"But you never leave this damn mountain." Belle caught the confused look on the Dhampyre's face.

"Chase plopped you two in my lap. Since you can't protect her, it falls to me. When we find his ass, I will tell him we are even." Raiz rose from the chair, and walked toward Belle. "Come, before I change my mind."

Belle smiled as Caern buried his face in his hands. She should feel relieved, but didn't. In her heart, she knew whatever danger Chase was in, it was too late to help him. The feeling wasn't about to stop her from doing everything in her power to find him.

## Chapter Twelve

Chase shivered against the damp ground. Consciousness was slow in coming, but come it did. With a surge of newfound adrenaline, his body awoke to agony. Even consciousness felt too great a burden to bear, but he struggled like hell to keep his tentative hold on it. In spite of good sense telling him to give up, Chase knew lying here wasn't an option.

Fighting back the pain, Chase slid his eyes opened to see what this new hell held for him. Whatever that bitch did to him had seriously screwed with his entire being. He'd never felt this much agony before in his long miserable existence. A thousand battle fields couldn't do the damage to him one woman succeeded in doing in one night.

Waiting for the searing pain to wash through him, he rolled over on his back, and stared into the night sky. Chase fought down the urge to scream from the sudden motion. Instead he focused his mind on the blanket of snow gently falling around him. Wincing, he shrugged at his good luck. For one brief second, he was afraid he'd look up and find the bitch standing over him.

Foregoing any thanksgiving for the small favor, he pushed himself up, only to double over. Chase threw his hand down to stop from hitting the ground rushing toward him. Counting slowly to ten, he found the strength to try standing again. Even then, he had to grasp his knees to keep from rushing back to the ground for his stupidity. The simple action nearly sent him falling into unconsciousness for his trouble. Whatever fortitude he had left was rapidly draining.

Pain soaked into every inch of him. If he thought it was bad before, standing up just magnified his agony. In the grip of it all, Chase almost hoped fate would finally give him a reprieve. The sweet release of death had long been a wistful dream playing at the back of his mind. The warmth of thinking it had finally come for him lulled him back toward unconsciousness.

*"Warrior, death is awaiting you!"* A chorus of voices rang in his head.

"Fuck off! Haven't you hounded me enough for one lifetime? Let death take me." The words were slurred as blackness clouded his vision.

*"Your life is ours. You will not deny us our vengeance. Death has no claim to you. You shall not die, yet. We forbid it!"*

"Watch me," Chase said with a shallow grin on his face, his eyes drooping in exhaustion.

*"What of Belle?"* This time the voices were splintered, coming at him from all directions.

Chase hesitated. Suddenly, her face popped into his head. Sadness welled in her eyes as Belle looked down upon him. The image felt so real he swore she was there with him. Bewitched by the vision, he lifted his hand to reach out and touch her cheek. His fingers brushed empty air shattering her face into a thousand stars that danced into the gloom.

He dropped his head to his knees. "I can't help her now. That bitch did something to me. If I go to Belle, Kylanndria will come for her. It would be better that I die here."

*"Coward!"* The voices screamed into his brain, jarring him awake. *"She is your redemption. If she dies, you will never know peace. Not even death will offer you succor for your sins."*

"What would you have me do? Spit in death's face and tell him to fuck himself? I ain't going." Chase let out an anguished laugh. "It isn't like I have a choice here."

*'Is death truly your decision?'* The question was a whisper.

Chase stared into the shifting snow falling around him. Great, now the weather had decided to mirror his soul. The voices were right. He was a coward. He'd never taken the easy road, and wasn't about to now.

"No!" he howled.

*'Then, take strength from us. Sleep, Warrior.'*

Chase felt sleep drift over him -- not unconsciousness, but true sleep. As it claimed him, he heard the voices of his tormentors singing ever so softly into his brain. He couldn't make out the words but the serenity of their song was all it took to send him into slumber. When the blackness finally conquered him, Belle's face floated into his dreams and for the first time in forever his non-existent soul found peace.

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Belle held on for her life as Raiz rammed the massive four-wheel drive over a hill at high speed. The man never even looked for oncoming traffic when he spun the wheel, landing them in the center of a long stretch of road. Her head slammed into the ceiling, and she yelped. She did her best to ignore the chuckle Caern let out at her plight. She'd already skidded into his lap twice, and was doing her best not to make it a hat trick. When Raiz's next spin of the wheel sent the Dhampyre's head slamming into the side window, she let out a laugh of her own.

"Where the hell did you get your license, man?" Caern growled, rubbing the newly formed knot on his head.

"What is this license? It is my truck. I drive," Raiz grunted, bringing another chuckle to her lips.

"You find that funny?" Caern turned on her, making a wave of giggles explode from her.

"Immensely," Belle cackled.

"Screw you, and this fur bag." He rammed his head back into the seat, letting out a snarl.

"*Tavorish*, you are more than welcome to walk." The big man's face broke into a wide grin. "I will even slow down to thirty-five, so you can jump without much injury."

"Before you toss momma from the train, do you even know where we're going?" Caern stared past Belle to glare at the Were.

"*Nyet*, you said go east, so I go east. I thought you knew where we were going." Raiz shrugged and gunned the Hemi. "If you not know, then who does?"

"Hell if I know?" Caern snapped. "How many roads lead to your place?"

"After you leave the main highway, just the one. There are some side roads but not many. If Chase was on his way, we will find him on this road."

Belle looked past Raiz to the blurring landscape framing his silhouette. She willed her mind to ignore the raging conversation between the two men. The tension knotting between her eyes wouldn't let her. The connection she'd felt earlier eluded her. As much as Belle tried, she couldn't feel Chase anywhere. Her heart told her he was out of danger, but her mind told her different. If anything, Chase was in more trouble now than before. She could feel death hovering around him, even without the connection.

"Well, how the hell am I supposed to know what route he was driving?" Caern snapped, breaking her maudlin train of thought.

"Wait a minute!" Belle shouted, a glimmer of hope igniting inside her. "Caern, do you guys have Loboy on your vehicles?"

"Do you mean Lo Jack?" Caern smirked.

Frustration ate at her brain. "Whatever you call it. Do you have it?"

"No, I don't trust Lo Jack. I don't like the idea of other people knowing where my crap is," Caern snorted. "But I do have my own tracking devices installed in all my vehicles."

"Then, couldn't we check for him that way?" God, she hoped so.

"Hell yeah, we could!" The excitement bubbled over to her. "Why didn't I think of that? Since he's in the Mustang, I can find him in no time."

Belle resisted the urge to hold her breath as Caern fumbled in his pocket. Raiz swerved to avoid a pothole, sending them banging into each other. Caern's hand came up with a slender box no bigger than a cell phone. The remote bobbed on the tips of his fingers, but he grasped it before it could go flying.

"Raiz, I swear if you hit one more bump, I'm going to throw your ass out and drive myself," Caern snarled.

"You may try, but no one drives my truck," Raiz thumped the dash. "But me."

"Then drive the son of a bitch like you know what you're doing," Belle snapped before Caern had a chance to.

"She has fire, *da*?" Raiz let out a belly roll of a laugh. "If you were not of my enemy, I could come to like you."

"I got a signal!" Caern exclaimed before Belle had a chance to respond. "According to this, he's about three miles in that direction." He pointed toward the left side of the road, slightly ahead of them.

"There is an access road that comes from the main highway just ahead," Raiz nodded his head. "It's rarely used, but Chase knows about it. He called it my bolt hole."

"Why would he take that, instead of the main road?" Belle asked.

"He must have thought he had a tail. No way he'd bring someone to us," Caern said.

"It still doesn't explain why he hasn't made it to your place." Belle looked to both men for a sign her fears were unfounded. They looked away, as if afraid to answer her. "Mind telling me what you're trying to hide?"

Caern hesitated then began to speak. "There is no way Chase would leave us hanging. Either he's got car trouble, or he's..."

Belle turned away before he was forced to tell her. Turning her eyes back to the road, her thoughts drifted to Chase. She knew they had only known each other for less than a day, but the thought of him dead was more than she could bear. The idea that any minute they'd come upon his lifeless body drove a knife through her heart.

What was wrong with her? Now wasn't the time to start having emotional entanglements. Her plans were too important for a man to suddenly pop into her life, making everything crazy. The Peoples needed to be united! A strong leader didn't let her heart get in the way of doing what needed to be done.

Chase made her do just that. They'd never even kissed for heaven's sake. Not that the thought hadn't filled her every synapse since they met. His rugged face begged to be kissed. She couldn't imagine doing anything less than devouring his hard lips until they softened, returning her embrace with the ardor she felt. The haunted loneliness in his eyes, so mirrored her own, that she couldn't help but want to take away the pain she saw there.

Maybe Ronald had been right. If a man could have this affect on her, she wasn't the person to lead her people. How could she be thinking about him with everything that truly mattered to her at stake? One day she could afford to think about romance and a life of her own. Despite what her mind seemed to think, now wasn't the time. As long as her stepfather's grip on



the Summer Court fractured her people, Belle would have to forget she was a woman and focus on being the queen her people desperately needed.

A lot easier said than done. Her life was such a mess. When Belle had been younger, her mother would tell her stories of princesses. They never had the troubles she did. They were happy, and princes always came running to save the day. Belle gave up on princes and shining knights a long time ago. The real world had no room for the foolish dreams of childhood.

Yet, here she was putting all her hope on one man. Chase might be many things, but shining knight? Hell, she was the one running to save him. Belle didn't think that fact qualified him for knighthood. In spite of everything to the contrary, Belle wished more than anything that he could be the knight she'd stopped dreaming about after her father died.

Something about the man begged her to believe in him. Their first meeting aside, he represented everything she'd once imagined a knight to be. Even after shooting him, Chase offered to help her without forcing her to reveal the secrets she had to keep. There weren't many men who would do that.

Now, he was probably dying because of her. Caern was right. If she'd confided in him, would things have been different? If he'd known that J.G. wasn't the only one after her, would he have been more guarded? Those, and a lot more 'what ifs', strangled her thoughts, turning them dark as they settled into a headache behind her eyes. The secret must be kept at all costs. That mantra had been drummed into her head, and a carefully crafted masquerade had been set in place to protect them.

In light of things, Belle couldn't help but wonder if Winter could be behind Chase's disappearance. The balance between the courts could be called tenuous at best. Winter would benefit greatly if Belle became lost to Summer. Without an heir, Summer would fade away, leaving Winter complete control of the Peoples. Even if her own people did their damndest at times to blow apart the world. Only the power Summer represented kept the icy Queen from openly acting against her sister house.

She winced at the thought of Chase in the hands of the Winter Queen. The woman was heartless, and not above doing whatever it took to get what she wanted. Already, Winter's control grew unchecked. The world was in chaos enough without her gaining full power in this world. Should Summer fade into the mists, the Earth would become a cold barren wasteland.

In essence, the fate of the world rested on Belle's shoulders. The idea frightened her straight to her soul. She wasn't prepared for this. This was too much responsibility for one person. Yet, she couldn't walk away from it. She had been born to this role and nothing would change that fact.

"What the hell did he do to my car?" Caern's shout drew her away from her thoughts.

Belle snapped her head up, seeing that sometime during her musing it had begun to snow. Peering through the windshield, she saw a smoldering ruin lying directly in the center of the road. The side of the car had been smashed in all the way down the length of it. The windshield lay shattered outward over the crushed in hood of the car. She let out a gasp, thinking of the impossibility of anyone surviving -- let alone walking away from -- the twisted hunk of metal. Belle's mind told her that Chase's curse should have saved him, but at what price? But, her gut sensed the car crash hadn't been the danger she felt surrounding him. Whatever they found at the crash site would only be a precursor to the real trouble.

Raiz slammed on the brakes, stopping them directly in front of the wreckage. Belle nearly shoved herself into Caern's lap in her haste to get out. She needn't have bothered. He moved faster than she believed possible. By the time she had scooted to the edge of the seat, he had

already reached the mangled car. In one smooth motion, the Dhampyre ripped the crushed-in door off the hinges and tossed it across the road. Running up behind him, Belle peered into the gapping hole, only to find the car empty.

"Where is he?" she cried.

Caern grabbed her around the shoulders and pulled her away from the car. "I don't know. Maybe he was thrown from the car on impact."

Raiz raised his head and sniffed the air. "He is close by. I can smell him."

"Where?" Caern demanded.

The big man pointed toward the far tree line. "There."

Belle wrestled free from Caern's hold and took off. The icy ground crackled under her feet, as she tore up the distance toward the trees that built a blackened wall against the snow washed horizon. The sounds of Caern and Raiz rushing after her filtered through the air, their heavy tread grew like thunder in her ears. She shook the sound from her head. Somewhere out there Chase needed her. Her heart felt him teetering on the edge of death. She heard his soul call out to her from that abyss.

Scanning the gloom, Belle caught a flash of golden flesh hidden among the green darkness ahead. It was Chase! She knew it without a doubt. Her calves screamed and her thighs burned as she pushed her legs beyond their limits. Belle shoved the pain away. She could deal with the Charlie Horse later, right now, getting to Chase was the only thing that mattered.

Reaching him, the sight awaiting her broke her heart into a thousand pieces. Chase sat slumped against a tree, his arms wrapped around his legs. Belle fell down to the ground in front of him, tears racing down her face. Hiding behind the matted shaggy mane of his long hair, Chase's face appeared ghostlike and wane. Her fingers trembled as she brushed it away. Behind the curtain of hair, a look of such serenity greeted her. Running her fingers over his closed eyes, reality came crashing down around her.

Sobs welled in her throat. Dammit to hell, they were too late. He was dead. Tears flowed down her cheeks, as she gazed into his face. Despite her earlier thoughts, he had been her knight in shining armor. Now, he was gone. She bowed her head unable to look at him anymore. The pain of seeing him like this made it all too real.

"Belle, I can't look that bad," Chase coughed. "Now, if you want to see bad, turn around. Caern's sorry mug is something worth crying over."

"Chase!" Belle's head popped up. "You're not dead."

"And you're real this time." He smiled into her face.

"What?" He was delirious. They hadn't gotten here a moment too soon.

"Nothing, it doesn't matter." Chase winced, as a smile cracked his face. "You're here now."

Belle scrambled to catch him as he collapsed into her arms. "Chase!"

Caern rushed over and helped her lay him on the ground. Raiz reached over her, gently placing his jacket over Chase's body. Belle straightened it above him, until only Chase's head poked out from under the massive fur coat. She ran her hand down his blood crusted cheek. His skin so cold to the touch, her hand flinched back involuntarily. Death crept through his body. Her tears fell onto his face, tiny tornados of steam to rise from the frozen flesh. She leaned forward, praying for some sign he was still with them.

"Wake up. You can't die on me now," she whispered, her breath bringing a patch of pink onto his face.

"I held on for you. I'm not about to die now." Chase's eyes fluttered open. "They promised to help me to stick around."

"Who did?"

"Ghosts from the past." A series of coughs wracked his body. "But I guess I'm having the last laugh on those bitches. I'm dying after all."

"No you're not. I won't let you," Belle cried.

"Darling, I wish it was that easy. If this curse can't save me, I don't think you can." The color rapidly faded from his face. "Caern, get your ass over here."

"Don't talk, buddy. Save that strength for something important, like living," Caern squatted down beside Belle, wrapping an arm around her shoulders to steady her.

"Too late for that shit. I need you to promise me that you'll protect Belle." Chase tried to sit up, but Caern shoved him back to the ground.

"You can do that. I don't need the hassle. She's your woman, not mine." Belle saw the pain the man masked behind the bravado.

"And don't you forget it." Chase laughed weakly.

Her heart stopped, as she watched the life drain from him. "I thought he was immortal."

*"Nothing is immortal, child. All things must come to an end. People, planets, even gods have their time before fading into the void."*

From the shadows the woman from her half-remembered dream shimmered into life. Belle wiped her hands across her eyes to make sure it wasn't a dream.

*"It is no dream, my dear. Now, we don't have much time for explanations. Chase is dying."*

"Then save him," Belle demanded.

*"Sadly, that is beyond my power."* The woman settled down on the opposite side of Chase. *"Only you can do that."*

She was a fairy princess, dammit. Not a freaking doctor. "How?"

*"You know how."* The ghost woman placed a hand over hers. *"Take him to the Witchling."*

"I can't take him into the Lands. Gardner would feel me enter." For a Yoda-type, the woman had some serious reality issues. Mortals weren't allowed into the Lands and even if they were, she wouldn't be crazy enough to take Chase to the Witchling. Not even the dark ones treaded lightly on the one of the Primordial's domain. Those with great power like the Witchling grew unstable as the years wore on their minds. Rumor had it that the Witchling had been at the creation and lived to tell about it. Someone who could do that was to be avoided at all costs.

*"His power is not as strong as he would have you believe. You are the heir of Summer, not him."*

"But..."

*"Time is slipping away for you both. Go."* The woman raised her arm and pointed into the darkness.

"Belle, what's wrong?" Caern's voice shattered the vision from her eyes, leaving her empty from the woman's words.

"Nothing," she answered, looking blankly into the darkness.

He leaned in front of her, blocking her line of sight. "You spaced out there for a second."

"I know." Belle rocked back on her knees, trying to make sense of what just took place.

The woman from her dreams asked her to do the impossible. She couldn't go into the Lands. It would be her death, as well as Chase's. Her stepfather would stop at nothing to get her.

If he found out Chase had double crossed him, nothing would stop John from killing the man. She wasn't even sure the Witchling would aid her.

The ancient ones were fickle. Even if she did help, the price of that help could be worse than the cure. The ancient powers, especially the Primordials were laws unto themselves, beyond the dual Courts.

Belle looked down at Chase. His breaths came at irregular intervals -- each one more labored than the last. Could she truly let him die, when it was in her power to save him? The answer came to her without a second of thought. No! Whatever happened to him had been her fault. She had to do this. For him as well as her, she had to take him to the Witchling. The Fates would have her believe that his life was tied to hers. Since they had deemed to throw them together, there had to be a reason behind it. Watching him slip away, Belle wasn't about to let the fickle bitches rip the two of them apart now.

"Caern, do you trust me?" Belle's voice was a dull whisper.

His face twisted into a hard mask. "What do you mean?"

"I can save him," Belle didn't even want to say the words, afraid she would be lying to them both.

"Then what the hell are you waiting for? Do it."

"That's where the trust comes in. For me to save his life, I must take him into the Lands."

"*Nyet*, my friend. The Lands mean death to those who enter," Raiz howled.

"He's telling you the truth, Caern. The Lands are the most dangerous place you will ever go," Belle paused. "But trust me. If I take him there, I may be able to save him. Otherwise he will die right here."

"Only maybe?" From the look on his face, Belle could tell Caern didn't like those odds.

"I can't promise anything more, but it's better than the chance he has now." Belle's heart poured through her voice, pleading for him to say no. There was another way.

Caern rose to his feet. Belle watched his face switch from concern to uncertainty. She could see the inner debate ripping him apart. Finally, he opened his mouth.

"Do whatever it takes, but bring him back alive."

"If I can't, there isn't much sense in coming back." Belle grabbed the Dhampyre's hand and gave it a squeeze. "You and Raiz go back to the bar. I don't know how long this will take. You have my word. We both will find you there as soon as we can."

"You damn well better." Caern forced a weak smile, but she could tell it for the lie it was.

Before he could say anything else, Belle let go of his hand. Not daring to look the man in the eye again, she gathered Chase into her arms. Closing her eyes, Belle focused her mind on the Witchling. With the woman's face firmly in place, the barrier between worlds dissolved around them. They were on their way.

Heaven help them, now.

## Chapter Thirteen

Rubbing his graying temples, John Gardner swiveled in his chair until he faced the open window. He stared out over the grounds of his estate, or rather his wife's estate. Not that it mattered who owned the place. It was his in all but name anyway. The thought brought a satisfied smile to his face. He reached back and flicked open the humidor and pulled one of his prized Cubans free of their oaken home. Running the cigar under his nose, he relished the comfort and prestige his brother's death afforded him. It was almost a shame he wasn't here to share it with him.

Clipping the end from the cigar, Gardner turned his gaze back to the window. The snow falling over the barren trees worried him. Bringing a touch of flames to his fingertips, he lit the cigar absently, and let the implications wisp around his head like the thick smoke of his Cuban. Gardner drew the deep intoxicating scent into his lungs and mulled over the problem. An early snow storm was not so unusual that he should mark it with a wary eye, yet he did. Even with the invading smoke of the cigar dulling his senses, the scent of Winter's hand in this felt too strong for him to ignore. If Gardner had learned one thing, it was to never discount the possibility of Kylanndria's grubby fingers meddling in the mortal world. To do so amounted to sure death.

Growling, he spun in his chair and smashed the cigar into the ash tray. He watched the crushed cigar smolder half smoked and cursed himself for letting his emotions get the better of him. He had allowed Kylanndria to ooze under his skin, when he should be marshalling himself for the task at hand. That frigid bitch was a distraction he did not need at the moment. Until he had Belle securely under his thumb again, he couldn't risk the chance of Winter's queen discovering that he'd lost his troublesome stepdaughter. As much as he hated the fact, he needed Myrandia's daughter. His dear wife had become far too weak to be of any use to him.

Even though he was above pandering to rumors, John knew the Summer Court to be whispering among themselves behind his back. Very soon, the imbeciles would gather the courage to confront him. Only the meekness inherent in his people kept them at bay. One more embarrassing display from Myrandia, Gardner knew, without a doubt, they would pounce on his perceived weakness. Without Belle to ascend -- under his control of course -- the Court would demand the old ways be adhered to, and a new queen chosen from among the remaining royals. That was something he would not allow to happen.

For the time being, he needed to focus on the here and now. His powerbase remained firmly in place. Gardner knew his position among the hierarchy to be tenuous at best, but well within his control for the time being. It was no secret that the members of the royal seat would like nothing better than for him to be disgraced and ousted from his office as Knight. As distasteful as it was to him, that fact meant without Myrandia to act as a figurehead, a new Knight of Spring would be chosen. That outcome would not sit well with his plans or endear him to his allies.

Gardner opened the humidor sitting on the edge of his desk. Extracting another Cuban, he allowed his mind to dissect the problem. Belle had obviously sought out help from the renegades who had already shown themselves receptive to a new regime -- one without him. Even now, his agents were hard at work searching them out. The half-breeds had already rooted out three of the

malcontents. They had been suitably rewarded for their sedition without getting him any closer to finding the girl.

He brought the cigar to his lips. A snap of his fingers brought a flame dancing across his fingertips. He inhaled the heady fragrance of the tobacco, as he touched the flames to the hand-wrapped cylinder. Sending the fire back into the ether, he knew his only hope lay in this private detective.

Hiring the man had been a spur of the moment decision. Truthfully, he hadn't thought the detective would be much help. Then, the fool went off and found the girl. Of course, the encounter hadn't ended as well as Gardner would have hoped. Belle gave the man the slip. After talking to Michaels this afternoon, he was sure the private investigator would have no trouble locating her again. As he fingered the invoice for the Shelby on his desk, Gardner had to admit the man's services were becoming extravagant, to say the least. Still, if Michaels actually brought the little bitch in, it would be money well spent. The thought brought a smile to his lips.

"You were always too damn smug for your own good, J'hanous. I wonder if you will still look so pleased with yourself, once you've heard my news."

Gardner spun in his chair, surprised by his unwelcome visitor. Even without looking, he knew it to be Corith. He grimaced at the ill wind that just blew through his door. A visit by one of the Triumvirate was never a joyous occasion.

Taking a puff on his cigar, he studied the man. The horned god appeared in his mortal guise. The glamour was quite impressive, but you couldn't mistake him for anything less than whom he was. Corith wasn't about to let humanity diminish him, especially in the company of an uneasy ally.

The god stood every bit of seven feet, all of it dressed in black leather. Gardner had to suppress a grin at the man's choice of dress. He looked like a reject from a bad biker movie, instead of the most fearsome of the Triumvirate since the Unseen had passed into shadow. He wore his brown hair long and tied back with a leather cord. Corith had added blond highlights since the last time they'd met, which hadn't been that long ago. Gardner wished it could have been longer, but times such as these called for unlikely alliances.

"And what news would that be?" Gardner asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

Corith took a seat opposite the desk without speaking. A pair of Ray Bans kept Gardner from seeing the dead eyes glaring into him, which suited the man just fine. The god stretched his massive arms revealing a swirl of tribal tattoos running their way up his forearms and biceps to disappear under the vest the god wore like a second skin over his rock hard chest. Gardner was so caught up by the spectacle, he missed the giant of a man pluck the sword slung across his back from its place until Corith slammed the blade on the desk between them. Gardner flinched back, unwilling to be so close to the cursed blade.

John knew well the power in the blade and feared it rightly so. Evening Song, god slayer was its name. Prophecy foretold the world would one day fall to the sword's kiss. That was enough to make Gardner tread carefully in its presence -- let alone with the blade inches away from him. He tried to recover his composure before the god noticed, but it was too late. From the look on Corith's face, the god already knew he'd won the first battle in their game.

"Your stepdaughter has gone to the Lands." Corith grinned, taking off the Ray Bans to reveal eyes the color of a corpse three days dead.

"How can you be sure?" Gardner blurted out before he could catch himself.

"Because, she's gone to see the old bitch." His grin deepened.

"She's gone to Morag. Dammit to hell! Why didn't you stop her?" Gardner knew he was pushing his luck, but was too upset to care. Things were getting out of hand.

"Not in our agreement. You asked for one death and received it. If you would like to renegotiate for the daughter, as well the father, I am more than willing to draw up a new contract." Corith leaned forward, patting the sword.

"The contract was for you to protect my interests. Allowing Belle to contact the Witchling is in direct contrast to protecting my interests," Gardner growled.

"You know as well I do, I am not allowed to interfere in Morag's affairs. The girl cloaked herself from me until she entered the Witchling's grove. Perhaps you can explain to me why that is?" Dead eyes found a haunting life as they drained Gardner's resolve to be in their light.

Corith might have won the first battle, but too much rested on finding the girl for him to back off now. There were worse things in the worlds than the Horned God, and John knew that all too well. "Hell if I know. You're the god. You tell me."

Corith leapt to his feet and jerked Gardner from his chair. "Little knight, don't push me. Your life is nothing to me. This is a pleasant diversion, something to while away a little time between apocalypses, but nothing more."

"Then what of the Glimmering," Gardner gasped, Corith's fingers digging into his neck.

"If I remember correctly, that is your end of our bargain and one you best fulfill soon, otherwise you will join your dear brother in his gentle repose." The threat was enough to make Gardner's mouth snap shut. "Now that we understand each other, what else can I do for you?"

"Do you know why she went to see the old woman?" Gardner asked as Corith set him back on the floor.

"Wondered when you'd get around to asking me that." A smirk marred the god's face. "It appears your darling stepdaughter has a male companion."

"What?" His mind reeled, the pieces starting to fall into place.

"Thought that'd get your attention." Gardner realized his mistake as soon as Corith eased back into his chair. Once again he'd given the god the upper hand.

"Since your knowledge is greater than mine, please enlighten me further." He eased into his chair and waited for the smirk to fall from Corith's face.

Laughing, Corith clapped his hands together. "Groveling suits you, J'hanous. It amuses me to no end."

"Then finish your tale. I can see how it pains you to hold it all inside." Gardner flexed his fingers under his chin, watching the amusement play over the other man's face.

"Seems little Belle found herself a beau, but Kylanndria snatched him up for some nastiness. You know the kind she likes -- torture, maiming, with a little intimidation on the side. As with such things, she ended up breaking the poor fellow and left him for dead where your stepdaughter could find him. This is where things get fuzzy. Someone or something told her to take the man into the Lands."

"What do you mean someone or something?" He tossed away any semblance of disinterest and slid forward in his chair. Other players had entered the game, and that worried him more than Corith's veiled threats.

"Whoever did it blocked the knowledge from me." Gardner saw how much it pained the god to admit such a thing.

"If that was the case, how were you able to find out anything?"

"Because Winter left a pawn behind to watch the man in case Belle showed up. As per your orders," Corith paused to spit. "I'd been keeping an eye on the frozen realm. With all the

activity, I thought it best to see what was going on. I was too late to stop them from crossing over but I found the snow sprite Kylanndria left on guard duty to be most cooperative once I plucked its wings."

"Were you able to find out the identity of this man?" Gardner did not like the idea of Winter suddenly rearing her head.

"That's the part I love about all this." The lopsided grin on Corith's face didn't make him feel any better. "Do you know someone named Chase Michaels?"

"Son of a bitch!" Gardner jumped from his chair and turned to the window. "Are you sure of this?"

"Wingless pixies don't lie." Corith cackled. "Well, lie for long."

Glaring at his reflection, John spoke. "Corith, I need you to do something for me."

"Figured you would. Tell you what. I'll even do this without asking a boon."

For one brief second he worried about Corith's sudden benevolent nature, but that was all. Michaels had played him for a fool. He would not stand by and allow the man to laugh behind his back. Should word leak back to the Court, the ramifications could topple his already sensitive position within the hierarchy.

Turning from the window, he went to his desk. He opened his planner and pulled out Michaels' business card. As an afterthought, he jotted down the address to the sleazy bar as well.

"Here, take this." He handed the slip over. "Go to the address on the back."

"And do what?" Corith asked, taking the card.

Gardner rolled the words around in his mouth before spitting them out. "Kill Michaels when he shows back up."

"Sorta hoped you'd say that, but what if there should be -- shall we say collateral damage?" Gardner watched Corith shove the card into his pocket.

"Just bring me back Michaels' head. What do I care who has to die to make it happen."

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Belle's lungs burned. It took her longer than it should have to realize she'd been holding her breath. Black dots swirling across her eyes, she gasped in a rush of air. The flood of oxygen swelled in her chest with a hint of cedar. The rich scent turned her frantic attempts to breathe into coughs that ripped through her and dropped her to the floor of the verdant meadow. She struggled to her feet, only to fall crashing to the ground. The soft feel of warm grass pressed into her face. Filling her with memories of better times, she breathed in the honeysuckle scent of it. Belle fought to keep those thoughts at bay. She knew all too well those days couldn't be relived. Dredging them up would serve no purpose except to bring up ghosts that needed to stay buried. She had enough trouble with living in the present without wishing for a second childhood. Besides, right now, Chase needed her more than the ghosts of the past.

With an unladylike grunt, Belle rolled over onto her back and let the pure warmth of the sun warm the chill of crossing over from her body. She'd forgotten how draining crossing through the barrier could be. The added strain of carrying Chase's dead weight hadn't helped. The heat washing over her body helped with the worst of the transition. Time would deal with the rest. She'd be shaky for a while, but that was to be expected when traveling across the planes. Knowing she'd wasted enough time, Belle drew in another breath and willed her eyes to open.

A clear blue sky shined down on her. In spite of the circumstances that brought her here, Belle loved being in the Homelands. The mortal world offered much that she loved, but this was



where she felt truly alive. Just watching the silver tinged clouds float by the haloed specter of the noonday moon, eclipsed by the twin suns that haunted the landscape from above, filled her with the peace John's presence in her life denied her. She was truly home. In spite of her desire to the otherwise, memories came flooding into her.

Fighting the unwelcome images, Belle sighed and rolled over onto her hands and knees. Her head swiveled, searching for Chase. He was nowhere to be seen. He should have appeared nearby her. Instead, the clearing was empty. Scrambling to her feet, she staggered across the soft grass, looking for any sign that he had made it safely through the barrier. Finding nothing, she let out an anguished moan. She'd felt the weight on him as they broke through. She was certain of that. He should be right here. Unless someone, or something, pulled him away as they breached the wall separating the barrier from the Homelands.

What a fool she'd been for listening to that old woman! She should have realized bringing a mortal -- even a cursed one -- into the Lands was asking for trouble. The Peoples weren't the only residents of the Homelands. Too many forces would see Chase as either a prize to be bartered away, or worse, a quick meal. All it would take was for her and Chase to lose contact for even a split second and the barrier would have spit him out anywhere. Belle just prayed the fact they entered together meant Chase had to be somewhere nearby. She wouldn't allow herself to think otherwise.

Dammit! She just needed to find him.

That one defining thought filling her being, Belle tore through the thick brush guarding the forest beyond. Dipping branches flayed her flesh into thin lines as she threw her weight against them in her haste. Just when she thought the forest would go on forever, the trees and dense thicket gave way to an overgrown path. Free of the straggling growth, Belle picked up her pace.

Something told her she was going in the right direction. Maybe her strange connection to Chase had returned. Silvan, she hoped so. She hadn't brought Chase here to lose him before she could save his life. The Fates wouldn't be so cruel, yet she knew by definition they were. Screw them. She would find him, by the goddess. Broken branches, hidden under the leafy blanket covering the trail, ripped at her feet. Pushing past the pain, Belle kept going. The connection growing stronger, she let it lead her.

After twenty minutes of nonstop running, that thin thread of hope had all but deserted her. With her lungs burning and stitches dominating the worn muscles in her sides and legs, she was no closer to finding him. Only blind hope spurred her on. The trees closed in on the path again. Her hands warded off branches that tore at her clothes and face. Throwing herself against this new obstacle, Belle prayed for a second wind but seriously doubted she had one in her.

Finally, her body would not allow her to go any further. Her legs betrayed her with their weakness and she stumbled onto the narrow path left between the trees. A rock slashed at her cheek as she hit the ground. Determination overruling good sense, she scrambled to her feet. Chase had to be close by. The connection between them reverberated in her head, like a siren. With her last breath, Belle would keep looking for him. She'd gone through too much to give up now.

Blood seeping down her face, Belle gritted her teeth against the salty sting and started down the path again. Her pace slower than before, she hated herself for the weakness that denied her the swiftness she needed. Her legs were burning aches she couldn't ignore, but still Belle wouldn't give into the pain. Crazy as it sounded, her soul told her she would find Chase at the end of this trail. Nothing would convince her different -- or stop her from finding him.

Just when Belle thought her body couldn't move another step, the scent of smoke filtered down to her. She detected the distinctive aroma of burning rosemary, along with the unmistakable hint of smoldering cedar that seemed to be everywhere. The heady fragrance, and no small amount of just plain stubbornness, drove her onward when common sense screamed for her to fall down.

Within seconds, she broke through to another clearing. What was left of her breath caught in the back of her throat. Paradise opened up before her. A brook bubbled along the other side of the glen. Grass swayed along a gentle breeze, rippling like waves across the ground. Belle wanted to reach down and take off her shoes, just to see if the grass would feel as good against her toes as it looked. She fought the urge, knowing all too well the spell the Homelands could put on you if you weren't prepared for it.

Shaking her head, she focused on the rest of the area. The remains of a cottage stood like a pale reminder of a different world and time at the center of the idyllic meadow. The structure was the only blemish on the scene. One of its walls had long ago collapsed in on itself. Huge cracks raced from the damage, creating a spider web design over those walls that remained standing. If it hadn't been for the smoke billowing from the chimney, Belle would have thought the place deserted. For all she knew it had been. The Homelands were riddled with mirages left over from better -- or worse -- times depending on your point of view. She didn't get the feeling this would be one of those.

Not willing to totally trust anything, Belle walked warily up to the cottage. The door stood ajar, as if welcoming her. Silvian knows, the smells wafting through the opening certainly said home. That feeling of well being, and the confidence of knowing she'd reached journey's end, steeled her to walk into the darkened abyss.

"You certainly took your time," a voice cackled from the gloom.

Belle jumped at the sound. Squinting, she tried to make out the voice's owner. Gradually her eyes adjusted, allowing her to see a huddled figure sitting beside the fireplace. An ancient woman worked a wooden spoon in a smoking cauldron that hung suspended over the fire.

Words escaped her. The Witchling had not aged a day since the last time Belle had seen the woman. Her appearance frightened her just as it had the day her mother brought her to see Morag when she had been a child. Twigs and leaves adorned the mass of frizzy gray hair jutting from the woman's face, which was so crazed with wrinkles Belle could barely make out any definition from the flickering light highlighting it. A dusty robe, that may have been black at one time in the distant past, covered her rotund body. Now the tattered bit of cloth owed no allegiance to any color at all, but stood as a patchwork of dull hues fighting for life amid the darkened room.

"So quiet. Does so little remain of the chilblain, who came to me in her youth, full of mischief and laughter?" The Witchling gave Belle an appraising look, chilling her to her very soul.

"I am no child." The sound of her own voice startled Belle. She kept searching inside herself for the child the woman remembered, and couldn't for the life of her locate her.

"Nay, ye are not, but then again who is?" The Witchling pursed her lips. "But, you did not come here for the ramblings of a forgetful woman."

"I am looking for--"

"Your Salouq Tuo," the woman finished for her.

"Chase is not my pair mate," Belle snapped too quickly for even her to believe.

"Yes, dear. He is not." She smiled, sending a shiver down Belle's spine. "Yet."

"How can you presume to know the impossible? He is not of the Peoples. There is no way we can be fated to be joined." Belle tried to repress the joy she felt at just that prospect.

"I am Morag. I was old before the Peoples flew from the womb of the Great Darkness into the light of the world. My sisters and I were midwives to the low and the mighty. Why should I, the last of the three, not know the fate of those we walked into the light and ushered into the endless night?" Morag swept from the fireplace, sending Belle staggering back toward the door. "Don't be afraid. No harm shall come to you in the confines of my home."

"How can I be sure of that?" Belle stammered.

"Because, you are the scion of Summer. Long ago we pledged ourselves to the balance of the Courts. To harm thee would upset the pendulum of fate I alone am left to guard."

"Then aid me. Help me find this man and save him," Belle begged.

"Ah, you ask much." Morag grinned.

"I ask little. You said yourself you serve the balance. Saving this man, preserves the balance." At least, she hoped so.

"So you say, but the balance is not yours to know." The woman spun around and jammed a gnarled finger under Belle's nose. "How can you say it serves the balance to save the cursed one? Only I have seen the fate of the world unfold."

Tears ran down her face. "Then you know Chase is the only one who can help me defeat my stepfather and unite the People."

"That is but one road the balance can take. Another is chaos. From it comes a greater accord. Would you deny the possibility you are wrong? Perhaps, the Peoples are not supposed to be united. The world has moved forward. There is no place in it for the remnants of the past." The old woman lifted her finger. "Tell me, girl. What makes you so sure this is the way of the balance?"

"Because the world needs the magic created by our very existence. Look into the darkness beyond the Land. The mortals have forgotten what it means to see wonder in anything. They drift through their lives without knowing what could be and only know what they see with their eyes. You say the balance is protected by the chaos. I say it has destroyed the balance. We huddle behind the shadows of what might be. With the Peoples united, can the world live with what will be? Would you deny..." Belle paused until she saw she had Morag's complete attention. "The possibility that you are wrong?"

Belle refused to look away as Morag's eyes bore into her. She felt the woman questing against the defenses of her soul. Still, she would not play the wilting violet. She was right, not Morag.

"You are stronger than your mother. That is good," Morag said finally, breaking eye contact. "The road ahead is not for the weak. You will need that strength you hold hidden so well."

Belle cocked an eyebrow. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. Something. Maybe, everything." Morag grimaced then returned to the fire, sitting down in the spot she had been when Belle entered.

Belle crossed the room and sat down in front of the woman. "I am tired of your cryptic messages. Excuse my language but, I don't need this bullshit. Just give me a straight answer. Will you help Chase?"

Morag gave the caldron a stir before looking back to Belle. "You are mistaken. That is not the question you should be asking."

"Then what the hell should I ask?" Belle asked, throwing her hands into the air. The woman kept turning everything she said against her. All she wanted was one answer that did not lead to another question.

A grim smile broke the old woman's face, letting Belle know her ordeal had not yet reached an end. "All right, dearie. You want straight answers to this. There are none. The flux created by the possibilities does not allow straight answers to appear. All that exists are questions upon questions. Each one leading to another until you face the truth you are denying yourself."

"Then tell me. What is it you think I'm denying to myself?" Belle screamed, her patience at an end.

"Simply this. You think you aren't prepared to pay the price this man's life calls for? If this is the case, walk away, because the only way Chase Michaels will survive is if you throw away everything you know. Can you do this for the man you say you don't love, but appear ready to risk your very future for?"

Belle sat back, startled by the woman's final question. Her answer came unbidden to her lips. "What is the price?"

Morag stared into Belle's eyes. Cold fear crept over her. Suddenly, Belle was more afraid than she had ever been in her entire life.

## Chapter Fourteen

"Tell me the price," Belle demanded, her heart slamming into her chest. As much as she wanted to walk away, she couldn't.

Even though she and Chase had only known each other -- For what? Two days? -- she refused to let him die because he agreed to aid her against John. She couldn't deny the evidence that the Fates, or whoever ran things, had thrown them together for some reason. That should piss her off, but it didn't. Love at first sight didn't even figure into why she sat here contemplating paying anything to make dead certain he lived. Shooting a guy couldn't very well be considered love at first anything. Belle didn't like the idea someone controlled her actions, either, but that feeling hung like doomsday in the back of her mind. Still, could she step back just because destiny had come calling? With Chase's life hanging in the balance, that wasn't even an option. Neither was denying the feelings he awoke in her were real, no matter if they were hers or the design of Fate itself. Staring into the Witchling's piercing eyes, Belle knew she'd pay it, whatever the price.

"Good, you are as strong as I hoped." With a snort, Morag shifted from the fire and took Belle's hands into her own.

"The price?" Belle grew restless from listening to the woman's talk and misdirection.

"Nothing so painful as the thoughts rolling around in your head, I assure you. Fate only wants one thing from you." Belle flinched as Morag captured her eyes with a wicked stare.

"Then, tell me so we can end this game." Frustration oozed from her words.

"Your destiny."

"Can't you see? That's what I'm trying to do, unite my people," Belle said in disbelief. All this talk had been for nothing. While they had been wasting time with foolishness, Chase probably lay dying -- wherever she'd hidden him away. That the old woman had a hand in his disappearance, Belle was dead certain.

"Silly child. That is but the destiny you've set for yourself. The great Unseen has bigger things in store for you." Morag gave her hands a gentle squeeze.

Belle found herself struck dumb. Morag had to be wrong. Her only destiny was becoming the Queen of Summer. She had never been one to aspire to more than that which was her due. Even being the head of Summer had never been her idea. It was a role thrust upon her by birth -- nothing more. Morag had to be wrong.

"I am not wrong. This was preordained before the Peoples walked from the void." As if reading her mind, Morag smiled before letting go of her hands and pulling back to the fire.

Folding her hands over her chest, Belle followed the woman's movements as Morag poked at the fire. "Then tell me. What is this destiny?"

Infuriatingly enough, she simply shrugged. "That is for you to discover."

"Damn you and all your riddles! All I want to do is to find Chase and save his life." Belle hissed. "Will you aid me, or not?"

"Will you pay the price?" Morag's voice had an edge that demanded an answer.

"Yes," Belle said, so low she doubted the woman could hear her.

"Then your warrior is just beyond my grove. He rests in the Willowing between worlds, where the shades of the unjust await their reward."

Belle let out a strangled gasp. The Willowing existed as a crossroads for the dead. Rarely did anyone held in its embrace find peace as death claimed them. In short, it was the waiting room of Hell, itself. Just imagining Chase there filled her with such dread a cold sweat broke out on her flesh. "What is he doing there?"

"I told you. There are stronger forces at work here than you know." Morag pursed her lips. "They will not allow him to cross over, but he refuses to walk back into the land of the living."

"Then there remains one final question." Belle drew in a deep breath before asking the thought burning a hole through her brain. "How do I save him?"

"That is both the simplest and hardest thing for you to do. His heart is cold with the sins of his past. His hands are stained with lifetime upon lifetime of the blood of innocents. More than that, age has made him weary of merely existing, knowing that death is just out of his grasp. Immortality is a burden mortals should never bear. That is the heart of his curse. To release him, you must open your heart so that he may know his life is more than the single mistake damning him to eternity."

"How--" She began to ask, but Morag put a gnarled finger over her lips.

"Love him."

The concept sounded so foreign Belle thought she'd heard wrong. Love! What was that? She had no time to think about love or becoming Salouq Tuo to a man not of the Peoples. How could she love, when it was the one emotion lacking in her world? Her father died so long ago, she barely remembered his face. What few memories remained of those happy times stood tainted by the life that came after. Belle wasn't even sure they existed except as a dream she'd created to convince herself she was more than the forgotten daughter to a mother who'd given up living when her father passed into the next world.

Belle looked up from her thoughts to see Morag smiling. For all the power in the woman, she couldn't accept the Witchling's words. Destiny was one thing, but love? No, there was no place for love in her life. She would save Chase, not for the sake of love, but for the duty she'd known to be hers for her entire life.

"Don't be afraid, child. It isn't as painful as all that." The woman gently patted her cheek. "Now go to him."

Belle wanted to say what was in her heart, but the room dissolved around her before she had the chance. In a twinkling, she stood within a wall of shifting mists. Belle held her breath against the swirling shadows. To breathe in the mists surrounding the Willowing was sure death. A fact she'd learned at the knee of her tutor long ago. Standing in the midst of the fog, Belle was willing to believe every word her mentor had told her.

Moving swiftly offered only a chance at surviving. To linger longer than necessary would be a death sentence. With the shifting banks of mist closing around her, Belle took off as fast as she dared. Voices called from the edge of the shadowy walls of smoke. Their howls tore through her mind. The souls who'd fallen prey to the Willowing called to her, their mouths full of false promises and hate. Ignoring the baleful moans seemed all but impossible. She found it just as difficult as knowing that if she failed to reach Chase, he would join the chorus of the damned.

Fear tickling the edges of her mind, Belle pushed herself forward, her hands clasped over her ears for the small comfort it afforded. A false dawn appeared at the extent of her vision. With nothing else to guide her, she moved toward it.

Her lungs screaming for oxygen, Belle forced her feet to make each agonizing step that brought her close to the radiance. The light grew in intensity as she counted off the seconds of

life remaining to her. Belle knew time was slipping away from her. If her instincts were wrong, Chase would not be the only one in danger of joining the voices screaming around her.

The light intensified suddenly, almost blinding her with its brightness. Tears ran down her cheeks as it invaded even her closed eyes. Belle knew then, if she didn't get her ass in gear, she was as good as dead. Driving her legs beyond their strength she dashed into the light.

Opening her eyes just enough for them to be called slits, Belle saw the mists part around her, revealing a world of greens and blues. Her lungs screaming for oxygen, she couldn't wait to be certain the mists were safely behind her. It was either breathe or drop dead. The last wasn't even an option. Drawing in the air her body demanded, Belle tasted copper as her lungs expelled their stale contents. As black dots formed before her eyes, her legs disappeared from under her.

The ground slammed into her. The impact drew a grunt from her she barely noticed. Consciousness slipped away from her. No, her mind screamed. She was too close. If she gave in to weakness, Chase could die. No, *would* die. From the depths of her soul, Belle scratched at the blackness blanketing her until thin ribbons of light filled her eyes. Reserves she never realized she had filled her, and the darkness faded. The harsh blues of the clear sky scalded her eyes. Biting back an agonized yell, she staggered to her feet.

Dizziness threatened to send her back to the ground, but Belle would have none of it. She'd come too far to give up now. Using Chase's name as a mantra, she forced unsteady step after unsteady step until she found herself fully within the center of the Willowing.

After the mists, she was amazed by the place that counted as one of the holy of holies to her people. A bubbling waterfall filled a small lagoon to the left of her. The sound of it acted as a balm to her aching ears. The screams from the void still echoed within her, but at a level she could manage. The fragrant scents of jasmine and honeysuckle floated to her. She sucked in the smells, feeling strangely at peace. She stumbled across the green carpet of the clearing, searching for any sign of Chase among the flowering bushes and sparse silvery elms that called the place home.

Finally, Belle caught sight of him. His body reclined on a pyre woven from silver branches in the center of the clearing. Her heart in her throat, she crept up to the lattice work cairn. Chase looked like he was asleep. His normally long hair had been combed and held back by a thin bronze cord, revealing Chase's face, serene in his slumber. Gone were his modern clothes. Someone had dressed him in nothing more than what appeared to be a leather thong and an ancient pair of sandals that came almost to his knees. A crimson cape with gold piping covered his arms and wrapped him well below the knee to complete his meager wardrobe. His arms crossed over the pommel of a sword bearing a Celtic design on both the blade itself and the hilt. Chase looked every bit the ancient warrior, ready for the final journey that all men must make.

Her mind reeled from the sight. Belle wondered if this was what he looked like back in the day. What a sight he must have been. She had studied a bit of ancient human history, so could well picture the man before her running wild upon the plains of conflict, his sword raised high and the blood of his enemies sailing through the air. Belle could just imagine him, fresh from the battlefield his body glistening from the heat of action. In that, her race and the mortals were much alike. Both of them relished the thrill of war to the exclusion of reason. Now, she saw the ultimate price for that stupidity before her.

"Bellaronia Skylorian Gardner, unburden your heart. Brechashe is not dead."

Belle looked up to see the ancient woman from her dreams standing on the other side of the cairn.

"What is this? Old lady scare the shit out of Belle day?" Belle blurted out.

"I'm sorry if I frightened you, but this is the only place I can communicate with you outside of your dreams." The woman moved toward Chase and placed her hand over his heart. "I felt it was time for us to talk."

"What are you doing to him?" Belle demanded.

The wizened woman patted Chase's brow. "Simply keeping him from moving on until our talk is at an end."

Belle moved slightly toward them, a predatory instinct driving her steps. "Why?"

"Long ago, Brechashe was young and foolish." The woman tilted her head toward him. "He acted without thought. For that he paid the price, but he has told you this tale before. What is the question you really wish to ask?"

Belle bit at her bottom lip considering the woman's words before speaking. "Who are you?"

"A complicated question to be sure." She scratched the side of her head, a look of confusion covering her face. "And really not the one I thought you'd ask."

Belle placed her hand protectively on the cairn. "Sue me. I like to know who's screwing with my life."

"Smart girl. Once upon a time I was called Eoyian, but that isn't the answer you're looking for. A name rarely denotes the character of the person it belongs to, and that is the question you want answered. Eoyian ceased to be the minute I assumed the robes of Silvian's priestess."

The breath rushed out of Belle's lungs. Silvian was the mother of them all -- the one true goddess of the Shazhium race. From her all life sprang. By the Peoples, if Chase had defiled her temple, it was no wonder he had been cursed. Silvian was a goddess of peace, but one quick to enact vengeance on those who harmed her chosen daughters.

Eoyian smiled. "By your reaction, I see the old ways have not been forgotten."

"If that was his crime, why is he still alive?" Disbelief flooded Belle's mind. Immortality still didn't sound like much of a curse to her.

"Because of the inherent goodness in his soul. The man you know as Chase Michaels was..." She held up a crooked finger. "And is not an evil man. Silvian knew slaying him would be a larger crime than the one he committed. As is her nature, the goddess took pity on him -- though he probably doesn't view it in that light -- and allowed him to redeem himself through you."

"Through me?" Now, she truly was confused.

"Bellaronia, you are the future of your people. In you resides the sole hope of the Shazhium. Silvian's people are slowly dying. In their apathy, they have become too short sighted to see their mortality staring them in the face. Only you have seen the fate that awaits them -- more importantly, you are willing to move forward, whereas they wallow in their past glories."

"How am I supposed to change anything? I have talked until my voice is gone from trying. The Peoples aren't willing to listen to me. What has it all gotten me? I am hunted and lost to them. Their fear of my stepfather keeps them enslaved." Belle wished it wasn't so, but knew better than anyone the state of her people.

"Alone you cannot." Eoyian's hand swept up from Chase's heart and hovered over his head. "But the union of strength and wisdom offers the promise of the world to come. Morag told you correctly. You must open your heart and accept the strength this man offers."



Suddenly, Chase's chest rose and a mighty gasp flew from his lips. Life rushed into his cheeks.

"Now accept the destiny you deny, or he will reside within the Willowing forever. As always, the choice is yours to make." With that the ghost faded into nothingness.

## Chapter Fifteen

Caern crashed through the door to Darkside's crowded interior, ready to chew nails. Letting the girl take Chase had been a big fucking mistake. If he'd been thinking clearly, he would have jumped through that freaking Stargate wormhole to hell along with them, and not let Chase out of his sight. He guessed he wasn't the only one blinded by the girl's charms, but Chase would be the one who paid if he'd been wrong to let them go. As much as he knew there had been no other choice, Caern had stewed over the fact all the way back to the bar. Raiz's driving hadn't improved his mood one bit, but doubted he could have done better worrying his ass raw about Chase. Still, he'd been lucky to survive the experience. The Russian drove like a mad man on a normal day. With Chase on both their minds it was even worse. Caern found it hard to believe he didn't have a driver's license, but then again who would have the balls to tell the giant he failed.

Safely on solid ground again, what Caern needed now was a good stiff shot of anything ninety-proof or better. Pushing through the crowd, he signaled Smokey for a drink. Scratch that, he motioned for the whole bottle as the bartender turned toward the rack against the wall. Raiz bullied his way through the drinkers behind him, probably scaring the shit out of the customers, but Caern didn't give a rat's ass. If this group couldn't deal with a little rough and tumble, they could go down the street to the yuppie bar for their nightly dose of forget-me-not.

Frankly right now, he wanted a nice quiet place to think, and clearing the place sounded like a damn fine idea. Since that wasn't about to happen, he'd slink his ass back to the office and get drunk. First, he needed some insight into this whole mess. With Raiz sullied up worse than usual, that left him only one source to hit up for a bit of conversation about all this fairy tale crap.

"Sebastian!" Caern yelled when he reached the bar.

The ghost appeared in front of him. "What ya need, Boss?"

"A glass to go with this bottle would be nice. Screw the shooter. Give me that tall one next to it. Caern grumbled, snatching the glass out of the bartender's hand and looked at the label. "Nice. The good stuff. Add a fifth of Vodka and a glass for the mountain over there and we should be good."

"Forget the glass," Raiz said, over Caern's shoulder. "Not sure I'd trust a glass from this place."

"What the hell is wrong with *this place*?" Caern snapped, wondering how someone so big could move so quietly.

"It's a bit seedy," the Russian snorted.

"This from the man who lives in a log cabin out in the middle of nowhere," Caern turned on the man.

"*Da*, but it is a clean log cabin. There are roaches behind the bar." Raiz said, pointing toward the cash register.

"I don't see any roaches." Caern was afraid to look, but damned if he'd let the Russian know it.

"You do not have my eyes." Raiz took both bottles from Smokey, who shot him a disapproving glare before walking away.

"Don't scare the help, furball." Caern growled.

"Caern, did you want something, or did you call me in here to watch you two trade meaningful quips, since my TV isn't here yet?" Caern didn't miss Sebastian's veiled jab.

"No," he snarled. "Meet us in the office, and keep the smart ass remarks to yourself."

Caern whipped around and strode through the bar, leaving the ghost and the Russian to catch up -- or not. Slipping through the door leading to the offices in back, he decided at this point he really didn't care. He'd work up to giving a crap in a half a bottle either way. Free of the crowded space, Caern slumped against the wall.

He looked at the glass sitting in his open palm. Raiz had been right. Who needed a glass? The glass suddenly felt like a dead weight in his hand that he couldn't stand a minute longer, and threw it against the far wall. Even the shattering glass couldn't improve his mood. Caern flicked the top off the bottle of scotch and took a swig, letting the burn wash down his throat.

For the first time in forever, he felt so fucking useless. If he had a soul, it would be screaming at that injustice of it all. He and Chase were partners. For longer than he cared to remember, they'd had each other's backs. Instead of being there for his bud, he was cooling his heels and getting dead ass drunk, or he hoped to sometime in the next half hour or so. Chase had disappeared to God knows where, and there wasn't one damn thing he could do to help him. The scotch settled in his stomach, igniting an ulcer he hadn't had this morning. This was why he didn't make friends. It only led to misery. He'd let his guard down once in three hundred years, and this was what it got him.

Escaping into his office, Caern thanked whoever watched over him at the moment that Raiz and the irritating ghost were giving him a few minutes to himself. Since he was basically sitting on his hands until Chase and Belle got back from Wonderland, it was time to get proactive. He needed to find out everything he could about these fairy bastards. Lifetimes of experience taught him one defining fact. If you don't know your enemy, your enemy would end up kicking you dead up in your teeth.

And he wasn't in the mood for a trip to the dentist!

He lifted the bottle to his lips for another slug as the door opened. Raiz entered the room, the big man forced to duck to fit through the opening. Caern didn't see Sebastian, but knew the sucker had to be lurking in the ether. The ghost never missed a chance to get nosey. Well, Seb could get his ass out where he could see him. This wasn't the time for any of the ghost's games.

"Seb! Front and center!" Caern looked up as he screwed the top back on the scotch. He needed a head clear for this.

"Caern, you really need to calm down." The ghost appeared on the edge of the desk and turned his head from side to side. "Hey, where's the other half of this duo?"

"I'll calm down when there's time," Caern grumbled, regretting the need to stay sober, when he wanted to be anything but. "And, Chase is the reason we're having this meeting of the minds."

"What's he done to get your boxer briefs in a bunch, anyway?" Seb leaned back and fiddled with the computer keyboard. "Does this thing get YouTube?"

"Get away from that." Caern batted his hand through the ghost's hand. "He went and got himself mixed up with a bunch of damn Fae, and nearly got himself killed."

"So? He's indestructible." Sebastian waved his hand. "Once he wakes up, he'll be fine."

"Nyet, my friend, not this time." Raiz shook his head, giving Caern a mournful look.

"What the heck is he talking about, Caern?" Confusion washed over the ghost's face.

"We found Chase next to his wrecked car. He and it had been through the ringer. More than that, we have no idea what happened," Caern said, through gritted teeth.

"I take it this has something to do with the girl Chase came in with," Sebastian said.

"Yep," Caern answered.

"Then I've got your answer." Seb's face drew into a twisted knot. "The Winter Court got to him."

"How can you be so sure it wasn't the other one?" At least Caern thought there was another one. What little he knew about this crap could be traced back to Lord of the Rings. That left a lot of room for 'duh'. Time to rectify that before he got his ass handed to him.

"Because I was in the room when Chase met with the Knight of Spring. He had the guy fooled. Couldn't have been him."

"That's good to know, but I find it hard to believe a bunch of fairies could kick the living shit out of Chase," Caern leaned back in his chair, trying to make sense of this, and couldn't.

"Then you don't know what you're dealing with. The Fae aren't Santa's elves or cutesy little shoemakers. They are hardcore sons of bitches, especially Winter. Kylanndria, the queen of the Winter Court, invented Dark Magic and knows more ways to break a man down to his soul than has been invented." The look of worry on Seb's face made Caern sit up.

"You're shitting me!"

"Take it from me, *tavorish*." Raiz leaned forward in his chair. "The ghosty is playing you straight. The Bolsheviks enslaved my people for the pure pleasure of having someone to torture. I doubt not what they could do to a man alone, even one such as Chase."

"Right, so where did you two stash Chase?" Caern detected a hint of panic in the ghost's voice.

"We didn't. The girl took him into something called the Homelands. Belle said the only way to save him meant taking him there." Trusting had seemed like a good idea at the time, but now Caern wasn't so sure.

"Then it's out of our hands. I just hope she knows what she's doing. It would take one of the elder gods to save him if he's in as bad a shape as you're talking about," Seb rubbed his ectoplasmic head.

"Elder races?" This was getting too weird for Caern to wrap his mind around. Being a half-life vampire, you'd think he'd be used to crap like this by now.

"She probably took him to one of the Triumvirate -- the last three remaining gods who were around when the worlds were created. Big Bad Mama Jammias on the power scale."

"So, now we've got elves, and gods. What the hell did Chase get us into?" Caern rubbed the back of his head. He needed something stronger than the bottle on the desk to settle his nerves.

"I'd say a river of shit." Raiz grunted.

Caern ignored the Russian. No sense overstating the obvious. "Seb, if Belle did take Chase to one of these elder gods, which one are we more likely to be dealing with?"

"The only one I can think she'd go to is the Witchling." Sebastian rose from the desk and floated around the room as he spoke.

"Look, Obi Wrong. As far as I'm concerned you're speaking in riddles. Mind simplifying it for me in plain English," Caern looked to Raiz, who nodded in agreement.

"Okay, here goes. Mythology for Dummies coming right up. The old ones all faded out, or died off. Take your pick, because nobody's sure. Gods being gods, you never can tell. The three who survived are called the Triumvirate. There's Morag or the Witchling. She's the last of the three witches of fate. Story goes, Shakespeare met her in a dream and based the witches from *Macbeth* on her and her sisters. The second is Corith, the horned god. He's a little bit of this and

that, but mainly death incarnate. You might have heard of him, but never by his true name. Does the God of the Hunt ring any bells? That's just one of his personas. The last is the Great Unseen. He, she, or it is so mysterious, nobody knows what to call it."

Caern rubbed a clear patch on his head. "And Belle took Chase to see one of them?"

"Yes... maybe... probably. Hell I don't know, but it's a safe bet she did," Sebastian said in frustration. "Morag is the only one who would heal Chase. If it suits her to do so, that is."

Caern thought for a minute. Chase was either coming back, or he wasn't. He thought finding out more would make him feel better. It didn't. The whole thing felt scary as hell. What the fuck had Chase gotten them into?

Okay, they couldn't do a damn thing for Chase now. What they needed to do was get some intel on these Courts Sebastian kept talking about. From what little he knew, Summer was the good side and Winter the dark side. He could be wrong, because to him they both looked bad. Belle was alright, but he wasn't about to judge anything by that. Her step-daddy looked like a right bastard, and from the sound of things he was in charge of the shooting match for the moment.

He was about to ask Sebastian to explain just that, when a loud yell came from inside the bar. It was followed by the sound of all hell breaking loose. Caern leapt to his feet and made for the door. He nearly reached it, but Raiz's massive hand stopped him dead in his tracks.

"What's the deal? Somebody is wrecking my place!" Caern shouted.

"And in light of recent events, do you think it's wise to rush in there?" the Russian asked.

"No, but I'm not about to let whoever it is bust up my place, either." What did the big guy want him to do? Sit in place while the whole building came down around his ears?

"*Nyet*, but proceed with caution. Let the ghost go check it out first," Raiz tilted his head back to Sebastian.

Now, finally something that made sense. "Seb, you heard the man. Go see what's going on?"

"Sure, let the ghost get his ass kicked, while the big strong men folk sit back where it's safe," Sebastian whined.

"Just do it!" Caern snarled.

With a sigh, the ghost disappeared. He'd only been gone a second when he suddenly reappeared, a look of abject fear on his face.

"Well?" Caern said, shaken by the look.

Shaking, Seb looked over his shoulder, like he'd just seen hell itself. "Remember what we were just talking about?"

Caern rolled his eyes. "Yeah."

The ghost chewed nervously at his bottom lip. "Seems like you've got a visit from one of the Triumvirate."

"Which one?" Caern asked, but already knew.

"Corith is tearing the bar apart, but that's not the bad part," Sebastian shifted uneasily.

"You mind telling me the bad part, or do I have to go ask the big bad god himself?"

"He said if Chase doesn't show his face in the next ten seconds, he's going to kill everyone in the place, one by one until Chase grows the balls to come out and play."

Raiz frowned. "You can't get much worse than that, my friend."

Caern glanced at the door. Well, today was as good a day as any to die.

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Belle squatted beside the makeshift pyre and watched the gradual rise and fall of Chase's chest. She had been so intent on making sure he was really alive, she didn't notice his eyes pop open -- or the smile that graced his face upon seeing her. The touch of his hand stroking her hair brought Belle's eye level with his. Something melted inside her at the sight of his gaze twinkling up at her.

"So, where am I? Last thing I remember is you and Caern running up to me," Chase said as he lifted himself up by his elbow.

Belle gently pushed him back down. "For the moment, you're safe."

"Don't bullshit me, Love." He winced. "I can feel myself fading away."

"You're not going anywhere except back home with me," Belle said, keeping a dam on the tears rising inside her.

"I wish I could. Those old bitches thought they could keep me around forever, but your buddy Kylanndria pulled a fast one on them." A smile graced his taunt expression.

The weakness seeped back into his face. Belle wished she could deny the two old women's words, but the truth of it stared her in the face. Chase wasn't going to last much longer in his present shape. When this was over, she would have a few choice words for that Winter bitch for doing this to him.

"Shush, didn't I just tell you, you're not going anywhere?" She patted his face, wishing she believed it.

"Look Belle, even if I wanted to stick around, it would seriously be a bad idea. She did something to me. I'm pretty sure whatever she did can lead her straight back to--" Chase whispered. "I would die before I let Kylanndria get her hands on you."

"What did she do?" The thought made a cold spot run through her. John was a pain in the ass, but one she could handle. Kylanndria, on the other hand, was a bitch of the first order. Belle couldn't conceive of all the things the witch could have done to him.

A shiver ran through him, causing him to buckle under her touch. "My heart is so cold. It's like my entire body is turning to ice."

Belle grabbed him to settle the spasms. His flesh was growing white with frost. Only one thing could affect a person like this. Kylanndria had placed a Sliver of Wýnterhium into his heart -- a piece of the soul of winter itself. Chase was more right than he knew. If the Sliver didn't kill him first, Kylanndria could track him anywhere in the world and straight back to her in the process.

Only one thing was capable of counteracting Winter's magic, a fragment from the Sjàl l'Samhrædh, the Heart of Summer. Too bad she couldn't access it until her ascension to the throne of Summer. Only her mother could wield the magic of Shazhium Royalty. Belle was back to where she started from -- at the mercy of two old women who were more worried about her love life than saving Chase's life.

"Don't look so sad. Death isn't so bad," Chase took her hand, giving it a squeeze. "Up until now I could have gone into the unknown with no regrets. Then you had to shoot me."

"Love at first gunshot wound. How romantic?" Belle smiled in spite of the tears digging trenches in her makeup.

"Hey, who ever said love was for sane people?"

His words drove a bolt of electricity right through her. He loved her! How could he love her? They were nearly strangers. People in the real world didn't fall in love in the course of one

day. Stuff like that only happened in the movies -- and cheap romance novels. If that was the case, why did the words coming from his lips set her heart to racing?

"Chase, you're delirious. What we have isn't love. It's two people in an outrageous situation." She so wanted to believe her own lie.

"Babe, I'm a helluva lot older than you. Too damn old not to know love when I see it. I just wish I had the nerve to kiss you when it would have mattered." The regret in his words broke her.

Maybe the Morag and Eoyian were right. Here was a man who actually loved her. Hell, even after shooting him he loved her or thought he did. Which was the same thing, as far as she was concerned. Belle knew she would spend the rest of her life wondering how it would be to be loved by him, if she didn't take this moment for what it was. The chance to truly love for the first time in her life. Throwing caution to the winds, Belle bent down and took his lips with hers, knowing after the first taste it wouldn't be enough. Heaven help her, but she had to have more.

## Chapter Sixteen

Caern wasn't much for hitting walls. He hated it to be exact. Finding himself being thrown into one was a total pain in the ass and didn't improve his opinion on the matter one bit. He should have known better than busting into the barroom like he owned the place -- even though he did.

He hadn't even got a snappy remark out of his mouth, when the bastard lit into him. Caern had always considered himself a rough and tough kind of guy, able to handle just about anything. Tonight proved how wrong he had been. This Corith guy didn't screw around. The last thing he remembered before going flying was the big man's fist connecting with his jaw. After that everything went blurry, then black, before going back to blurry. With a grunt, Caern unwound his legs from his head and looked back toward the fight.

Damn. Pass out for five seconds and you miss everything.

Raiz was dangling from Corith's hand a good three feet off the floor. Caern let out a gasp. This guy had to be Hercules to lift the big Russian single-handed like that, especially when Raiz was all Grizzled out. Instead of the none-too-gentle giant, a nine foot tall grizzly was hefted into the air like a freaking teddy bear. Caern watched in horror as a huge crack exploded from Raiz's back before he too went flying through the air.

Caern scrambled out of the way as Raiz's body came crashing down, right where he'd just stumbled to his feet. He tried not to look at the wrecked and bleeding body of his friend. Focusing his attention on the horned god, he skirted the damaged bar stools and shattered floorboards. His foot skidded through a puddle of blood. He looked down to see it flowing freely from the Russian. He uttered a rare prayer to the powers-that-be that nothing short of a silver stake or bullet could put the Were out for long.

Corith had occupied himself with chasing after the last of the clientele as they fled through the front door. Caern took the opportunity to dash to the end of the bar. He checked to make sure the god wasn't watching and threw himself over the top of the bar. He landed with a sickening thud amid the shattered remains of the bar's complete stock of single malts. Letting out a curse, he lifted his head to check on Corith's whereabouts. The god wandered around the carnage with a pleased look on his face.

Caern felt for the sawed-off that sat under the till. He wondered how pleased the son of a bitch would look with a couple blasts from the gun peppering his ass. He slipped the gun from its moorings. A double click told him Smokey had the thing loaded. A ghostly touch kept him from pulling the Rambo, he had been so ready to unload on the bastard.

"Don't do it, Caern," Sebastian warned.

"Why the hell not?" Caern scowled.

"Unless you got a Scud missile under there, that pea shooter won't do anything but piss him off."

Caern slid back to the floor. "Then, what do you want me to do? Let him kick my ass some more!"

"Well, he was doing a good job of it." The ghost smirked.



"You know I could dump the rest of the hooch on the bar and set it afire. That way I'd be getting rid of two pains in the ass, at the same time." Caern let the threat settle in. From the look on Sebastian's face, the ghost actually thought he might be considering it.

"You wouldn't!"

"Try me." Caern let an evil grin spread across his face.

"I think I'll keep any further opinions to myself."

"Good idea. Look, Seb. This crap is out of my area of expertise. My earlier statement aside, if you got some way to take this fucker down, now would be the time to hit me with it." Caern knew things were bad when he had to turn to the smart ass spook for help.

"Well, you could try talking to him." The look on the ghost's face said he wasn't too thrilled with the idea, but didn't have anything else to offer.

Well, neither was Caern. "Yeah, why don't I do that? I always wanted to see what suicide felt like."

"Seriously, he wants Chase. You guys are collateral damage. Just tell him Chase ain't here and isn't coming back. You never know. It might work," Sebastian shrugged.

"You're killing me here." Caern stuck his head back over the bar to see Corith kicked back in a chair, his sword thrown across his lap. He didn't look in the mood for a chit chat to Caern. Sebastian was crazier than a shit-house rat if he thought this would work.

"What would you rather? Me talk you into killing yourself, or him killing you without a friend to egg you on." Sebastian smiled weakly.

"Hell, let me just go ahead and kill myself and save the both of you the trouble," Caern grumbled.

The ghost had a point. Sooner or later, the god would get tired of waiting and come after him. At least if he went out there, he'd die on his terms and not like a sniveling coward. Either way, his ass was grass.

"Okay, but if he kills me, you know I'm going to haunt you," Caern joked, wishing he wasn't hitting so close to the truth.

"Good, then maybe I'd get the Plasma screen you two have been promising me," Sebastian said, as Caern rose to a crouch. "Hey, bud. Do me a favor."

"What is it now?" Caern looked back.

"Don't get killed out there."

"Seb, believe me that is the last thing on my mind, but if I change my mind, you'll be the second one to know," Caern let himself give the ghost a smile.

"Who's going to be the first to know?"

"Me!" With a sly grin, Caern jumped over the top of the bar.

Hitting the ground in a crouch, he realized how crazy he was. Taking advice from the ghost should have been the tip off. His sanity was a moot point now. Caern glanced up to see Corith hadn't moved. From the way the god's head was laying on his chest he thought maybe the big man had fallen asleep. Caern knew if he'd just destroyed a bar and nearly killed half a dozen people, he'd be tired as hell.

Stranger things had happened -- just tonight to be exact. Caern figured a tuckered out god didn't fit too far outside the realm of possibilities. He knew it wasn't likely, but what the hell. You only lived once, but it was the dying that could be a mother fucker, as his dear old grandfather used to say. Letting out a sigh, the Dhampyre took a step to test his theory. Corith's head snapped up before his foot even left the floor.

"Wondered when you'd stop hiding. I thought you'd make me come after you." The god's eyes never lifted from the shadows of his hooded brow.

"Who said I was hiding? Maybe I just wanted you to get some rest before I kicked your ass," Caern said, watching for a reaction.

"You amuse me, little vamp."

"I'm not a vampire!" Heat rose to Caern's cheeks.

"Ah, but you are so close. I can smell the need on you -- the want for what you deny yourself." Corith jerked down his jacket, and bent his head until his jugular was laid bare. "Come taste me, Vamp. See what you're missing. The blood of a god would show you many things."

"Fuck off!" Caern flexed his arms, balling his hands into fists at his side.

"Temperamental." Corith laughed. "Am I coming too close to the truth, or are your feeble attempts at humanity finally wearing thin?"

"Kill me, but don't bore me. You came here looking for my partner. Why don't we get that out of the way, before you start hitting on me," Caern growled.

"Ah, yes. I am growing forgetful in my dotage. Why don't you tell me where he is so I can let you get back to your pretending you're really a human again, instead of the predator you try to hide behind this pitiful façade?" Corith deftly picked up the sword from the table and slammed the blade into the floor.

"You really are stupid. Chase is dead." Caern held his breath hoping he wasn't telling the truth.

"I don't think so." Corith pulled a dagger from a sheath at his side and picked at his teeth. "The Winter Court plays rough with its toys, but the last time I saw your friend, he was very much alive."

"Then you should have stuck around longer, dumbass." Caern knew he might have pushed too far with that one, but this guy was jacking on his last nerve.

Corith jumped to his feet, his face red with rage. "Your lies are as feeble as your disguise. I know the girl took him into the Lands. So, let's start this over. I want Chase Michaels."

"If you know all that, why are you here? Go get him from there, and leave us the hell alone." A sudden thought hit him. "You can't. Can you? As long as they're in that other realm, you can't touch them."

"Smart boy. You're right. I am not allowed to interfere inside the boundaries of the Lands. Too bad for you. If I could, you wouldn't be about to die." Corith grabbed the hilt of the sword and ripped the blade from the floor.

"Go ahead. Kill me!" Caern stuck his chest out. "But I promise you, if you do, Chase won't come back. We're more than partners. We're blood bound. I die, he'll know, and you can wait here until the end of fucking time."

It was a bluff, but dammit it was all he had. There was no way he could defeat the son of a bitch. They both knew it. Caern would buy enough time for Chase to get his ass healed and back here, or die trying.

Corith seemed to be thinking it over. Caern saw the uncertainty play across the god's face. Then Caern knew he had him.

"Well played. It seems we are at an impasse." Corith let out a grunt and sat back down.

Caern bit back the sigh of relief begging to be released.

"What say you go back behind that bar, and find us a bottle? If we're stuck here, we might as well see how sloppy drunk we can get while we wait for your friend to get back," Corith said, slapping the table.

Caern didn't even blink at the suggestion. If this wasn't the time for a good stiff drink, he didn't know when was. Turning around, he reached for a bottle of Jack black label. He grabbed two glasses that had somehow survived the carnage and walked over to the god. As he reached the table, Corith kicked a chair out for him. This wasn't the first time he'd drunk with an enemy. Pouring them each a three finger shot, he prayed it wouldn't be the last.

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Belle knew she shouldn't be kissing him, but couldn't stop herself. The taste of him felt like a drug coursing through her system. She had to have more. How she wished all this could be more than it was. To love him was too much. As much as she wanted to give into her feelings, Belle knew if she did, she would never be the same. But, was that a bad thing?

Loneliness had always been the only emotion she could truly call her own. She'd never allowed herself to love someone, other than her mother and the faded memory of her dead father. Even that had worn a hole in her heart. Steeling herself against the pain, Belle had long ago forsaken the possibility of loving anyone. Sometimes late at night, she'd almost believed the lie she held so close.

Now, with Chase beneath her, Belle knew the lies and denials were falling apart. Each fevered kiss told her this to be the man who could make her forget the loneliness. This was the man who could heal the heart she'd broken to stop any chance of pain leeching its way into her. Chase was the man -- she loved!

The thought scared her. Belle pulled away from him. Even as she backed away from the cairn, his scent filled her with such longing it took everything she had not to run back to him. Belle brushed her lips with the tips of her fingers, feeling the warmth of him still lingering on the soft flesh. She wondered if kissing him would always leave her feeling like this -- confused yet exhilarated at the same time. This was insane. She should be worrying about saving him, and not trying to figure out ways to jump his bones for the rest of his life.

"Belle, look at me." Chase's face stared up at her and Belle knew she was lost.

"I can't save you, Chase. Morag and Eoyian thought I could, but it just isn't in me." She fell to the ground beside him.

The wood he rested upon shifted as Chase slid down beside her. "Belle, nobody expects you to do more than you can. You're the one putting this all on your shoulders."

She bit her bottom lip, keeping her head turned to the floor of the clearing. "I thought you were dying."

"I'm thinking of giving it up for Lent." His smile did nothing to ease the agony burning inside her.

"Seriously, shouldn't you be at death's door or something?"

"Babe, I'm so far past death's door it isn't funny. Hell, this is death's waiting room. The only thing keeping me here is you." She looked over and saw how serious he truly was.

"Why?" She truly wanted to know. In the past two days, she'd shot him, dragged him into her mess and finally Kylanndria had tortured him, all because of her. She could see why all those things would make him want to stick around. Not.

"Because for the last three thousand years, I've been a corpse. Sure, I've walked, talked, and did all the things that make you live, but not once in all that time did I feel alive." Belle jumped, as he put his cold hand against her cheek. "You gave me that."

"If that's true, why are you willing to go into the void?" she cried.

"Kylanndria did something to me. I can feel her inside of me. If staying with you means she gets her claws into you, I'd rather die." He looked away.

The pain in his voice told her he meant every word of it. He would actually sacrifice himself for her. Why couldn't she do the same for him? She was a damn fool, that's why.

The splashing of water alerted her to the fact Chase was no longer beside her. Belle looked up and saw him wading into the waterfall fed pool, his cloak and sword forgotten on the back of the lagoon. The water lapped against his knees. The further he went into the water, the less real he seemed to become. Belle leapt from the ground. By the time she reached the edge of the water, he had turned into a pale shadow bleeding into the air.

"Chase!" Belle screamed, splashing into the water.

He looked back with a smile on his face. "Belle, it's better this way. Go back and tell Caern I said he better watch out for you."

"Like hell I will! You're going to get your ass out of this water and come back with me," Belle said as she floundered toward him.

He halted at the edge of the waterfall. "Weren't you listening? That bitch has a hold on me. If I go back with you, I might as well hand you over to her myself."

"I don't care. I can't lose you now. We'll figure some way to fix this, but first you have to come back to me," Belle sobbed, as his body shimmered in the spray coming from the cascading water.

"I wish I could. Staying with you would be heaven." He turned his head away from her and pushed his leg into the waterfall, but not before Belle saw the sadness covering his face.

"Dammit! I love you." Belle fell into the water, her voice slipping into a husky whisper. "Don't leave me."

Belle couldn't bear to look. Morag had been right. Eoyian had been right. She did love him, and when it would have mattered, she didn't have the guts to tell him. Now, he was gone.

Her head dipped into the churning water. It did little to wash the salty taste of her tears away. She'd been so stupid. Everything the old women told her had been true, but she'd been too hard headed to realize it. She should just drown herself now to save John and Kylanndria the trouble of killing her.

A pair of strong hands pulled her suddenly from the water. Her body went rigid, but when she stared into Chase's blue eyes, she was too overcome to do anything but cry. He'd come back for her. Thank Silvian, he'd come back.

"Why are you crying? I thought you wanted me to stick around," Chase said, his lips brushing the top of her head.

"I did," Belle choked out between the sobs.

He lifted her chin until her face was level with his eyes. "Then stop crying, or I'll go back."

"You do and I'll kick your ass," she laughed.

"What say we split the difference and kiss instead?" He didn't give her a chance to say no.

His lips closed over hers, throwing her body into a tailspin. He tasted like heaven. A flush ran through her as he clasped her face in his hands, bringing her closer to him -- their bodies inseparable in the churning water. Belle knew kissing him wouldn't be enough to satisfy the ache his touch awakened in her. She wanted every bit of him and wasn't about to let him go until she had it.

## Chapter Seventeen

"Belle, I need you," the hoarse whisper of his voice sent chills running up her spine.

"Heaven, help me, but I need you, too." Her words tattooed the side of his cheek as Belle snuggled her face against him.

The touch of his rough hands swept through her before she could move. Even through the cold water, she felt the newborn heat radiating from him. His lips danced away from her mouth, pausing to gently suckle her chin before moving down to the curve of her neck. Belle's breath came out in a ragged gasp, as his hands slid under her shirt, caressing the swell of her breasts through the sheer fabric of her bra.

Belle clawed her hands down his back as he lifted her from the lapping water. Chase's lips never left her, as his powerful legs moved them toward the bank. His mouth delved into the valley of her breasts, his tongue gently kneading the tender flesh of her cleavage. She wrapped her legs around his waist, as she slipped down his wet body. His hands instantly reached around to keep her above the lapping water, drawing her even closer to him so that she could feel his sex pressing against her soaked jeans. He was so hard Belle could scarce imagine his leather thong containing him for much longer. In light of what they were doing, that suited her just fine.

Splashing onto the bank, Belle let him ease her down on the grass, laying like a soft carpet beneath them. Her legs dangled in the gentle surf of lagoon, the water a pleasant balm to the heat raging inside her. She looked up from the shadow his muscular form threw over her. His blue eyes drank her in like hungry moons. Belle stroked his rough jaw, drawing a primal growl from his throat. Her eyes went wide at the desire burning its way from his fevered face. Never in her life had a man looked at her with such uncontrolled want. A want she knew to be mirrored in her own expression.

A part of her grew afraid of the emotions she allowed this man to bring out in her. Belle could see herself becoming lost in him -- lost to him. She had never given herself so fully to anyone in her life. A lifetime of locking away her feelings became so ingrained in her psyche, it was a wonder she hadn't run screaming from the Willowing. Yet, with Chase she felt profoundly safe. Belle knew, in her heart, he would never harm her. Giving herself to him would be a completion of who she was. The thought shocked her, yet she knew it to be true. As corny as it sounded, Chase had been the one thing that had been missing in her life. Now that she had him, Belle knew she would never let him go.

Sadness swept over her. As strong as he looked, Belle sensed Kylanndria's magic slowly eating its way into his body. The scent of Winter coursing through him was so strong, she tasted the bitter cold of it in the air around him. Belle placed her palm over his heart. She jerked back her hand and found it covered in a thin layer of frost. Looking down, she saw her handprint ghosted in the flesh of his chest. The air was alive with the biting cold radiating from inside him.

If she couldn't stop the magic eating its way to his soul, this moment was for nothing. A brief interlude wasn't enough. She wanted forever, dammit! Both Morag and Eoyian told her the power to save him resided in her. As strong as her feelings were, Belle didn't know if she was prepared to take that final step. Revealing the secret fostered in her heart felt more frightening than the thought of losing him.

Looking into his shallow haunted eyes, Belle knew saying, *I love you*, wouldn't be enough. He seemed to have slowly faded away even more after she'd told him. It was going to take more from her -- a commitment beyond words. She was going to have to give her heart.

Taking one last look into his eyes, Belle pushed past the fear. Closing herself to everything else, she let her heart open to the possibilities loving him offered. In the blackness of her mind, she saw a future where happiness wouldn't be just a dream. In Chase, Belle saw love without end, and children -- their children. That thought kick-started her. The warmth of her love for him flowed out. The heat sang from her body, engulfing him. Chase tried to pull back, but Belle wouldn't let him go. She curled her hands around his wrists, holding him in place, as her body glowed with the glorious radiance of a summer's day. For the first time in her life, she tapped into the power that was her heritage.

Lifting her head, Belle willed the twin suns to shed their light upon her. Instantly, a halo of radiance filled the clearing. Laughter boiled from inside her. Giddiness seemed wrong considering the situation but she couldn't help herself. She was Summer!

Still laughing, Belle captured him in her stare as Chase looked into her eyes. He probably thought she'd lost her mind. Honestly, she wasn't entirely certain she hadn't. Still, that didn't change the fact she had a job to do. Crazy or not, she would keep him from crossing over. Clamping the lid down on her giggle box, Belle refused to allow him to look away.

Gaining confidence from the energy of Summer coursing through her, Belle cupped his cheek. Smiling, Belle wanted him to see her love. A tickle in the back of her mind let her know only it could burn away the Winter infecting him. Sunlight beamed from her hands, as she gently played them across Chase's hard flesh. Her touch was instantaneous. Where frost had taken hold on him, now sweat poured from his face, trickling like raindrops over her. But, Belle knew she'd only reached part of him. It would take more to convince him to stay. Much more. Everything she had, in fact, but that didn't scare her. Her heart already belonged to him. Now, she just had to give him everything else.

"Chase, don't give up on me now. We're almost there." She dropped her lips to his and brushed them across his swollen mouth. "Now, stop screwing around and live!"

Whipping his head into the air, Chase let out an anguished howl. Belle's heart cried out as the knotted muscles of his neck strained from the effort of trying to release the foul magic. Pouring Summer into him, Belle felt Kylanndria's curse give way. A final scream exploded from the depths of Chase's soul. A torrent of ice and snow shot from his mouth, as he expelled the last vestiges of Winter from his body.

Belle caught him as he collapsed into her arms. She flinched as his cold breath washed over her face. For a moment, she was afraid he still languished under Kylanndria's spell, but the warmth of his body told her whatever she had done to free him from Winter's hold had worked. Chase shook with the exertion, but he seemed over the worst of it. Letting out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding, Belle let her body go limp. Gradually the power that Summer had lent her faded, and exhaustion washed through her.

Knowing he was at last safe, Belle let herself fall back into the soft grass. As he collapsed on top of her, she relished the feel of him pressed against her. His heart beat a savage rhythm into her chest. Absently she bent her head, placing a kiss on the top of his head, while her fingers idly stroked their way through his hair. Her other hand kneaded the muscles shaping his back. She marveled at the strength she felt under his taunt skin, even after all he'd been through.

"Belle?" His voice sang a raw ember in her ear, breaking the spell his flesh had her under.

"Don't talk, you big lug. Save your strength. You've just gone through hell, literally," Belle chided him, nuzzling the curve of his neck.

Belle tried to stop him as he leveraged himself on one elbow. "Screw saving my strength. I've wanted to do this since the first time I saw you standing in that bar. I'm not about to let some fairy bitch's bad mojo stop me."

His mouth captured her before she could object. He tasted even better the second time. His warm husky scent flowed through her. Belle's body quickened in response to his hand stroking her side as his lips played havoc with her mind. Letting out a gasp, she welcomed his tongue questing inside her mouth, while his hands worked their way to her pants.

She didn't know how he managed it, but he slipped her pants down her legs in a matter of seconds. For him to move that quickly, Belle wondered if Chase had a spark of the Fae in him. Whatever the reason, she didn't feel a burning need to complain. He had started a more urgent burning need that she couldn't ignore. His fingers caressed her inner thigh, drawing a line of heat that made her buckle through the electricity of his tender touch. When his finger tugged at the elastic band of her thongs, Belle thought she would lose it. Her body ached from the intensity of her need to feel him inside her, but he wasn't ready to give her the release she so desperately wanted.

His breath danced across her flesh, sending goose bumps racing over her. Tracing every curve of her body, his hand floated down her silky flesh. She was paralyzed, waiting for the moment she knew was sure to come. His voice whispered something in her ear, but she was too far gone to hear him. Her body rose to meet his embrace and she shuddered as that simple touch sent her over the edge. Screaming his name, Belle threw her arms around his neck, the release building before finally exploding through her. Gasping for breath, she held onto him, afraid that if she let go this would have all been a dream. A dream she didn't want to end -- ever.

She'd never lost control like that in her life. With him, Belle got the idea it wouldn't be a one time occurrence. Being with him would always be explosions and rockets. Her body had barely recovered, when his hands began to dance back up her sides. Each touch of his rough hands upon her flesh sent shockwaves through her. Reaching her shirt, he stopped.

"My Belle," he whispered and she was amazed to actually hear him. "I want you more than life itself."

His words ignited her in a way his touch had only hinted. She held her breath, expecting him to boldly rip it from her body. Instead, he slowly slid the thin top up her body. His deft hands lingering on her breasts long enough to make the nipples strain against her bra. Reaching her arms, he paused and stared into her eyes in a way she could only describe as 'hungry'. With a smile, she uncurled her arms from his neck, lifting her body just enough to allow him to pull the shirt over her head. By the time he had flung it across the clearing, she had her bra undone. In seconds, it lay like a wilted butterfly on the grass beside her discarded shirt.

Belle caught the look in his eyes when she looked up. He drank in her body with his haunting stare. She saw his thoughts mirrored in his eyes. Over the years, a fair share of men had looked at her, leered at her, but none had made her feel beautiful like Chase did right now. In his eyes, she was the beautiful princess her mother had always told her she had been. Something in the tender, almost reverent, way he looked at her made her believe it.

"So beautiful." Chase cupped her chin with his large hand. His caress so tender, it felt like a whisper across her skin. His finger traced her lips as he bent down to kiss her forehead before placing one over her each eye, trailing down the bridge of her nose to nibble its tip. A tiny giggle escaped, and he smiled.

"What's so funny?" Chase asked.

"Nothing." Belle giggled.

"Tell me." He nipped playfully at her ear. "Or you'll force me to torture it out of you."

"Okay, you asked for it." She wiggled her ear out of his distracting mouth. "Suddenly, Pee Wee Herman popped into my head when you said so beautiful."

Chase pulled his head back, a hurt look on his face. "That was so not what I was expecting. Should I be worried that you're imagining him when making love to me?"

"Not like that." She smacked him on the chest. "But when you said it, I couldn't help thinking, I know you are but what am I?"

"I think I love you," he whispered through the grin.

"A few minutes ago it was I love you, without the think. Which is it?" She winked. "Don't tell me you're jealous of Pee Wee."

"No." He laughed. "If I did, I sure wouldn't tell you, in any case."

"Then answer my question, before I find someone you are jealous of." Her eyes twinkled as she caught the look in his eye.

"Belle Gardner, you're a hard woman." He captured her hand and kissed the palm. "To answer your question, I think therefore I love you."

She gave him another whack to the chest. "Wrong answer. You're supposed to say, you're struck dumb by my beauty and incapable of a single thought."

"Well, the blood loss to my brain has hampered it somewhat." He flinched as she raised her hand playfully.

"I can see." She turned her head to the side and saw just how little blood he had getting to his gray matter. "Maybe we should do something about that before you pass out or something."

Chase pressed his body tighter against her. "It's the something I'm interested in."

"And all this time I thought it was me." Belle giggled.

His finger traced the curve of her neck, his eyes never leaving her face. "Belle, you are the only something I have on my mind."

Belle jumped when Chase's mouth fell to her breast, his tongue whirling circles around her nipple, teasing it to life. She felt herself quickening again but fought back the urge to let herself go. Belle wanted Chase inside her, his release exploding along with hers. Doing her best to ignore the pleasure he gave her tingling breast, she lowered herself onto him. She'd grown tired of waiting.

Belle smiled into his wide eyes, loving the look peppering his face. His eyes were aflame with an intoxicating mixture of pleasure and wonder. How she wanted to take him all the way inside her, but held back. She wanted to savor each exquisite second, filing it away in her mind, as the most perfect moment in her life.

"If you keep doing that, I swear I'm going to die," Chase hissed from behind his clinched teeth. The expression on his face, told her he wasn't lying.

She had so wanted him -- wanted this. To actually have him inside her was better than heaven. It felt like eternity. Belle felt the rhythm of his life beating in each stroke. The oneness in his touch was closer than she had ever felt with another person. Belle welcomed him deeper until she felt like he was touching her very being. Her body quickened, her release washing over him. The strength of it so intense, she thought her mind would explode along with it. In spite of the energy coursing through her, she didn't want it to end. Wrapping her legs around his back, she drove him deeper until she felt his body rise up.



Belle screamed as his strokes came quicker, harder, the soft grass crackling under her. His name, a melody her mouth refused to stop singing into the crisp air. Just when she thought she couldn't stand another second, his body went rigid as his release exploded inside her. Tightening her legs around him, she held him captive, not willing to let the feeling end. Belle closed her eyes, letting the moment hold her. Belle loved having him inside her. Him being there felt so right, she knew when he wasn't, a part of her would go with him.

Belle opened her eyes, to see him smiling down at her. His eyes danced with reflections of her. She reached up and stroked his rough cheek. He bent his head suckling her finger, as he curled his body to lie beside her. She snuggled into the curve of his body, as he threw his arm over her. Belle realized she was right. A part of her was gone. She felt it in the heat of his body tight against her, but knew that he was still inside her. His heart belonged to her, as surely as hers belonged to her.

"Belle, thank you," he whispered into her hair, bringing chill bumps across the flesh of her neck.

"I think I should be thanking you," she said, breathlessly into his massive chest.

"Can we agree on a mutual thank you?"

"I think that sounds good," Belle said, relishing the sound of his heart racing in her ear.

He threw an arm around her, pulling her against him. "I hate to buzz kill the moment, but where do we go from here?"

The question stymied her. She really hadn't given it much thought. To tell the truth, this whole thing had been an entire case of not thinking. Yesterday, that fact might have frightened her, but not now. The world outside might be waiting for them, but this was too perfect to sully with rights, wrongs, or the hundreds of other things that was lurking in the shadows of their lives.

"Chase, I honestly don't know. This is so new, I have no idea." She pulled away, but he closed his arm over her, dragging her back into him.

"Belle, don't leave me yet. This is new to me, too. I'm willing to see where it goes. No rushing, but I don't want to lose this with you." The sincerity in his voice melted her.

"I don't, either, but it's crazy to make plans when everything is chaos around us." Belle frowned as reality settled in.

"Then, we'll wait until this mess with your stepfather is over before we decide anything." He kissed the creases in her forehead. "But understand this, I won't walk quietly away when it's over."

Lying there in his arms, Belle prayed like hell he wouldn't. The thought of losing him was more than she could bear.

## Chapter Eighteen

Belle didn't want to let go of his hand. Her mind told her if she released her hold on him, the bubble would burst and the real world would come crashing down around them. Whatever else happened, holding on to this moment meant more than her life. Even walking through the mists didn't frighten her. Chase must have sensed her mood, because he gave her hand a squeeze as they cleared the mists, and found themselves back in Morag's clearing. The old woman waited for them with a smug look on her face, Belle was none too happy to note.

"I see you found the courage to bring your man back." Morag ran her gaze up and down Chase, making Belle want to hide him away from the woman's glare. "And a fine man he is, too. Makes me wish I was an eon or two younger."

"Morag!" Belle exclaimed.

"Don't look so shocked. I was young once." Her playful smile faded. "But, now isn't the time to rehash my wayward youth. Corith is loose in the mortal world."

Belle let out a strangled gasp, and pulled her hands to her mouth.

Chase scratched his head. "Who is this Corith?"

"Imagine the baddest bad ass you've ever met, and he's a pussy compared to Corith," Morag answered to Belle's shock. "What's that look for? You don't get to be as old as me without picking up a colorful vocabulary."

"What's he doing on Earth? I mean the apocalypse isn't even on the agenda for a few eons," Belle said, trying her best not laugh at the woman.

"He's after Brechashe, here." She swung her finger toward Chase. "Seems the Knight of Spring found out Lover Boy double crossed him."

"Shit!" Chase exclaimed.

"See, a colorful vocabulary is a wonderful thing. One word sums up everything in a neat little package," Morag smirked.

"How are the Horned God and John connected?" Belle asked, but a sinking feeling made her think she already knew the answer.

"The Knight has formed an alliance with him. More than that, I can't tell you," Morag said, a frown creasing her forehead.

"Alright, he's a bad ass and working with Gardner. Gotcha. So any idea where he is?" Chase asked, taking hold of Belle's hand.

She gave him a weak smile. This wasn't good. Her stepfather had been bad enough, but one of the Triumvirate working with him made it a hundred times worse. From the look on Morag's face, Belle knew it would turn out to be much worse than that.

"He is with your friends, the Niegilium and the Dhampyre." The old woman's words were a death knell hanging in the air.

Chase's tension rolled through the contact they shared through their clenched hands. "Chase, don't worry. We'll figure out a way to help them."

"Damn straight we will!" He turned away from her and glared at Morag. "And I think you know just how. Don't you?"

"Very astute." Morag pursed her lips. "Corith is a creature who is bound by certain laws, as am I. He may exist on the mortal plane, but his power rests here in the Lands. Cut that connection and he must return."

"How do we do that?" Great, Belle thought the task impossible before, but now... The Horned God was all but invincible. Morag's words offered her very little hope.

"Simple, Chase must take away his sword," Morag said, pretty as you please.

"I just got him back! I'm not about to see him commit suicide," Belle wailed.

"Have faith, Bellaronia." Morag gently patted Belle's face. "He is stronger than you think."

"Okay, get a god's pig sticker and we're good. I can do that." Chase's confidence didn't calm her nerves one damned bit.

Chase had no idea what they were dealing with. Belle did. Corith was death on two legs, The personification of the grim reaper come to life, not just some myth to scare kids into going to bed. If Chase tried to battle him one on one, he would die, curse or no curse.

She couldn't -- no wouldn't -- let that happen. "No, you can't!"

Chase pulled her to him. "Baby, there isn't another way. From what you two have told me, he isn't about to give up. He will keep coming for me until one of us is dead. Tell me I'm wrong."

Belle shook her head, hating the truth he forced her to admit.

"I won't let Caern and Raiz die while I hide here with you." He gently lifted her face until she looked him in the eye. "That isn't who I am, and you know it."

"Then we'll do this together. If he's working for John, he's after both of us," Belle turned to Morag. "Isn't there something you can do to help?"

"Nothing, my dear." Morag shook her head. "This is your battle, not mine."

"I'm not asking for you to come blazing in like the calvary, but there has to be a way to weaken him, so I can snatch the sword." Chase tilted his head toward the woman. "Come on. Even Superman has Kryptonite."

"The only advice I can give you is to look to the old ways. Corith is a creature of the Elder Days." Morag nodded her head absently. "If he has a weakness, it lies there."

"Elder Days?" Chase looked confused.

"That's all." The old woman looked gravely behind her, as if she heard something that disturbed her. "Time grows short. You must leave now, or abandon any chance you have of saving your companions."

"Dammit, I need more than that," Chase growled.

"It is all I can give you. Even I must adhere to the balance. Now, go."

Belle barely had time to grab a firm hold on Chase when Morag threw up her arms. With a wild gesture, the old woman opened a fissure in the air. Through the crackling energy, she gave them a weak smile before ushering them toward the growing crack. Pulling Chase with her, Belle took a step into the yawning abyss, only to be swept into the whirlwind created by the opening. She didn't have time to think, as the power of Morag's magic sucked them back toward the mortal realm.

Eternity moved past them. Belle felt herself being ripped apart by the forces at work. It took all her strength to keep a firm grip on Chase. The last thing she wanted was for them to become separated in the void between worlds. She wasn't sure Morag's magic would see them both safely through the barrier if they became separated. The stress took its toll. Exhaustion crept over her. Her fingers slipped as the biting cold tore away the last shred of her failing strength.

Panic raced through her mind. Chase was falling away. She couldn't feel his touch in the darkness surrounding them. The energy Morag used kept pushing them faster than Belle had ever traveled in the glimmering between the Lands and the mortal realm. Just when she thought she couldn't hold onto him a moment longer, light flooded her eyes. With a jolt, she found herself collapsing into Chase's arms as they materialized inside the ruined interior of Darkside.

"Hey, what took you so long? We're out of Jack!" Caern yelled, before collapsing head first onto the table.

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Chase didn't know whether to be relieved, or go kick his friend's ass up around his shoulders. He'd just gone through hell and a half to get back here to save Caern's sorry butt, to find him drunk with the guy trying to kill him. Sometimes, Chase wondered why he even tried to understand the man. He was so tempted to grab Belle and just leave the fool to his own devices.

The sight of Raiz's bleeding body stopped him. The big man lay sprawled in front of the bar, his body half transformed. Tuffs of hair matted with blood covered the Were's mangled body. The Russian's face looked like someone had slammed a bear into some guy at about Mach-6. Raiz's gapping maw drew in ragged breaths as his body struggled to put itself back together again. Chase let out a relieved sigh to see the damage didn't appear to be permanent. The fact Raiz had begun to transform back to his human form let him know the worst of the damage was already gone. What he saw was merely the aftermath of the battle. Assured his friend would eventually be all right, Chase could turn his attention kicking the snot out of the big bastard he came for.

"Ah, Chase Michaels I presume," Corith beat him to the punch. "Your friend kindly entertained me until your return. I hope you don't mind, but we seemed to have taken the liberty to diminish your stock of potables."

"I guess you were thirsty," Chase said, trying to get a read on the man.

"Positively parched." Corith let out a chuckle that came to an abrupt end when Belle moved around Chase's side. "My, my, John will be so pleased to know the old hag let you return. He was so worried over your safety."

"I bet he was," Belle snarled.

"Oh, but he was. The Lands are a dangerous place, especially with the friends you were keeping," Corith paused. "How is Morag, by the way? I know she had glowing things to say about me."

"What say we cut the bullshit?" Chase snapped, not liking the way the guy leered his way up Belle. "We both know what you're here for, so let's get it over with."

"You are a brave man, or a very foolish one. I know the hag told you all about me. You could have easily run away with the girl, but you didn't. A hero at last!" Corith threw back his head and roared. "This world has grown boring without fools tilting at windmills to entertain me. You will entertain me. Won't you?"

"As much as you're boring the shit out of me," Chase said, pushing Belle out of the way.

"This will be sweet. Too bad I won't be able to enjoy the spoils of war." Corith grinned. "Then again, with Gardner you never know. It's not like he's worried about her honor, just that she's alive enough to keep him in power."

Chase lost it. He exploded across the floor. Corith let out a howl, meeting him halfway. Slamming into him was like hitting a brick wall. Chase felt the impact all the way to his toes.

Staggering back, he shook his head. He didn't know about the other guy, but if these damn birds didn't stop circling soon, there would be hell to pay.

He shook off the dizziness, and jumped back just in time to avoid a body blow that would have put him through the wall. Corith had overextended his reach, giving Chase the opening he'd been looking for. He dropped to his knees and slammed a two-fisted into the god's Solar Plexus. The blow might not have been much, but it was enough to take the wind out of Corith's sails. Chase was grateful for the breather it offered. He rolled slightly to his left, and rapidly came up in a crouch. Corith was hunched over, sucking in air in huge heaping gulps. Chase didn't feel the burning urge to give him the chance to recover, either. He threw his leg and swept it behind the god's knees, knocking him headfirst into the bar. The sickening sound of cracking bone and wood filled the air.

Chase knew he was just buying time, but right now he needed it. The son of a bitch had egged him into losing his cool -- a stupid mistake that nearly got him killed. In the old days, he'd beaten his troops for less. He couldn't defeat this guy with brute strength. Cryptic messages from old women weren't helping, either. If he could figure out what the witch meant by old ways, he might stand a shot at taking this guy out. Seeing as how he never read fairy tales growing up, it was a sure bet he wasn't about to have an epiphany and solve the frigging riddle any time soon, at least soon enough to save himself from an ass whooping.

He glanced toward Belle. She kneeled in front of Raiz and tried to help the big man. The Russian had finally come around, but looked to be in no shape to stand on his own two feet, let alone lend a hand. From the snores coming from behind him, he knew Caern was next to useless. If Chase made it out of this, he and the Dhampyre would have a few choice words about sobriety and his taste in drinking buddies.

The groan and creak of wood brought Chase's head snapping up. The horned god was on his feet again, with the ten foot long bar gripped in his hands. The giant of a man twirled the massive hunk of carved wood about his head and swept it toward him. Chase hit the floor just ahead of it. He hugged the floor as the bar sliced the air over his prone body. He could hear Sebastian's anguished howl coming from the depths of the bar.

Chase winced, as he thought of the ghost trapped defenseless within his prison. The impact of the bar hitting the far wall exploded in the confined space. Another cry sang out from the bar, but Chase couldn't think about that now. He added another bullet point to the 'if he survived this' list. If he didn't end this soon, there wouldn't be enough of the place left to save.

He didn't have time to consider if his insurance covered acts of horned gods. Corith dragged him from the floor and dashed him into a stack of empty bottles lining the wall -- another slice of happiness from Caern, no doubt. He shoved down the pain as glass slashed his back and skull. He landed with a wet thud amid the wreckage where the bar had just sat. The birds started circling again, which couldn't be a good sign.

"Chase, you're getting your ass kicked. I hope your plan isn't to make him sick from all the blood you're getting on him," Sebastian's voice filtered through the fog covering his brain.

"Thanks, for the advice. I'll try to remember that when I'm gushing blood all over him. Maybe, you could hand him a barf bag if he looks like he's about to lose it," Chase grumbled.

"Just pointing out the obvious." Seb smiled. "And in case you failed to notice, he just trashed my tree."

"No, I missed it while I was eating the floorboards." Chase pushed himself from the floor.

"You know, sarcasm does not suit you," Sebastian huffed.

"As you just pointed out, I'm getting my butt handed to me. All I have is some old witch's riddle to help me, so unless you know what, trust to the old ways means, I don't need you whispering in my ear," Chase said, looking around for Corith. The god was guzzling a bottle of Hennessey, and seemed to have forgotten him for the moment.

"Old ways?"

"Yeah Morag said the only way to banish Corith from the mortal plane was to separate him from his sword, but to do that I needed to weaken him, using the old ways," Chase explained, as he watched Corith polish off the bottle.

"Man, that is so easy. You need cold iron."

"Cold iron?" This began to sound like a game of twenty questions, but he didn't have time for games. Big boy over there would run out of booze soon, and come back for round three. "Care to cut the riddles and just spell it out.

"Corith is old school Fae. You hit him with or shove something made of iron into him and he's almost human." Seb frowned. "Ah, I'd definitely go with shove into, if I were you. Hitting him doesn't seem to be working to well for you so far."

Chase processed the information. It all made sense. Even he knew that much about the Fae. He just assumed it was another bit of misinformation. Living around Caern had taught him not to believe everything you heard about the night races. Now his only problem was where to get his hands on something made of iron. No, his only problem was getting the hell out of Corith's way long enough to find some. He looked up just in time to see the god storming across the floor right in his direction.

"Sebastian, find me something made of iron," Chase paused to dodge out of the way of a size eighteen aimed right for his head. "And hurry!"

## Chapter Nineteen

It took everything Belle had not to scream. Corith had made a career out of throwing Chase like a rag doll across the wrecked bar. She thought aiding the Niegilium would take her mind off the chaos going on around her. So far it had only succeeded in getting her covered in blood and fur. Honestly, Belle couldn't see that she had done the creature much good. Raiz pretty much healed himself without any help from her.

Chase let out an inhuman scream, distracting her. Clamping her eyes shut, she couldn't bear to see him take another blow from the god. Five seconds went by with no new howls filling the air. Willing herself to open them, she looked up just in time to see another cut close itself on the Russian's body. Even that set her stomach on queasy. Corith howled out an unholy battle cry that drew her gaze back to the struggle dominating the room. She winced as Corith's foot narrowly missed hitting Chase in the head. Chase rolled out of the way just in time before sluggishly staggering to his feet. The ancient one turned just in time to graze the back of Chase's leg with a blow with the flat of his hand. Belle could hear the crack of bone clear across the room. She winced as she saw Chase scrambling across the floor, dragging his leg like so much dead weight behind him.

Belle jumped from the floor in the vain hope she could do something before Corith killed him. A hand clamped onto her ankle dragging her back to the floor. She glared into Raiz's blood soaked eyes.

"*Nyet, nyet*," he growled weakly. "It would be suicide."

"What do you expect me to do? Let the son of a bitch kill him?" Her voice came out as a raw shriek that intensified when she caught sight of Corith grabbing Chase's wounded leg.

"No, I expect you to live for him. I've known Chase long enough to know he isn't about to go out like a bitch," Raiz said with a grimace as he pushed up on an elbow.

"How the hell can you be so sure?" Belle cried, watching the horned god twist Chase's leg until he let out an inhuman scream.

"Because he has you to come back to," Raiz answered.

"That's right, sweetie," Sebastian said, materializing beside her. "And we got a plan."

"Who...?" Belle stammered.

"Sorry, we haven't been introduced. My name is Sebastian."

"What...?" Her eyes went wide as the ghost shimmered into view next to her.

"Limited vocabulary you got there, but I'll forgive you." Seb snickered.

"Don't let the ghostie screw with you. Sebastian's a right bastard, but he means well." Covering his mouth, Raiz coughed before looking into his hand and wiping it on his torn jeans.

Belle didn't know what to think of this new development. Weres, vamps, and now ghosts, what next? If little green men from Mars showed up, she doubted she'd so much as think twice about it. Who was she to say anything? She was a fairy princess after all.

Raiz and the ghost were going at it pretty good. Belle would have been more than happy to let them continue, but there had been mention of a plan. The sight of Chase being pummeled into the floor, convinced her she had better find out what it was, before she had to make another trip to the Willowing.

"Excuse me!" she shouted to be heard over the verbal barrage going on between the two. They stopped their word-play and looked at her. "So, what's this plan?"

"Yeah, right!" Sebastian stroked a hand through his matted hair.

"Well, you going to tell us? If you haven't noticed, Chase isn't exactly winning out there," Belle snarled.

"Cold iron."

Dammit! She should have realized what Morag had meant. It was so simple, it never entered her mind. The old ways had fallen into such disuse, no one ever bothered to mention them anymore. Once upon a time, the fact cold iron could banish the ancient ones had been common knowledge. Over the centuries, the affect of it on the newer generations had grown weaker. Inbreeding had diminished the lineage of the Peoples. Only the royal houses retained much of the older Magics, but they, too, were not as powerful as they once were.

"I hope this means you know where some is?" Belle asked, doing her best to ignore the bashing Chase was taking.

"Would I show my face if I didn't?" The ghost tried to be charming, but she really couldn't cope with Casper the Goofy-ass Ghost.

"Tell you what. When I get to know you, I'll get back to you. Until then tell me where the damn iron is!" Belle had never been a yeller, but dammit her nerves were frayed enough without playing games.

"Well, I never!" he snorted.

Belle would have throttled him right then, if he had a body to throttle. Instead she unleashed the eyebrow of doom. She doubted it would do much good, but she'd run out of options since bodily harm was out. From the look on his face, she guessed it worked.

"Uh, it's over there. Chase has an old set of golf clubs behind the Sam Addams display in the corner," Sebastian pointed to his left.

"I thought golf clubs were made of fiberglass?" She knew all of John's were, he made a point to telling everyone whether they cared or not. Which she didn't.

"Chase lived in the era when the sport was invented, babe. Those puppies should be in a museum. I can smell the iron from here. Is that good enough for you?"

"Yup, so what do I need to do?" She levered her body into a crouch.

"You will do nothing," Raiz said, pushing himself up.

Belle slapped him back down. "Let me guess. This is a job for a big strong man. Well, let me tell you something. You're in no shape to do anything, so that leaves me." She turned to the ghost. "That leaves you. Tell me what to do before I get nasty."

Belle wasn't sure what she could actually do to him, but it got him to talking. "Just hit him with it. Contact with iron will weaken him enough for Chase to get the drop on him."

That was all Belle needed to hear. Not giving the Russian time to change his mind about playing hero, she was off like a shot toward the beer display. Corith was too distracted with mayhem and attempted murder to notice her. Belle just hoped Chase survived long enough for her to come to the rescue, which seemed to be becoming the new theme to this relationship. She'd feel better about her role if it wasn't her fault he needed all the rescuing.

Slipping in the wreckage, she made it to the corner the ghost had pointed to. Belle tossed the cardboard cut-out to the side. Sure enough, a ratty bag of golf clubs were tossed in the corner behind it. The dust and cobwebs covering it told her they hadn't been touched in like forever. Batting away the worst of it, she dug into the bag. She pulled out a nine iron so covered in filth,



she was afraid to keep a hold of it without a tetanus shot. Even through the recent addition of a rubber grip Belle felt the power of the iron like a growing ember against her palm.

The sound of crunching bones told her that the time to be squeamish had passed. She dragged the club across her pant's leg, trying not to think about the damage done to her couture. Tightening her grip, she took off toward the battle.

Belle fought down the urge to scream as she dashed through the debris. Corith had Chase dangling by his leg. She saw a hint of bone protruding from the worn denim. Raw heat exploded inside her at the sight. Everything disappeared but the anger fueling her momentum. Her entire body burned with hatred for the god. Chase didn't deserve this. John would pay for this. But first she would see to this asshole.

Corith looked up as she skidded to a stop just in front of them. Belle didn't give him a chance to react. She swung the ancient golf club, catching him right under the chin. The god staggered back. Chase slipped from his weakened grip. She jumped over him and kept wailing on Corith. A straight shot of adrenaline roared through her and her next swing sent a chunk of Corith's skull flying. He let out a howl as the metal end bit deep into the soft meat of scalp. Quicker than she thought it'd take, he collapsed into a heap, his body convulsing.

Her lungs drawing in huge gasps of air as her adrenaline continued to pump ninety to nothing, Belle gripped the club, afraid to let go. In the back of her head, Belle knew she'd need both hands to grab the sword from his back. Reluctantly she let it fall next to the horned god's body. Luckily for her, Corith had fallen on his side, leaving the hilt of the sword unencumbered by his body.

Her hands slick with sweat, Belle gripped the leather wrapped hilt and pulled with all her might. The blade slipped free but snagged on the worn scabbard. She planted her foot on his blood drenched neck and jerked. The sword held for one brief second before slipping free. Belle staggered back as the full weight of massive weapon filled her hands. A pair of rough hands stopped her from going sprawling onto the floor. She looked over her shoulder to see Caern's bloodshot eyes glaring back at her.

"Did I miss something?" he grumbled.

"You could say that." She wrinkled her nose at the smell of Tennessee's finest coming off him. The best thing to do at the moment would be to ignore him. To that end, she turned and pointed toward Chase. "Mind checking on Chase. I think I got this in hand."

"Okay," Caern mumbled, winching as he ran a hand through his hair. "But you need anything..."

"I won't," Belle answered, a little more forceful than she intended.

Belle hated to be abrupt, but dammit, while Chase was getting his head handed to him, Caern had been sleeping off a buzz. As much as Belle liked the man, she couldn't convince herself to forgive him that just yet. If Chase wasn't dying, she might -- in say fifty years.

Distracted by her thoughts, Belle failed to see Corith slowly getting to his feet behind her. By the time she did, he was almost on top of her. She spun around, dragging the sword sluggishly into the air between them. The action amounted to more bluff than bite. Belle doubted seriously if she could take him out with the blade, but wasn't about to show any sign of weakness to the god.

"You truly are a wildcat." Corith grinned through the mass of mangled flesh she'd left of his face. "Gardner underestimates you. A mistake I think, but his not mine."

"Shouldn't you be on your way to the other side?" she snarled, biting back the fear churning in her stomach, like a raw sore.

"Momentarily, but first I had to congratulate you on your brief dance with victory. It will be a short lived one, I promise. You can steal my sword, and banish me from this realm, but I'll be back. John..." He said the name like a curse. "Won't let me stay behind the barrier long. For all his brave talk, he is a coward at heart. He needs me to do the dirty things his soul is too sniveling to deal with."

"You don't scare me." This time she almost believed it herself.

"Then you are a bigger fool than I thought. So much like your father," Corith stuck his blood drenched face right up to hers. "Just make sure you don't make the same fatal mistake he did."

"What the hell do you know about my father?" The insinuation in the dark god's voice made her forget all about Chase.

"So sad, it appears my time on this plane is at an end." Corith faded before her eyes. "But perhaps, you can ask John. I'm sure he will be more than happy to enlighten you."

Belle let out a howl as he disappeared. The hidden meaning of Corith's words stabbed into her heart. Her father's death had always been a mystery. His mangled body had been found in the woods surrounding the Sphere of Summer, the seat of her mother's power. It was assumed one of the Niegilium had attacked him. Belle had always been convinced there had been something more to it than an uprising of the nightmare creatures. Seeking the throne had been purely because she felt it to be her duty. If John had indeed been behind her father's death, as Corith intimated, this war just became personal.

But, first things first. She turned toward Chase. Caern had lifted him up to a chair that had somehow survived the melee. He looked like hell, but still breathed, if gasping could be called breathing. As much as she'd like to follow Corith into the Lands and get to the bottom of this, she knew, for now, her place was with Chase. Belle had a feeling the horned god wasn't about to stay put. Sooner or later, she'd get a straight answer from him -- and John.

She hefted the sword and tossed it on the table beside Chase and Caern. The metal clang was a dull echo through the devastated room. Up close, he looked in worse shape than she thought. His face had been smashed in on one side, but his eye shined through blue and clear. The minute he saw her, a twinkle came to it. His leg was the worst, by far. She'd been right. It was broke. The femur strained at the side of his pants legs. How he remained conscious through the pain amazed her.

"Don't look so grim. It's not as bad as it looks," Chase said, his lip curling up into a mockery of smile.

"Care to explain that one to me. You look like shit. That leg is going to need a cast. Your face needs a full season on *Nip/Tuck*." Belle flinched, as she heard the bone in his leg crunch.

"You mean this." Chase patted his leg. "This is nothing. Try having it cut completely off. Now that's a mutha fucker."

"We better show her, before she calls an ambulance," Caern bent down, taking him by the ankle.

Before she could get out a reply, Caern jerked the leg straight and gave it a twist until she heard the leg snap back into place. Her eyes were glued to Chase's face. He took it without a sound. The only indication of his pain was a grimace, set in stone upon his face. She fought the urge to throw up, when Caern gave the slight turn to the right, eliciting another crack of bone.

"Dear Silvian!" Belle blurted out in spite of her bid for self-control.

"Shit!" Chase moved around, letting his leg flex in front of him. "I wasn't thinking."

"No, it's my fault." She looked away. The sight of him wiggling his toes to the accompaniment of scratching bone freaked her out. After seeing him come back from the dead, a little thing like a broken leg shouldn't be affecting her like this. But it wasn't everyday you saw a leg set back in place without a doctor being present.

"Look, you two can go on like this all night, but my head is killing me." Caern growled. "Can we wrap this up before the Easter Bunny shows up to stomp a mud puddle in our butts?"

"Yeah, go grab Raiz and we'll hit the road." Chase waved him off.

Watching Caern stumble toward the Russian, Belle was grateful for the time alone with him, even if they were all in the same room.

"So, I guess saying I'm sorry for getting you into this, sounds a little trite, all things considered." Belle touched the fresh flesh appearing on his cheek.

"Well, I wouldn't say that." He took her hand and gave it a kiss. "Belle, this isn't your fault. None of it. This is Gardner's fault. He's trying to set up a tin pot kingdom at you and your mother's expense. Believe me, he isn't the first person, I've seen try it. I didn't sit back and watch the other's do it, and I sure as hell won't play spectator now."

Belle felt the righteous anger in his voice. More than that, she sensed his love for her behind the emotion. He wouldn't back down from this, even if she asked him. It suddenly dawned on her this was the man she loved. The man, who would always protect her, even if it meant losing his life. His immortality meant nothing. Chase could be a man without all the bells and whistles, and he'd still lay down his life for her.

Tears rolled down her cheeks as she brought their entwined hands up to her lips. She tasted their salty flavor as she kissed the spot he'd just touched with his own lips. This was what it meant to love someone unconditionally. The fear of such a simple act consumed her, but she wouldn't trade it for anything in the world. They were in this mess together and it felt just too right for her to deny.

## Chapter Twenty

Chase had no idea what they were going to do next. He'd like to blame it on the pain, but he honestly couldn't. Sure, his ribs were killing him. They nearly overrode the pain from his broken leg. But, just. Another thirty minutes and he should be more or less back to human -- or as close as he came since the bitches had come into his life. He prayed they could afford to kill the half an hour it would take to get him more or less mobile again. With Corith out of the picture, they had some but he wasn't the only asshole they needed to worry about. He didn't know if Gardner had trusted the job solely to the god. Gardner didn't seem the type to let one man -- be he a god, or just your regular every day Joe -- handle anything alone. It wasn't a comforting thought, but a realistic one.

Ignoring another wave of pain, Chase turned his attention to his friends. Caern had managed to get Raiz to his feet. The Were's powers of recuperation were a damn sight better than his, so the Russian appeared ready to go. As soon as his damn leg knitted together enough for him to walk on it, they were out of here. If he had his way, they'd leave now, but Chase wasn't about to hinder the others if Gardner had a line of hard-cases waiting for them outside. If they had to fight their way out of here, they needed a few things, in any case.

Weapons, for one thing. Chase fingered the hilt of Corith's sword. Picking it up, he marveled at the balance of the blade. The sword was truly a work of art, but he doubted he would find much use for the thing against the gang bangers he normally had to deal with, if they were packing. That wasn't to say the blade was totally useless. He could use a pig sticker as well as the next Mesopotamian, but call him modernized enough to appreciate the feel of a 9 mm in the palm of his hand.

He checked on Caern and the Russian to see they were thinking the same thing. While he was playing Conan, they'd hit the arms cabinet in the back office. Each man came back loaded down. Raiz alone had enough armament to start a war against a Central American nation. Caern had gone a little more reserved, but not by much. Chase just hoped they remembered him in their little scavenger hunt.

Belle kneeled off to the right, doing her own bit of scavenging. She'd managed to salvage some food from the back. It wasn't much, a few bags of chips and peanuts, but the way his stomach rumbled at the sight, the stash looked like a gourmet freaking meal. She caught him looking at her and flashed him a smile, while shaking a bag of Doritos in his direction. Reading his mind, she walked over, tossing him the bag as she sat down across from him.

"So, partner, what's the game plan?" Caern asked, sneaking up behind them and slipping a bag of chips from Belle's fingers.

"Hell if I know. To tell you the truth, I'm amazed we've survived this long." Chase slapped his hands together, popping open the bag of chips. He snagged one and dropped it into his mouth, waiting for some input from the peanut gallery.

"I think it's a gimme. We need to haul ass outta here," Caern mumbled through a mouthful.

"We could go back to my place. Is quite defensible," Raiz offered before turning to Belle. "Fritos?"

She handed him a bag. "I don't think that's a good idea. Your place is so remote, if we did need help, it'd take forever to come."

"She's got a point. Gardner sure as hell wouldn't find us, but I think the important thing now is to keep an eye on him," Chase said.

"And finding where he's stashed my mother," Belle added. "You heard Morag. To get John out of the picture we need Mom to start the transference of Summer."

"Is that what you want, babe?" Chase wasn't so sure.

He knew Belle wanted to unite her people, but he got the distinct impression she would rather not have to wear a crown to do it. Honestly, Chase wasn't sure he liked the idea, either. Chase wasn't up on Fae royalty, but he doubted a cursed immortal consort could be termed as acceptable husband material for anyone, let alone a queen. Yet, the thought of losing Belle to a throne didn't sit well with him. He knew enough about duty to know he wouldn't stand in her way, but Chase wasn't sure he could just walk away, either.

"If it's the only way to save my people, then yes." The set of her jaw told him she meant it.

"Okay, we're with you Queen Belle." Caern slapped Chase across the shoulder hard enough to make him wince. "That makes you the beast, my friend."

Raiz let out a peel of laughter. "Don't worry, Chase. She probably won't make you dress in pantaloons until after she's Queen."

"Yuk it up, furball. Now if the comedy hour is over, can we get back to business?" He gave his friends the evil eye. "Belle, do you have any idea where he might keep the information about your mother?"

"John isn't big on computers, so probably somewhere in his office at the mansion. She's got to be somewhere nearby, too." Belle ran a finger across her brow.

"What makes you say that?" Caern leaned in, and took another bag of chips from the table.

"As the Knight of Spring, he needs Mom to survive. He must be in contact with her at least once a week, or he grows weak. With John's schedule, he couldn't put her somewhere too out of the way, or I'd have noticed his absence. The phone is always ringing for him, day and night," she answered.

"No cell phone?" Chase asked.

"Same thing as the computer. It's a necessary evil, but he's always forgetting it. John depends on his hirelings to keep track of things, but he still wouldn't stay away from the house for an extended period. He's got too many enemies for that."

"Well, that narrows the search perimeter down to someplace he can reach and be back from in a day's time," Chase rubbed his chin as he let it percolate in his head.

"You thinking a private hospital?" Caern asked.

"Yup. Can you run a search on the computer to run down all the places that fit the bill?" Chase had a plan forming in his head.

He didn't like it, either. Right now he was in no shape to protect Belle, but if they hung together, it could take days to track her mother down. If Caern and Raiz focused on locating a list of possible hiding places, he and Belle could do a little recon at the family manse. Not the best of plans, but he didn't see anything else they could do. Gardner might be keeping the location in his head. If that was the case, it was back to using a little good old fashioned detective work to get the job done. Now that he knew what they were going to do, it was how they would take the news

"Okay, here's the deal. Caern, you and Raiz hit one of the safe houses and do a complete rundown of all the privately owned hospitals in a hundred mile radius. See if you can find something with either Gardner listed as an owner, or a shareholder in the company. Check for dummy corporations." Chase pushed a bag of Cheetos around, toying with adding it to his carb rush. "He's smart enough, I think, to want to control every situation so nobody can tell him no. Payroll will see to that."

"And if we find nothing?" Caern asked, nodding his head.

"Dig deeper, because I seriously doubt either his or her name will be on a registration form." Chase paused. "And if you can't find anything tracing ownership back to Gardner, run a track on payments. If we're right, he had to pay for the care somehow. One way or the other, we'll nail his ass."

"Let me guess, ASAP is too late." Caern let a knowing grin play across his face, bringing one to Chase's.

"Yesterday is too fucking late, got me?" Chase said with a smirk.

"Crystal, brother." Chase caught the wink he shot at Belle, and laughed.

"Chase, what about us?" Belle slipped her arm though his and laid her head on his shoulder.

"We're going to do a B and E at your step-dad's." Chase waited for the shoe to drop.

"Are you out of your mind?" Caern was the first to the punch.

"Damn straight, my friend. You are in no shape to go anywhere near this man, *tavarish*," Raiz agreed with a nod.

"They're right, Chase. You are going to get yourself killed," Belle said, gripping his arm tighter.

It hurt like a bitch, but Chase shrugged it off. He'd had worse injuries than this one. Of course back then, no one was around to give a shit if it hurt or not. Having Belle around was definitely going to be a complication, but one he didn't mind dealing with. Chase wondered what it would feel like to have her taking care of him. Kissing his boo boos and all that crap. He was almost tempted to let her, but stopped himself. The grief Caern would give him over it wasn't worth it. Besides showing how bad he really felt wasn't going to help his case one bit.

"Look, all of you. This is the way it has to be. Caern, you're the only one who knows his way around a computer well enough to get the information we need. I sure as hell can't do it." He held his hand up before they could interrupt. "And I'm not about to let Belle out of my sight again. We crystal on that?"

"Yeah, crystal, but that doesn't mean I like it," Caern said, easing back in chair.

"You don't have to like it, just deal with it. We both know I'll be back to good before we even reach Gardner's place," Chase lied, hoping it would ease the tension between them.

"That's not the point. In less than a day, you've got the shit kicked out of you not once, but twice. Nearly died the first time, in case you forgot that little fact." Caern slapped the table with the palm of his hand. "Oh, let's not forget the princess popped three caps in your ass before that. No offense, darling. So, let me state this for the record, going to this asswipe's place without back-up is a mistake."

"Could be, but this isn't about overpowering the place with strength in numbers. This is a precision strike. Belle knows the grounds. We can be in and out before anyone knows we're there. How far do you think we'll get with us," Chase flipped his hand between them, "and you, plus Raiz, lurking around?"

Caern held his tongue but his opinion sat painted all over the Dhampyre's face. In spite of that, Caern knew he was right. Didn't make it any easier on him, but Chase knew he would play ball. They both knew the job came before personal feelings. It's what made them the best at what they did. Well, next to Wolverine that was.

"Since you two have kissed and made up, can we get out of here? I feel claustrophobic all of a sudden." Raiz rubbed his arms, and eyed the door nervously.

Chase felt for the guy. The big man didn't make it a habit of sticking around in populated areas for kicks. As far as Chase knew this was the longest that the Russian had spent in a city, any city. That fact alone spoke volumes for the kinship the Raiz felt for him. Truthfully, Chase would die for the man. He had on more than one occasion, now that Chase thought about it. Ancient history aside, he knew the Russian would do the same for him.

"Caern, take Raiz and beat it through the passage in your office," Chase ordered.

"What about you two?" Caern asked, rising from his seat.

"Whatcha think? We're five seconds behind yo ass." Chase gave him a grin -- he so wasn't feeling -- as he got to his feet. "Leave me the keys to something fast, if you beat us down."

Caern's eyes narrowed. "After you trashed my 'Stang, you expect me to let you behind the wheels of another one of my Cherries?"

"Yeah." Chase winked. "Who else is going to bail your ass out of jams?"

"Damn, you know how to drag a man by the short hairs! I'll toss the keys to the Lamborghini in the seat," Caern yelled from the doorway. "Don't forget to top off the tank when you bring her back."

"You mean *if* I bring it back, right?" Chase couldn't resist the parting shot.

"No. I mean either bring it back, or plan on finding another place to live," Caern growled slipping through the door.

Chase waited a second until he was sure they were gone before turning back to Belle. Hanging around probably wasn't the best idea he'd had in the past twenty-four hours, but he needed to clear a few things up with Belle before they jumped into the fire again.

"Chase, shouldn't we get going?" Her eyes darted after Caern and Raiz.

"In a minute..." Chase rubbed his chin. He never had to explain himself to a woman before. It was a strange experience for him. Hell, he hadn't answered to anybody since Alexander, and looked how that shit turned out. "Look, we need to come to an understanding before we get out of here."

"What kind of understanding?" The tone of her voice told him she wasn't going to be too receptive to what he had to say next.

"It's just this. Things are going to get hairy -- real hairy. I know it doesn't look like it, but I can handle myself. For me to do that, I need to know you are safe. Hush." He clamped his fingers over her lips. "Let me finish. I know you can take care of yourself, but I'm not sure what we're walking into. I need you to tell me, if I say back off, you'll back off. If I tell you to run like hell, you won't look back until you hit the other side of nowhere. Got me?"

Chase waited for her to blow up. In his experience, women always blew up when someone told them what to do. From the glare coming from her eyes, he expected it to come roaring out of her any second now. Then her face softened and he saw resignation fall into place.

"I want a promise from you." It wasn't a request. The softness, of her tone, belied the demand attached to what she had to say next.

"Name it." Even before she asked, Chase knew whatever she had up her sleeve, he'd willing give in to it, as long as it meant keeping her safe.

"I want your word that when the time comes, you will walk away if it's between your life," she reached up and stroked his cheek, "and getting me on the throne."

Chase didn't know what to say. He'd expected a ploy to get him to take care, maybe even, a 'Don't do anything stupid'. Sacrificing everything she had spent the last few days fighting for if it meant his life definitely had not been what he thought she'd come up with. He couldn't lie to her. Chase knew that for damn sure. He could, but wouldn't. What they had was so new, he wasn't about to tarnish it with lies, not that he ever would.

"I can't promise you that. Belle, life is about chances. We had a chance to love each other and took it. Whether it lasts a day or forever, the decision was worth it. If you ask me to stop being who I am, I won't be the man you gave your heart to. Belle, I can't give you something I'm not willing to give. My heart, my life belongs to you, but yours belongs to more than just me. Your people are depending on you to save them, rule them and ultimately take them into the future. I won't sit back and see you throw that away, even for me." He held his breath, watching the frustration play across her face.

"You son of a bitch. You play dirty," she hissed.

"No, I play to win." He pulled her into his chest. "I may not be able to promise you to walk away, but I can promise you this, I won't die as easily as everyone seems to think I can. Those old bitches won't let me. Even while I was trying to cross over, they held me place."

"For me. Eoyian told me, but even they aren't all powerful. Believing them to be will make you careless," she said breathlessly against the press of his cheek.

"You are the only thing that makes me careless. I've lived a long time, and never given my heart to anyone." He kissed her ear lobe. "Yet, you've made me do so in less than a day."

"Then promise me we'll wait until tomorrow to go after those files," Belle moaned as he dipped his lips to the curve of her neck.

Chase pulled back. "I can handle this."

"Normally, but Caern was right. You're half dead. What difference will one day make?" Her eyes bore into him.

Her concern finally melted his resolve. "Okay, we'll wait."

"Good, now are you going to kiss me, or stay all broody on me for the rest of the night?" The look she gave him, told him he couldn't, no wouldn't, turn down that invitation.

Chase took her lips, crushing them with the fever of his emotion. Danger surrounded them, but he couldn't stand the thought of not touching her, loving her. He was realistic enough to acknowledge the fact this was the last moment they would have together without hell raining down around them. He would take this moment of solitude with her. The real world be damned!

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The bittersweet scent of the cigar rolled around in John's nose. The smell of a fine cigar was one of the things he enjoyed most in life. The evening wore thin, leading quickly to the midnight hour. He should be tired, but found himself too energized to think about going to bed. His body refused to think about sleep. His entire being rested on a precarious edge.

Gardner knew the reason why. It neared the time he would be forced to visit his wife. He hated being beholden to the worrisome crone. But such was the cost of power, and one he'd gladly pay again. The price he held as a result was minuscule, especially since he'd seen to all



but removing his dear wife from his life. With her safely locked away, he had been free to do as he pleased. He had their people firmly in hand, and would continue to have them there -- only if he could get his hands on Belle. The thought soured the taste of the cigar in his mouth.

Laying it in the ashtray sitting on his desk, Gardner fingered the receiver on his phone. Corith should have checked in by now. The god's tardiness only added to his tension. Corith had steadily become more erratic with each visit he made to the mortal plane. His failure to report in symbolized just another indication of that fact. Their partnership had gradually morphed into a compromising position John no longer wanted to be associated with. The god served his purpose, but in the grand scheme he amounted to nothing more than a pawn in the game John played. Even the Summer Court simply represented a means to an end -- a steppingstone.

The Lands were too fractured to satisfy him. Earth offered little to justify a war to gain it. No, his sights were on a much larger target -- the power to control them both. To that end, he'd worked long and hard to convince his allies to aid him toward attaining that goal. John was not stupid. He knew how dangerous a game he had initiated. The Nespharillium were a people not known for the trust they instilled in those who aligned themselves with the dark race. He had known them long enough to know that duplicity was second nature to them. They would cut his throat, if it served their purposes to do so. He did not delude himself about that fact.

In hindsight, he had been foolish to go to them. The Nespharillium were the Peoples dark cousins. During the great upheaval, the two races had battled for the upper worlds. The war between them had spanned eons, and only by pure luck did the Shazhium defeat their sister race for control of the worlds of light. Now, a millennia later, he was about to unite them again. John was quite aware of the evil he would soon unleash upon the worlds. He would have left them to their dark devices if they did not possess the last key to his scheme, the Heart of Darqueverness.

Most thought the gemstone to be a myth, a tale to frighten the young into uneasy slumber. John knew better. His life had not always been one of ease, unlike his beloved brother. He had always been the bastard son, not worthy of notice by his father, or the bitch who'd whelped him, until he grew old enough to be cast away. The fact his father deemed to claim him proved sufficient for the old man's honorable sensibilities. His father already had his heir. He saw John as a duty, and little else. Marcus had always been the one who mattered, not him. John hadn't been about to idly sit back and watch his brother ascend to greatness, as his father eloquently put it. No, as soon as he came of age, he went forth into the worlds. On his journeys, he found the first traces of the Nespharillium.

From that chance discovery, he formed a plan. He would discover where his dark relatives called home, and learn the secrets his people had forgotten in their shortsighted ignorance. He'd learned one lesson from his father, and learned it well. Power was the only thing that mattered. Those who had it ruled. Those who didn't were serfs to those who did. John would be no one's slave or footstool.

He sought them out in the dark corners of the known universes. Finally, at the crossroads between the world of man and that of eternal night, he found them. John gladly bore the scorn they showered on those not born to their womb. Even their abuses were worth the prize awaiting him. Gradually, they came to begrudgingly accept him. The spark of their blood flowing through his veins did little to convince them of his worth, but gave him a chance to prove it to them. He studied at the hands of their wizards, the cloaked monks, who were pledged in darkness to the god Dræwl. Their cruelty worked a balm to his soul. At least it had been honest. He saw the potential his people squandered. In the misery they heaped upon him, he learned the only way to truly gain the power he craved rested in subtly.

Now, the time for subtly had come to an end. No longer would he willingly hide behind the shadows of a false queen. Tomorrow the Nespharilliüm would arrive, and their arrival would see that nothing could stand in his way, not even Corith. The delegation would bring with them the Heart of Darqueverness, the very soul of Dráwl come to his people. With the Heart in his hands, he could bind the worlds to his will.

His dear stepdaughter thought his motives to be so mundane as to want for nothing more than to have Summer for himself. She had always been too narrow-minded to see he was grander than the tin pot kingdom she thought he aspired to attain. Corith, too, underestimated him, which suited his purposes, as well. Let them all wallow in the misery he would soon bring to them.

John's thoughts drifted back to the here and now. Before the monks of Dráwl arrived, he needed to find his errant ally. The last thing he needed was the oaf to show up at an inopportune moment. For the time being, this meeting must remain a secret. If the Peoples discovered his involvement with the fallen races, not even his station as the Knight of Spring would save him.

Walking over to his desk, he fingered the orb Corith had given him for communication. At his touch, the globe instantly glowed to life. John sat while he waited for the horned god to appear. The god did not make him wait long. Corith's battered face consumed the orb, forcing Gardner to do a double take. Corith looked like he'd been through hell.

"Wondered when you'd get around to ringing me," Corith sneered.

"What the hell happened to you?" Gardner had a sinking feeling he didn't want to know.

"You stepdaughter has a nasty slice." The image in the orb pulled back a stock of hair revealing a deep cut running into his scalp. "Seems Morag was free with a lot of secrets the bitch should have kept to herself."

Damnation. "Were you able to dispatch the detective?"

"No, but you have bigger things to worry about than a back-stabbing gumshoe. Your baby girl is beginning to guess what really happened to her dear old dad."

"And how would she know it to be anything but a tragic mishap?" John had a pretty good idea, another sign his trust in the god had been misplaced.

"A little birdie might have let something drop." The grin filling Corith's face told him it wasn't by accident, either.

Gardner was willing to let the issue drop. He sensed a hidden agenda in the horned god's statement. It set him ill at ease, but bandying with the Lord of the Wildlings would get him nothing but a headache. "I take it from your appearance you are no longer able to visit the mortal plane."

"Worried that you may have to get your hands dirty without me around to do the nastiness for you?"

"No, just concerned over the welfare of my friend." The lie stuck like a cancer in his throat, but it would amuse Corith.

"Aww... I can feel the love." Corith snorted. "Yes, my friend, you are alone for the time being. The mortal coil is denied to me for the present."

"That is a shame." Gardner did his best not to laugh at the god's plight.

"It is, and with all the trouble you're about to have coming your way, you could really use a friend to guard your back."

Gardner wanted to throttle him. "What do you mean?"

"Johnny boy, they're coming for you." With an evil grin, Corith's face faded from the orb's shimmering glow.

## Chapter Twenty-One

Belle rolled over, the cheap hotel mattress creaking beneath her. Dusty light filtered through the dingy window. Beside her, Chase moved restlessly as his body jerked in dreaming. Idly brushing a stray hair away from his cheek, Belle stared into his sleeping face and wished she could do something to ease his troubled mind. After watching him for half the night, she thought all but consumed her. From what he had told her, she knew he'd never been what you'd call angel material, but that was exactly what he'd been to her. Not only had he saved her life, but he'd opened her heart. If the last one didn't equate to a true blue miracle, she didn't know what did. To see him unable to escape the pain even in his sleep, hurt her almost as much as it did him.

He deserved some respite from the curse that had become his life. Sinking back into her pillow to stare into his face, Belle thought to some degree she had become that. But, it wasn't enough! Whatever he had been before in no way resided in the man he was today. Chase was a hero, or as close as you could get to one. Lightly stroking his face, Belle wanted nothing more than to wrap her arms around him and never let the real world back into their lives.

Unfortunately, she knew that wouldn't be happening. Still, she could dream. Lying next to him, other thoughts had filled her head. Even asleep, he oozed sexy. Belle had a hard time not waking him up for a few of those naughty visions rolling around in her brain. If she hadn't spent three hours looking on as bones knitted themselves back together, she might have been tempted to do just that. Sure, Belle knew he'd be up for a little vigorous exercise, but tomorrow would come all too soon, and Chase needed as much rest as he could before they faced going to her house. She needed some rest herself, but it obviously wasn't coming.

Since sleep wasn't happening, she eased out of bed to let Chase enjoy his. Taking one last look at him, she paused as he curled his arm around the empty space she'd left and mumbled her name before going back to his broken dreams. Satisfied he wouldn't wake up, Belle made for the bathroom. The cold air spread across her body, making her wish she'd grabbed a robe from the floor. She toyed with the idea of going back, but decided not to chance disturbing Chase.

Still, Belle couldn't resist looking at him one more time. Glancing back, she saw he had rolled over in his sleep. His hand quested for her in the rumpled sheets. The urge to return to lie beside him overwhelmed her. He was perfection laying there. The sheets offered scant covering for his muscular body. They barely covered his sex, his legs sticking out from the thin cover just below his hips while the fabric flowed over his waist ending in the place she'd just vacated. Belle caught herself gawking at his new position. It offered such a spectacular view of his butt, but right now a shower would do her more good than wishful thinking.

Last night had gone by in such a blur, she had trouble processing it all. Seeing him lying there only made it seem too unreal. Belle had just been grateful he'd finally seen reason, and agreed to spend the night somewhere before going after John. He'd been in no shape to tackle her stepfather. They'd barely made it to this Hotel Hell before he collapsed. Chase would kill her when he woke up, but she'd managed a quick run to the store after he'd fallen asleep to snag them a change of clothes and some less-than-healthy snacks. Luckily, she'd made it back before he noticed she'd left.

Stopping at the bathroom door, Belle forced herself to look away. Standing here drooling over him wouldn't get her the shower she desperately needed, in more ways than one. The

bathroom door gave a little whine as the aged hinges resisted her attempt to close the door soundlessly. She glanced to make sure she hadn't disturbed Chase's fitful slumber. He grunted, but held firm to whatever comfort sleep offered him. Thanking Silvian for that small favor, she finally got the door closed.

Willing to risk the sound of the shower going might wake Chase, Belle turned on the ancient faucet. The oxidized spout hiccupped stale air before something resembling clean water flowed sporadically from it. Dropping her clothes to the floor, she fumbled around on the edge of the tub until she found a bottle of shampoo and a bar of soap the size of a Hershey's miniature. It was small, but right now she would settle for anything that promised clean, even if it looked like it was made for an Oompa Loompa.

Stepping into the shower, Belle shivered as the feel of the cold water rushed over her. The sensation shocked the remnants of exhaustion from her system. That was all well and good, but her freezing body demanded heat. She scrambled to turn the hot water up only to earn lukewarm for her troubles, and the only thing it accomplished was to numb her enough to believe she was awake, but her body screamed different. Wishing for her loofa, Belle grabbed the facecloth from the bar on the back of the shower and hastily worked up a lather before lukewarm went back to arctic.

She rushed and barely managed to finish rinsing out her hair before the hot water played out. Snagging a towel from where it hung outside the shower, Belle dried off and walked over to the sink. She wiped the thin film of condensation from the mirror over it. The face staring back from the streaky glass could have easily been mistaken for hers, but Belle couldn't place the careworn eyes glaring back at her. Her age aside, she didn't feel as old they looked. From the way things were heading, she would end up feeling a helluva lot older before this mess ended.

Tired of the mirror haunting her, Belle turned away. If she stayed in here much longer, the only thing she'd get done would be a whole lot of soul searching, which didn't fit her mood in the least. Life was bad enough without thinking about things that could happen before they happened. Besides, no matter how scary it all felt, Belle knew she had an ace in the hole.

Opening the bathroom door, she found her ace still snoozing blissfully away, his face buried in her pillow. Outside, Belle could see the daylight dwindling. A red halo from the digital clock sitting on the side table flashed five thirty. They'd slept through the night and the entire day. Man, Chase would freak when he woke up. No sense worrying about it now.

Truthfully, she was glad for the rest. Chase definitely needed the time to recover from everything. A few hours here or there wouldn't hurt. Chase had made sure to pick a hotel close to the mansion. A fifteen minute ride would have them on the outskirts of the rolling estate. Maybe another twenty minutes to by-pass the security system to actually get up to the main house. All in all, the whole thing shouldn't take more than an hour. Belle had never been one to look for silver linings, but dammit they could use one right now.

In any case, she couldn't put off waking up Chase for much longer. Her stomach rumbled for something a bit more nourishing than a Little Debbie. Not that she was one to think with her stomach, but she hadn't eaten anything but junk food since before meeting Chase in the bar. Jenny Craig would kill her, if she found out what she'd been eating.

Belle sat on the edge of the bed, all prepared to wake him. Something held her back. The childlike way he cuddled the pillow to his chest, his chin nuzzling it close to his body, set her mind to thoughts best left untouched for the moment. The unplanned cold shower had done little to quiet those dirty thoughts. If she kept on like this, it would end in them not leaving the bed until tomorrow. As a delightful a scenario as that sounded, they had more pressing entrees on

their preverbal plates than a romp in the sack. Belle seriously doubted Chase would oblige her, no matter how tempting she made the offer.

She would like to think when this mess was over, they'd have all the time in the world for moments like this. Staring at him, Belle wished for it with her whole heart, but was realistic enough, in this case, to know the hard painful truth. Hers and Chase's worlds were too far apart. If they pulled this off, she'd be a queen. Queens of the Dual Courts didn't make consorts out of mortals, even ones cursed to immortality.

Morag's assurances aside, the Peoples would never accept him as the Knight of Spring. Her grip on the throne would be tenuous enough without a division in the Shazhium over her choice of consorts. How she wished the old woman could be right, but she couldn't plan her life on the cryptic words of the Witchling. The best thing she could do was enjoy the time they had together. If this was to be her one chance for happiness, she would by the Great Unseen enjoy every second of it and leave the regrets for later.

Belle didn't even realize she was crying until, Chase's finger brushed a tear away from her cheek.

"I know I could use a shower, but I think I'll wait til I get in the bathroom."

"Oh, Chase," she burst into sobs.

His arms shot around her, making it even worse. "Damn, Belle. What's wrong?"

Belle forced herself to stop crying. Being a ninny, wouldn't solve anything. "Nothing, I'm just being silly."

"I don't think so. Something's on your mind, so let's get it out of the way now." She tried to pull away, but he wouldn't let her. His hand closed over his wrist.

"This can't work. Us, I mean." She couldn't look him in the face. If she did, all reason would leave her. Right now, she needed her wits about her to say the lies that would make this easy on them both.

"Like hell it can't! If this is about you being a princess, forget it." Chase sat up, pulling her into him.

Her head dropped. "My people..."

"Can go to hell. This isn't about them. It's about us. I haven't spent thousands of years being alone, to go back to living that way again. As much as I hate to admit it, the Fates have brought us together. That old witch back in the clearing said as much, so give me one reason why we should just chuck it." He turned her face up to his. "Because unless you can sit there and tell me you don't love me, I'm not about to let you tear us apart."

The vehemence in his words, made her believe it was possible to have everything -- including him. Her mind said different, but right now her heart told her to believe him. And for now, she found herself willing to listen to it.

"How can you be so sure?"

His smile went right through her. "Because since you came into my life, the damned ghosts have done everything in their power to bring us together. You try having a hundred damn women controlling your life for an eon or two. If they say we're supposed to be together, I'm not about to tell them we're not. My life is shitty enough without adding that aggravation to it."

A snuffle wobbled her voice, but Belle had to know. "What are they saying now?"

"Nothing, so let's not invite them into this conversation. The only voice I want to hear right now is yours telling me you'll put all this crap out of your mind. What will come, will come. Your duty to your people is to serve them the best you can. That doesn't mean they own

you. You get to pick which direction your life goes." He gently placed a kiss on the end of her nose. "Are we crystal?"

Belle smiled in spite of herself. Maybe they did have a chance, but unlike him she knew the Fates were fickle. Despite what Chase thought, the future belonged to them. The love of two people went beyond their caring. She wanted to believe him for both their sakes, but knew in the end it was beyond hers or Chase's control.

"Crystal," she said, hesitantly.

"Now, that that's settled, what time is it?" Chase shifted as if to get up, but she held him tight against her.

Belle looked over his shoulder at the clock. "A little before six."

"Damn, I slept too long. We don't have much time before we need to head out. I need to touch base with Caern to see if he's come up with anything. He's going to kill me for slacking." Chase let her go and reached for the phone beside the bed.

"Since you're up, I'm going to finish up in the bathroom, then come out here and get dressed," Belle said, untangling herself from him. "Think you can live that long without me?"

Putting down the phone, he gave her a lecherous look. "If you wait a minute, I need to take a shower. You could join me."

"I think that's a very bad idea. Didn't you just say a second ago we needed to get moving?" Belle grinned, loving the way his eyes roamed up her body.

"We do, but I have spots I need help washing." The puppy dog look he gave her, almost made her say yes.

"Then, you need to buy a scrub brush. I promise you when this is over, we can take as many baths together as you want, but you need to rest up a little more before we try water aerobics again," she said playfully.

"You tease," he laughed.

"Yep, now call Caern before he comes busting in here looking for us." She dashed for the door before he could get out a snappy comeback.

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Chase smiled as the door closed behind her. It had been forever since he found himself so at ease with someone. Caern didn't count. Years of fighting at the Dhampyre's side had cemented a bond of brotherhood between them that had been hard won. His feelings for Belle were like a sudden spring rain. It came out of nowhere and all you could do was stand in the middle of the downpour wishing it would never end.

Chase toyed with the phone cord, as he gave that nugget some thought. He'd be lying to himself if he said the thought of losing Belle didn't weigh heavily on his mind. His brave words to the contrary, he truly couldn't be sure they would make this work. One thing was for damn sure, after finally finding her, he wasn't about to give her up without a fight.

Deciding he'd gathered enough wool for the time being, Chase dialed Caern's cell. He prepared himself for the ass chewing Chase knew he'd get from his partner. Honestly he deserved it, but from the way he felt, the rest more than made up for the grief his friend would dish his way. His body still felt the pains of the past two days, but he didn't have any plans to let Belle know it. She'd probably have him in back in bed for the next two days, and not in the way he wanted. After seven rings he decided to leave a voice mail when the message popped up. Caern's voice clicking over saved him the bother.

"This had better be you, buddy," the Dhampyre's voice growled into the receiver.

"I take it you've been looking for me?" Chase eased back in the bed. This was better than he thought it would go. Caern had switched into mother hen mode, not using his usual freaked out mom on prom night voice.

"Damn straight I have! What the hell..." Chase heard his friend pause. "Are you doing at a Motel 6?"

"Needed the rest, man." He squished himself deep into the bank of pillows at his head. "Belle convinced me to crash for the night before going to Gardner's place in the country."

"Would it have killed you to let a brutha know?" Chase heard the tension ease in his buddy's voice.

"Okay, I'd been wrong not to let you know I was shacked up in a cheap motel with another woman, dear. I promise next time, I'll call." He hid the snicker that he was dying to let out.

"Well, while you were shacking up, as you eloquently put it, some of us have been working our asses off." The telltale sound of fingers dancing across a keyboard played in the background

Chase's ear perked up. "You found something?"

"A lot of somethings. Gardner has his fingers in a lot of medical pies. He owns controlling shares in no less than five private hospitals, and partial interest in another six."

"Damn, I was hoping we'd find something without breaking into his place," Chase cursed.

"Hey, I do have a bit of good news. Only three are in the hundred mile radius you said to look for," Caern said.

"Still, I've got a feeling we don't have time to search each one. By now, Gardner must know Corith is out of commission." Chase sat up, no longer comfortable.

"You think he'll try to move Belle's mom?"

"Smart thing to do. Logistically speaking, I think it may take awhile for him to decide where to relocate her," Chase paused to gather his thoughts. "Tonight may be our only chance to get to her before he makes up his mind and does..." He paused again and looked toward the bathroom door. "Something final to fix the situation."

"I'm still trying to get past the firewalls on the three places nearest to us. They're heavily encrypted, and this piece of shit I picked up at Wally World doesn't have the power to get past them. I need my IBM at the office to do this right."

"Bad idea. By now, Gardner has our place staked out a thousand different ways. That reminds me, have you checked in with the office?" Chase listened to Belle bang around in the bathroom through the paper thin walls as he spoke.

"Yeah. After our run in with Corith, I told them to cancel all our appointments until sometime next week, and close up shop. I told Della we'd give her a call when we wanted to open back up. No sense giving the bastards hostages to use as leverage against us."

Chase was glad at least one of them had their head screwed on straight. "How'd she take that?"

"Freaked, but went along with it. She knows better than anyone we're not running a daycare center."

Chase absently scratched his ear. They needed this information, but was it worth the risk in letting Caern go back to Darkside to get it? He decided to leave it up to Caern. It was his ass, after all. "Think it's safe to go back and try the IBM to hack into the system?"

"Not a chance. Della said some strange men were hanging around asking for you, then asked for me when they found out you weren't around. She sent them packing, but doesn't think they went far. She saw a black sedan parked outside the office for most of the day."

"Okay scratch that idea, but keep hitting the keys. Belle and I will head out to Gardner's in about an hour. We're going to stop and get something to eat first. I'll try to pick up a pay as you go phone before we leave, and give you a call."

"You better. While I'm on a mothering you to death roll, you sure you don't want me to send Raiz your way? He's going crazy stuck in the safe house with me. I think he could use some air."

A muted '*Da*' rang out.

Chase thought a minute. The idea of having the big Russian in reserve suddenly sounded like a damn good idea. "Yeah, send him on. When we get to the restaurant, I'll get in touch about where to have him meet us."

"That's right, leave poor Caern sitting on his hands while you three go play hero," Caern grumbled.

"Hey, somebody's got to play Charlie while the Angels are out kicking ass and taking names." Chase laughed out loud this time.

"Kiss my ass, Farrah."

"Sidetrack your nose, Bosley."

"Chase, serious for a moment. Try not to get killed out there tonight."

"Didn't you get the memo? I'm immortal." But, sure the hell didn't feel it at the moment.

"You are, but Belle isn't. Remember that when you decide to go John Wayne tonight," Caern warned, his mother hen showing again.

"Like I'd put her at risk," Chase shot back, hurt that his friend would think him capable of putting her in harm.

"Hey, I know you're into her, but you forget she's just as into you. I saw how she reacted to your macho bullshit last night. That woman ain't going to sit back quietly if your butt gets in the ringer." Chase detected a hint of real concern in his friend's voice.

"You like her, don't you?"

"Yeah, I do. She's good for you, Man. We've been buds for a helluva long time. This is the first time I've seen you act like a human being, instead of a fucking robot. If she can do that in two days, she's got my vote for woman of the year."

"Well, does he like her or not?" Belle's voice startled him.

Chase looked up to see her coming out of the bathroom door. She still had a towel wrapped around her head, making her look like a hotter than hell Marge Simpson, especially with the towel she had saronged around the rest of her. His mouth went dry thinking of all the things that they could be doing, if time allowed them the chance. One good thing about it, the sight of her helped him drown out the sound of Caern harping in his ear.

"Got to go, buddy. Talk to you in a few," Chase said absently into the phone.

"Damn, if she looks that good, maybe you better make it a couple hours," Caern joked.

"Even that wouldn't be enough time," Chase said, breathless from the sight of her.

"Then you better remember what I said and take care tonight," Caern said before clicking off.

"So, did they find anything?" Belle asked, shaking her hair out of the towel, nearly striking him deaf and dumb.



"Yeah, a few leads, but we still need to check out Gardner's place. The files were too heavily guarded for Caern to get past. We're going to have to do this the hard--"

She dropped the towel covering her, and the words he wanted to say escaped him. She was a goddess. The pale light from the small lamp beside the bed played across her body, giving her the appearance of a fifties pinup girl as she dressed, and he went hard beneath the thin sheet. Chase wanted nothing more than to take Caern's advice, and spend the next two hours enjoying the mysteries of her body. He could become so lost in her that two hours would rapidly turn into two days. She caught the look on his face, and gave him a big smile as she clasped her bra. He shifted in the bed, trying his best to hide the erection beneath the sheet.

"Penny for your thoughts," she said.

"I don't think you'd want to know what I'm thinking," he growled.

"From the looks of that sheet, I know exactly what you're thinking." She continued to dress, which was the last thing he wanted her to do.

"Then, why don't you stop dressing and join me under this sheet?" Chase patted the bed beside him.

"Because, as you pointed out earlier, we need to get moving. Now get your lazy butt up and go take a shower, stinky boy," she ordered, throwing a fallen pillow at him.

He patted it away and laughed. "I do not stink!"

"Yes, you do. You smell so bad I'm beginning to think I should have finished burying you the other night." She pinched her nose and pointed toward the bathroom.

"I thought you loved me, smelly ass and all?" he asked swinging his legs off the side of the bed.

Belle shot him a devilish wink. "Think of this as tough love."

Chase smiled as he obediently followed the line of her finger toward the bathroom. He was nearly there when the snap of a towel stopped him dead in his tracks. The corner of the towel struck him square in his left butt cheek.

"Hey, that hurt!" he howled.

"It was supposed to," she cackled.

"What did you do it for then?" he rubbed the tender spot, giving her a pained look.

"For making me actually consider your idea." She let out a laugh.

"You're a hard woman, Belle Gardner." He flinched as she twisted the towel for another shot.

"And don't you forget it." She reared the towel back. "Shower, big boy."

"I'm going." He dashed for the door, as she let fly with the towel.

Chase closed the door just in time. The towel sounded like a gunshot as it connected with the wall outside. He fell back against the door, laughing his ass off. Just when he thought he knew her, she came up with something that totally threw him for a loop. He got the feeling the next hundred years wouldn't be enough time to plumb the depths of her mysteries. But what fun it'd be to try.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

The place looked worse than a dive, but the food tasted like heaven and that was just what they needed to recharge their batteries. With a name like the Waffle Shack, Chase couldn't resist. Nothing said energy like a tall stack, syrup, sausages and a pound and a half of greasy hash browns. He'd already finished his plate, while Belle toyed with the new cell phone they'd picked up at the convenience store down the block. As he twirled his fork through the barren swamp of syrup covering his plate, he wondered if she'd mind giving with her sausage.

Finally the sight of it got the better of him. "You going to eat that?"

"Yeah, I was planning on it," Belle looked up from the phone. "Wasn't all that enough?"

Chase glanced sheepishly toward his empty plate. "What can I say? Waffles do a body good."

"Is that how you explain all those rippling muscles?" She put the phone down and gave him a dirty look.

"Pleading the fifth." Chase grinned.

"Go ahead, eat up. I'm only good for one anyway." She pushed the plate toward him. "But don't touch the sausage."

He gave her a mock salute. "Ma'am, yes, ma'am."

"Eat up, soldier. I'm going to the pay phone by the bathroom and activate this one." She grabbed the cell and made to get up, then stopped. "And I meant it about the sausage. If I see one bite missing, I'm cutting you."

Chase watched her go, wondering what he did to deserve to feel this good. It sure wasn't something he remembered. That was for damn sure. Stabbing a fork full of waffle into his mouth, he looked out the window. A dusting of snow filled the sky. Chase found it more than a little weird that the parking lot already had a fine white mist covering it.

Chase found the sudden snowstorm strange, but not out of the realm of possibility. Late October had been known to have the odd winter storm from time to time. He'd checked the Weather Channel before leaving the motel and hadn't seen snow mentioned -- not that meteorologists were known for their accuracy. Still, he found it disturbing.

The storm would put a crimp in their plans, but it wasn't like they could call a rain delay. They'd have to deal with it. In fact, the more he thought about it, the unexpected snow may be a blessing in disguise. The white stuff would blind any surveillance cameras they happened upon. Chase wasn't sure if Gardner had motion detectors, but it would help with those as well. All in all, things were definitely looking up.

He was about to take an illegal sausage to celebrate, when a shadow crossed over him. Chase looked up to see the palest man he'd ever seen standing over him. Suddenly it all clicked into place. Winter had come to the Waffle Shack.

"Mind stepping back, asshole. You're putting ice cubes in my coffee," Chase said shoveling a hunk of waffle in his mouth.

"My queen wishes to have words with you," the albino said, white smoke coming from his mouth.

"Kylanndria is here?" Chase took another bite, sizing the man -- if he truly was a man -- up.

The man tilted his head toward the window. "The grand mistress of Winter is outside in the parking lot."

Chase couldn't help himself. He busted out laughing. It was all too rich.

"What is so funny, mortal?" The albino scratched his head. Chase could see the confusion playing across the man's face.

"I guess you didn't get the memo," Chase sat back, folding his arms behind his head.

"What be this memo you speak of?"

"That you should never, and I mean never," Chase paused, slipping his fingers under the plate, "bring yo bitch to the Waffle Shack."

Before the man could react, Chase slammed the plate into his face. The cheap porcelain cracked into two pieces against the bridge of the man's nose, sending a spray of black blood into the air. Not willing to lose the element of surprise, Chase leapt from the booth. He landed a wicked right hook under the albino's chin, sending him staggering back into table behind them. The flimsy bit of particle board shattered under his weight, showering the room with flying debris.

The man tried to rise from the ruins, but Chase slammed him back down with the heel of his boot. He let out a wet sounding gurgle as Chase pressed his boot deeper into his chest. Eyes the color of ice bulged from the albino's face, as oxygen ceased to flow into his lungs. Chase eased his boot off enough to relieve the pressure on the man's diaphragm. He didn't want the man dead quite yet. He just wanted to make a statement that Kylanndria couldn't ignore.

"I'm going to take my foot off your chest, but first me and you are coming to a little understanding." Chase waited until the man nodded his head. "We're going to see your mistress, but you try to bully me again, I won't be so nice about explaining myself. Got me?"

"Yes," the albino gasped.

"Another thing. You got any cash on you?"

"I do."

"Then pay the man for the mess you made of this fine establishment. You can pay for my meal, too." Chase dug his heel back into the man's chest until he fumbled his wallet from the back pocket of his slacks, and tossed a wad of cash on the floor. "Don't forget the tip."

The albino reluctantly added a twenty to the pile of cash.

"Glad to see you know I'm a big tipper." Chase looked up to see Belle standing in the walkway leading to the bathrooms. He motioned for her to stay out of sight. "Now, go wait by the door. I'll be there in a second."

Chase removed his foot and the man scampered across the floor to wait by the door. Chase hesitated to make a move toward Belle, but knew if he didn't, she'd come to him. Figuring Kylanndria probably already knew he had Belle with him, Chase walked over to her, keeping a wary eye on the albino who was doing his best to stop the blood flowing from his smashed nose.

"Found someone to share my waffles with, I see," Belle said when he reached her.

"You wouldn't believe how hungry he was." Chase straightened his shirt, looking blasé about the whole thing so she wouldn't worry. He already had that covered enough for the both of them.

"I can tell." A frown crossed her brow.

"We got a situation. Kylanndria is in the parking lot."

"Thought the guy by the door looked familiar." Belle glanced past him. "His name is Aduian, her second in command."

"Well, I met her first in command two nights ago. Glad he kept his ass at home. This guy's a pushover compared to him."

"So, what're we going to do?" She peeked over his shoulder with a worried look on her face.

"Go have a nice chat with queenie. Tell her to kiss our asses. Then go along with the plan just like we worked it out." Sounded simple enough, and Chase found simplicity always worked best.

"Good thing I got the phone online." She smiled weakly. "By the way, I called Caern while I was back there. Raiz is a few minutes away."

"You're the best, babe." He bent down and gave her a peck on the cheek.

She pinched him on the nipple.

"Oww...What was that for?" He jerked back, rubbing his tender nub.

She pointed to the pile of food on the floor. "For throwing my sausage on the floor."

"Well, next time I'll let him kick my ass," he groaned.

"Oh you can hit him with my plate, just remember to take the sausage off first," she paused. "Next time!"

"Will do." He slipped his hand around hers, and gave a squeeze. "So, you ready to get this over with?"

"Might as well. Too damn late to run out the back door." Pulling free of his grip, she took off leaving Chase to stare after her.

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The cold slammed into her as soon as Belle walked through the door. Swirling clouds of snow danced around her. The air was alive with the malignant scent of the Winter Court. The taste of black ice burned her tongue when she opened her mouth to draw in a frigid breath. She coughed out a blast of white mist. Even though the power of Winter seeped into her bones draining her slightly, Belle forced her feet forward. She'd be damned if she would show an ounce of fear in front of Kylanndria.

Belle had never been this close to the Queen of her sister court. She wondered idly if her presence had a similar affect on Kylanndria. From the way the storm intensified as she walked, she doubted it. Perhaps if she had her mother's powers, this might be an even match. The reassuring feel of Chase at her side sent a jolt of heat running through her. Instantly, the cold dissipated. A warm steady glow enveloped her, creating a foggy halo in the air surrounding them as they walked forward.

They hadn't walked more than a hundred feet, when the snow cleared. Winter's Queen waited for them at the edge of the parking lot. She was clothed in a white sheer robe, revealing slightly more than Belle thought decent. She took in the sight with disgust. An instant dislike swelled in her heart for the woman. Belle wished she could attribute the feeling to the instinctual dislike between the courts, but knew in her heart the real reason. This was the woman who had tried her damndest to kill Chase, and for that the bitch would pay.

"Mr. Michaels, what a pleasure to see you again," Kylanndria cooed. "And it seems you have located the missing Ms. Gardner."

"Let's cut the bullshit. What do you want?" Belle hissed through gritted teeth.

"I see the heir of Summer lacks the diplomacy her mother is known for." Kylanndria brought a finger up to her lips. "Perhaps, the heir should learn to curb her tongue when dealing with her betters."

"I see no reason to be diplomatic at this point. Attempting to kill my chosen has invalidated the rules of diplomacy between us," Belle stated.

"If I overstepped my bounds as Winter's Queen, I apologize." Kylanndria bowed her head. "But Mr. Michaels did not enlighten me to that fact while a guest in my home. If he had, my hospitality would have been much gentler"

"So is it Winter's policy to torture guests under its roof?" Belle shot back.

"It has ever been Winter's policy to do as it pleased. Perhaps you should remember that, little princess. The game of thrones is a harsh enterprise for the uninitiated. Your mother should have taught you the lesson before you attempted to play." Kylanndria raised her head, revealing a smile colder than the air surrounding them.

Belle matched her smile with one of her own. "A game is best played by the young, who are still in their prime. It has ever been the strongest who wins. Perhaps that is a lesson *you've* forgotten as the years have gained on you."

"Touché." Kylanndria straightened to her full height.

"You wanted this parlay. I tire of this word play. State your business, so that we may be done with it," Belle snapped.

"But, I just sought to make sure you were safe, child. Winter cares much for its sister court. I tried to explain as much to Mr. Michaels, but alas he thought rudeness was the way to appease my fears." She gave Chase a nod, laced with a vindictive stare.

Belle moved in front of him. "As you can see, I am the picture of health. You may go back to your seat of power secure in that knowledge."

"But, how can I be assured such will continue to be the case. The mortal world is fraught with many dangers. I would be remiss if I left you unguarded." Belle couldn't help but note the implied threat behind Kylanndria's statement.

"Again, your fears are unwarranted." She gestured toward Chase. "Chase is more than adequate to see to my safety."

"So you say, but still--"

Belle cut her off. "Do you now seek to usurp Summer's right to chose its own guardians?"

"Never, my dear." The Queen of Winter waved her hand. "As I said, your safety is my only concern."

"Then concern yourself no longer." Belle turned to Chase. "Come on, this meeting is at an end."

"Mr. Michaels before you scurry after her." Belle stopped to see what the witch had on her mind. "Guard her well. I would hate to think about anything happening to her while she is in your care."

"Better make it plain to those under your rule, that should anything happen to Belle, I will make it my personal mission to find the person responsible. Even if it means slaying everyone in my path until I get to the one I'm looking for. No matter how far up the chain of command I have to go." Belle knew, by the grim expression on his face, he was deadly serious.

"I will be sure to pass that along to my subjects, but I think you will find, the threat comes not from mine, but hers," Kylanndria answered.

Chase smiled in a way that made Belle shiver. "I'm a thorough man. Who knows what I'll do just to make sure I have the right person?"

"I don't accept threats idly," Kylanndria said.

"Then it's a good thing I don't make threats. I find statements of fact are much more effective," Chase answered, his face as cold as hard as the one on Winter's own.

Belle watched the exchange with growing apprehension. Kylanndria wasn't liable to do anything here in the open where a group of mortals could see her. The snow storm raging around them was ample proof of that. It didn't mean the queen would likely restrain herself for much longer. The sight of Raiz pulling up gave her the opportunity to end this before it escalated into an all out battle.

"Chase." Belle motioned toward the black Hummer.

He followed her hand and nodded.

"Kylanndria, until we meet again," Belle said, offering the woman a bow of her head.

"Bellaronia, I look forward to it." Winter nodded her own head before disappearing along with her second in command.

The storm remained behind. Belle knew Kylanndria had left it as a parting gift to tell them just how strong her powers were and how far they reached; a cheap trick, but a highly effective one. Taking one last look into the billowing snow, Belle turned to follow Chase as he waded through the growing drifts to where Raiz had parked.

By the time she reached them, the two men were in a huddled conversation by the SUV's open door. Normally, Belle would have hung back letting the men have their male bonding, but since she was more than likely the object of their talk, saw no reason to be left out of the loop.

"So, what's up, Raiz?" Belle squeezed between the two, seeking a little of the warmth blowing from inside the SUV.

"I should be asking you that." Belle did a double take when she saw the hint of a smile on his face. "Next time you decide to throw a party, I'll be sure to arrive before the other guests leave."

"Believe me. You wouldn't have liked the crowd." Belle jabbed the man in the ribs. "They were a bunch of assholes."

"*Da*, I could tell." Belle couldn't be certain, but it looked like the Russian actually wanted to smile.

"Not to kill the jovial mood, but times wasting," Chase interrupted.

"Party pooper." Belle poked him in the arm.

"Chase, she is right. You are a pooper to the party." Raiz let out a growling laugh.

"Yuk it up, but I want to use this snow to give us cover while we break into Gardner's place. I'm not sure how long it'll last, so can we get a move on?" Chase grumbled.

Belle was about to make a snide comment, but the look on his face stopped her. The big lug was worried about her. Honestly, Belle couldn't blame him. Kylanndria popping up had been the last thing she expected. The complications in her life just kept mounting. Chase was right, though. They needed to get moving. She had a sneaking feeling they didn't have much time before Gardner made a move, or Kylanndria decided to put in another appearance.

"So, what's the plan, boss man?" she asked.

"Raiz, you up to playing chauffeur?" The Russian nodded. "For now that's all I got."

"Hope you got a plan B," Belle said.

"Yeah, it's the same as plan A -- don't get killed."

## Chapter Twenty-Three

Chase looked through the Hummer's tinted window, trying his best to make out anything through the driving snow. The country road was dark enough without the winter weather cutting the visibility down to jack crap. If Chase considered himself the least bit superstitious, he'd call the whole thing a bad omen and pack it in. If the situation had been different, he just might have been tempted to do just that. But, one look at Belle told him running away was out of the question, not that he would have, anyway. He hated to back down from a good fight.

Belle tapped Raiz on the shoulder, indicating he could pull over just up ahead. Chase followed the line her finger drew in the dim light. A small clearing opened up in the line of trees guarding the side of the road. At first he thought it would end up being a turn off to another one of the graveled roads they'd passed for the past half hour. Instead it led to an opening that led to a transformer box that fed power into the grounds. It didn't look like something Con Ed would have in place. The thing looked more like a souped up generator. Raiz brought the Hummer to a bumpy stop beside it. From their vantage point where the Russian had parked, they were far enough from the road they were almost invisible in the gloom.

"So, this is it." Chase waited for Raiz to kill the engine before speaking. The line wasn't original but in light of what they were about to do, he didn't think anyone would call him on it.

"Comrade, I hope your plan is better than your snappy one-liners." Raiz snorted.

"I doubt it, but since Gardner isn't likely to just hand over Belle's mother, we're going through with what I got."

"Which is?" Belle joined in.

"Simplicity itself, my love." He gestured toward the blackened tree line. "You know the layout of the place, so you and I will sneak in while Raiz stays with the Hummer, in case we need to make a quick getaway."

"What do we do if John has a small army running around at his beck and call?" Leave it to her to bring up the down side to his plan.

Chase had already considered the possibility, and hadn't come up with anything yet. He wasn't about to let her know that, though. "I'll deal with it while you haul ass back to Raiz."

"You're nuts. I'm not about to leave you in there." He could tell she meant it, too.

"Then you're not going to begin with." Chase had been afraid it would come to this. That's why he didn't say anything back at the restaurant.

"And how do you plan to stop me?" The defiant expression on her face made him feel guilty as hell for what he was about to do, but it would be for her own good.

"Raiz."

The Russian reached around and wrapped Belle up like a bear hug. "See, little one. You must stay with me now."

"Chase!" Belle howled, struggling to free herself.

"Sorry, babe. My plan, my rules."

"Okay, I'll leave when you tell me to," she sighed, but he didn't quite believe she'd give in that easily.

"I wish I could believe you. Before I let Raiz turn you loose, I want to explain why it's so important for you to run." Chase paused long enough to make sure she was listening. "Chances

are pretty good we can get in and find out where he's keeping your mom, but it's the getting back out I'm worried about."

Tears sprouted at the corners of her eyes. "That's why you need me to stay with you."

"No, that's why I need you to go." He flicked away the tears as he cupped her face. "I need you to get to Raiz. He'll make sure you hook up with Caern. While I misdirect Gardner, the three of you can free your mom. Once you get your mom to safety, then you can worry about getting my ass out of the sling."

"I just did my best to get you back. You can't expect me to willingly lose you again," her voice went all soft and mushy, and Chase knew he was in trouble.

"Belle, I'm not about to die on you. Are we crystal?" He stroked her cheek. "Raiz, let her go."

"That's damn easy for you say. From this side of the relationship, it's a little harder to accept." She held up her finger, stopping Chase before he could speak. "Don't pull the immortal thing on me, either. Kylanndria got to you. What's to say John can't as well?"

"Because, you've given me something to live for. Not just exist, but actually live." He held her face inches from his. "Remember that."

"And you remember one thing, mister. You get yourself killed, I'm going to make Morag bring you back just so I can kick your butt." Belle kissed him on his nose. "Crystal?"

"Clear, baby." Her face was so close to his he had no trouble capturing her lips for a quick kiss.

"Do that again I may puke," Raiz grumbled from the front seat. "Can you please get out of my truck and do this? If not, I'm going back to the motel with Caern."

Chase nodded. They'd wasted enough time. The snow now came in slowing spurts. The wintery blast wouldn't last for much longer. Kylanndria's freak storm must have reached the limit of its power. Chase opened the truck door, instantly shivering as the blistering air slammed into him. Belle and Raiz exited on the other side. While she rummaged in the back seat for a jacket, the Russian walked around the front of the truck.

"My friend, I do not like this. You are leaving too much to chance. Allow me to come with you," Raiz said when he reached him.

"Thanks for the offer, but I need you here," Chase answered.

"Caern said you would say that, but I had to try." Raiz dug in his pocket and pulled out a walkie-talkie. "He said to tell you these work on a secure network. More reliable than a cell phone. No one but him can decode the signal."

Raiz handed it to him. "Thanks."

"Don't thank me." The Russian clamped a hand on Chase's shoulder. "Just make sure you come back to thank Caern."

"Will do." Chase smiled and pocketed the walkie-talkie.

"You need me, call. I'll be there before you know it."

"Thanks for doing this, Raiz." He clasped the man by the shoulder. "You don't owe me this. Whatever you owed me was paid a long time ago."

The Russian squeezed Chase's shoulder. "Friends do not owe each other. I do this because you would do the same for me."

Chase nodded. He didn't need to say anything to the man. Raiz had said it all. It was true. Chase would walk through hell for the man. Aside from Caern, there was no one he'd rather have at his back.

"We ready?" Belle asked as she walked around to join them.



"As ready as we're going to get," Chase said, hoping he sounded more optimistic than he felt. In the immortal words of Han Solo, he had a very bad feeling about this.

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John looked across the grounds from the warmth of his study. The creeping mounds of snow set his teeth on edge. He could smell Winter all over the place. That bitch Kylanndria was overstepping her bounds. The possibility the woman had somehow discovered his plans danced around the edge of his growing paranoia. Corith, while totally in the dark about Gardner's true intent, wasn't above telling tales out of school, if he saw a benefit toward him in doing so. It would be just like the man to tell the Winter Queen all about his stepdaughter's disappearance.

All he would need was for Kylanndria to show up to question him about the situation. Gardner found himself sorely tempted to contact her just to prevent that scenario from occurring. The fact his front lawn lay covered in an early snow told him the bitch had to be up to something. No, he would keep to himself for the time being. Knowing Kylanndria, this could simply be another one of the woman's mind games.

There could be no way she knew about the Nespharillium's arrival, or more importantly his deal with them. The witch had him jumping at shadows, nothing more. He was not a man who would normally let himself become a prisoner to his fears, yet Gardner couldn't deny the edge it gave him.

He would need his wits about him very soon. The Grand Vysion of Dræwl would be with his court at any moment, along with the Heart of Darqueverness. The epoch of his entire existence would soon come to be. Kylanndria, Corith, not even Belle could stop it from taking place. This was to be his time.

Looking away from the window, Gardner felt the disturbance in the planes marking the arrival of the Nespharillium. Gardner walked from the room, heading toward the solarium where he'd made preparations for his guests. Each step made his skin tingle with the raw power rising from the transition of the dark ones. From the electricity burning the air, he knew the monks would soon break through the barrier. He quickened his stride, closing the distance to the solarium's double doors.

Throwing open the doors, the energy flux of the gateway opening reached terminal. Gardner shielded his eyes from the glaring light flowing from the widening rip in the fabric of space, slashing the room in twain. He opened his eyes, and black swirls flowed across his vision. Three shapes materialize into the room from the radiance emanating from the rip.

Gardner did his best not to gasp as the lead figure reached him. The Grand Vysion was a hunched mockery of a man. Covered in a hooded robe the color of dried blood, the monk seemed to float across the floor. The sleeves of the robe engulfed the Vysion's hands as he held them before him. In fact, John could not see one inch of the dark Fae's desiccated flesh, with the exception of a lone bloodshot eye glowing from the darkness of the hood.

"Well met, Acolyte J'hanous." The sound of the monk's voice was a grating whisper cutting across John's soul.

John bowed at the knee. "And well met to you, Lord Vysion."

"Rise, the time for greetings is past. Let us move on to the reason for this meeting. This world smells, and I would be free of its stench with all due haste." The Vysion moved past him toward the picture windows overlooking the garden bordering the back of the house. "I sense your sister court nearby."

"Rest assured, she is none the wiser concerning our agreement." Gardner moved around to the monk's side.

"There is no agreement as of yet. We are simply here to discern if such an alliance will benefit the will of our lord and master." The single eye glared at him from the darkness.

"But I thought we had already--"

The Grand Vysion held up a grey gnarled finger stopping John. "It is not your place to think. You are still the man-child who groveled at my feet lo those many years ago. Dræwl has yet to communicate to his humble servant the course he wishes us to follow."

"I did not mean to presume." Anger fumbled behind his eyes, but he kept it in check. Gardner knew one misstep would end all his carefully laid plans.

"Ah, but you did. Your pride has always been your undoing. You think you are the instrument of Dræwl's will." The monk stared John straight in the eye. "But that remains to be seen."

"Yes, Lord Vysion." Gardner bowed, gritting his teeth.

"Good, subjugation is the way to knowledge and knowledge is the path to power." Vysion turned from Gardner, and snapped orders to the others with him. "Communicate to the Hectorium, I wish a small party to come through the barrier and set up a guard around the dwelling for the duration of our visit."

John flinched at the mention of the warrior elite of the Nespharillium. They were born fighters, breed to do one thing -- kill. He watched, powerless to stop them, as they appeared. They wore the elaborate black armor that was their trademark. Vicious spikes ran from the shoulders down the gauntlets. Faceplates on their helmets hid their visages, for which Gardner was eternally grateful. During his time with his dark cousins, he'd heard horror stories about them. The last thing he wanted was to actually come face to face with one of the dreaded men.

The clank of armor and weapons filled the room as the last of the warriors passed through the gateway. Gardner counted ten warriors in all, with a troop commander receiving his orders from Vysion off to the side, as his men continued to come through the breach. With a snap to attention, the soldiers came to a stop and awaited their lord's command. Their leader bowed to Vysion and returned to his men. As one, they went forward to do the will of their master.

As John watched them leave the solarium and enter the rest of the mansion, he suddenly felt sorry for whoever had the misfortune to run into Vysion's troops. He knew without a doubt, it would be a mistake the poor souls wouldn't get the chance to make a second time.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Belle was freezing. The warmth she'd been able to tap into earlier had slowly leached away, leaving her frozen to her very soul. Right now, visions of hot chocolate with a shot of something stronger to make this seem like nothing more than a bad dream danced around in her head. When the snow turned into a freezing drizzle that did its best to soak her to the bone, Belle added a long hot soak into her playlist. The fact Chase didn't seem to be taking much notice of their dousing didn't improve her mood one bit. No matter how hard she tried to follow his example, she couldn't. Cold she could take. Wet she could manage, as long as a pool or hot tub was involved, but both at once amounted to more than she could handle.

Belle spotted the line of statuary that marked the beginning of the residential area of the estate. By her reckoning, they were nearly to the outbuildings that made up the guest quarters. Letting out a sigh of relief, she motioned for Chase to stop before they reached the first of the Greco-Roman statues. As far as she knew, the tiny condos should be empty. John didn't like to have people around, especially when things weren't going his way. The buildings were holdovers from when her father had been alive and the estate had been alive with the love her parents shared. Seeing the row of houses dark and empty sent a wave of sadness through her. Chase gave her hand a squeeze and she looked over to see him watching her with such love, Belle felt a glimmer of hope that the promise of those days lived inside his eyes. Once again, he'd become her hero.

Since that sentiment pretty much summed up the past two days, Belle allowed herself to actually believe they would make it through this mess alive. In any case, until they got past the outbuildings they should be safe. For the time being, at least. Crouching at the edge of the trees, Belle got an idea from the boxy dark shapes. She knew they were in a hurry, but a moment or two out of this cold ass rain wouldn't hurt. Besides, it wouldn't do for them to track wet footprints through the house, when they were supposed to be trying their best not to get noticed. Anything to get them out of this freezing weather. She pointed to the closest of the buildings, motioning for him to follow her.

She decided not to give him a chance to say no. Belle sprinted for the overhang blocking the door from the worst of the snow, which had turned into a miserable rainy downpour. Belle tried the knob only to find it locked, not that she expected the welcome mat to be out. John's paranoia wasn't about to let him leave anything not securely battened down. Well, that blew her dreams of getting out of the weather. On the other hand, thanks to the overhang, they weren't standing in the middle of it, either.

"How much further until we reach the main house?" Chase asked as he settled in beside her.

"Another hundred yards, just past that last bungalow." Belle pointed to their left to a blackened square.

"Good, then we can afford to take a little break." His words were a dream come true.

Belle eased down to the concrete threshold. The narrow strip had remained thankfully dry in spite of the driving rain soaking the world outside. She settled her back against the brick-faced wall, trying not to focus on the way her underwear squished every time she moved.

"Are you sure about this? Knowing John, he's probably got the information locked up in that hard head of his," Belle said as she stared into the gloom.

"If you want to find your mom, it's a chance we've got to take. Caern is coming up blank on his end." Chase took her hand, using his thumb to stroke the tender flesh of her palm. "I wouldn't ask you to do this if there were another way."

"I know that," she said, relishing the warmth of his touch.

Belle was about to say more when a blast of radiance shot from the main house, lighting up the entire grounds. Chase pulled her into the shadows. Looking back toward the house, she saw the light had dimmed, but still cast a bright shadow from somewhere up at the house. From the direction, the light looked to be coming from the solarium. Only the sun room had enough windows to allow that much light out onto the grounds. What the hell had John been up to?"

"Come on, Belle. We've got to get somewhere out of this light." Chase didn't give her time to think. He grabbed her arm and pulled her around to the side of the bungalow. He didn't stop until they were once again clothed in darkness. "You got any idea what that was all about?"

"Not a clue," Belle said, gasping from the short run.

"Does he have any powers?" Chase scrunched up his face. "You know, Fae magic or something?"

"No, only members of royalty have them. John married into the family. He isn't officially of royal blood. Do you think Corith is back?" The idea didn't sit well with her.

"I don't think his powers run in that direction." Belle could barely make out Chase in the darkness as he rubbed his chin. "This is something different."

"Okay, let's get out of here. I've got a funny feeling about this." Belle looked back toward the house.

"Not a chance." Chase smiled. "Call me curious, but I'm going to find out what he's up to."

"That's suicidal! Curious doesn't even fit into the equation. Chase, it's too risky. I don't know what John has gotten himself into, but my gut tells me it isn't something to make me sleep well at night." She was talking some major power at play, and last time she checked, John didn't have it. That could only mean something a whole lot scarier than him had suddenly popped into the picture. Belle actually felt afraid for the first time since this whole thing started.

"Change in plans." Shifting around, Chase put a hand against her cheek. "Remember back at the car?" Belle nodded, not liking what his voice hesitated to say. "Well, I want you to hightail it back to Raiz. I'll go in and find out what the deal is."

"No way." Instantly regretting it, she slammed the tip of her finger against his rock hard chest and got a broken nail for her trouble. "You go in. I go in. We still need to find out where he's hidden my mother."

"I'll grab his computer on my way out. More than likely, he has the information saved on his hard drive. Caern can dig it out when we get back."

He made a move to get up, but she wouldn't let him get away so easily. Belle grabbed him by the back of his shirt and pulled him back to her. "Not so fast. I said I'd go back if things got hairy. They're not even close yet."

"But--"

"But nothing. You still need me to get you inside the house. John can barely program the microwave to cook popcorn, so I know he hasn't changed the password on the security system." A password she wouldn't give him unless he agreed to let her go with him. A bit bitchy, she knew, but he wanted to play tough guy. Well, she could match him Eastwood for Eastwood.

"Then give it to me, and go back to the truck."

"Not on your life. Besides, the code won't work without a retina scan from yours truly. John is a total dick about security. He saw CSI one night, and hasn't trusted security codes ever since. So you need the code and a member of the family to get inside the house." Take that and choke on it.

Chase ruffled his wet hair. Instantly, Belle knew she had him over a barrel. "Okay, but the minute I say jump, you haul ass."

"Deal." She stuck out her hand with a huge grin on her face.

He took it but pulled her in for a stiff kiss. "Mom always said you swapped spit to seal a deal."

"Good thing you weren't a Boy Scout. They would have kicked your ass out after the first meeting." The warmth once again coursing through her, she wished they had time for another one.

He turned his head back toward the house. "They didn't have Boy Scouts back in Alexander's Legion, and I doubt they would have lasted long if they did."

"Ew... TMI." Belle clamped her hand over the laugh bubbling up from her throat.

"You had to be there." Chase shrugged. "Can we get back on subject? Let's get in there, before something else happens."

Belle nodded. They'd wasted enough time already. Honestly, she was just as interested in what her stepfather was up to in there. If she thought Chase's pace had been slow getting this far into the estate, it was nothing compared to how slow he led her through the inner grounds. They were positively creeping. She was about to tell me to get the drag out, when he threw his hand up for them to stop.

Moving even with him, she peered into the rain and darkness. Chase gently guided her face until she caught what he was looking at. Two figures were off to their left about thirty yards in front of them. Chase pulled her down behind a rose bush that looked in serious need for Spring to return.

"Any idea who they are?" he hissed.

"No, but it's too dark for me to make them out." Belle shrugged, squinting to see if she could get a better look.

"I caught a good look at them when they walked in front of the windows. They're in heavy armor. I mean real armor. Plate mail from the looks of it. You can't make them out because the armor is black. They're blending in with the night so perfectly, I barely caught them."

"Strange. None of the Fae would wear black armor. It's a sign of the Nespharillium," she explained trying to get a look in spite of the darkness.

Chase leaned forward and peered into the night. "The what?"

"Nespharillium. They're what you'd call our darker cousins. Supposedly, they're a myth," Belle said, but she began to wonder. John's past had always been a bit mysterious. Her father had never mentioned him until the day he showed up at the door when she had been a child.

"So they're like what? Dark Elves like in that game where you sit around and throw dice or whatever." He eased back into a crouch.

"If the tales are believed true, they're evil incarnate. You know all those Grimm's Fairy Tales about elves doing all sort of evil crap? Well, they're based on the Nespharillium." She shivered just thinking about it.

"Shit. I guess they are magical powerhouses." Chase rubbed his jaw.

"No, according to legend only the monks of Dráwl contain any magical ability." She thought about it for a minute. Dammit, everything pointed to John aligning himself to their dark cousins. "If that was the case, we're in even bigger trouble than we thought. Because, if he is in league with the Nespharilliüm, those guys are probably members of the Hektorium, or the warrior caste."

Chase's attention kept turning back to the house. "What do you know about them?"

"Not much, like I said, we believed them to be a myth. I'm not even sure that's what we're dealing with. John could have his men dressed up that way for the fear factor." Belle paused, as she thought about it. "But, I don't think so. The People have long memories. The war between the Shazhium and Nespharilliüm had been one of the defining moments in our history. I can't think of one of my people who would willingly don the armor of our worst enemy."

"Then, you step-daddy has more up his sleeve than taking over the Summer Court," Chase voiced the thought she'd been repressing.

But, Belle thought they might both be right. If word got out that John was in league with the dark ones, nothing could get the Shazhium to accept him as the Knight of Spring. He would become an outcast and not even his power over her mother would change that.

"Look, babe. Things just got hairy."

She knew he was telling the truth, but hated the thought of leaving him alone. "But you need me to get inside."

"And you can help me get in." Concern etching his face, he turned to her. "But as soon as that door's open, you're out of here. We crystal?"

"Yep," she said, reluctantly. She hated to admit it, but if the dark ones were on this plane, the Shazhium needed to know. The fact Chase would be left alone was the only thing that gave her pause.

"Okay, I've studied those two long enough." He pointed toward the darkness lining the house. "They seem to be making a circuit of the grounds on this side of the house. I'm hoping that means there's only a pair for each side of the house. That makes eight in all. Maybe more, if he's got them inside the house, too."

"So, what are we going to do?" She didn't like those odds, especially if Chase would be facing most of them on his own.

"While we've sat here, I've been watching. It takes them about fifteen minutes to make the whole circuit from the time they hit the light. We can make it to the back door in maybe five minutes if we run. That gives us two minutes to get the door open, so you can dash back here before they come back. Don't get anxious. I want you to wait another fifteen minutes then get back to Raiz. ASAP." Chase ran his thumb over her bottom lip. "Crystal?"

"Okay." She was glad for the darkness. If Chase could see her face he would know exactly what she had on her mind, drag her back to the Russian himself, and just go in guns blazing.

As if reading her thoughts, Chase pulled the walkie-talkie out of his pocket. "I'm going to risk giving him a call. I want him ready to come in, if you're not back inside an hour. I'm going back to the corner of the building so those two don't hear me. You wait here and keep an eye on that window. If they deviate from the fifteen minute thing, you tell me when I get back."

"Then what?" Hoping he'd say they'd both leave would be too much to wish for.

"I honestly don't know. We'll figure it out when I get back." He gave her a quick peck on the end of her nose before scampering away, leaving her all alone in the pouring rain.

Belle kept her attention glued to the deep shadows surrounding the house. She counted the minutes until the warriors were supposed to reappear in front of the windows of the solarium. The seconds dragged on in her mind. Just when she thought they weren't going to make it back, a blur crossed over the lighted expanse. First one, then two figures came to a rest in front of the window. They remained in place for a full two minutes before starting their trek around the house again.

Her attention so intent on the two warriors, she missed Chase's return. His hand on her shoulder nearly sent her running through the bush. "It's only me."

She slapped at his hand. "You scared the crap out of me."

"Sorry, but I didn't want to speak in case someone was nearby," he whispered next to her ear.

"Did you get a hold of Raiz?" she asked, deciding to forgive him for the moment.

"Yeah, I filled him in on what was going down. He'll be waiting at the edge of the woods for you. Here take this." He slipped the walkie-talkie into her hand. "Can you do a reasonable owl imitation?"

"What are we, in the third grade?" She held up the walkie-talkie. "Why can't I just call him on this?"

"Because things could get hairy. You could lose it and if Raiz doesn't hear you hoot hoot, he's liable to open fire on you," Chase warned.

"Then call me Woodsie," Belle answered, adding a hoo hoo at the end.

He smiled, but she could tell his heart wasn't in it. "Since we got that settled, did they keep to their schedule while I was gone?"

"Yes, they just went back on patrol maybe six minutes ago."

"Okay, we've got nine until show time." Belle couldn't help but notice the wicked glint in his eye as he said it.

"I don't think we have quite enough time for that," Belle smirked.

"At least not the way I want to do it." She nearly melted at the innuendo in his voice. "Make you a deal. As soon as this is over, you, me and the honeymoon suite at the Palace."

"Is that a proposal, Mr. Michaels?" Her heart went ballistic at the thought. Suddenly, Belle wanted his off-handed remark to be more than a way to relieve the tension.

"This probably ain't the best time to think about getting married, but there it is." He dropped to one knee and looked up into her eyes. "Ms. Belle Gardner, if we don't get our asses killed, would you do me the honor of being my wife?"

Belle didn't know what to say. A couple seconds ago it had been a nice fantasy, but to actually hear the words come out of his mouth... It was too much for her to assimilate. She wanted nothing more than to fall into his arms and promise to his forever, but the reality reared its ugly head. Until she secured the throne, she couldn't give him the answer he wanted. She couldn't give him any answer.

Even after becoming Queen of Summer, her life wouldn't be her own. They had been through this. If she told him yes now, it would be a lie -- one she wasn't prepared to tell, as much for her benefit as his.

"Chase, I ca--" The words caught in her throat before she could get them out.

"Don't say anything. I know this isn't the right time, but dammit if I didn't ask you now, I don't think I could work up the courage to do it again." She started to say something, but his fingers on her lips stopped her. "Belle, it's on the table, that's all. I don't expect an answer right this minute."

"I want to say yes. You don't know how bad I do, but--"

"Like I said, don't say anything now." Chase kissed her gently on the forehead. "Give me something to look forward to when I come back. On that note, it's time to go."

He gave her a smile and took off at a dead trot across the yard, keeping his body low to the ground. Trying her best to imitate him, she hurried to catch up. Belle couldn't believe how much he looked like a wild animal as he bobbed and weaved his way through the shadows dancing along the manicured grass of the lawn. If she hadn't been aware he was there, Belle doubted she could have spotted him. The fact she kept pace with him amounted to a minor miracle. With the rain pounding the air, Belle hoped no one would spot her as she feebly stumbled along behind him.

Chase drew up just inside the cobblestone walk leading to the back entrance to the house. Belle came to a stop just beside him. He held up a hand for her to be quiet while pointing with the other hand to their left. She looked up to see the two figures at the far end of the house. They waited in the shadows cast from the wall bordering the walk and garden until the two warriors rounded the corner of the house.

Belle had barely caught her breath when Chase pulled her toward the house. Less than twenty steps later they were under the overhang above the back door, leading to the kitchens and servants quarters. Chase stepped aside so she could get to the control panel for the security system. Slipping into the spot he just vacated, he took up a wary vigil, his eyes darting toward the far corner of the house.

Belle slid the cover off the console, and placed her eye over the sensor pad. A muffled beep told her the system was working. Now to see if John had changed the security code since she'd taken off. A quick glance at Chase told her they weren't in danger of being discovered. For the moment, she had to remind herself. Doing her best to dry her fingertips on her wet pants, she returned to the control pad. She let out a groan at the sound of her fingers tapping out the sequence into the pad. Belle tensed, sure that she had hit the wrong key, which would have reset the system, alerting John in the process. The soft hum of the security system powering down came as a complete surprise.

"Chase, we're in," she hissed.

"Not we. Me. Now keep your end of the bargain. You've got a total of five minutes to make it back to the outbuildings before they come back." The set of his jaw told her he wasn't about to back down.

Belle threw her arms around his neck. "You be careful in there."

"You know me," he grinned.

"That's why I said be careful." A silent prayer to Silvian went out because Belle knew Chase and careful didn't even belong in the same sentence together.

"You just be ready with that answer, cuz I'll be expecting it as soon as I get back." He gestured toward the far forest. "Now get, you're down to four and some change."

"Chase..." Belle paused as her brain and mouth tried to gather the feelings inside her into words.

"Yeah?"

Then they came flooding out. "I love you."

"I know." Chase pulled her into a rushed kiss before pushing her back into the rain. "Now go."

Belle heart froze as she gave him one last look. Taking off at a dead run across the yard, she knew if she looked back, the sight of him would drive a wedge through her heart. Leaving



him had been the hardest thing she'd ever done. It had felt so final. Her brain told Belle that he would be fine. Immortality had its perks. Even though her fevered thoughts were telling her that she probably wouldn't see him again, her heart said different. They were made for each other and nothing could keep them apart. Running through the darkness, Belle kept repeating that as a mantra to force her feet to move.

Belle skidded to a stop at the corner of the bungalow sitting closest to the house. She ducked under the eave and stared back at the main house. Chase stood in front of the doorway. Seeing her safe, he gave a wave before opening the door and disappearing inside. Belle let out a sigh. Everything was out of her hands now. Even if she wanted to go back, Belle knew she wouldn't. Chase had been right. Someone needed to get word to the Peoples that the Nespharilliüm were in cahoots with her stepfather. Her ingrained sense of duty would see her do no less. That left Chase to find out where John was keeping her mother. He was too stubborn not to. Before morning, they would be laughing over how silly she was being and that was that.

Chase would be okay. Telling herself that over and over, Belle felt like she could manage to untangle herself from the darkness and head back toward the Hummer. Her internal clock told her it was time to go. The two Hecctorium had just made it back around to the side of the house, and in any case Raiz would be expecting her. She took one more look at the house, hoping for a glimpse of Chase before she left. It was silly, she knew. Between the darkness and the rain, the odds of her seeing him seemed almost insurmountable, but she had to try. Only blackness greeted her attempt. He had to be well inside the house and that meant she'd wasted enough time.

Rising on the balls of her feet, she turned to make a dash toward the far tree line. Belle took two steps before slamming into something she was sure had to be a brick wall. Nothing else could explain it. Sure that it hadn't been there a minute ago, Belle stumbled back doing her best to stop from falling onto the muddy ground squishing around her feet. As soon as she could see straight, she would find out who put it there and give them a piece of her mind -- if she had one left. Shaking the stars clear from her eyes, the blurry shape came into focus. When it did, she wished like hell it had been a brick wall. A black helmeted figure glared at her from the rain.

"What do we have here?" a gravelly voice echoed from the depths of the helmet.

Belle knew the answer, if he didn't. It was trouble with a capital T.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

Chase waited at the door for as long as he dared. When Belle disappeared into the blackness shrouding the outbuildings from clear view, he allowed himself to pull away from the door. For all his worry, Chase knew as long as she didn't do anything stupid like stick around, Belle would be okay. The guards were content to keep their patrols close to the main house. Whatever Gardner had going down, it was centered around the main house, placing him securely in the hornets' nest. Not a comforting thought when you were ass deep in trouble, but he had been in a helluva lot worse.

He took a half step into the kitchen. A blue halo shined around him as the chrome embossed room picked up the pale light streaming through the window. Chase moved warily through the unfamiliar room. He barely dodged the center island that stood all but invisible in the gloom. Still, his movement rocked a copper pot sitting on the edge of the marbled counter. Scrambling, he caught the thing before it slipped toward the floor.

Chase knew, without a doubt, getting spooked would not help him. He needed to focus on the job at hand before he started imagining the hounds of hell jumping out of the woodwork. More than that, he damn well needed to get his head in the job. If he didn't soon, he'd end up dead, or in his case, worse. Over the centuries, he'd seen worse and didn't feel inclined to do go through it again. He damn sure wouldn't do Belle any good if he got his ass captured. Then Gardner would have all the cards. If the bastard suspected his feelings for Belle, he'd end up a liability, or a chess piece Gardner could use to get Belle to do exactly what he wanted. Chase wasn't about to let that happen.

A moment of fear gripped him in the darkness. Not for himself, but for Belle. The cloying shadows pressed in on him, igniting a blaze of worry to flare in the back of his mind. Common sense told him all the danger rested with him. Belle was fine. She'd gotten clear of the house and had probably made it halfway to Raiz while he'd been playing kick the can in this kitchen. Chase kept telling himself that, but his mind wouldn't buy it. Good thing he was too stupid to listen to the little voices in his head.

*'Brechashe.'* The whisper of the voices in his head made him juggle the metal pot he'd forgotten he'd been holding.

"What do you bitches want now?" he snarled, setting the pot back on the counter before he did drop the damned thing.

*'Time grows short. You must complete your mission with due haste.'*

"No shit. Tell me something I don't know."

*'The dark forces at work in this house will soon discover your presence. If you hope to aid Belle and her mother, you must hurry.'*

He got the distinct impression his tormentors were hiding something. Then again, it wouldn't be the first time. "So, why don't you give me a little help here? Like, tell me where Gardner keeps his computer."

Silence reigned in his head. It wasn't like he expected an answer, but he had to give it a shot. *'The answer you seek is in his private quarters at the top of the stairs.'*

Chase went still with shock. They'd given him a straight answer. The world was coming to an end. Since they were in such a giving mood, he might as well go for broke. "If you know where it is, why don't you just tell me what we need to know, so I can get my ass out of here?"

*'We have exceeded ourselves telling you that much. The balance must be kept. Now go.'*

Chase knew a brush-off when he heard one. They had helped him as much as they could, or as much as they wanted to. He knew the game well by now. Finding the information rested securely on his shoulders, like it hadn't before. Silent as death, he made his way through the kitchen. He pressed against the swinging door until it slipped far enough to be considered a slender crack. An open ended hallway led to what looked to be a sprawling foyer just beyond. Except for flickering shadows, he detected no sign of life within the house, despite the evidence to the contrary.

Slipping through the door, Chase hugged the right side of the hallway. It offered him a good view of the foyer while keeping him from being seen. Dropping to a crouch as he reached it, Chase saw the curving staircase the ghosts had mentioned.

The room itself looked empty but taking unnecessary chances had never been his style. He sat hunched in the shadows for an eternity before finally deeming it safe to venture across to the staircase. After the first step, Chase cursed the squish of his wet boots on the marble tiled floor. Nothing short of taking them off would help, but he didn't relish the idea of going barefoot. He'd just have to deal with it, and hope the bad guys were hard of hearing, or squishy shoes would be the least of his troubles.

Chase paused at the foot of the stairs. The muffled sound of voices filtered through the stagnant air from above, but the acoustics could have placed their source as coming from anywhere. For all he knew, there could be a whole squad of the bastards right around the corner. He squatted down among the shadows cast by the banisters, waiting for someone to appear. As he settled in, Chase determined the voices were from another section of the house, the night air carrying it further than it should have. Relief flooded him. His nerves were dangerously close to being shot. Between worrying about Belle and scaring the crap out of himself, it was a wonder he hadn't gone bonkers. In any case, he felt in no shape to deal with complications at the moment.

Deciding it was safe to move, he ascended the stairs. Chase dropped into a crouch just short of the top, and craned his neck surveying the upper floor. Except for an over abundance of dust bunnies, the walkway appeared clear. He fought the urge to let the emptiness lull him into a false sense of security. With so many guards on the outside, Chase had been sure he would have run into at least a token force inside the mansion itself long before now. Gardner at least should have had the common sense to place a guard or two on the first floor. That he hadn't let Chase know his luck had finally kicked in.

Even overconfidence on their part couldn't explain it. Then again, he wasn't dealing with the human mind. These guys were something else altogether. Belle's humanness made him forget he was dealing with something out of a fairy tale -- a very dark fairy tale, but one nonetheless. For all he knew, Gardner could have set magical wards all over the place, letting the bad guys know his every move. An even more sobering thought, they could be setting up a nasty trap, one he could very well be walking right into.

Well, he wasn't about to make kicking his butt easy on them. They may be big bad muthas where they were from, but a 9 mm was the great equalizer. Plate mail and a two-handed bastard sword might have been the thing back in the day, but nothing beat a Glock and a fully

loaded clip. If that didn't work, he still had Corith's sword digging a wicked groove in his backbone.

His confidence bolstered, he rose to his feet. The stairs opened into a circular landing bordered by more doors than he felt comfortable with. Any one of them could be the one he was looking for, or let loose a million baddies waiting for a chance to slit a throat. After sizing them up, he got the distinct impression the one he needed sat at the far end of the arched landing. His attention settled on a set of double doors. Chase's gut told him Gardner wouldn't be satisfied with anything less than the biggest room in the house.

The carpet muffling his steps, Chase made a quick dash past the row of doors, keeping a wary eye on the floor below. His mind searched for signs of life behind each shadow that cropped up and kept coming up empty. At least one thing worked in his favor tonight. Chase knew he'd gone beyond the need to check for hidden sensors. If one had gone off, he'd know by now. Since he didn't have a giant pig sticker in his gut, he considered it unlikely they'd found him out.

Skidding to a stop, Chase took one last glance back toward the stairs. It checked out clear. Satisfied dying didn't figure into the cards for the next five seconds, Chase threw the double doors open and slipped inside the room. He had been right. The room screamed Gardner. A huge antique oak desk dominated the room. The surface sat littered with a carpet of newspapers and files arranged in no certain order. A bank of picture windows overlooked the desk, obviously affording Gardner a picturesque view of the grounds surrounding the mansion. Bookshelves lined the room on the two walls adjacent the desk. He spotted the computer on a small side table to the left of the room. Chase let out a grunt. Figured, someone as old school as Gardner wouldn't want the desk sullied with something so modern.

Instead of making for the IBM desktop, he crept over to the desk. Before attempting the task of unraveling the hard drive, then lugging it through the rain back to the Hummer, Chase decided to follow his gut again. Gardner didn't seem the type of man to trust modern technology or even understand it. He was the type of man who would want information at his fingertips not locked away in a computer where a hacker could get at it, or more importantly, where he couldn't.

Doing his best not to disturb the trash pile on top of the desk, he scanned the mess for something concerning Belle's mother. If they were right, and Corith warned Gardner that they were on their way, the man's first instinct would be to move her as soon as possible. Chase just hoped their decision to rest up before coming hadn't given the man time to do it. Shuffling the papers to the side, something caught his eye.

Amid the clutter was a folder marked in red. He lifted the folder from the mess, and it sifted a rain of forms onto the desk. Spreading the papers out, he found exactly what they were looking for. Myrandia Gardner had been a resident of Cedar Falls Institute for the last six months. According to the heading, the place specialized in disorders of the mind, in other words, a mental hospital.

Reading through the sheets, Chase couldn't decide whether to be disgusted or outraged. The bastard was a real piece of work. She had been under therapy since she'd been admitted for an undetermined psychosis. The doctors on staff had her diagnosed as having psychotic episodes with delusional fantasies. They believed the death of her first husband had led to a manic depression that gradually resulted in her developing a dream-like existence where she was a fairy princess, and her current husband became the focal point of her depression. The doctors went on to say she saw him as a malignant monster that threatened her kingdom. The son of a bitch had

been using the truth to keep his wife locked up, and the doctors were eating it up. Her last episode, sparked by a visit from Gardner, had been violent, and led the doctors to prescribe sedatives around the clock to prevent her from harming herself.

Chase nearly missed a small piece of paper clipped to the last sheet of the report. It was a transfer order dated today. Gardner wanted her moved to another facility where she could receive a more radical form of therapy in hopes it might ease her suffering. The paper didn't say what kind of therapy, but Chase didn't think it would do anything but make matters worse. He checked the bottom of the slip. Gardner had scheduled her to be moved tomorrow at noon.

Dammit, that didn't give them much time. It was already well after midnight. They would be hard pressed to make an eight hour drive of it to reach the place before the shit went down. By the time he made it back to Belle and Raiz, they might just make it. If they managed to get a hold of Caern, he might be able to get there a little ahead of them -- a slim hope at best. Growling to himself, Chase stood up. He had to get the hell out of here.

The voices came back with a vengeance, and the symphony they created slammed a knife through his brain. *'Breachashe, you must leave now.'*

"No, shit," he winced, rubbing his temple as the pain intensified.

*'We are serious. Already the darkness begins to feel your presence. If you do not flee now, your life, and that of the one you love, will be sacrificed.'*

That was all it took to get him moving. Shoving the file more or less back where it had been, then sliding the newspapers back over it all, he dashed for the door. The rumble of the voices returned, stopping him from cracking the door.

*'Not that way, warrior. The Nespharilliüm have returned to the house.'*

Sure enough, the sound of trampling feet came from the hallway, joined by the clamber of raised voices drifting up from the foyer below. The shit had definitely hit the fan.

Chase's heart slammed a whole damn opera in his chest. His mind rolled with images of Belle being dragged in. He had to catch himself before he threw the door open and rushed into the hallway. Belle was safely at the Hummer with Raiz by now. His imagination had started running wild again. If he didn't get it together and soon, he might as well just walk up to the bastards and give himself up.

Since that wasn't going to happen, he better figure a way out of here that didn't involve walking through a shit-load of sword totting badasses. Taking a look over his shoulder, he knew the answer. Chase didn't like it, but he knew the window offered his only option. Now would be a good time to sprout wings and flap his ass out of here. Not in the cards, but it was a thought.

Peering through the glass, Chase estimated a twenty foot drop to the ground. He'd fallen from higher and walked away. He just didn't know if Gardner's troops would be kind enough to wait around for him heal enough to walk anyway. Running his hand over the frame, Chase checked for security sensors. Finding none, he slipped the window open. The sounds from outside the door seemed to have faded, but he didn't plan to let that drop his guard one inch until he was kicked back in Raiz's heated seats.

Chase took a wide range scan out the window. The rain had let up while he'd been inside. A slow moving mist etched its way across the grounds. He could barely make out the outbuildings. Bringing his head toward the house itself, he caught sight of the guards rounding the corner to his left. That gave him somewhere close to ten minutes to find a way down and dash into the growing fog before they returned. Piece of cake.

A slender elm sat six feet from the window, not the best of escape routes, but he didn't have a lot of options. The tree didn't appear all that big, but it should hold his weight and a short

jump would get him into the whisper thin branches. Chase mentally clicked his time down to eight minutes.

Before he could talk himself out of it, he leapt through the window. Angling his body, he grabbed the tree with his left hand. His shoulder wrenched free with a sickening pop, but he held on. A blast of agony shot through him. Ignoring the pain burning its way down his arm, he fought to stop from sliding down the swaying trunk. Finally, his legs found purchase on a branch just below him.

He allowed himself a moment to catch his breath. Everything had turned to crap. His arm might as well be lying on the ground under him for all the good it would do him. No way he could focus through the pain to catch anything, except maybe the ground. Not even thinking about it, he slammed his shoulder into the tree trunk. The sound of bone on bone echoed in his ears, as he felt his shoulder grate back into place. The pain that came rushing through him was so excruciating he felt consciousness slipping away from him.

*'Brechashe!'* The sound of their voices instantly brought him back from the edge.

"Thanks," he begrudgingly muttered but they had already disappeared back into the ether.

More or less awake, Chase shimmied down the tree. He dropped the last six feet to the ground, a jolt running back through his arm from the impact. When the world stopped spinning, he cast a wary eye toward the far corner of the house. By his estimation he had another five minutes before the warriors finished their circuit and returned.

Not wanting to waste a second, he took off. The swirling fog enveloped him as soon as he slipped past the shadow of the house. The telltale clink of armor drifted to him, but it came from too far away to indicate pursuit.

Dammit, they'd done it. Chase couldn't believe his luck. A few hours ago, he thought they'd be lucky to find out where Gardner stashed Belle's mom, let alone get away with the information. Now, here he was, getting away scot-free. It was enough to make him believe in miracles. Miracle or not, one thing was for sure, the minute he got back, he would never let Belle out of his sight again.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

Chase broke through the tree line, not even bothering to slow down. In the near darkness, he nearly missed the Hummer sitting back in the shadows. Raiz leaned against the hood, watching him as he walked up. Chase peered through the heavily tinted windshield for Belle. Not seeing her, the knot in his gut returned.

"She never made it, comrade," Raiz announced like a death knell ringing in Chase's heart.

Chase turned on the big man with fire in his eyes. "Why didn't you go look for her, dammit?"

"We both know if I had, you would be standing here alone, wondering what the hell had happened." Raiz took a step back.

"You son of a bitching coward!" Chase screamed.

Raiz rose to his full height, dwarfing him. "Careful, my friend. Friendship only goes so far. Your woman is gone, deal with it."

"Like hell I will! You can sit here twiddling your thumbs, but I'm going to get her." He made a move for the tree line, only to have Raiz jerk him up by the collar of his shirt.

"*Nyet*, that is suicide and we both know it." The Russian pulled him higher, until Chase's feet dangled a good foot from the ground.

"I'm not leaving without her," Chase screamed, almost insane with the thought of her in Gardner's hands. He pounded his fists on the Russian's chest.

*'You must, warrior.'*

Chase's head snapped up at the sound of the ghosts' voices in his head. "You knew. You fucking knew they had her and sent me outta there!"

*'Save your anger, Brechashe, for those who deserve it. Bellaronia is safe for the moment. John Gardner will not harm her as long as she is still the heir of Summer.'*

"He needs her alive, but that doesn't mean he won't..." The words choked in his throat, if only his mind treated him so mercifully. For all he knew, Gardner could be having her tortured at this very moment. Only Raiz's firm grip kept him in place.

*'She is not in danger. Keep your fears in check. Bellaronia is too valuable to Gardner unharmed for him to do anything to enrage the Shazhium.'*

Calmness was hard coming, but their words settled his stomach. They were right. Gardner would blow everything if he tried to prance out Belle looking like she'd been roughed over. Raiz must have felt his state of mind change, because he loosened his hold on him, but didn't go so far as to let him go.

"So, what do you expect me to do?" He had a good idea, but dammit, he wanted them to step up and tell him. If he had to be at the will of the bitches, they could damn well do their part.

*'Free Myrandia. She is the key to saving Bellaronia and the Shazhium.'*

Chase ground his teeth at the thought of leaving Belle behind, but didn't see any way to save her without getting them both killed in the process. "Okay, I'll do your bidding, but if anything happens to Belle, death won't stop me from sending you to hell for a second time."

*'Believe us. We are beyond your threats, but your time grows short. Soon, not even we will be able to advise you, if Gardner's plans move forward.'*

Chase wanted to ask more, but knew their conversation had come to an end. The bitches specialized in cryptic, and were damn good at it. Whatever Gardner was up to had their panties in a bunch. Even in the beginning, they hadn't been this chatty. Of course in the beginning, they had been yelling at him to suffer for his crimes, but that was beside the point.

The whole situation gave him a funny feeling. Chase couldn't help but think he'd been a puppet on their strings for some reason other than the wholesale slaughter that landed him in trouble in the first place. For years he'd thought there had to be more to it, now he had an inkling that he may have been right.

Frankly, he didn't give a shit who was pulling whose strings here. He would go get Belle's mom because that's what Belle would want him to do. Then come hell or high water, he was coming back for her. Ghosts be damned! She was his, and by everything holy, nothing would stop him from getting her back.

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Rough hands slammed Belle through the door. Her feet fell out from under her and she went careening toward the floor. Heavy metal fingers closed over her hair, jerking her back upright. The back of her scalp screamed in protest as the Nespharillium twisted her hair and balanced her precariously on the tips of her toes. The metallic grind of his laughter filled her ears.

"Enough, drone," a raspy voice called from the center of the room.

Instantly the warrior released her. Belle stumbled but refused to show any more weakness to her captors. Instead, she tried to focus her eyes to see who she was dealing with. Between the pain slamming into her eyes, and the brightness of the room, she couldn't make out the voice's owner, but a feeling of dread filled her at the sound of the cold dead voice.

"J'hanous, you never mentioned what a delightful creature your stepdaughter turned into. She looks so much like her mother." The slime oozing from the man's voice made her skin crawl. The thought of this man anywhere near her mother made her want to vomit. The fact she had to be this close to him didn't make her feel all that good, either. "Bring her to me, drone."

Belle took a step back only to have two sets of hands drag her toward the man. She knew it was useless to try to escape, but damned if she would be a submissive twit about it. These flunkies would pay for touching her. Kicking back, she connected with the hard armor plate that covered the Hecorium's leg. Numbness swam up her leg, ending in a stabbing pain at the base of her spine. So much for making them pay.

"Cease your futile attempts to escape, child. For the moment we wish you no harm." Belle looked up to see the hooded figure turn to John. "Tell her, J'hanous."

"Belle, stop being a child. You are making a total ass out of yourself," Gardner sneered.

"You should know, because you're the biggest asshole I know." When the slap came, she knew to expect it. Her teeth sunk into the flesh of his hand hard enough to draw blood, the stale copper taste filling her mouth.

"Bitch!" he howled.

"J'hanous, cut this foolishness. It wearies me." Before Belle could move, a gnarled hand closed over her face, squeezing her mouth into a mockery of a pucker. "Your life hangs in a precarious state. J'hanous may need you alive, but I suffer from no such weakness. Your death would be nothing to me."

"Lord Vysion," John's voice croaked off as the old man held up his hand.



Belle's skin crawled at the dry touch. The foul stench of his breath filled her nostrils. The urge to vomit swelled inside her as she stared into the blackened maw of a mouth broken only by the yellowed tombstones of his crooked teeth. For the first time since she'd been captured, fear crept up her spine. The Nespharillium was not joking. He would as soon kill her as take his next breath. What the hell had John gotten himself mixed up in?

"For you own sake, Belle, listen to him," John squealed, the fear in his voice as real as the dead hand gripping her. She knew his fear wasn't for her, but for himself should this thing make good his threat and kill her.

"No need to fear for her safety. The child, I believe, understands perfectly the consequence should she remain defiant." Another blast of his putrid breath filled her nose. "Don't you, my dear?"

Her body shivered as his finger caressed its way down her chin. She nodded her head just to shake his finger free.

"See, J'hanous, most cooperative." He turned and walked back to John, who nursed his bleeding hand.

Belle wanted nothing more than to ask what the two men were up to, but held back. Afraid her questions would bring the Nespharillium back, she kept her mouth shut. Sooner or later, John would let something slip. He loved to talk about his conquests, and this looked like something he wouldn't be able to keep bottled up for long.

Since the pair sat huddled in conversation, and not likely to reveal their plans, she had time to take in the lay of the land. Four warriors were set at regular intervals around the room, counting the two behind her. When nassy man had been all over her, they had moved back to guard the solarium's door, while the others were on either side of the windows overlooking the main garden. The only way she could see to get past them to the outside would be to become Supergirl and fly through the roof. The powers of the Summer Court were impressive, but super-powers they weren't. Her best bet was to hang loose and try not to get antsy and give Chase time to get her out of this.

Belle dreaded the confrontation when that happened. He would kill her when he found out she'd let herself get captured -- if John didn't take care of that problem for him. Belle still couldn't believe she'd walked right into the very thing Chase had been trying to save her from. When he got his ass in gear and got her out of this, she would have a few choice words with him about listening to her. Anyone who'd watched a freaking episode of Scooby Doo knew the plucky heroine always got caught.

Of course, that was if she got out of this. The sudden thought sat like a lead weight in her chest. If she had just John to contend with, Belle knew she would have little trouble giving him the slip. Hell, she'd make a good job of it for the past hundred years, but these Nespharillium were a different story, especially this Vysion guy. On cue, he shot her a look from across the room, making her blood run cold.

Belle got the sinking feeling he was reading her mind. She imagined his fingers digging their way from her brain. Across the room, his smile grew larger and he nodded toward her. A slight pressure rocked against her brain, and she knew it hadn't been her imagination. He seemed to get off poking inside her mind, playing games with her.

"Enough talk J'hanous." Vysion clapped his hands, the sound echoing like a gunshot through the room.

"But we haven't come to terms concerning the Hea--"

"I said enough." Vysion's hood whipped toward her stepfather. "Your loose tongue will be your undoing, and the death of your stepdaughter, if you say one more word."

John's mouth instantly clamped shut. Now, her interest was really piqued. John never backed down -- never! This had to be bigger than she thought. Securing the Nespharillium's aid to get the Summer Court all to himself was one thing. Belle saw no reason why he would hide that from her. Nassy man was in charge here, in spite of what John might be telling himself. Belle might as well face the facts. Nothing short of a miracle would get her out of here.

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Pulling back the curtain, Caern watched the Hummer pull up to the safe house. He'd been chewing nails ever since Raiz had given him the heads up about Belle. Knowing Chase, the shit had probably gone way past hitting the fan and gone straight to slamming holes through the wall. On a normal day, Chase was as calm as they came. Caern knew that was subject to a sudden change on a moment's notice. His bud had a bad habit of bottling things up. Then a wild hair would throw him into a slow boil until Chase-atoua just blew. It wasn't pretty to watch, but damn if it wasn't interesting as hell when it happened. Caern scratched his chin, wondering how bad his friend would get before they got Belle back. If he had to bet, he'd throw his money on an all-time high body count. Something like the population of the entire west coast, if they didn't get her back and soon.

It worried him that he hadn't heard from the pair since that first call. He had expected a full on Chase barrage to pull out all the stops to track Gardner and Belle down on the computer. A threatened ass beating, at the very least. All he'd gotten for the past hour was an empty voice mail box and an ass full of where-the-hell-are-theys. That alone told him to be ready for the worst when the man walked through the door. When Chase went silent, things got hairy, real quick. The last time Chase got this way, he convinced Sitting Bull to go kick Custer's ass. His partner took vindictive to a whole new level.

This time it was personal, and Caern hated to think what his friend would do when he came uncorked. To be perfectly honest, this whole mess with Belle had him more than a little confused. His friend had always been just like him, a loner. This sudden attachment to a woman didn't seem like Chase's style, not that Caern thought the woman wasn't good for him. Hell, in the past two days Chase had been acting almost human -- a miracle in itself. Caern knew that it couldn't last. His bud was a great guy, but women like that didn't stick around for men like him and Chase. Love 'em yes, but stick around? Hell no. Women wanted men with more stability than they had to offer. Which was why he avoided the whole relationship trap.

Belle was a great girl, first impressions aside. Damn straight, they were going to get her back, but he hoped Chase knew the deal. When this whole mess came to an end, she would walk right back out of his life, pretty as you please. If he'd ever seen poster children for a tragedy in the making, Chase and Belle were it. If his bud didn't know the hard cold truth, he did. Their worlds didn't mesh -- plain and simple.

Chase walked up and made him shelve that train of thought. His personal feelings weren't going to do a damn thing but make Chase fighting mad. From the look on the man's face, he had already started treading the edge of a very thin line. Caern would be damned if he'd be the one to make him fall off. The state Chase looked to be in, Caern doubted even friendship would save him if it came to blows. That said a lot. His jacked up genes made him faster and stronger, but in a fight, Caern wouldn't stand a chance against his friend when his blood ran hot.

For that reason, he'd bide his time and see how the game played out. It was the only thing he could do. When the pieces hit the floor, he'd be there. He just hoped she left enough of Chase to save.

"You ready to roll?" Chase snarled when he reached the safe house door.

"All packed." Caern patted the bag at his feet.

"Then get in the Hummer. Time is wasting, and we got some miles to roll if we're going to get Belle's mom out of that damned hospital before Gardner has time to get her moved." Chase turned on his heel and started back to the truck.

Caern threw his hand out and grabbed him by the sleeve. "Whoa, hold it a minute! Shouldn't we be going after Belle?"

The look Chase shot him was damn right lethal. "Nope."

"Any reason why?" Caern found himself flinching.

"Yeah, the bitches said not to." The sound of grinding teeth accompanied the statement as he jerked free and made for the Hummer.

Caern rolled that over in his head. Chase never mentioned the ghosts haunting him. They'd known each other for close to two hundred years, give or take a decade. In all that time, Caern could count on one hand the times the subject had come up, and it'd been him bringing it up every single time. Something was definitely up. Chase wouldn't leave Belle in her step-dad's clutches unless he had a damn good reason. For him to bring up the ghosts, it must be one helluva good one.

"You going to stand there all fucking night, or get in the truck?" Chase growled from the passenger door of the Hummer.

"I'm with you, pal." He scooped up his backpack and jogged to the SUV.

"Good, then get in." Chase climbed into the seat a half second before Caern got in the back. "Raiz, you got the GPS set up?"

"*Da*, she is programmed to take us to the hospital."

The Russian slammed the Hummer into gear. The black monster threw a hail of gravel into the air. Caern scrambled to grab his seat belt before Raiz tossed him through the window. They hit the road doing close to sixty, gaining speed as they hit asphalt. He figured they rolled through town at better than eighty miles per hour. Caern pitied the poor fool who tried to pull them over to give the Russian a ticket. The guy's chances for making it home in one piece sat somewhere between 'not going to happen' and 'body bag dead'.

Silence reigned between the men. The tick and whistle of the SUV grated on Caern's nerves. He wanted to say to hell with it and hit the radio for some tunes. Anything to break the void hanging over them. Even in the pale light, he saw the muscles of Chase's neck and back bunching from the tension rolling off him. If he didn't do something to take his mind off Belle, Chase would drive himself mad.

He unbuckled himself and moved up between the front seats. "What's the plan, chief?"

"Gardner has Belle's mom in a private institution close to Cedar Creek. He's got her planned for a noon transfer," Chase grunted.

"You thinking a snatch and grab?" he folded his arms over the seats and peered at his friend's reflection in the windshield.

"Without Belle..." Chase's voice died out and he looked blankly out the windshield.

Caern felt for him but wasn't about to let him dwell on the pain. "She's not here, man. You want to help her, you got to get past it. Crystal?"

He leaned back, waiting for the explosion.

"Crystal," Chase mumbled.

"Finish it." Caern patted him on the shoulder.

"Without Belle, we'll have to snatch her," Chase answered.

"So, we need a layout of the hospital. No prob. I can download one from the Internet in about two seconds. You got a room number?" Caern pulled out his laptop while he waited for Chase to answer.

"She's in ward three, room 209." He turned his face to the side window and closed his eyes.

Two seconds may have been optimistic, but three minutes later, he had the information on the narrow screen. "Got it! We have a fire exit just down from her room, but the nurses' station is right across from it. Tricky, but doable."

"Can you find out when they change shifts?"

Caern smiled, seeing a little of the old fire back in his friends tone.

That took a little longer. He needed to breach the firewall, then bypass a password or two. Damn, this place had security that was almost as hard to break as the CIA mainframe. Finally, he locked onto the admin database. The information scrolled out.

"They got a night crew that checks out at six a.m. on the dot. The security team switches out an hour later." Caern held up his hand. "Before you ask. They keep two guards on each floor. The one we're shooting for keeps four, one on the main elevator, another one sticks to the freight elevator while the other two do walkthroughs."

"Figures. Gardner isn't about to take chances with his meal ticket." Chase rubbed his face, revealing just how weary he was. The sight shocked Caern. "Raiz, what's out ETA?"

"At this rate with one rest stop in between, we should make it close to nine possibly ten," Raiz said, without taking his gaze off the road.

"Then speed the fuck up and cut out the rest stop. You guys can just hold it," Chase grunted.

"*Nyet*, I'll piss out the window but that won't change the fact, this bitch drinks gas like my countrymen drink vodka. We're down by half a tank already."

"Shit!" Chase threw his hand into the windshield, sending a crack crazing up the bulletproof glass.

"Calm down, Chase. We still got time. So we miss the shift change. Big fucking deal. There was no way we could have passed ourselves off as doctors, anyway. This is brute force all the way. Crystal?"

"Crystal." It didn't sound as enthusiastic as Caern hoped for, but hell, at least Chase stopped grunting his replies.

Caern knew he didn't stand a chance in hell of getting anything else out of his partner. He'd be lucky to get a satisfying growl from Chase now. Truthfully, Raiz was just as bad. The Russian barely talked on a good day. Damn, he wished he'd remembered to toss his iPod in the bag. With all this tension in the air, he could use the diversion of something hard and driving in his ears.

Kicking back, Caern decided since he was stuck in this hell, he might as well try to catch forty winks. Tomorrow would come all too soon, and at least one of them needed to be on their game. The steady hum of the road beneath them rocked him to sleep, but the ghost of Chase's haunted eyes kept him from enjoying it.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

Belle came awake with a start. Her eyes burned from the sudden injection of sunlight streaming over her. Running her hand over them to shield them from the worst of it, she tried to piece together the rest of last night. She couldn't remember falling asleep, so doubted she'd have much luck. Vysion, or as she liked to think about the monk, John's version of a poor man's Darth Vader, looming over her was the last thing her mind could put a finger on. She'd probably have nightmares over him for the rest of her life, so she shook the image of him out of her head. Focusing on the here and now seemed more productive. Stifling a yawn behind her hand, she let her hooded eyes roam around the room. Someone had moved her from the solarium during the night. John's den surrounded her, the dark wood grain sucking her back to her youth.

Instead of John, she pictured her father inside this room. Some of the happiest times of her childhood had been spent with him alone in the solitude of his study, her father at his desk and her running around like a banshee. No matter how busy he had been, her father couldn't resist her. Father would laugh at her antics, forgetting all about whatever work he had going in the process. They would enter their own little world, with him acting as her very own knight in shining armor and she the beautiful fairy princess. Hours would pass before they were forced back to the real world, usually because her mother would come in to remind her father of his duties.

Belle couldn't stop the tears that sprang to her eyes at the memory. It had been so long since she'd felt the love of a family enclosing her. John had killed all that, just like she was now sure he had killed her father, or been involved in it somehow. Last night she had forgotten Corith's veiled comments. This morning they came crashing through the fog. After seeing the extent John would go to get what he wanted, she knew without a doubt he had been responsible.

This alliance with the Nespharillium proved it. No one sane would truck with the fallen race. She just wished she knew what was truly going on. John wanted Summer, but what did this Vysion want? He didn't look the type to be anyone's lackey, especially John's. For all his bluster, John was weak. He kept his position with fear and threats. Without her mother, he had no strength to back up any of it.

If her mother had been able to see through the façade John used while around her, she'd see him for what he truly was -- a coward, through and through. But, John had made sure her mother never saw that side of him. For years, he'd cultivated her pain into neurosis and dementia. Finally, she had been too confused to see anything but the memories haunting her. Belle had been lucky enough to slip through the cracks of John's notice, until she'd grown up to become a viable threat in his mind. Then, whatever childhood was left to her disappeared. Her life had gone from misery to living hell. The moment came when she had ultimately decided enough was enough.

Looking back, she thought it funny her own people were so hesitant to come to her side. Belle found it so strange her once proud race would rather wallow under John's thumb than attempt to return to their former glory. If it hadn't been for Chase, no one would have stepped forward to aid her. Her meeting with Ronald had been a washout. She knew in her heart that Ronald had no intention of aiding her. The only reason he agreed to meet with her had been because of her mother. He might not like or agree with John's handling of the court, but Ronald

was a prisoner of tradition. As long as John remained the Knight of Spring, he and the other houses would not go against him, openly or otherwise.

That was the rub. She might be first in line for the throne but it was meaningless until her mother stepped down and handed over the crown. Unless she had a champion to defeat John, her fate could very well end up like her mother's, a tool for John to use.

*'A champion awaits you.'* Eoyian's voice shocked her from her musings.

Belle looked up to see the ghostlike image of the woman standing before her. The woman shimmered in the dust filling the light from the window.

"Eoyian, I know what you think, but the Shazhium will never accept Chase," Belle hissed, afraid John would stoop to having her monitored.

*'They will have no choice. The will of Silvian is absolute.'*

"That would be true if the Peoples didn't still follow the old ways," she answered, meekly, dreading the truth in her words.

*'Bellaronia, you forget your history. The Knight of Spring is the choice of the Queen and the queen alone. Her choice, but his power to keep. That is why J'hanous is still Knight. Brechashe will be the Knight of Spring and so much more.'* Belle couldn't mistake the veiled meaning in the woman's words.

Or, stop herself from finding out what the woman hid behind her mysterious announcement. "What do you mean?"

*'Silvian's will be done.'* Eoyian smiled and faded from existence.

Belle banged her head in frustration. Why couldn't anyone give her a straight answer? Eoyian and Morag both spoke of things that confused the hell out of her, hinted at things of importance, yet refused to give her their full meaning. She just wished, once, one of them would say something without making her head ache from trying to figure it out.

Before she could dwell on the futility of understanding the two women, the door opened behind her. Even without turning around, Belle knew John had come to try and make her see reason. The stench of his cheap cologne was unmistakable.

"John, if you've come in here to peddle more of your lies, feel free to carry your ass back out the door," she said, without giving him the satisfaction of looking in his direction.

"Daughter, you wound me."

"I'm not your daughter! My father is dead." The very idea of him claiming to be anything to her made her see red. The fact they shared blood through her father sickened her enough.

"A tragedy. We both lost so much when he was slain. I thought we'd worked through that." John walked around to stand behind the desk.

"Don't give me your lies. You hated my father, and we both know it." Belle wanted to say more -- accuse him openly, yet something held her back. She wanted him to admit it himself, without her coercing him.

He waved his hand absently. "Sibling rivalry, nothing more"

"We are not at court. There isn't anyone here to convince but those who already know the truth."

He leaned back in the leather chair her father had once loved so well, his presence a sacrilege to her father's memory. "What do you really want to hear, Bellaronia?"

She banged her fist into the top of the desk. "The truth!"

His face scrunched up with his indecision. Belle waited, watching him. From the smile slipping onto his face, she sensed the moment had come. Finally, she would have the truth.

"Okay, you want the truth. Here it is. I hated my brother. His condescension was a bane to me. Every breath he took was a violation of everything I believed in and when the time came I--"

"You killed him." Belle finished for him.

He clasped his hands in front of him. "As much as I would have relished that pleasure, it was not me."

Then the truth hit her. "Corith."

"So he did tell you. I knew one day his mouth would overload his common sense. Yes, the Wildling King killed your father by my order. He ripped the very life from him while I watched from the safety of this very room. How he screamed for salvation, mercy, anything that would buy his life. It just fueled Corith's carnage. If it's any consolation to you, your name was the last thing to escape his lips before death claimed him." Glee filled his eyes in the telling.

"You bastard! He was your brother." Tears rolled down her cheeks. Belle thought she could handle the truth, but hearing it tore her apart. This man had ruined her life, and then came along to hold them hostage with his lies. If Belle could have killed him now with her bare hands, she would do it without an ounce of remorse.

"He was not my brother in anything but name. Our father's seed was the only thing we had in common." John flicked his finger idly into the air. "His death meant nothing to me."

Belle fought to keep her emotions in check, but the agony of John's words struck like a knife into her heart. She had to stay calm. Doing something stupid wouldn't get her anywhere. John would pay for what he'd done. By Silvian herself, he would pay.

"So what now?" She stepped away from the desk, her shaking body the only outward sign of the rage building inside her. She had one truth, but needed the whole truth. "You've gotten what you wanted. Why bring the Nespharillium into it?"

"That is a secret for another time." Belle jumped as Vysion's voice came from behind her. "You have upset your stepdaughter enough, J'hanous, with your tales of betrayal."

Belle watched her stepfather cringe at the man's admonition. "Lord Vysion, I did not hear you come in."

"Or you would be well on your way to revealing our plans, no doubt. Don't deny it, I can see the urge to do so in your eyes, but feel free to do so if it suits you." The robed man floated past her. "The fact she knows of my presence on this plane has already sealed her fate."

"We agreed she would not be harmed," John leapt from his seat.

"No, you requested she not be harmed. Dræwl has decided otherwise." The monk stopped in front of her stepfather, all but blotting him out of existence.

"B-b-but--"

"Keep that tongue shackled, J'hanous!" Vysion crooked a gnarled finger toward him. "Before he adds your fate to hers. It is time to for us to depart. Dræwl would see the Lands again."

"I need to retrieve Myrandia before we can leave," John said meekly.

"My Hektorium will see to retrieving your wife, while we go the way of the shifting path. Now, bring the girl and come." Vysion turned on his heel and walked from the room.

Belle caught a look of resignation on John's face. If the situation had been different, she might actually find some shred of satisfaction in his discomfort. Considering it looked like she was going to die, Belle decided to reserve it for when Chase got his ass in gear and got her the hell out of this. As John grabbed her by the arm, she hoped he wouldn't be too late to do her any good.

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Chase fingered the hilt of Corith's sword as he absently watched the morning traffic crowd around them. Caern's snores were a wilting opera coming from the backseat that he had grown steadily tired of as they'd driven through the night. The monotonous drone had kept him company for the last forty miles. He wondered how Raiz coped with it, but the big man didn't seem to notice much except the road. Chase wished he had the man's ability to block out the world except for the job at hand.

Every time he tried to focus his mind, visions of Belle intruded, making it all but impossible to do anything, let alone think. Chase kept thinking he'd been wrong to leave her behind. Common sense told him saving Belle's mom was the right thing to do, but his brain just wouldn't listen to reason.

He had it bad, no mistake. Chase had locked his heart away for so long, when it finally opened up, he'd let himself in for more pain than he'd endured in his entire life. Still, he couldn't deny trading his half-life for this agony had been a small price to pay for knowing love. Chase thought he'd had a firm grasp on the emotion before she stumbled into his life. Now, without her by his side, he at last fully understood the concept of loving another person, being dependant on that person for any shred of happiness. And believe what you want, it sucked a big fat one.

His heart ached for her. Sitting in this vehicle was more than he could stand. His place was with her, not here. Laying his head on the side window, Chase tried his best to reconcile himself to the fact that he truly needed to get Belle back. He was playing a fool's game. Trusting in the spirits of those he'd slain to lead him amounted to lunacy. Hell, he didn't even know what to do with Belle's mother once he had her.

The ghosts were blissfully silent on the matter. He just knew saving her was important to them for some reason, while saving Belle seemed to be secondary. Chase didn't completely trust their assurances she would be unharmed by Gardner. He just wished he knew what they had on their own agenda, and how he was a pawn in their mind-fuck. Their motives in this were suspect at best. If Chase had some inkling of what they wanted from all this, he knew he'd feel a helluva lot better about being their puppet. You could bet that wouldn't happen, but hell, he could still wish on that damn star for all the good it would do him.

"Chase, where are we?" Caern yawned from the backseat.

"Just entering Cedar Creek," Raiz answered for him.

"We should be there in ten minutes. You ready to roll?" Chase asked, craning his neck to glare at the man.

"Give me a few," he yawned. "You get any rest?"

"Some," Chase lied.

Caern pointed toward the side glass. "You better roll down your window."

"Why, you going be sick?" Chase slammed his finger on the button, letting in a wash of morning air.

"Yeah from that bullshit you're tossing at me." Caern let out a chuckle. "Tell the truth. You sleep any?"

"*Nyet*, he didn't sleep. He watched me drive the whole way," Raiz snorted.

"Can we discuss something else besides my sleeping habits?" Chase growled, as he rolled the window back up.



"No we can't. We're about to jump into the fire, you stupid son of a bitch. You're wasted as hell. That affects us. So your sleeping habits are very much a subject worth discussing," Caern said in a tone Chase knew meant his friend had no intention of letting the subject slide.

"I can take care of my end," Chase assured them, and meant it.

"You damn well better." Caern smacked him upside the back of the head. "We're going after Belle next, and I don't want you getting killed. She'll skin me alive if anything happens to you."

Chase sobered up at that. Caern was right. He was screwing up big time. He knew better than to go into battle without his A-game on. Yet, he'd been doing exactly that.

Knowing when he'd lost to reason, Chase nodded his head. "Point taken. We get this done, you have my word. Sack time."

"I'm holding you to that." Caern slapped him on the back before falling back into his seat.

"If you two are through bonding, we got a problem," Raiz's voice cut through the air, bringing Chase's head up.

Chase scanned the scene, as Raiz pull into the hospital's parking lot. A black van sat parked under the entranceway with two heavy hitters standing on either side. Chase could tell they definitely weren't locals. He'd bet his life, the natives didn't stand seven foot tall with skin so black it shined in the sunlight. They had to be the guys in the black armor from last night. They were too frigging late.

"Raiz, pull in front of that caddy." Chase pointed toward a rusted out car near the entrance.

"You got a plan?" Caern asked.

Chase looked up to see the Dhampyre's face level with his. "They're just standing around. I think it's a safe bet she isn't in the van. They look bored, means they've been there awhile."

"Yeah." Caern leaned forward again. "I doubt even Gardner's money can cut through the bureaucracy it takes to get someone out of the hospital."

"You got that right. I figure the only shot we got is to wait until they bring her out. We hit them right before she gets into van." Chase rubbed his hands together, the thrill of the coming battle waking him up.

"Tell me if I'm reading you." Caern shifted behind Raiz for a better look. "We split up and hit 'em in a three way?"

"Basically. Raiz, I want you to hang back. No sense showing all our cards. Caern and I will do the wet work. First opening you see, I want you to swoop in and grab the woman."

"How physical you want me to play it?" Chase knew that tone. Raiz was in the mood to bust some skulls.

"If they're moving, they'll come after us. That makes them viable targets. Take 'em down as hard as you want. Crystal?" Chase didn't feel one bit guilty after giving the Russian *carte blanche* to kill and maim. It's what the man did best. Who was Chase to stop a man from exercising his natural talents?

"Da, we crystal." The grin that split the man's face gave Chase a shiver straight up his spine -- in a good way. He thanked whatever gods were watching over this confederacy of dunces the Russian was on their side.

"We got movement at the door. Looks like another bully boy," Caern brought their attention back to the front of the hospital.

"Means they're about to make their move." Chase opened the door, grabbing Corith's sword on impulse. "Caern you take the left. I got the right."

Knowing Caern would know what to do, Chase hit the row of parked cars in a low crouch. Another warrior came out the doorway, bringing the total up to four. Two took up defensive positions on either side of the door, while the first two stayed with the van. The transfer would go down any minute now. Chase skidded to a stop at the fender of the last car in line just in time to see Caern shoot him a signal from the other side of the van.

He craned his neck, looking for some sign of Raiz, but couldn't find him. Chase would have to trust the man had made it into position, and had already got set. He just hoped the Russian knew what to do, and more importantly, when to do it. Now they needed something to happen on the other end before they lost their edge.

Chase caught movement at the door. Another warrior appeared, wheeling out a woman strapped into a wheelchair. Even though everything told him to dash, he stayed in place. He wasn't about to rush into the lion's den until he saw that there weren't more of the warriors roaming around. Caern signaled him. Chase put up his hand, telling him to stay in place. A nod told him Caern understood.

The guard at the front of the van came around to the passenger side door, while his partner opened the back of the van, activating the wheelchair ramp. The slow grind of the motor rumbled across the parking lot. Chase mentally counted down. The wheelchair reached the end of the path that led out from the entrance and started along the walk leading to the back of the van.

Show time!

Hugging the ground, Chase hit the van at full speed. Swinging the sword hilt first, he hit the guard at the back before the man realized he was even there. The warrior's nose exploded in a shower of blood. From the other end of the van, he heard Caern make contact with his guy. A loud grunt told him they were down to three opponents. Time to even the odds a little bit more.

He rounded the side of the van to find a fist waiting for him. The goon with the wheelchair was there and ready for him. This time the crunch came from his face. Chase staggered back, but the Nespharilliüm pressed his advantage. Another blow landed just under Chase's chin, sending him slamming into the back door. His head rang from the impact, but he had enough presence of mind to duck as the dark Fae swung again.

Shaking off the pain, Chase grabbed the man by the shoulders, and brought his knee into the man's ribcage. His kneecap drove into the ribs, shattering bone until the sternum stopped his progress. Blood lust swept through him. With a vicious twist, he broke the guy's neck before dropping the man's lifeless body to the ground.

He rounded the van a little more cautiously the second time around, just in time to see Raiz hightailing it across the parking lot with Belle's mother tossed across his shoulder. Chase pivoted on his left foot, ready to take off after them, when he caught sight of Caern wrapped up with the last two Nespharilliüm. They had him cornered against the side of the van, taking turns smashing his face into the side panel.

Shit! He might have left Belle behind, but he wasn't about to make the same mistake again. The old bitches could kiss his ass. The only way Chase would leave Caern behind was over his dead body, voices or no voices.

With a yell, Chase rushed forward, swinging Corith's sword high above his head. This time the bastards would taste blade. The Nespharilliüm closest to him broke off his attack and jumped to meet him, a sword materializing in his hand. No technique involved, Chase's swept the sword forward to meet the blade. He simply forced the sword into the Fae's blow. The blade

sliced through the man's blade continuing through his body until it hit the metal frame of the van. The Nespharillium let out an anguished howl as his body fell apart before Chase's eyes.

Chase looked down at the blood soaked blade with respect. Damn, he needed one of these puppies back at the Battle of Gaugamela. The Persians wouldn't have stood a chance against it, not that they did anyway. But, dayum!

"Chase, you going to admire that pig sticker all day or haul your butt back to the Hummer," Caern yelled, as he sprinted past.

"How'd you take care of that last guy?" Chase asked as he caught up with him.

"If you hadn't been playing 'lookie at my big ass sword', you would have seen it for yourself. You aren't the only one who knows a trick or two when it comes to kicking butt." The squeal of tires stopped Chase's reply dead in the back of his throat.

"Stop dragging and jump in. I can hear the sirens from here," Raiz yelled from the Hummer's window.

Chase let Caern take the front seat while he took the back next to Belle's mother. His leg still dangling across the asphalt, Chase scrambled to hold on as Raiz took off. The Russian banked hard to the left, slamming into a parked Neon. Chase grabbed the oh-shit handle and dragged himself in, the door catching his ankle as it slammed shut. He grunted, but ignored the pain. The scene through the cracked windshield told him he had more to worry about. Like the Russian killing them all with his driving. Chase barely had time to snag his seatbelt before Raiz took the exit from the hospital on two wheels.

Snapping on his seat belt, Chase turned his attention to the guest of honor. Myrandia was out of it, drugged-up-to-her-gills out of it. Her face hung slack around her hollow cheeks while her eyes stared blankly into space. He reached over and took her pulse. In spite of the drugs, it came through steady and strong. He let out a sigh of relief for small favors.

"Where to now?" Raiz called from the front seat.

Chase let Myrandia's hand fall absently back into her lap. "Did we pick up a tail?"

Caern shoved his head into the backseat. "We lost the last cop three blocks back. I didn't see anything else even trying to follow us."

"Raiz, take the backstreets for awhile." Chase rubbed his jaw while he let his mind work.

"What do you think I'm doing now? Give me a destination, so we're not making circles. If you need time to think say so," Raiz snapped.

"No, I know where we're going. I'm just trying to figure out the best way to get us there in one piece." Chase felt the last of his adrenaline rush fading.

"Mind letting us in on it? Flying blind kinda sucks, boss man," Caern said.

"We're going back to the Darkside," he managed to spit out before a yawn took control of his mouth.

"Why in the hell would we go back there?" Caern slammed his face between the front seats. "In case you forgot, Gardner's already sent one bad ass there to kick out butts."

"Three reasons. One, he has already sent his A-game there and we kicked his ass. He won't expect us to be stupid enough to go back. Two, he already has Belle, and probably has his hands full with her and his guests," Chase answered.

"And number three?" Caern asked.

"I need Sebastian." Chase leaned back in his seat, knowing that one would throw the Dhampyre.

And it did. "Sebastian?"

"Yeah, he's our only link to the other side, and right now, I don't much feel like talking to the bitch squad." He tossed a hand over another yawn. "That good enough for you?"

"Yep. You heard the man, Raiz. To the Darkside," Caern turned to Chase. "Tell you what. You sit back there and get that rest you promised me. We'll deal with getting us there."

Chase wiggled his back into upholstery. "Deal."

Like a good boy, he dropped his head onto the headrest. At the mention of rest, he felt the past forty eight hours catching up with him. He was honestly too tired to think. Another yawn exploded from him, as he felt his resolve to stay awake soaking away. His limbs were heavy weights he had no interest in lifting. Black lines circled his eyes, closing in with each blink.

He hadn't been completely honest with Caern. There was another reason, he needed to see Sebastian. Chase hoped against hope the ghost knew of a way to bring Belle's mother back from the damage Gardner had done to her. Belle had lost so much over the years he couldn't stand to bring this vacant husk back to her. If there was any way he could give her back a mother who was whole and not some broken toy, he would do everything in his power to do it.

Exhaustion flooded him. Chase knew he couldn't win this losing battle. As much as he wanted to force himself to stay awake, it wasn't going to happen. His last thought was a silent prayer to Belle before sleep finally claimed him.

'Belle, stay alive. I'm coming.'

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

The twin summer suns baked the back of Belle's neck. Even in the shade, the heat broiled her flesh. She looked around the dying garden, the seat of her mother's power, and wanted to cry. So many good memories were tied up with this place. To see it withering around her drove a wedge straight through her heart. It was more than pent up emotions. In her heart, Belle knew what the truth the land revealed to her.

Summer was dying. Staring at the withering evidence around her, she laid the fault squarely on John's shoulders. Belle felt the grass turning brown as the life was sucked out of it. As much as she'd like to pin all the blame on him, the true reason stood unwelcome and unwanted around her -- the Nespharillium. They didn't belong here and the Land knew it. The Land's rebellion at their presence hung thick and cloying in the air. Her connection with the realm allowed her to feel every ounce of the Land's horror at the intruders trampling around its borders.

A rain of brown leaves swirled to the ground around her. Belle didn't know how much more the land could take before it would be utterly destroyed from their decaying touch. Her head snapped up as the sound of a sword slashing into the bark of the sacred elms surrounding the courtyard filled the air. The Hectorium were systematically cutting down the eons old trees and tossing the silver trunks onto the ground like rubbish, not realizing they were destroying the lives of the dryads, who guarded the Summer Court. Their screams reverberated in her head as each one howled into the mists between the lands of the living and the dead. Not even the valiant souls of the trees dared come out to their own defense.

Belle held her anger in check. She couldn't do anything by herself, especially not with Vysion peering into her mind whenever she let her guard down. Biding her time had become an art form, one she was steadily growing tired of cultivating.

"J'hanous, soon the preparations will be complete and Dráwl will once again walk the lands of our birth. You should be proud of your role in his return." Vysion's voice filtered through the air, bringing Belle from her misery.

"Lord Vysion, I only asked for the Heart. It was never my intention--"

"Your intentions are of no consequence. The Will of Dráwl is above the petty concerns of even the lowest of the Shazhium. That was a lesson you should have learned well when in our hands. Your time among your brethren has made you weak. When our lord returns, you will know true strength." Vysion smiled as he swept his gnarled hand toward John. "Your body will be a fitting vessel for his radiance."

Belle watched the horror creep across John's face.

"That was not the bargain we struck. You were supposed to help me gain both the Lands and the mortal plane." John's voice broke into uneven squeaks.

"And so you shall." The monk walked toward him. "Not as this weak mewling creature standing before me, but as the host of the most glorious radiance of your lord and master."

"How?" John's voice cracked.

"A sacrifice of power." Vysion turned this hooded face toward Belle, freezing her in spite of the heat surrounding her.

"Belle?" John's head spun toward her.

"As the Heir of Summer, her blood will be more than sufficient to open the wards holding Dráewl within his prison."

"You can't do that!" John's eyes bugged from the recesses of his reddened face, making him look like he was about five seconds away from going ballistic.

Belle fell off her bench as her stepfather shot into the air. She scrambled to the far side of her seat, stricken by the sight of the hooded man dangling his hands in the air, like a puppet master pulling his puppet's strings. Dark powers seethed into the air. She knew this to be but a taste of what life would soon be like if this Nespharillium god had the chance to return to this realm. The fact her life was the payment for that return gave her no lasting love for the project, if you got right down to it.

"Oh, but I can. This is no longer your world. Its rightful owners have come home to take back what is theirs." Vysion cast his crooked finger toward John. "Your ilk banished us, but we will reap the garden you have sown in our absence."

"This was all a charade. You never intended to aid me. I was just a pawn to you," John screamed as he twirled above them.

"A foolish one to think we would lower ourselves to become serfs to the likes of you. We are the true gods of this world." The monk let out a maniacal laugh. "While your feeble powers are forever tied to this land, ours are a gift from our divine master."

Belle shuddered as his words rose above the screaming air. Fear wasn't strong enough to describe the emotion she felt. John had loosed the hounds of hell, and there was nothing anyone could do to stop them.

*'Hush child, there is nothing to fear,'* Eoyian whispered into her ear.

"But--" Belle caught herself, not daring to let the monk know about her ghostly guardian.

*'No buts. Let the words of madmen fill their mouths, but never allow them to dictate your destiny.'*

"Easy for you to say. You're not the one up on the menu as the sacrifice for this evening's meal." Belle couldn't believe the woman could be so calm. Sure Eoyian was a ghost but that didn't mean she knew everything.

*'Trust in Silvian, child. The future is set according to her will, not your own...'* the ghost woman's voice faded, leaving Belle more confused than ever.

Belle wasn't sure what the hell was going on, but she did know one thing. If something didn't happen soon, she'd be too dead to have a destiny. And all the ghostly intervention in the world wouldn't change that fact.

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Ignoring the wreckage that had once been Orpheus' Dream, Chase gently set Myrandia on the ruined bar. Free of the burden, he slumped beside her motionless body. He ran a hand through his hair as he stared into her lifeless face. Damn, if this wasn't a kicker. A part of him was glad Belle wasn't here to see the woman like this. She'd had enough heartbreak already without adding this to it.

He looked away from the woman. He'd hoped for some miraculous recovery once they'd gotten her out of that hell hole. No such luck. The woman hadn't made so much as a move since they'd left the hospital. Except for the warmth of her skin, he wouldn't have known the woman even had a spark of life left in her body. His own thoughts pushed him to back to her. Chase noted that her flesh had taken on a grayish pallor somewhere along the way. Damned if he could

remember if she'd looked that way back at the hospital or not. Things had been so hectic, Chase doubted he could have named the color of the sky, let alone give a medical rundown on a comatose woman.

He took a table cloth from the floor and draped it over her, hoping the thing was cleaner than it looked. In her shape, he doubted she would say anything if it was covered in pig swill, but it was the principle of the matter. Tucking it under her body, he turned around to check on Caern and Raiz. They were sacked out against the wall near the door. Raiz snored for all he was worth. Caern's eyes might be closed, but Chase knew his friend well enough to know the man feigned sleep.

The Dhampyre thought he could get away with playing mommy. Chase might be a sight more rested after his nap on the way to the bar, but Caern wouldn't believe he was anywhere close to being in fighting shape. Frankly, Chase couldn't admit to being all that convinced himself. His body might be healed and ready to go. His mind, on the other hand, wasn't in any condition to do anything short of the most basic of functions, and thinking clearly ranked way down the list.

Every thought rolling around in his head seemed bound and determined to turn to Belle. His heart ached for her. Just thinking about her in Gardner's grubby hands made his blood boil. How in the hell could he expect to think clearly with her in danger? As crazy as it sounded, he kept waiting for the bitch squad to return with some guidance on what the hell he was supposed to do. They'd gotten him into this mess, and dammit they should pipe up and tell him how the hell to get out of it. Because quite frankly, he was totally lost on where the hell they went from here. His options were limited. Going after Gardner wasn't going to work with Myrandia in her current shape, and he couldn't very well leave her behind. Raiz and Caern were the only fighting force he had. Sparing either one of them for guard duty left him a man down, so that was out of the question. He needed all the firepower he could muster. Without some input from the voices in his head, he pretty much was left holding his dick until he came up with something.

At the moment, he had only one option open to him. Get Sebastian's butt up here and see what they could do about problem one.

"Sebastian! I know you're here," Chase called out.

"Dang, Boss. Could you keep it down? I'm in mourning here," the ghost whined as he materialized.

"The bar isn't totaled. We can fix it up good as new, so get over it," Chase said, giving the ghost a dirty look. He took a step to the side, so the ghost could see Myrandia laid out on the tree in question. "I got bigger things to worry about than your stumpy house."

Seb craned his neck to peer over Chase's shoulder. "Who's the skirt?"

Chase snarled at the start of a game of Twenty Questions. "Belle's mother."

"You brought a Sidhe queen into my bar!" Sebastian shouted.

"Last time I looked, my name was on the lease." Chase waved the ghost off. "So, deal with it."

"Whatever. Is she dead, or something?" Sebastian bent over Chase to get a better look.

"No, but she's heavily drugged and in a bad way." Chase didn't even want to think about how bad that might be. "I need to know if you know how to help her."

"Got me. I'm a dryad, not a doctor, Jim," Sebastian laughed.

"Come on. There's got to be something we can do." Chase slapped his leg and whipped away from the bar. He was ready to go on a real cuss fest when a chill ran down his back.

"There is nothing you can do for her. Her mind is beyond repair. Gardner has destroyed it with his machinations."

Chase spun on his heel to see Kylanndria standing in the doorway of the bar.

"Two Sidhe queens!" Sebastian squealed before disappearing.

Chase ignored him and walked toward the Winter Queen. "If you're here to cause trouble, we got enough."

"More than you know, but I am here to aid you," she replied.

"Forgive me if I don't believe you." Chase stopped right in front her, his face nearly touching hers.

"Your fear is unfounded. Gardner's schemes have cast us as uneasy allies, it seems." The tone of her voice made him think she might be telling the truth.

"Excuse me?" Chase had trouble processing the woman's sudden turn around.

"I am well aware you know of the Nespharilliüm and Gardner's role in their reappearance. While you rescued Myrandia, John opened a doorway into the Lands. The dark ones are inside the world of the Shazhium. Their presence is a threat Winter can ill afford to ignore."

"As ruler of the Winter Court, you should be able to handle them. Why come here?" Chase really wanted the answer to that one.

"The last time the Nespharilliüm posed a threat, it took the combined might of the two Courts to defeat them." Things had to be in the far end of the shit pond for her to admit she needed help from anyone, let alone from her worst enemy.

"So, basically you need Myrandia to get rid of them?"

"Not in the shape she's in now. The Queen of Summer must wield her power." Kylanndria ran her finger down the unconscious woman's arm. "This thing is nothing but a shell. I need the heir."

"She's not here. Gardner has her," Caern yelled from the floor.

Chase could have killed him. Kylanndria may be baring her soul, but that didn't give him the warm and fuzzies enough for him to trust her just yet. Caern should know better than to let his mouth do his thinking for him. The look he shot the Dhampyre broke through whatever dumbass infected him. Caern gave him an 'I'm sorry' shrug. Chase didn't feel particularly ready to let him off the hook, just yet. In the immortal words of some nameless genius, payback's a bitch.

"Then all is lost. The Nespharilliüm will not allow her to live, knowing she is the key to their defeat," Kylanndria stated to Chase's dismay.

Well, he wouldn't go down like this. He'd waited too many lifetimes for a woman like Belle, to let her die once he'd found her. "Can you take me to the Lands?"

"Chase, what the hell are you thinking?" Caern grabbed him by the arm and jerked him around. "You can't take on these guys. You heard Frosty, she can't even take 'em out. What makes you so damn fire sure you can?"

"I ain't trying to do shit to them." Chase shrugged off his hand. "They can burn the place down for all I care, but no way in hell am I leaving Belle there."

"You are quite mistaken. The Nespharilliüm will not stop their conquest with the homelands." Kylanndria came between them. "When it is a barren wasteland, they will come for this world. Dræwl is a hungry god. Only by working together can we save Bellaronia and defeat them."



Chase hated to admit it but the bitch was right. "Lady, I trust you about as far as I can throw you."

She raised an eyebrow. "Is that a no?"

"It's an, *I'm fucked if I do, and screwed if I don't*," Chase grumbled, knowing she had him by the short and curlies.

Kylanndria licked her lips. "An interesting analogy, most provocative."

"It ain't an invitation, it's a statement of fact." He snarled into her face. "Understand this. If it wasn't for Belle you could kiss my ass, and the rest of your people could go to hell. We crystal?"

"What colorful speech you have." She laughed snowflakes into the air. "If crystal means I understand perfectly, then yes we are crystal. I was not proposing a lasting truce."

"Good, I wasn't accepting one. I take it you have a plan to get us close to the bad guys." Chase might not feel quite up to trusting the bitch, but was willing to work with her -- with one eye open.

"As with all things, our only advantage is surprise." She pursed her lips. "Unfortunately, my resources are limited but I have some agents in Summer's domain. They are keeping me appraised on the Nespharillium's movements."

"Spying on the enemy. Shame. Shame," Caern snorted.

"Yeah, but which one, Summer or the Nespharillium?" Chase had a good idea which one, but wanted her to say it.

"Why both of course. Just as I'm sure Summer has its own agents within my realm," Kylanndria smiled. "I never claimed to be anything other than what I was."

"Well, right now, the situation calls for a ruthless bitch. Guess you'll do." Chase picked at his jacket, wondering how she'd take that hunk of truth.

"I believe I'll take that as a complement. If you two are through playing the comedians, can we get back to the issue at hand?" Chase gave a wave of his hand for her to continue. "My agents tell me they are congregating inside the royal courtyard. My powers can get me to the barrier of Summer's domain, but not inside the palace proper without an invitation."

"So, that's where we come in?" Chase asked.

"In so many words, yes. It's risky, but one of you will have to cross the barrier and get close enough to Bellaronia to tell her to say, '*Kylanndria, queen of the court of Winter, I invite you into the heart of summer*'." Kylanndria paused. "But she must speak the words in the old tongue. That is the only way I can be of any good in this endeavor."

"Risky doesn't even begin to cover it. That's fucking suicide!" Caern exploded.

"Perhaps," Kylanndria replied. "But it's the only way."

Chase didn't even have to think twice. "I'll do it, provided you give me your word, the first thing you do is get Belle clear of the place."

Kylanndria bowed her head. "You have my word."

"Oh, hell naw!" Caern shouted.

"Caern do you have a better plan?" Chase demanded. "Because if you do, spill it. Otherwise, this is it."

The Dhampyre remained speechless. Chase could see the motor in his friend's head ticking as he tried to come up with something. Caern would just have to see reason. This was all they had. Caern fell back on the bar, frustration playing tennis across his face. Then Chase saw a spark of something, as the Dhampyre caressed the oak bar.

"Frosty, you said you can't go inside the Summer court without an invitation. Right?" Caern asked, excitement brimming over in his voice.

Kylanndria nodded.

He continued. "And since you didn't suggest sending one of us, that means you can't get us into the castle either?"

She nodded again.

"But what about something inanimate," Caern patted the bar. "Like a hunk of this bar."

Suddenly, Chase got it. "Sebastian?"

"Yep, he knows the lay of the land. He's a ghost, so he can't be hurt."

"And he's got a mouth and ain't afraid to use it." Hot damn, this just might work. Chase looked at Kylanndria. "Can you do it?"

She waved her fingers at the bar. "Yes, but what good would a piece of wood do?"

"Sebastian," Chase barked out the dryad's name. "Get your butt solid."

"Ru-roh. No way in hell, Velma," the ghost's voice drifted through the air.

"Dammit, Caern! I told you getting him the Cartoon Network would come back to bite us in the butt. Instead of Casper, you got us the frigging ghost of Scooby Doo past."

"What is this Sebastian?" Kylanndria asked.

"He's the damn dryad in the bar -- or the ghost of one who lives in the bar. Take your pick. Most of the time, he's a pain in our asses," Caern answered.

"I see the value in your plan. It is a good one. If he is tied to the oak in the bar, as you say, a small fragment could in theory be sent through the barrier. Using Myrandia as a focal point, I can send it directly into Bellaronia's hand."

Caern grabbed the sword from beside Chase. "May I?"

Chase smiled, stepping aside. "By all means."

"Sebastian, get your ass out here." The Dhampyre ran a finger across the corner of the bar. "You've just been drafted."

"I'm ready to break the don't ask, don't tell policy," the ghost's voice called out.

"Too late. We don't give a shit." Caern lifted the sword and brought it down on the corner of the bar, slicing a hand sized chunk out of the wood.

The ghost let out a painful howl and appeared where the chunk lay on the floor. "Dammit, C! That hurt."

"It's going to hurt more, if you don't do what we say," Chase growled. "I'd hate to see this thing chopped up for firewood."

"You wouldn't!" Sebastian's mouth chewed the air.

"Try me." An evil grin slashed Chase's face.

"I'd believe him. He's not playing," Caern warned.

"All this for some girl. If I didn't love you guys, I'd consider moving to a classier dive," Sebastian huffed.

Chase bent and scooped the piece of the bar from the floor, tossing it toward Kylanndria. "Here, get to work."

"One of you grab Myrandia, and we may go," she replied.

"Wait a minute, what do we need her for?" Chase's suspicion came racing back.

"She is the focal point. I can't work the spell here, outside the barrier, or without her."

"Okay, but no funny stuff." Ignoring her for the moment, he turned and saw Raiz still snoring away. "Caern, go wake up Sleeping Beauty. It's time to go."

That should pay him back for running his mouth. Didn't solve any of the problems, but it did make Chase feel better. While Caern dealt with Raiz, he bent and gently picked Myrandia up from the bar. Her body felt feather light in his arms. He stared into her face and saw so much of Belle, he nearly broke down right there. Chase hoped this wasn't some foreshadowing of things to come. Without Belle, his life would be meaningless -- as empty as the eyes staring back up at him.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

Chase squatted, letting the balls of his feet support his weight as he rocked back and forth, glaring into the mists. He ignored the pain shooting up the back of his thighs. Physical pain he could deal with. They were old friends. This agony consuming his mind and soul, on the other hand, had to be some new tribulation the fates had deemed to thrust upon him. Chase would gladly tear out his own heart, if it would relieve the ache he felt searing him to his core, but knew it would do no good. Chase knew, without a shadow of a doubt, only one thing would ease his pain -- Belle.

His fingers idly twirled the blades of grass that he'd ripped from the loamy earth at his feet sometime during his trip down melancholy lane. He'd done his best to hold it together, but standing this close to the Summer Court, and not being able to go to Belle, felt a hundred different kinds of wrong.

Over the centuries, he'd never seen himself as a hero, and he damn well knew he wasn't some knight in shining armor. His hands were too black with the blood of innocents for that shit. Right now, he'd give anything to be one. Belle deserved a hero to come to her rescue, not some bastard cursed for what he did best once upon a time -- murdering people in cold blood. If one happened along, Chase would be more than willing to send one in there to save her. He'd do anything it took to get her out of the mess Gardner had gotten her into.

*'Breachashe, you are the hero she needs,'* Eoyian's voice spoke into his mind.

"Yeah, I can see that. Your centuries of positive reinforcement have made me so secure in my herodome," Chase grunted, not caring what the ghost had to say.

*'I never said you were worthy of the title. I just said you were the one she needs.'*

"Great distinction you've made there."

*'Whether you believe it or not, your life has had worth. I am loath to say this, but after you saw the error of your ways, you were quick to attempt to redeem yourself.'*

"Where's the but?" Chase looked up, expecting her to be standing beside him. Only blank space greeted him.

*'There is no but. The rest is up to you. Will you wallow in your misery, or step up and be the man Bellaronia needs?'*

Chase didn't even bother to reply. She'd given him too much to think about and he knew she had finished tormenting him for the time being. He'd spent enough time in retrospection. If he stood a chance in hell of getting through this, he had to stop looking back and look toward the future. As far as he was concerned, the only future he had included Belle, alive and well. So, if he had to toss out all his old hang-ups and try to be something he obviously wasn't, so be it.

"Hey, Chase. She's ready," Caern called from the other side of their makeshift camp.

Chase tossed aside the mutilated grass as he rose from his crouch. The mists swirled across the plains, revealing a pale smear of brown grass that seemed to wither under the bright suns shining overhead. Was it him, or did it seem hotter here than it did the last time Belle brought him into the Lands? Then again, his mind really hadn't exactly been on the weather. Not dying had taken up a lot of his time.

"You coming, or what?" Caern yelled.

"Yeah, have you calmed Sebastian down any?" Chase asked, walking back to his friends.

"He's not sobbing anymore, so I guess he is, but if a ghost could piss himself I think he would be doing a lemonade dance in his pants," Caern said, drawing a chuckle from Raiz, who leaned against a tree just inside the grove.

"I would never," Sebastian whined, appearing in the shadows next to Raiz.

"Sure you wouldn't, big guy." Caern cocked his head, giving Chase a wink.

"Where's Kylanndria?" Chase grumbled, in no mood for their banter.

"Inside the grove," Raiz pointed behind him. "The frost bitch said she needed silence to complete the final preparations for the spell."

"With you three around, it's no wonder," Chase said, as he passed Raiz to enter the hollow between two trees. "I'm going to chat with Frosty. You three get ready to roll."

Chase didn't wait around to hear their complaints. Kylanndria still worried him. Her reasons to the contrary, he couldn't bring himself to completely trust her. He knew she had an ulterior motive, even if helping them just so happened to be in her best interest. He might be willing to put himself on the firing block to get Belle back, but he wasn't about to do anything that would endanger the standing of the Summer Court. This land belonged to her by right, and giving Kylanndria an inch of it didn't figure into the game plan.

He found the Winter queen kneeling inside a small clearing. Even in the heat, Chase felt the chill from the Queen of Winter. A thin sheen of ice crystals covered her nude body. In the green light filtering from overhead, she looked like a shimmering emerald statue. Chase would be impressed by the sight, if he didn't know the truth behind the glamour she wore.

"Are you stalking me, Mr. Michaels?" Her voice dripped like frozen honey, but Chase knew better than to fall for her tricks.

"Not if you were the last bitch on earth."

"So, I take it your skulking is not personal, but rather for professional reasons." She turned, giving Chase more than an ample view of her varied assets. Too bad it amounted to a wasted effort.

"Look, mind tossing on some clothes?" Chase turned his head.

"If my glorious form disturbs you, I shall acquiesce." Chase looked up to see ice form over her naughty bits into a close approximation of a camisole.

"You can cut the sex kitten act, too. It ain't working on me," Chase snapped.

"Bellaronia picked her lover well. You will make a champion worthy of Summer," Kylanndria bowed.

Chase couldn't decide whether she was mocking him, or serious. It really didn't matter either way. This wasn't about him.

"Look, Kylanndria. We need to get a few things out of the way before this thing kicks off. I'm not stupid enough to believe you're helping us for some greater good."

"You know me well. Having Summer beholden to Winter will swing the balance ever so slightly into my favor. It will gall the bright court to know they owe their existence to me."

He captured her gaze and bore a hole directly to her frigid soul. "And that's it. Nothing else?"

"Well, it did occur to me to ask for half of Summer, but the implied threat of my doing so is enough to appease me." Now that Chase could believe, but he wanted something more than her word.

"I want your oath as Queen of Winter you will not come back and demand anything more from Belle or her mother," Chase looked her in the eyes, and held her gaze.

"If it will make you feel better. I, Kylanndria, High Queen of Winter and all the lands adjacent to the frozen realm, hereby swear upon the life of my people I shall not seek reparations from my sister court for my role in today's endeavor." Kylanndria gave him a smile. "Is that satisfactory?"

"It'll work," Chase grunted.

"Good, if you don't mind, let's get this started. The Nespharillium are damaging the Lands with their presence. If we tarry overlong it will be too late to stop them." She turned her back on him and gestured toward the way he'd come. "Call your friends."

He didn't have to. Caern and Raiz walked in from the edge of the clearing.

"You guys hear everything?" he asked, with a smile. Somehow he doubted they were too worried about being accused of eavesdropping, but it was nice to know they had his back if it'd come down to it.

"Yeah, you feeling better after getting that off your chest?" Caern asked, twirling Sebastian's piece of the bar over his fingertips.

"I'll feel better when Belle is safe," Chase answered curtly.

"So will we all, my friend." The weight of Raiz's hand on his shoulder gave him a piece of reassurance.

In spite of his foul mood, his friends were with him. Damn, he didn't deserve their loyalty. Especially since in all likelihood, he could very well be leading them to their death. If he was any type of friend, he'd send both of them packing.

"I know that look. We're not going anywhere except into that castle, or whatever the hell it is. We crystal, Athos?" Caern slapped him against the back of the head.

"Why can't I be Porthos?" Chase laughed, rubbing his head.

"Because I'm more the Oliver Reed type, and you're too damn serious," Caern answered glibly.

"Nyet, I should be Porthos. You are Aramis if you are anyone," Raiz snorted.

"What say we settle this after we save Belle?" Chase asked, feeling they actually had a chance in hell of pulling this off for the first time since this whole mess started.

The sight of a troop of what could only be called Frost Giants entering the clearing sobered him. He counted ten of them, the smallest standing a solid thirteen feet high. Chase didn't even want to estimate on what the biggest one topped out at. He pulled his two friends to the side as the giants filed past to stand behind Kylanndria. The last carried Myrandia's unconscious body in its arms. Only Caern's hand on his arm stopped Chase from making a fool of himself in attempting to take the woman from the giant.

He could only stand back and watch as the Winter Queen placed her hands flat over the ground. Instantly an altar of ice formed in front of her. Kylanndria motioned for the monster to set the woman on the block of frozen air. Belying his appearance, the giant set the Queen of Summer gently on the altar before bowing and moving to join his comrades. Kylanndria turned to the trio, her face a grim mask.

"From this point onward, there is no turning back for either of us. Our fates are intertwined. Bellaronia's life, ours, and all that the Shazhium holds dear, is our prize. This is no battle for the weak at heart." She paused. "If anyone wishes to walk away, now is the time."

Chase flinched, as Sebastian appeared beside him.

"Don't worry, Chase. I'm not going to say anything, even though if I had a lick of sense I should. If you want to fall in love with the High muckidy-muck Sidhe and risk everyone's life to

save her, who am I to stand in your way, but that plasma just got bumped up to a sixty-two inch with high def and a Blue Ray DVD player."

"Anything else?" Chase grinned.

"Yeah, I want you and Caern to keep your asses alive," Sebastian answered.

"You aren't going soft on me, are you?" Chase asked.

"Hell no! I'm just saying if you two end up dead, who's going to buy my TV?"

"Good, cuz I couldn't take it if you turned Good Samaritan on me."

"You can bet your ass, that ain't going to happen," Sebastian snorted.

Chase wanted to say something more, but Kylanndria threw her arms into the air. Electricity froze the air as she began her spell. He couldn't understand the sing song language flowing from her lips, but he understood the power behind them. He'd heard it once before -- the day he found himself cursed. Suddenly, it struck him that maybe the old biddies really did have this planned out from the beginning.

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The Nespharilliüm busied themselves across the once verdant garden. From the dead bodies of the guardian trees, a platform began to take shape. Belle watched them with growing dread. John and this Vysion character had disappeared into the shadows surrounding the Temple of Silvian. Even though the goddess had fallen silent to the plight of her children long before Belle's grandmother's grandmother had been born, the old ways still held true, and her temple to this day overlooked both courts of the Sidhe, so that her children would not forget the womb from which their race had sprung to life.

To see the structure perverted by the dark Fae tore at her heart. The great statues of the handmaidens lay broken in front of the massive doors leading into the temple proper. The monuments had been the first things the Hektorium had destroyed. In their place now stood twin images of a foul beast birthed from a nightmare from hell itself. Belle shivered, as a shadow fell over the sky.

She looked up to see storm heads racing across the blue blanket covering the land. A chill ran down Belle's spine. She looked around for some sign of where it came from, but the only thing that greeted her was the taste of cold dead air. While the twin suns of Summer peeked from behind the clouds to bake her with their heat, a chill permeated her all the way to her bones.

Rising from her seat, Belle rubbed her arms and walked into the drizzle of sunlight escaping from the clouds. The warmth proved to be no balm for the chill. The invasion by the dark ones must be having a worse affect on the land than she thought. Since the suns offered no comfort, Belle saw little cause to stand under their useless kiss. If she was to end up a sacrifice to some freaky dark god, she could at least be a well rested lamb to the slaughter.

She turned to sit down, only to stumble over something in her path. Looking down Belle saw a block of wood between her feet. It hadn't been there when she walked into the sunlight. She was sure of it. The chunk looked no bigger than the size of her fist. There was no way she could have missed something like that, especially since she been staring at the plot of dirt all day and would have noticed it, if for no other reason than there was pitifully little to look at. Bending down, her fingers grazed the rough hewn piece of oak. Belle couldn't shake the feeling that she recognized it but belonging to something bigger.

"Belle," a voice whispered in her ear, sending her sprawling across her marble bench. Before she could cry out, Sebastian's face appeared in front of her. "Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

Relief flooded her. It took her a second or two but Belle finally recognized Sebastian's voice. Expecting Chase to be nearby, she brought her head up to peer across the courtyard.

"Where's Chase?" she asked, when no sign of him appeared.

"He's back beyond the borders of your domain. The dumbass has teamed up with the Winter Court, of all people, to get you out of this mess."

"Why the hell would he do that?" Belle caught herself and let her voice drift back to a whisper.

"To save you. They've called a truce until those guys are gone," he pointed over her shoulder to the Nespharillium.

"Then, why aren't they with you?"

"Because she can't enter your kingdom without the permission of Summer."

Well, duh. She should have remembered that. The two courts weren't allowed to trespass onto the other's lands without the leave of the Queen. If that was the case, why not ask her mother to do it? She wasn't the queen. Since mom wasn't here with her and John, she'd assumed Chase had saved mom and had her safely tucked away. Worry flooded her. Even if she didn't like the answer, she had to know.

"Sebastian, is my mother with Chase?"

The ghost looked away.

"Sebastian, where is my mother?" A knot formed in the pit of her stomach. If she could have strangled the answer from him, she would have.

"Belle, she's with Chase, but..." He refused to look up from the ground.

"But what?" Belle demanded.

"Look, I hate to be the bearer of bad news. Really I do, but she's not there anymore." The ghost tapped the side of his head. "Whatever your stepfather did to her has done something to her mind. Her body is there, but the rest of her has gone bye-bye."

Belle sank to the ground. She should have expected it. Her mother had left long ago. It had been so long since Belle saw the woman who once lived in her mother's eyes. Truthfully, she couldn't even remember well enough to picture the memory clearly in her mind. That didn't change the love she felt for her. Now to hear her worst fears confirmed, the last fragment of her past had finally slipped away. She was truly alone now.

No she wasn't. She had Chase. If you wanted to get technical, Caern, Raiz and even the ghost were her family now. All of them were willing to risk their lives for her, while her own people sat back. Belle couldn't deny the emptiness she felt, but with Chase in her life it seemed smaller -- easier to handle.

"Belle, are you okay?" Sebastian asked. "You're crying and I'm not really up to dealing with crying at the moment."

"Yeah, I'm fine." Belle wiped her face dry. She hadn't even realized the tears had been falling. She sucked the last of her tears back where they belonged. When this was over she would deal with it, but for now the important thing was getting out of this alive. "So, I hope Chase has a plan?"

"Uh, yeah. Kylanndria has an army waiting outside Summer's borders. They need you to invite Kylanndria in. Then they can come charging in. The cavalry they ain't, but what do you expect?" Sebastian said, giving her a big grin, which helped some to calm her down.



Belle opened her mouth, ready to invite in everybody from Rambo to the Boy Scouts, when Sebastian motioned for her to stop.

"I forgot, they said you had to say it in the High Language, if that makes any sense."

It did, but not that it would help her any. Whatever fragments of the old language she knew had fallen through the cracks of her memory long ago. When her mother stopped actively assuming her duties as the leader of the Summer Court, speaking the old tongue like so many things ceased to be important. If only she could remember one stinking word, Belle knew with certainty the rest would come.

"What have we here?" Vysion's voice rolled across the courtyard, jarring the thoughts from her mind. "J'hanous, it appears the Palace of Summer is haunted."

Sebastian let out an anguished howl. Belle instinctively reached for him but her hand slipped through the whisper of his arm, as the ghost was pulled toward the hooded monk. She staggered after him, his screams filling the air. Vysion's fingers danced upon the air, each twist and turn of his wrist making the dryad scream even louder.

"Leave him alone," Belle was amazed by the sound of her voice. She couldn't believe she'd found the courage to scream out.

Instantly, Vysion's hands fell to his side. "You actually feel for this apparition. But why? He is of no consequence to anyone. Whatever existence he has is at the whim of those who control him."

"He is a person! Life or death doesn't change that fact," Belle sobbed as Sebastian writhed on the ground.

"No wonder the Master wishes to reshape this world. The Shazhium have grown weak." Vysion walked across the courtyard, pausing before the ghost. "Even in life, this plant was nothing. We are the rulers, not these beasts. Their lives are ours to do with as we please. And it pleases me to extinguish this one from life and death."

Ebony lightning sprang from the monk's gnarled fist. Belle flinched back as a foul smile shown from the folds of Vysion's hood. Belle knew she should be afraid, but she wasn't. Rage flooded her. The Shazhium were the caretakers of this world, not its overlords. These bastards might be hot shit where they're from, but this was her land -- her responsibility. Belle might not be able to save herself but by Silvian she was going to save Sebastian.

Rising to her feet, Belle made up her mind. She refused to lie down and die like some meek lamb. If Vysion wanted a willing sacrifice, he came to the wrong place. Determination etched into her face, Belle marched toward the hooded monk.

"Vysion, I said leave him the hell alone!" she shouted to be heard over the sound of crackling energy.

"Girl, you have no way to stop me. This is Dræwl's will at work," he hissed from the folds of darkness covering his face. "What can you do to stop it?"

"This, you loathsome son of a bitch!" Belle thrust her arms into the air, trusting that Eoyian or whatever spirits that still watched over her would give words to the blankness festering in her mind. And suddenly they came.

*"Isa Bellaronia sectate l'dourane di Myranndia Supremis Summeiran investa Kylanndria Supremis Wintorium ti dela cortus l'Summerian."*

Snow filled the air. First a few stray flakes melting to mist as soon as they appeared. In the span of seconds the entire courtyard became a whirling mass of snow. Belle saw huge shapes moving in the white shadows but couldn't make them out. She ignored them. Winter had entered Summer by her invitation. She'd opened that door, so it was too late to worry about it now.

Right now, she had to get to Sebastian. Belle seriously doubted Vysion would let this blizzard stop him for long. The ghost had risked too much getting here to help her for her to let him come to any harm. Pushing up from the ground, she dashed for the spot she last remembered seeing them. The wind lashed at her clothes, freezing her face and bare arms. She struggled to make her way across the yard. The gale force breeze batting at her made it hard going, but she refused to let anything stop her from reaching the ghost.

Through a break in the storm, Belle saw Vysion sending blasts of black lightning into overcast sky. She peered through the haze of snow and smoke for some sign of Sebastian. The ghost was nowhere to be seen. A blast of black light whizzed past her, singeing the air against her face. The whole courtyard exploded with the wild magic dancing from the priest's hands. Belle ducked to avoid a stray blast that scorched the ground in front of her.

Belle finally had to admit she couldn't reach the ghost. Trying to get to him would end up becoming a suicide mission if she pressed her luck. Either her ploy had put Sebastian out of danger or he was beyond her help.

"Belle!" The sound of Chase's voice carried from across the white battlefield, blocking all thoughts of the ghost from her head.

The urgency in his mournful yell brought Belle's head spinning around. In the confusion, she couldn't tell from which direction his call came from. The screaming wind and clang of weapons mixed with the unmistakable report of gunfire made it hard to tell where she was let alone anyone else.

Staying alive had to be her first priority for the time being. Belle had to trust that she would find Chase, or he would find her. An anguished howl rang out above the screaming wind. Belle barely had time to move out of the way, before a frost giant crashed through the fog, landing where she had been standing. She dashed in the opposite direction as two of the Hecorium came bounding after the monster to finish what they had started.

The sound of battle intensified as she threaded her way through more fighting. Her mind attempted to dredge up the layout of the courtyard, but couldn't reconcile the white world around her with her memories of her family home. Belle felt like she'd been transported to another world. Suddenly, she found herself at the steps leading up to the Temple of Silvian. Without a second thought, she dashed up the stairs. The safety the temple offered wasn't much, but possibly it would give her time to catch her breath out of the freezing weather and allow her to figure out her next move.

Reaching the top, strong hands gripped her by the shoulders and slammed her hard against the cold marble of the temple's outer walls. Black spots circled the whiteness covering her eyes. Her vision quickly cleared, but once it had she wished for the bliss of ignorance. John's leering face glared into hers. His flesh was marred by minor cuts and a thin line of blood sat frozen onto the flesh of his forehead and cheek. His hand clamped down the involuntary scream that exploded its way up her throat.

"Game's up, bitch!" Foam ringed John's mouth, as he pressed her roughly against the wall. "Your friends can't save you now."

Belle looked past him to see the hooded shadow of Lord Vysion standing in the doorway of the temple. A line of Hecorium stood on either side of the monk. Her eyes darted toward the courtyard, looking for Chase to come rushing to the rescue. An empty white void greeted her with not even the sound of battle to let her know the world outside existed. Belle knew then that it was too late. John and Vysion had won. If they got her inside the temple, it would take a miracle to save her. And she was afraid they were all out of miracles.

## Chapter Thirty

Chase grunted as Corith's sword slid easily from a dying Hecorium. Black ichor gushed over the cursed warrior's hand, the warmth a shocking contrast to the cold biting into his body. He kicked the body away wiping his hand across his blood soaked leg. The symphony of battle, the voices raised in death, sang out to him. For the first time since before the bitches and the temple, Chase felt alive.

The call of the warrior filling him, Chase scanned the area, more than ready for his next victim. Blood lust didn't figure into it. Swinging the blade into a rush of dark Fae, his brain ticked off each newly fallen foe, because every dead warrior put him one step closer to Belle. He didn't care if he had to kill every living thing on this plane and the next, but by whatever gods still watched over him, he would find her.

Caern moved through the dying snow off to his left. Blood covered the Dhampyre, but he appeared mobile enough to fight. Turning his head, a blur caught his eye. The larger hulking shape of Raiz moved just to his right. Chase let out a sigh of relief. For the moment the fact his comrades were safe allayed some of his fears. His gut told him the two knew the risks before jumping on his crazy train, but if either of them fell, Chase wasn't sure he could've lived with that. Shaking his head, he cleared the bad mojo from his brain. Positive thoughts. Positive thoughts. Damn, Sebastian and his addiction to Dr. Phil. Now, wasn't the time to go touchy feely. Just the idea made him want to kill something.

Right now, he needed to focus on finding Belle. He'd caught sight of her when they and Kylanndria's army dropped into the courtyard. Sometime after the shit started hitting the fan, he'd lost track of her in the chaos. The rush of the Nespharillium into the fray had stopped any chance he had of getting to the woman he loved. After the initial skirmish, simply staying alive had been a challenge. Chase couldn't count the number of foes who had fallen to the Horned God's blade. Until the last of the bastards fell, it wouldn't stop its song of death.

Caern waved to him from across the battlefield. Chase allowed him a nod, as he continued his search for Belle. Dammit to hell, the Frost Queen could cut out the winter wonderland. Visibility had diminished down to nothing. In the heat of battle, they needed the edge, but now the mess was more of a hindrance than a help.

Thinking about the Sidhe, made Chase realize he hadn't seen the woman since they came through the portal. The giants he'd seen, but nothing of Kylanndria. Somehow, he doubted it likely she'd pull a disappearing act in the middle of battle. Hang back until the fighting ended, he could see her doing. Up and leaving without finding out who came out on top, didn't seem like her style. She'd want to know, pure and simple.

"You guys seen Kylanndria?" he asked, as his two friends sauntered up to him.

"She was over by the temple when we first arrived with Belle's mother, but I haven't seen her since the fighting started," Caern answered, dragging his bloody hand down his pants.

"Well, we need to round her up. Gardner has given us the slip and we need her ass to get in gear and find him, because more than likely he's wherever they're keeping Belle." Chase pushed through the men making for the temple.

"Michaels, wait," Kylanndria's voice sliced through the air.

Chase drew up, as the Winter Queen strode into view. "About time you showed up."

"It took all my attention keeping the storm in force. I could not allow the battle to distract me." The thin lines in her face told Chase she wasn't lying. She looked like she'd aged a hundred years since they'd come through the portal.

"Think you can kill the storm?" Chase pushed past her toward the temple.

"It is already dissipating, but it will take time for the Magics to completely diminish. I expended much of my power to keep it in place here at the heart of Summer's power." Chase caught her as she nearly collapsed into his arms.

"Dammit! Are you okay?"

"I'm just weak, warrior." He wasn't buying it.

Chase hitched her up but kept a firm grip on the woman. "Like hell you are. Lady, you're dead on your feet."

*'She is more than that, Brechashe. The Queen of Winter is dying in truth.'* Eoyian said as she appeared before them. Her form solid enough, it drew gasps from the others.

"What do you mean she's dying?" Chase demanded.

*'Kylanndria used the total of herself to defend the three of you from the Nespharillium's attack. Unless she returns to her court soon, Winter will cease to exist.'*

Chase turned to Kylanndria. "Is she telling the truth?"

"Yes, my life force is fleeting. Already I can feel the heat of death filling me," she said, her voice a muffled echo.

Chase motioned for Caern to help him keep Kylanndria on her feet. "Then why are you still here?"

"Because without me to aid you, you will not stand a chance against the Nespharillium. My life is nothing compared to that of my people. The enemy must not be allowed to win."

Chase didn't know what to think. Selflessness was not an attribute he'd figured the woman to have. Suddenly he saw grays in the black and white world he'd created in his mind.

"Go home," he told her finally.

"But you will need me," she gasped.

"I'll need you in your own realm. If we can't pull this off, somebody has to be ready to stand against these fuckers. The way I see it, you're the only one who can bring the Shazhium together to fight them. All I ask is that you take Belle's mother with you..."

*'Myrandia stays!'* Eoyian interrupted.

"You can't be serious. She's a fucking zombie. There's no way I'm letting her stay here in the line of fire," Chase said in disbelief.

*'This is her place. The fate of Summer is hers. If it is her well being that concerns you, we, the priestesses of Silvian, shall be her guardians.'*

Chase had officially heard it all now. Ghosts were going to babysit the comatose queen of the Sidhe while he, a half-vamp and a Russian were-bear took on the might of the vilest army this side of hell. Sure. Why not. Nothing else made any sense, why should this.

"You heard the lady. Have your guards bring Myrandia over here, then you and the golly frosty giants hit the bricks," Chase said, rubbing his temples with his free hand.

Kylanndria lifted her head and kissed him on the cheek, leaving a touch of frost on his flesh.

"What the hell was that for?" Chase asked, rubbing the spot.

"For being the champion for our people. If you survive, you will have the Court of Winter as your humble servant," Kylanndria said, as she pulled herself from his arms.

"Tell you what. You can shove your servant bullshit and just be ready with an army if things get hairy," Chase said, feeling more misty than he should have.

"Your bluster betrays you, Knight of Spring. I have every confidence you will find victory long before you have need of an army -- mine or otherwise." Two Frost Giants moved through the dying mists and took hold of their queen. "But, we shall be ready for your call."

Before Chase could reply, the pair of frost giants lifted her between them, while another pair appeared with Myrandia resting in the arms of the smaller of the two. The monster laid the Queen of Summer in Chase's arms, then stepped back. Kylanndria motioned for her guardians to join her. With a bow they disappeared, leaving Chase more than a little confused.

"Okay, you happy now?" Chase grunted, looking around for the priestess.

*'All things proceed as Silvian wills. Happiness is not mine to feel,'* Eoyian said, flatly.

"Now that we're got the Vulcan phrase of the day, where the hell is Sebastian?" In the midst of everything else he'd forgotten the ghost, but now he needed the bugger.

*'We have the dryad with us in the temple of your mind. The monk of Dræwl was not kind to him.'*

"Tough shit, I need his ass, so go get him," Chase snarled. He grew tired of them calling all the shots. It was about time they learned he was the one in charge of this suicide mission.

"Dammit, Chase! Can't you let me have a little peace and quiet?" Sebastian whined as he appeared next to Eoyian.

"Not til this mess is over." Chase peered through the fog, hoping for some sign of Belle. "We've got bigger issues than your R and R."

"Well, what's so important that you need me?"

"I need someone I can trust to keep an eye of Belle's mother. Since Caern and Raiz are the only ones I trust at my back, you just got tagged to be our back-up. If things go south, I want you to make sure they take Myrandia someplace safe," Chase point toward Eoyian, then careful to keep the unconscious woman firmly in his grasp bent down and took the Sebastian's block of wood from the ground and put it in her hand. "And to make sure you're along for the trip this is going with her."

"Aw shucks, I didn't know you cared," Sebastian beamed.

"Don't let it go to your head. This is more for her, than you," Chase didn't believe the lie and really didn't expect Seb to, either. The ghost had already done more than enough just getting them here, Chase wasn't about to put him in even more danger. The fact the rest of them were probably about to go to their death, was enough to lay on his conscience.

*'We will care for them both, Brechashe. You have my word they will come to no harm while in my care.'*

"I'm holding you to that." He gave the woman a bow of the head, but the respect was all he was willing to allow the woman.

She returned his gesture. *'One last aid may I give you, warrior. The dark ones are inside the temple of the holy mother. You don't have much time. Already they are opening the gateway for Dræwl.'*

"You heard her. Caern, Raiz, time to roll." Chase drew Corith's sword from the frozen ground, tossing it over his shoulder.

He knew instinctively, without looking back, his friends had fallen in step behind him. True to Kylanndria's word, the snow had stopped falling. The heat had returned with a vengeance turning the courtyard into a mist covered charnel house. Mud clung to his boots, dragging his

feet into the soft ground. Chase took no notice of it. He'd already focused his mind on getting to Belle.

Chase registered the small things happening around him. Caern clicking rounds into his spare magazine, the shuffle of Raiz's feet in the muddy earth as he shifted into his true form, all these things he heard, accepted as truth, but they didn't matter.

Mounting the steps to the temple, Chase knew in the next few seconds one way or another, the rest of his immortal life would be decided. If it didn't include Belle, any life he had would be death -- a living death devoid of any meaning. He'd already been through that, and wasn't prepared to do it again. When this was done he would live or the shadows of the Willowing could have him. Without her, one way or another, the land beyond life would be his.

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Belle decided to stop fighting them. Even as the Nespharilliüm placed her on Silvian's desecrated altar, she didn't so much as flinch. Let them do whatever they wanted to her. Giving up hadn't figured into her decision. Calmness settled over her the minute she entered the temple. Belle didn't know how, but she knew this was the way things must be.

Rough hands slid along her arms, stopping at the wrist to hold her in place. Belle looked up to see the hooded shadows of Vysion's face smile as the dark one clasped manacles into place around her wrists. Cold fire singed her wrists from where the metal touched her flesh. She winced as the chill of two more bands snapped around her ankles.

Blocking out the feel of the monk's dried flesh lingering on her leg, Belle tried not to think about the sacrilege Vysion had done to the goddess's holy seat. The runes etched darkness into the stark whiteness of Silvian's altar mocked her effort, denying her the oblivion she sought.

"Don't fear the unknown, my child. My master is a benevolent god. In death, you will be joined to him -- body and soul." Vysion's foul breath ate at the skin of her cheek as he bent over her.

"Excuse me if I don't feel privileged for the honor," she snarled, turning her face away from him.

His gnarled fingers caught her chin, and twisted her face back to his. "Misguided child, the time for bravado is long past. The age of the Shazhium ends today."

"Lord Vysion, all is ready." Belle looked up at the sound of John's voice.

"Good, J'hanous. Take the Blade of Night from its case. Soon, my dear. I can hear the god's cry through the veil." He cocked his head to the side, tilting it upward. "He grows impatient for his rebirth."

John's shadow crossed over her. Belle glanced up to see John's blank face looming over her. A curved three foot blade rested in his hand. The light from the candles set in a circle around the altar caught the runes engraved in the folded metal of the black blade, making them glow violet in the darkness surrounding her.

Vysion moved to stand at her head, while John stood at her feet. From the shadows of the temple, a soft drumming began, the sound a gentle heartbeat echoing in the darkness. From above her, Vysion started chanted, his voice a mixture of mumbles and grunts, yet she knew it to be the language of his god. With an inhuman shriek, the monk called to his master and the breach between worlds opened that would usher the god back into being. The chant grew louder as Vysion continued, until the sound of his voice filled the temple with its intensity.

Belle closed her eyes, willing her ears to block out the sound. Death whispered in her ear. She knew her life could be counted in seconds not minutes. The energy of Vysion's spell filled the domed chamber, the oppressive weight of it pressing her into the marble altar. She felt the god straining against the wards keeping him in place. A scream shot from the depths of her soul, as she heard the explosion of the barrier as Dræwl crashed into it.

"J'hanous, now. The master demands his tribute," Vysion's voice became a hysterical shrill stabbing into her brain.

Then, she felt the prick of the dagger as it creased the flesh above her heart. She struggled against the manacles holding her to the altar. The swell of blood warming her chest sent her over the edge. Her legs kicked out only to be drawn up by the chains bolted to the marble. The tip of the knife bit deeper, prodding the hard bone of her sternum. Belle screamed, knowing it was too late. A rush of air told her Dræwl had arrived.

## Chapter Thirty-One

Belle's scream tore through the twisting air surrounding the three friends. Chase stopped dead in his tracks at the sound. His heart told him she lived, but the anguished howl sounded too much like a death wail to his ears. He licked a bead of sweat from the quivering ridge of his upper lip. They were too damned late. Gardner and that bastard of a monk had succeeded.

In spite of everything, Chase refused to believe Belle could be dead. He would know if she crossed over into the Willowing. He felt only urgency, not the heavy weight of loss. Chase clung to the vain hope that the voices would have told him if she had slipped into the shadow lands, not that they weren't selective with imparting knowledge. No, Belle had to be still alive somewhere in this house of the dead.

Squinting against the biting winds that raged from the center of the temple, he sought some sight of her, but found only twirling madness for his trouble. Against reason, Chase willed her to be all right, but the certainty Vysion had already fed her life to his dark god scoured the hope from his heart. Even though everything told him the priest had opened the portal to bring Dræwl forward, Chase couldn't release the thin thread that kept him from losing his mind. Belle was alive and by whatever gods gave a shit enough to listen, he wasn't about to let her go.

Through a break in the storm he spotted her chained to some altar. Vysion loomed over her, pressing a dagger into her chest. Another scream as the monk shoved down with the blade let Chase know she still lived. The sight of the dagger digging into Belle's chest drove all reason from his mind, replacing fear with cold fury. He felt Caern's hand on his shoulder. Shaking it off, Chase grabbed the Glock from Caern's hand. Not even stopping to take aim, he brought the perfectly weighted gun up and fired. Through the haze of magic permeating the temple, he saw the blade go spinning out of the monk's hand.

But even that wasn't enough to quell the anger burning his mind. The overwhelming need to lash out at the man standing above her consumed every fiber of his being. The report from the Glock a fading echo, Chase moved toward them. Caern tried to block him, but he shoved his friend away, tossing him the gun, as he dragged Corith's sword from its sheath.

Chase heard Caern and Raiz move up behind him. The subtle click of a shell filling the void he'd created in the Glock's chamber brought a smile to his face. He turned his head to see the grim set of Caern's face. Raiz nodded to him from the other side of his partner. Their countenances spoke of only one thing, death to their enemies. Good to see they were all on the same page. Not to sound clichéd, but today was a good day to die, but damned if he'd give death the time of day. Death was a gift he brought, not one he planned on enjoying himself.

Gardner appeared from the mists behind the altar, the dagger glinting in his hand. With a crazed smile, the man raised the blade over his head directly over Belle. Chase let out a soul wrenching howl as the dagger raced toward Belle's heart. Before he could move, Chase heard the Glock explode next to him as Caern fired off a round. Seconds turned to hours as the bullet swam through the thick air.

His vision blurred, as he tried to crawl from the stupor enveloping him. One minute, he could have reached out and plucked it from the air, the next he saw Gardner's hand fall, the dagger shimmering as it slashed down toward Belle. His mind demanded action, but his body



refused to cooperate. He could see Belle's death painted in the glistening blade and there wasn't one damn thing he could do about it. Her only chance lay in Caern's aim.

Fear choking him, Chase watched with growing horror. His eyes followed the downward stroke of Gardner's blade. He knew only a miracle could save her and hoped like hell the voices in his head had one up their sleeves. As if in answer to his doubts, time sped up.

Chase barely had time to blink, when Gardner's head exploded. The dagger slipped from the man's limp hand as the headless body staggered back, its arms questing for the life Caern's bullet had snatched away. It was a kill Chase would have relished making himself, but at least Caern had bought Belle a few minutes. Hopefully, that would be enough for him to get his ass in gear and finish this.

Vysion had slipped through the cracks, but Chase knew as long as the monk drew breath this was far from over. A phalanx of armored warriors rushed them, killing any chance of getting to Belle. The Dhampyre might have been the first to draw blood, but he wouldn't be the last. Chase yelled a war cry last heard when Greece was young and slapped his sword skyward.

"Well, boys, it's time to deal death and take names," Chase cried.

"It is better to deal it, than end up in its embrace, *tavorish*," Raiz grunted.

"You're both drama queens. Let's just kill these bastards, and get home in one piece." Caern snorted, bringing up his Glock and adding another to his other hand.

"Then let's get to it," Chase said, as two of the Hektorium split from the herd and made straight for him.

Caern and Raiz shifted out on either side of him to take the flank, while he took the middle. Chase dropped back, letting the sword fall to his side. The scent of battle hung heavy in the air. He could almost taste the death to come. Chase waited, the sword slapping against his thigh. The shocked expressions on the twin Hektorium came as no surprise to him.

They were so close Chase could feel their hot breath washing over him. Still he waited. Both warriors grinned, thinking him a fool. Chase smiled back. The Hektorium realized their mistake, but by then it was too late. They came for a fight and by the heavens they would get one.

Corith's blade came to life in Chase's hand. He moved so fast, the blade sliced the first warrior from groin to neck before the man could bring his own sword to play. Chase pivoted to his left clearing the newly made corpse in a spray of blood and gore. The second warrior tried to dodge, but Chase was quicker. His body joined his comrade's falling like a rain of dying flesh to the floor. His eyes blank orbs staring into space, Chase stepped over them looking for his next foe. Knowing even that wouldn't dull the fury consuming him.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, he heard his friends join in the battle. The rapid fire reports of Caern's twin Glocks came like distant thunder in his head, while the crunch of bone and sound of rending armor and flesh told Chase that Raiz held up his end of things. That left it clear for him to free Belle. If only the Hektorium hadn't made it their mission in life to keep coming. Frustration swept over Chase, as the dark warriors barred his path at every turn. For every two he slew, three more took their place. His sword arm grew slick with their blood, yet he saw no end to the juggernauts.

Stabbing blindly at a foe, Chase saw an opening. Raiz had wrapped up a trio of the Nespharilliūm leaving a clear path to the altar. Chase dragged his blade from yet another dying warrior and dashed into the fray. Bending his head, he slammed his body through the carnage. The foes stupid enough to get in his way, tasted the edge of his sword before finding death

waiting for them. Their deaths meant little to him. Getting to Belle was the only thing that mattered. If he had to kill everyone in existence to accomplish that, so be it.

Raiz jumped through a knot of Nespharilliüm, clearing the last ten feet to the altar. Chase rushed through without even thinking. He'd gone five steps, when metal crashed down into the middle of his back. Pain rode down his spine, collapsing his legs under him. Falling to the floor, the sight of Belle chained to the altar filled his eyes. Twisting his body, Chase reached out, his fingers so close he could almost touch her. Then the impact of cold marble jarred the image from his brain.

Shaking the pain from his eyes, Chase rose up on his elbow, only to be slammed back to the floor. He looked up to see the black armor of a Hectorium over him. Damn him for being first blooded. For so simple a blunder, he deserved the fate of one of those first to die on the field of battle. He'd made the mistake any fucking squire knows to avoid -- never take anything for granted. Instead of focusing on Belle, he should have been watching his back.

Chase saw the grin beneath the helm of the Nespharilliüm widen. "You thought you could beat the elite, and failed. I salute your valor but even heroes must die for their legends to rise."

He wouldn't flinch. Even as the warrior raised his sword, he stared death in the face. Not knowing if the dark elf's blade could kill him, Chase held himself ready for whatever fate awaited him. He watched the swirling mirrors of himself grow bigger, as the sword began its down stroke. Chase registered a shot ring out somewhere in the temple. At least he would die knowing Belle still had a chance. Caern and Raiz would finish this.

Closing his eyes, Chase awaited the Willowing to appear around him.

"Are you going to lay on your lazy ass all day, or go save the fair maiden?" Caern's voice stabbed him from his stupor.

He threw his eyes open to see the Hectorium staggering above him. Blood seeped from the warrior's face plate. A thin dimple notched the metal right between the eye slits. Chase turned his head to see Caern shoot him a wink.

"That's one I owe you," Chase yelled over the din.

"What's one more between friends?" Caern shouted back before disappearing behind another wave of Hectorium.

Not sparing a second glance at the unfolding battle, he sprung into a crouch and faced the altar. His heart stopped when he saw Belle's chest covered in blood, her flesh pale and lifeless. The thick liquid had soaked into her shirt and flowed onto the altar. The rise and fall of her chest faded to nothing more than a minute gasp for life and finally even it came to an end.

Gods dammit! He'd been too late. Staggering up the steps to the altar, Chase felt his own life slipping away. He dropped to his knees beside the scarred marble holding her. Fighting back the sobs choking him, Chase pressed his face into the cold flesh of Belle's breasts. His soul cried out as he willed her strangled heartbeat to come again, only to hear the muted damnation of loss.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

"Pitiful warrior, did you really think you could stop the will of Dráewl? Her death was foretold long before either of us fought our way to life."

Chase twisted his head to see Vysion rise from behind the altar. Choosing to ignore the monk, he grunted and returned to the private hell consuming him. As long as he denied the world falling apart around him, he could convince himself Belle still lived. The chilled touch of her breasts against his cheek would forever remain a figment of his imagination. Vysion could slay him where he sat for all Chase cared. Death would be a kindness he didn't deserve to feel. Gods, if he only he could stop feeling anything. She was dead because he failed her. Not even death could erase the knowledge from his mind.

*'Brechashe, you must let her go.'* Eoyian's voice whispered softly into his ear.

"You can go to hell. I'm through taking orders from you bitches. I did everything you asked of me." He whipped his head from Belle's chest and screamed into the nothingness of his life. "All it got me was one brief moment of happiness before your precious goddess ripped it all away."

*'Destiny must be served, Warrior.'*

Chase slammed his fist into the marble. "Fuck destiny!"

*'Brechashe, wail against it all you want, but destiny has dictated every moment of your life since the day you walked into our temple.'*

"Don't lay this bullshit at my feet. Belle would still be alive if your goddess had just killed me." If only she had, then he would have never known love or the pain of losing it.

*'Life is but an extension of death, a beginning to an eventual end, but who is to say whether you must step in the light or if the light is the only thing keeping you from the darkness.'*

"What the hell does that mean?" Chase demanded but knew the ghost had already fled back into the ethereal.

Her returning voice surprised him. *'It means only the gods know how things will end and a warrior has no place second guessing their lot in life. Now stop feeling sorry for yourself, and be the hero Belle thought you were.'*

From the darkness of self pity, Belle's face filled his mind. Her brilliant smile bloomed sunlight in the sinking void of his soul and he sobbed. Eoyian was right. If he gave up now everything Belle lived for, fought for -- gave her life for -- would have been for nothing. She would want Chase to finish what they had started together. The world might not matter to him, but it had to her. For her he would see the end of Vysion and his mad god. Then the Willowing or hell itself could take him, but at least he would go with a clear conscience.

Chase rose from beside the altar. Looking down at Belle's slack face, he ran his hand through Belle's hair. She looked almost alive, like a soon to be woken Sleeping Beauty. Too bad, life didn't allow for fanciful dreams or fairy tale endings. If it did, he wouldn't be saying goodbye to the only dream he ever wanted to come true.

Eoyian's words echoing in his head, he knew he'd wasted enough time on self-pity. He had ass to kick. Chase bent down and placed a gentle kiss on the lips that should have been his forever. As he lifted his head, he caught a flutter of her eyelids. Chase had to catch himself from screaming. Belle was alive. And by the goddess who cursed him, she would stay that way.

Vysion's shadow moved across the altar, reminding him he had more than a war to win. Belle's life depended on how he played out this game.

Vysion cackled. "Your suffering amuses me."

"Bastard, you may have killed Belle." Chase moved in front of the monk, blocking him from nearing Belle. "But without your precious pawn, I don't see much chance of anything bringing your fucking god back."

"Your ignorance is laughable. J'hanous, even in death, is a vessel for the master. The blood of Summer's heir is already at work." Chase looked past him to see Belle's blood seeping from the altar onto her stepfather's body. "Look, Dræwl lives!"

Chase stepped back as Gardner's body rose from the floor. Before his eyes the shattered ruin of the man's head reconstructed itself into something close to Gardner's face but not quite. Chase's mouth went cotton as the man's eyes snapped open and something not quite human glared into the world. He saw a hunger within those alien eyes, a hunger for conquest he'd seen many times, but behind that he saw more. Chase saw the end of everything. He saw the world burning and life but a faded memory, with this thing that had been John Gardner laughing over the ruins.

His mind whirled with the nightmares of things to come if he failed. Chase choked up on the hilt of the sword and moved toward the mockery of a man. Death awaited him but before he went to the shadow lands he'd take this fucker with him.

Gardner's reanimated body moved in answer to Chase's threat. It moved like a rag doll held aloft by strings. Chase didn't know how long he had before Vysion's god had full control over his new form, but he didn't plan to let him get the chance. From the corner of his eye, Chase saw the monk shift around the side of the altar, angling for him. Chase could manage one of them, but doubted he could take on both of them. Scanning the room, he caught sight of Caern and Raiz. They were too wrapped up to be any help.

Vysion's voice sang out behind him. "Whatever foolhardy thoughts are running through your head, forget them. You're all alone. Your friends can't help you. Soon, my Hecitorium will finish with them. Give into the inevitable. Dræwl has taken form. Nothing you can do will stop him."

Looked like the bitches would get their wish. If they wanted a hero, they'd damn well get one. "Too bad you'll be dead and won't get to throw him a welcome back party."

Smoother than silk, Chase spun and tossed the sword straight through the monk's chest. Taking a sideways glance at Gardner, he rushed and grabbed the hilt and jerked it free from the dying husk, sending a spray of blood gushing from the dying priest's mouth. Vysion grabbed the sword, a look of shock glued to his face. Chase rushed toward the staggering monk. Not giving Vysion a chance to pull away, he jerked the sword from the man's chest and slashed it through the monk's neck.

"Guess what, fuckshit? You lose."

"A bit premature, Mr. Michaels. You may have removed my most treasured servant, but you will find his master to be harder to dispatch," Gardner's dead voice called from behind him.

"Dræwl, I take it," Chase didn't look up for an answer, afraid he would give Belle away.

"Yes, and you need not worry that I may find out your lover yet lives. I already know. The fact she is alive is of no consequence to me. Soon, you both will be dead."

Chase dragged the tip of the sword across the floor as he turned to face the god made flesh. "I'm not giving up without a fight."

"That shall be your pain to bear. There is no way you can stop me." The surety in the god's voice did nothing to deter Chase's path. He would die before he let Gardner, or whatever resided in his body, anywhere near Belle again.

"He is telling you the truth, warrior. You have no hope in defeating the power of the dark one." A feminine voice yelled from the entrance of the temple.

"Mother." Chase heard Belle weakly call out from the altar.

"Sadly, my child, your mother is no more. By her leave, I have inhabited her form so that the world may live." Chase could only stare, as Myrandia's body made its way through the bloody swath of dead and dying bodies.

Gardner cut in front of him. "Silvian!"

"Dear brother, I thought I'd seen the last of you long ago. How upset I was to hear you were up to your old ways. Is no prison strong enough to hold you?"

"You know me, sister. Ever the thorn in your side."

"So, let us play this game out once again," Myrandia taunted.

"Just the two of us?" Gardner's hand gestured toward Chase and his friends.

"As it should be," Myrandia turned to Chase. "Mr. Michaels, please take this body's daughter and leave."

With a click, the manacles holding Belle in place slipped away and fell to the floor. Before he had a chance to turn around, she moved beside him, her hand snaking into his.

"Wait!" Belle yelled.

"What is it, child?" Silvian asked.

"I know you're not my mother anymore, but I can't leave without saying goodbye." The tears coating her words tore at Chase's heart.

"Come," Silvian motioned for her to step forward.

Chase reluctantly let her hand slip from his. He could only watch as Belle staggered toward the body of her mother. Even though it wasn't Myrandia anymore, he knew Belle couldn't let go. Gardner had stolen even this moment from her.

Silvian enclosed Belle in her arms. The sound of his lover's sobs wrenched at his heart. As much as he wanted to go to Belle, Chase knew he had no place in this private moment. He couldn't even remember his parents, let alone know the pain of losing them. He'd thought his life in the slave pits had sucked every emotion from him. Belle had reawakened more than his love. She had given him back his humanity.

The goddess held her hand out toward him. "Breachashe, come to me."

Bewilderment filled Chase's mind. It had been so long since he heard his true name spoken aloud, the word sounded foreign to him. Except for the damned ghosts, no one had uttered it since time before time. To hear it from someone not screaming in his head threw him, especially when it came from Belle's mother.

"You have done well, as I foresaw you would," Silvian said.

"Huh?" Chase muttered, too confused to say anything else.

"Long ago, you came to my temple as a killer seeking nothing more than to satisfy your blood-lust. I saw the destiny stamped on your soul and spared your life. You have proven that decision to be the correct one," Silvian said as her smile broadened. "Now you and this daughter of my flesh will be the future of my people. Guard them well."

"But, I can't--" Chase stuttered.

"You will. Destiny has been decided. Now take this little one into your arms, even as she is in your heart and go. My brother and I have much to decide amongst ourselves."

The goddess thrust Belle into his arms. She immediately buried her face into his chest muffling the sobs wracking her. He kissed the top of her head, relishing the way she felt to finally be in his arms again. That aside, he wasn't about to walk away from this battle. This was as much his and Belle's fight as it was some dead goddess's.

"Lady, thanks for the offer, and I can't speak for Belle but I'm staying," Chase stated despite several small voices telling him to haul ass.

"Me, too," Belle sobbed. "They have taken everything from me -- my father, my life, my happiness and now my mother. I'm not leaving"

Myrandia's face scrunched up, flashing uncertainty. Chase waited for the eventual dismissal he knew she would voice. Myrandia, Silvian, or whoever lived in there could go to hell. Belle deserved closure, dammit.

Myrandia smiled lovingly into their faces. "Yes, you are right. It is fitting. The future should see the end of this age. For win or lose, my time is at an end, as is all the ancient ones. Our place in this world is over. It is time for you, our children, to define your own future."

"Thank you, but may I ask for one more boon?" Chase knew he was probably pushing his luck, but when hadn't he?

"For your service, you need but ask and if it is within my power, it is yours," the goddess answered.

"My friends. Could you see that they are taken somewhere safe?" It was the least he could do. Caern and Raiz deserved to live if this shit ended in the apocalypse or something.

"It shall be as you wish." Chase watched her twist her wrist. Caern and Raiz vanished. "They are safe, along with your friend the dryad. You have my word nothing will happen to them."

"Thank you," Chase said, knowing the meager words weren't enough.

"Dear sister, still pampering these pets of yours. How sad. That was always your problem. They are cattle, and as such should fall beneath the blade of their betters!"

Chase grabbed Belle and fell to the floor. Dræwl blasted the air where they had been standing. Black fire burned the air around them, an inferno racing toward the top of the domed ceiling. He threw his body over Belle, shielding her as best he could as the flames licked toward them. Chase felt his jacket turn to cinder scorching the flesh underneath.

"Enough!" Silvian yelled, and instantly the fire swept back from him. "Brother, this is between us."

"Then die, so that I can play," the god yelled.

Chase snatched Belle's hand and pulled her behind the altar. A shower of marble followed them. The floor exploded upward, like an earthquake had torn through the building. He pushed Belle to the floor, as more rock and debris rained down on them. Peeking around the altar, he saw Silvian answer with a blast of her own that tore a hole through the front of the temple. Dræwl barely dodged out of the way only to find Silvian cutting off his escape with another bolt of power.

"Chase, what's going on?" Belle screamed over the thunder of the battle.

"Hell on earth. Hell on earth," he mumbled, caught up in the fight.

Her head came up beside him. "I can't believe this. All I wanted was to take back what was mine, and help my people. How did it turn into *Clash of the Titans*?"

"If I've learned anything, nothing is ever the way it seems. Silvian must have planned this out. It would explain a helluva lot," Chase said.

"You mean you believe what she said about you and the temple?"

"I have to. By all rights, she should have killed me that day. Belle, I was never anything but a stone cold killer until then. I wasn't worth anyone's mercy. Hell, I killed every single one of her handmaidens. You tell me why she let me live." He hated admitting his past to her. Even now, what he'd been haunted him. He'd tried to atone for his sins, yet none of it seemed enough.

"I can't," her words cut through him. He could feel the disdain in her voice. "But that doesn't change who you are now. Silvian forgave you. I think it's high time you forgave yourself."

His words warmed his heart, but he wished it could be that easy. He dropped his head, not able to face her. She touched his chin, bringing his eyes right back up to her face. Her love for him plastered over every inch of it. What had he done to deserve this woman -- this life?

"Chase, both our worlds are coming down around us. Silvian has offered us a chance to make a new world together. If we survive this, I... No, we are going to do just what she said. Become the future. We've gone through too much to let your past and my screwed up family stop us. I love you and I know you love me, so give me one good reason why we shouldn't take this chance."

He couldn't come up with a single one. Instead, he bent his head and took her lips, crushing them with the urgency of his love. She tasted like heaven. Chase knew this was the start of a new life, and one he wasn't about to let slip through his fingers.

Pulling away, Belle laughed. "So, I'll take that as a yes."

"You can take it as more than a yes. As soon as Silvian mops the floor with this asshole, you can take it as the rest of your life," Chase said, tears streaking his cheeks. Sebastian and Dr. Phil could go to hell for turning him into some weak-kneed romantic.

"No, I think you mean the rest of our lives," Belle answered.

A scream rent the air, cutting off his reply. He shot from behind the altar to see Silvian twisting in the air, her body contorted and writhing. Chase looked up to see Gardner laughing as he shot energy through her body. Dammit! While they were making kissing face, it had come all unraveled.

"Look, sister. Your precious children have come from hiding to see you die," Gardner howled.

Silvian turned her head toward the pair. Chase saw death in the woman's eyes. She wasn't strong enough to defeat her brother, and she knew it. Behind that he saw something else -- hope. The goddess might not be strong enough alone. Chase didn't know what he could do to stop a god but he wasn't about to let her die without trying to do something.

Belle grabbed at his arm as he dashed from hiding. Jerking away, he stumbled down the steps. Dráwl was so caught up in killing Silvian, the god never noticed him coming. Chase lifted the sword and made ready to sling it, when his hand refused to move. His head snapped up to see Silvian's hand stretched out to him.

"Breachashe, you can not do this alone. Only together with Bellaronia can you defeat Dráwl. Only the light can vanquish darkness. Use the light you both hold in your hearts..." She let out a scream that rocked the temple and he knew she was gone. Dráwl loosed another blast of blackness and her body evaporated into nothingness.

"So, children, it is just us," Dráwl's voice sang out.

Chase pulled back and readied to toss the sword. Belle's hand fell onto his arm. He looked over and saw her glowing with the power of Summer. Without her mother's body to hold the power, it had shifted to Belle. With her touch, he felt it coursing through his arm. Suddenly he understood Silvian's words, and he opened his heart. Releasing himself to her, he felt Belle

inside of him -- truly inside him. She consumed his thoughts, but as much a part of him as the arm holding Corith's sword. They were one.

"Dræwl, guess what?" Chase howled.

"What, little mortal? Do you wish to beg for your life and that of the bitch by your side? Do so, it may amuse me enough to spare your life," the god laughed.

"You can kiss my ass and fucking die!" Chase yelled, as he flung the sword into the air.

By the time the blade left his fingers, the ancient metal glowed red with the heat of Belle's power mixed with his own. Straighter than Chase imagined, the sword drove through the smoke filled air. Dræwl threw back his head and laughed.

"My sister couldn't kill me. What makes you think that will? Here..." He pulled back the blood soaked shirt revealing his bare chest. "Let me make it easier for you to see your foolishness."

The sword stuck him full in the chest, piercing the flesh right above his heart. The sword sent thick veins of light flowing over Gardner's flesh. Dræwl let out a scream as the light slowly overtook him, engulfing him from the inside out. The god shrieked. Gardner's body, aflame as it was eaten away to be replaced by the glowing radiance of Summer itself. Chase felt the energy building around the god. The air grew thick with crackling power as Gardner's body threw off lightning, the power of Summer consuming it.

*'Brechashe, it is time to go,' Eoyian's voice shouted. 'Dræwl is dying, but his demise will destroy this temple.'*

Chase looked at the entrance to see it being covered in falling stones from the upper wall and ceiling.

"How?" he yelled.

The priestess of Silvian shimmered into view. Her hand sliced the air in front of her. *'Into the light, my child. Into the light.'*



## Epilogue

Chase stood like a vulture upon the parapets overlooking the once beautiful courtyard of Summer's palace. Even though the debris had been cleared away, he could still see the scars Dráwl's rebirth had etched into the landscape. It would take years to heal the damage Gardner and the Nespharilliüm had done. Belle's people had already started the process. Where the guardian trees once stood, saplings took root, adolescent dryads dancing in the soil of their new homes. Their antics brought a smile to his face.

Looking over the bustling heart of Summer, Chase saw happiness everywhere. The ascension of Belle to Summer's Queen had renewed the spirit of the Shazhium. The misery left by the death of her father, and Myrandia's decline under Gardner's thumb, had slowly been replaced by something the Peoples had lost. Hope.

His acceptance as Knight of Spring was a different matter altogether. Belle assured him tomorrow's ceremony would go far to rectify that. Though, the idea of being part of a dog and pony show didn't set well with him. As far as Chase was concerned, some ceremony wouldn't change the fact that in his heart, he had belonged to her from the moment she pumped three bullets into his chest. He chuckled. Cupid must have gotten a subscription to *Guns and Ammo* for this case. Not your normal courtship, but he had never been one to do things the easy way.

A twinkle of laughter came from below. Chase bent over the battlements to see Belle dancing with the young dryads among the boughs of the new guardian trees. He still found it hard to believe the new center tree had grown from the fragment of his bar that they'd used to get inside the Summer Court. Sebastian had been overjoyed. Now his and Caern's ghost had begun to grow alive again, as the tree took root. Belle had told him that Seb would now exist in both planes. As soon as the dryad remained in the Lands, he would be a living dryad, but when he returned to the mortal world he would revert to his spectral form. Chase had figured the dryad would never leave the Summer Court, but in typical Sebastian fashion, the ghost had thrown him for a loop. Apparently, the Lands hadn't discovered cable television and Seb was loath to give up his sit-com addiction, so they'd still have him knocking around the bar. At least, in the midst of all this upheaval, it was a relief to know some things didn't change.

Belle's laughter erupted again from the courtyard below. Chase dragged himself from his woolgathering to look at his soon-to-be bride. He still couldn't bring himself to believe by this time tomorrow she would be his forever. How he wished to rush down the steps and join her. Even after everything that had happened, he found it hard to believe his life was once again his own. For the first time since that day in Silvian's temple, the voices had disappeared. He hadn't heard one peep from them. Part of him yearned for a return of their endless chatter. They had made his life a living hell, but now that they were gone it felt like a part of him had come up missing.

*'It is well to know you think fondly of our time together.'*

"Eoyian?" Chase whispered, smiling at the sound of her voice in his head.

*'Yes, my warrior,'* she answered.

He turned away from the courtyard and looked toward the clouds swirling cotton candy across the sky. "I thought you departed this plane along with Silvian."

The priestess took form beside him. *'My time here grows short but I couldn't leave without witnessing the rebirth of my people.'*

"The ceremony is not until tomorrow." He gave the woman a tilt of his head. "You're a bit early to be celebrating."

*'The Rite of Binding is but a moment in time to placate the Peoples. I speak of something more.'* Eoyian pointed toward Belle with the dryads. *'But that knowledge is not mine to impart.'*

"Do you always speak in riddles, or just do it to me for shit and giggles?" Chase rubbed his temples, secretly amused that nothing had changed between them.

*'You only see them as riddles, because your warrior brain is too dense.'* Eoyian knocked two ghostly knuckles against his forehead. *'To sort out the logic inherent in my words, you need only look to your true love to find the answer.'*

Belle's laughter flowed up to him. Turning from the ghost, he saw her almost glowing beneath the twin suns. An ethereal radiance flowed from her, filling the very air with a magic he couldn't describe. After all the months they'd spent together, Chase found it strange that he hadn't noticed it before, but seeing her now he couldn't deny something was different. Maybe he'd been too dense, like Eoyian said, to figure it out on his own. Or not, might be closer to the truth.

Eoyian let out a laugh. *'You really are denser than a stone, but I forgive your ignorance. You've proved to be an apt pupil in spite of being a blood thirsty bastard when we began your training.'*

Chase bowed his head not daring to look her in the face. His deeds were nothing compared to that one act. He was no hero. He was a killer. Everything he'd done for Belle had been born of selfishness. Losing her would have been too great a pain to bear. No one could ever call him a hero. He damn sure didn't feel like one. Whatever forgiveness Eoyian and the others offered him, he didn't deserve.

Looking at Belle waving madly at him from the courtyard before, Chase knew he didn't deserve her, either.

He flinched when Eoyian stroked his cheek. *'This is not the time for sadness or regrets, my warrior. We forgave you long ago, now it is time for you to forgive yourself.'*

"I don't think I can." Shaking off the remorse that consumed him, Chase gave her a weak smile. "But I will do my damndest to become the man you think I am."

The ghost patted his cheek. *'You already have warrior. All I ask is you find the happiness you both deserve.'*

Suddenly, he realized he would miss her voice inside his head. "Will I see you again?"

*'Like my goddess, our time on this plane is at an end but know this.'* She reached up and kissed him lightly on the cheek. *'You will be always in my heart.'*

She faded from his mind and Chase knew she was gone for good. For better or worse, he was alone now. The soft shuffle of footsteps brought his head around. Belle stood in the arched doorway leading out to the parapets. Her face glowed as she stared at him from the shadows. Again Eoyian's words haunted him. Seeing her now, he could almost taste the future the ghost spoke of.

"Why is it whenever I come looking for you, you're always up here brooding. We're getting married tomorrow." Belle tossed her hand on her hip. "Care to tell me what possible reason you have for being Mr. Grumpy Puss on the day before the happiest day of our lives."

He walked to her and took her hand. "Sometimes you have to bury the past before you can walk into the future."

She cupped his face in her hands. "See, you're all broody, again."

Chase grinned through his puckered up face. "I'll try to be better, my queen."

Belle kissed him on the nose before releasing him. "You better be. Mr. Grumpy Puss is not invited to my wedding."

"I think we can safely say he will not be showing his face tomorrow. Is there anything else before we completely lock him away?"

"That should be it. We'll be fine as long as you understand one thing. As Queen, my word is law. If you try to run on me..." Belle drew a finger over his throat, giggling. "It's off with your head."

"With a threat like that hanging over me, I think I can be a good boy." Chase marveled at the joy he felt. He might not deserve her, but by Silvian, he wouldn't let her go.

"Then, let's go downstairs." She took him by the hand. "I promised the dryads you'd dance with them."

Chase kept expecting to wake up at any moment. This had to be a dream. Following her, he realized dreams weren't this perfect. Dancing with dryads suddenly sounded like the exact thing ex-cursed warriors should do. After slaying gods, crazy stepfathers and saving the universe, what else was left?

Living happily ever after might sound clichéd, but he planned to do it anyway.

*The End*

*Amor Immorati continues with Immortally Damned  
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## **About J. Morgan**

Hello, my name is J. Morgan and I'm a romance novelist. Yeah, I find it hard to believe myself but it's the truth. I have always been plagued with a vivid imagination since my early childhood, and writing seemed the perfect outlet for it. Now instead of the stories sitting in notebooks gathering dust, I'm unleashing them on the world. Be very afraid.

I am happily married to fellow author Jenna Leigh. Well, happily is a relative term when it comes to who gets to read the latest Dark Hunter book first. When not fighting over books, I can be found in front of the tv pretending to write while really watching endless hours of drivel and laughing at the voices in my head who are constantly feeding me plotlines. While the voices may not be in control yet, one day they hope to have a book deal of their own. Until then, I will continue to get to spend the royalty checks.

Read more about J Morgan at <http://www.freewebs.com/jmorganslair/>