

CHAPTER 1

“So I kissed her—what’s the problem with that?” I said, smiling at a definitely peeved Hedley Edrick, who sat behind his secret office’s desk at the College of Immortals that was hidden in plain sight on the hallowed grounds of the University of Oxford in England. The Master of Masters frowned, drumming his fingers in utter judgment of my actions. It’s not like I had slept with the Thief, and what business was it of the Master of Masters if I had? He rubbed a hand over his bald head and glared at me. Apparently, he thought it *was* his business. Oliver, good loyal friend that he was, sat in the chair next to me, alternating between rubbing his temples and shaking his head disapprovingly.

“What’s the problem with that?” Hedley was spurting like a walrus on the make. “Are you quite daft, man?”

“Daft,” Oliver’s deep voice echoed. “Quite daft! So very daft! Daftest of the daft!” He must have realized that both Hedley and I were looking at him oddly. “Oh, that was too much.” He nodded. “Carry on, dear Hedley.”

“Did you have relations with her?”

I knew that one was coming even if I actually hadn’t. “What are you, my mother, Hedley?” I said. “It’s no business of yours if I did give her the high hard one. I do have a reputation to uphold, you know. Look at my chiseled muscles, classic features, and—to you, no doubt—my jealousy-inducing thick and lustrous dark hair. Did I mention my heroic humility? Damn right that you would assume that the Thief 2

and I were together. But we weren't, so if that makes you happy, great, because it sure didn't make me."

"Liar!" he screamed. He pointed at my wrists, where the faint burns from the Chains of Desire were still visible to the apparently well-trained eyes of the Teacher of Teachers. "Then how do you explain those . . . hmmm . . . *hmmm*?"

Oliver clapped his massive mitts together so loudly that, even though thick stone walls separated us from the College of Immortal's classrooms, offices, and common areas, the students and staff must've thought a freak thunderstorm had struck the merry old University of Oxford in the middle of October. "I knew it!" he yelled triumphantly, unfolding his hulking frame from the chair and standing, pointing at me accusingly. "You said those burns were from the pot to warm your bath. Out with it, man—give us the truth!"

"Gentlemen, whatever happened to a little discretion . . . ?"

"It's you, my good man," Oliver said, sitting back down. "Discretion went out with your bathwater. If you hadn't at least given the serving wench a proper how-do-you-do, I would have thought you ill."

"Well, maybe I wasn't in the mood . . ."

"And all of us in this room know you would have gone there, if the whim took you," Hedley interrupted. Norville squeaked, and Garlic barked from the corner where they had been playing cards and not listening (or really, really listening as it turned out).

"Look, I did not sleep with the serving wench or the Thief," I said, looking at each of my accusers in turn, including the rodent. "Garlic, you know that to be the truth. You were there." Garlic immediately lay down and put her paws over her eyes. "Right, you were sleeping. Whatever happened to that man's-best-friend rubbish, anyhow?" A dismissive "arf" was the only reply from the infernal vampire Maltese.

"Come on, Sirius," Oliver pleaded. "You expect us to believe that the Thief only got a kiss from the Lover of Lovers?" He saw Hedley glare at him. "Sorry, old chum, it just seemed to fit there, you know, because of all Sirius's loving with the ladies. No offense meant to you as the Master of Masters and the esteemed position you hold. Though, to be fair, the Lover of Lovers held not one esteemed position, but several steamy ones during his burned-wrist tryst. Oh damn, I am so sorry, Hedley! Sirius, you can jump in anytime now."³

“It was quite a kiss,” I said, rescuing the unusually slaphappy troll. “I am still thinking about it, to tell you the truth. And I think she is too. I still cannot believe she didn’t join me in the bath! I don’t think that has ever happened before.”

“Ah, the Ego of Egos speaks!” Oliver blurted. “Again, Hedley, these are just too easy.”

“As is mocking me, apparently,” Hedley said, looking a bit miffed as he crossed his arms over his chest and looked away. “Do you people always do that?”

“No, Hedley,” Oliver said, a bright white smile illuminating his dark complexion. “Just feeling a bit giddy since Lovely is coming back. My sincerest apologies to you, but I really do miss my son!”

“Listen, the Thief is not on Scorn’s side,” I said. “As much as it pains me to say this, Hedley—you were right.”

“Well of course I am,” Hedley said. “Oh, about what in particular?”

“The Thief is indeed part of the faction of immortals that believes that the Seven Sacred Relics would be safer if kept in a centralized location, protected from all immortals,” I replied.

“And just how did you deduce this?” Oliver exclaimed. “Was it the way her tongue probed yours that said it?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I said. “Although one does learn a lot from a probing tongue, I tell you that—no—the Thief told me so.”

Oliver clutched his chest. “And you of all people believe her? You are the one that has been manipulated by women and almost sent to your utter and inescapable doom, yes?”

“Our giddy troll is a master of the obvious,” Hedley quipped.

“Yes, as a matter of fact I do believe her,” I replied. “I mean she hates Orcinus, so that should say something good about her.”

Oliver pulverized his chair’s armrest into so much kindling. “Damned cheap chair,” he growled. “Sorry about that, Hedley.”

I looked at the seething troll for an explanation, and then to Hedley, who did not seem remotely concerned about what had just happened to his chair. “So, Oliver, I am guessing that you are not a fan of Orcinus,” I said facetiously. Oliver ignored me, choosing to focus on removing a bit of detritus from the bottom of his boot instead.

Hedley was busy playing with the hairs on his chin. “Hmmm, we cannot forget that the Thief is but one player on this Blood of the One 4

chessboard that ultimately could checkmate the entire planet,” he said. “The question is which one. She is maybe just a pawn of sorts, and not the queen at all.”

“Queen . . .,” I said. “We have one of those already.”

“Figure of speech,” he replied. “And you had her. We didn’t.”

“So let’s review,” Oliver said, angry no longer. “Sirius says we have an innocent Thief. At the coronation, the demons we ran into said they went to Scorn to get the poison, and he wanted Sirius to suffer but not die. And, whatever you may think about the relative veracity of what they told us, Scorn was not there at the coronation. But Orcinus did somehow provide aid to a werewolf—of all creatures—in order to try and thin our ranks. Where does that leave us?”

“Still with a purloined Moon of Madrid,” I said. “And we have no clue as to the identity of the taker of that Relic. Doesn’t have the feel of a Scorn, or Kunchen operation.”

“I concur,” Hedley said. “But rest assured, Scorn’s mind is quite cunning, and his reach is as vast as his agents are numerous.”

“So you think the coronation was used as one big diversion?”

“Clearly.”

Oliver grunted in agreement. “And it worked perfectly.”

“Did it now?” I said, putting a finger to my temple and tapping it. “Lest we forget, betrayal is right up there in the classic moves of war with diversion. Perhaps our circle has been broken—just something to consider. My former colleague and fellow professor here at the College of Immortals, Templeton Braddock, would not seem to be very invested in our cause anymore. Having your bulbous goblin nose smashed into the table in our faculty lounge by yours truly, with all your other coworkers in attendance, could have that effect. Or maybe it is somebody else entirely.”

Hedley grimaced and reached for a piece of goat sausage to comfort himself. “Possibilities one and all,” he said, burping loudly and happily, admiring the flash of flame that emitted from his mouth.

“The jury is still out on whether Orcinus and Scorn acted in concert, though my vote is that they had competing plans to attack us,” I added. “Gentlemen, I have had a long night, and I am going to see myself to bed.” I rose to leave, and found Oliver holding on very tightly 5

to my arm. Apparently, I was going nowhere until the big troll released me. “Yes, Oliver, can I help you?”

Hedley had his face buried in a tome as he chomped on the sausage and didn’t bother looking up. “Three words, my good man,” he mumbled through a particularly large bite. “Chains of Desire.”

“You are not going to let me go until I tell you two blokes about it, are you?” I said to the two men.

Oliver gripped my arm tighter for emphasis. “That’s a yes,” he said. “Throw a troll a bone, will you—though mortal myths would find that saying rather ironic, right?”

I sat back down in front of Hedley’s desk. “All right then. This calls for some of that superb tequila of yours, Hedley.”

“Very well,” Hedley said, rising from the desk and bringing over a crystal decanter, pouring three generous shots for us. “But your tale had better be worth the rareness of this premium vintage.”

“Two words, Hedley,” I said. “Elf twins.”

Hedley and Oliver burst into mock applause, with Norville trying so hard to keep up that he nearly fell over. Rats are very enthusiastic clappers. I smiled, knowing I had a live audience, and reached for my tequila ready to tell my tales of ho’.

“When Hades said no good deed goes unpunished, she meant it!” Oliver exclaimed, smacking my shoulder and knocking me full out of my chair. I looked at my hand and opened and closed it, sad to see no tequila in my grasp. I sighed deeply, collected myself from the floor, and took my seat once again with a full glass of tequila. “Sorry,” Oliver said sheepishly. “Giddy, remember?”

“And here I thought the elf twins were the demonically exuberant ones,” I said. “Calm yourself, my good man, and perhaps a rather cold bath is in order before I relay my erotic exploits.” I had them hanging on my every word and could not help myself, sipping dramatically from my glass. “Ah,” I said. “That is a little bit of heaven in my gullet, but it pales in comparison to the hell I have had on my cock.” A veritable standing ovation ensued, and more tequila flowed. Boys—we are ever entertained with tales of dickly derring-do.

Garlic rolled over and yawned, going to sleep. My vampire Maltese knew this sordid story firsthand and could not be bothered with hearing about what she had already seen. And finally, several decanters of

tequila later, I stumbled through the mazelike passages of the College of Immortals, made it to my bedchambers, and slept as hard as I had in years. And, correspondingly, I awoke with Garlic curled up on top of my head, and my temples throbbing with the largest hangover I had had in . . . well, ever. And I was looking right into my daughter Maria's eyes. Garlic immediately popped up, and jumped into Maria's arms, licking her face and yelping happily.

"Good morning, Daddy," she exclaimed, leaning forward and dropping Garlic back on the bed. She put an arm around me as I lay there, and hugged me. "Whew!" she said, wrinkling her nose. "You smell riper than rotting kelp! What is that?"

I sat up and looked down to see that I was still in the clothes I had worn back from the coronation. "Adventure," I said, "and I am thinking half the dust between London and Oxford." I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes. I had probably slept for several hours, but it seemed a whole lot longer. Now fully awake, I inspected Maria more closely. "Wait a minute. You have grown. A lot," I stated, looking at her curiously. Her hair was as long, blonde, and as curly as her mother's, and she rather favored the Queen now except for the fangs that showed ever so slightly when she smiled. "Where did you get those . . . those . . . uh . . . things . . . ?" She had developed into a young woman overnight and would be mistaken for a child no more. "I haven't been sleeping that long, or have I?"

"You haven't," she answered. "Lovely and I got back a little early. You got here yesterday, from what I hear, and we just arrived an hour ago."

I was secretly excited she had come right to see me but troubled by what I saw in front of me. "But, what happened when you went to see your mother—did you sprout breasts as soon as you hit the seawater?"

She laughed. "Actually, yes," she replied. "I could feel the changes coming within me, Father. That is why I had to go see Mom. I was absolutely yearning for the ocean! I didn't exactly have any mermaid women around to ask what was happening to me. So Grandmother Maria recommended that I see Mother about my changes." She lifted up her shirt slightly. "Look, I have full-blown gills now too. They came in with the boobs!"

I was not sure what I found more unnerving—the fact that Maria had talked to my mother without me even knowing about it, the breasts, 7

or the gills. It was a lot to take in all at once while waking up with the tequila hangover of the century! With the other girls, the change had been gradual, but Maria had gone from child to woman in seemingly one dip in the seven seas.

“Are you okay, Father?” Maria asked as I moved to stand up still holding my head. “I begged Grandmother not to tell you. I didn’t know what was happening to me, and frankly, I was a little embarrassed.”

“I am fine, sweetheart,” I said. “You can tell me anything. I may not know all the answers, but I have access to a veritable wealth of knowledge with the help of the cast of characters that inhabits the halls of this college! Tell me, how is the Queen?”

Maria nodded thoughtfully. “I have lots of news, but Hedley and Oliver made me promise to drag you to the faculty lounge immediately so I can tell all of you.”

“Fathers get advance notice, yes?”

She wrinkled her nose. “Ordinarily, yes,” she said. “But you could wilt a flower, really you could.” She pointed around the corner to where the bathing room was. “How about you pop in there, put on some fresh clothes, and on the way to the faculty lounge, I’ll tell you what Mom said about you.”

I raised an eyebrow at her boldness and felt pride at her confidence. Connecting with her mother and the ocean had served her well. So I merely nodded and acquiesced to her wishes. Maria scooped up Garlic as I turned to the bathing chamber, and she headed toward her own chambers. “Come on, stinky pup,” she said. “You are just as much in need of a bath! I think Daddy let you have too much tequila!” Garlic gave a bark of protest and then denial, but allowed Maria to carry her away, snuggling into her neck contentedly.

I beat them out of the bath and sat out on the couch, racking my brain as to what the Queen might have mentioned to our daughter about me. The possibilities were as maddening as they were endless. The Queen was a very complicated woman, or perhaps that was just our relationship. Maria came out of her chambers with Garlic, and the vampire Maltese shone as bright white as I had ever seen her. “Wow, I forget, dear pup, that your hair is as white as the purely driven snow,” I said to my usually dirty and rather bloodstained companion. I sniffed the perfume emanating from my clean canine. “Jasmine,” I 8

commented. “How nice . . .” I did not need to speak Maltese to know that Garlic’s next bark was to let me know she did not appreciate my sarcasm.

I held open the door to my chambers, and Maria and I walked toward the faculty lounge. “Okay, out with it,” I said, taking Garlic from her and depositing the Maltese on the floor. “What did the Queen say about me?”

Maria gave me a sideways glance as she walked. “That she still loves you.”

I pondered *that* as we walked on in silence. “You said years ago that she was still mad at me,” I said. “And I can’t say our last encounter ended well. The look on her face said she was done with me. And trust me, little girl, that is a look I am *well* familiar with. So how can she say she loves me? That is disingenuous.”

“Oh, she didn’t say she isn’t still mad at the whole divorce-her-for-a-dog thing,” Maria said. She looked down at Garlic, who had stopped suddenly. “Yes, yes, we all know you are not *just* a dog. You are a girl! You know our feelings get hurt even when it doesn’t make sense.” Garlic cocked her head to one side for a second before nodding and walking down the hall in front of us.

“You have grown up,” I said, “but you are not making any sense.”

“Do you still have feelings for her?”

Now I was the one to stop in the hallway and cock my head to one side. “Look, I am not getting into this right now with you. I know every child wants their parents to live together forever, happily ever after, like some kind of blasted fairy tale. But here is a lesson for you—sometimes life just gets in the way. Or perhaps the Lady of the Underworld gets in the way—whatever.”

“So that’s a yes,” Maria said emphatically. “You do. Mother said you did. And it doesn’t matter to her that she knows you are up to, uh . . . in her words . . . bestowing your blessings upon the world.”

“We are *not* having this conversation!”

Maria chuckled to herself. “I believe we are,” she said smartly. “And to answer your question, I never knew you two together. Only apart. So this is all I have ever known. And quite honestly, you both think yourselves to be so blasted right all the time that it is hard to see that *ever* working out.”⁹

“Of course it is not going to work out,” I said. “If I may point out, your mother is still married to someone else. The royal ass, Orcinus.”

Maria smiled broadly. “Whoa, Father, no animosity there. . . . But yes, Baron Orcinus puts the pomp in pompous. And you know, he says the same thing about you.”

“He is just jealous of the relationship I had with your mother,” I said. “It drives him even more insane than he is already, that a man outside of his race was with the queen of his people.” Again I wondered if he was fully enjoying all the benefits that came with being married to the Queen. I sure hoped not. Not that he could match what I brought to the table in that department. I did, after all, make her tail twitch. Maria was looking at me with her mouth wide open.

Did you forget that I can also do this?

“Apparently.”

“You certainly think a lot of your abilities,” she said.

“And I can see the little acorn has not fallen far from the ego tree.”

Maria put a hand on my arm and did her best to look sweet. “I didn’t say that it was a bad thing entirely.”

“Ah yes,” I said. “I guess I am going to have to think pure thoughts around you and not worry at all about you dating.”

“You are a man, so you can’t help yourself,” she said. “And, yes, the male brain is absolutely disgusting. Women are so much more complicated in their thought patterns and do not tend to drag their knuckles on the ground. If you really want something done, ask a woman. Oh wait—you won’t have to, because she’ll already have done it. Boys.”

“I won’t disagree with you there,” I said. My daughter was wise beyond her years. A man’s overwhelming phallus focus clouded his judgment and explained his general lack of ability to multitask.

“She’s not.”

“She’s not what?”

“Sharing a bed chamber with Orcinus.”

I shrugged my shoulders. “I don’t care if she is. She is married to that lout now, so it is what it is.”

Maria turned those big blue eyes on me. “Yes, you do.”

Thankfully, we had reached the outside of the faculty lounge. I sighed deeply. I hated that Maria was absolutely, positively right. The black dogs guarding the door spotted Garlic and immediately began 10

wagging their tails. Garlic touched noses with each of them, then participated in some satisfying butt sniffs all around. The eyes of the black dog on the right glowed red as he saw Maria. “Greetings, Mistress of Blood and Sea, no longer a pup you seem to be,” it growled.

“Yes, I am all grown up,” Maria said, putting a hand on its snout. “Do you mean blood and sea, or blood and see?”

The other dog’s eyes glowed red as well, and it shook an invisible flea from its neck, sending steaming drool in all directions, missing Maria and Garlic, but not my boot, which hissed unhappily. “Yes,” it growled. “Mistress or master, master or mistress, of that we shall see what we shall see.”

“I think you boys have been getting into the special treats,” I said. “You don’t have to talk in riddles all the time, you know.”

With twin growls, the dogs were now focused on me, and I had never quite noticed how sharp their teeth really were, and did not want to find out if they could leave their posts. Long red tongues flickered like flames across their massive incisors. Indeed, perhaps vampire was on the menu today.

“Welcome, Sirius Sinister, Instructor in Immortal Self-Defense,” the black dog on the right barked softly. “You may pass. I see you have been burned by desire provided by your nose.”

Maria put her hand over her mouth to stifle a grin. “Good news travels fast,” I said. “Perhaps time for that tale another day—it’s a real tail-wagger. And, just so we are clear, my nose had nothing to do with London.”

The black dog on the left barked sharply. “Don’t forget you survived because of your nose.”

“My nose?” I said curiously. “I didn’t exactly sniff Hades into bailing Oliver and me out, so you are barking up the wrong tree there.”

“Not nose, Father,” Maria said. “Knows. Who you know.”

“Oh, well that does make sense,” I said, nodding. Certainly, knowing Hades, and having her as much on my side as was ever possible, worked out for me. Scorn was probably fuming about that too. Maria was indeed a sharp and perceptive young lady. She was a merpire, but could she read canine minds, or really, canine demon half-breeds?

Maria smiled at me. *That is a no. Just Garlic, more or less.*¹¹

The dog on the right snarled. “Pass. The Master of Masters awaits, and know this—that as shocking as you may find desire, it is true love that moves the earth.”

“I will keep that sage advice in mind,” I said, reaching for the door. What did these two fortune-telling Fidos know about true love anyway? The dog on the left gently grabbed my wrist in its mouth, its teeth pressing down like great clamps preventing me from removing my hand unless I no longer wanted it attached to my arm. I instantly and understandingly stopped and looked into those fiery red eyes. “Yes?”

It released my hand and put a paw on my shoulder. “Nothing but trouble for you will come from the switch of a bitch,” it said.

I reached for the door again, and this time, the dogs did not stop me. Had I understood earlier that when they said *nose* they had really meant *knows*, I am not sure if that would have helped me out at the coronation. But now, I actually thought I knew what they were trying to warn me about. I made a show of rubbing my now healed wrists. “I think I have learned my lesson,” I said. “I will pass on chains, ropes, switches . . . and other things.” I couldn’t very well say butt pluggie in front of my child. A child I guessed even the dogs were not sure about, what she would do, or could do, with her rather unique abilities.

“No, you haven’t,” Maria said as we entered a rather full and boisterous faculty lounge. “And don’t be so sure you know what those pooches are saying about either one of us. Words can have meanings within meanings within meanings. Besides, you are the one who taught me that things are rarely what they seem.”

“Perhaps I should take my own advice more often,” I said while the room had grown suddenly silent at our entrance. Seated at the faculty table were my fellow College of Immortals instructors—the wily leprechaun Patrick, who taught economics and world trade, the meek werewolf Hopkins Scott, who covered the physical sciences, the quiet but competent brownie Miss Sop, who taught mathematics, the gorgeous elf Breeze, who specialized in world languages, the bland faerie Professor, who had her class sleeping through the history of science, and the corpulent pale troll Arthur, who was all things engineering.

The Master of Masters, Hedley Edrick, looked over his faculty with a mix of pride and concern on his face. What was he going to need these assembled folks to do? Standing behind Hedley was my eldest 12

daughter, Contessa, trying her best to look important. I would have expected her sister Mary Grace to roll her eyes at Contessa's behavior, but she and the handsome mertrull Lovely were holding hands, and when he leaned in to kiss her cheek softly, the only thing in her world was her beautiful, blond, beefy boyfriend. My two remaining daughters, Beatrice and Adelaide, were alternating between whispering to each other and flirting with their now constant companions and love interests—the handsome werewolves known as the Wood brothers.

We broke the silence with a series of hugs and handshakes that gave the room a rather cheerful din. I couldn't help but marvel at the Professor's ability to disguise her rather superb body under another tent-like dress. And somehow she had managed, yet again, to get something white and stringy in her black mop of hair, which I tried to point out to her but to no avail. I was guessing it was paint, bird poop, or maybe dried cream. She looked rather bored by the proceedings. We had never really spoken after our foray into London to investigate Halley's diving bell, so for all intents and purposes, it was as though our time under the dock never happened. All women were slippery as eels, as Mary Grace had said, and I was beginning to think she was absolutely correct when it came to the Professor. I looked around the room at the other faculty members. Perhaps it would serve me well to not trust *any* of them completely. If they weren't family, they weren't of my blood, and thus not in my inner circle. A troubling thought entered my mind—my vampire blood was only responsible for half of what my girls were made of. No big deal where Maria and the Queen were concerned, but damn if the werewolves didn't have half of their makeup from the Blackhearts. You know, from Angus and the Howler—those veritable pillars of ethical behavior. I cursed my overactive brain for going there and hoped to find some way to distract myself.

I finally made it to my seat next to Breeze, who smiled at me warmly. I realized the last time I was in this room I had smashed the face of her soon-to-be ex-husband, Templeton Braddock, into the table. I peered at the top of the table for any signs of bloodstains from his pudgy proboscis, and frankly, I was a little disappointed not to see any. Breeze kicked my foot and smiled even broader when she saw what I was looking for. "Much nicer in here than last time," she said happily. "The air smells a whole lot cleaner." Well, maybe I could trust Breeze 13

more than the others, since she owed me, apparently. All I had to do was not screw up that trust by accidentally sleeping with her.

“Must be Hedley’s new potpourri that came in with his last shipment of French wine,” I said with a wink, pointing at the table behind us, where indeed a collection of herbs, flowers, and what looked to be sea salt lay on an ornate dish. I wrinkled my nose, perhaps a bit heavy on the juniper. Breeze inhaled deeply, and the barest of moans escaped her full lips, which did not help my cause—of course the elf loved juniper.

“Attention, attention everyone,” Hedley called, rapping the table with his hand. There was a glint in his eye and a shine to his bald head that was sorely lacking the last time I had seen him. Of course, that did involve some of the most amazing tequila I had ever tasted. Now Hedley was all business—the business of trying to save the world. “Our all-grown-up Maria has returned to us with Lovely from the kingdom under the sea and brings us news that is extremely troubling. Maria, the floor is yours.”

Maria had been standing next to Hedley’s chair, and now, with every gaze upon her, she took a moment to make eye contact with each person in the room. I assumed the big news had nothing to do with Orcinus and the Queen’s sleeping arrangements. But what then was so important that she had not told me—her father and confidante these many years? She stood tall and composed with her shoulders back and posture straight as an arrow. I had never been more proud of her than I was at that moment. She looked to the Master of Masters, and he nodded. So, that was the master she served.

“First, I would like to offer my thanks to the noble Lovely for ensuring my safe passage from Oxford to the sea and back again,” she said. “Suffice it to say, there are now a lot fewer marauders on the road from Oxford to Bristol.” Lovely saluted her and smiled, and Mary Grace clutched his massive arm just a little bit tighter. Oliver, who had also been invited to our meeting, was nodding proudly and received a second salute from his son. Pride of one’s offspring was on full display here in the faculty lounge!

“Once Lovely delivered me into the hands of the Queen, she took me to the Royal Palace,” Maria said. “The Queen was overjoyed to see me, of course, but there was something else going on in her kingdom. 14

She forbade me from going anywhere either without her or her personal guard. Turns out, nobody knew I was there, and Mother was risking her precarious grip on those loyal to her by having her half-breed daughter there in the midst of a brewing civil war!”

“For the record, there is nothing wrong with half-breeds,” Lovely said, meeting the gazes of Contessa, Adelaide, Beatrice, and getting a kiss from Mary Grace. “But, I still have friends in the undersea realm, and I have heard nothing of a civil war.”

“There may be a reason for that,” Hedley said sternly. “Lovely, you are more on land than under the sea these days. And you are betrothed to a land walker. Good news travels fast.”

Lovely nodded, and he and Mary Grace made long and drawn out eye contact as if they were the only two in the room. “A land walker who is the daughter of the sworn enemy of the royal consort,” he said.

Mary Grace put a hand on his arm. “Hedley’s right,” she said. “You don’t know how your friends feel about me.”

“If they do not love you as I do,” he said gruffly, and kissed her passionately, “then they are not my friends.”

“Exactly my point,” said Hedley. “You don’t want to set the wolf in charge of guarding the henhouse.”

“He isn’t talking about us, is he?” Will of the Wood bristled as he whispered to his brother. Connor shrugged his shoulders, unsure if he had been insulted or not, and the barest hint of a snarl issued from his throat.

“No, pipe down, you two,” Beatrice snapped. “It is just an expression.”

Hedley had heard the whole exchange. “All right, people, let’s get to the root of the secrecy,” he said. “Lovely knows what I was talking about. But consider this a warning against flapping your gums. Spies of Scorn and Orcinus are among us—that is all but certain. Perhaps at this college, certainly in town, but hopefully not in this room. I am as sure as I can be that I am able to trust everyone present. However, trust is not constant because people are not constant. I am not accusing anyone, merely stating what thousands of years of experience have shown me.” An awkward silence fell over the room, as accusing glances ran roughshod over the precarious alliance assembled in the faculty lounge. “I challenge all of you,” Hedley said. “Serve this 15

mission with honor and pride and act like your very lives depend on it—because they do!”

Everyone watched him as he spoke, but out of my peripheral vision, I saw the Professor rolling her eyes. She caught herself and quickly looked up to Hedley along with the others and joined in their pledges of loyalty. Hedley gave no indication he had noticed. But I had—and it troubled me greatly. Eel, eel, eel.

“Now then, Maria, please continue,” Hedley said.

Maria took a deep breath, feeling the import of what she was about to say. “The time passed quickly as the Queen split her attentions between teaching me what I needed to know and having meeting after meeting with the high council. Then, one day, a great alarm sounded— a host of kraken were attacking the city.”

“That’s never happened before!” Lovely exclaimed. “Maybe a rogue from time to time . . .”

“No rogue attack this time,” Maria said, shaking her head. “All the forces of the city were assembled and sent out to battle our ancient enemies. But the battle was never joined.”

“Because the kraken were nothing more than a diversion,” I said confidently. “Isn’t that right, Maria?”

“Yes, Father,” Maria said to an astounded round of gasps. “How did you know that?”

I winked at the Master of Masters. “Hedley is not the only one with years and years of experience, and I have studied the art of war at the feet of the masters.” I could see Oliver about to open his mouth, but then think better of it. He was probably recalling the conversation between Hedley, him, and me. The coronation had been all about deception, and I wagered the craftsman of the kraken attack had a bigger goal in mind. Not that I felt Orcinus was remotely a craftsman—a few other choice words came to mind instead. “Maria, go on with the rest of your tale, please.”

Maria nodded. “Indeed,” she said. “The moment the royal forces rushed out to meet the kraken, the creatures let forth a colossal, concerted cloud of ink. The kraken are usually focused on defending their own territory and feeding their insatiable appetites. So a mass attack was highly unusual on its own, but showing a strategy during an attack? Unheard of.”¹⁶

“Well, well, well,” Lovely said. “I thought my run-in with the kraken when the Thief tried to steal the Font of the Oracle was strange. I just figured I had made an impression on that one particular beast from Sardinia, and when it caught my scent in the water, it merely seized the opportunity to get some revenge. Maybe that was part of the plan.”

“More like that encounter was merely part of a bigger plan,” I said. “Perhaps whoever was controlling that sole kraken was doing a test of sorts, and once that went well, and it was persuaded to go after you, a bigger operation was put into place. Let me guess who is involved in the next part of your story, Maria, the royal consort, perhaps?”

“Yes, Father,” Maria said. “The kraken were merely faking an all-out assault and drawing the forces farther and farther from the hall of the high council.”

“And from the Font of the Oracle, which I remind you is the Sacred Relic guarded by the merfolk and thus a target for the evil known as Gulth Scorn,” Hedley said. “Let me fill in the gaps for those looking a bit confused in this room. When the Thief tried to steal the Font, the explosives she used destroyed half the meteor to which the Font is affixed. So, once impossible to move from the hall without a bevy of marine behemoths, the Font was now vulnerable.”

“Turns out she was not the one who used the explosives,” Maria said.

“What?” Hedley said. “That cannot be.”

“Wait a minute,” Lovely said, looking to me. “That does make sense. I never actually saw the Thief in the hall. That was the story from the guards inside!”

“Guards loyal to—” I said.

“Orcinus,” Maria finished, folding her arms across her chest.

“Exactly,” I said. “So, I am betting that Orcinus was behind the kraken’s attack on us in Sardinia.”

“Why would he have done that, Father?” Contessa said. “Wasn’t that Hades’s doing? The merfolk came to rescue us after all.”

“No, I don’t think so,” I replied. “If the Queen was lost in the battle with the kraken, it would have made it a whole lot easier to take over the undersea kingdom.”

“Not to mention if a certain handsome half-breed died as well,” Oliver said. “That would erase one personal vendetta of his.” He 17

smacked his hands together. “But rest assured, mine is still alive and well.” He fell immediately silent and glared at the floor.

I looked at him curiously. I *had* to know what had transpired between Orcinus and Oliver. He looked up at me, coolly composed once more, and I realized that now was not the time or the place.

“Orcinus wants you dead,” Mary Grace said to Lovely, stroking his cheek. “I am with your father—he needs to die!”

“Oh, I am sure finding people in this room who want Orcinus dead is not going to be difficult,” I said. “Put me first in line! I think that was his first go-around with trying to control a kraken, and the results were predictably uncertain. But he got better. Good enough to send the kraken after Lovely as he went after the Thief. Orcinus could not afford for Lovely to catch the Thief and have it be known that Orcinus himself was behind the explosives and not the Thief. And when he mastered control of a whole school of kraken, well, then it was time.”

“After the attempt to take the Font, the Queen said she was going to get some of Harvis’s special concrete to reattach the Font to the meteor,” Hedley said to Maria. “What happened?”

“Orcinus happened,” I said. “The concrete was never used because the men working on securing the Font served Orcinus, not the Queen! Right, Maria?”

Maria cleared her throat. “There was a massive explosion in the hall, and the entire hall collapsed. When the rubble was cleared, the Font of the Oracle was gone.”

“And so was Orcinus!” I said triumphantly. “I knew it!”

Hedley gave me a look of irritation. “Must you be so self-congratulatory?” he said. I gave him my best takes-one-to-know-one smile. “Right,” he continued. “But the Royal Consort would never leave the kingdom and take the Font. He has spent years and years building an alliance to stalemate the Queen. Taking the Font from the capital, even by one who belongs to the family that has the right to possess that Relic, would still be seen as the ultimate blasphemy! Why would he risk that?”

Maria looked down at the table. “Actually, having a half-breed daughter is apparently the ultimate blasphemy,” she said. “Orcinus’s spies have spread propaganda throughout the kingdom about me. He has challenged the Queen’s rule and has at least half the royal forces on 18

his side in a new capital city he has been secretly building just off the coast of Iceland. He is claiming to be the rightful king of the merfolk. The people are torn between following the old beliefs and Orcinus's charisma. But, he has the Font, and the Queen has me." She looked genuinely sad and on the verge of tears—that is, until her sisters descended on her for one massive merpire sandwich.

"Iceland. Why Iceland?" Lovely said. "Why put a capital city there?"

"Well, it is equally in reach of both Europe and the Americas for any attack," I said.

"No," Oliver said. "That is not it. Taralock is there."

"What's that?" Lovely asked.

"The top-secret high-security prison for the merfolk," Oliver answered. "There is one way in and no way out."

"Makes sense," I said. "Easy to put those who oppose him under lock and key forever."

"Baron Orcinus has a Relic, and whether in league with Scorn or on his own, he is a danger to our cause," Hedley stated with conviction. "He wants to provoke a civil war within his own people. Merblood will color the seven seas red if he gets his wish. He is not a mere tyrant, he is a madman!"

"The Queen should attack Orcinus and take back the Font," Connor of the Wood said.

"She should restore order with an iron fist to the face of this traitorous lout," Will added.

"No, Connor, no, Will," I said. "That is what he wants—first, bloodshed in the ocean and then bloodshed on land. And think about this, you can bet that with all the time he has been building this city, I am sure it is well protected with any number of ingenious traps and pitfalls to decimate an attacking army. A stalemate is what he will get. For now." And yet, what gnawed at me the most was the fact that he was *still* married to the Queen—as bizarre as that was!

"As our instructor in economics and world trade, I respectfully beg to differ with Sinister, Hedley," Patrick said. "There certainly is not going to be a stalemate! Orcinus will attack land-dweller shipping, disrupt the capital city's supply caravans and, in short, do whatever he can to starve the Queen into submission. Someone needs to calculate 19

just how much time the Queen has . . . and get the mortals to alter their shipping routes.”

Hedley nodded. “And it sounds like we have a volunteer.”

Patrick nodded as well. “No offense on the stalemate thing, dear Sinister,” he said.

“None taken, my good man,” I replied. I extended my hand for him to shake it. “For our former faculty member Puttsworth—dead and gone these many years but never forgotten.”

Patrick clasped my hand in his two small leprechaun ones and smiled broadly. “For Puttsworth,” he said. He reached up and touched his hat. “Maybe one day I will let you use the Luck of the Irish.” I smiled, picturing how much fun it would be to fire off a few rounds with that oversized gun right at Orcinus’s face. Or Scorn’s. I was not picky. Patrick turned and poked Miss Sop, waking the snoozing brownie. I suspected she was merely feigning sleep and observing everything, as was her nature.

“Mmmph,” she said, making a great show of rubbing her eyes as she stood and stretched as dramatically as a three-foot brownie could muster.

“Come on, Sop,” Patrick said. “I am in need of your equations, my dear.” He tipped his hat to Hedley and the others, and patted the brownie on the rump. “Come along, my little winged wild woman,” he said. “Time is of the essence, we must make haste.”

“So, no fighting?” Hopkins said with a sigh of relief as Patrick and Miss Sop left the lounge. Will and Connor looked at the yellow-bellied excuse for a werewolf and made faces behind his back until Beatrice and Adelaide shushed them. “So, we just go on with our studies, Hedley, until you let us know what to do. Right?” The last thing Hopkins said was more of a plea than anything else.

“Nope, no fighting for you, Hopkins,” Hedley said. “Any combat involving you would seem to be more suicidal than homicidal.” Hopkins put a hand on his chest as if to quell the apparent palpitations he was having. He rose to his feet happily, bidding a fond adieu to his fellow faculty members and all assembled. “But, dear Hopkins,” Hedley continued, “don’t get too comfortable down in your laboratory. I may have need of your particular knowledge for our next mission. Or not. 20

Time will tell. And that goes for the entire faculty. You are all excused as we have some other business to attend to.”

There were happy shouts as the instructors stood, and my girls and their male companions waited for Hedley’s announcement of the “other” business. I could see the Wood brothers hoped it involved displaying some bravado in front of Beatrice and Adelaide. I had also been watching the Professor while Hedley had spoken, and recalled how he had previously stated that only she and I would be going on missions related to the Relics. She definitely made a face when Hedley brought Hopkins into the equation. And it was not a happy face by any means. That was clear even on a face that specialized in portraying blank vanilla most days. Did Hedley not trust her?

“What business is that?” the Professor asked, doing her best to sound uninterested.

“The business of planning and executing the perfect wedding for Lovely and Mary Grace,” Hedley said. “It does not matter if we are at war or at peace, in famine or in harvest, in winter or in summer. Life goes on, and with that comes celebrating one of the most amazing things in this universe of ours—the union of two souls who truly love each other!”

“Oh, that is exciting,” the Professor said. “Well, I must be going.” She rose and brushed past me, bumping me rather hard, either intentionally or by accident I could not tell. Her eyes went wide as she stumbled back before I caught her.

“Whoa now, be careful, Professor,” I said. “Are you all right?” I leaned in and whispered in her ear. “You got a little white something, or other, in your hair.” I reached to pull it out, but it looked for all the world like some kind of varnish.

The Professor pulled away from me and flushed crimson, which I found odd for a creature well disposed to having various types of porridge and the like as permanent fixtures of her countenance. Her hand went to her head. “Why, thank you, Sinister,” she said, darting past me. I was surprised by the vaguely ladylike response from a very unladylike creature.

Breeze had witnessed the whole exchange and done her best to stifle a laugh. She held out her hand to me, which I took as she curtsied. 21

“Until the next mission, dear Sirius,” she said. “Don’t be a stranger. And do see to it that I get an invitation to the nuptials.”

“But of course, Breeze,” I said. “Until the next mission.” As she sauntered out of the lounge, I could not imagine that Hedley would ever team me up with the elf on any mission involving the Relics. No offense to her, but useless would be a massive understatement for her skill set. It was not like I needed any translation skills or we were going somewhere the denizens spoke a language from a forgotten time.

“Make sure you keep yourself available, Breeze,” Hedley called after her. Well, well, well, Hedley was bringing everybody into play. Clearly, he knew what he needed. And to me the most interesting omission was the Professor, who did not even get so much as a second glance from the Teacher of Teachers when she left. I was sure the Professor had heard Hedley call after Breeze to be ready and available. I only wish I could have seen her face when she heard what he had said!

Hedley quickly changed the subject. “Mary Grace, Lovely, have you given any thought to where you would like to be married?”

Mary Grace looked to Lovely to answer, but he was strangely silent. “Well, the werewolf and vampire contingents on my side can travel anywhere, and as much as the present Lord of Castle Blackheart would like the wedding to be held there, I have a feeling that might bring up some unwanted bad memories for Father.”

I laughed out loud, drawing all the attention to me. I peered around the room, making eye contact especially with the Wood brothers. They needed to know a little bit of history about their patron, Angus. “Thank you, Mary Grace,” I said. “But, you don’t have to worry about my personal feelings about Castle Blackheart weddings. Didn’t work out so well for me, what with the decade-plus imprisonment below Peel Castle, talking buttock boil, and not seeing you ladies for the whole torturous time, but I am over it, believe me. I wouldn’t say time heals all wounds, but seeing the boil on Angus’s face certainly did ease the emotional pain. So if Castle Blackheart is the venue, so be it. Just don’t expect your mother and me to dance.”

Contessa had been sitting deep in thought, and suddenly leaped to her feet. “I got it,” she said. “It can’t be Castle Blackheart anyway.”

“And why is that?” Adelaide asked.²²

“Father really doesn’t care,” Beatrice added. She patted Will of the Wood on the hand, and whispered. “Maybe I can meet your mum.”

“Because of the state of affairs in the kingdom of the sea, no merfolk will be able to come.” Lovely blurted out. “There *are* those friends who would risk it—that I am sure of—as Castle Blackheart is not that far from the sea. Perhaps even Mother. Somehow.”

“Actually the Queen would send a contingent to recognize us as her allies,” I said. “Most of the undersea dwellers do not believe as Orcinus does. They simply want to raise their families in safety and keep the same relationship with the College of Immortals as they have done throughout time. Right, Hedley?”

“That would seem to be the case,” the Master of Masters agreed. “So, then, these nuptials will take some planning, for the location has to have equal access for those from the land and those from the sea, and I think I know the perfect place.”

“Where is that?” Contessa asked.

“Lisbon,” Hedley answered. “Perhaps I can call in a few favors and get use of the Ribeira Palace.”

Adelaide grabbed Mary Grace by the shoulders and began jumping around the room with her. “You are going to get married in an actual palace!” she shouted. Maria and Beatrice piled on and pulled a reluctant Contessa along with them. The collective shrieks that ensued were loud enough to rival Norville and his rodent companions at a cheese convention. The bouncing, shrieking mass of femininity exited the faculty lounge and headed toward the college’s dressmaker and then would go to the kitchen. There was a wedding to be planned.

“Has anyone ever studied the best way into Taralock?” Arthur asked quietly. All heads in the room immediately turned and looked at him. Had he been here the whole time? I would have thought it impossible not to notice the big, bloated troll, but in the excitement of the wedding and concern over Lovely’s feelings, Arthur had gone unnoticed.

“It’s impenetrable,” Oliver said.

“Well, how do you know that?” Arthur retorted. “I am an expert in engineering. I bet I can find a way in.”

Oliver rose to his feet and glared at Arthur. “Let me say it again, Arthur,” he said. “It’s impenetrable. That means you can’t get in.”²³

Lovely walked over to his father and put a hand on his shoulder, causing Oliver to turn and make awkward eye contact with him. “Well, that doesn’t make any sense,” Lovely said. “Tell me this, Father. How do you know about Taralock? I am half merfolk and I did not know about it. You are a troll. How do you know it is allegedly impenetrable?”

“Nothing is impenetrable,” Arthur said, cowering his head slightly, fearing Oliver’s unbridled wrath. “That is what our people do, Oliver— we find a way.”

“I could not find a way,” Oliver said through clenched teeth.

“But, Father,” Lovely said. “Why did you even try?”

“Because I think that is where your mother is imprisoned—and my heart tells me she is definitely very much alive.”

Lovely’s mouth dropped open, and an awkward silence fell over the room. My gaze was focused on the Master of Masters, looking for a sign that he already knew this information. Yet I could read nothing from the stony face of the Master of Masters. He could have been a troll.

“But that doesn’t make any sense,” Lovely said, his eyes wet with emotion. “Mother was a nobody, barely a citizen. Why would they imprison the common help in their most secure prison? Was it because of you?”

“There is nothing common about your mother Iyonna!” Oliver exclaimed. “Whatever job she did does not tell what kind of woman she is. And I tell you this, she is amazing!”

“You didn’t answer my question, Father!” Lovely shouted. “Were you the reason Mother was sent away?”

“Excuse me,” Hedley said, drumming his fingers on the table. “Did you just say Iyonna?”

“Aha!” I cried, drowning out Hedley in the process. “So that is the reason you hate Orcinus, and Orcinus hates you! You had a run-in with him at Taralock when you were trying to break in to find Iyonna. I bet that was one of his first posts—running the prison! Am I right, or what?”

“Well, sort of,” Hedley said quietly. He now had the attention of Arthur and the Wood brothers.

“Uh, gentlemen,” Arthur said softly. “I believe the Master of Masters would like to speak.”²⁴

But Oliver was just getting started, and centuries of pent-up rage rose to the surface and boiled over. “Aye, you are right, Sirius,” he yelled. “I got through nearly all their defenses, using the shells of the Worimi, and a few devices of my own, but Orcinus had those accursed nets ready for me and trussed me up. He was torn between the hours of torture he could devise or leaving me to drown. He went with the torture.”

“But you survived,” Lovely said, looking at his father with renewed pride. “And you escaped Orcinus’s clutches.”

“Yes,” Oliver said, regaining his composure. “Arthur is right. Our people find a way. However, the one thing I don’t understand to this day is why it was so clearly personal to Orcinus. I could see it on his face!”

“Oh, that one is easy,” Hedley said. “Iyonna was not a princess per se nor a refuse collector. When you met her in London, she was a student here at the College of Immortals, Oliver. She was just telling you that story to try and protect herself, and ultimately as it turned out, you and Lovely.”

“Didn’t work too well, apparently,” Arthur quipped, ignoring Oliver’s glare. “Sorry . . . ,” he muttered.

“She was in love with you, Oliver,” Hedley said. “And what could she do? Once she was pregnant, she had a very big problem. Bigger than you know.”

“I know the whole torrid tale she eventually concocted, Hedley,” Oliver said, annoyed. “Monster schmonster, I have heard it all before! Know it all too well, fuck you very much!”

“Well, did you know that Iyonna is Orcinus’s sister?”

“What?” Oliver shouted. “That cannot be!”

“You are telling me, Master of Masters, that I am related to that asshole?” Lovely exclaimed.

“That is exactly what I am telling you,” Hedley said.

“I wonder why the Queen did not tell me that choice bit of information,” I said. “I mean we were married, you know. You would think something *that* good would have fallen under marital privilege.” I wondered what else the Queen had failed to mention to me. Her and Orcinus doing the deed, perhaps? Ugh.

“Don’t fault the Queen,” Hedley said. “She was sworn to secrecy. And I am sorry if I didn’t put it together sooner, but Oliver never mentioned 25

Iyonna's name to me before. I just figured that Lovely's mother really was a commoner among the merfolk. Scullery maid, refuse collector— it didn't make a difference. Because what most immortals do not know is that commoner mermaids end up with land dwellers from time to time no matter what the merfolk propaganda says."

"Do tell," muttered Arthur to himself. "Do tell."

"So I have an Uncle Asshole." Lovely grimaced, breaking the tension and bringing the house down with peals of laughter. "Master of Masters, since I am getting married and have just heard some incredibly distressing news, would it be possible for me to have some of that?"

"Tequila?"

"Yes, sir," Lovely replied. "Consider it an early wedding gift."

"Oh, absolutely not," Hedley said. "And who says you are getting a gift from me anyway? So, you have a relative that is a homicidal megalomaniac, big deal. I can relate."

Oliver's face grew serious again. "Well, then I was right that Iyonna is imprisoned in Taralock," he said. "She so embarrassed her brother by lying down with me that he had her squired away to save his reputation. Bad enough that she was with me, and now I can see it wasn't Iyonna who came up with the raped-by-the-monster story. It was Orcinus! If his supporters had heard her side of the story, he would have lost all credibility as a fervent merfolk nationalist."

"Why did the Queen go along with that awful lie?" Lovely said, actually looking quite hurt.

"That, my dear boy, was the deal she struck," I said. "To save your life, she perpetuated the lie. Iyonna went willingly to Taralock. Any mother would. But Orcinus is so egotistical and thinks so much of himself—and, I guess, his prison's defenses—that he never considered that a land walker could do what the scientifically brilliant and incredibly motivated Oliver did in actually finding her. He also never contemplated what you would even look like. But the less merfolk you looked, the more he had to get rid of you. The rumors would start. Someone would talk. The truth would be known that his sister was your mother."

"We need to rescue her, Father," Lovely said.

"Boy," Oliver said, shaking his head, "you have a bride to marry. And our efforts would be doomed to fail."²⁶

“I want to help,” Arthur said loudly. “I *need* to help. I need to get into Taralock too.”

Oliver looked the fat troll up and down. “I can’t see that working out too well, big man,” he said. He peered into Arthur’s eyes. “Why?”

“Because the commoner merfolk that fall in love with land dwellers and get found out get sent to Taralock for permanent work detail,” Arthur replied. “And that, my dear gentlemen, is *my* story.”

“I have a feeling we are going to need to breach Taralock’s defenses,” I said. “Do you agree, Hedley?”

“I do.” The Master of Masters nodded, then rubbed his bald head and grimaced. “Oliver and Arthur, it seems you have a project to attend to. Lovely, it is time you and the Wood brothers made a trip to Lisbon for me. We need to parlay with the Braddock goblin clan. Are you up for it?”

I noticed that the Wood brothers and Lovely had instantly formed a mutual admiration society, perhaps because of the joint affection they held for my daughters. “Aye,” Will said. “We could use the time out of Oxford.”

“Indeed,” Connor added. “Or before you know it they will be putting us on the marital work detail. We’ll get our provisions and meet you at the stables, Master of Masters.”

“Just let us know what you want us to do,” Lovely finished, and the three men left, trailing behind Oliver and Arthur.

Hedley and I were now alone in the faculty lounge. “What do you need from that beastly Braddock’s brethren anyway?” I asked, irritated that the goblins were somehow involved in Mary Grace and Lovely’s wedding plans.

“Security,” he said. “So close to the sea, it stands to reason that Orcinus may take his shot at eliminating the competition for the Relics.” He turned to look at the great spinning glass clock that tracked what time it was outside of the College of Immortals. For all its weird gears and dials, I thought I could still make out the time.

“Does that say 1750?” I said. “How can it be that so much time has passed?”

“June 11, 1750, to be exact,” Hedley said. “Between the tequila, having a faculty meeting, learning about new family members, and planning a wedding—time flies. And you have to understand it is the nature 27

of time to ebb and flow like a great temporal river, so sometimes, it nearly matches the time passing in here, and sometimes it rushes by in torrents, consigning those outside to being so much ancient history.”

“We are sure giving our enemies lots of time to plan,” I said.

“Are we?” stated Hedley. “A minute, or a day, or a month, are all the same to an immortal if you think about it. Scorn is an ancient, ancient creature, and he does not bother obsessing over the passing of time. He thinks he has all the time in the world. For him, his means will justify the end he seeks, and he is patient as to when that end will be.”

“You think you know your brother that well, huh?”

“Half brother,” Hedley corrected. “And, yes, he was always a rather measured asshole.”

“What about Orcinus?” I asked. “He will be hell-bent on war.”

“His family is the rightful possessor of the Font, so he may be content for a bit of time to revel in the fact that he is the one in the family that has that power,” Hedley said. “But his mind is turning and twisting like a riptide. He will not sit patiently.”

Suddenly there was a great commotion outside the door of the faculty lounge. The massive black dogs growled, alerting us that there was an intruder in our midst. My hand went to my sword, and I looked to Garlic, who oddly remained seated by the fire, yawning as she lay back down. “Girl,” I admonished her. “What are you doing?”

The door to the lounge was thrust open, threatening to let loose from its hinges. I leaped in front of the Master of Masters to give him time to vanish, but he made no move to do so. A huge figure loomed in the doorway, its size blocking out all the light behind it, and I could see only the fiery red eyes of the black dogs, each of which had its jaws attached to the intruder’s massive forearms.

“Back away, or the dogs will have your arms for lunch,” I threatened.

“Is that so, Sirius?” a familiar voice called out. “Hedley,” Harvis said, emerging from the darkness and into the light of the lounge. “Can you tell these overgrown whelps to stand down before I turn them into puppy chow?”

“He is not faculty,” one of the black dogs growled, its teeth clamped on Harvis.

“He is indeed a big dog, though,” the other said. “Would you like us to make him a bitch, Master?”²⁸

“Like to see you mutts try,” Harvis growled.

Hedley appeared to be enjoying himself, but quickly shook his head no. “Thank you for your loyalty, but you may let Harvis enter,” he said to the guard dogs.

Instantly, the black dogs released Harvis, who glared at them angrily. “Next time,” he said, “I will show you how we treat rude demonic guard dogs in the New World!” The black dogs were not impressed. I wondered if they would give Harvis any insight into his future. I didn’t have to wait long.

“You will say you want a revolution,” one dog barked.

“Well, what do you know,” I said. “Dog-on-dog prophecy. Who knew?”

“Yeah, okay, mutts,” Harvis said. “We all want to change the world, I get it. Well, count me out. I am just a simple country farmer these days.”

The other dog growled, looking a bit angry. “My canine brother,” it said, “it’s going to be all right.”

“Hedley,” Harvis said, “I have had it with these pooches speaking supposed words of wisdom— words that I do not understand.”

“Let it be, my old friend, there will be an answer to what they say,” Hedley said. “Of that you will surely someday see, this I promise you.”

The black dogs turned and took their places outside the faculty lounge, but not before delivering one last maxim as the door slammed shut behind them. “That immortal dog will learn no new tricks, but if that dog doesn’t, the new tricks will learn the immortal dog.”

“What?” Harvis exclaimed with a scowl.

I ran forward and bear-hugged my old friend. “It has been far too long, Harvis,” I said. “Aren’t those pups a hoot!”

“About as much fun as all your friends falling through a wormhole into your hay loft whilst in the midst of coitus more ferarum,” Harvis said with a grin.

I laughed. “I am sure you prefer the style of that dog over those of the ones you have just met! But, really now, I don’t think I have had the pleasure of your company since I saw you in 1703 after the Great Storm. Oh hey, remember the mermaid I was telling you about? The beautiful one?”²⁹

“Yes, I do recall you seemed to be quite taken with her,” Harvis said with a wink at Hedley. “You always did enjoy seafood.”

“Hey, I married her!” I said, feigning hurt.

“I know,” Harvis said. “And divorced her, and you have a child with her. I heard. I have had the pleasure of meeting all your progeny on my way in here. They are impressive young ladies. Do you have any other children I haven’t met, or any other wives out there to talk about?”

“Actually no, to Hedley’s great happiness,” I said. “Thanks for the nice words about the girls. I am very proud of them. And I have been meaning to pay you a visit in the colonies to meet your brood, and of course give a proper greeting to Molly, since I am her favorite.”

“Right,” Harvis said. “You might have that a bit mixed-up. She rolled her eyes rather expressively when I told her I was coming to London, and mentioned your name.”

“So why the visit?” I asked, curious and reading trouble in his eyes. “Checking on the farm, were you?”

“Aye, my farm,” Harvis said, looking down at the table. “I think we need to talk, Hedley.”

“By all means,” Hedley said, gesturing for us to take a seat. “I had a feeling this was more than just a social call on your part.”

Harvis nodded. “About a week ago, I received word from Old Man Tyler that he sensed he was being watched as he milled about the farm, executing his caretaker duties properly.”

“Old Man Tyler?” I asked. “You left that stinky half werewolf–half gnome running your farm while you were in the Americas? From what I remember about that guy, he hadn’t had a bath in a century or two. But, a hard worker? I give you that. I bet your farm ran flawlessly, and your neighbors did not even know you and your family were long gone.”

“Well, apparently someone did,” Harvis said. “Because when I got there, I found Old Man Tyler in the barn, finally taking a bath, but unfortunately it was in his own blood. His throat was slit from ear to ear, and he had massive stab wounds in his chest from a weapon I could not even identify.”

“No!” I cried. “Not Tyler! That poor soul!”

“And the vault . . .” Hedley said quietly. “What of the vault?”³⁰

I turned my head and glared at Hedley. “A good man was horribly murdered, and all you can think of is the vault? What is wrong with you?”

Hedley met my gaze, and his eyes flickered with the flame of his irritation. “Tyler is long gone from this world, and we can do nothing about it. Do nothing, that is, but think of how to save the rest of the citizens of this world, Sirius!” He looked back to Harvis. “Out with it, man. I say again, what of the vault?”

“The vault was open to the world for anyone to steal from it any of the gold, precious jewels, ancient weapons, antiques from long dead dynasties, and the like,” Harvis said. “But, after a careful tallying of the contents, I found nothing was taken. Not one single thing.”

“Well, that is curious,” I said. “Maybe some immortal finally settled a long ago vendetta against Tyler, then lost their nerve and fled, leaving the vault unharmed.” I looked to Harvis and Hedley and saw that neither one was remotely entertaining my explanation.

“I suppose that is possible,” Harvis said finally. “But only a handful of immortals even know the vault exists. Not to mention it is virtually impossible to open. I designed it myself, and short of explosives that have not been invented yet, or a direct hit from a gas-filled runaway dragon, it’s impenetrable.”

“Nothing is impenetrable,” I said. “Or so I hope to hear from the troll set . . .”

“Clearly,” Harvis agreed. “But the lock simply was not there. It was like it had melted away with no trace of what caused it to do so.”

“So nothing was taken,” Hedley said. “And there was no clue as to the perpetrator of the heinous crime upon Tyler or the break-in?”

“Oh, I didn’t say that,” Harvis said, fishing deep into his cloak. “Right in front of the spot where Sinister’s hoard is stashed, I found this.” He dropped onto the table a round and shiny black stone with bits of red crystals embedded in it that caught the light and cast red droplets like so much blood on the faculty lounge table. I shuddered. Surely that was not an omen of future doom for the members of that group?

“What is that?” I said, reaching to pick it up, and instantly getting a strange feeling of nausea, which caused me to drop it. “Am I the only 31

one getting that sensation of wanting to vomit just from touching that clearly demonic rock?"

Hedley picked it up, and studied it intently, apparently feeling no ill effects from handling the strange stone. "It's not a stone at all," he said. "It's the scale of a basilisk. Would anyone like to wager a guess as to who else was in that vault?"

"Scorn," I said, slamming my fist down on the table. "I knew he had been too blasted quiet lately. I think we have just figured out what caused the holes in Tyler's chest. An accursed demon bird! No doubt Kunchen was there for moral support. Or was cheering on the foul beast!"

"By Scorn, do you mean the old Head Magistrate of Immortal Divorce Court?" Harvis said, looking confused. "Why would he be in my vault, and how could he have a basilisk under his power? Aren't basilisks legends—" He stopped himself and looked at the scale. "Right, *were* legends would seem to be more accurate."

"We have a lot to talk about, my old friend," I interjected.

"The scale did not bother you, Harvis?" Hedley asked, still studying it. "Hmm. Usually people without demon blood have some sort of reaction to it."

"Nope, not in the slightest," he answered. He looked mildly offended for a moment. "Hey, I am one hundred percent werewolf." He thought for a moment. "Well, they always say Great-Granddaddy Buka can blow fire out of his ass. Maybe that is true . . . and he is a . . ."

Hedley smiled evilly. "Buka is a distant cousin. Welcome to the family. But it is probably a good idea not to tell Molly, Harvis."

"Lucky me, I am the only one in the room who has no demon in them," I said. "And even worse, I seem to have a really strong sensitivity to those foul beasts. Damn, I hate that weakness—couldn't be worse."

"Couldn't be better," Hedley said. "Scorn and his pet are never going to be able to ambush you. I am fairly certain you will feel that foul beast before you ever see it. And, as I may remind you, seeing a basilisk is entirely hazardous to one's health. And it's ironic, because for all the immeasurable valuables in that vault, the one thing most coveted by Scorn was absent thanks to some good planning on our part."³²

“The blood!” I shouted. “He wants my blood collection for the Blood of the One! Well, it’s a good thing you have it here, safely under lock and key in your private vault.”

“Sinister!” Hedley snapped. “Speaking of vaults, you are not exactly acting like one! If Scorn got into Harvis’s vault, why is mine any safer? And, may I remind you, the college may have been compromised, so next time—whisper!”

“Sorry,” I said sheepishly. “So what is the plan?”

“I think I have a way to dispatch the basilisk for good, using a lightning rod,” Hedley said. “But I don’t think our professor of science, one Hopkins Scott, is going to like it. And I am going to need Breeze, too, so try not to put your penis in her.”

“Like that would ever happen during an important mission,” I said, ignoring Hedley’s and Harvis’s stares. “I don’t even like Breeze that way. She’s not that pretty. Or sexy. Okay, I don’t believe me either. Never mind—forget I said anything.”

“Uh, I can’t after your story with the Chains of Desire, Sirius,” Hedley said with a smirk. “Because for my plan to work, I am going to have to send Breeze’s twin sister along with her.”

“No problem,” I said, not convincing Hedley, Harvis, or myself, because the first thing that popped into my head was my recent interlude with the Hell-sent elf twins. Breeze and her sister were surely not Hell-sent. Hmmm. Oh, damn it!

Harvis looked at me and Hedley incredulously. “No!” he exclaimed. “The Chains of Desire? Figures when that legendary bit of naughtiness actually makes it into the real world it would involve you. This story I have got to hear!”