

CHAPTER 1

As Tempest swooped down low over the English countryside, I could see Oxford dead ahead, and yes, dead was what Hedley Edrick, the Master of Masters, most probably wanted of me. I had let myself fall victim to the very thing that Hedley and Justice had warned me about—my libido. Not only had I lost the Blade of Truth to the Professor, who was allied with Angus Blackheart and Scorn, but I had conceived a child with her that she clearly intended to kill.

I sighed and breathed in the cool air of a glorious September afternoon, admiring the English countryside, beautiful even in this trying time. I had in a moment of inspiration plucked the Dagger of Dorje from the Professor and allowed the Thief to regain its possession. Hopefully, Lobsang would live again and rejoin the fight against Scorn. I had watched the Thief walk out of Immortal Divorce Court with the Dagger, and my child growing in her womb. They would be at the Temple of Dorje. Where would I be?

Tempest circled once over Oxford, then again, whinnying back at me because she sensed my hesitation. I leaned forward and whispered in her ear for her to land. It was time to face the music, and I had, after all, averted a certain world war by preventing the assassination of the delegates to the Treaty of Paris. That had to count for something, right?

I had to adjust my goggles, for as we approached the stables of the College of Immortals, there waiting for me on the ground were Justice and Garlic. I was wondering where they had disappeared to, but really

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where else could they go that even the foot-soldier faeries of Immortal Divorce Court would fear to tread other than the private abode of the Master of Masters? I grinned, betting Hedley had the college properly scienced, or ensorcelled, to prevent the intrusion of any faeries bent on the assassination of one Maximillian Justice. But as Tempest's hooves struck the good clean earth of Mother England, out from the college walked Maria, Adelaide, Beatrice, Mary Grace, and Contessa. I swallowed the rather large lump in my throat. Were my children coming to pay their last respects before Hedley and Justice conscripted me to a life down below for my transgressions?

I was barely off of Tempest, who was happy to find herself in Dilla's caring hands, before I was enveloped in one massive group hug, which included Garlic making sure my knee and shin were not neglected. I could see Justice beaming a smile that was matched by Don Indigo, Oliver, the Wood brothers, and Lovely, who had also joined us. Lovely was holding little Apollo, not actually so little anymore. Lovely set him down, and Apollo ran to me and launched his toddler body into the air for me to catch. "Granddaddy!" he squealed happily.

"Hello, my dear grandson, Apollo," I said as I held him up high in the air. "If ever there was a time when your name was more fitting, I do not know it—you are indeed the light in my life!" It was at that moment that I saw Hedley Edrick approaching with what I assumed was the frown of all frowns, but even that sourpuss could not quench the elation in my heart at holding my grandson ever so close.

My girls stepped away with the approach of the Master of Masters, and I could barely suppress a wry grin as Apollo slapped hands with Hedley on his way back to his mother's arms. "Well, that was too cute, Hedley," I said. "I don't suppose you and I could just slap hands too, and walk to your office for a bit of your finest tequila, yes?"

"No," Hedley said quietly, and a hush came over the assembled crowd. "When I heard from Justice what transpired at Immortal Divorce Court, frankly, I drank my entire stash. I have to tell you, the one good thing about being at least part demon is the avoidance of any alcohol-induced symptoms the day after." He burped, and fire shot from his mouth. "Aside from that, of course, and, well, this is my third pair of trousers today, but as usual I digress. So don't think I am going to be all soft and mushy with you." Another collective groan from

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friends and family did nothing to assuage the somber mood of the Teacher of Teachers. And I had to admit that I could not really blame him. Things had gone rather poorly for our side, with the exception of my purloining of the Dagger of Dorje.

Hedley and I stood there staring each other down for what seemed to be the longest moments of my entire immortal life. But I was buoyed by the collective love of my surrounding family, and I think that perhaps influenced Hedley Edrick in the end. "So, Hedley, where do we go from here?" I said, reaching down to swoop up my vampire Maltese into my arms.

Hedley shrugged. "Shit happens," he said. "We drink my new shipment of tequila, you finally try some goat sausage, and we move on. If I have learned one thing in all my time on this wondrous planet of ours, it is that it is literally impossible to predict every possible occurrence that could happen in the world. So you knocked up two women in the same evening. Improbable, yes? Inconceivable—forgive the pun—no. But your quick thinking made it a push in terms of net Relic gains and losses. We really need to strategize our next moves in this wild, cosmic game of ours. We shall defeat Angus, the Professor, Scorn, and Orcinus . . ."

"So the asshole of the seas is not dead, is he?" I said, knowing full well the answer.

"That would have been far too easy," Hedley replied. "Scorn saved him for reasons known only to him, since that is his chief rival in his quest for world domination. Probably has a dastardly plan to eliminate the good Baron after he steals back the Font of the Oracle from the Queen. Hmm, that reminds me, we probably need to send a warning to the Queen that the Font of the Oracle is going to be the subject of a plot to procure it for Scorn, courtesy of Orcinus."

"Please do so!" I said emphatically, looking to the water-breathing members of my family. "Like now . . ."

"On it!" Maria and Lovely said at the same time, and sprinted back into the college.

"Did you know Angus Blackheart was in bed with the Professor and Scorn?" I asked Hedley.

"No," Hedley said. "Only suspicions, but according to Justice, Angus's ego got the better of his strategy in Immortal Divorce Court."

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Angus could not help himself, and he let you know that he was personally involved in the plan to divest you of the Blade of Truth. He is a rank amateur, I tell you that!"

I frowned. "He may be rank, foul, and downright putrid of heart, but his plan worked," I said. "Fair bet he means to eliminate Scorn or Orcinus—whichever one of those ingrates is left—and take the Blood of the One for himself."

"You have a remarkable gift for stating the obvious," Hedley said.

"Indeed, Angus has managed to get his woolly hide smack dab in the middle of the quest for the Relics, hasn't he?"

"Like the Moon of Madrid," I asked. "You know where it is, right?"

"Of course," Hedley replied. "Purloined by the Professor and in the hands of Angus. The 1800s are going to be quite an interesting time. Shall we retire to my office for some polite conversation?"

Justice had been watching our conversation with all of its verbal volleys like it was some sort of tennis match. "I had anticipated a bit more of a racket between you two," he said.

"I think we all did," Contessa added. "I was sure our quest to save

the world would have been split into two competing factions. Wow, I guess your egos aren't that big after all."

"Thanks, I think," I said to Contessa.

"Forget the inside voice, did you, sweet sis?" Mary Grace said with a delighted grin.

"I meant well by that, Mary Grace," Contessa replied, crossing her arms.

"Did you now," Mary Grace said. "Okay, if you say so."

"Ladies, it has been a long journey, so take it down a notch, will you?" I said. "So for the record, Hedley and I are thankful for all of you, and our egos are too."

"Yeah, without us, I can't say I am sure this meeting would have turned out the same way," Adelaide interjected.

"I could not agree more," Beatrice said, giving Hedley her best smile.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Hedley said. "Am I that cranky, and given to fits of rage and not reason?"

"You said it, not us," Mary Grace said, rubbing the shoulders of the Master of Masters as she and Apollo made for the college.

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Hedley turned to me, his face a mix of irritation and admiration.

"Your daughters are indeed a chip off the old block," he said.

"Thanks, that is really sweet of you," I agreed. "To your office then?"

All I got out of Hedley was a grunt, but I was happy to follow him and Justice back to the Master of Masters' office. Norville jumped two feet in the air upon seeing me, so startled was he that I had survived whatever Hedley had planned first—that is until my family showed up for support, moral and otherwise. Right as I was about to take my seat, and Hedley was begrudgingly pouring us some tequila from his new stash, a troubling thought came to mind.

"I know that I was just up close and personal with the Professor, but have either one of you checked on the blood collection recently?"

I asked. "Because if you were so focused on me, the Thief, and the Professor in Paris, perhaps old Angus was busy doing something else?"

I was both pleased and alarmed to see Hedley and Justice exchange a glance. "Well, it couldn't hurt," Justice said, looking a bit worried.

"Brother, what do you think?"

Hedley stopped pouring and nodded in agreement. "I have, after all, had a very recent reminder of the difference between the improbable, the inconceivable, and improbably conceiving. Let's take a look, since we have the Assassin of Assassins in the house." He smiled devilishly.

"I don't blame you for lying down and getting all painted with the Thief. It was quite endearing the way she called you the Ass."

"Wait a minute," I said. "How do you know about the paint thing?"

Justice looked at Hedley, and Hedley looked back at him as if the lawyer were the one that had betrayed a client confidence. "Never mind,"

I said to them. "I don't really care how you know. I would rather talk to my favorite prophetic puppies any day over you guys. At least they give me some truth, no matter how concealed it is in their inane canine rhymes."

But as I entered the vault ahead of Hedley and Justice, the black dogs were in no mood to see me. The one on the left was a snarling mass of anger and flying drool, until Garlic calmly walked up to it and they touched noses. What had I done to make this mystical mutt so blasted angry?

"Seriously, Sirius?" it barked. "How did you lose the Truth when we

showed it to you?"

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"Come again?" I said. "What are you talking about? You know, it would help if you two just got right to it once in a while. This whole speaking-in-tongues thing gets a little old, if you ask me . . . sometimes what you mean is not clear until it is all too late."

The one on the right now spoke up in support of its brother. "We told you to beware of that which is not what it seems, and of thinking that what you see is actually what it is, or custody will be lost to evil's gain."

I nodded. "You did tell me that, and now it's quite obvious," I said.

"But while I may have actually figured out that the Professor was the Thief's twin, the one thing that no one ever warned me about was the wine that they spiked to really make the plan come to fruition. Nothing was what it seemed except for my time with the Thief in the Louvre. And as for thinking, that went right out the window with that blasted spiked wine. But no worries, I did manage to get the Dagger of Dorje back, so don't I get points for that?"

Garlic touched noses with the big black dog on the right, who seemed a bit more excited to see her than his pack mate. I sighed—boys. The black dog on the left was not happy with this apparent fraternization. He leaned his head back and outright howled. "It is not the size of the dog in the fight, but the size of the fight in the dog."

"Clearly," I said. "But you aren't talking about your pack mate's new girlfriend, are you?"

"The one who is thought small yet is average only in stature will show his greatness of spirit and cast Europe into war," the black dog on the right said.

"That is not Scorn, I would think," I said. "Why do mortal concerns come into this conversation?"

"You can ask all the questions you want," Hedley whispered. "But for you they only seem to give answers in the form of questions."

"Maddening, really," Justice added. "Sounds like a bunch of lawyers . . ."

"Ah, the Master of Masters and the Lamprey of Libidinous Litigation have approached," the black dog on the left called out. "You may enter the vault along with the Keeper of the Blood."

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"Hey, come on," Justice protested. "Are you guys trying to get under my skin—really? Do you stay awake at night chomping on choice bones just thinking of ways to insult me?"

"Yes," the black dog on the right said.

"You asked," I said with a laugh. I looked to the black dog on the left. "That was pretty good—how about giving me some paw?"

The dog on the left gave me paw all right—two of them around my neck—and drew me so close I could feel the heat from his red-hot eyes.

"The union of three will thrill your heart, but a thrill with the heart will cause double trouble for you." And with that, the black dog let go of me before I nearly passed out from the stink of its sulfurous breath.

I stood back and stared hard at the black dogs, looking from one to the other. "You know what—this time I think I actually know what you are talking about." The dog on the right merely whimpered, which did not give me any sort of confidence. And the truth was I had no idea what they were talking about, other than perhaps a union with triplets this time around? Hmm.

The dog on the right whimpered again. "The union is now four to

lighten your soul, but the heart will indeed be double trouble for you.”

“Four, huh?” I said. “Now it’s a party! You pups are really too much! Wait a minute—are you two talking about the Heart of Kings, or my heart? Because I don’t think you can find four goblins that are attractive enough for me to go there . . .” I got silence for all my analysis.

“You guys are going to give me a headache trying to overthink this last conversation, you know that?”

“I don’t see an ache in your head, if this helps,” yelped the dog on the right.

“Great, so my head stays attached to my body—well, that is indeed a relief,” I said.

“The heart that is blessed will come to be because of you, Sinister,” the dog on the left barked. “But another heart may be lost in the process, so the heart you choose and the heart you lose may not be one and the same.”

“Got it now,” I said, shaking my head. “Couldn’t be any clearer . . .”

After entering the vault, I was relieved to see, and more importantly smell, that the blood collection had survived my dalliances in Paris unscathed. We still held the blood collection and at least half of

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the Relics. I presumed Hedley knew who had the Seventh Relic. I actually suspected that it was him, Justice, or Malakar . . . or perhaps a yet unknown party. I guess I wasn’t sure what I suspected with regard to the Seventh Relic and its holder. For that matter, I wasn’t sure what we were doing with the blood collection.

Once I was seated next to Justice and facing Hedley, I raised that very issue with my glass of tequila. “So if the Blood of the One is only going to work with the Relics and my blood collection, wouldn’t it make sense to just destroy the blood collection?” I asked. “I mean, if you meant what you said last time that through my body courses a veritable blood collection, why do we even need what is in the vault?”

“Good questions all,” Hedley answered. “We think the best plan is to beat our enemies by creating the Blood of the One. Have you come around to our way of thinking yet?”

“Nope,” I answered. I wanted anonymity, not world domination. I wanted true love, not true power. I wanted to be with my assembled family, not rule over the assembled masses. Then it hit me. “Oh, right, the blood collection is your little backup plan in case something happens to me, or if you cannot eventually convince me to use it to create the Blood of the One. Whom do you have in mind? Lovely? Or perhaps are you two going to flip a coin to see who gets to imbibe the blood and rule the world?”

Justice sighed audibly. “Scorn is going to kill us all if he can, you know that, right?”

“Not if we kill him first,” I said. “We can take him on and win.”

“The problem with evil is that if you cut off one head, then two seem to take its place,” Hedley stated. “Haven’t you just seen that with Angus and the Professor? If Scorn and Orcinus are dead, preferably at the hands of each other, those two are ready to step right into their place. And if not the Professor and Angus, well, you just never know who is lurking around the corner. History is full of those that were thought untouchable in their moral makeup, yet gave in to the seductive temptress of absolute power. You can’t eliminate all of the evil in the world, Sirius. Evil has a rather Hydraean makeup.”

“Well, I am going to try,” I said resolutely. “I can just as easily cut off two heads as one—I am no Hercules, but he didn’t exactly have my support system either!”

"They will get you eventually," Justice said. "They will get all of us."

I shrugged. "No, they will not," I said. "We are an amazing team, and I have to believe that we will win."

"What if we don't, and when we are gone, they come here to make sure the next generation cannot avenge us? As with every tyrant, whether it be Scorn, Orcinus, Angus, or even the Professor, the winner will come for your family," Hedley said. "They will come for Apollo and the others. Can you live with that?"

I sighed. He knew that I couldn't. I said nothing, staring at the floor, then my glass, and finally back into his eyes. "Damn you, Hedley," I said finally.

"So you are considering the option, at least," Justice said. "I guess that means we are making progress on that particular final option."

"Progress indeed," I retorted. "So, speaking of progress, what do you feel is our next move?"

"Well—" Hedley started before I interrupted him.

"Do you want to hear mine?" I asked. "I am sure you do. Before I go after any Relic, or put a blade in Scorn or Orcinus, I am going to track down an increasingly pregnant Professor and try to prevent her from murdering our child. Perhaps after that, you will see my face to help in this mission of ours. But if I fail, and my child loses his or her life for the simple reason that I was their father—I am not sure if you will ever see my face again. Actually, either way, right now I am not sure that will happen—got it? I am feeling pretty done with the both of you!

Contessa was talking about two factions and us splitting. Maybe as crazy as it sounds that is not a bad idea. What do you think of that?"

Hedley did not look remotely bothered by my outburst and sat thinking rather quietly. "I am wondering how that thought got into Contessa's mind, to be honest," he said.

"So now you think my daughter is a traitor to our cause, trying to sow dissension in our ranks?" I yelled, jumping to my feet. "That is bullshit!"

"Well, it's kind of working," Justice said quietly. "Bullshit or no, Sirius—while we are going there, I did always wonder how unlikely it was for all four of those werepires of yours to turn out so good with half of their internal makeup being so . . . well . . . blackhearted."

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"That's ridiculous," I said, my heart sinking to the floor as I sank back to my chair. I put my hands over my face. "But I would be lying if I said that I had never had that thought myself."

"Ernesto and Maria did not raise a fool," Hedley said. "But the fact remains that the Pack raised the werepires. All of this 'discussion' could be nothing more than stress, fatigue, and pressure, but then again . . ."

Norville popped into Hedley's office, portending the approach of visitors. I sighed—who could it possibly be? Into Hedley's office strode Don Indigo, and Connor and Will of the Wood. Don Indigo saw the strained look on my face and stopped the other two exuberant lads in their tracks. "Pray tell, Sirius Sinister," he said. "Is this a bad time?"

"No, not at all. I was just leaving," I said, standing and motioning Garlic to me. "The Master of Masters and the Lawyer of Lawyers are all yours."

Will Wood was so nervous that I thought he was going to throw up. Why? "Actually, Sirius, we didn't come to talk to them—we came to talk to you," he said.

"Did one of you smarmy bastards step out on one of my girls?" I

said, fangs flashing to the forefront of this conversation. "Which one of you louts did it? Come on now, out with it so I can beat you good and proper."

"Relax, Sirius," Don Indigo said, his voice as cool and calming as ever. "I know you are off wine now for a bit, but you need to relax. It's nothing like that . . ."

"And it has nothing to do with killing any of our enemies, or traipsing after Relics either," Connor added with just the tiniest hint of disappointment in his voice. "But all the same, we need your blessing

before we each undertake the single greatest mission of our lives."

I looked at Hedley with a mix of disgust and anger. "So if I won't be your blood patsy, you are going to ask these fine men to do it?" I spat.

"And to think my vampire blood was boiling before this travesty. I don't think you have the right to ask them to take the risk of certain death and mayhem! I guess you do really want me and them to have a whole lifetime of gloom and doom? Because let me tell you, if these louts go to their unjust reward, I am going to have some rather depressed females in my life!"

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"Yeah, about that," Don Indigo said, pursing his lips and frowning.

"Sirius, this really doesn't have anything to do with you other than custom and courtesy," he said. "I don't think any of the three of us think things are going to go that bad, but if they do, we chose this path of our own free will, or at least as much free will as is involved in something so complicated."

"What in the hell are you talking about, Don?" I asked. "Hedley and Justice are clearly trying to take away any free will you boys have left, and I know that is probably not a whole lot to begin with, with such strong ladies in your lives . . ."

Hedley looked at me, the fire of his irritation stoking ever greater in his eyes, and shook his head in disbelief. "If you listen for one blasted moment, all will become clear to you," he said. "I promise."

"Yeah, well, your promises are worth about as much as rotten goat sausage to me right now, Promisor of Promisors," I said. If I had been wearing gauntlets, I would have thrown one down at that moment.

"Hedley, can you not break out your most private stash for this occasion?" Justice pleaded. "Sirius is going to kill someone if he doesn't cool down, and I am the one standing the closest to him . . ."

"Now what exactly do you mean by 'most' private?" I asked. "It seems the Secret Keeper of Secret Keepers has been holding out on me as per his usual custom."

Hedley stifled a smile, and for some reason that took the edge off my ire. "So private, Don Indigo hasn't even heard of the vintage," Hedley replied.

"Get the bottle," I said, feeling pretty happy that my little demonstration in demon baiting had turned out so well. I sat back down in my chair. "All right, fellows, out with it—what mission do you need my blessing on?"

Don Indigo smiled ever so charmingly. "I would like to ask you for Contessa's hand in marriage."

Will looked ready for battle. "I would like to ask you for Beatrice's hand in marriage."

Connor grinned from ear to ear. "I would like to ask you for Adelaide's hand in marriage."

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I sat there for a moment absolutely speechless. Justice took one

look at my glassy eyes and called to his half brother. "Better make it two bottles," he said. "And that is just for Sirius!"

I looked at the dusty wine bottles that Hedley brought out from some unknown location. If I had known he had a vault filled with priceless wine, perhaps I would have been tempted to break in myself. If Hell guarded the blood collection, what guarded the wine collection? Hedley knew me all too well. "You don't want to know about that," he said quietly. "Trust me, it is just better that way."

I nodded, and noticed there was nothing fancy about the bottles, which just said "wine" on them in English script. Sometimes simplicity was all that was needed since this wine must have come from a time when there were just a few producers. "Where did this come from?" I asked. "It looks like they have more age on them than you, and that is saying something."

Hedley sighed. "As you know, great wine is not just about the time on the vine or in the barrel," he said. "A master winemaker is the difference between cheap-ass swill and, well, perfection."

I nodded in understanding. "So it's yours literally," I replied. "You could have just led with that, you know. Is there a vineyard somewhere here in the College of Immortals, or does Don Indigo have a hidden block of your special vines at his estate?"

"Oh no, I didn't make this wine, and neither did Don Indigo," Hedley answered. "Don is amazing, but he doesn't have access to the place where these grapes are grown. You are the only man to have gone there and actually leave. How is that for a hint?"

"Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned," I said. "But the temperature is all wrong for wine—did this come from Limbo? Is Limbo now a vineyard?"

Hedley laughed. "Think about Knowledge and Wisdom, and maybe you can figure it out."

"No shit!" I exclaimed, knowing instantly that he meant the gardens of Persephone. I had no idea how Hedley had gotten the wine from my favorite bookworms, who in turn got it from my favorite parttime ruler of Hell. It made sense that because Persephone could do wonders with all things nature, fine wine would be hers to make if she so desired. I actually did not care to know what Persephone wanted

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from Hedley that put him in possession of these bottles, but I am sure it had something to do with him making another one of his "deals." If I had to guess, I would say making a deal with Persephone was probably infinitely safer than making one with her ex!

Hedley eased the cork open with a satisfying pop, and the most beautiful reddish-purple color came out of the bottle. I swirled it carefully in my glass and put my nose to it once, then quickly again, stunned at its impressive bouquet. I could smell the goddess's perfume like she was right there in the room, and I realized she was—but just for me. I had a feeling that was why Persephone was willing to provide Hedley with her ironically heavenly bottles. I wondered why, but who could question or even fathom a god's motivations. Besides, I felt intoxicated, and I had not even taken a sip! I swirled, sniffed, and then tasted a wine more complex and layered than any I had ever tasted before.

I turned away from the other men in the room as the wine took me to a place where even immortals could not tread. I was back in the embrace of Persephone, the wine touching me like a kiss from her impossibly soft lips. As the wine fairly danced over my taste buds, the flavors just exploded in my mouth, sending waves of pleasure throughout

my body, and I sat down quickly, nearly passing out. It was indeed a bit of the goddess in a glass. From my own faraway world, I heard the others state how it was indeed the best wine they had ever tasted, but as Hedley knew it would, the gift from Persephone had rocked me to my very core.

"So, are you relaxed now?" Justice inquired of me.

I did not answer him but took another sip from my glass and looked down, happy to see that I had not soiled my trousers. Yet. I nodded finally and set the glass back on Hedley's desk. I could see Don Indigo and the Wood brothers exchange a hopeful glance. "Oh no," I said, recovering my faculties, at least temporarily. "I was nodding in appreciation for the wine and its maker. I am still debating if I am going to give you my blessing."

I enjoyed the look of surprise they each displayed, and made a mental note to congratulate Don Indigo on keeping his dismay nearly hidden from me. I had learned a few things over the years from dear Oliver about reading people, and these were some rather unhappy and distressed faces! "Perhaps if each of you had come to me individually, 14 KIRK ZUROSKY

plied me with wine the equal of this, and given me a passionate and well-reasoned dissertation of your undying love for the rare jewel of a daughter of mine that you have been bedding for the better part of the 1700s, well, then maybe I would have assented to each and every one of you," I continued over Justice's loud guffaw.

"Sorry about that," he said to the erstwhile suitors at my mercy.

"But this is a full-on assault on my sensibilities, mere moments after my arrival from Immortal Divorce Court, and I am sure you have heard that things did not go well for our cause, yes?" I asked.

"I guess that is a matter of perspective," Will blurted out.

"Indeed it is, and our perspective is that you, as always, were successful," Connor said. "You did manage to recover the Dagger of Dorje, right?"

"So, what gives?" I pressed the three not-so-wise men. "Why the mad rush to get my blessing?" I took another sip of the virtuoso vintage, trying and failing to ignore the tune it was playing with my heart. Truth be known, I had an inkling as to what the problem was with my girls and their suitors.

"Oh, I get it," I said. "You think I am going to disappear for parts unknown, and you are getting a lot of pressure from the girls. They don't want you to wait for me to surface in a century or so—if I ever come back! Hmm, now that makes sense."

I saw them nodding quickly in agreement. Hedley did a fabulous job of staring at his wine and swirling it to create geometric equations in his glass, the meaning of which were known only to him. And that reminded me, not that I had forgotten, with Hedley there were always unseen motivations to his actions, including this little parade of suitors and plying me with Persephone's wine.

Don Indigo cleared his throat. "You pick up on things as quick as always, Sirius," he said. "Indeed, your daughters are all very headstrong, and when they want something, they want something."

Connor nodded in agreement. "I just have no ability to say no to Adelaide," he said.

"Beatrice is ever a take-charge kind of lady," Will pitched in.

I was a little disappointed these fellows had caved so easily to the demands of my daughters to make them honest women. I was not,

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however, remotely surprised. Those girls were indeed like me more and more every day. Or at least that is what I hoped—Justice’s comment about them, or one of them even, being blackhearted notwithstanding. That worry was just going to have to play itself out, because now it was time to let these good men off the hook so I could leave the College of Immortals to see the Thief, before tracking down the Professor.

“My daughters are, after all, ladies of strong moral character and purity of heart,” I said. “And they deserve good men that epitomize these same ideals. So I will give you my blessing to ask for their hands in marriage, and if they say yes to you, then you will consider yourself the luckiest men in the world.”

Don Indigo looked to the Wood brothers. “I think I can speak for all of us here when I say—we already do,” he said.

I stood and went to bear-hug dear Don Indigo. “Just take your time making me some more grandchildren,” I said, and I was surprised to feel his body tighten up. “Oh no, it’s the ambrosia. Immortality has made you unable to have any more children, hasn’t it?” I whispered to him privately. How embarrassing that a man as virile and lively as the incomparable Don Indigo had been robbed of giving life by the very thing that gave him life. “So sorry, my man,” I continued. “Does she know?”

Don Indigo coughed uncomfortably. “There is no issue with me having issue,” he said. “I am as fruitful as my wines.”

“Then apparently you have been popping your cork a whole lot, haven’t you?” I exclaimed, realizing the great vintner had an entirely secret vintage on the way. I stopped hitting him and hugging him, and pushed him away from me none too gently. “Damn you, Indigo, Contessa is with child, isn’t she?”

Garlic began to howl, showing her displeasure with Don Indigo.

And I was right there with her. “Come on, man—out with it before my fists help you find the words!” I shouted.

Don Indigo flushed to a color that matched the wine. “Um, my dear friend,” he sputtered. “Remember when I said when Contessa wants something—she wants something?”

“Uh, yeah,” I replied, still in shock. “They all want what they want, but you know this . . .”

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“Well, she wanted a baby,” he said. “And she threatened to find someone else that could make that happen, if I wasn’t willing . . . well . . .”

“And you bought that bunch of rubbish in spite of your centuries of experience,” I said. “You went along with her? How could you?”

Don Indigo shrugged sheepishly. “Well, it wasn’t actually that hard . . .”

Justice snickered again, clearly enjoying this to my great chagrin.

“Sorry to hear that, but apparently with that extra special ambrosia he brings to the table it worked anyhow,” he quipped. “Oh come on,” he protested, ignoring my evil glare. “Like I wasn’t going to leave that one alone . . .”

“I don’t even know what to say to you,” I said to Don Indigo.

“Well, ‘I am a hypocrite’ comes to mind,” Justice said. “Get over it, Sirius, and get over yourself, because when you put two people together who are into each other, it doesn’t matter if they are in a bed or barn, perhaps on the floor, and the bushes are always convenient . . .”

“Or in an academy dedicated to the arts . . .” Hedley added. “With lots and lots of paint . . . you know some Louvre loving . . .”

That caught all of us off guard, and laughter filled the room. I had

to realize the possibility that maybe when it came down to it, Contessa really was a lot like me. She followed her own rules just like I did. I inwardly frowned because Angus and the Pack followed their own rules too. But Don Indigo was one of my favorite people on the planet, and so in the end I trusted his instincts as much as anything. Mary Grace had said and done things that made me question her loyalty in the past, but team her up with Lovely, and I hadn't given those doubts a thought in years . . . until now. Damn it, was the wine going to my head, and my heart too?

I turned to look at the Wood brothers. "I am glad to see that at least you two are going to do things the traditional way," I said. "Sweet church weddings, and then long, romantic honeymoons where the baby-making occurs . . ."

Garlic sauntered over to the Wood brothers, sniffed at them a little more closely, and began howling wildly in alert mode. "What is it that my wonderful vampire Maltese has scented on you two?" I asked. "Could it be deceit, or actual treason—hmm, no, that is not it, because

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she would have drawn blood for that. Oh, I know what it is—the guilt as a result of premarital relations!" Garlic came over to me and sat on my foot in satisfaction of her discovery and my spot-on recitation of same.

"Come on now, really," Connor said to Garlic, clearly shocked that she had ratted him out. "We are all canines here—now, I understand selling out Indigo, but we have had bones together, Garlic, so how could you just sell us out like that? I mean, sure, he is your alpha—I get it, I suppose—and you have to be loyal to the pack of Sinister. But the next bone I get—you can rest assured I am not sharing it with the likes of you."

I put my head in my hands and ignored the low growl of my snarling and very loyal vampire Maltese. "Let me try that again," I said.

"Sweet church weddings and long, idyllic honeymoons during which life is created by the new couples!"

Will nodded and put his hand on my shoulder. "Yeah, well, about that," he started. "It's kind of funny, really—remember the whole Beatrice-takes-charge thing? Yeah, well, I fought her off for as long as I could—but it happened . . ."

"Happened?" I asked, not liking where this was going.

"You can't spell baby without the Bea," Connor blurted out.

"What?" I spat.

Will looked at his brother with disdain. "Well, you can't spell laid without the Addie," he retorted.

"You have got to be kidding me," I said, sitting back down in the chair and reaching for my wineglass.

Justice had taken it and refilled it for me. "Here you go," he said.

"You know, my good friend, for someone so prolific you are quite prudish when it comes to your own progeny—a bit of a double standard, no?"

"NO!" I shouted. "So we are at least having some weddings? Master of Masters, please provide the knowledge of ages to me—I am dying over here . . ."

"Sure," Hedley said. "We are not actually having weddings, plural.

Out of great concern for the mortal population of any major city in Europe or in the Americas where we could stage a wedding—we

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are doing a triple wedding next week here at the college. Think small,

sedate family affair.”

“Just one question—how long did you know that all of this was going on?” I said accusingly. “Come on, tell me—how blasted long?”

“Irrelevant,” Hedley said. “You had other things taking up your attention. And of course I knew about it—it’s what I do. But you can’t tell me that you didn’t see this day coming a long time ago.”

I nodded. “Oh, I did,” I replied. “Just not all on the same blasted day! Now, bring me another bottle of that wine.” I took a long drink from my glass, toasted Persephone silently, and counted on my fingers.

“Say, has Maria been hanging out with any randy young gentlemen lately?”

“Not exactly,” Don Indigo said. “She does nothing but study any tome Hedley gives her. So she thirsts for knowledge more than she thirsts for companionship.”

“Yeah,” Connor agreed. “Is bookish a word?”

“I think so,” Will added. “If it is—that is Maria. So very brilliant. More smarts in her baby toe than Conner and I have in our whole dumb bodies.”

“So I guess you are telling me that I will have no surprises at this triple wedding that Hedley is rambling on about,” I said. “You don’t know how happy that makes me, because this old heart of mine can’t possibly take any more surprises!”

“I think you are safe there,” Hedley said. “Maria is on her destined path. Remember, knowledge is power, and trust me, she is on the path to being her highest best self. She will only surround herself with those that can help her achieve that apex, and admittedly that gives her a very sparse group of humans to let into her heart. Do not forget her mother is the Queen, a rare woman in all ways—beauty, brains, compassion, courage, leadership, the capacity for great love . . .”

“Didn’t you divorce her?” Justice said to me, drinking deeply from his wineglass. “What a world-class dumbass you must be . . .”

Thankfully, my own wineglass was now empty, and the vintage had armed me with enough liquefied calm to ignore Justice’s ramblings of truth. Instead, I just nodded and took great comfort in knowing as always the Master of Masters was right. What else could I do—life happens, and time passes, and if I had anything to say about it, the

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world would always be a place where people, immortal and mortal alike, were free to travel the continents and oceans in a quest to find their match in life and fall in love.

The next week was a blur, and that doesn’t include the private moments I had in my chambers drinking a few bottles of Persephone’s wine. Well, I guess the all-by-myself part was not really accurate because when I drank the goddess’s vintage I found myself transported to another plane of existence where Persephone was a bit more, uh—corporeal. So that is why I awoke lying with my head at the foot of the bed, mouth hanging open, bathed in a pool of divine sweat the morning of the triple wedding of the millennium. There was a loud and incessant rapping at my door, or was it in my head? I closed my eyes, disappointed that Persephone had delivered me back to earth, but wait—who was that frantically licking the inside of my mouth?

I pried one eye open and then the other, and I found myself looking into the little black eyes of a very concerned vampire Maltese. “Okay, okay,” I croaked, pushing Garlic away. “Or, rather, I am okay.” She was so worried that she wasn’t even fussing at me about the pink bow in her hair, or the fact that her perfectly coiffed white hair was gleaming from

a recent grooming. Why would Garlic look like that other than this was a dream? The pounding in my head continued, and just as I was about to roll over and go back to sleep, I realized that at least some of the noise in my head was actually coming from my door. Feeling a bit drained and rather dehydrated, I stumbled to open it, flinging it wide and not realizing that I was completely naked.

Cabernet looked down and frowned. "I mean, come on, man," he said, looking a bit flustered. "Do you really need to show it off like that? I have been working hard for you and your people, so put some trousers on so I don't go into a complete depression at my own now wholly deficient twig and berries . . ." He thought for a moment. "Can you imagine if it was one of your children at the door instead of me?" he said. "Now that would have been funny, or emotionally scarring, depending on your viewpoint . . ."

I waved him in, all the while trying to frown at his comments, but merely ended up spitting instead, and shut the door still unable to really speak. I found a water pitcher and drained it, ignoring the fact that more went on me than in my mouth. But it did bring me back to
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this world enough so I could have a halfway intelligent conversation, and thankfully Cabernet kept it on a rather visceral level. My eyes fell on Garlic, who was still primed as could be. Hmm.

"Uh, yeah, the wedding is today," Cabernet said as Garlic huffed at me like the bow in her hair was my fault. The satyr held up my wedding attire, which I could see was made of starlight, and Cabernet's pride shone through even brighter than the wedding suit with his beaming smile fixed on my face for a reaction. There was no doubt that it was truly beautiful, but right now the goofy goat's grin and the shining suit both frankly just hurt my eyes, and I turned away.

"Of course I know the wedding is today," I said. "Or at least I do now. Hey, I have been here the whole time." Well, sort of . . .

Cabernet was standing there, his smile of happiness dashed by my dourness, and he did not even try to hide his disappointment. "Really, Sirius?" he said. "No one has seen hide nor hair of you in three days. Don't you think it is a bit irresponsible to drink yourself into oblivion?"

"You say oblivion," I croaked. "But it was more like heaven . . . wait, did you just say three days?"

Cabernet nodded and folded his arms across his chest. "The only one that did not seem remotely concerned was Hedley Edrick," he said.

"Must be nice always knowing everything . . . but yes . . . three days."

Had it been that long? I wondered. Although it did explain the hunger and thirst I suddenly felt, which I immediately began taking care of with a platter of food that appeared next to the water pitcher.

"So love blood oranges," I rasped, cramming several sections into my mouth and feeling more and more invigorated with every bite.

Cabernet's eyes widened as he forgot his next unkind words. "That platter was not there a second ago—I swear on the peephole of my Grand Ram!" he said. "What nature of immortal hussies have you been consorting with?"

"Cabernet," I said. "You need to relax before you lose the last of that mange you call hair! And a word of caution, about the very last thing the angelic creature that sent me these blood oranges can be described as is immortal, or a hussy. So I would thank your lucky star suits that she has apparently chosen to spare your soul and not consign you to an eternity of walking behind all of the golden swans that inhabit her domain picking up their gilded poop with your spindly fingers. And

yes, eternally is a mighty long time to not be able to stroke the little satyr . . ."

"Oh God," Cabernet panicked, looking even whiter, if that was possible.

"Close," I said, beginning to feel a little pep in my naked step.

"Think of the feminine, though . . ."

"A million pardons!" Cabernet shouted at my floor.

"I think you are good since you are still here," I said. "Now, I like being naked even more than most, but this is getting a little weird, so hand me my star suit because when I put it on I have a feeling I am going to be a pretty good-looking father of the brides!"

Cabernet just sighed, although I knew he was all too happy to see the sparkle back in my eye. "Hey yeah, the man really is his clothing," he exalted. "Sinister is back—look out, world! But you might want to bathe the stink off of you first, since you are still glistening with the sweat of . . . of . . . your endeavors."

"I don't stink," I said, lifting up an arm to take a whiff at the pit.

"Honeysuckle—see?"

Cabernet leaned forward, wincing in advance of expecting the worst. "Actually, you smell fantastic," he exclaimed, clearly surprised, and handed over the clothes. "Who knew?"

I looked in the mirror and felt like myself once again. Goddess therapy, anyone? "All right, I will see you in the brides' chambers in ten minutes," Cabernet said. "The girls think you have been laid low with some kind of weird sickness, depression, or anger-at-the-world thing. They were wondering if you would be alive and awake for their wedding."

"I was having a moment," I said. "But I am back and ready for action. Though giving away three of my ladies at once is never something I thought I would do—in fact I am not even sure how this is going to work."

Cabernet grinned. "I have it all figured out, or rather Oliver and Arthur do," he said. "Go see the brides, and then come to the college cathedral."

Maria opened the door to the brides' suite right as Garlic and I got up to it and I had extended my hand to knock. "I felt you coming," she said, looking quite dazzling in her own starry gown. There was no

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doubt Cabernet had worked overtime getting starlight garments ready for all of the wedding party. I almost felt guilty that I had threatened him with the wrath of Persephone, although the image of the sexstarved satyr waddling behind the equally waddling swans and picking up their poop with his bare hands was pretty funny. I smiled broadly at this thought, which caused Maria to look at me curiously. "You seem to have gotten a bit of extra pep in your step—what did you do?"

I shrugged. "Slept a lot, apparently," I said. "Cabernet said you ladies were worried about me, but trust that I got what I needed to be rejuvenated and ready to face the world, and the college chapel!"

"Well, you must have been doing your sleeping on a different planet than this one because you have been off my grid for three days now," she said. "Care to elaborate on how you managed to pull that off?"

"Nope," I said. "Not a bit."

I was saved by the doors to the inner chambers being opened, and Mary Grace came out to give me a big hug. "Are you ready?" she said. "You could barely contain your emotions when you saw me, but now you have three beautiful daughters about to get married. Wow, Father,

you smell great—new cologne? Is that a tear I see in your eye?” I batted a hand at my traitorous eye. “No, just a bit of dust is all, or maybe that new cologne is getting to me,” I said coolly. “Of course I am ready!”

“Are you sure you don’t need a moment to compose yourself?”

Mary Grace pressed.

“No, don’t be ridiculous,” I said, my hand going to my eye again. What in the really beautiful part of Hell was going on with me? “Go ahead and open the door, Mary Grace, because I have been here and done this before.”

“All right, Father,” Mary Grace said as Garlic barked in anticipation of seeing the brides. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you . . .” she continued, reaching for the doors to the bridal chamber.

I nodded and took a deep breath, for oddly she was right—I did feel a whole lot more emotional than I thought I would. But I had no time to ponder this odd development, for Mary Grace flung the doors wide open, and there in front of me looking like three stars dropped down from the heavens were Contessa, now slightly showing the signs of her impending pregnancy, and Adelaide and Beatrice, equally glowing in

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the way of nature taking its course. I felt tears well up in my eyes like drops of spring rain, seemingly of their own volition, and thinking on it for a moment I chalked it up to some remnants of Persephone still coursing throughout my body. I had a feeling that she loved weddings.

“You are all so amazingly beautiful!” I exclaimed, or more accurately blubbered. “I couldn’t be happier right now!” I was thankful that Mary Grace stepped in with a handkerchief to help me save face. A quick honk of my nose and dab to the eyes and I muttered something about allergies that everyone knew I didn’t have.

“Good,” Contessa said, clearly so caught up in her moment that she would not have noticed if I had entered the bridal chamber hopping on one leg. “I thought you would be pretty pissed off at us.” She sniffed the air curiously. “Is that honeysuckle? Because I know I didn’t ask for any honeysuckle. Hmm, now I don’t smell it anymore. Well, what do you think of me—uh—of us?”

“Incomparable,” I tried, feeling the emotions come rushing back, but with all of my willpower fully engaged I managed to keep from crying.

“Don’t worry about the timing of things—I swear I am not upset with any of you. I love—”

“Thanks for that, Father, I really appreciate it,” Contessa interrupted.

“But you know, as the oldest daughter, I wasn’t getting any younger . . .”

“We are quadruplets,” Beatrice said quietly. “We are the same age . . . a few minutes here or there doesn’t turn you into a spinster, you know!”

“Forget it, Bea,” Adelaide said with a grin. “She’s in the moment. Thankfully we don’t have to share every step of this day with her because she would probably try and push us out of the way.”

“You said it, not me,” Mary Grace quipped.

“Like I was saying,” Contessa continued, seemingly oblivious to the banter of her sisters. “You know that I couldn’t ever find a man with the makeup of Don Indigo, and he truly loves me. I had to have a baby with that man with all he brings to the table! You understand, right?”

She did not give me a chance to finish. “Well, of course you do,” she continued. “I hear we have some more sisters on the way, do we not?”

“Uh,” I stammered. “They might not actually be sisters . . . you

could get a brother or two out of it.”

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Adelaide laughed. “Yeah, right, Father, like that would ever happen because you clearly make girls,” she said. “Don’t worry—you got pretty good odds here that one of us will give you another grandson!”

Beatrice frowned and rubbed her belly. “I think I have more than one growing in here, I tell you that!”

Adelaide rolled her eyes. “Come on, did you fail the class in the birds and the Beas? We are werewolves—of course there is more than one baby in there. We have a litter, remember?”

“Right,” Beatrice said, looking none too happy about that prospect.

“What about you, Contessa?”

“Don’t really know,” Contessa said with a smile. “Don Indigo was a mortal, now he is something else entirely.”

“Which is what?” Mary Grace said. “Oh right, he is a master vintner, so that means your kid, or kids, will come out drunk as little wereskunks!”

“Girls,” I interjected as Contessa’s eyes flashed with anger that nearly outshone her starlight. “This venue is not the place for any mean-girl comments. Mary Grace, say you are sorry.”

“Sorry,” Mary Grace said, actually sounding sincere, but Contessa’s middle finger was aimed at Mary Grace, who just rolled her eyes.

“It is okay because she is just jealous that Lovely doesn’t have ambrosia flowing through his veins,” Contessa retorted. “I understand her frustration that I got the ultimate catch.”

“You’ve seen my husband, right?” Mary Grace said, a bemused smile creeping across her face. “You know, the one that looks like a Greek god . . .”

“Yes, ‘looks like’ is the phrase of the day,” Contessa agreed.

Mary Grace just shook her head, and Beatrice seized the opportunity to shatter the awkward silence permeating the room. “I am going to figure it out as this pregnancy progresses, with all of you doing the same,” Beatrice said. “And Mary Grace,” she said, grabbing her irritated sister’s arm, “I am going to be asking you lots and lots of questions since you have been there before.”

“Yeah, me too,” Adelaide said.

“I am more than happy to be there for all of you,” Mary Grace said, making sure to lock eyes with Contessa. “I had no idea what to expect with Lovely involved, but I figured it out. And we can compare notes as IMMORTAL DIVORCE COURT • VOL. 5

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we go along because you know every pregnancy is different even if you have had one already.”

I looked a little more carefully at Mary Grace and sensed her glow was from more than just excitement for this wedding. “Don’t tell me you are with child—too?” I said.

Mary Grace laughed. “Okay, I won’t tell you,” she said. “Oh, and for the record, I am the only one to make a child—now two—after I was married. Just saying . . .”

“Was that really necessary?” Contessa said.

“Yes, why yes, it was,” Mary Grace said, making a face at her sister.

“And it’s true!”

“Okay, have it your way,” Contessa said, looking me in the eyes.

“Mary Grace was not a virgin on her wedding day . . . and it’s true, yes, it’s true.”

“All right, none of that matters to me,” I shouted, quickly quelling the potential sisterly fisticuffs before the nuptials. “I just want all of you

to be happy. I mean that from the very depths of my heart!" I caught the scent of the most delightful bit of honeysuckle, and it was like all of the negative energy and anger had been sucked out of the room. I reached for a piece of blood orange from a bowl that had not been there a moment ago and took a satisfying bite. "Oh, that will work for me," Bea said, grabbing a piece, with her sisters following her to do the same. "I feel happy, refreshed, and loved," she said to a chorus of agreement from her sisters.

"Me too," I said, really wanting to kiss Persephone for what she had just done. Actually, I just really wanted to kiss Persephone. There were some hungers the blood orange could not quell. "Ladies," I said, and the room was quiet as they hung on my sage fatherly wisdom. "I really can't complain a bit about the lucky gentlemen that are going to be waiting for you at the end of the aisle, and I wish all of you the very best in love and life." They all swarmed me for a group hug, which lifted my heart to heights it had never experienced, and started the tears streaming again from my eyes.

Maria handed me a handkerchief and looked at me oddly. "Those are not your tears, Father, because human tears do not sparkle like stars the last I checked," she exclaimed. "Well, either that or it is the reflection of the light off your star suit . . ."

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"It is definitely the light from the star suit," I said. "Or likely it is some sort of odd weather phenomenon that hasn't been discovered yet, or maybe some other perfectly logical explanation that you can tell yourself because I am not saying a thing about this anymore! By the way, just to rule this out, you don't have anything you want to tell me, do you?"

Maria sighed. "Father," she said through gritted teeth, "I am most assuredly not pregnant."

"Are you happy?" I asked, seeing contentment in her that I don't think I had ever seen before. "You know, with the path you are on, and working so closely with the Master of Masters."

Maria smiled wide and hugged me close. "Yes, Father," she said. "I have never ever been happier! I feel I am exactly where I should be in my life. And I am a big believer that if that wasn't the case, the universe would get me where I am supposed to be!"

"So you are supposed to be right here, right now," I repeated. "No doubts?"

"I have never been surer of something in my entire life," she said emphatically.

Well, that just brought more tears to my eyes, but the brides thankfully were not so concerned. But then something popped into my mind that I hated to even ask them, though it did stop the waterworks. "Did you invite your mother to this wedding?" I asked my werepires as a group, waiting with honeysuckle-bated breath for the answer.

"I cannot believe you asked me that," Contessa fairly exploded, her eyes wide and angry. "Oh my God, can you just imagine that scene with her and our grandsire rambling on nonsensically about the Pack on my—I mean our—day? The last time we saw each other we nearly came to blows, so no, I certainly did not invite that woman."

"When was that?" Mary Grace asked. "I never heard about a fight with dear Mother."

"I didn't tell you," Contessa replied. "Father was there—he remembers."

I thought back to the barn at the Three-Legged Turtle where Oliver, the Howler, Contessa, and I had all met right before the coronation of

one of the Georges, whose particular number escaped me. All those German Hanovers becoming English kings tended to run together.

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"Yes, I was," I said. "That was a long time ago, and I had completely forgotten that was the last time you saw your mother."

"Ah well, it was nothing—just like Mother," Contessa said. "She is pretty good at making bad memories."

Then I remembered that after their conflict in the barn, the Howler and Contessa had a rather long and whispered conversation outside of the inn. Talk about a bad memory! I had never quite reconciled that, or talked to Contessa about it, and today certainly wasn't the day. "Uh, let's focus on making good memories," I said. "Can we end this discussion about that woman? Though I guess we can't until we hear from Adelaide and Beatrice."

Beatrice looked like she had swallowed a whole lemon. "Well, Addie and I talked about it, and I felt the right thing to do was at least invite her to the wedding," she said. "I mean, sure, she doesn't have a maternal bone in her body, but she is our mother, right? Right?"

Contessa snorted. "Just because you are related to someone doesn't mean you have to like them," she said. "Or more bluntly, just because some bitch squeezes you out of her vagina as part of some weird, twisted Pack-centered plot doesn't make her a mother. I think I learned more from the tutors, nursemaids, Granddaddy, and of course, our daddy!" "Indeed," Mary Grace exclaimed. "Bravo, Contessa!" I waited for the inevitable stab of sarcasm or dig of derision from Contessa, but none came. "What—it's her wedding day, come on. And what she said was right on point!"

Adelaide broke her silence. "So there you have it," she said. "You have two sides of the story. Want to hear mine? I won this argument, by the way . . ."

I nodded and smiled. "Of course," I said. "I can't wait to hear what you have to say!"

"It is not all that complicated," Adelaide said. "When I make a decision, I like to gather all of the information and see if there is some historical data I can rely on to assist in the process."

"And was there?" I prodded.

"Uh, yeah, Father," Contessa said, glaring at Beatrice. "She is our mother, right? Too bad we can't do anything about that bit of historical data!"

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"Contessa, cool your emotions before you pop out a baby," Adelaide said. "Yes, the relevant data we have is from Mary Grace's nuptials, where we learned a wedding involving all of the members of our extended family caused a major world disaster."

"Don't forget the loss of property, limb, and life because that is important data too," Contessa said.

"Indeed," I agreed. "I really appreciate your taking that into concern. But your mother did not cause the earthquake—Scorn and Orcinus did. As far as Hedley and I can tell, the Howler and Angus had nothing to do with what happened in Lisbon."

"Well, I still blame her for it," Mary Grace fumed. "She could have warned us and let us save some lives. My walk down the aisle, vows, and party were perfect. But so many in Lisbon never got the chance to experience that kind of amazing because of her!"

"I saw her face right before she left with Angus, Mary Grace," I said, not believing I was about to defend one of the humans I most

disliked on the planet. "She did not want to leave. Angus made her."

"She had a choice to stay, and didn't," Beatrice said quietly.

"There is no choice with the Pack," Contessa said affirmatively, drawing all eyes to her. "That is what she always said, if you remember," she added.

"I must have blocked that out," Mary Grace said. "If she's been invited, I am going to help my fist into her face."

"I'll help," Contessa said, now best friends with Mary Grace.

"Angus and Mother Dearest may have not caused the earthquake directly, but now we know they are aiding and abetting Scorn and Orcinus in their quest against the rest of us," Adelaide said. "And Mother has loyalty to that egotistical baboon of a grandfather of ours!" "Her generation is all about the loyalty to the Pack," I said. "And Angus is the Pack leader. His word is the only word that matters to the werewolves of Lancashire."

"And if you are not a werewolf, you are deemed inferior," Beatrice said. "Even us, half vampire and with assassin training, don't quite measure up to the Pack in their eyes."

"Yeah, you would have to be practically part god for them to accept you as an equal," Contessa snorted.

"That is so true," Adelaide agreed.

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Mary Grace frowned. "Well, our generation is about loyalty to family," she said. "We are the sum of many parts, and Mother crossed us—her own flesh and blood—for the good of the Pack!"

I nodded. "That has always troubled me," I said. "But she made her choice—what is yours?"

"Where one goes, the other will surely follow, so in summation—hell no, Mother is not invited!" Adelaide finished.

Contessa groaned and rolled her eyes at Adelaide. "I am not sure your decision required that little familial dissertation there."

I smiled. "Well, I agree with the decision no matter how you came to it," I said. "Now, Garlic and I are going to the college cathedral to see if we can't have this wedding without any other cataclysmic disasters befalling the earth."

Chapels and churches were not unique to the grounds of Oxford, but the College of Immortals had to be a little bit creative when it came to its cathedral. For starters, on the outside it looked like a simple stone storage building just past the stables. We stopped to visit Tempest and say hello to Dilla, who now no longer looked at me in a predatory manner. Hopkins was handling his business. I didn't know whether I should be disappointed or relieved, and settled on relieved.

Bidding my exemplary equine adieu, I pulled open the ornate wooden door of the cathedral and stepped into the foyer, which, in a feat of engineering, science, or magic, stretched far higher than what was possible based on what appeared to be a single-story building from the outside. Opulent tiles depicting the likeness of every single immortal race that had ever graced the classrooms of the College of Immortals adorned the floor, and large marble columns buttressed the sides of the aisle leading down to the altar where my girls would be getting married. I practically needed a spyglass to see to the end of the aisle, and I wondered how I was going to walk the girls down and have it be personal for each of them. I certainly wasn't going to walk them down all at once and spoil that special moment. Perhaps I could just sprint back up the aisle, and people would be fine with it. I was a vampire assassin, so it's not like I was going to get tired if I did some serious

sprinting in my star suit. Just then I heard the clink of a hammer striking metal and followed the sound to a side room, where Hopkins and Oliver were putting the final touches on their creation—a long golden

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hoop that was attached to the floor and was just big enough for a man to step through.

"That's one heck of a wedding ring," I said. "Or I guess wedding hoop, so to speak. Who is that for?"

"You," Oliver said with a grin. "It's a miniature Gate, and its match sits on the floor of the cathedral next to the altar. That is how you are going to go back and forth walking your girls down the aisle so that each one of them gets the moment they dreamed of. Pretty awesome, yes, and what did I hear you say—oh, there it is—why, thank you so much, Oliver!"

"Does it work?" I queried. "It just looks like a hoop on the ground."

"That really did not sound like the 'thank you so much, Oliver' that I was expecting to hear." The big troll's face was as impassive as ever, but his voice connoted a bit of indignation. "Did we not get into Taralock and rescue the love of my life?"

"We did," I agreed. "But this thing is not made of water, so how do I know it works?"

"One minute," said Hopkins, taking off running toward the altar. Garlic sniffed at the ring, huffing suspiciously. She ignored Oliver's frown of disapproval and ran after Hopkins to take her seat by the altar and squeeze in a nap before the ceremony.

"It works," Oliver said with a sigh. "So, are you ready for more grandchildren? I hear you will be adding a whole bunch to your collection. Me—well, I am thinking I will get one little blessing just like last time. Trolls don't do the litter thing when we are birthing our young."

"Mary Grace could be having twins," I warned.

"Unheard of," Oliver responded. He thought for a minute. "She does have some werewolf in her, so possible though unlikely, as troll matter is strong matter."

"So why is Apollo blond like his father and grandmother, who are definitely not trolls, hmm?" I teased.

"Iyonna can handle me," Oliver said with a smile. "You know how strong that woman is, so blond hair is a fair trade-off, the way I see it." Just then Hopkins popped out of the air from the gold hoop. "Tada," he announced. "Thank you, thank you for your concern. But as a recent expert in transportation contrivances, I declare this one open and ready for Sirius business."

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"So I am not going to wind up in the Himalayas on an ice-covered ledge?" I asked.

"Don't you actually want to go there?" Oliver queried. "Or need to go there, more accurately?"

He was right. "Yes, force of habit on the Himalayas comment," I replied. "But not until the nuptials are over. So, Hopkins, when are you going to make an honest woman out of Dilla?"

"Why in heaven's name would I want to make her an honest woman and spoil all of my fun?" the werewolf said. "I have no idea why that expression even exists because you might as well substitute 'honest' for 'orally deficient' because that would be more accurate, from what I hear!"

"Don't say that to her, because she might get offended," I cautioned Hopkins.

"Offended, my ass, or more accurately, I fend for her ass," the werewolf said, grinning as his mind went to other places. "No offense to marriage, of course, but this guy likes his women wild," he finished, thrusting his pelvis for emphasis.

"Woman," Oliver corrected. "You have one and only one wild woman."

"Details, because I can tell you on some nights it sure seems like there is more than just one girl in the bed with me," Hopkins said. His eyes went wide as he put one and one together and figured out how he got to two. "Oh, right," he said. "The witch thing. Forget double, double, cauldron bubble, I've had the cauldron bubble make Dilla a double!" He held his hand to his ear. "Oh, will you listen to all of that noise—it appears the wedding guests are arriving. I had better get the ushers out there now!"

"Who are the ushers?" I asked.

Oliver just pointed a beefy finger, and out from a side door wearing the finest in starlight usher wear walked Little Squirrel, Arthur's son Tod, and Jova's sons, Richard and John. Leading them all was Malakar with a full wine goblet in hand. "I have never been in a wedding," he said. "And Don Indigo asked, so I couldn't refuse."

"He bribed you with a barrel of your favorite wine," Little Squirrel interjected. "Come on, man, put down your goblet. We have people to get seated."

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I laughed, figuring I had some time before they actually managed to seat the guests. I was wondering who would be coming. I hadn't even had the chance to ask about the guest list what with my little Persephone party. And now it was too late to ask. "Where are the grooms?" I said to Oliver. He motioned with his thumb to a room down the hall. "This place is an engineering marvel. Was that hallway there a moment ago?"

"Thank you," Oliver said with a mock bow. "And why no—it wasn't. Say hello to my son the best man for me—I am going to go escort Iyonna to our seat. This wedding is the first that we have ever attended together."

"Well, with this guy you can rest assured that there will be some more," Hopkins said, ignoring my death glare. "Oh, look at the time—just enough to squeeze out a quickie in the stables with Dilla . . ."

I found myself quite alone and took a moment to gather my thoughts. Would the grooms feel like I was intruding? Perhaps I could give them some last-second advice. I walked down the hallway, and the door was slightly ajar. Lovely was holding court in the manner that fit the best man. "Let me tell you boys some things you need to know about marriage," he said. "Well, sorry, Don Indigo, you have been married before, so never mind because I don't want to be rude or insensitive to past memories."

"That's just it," Don Indigo said. "It was literally a lifetime or three ago. I am not the same person I was, immortality aside. The past memories are there and treasured in their proper place. But I am not the same man. And to me, there has never been, or ever will be a woman like Contessa."

I was just about to enter the room and give Don Indigo a big hug, but Lovely spoke quickly and sharply. "Indigo!" he admonished. "Sure, you can say that to us and even to Contessa at the right moment, but if you are a gooey-eyed, lovey-dovey sap for all eternity, she is going to lose all respect for you before we even hit the 1800s!" He turned and eyed the Wood brothers. "You boys understand where I am coming

from?"

"So, you are saying be an insensitive clod?" Conner said.

"And don't forget to fart in bed, fluff the covers over her head, and drag our knuckles appropriately," Will added. "Right? I can so do that!"

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I stifled a smile then stopped in my tracks, not sure if they were kidding with Lovely or serious. I had to get in there and set things right. But I stopped myself once again, figuring that the best man was indeed the best man for this job, and I would not be disappointed in what words were coming next out of his mouth. "Are you guys complete idiots?" Lovely lectured. "Love her honestly, and love her strongly, but be a man," he said. "Don't stop courting her for a minute, lest it turn into a century and you forget why you fell in love in the first place."

"That sounds easy enough now," Don Indigo said. "But things change once the babies are born, and they view themselves as mothers and not the objects of your sexual desire. That I do remember. The passion wanes a bit at times, but then you hold that newborn child in your arms, and you realize that you never thought you could love anything as much as your wife—now that is a moment to treasure."

"He's right there, fellows," Lovely agreed. "Apollo is literally the light in my life. And you don't love them more than your wife—just differently. It's the best thing in the world, I will tell you."

"So, cater to her?" Conner asked.

"Sure, like we wait on her hand and foot," Will said. "Right?"

"Oh no," Don Indigo said.

"No, no, no," Lovely said. "You are attentive, but not pushovers. You are agreeable, and logical, but when you feel one way about something important, and I emphasize important, and she feels the other way, you cannot give in, because she will not respect you. Stand your ground, but still respect her opinion. Sometimes you are just going to have to agree to disagree, and that is all right too! You have to show your ass in more than one way in a marriage for it to truly work."

"But isn't that just going to lead to a fight?" Will said.

"And if you haven't noticed, Lovely," Conner continued, "these ladies are all pretty good at fighting, no?"

"I feel your pain," Lovely said, absentmindedly rubbing his shoulder.

"Believe me I do, but fighting leads to something absolutely crucial to the survival of any marriage."

"Making up," Don Indigo said. "Make-up sex is some of the best, most passionate loving you will ever have. But don't pick a fight just to have the clothes come ripping off and get to the sweaty, down-anddirty loving—it has to be honest and genuine in the moment."

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I exhaled and sure hoped he was talking about his past life, and not his time with Contessa. Hedley was right that I had a massive double standard with my girls. The fact remained that no father wanted to think of his daughters as anything but innocent and pure of virtue. I had to remember that biologically we were now all about the same age. I just had the wisdom and weight of centuries on me, or so it sometimes seemed.

"Honesty is always the best policy," Lovely agreed. "There is no way you can go wrong with that as long as you don't tell your wife everything."

"Isn't that a bit of a contradiction?" Will said.

"Marriage often is," Lovely said. "Because, gentlemen, we are as much a contradiction to women as they are to us. It's simple, really."

Okay, that's just about all I have, except for one last little bit of advice. You guys ready for the best day of your lives?" He held out his hands and clasped each of the men's hands in congratulations.

I peered through the door, and I realized that now was the best time to make my entrance. "What is that last bit of advice, Lovely?" Conner asked. "Is it that important, or are we done here?"

"Oh no, it's crucial," Lovely said. "Don't forget you have to give it to her in the ass at least once a month to keep her honest."

It was at that moment that I realized I had chosen the wrong time to make my entrance. I sighed—there were just some things you couldn't unsee, and some things, I now knew, that you could not unhear. I stood, head in my hands, shaking my head in dismay.

"How long have you been standing there?" Lovely asked with a sheepish grin.

"Oh, long enough," I said. "I think it's time for me to wish you gentlemen good luck."

Don Indigo and the Wood brothers erupted in a chorus of thanks and quickly departed the room, heading down yet another hallway where they would be stashed to await their brides. That was of course assuming I still let these weddings happen! Who was I kidding—I was powerless to stop anything, assuming I even wanted to, and I didn't. Lovely put a big arm around my shoulder and steered me in the direction of the brides. He would be escorting Mary Grace down the aisle

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before he took his place next to the grooms. "Did you disagree with anything I said?" he asked quietly.

"Oh no, I think it was good advice for the most part," I said. "Okay, not true—it was all good advice, even that last bit."

Lovely looked rather relieved. "Thank heavens, I was so worried," he said. "And for the record, that last part was her idea . . . not that I am complaining one bit, and thank goodness for tororo-jiru, am I right?"

I looked at him and wondered how I had managed to find my way to Hell yet again. "I am going to pretend you never said that," I said, letting him lead me out of the groom chambers. "Are we agreed?"

"I have no idea what you are talking about," Lovely said as we came up to the brides, Maria, and Mary Grace, and were enveloped by the sheer star power in the room.

I took a moment and collected my thoughts as I gazed at my daughters, so happy that they had grown into such incomparable young women—young being a relative term with immortals. My thoughts went to the babies growing in the bodies of the Professor and the Thief.

I would be starting all over with that process, assuming I was able to be involved in their lives. I frowned slightly—that last statement just applied to the Thief as my quandary with the Professor and her ill will to our unborn child was another thing entirely. I sighed and pushed that last thought with great difficulty to the very back of my mind.

"You look rather thoughtful, Father," Maria said. She leaned in and whispered in my ear, "At least you are not sobbing your eyes out. I am wagering that a certain goddess loves herself some weddings!"

I smiled broadly. "You can wager all you want," I replied. "But you are on a need-to-know basis, and you most definitely do not need to know my business!"

Maria pretended to look hurt, or maybe she actually was a bit miffed that I would not tell her what had happened to me. I realized that since birth, and even before, she had always been able to keep a psychic handle on me. It must have been quite unnerving to her to

have me simply not be there. The Queen was still available to her as much as holding the undersea world together allowed her to. But I wondered why Maria chose to spend so much time on land, being half merperson. Lovely had a wife and child keeping him here, but what was Maria's rationale?

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"I will tell you the whole story after the wedding," I said to her, feeling a little bit guilty.

Just then, Cabernet burst into the bridal suite and brought all conversation to a halt. "All right, ladies and gentlemen, are you ready?" he said. "The guests are all seated and ready for a spectacular wedding. I just stopped by and saw the grooms, and I have to say, as handsome as those men are, the beauty of these brides puts them to shame. Lucky, lucky men indeed!"

The brides beamed, and I wondered just how much Cabernet was charging me for this wedding spectacular. I hope he was not billing by the platitude. "Okay, first down the aisle are Mary Grace and Lovely," Cabernet continued. "Sirius, doesn't Mary Grace make the very picture of innocence and beauty?"

I nodded. "Indeed she does," I said, ignoring Lovely's wink as Mary Grace took his arm.

"Thank you, Father," Mary Grace giggled. "I love you!"

My heart melted. "I love you too," I said. "Now lead the way for your sisters!"

I began looking around for Hedley Edrick, who I thought was going to walk Maria down the aisle, but I did not see him anywhere. Cabernet was going to have a fit if the Master of Masters did not show his face and show it like now. He was probably going to appear in a show of smoke and arrogance because Cabernet did not look remotely concerned. There was a soft knock at the door, and Tayanita entered looking absolutely dazzling in a gown that was made of starlight as well. How nice it was that the brides had allowed her to have a gown made from the remnants of the bridal party gowns. Cabernet had either done a magnificent job, or Tayanita was so beautiful my eyes hurt, or both.

"Are you ready?" she said to Maria. Maria nodded and took a deep breath. I wondered what the big deal was because Maria had walked down the aisle with Hedley before, and she couldn't be nervous, could she? And just where was that confounded egoist, the Teacher of Teachers, because this was beginning to be a bit rude!

Maria leaned forward, clasped Tayanita's hands, and kissed her full on the lips. The two girls broke the kiss and giggled when they saw me standing there with my mouth open. I looked around the room,

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and it was very apparent that I was the only one surprised by what had just transpired.

"Uh," I said, struggling to find the right words. "Is there something you want to tell me, Maria?"

"Oh no, Father," Maria replied. "You are on a need-to-know basis, and right now you do not need to know my business. Tayanita, are you ready to escort me down the aisle?"

"Absolutely," Tayanita replied. "I would be delighted to."

I didn't have a whole lot of time to process the coupling of Maria and Tayanita because there were some brides to be walked down the aisle. I sure hoped that Hopkins and Oliver knew what they were doing with their golden hoop contraption. "So, have you decided who is going

first?" I asked.

"Me, me, me," Contessa replied, extending her arm. She looked at Adelaide and Beatrice. "You girls okay with that? I am the oldest, you know."

Adelaide looked at Beatrice. "I have a recently discovered memory of Contessa elbowing me out of the way in the birth canal," she said.

"Me too," Beatrice agreed. "But you can certainly go first, Contessa, because the last thing Addie and I want is all the eyes on us first!"

"So, it is settled," Contessa said. "And for the record I did elbow you both out of the way at birth!" She made what I hoped was a friendly face at her sisters and turned back to me. "Take me to my groom, Father!"

I kissed her softly on the cheek. "I could not be happier for you and Don Indigo," I said. "He is a good man."

"I know," she replied. "Not every man has got what he has running through his veins."

"Uh," I said, realizing now was not the time to question Contessa about her motivations for marrying Don Indigo, but I just had to go there. "Is that why you are marrying him?"

"Of course not," Contessa recovered. "He kind of reminds me of you."

"That is sweet," I said. "I really think the two of you make a fantastic team."

"Do you mean that?" she said, still standing at the edge of the door.

"Indeed I do," I replied. "Now come on, your guests are waiting!"

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"Yeah, let's get to this and legitimize these babies," she said, rubbing her belly.

I got a slight chill as she spoke those words and hoped that history would not repeat itself. She was the Howler's child, but surely she was marrying Don Indigo for the right reasons. I just prayed that Don Indigo would not end up chained to a wall in the dungeon underneath Peel Castle. Why did someone as selfish as Contessa sometimes was—well, legitimately a good part of the time—want babies anyway?

Contessa dressed me down like I was her servant. "I am not getting any younger here, Father," she said.

I nodded, hoping that simply wanting to be a mother was the answer to my question. I motioned to Cabernet and unseen hands pulled open the doors, and the college cathedral was transformed into the Tuscan countryside in an ode to Contessa's future home. It looked like our many guests were standing amidst a great vineyard with the wooden roof of the cathedral a brilliant sky blue with birds chirping musically all around. I leaned in to whisper in Contessa's ear. "The House of Indigo has needed a lady for so long, it only makes sense that it wanted to be a part of this!"

"Yes," Contessa agreed. "Though it really could use a few choice upgrades." She must have felt me stiffen slightly. "Just kidding, Father, the House of Indigo is perfect!"

"That's better," I said, not completely faking wiping the sweat from my brow.

She grinned, and I peered ahead to see Don Indigo stepping forward away from the Wood brothers, Mary Grace and Lovely, and Maria and Tayanita. My eyes lingered on Maria and Tayanita at the exact moment they whispered their love to each other. I was no expert in love other than knowing what it looked like in other people. Perhaps one day I would truly know what it felt like too.

I winked at my parents in the gallery where they stood next to Jova and Cornelia. Harvis and Molly were just ahead of them, and I could

not believe how Hedley managed to get everyone in our circle here to Oxford for the wedding. I smiled as I looked around the cathedral, happy to see that Angus and the Howler were nowhere to be found. It was kind of sad that the Howler couldn't exhibit at least a modicum of maternal behavior. I stole a sideways glance at Contessa and realized

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that was the last thing on her mind. I looked back to the altar and saw the grinning countenance of the first thing on her mind, and in her heart—Don Indigo. He and I clasped hands warmly as I put Contessa's hand in his, and after giving her a kiss on the cheek I took a deep breath and stepped through the gold hoop.

I have to admit that I shut my eyes, so when I popped back into the bridal suite, they were still closed, which drew chuckles from Cabernet.

"I can't say I blame you," he said with a bleat. "I mean, you should have heard them grunting and carrying on while they were installing it. You would have thought they were . . ."

"Okay, who's next?" I blurted out to Adelaide and Beatrice, who exchanged a glance.

"We'd like to go together," Adelaide said nervously.

"Uh, without me?" I said, feeling quite crushed.

"No!" Beatrice squealed. "Of course not without you," she exclaimed. "One of us on each arm, Father, if you don't mind?"

"We found love together," Adelaide said. "So it only makes sense that we take this journey to our future husbands together too!"

I looked at her curiously. "And you are both terrified of walking by yourselves—even though I will be with you . . ."

"That too," Beatrice said.

The girls grabbed my arms as the doors opened, and to my amazement, the college cathedral had changed to look like a thick English forest with towering oaks where I remembered columns once stood, and thick, lush grass beneath our feet, where I remembered a rug just a moment ago. "What better place to marry a couple of werewolves but in the forest?" I whispered.

The girls giggled in response, and once they saw the Wood brothers waiting at the end of the aisle, they half ran, half walked elegantly to their betrotheds. I placed their hands in those of the Wood brothers and gave them kisses on their cheeks. "Whoa," I said, squinting because their dresses shone as bright as the stars they were made from. "That is true love!" As I was about to take my seat and wait for Justice to make his entrance to perform the ceremony, Maria grabbed my hand and pulled me over to the golden hoop, which promptly took us back to the bridal suite.

"What are you doing?" I asked, confused.

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Before my eyes her bridesmaid gown lengthened into a full-blown wedding gown, including a veil that dropped onto her head like a ray of sunshine piercing a cloud. "One more," she said coyly.

"You?" I said.

"Me," she replied.

"You are in love," I said. "I can see it."

"I am," Maria said.

"That's all I need to hear," I said, motioning to Cabernet to open the doors one final time. The chapel had reverted to its majestic original form, which made sense because it was here at the College of Immortals that Maria and Tayanita's unbreakable bond had been forged. I saw Tayanita stepping forward in a gown that matched Maria's and saw

sweet, genuine love in her eyes. I nodded—it was as it should be. Now, maybe I would find out Tayanita’s lineage, if Maria knew and would tell me.

“Need-to-know basis, Father,” Maria whispered as we reached Tayanita.

I turned away from the brightest starlight of them all and smiled, kissing Maria on the cheek. “All I need to know is that you are happy,” I said.

“Thank you, Sirius,” Tayanita said sincerely.

“No, thank you, Tayanita,” I replied.

“For what?” she said, looking a bit confused.

“For loving Maria as much as I do,” I said. “That’s a gift to any parent.”

And with that, I stepped away from my daughters and their betrotheds and let Justice have the stage. I could hardly believe that all of them had finally found someone that they loved to be with for all eternity, even Maria. Maria! I looked around in the gallery for the Queen but did not see her. Were the ravages of maintaining peace in the underwater world simply preventing her from being here?

The golden hoop flashed again, and out of it came the Queen, bringing me back to that day on Sardinia where she and I became a married couple, albeit ever so briefly. Her golden hair cascaded over her shoulders, and the golden dress she wore was breathtaking. For a moment I almost considered asking if she wanted to join the wedding couples and do it all over again with me. The key word there was almost. The IMMORTAL DIVORCE COURT • VOL. 5

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girls were still impressed by the Queen’s radiant energy and amazing beauty, and the truth was, so was I. After hugging all of the girls and their respective future spouses, and petting the just awakened Garlic, the Queen spotted me. “Is this seat taken?” she asked with a grin.

“No,” I said, returning the smile. “I was hoping that you would find a way to be here.”

“Miss the wedding of my only child?” the Queen replied. “My kingdom will have to survive without me! I wasn’t going to miss this for anything. Of course, I didn’t have much notice. When did you know about this?”

“Right before I walked her down the aisle,” I replied.

The Queen chuckled and grabbed my hand. “Maria has a remarkable gift for keeping secrets—does she not?”

“Yeah,” I replied. “Hedley better watch out, or she will take his job!”

The Queen and I exchanged a glance and looked over to see that the Master of Masters had the weight of the world on his shoulders.

“The scholarship . . .” the Queen said as the heralds readied their horns to announce the beginning of the ceremony.

“No shit!” I muttered. “That was his plan all along . . . I just wonder how Tayanita fits into it.”

“Need-to-know basis, remember?” the Queen said, squeezing my hand again. We shared a smile, and we both took great pleasure in Maria looking over at us with a mix of shock and approval on her face. I am not sure what I enjoyed more—the sweet, personal vows of the couples, Justice waxing philosophical on the joys of marriage, or the incredible party that broke out after the ceremony as the cathedral was transformed into a massive feasting hall. I never had so much fun eating, drinking, and dancing as I did that night with all of my family and friends. At the close of my dance with Maria, I saw the Queen standing nearby and patiently waiting for me.

"May I cut in and dance with your father?" the Queen said with a curtsy.

"But of course, Mother," Maria replied, putting my hand on the Queen's shoulder and stepping away with a smile to find Tayanita. "Just behave yourselves, I don't want any more sisters . . ." She paused and looked at me. "I mean full sisters, not like the half ones that Father has on the way. Mother, did you hear Father is having a couple of faerpires?"

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The Queen looped one hand around my neck and clasped the other in it. "It's you, Sirius," she said. "Of course you have some children on the way. I don't know how you find the time for all of that fornicating—what with all of the saving of the world you are supposed to be doing." I shook my head, trying to read if she was making fun of me or irritated at me, and decided it was both. "I was set up, as you have probably heard," I said. "It was a masterful plan, and there was nothing I could have done to stop it."

"Other than keep your dick in your pants . . ." she said, looking me dead in the eyes.

"There is that," I admitted. "I didn't give Hedley an excuse, and I am not going to give you one either."

"The more you change, the more you stay the same," the Queen said, actually looking a bit sad.

"I may be immortal, but I am still human," I said. "And humans make mistakes. Look, I will be blunt. Does it bother you that I have been with other women? You made it clear to me at Taralock that it was definitely good-bye."

"Well, it was . . ." she said, her voice trailing off as she broke eye contact. "But for this wedding, I wasn't sure if I would ever see you again, or even if I wanted to."

"Did you want to?" I asked.

"I never let myself get there," she answered. "And the problem with having feelings for you, Sirius, is that I always seem to find you with other women in your life."

"You know, I have never asked you if you have been with other men," I said. "So, have you moved on, moved on from me?"

The Queen turned the full power of those gorgeous blue eyes toward me, and I think she was surprised when I gasped. So was I, actually. "Do you care if I have?" she said.

"Of course I do," I admitted. "Because it will never be better than it was with us."

"Are you so sure about that?" the Queen asked. "Are you that confident in your own abilities?"

"You forget the tail twitching?" I flashed my most charming smile at her, which had its intended effect. "You know it takes two to tango, and as you can see we are creating quite a stir on this dance floor," I

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continued. I expertly whirled her to the music, and the Queen proved to be quite an able partner, as she was never one to back down from a challenge. I realized that we had never danced together before, but clearly we moved just as well vertically as we did horizontally. The crowd began to clap as we reached the crescendo of our movements, bursting into applause as we finished. Now that was a first for me. I bowed to the Queen as she curtsied, and we headed off to get a drink. I could see she was flustered by our dance and the contact of our bodies. She wasn't the only one, as I walked to the bar rather stiffly.

"How long are you staying in Oxford?" I said, handing her a glass

of wine.

She took a sip and handed it right back to me. "About another ten minutes," she replied. "Just enough time to see Tayanita and Maria.

Duty calls."

"So, it's good-bye again, is it?" I said.

The Queen sighed and leaned in and kissed me, holding on to my jaw as she did so. She broke the kiss, and our eyes met. "Yes and no, Sirius," she said. "You have your job, and I have mine, and who knows if together they both shall meet. In the meantime, do enjoy bedding all of those attractive females in the name of duty."

"Was that really fair?" I asked. "If I had you, there would be no other."

I don't know which of us was more shocked by those words. "Well, you don't have me," the Queen said. "And I am not sure the universe will ever let you."

"Isn't that up to us?" I asked, leaning in to kiss her again.

Neither one of us broke this kiss, and if the Queen had been in merfolk mode, I am fairly certain her tail would have twitched. She, however, was not so sure. "There is no us, Sirius," she said, pushing me away reluctantly. "We don't have a relationship other than sharing some really pleasant, and some really unpleasant, experiences, and Maria, of course."

"Not true. Maria says we have a messed-up relationship," I said, seeing our daughter approach with Tayanita.

The Queen considered that for a moment. "Not messed up," she said. "I prefer complicated. Take care, Sirius, and just so we are absolutely clear, this really is good-bye."

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"Or not," I said, making sure that she was the one that broke eye contact.

"It is better this way, Sirius," she said. "Trust me on that . . ."

I watched her walk off and disappear with Maria and Tayanita. A few moments later the golden hoop flashed, announcing the Queen's departure. I had no idea what had just transpired, but owing to the Queen's and my past history, it was probably much ado about nothing. The Queen was right. The universe was not going to let us be an us, and since she clearly accepted it, so should I, because it really did make everything so much easier. I lifted both wineglasses to toast the Queen—but since when did I ever do what was easy? Was my attraction to the Queen a classic case of wanting what you could not have? That theory went right out the window because I had had the Queen, and had her in a spectacular fashion. I sighed and drank deeply from both glasses, realizing I would never understand the mystery that was love. I didn't have to understand love. I just had to understand that any chance of love with the Queen was really over.

I stood by the bar for a while, still holding the two wineglasses and watching the festivities. I could see Jova's son Richard making the moves on an elf I did not recognize. His brother John was dancing with her friend, and the boys exchanged a knowing look. They had come a long way from that day in the forest. I apparently had not, because the wine and my mood were about to make me search for some company, but as was my lot in life—company found me first.

"Oh, Sirius, thank you so much for getting me the wine," the Countess said, taking a glass and putting a warm thigh into my crotch.

"You are a dear."

"Would you care for a dance?" I asked politely. I guess it was true that when something closed, something else opened. Or in this case,

multiple openings were in play.

The Countess snorted. "Uh, yeah. But not here. I hear you got a fancy washroom in your chambers now—is that right?"

"Indeed it is," I replied, draining my wineglass. "Why do you ask?"

"I got tororo-jiru," she said.

I could see that although the wedding party was winding down, my night was about to be winding up, or greasing up, or whatever the proper term was for using grated yam extract. I excused myself

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from the Countess and circulated, saying my good-byes as the guests departed. The wedding couples were eager to begin their lives together, and they too departed for their respective honeymoon suites in a flurry of hugs and kisses.

I turned to see the Countess impatiently tapping her foot. "I don't wait for anyone, Sirius Sinister," she said, doing her best to look pouty.

"That's good," I said, grabbing her around the waist and gathering her up in my arms, which elicited a lovely squeal of pleasure. "Because I am not just anyone, Countess . . ."