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One

Twilight falls crisp and clean on the first day of spring in Carrefour.

As the light seeps from the sky, I stand in the garden behind our mansion, my eyes closed, trying to picture my mother standing here fourteen years ago today, just before she died.

It would have been an important day for her, the way it is for me. In this town, the arrival of the vernal equinox means a lot, because zandara, the type of voodoo-like magic we practise here in secret, is most powerful in spring. Then again, thanks to the magic cloaking the town, there's no real winter, so the roses, lavender, fennel, and thousands of other plants and herbs we use to cast zandara charms flourish year-round.

I take a deep breath and try to reach out to the nether,

the world between life and death where some souls get stranded for a while. Later tonight, just past midnight, I'll meet Peregrine and Chloe, my two sister queens, in the middle of the cemetery for a ceremony to strengthen our bond with the spirits who help us. But for now, I'm trying to reach them alone. I've felt unsettled for the last couple of weeks, since the night in New Orleans when I played a role in the death of Drew Grady, someone I'd thought was a friend. Instead, it turned out that he'd been recruited to kill me. Now I can't help but feel like the incident was merely the prelude to something darker and more sinister that's about to unfold. I need to ask the spirits to protect me and those I love.

"Come to us now, Eloi Oke, and open the gate," I chant. "Come to us now, Eloi Oke, and open the gate. Come to us now, Eloi Oke, and open the gate." Eloi Oke is zandara's gatekeeper, a spirit who opens the lines of communication each time my sister queens and I ask for help. The air around me suddenly feels eerily still, and I know that the words, which we use to begin all but the smallest of charms, have worked.

I put my left ring finger on my Stone of Carrefour, the powerful rock that hangs from my neck. It was imbued with magic more than a hundred years ago, when the town was founded, and now it allows me to cast charms without actually holding the things I'm invoking.

As long as I'm touching it, I can draw power from any plant in the world.

I do my best to clear my mind and summon some of the herbs I've been learning about. "Sage and yarrow, I draw your power. Spirits, please help me to see the threats against me and the people I love, and to bravely face any coming danger." I concentrate hard on my requests, and then I murmur the standard words of gratitude for the spirits' help.

"*Mesi, zanset,*" I say. "*Mesi, zanset. Mesi, zanset.*" Ceremonial words are meant to be repeated three times whenever possible, because three is the most powerful number in zandara. It demonstrates respect for the spirits by symbolizing heaven, hell, and the space between.

The air pressure returns to normal, the way it always does when communication with the spirits has ended, but something still doesn't feel right. There's a gnawing in the pit of my stomach, and I have the sense that something is lurking in the garden.

"Hello?" I say tentatively. "Is anybody out there?"

It's not until the words are out of my mouth that I realize I'm hoping the answer is yes, that it's Caleb Shaw in the shadows. I've barely seen him since Drew's funeral a couple of weeks ago, when he kissed me passionately and then pulled away to tell me it was over between us. I'd known it was coming; the rules of zandara forbid us

from being together, even if we're drawn to each other like magnets. His family is sworn to protect mine, and any romantic feelings between us get in the way. He attempted to explain it to me a couple of months ago by comparing the link between us to a Wi-Fi connection that grows fuzzier as it gets overloaded. In other words, the more feelings he has for me, the less able he is to sense when I need his help. "Caleb?" I call now.

Something rustles behind the wall that separates the garden from the cemetery, and then the night goes still again. I hold my breath and try my best to listen, but I'm forced to admit I'm imagining things. Caleb isn't out there. I'm on my own.

"Eveny?"

I look up to see my father standing in the doorway of the house, backlit by the dim lamplight of the living room.

"Out here!" I call. He closes the back door and makes his way down the deck stairs and out along the twisting path of the garden towards me. I still can't get used to him being here, and I haven't quite decided whether I can trust him yet. Despite his claims that he has always kept an eye on me from afar, it feels strange that after seventeen years, he's suddenly back in my life. Still, I know my mother loved him until the day she died. I owe him the benefit of the doubt.

"What are you doing out here?" he asks, sitting down on the stone bench in front of my mother's roses and gesturing for me to join him. "You disappeared after dinner."

"I was just thinking," I say, settling beside him.

"About your mom?"

I nod.

"You miss her a lot, don't you?" my father asks.

"She was my whole world when I was a kid. Losing her was like losing everything."

"I felt the same way. When she was still alive, knowing that I had to leave her and go back to Caouanne Island… It was torture for me."

I nod and look away. My parents had decided before I was born that my dad would return to the island where he'd been raised, just off the coast of Georgia. My father is a king of andaba, the magical sect based there, and he and my mother feared that if an anti-magic organization like the murderous Main de Lumière realized they were together, their child would become an instant target. Never before had a king from one voodoo-derived magical sect and a queen from another produced an heir. My father's absence seemed to work for a while, although it broke my mother's heart. But now she's dead, and our enemies know about my heritage anyhow.

I only learned a couple of weeks ago that Main de Lumière considers me the most powerful queen in the

world because I have a rare combination of magical blood – andaba from my dad's side and zandara from my mom's.

"Dad?" I say after a moment. It still feels strange to call him something so familiar.

"Yes, honey?"

"Do you think I'm still in danger?"

I watch a shadow pass over his face. "I think that we have to assume you are." He speaks slowly without meeting my eye. "I can't imagine that a group as strategic as Main de Lumière wouldn't have a backup plan. But that's why I'm here, Eveny: to protect you. To make sure you're not harmed."

"I thought that was Caleb's job." I sound more bitter than I mean to. I shake my head and look off into the distance. I'm frustrated that I know so little about the traditions that make me who I am, and I'm overwhelmed by everything I'll need to learn in order to be any good at either form of magic. I have the sense that my father is waiting patiently until I ask about the details of andaba before he explains everything. The thing is, learning I'm a zandara queen was jarring enough, and I'm not sure I'm ready to know any more just yet.

"Want me to bring you out some of that chocolate chip lavender cake your aunt Bea made for dessert?" my father asks me after the silence has stretched on too long. "I think there's some vanilla ice cream in the freezer too…"

"I'm not hungry," I tell him. "I'm just going to sit here for a while, I think."

He nods. "Being with your mom's roses has always brought me peace too," he says. "It's a little bit like she's still here with us." He stands, kisses me on the top of my head, and smiles at me sadly before striding back towards the house.

Exhausted from a long day of studying zandara charms and sapped of energy after asking the spirits for help, I doze off on the garden bench and dream of Caleb emerging from the shadows in New Orleans a couple of weeks ago to save me. I'd gone there to take part in my sosyete's annual possession ceremony, but as we danced in the streets among Mardi Gras revellers, Drew had emerged from the crowd, brandishing a knife, and forced me into an alley. He would have killed me if Caleb hadn't shown up just in time.

Suddenly, in the midst of the dream, I hear a woman's voice in my head, clear and sharp: "Save yourself." I awaken with a start, my heart pounding, but before I can figure out if I'm hearing things or if the warning was just part of the unsettling dream, a hulking shape comes at me from the left at lightning speed, slamming my head down onto the stone bench. I hear a loud grunt, then a mumbled phrase in what sounds like French.

I start to scream, but a man's hand, rough and hairy, clamps down over my nose and mouth, cutting off my air supply. I struggle and choke, clawing at him, but he's much bigger than I am, and he swats my hands away. I strain to see his face, but he's wearing a ski mask, and he's shrouded in darkness. The only thing I can make out are his pale blue, bloodshot eyes, rimmed with blond lashes.

Keeping one hand over my mouth, he uses his other hand to lift me up by my hair until I'm dangling several inches above the ground. "Good girl," he hisses. "Be nice, now."

I try to scream again, but he shakes me so hard that I can almost feel my brain banging against the inside of my skull. I'm temporarily silenced as the world goes fuzzy. I blink a few times, forcing myself to focus, and I begin to kick wildly, aiming for my assailant's torso. But he's larger than I thought, and he's easily holding me far enough from his body that my kicks aren't even close to connecting.

"Stop struggling!" the man says, giving me another violent shake.

A moment later, my vision clears, and I can see that we're moving rapidly towards the back wall. The man still has me by the hair, one hand over my mouth, and he's dragging me across the dirt almost effortlessly. My head throbs, and I feel dazed, but I'm coherent enough to realize that the further we get from my house, the less likely it is

that anyone will find me. Just as we reach the brick wall separating the garden from the cemetery, I gather all my strength, force my jaw open as if I'm about to scream, and clamp down as hard as I can, biting the man's hand.

"*Merde!*" He jerks his hand away from my face and loosens his grip on my hair a little. It's enough for me to twist away from him and begin screaming.

"Help! Caleb! Dad!" I yell, but it's all I have time for before the man pounces on me again, shoving me to the ground and pinning me with the weight of his enormous body. In the distance, from the direction of the house, I can hear footsteps and shouting, and I know that someone's coming for me. But I might not have that much time.

"You little bitch!" My attacker tries to pull me up by my hair again, but I jab backwards with my right elbow, connecting with his face, and hear a sickening crunch. "Damn you!" he cries as blood spurts from his broken nose.

He doesn't let go, though, and a moment later, his hands are around my neck. "I'm not supposed to kill you, but I think I can ignore orders just this once," he growls. "And believe me, I'm going to make it hurt." In one deft motion, he presses down on my right arm until I hear it snap. Pain sears through me like I'm on fire.

I scream as the agony takes over my body. Suddenly, I hear the voice from my dream again. *Save yourself*,

it whispers, and I realize suddenly that I don't have to fight like a normal person. I'm *not* a normal person. I'm a zandara queen.

I stop struggling, which seems to startle the man. He pulls away slightly, and in the instant before he reaches for me again, I touch my Stone of Carrefour with my left ring finger and murmur, "Asafoetida, I draw your power." It's a repellent herb I read about yesterday, and I think it could be just the thing to push him back. "Please, spirits," I add quickly, "keep this man away long enough for me to escape from him."

Right away, he stops fighting and rolls to the side, limp. I don't know how long the charm will work, so I scramble out from beneath him, kick him in the face for good measure, and take off towards my house. I'm breathless and bruised, and my right arm sends pain ricocheting through my entire body with every step I take, but I run as fast as I can until I almost collide with my father and Caleb. Relief sweeps over me.

"He's that way!" I point with my left hand. "I think he's Main de Lumière. Be careful."

"You're okay?" Caleb hesitates, his sky-blue eyes ablaze with concern.

"I'll live," I say. He hesitates for another millisecond before running in the direction I pointed.

My father reaches for me, but I cry out when he touches

my right arm. “The man broke it,” I say, and his eyes widen.

“Let’s get you inside. I’ll call Peregrine and Chloe.”

I nod, but already I’m feeling woozy, and I’m not sure if it’s from the pain of my snapped arm or if the man shook me hard enough to give me concussion. Either way, I sink gratefully into my father and let him lead me gently back towards the house. In the distance, I can hear Caleb shouting and then the screams of the man who tried to kill me.

After that, silence.