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BOOK 1

SHIFTED

LEGACY BORN SERIES

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SHIFTED

LEGACY BORN SERIES I

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I

SOPHIE

I never really thought much of my death. I was a teenager for crying out loud. We were infallible.

The iPad dangled between my legs as Dad said, “I love you, Sophie.” The crack of a quasi-smile from the opposite side of the video call failed. Brown slants of hair was another poor attempt at covering his worry-lines and the dark circles underneath his eyes, another giveaway. “You are in excellent hands.”

A chuckle escaped my lips as the tears rimmed Dad’s blue eyes. My fingers brushed the screen of my tablet. “When was the last time you hit the sack?”

“Don’t worry about me, just focus on the surgery. When you wake up, there’ll be no more headaches. You can go back to school. Lyla will love that.”

My lips trawled up into a smile. *Lyla, yeah right! She hasn’t answered any of my texts for the past couple of weeks.* “Let’s hope. Love you, Dad.”

“Love you more. Don’t let your mom yell at the doctors.”

“Hey!” Mom sat in the worn-out visitor’s chair, paging through a magazine. “I only yell when they deserve it.”

Laughter sprinkled the air as I drew an x with my finger over my chest and touched my lips before our chat ended. Laying back on the soft pillow, I stared thoughtlessly at the TV in my hospital room.

Doctors getting paged over the intercom, the constant whooshing of slippers, and rattling IVs attached to walking patients, combined with the unyielding headache, kept me out of sleep again.

My stomach twisted into knots as a tightness clasped around my chest. The heaviness became a constant companion, even in the very capable hands of Dr. Bryanston.

My gaze flickered to my mother, scanning through a magazine. Wavy blond hair—the opposite of mine—caressed her shoulders. She ripped a page from the magazine. The noise echoing through the room.

“Mom?”

“What?” Her green eyes grew, and she flipped over the torn page, revealing a crochet pattern for her collection.

A huff escaped my lips as I shook my head. She slipped the page in her handbag and gasped. “Today marks a year, Soph.”

“Hmm.” I tried to play it down. But the truth was, this day a year ago, my life changed.

The change had started with a dream of a flaming bird. Just a bird on fire, standing majestically in front of me. Then it

became so vivid I could feel the heat radiate from its wings and with the heat came a song that stemmed from the life force of the phoenix. It was like a siren's song.

It felt so real that when my eyes flew open, the pain still lingered.

It was the first time I'd woken up in the hospital and discovered that an intractable migraine had caused this pain. The killer headaches had visited regularly after that, giving a reason for my endless days in bed. The last part of the change...

The door swung open, and Nurse Colby ferried herself into my room. Her curvy hips moved side to side with each step and her furious red hair was a few flickers away from glowing. She had a sleek, black tail, swaying behind her. A tail that only I could see.

She'd become a dear friend the past four days. Colby grabbed the chart in front of my bed and attached the result of my latest scan for Dr. Bryanston.

My gaze kept lingering on her tail and I had the urge to touch it, but knew I shouldn't.

"You know what is taking so long?" Mom asked.

"I'm sure it's prepping the OR, Mrs. Emerson," Colby said. "Nothing to worry about. Dr. Bryanston will be here shortly."

Colby's eyes flickered to me, flashed her grin—only for her favorite patients—and winked before she turned and flounced out of the room with her tail.

The worry lines my mother desperately tried to hide crinkled around her eyes.

“Relax, look for a cheesecake recipe, something that your family can actually enjoy.”

“You’re hilarious.” Mom’s tone was dusty.

I fluttered my eyelashes. “I know.”

Colby wasn’t the only one with a tail. There were others, too. Some had cat-ears, others owned a mean pair of ram horns. One guy even had an eagle beak, but they were scarce. These human-creatures walked among the ordinary folk of Tacoma, Washington and now Atlanta. Not a single word escaped my lips about what I could see, especially to Francis and Daniel Emerson, also known as Mom and Dad.

Faint bells chimed. I closed my eyes for a brief second before opening them. Oh, yeah, I forgot about the orbs of silver bright light that had appeared with the tails and ears. The faint ringing of the bells followed whenever these specks of lights soared above me. Their brightness enhanced the headaches, so I’d made it my mission to ignore them.

The tiny speck flew past Dr. Bryanston, trailing into the room. “You ready, Sophie?”

I nodded. Dr. Bryanston’s golden eyes penetrated my soul. They’d used to freak me out. Not anymore. Now they made me forget about the operation.

He whispered to Mom. Her hand rubbed her collarbone and her thin, shapely eyebrows knitted together as she listened to the words leaving the doctor’s mouth.

Colby swaggered back into the room—her tail flicking behind her—and lifted the side rails of the cot. She rolled my bed toward the door and stopped.

Mom leaned over and pressed her lips against my forehead. Her hand clasped mine as she lifted her head. The bud of a smile didn't reach her tear-filled eyes. "I'll be here, waiting for you, baby."

"You can try out that crochet pattern you tore out earlier from the magazine," I said in a flat tone. Mom closed her eyes as red dusted her cheeks. Chuckles came from the nurses and Dr. Bryanston as my eyes closed before entering the hallway with its bright lights.

Colby pushed me out of the room.

"Love you, Sophie Emerson," Mom said.

"Love you too, you crazy woman."

My heart hammered with every step and jostle of the bed. *Please, God, let this be a success. It's been 365 days since normal.*

Goosebumps bristled my arms and my body shivered as the strong draught of sanitizer stung my nose. I opened my eyes. Light bounced off the white tiles against the walls and invisible cords strung tight through my center.

Two giant round lights—still off—announced our stop. My bed came to a halt next to the operating table and the medical staff transferred me. My heart pounded the dreadful timpani beat as nerves danced in my stomach.

Colby hooked the saline bag she carried on the silver frame next to the operating table. She slid a smirk up one half of her face as she worked fast, attaching wires to the gel pads on my chest.

Heat radiated from my cheeks, and I couldn't hold eye contact with Colby and the other staff. What seventeen-year-old flashed her boobs? Except for the Playboy Bunnies, but I had no fluffy tail.

The LED monitor next to me mimicked the beats of my heart as Colby lowered the hospital gown.

“Hi, Sophie, I'm Dr. Blunt. I'll be your anesthesiologist and party director on this fun cruise,” said a deep voice, coming from the top end of the bed.

Only the laughing lines at the corner of his eyes were visible as the rest of his face hid behind a mask. White hair protruded from the bouffant-style cap. He squirted liquid into my IV and placed a mask on my face.

“Sophie, time to count backwards from ten, please,” Dr. Bryanston said.

“10, 9.” My lips couldn't finish the word eight, but I was still awake. Soft laughter filled the operating room as my mind got to 5.

Dr. Bryanston stared at me when I reached 3, 2, and 1.

My body was asleep, but the murmuring and soft chattering still reached my ears.

Dr. Bryanston's figure remained next to my bed. His smile disappeared as shoulders sank into a bowed heap. “Call Dr.

Dent.”

Who is Dr. Dent?

The door opened.

“You are free to leave!” An unfamiliar, deep voice barked.

Everyone got up. Even Dr. Blunt.

The shuffle of footsteps moved toward the exit. The swinging sound of doors followed, and soft chatter left the room.

It was quiet for a moment, and then the door swung open, and footsteps pelted into the room.

“Make sure you do the *electroencephalography* correctly this time,” the deep voice said. “We need the recording of her brain activity, especially what it shows right before she dies. Don’t mess up like last time!”

What? Dies?

“She has the gene, doesn’t she?” Dr. Bryanston asked.

Gene? Cancer, followed by an alien growing inside my head, jumped through my thoughts.

“Yes. Her ability is causing her headaches. Be glad that she has no idea that she has something powerful trying to wake up.”

My ability to do what and what is he talking about, something powerful?

“So, what do you think she is?” Dr. Bryanston asked.

What I am? I'm Sophie, who loves life and wants to carry on living without these skull-splitting headaches. Thank you very much.

“No idea, but I don't want to be here when it shows itself. These creatures are uncontrollable. Believe me, we've tried everything.”

Itself and these creatures? Do I have a creature burrowed into my brain?

The heart monitor mimicked the increase in sound that pounded behind my ribcage.

“Damn it. She's not asleep!” The man with the deep voice came into my view. Deep wrinkles outlined the corners of his nose to lips. A stern, unforgiving expression fogged his cold, brown eyes as he tapped the screen. He didn't even wear a mask.

“No, we had put her to sleep,” Dr. Bryanston replied.

Asleep? No, this wasn't happening. Wake up, stupid body! I tried to wiggle my toes and fingers, but nothing. I don't want to die. Please, please, please. Mom!

Dr. Dent, or rather Dr. Death, squinted at the HRM and pressed a few buttons more before he turned his gaze to me. “It's as if she can hear us.”

I knew it. I was experiencing some sort of out-of-body experience. The only difference was my soul didn't leave my body. It was still very stuck to it.

“So what do I tell her mother when I give her the news that she didn't make it?” Dr. Bryanston asked.

“It’s the brain, Bryanston. Plenty of things can go wrong.”

“She’s going to demand to see her daughter’s body! We shouldn’t be doing this.” Dr. Bryanston was sort of losing it.

Daughter’s body printed itself into my mind. Today was my last day!

Dr. Death grabbed a hold of Dr. Bryanston’s shoulder. “Get a hold of yourself! I already took care of that.”

I tried to move my arms and legs again. In my mind, I jumped off the operating table and sprinted down the hallway. I didn’t want to die. I was too young to die. My attempts were without success as squeaking wheels rolled into the room.

Dr. Bryanston left my side as Dr. Death turned back to the heart monitor. The beeping of fingers pressing buttons and a zipping sound reached my ears.

“It looks so much like her.” Dr. Bryanston’s voice came from my left.

What? Like me? A clone? No, human clones didn’t exist. The information gunned my heart into overdrive. Mom, help! God, please, please help! I don’t want to die. Mom!

“To be cautious, put her in straps.” Dr. Death eyed me.

The beat on the heart monitor flared up. A headache formed, pounding against my temples. Black spots danced in my sight.

The door crashed open.

“You shouldn’t be here!” Dr. Death said, as chairs scraped against the floor.

A ruckus exploded.

Grunts, shrieks, and dull sounds filled the room, mixed with the clinking of metal connecting with the tiles. Punches and groans with the harsh, high-pitched beeps radiated from the HRM murdered my ears.

Dr. Death worked fast. The desperate shuffling of objects moved around on the silver tray. He turned back to me and pulled the glass vial's content into a syringe. A silver scalpel flew past and jabbed into his chest.

A grunt escaped his lips as crimson seeped through his scrubs. He didn't stop and aimed the needle at my neck. A silver tray zoomed inches above my nose and hit Dr. Death straight on the corner of his temple, followed by the dull sound of him plummeting to the floor.

Another doctor, wearing a face mask, appeared. He stood over me, breathing hard. A white surgical style cap covered dark blonde hair. He killed the constant beeping of the monitor with a few buttons and removed the IV attached to my arm. He pressed his finger over the entry point before covering it with cotton and a plaster.

He was a lot younger than Dr. Bryanston and Dr. Dent.

His gaze met mine, and the green and brown of his heterochromatic eyes beseeched my heart to calm. He tapped my cheek. I didn't feel a thing. "Can you hear me?"

Hard pounding came from the door. "Open this door!"

Colby!

The doctor lifted his hand to his left ear. “I found her, but they sedated her. Her vitals are reading like a corpse.”

“Open this door!” A voice came from behind the door.

Who is he speaking to? There is no one here.

“Of course, I tried to wake her up. I’m not an idiot.”

The hammering on the door became more demanding. “It’s security! Open this door, now!”

Help! My scream echoed against the walls of my mind, refusing to give up. My heart pounded as I tried to move my still body.

“I had no choice!” the strange doctor said and pulled out an earbud, one of those you see in the movies the FBI wears.

“Drake!” A faint, tiny voice blurred from the bud.

More hammering came from the door. “Stand back!” The security guard yelled.

The doors crashed open, and I saw the figure explode into a creature with a beak. Feathers overshadowed everything in the room. I had no time to investigate the transformed state of this man as darkness finally claimed me.

DRAKE

MY MISSION: to infiltrate the facility, neutralize the threat and retrieve the asset, unharmed.

I wished I could say it started as smoothly as many a mission before.

Sure, grabbing her clothes from her room was as easy as plucking my feathers. But it looked a bit suspicious when you do it in scrubs. What doctor walks around with a patient's clothes to the O. R?

I piled her clothes under my shirt looking like I had a dad bod, and knew Alex would never let me forget about this, but I had no choice. Alpheus just didn't foresee events fast enough.

I was kitted out in full scrubs from head to toe, including a surgical mask to hair dusk—even the stupid booties. The staff in the hallway let me pass with ease, as I looked the part. But when I burst through the O. R doors, security immediately came . Being the creature I was, and owning the abilities I have, I knew from that moment the quest was in peril.

I kicked a chair in the way of an advancing guard, immobilizing him for a moment, while I threw a second chair at an oncoming guard with his baton, knocking him off his feet. The rod in his hand skidded over the tiles toward me.

I picked it up, ran back toward the doors and placed the baton horizontally through the bars—a trick Alex taught me that saved his ass on this side of Mavis' shield.

More guards advanced, but I quickly knocked the short one out with a knuckled fist to his temple and swung around to grab the other guard in a chokehold till he passed out. But it was when I saw the girl, lying helpless, so still on the bed, that I lost focus for a moment and nearly got punched in the jaw by guard one. I ducked just in time and delivered a short but powerful jab to his jaw, rendering him unconscious. I gave the

girl a second glance. It was definitely the girl that plagued my dreams.

My creed is to never let someone of our kind die. A creed that seemed to follow by life risking events.

“You shouldn’t be here,” the doctor standing right beside her commanded as I noticed a second doctor advance toward me with a scalpel. I bent down, snatching a metallic kidney shaped bowl. Ducked his jab and struck him in his windpipe with the sweet satisfaction of hearing cartilage crack in this throat.

The man refused to go down. The bowl hit him against his shoulder, and the scalpel came flying toward me. I ducked, and it cluttered against the tiles.

He swung a fist at me, but missed. This man was really slow. I grabbed his punching arm, twisted it around his back and held him to the ground and smashed his head against the floor until he, too, was flat out cold.

When I looked up, the doctor who stood beside the girl had a syringe and was busy extracting liquid from the vial. I grabbed the scalpel that laid on the floor, and threw it at him, hitting him square in the chest. But even as the blood spread on his ice-blue scrubs, he wouldn’t go down. He was guild one hundred percent.

I grabbed hold of the silver tray, threw it at an angle and it hit him right on his temple. The tray clung to the floor as the doctor followed.

More hammering sounded at the door as I stood over the girl and side-eyed the corpse beside her—they almost looked identical.

I tapped the girl's cheek. "Can you hear me?"

"Open this door!" A voice came from behind the door.

My earbud came alive with Alex, yelling, "Drake, is the girl alive? What is happening?"

I grunted, tapping her cheek one more time, hoping she would stir or open her eyes.

"Drake, talk to me?"

I pressed the hearing device tighter into my ear. "I found her, but they sedated her. Her vitals are reading like a corpse."

"Have you tried to wake her?"

"Of course I tried to wake her. I'm not an idiot."

"You should've waited. We are not done speaking about this..."

The hammering on the door became more demanding. "It's security! Open this door, now!"

"I had no choice!" I removed my earbud. There was no time for protocol and, to be honest, this wasn't a normal mission either.

"Drake!" Alex's voice vibrated over the tiny telecom device.

The hammering on the door became more demanding. "Stand back!"

This was my cue. Feathers rippled from my skin, and big black paws replaced strong human legs. My tail coursed down the middle of my spine, feathered out toward my coccyx, and swept in deep dark blue feathers over the floor—strong, bold, and robust. Enough to knock any opponent off their feet. Massive talons replaced my hands, sharp enough to rip through metal, and my mouth transformed into a beak that could snap an arm in two. My wings spanned the entire room, the color of a dangerous storm. My instinct immediately kicked in.

I snatched up the unconscious girl, gently curled my talons around her, and tucked her in under one of my wings. Monitoring the door, knowing that those any minute they would burst open and more guards or Guild would storm in.

The window was our only escape. I used my other talons to hook the frame and rip it out of the hinges.

The doors smashed open as I ducked down and crashed through the window, jumping out. Glass exploded onto the sidewalk, leaving screaming humans in my wake as my wings spread and took flight.

My escape became a victory as the icy wind swept through my feathers. I had to use both my claws to envelop her body in the warmth of my claws and prayed that a second group of The Guild wasn't close by.

SOPHIE

Icy wind blasted through my hair, and the cold ripped at my cheeks.

A howling gale swooshed past my ears, threatening to tear them straight from my head. My teeth chattered uncontrollably in the frigid conditions. Forcing my eyes open, the wind pushed them closed again. The tears that streamed over my temples froze as they hit my hairline.

Images of what had happened before I'd passed out flashed through my mind.

Doctors had tried to kill me. A corpse that looked just like me, and then the strange doctor. Blood, so much blood. Feathers, giant wings and last; eyes that reminded me of a kaleidoscope.

Dancing lights flickered through my blurry sight. It made little sense where I was and why it was so damn cold.

What type of air could sear down my windpipe, turning my lungs into a glacier as I breathed, burning like icy fire?

This was a hallucination from the drugs, or it was one of my messed up dreams again.

Still, I never dreamed about anything remotely like this. It was usually fire, loads and loads of fire. Not ice cold air and gigantic claws pressing into my body like a vice grip, threatening to squash the little air I had from my lungs.

Soon, the flapping of wings faded beneath the pounding of my heart. I could feel my heartbeat in my temples.

Logically, being held captive by a giant bird was an insane concept, but I could not deny all the physical assaults done to my body.

I wiggled and bit down hard on the grotesque claw clamping down on my chest.

A high-pitched whistle battered my ears as a similar scream tore from my lungs. I pushed against the tight grip the giant bird had around my body, trying to free myself.

If I could rid myself from this nightmare, I would find myself beside my mother in the hospital room, all warm and cozy.

It must be the drugs messing with my mind and my usual dream, changing it to the complete opposite.

My dreams were always this vivid. So the absence of the medicated numbness didn't even bother me that much.

I didn't stop struggling, though. Anything to wake up.

The claws around me pressed tighter. I couldn't breathe. Instinct forewarned me that fighting my circumstances could

mean my death, and so my adrenaline worked against me and put me right back to sleep.

DRAKE

THE GIRL WOKE up and it was a constant fight. She wiggled so much that my claws around her threatened to slip and therefore, they tightened around her.

She was relentless and very unlike in my dreams. The girl in my dreams, well, was that: a dream girl. Always smiling and kind, so, so kind.

This one, she was bat shit crazy, but then what did you expect waking up, trapping inside the claws of a giant griffin.

Something that Mavis kept telling me was a myth in their world.

The girl didn't stop and my frustration grew until it slipped from my beak. Even my cry sounded annoyed.

Could one thing just go right with this rescue?

A scream mimicked the cry and for some reason my heart pounded in my chest.

What was it specifically with this girl? Was it because I'd seen her for months, or whether the fact that I knew exactly why I'd dreamt about her.

It wasn't that hard to figure out.

It was my sight. Something I shouldn't have. Something that was wrong in our world. King Avery wouldn't think twice to put me down, even if my father was one of his best

generals, and the king vowed with his life to look after me and my brother.

Sight was just not a good domain to have.

The girl belonged to my brother. She was his fae, which tells me that her legacy was spirit. They were rare and the strongest of all the elemental faes.

My brother had never gotten his fire and therefore was a normal griffin. He was strong, well, stronger than most griffins at Earwyn Academy, which automatically told everyone that his fae was going to be very powerful, and that was the reason I'd seen her.

She belonged to my brother. She was his last chance of ever being whole.

The girl had stopped squirming.

Fuck!

I tried to shake her awake, but she was lying like some dead ferret in my grasp.

“C’mon, not this, please,” I begged, and shook her again.

A grunt rustled from my core and the growl changed halfway up my throat into another ear-piercing eagle’s cry.

Down was the only way now and I had to stop.

We were somewhere in Iowa. The forests all looked the same, but I knew the human world like my remiges feathers.

I touched down and opened my claw to lay the girl on the ground.

I shifted back into my human form and rushed to the girl's side. My lips touched her extra soft ones, covered in strawberry flavor Chapstick.

I blew in a big breath and compressed her chest a few times. Covered her nose with my fingers, blew in a big breath and compressed her chest again.

The thoughts in my head went crazy. What would happen to Chase if I didn't bring her home? Worse, what was I going to tell Alex and Maverick, as to why she was dead.

Alex was right. I should've waited.

I pinched her nose, blew in breath again, compressed a few times. Repeat.

My mind was now like a robot and the actions that followed mimicked the order.

The girl took a deep breath and it felt as if everything in my body ignited to life.

She didn't wake up though. Just went back to sleep.

She was really beautiful. With her almost black slants of hair. She could easily pass as Maverick's niece.

Her lips were extra poofy and the want to touch them, to feel if she was truly breathing overpowered my senses.

I stopped myself mid-air and pulled my hand back. The area was quite sheltered, and this place was as good as any other place to camp out.

I would try to get word to Alex and the others, hoping that they would pick up my signal and come to aid in this rescue.

All the signs till now, showed that I couldn't rescue this one on my own.

SOPHIE

I IMMEDIATELY FELT WARMER when my senses came to. The first thing I felt was relief that I was not freezing anymore.

The next thing that piqued my attention was the drone of traffic going past in the near distance.

Birds' twittering flowed in abundance. Crackles and pops sounded in the air as my body protested from sleeping on the hard surface of the ground.

I opened my eyes and found myself burrowed deep into a sleeping bag. The soft cotton material inside caressed my butt cheeks and my eyes grew wider.

Crap, I'm still in my hospital gown, wearing a thong!

Everything hit me at once. Where I was, what had happened. I wasn't in my bed at the hospital. Mom wasn't at my side and, for some reason, the only voice in my head belonged to my instructor, Andy Maloney. In dire circumstances, prolong the situation as an unconscious victim and take in the surroundings.

I peeked out of the sleeping bag. Sparkles of light danced through the canopy of trees and a giant figure of a man sat on a log in front of the fire pit with his back to me. The smokey smell irritated my nostrils.

“Drake.” A voice spoke over a walkie talkie. He lifted his arm in front of his face to speak into the device that curled around his bicep. Not a walkie talkie. What in mother’s name is that?

“I’m here,” said the man in a hushed tone. He pressed something into his ear and the other voice disappeared. His shoulders turned sideways. I closed my eyes, pretending to be asleep.

“We are in Iowa. I had a situation last night. I had to stop.”

Iowa? How did we get from Atlanta to... Claws trapping me, squeezing the living daylight out of me, flashed through my mind. That can't be real. How did I get here?

“Yes, I have the girl. She hasn’t woken up yet.”

Mom’s biggest fear knotted at my core. Did this guy kidnap me to be sold to human traffickers?

“There was already a...” His voice faded as my mind went into survival mode.

The tension released in my limbs as Andy recited his mantra: keep calm, survey your surroundings, find a weapon, and remember to SING! Solar plexus, instep, nose, and groin. No, Andy didn’t steal it from the Miss Congeniality movie. It was actually a real defense technique. We had to say it so many times I’d dreamed about it.

I opened my eyes a crack, just enough to peek at the guy. His back faced me again. An image of a 3D map hovered above his watch. The advanced technology fed my paranoia.

My gaze darted around and landed on a flat rock jutting from a carpet of pine needles before it flickered to a clear path right behind it. I unzipped the sleeping bag as silently as I could.

“Yeah, that will not happen. We are so off course...” The guy’s sentence trailed on as I tucked my knees into my body and rolled onto the balls of my feet.

My heart pounded as a million thoughts reeled through my head while the adrenaline pumped through my veins. I uncoiled from the ground just as the wind slipped through the hospital gown and made a vulgar introduction. My feet reacted before I could find something better than a flaring hospital gown to cover myself. I clutched the hospital gown tight, running with one arm behind my back.

I looked behind me to see if the guy was following.

There was no one. What an idiot.

The sun-dappled leaves flickered shadows on the ground as I rushed past the tall trees. My heart stammered as pine needles jabbed into the soles of my feet and crushed leaves with every step. “Ow, ow, ow.”

The leaves rustled behind me, and I turned around to look.

Only the wind! Now breathe through the pain, Sophie, otherwise you are going to die.

The noise of the traffic became louder, and it gave me another spurt of hope. I ran and didn’t give a rat’s ass anymore whether mine was showing or how much my feet were getting

tortured. My lungs and legs burned as I reached the path dwindling up a hill.

Please, God, I promise to never complain about the things that I'm seeing. I'll endure the pain. Not that I want that, but I'll do it if you get me back to Mom and Dad.

I rushed up the incline with bated breath. The forest entrance opened onto a busy road. Cars sped by as I tried to keep the gown from showing my ass to the traffic. Hooters honked, but none of them stopped. My arm flailed as I clutched the back of my hospital gown closed with the other. Then Mom's paranoia replaced my reasoning. 'You never know the person living next door. They can be a serial killer, Sophie.'

Zip it, Mom. I'll take my chances with any of these cars rather than the trafficker.

A pickup stopped just as a pair of arms clasped around my body. A buzz rushed up my back and spread down my legs. I shrieked.

I tried to SING, but my kidnapper gripped my arms too tight, and he lifted me off the ground. I couldn't get to step on his foot.

Why didn't I hear this idiot?

My feet kept kicking his shins, but all that did was incite a grunt and motivate him to lift me higher. Big mistake.

It brought me to his height and in level with his face. I threw my head back hard, connecting with his nose.

A growl mixed with a suppressed curse slipped past his lips. He refused to let me go, as his grasp tightened around me. When my feet touched the ground, I went for the instep.

He kicked at the back of my knees, and my legs folded, connecting hard with this pavement. The pain jolted up my leg, and I grunted.

“Would you calm down?” His deep voice rasped in my ear. All the hair on my neck stood straight with a tingling sensation that spread through me.

“Help!” I still squirmed as we both kneeled on the ground. His arm gripped me by my shoulder, while the other covered my lips.

My teeth sunk into his finger.

The guy growled, then pushed my cheek onto the pavement. A pair of shoes and the bottom of dark trousers rushed past us.

“Wait! Please! I’m right here.” The words came out awkwardly as the pavement crushed my cheek. Grunts still left my mouth as the stranger stopped and looked past us. I managed to look up and into his perplexed face.

My would-be rescuer’s eyebrows knitted as he turned his head in our direction and back toward the oncoming traffic. His mouth agape as he scratched the back of his head before he headed back to his truck, pulled over on the side of the road.

Tears rimmed my eyes. “No, wait, please!”

We are right here! Why can’t he see us?

My kidnapper breathed hard behind me and pulled me up from under my arms. “Get up!”

I wiggled and hammered my fist into his knee.

Something connected with my head, and the pain seared through my skull.



WHEN MY EYES OPENED, I was upside down, draped over the brute’s shoulder. His fingers fisted the two flaps of the hospital gown together, resting on top of my ass.

“I had to mask myself,” he grumbled.

Mask himself?

“I know! Fuck!” he said.

The semi-giant took me back to the forest. A moan escaped my lips, and that tingling sensation invaded my body once more.

I screamed and squirmed. “Let me go.” I took a deep breath. “What do you want from me? Help!”

“Sweetheart, scream as much as you want. No one can hear you now.”

“Let me go, you asshole!” I pounded on his kidney region. My fist ached as I slammed them against his Kevlar vest. “And take your hand off my ass.”

“Fine by me.” He chuckled and let go of the flaps.

My one arm flung behind my back, trying to close them again as the wind slipped through the gown.

“You are the weirdest human trafficker—”

“Human trafficker? I’m trying to save your life!”

“Save my life? You knocked me out!”

“Because you gave me no choice. They tried to kill you last night, and I’m the bad guy here?”

I pushed my palms against his back and whipped my head around to speak to him. “Wait, last night happened?”

“Yes, and if you would calm down, I’ll tell you the reasons they want you dead.”

“Someone wants me dead?”

“The world is full of mysteries, sweetheart.”

“Stop calling me that and put me down. I’m not a cave woman.”

“Not until you give me your word that you won’t try to run away or become violent again.”

“Then give me your word that you are not part of some sex trafficking syndicate.” It sounded so stupid the minute it left my lips.

“You’ve got to be kidding me. I’m part of a rescue team.”

“Well, your actions yell the opposite.”

We returned to the campfire, and he dropped me to the ground. I clutched the flaps at the back of my gown, ignoring the twigs that pinned into my butt cheeks.

The tingling stopped. It came from him?

“You’d think a rescue would include bringing the victim’s clothes,” I hissed.

“Yeah well, sweetheart—”

“I said to stop calling me that. My name is Sophie. Thank you very much.”

He sat down on the log, his thighs bulking through his pants. “Things didn’t go as they were supposed to.”

He cupped his mouth and pushed back his nose into place. I flinched at the crack of the tiny bones.

Blood seared down his lips as he reached for the bag. His gigantic frame was all muscle, and sun-kissed smooth skin appeared underneath parts of his black tight long sleeve shirt.

My eyes scanned his gigantic biceps that pressure-tested the black long sleeve shirt hugging his body underneath the Kevlar vest.

The veins in his silky-smooth neck—also tanned—pulsed as he opened the bag and took out a cloth.

He held it to his nose. A perfect mop of messy blonde hair finished the oil painting that made this guy into perfection.

A pang of guilt roiled in my stomach. But what else was I supposed to do? The guy just kidnapped me.

His attire didn’t look like anything I’d imagine a rescue team would. He was kitted out with cargo pants and all kinds of gadgets strapped to his upper body. I was sure I saw a blade or two strapped to his utility belt.

With his head tilted, he chucked the bag in my direction.
“Get dressed.”

The words were mumbled, but I heard them perfectly.

I opened the bag and found my jeans, shirt, sneakers, and hoodie. My voice peaked. “How did you get these?”

He dabbed at his nose, pinched his eyes shut and then looked straight at me. His eyes seemed so familiar, one green and one brown. “It was you last night, you were dressed as a doctor.”

He just nodded. I stood up with all my clothes in a heap in front of me. I picked up my jeans and was ready to step into it.

The guy’s gaze lingered on my body.

“Don’t look. Turn around!”

He turned around, still dabbing at his nose with the cloth.

“Why didn’t that guy see us? We were right there,” I asked as I closed my jeans’ button and bent down to pick up my shirt.

“Because I’m different, like you.”

I pulled the hospital gown off my body as his back was still turned to me and pulled on my shirt. “It doesn’t answer my question. How?”

He took the cloth from his nose. “I can disappear.”

Disappear? Okay, as crazy as that sounded, it was the only thing that made sense why the guy didn’t see us. “Why did those doctors try to kill me?”

The guy looked back at me as I slipped on my shoes.

“I didn’t say you can look!”

He waved me off. “Please don’t flatter yourself.”

He walked over to the fireplace and stomped out the fire.
“You are different. You do not belong in this world.”

I kind of was listening but was more focused on the shape of his lips as he spoke about another world that hid behind magic.

He walked over to the sleeping bag and started folding it with vigorous flicks of his hands, grabbing the bag at my feet, and attached the sleeping bag to it. “We need to move. Time for questions later.”

My mind struggled to process magic and the disappearance part. Not to mention being different. The headaches? The animal parts on the humans I could see were probably all part of it.

I pulled him by his arm, and that same tingle rippled through me.

It was him, but I quickly recoiled and forgot to ask him about what he meant by I was different.

He shook his head as his eyebrows pulled closer together. The log in front of the campfire got chucked deeper into the forest. Then he took the bag and put it around his shoulders.

“You want to tell me the things that I’m seeing are real?” I buried my hands in the pocket of my hoodie as I felt suddenly cold.

His body tensed as his squinting gaze locked with mine.
“You see things?”

I shook my head and looked away as he fiddled with the straps and snapped it closed around his waist.

“I would keep seeing things to myself if I were you. It’s not a good thing in our world either.” He started walking, and I followed. His strides were so long, I struggled to keep up.

The questions kept flashing through my thoughts. “How did you find out about me?”

“We have people searching for unusual cases like yours. They investigate humans that seem to have incurable afflictions.”

There was an awkward silence as leaves crunched beneath our feet.

“It doesn’t mean that we are different.”

“Ninety-nine percent of the time, it means that.”

My heart climbed as my legs cramped, walking his pace.
“So what am I?”

“I don’t know. What did the doctors find wrong with you? They kept looking at scans.”

“I have horrible headaches.”

“You could be several things. We will only know what you are once we narrow down your abilities.”

“Abilities?” My heart jerked to a gallop, remembering what the doctor had said about what caused my headaches.

“Yeah, it’s not so bad once you get used to them. Earwyn will help you.”

I put on the brakes, and he stopped.

An enormous sigh left his lips. “What now?”

“I don’t want to go to someone named Earwyn. Take me home!”

His gaze ensnared mine. “Oh, that is a no-go, sweetheart. Believe me, your parents already think you are dead.”

“They think I’m dead!”

“Yes. Now move.” Offering no measure of sympathy, he tornadoed on again.

I clambered after him and pulled on his arm to slow down.

“What?” A growl rumbled from his chest, and it made me second-guess my question as the annoyance rolled from him.

“Why?” The sadness dripped from my tone.

He sighed and closed his eyes, opened them and looked at me. “It’s what this world does. When humans find something different, they want to cut it to pieces and label it as science. Believe me, keeping you alive, keeping anyone like us alive, is last on their list. We need to keep moving.” He looked around. “At this rate, we will never make it on time.”

“Hey, I told you before, I’m not going to someone named Ewyn.”

“Earwyn,” he corrected me. “And it’s a place, not a person.”

“I don’t want to go to Earwyn. I want—”

“If you tell your parents you are alive, they will die. Let’s make them believe you are dead. It’s the only way to save them, keep them out of this war.”

“What war!”

“The war trying to keep our kind safe!”

3

SOPHIE

My legs burned, trying to keep up with the idiot on a meandering forest path. I considered running again.

“You are insane. There is no war!” Then again, how could I explain the stranger’s inability to see us? We were right there.

A half-strangled chuckle escaped his lips, as if he could hear my thoughts. “Suit yourself, but remember, people are looking for you. The Guild of The Primal Cross knows about you, and they know you didn’t die in that hospital as they ordered.”

“The Guild of what?”

“The ones that tried to kill you. They are part of a secret organization that believes they are protecting the humans from our kind.”

Secret organizations and doctors wanting me dead brought this conversation to an abrupt halt.

He hiked on, passing sheer rock-face and crisscrossing tree roots. It was hard to keep up, so I stopped.

He kept jotting down the trail, and escape was still a priority for me, but for the first time I doubted running away, as I knew there were people trying to kill me. My instinct to be away from all danger won in the end. I dropped one foot back, whipped about, and powered along the path I'd come from. Tree trunks and thickets whizzed past us. Layers of dead leaves and twigs crunched beneath my feet with a fresh crunch that called out into the empty forest.

I looked over my shoulder to see if he was following me. My foot struck a rotten log, and I fell forward, hitting the ground. Pain seared through my palms and knees seconds before vines bit around my ankles. A shriek escaped my lips at the same time I got yanked off the ground. I hurtled towards the treetops.

The hauling came to a stop, and a burning sensation exploded from my ankles. Vines slithered around my calves and thighs like a snake, squeezing tighter.

Now the forest is attacking me!

“Help!”

The vines squeezed harder. I couldn't breathe. I kept squirming, refusing to give up getting back to my parents.

His footsteps pounded on the ground. My heart stammered. Here I was stuck in an impossible situation, and probably have no choice but to ask my kidnapper for help from murderous plants.

Tears pricked my eyes and burned my nose. I didn't ask to be different. I didn't want a life running away from some

secret cross organization and I definitely didn't ask to be this idiot's prisoner.

I rotated in the air and a guy with floppy dark hair and green eyes shored his leaning frame against the tree. He wore the same ops uniform.

"Drake didn't kid when he said she was feisty." A second man with dark skin and dreadlocks came closer as I grunted. He had the bluest eyes I'd ever seen.

"Aye, lose a lass, Drake?" Floppy asked with a drawl.

"I'm done." Drake's voice came from behind me. "If she wants to leave, let her leave."

Hanging upside down, rotating slowly, Drake came into view, walking away with an indistinct mumble following him. A migraine brewed, as all the blood flooded to my head. But it didn't hurt as much as my ankles and body where the vines cut into my skin.

Floppy came into view first as I circled my way back to them. "There's *nothin'* wrong with a sassy lassy."

"Get her down, Mav," Dreadlocks said with a posh British accent.

Mav lifted his hand, and the vines retreated, slithering back to their original buds. I connected hard with the ground. Air left my lungs as my back hit the ground, while a sharp pain splintered up my spine to my head.

"Ouch," I breathed.

“Oops, sorry.” Mav stood over me with a smile. His hand grabbed mine and hauled me to my feet.

A deep, roaring growl behind us shook my core.

The two men looked down the trail and back at each other. Mav’s eyebrows came together as he squinted, staring in the direction before he lifted his hands, coaxing vines to lock around my wrists, ankles, and torso. He lifted his hands, and I lost my balance. My eyes closed, ready for the impact, but it didn’t come.

When I opened my eyes, I hovered above the ground. My mouth instantly went dry as my mind struggled to process any of this. Drake’s footsteps neared, and then he jumped over my body and kept running.

“Let’s go!” Dreadlocks barked, and I flew behind him and Mav.

“What the hell is this?” Vines twirled around my face, covering my mouth. It tasted like dirty pencil shavings.

I grunted. *These men are barbaric.*

Trees flew past me as I sailed inches from the ground, barely missing the pinecones dotting the floor like spilled trinkets. I came to a stop.

Mav, Dreadlocks, and I took cover behind the thicket near the colossal tree where Drake hid.

Growling came from my left side. I turned my face and looked through an opening between two bushes.

A group of people wearing camouflage gear with massive black guns dangling from straps around their shoulders paraded the open area behind the thickets. Could they be the secret organization Drake was talking about? The hair on my arms raised, and the suffocation pressed against my lungs as I stared at something that looked like a lion with wings, struggling underneath the biggest net I'd ever laid eyes on.

It growled at the guys, who tried to hold on to the net. Enormous wings struggled against the contraption, begging to be free. Lions didn't have wings, and they didn't have ram horns either. What was that thing?

A tail wrestled the net. Claws extended through the gaps, digging up dirt and tree roots. Throwing it at its captors. Its snout snapped at the net to tear itself free, but then the net electrified and shocked the creature, rendering it immobile for a few seconds. The beast jumped back to life, fighting twenty times harder for its freedom.

"Pull harder on your end, McGregor. Be careful of the stinger."

A giant scorpion stinger attached to the lion's tail tangled itself in the net.

"The griffin is somewhere near. They are always together," another yelled.

The griffin? The griffin in my head belonged in a fantasy world.

"There are way too many agents," Mav said.

“We can’t just leave Lindy. Where is Brooke?” Dreadlocks asked.

Drake grunted and swooped in my direction with his hands, ready to strangle me.

Mav pulled him back. “Easy, lad.”

Drake jabbed a finger in my direction. “They wouldn’t have trapped Lindy if she stayed put.”

“Hey,” Dreadlocks said, keeping his eyes on the situation in front of us. “You were the one adamant about saving her life, remember?”

Say what now?

Drake grunted. “And how I regret that.”

“We need a diversion,” Mav said.

“Fine, I’ll create one,” Drake replied. “Don’t wait for me. Just get to the compound.”

He was ready to make a run for it when Dreadlocks pulled him back. “Be careful.”

Drake nodded and moved fast before he vanished.

I looked at the beast struggling and growling under its entrapment. My stomach turned as I tried to process.

This can’t be real. Wake up, Sophie.

The aches and pains pulsing from my body told me I was awake. My eyes saw every inch of the creature and my ears heard every growl it made. I couldn’t stop looking at the giant stinger that tried to free itself, not to mention its colossal

wings. I wanted to barf, but the retching would give us away, so I held it in, which was as disgusting as the actual deed.

Mav came closer. “*Tis* world is not what it seems. Please take my word when I tell *yeh* we’ll answer all *yeh* questions later. *Yer* life is in danger. Can I trust *yeh ter* keep quiet and stay put?”

I nodded.

I didn’t know how Drake would create a diversion. I felt horrible about how I kept trying to evade him as the danger of this situation finally sank in.

The troops struggled to keep the strange creature ensnared.

The same high-pitch whistle from last night screeched in the distance. Mav pulled me up and shoved me into a hollow of a tree.

“The Griffin!” barked one of the military men.

“Stay put, Lass.” Maverick’s eyes blazed with warning. “*Dinnae* be afraid.”

I nodded, and he opened a tiny basket looking like a bowl purse and a bright orb flew out.

Mav nodded at the ball of light. “Keep her safe.”

Bells came from the orb and flew into the opening of the tree with me.

Mav lifted his hands. The vines swam inside and all around me, covering the opening. The light faded and the little orb grew brighter. What the hell were they?

I didn't look too long as it would bring on the headache faster. The dull sound of drones hovered in the air as faint commands ordered a portion of the military to follow whoever was in charge. My heart rattled and the leaves and vines still crept into the hollow space, protecting me from the outside. It finally stopped.

I couldn't move. With tense muscles and sweaty palms, I focussed on a string of words: *Please, God, help. Calm down, Sophie! Deep breaths, you can do it.*

I closed my eyes and inhaled and exhaled deeply through my nose, breathing in all the earthy scents.

I kept thinking about the griffin, remembering the fantasy art of griffins from one artist I followed. I kept liking his art. What did they really look like?

The growls and roars of the beast filled the air outside of the tree once more. "Contain the beast!"

I gulped down a steadying breath as I tried to concentrate only on my breathing. Nothing helped as a suffocating fear tightened my lungs. *Come on, Soph, deep breaths.*

Men screamed as if possessed by demons, and a roar of water drowned their cries.

My eyebrows knitted. We were far from the ocean. I hadn't heard the gushing of a stream or river close by, but I knew the sound of water. We had a lake behind our house.

"Brooke!" Dreadlocks said, and a giant splash made me jump.

The screams had ceased.

“Change back, now!” Dreadlocks’ faint voice reached my ear.

Change back?

“Maverick, free Alpheus and the girl.”

I turned my head back to the bright little orb. It had a name?

The creeping plants and leaves retreated, and light seeped through. Vines slithered away from my body, loosening my ankles and arms. The bright orb flew out as the vines that had twirled around my lips to keep me from screaming retreated. I was completely free, but the need to escape was far from my mind with everything I had just experienced. Guilt pulled at my center for what I had done to that beautiful semi-giant.

My hands wiped over my body to remove the residue left from the moss as I climbed out of the hollow tree and looked back. Huge tents lay on their sides as army trucks and SUVs stood in rows. Bodies scattered on the ground.

“Don’t look!” Dreadlocks’ order came a few seconds too late.

My gaze snapped to the floor as tears burned my eyes. It was real. All of it was real.

“We need to go after Drake.” The voice belonged to a girl with ram horns protruding from her hairline, sitting on the ground, clothing herself.

I frowned as I kept staring at her horns.

“Drake can take care of himself. We need to get to the compound,” Dreadlocks said.

The girl pulled on a black sweater. She already wore black pants like the others. “He is all alone.”

“Drake can take care of himself,” he said in a louder tone. “We already veered too far from the plan.”

She braided the one side of her dark blonde hair with fast tucking while glaring at me with amber eyes. They were almost as gold as Dr. Bryanston’s.

“What is your name?” Dreadlocks asked.

“It’s Sophie. Sophie Emerson.” My hands trembled from the adrenaline and confusion. A headache pulsed softly behind my eyes.

“Sophie, this is Brooke, and you already met Maverick.” My eyes shifted back to Maverick, who kept his gaze on me. A second girl with white pixie hair and crystal blue monolidded eyes stood next to him as the girl with the horns grunted and mumbled incoherently, braiding the other side of her hair now.

Brooke waved as her lips quirked upward.

The girl with the horns walked past and shouldered me out of the way.

“Ow,” I said and rubbed my shoulder.

She swerved around and pointed her finger at me. “If anything happens to Drake, it’s all your fault.”

“Lindy!” Dreadlocks barked.

I stared at the girl, whose back was ramrod straight as she stomped away.

My gaze snapped to the net that trapped the beast far below in the army camp. There was nothing below it now. I looked at the girl again. That was Lindy? She was the beast.

That was what Dreadlocks had meant by changing back.

She was a shapeshifter. Shapeshifters didn't exist. Humans with horns, cat-ears and tails jumped into my mind. They were all shapeshifters.

Maverick touched the bottom of my jaw and closed it. His lips curved, and air escaped his lips as his feet took him in Lindy's direction.

Brooke followed Maverick as Dreadlocks stepped closer to me. "My name is Alex. Are you okay?"

I nodded, even though my mind raced through so many things. "Is Drake going to be okay?"

A gleam of sun spread over Alex's face, lighting up bright blue eyes with the same hypnotic qualities as Drake's eyes. "Don't worry; Drake can take care of himself. Let's go."

4

SOPHIE

We walked until the sun faded beneath the horizon. I slammed into Alex's back as they all rooted their feet in front of an old oak tree. Great! A break.

Nobody moved as we waited, all looking at Alex. Except for Lindy, who was glaring at me, arms folded. So vexed that a vein throbbed on the side of her head.

Under her scrutiny, my gaze flickered to the ground while questions about what I'd seen flooded my mind, but I was too scared and too dumbfounded to ask them.

I held my head and tried to massage the headache away with my thumbs. It was hard to accept that the girl in front of me had been the horrific beast. An entire army couldn't capture her. What was she? How did I get myself into this mess, getting almost killed by mad scientists and chased by secret organization villains? My blood ran cold. Would I turn into a monster, too? Drake? Even though he could turn invisible, he seemed the most normal out of the bunch. I needed to talk to Drake. My stomach turned, thinking of

seeing his handsome face in front of me, but I had to put my fears aside and start getting some answers before going insane.

The bright light shimmering from the tree pulled me out of my thoughts. A golden key protruded from the tree's bark. Sparkles bounced from the top of the tree to the bottom. Swirls and curls slithered deep into the tree's trunk, and the sparkles painted small intricate carvings. Where the trunk flared into roots, vertical lines appeared and suddenly a door magically appeared in the bark. The sound of wood coming alive caressed my ears and right in the middle of the door in the tree, a doorknob grew from the bark.

Pins and needles rushed through my body as my flesh became alive with goosebumps, the same tingles I felt every time Drake touched me. Magic felt so foreign, yet hypnotic. It was hard to describe everything that I was feeling at that moment. I was overcome with feelings of wonderment, nausea, joy, sadness. My eyebrows knitted together as I tried to make sense of it all.

The transformation ended in a click, and Alex moved forward, opening the door. He gestured for Lindy to go through first.

She grunted and stormed inside. Brooke was next, and then Alex touched my back and gave me a gentle nudge toward the entrance.

As soon as I stepped through the door, the stench of urine mixed with a sour odor of rotten apples and decaying meat hit my nostrils hard. I covered my mouth and nose with my sleeve

to prevent myself from gagging. The dim light above showcased a dark alley closed in between two brick walls.

The soles of my shoes made contact with a sticky substance on the concrete. A light flickered in the distance. It was not what I had expected to find behind a magic door.

Someone pushed me from behind, and I took a sticky step out of Maverick's way. The smug purse of his lips made me uncomfortable as his gaze took inventory of my body. Alex stepped through last. He pulled out the key, and the door vanished, turning into part of the wall. He held onto a golden chain with a key. My gaze landed on the enormous emerald on the bow before it slipped back underneath his Kevlar vest. "Walk fast. We are not out of danger yet."

"How is Drake going to meet us? We are miles away from Iowa, and he doesn't have a key, Alex," Lindy said.

"Will you calm down? It's Drake you are talking about. He always finds a way."

Her lips thinned as she anchored her gaze to his. With a slight shake of her head, she folded her arms across her chest.

I agreed with Lindy and wondered the same thing. How was Drake going to meet us?

Lindy's poison-tipped gaze met mine again before powering off toward the exit of the alley.

My eyes panned the landscape, trying to figure out which city I was in. The horrible guilt crawled into the pit of my stomach again. This was my fault. I followed Brooke and

Maverick and made sure there was a distance between Lindy and me, keeping in mind the beast I saw under that net.

In total silence, we walked a few city blocks. Nothing seemed familiar to me at all. We walked until we came across a thirteenth-century gothic church towered over us. We followed Lindy around the main entrance, past a huge, stained window, where she opened a small gate situated in the corner of the building.

Her feet skittered over the stone passage that led toward a meager wooden door framed with dark iron. She knocked a few times, as her gaze did a visual sweep of the area. A latch shifted, and the door opened.

A priest stood on the other side of the door. Ram horns, in contrast with the clerical robes, were the umbrella in the weird cocktail. I entered the church, trying hard not to stare at the priest's horns.

He closed the door, as his eyes and lips pulled downward. "Did *somethin' happen* to Drake?" the priest asked with a slight Irish accent.

"We had a bit of a situation. Nothing to fret about." Alex smiled, patting the priest's shoulder. "Drake will be here soon, Father."

"*Musha*, I take it you'll wait for the pup?"

"If you don't mind. We can't leave for Earwyn without him."

"Come in, you must be wrecked," the priest said. He touched my shoulder as I passed him. "*An'* who is this?"

He was friendly, but the horns on his head were a bit off putting. Drake's warning popped into my mind again. The priest squinted as he looked at me, and I looked away.

"Her name is Sophie. Drake found her just in time," Alex said.

The priest's eyes glistened. "I'm Father Matthew. I'm happy to see that you are in one piece, Sophie. We're all part of His creation." The priest pointed to the ceiling.

I smiled and nodded.

"Sophie!" Brooke said a little loud, startling me. I followed Brooke past the benches in the church, crossed the aisle and went through another door on the opposite side.

We entered a dim hallway decorated with only a table holding a bunch of lit candles. The wax dripping into the metal tray underneath. She walked up to the table, took a match and lit one candle, then she bowed her head and closed her eyes. Brooke motioned for me to follow her. First, I thought she disappeared into the wall, but when I came closer, I saw an opening beside the table and a wooden staircase leading upward. We climbed the wooden staircase and ended up in a long hallway.

"He is far from here, Mav." Lindy's voice sounded from the room on the right.

"I'm with Alex, Lass. It's Drake."

"If anything happens—"

"*Nothin'* will happen to the lad. Stop *blamin'* Sophie. *Tis* not her fault. She only did what anyone else in *'er* situation

and with *'er* skills would've done.”

“She was reckless, and if it's going to cost him his life, I'll wring her neck.”

Maverick grunted.

Brooke led me to another room and closed the door.

It was small, a wooden table separated into two beds draped with white quilts. A faint glow came from a lantern on top of the table. A lonesome wooden cross hung on the wall.

“Don't worry too much about what comes out of Lindy's mouth. Everyone knows she is still not over Drake. He'll be fine.”

That explains the *'can't-eat-can't-sleep-need-to-save-him-now'* affection. My mind reeled with loads of questions.

“You must be tired. You had a long day.”

I blinked back tears as our gaze met. The adrenaline slowed its trek, and I felt drained, but needed answers.

Brooke touched my shoulder. “Hey, you okay?”

I shook my head, plopped down on the bed, and covered my eyes with my palms. I was overwhelmed. What in the hell was going on? And how did things get so bad so quickly?

Brooke sat down next to me and rubbed my arm. “I know it's a lot to take in. Especially when not knowing that you are different.”

I sighed and lifted my palms from my face. “I am worried about my parents.” My voice broke.

Brooke just rubbed my arm.

“A beast of a girl blames me for the disappearance of her ex. She could devour me.” Selfishly, I thought to myself, he held so many answers.

“You must have questions?” she asked.

“Too many.” My sentences weren’t even full ones.

“My mother had this saying: best to start is at the beginning.”

“Your mother?”

“I know how you feel, Sophie. Two years ago, it was me they rescued.”

“Wait, you didn’t know either?”

A quick no jerked her head. “It was scary as hell when my ability showed up, especially more so when I discovered what I was.”

“What?”

Brooke grabbed a water bottle off the nightstand, unscrewed the cap, and tipped the bottle over to let the water run free. My knees jerked up, but the water didn’t splash on the carpet or me. It hovered in the air and followed the movements of Brooke’s hands.

The thread of water twirled and bent in an elegant pattern. It formed tiny dolphin figures and dove back into the bottle. A chuckle escaped Brooke’s lips as she screwed the cap back on the bottle. “A bit of humor.”

“The water?” I pointed at the bottle.

“Yeah, it’s awesome now, but it scared the living crap out of me two years ago.”

That was why she looked human. She wasn’t a shapeshifter. She had an ability.

“Just like it scared The Guild two years ago.”

“The Guild?” I asked.

“My neighbor saw me. Her name was Tammy, and we were the same age. She was my sworn enemy. I still don’t know what her problem was. It scared her shitless, when she saw it happen, and she told her mom. I didn’t know how to control it then.

“One day, she made me so angry. The water fountain in our school burst and all the water trapped her inside a giant bubble. She almost drowned. Plenty of phones recorded it, and the next day an agent stating he was from a special division in defense came to our house.

“They lied to my mom, told her of a special program, and I went with them. When I got there, it was everything but special. They did tests on me that hurt. I still get nightmares. Believe me when I say you are lucky that Drake tracked you down when he did, Sophie. They don’t want to study us anymore. They want to cut us up in pieces and find out through science why we are so different.”

“I only get headaches,” I said.

“Headaches that doctors can’t find the cause for. Believe me, your headaches could mean anything.”

Drake had told me the same thing.

“So your mother didn’t know you could manipulate water?” I asked.

“Nope. My parents adopted me when I was two. They had no information on my birth mother.”

“Same here.”

“Your parents also adopted you at two?” Brooke’s eyebrows furrowed.

“No, they found me in front of a church when I was a few days old.”

She bumped her shoulder into mine. “The pair we make, huh?”

“So, what am I?”

“If your ability hasn’t surfaced yet, then I’m afraid you need to wait until we get to Earwyn.”

“It’s a place, right?”

She nodded. “It is a city. It has an Academy too. Rescue teams—like the one Alex leads—stay on campus. They rescue people like us. Drake and Lindy are part of Alex’s team. I am still a student. It’s my last year. I help with rescue missions during summer break. Next year I will become a graduate. I will either become part of the team or study further to get better at using my ability.”

“A graduate?”

“Someone that is finished with high school. The start of many possibilities that happen under one big magical shield. Earwyn is like a rescue and learning compound, helping the

citizens of Concordia. They keep us safe until it's time to go home."

"Home?"

"Concordia. It's a realm somewhere out there. We reach it through the key barriers."

"Those magical doors?"

"Yup, but you need a key bearer to go through one. Alex's key can jump from place to place all over the world. His key doesn't open a barrier to go to Concordia. Only a few bearers have those types of keys."

"They won't let me talk to my parents. Drake said it's better if they think I'm dead."

"Put that life behind you, Sophie. The Guild is relentless, and your parents won't be safe until you're out of their life."

Out of my life? "Don't you miss your mom?"

"Every day. Telling her I'm alive will only put her life in danger. My sister's too. So it's best that they think I'm dead."

It was the same as Drake had said. What type of life would I have without my parents?

5

DRAKE

I hid inside the hollow of a tree and padded up the entrance by pulling vines and branches across the mouth. I couldn't use my shield of invisibility against The Guild; I've witnessed firsthand what their equipment could do. If I had to use my glamor it would show up on their equipment and give away my exact location. So I had to hide like any mundane would. Like a coward.

Rolling my eyes at their ground patrol, I felt I could jump out and slap one of them because every single step they made crunched down on the forest floor.

I drew in a deep breath, and stilled my heart on remembering what their equipment could do. Once I tried to attack them with my fire, but they had some kind of artifact that used my own ability against me, and I awoke in the infirmary with third-degree burns. It took Hank weeks to heal it.

Using my advanced hearing, it almost sounded like they were upon me. I knew they weren't, but they were close; so I

steadily filled my lungs and held my breath as they scurried outside.

“You see anything?”

“Nothing, it’s quiet.”

“The General will not be happy about this.”

“Then best we do not tell the general we’d lost him.”

“Hold out your palms.”

“Why?”

“You will see.”

“What you going to do with that knife?”

“We have to make it look like we at least put up a fight.”

I heard the slice of a blade, followed by the one guy cussing.

“Holy shit, you didn’t have to cut me that deep.”

“Stop whining, now take the blade and let’s go for a nice big scar right over the left side of my face.”

Idiots.

I listened to the guys’ grunts and moans and wondered if their General would fall for it?

Slowly their footfalls faded into the distance, their voices becoming soft murmurs the farther away they got. But I kept myself hidden because I knew their equipment would still be able to locate me from this distance.

Bending my knees, I slid down the back of the bark until my ass hit the ground. I was growing tired; my gaze fell on my watch that read it was just over midnight and I gave a silent yawn. I stayed seated for a while as Sophie entered my mind. I had summed her up all wrong. In my visions she was always smiling and friendly, but my brief encounter with her was the total opposite. I guess who could blame her under the circumstances.

I couldn't deny the pull I had toward her. A part of me knew what she was, but they were rare.

The severity of her headaches was another dead giveaway, as that was where her ability lay. In her head.

The fact that she could see things: another giveaway. Not something good and if Avery found out that she could see, he would kill her on the spot, whether or not she was a Spirit Fae. Just like me.

Lucky for me, I had my projection as well. It came in the form of invisibility. Or that was all I could get my projection to do. Show people I wasn't there.

Mavis had said it was a defense mechanism, analyzing me again, saying it was an underlying problem I refused to admit. I wonder what she would say if I told her I could see.

Or maybe not, as the only thing I saw was this girl, Sophie. My eyelids grew heavy and the last thing I saw before the darkness consumed me was a bright light.

SOPHIE

AFTER DINNER, feeling spent, we all went to bed, but my coiled muscles refused to relax, and sleep wouldn't come. I was still starving. I couldn't eat anything at all, even the appetizing sandwiches the nuns prepared for us.

The room was so small, making it feel as if the walls were caving in on me. I stared at the shadow the cross cast against the wall. Was God in this creation, too? Everything we'd learned about magic in religion had a negative connotation to it, but I always saw Jesus from the Bible filled with magic. Didn't he heal people by touching them and performing miracles during his time on earth? This was so confusing.

So many questions filled my mind. Questions that would probably never get answered, like, were my birth parents like me?

Why did they abandon me in front of that church? Why couldn't they care for me?

While my mind mulled over those thoughts, I also wondered about the agency chasing me. I wondered if perhaps my parents were like me, then the agency would have been chasing them too. What if to save my life, they had to leave me somewhere they thought I'd be safe? That was a comforting thought, more comforting than just being dumped on the doorstep of some church for unknown reasons. My thoughts jumped back to Brooke manipulating the water. That made me think of Maverick manipulating the forest, and the question came up if Alex could control anything. Or was his sole purpose to be The Key Bearer?

It was a scary thought that there were humans, or rather beings, out there that could manipulate the elements.

I missed Mom and Dad and couldn't help thinking how hard they had tried to get me the right help. I wished I could get word to them I was okay, that I was different, and that they should let me go. But Francis and Daniel would never let me go. They would fight for me until their last breath. And given what I've seen about the world I had just been sucked in to I was unsure they would make it out alive.

Rolling off my bed, I wrapped the blanket around myself. As soon as my feet hit the ground, I padded across the room and carefully opened the door.

Faint voices came from a room at the beginning of the hallway. Alex and the priests were in a serious conversation. From what I could hear, they were still waiting for Drake.

Why isn't he here yet? What if the cross-people had him? The guilt hit me hard, and my head sank. I stood staring at the royal blue carpet that lined the hallway. This stance allowed me to hear more as I crept closer to the room. But I didn't have to go that close as their voices echoed throughout the passage.

"His projection is strong. *Yeh* didn't make a mistake by leaving '*im* behind. We both know how stubborn the pup can be, and besides, he told *yeh* to go, to stick to the plan."

"Yes, I know. I should've done things differently with Sophie. Drake was adamant about rescuing this one."

"He's like that about *savin'* all of '*em*," the priest said.

Alex didn't give a verbal answer.

“Why do *yeh* think that?” the priest asked.

“I don’t know. It’s like he waited for her. He had more information than Alpheus.”

The little light orb?

“*Meanin*’?”

“Come now, Father. We both know what it is Drake can do. Even if he refuses to tell us, he can see. We all know why he doesn’t say a thing. Avery would put him to death if he voiced it out loud.”

To death?

“Ah, *yeh* think he saw ‘*er*’?”

Saw me?

“For months now,” Alex replied. “He was always waiting for the right words to leave Maverick’s mouth. It drove me insane.”

What is Alex saying? Could Maverick see too?

“Maybe she is special,” the priest said.

“She has headaches. You, of all people, know they are a common trait.”

“It’s not my *meanin*’. It’s the way she stared at me when she met me.”

“Stared at you?” Alex asked.

“Like she could see through me. Knew I was different.”

“You think she can see through glamor?”

That's what I see, their glamor?

"We both know that one is impossible."

Impossible?

I swallowed hard, spinning back around and smacked right into Maverick carrying three cups of coffee. With great reflexes, he kept the coffee from spilling.

His eyes slanted. "*Tis* not a wonderful trait to eavesdrop on others' conversation, lass." Maverick looked different now, wearing a blue sweater, jeans, and sneakers. The guy needed a haircut, but I had to admit, he sure was easy on the eyes.

"Sorry," I whispered. "I didn't mean to."

"Come, *yeh* must have loads of questions." He nudged me into the dining room where Alex and Father Matthew sat.

"Sophie?" Alex got up. He was also in street clothes, and it looked weird seeing him wearing a hoodie with tracksuit pants and slippers. My eyes lingered on his big fluffy bunny slippers, and a smile trudged up my lips.

"Found the lass *wanderin'* in the hallway. I think she's *strugglin' ter* sleep," Maverick said, and placed the cups of coffee down. He took the chair opposite Alex.

"What are those?" I asked Alex, still staring at his slippers.

Maverick and the priest laughed.

"What?" Alex looked down at his feet and the top of the bunny slippers moved with the motion of his wiggling toes inside of them. "They are terribly comfortable. Believe me, when your feet are as old as mine, you will wear slippers too."

“Come sit, child.” Mirth soaked up Father Matthew’s expression. I tried my best not to look at the horns on his head and sat down in the empty chair next to Alex. My gaze flickered to the *fleur de lis* on the wallpaper and the lit fireplace. Flames danced in the hearth, casting moving shadows over the pictures on the wall of former priests and nuns. They stared back at me as if they were judging my eavesdropping. A huge wooden cross parted the pictures of the priests and the nuns. A dressing table carrying a porcelain tea set sat below a vast window. Blue curtains matched the color of the carpet lining the hallway outside the room.

“*Yeh* must have a lot of questions,” the priest said.

“I do. What am I?” I looked at the priest and then at Alex.

“We will know when Hank sees you,” Alex answered. He had an otherworldly beauty with his rich, brown-colored skin, piercing blue eyes, and crazy long dreadlocks.

“Who is Hank?”

“He is a specialist at Earwyn, a Frost Eagle. He has a delightful ability that helps magical beings like yourself,” Alex replied, as if I knew what he was talking about.

“What is a Frost Eagle?”

The three of them choked back their laughter. “We sometimes forget how *intriguing* our world is,” Father Matthew said, using a softer tone.

The corner of my lips quirked.

“Frost Eagles,” Maverick answered, “are giant white eagles that can breathe a snowstorm, lass. Best not *ter* get on

their wrong side. They can also detect normal folk from magical ones. Most of them *dinnae* like *ter* go beyond the barrier.”

The human with a beak filled my mind. Was that the reason I only saw one?

“How can you manipulate the forest and Brooke the water?” I had to know the answer. I needed to know why they were so different from Father Matthew and Lindy.

“Because we are faes.”

“Faes?” I asked and looked at the other two. “Like the kind with the pointy ears and wings?”

Father Mathew smiled.

“Not wings, just pointy ears,” Maverick answered and looked at Alex. “Can *yeh* imagine us *havin’* wings?”

Alex chuckled at that. “Maverick is an Earth fae, I’m a Wind fae, and Brooke is a Water fae. Maverick and I run this group. Drake has been part of our team for the past three years, and Lindy joined us about a year ago. Brooke is an intern. Next year, when she becomes a graduate, she will advance to either become part of the graduates, meaning she will learn to master her gifts, or Concordia will assign a special place for her in society. You will find your place too, Sophie.”

“Where is Concordia?” The questions popped out of my lips faster.

“Nobody really knows, but it’s a world filled with magic and mythical creatures that this world only gets to know

through their fairy tales. You will meet them or most of them at Earwyn,” Alex answered.

“What sort of creatures?”

“*Dinnae* worry. They have human forms too, like Lindy and Drake,” Maverick said.

“Drake is a creature like Lindy? Will he be okay?” I didn’t see any animal part on him.

“A Phoenix Griffin. He lights up like a torch. I’m stunned that he didn’t reveal that today. You really worked his nerves.” A grin fanned over Alex’s lips as he sat back in his chair with the cup of coffee in his hand.

“*Aye*, lass. Worry about the damage he’s *goin’ ter do ter* someone.”

Laughter escaped Alex’s lips as Maverick told Father Matthew about the few times I’d tried to escape.

“Don’t look at me like that, Father Matthew. Losing me to sex traffickers was one of my mother’s worst fears.”

More laughter erupted. “That is what *yeh* thought he was?”

I nodded and looked at Maverick. “I feel bad about thinking the worst of him when I first gained consciousness.”

Father Matthew had a joyous laughter to him. He was so friendly, but the ram horns made him look like the devil in disguise.

Father Matthew looked at Alex and said, “I doubt Sophie is feeling up to sleeping right now. I know how I felt on my

first night.” He looked at me and winked. “I’m going to get the book.”

The priest raised to his feet, crossed the room to the colossal bookshelf, carrying old brown leather hardcovers. He pulled on a particular book. I heard a click and then a secret drawer opened at the bottom of the shelves. He bent down to retrieve an object wrapped in a green velvet cloth with the dimensions of a biggish book.

Father Mathew returned with the package and unwrapped the velvet cloth. It was an old leather-bound book engraved with silver writing on the spine, steel caps on the corners, with letters engraved on the front cover.

The first page had a beautiful frame drawn around the edges. Gold glistened in the words, written in cursive style.

Alex launched into the history of Concordia.

“Concordia was a beautiful world, filled with lush forests and trees as high as skyscrapers. The waterfalls cascading from snow-capped mountain ranges sparkled with rainbows across the width of the flowing rivers. It was ruled by a ruthless queen who hated magic and banned her people from using it. The irony was that she was a Phoenix. In Concordia, the fae were the most oppressed because, without practicing, their children couldn’t control it. Lots of accidents had happened that led to hearings, jail time, and sometimes deaths.”

“Wait, as in, cut off your head?” I asked.

Alex nodded.

“Isn’t that a bit drastic?”

“It was a brutal existence until a fire fae had enough. A brave fire fae riled up the faes and promised to free Concordia from the tight grasp of the Phoenix Monarchy. Faes and shifters fought to dethrone the phoenix queen. And it was the end of an evil era and the beginning of the modern society we live in now. Where all fae and creatures can practice magic in a safe environment.”

“Evil? I thought phoenixes are good.”

“A bit of a fib. They are not supposed to exist, remember?”

I nodded. I’d loved the symbol that attached itself to the phoenix. It meant life, change, and I had to admit, discovering that evil phoenixes ruled Concordia was hard to process. Why the hell was I dreaming about a phoenix if they were evil?

“He did more than just dethroning the phoenix, Alex.”

“It had to be done, Father Matthew. You weren’t there when they ruled.”

“I know, but it wasn’t wise to kill *‘em* all.”

“Kill them all?” I asked.

Alex sighed, and he struggled to come up with an excellent reason to justify killing off an entire race. “The fire fae made sure they were extinct that night. Magic is part of us, Sophie. We need a fair king, not a tyrant.”

I nodded.

“But plenty escaped that night, and that is how the lost came to be. People like you who don’t know what they are.

They are changelings or orphans like the priest and Brooke.” Alex carried on.

I looked at the priest. He was an orphan too?

“What is a changeling?”

“When a *bairn* is very sick and suddenly heals, they’re usually fae *bairns*,” Maverick answered. “A fae mother that couldn’t take care of her own, so she replaces the sick one for ‘ers.”

“I’m sure you fathered plenty, Mav.” Alex winked.

The priest protested playfully and tapped Mav on his arm. “You need to confess your sins before you go.”

“What happens to the human baby?” I looked at Maverick.

“A *bairn* like that is *ter* weak for our type of *healin*’. The faes keep them comfortable until they pass on to the afterlife.”

“My birth mother was part of the lost, wasn’t she?”

“Most likely,” Alex answered.

“You think she knew what she was?”

“We will never know, Sophie,” Alex answered this one, too. “From what we gathered, they dropped you off at the church when you were only a few days old.”

I nodded.

I didn’t know why I felt sorry for my birth mother. I didn’t know her, but tears brimmed in my eyes, anyway. Was she an orphan too, or did she live with adoptive parents like I had? Or

was she a changeling? So many questions plagued me. Questions I would never get answers to.

Alex kept paging through the book, then turned the book around to show me. Creatures with panther bodies and owl heads filled up the page before me, with the heading—Drivines. The next page depicted a picture that resembled a dragon's head with antlers and the body of a deer. Hair and feathers covered their feet. I couldn't see if they had claws or hooves. These creatures were titled Duredina.

“Both creatures are very gentle, and as for their human side, they are easy to approach and conversationalists. They are also very intelligent,” Father Matthew said as he tapped on the image of the Duredina.

“Just a pity that The Guild *dinnae* see it that way, Father,” Maverick said.

The rest of the night, we paged through the book.

Pegasi, manticores, griffins, chimeras, and crows that could disappear in a cloud of dark smoke were all inside this book. Even fairies, who carried unique abilities from guiding magical beings to reading minds.

There was a picture of a phoenix, but it looked nothing like the phoenix bird in the art that I'd seen. The torso was a bird, but it had two hind legs with paws. Enormous, majestic wings carrying the colors of the rainbow spread across the page. It had the most beautiful cat-like face. They looked so friendly, and their fire was different for each species. Some had orange, where others had a bright pink. Some of them radiated blue and purple fire.

The next few pages were about the fae.

There was a picture of the fire fae who had saved Concordia. The title read: King Avery.

“There are five elements that faes could control—wind, fire, earth, water, and spirit.”

“Spirit?” Ghosts roamed in my mind. An icy finger ran up my spine just thinking there were faes that could control them.

Alex answered, “Visions and everything that has to do with the mind. Spirit faes are uncommon in our world, and you are lucky that King Avery has assigned a spirit fae to take the responsibility at Earwyn.” It was hard to take Alex seriously with those ridiculous slippers, but I had to concentrate on learning all I could of this new world I found myself smacked in the middle of.

“Mind faes.” I nodded, wishing it would sink in faster. “So the fire faes play with fire?”

“It’s the element they were born with. Some dabble in other elements. Like me, I can guide fire if needed. I only need a fire source for that to happen. I can also assist Maverick in his element, guide it if he gets too distracted.” A smile crawled across Alex’s face over at Maverick, who gave him the lazy eye.

“*Yeh* can be glad we’re in the Lord’s house,” Maverick chirped.

Father Matthew thought that was funny, and it put a curve on my lips.

“But it takes years to dabble in the other elements. It’s difficult to learn how to do that, too.”

I nodded again, letting the information sink in.

“Why is Drake not back yet?” I asked.

They all just looked down at the table.

“We don’t know. Something tells me he might not be in a compromising position and is waiting for the right time. I meant what I said earlier.” Alex tapped my hand. “Drake can take care of himself. He has other abilities other than fire to keep him safe.”

“There was the vanishing thing he did. That was quite impressive, but also scary at the same time,” I answered.

“Oh, yeah, you saw that when you did your running away trick.” Alex snorted.

I just nodded, burrowed deep in the thought and hoped that Drake would be back in the morning.

6

SOPHIE

“Sophie,” I heard my name, then felt someone pull on my arm. The dream of the lush forest clearing faded away as I opened my eyes and saw Brooke standing beside me. The sun streamed in through the open curtains casting a beautiful glow around her.

I wiped the sleep from my eyes. “What time is it?”

“Five to eight. I’m afraid you missed breakfast.”

“Why didn’t you—”

“Yesterday couldn’t have been easy on you,” she interrupted. “You had so much to deal with. I thought it best I leave you to sleep in for a bit.” She jabbed a finger at the cup of coffee that stood beside a plate of cookies on the bedside table. I noticed Brooke twisting the ring around her finger vigorously.

“Thank you.” I sat up and pulled the covers tighter around my lap. “Has Drake come back?”

“Not yet,” she whispered. Concern pulled at her eyes, mimicking the disquiet Maverick, Alex, and Father Matthew

had carried last night. She plopped down on her bed and leaned her arms on her legs, her glare hit the side of my face as I stared out the window in thought. I didn't want to go downstairs and get scolded by Lindy because Drake hadn't returned yet. "What is this place? I mean, when it's not a church." I asked.

"A safe-house," Brooke answered. "The priest is one of us, a Manticore, same as Lindy." She breathed, "At first, he thought a demon had possessed him when the first change came. Father Matthew struggled to make peace with it. Then he met Alex and discovered he was far from being a demon. Alex answered all his questions, and father Matthew discovered the truth and found God in our creation too."

Brooke didn't realize that I had the same conversation with Alex, the priest, and Maverick last night. I reached for my cup of coffee. The warmth spread through my fingers.

Alex appeared younger than Father Matthew, but the things Alex had said last night made me doubt his age. "How old is Alex?"

A smile warbled her mouth. "He might look young, but he'll be celebrating his hundred-and-fiftieth birthday in two years."

My eyes widened. "Hundred and fifty? How is that possible? Are you messing with me right now?"

A giggle escaped her lips. "No, they have what we call the essence. It's part of a fae's anatomy."

Wow. "So you will live for hundreds of years too?"

Brooke frowned as she turned on her side and rested on her elbow. “You know what I am?” Her voice took on a higher pitch toward the end of the question.

Shaking my head, I took a sip of coffee welcoming the sweet roasted taste swirl in my mouth. The cookie almost melted on my tongue as I took a bite. “I struggled to sleep last night so I had a long chat with Alex and Maverick about all things not from this world. They told me. You have pointy ears, too?” I squinted pretending I couldn’t see her ears, I had to heed Drake and the Priest’s warning of being able to see through glamor.

“Oh, don’t bother,” she waved me off. “We use magic to hide our true features from the human world.”

“So, if I’m a fae, I would get pointy ears, too?”

She nodded and sat back straight up on her bed, legs crossed and rocked forward. This girl just couldn’t sit still.

“I know it sounds very scary and can be quite overwhelming at times,” she said.

“To be honest everything sounds like a nightmare to me.”

“Don’t worry so much, Sophie, we have excellent teachers and before you know it, we would have found our place in Concordia. And the stronger we are before we graduate, the faster we get to go home.”

I swallowed the last of my coffee and placed it beside the empty plate on the side table as she started telling me about Earwyn Academy.

A smile grew on her face, “The principal of Earwyn is spending plenty of one-on-one time with me so that I can master becoming one with my element.”

“Meaning?”

“Becoming one with water in such a manner that I can actually become water?”

The outline of a human figure filled with water jumped into my head. “You can turn into water?” My jaw dropped.

Brooke blushed. “It scared me shitless when I did it the first time, but once I succeeded to manage my shifts, it was pretty awesome.” She positively radiated with glee and confidence. “The rescue missions we go on help a great deal in growing one’s abilities, as you get to practice your skill under real-life conditions, bringing me closer to graduating.”

I gave her a lopsided smile, “Let me guess, you hate school?”

“No, it’s complicated. Magic school is fun, but dangerous. You’ll see when we get back to Earwyn.”

I liked Brooke. I could relate to her. A shift in the mood was almost palpable as Brooke sighed and removed a small square device from the back of her pocket, staring at it intently.

“I’m terribly sorry about Drake.” The guilt gripped at my chest like the coil of barbed wire.

“Hey, don’t worry about Drake. He will be fine.” A smile grew on her face, “From what I hear, you gave the Fire-Bird quite a challenge.” She placed the device down on the table. It

resembled a pager but was thinner with a row of small blue blinking lights on the side. She rubbed her face with her palms.

I hmped. “I did. I was being very stubborn and didn’t listen to what he was trying to tell me.” Silence lingered as I kept staring at her. “If it’s not Drake you’re worried about, tell me what you are worried about?”

She squinted at and let out a pent-up breath.

“I’m sorry,” I held my hands up and quickly added “it’s none of my business,”

“It’s not that. You are very observant is all.”

I scrunched up my nose at her. “Yeah, my mom calls me her curious kitten.”

A thin smile crossed her lips as her eyes flickered to the device on the table before fixating her stare on me. “I’m worried about someone else, Xander. He is my Frost Eagle. Their team is on a rescue mission to save a lost one on the other side of the world. I haven’t heard a word from him, and they left over a week ago, and getting in contact with the team would put them in extreme danger.” She pulled her hands through her hair.

“You have a Frost Eagle?” I recall seeing an image of a frost eagle that could breathe ice vapors.

“They call it the Bond. Water Faes can bond with Frost Eagles, and when I joined Earwyn, it was a nightmare, to be honest.” Laughter bubbled out of her. “Every Frost Eagle in that academy followed me like an unwanted puppy.”

I twisted my blankets around me as Brooke continued talking.

“Earwyn has these magical fires to find out if you have a bond. Every time I stepped behind the fire, waiting for the Frost Eagles fire to change, I begged for a negative outcome. It can be quite nerve-racking if you dislike the guy or girl.”

The only thing I could think about was getting stuck with someone that you didn’t get along with.

“None of them were mine, until Xander came back from a mission.” The look on her face seemed to transport her to an entirely new state of existence when she spoke of him. “Have you ever been so happy that you can’t contain it? Xander was part of my rescue mission.” She tugged on her hair. “Unfortunately, I was too out of it to remember.”

I wanted to ask her what the Guild did to her, but I could remember what they did to me, and I never wanted to relive that nightmare, so I let it go.

There was an awkward silence for a minute, I watched the slither of sun streaming in from the gap in the curtains reach toward the door.

Brooke cleared her throat pulling me from my daydream. “It’s taboo for students to date graduates but the pull between was instant and intense. We couldn’t let it go to waste.”

I was a sucker for sappy romances.

Brooke carried on, “Xander was my trainer and the more time we spent together the more I fell for him. I couldn’t sleep, eat or focus properly with Xander on my mind all the time.”

She took a breath and looked down at her hand twisting the ring on her finger again before she continued, “All my friends and even people I didn’t know kept telling me he was with someone else, beside the fact that they kept reminding me that it was against the rules to be with a graduate.” Her shoulders dropped as she told me about that last part. “It seemed hopeless at first.” She paused.

I kept waiting patiently.

“One day after a long day of training, and constantly failing at this one move, I felt very down and Xander took me for a walk at sunset down to the lake. He had told me he wanted to show me something. I knew it was getting very close to the curfew, but I was willing to risk it just to be with him. When we got to the lake, the sun just hit the horizon. I couldn’t even remember what he wanted to show me. I just remembered the way he grabbed my face and planted the softest kiss on my lips. Then he told me in a soft whisper, never say never.” She fell back on her bed, tucked her arms behind her head. “From that day everything changed.” She looked at me through the slits of her eyes. “It makes it real hard when he goes on missions and especially when he comes back. Trying to pretend there is nothing between us, when the attraction is so strong. I mean you can’t just switch it off. I can’t stop staring at him and him at me. And we have to be so careful we don’t get caught.” Her smile grew wide as she stared up at the ceiling. “But we found our times together in secret.”

“They’ve never caught you and him together?”

Brooke's eyes grew as she turned to me. "Oh, no, they did. Jacob, his team leader, was the one that caught us sneaking around. I thought they would ban us from being together, but it led to the opposite. The principal put us behind those bond defining fires, and I prayed for a match. I almost peed myself when both our fires turned red. We've been together ever since." She sat back up on her bed, swung her legs over the bed, staring down at her feet in silence.

I leaned toward her. "Hey." My fingers curled around her arm and slid down to her icy hand, squeezing it. "I haven't seen Frost Eagles yet, but from what I heard last night, this Guild will see their asses when they meet Xander."

Brooke laughed.

"I'm sure he will do whatever is in his power to get back to you."

"Every night I pray for his safe return, or just some news. He put in a transfer request to join Maverick and Alex's team. Team Jacob and Emile rescue missions are farther out, which means I don't get to see him for weeks." She let out a breath, sadness brimming her eyes.

"I'm sorry to hear that, I know what it feels like to miss someone you care for."

She gave a wry smile and crossed her fingers.

"I'll cross my fingers too." I showed her, smiling back.

"Thanks, Sophie."

Silence filled the room. Suddenly Brooke jumped up and put her hand out for me to reach. "Let's get out of here, what

do you say?”

I smiled up at her and took her hand and stood following her down the hall, through a narrow door and down a set of dim stairs to a room where the rest of the rescue team from yesterday were speaking over an archaic looking hand radio device.

My heart skipped a beat when I heard Drake’s voice come from the other end, but the static made it hard to make out what he was saying. Ripples of relief washed over me as I watched Alex turning the knob to catch a better frequency. At least he was safe and in communication with his team.

Lindy had the biggest smile on her face; she lit up like an angel and the previous visions of the beast she was vanished from my mind. The only reminder of what she was were the two ram horns sticking out from the top of her head and the pang in my gut returned for a moment. My sight was a curse.

Her hands, covered in leather gloves, the tips cut off, gripped the table in suspense as she listened to the conversation between Drake and Alex.

“Repeat that. We are struggling to hear,” Alex said.

More static came through. “... Sophie okay?”

I froze when everyone’s eyes hit me, and the cold tendrils gripped my stomach into a sharp pinch as Lindy’s eyes pegged mine. My gaze flickered to the floor as a chuckle escaped Maverick and Alex’s lips.

“She’s just fine. Something tells me she won’t be running away soon.”

Laughter erupted from the priest and Maverick. Heat burned my cheeks.

“How far are you from New York?” Alex asked.

New York?

Static crackled as a scowl replaced Lindy’s look while trying to listen.

“... meet you...” More static. “Ana.”

“Say again?” Lindy asked, her hands balling into fists on the table. “....meet you in Montana....” More static. “.... the entrance location....”

“Drake?” Alex said, turning the knob more. “Drake!”

“Let it go, Alex. The lad is fine. Time to get *goin’*.” Maverick’s lips quirked to the side as he walked past me.

“You heard him. We need to get moving to the entrance location of Earwyn before Mavis changes it again.” The chair screeched as Alex rose to his feet.

Lindy stormed off to her room.

Brooke raised her eyebrow as she walked away, and I could see the twitch in the corner of her lips.

“It’s best to wait down here while they get ready,” Alex said and hmped with a curve tugging at the corner of his lips.



WITH FRIED NERVES, a gut that felt wrong, and sweaty palms, I remained close to Alex as we all stood ready to head out.

“Thank you, Father Matthew, for the accommodation.”
Alex shook the priest’s hand.

“Alexander, you are always welcome in the house of the Lord. Now go before The Guild finds out you are here and don’t forget to tell Drake that I’m praying for him.”

“Will do, Father,” Alex replied.

Pray for him?

Everyone said goodbye to Father Matthew with a hug or a touch on his arm.

“Take care, Sophie.” The priest gave me a warm smile.

“Thank you, Father.”

His hand touched my upper arm as he said, “I know it’s a scary time for you, but it is best to know what you are in this world, rather than spend your whole life seeking answers in all the wrong places. It could drive you mad.” He nodded before looking me straight in the eye. “Remember, God is the maker of all things, even the scary-looking ones.”

“Sophie, let’s go!” Alex wailed from the church entrance.

“*Yeh* need to get *goin’*. May God be with *yeh*.” He smiled then added. “Hurry now love, you don’t want Lindy to come *knockin’*.” The father winked.

I just chuckled at that. “Thank you, Father. Take care.” My arm wrapped around his waist for a brisk hug. Despite the fact that he had horns he was a priest through and through in every sense of the word.

I rushed to Alex, we exited the way we came in and raced back down the path toward the alleyway.

The street was quiet except for a bike messenger and two women chatting on the steps in front of a doorway across the road. None of whom seemed to notice us.

We slipped into the alleyway. Almost immediately my nostrils were assaulted by this acrid smell. I tried my best to cover my nose with my sleeve and inhaled through my mouth. The tang of rotten meat left a ghastly taste in my mouth, causing me to gag a few times. Finally at the wall, everyone gathered in a group where Alex took out his key.

Maverick turned around and stared back at the entrance.

The keyhole appeared the second the emerald stone lit up, and Alex pushed in the key. The sparkles painting the doorway doused my body with prickles, and all the hair on my arms rose as Alex opened the door.

Through the doorway, the world was of trees and plants with a dark soil path snaking ahead. Lindy adjusted her backpack and walked through, followed by Brook. Alex nudged me with a gentle push on the arm to go ahead. As soon as I crossed the threshold, I looked back, noticing the door was carved on the trunk of a gigantic oak tree.

Maverick came in right behind me, trailed by Alex who then stopped as we all were safely on the other side and took the key out, causing the door to vanish, replaced by the fat burls and bark of the tree. Not one trace of the door that was there a few seconds ago.

It didn't look like the same woods as before. Mountains rose up in the distance, the sun making its way below the horizon.

"Just a few miles to the South, then we will be back home," Alex said.

"Ahh, a nice glass of Whiskey," Maverick said.

"A warm cup of tea," Alex replied, "With a mean steak, egg and fries on the side."

"Xander," Brooke said, and everyone chuckled.

Lindy said nothing as she walked close to Maverick.

To see my mom and dad again I thought to myself.

I heard the distinct sound of a click. Alex pulled me back in one swift movement. Maverick lifted his hands and the earth rumbled as roots shot out from the ground and the trees launched vines.

Alex looked at the three of us. "Lindy, Brooke, go! Sophie you follow them. Stick to the plan and get to Earwyn."

Lindy grunted. "What about—"

"We'll be fine, go!" Alex ordered, and a powerful gust of wind appeared with the circular motion of his hands.

Lindy darted past me, and Brooke grabbed my arm as we made a run for it.

Earwyn was in the opposite direction, and I feared we would not get out of this alive.

A couple of soldiers that had escaped Maverick and Alex chased the three of us as we ran through the woods.

Lindy and Brooke stopped, and I had no choice but to stop, too.

Another headache pushed its way to my forehead, pressure building up behind my eyes. Were Alex and Maverick okay?

“I’ll hold them off!” Brooke pulled her shoulders back, pushed her chest out, and kept her chin high, facing Lindy.

“Are you insane? Mavis will kill us if anything happens to you. I’ll hold them off. You make a detour and run for the barrier.”

“Lindy, you know the plan, Alex said—”

“Alex is not here right now! You are only a student.”

“With water as my element. If I turn to water this close to the entrance, I’ll end up in the lake behind the barrier. I’ll be safe. Alex knows this. You and Sophie do as I say!”

Lindy’s eyebrows and lips pulled into a scold. “You better get your ass back to Earwyn, you hear? I don’t want to explain to Xander what went wrong.”

“Just go. I’ll be fine.”

A rustle of footsteps came near. Lindy grabbed my arm. We ran. The same sound of waves from yesterday rushed behind me. I looked back, and a wall of water formed a barrier from the ground to the treetops. Bullets with yellow sparks bounced against the water wall as an arm grabbed me and pulled me down. I fell hard to the ground.

“Just keep your mouth shut.”

“Brooke said...”

“Oh please, you just met her. She can’t fight them alone!”

My head throbbed, and I grunted as I touched my temple.

“Don’t start that crap now. Suck it up. We can’t leave her here.”

“What are you going to do?” I spoke through gritted teeth, trying to get the headache away.

“Do what I do best.” She yanked off her gloves exposing dark pink, fibrous skin from third-degree burns. Her bag landed a few inches from me as she pulled off her shirt and the rest of her clothes, toeing off her shoes. Lindy ran out naked from our hiding place. “Just stay here.”

She fell on her palms, and her back curled, releasing the beast. A lion’s body and head shook free, horns curled backward among a thick mane. Wings protruded from her shoulder blades and an enormous scorpion tail whipped through the air.

She darted forward, and the earth trembled as Lindy’s paws connected with turf. A deep roar echoed through the woods.

Terrible screams followed, and I covered my ears, trying to drown it all. This couldn’t be my life.

The screams stopped. I uncovered my ears and the sound of water splashed to the ground. Footsteps running fast came to my hiding place.

Brooke slid to the ground next to me. Her bottle of water was still half full. Lindy was back in her human form, sliding down next to Brooke.

Blood covered part of Lindy's body. She put herself back into the layers of clothes with jerky movements.

“What happened?”

“Backup came. This close to Earwyn, backup always comes,” Brooke said fast.

“We need to go,” Lindy ordered.

“I told you—”

“I don't take orders from you, Brooke!” Lindy barked.

Brooke grabbed my hand, and we went in the direction Alex had ordered. I breathed fast as the unwinding path became steeper. My heart hammered against my ribcage as I calculated each step, dodging pinecones and hidden rocks among the leaves. An unsettling fear burned in my gut.

I ran straight into Brooke. “Why are—?”

“Shh, someone is coming.” Lindy looked around and then darted behind the plants and trees. Brooke and I followed her lead.

When is this going to stop?

A guy wearing a black uniform dashed past us.

“Drake,” Lindy yelled and ran out of our hiding place.

“I'm okay, Lindy,” Drake said.

“You just disappeared.”

“I had to do something. Where are Maverick and Alex?”

“Up ahead. A couple of Sovereigns came to help Brooke and me and ordered us back to Earwyn.”

Brooke and I came out from our hiding place, and Drake’s eyes found mine.

I wanted to apologize, but I guessed now wasn’t the best time. My eyebrows knitted at the lack of a beak, tail, or ears attached to him.

“We need to get to the barrier. We don’t have a lot of time.”

“Drake, the Guild is everywhere.”

“We just need to reach the barrier, Brooke. We do not want Mavis to change the location now. Not when we are this close.”

Change the location? Nothing made sense.

We ran fast and hard with Drake in the lead. The pull in my muscles, the burn in my lungs and the pounding in my skull reminded me how real this situation was and how unfit I was. With each pounding step my headache seemed to beat like drums in my head, sharpening the pain behind my eyes.

Drake stopped and the three of us almost smashed right into him. Before us stood a row of soldiers, guns aimed right at us.

Drake lifted his hands as Lindy snarled. Brooke uncapped her water bottle behind her back.

“Drop it!” the soldier ordered.

“Take it easy,” Drake warned.

I rested my head in my palms and rubbed my temples, trying to massage away the headache.

“What is she doing?” the soldier yelled.

The pain in my head flashed hard and hot.

“She is not doing anything,” Drake barked. “She needs medical care.”

It felt as if someone stuck hot needles in my eyes.

“Tell her to stop!”

I got to the edge of my headache as I fought off nausea.

“She can’t stop a headache, you idiot,” Lindy yelled at the guy.

My head felt like it was splitting in two, and then a scream left my mouth.

SOPHIE

T all grass brushed against my body. The red haze of the blood moon washed the marshy reeds in crimson shades as the wind cut through grasslands towards the clearing ahead.

There was no trace of Brooke, Lindy or Drake.

I looked up at the red blight that consumed the moon, feeling confused. Where was I?

Orange flickering caught the corner of my eye, and I realized what this was. None of this was real, no matter how vivid the world around me felt. I could smell the chilly night air, feel the breeze on my skin and hear night bugs chirping in the background to the sound of my footfalls. I looked toward where the flaming bird stood and suddenly it was right in front of me. The flames overtook the shape of the bird so that I could only see the outline of the flaming bird.

Its beautiful melody beckoned me to come closer.

No, no, no, please. My body moved forward, and I knew the pain that awaited too well. I tried to push myself to go the other way, but I had somehow lost control of all mobility. The

flames grew hotter, and the warmth started to sear my skin. A grunt pushed through my lips as tears filled my eyes.

The unknown force kept pulling me forward to the unearthly voice. My body swung around, and the flames licked my skin and left scorching blisters in their wake. The acrid smell of burning flesh stung my nose. The sight of my skin peeling back, exposing red flesh, tendons, and even the sight of the stark white of my bones made me gag. The pain grew into an unbearable crescendo. A wail tore from the bottom of my gut.

My eyes flew open, still screaming. Foreign hands tried to push me down. My heart stammered inside my chest as the ache split my skull and it grew stronger.

My head was on fire and the last thing that reached my ears was another scream leaving my lips.



I FOUND myself in and out of stupor. The first time I'd opened my eyes, my headache had diminished into a dull thump. I lay on a bed that wasn't a bed and warm air enveloped my body.

"What is she, Hank?" I heard a voice ask.

"I'm not channeling fire," a deep, unknown voice replied.

"Is she going to be okay?" Drake paced up and down in front of the bed. His one arm covering his chest while he nibbled on his nail.

"She'll be," the man said. "Are you heading out again?"

“Yes; why isn’t she waking up?”

“Drake, she will be fine. You haven’t failed her. She is not dead.” The deep voice assured him, but the annoyance from Drake’s questions was clear in the man’s tone.

It was all my body allowed before I slipped back to darkness.

The second time I came around, I didn’t feel any better.

Looking around I saw a woman that must have been in her twenties with a glow to her dark skin stand off to my right and off to my left a male in his late fifties stood looking at a chart. It didn’t look like they knew I was awake.

The woman wore her long white hair in a braid over her shoulder; her hair reminded me of Brooke and her eyes were similar to Alex’s. Could she possibly be his sister? I noticed her ears were pointed. I switched my attention to the man whose hair was gray, bringing out the dark gray and blue in his eyes. His mustache covered his entire top lip.

The woman moved closer to him and asked, “Have you figured out what she is yet?” Her voice had a sweet tone to it.

“I’m not a channeling flame, Mavis.” The emphasis was on her name as if he was starting to get irritated with her.

“I’m not speaking about her legacy.” Her lips moved into a quirky smile.

He sighed. “You know the lost ones are tightly masked. It’s going to take time. At the moment, she could still be a creature that hasn’t transformed yet.”

Mavis nodded.

“But from my observation, I think she is a fae.”

“A fae?”

“The Recast Ceremony will tell us where she belongs.”

She nodded, as her eyebrows knitted together when she stared at me.

Unfortunately, that was all the energy I had, and I slipped away again.

The third time I awoke, my entire body stirred back to life with a jerk, my headache only a slight pulse behind my eyes. The heat that surrounded me felt different. This time I was being kept warm by a blanket. Vines crept up the walls where blinds covered the windows; the only source of light came from the light above the bed.

Suddenly a guy with an eagle beak appeared beside me. I recognized his silver hair and the complimentary gray and blue hue in his eyes.

“My name is Hank, and only Hank. No doctor or mister, you hear?” The words escaped through his beak.

I nodded. “Sophie.” I introduced myself wondering why I could see his beak now.

“That was one heck of an episode you’ve had. What happened?”

“When we were in the woods, I had a migraine attack. It was different this time. Stronger and more painful.”

“Is it normal that they knock you out for days?”

I shook my head. “Maybe for half a day.”

“Anything happened while you were sleeping?”

I shook my head again. Lying seemed to be the best foot forward at this stage as I was still unsure of who to trust. Horror knitted my eyebrows as I pushed myself up in bed. Flashes of the last place I was before the headache knocked me out played through my mind.

My heart pounded in my chest. “Are Alex and the others okay?” I heard Drake’s voice earlier.

“They are all fine. You are safe. No one is going to hurt you.” Hank nudged me to lie down as the pounding of my heart started to settle. I stared at the strange beds in the room. Above each bed a domed ceiling hovered as if suspended midair.

“Where am I?”

“In the infirmary of Earwyn Academy.”

“What am I?” My eyes locked on the strangeness of Hank’s beak.

“I think you belong to the fae, but we will know for sure at the Recast Ceremony.”

“The what?”

His lips curved into a smile. “Recast Ceremony. All Concordia’s sixteen-year-olds attend. It’s a very special ceremony, one that will show us where you belong. It doesn’t hurt, so nothing to be afraid of, okay?”

I tried not to stare at the guy's beak. He didn't have one before and I couldn't understand why I would see one now.

"Do you mind if I do a check-up on you?"

I shook my head and pushed myself up with my elbows, swung my legs over the bed and let my feet dangle off the side.

Hank sat on the stool next to the bed and placed his hands on both sides of my temples. A familiar buzz that I only felt coming from Drake when he had me in that tight grip coursed through my body. All my hair rose, and I closed my eyes.

"What is that?"

"My healing ability. Does it hurt?"

"No, it's quite nice." I couldn't keep my eyes open. A chuckle escaped my lips. "Sorry."

"No need to apologize. It's how it should feel. I don't feel your headache anymore." His hands fell to his side.

"You can feel headaches?"

"They have a familiar beacon to healers, and I have to admit, I haven't felt the beacon that strong on a young fae before. I'm quite excited about what the Recast Ceremony will reveal about you, Sophie."

I huffed. At least one of us was excited, I was scared shitless.

"The best thing for you now is to rest. We still have plenty of time to figure everything out."

I nodded and lay back down on the bed, tucking my feet under the blankets.

Hank pulled the blanket up to my chin. “Try to get some rest.”

He exited and I closed my eyes, but sleep eluded me. Hank had said that I might be a fae but seeing the pictures in the priest’s book about faes channeling their elements, it felt scarier now than being a beast.

When I opened my eyes, a woman stood at the foot of my bed analyzing the chart Hank had earlier. My gaze shifted to her pointy ears adorned with decorative earrings from lobe to tip. Her stark blue eyes were strikingly beautiful against the pallor of her skin.

Her eyes shifted from the clipboard to me, and three lines appeared next to her eyes as her lips curved into a smile. “Welcome back, Sophie. You sure gave everyone a scare in the woods. How is your headache?”

“It’s fine now, thanks.” I smiled back.

“We’ve deduced that they come on during stressful situations. It might be just the thing blocking your abilities at the moment. So the headache I am afraid is the end product.” She looked down at the chart and back up at me again, her piercing blue eyes startling me for a moment. “How do you feel?”

“Better now. What happened out in the field? I’m afraid I missed everything.”

“Well, your headache was so distracting that it gave Drake enough time to take action to disarm the attackers and luckily more backup was close. With everyone’s efforts they brought you back here.” She came closer and laid her hand on my shin while she carried on, “You don’t have to be afraid anymore, you are safe here. No one is going to hurt you as long as you are under our protection.”

I swallowed before saying, “Thank you.”

“My name is Mrs. Beatty. I’m the principal of Earwyn Academy. I promise to help you discover your place in this world.”

“Through the Recast Ceremony, right?”

“Yes, everyone goes through it.”

“Will it hurt?”

“No.” Her grin skewed. “It’s magical fire, and—”

“What!” I sat up straight, about to jump off the bed, but she stopped me with the gentle touch of her hand on my shoulder.

“Relax; deep breaths.”

“You said fire. I don’t do well with fire!”

She squinted. “Do you draw fire to yourself?”

“Yes.” I lied. I couldn’t tell her I dream about a huge bird on fire now. “And they always hurt.”

“I promise you, this is not like those fires. The fire that is part of the recast ceremony has no flames. It’s just warmth and

they are going to tell us where you belong, okay?” Her tone was calm.

“Why?”

“Sixteen is the age that faes find their legacy and the shifters their form. The shifters that get raised inside Earwyn know they are shifters and get a bit of a taste of what they would become, but the Recast’s decision is final. Once the recasting flame uncovers you, you will learn at Earwyn how to control your ability. You are not sixteen anymore, are you?”

I jerked my head no. “I am almost eighteen.”

“Then we will take you to the stones that will tell us the domain of your legacy.”

“What is a Legacy?”

“It will determine in what domain you belong and reveal to us what ability you have. To put it simply, your ability lies in your legacy categories and those are called your domains.”

“The stones?”

“Ever seen gigantic stones placed in circles? I believe they are common in your world.”

“Like the stone circle in Scotland?” I remembered them from Mom’s favorite TV Show, but those stones had transported the main character back in time and didn’t show her as being magical.

Mrs. Beatty smiled with a gentle nod. “Like the ones in Scotland.”

“So, when is this ceremony going to take place?” *I still can't believe they use fire. Am I a fire fae? I'm always dreaming about the fire burning me.*

“Tomorrow night. Don't worry, you won't be alone. There are plenty of third years that need to find their place.” She tapped my hand.

I relaxed, knowing that I wouldn't be the only one dreading this ceremony.

“I'll check up on you in a few hours and find out from Hank if you are ready to join the rest. Speak to you soon.” She walked to the door and left.

My parents' faces popped into my head again. I missed them so much. At least they were safe from the Guild, and that was all that mattered now.

SOPHIE

I ate lunch in the infirmary. My stomach growled as I kept shoving the food into my mouth. The buttery mash melted on my tongue. A light and sweet taste danced on my taste buds as I ate the roasted chicken. The green beans still had a crunch, which I liked. I had to take my hat off to the chef. He really knew his way around food. A slice of rainbow-colored pie waited for dessert, and somehow each colored layer had a different taste to it.

When I was done with my lunch, Mrs. Beatty came and led me out of the infirmary. She took me down a long hallway inlaid with smooth white marble, and a long red runner ran the length of the corridor. The windows ran along the wall of the hallway, beautifully arched, and as the sun peeked through, it showcased the spectacular bell flowers rimming the top of each window arch. On the opposite side of the windows the smooth white stone walls were adorned with paintings of fae and all the magical creatures I learned about in the priest's book and more.

Coming up to the spiral staircase huge windows displayed the elongated branch of a lush tree. The sun sneaked through the leaves, illuminating the surroundings in a green glow.

Following Mrs.Beatty, trying to get a better look, I pondered the fact that this part of the academy might have been built inside a tree. Mrs. Beatty's strides were too long, forcing me to walk faster.

We walked up the grand staircase, Ivy snaking up and around the giant pillars framing the staircase. I recalled my mom emphasizing that dangerous critters, like poisonous spiders and snakes, loved to make their home in between the leaves and twirling vines. White and blue bell flowers retreated into the ivy as we walked past.

As we ascended up the stairs I looked back and the flowers revealed themselves again, I reached for the flowers, and they withdrew back into their buds.

Mrs. Beatty turned to face me as an audible chuckle escaped me at the playfulness of the flowers.

I pointed. "The flowers?"

Her lips curved. "They have a mind of their own. But they are very helpful when in need."

"Helpful?"

"This place is filled with magic; keep an open mind to anything being a possibility in this realm."

No kidding.

My gaze flickered to a blue-black veined marble statue that stood five stories high inside a leafy gothic archway against the wall. Ivy enveloped the statue, crawling through its arms. The sculpture was a stone fae, a plaque above its head read King Avery.

Despite being inside a stone building it was not cold at all.

When we reached the top of the staircase, Mrs. Beatty took a left. This hallway didn't have windows or paintings, just gigantic doorways.

She stopped in front of a door at the end of the hallway and opened it.

The room was enormous and in a pentagon shape. A window with a ledge covered in soft pillows faced the door. Scrunched up drinks were strewn across the ledge. The pillows looked so cozy. Part of a giant tree was visible as a cool breeze drifted in through the open window.

The lighting embedded in the walls, with a coupe-ceiling beautifully framed the vintage swirls of floral patterns decorating it.

Four beds lined each wall. A blanket with bright autumn colors lay messily on the first bed. Make-up and cotton-balls littered the surface of the desk.

Mrs. Beatty sighed and snatched the clothes off the floor and put it with the others on the bed. "Sorry about the mess. I told the girls to clean up."

"It's okay." I walked to the empty bed and desk and sat down on it with the softest bounce.

“Your school uniform is in the closet and the dresser is magical. It will provide you with everyday clothes.”

I got off the bed and walked to the dresser. I opened the drawer and found everything that I needed clothes-wise, even underwear.

Two uniforms hung in a small closet next to my desk. My new reality hit me with a heaviness that sunk my shoulders.

“I know what you are going through, not having a chance to say goodbye to your parents and suddenly accepting this as your new home can be very overwhelming. But we did what we had to, to save your life.”

I nodded.

With a smile she gestured to the bed on my left. “This is Nikki’s bed. She is an Earth fae.” Lots of creeper plants climbed the walls and twirled around the edges of the steel frame. There were plenty of unfamiliar plants in pots littering the desk, with books about fauna and flora stacked on the tiny shelf against the wall.

“And over here...”

The door opened, and Brooke entered. I thought Hank had said that they’d left.

She looked different with the scarlet shredded jeans, a cropped-topped and a leather jacket that hugged her skinny figure.

“Sophie!” Her eyes grew, and she ran towards me. Her body connected hard with mine as her arms wrapped around my neck. She pulled away. “How are you feeling?” Plenty of

piercings decorated her ear, but my eyes lingered on the sharp point. She didn't have that before.

“Better, thanks.” I touched my ear, but it still felt the same.

“I'll see you girls later. Sophie, rest and take tomorrow off. It's no use putting you in class without knowing your legacy.”

I nodded.

“Brooke, tell Cali to clean up her mess.” Mrs. Beatty pointed at the clothes she'd chucked on her bed.

“Will do,” Brooke said as both her hands rested on her butt, pushing her chest forward.

“Please show Sophie around before tomorrow.”

Brooke nodded, and Mrs. Beatty left.

She walked to the bed that had posters of fantasy art lining the walls. She really had a thing for blue. She turned on the radio that sat at the docking station next to the bed. Her desk was cluttered with textbooks and on the wall hung a giant cork board with class schedules and photos from nights out, among other mementos.

“So what happened? Is Xander okay?”

“Xander is fine.” She walked to my bed and sat down next to me. “The transfer came through and he left with Alex.” She turned to me and put a hand on my thigh. “But you scared the living crap out of me. I thought you were faking it. I wasn't sure what was happening. When you started screaming, I knew something was really wrong.”

“Why would you think I faked it?”

“Maybe to distract the Guild.” She gave a half smile. “Well, it worked long enough for Drake to do use his projection ability. He grabbed you, and we literally slipped past everyone when the chaos broke out and ran for the barrier.”

I buried my face in my hands and mumbled. “That is so embarrassing.” I took a deep breath and looked up at Brooke. “Projection thing?”

“His vanishing ability. For outsiders he projects the environment around him, and it will appear as if he is not there.”

“That is a pretty neat ability to have.”

“So Hank doesn’t know what you are?”

Clearing my throat, I answered her “He thinks I’m a fae, but told Mrs. Beatty that the mask-thingy is hiding it.”

“Eeeek!” She bounced on the bed. “I can’t wait to see what type of fae you are. I know it’s scary but trust me, it’s exciting at the same time. The graduates actually have a wager running on what you could be.”

“Why?” I snorted.

“Because of the way Drake acted during your rescue mission.”

“Acted?”

“It was weird. He has been overly broody in the months leading up to your rescue. When Maverick finally gave the order for him to go to Atlanta to retrieve a Lost One about to

be operated on, Drake seemed to know a lot more about your rescue mission than any previous missions. We lost him twice as Alex and Maverick moved too slow for his standard, and he kept demanding that they were going to kill you. It was like he saw everything, before it even had happened,” she whispered the last part as her gaze flickered to the window.

“Saw?”

“Shh.”

My gaze shifted toward the window too.

Brooke spoke softly. “Visions. He gets visions.”

“What is he?” I asked, recalling seeing him shift in the hospital.

“He is a Phoenix Griffin. They can often see things, but to foresee, doesn’t sit very well with our kind.”

“Yeah, I have heard that; why is that?”

“It’s the one domain that King Avery deemed as dark. History told us that the faes that had these foreseeing abilities, would use this ability to manipulate situations for their own personal gain, and turned them dark. We have a name for them around here. Scry.”

“Dark?” I saw things too.

Brooke nodded. “Who Becomes part of the Scry. The dark ones are way too powerful and can’t be controlled. Drake would never admit that he could see. So just keep the theory to yourself.”

I nodded and released a pent-up breath. “So what do the graduates think I am?”

“Their speculations are all over the place.”

“They don’t know?”

“Alex thinks you are a Phoenix Griffin, like Drake. It could be the reason Drake saw you.”

“So I’ll burst into flames and become a griffin?” My voice rose into a high pitch towards the end.

“It’s not a bad thing, Sophie. Phoenix griffins are rare and magical. King Avery favors them and the fire faes.”

There was an awkward silence.

“What is it?”

“He has a thing for Spirit faes too, but those are super rare.”

“Like Mrs. Beatty?”

She nodded. “Mrs. Beatty’s domain is shield. It’s one reason King Avery stationed her at Earwyn. The shield that protects us from the human world is hers. If she dies, so will the shield and we would be exposed, and the Guild would most definitely discover our location.”

Brooke must have seen the look on my face because she reached over with a soothing touch and said, “It’s kind of scary to think someone could be that strong. To shield an entire academy and the surrounding grounds.” She gave me a confident smile. “I know how you feel, but I can promise you

things get easier to accept the more you discover about this realm and the existence of all the creatures.”

I shrugged in response. “I get your meaning. The little that I’ve seen was kind of wonderful. Like the little bell flowers.”

She laughed. “That is Earwyn for you. Never thought that a place like this existed on our dull little earth, huh?”

“So all the residents grew up here?”

“Most of us are from earth. Either Mom or Dad is shifter or fae who got stationed here on earth. There’s only a handful of Lost Ones like you and me.” Silence lingered. Brook looked at me as if she was waiting for something. “You don’t ask lots of questions for someone that just discovered she is magical.”

“I guess I’m still processing and hoping that I’m not some sort of Fire-Bird.”

Brooke’s lips curved. “I can’t wait for the questions to start. They are usually far-fetched. My questions were.”

I hmped with a small smile lingering on my lips as I got up and grabbed the sheets to make my bed. In silence Brooke and I made my bed. I internalized everything I had been exposed to in the last few days.

“So Maverick sees the Lost Ones?” The question just popped out.

Her gaze flickered to me. “Sorry.”

“You said that Drake couldn’t wait for Maverick’s orders.”

“Oh, no. He is the only one that understands Alpheus who sees the Lost Ones.”

“The orb of light?” I remembered Maverick calling him Alpheus.

Laughter that sounded like chimes filled the room. “A fairy.”

I gasped. “Like a real fairy?”

“Yeah, but they are pretty annoying with their blinding light and constant ringing.”

“Can everyone see them?” I had to make sure.

“Only the Lost Ones. Fairies with sight are not seen as dark though, because nobody understands them. There are like five in the entire Concordia that understand the ringing, and Maverick is one of them.”

That part of information put Maverick in a completely different light. They were all so unique and powerful.

I told Brooke that I used to think they were spirits. I even had names for the agency that I was going to open up one day. She laughed at Spirits Inc.

Silence lingered as we placed the duvet into the cover.

“How’s the headache?” Brooke asked.

“Bearable; only a slight pulse now.”

“Once you ease into your ability, they’ll become better, and you will do amazing things. Depending on what your domain is.”

There was that word again, and even though Mrs. Beatty had explained it, it still sounded Greek. “What is a domain?”

“Domains are like categories of a Legacy.”

I understand the category part, but not the Legacy part.

It must have shown on my face as Brooke carried on. “Well, let’s take water, for instance. Water has three domains. The first one is water, the second one is steam, and the third one is ice. My legacy is water and I’m a water fae. That is why we are Fated-Bond with Frost Eagles as water, or one form of water, is their ability. My domain is water, but I could dab into the others with hard training. Like, for instance, I could turn my water into either ice or steam. It takes lots of practice. Mrs. Beatty has often said I would learn about it in theory, within the next year when I become a graduate. She said it is crucial to learn with Xander, to become like one. I can’t wait because it means that he’ll stop going on those missions.”

“I heard they left again. I’m sorry, you okay?”

“Oh, don’t worry about it, I’m pretty occupied when classes start. I have a lot to learn before Xander and I can think about learning to grow in our ability together.”

I was really curious about Alpheus, and what he had seen with me. Was it him that day in my room or just a random one roaming the human world?

“How does it all work, Brooke? I mean, when Alpheus sees a lost one?”

“Well, Alpheus has a big drinking problem.”

“Oh, okay and you have to be drunk to see a lost one?”

She burst out laughing, “Of course not!”

I chuckled in response, imagining a drunk fairy.

“Maverick is the only one that can make sense of his constant ringing, and then he has to sober Alpheus up and get the information out of him. It’s how they communicate. It’s a rare gift. So it’s up to Maverick to get the exact location from him. Most of the time, they are too late. But I’m glad Drake saw something with you and that he was on time.”

Heat warmed my cheeks, embarrassed by the fact that I gave him so much hell at first.

“A fairy with an alcohol problem could be the reason they don’t make it.”

“Ha, yeah. Tell that to Maverick. He loves his drink as much as Twinkle-toe does.”

“Twinkle what?”

“It’s what Maverick calls him. They are so similar, and Mrs. Beatty always teases that their drinking might be the only reason Maverick can hear them.”

I didn’t sum Maverick up that way, but then again, the comments that Alex and the priest made around the table that night should’ve pointed toward that Maverick was a bit of a loose head, as Mom would say.

Silence lingered again while I processed and kept making my bed. I could feel Brooke’s eyes on me and knew she was waiting for more questions.

“What can Lindy do, other than turn into a beast?”

Brooke laughed, pinning her gaze to mine.. “Manticore. Lindy’s stinger is more than enough to take out her opponent. Manticores are possessive and very vain creatures. Another ability will tip them over the edge. And you know what Drake does. Projection is a widespread ability not just for Phoenix Griffins but all Griffins.”

I grabbed the duvet and shook it out, ready to put it on top of my bed.

“The Recast Ceremony is tomorrow night, right?”

“Yes, it’s such an enormous deal, too. Every parent comes. It goes with a five star meal and everything. It’s really special to receive your colors.”

“Colors?”

“Oh, you will get a Recasting robe. They are so beautiful. It’s very similar to a kaftan, all pure white and flowing. When you stand underneath the recasting light, and the light changes color, it will place you in your legacy. Your entire robe transforms. Every legacy has its own color, just like the creatures. I’m so excited for you. And once you have been housed in your Legacy all this angst you are feeling will disappear.”

9

DRAKE

I worried about Sophie. Her headaches were really bad and the fact that she passed out had me on edge. me. I had no choice but to leave with Alex and them as Alpheus saw another lost one.

He took us on a detour, and I almost ended up eating the little shit.

It took us days to get to Hong Kong.

Jacob's team usually went to Asia as they speak all the Asian languages, but they were already out on another retrieval, so we had no choice.

Alex's key worked over time, so it could only be used once only once a day. It took us almost three days to get to our final destination.

And just like the other times, he saw a different region of Hong Kong. We were in the complete wrong place again.

Alex stared at Maverick.

“Wha’?”

“Get him sober, Mav. For fuck’s sake. Ever think if he stops drinking maybe we would save all the Lost Ones.”

“Aye, but yeh tell Twinkle Toes he cannot drink. See how tha’ goes?”

We camped out at a beautiful sight that overlooked the lake.

I loved camping but hated the worry of not being able to retrieve this lost one.

Honk Kong was really spectacular. The nice thing about Asia, was that the Guild haven’t really expanded this far, yet.

The next day we left for the destination that Alpheus had seen. What he didn’t see, wasn’t just one, but a family. And to make it worse, a family of Manticores.

For some reason I wished Lindy was here, but she and Xander swapped groups.

It was up to Xander and me to show them that they were not alone.

The oldest boy, I guessed in his twenties, shifted. He was huge and his stringer ready to strike.

Maverick called on nature. The vines shook from the trees and twirled around his stinger to keep it from us.

Alex’s bad Cantonese only worsen the situation.

“Yeh’re not helping,” Maverick grunted as Alex tried the to find the right word.

The manticore was busy breaking the vines that kept his stinger intact.

Xander and I leaped into the air. I shifted in front of the Manticore and shrieked back as Xander iced his stinger, only the top part.

The father had a bit more common sense when he saw us and jumped in front of his son with his hands in the air. He showed me to stop too.

It gave Alex time to get Jacob on the line and to explain to the father in Cantonese that their lives were in danger.

I stayed in my form as Jacob spoke to the father. The boy stayed in his form too. We both stared at each other, ready to strike.

The father finally cut the call and spoke very slow Cantonese.

“Change back, Drake.”

I didn't dare take my eyes off the boy. “Alex. What if—”

“Change back, now.”

I nodded and changed back the same time the man's son changed back into his human form.

Xander threw me my clothes. He was already dressed. I pulled it over my body. Covering every inch of myself.

It was difficult for the family to discover that they were not the only ones. That they weren't even from Earth. But at the same time relief washed over their faces.

Alex decided to get Jacob and their team, to assist us on this mission. And we had to wait for them as both key bearers used their keys already for the day.

The family started to pack as we kept a look out for whatever danger was going to follow them.

I couldn't help not seeing the sixteen odd year-old girl and how she stared at me.

It was a Griffin-Manticore thing. We were like magnets to them. Reason I tried to have a relationship with Lindy, but it didn't work out. She would only get hurt. She got hurt. Her hands jumped to mind, and I pushed it back. She told me so many times to forgive myself. It wasn't just my fault.

We left in the dead of the night and Alex took us to a safe house in the city.

In the loft, we gave the family the rooms and we took the lounge.

"Yeh might brush up on yer Cantonese," Mav said as he took Alpheus ball nest from his belt and put it on the dining table. The little bug flew out and went immediately to the liquor cabinet.

"I don't see you trying at all?" Alex bit back and Xander's lips curved. The two bickered like an old couple.

Mav stared at me with a sly smile. He was working on my nerves to be honest.

I shrugged at Mav.

"What *tis* with *yeh* and Manticores, lad?"

"Stop," I grunted as Xander chuckled.

"The lass can't take her eyes of *yeh*."

"I said stop."

“Maybe she wants *yer ter* groom her horns.”

“Mav?”

Xander thought it was hilarious.

“Maverick,” Alex reprimanded him.

Mav lifted his hand in the air. “I’m done.”

I chose the comfiest sofa and fell on top of it as the soft whispers of the family came from the room next door.

I hated not understanding what they said. Maybe I should learn Cantonese too, but we almost never get sent to these parts of the world.

Xander lay on the other couch as I stared at the ceiling, ready to close my eyes.

Brooke shrieked and my gaze shifted to Xander holding his comm devise in his hand. She couldn’t stop asking him questions.

I actually envied what he had with Brooke. A true bond. There weren’t many of those either.

But we loved to tease them whenever we could. I rolled off the couch and sat down on the carpet in front of Xander, looking at the screen.

The water nymph, that was the name I had for her, waved as she finished answering Xander’s question.

“Brooke, don’t you have anything better to do than wait for Xander to call?” I asked in a serious tone.

“Like what?” She always fell for it.

“I don’t know. Play outside,” I said, and everyone laughed out of their bellies, including Xander.

I lay back on my spot and listened to her telling me to go fuck myself.

“*Yeh* better be careful, lad. *Yeh* might be in the playpen with Xander soon.” Maverick said.

“Fuck off,” I mumbled as Xander and Brooke laughed. Idiot. I saved her for a reason, and it wasn’t for my benefit.

I shouldn’t have made it so obvious that I’d seen Sophie, but I couldn’t trust Alpheus. I couldn’t lose her the way we lost so many lost ones due to him and his drinking problem. I was glad that Alex finally voiced it.

“So how is the little precious Lost One?” Xander asked. My ears perked. I really wanted to know it myself.

“She joined the living but still has loads to process. I was about to show her Earwyn when you phoned. When are you coming back?”

“Alex said soon.”

“So I take it you got your lost one?” Brooke asked.

“Yup, it’s an entire family. Alpheus didn’t see the other four shifters with this one. I think he had a bit of a hangover when he saw that vision.”

Brooke chuckled. “Yeah, maybe Maverick should try to put a damper on his drinking. It could be the reason so many Lost Ones die, Xander.”

I shrugged at Maverick and Alex stared at him.

“You are not the first one thinking that, sweetheart. But you know Mav.”

“So, an entire family?”

“Yeah, which means it’s going to take longer to get back.”

“You will not be back for the Recasting Ceremony?”

“Nope, but I’ll phone you tomorrow to find out who won the wager.”

“Whoever thought she was a shifter, they have a 20 percent chance of winning. Hank thinks she is fae.”

“Fae? Damn,” Alex said.

“I’m out too,” Mav said. I knew she was a spirit fae. It was the only thing that could explain this pull.

“You guys are idiots. She is terrified of tomorrow night.” Brooke’s voice blared over the screen.

“Oh, it’s an awesome evening,” Xander said. “Tell her to enjoy it.”

“I did. So, have you run into any problems yet?” Her tone grew somber.

“Nope. Finding out they weren’t alone in this world relieved the family’s fears. They packed the necessities pretty fast and came with us.”

I chuckled at the slight fib as he didn’t mention the showdown.

“Where are you now?”

“The safe-house in Hong Kong. Relax, you know the Guild is not as active here as in North America and Europe. I’m sure it will only take a few days.”

“I can’t wait.”

“Okay, I’ll speak to you later,” Xander said. “Go play.”

More laughter elicited from all of us, and he winked and said goodbye.

“That comment is *goin’ ter* cost *yeh* in the bawbag, my friend.”

“Maverick!” Alex reprimanded and we all chuckled.

“Alex, yer seriously need ter wake up. The two is screwing like fuckin rabbits.”

“Stop,” Xander said as his cheeks reddened.

Alex gaped at Mav and shook his head. “I can’t take you anywhere.”

“*Yeh* love me.” He winked and got up. “I’m hungry.”

“You are always hungry.”

“I’m just *sayin’* if I’m hungry, maybe the family is hungry too.”

“Fine, I’ll get us food.”

“Yes, get me that dumplings I love so much.”

Alex shook his head and placed a call. My stomach rumbled too, but for some reason I really would’ve like to be at the Recast Ceremony tomorrow.

SOPHIE

“GO PLAY?” I asked when the call disconnected.

“It’s a stupid joke. When we fell in love, everyone teased him. I was still pretty young and had three more years to go before I graduated. He sort of owns it now, as it used to piss him off whenever the others teased him about it.”

Butterflies fluttered in my stomach as I just discovered what Maverick’s comment meant about Drake being in the playpen with Xander.

“How much older is he?” I tried not to think about Mav’s comment.

“Four years. I know it wasn’t ideal when I got here. I was barely sixteen, but it was a Fated-Bond.”

“So he’s like what, twenty-two?”

“Turning twenty-two. I can’t wait for next year.” She rubbed her face.

I could imagine that. Brooke probably had enough of all the ‘go play’ comments by now. I found a pair of flip-flops and stepped into them.

“So, are you ready to see Earwyn? Find out where everyone hangs out over breaks?”

“I can’t wait.”

Brooke swung her legs off the bed, motioned for me to follow her and we left the room. We walked into the hallway. The afternoon light cast thick beams of light through each arched window as we proceeded down the hall.

“What day is it?” We kept walking on the dark red carpet passing so many dormitories on the way.

“The last day of our summer break. That is why it is still so quiet. Students should be arriving around midafternoon. Classes start tomorrow, but to answer your question, it’s Monday.”

All around us ivy and creeping plants with enormous leaves crawled up the walls and twirled around the railings. I remembered seeing the giant tree through the windows. “Is the academy built in a tree?”

Brooke laughed. “No, but it’s built against the base of what the faes call the elder tree. It’s home to all different kinds of creatures that found their way past the barrier and nested here. It also guides fae after death to the afterlife. There are rumors that the tree is home to plenty of spirits that guide fae through troubled times.”

Making it down a staircase I have never been down before, a huge arch housed a gigantic statue of a fae made from blue veined marble. The fae statue glistened in a pool of crystal blue water at its feet. I couldn’t tell where the water was coming from, but it was soundless as it washed over the curves and arches of the statue.

“Is it just me?” I pointed toward the water.

“No, it’s called silent water. The only water I cannot use as my element, so something tells me it’s not actual water. That it’s some sort of spell.”

I leaned in, braced my hands on the railing to take a closer look.

“It looks so real.”

She smiled from over her shoulder as we continued our walk.

We descended the four stories of staircase carved out of magnificent dark wood, built in a square around two mammoth statues. The second level completely made up the infirmary.

When we reached the bottom of the staircase and stepped into the foyer, I stared up at the gigantic fae statues that faced each other. The detail in the carving work was magnificent. Like the sculptor etched a piece of his soul into each stroke and chisel.

Brooke guided me to an entrance that opened up onto a lanai. Four granite columns stretched toward the sky embracing a high pitched pyramid shaped ceiling. Adorned with blue and green glass between the brass filigree outline, so that when the sun illuminated the roof, it drowned the room in a turquoise haze.

The ability to capture the beauty of the room in words escaped me. Taking a deep breath, the smell of spring's first blossoms hung in the air. Another breath and it smelled earthy, like just after rainfall. The third smell was sweet, like cotton candy mixed with apples. Every time I took a deep breath, a different scent caressed my nostrils.

Brooke laughed as I kept sniffing the air.

“I did the same the first time I came here. I still can’t figure out why the air smells different here?”

Brooke took the first few stone steps leading to a landing that parted into a path on the left, neatly hugged by deep green moss. To the right a second set of stairs went further down.

Every second step was adorned with a blue light that matched the color of the blue stained-glass ceiling, creating the illusion you were underwater.

At the bottom landing we were welcomed by a metal gothic styled archway that marked an extended hallway.

“Let me show you the classrooms.” Brooke took a sharp right turn. The landing faced an elongated stone catwalk with a marble railing.

Big leaves and colorful bell flowers blanketed the walls and railings.

On the right side, facing the railings, were colossal wooden doors engraved with a filigree pattern. The doors were framed by blue veined marble and a crystal was inlaid at the top.

“The crystals on each door is responsible for the magic that is used in class.”

We walked further, passing a row of doors that resembled the first one. Above each door a golden plaque hung with the type of magic taught in that class. We passed abjuration, alteration, conjuration, divination, elemental, enchantment, illusion, and invocation.

When we came to the end of the hallway, it split into two catwalks. The one on the right led to a dead end.

Hugged in by the two catwalks stood a colossal statue of an Eagle on ground level, its feathered head, sharp beak and stark eyes rose above the catwalk.

Brooke pulled me along the second catwalk with the dead end.

We stood at the railing, overlooking an Elder tree that covered the scenery of fae statues, tiny waterfalls and gardens growing between its roots.

In the distance, a barway bridge with three pillars crossed a serene stream. Water glistened at the peak of the rocks just before it gently ran down over the mossy surface of the rocks into a sparkling square marble pool. A gigantic marble sculpture of a Pegasus with open wings standing on his hind legs graced the edge of the pool. Rising up from behind the bridge was a beautiful, brilliant, white building with two towers overlooking the square.

Stained glass windows clad the building from bottom to top, with the towers having the biggest windows.

“What is that building in the distance?” I pointed at what I could only describe as a palace.

“That building is the graduates’ living quarters and the graduates’ academy.”

Lush gardens and ponds with two Willow trees framed a seating area with the gorgeous purple Wisteria flowers hanging from the arches of the first story windows.

“The graduates’ entrance to Earwyn Academy is on the opposite side of that building.” Brooke pointed in the

direction.

“Xander and I will both study there next year to learn more about how to combine our abilities as fated bond.”

Brooke turned around and walked back to the path we came from with me following bright eyed alongside her, staring at the beauty of Earwyn. We took a sharp left as she named more classes, passing more doors.

Ever so often, the sun caught the bronze framework and sent a spark of bright pink along the catwalk.

We walked all the way to the opposite side to a door that didn't have a plaque and was shrouded in shadow. Brooke must have seen the trepidation on my face because she rubbed my arm before saying. “This door leads to the dark arts ward, here we will come across the classrooms for divinations, necromancy, potions, and charms.”

“Charms?” I asked.

Her eyes widened. “Especially charms.”

I waited for an explanation, but none came. We entered and the steps led down a dimly lit platform. More steps came ahead and finally we exited the stairs and found ourselves on a floor that replicated the one above. The only difference was the absence of the marble railing.

My gaze took in a sculpture carved halfway out of the stone wall of a griffin with his mighty wings stretched out beside him, detailed so fine that captured the fierceness on its face.

My feet carried me in awe toward the sculpture where my fingers stroked the detailed grooves of the feathers and my eyes caught the pointy cat ears that were incredibly detailed; it looked soft, but I knew it was cold and hard.

“See why I say they are magical, Sophie?”

I couldn't stop touching the body of the griffin. The muscles of its front legs that ended with eagle claws bulged from the marble. It was beautiful, but a part of me hoped Hank was right about his fae analysis.

“Are they this big?” I couldn't even reach its beak.

“Some are,” Brooke said with a smile adorned on her face. “Oh,” she said and pointed at two enormous doors on our right. “This is the library.”

“Oh please can we go inside?” I said with a wide grin. Brooke laughed, pulling me away.

“Today is your tour of the campus, to get you oriented as to where everything is situated. Just preparing you for tomorrow.”

She turned right at the end of the path and passed another class. The passage either went left to more classes and toward the main building or down lots of steps to a small courtyard with stone benches surrounded by beautiful rose bushes and the sculpture of a magnificent Eagle, halfway hidden inside a tree.

“That is what my Frosty looks like.” A wide grin spread across her lips as she looked up at the statue.

“Is Xander that big?” I asked as I sat down on the steps.

“No, he’s not that big, but he is pretty big for his age.”

Brooke plopped down next to me. She started telling me the story about her life before a group of Master fae, griffins, manticores, and pegusi rescued her and those that were with her.

It was before they decided our kind needed to be killed. The scientists treated Brooke like a lab rat.

She told me briefly about it a few days ago, but today she went into detail. Scientists tortured her. I couldn’t imagine how badly they had messed her up.

“Being able to do what I can took a lot of patience to trust it again. I wished it away so many times. Not to mention how I begged for death, to end my misery.”

“How long were you there?”

“I don’t know. It felt like an eternity, to be honest. There were so many that didn’t make it, and almost all of us were kids.”

She cleared her throat and looked down at her hands, her fingers laced together in her lap. “I’m still afraid of water.” Her voice was barely a whisper. Her gaze met mine and I could see eyes filled with fear and tears as she said, “Our rescuers showed the scientists just how dangerous our kind were and the sole reason the Guild has been bent on eliminating us.”

“I am so sorry.” I swallowed against the fear rising up in me.

“For a long time, I couldn’t even channel water.” A tear ran down her cheek and she wiped it away with the back of her hand. “I still struggle with nightmares of that place, but with time, and with having Xander in my life, they have become less. This place didn’t just save my life, Sophie. It gave me back my life, one with meaning and purpose. It’s been a long road to get where I am now.” Sadness filled her tone, and then her lips curved into a smile as she looked up at the Frost Eagle’s statue. “Xander was there to guide me through all of it. He was so patient with me, and plenty of times, I thought he would give up, but he kept returning, kept trying. I wouldn’t have trusted my element if it wasn’t for him.”

My gaze flickered to the Frost Eagle’s statue. “I can’t wait to meet him. He sounds amazing.”

“He is, but around Drake, he can be a real idiot.”

I barked out laughter. “What was Maverick’s playpen comment about?”

Her lips curved. “You heard that, huh?”

“Yeah, Maverick wasn’t very subtle about it.”

“All about the way the Fire-Bird acted. I can’t wait to see what you are.”

“I put him through hell. I doubt he sees me in the same light.”

“He still keeps asking about your wellbeing.” Brooke’s grin fanned into a smile.

We kept staring at the frost eagle statue.

“What happened that day?” Brooke asked. “One second we were still speaking to Drake and the next, he was silent. I’ve never seen Alex like that, not to mention Lindy.”

“I tried to make a run for it.” I didn’t mention the half-naked part.

Brooke burst out laughing. “He didn’t even hear you escape?”

“He was speaking to you guys. I didn’t think twice. I was in the woods, and I thought he had kidnapped me. Did you see the size of that guy?”

She laughed louder this time.

“I didn’t get far because I didn’t see the idiot following. I didn’t even give him a chance to explain.” I shook my head.

“How did he end up with a broken nose?”

“He grabbed me from behind, and when I stomped on his foot, he did all the wrong things, and the back of my head hit him full in the face. I have to give it to him. He didn’t let me go and subdued me so fast. Still, I didn’t stop and bit him.”

Brooke’s shoulders bobbed as she snorted with laughter.

“I’m sure he had to get a tetanus shot or something,” I added on.

Footsteps ran from the top of the stairs. We stopped laughing and turned around. A tall male figure with blonde, shoulder-length hair came running towards us. His sandals slapped on the stone as he halted in front of us.

“Hey, Brooke,” he said with a dashing smile. The top of his pointy ears peeked through his curly hair.

“Hi Craig, this is Sophie, the new girl.”

“The girl you guys saved?” he asked, and Brooke nodded.

He took my hand in his and planted a kiss on the back of my hand. “I heard you gave Drake a hard time.”

“I feel pretty stupid now.” I smiled and took my hand out of his.

“Well, anyone that gives the Fire-Bird a run for his money is awesome in my book. Earth is my element.” He beamed.

“Unknown.” I shrugged.

“Ouch!” He pulled his face. “Don’t worry, tomorrow night’s Recasting Ceremony will sort that one out in two jiffs.”

“I hope so,” I said.

“See you later, ladies.” Craig waved goodbye and rushed down the steps with a book in his hand.

“He’s friendly,” I said.

“Yeah, he’s okay. Not a bad brain between those pointy ears, either.”

Brooke got up, and we walked down the steps that Craig just ran down. We took the opposite direction back to the main building of the Academy.

This place was surely magical, and I couldn’t wait to see more.

IO

SOPHIE

Brooke led me back to the entrance, taking a set of steps that led down to a cobblestone square. Grabbing my hand she rushed towards a red scooter parked under a tree, got on and handed me a helmet.

“What about you?”

“I’ll be okay.”

I placed the helmet on my head, she helped me tie it beneath my chin and turned to face the front while I climbed on behind her.

With an effortless start we sped off towards two massive brass gates. Vines and roses twirled around the framework. Brooke pushed a button on her left handle and the gates opened. She didn’t slow down for the gates to open fully. As soon as a gap big enough for us to exit appeared, she accelerated onto the cobblestone driveway. Beams of sunlight stripped the road ahead before we turned left into a tar road.

Trees of sunlit caramel hues surrounded the narrow tar road. Their great arms spread heavenward, shielding us from

the sun. I looked up at the colors of orange, red, yellow and brown leaves shimmering in the gentle breeze. And for the first time I felt a sliver of happiness wash over me since the day I was almost killed in the hospital.

It reminded me of fall, but it should have been summer. That unique tang of freshly cut grass permeated the air.

I shouted over Brooke's shoulder, "How do the seasons work here?"

She turned her head to the side, while still keeping her eyes on the road. "Every day is a mixture of fall, spring, and summer. Except for Christmas. It always snows around Christmas!"

The road surrounded by enormous trees ended as it crossed with a wider tar road.

Brooke turned right. Vineyards on either side spread upon rolling hills as far as the eye could see. The long leafy vines tethered to posts spread in rows where workers with wide-brimmed hats attended to the grapes. The aroma of red fruit filled the air as Brooke whisked past on the scooter.

We crossed an old bridge over the river, and after a windmill we passed a sign that named a few places in the distance. We sped up to get to the top of the hill, and a village came into full view. Brooke didn't stop, and we zoomed past the magical shops.

I held on for dear life. People walked on the pavement. Some had cat-ears, others had wings, a lot of beaks and claws were also present among the pointy ears. The magical beings

walked into different stores, old stores built with flat stone walls and huge square windows.

The stores whizzed by too fast to have a proper look at what was inside, but enormous signs hung above every stone building, large enough to make out its intriguing lettering. Each logo gave me a clue to what was inside. Both astonished and puzzled, I gaped at one logo in particular. Scorchvine had large axes chopping at the title.

Brooke zoomed past cars and scooters on the road. She pointed to the sky at a gigantic beast flying with little beasts at its side.

It looked like Lindy.

Brooke turned down another street and my eyes grew to find a family of gigantic Duredinas with cherry blossoms festooned upon their antlers. A group of pegasi flew above us. Two black and one white.

My brain struggled to process it again, but I didn't care anymore.

I couldn't believe that there were so many like me living in Earwyn.

We came to the end of another bridge with multiple signs giving away different designations. We followed the sign that pointed toward the city. The scooter zoomed down the road, past houses and a white granite city towered the skies in the distance.

The road ended in a cul de sac, where Brooke pulled off to the side of the road and motioned for me to get off. Climbing

off the scooter, Brooke assisted in getting the helmet off my head and straightening my hair with a half-cocked smile on her face before we walked to a metal railing and stood on the edge of a small cliff overlooking the spectacular shimmering city of Earwyn.

White marble stores were extensively erected on both sides. The buildings stretched tall and elegant, with glass windows and balconies framed with ivy and Wisteria flowers. Even a bullet train ran on railings above the city to more glass buildings that seemed to merge with the sky.

“That there, where the train just stopped,” Brooke pointed way above our heads to a pure white and bronze train, parked in front of an extensive building, “that is the hospital. The best type of doctor is a magical one.”

My eyes flickered to the area below us. People walked on the pathways in front of the shops. Some with packages in their hands, others had packages hovering beside them as they strolled the sidewalk. It all felt so surreal, as if I were watching a fantasy novel come alive before my eyes.

In the middle of a cobblestone street, an extensive rectangular marble pool went on for as far as my eyes could see, running past most of the city’s shopfronts, dwellings and community centers. A massive statue of a broad chested fae adorned the crystal clear pool.

The streets were immaculately clean; potted plants decorated the sidewalks, shopfronts, restaurants and rooftops. A few food carts dotted the side of the roads, magical beings of all varieties lined up for their lunch at each cart. Seated at

the edge of the pool, people sat enjoying their lunch or just taking in the beautiful surroundings.

“This is Earwyn City, and it never stops taking my breath away.”

Behind the city, in the distance, prominent skyscrapers filled the sky. “What are all the buildings used for?”

“Offices. Concordia sends a lot of their administration work to Earwyn. Plenty of people travel through the port-key in that building. It’s a dead-ended tunnel, and a train is the port-key transporting you to Concordia.

“The train arrives at eight am every morning leaving Earwyn and returning at seven pm each night,” Brooke said. “Over summer breaks and the holidays, many people visit Earwyn to get a taste of Earth. Some even migrated to Earwyn to be closer to their job as teleportation takes a toll on you over time.

“It grew as the years passed. If Concordia is more beautiful than this, I do not know why anyone would want to leave.”

“Me neither.”

“We usually roam around the little shops, as everything down there is super expensive, and I’m not the type of fae that likes to do window shopping.”

Brooke walked over to her scooter, placed the helmet back on my head, and started it again. After fastening my helmet, we drove back the way we had come past all the markets and stores. We pulled off to the side of the road in front of a coffee shop.

I struggled to grasp that Earwyn was on Earth. This place was beautiful, like an alternative world, but filled with magical beings with plenty of pointy ears. Even little ones ran around with cat-ears or tails swinging behind them.

The one little boy with cat-ears pointing out from under his blonde messy hair walked past us with his mom. She had a pair of antlers. The little boy turned around and waved at me.

Brooke laughed as I waved back.

We didn't stay long at Earwyn as all the cat-ears kept staring at me, and Brooke even voiced how creepy it was. The drive back was fast, and we climbed off her scooter when she parked it in her spot.

By now the shade had crept over the parking bay covering most of the cobblestone pathway that ran past the building.

I took off the helmet and gave it to her. "Thank you for showing me around, Brooke."

"It is my pleasure, and I guess I can finally say welcome home."

I appreciated her gesture of showing me around the place that would be my home more than she would ever know. "So, Mrs. Beatty protects it all?"

"She is one being, but other things are protecting the barrier, too. A lot of spells and charms make up wards to this place."

We ran back up the marble steps to the lanai. My short legs were burning with effort as I tried to keep up with Brooke.

A commotion came from the foyer inside the main building, and Brooke stared back at me with enormous eyes before picking up her pace. A horse's neigh mixed with a piercing shriek erupted throughout the building.

Curiosity tugged at me and found reserved energy as I ran up the last few steps.

I gasped as a black Pegasus on its hind legs kicked, spreading out his enormous wings at an equally sized creature. I stared at the other beast in awe with his hindquarters of a lion and forequarters of an eagle. It was majestic. A Griffin. The statue Brooke and I had seen earlier was larger, but the real thing was fiercely beautiful.

"Enough, both of you!" Mrs. Beatty leaned over the stone railing of the second floor. "Transform back now!" Her tone held much authority.

The Pegasus shrank back into a boy with light brown hair, without wearing a shred of clothes, except for a bushy tail covering his rear.

I just shook my head and gave an internal giggle as every witness laughed.

"Not bad, Theo!" Brooke chuckled, elbowing me. "This happens often, but by the look on your face I'd say it might take some getting used to."

My eyes caught the Griffin strolling away into one hallway on my right. He didn't transform back.

"Theo." Mrs. Beatty spoke in a stern tone. "I expected more from you. Go get dressed."

“Yes, Ma’am.” He cupped his private parts and ran up a staircase past sniggering students.

I shook my head as we walked up the stairs to our room. “Who’s the Griffin?”

Brooke smiled. “Chase, Chase Evans. He is the younger brother of the Fire-Bird that saved your life.”

“That is Drake’s brother?”

She rolled her eyes. “Yep, he is an idiot and such a showoff. Most of the girls swoon whenever he winks his eyelashes at them. So a warning, Soph, don’t fall for his tactics, because deep down inside, he’s still an idiot.”

I snorted as we rushed up the stairs.



UP IN THE ROOM, I met the other two roommates who’d left early this morning to spend their last day of freedom in the city. Cali, short for Calida, was a Fire fae. As beautiful as she was, her talking herself up the entire time was a bit off putting. Her hair resembled her gift. It had this orange glow that hung in waves below her shoulders and highlighted her warm tawny skin. Beautiful double eyelids with green irises sparkled as her gaze caught mine. I mapped out her petite features, rosy high cheekbones with a little turned up nose and blushed sultry lips.

Nikita was the other fae, an Earth fae nicknamed Nikki. Tight dark blonde curls hung down her back accentuating her light brown eyes that beautifully contrasted with her porcelain skin. She was tall and slender with wide hips and long fingers.

Brooke told them what had happened in the foyer, and the two girls laughed. I laid down on my bed, hugging my pillow.

“Theo probably started it.” Nikki watered her strange looking plants. “Chase is so damn hot.”

If Drake and Chase were from the same gene pool, then I could only imagine how gorgeous he was.

“You know it.” Cali and Niki high fived each other.

“Hot? He is a cocky tit-head,” Brooke said, lying on her bed. “That mouth of his is going to get him into real trouble one day.”

“Not Chase Evans.” Cali added more mascara to those long lashes of hers. “Brother bear even struggles to whip his ass. Now he can be glad he is a graduate.”

I didn’t want to think about Maverick’s playpen comment.

A snort escaped Nikki’s lips. “You can say that again.”

“Lindy will snap both of you in two,” Brooke retaliated.

“Pfft, that Manticore has nothing to my fire.” Cali waved her hand, sitting on the chair in front of her dressing table, opening her lip gloss. “Besides, she and Drake are so last year’s news. So, tell us, Lost One, where are you from?”

Brooke held a pretend gun she made with her fingers against her head behind Cali and Nikki’s back. My headache pounded way too much for me to care about her lost one comment.

“I’m from Tacoma, Washington.”

“Changeling or adopted?”

“Adopted,” I said.

“Where the hell are you even going?” Brooke asked, staring at Cali.

“I’m meeting Chase in the cafeteria.”

“Does Chase actually know he’s going to meet with you, or are you going to push yourself on him again like last year?”

Cali turned away from her mirror and gave Brooke a raised eyebrow look. “We are the same.”

“You are not his match. You are playing with fire, the kind that is not part of your element.”

“Oh, please, Chase is one of those that will never bond with anyone. So I think I’m safe in that department.” Cali flipped her hair and looked back at the mirror, putting on blush.

“I don’t know what the big fuss with Chase is anyway,” Brooke said.

Both girls gasped. Cali’s hand touched her chest, staring at Brooke sitting on her bed.

“You’re joking now, right?” Nikki stopped watering the funny-looking crab plant with little blue flowers.

“He’s pure hotness. You need glasses,” Cali said.

“No, I don’t. Chase is a mean and arrogant brute that doesn’t give a crap about anyone but himself.”

“I can always make him care about someone else,” Cali said. Nikki and I chuckled.

I fluffed my pillow and laid down, just listening to their bickering.

Around six, Brooke and I left for dinner. The dining hall was on the ground floor. It reminded me of a glorified greenhouse with the amount of ivy that covered the walls and part of the windows. The moon's silver rays sparkled through the glass roof.

Rows of wooden tables filled the area. There were round golden placemats with cutlery and goblets. Magic loved the sixteenth-century era.

At the front was a huge buffet. We found many dishes on the table, with some sort of blue light and white sparkles, like snow, descending on the food.

Students sat in groups at the tables, but it wasn't everyone. The tails, horns and cat-ears were among the pointy ears.

I remembered what Father Matthew told Alex. Seeing through the glamor wasn't normal. In fact, Alex used the word impossible.

The question now was, why was it impossible?

"I'm starving," Brooke said, and on cue, her stomach growled. Mine followed, and we both giggled.

We dished up, and I followed Brooke to the nearest open table. We ate in silence and drank from the goblets.

The sweetness of the liquid glazed my tongue. It wasn't juice. It was too thin for juice and was clear, like water.

I downed my drink. To my surprise, the liquid in the goblet rose again to its original level. “The goblet refilled itself.”

“Don’t you just love magic,” she said. “It’s a lot different from in the books, though.”

“I don’t know, Brooke. It’s not that different. It makes you wonder who wrote those stories. Maybe they visited this world and then woke up the next day thinking it was just a beautiful dream. That is what I would think. Envisioning a place like Earwyn existing on earth would be a harder revelation than the dream.”

Brooke’s lip tugged on one side, and she took a sip of her drink.

After dinner, we went back to the room and for the rest of the evening, everyone was doing their own thing, preparing for tomorrow. Brooke let me process as she texted on her tablet-thingy.

Cali was not in the room, and Nikki sat at her desk, reading through a book.

I turned around and stared through the window at the bright moon. My eyelids drooped and I couldn’t shake this tiredness off. My stomach twisted into knots whenever I tried to imagine tomorrow night, and I prayed I wouldn’t concoct some horrible dream about it.

The sleep won as I drifted slowly into oblivion.

II

SOPHIE

The darkness washed away, and I strolled down a hallway with marble floors and beautiful ivory walls.

My hand brushing the icy wall wasn't my doing. I had no control of my movements. An invisible entity steered me in the direction it wanted. The wall wasn't ivory either but had the same texture.

How in mother's name did I get here? What is this place?

An unintelligible conversation flooded my ears, and I got pulled toward it. Through the half-opened door, the conversation became clearer.

"If you want Drake to be my concern, then you need to take care of Dreya."

"Dreya?" a male voice said. "Are you insane? She is a celebrity, Caus."

Who are Caus and Dreya?

"I can't handle someone as powerful as Drake and Dreya."

"I see," the other male said.

What did Drake have to do with all of this?

“An accident,” the other voice suggested. “I’ll think of how and let you know.”

“It’s going to be an enormous shock to Concordia.”

“Drake is a bigger priority now. So I’m taking care of Dreya. You should prepare for him.”

Preparing for him? What are these two people speaking about?

A searing ache in my head woke me up and a grunt that didn’t even sound like me left my lips.

“It’s okay, Sophie, it’s okay.” Warm hands cupped the sides of my face and the tingling sensation seeped through the ache as the warmth drove the pain away. My eyes closed voluntarily as a tear ran down my cheek.

“It’s going to feel better in a few minutes. Give it some time.” Hank carried on doing his thing. The headache faded away.

A deep sigh came from Hank, but the sensation of the magic coming from his healing made it hard for me to open my eyes and ask him why that sigh.

“I think that should do it. How do you feel?” He lowered both his palms from my face and there wasn’t even a slight pulse.

I opened my eyes and looked at him. “Thank you. How did I get here?”

“One of your roommates came rushing through the doors last night, begging me to come. You don’t remember?”

I shook my head.

He huffed. “The runes inside the walls should help with controlling the level of your headache. What caused it? Do you remember?”

I shook my head again. I didn’t want to tell Hank that I’d dreamed about someone named Dreya and that a man named Caus was going to plan her death and made it look like an accident. They would think I was insane.

He took a deep breath and the lines next to his eyes crinkled.

Footsteps clicked on the floor and Mrs. Beatty appeared around the corner. “Good, you are awake.” She came closer and stood at the end of my bed. “Hopefully tonight, when her legacy reveals itself, we’ll understand if the headaches belong to the mask or the legacy.” A thin smile sprawled across her face. “Is she good to go? She needs to get ready, and so do you.”

“She is good for now. What do you say, Sophie?” Hank asked.

I nodded and hopped off from the bed.

“Your wardrobe is on the bed. Ask Brooke to show you where you need to go,” Mrs. Beatty said.

“I will. Thanks again, Hank.”

“You are most welcome.”

I left and the knots in my stomach twisted as I kept wondering about that dream. Did it mean anything, or was it just my mind playing tricks on me?

I walked up the stairs to my room and opened the door. All three girls jumped and rushed toward me.

“What the hell was that?” Cali asked.

“You gave us such a scare?” Nikki said.

“Calm down!” Brooke told both of them. “I told you guys; Sophie’s headaches are crazy. It was a headache, right?”

I nodded. “Thanks for getting help. Sorry for the scare.”

“Hey, don’t worry about that. So what does Hank say? Why do you get them?”

“He doesn’t know if it’s attached to my mask or my legacy. After tonight, they will know, which reminds me, I have to get ready.”

“Of course, go get your butt in the shower.” Brooke nudged me toward the bathroom.

“I’ll do your hair,” Cali said.

“I’ll help,” Nikki added.

“Thanks.” I closed the bathroom door and sighed as I opened the shower tabs.



A WHITE KAFTAN ROBE, a pair of white pants, and white slip-on shoes waited for me on my bed.

The girls couldn't contain their excitement.

"Come sit." Cali pushed me in her chair, facing the mirror as she pulled off the towel on top of my head and started brushing out my hair.

"You really have thin hair, babe. It's going to take more than magic to put some volume into this."

"Then take it up," Nikki said.

Cali looked at her. "You might be right."

My eyes flickered to Brooke, who sat on the edge of Cali's bed, and I got a tug to the hair to look in front of me.

How the hell was I going to do this tonight alone? All of them already got their colors, or their legacy, as Mrs. Beatty had called it.

Half an hour later, I hardly recognized myself with my new hairdo. Cali had taken it up into a small bun as the lower part of my hair brushed the top of my shoulders. A few slants that had a slight curve hung around my face.

She pushed in two white sticks into the bun to end off the hairdo and her make-up technique added the finishing touch to this look.

"So, what do you think?"

My eyes lifted to the reflection of Cali in the mirror. "I love it, thank you."

She clapped her hands, and I turned around in her chair, resting my arms on my knees.

"Why the long face?" Brooke asked.

“I don’t know if I can do this alone.”

The girls looked at each other as their lips quirked.

“You want us to come with you?” Brooke asked.

“Is it allowed?”

“Of course it’s allowed.”

I nodded.

All three of them scattered to their closets and took out their kimonos. Brooke’s Kaftan was black and blue with beautiful water drops mixed into a curly design. Cali’s was orange and black with flame-shapes mixed into the curly design. Nikki had a beautiful Green and black design, leaves and flowers shapes mixed with the same curly design.

Cali rushed to the bathroom as Brooke started putting on her kimono. She paused tying her kaftan and looked at me. “Get dressed, Sophie.”

I jumped from the chair and went to my bed, where my white kimono still waited.

I felt better knowing that my roommates were tagging along.



THE GIRLS LOOKED SO PRETTY WEARING their dresses filled with rich color among the black. They took me to a hall that was at the back of the school grounds and Cali opened the side door.

She jumped slightly as a guy with a white tunic stood in front of the door. He was the last in the row and we entered.

“Sophie.” Mrs. Beatty’s voice came from the front. I stood on my toes to see her. “What are you girls doing here?”

“Moral support,” Nikki said.

“She needs us, Mrs. Beatty,” Cali added.

Mrs. Beatty showed her palms. “Okay, girls, come through.”

We pushed through the row that was filled with cat ears, tails, horns, beaks, and wings.

When we reached the front, the most beautiful kimono hugged Mrs. Beatty features. Her colors were slightly different. It had a turquoise type of spiral woven into the same curly design on her robe mixed with black. Hank was here too, and his tunic looked different. The men’s tunics had no sleeves, and Hank’s tunic had blue and white colors. His beak still freaked me out. There was another adult male and female among them. The male had the same tunic colors as Cali, and the woman wore the same tunic as Nikki.

My gaze reverted to Mrs. Beatty’s tunic. It was the most beautiful of them all and I wondered if it was the colors of the Spirit or whether it was because she was the principal.

“Deep breaths; you are all going to be fine.” Mrs. Beatty looked at the rows of third-years. “You will go to the room at the back, and when it’s time, you will come to the stage and line up in a neat order behind the curtain. The older grades will go first, and then it will be all of you.”

Everyone nodded as they stared at me.

“Let’s go, guys,” the Sovereign with the orange and black tunic said. He had bushy black hair and brown skin with orange undertones that brought out the color of his tunic. The four of us followed him first into the room that had plenty of chairs and we plopped down on the first four, followed by the third years. They must have rehearsed this the entire day as they did this in an orderly fashion.

My heart pounded as everyone spoke about what they really wanted to be. Most of them said Spirit.

Brooke leaned closer. “The statistics that a Spirit fae is going to be among them are zero percent. The idiots all have high hopes.”

Nikki and Cali whispered to one another.

“So, what do you really want to be?”

“I don’t know.” I rubbed my hands as I kept thinking about the fire dreams and the last one about Dreyra. What did they want with Drake?

The slight throb behind my eyes spasmed and the pain grew. I ground my teeth as my hand flung to my head and pressed my eyes shut.

“You okay?” Brooke touched my arm.

“Just a headache.”

“Sophie?” Hank’s voice came from next to my chair and when I opened my eyes, I found him crouching next to me.

“It’s a headache,” Brooke said.

“Come with me.” His beak moved as he spoke the words.

I got up from the chair, and he took me to the corner at the back.

He put both his hands on my temples, and I could feel the familiar buzzing sensation that sprawled from his hands. It became slightly warm as he scoffed. A deep sigh was expelled through his lips, and I couldn’t even open my eyes to look at him or ask him what was happening to me.

After around a minute, he lowered his hands. “I think that should do it. How do you feel?”

“Your hands sure are magical.”

He chuckled. “I will order you a stone to help with the headaches.”

“A stone?” I asked.

“They are what we call healing stones, and they are excellent at keeping headaches under control. If your headaches don’t go away, we might have to find your fated-bond creature.”

“What?”

He smiled. “They haven’t mentioned the fated-bonds yet?”

Brooke had but she barely scratched the surface. I shook my head.

“When magic is too strong in one individual, the best is to find the creature that matches you.”

Drake flew into my mind, but I pushed it away fast. “That’s if I’m not a creature myself.”

“I think your legacy is fae.”

“Are the ears going to hurt?”

The crow’s feet next to Hank’s eyes appeared. “No, it doesn’t hurt. The arch will only remove the mask, the part that protects our little ones until they are sixteen.”

“So everyone gets pointy ears?”

“Only the fae.”

“Thank you, Hank.”

“You are welcome.” His eyes still smiled as the yellow beak covered the area where his mustache used to be. I went back to my chair and plopped down next to Brooke.

“Feeling better?”

“Much. Hank’s hands are pure magic.”

“That’s a healer summed up as best as one can sum them up.”

Bickering started among the third-years.

“I can’t wait for my pointy ears,” one girl said.

“That’s if you are a fae. Get used to the color green, guys. Many of us are going to come back wearing green-Changpao tunics,” another girl said, speaking super-fast.

Paper balls, empty soda cans, and water bottles got chucked her way. She ducked and dived to dodge most of them.

Cali and Nikki laughed.

“Definitely a wind fae,” Brooke said.

“She is not wrong,” Nikki said, using her theater voice.

The wall glowed, and the edge expanded into a huge oblong. Mrs. Beatty, standing on the stage next to a pointy archway with white glowing light, appeared inside the oblong.

Shushes filled the room as she spoke.

“It looks like a porthole.”

“Oh, you saw one before then, to know what they look like?” Brooke said, and I couldn’t help snorting a laugh.

“If portholes were real, this place would definitely be where they exist. I always imagine it looking like that.” I motioned at the wall.

“It’s the projection coming from the Sterilian guard at the back.” Nikki leaned over Brooke, and I turned my head toward the back. A woman with blonde hair wearing the same color tunic as Mrs. Beatty sat on a chair. A curvy device covered her eyes. She almost looked like an X-man character and not a fae.

I looked to the front as Mrs. Beatty spoke about what a special year it was for the third graders. They had reached a milestone that was going to showcase their legacy and place them in this world. Her words were touchy as she spoke, to whom I assumed were all the parents.

I wondered what Mom and Dad would’ve thought about all of this. Would they have accepted that I wasn’t normal? Frances and Daniel had tried their best to get rid of the headaches. It had scared them both. But if Mom had known what I was, would she have accepted it?

I looked up at the screen again as Mrs. Beatty mentioned my name.

Hank motioned for me to come, and Brooke, Cali and Nikki got up too.

“Good luck, guys,” Nikki said to the rest of the class as we met Hank at the entrance.

We followed him through the hallway and turned right into a narrow passage that had long black curtains on the left. The walls muffled Mrs. Beatty’s voice, where laughter followed. I wished I knew what she had said.

We walked up to the entrance on our left, and Hank opened the door. Mrs. Beatty’s voice became clearer as we climbed the four steps that led to the back of the stage.

Big black curtains hung in columns as we zigzagged our way through it. The stone archway finally came into view, the white light igniting the way forward.

“So let’s give her a big welcome home. Sophie Emerson.”

“Break a leg,” Brooke whispered as she nudged me slightly forward while the audience applauded. My heart galloped as I walked toward Mrs. Beatty. I didn’t want to wipe my sweaty palms on the white tunic, scared that I would smear the white dirty.

Please don’t burn, please don’t burn.

Mrs. Beatty motioned for me to stand on the raised platform right underneath the archway. I swallowed hard, trying to get the lump in my throat to disappear.

She smiled, and her dimples showed. Her smile had the same effect as Dr. Bryanston's eyes. I could feel the slight change in my heartbeat, beating slower.

She leaned closer. "It's going to be okay, trust me."

I stepped onto the platform, lifting my chin to stare at the light above.

A couple of sniggers came from the onlookers, and I lowered my chin.

Round tables spread over the room occupied by the parents that had come tonight. Drapes hung from the roof, and faint fairy lights, among the ivy that crept up the wall, gave it that mystical vibe. Every person in this room wore their tunics.

Warmth caressed my skin and the buzzing sensation that had come from Drake and Hank's touches seared through my limbs. I closed my eyes as the warm waves of wind caressed my face. My heart went back to its rapid beat. *Calm down, Sophie.*

Gasps filled the room and my eyes flung open. The light above me turned to a greenish blue hue.

Mrs. Beatty eyebrows raised as she stared at me before her lips fanned into a smile. My gaze fluttered back to my tunic. The hem was black as the turquoise and black filled the rest of the design. It rushed up the material of my kimono. Mrs. Beatty motioned me down, and I stepped off the platform. The color in the archway changed back to white.

"Sophie Emerson," Mrs. Beatty said. "Spirit fae."

Goosebumps spread over my skin, and my tunic matched the colors on Mrs. Beatty's tunic. The crowd applauded again.

"Meet me tomorrow morning around seven at my office," she said. "You are free to go."

I walked back the way I'd come, dazed in thought, to Brooke, Cali and Nikki.

"You are a freaking Spirit fae. No wonder your headaches are so bad, Soph," Brooke said.

"What?"

"Oh, man. You know how rare it is?"

"She is just like all of us, Brooke, pointy ears, and magical," Cali spoke. "Congrats on nailing down the rarest type of fae there is."

I didn't like her tone, but I followed them back to the hallway.

Cali pushed the door and Hank smiled as he stood with crossed arms against the wall. "The color suits you. Mrs. Beatty thought you might be Spirit."

"Mrs. Beatty knew?"

"She had an inkling. Spirit's headaches are the worst."

The third-year students started pushing and squeezing against me, and I said goodbye to Hank.

"So unfair," the one girl said.

"Lucky bitch," another one popped through.

"Congrats," the girl that had made jokes tonight said.

“Thanks,” I said, pushing through the throng of third-years until I made it to the end of the hallway, where Brooke waited. Cali and Nikki had disappeared.

Brooke laughed. “No wonder Drake was so adamant about finding you. Spirit faes are like magnets to all griffins. I feel sorry for you with the unwanted attention, girl.” Brooke chuckled. “Lindy is going to love that.”

“Lindy?”

“The last time I checked, Phoenix Griffin is still part of the griffin race. Even if they’ll never admit it, they are just as pathetic as the normal griffins with Spirit faes.”

I still didn’t know how I felt about that. Drake was stupidly handsome.

“Are Cali and Nikki okay?”

Brooke huffed. “It’s Cali. Don’t pay her any attention. It’s a bit of green-grapes if you ask me.”

“Green-grapes?”

“Something my mom used to say when someone is sour and envious.”

“Why?”

“Because two years ago, she was so sure that she would’ve been a Spirit fae.”

SOPHIE

I couldn't stop staring in our bedroom's mirror. I pushed a strand of hair behind my pointy ear and inspected the tip. My human ears didn't fit my long oval face, but looking at it now, I was born to rock pointy ears. It even complimented my thin lips and pointy nose. It brought out a copper glint I never knew I had in my brown eyes. The freckles dusting my nose weren't a problem anymore, either. Who would've thought that all I needed was the long, pointy tip to my ear for me to be happy with the way I look.

Brooke's laughter came from her bed. "It won't disappear, I promise."

"Sorry, it's hard to process."

"It will take time."

I pulled off my tunic to inspect it and walked to my bed. The edges were black, and a stunning design of tear drops and flowers twirled into swirls in the fabric. Turquoise and black filled the entire tunic. A swirl-symbol filled the entire back.

“Do you know how rare Spirit is, Sophie?” Nikki spoke for the first time since we’d gotten back. Cali must have been in the bathroom as the door was closed.

“She didn’t ask for Spirit, Nikki,” Brooke said. “It’s not like any of us gets to pick a card with our legacy written on.”

“I know, it’s just, you haven’t seen how it upset her, Brooke.”

“Oh, please. She needs to get over it. And I promise you, if she is going to take it out on Sophie, there will be hell to pay.”

“So what does it mean to be a Spirit fae?” I asked, trying to change the vibe between these two.

“It’s one of the coolest legacies there are,” Nikki said. “It just sucks to get into it, as I heard the headaches are quite horrible. Spirit Fae’s domains are projection or shield.”

“Only two?”

Both of them stared at each other as a thicker vibe formed.

“Brooke?” I asked.

“The third one is sight.”

“It’s seen as a dark domain as the faes that had that gift are all bad,” Nikki said. “Now, when King Avery comes across a Fae or a creature with sight, he either locks them up or kills them.”

My eyes almost bulged out of their sockets. “What?”

Brooke looked at Nikki. “Easy.”

“What? It’s the truth.”

“Death?” I’d remembered what the priest and Alex had said that night about Drake’s sight. How he would take it to his grave. That was what Drake had meant when he’d said that sight wasn’t a great thing, even in his world. A lump stuck in my throat, and I struggled to swallow. I sank onto the edge of my bed.

Brooke came over and the bed shifted as she sat down next to me. Her hand rubbed my arm. “Relax, girl. You would’ve known about it already if sight was your domain. So it’s projection or shield.”

My eyebrows knitted as I looked at her. “Projection?”

“What Drake does. The vanishing thing.”

“So, if I have projection, will I do what Drake does?”

“Not exactly. Spirit fae’s projection works differently than phoenix griffin’s projection.”

The dream about Dreya kept popping into my mind, like a constant reminder that projection wasn’t my gift. I would’ve taken a phoenix griffin any day over Spirit fae now.

“Or you could be a shield.” Brooke interrupted my thoughts. “Shields are awesome, not easily fooled, and they protect everyone. Mrs. Beatty is a shield. She is the perfect one too, if you think about it. You can’t lie to a shield or try to bullshit her.”

Nikki laughed as I tried to hide the fact that sight was my domain. I didn’t ask for sight. Why was it labeled as a dark gift? I didn’t feel dark or any different apart from the

headaches. It was like having a dream, a very realistic dream that came true. What did the fire mean, then?

“Concordia has a dozen Spirit faes. So I get a feeling that you are going to fill a huge role in Concordia one day,” Brooke kept babbling as I tried to process the death part attached to my domain.

I took a huge breath and brushed my hands through my hair.

“Relax, it won’t be soon. I’m sure King Avery will let you settle in and learn a few things first,” Nikki said.

Brooke’s phone rang, and she jumped from my bed to answer it. Her lips sprawled out into a huge grin as she greeted Xander.

“And?” Xander asked.

“She is not a creature.”

“Yeah, you said it before.”

“She is not a wind, water, or an Earth fae either.”

“Fire fae?”

“Nope.”

“Spirit!”

Maverick cheered the loudest. Brooke laughed at the same time bantering started in the background, teasing Drake that it was his main reason for trying to get so fast to me.

Drake cussed.

“Enough!” Alex’s voice sounded in the background.

The door to the bathroom finally opened, and Cali walked out. She didn't say a thing or look at anyone and climbed into her bed. She threw the covers over her and switched off her light. Brooke kept speaking to Xander and she couldn't wait for him to come back home.

I kept staring at Cali's figure, lying in her bed. Why would she want to be Spirit? Why did any of them want it?

I got up, grabbed pajamas from my dresser, and went to the bathroom. I couldn't have sight. My hands trembled on my lap as I sat on top of the toilet's lid. Tears pricked my eyes as my gaze became watery and my stomach turned into knots again, twirling in my gut.

What was going to happen to me if they discovered my domain was sight? Would they ban me, let me fend for myself? Maybe I could go back to my parents. Then the Guild would become our number one concern again. I couldn't put Francis and Daniel through that either. Besides, they believed I was dead.

I jumped at the knock on the door. "Soph, you okay?"

I wiped the tears with the back of my hand and plastered a smile on my lips before answering Brooke. "I'll be out in a minute."

No one can ever find out. You will take this to your grave.



BROOKE WOKE me up the next morning, already wearing her school uniform.

“You need to get ready?”

My gaze flickered to the other two empty beds. “Where is everyone?”

“Cali went jogging, and Nikki hit the greenhouse. Something about a Marvel plant that is going to sprout any day now. Don’t ask me. I don’t know all the plants the way she does, but I’m sure it’s a tree that grows gems or something.”

“There are trees here that bear gems?”

Brooke laughed. “No, but I thought that when I got here. You need to get up.”

I grunted as I swung my legs off the bed and stood on the balls of my feet. Inside the closet hung my uniform, and I went to the bathroom to get dressed. I’d never worn a school uniform before.

The blue pleated skirt reached just above my knee. The white shirt, tie, and blue pullover were a perfect fit.

White socks covered my shins with black shoes.

I brushed my hair and teeth before putting on a little eyeliner, mascara, and lip gloss. Brooke wore that, so I guessed the school allowed it.

I hated the pulse behind my eyelids. The appointment I had with Mrs. Beatty flashed through my thoughts. Crap!

I flew out of the bathroom and grabbed my school bag.

“Is Maya here?” Brooke asked, gazing at the door.

“Who?” I looked at her, as we were the only ones in the room.

“The way you whirled out of that bathroom makes me think a Wind fae hit you with a wave of her element. Maya is the only one that comes uninvited.”

I huffed, wanted to laugh, but I didn't even have time for that. “No, I'm late. I'm supposed to meet Mrs. Beatty this morning.”

Brooke came with me. We walked into the hallway and took the staircase up to the last level.

The morning light glowed from the opposite windows as we climbed the stairs.

“N-o-o-o!” A girl's scream echoed through the foyer. Everyone in the hallways and on the stairs rushed to the railing. Brooke and I did the same. Even the flowers popped out of the ivy to see what was going on.

I stood close to one pillar, labeling that type of scream. Someone close to her must have died. Mouse colored blonde hair and deer antlers towering in the air shook with the girl's sobs as she sat on the floor. She bawled her heart out with the phone in her hand. Two girls crouched next to her. One had a pair of deer antlers, too, as the other one had a beak.

“It's Kayla. She's a duredina,” Brooke whispered.

The image of the dragon's face with antlers and a horse's body covered with colorful feathers popped into my mind. The priest had said that they were kind and intelligent.

“She... just... died. Dreyra... died!”

My skin prickled as a heaviness descended in my core. My heartbeat pounded as I cupped my neck.

Dreya! The vision played off in my mind. The male voice had said that he would take care of Dreya, making it look like an accident so that the person named Caus could make a place for Drake. It wasn't a coincidence. Sight was my domain.

“A-c-ci-dent,” Kayla bawled.

“Who is Dreya?” I asked Brooke.

“A Fire fae. She's a celebrity in Concordia. You will learn soon that anything that plays with fire has a bright future. It's so unfair.”

The déjà vu was getting the better of me. The swirling in my stomach and the ache in my skull returned. Hot waves rolled from my body. I took a deep breath as a demonic fear pushed down my core. *Play it cool, Sophie.*

“If you ask me, I did not know how she got to be so famous.” Brooke kept on babbling. Words like “an annoying voice” and “irritating the crap out of me” found their way into her speech.

I don't want sight. I can't have sight.

“I hope her soul rests in peace.” Brooke tapped with her fingers her right shoulder, left shoulder, and then her chest in one swift motion. “Sophie, are you okay?”

“Yeah.” I shook myself out of my thoughts, and we stopped looking at the girl that cried over someone she didn't know.

Many students nearby stared. Some tittered as others were on their phones to confirm the news.

We reached the last level, and Brooke turned right, walking down the hallway. When the hallway stopped, she turned left. At the end, stone steps led to frosted glass doors. A substantial red stone glistened above the door as more brass twirls and curls decorated the frosted glass.

Green vines grew on the edges, and tiny pink and purple flowers popped in between the ivy. Brooke and I climbed the sleek stone steps.

She knocked on the door, and finally, Mrs. Beatty's voice commanded us to enter.

"Good luck. I'll see you later." Brooke ran back in the direction we had come.

I took a huge breath, trying to push the reality of what had happened to the back of my mind. My fingers gripped the knob, and I opened the door to enter.

Mrs. Beatty stood on a tall ladder in front of the mother of all bookshelves. She pulled out one book after the other, searching for a title. A train of books hovering in the air.

"Take a seat, Sophie. I will only be a minute."

The strong roasted scent of coffee, coming from a fancy coffee machine sitting in the corner, hung in the air. An enormous bouquet of lilies, mixed with tiny pink blossoms, sat on a table in a crystal vase.

I walked to the wooden desk that was half the size of the window. A huge calendar lay flat on the table, with a stack of sticky notes and a stapler close to the basket filled with pens. Her chair looked like a leather throne—very modern. Two

similar chairs stood in front of the desk, but they were not as big as the chair behind the desk.

I plopped down as my mind still ran crazy about having sight as my domain. I needed a distraction, and Mom had always said that the best was to look around and concentrate on only five things. She had a lot of panic attacks.

A welcoming fireplace sat against the opposite wall. Soft brown leather couches placed on an Arabian carpet broke the modern chic of the office. Bookshelves stacked with books lined the walls. A spiral staircase led up to another compartment, and light seeped through the floor-to-ceiling window. Big dark red curtains tied neatly behind hooks, draped in front of the window.

The books still hovered in the air. My heart picked up a few beats faster. *Don't look at the books.*

My eyes flickered to a few paintings hanging against the wall where there weren't any shelves. I looked at each of their faces. They didn't look friendly. The last picture was of a woman with snow blond hair that cascaded in a sleek strand over her shoulder. Sharp, pointy ears stuck out from her hair. She had the weirdest turquoise color eyes that went well with her porcelain skin. I struggled to look away from her painting.

Mrs. Beatty climbed down the ladder with a book in her hand and walked toward me. She waved her hand, and the books all flew back to their places and shelved themselves.

She plopped the book on the desk. It was a green, leather-bound book and something to do with the Earth element. She

had a tiny box in her hand and dropped it in front of me. “It’s from King Avery.”

“The king?”

Mrs. Beatty nodded.

There was an envelope with the box, and I took it. A wax drop sealed the flap. An imprint of a crest covered the drop, and I almost regretted breaking the seal. I unfolded the note.

Dearest Sophia.

Welcome to Earwyn. I hope you will rest well and enjoy learning everything about your new world and where you belong in Concordia. You are a rare rose. Concordia needs more Spirit faes. I’m looking forward to the day we are going to meet. Regards, King Avery.

P.S. The stone will help with your headaches.

I unwrapped the king’s gift and found a beautiful white suede box. My fingers brushed over the material that was in the design of golden floral swirls. I opened the box.

A yellow stone sat inside a small silver cage. It was the most beautiful pendant I’d ever seen.

I took out the golden chain, and the pendant dangled from it. The chain was big enough to put it over my head.

“Never take it off, Sophie. The gemstone will help with your headaches until you have blossomed into your gift.” She took out another file from her drawer with my name written on it. She opened a file as she pulled her chair closer before sitting on it. “Now, let’s get started.”

She asked me questions about my parents and what they did for a living. She needed to get a clear picture of the environment I'd grown up in.

When we'd gotten through all her questions, she closed the file. "I'm not only the principal here, Sophie, but I'm also your mentor. We don't get a lot of Spirit fae students. It's my job to help guide you into your spirit gift. I will not sugarcoat things. It's not an easy gift to have, and discovering your domain is going to be tiring. So let's start at the beginning. Here are the subjects you will take this year. I'm quickly going to run through them."

"Okay," I said, not sounding sure.

It had taken about an hour just for her to explain it all. I had to choose three more subjects on top of the ones the curriculum forced me to attend. The two subjects that I had to take were projective magic and mentalism magic. The subjects broke down into subcategories that I would take this year and carried on at the university. Projecting, shielding, telepathy, and mental compulsion were among those with spell casting and warding. It was a mouthful, and I did not know how I would process the information.

Divination, history, and mathemancy were the other three subjects on the list. Now I had to choose three more.

I did not know how I would fare with the cramped schedule. The subjects sounded so Greek. "Can I ask a question?"

"Sure, what is it?"

“Divination is about the future, right?”

“Yes?”

“It’s not seen as dark?”

“Not this type of future casting.” She put her elbows on the table with her fingers interlinking below her chin. “Brooke told you about sight?”

I nodded. “She said it’s a dark gift.”

“To see something of the future directly is labeled a dark gift, but to use it through the tools is something that one can learn. Sure, the Spirit faes are better at it, because of Sight, even though it isn’t their domain. King Avery has a couple of Spirit faes dabbling into divination to see if the choices he has to make are the right ones. He only dubs the direct sight as a dark gift.”

“Did all the faes that had sight go dark?”

“No, I actually used to know a fae that had sight, and she was one of the kindest faes I knew. Still, we kept her domain a secret. Are you afraid that your domain might be sight?”

I shook my head. “Just curious.”

“Tell you what, I’ll give you a day to think about the other subjects.”

My lips quirked, happy that I had twenty-four hours to decide. “I need something fun. These subjects sound so heavy.”

“Well, if you want my advice,” Mrs. Beatty took the parchment with all the subjects listed in front of me, “magical

art is fun, but can be quite dangerous.”

“I’m not great at art.”

“Okay, not that one, then. What about charm casting? It’s always helpful in dangerous situations. Charms are hardly something that the cops looked at.”

The laughter barked out of me. “What do you think I’m going to do with charms? Kill someone?”

Her lips curved as her eyebrows playfully arched. “One never knows the sticky situations you get yourself in. Too drastic?”

I nodded.

“Pity, it is a lot of fun to learn.” She pointed to the following few subjects. “There is animal care, healing magic, nutrition, which could help a new fae like yourself. Stealth-and-survival is fun too. A lot of brain work, though. You would think it’s a practical class.”

I brushed my hands through my hair. “It’s all so overwhelming.”

“I know it can be, but I’m sure you are going to make the right decision. If you are great at math, then dimensional manipulation is a great subject to take.”

“What is that?”

“You learn how to manipulate interior spaces and dimensions. Something might look small on the outside but could be big on the inside.”

I got what she was saying, and I had to admit, that sounded like something I could use in my future.

“Think about it, but I’m going to need your answer on those three subjects by tomorrow morning.”

“Okay.” I took the parchment from her.

We both got up and walked to her door.

“If you have more questions, ask. My door is always open.”

“Thank you, I will.”

She opened the door, and we stepped through the threshold onto the marble platform that led to the white stone steps.

“Healing magic is not a terrible choice for Spirit faes either. I remember the headaches, even if it happened a long time ago. The pounding is difficult to bear.”

My lips curved. “Thank you, Mrs. Beatty.”

“Call me Mavis.” She winked. “After all, our Spirit faes need to stick together.”

A skinny boy rounded the corner and rushed up the steps and came standing next to me. A sleek, stripy tail swayed behind him.

“A note from Hank,” the boy said, and Mrs. Beatty took it.

“Thank you, Trevor. Can you please show Sophie to Sovereign Reginald’s class?”

“Yes, Ma’am.” He saluted.

“That’s a good boy, now go.” She looked at me.

“Thanks for the help.” I ran to keep up with Trevor. He looked comical with his two front, prominent teeth, with the tail swinging behind him.

“I’m Sophie.” I reached out my hand to him.

He shook it fast. “Trevor.” He didn’t sound too enthusiastic about taking me to my class.

“Sorry that you won this duty.”

“It’s not that. It’s Sovereign Reginald. He can’t stand me and always humiliates me because of who my father is.”

“Your father?”

“A mantichore that made his life a living hell.”

“You can point me in the class’s direction.”

“No, it’s divination. It’s tricky to get there.”

He walked faster as he looked at his watch and took the stairs to the foyer. He led me out the entrance that ended in the lanai with pillars and the decorated glass roof.

We took the steps to the left and entered the courtyard of the school, rushing in the tower’s direction.

The door was open now, and Trevor climbed the spiral staircase to the top of the tower. It had a dungeon feel to it, with the stuffy smell lingering in the narrow passageway, and the flat stone walls.

“So you are a mantichore?” I knew he wasn’t, but I had to pretend that I didn’t see his tail, and I was dying to know what he was.

“You would think that, but no. With shifters, it’s not to say if your father is a manticore, you will be one too. I’m a drivine.”

The owl and hybrid image jumped into my head.

“Here you go. I’m sure Reginald will love you, being a Spirit fae and all.”

“Thank you, Trevor. Nice meeting you.” I smiled, and he rushed down the spiral staircase.

I was positive now that nobody else saw the ears and the tails. I took a deep breath and opened the door.

The class stopped when I entered. Sovereign Reginald wasn’t what I expected him to be, and neither was this class.

A pair of cargo pants hung from his hips, his blue and white shirt fringing the top of the pants. He had shoulder-length blonde hair and blue eyes that matched the color of the blue in his shirt. His nose was a bit too big for his face, but nobody could choose their features.

“Well, come in, or are you going to stand there the entire day?”

“Oh, sorry.” I walked fast to where he stood in front of a beautiful half-moon desk with decorative carvings on the bottom.

I handed him the slip that Mrs. Beatty gave me, and my eyes caught the giant glass orb resting on a brass ring behind him.

“Yeah, yeah.” He waved me away to sit down.

Brooke sat in the third row behind a long half-moon desk, waving at me. The space next to her was empty. I climbed the wooden steps and sat on the end behind the long desk that four other students shared.

She grabbed my necklace and smiled as she admired the stone in its steel cage.

A glass orb resting on a brass holder with claw feet sat in front of Brooke. Every single student in this class had a glass ball in front of them.

Madam Clementine, the gypsy at the carnival, reading fortunes inside a colorful tent, took up the space in my mind.

A book came out of nowhere and landed on my desk. I jumped, and Brooke snorted. “Expect that a lot today.”

The Sovereign carried on with his lecture as I paged through the book. I didn’t need the stupid orb to see the things that were going to happen.

The two dreams plagued me, too. What did the one with the phoenix mean? Was it a phoenix, or a phoenix griffin? How did the two dreams connect?

I pushed the dreams to the back of my mind as my eyes wandered. It didn’t fit with what Brooke had told me. She’d said this class was dark, or needed a dark environment. I didn’t feel like we were inside the tower at all.

It was light with wooden pillar walls. The top part of the window had a decorative brass design, running into five vertical lines, forming the lower part of the framework.

The delicately placed colored glass between the brass turned the windows into a masterpiece. A twin window stood right next to it.

Stone figureheads hung against each wooden pillar next to each window. The first one was the griffin, with its cat-like ears, then the frost eagle, and the manticore. Behind Sovereign Reginald, a green board filled the entire wall, and bookshelves lined the part above the board.

I turned around and found more glass bookshelves against the wall behind me, carrying more books.

Sovereign Reginald's desk stood on a wooden platform, and the floor was a rose-pink marble with a green and gold star symbol. An antique brass ring chandelier hung from the roof. The room wasn't big, but it was beautiful, like it jumped out of a storybook.

SOPHIE

Brooke swore she'd seen a butterfly fluttering inside the crystal ball. The revelation meant a change, but because she couldn't tell Sovereign Reginald the color of her butterfly, he couldn't say if it meant a wonderful change or an unwelcome one. A bell rang in the distance, and I followed Brooke to Sovereign Finley's class. Students filled the hallways trying to get to their classes, and there were cat-ears and ram-horns everywhere.

The tails were harder to notice through the ocean of students.

Some of the cat-ears sniffed my hair as Brooke and I pushed through to get to Sovereign Finley's class, which was in the opposite direction of the tower.

She said a quick goodbye and rushed further down the hall. I was one of the last ones that entered. I looked around as I waited for the Sovereign to come.

The walls were made of dark face bricks, and the desks were placed in a circle. There were three-tiered seating placed in half-moon formation.

The Sovereign's desk faced the class.

On the walls, giant symbols glowed in bright colors, and the windows were in the same shape and form as the windows in the tower.

Students filled most of the tables, except for the one in the last row. Rows of glass cases with books lined the back.

Cali's bright red hair grabbed my attention. She sat in the row opposite the Sovereign's desk next to a girl with long blonde hair cascading behind her back with the bluest eyes.

I smiled at her, but the two of them glared at me. If I could trade legacies with her, I would.

The Sovereign came rushing through the door. She wore a long robe jacket over a pair of pants, and the top of a white blouse stuck out from a golden vest.

Her glasses rested on top of her nose, with a gray bun hanging loose behind her head. Her hair hung in messy strands, and to be honest, she looked kind of bizarre. I'd bet she was one of those people who was super-smart but noticed nothing around them.

She jumped as she saw me standing close to her desk. "Ah, the new Spirit fae, Sophia."

"Sophie," I corrected her.

"Sophia, please take a seat." She ignored my correction and pointed to the only open table.

I climbed the steps and sat down in the empty chair.

The table had seen better days, and there were messages carved into the wood. The students with cat-ears all gawked at me. I pretended not to see them.

Leaves of paper flew around the class and landed on every table. Funny symbols mixed with math questions filled the paper. Math was my favorite subject, but the questions made no sense.

I did the mathematical parts of the equations, but the strange symbols behind some of them confused the crap out of me.

“Sorry, I’m late,” a guy said, and Cali shrieked.

A tall guy with dark blonde hair, almost brown, and sun-kissed skin walked in with his bag hanging from one shoulder, his hands in his pockets. A pair of cat-ears protruded from his gelled hair. His lips curved, showing a deep dimple on his left cheek. I didn’t like the slight change in my heartbeat that brought on heat waves.

From the way Cali shrieked and every single girl stared at him, I could only assume who that was—Chase Evans.

He walked straight in my direction. My heart pounded as he plopped into the chair next to me.

This was his table? I took a deep breath, hoping that Cali’s glare might be attached to this new revelation and not the Spirit thing. A powerful scent of something sweet with a musky undertone hit me full in the face.

The lecturer tutted and ordered the class to carry on with their quiz as a test fluttered in the air and landed in front of

Chase.

He filled it in super-fast and put his pen down. A chuckle escaped his lips.

I took a deep breath, and his scent clouded my mind. My eyes flickered toward him and discovered that he was staring at me. “What?”

“The name is Chase.” He left out his hand for me to shake as his eyebrows furrowed, staring at the paper in front of me. “What are you trying to do?”

I eyed his outstretched hand and wondered if his touch would affect me the way his brother’s touch did.

I shook it, but there was no current or vibration at all. Maybe it was because it was the first time a magical being touched me. It had to be something as simple as that.

“Sophie, and I’m trying to fill in the questions for the test.”

His lips clamped tighter, looking nothing like his brother. Drake had different colored eyes and didn’t have the dimple. Well, he didn’t smile, so I didn’t know if he had a dimple. Drake’s face was more manly, too. Chase had a baby face.

I looked back at the questions on the paper and concentrated back on my test.

“You are trying to work it out? I’m impressed, Sophia.” He spoke my name with a slight mock to his tone. Did he hear what the teacher had called me? He wasn’t even in class? What if he owned enhanced hearing? Meaning all the cat-ears have enhanced hearing.

“It’s Sophie.” I corrected him with a slight tweak at the corner of my lips.

He chuckled again as he saw my answer.

My hand covered the paper.

“So, tell me, Sophie, what makes you tick?” he asked as I tried to fill in the following answer. Ignoring him would not be easy either, and I could see plenty of fire in my sudden future.

I took a huge breath. “We are busy with a test if you haven’t noticed. It’s not a social hour.”

“Don’t be a sourpuss. It’s an innocent question.”

“Shh.”

The twerk of his lips showed me he was enjoying every single moment. One of the other boys stared at me, and I had to suppress my laughter the way Chase bent over the table and looked at him.

I got what Brooke had meant with the horror that would unleash on me soon. The boy looked away when he saw Chase’s glare.

Oh man, I was going to deal with a Fire fae after this.

The test ended, and the papers lifted off our desks and landed on the Sovereign’s table.

The Sovereign looked at the paper that was on top of the pile and frowned. “Chase Evans?”

“Sov. Finley.” Chase smiled with his hand in the air. He was an Evans alright. They both possessed the dreamy appearance.

“What are you doing in my class?”

Laughter filled the air as I closed my eyes. He wasn't even in this class?

“Oh.” He got up and skipped down the steps until he reached her desk. “I forgot. Here is my slip. New schedule.” His tone dripped with honey. She looked at him as he walked back. A grin formed on his lips that probably made every girl's heart flutter. He even winked at the one girl in the row below.

He was such a flirt.

Sovereign Finley looked at his schedule. “Humph.”

He'd changed his classes because of me?



MY HEAD FELT like exploding after the hour of mathemancy and the endless questions popping out of Chase's lips. Chase was definitely different from Drake. He was quirky, and I couldn't help but like him. The bell rang, and I walked to history class with Chase at my side.

“You have history too?” I asked.

“Yep,” he answered.

“Is it a new class for you or an old one?”

“Old one.”

“Hey, Sophie,” a boy with red hair and cat-ears greeted me.

Chase growled as I squinted at the boy.

This one didn't back off. He winked at me, driving a warmth to my cheeks.

"Sorry about that," Chase said. "If you haven't noticed before, Spirit faes are like catnip to griffins."

"So everyone tells me. Why is that, Chase?" I was dying to know his answer.

"They didn't answer that one?"

"Nope. They just said that I was going to have plenty of unwanted admirers. So what is it about Spirit faes that pull griffins to us?"

"Relax, I already told them to give you space until you settled in."

"What?" My eyes grew.

He showed me his palms as he found my answer somewhat funny. "It's out of my control. You need to bond with a griffin," he said, sounding as if he wasn't one. "It's not my fault that your destiny lies with one of these asses." His dimple dented into his left cheek. I had the urge to poke it. Thank heavens I didn't follow through.

"I thought it only happens when the headaches don't go away."

He shrugged. "You can read up about bonds in the library if you don't believe me. Prepare yourself for what's coming."

I stopped myself from reminding him what he was. "Thanks for the warning."

"You are welcome."

“So, out of curiosity, how long am I stuck with you following me around?”

“Until you find your way around. You’ll beg me to come back when I’m gone. It’s a horror show when new meat enters through these doors. Just ask Brooke.”

“But Brooke has found her match.”

“Still, it was freaky.”

I remembered what Brooke had told me about her and Xander sneaking around. “Could that be the reason Cali is so obsessed with you?”

Chase laughed. “No, I’m afraid that is pure attraction. I’m not a match for Cali or anyone.”

“Oh, I see. You are one of those special types of griffins.”

“Yup, I’m waiting for my fire to turn up any day now.”

“Like your brother?”

He grunted. “Of course you met the ass already. Yes, we are the same. I’m just a late bloomer.”

“Okay, so what you are doing is sort of keeping the other griffins in line?”

“Yes, I’m not as pathetic as they are. You are the new lost one, and Mavis asked me to help you for the first few days.” He called her by her first name, too.

“How kind of her.”

We walked into the class.

Chase went to sit next to the griffin that greeted me in the hallway. They were friendly now.

I went to the Sovereign's desk when Brooke waved at me. The seat next to hers was open again. I rushed to her table and plopped down next to her.

She shook with silent laughter as everyone with cat-ears—girls included—turned to look at us. I closed my eyes and sighed before opening them.

Brooke kept snorting to her palm.

“Yeah, you told me it was going to be a nightmare.”

“Oh, relax, it's not so bad. The idiots will stop soon if you do not show any interest in any of them. The bond has to come naturally. They can't force it. Besides, it's not why I'm laughing.”

“Okay, why are you—?”

“Later, too many ears in this class.”

My gaze fluttered to the griffins. All their ears turned in our direction and I couldn't help the feeling that they have enhanced hearing. I couldn't wait to find out what Brooke knew.

SOPHIE

Gigantic maps and a glass showcase stood against the back wall. The giant golden plate with a hand reminded me of an old sundial, but something told me that wasn't one. In another compartment sat a beautiful white misty bottle with red wax sealing the lid. The feather ring next to it gave off a creepy vibe. The other artifacts were too small for me to see what they were.

Shelves of books filled the opposite wall and behind the Sovereign's desk. The windows were the same as all the other classes and the floor had *Coat-of-Arms* patterns printed in red on a pink tinted marble floor. Orange-red colored curtains draped the windows.

Sovereign Danish was the same guy last night at the ceremony.

History was always such a boring class to me. I was more of a look-to-the-future-type of girl.

My mind kept going over the previous class and Chase's constant questioning. Then his brother took hold of my thoughts again. The way my body had tingled every time we'd

made contact. What was that? A part of me wanted to know more about the phoenix griffin too. I needed to discover why I kept seeing ears on everyone else except him. Earwyn Academy forbade having a romantic connection with the Graduates. Urgh! I couldn't fall for Drake.

Brooke tapped on my arm, and my eyes flickered to her. She nudged me with her head and looked sideways in the Sovereign's direction, who sat on top of his table, legs swinging. He seemed to be waiting for a reply.

"Sorry," I apologized with a smile.

His lips parted, revealing pearly white teeth. It contrasted with his brown complexion and sleek black hair. "It's okay. The first day in a new school, especially a magical school, can be quite scary."

The class sniggered.

He raised his hand, and the class fell silent. "Sophie, please tell us more about where you are from?"

"Oh." Warmth pricked my cheeks. I was never one for public speaking, and the entire class's eyes were on me, including Chase Evans.

"No need to stand up. Just tell us right there in the comfort of your chair."

"I'm from Tacoma, Washington," I said, launching into my story. "Mom and Dad are as human as they come. They do not know what I am. So you can imagine the shock when I found a griffin saving my life."

"A phoenix griffin," Chase chirped.

“Sorry,” I said to Sovereign Danish. “A phoenix griffin.”

Sovereign Danish’s lips fanned into a grin.

“Discovering that faes and other magical creatures existed was difficult. Not to mention that I am one of them.”

“Please share with us how you discovered you were different, Sophie?”

“Well, I didn’t know straight away. Like I said, a phoenix griffin rescued me.” I put emphasis on the phoenix griffin and my lips curved as the class thought my tone was funny. “When I woke up during mid-flight, he almost killed me.”

“Did my brother drop you by accident?”

“No, but he almost squeezed the life out of me with his enormous claws. I passed out, and when I woke up, I was told that I was different, and that some cross bearing guild wanted me dead. It didn’t sink in. I thought the guy was crazy.”

“Welcome to my world,” Chase yelled. Brooke tried to suppress her laughter as I left out kicking his ass and trying to escape him twice, once in a hospital gown that barely covered my ass.

“The rest was quite nerve-racking, and something I do not want to talk about.”

Sovereign Danish smiled.

“I woke up at Earwyn and here I am.”

“Thank you, Sophie.” Sovereign Danish looked at the class. “That is part of Sophie’s history. We know now where she’s from, her origins—”

“And who saved her,” Chase said.

“He is throwing huge dynamite at you, girl,” Brooke whispered.

Cali will love that.

A chuckle slipped past Sovereign Danish’s lips. “Who saved her, and she became more than just someone sitting in a chair. She became an actual person, and that is what this class is all about. To learn more about the origin of magic, Concordia, and who we are. I know that your last year’s classes covered most of it, but there were also topics they didn’t want to discuss with you. There is no such thing as taboo topics this year.”

A boy lifted his hand.

“Yes, Gerald.”

“Even the history of the Phoenix Monarchy?”

Some students gasped, other’s postures perked up. I looked at Brooke as her eyes grew, looking from the boy named Gerald to Sovereign Danish.

“Especially about the Phoenix Monarchy. It makes up to 30 percent of this year’s grade.”

My gaze shifted to Chase, who raised his left eyebrow with folded arms leaning against the backrest.

Sovereign Danish clapped his hands and jumped off his table. “Don’t act so surprised, guys. We still have the phoenix griffin that had a powerful alliance with the phoenix.”

I thought immediately about Drake.

Sovereign Danish continued, “You need to know the facts that had taken place a hundred years ago and why the phoenix is extinct today. The reasons behind King Avery’s actions are fundamental. If it wasn’t for him, we would still live under the iron claw of the phoenix, not being able to use magic and how to practice it in a safe environment like Earwyn.”

“Why were the phoenix such tyrants?” another girl asked.

“Lacey, we’ll discuss that too, and who knows, maybe some of you will even get a better idea why the phoenix became such a tight ruling monarchy. I wondered how many of you might actually understand and agree with the phoenix.”

“Is it true that there is a prophecy of their return?” Another girl wanted to know, and Sovereign Danish looked at her.

He smiled. “Miss Cavenagh, I knew your mother well. She was a great Spirit fae, and the day she saw that prophecy in divination, she was barely your age.” He launched into what her mother saw in the glass orb, just the way Brooke had today with a butterfly.

Every student was hanging on Sovereign Danish’s words. He wasn’t your average history teacher, either. I still wondered why the fantasy lore described the phoenix as wise and faithful figures, giving them the symbol of life when they were the opposite. It led to more questions.

“There was a prophecy, yes. And let me guess, your uncle didn’t tell you a lot about it?”

She shook her head, and the fear was clear on her face.

“There are reasons they didn’t want to elaborate on it. Because your mother prophesied their return. What she saw wasn’t great.”

“She is from Concordia?” I asked Brooke as I kept staring at the Cavenagh girl.

Brooke shook her head and whispered, “It’s a long story, and I’ll tell you about that later.”

I looked at the girl. She was petite, and I couldn’t believe that her mother was a Spirit fae. Sovereign Danish spoke about her in the past, which told me she had died. The question was, how did she die?

History was going to be my favorite class. I would learn more about the new world in this class than any other one.

We all took an oath not to speak to the lower grade students about what we were going to learn this year. The pledge was a confidentiality form attached to a magic spell that we had to sign. Apparently, all last years signed this one. The magic bound us from opening our lips to speak to younger students about the Phoenix Monarchy. Why?

It looked like a normal piece of paper, nothing special. My eyes skimmed through the fine print of the form, something I’d learned from Dad. He was one of the best lawyers in Tacoma. It basically boiled down to one thing: If you tried to tell anyone about the phoenix monarchy, a horrible pain would emerge from your gut and spread through your body until you stopped talking about the phoenix. It was drastic. We signed it by pricking our fingers and pressing it on the dotted line. A

golden shimmer ran across the length of the contract and then the paper vanished.

The bell rang, and everyone bolted from the chairs and out of the room. I followed Brooke to the dining hall. My stomach growled as we both walked up to the buffet area.

There were many colorful dishes on the table. Pink, round cakes, roasted little birds that could be baby chickens, but weren't. Roasted meats with fresh vegetables. Purple bread rolls grabbed my attention, and I took one. Mom had always said to try it yourself before deciding. I brought it to my nose and the scent of beetroot filled my nostrils.

When we finished dishing up, we walked to the nearest open table. I picked up the goblet and liquid raised in the glass. The same sweet-water spread through my tastebuds. I put a piece of the purple bread in my mouth and a sweet savory taste danced on my tongue. It looked weird, but the taste was the complete opposite.

My eyes flickered to Chase, plucking his eyebrows, sitting at a table with a group of boys and girls. Cali and Nikki were among them.

I wondered what occupied his thoughts. Was it because of what Sovereign Danish had said? That the phoenix griffin had an alliance with the phoenix, and he was one. Was it the reason there weren't many phoenix griffins here at Earwyn, either? Was it why Drake looked normal and didn't have cat ears or a beak, claws or a tail? Or was he wondering, like me, where the hell did that contract disappear to?

The Cavenagh girl walked with a group of friends to the buffet. Brooke scraped around her plate with her fork in thought.

“So, are you going to tell me the truth about the Cavenagh girl now?”

Brooke put her fork down and glanced at me. “She was quite the talk of the school when she came two years ago with me.”

“She came to Earwyn with you?”

Brooke nodded and spoke in a low, soft tone. “Her name is Penelope, and she is a Water fae like me. Her Domain is ice. She wasn’t adopted, Soph. She was a changeling.”



WE STILL HAD ABOUT fifteen minutes before class started. I took a walk with Brooke toward a stream close by. She always wanted to be near her element. We reached the pond with the Pegasus statue, and Brooke removed her shoes and put her feet in the cold water.

“When I met Penny, I didn’t know what a changeling even was. I felt so sorry for her when they brought both of us here. The way the students treated her when the news came out. It wasn’t right.” Her posture bent forward, with heavy arms and shoulders pulled low.

“What happened?”

“Let’s just say it’s better to be adopted than being a Changeling.”

“They bullied her?”

“I did too after a while because I tried to impress Chase.”

I froze. “You liked Chase?”

“Soph. I know what you are going through, because Chase has a wicked charm. He showed me around, too. He told me it was to make sure that all the Frosties were in their place until I settled. You should be careful, but the ass could be your match. Still, there is another side to Chase Evans. I meant it when I said he was rude and only thought about himself. With his looks, he is like his brother. They are by far the most beautiful creatures I’d ever laid eyes on, apart from Xander. I fell in love with Chase Evans super-fast and got hurt when he showed me his true colors.”

“This was before you saw Xander?”

“It was forbidden, and I tried not to see Xander in that light.” She sighed. “Penny almost committed suicide because she didn’t fit in. Until doctors came to do tests one day, orders of the king. They discovered Penny belonged to Amilda, the fae that made half of Concordia’s prophecies through a crystal ball. She was also the princess of Concordia.”

“Wait, her uncle is the king? His sister had sight?”

“They said she had projection, but sometimes I wondered if she didn’t have sight and just learned super-fast to tap into projection, as she knew how much her brother hated sight.”

Mrs. Beatty's comment about the fae she'd known who had sight registered in the back of my mind. Was she speaking about Amilda?

"Finding out what flowed through Penny's veins taught all of us a lesson."

"How did she become a changeling?"

"Penny was born out of wedlock. It's still a huge thing in Concordia. And because she was part of the monarchy of Concordia, Amilda hid her child on the other side. She exchanged her baby for a sick one. It's unfortunate as Amilda died before Penny reunited with the royals."

"Holy crap, can you imagine?"

"I don't have to imagine I was here. Saw everything. Especially when King Avery came to meet her."

"How did he find out about her?"

"His sister told him on her deathbed. And he searched for her ever since. So when there were rumors that a changeling came to Concordia, he sent his doctors. She goes home every summer."

"To Concordia?"

"Yep, she is apparently very close to her uncle."

"Hmm."

"She was with me at that compound where they have done tests on us. After everything we had been through, I still treated her like shit just to fit in." Her eyebrows knitted and the corners of her mouth pulled downward.

“Hey, you were hurting too.”

“It doesn’t justify it. She was like me. We were both so scared and scarred. I promised myself to never follow Chase Evans’ lead again.” Brooke glanced at her watch. “Oh, shit. We should hurry.”

She put on her shoes, and we rushed back to the building. I made the class with a second to spare and grunted when I saw Chase sitting at the back. The only empty chair available was next to him. I couldn’t help the fluttering butterflies, but I heeded Brooke’s warning. Two years ago, she was exactly where I was now.

I plopped down in the seat. “Old class or new scheduled class?”

A grin showed the dimple. My stomach fluttered. Urgh! I wasn’t even a dimple-person. “You will beg me to come back when I’m gone.”

“Maybe not. One of these griffins you try to keep in line might be my match.”

His left eyebrow raised as he looked at me. “Touche.”

He opened his book when the lecturer flew in like the wind.

I chuckled, as she reminded me about the girl from last night. I wondered what her legacy was. Did she become a wind fae?

“What is so funny?”

“Nothing, just something Brooke said.”

“Yeah, don’t believe everything she tells you.”



I FELT MENTALLY DRAINED after two hours of projection. Chase excelled in this class. He’d tried to help me, but it only brought on the slight pulse of another headache. The idiot was by far Sovereign Tridell’s favorite student.

I didn’t impress her at all. According to her, Spirit faes excelled during the first hour of the lesson. I sucked at projection.

I sighed and hunched over in my chair.

“Don’t listen to her. Tridell can be a bitch when she wants to be. You are not open yet.”

I looked at Chase. What the hell did he mean by not open yet?

The bell rang, and I wished I could go to my room and sleep forever.

Chase walked with me to the stairs.

“What do you mean by me not being open yet?”

“Tridell will complain soon, and then she will force Mavis to take other measures to deflower you.”

“Deflower?” The only deflower I knew was when you lose your virginity.

“Yes, take you to the stones to open you so that your natural domain can show.” His eyebrows knitted. “What did

you think I meant?"

Warmth radiated over my body and aflame my cheeks.
"Nothing."

He chuckled. "I'll find out."

"Yeah, good luck with that one."

I found Brooke waiting at the stop of the stairs as my path with Chase split.

"Ooooh, already one griffin that can't get enough of you."

I shook my head and Brooke giggled. It didn't stop the butterflies from hitting my stomach's wall, though. He was attractive.

When we neared our room, the door opened, and Nikki stormed out wearing a tight black training uniform.

Brooke and I entered. I found the same uniform in the drawer. The emblem of two stags standing nose to nose was on the front of my vest. Their antlers formed the top of a triangle. In the middle was another swirl sign.

"It's the symbol of magic. Ever heard of the White Stag?"

I shook my head.

"Some say he only appeared to powerful, magical creatures which are pure and have a destiny to change the world. If anyone not worthy shows up, he disappears into a million butterflies."

Now that she spoke about it, I'd seen the white stag in a movie once.

“The swirl in the middle is the Spirit fae’s symbol.”

I looked at the outfit again. “This isn’t your normal P. E class, is it?”

“Nope, you are going to learn how to fight. A fae should learn how to wield her sword, Lassy,” she mimicked Maverick’s Scottish accent, and I couldn’t help but laugh. “And hold out *ye* shield to protect *yerself* from the blazing fire of the one eye drake.”

“One eye drake?”

“Humor me. It’s fun once you get used to the scrapes and sore muscles.”

“Please tell me this isn’t the class you deemed as a dangerous subject when you told me magic school is fun.”

“Not by far. Charms, and magical art, those classes are vicious when the spells go wrong. Just ask Dorian Gray.”

“He existed?”

“There are many Dorians. They said it was a spell gone wrong, but I don’t know. The guy lived for a long time, didn’t he?”

He was a fictional character, but the way Brooke spoke about him told me he was far from one. “He was fae?”

“No, he had a thing with a fae. He broke her heart, and she wanted to curse him into a painting. She gave the idiot immortality as long as his painting stayed out of harm’s way.”

Wow! Now I was wondering if I should take magical art as an extra subject.

I knew one of the extra subjects was going to be animal care. Thanks to Sovereign Danish and the fact that the phoenix griffins and phoenix had united. Maybe I'd understand my dream.

SOPHIE

I walked with Brooke to the training courts stationed behind the classrooms.

A zillion little steps surrounded by plants carried blue and yellow sunflowers double the size of my head. I couldn't stop taking in the weirdness of Earwyn. It must be what an ordinary fairy experienced in our world.

The pants hugged and rode my ass. I tugged at the area around my butt-cheeks.

“Stop fiddling,” Brooke said and launched into the subject that broke her femur. She'd tried to do a simple spell during charms. It had backfired and broken her leg.

At the bottom of the stairs, we walked along a cobblestone path lined on either side with tall, green hedges. We reached the point where the hedges made a sharp left.

In the corner was another gigantic sculpture. It was of a male fae wearing a training outfit, holding a spear in his hand. The statue reminded me of Alex because this guy had dreadlocks hanging down his shoulders.

We reached the exit of the hedges, and a forest was on our left.

The cobblestones led to a pathway that ran next to the edge of the forest. Poles of colorful flags, showcasing the emblem of the stag, fluttered high in the air above giant tree-tops.

When we passed the trees, an open field came into view.

Enormous blocks of podiums covered half the ground. Next to the platforms of training blocks, different weapons hovered on top of pillars.

Many guys stood in groups on the platforms, chatting to one another. They were a mix of cat-ears, beaks, tails, and horns among the faes. They all wore some kind of training outfit. The boys didn't have sleeves, and the pants differed from the girls. They looked more like soldier pants than tights.

The butterflies in my stomach fluttered as I locked my gaze on Drake standing on the podium with a group of guys. I didn't know what it was with this guy that affected me so much.

The two guys with him had both blonde hair. One of them had his back facing us, the other guy had a mean set of eyebrows and a white bushy horse's tail flailing behind him.

"The broken femur was painful, but the magic to heal it was twenty times worse," Brooke said. "Getting mended through magic potions is not as fun as one thinks."

I guessed there was no easy fix with broken bones.

My eyes kept lingering on the group that Drake was a part of. With his arms folded, in the training vest all the boys wore,

every bulge of his torso and arms was on display.

He looked as if he carried the world on his shoulders but dripped in the tough-guy factor. I sighed, and it sounded so sad. Lucky for me, Brooke didn't stop telling her story.

Eyebrows-guy's wavy blond hair flipped as he made galloping movements, speaking. He slapped his ass, and I suppressed my laughter. Drake hardly broke into a smile, but the guy with his back to us laughed out of his belly.

Brooke gasped and then shrieked as she ran to the platform.

The blond guy looked over his shoulder. A mean beak covered his lips, and he jumped off the platform. Brooke jumped into his arms, and she moved her face closer for a kiss. The beak disappeared and got replaced with lips. I knew who that was.

I gave them space and followed the girls a few yards in front of me, heading past more trees.

Xander put Brooke down as she asked when they had come back.

"Hey, Sophie," a couple of cat-ears standing on the opposite side of the podium sang in unison. I sighed and closed my eyes as Brooke's laughter reached my ears.

My lips twitched, and I opened my eyes.

Drake's shoulders shook, looking down at the floor, and I met the greenest eyes that belonged to eyebrows-guy.

“You will get used to it,” he said, with a grin adorning his lips.

I put an imaginary gun to my head and pretended to pull the trigger. He thought my silent humor was hilarious.

Heat rolled off me in waves as they laughed, Drake included.

Brooke caught up to me when I walked up the dwindle path.

“So I assume that’s Xander.”

“Yes.” She had a massive smile on her face. “They came back this morning.”

“Who is the guy with the bushy eyebrows?”

“Oh, that’s Emile.” She blasted into a bubbly conversation about Emile. He was part of the team that Xander transferred from. He was a Pegasus and great at retrieving a Lost One.

The path led to a meadow covered by many trees.

A round cement platform stood in the middle. Four mid-length walls surrounded the edges of the circle. An element hovered on top of each division. On the water wall, water ran down the top into a small pool. The fire wall looked like a modern fireplace. Fire danced on top of white rocks.

The wind wall looked like feathers hovering in the air. Ivy covered the top of the earth wall.

The only element missing was Spirit. But then again, Spirit had everything to do with your mind, and it wasn’t something you could touch, feel, or see.

Stone seats forming a half circle faced the podium.

“Welcome to our fighting grounds,” Brooke said as she led the way to a group of girls that stood in front of the stone seats. “Once a week, the other two days we are training with the boys, learning to defend ourselves.”

Cali and her friend from mathemancy were among the group. Cali glared at me as we neared, and Brooke had the decency to detect it and stopped moving closer.

The girl with the long blonde hair stepped closer to Cali as they whispered and burst out laughing.

“What is Cali’s problem?” Brooke asked.

“Chase and this morning in mathemancy,” I said in a hushed voice.

Brooke tilted her head back and laughed.

“Stop, she is only going to hate me more.”

“Oh, please. Cali doesn’t even stand a chance with Chase. She never had; besides it wasn’t the reason she glared at you like that. Chase told all the griffins to back off, and that’s sugar-coating it.”

“What? He told me that Mrs. Beatty gave him the duty to help me until I’m settled.”

“She did, but she didn’t tell him to tell the others to back off. It’s like he marked you. I told you he likes you.”

Chase was cute, but he wasn’t his brother. Not by far. Forbidden things were my magnet.

“Cali is just jealous because you are getting all his attention,” Brooke said in an overbearing tone for everyone to hear.

“Oh, shut up, Brooke,” Cali yelled. “Just because you found your Frost Eagle doesn’t mean you know everything.”

“Well, it’s the truth. Chase is not a match for Fire faes. When is it going to sink into that head of yours?”

“Well, neither will he bond with anyone else,” Cali barked back.

“Keep telling yourself that. The guy changed his schedule.”

Cali’s lips curled and she bared her teeth as a stream of fire launched our way.

It happened so fast that I didn’t have time to shriek.

Brooke threw the water in her bottle in the air, and a wave of water shielded the two of us.

I hid behind Brooke like a scared little mouse. Things were happening again that my brain struggled to process, and my heart pounded behind my ribcage.

“Girls, enough!” Mrs. Beatty yelled. The fire stopped as the wall of water splashed on the ground. “What is going on here?”

“Nothing,” Cali said as she glared at Brooke and me.

“Brooke?” Mrs. Beatty looked at her.

She shrugged. “That time of the month, I guess.”

Some girls sniggered, and Cali's lips curled, baring her pearly k-nines.

“Well, whatever it is, work it out. You two,” Mrs. Beatty pointed at Brooke and Cali, “won yourself the platform. Let's go.”

Brooke and Cali were eager to step into the ring. The rest of us planted ourselves on the stone seat in front of the concrete ring.

“I want to see defense techniques. No attacks.”

“I have fire. Defending myself is harder. We attack!”

My eyes grew the way Cali spoke to Mrs. Beatty.

“And I showed you many times how to protect yourself using fire.”

“My father was so right about you. Teaching us how to defend and not attack—”

“Is what will save your life in the end! You won't have time to attack when a dark fae becomes your opponent, Miss Hale.”

Cali went super quiet. Her jaw muscles pumped.

Mrs. Beatty nodded at Brooke, who held her hand out to the water wall, and a beautiful long orb of water flew toward her. She guided it into the form of a sphere. “I know I shouldn't say it, but this is going to be fun.”

“Oh, I'm counting on it.” Cali had a sly smile on her face.

“Defense only, Cali!” Mrs. Beatty ordered.

Cali reached out her arm to the fire pillar, and the fire ran in her direction as if it was moving on an invisible string. She snatched the fire into her hands and brought it up into a fire orb in both her hands.

“Hit me with your best shot, little waterfall,” Cali said.

“You bet I will.”

“Begin,” Mrs. Beatty yelled, and Brooke released the first water orb. Cali protected herself with fire, but Brooke’s water orbs left her hand so fast that it created a lot of steam around Cali.

“Guide the steam, Brooke,” Mrs. Beatty said. I knew it wasn’t her element, but Brooke made it look like it was. Sweat lingered on Brooke’s temples, either from concentration or from the heat coming from Cali.

The fire fae growled as she struggled to form a proper firewall.

“Defense only.”

I sat on the edge of my seat as I watched two faes using their elements against each other. My eyes saw all this, but my brain refused to believe it. I even pinched my leg to make sure I wasn’t dreaming.

A scream left Cali’s lips, and fire connected hard with Brooke. She lost her balance and fell backward on the floor.

“Cali, defense!” Mrs. Beatty said.

“I told you the firewall doesn’t work!” Cali’s fist clenched next to her.

“It does if you know how to erect one properly,” Mrs. Beatty said back. “Maybe if you take your classes more seriously, you will learn to unlock your full capacity. Go sit down. Nikki.”

Cali’s body shook as she walked with considerable strides to the stone seats. Her nostrils flared as tears lingered in her eyes. Her eyes met mine before she plopped on the stone bench, and anger danced inside of them.

Inside the ring, Nikki took her stand facing Brooke.

“Defense only, Brooke,” Mrs. Beatty said, and Brooke nodded.

Nikki stretched out her hand to the wall covered with ivy and the vines shot strands toward her.

Brooke’s water shield looked strong, but Nikki had many ways to penetrate Brooke’s water shield. I wished that one of these elements was mine. I wanted to do that too.

“Think, Brooke, what do you do when attackers surround you?”

Brooke called for more water as Nikki got the upper hand with her earth. Vines twirled around Brooke’s arms and legs.

“Your window is almost closing, Brooke. Act and act fast,” Mrs. Beatty guided her.

Nikki was a badass with her element as Brooke tried to drown the vines.

The water splashed onto the floor, and Brooke vanished.

Mrs. Beatty laughed as some girls stood up and cheered.

Everyone applauded. I followed their lead, not knowing where the hell Brooke had disappeared to. I remembered what she'd said in the woods to Lindy. How she would become one with the water and end up in a lake.

Brooke came running up the path through the trees. Her hair clung to her face as her suit glistened from sunbeams reflecting on the drops.

Mrs. Beatty handed her a towel. "That one is getting stronger."

"Just like you said, it's like riding a bike." Brooke elicited laughter from the class.

Did she just become one with her element?

Mrs. Beatty called the next opponent to fight against Nikki so that she could defend herself.

"Holy crap. That was brilliant."

Brooke grinned, drying her hair.

I wanted to know what happened to her when she became one with the water like that, but Mrs. Beatty demanded silence from us. We watched the rest of the class getting their turn except for me. I wasn't by far ready to defend myself or attack.

When the school bell rang, Mrs. Beatty called me.

"I'll wait for you." Brooke pointed at the boys' training podium.

I nodded as Mrs. Beatty lifted her hand. The fire that danced on the fire wall died, the water stopped, the feathers

floated and came to a landing on the wind wall, and the ivy retreated on top of the wall. “So, how was today?”

“Hard,” I said, frowning at the walls. “Will I be able to do that?”

“You’ll be able to do so much more when you are ready, Sophie. I want you to take a rest, and then this afternoon around three, meet me at my office.”

I nodded.

“Don’t be late. We have lots to cover.”

“I promise.”

I rushed back to where Brooke waited for me, and we walked back to the room. I couldn’t wait for this afternoon.

SOPHIE

The door in our room shut with a loud bang as Cali stormed out. She and Brooke had a few words, or rather, a screaming marathon.

I didn't like this type of drama. Nikki glared at Brooke, and went to one of her plants.

“What, she started it?”

“You should know better.” Nikki started trimming one of her plants.

“Cali is not innocent in this. She is treating Sophie like shit because of the idiotic moves Chase made earlier this morning.”

Nikki stopped trimming the plant that looked like a dead green hairy spider with its legs pointed in the air. She looked at me. “He seriously changed his schedule?”

“And telling the other griffins to back away from her. But she is the only Spirit fae apart from Principal Beatty, so we should've expected this, right?” Brooke answered.

“Could he be cuter?” Nikki said with closed eyes.

“Cute!” Brooke shook her head and rolled her eyes.

“What? It’s romantic.”

“Yeah, we’ll see what Sophie thinks if he shows his true colors.”

“Well, Cali actually has a chance with him. He is throwing her crazy signals.”

Brooke looked at me, and I got what she meant earlier on. I’d also seen him winking at another girl in mathemancy. He liked to have his bread buttered on both sides. I couldn’t care less, as Drake in his training uniform, imprinted on one of my temporal lobes.

I remembered the book about bonds, and I really wanted to find more about the phoenix griffin.

I looked at my watch. There was still like an hour and a half left. I had more or less an idea of where the library was and picked up my bag.

“Where are you going?” Brooke asked.

“The library,” I said and smiled.

“I’ll walk you. I’m heading that way as I’m meeting Xander.”

She jumped from her bed, and we left Nikki alone with her plants.

“Who’s the blonde girl with Cali today?” I asked Brooke as we walked to the library.

“That is Maya, and believe me, if you think Cali gets on your nerves, Maya is twenty thousand times worse. Her father

is a rich tycoon in Concordia. Her mother was a human living here. It's how they met. He had some business to attend to, and they fell in love and had Miss Perfect." Brooke fluttered her eyes.

"So she always knew what she was?"

"Yeah."

"And Cali's parents? What did she mean with her dad being right about Mrs. Beatty?"

"Some parents dislike how she trains their kids with defense. They believe in the full-on attack method. But Mrs. Beatty is right. We can't learn how to attack if we do not know how to defend ourselves first."

What she said made sense. She waved goodbye as we reached the library. "See you later, Soph."

"Okay, bye." I waved and walked through the enormous doors of the library.

The library was extensive, with rows of bookshelves from floor to ceiling. That paper smell you only get with books lingered in the air. A spiral staircase led to the upper levels and lots of ladders leaned against the shelves.

Books flew in the air, with specks of lights leading the way. Their faint bells reached my ears.

Groups of tables filled the middle of the library. Students occupied some tables, with stacks of books next to them.

I found the guy that Brooke had introduced me to that day we sat on the steps. The one with not a bad brain—I think his

name was Craig—worked at the desk.

“Hi.” I smiled at him.

“Oh, hey, Sophie, how are you doing?”

“Better than I thought.”

“Congrats on nailing one of the rarest faes. The griffins making your life terrible?”

“No, I think Chase scared them off. Him, I can handle.”

“That is a first. Usually, the ladies fall at his feet.”

“Yeah, well, I’m a Spirit fae, not a stupid fae.”

He laughed at my little joke. “What can I help you with?”

“I need a book about bonds, just to get my head wrapped around the idea.”

“Always better to be prepared.” His hair was extra curly today and almost reached his shoulders. He wrote the number of the aisle where the book was. “If my dim-witted assistant was here, I would’ve shown you where the book was.”

“No worries, I’m great at searching for things.”

He pointed in the direction where the aisle was. I found the book that Craig suggested and walked to the nearest table.

My fingers automatically pulled on the glass lamp’s string. The light brightened up the leather casing. There was a symbol engraved deep into the front, and I assumed it was the fire they used in the bond ceremony. The flame had a big circle drawn around, with a triangle in the middle. I opened the book and paged through to chapter one.

It was about bonds and what made a bond between a fae and creature so special. Not every fae needed their fated bond creature, only those whose magic was potent. If the magic was too strong for the fae, their body broke down. One picture showcased skin that peeled off. Another picture showed how limbs became black, then dried out, and turned into dust. The artist drew their faces pulled in excruciating pain.

It was why they needed a Fated-Bond creature.

The author kept talking about a pull. It was different for every fae, but it was like a spark that would grow into a flame and become unbreakable. The bond could be anything, from lovers to family. Still, the author warned that if there was a love interest lying with one part and not the other, it could lead to a tear in the bond, and it was almost impossible to repair.

That part made me shiver and put more weight on my shoulders.

The creatures or the fae couldn't force this bond. It had to come naturally. I couldn't stop thinking about Drake. I knew I shouldn't think about him. He wasn't a Fated-Bond creature, but I guessed that was what made this crush even harder because he came with a forbidden clause.

I discovered what Brooke meant by unhappy in love. I could never hold the attention of a guy like Drake anyway.

I turned the page and focused on the information.

There was an entire chapter on the Bond Ceremony, and the pictures more or less gave me an idea of how the ceremony

worked. The sketches labeled all the different color flames and what they meant.

The red flame was the most authentic bond, a hundred percent match, followed by the turquoise flame and blue flame. The percentage decreased going through the color chart of all the different fires.

I wrote in a notepad all the crucial points of what formed a bond and the top percentage of flames before I carried on to the next chapter.

Water fae came next, and their Fated-Bond creature was the Frost eagle.

There were pictures of faes riding them. The eagle and fae ratio was out of proportion. I'd seen them in the book that Father Matthew showed me, but this book carried more information.

There were plenty of ways for a Frost eagle to bond with a Water fae. Some bonds read like meeting your soulmate. Others formed by saving their lives. Friends and family listed last.

It made sense, as these relationships already came with strong bonds.

The following chapter was about how they could efficiently channel water and ice. If a Frost eagle and Water fae's bond was strong, the Water fae could take the eagle with them when they become one with their element.

I paged through to the next fae. It was fire, and they bonded with the drivines. The creatures didn't own fire, but

the drivines were immune to fire faes fire and assisted the fae with other abilities to protect them. One of them was vanishing like the phoenix griffin. The chapter said that it was one of the drivines' most challenging abilities to master and needed a Fire fae for that.

Fire faes had a second Fated Bond creature. The crows looked like ordinary crows, but the way they traveled was unique. According to the book, they didn't own a human form and changed into a billow of dust and traveled at the speed of light. A huge reminder at the bottom of the page read not to mistake their travel with teleportation. The crow could take their Fire fae with them. The next page showed a picture of a fire-breathing crow, something the faes gave them.

I skimmed through the Wind faes paired with the Pegasi. The next one was about the Earth faes and how they could pair up with the crows and the duredinas.

Last was the Spirit fae and the griffin. The pictures made them look majestic. They always painted the Spirit faes on top of the Griffin's back. Both their eyes glowed.

I read through the chapter, and it was crucial for a Spirit Fae with the Domain of Sight to have a griffin. If it was a dark gift, why was it in this book? Unless it was only dark in King Avery's eyes. Didn't he oppress them too, then?

The griffins helped lessen the blow of visions and became the carrier of their magic through the bond. The griffins changed as the Spirit fae's domains changed. They have projection if the Spirit fae they bonded with has projection, and a shield if the Spirit fae's domain was a shield. It was a

fantastic chapter, and their bond read like the other fae-creature bonds.

The most important part of this chapter, their bond needed to be strong. It was overwhelming, too, as I got a clear picture of what it usually became—partners for life. If I didn't like my griffin, it would tear the bond, broken forever.

This was heavy to bear. Drake kept jumping into my mind, and I kept pushing him to the back.

Stop it, Sophie. Drake is off-limits.

The last chapters were about the three creatures that weren't a fated bond. One was the manticore, the next the chimera, and last the phoenix griffin. The three of them were like the alphas of the creatures, more superior, but in my honest opinion, they missed out on something unique.

I read through the manticore and kept seeing Lindy. Her nature was on par in this chapter, the way Brooke had said and from what the girl had shown me. They were hard-headed creatures and were very possessive. The manticore had a pull to the phoenix griffin, which explained the obsessive worry that Lindy had for Drake. Still, the book warned it wasn't a healthy match either.

What was it with girls that shouldn't go for the ones that books warned them about? Including Sophie Emerson.

I sighed and turned the page. The next creature was the chimera. They were just as scary as manticores and had three heads. I would pee myself seeing a chimera.

The first head was a lion. A goat's head rested on top of the lion's head. The third head was his tail—the snake. I prayed that I never bumped into a chimera and wondered why I hadn't seen a chimera marking on any shifter. What would it even look like? A snake for a tail, or similar horns like the manticore. The chimera had wings. It could be the wings.

Last was the phoenix griffin.

They were hypnotic and more majestic than the griffins.

Even the art painted them with a glowing fire covering their body. It was beautiful, and I touched the fire softly. To think that this was what Drake hid underneath the human.

His fire was about twenty percent of that to a phoenix, but more potent than the Fire faes. They could get reborn, but they needed the phoenix's help, meaning that they couldn't be reborn anymore. I understood why the phoenix griffin had an alliance with the phoenix. They were more phoenix than griffin.

How did King Avery kill them all? If they could be reborn, what did he have to do for that to never happen again?

Their demeanor was arrogant, stubborn, and set in their ways. They had high moral values, and once you backstab one, there was no way that phoenix griffins would forgive or trust ever again. They shared the pull that griffins had to Spirit Faes, but only because... the sentence ended, and I wanted to read further. I turned the page and a new chapter started.

I kept turning the pages as if by some miracle I'd find the chapter on the pull.

A grunt left my mouth. Because of what?

I paged back to the page, to see if maybe the pages didn't stick together. My eyes flickered to the page number. This book had a page missing, and I saw the small rifle of a page being torn out, stuck in the grooves of the page way at the top. I looked at the number in the corner and the number on the next page. It wasn't just one page. It was almost ten pages long.

I went back to the index to see what was after the phoenix griffin and saw it was the phoenix. They ripped the entire chapter of the phoenix out of this book, cutting off the context of why phoenix griffins shared the griffins' pull to Spirit faes. Why would someone rip out the entire chapter on the phoenix?

SOPHIE

I did a double take at the enormous round clock against the wall when the arm pointed five to three. *Crap!*

I bolted from the chair, rushed to the front, and placed the book back on the trolley.

I ran back to the main building and up the stairs two at a time. My lungs burned and my heart pounded. A couple were kissing in the hallway and I only realized as I almost passed them it was Cali and Chase.

An unexpected sullenness pressed on my chest. I shook my head in disbelief and I sighed inwardly. Well, Brooke had warned me.

“Sophie, wait?” Chase yelled as I climbed the next steps of stairs leading to the upper levels.

Cali’s grunts came from the lower level as Chase followed me up the stairs to the last level.

“Where are you going?” His sweet, musky scent caressed my nostrils before his figure emerged next to me.

“To meet Mavis at her office.”

I had to admit, whatever pulled me to the guy turned out to be an immense disappointment.

“First name basis, so hot.”

My eyebrows knitted. It annoyed me that he could switch over to the next girl so fast. Chase chuckled as he walked with me to Mrs. Beatty’s office and stood in front of the frosted glass in no time. Chase tapped the top of my nose. “Here you go. Don’t overwork yourself, okay?”

My stomach fluttered from his touch. It was so confusing. He turned around and scampered back in the direction we’d come from. I didn’t need his help.

Just then, the door opened, and Mrs. Beatty walked out. “Good, you’re on time.” She locked the frosted glass door, and I followed her.

She had changed her attire and now wore a brown leather outfit. Tight training pants, with a fitting long sleeve vest and a cape reaching her calves.

“So apart from the hard day, how is everyone treating you at Earwyn?”

I told her about Cali and Maya. The way they’d treated me this morning confused me at first, but then I’d discovered the reason and I’d told her what Chase did—changing his schedule. “Thanks for asking him to keep the other griffins at bay until I settle into my new schedule.”

Mrs. Beatty’s deep dimples showed as her lips curved into a grin. “You think I asked Chase to do that?”

I looked at her as we walked down the stairs to the foyer.
“You didn’t?”

“No. He’s a griffin. We think he is a brilliant match for you.”

“Chase and me?” My voice faltered. “I thought phoenix griffins are not fated-bond creatures?”

“Who told you he is a phoenix griffin?”

“He did. He said his fire is going to show any day now.”

She laughed and shook her head. “Phoenix griffins are born with their fire. Chase, I’m afraid, is a normal griffin.”

“But he said—”

“Yeah, he is a griffin that will never admit what Spirit faes are doing to him.”

What an idiot.

“Maybe there is something to this.” Mrs. Beatty’s eyebrows knitted as we walked with huge strides through the door leading outside to the school. “That boy’s acting strange around you.”

We walked down the stairs as her words sank in. I didn’t know how I felt about Chase anymore after witnessing him kissing Cali. We rushed down the path leading toward the training courts and through the hedges. The powerful smell of pine lingered in the air and my soles crunched on the short grass with each step I took.

When we exited the hedges, Mrs. Beatty took the first fork to the left in the cobblestone path, away from the training

center, and it dwindled down a hill.

The path led to a circle of stones. I'd seen plenty of them in the movies and my favorite shows that I'd watched with mom. It was our bonding time—the way she'd called it.

Mrs. Beatty walked inside the circle and toward the most prominent stone in the middle. She motioned with a wave of her hand for me to come. A soft buzzing erupted all over my body as I took a step into the circle. Goosebumps spread over my skin, crawling up into my neck, and I shivered.

“I forgot what that felt like. It's the magic that is calling out to you, Sophie. It happens only once, as a small introduction. The magic recognizes you as an ally, and it's saying hi.”

I rubbed my arms to get rid of the goosebumps. The buzzing still lingered. So that was what Drake's touches meant? He was a magical being, welcoming another magical being. The guilt piling on over how much irritation and trouble I had caused him.

Mrs. Beatty crouched in front of the stone and placed her palm against it. Her eyes closed as a content smile lingered on her lips.

I walked toward her, and the closer I got to the stone, the stronger the buzz rippled through my body.

Mrs. Beatty pulled my hand to crouch beside her. My knees bent into position, balancing my body on my toes.

“Place your hand on the stone.”

My throat became dry, and my pulse heightened. What would the connection do if stepping into a circle of magic had that effect on me?

“Don’t be afraid. Magic is part of us. It’s our friend. It will never hurt you. But if it’s in the wrong hands of someone who wants to harm you, it will cause you a lot of pain. Touch the stone.”

My hand reached out to the stone. The magic tickled my palm as it came inches from the flat surface. Laughter rippled through me, and I pulled my hand away to scratch my palm.

Mrs. Beatty’s eyebrows furrowed as she looked at it. Her lips quirked before a small chuckle escaped. “Your gift must be stronger than I imagined.”

“This is not normal?”

“No, the tickling sensation is, but it’s usually bearable. They did not induce these stones the way magic folk induced the old circles through rituals and spells. I’m afraid that you will only end up draining them.”

I frowned, not knowing what she’d meant.

She got up from her haunches, and I followed. “Master fae and creatures induced the magic into the stones when the academy opened. They took the strongest of every elemental faes and creature to fill the stones with magic.” She launched into her story about the history of the Stone Circle.

“It’s like a conduit for magic. Our elements are stronger inside these stones. Always remember that. Wherever you are in this world, these stones could mean a haven for a fae. You

only need to learn how to harness the magic from them and use it for what you need.

“If the element is new, like yours, these stones help to bring them forward. The elemental fae are the strongest in a Stone Circle, like this one. But because it’s not as old as some others, the stones are not powerful enough to open a Spirit fae. I will take you to Salem soon, to a place called Misty Hill. It’s the oldest stone circle in the USA, and you’ll open when you are in that circle. I can’t wait to see how you are going to react inside a naturally induced Stone Circle.” The excitement pulled at the corner of her lips and eyes as I understood when she said I’d only drained the stones.

My left cheek pulled upward. “But Salem is over 2000 miles from here.”

“Alex mentioned special doors to you?”

“Yeah, we went through them.”

“Then you know how we travel to places that are not nearby.”

“What if they are waiting for us?” I remembered what Xander had told Brooke about how Hong Kong was still blind to our race, but not Europe and the USA.

“This time, the way is safer. First, I’m going to teach you the most important part of our gift: how to protect yourself. Even in Concordia, you need to be careful who you trust. There are faes that would do anything for the truth, even if it means hurting another fae to get it. Even if it means killing them.”

The words leaving her mouth made my gut turn into knots, but I heeded her warning.

She smiled again. There was something about Mrs. Beatty's smile that made all the insecurities and fear disappear in a second. I felt safe with her.

“Remember, I'm your friend. I'm here to teach you everything you will need to protect yourself from whatever they throw at you. You will find plenty of other teachers showing you how to harness your gift for an attack. But to me, the important part of a gift is defense. So that is where we are going to start. I want you to trust me, Sophie, with everything you have. Now, I know it will not be that easy as we only just met each other, but I'll try my best not to fail you.”

Fail me? I didn't ask what she'd meant by it, and she looked at her watch. “We still have a few minutes.” Her lips curved. “So let's get going. How do you shield your mind so that nobody can ever penetrate it? It's difficult, but if you do what I tell you and practice every day, it will become natural, like breathing.”

Her dimples dented deep, and my lips grew into a smile. I nodded, inhaling steadily.

“Step one, clear your mind, and I mean, there has to be nothing in there. I know it's difficult because you are in a magical place with magical creatures and must still have so many questions. You're forming new bonds that will last you a lifetime. Not to mention your love for your parents and your worry for them must lay heavy on your mind. Know that we

sent a team to check in on them and see how they are doing, and so far, they are safe from the Guild.”

“Someone checked in on them?” A warmth spread through me.

“We do that from time to time, to help if they are in trouble. But it’s crucial that it doesn’t come from you. They can never know that you are still alive.”

I nodded even though I didn’t want to, tears threatened. “How are they?”

“It’s best not to ask that question either.”

I nodded again, trying to push away the pang.

I understood their reasoning. The situation wasn’t favorable, and signaling to my parents that I was alive would threaten their safety.

“Then there is the unknown.” Mrs. Beatty carried on. “The things you still don’t understand. So for someone like you, it’s going to be difficult. But you have to try. You can’t think about any of that. Lock it away. It has to be unknown to you when clearing your mind.”

I loved the way she explained things. “How do you do it?”

“Shield is my domain, so it’s my strongest. I invented an imaginary room to shut all those things away. The room in my mind is so strong now that I’m sure the door is steel.” A chuckle escaped her lips.

She must have had many disappointments to start her lessons with defense and not with attack mechanisms.

“You can start by thinking about a black void. Concentrate only on the darkness until all your memories and what you know disappear. The void has to overpower your entire being. Practice that for now until we can build on your room.” She smiled again. “Okay?”

I nodded.

“That is all the time we have for now. I’ll see you tomorrow morning at seven. Don’t be late.”

“I promise.”



WE WALKED BACK to the academy. Our paths split at the stairs, and Mrs. Beatty reminded me again not to be late for tomorrow’s appointment. I could finally go back to rereading my book about bonds, and I rushed back to the library as Mrs. Beatty walked into the main building.

The book was still in the trolley. I picked it up and went back to the table I sat at prior to our appointment.

I paged to the index of the book and my gaze fell on the chapter titled Bonds. The author must’ve mentioned the phoenix, and I discovered two pages missing from the Bonds’ chapter as well.

A grunt escaped my lips as Brooke plopped down in the chair in front of me. “Did you read something you didn’t want to hear?”

“No, there are pages torn out from this book.”

Her gaze snapped down at the page. “What?”

“You wouldn’t even notice it if you didn’t look at the page numbers. An entire chapter on the phoenix is missing and two pages on the Bonds chapter. Who would do that to a book?”

Brooke chuckled. “Are you serious?”

I nodded.

She lifted her arm towards the person standing on her left.

“Sophie, I want you to meet Xander.”

I looked up at Xander. I frowned as his beak had disappeared.

“Hi, Sophie, nice to meet you,” Xander said as I took his hand. I couldn’t stop wondering why I didn’t see his beak anymore. It was there this afternoon before Brooke grabbed and kissed him, but now there was no trace of a beak.

I looked around at the tails and ears in the library, but Xander, nothing.

“You okay?” Brooke asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “Don’t you think it’s odd that Concordia tries to delete the phoenix altogether?” I asked so that she could think that my confusion was linked to the book.

“You worry about the phoenix. I’m trying to introduce you to the love of my life.”

“Oh, sorry, Xander. I’m Sophie.” Our hands still clasped together. Lucky for me, Xander thought it was hilarious.

Brooke bent over the table and touched the book. “Why do you care about the phoenix? They were evil, and I pray they never set foot in our world again.”

“You are not one bit curious about them? I discovered why the phoenix griffins united with them.”

“Are you serious?” Brooke obviously hadn’t read the entire book. Xander pulled the chair out next to Brooke and sat down.

“How can you not know that, Love?” Xander’s eyebrows knitted as he stared at Brooke.

“I didn’t read the book. Did you know?”

“Yeah, they helped phoenix griffins get reborn. I guessed that whoever tore out the pages couldn’t tear out that part without being conspicuous.”

Brooke and I chuckled at Xander’s reply.

I looked at both of them. “It feels like they’re trying to hide something about the phoenixes.”

“Then ask Sovereign Danish. I’m sure he could tell you.” Xander had a great idea.

BROOKE LAUGHED AGAIN. “I forgot to tell you how Chase rearranged his entire schedule to have all his classes with Sophie. It’s hilarious.”

“What?” Xander whispered, and crow’s feet appeared at the corners of his eyes as his lips spread into a grin.

“The griffins are acting like she bewitched them.”

Xander's shoulders shook from silent laughter like Drake's had this afternoon.

"Drake will be so happy to hear that Chase is accepting the idea—"

Brooke covered his mouth. "He's not. He told Sophie that he was a late bloomer and will get his fire soon."

Xander's eyebrows furrowed, and he pulled her hand away. "What?"

"Idiot, I know," Brooke said.

"Sorry," Xander said, and looked at me.

"It's okay. You didn't cause his idiocy, so no need to apologize."

Xander laughed and stole a quick kiss from Brooke.

"Are you going to join us tonight?" Brooke asked, "We are hanging with the graduates for a few drinks."

I thought about going, but then Drake popped into my mind. My crush on him already moved into the complicated category, and I needed distance from the guy, not to mention that I'd caused him pain and hadn't apologized yet.

I shook my head. "A small headache is brewing. I'm going to pass."

"Soph, I don't want to sneak in alone."

Xander's shoulders shook at her excuse of why she wanted me to tag along.

“Please,” she begged, and I grunted in agreement. “Yes,” she whispered as Xander shook his head at her.

“I’m going to get a few hours of sleep. My headache is flaring up.” I needed some time to think.

“Okay, go sleep, but tonight you are coming with us.” Brooke looked smug or something like that.

I got up. “Nice meeting you, Xander.”

“Good luck with the headache,” Xander said back as Brooke mumbled sweet nothings to him.

I put the book back on the tray. *Dammit*. It was already hard to get Drake out of my system, with him saving my life and everything. Going with them tonight would only make it worse.

I walked back to my room and heard soft voices quarreling up ahead.

I chose the nearest sculpture and hid behind it.

“You don’t have fire, and you are not a late bloomer. Just go with Mavis.” My stomach flipped as Drake’s voice spoke in a stern tone.

“I don’t want to go to the bloody stones,” Chase retaliated.

“Assist Mavis. You need the projection exercise.”

“Oh, and if I help her, what is going to follow, huh? I’m not Mavis’s go-fetch-fluffy. She already has you, and the stones are not my life either. I hate how they make me feel.”

“Dammit, Chase. Don’t be stupid.”

Chase laughed. “You are so predictable. This has nothing to do with Mavis or the stones, does it? Mavis put you up to this?”

“What are you talking about?” Drake asked.

“It’s about the Spirit fae. I’m no one’s slave, and if you push this, I swear you will regret it.”

“It’s not like that, you idiot,” Drake roared, and I flinched. “You do not know how lucky you are. Just help Mavis. Maybe you will learn something.”

“If it’s so fucking important to you, why don’t you help? Oh, I forgot, you are not the right griffin.”

Drake sighed.

Chase chuckled. “It’s not a great feeling, is it? Well, at least you know how it feels to be in my shadow for once.”

Silence lingered.

“That is what you think this is? You are a prick. Do what you want to do, but don’t come crying to me when it bites you in the ass. The Fire fae is a scratch. All of them are. But hey, I’m just some wanker. What do I know?” Drake stormed off, and I tried to make myself super small as he rushed past my hiding spot.

Chase grunted in frustration. I prayed he would leave soon. So that was what Mrs. Beatty meant by her ‘we’ think Chase was a great fit. It was her and Drake. It could also be why he was so adamant about finding me. Maybe he saw I was a Spirit fae and one that could be a match for his brother.

I thought it had to be a natural bond no one could force, but the way Drake pushed his brother on me made me feel like I was a possession. I waited for another few minutes.

When the hallway seemed abandoned, I went to my room. Brooke wasn't in yet. Nikki sat behind her desk, paging through a book.

"Hey," I said.

"Hi, yourself." Nikki looked up from her desk. I went to my bed to lie down. I wasn't even hungry.

The information was a lot, and I tried to will myself to only darkness. I didn't want to go anymore, but I'd told Brooke I would. What kind of friend would I be if I chickened out now?

Why did I always walk into conversations that I was a part of but didn't want to be? At least I knew the answer to what Alex had meant that night about why Drake acting so strange. I was certain that he'd seen me on his brother's behalf, meaning that the possibility that Chase was my Bond-Fated creature was huge.

I wasn't ready to have what Brooke and Xander had with a being like Chase Evans.

SOPHIE

A soft shake woke me. My eyes fluttered open. Brooke stood over me with a huge grin spread across her petite face.

My headache had subsided somewhat, but I could still feel it's aching pulse behind my eyes. The king's necklace had helped a little, and I was thankful for that. Swinging my feet off the bed my toes touched the soft carpet and for a moment it reminded me of home. I got up and swallowed the lump forming in my throat, opened the dresser and took out a pair of jeans, T-Shirt and a gray cable knitted cardigan. Cali and Nikki were apparently also coming with us. I loved the way Brooke did my makeup. She used a lot of nude colors and finished with a clear lip gloss. Her floral scent kept teasing my nostrils.

The three of us left with Brooke.

“Getting out is easy. It's the sneaking in part that's difficult, curfew is at eight-thirty,” Nikki said.

“We'll be fine.” Cali waved it off as if sneaking in was her middle name and she rushed down the stairs to the left.

I looked at my watch. It was just after seven.

In the parking lot, Chase waited inside a mustang, and Cali and Nikki practically jumped in. Brooke and I walked to a pickup where Xander sat behind the steering wheel.

“Sophie, really, you don’t trust me?” Chase leaned over Cali, sitting next to him in the passenger seat to speak to me.

A chuckle escaped my lips as I climbed into Xander’s pickup truck, squeezing in next to Brooke.

“Fine, be that way!” Chase reversed out of the parking area.

“Oh, he is such an ass,” Brooke said as Xander turned on the ignition and reversed out of his parking spot, hitting the road back to the town

I wished we were born with an on and off switch. That whenever someone disappointed us like that, we could just switch off our feelings. I still didn’t even understand the emotions as we’d only fought and quarreled since we’d met. But what Alex had said and what Drake had asked when the team got hold of him, and how anxious he sounded... *stop it, Sophie*. He was just worried, like the priest had said. He was adamant about finding every Lost One.

The pickup stopped, and we climbed out. Was this the pub? Green wooden walls and two giant beer mugs on the sign with the bubbles popping above the foamy beer mugs spelled out the words Craft and Co established in 1981. The sound of doors shutting reached my ears.

I stayed close to Brooke as we entered, and I had to sidestep the mugs and cocktail glasses floating in the air until they reached the owners. Not a drop got spilled.

A creature working the mop strolled past me about knee height looking very much like a troll with an elephant trunk.

“What the hell is working the mop?” I asked. Xander burst out laughing.

“It’s magic,” Brooke said.

I looked back at the mop. The creature was looking at me with its big, sad eyes. Brooke didn’t see it? My stomach tightened again. I’m the only one who can see him. My hands ran cold with the realization. Just as well I had not asked what creature was behind the mop. I should be more careful, I noted to myself. Inwardly I sighed, this was going to be harder than I thought. I looked around second guessing everything I saw. Was this my life now?

We reached a table. Chase and Drake were already backbiting each other and had the table in hysterics.

Maverick sat at the end with a drink in front of him.

I took a seat next to Brooke. We sat across from a stunning girl with a golden complexion, big round dark eyes that matched her shiny, raven hair and lips that would make any girl jealous. I couldn’t tell if she was fae or shifter. The animal parts weren’t noticeable, and her black curls hung over her ears and cascaded down her back..

A male fae with dark brown hair and wearing a hoodie sat diagonally from Maverick and opposite Drake. Emile sat next

to Drake with another unknown guy with short hair opposite him. Next to the guy were Xander and Brooke, and next to Emile was the girl sitting opposite us, listening to Chase.

“Sophie, this is Parvati, Parvati, Sophie,” Brooke introduced us over the murmuring of the other tables, enjoying a night out. Cali and Nikki waited at the bar for drinks.

She reached out her hand for me to take. “Hey, Sophie, nice to meet you.”

“Likewise.” I shook her hand and sat back in my chair.

“Sophie,” Maverick greeted me, and I looked at him. “How *yer daein*’, lass?”

“Still processing,” I replied as Chase whispered something to Parvati.

“Baby Evans, you are cute, but I’m not ready to join the playpen yet,” Parvati said, and pushed his face away.

“Beautiful, you wish you were cool enough to join the playpen.” He winked, and Parvati closed her eyes as her lips pursed together.

My gaze landed on Drake, who stared at his brother, jaw pumping. He drew a sip from his beer as he shook his head.

“It’s forbidden, Sweet Cheeks,” Parvati said. “The academy will send me to Concordia and lock me up.”

Chase laughed and looked at me, but when Cali and Nikki came back, Chase gave Cali all his attention.

I looked at Brooke, who gave me a raised eyebrow, which I realized was her ‘I told you so’ look.

The mop with the creature came closer to me. I tried not to see how it looked at me. I closed my eyes, pretending that I didn't see the creature, and cried playfully.

Xander laughed.

"It's weird. Please get it away from me." I looked at Brooke and Xander. Chase got up and picked up the mop. The poor creature was assaulting Chase with incoherent nonsense as it hung from the mop for his dear life.

"You are bewitching mops now too, Sophie?" Emile asked, eliciting laughter from everyone.

"Must be a Spirit fae thing," I answered.

"What do you want to drink?" Brooke asked.

"Anything that is not induced by magic."

A giggle escaped her lips as she lifted her hands to get a server's attention.

The table clapped their hands as Chase came back and sat down in his seat. Everyone teased him about being my hero. He flipped everyone off, mocking him. "The mop is gone, drama fae."

I raised my eyebrow at him, giving a glassy stare.

He shrugged with a smile before I looked away.

Everyone chatted to one another, making jokes. Parvati was a drivine and was sitting on her tail. That was why I couldn't see it. She had loads of confidence and Emile was with her on Jacob's team.

"Where is Alex?" Brooke asked Parvati.

“Oh, Lenora came to visit.”

“No need to say more.” Brooke took another sip of her second cocktail. I was still nurturing my first as my headache flared up a bit more.

A round of drinks reached our table, I wondered why our beers didn't fly to us the way the other drinks had. Maverick asked who ordered it.

“The guy at the bar,” the server said.

As one, we all looked at the bar, and a guy with cat ears looked straight at me. He raised his beer glass my way. I grunted as Brooke snorted.

“You are coming with me to all my parties from now on, girl,” Parvati said as everyone grabbed their drinks.

“Please don't let him come over here,” I begged Brooke, and Xander's shoulders bobbed in silent laughter.

Chase glared at the guy at the bar, and Brooke bumped my shoulder to look.

I took a deep breath and shook my head as my gaze flickered to Drake. The butterflies in my stomach went crazy as he kept staring at the guy, too.

I stopped the huge grin wanting to form on my lips, and looked at Chase, who was whispering to Cali again.

I didn't care about Chase anymore. Not after what I'd discovered in the hallway this afternoon. I wished I could feel the same about his brother. I was nobody's property.

My headache pounded a bit more, and I struggled to keep it under control. It would be just my luck if I got another vision right here in this pub.

I felt tired, cursing as I didn't have a life in Earwyn either. I missed my life before the headaches.

Cali got up and kissed Chase.

My gaze flicked back to Chase, and he smiled at me.

“Why are you smiling at me like that?”

“No reason.” He kept grinning, putting his glass to his lips. So creepy.

I sighed as I willed my headache away. This bloody stone or rune or whatever hung around my neck didn't help one bit.

Chase downed his drink and got up, too. He walked in the direction Cali had disappeared in, and I followed him with my eyes.

Parvati and Brooke tried to suppress their laughter.

Drake shook and rubbed his head, staring at the table. Maverick spoke softly to him. Drake seriously thought that he could just push his brother on me. He could be glad that I had a headache. Otherwise, he would get a piece of my mind.

“You okay?” Brooke asked.

“Headache,” I whispered back.

“I'm speaking about in here?” She tapped her chest.

I frowned. “You think I'm making up the headache?” and lifted my necklace. “This doesn't work.”

She squinted and looked at the stone dangling from my chest.

I chuckled. "I don't give one crap about Chase Evans."

"Lass, *yer* okay? *Yer lookin' a bit peely wally,*" Maverick asked from the other end of the table.

"Yeah, she's dealing with a headache. I think this stone is a fake," Brooke answered on my behalf.

"Come to Maverick, let me help *ye*."

I raised my eyebrow and looked at him. "Excuse me?"

"*Aye*, we saved *yer* life, Soph. I'm great at the art of healing, lass." He rolled his r's.

I looked at Brooke, who nudged her head in Maverick's direction. I got up and walked over to him. He lifted his hands, and a vine that twirled around the bar latched onto an empty chair out of his reach and brought it to the table. He was so smooth. I bet he got plenty of girls that way.

I plopped down on it, right next to him.

"Where's *yer* headache?"

I tapped with my fingers on both sides of my temples, and he put his hands on me. The same tingling sensation that came from Hank came from his hand. The vibration felt good, and the warmth of Maverick's palms made me want to fall asleep.

"Holy crap, Soph," Maverick's tone was severe. "*Ye* walk around with *tis e'ry* day?"

I chuckled and nodded. "Don't stop, please."

I literally melted into his hands with eyes closed. Everybody went silent for a while as Maverick healed my headache. A few moments later, they started making jokes again, and laughter erupted around the table.

I could feel eyes on me, but I wasn't that curious to look. I was just glad that Maverick had confirmed to Brooke that my headache was real, and that Chase didn't crush my heart the way she'd initially thought.

“So you can feel that I'm not faking this?” I asked Maverick.

“*Aye*, headaches have a certain touch to them. *Tis* like the pain has a certain beacon.” I love how he pronounced some words. “I hadn't felt this sort of beacon in a long time, and I'm with Brooke. *Tis* stone is not *daein* its job.”

I laughed. “The king's handing out fake presents?”

“*Aye*, I *dinnae ken*.”

Drake was extremely quiet for my taste, but then again, he was the silent, broody type and not the flirty big mouth bad boy like his brother.

“It's eight-thirty, Brooke,” the guy next to me said.

“So,” she chirped back.

“You don't think it's time to go back to the playpen?”

Laughter escaped my lips as Brooke used a string of colorful language again. “I'm not a baby, Jacob. I'm so over it.”

I grabbed Maverick's hands as he shook from laughter, moving away from the pulse in my head. A few moments later, Maverick took his hands away. "Okay, Soph, how're *ye feelin'*?"

I opened my eyes and looked at Maverick. There was no ache or a pulse. "Your hands are pure magic, Maverick. Thank you."

"*Aye*, my hands 're 'ere for yer pleasure anytime, sweetheart." He winked.

Laughter broke out as heat flushed to my cheeks.

"Okay, it just sounds wrong around a bar table," I chirped.

"Another drink, Sophie?" Emile asked through chuckles.

"Yes, where are the cat-ears?" I joked and looked back at the bar. For all I know, that could be my bond.

"Cat-ears?" Brooke asked.

"Yes, when they change, they have ears that look like cat-ears."

Emile turned to Drake with a soft smile on his lip. "I see it now too."

"See what, Emile?" My gaze shifted to his, and his eyebrow raised slightly.

"Stop eavesdropping, Soph," Maverick scolded. "I told *ye tis* bad form."

"I wasn't eavesdropping. The guy sits right there, and I wasn't eavesdropping that night either. Gossiping is just as bad."

“Father Matthew *ain't a blatherer.*”

I smiled at the word ‘blather.’ “Well, they mentioned my name.”

“He mentioned your name that night?” Drake asked his first question.

“Yes, he did,” I answered Drake.

“What did they speak about?” He was so severe.

I bent over the table to move closer to him. “Nothing for your cat-ears.”

His face fell as his one brown eye and one green eye stared straight into my soul.

“Naw, what did they say, lass?” Maverick asked.

“It’s poor form to blather.”

Maverick stared at me with a slight twitch at the corner of his lips.

“So, Sophie, please tell us, how did Drake rescue you?” Parvati changed the subject, and I was so grateful to the girl. But then my bare ass filled my mind, and I put my drink to my lips as Drake shook with laughter.

“Shut up,” I said to him with a slight quirk at my lips and flaming cheeks.

“I’m still waiting for a thank you,” Drake said as he burst out laughing again.

“Are we *missin' somethin' 'ere?*” Maverick asked.

“No,” I said to Maverick, trying to dispel the heat from my cheeks. “A thank you.” A smirk tugged on my lips. “For ripping me away from my parents? For dumping me into a world filled with strange creatures, or wait, saving me from a life I might not even get to see, because if this thing around my neck can’t even dampen my headaches. Thank you for that, Drake. I’m so grateful.” I smiled, hoping my sarcasm wouldn’t appear rude.

More laughter erupted at the look on Drake’s face. “Oh, you are such a drama queen. You don’t need to die young. You just need to find your griffin.”

“Your brother, yeah, I know he’s not busy taking a dump in the toilet.”

Parvati screamed with laughter.

“So, no, the bond needs to form naturally, and Chase Evans, I’m afraid, is not good enough for Sophie Emerson.”

Brooke whooped. “You saw the light, my friend.”

“Oh, I always see the light. I can smell bullshit a mile away.”

Everyone gasped.

“I’m nobody’s property, Drake. So whatever you and Mrs. Beatty are planning. You can’t force a fated-bond.”

The table applauded as Drake just flipped them off. “You and Chase are the same.”

A cuss slipped out of my lips, and Maverick shook with silent laughter. “We are nothing alike. That I can promise you.

Your brother cannot commit to anything longer than a week.”

“You have not even been here a week..” His entire face frowned, making him look stupid hot again.

“I’ve seen enough, and I hear all the lies. I don’t need to be at Earwyn for a week.”

“She’s a shield.” Most of the guys yelled.

“Awesome, then I don’t even need a griffin, so you did your job. Trying to push innocent spirit faes on a griffin like your brother, shame on you,” I scolded him playfully, and a smile finally appeared on his face.

“Yeah, I’m not so sure about that innocent part anymore,” said the guy with long silky black hair and warm ochre skin color sitting next to me.

I pushed my hand toward him. “Hi, I’m Sophie. I’m a Spirit fae and one of Earwyn’s newest citizens.”

He laughed. “Jacob. I’m a Wind fae, and I help to find lost ones like yourself.”

“Nice meeting you, Jacob. See,” I looked at Drake, “it’s as easy as that, not your caveman, barbaric style of throwing ladies over your shoulder.”

Drake threw his head back and laughed again. I knew what was playing off in his mind. He probably took so long to get to me, because he was cracking himself against a tree because of my bare ass.

“Stop laughing. It was that or die.”

“Die? I was there to rescue you, not kill you.”

“Yeah, drama fae, remember.”

More laughter erupted as I chuckled with them.

“Why do I get a feeling you didn’t tell us everything that happened that day, Drake?” Jacob asked him.

“Oh, it’s going to hail,” I said dramatically, looking at the roof.

“Haha, besides, I didn’t steal you away. You were stone cold on the bed. If you actually gave me a chance, I would’ve introduced myself like a normal person.”

I chuckled with closed lips. “Still, I thought you were trying to kidnap me when I woke up.”

Drake laughed. “For my sexual pleasures.”

Everyone laughed.

“I didn’t say that.”

“Oh, the sex traffic comment said a lot, Soph.”

“That is what you thought?” Jacob asked.

“The guy looked suspicious,” I answered Jacob, and then looked back at Drake. “And now you want to push me onto your brother? Seriously, I don’t need that type of petty. I can find my own griffin. Thank you.”

“*Ye* eavesdrop on another conversation, Soph?” Maverick asked in a serious tone. Still, the curve on his lip gave him away.

“I just walk in on these conversations; believe me, if I had a little bell that could tell people where I was, I would put that

around my neck.”

More laughter erupted as the realization dawned on Drake which conversation I overheard. “You can try to fight it. I know you are his Spirit fae.”

“Go play.” I sounded disgusted at the mere fact, but my curved lips kept giving me away at just how much fun I was having. “And for that, I will show you I’m not.”

“Oh c’mon, don’t be like that?” Drake begged. “You are not even giving my brother a chance to show you who he really is.”

“Okay, I think you had way too many beers to drink.” I took his beer away, and he grabbed it back from me.

“Chase is a wee of a lavvy heid,” Maverick said, and I love his Scottish words.

“You can’t force the bond. Look at my lips. No.”

“You don’t have to like him?” Drake answered in the similar tone.

“Yes, I do. I read up on fated bonds today for your information.”

“You read up on bonds. Why?”

“Because since I got dumped in this world, everyone keeps telling me about the bond. Yeah, that crap is not me, sorry.”

“It’s not like that at all,” Brooke said, sitting next to Xander, leaning over the table to look at me.

“Not for you, but I will probably kill the griffin I will be ending up with. Especially if it’s this lavvy heid’s brother.”

Maverick chuckled, holding his hand up for me to slap.

“No.” I shook my head at Drake as I touched Mav’s hand. Drake stared at me, then I gasped. “But since we are on the note of fated bonds, you can help me with something.”

“Now you want my help?”

“Yes, you are the only phoenix griffin here.”

Drake sighed.

I chuckled. “It’s not so bad. I promise. I tried to find out the reason in the griffin’s chapter, but they didn’t mention it. However, they mentioned it in the phoenix griffin chapter.”

“What?” His eyebrows furrowed.

“Why does a phoenix griffin have a pull toward Spirit faes?”

He closed his eyes as everyone went into a fit of hysterics. He opened his eyes and scolded me with a glare.

“I didn’t say that. The book does.”

“Then why are you asking me?”

“What is another word for idiot?” I looked at Maverick.

“Gowk, Roaster or Rocket.” He rolled his r’s again.

“Because some gowk ripped the pages that explained that part from the book.”

“Then how did you even get to the part that phoenix griffins have a pull toward Spirit faes? Which is crap, by the way.”

“I’m quoting now, ‘Phoenix griffins are pulled to Spirit Faes because’,” I said, emphasized with a pause, “And the next page started on an entire different chapter. Page upon page have been ripped out completely, and it’s been driving me insane ever since.”

He smiled as he took a sip of his beer, taking his time to swallow it. “Okay, I guess I have another page to tear out.”

Everyone burst out laughing as I stared at him. “You are the *gowk* that tore out the pages. Why?”

“Because it’s embarrassing. It’s not even a cool reason. I saved future phoenix griffins from serious humiliation.”

“Oh, now it’s humiliating. A few seconds ago you said it was crap,” I said in a severe tone and looked at Brooke, who struggled to breathe. That was how hard she laughed and looked back at Drake. “You had to rip out the part of the phoenix too?”

“No, that wasn’t me. That was another idiot.”

I smiled. “I really wanted to know the rest because, like I said, that sentence is driving me insane.”

“No,” he replied. “I’ll take it to my grave.”

I grunted. “Fine, I’ll find another copy whose pages are still intact.”

Drake smiled. “Oh, please, go ahead.” He cheers me with his beer.

I gasped and looked at Maverick. “No, there has to be another copy?”

“I *dinnae ken* at Earwyn, maybe on Concordia.”

Drake laughed out loud at the slack look on my face. “C’mon. That part you read should be enough.”

“It’s not. The book emphasizes phoenix griffins too, but I still need to be convinced,” I teased.

“Because we are that great. I saved your life. I don’t care what you say.”

“Oh, and that part about you not lying?” I retaliated. I really enjoyed our bantering.

“We don’t lie.”

“Pfft, tell me something more believable. I heard the lies when you tried to explain what I was.”

“I told you I didn’t know.”

“Not that part, the part when I asked you how you knew I was different. You know what Drake told me?” I looked at Maverick.

He smiled and stared at me. “I *dinnae ken*, Sophie, enlighten us, please.”

“He told me, wait for it. That you guys have people stationed all over the world,” I moved my hands around to put more emphasis on the world part, “listening into stumble on cases like mine.”

Maverick closed his eyes. He opened them and smiled at Drake. “*Ye Gowk.*”

“Okay, so I told a small fib,” Drake defended himself. “I couldn’t tell you that a fairy saw it. You would think I’m

raving mad.”

“Why did you think I tried to get away from you? I thought you *were* mad.”

Cali came back, and her eyes grew slightly as she saw me sitting close to Maverick and speaking to Drake. She went back to her seat.

“*Ye told her tha’?*” Maverick asked.

“Yes, she wouldn’t believe me if I told her about Alpheus.”

“News flash, she *dinnae* believe *ye* at all. Ye might ‘ve started with Twinkle toe. Lucky I was there to save the day.” Maverick winked at Drake.

Drake cussed.

“Yeah, your bedside manners weren’t that great either.” I looked at Mav. “Do you know how hard the ground was?”

“*Ye’re* a sturdy lass, Soph,” Mav said.

“And you can vanish, seriously. Why didn’t you just fly to wherever Mav was waiting?”

“It doesn’t work while I’m flying,” Drake replied.

“Okay, I’m going to find a book on projection next. Unless you tore that book apart, too?” I raised my eyebrows at Drake.

He shook his head.

I looked at Maverick. “By the way, what does Alpheus sound like when he speaks to you?”

“Holy crap, lass, ye did a lot of *readin’*.”

“No, she had me. Thank you, Brooke,” Brooke interrupted.

“Ye told her I speak to the twinkle toes?” Maverick asked Brooke.

“Yes, it’s a cool gift. Own up to it,” Brooke said and smiled at Maverick.

“That is a cool gift.” I seconded that.

“Thank ye, Soph.” Maverick smiled.

“I can vanish?”

“Pfft, apparently not while you are flying. That would’ve been impressive.” My lips spread into a smile while he kept staring at me.

He cussed. “You are one of those faes?”

“I’m a Spirit fae, Drake. I’m rare. So you bet I’m one of those faes.”

Chase finally exited the bathroom, and a smile adorned his face as I spoke with his brother.

“What the hell happened to you? A few minutes ago, you looked like you were going to fall asleep.”

“Maverick gave me some of his *healin*’.”

Everyone laughed.

“What? It’s the truth.”

“It’s the way you said it, Soph.” Brooke smiled as she shook her head.

“You have dirty minds.” I scolded her and Parvati playfully.

I looked at Chase again, who planted his butt on top of the table, blocking Maverick from me, and just staring down at me.

I frowned at him. "I'm in a conversation here. Get up." I pulled his hand and thanked heavens; the guy moved on his own accord as he looked sturdy. Chase looked just as dumbfounded as Cali.

I was nobody's second choice or property, and I hoped that the Evans brothers had learned that tonight

DRAKE

The night flew by way too fast. Soph was driving me crazy and not in a bad way.

“Don’t you dare tell them.” She pointed her finger in my face.

I kept laughing, as they all wanted to know. “She has a beautiful round ass and that gown, oh man, revealed so much.”

The words slipped out of my mouth and within seconds red flushed her cheeks.

“You are douche. Thanks for that.”

Everyone cracked themselves.

“I wasn’t thinking about the damn hospital gown, okay? It was life or death. My ass wouldn’t matter much if I was six feet under the ground,” she retaliated.

Maverick took a huge breath and looked at me, probably thinking why I didn’t grab her.

“Don’t look at me like that. She can be glad it was me and not you’re perverted- self chasing her.”

Maverick laughed again as her eyes flickered to me, staring this time.

I shrugged. “We are even now.”

Cali and Nikki got up as Chase tapped at his watch. “It’s ten thirty.”

“So?” Brooke waved at them.

I knew my brother was starting to change his mind, but a part of me was also admitting how stupid it was to push him on her.

Our gaze met and she shook her head unapologetically at me again.

“No.”

Maverick, Jacob and Emile chuckled.

I clicked my tongue. “You are so stubborn, and they say we are stubborn. My brother is not like that.”

“Pfft, whatever,” Sophie said and took another sip of her drink. My eyes kept moving to Xander. I hated that I was falling for this fucking Spirit Fae. The pull didn’t feel the way the book explained it either. It wasn’t the same pull as I felt toward Mavis. This was different.

Sophie got up and looked at Brooke, pointing at the loo as I spoke to Emile, while sipping on my beer. She disappeared.

I got a text on my phone and Xander raised his eyes. My gaze flickered to the phone in his hands.

I fished out my phone and looked at the text under the table.

Should we leave her here?

Fuck. My lips curved and I looked at him.

His eyebrows rose, looking for an answer and I nodded. He leaned in closer to Brooke to whisper to her.

“What about Sophie?” she asked.

“Trust me. She will be fine.”

I didn't dare look at Brooke, put all my attention on Jake as he quarreled with Mav about who knows what.

Xander and Brooke said goodbye. Told Mav that he needed to make sure that Soph got back home safely.

“Of course, lad. Enjoy.”

Brooke gaped and Xander laughed, pushing her out of the bar.

Soph finally came back.

“She left me?” She asked Maverick.

“Relax. I told her I'll take *ye* home,” Maverick said.

“Why did she leave?”

“It's none of *yer* business, Sophie,” Maverick scolded playfully.

She lifted her palms. “Okay, that's plenty of answers, thank you. I'm actually tired now. I need to sleep as I feel another headache coming on.”

Maverick looked at her, the same time I did. Her headaches were not normal. But it was Mav that voiced it.

“Okay, *tis* not normal, Lass.”

She chuckled. “Welcome to my world. I’ve heard that a lot since I gotten here.”

“It’s normal for shields,” I said with confidence.

“Why does everyone say I’m a shield? Because I see through your bullshit?” Her lips curved.

Parvati reached over the table and high-fived her.

I chuckled. “I would like to see how you are going to sneak into the academy tonight.”

“Oh, I’ve been silently preparing that speech for when Mrs. Beatty catches me, because something tells me she knows that a couple of us are not in our rooms.”

Maverick chuckled. “*Whit’s* on the top of *yer* list?”

“Sleepwalking, but she would see straight through that bullshit.”

Jacob played with his almost empty beer bottle. “I’m sure we can think of something other than sleepwalking, Soph.”

“If I could work my projection, I might actually become a master at this.”

“Sophie, you are a shield.” Tim reminded her. He was like the odd one out. The extra but for some reason, Jacob always took him with on his missions.

“I’m going to laugh the day when you finally get to eat those words.” She looked at all of them.

I stared at her. For some reason I couldn't stop thinking about her ass in that hospital gown.

I downed the last bit of my drink. Maverick followed, and we all got up.

“Oh, we are all leaving now?” she asked.

“We came with Maverick,” I answered.

“You don't need a ride. You have wings and can light up your way too.”

“Ha-ha,” I replied sarcastically, without breaking a hint of a smile. “Yeah, it's cold. I'll take the lift. Besides, you will pee yourself if my other form comes out to play.”

“See, you like to play?”

Maverick settled the bill, and we walked to the door.

The fresh air sobered me immediately. I hated the fact that I struggled to get drunk and just let loose. I would give anything to let loose with Sophie.

Stop, Drake. Your fire.

Mav threw his keys at me and I barely caught it. “I'm a *wee bit steamin. Ye mind drivin?*”

I shrugged and walked to the driver's side. Sophie climbed in the back seat of the twin pickup, next to Parvati.

The two of them chatted. Parvati liked Soph; that much I could tell.

“*Ye should tell Mavis when yer headaches get bad, Soph. That rune's not working for ye, Lass,*” Maverick's said.

I waited for Emile, Tim, and Jacob to get on the back and then we drove out of the parking area.

The drive wasn't that long, and I stopped in the parking area of the academy.

"Good night, Sophie," I said.

"Night," she said and I looked at her in the rear view mirror. "Mav, I'll see you at seven tomorrow morning to heal my headache."

She opened the door and climbed out. I could feel Parvati's eyes on me.

"Soph, Hank is much better at *healin'* than me. Just go to him."

"Seriously, go show Sophie how to get in. She is new at the academy," Parvati scolded me.

"And miss all the fun, hell no."

"It's okay, Parvati," Soph said and looked at me. "Stay. You are going to need my help one day when I'm a powerful fae, and then I'm going to throw the words back in your face."

"Fine," I said, and opened my door.

"Bye for *noo*, Soph, and good luck *gettin'* in the academy." Mav's Scottish accent was stronger when drunk.

"Thanks, Mav." She shut the door at the same time I closed mine.

"I'm just going to help Sophie sneak into her room without Mavis catching her." I spoke to Emile, Tim and Jacob.

“Good night, Sophie,” they all sang using their theater voices.

“Thanks for tonight. It was fun,” she said, walking behind me. I realized she was stepping where I stepped.

“What are you doing?” I looked back at her.

“I’m walking where you are. Mavis must have many tripwires around the academy.”

I turned back and shook my head. “You are definitely a Shield fae.”

“Yeah. We both know I’m not normal.”

“Okay, so what are you seeing?”

“I see you trying to sneak me in.”

I chuckled. “That is not what I mean.”

“Yeah, I got warned on the first day I came here, so I do not know what you are speaking about,” she whispered.

Silent laughter poured from me. She was really funny and was not helping my situation at all.

“Please tell me you’re not going to take me through the front door. I could’ve done that myself.”

I looked back at her, with a curve playing at my lips. “No, keep quiet.”

Taking the route that led through the school.

I crouched as we neared the windows on the ground floor with Soph mimicking me.

I looked up at Mavis' window. The light was still off. Thank heavens.

"I'm not climbing the vines. So you better think of another way," she whispered.

I put my finger on my lips, reminding her to keep quiet. I pressed a small stone next to the biggest one on the wall. It shifted deeper into the rocks, and a wall opened. I motioned for her to walk inside and waited a few seconds until the wall closed behind us.

As the darkness swallowed us whole I so desperately wanted to reach for her hand, but the ruckus in the pit of my stomach grew, knowing that she was right there. I took a deep breath and willed whatever was bubbling inside of me back, it was a stupid idea anyway. Instead I wielded my fire on my palm and an orange glow lit up the dark room.

"Okay, now that is impressive," she said.

"Shh. You need to switch to stealth mode."

I walked first, with my back to her. My grin grew from ear to ear. There were webs all over the staircase, spanning from wall to wall, and covered every corner of the unused tunnel. We climbed the staircase after I singed all the webs away. Every step protested with our weight.

"Think about giving Chase another chance if what you say is the truth." I was serious.

"Pfft no."

"C'mon, he is not like that."

“Drake, you and I have a better chance to bond than me and your brother.”

I snorted. She should not say things like that. “Stop saying that. I’m not a fated-bond creature.”

“It should show you how little chance your brother has,” she hissed.

“You don’t have to be romantically involved with him?” I pleaded for my brother as the idiot didn’t know what was good for him.

“I know that part, but Chase and I, we do not jell.”

“He is the strongest griffin here, and from those headaches you kept getting, something tells me that the Stone Circle at Misty Hills will not deflower you.”

The air pushed past her lips, failing at suppressing her laughter.

“Oh, what now?”

“That word, deflower.” She laughed softly against her sleeve to muffle her laughter. “You won’t use it if you know what it meant where I’m from.”

“What does it mean?”

“I’ll tell you if you tell me what draws you to a Spirit fae?”

“Hell no,” I protested.

“Then my answer is hell no, too.”

“Fine, be that way,” I mumbled as we climbed another set of stairs.

“How much father is it?” She whined.

“Relax, the panel opens up right next to your room.”

“How do you know where my room is?”

“You share with Brooke, right?” I asked all innocently.

“What are you going to do if I tell you my room is on the opposite side of Brooke’s?”

“Then I suggest you share a bed with her tonight?”

“Okay, fine,” she complained.

I loved her little complaints. It did something to her face that made me all fucked up again.

I leaned in closer. “No, but seriously, where do you sleep?”

“I’m not telling you. A girl’s room is her sanctuary. Unless you’ve seen every girls’ room at this academy.”

I chuckled.

“Okay, you don’t have to answer that.”

“Yeah, I grew out of that phase.”

“That is good to hear.”

I finally stopped and walked to a wall. I opened the panel on the wall and peeked outside. “Okay, it’s clear.”

“Thank you. I owe you one.”

“Yeah, you owe me a few,” I said.

“Don’t push it,” she mumbled.

Fuck this. She was never going to give my brother a chance anyway. I closed the panel as she tried to climb out.

“You really feel that way about me saving your life?”

“No, believe me lying on that table and hearing every word they said was scaring the life out of me. So I guess I need to thank you for that one too and to apologize for breaking your nose.”

I squinted at what she said. She was man down. I shook out of it fast. “And for hurting my foot.”

“I’m not apologizing for a foot. Suck it up.”

I closed his eyes as I tried to suppress my smile. “Sorry that I whisked you away from your parents. But I had no choice.”

“Yeah, I heard you are pretty adamant about saving lost ones.”

I grunted. “My brother does not know how lucky he is. Sorry that I tried to push him on you.”

“Thanks, I’m so glad that you finally—”

I didn’t think. I kissed her and there was just something welcoming about this girl’s kiss. Something familiar too. Probably because I saw her. Her kiss were hungry and drove me crazy. I could kiss her forever, use her breath as my life source, glued to her lips for all eternity, they were so soft and perfect. The kiss was perfect.

I pulled her tighter against me and the kiss grew into something dizzying, I became drunk from her kiss. I had to stop because I could feel my fire at the tips of my fingers, threatening to come out and play. I couldn’t hurt her like that.
What are you doing, Drake?

My hand cupped her cheek and I gently pulled her face away from mine.

“I guess you want a thanks for that too,” she said, while her eyes were still closed.

I chuckled. “I’m in such deep shit if this comes out.”

“Yeah, I didn’t say kiss me, *ye gowk*.”

I snorted. Things were so easy with her. “It was bound to happen, eventually. “You’re driving me crazy.”

“Is that the phoenix griffin-spirit fae pull the book was talking about?”

“No, that is a Drake Evans thing, I’m afraid.”

“Oh, so not to read into it too much, then.” She finally opened her eyes.

“Good night, Sophie. Sleep tight.” I let her go through the open panel.

She slipped through without saying goodnight back.

I closed the panel and lay my head against the wall in the dark. That was stupid. Fuck. I was mingling with my brother’s affairs, but I couldn’t help it. I really liked her and it wasn’t my fault that he was an idiot.

I rushed back down as softly as I could and slipped out the way I came in.

Mav and everyone were deep in conversation. Nobody even asked how it went as I got into the truck and we left. Thank goodness for small miracles.

Inside my cabin, I told Spear Tooth, my trident and best friend, everything about Sophie Emerson and that I was fucked up, head over tail, feather's ruffled, in love with her.

This was going to turn into a hell of a mess and one that I should try to stop. But I didn't know if I could.

Still I should try for my brother's sake. Even if it was the last thing I wanted to do.

SOPHIE

I felt great the next morning without a hint of a headache.

Who could've thought that I only needed a kiss from a phoenix griffin? My eyes burned slightly, but I was on time to meet Mrs. Beatty.

We trained for about an hour and after that she walked back with me.

“So how was last night, Sophie?” Mrs. Beatty asked.

“You knew we weren't in our beds?”

She laughed as her deep dimples showed. “Maverick told me this morning how bad your headaches really are, that he had to heal one last night. Why didn't you tell me?”

I sighed. “I feel different, even in a world where everything is different.”

“Different is not a bad thing. He also thinks that you are a shield.”

“Yeah, I don't think I'm a shield.”

“I agree with him. You are as shut down as someone that is a shield. I think it’s one reason we get along so well.”

My thumb rubbed my other palm. “I’m not a shield.”

“How do you know?”

I wanted to tell her. She was the only one that knew someone that had sight and had said they weren’t evil, but a pit in my stomach withheld me from forming the word Sight. “I can feel it.” I shrugged.

“Sophie, feeling something and knowing something are two different things. You are carrying the characteristics of a shield. It’s also the reason you are struggling with projection. That domain is not yours.”

I got what she was saying, but the dreams played in my mind. “Okay, so how am I going to know for sure what my domain is?”

“Tonight, I’m going to take you to the Stone Circle in Misty Hills. Naturally induced stones like the one in Misty Hills will tell us what your domain is. I promise you.” She smiled.

The same circle Drake doubted would open me.

“Before I forget.” I handed her my extra three subjects. I’d decided on animal care, healing magic, and dimensional manipulation. Even though magical art had my attention for a few quick seconds with Dorian Gray’s painting, I wasn’t great at art, and I could see how my stick figures might jump out of the canvas and blow up in my face.

“Thank you for this,” she said, waving the piece of paper as our paths diverged. She was such a warm and kind person, but then again, she had an agenda, with getting Chase and me to bond.

Was Drake still part of that agenda now?

I rushed up the stairs to our floor and down the hallway to the last room. I entered just as Cali and Nikki touched up their makeup.

Brooke walked out of the bathroom and I slipped in and took a shower, got dressed in my school uniform, washed my face, combed my hair, brushed my teeth, and went outside.

Cali and Nikki left, Brooke sat on her bed. “I’m sorry that I just left you. I begged you to come with me and I felt crap for just leaving you. It was Xander. I didn’t want to leave you. Please forgive me.”

“What was Xander?”

She grunted. “Please don’t ask me that?”

My lips curved into a smile. “You could’ve just dropped me off.”

“Yeah, I told him that. It didn’t work. But Maverick brought you home, right?”

“Yeah, and then they showed me a hidden passage on how to sneak in and out of the school.” I didn’t want to tell her it was Drake.

“Are you serious?”

“I summed up Maverick completely wrong. He is a lot of fun.”

“We summed you up wrong.”

“I told you the headaches changed my life completely, but I felt like myself last night when Maverick healed me. Sorry if I was a bit too much.”

“No, I love it. Seeing you giving Drake a hard time, was priceless. Nobody else really does because he is always so broody and moody. Sorry that I thought you were faking it to hide your disappointment about Chase.”

“You warned me, and I heed all the warnings I get, but to be fair, I walked in on him and Cali kissing, so he sort of beat you to it.”

“When?”

“Yesterday when I had to meet Mrs. Beatty.”

“And take my word, next week it is going to be someone else. He’s always been like that.”

“His brother drove me insane by pushing Chase on me last night.”

She laughed. “Well, you make both the Evan boys crazy no matter what you think about them.”

“How do you know?” My lips curved, trying to keep myself from smiling.

“Plenty of information found my ears last night. It’s one reason I left you.”

I gave her that look. “Say what?”

“Oh, man. Xander will kill me if I tell you.” She wrapped her arms around my shoulders. “Sorry that I left you. I’m not that type of person. I promise.”

“It’s okay. I learned a lot of things myself after you left, so no hard feelings.”

We left for the dining hall and we walked over to the buffet area. I couldn’t get Drake’s kiss out of my head as I dished up some scrambled eggs, bacon, and toast. There were these funny round pink and white flower cakes in one dish, but I didn’t take one. There were plenty of pastries stacked in the buffet area, too. I sauntered back to the first open seat I could find.

This morning, magic replaced the sweet nectar in the goblets with orange juice. It was like it could analyze what our bodies needed, and the sweet-water wasn’t it.

Brooke plopped down next to me, and we dug in. It was going to be difficult to concentrate today, that was for sure.



THE DAY PROGRESSED FAST, and Chase worked a bit on my nerves the way he flirted. I agreed one-hundred percent with Parvati. He was cute, but it is where his good qualities ended.

When the bell rang, it felt as if I could breathe again. I walked into one of my new classes; animal care. The class was an actual greenhouse, and plenty of silver specs with the bells chiming fluttered around the beautiful garden that ran down the one side of the glass walls.

They set up the seats in a laboratory formation, with the Sovereign's desk at the front. A giant green board filled the wall behind the desk.

The Sovereign entered as I took a seat at the open table at the front. She was short and stocky and reminded me of an overgrown gnome, but in a good way. Her hair resembled twigs that curled around her face, with her pointy ears protruding from her hair.

Books came flying to my table, stacking them in front of me on a pile. I paged through the top one and my eyes landed on a picture of the creature I saw behind the mop last night. The title above the picture read Dingle-hoppers. Their body looked like a small troll with a potbelly. They were all shades of green and had the saddest eyes. Their noses resembled a trunk.

The lecturer told us which page to turn to, and I folded the corner of the chapter to read later.

We covered Pegasi for the next hour, but I couldn't stop thinking about the Dingle-hopper last night at that bar. The way he looked at me. Why didn't anybody see them, and why only me?

The bell finally rang, and I put the book in my bag as the day finally ended.

I went to my room and found no soul in sight. The tension in my shoulders released as I got some time alone.

I didn't see Drake today and wondered if last night was a huge mistake for him. If that was how he felt, I was glad that I

didn't act like the love struck puppy and had nothing to be sorry about.

I carried on reading about the Dingle-hopper.

They didn't own human forms at all and were part of the magical race.

There were signs of when a Dingle-hopper was sick. Their bodies would have a funny yellow green, just like the little guy from last night. There was a lot of information on how to brew the tonics on how to treat their illness. They were pretty calm creatures that owned a remarkable ability to disappear.

Dingle-hoppers were great allies, but also creatures that struggled to trust. They trusted only Earth faes because of their great instinct with nature and animals.

I cared more about the disappearing part and scanned through the words until I found what I was searching for.

Brooke walked into the room and looked at what I was reading. "Dingle-hoppers? They are nasty little beasts."

I looked at her. "Why do you say that?"

"Well, because Nikki had to care for one last year, and he kept eating our homework. The teachers didn't believe one part of it, which sucked."

I laughed. "Well, the book said when they eat paper, they are short on iron."

"Iron?" She looked at the pages.

"Did you know they can disappear?"

“Yep, but they only do that for like twenty minutes. We had to help Nikki look for the brat every time he disappeared. The adults can also teleport.”

“What?”

Brooke nodded.

“The book said they’re great allies, Brooke.”

“Only if you get them to trust you, and believe me, only the little ones trust. When Dingle-hoppers reach adulthood, nobody can make them trust anyone.”

I kept thinking about the Dingle-hopper inside that bar. Did the owner even realize he had a Dingle-hopper working his mop, or did he believe it was magic that cleaned his floors? Why didn’t it teleport?

I kept reading, trying to find out more about the one from last night. I got a great feeling that he knew I could see him, but after Chase took the mop away, he didn’t bother us anymore.

I found the part about the disappearing acts. It came with a warning. Dingle-hoppers shouldn’t disappear for too long periods at a time as some of them get stuck and need help to get unstuck, which was almost impossible as nobody could see them.

I froze on the “nobody” part. Why the hell was I seeing them? Was it the same reason I saw beaks, tails, and ears, or was it linked to something different?

There was no reference to what could see them, either. Earth faes were in tune with them, and I made a note to stalk

Nikki and ask her about Dingle-hoppers. Maverick could know more. The question was, could I trust any of them with the fact that I was the only one that could see them when they were stuck in their invisibility?

SOPHIE

I bombarded Nikki with questions when she got in and she glanced at what I was reading.

“Dingle-hopper?”

“Yes, how well do you know them?”

“Apart from taking care of the little rascal last year, not much. What do you want to know?”

“They really go invisible?” I tried to hide the fact that I had seen one.

“Yeah, Sovereign Bower told us how she felt one a long time ago. It’s something that doesn’t really happen a lot. You can ask her more about that. Why do you ask?”

“Nothing, just curious.”

“Okay.”

Maverick might know. He communicated with the twinkles-toes.

I left to hunt Maverick down. I needed to sort out the Dingle-hopper. The little guy was going to haunt me until I

helped him.

It would be a great way to see Drake and learn how he really felt about last night's kiss.

I found Mrs. Beatty entering the academy and rushed to her. "Mrs. Beatty!"

"Sophie," she smiled.

I clutched the book on animal care in my hands and walked up to her. "How can I find Maverick?"

"Maverick?"

"Yes, I learned something in animal care about Dingle-hoppers, and they said that Earth faes are extremely in tune with them."

"Dingle-hoppers? I disliked it when the Sovereigns assigned them to the Earth faes to learn how to get in touch with their animal connections. The little buggers always disappear and run amok in the hallways" She walked back to the entrance and on the Lanai, pointed in the direction of the training courts, and told me to just stay on the path. I needed to walk until I was past the training courts and I would find a trail on my left. I needed to follow that until I reached their quarters.

"Thank you."

"I'm sure you will find what you are looking for, asking Maverick. He is an outstanding teacher."

I rushed down the steps and walked through the hedges, past the statue of the fae with the spear, turned left, and onto

the cobblestone path that led to the training courts.

The path split toward the fighting circle of the fae, but another track carried straight on, and I followed that.

After a minute of walking and almost past the fighting courts, lanterns hung in some trees. I could just imagine how magical this was at night.

I stayed on the trail until it turned right. An opening in the forest came up ahead.

It looked like a fairy summer camp as my eyes took in the gigantic trees forming a circle.

Against each tree was a pointy roof round hut structure. It had wooden stairs leading up to each hut, with patios in front of the entrances. Every hut was a replica of the others, and there were at least ten to twelve wooden huts.

Parvati yelled my name. “What are you doing here?”

Drake’s back slid lower into the chair he sat on, speaking to Xander, who sat in an opposite chair. My stomach dropped and hurt tugged on the edges of my heart. I got my answer, and thank heavens I wasn’t here for him.

“Is Maverick around?”

“What, you have another headache?”

“You okay, Soph?” Brooke’s head popped out at the entrance of the door. Parvati was busy climbing down the wooden staircase to reach me.

“Yes,” I yelled at Brooke.

“No.” I smiled at Parvati. “I have plenty of questions about something I learned in animal care, and it says I need the help of an experienced Earth fae.”

“Come, let me show you.”

She took me down the path toward another cabin opposite theirs, and we climbed the stairs.

I couldn't stop staring at the windows as ivy and the tree's leaves covered parts of his little wooden hut.

The door had decorative carvings on it. It screamed fae, and I never thought that I would ever live in a magical world like this one.

Round lanterns hung above the doorway. A small post box with the letter five hid among more gigantic leaves, and I kept wondering if I hadn't shrunk into the size of a fairy, as everything was so big here. The specs of lights in the library and in animal care jumped into my head. How would I explain them then?

Parvati knocked on the door. Maverick opened and smiled as he saw me standing there.

“Lass, *yer* okay?”

“I need your help.” I begged, and he nudged for me to enter.

“Yell, if you need help,” Parvati said.

“Why would she need help?” Maverick asked.

“The playpen looks mighty interesting lately.”

Maverick scolded. “On *yeh* bike, Parvati.” He grinned and closed the door as Parvati’s laughter spread through the area.

Inside, his hut looked ordinary. He had a comfortable chair and a sofa, with a few beer bottles breaking the magic of this place.

A tiny kitchen was on my right, with more arch windows. Mav had a gas stove, and it looked ordinary, like any other home I’d visited.

Stairs led up to an upper level, which I assume was his sleeping quarters, and a hallway with a closed door at the end.

He plopped down on the single chair and grabbed his beer bottle. “What *dae yeh* want to *ken*?”

I stared at the beer bottle. “It’s like three in the afternoon, Mav.”

“So, I’m Scottish. We started drinking as a *wee* lad. Do *yeh ken* how long ago that was for me?”

I laughed, remembering that Maverick was like a century old.

“So, what *dae yeh* want?” The one side of his lips curved into a lopsided smile.

“That is the problem. Because I know you are going to ask a lot of other questions that I’m afraid I don’t know how to answer.”

“Try me.”

“Do you know anything about Dingle-hoppers?”

“Ha, they’re *wee shits*, that I can tell yeh. Why *dae yeh* ask?”

I opened the book.

“Ye’re *takin’* animal care?”

“Yes, I am. And I came across the Dingle-hopper that I think might need your help.”

He frowned. “In *wha’* way?”

I rubbed my hand.

“Lass, relax. Take a deep breath, and sit down.”

I plopped on his chair but sat on the edge, terrified about four paltry words: *It is not normal*.

He frowned. “*Tis’* attached to Dingle-hoppers?”

“Yes,” I sighed. “You can’t tell Mrs. Beatty about this?”

He nodded with furrowed eyebrows.

“Do you know how to help one that is stuck?”

“In his invisibility?”

I nodded.

“Soph, how do *ye ken* about one that is stuck, as nobody can see them?”

“Don’t say it, please.”

His eyes grew as he stared at me. “Where?”

“Last night at the bar. One was working the mop. That is why I freaked out when it came so close to me, but Brooke told me that there was nothing.”

“Was it a grown Dingle-hopper?”

“Yes, and he looked miserable. I think the reason that mop came over to me was because he could sense that I could see it, but he probably changed his mind as I didn’t see it the rest of the night.”

“He worked the mop?” Maverick’s eyes looked up and down the length of my body as his eyebrows knitted. I didn’t like that, as it wasn’t linked to the universal body check, but to the weird ‘*what the hell are you*’ kind.

“Can you help him?”

He chuckled. “Yes, Soph, but I’m going to need *yer* help, as I can’t see ‘*em* when they go invisible.”

“Apparently no one can.”

“Yeh ken what, I think Trudy is *goin’ ter* love me when I bring an invisible Dingle-hopper *ter* her class and show every student of hers how *ter* get them unstuck.”

I grunted at the ceiling as she would ask questions, too.

“C’mon, Soph, it’s an exceptional *learnin’* experience. Why *dinnae yeh* want anyone to *ken* that *yeh* can see them?”

“Because they will tell me it’s not normal.”

“*Aye, tis* not normal to hear the twinkles either, but it became a thing when a handful of us actually told people we could.”

“I’m a Spirit fae, not an Earth fae, Maverick. I already struggle to find my domain. Telling them I can see invisible

Dingle-hoppers. They might change me to Earth fae, then I'm back to square one."

He threw back his head and laughed. "*Tis* not how it works, lass. Believe me, *yeh* have the pull on all griffins."

I gave him a glassy eyed stare showing him I did not appreciate that comment.

"Meet me tonight, and we'll find *yer* invisible Dingle-hopper."

"I can't tonight. I have a thing with Mrs. Beatty. We're going to Misty Hills."

"Then tomorrow night," he said, actually sounding excited.

"Thank you."

"*Yeh* should think about telling people, Soph. That is a cool ability."

"And have invisible Dingle-hoppers on top of the cat-ears, no thank you."

His shoulders bobbed as he tried to hold in his laughter.

"So tomorrow night?" I said, confirming the mission.

He nodded. "I'll arrange it with Mavis."

"Don't tell her." I pointed my finger at him, and he literally wanted to bite my finger. I pulled away just in time.

"Fine, I won't tell her. It's not a bad thing to be different. It's why *yer* headaches are so strong. *Ye're goin'* to be one hell of a Spirit fae, lass."

“Yay me.” I made myself sound indifferent, and he opened the door. “Thanks, Maverick. I think he would’ve haunted me if I didn’t ask for help.”

Maverick laughed. “First griffins and now Dingle-hoppers, Soph?” He leaned against the frame of his door with folded arms.

“Shush,” I mouthed at him.

“Bye, Soph,” Parvati yelled as she was sitting close to Xander, Drake, and Lindy. Lindy wasn’t on the porch earlier. I shouldn’t have kissed him last night, but I didn’t regret it either.

“Soph, wait up,” Brooke yelled and kissed Xander goodbye. She rushed over to me, and we walked back to the path. “So, what did you want with Maverick?”

“Just needed to ask something about the Dingle-hopper.”

“What did he mean by first the griffins and now Dingle-hoppers?”

I sighed. “Because I saw one last night. It’s why the chapter intrigued me, and he needs Maverick’s help.”

“In his invisibility?”

I nodded.

“Why didn’t you just say so?”

I smiled. She was just like me. I was very happy that we were becoming good friends.



EIGHT THAT NIGHT, I ran all the way to the place Mrs. Beatty told me to meet her and hated that she was already waiting.

I struggled to catch my breath, and Mrs. Beatty looked at her watch.

“I’m a few minutes late, sorry.”

Chase laughed, and I looked up. He leaned against a tree.

What the hell was he doing here? I thought he didn’t like the Stone Circle or how it made him feel. His brother pushing this on him should’ve made him back away entirely, but he was here. Why?

“Okay, Sophie is here. Can we please go now?”

“Awe, are we getting antsy,” Mrs. Beatty mocked playfully.

“Mavis, seriously.” The corner of his lips twitched as he failed at faking his frustration.

“Wait, the Fireless Bird is going with us?”

“You hang out way too much with Brooke,” Chase said. “I hope you don’t believe everything she tells you?”

“I do listen to the things she says about you. Especially about how you like to have your bread buttered on both sides? Already saw that with my own eyes, Baby Evans.”

“Ha-ha.”

Mrs. Beatty didn't say a thing. The walk wasn't that long as she led the way. Chase was walking behind me.

"Nothing happened last night."

"I can hear the bullshit dripping of that one, Chase."

"Sophie, c'mon. It's not like Cali and I are Fated-Bond or something."

"I thought you were a late bloomer."

"Yeah, I don't think my fire is going to come. I'm making peace with it. I know it's disturbing."

"Wow, you actually admitted that?"

A chuckle escaped his lips. He was an Evans, all right. But I already gave my heart away to another last night in the dark, even though he thought it was a mistake. It felt right to me.

We reached a big fat cave wall, there was no entrance, just the grey rocky surface that was double Chase's size.

Neither of them went inside the cave.

Mrs. Beatty took a key from a tiny hip purse. The key looked like Alex's key, but it had a Magenta stone where Alex had an Emerald stone in the bow of the key. It had a lot of filigree around the edges. Chase knocked on the wall with his fist.

"You know it's not how it works." Mrs. Beatty put the key close to the wall, and a vast lock appeared just like it had with the tree when Alex brought his key closer to it.

She pushed in the key, and sparkles ran down the wall, emblazing the shape of a door. My lips parted, witnessing this

for the second time.

“Now you can knock.” Mrs. Beatty looked up at him, and Chase knocked three times. Keys rattled from the other side. Mrs. Beatty didn’t remove her key.

The door opened, and an entire living room appeared. It looked like a standard room, as if it were part of someone’s house.

A man in his mid-fifties stood on the other side. He had pepper streaks in his hair, they were quite prominent around the middle and looked like an ordinary man with a two-day-old stubble.

“Good evening, Flint,” Mrs. Beatty said and stepped through the door. Chase walked in next.

I was last, and the forest disappeared as Flint closed the door.

“How long are you going to be?” Flint asked.

“Not that long. I have a Spirit fae who needs to be opened.”

Flint’s head snapped to mine and frowned slightly. He looked at Mrs. Beatty again and then at Chase. “You sure about the griffin?”

“Yes, he needs the experience. Top of his class.”

“Mavis, if anything goes wrong—”

“I can do it.” Chase said with determination set in his eyes.

“Okay, good luck then.”

“See you in a couple of hours, Flint.”

“You know the way.” Flint spoke focused his attention on me.

My eyebrows furrowed as I followed Mrs. Beatty to the front door of Flint’s home.

We walked out, but there was no sign of the stone circles. Chase walked with considerable strides toward the shadows. In the pitch dark I walked silently beside Mrs. Beatty. I couldn’t stop thinking about the Dingle-hopper.

Why can I see him? What are the stones going to do tonight? Will it hurt?

I kept taking deep breaths and let it out slowly, trying to calm my beating heart as I rubbed my palm with my thumb. “You are too quiet, Sophie. What’s on your mind?”

“Is it going to hurt?” I asked Mrs. Beatty.

“It shouldn’t”

My silence confirmed my fear.

Her laughter tickled the night, “I’m just pulling your leg, Sophie, of course it’s not going to hurt.”

Light started streaming in as the trees thinned out and the beams of the moon lay thick columns of slanted light lit up the terrain around us.

Chase removed his shirt and threw it over his shoulder at us. Mrs. Beatty caught it with ease, as if she was ready for it.

“Oh, what is he doing now?” I whispered.

We stopped as he kicked off his sneakers and started unbuckling his belt. I immediately looked away, knowing that this is the part where he would probably transform into a griffin.

Mrs. Beatty kept on picking up his clothes and putting them into her small hip bag the father we went. Which I assumed she charmed with a dimension spell to carry all the items in such a small space. Lastly, his boxers landed on the ground.

A grunt with a stretching and humming sound filled the night. I felt a rush of air, and I couldn't help but look. A giant lion with wings and a head of an eagle replaced the human that walked there moments ago. The moon glowed behind his gigantic silhouette, making him look like he was lit by heavenly fire.

“Ready?” Mrs. Beatty asked me.

“To do what?” I looked at her and back at the Griffin version of Chase.

“To go to the Stone Circle.” She climbed on Chase's back, who at that point lay down flat on his stomach.

“We are fll-ying on top of hi-immm?” I struggled to get the words out.

“Stop being a sourpuss, Emerson. Get your butt over here,” Chase's voice took on a deeper tone, and involuntarily I took a step back at realizing a speaking giant bird was talking to me. Mrs. Beatty took two full fists of feathers and pulled

herself on to Chase's back and held her hand out for me. She literally pulled me on to Chase's back.

My heart thumped beneath my ribs as Chase lifted off.

As I clung to her my eyes had a hard time communicating to my brain about what I was seeing. But the wind in my hair, the sting in my eyes, and the rush of air down my windpipe as I opened and closed my mouth with the rustle of feathers tickling my ankles made it all too real.

That high up the moon illuminated the clouds, giving them a silver lining that appeared so ethereal. The stars seemed close enough to touch, and big enough to catch.

Deep breaths did it, and my heartbeat calmed to its normal rhythm.

Chase climbed higher into the air until he reached a suitable distance not to be seen by ordinary folk.

The wind swished in my ears and blew my hair in all directions. It was highly distracting and not at all what the movies made it out to be. It wasn't a comfortable ride, either. I should wear a ponytail next time.

Mrs. Beatty seemed to love every second. She held onto Chase's feathers with one hand and with her other, she tried to grasp wisps of clouds.

A few minutes later, Chase descended, and the clouds opened in breathtaking night scenery. Lights twinkled down below us. It wasn't a significant population that inhabited Misty Hills as big open fields surrounded the twinkling lights.

In the distance, the circle rocks lit up from the moon's beams.

Chase flew faster to the hill. Trees surrounded the area, and he came to a graceful landing.

Mrs. Beatty slid off his back gracefully. I tried to follow her beat, but my knees buckled as my feet touched the ground, and I fell flat on my face.

Mrs. Beatty bent down, giving me a helping hand.

I accepted her assistance. My hands vigorously brushed down my pants as chunks of dirt and grass stuck to my jeans.

Chase changed back into his human form, buck naked, and laughed.

I looked away. "Ha-ha."

I heard Mrs. Beatty dig in her bag as her bangles echoed out into the open vastness. "At least she didn't throw up." She snorted.

A moment later, Chase said, "You can look now, Emerson."

But when I looked he still didn't have his shirt on and the shadows burrowed out the crevices of his abs and defined shoulders, causing his muscles to seem overly defined and bulky. I looked around as he pulled his arms through the sleeves of his shirt.

The guy was beautiful. There was no way around it. I looked away as he pulled down his shirt.

“Let me know when you get tired.” Mrs. Beatty looked at him.

“We’re at the Stone Circle. I might not be my brother getting all excited about the Stone Circles, but I’m still a griffin.”

Mrs. Beatty’s corners of her lips twitched. “Let’s go, Sophie.”

Chase stayed behind as I followed her. He sat down close to the one stone forming part of the outer circle.

I kept staring over my shoulder at him. My curiosity reached his peak. “What is he doing?”

“What every griffin and most Spirit faes can do. He is protecting us from the human eye.”

I remembered projection class and what I’d read in the book about bonds, how griffins took on their fae’s domain. None of it made sense. “He’s going to use his projection?”

“Yes. When we’re close to the Stone Circle, our magic is the strongest. He is going to keep us safe tonight to bring your domain forward.”

I kept staring at Chase. Nothing seemed to change. No floating colored clouds were hovering around the circle or sparkling dust motes to show me that magic was actually happening. It was just like that time when the guy ran past us. I had no clue what was taking place.

“He is doing it now?”

Mrs. Beatty looked at Chase and nodded with a faint smile.

“How do you know it’s working?”

“It’s not for us to know or see. It’s something that comes from Chase. Chase might be arrogant and hard-headed, but I trust his gifts. The same way I do Drake. You need to give Chase some slack, Sophie. He is a young griffin, and his hormones are making him do stupid things at his age.”

“Maverick told you what happened?”

“He did, but he also told me that what you showed everyone could be linked to a headache and not the disappointment of what he did.”

“It was a headache, I promise.” I quickly jumped in.

“Intuition tells me you are a powerful Spirit fae. And well Chase’s legacy is strong, which makes him a powerful griffin.”

I sighed. “Mrs. Beatty—”

“Mavis.”

“You can’t force this bond. I know Chase is smart and probably one of the strongest griffins at the academy, but I don’t feel a bond with him.”

“You banter all the time.”

“There is no pull toward Chase. Not even the regular one that all the girls at the academy experience. When I see the guy, I just want to punch him.”

“You don’t know that could be the pull, the anger you have when you see him.”

“It’s not anger, I’m indifferent.” I said. “He annoys the living crap out of me, and I know what a bond is. I have one

with Brooke and Maverick, even his brother.”

“Drake?” She frowned.

“He saved my life. That action leaves a mark. Chase,” I sighed, “there is nothing. But I will be open-minded. That is all I can give you.”

“That is more than fair.”

I stepped into the circle, and my head spun. I lost my balance slightly and grabbed Mavis’s shoulder.

“You okay, Sophie?”

“I don’t feel so good. There is a vortex in my head that doesn’t want to stop.”

“Okay.” She didn’t sound too sure. “Take deep breaths.”

I did what she’d said.

“It might be the magic that you are in tune with. To be honest, I’d never seen magic affecting a fae this way.”

I sighed then opened my eyes, willing the vortex to stop. “Let me guess, it’s not normal.”

She smiled. “No, it’s quite the opposite. Your gift is stronger than I expected.”

“Stronger?” Everything Maverick said today when I’d told him about seeing the Dingle-hopper flashed through my mind.

“It’s also the reason your headaches are so unbearable. That stone should lessen the pain, and the way Maverick described what he felt last night when he healed you. The stone isn’t doing what it’s supposed to do. This is why you

need a griffin, it doesn't matter what your domain is going to be. The magic attached to the domain is simply just too much for your body to handle."

I didn't like where she was going with this.

"I'm glad that Drake found you when he did."

"Brooke told me about Penny. Is it true what her mother saw about the future of Concordia?"

"Amilda," Mrs. Beatty said. "She was a remarkable fae, and yes, she predicted the end of Concordia. Said that when the phoenix returns, it will go back the way it was. They will ban magic again, and for our fae, it obviously is not good news."

"I don't understand. The lore always painted how good phoenixes were. They represent new life. How can they be tyrants and oppressors?"

"There is another prophecy made, too. The opposite of what Amilda saw. A new world, where the phoenixes aren't tyrants. That we found peace and everyone lived in harmony. The reason nobody focuses on that is that that prophecy came from someone wielding the dark power of sight. She got killed twenty-four hours later, after the proclamation of what she saw."

I did not know what to say to that. I just shook my head.

"King Avery is stubborn with the Spirit fae's third domain. I sometimes believe he is the reason the Scry still exists as he deemed certain creatures dark and others light. He wasn't always like that. It changed when he replaced his general."

“So he really kills those with sight?”

“He does. Remember I told you; I knew a fae that had sight, and she was the kindest fae I ever knew.”

“Was it the princess?”

Mrs. Beatty fell silent. “What gave you that idea?”

“Brooke. She said that she had a feeling that the princess had sight and just tapped into her projection, pretending to see things inside a crystal ball.”

“Brooke is a bright fae. Nothing seems to pass her.. Amilda hid her sight from her brother and focused solely on dubbing into projection. I don't believe the way Avery does. We need the faes with sight to protect our world. It feels off balance and one of the biggest reasons that Concordia has so many rebellions.”

“Wait, everyone in Concordia doesn't live in peace?”

“Far from it, Sophie. There is a place in Concordia known as the Shadowlands. Plenty of shifters, like the Manticores and Chimeras, live there. Fae drove them to the Shadowlands. It's forbidden for fae to enter unless you wanted to be labeled as dark and evil, or the Scry. The Manticores and Phoenix Griffins sort of had an alliance to the Phoenix. Drake might not enjoy hearing it, but their survival depended on the phoenix.”

“You mean the part of them getting reborn?”

Mrs. Beatty gaped. “How—”

“Read it in a book.”

She nodded. “A lot of them found sanctuary in the Shadowlands. The dark fae among them saw the opposite and also felt the need to tell King Avery about it. She was a fool, thinking that she would get past his ears and eyes. Since then, it was a constant battle between the fae and the Shadowlands. Which prophecy is going to come true? Which one is real?”

“What do you think?”

“If the phoenix does return, it all depends on their perspective of things. It can be good for the entire Concordia, or it can be bad. It’s all about the nature of the phoenix.”

I hmphed. “Are the Phoenix really extinct?”

“There hasn’t been sight of a phoenix for almost a century. You will learn about them soon. If I’m not mistaken, we base more than a quarter of your history grade on the Phoenix this year.”

“I can’t wait to read about them, to be honest.” My voice raised into a higher pitch towards the end.

Mrs. Beatty laughed. “You’re speaking like a true Spirit fae already. There is a reason you are drawn to the Phoenix.”

“Wait, we are drawn to the Phoenix, too?”

She nodded. “It’s not a good match, just like the Fire fae and Phoenix Griffin aren’t a suitable match, and the same with the Manticore and Spirit fae aren’t a suitable match.”

I get what Mavis was saying. She saw straight through me, and she knew I was busy falling for the wrong griffin.

“We have something in common with the Phoenixes, too. If you have something in common with a creature or magical being, the connection is always strong, no matter if they are good for us or not. A part of a Spirit fae feels that what the Phoenixes did was try to do what they thought was right. It’s the reason Spirit faes are so rare. The creatures whose abilities are attached to the mind were all connected to the Phoenix. And that is why the Griffins, whether they are the right Griffin, have this undeniable pull to Spirit faes.”

“How can a pull like that be wrong, then?”

“Because they created every single one of them just for one other. They created Spirit faes for Griffins, and that is how Phoenix Griffins are born to assist Phoenixes. It’s a symbiotic relationship. Faes will die if a Phoenix Griffin should lose control.”

“What do you mean they lose control?”

“The fire is part of them. It’s an attack mechanism but it’s very much connected to their emotions. I think it’s the reason Drake is so guarded. When his father died, he lit up for an entire day, and after that, there was a constant fire disturbance at the academy caused by him. Everyone labeled him a troublemaker, but he just missed his dad.

“That fire is lethal to Spirit fae and other creatures. It is why we are an excellent match for griffins but a horrible match for the phoenix griffin. But the phoenix griffins need us too. because we give birth to them.

“The pull phoenix griffins have to Spirit fae,” Mavis started, and I gasped. She was going to tell me the reason. “It’s

like the love a child has for a parent. That bond is strong, but it's not the bond that you need to carry the magic that is inside of you.”

It didn't feel like a motherly bond I have for Drake. It was the opposite. But I heeded Mavis's words. I found the reason for the pull between me and Drake, and it sucked.

The Vortex in my head had finally stopped as Mavis kept talking about how different the phoenix sight was from the fae sight. “Phoenixes could easily predict the future without the after-effects that our faes are stuck with. Their predictions always came true, so one would always wonder, what they saw with magic to cause them to take such drastic measures?”

A breeze brushed against my skin and gently blew my hair. “Why do I need a griffin?”

“Because we think your magic is too strong for your body.”

I’d read about that. An icy finger ran up my spine thinking about the images of how the faes body broke turned into ash and blew away with the wind.

“Think of a fated bond creature as your keeper. They help you carry the weight of the magic reflecting the side effects it has on a fae’s bodies. With sharing the burden, you won’t develop tumors or go through the horrible pain of what faes sometimes go through. Magic is beautiful, but too much magic can turn into your worst nightmare.”

“Do they feel the impact of the magic, too, if they bond with a fae?”

Mavis’s lips quirked. “I know what you are thinking. Yes, our pain becomes their pain, but you need to know one thing about these Fated-Bond creatures. They are born with this addiction to be needed—that is their cross to bear. A Fated Bond brings out the best in these creatures. They are balanced when they team up with their fae. They become their best version. Feel sorry for the phoenix griffins, Sophie. They don’t have their fated bond creatures anymore and they have to take all the scraps from the floor to fill their addiction. It’s why Drake was so adamant to save you. Why he wanted this for his brother?”

“It’s why Chase showed up tonight, why he is acting so different suddenly. Why he finally accepts that his fire won’t come. Flint’s like Drake, but he fills his addiction another way. One can trace his family line back to the old ages of Concordia and they were always key bearers. Few know about Flint being a phoenix griffin, as they would take the key away from him. The few that know keep it a secret as he fills the addiction by being a key bearer. So I beg of you, don’t share that with anyone.”

It felt weird, perhaps a bit uncomfortable with the weight of entrusting me with other people’s lives.

Chase was sitting with his back facing us, chewing on a stalk of sweet grass. I cocked my head in contemplation, “Mavis, why does Chase think he is a phoenix griffin?”

“His parents. Technically, he should be a phoenix griffin because his father was a griffin and his mother was a Spirit fae. Drake is a phoenix griffin, but when Chase was born, the fire they released after a few minutes never bloomed. It happens a few times in the phoenix griffin history, but it’s rare. It’s why I think he is a brilliant match for you, Sophie, because you are both rare magical beings.”

“What happened to their parents?”

“Their mother passed away when she gave birth to Chase. They still sing songs about their father’s bravery. He was a legend and dying while protecting the royals. The griffin inside of him was Amilda’s Fated-Bond, but Philip loved another, Claire. What they had was a natural bond and stronger than the fated bond. It also helped that Claire didn’t need a griffin, as her domain was like mine. She was a shield.

“When Claire passed away, Philip and Amilda’s bond grew tighter, but it was never a romantic one. After their mother’s death, Philip and his sons moved into the castle. After his death, the king thought it was best for them to come to Earwyn. Drake was only nine when the king turned them over in my care. Chase was six. He was too little to remember his mother and hardly remembered his father. It’s why my bond with both of them is so tight. They are in many ways the boys I’d never had, and I liked to believe I became the mother they lost so long ago.”

“That was why Amilda died, because their father, Philip wasn’t there anymore to lessen the blows?”

Mavis nodded.

My gaze flickered back to Chase. He rested his arms on top of his kneecaps.

“You ready? Feeling better?”

My gaze locked on Mrs. Beatty again, and I nodded.

Her lips curved into a smile, and she closed her eyes. “Close your eyes.”

I did as she asked.

“I want you to clear your mind. Take in the magic.”

“How?”

“See yourself as a door. Become still and let the surrounding noises in. The magic will enter. You will know it when you feel it.”

Closing my eyes, I focused on being still. I heard the croaking song of the frogs in the pond nearby, the chime-like trickle of the water over stones and tree roots, something moved in the grass, the slither of a snake came to mind and suddenly there it was the hum followed by the vibration that touched the night. I’d felt it with Drake last night during our kiss, but this was stronger. “Does magic have a hum?”

“It could be a hum to you. It’s different for everyone.”

The hum spread, tickling its path to my ears. It turned into a thrum when it reached my eardrums. A tight grasp crushed my lungs as a warmth settled into my gut. “You want me to let it in, Mavis?”

“Yes, welcome it in. Trust it. Become one with it.”

I was relaxed, letting the current flow in, at first it was a small vibration then it felt hostile, too strong, like it wanted to rip me open from the inside out. I bit back a tear and exhaled, unwilling to let it turn into something unpleasant. “How will I know when it’s done?”

A small chuckle escaped her lips. “You will know.”

I released a pent-up breath, and I tried to let the current in. My body relaxed as the stream grew into an overpowering a ripping roar.

It felt wrong, like it wanted to tear me in half. My heart collided against my ribcage over and over again.

“Deep breaths, Sophie.” Mavis’s calming voice instill a deep breath within me, causing a calm wave of fresh air to fill my lungs and still my crashing heart. I took a deep breath, taking in the clean air. “Don’t be afraid of it. Let it become one with you.” Her voice kept vibrating against my ear like the hum of the magic itself was so powerful.

A gusty wind pushed against me, whipping my hair across my face.

My breathing became faster as the current penetrated my skin and my organs quavered. It seeped through deeper into my core, reverberating against my bones.

“Deep breaths, Soph. You are doing great. Calm your heart.”

I took another deep breath, trying to calm the erratic beat of my heart. The trembling stabilized and quieted down. The wind became still, followed by the background noises. An

unnerving silence fell around us as the magic stopped. It vanished, like it had rejected me.

I opened my eyes and looked at Mrs. Beatty. There wasn't even a sway of branches coming from the surrounding trees.

Her eyes flew open, looking around.

“What is happening?”

She reached out her hands and touched the stone. Her eyebrows furrowed as her eyes still flickered around. “I'm not sure. I never experienced anything like this inside this Circle, but I'll find the answers. You have my word.”

I could sense the disappointment in her voice, the concern and the unknown of what had taken place was written all over her face. “Can magic reject me?”

“No.” She smiled, rubbing her jaw as her forehead wrinkled. “I'll find out why it did that.”

“So I assume that it's not normal.”

She sighed and squinted, tugging on her bottom lip. “Not in this circle. No.”



OUR TRIP back to Flint's house was quiet, and over so quick. My stomach strung tight as my mind raced through all the possibilities of why the circle acted like that. Could it have been me? What if I didn't fit in here, either? The thought stole my breath causing my chest to feel like it would explode. The headache pulsed and with each pulse the stabbing sensation

grew. I held up my hand to my head, as if the action would get rid of the headache about to erupt.

I didn't even realize when Chase landed. I slid off his back and my foot landed in a hole in the uneven ground. The pain spread through my ankle like lightning up to my calve. I massaged the foot and twirled it around.

“You okay, Sophie?” Mavis asked.

“Yeah, I didn't see the hole.”

The disappointment and worry of what had happened inside the circle laced my entire being. Why didn't I open? It felt like magic had rejected me ultimately. It had tested me and decided that I wasn't worthy of its companionship.

Mavis's worry mimicked my own. Her eyebrows drew together as she retrieved Chase's clothing from her hip purse for him to get dressed.

We waited silently as Chase got dressed. The clunking of his belt when he fastened it reached my ears, and a few seconds later, he walked with huge strides past me, not saying a word.

Chase ran a jerky hand through his hair. I tried to ignore it.

Yellow light seeped through Flint's drawn curtains. When we neared his home, the door opened. Flint's posture changed immediately when his gaze caught Mavis'. He pulled at his beard while clearing his throat. “What happened?”

Chase walked past him, stepping into the house.

Mavis looked up at Flint. “Has the Stone Circle ever shut down with anyone before?”

His gaze landed on me and he shook his head.

“It just shut down. It was busy with Sophie, and then it, it...” She blinked as if the act itself would help her digest her thoughts. “it, just disappeared.”

Flint’s eyebrows knitted as he looked at the wall. “It shut down?”

“It’s like magic shut down. Somehow the connection severed. I have never felt that before.” She tugged at her lip. “I could feel it accepting Sophie, but it was as if someone just flipped a switch.”

“I’ll find out,” Flint said, “I need a private conversation whenever you get the time, please.”

“Soon, I promise.”

He opened the door with a twin key to Mavis’ key, and the entrance opened into the forest at Earwyn.

Chase stepped through. I followed him, and then Mavis exited.

We said goodbye to Flint, and his eyes lingered a little longer on me before he closed the door again.

“Chase?” She called.

“What?” He stopped and waited for us to reach him.

“Did something interfere tonight?”

“There was nobody there, Mavis.” He gave me a concerned glare.

“Stop looking at Sophie like that!”

Air expelled from his lips, and his shoulders stooped. “Did she break the Stone Circle?”

“C’mon, Chase,” she said.

“I felt it. The magic was all around me. I was literally buzzing.” He rubbed his arms. “You know how much I hate that feeling. It just stopped. What happened?”

“She didn’t break it.”

“Well, whatever happened, it shouldn’t have.”

“What should’ve happened?” I asked.

“Your gift should’ve made the circle stronger,” Chase said. “Not break it.”

I looked at Mavis. “So, I did break it.”

“Sophie, it’s not broken. Something else happened tonight.”

“What was that about, anyway?” Chase asked as we walked toward Earwyn academy again.

“What are you talking about?” Mrs. Beatty asked.

“The private conversation he is requesting, Mavis.”

“I don’t know.”

“It sounds urgent.”

“Chase, I will find out when I see him. Whatever it is, he doesn’t want you guys to worry about it.”

“I sensed his worry too,” Chase said.

“We’ll talk later.” Mrs. Beatty’s tone was stern.

They fell silent, and the walk back to Earwyn felt like forever.

Finally, the glow of the academy lights lit the way and welcomed us home.

My lower lip trembled and tears stung my eyes.

What happened tonight? Why with me? Chase is probably going to tell everyone what a freak I am.

My strides became more urgent the closer I got to my room, and all I wanted to do was bury my head under my duvet and sleep forever. The headache kept pulsing behind my eyes, it probably would keep me out of sleep.

Why is magic rejecting me? I didn’t care what Mrs. Beatty said.

The magic had left me. It didn’t flip off like a switch. It left, retreated slowly, and then it vanished.

“Chase?” Mrs. Beatty called. “Sophie, I’ll see you tomorrow first thing at the Stone Circle.”

I nodded and lifted my hand as a goodnight gesture. Chase stayed behind as I went to my room.

The girls were already asleep. Only my bedside lamp was on.

I tip-toed to my bed so as not to wake them and wiped a small tear from the corner of my eye. What was Drake going to think about all of this? I was breaking his favorite thing in this world. Maybe it was for the best if he would hate me. Perhaps it would break whatever I felt for him. I needed a shower to think.

The warm water eased the knots in my muscles, but it didn't help the racing thoughts in my head.

It would be just my luck if I was going to become the first Spirit fae, not knowing how to control her domain. Without magic, I was a freak.

After the shower, I crawled into bed and tried to sleep. The darkness came first, and then the same hallway with the marble walls appeared. The walls became thinner, fading away, and the entire picture in front of me changed. Trees seeped through and the visual became stronger as I found myself inside a Stone circle, but the only difference was that the stones weren't stones. They were Cali, Chase, Nikki, Brooke, and a couple of other students I didn't know, only younger, like nine or ten.

I turned around, taking in each and everyone. Something was wrong with them.

"Brooke?" I called. I wanted to go closer, but my feet refused to lift from the ground.

What the heck was going on?

Brooke didn't respond.

“Nikki!” The same thing happened. She just stood there, waiting. Their skins were pale. Their eyes were droopy and glassy.

One by one, their eyes lit up like glowing orbs, as crowns of bones or antlers appeared on their heads. I jumped backward. None of them moved. They just stood there, not making a sound.

Blood seeped down their faces from the pointy crowns stabbing into their heads. My heart pounded as I tried to make sense of what was going on.

Something pricked my skull, and a blinding pain seared through my mind. My energy waned, and I forced my arm to lift. It weighed like a ton. My fingers touched the cool surface of hard, boney objects. It was the same crown that all of them wore. Warm liquid ran down my face.

Thunder rumbled through the sky, and then the lightning struck. It was so bright that I needed to close my eyes, but my eyes refused to shut. The pain burned through my sockets and the light seared my eyeballs. Pain jolted from my shoulder blades. I turned around and nine-year-old Cali lit up. A bright red beam shot from her as her body curled backward with arms spreading out next to her. Then ten-year-old Nikki’s body curled backward and a green beam jolted from her. Next was Brooke, and a bright blue beam sprung from her. I looked with great difficulty through burning eyes at how they all lit up a different color.

When all their beams were in the air, the bright light moved forward and back down to the ground. Chase’s white

light stung me first, followed by Brooke's blue, and then Nikki's green. The warmth scorched, like a laser, as they cut my body into pieces.

My jaws locked as the pain grew stronger. It had a familiar feel to it, like magic, only thirty times stronger. It grew inside of me, breaking my bones, and mashing my brain. I felt every torturous pain... and then I exploded.

A scream left my lips, and it didn't stop.

DRAKE

My brother was so annoying. Why did he show? He made it pretty clear he didn't want Sophie and just as I decided fuck all this, I didn't care if it was forbidden, the ass showed.

I decided to wait for them, but then Alex showed up and wanted a word with Mavis. I changed my reason and said I needed to speak to my brother. I hated listening to Alex's laughing, saying how he could see Sophie was Chase's fae. He was seeing what Mavis was seeing.

I wanted to punch him so badly, instead I just zoned out.

He stopped abruptly. "They're back?"

I looked up and found Mavis and Chase speaking. I looked at my watch, it was late. I waited a little longer but there was no sign of Sophie anywhere.

"There was nothing there, Mavis. I swear." My brother sounded super frustrated.

"Okay, I believe you."

"How did she do that?"

“It’s not Sophie’s fault. I don’t even think that it had anything to do with her. She was simply there at the wrong time. I had a feeling that whatever Flint wanted to speak to me about, had something to do with why the stones reacted that way tonight.”

“Something happened?” I mumbled to Alex.

We walked faster and reached them as the two were headed up the steps.

I looked at Chase as Alex asked, “What happened?”

Mavis sighed. “The stone circle shut during Sophie’s opening.”

“What?” My gaze darted to Mavis.

“We don’t know what had caused it.” Mavis’s jaw clenched at the vein on her temple protruded, pulsing.

“Flint also wants to speak to Mavis,” Chase said.

“Chase?” She reprimanded him.

“What?” He shrugged.

“About what?” Alex asked.

“I don’t know. But I have a feeling that whatever happened tonight had something to do with it.”

We started to climb the stairs of the Academy.

“What do you mean that the stone circle shut down?” I couldn’t imagine it.

“The only way to describe is like someone flicking a switch and the current just ebbs out.”

“And there was no one else there?”

“No, for umpteenth time! I know how to hide,” Chase growled.

“It’s not what I meant,” I replied.

“There was nobody there.” He sounded annoyed.

“Okay.”

A horrible scream boomed down the stairs.

Mavis and Alex froze. I’ve heard that scream before. It was Sophie. My feet propelled me up the steps toward their level. I could hear my brother Chase right behind me.

Another gut-wrenching scream filled the night.

“What the hell is that?”

“That is Sophie,” I said.

I wasn’t sure where their room was, so I let him pass me. He ran straight to their room and pounded on the door.

A girl with the red hair opened the door, she looked between us, probably taken back by having both of us on the doorstep. Alex and Mavis followed as Chase ran to the bed where Brooke and their other roommate tried to wake Sophie.

More screams came. They covered their ears. The blonde shook her head and backed away.

“C’mon, Soph, wake up,” Chase pleaded.

Nothing.

Alex and Mavis rushed to her side.

Mavis stared helplessly.

“Chase,” Alex said, “See if you can ease it.”

“I don’t know how, Alex.”

“Calm down and do as I say. Close your eyes.”

“Do it already, I can’t take the screaming anymore!” the red head yelled.

Chase closed his eyes.

“Concentrate. Try to connect with Sophie.”

My brother went super quiet.

More screams.

He shook his head. “I can’t. I can’t do this.”

“Relax and try again.”

“She needs help.” I rushed toward the bed and picked Sophie up.

“Drake,” Mavis warned as Sophie was still screaming in my arms. I ran with her out the room and down the stair, taking two at a time.

“Almost there, Sophie. Just hold on.”

I rushed around the corner and sprinted with her down the hallway toward the infirmary.

“What is all the screaming about.” Hank came out to meet us at the door, assessing the situation fast. Her on the nearest bed with the Electrophy on.

The yellow light's warmth caressed my skin. Prickling it softly.

Hank put his hands on her and took a deep breath. He closed his eyes and Sophie's screams finally quietened. I thought that she might wake, but she just fell silent. I stepped back as Mavis came forward and started speaking to Hank. I found my brother with Alex outside.

"I should've been able to..."

"Relax, Chase. It was a push and if you succeeded, I would've been surprised." Alex said.

"Meaning?"

"You haven't been paired yet. That could be the reason you didn't feel her."

"You think?"

"Now you wanted to be her griffin?" I asked. Pissed off with my brother for fucking everyone around.

I shook my head and walked on. I shouldn't be upset, but I was. I made up my mind that I didn't give a shit anymore.

Sophie had been on my mind the entire day and why should I just step back. Just because she could be my brother's fated bond. I doubted that. She didn't even like him and a flame needed a spark to work with. It was the same with the bond. They had no spark.

SOPHIE

A SWEET, flowery scent reached my nostrils. My eyes fluttered open as the warm yellow light from the lid above caressed me. I was in the infirmary, but this time I wasn't alone. A fae—no, a shifter—slept on the bed in the corner as the tip of a wing appeared from the blanket covering him.

The tip of his wings protruded from the blanket. What creature had wings?

I grunted, feeling the annoying friend I now call chronic headache. What the hell did I see last night? Nothing about that vision made sense. I'd experienced every ounce of pain that had come with that one. The fear knotted my stomach and squeezed my chest.

What did any of it mean?

“How do you feel?” I jerked when Hank suddenly stood next to my bed. I looked at him, his beak still covered his lips. Why did Xander's beak disappear?

“The headache is still there. How did I get here?”

“Your friends brought you in.”

My friends? Brooke was the only one that jumped into my mind.

“They were so worried about you, said you woke up screaming in terror, clutching your head.”

“Great,” I sighed. The entire academy had probably heard me last night.

“It was to be expected, knowing where you were. What I don't understand is, Mrs. Beatty usually brings in the patients

in for observation. She has been in and out a few times too, wanting to know if you have woken up yet.”

Woken up yet. “How long was I out for?”

“Two days. The stone around your neck and the emeralds on the walls should’ve dampened the headaches. It’s not normal whatever is happening to you. It took me a few hours to lessen your headache.”

I remembered what Maverick had said about Hank being better at it than him.

“I’ll let Mrs. Beatty know you are awake.”

I sighed. *It’s not normal. Nothing I do at this place is normal.*

My stomach growled. I only realized, feeling the grumble, how hungry I was.

“Can I...” I looked up, but Hank had already left. My eyes shifted to the other occupied bed. It was a guy, and he was sound asleep.

I couldn’t get the vision out of my head. A circle of magical beings. To do what?



MRS. BEATTY WALKED into the room. She was beaming. “I’m so happy you are awake. I need to apologize to you. I should have brought you to Hank right after. But I had no idea the affects...”

“Affects?”

“When I take students to the circle, one that is naturally induced, I usually book them in with Hank to monitor them. Something always happens. I thought that with whatever happened or rather did not happen in the circle, nothing would happen to you.”

“I don’t understand?”

Her eyes sparkled as she spoke to me. “I spoke to Flint. Whatever happened in that circle isn’t what we think happened.”

“I’m still not open.”

She walked to the other side of my bed. “The stone circle wasn’t strong enough to open you. It confirmed what he told me. The only stones that will open you, show your domain, are in Scotland. I’ll make the arrangements.”

My eyes grew. “What?”

“It’s the strongest one in the world. What caused your headache to be that wild?”

It was time to tell her. “A dream?”

She frowned. “A dream?”

“The headaches are not normal. Before Earwyn, they would flare up with a dream.”

She plopped down onto the chair next to my bed. “What happened in the dream?”

I wiped my clammy hands against the blanket as my lip trembled slightly. I didn’t want to tell her about the visions, especially about the circle of magical beings and the beams

coming out of them connecting to me. Not without knowing what that even meant, so I went with the first one. “A dream of a bird on fire.”

Mrs. Beatty lowered her chin and frowned before her eyes flickered back to me. She waited for me to carry on.

“I don’t know what it means. I thought it was about a change as the internet always said if you dream about a phoenix, something new is coming.” I turned my palm to face the ceiling.

The excitement on her face slacked, and her skin grew pale. “Are you sure it was a bird?”

“I don’t know.” I scratched my cheek. “The flames are overpowering in the dream. I’m not a shield.”

“Shh.” She tapped my leg. “Dreams are normal for Spirit faes. Especially when that spirit fae isn’t open yet.”

“Not one that knocks me out for days with a skull-splitting headache.”

“Dreams do not cause your headaches. What happens in this dream? And I will tell you why the headache feels as if it’s splitting your skull.”

“That is the weird part.”

“Nothing is weird.”

“It beckoned me closer.”

“In what way?”

I pulled on my earlobe. “A melody, a song that I have never heard before.”

“And then what happened?”

“I touched it, and the fire consumed me.” It was a warning. A warning to stay away from Drake, as his fire would burn me alive.

“Okay, so it’s simple. It’s your shield that is causing the headaches. Your shield wants to protect you from the fire, that’s it.”

“It’s not it!” I’d lied. I didn’t want to tell her about the other visions. “The flames, I feel it. I feel it burning, and it feels like that headache that knocks me out for days. The headaches are a reminder of how badly that fire hurts.” My lower lip trembled as I wiped away a tear. “Sight is my domain, and we all know what King Avery does with faes that have sight. I’m not a shield.” I pleaded with her in a whisper.

Her eyebrows squished together. “You felt the flame?”

“It’s not a dream. The dream is so vivid. It’s like all my senses are awake in that dream. It’s like I’m there. Dreams don’t do that.”

She kept silent. Her eyes shifted from side to side as if she was reading an invisible scroll or book. “Your characteristics are of a shield, Sophie. The faes with domain of sight, opens up. You hear lies from a mile away, as that is our shield. Spirit with Sight don’t have to hear lies. They see the lies.”

“Well, then I’m a shield that sees things.” I crossed my arms.

She didn’t reply to that, but she didn’t argue either that sight wasn’t my gift. She only rubbed the back of her neck.

Moments passed where nothing was said.

She cleared her throat before her gaze locked on mine once more. “Everything has changed now that the stones at Misty Hills didn’t open you. You need to be more than open-minded with Chase and this bond. He is the only one strong enough that can help you with this.”

“Okay, but what if it’s not Chase? What then? You said the bond is special. What I feel when I’m with him isn’t.”

“Because you are not giving him a chance!” Her tone made me jump. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have sounded so harsh.”

I shook my head to show her it was okay. She was just as frustrated as I was. “Stubbornness is another sign that you are a shield.”

“I’m not stubborn. I know forcing a bond with Chase is a waste of my time. He is not my match,” I said. “Chase Evans might be the strongest griffin at Earwyn, but he is not mine.”

“Then we need to find your match, as the magic inside of you is too strong.”



AROUND TEN, I rejoined classes. I had mathemancy first. When I stepped into the class the air was so cold it gave me a chill. I didn’t look forward to spending an entire hour with Chase. Unfortunately he was already seated when I plonked in the seat next to him, His cologne tickled my nostrils.

“Welcome back to the living.”

For a fleeting moment I got a flashback of my vision of him, drugged out of his mind with a crown on top of his head forming part of the circle.

I huffed as I took my heavy textbook out of my backpack plonking it down onto the desk. “Thanks. So I take it I’m not a super-freak.”

“No, I got an answer that night, and I felt pretty stupid about everything afterward. Sorry.” He tapped his pen on the desk.

I squinted. “An answer? From whom?”

“My know-it-all brother and his buddies.”

Oh crap. “You spoke to your brother about this?”

“Hey, I was just as shocked as you were. I thought you broke the damn stones,” he whispered. “I felt pretty dumb when I told him that. They were all surprised, though, but Alex told me he knew a fae in Concordia that struggled the way you had. It was still during the time the phoenix ruled and they had to sneak her off to a stronger circle to open her. She needed the oldest stones in Concordia. Her magic made those stones stronger, and Alex told me that the one in Scotland was almost just as strong as that one. The circle in Scotland will open you. How does the headache feel?”

“Slightly pounding, but bearable.”

He cursed. “Hank’s healing doesn’t even take it away?”

“Story of my life.”

Sovereign Finley flew into the class and yelled out the page number. Everyone paged through their textbooks.

Chase leaned closer as he whispered, “Well, it sounded pretty bad that night when you got it.”

“Sorry about that.” I probably had to think about how I was going to apologize for the scare of everyone’s life for the next few days.

“Don’t. I just felt useless that I couldn’t help you.”

Sovereign Finley started with the lecture in the background.

“Help me?”

“We were close when you screamed.”

“We?” I asked again.

“Alex, Drake and me.”

I grunted.

“So we assisted, as your roommates couldn’t even get you out of bed. Alex told me what I should do, and I couldn’t.” He pulled his hands through his hair. “Probably because the fated-bond flame hasn’t paired us yet.”

“Or it could be the fact that you are not my griffin.”

He huffed. “I’m the strongest griffin here. Believe me, if I’m not your match, then no one is.”

I didn’t like the cockiness and I was too tired to argue with anyone about it.

“This is what you meant by ‘*they changed your entire life*’, wasn’t it?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your headaches? You look like a wilted flower.” Chase looked down. The concern made him look adorable. It was a softer side to him I didn’t think he’d owned.

“Yeah, the headaches suck all my happiness out of me.”

He chuckled. “That night in the bar, that was the real you?”

“Pretty much. Always have something back to say, but since the headaches showed up, I only wanted darkness and quiet.”

“That must suck.”

“It does, believe me.”

“You are one powerful fae,” he said with admiration.

“Mahalo for the ego boost, but at the moment, I don’t agree. Is Maverick still here?” The Dingle-hopper popped into my mind again and they said a change was as good as a holiday, so maybe something other than the stones might be what I needed.

“Maverick is an Earth fae, not the one that you need to handle all the yuckiness of this gift, Sophie.”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s not why I’m asking.”

“No, they left on another mission.”

Great.

We listened for a while to Sovereign Finley. Everything that left her mouth still sounded like Greek. My eyes itched from the cold air that hovered in the classroom and I blinked a few times, hoping it would disappear. Where was the breeze coming from?

“Okay, talk to me. Why the long face?”

I folded my arms. “I would like to pass this class.”

A chuckle escaped his lips. “That is so not going to happen.”

“Shut up.” I couldn’t help the slight upward curve at the corner of my lips.

He leaned back in his chair and folded his arms. We both listened to the Sovereign. The cat-ears still glanced at me. All of them carried some expression of knitted eyebrows, pity glistening in their gaze or narrowing eyes. The red head lifted his chin at me, and I shook my head.

I guessed they’d bought this whole Chase being my fated-bond like Drake and Mrs. Beatty tried to believe it.

There was something between Drake and me, even if he didn’t want to admit it. It was more than just a motherly attraction. The feeling was deeper. It felt like that night I stood inside the circle in Misty Hills. The only difference was that his touches were not that strong.

My mind was a mess again as I kept thinking about the dream. What did it all mean? I didn’t like how that vision made me feel, putting me on edge and knotting my muscles and core.



I CAUGHT up with in divinations, and as for the rest of the day she clucked around me like a mother hen the rest of the day. Between her and Chase, I wanted to yell at them to leave me alone, but I knew they meant well.

I was super excited when a note from Mrs. Beatty given to the Sovereign asked me to come and see her, with haste I packed my bags and left for her office.

I knew my way better inside the academy now. It felt as if I'd been at Earwyn for more than just a week.

I knocked, the command came, and I opened the door, stepping inside.

“Long day?” Mrs. Beatty asked from behind her desk.

“Draining day.” I flopped down into the seat in front of her desk.

“How is the headache?”

“Bearable,” I said in a softer tone.

“I want to try something else with you.”

“I thought you were going to take me to the stones in Scotland?”

“I am, but until then, I need to find out where your domain lies.”

“What do you mean, where my domain lies?”

“Something you said this morning. Please, can I try this?”

“Is it going to hurt?”

“No, but it’s draining.”

I grunted as the wilting feeling made every limb droop.

“Okay, what are we going to do?”

“An aptitude test. I rarely use it, but for the more difficult ones like you, I’m making an exception.”

“Will it help?”

“Definitely, you just have to be honest with your answers.”

“Okay.”

She took out a thick stack of papers and slid it in front of me with a pen. “Yell, if you need help with the questions.”

I looked at the first one and smiled to see multiple choice answers. This should be a breeze.

The stack was twenty-four pages filled with questions, and some of them took time and thought to circle the correct answer. I needed Mrs. Beatty's help on a few and asked for examples of what the actual scenario meant. I was dead honest, and I circled the answers that applied to me, my reasoning and action if I found myself in life-threatening situations. Heck, I was in a life-threatening situation a week ago.

It took me over two hours to fill in the questionnaire, and then Mrs. Beatty marked it in front of me.

She sighed a lot and looked confused, which made me feel more out of place. She even had a book she scanned through before she carried on. The silence was killing me.

"Sophie, go rest."

"Is everything okay with the test?"

She looked up at me and smiled. "You were honest, right?"

"Brutal," I replied.

"Then you have nothing to fear."

I nodded and pushed myself from the chair.

Mrs. Beatty's smiles tried to lessen my concern, but I felt like one super freak that my aptitude test didn't even make sense to her.

I went up to my room.

Brooke was fussing around me again, even Nikki and Cali were super friendly. We did our homework in silence after I'd given them the breakdown of my episode and told them it was one of my headaches that had flared up. I didn't tell them about the circle in my dream. I would probably carry that to my deathbed.

Brooke sat with her legs crossed on my bed as she let me copy the past two days' homework.

"We are going to the dining hall. Do you need something?" Nikki asked.

A smile spread across my face. "I'm fine I—"

"She is okay. Just leave. You are working on my nerves." Brooke sounded as annoyed as I was.

The door closed behind them, and I fell on my bed, trying to suppress my laughter.

Brooke tsked. "I know they mean well, but they hardly tried to make you feel welcome before."

"Who knows, maybe we will become best friends now, have our kids grow up together, and be each other's bridesmaids—"

"Shut it. Hell will freeze over."

I burst out laughing.

Brooke chuckled. "I hate your headaches. They are such a buzzkill."

"I wish Maverick was here."

Brooke stifled a laugh.

Oh, crap, what does she know? "What?"

"I'm not stupid. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you what?" I played it cool.

"About the Fire-Bird and the kiss."

I grunted. "Because it was nothing, okay?"

"I don't think it's nothing. He looked pretty worried the night he barged into the room with Alex and Chase on his heels. Chase couldn't even follow Alex's instructions. He was so useless. I don't think he is your match, either."

"Thank you," I yelled and punched the air.

Silence lingered as I played Brooke's words through my head.

"He looked worried?"

"Out of his mind. Fighting hard not to show his feelings made him look like he was constipated."

I laughed and chucked the pillow at her.

"I'm serious." She hugged the pillow. "You should've told me."

"How did you even find out about that?"

“Xander told me. He said Drake was pretty out of his element the next morning and he wanted to know more about how it was for him when he met me. Xander said it was weird hearing Drake speak that much.”

“Yeah, Drake made it clear he didn’t want anyone to find out about it.”

“Because it’s forbidden. It’s not like Xander and me. They won’t look the other way.”

A sigh left my lips as the butterflies kept crashing against the walls of my stomach. I loved that feeling but hated it at the same time. “I know. Mrs. Beatty told me why phoenix griffins are not a suitable match for Spirit faes.”

“Oh crap, you think she knows?”

“I think she picked up on it. You say she sees straight through the bullshit, then yes. I’m sure a part of her saw straight through mine.”

Brooke hissed out a curse word.

“When did they leave?” I asked.

“The day after Misty Hills.”

Brooke gasped, swung her legs over the bed and ran to her nightstand. She opened the drawer and took out a blue box with a beautiful bow and brought it back to my bed. She gave me the present and there was a note folded underneath the bow.

“Open it. I’m dying to know what’s inside.” She clapped her hands.

“Is it for me?”

“Yes, it’s for you. Xander gave it to me. I was so happy thinking it was mine, and then he told me I was only the courier and had to give it to you when you wake up.”

I grabbed the note. My heart grew inside my chest as I unfolded it. Only a few words stared back at me.

I’m a Gowk, sorry.

He made me so confused. Sorry about what, the kiss, the way he ignored me? It wasn’t clear.

Brooke waited as an enormous smile spread across her lips as curiosity twinkled in her eyes. “And?”

I gave her the note. She grabbed it out of my hand, and her eyes read through the line, turning the note over. “That’s it?”

I shrugged as my fingers pulled at the strings to open the box, finding the same device that Brooke had. It was some sort of phone.

Brooke shrieked. “That must have been one hell of a kiss, Sophie.”

I remember the buzzing and the toe-curling feeling.

“Yeah, it was pretty magical.” I took the device out of the box and looked at Brooke. “How do you switch it on?”

Brooke leaned over and gave me a quick breakdown of all the buttons on the side and pressed the top button. The screen lit up with images that moved. Mine was of snow falling in the forest and a cabin with smoke escaping from the chimney. My fingers brushed the screensaver. It looked so real.

Plenty of text messages came through. Drake had sent all of them the last two days while I was sleeping. I read the first message.

DRAKE:

OK, can see it. MayB I wanted this match 4 my brother, hoping he would grow up. But he isn't UR match. He couldn't even perform half of the things 2 calm UR headache that night. I don't care that Mavis says it was because the bond is not sealed yet. Xander calmed plenty of Brooke's headaches when they were still sneaking around, not knowing that they were the perfect match for one another.

I smiled as I read that, and a warm tingling sensation spread through my chest. My fingers pressed on the second message.

Drake:

Sorry that I pushed you on him, and sorry 4 being an asshole that day. Mavis asked me 2 assist you and her to Misty Hills and I was going 2 apologize to you, but then my brother showed up and I had 2 step aside. I never envied him as much as I did that night. I would give anything just to be a normal griffin.

The third one turned the color of my cheeks.

Drake:

U R one powerful fae, Sophie, and it drives me insane. It has nothing 2 do with the pull, either. It's a Drake thing. I'll see U when I get back. We will figure it out if U can find it in UR heart 2 forgive me 4 being a jerk. Hope U feel better soon.

The next couple of messages were weird.

One said *text me if you want* and another said *don't text me*.

I remembered what Brooke had told me that day when I'd asked her why she was worried about Xander. She couldn't text Xander because they were both on a mission. This was what these texts meant.

The last one was not to text him.

I understood what Brooke had felt that day. She did not know whether Xander was okay.

“They always come back.”

“Until the day they don’t, Brooke.”

“Yeah, well, something tells me that the Fire-Bird has something to come back to now, so he will be more adamant this time.”

I wanted to jump out of my skin. The butterflies caused turmoil in my stomach, almost making me nauseated—in a good way, though.

“Yeah.” Her hand twirled in my face’s direction. “You need to hide that constant happiness, too. It was what gave Xander and me away.”

Laughter bubbled out of me as I fell on my bed, and then the smile disappeared as the vision of the human circle traipsed into my head. It felt so real. Just when things turned around for me, I had to dream about that. What did it mean? And why were all of us kids?

I read Drake's texts twenty times. He knew what the pull to Spirit faes were, and yet he kept telling me it wasn't the pull, that it was a Drake Evans thing. I had to smile at that. But deep down I knew how I felt, it was something different, something I've never felt for anyone ever before. It was so intense it twisted at my guts and seared through my veins with an all-day longing when I wasn't with him.

I recalled what Mrs. Beatty told me about the natural bond between Drake's parents.

What if we had that natural bond? He did save my life, and as everyone had mentioned before, he was quite frantic about saving me, this Lost One in particular.

I couldn't wait for the text message to go through; I was feeling anxious to hear his voice.

How are we going to do this?

When Brooke and I went for dinner, every single person with cat-ears looked up at us. They were driving me insane with their constant staring.

I was extremely happy that Chase wasn't around. I didn't have the strength for him tonight.

Brooke excused herself early to go check something in the library. And I excused myself early as my headache started, it felt like a someone was turning a corkscrew grinding into my temple.

I walked down a deserted hallway when something in the dark corner caught my eye.

I turned to look and gaped. It was Chase kissing a blonde, no, grabbing her lips with his was more like it.

I couldn't wait for Drake to come back.

"Sophie," one of the other boys yelled my name, and I sort of froze as he came running over.

It was the griffin with the red hair. The one guy that didn't feel threatened by Chase's presence.

"Yes." I smiled as he reached me.

"Sorry, but I think this might be the only time to introduce myself without Evans hovering around you. Name is Sam." He reached out his hand to shake mine.

"You clearly know mine."

Chase slipped past the pillar and walked down the hallway as Sam spoke about hanging out sometimes. "Sure, that would be nice. A change of scenery might not be a bad thing," I whispered as the girl with blond hair glided past us.

"Hi Sam," the girl sang.

"Tiff."

She waltzed down the hallway and into a room a couple of doors from ours.

“So, I guess I’ll see you soon.”

“Okay.” A chuckle escaped my lips, and he rushed back the way he came.

He seemed nice enough, and maybe he could be the griffin that I needed.

I entered the room and stared at Cali’s bed. I felt sorry for her. Chase was a huge player, like Brooke had said. It was another girl every week.

I walked to my bed and grabbed the phone I stashed underneath the pillow. No text had come through yet.

I could only imagine Drake running for his life again, trying to get some poor lost soul to Earwyn.

The bathroom door opened, and Cali smiled at me. I shoved the phone under my pillow and my eyebrows pulled together as I stared at her. There was no sign of tears or puffy, red eyes. Did she even know?

“Are you sure you are okay?” Cali asked.

I smiled. “I’m more than okay? Are you?”

“Peaches. The Chase thing will not make things weird between us, will it?”

Oh, crap. She doesn’t know.

“As long as you don’t push him on me, I can’t see why not.”

She laughed. “Something is wrong with you, girl.”

I giggled but felt sorry for her. That crap was going to hurt when she discovered it. Brooke walked into the room.

“I don’t even have to ask why the long face?” Cali said as she paged through a book while sitting on her bed.

Brooke face-planted my bed. She left out a frustrated grunt, muffled by the bedding.

“When was the last time you heard from Xander?” Cali asked.

“Yesterday. I hate it when he doesn’t phone.”

“He will be fine,” Cali said and got up to make her bed. “Besides, he is on Alex’s team now. I can just imagine what a team Drake and he are going to make.”

“What?”

“Both are bad-asses. I don’t know why you are so afraid.”

“Because there is always some sort of snag when they get closer to Earwyn.”

“There was no danger the last time.”

“Because they came from Hong Kong. I don’t know where the entrance is this time. They don’t either.”

Cali launched into the amazing afternoon she shared with Chase. Knowing that Chase kissed another girl gnawed on the inside of my gut. *Do I tell her? Hell no. That will hurt too much, and will she even believe me?*

“He is such a tease, Cali,” Brooke sang, sounding annoyed.

“I don’t care. Chase is my tease.”

We both laughed at the way she’d said it. If only that was the truth.

“What, it doesn’t even bother Sophie one bit?” Cali waved at me.

I shrugged. “Because he is not my match, but Brooke has a point. If the team comes back with fresh meat that is a girl, Chase moves on from chaperoning me to her. I bet she will not look at Chase the same way I do.”

“She must try?” Cali chirped, and I shook my head. I hoped the blonde that he’d made out with had a wicked ability that was going to match the Fire fae’s.

“I forgot to tell you; the other new kid started. She is sixteen years old.” Brooke looked at me.

“The Manticore?”

“Yes.”

“At least she is here with her entire family.” I sighed, missing Mom and Dad like crazy.

“Yeah, she is one of the lucky ones.”

Brooke’s phone rang, and she squealed. I didn’t dare to look at my phone as Cali was in the room.

“Hey, baby,” she cooed.

Xander’s laughter came from the speakers.

“I assume the dangerous part of the mission is over. So when will you be coming back?”

“I don’t know. Alex is still waiting on Mavis for the location for the entry point. We already used his key today, so we’ll get it early tomorrow morning.”

“So tomorrow?”

“I pray.”

“I miss you. These missions are getting on my nerves now.”

“Yeah, Alex says that Mavis put a beacon out to call everyone back from their missions.”

“Why?”

“Nobody knows, but I’m over this mission now. It’s taking way too long.”

“You are a giant baby, Xander,” Cali yelled, and Xander laughed.

“Hey, Cali.”

Brooke looked at me and then back at the phone. “I forgot to tell you, the Spirit fae graced us with her presence.”

“Thank God for miracles. Is she okay?”

“Yes, but these headaches are messing with her personality.”

“I’m sure the stones will deflower her beautifully.”

“Xander,” I yelled. “Stop using that word. It’s disgusting.”

Brooke roared with laughter. “I forgot, yeah, that word is not fresh where we come from, babes.”

“What word?”

“Deflower,” Brooke said.

“What does it mean?” Drake yelled in the background, and my heart felt like it skipped a beat.

“For me to know and for you to find out, Fire-Bird,” Brooke retorted.

My phone hadn’t vibrated yet.

“Find out, Drake,” Xander spoke, and I could hear Drake laughing, knowing he already looked it up.

“What does it mean?” Xander asked.

“Drake, you are a party pooper,” Brooke yelled.

“What?” Xander commanded Drake this time. I could hear the smile in his voice.

“To deprive a woman of her virginity,” Drake said louder in the background, and everyone laughed.

Brooke included.

“Baby, who deflowered you?” Xander asked.

“I was innocent until I met your ass,” Brooke scolded him playfully, and Cali looked at Brooke with a raised eyebrow. There was no way Cali was still a virgin.

“I like that word, deflower.” Cali looked at me.

“Sophie,” Xander yelled. “Who deflowered you?”

“Hopefully, the stones in Scotland, Xander.”

“Keep the deflowering to the stones, Soph.” Maverick’s voice came from the background.

I could hear more laughter erupting.

“What?” Maverick said as Cali looked at me.

“He can heal my headaches,” I answered, whatever was brewing inside that mind of hers.

“He’s like a hundred years old,” she whispered back.

I was on fire and nailed Cali’s thoughts. Girl hormones were just as bad as boy hormones. “Rather an old man’s darling than a young man’s slave.”

“Mav, you have plans with Soph we don’t know about?” Drake asked.

“Well, I *dinnae* see any of the cat-ears going to get that lass’s attention soon. And from what I gathered, I’m the only one that can take her headaches away. Me and my magic hands.”

“Maverick! Don’t even think about it. Sophie needs a griffin.” Alex was the only one that didn’t think Maverick was funny.

Brooke whooped as Xander roared with laughter, and my cheeks flared up.

“I’m only joking, Soph, relax,” Mav yelled.

“Oh, Sophie grabbed a knife and stabbed herself, Maverick,” Brooke joked, and more laughter elicited.

“Poor lass, I would too if my headaches were that bad.”

My phone vibrated under my pillow. I turned around with my back facing Cali and peeked at my newest message.

DRAKE:

I will stab myself too. How do u feel?

SOPHIE:

I'm Ok.

I pressed the send button and waited for his next text as my heart pounded.

DRAKE:

Cali still in the room?

SOPHIE:

Yes, she is not going away soon.
This conversation is way 2 juicy 4
her.

DRAKE:

Dammit

Brooke still cooed sweet sentences to Xander.

SOPHIE:

R U still with everyone while U R
texting me?

DRAKE:

No, but Maverick knows something.
He only said those words 2 rile me
up and 2 admit it in front of all of
them.

SOPHIE:

U R such a clever little Fire-Bird.

DRAKE:

It's Master Fire-bird, and U'll piss
urself if u see how big this fire bird is.

My fingers glided over the keys.

SOPHIE:

😁, I have news for you. UR brother
beat U 2 it.

DRAKE:

He has nothing on me.

He can say that again.

DRAKE:

My luck, he could still be ur match.
Headache?

SOPHIE:

☐. And he is not my match, thank U
very much.

DRAKE:

Sorry. Wish I could help.

SOPHIE:

Thank U for the phone.

DRAKE:

🙄, it's not 4 UR benefit. It's 4 me.

SOPHIE:

Still, thank U.

DRAKE:

We need to get rid of those headaches.

SOPHIE:

Oh, I'll ☐☐ ☐ the day they go away.

DRAKE:

🤔🤔🤔 I'm holding U 2 ur words.

We chatted for the entire evening and came up with a great alternative plan. Maverick could heal the headaches so that I could get my sparkiness back. That way, his brother could play with someone else.

He hated it when his brother showed up the night Mrs. Beatty asked him to come with us to Misty Hills. That would've been perfect if Drake could've been there and not Chase.

The conversation was reaching the end, and I hated saying good night.

I hoped Mrs. Beatty would send them the entry point location soon so that they could come home soon.

I was on cloud nine when his messages stopped, and I couldn't wait to see him again. The image of him in my mind did not do that guy any justice, but I knew it was going to be hard to sneak around without getting caught.



THE FOLLOWING DAY, I went to the Stone Circle and found Alex there instead of Mavis. Witch meant they were back. The butterflies in my stomach went into a frenzy, threatening to explode from within me. “What are you doing here?”

“Oh, good morning to you too, Sophie,” Alex said, with such a wide grin I could see his pearly whites. “Mavis had to leave and asked me to assist you. Not that projection or sight is my domain.”

“She left? Why?”

“It sounded urgent. I didn't ask. So I'm afraid you are stuck with me.”

I chuckled. “It's not like that. Mrs. Beatty was supposed to give me my results today.”

“Results?”

“She let me do a domain aptitude test yesterday.”

He frowned, but then his lips curved into a smile. “Interesting.”

“So, how are you going to help me?”

“Not with the elements. Drake might be a better teacher than I am with your elements.”

At his name my heart skipped a beat again, just imagining Drake teaching me about the elements of Spirit was enough to send *me* into a frenzy. I wondered if I would learn something?

“Follow me.” Alex walked out of the Stone Circle and walked in the opposite direction toward the training court.

“So how was your mission?”

“I’d rather not talk about it, if you don’t mind.”

“That bad huh?”

He glared at me.

I put my hands up, “fine I won’t ask.”

All I can tell you is that that the Lost one was a chimera or a manticore, but we were too late and the Guild already dealt with them. When King Avery dethroned the Phoenix Monarchy, a lot of manticores and chimeras had left.”

“So you were around when the phoenix still ruled?”

“Yes, the times were much harder than now for our faes. Plenty of faes had dwellings inside caves and deep into the forests, teaching their kids to hide their gift. My father was the one that guided mine forward and taught me to control my gift. During that time we had a shield amongst our dwellings that kept the magic contained, for extra protection”

“Is your father still alive?”

“He is. He is celebrating his one-hundred-and-seventy-fifth birthday soon.”

“Wow.”

We reached the platforms where the shifters trained, and Alex walked straight to them. He jumped on the podium. “Let’s see what you got, Sophie?”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” He smiled. “Where did you learn to fight, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Sex trafficking is a big thing in the parts where I come from. So my mother enrolled me in a defense class for a year. I hated it, but I had to admit, it felt great when I thought my life was in danger.”

Alex chuckled. “It’s good to know that you have the basics. A fae needs to know how to protect herself as well as knowing how to use her abilities.”

I took a deep sigh as tears threatened to prick.

“What?”

“You sound like my mother.”

Silence lingered.

“Sorry, Sophie.”

I shook my head.

“They are holding up,” Alex said. “They’ll be fine with time, I promise.”

I wasn’t so sure about that fine comment. I knew my parents, and hoped this didn’t pull them apart like it did with most families. “You checked up on them?”

“We look in on all the Lost Ones’ families. There is a list, to be honest.”

“You look in on Brooke’s family, too?”

“Not as much as we used to, but yes.” He motioned to me with his hand to show him what it was I could do.

It was throwing and grips, and my favorite, the move where you attack the four sensitive areas of the body, which was the Solar Plexus, Instep, Nose, and Groin, also known as SING. Alex was on the floor grunting, begging for a break.

“That gives me time to get away,” I said as he was on his knees, body curled up. “Sorry.” I hated this but felt proud of myself.

“I feel for Drake.”

“Yeah, he didn’t budge with the instep or the nose, though. And he grabbed me so hard that I couldn’t go for the solar plexus or the groin.”

Alex chuckled and got up. “He fought back. He wasn’t your guinea pig to do with as you please.”

True.

“But as lethal as you are with grips, you need to learn how to attack.” Alex went straight into fighting mode. “First, you need to learn how to stand correctly.”

He taught me the beginning of a fighting stance, how to keep my fists shielding my face. Alex moved my thumbs in order not to hurt myself when I punched someone.

It wasn't easy to make a fist to punch, but I got what he was showing me with my thumbs in the way, and how easily I could break a thumb if I didn't place it in the right spot. By having the thumb in the right position it would reinforce the first for a harder blow.

Next, Alex taught me how to kick with a knee. It was easy, and it was my best limb for now until my arms became stronger for the punches and my core muscles built up a bit more.

My butt screamed as I had to practice knee kicks on a dummy while he checked if I did it right.

The poor guy was still hurting but it didn't stop him from finishing this task.

We practiced a few punches too. The sweat dripped from my body, and I breathed like a bull. My lungs burned, my muscles begged for relief and my bones started to ache.

"I think you got the basics. Let's call it a day."

"Does everyone at Earwyn take fighting this seriously?"

"Pretty much everyone." Alex walked with a limp, and I had to suppress my laughter.

"Sorry," I said, he just shook his head.

"Drake warned me this morning, but I had to see it for myself."

We said goodbye at the hedges, and I rushed back as Alex limped toward the graduates' quarters.

Brooke was going to pee herself when I told her.

All three of my roommates scurried to get ready for class as I entered the room.

“Is it true Mavis is not here?” Nikki asked.

“Yes, she had some business elsewhere.” I walked into the bathroom to take a shower.

The girls still twittered until the water drowned them out. When I got out, it was only Brooke left in the room.

She had a massive smile on her face, packing her books for today’s classes in her bag.

“You know he is back?”

“Yes, he came just after you left and woke me up. Man, I miss him way too much when he leaves.”

“They were not gone that long.”

“I know, but in my defense, I am bound to the guy.”

We both laughed.

She grabbed her bag and put the one strap over her shoulder. “See you later?”

I nodded and got ready for the day. I couldn’t wait to see Drake.

I had both dimensional manipulation and healing today.

The healing class was similar to Biology. Shelves holding glass cases covered three walls and shelves containing bottles of ingredients and little cauldrons covered the Sovereign's desk above the green board.

The tables were stacked in lab formation, five tables grouped together by six chairs..

I sat down next to Nikki. There were plenty of other faes who took this class. Craig sat opposite Nikki and me with another male fae with dark brown hair.

“Philip.” He reached out to me with an open hand. His handshake was firm.

“Sophie.”

“Oh, everyone knows who you are.”

Nikki laughed. “Philip is an Earth fae, too. Most of the students in this class are Earth faes. You get the occasional Frost eagle like Nina over there,” Nikki said, pointing to a girl with red hair. She had a beak covering her lips. “And duredina,

like Bridgette, who is in that group.” Antlers protruded from her dark brown hair.

Hank stormed into the class and lifted his hand. Blinds rolled down one after the other, shutting out the light. “Open your pages to a hundred-and-thirty-seven; the Congestion Tonic.” He spoke in that deep voice of his as he looked around the class, his gaze rested on me before moving on.

“You will need to learn how to make this one before we can move on to the *Faeus Nonaglacies*, aka Fairy tonic.”

Everyone gasped.

“Fairy brews are very complicated. It must be precise because it could kill a fae if the measurements are wrong,” Nikki whispered as Hank continued to speak about the one we were about to make today. It was a standard tonic that could heal the flu quickly and acted as an immune booster.

We did theory for the first half an hour, then suddenly cauldrons flew from the shelves and landed perfectly in front of each student. Tins filled with ingredients came next, with each table ending up with four containers and a bottle of opaque liquid. The bottle was labeled ‘*Diluted Blood Tree Sap.*’

“You have half an hour to brew the tonic, so I suggest you get started.”

I followed the procedure to the t, pushing through as one of my headaches started to bloom.

The tonic’s color looked all wrong when I finished, and it smelled way too sweet.

Hank walked through the class, inspecting what we had brewed.

I didn't dare to take a sip of mine.

Nikki's tonic smelled and looked very similar to the image in our textbook.

She was really great in this class.

When the bell rang, it was time for P.E.

"Sophie, could you please stay for a few minutes," Hank said while I was busy packing up.

I walked up to his desk. He pushed himself out of his chair and stood in front of me. His hands immediately cupped my temples.

"How did you know?"

"I told you before, it has a certain beacon. I don't have to touch you to feel it."

"Today's buzz and heat are more potent. Did you follow the recipe to the t?" Hank asked.

"I did. Maybe I don't have healing in me."

"Nonsense. You are learning advanced classes. You don't know the basics of treating the cauldron, the flame, and the ingredients like the others do, but you will get there. I will give you a list of reading material that would help. It will teach you the basic techniques. You can find the books in the library."

"Thank you."

Hank's touches felt good, I practically melted in his palms as a soft moan escaped my lips. When he let go of my head, he looked at the stone around my neck before clasping it in his fist, closing his eyes. He opened his eyes and said, "The stone isn't doing what it's set out to do. Do you mind leaving it with me so that I can figure out what is wrong with it?"

I nodded and took off the necklace. There was no sign of a headache, just like that night in the bar when Maverick took it away.

Hank scribbled on a piece of paper and handed it to me. "To give to your next class's Sovereign."

He grabbed a form that already had a list of books on it and wrote a few more. "Below are the books that I suggest you read." He handed it to me.

"Thank you."

"It's my pleasure." He smiled. The beak still freaked me out. I couldn't stop wondering why Xander's beak had disappeared.

I rushed up to my room to get ready for P. E and put on my uniform. I was terribly late, but thanks to Hank's note, I had a great excuse.

My strides were considerable as I rushed to the training grounds and saw the faces of the shifters in combat. Some were fighting on the podiums, and others were sitting on the bleachers next to the platforms.

With Mavis gone, the graduates were helping out for the day.

My eyes quickly found Drake standing with his back toward me as I ran up the bleachers. His arms folded in front of his chest, pacing the length of the first block where two shifters were fighting against each other.

Chase was fighting on the block opposite, and I had to admit he had some skills.

I sat next to Nikki and Brooke.

“Where the hell were you?” Brooke whispered.

“With Hank. He healed my headache.” I clasped my hands in my lap.

Brooke smiled and hugged me. “She is back.”

“You haven’t met my magic hands yet, Soph,” Sam said from behind me, and I looked over my shoulder and squinted.

“You can heal too?” My tone was severe. “I didn’t see you in Hank’s class.”

“I don’t need that stupid class. If the flame is the same color, you will find out just how powerful of a griffin I am.”

“That is a big if, Sam,” I said and flicked his cat-ear, but my finger just went straight through.

His lips fanned out into a huge grin. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing,” I chirped, feeling like an idiot.

“No, what was that flick?” Sam asked.

I couldn’t believe that my finger had gone straight through. It meant that his cat-ears weren’t really there.

“Give it a rest before you give me another headache.”

He leaned in to say something else when an empty scrunched-up tin hit him straight in the head. The act alone was funny enough to elicit a roaring laughter from the students, but the look on his face was the bonus.

“Pay attention, all of you. It’s not a social hour!” Drake barked.

I looked at him, but he was back to his broody, silent self.

“Ow,” Sam complained, rubbing his head.

“What is wrong with the Fire-Bird?” I asked Brooke.

“Oh, I can think of a few reasons.” Her lips curved.

“Seriously, if it’s not the one Evans, it’s the other one,” Sam complained, still rubbing his head where the can had hit him. Brooke and I had to suppress our laughter.

“Well, he is griffin too, Sam,” Brooke said.

“Thank you, captain obvious. But, he is not the right griffin, so he should just step out of this lane.”

“What lane?” I asked Sam.

“The Sophie Emerson’s lane,” Sam chirped, and all the cat-ears close to us sniggered.

“You are going to get another tin in your face soon.” I looked at Sam, and one connected with my arm and landed on my lap.

I looked at it. “Ow.” I picked up the can and threw it back in Drake’s direction. My aim was way off.

“Pay attention,” Drake ordered again, without a hint of a smile.

I pulled my face at him as he turned back, all serious, ready to fight.

Xander and Emile struggled to keep their laughter across the podium.

Drake had to be careful. Everyone would see that something was going on if he kept being so overprotective.

“You are playing on death’s front step, Sophie,” Nikki whispered.

“Pfft, he is a griffin, too.”

The ones close to us, snorted.

A buzzer went off, and it was time for a change-up.

Drake motioned with his finger for our entire group to come.

“I’m a lover, not a fighter,” I said.

“That won’t work on me,” Drake bit back. “Get down here.”

“C’mon, Sophie,” Chase yelled. “I promise to take it easy on you.”

“Oh, hell no.”

“Sophie,” Alex said, and I looked at him.

“I don’t know how to attack. He is going to kill me.”

Alex gave me a raised eyebrow, and all the graduates laughed. “Just sing.”

I laughed, and got up. “Fine.”

“Sophie can sing?” Chase asked and looked at Alex as I walked toward the platform.

“Oh, like a nightingale, Chase,” Alex said.

Parvati’s laughter came from the other side of the podium, where she stood next to Maverick.

Chase looked at her. “Why am I not in on this joke?”

“Not everything is about you,” I said while I walked up to the mat and took my shoes off.

“Awe you scared,” I mimicked Tweety Bird.

Chase shared a look with his brother. “The broken nose was Sophie?”

More laughter erupted as Drake glared at his brother with arms folded.

I got my chance as Chase waited for an answer from Drake and grabbed his arm, stepped closer to him and threw him over my shoulder, grunting as I struggled with his weight.

Parvati and Maverick applauded.

“Whoohoo.” Brooke yelled out.

“That is cheating. I wasn’t ready.” He rolled up onto his heels, but wasn’t quick enough to hide his smile. “I was going to take it easy on you.”

He came for me, but I managed somehow to block his punch and kneed him in the side. It took only a moment for

him to lose focus before I swept his leg from under him, landing him on his back again. Boy I was on fire!

“Who the hell is this chick?” He got up and fought harder. It was a bit more difficult to block all his punches, and when his knee connected with my side, he turned me around and got me in the exact grip his brother had, but not that strong.

It was time to SING. My arms connected hard with Chase’s Solar Plexus, then my heel stomped on his foot, then the back of my head connected with his nose, as the side of my palm connected with his groin.

Chase was grunting on the ground. I threw up both of my arms in defeat of my opponent. “You can at least make this harder...”

A leg came at me from the back, falling the air expelled from my lungs. Pain seared through my arm as laughter broke out.

I complained as Chase rolled back into his fetus position, groaning.

Alex looked down at me. “Always be on alert, Sophie.”

The buzzer went off, and I got up walking back to the bleachers.

Chase asked Alex for time out with his hands. Drake’s shoulders shook with silent laughter.

“Mav,” Alex called as Chase struggled off the podium, and Maverick followed him.

“Where the hell did you learn how to do that?” Brooke sounded shocked.

“My mom was paranoid, and she enrolled me in defense classes. That is only defense, Brooke.”

“Did you sing with Drake, too?” Cali asked.

“No, I ‘IN’ with him.”

“In?” Nikki, Brooke, and Cali asked at the same time.

“Instep and Nose. He had me in a tight grip.”

More laughter erupted, but it didn’t last long because Drake glared at us.

It didn’t matter if he was broody or not. He could still elevate a girl’s heartbeat.

After the last bell rang we made our way back toward the academy.

“Where is Chase?” I asked Brooke.

“Alex asked Maverick to heal him.”

“How did I miss that?”

“Oh, maybe fire bird has all your attention these days.”

Sam flung his arm around my shoulder. “I didn’t know you could fight like that, Emerson.”

“It is called defending myself. It’s hardly fighting.” I removed his arm from around me.

“Still, it was fun seeing Evans in so much pain. Usually, he inflicts pain. Karma is a bitch.”

The few students around us laughed at his statement.

“Pretty brutal to beat up your match, Emerson.” Sam smirked.

“Go away would you.”

When we reached our room, I took a quick shower and wanted to go to Maverick to find out if we could go to the bar

tonight to catch the Dingel-hopper.

When I exited the bathroom, Brooke slipped in.

Nikki and Cali had a bag open on Cali's bed. I frowned at them as they threw clothes into it.

"You guys are leaving for the weekend?" I asked as I took out the blow dryer and connected it to the outlet.

"Yes, a bit of freedom," Cali said.

"Uh-uh," Nikki said, hurrying towards me. She took the blow dryer out of my hands and ruffled my hair. Water droplets landed on my skin. Her lips mumbled foreign words as she scanned my hair with her palm. The tingling connected to magic crawled all over my scalp.

"There you go," Nikki smiled and sounded all chuffed with herself.

My fingers brushed through dry hair. "Neat!"

I looked out the window. The sky was so blue and cloudless it showed promise of a gorgeous weekend. A pair of shorts with a shirt and flops popped into my thoughts and when I opened the dresser, the outfit lay neatly in the drawer.

The door of the bathroom opened as I pulled on my clothes. From the corner of my eye I saw Brooke pulling on a pair of knee-high jeans.

"Are you going to Xander?" I asked.

"Yes, why?" She pushed her arms through a floral print shirt.

"I need to speak to Maverick."

“Seriously, Sophie. He is old.” Cali said as she paraded her perfect figure in nothing more than a bra and tights.

“It’s not the reason I need to see him.” I rolled my eyes. “Seriously are boys all you think of?”

“Yes.” Brooke and Nikki answered simultaneously.

“Does it have to do with Earth?” Nikki asked when I shot her a look.

“Yeah,” Brooke answered. “Soph saw a Dingle-hopper that didn’t look fresh.”

Nikki raised her palms. “Count me out.”

Cali and Brooke broke down in laughter as a smile sprawled on my lips.

“I hated the little bugger that you had to look after. Something was seriously wrong with him, I swear,” Cali said.

“Just my luck. I always end up with crazy creatures. I mean, look at my plants.” She waved at the creepy spider looking plant.

“That is so you, my friend.” Cali smiled. “Always have a soft spot for the weird.”

Brooke grabbed my arm as she stepped into a pair of flip-flops. “See you guys on Sunday.”

“Bye,” I said, rushing behind Brooke as the two of them sang their goodbyes.

We rushed down the steps to the foyer.

“When did you see the Dingle-hopper, Soph?”

“He worked the mop that night at the bar.”

“I think it’s so awesome that you see through their invisibility.”

“You don’t think it’s weird?”

She shook her head. “They used to say that about the fairies, too.” Brooke changed the subject to P. E. It was what I loved about her. She ticked off all the severe injuries that she had witnessed during the past two years, and it took her the longest to get used to when she came to Earwyn. “You actually handle it better than me.”

“Yeah, I told you my personality was leaning more toward the disturbing side.”

“It doesn’t. I love it.” She hooked her arms into mine.

I was glad that she understood me, and I really wanted to tell her about everything that I was seeing, but fear got the better of me.

I told her in a hush tone what she’d thought about the princess of Concordia was spot on. Mrs. Beatty had confirmed it that night. She knew her personally.

“Of course she had. She used to be a Sterilian guard. Was one of King Avery’s favorite shields. But it changed and the theories of why are driving her insane.”

“How do you know all these things?”

“Xander.”

We reached the graduate’s quarters where Xander stood on the steps that led to his little hut. Drake, Parvati, and Lindy sat

on the porch of the hut next to Xander's. Brooke rushed over to Xander as I rushed to Maverick's hut. I didn't look at Drake, but I could feel his presence as thick as smothering smog. I hated this secrecy thing. All I wanted to do was kiss him one more time. Stroke his hair and run my fingers down his muscular arms.

"Great fighting skills, Soph," Parvati pulled me from my fantasizing reverie.

I just smiled and nodded at her as a thank you. But really, I was only defending myself. Maybe Mavis had a point about learning defense first, and because of that Chase hardly caused any damage except the bruise on the side of my stomach that throbbed.

I knocked on Maverick's door, and it opened. His lips curved into a knowing smile.

"Oh, stop it. I really didn't like what I did to Chase."

"I'm not thinking about Chase, Soph. It was hilarious when Alex stumbled to me this morning."

I huffed as the corner of my lips curved.

"I take it Hank helped *ye* with the headache as *ye're* back to *yerself*."

"Yes."

"Where is *yer* necklace, lass?"

"Hank took it. Saying something feels wrong."

Maverick squinted but said nothing.

"So we're going to do this thing?"

“Not tonight. Meet me around seven tomorrow night in the parking lot.” He rolled his r’s.

“Okay, great. See you then.” I turned around and ran down the steps of his cabin. I glanced over to where Drake had sat. But he was not there anymore. I felt the pang of disappointment crush down on my chest.

“Are you leaving?” Brooke asked.

“Yes. Hank gave me a list of books that I have to read up on.”

They all sang their bye in unison as I waved.

I took the path back to the main trail leading up to the Academy, walking on the uneven cobble path. The grass that grew between the stones tickled my toes as I breathed in the fresh air. I think I was starting to enjoy my time here.

A hand grabbed my arm. A vibration erupted throughout my body and couldn’t stop the tiny yelp that escaped me.

An earthy smell of decomposing leaves and the powerful scent of wild mint stung my nostrils before it got replaced with a manly, sweet fragrance that only belonged to Drake. His laughter reached my ears.

“Oh, now you can laugh.”

“Stop it. My pensiveness is my defense mechanism,” Drake said as he looked into my eyes. For a moment nothing existed except the space between us. A gap Drake quickly closed as he drew my face nearer with his gentle touch to my cheek. Our lips touched and I inhaled as much of him as I could.

His kisses were terrific as the buzzing became one with the hum of insects, drowning out the bird calls and squirrel chatter. My lips itched, and the way his teeth scraped softly through his sucking eased it. The kiss broke, and I lost my balance.

“Whoa.’ his one arm captured my waist, preventing me from falling.

My smile grew. “You kissed me right off my feet.”

He smiled back.

“That tin really hit Sam hard.”

“Good, it should teach him to poke in my salad.”

“I’m food now?”

He chuckled. “I actually feel sorry for my brother, Sophie.”

“Yeah, well, I heard from others that he deserved it.”

We kissed again.

“You are not scared that someone is going to walk in on us?” I spoke against his lips.

“They have to be fantastic to see through my projection, and Mavis is not here.”

I gasped as I pulled away from the kiss. “We’re invisible.”

“Yeah.” His eyes widened as he planted his lips on mine again. This guy was driving me crazy.

Everywhere his hands touched, a tingling sensation exploded, spreading through my entire being. I had the urge to

prance around like a horse to get rid of the buzzing that ran down my legs. It felt wonderful. I still did not know what it was.

The kiss stopped when we both struggled to breathe. “So I take it that none of the graduates are going to leave until Mrs. Beatty gets back.”

“I’m here for a couple of days, hopefully, an entire week,” he whispered, and took my hand as we walked deeper into the forest. Dead logs covered with moss and mushrooms littered the floor. “What are you and Maverick going to do tonight?”

“Not tonight. He moved it to tomorrow night.”

“To do what?”

“We are going to the bar.” The spongy crunch of layers of dead pine needles and twigs crunched underneath our feet.

Drake’s entire face slacked as his gaze locked with mine. I struggled to suppress my smile.

“It’s not like that. Why is everyone worried about Maverick and me?”

“Because you do not know Maverick the way we do. That Scot is a horn dog.”

I threw back my head and laughed. “I only need his element for a project.”

His lips curved before he squinted. “Why do I feel you are up to no good, Sophie Emerson?”

“I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“Should I be worried?” His tone was severe as we came to a stop. With his free hand he plucked a twig and started chewing on it.

“No, I’m not like that. I promise. It’s really only something he can help me with, otherwise I would’ve asked you.”

“Is it another headache?”

“No, I need him to help me with something I learned in animal care, that is all.”

“Why on earth are you taking animal care?” Drake asked.

“Because the pages in animal care books aren’t torn out.”

His face lit up as he stifled a laugh. He didn’t have his brother’s deep dimple, but he had long vertical laughing lines that reached his eyes. “Okay, fine!”

“Shh, someone is going to hear you.”

He squinted. “No one can hear through my projection.”

“That is great to know that it doesn’t suck that much.” I teased. “So Mavis can really see through projection?”

“She can when it’s attached to phoenix griffins. It’s harder with Spirit fae’s projection, though.”

“That would be so awesome if my domain is projection. Did she say where she was going?”

“Nope, she just told Alex she needs to see someone. It sounded urgent. Why do you ask?”

“She let me do an aptitude test yesterday, and she mentioned she hardly does them. I’m waiting in anticipation

for the results.”

He frowned. “Why would Mavis let you take a test? I thought she knew your domain is shield.”

“Yeah, I don’t know if it is Shield, Drake.”

“You are a shield, Sophie. You have the characteristics of a shield.”

“Okay, if you say so.”

“I do say so. You don’t need a griffin.” He sounded jealous. I couldn’t help the chuckle escaping through my lips.

“Stop laughing at me. You are mine.” He pulled me in front of him and kissed me again. His hands on me were heaven, and it was definitely and very quickly going to become my personal fix.



WE PARTED AROUND four and I slipped to the library looking for a few books on Hank’s list. I found the first one on Cauldron Care pretty fast and booked it out from the library with the intent of reading it tonight.

The academy was quiet around the weekend. Our room was deserted with Nikki and Cali gone and Brooke was obviously with Xander. I read the first few chapters on how to oil the cauldron first, which oil to prepare for which potions. There were three different oils, and it was important to learn which spells fell under which category. No wonder my potion didn’t come out right.

My stomach grumbled just as I turned the page to the fourth chapter. Here and there, a student walked in the hallways as I climbed down the stairs. The place was quite creepy being so empty. I helped myself to bread, fruit, and nuts, then went back to my room to continue reading. I opened my door and put my plate on my dresser. My phone jumped to my mind, and I was sure that Drake must have messaged me to meet him somewhere, unless he was already at the bar with friends.

Brooke didn't lie when she said how much it sucked to sneak around.

I rushed to the table next to my bed and opened the drawer grabbing my phone. No message yet.

My fingers glided over the keys as I texted Drake. I hated being alone in the room. I reached over to switch the lamp on beside my bed when something grabbed me and pulled me down towards my bed.

I punched the nearest body part.

A hand clamped down over my mouth and Drake said through a laugh, "It's only me."

"Not funny, Drake." I crawled into his arms. I felt so safe. He came closer and planted his lips on me. The kiss was short and sweet.

"What are you doing here?" I switched the lamp on.

"You don't want me here?"

"That's not what I said. Aren't you afraid someone will catch you?"

“Who? Nikki and Cali are not here, and Brooke stays over at Xander’s on these types of weekends. I didn’t think that you wanted to be alone, but if you do, I’ll understand.” He pouted.

“No, I don’t want to be alone.”

We spent the rest of the evening in the room. Drake spoke about his dad and all the stories he used to tell him as a child. I kept remembering that first vision that I had and Dreya dying a few days later.

“So, why do you need Mav for your project at the bar, Sophie?”

“You won’t let this go, will you?”

“No,” he said.

“Promise you won’t look at me weird.”

He squinted. “Why would I look at you weird?”

“Just promise.”

“I promise.” He crossed his heart.

“That night at the bar, I saw a Dingle-hopper.”

His eyebrows knitted. “Where?”

“He was working the mop.”

“What mop?”

“The one that Chase took away.”

His eyebrows knitted as he looked at the carpet. “There wasn’t a Dingle-hopper.”

I kept looking at him and his eyebrows slightly raised. “It was invisible?”

“Bingo.”

“You can see the ones that go invisible?”

“Yeah, I know, it’s not normal.”

“No, I think it is amazing.” He took my hand, our gazes locked. “You are amazing.”

My only answer to that was to grab him and kiss him.. He laughed into the kiss. I was so glad he didn’t say it was abnormal or made a fuss about it. He truly didn’t care.

The kiss broke, and Drake looked at his watch with a grunt. His gaze flickered back to me. “It’s one. I have to go.”

“Can you stay?” I begged him, and he looked at me.

“You want me to stay?”

“I don’t want to sleep alone in this room.”

“Okay, fine, but I sleep naked.”

I squinted at him. “You can make an exception tonight.” I wouldn’t have any of that sleeping-naked nonsense.

“I have to warn you, I’m like a furnace.” He got up from the bed and took his sweater off. My eyes bulged slightly at his perfectly sculpted muscles bulging everywhere.

His hands tugged at the belt of his jeans.

“What are you doing?”

“I will not sleep in my jeans. You can forget that.” He bantered and pulled down his jeans. Luckily he wore boxers.

My eyes took him in and I knew this guy is going to be the death of me.

Drake climbed back into my bed and pulled me closer to him, my stomach felt like I was suddenly falling and perhaps that feeling meant I was really crashing in love with him. I curled into him feeling like this was where I belonged, it took only a few seconds for his body heat to ignite me from the inside out. And with it came that electrical current buzzing through my bones as if he was bringing me to life.

When he reached over to switch the lamp off the darkness was stark and suddenly my entire body came alive. How was I going to sleep with him right next to me?

His lips brushed the top of my head, his hand caressed my face, in response I raised my chin to meet his lips. I knew it was dangerous to be kissing Drake this way, but my body reacted to each stroke and each touch like a hungry tiger. In a way every kiss from Drake and every touch was like the first time I had ever experienced human affection.

My head spun, but I welcomed this vortex. I finally pulled back, and his lips traveled down to the soft skin of my neck.

I opened my eyes as I realized I was sitting on his lap, straddling him. How the hell did I even get on top of him? I didn't care. I didn't want to care either, and the kissing continued.

For a semi-giant, he was surely gentle, and I couldn't get enough of him.

Drake grunted as he pulled away. His hand covered one side of my head, his forehead resting against mine. “We need to stop. I can’t lose myself with you. You can get hurt.”

“I didn’t say kiss me like that.”

He laughed. “It’s hard to not kiss you like that. I really should be more careful with you.”

We looked at each other. I chuckled and gave him one last kiss before we crawled back under the covers and tried to sleep.

I couldn’t understand why Mavis could say this sort of bond was wrong when everything felt so right.



A SIREN BLARED, and we both jumped awake.

The night light went on.

“What the hell is that?” I covered my ears, and Drake jumped into his jeans and pulled on his sweater.

“Drake!”

“I have to go.” He stepped into his sneakers and touched the sides of my face and kissed me hard.

When the kiss broke, I could see the worry tugging at his eyebrows.

“Stay in your room, promise me!”

I nodded as the fear of the siren poured into my soul.

He tied his shoes fast, and then he disappeared. My door opened and closed, and I was alone.

The siren still blared. When was Mrs. Beatty coming back? Was she okay? I didn't like the sound of the wailing. What did it mean?

The door opened, and Brooke rushed in.

“Soph!”

“I'm here. What the hell is going on?”

“It's happening again.” She rushed to the window, pulled the curtain away, and looked outside.

“What is?” I yelled over the blare of the siren.

The siren finally stopped, and I could hear myself think again. “Brooke, what is happening?”

“The year that I came, the same thing happened. Mavis left on a business trip to Concordia, and three kids vanished from the village.”

“What?”

“Sterilian guards paraded Earwyn for two months and they never found them.”

“You think more kids disappeared?”

“I don't know, but when that siren goes off, bad news always follows.”

The next day, we were in full lockdown. We had to stay in our rooms and only leave for meals. I wasn't even hungry.

The graduates were all suited up and stationed at every entrance of the academy. I hadn't seen Drake the entire day.

Brooke looked worried as she paced, biting her nails. Her phone rang, and she jumped before picking it up. "Xander."

"They took three more kids. Bertram, Tom's eleven-year-old son, is one of them." His voice came from the speakers.

"What, why?" Brooke yelled.

"We don't know. Mavis is coming back soon. I won't be able to speak to you, as Alex wants us to be in our other forms."

"Are guards coming again?"

"They are already in the city, investigating. Stay safe."

"We will. You too."

They said goodbye, and all I could think about was my dream. That was why all of us were younger. It wasn't us, but the kids that were kidnapped.

“Soph,” Brooke called, and my gaze snapped to her. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. It’s just the stress.” My headache pulsed slightly. Usually, by now, they would flare-up, and I’d be screaming this roof down. “Who is Bertram?”

“The owner of the pub we were at the other night. He is the nicest manticore and his son is the sweetest eleven-year-old.”

“Are we safe without Mrs. Beatty?”

“Yes, the teams are all here. They are going to be in their other forms until they sort this out.”

I nodded. I couldn’t help thinking that my dream was connected to this. Why did they need young children?

Around lunch time, my stomach growled at me. I wasn’t hungry, and it was probably the stress. There were still no new developments around lunch.

“Let’s go grab something to eat.”

“I’m not hungry,” I said.

“That is a lie. I can hear your stomach from over here.”

I sighed, got up and followed Brooke. She opened the door, and we found Jacob guarding our floor.

“Any word?” Brooke asked.

“No, go eat and come back.”

We nodded and rushed down the steps.

In the foyer, Lindy and Alex kept guard at the two entrances. I kept staring at her stinger that resembled a giant peach at the end of her tail. There was a slight growl in her breathing as she paced the front door.

Her stinger was ready to attack. Alex was in his op-suit and spoke over a device.

“Go eat and get back to your rooms,” Alex ordered as we passed him.

We nodded again. I wished Mavis could come back.

Inside the dining hall, Maverick stood at the entrance with his bow around his shoulder. Close to the buffet area, a panther paced the length of the hall. Its tail swung restlessly.

The panther turned around and prominent eyes with a beak looked at both of us. The face reminded me of an owl—a drivine. Dark brown fur with golden stripes glistened in the light. Its paws were enormous.

We walked closer to the buffet area. “Hey, Parvati,” Brooke said with a smile.

“Hey, girl. Eat and get back to your rooms.” Her voice didn’t even sound like hers.

I dished up a small plate of potato salad, grabbed a dragon fruit, and went to sit down at the nearest table.

The dream kept playing in my mind. The faces and how sick everyone looked as if they were under a deadly spell were all I could think about. It was the crown on their heads that kept nagging at me I remembered how I felt out of control with the crown on my head.

Brooke plopped down next to me on the bench.

I kept looking at Maverick at the door. He had a bow around his shoulder. The students that had left for the weekend were recalled.

Nikki entered, greeting Maverick. He nodded in greeting.

She came rushing toward us sitting down opposite us. “You guys okay? I heard they took three more kids?”

“Making it nine,” Brooke said and launched into what happened around four o’clock this morning.

I could still feel the beams that stung as they connected with me. That dream felt so real, and I didn’t like this feeling that was busy brewing inside of me.

“Cali’s dad refused to send her back, obviously she is not pleased. Everyone at Concordia is questioning Mavis’s teaching techniques...” Their voices drowned out, and I shuddered, remembering the time when I felt like a ticking time bomb.

“Soph.” Brooke touched my hand, and I jumped. “Didn’t you hear me calling you?”

“Sorry.” I took a huge breath, and I ate some of the potato salad.

“Parvati is restless,” Brooke said.

“They all are. I’d rather stay near the Drivine than the Manticore. Lindy is a Jack in a box ready to strike,” Nikki said. “Not to mention Drake.”

“You saw Drake?” Brooke asked. That got my attention.

“He is guarding the front gate with Tim. That fire bird is getting bigger and bigger each year.”

I could only imagine what Drake looked like in his griffin form.

The air shifted, and my skin crawled. I pulled my hoodie tighter around my body as the atmosphere of the room became heavy, like the very air was being sucked out of the room. Something was wrong. My heart stammered, and I looked around. What was that?

Brooke and Nikki still spoke about the graduates, as she did not know where they stationed Xander and Emile.

My gaze snapped to a woman strolling in the dining hall. The woman didn't belong. Her hair was black and messy, with dark, hooded eyes. She wore a black lacy dress.

Maverick hadn't acknowledged her like everyone else that walked into the room. A furrow crossed my face as I stared at the other students in question. None of them reacted to her entrance. An icy finger trailed down my spine.

The woman walked in front of Maverick and smiled at him. He looked straight at her and did nothing. She stepped out of his way while he walked to the door.

Was I dreaming again?

The lady in black looked around, I just looked down at my plate of food. I put the hood from my sweater over my head, resting my elbow on the table and hid my face with my hand, trying to look bored. Trying to act indifferent like the rest of the students.

My gaze fluttered toward the woman who was still around Maverick. Her lips parted in silent laughter. He obviously couldn't see or hear her.

"Sophie," Brooke said, bumping me.

My gaze shifted to Brooke, then back to the woman who walked toward the first table. She bent forward, with her hands resting on the table, and looked at each of the student's faces.

She was looking for someone.

Brooke followed my gaze as my eyes locked on Parvati. She wasn't seeing her either.

I looked at Maverick again. Still on guard.

"Sophie." Brooke shook my arms to look at her.

"Not now," I whispered.

I looked at the woman as she still searched, going to the second group of students eating their dinner.

Why was I seeing people that others couldn't see? Who was this lady? And who was she looking for?

I got up, keeping her in my peripheral vision. How the hell was she doing that?

"Sophie." Brooke called again.

"Maverick," Parvati spoke. Maverick walked toward her as Parvati walked to the front.

My gaze found Maverick's, and he frowned at me.
"Soph?"

I nudged my head to the buffet area. I kept my head down as I walked toward the buffet area.

The woman stopped searching and was now looking in my direction.

“Ye okay, lass?” Maverick asked.

“Shh.”

The woman climbed on the table, and I saw the reason no one else but me could see her. She had a drugged-out-of-his-mind Dingle-hopper next to her on a leash. I started to shiver when I saw the bone crown on his head.

Mav looked over his shoulder at her and then back at me. “Soph? Ye as pale as a ghost.”

“Dingle-hopper,” I whispered.

“What?”

“It’s how they steal the kids without being seen. She has a Dingle-hopper. She is standing on top of the second table.”

The revelation hit Mav full in the face, and he pulled me behind him. “Just point!”

I pointed in her direction, and Maverick pulled a few arrows out of his quiver and started releasing them at his invisible target.

Students screamed. Some stormed out the door and others ducked under the table.

Parvati jumped on the table as Lindy entered the dining hall.

Parvati leaped to where I pointed, but she missed because the woman leapt on the other table with the Dingle-hopper in her deadly grip.

Alex and Lindy struggled to grasp the situation, as they couldn't see anything, but he unrolled his whip, ready to attack anyway.

The woman was like a monkey and jumped out of Parvati's reach. Parvati lost her balance and skidded off the table, hitting the floor with a bone cracking thud. Maverick released more arrows, but with her bubble around her, she had the advantage and kept missing them.

Parvati was relentless and jumped on the table again. I made Maverick crazy with my directions.

“Soph.”

“She is fast and all over the place!” I still pointed. “Just keep releasing those arrows, one is bound to hit.”

I could see the sadistic enjoyment as she cackled, hissing at Parvati while ducking Maverick's arrows. It was weird how no sound had left her lips.

Lindy joined the callous game of hide and seek, and the woman suddenly realized she was playing on death's front porch. She retreated to the entrance.

“Entrance, she is going to get away!” I yelled. Mav released more arrows as Alex's whip kept missing her by mere inches.

“You are too far, Alex,” I yelled, and moved closer.

A griffin blocked the entrance, and she stopped.

“Where is she, Sophie?” Mav yelled.

“In front of the griffin.”

“Drake, she has a Dingle-hopper. In front of ye!”

Drake whistled his ear-piercing cry and batted his paw as he moved forward. His talons missing her by merely an inch.

The woman ran to the first table and jumped on it.

“Table one!” I pointed, and Lindy jumped on the table crushing it beneath her weight. The woman fell, rolled over and with miraculous speed jumped to the next table.

“Keep pointing at her, Soph,” Mav ordered.

She was jumping from one table to the next as Mav kept releasing his arrows, confusing the crap out of the shifters.

She laughed, as it was her favorite game.

Why wasn't she using the Dingle-hopper to teleport?

An invisible force hit me and Maverick. It lifted us from our feet and smacked us against the wall. Furniture dragged across the floor as I fell hard on the ground, feeling like I just broke every bone in my body.

High pitched shrieking assaulted my ears.

“Drake, don't,” Mrs. Beatty yelled. “Lindy!”

Drake kept on shrieking.

“We need her alive!” Mrs. Beatty ordered.

“Soph, yeh okay?” Maverick assisted me to my feet.

“Maverick,” Mrs. Beatty bellowed.

“Go, I’ll be fine,” I whispered.

The dining hall was a mess as the seating and tables shifted from the force.

The griffin stood between two tables on top of the woman, who wasn’t invisible anymore. His one giant claw pinned her down.

Lindy was on the opposite side of him and growled. Her stinger ready to come down.

Parvati was on top of the table, looking down.

The woman cackled with laughter. “Kill me, Griffin, you know you want to.”

“Drake,” Maverick yelled, and the vines against the wall obeyed his command and twirled around the woman, pushing Drake and Lindy away.

“No, kill me, you coward,” the woman screamed as the vines wrapped around her.

She shrieked as the vines shot up into the air, revealing a woman trapped in nature’s cocoon of vines and ivy.

“Take her to my office,” Mrs. Beatty ordered, and sat on her haunches next to me. “Sophie, are you okay?”

I grabbed her around the neck. “Where were you?”

“I’m here now.” She hugged me back as I stared at how they took the woman away, with the three creatures following below her.

“Mavis!” Hank entered the cafeteria as students stormed through the doors to witness what had just happened.

“Go back to your rooms, now!” Jacob’s voice ordered as the tears pooled in my eyes.

Hank reached us and bent down on his knees. “Sophie, are you okay?”

I shook my head, and he placed his hands on my head.

“Jacob, we need to get Trudy.” Mrs. Beatty got up and went to him. “That Dingle Hopper does not look well, and we need Fabian to take a look at that strange looking crown.

He nodded and left.

“How did you know about the Dingle-hopper?” Mavis asked.

I looked at her.

“Answer me!”

“I can see through their invisibility.” My voice trembled and both of them stared at me.

Hank touched Mrs. Beatty. “You need your rest; releasing your shield like that drains your—”

“I’m fine.” She looked at Hank and back at me. “Why didn’t you tell me this?”

“You know why.”

She nodded and got up.

“Did she say anything?”

“No, she was looking for someone.”

Mrs. Beatty's eyebrows furrowed, and she looked at Hank, who sighed.

"Who was she looking for?" I asked as my heart galloped behind my ribcage.

"I don't know yet, but I'll find out."

Hank took me to the infirmary. He did a thorough checkup to make sure that Mrs. Beatty's shield didn't fracture any of my bones. He also confirmed that it was one reason that King Avery stationed her at Earwyn. She was one powerful fae.

Afterward, he sent me back to my room. Tim patrolled our hallway.

"How do you feel, Sophie?"

"Better, thanks."

He smiled as I opened the door and entered our room.

Nikki and Brooke stared at me.

I froze at Brooke's glower and I lowered my head, walking to my bed. I opened the drawer to see if Drake had sent me anything. There were no messages.

Brooke plonked herself down on my bed tapping on the spot next to her and I sat down. She looked at me and grabbed me around the shoulders.

"Why didn't you say that you could see through Dinglehopper's invisibility?" Nikki asked.

“Because the book said nobody can.”

“Books also said that nobody can hear fairies, but Maverick and a few others do.” She looked at Brooke. “Wait, you knew.”

“Of course I knew. I’m with Sophie. You guys grew up here, Nikki. We didn’t.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Oh, please. Your superficial glares when someone that isn’t normal to your standards is the last thing Sophie needs. Look what happened to Penny when all of you started with that changeling crap.”

“Stop fighting, please,” I begged.

“Mav knows?” Nikki asked.

I nodded. Silence lingered.

“What did the woman want?” Brooke asked.

“She was looking for someone.” I breathed out loudly and pulled my hands through my hair.

“You guys think it’s connected to the other nine kids’ disappearance?” Nikki asked.

“It has to be,” Brooke answered. “It’s the only way that nobody could see them when they grabbed the kids and only when Mavis isn’t here, Nikki. Her shield is powerful.”

“But why?” Nikki asked.

“I don’t know,” Brooke answered.

“Can we please talk about something else?” I asked, and the conversation switched over to Cali and how furious she was with her dad, for not sending her back.

I grabbed my pillow and laid on my bed, closing my eyes. Their voices drifted away as the fatigue pulled me into oblivion.

Flashes of the circle played behind my closed eyelids. The view was slightly different this time.

The person in the middle looked like the others forming the circle and every time their beam connected with her, she screamed.

My face slackened as I realized the girl was still me. I looked pale, skinny, sick, but every scream pierced through my soul.

I startled awake as Brooke shook my arm.

The lights in the room were on, and the curtains were drawn. How long had I been out?

Mrs. Beatty and Alex stood behind her.

I sat up as a pounding pulsed behind my eyelids again.

“Thanks, girls.” Mrs. Beatty smiled at Brooke and Nikki as they walked out. She came over and she sat on the edge of my bed. Alex came nearer, standing in front of Nikki’s bed with his hands behind his back.

“How do you feel?” she asked.

“Slight headache, but it’s bearable.”

She nodded. “We’ll fix that soon.”

“Who was the woman looking for?”

She sighed and looked past me.

“Mavis?” It felt wrong calling her by her name.

She closed her eyes and opened it slowly. “You.”

“What?”

“She was looking for you. From what we gathered, the nine missing children are linked to everything.”

The dream. My heart pounded again as my breaths became rapid.

Mrs. Beatty touched me. “Sophie, calm down.”

The ache in my temple made me clutch my head, and it was so bad that I couldn’t even open my eyes.

The scream tore through me as my head split in two. The images of the dream seeped through again. Cali lit up, and this time fire engulfed her as a scream left her mouth. Next was Nikki. Ivy and creepers crawled on top of her until she drowned in them. A giant water bubble trapped Brooke. She slammed her fists against the walls, but it didn’t budge.

My heart’s beat became so loud that it overpowered the entire scene.

Chase was next. His cat-ears lay flat on his head as the light shot from him. Then the duredina, followed by the drivine, the manticore. I looked at every single one. It was one of every race. That was why they needed me. I was the only Spirit fae apart from Mrs. Beatty. It wasn’t the people I knew

that were going to become the stones. It was the nine kids that they already stole. I was the missing piece.

“Sophie, stay with me.” Hank’s voice seeped through and the picture in front of me faded.

The buzzing and the warmth eased the headache, and the pounding of the drums faded.

Yellow light came back as Hank’s face was inches from mine. “Deep breaths.”

“I didn’t ask for this.” I spoke through clenched teeth.

“I know,” he replied. “Calm down. Nobody is going to let you out of their sight.”

The darkness came, and I drifted into a dreamless sleep.



HANK DID another observation the next morning.

He went to his desk and took out a black box. I opened it. Inside was the same necklace, but instead of a yellow stone, it was a bright blue one. “Never take it off, you hear?”

I nodded, and he put it on my neck.

“Hide it if you must. It will dampen the headaches until you are open.”

I kept quiet as he pressed his hands everywhere on my body. “Why didn’t you tell anyone that you could see through a Dingle-hopper’s invisibility?”

“Because the book said nobody can.” I gave the same reason I gave Nikki. There was no reason to push Maverick in front of the bus.

“There is a first for everything. Hiding important information like that does not count in your favor.”

“I thought Dingle Hoppers had to grant you their gifts.”

He nodded. “Mavis thinks they are controlling the Dingle Hopper through the crown. She thinks the kids that they took are not random children either. They were handpicked, and whatever their plan, they need you to fulfill it.”

“I don’t want it!”

“I know you are terrified. We won’t fail you. You saw how the team works together. They are the best of the best, and Mavis has a plan. We just need to figure out what it is they want with you.”

I nodded. The dream was about me, it wasn’t about the people I knew. “We need to find them, Hank.”

“If they are still alive.”

“They are.”

He looked at me sternly. “How do you know?”

I didn’t want to tell him about the dream. “You just said it. The kids were not selected randomly. So they need us to fulfill a purpose.”

He looked past my head, and I turned around to look at what he was staring at. There was nothing. “I need to speak to Mavis.”

I grabbed his wrist. “Don’t you dare leave me alone!”

He touched my hand. “You are not alone. Emile and Parvati are outside the infirmary.”

“Can you call them in here, please?”

He nodded and walked to the door.

Parvati was back in her human form, and she came running over to me.

Emile stood at the door.

She flung her arms around me. “For what it’s worth, I think it’s wicked that you can see through a Dingle Hopper’s invisibility, Soph.”

“I feel like a freak.”

“I would give anything to see through a Dingle Hopper’s invisibility. They are amazing creatures.”

My lips quirked. “What is the plan?”

She blew out a breath. “They are still interrogating the woman.”

“Who is she?”

“We don’t know, but she is not afraid of dying.”

I took a deep breath and blew it out slowly, raking my fingers through my hair.

“Hey, we got your back, didn’t we?” Parvati said.

“How did you know?”

“Soph, you looked like you were about to barf. The way you kept staring at something that wasn’t there, it put me on alert. You have a rather unusual bond with Maverick, so I thought maybe you would tell him. I’m glad that you did.”

I shivered just thinking about it. Parvati grabbed my hands. “You are going to be fine. You are a fighter, and I feel sorry for anyone who gets on your bad side. We just need to train you and get you up to speed.”

I wished I had Parvati’s confidence. Both stayed until Mrs. Beatty walked into the infirmary. She came over to me and stroked my arm. “How do you feel?”

“Better, thank you.”

“Parvati, I need you to be with Trudy when the Dingle-hopper wakes up and find out what he knows.”

“She is not talking?” Parvati asked.

“No, the Sterilian Guards are coming later tonight to interrogate her further.”

Parvati nodded, and both of them left.

“Parvati can speak to Dingle-hoppers?”

“Yes, it’s not one of the easiest languages out there, either. She was one of my favorite students here at Earwyn. Smart too. She is a great friend, Sophie.” The door closed behind Emile. “Why do you think they want something from the children?”

“Hank said—”

“Stop lying! I told you, you can trust me.”

My lower lip quivered, and I sniffled as tears rimmed my eyes. “I had a dream.”

“About what?” she whispered.

I wiped the tears from my eyes. “About a Stone Circle, the only difference was they weren’t stones. It was a circle of magical beings. They each had a crown, they looked sickly, and I found myself in the middle of it all. One by one, they lit up, and the beam connected with me. I woke up when I exploded.”

She looked at me sternly. “When did you have this dream?”

“The night we went to Misty Hills and last night.”

“You lied about the bird!”

She wanted to walk away. I reached out and grabbed her arm. “No, I dreamt about the bird.”

She looked at me and sighed. “Flint had a similar dream to what you described. He thinks it’s them that stole the magic from the stones at Misty Hills. It’s why it wasn’t strong enough to open you.”

“It felt strong.”

“It wasn’t.” She sounded tired.

“You see why I say now that Sight is my domain.”

She nodded. “We can talk about that later. We have bigger things on our plate, and our priority is you. You are going to a safe house soon, and you will stay there until it’s over.”

“I don’t—”

“You will train. If you have another dream, tell me, do you hear?” She was stern.

I nodded as my lip wobbled again. “I’m sorry that I didn’t tell you.”

“It’s why I was so sure your domain was Shield,” she said. “You are so guarded. We’ll talk later. Right now, you need to do as I say. Go to your room and stay there until I come and get you.” She pulled me in for a hug. “They won’t stop looking for you, so I’m going to give you to them.”

“What?” I pulled away and stared at her.

“Relax, it won’t be you.”

“How?”

“You will see tonight. But for now, stay inside your room, and pack what you need.”

Emile entered with Jacob, and they took me back to my room. They said nothing as we climbed the stairs up to the third floor.

“Pack only what you need, Soph,” Jacob said before I entered my room.

Brooke got up from her bed and came over to hug me. “What the hell happened?”

“Not now, okay. I need to pack.”

“You’re leaving?”

“Shh. Mavis thinks it’s for the best.”

“Why?” Brooke looked as worried as I was.

“That woman, she was looking for me.”

“What?”

“The story of my life. Everyone is looking for me.”

She wrapped her arms around me and hugged me tight as I sobbed.

“It’s going to be okay. Mavis will keep you safe.”

I sniffled into her chest as she stroked my back until I calmed down.

“Where are you going?” Brooke asked.

“I don’t know. She just said I’ll be safe.”

I packed my bag and waited for Mavis to come and fetch me.

DRAKE

We all waited for Mavis in her office. Well not all of us. Xander wasn't there and Emile went missing too. I hadn't seen Parvati either.

Why was Mavis so secretive? I didn't like it. I needed to speak to Sophie.

I knew when I entered that a Dingle-hopper had to be involved. The way that everyone was shooting at nothing and Soph guiding them. When she said it was right in front of me, I didn't hesitate.

The woman wanted me to kill her. The weird part was that I wanted to. Why?

I hoped now she would lead us to the missing nine.

Mav just sat on one of the chairs, balancing it on its hind legs. I had the urge to kick it from underneath him.

I rubbed my face. What was wrong with me? Why was I so on edge?

Lindy and Tim sat in silence on Mavis' couch.

Finally the door opened and Alex walked in.

Maverick put the chair back on all four legs and got up.

“And?”

He shook his head as Mavis finally entered.

“Maverick, I need you and Drake to pack.”

“Why?” I asked.

“I need your help.”

“For how long?” I didn’t like this.

“Drake?”

“How long, Mavis?”

“What does it matter? I need you.” She gave me that look.

I didn’t like the way she said that. So I left it for now.

“What is the plan?” Alex asked.

“I’ll let you all know soon. The two of you.” She looked at Mav and me. “Go pack. You are leaving tonight.”

I really didn’t like this. I left with Maverick.

“What do you think this is about, Mav.”

“Let’s just do what she said, Lad.”

“Do I take Spear Tooth with me?”

“Take him. I’m takin’ Heart String.”

I nodded. “You don’t know anything?”

“Does it look like I ken *anythin’*.”

I didn’t answer.

Our ways parted and I went to my room, grabbed my duffle bag and packed. I didn't even know where Sophie was or if it was safe to text her. Nobody could know. I couldn't lose her now, but I needed to tell her that I was going away. I didn't even know for how long.

I told Spear Tooth we were going on a mission. I told him my fears. I tell the Trident everything. He felt my anxiety, tried to calm me with buzzing. He knew I loved it. It worked. Then I placed him in his chest. "See you soon, bud."

I closed the lid and carried on throwing clothes in my duffle bag.

A knock came at the door. Mav was already done and stood in the entry with his bag.

Tim and Jacob came and fetched Spear Tooth's chest. I zipped up my duffle bag, threw it over my shoulder and followed.

I didn't like this one bit. I needed to find out why me. Why did Mavis need me?

SOPHIE

"HOW DID she control that Dingle-hopper? I thought it was something that had to come from them," Nikki said.

I sat on my bed, arms leaning on my thighs. "The crown on their head sort of controls the Dingle-hopper. It's barbaric, if you ask me."

"So, the crown is like a charm?" Nikki asked.

“Now you know why I’m taking charms,” Brooke said. “Not for that purpose, but charms can be potent if you do it right.”

“The Sterilian guards are going to have a field day with her that is for sure. King Avery is ruthless with oppressing and enslaving,” Nikki mumbled.

“You know him?”

“No, Cali’s uncle is part of the Sterilian guard. He is some commander or captain. But the way Cali is carrying on, you would think her uncle is the general.”

A chuckle escaped my lips as Brooke sighed.

Nikki looked at Brooke. “Hey, that was supposed to be a joke.”

Brooke smiled and brushed her hands through her hair. “I know. I’m just worried because I don’t know what is going to happen.”

My stomach turned and twisted into knots. At least there was no headache. My hands grabbed my pillow and dumped my head into it. Drake’s smell still lingered on my pillow. I really needed to speak to him.

Around nine, a knock came at the door, and Nikki rushed to open it.

Jacob entered. “Let’s go, Sophie.”

I picked up my bag and hugged Brooke. “Be safe, okay? I’m going to miss you.”

I nodded and hugged Nikki.

“Your phone.” Jacob held out his hand.

“What?”

“No phones allowed on this trip. Mavis is doing everything in her power to keep you safe.”

Tears welled up in my eyes as I knew I would contact no one, not even Drake. I took my phone out of my pocket and switched it off. I put the phone down into Jacob’s awaiting hand.

He put it in his back pocket, and I followed Jacob to Mrs. Beatty’s office. When we neared, a big quarrel was taking place in Mavis’s office.

“I don’t have anyone else with your skills. I’m begging you, please.” Her tone carried a lot of strain. The other person didn’t answer.

“Thank you,” Mrs. Beatty said as Jacob knocked on the frosted glass.

The door unlocked, and Alex stood on the other side.

Jacob entered first, and I followed. Everyone except Emile and Xander were here. Parvati and Lindy stood close to Drake by the window. Seeing him calmed every nerve in my body. Tim rested against the back of the sofa. Maverick stood close to Mrs. Beatty’s desk.

“Did you pack?” she asked, standing behind her desk, and I nodded.

Drake stood with his back to us, his hand rubbing his chin as his other arm hugged his body. He looked over his shoulder

and my eyes flickered to his and back at the ground.

“Mavis, what is Sophie doing here?” Maverick asked.

“I’ll explain soon. Come sit, Sophie.” Mavis gave Alex a look, and he locked the door.

She looked at her watch as I took the seat in front of Mrs. Beatty’s desk. Sparks came from the bookshelf, forming the outline of a steel door.

“What are you—”

“Soon, Alex.”

The door opened, and a man walked through. Pepper streaks broke his thick, wavy raven hair. He had some wrinkles and I assumed he was close to Alex’s age, maybe older. He wore a deep purple and dark blue suit with a wine red cape reaching above his knees. Boulder muscles stretched at the seams. At the shoulders, some sort of collar hugged his neck. Purple and dark blue boots came up to his calves. The suit showcased every bulging muscle on his body. He resembled a superhero.

Mrs. Beatty walked to the bookshelf to welcome him.

“Mavis,” the man greeted.

“Dozer.” Mrs. Beatty smiled and grabbed his arm. His fingers curled around her arm, and then they shook once, like some sort of handshake.

Alex walked toward Dozer and touched his arm the same way Mrs. Beatty had. He greeted everyone like that, even Drake.

Next, a woman with red hair, an oval face and hooded eyes stepped through. She was petite and looked like a twelve-year-old girl if it wasn't for her womanly features. She wore the dark purple and blue uniform with pride.

"Kim," Mrs. Beatty greeted her the way she greeted Dozer.

Another woman with long blonde hair in a plait like Mrs. Beatty followed. She was tall and had a heart shaped face with bright forest green eyes.

"Skyler," Mrs. Beatty hugged her. They must be old friends.

"Avery sends his wishes. He is doing everything he can. Sorry that we only arrived now. There were a lot of formalities, as you remember."

They were Sterilian guards. I looked at Mrs. Beatty and remembered what Brooke had told me. She used to be a Sterilian guard, too.

A woman with short, spiky, dark hair with pools of mud-brown eyes followed her.

"Thank you, Sabine, for coming," Mrs. Beatty said.

Sabine's lips curved. "Wish it was sooner. Avery wants these children back in one piece."

She reminded me of a mom and didn't look like a guard, well if you could picture her without her uniform.

Her eyes flashed to Drake standing at the window and smiled. "Drake."

“Sabine,” he answered in his broody tone, standing with arms folded facing us.

“H-e-e-e-y!” a deep voice cheered.

“Fuck,” Drake cussed, and Parvati and Lindy suppressed their laughter.

A broad-shouldered guy, almost Drake’s height, with blonde hair reaching his shoulders walked through the door.

He opened his arms at Mrs. Beatty as the door closed behind him and rippled before it faded, then the bookshelf seeped through, replacing the steel door.

Mrs. Beatty laughed and wrapped her arms around his body as he swayed. He whispered something softly, and then joyous greetings followed as he grabbed Alex’s arm.

“Kyle,” Alex greeted.

Maverick was next, and he hugged the guy. “It’s been dunky’s since I last saw yeh.”

“*Aye, yeh dinnae* think that *yeh* were *goin’ ter* have all the fun, *yeh bawbag*,” the guy answered, and left Maverick, walked over to Drake, and punched him in the shoulder. “*Yer lookin’ a bit peely wally*, Drake.”

Drake glared at him as everyone chuckled.

I kept looking at Kyle, and the guy winked when his gaze landed on me. He was just like Maverick, only bigger and louder. All of them had pointy ears.

Kyle slapped his hands and rubbed them together. “So, *Bonnie, yeh* have all of us *‘ere*.”

Mrs. Beatty motioned with her hand for everyone to come closer. She took out a ball and smashed it onto the floor. The smoke evaporated and formed a coupe around the people that were in her office. I kept staring at it.

“The attack wasn’t random. Fabian discovered the crown injects a serum into the pineal glands of the Dingle-hoppers to control them and use their abilities as they pleased. Whoever is behind these kidnappings is smart and organized. They are going to use the crowns on the kids that have already been stolen, but they need a conductor to finish what I think they want to create.” She looked at me. “I honestly believed that they had found her, and they won’t stop until they have her.”

“You don’t know that it’s Sophie, Mavis!” Drake said.

“Sophie has powerful magic. They selected the nine they stole carefully. They are not random. The first six children are Dina, an Earth fae, Stephan, a Water fae, Abby, a phoenix griffin, Damon, a griffin. Little Jimmy who is a Fire fae, and Willow the wind fae. Two nights ago they took Bertram, Tom’s kid, who is a Manticore like his father, and Jess, a duradine with Peter, the drivine. They don’t need a Pegasus or the crow. Sophie is the only Spirit fae and the last of what they need.”

“Bonnie, how *dae yeh ken* this?” Kyle asked.

“Because I’d been trying to solve it since they took the first kids. They’d been tapping magic from the stone at Misty Hills for this.” She lifted the crown, “So that they can control these kids’ powers, and probably to see who and what they are.”

“Why children?” Skylar asked.

“Because they are easier to control.”

“The audacity.” Kim, the woman with the red hair, slammed her hands on the table.

“I agree,” Mrs. Beatty replied. “But kids are easier to manipulate than grownups.”

“For what?” Drake wanted to know.

“The Ultimate Weapon.”

Everyone gasped. *What in mother’s name is the Ultimate Weapon?*

“When I discovered they wanted Sophie, I realized that someone wants to create the ultimate weapon. If they don’t get Sophie, they won’t be able to succeed.”

Everyone stayed silent as it sank in. How could anyone use kids like that? It was insane.

“That’s why I called for Sabine.” She looked at Drake. “She would mask Dozer, myself, Skylar, and Kyle to become the four of us, and that is why I need you, Drake. I need you and Maverick to help Kim protect and train Sophie.”

I wanted to cry as my lungs just opened to take that breath. I would kiss Mrs. Beatty now if my relationship with Drake wasn’t a secret.

“Okay, so what is this plan of yours, Mavis?” Sabine asked.

“I want you to make me look like Sophie, and change Kyle into a Drake look-a-like. Skylar has to take my place. Dozer

has to become Maverick. Kim will be going with them.”

Kim stepped forward. “Why are you going to turn into Sophie?”

“Because I’m going to take her place. Let them take me instead. I’m a Spirit fae too.”

“No, that is ludicrous. If you turn into this ultimate weapon —”

“I’m a powerful shield, Kim. I can protect them.”

“And if you die? We don’t know who is behind this. The shield of Earwyn will vanish and then the Guild will attack.”

“Do you have another idea?” Mrs. Beatty’s nostrils flared.

“Yes, take me instead. I’m not a Spirit fae or the one that is attached to Earwyn’s shield. They won’t succeed.”

The entire room fell silent.

“I can’t ask you to do that.”

“I’m volunteering. This girl is going to need you to train her in Spirit, Mavis. I can’t help her with that. Take me!”

A warmth spread through my core. She didn’t even think twice about putting herself in harm’s way.

“Kim is one of the best—”

“I know, Dozer. Still, the idea...” Mrs. Beatty didn’t finish her sentence as she rubbed her face. She looked at Kim. “You sure?”

“It’s a better plan than risking your life.”

“Okay, then turn Kim into Sophie.” She looked at Parvati.
“Can you please pack a bag for me?”

Parvati nodded and rushed up the stairs. Lindy followed to help.

“Fabian is enhancing objects that has to be on Kim all the time so that the Sterilian guards can track her and when they come for her, she will lead them to the other nine, save the children and bring the culprits to justice.”

“It’s too easy,” Drake said.

“Kim’s life will be in danger.” Mrs. Beatty tapped with her finger on the top of the arm of her chair. “None of this is easy. We’ll have to go along with the decoy plan for now.”

“It’s a solid plan, Drake,” Maverick said.

Drake wiped his face.

“Can I count on you to keep us safe?” Mrs. Beatty looked at Drake.

He nodded.

“Thank you.” Mrs. Beatty looked at Sabine. “You’re up.”

Sabine cupped Maverick’s face, and they both closed their eyes. I did not know what she was doing, but when she cupped Dozer’s face, his appearance changed and turned into Maverick.

I gaped as I stared at two identical Mavericks. Next was Drake.

She touched his face in a motherly fashion and her forehead touched his. I couldn’t help but get the feeling that

she knew him personally. She couldn't be his mother, as Drake's mother had passed away with the birth of Chase. She walked to Kyle and repeated the action. He turned into Drake's double.

It was flawless. If they were standing next to each other, I wouldn't be able to tell the difference. Until Kyle spoke. "*Yeh have ter turn me into the Crabbit?*"

"Stop *yer haveren*'," Maverick mocked.

"Only *joken wi ye, lad*," Kyle said, and Drake flipped him off.

Sabine came over to me and cupped my face. Her touch felt weird. It wasn't a hum. It was like a prickly sensation, which turned into a sting. I clenched my jaw, taking in the pain. Her hands finally left my face, then she walked over to Kim. I watched her turn into me.

Last it was Mrs. Beatty, and she went to the beautiful blonde hair fae, Skyler, who took her place.

"Protect my school, Skylar."

"I'm a Sterilian, not a Sectarian."

Everyone chuckled as my lips curved. It was like my saying 'I'm spirit, not stupid'.

The original Mrs. Beatty looked at the others. "Carry on as if nothing is out of place. Try not to speak too much, Kyle. When they grab Kim, let me know."

They nodded.

Mavis walked over to Kim. "Thank you."

“Hey, don’t grow soft on me. This is what I live for.”

She looked just like me.

Mrs. Beatty’ lips curved. “Fabian will give you a couple of things that the guards can track.”

“Where is the woman, Mavis?” Sabine asked.

“Alex will take you to her.”

Sabine nodded.

Footsteps rushed down the spiral staircase. Parvati had a bag in her hand and handed it to Mrs. Beatty.

“Thank you, Parvati. Look after everyone.”

“You know we will.”

Mrs. Beatty took out long black capes with hoods from her hip pack and handed them to the three of us.

“Put it on, Sophie,” she said and looked at Drake.

My eyebrows twitched as I tied the cape around my neck. It was Drake she’d begged when Jacob had brought me to the office. He didn’t want to come with us? I didn’t like the turmoil that was swirling inside my chest.

“We need your projection until we reach our destination.”

Drake nodded, and Mrs. Beatty grabbed my arm while everyone said goodbye to each other. “You will be safe. You have my word.”

Lindy hugged Drake the longest. “Just stay safe, okay?”

“I will. You too.”

Maverick and Drake picked up their bags. Mrs. Beatty put the leather strap of her hip bag on her shoulder.

When they finished saying goodbye, Drake walked closer to us. The others gasped.

“You are mastering this,” Mrs. Beatty complimented him.

“Where to?” Drake sounded annoyed with her.

“Flint’s house. The passage is through one of his doors.”

He nodded, and we walked to the frosted glass. Mrs. Beatty unlocked the door and opened it. We walked down the stone steps and down the hallway.

“Sorry that you have to babysit me?” I whispered to Maverick.

“It’s an honor. From all the people that Mavis could’ve chosen, Tis was the Fire-Bird and me.”

“If only Drake felt that way,” Mrs. Beatty chirped.

“I didn’t know what you needed me for,” Drake said.

“I would never ask you if it isn’t top priority. Besides, that plan is highly confidential, meant to be said once and only once.”

“Sorry,” he whispered.

The turmoil vanished, and warmth replaced it. He didn’t know it was to protect me.

Descending the stairs we crossed the foyer to the entrance that didn’t lead to the classes but to the front of Earwyn.

The walk was a stretch as we took another detour into the forest.

We finally reached the path that led through the forest and came to the cave that lead to Misty Hills.

She took out her key and put it in the hole that magically appeared in the stone.

“Hoods now,” Mrs. Beatty said, and we covered our faces with the hoods that she handed out earlier.

She nodded at Drake, stepping forward and knocked on the door.

Keys rattled on the other side, and Flint opened the door.

“Drake,” Flint greeted him as he looked around. Maverick touched my back to walk inside. Flint closed the door behind us and looked at Drake. “Did anybody see you?”

“No, we’ve been under Drake’s projection,” Mrs. Beatty answered and Flint jumped slightly as she took off her hood. He squinted at her.

“Kim, she didn’t think it was wise to give them a Spirit fae.”

Flint chuckled. “I told you she wouldn’t.”

“Yeah.” Mrs. Beatty sighed.

“How are you holding up, Sophie?” Flint asked.

“Better than I expected,” I said, forging a smile.

“Maverick.” He nodded.

“Flint.”

Flint took out a key and walked to another closed door, this one not leading to the lounge. The door opened into a path surrounded by trees.

Mrs. Beatty touched his shoulder. “Thank you.”

“Stay safe.”

“That is the plan. Good luck.”

“You too.”

Mrs. Beatty walked through first, and then Maverick nudged me forward. Maverick and Drake stepped through last, and Flint closed the door before it disappeared.

An earthy smell of decomposing leaves, animal scat, and rotting wood caught my attention.

We walked down the path and the spongy layers of dead pine needles and twigs squished beneath our steps. Birds chirping and squirrels chattering made me jumpy.

The sound of rushing water came from up ahead. The wind rustled through leaves and a cool breeze blew through my hair caressing my skin. I inhaled the fresh air as the path narrowed. The trees dispersed into a clearing.

Before us stood a beautiful wooden cabin overlooking a placid lake, with snow-capped mountains as the background

“This is quite the safe house.” I noted.

SOPHIE

Long grasses and wildflowers hugged the walls near a pile of wood and a cutting stump. The cabin was enormous and in excellent condition. Not what I was expecting, to be honest. Wooden steps led up to a door framed by purple Wisteria.

Mrs. Beatty opened the door, and we walked into the lounge.

Dropping our bags we took in the beauty of the place. Big tan leather chairs rested upon one of those plush cream round carpets covering light wooden floors. A gigantic stone fireplace stood against the wall with a big-screen hanging above it. It was way more modern on the inside than I thought it would be.

A large, open-plan kitchen stood on the left of the lounge. It looked way too clean for a cabin by the lake.

“Whose cabin is this?” Drake asked.

“Flint’s.” Mavis walked to the windows and started opening all of them to get some fresh air into the living space.

To the right of the kitchen, a long hallway began. Mrs. Beatty picked up her bag and disappeared down the hallway. Maverick followed her, leaving me with Drake.

“You okay?” Drake asked, and I did not know whether to nod or shake my head. Tears pricked my eyes.

“Sophie,” Mrs. Beatty called. I picked up my bag and followed her voice down the hallway. I found her in the second room, standing by the window. “This will be your room.”

The room was big. Had a bed, a fireplace, and a closet. It smelled stuffy. Mrs. Beatty drew the blue curtains and opened the window for fresh air.

“Drake,” Maverick called, followed by soft conversation. “Mavis.” He entered “We’re *goin’* ter scout the area. We won’t take long.”

Mrs. Beatty nodded, sitting on my bed as their footsteps rushed down the hall. She blew out a huge sigh.

“A lot of faes think that I’m making a rash decision because of my paranoia. I’d rather keep you alive than not act, and let anything bad happen.”

“Do you think it’s going to work? They know you are back?”

She nodded. “If what you saw was, in fact, what they are planning, then yes, they will come for you, whether or not I’m there. They might lie low for now because of the woman in our custody, but they will come eventually. Right now, I want

you to take a bath, rest, and tomorrow morning you need to practice. I'm going to make sandwiches.”

I nodded. Mrs. Beatty left.

I got up and took a shower. I tried to forget the reasons I was here. The warmth of the water eased the tension in my muscles. My thoughts drifted back to the meeting. Kyle sure was a character. Where were Xander and Emile?

The strawberry fragrance coming from the shower gel caressed my nose, and it felt great to be clean. I closed the taps and dressed in yoga pants and a shirt.

The towel twirled around my head as my stomach growled. I towel-dried my hair, pulled on my socks, and went to grab a sandwich.

Drake and Maverick sat around the breakfast nook as Mrs. Beatty leaned against the counter next to the stove. She was in something more comfortable than her button down blouse and trousers. The knitted long sleeve shirt hung loose on her body and covered the top part of her jeans.

Maverick laughed at something Drake had said, and Mrs. Beatty just stared at him.

“What?” Drake said. “You put me in this situation.”

“You will keep your hormones at bay, Drake, both of you,” she scolded softly, and they laughed. Her eyes flickered to me. “Sophie.”

I smiled.

“Have a sandwich.” Mrs. Beatty opened a lid that still had plenty of toasted sandwiches on the plate.

“How are *yeh*, sweetheart?” Maverick said, and Mrs. Beatty looked at him. “Stop it. If I wanted Sophie, I would’ve had her a long time ago. With or without *yeh* rules.”

Drake’s shoulders shook from his silent laughter.

“Seriously?” I looked at her.

“I’m paranoid, remember?” she chirped back.

“Well, you better stop,” I scolded her playfully. “I still think it’s stupid that we have limitations to who we can be with, as my selection of choices are all gowks.”

Maverick threw back his head in laughter.

“Gowks?” she asked.

“*Aye*, fools or simpletons,” Maverick answered.

Mrs. Beatty shook her head at me. “You said you are going to be open-minded.”

“Yeah, that didn’t work. I enjoy hurting Chase way too much.”

Her eyebrows furrowed. “When?”

“During P. E when you were not here.”

Maverick told her what had happened, and I chuckled at how hilarious it sounded coming from his point of view. I took a bite of my sandwich..

“He actually asked for time out,” Drake said, eliciting more laughter.

“Sophie?” Mrs. Beatty’s mouth gaped.

“I told you there is nothing, but no, I’m just a faeling. What do I know?”

Mrs. Beatty’s lips tugged upwards. “Well, I think it’s a pity. He is one of the strongest griffins at Earwyn.”

“It doesn’t replace the fact that he is still an idiot.” I took another bite of my sandwich.

Mrs. Beatty laughed whilst shaking her head. Around eleven, I crawled into bed.

I couldn’t even give Drake a proper goodnight hug or kiss. This arrangement sucked.

I struggled to fall asleep, and when I did, Maverick started with his snoring. Or maybe it was Drake. I did not know which room it came from, but it was loud. A grunt escaped my lips as I pulled my pillow over my head.

A door opened down the hall and I listened for footsteps, but there were none.

My door squeaked, and Drake’s silhouette slipped into the room and closed the door.

I threw down my pillow and got out of bed as he walked closer. He wrapped his arms around me.

“You do not know how scared I was when Mrs. Beatty told me to pack, and they took my phone away,” I whispered against his chest.

“Why did you think I put up such a huge fight? Mavis just told me she needed my help with something. You scared me

shitless yesterday.” His gigantic hand covered the entire back of my head and pushed me tight against his chest.

The familiar buzzing that came from him put me at ease.

“I thought being needed was your fix.”

“Apparently not when I’m in love.”

My stomach melted into a pile of goo.

“I won’t let anything happen to you, okay?”

I nodded.

“Neither will Maverick nor Mavis.”

He tugged on my hair ever so softly to lift my face. His lips were right there, meeting mine. My palm brushed his jaw as the kiss deepened.

I could kiss Drake Evans forever.



AROUND EIGHT, we had breakfast. Mrs. Beatty sure was one hell of a cook. There were fresh pancakes, an assortment of healthy muffins and poached eggs with crispy bacon.

After our hearty breakfast, we went outside for combat training.

Drake started where Alex had stopped, and I hit his palms with my black gloved fists I hated using him as my dummy. The guy in the woods was long gone, and it got replaced with someone that I could easily spend the rest of my life with.

After a few minutes, every muscle in my body ached as my breathing became rapid.

I had a couple of breaks through the lesson as a blinding, stabbing pain overpowered the side of my torso.

I grunted.

“Come on, Soph, push through it,” Drake said. “Let’s go.”

I breathed hard and growled at him, which he obviously thought was funny.

We finally took a break after an hour because I felt dizzy. God did not create me for any of this.

Mrs. Beatty put a plate filled with chicken lasagna and a green salad with different colored berries and nuts in front of me. She gave me like twenty minutes to rest, and then Maverick took over with the training.

Around two, I called for a timeout. I heaved, resting my palms on top of my knees, trying to catch a breath. Mrs. Beatty ordered me to take a shower and get some rest.



AROUND THREE, I woke up, and it was training with Mrs. Beatty.

There was no stone circle around, so it was loads of reading from a book she’d brought with her. It had all three domains inside, and she told me it was crucial to learn the Spirit domains, even if I only had one. Knowing the other two

was as crucial as knowing my domain. The faster I could master them all, the easier my life was going to be.

“I thought that took years.”

“It does, but you are behind in training, Soph, so you just have to suck it up.”

I hated reading textbooks. It was so dull, but this book was different. It had a lot of information about how to release your shield, your projection, and the visions.

The visions they mentioned sounded nothing like the dreams that I was getting. Every Spirit fae with the domain of Sight received their visions differently. They all had a griffin to decipher the images they'd seen. Some saw it in different stages, only broken events. Some would get messages in a book or newspaper. The words of the book would swirl around and form brief messages, broken messages and the griffin deciphered those messages. It was like they saw another part that would make it clear for them. A few saw it on a TV screen. Others got told by a relative that long passed. But none of them was as clear as I saw mine.

My dreams were pretty straightforward. No translations needed. I just didn't know the people in them, and I felt every jolt of pain.

Why was I so different? I didn't like this one bit, and it felt as if there was no information on what *I* could do. No information on how to help me become what I needed to become.

Late afternoon before dinner, Drake took me for a jog.

“Stay close to the cabin, Drake,” Mrs. Beatty said.

“Will you relax? She’s safe.”

We jogged down a trail that ran past the lake.

“I have to tell you something.” I said in a severe tone and looked back at the cabin.

He looked around. “What is it?”

“I’m not great at jogging.”

He relaxed immediately and stared at me with no emotion on his face. His eyes widened. “Run.”

I shrieked as I ran as fast as I could with Drake chasing me.

My muscles burned, my throat got dry and my chest was on fire about a mile away from the cabin. I stopped and asked for a timeout.

Drake laughed. “It’s not even twenty minutes yet.”

My palms rested on my knees. “I don’t care.” I puffed as I tried to catch my breath. I could feel my pulse racing in my arms and legs.

Drake tackled me down to the ground, and I laughed as his lips pressed hard on mine. “She might have a hawk-eye, but she can’t keep you under her surveillance for twenty-four hours.”

I grabbed the sides of his face, and our lips collided, kissing each other desperately, like our kisses were the very air we breathed.



THE WEEKS FLEW by and my daily routine stayed the same. I woke up, had breakfast, trained with Drake, trained with Mav, showered, ate lunch, and rested. Three o'clock was study time, and this session was about all three domains and then once a week, Mavis and I discussed this in full. I didn't ask her why my dreams were so straightforward. Soon calling her Mavis came naturally.

Around six at night, I jogged with Drake or Maverick, as Mavis liked to change things up. And then it was dinner, bath, and bed. At two o'clock, Drake would sneak into my room to sleep.

Eventually my body lasted longer during combat training and runs. It changed by gaining lean, sculpted muscles. I could run for forty-five minutes straight without getting tired and without the pain, and I was really getting good at kicking some butt, too.

I felt fierce and ready, but what was worrisome was that nobody took another jab at trying to kidnap me again—not that I knew of.

Mavis' phone rang during dinner for the first time since we'd gotten here. Mavis picked it up, getting up from the dining table.

“Skylar,” Mavis answered.

She closed her eyes and opened them again. “What do you mean, the tracker didn't work?”

Everyone stopped eating and looked at Mavis. Abruptly she cut the call and threw the phone on the floor and stamped on it with her heel. Pieces scattered across the floor. My heart pounded.

“Mavis!” Maverick jumped from his chair.

“The tracker didn’t work. They got cut off the first five minutes after Kim was taken”

“How is that possible?”

“I don’t know, Maverick,” Mavis bit back.

“Shh.” Drake’s hand lifted to keep us quiet, and everyone fell silent. My heart galloped as he got up from his chair and walked over to the window.

“Drake,” Mavis whispered as he reached the light and switched it off. The cabin became so dark you couldn’t see your hand in front of your face.

Maverick stood close to me as the adrenaline pumped through my veins. *What is going on? Are they here? Did they come for me? No, Mavis told me that Flint is the only one that knows where we are.*

Drake slightly pulled the curtain away.

He dove to the ground a second before the windows exploded. Glass rained down on him. Suddenly hairy limbs and claws ripped through his skin, and a growl escaped his lips.

“Maverick, run!” Mavis yelled.

Mav grabbed my hand, and we were out the back door. We ran as fast as we could, and Maverick's arms flailed behind us. The earth rumbled as giant roots sprout from the ground, closing our path.

We ran into the forest away from the cabin as fast as we could. He pushed me against a tree that had a semi hollow and waved his hands. Vines covered most of me. Only a sliver of a view was left open, just enough for me to see his face. "Stay, lass, until one of us comes for ye."

"I can fight." I pleaded.

"Sophie, stay, please," Maverick begged.

I heard his footsteps running away replaced by footfalls nearing as my heart faltered in my chest. I took a deep breath to calm myself down. *You can fight now, Sophie. You are not that helpless girl of three months back.* Three months? It felt longer.

The footsteps passed my hiding spot and faded as they ran deeper into the forest. Screams from far away filled the air. I did not know whether it was Maverick's screams or the enemies'. My breathing became rapid, praying that it wasn't Maverick.

Everything became quiet after that. It was silent for a long time.



"SOPHIE," Drake's voice yelled, and I opened my eyes.

Was it a dream? It was quiet again.

“Sophie!”

“Drake,” I yelled as loud as I could and slapped against the vines and ivy that covered me.

Where the hell is Maverick?

“Sophie!” His voice came closer.

“I’m in here,” I yelled louder, pulling harder on the vines, trying my best to free myself.

“Soph,” he called out again.

“Here,” I screamed as loud as I could, tugging, kicking, and even biting at the vines to free myself. “I can’t get out!”

The leaves and the vines that covered my hiding place got ripped off. The chilly evening breeze seeped through first as Drake’s giant hands destroyed the vines and the roots that entrapped me.

“Is Maverick okay?” I asked.

Drake didn’t answer me, as he still kept tucking at the bark, breaking me free.

There was finally enough space to climb through. I wrapped my arms around him as he lifted me off the ground and kissed my forehead.

“Is Maverick okay?”

“No, he is badly hurt. We need to get him to Hank.”

I froze. The buzzing that usually came from Drake wasn’t there. I let go of him and looked up into his eyes, remembering

what Sabine could do. He squinted as his Adam's apple bopped.

I pushed him away, and dropped to the ground. "You are not Drake!"

"Sophie, don't be absurd. We don't have time. Mavis is waiting. We have to go." He grabbed my wrist.

"No, you are not Drake. Drake!" I yelled and tried to free my arm from his grasp. I brought my face to his fingers and bit hard.

A roar left his lips as his fingers sprung loose from my wrist. I turned around and ran.

The leaves crushed underneath my footsteps as a second pair of footsteps followed. A hand grabbed me.

I didn't think, I just went to my go to moves and SING. My limbs connected hard with parts of his body and the imposter fell on the floor, grunting, lying in the fetal position. I just took off and ran. Trees became a green-brown haze the faster my legs pushed me forward. I hopped over tree roots and climb over fallen stumps. I was heading deeper into the forest. My gaze searched for any type of thicket to hide under before I totally got lost.

Suddenly I tripped as my foot got hooked on something, then I noticed vines twirling around my other leg. I clawed at the vines, knowing these were not

Maverick's doing. The tightness were severe, vines cut deeper into my skin as they captured my arms.

I gritted my teeth not to make a sound of how much it hurt.

More vines twirled around my body, trapping me on the spot.

A girl stepped out of her hiding place, circling around me, scrutinizing me with her glare.

She had long, pointy ears and curly brown hair.

Her eyes were feline shaped and crystal green. In the moon's light that seeped through the treetops, she was a vision.

She kept staring at me.

Drake's doubleganger caught up, and he puffed. He limped with gigantic strides, nostrils flaring and jaw muscles pumping.

He lifted his hand high when he got closer to me and swung it back across my face.

I literally saw stars.

"Are you crazy?" the girl said. "Without her, the entire mission fails. What about that don't you understand? Get a grip on yourself."

"She knows I'm not him!" the guy roared in Drake's voice.

"How?"

"I don't know." A gob splattered on the floor. My face didn't sting at all. This was so weird. I, however, felt great that I hurt him. I wished I inflicted more pain on the asshole.

"What is this?" The woman got a hold of my pendant as I felt the string cutting hard into the back of my neck. Now why do I feel that, and not the sting that should burn my cheek?

“Leave it,” another man said. I couldn’t see his face. I just stared at the ground.

“It could be a tracker?” The girl sounded as paranoid as Mavis.

“It’s not. It’s a healing jewel, one of the strongest. She is useless to us if she gets headaches. She needs it. How did she know you were not him?” the man asked the imposter.

“I don’t know. She hugged me and asked me about Maverick.”

“What did you say?” he roared.

“That he is badly hurt, and we need to get him to Hank, I used all the names you gave me. She just looked at me, and she knew I wasn’t him.”

“Change back. It’s no use that you are trying to be him anymore. Free her, and let’s go,” the man said, and I could feel the vines on my arms and body retreat. I willed my body to wake up. Where the hell were Mavis and Drake? Where was Maverick? They couldn’t be dead. They were strong. I needed to get out of this and willed my body to wake up, but like always, it failed me in the times I needed it the most.

Nothing wanted to move.

I got hoisted around someone’s shoulders as my sight, whatever could make me see more after I went down, faded and became black.

SOPHIE

An icy draft and chattering of teeth woke me. My body pressed against hard cement floor. I was in a square concrete cell with a barred gate. A stainless-steel commode and sink sat in the corner, with a feeble excuse for a cot, a thin mattress, and pillow covered the lower part of the opposite wall.

The side of my face felt bruised from where the impostor had hit me. My hand lifted to my head. There was no crown on it yet.

I crawled to the cot and grabbed the blanket to cover myself. I tried to take in breaths as my body shivered. *Calm down, Sophie.* My stomach protested like a beast. *How long have I been here?*

I crawled to the barred gate. Three more cells sat across from mine, divided by steel steps that went to the lower level.

“Hey, are you okay?” a boy asked, coming from the cell next to mine.

“Yeah, just cold. Are you okay?”

“Had better days. Are you the Spirit fae? The one they have been waiting for?”

“I wish I could tell you no, but that would be a lie.”

He cursed, and my eyes widened.

“How old are you?” I asked.

“Turning fourteen,” the boy whispered.

“How long have you been here?”

“Four years. They took me with two others. Don’t worry, you will get food soon. They make sure that our energy levels are high.”

I shivered again and tried to warm my body by rubbing my arms. “Do you know where we are?”

“Someplace near a forest, but they have a Shield fae here, and with Enzo’s projection, they will never find us. Apparently, they need a fae with Sight.”

“How do they know it’s my domain?”

“Enzo, they call him the Dark Griffin. He is a phoenix griffin, and his sight is strong. I think he saw you.”

“How long have I been here?”

“Almost two days. Murkle kept giving you something to sleep.”

“Who is Murkle?”

“The hag that keeps us in line if we try to escape. She is an Earth fae.”

“Is she young?”

“Nope, that is her daughter, Evangeline. She is an Earth Fae too.”

“How did the one guy turn into one of my friends?”

“Blaze, yeah, he is an idiot, and believe me, he’ll become anyone to taunt you.”

“How?”

“His mother was Enzo’s sister, and his father, a Spirit Fae.”

My eyebrows squinted at the revelation. Like Drake and me. I remember what Mavis had told me. Why phoenix griffins weren’t brilliant matches for anyone but other phoenix griffins. When they lose themselves, say during sex, the flames wanted to play too. “How? Their fire will burn them alive.”

The boy chuckled. “I didn’t say the guy lived to see his little reject get born.”

I got what the boy meant. She burned him during conception. “What do they become?”

“Something that should never exist. They don’t have a griffin form, but the guy’s projection is twisted. He can turn into anyone you know. If he does that, don’t give him the satisfaction, please. It could really mess up your trust in the ones you love.”

I wondered how many times it had happened to him? How many times was his mother cruel to him? How many times did his father or someone he loved come to save him?

The only problem was that I didn't know my friends that well, only Drake, and I wouldn't even know this guy wasn't him if it wasn't for the way Drake's touches felt.

"Do you know when they are going to put this weapon together?"

"No, but it's real soon, in the next day or two."

"What is your name?" I stuttered as my teeth chattered. I couldn't even think in this cold.

"Damon; I'm a griffin." I remembered his name. Mavis mentioned it during the meeting.

"I'm Sophie. Nice to meet you. Wish the circumstances were better." My breath misted in front of my lips as I released each word.

I tried to warm my body, and would give anything to have Drake appear on top of those stairs, anything for my furnace.

I'd never been this cold.

"Try to get some sleep. It will bring tomorrow faster, then you will get something to eat."

"Yeah, if I don't freeze to death."

"You will get used to the cold too. They won't let you freeze either. Believe me, I've tried everything you can imagine. They always come."

I got up from the cold floor and sat on my bed. I looked at my jewel. Thank heavens this Enzo guy didn't take it off. What did he see with me? Who were these people? Why were they doing this, and for what purpose? Why did this Enzo guy

need this ultimate weapon? But most important, what had happened to Drake, Mavis, and Maverick? Were they still alive?



I FELL ASLEEP EVEN through the chattering teeth. My body still shivered when I opened my eyes. But I wasn't in the cold cell anymore.

I gasped as Drake was on his haunches in front of the fire, stoking it. It was Flint's cabin. I still felt cold, but seeing him sitting there, I felt home.

“Why is it so cold?” I asked.

“Are you cold?” Drake came closer. He smiled and rubbed my shoulders. My smile immediately disappeared, as it was that idiot, Blaze.

I glared at him and spat in his face as he grunted and got up.

The fireplace and the cabin's lounge disappeared.

“What! What was it that gave me away?”

“I know Drake. You can never become him, no matter how hard you try,” I said through chattering teeth.

He mocked the shivering, and I closed my eyes. It was cruel.

A chair scraped closer as I took a deep breath and released it slowly.

I opened my eyes, and the impostor sat on the chair, staring at me through Drake's eyes. He really was good. Any of my other friends, I would've said that they had come and to rescue me.

"You know that it's a losing battle what you two have. Or should I say we have?" The idiot pointed at himself.

"I don't know what you are talking about."

He scrunched up his nose, a look that I never saw from Drake before. "I'd seen it when you thought I was him, and you were all alone," he sang and batted his eyelashes. A sickening sweet smile fanned over his lips.

It's not Drake, Sophie.

"You'll never feel the pleasure of getting fucked by him," he said, and I grunted at the vulgar words that came from him. "Because if a phoenix griffin enters the tight folds of a woman's—," a disgusting word slipped through, and hearing it in Drake's voice made me flinch. "They light up." He laughed. "And you will be no more. Just ask my sperm donor. It must have brought an entirely new meaning to the word smoking hot."

"I heard, and you were the reject."

"I'm a perfect reject, sweetheart. Would he say, sweetheart?"

"You would never be him, even if you give it your utmost best."

He pouted and folded his arms. "Yeah, it doesn't really matter anymore if I can portray him or not. Because after Enzo

is done with you, turning you into his, you'll be so drugged out of your mind that you won't even know your own name. You'll have a little griffin, a bit of fire, some earth." He pointed all over my body, "All messed up in the wonderful specimen you will become. And he'll tap into that, drain you physically. But don't worry, I'll be there to keep you warm. You won't be able to tell the difference." Blaze winked.

I finally understood what that dream meant. The beams weren't beams. Enzo was transferring all of them to merge with me. I was going to become something completely different from what I was now. The children were going to die.

He didn't need a conductor. He needed a host.

"A little bit of Damon in my mind, a little bit of Willow in my thigh, a little bit of Jimmy in my knee," he sang the tune of Mambo Number Five horribly. If his excellent explanation didn't sink in yet, the song sure did.

He kept on dancing to his horrible song and opened my cell and shut it behind him. "A little bit of Abby, in my feet. A little bit of everyone turns you into a freak." He lapped the air with his tongue and I closed my eyes. He started singing the song louder, still in Drake's voice, as he walked past the cells and down the steps.

I closed my eyes.

It's not Drake, Sophie.



I WOKE as Drake stood by the entrance of my cell wearing an opt-uniform. “Sophie,” he hissed. “Wake up.” He opened the cell and came running to me. He crouched down and saw my cheek. “What the hell did he do to you?” He touched my cheek. “Come, it’s time to go.”

“Get away from me!”

He got up and roared frustrated. “What gave me away?”

“Leave me alone,” I yelled, and I could hear the kid next door laughing.

“Shut up, you little mutt.”

“You are a loser, Blaze.”

“Yeah, we’ll see who the loser is after tomorrow night, Damon.”

Damon had nothing to say to that.

“Don’t you have more important work to do than taunting little kids?” I yelled.

“No, unfortunately, you are stuck with me.” He winked, looking so much like Drake. I didn’t even know if he was alive. “I’ll be back, Sophie.” He pulled his lips into a kiss and walked away.

“I’m glad you took my advice, Spirit fae,” Damon said. “It sure is fun seeing him losing it like that.”

My lips curved upward. The kid did not know how hard it was, thinking that Drake had come to save me, only to discover it was a lie.

I closed my eyes and forced myself to sleep, this reality was too hard to digest, and perhaps a vision will come to me and I'll know if Drake, Mavis and Maverick were okay..

The sound of the door opening woke me. A woman dressed all in black entered. opened with the door and a woman entered this time. She had auburn curls and almost looked like the woman who tried to kidnap me.

“Your breakfast,” she said, and I looked at the door. On her trolley, loads of ivy and vines crawled up the framework. She put an extra blanket on my bed and handed me my breakfast.

“Thank you,” I said, while she gave me a quizzical look. Her eyes softened suddenly, but it disappeared just as quickly. With a few strides she exited the cell and locked me inside again. She carried on to the next cell. I grabbed the second blanket and put it over me. It was so much fluffier than the first one, it became a lot warmer quickly. Hopefully, now I'd be able to think about how to escape from these monsters.

I took the tray with eggs, toast, bacon, and sausage on the plate and shoveled the food down.

I wasn't this hungry when lying in the infirmary. Hank must have fed me through magic. I missed Hank and the warmth of my bed. I missed Brooke, Maverick's personality, Mavis's smile, but most of all, I missed Drake.

I kept eating until I couldn't eat anymore. There was still food left. I kept the toast for later and hid it under the pillow.

I hated the open toilet that was inside the room, just looking at it made me feel ill.

The woman came in again, and if it wasn't for that tray of plants, I would've attacked her.

"You have an appetite, girl."

"It's Sophie."

"I don't care," she said and took the tray and left.

"Your tray, boy," the woman yelled. The tray slid across the floor.

I laid down again as the warmth finally swept through.

The next time I would see Blaze, I was going to kill him, and then I would help the others escape. There had to be a way out of this place.

I closed my eyes to preserve my strength, just before my gate opened again. I opened my eyes, and it wasn't the imposter. It was a guy with shoulder-length dark hair. He had broad shoulders and was somewhere in his late forties. Dark cat ears pointed from his hair.

His eyes were almost black as he grabbed the chair. It screeched on the cement floor, and he sat on it as I kept staring at the chair.

"Hi, Sophie."

It was the man in the forest. His voice was familiar. He must be Enzo.

"How are the headaches?"

"I don't get them wearing my pendant."

His lips spread into a warm smile. “It won’t be much longer.”

“Why are you doing this? They are just kids?”

“Because I need the Ultimate Weapon, you.”

“I don’t even know what my domain is yet.”

He tapped his temple.

“How do you know when my principal at Earwyn cannot even figure it out?”

“Because I’m a bit more clever than Mavis.”

I gasped. “You know Mavis?”

“I knew Mavis.”

I stared at him as my heart pounded faster. Was he saying what I thought he was saying? “Why do you need this weapon to do what?”

“To destroy Concordia, to rebuild it to what it’s supposed to be.”

“Rebuild it?”

He chuckled. “Avery isn’t the right king for this world.”

“Oh, and let me guess, you are. King Avery isn’t the one who is going to kill nine innocent kids for an Ultimate Weapon.”

“You speak about him as if you know him. And if that is how you see him, I suggest looking deeper. I’m doing it for the greater good.”

“You are evil and bitter and sinister, and saying you are doing it for the greater good is a lie. You do it for your own vengeance.”

“I know what I am. At least I don’t hide it behind kindness and a smile and promises of how great Concordia is. Who do you think made me like this?” He tapped hard on his chest. I could hear the truth behind his words.

“Why would King Avery do that?”

“Because he craved more fire. Who knows for what? I’m done with the lies that he is trying so desperately to hide. It is going to stop tomorrow night when you become my weapon.”

“And if you destroy him, what is going to happen to me?”

He just stared at me.

“Just what I thought,” I said. “At least King Avery fought the old-fashioned way. He wasn’t a coward that needed innocent children for a stupid weapon.”

“I’m sorry about the spilling of innocent blood, but it’s the only way. I tried the other ways. They didn’t work.”

“And what makes you think you can control this weapon?”

“I just know.”

“Can I ask you a question?”

He nodded.

“Mavis and the other two that were with me. Are they still alive?”

He stared at me. “I’m sorry for your loss,” he said, and tears pooled in my eyes as a sharp pain shattered through my soul. I didn’t want to cry in front of him and turned my back against him just as a tear escaped me. “Piece of advice, rather trust the devil than any of those that you call friends.”

My lower lip trembled. The gate shut, and I pulled the cover over my head and sobbed uncontrollably.

Drake was gone.

SOPHIE

I ate the lunch they gave me and as I finished Enzo graced me with his dark presence. The unearthliness of this guy came off him in waves, twisting my stomach and making me feel ill.

“Let’s go.”

I got up, and my broken heart couldn’t even think about an escape. To be honest, I didn’t want to escape. I wanted to lose my mind, not knowing who I was. If Drake wasn’t alive anymore, I didn’t want to live either.

The tears still pooled in my eyes every time I thought about him. I would never feel his touches again, taste his lips, or feel safe in his arms.

I walked down the stairs behind Enzo. Murkel stayed behind me with Evangeline. I did not know how many people were part of this sadistic plan.

Enzo took me to the lower level and down one of the steel hallways. We walked past unforgiving steel walls all the way to another room. He walked in first and I followed. I stopped

inside the big open room covered with white tiles with rows of nozzles and draining plugs on the floor.

“Take a shower. There are clean clothes on the bench.”

My gaze flickered to him. “You need us to be clean to become your weapon?”

He smiled and huffed. “No, Sophie, see it as your last rites.”

He walked past me and closed the doors. I pulled off my clothes, went to the showers and turned on the taps. The warm water felt great, and the cold that had seeped into my bones disappeared.

My lower lip wobbled as a lonely tear rolled down my cheek, mixing with the water. I finally understood what my parents were going through. They would never be okay, not even with time. Uncontrollable sobs shook from me.

I would never be okay.

The door opened. “Finish, girl!” Murkel yelled and closed the door again.

I sniffed, grabbed the soap, and washed. A strong antiseptic smell came from the soap. I rinsed, closed the taps and felt the warmth of the towel pressing against my skin as I dried myself.

The tank top fit, but I didn’t trust the underwear.

The tracksuit pants were a size too big, and I tightened the string around my waist. I pulled on the oversized knitted sweater and slid my feet into the sneakers.

I pounded my fist against the door. It opened, and Enzo waited with the two Earth faes to take me back to my cell.

All the kids too had showers. They ran a tight ship here, just like Damon had said.

When it was Damon's turn, he stopped by my cell and smirked. He had this red shine to his hair, with freckles on his face and his cat-ears wilted on top of his head.

The guard shoved him forward and his cell gate shut.

Dinner got served, and after dinner, it was lights out.

I closed my eyes and wished I could see my parents one last time. A part of me wished I was back in that hospital bed. Back to just being the girl with the skull-splitting headaches. That was a normal human being. But I wasn't a normal human being. Loads of magic flowed through my veins. The worst part was, I didn't even know how to use it—scratch that. I knew. It had just never worked.

Maybe there was still a way to help the other nine if I could think past the gut-wrenching hole in me. I wouldn't let them die. I'd never forgive myself, and that is what Drake would do in my situation. Save those kids even if it cost him his life.

I wished for another vision to show me how all of this would end. I just wanted it all to stop. At least Drake was safe from whatever Caus wanted to do to him.

I knew nobody was coming for me. Mavis was dead, and I highly doubted that the Sterilian knew where to look for us. If

there were kids here for four years already, the chances of finding us was zero.

I remembered what Enzo had said in the forest. I was useless to him with the headaches.

I looked at my crystal. ‘Never take this off.’ Hank’s words sounded in my mind.

I grabbed the crystal and took it off the chain and shoved it underneath my pillow. Tucking the chain into my top, I hoped they would think I still had the crystal attached to it.

It might be the only way that I could stop this, buy us more time.



I FELT a slight pulse behind my eyes.

Murkel came in and put the tray of food down and walked out of the cell. “Good morning,” she gave me a sardonic smile as she left.

She came back half an hour later and took the tray, taking her time collecting all the trays.

It fell silent.

“Sophie,” Damon called me, and I went to the gate.

“Yeah,” I said.

“You think my mom and dad miss me?”

Tears welled up in my eyes. “You miss them?”

“It’s been so long, and Blaze...” He didn’t finish.

“It wasn’t them, Damon. I can tell you this, they do, and it’s killing them to know that you are still alive, and they can’t find you.”

“Are you scared?” Damon asked.

“I’m terrified,” I whispered. “But they say that is when your courage truly shines.”

He scoffed. “Whatever is going to happen, I want you to know that what they say about griffins are true.”

“What?”

“You are like a magnet.”

I chuckled.

I didn’t know if my headache was going to come or not. I didn’t know if I had enough time away from the crystal. It was still close by.

“I miss them,” he finally said.

“Multiply that by a thousand, and you will know how much they miss you.” Or that was what Francis had told me once when I was away at camp for an entire summer.

He didn’t reply, and I went to my bed again.

A tear rolled down my cheek. That was how much I missed Drake.

“Give it a rest.” I heard Damon as I saw Drake walking up the stairs with a bow.

“Don’t even try it. I mean it, just go away.”

He grunted, turned around, and left.

“He’s an idiot,” Damon chuckled.

“Well, at least he’s still good for a couple of laughs.”

“Yeah.” I could hear the smile in Damon’s voice, and it was great to know that he’d never lost his spirit in this forsaken place.



THE REST of the day actually went pretty fast, but there was no sign of a fully blown headache. I just needed to fake one then.

The time finally came, and a lot of guards walked up the stairs. Blaze was still Drake, with the bow around his shoulder.

“Let’s go, sweetheart.”

Damon scoffed. “A bow actually chose you? I bet he or she is regretting it now.”

“Ha-ha,” Blaze said and nudged Damon harder towards the stairs.

“Unless it’s not magical. I doubt magical weapons want anything to do with rejects.”

What was he speaking about?

There was no quiver with arrows in sight. I passed Blaze and his hand connected hard on my butt. The pain seared through my butt-cheek using Drake’s strength. It was on fire.

All the kids walked down the stairs. They ranged between nine and thirteen.

My gaze locked on a boy with the ram horns. His eyes were puffy. Murkel pushed him to walk faster.

“Stop that!” I yelled at her, and she stared at me. Blaze shoved me, and the brute of a guy in front of me blocked me from falling.

The semi-giant turned around and slapped the living crap out of Blaze. “Your new form doesn’t scare me.” The guy’s voice sounded like thunder.

“Ow,” Blaze whispered, rubbing the side of his face. I wished he could become someone else, but if Enzo was going to succeed tonight, that was the last face I wanted to see.

We walked through so many doors and up different stairs that I didn’t know where the hell I was. We finally climbed up a ladder, and the hatch opened into a room. It wasn’t even the forest.

There was no way that we were going to be rescued.

Fake your headache, Sophie. I grunted, and I went down on my knees.

Blaze kicked my leg. “Get up!”

Fake harder. A piercing scream sounded faintly in my thoughts. I took a huge breath and let the scream rip through my lungs.

“Dammit, what is going on?” Enzo reached us, and I screamed again, clutching my head. “No, no, no!” He picked me up and took me aside, and I grabbed his shirt, faking it more. He grabbed my necklace and saw that the pendant was gone.

I screamed one last time as Murkel came to Enzo's side and put her hands on my temples. She grunted and slapped me hard. "There is no headache. She is faking it!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," Murkel said, and my head was fiercely close to Enzo's. His fingers curled around my neck. I couldn't breathe as he carried me while my legs kicked in the air. He pushed me onto a metal table. I was right in the middle, surrounded by nine other tables.

I coughed as I drew a breath.

His hands worked fast, clasp a leather strap around my arms and buckling it tight. My other arm swung, and my fist connected hard with his face. Another guard grabbed my arm and put my hand in the contraption as I moved my legs and struggled on the table. The headache finally pulsed as my heart elevated. Someone tried to grab my leg and my foot connected with something hard. It only attracted more guards.

Blaze laughed, using Drake's voice and jeered, "She is feisty."

I groaned, and Enzo looked at me. "Stop it. There is no way out of this."

"I hope when I become your weapon, I'm going to make your life a living hell." I spat in his face.

He wiped it off, and I thought he would hit me, but he didn't. It might have brought on the headache faster.

"All of them are in place," a guy's voice came from the system.

Think, Sophie, Think! The words scrambled through my mind as the table started moving, putting me in an upright position.

With my heart pounding so fast and my hands, feet, and body tied to the contraption, I couldn't think. My body refused to give up, and I shook against my restraints and grumbled like a wild, trapped animal.

The machine started up, and my heart felt like it was going to explode.

"Get the crowns," Enzo ordered.

"Don't do this, Enzo. They're just kids," I begged one last time.

"It will be over soon, Sophie." He spoke in a calm voice.

I screamed again, and my headache pulsed, matching the rhythm of my heart, but the headache would not come.

I felt like a ticking time bomb.

Something jolted from my body, taking my breath away. I heard a loud bang followed by grunts, thumps, flesh hitting flesh and moaning from somewhere behind me.

"No, no, no!" Enzo screamed as I heard the guards fighting. Someone came?

I opened my eyes and froze. Around us, duplicates of me fought. Limbs kicking, and fists punching. Some even jumped on their opponents. One pulled Murkel's auburn curls, swinging her in circles as the woman screeched.

A clone came to me, working with fast fingers she untied my buckles.

I kept staring at her with enormous eyes. She had dark flat hair, with dark brown eyes, her nose was a bit too long. The freckles were there, even the slight purple bruise on her cheek was present too She had all my flaws.

My eyes flickered to a guard behind her. “Behind you!”

She kicked behind her and left me, going for the opponent as he stood up.

I pulled my wrist, but the strap didn’t want to budge. Another Sophie appeared next to me, and she unbuckled the rest of my hand as she kept looking around her.

“I got it,” I said as my hand was free and she ran away and hid behind a pillar.

Okay, she was weird.

The kids kept staring at all of me with enormous eyes.

“Sophie,” Damon called out to me.

“Not now, Damon,” one of me called.

Enzo went to her and grabbed her by the neck. “Stop this, now!”

She turned into a billow of smoke.

I rushed to untie Damon. A gasp slipped past his lips as someone shoved me. I lost my balance, and a hand clasped around my throat. Enzo pressed so hard that all the other Sophie’s disappeared.

A door exploded close to the roof, and Sterilian guards stormed through.

Enzo turned me around so my back was against his chest, like a human shield. His grip around my throat eased, and I coughed as I took in air.

The brute that had slapped Blaze swung a sword in circular movements, walking toward the first guard that rushed down the stairs.

The guard had snow white hair falling over his shoulders. He lifted his hand, and the brute won himself a place against the wall and crashed hard to the floor.

“Stop, or I will kill her!”

“Enzo, it’s over. Don’t be stupid,” the blond-haired guard said.

“It will never be over, Caus. Not until I have my weapon.”

Caus! I stared at the guard. His pointy ears protruded from his hair. His face was oval, with neat white eyebrows and sky-blue eyes. Caus was real.

He sauntered toward us as my eyes landed on something that moved on the top platform above our heads. It was a griffin.

“Stop,” Enzo yelled again, and my gaze darted back to Caus.

From the corner of my eyes, Murkel and Evangeline still moved. I looked at them and back at the guards. Nobody told them to stop.

The drugged-out Dingle-hopper with a crown came into view, and I knew they were invisible.

I found the owl face stalking past the Sterilian guards a few feet in front of me. Parvati.

Murkel was coming closer. I showed Parvati with my eyes where the Dingle-hopper was, and I could see the intellect behind her big, hooded eyes as she flickered her gaze to what I was staring at.

Those yellow eyes darted back at me, and I nodded. The drivine knew precisely what I tried to show her.

“Shield,” Parvati yelled, and a shield-like Mavis’s pushed Murkel and the Dingle-hopper away when she pranced in the direction I’d shown her.

The force blew Enzo and me away in the process.

“Maverick,” Mavis yelled.

They were still alive.

Green vines pulled on my arm and yanked me out of Enzo’s grip pulling me forward.

I collided hard with a body, and we toppled over.

“*Heya*, lass.”

“You’re alive,” my voice faltered, and I grabbed Maverick around the neck.

Enzo exploded into a griffin as we got up and Maverick pushed me behind him.

“No, Drake! He has dark fire,” Mavis yelled. My gaze flickered back to the griffin on the platform, now airborne, ready to pounce on Enzo.

Drake?

Enzo lit up with black flames and fell on his back, pushing Drake’s body away from him. Drake crashed against an empty table, skid over the table, and crashed to the floor.

“Nooooo!” I yelled as Maverick grabbed me and started pulling me backward.

A spear hit the dark griffin in the eye, releasing a piercing shriek that almost blew my ears. Suddenly my feet got dragged up the steps. Caus jumped off a railing into the air with a bow and released arrows in Enzo’s direction.

I couldn’t see Drake at all.

Enzo’s used his wing to protect himself as Caus landed right next to him.

I heard Enzo’s high pitched whistle as Maverick pushed me out the door. Fresh, cold air caressed my skin.

“Drake needs our help!” I yelled at Maverick and wanted to go back inside, but his arm pushed me back.

“*Yeh* sound like Lindy now, lass. Let’s go,” Mav roared.

Drake was still alive. I wanted to cry, scream, and I wanted to laugh all at the same time.

I fought hard to get Mav’s arm away from me while he kept dragging me father away from the entrance.

“Sophie, stop,” Maverick yelled.

“He needs our help.” Tears streamed down my face.

“It’s Dark Fire.” Mav shook his head.

“What?”

“Enzo hit Drake with Dark Fire. It’s not good if Drake wakes up.”

If? I looked at Maverick and my energy waned. I landed on my knees.

Arms hugged me, and Damon grabbed me tight around the neck. “You didn’t have sight. You are a shield. They protected all of us. Only shields do that.”

“What?” Mav asked.

“It was bloody amazing!” Damon yelled.

I was a shield? Drake, Dark Fire. Mavis was right. If he wakes up. The thoughts scrambled in my head.

My eyes flickered to Mav. “How is it you are still alive?”

“The guy had thought he killed me. I got to Drake and Mavis just in time.”

Enzo didn’t lie. “You really almost died?”

He nodded.

“How did you find me, Maverick?”

“Mavis and her paranoia. She put a tracker in *yer* new stone. It just took us longer to get out of the woods without Flint.”

He led me to the van that waited.

“Flint died?”

“*Naw*, they put a crown on him.”

I gave Maverick a side hug as he put me into the van.

“*It’s goin’ ter be okay. Ye’re safe. Ye’re all safe.*”

The kids’ arms curled around me. I still didn’t know what Maverick had meant by the dark fire comment and if Drake was going to wake up. He couldn’t be dead. I could deal with dark fire, but I wouldn’t deal with death.

SOPHIE

Maverick, Alex and Parvati gave out blankets and water. Afterwards, we took the drive back to the academy. I rested my head on Maverick's shoulder.

"It was a lot of dark fire, Alex," Parvati said.

"Hank might pull him through."

"You make it sound as if it's fantastic!" Parvati's eyes glistened with tears. "It's dark fire. He will be cursed. He will end up like Enzo, out of his mind."

Tears rolled down my cheek as I prayed it wasn't too late. Sirens blared, and an ambulance zoomed past us.

"Is that him?"

"I dinnae ken, Lass."

Alex looked at Parvati. "He's one of the best. If it's Dark Fire, we will deal with it. If there is one griffin that can fight it, it's Drake."

"No one can help phoenix griffins from that... not anymore."

“What do you mean, not anymore?” I asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” Parvati said, as we stopped in the parking lot of the academy.

Alex was the first one out of the van, and he ran up the stairs into the academy.

Brooke waited with plenty of parents in the parking lot.

“Dad,” the boy with the horns yelled, and he was the first one out of the van. He ran into a giant of a man’s arms, also with horns, and they both cried as his dad kept kissing him on his head, holding him tight.

Two other kids spotted their parents and ran to them as we made room for the others to get out.

Brooke reached the van and hugged me tightly as I climbed out.

“Come guys, your parents are waiting for you,” Parvati said, and I let go of the hug.

“Mom?” the girl with the orange cat ears asked. She was a phoenix griffin.

“Abigail!” her mother screamed with excitement, and it was like the rest of the parents’ feet got unfrozen, and they darted for the van.

Brooke and I stepped back as laughter, screams of relief, and tears filled the reunions. Full-grown men cried like babies as they wrapped fatherly arms around their sons and daughters. I pushed a make-believe reunion with my parents to the back of my mind. It would never happen.

Damon climbed out, and there was no sign of his parents.

I put my arms around him.

“It’s going to be okay.” I rubbed his arm.

He nodded, as his eyes still looked bewildered around him.

“Damon!”

Damon flickered his eyes to where the voice came from. Tears pooled in his eyes, but he didn’t go to his father.

“It wasn’t your dad that did all those horrible things to you. Don’t give Blaze that satisfaction.”

Damon looked at me and then at his father again. “Dad.” The fourteen-year-old griffin ran to his father.

“Look how big you got,” his father said and pulled him to his chest. His mother screamed and came running to them.

“All happy endings.” Brooke had tears in her eyes and wiped them away.

Drake. I looked around. There was no sign of Parvati, Alex, and Maverick. “No, something happened to Drake. We have to get to the infirmary.”

I grabbed Brooke’s arm and ran to the infirmary, past the parents, and into the academy. I took three steps at a time, and Brooke struggled to keep up.

Uncontrollable sobs and screams came from the end of the hall, and I froze. I couldn’t breathe. Brooke darted past me and grabbed my arm as my feet climbed the last few steps.

In the hallway, in front of the infirmary's door, Maverick held Mavis tight as her body shook from violent sobs. Alex held Lindy, who screamed into his chest. Emile had his arms wrapped around Parvati as she cried.

Xander sat on his haunches, and his shoulders shook.

"No, no, no." Drake couldn't be dead. I just found out he was alive. This wasn't real.

I was anchored to the spot, feeling helpless.

He couldn't be dead. Not now.

"Xander?" Brooke said, and Xander got up.

"Dark fire. He received too much of it."

Tears streamed down my face as my heart broke, my knees connected hard with the floor as my scream ripped through me.

Arms wrapped around me, and from the smell, it was Brooke.

"I'm so sorry."

"No, he can't be dead," I said into her chest.

"It's going to be okay."

It wouldn't. It would never be okay. I pushed myself up and walked to the infirmary.

Maverick grabbed me as I wanted to enter.

"Let me go."

But he didn't, he just held me tight against his chest. "So sorry, lass."

Chase's cries came out of the infirmary, and all of us cried outside in the hallway.



CHASE FINALLY EXITED THE ROOM, his eyes puffy. Everyone gave their condolences with a hug. Maverick let me go, and I slipped past him and went inside.

Drake sprawled out on one of the infirmary beds. He was still in his griffin form. The light above him was off and his feathers looked so dull.

His front paws with eagle claws lay limply off the table. His wings covered his body, and the tips almost touched the ground. Flat ears laid against his head.

He was so big.

More tears pooled in my eyes as I stepped toward him. My heart shattered, and this time there was no coming back. I fell on his body and bawled. Nothing came from him. Not a buzz, not a single prickle.

“What am I going to do now?” I whispered through my tears. “Why did you do that? It had it under control—you gowk.” I shoved him hard. “How am I going to do this without you? Why didn't you just stay put?” I cried harder, muffling my sobs at the nape of his giant neck. My body shook, and tears streamed down my face.

My arms prickled, and the buzz spread through my body. I sucked in a breath, staring at him. “Drake?” I buried my fingers in his feathers. The buzz was there. “Hank!”

Hank rushed into the infirmary.

“He’s alive!”

“Sophie.” He shook his head as tears glistened in his eyes.

“He’s alive. Just check.” I took a step back.

He sighed and walked over to me, and his hand disappeared in Drake’s feathers. Hank froze as his eyes widened. He pulled the stethoscope around his neck, switched on the light and put the stethoscope against his neck to check for a pulse.

“Drake,” Hank said, and everyone came running in.

A faint whistle left his beak. He was alive! How?

Hank laughed. “Can you change back?”

His high pitch whistle welcomed my ears. I didn’t care how loud it was. He was alive.

Arms grabbed me from behind, and Mavis’s laughter through her sniffs reached my ears. Emile ran out of the room and announced that Drake was alive.

The semi giant laid back in his human form on the table as Hank’s deep laughter escaped his lips. “Just rest. We’ll deal with the dark fire later.”

He whispered something to Hank.

“She is safe, all of them are safe,” Hank said, and stepped back. He walked over to me, looking concerned. “He needs to rest. Best is to give him that time.”

I looked past Hank at Drake, sleeping. The light of the lid that hovered over his bed was on, and a blanket covered him. Only his arms and face showed.

I turned around and wiped away some tears as Hank touched my back, gently leading me to the door.

Laughter and tears filled the hallway at this revival. Everyone was questioning how he came back alive.

Hank led me to another door and into a small room with a bed. He took out my necklace. “Where is the crystal?”

“I had to take it off. I thought it would induce another headache. Enzo made it clear he can’t use me if the headaches are bad.”

Hank touched my head and healed the one that was busy forming. He kept staring at me as his hand cupped my cheek, healing my bruise. He didn’t ask how I got it.

“I’ll get word to Caus to look for it.”

“Who is he?”

“Caus?”

I nodded.

“He is the general of the Sterilian guards, King Avery’s right hand.”

I remembered Mavis telling me how the king had changed after he’d replaced his general. So that was Caus. I did not know what he’d wanted with Drake, but what Enzo had said in the cell stayed with me. He thought he had killed Drake, Mavis, and Maverick. He didn’t lie.

Why did King Avery want more fire? For what reason?



MAVERICK, Brooke, and Xander waited for me.

“I’m okay guys, really. The villain is dead. So dead.”

They all chuckled.

“*Aye, we ken, Soph.* He fought many of *yeh*, or so *wee Damon says*,” Maverick said.

“You are a shield,” Brooke yelled and jumped around on the spot.

“How many Sophies?” Xander wanted to know.

“I struggled to count with all of them kicking and clawing eyes out. I don’t know.”

“I can’t wait to become friends with them.” Brooke gave me a one armed hug.

“I’m afraid they all have my dark sense of humor.” I didn’t know that for sure, but I guessed I would find out just how much they were like me.

We didn’t take the steps up to our level but walked down the steps to the foyer. I craved a shower, my own clothes, and my warm bed. Not a night out.

A lot of chatter came from the foyer. There were still plenty of things going on in the academy.

Applause reached my ears when we almost reached the bottom, and it was all the parents of the children.

Damon rushed to my side and flung his arms around me. He was only fourteen but just as tall as me. “Sophie Emerson.” He lifted my arm like a champion. “The girl who became ten.”

All of them laughed, and then the parents came to hug me to say thanks. “I did nothing. My shield did, and thank heavens for that, too.”

I still didn’t understand the dreams and didn’t know why I got them if my domain was shield.

They applauded again, and my cheeks turned red.

Mavis came down and wrapped her arm around me. My lower-lip trembled again, as everything started to sink in.

“I told you. You are a shield,” she whispered in my ear and broke the hug. She looked at all the parents and children. “I’m glad that all your children are safe and happy that we got to you just in time. Not that Sophie needed it.”

Soft chuckles elicited.

“We have dealt with the culprit. Enzo is dead. The Sterilian guards have captured all his accomplices. They are in transit to Trilidor as we speak until their hearings. But know they will never harm you again.” She looked at all the children.

Every parent applauded and Mavis smiled as heat spread through my body.

After that, the parents said goodbye, and they left with their children that had been missing. Some for years and others a few months.

“Go take a bath and get some rest. Come to my office when you wake up. We have a lot to discuss.”

I nodded and hugged her again.

She stroked my back, and I walked with Brooke up the steps.



THE LONG SHOWER felt like heaven, and when I got out, Brooke wanted to know everything. I told her the short version, as exhaustion pulled at my eyelids. Warmth and extreme joy filled my heart knowing that Drake was alive. I worried about the dark fire and wondered what Parvati had meant by ‘nobody could help him anymore.’ It sounded as if somebody could. Was that the phoenix, too? Or his parents? I wished she had finished that sentence.

I fell asleep faster than I expected. I thought I would wake up in that nightmare of a cell again, but I didn’t.

When I opened my eyes, the sun spilled into the room, and everything felt light again. I got up, got dressed, and had some breakfast. Everyone was speaking to me at once, and this time, Brooke told them in her colorful language to back off.

After breakfast, I went to Mavis’s office, and I knocked on the frosted glass door. She opened it but was on the phone with someone. I ignored the conversation, and Mavis ended the call.

She put the phone down and smiled as she stared at me. Her smile faltered, and I knew what it was about.

“Don’t ask me, please. I can’t.” The tears pooled in my eyes.

“Sophie, it’s not an excellent match.”

“I don’t care. Where I am from, there is no limitation to who you can fall in love with. The bond we have might not be the right one for you or anyone else, but it is the right one for us.”

“You will die if you don’t find your griffin,” she pleaded.

“I’ll find my griffin. I’ll do whatever you want me to, but that. It doesn’t matter what he is. He will never hurt me like that. I won’t give him a reason to.”

Her eyes grew softer. “That is not a life. Not being able to be intimate with a husband one day, to have kids. You don’t know what you are saying.”

“Then let me make that choice, Mavis. Let him make that choice, but don’t make it for us. If our bond is so wrong, then we will see it. I’m begging you.”

“A curse touched him. He woke up, and I’m so glad that he had, but the hard part is still coming. The Dark Fire will consume Drake. There is no happy ending.”

My jaw muscles pumped at her negativity. “How do you know? Huh?”

Mavis’ face slackened as she stared at me. Silence lingered.

“Everyone is dooming him without knowing what that fire will do to him. Alex seems like the only one that will stick by

him.”

“I know what it is you are going through.”

“No, Mavis, you don’t.”

“I was you many years ago.”

My gaze flickered to her. “What?”

“I fell in love with a phoenix griffin too, and I know how it feels. The pull towards them is strong. I was still a teacher when Concordia sent him to train the graduates. He was a Sterilian Guard, and I didn’t care either. I should’ve.”

“Where is he now?”

“He died years ago for me, but yesterday for everyone.”

I gasped. “Enzo?”

Mavis nodded. “He was the love of my life. We weren’t the right fit. I knew that night at the circle that you found a connection with Drake. I tried not to see it, but I should have.”

“Mavis please?”

“I don’t know how Enzo got the dark fire, but what had left his mouth scared me. It wasn’t my Enzo. He almost killed me when I refused to believe him, and then he vanished. I got word that the guards had found him and put him out of his curse.”

I looked at the table as tears pooled in my eyes. “Then you understand why I can’t leave him now. Why I need to try.”

“He will take you with him, Sophie.” Her voice rose as she got up.

“Let me try,” I pleaded. “Just because a book says it’s not right doesn’t mean it isn’t. He was dead, and I spoke to him, and he became alive again.”

“Soph.” She sighed. “He struggled to wake up, that is all.”

“No, he wasn’t breathing. He was dead. I don’t care what you say. He woke up when I spoke to him. We have a strong bond.” A tear rolled down my cheek.

“It’s not the one you need.” She spoke softer this time.

“It is the one I need. Maybe not physical, but I need him. If you take him away from me, you might as well send me back to my parents. Drake was the only thing that made this deal worthwhile. Don’t take him away too, please.” I begged. “I will find my griffin, and he or she will know the deal. If it could work for his parents, it could work for us, too.”

She closed her eyes, and silence lingered. “Did you and Enzo speak?”

“We did. He told me about the Ultimate Weapon. Why didn’t you?”

“How do you tell someone that a beast of a man was going to put all nine of them inside you?”

She got that right?

“I’m actually surprised that he explained it to you.”

“He didn’t, an idiot who was like a shapeshifter told me that,” I said.

Mavis frowned. “What do you mean by a shapeshifter?”

“I don’t know what he looked like, but he liked Drake’s body an awful lot.”

“He became Drake?”

“Yeah, like Sabine, the way she changed—”

“No, that is Sabine’s projection. She can’t change herself, Sophie, only others.”

“Well, this one can. Damon told me it’s his projection. You can ask any of those kids that got tortured by him masking himself as their parents. Those kids went through a lot. The idiot kept coming to me, looking like Drake, but I knew it wasn’t him. He didn’t like it much, and it sort of became his favorite little game, trying to fool me. He said his mother was a phoenix griffin and his father a Spirit fae.”

“Sophie!”

“His father was only part of the conception, didn’t get to see the bundle of joy coming in this world.”

Mavis picked up her phone and dialed a number. “Do you have the shapeshifter?”

“Blaze,” I whispered his name.

“Blaze, his name is Blaze. His projection can make him become anyone.” Mavis sounded alarmed. “He is changing into people, not creatures. Do you have him?”

I heard faint laughing coming from the phone.

“I’ll speak to Caus myself.” She slammed the phone down.

“They don’t have him?” I asked.

“The idiot laughed in my ear, said that isn’t possible.”

I took a deep breath.

“Calm down. We will find him. I promise.”

“How? His projection can make him become anyone.”

Mavis came over and sat on her haunches in front of my chair. “This should make you run the other way.”

“I can’t leave him!”

“I know. Drake is going to need all the help he can get to stay true to who he is. But you also need to know when to let go.”

I nodded.

She hugged me. “Don’t let me catch you, either.”

I chuckled and squeezed harder. “Thank you.”

“Go,” she said, and I ran out of her office and to the infirmary.

I disagreed with Mavis about what she said. Before my parents adopted me, Mom had a dark phase. She felt so lost, and Dad did not know what to do. Everything that doctors and support groups tried didn’t work, but he refused to give up. He joined her in the end, and only then did she become better. I did not know how that worked, but it did.

I walked into the infirmary and found Lindy sitting next to Drake’s bed. She held his hand in hers.

Shit.

“Hey.” Lindy looked up and saw me.

“Is Hank here? I’m still waiting on my crystal.”

“I think he is in the other room.” She pointed to the door he took me through last night.

“Thanks. How is he?”

“Still hasn’t woken up, which is boring,” she said louder to Drake.

I walked to the door and opened it.

Hank sat on a bed with a device in his hands. He looked up. “Sophie, you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” I fidgeted with my hands.

He chuckled. “Are you scared of a manticore?”

Crap, he knows too. “She is vicious.”

Hank’s lips curved, and he got up as he winked and walked to the door. “Lindy, why don’t you go get something to eat? I need to do some checkups on Sleeping Beauty over here.”

“As long as I get to kiss him awake, you can do whatever you want, Hank.” She brushed Drake’s cheek. “See you later, okay?”

Hank closed the door and appeared in the doorway. “I’m going to check up on the other patients. It takes about twenty minutes.” He had to know that there was something more than just friendship between us.

I walked to Drake’s bed and sat down on the chair Lindy had occupied earlier.

My hand grabbed his, and the buzzing flew through my hand. I put his hand against my cheek, and I could sit like this with him forever.

I closed my eyes as a mild headache pulsed. Drake's hand was so warm in mine, I wished he'd wake up already, I missed him way too much.

"You need to wake up," I said. "I don't like the sleeping version of you much. And if you scare me like that again, Drake Evans, I will think of a way to punish you. I don't know how yet, but I'm Spirit. I'll figure it out. Maybe rile up the other Sophies and beat you, no." I sighed. "I don't take any pleasure in hurting you." From the corner of my eye, I saw his lips twitching, and my gaze flickered down at him. "I swear if you are awake—"

A chuckle escaped his lips, and he opened his eyes. "I have been awake with Lindy. I just didn't want to talk to her because then she will never leave."

I laughed and got up and hugged him.

He pulled me onto his bed. Heat rolled from him in waves, like a furnace. He was still my Drake. "We need to talk."

"If it has anything to do with dark fire, I do not want to hear it?"

He sighed, and I looked up at him. "I don't want to hurt you."

"For someone awake, while I talk, you don't listen that great either."

He laughed as I arched an eyebrow.

“I’m not stupid.”

His lips curved.

“Besides, Mavis knows. I will not tell her now to forget it because it’s over. You are stuck with me, whether you have dark fire, pink fire, gray fire, fire with spots. I don’t care. All that matters is that you are here.”

He grunted and closed his eyes. “Mavis knows?”

“Yeah, she warned me about you, more about us being caught together.”

He opened his eyes. “She’s okay with this?”

“I won’t say she is okay, but I used to make solid statements on the debate team, so you can thank that.”

He chuckled again and pulled me towards him for a long soft kiss. I could kiss him forever, and I would never get tired of him. I didn’t care about a little dark fire. I knew, good or bad, as long as we were together, we would be okay.

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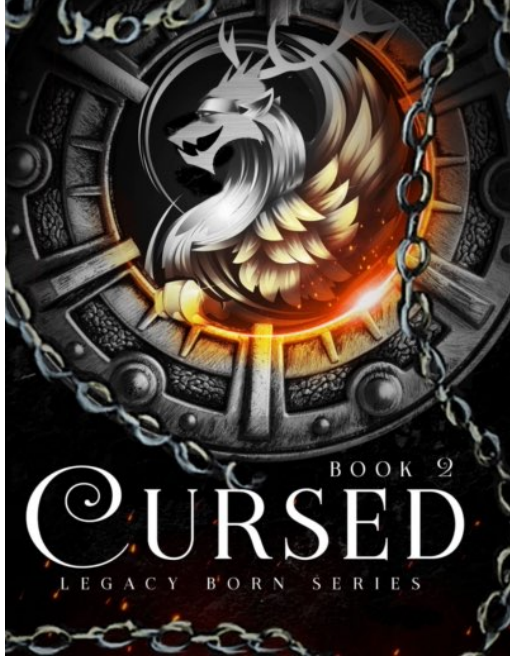
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EXCERPT

“Hey, Soph.” Maria swooshed past me in the hallway. Her dark curls bobbed on her shoulder as she ran down the hall.

“Sophie.” Philip from healing class waved with a smile and walked on. I still kept staring at the cat-ears, the tails and horns.

“Sophie, wait up!” Damon rushed to catch up with me as I made my way to history. His father enrolled him two weeks after we got rescued. His cat-ears had disappeared, and I still did not know what triggered them to vanish. He was the second one now that magically lost their animal part. Xander, Brooke’s boyfriend, was the first. One minute I saw him with a beak and the next, nada.

“Here,” he said and handed me a daisy. The petite white petals and green center had lost the sweet fragrance that lingered on daisies as I brought it to my nostrils and took a big sniff.

“Thanks, Damon.”

“Soph!” Brooke’s voice came from up ahead and she pushed through the ocean of people in front of me.

“See you later,” Damon said and rushed in the opposite direction. His red hair bounced slightly as he rushed through the throng of students trying to get to their next classes. I was glad that he didn’t become part of my thigh. That kid was so kind and sweet.

Brooke reached me and her eyebrow raised as she gawked at my daisy. “Another daisy from Damon?”

“He is just grateful for what I did that night. He almost died.”

“It’s been like two months, Sophie, seriously? He’s becoming annoying.”

“Stop it.” I slapped her shoulder.

She smiled all giddy and bounced slightly as she leaned in and whispered, “They are coming back today.”

A gasp slipped past my lips. “You got word?”

She nodded. “Alex texted me, said he will see me later.”

“Awesome. I can’t wait to see my Fire-Bird and to help the Dingle-hopper. It’s about time.”

Brooke chuckled as we walked toward class. She blabbered about Alex as my mind trailed off. Drake hadn’t shown his dark fire, just like my ten little Sophie friends refused to make their appearance, no matter how hard Mavis pushed me.

I still couldn’t believe that I was a shield. I mean, I got the visions. They were prominent and frequent, but since the

Sophies had made their appearance, I hadn't received a single peek of the future.

I made peace with being a shield. It was better than the visions and having projections. Projections came with loads of responsibility, and according to Mavis, the mysterious kind too.

I didn't know what she'd meant by that, but I didn't want to find out. I had too many things to dwell over in my mind at nights, stealing my sleep.

"Sophie!" Brooke bumped me and I jumped out of my thoughts just as we were ready to step into Sovereign Danish's class. "Have you listened to a thing I've said?"

"Sorry," I whispered. "I struggled to sleep last night, and my mind is just going haywire. I promise to listen to everything later."

"You okay?" She looked worried, and my grin immediately appeared.

"Yeah, just tired. I don't sleep as well as I wanted to. Always worry about everything."

"I hear you. Two months ago, was a huge thing. You really dealt with it like a star."

"Yeah, well. I had Nadirah and Mavis. I mean, speaking about it helps."

Nadirah was the psychologist that they made all the survivors see at least once a week.

I saw her about once every two weeks. I was only there for like a few days, not even a week. The others needed her the most. They were much more traumatized than me, and Drake needed my support. Enzo hit him with a dark fire that I kept waiting in agony to jump out and yell boo.

I only saw a glimpse of Enzo's fire that night. The flames still had a bit of an orange hue to it, but the rest was dark. It was weird how I didn't even dream of it when I fell asleep.

We waited in anticipation for today. Some kids even marked it on their calendars. Today Sovereign Danish was going to start with the Phoenix lecture.

We took our seats as Sovereign Danish sat on the edge of his table. A huge smile adorned his face. He was always so friendly. "I'm sure you are all aware of what day this is."

The class sniggered.

"Before we started, I wanted to speak about one of the darkest times that Concordia ever faced. One brave soldier changed it. Who can tell me his name?"

Everyone lifted their hands, including me. We all knew this story. Alex told it to me.

"Penny?"

"My uncle," she said, proud and loud.

"I'm afraid not."

Everyone gasped, and everyone lowered their hands. Chase was the only one who had his hand still raised, sort of.

"Mr. Evans."

“Bartolomeo.”

“Right you are, Chase.” Sovereign Danish hopped off his desk. “Miss Cavenagh, your uncle saved many people, but I was speaking about a time darker than what the fae endured. The time I’m speaking about was the dark ages. Who was Bartolomeo, Chase?”

“He was a phoenix and became the first ruler of Concordia.”

More gasps filled the classroom.

“We are covering the phoenix, guys. You need to know where it all started. What they fought against not just to become the rulers, but why they earned the title. Why they banned magic and their motives behind the law that suppressed the faes and other beings whose lives depended on Magic. Not all of it is evil. I promise.”

I looked at Brooke, who frowned. I knew she didn’t like the Phoenix Monarchy, but she was just as curious as the rest of us to find out more about them.

“You know what? Better I show you, then tell you. If you are there, then maybe you might understand better.”

He reached out toward the window. The blinds rolled down, and the orange curtains yanked close.

It became dark, and then a bright light popped in front of the classroom.

My heart pounded as animals and 3D figures of fae ran out of the light and filled the classroom.

The light faded and transported us to a different scene. We weren't in the classroom anymore, or maybe we were. It was so hard to tell when magic was involved.

Voices seeped through. Women and children screaming, begging for their lives as dark cloaked figures plunder everything in front of them. If Brooke's hand didn't grab my arm, I wouldn't even know that she was still sitting next to me.

"During the dark ages, there was a rebellion known as the Scry. They were intelligent, ruthless and wanted more. More magic, more power, and they didn't care how they were going to get it," Sovereign Danish said.

I watched with wide eyes at everything around me. It looked so real and it hit me full in the face what this was. It was a memory, stored inside a projection.

The only thing that was missing was the icy wind that howled, sensation. But the vibe of how dark those ages clung in the air. My heart pounded behind my ribcage and my gut turned in all directions.

Dark cloaked figures killed faes and creatures. They had some sort of necklace with a black stone that sucked up souls. Bright blue spirit figures, leaving the bodies of fae and creatures, seeped into the stone.

They didn't care whether the magic belonged to male, female, child or creature. They just wanted more.

The crying and screaming of the ones that were left behind as they plunder one village after another made me cover my

ears. I couldn't handle the sadness and the evil that played off around me.

Then bright orange flames as a bird slash panther appeared. There was no beak, only a snout. A beautiful panther-like face filled the screen, and his eyes were bright blue.

Gasps filled the air. I've seen a picture in Father Matthew's book, but I didn't know if any of the others in the class saw what one looked like.

The phoenix had the back of a lion or a panther. Its paws were huge, but it didn't have the front claws. Their wings were their front part.

It was the most beautiful and mesmerizing creature I'd ever seen. They looked nothing like the paintings.

The phoenix with other phoenixes, Spirit faes, phoenix griffins, chimeras and manticores, filled the scene and fought against the hooded figures.

They killed every single hooded figure.

The scene changed into a man that had blonde hair with bright blue eyes and his wife next to him. She could almost be his twin, as they looked so similar.

The entire Concordia bowed in front of them as they sat on their thrones. Everything was peaceful again. The images faded back into the bright light and the class walls seeped through again.

"It's over," Brooke whispered as she touched my arm. I glanced at her and her eyes glistened.

“Not what you expected them to be. The phoenix wasn’t evil, they just did what they thought was best. They banned magic because they knew what the world could become if greed took over. Sure, the Scry are still active today, but not as much as they used to anymore.”

My eyes glanced back at Brooke. She frowned as she listened to Sovereign Danish.

Chase lifted his arm.

“Chase?”

“So what, you want us to believe is that the phoenix did these horrible things in order to keep us safe?”

“I didn’t say they were smart.”

A group of sniggers waved around the classroom.

“They lived through one of the darkest times in Concordia’s history. It wasn’t wise to ban magic, but they weren’t completely wrong to contain it. I mean, after King Avery overpowered the phoenix, we’d learned how to work with it in a symbiotic environment. We use it only when we need it. Do you think we would’ve done that if the phoenix didn’t put such a hard lid down on magic?”

Nobody answered.

“Just what I thought. I will assign you in groups of two and in the next three weeks I want you and your partner to write a full detailed report on the phoenix, and how you would’ve done things differently.”

The bell rang, and we all got up. I didn't know how to feel about the phoenix after what I'd seen.

I wondered if Alex had seen that projection. The way he spoke about memories as a child, it sounded dark and twisted.

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Till next time,

Adrienne and Carlyle

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Carlyle Labuschagne is a USA Today bestselling author from South Africa, who has won an award for her SF fantasy series the Broken Trilogy.

This series broke ground not only in her country but in many where the genre of SF is concerned.

Mixing African tales into worlds most of her readers describe as highly imaginative and unique.

Her Dystopian Romance book, Dead of Night is a multi-award nominated tale set in a world where love is outlawed, described by readers as breathing new life into the genre.

Adrienne Woods is a USA Today Bestselling author, living in South Africa.

She's been in love with books all her life and knew at the age of 13 that she is going to be a writer one day.

That dream happened ten years ago and she started to pen her stories down on paper. Firebolt, her debut novel, were released 4 years after that, and she hasn't stop since.

With more than 15 novels under her belt, it doesn't look like she is going to stop soon.

The Legacy Born Series is the first series they penned down together and will follow soon with more.

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