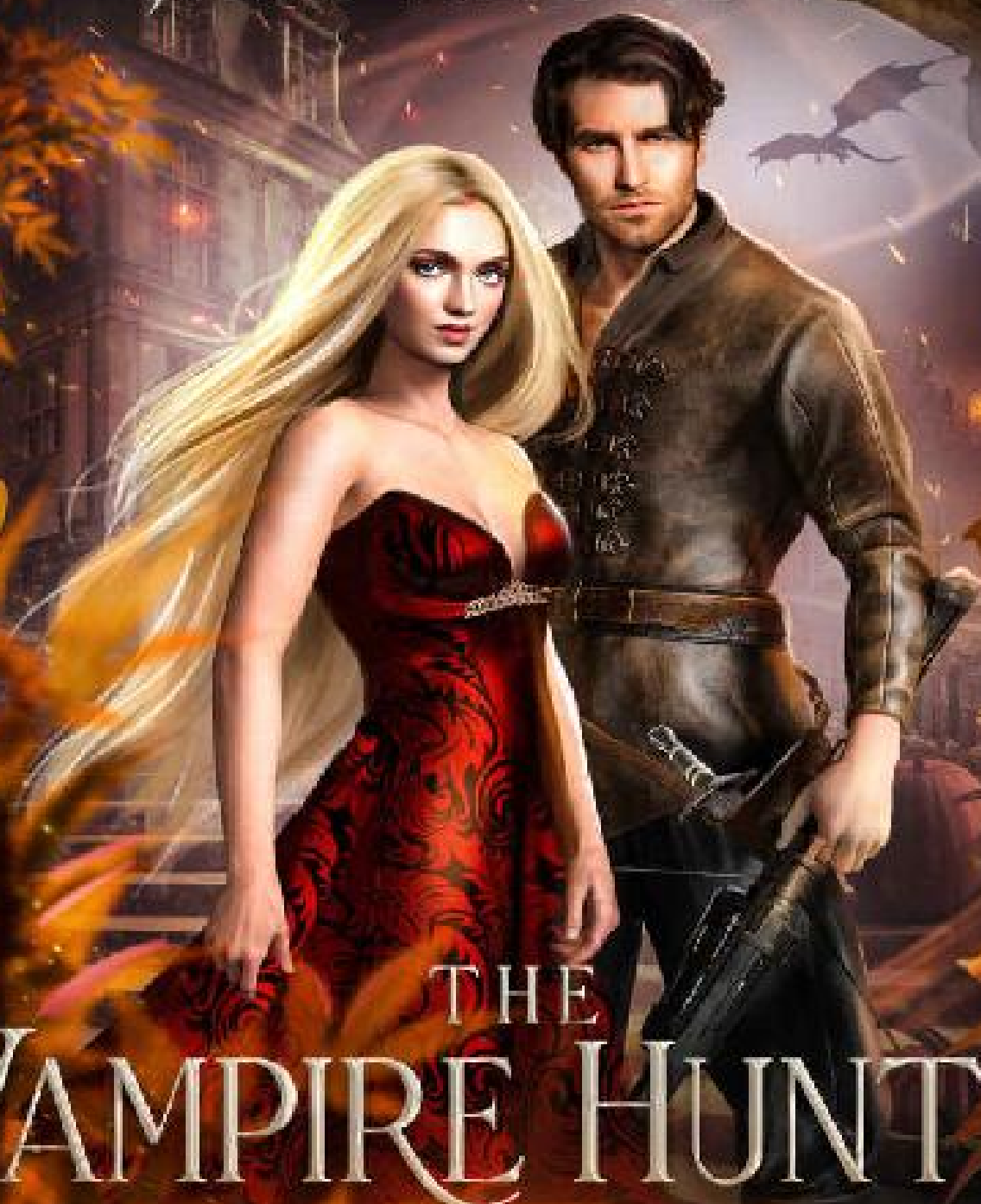


USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
SHARI L. TAPSCOTT
JAKE ANDREWS



THE
VAMPIRE HUNTER
AND THE
HEIRESS

CHRONICLES OF G.H.O.S.T.



THE
VAMPIRE HUNTER
AND THE
HEIRESS

SHARI L. TAPSCOTT
JAKE ANDREWS

CHRONICLES OF GHOST
BOOK ONE

ALSO BY SHARI L. TAPSCOTT

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The Vampire Hunter and the Heiress

Chronicles of GHOST, Book One

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PROLOGUE

ELIZABETH

You're not guaranteed to die if you go into the woods that border the village, but the chance of it certainly increases. You're not safe inside the village these days, either. Honestly, if you live in Oakenridge, you must accept that your life expectancy may be short.

It wasn't like that a year ago. Last summer, we were like any other village in the Northern Terrace—just a quaint community based around a sawmill, with a nearby mine, where an occasional vein of silver could be found if you were diligent enough to keep digging. Oakenridge was a friendly sort of place. It was welcoming to newcomers, with people who took care of their neighbors, all watched over by Colonel Delane, a kindly gentleman who lived atop the hill at the northern end of the village.

The colonel died a year ago today, when the oak brush was bright red and yellow aspen leaves littered the ground. He was one of the first.

His manor still stands against the backdrop of the granite cliff. It's now a sad, empty place, housing only his daughter and a handful of the staff members who haven't abandoned her.

Sadly, she's going to die tonight as well, leaving the grand house without an owner.

I know this because I'm she, and judging from the shadow creeping across my room, one of the monsters has gotten into the house...

BENJAMIN

A stack of papers drops onto my desk with a heavy thud, making my inkwell rattle. I look up at the hunter in front of me, unimpressed.

“The paperwork you requested,” Atticus says dryly. “All thirty-seven pages of it.”

I push the disheveled pile to the side, looking back down at my ledger. “Did you make sure to sign *and* initial page seven, fifteen, and twenty-eight?”

The hunter mutters a curse as he walks away, likely headed to the dining hall, where he’ll spend the evening regaling any and all who will listen with his extraordinary exploits.

Does he care that the blade he forgot to fortify before fighting the gargoyle will cost two hundred eighty kevlings to replace?

No.

Did it cross his mind when he mindlessly charged into the fray that the antibiotic tonic he would have to consume contains rare tundra crocus stamens, and is worth more than liquid gold?

Of course not.

“Hunters,” I mutter under my breath, continuing to tally up his expenses.

Around me, the guildhall is quiet. Most everyone has left for the day or gone to dinner. But the doors to the training

room are open, letting out the sound of a few stragglers. We have a batch of recruits learning the ropes. They're eager to please now, but after they have a few dozen missions under their belts, they'll be as obnoxious as Atticus.

"Night, Benjamin," one of them says as he walks past my office, rubbing his shoulder like he hurt it during practice.

Nodding to him, I calculate the numbers two more times just to make sure they're correct.

"You have that look again." Arthur pauses in my doorway on his way out. "What's the damage?"

Sitting back in my seat, I cross my arms. "Eight hundred thirty-seven kevlings."

"And how much did the job pay?"

"Five hundred fifty."

Arthur winces.

"We're not running a charity," I remind him. "You need to raise our rates."

"We already charge more than Haverdell. If we go higher, we'll price ourselves out of the market."

"Julian's hunters are liars, cheats, and hacks," I argue. "We're the best in the business. Surely that counts for something?"

"I'm not raising our rates," Arthur says firmly.

"Fine," I snap. "Then tell your hunters to stop being careless with guild-issued equipment. They seem to think money grows on trees."

"Surely you don't expect them to add up their expenses while they're fighting?" Arthur says, frustrated. "Honestly, Benjamin."

"I don't see why they can't."

He rolls his eyes. "You haven't been in the field in years. You don't remember what it's like."

“I know it’s not that hard to collect your crossbow bolts from a corpse, and it only takes half a minute to fortify a blade before you go into a gargoyle-infested cave. Do you have any idea how quickly those small things add up?”

Arthur closes his eyes, massaging his temples as though the conversation is giving him a headache. “You want our hunters to reuse crossbow bolts?”

“It’s not that much to ask,” I argue. “With the amount we go through, that alone would save the guild thousands of kevlings a month.”

Arthur shakes his head, turning to walk away. “If you think you could do a better job, why don’t you take an assignment?”

It’s a rhetorical question, but I mutter, “I should.”

Arthur stops and looks back, peering at me with the strangest look on his face.

“You know.” He walks to my desk, tapping the wood. “It’s not the worst idea I’ve ever had.”

Rolling my eyes, I flip through Atticus’s expense report. “Lazy git didn’t initial page fifteen. Did I tell him? Yes, I did. Did I tell him the *page number*? I did that too.”

“You’re talking to yourself again.”

I continue to mutter as I slip a piece of paper between the pages, marking it so Atticus might actually find the empty spot when I tell him to take care of it tomorrow.

“You’re certified like all the others,” Arthur goes on, prattling on about who-knows-what. “If I remember right, you graduated at the top of your training class. Remind me how you ended up as the guild’s executive director.”

“You placed me in the position when you discovered I’m the only guild member who can count to ten without using his fingers.”

“When’s the last time you went outside?”

“I walk to and from the guildhall every day.” I wave him away with my hand. “Speaking of that, I’d like to get home

before midnight, and I have things to finish.”

Arthur crosses his arms, nodding to himself as he studies me. “We received a new job today.”

Setting aside Atticus’s mission report, I pick up Douglas’s request for new boots. Distracted, I say, “All right.”

“Vampires in Oakenridge.”

“Up by Wrenvale?”

“That’s right.”

I pull my eyes from the form. “Is this a request from a paying customer?”

“The girl’s father died last year.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“I want you to take care of it.”

“If you charge less than three hundred, it won’t even cover the expense of sending someone all the way up—” I stop, narrowing my eyes. “What?”

“You still train, don’t you? Are you decent with a crossbow?”

“I’m better than decent, but I can’t take a mission.”

“Why?” Arthur demands.

“This place would fall apart without me.” I cringe as I imagine the mess I’d come back to. “No one can do my job.”

“You’ll be gone a week at the most.”

“It takes a week just to travel up there.”

“It’s a day and a half by train.”

I drum my fingers on the desk. “There’s no one to fill in for me.”

“Catriona can do it,” Arthur says as the hunter passes by the door.

She pauses, assessing the situation. Warily, she steps inside my office and asks, “Catriona can do what?”

At first glance, a person might assume Cat's too pretty to be a hunter, but she's one of our best. Right now, she wears her strawberry blonde hair in a braid that hangs down her back. A few strands escaped while she was training the recruits, and now they frame her face. Thanks to her soft brown eyes, the dusting of freckles across her nose, and her dusky pink lips, the new hunters always assume she'll be a pushover.

She sent two of the soft boys to the infirmary on their first day of training just a few months ago.

"You can fill in for Benjamin while he does a job," Arthur says.

Cat's eyebrows fly up. "Benjamin doesn't take jobs."

"He's taking this one."

Her gaze moves to me, and she furrows her brow. "Can you shoot?"

The way she says it makes me rather indignant. Sharply, I answer, "Yes, thank you. The question is whether you can do my job."

She glances at my desk. "You just approve requests and keep up with the account ledger, right? Do some scheduling, fill out some reports, sweet-talk the authorities when needed. It doesn't look that hard."

They think it's that simple to keep this place running, do they?

"Fine," I snap. "I'll take the job."

Arthur looks pleased. "You will?"

"*And* I'll stay within the budget."

"We don't have a budget for this one." The six-foot-three, fifty-seven-year-old hunter looks sheepish as he rubs the bridge of his nose.

I growl, "I knew it—you took another charity case."

"It's good marketing," he argues. "And the girl's father was one of my closest friends."

I roll my eyes. “Fine—*fine*. It’s better to send me than someone who will cost the guild more.”

“What type of monsters will he be dealing with?” Cat asks Arthur.

“Vampires.”

The pretty hunter frowns. “You’re sending him after vampires his first time out?”

“He’s just clearing a few out of the woods. He’ll be fine.”

She shoots me a worried look. “Don’t we have a garden gnome infestation Benjamin could deal with first?”

“Garden gnomes put Hubert in the infirmary for eight weeks,” Arthur reminds her.

“I’m fine,” I say, growing exasperated. “I finished my training like everyone else.”

“But how many years ago?” Cat asks.

“Don’t you have a weapon request in here?” I point to the stack of papers I just started going through. “Do you want me to approve your new twin blades or not?”

She smirks, stepping up to my desk. “I’ll just approve them myself while you’re gone.”

“Cat has a point,” Arthur says. “It’s been at least five years since you were in the field.”

Six. I joined the guild when I was seventeen, trained for six months, and then apprenticed for another eighteen months. Throughout those first two years, I put out fires in the office for Arthur because his system was in shambles. He appointed me as his secretary when I was only nineteen and then executive director when I was twenty-three. Now I’m twenty-five.

“Maybe I should send someone with you,” Arthur goes on. “Since Atticus just finished a job, I could ask him—”

“I’ll quit, I swear,” I warn.

“Touchy,” Cat laughs quietly.

When I shoot her a look, a mischievous grin steals across her face.

“Then take Cat.” Arthur jerks his chin toward the hunter.

“I thought *Cat* was filling in here?” she says.

I rub my temples. “Don’t talk about yourself in the third person.”

“Besides,” she continues, ignoring me. “I still have a gaggle of trainees.”

Arthur snaps his fingers, and then he points at me. “I’ve got it—you’ll take Greg.”

“Absolutely not,” I deadpan.

“What’s wrong with Greg?” Cat demands, which is no surprise. She has a soft spot for him and always gets defensive on his behalf—even when he lit half a village on fire two years ago. The damages completely wiped out our operating account.

“Greg and I don’t get along well,” I remind Arthur.

“That’s because you’re both so stubborn.”

“It’s because he racks up more expenses than any of your hunters.”

“You’ll be all right,” Arthur answers, preparing to dismiss me. “You two will leave in the morning.”

He’s made up his mind.

“Come on,” Cat says once Arthur’s gone, jerking her head toward the training doors. “Let’s see how well you shoot.”

“Aren’t you finished for the day?”

She comes around my desk and grabs my arm, dragging me with her. “What’s a few more hours?”

For such a slender woman, she’s bizarrely strong.

“I have paperwork,” I remind her.

“It’ll be there when you get back.”

“Cat...”

She slaps my arm. “Stop whining—I won’t break you.”

As we enter the training room, a recruit limps past us, giving Cat an extra wide berth.

“What, exactly, do you do to these boys?” I ask her quietly.

The hunter laughs. “Nothing most of them can’t handle.”

“Most?”

“Don’t worry about it.” She graces me with a wicked grin.
“You’ll be fine.”

ELIZABETH

I stare into the flames crackling in the hearth, sipping spiced cider. The drink is tart and scalding hot.

It's the only warm thing in the room.

Calling the shack my companions and I are staying in a cottage would be too generous. The nighttime chill seeps through the thin walls, and I wrap a quilt tighter around my shoulders, mulling over our current situation.

The vampires chased us out of the manor. Though I barely escaped the night they broke in, I *did* escape. Not all my father's employees were so fortunate. There are only four of us now—Sterling, our coachman; Gretchen, his four-year-old daughter; Tansy, the cook's assistant; and me.

Wilbur, the hound master, and Corrigan, our butler, didn't make it. I'd like to think they got out—there's a chance we simply didn't cross paths in the chaos, but my mind is consumed with worry.

Are they dead? Were they turned?

The rest fled weeks ago, and I don't blame them. Most in the village left as well—abandoning homes they've had for generations.

As far as I know, Oakenridge is empty now. I don't know where the families have gone, and it breaks my heart. How will I contact them once the guild hunter vanquishes the threat to tell them their homes are safe once more?

And after the nightmare we've lived through, would they even want to return, or would the memories be too haunting?

I sigh, my eyes turning to Sterling's young daughter.

Gretchen lies on a woven rug in front of the fire, covered with a worn quilt her mother made when she was a baby. She fell asleep a few minutes ago, clutching a rag doll. Her fine blonde hair escapes her braid, and her face looks too thin. But maybe that's just a trick of the firelight and shadows. We've only been here eight days.

"Elizabeth," Sterling says quietly, keeping his voice low so he won't wake Gretchen. "It's late. Why don't you go to bed?"

The flickering light dances over his light brown hair. He's only twenty-four, but the last year has taken its toll. His face is harder than it used to be, with faint lines at the corners of his eyes and around his mouth.

Sterling and his wife married young and had Gretchen soon after. Annalisa was my maid and friend. She's gone now, died of a fever several years before the monsters came. Many expected Sterling to leave Oakenridge when she passed away since he has family in Rialis, but he remained with Father. I've always been fond of Gretchen, and I was glad he stayed.

But now, for both their sakes, I wish he'd taken her away.

"I don't want to leave her," I whisper. "What if she wakes?"

Gretchen has been having nightmares since we fled. She's at peace now, but I'm not sure how long it will last.

"I'll stay with her," Sterling says. "You need to sleep. We have an early morning."

According to Lord Cunningham's telegram, Benjamin Oliver will arrive by train at seven o'clock. That's all the information he gave me, but the guild has an excellent reputation, and Father and Arthur were good friends. Father told me I could go to Arthur if anything ever happened to him.

Too tired to argue with Sterling, I vacate my chair and go to the single room in the back. It's cramped and cold, and tiny

things scamper across the floor when it's dark. But it's all we have, at least for now.

Because my father's body was never recovered, and he therefore cannot be declared as deceased according to the estate law official in Valette, his accounts are tied for the next five years. I'm his sole heir, but a lot of good that does us right now.

It was all right at first—I still had the manor, along with a safe of funds and plenty of heirlooms to sell if needed.

But that's all gone. I didn't have time to open the safe the night the vampires attacked—I didn't even make it to the kitchen to snatch my grandmother's silver.

I crawl into the small bed next to Tansy, who's already asleep. Never in my life have I shared a bed. It's a humbling experience.

I wake often throughout the night, freezing cold and wishing for dawn. When the sun finally peeks through the shutters, I rise, grateful I don't have to try to sleep anymore.

Tansy leaves the bed, yawning. "I'll get the tea going in a few minutes."

I watch as she meticulously runs the comb through her long, brunette hair. Once she's finished, she hands it to me and then quickly works her thick strands into a braid that she ties with a thin, red ribbon. Even in our situation, she likes to look presentable.

I absently comb my hair. "We won't be able to stay here through the winter."

Tansy's back is to me, but her reflection frowns in the cracked mirror that sits on a weathered wash table. "The hunter is coming today."

I nod slowly, not liking that all our hopes rest on one man.

"How long will Madam Weber let us stay here?" Tansy asks, speaking of one of my mother's acquaintances in Wrenvale, the small city we're staying in while we wait for the hunter. We're in the outskirts, on land used for sheep.

I lower the comb. “Her tenant only stays in the cottage in the warm months when he brings the flock into the mountains to graze. She said we can remain here until he returns next year.”

But we have to find a more suitable shelter before that. How long do we have? A few weeks? Maybe less if the weather turns early.

“We’ll be all right.” Tansy turns to face me. “It’s still pleasant in the afternoon, and we haven’t had a hard freeze yet.”

Yet.

“I want you and Sterling to go to his family’s place in Rialis,” I say.

Without even thinking about it, she responds, “We’re not abandoning you.”

“I’ll send word when the village is safe again. It’s only a temporary parting.”

“We’re not leaving you alone with the hunter. What do we even know about him? Sterling says they’re unscrupulous and callous—hardened by their profession.”

“Lord Cunningham’s not like that,” I argue. “He’s a gentleman.”

“Lord Cunningham’s not the one coming. We won’t leave you, Elizabeth.”

“Gretchen can’t stay here, not like this.”

Tansy presses her lips together. She doesn’t have an argument for that.

“I’ll be fine. I’m like a cat—I always land on my feet. You know that.”

“But you don’t have nine lives.” Tansy worries her bottom lip between her teeth. “And Sterling will never agree.”

“He will for Gretchen’s sake.”

“We’ll meet this hunter, and then we’ll decide.”

I think about it for a few seconds, and then I sigh. “That’s fair.”

“He’ll stay at the hotel, won’t he?”

“Where else would he stay?”

“You can’t bring him here.”

I look around the small room, my eyes landing on the shutters. They broke at some point, and someone nailed them to the window frame to keep them from falling down completely. Light and cold air filters in between the boards, no insulation of any kind keeping out the weather. Every time the wind blows, I swear half the forest floor makes its way inside. We sweep twice daily, and there’s still grit underfoot.

“I can’t imagine he’d want to stay here,” I finally say.

Tansy doesn’t argue. We’re both used to finer accommodations than this shack.

She turns back to the mirror, fussing with her hair. After a few moments, she says, “Maybe the man will be handsome?”

“Perhaps,” I say to humor her, but even if the hunter is the most stunningly beautiful man in the Allied Provinces of Staulus, I wouldn’t care. I just want my home back.

“Shall I plait your hair?” she asks. “Just in case?”

Only because it makes her happy, I nod. “Go ahead.”

IT’S TEN AFTER SEVEN, and the train is late.

I wait, rubbing my bare arms.

“Miss Elizabeth, please take my jacket,” Sterling offers.

“I’m fine,” I lie, attempting to suppress a shiver. I have no cloak, nor a coat of my own.

I escaped in this petal-pink gown. The night the vampires invaded the manor was my late mother’s birthday. I set aside my black garments of mourning, deciding it was time, and

wore this frivolous dress for the occasion, hoping it would raise my spirits. Even long after she passed away, Father and I always had a little party, just us and several members of our staff. We'd eat spiced pastries and decorate the parlor for autumn, just as she always did. The harvest season was her favorite.

The evening started well, despite the sadness that accompanied it. It was the first year without Father. Tansy baked a spiced apple tart, and Gretchen helped me make this year's scarecrow for the porch.

We didn't light the porch lanterns as Father had always done, knowing it was too dangerous to linger outside after dusk, but we decorated the steps with pumpkins from Farmer Calvin's patch. He abandoned the village mid-season, but I left payment for them under his woven doormat all the same.

My mind is far away when the train arrives. The rumble brings me back to the present. Just before the engine approaches the station, the conductor blows the horn.

The train slows to a jarring stop on the tracks, the brakes screeching as metal grates against metal. Steam fills the air, billowing like a thick, hot, soot-scented cloud on this cold autumn morning.

I rub my hands over my arms, nearly sick with anticipation.

An attendant opens the door, and people begin to file out of the train. A distinguished gentleman with a cane emerges, and then a young couple with a sleeping baby. A pair of older women with scarves draped over their heads and thick woolen dresses comes next.

And then appears a man so massive; I inhale sharply when I look at him. His shoulders are broad, and his hands are the size of bear paws. He must have his clothing and gloves custom-made, or he'd never find anything that fits.

He's not a handsome man, but intimidating, with a hard jaw and a scar that cuts through his left eyebrow. Like a

warrior, he descends the metal stairs. Just looking at him instills a sense of confidence and wellbeing.

This is our hunter.

I step forward. “Mr. Oliver?”

The man turns his eyes to me, confused as he bows his head. “My name is Duncan Westhouse, miss.”

“I’m Benjamin Oliver,” a male voice says from behind him.

The man I mistakenly addressed shifts away, going about his business and leaving me with a clear view of the hunter leaving the train.

My confidence wanes. Mr. Oliver is several inches shorter than the man who exited the car before him, making him an average height for a man. He’s handsome—too handsome, perhaps. And his appearance is...orderly.

His brown hair looks as if it was recently trimmed. His jaw is clean-shaven. He carries a satchel over his shoulder and a large, hard case in his hand—both are scuff-free, with gleaming buckles. Even the hem of his traveling cloak is pristine.

He looks like the type of man who works in a law office and tells you your father’s estate is tied up in legal red tape because his body was never found.

“You’re...Benjamin Oliver?” I try to hide my skepticism, but I’m afraid some of it slips through. “From GHOST?”

He stops in front of me, his eyes quickly skimming over my ridiculous, wrinkled party dress as he takes stock of me.

Then he frowns.

“I am,” he says. “And you must be Miss Elizabeth Delane?”

“Yes. Lord Cunningham sent you? To eradicate the...” I look around the platform and then lower my voice. “The *vampires*?”

Maybe he's here to sort out the contract. Perhaps the real hunter is coming shortly, in all his thick-necked glory.

"That's correct." He adjusts the satchel, his frown deepening. "Forgive me, but aren't you cold? Shall we continue this conversation inside?"

I cross my arms, pretending I'm not freezing. "Inside where?"

"Preferably somewhere that makes a decent cup of tea."

I can't afford to take him to the bakery, where each croissant costs as much as a whole chicken. I can't even afford to take him to the tavern, where the tea is weak but only costs a single kevlung.

"My cook's assistant makes an excellent cup of tea. If it suits you, we may discuss the job in our temporary accommodations."

"That would be fine. Thank you for your hospitality."

With that settled, I say, "Mr. Oliver, I'd like to introduce you to Sterling Ashwood, my coachman."

"A pleasure." Mr. Oliver extends his hand, and the two men shake. He then gestures toward the path that leads around the side of the train station, ready to move things along.

When we reach the road, he scans the waiting coaches. "Which one is yours?"

"We walked," I say brusquely, heading south. "Brisk morning air is good for the constitution."

Again, the hunter frowns at my elaborate evening gown, his eyes catching on its many layers of ruffles. I think he's figured out something is amiss, but I'll hide my current poverty for as long as possible.

We have a carriage, naturally, but it's currently in the coach house back home. For all I know, the vampires have been taking it for nightly joy rides about Oakenridge.

And I can't simply buy another. If I had that kind of money at my disposal, we wouldn't be holed up in that shack, and I

would certainly be wearing something more appropriate for the situation and weather.

Sterling falls into step beside me, and the hunter follows.

“Just how far away from the city are you staying?” Mr. Oliver asks when we’ve walked long enough I’m starting to warm up. We’ve left Wrenvale and are now surrounded by fields. “And what’s *that*?”

I pause, looking at the tree in the middle of a recently harvested wheat field. Dozens of large strips of once-white fabric hang from its dead branches. “We haven’t been here long, but I’ve heard locals call it the Ghost Tree. The farmer swears it works better than a scarecrow.”

Our new companion makes a noise as if unimpressed, and I turn to look at him. “I suppose it must seem a bit ridiculous to you, considering you hunt true ghosts?”

“Ghosts like these don’t exist, Miss Delane.”

I narrow my eyes. “Please, call me Elizabeth. And my mother told me she saw a wraith once, Mr. Oliver.”

“Benjamin, please. And wraiths are not ghosts, but spirits.”

“What’s the difference?”

“A spirit was never a person. They’re simply an expensive-to-exterminate monster.”

That piques my interest. “Not difficult...but expensive?”

“All monsters are difficult. That’s why our guild exists.”

Sterling shifts next to me, a touch uncomfortable.

I force a sunny smile. “Shall we continue?”

Benjamin nods, waiting for me to lead the way.

By the time we arrive at the shack, the air is considerably warmer. The sun is out, and the bees are industriously going about their business, finishing up before the weather turns cold. Their days are numbered. Just like ours.

“Here we are,” I say brightly, pretending I’m not mortified.

The outside of the shepherd's cottage looks even worse than the inside. It sits slightly askew, as if it's lived such a long, hard life, it no longer has the strength to stand straight anymore. Like in the bedroom, instead of replacing sagging hinges, someone nailed all the shutters closed. Only the window above the stove is open to let in some light.

Remarkably, something that smells like food wafts to us, cueing hunger pangs in my vacant stomach.

Benjamin pauses on the dirt path and assesses our accommodations. "This is where you're staying?"

I stand a little straighter, my bruised pride stinging at the skepticism in his tone. "That's right. As I told Arthur, the vampires invaded my home. We had no choice but to leave."

Sounding more curious than judgmental, he asks, "And you chose to come here?"

"Is this a holiday, Mr. Oliver? Should I take this opportunity to live the high life, squandering my father's hard-earned savings? In such a situation, surely you don't expect me to worry that accepting the hospitality from a dear friend of the family might make me look pitiable?"

The hunter turns to face me, startling me a little when his eyes lock on mine. They're deep brown. Pretty. And his lashes are dark.

"Benjamin, please," he corrects. "And I admire you for your decision, Miss Delane. If only our hunters were as practical as you."

I study him, looking for signs of mockery. But there are none. He means the words.

Sterling clears his throat and walks in the door, yanking it when it sticks. "I'm going to check on Gretchen."

I should go in as well, but I don't. "Can I ask you a question?"

Benjamin nods.

"What does GHOST stand for?"

“Guild Hunters of Supernatural Threats—it’s an acronym.”

“It’s a bit awkward, isn’t it?”

“I didn’t come up with it.”

“And there are enough monsters in the world to keep you employed?”

“The guild has been operating for almost thirty years.”

I wrinkle my nose. “That’s a little disconcerting.”

The hunter smiles a little. “It’s job security.”

“I suppose so. Would you like to come inside?”

He beats me to the door, opening it for me like a gentleman.

“I’ve got a kettle on the stove,” Tansy says, her back turned to us. “Breakfast is almost ready. I found a jar of strawberry jam in the cellar, and I shamelessly pilfered it. It will go well with the scones. How did the meeting with the hunter go? Was he—” She turns around halfway through the sentence, and her eyes land on Benjamin. She blinks several times, and a blush stains her cheeks.

I take another look at the hunter, realizing he’s exactly her type—young, healthy, and male.

“Sterling didn’t mention we had company.” Her hands flutter at her waist. “Forgive me. Won’t you please sit? I’ll bring you a cup of tea. Do you take sugar? I’m afraid I used the last of the cream in the scones.”

When we first arrived, I asked Sterling to sell my earrings in the city, too embarrassed to do it myself. He didn’t get as much for them as they were worth, but they bought enough supplies to last a few weeks. That money is almost gone now, though. All I have left to sell is my mother’s ruby necklace, and I can’t bear the thought of hawking it.

“Plain is fine,” Benjamin answers.

Tansy bustles around the tiny, dilapidated kitchen for a few minutes and then sets an earthen mug in front of our visitor,

pouring his tea with practiced grace. "I'm Tansy," she says with a smile, now recovered from her surprise.

"Benjamin," the hunter replies. "Thank you for the tea."

Pleased, she looks at me. "Sugar in yours, Elizabeth?"

I nod, taking the seat across from Benjamin. "Where's Gretchen?"

"She was cold, so I bundled her up in our bed. Poor thing fell asleep almost instantly."

Guilt racks me. "She's not sleeping well. We'll tuck her between us tonight. I thought she'd be warmer by the fire."

Conscious of the hunter's eyes on me, I look his way. He lowers his gaze, taking a cautious sip of his tea.

I thank Tansy when she hands me my cup, waiting for Benjamin's reaction.

"It's good," he says as if mildly surprised.

"Our Tansy makes the best tea in Staulus." Sterling emerges from the bedroom, holding Gretchen in his arms. Her fair hair is wild, and her eyes are sleepy. She clings to her doll for comfort, eyeing Benjamin with distrust.

"Are you hungry, darling?" Tansy asks Gretchen. "The scones are almost done."

She nods and then turns her face into her father's shoulder.

"Gretchen," Sterling coaxes gently. "Say hello to Mr. Oliver."

She shakes her head.

"Gretchen."

"It's all right," Benjamin says. "I wouldn't like to wake to a stranger in my house either."

Tansy smiles at the hunter like he's the most benevolent man in the provinces. Sterling follows her eyes, frowning a little.

"Tea, Sterling?" she asks.

“Yes, please.”

He sits to my left, adjusting Gretchen on his lap. Immediately, she reaches for me, not wanting to be too close to the hunter.

A few minutes later, Tansy serves the scones. She’s the last to the table, clutching her tea and waiting to see if we like her breakfast.

“It’s very good, Tansy,” Sterling assures her, adding jam to a scone for Gretchen. Then he warns his daughter, “It’s hot. Don’t forget to blow on it.”

Still on my lap, she holds up the chipped plate. Softly, she says, “Please blow on it, Miss Elizabeth. It’s hot.”

I smile, giving it a quick puff. “Now it’s your turn.”

Gretchen nods.

“Why don’t you come sit with me?” Sterling says. “Let Miss Elizabeth eat her breakfast.”

“Do you hear that?” I lean close to Gretchen’s ear as if we’re sharing a secret. “He’s trying to steal you from me.”

Gretchen giggles.

I meet Sterling’s eyes and mouth, “Eat.”

He studies me for a few seconds, and then he nods. “Hurry with your breakfast, Gretchen, and then you may play with Miss Mabel in the bedroom, all right?”

“Miss Mabel?” Benjamin asks.

Watching him warily, Gretchen slowly holds up the doll—keeping it close, just in case the hunter should decide to snatch it from her.

“Ah.” He smiles, obviously uncomfortable around children but not unfriendly. “Hello...Miss Mabel.”

Deciding he’s not a threat, Gretchen carefully sets the doll on the table and begins to eat her scone. Once she’s finished, she asks, “May I have another, Miss Tansy?”

Tansy's face freezes. "I'm sorry, darling. There are no more."

The room is quiet, the sadness of the situation known only to the adults.

Gretchen turns to Sterling. "May I play in the bedroom now?"

He nods, and she slips off my lap, taking her doll with her.

"Close the door, my love," he calls to her. "We have grown-up things to discuss."

Tansy focuses on the table, looking like she's going to cry. "I should have made more. We're just getting low on—"

Sterling clasps her hand. "We had plenty."

Tansy nods, giving him a smile that doesn't reach her eyes.

"Both the tea and the scone were delicious," Benjamin says. "Better than the café I frequent in Valette. Thank you for the meal."

"I'm so glad you enjoyed them." She blinks quickly, suddenly rising. "I need to straighten up. I'll heat more hot water. It's still a bit chilly in here—you'll all want some more tea."

Tansy whisks away the plates, and Benjamin crosses his hands on the table, ready to get to business. "Tell me your story."

I don't bother with a preamble. "A miner came into the village a year ago, reporting that a small coven of vampires had infiltrated one of our nearby mines. My father and several men from the village went to the caves to eradicate them. But..." My voice quavers, and I take a moment to control myself.

"They never returned," Sterling graciously takes over for me. "The other men's bodies were recovered, but the colonel's was not." He glances at me, and I nod for him to continue. "We believe he escaped alive, as we followed a trail of blood into the woods. But the trail ended at a stained patch of earth. There were signs of a struggle or...an attack."

“It was near a wolf’s den.” I close my eyes. “We believe she finished him.”

Benjamin processes it, running his finger over the rim of his cup. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

I nod, swallowing hard.

“And after that?” he asks.

“We didn’t see any sign of the vampires throughout the winter,” Sterling says. “Raid parties were sent into the mine, but we believe the ones the colonel and his men didn’t kill ended up fleeing.”

“Vampires are opportunists,” Benjamin agrees. “They don’t like to remain in communities that fight back.”

“But early in spring, not long after the snow melted, a farmer was found dead in his field,” I say. “He had the telltale twin bite marks upon his neck, and according to the coroner, he was drained of blood.”

“Throughout the spring, there were more random deaths,” Sterling says. “They were mostly people who lived alone in the outskirts of the village. An elderly woman, one of the local hunters. But come summer, the creatures attacked a family inside the village. They were walking home after visiting relatives.”

“What time of day?” Benjamin asks.

Sterling sits back in his chair. “It was late, near midnight. They shouldn’t have been out.”

I seethe at that. “Our people should be able to walk about the village any time they like.”

“You know what I mean,” Sterling says, his voice the gentle one he uses on Gretchen.

“Don’t coddle me, Sterling,” I say quietly.

Tansy leaps into the conversation the moment she senses tension. “After that, the attacks came more frequently.” She dries a plate with an old, worn tea towel. “We lost the

chandler's wife, the cobbler and his grown son, Madam Grundle, and young Vanessa Toulouse."

"By mid-summer, people began to abandon their homes," Sterling says. "Oakenridge was no longer safe."

"Did anyone go missing?" Benjamin asks.

The thought gives me chills. "Everyone who was attacked was killed."

"Except possibly your father."

"The wolf got Father," I say sharply.

"I'm afraid we cannot know that for certain."

I lean across the table, breathing hard. "My father is *not* a vampire."

"If a human is bitten by one of the monsters and does not die at the time of the attack, they will succumb to the infection in twenty-eight days. It's common for new vampires to remain close to the place they awaken for the first few years."

"My father did not kill those people, Mr. Oliver. It's not possible."

"You're right—it was not your father, Miss Delane. But it's very likely it was the monster that—"

"You can't know that!" I exclaim. "You weren't there. You didn't see the disturbed leaves, the wolf tracks, the blood, and..."

And suddenly I'm crying.

I stand quickly, turning away from the table, embarrassed and yet unable to stop the hot trail of tears as they slide down my cheeks. I walk to the door, letting out a frustrated sob when it sticks. Giving it a good shove, I push through it, needing fresh air.

3

BENJAMIN

Well. That didn't go well.

Sterling begins to rise. "I should check on her—"

"Allow me." I raise my hand when he protests. "I must apologize."

"Surely you've worked with enough people to know how sensitive the victims are?" Tansy says, gently reprimanding me.

"I don't do a lot of field work." I hesitate before I move to the door. I also don't console crying females.

Sterling's eyebrows slowly slide up at the admission. "What do you do?"

"I'm the executive director of the guild."

"Executive director?" Tansy says softly, her eyes traveling over my clothing. "Does that mean you're in charge of the entire guild?"

"Lord Cunningham is the president, and one of our original proprietors, but he's appointed me to keep things running for him."

"You're not a hunter?" Sterling demands.

"No, I am. There was simply a need for me in a different capacity, and that's where I ended up."

Tansy stands in front of me, wringing her hands at her waist. "Have you ever killed a vampire before?"

“I understand the theory of it.”

Horrified, they stare at me.

“I never had the opportunity to hunt vampires during my field training, but monsters are monsters.”

“And how long ago was your field training?” Sterling asks.

“About six years.”

The coachman groans, sinking into his seat. “They sent us the office manager.”

“Not to be horribly callous, but you realize the guild is doing this for free, don’t you?”

They stare at me.

I sigh. “The hardest part of killing a new vampire is tracking him down. I assure you, I will find the threat, and I will take care of it. Now, if you’ll excuse me...” I’m already heading toward the door.

“Mr. Oliver,” Sterling says as I step outside. “Don’t tell Elizabeth you’re the guild’s director. It doesn’t instill as much confidence as you might think.”

“Noted.” I shut the door behind me.

Elizabeth didn’t walk far, stopping at the well that’s near the eastern grazing pasture. It’s now warm enough I must remove my cloak, and I carefully lay it over my arm so it doesn’t drape on the ground.

The questionably dressed heiress doesn’t turn when I come up behind her.

She’s disarmingly lovely, with pale blonde hair braided into a crown and gray eyes that remind me of a cold winter lake. She looked half-frozen at the train station, and for the life of me, I couldn’t figure out why she’d wear such a frivolous outfit in the cold hours of morning.

But now I understand. She has nothing else, though I don’t yet know why. Her father came from money. He was the second-born son in a titled family. He studied medicine and then entered the military to make a name for himself—and he

succeeded. Though I never met him, he was said to be kind, respectable, and admired by his friends and acquaintances.

When I looked into their family history before I left Valette, I learned the destitute girl before me in the sad, pink ball gown was supposed to inherit over five million kevlings upon his death.

Something went terribly wrong.

“I’m not a fool, Mr. Oliver,” Elizabeth finally says. “I’ve had the same thought myself.”

I clear my throat. “I’m sorry for how I delivered my theory. It was abrupt and lacking empathy.”

The heiress turns, her eyes still swimming. After a moment, she composes herself. “You’re here to do a job. I will control myself from here on out and not become an unnecessary burden to you.”

“The pattern does suggest a new vampire. Is there anyone else who went missing around the time the colonel disappeared?”

Slowly, she shakes her head. “Not that I’m aware of. But people come and go all the time, attending their business, going on holiday, and visiting friends and family who live outside Oakenridge.”

I nod, thinking it over. “It sounds as if your community is quite tight-knit.”

“We are.” She pauses, and then her voice drops. “We were.” Slowly, she lifts her gaze to mine. “Mr. Oliver...”

“Benjamin, please.”

“Benjamin,” she says, testing it. “Is there a cure?”

I let out a held breath. I’d been fearing she would ask me that. “I’m sure you’ve heard rumors that such a thing exists. We’ve never discovered it.”

“So even before a person succumbs to the sickness...”

“I’m afraid there’s nothing we can do.”

She nods. Her eyes go distant, anguish written on her face.

We stand in silence for a few seconds, and then I gesture towards the cottage. “How did you end up here?”

“Madame Weber was a friend of my mother’s. She said we could stay here since the summer season is over and the flock has been moved to their winter grounds.”

“But why here? We passed a respectable hotel in the village.”

Elizabeth stares at me for several seconds before her shoulders sag with defeat. “Because my father’s body was never recovered, the law official in Valette said I cannot legally access his estate for five years. It mattered little...until it did.”

“So you’re temporarily destitute?”

“Only until you eradicate the vampires. I’ll be fine once I can return home.”

“How far is Oakenridge from here?”

“Three hours by carriage.”

I look at my pocket watch. Eleven fifty-two. It gets dark just after six. If I travel by horse, I can cut the travel time in half.

“I’ll scout the village today and meet with you again tomorrow.”

“You’re going now?”

“That’s why I’m here.”

“Do you think we can get into the house?”

“We?”

“I need to tell Sterling and Tansy we’re going.”

“*We?*”

Looking particularly pragmatic, she says, “The arrangement will benefit us both. You’re not familiar with the village, and it’s not safe for me to return to the manor alone.”

“Why do you wish to return before it’s safe?”

She glances toward the shack. “Because we’re running low on food, and a hard freeze is coming soon. We can’t stay here much longer.”

“You need money.”

“I need money,” she confirms softly. “These people... they’re not just my employees. They’re the only family I have left. They could have abandoned me when we had to flee. In fact, they should have. But they didn’t. And I’m going to take care of them.”

It goes against protocol. Article Five of the guidebook, Section Two. But is this actually a job? Elizabeth isn’t paying the guild—I’m here as a favor to Arthur. And technically, I wrote that section, so if I were to bend the rules slightly, I would disobey no one but myself...

“We have to move quickly,” I find myself saying. “We must be well away from the village before dusk.”

She nods, eager.

“It could be dangerous,” I warn.

“I know.”

This is a bad idea. I should at least let Greg scout the village first. But I haven’t seen any trace of him since I arrived. He likely got distracted, as he’s prone to do.

I look at Elizabeth, resigned to my decision. “Let’s get going.”

“I DON’T SUPPOSE you have a horse,” I ask Elizabeth as we study two geldings in the local stable. The man running the establishment was happy to loan us a pair—for a price.

“I used to.”

They’re each sixty kevlings for the day, along with a two hundred kevlings deposit—downright robbery.

“The guild cannot foot the bill for your horse when there’s no reason for you to join me on this scouting trip.”

Elizabeth’s eyes narrow just slightly, and she turns her head to look at me. “I’ll pay the guild back once we get into my father’s safe.”

“I’m sorry. Article Three, Section Nine states that we cannot loan guild money or assets.”

Her smile is crooked and tight, betraying both her amusement and irritation. “All right then. Why don’t *you* lend me the money, Mr. Oliver?”

“I don’t believe you have collateral to secure the loan.”

She studies me, her eyebrows twitching as if she’s trying to decide if I’m joking.

I’m not.

Apparently, she comes to the correct conclusion. But her solution is not what I expect.

Staring right at me, she tugs a thin gold chain from around her neck, pulling a pendant from her bodice. “Will this do as collateral?”

I take the necklace when she offers it, studying the handsome ruby in the palm of my hand. It’s large and deep red, and I have no doubt the diamonds surrounding it are genuine. She could purchase the entire stable with it.

I hand it back. “Why are you staying in that shack when you have this? You could sell it and live comfortably for a year.”

She crosses her arms, refusing to take it. “It was my mother’s.”

“In that case, I don’t suggest revealing it to men you’ve known for less than a day. There are plenty of unscrupulous people in this world.”

“Lord Cunningham wouldn’t send someone unscrupulous.”

“You know Arthur that well?”

“Father wouldn’t be friends with a man who wasn’t trustworthy.”

Her high opinion of her father is stretching further than it should. She’s right, Arthur is a good man. And I try to be as well. But that sort of blind trust is unwise.

“Take back your necklace,” I say with a sigh. “We’ll ride together.”

“Are you that cheap, Mr. Oliver?”

“I’m frugal,” I correct. “And I know myself well enough to acknowledge that I wouldn’t claim your mother’s necklace if you found yourself in a position where you couldn’t pay me back, therefore it’s not a wise business deal to accept.”

Her lips quirk to the side, making her look a little smug. “So Arthur did send a decent man.”

“Take the necklace.”

“Keep it and secure two horses. I’m good for it, I swear. Just do your part and get me into the house.”

Mildly frustrated, I take an abrupt step forward, draping the chain over Elizabeth’s head myself. I’m just about to drop it when our gazes accidentally meet. The necklace goes still in my hands, and my pulse jolts.

Her eyes capture me. Cold and melancholy, they hold me hostage.

ELIZABETH

I blink at the hunter, startled to find him so close.

He freezes, his hands still holding the chain, and then swallows as if realizing this isn't entirely appropriate. If someone were to walk into the stable, they'd think we were having a romantic moment.

Benjamin drops the necklace and steps back. Without another word, he turns toward the exit and walks into the small office building near the front of the property. I follow, tucking the pendant back into place.

"We'll take the pair," Benjamin says to the man at the desk, setting the money down on the counter.

Apparently, he decided not to ride with me after all.

"Have them back before dark, or I'll charge you for another day," the man warns.

"You realize I could buy a horse for what you're demanding for a deposit?" Benjamin asks the man.

He doesn't look the slightest bit chagrined. "If you don't bring them back, you *will* have bought them."

With a grunt, Benjamin turns toward me. "Let's go."

It's a pleasant day for a ride. If circumstances were different, I'd probably enjoy myself.

We pass farms, fields, and an old inn with a scroungy looking cat on the porch and a wagon with a busted wheel in the front.

Benjamin isn't one for small talk, and I'm not in the mood to chat, so we ride in companionable silence. But as we enter the woods that surround Oakenridge, I grow anxious.

I look at the sky, reminding myself it's a nice, bright day. The only clouds build on the distant horizon. They're dark, but they'll likely move toward Fieldbrook as they usually do.

A strong breeze blows through the forest, pulling orange and yellow leaves from the trees. They swirl in the air before joining the others that already litter the road. Only the oak brush, with its deep red leaves that just began changing, holds strong against the gust.

I shiver, wishing I had a cloak. I must remember to grab one while we're in the manor. My eyes move to my gown, and I frown. A cloak and something more appropriate to wear.

Benjamin clears his throat. "Are you warm enough, Miss Delane?"

"I'm fine," I lie.

He doesn't believe me any more than Sterling did this morning.

A nearby crow caws at us from a branch, and my fanciful mind imagines it's a warning.

Deciding I need to distract myself, I turn my attention to the hunter. "Do you have a family, Mr. Oliver?"

"My sister lives in the city," he says, not bothering to correct my use of his proper name anymore. "She's married to a doctor."

"Are you married?"

"I'm not."

I pause, expecting him to ask me something, as that's how conversations work. When he doesn't, I sigh. "How long have you been with the guild?"

“Eight years.”

I give him a surreptitious look. “You must have joined when you were young.”

“I was seventeen.”

“And do you enjoy...” I find myself at a loss for words. “...monster hunting?”

A strange look crosses his face, but only for a moment. “I enjoy working for GHOST.” After a few moments, he glances my way. “What about you, Miss Delane?”

“I’ve never hunted a monster,” I joke, hoping to lighten the mood.

He smiles a little, though it looks slightly pained. “You’re not married?”

“You’re wondering why I haven’t already snared a husband?” I say, deciding not to mince words.

His smile becomes a little more genuine. “Something like that.”

“I courted a man from Albrech for a short while, but we parted amicably.”

“What happened?”

“We didn’t like each other.”

In a delightfully droll tone, he says, “I didn’t realize that was a prerequisite these days.”

“It makes things more pleasant. But perhaps I should rephrase my answer. He liked me just fine, but it was my inheritance he was most taken with.”

“I imagine it’s difficult to find suitors who don’t have ulterior motives.”

“Indeed. Thankfully, Oakenridge is remote, so if you’re going to hide from the masses, this is an excellent place to do it.” The village is just now visible through the trees. “Until you’re chased out by vampires.”

The hunter looks over, his eyes slightly crinkled at the corners. “That must have been inconvenient, I’m sure.”

I laugh a little, but I’m distracted by the icy dread that’s building in my stomach.

Oakenridge looks exactly as it should—a quaint settlement, dotted with sweet little farms, gardens, cottages, and shops. And above the rest, on a ledge on the cliff that embraces it all, is Father’s manor.

My home is a handsome house, large and sprawling, with three stories and an attic. The exterior is painted tan, the wood trim is dark, and the design boasts steeply pitched, cross-gabled roofs and half a dozen dormers. Each window has a merry pair of shutters, though they’re purely for aesthetics as the panes are fitted with glass.

“Is that your manor?” Benjamin asks.

“Yes.” I feel a pang of homesickness, and not just for the house.

The village is empty. On a pleasant autumn afternoon like this, people should be out, enjoying the late season sunshine. Children should be running through the streets. Their mothers should be standing on their porches, propped up with their brooms, chatting with the neighbors as they avoid afternoon chores.

Another cool breeze blows, taking dead leaves and carrying them down the deserted cobblestone street.

Pumpkins and gourds decorate a few entry steps, put in place before the vampire attack that completely cleared out the village. Bundles of wheat are propped up on several porches, and plants spill out of window boxes. Most are dry and brittle, but a few hardy ones defy the cold nights, determined to flower until the bitter end.

I follow Benjamin as he rides down the streets. Goosebumps prickle my arms as a chill runs down my spine. It’s too quiet.

We pass Professor Lundhart’s bookstore. He used to have a stained-glass window that would cast colored shapes on the

rug in the entrance of his shop. It's boarded up now, broken sometime during the last year.

The rich, buttery smell of baking apricot rugelach or walnut and orange cozonac usually wafts all the way to the town square from the Moldovans' bakery, but not today. The shutters and the front doors are closed—all tightly locked, I'm certain.

Benjamin pauses in front of the courthouse, reading the notice tacked to the door. I don't need to read it—I know what it says. It's a warning to leave this cursed village before dusk.

"Let's continue." Benjamin adjusts his crossbow, his watchful eyes scanning the shadows.

"Vampires can't come out during the day...can they?" I ask.

The hunter's lack of response isn't very comforting.

"Surely not with the sun shining?" I press.

My stomach ties itself in knots. Should I have stayed behind and left this monster business to Benjamin? He's a professional, after all.

"Let's hope," he finally responds.

That's not reassuring at all.

We begin up the winding, wooded lane that leads to the manor, and memories of our rushed escape fill my head.

Sensing my growing fear, Benjamin asks, "Are you all right, Miss Delane?"

What if Father *is* behind the attacks? What if he's in there now?

"Mr. Oliver?" My voice wavers a little. "Vampires...do they look like..."

He turns his eyes fully on me this time, his expression softening. "Like their human selves?"

I nod.

“Yes.” His gaze returns to the surrounding forest, lingering in the shadows that are created by the thick aspens and the oak brush that grows under them.

I hate to ask, but I must. “If we meet someone—someone I know—how will we be able to tell if they’ve been turned?”

Is Benjamin the “shoot first and ask questions” later sort?

“We’ll know,” he says ominously.

The road leads to a large wrought-iron gate. Stone griffons flank either side of it.

“The gates are open,” Benjamin muses.

“They were always kept open until the vampires showed up in the cave. Then we started locking them at night.”

He studies the slender iron pickets. “The fence would be difficult to scale.”

I know what he’s thinking—one of the vampires that attacked must have had a key to the lock. And who would have a key except Father?

We continue past the gates and into the grounds. The landscaping is simple, mostly shrubs with a few trees and the perennial flowers that return year after year. The fuchsia coneflowers are just finishing up their season, but the purple asters, scarlet sedums, and golden chrysanthemums are in full bloom. A bird bath is nestled in them, at the base of a blue spruce. Rainwater has collected in its basin. There’s dirt in it too, blown in by the wind. It looks neglected, like I’ve been gone longer than I have.

The sun shines above us, but the clouds are closer, churning and growing darker. Apparently, they’re not headed for Fieldbrook.

A feeling of intense foreboding settles over me. It’s probably in my head, but I cannot help but feel like we’re being watched. Benjamin pauses, assessing the manor.

“What are you looking at?” I whisper.

“Windows.” His eyes sweep over the house. “There are a lot of them. When you left, were all the drapes closed?”

“We always pull the drapes over the lower windows at night,” I answer. “But there are no curtains over the higher ones in the rooms with the vaulted ceilings. No one can see in at that height, anyway.”

He nods, satisfied.

“Why?”

The hunter pulls his crossbow from his back, fitting it with a bolt. “There will be light when we go inside.”

I look at the weapon, not sure this was a good idea. But how else are we going to survive? If I cannot access the money in Father’s accounts, this is the only way.

“I’ll go in first,” Benjamin says. “You’ll follow me. Be as quiet as possible.”

“Do you think...” I begin to tremble. “Do you think all the monsters are still inside?”

For some reason, the question catches his attention. The hunter looks back at me. “All?”

I nod, not understanding the question.

“Miss Delane, tell me exactly what happened the night you fled.”

“A few weeks ago, when the leaves first started changing, a great number of vampires broke into the manor. The staff and I—the few who remained—escaped.”

“How many is a great number?”

I rub my clammy hands on the skirt of my dress. “Five? Eight? I’m honestly not sure.”

“I was under the impression we were dealing with one, maybe two, vampires.”

“No,” I breathe.

The fact that this is a bad idea is written all over the hunter’s face. He looks like he wants to reprimand me, but he

only groans low under his breath, thinking about my answer.

“The village is empty,” he says.

Though it sounds like he’s thinking aloud, I answer, “Yes.”

“You left here a week and a half ago?”

“That’s right.”

“The village is empty,” he murmurs again.

“Yes. I mean, I think so.”

He raises his eyebrows at me, asking me to explain.

“We didn’t all make it. I have no idea if anyone was turned.”

“They wouldn’t be yet,” he muses. “It takes a month for the venom to kill off the host.”

My stomach rolls.

Sensing my distress, he looks back. “We don’t have to do this, Miss Delane. We can go back to Wrenvale right now.”

“I must.”

“You don’t have anyone you can go to while I sort this out?”

“I have no one.”

Looking like it’s against his better judgment, Benjamin nods and begins toward the manor. “It should be fine. Just be quiet once we’re inside. We’ll get in, and then we’ll get out. I’ll return tomorrow and scout.”

We tie the horses to a couple of trees and then turn toward the house. Briefly, I contemplate giving the hunter the code to the safe and telling him I’ll wait out here, but I swore to Father that I wouldn’t offer it to anyone under any circumstance. He was adamant, and I can’t bring myself to disregard his warning now. So I follow Benjamin.

I half expect the front door to be locked, but Benjamin turns the handle and pushes it open. I grit my teeth when the movement creates a creaking groan that echoes throughout the foyer and beyond.

The house smells stale. The sitting room behind the foyer is silent, the velvet settees abandoned without proper covers. A book lies on the floor, swept off the side table in the chaos. My eyes move to a bloodstain on Mother's expensive rug, left from when Sterling killed one of the monsters in our escape.

Its body is gone. Maybe it wasn't dead after all.

Dust motes dance in the wedge of sunlight that shines in through the doorway. We're halfway up the winding stairs at the right of the room when I wonder what disturbed the dust. Do the motes always float like that, caught in the infinitesimal breeze that permeates the closed windows and doors? Was it simply the motion of opening the door that stirred them up?

Or something else?

Benjamin touches my shoulder, silently asking me what's wrong. I shake my head and continue.

Leading the way, I slink up the stairs like I did when I was a child sneaking from the kitchen after fetching a late-night sweet, wincing when I step on the wrong tread. It groans under my weight, and I freeze, my heart beginning to race.

It feels wrong in here. Empty, but...not.

"It's all right," Benjamin says under his breath, so quietly I almost can't hear him. "There's enough light we should be all right even if..."

He doesn't finish the sentence, and he doesn't need to. I know what might be hiding in the shadows.

I gulp, nodding, and continue up the stairs. The first level is for entertaining—for dining and chatting with callers. The third is for our staff, and the second contains our living spaces. My bedroom is here, along with the music room where I studied the violin. Father's room is here as well, but on the opposite side of the house. His study is next to it.

Mother's sitting room is through the doorway directly in front of us. One wall boasts floor-to-ceiling windows, and it spills light into the hall. That light, plus the direct sunlight shining in through the tall stairway windows behind us, reassures me.

But there are shadows as well—places the light doesn't touch. The hall closet. The washroom. In the bedrooms and in all the chests and cupboards.

I pause once we reach the landing, unsure where to start.

“What's the matter?” Benjamin asks. His mouth is near my ear, and I can still barely hear him.

“Should I get the money or my clothes first?” I respond in a bare whisper.

The hunter seems tense, and it's not helping my nerves.

“Which is more important to you?” he asks after a few seconds.

“The money.”

“Then start with that.”

He doesn't think we'll be able to fetch both. What's he sensing? What has he noticed with his trained eyes?

I creep toward the study, wanting to turn back. We should go. We should go *now*.

But no. Gretchen is relying on me. Tansy and Sterling are relying on me. Everyone I love—the only people I have left—need me to walk to that safe.

But the study door is closed.

Why is it closed?

I stop a few feet away from it, peering into the darkness inside Father's room that's at the end of the hall. Why didn't I ask the maids to leave the curtains open that disastrous day? Why did we close them?

“It's through there,” I whisper, gesturing toward the study door but keeping my eyes focused on the bed in Father's room. The sun shines through cracks in the drapes, and light spills in from the hall. It's not pitch-black. It's just shadowed.

How dark must it be for vampires to walk? Are they even awake at this hour, or do they sleep?

“I'll open it,” Benjamin says. “Stay right here.”

But he needn't worry about me wandering off. I have no intention of straying from him or his crossbow, certainly not when—

What was that?

I narrow my eyes at the wall in the corner. I swear something shifted next to the tall chest. My heart rate ramps up, and I begin to perspire.

I stare for the longest time, but nothing moves. I must have imagined it.

Benjamin sets his hand on my arm to get my attention, and I nearly jump a foot in the air. He winces an apology, gesturing toward the study. Leaning close and keeping his voice barely audible, he whispers, "I'm going in. Stay in the light."

I pull my eyes from Father's bedroom. Benjamin has opened the door to the study, but the drapes are closed in there as well. Like Mother's sitting room, there's a great picture window spanning the back wall. The ceiling is tall, at least fifteen feet. Once the hunter opens the drapes, light will flood the room.

My eyes move to the safe. It stands tall and sturdy behind Father's massive oak desk. It represents security and comfort. A safe house. A soft, warm bed for Gretchen. A kitchen stocked with food.

I have to get to that safe.

I hug myself as I wait, standing in the hall's light. I'm tense and ready to run down the stairs.

Fear for Benjamin adds to my anxiety. What if something attacks the hunter before he reaches the drapes? Will he be able to kill it in time? What will I do if he dies?

My heart thrums at a frantic pace now, pulsing through my body and making me lightheaded.

And then light cuts through the dark, filling the room as Benjamin yanks open the curtains. I dart inside, the bright space feeling safer than the hall.

I round the desk, open the bottom drawer, and pull out Father's old Staulusian Army satchel. As I slip the strap over my head, I look at Benjamin.

He's positioned himself near me, his crossbow trained at the doorway—like he's waiting for something.

"It's all right," he whispers when he notices my distress. "Open the safe."

Shaking myself from my frozen state, I turn. I haven't opened it more than a few times. But the code is a conglomeration of Father's, Mother's, and my birthdays, easy to remember even now.

My hands shake as I turn the dial, trying to remember the pattern. I fail the first time.

"We're in the colonel's manor," Benjamin says under his breath. His voice sounds strained and a little angry. "Hurry."

I turn my head toward him, wide-eyed. "I'm sorry?"

"Not you, Miss Delane," he answers. "You're fine. Continue what you're doing."

Not me? Then *whom* is he talking to?

"It's about time," he whispers harshly.

"*What?*" I ask, his sudden strangeness creating panic in my chest.

"I'm talking to my partner," he assures me. "It's fine."

"But there's no one here."

Have I wandered into a potentially vampire-infested house with a madman?

"Miss Delane," Benjamin says calmly, angling his head to look at me while still keeping his weapon trained on the doorway. "I'll explain it once we're out. Open the safe."

He doesn't seem insane. He's tense, certainly, but his manner is calm.

I swallow my fear and try the combination again. This time, the pins fall into place, and the audible click of it

opening fills the room.

As I breathe a sigh of relief, our sunshine vanishes. I swing my head toward the window, realizing the clouds have blocked the sun. It's not like a normal overcast day, which is still bright even if a little dreary. This is the darkness brought on by heavy storms, the kind that makes day look like dusk.

I hear footsteps before I see the monster.

"Hurry," Benjamin coaxes, and this time, I'm positive he's talking to me.

I whip open the door to the safe, pulling out stacks of strapped bills and dumping them into the satchel. There are other things in here as well—gold bars and documents from Father's medical days. There's his old, worn journal too.

Suddenly feeling sentimental, it goes into the satchel with the money and several of the bars.

I jolt when the sound of Benjamin releasing the crossbow fills the room. The shocking sound is followed by a hiss and the telltale thump of a body thudding to the floor.

A scream lodges in my throat, but I choke it back. When I look over, I find a vampire lying on the ground. A wooden bolt protrudes from his chest.

Benjamin is already loading another into his crossbow. "We're on the north side of the house, second level. The second-to-last picture window on the western end."

He's talking to himself again, which isn't instilling a high level of confidence in me.

I fumble with the satchel's flap, securing the buckle. "I'm done."

"They've cornered us," Benjamin says calmly.

"Are you talking to me? Or..."

"Yes, Miss Delane," the hunter answers. "Stay behind the desk."

He barely gets the words out before more of the monsters appear beyond the door. I gasp, my heart beating wildly.

One meets my gaze, recognition in his eyes even though I've never seen him before. I stumble back, bumping into the safe.

The vampires look like men, but their skin is pale. Their irises are black, and their gaze is hungry and alarmingly alert. It's like looking into the eyes of a wild animal and knowing it wants to eat you.

"Stay back," Benjamin warns the monsters.

"We outnumber you," the vampire at the front says, his voice a chilling, grating timbre that sends ice down my spine.

They talk.

I didn't have time to look at them before. When they attacked, I ran. But now that we're trapped, I cannot help but catalog the monsters in my brain. They're dressed well, not in rags like I imagined. The three in the doorway wear trousers and loose shirts. The one that spoke is in a waistcoat and a long jacket.

If they wore cloaks to mask their skin and hoods to shadow their faces, you could easily mistake them for humans on a dark street.

"I'll take you out one by one if you enter the door," Benjamin says calmly.

"Leave the girl, and we'll let you go, hunter."

The monster's voice is like the scrape of nails on a chalkboard. I shudder, the sound too horrible.

"We'll move away from the window," Benjamin says, not making any sense yet again. Then he grits his teeth. "You have *scales*. You'll be fine."

Even the vampire looks confused. He tilts his head slightly, processing.

"Elizabeth, stand behind me," Benjamin commands.

I edge toward him, moving slowly as I keep my eyes trained on the vampires. I'm halfway to him when one of the monsters shoves past their leader and sprints toward Benjamin,

his fangs bared like a cobra. Benjamin shoots him, but as soon as he's spent the bolt, the leader leaps forward...

Headed for me.

I scream a little, running for Benjamin, but I'm not quick enough.

"Elizabeth!" the hunter yells.

Just before Benjamin can load another bolt in his crossbow, the vampire grabs me around the waist and pins me against his body. My back presses to his chest. His breath smells like meat left to rot in the sun, and the hand he's wrapped around my neck is cold. He leans around me, placing his mouth against my skin.

I gasp when I feel the sharp press of his fangs at my throat, but he doesn't bite. Instead, he nudges me toward the door.

He might as well be holding a knife to my throat.

"Don't shoot, or he'll kill her," the remaining vampire in the doorway says.

"Greg!" Benjamin growls, punctuating the name with a curse. "Where are you?"

I whimper, my eyes trained on Benjamin as the vampire pushes me forward. He's managed to load another bolt, but he doesn't dare use it. The hunter works his jaw, his eyes sweeping over me and the vampire as if quickly assessing the situation and the odds of getting me out of it alive.

Suddenly, the window shatters.

The glass splinters into thousands of tiny, sharp shards, and a large *something* explodes into the room. Its great body pushes Father's desk forward, sending it careening along with the rug under it. It knocks into the vampire and me, jostling me from the monster's grip.

I hear my assailant scream the moment his fangs leave my neck, and then I'm being yanked off the floor and shoved behind Benjamin. I turn to look back, breathing hard as I focus on the bolt in the monster's chest.

But it doesn't hold my attention long. A gigantic beast fills the room, black as night, with teeth and talons and scales.

I blink at it, not trusting my eyes—even as it opens its mouth and *roars*.

Dragon.

Dragon?

There's a *dragon* in Father's study.

More vampires flood into the room, enraged by the beast. The dragon lunges forward, fighting the furniture in the tight space, and...

I look away as he *eats a vampire*, too in shock to process our situation.

“Out the window!” Benjamin yells at me. At least, I think he's talking to me.

“What do you mean ‘*out the window?*’” I demand, clutching the satchel like my life depends on it.

“To the window, *now!*”

“I can't go out the window!”

The hunter is already pushing me toward my doom. Just before we reach it, the sun emerges from the clouds, filling the room with light.

The vampires scream as the sunshine hits their pale skin. The ones in the direct light begin to smoke, and then... crumble. Before my eyes, their bodies disintegrate, leaving nothing but ash that floats gently to the ground, caught in the wind created by the dragon's hot breath.

And then the clouds swallow the sun once again.

More of the vampires gather in the hall. Having narrowly evaded their companions' fate, they hesitate. They watch the dragon, pacing beyond the doorway like angry wolves.

Benjamin starts pushing me again. “Go, go, *go!*”

I stumble over the broken glass, wondering what exactly he expects me to do. But as I question it, Benjamin runs back

into the room.

“What are you doing?” I cry.

“These bolts are twenty-three kevlings each,” he says, pulling them from the ashen remains of the vampires.

“Are you *serious?*” I yell, narrowly avoiding the dangerous slash of the dragon’s tail. It whips about the room, thrashing anything and everything he didn’t already destroy when he entered.

Without giving the dragon so much as a second glance, Benjamin collects all three bolts and then runs back to me, physically tugging me to the window once more. He kicks the jagged pieces of glass out of the bottom of the sill. “We’re going to slide down the roof.” He points. “Until we reach that dormer. You see it jutting up there? It’s the only thing that’s going to stop us, so we must aim for it. I’m going to leap to the ground from there, and then I’ll catch you. All right?”

“It’s not *all right*. I’m not jumping out the window!”

But apparently I don’t get a say in this.

Benjamin wraps his arm around my waist and *hoists me out*.

And then we’re careening down at a breakneck pace. Benjamin holds me firmly as we slide down the roof. The only thing protecting me are my many layers of petticoats and drawers, and even then, I feel every smack and bump of the shakes. The rough wood catches my dress, making the ordeal even more difficult.

We end up going toward the dormer as planned, barely able to slow ourselves before we fall right off the edge. I draw in a gasping breath as we come to a stop, my dress nearly over my head at this point.

But we’re near the ground now—only ten feet from it instead of twenty.

Benjamin turns to me, his hair wind-blown and his cheeks flushed. “Are you all right?”

“You pushed me out a window.”

“I did.” He cautiously scoots around the dormer, pausing at the edge of the roof. Before he leaps, he adds, “You’re welcome.”

I glance up, wondering if the monsters will follow us. But I know they can’t. The clouds made it dark in the house, but it’s still too light for them outside. But what about the *dragon*?

“All right!” Benjamin yells to me from below. “Carefully move to the edge and then jump down.”

My leg begins to tremble. Sliding on my hind-end once more, I scoot at a turtle’s pace to the roof’s ledge, blanching when I look down. “I can’t jump that.”

“I’ll catch you,” the hunter says.

I shake my head, overwhelmed by the ordeal we just went through. I can’t do this too.

“All right,” Benjamin says patiently. “Instead, I want you to roll onto your belly and slowly lower yourself. I’ll grab your legs and ease you down.”

That doesn’t sound so bad. I turn around, moving awkwardly as my dress bunches and twists under my knees.

“Please hurry, Miss Delane,” Benjamin calls.

“I *am* hurrying,” I snarl, fighting with the satchel and throwing it over my shoulder so it rests on my back.

I shimmy down slowly, knowing I look like a fool. My dress continues to catch, and the satchel keeps falling around me, getting in the way. But I continue, moving like an inchworm down the roof.

“Miss Delane!” Benjamin snaps, losing his composure for the first time today. “*Hurry up.*”

Hoping for the best, I let go of the roof, sliding much faster than intended. I scream as my legs meet air, and then I’m falling. I catch the roof at the last minute, dangling precariously.

“Let go,” Benjamin says from below me. “I have you.”

And sure enough, his arms are wrapped around my legs, his hands secure on my bottom and his chin against my stomach.

I let go and slide down against him, gasping for breath when my feet finally meet the ground. Once I land, I take a moment, breathing hard as I try to pull myself together. I'm in his arms, clinging to him like a traumatized child.

Benjamin pats my back awkwardly. "It's all right. You did well."

"We almost died."

"No, we didn't." And absurdly, he sounds like he means it.

"The dragon," I say as I suddenly remember its existence, jolting as I look up at the house.

The hunter growls. "He's with me."

"With..." My head becomes fuzzy. "You?"

That doesn't make sense.

"It doesn't matter right now." He gently catches my chin, turning my face to the side as he examines my neck.

"Did it...?" Suddenly, my stomach lurches.

Did the monster bite me? Did his fangs break my skin?

"Not a scratch," Benjamin breathes, exhaling a held breath. He then sets his hands on my cheeks, looking me right in the eyes. "Are you all right?"

"They...talk."

The hunter frowns.

"The vampires."

"Monsters do that, unfortunately. Some more than others."

"But they're...dead. Dead humans..." My stomach clenches violently. "Dead humans don't talk."

"Vampires aren't the people they once were. Once the victim dies, the spirit in the venom takes over the body."

I blink at him. "Spirit?"

“Like a ghost,” he explains. “All monsters are spirits, whether they’re corporal or not. The body is a host and nothing more. The human is gone.”

I slowly nod, trying to wrap my head around it.

“We can discuss it later.” He coaxes me away from the house. “We need to go.”

Before I can answer, the dragon emerges from the window, busting out even more glass as he shoves his great self through. Once he’s clear, he extends his wings and takes to the air like a raven.

BENJAMIN

“**B**last it all, Greg, where have you been?” I holler as the dragon disappears into the sky.

The sun’s peeking through the clouds again, but the growing storm will swallow the patch of blue sky soon. We need to get moving.

“And *where* are our horses?” I turn, looking for them.

“*Your horses?*” Greg asks, speaking directly in my head, as he does. He sounds guilty.

“What did you do?” I demand.

He doesn’t answer.

“Greg!”

“*I was hungry.*”

“You didn’t.”

“*I might have.*”

“You ate our horses?” I seethe, trying to spot the dragon beyond the churning clouds. “You couldn’t have found a deer or a cow—or *anything* else?”

“*I thought they were the vampires’ horses.*”

“Vampires don’t ride horses!”

Elizabeth’s too pale. Her eyes are wide, her arm is bleeding, and her hair is falling from her braid. She stares at the sky, likely just as terrified of the dragon as she is of the vampires.

“*And how was I supposed to know that?*” The overgrown lizard sounds huffy now, just like he did when he burned down Kovra—like it’s anyone’s fault but his.

“You’ve been with the guild for thirty years, Greg! You should know vampires don’t ride horses.”

He makes a scoffing noise, and I can just hear the edge of fire in his tone. “*I only ate one.*”

“Where’s the other?”

“*It took off.*”

My patience is wearing thin. “I gathered that. Do you *see* him?”

He growls. “*I’ll look.*”

To Elizabeth, I say, “Come on. We need to get moving.”

“The dragon ate our horses?” she asks numbly.

“Only one. We’ll find the other, but for now, we need to go. It will be dark in just a few hours.”

That’s enough to scare her out of her stupor. She shivers, wrapping her arms around herself, and begins down the lane.

“*I’ve found him,*” Greg says a few minutes later. “*He’s at the edge of the woods.*”

“Don’t scare him deeper into the forest.” I grip my crossbow a little tighter. “And I swear, if you eat him—”

“*I won’t,*” he says petulantly. It’s apparent he thinks I’m overreacting.

It takes Elizabeth and me forty-five minutes to walk down the mountain lane and through the main square of the village. The storm has swallowed up the last of the clear sky, and the clouds shift overhead. It’s still too light for an attack out here in the open, but dusk isn’t far off. The air has already grown cold.

I look at Elizabeth from the side of my eye. She holds her father’s satchel like a child might carry a doll, hugging it against her chest as though she’s afraid something’s going to

steal it from her. Since we didn't have a chance to let her change, she's still in her ridiculous pink gown. It's looking a little worse for wear now. The skirt has two jagged rips in it, and several more snags mar the once-smooth fabric. I suppose sliding down a roof will do that to a dress.

She stares straight ahead as we walk, limping a little. We don't dare stop, so I can't mention it.

A bitter wind whips at her skirt and hair, dragging more pale strands from her braid. She looks like a forlorn maiden from a tale, but she continues stoically, even though I'm sure she's frozen.

I tug off my cloak as we walk. When I offer it to her, she stares at it.

"Take it," I say. "It's cold."

"What about you?"

"My clothes offer more protection than yours."

I see the conflict in her eyes.

Before she can refuse, I drape it over her shoulders. "You'll catch your death if you don't. The breeze is icy."

She clings to it immediately, wrapping it around her delicate frame, keeping the satchel close to her chest. The cloak is too long, trailing over the ground, but it's better than nothing.

"Are we close?" I ask Greg, feeling like the small village stretches on forever.

He circles above us. "*You're nearly out.*"

"Is anything following us?"

"*The city is empty.*"

"Hang back when we reach the horse. The last thing we need is for you to scare it off."

He grunts, offended again, though only he knows why.

Elizabeth and I finally reach the forest's edge. There, grazing on a persistent tuft of meadow grass, the horse waits,

as promised. He shifts as we approach, still spooked—as I would be if a dragon ate my companion.

“It’s all right,” Elizabeth soothes, catching his bridle and petting his soft muzzle. He quiets after a few seconds, relaxing enough we can ride him.

I mount first and then offer Elizabeth my hand. Adjusting the satchel, she allows me to assist her up and then settles down behind the saddle.

It’s not an ideal situation. We have no relationship with this horse. He’s already on edge, and the night is swiftly approaching. If we push him too hard, he’ll buck us off and bolt.

“Make sure we’re not followed,” I instruct Greg, and then I direct the horse into the forest. To Elizabeth, I say, “Hold on.”

She does as I ask without question, wrapping her arms around my waist. She’s too still, like she hasn’t fully processed what happened.

I leave her be until we’re well away from the village. Thanks to the storm, dusk settles earlier than I anticipated. By the time we emerge on the other side of the woods, the color has leached from the landscape, nearing the twilight hours. Thunder grumbles in the distance, along with an occasional flash of lightning.

“Did anything follow us?” I ask Greg, causing Elizabeth to jolt after the long stretch of silence.

“No,” the dragon answers, sounding bored.

“Good. Circle back and watch the village. Let me know if something happens.” I turn my head so Elizabeth will know I’m talking to her this time. “Nothing followed us into the woods.”

“That’s a relief.” She’s quiet for a few minutes, and then she asks, “Why are they in the house? What do they want?”

It’s a good question—one I don’t have the answer to yet.

“I don’t know why they would linger when there’s no form of sustenance left in the village,” I answer.

“Sustenance,” she murmurs. “That’s a cold way to phrase it.”

I sigh. “Miss Delane, if you can’t separate—”

“Stop *calling* me that,” she says waspishly. “You pushed me off a roof, and I’ve ridden with my arms around your waist for the last hour. We’re past the point of using honorifics.”

I open my mouth to respond, but the words get lodged in my throat. I didn’t give it much thought before, but I’m suddenly aware of her. Her arms are, indeed, wrapped around my waist. Her feminine body presses against my back—warm, soft, and *angry*.

Why is she angry?

“Have I done something to upset you?” I ask after several seconds.

“No.”

Yet she sighs heavily, making me think that’s a female *no* and not an actual *no*. My sister, Danielle, uses the same tone when I turn down invitations to her many social gatherings.

I rack my brain, trying to think what I’ve done to agitate her. Besides Danielle, the only woman I’m often around is Catriona. But Cat is straightforward for a female. You know when you’ve made her mad because she punches you.

“If this is because I pushed you out the window—”

“I’m tired, Mr. Oliver,” Elizabeth interrupts. “I’m starving. My ankle hurts. And I’ve just learned that a dozen vampires have taken up residence in my home.”

I should say something soothing, but I draw a blank. If she were a hunter, I would tell her to quit whining and be grateful we made it out alive. But she’s not a hunter, and therefore, that’s not the right response for the situation.

This is my fault for ignoring Article Five, Section Two.

“I’ll take you to the hotel in Wrenvale,” I say, deciding to change the subject.

“I need to go back to the shack first.”

“Then I’ll take you to the shack.”

She’s quiet for several heavy minutes. Her agitation is palpable, but I’m not sure what to do about it, so I keep my mouth shut.

It’s nearly dark now. In the distance, lightning cuts jagged lines through the sky, and each rumble is a little louder than the last. Hopefully, we can find shelter before the storm reaches us.

“People should never be referred to as sustenance!” Elizabeth finally blurts out.

I turn in the saddle, looking back at her in the dim light. “*That’s* what you’re upset about?”

“Of course I’m upset! Has your profession made you so callous that you refer to humans like they’re livestock?”

The beginning of a headache settles at the base of my skull. “Miss Delane—”

“*Elizabeth.*”

“Miss Delane,” I repeat, saying it only because I know it will irritate her further and I’m petty when I’m tired. “What do vampires eat?”

She hardens her delicate jaw, scowling at me.

“Human blood,” I say, feigning patience. “Therefore, we are their—”

“Just say people! ‘*Why are the vampires in your home when there are no people in the village?*’” She tilts her chin a little further into the air. “Say *that.*”

And then, with no warning whatsoever, she hiccups out a small sob. I gape at her, silently acknowledging I’ve wandered far out of my element.

“Why am I crying?” she demands helplessly, angrily swiping away the tears like they’re my fault.

“I have no idea.”

“The entire village is empty,” she chokes out miserably. “You saw it, didn’t you?”

“I saw...”

“It was so surreal.” She lets out another sob. “All those people...”

“*You’re supposed to comfort her, you dolt,*” Greg says in my head.

“What are you still doing here?” I demand, startling Elizabeth again.

“Where else would I be?” she snaps.

“I was talking to Greg,” I explain. “Dragons are telepathic, to a point.”

She blinks at me, her eyebrows inching up. “Your dragon’s name is Greg?”

“He’s not my dragon,” I immediately correct. “He belongs to GHOST.”

“*I belong to GHOST?*” Greg demands.

“He *works* for GHOST,” I correct.

Genuinely confused, Elizabeth says, “But...he’s a monster.”

Greg roars in my head, indignant.

“Would you shut up?” I say to him, looking at the sky so Elizabeth won’t think I’m talking to her. Then I look back, preparing myself for an explanation. “Dragons aren’t monsters—they’re beasts.”

She shakes her head, not understanding.

“Monsters are evil—they’re part of the spirit world, and they feed on life. But beasts are just—”

“*If you say animals, I’ll feed on you,*” Greg warns.

It's a touchy subject.

"They're *beasts*," I say again. "They're hatched from eggs, not created in death. They're capable of reason"—I glare at the sky—"even if they choose not to utilize the gift."

The dragon snorts.

"And they have a conscience."

"But dragons are...*wicked*." Elizabeth whispers the last word like she's worried Greg will hear her.

"Just like humans, dragons must decide how they will live their lives. They can be a boon to society or a menace."

"And Greg...is a boon?"

I laugh out loud, darkly amused at the thought. "Greg is a menace, but rarely intentionally."

"*I'm tired of you,*" the dragon announces. "*I'm going to watch the village.*"

Like it was his idea.

"Yes, fine," I say. "Get out of my head."

The connection falls silent, letting me know I'm finally alone.

"But why does the guild have a dragon?" Elizabeth asks. She's dwelling on the subject, but at least she's stopped crying.

I face forward, continuing down the road.

"About thirty years ago, GHOST was hired to hunt down a coven of warlocks in Dalhahn's Shadow Forest. This was when the guild was in its infancy. There were only three hunters at the time, the founding members: Arthur Cunningham; his fiancée, Carissa Daimel; and their friend Gilbert Adams. They cleared the coven, but when the local authorities asked them to go through the house the wizards occupied and destroy any spirit objects, they found a dragon's egg."

"And they didn't turn it in?"

"They were going to—but it hatched."

“And that’s...bad?”

“A dragon bonds with whomever it sees first—a bit like a duck imprinting on its mother. Well, after that happened, the now-Lady Cunningham didn’t have the heart to give him up, so she kept him. At first, he was like a pet. Then a mascot. And now...” I shake my head.

“Now?”

“He calls himself a hunter.”

“Is thirty very old for a dragon?” she asks.

“They generally live about a hundred fifty years. Compared to humans, he’s about nineteen right now. Dragons reach their full size at around fifteen, but it takes a good forty years for them to mature.”

“So he’s young?”

“And contrary and arrogant.”

“You don’t like him?”

“He saved our lives earlier—I cannot deny his usefulness. But his mistakes cost the guild a ridiculous amount of money.”

“Are all hunters as conscious of the guild’s budget as you?”

“No,” I answer dryly.

Before Elizabeth can respond, a bolt of lightning arcs across the sky ahead of us, almost immediately met by a crash of thunder that spooks our horse. He rears up a little, prancing to the side.

“Hold on!” I warn, but Elizabeth’s arms have already tightened around my middle. Her forehead meets my back as she tucks herself against me.

The horse quiets, but before I can reassure Elizabeth that all is well, the sky opens up, and it begins to pour. The rain is cold, and the drops are massive. It’s as if someone turned a bucket of water over us. My hair and clothing become soaked in seconds. Elizabeth likely isn’t fairing much better even though she’s wearing my cloak.

Another jagged bolt of lightning illuminates the sky, followed by a cracking boom of thunder. The horse rears up again, desperate to throw us and bolt.

Just as I accept that we can't ride in this, a light comes into view. It's the inn we passed earlier, the one with the broken wagon out front.

I've never been so relieved to see a seedy establishment.

"We're going to stop there until the storm passes," I say, raising my voice so Elizabeth will hear me over the deluge. It's getting louder by the second.

"What?" Elizabeth hollers back.

"We're going to stop!"

I feel her nod against my back, and I direct our frazzled horse to the inn. There's a lean-to behind the building. I can just make it out in the twilight, down a path that meanders through low brush and tall grass. I don't want to make Elizabeth walk through it, so I stop the horse at the inn's entrance.

I leap down first, ending up in a puddle. The dirt has turned to mud, and it splashes on my boots. I hold tightly to the gelding's reins, trying to keep him calm so he won't take off with Elizabeth.

"All right." I turn toward her, ready to assist.

But after she's pulled her leg over the horse's back and is about to slide off, lightning hits a nearby tree. The crash is deafening, lingering for several seconds and shaking the ground. The tree sparks, and blue light illuminates the night.

Our horse lets out a feral neigh and rears back, sending Elizabeth careening toward me.

Dropping the reins, I step forward to catch her. She falls against me, and I lose my footing on the slick, rain-drenched ground. The horse takes off as we tumble backward.

My arms go around Elizabeth as we fall, and I end up back-first in a cold puddle of mud. Filthy water sprays up—as

if we weren't wet enough already. Rain pummels us, splashing even more muddy water when it meets the murky puddle.

Elizabeth lies on top of me. Strands of her cold, wet hair drape over my face, and her satchel digs into my gut.

"I'm sorry!" she exclaims as soon as she gets her wits about her. She scrambles to get up but slips in the mud, accidentally kneeling me.

I groan, frozen for several seconds.

"Oh no!" Horrified, she pushes herself up—successfully this time. "I'm so sorry!"

The rain continues to come down in great sheets around us. I lie here for a few more seconds, hating Arthur, hating storms, and especially hating vampires. After I catch my breath, I sit up.

Soaking wet, Elizabeth hovers over me, looking like she wants to help but doesn't know how. The heiress is a sad sight.

I push against the mud and rise, water running in rivulets down my body as it returns to the puddle. "Let's go inside."

"What about the horse?"

"Greg can eat him."

She lets out a startled laugh that sounds a touch hysterical and then turns toward the inn. The wind grabs hold of the door as I open it. It slips out of my hand and cracks against the exterior wall, loudly announcing our presence and startling the inn's elderly proprietors.

They look over from their cozy chairs, their eyes widening when they take in our bedraggled appearance. We probably look like bog monsters.

Elizabeth scans the space, appearing disconcerted. Under her breath, she says, "This..."

Isn't what we expected.

The inside of the inn is tidy. A long counter runs along the length of the back. A board hangs on the wall. It has ten hooks, each assigned a number. There's only one key left. The

wooden floors are swept clean, and a fire crackles in the fireplace. The innkeeper takes tea by the hearth. He stares at us, the cup halfway to his lips, his gray mustache twitching with surprise.

The woman in the rocking chair across from him works on a patchwork quilt. She's paused with the needle drawn back, her eyebrows high. She gawks at my crossbow, and then she slowly lowers her gaze to the growing puddle of filthy water we're dripping onto her clean floor.

"My apologies, madam," I say, clearing my throat. "Our horse spooked, and..."

There's no need to finish the sentence. They have eyes. I'm sure they can deduce what happened.

When they continue to stare at us like owls, I say, "We were hoping to clean up and would like a place to wait out the storm."

The innkeeper sets his tea on the table next to him and rises. He groans a little, stiff with old age, and shuffles to the back counter. His wife sets aside her quilt and then follows, a little spryer than her husband.

"How many rooms do you need?" the man asks, opening a ledger that looks like it's over forty years old. The pages have yellowed, and the leather binding is worn.

My eyes flick to the single key. "Just one."

Elizabeth tenses beside me.

"That's good—it's all we have available." The man turns toward the key board. "It's our largest room, a little more expensive. Will that be all right?"

"How much is it?" I ask warily.

"Seventy-five kevlings."

"For just the night?" I demand.

That's robbery, and they know it.

"It's a nice room," the innkeeper's wife assures me.

I mentally tally how much this job is costing the guild and shudder. Then I glance toward the windows, contemplating the storm. “We only need it for a few hours. I don’t suppose you’d give us a discount?”

The couple gasps like I’ve said something scandalous, and Elizabeth fixes me with a scowl so dark, I shift back.

It takes me several seconds to puzzle out their strange reactions, and when I do, I nearly roll my eyes. “As I said, we’re just waiting out the storm.”

The woman’s eyes flick between us, her expression full of distrust. “Are you married?”

Something tells me she’ll boot us into the rain if I say we’re not.

“We are,” Elizabeth says before I can answer, startling me.

The woman presses her lips into a thin line, her wrinkled face pinched. After a moment, her expression eases somewhat, and she fetches the key. “Room eight—no discount.” She tilts her nose in the air. “We’re not the kind of establishment that charges by the hour.”

I almost laugh at the absurd situation I’ve found myself in.

“Yes, fine.” I count out the money and slap the bills on the counter. “Do you have someone to bring hot water to the room? We need to clean up.”

“That will be another ten kevlings.” The woman doesn’t even blink.

Holding in a curse, I reluctantly add another copper-laced bill to the pile.

As the innkeeper accepts the money, his wife hands us the key. “Have a pleasant stay. We’ll have someone bring the water shortly.”

“Take a lamp with you.” The man nods toward a table near the doorway where one sits, waiting for us.

I grunt as I accept the key, turning toward the hall to the right. Elizabeth follows me resolutely, her boots quietly

squelching with every step she takes.

“Sterling and Tansy are going to be so worried,” she says when we reach the door, holding the lamp so I can see to open the lock.

“The storm will let up soon.”

“Surely you don’t intend to walk back to the shepherd’s cottage in the dark?”

I frown as I push the door open, not wanting to think about our lack of horses, or how much money their disappearance is going to cost the guild. I’ll worry about that when I’m not soaked to the bone and covered head to boots in mud.

We step into the room, pausing just inside to take stock of it. There’s a fireplace and cut wood stacked next to it. The bedding looks fresh. I walk across the space, peering behind a sagging privacy curtain strung up in the corner, and find a small washtub. It’s wooden, shaped like half a large barrel, and though it’s well-aged, it’s clean enough. There’s a small bar of soap and a couple of large linen cloths folded on a shelf.

It’s a thirty-kevling room—not a seventy-five kevling room. And certainly not eighty-five when you include the bath water.

Elizabeth hugs herself, suddenly shivering violently. Unlike the front of the inn, it’s cold in here. She’s going to freeze to death in those wet things if we don’t warm it up.

“I’ll light a fire.” I kneel in front of the hearth, stacking the wood over a handful of pine needles that have been provided for kindling.

Elizabeth stands awkwardly, her arms wrapped around her satchel once more. The hair that escaped her braid earlier hangs flat on her head. A single bead of water rolls down her temple. My wet, muddy cloak sags around her, puddling on the floor. It’s left a wet trail behind her, like she’s dragging a mop. To top off the bedraggled appearance, her face is freckled with mud.

She looks like a beggar who found a ballgown in a bin of rubbish.

A pretty beggar.

I pull my eyes from her, focusing on my task. A few minutes later, a fledgling fire consumes the kindling, licking at the larger pieces of wood. About the time it becomes a proper fire, there's a knock at the door.

"Hot water," a young voice calls from the hall.

I open the door, finding a scrappy-looking boy carrying two large pails of steaming water that appear to be far too heavy for his lanky frame. He hobbles into the room, grunting, "Evening, madam," to Elizabeth as he passes her. He then dumps the water into the tub.

"Why don't you come stand by the fire," I say to Elizabeth. "It's a little warmer over here."

She steps up next to me, looking distressed. I'm not sure if her frown is for the tub or the boy.

"I got a few more trips to make," he says with a heavy country accent as he heads for the door. "Be back shortly."

I nod, closing the door behind him. To Elizabeth, I say, "When he's finished, you can clean up first."

Elizabeth pulls her eyes from the tub and fixes them on my face. She's conflicted, as I assume any proper young woman would be in our situation.

"I'll step out of the room," I assure her awkwardly.

She looks back at the tub. "I have nothing to change into."

"While you're bathing, I'll see if the innkeepers have something you can borrow."

Elizabeth contemplates my offer, and then she nods. Staring into the flames, warming our hands, we wait for the boy to return.

Ten minutes later, he finishes his fifth and final load of water.

"Take your time," I say to Elizabeth, stepping out before she feels she must respond. I lock the door behind me and find the innkeeper and his wife in the front room again.

They look at me expectantly, and I explain our dilemma.

“Patrons leave things from time to time,” the elderly woman says, more cheerful now that my eighty-five kevlings are in her lockbox. “Come with me. I’m sure we’ve got something that will fit you and your wife.”

As a knee-jerk reaction, I almost correct her, but I swallow the words, letting them sit in the air between us.

Wife.

It’s a strange word. Foreign. Uncomfortable.

I’ve always been committed to my career, despite Danielle’s ardent attempts to marry me off. I’ve never had any particular desire to change that, but for a split second, I contemplate it: a pretty girl in a white gown, smiling at me from the aisle of a church. A girl who might look a bit like Elizabeth.

I slam the door on the thought quickly, startled by its abrupt and unwanted intrusion.

The innkeeper’s wife leads me around the counter and goes into a small storage room. A trunk sits in the corner under a stack of burlap bags. She sets the bags onto a nearby chair and then lifts the lid, rummaging through the contents. She then begins stacking things in my arms, adding to a rapidly growing pile.

“It’s all clean,” she assures me as she places a pair of ruffled white drawers on the top of the pile. “I wash everything myself.”

Mildly uncomfortable, I clear my throat. “Thank you, madam.”

“Let’s go to the front and discuss payment,” she says brightly.

I lift a brow. “You said these are items left by patrons.”

She smiles—clearly a ruthless businesswoman parading as a kindly innkeeper’s wife. “Yes.”

“And you...charge for them?”

“That’s correct.” She crosses her hands at her waist primly, her pleasant expression not faltering under my stare.

“All right,” I say heavily. “How much do you want?”

ELIZABETH

I yank the fabric curtain in place, squinting my eyes to make certain I can't make out the tub on the other side of the fabric. But it's perfectly opaque. As long as I leave the lamp in the main part of the room, it should be fine.

Stop being so prudish, I tell myself, and then I step inside the curtain. When the fabric is closed, it makes a triangle in the corner—a tiny makeshift washroom. It's rustic, but manageable.

“Just get it over with,” I whisper to myself, steeling my resolve.

Quickly, I pull the pins out of my hair, lowering what's left of my braids and combing through the knotted, wet strands with my fingers. Then I draw in a deep breath, hold it for a few seconds, and strip out of my clothes.

I'm in the tub in a flash, some part of my frazzled brain thinking the water will keep me modest...but I should have paused to check the temperature first.

It's *hot*. I let out a startled exclamation, gasping as the water envelops my frozen skin. The steam rises from the surface, mocking me. I feel like a chicken plunged into a pot of boiling soup.

I whimper to myself as I lower even deeper, tilting my head back to dunk my hair, and then I begin scrubbing.

Despite my anxiety, I pause to scowl at the soap. It smells a bit like glue, not scented with fragrant oils like I'm used to.

Just a hunk of animal fat and lye.

“It’s better than looking like I wallowed in a pig puddle,” I tell myself.

With renewed determination, I scrub every inch of me, washing my hair twice just to make sure it’s clean.

By the time Benjamin knocks on the door to announce his return, I’m wrapped in a sheet, waiting behind the curtain.

The lock turns, and the door cracks open. “May I come inside?”

I look down at the linen sheet. “I’m decent.”

The door opens the rest of the way. Benjamin’s boots thud against the wood as he steps inside. The door closes once more, and then there’s the sound of the lock clicking back in place.

“Did the innkeepers have anything?” I poke my head around the curtain to keep an eye on him.

Benjamin drops an armful of garments on the bed and frowns at them like they personally wronged him. “She did—for a price.”

“I’ll pay it,” I say without hesitation. “Whatever it is, I’ll pay.”

He stretches his neck. “Only the most depraved of men would extort money out of you in this situation, Miss Delane. I’m certainly not going to hold this clothing hostage for a fee.”

Benjamin removes his leather jacket and rubs his shoulder, closing his eyes and tipping back his head like he’s exhausted.

I swallow, realizing he doesn’t know I’m watching him. “I knew Arthur wouldn’t send someone unscrupulous. What did I tell you?”

He chuckles softly, shaking his head. “You thought it. For a moment, you wondered.” He rubs his other shoulder now, massaging it idly. “Are you almost done?”

I watch him, transfixed by the way his wet shirt clings to his skin. “Almost...”

His arms are corded with muscle, and his shoulders are well defined—a fact his jacket kept hidden. I really shouldn't be staring at him like this, but with his hair all mussed from the rain, and his general state of disarray, he suddenly looks like a different man.

He looks like a hunter.

Benjamin turns his head, meeting my gaze like he's *very* aware I've been watching him this whole time. "Forgive my impatience, but I'd like to wash up before the water gets cold."

He's caught me.

"Hand me my clothes," I say, my tone tight with veiled embarrassment.

He scoops them off the bed, sorting out a few items that appear to be for him, and then crosses the room, averting his gaze as he hands me the pile. "Hopefully they fit."

My eyes fall on the drawers. "Where did all this come from?"

He walks back to the fireplace. "The innkeeper's wife said patrons occasionally leave things. She washes them and puts them in a trunk."

I wrinkle my nose at the underthings. I'm not wearing someone else's drawers. "I don't suppose you'll step out of the room while I change?"

I swear I hear him let out a frustrated groan. "Miss Delane, I solemnly vow I will not—"

"Fine. Just...turn around."

"You realize I can't see through the curtain, don't you?"

"Have you *tried*?"

The hunter chuckles—a real, warm, slightly frustrated noise of mirth that has a smile tugging at my lips despite the situation.

He turns. "I'm staring at the wall, Miss Delane. Will that suffice?"

My eyes run over his lean, well-muscled back one last time. “Yes, thank you.”

I disappear behind the curtain once more and change quickly, letting out a sigh of relief as I fasten the button of my skirt, feeling more like myself than I have in days. I look down, admiring the clothing.

The blouse is soft and clean, with long, loose sleeves and ruffles that travel down the front of the garment and decorate my wrists and throat. It’s a simple design, and though the fabric is lightweight, it’s far warmer than my gown was. The skirt is long and made of burgundy velvet. It’s a little big, and it will show horsehair something terrible. But seeing as how we don’t have a horse at the moment, that doesn’t seem pertinent to the situation.

I open the curtain and step out, averting my eyes so I don’t look directly at Benjamin. “It’s all yours.”

As he turns, his gaze sweeps over me. I’m suddenly conscious of my tangled mess of hair, wishing I had braided it before I left the privacy of the curtain. The hunter passes, pausing in front of the wooden tub and then turning back to face me.

I don’t look at him. Hoping to distract myself with a task, I separate my hair into three long, wet sections and begin to braid them. Unbidden, my eyes creep to the fabric molded against his torso once more.

“Miss Delane?”

My eyes fly up to his face. “What?”

He lifts his brows as if waiting for something.

“*What?*” I repeat, a little more forcefully this time.

A crooked smile tugs at his lips, catching my attention. It’s a startling contrast to his usual businesslike expression, and it grows as the seconds pass. His eyes linger on mine as he pulls the curtain shut. The smile turns into a full-on smirk just before he draws the fabric closed. “I really must insist you turn around.”

I blink at the now closed curtain, my mouth gaping as I try to think of a reply to that outlandish statement. After several seconds too long, I say, “I *wasn't*—I mean, surely you don't think I—”

He chuckles quietly, making my cheeks catch fire.

“I'm going to see the innkeeper's wife,” I say tartly.

“What for?”

“To...see her.”

And with that, I snatch the key off the side table and flee from the room.

“THE CLOTHES FIT WELL ENOUGH,” the innkeeper's wife says when I wander awkwardly into the front room of the inn.

“Yes, thank you.” I clasp my hands at my waist as I peer around, flexing my interlaced fingers a few times.

I can feel the couple stare at me. They must be wondering what I'm doing out here when my *husband* and I paid for a perfectly good room.

After a few awkward seconds, the woman asks, “Would you like a cup of tea, dear?”

“Tea?” I say brightly, thankful she gave me a purpose for being here. “That sounds lovely.”

She directs me toward a soft chair near the fire, rising as she fetches another cup.

“I thought you might be peckish,” she says when she returns, carrying a plate of biscuits along with the extra cup and matching saucer. “I made these this morning.”

I'm not peckish—I'm ravenous. It's been far too many hours since the light lunch Benjamin and I shared before we picked up the horses.

“Thank you so much.” I take a biscuit, resisting the urge to grab five like a greedy child.

Fifteen minutes and three sweet, buttery biscuits later, I sit with the hot cup in my hands, realizing taking tea with the innkeeper and his wife might have been a mistake.

“How long have you been married?” asks the innkeeper’s wife, whose name I’ve learned is Hilda Caverska. She’s returned to her quilting.

“How long?” I repeat.

“That’s right.”

“A...month?”

“Oh, newlyweds,” she says, as if that’s just lovely. “Did you have a honeymoon?”

“Um...” I take a sip of the tea. “Yes?”

“Where at?”

Benjamin appears in the doorway, wearing a pair of tan trousers and a shirt. He’s rolled the sleeves up to his elbows. I suspect it’s because they were too short. It’s a casual look that I wouldn’t have thought would suit him, but does.

I think he’s going to save me, but he leans against the wall and crosses his arms. He looks solemn once more, with just a hint of boredom in his expression. When I shoot him a glare, he merely raises his eyebrows as if he’s interested in learning where we honeymooned as well.

“Angora Morain,” I say, blurting out the first place that pops into my head.

“The coast?” Madam Caverska exclaims with a smile, looking up from her work. “I’ve never been.”

Neither have I.

“Aren’t there seals this time of year?”

I look again at Benjamin, but he only shrugs.

“I think so?” I answer.

“You didn’t see any?”

“I’m afraid not.” I take another sip of tea, this one more of a gulp, and I burn the roof of my mouth.

Innocently, she says, “I suppose you were a little preoccupied, dear.”

Benjamin pretends to rub his jaw, but the light in his eyes tells me he’s hiding his amusement. When he lowers his hand, he looks solemn once more. Finally taking pity on me, he crosses the room, pausing next to my chair. “It’s stopped raining.”

I turn toward the window, realizing he’s right. But the idea of traveling by foot in the night is less than appealing. I know what lurks in the darkness now.

“I’m a little tired.” It comes out as a request—a plea.

Please don’t make me go out there.

“Sterling and Tansy are waiting for you,” he reminds me.

“Surely it will be morning before we arrive anyway.”

The hunter studies me, and then he jerks his head toward the hall—toward our room. My relief is quickly met with trepidation. Though I didn’t want to leave, this situation is far from ideal.

I rise, thanking Madam Caverska for the tea. After we excuse ourselves, Benjamin follows me down the hall, not saying anything as I fumble with the key.

As I open the door, my stomach tightens. The room is now warm thanks to the fire that crackles safely behind the screen. In fact, it feels very cozy. My eyes stray to the bed.

Without a word, Benjamin takes a pillow and a blanket and lays them on the floor in front of the hearth. He then lies down and closes his eyes.

Feeling me watching him, he says, “I already claimed the spot by the fire, so don’t try to steal it from me.”

He’s giving me the bed.

That’s...kind.

Very kind. I requested aid, after all. It's not like he wants to be here.

"You're sure?" I say softly.

He opens one eye, peering at me from the ground. "I'm not budging, Miss Delane. I get cold easily. You'll have to take the bed."

"Elizabeth," I correct.

Smiling just a little, the hunter rolls toward the fire, turning his back to me, and pretends to go to sleep.

Fully dressed, I crawl into the bed and burrow into the blissfully soft covers. I don't expect to sleep well, but I haven't been this warm or clean since we fled from the manor. Exhaustion wins.

I begin to drift as soon as my head hits the pillow.

BENJAMIN

I get up a few times during the night to add more wood to the fire, never fully sleeping, and not just because the floor is uncomfortable.

My mind won't rest. Why are there so many vampires in the Delane manor? What are they doing there? The village is empty now. They should have moved on.

Every time the old inn creaks or the wind knocks a branch into the window, I tense, listening.

It's unlikely we were followed. We left the village well before dark, and vampires aren't known for their tracking abilities like werewolves. Besides, Greg would have spotted them. He has excellent night vision and a bird's eye view of the landscape. If he's suited for anything, it's a lookout.

Even so, a run-in with the monsters makes you spook a little more easily.

I think back to my training days, the last time I was in the field. I apprenticed Bruno von Riegel. He specialized in wraiths, one of the best specter hunters around until he retired about four years ago. I'm not as familiar with physical monsters. Those are really more of Catriona and Atticus's field of expertise.

But I'm a good shot, which I proved to Cat the evening Arthur gave me the assignment. And I train for an hour every morning before anyone else even walks through the guildhall doors, so I'm in decent shape.

With a sigh, I glance toward the bed. Elizabeth seemed to fall asleep immediately—an impressive feat after the day we had. Has she slept well since she and her companions took refuge in the shack?

Probably not, and that's what settles it. I can't let pride get the best of me. This job is far larger than Arthur suspected, and I'm rusty at best. I need to ask for a replacement.

I RISE WITH THE BIRDS, trying to be quiet so I don't wake Elizabeth. After I fold the blanket, I turn a chair toward the fire. Staring into the flames, I mull over the situation some more, trying to make the pieces of the puzzle fit together.

Why did the vampires return to Oakenridge after the long absence? Why are they there now?

A while later, I hear Elizabeth shift. She stretches and then goes still, likely realizing where she's at. When she rolls over, she spots me by the fire.

“Good morning,” I say.

She sits up, not quite meeting my eyes as she pushes the covers back. “Morning.”

“Did you sleep all right?”

“Like the dead,” she says, and then she winces, probably regretting her choice of words. “You?”

“I slept fine,” I lie.

She crosses the room to stand in front of the fire. Slowly, as if still half-asleep, she unties the ribbon from her braid and loosens the plait, running her fingers through the strands. “I suppose you're used to sleeping in strange places.”

“Not really.” I stand, dreading the conversation we need to have. My position in the guild wasn't something I was hesitant to admit yesterday, but the more time I spend with Elizabeth, the more difficult I suspect it will become. If I keep avoiding

it, when she does find out, she'll think I was trying to deceive her. It's better to get it over with.

She turns to face me, questions in her eyes. Her silken hair is wavy thanks to the braid. It falls to the small of her back, so long.

I clear my throat, my eyes still on her hair. "I haven't taken a job since I completed my training."

Her mouth parts as she processes my confession. "But..."

I rub the back of my neck. "I took an administration position right after I became a journeyman hunter."

She thinks about it. "But...you are a hunter?"

"I am. Officially certified by the guild."

"So, at some point, you've hunted vampires, I'm sure?"

"I apprenticed a man who specialized in wraiths."

Disappointment shadows her face, hitting me right in the stomach. "So you've *never* dealt with vampires?"

"I'm an expert in theory, well educated in all manner of spirits. But no, I've never personally dealt with their kind."

She exhales slowly. Her shoulders droop, and she stares at the flames like I was her last hope.

"Once we return to Wrenvale, I'm going to send a telegraph to Arthur and request he send an experienced hunter to assist you," I assure her.

Elizabeth whips her gaze back to my face. "You're *leaving*?"

"I think it's for the best."

"But...you killed three of them," she argues. "I watched you do it."

"I feel confident I could eradicate a small coven on my own, but something peculiar is going on, and I'm afraid I'm not experienced enough for this job."

Her eyes meet mine, that strangely sad expression of hers gutting me. "I trust you know your limitations. Call for aid,

certainly. But don't go."

"Miss Delane..."

"Benjamin."

Her use of my given name stops me short. My mouth goes dry, and I swallow, suddenly uncomfortable with her soft, direct gaze.

"Let's see what Arthur says," I finally answer. "I won't go until he responds."

She nods, placated.

I jerk my head toward the window. "It's going to be a long walk to Wrenvale. We should get going."

Elizabeth turns toward the hearth, picking up her boots.

"Are they dry?"

"Dry enough." She offers me a smile. "Thank you for remembering to set them out."

I did it before I found her having tea with the innkeepers, scrubbing our clothes as best as I could after I finished bathing, knowing we'd at least need my jacket and cloak this morning. "You're welcome."

She picks up her gown, running her finger over the trim on the bodice. "I'm not sure this was worth washing."

"May I ask you about it?"

She smiles a little. "Go ahead."

"I assume you were wearing it when you had to flee the manor. But you said the village was nearly empty by that point. What was the occasion?"

"My mother celebrated the harvest on her birthday every year, and after she passed, my father and I kept the tradition alive." She blinks a few times, looking like the memory is difficult. "When it came time to celebrate this year, I put on this gown and tried to pretend my life wasn't falling apart."

"Ah," I say gently.

She smiles ruefully even as she chases tears from her eyes. "I wish I'd picked a warmer dress to celebrate in."

I laugh a little because she expects it, but the story hits me hard.

Elizabeth folds the gown, along with her other things, both of us ignoring the fact that I scrubbed the mud-drenched chemise, petticoats, and drawers just like I scrubbed her dress and my clothing.

It seemed wrong to avoid them.

"I hope they're clean," I say. "I did the best I could do with what was available."

"Few men would even know where to start."

"My parents passed away when I was fourteen. My sister and I took care of each other. We managed to keep our parent's house, but we couldn't afford our staff."

"I'm sorry," she says softly, taking several of her dry garments and disappearing behind the privacy curtain.

I think back to that hard time in my life, no longer aching like I used to. But I remember it. It lives like a ghost in my memory. "I'm fortunate to have Danielle."

I realize I should probably tell my sister that every once in a while, especially if Arthur insists I keep taking dangerous jobs.

Elizabeth emerges a few minutes later and pulls on her boots. "Danielle is your sister?"

"That's right."

"Are you older or younger?"

"Younger by a year."

"And that would make you...how old exactly?" She gives her boots her complete attention.

"I'm twenty-five." I pause, wondering if I should indulge my curiosity. "And you?"

"Twenty-two."

“And you have no siblings?” I ask just to keep the conversation going. I already know thanks to my thorough research.

“It’s just me.”

“There’s nothing tying you to Oakenridge now,” I say, broaching the subject carefully. “You can live off the money you retrieved from the safe until your father’s estate passes to you. And then you’d be free to sell the manor and buy a home somewhere else.”

Elizabeth doesn’t answer, but I can tell she’s thinking about it.

Gently, I add, “If you remain here, I imagine it will be difficult to untangle the good memories of your childhood from the bad ones.”

“But where would I go?”

“You could go to Valette.” Why the suggestion leaps from my mouth, I don’t know. But I’m not done, apparently. “It’s beautiful, with an abundance of shops, parks, and grand architecture. There are museums and opera houses and—”

“Suitors breathing down my neck at every turn.” Elizabeth lifts an eyebrow, carefully braiding her hair into a long tail once more. “Surely you can imagine what my life might look like in Valette.”

She’s right. Her fortune is like bait. And if that isn’t enough, she’s beautiful. The unwed men of the city would trail her like a pack of rabid dogs.

“You’d certainly have your pick of every eligible man in the city,” I say with a laugh that sounds as uncomfortable as I feel. I don’t particularly like the idea of Elizabeth choosing one of the dogs.

“How would I know if they liked me or my money?”

I frown at my crossbow before I slip it onto my back.

“No,” she says. “That’s not the kind of story I want to live.”

My frown deepens, never having heard someone say anything quite like that. “What kind of story do you want?”

She ties the ribbon around the end of the braid. “The usual type, I suppose. I want romance—I want to be wanted. When I marry, *if* I marry, I need to know that my husband is in love with me, not my fortune. That he’s attracted to me, not my family’s wealth.” She sighs a little, flinging her braid over her shoulder. “I suppose I want him to desire me as desperately as most would desire my money.”

I resist the urge to clear my throat, unsure how to answer her. My mind just keeps repeating the word *desire*, her soft voice in my head.

“Are you ready to go?” she asks, her expression brightening like we didn’t just bare a little of our souls to each other.

“Yes,” I say, grateful she dropped the subject. “Is your ankle feeling better? You don’t seem to be limping this morning.”

“It is, thank you.”

“Do you think you can walk?”

I’m not sure what we’ll do if she can’t.

“I’ll be fine,” she assures me, and I can only hope she’s right.

“PLEASANT TRAVELS!” Madam Caverska calls as we step into the morning. I raise a hand in acknowledgement, silently saying goodbye to the money I left in the couple’s care.

Last night’s storm has moved out, the clouds now marring the distant horizon. It’s cold this morning, the saturated ground iced with frost.

I place the cloak around Elizabeth’s shoulders, not giving her a chance to refuse it. She turns back to look at me, a little

startled, but her surprise quickly turns into a smile. “Thank you.”

With a nod, I start down the path.

“You’ll be warm enough in your jacket?”

“I’m fine,” I assure her.

I’ll warm up once we get moving anyway, and the sun is out. Soon it will chase away the chill in the air.

Elizabeth matches my pace. “Why aren’t you married, Mr. Oliver? It seems a man your age would begin to think about settling down.”

So much for her using my given name.

I give her a wry look. “You sound like my sister.”

“Do you have an unrequited love?” she teases. “Do you secretly pine for someone?”

“Danielle has successfully foisted me into a myriad of outings, and I attend balls and galas when Arthur claims I must make an appearance for the sake of GHOST, but I’ve never taken a special interest in anyone.”

“You don’t enjoy the outings and balls?”

“I’m not generally an extroverted person.”

“No,” Elizabeth says, mock astounded by the revelation. “But you seem like such a social butterfly.”

I shake my head, a smile trying to break through my solemn expression. “I’m not aloof, Miss Delane. I simply prefer intimate gatherings to grand affairs.”

“You would have been right at home in Oakenridge,” she says, her tone a little sad. “We had no grand affairs.”

“GHOST will eradicate the vampires from your village.” I turn to look at her. “I swear it.”

“I trust you.” She smiles, but there are shadows in her eyes. Returning the subject back to happier things, she says, “Tell me about your sister.”

We pass the time sharing stories of our childhoods, talking about nothing of particular importance. The sun gradually warms the air until the morning is pleasant. But as the frost melts, the road turns to mud.

Elizabeth doesn't complain, but sliding and sticking in the muck is going to make the trek take twice as long. We'll be lucky to make it to Wrenvale before nightfall.

We've only walked an hour when the unmistakable rumble of wagon wheels greets us from behind. I turn, finding a farmer who must be heading toward the small city.

"How do you feel about riding in the back of a wagon?" I ask Elizabeth. "Should we stop him?"

"I will happily ride in the wagon if he will allow it."

I raise my hand in greeting, calling when he's near, "Good morning. Are you headed to Wrenvale?"

He tugs on the reins, bringing his mules to a stop. "I am."

"Can we ride in your wagon? We've lost our horses."

He looks us over. "It'll be fifty kevlings."

Taken aback, I say, "Fifty kevlings?"

"That's right."

So much for country hospitality.

I glance at Elizabeth. She's already opening her satchel, but I slap my hand over the flap, not about to let her display the amount of money she's carrying. "I'll pay it."

I hand over the bills, resigned. He counts them to make sure I'm not trying to swindle him, and then he nods toward the back. "Get in."

We scramble around the wagon, and I help Elizabeth up. Once we're seated on two bales of hay, she smiles. "This is nice."

I agree, but in my head, I'm running numbers. It's only been twenty-four hours, and this job has already cost far more than it should.

I can picture Arthur's bright-eyed amusement, Cat's quiet smirk, and Atticus's smug face. If I don't put a stop to the spending, I'll never hear the end of it.

ELIZABETH

We leap off the wagon in Wrenvale, thank the farmer, and then continue to the shack on foot. Fortunately, the roads are drying out, and it's easier to avoid the mud.

"Brace yourself," I warn Benjamin. "We're in for a lecture."

The hunter frowns as the shack appears in the distance. "Surely Sterling and Tansy wouldn't reprimand their employer?"

I laugh so loudly, I startle Benjamin. "I assure you, they would."

The door to the shack swings open when we're close. Tansy runs toward me, her face pinched with distress.

"*Where have you been?*" she yells when she reaches me, embracing me so tightly it hurts. "I thought you *died*."

"I'm so sorry. A dragon ate one of our horses, and the other spooked in the storm."

She jerks me forward. "A *what* ate your horse?"

"It's a long story." When I pull away, I find Sterling in the doorway. He stands behind Gretchen, his hands resting on his daughter's shoulders as if holding her back. His face is stern.

My stomach sinks. He's never given me that look.

"Is Sterling furious?" I ask Tansy under my breath.

“If it weren’t for Gretchen, he would have gone after you last night. I told him he couldn’t risk making her an orphan. It’s the only thing I could say to stop him.”

I didn’t even contemplate the possibility he’d look for me. What if Sterling had gone to Oakenridge last night? The vampires would have killed him.

He continues to watch us from the doorway, finally allowing Gretchen to run forward when we get closer. Oblivious to the tension between us, the sweet child grins as she waves dried dandelions in her hand. “I picked flowers, Miss Elizabeth. You can have one.”

I kneel, suddenly feeling like I’m going to cry. “Thank you, Gretchen.”

She offers me one of the flowers, her eyes somber. “Make a wish.”

I blow on it, scattering seeds. She does the same with another.

“What did you ask for?” I ask her.

“If I tell, it won’t come true.”

“I’ve heard that as well.”

She leans in and whispers not-so-quietly, “I wished we could go home.”

My poor heart twists. I blink quickly, forcing a big smile as I pull back. “I want that too.”

I slowly stand, meeting Sterling’s eyes as he reaches us. “I’m sorry I worried you.”

He turns his gaze to Benjamin. “I trust you have a good reason for returning her so late?”

Benjamin recounts our adventure, his tone business-like. Sterling listens to the report impassively. I cannot help but notice that the hunter leaves out the part where we fell in the mud and were forced to bathe in our shared room. But that’s probably for the best.

“It sounds like you’ve had a trying few days,” Tansy says soothingly. She directs her smile at Benjamin, grasping him by the arm and leading him toward the house. “I’ll make you a cup of tea.”

The hunter glances back at me, looking hesitant to leave.

“It’s all right,” I tell him. “We’ll join you shortly.”

His eyes pass from me to Sterling, and then he nods, allowing Tansy to pull him inside.

“Come along, Gretchen,” Tansy calls, taking the child with her.

Sterling looks back at me as soon as we’re alone. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.”

My friend looks past me toward the distant mountains.

I pull the satchel over my head and then toss it at him. “Take a look.”

He catches it easily. When he peers inside, he freezes.

“I got into the safe,” I say triumphantly. “I almost died, but I did it. We won’t be sleeping in the shack tonight. We’ll stay at a hotel until we find a house to rent—one large enough everyone can have their own room.”

Sterling closes the flap with a frown. “I hate this.”

“What do you hate?” I take back the satchel, feeling deflated. I thought he’d be happy.

“You shouldn’t be taking care of me. I should be taking care of you.”

I frown, not understanding. “You’ve always been in my employ—”

His eyes snap up to mine. “I hate that too.”

“Sterling.”

He turns away, running his hand through his hair. “Your father wouldn’t have wanted this.”

“You’re right—my father wouldn’t have wanted *any* of this,” I say softly. “This is awful. But I don’t see what you’ve done wrong.”

“Things have gotten so out of hand that you had to call in an outsider to take care of them—a *hunter*.” He says the word with great distaste. “I should be protecting you, Elizabeth. You and Tansy and Gretchen. Me, not *him*. I shouldn’t have to worry about you in the middle of the night, wondering why I let you go off with a man we don’t even know.”

“Let me?” I say a little incredulously.

“You know what I mean.” He hangs his head for a few seconds before he looks up. “Tansy said you want me to take her and Gretchen to my family in Rialis.”

“I think it would be best.”

“I’ll go, but only if you come with us.”

“I need to see this through, but you don’t have any ties to Oakenridge. You should go—take Gretchen home. Your family is going to love her.”

Pain crosses his face, and he drops his voice. “What if they don’t?”

“You left home to marry a girl your father didn’t approve of. You’re not the first nobleman’s son to defy his parents when he chose love over bloodlines, and you certainly won’t be the last. They’ll forgive you, and they’ll accept your daughter.” I soften my expression. “Especially now that your father has passed away. I’m sure your brother and mother miss you more than ever.”

He nods, thinking about it.

I drop my voice. “Benjamin was a gentleman, by the way. I know you’re worried, and you don’t feel comfortable asking me directly. But nothing even remotely romantic happened.”

“I hate hunters,” he says, though he looks relieved. After a moment, he frowns. “Did you want it to?”

I look toward the shack, knowing Benjamin is in there with Tansy, feeling the strangest wisp of jealousy. “Maybe?”

“Tansy won’t stop talking about him.”

“She doesn’t even know him.”

He gives me a pointed look. “Has that ever been an issue before?”

I think about that for a moment, and then I walk toward the house. “Maybe we should go inside.”

“THANK YOU FOR COMING WITH ME,” I say to Benjamin as we wait to speak with a man at the bank in Wrenvale. I clutch the satchel in my lap, glad I won’t be carrying it around much longer.

“I had to send the telegram anyway,” he says.

He wrote to Arthur, as he said he would, explaining that he wasn’t qualified for the job.

I don’t like it.

I know he said he has a position in administration, but I saw him kill three vampires. I watched him keep calm under extreme stress.

Benjamin’s a good hunter, even if he’s a little out of practice. And I don’t want someone else.

A man emerges from an office along the back wall. “Miss Delane?”

This bank isn’t as large as the ones in Valette, but it’s just as ornate, with marble floors and tall ceilings. We sit in a small lobby, in chairs upholstered with red velvet.

Benjamin and I rise to greet the man.

The banker is short and portly, with a kind face, a full head of thick blond hair, and a waistcoat that strains a bit over his soft, rounded stomach. Though he looks like he’s had a long, trying day, he smiles. “I understand you’d like to open an account?”

“That’s right.”

“Are you perhaps related to Colonel Delane?”

“I’m his daughter.”

The man’s eyes light up. “Are you? That’s lovely. What a pleasure. Yes, come this way, please. After you.” He gestures toward his office, a new bounce in his step. “Would you like tea? Of course we should have tea. Make yourselves comfortable, and I’ll return shortly.”

I press my lips together to keep from laughing, sinking into a chair that sits in front of his heavy walnut desk. It’s a nice office, with a rug on the floor and big windows. I study the potted plant in the corner, a little sad. Father would have known what it was.

Benjamin takes the seat next to me.

Several minutes later, the banker returns. “Tea will be here shortly.” He sits down in his chair, folding his hands on his desk. “I forgot to introduce myself. I’m Clive McAlister, senior banker here at the Wrenvale Bank.”

“I’m Elizabeth Delane.” I gesture to the hunter. “And this is my friend, Benjamin Oliver.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you both—a pleasure.” He leans across the desk to shake our hands, stretching a little to accomplish the feat. When he sits back, he asks, “And what is it you do, Mr. Oliver?”

“I’m the executive director of GHOST. We operate out of Valette.”

I jolt in my seat, gaping at Benjamin. He’s the executive director of the entire guild? He said he helped run it, not that he was in charge.

“GHOST?” Mr. McAlister says, a touch uneasy. “You’re…”

“Monster hunters,” he responds. “That’s correct.”

The banker turns back to me. “Are we having trouble with monsters here in Wrenvale, Miss Delane?”

“No,” I answer immediately.

“Not yet,” Benjamin amends.

I shoot him a look, but he merely shrugs as if it's not his fault that the truth is uncomfortable. And he's right. We don't know why the vampires are in Oakenridge, and this is the closest community to my village. Eventually, the monsters are going to get hungry.

The man laughs nervously. “What kind of account are you hoping to open?”

I glance at Benjamin, realizing I have no idea. He raises his eyebrows, asking if I want his input, and I nod subtly.

As if suddenly in his element, Benjamin leans back in his seat, ready to do business. “To start with, Miss Delane will require a safe deposit box. She'll also need a high yielding savings account, a working account, and why don't you tell us about your investment options?”

“YOU DIDN'T TELL me you're in charge of GHOST,” I say to Benjamin as soon as we walk out of the bank. My satchel is now much lighter.

By the time we finished, the banker was giddy, my father's papers and the gold bars were stashed in a deposit box, and I was left with a feeling of sheer relief.

“Arthur is in charge of the organization,” Benjamin answers, evading the question.

“Arthur owns it,” I say dryly. “But you apparently manage it for him.”

He shrugs, overly modest. “I went where I was most needed, and I was most needed in the office. Arthur is an excellent hunter, but he's rubbish when it comes to business.”

I smile a little. “Aren't you a little young to head up such a prestigious organization?”

He turns to look at me, a wry smile playing over his face. “I’m very good at what I do, Miss Delane.”

And out of nowhere, my stomach flutters. I stare into his dark brown, smiling eyes, and my heart gives an extra thump.

I rip my gaze away quickly. “Why did you become a hunter?”

“The wages were good,” he says as we continue walking. “My sister and I were on our own, and I needed to pull my weight. She was about to be married, and I was determined to pay for her wedding.”

“That was kind of you. Why GHOST, though? How did you find them? And what are they exactly?”

“They’re a private guild, for profit, regulated by the Alliance. I’d met Arthur a few times at social events, and I admired him. He’s entertaining, friendly—he can tell a good story. He doesn’t belittle people, nor tell cruel jokes. I went to him, explaining my situation, and asked for a job.”

“And just like that, you became a hunter?”

“And just like that, I started two years of training to become a hunter.”

“What about your sister? How did she feel about you joining GHOST?”

Benjamin laughs. “Danielle hated it. No one was happier than she was when Arthur gave me the management position. She would have chained me to a desk herself if she’d had the power.”

“I’d like to meet her.”

I catch myself just after I say it, realizing it was a little forward.

“She’d love to meet you.”

I turn to him, befuddled. “Why?”

“Why?” The afternoon sunlight catches on his hair, making him look very handsome. “You followed me into a

vampire-infested manor for the sake of your two employees, Miss Delane. Danielle would find that admirable.”

“Hardly,” I protest. “I needed the money as well.”

His smile becomes knowing. “Tell me your father didn’t have acquaintances you could have stayed with in the city. Arthur said your father was his *good* friend. I know Lady Cunningham would have taken you under her wing in an instant. I’m sure there are half a dozen other well-to-do families that would have come to your rescue as well.”

“With ulterior motives, no doubt.” I give him a pointed look. “And Arthur and Carissa have a son just a little older than I am.”

Benjamin nods. “Felix, yes. He’s in training right now. He’d likely love you too, and Lady Cunningham would, no doubt, be thrilled about the union, but he’s a suitor best avoided.”

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing, looking ahead. After several seconds, I softly admit, “I couldn’t abandon Tansy and Sterling. They’re my friends.”

“Your loyalty is commendable, Miss Delane.” Benjamin stops on the street to wait for a carriage to go by. “I wish I had a friend like you.”

Just before he crosses, I touch his arm, drawing his attention back. “You can have me, Mr. Oliver. If you want me...consider me yours.”

BENJAMIN

There's something a little too appealing about Elizabeth saying she'll be mine. Her words tie my tongue.

Her smile grows even warmer as she drops her hand. "I'm happy to be your friend."

Obviously, I know that's what she meant. But still...

"Consider it done," I say a little gruffly.

We cross the street once it's clear. When we reach the other side, Elizabeth turns to me. "Since we're friends now, may I speak more candidly?"

"Please do."

"I don't want you to return to Valette. Stay here, see this job to completion. I have faith in you."

That level of confidence makes me want to slay all of Elizabeth's monsters—the ones in her home and the ones in her heart. I want to bring light back into her solemn eyes.

"I write reports, Miss Delane. I file paperwork, pay taxes, approve weapon requests, and hold meetings. I don't hunt monsters. Not anymore. Arthur sent me out here to prove a point, which he has successfully done. It's time I return to Valette."

"You do hunt monsters. I watched you do it."

We're almost back to the telegraph office. There should be a reply by now—I have no doubt Arthur has been waiting for me to wave the white flag. He probably clasped his hands

together with triumph when he read my surrender, laughed out loud, and told Atticus to pack his bags.

The thought is humbling.

“Why don’t you visit me in Valette?” I say to Elizabeth. “Next time you’re in the city, I’ll take you on a tour of the guild.”

Her smile hardens. She’s not happy I’m leaving, which is gratifying...but foolish. She needs a real hunter.

I hold the door for Elizabeth as we step into the small office, looking at the man at the desk. “Any reply?”

He turns toward us. “Yes, sir. One came in about five minutes ago.”

I accept the slip of paper from him, reading it twice to make sure I didn’t misunderstand.

There is no budget for another hunter. I’m sure you’ll manage.

And then I read it again for good measure.

“What does it say?” Elizabeth asks, looking like she wants to rip it from my hand.

I resist the urge to crush the paper. “Arthur said there’s no room in the budget to send another hunter.”

I’m sure he thinks he’s funny.

She contemplates my answer. “You’re staying?”

“So it seems.”

Her entire face lights with triumph, but I’m not feeling as optimistic.

“I hope you know what you’re doing, Arthur,” I mutter, and then I turn from the office and escort Elizabeth out the door.

AFTER A DECENT DINNER and a good night's sleep, I feel rested enough to pretend I'm a hunter. I pull on a new pair of clothes after bathing, followed by my spare fitted leather jacket. It's an old piece from my apprentice days, a little snug in the shoulders now, but it will do.

We're at The Brass Bell, a hotel in Wrenvale. It's more elegant than the roadside establishment and half the price. And this time, I don't have to share a room or sleep on the floor.

I unroll my leather supply pouch on the bed, taking stock of my inventory. It looks like a roll an artist might keep brushes in, but it holds both standard hunting equipment and a few extras relevant to vampires. Most hunters have their own supplies, only supplementing their tools with guild-issued tonics and poisons, but I never bothered to buy my own. There was never a need.

Most everything in here is wildly expensive, and some of it is priceless. There are four ash stakes, each sharpened to a deadly point and threaded with silver. Crossbows are the safer alternative, as they keep the hunter further from the monsters' fangs, but stakes are needed when you're fighting in close quarters.

Next to the stakes is a collection of green, slender bottles—tonics that fortify and heal. There's also a black bottle of poison hemlock oil infused with bleeding heart pollen for wiping on a blade. The concoction blocks a spirit's ability to regenerate, thus rendering them as good as dead if you hit something vital—especially handy for our hunters who prefer blades to bows. There's also a case of silver bullets for my pistol. They won't kill vampires, but they will slow them down.

And last, there's an unassuming blue glass bottle about as large as my thumb, stopped with a fat cork. It's at least thirty years old, and it's the only item in the kit we cannot create or purchase. Once it's gone, it's gone. And after that, our job will be far more dangerous. Tucked next to the bottle is the sterile syringe that goes with it.

I pick up the vampire antivenom, holding it up to the window to examine it. Like a thick syrup, it moves slowly.

But it hasn't dried up. Not yet.

When Arthur began GHOST, he had a small wooden box that contained twelve of the tiny bottles. We're down to one—this one.

We've used eleven over the years. Eleven hunters saved.

And now this is all that's left.

I think back to Elizabeth's question, guilt circling in my mind like a vulture. I lied to her. There is an antivenom—a substance that can be administered in the first twenty-eight days after a person is infected that will kill the parasitic spirit in the bloodstream.

It's the guild's best-kept secret.

Satisfied everything is in order, I roll up the pouch and buckle it closed. After inspecting my bolts, ensuring the used ones are properly clean, I strap my crossbow to my back and slide my pistol into its holster. Then I step into the hall of the hotel.

I don't expect to find Elizabeth waiting for me, and certainly not right outside my door. But there she is, leaning against the wall, her hair long and loose. Our eyes meet as I step out of my room, and she immediately pushes forward.

She wears a white blouse, a scarlet corset, tall black boots, and a pair of fitted trousers. She looks like a pirate princess, or a vision out of a dream, and it takes me a moment to gather my wits. But I sober fairly quickly when I see the stake hanging from her belt.

“What's that?” I demand, jerking my head toward it.

“It's a stake.” She glances at her hip. “I bought it in the market yesterday while Tansy and I were shopping.”

“And what do you plan to do with it?”

She gives me the smallest of shrugs, averting her eyes like she's uncomfortable. “Stake something?”

“Something like a vampire?” I ask incredulously.

Finally, her gray eyes meet mine. Her lips quirk ever so subtly, making my blood run a little warmer. “You catch on quick, Mr. Oliver.”

I laugh, shaking my head. “You’re not coming with me.”

“You can’t go out there alone.”

“I’m not alone—I have Greg.”

“I want to go with you.” She steps forward. “We’ll do this together.”

“Didn’t you listen to me yesterday? I trained in the guildhall for six months before I ever set foot in the field as an apprentice. You want to become a hunter, that’s fine. I’ll take you to the guild myself when this is over. But you’re not going out there until you’re ready.”

“You let me go before.”

“Before was different. I thought we were dealing with one or two vampires, and I had no reason to believe they’d linger in your manor. On top of that, you were desperate, and I—” I cut myself off abruptly.

“You what?” She takes another step in.

“I wanted your company.”

Something flickers in her eyes. “Why?”

I don’t answer.

“Tell me,” she urges.

I give in and flash her a casual smile. “You’re beautiful, Miss Delane. What man wouldn’t covet your attention?”

Her lips part ever so subtly, and she inhales slowly, as if breathing in my admission. “Am I less beautiful today, Mr. Oliver? Is that why you won’t take me with you?”

I tilt my head back and laugh, turning toward the stairs, only to stop abruptly when I feel the tip of her cheap stake poking the middle of my back.

“I’m quicker than I look, Mr. Oliver,” she says. “Before, I was unarmed, and certainly unprepared, but I studied fencing for eight years, and I’m not as helpless as I look.”

I grin because she can’t see me, but I make my voice stern. “Is this how we’re going to play, Miss Delane?”

“Take me with you.”

“If I unarm you, you will agree to stay. If you best me, you may accompany me. Deal?”

“Deal.”

I turn lightning-fast, snatching the stake from her hands and pinning her against my closed room door. I catch the back of her head before it collides with the wood, cradling it in my palm.

Elizabeth stares up at me, her pupils dilated with exhilaration. I lean down, gently scraping my teeth over her ivory neck. Against her skin, I say, “You’re dead, Miss Delane.”

Elizabeth trembles under my touch, melting into me like a lover in an embrace. Her reaction kindles a fire in my stomach, but I release her, stepping back to gloat just a little.

Wide-eyed, she brings her hand to her throat. “You play dirty, Mr. Oliver.”

“I’ll be back late. Don’t go out at night, all right? Eat well before dark and return to your room. Stay with Sterling and Tansy—there’s safety in numbers.”

She nods resolutely, looking so dejected, I smile. Before I can stop myself, I take her hand, bringing it to my lips. “It was a good effort.”

“Not good enough,” she laughs, watching as I drop a kiss to her knuckles.

“Don’t wait up for me. I’ll see you tomorrow morning,” I promise, and then I turn away from her.

I’m halfway down the hall when Elizabeth calls, “Don’t die, Mr. Oliver. I’d like to try that again when you return.”

I look back over my shoulder, amused. “You want to spar with me?”

“Spar?” Mischief lights her smokey eyes. “No. But something like that.”

Startled, I nearly trip.

She waves, sending me off, knowing exactly how her words affected me.

“LET ME SEE IF I UNDERSTAND,” the stable master says. “A dragon ate one of my horses, the other ran off, and now you’re here to borrow a third?”

“Don’t pretend my deposit didn’t cover their full worth,” I say wryly.

“What business did you say you’re in?”

“I’m a guild-certified monster hunter.” Wryly, I add, “Shall I show you my credentials?”

He processes my answer with reservation. “May I inquire what you’re doing in Wrenvale?”

“Protecting it from monsters.” I give him a pointed look.

“I have another horse.”

“How much?”

“Can you promise me you’ll return this one?”

“No.”

He growls under his breath, shaking his head like he finds me particularly aggravating. “What kind of monsters are we talking about, exactly?”

“Vampires.”

He winces. “Just take a blasted horse. Try not to kill it, all right? And if you see the one that ran off, bring it back, would you?”

This turned out better than I expected. “I’ll do my best to keep this one alive.”

He grunts. “Take the gray mare out in the stable. Ask Elgin for her.”

“Elgin?”

“He’s ten, lounges around when he should be mucking stalls. You’ll see him.”

Amused, I leave the building to find the boy and fetch my horse.

I’m near the edge of the forest, only a few minutes outside of Oakenridge, when I call for Greg. “I’m almost to the village. Where are you, you worthless beast?”

He doesn’t answer, but there’s a shift in my head.

“I can feel your presence poking around in my brain,” I say. “I know you’re there somewhere.”

“It’s not much of a brain, though, is it?”

I smile, feeling generous this morning. “I sent a telegram to Arthur, asking him to send a hunter experienced with vampires.”

“You’re tucking your tail and running home? It’s good to acknowledge your limitations.”

“He refused my request.”

The dragon growls out what sounds suspiciously like a groan.

“Please tell me you spotted something that will give us a clue as to why the monsters are in this deserted village.”

He’s quiet.

“Greg, stop watching squirrels.”

“I didn’t see anything.”

“The vampires didn’t leave the manor at all? Even at night?”

“I don’t know.”

I grit my teeth, breathing in slowly through my nose. “What do you mean, you don’t know?”

“I got sick.”

“Was it your stomach?”

He doesn’t answer right away. Finally, he says, “Yes.”

“What did Arthur tell you about eating dead things? You’re not a scavenger, Greg. You don’t have the immune system for it.”

“It was alive.”

“It was a *vampire*. Vampires are dead.”

“You don’t know that’s what made me sick. Maybe it was the horse. Maybe it was a bad horse.”

“That was the freshest horse you’ve ever eaten.”

He huffs.

“Do you feel better now?”

“My stomach’s squirming a bit, but I think I’m all right.”

I arrive at the edge of the village. “Fine. I’m going in.”

ELIZABETH

“I don’t like it.” I look again at the dark night beyond the window. “Benjamin should be back by now, don’t you think?”

Tansy sits atop the bed in her room, braiding Gretchen’s hair while the child plays with her doll.

“He’s a hunter, Elizabeth,” Sterling says mildly, drinking tea while browsing a newspaper at the small corner table. “This is what he does.”

“He’s not, though.”

My friends both whip their heads up. Tansy’s face hardens with irritation as she demands, “He told you?”

“You knew?”

“We both knew,” Sterling says. “We told him not to tell you—we didn’t think it would bring you comfort.” He gestures toward the window. “Were we wrong?”

Sighing, I drop the curtain. “The man trained for two years. It’s not like he’s a complete novice.”

Tansy narrows her eyes, her smile too knowing for my liking. “You like him.”

I don’t answer right away, her calculating expression making me nervous. “A little. Maybe.”

Probably.

Yes.

I think of the way Benjamin pinned me to the door and ran his teeth over my neck, and my skin flushes.

“He’ll be fine,” Sterling assures me. “He has a dragon.”

“They don’t seem to get along that well.”

From what I could tell, anyway. I only heard Benjamin’s half of their conversations.

Gretchen looks up. “Mr. Oliver has a dragon?”

“Supposedly,” Sterling says.

“Not supposedly,” I correct. “I saw him.”

Gretchen turns to me. “Can *I* see him?”

“No.” Sterling shoots me a warning look like he’s afraid I’m going to introduce the beast to his daughter myself.

“He’s more a work dragon than a pet dragon,” I tell her.

Her eyes grow as wide as saucers. “Are there pet dragons too?”

“No.” Sterling finishes his tea and rises. “And it’s well past your bedtime.”

His daughter pouts atop Tansy’s bed. “A little longer?”

Tansy finishes with the girl’s hair. “We’ll see you in the morning.”

“Should we go to the hotel café for breakfast?” I ask Gretchen. “They have cake...”

The girl looks at Sterling. “Cake for breakfast?”

He gives me an unamused look, but his almost-smile betrays him. “If you go to bed without a fuss.”

Immediately, she turns around, giving Tansy a big hug. Mine is next, and then she and Sterling leave the room.

Tansy turns to me when the door closes. Again, she says, “You like the hunter.”

I sigh, glad we have something happy to talk about for once. “You’re a dog on a bone sometimes.”

“You never like anyone.”

“That’s not true,” I argue. “I just don’t trust them to like me back.”

“And Benjamin? Does he like you?”

“He’s the cheapest man I’ve ever met, and yet, I don’t feel like he’s trying to worm into my good graces so he can win me over and claim Father’s fortune.” I frown. “In fact, he tried to *leave*.”

Tansy’s face falls.

“But I think he might like me a little.” Again, I think of the way he held me.

“What’s that look?” She’s too observant. “What are you thinking about?”

“Nothing,” I lie.

“Has he kissed you?”

I laugh. “Goodness, Tansy, how your mind runs away with you.”

She’s about to respond when something catches her attention. She falls silent, listening.

Instantly on edge, I ask, “What is it?”

“I heard a noise.”

“Where did it come from?”

“Outside the window.”

We’re on the second level.

I glance toward the closed drapes, nervous. “Maybe it was a bird?”

“A bird at night?”

“A bat then,” I whisper.

“At the *window*?”

“I don’t know!” I hiss quietly.

“You must invite a vampire in, right? They can’t just walk inside? Or is that a tale?”

“I certainly didn’t invite them into the manor.”

She screams when there’s a loud thump on the glass. Not waiting to see what it is, we bolt toward the door. But instead of running down the stairs to find Sterling, I turn toward my room at the end of the hall.

“What are you doing?” Tansy cries.

“Getting my stake!” I fumble with the key, finally opening the door.

Even if it is a vampire out there, I don’t know how we’re supposed to run anyway—it’s not as if we can flee into the night again. We have nowhere to go, and they probably have the hotel surrounded.

We got lucky once. It will be difficult to get past them again. The vampires are monsters, but they’re not stupid. I saw intelligence in their eyes.

Tansy follows me inside, urging me to hurry as I grab the stake I left on the bedside table. Once I have it, we race for the door.

“We need to go to Sterling,” Tansy says. “We should be together.”

I throw open the door and then let out a cry of surprise when I see the vampire waiting for us on the other side. My heart leaps into my throat, and I slam it shut.

“We’re trapped,” I breathe, turning to Tansy. “What are we going to do?”

The door handle begins to turn, and I flip the deadbolt, leaning against it as if I can prevent an intrusion. As I frantically try to devise a plan, the window breaks.

It’s a horrible sound, triggering a feeling of déjà vu. But this time, I don’t think it’s a dragon on the other side.

“Elizabeth!” Tansy screams as the vampire crawls past the drapes.

The monster's dark eyes fix on me. I step in front of Tansy and hold out my stake, trembling. "Stay back."

"Hello, Elizabeth," the monster says coolly, smiling a little at my weapon. His voice is deeper than the first I heard speak, but it's just as jarring.

"How do you know my name?" I demand, waving the stake when he comes closer. "Stop *moving*."

He pauses, but I can't help but think that he's humoring me. "You can put that down. I'm not going to hurt you."

"It's difficult to believe you when you just busted through the window."

He chuckles. "You are tempting, but I have orders to bring you back unscathed."

My stomach drops. "You've been ordered to abduct me?"

Behind me, Tansy's fingers dig into my arm as she whimpers in fear.

The monster's eyes move behind me. "I have no such orders for your friend. If you fight me, I'll kill her."

"Who wants me?" I demand.

"I can't tell you that."

"*Why* do they want me?"

He laughs again. "I can't tell you that either."

"*Can't?* You don't know?"

He merely shrugs.

I assess the situation, coming to a decision. "I'll go with you."

Tansy clamps down on my arm so tightly; her nails would likely draw blood if my blouse was sleeveless. "Elizabeth, *no*."

"It's all right." I try to keep calm like I know what I'm doing, when in fact, I'm making it up as I go. I yank away from her, creeping toward the monster.

His smile is chilling. It's like looking into death itself and seeing your reflection in its clutches. "We'll go through the door like civilized people."

"You're not a person," I say. "You're a spirit."

"Are you the hunter's pretty protégé?" He laughs. "Is he teaching you all he knows?"

The vile monster grabs my arm, yanking me against him. His breath *reeks*.

"You should have picked a better teacher." He leers down at me, licking his lips like he's starving. "He should know better than to leave his charge alone."

"He wasn't hired to protect me," I say boldly, turning my head away from his mouth.

Leaning forward, he presses his nose to my neck and inhales deeply. "He should have been. I—"

He rears back, letting out a loud hiss. He suddenly bares his fangs, grasping the stake that's protruding from his stomach.

"Run!" I yell to Tansy.

"Where?" She's practically hysterical. "There's another one in the hall!"

The vampire yanks the stake from his gut, stalking toward us like a monster on the hunt. Orders or not, he means to kill me now.

"Elizabeth!" Tansy screams as he lunges.

Even though I didn't kill him, he's sluggish from what should be a mortal wound. We dart out of the way, and he slams into the wall, dropping the stake with a grunt.

Running on fear, I leap forward, snatching it before he realizes what I'm up to.

"His chest this time!" Tansy screams as the monster turns. "You have to stab it into his heart!"

“I’m *trying!*” I yell as I barely evade another attack. My hair falls over my eyes, sticking to the perspiration on my face. “It’s not that easy!”

He makes another grab for me, and this time, I brace myself, shoving the stake into his chest as hard as I can and waiting for the bite of his fangs.

But the bite never comes.

He clutches the stake, falling on the floor and twitching. This time, he doesn’t pull it out.

“Elizabeth, there’s another!” Tansy yells, madly gesturing toward the window.

I stare at the vampire on the ground, stricken. “Can I take out the stake? Will he still be dead?”

“I don’t know!”

Just as the vampire splits the drapes and crawls through the broken window, a bolt embeds itself in his back. The tip protrudes from his chest, a shocking sight neither of us were prepared for.

Tansy screams. I scream too.

We’re frozen in place like deer, trapped with two hopefully dead vampires. Not even a minute later, there’s a growl outside the door, followed by a hiss, a thwack, and a *thump*.

“Elizabeth!” Benjamin yells. “Let me in!”

I tear toward the door. My hand slips on the doorknob, my fingers slicked with blood that’s not mine—blood that probably doesn’t belong to the corpse on the floor either.

Which I don’t want to think about.

Benjamin reaches for me as soon as I throw the door open, his eyes falling to the blood.

So much blood.

He breathes hard, his mouth falling open as blatant worry consumes his expression.

“It’s not mine,” I assure him, beginning to shake. I glance at the vampire and then look away quickly when my stomach rolls. “I killed it.”

“You killed it?” the hunter asks dumbly, clutching my shoulders.

“I did. Are there more?”

“No, only the three.”

Behind me, Tansy lowers herself onto the bed, looking like she’s going to faint.

“Greg is circling,” Benjamin says. “He saw them just as soon as I entered the city. I didn’t get here in time.”

“You killed two out of three.” I laugh, about to cry. “That’s not bad odds for a man who’s usually chained to his desk.”

He shakes his head. “You killed one. That’s astounding for a girl with no training.”

I fix him with a stare that’s probably a little insane around the edges. “I’m very good at what I do, Mr. Oliver.”

He barks out a deep laugh. The comforting rumble of it eases my lingering anxiety, but it doesn’t change the fact that there are three dead vampires in The Brass Bell.

“What do we do with them?” I ask.

Benjamin sighs. “We burn them.”

ELIZABETH

I thought it would be difficult to keep the news of the attack from spreading throughout the city, but it was surprisingly easy.

“I’m sure I don’t have to explain why you don’t want rumors of this situation to spread,” Benjamin says to the owner of the establishment, his nonchalant manner making me think he has these sorts of conversations often. “Vampires are never good for business.”

Excluding our group, the owner is the only person who saw the bodies and discovered they weren’t human. He was called in to deal with the situation after Benjamin told the woman at the front desk I was nearly abducted. Apparently there’s a ring of ruffians kidnapping young heiresses and holding them for ransom—or so Benjamin claimed.

The woman believed him because she isn’t aware I have no one to pay the ransom, and therefore, I’d make a poor victim.

“I won’t say a word,” the man vows solemnly, and then he shudders. There’s a good chance he won’t sleep tonight.

Neither will I. My mind keeps trying to replay the event. Every time I remember the sound of the glass breaking, my chest feels tight and my legs itch to run.

But even if I were to run, where would I go?

Benjamin turns back to me when we’re finished with the hotel manager. “You must be exhausted.”

I bathed and threw away my stained clothing, but I don't feel clean. Every time I look down, I half-expect to see blood on my hands.

I nod, worried that if I try to answer, I'll start sobbing. The horrors of the evening caught up with me after my heart rate returned to normal, and now I'm a mess.

Benjamin takes me by the shoulder and leads me out of the office and into the hotel's grand foyer.

"Where are we going?" I ask, realizing he's directing me toward the stairs that lead to my room. I turn before he can answer, clutching his arm tightly. "I can't go back to—"

"My room, Miss Delane," he interrupts. "It seems we have a strange fate."

I look up at him. "And what fate is that?"

He turns his dark brown eyes on me. "Whenever we're together, you're destined to steal my bed."

I should protest or act affronted or *something*, but I'm so relieved I won't be in a room by myself tonight, I can't work up the fake indignation.

Tansy and Gretchen fell asleep about thirty minutes ago, according to Sterling. He's going to stay with them on the settee in his room. There's no room for me in there, not unless I fancy sleeping on the floor. And I don't.

We climb the stairs, and I stare at the door as Benjamin looks for his key.

This is where it happened—where he caged me with his body and held me like he was going to kiss me. We were close. I saw a flicker of attraction in his eyes. It matched my own.

But that was before.

"Mr. Oliver?" I ask as he slides the key into the lock. "If a person kills something that's already dead, is it considered... killing?"

He glances at me as he opens the door. “You’re not a murderess, if that’s what you’re asking. You killed a spirit, Miss Delane, not a human. The human passed away long ago. None of his consciousness remained. The body he left was but a shell.”

“I don’t want to be a hunter.”

He laughs under his breath, not nearly as shaken by the ordeal as I am. “I didn’t figure you did.”

“Why would a vampire want to kidnap me?”

“Vampires don’t abduct people. They’re fueled by hunger.” He closes the door once we’re inside, locks it, and then drags a chair across the room and wedges it under the doorknob, just in case.

“He said he was charged with delivering me to someone.”

That catches the hunter’s attention. He slowly turns to look at me. “He told you that?”

“He said he had orders to bring me in unscathed, but I couldn’t get him to tell me where he wanted to take me or who gave him the order.”

The hunter’s brow furrows as he thinks, his eyes narrowing as he looks past me. It’s like he’s flipping through the pages of a book, searching for something.

“What is it?” I ask.

“I’ve never heard of such a thing. Often, they’ll form clans for protection, but there’s always a power struggle. They don’t cooperate well.” He turns his eyes on me. “They tried to take you at the manor too.”

I shiver, remembering the monster’s cold embrace.

Benjamin turns toward the fireplace and begins stacking wood. “Greg?” He pauses. “The monsters are looking for Elizabeth. Keep a close eye on the city tonight, all right?”

I cross my arms, always mildly uncomfortable when the hunter has conversations with his dragon.

“You can sleep in the morning. I swear, if I wake up with a vampire attached to my neck, I’ll have your scaled hide.” He pauses again, his tone softening. “She’s shaken, but all right. You saw them in time.”

I smile a little.

“I’ll try.” Another pause. “I’ll tell her.”

When he’s quiet for several seconds, and I believe the conversation is over, I ask, “Tell me what?”

Benjamin uses his knife against a piece of flint, sending sparks to the kindling. “Greg says he’s sorry he didn’t see the vampires leave the manor, and he’s glad you’re all right.”

“Oh. That’s nice of him.”

The hunter grunts, obviously not liking his partner very much.

“Is he still...in your head?” I ask.

“No, he broke the connection.” Benjamin stands as the fire spreads, stretching.

“How does it work? You can hear his thoughts, but you must speak aloud?”

“Dragons have exceptional hearing, and once they know a person, they’re especially attuned to the sound of their voice. They can focus on it, turning off the other chatter. They can’t read minds, though.”

“How does he speak to you? Do you hear all his thoughts?”

“No, only the ones he sends to me, thank goodness. Once he gets a feel for a person, he knows the address in which to send his messages, so to speak.”

“So, could he talk in my head?”

“After he got to know you.”

The thought is both disconcerting and intriguing. What would it be like to have a conversation with a dragon?

“Why doesn’t he just talk to you?”

“He lacks vocal cords, and this works better anyway. We’re rarely close enough to carry on a normal conversation.”

“If I say his name, will it catch his attention? Can he hear something I say?”

“Possibly, though he doesn’t know you well enough to answer yet.”

“That’s all right.” I turn away a little, feeling foolish. “Greg? If you can hear me, thank you for saving me tonight. I’ll sleep well knowing you’re keeping watch.”

“He says you’re welcome.” Benjamin rolls his eyes a little, likely at something the dragon said. “I’m not telling her that. Goodnight Greg.”

“Is he...gone?”

“It feels like it.”

“What did he want to tell me?”

Benjamin gives me a droll look. “That you seem like a lovely girl, and he’s sorry Arthur scraped the bottom of the barrel when he sent me.”

“I’m glad Arthur sent you.”

He grunts again, obviously not agreeing.

I walk toward him, only stopping when we’re close enough I must look up to see his face. Benjamin drops his gaze to the floor, but I’m not deterred. “I’m afraid you’re going to have to come to terms with the fact that you’re stuck with me.”

He lifts his eyes, his expression becoming skeptical. “You need a hunter who’s experienced with physical spirits.”

“I have money now—I can pay you. You don’t have to work for free. If you’re worried I’m wasting your time, I assure you I fully intend—”

“I don’t want your money, Elizabeth,” he interrupts, his tone an abrupt snap.

I stare at him, stricken.

He clears his throat. “I’m sorry, Miss Delane. I shouldn’t have spoken so—”

I press my hand over his mouth before he can finish, not wanting his apology. “Don’t.”

It takes him completely off guard. “What are you doing?” he mumbles against my palm.

“Don’t ruin it,” I whisper.

He tugs my hand from his mouth. “Ruin *what*?”

“That was the most beautiful thing a man has ever said to me. Don’t take it back. Don’t apologize. Don’t ‘Miss Delane’ me.”

“Miss Delane—”

“*Benjamin.*”

He stops short.

“Do you like me?” I ask boldly.

“What?”

“Does being locked in this small room tie a warm knot in your stomach? Have you relived our moment in the hall a dozen times?” I swallow. “Tell me it’s not just me.”

His jaw softens with surprise. The frustrating man looks like he’s been struck mute.

“All I’m saying is that if you do like me, even a little, stop telling me all the reasons you should *leave*.” I turn toward the bed. “I’m going to sleep.”

The hunter loops an arm around my waist and drags me back. My shoulders meet his chest with a soft thump, and my eyes fly wide.

Benjamin’s jaw hovers close to my ear. In a smooth, dark voice, he says, “You need a more experienced hunter, and I’m wildly attracted to you. Those two facts are not at odds with each other, Miss Delane. They can, and do, coexist.”

My heart beats like mad. We’re in a lover’s embrace, intimate. And Benjamin just admitted he’s attracted to me.

Wildly attracted, which feels promising no matter how you examine it.

I swallow. “Be that as it may, I don’t want a different hunter. I want *you*.”

Benjamin growls, turning me in his arms. “Want me how? As a hunter? Or as a man?”

The lines have blurred. Even I’m not sure anymore. Are we talking about the job? Or a relationship?

“Why must I choose?” I finally say.

He looks conflicted. “It’s late, and our emotions are high after the night’s events. We’re both too tired to face the situation objectively, and it would be unethical of me to trust your emotions right now.”

“What does *that* mean?”

He hesitates, making me think I’m not going to like what he’s about to say.

“We were warned about this type of situation in our training,” he explains. “It’s common for clients to believe they’re falling in love with the hunter who comes to their aid, confusing their feelings of gratitude for more.”

“Please tell me you didn’t just say that.”

“You’ve experienced so many highs and lows these last few days,” he continues. “It’s normal—”

“I don’t want your lecture.”

His hand flexes over my back. Slowly, as if he’s not even aware of it, he leans down. “You’re maddening.”

“And you’re still lecturing. Either kiss me or let me go to sleep.”

He releases me. “Go to sleep, Miss Delane.”

“You like me,” I challenge, tilting my head back to meet his eyes, not caring that the statement is bold. “I *know* you do.”

“I never denied it.”

“Then *why* are you fighting it?”

He looks down. “It’s not just something they warned us about. It’s against the rules.”

My eyebrows inch up. “GHOST has rules about kissing?”

“Article Five, Section Seven: no entering into a romantic or physical relationship with the client while on a job.”

I stare at him, realizing he’s serious. “I’m going to bed.”

He nods, averting his eyes. “I’ll sleep on the settee.”

And that, I’m afraid to say, is that.

BENJAMIN

I'm grateful the northern provinces have embraced coffee, as tea wouldn't be enough this morning, not after the night we had. I'm on my second cup and am debating requesting a third. The hotel café is busy this morning, but we managed to get a table for five.

I barely slept, and from the way Elizabeth tossed and turned all night, I doubt she did either. Sterling and Tansy look a little rough as well.

Gretchen is the only one at our table that's well rested. The young girl happily eats her cake, swinging her legs in her chair and talking nonsense to her doll.

"Do you have a plan, Mr. Oliver?" Sterling asks once the coffee has had a chance to begin its job.

I set my cup down with a sigh. "I do."

I make the mistake of looking at Elizabeth, and memories of last night's conversation accost me. I decided at roughly four in the morning I should have tossed GHOST's blasted rules out the window.

But in the light of morning, I know I made the responsible choice. The rules are in place for this sort of situation. It's not right for a hunter to take advantage of his client. If Elizabeth is still interested in me after we have this mess sorted, then...

No, I cannot think of that right now. I must focus on the job.

"Well?" Sterling asks.

“Miss Delane and I must go to Valette. I need to speak with Lord Cunningham and browse GHOST’s resource library.”

“Why must Elizabeth go with you?” Tansy asks.

“Because I cannot leave her here now that we know she’s being hunted.”

Tansy blanches, and Sterling looks at Gretchen sharply to see how she’ll respond. But the girl is preoccupied, pretending to feed pumpkin cake crumbs to her doll.

“And where will I stay while we’re in Valette?” Elizabeth asks.

I meet her eyes. “With me.”

Her mouth tugs to the side as she narrows her eyes, the expression less than friendly. “Surely that breaks some GHOST rule, Mr. Oliver? An article.” She quirks a brow. “A section.”

“If it makes you uncomfortable, Miss Delane, I’m sure Lady Cunningham would be thrilled to take you in.”

Tansy and Sterling look between us. Neither of them is stupid. I’m sure they figured out something happened between us last night.

“Not at all,” Elizabeth says primly. “I just don’t want to promote brazen lawlessness.”

I laugh despite myself, earning a subtle smile from the pretty heiress. “I will book the train tickets today.”

“We’ll go with you,” Sterling says, and then he glances at Tansy as if asking permission.

“No.” Elizabeth turns to her friends. “Go to your mother and brother, Sterling. Take Tansy with you. Introduce them to Gretchen. There will never be a better time.”

“Elizabeth,” he says quietly, shaking his head.

“Mr. Oliver is taking me to GHOST’s main guildhall. Where could I possibly be safer?”

“I can’t—”

“Sterling.” Tansy widens her eyes. None-too-subtly, she says, “Elizabeth wants to go with *Mr. Oliver*. We’ll only be in the way.”

Elizabeth turns her face to the ceiling, mildly annoyed.

Sterling hardens his expression as he focuses on me. “You will protect her.”

“With my life, if need be. That’s my vow as a GHOST hunter and my personal promise to you.”

Elizabeth’s eyes soften, the smoke-fire dissipating until they’re a saddened gray again. I don’t like it, nor do I understand it. What did I say that would bother her?

“Very well,” Sterling says, reluctantly giving in. “Tansy, Gretchen, and I will go to Rialis.”

At least that boosts Elizabeth’s spirits. She nods like she’s relieved and then turns to me. “When do we leave for Valette?”

“As soon as possible.” I rise, ready to leave. “Hopefully today.”

THE CONDUCTOR SHOWS Elizabeth and me to our compartment, oblivious to the air of discomfort between us.

“The benches make into beds when you’re ready to rest,” the man says, demonstrating the mechanics of the process. “Bedding is in the cubby above you. Storage compartments for your personal things are next to that. The windows contain two shades, one intended to let in light and the other to block it when you’re trying to sleep.” He demonstrates each of the roller shades, as if we’re not smart enough to figure out how to pull the string attached to each. “There’s a lock on the door for privacy, but keep in mind I have a key and will use it in case of emergencies or if you miss your stop.”

“That’s fine,” I say, wishing he’d leave.

He turns back when he's done. "The dining car is open. Dinner will be served soon, but you and your wife may order light refreshments whenever you like."

Wife.

Again.

This time, however, we told no lies. The man simply assumed.

"Thank you." I pass him a tip. When he leaves to assist the next patron, I ask Elizabeth, "Would you like the door open or...closed?"

Her expression becomes rather pinched. She stares at me and then at the door. "Closed," she finally says, though it looks like she hates to do so. "The other passengers don't need to hear our conversations."

I slide the pocket door shut, feeling awkward when I sit on the bench across from her. Elizabeth's looking especially beautiful today in a gray traveling dress and coordinating long-sleeved jacket. The fabric matches her eyes, and the cut is fitted. A row of white ruffles tumbles from her neck to her waist. She looks prim and proper, and something about that is making it difficult to think.

This woman killed a vampire last night with nothing but a cheap novelty stake, and now she looks like a librarian.

"What is it?" Elizabeth frowns at her outfit like there's something wrong with it.

I yank my eyes to the window. "Nothing."

"No, tell me."

Giving in, I turn back. "You look lovely in gray."

"Oh." Her mouth works like she's trying not to smile. "Thank you."

I go back to looking out the window, wishing I would have purchased an overpriced book from the bookstand next to the ticket counter. But I doubt I'd have a chance to read anyway. It

quickly becomes apparent that Elizabeth isn't the type to sit idly by and let the scenery pass.

She must fill every moment with conversation, even if she's irritated with me and would rather not talk. She starts a conversation, pulls back, plays aloof for ten to fifteen minutes, and then begins the cycle all over again.

"What's GHOST like?" she says after a particularly long stretch of time. It's dark beyond the windows now.

"The guildhall or the organization itself?"

"The hall. My father and I met with Arthur and his wife every time we visited Valette, but I never got to see the guildhall."

"It's loud. There are never less than twenty-five hunters milling about, most of them chatting when they have better things to do. We have a training hall, a dining hall, a community room, an infirmary, a library, and a reception foyer. There's also a dormitory for the hunters who prefer to live on-site. We have a small stable on the grounds and a larger one in the outskirts of the city."

"And where does Greg live?"

"On Arthur's country estate. He would be conspicuous in the city."

"And your office?"

"In the hall between the foyer and the training room."

"You promised you'd take me on a tour."

I meet her eyes. "I will."

"I thought about what you said last night," she says, her tone changing. The admission feels rather abrupt after the casual conversation.

I swallow. "And?"

"I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable."

"Miss Delane—"

"I'm sure Arthur made the rules for a reason, and—"

“Elizabeth.”

“What?” She huffs out a breath, looking like she’s not happy I interrupted her prepared speech.

“You’ve made me feel many things, but discomfort is not one of them.”

She waffles, looking frustrated.

“But...you’re right,” I continue. “The rules are in place for a reason. I think it will be best if we keep our relationship professional for now, and after the situation has been remedied, we can...” My tongue becomes dry, and I’m having trouble finding words to finish the sentence.

Elizabeth quirks an eyebrow. “Explore other options?”

I nod.

“Very well.” She leans forward on her bench, extending her hand. “You have a deal, Mr. Oliver.”

Against my better judgment, we shake.

“I hate to interrupt your feeble attempts at courting, but I thought I should remind you I’m still here,” Greg mutters in my head, startling me. *“I can give you some advice if you’d like. I shadow Atticus fairly often, and he seems to have an abundance of luck with the ladies.”*

I hadn’t realized the dragon was listening.

“Don’t eavesdrop, Greg,” I snap. “It’s rude.” I pause. “Are you saying Atticus is routinely breaking Article Five, Section Seven?”

“I don’t know what that is. Nor do I care.”

“Why are you talking to me right now?”

“You told me to let you know if I spot a vampire.”

I sit upright. “And you’ve spotted one?”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that to begin with?”

“I was going to eat him so I wouldn’t have to bother you, but I thought to myself, maybe it was the vampire that upset my stomach last time and not the horse. Maybe I should let you deal with it.”

“It was never the horse, Greg.” I shake my head. “How many vampires?”

“One. He looks sickly though. Not a lot of meat to him.”

“They all look sickly—they’re dead. Where is he?”

“On the roof, making his way down the cars.”

I swear under my breath, reaching for my crossbow.

“What’s going on?” Elizabeth’s voice is calm, but she clenches her hands in her lap.

I strap the crossbow and its bolts to my back. “We’re about to have a visitor. I’m going to take care of him before he reaches us.”

“How?”

“I’m going to climb on top of the car.”

“On top of the *train car*?” she demands, horrified.

“I’ve done it before.” I open the window, frowning a bit as the dark ground goes whizzing past. I need to ask Arthur for a raise.

“But how many years ago?” Elizabeth asks.

“A few.” I flash her a smile that I hope looks confident. “I’ll be back shortly. If an attendant comes by again, order us a fresh pot of tea, all right?”

“If you die, I’ll never forgive you.”

“I doubt I’ll care if I’m dead.” I grip the edge of the window as I climb up and out.

“Then I will find a vampire to bite you so you can rise again and know my immense anger.”

I laugh, holding tight as the wind does its best to whip me off the side of the car. “That’s not how it works, Miss Delane.”

She leans out the window, grabbing my arm. “Be careful.”

“I will be,” I promise.

I must sound convincing because she nods and releases me.

As I hoist myself up, I wonder if I’ve lost my fool mind. The railcar is frozen in the cold autumn night. The top is gently rounded, making my task more difficult, with only a narrow strip of iron trim to grab hold of. I use the upper window case as a foothold and hope for the best.

“I never pictured you as a climb-on-top-of-a-railcar type of man,” Greg says as I struggle. *“That’s usually Atticus’s area of expertise.”*

“Where’s the vampire?” I demand.

“Two cars down from you, headed your way.”

My foot slips on the slick metal as I attempt to pull myself up and over the top of the car, sending me sliding down. I catch myself, but barely. The momentum nearly rips me from the train. I dangle precariously, the wind rushing by me and the train’s vibrations trying to shake my grip.

“You’re going to fall if you’re not careful,” Greg warns.

“Thank you, Greg,” I grit out, finding a foothold and climbing once more.

“Happy to help.”

I finally manage to pull myself over the rounded edge of the roof, but there’s no time to catch my breath. A startled hiss tells me I’m not alone.

The vampire lunges for me before I have a chance to rise to my feet. I’ve only chased a spirit onto the top of a train car once. I was younger then, far more stupid, and needed to prove myself.

It’s more difficult than I remember. I stumble when I try to stand, finding it nearly impossible to keep my balance atop the vibrating train with the wind whipping around me. The

monster and I struggle against each other, thankfully falling toward the middle of the train car and not off the edge.

The dragon is somewhere above us, useless as usual. “*Don’t let him bite you.*”

Jarring pain radiates throughout my body when my shoulders collide with the metal roof. I wrestle with the vampire, my hand on his throat as I fight to keep his fangs away from my neck. Greg was right. This one’s scrawny.

He’s persistent though, and what he lacks in muscle, he makes up with determination and a rotten attitude.

I manage to roll him over, pinning him to the roof with my knee pressing into his stomach and my hand to his throat. He flails, trying to kick me, but I press on his windpipe. Cutting off his air won’t kill him, but it will make him lose consciousness, and he knows it.

“Why do you want the girl?” I demand, pulling the stake from my belt and holding the sharpened point to his chest.

The vampire hisses, arching his head forward and baring his fangs like a snake.

I grasp a handful of his short hair and knock his head against the metal roof. “*Tell me.*”

When he struggles to talk, I release a little of the pressure on his throat.

“I don’t want her,” he rasps.

“Why are you after her?”

“No choice.”

“Why don’t you have a choice?”

“*Just kill him,*” Greg says, bored.

“*Why don’t you have a choice?*” I growl again, cuffing the side of the vampire’s head when he refuses to answer.

The monster goes limp, fighting me no more. He mumbles something, but I can barely hear him over the roar of the train.

“*Louder!*” I yell, leaning closer.

“Compelled,” he whispers raggedly.

And then he lashes out with the last of his strength, rearing up and knocking me off him. He punches me, his fist connecting with my temple. I stab the sharpened stake into his chest before he can sink his fangs into my flesh.

The monster screams and goes lifeless, the parasitic spirit dead.

Breathing hard, I crawl back and sit atop the train car with a heavy grunt, taking a moment to collect myself.

What did he mean he was compelled?

An enormous shadow descends from the sky, passing over the train. The dead vampire is there one minute and gone the next, swept right from the top of the car by the dragon’s massive tail.

“Why did you do that?” I demand, incredulous.

“I got rid of the body,” the wretched dragon says.

“You couldn’t have waited until I retrieved the stake? Do you know how expensive those are?”

I feel the dragon’s annoyance, but he doesn’t respond.

“And why didn’t you do that to begin with and save me the trouble of climbing on top of the train?”

“I wanted to give you the chance to do something heroic.”

I grit my teeth, reminding myself I cannot shoot the dragon.

“I was helping you better yourself. You should be grateful—I’m sure the girl will be impressed.”

“Thank you for allowing me to grow,” I growl as I teeter on top of the car, crouching low and working my way to the edge.

“You’re welcome.”

The car shakes and rattles down the tracks as I lower myself off the side. Thankfully, Elizabeth left the window open. I find the sill with one boot, and then the next.

“You know, when Atticus needs to access the top of a train car, he usually uses the ladder at the back,” Greg says.

I pause, thinking murderous thoughts. “Why didn’t you tell me that before?”

“It seemed like you knew what you were doing.”

I don’t have a reply for that.

Elizabeth lets out a relieved exclamation when I slip my first leg through, bombarding me with questions. I don’t catch any of them, focusing instead on the awkward task of climbing through the window while the train does its best to rattle me off. I hiss as I scrape my back on the bottom sill, arching as I slide down. Too late, I realize I took the worst approach possible.

“Are you all right?” Elizabeth demands when I finally make it inside. Her eyes move to my forehead, and she swallows hard.

I dab my hairline, and my fingertips return with blood on them.

“Here.” She pulls a handkerchief from her bag and steps forward.

I gently catch her wrist before she can touch the fabric to the wound. “You’ll get blood on it.”

She rolls her eyes and shakes her hand free, pressing the corner of the fabric to my skin. I watch her fuss over me, the concern in her expression oddly appealing.

Her eyes flick to mine, catching me watching her so intently. She starts a little, her hand jumping before she returns to her task. Ripping her gaze to the handkerchief, she asks, “What?”

“Nothing.”

“Did you kill it?”

“Yes.”

She glances at me again, pressing her lips together. She wants to say something, but she wrestles with it. Finally, she

clears her throat, flicking her gaze back to mine for only a second. “I can’t believe you did that.”

“It’s my job,” I answer, my voice a little rough.

Elizabeth lowers the handkerchief, capturing me in her gaze fully this time. Her eyes simmer somewhere between smoke-fire and a cold, foggy lake. “Don’t be brave on my behalf, Mr. Oliver. Don’t risk your life to save mine.”

I frown, unsure how to answer.

“I’ve lost too many people.” She turns abruptly. “I don’t want your death on my conscience as well.”

“I’m a hunter, Elizabeth.”

“I’m aware.”

“You said you wanted me on the job,” I point out.

She looks back, her expression heated. “I’ve changed my mind. Go back to your desk. Assign someone else to me.”

I cock my head to the side, intrigued. “I was careful.”

“You climbed on top of a moving train!” She heaves the bloodied handkerchief at me. “You could have *died*.”

“But I didn’t.”

She *growls* and then steps close. Her hand captures the back of my neck, and she tugs my face down. I expect her to inspect the injury once more...but she doesn’t.

Without warning, Elizabeth’s mouth meets mine, her lips hot against my chilled skin. She lingers but a moment, gifting a kiss that’s soft despite her agitation.

I freeze, struck dumb by the sweet press of her lips.

When she releases me, she holds my gaze. “You were very brave and very stupid, and you have my gratitude. Don’t do it again.”

I open my mouth to say something...but she’s rendered me speechless.

Her look turns knowing. “And before you protest, remember that I don’t work for GHOST, therefore I don’t have

to obey their ridiculous rules.”

ELIZABETH

“I ...” Benjamin blinks several times, perfectly befuddled. My heart racing, I turn abruptly and leave our shared compartment. “I’m going to order a new pot of tea.”

“Elizabeth!” he calls after me, but I ignore him.

I don’t know what got into me. I was so scared while he was on top of the train, and then he came back bleeding, disheveled, and...dashing.

Oh, how that man has gotten under my skin. I fan my face, absurdly flustered.

I don’t regret kissing him, though I probably should. Nice girls don’t throw themselves at the men they’re interested in. They bat their eyelashes and play coy, luring them in like a fish on a line.

But I’ve never been patient enough to fish.

I shake my head, huffing out a breath as I reach the dining car. Most of the tables are empty. I hadn’t realized the hour was so late.

The maître d’ wears a pristine white waistcoat under his black jacket. He’s an older gentleman, with graying red hair. He smiles when I approach. “I’m afraid we’re no longer serving dinner, but I can offer you light refreshment. Would you like to have something sent to your compartment?”

“A pot of tea, please,” I say, and then I give him our compartment number.

“I’ll send someone right away,” he assures me, going between the tables and disappearing into the kitchen car.

When I turn around, I find a man lounging near the entrance of the car. He’s older than I am by ten or so years, with a pleasant face and brown hair that’s a little lighter than Benjamin’s. He wears a neutral expression, on the edge of bored, like he’s waiting to speak with the *maître d’* but he’s not in any particular hurry.

Our eyes meet as I walk toward him. He nods, polite but somewhat dismissive, and then begins to look away. Before he does, he pauses as if suddenly intrigued. “Hello.”

“Hello,” I answer, still walking, not in the mood to make small talk.

“I know you.”

Manners alone cause me to hesitate. Suppressing a sigh, I say, “Do you?”

“Your Colonel Delane’s daughter, aren’t you?” He scrunches his brow as if thinking very hard, and then he snaps his fingers. “Miss Elizabeth Delane.”

“Yes...”

He pushes away from the wall. “I’m Julian Renward, head of House Renward.” When it’s clear I don’t remember him, he adds, “We met several years ago at one of my grandparents’ galas.”

“Ah.” I have no idea who the man is, though on closer inspection, he does look vaguely familiar. “And who are your grandparents?”

“Lord and Lady Warrington.”

The rigid set of my spine eases slightly. My father and Arthur served with one of the Warrington’s sons in the Staulusian Army. The three were close.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I’ve only attended one of their soirees, and I met many people that night.”

It was exhausting.

“I don’t expect you’d remember me. You were the belle of the evening, constantly surrounded.” He offers his hand, politely waiting for me to accept it. “I had to shamelessly beg my grandmother for an introduction, but I’m afraid we didn’t get a chance to dance.”

I smile a little, setting just my fingers over his. After a quick bow, he releases me.

“Are you headed to Valette?” he asks.

“I am.”

“Surely not on your own?”

“I…”

He saves me from finishing my answer. “I heard your father went missing last year.” Julian looks chagrined. “My apologies.”

“Thank you,” I murmur.

“May I inquire how he—”

“Miss Delane?” Benjamin says from the doorway.

Just hearing the hunter say my name in that professional tone of his makes my heart jump.

“Mr. Oliver.” I gesture him forward. “Allow me to introduce you to Lord Renward.”

“Hello, Julian,” Benjamin says coolly.

Julian shakes his hand, giving him a tight smile. “Benji.”

Benji?

“You two are acquainted?” I ask.

“Indeed.” Julian eyes Benjamin. “You could say we’re friendly rivals.”

I’m not sure “friendly” is the word I’d use considering the way the two eye each other, but all right.

“Rivals?” I ask.

“Julian is a hunter,” Benjamin explains.

“You work for GHOST?” I ask the man, surprised.

Julian laughs. “I’m afraid I like money too much for that. I founded Haverdell Street Hunters.”

“Haverdell Street Hunters?” I ask Benjamin.

He flashes Julian a satisfied look. “It doesn’t appear she’s heard of you.”

Julian chuckles. “That may be, but it’s my understanding that Miss Delane rarely visits the city.” The man looks between us. “And how are the two of you acquainted?”

I don’t want news of my predicament spreading throughout Valette, so I say, “It’s been too long since I visited Lord and Lady Cunningham. Benjamin kindly volunteered to escort me to the city so I wouldn’t have to travel alone.”

“Arthur’s right-hand man is a dutiful employee.” Julian’s tone is friendly enough, but I don’t believe it was a compliment. “Can I hope you’ll be in Valette long enough to attend my grandparents’ annual Autumn Costume Ball, Miss Delane?”

“When is it?” I hedge.

“A week from tomorrow.”

“I imagine invitations were sent ages ago.”

The man smiles. “I’m sure I can pull a few strings.”

Oh...joy.

“If it doesn’t conflict with plans the Cunninghams may have already made...” I end the sentence with a vague shrug.

Julian walks toward the maître d’, preparing to part. “If I see you there, I hope you’ll save a dance for me.”

I smile, choosing not to respond.

Benjamin and I make our way to our compartment. Once we’re out of earshot, he shakes his head. “I leave you alone for a few minutes...”

“I told you,” I say mildly.

He breathes out a solitary laugh.

“Why did he call you Benji?” I ask, eliciting a groan from the hunter.

“Because he’s an obnoxious lout.”

I smile. “Tell me about Haverdell.”

“It’s a private spirit hunting organization, similar to GHOST, though they operate more like a business. They don’t train their men, nor do they offer benefits or camaraderie. They’re cheap and so are their methods.”

“My father and Arthur were good friends with Julian’s uncle. It seems odd he’d start a competing business.”

“Julian and I joined GHOST the same year. He earned his certification and then founded Haverdell not long after.”

“Why?”

“He and Arthur don’t get along.”

“You trained together?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“He seems pleasant enough.”

Benjamin looks like he wants to roll his eyes. “A talent of his.”

We reach our compartment. The hunter waits for me to enter first like a gentleman. After I step inside, he joins me, sliding the door closed behind him.

When he turns back, my eyes stray to his forehead. His hair hides the wound.

“How’s your head?” I ask as I sit.

He takes his bench on the opposite side of the compartment, crossing his arms as he studies me. “It’s fine.”

I imagine he’s going to interrogate me about the kiss. I brace myself for it.

But instead, he says, “I spoke with the vampire.”

“You *spoke* with him? On top of the train?”

“It wasn’t a civil conversation—I was holding him down at the time.”

“Why are they after me?” I breathe, leaning forward. “Did he say?”

“When I asked why he wanted you, he said he didn’t. When I asked why he pursued you, he said he had no choice.”

“What does that mean?”

Benjamin shakes his head. “I don’t know.”

“Do you think...” I lower my eyes. “Could this be...”

“Connected to your father?” he asks gently.

I hate how just the mention of him makes me emotional. Every time, it hits me so hard. I know I should move on. I know he wouldn’t want me to mourn forever.

But I just don’t know how to let him go.

I look up at Benjamin, nodding because I don’t trust myself to speak.

He answers, “I’ve thought about it, certainly, but I cannot imagine how it could be.”

“I know you said the human is gone once...once the vampire claims the body. But what if Father is still in there somehow, and he’s trying to—”

“Elizabeth,” Benjamin says, stopping me. “Those are dangerous thoughts. And it’s impossible. The spirit and the human cannot inhabit the same space. If your father was infected, he’s gone now.”

I know Benjamin is right. I just want to see him again—so badly want to believe a part of him is still alive.

“I miss him,” I whisper, staring at my lap. “I feel rudderless. I keep thinking that if he were alive...”

“Things would be different.”

I look up, realizing Benjamin knows exactly how I feel.

“Does it get easier?” I ask quietly.

“I’m not sure it gets easier. But until you grow strong enough to shoulder the burden of your grief, you find people to help you carry the load.”

“It feels like it’s crushing me,” I admit. “Tansy, Sterling—they want to help. But they’re part of the weight. I feel responsible for them. I don’t have...”

Anyone.

My throat thickens.

Benjamin crosses the compartment, sitting next to me on the bench. After a moment, he turns his head to look at me. “It sounds like you need a friend.”

My eyes burn with unshed tears.

“You can have me.” He offers his hand, setting it palm up on the bench between us. “If you want me...consider me yours.”

“You stole that from me,” I whisper, emotional.

He smiles as he takes my hand, leans his head back on the seat, and closes his eyes like he’s going to rest.

“I don’t know, Mr. Oliver.” I feign concern. “What if I’m confusing gratitude for friendship? Perhaps I’m so in awe of you, it’s skewing my perception?”

He opens an eye, giving me a wry look.

I lower my voice to a mock whisper. “Does GHOST have rules about holding hands?”

He transfers my hand to his left one and then wraps his right arm around my shoulders. “No.”

I’ve never been like this with anyone before. I feel...safe.

“Just to be clear, you’re not going to suddenly panic and push me away, are you?”

The hunter chuckles lightly, not bothering to answer.

“Greg is keeping watch, isn’t he?” I ask, needing to know before I let my guard down.

“He is.” Benjamin strokes my arm. “It’s safe to rest. Would you like me to make the beds?”

I lower my cheek to his shoulder, telling myself it’s only for a few minutes. “Not yet. The tea should arrive soon.”

But hopefully not too soon.

BENJAMIN

We arrive in front of the guildhall, luggage in tow. The coachman I hired at the train station unloads our trunks onto the walkway that leads to the front doors.

Elizabeth stares up at the building, taking it in. I look at it too, remembering what it was like to see it for the first time.

It's impressive, with five stories, several large wings, and two imposing towers. The plastered siding is painted white, and each window is encased in intricately carved wooden whirls that are stained dark brown to match the heavy beams and flat trim that crosses over the walls like decorative lattice.

A trio of trainees emerges from the doors, pausing when they spot me. When the young men's eyes move to Elizabeth, they're suddenly interested in saying hello.

"Good afternoon, Benjamin," Calvin says. He's shorter than his two companions and stout. "Welcome back."

"How was your job?" Felix asks me, though he's particularly interested in Elizabeth.

"I'm still working on it."

The trainee is a notorious flirt. He's lazy, unmotivated, and the bane of Catriona's existence. He also happens to be Arthur's son.

His eyes crinkle at the edges as he addresses Elizabeth. "Hello, Miss Delane."

"Oh, are you acquainted?" Tibs asks, obviously hoping for an introduction.

Felix runs a hand through his short, sandy hair, giving Elizabeth a dimpled smile. “Well acquainted.”

“Hello, Felix.” She smiles in a familiar way I don’t particularly care for. “The last time I was in Valette, your parents said you were roaming Galbreah.”

He laughs, catching the attention of a pair of young women that pass the guildhall on the walkway beyond the gates. They duck their heads close, giggling quietly before they continue, glancing back at Felix several times. The other two trainees watch them wistfully, jealous of the attention their friend receives.

“Did you find your life’s passion?” Elizabeth asks Felix.

“Alas, I did not. Hence why I am now here.”

“You’re a hunter?”

I feel the need to interrupt. “He’s a trainee.”

“I hope you won’t be gone much longer, Benjamin,” Calvin says, changing the subject away from Felix. “Cat’s been in an awful mood since she started filling in for you, and she’s taking it out on us during training sessions.”

That brightens my spirits considerably. “She’s struggling a bit, is she?”

The woman in question walks through the entry doors, talking to Atticus. The pair of hunters don’t notice us—something Felix feels the need to remedy.

“Cat’s not struggling with the workload.” Felix jabs his hands in his pockets and gives the trainer his full attention. Loud enough to make sure she’ll hear him, he says, “She’s lovesick, pining over our absent director.”

Elizabeth tenses beside me, giving my ego a boost. Though she need not worry about Cat.

Catriona turns toward Felix, rolling her eyes as she prepares to set the man straight. Then she spots me and grins. “You’re back.”

“Temporarily.”

She jogs down the steps. “Corrigan accidentally shot a sheriff from Idamire in the buttocks, and the man is suing the guild for medical and emotional damages. Dirk went three thousand kevlings over budget—”

“Three *thousand*?” I demand.

“—and Dane has messed up his paperwork five times in just a few days. Five times!”

“I’m sure it’s nothing you can’t handle. My job is easy, remember? I just sign a few things and schmooze officials.”

She narrows her eyes. “Why do you say that like you’re not back?”

“I’m not. I’m here to consult with Arthur.” I turn to Elizabeth, gesturing to Cat. “Elizabeth, this is Catriona Mason, our resident trainer. Cat, this is Miss Elizabeth Delane.”

“Pleasure,” Cat says, friendly as can be until she looks back at me. “So you’re *not* back?”

I glance at Atticus, who’s decided to join us as well. Ignoring Cat, I say to Elizabeth, “And this is Atticus. He’s just a hunter.”

“The best hunter you have.” He smirks at me before he steps forward to greet Elizabeth. “Miss Delane, is it?”

“That’s right.” She looks a little starstruck, as most women do when they meet the guild’s golden boy.

Atticus flashes me a look. “I know it’s been a while since you’ve done field work, but we don’t usually bring our clients home with us.”

“Miss Delane isn’t a client,” Felix corrects, not about to be overshadowed by Atticus. “She’s a close friend of our family.”

I use that as my chance to escape. “Speaking of that, we need to find Arthur. Do you know where he is?”

“In his office,” Atticus answers.

“It was nice to meet you, Miss Delane,” Catriona says as we excuse ourselves. She then looks at the trainees. “Take their luggage inside.”

Felix grins. “I don’t think that’s in our job description, Cat.”

I turn away before she responds. Whatever she says is followed by a pained grunt.

Felix groans out a chuckle. “This luggage? You want it inside? Certainly, Miss Mason.”

Elizabeth smiles as she walks through the entrance, and then she pauses. The foyer is large, with open ceilings and heavy beams overhead. I watch her, enjoying her reaction.

“This is impressive.” She gestures to the swords and shields that line the walls. “Are those real?”

“They are—as are the suits of armor.”

“You say that like you don’t care for them.”

“Five years ago, a poltergeist followed one of our hunters back to Valette. He slipped inside the guildhall undetected, donned one of the suits, and created havoc. I argued that we should remove them, as it doesn’t seem wise to offer poltergeists weapons, but Arthur insisted the incident was a fluke.”

She gapes at me. “Are you serious? A ghost infiltrated GHOST?”

I laugh at her incredulous expression. “A poltergeist, Miss Delane. Though that manner of incident has only happened once, it’s rarely dull around here.”

Elizabeth gestures to the massive tapestry hanging on the back wall behind the reception counter. “That’s a lovely way to greet your guests.”

It’s an ancient piece, depicting a war between spirits and hunters in the thirty-second century. Werewolves, vampires, witches, warlocks, ghouls, and specters haven’t gathered like that again in our history, not since we learned how to effectively fight the monsters.

“My sister doesn’t like it either,” I say.

Elizabeth turns to me. “Will I meet her while we’re in Valette?”

“We’re not on holiday,” I remind her. “You’re still being hunted.”

“As if I could forget,” she says with a sigh. “Let’s find Arthur.”

People greet me as I pass, but I don’t allow them to drag us into a conversation this time—not until I see Dirk.

“Benjamin!” the hunter says when he spots me on the stairs leading up to Arthur’s office. He’s built like an ox with a healthy appetite—beefy, but with a bit of a paunch. “Whatever Catriona told you—”

“Three *thousand* over budget?” I demand.

The hunter winces. “Listen, it’s a long story. You know how I hate spiders, right? Well—”

“Later.” I hold up my hand and turn from him. “Just... later.”

“I went back for my crossbow bolts!” he calls. “Benjamin...?”

We continue up the stairs, and Elizabeth says, “That must be Dirk.”

I grunt, reminding myself he’s Catriona’s headache right now.

We pause in the antechamber outside Arthur’s office, waiting for his secretary to acknowledge us.

“Just a moment...” Muriel says, scribbling away at the novel she’s been writing for three years even though she’s not supposed to work on it during business hours.

I clear my throat.

“Almost finished...”

“Muriel.”

“Benjamin!” She whips her head up, causing the graying brunette bun atop her head to wobble. Her eyes go wide

behind her spectacles, and her voice goes up an octave as she chirps, “You’re back!”

Keeping her eyes locked on mine, she snaps the leather-bound book shut—like she thinks if I’m not looking down, I won’t see what she’s doing.

“Is Arthur in?” I ask with a sigh.

If she were my secretary, I’d have removed her from the payroll years ago. But she’s Arthur’s cousin, and he doesn’t have the heart to dismiss her.

She nods enthusiastically. “He is.”

I wait a beat, and then I give her a pointed look. “May we speak with him?”

“Go ahead.”

“Shouldn’t you make sure it’s a good time first?”

“Oh! I suppose I should.”

Elizabeth bites her lip to keep from laughing as the woman scampers to the door behind her and raps three times.

“Lord Cunningham? Benjamin is here to see you.”

A moment later, the door swings open, and Arthur scowls at me. “You’re supposed to be on a job.” His eyes move to the woman at my side, and his expression immediately softens with surprise. “Elizabeth.”

“Hello, Lord Cunningham.”

“Come now, we might as well be family. You used to call me Uncle Arthur when you were little.”

She smiles, nodding.

He turns back to me, his expression becoming businesslike. “What are you doing here? Did you already finish the job?”

“Not exactly.” I nod toward his office. “May we speak with you?”

Arthur gestures us inside.

As we pass her, Muriel says, “I’ll make tea!”

“No, that’s—” Arthur begins, but she’s already left the antechamber and is trotting down the stairs. He shakes his head and then closes the door to give us privacy.

Arthur sits in his large leather chair behind his desk, and we take the two smaller chairs opposite him. He waits for us to begin.

As I explain the situation, his brow furrows until it’s deeply creased. “Tell me again what the vampire said on the train when you questioned him.”

“He told me he didn’t want Elizabeth. When I asked why he was after her, he said he had no choice.”

Arthur sits back, his expression dark.

“What would compel a vampire to abduct someone?” I ask.

He looks at me sharply. “What did you say?”

“Why would a vampire abduct someone?”

“You said *compel*.”

“Yes...” I try to remember the conversation. “That’s the word the vampire used. He said he was compelled.”

Arthur stands abruptly, biting back what sounds like a curse, likely only using restraint because Elizabeth is present. “It’s not just a synonym for coerced, Ben. Not the way he was using it.”

I extend my hands in front of me, having no idea what he’s talking about.

“If you compel a vampire, you control him with venom from his sire.”

I let that sink in for a moment. “I’ve never heard of such a thing. Why don’t I know about this?”

“You wouldn’t. We’ve never seen it in Staulus. But I...I’m familiar with it.” Arthur turns back, his eyes on Elizabeth. He looks worried, and I don’t like it. “Your father, Elizabeth, was

familiar with it as well. We believed we snuffed out the dark practice while we were in Saranica, but...perhaps we were wrong.”

ELIZABETH

I'm suddenly finding it difficult to breathe. "When were you in Saranica?"

"During the Territory War," Arthur answers.

The Territory War of 3918 was waged in Calrij, in a fertile territory that has traded hands dozens of times over the last two hundred years through battle and bartering. It borders the Saranican Empire, a stretch of desert that's little more than a shrouded mystery on our maps. It's said to be a beautiful land, with diamond-white sand dunes, lush oases, and unimaginable treasures—but hostile, with monsters so horrifying, just a glimpse will curdle your blood.

However, few know if the legends are true, as the borders aren't open. A great wall circles the empire, guarded day and night. No one enters, and anyone who does, doesn't leave.

Occasionally, their diplomats will grace the other countries with their presence, flaunting their fine fabrics and jewels. And the empire, too, had their share in the Territory War.

"Gordon, Vincent, and I got separated from our battalion," Arthur continues. "We stumbled on a group of Saranican scouts. They vastly outnumbered us, and could have killed us, but they captured us instead."

I exhale slowly. "Father said their soldiers were terrors, fighting as if possessed, but were decent to hostages, giving them clean water and food. I never thought to ask him how he knew that."

“They took us across the border, into the empress’s city,” Arthur continues. “We were put to work in the palace—Gordon and I in the gardens and Vincent as a palanquin bearer. They paid us weekly wages, and we had freedom to explore the palace grounds in the evenings. There was one rule—do not leave the safety of the palace after twilight because that’s when the empress’s personal army left the underground caverns to feed.”

“Vampires,” Benjamin says.

“Early every evening, we would meet with Vincent. Closer to the empress, he saw things. Learned things.”

“What kinds of things?” I realize I’m leaning forward, fully lost in this chapter of my father’s life he never shared with me.

“The empress’s vampire army was compelled. She controlled them by taking a potent concoction of their sire’s venom every month.”

“And yet she didn’t become a vampire herself?” Benjamin asks.

“Her alchemist separated the venom into two parts, extracting different elements of the spirit. The first was used to create the compelling serum. The second...”

“The antivenom,” Benjamin breathes.

“Antivenom!” I turn to Benjamin, but the hunter doesn’t meet my eyes.

Arthur nods. “On the twenty-sixth day of the cycle, heavy chains were strung across the doors that closed off the caverns, locking the creatures inside. Nessamaura would then inject herself with the antivenom. It took her several days to recover to the point she could take the compelling serum once more.”

“What happened?” Benjamin asks Arthur. “How did you escape?”

“While we were there, the empress took a liking to Vincent. He became a companion, a friend, and eventually, a lover. He pitied her, said she was trapped in a wicked cycle of

imminent death and recovery that the royals in her family had been practicing for generations. He believed if he murdered the empress's alchemist, the secrets would die with him. We tried to dissuade him, but he killed the man and destroyed the entire supply, sparing one bottle of antivenom, which he saved for Nessa's final dose."

"And that was...the end?" I ask.

"Unfortunately, no. Feeling betrayed, Nessa arrested Vincent and sentenced him to death—by vampire bite." He sits down. "By this time, we were all well acquainted with the empress. We never gave her our real names, but she discovered your father was a gifted doctor. She told Gordon that if he could create the sister serums in twenty-eight days, she would allow us to save Vincent with the antivenom and leave Saranica."

"She blackmailed my father into creating the serums?" I ask.

"Somehow, even with the limited information Nessa could give him, that brilliant idiot accomplished it in twenty-two days."

It's a lot to take in.

Arthur continues, "Gordon made five years' worth of the sister serums and gave Nessa a copy of his notes, obeying the terms of the deal."

"Why would he give her that information?" I ask, feeling ill.

"He altered them, ensuring serums made following his instructions would fail. We left, knowing in five years' time, Nessa would die if she continued down her current path, and the secrets of her compelling serum would be lost."

"No one followed you out of Saranica?" Benjamin asks.

"We laid low in Calrij for just over five years, waiting. When no one came for us, we returned to Staulus with a group of political prisoners who were finally released. The war was over then. As far as the Staulusian Army is concerned, we were being held by the Welkin government all that time." He

sits back in his chair. “I left the army to start GHOST, but Gordon had enough of the monsters. He went on to have an admirable career in the army, eventually married Elizabeth’s mother, and you know the rest.”

“And Vincent?” Benjamin asks.

“He took to the sea aboard a merchant vessel, making a small fortune in pearls. I still see him from time to time, but we’re not close anymore.”

“What does all this mean for Elizabeth?” Benjamin asks. “It’s been thirty years since you were in the army. Could it be related?”

“If they were going after anyone but Gordon’s daughter, I would say no. But the coincidence...” He purses his lips as he thinks. “I feel it’s too great.”

“What do they want with me?” I ask.

Arthur meets my eyes. “I don’t suppose your father taught you how to make the antivenom, did he?”

I laugh darkly at the ridiculous notion. “No.”

“I didn’t think so. We don’t have access to all the ingredients in Staulus,” Arthur says. “At my request, Gordon dabbled with a few substitutions over the years, but the experiments were never a success.”

How do I know none of this? What all did Father keep from me?

A knock at the door draws our attention. Muriel pokes her head in. “I have tea, Lord Cunningham.”

Arthur sits back, relaxing marginally. “You may bring it inside.”

I quietly stew over the new information as Arthur’s secretary wheels in the cart and pours the tea.

“Cream and sugar, miss?” she asks me.

“Yes, please,” I answer absently.

Benjamin touches my hand when Muriel turns to Arthur. When I look at him, he subtly shakes his head.

I frown, not understanding.

“Thank you, Muriel,” Arthur says.

I take a sip of the tea, going still when the hot, bitter liquid touches my tongue. If I were younger, I would spit it out. But grown women do not spit out their tea, so I force myself to swallow.

The moment the door closes, Benjamin says, “Don’t drink it.”

Scowling, I delicately push the tea away. “Too late.” I look at him, horrified. “It’s not poisoned, is it?”

Arthur lets out a boisterous laugh.

“No,” Benjamin assures me. “Muriel brews it with a conglomeration of herbs that she finds delightful, but no one else can stomach.”

“I can still taste it.” I grimace.

Arthur nudges the plate of biscuits toward me. “These are generally safe.”

I take one, thankful.

After Benjamin pours his tea in a potted plant near the door, he asks Arthur, “Do you think that’s what someone is after? The secret to the serums? Is that what this is about?”

“When Gordon disappeared after a vampire attack, I wondered...” Arthur says. “But it’s not uncommon to find the monsters in the Allied Provinces, and if a few found their way to Oakenridge, Gordon would naturally feel the need to remove them. But now...now I’m not sure it was a coincidence.”

“Do you believe someone kidnapped him, Arthur?” I demand, gripping my chair’s armrests. “Is it possible he’s still alive?”

“Elizabeth,” Benjamin says gently.

I sink back into my seat, knowing I shouldn't get my hopes up.

"Where are you staying while you're in Valette?" Arthur asks, avoiding my question.

Benjamin says, "With me."

Arthur looks between us, most likely not liking the idea of me staying in Benjamin's home without a chaperone. We wouldn't want to start a scandal for the sake of safety after all. What would people say?

"Stay with Carissa and me, Elizabeth. We'd love to have you."

"I cannot watch over her at your house," Benjamin argues. "And if you'll remember, you've given this job to me."

"A few days ago, you were trying to pawn it off on someone else," Arthur points out. "Why the change of heart?"

"A few days ago, I didn't know Miss Delane was being hunted. Nor had I successfully crawled on top of a moving train and killed one of the monsters." He pauses. "Not only am I feeling more confident, but I also promised I would stay by her side. I intend to follow through with that."

Arthur wears a knowing, slightly smug look on his face. It's a paternal sort of expression, and it blatantly proclaims he's proud of himself for prodding Benjamin out of his comfort zone.

"Very well," he says. "In that case, I believe it will be best if you and Elizabeth stay here in the dormitory. I doubt there is anywhere safer in all the city than the guildhall."

Benjamin looks at me, waiting for my approval before he agrees.

"That sounds fine," I say.

"Then it's settled." Arthur rises. "For now, you're under GHOST's protection, Elizabeth. Feel free to go about the city as you wish, but I would like you to have a hunter escort at all times."

“And what about the vampires?” Benjamin asks. “What’s our next step?”

“As much as I hate to admit it, you were right. This job is more complicated than I expected. You will guard Elizabeth, as you’ve already expressed the desire to do so. I’ll send several hunters back to Oakenridge to scout.”

Most men would gloat, but Benjamin merely nods, fully focused on the task. “I’ll speak with my contacts in Castle Valette.”

“Yes, that’s a good idea.”

“Your contacts?” I ask Benjamin.

“All private hunter organizations in Staulus are required to submit monthly records to the Alliance so they may keep track of spirit activity in the Allied Provinces. It’s possible they’ll have information that will help with our hunt.” He pulls out his pocket watch and tells Arthur, “They’re preparing to leave for the day. Elizabeth and I will go first thing on Monday morning.”

“Very good.” Arthur gives me a reassuring smile. “GHOST will take care of this, Elizabeth. I swear.”

“SEVERAL OF OUR hunters reside in the dormitory right now,” Benjamin explains as we walk down the long hall. “I’m afraid the few larger apartments are occupied. The only available rooms are small.”

We pause in front of a door with a brass-plated number seventeen on it, and Benjamin slips a key into the lock. He pushes it open, allowing me to go in first.

The window faces south, and the curtains are open, letting in sunshine. Over the glass, decorative swirls of iron protect the room from intrusion.

I swallow, remembering the incident at the hotel all too well.

We're on the second floor, as we were that night, but my quarters aren't as luxurious. They feel safer, though.

The wooden floors are scuffed but clean. A wardrobe stands in the corner. The white paint is chipped in a few places, but it looks like it's well made.

A light blueish gray quilt covers the small bed. The headboard is painted to match the wardrobe. A chest rests at its foot, with a tan blanket folded and waiting.

There's a small writing desk on the wall opposite the bed. A quill sits in an inkwell atop it, waiting to be used.

But there are no homey touches—no art or knickknacks. I suppose if you were staying here very long, you'd add those yourself.

“The women's washroom is down the hall to the right.” Benjamin gives the space an uncertain look. “Do you think this will be all right?”

“It's fine,” I assure him. “But what about you? Will you be all right?”

“It feels a little ridiculous to stay here when my home is not ten minutes away, but Arthur's right—there's nowhere safer than the guild.”

I run my hand over the bedspread. It's soft. “I must admit I'm disappointed.”

He turns, giving me his full attention. “I know this isn't ideal, but right now—”

“It's not that. I was just hoping to visit your home—see you in your natural environment.” I look up. “I wanted to discover what books you have on your bookshelf, if you have any pets, what color you've painted your walls, and how many umbrellas you keep in your stand. I want to know who Mr. Oliver is when he's not climbing on top of trains and fighting deadly vampires.”

Benjamin looks at me, wearing that befuddled expression again. After a moment, he says, “I don't own an umbrella.”

I laugh, turning when there's a knock on the open door.

“Arthur mentioned you’d be staying here for a bit.”
Catriona holds a jar of cut sunflowers and chrysanthemums.

The woman could be mistaken for a ballerina. Just from looking at her, I’d never guess she could slay a monster, much less teach someone else how to do it.

I remember what Felix said about her pining for Benjamin, and I glance at him, unsure. But she’s not looking at Benjamin. She’s smiling at me, offering the jar. “I thought you might like something to brighten up the space a bit. When I first came as a trainee, I was horribly homesick in my tiny, neutral room. I know you’re not a trainee, but everyone likes flowers, right?”

“Thank you,” I say, startled by the gesture. “Where did you find them?”

“I tend a small garden in the back. It keeps me sane, but I’m afraid it’s about finished for the year. I expect to lose it all to a hard frost any day now.” She sighs. “Soon I’ll be stuck inside all day with Felix.”

I laugh, setting the flowers next to the inkwell, liking that I’ll be able to see them from the bed.

Benjamin chuckles as well, pulling out the desk chair and sitting. “Remind me how long you’ve had your current batch of recruits? You’ll be sending them out as apprentices any day now, won’t you?”

“Not Felix,” Catriona says with a sigh. “He’d die on his first day out. Arthur and I talked about it. He thinks I should keep him for another year—train him one-on-one until next summer, when the next recruits come in. Then he can join them, and maybe by autumn, he’ll be ready to apprentice someone.”

“You know he’s dragging his feet in hopes that Arthur will let him quit,” Benjamin says. “He’s more capable than he lets on. I’ve watched him train with the others when you’re not around, and he’s better than decent.”

Catriona shakes her head, not believing him. She turns toward the door and says to me, “My room is twenty-four, at

the end of the hall. Let me know if you need anything, all right?"

"Thank you," I say.

Benjamin stands when she leaves. "I'll have someone bring up your things. Are you hungry?"

"A little."

He looks at his pocket watch. "They're serving dinner in the dining hall in fifteen minutes if you'd like to eat here. Or we can go out."

"I'd like to see the dining hall."

"It's often loud and crowded," he warns. "But Lady Cunningham has employed an excellent head cook."

"Do you eat here most nights?"

"On the nights Arthur doesn't drag me home with him. Lady Cunningham hosts at least one of us each evening, rotating through the unwed hunters like we're her favorite street urchins."

The idea makes me smile. What a strange life these people live.

"You all seem close," I say.

"We are, mostly. Sometimes we drive each other mad."

"Atticus," I say knowingly, thinking of Benjamin's irritated manner when the gorgeous man joined our conversation earlier.

"Don't say his name like that," Benjamin groans, escorting me out of the room. He locks the door and then hands me the key.

"Like what?" I laugh.

"Like you're thinking twice about asking me to stay on the job."

"You're ridiculous."

He turns to me, tilting his head to the side, his manner lighter than I've ever seen it. "I realize I've made a mistake,

Miss Delane.”

“And what’s that?”

“We should have fled to the uninhabited eastern corner of the Northern Terrace, hiding from the vampires in solitude.” He ambles forward, his hands in his trouser pockets. “Instead, I brought you home to a guild full of hunters who are all more capable than I am. What hope do I have of impressing you now?”

My stomach flutters at his warm tone. It borders on flirtatious. For the first time since we met, I feel safe. I’m not worried about the vampires, or Oakenridge, or Tansy, Sterling, and Gretchen. I can almost pretend we haven’t been through a hellish week.

“Haven’t I made it clear?” I ask him. “I’m already impressed.”

“Are you?”

“What you said in Arthur’s office...you were very dashing.”

He leans down, his warm brown eyes meeting mine. “You’re making it difficult to follow the rules, Miss Delane.”

I inhale softly, wondering if he’s going to kiss me right here in the hall, where anyone could see—

A door opens, and we fly apart, looking appropriately guilty.

ELIZABETH

The man who steps out pauses, his eyes going between us. “Hello, Benjamin. You’re back?”

“Briefly.” Benjamin directs me toward the hunter. “Elizabeth, this is Ambrose Rochester, one of the few men in the guild who knows how to properly fill out paperwork.”

The man is good-looking in a dark and brooding sort of way. He wears his long, black hair pulled away from his face, held up in a knot at the back of his head. His eyes and brows are dark as well, and his skin is a warm olive shade. He’s of medium height, a touch shorter than Benjamin. He reminds me of a well-crafted blade—deadly, but beautiful.

“Ambrose, this is Miss Elizabeth Delane. She’s currently under our protection and will be staying in the dormitory.”

The hunter inclines his head toward me. “Welcome to GHOST, Miss Delane.”

“Thank you.”

“We were just headed to the dining hall,” Benjamin explains.

“I see.” A smile passes over Ambrose’s face as if he knows what he interrupted, and it wasn’t us walking to dinner.

“Are you between jobs?” Benjamin asks him.

“I returned from Kentora yesterday. Do you need something?”

“Speak with Arthur and ask to go to Oakenridge.”

The hunter's eyes slide over me and then return to Benjamin. "What's the target?"

"Vampires. Arthur can give you the details."

"All right." With another nod, he excuses himself, leaving Benjamin and me alone once more.

"You almost got us in trouble," I tease quietly.

Benjamin's eyebrows fly up as if innocent. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Don't you?"

He shakes his head, smiling to himself as he offers his arm. "May I escort you to dinner, Miss Delane?"

I slide my hand through the crook of his elbow. "You may."

We greet many people along the way to the dining hall. Most give me curious looks. They want to know who I am, why I'm here, and what I'm doing with their executive director.

Benjamin is respected, admired, liked—I can tell by the way people interact with him. And though he's not mine, my heart swells with pride for him.

He's a good man.

We reach an exterior door. A large courtyard stretches between the main building and the dining hall.

"The guild has quite a bit of land for being in the city," I say.

"We're fortunate to have the space."

Even though it's not quite dark, lanterns burn at the perimeter of the courtyard and along pathways that cut through landscaped beds bordered with low-growing boxwoods.

Catriona's garden is out here as well, a small rectangular plot off to the right side, near a shed and a small barn. Several towering stalks of sunflowers are already dry and brown, leaning heavily against the garden fence.

Several guards stand watch in the outdoor space, two in front of each of the main doors.

I pause after just a few steps, realizing we'll have to walk back this way later tonight. Noticing my discomfort, Benjamin turns my way.

"Is it safe to stay out past dark?" I ask.

"The courtyard is well guarded. I doubt a vampire would be desperate enough to attempt to infiltrate GHOST."

But I remember him mentioning the poltergeist incident, and a shiver travels down my spine.

It only takes a few minutes to walk across the courtyard. The day's warmth has already leached from the air. Located near the heart of the Allied Provinces, Valette is nestled in farmland. But right now, it's not much warmer in the city than at home.

"Evening, Benjamin," one of the door guards says when we reach him. He and his companion are each armed with a crossbow, a pistol, a short sword, and three daggers. The arsenal makes me feel marginally better.

"Hello, Byron."

"I didn't get a chance to thank you for approving another month of guard duty," the man responds. "I appreciate it."

"Your wife and son are healthy?"

"Yes, sir." Byron opens the door for us. "The midwife said the birth went as smoothly as we could hope."

"Glad to hear it."

We step inside, greeted by the smell of roasted meat, freshly baked bread, and sweet spices.

The large hall is filled with round tables, most already full. They're set with white tablecloths and orange runners, each with an autumnal arrangement of chrysanthemums and gourds at the center. Heavy iron chandeliers hang overhead, lighting the space.

A long counter separates the open kitchen from the dining room. Several large brick ovens line the back wall. A man opens one and moves golden pies to a cooling rack on the worktable next to him.

Other members of the kitchen staff go about their tasks—some carving meat, others testing sauces, and a few garnishing finished dishes. Servers load silver carts with platters to deliver to the waiting diners.

Tansy would love it here.

“What is it?” Benjamin asks when he realizes I’ve stopped.

“I expected a mess hall like Father described from his army days. But this...” I shake my head.

“That’s one of the joys of working for a private guild.” Benjamin directs me toward an attendant at a stand just beyond the doors. “Lady Cunningham feeds us well.”

“There are children here,” I say, surprised.

“Arthur encourages hunters to bring guests when they attend dinner. We’re a close group—an extended family.”

The attendant greets us. “Two this evening, Mr. Oliver?”

Benjamin passes him two wooden tokens. “That’s right.”

“Your usual table?”

“Yes, but there’s no need to escort us.”

The man bows his head. “Enjoy your meal.”

“What are the tokens for?” I ask as Benjamin leads me to a table at the side of the room. Catriona is there, along with Felix and Ambrose.

“Each month, every guild member gets thirty to exchange for a meal.”

“You used one of yours for me?” I ask, startled.

“I can purchase more. I usually do, as I eat most of my meals at the guildhall.”

“Do you ever bring guests?” I ask, wondering about his social life.

“My sister, her husband, and their son join me occasionally.”

“Elizabeth,” Felix says with an impish grin when we arrive at the table. “Come distract Catriona so I can slip away. She’s trying to rope me into training after dinner.”

Cat rolls her eyes, but she smiles at me, gesturing toward the empty seat next to her. The one next to it is empty as well, but a cup of coffee waits for its occupant to return.

Benjamin takes a seat across from me, the only other one available. He gestures toward the coffee cup. “Who’s sitting there?”

“Atticus,” Catriona says, earning a low groan from Benjamin.

“Ah, *Atticus*.” I shoot Benjamin a teasing look. He returns it with a wry one of his own.

“Do you know him?” Ambrose asks.

“I met him earlier.”

Catriona nods toward the middle of the room, where the tall, blond man speaks with the hunters at another table. “He’s impossible to forget.”

Felix and Benjamin scoff at nearly the same time, but Ambrose merely shakes his head.

“It’s true,” Catriona argues, obviously trying to get a rise out of her friends. “He’s six feet three inches, with chiseled good looks and a body that deserves to be immortalized in marble.”

I can’t contain my startled laugh, but thankfully it doesn’t come out as a snort. None of the men at the table look impressed with Catriona’s description of the hunter.

“And what about me, Cat?” Felix asks. “How would you describe me?”

“You will call me Miss Mason until you complete your training.”

Felix grins. “I’m a year older than you.”

“And yet you cannot best me in a fight.”

“Hello, Miss Delane,” Atticus says to me as he returns to the table, interrupting Catriona and Felix’s tiff. “I didn’t know you’d be joining us this evening.”

“Good evening,” I say, keeping an eye on Benjamin.

“I spoke with Arthur fifteen minutes ago.” The hunter claims his seat. “He assigned me to your job.”

Benjamin looks resigned, as if he knew Arthur would go to Atticus.

“Thank you,” I say, unsure how else to respond.

The hunter’s strikingly green eyes meet mine. Solemnly, he continues, “I’m grateful I can be of assistance. I imagine this has been a harrowing experience. I’ll do everything in my power to vanquish this threat so you may return home.”

“I’m going to Oakenridge with him,” Ambrose says before I have to think of an answer for *that*.

“Don’t feel bad about being taken off the job, Ben,” Atticus adds, turning his attention to the director. “You’re just out of practice, that’s all.”

“Benjamin has the lead,” Ambrose says, coming to his friend’s defense. “Arthur assigned him to Elizabeth.”

Atticus frowns at Benjamin, not liking that very much. “You’re guarding her? Forgive me, but if she’s in danger, do you believe you’re the right man for the job?”

“He killed a vampire atop a moving train on our way to Valette.” I send Benjamin a knowing smile.

“Did you?” Ambrose asks, surprised.

“I could probably climb a train,” Felix muses, “but not if it was hurtling down the tracks.”

Catriona lifts a brow at the trainee, highly skeptical. “Tell me you didn’t jump trains while you were gallivanting across Galbreah.”

“Gallivanting?” Felix grins.

She rolls her eyes and looks back at Benjamin. “How fast do you think the train was—”

“Yes, yes,” Atticus interrupts. “We’re all properly impressed. Good job, Benjamin.”

Catriona laughs, but the humor slowly fades from her face. “What sort of job requires three hunters?” She looks at me. “One of which is filling in as a personal guard?”

“This one has turned out to be rather complicated,” Benjamin explains, interrupted when a server brings a cart.

“Good evening.” The man places platters and serving bowls on the table, avoiding the centerpiece. “Tonight, we have rosemary pork tenderloin, baked spiced apples, brown-sugar yams, and buttered rolls. As a reminder, drinks are served at the front. A selection of desserts will be placed on the side tables shortly.”

Felix asks, “Did Miss Sara make her pear crostatas again?”

“Not tonight, Lord Cunningham. We have walnut tartlets, pumpkin pie, and spiced cake.”

When the server leaves, I ask, “Is there a holiday I’ve forgotten about? This is impressive.”

“Hunters often bring guests on Friday nights,” Catriona says. “Our head cook likes to show off for them.”

We begin to eat, but the conversation never returns to Benjamin’s assignment. It does take a few interesting turns, however—something to be expected when Felix is present.

“I’m just saying you should think about it,” Felix says to Benjamin, helping himself to another serving of pork.

“We’re not adding fireworks to the list of standard guild-issued supplies.” Benjamin deadpans.

“Back me up here,” Felix says to Catriona. “I’m not saying you’ll need them for every job, but you never know when you’ll want to create a distraction. Let me tell you about this one time in—”

“Stop talking.” Catriona raises her brows in a way that could be mistaken for flirting. “Please.”

A slow, disarming grin builds on Felix’s face. “Someday, you’re going to be out in the field, lamenting the fact you have no fireworks. And you’ll say, ‘*Oh, how I ardently wish I’d listened to Felix.*’”

Cat smiles sweetly. “Never in my life will I utter those words, not even in the privacy of my head.”

He leans a touch closer and rests his elbow on the table. “You will.”

Their gazes hold for several seconds too long. Looking irritated, Catriona finally rips her attention to her plate and stabs a slice of pork.

I lower my eyes and press my lips together, trying not to laugh. Benjamin said Catriona can’t stand the man, but he’s dead wrong.

The subject moves from fireworks to the weapon approval process and then to the upcoming mandatory yearly physicals. Throughout the evening, Atticus attempts to draw me into conversation. He’s smooth, seemingly sincere, and I’m sure most girls would melt at his feet. But the object of my affection sits across from me, watching our conversation with a strange expression.

“I must admit I’m disappointed I’ll miss the Warrington’s Costume Ball,” Atticus says to me when we’ve nearly finished the meal. “I would have asked you to save me a dance.”

Benjamin suddenly rises. “More tea, Miss Delane?”

Thankful I don’t have to answer Atticus, I answer, “Yes, please. Shall I go with you?”

“That’s all right.” Benjamin’s eyes shift to Atticus. “It won’t take me long.”

I watch him go, wondering if I should follow him anyway.

“What time does the train leave tomorrow?” Ambrose asks Atticus. “I haven’t secured my ticket yet.”

“Neither have I,” Atticus answers, and then the two hunters begin discussing the job.

“I think Benjamin likes you,” Catriona says to me while the men are distracted, grinning as if delighted. “I’ve never seen him twist himself in knots over a woman.”

I study my plate. “Does he bring many to dinner?”

“He never brings women to the guild,” Catriona says.

It would be easy to read more into that than I should, but I’m not here because we’re in a relationship. I’m his charge.

At least for now.

“Do you like him?” she asks.

My gaze meets Benjamin’s from across the hall, lingering. “I do.”

“He’s going to tell you a relationship isn’t allowed,” Catriona warns. “He’s a chronic rule-follower.”

Mildly irritated, I say, “He already explained that I cannot trust my feelings, as they’re likely stemming from gratitude and not genuine affection.”

“That’s straight from the handbook,” Catriona laughs.

“What kind of man is he? You’ve known him for a while, haven’t you?”

She smiles. “He’s reliable and dedicated. He drives the hunters insane sometimes, as he forgets what it’s like to be in the field and they hate his paperwork, but he genuinely cares about their wellbeing and the financial security of the guild. Everyone likes Benjamin—even when they want to punch him.”

“I don’t like him,” Atticus says abruptly, turning from his and Ambrose’s conversation, betraying that he was eavesdropping.

“You do too,” Catriona laughs. “You’re just jealous of him.”

“Why would I be jealous of Benjamin?” Atticus demands.

“He’s handsome—”

“*I’m* handsome,” he interrupts, looking so offended I laugh. The hunter turns his eyes on me. “*I am.*”

“You are,” I concede.

“Everyone respects Benjamin,” Catriona continues with a grin. “And Arthur put him in *charge.*”

Atticus grumbles.

“Don’t listen to Atticus or Benjamin when they make a fuss about each other,” Catriona says to me. “They would walk through fire to save the other if needed.”

“I never said I wouldn’t,” Atticus says with an indifferent shrug, reminding me of a large, very handsome cat.

Benjamin returns to the table, offering me the tea. Everyone looks at him somewhat expectantly, taking him off guard. He steps back, eyeing his friends. “What?”

“Atticus just said he’d walk through fire to save your life,” Ambrose says in his serious, slightly indifferent way. But humor crinkles the edges of his dark eyes. “I didn’t realize the two of you were so close.”

“Now wait a minute,” Atticus protests. “That was taken out of context—”

“I don’t want to know,” Benjamin says, cutting him off. “Now, if you’re all finished eating, I’d like you to join me in my office so we can discuss the job. I’m not sure how much Arthur told you, but I think you need to know what you’re getting into.”

“You want me to join you as well?” Felix asks, surprised.

“No,” both Catriona and Benjamin say at the same time.

Ignoring Benjamin, Felix gives Catriona a droll look. “Haven’t you said I should show more initiative? Why are you trying to stop me?”

“Because you’re a fledgling trainee, and you can’t play with the grown-up hunters yet.” She stands, dragging him up by the arm. “Come on. We’re going to train.”

Felix protests loudly, but his subtle smile doesn't slip my notice, nor the fact that he follows her as eagerly as a puppy.

The others stand, and I give my tea a wistful look.

"You may take it with you," Benjamin says. "I'll return the cup later."

I pick up the tea, hoping I won't slosh it. Then Atticus, Ambrose, Benjamin, and I leave the table, trailing behind Catriona and Felix. We reach the doors, and I grow nervous, knowing we'll have to walk through the courtyard in the dark.

"It's all right," Benjamin assures me, correctly reading my hesitation. He holds back his jacket flap and reveals a sharpened stake, a dagger, and a small pistol. "I'm armed."

"As are we," Ambrose says, and he and Atticus flash me their arsenal as well.

"Do you always bring so many weapons to dinner?" I ask them, disconcerted.

"Always," Atticus answers solemnly.

"Sometimes more," Ambrose adds.

Not sure what to make of that, I follow them into the cool night. I feel reasonably safe flanked by the three hunters, though I walk faster than is probably necessary, and I spill some of the tea over the lip of the cup and into the saucer.

But we reach the main building without incident. The door guards bid us a good evening, and then we're inside. I let out a deep sigh of relief as the doors close behind us.

I follow Benjamin to his office, eager to see the space. He holds the door open for me, allowing me to enter the room first.

There's an imposing wooden desk, much like Arthur's, and a leather chair behind it. Benjamin doesn't have chairs opposite it, likely because he doesn't want visitors staying long enough to get comfortable. A potted tree stands in the corner. There are two bookcases and a credenza along the back wall with large drawers that likely hold files.

A massive stack of paperwork sits on his desk, along with several other pieces strewn about. There's a pile of books near the corner. Another is open near the front of the desk, with a note scribbled on a piece of paper that lies on top of it. A strange collection of things lies near the inkwell—a dagger with a broken blade, a leather glove with a hole worn in both the thumb and the forefinger, two empty teacups, and a plate with crumbs on it.

Benjamin comes to an abrupt stop, staring at the mess. His eye twitches, and he mutters, "*Catriona*," under his breath.

"It's no wonder she took off as quickly as she did," Ambrose says.

Letting out a long-suffering sigh, Benjamin rounds the desk and closes the long drapes that hang over the five tall, narrow windows lining the back wall.

We've barely stepped inside when a hunter announces his presence at the door. "Mr. Oliver?"

Benjamin looks over. "Yes, Louis?"

"A message has arrived for a Miss Delane, but I was told to deliver it to you, as you'd know where to find her?" He carries a letter that's sealed with a coin-sized circle of red wax.

"For me?" I ask, startled.

"If you're Miss Delane, then yes. The courier is waiting for your response."

Benjamin takes the letter and hands it to me. "Who's it from?"

"House Renward, sir," the man says with an air of distaste.

"Julian?" Ambrose asks, startled.

Atticus looks at me, suspicious. "How do you know him?"

"He cornered her on the train," Benjamin says.

Feeling the need to further defend myself, I add, "He said we met when I attended one of his grandparents' galas, but I don't remember him."

“Did he find out she hired GHOST?” Ambrose asks. “Is he hoping to steal the job from us?”

The way he says it makes me think it wouldn't be the first time.

“What does the letter say?” Benjamin asks me.

I break the seal and scan the message, resisting the urge to toss the note into the rubbish bin. “It's an invitation to sit with him at dinner during his grandparent's costume ball. He said he has something he needs to discuss with me.”

“What could he possibly need to discuss with you?” Benjamin scowls, but then his frown becomes thoughtful. “He's Vincent's nephew. Why don't you tell him you're already going with me, but we'll sit with him if he'd like the company.”

“I wasn't aware we were going to the ball,” I say.

He lifts a brow. “Would you care to be my dining partner at the Warrington's Costume Ball, Miss Delane?”

“Thank you for the invitation, but I don't particularly care to announce my visit to Valette, which my attendance would surely do.”

Growing bored, Atticus says, “Could you discuss this later? Don't you have something important to tell us, Benjamin? Why are we here?”

Eyeing Atticus, Benjamin turns to the hunter waiting in the doorway. “Tell the courier Miss Delane will send her response in the morning.”

“Yes, sir.” The man bows his head as he closes the door. “Have a pleasant evening.”

Once we're alone, Benjamin explains the situation to Ambrose and Atticus. Ambrose exhales slowly once Benjamin is done, processing the new information.

Atticus's expression becomes thoughtful. “Arthur left out a few details.”

“I think it's best you know,” Benjamin answers.

“So we suspect the Saranican Empire is behind the attacks?” Ambrose asks.

“We don’t know. That’s merely our best guess at this point. It could very well be someone else who’s figured out the secret to the compulsion.”

“It would be a great coincidence,” Atticus muses.

Benjamin nods. “And now Julian is flitting around Elizabeth.”

“You think he’s somehow connected?” I ask him.

“I’m not sure, but we can’t ignore that he’s Vincent’s nephew.”

“You don’t suppose...” I trail off.

“What is it?” Atticus asks.

I nudge a few papers to the side and sit on the edge of the desk. “Does anyone know where Vincent is? What if, like Father, he went missing as well? Perhaps Julian reached out to me because he’s looking for him?”

If it’s true, then Julian was following me, likely looking for the right time to stage our meeting. The thought is unsettling.

“It might be best if Elizabeth accompanies Julian as his dinner companion,” Ambrose says to Benjamin. “He won’t talk in front of you.”

“I’m not sending her unattended.”

“Catriona can sit with them,” Atticus interrupts. “You can attend as well, monitoring Elizabeth from afar.”

Stubbornly, Benjamin says, “I don’t like it.”

I meet his eyes. “I’ll do it.”

“Elizabeth—”

“Let’s see what Julian wants.”

“It’s getting late,” Benjamin finally says, turning to the hunters. “Be cautious in Oakenridge.”

“We will be,” Ambrose answers almost flippantly, just as cocky as Atticus, though he doesn’t make the fact as blatantly obvious.

“Take Greg,” Benjamin suggests. “He’s now familiar with the area and might come in useful.”

“I talked to him earlier,” Atticus says. “He informed me he won’t leave Miss Delane until the job is complete.”

I blink, startled. “He did?”

“He’s a loyal dragon,” Atticus answers. “He decided it’s his job to keep you safe.”

“Where is he now?” I ask.

“Circling overhead.” Benjamin sighs. “He has been since it grew dark enough for him to venture into the city.”

I feel better knowing he’s up there, watching.

“Thank you, Greg,” I say aloud, hoping he’ll hear me.

“He says you’re welcome,” Atticus responds, beating Benjamin to it. The hunters share a look that’s laced with competition. I believe it’s time to separate them.

I push away from the desk. “I’d like to retire now.”

“I’ll walk you upstairs,” Benjamin responds.

“It was nice to meet you both,” I say to Ambrose and Atticus as we part with them in the hall. “Thank you for taking the job. I hope you both stay safe.”

They nod as we leave, and then it’s just Benjamin and me. Halfway up the quiet stairway, he turns to me. “You’re not going with Julian.”

My eyebrows fly up, and I can’t keep the challenge out of my tone. “Isn’t that for me to decide?”

“Arthur assigned me as your guard, and my intuition is telling me something feels off about this.”

“If he is connected, we need to know what he wants from me. And Ambrose was right—I suspect he won’t talk in front of you.”

“And you think he’ll talk in front of Cat?”

“I think I can persuade him to, yes, especially if she appears preoccupied at the moment.”

“Preoccupied with what?”

“Not what—whom.”

“Fine. Whom?”

“Felix.”

Benjamin laughs abruptly. “You’ll never convince Catriona to accompany Felix in any social situation, for a job or not.”

I don’t believe that, but I don’t push the issue. “Let me talk to her about it, all right? And you’ll be there as well, and I’m sure Greg will fly overhead if we ask him nicely.”

Benjamin exhales slowly, thinking about it. “I still don’t like it.”

“Which part?” I ask, frustrated.

“The part where you walk arm in arm with Julian. Or where you sit next to him at dinner. And certainly not—”

“Careful, Benjamin. You’re on the verge of breaking your own rules again.”

He contemplates me for a second, and then he glances down the stairway. “This isn’t the place for this conversation.”

The hunter then leads me up the stairs and into the room next to mine where he’ll be staying. I raise an eyebrow once we’re alone. “I’m not sure this will do anything for your reputation either.”

“I’m not going to advertise that I brought you in here, and no one saw us.”

“I don’t like Julian,” I say, getting to the point.

Benjamin presses his lips into a thin line. After a moment, he admits, “It shouldn’t bother me, not when I’ve continually put distance between us.”

“It shouldn’t? Or it doesn’t?”

Reluctantly, he meets my eyes. “Shouldn’t.”

I draw in a breath, caught in his chocolate gaze.

“I don’t want to take advantage of you, Elizabeth.”

“Yes, I know,” I say dryly. “I’m a weak female, unable to discern my own emotions in the presence of a capable hunter.”

“The guideline doesn’t only apply to females. Catriona must be cautious with male clients as well.” He smiles a little, and then his face goes solemn once more. “But prove to me that’s not what this is. What do you like about me?”

“Are you fishing for compliments, Mr. Oliver?”

“Is there nothing?” There’s something vulnerable in the question. “Why do you like me, Elizabeth?”

I study him, questioning how much of my heart I dare show. Finally, I say, “Because you said hello to Gretchen’s doll to put her at ease when she was scared of you. Because you complimented Tansy on her scones when she was embarrassed by how little we had. And because you let me go to the manor when I was so desperate. We both know you shouldn’t have.”

He looks like he’s going to say something, but I’m not finished.

“Because you gave me your jacket and slept on the floor so I could have the bed.” I press my fisted hand to my heart. “Because you don’t seem to care about my father’s money—you haven’t even asked me to pay you back for the horse. Because you’re as kind as you are handsome, and every time you look at me like you are right now, I feel like you’re chipping away at the ice that’s encased my heart ever since my father disappeared.” I pause, searching his eyes. “Don’t you understand, Benjamin? I’d like you even if you couldn’t kill a vampire.”

His eyebrow twitches. He continues to stare at me, making me feel vulnerable, bare. I’ve opened myself up, and this time, it’ll hurt if he rejects me.

I nearly jump when he finally moves. He takes one slow step toward me...then another.

I hold my breath, my stomach fluttering like mad when Benjamin sets his warm hands on the sides of my neck, his thumbs cradling my face. I go perfectly still, my heart beginning to race.

Our gazes lock. He presses his mouth into a thin line, wrestling with himself. Unable to resist, I follow the movement, tracing the shape of his lips with my eyes, desperately wanting to trace them with my mouth.

When I pull my attention back up, I inhale a soft gasp. His eyes have darkened, and I know he's come to a decision. Without a word, Benjamin angles my face up, stroking my skin along the back of my neck.

And then he kisses me.

He covers my soft exclamation, his mouth warm and welcome.

Exquisite.

I grasp hold of his leather jacket, using it for leverage as I stand on my toes to meet him. The hunter makes a noise in the back of his throat and then drops a hand to my side, dragging me against him. The firm pressure of his touch drives me mad. I part my lips, inviting him to deepen the kiss—needing him like I need air.

Benjamin groans, suddenly pulling back. We stare at each other, breathing hard, both startled by how brightly we burned.

Never in my life have I been kissed like that.

BENJAMIN

Elizabeth stares at me, her lips parted, her cheeks flushed. I swallow, trying to slow the pounding in my chest.

She puts on a mournful face, taking my chin and tilting it down to press another kiss to my lips. Softly, she teases, “You broke your rules.”

“To the shadow realm with the rules,” I whisper.

She laughs, releasing me as she turns toward the door. “I should go to bed.”

I catch her hand before she leaves. “Let’s talk for a few minutes.”

“About what?”

“I’m not the type of man who engages in brief affairs. Are you certain you want to begin something with me?”

The warmth that lights her gray eyes eases some of my anxiety. “Are you asking if I’m prepared to announce an official courtship?”

My mouth goes dry, and my nerves nearly get the best of me. A week ago, I didn’t want a relationship. Now I can’t think of anything I want more. “I believe I am.”

As I wait for Elizabeth’s answer, my chest tightens. Perhaps this was too bold of me. We’ve only known each other for six days, and our home provinces are two days apart by train. But courtships are started with less, often only a discussion between two fathers and a piece of paper.

At least Elizabeth and I have affection between us. And we have time to figure out logistics. There's no reason to rush things. We'll court for a while, get to know each other slowly. Elizabeth needs to meet Danielle, and I should meet anyone else who's important to her.

"Ask me again next week," she finally says. "I promise I'll say yes."

I drop her hand. "You're determined to go with Julian, aren't you?"

"Julian has nothing to do with it. I'm determined to discover what happened to my father. If that means I must spend one evening with Julian to gather information, then I will."

I don't like it, especially not when I'm responsible for her wellbeing. If I approve this, and something happens...

But I won't treat her like a child. She's a grown woman, and if she wants to accept Julian's invitation, it would be wrong to stop her.

"All right," I finally say. "As long as Catriona agrees to accompany you and Julian accepts her company."

Elizabeth relaxes her shoulders, and then she nods.

"I'll walk you to your room," I say.

"It's only next door."

"I'll walk you next door."

She smiles, heading toward the hall. I catch her before she reaches for the doorknob. "Let me make sure it's clear first."

I look out, relieved to find the hall is quiet. Quickly, we slip out of my room.

I clasp my hands behind my back, watching as Elizabeth produces her key and opens the door to her room. She looks back, almost expectantly.

"What is it?" I ask.

“You will ask me again, won’t you?” Her words are light, but her eyes search mine like she’s anxious. “This has nothing to do with Julian and everything to do with Father. You know that, don’t you?”

“If I say I won’t, will you turn Julian down?” I ask, but she looks so torn, I immediately relent. “Of course, I’m going to ask you again.”

A smile steals across her face, and she steps into me without warning, wrapping her arms around my middle. “Don’t change your mind.”

In some ways, the embrace feels more intimate than the kiss. I loop my arms around her, stroking her back. It feels good to be this close to someone. “I won’t change my mind.”

Elizabeth slowly extracts herself from my arms. “Sleep well.”

“You too.”

And then she slips into her room.

THE CUNNINGHAM’S butler shows Elizabeth and me into the parlor. We find Arthur in the sunniest corner of the room, frowning at a potted plant with arching fronds that grow nearly as tall as he is.

He looks over when we come in. “I don’t suppose you know anything about silvervein palms, do you?”

He must be talking to Elizabeth because we both know I have a black thumb. If it weren’t for the maids employed by Lady Cunningham, the potted tree in my office would be dead.

“I don’t.” Elizabeth gives the plant a sad look. “Father was good with plants, but I didn’t inherit that gift.”

“He gave me this one, actually,” Arthur says. “I can’t bear to let it die.”

On closer inspection, I notice the tips of the fingered fronds are brown, and a few of the stalks have turned yellow.

With a regretful sigh, Arthur turns from the plant and takes a seat, motioning for us to do the same. “You need to speak with me?”

“Julian Renward has invited Elizabeth to join him for dinner at his grandparent’s costume ball. He says he needs to speak with her.”

Arthur looks baffled, as if he cannot understand why I feel the need to tell him.

“His connection to Vincent made me uneasy,” I add.

“Do you often see Julian when you come to the city?” Arthur asks Elizabeth.

“He said we met at one of his grandparent’s galas, but I don’t remember. As far as I know, we met for the first time on the train to Valette the day before yesterday.”

Arthur sighs. “I know you don’t care for Julian, Benjamin, and truth be told, neither do I. But Miss Delane’s visit to the city is bound to attract attention. Once people realize she’s here, every well-to-do mother in a hundred miles is going to find a creative way to push their son at her.”

Unfamiliar jealousy rears its ugly head, but I reason with it. Elizabeth and I are as good as courting, even if we haven’t made the announcement official.

“I only thought it was strange that someone connected to the incident in Saranica is suddenly interested in Elizabeth,” I say, getting the impression he thinks I’m paranoid.

“We thought, perhaps, something might have happened to Vincent as well,” Elizabeth adds.

“Even if that’s the case, I see no reason to dissuade you from accepting Julian’s invitation,” Arthur says, “providing we send a hunter escort along.”

“Catriona has reluctantly agreed to accompany me,” Elizabeth informs him.

“Reluctantly?” Arthur asks, surprised.

“Somehow, Miss Delane has convinced Cat to bring Felix as her dining partner,” I explain.

“Ah.” Arthur laughs a little. “I understand.”

“I was hoping to persuade you and Lady Cunningham to attend as well,” I tell him. “Most of Valette knows I only go to these things when you drag me along.”

And I need to be there. If Julian is dealing with the vampires as well, then this situation is large and has the potential to be extremely dangerous.

At least that’s the reason I’m giving myself.

But what if the snake merely wishes to sneak into the heiress’s good graces before the rest of Valette realizes she’s in the city?

I begin to doubt myself. Is that all this is? A social outing? And does the thought of that, perhaps, make me even more uneasy?

Julian is the head of House Renward. He has money, and he’s reasonably decent-looking as far as I can tell. Yes, his scruples are questionable, but he has good connections. Most people are all too happy to ignore his lack of character.

And if he’s hoping to woo Elizabeth, he’ll be on his best behavior.

“You’re in luck, Ben. Carissa and I are already planning to attend the Autumn Ball,” Arthur says, interrupting my thoughts. “It’s one of Carissa’s favorite social events of the year. As always, you are welcome to join us.”

“Thank you, sir,” I say.

Arthur turns back to Elizabeth. “Do be cautious, and remember you’re still being trailed. Vampires can walk among us at night, even in the light of the ballroom.”

“I understand,” Elizabeth says.

“Good.” He rises. “Now go—enjoy the city. There’s nothing we can do until Monday. Why don’t you take

Elizabeth to see the sights, Benjamin?”

“I was planning to go back to the guild so I could unearth my desk.”

He gives me a pointed look, one telling me I need a social life.

“Yes, sir,” I end up saying.

He smiles indulgently, letting me know I made the right choice.

We leave the Cunningham’s estate, and I shake my head. “Apparently Arthur isn’t any better than Valette’s well-to-do mothers. I feel like I should apologize.”

Elizabeth smiles, her eyes dropping to my mouth. “I think we’re past the point of awkward social apologies, Mr. Oliver.”

Intense desire clutches me, but I fight it back, knowing I mustn’t kiss her in the middle of this busy walkway. In fact, I shouldn’t kiss her at all, not until she accepts my request to court.

Coming to that decision, I clear my throat. “Would you like to walk to the park?”

Disappointment shadows her pretty face, but she says, “That sounds fine.”

It’s going to be a very long week.

ELIZABETH

I lie in bed, flipping through Father's journal in the candlelight. I cried a little when I first saw his handwriting, still missing him so much.

There are notes in here, alchemy recipes and lists of ingredients too. Some entries are dated, but others are not. It's a rambling mess, one I can't even decipher, and I knew him well.

There's a tonic for headaches that I recognize, and another for soothing hay fever and hives. I pause on an entry titled "Skin Lesions." It looks complicated, with scratched out notes and adjusted steps. My eyes skim over the ingredients. There are plants I've never heard of, ones we certainly didn't grow in our medicinal herb garden. A few lines are scratched out so well I cannot make them out.

"Wolf...something?" I say aloud, squinting as I try to read one of them. "Wolfsbane?"

That must be it.

I read half a dozen more entries. There's a recipe for easing symptoms associated with head colds, a rambling entry about antler slugs, and a tonic for morning sickness.

There's nothing about the sister serums, antivenom, or vampires.

"For a brilliant doctor, you really were a mess." My heart hurting, I close the journal and tuck it under my pillow, glad to have a small piece of him with me.

“THIS ONE,” Catriona says confidently, gesturing to a scarlet gown that hangs in one of the three wardrobes in her room.

I’ve been in Valette for a week. Though I had a chance to shop, my heart was never in it. Truth be told, I’ve been dreading the evening.

Now I’ve run out of time. Cat insisted I mustn’t wear a day gown to the ball, so she’s going to lend me something appropriate.

The dress she’s currently offering is sleeveless, with a fitted bodice, a sweetheart neckline, and sumptuous satin fabric. It’s the kind of gown a woman wears when she wants to be noticed.

“Something less...red?” I suggest.

“You don’t like it?” Cat holds it up to me, assessing.

“It’s a little bold.”

“It is.” She lowers the garment, nodding to herself. “It suits you.”

Does it? I don’t feel like someone who can wear something so daring. I scan the other gowns, but it’s the only one that catches my eye.

“Maybe,” I finally say.

“I don’t have the figure to do it justice.” She grins. “And I want to see the look on Benjamin’s face when he sees you in it.”

Suddenly feeling like this is a terrible idea, I say, “Benjamin won’t be my dining partner.”

She gives me a knowing look. “He’ll be there, though.”

“What about you?” I ask, deciding it’s time to change the subject. “What are you going to wear?”

The smile that crosses her face is a touch wicked as she looks down at her fitted trousers and brown leather, lace-up corset. “Just imagine the look on Felix’s face if I were to go like this.”

“Don’t you think you’re a bit hard on him?” I laugh. “Felix is really quite nice.”

“Felix’s problem has nothing to do with pleasantness.” She frowns at a sapphire gown with a shimmering overlay. “Is this one too dark for a bluebird?”

“A little.”

“I’m afraid you’re right, but I’m going to wear it anyway.” She looks over. “It cost me an entire month’s wages, but it’s pretty, isn’t it? I’ve never gotten a chance to show it off.”

“What did you buy it for?”

“Nothing. I purchased it on a whim.” She glances over and laughs. “I live in the guildhall for free, and GHOST provides my weapons. I have nothing to do with my earnings but squirrel them away and then spend them on wildly expensive sapphire gowns.”

Catriona is a conundrum. From the way the hunters respect her, and the fact that Arthur has her training the new recruits, I imagine she must be deadly. But she’s like a butterfly, pretty and delicate, and I cannot picture her facing off against a vampire.

“At least try the red one on.” She sighs a little. “It’s a shame we didn’t have time to have something made.”

“All right,” I finally give in, making Catriona beam with approval. “But what about the costume part of the ball?”

“Wear one of my tiaras and go as a duchess.”

“*One* of your tiaras?”

“I don’t get the chance to wear them as often as you might imagine.”

I laugh, shaking my head as I picture her draping herself with jewels and then going off to kill monsters.

We fuss with the dresses for a while longer, and Catriona shows me the wings she made for her costume. It almost feels normal—like we’re two friends preparing for a ball. Like there aren’t vampires hunting me, and I’m in Valette for a holiday.

Twenty minutes later, I leave Cat’s room. Benjamin waits for me in the hall, speaking with another hunter.

His eyes move to my empty arms. “You didn’t find anything?” He looks relieved, as if he assumes I’ll have to cancel the plans if I cannot find a dress.

“Catriona’s going to take our gowns to the laundry so they can be steamed,” I explain.

Benjamin grunts, resigned. His expression is so stormy I almost laugh.

“I’m going to lie down for a bit,” I tell him.

“Are you feeling all right?”

“It’s just a headache.”

I can’t tell Benjamin I’m dreading the evening, and not just because I don’t want to go with Julian. These social situations are always painful. By the end of the evening, I’m positive I’ll feel like a prized goat. Or worse—a broodmare. Men will talk about the size of my inheritance. Mothers will talk about the size of my hips.

“I’ll walk you to your room,” Benjamin offers.

He’s been quiet today, almost broody. But I suppose I’ve been lost in my own thoughts as well. But this whole week, since we talked to Arthur, he’s distanced himself. Not physically, of course—he’s been a dutiful guardian. But emotionally, I can feel a chasm between us.

When we arrive at my door, he hesitates.

“What is it?” I ask.

“Nothing.” He offers me a smile that isn’t very convincing. “I was thinking about paperwork.”

“I’m safe enough up here, don’t you think? If I lock the door, I don’t see why you can’t work for a few hours.”

“I’ll bring up a few things so I won’t be too far away should you need me.”

“Thank you for walking me.”

He nods, looking pensive. Even though I’m tempted to pull him into the room, I softly close the door between us.

I’m sound asleep when Benjamin knocks on the door a few hours later. Groggy, I blink several times.

“Elizabeth?” he calls, likely worried because I haven’t answered.

“I’m coming,” I say, my voice heavy with sleep.

I pull myself off the bed and cross the room, fumbling with the lock and then opening the door.

Benjamin stands on the other side, holding the scarlet gown in his arms. His eyes move up to my hair, which is likely a mess thanks to the pillow, and this time, his smile is a little more genuine. “Catriona asked me to bring this to you.” He shakes his head as if baffled. “She said something about fighting with her wings?”

“I overslept,” I needlessly explain, imagining Catriona wrestling with her elaborate feathers. I should have asked if she needed help before I left.

“Sleep some more and my night will go better.” The hunter leans a shoulder against the doorframe. “I won’t complain about missing the ball.”

Thankful for his light tone, I take the garment. “Thank you for delivering the dress.”

He raises his brows, acknowledging the gratitude, and then turns toward his room. “Since you’re determined to do this, I best get ready as well.”

I close the door, sighing a little. Is this a mistake? Am I, perhaps, grasping at straws? Julian didn’t mention Father in

his message, but I want so badly to believe...

With a low groan, I set the dress on the bed and bury my face in my hands.

An hour later, there's another knock at the door.

"Are you ready?" Benjamin calls as I'm finishing my hair.

I stare at my reflection, resisting the urge to tug at the neckline. The gown is beautiful, elegant, and the cut is modern. Perhaps too modern.

"Come in," I call.

"You didn't set the lock," Benjamin says as he comes inside.

"I knew you were next door."

"Even though you're staying in the guild, you should..."

The hunter's admonishment trails off, his lips parting as I turn from the mirror to face him. I draw in a slow, measured breath to ease my nerves, and then my eyes catch on him.

He's traded the protective leather hunter's jacket for a calf-length tailored topcoat in a deep shade of cobalt blue. The mandarin collar and lapels are embroidered with golden thread that matches the buttons and trim on his deep charcoal waistcoat. He wears cream-colored trousers that tuck into his tall black boots.

He looks very handsome.

My heart beats a little faster, a new sensation that only seems to happen when Benjamin is nearby. It takes me a moment to remember we're not attending the ball together, though I desperately wish we were. He's sure to draw female attention tonight.

And I don't like it.

"You look beautiful." The hunter's eyes travel down the length of the dress, and then he rips them back up and clears his throat. "Your dress matches your mother's necklace."

I touch the pendant. “Catriona’s taste in gowns is a little more flamboyant than mine.”

“You’ll fit in with the crowd. Valette loves its pageantry.” He raises a brow. “This is your last chance to change your mind.”

He’d like me to.

“Why are you worried about Julian?” I cross the room. “Surely you don’t think I’ll play traitor and run to him for help when I’m already working with you?”

“No.” He sighs.

“Then what’s plaguing you?”

“I just don’t like it.”

“Are you jealous?” I ask softly.

Benjamin meets my eyes. “Insanely.”

Butterflies flit in my stomach, and I force my hands to stay still at my sides. I was worried he changed his mind about me. About us.

But he hasn’t. Not at all.

I swallow hard, realizing we need to leave the privacy of my room. It’s too tempting to stay here and ignore everything that’s wrong with my world.

Benjamin’s eyes run over my dress again. “Especially when you’re wearing that.”

“I didn’t wear it for Julian.”

A smile ghosts across his face. “If it’s not for your dinner companion, then whom?”

“Tell me I can’t go,” I suddenly say. “Tell me it’s foolish, that Julian doesn’t know a thing about my father—”

“I’m not going to take away your freedom, Elizabeth. If you feel you need to do this, then we’ll do it.”

“I don’t want to go with him.”

“I know.”

“Benjamin...” His name is a plea.

“What do you want me to say?” he asks.

“That you’ll forgive me. That you understand why I’m doing this. That you know how badly I want you—”

The hunter closes the space between us in two strides, claiming my mouth with his. He slides his hand over my side and then my back, his grip firm.

His kiss is as bold as the scarlet of my gown. It’s exactly what I want, exactly what I need.

“Elizabeth,” Benjamin breathes, pulling back just enough his lips feather over mine. “Tonight is going to be torture.”

“I’ll leave early,” I promise him. “I’ll find out what Julian wants to tell me, and then we’ll go.”

He nods, threading his fingers through my hair as his eyes rake over my face. The look makes me feel wanted, cherished even.

It nearly destroys me. I lean forward, slowly kissing his bottom lip, and I’m rewarded with a low groan. Desire flares between us.

I end up against the door, caged in, my heart beating wildly. Without breaking the kiss, Benjamin flips the lock to prevent an unwanted interruption.

“Benjamin,” I breathe, “It’s getting late.”

“We have a few minutes more.” He pulls back just enough to look at me again, his eyes molten. His lips quirk up in the corner. “Unless you want to stop?”

I kiss the smirk from his mouth. He laughs softly and then breaks away, trailing his lips down my throat. My breath catches in my lungs, the sensation delicious. The air between us simmers, and my muscles grow weak. Benjamin returns his attention to my mouth, kissing me thoroughly, until my entire body is flushed.

An impatient knock vibrates the door, nearly making me groan aloud.

“Shhh,” Benjamin teases at a bare whisper, moving his mouth near my ear. “You’ll give us away.”

“Elizabeth, are you ready?” Catriona calls.

“Nearly,” I answer, hoping my tone doesn’t sound as breathy as it feels. “I’ll be down in a few minutes.”

“Hurry, or we’ll be late,” she warns. “I’m going to find Benjamin. Arthur and Carissa are here for him as well.”

As soon as she leaves, Benjamin steps back. His jacket is askew, and his hair is mussed. He straightens himself, raising his brows as I do the same.

“Why don’t you go down first?” he says. “I’ll wait until it’s clear, and then I’ll follow.”

I nod, glancing in the mirror to see if my skin is the same color as my dress. Thankfully, only my cheeks are flushed, and the color could easily be mistaken for rouge.

Benjamin watches me go, his expression becoming solemn. For what must be the tenth time, he says, “Stay with Catriona tonight.”

“I will.”

“And don’t forget Arthur’s warning—vampires can walk indoors at night. I doubt they’ll be bold enough to infiltrate the Warrington’s estate, but we don’t know how desperate they’re growing.”

I nod.

“If you need me, and I’m not nearby—”

“I’ll call to Greg. He should be able to hear me, and he’ll alert you.” I laugh a little. “Benjamin, I know all this already.”

The hunter almost smiles. “It never hurts to review.”

“I’ll be careful,” I promise.

“Have a pleasant evening, Miss Delane. Save a dance for me.”

That, at least, is something to look forward to.

“I will.”

Benjamin catches my hand before I slip out. He says nothing, just twines our fingers together like he hates to see me leave.

“Catriona is going to come looking for me again,” I remind him.

Nodding, he releases me.

I step into the hall, wishing I hadn't decided to do this. But it's too late to change my mind now, and I'll never know what Julian wants to discuss if I don't go.

BENJAMIN

“Benjamin!” my sister exclaims when she spots me exiting Arthur and Carissa’s carriage. It looks like she and her husband, Harvey, have just arrived as well.

As I raise my hand to greet Danielle, I scan the rows of carriages, acknowledging that Elizabeth, Catriona, and Felix must already be inside Lord and Lady Warrington’s estate. Excusing myself from Arthur and Carissa and the friends who have already cornered them, I walk over to greet my sister.

“I didn’t think you were coming.” She grins, delighted.

In the spirit of the event, she wears an orange gown with a cascade of white lace ruffles sewn in tiers down the front of the skirt. A pair of fox ears peeks out from her short brunette curls. All she’s missing is a tail.

Her eyes scan my clothing, and she frowns. “You didn’t come in costume.”

“When is the last time you saw me wear a costume?” I gesture to her ears. “But this look...it suits you.”

She grins. “It does, doesn’t it?”

Harvey comes over, a pleasant smile on his face. My brother-in-law is a little plump, with a perpetually friendly expression. And my wicked sister has dressed the poor man as a chicken. He wears a white topcoat over a red waistcoat made of dyed red feathers.

I laugh at his apparent discomfort. “You look disturbing tonight.”

“Your sister...” He strokes his chest feathers self-consciously, ever a good sport.

“I’m well aware.”

Danielle scans me again. “You might not be in costume, but you *do* look rather handsome.” I can already see the gears in her brain working. “I’m glad you came. I have someone to introduce you to—”

“Not tonight.”

“Benjamin,” she groans. “At this rate, you’re going to die a bachelor.”

“I don’t know about that,” Catriona says from my elbow, startling me. “Surely some lovely girl has her eye on Benjamin. I think it’s only a matter of time before someone snatches him up.”

I turn, finding Elizabeth standing with Cat. Even though I saw her only thirty minutes ago, she steals my breath. Catriona has accessorized her, giving her a silver tiara to wear in her long, silken hair. She now looks like the royalty she might as well be.

Elizabeth’s eyes hold mine for several long seconds before she pulls her gray gaze to my sister.

“Hello, Catriona,” Danielle says, delighted. She’s always had a soft spot for the hunter, trying and failing several times to pair the two of us together. Her eyes move to Felix and Elizabeth. “And Lord Cunningham and...a new face.”

“Danielle, this is Miss Elizabeth Delane,” I say. “Miss Delane, this is my sister Danielle.”

That piques Elizabeth’s interest. A smile spreads across her pretty face, and she flashes me a look before she says, “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Delane?” Danielle asks, her eyes widening. “You’re Colonel Delane’s daughter?”

Elizabeth’s expression softens with veiled grief. “That’s right.”

“I’ve heard you rarely come to the city,” Danielle says with a laugh. “I feel as though I’m meeting a legend.”

“Danielle,” I chastise quietly.

Ignoring me, my sister asks Elizabeth, “What brings you to Valette?”

“Vampires.” Elizabeth’s gaze flicks my way once more. “Arthur assigned your brother to me.”

That’s enough to shake Danielle out of her good mood. She whips her attention to me. “You don’t take jobs.”

“This is the first in years.”

“*Benjamin*,” she whispers, looking heartbroken. “No.”

“The guild is in shambles without me,” I say. “I doubt it will become a common occurrence.”

“I’m not sure shambles is the right word,” Catriona argues.

I narrow my eyes at her. “How else would you describe the state of my desk?”

“You exaggerate.” Cat picks at the skirt of her blue gown, smiling. She’s a bird or a blue fairy or...something with wings. The feathered creations clash with the twin daggers she wears on her hip. Like me, I’m certain she has a stake or two hidden somewhere as well.

I glance around the dark courtyard. There are people milling around, but we’re still in the open. It will be safer inside.

“Miss Delane!”

Our small group swivels to look at Julian as he jogs down the steps of the estate’s grand entry. Irritation muddies my good mood, not only because he’s here, but because he announced Elizabeth’s presence to everyone outside. People follow his eyes, young and old intrigued by the heiress’s presence. They whisper, heads leaned together as they gawk at Elizabeth.

And so it begins.

Julian dressed as a prince, complete with a ridiculous crown and short red cape. He looks like an idiot, but I can't help but realize they make a matching pair.

I cast a subtle glare at Catriona.

"How was I supposed to know what he was going to come as?" my friend hisses under her breath.

"Hello, Lord Renward," Elizabeth says, her tone cordial but lacking the warmth I've become accustomed to. At some point in the short time we've known each other, she allowed me into her inner circle, and her manner changed toward me.

"You look..." Julian shakes his head as if so overcome, he cannot possibly think of an adjective to describe her loveliness. "I'm unable to express how fortunate I feel to be granted the opportunity to accompany you to dinner."

Elizabeth smiles, but it doesn't reach her eyes. "Thank you for the invitation."

Apparently finished fawning over her, Julian turns to the rest of us. He smirks at me. "Too solemn for a costume, Benjamin?"

I nod to the golden atrocity sitting atop the man's head. "I misplaced my crown."

Felix snorts and then clears his throat. He's been unusually quiet this evening. Unlike me, he dressed for the occasion, wearing black trousers and a billowing black and white silk shirt that I wouldn't be caught dead in. He's transformed himself into a harlequin jester, complete with a ridiculous hat. He's even gone so far as to line his eyes with dark kohl.

I'm assuming he chose the costume purposely to rile Catriona and his father, who both constantly complain he doesn't take anything seriously.

Julian offers Elizabeth his arm. "Shall we find our places, Miss Delane?"

I grit my teeth as he escorts her into the house, hating that they make a handsome couple. The people around us must

agree. They chatter like excited sparrows, watching the couple walk arm in arm.

“Interesting,” Danielle murmurs from beside me, making me realize she was watching me and not them.

Catriona sidles up next to my sister. “I have gossip for you.”

“What’s that?” Danielle asks, all ears.

“Miss Delane appears to be quite taken with our Benjamin.” Catriona gives me a feline smile that lives up to her name. “She’s only here with Julian because he asked her first.”

That’s true, but only in the most basic sense.

Danielle turns back to me, wide-eyed.

“Aren’t you on guard duty?” I ask Cat.

“Alas, I am.” Smug, she raises her brows, knowing very well what snare she’s set up for me. It’s payback, no doubt, for insulting her management style. She grasps hold of Felix and none-too-gently propels him toward the entry.

I turn back to my sister, preparing myself for a brief heart-to-heart that is sure to end with strong words of encouragement. But instead, I find her looking at me with such pity, it makes my spine stiffen.

“What?” I demand.

“You go about life ignoring women and throwing yourself into your work, and when one finally catches your attention, it’s Colonel Delane’s daughter.”

“What of it?” I demand.

“She might as well be dipped in gold. Do you have any idea how desirable she is?” She shakes her head, obviously having decided I’m reaching out of my station. “*And* she’s beautiful.”

“I’m aware.”

“What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking it doesn’t matter. She can donate all her money to an orphanage if she desires. I don’t like her because she’s wealthy.”

“And I’m sure you’re going to say you don’t like that she’s beautiful either.”

A smile toys at my lips. “No, I like that.”

Danielle sighs, laughing a little. “I’m just...worried.”

“You can’t mother him, Dani,” Harvey says, coming to my rescue. “Let the boy live. You know what it’s like to be young and in love.”

“You’re three years older than I am,” I say wryly. “And it’s difficult to take you seriously while you’re wearing feathers.”

Harvey only shrugs.

“This doesn’t matter right now,” I say. “I need to keep an eye on her.”

“Keep an eye on her?” Danielle asks, concerned.

“Miss Delane is being hunted by vampires,” I inform her, and then I walk briskly toward the entry, knowing I best take the chance to escape before my sister starts asking questions about the job.

I meet Arthur and Carissa as they’re on their way inside. Arthur isn’t in costume, but Carissa wears a deep navy gown covered in gemstone stars. In the carriage, she informed me she’s dressed as the night sky, but I suspect she saw the costume as an excuse to ask Arthur for the new diamond necklace that adorns her neck.

“We have at least seventeen guild members here tonight,” Arthur says as we make our way up the stairs, catching my expression. “I think you can relax a little.”

I grunt as I think of Julian and Elizabeth, not wanting to admit the reason for my turbulent mood.

The ballroom is abuzz, and the space is packed with round tables. Attendants will whisk them away as soon as dinner is over, and then the dancing will begin.

Elizabeth will be free at that point, able to spend as much or as little time with Julian as she wishes.

“Why is it so dark in here?” I demand, scowling at the chandeliers. Only half the candles are lit. Carved lantern pumpkins are scattered about as well, their smiling faces irritating me.

“Surely this isn’t your first Autumn Ball?” Arthur eyes me. “It’s like this every year.”

“I don’t like costumes,” I admit. “And you’ve never forced me into attending.”

Arthur rolls his eyes. “It’s always this dark—it’s fun for the children.”

“It’s fun to eat in the dark?”

“It’s dim, not dark,” Carissa laughs. “And yes, it’s fun to see the jack-o’-lanterns all lit up. Why don’t we get some spiced cider and watch the children play their games? Lord Warrington sets them up at the back of the room. When they win, they receive a sweet. They get so excited—it’s adorable.”

I grimace, not overly comfortable with things deemed adorable.

It’s not usual to see children at a gala, but they’re certainly in attendance tonight. They wear tiny costumes like their parents and squeal in delight at the decorations.

I watch a little wolf walk hand in hand with her sheep sister. Their gowns are gray and white respectively, and they carry baskets filled with assorted candies and baked goods. They’re certainly having a good time.

Resigned, I sigh. The atmosphere is warm and friendly, a celebration of the harvest season. Happy scarecrows sit atop bales of straw. Swags of bundled wheat and rust-colored flowers are fastened to the backs of the chairs. The air smells of apples and spices, likely from the cider Carissa mentioned.

Most importantly, not one person has tried to persuade me to dance with their daughter. All in all, it’s not the worst ball I’ve been dragged to.

“You go ahead,” I tell Arthur and Carissa. “I’m going to find my seat.”

I stroll through the mostly empty tables, eventually finding my place card in the back corner. Deftly, I hide it in my hand until I stumble upon Elizabeth and Julian’s names. Catriona and Felix are seated with them, as Elizabeth requested, along with Ellamarissa Gabnim and Theodore Erowood. I have no idea who they are, but I pluck their cards, replacing Theodore’s with my own. After that, it’s quick work to deposit them at another table.

Satisfied, I wander toward the back of the ballroom where most of the guests have gathered, spotting Elizabeth’s blood-red dress and Catriona’s blue wings. The crowd laughs, and I squeeze my way in, ending up directly behind Elizabeth. People watch children dunk for apples, apparently easily entertained.

Julian is just in front of Elizabeth, speaking with Felix. I’m bumped from behind, accidentally jostling into her. “Pardon me,” I say close to her ear.

She shivers and then turns her head to look at me over her shoulder. Her lips turn up at the corners, tempting.

“Are you enjoying yourself?” I ask quietly.

“More so now.”

“Has Julian told you anything?”

She shakes her head, irritated. “I’ve tried to instigate the conversation, but he’s proven to be easily distracted.”

“Perhaps during dinner.”

“Perhaps,” she agrees, but it’s obvious she’s beginning to think Julian simply wanted to monopolize her evening.

“Miss Delane!” a woman says from near us, causing us to subtly shift apart. “What a *surprise!* I didn’t know you would be here.”

Elizabeth puts on a pleasant expression. “Have we met?”

“We have.” The woman drags her son along with her. He’s younger than Elizabeth, probably only eighteen or nineteen years old. “We met three years ago in Wrenvale, remember? At that little café you and your father stopped at? I’m Mrs. Borganstein. My husband was in the army with your father?”

“Oh, yes,” Elizabeth says smoothly, obviously having no idea who the woman is.

“This is my son, Melvin.” She practically shoves the boy at Elizabeth. “You two have so much in common.”

“Do we?” Elizabeth glances at me, raising an eyebrow just slightly.

“Yes, indeed,” the woman insists. “You live in the country, and Melvin enjoys hunting.”

“Ah,” Elizabeth says. “That’s so very similar.”

“Ask her for a dance,” the woman hisses behind Melvin’s back.

The boy flashes his mother an irritated look, and then he looks back at Elizabeth. “Would you care to dance with me later?”

“I’m afraid my dance card is full,” Elizabeth says regretfully. “But it was a pleasure to meet you.”

“Perhaps another time,” the woman says. “Will you be in Valette long?”

Elizabeth puts on a vague expression. “It’s difficult to say.”

They make uncomfortable small talk for a while longer, and then the mother and son leave.

“Your dance card is full?” I ask. “Already?”

She flips it open for me to inspect. Julian, regretfully, has the first dance. But my name is on every other line. She smiles at my surprise. “Any more questions?”

“Strictly speaking, it’s bad manners to do that.” I move a tad bit closer. “But I’m not going to complain.”

“You enjoy dancing, Mr. Oliver?”

“I hate it.” I lean close enough only she will hear me. “But I like you.”

“Benjamin,” Julian says, the fool just realizing I’m speaking with Elizabeth. “You just keep showing up, don’t you?”

“Benjamin has been assigned to me,” Elizabeth says, obviously deciding it’s time to see if the man knows anything. “You knew that, didn’t you?”

“Assigned to you?” Julian frowns.

She gives him a knowing look. “It seems I’m being tracked by vampires.”

“Vampires?” he says a moment too late. “Surely not?”

I watch my rival, certain he’s not as surprised as he should be. The man knows something.

“Why don’t we find our table and talk about it?” Elizabeth asks, glancing around as if not wanting to be overheard.

“If you’ll excuse us,” Julian says to me. “As you’re aware, Elizabeth is quite safe in my company.”

“Trying to steal the job out from under me, Julian?” I ask lightly, following them. “And here I thought Haverdell was doing well.”

They reach their table, and he turns back to me. “Dinner is about to be served. I think it’s a good time for you to find your spot.”

“Very well,” I say graciously, and then I round the table, pull out my chair, and settle directly across from him.

“*Your* spot,” he says, losing his patience.

I flip my place card around, mock innocent. “This appears to be my spot, doesn’t it? That’s my name. Are there two Benjamin Olivers in attendance tonight?”

Elizabeth presses her lips together, trying not to smile.

“Listen here,” he begins to say, and then Catriona and Felix arrive, cutting him off.

“Benjamin!” Catriona exclaims. “I didn’t know you were sitting with us.” She looks at Julian. “It’s nice to see the two of you putting your animosity behind you.”

Julian gives me a tight, rather hateful look. I merely raise my brows, silently asking him how he’ll proceed.

“Yes,” Julian says tightly. “I can be the bigger man.”

“The biggest,” I agree. “Just your head alone—”

“*Benjamin*,” Catriona cuts me off, giving me a hard stare that’s tinged with amusement.

My table mates find their places, one less pleased than the others.

After we’re all seated, I lean forward slightly. Since Elizabeth started this, there’s no reason to beat around the bush. “What do you want with Miss Delane?”

“Want with her?” Julian looks at me like I’m dimwitted.

“You said you had something to discuss.”

He looks at the heiress.

She shrugs. “He asked. I didn’t realize it was confidential.”

“I do have something to discuss with Miss Delane,” Julian says. “But I don’t see how it’s any of your business.”

“So, it’s personal then?” I ask. “It has nothing to do with the job?”

The question rankles him. He fidgets in his seat, his expression hardening. “Why would it have something to do with the job? I didn’t even know you were working for her.”

“You must have suspected it, though. Why else would I bring her to Arthur?”

“This is ridiculous—you’re ridiculous. I’m sorry our history is clouding your judgment, but this doesn’t concern you. I will speak to Miss Delane about the matter privately.”

The servers choose this moment to come to the table with the soup course. I sit back in my chair, studying Julian. He glares at me and then turns to Elizabeth, deciding to pretend I

don't exist. "Do you like pumpkin soup, Miss Delane? My grandparents' cook's recipe is delicious."

She contemplates me for a few moments before she turns to the man with a sigh, playing the part of a demure young woman. "I do."

Halfway through the meal, the Warrington's steward approaches Julian. "Excuse me for interrupting, my lord. But your grandmother wishes to speak with you."

Julian casts a look at his half-finished plate. "Right now?"

"She said it's urgent."

Julian rises, giving Elizabeth an apologetic look. "Forgive me. I'll return shortly."

"Of course," Elizabeth says.

The moment he's out of earshot, Catriona turns on me. "Very subtle, Benjamin."

"He knows something," I say. "His hesitation confirmed it."

"Good luck getting him to share," she says.

"I know I'm not a 'grown-up hunter,'" Felix says, "but I think if you want him to talk, Elizabeth must get him alone."

"No," I say immediately. "I don't trust him."

"It doesn't have to be somewhere private," Catriona says, and then she turns to Elizabeth. "He has your first dance tonight, doesn't he?"

"He does," she confirms.

"Get him to talk then." Catriona points at me. "And you will keep your distance so Elizabeth can wheedle it out of him."

I scowl at her, but I finally nod.

Julian returns too soon, apologizing for the absence.

Not long later, servers begin to clear the empty tables. "It looks like the dancing will start soon." Julian offers his arm to

Elizabeth. “I’m honored to be your first dance partner. I’m certain I will be the envy of every unwed man in attendance.”

He then smiles at me.

I fist my hand in my lap, but I keep my face impassive.

We leave our table, staying in our small group. The quartet of players find their places in the corner of the ballroom and run through a quick warmup.

Once they’re ready, Lord and Lady Warrington take their place at the center of the floor, beginning the dance, as is tradition in Valette. The music crescendos, and soon, others join them, including Elizabeth and Julian.

I settle against the wall, watching them.

ELIZABETH

“Benjamin is annoyingly fond of you,” Julian says as we begin our waltz. “You should remind him you dwell in different social circles.”

“I’m not titled,” I remind him. “I’m no one, really.”

“You could be,” he boldly hints.

“What do you need to discuss with me?” I ask. “I’ve waited all evening, eager to hear what you have to say. We’re finally alone. Please don’t keep me in suspense any longer.”

Julian glances around, looking as if he’s unsure we should talk about it here.

“It’s about the vampires, isn’t it?” I prod. “I understand why you don’t want to say anything in front of Benjamin, but what reason do you have not to tell me?”

Julian looks at me, pursing his lips.

“Tell me,” I coax.

“It’s not good news, I fear. I’m afraid if I share it with you, you’ll put yourself in danger, and I must be honest...I’m quite fond of you.”

I almost laugh, but I manage to suppress the urge. “Tell me. Please.”

“When I returned home, I was greeted with a ransom note.”

For a moment, I forget to dance.

“No, we mustn’t stop,” he urges. “I believe we’re being watched.”

“By whom?” I almost glance around, paranoid.

“I don’t know, but it seems the captors have been studying my every move. They realized we met on the train.”

“Who did they abduct?” I demand in a whisper.

“My uncle.”

“Vincent?” I breathe.

He frowns a little. “You know of him?”

“He was one of my father’s close friends.”

“Do you know what happened while they were in the army?”

“In Saranica?” I whisper.

Julian nods.

“Arthur told me.” I draw in a deep breath. “Do you think it’s related?”

“I do...because they want you as well.”

“Why?”

“They believe you have your father’s notes. They think you know how to concoct the serums.”

“I don’t,” I say, and then I freeze. The journal. The unmarked recipes—the rambling entries that are impossible to decipher if you’re not an alchemist or doctor.

Is it possible that I do have the secret to the sister serums in my possession?

“Of course you don’t,” he says. “If your father didn’t remember how to make them, how could you?”

“My father?”

His eyes go soft with pity. “They have him, Miss Delane. And your friends.”

My heart beats double-time, and my blood goes cold.
“What?”

“They intercepted them on their way to Rialis.”

Father was kidnapped. They have Sterling, Tansy, and Gretchen, too. Tiny Gretchen.

“Who are these people?” I demand.

“The message didn’t say, but I believe it’s someone related to the empress. They’re compelling vampires. Who else knows those secrets?”

“How? I thought there was only enough of the serum to last a few years, and that was thirty years ago.”

“I don’t know,” he bites out, looking frustrated and helpless.

“We have to go,” I say.

I’ll give them the journal if that’s what they want. Anything to save my family.

Julian shakes his head forcefully. “It’s too dangerous. I cannot offer you as a trade. This is why I was hesitant to tell you, but I couldn’t in good conscience keep the news from you.”

“What do we do?”

“If I share this news with anyone but you, they said they’d kill the hostages. And if we ignore it...”

I close my eyes, ill. When I open them, I demand, “How do I know you’re telling the truth?”

“I brought the note along with...” he winces.

“What?”

“They sent a doll. They said you’d recognize it.”

Miss Mabel.

I nearly crumple in his arms, but he holds me up.

“I’m so sorry,” he says, his eyes searching mine. He looks and sounds gutted. “I...I don’t know what to do.”

“You’re a hunter,” I say.

“I am.”

“Are you any good?”

“I’m better than Benjamin.”

“Fine. Take me to the captors. Use me as a key to get into their inner sanctum and then kill them.”

His eyes fly wide. “Miss Delane.”

“I’m serious.”

“One problem.” He glances at Benjamin. “Your stoic protector won’t let you out of his sight.”

Oh, Benjamin. He’s not going to be happy with me.

“Is there an exterior door near the powder room?” I ask.

Julian frowns, looking like he doesn’t think this is a good idea. “It’s not too far…”

“Tell me exactly where it is. As soon as we part, prepare a carriage. It’s imperative no one sees us leave.”

“Let’s slow down a minute,” he says. “We mustn’t rush into—”

“They have my family and your uncle. Yes, I believe between your organization and GHOST, someone will find them eventually, but why wait when whoever has abducted them has given us a location? We’ll go to their rendezvous point and let them lead us to their lair.”

“This is a very dangerous plan, Miss Delane.”

“I know.”

“Very well,” he says, finally giving in as our dance comes to an end. “I’ll ask someone to distract Benjamin. You’ll escape through the servants’ quarters. They’re just down the stairs beyond the main level powder room. Once there, you’ll take a left, and then a right, and that will lead you to a black door. Go through it. I’ll wait for you there.”

I nod, determined.

Around us, couples part. I curtsy, Julian bows, and then we go separate ways.

IF CIRCUMSTANCES WERE NORMAL, I'd tell Catriona the plan. But if Julian is right, and we're being watched, I cannot risk it.

And I think he's right.

The blonde-haired woman standing in front of the full-length mirror who's been powdering her nose for the last five minutes is suspicious. She carries a ribbon-wrapped crook, her costume a romanticized shepherdess.

Our eyes meet in the reflection, and she immediately looks away.

"He's infuriating," Catriona says, speaking of Felix. She leans against the vanity as I fuss with my hair. "I don't know how you talked me into going with him tonight. I should have come alone."

I look at her in the mirror. "He's handsome, though, isn't he?"

She stares at me for several seconds, and then her entire demeanor changes. She sags against the vanity, looking daunted. "I hate that about him."

"You hate it? Or you like it too much?"

"Both."

"You have feelings for him."

"No," she protests.

"Go dance with him," I laugh.

"I can't—I'm on guard duty, remember?" She frowns. "Besides, he's probably dancing with someone else."

"You haven't noticed? He's only had eyes for you all night."

She blinks at me. "You're wrong."

“I’m not.” I jerk my head toward the door. “Go. Hurry before they begin the next song. We both know Benjamin has been monitoring me.”

But he’s not, not right now. I waited until a short man dressed as a goat cornered him—Julian’s promised distraction, no doubt.

“Should I?” Catriona hedges.

“You should.”

“Fine—but only if you dance too.”

“I’ll be right out. Go find Felix before it’s too late. I’ll join you in a few minutes.”

She looks torn. “Please hurry. If Benjamin finds out—”

I force a laugh, waving her away. “Would you go already?”

She edges toward the door as if about to change her mind. And then she bolts.

I wait a few seconds until I’m sure the hall is clear. Then I’m out of the powder room and running down the stairs. I wind through two halls, push past a black door, and step into the night. Julian waits with a coach, as promised.

But I pause before I cross the courtyard to meet him, looking toward the sky.

GREG

It's hard to find a meal in a city. I'm trolling the area around the estate, swooping in low and gliding back up, looking for a misplaced goat or pig while I watch for vampires. I haven't had any luck. I've seen a few stray cats and dogs, but Arthur told me I mustn't eat them because it upsets the fragile humans. I've spotted at least a dozen rats as well, but it takes thirty to make a decent meal, and I don't fancy picking their tiny bones from my teeth again.

There's a big, fat bull in a small, fenced pasture behind the manor. He looks appetizing. I've passed him a few times, getting closer than he would like. The unobservant passersby are oblivious to my presence, but prey have a way of knowing when a predator is overhead.

"Can you hear me, Greg?" a female voice whispers, catching my attention when she says my name. The city is a jumble of noises, but this one is growing familiar—this one said thank you when I saved her, which is more than I get from the GHOST hunters.

"*I can hear you,*" I respond. It doesn't work though—I don't know what Elizabeth's mind feels like yet. I'm not even sure where she is exactly, though I can tell she's still in the estate.

"Are you there?" she whispers. "Can you talk to me like you talk to Benjamin?"

"*I'm trying.*"

“Listen, Greg,” she says urgently, speaking in a whisper even though she must know I’m up here attempting to communicate with her. “I only have a moment. Julian says my father, my friends, and his uncle were kidnapped. The abductor is holding them for ransom, and I’m what they want. They have people watching us. I can’t bring Benjamin, or the criminal will kill them all, but you must tell him to track me after we’ve had a bit of a head start.”

I huff out a breath of fire, processing. “*Benjamin’s not going to like that.*”

As if reading my mind, she adds, “When he argues with you, remind him he said he wouldn’t take away my freedom. This is my choice. I must save my father and my friends.”

That’s not going to go over well either.

“*All right,*” I say. “*I’ll tell him...*”

“Don’t lose me, Greg,” she finishes, sounding rather terrified. “Please. I know I can count on you.”

What a stupid human. But she is rather dear, isn’t she?

Below, a shadowed figure runs from the safety of the estate. The woman lowers her hood as she pauses in front of a waiting carriage, flashing me a view of her long, pale hair. She glances at the sky for only a second and then slips inside.

I focus on the coach, taking in the details, including the crest on the door.

“*I won’t lose you, Elizabeth,*” I vow, and then I reach for Benjamin.

BENJAMIN

“I’m sorry. I know nothing about pirate rats,” I tell the costumed goat-man who’s cornered me. I’ve never even heard of such a creature, but the man is certainly persistent. “GHOST focuses on spirits. Ghouls, vampires, witches—those are the types of things we hunt. It sounds like you need an exterminator.”

I try to edge away, but he follows, determined to tell me about the small vermin that have made a home in his warehouse off the docks in Port Mueller.

“They’re wicked little devils,” the man insists. His voice is slurred, making me think he indulged in a bit too much of the hard cider. “Possessed, I’m certain.”

I glance down the hall, toward the powder room. Catriona and Elizabeth have been in there a long time, and I’m starting to get an uneasy feeling.

“I don’t suppose you know where your pretty charge is, do you?” Greg says in my head.

“She’s in the powder room,” I tell the dragon, confusing my new goat friend.

“Or is she in the carriage with Julian, planning to offer herself for ransom to save her father, friends, and someone’s uncle?”

I curse out loud.

The man across from me blinks. “Why, Mr. Oliver, I didn’t realize you were so passionate about rats.”

I turn from him without bothering to excuse myself, striding toward the powder room and stopping the first woman I come across. She smiles prettily, looking vaguely familiar.

“Mr. Oliver,” she says as if breathless. “My dance card is full, but—”

“Would you be so kind as to check the powder room for me? Two of my companions have gone missing.”

Her face falls. “Who are you looking for?”

“Catriona Mason and Miss Delane.”

“Miss Delane.” She says the name without enthusiasm, as if she’s sick to death of hearing it. Apparently, Elizabeth has been the favorite subject of gossip this evening, just as she grudgingly predicted.

“Please,” I add.

She sighs and walks through the door. A moment later, she steps back out. “There’s no one in there.”

My stomach drops, and my mind begins to race. Elizabeth just finished dancing with Julian. How did he convince her to leave with him? She’s not the flighty type...but she is desperate.

And she’s wanted more than anything to believe her father is alive.

“Thank you,” I say, turning from her.

“Mr. Oliver!” the girl calls, but I keep walking.

I spot Catriona in the crowd. It’s difficult to miss her bright blue feathered wings. She’s cozy with Felix, the two of them perfectly distracted by each other. I have no idea how the situation developed, and nor do I care.

“*Before you go after her, let me deliver her message,*” Greg says.

“She left you a message?” I demand, stopping short.

“*She requested you give her a head start. She’s hoping to lead you to the villain’s inner sanctum, and she believes they’ll*

kill her father and friends if the abductors think she told you herself.”

As soon as I track down Julian, I’m going to wring his fool neck. What kind of man would convince an innocent woman to sacrifice herself? He’s a rubbish hunter and a detestable human being.

“Can you track them?” I demand. “We’re going after her now. I’m not waiting until it’s too late.”

“I can. But she also said to remind you that you promised you wouldn’t take away her freedom, and that this is her choice. Whatever all that means.”

Did she throw herself into this, trusting I’d save her? Her faith in my abilities is gratifying, but it’s wildly misplaced. I don’t know if she’s brave or just reckless, but she certainly has far too much confidence in the worthless dragon and me.

“I have to talk to Cat and Arthur,” I tell Greg. “Track the carriage until they leave the city so we know which way they’re going, and then circle back to tell me.”

“I will not lose her, Benjamin,” he vows, suddenly gallant. “And when this is over, you’re going to gift me with a cow. Well-fattened, preferably brown. I won’t accept an old heifer, so make sure it’s tender.”

“Yes, fine. If you find Elizabeth, and we all make it out of this alive, I’ll buy you a cow.”

“Good. I’m off.”

His presence leaves my head, and I make my way toward Catriona and Felix.

“Why aren’t you with Elizabeth?” I demand the moment I reach them.

Cat’s eyes widen at my tone. She steps away from Felix, looking chagrined. “You were watching her.”

I shove my hand through my hair, hating myself for letting that wretched man distract me. Julian sent him, no doubt. That’s the only reason he would have been so persistent about something as ridiculous as *rats*. “I thought you were with her.”

“What’s happened?” she demands.

“I just spoke with Greg. She left with Julian.”

Horrified, she says, “We must go after her.”

“The situation is complicated,” I growl, Elizabeth’s message running through my head.

“We’ll get her back.” Catriona rips off her wings, preparing herself for the hunt.

“I need to talk to Arthur.”

“While you look for him, we’ll let his coachman know he must prepare to leave,” Felix says. “We’ll meet you out front.”

Nodding, I leave Cat and Felix, looking for the president.

“They stopped in front of the guildhall,” Greg says. “Elizabeth ran inside and then returned to the carriage. They’re heading east now.”

“The guildhall?” I weave through the crowd. Arthur is a little more difficult to find than Cat, but I finally spot his white head. “Why?”

“She came out with a book in her hands.”

“A book?” I shake my head, unable to make sense of it. “Keep following them.”

“What’s the matter?” Arthur asks the moment I reach him, correctly reading my expression.

It guts me to admit it, but I brace myself and tell him, “Elizabeth is gone.”

“Then go after her.”

I explain the situation, feeling desperation’s claws sinking into my chest.

“Elizabeth’s father was a brave man,” Arthur says when I finish. “He seemed reckless at times, but he only took calculated risks. I believe his daughter is like him.”

“You think this was a *good plan*?”

“I don’t know, but it’s one that’s already in progress.”

I drop my voice a little. “Do you really think I can save her?”

“Elizabeth is my closest friend’s daughter. I never would have assigned her to you if I didn’t have faith in you. Go find her, Benjamin.”

I swallow my doubt and stand a little straighter. “Yes, sir.”

THE NIGHT IS COLD, and I expect to be attacked at any moment. But apparently whoever is compelling the vampires doesn’t realize Catriona and I are following Julian and Elizabeth yet. We ride at an annoyingly sane pace, closing in slowly, giving Elizabeth the head start she requested even though it kills me.

Able to travel far faster than the carriage, Greg has circled back several times to give us updates. We’ve left the capital territory of Valette and have entered Rialis, the easternmost province in the Allied Provinces of Staulus. It’s nearing dawn, and we’re close to the port city of Hesper and the Rialisan Sea.

The body of water separates Staulus from Calrij. Saranica lies just beyond that.

“Surely Julian doesn’t mean to take Elizabeth out of Staulus,” Catriona says when we reach the outskirts of the city and the dragon directs us toward the docks.

“*They got on a ship,*” Greg tells us, able to converse with Cat and me at the same time. “*They’ve left the bay, and it looks like they’re sailing toward open water.*”

Cat looks at me, at a loss. “What do we do? It could take hours to charter a boat to follow them, and that doesn’t even include customs paperwork.”

I look up at the sky. “Greg.”

“*What?*”

“We have to follow them together, just you and me.”

“What are you getting at?”

“You know exactly what I’m getting at.”

“I’m not a passenger dragon, Benjamin.”

“You are if you want that cow.”

The dragon roars out his displeasure, and then he says, *“Take the road that leads to the north. There’s a clearing just beyond the trees. I’ll meet you there.”*

We find the clearing just as the sun crests the eastern horizon. The light glows on the brown autumn grass. It’s a little warmer here than in Valette, but there’s still a layer of frost on the ground. It crunches as I leave my terrified horse and walk across the meadow, heading toward the black dragon who lands in the middle of the field.

He looks awe-inspiring in the light of dawn—a massive, scaled beast with wicked teeth and talons. But once you get to know him, he’s not all that impressive. He gets scale rot on his belly when he skips his sand baths. He has a sensitive stomach and is completely intolerant of grains. He’s scared of snakes, and he prefers to sleep with a light on in his arena.

The idea of trusting him to carry me over a massive body of water is terrifying.

“I have one condition,” Greg says. *“Neither of you will tell anyone about this.”*

I study him, wondering how I’m going to climb up to his back. *“I thought the cow was your condition.”*

“The cow is my prize.”

“I won’t tell anyone. I don’t particularly want the rest of the hunters knowing either.”

“Be careful,” Catriona says. At first, I think she’s talking to me, but when I look over, she’s stroking Greg’s snout. *“It might be a long flight.”*

“I can fly for hours without tiring,” he brags. *“You know that.”*

“I do.” She gives him one last pat and then steps back. “Shall I give you a boost, Benjamin?”

There are some things my pride won’t allow, and that’s one of them. “I can do it.”

Greg grunts and oofs like an old man as I grab his wing and crawl up his side. His scales are slippery, and even once I’m settled in front of his wings, I’m not sure how I’m going to hold on.

“We need to make you a harness when we get back to Valette,” I tell him.

“Do you want me to dump you in the ocean?”

“No—which is why you need a harness.”

Catriona smiles a little, but her eyes are anxious. “Don’t be a hero, all right? Save Elizabeth and get out. We’ll figure out how to rescue the rest of them later.”

“Send a telegram to Arthur and give him an update.”

“I will.”

“And don’t leave the city until we return.”

If we return. We both know it’s a possibility we won’t.

“We’re losing time,” Greg says.

“I’m ready.”

He extends his wings and warns, *“Hold on.”*

“To what?” I ask moments before the dragon takes a massive leap and launches us into the air.

ELIZABETH

When I concocted this plan, I didn't realize we'd be leaving Staulus. But now that I'm on a boat filled with vampires, I can admit this was probably a bad idea.

"At least the accommodations are acceptable?" Julian says from our cabin's table. He removed his cape and crown early in our journey. Once we arrived in the cabin, he discarded his fine jacket as well. He now looks like a casual captive in his cream-colored trousers, white shirt, and royal blue waistcoat.

He appears to be as troubled as I am. I'm certain he's having second thoughts himself.

But he's not wrong about the accommodations. I've never been on a boat, but I didn't expect to be given a cabin like this the first time I journeyed across the sea. It's spacious, with a tea table, bookcases, rugs, lamps, and art.

There's only one large bed, but Julian asked for an extra cot so I wouldn't feel uneasy about resting, and the crew happily obliged. I slept for a while this morning, exhausted from traveling all night.

We're hostages, but the captain said I may walk around the upper deck as long as I don't cause trouble. The vampires are taking sanctuary in the belly of the ship right now, hiding from the sun, but there are enough human crew members to quell my urge to wander.

I don't know if Greg got my message, or if Benjamin is trailing us. I want to believe he is. I miss him so much it feels

like someone carved out my heart. Can you fall in love with someone in such a short time? If you'd asked me a month ago, I would have said no.

But I didn't know Benjamin then.

He must have been so upset when he found out I left with Julian. Perhaps upset enough he decided to wash his hands of me? I don't know. I hope not.

"I feel like I'm going mad in here," I say to Julian, setting Father's journal aside. I've looked through it a hundred times, wondering if the secret to the sister serums is hiding in it somewhere. "But I don't want to walk on the deck alone. Will you go out with me?"

The man stands immediately, his eyes lingering on my face. "You're uncomfortable."

"I'm all right. And it's not as if this was your idea."

He studies me, frowning, but finally nods and then opens the door. "It should be quiet out there this time of day."

"Do the monsters sleep?" I ask softly, a chill running down my spine. How many of them hide in the dark below our feet?

"They do, but even after nightfall, they can't hurt you," Julian says. "They're compelled to obey their master."

"And who is their master?" I ask, frustrated. "We've traveled all this way, and we still don't know."

"You'll find out soon enough." He steps onto the deck, breathing in the cool ocean air.

The ship turned north after we exited the bay. I can just make out the coastline to our left in the far distance, hazy and blue. We're not heading to Calrij as I thought, but skirting Rialis.

Julian's words catch my attention, and I turn toward him. "You won't?"

"What?" He pulls his eyes from the water to look at me.

"You said 'you'll find out soon enough,' but shouldn't you have said 'we'll find out?' Why aren't you including

yourself?”

“A slip of the tongue.” He laughs a little. “I don’t function well with such little sleep.”

“You’re working with them,” I realize, feeling like a fool. “Aren’t you?”

Julian frowns. “No.”

He looks so sincere, I question myself. Even though Benjamin doesn’t like the man, he’s been nothing but kind to me. “I’m sorry, Julian. I’m tired, that’s all. Please forgive me.”

“No, Miss Delane. Please don’t apologize.” The hunter gives me a chagrined sort of look, shoving his hands into his trouser pockets. “The truth is, I’m not working for them. They’re working for me.”

It takes me several seconds to grasp the meaning of that, and then I abruptly step back even though there’s nowhere to escape to.

Julian catches my arm when I reach the edge of the railing. “You’re going to fall overboard if you’re not careful.”

“You *tricked* me.”

“I did, and I apologize. It seemed like the best way to persuade you to cooperate, especially once I realized you were working with GHOST. I needed to separate you from Benjamin, and this was the safest way. But I admit, I’ve been feeling uneasy about my decision. I hope you’ll forgive me.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“I need the sister serums.” He leans against the rail, crossing his arms as he studies me.

“But *why* do you want them?” I demand. “How did you even find out about them?”

“Arthur has a few bottles of the antidote. I doubt he shared the information with you—it’s a secret he guards tenaciously. I learned about it while I was in training. I badgered my uncle to tell me where they came from, hoping to learn its secrets. One

night when Vincent was quite drunk, he told me their story. I also learned something Arthur doesn't know."

"And what's that?" I ask, deciding I might as well keep him talking.

"Vincent returned to Saranica while the trio was in hiding. He killed the empress—the lover who betrayed him—and took the serums your father made for her. He held onto them like a dirty secret, selling off bottles of vampire antivenom one by one to pay for his travels."

"I thought he made a fortune in pearls."

"That's what he wanted people to think." Julian shakes his head. "Not trusting my drunken uncle with such a dangerous weapon, I broke into his estate while he was away and stole the entire supply—both the compulsion serum and the antivenom."

"You should have destroyed the compulsion serum."

"I thought about it, certainly. But then I wondered, what if I could use it as a tool? Yes, in the wrong hands, it's dangerous, but with proper use..." He pauses. "I had no choice but to try it."

"You used yourself as a guinea pig."

"I did, and I found that vampire henchmen are invaluable weapons to wield while fighting spirits. But I came across a problem—one you're going to help me with, Miss Delane."

"I'm not helping you."

"You might change your mind by the time I finish my story." He frowns as a cool breeze crosses the water. "Are you warm enough? Should we return inside?"

"I'm fine."

"Would you like a cloak? I should have brought my jacket."

"Stop pretending you care about my comfort."

"I'm not pretending." He frowns like I've genuinely wounded him. "I like you, Miss Delane. I fervently wish we'd

met under different circumstances. I've never met a girl so loyal to her friends and family that she would throw herself in harm's way without so much as a second thought to save them. It's admirable."

"What problem did you come across?" I demand, finding it difficult to keep him on subject.

Julian sighs. "I had nearly four years' worth of the compulsion serum and only fifteen months' of antidote. My fool uncle had already sold off the rest."

"So you decided you needed to learn how to make it yourself?"

He smiles as if I'm a clever schoolgirl. "That's right."

"And you sent vampires to kidnap my father."

"No," he says. "I met him civilly, requesting his help. I offered to pay him handsomely as well."

"And when he didn't agree, you kidnapped him."

"No," he says vehemently. Then, looking hesitant, he admits, "Though I orchestrated a few things to ensure a desired outcome."

"You sent vampires to Oakenridge," I accuse.

He winces at my tone. "I did—but before you judge me, please know I didn't want to."

I stare at him, my emotions in a jumble.

"And I haven't hurt your father, Miss Delane." His eyes search mine as if he's searching for forgiveness. Or approval. "He's alive and well."

My jaw trembles, and I lower my eyes, not daring to believe him.

"Your friends, too, are just fine." Julian takes a step forward. "I didn't even take dear Gretchen's doll. I fibbed, hoping you wouldn't ask to see it."

I gape at him, incredulous.

“Don’t you understand?” he continues. “I’m not doing this because I want to hurt people—I don’t desire the control. I want to fight the spirits, and using their own kind against them is effective.” He takes my arm, pleading me with his eyes. “Help me, Elizabeth. Together, we can save countless lives.”

I yank away from him. “I’m sorry, but I don’t believe you’re that altruistic.”

“I’m sure this is a lot to take in.” He steps back. “I’ll give you some time to process.”

“What’s my part in this?” I ask him. “Why do you need me? I don’t know how to make the serums. I’ve already told you that. And if you think you can make sense of Father’s notes in his journal, be my guest.”

Julian contemplates me for an uncomfortable length of time, and then he shakes his head. “We’ve talked enough already. Why don’t you go lie down? It was a long night.”

He then turns down the deck, leaving me alone.

I DON’T ANSWER the knock at the door. It’s past dark, and I don’t know what I might find on the other side.

“Miss Delane,” Julian calls. “It’s only me.”

“I’m not sure why you think that makes me want to answer the door.”

“I take it you’re still angry?”

I walk across the cabin, yanking the door open. “Why have you kidnapped me?”

Julian really doesn’t like that word. His face pinches with displeasure, and he narrows his eyes as if reprimanding me for using it. “You asked me to bring you.”

“When I thought you were an innocent victim!”

“I told you I would take you to your father and friends, and I am.”

“But you left out the part that *you* are their abductor.”

“I did not abduct them, Miss Delane. Nor did I abduct you.”

“Let my family go.”

“The situation is complicated. I just need—” he cuts himself off.

“You need what?”

“I need you to convince your father to make the serums.”

“What do you mean?”

“After all this time, he says he won’t do it.”

“It’s not that he won’t—it’s that he *can’t*! Arthur said he tried to make the antidote several times once they were back in Staulus, but we lack ingredients that were available in Saranica.”

“We’ve gotten past that in the last year,” Julian says, impatient. “He can make the antidote now—he just can’t make it without creating the compulsion serum as well. It’s a byproduct of the antidote, and he feels he has a moral responsibility to keep it out of the world.”

“Let this go,” I beg him. “My father is right. Something this wicked shouldn’t exist. Imagine what would happen if it fell into the wrong hands—entire civilizations could fall.”

“I’ll be careful with it,” he swears. “Just as Arthur was careful with the antidote he and your father stole out of Saranica.”

He takes my arm, propelling me out of the room. Vampires loiter on the deck now, their eyes black and inhuman. They watch me like hungry predators. The compulsion is an invisible cage that keeps them from attacking, but the desire is still there.

I tell myself to ignore them, focusing instead on their master. “My father loves me, but his convictions are solid. I’m sorry you’ve wasted so much time and energy on something that will never come to fruition.”

“We’ll see,” Julian says. “For your sake, I hope you’re wrong.”

“What does that mean?” I try to pull away from him, but he holds me tightly this time. It doesn’t hurt, but it’s clear he’s not going to let me go. “Julian, please.”

“I don’t want to fight with you.” He looks down at me. “We’ll talk again tomorrow after we’ve both had a decent night’s rest.”

I pause when we step onto the deck, faltering enough Julian stops with me.

We’ve dropped anchor in a bay outside a small island. The shoreline is lit with torches, and lanterns line the path that leads to a grand manor on the hill. Large conifer trees grow atop rocky cliffs, towering shadows in the dark night. There are other islands in the distance, just visible in the moonlight, making up what appears to be a small chain.

“Where are we?” I ask, dumbfounded.

“My summer home,” Julian answers.

“You own an island?” I demand.

“I told you—the compulsion serum works very well. I’ve killed a lot of monsters in the last few years.”

“Enough to buy an *island*?”

He glances at me, smiling a little. “Have I finally impressed you?”

“No. I’m thinking it’s going to be very difficult to escape while I’m surrounded by water.”

Julian laughs, leading me forward once more. “I see why Benjamin likes you.”

Benjamin. Just the mention of his name tears me to pieces.

We walk toward a small boat that waits at the side of the ship. Attached to the boat is a length of fat rope that’s threaded through a series of pulleys. Human crewmen prepare to lower it into the inky bay.

Before we reach them, I tug Julian to a stop. “You’re going to have a vampire bite me, aren’t you? Like the empress did to your uncle.”

He looks resigned. “It’s effective.”

“It’s *wrong*.”

“It won’t come to that—I’m certain of it. Your father will give in and make the serums before any harm can come to you.”

Oh, Benjamin. Please hurry.

Julian helps me into the waiting boat, making sure I’m balanced before he releases me. “I’d like to be partners in this, Elizabeth. I’m not the evildoer you think I am.”

He believes that, but he’s wrong. A villain is still a villain, even if he wears a pleasant mask.

ELIZABETH

A carriage waits for us at the pier, ready to take us up to the house on the hill. The chill of autumn is in the air, and fallen leaves blow in the breeze. The shoreline is rough and rocky. It smells like fir and cedar, tinged with wood smoke and the salt of the sea.

“Watch your step,” Julian warns as he helps me into the carriage.

I don’t fight him—what’s the point when you’re being held hostage on an island? Even if I were to escape him, there’s nowhere to go.

The ride is bumpy, and my stomach is in knots by the time we reach the top of the incline. The rough road becomes cobblestone. Garden lanterns flicker from flower beds. The plants are brown and faded, asleep now that winter is imminent. Fallen leaves lie in drifts about the courtyard, still yellow and soft.

The manor rises above us, several stories tall and sprawling. The exterior is white, with columns and balconies that face the sea. It’s a stately home, newly constructed. It must have cost a fortune to ship the building materials to the island.

The carriage rolls to a stop and Julian hops out, offering me his hand. In different circumstances, I might feel like a member of the nobility here for a holiday. But even if I wanted to pretend, the vampires would make it difficult.

“You’re trembling,” Julian says as he takes my arm.

“I’m nervous,” I admit, hoping that reminding him I’m human might help him remember he has a heart somewhere in his dead chest.

He pauses before we reach the entry steps, concern in his eyes. “Why?”

“Because I want to believe I’m going to walk in the door and see my father, but I don’t trust you.”

His expression softens. “Come inside, Miss Delane, and see for yourself.”

One of the vampire attendants opens the front door for us, his black eyes lingering on my neck. I swallow as I walk past him, refusing to edge closer to Julian.

The monster smiles as I pass.

It’s warm inside the house, welcoming. The wooden floors shine like they were recently polished, and there’s a hint of citrus oil in the air.

Julian escorts me into a large drawing room. The scene before me is so perfect, so happy, I let out a soft sob.

Sterling and Gretchen sit on a rug in front of a large fireplace, playing a game of checkers. Tansy works on a needlepoint sampler on one of the upholstered settees. And my father...

My father sits in a chair near a bookcase, reading a book.

He’s very much alive.

They look up when I enter—three startled faces and one very happy one.

“Miss Elizabeth!” Gretchen cries, leaping to her feet. She runs across the room, practically launching into my arms. I kneel, crying as she hugs me as tightly as her little arms are capable.

She pulls back, her young eyes moving to my wet cheeks. “Happy tears?”

“Of course,” I lie.

But they're not happy tears. They're devastated. Because my family is here, they're trapped, and no matter how overjoyed I am to see them, I wish Julian had been lying.

Sterling and Tansy rise, but they hang back as my father steps forward. He's a slender man with a stern face and a soft heart.

"Elizabeth," he whispers, grief etched into every soft wrinkle of his brow.

I cross the room and walk into his arms, crying freely against his waistcoat. "You're alive."

"You shouldn't be here," he whispers, holding me. His voice wavers with emotion, and it nearly undoes me.

After several more seconds, he gently pushes me back, getting a better look at me. I haven't seen him in a year, but he looks exactly the same. Silver peppers his blond hair. His short beard and mustache went gray before the rest of his hair, and they're trimmed to their usual length. He looks healthy and well-fed.

"Look at my dress, Miss Elizabeth." Gretchen tugs at my skirt. "Isn't it pretty?"

I look at the girl, just now realizing she wears a light blue satin gown lined with lace. Her doll—which she seems to still have possession of—is dressed in one to match.

"It's lovely."

"Uncle Julian got it for me."

I look to Julian, anger I can't even put into words building in my chest. I want to lash out. I want to hurt him.

But he's oblivious to my anger. He wears an indulgent expression, making me realize he truly believes he's done nothing wrong. Apparently, he thinks holding people hostage is morally acceptable as long as you treat them well. And while I am grateful they've been caged in such comfort, it doesn't change the fact that they're in a cage.

"We'll give you a chance to catch up," Julian says, motioning to the few vampires that came in with us. "I'll see if

the cook has dinner ready.”

“Elizabeth,” Father whispers once we’re alone, drawing my attention back to him. “Why are you here?”

“I came to rescue you.” I let out a weary sigh, hating that I walked right into this trap. “It didn’t go as planned.”

“Where’s Benjamin?” Sterling asks. “How did Julian separate you?”

Since it’s such a long story, and one I can’t tell when I could be overheard, I merely shake my head. Sterling and Tansy exchange a worried look, likely assuming the hunter abandoned me.

They’ll understand when Benjamin rescues us—and he *is* going to rescue us. I must have faith, even if it seems impossible. But how is he going to get to the island? How is he going to get to the manor even if he gets past the pier?

And how is he going to get through at least twenty vampires and half a dozen human lackeys?

Suddenly, I’m so tired. I collapse on a settee next to the fire, staring into the flames.

“The kitchen staff is about to serve dinner,” Julian says a few minutes later when he returns to the drawing room.

I move my eyes to him, feeling dead inside. He frowns, crossing the space. “You must be exhausted, Miss Delane. Would you like me to show you to your room?”

“I have a room?”

“You’re not a hostage.”

“Oh good, prepare your ship. I’d like to return to Valette.”

He smiles, amused yet again. “You’re my guest—one I’m not yet ready to send home.”

I force myself to my feet. “Take me to my room then.”

“I’ll join the rest of you shortly,” he promises my family. “Why don’t you go into the dining room and get started?”

“Aren’t you hungry, Miss Elizabeth?” Gretchen asks, her eyes worried. She grabs my hand, looking like she’s not going to let go.

“It was a long trip,” I explain, stroking her hair. “I need to sleep.”

“No,” she begins to whine, on the verge of a fit.

“I’ll see you tomorrow morning,” I promise. “We’ll sit together at breakfast.”

Her eyes fill with tears, and she rocks back, trying to drag me forward.

“That’s enough, Gretchen,” Sterling says. “Miss Elizabeth is tired.”

The moment she releases me, Tansy scoops her up, tickling her as she walks toward the dining room.

“I’m sorry,” Sterling says. “She’s—”

“Been through more than any child should.”

He nods. “We’ll talk more tomorrow.”

I want to ask him how Julian tricked them into coming to the island manor. I imagine their story is similar to mine.

Father pauses in front of me. “We’ll talk more tomorrow as well,” he promises.

“There’s a lot you didn’t tell me,” I accuse gently. “Saranica? Really?”

He smiles softly. “Arthur told you?”

I nod.

“Tomorrow,” he vows. “Sleep well.”

Julian offers his arm as soon as they leave the room. “Shall we?”

I follow him down a hall going in the opposite direction of my family, barely noticing the art on the walls, the marble statuettes, or the ferns atop tiny tables.

“Your uncle isn’t here,” I say.

“Ah, no.” He looks a little sheepish. “I’m afraid that was part of my fib.”

“Your lie, you mean.” I spare him a glance. “Let’s at least be honest about what it was.”

He smiles a little.

I turn to him, so angry...and feeling so helpless. I walked into his trap. “Something is bothering me.”

“Please, tell me. I’m happy to answer your questions.”

“Arthur said the compulsion serum works on vampires sired by the one who donated the venom. It shouldn’t work on any random vampire you find. Where did you get your henchmen?”

I can ask him any question...except possibly this one. He looks uncomfortable, like he’s not going to answer.

“No, tell me,” I press. “I’m here. What difference will it make now?”

“It might skew your perception of me, Miss Delane.”

“Tell me.”

“I made a vampire with the compulsion serum, and then he made more vampires.”

“How?” I demand.

“The how is simple. As I’m sure you know, a person will die twenty-eight days after taking the compulsion serum if they don’t have access to the antivenom. I simply administered the compulsion serum to the individual and then deprived him of the antivenom, and...that was that. I had a vampire from the right spirit line.”

“Whom?” I whisper, feeling ill at the thought.

“A criminal,” he answers sharply. “A despicable man. You need not worry about that. His crimes suited his punishment.”

“And you stood in place of his judge and jury?”

Julian narrows his eyes. “I have taken no one from society that will be missed. My vampires were vile humans, and now

they're vile monsters. It's as simple as that."

Again, he means it. He truly believes his crimes are pardonable—that he's acting for some greater good.

We continue walking.

"Does it hurt?" I ask.

"Does what hurt?"

"The bite." I stare straight ahead. "I imagine you've been bitten in the process of controlling the monsters."

"It does," he admits. "But it only takes a few seconds, and I won't let the monster take too much blood. He only needs to break the skin to transfer the venom."

I shiver at the casual way he says it. "When are you going to do it?"

"Not for a few days. I want to give you time to enjoy your reunion."

"That's benevolent of you."

"Of course," he murmurs, missing the sarcasm.

We ascend a wide set of stairs that leads to the second level, walk down another hall, and then pause in front of a door.

"This is the room I had prepared for you." Julian opens the door, looking eager to please. "What do you think?"

It's beautiful, like the rest of the house. A lamp burns low on a side table, making the space look warm and intimate. The bed is decked with gauzy drapes and white bedding. There's an armoire, a dresser, a vanity, and a desk. A rug softens the wood floor, and a fire in the hearth heats the space. Two glass doors open to a moonlit balcony.

"It's fine," I say.

"You're not yourself." Julian turns to me. "You don't like it?"

"How would you know if I'm myself or not? You don't know me."

“But I want to.” He steps a little closer. “The Miss Delane I danced with? I want to know her very much.”

“You left her in Staulus. This Miss Delane is a prisoner of a foolish decision.”

“You’re tired.” He sighs. “We already decided not to talk until after we’ve had a chance to rest.”

I don’t answer.

“Sleep well, Miss Delane. If you need anything—anything at all—my suite is at the end of the hall.”

He closes the door behind him, leaving me alone in this beautiful, terrifying room. Listless, I cross the space, opening the balcony doors. They’re not locked, but why would they be?

The master of the house controls the things that lurk in the night.

I lean against the balcony railing as I look at the dark sea and breathe in the cold air. The chill makes my cheeks go numb, but I welcome it. I wish it could numb every part of me, especially my heart.

Turning, I go into the room, too tired to resist sleep any longer. Fully clothed, I crawl onto the bed. As sleep claims me, I think of Benjamin.

I hope he’s nearby.

BENJAMIN

“**G**reg!” I yell so the wretched dragon will hear me over the roar of the air whipping past us. I’m airborne again, unable to keep my seat when he took another sharp dip. It’s not the first time. It’s not even the third.

As I free fall toward the dark sea below, my kit slips from the inside pocket of my jacket.

“No!” I yell as it tumbles out of my grasp, catching the air and then disappearing into the dead of night.

“Are you trying to kill me?” I demand when I collide with the dragon’s back. The landing nearly knocks the wind from my lungs. “And do you have any idea what was in my kit?”

“You should have secured it.”

“To *what?*”

The dragon doesn’t answer.

“That was the last bottle of antivenom!” I yell. “The *last.*”

“Don’t let the vampires bite you, and you won’t need it.”

“Greg!”

“*I’m not accustomed to having a rider!*” he argues, his voice booming in my head. “*I told you I wasn’t a passenger dragon!*”

He’s right—he’s not entirely at fault. We were both unprepared for this. Humans were never meant to travel by air or this quickly. This is madness.

At least I was wearing my weapons. My stakes and pistol are under my jacket, and my crossbow is strapped to my back. It'll be all right.

I squeeze my legs to stay seated, sliding back and forth on his slick back, nearly toppling over his head every time he dives, which is far more often than I think is necessary.

“If you dump me now, I'll fall to my death,” I warn. “You can see how shallow the sea is around the island, can't you? Look at the rocks jutting out of the water.”

The ship is anchored in the bay below. It headed to deeper water and then skirted the mainland most of the day, heading north instead of toward Saranica as I originally feared. We're now in the Fenheim Sound, I believe, though I've never seen it from the air. The area is protected from the rest of the sea, its waters calm, boasting an extensive archipelago within it.

I visited one of the islands in my apprentice days to rid a ghoul from a cemetery. I don't remember which one it was, but it housed a small settlement and was larger than the one below us.

We circle the isle, getting a feel for the area and trying to decide how to rescue Elizabeth. The sun set hours ago, giving us the freedom to fly closer.

One thing is certain—I couldn't do this without Greg. The tiny port is well-guarded. Vampires make their rounds, milling about the small island like disposable pawns. There are humans as well. I can't tell if they're armed, but I imagine they are.

If only I knew where they're keeping Elizabeth.

“*Look there,*” Greg says. “*On the balcony.*”

I squint, not gifted with his dragon-eyed vision, and then I see her. Relief racks me, nearly sending me off the dragon's back again. I catch myself from sliding, clinging to Greg's slick scales.

Elizabeth looks out at the sea, alone.

“*Should I go lower?*” the dragon asks. “*I can incinerate at least half a dozen vampires in one swoop.*”

“It’s too risky,” I tell him. “We need to retrieve Elizabeth before we take out the undead army. We’ll wait a few more hours, until most of the humans are asleep. When it’s time, do you think you can land on the roof near her balcony?”

“*I’m offended you have to ask.*”

“But can you do it *quietly?*”

He doesn’t answer right away. “*Possibly.*”

Possibly will have to be good enough.

“How are you feeling?” I ask. “Do you need to rest? Should we find an uninhabited nearby island so you can land?”

Greg is quiet again, likely not wanting to admit he’s tired even though he’s been flying all day.

“I’d like to stretch my legs,” I add. “Let’s find a place to wait.”

Already eagerly heading toward a dark isle that’s not too far away, he says, “*Humans have no stamina. You didn’t even do any of the work.*”

“Dragons are the superior species,” I say, rolling my eyes.

“*I’m glad you finally acknowledged it.*” He extends his wings, jarring us to a standstill in the air before he lowers himself to the ground. We land with a thud that shakes the tiny island.

“Hopefully you can land a little more quietly on the roof.” I slide off his back, groaning out loud when my feet touch the hard ground. Every muscle in my body is stiff, and my back aches from the awkward riding position.

But we’re here, and the men who abducted Elizabeth don’t know they should be watching the skies. Even Julian didn’t stick with GHOST long enough to have the pleasure of meeting Greg.

“If you can find dry kindling, I’ll start a fire,” the dragon offers.

“We can’t risk the men spotting us.”

“You’ll freeze to death.”

“It’s not *that* cold, and I have a cloak.”

Trying not to think about what might be crawling in the dead grass, I stretch out on the ground. I haven’t slept in too long.

“Wake me in a few hours,” I say to Greg, covering my face with my cloak.

But even though I’m exhausted, I can’t sleep. The ground is too rocky, and Elizabeth is too close.

I sit up after an hour or so, poking the sleeping dragon by my side. He’s curled up like a cat, preserving body heat. Groggy, he says, *“What?”*

“It’s time to go.”

“I just got to sleep.”

“You can sleep later. It’s time to save Elizabeth.”

He growls out a plume of hot flames.

“Do that again.” I extend my hands. “Just don’t singe me.”

“I thought you didn’t want to attract attention?”

“Only for a moment.”

He breathes a slow, steady flame. The welcome heat sends a shiver down my spine, and my hands tingle. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Are you ready to fly?”

He stretches his massive black wings as if warming them up. *“I’m ready.”*

“Then let’s rescue Elizabeth.”

“CHANGE OF PLANS—DON’T LAND,” I say as we sweep low to the house. “Can you hover close to Elizabeth’s balcony? I’ll slide off your back.”

“I’m not a hummingbird.”

“Just for a few seconds. Can you do it or not?”

“I can do it.”

I hold my breath as the dragon flies low, afraid someone will hear the wind he creates with his wings. But the crash of the sea against the rocky shore masks the sound of the moving air. I swing my leg over Greg’s back and slide down, gritting my teeth as I land on the balcony with a dull thud.

“Go now,” I whisper. “But don’t get out of range—and don’t go rogue on me.”

“I won’t eat, maim, or set anything ablaze until you give me the command,” he promises, though he doesn’t sound happy about it.

“Good. I’m going in.”

The dragon lifts himself into the night, nearly invisible in the dark except for the glisten of the moonlight as it glints off his scales.

I nock a bolt into my crossbow and then walk to the door. Preparing myself, I try the handle. I expect it to be locked, but the knob turns. The door doesn’t creak or whine as I push it open, sliding unhindered and silent.

The room is lit by a low-burning lamp.

Cautiously, I step into a large bedchamber. Elizabeth lies on the bed, still in her scarlet ball gown, her blonde hair loose and splayed around her. She’s fast asleep.

I glance around the room to ensure she’s alone, and then I walk to the interior door. She locked that one.

It’s almost like she was waiting for me.

I lower the bow and move to the bed. Quietly, I sit next to her, hating to wake her when she looks so peaceful. But I have no choice. I need to get her out of here.

I set my hand on her shoulder, wincing when I realize how cold my hands are against her warm skin. She stirs in her sleep, flinching when she realizes someone is in the room with her. Her eyes fly open, and I press a finger to my lips. “It’s me.”

“Benjamin,” she breathes, sitting up abruptly. She throws her arms around my neck, hugging me like her life depends on it. “I can’t believe you’re here.”

I hold her, so relieved to find her unharmed. “You didn’t think I’d come for you? You told me to trail you, didn’t you?”

She pulls back, her eyes roving over my face. “*How* are you here?”

“Greg,” I murmur. “Having a dragon teammate is terribly helpful when you need to rescue a hostage on an island.”

“Where is he?”

“He’s circling right now.” I stand, ready to leave. “Let’s go.”

“Wait.” Elizabeth pulls me back. “We can’t go—not yet.”

“Why?”

“They’re all here—Tansy, Sterling, Gretchen...my father.” She clasps her hands together at her chest. “We can’t leave them. What will Julian do when he discovers I’m gone?”

“Julian?” I ask, startled.

“He lied to me, telling me my family was being held for ransom and I was the key to their release. But in truth, he intends to force my father to make the serums.”

“He’s behind it all?”

“He is.”

As I process the information, I press the palm of my hand over my mouth. How are we going to manage a mass rescue?

“Does Julian have vampires guarding the halls?”

“I don’t know. Probably.”

“Do you know where the others are staying?”

“No.” She takes my hand, holding it between her small, soft ones. “We can’t leave them. *Please don’t leave them.*”

“Do you have any idea how dangerous—”

“I’ll help you. Stay here. I’ll find them, and then I’ll come back.”

“You can’t walk through the halls in the middle of the night, not when Julian has so many guards.”

“They won’t attack me.”

“What excuse will you give them when they stop you?”

“I’ll say I had a nightmare.”

“You’re not a little girl.” I almost laugh, the idea of it too ridiculous.

“You’re right.” Her shoulders fall. “That won’t work.”

“I’ll come back for them,” I promise. “For now, let’s get you to safety.”

“Even if you come back, you won’t know which rooms are theirs.” She pauses. “Benjamin—”

“No.”

“I didn’t even say anything yet.”

“I can tell I won’t like it—so no. Let’s go.”

“Come back tomorrow night.”

I turn from her, grimacing. “Elizabeth...”

“I can locate their rooms during the day.”

Turning back to her, I whisper, “I’m not leaving you with that madman for another twenty-four hours.”

“I’m sorry, Benjamin.” She sets her jaw. “But I won’t leave without them.”

“Elizabeth—”

She embraces me again, looping her arms around my middle and pressing her cheek to my shoulder. “I’m so glad you’re here. I worried you might decide I’m too much trouble.”

Sighing, I return the hug. “Never.”

“Julian said the kidnapper would kill my family if I told you. I didn’t know what to do.”

“Greg explained it.”

“I’m so glad he heard me.”

“And I’m thankful you thought to tell him.” I pull back to look at her. “But no more making plans on your own, all right?”

“I’m not making this one on my own. I’m asking you to do this with me.”

“Greg won’t be happy. He was hoping to start a bonfire.”

“I’m sorry, Greg,” Elizabeth says to the dragon. “Tomorrow, all right?”

The dragon grunts in my head.

“How do I know you’ll be all right?” I ask her.

“I will be,” she promises. “You should go.”

“*Stay,*” Greg says. “*I’ll wake you before dawn.*”

“Are you sure?” I ask the dragon.

“*You’ll never get a good night’s sleep out here.*”

“Thank you, Greg.”

He grunts, “*I’m going back to our island.*”

“What is it?” Elizabeth asks.

I brush her soft hair out of her face. “I’ll stay with you until the sun rises, and then I have to go.”

“Isn’t that dangerous?” she asks, her voice small. She’s been brave all this time, but she’s anxious. “What if Julian or

one of his men catches you?”

“I’ll shoot them.”

“*Benjamin.*”

“If Julian or one of his men barges into your room unannounced, they deserve to die.”

She nods as if deciding my argument is sound and tugs me onto the bed. We crawl on top of the covers, both of us exhausted. I lie on my side, holding my arm out for her. She tucks in close, her breath on my neck.

“Miss Delane?” I say as I stroke her arm.

“Hmm?”

“I’d like to court you.”

“All right.”

I nuzzle her temple, breathing in the smell of her hair. “I’d like to marry you.”

She looks up. “That’s all right too.”

I smile, and Elizabeth leans in. She kisses my lips softly before she snuggles in close and promptly falls asleep in my arms.

ELIZABETH

I wake to a knock at the door.

“Miss Delane?” Julian calls.

I freeze, blinking in the bright light of early afternoon. I can tell by the way Benjamin’s arms tighten around me that he’s awake too. Our eyes meet, both of us frantic.

“May I come in?” Julian asks.

“No!” I cry, my voice groggy. “I’m...not decent yet.”

“I believe one of the maids left a robe hanging by the bedside for you.”

I give Benjamin a horrified look, silently vowing to slay his worthless dragon the next time I see him. The hunter presses a finger over his lips, reminding me to be quiet. He then gestures to the robe and disappears on the other side of the bed. I round the footboard, relieved to see he fits underneath.

My heart hammers in my chest as I throw the robe on over my dress and answer the door.

Julian waits in the hall, holding a silver tea tray. Two delicate cups rest on it, along with a selection of scones. “You slept in so late; I thought it would be best to check on you.” He smiles. “And I didn’t want to come empty-handed.”

I stare at the matching porcelain cups.

“May I come in?” he asks.

Slowly, I pull my gaze to his face.

“I thought we might continue yesterday’s conversation now that we’re more rested,” he adds.

“I don’t believe we have anything else to say.”

Julian frowns, looking very much like a sad puppy. “You’re still angry with me?”

“I cannot think of a reason why I wouldn’t be.”

“You’ve seen your father and friends. I’ve taken such good care of them.”

“They’re not pets!” I cannot help but exclaim.

He winces, looking down. “No, you’re right. I suppose that was the wrong choice of words. But please, let’s talk over tea.”

“Let me tidy myself. I’ll meet you downstairs.”

Julian looks like he’s going to push the issue, but he ends up giving in. “Hurry before it gets cold, all right? We’ll meet in the parlor.”

“That’s fine.”

I close the door, locking it behind me. I don’t dare say a word to Benjamin, worrying that Julian might still be within earshot.

After several seconds, he slowly emerges from under the bed.

“Greg!” he quietly snarls, and then he pauses as if listening. “Do you see what time it is? Yes, fine. No. *No*, I’ll manage. You just stay there. You’re too easy to spot in the daylight.”

The hunter turns back to me, shaking his head.

“What happened?” I demand.

“He says he accidentally slept too late.”

I close my eyes, reminding myself to be patient. He’s still young in dragon years. Barely an adult.

It doesn’t help.

I rip off the robe, straighten my gown, and attempt to fix my hair in the mirror. Benjamin watches me, frowning. “What does Julian want to discuss?”

“He believes it’s morally acceptable to harness evil if you’re using it to fight evil, and he’s desperate for me to agree he’s not a villain.”

“He’s taken with you,” Benjamin says darkly.

I glance at him, not happy about it. “He’s hinted at that, yes.”

“Is that what he’s doing with the compulsion serum? Using it to fight monsters?”

“Yes.”

“Of all the underhanded tactics—that’s *cheating*.”

“Can we talk about his business ethics later? Today, I must convince him I’m on his side so he doesn’t go through with his plan.”

“What’s his plan?”

I find a brush waiting on the vanity. “If Father doesn’t agree to make the serums for him, he’s going to command a vampire to bite me, just as the empress did to Vincent.”

“I’ll kill him. I swear if he so much as touches you—”

“You can’t.” I wince as I hit a knot in my hair.

“I can, and I will.”

I turn to face him. “What do you think will happen to all his vampires after he’s dead? They’ll be free.”

Benjamin’s jaw hardens, and I can tell he wants to argue—but he can’t because I’m right.

“We must save the others first, and then you can deal with Julian as you see fit.” I set down the brush. “I’m going now.”

The hunter crosses the room. “Be careful.”

“I will be,” I promise. “Are you going to stay here?”

“I have nowhere else to go.”

“Don’t get caught.” I turn toward the door, but before I reach it, Benjamin calls me back.

He tugs me into him when I turn, pressing me flush against him and wrapping his arms around my back. His mouth slides over mine, searing. I lean into his kiss, gripping his shoulders.

This is dangerous, edging on reckless, but I don’t care. It’s a moment of desperation, a release for our fear and frustration. It’s raw and vulnerable.

When we part, Benjamin’s eyes move over my face like he’s committing it to memory. “I’ll see you later.”

“Is that a promise?”

“I swear, Elizabeth,” he vows in a deep, rough voice. “I’m getting you out of here tonight.”

I FIND the parlor and Julian with little difficulty, glad to see the vampires are absent in the bright light of day. If Greg’s arrival wouldn’t be so noticeable in the afternoon, this would be the time to plan our escape. But the black dragon is suited for shadows and not sunshine.

I slide into the seat across from Julian, careful to keep my expression neutral. I haven’t figured out the best way to deal with him yet, but I don’t think angering him will do me or my family any favors.

“There’s a dress shop in nearby Fenyr,” Julian says, offering me a cup of tea. “My housekeeper will gladly fetch whatever you would like. She just needs to take your measurements.”

“Do you plan to keep me so long I’ll need a new wardrobe?”

“I’m afraid that’s entirely up to your father.” He takes a sip of the tea, wincing a little. “It’s too cool, isn’t it? Should I order a new pot?”

“It’s fine. Where is Father? And Sterling, Tansy, and Gretchen?”

“Gretchen is painting in the conservatory. Sterling is with her. Tansy enjoys walking along the shore in the afternoons, and I believe your father is in his workroom. He asked for you earlier, but we agreed we should let you rest after the taxing few days you’ve had.”

“Am I allowed to visit him?”

Julian lifts his eyes, looking mildly frustrated. “Elizabeth—may I call you Elizabeth?”

“If you like.”

“Elizabeth, I know this situation isn’t ideal, but I want you to feel comfortable in my home. Even after we settle the matter, you will be very welcome. I’d like us to be friends.”

“Is that a yes?”

He looks like he wants to groan. “Yes, of course you may visit your father. Go wherever you like. My estate is yours.”

He’s cocky—so confident in his vampires and island he cannot imagine how someone might thwart his plans. Hopefully, that will work in our favor.

“In fact,” he continues, “there is another subject I’d like to broach. I should wait until things are settled, but perhaps if I made my intentions clear, you will realize I mean you and your loved ones no harm.”

I sip the lukewarm tea, trying to decide how to get out of the conversation. But it seems I won’t have to think of an excuse. A human man bursts into the room, looking almost as pale as his vampire associates. “Lord Renward!”

“What is it?” Julian demands, obviously not appreciating the interruption.

“I’m sorry, my lord.” The man looks stupefied, like he cannot come to terms with the news he must deliver. “But a dragon is attacking the island.”

BENJAMIN

I pace Elizabeth's room like a caged animal, trying to form a plan. I'll go mad if I hide in here all day.

"*Where are you?*" Greg asks, interrupting my brooding.

Sinking into an armchair, I place my elbows on the armrests and steeple my fingers together. "Elizabeth's room."

"*The one with the balcony?*"

"Yes."

"*Where's Elizabeth?*"

"I don't know." The dragon rarely makes small talk, and it makes me nervous. "Why?"

"*I'm going to create a distraction so you can escape.*"

I bolt out of the chair. "Greg, no."

"*It'll work.*"

"We need to wait until tonight, and then we can—"

A roar shakes the manor. It's immediately followed by several horrified cries from outside, and then I hear someone yell, "Dragon!"

"Don't attack the manor!" I snarl at Greg. "You'll kill us all!"

"*I'm not a foolish hatchling,*" he responds. "*I flew over to get their attention. Now I'm going to take out their boats.*"

I'm about to tell him to leave, but then I think better of it. Julian already knows he's here, and if their ship and small crafts go up in flames, they won't be able to come after us when we escape.

"Fine," I end up telling him. "But then fly to one of the nearby islands and wait. And don't let yourself get harpooned."

The dragon waits a few beats before he answers, "*You think they have a harpoon gun?*"

"How would I know what they have?"

He doesn't seem to like that very much. "*I'll be careful,*" he finally says.

Risking being seen, counting on Julian's men being well distracted, I go out to the balcony just in time to see Greg sweep low and breathe a fiery plume of destruction at the small boats tied to the pier. Men scatter, running for their lives. I doubt Julian mentioned attacking dragons when they were hired.

Several men load bolts into crossbows. They shoot at the dragon, finding their weapons to be worthless against the massive beast.

"Watch out for the man with the rifle," I warn idly, knowing his scaled hide will deflect most attacks. Even if the bullets penetrate it, they're too small to do significant damage. They might sting, though, and Greg has a wicked temper. He'll get himself in trouble if he circles back to eat the man.

Greg scoffs, flying over the water and heading for the ship anchored in the bay. "*I didn't even feel it.*"

He roars out more flames, setting the vulnerable sails ablaze. Julian's people practically run in circles, most of them gawking without a clue what to do. A smile plays at my lips unbidden, even though I know I shouldn't be enjoying this.

"You should see the chaos you're creating," I whisper.

Below me, Elizabeth and Julian emerge from the entry. I step back, just out of view, and listen.

“What’s going on?” Julian yells to the frantic men in the courtyard. “Where did it come from?”

“She must have a nest on one of the nearby islands,” a man says.

“You hear that, Greg?” I whisper. “They think you’re a female.”

“*Careful, Benji,*” he warns, obviously having heard Julian use the wretched nickname on the train.

I’d laugh if Elizabeth was safely away, but the situation is too perilous. “You’re the worst sort of eavesdropper.”

“*It’s not my fault I can hear everything.*”

“One more pass over the small crafts near the shore, and then you should go,” I tell him. “Don’t give them long enough to find an effective weapon.”

The dragon takes my advice, sweeping low to the pier this time just to make the men run. Some leap into the ocean to avoid him. Others throw themselves belly-first onto the rocky shore. Cackling in my head, he sends another round of flames at the boats. The force of the attack causes the charred vessels to rock and sway. Their moorings give, and they float away from the burning pier, tugged by the water.

Greg then heads straight for the estate. I duck, realizing he’s going to draw attention right to me. He sweeps overhead, sending a stream of flames into the air and letting out a roar that shakes the house.

“You’re just showing off now,” I whisper. “Get out of here.”

“*Where are you?*” he asks.

“Still in the estate. I won’t leave without Elizabeth.”

“*I did all that so you could escape.*”

“You didn’t bother asking me if I wanted to escape. I’m not leaving without Elizabeth.”

The dragon grumbles, but after one more grand circle, he flies toward the east, picking up speed as he reaches the water,

eventually disappearing into the horizon.

Below me, Julian's men frantically try to puzzle out where the dragon came from and why it would attack the island. One man suggests the beast is a male, not a female. That's followed by more questions: Does he want to expand his territory? Did the red flag bearing the Renward crest catch his attention while he was flying overhead, sending him into a wild rage?

No one has a decent answer. The island isn't large enough to be a haven for prey. There was no sign of his mate when the manor's construction commenced.

No one mentions GHOST, and why would they? Who's ever heard of a dragon working with humans? They're temperamental, antisocial creatures.

I slip back into Elizabeth's room, watching the flames slowly die out behind the shielded safety of the glass. But I keep the door cracked. If I listen intently, I can make out the conversations in the courtyard. The boats are lost, as is the pier. Thankfully, the rocky shore acted as a firebreak, keeping the flames from spreading to the rest of the island.

"I've just recalled an interesting rumor, Elizabeth," Julian says.

I cringe when he says her name, hating that he feels they're close enough to use it. From the tone of his voice, I believe the conversation is private.

"Have you?" Elizabeth asks, trying to act nonchalant—possibly too nonchalant. She was nearly hysterical the first time she met the dragon, as she should be now. But judging from her tone, Greg might as well have been a goose flying overhead.

"I heard Benjamin has a strange pet."

"A pet?"

"A dragon," he clarifies, as if she doesn't already know.

A chill runs down my spine and then roots in my gut. How does Julian know about Greg?

Elizabeth laughs, but it comes out nervous and forced. “Come now.”

“No, I’m serious.” Julian’s tone is friendly, but there’s a deadly edge to it.

“That’s ridiculous. I’ve never heard of a man befriending a beast.”

“Did you not listen when I warned you, Miss Delane? What did I say would happen to your family if you told anyone about the situation?”

“Are you actually hinting that I told Benjamin, and he sent his *dragon* to rescue me?” she says sharply. “When did I even have a chance to tell him?”

“You went to the powder room with Catriona,” he says, his tone hardening as he stops pretending to be friendly.

“And you had someone in there with us,” she says. “Tell me you didn’t.”

He pauses. “I did.”

“And what did she report?” she demands. “Did I say anything?”

He doesn’t seem to like that. “No.”

“Did I talk to Benjamin even once after we parted?”

“No...”

“That’s right—I didn’t. I followed you like a perfectly brainless puppet.” Elizabeth’s voice is on fire. “And now you threaten me? Don’t you dare hurt my family, or I swear I will finish you myself.”

I blink, almost laughing.

“Elizabeth—” Julian begins.

“You will call me Miss Delane,” she snaps, turning on her heel. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to my room.”

“Miss Delane...” Julian calls, sounding irritated.

Elizabeth apparently ignores him because she doesn’t answer.

“*Miss Delane*,” he repeats, this time with a shard of anger in his voice. “While you are in my home, you will respond when I call you.”

“What?” she snaps, a little farther away than she was a few seconds ago.

“I suggest we speak with your father.”

“Why?”

“In light of recent events, whether they’re your fault or not, I believe it would be best to move things along.”

I debate leaping over the balcony and fighting Julian here and now, but there are too many of his men milling around, and Elizabeth is vulnerable.

“Tonight?” she asks, her voice strained.

“Just after dusk.”

I fist my hand as I fight my impulses and force myself to think this through. If I wasn’t alone, I might have a chance. But I’m outnumbered at least ten to one, and even more of Julian’s men are nearby.

One thing is certain though—I have to get Elizabeth out of here before dark.

The door opens behind me, yanking me from my thoughts. Reaching for a weapon, I whirl around. I was so focused on Elizabeth and Julian, I forgot to watch my back.

“Sterling,” I say when I see the man in the doorway, hit with relief.

He looks around the room, resigned. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“I’ve come for you.”

Less than impressed, he answers, “Yes, I saw your dragon.”

There’s something off about his manner, something concerning.

“You’re with Julian, aren’t you?” I ask.

Elizabeth's friend gives me an apologetic look. "He's my brother."

ELIZABETH

I don't know where Benjamin is. Julian hasn't left my side since Greg's attack, no longer as accommodating as before. As he threatened, he's taken me to see my father.

We're in a small room at the rear of the estate. It's stocked like an apothecary's workshop, with a large wooden workbench acting as the centerpiece of the space. The heavy bench holds a strange conglomeration of tools and ingredients—several mortars and pestles in varying sizes, green glass bottles, tins, and ceramic crocks.

It's dusky beyond the window, already entering the early hours of twilight. Too soon, it will be dark.

A small oil-fed burner rests in the middle of the workbench, the flame heating a glass jar that's suspended over it. The blue liquid it holds simmers ominously. I study the substance, realizing I've never seen that color in nature.

"I want the compulsion serum, Gordon," Julian tells my father.

"We agreed to abandon the sister serums and find a new antidote," Father says. "I'm close to an antiserum—I can feel it this time. My tests have shown my latest concoction to be extremely effective against the vampire spirit in a controlled environment. Now we just have to wait until—"

"No, *you* decided that. I never agreed. You went forward as if I did. You know I support your work with the antiserum. Have I not tracked down every obscure ingredient you've

requested? Perfect it, patent it, and sell it and make a fortune. That's fine. But make me a batch of the sister serums as well."

Father tilts his jaw a little further into the air, stubborn. "I won't make them."

"I cannot believe you're forcing us to have this conversation again," Julian snaps. "I've indulged you, letting you use my facilities to work on this pet project, but do not forget why you're here. You were supposed to create the sister serums using ingredients obtainable in Staulus."

"You told me you wanted to save lives!" Father exclaims. "Isn't that what you said when you first approached me?"

"And I meant it. Killing the monsters saves lives. I will use whatever tools are necessary for a hunt, including this one. You *will* make me a batch of the compulsion serum."

I've been quiet, my eyes going between my father and Julian as they argue, but I finally have to ask, "Father, were you abducted?"

The two men turn my way as if suddenly remembering I'm here. Father's face wrinkles with an emotion I don't care for. Not at all.

He looks remorseful.

"Elizabeth..."

"Julian kidnapped you, didn't he?" I take a step back. "You're not here by choice. Surely not."

"Your father came to me willingly, but we made a deal," Julian says. "He wasn't allowed to leave the island until he recreated the sister serums."

Father whips his head toward Julian. "We agreed on an *antidote*. Not the sister serums specifically."

"Why would you do that?" I whisper. "Why would you leave me and all of Oakenridge? Do you have any idea what's happened in your absence?"

He swallows. "Elizabeth, I was infected in the cave."

I hold my breath.

“I attempted to make the serum myself in the woods, but I failed, and I was running out of time. I couldn’t return home—it was too dangerous to be around you. So I went to Julian. He’d approached me a few months prior and asked me to help him recreate the sister serums. In exchange for a bottle of antivenom, I agreed to his terms.”

“And you couldn’t tell me?” I demand. “You couldn’t send me a letter?”

“That was part of our arrangement,” Julian answers. “I couldn’t have you telling Arthur what I was up to.”

I stare at him. “You let me think my father was dead, or worse, a *vampire*, all because you didn’t want me to tell your competition that you were working on an antidote?”

Julian shrugs, unconcerned. “As I mentioned, we’re rivals.”

“I’m sorry, Elizabeth,” Father says. “So truly sorry.”

“Why did you kidnap me?” I ask Julian. “If Father is here because of a deal you made, why did you need me?”

“Because he was getting distracted from our original agreement,” Julian answers wryly, shooting my father a look. “Obsessing over his new antiserum even though he’d found the secret to a new, more accessible version of the sister serums.”

“What’s the difference between the antivenom half of the sister serums and the antiserum?” I ask.

Father pulls his eyes from Julian to answer. “The antivenom kills the lethal spirit in the blood before it can finish the host. My antiserum will do that as well, except it also prevents future infection by making the blood inhospitable.”

I stare at him, shocked. “You’ve created a vampire... vaccine?”

“Something of that nature.” A smile breaks across Father’s face despite the tension between him and Julian. “Further testing will be needed, of course, but—”

“Are you comfortable using your daughter as a test subject for your antiserum?” Julian asks.

“Of course not,” Father snaps. “It won’t be ready for years.”

“Then I suggest you make me the sister serums because as soon as my vampires wake, Elizabeth’s going to be infected. You have twenty-eight days, Gordon. If you fail, she dies.”

“You’re going too far,” Father growls.

“And you are refusing to deliver the goods you promised.”

“If you infect her, I will save her, but you will never be able to trust a serum you get from me because I *will* poison it,” Father warns sagely. “Do not threaten me with my family, Julian—not when you’re playing with life and death yourself. You *need* me—remember that.”

“You can’t use Father’s new antiserum, can you?” I ask Julian before he can reply. “Let’s say you take it instead of the antivenom to avoid death at the end of your current cycle. You wouldn’t be able to use your compulsion serum again, would you? Your blood would kill off the vital ingredient. That’s the true problem. The new concoction would nullify the serum as soon as it entered your body and render it useless.”

Father looks pleased. “Correct.”

“You would live,” I add, “but you wouldn’t have your power.”

“This isn’t about power, Elizabeth,” Julian barks at me. “It’s about *saving* people.”

“Father’s creation could save hundreds, maybe even thousands, of lives over the course of the next ten years. Monster hunters, especially, would benefit from this new antiserum. You don’t think that outweighs your desire for the personal use of a spirit army?”

Julian takes me by the arm, not bothering to answer me. “I suggest you start on the sister serums, Gordon. I’ll take my chances with your poison.”

The door closes behind us with an ominous thud. I rip my arm from Julian as soon as we're alone in the hall. "Why would you risk it, knowing he'll taint it?"

"Obviously, I won't take it first," he explains. "I have a new test subject."

My mind flies through the options—Sterling, Tansy, Gretchen.

"Please don't," I beg.

"You have nothing to worry about—as long as your father doesn't tamper with the serum."

Panic squeezes my lungs, making it difficult to breathe. "I'd like to return to my room."

"So you can visit Benjamin?" he says in a conversational tone. He then lifts a brow, quietly teasing. "It's a bit scandalous to hide a man in your bedroom, even if it's only Benji. Don't you think?"

I inhale sharply through my nose, hoping to hide my shock. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"No?" He laughs, dropping the subject as he leads me back to the parlor.

I pause at the open door when I see Benjamin seated at the table. Four armed guards stand in the room, one on each wall.

Our eyes meet, and he presses his lips into a thin line. Anger, embarrassment, and remorse play across his face. After a moment, he turns his eyes on Julian.

"Hello, Benjamin," Julian says as he leads me to the table. "We were just talking about you. You realize it's bad manners to show up uninvited, don't you?"

ELIZABETH

“You realize it’s bad manners to kidnap people, don’t you?” Benjamin responds.

“Now to be fair, I only kidnapped Elizabeth. Colonel Delane came willingly, and Elizabeth sent the other three to me herself.”

“What are you talking about?” I demand.

Benjamin meets my eyes, looking like he’s not sure how to break the news to me.

“What is it?” I ask, growing cold.

“You’re not going to tell her?” Julian pulls out my chair for me.

I ignore it, taking the one next to Benjamin instead.

“Very well.” Julian sits and then turns to a guard near the door. “Inform the kitchen maids we’re ready for tea now.”

The man nods once and then slips into the hall.

When Julian looks back at me, he smiles. “Sterling is my younger brother.”

It takes several seconds for that to sink in. “That’s not possible.”

“It’s not?” Julian chuckles.

I study the man, feeling ill. They have the same jawline, the same eyes. Sterling is a little taller, but now that I know, it’s obvious. No wonder Julian seemed familiar.

Julian smiles at my horrified expression. “He met Annalisa at my grandparents’ ball all those years ago—the same one you attended, where we first met.”

“His surname isn’t Renward,” I protest.

“When our father forbade him from marrying sweet Annalisa, he discarded his birthright and began using our mother’s maiden name. Your father took him in because of his connection to Vincent.”

“No.”

“If it makes you feel any better, he had nothing to do with this.” Julian’s eyes turn to the door. “Did you, Sterling?”

Sterling walks in, his face solemn. “I did not.”

“Join us,” Julian offers. “There’s another chair.”

My friend won’t meet my eyes, but I stare at him, knowing I’m more stubborn than he is. Finally, he looks up. He winces when our gazes meet, and then he looks back at the table.

Julian says, “In an interesting twist of fate, he sent an urgent telegram to me from our family’s estate in Rialis the same day I returned to Valette, asking for help with your vampire problem. We’ve never gotten along well, but I saw this as a chance to make amends.”

“Gretchen called him uncle,” I accuse Sterling, realizing I was a fool.

Sterling nods.

“Dear Gretchen,” Julian says fondly. “She’s the one who told me about your dragon, Benjamin. She wants to meet him, you know.”

Benjamin offers him a grim smile. “I’d rather introduce the two of you first.”

Julian laughs. “A dragon, Benji? I admit I’m jealous. Wherever did you find time to train such a beast? Aren’t you usually drowning in paperwork?”

“You weren’t helping him before, but are you helping him now?” I ask Sterling, ignoring Julian.

Sterling slowly exhales, looking away. Refusing to answer.

“Upon our reunion, my brother and I realized we have a common goal,” Julian says.

“And what’s that?” I ask coolly.

Julian jerks his head toward Benjamin. “We need to get rid of him. I merely find him a nuisance—no offense, Ben. But Sterling’s reason is a matter of the heart.”

Several seconds go by.

I narrow my eyes at Sterling. “What’s he talking about?”

“That is the subject I was trying to broach earlier, Miss Delane,” Julian continues. “Acting as head of House Renward, I would like to propose a marriage alliance between you and my brother. Providing you agree to the union, we will welcome Sterling back into our arms, grateful to be reunited with him once more. His inheritance and good name will be reinstated, and sweet Gretchen will never sleep on a rug in a cold shack again.”

I stare at Sterling. “You’re in love with Tansy.”

“It was never Tansy,” he mumbles.

The words hit me in the stomach, along with guilt. I love him as well, and Gretchen too, but I’m not in love with Sterling. He’s my friend. Or I thought he was before he got tangled up in all this. Now I’m not sure.

Benjamin looks ill, but he says nothing.

“Why would I ever agree to this when you’re holding my father and me hostage?” I demand.

Julian studies me, nodding slowly. “That’s a valid point, isn’t it?”

I stare at him, wondering if he’s not a touch mad.

“I want the serums, yes. But I also want to reconcile with my brother...” He sighs as if coming to a difficult decision. “Never let it be said that House Renward is unreasonable. If you agree to marry Sterling, I will release your father from our

agreement. You'll both be free to leave if you'd like, though I'd much rather you stay as my guests."

"Why would you give up your chance at getting the sister serums when you've gone to such great lengths to secure them? Not only that, but you threatened my father not five minutes ago. Why the sudden change of heart?"

"Call me a wide-eyed optimist, but I can't help but believe that your father will eagerly work with me after you marry my brother. We'll be family, after all, and I'm such an avid supporter of his work."

My head is reeling. I feel like we're in the middle of a negotiation, and I wasn't prepared. Benjamin sits across from me, saying nothing.

"We can all leave this room with something we want." Julian meets my eyes. "Sterling will marry the woman he loves and finally be able to provide the life for his daughter that she deserves. I'll get my brother back. And you'll free your father from the contract he made with me. We can all live happily ever after, providing we cut Benjamin out of the equation."

"I don't want to cut Benjamin out of the equation," I say, growing angry.

Julian lifts a brow. "You would abandon your friend and his dear daughter—people you call your family—for a man you've known for a fortnight?"

"Julian," Sterling says sharply.

"That's not fair," I say.

"If you won't agree to my terms, we will continue as planned." He glances out the window. "And look—it's past dark. My vampires will rise soon."

"Let's talk," Sterling says to me, looking at his brother as if asking for permission.

"Go," Julian says. "Please. Take all the time you need. I'll keep Benjamin company."

I look at Benjamin as I rise. I don't know what I'd say even if we were free to speak. But he nods, understanding.

Sterling leads me from the room, taking me to another that's just down the hall. He closes the door after we enter, turning to face me. "I don't know where to begin," he finally says.

"Where's Gretchen?" I ask. "Is she safe?"

"She's with Tansy."

"You knew your brother would use you to snare me and force my father to make the compulsion serum, and yet you came?"

He looks at the floor.

"You said you wanted to talk, so *talk*," I say, some of my frustration finally escaping.

After several long seconds, Sterling looks up. "I didn't know what to do, nor did I know how to help. I came with Julian for my own peace of mind—I needed to see for myself that your father was all right."

I don't trust myself to say anything, so I wait.

"When I discovered Julian was behind everything..." He shakes his head, closing his eyes as he presses his fist to his chest. "I am deeply sorry, Elizabeth. I can't express the depth of my grief and guilt."

"And the marriage offer?"

He turns away, walking to the rapidly darkening window. "It was Julian's idea—what he's decided is a friendlier, more permanent form of coercion."

"And you agreed to it?"

"I wish you could have seen the way Gretchen's eyes lit up when she saw her new dresses. In that moment, I remembered what it was like to be a Renward. I wanted to give that to her." He looks back at me, his expression sincere. "I wanted to give that to you as well."

"If I don't marry you, your family won't take you back?"

“So Julian claims.”

“If they won’t accept sweet, darling Gretchen even now that they’ve met her, you would be better off to stay disowned.”

He smiles a little. “You’re right, but life has been so difficult, especially this last month, and it didn’t have to be.” He looks at me. “*It didn’t have to be.* I could have taken care of you—I should have.”

“I won’t marry you.”

“Would it be so terrible, Elizabeth?” He meets my eyes. “Am *I* so terrible? For the first time since we’ve known each other, I feel like I can stand before you as an equal. If you care for me, if you care for Gretchen, please tell me you’ll at least consider it.”

“I won’t be blackmailed into a marriage, even to a friend. I’m sorry, Sterling. I won’t do it.”

He studies me for several long seconds, and then he nods.

“Are we at odds now?” I ask, dreading his answer.

Laughing softly under his breath, looking genuinely devastated, he says, “No. I didn’t expect you to agree. We only came here so you could escape.”

“What?”

He walks to the balcony door. “Benjamin was going to call for Greg when I got you alone. We planned it earlier. He and I are going to deal with Julian and his vampires, but we want you safely away first.”

“Sterling,” I breathe.

“I’ll never betray you, Elizabeth. We’re family, even if we’ll never be as close as I would like.”

“If you planned to rescue me anyway, then why...”

“I wanted to give you the option.” He offers me a sad smile. “There was a chance you might have wanted me.”

I don’t know what to say.

“No, it’s all right,” he assures me. “I understand.”

I look into the dark night. “Your brother’s men will be watching for Greg. He’ll never be able to land.”

“He’s already been here and left once,” Sterling says. “While you and Julian were speaking with your father, Benjamin and I sent Tansy and Gretchen with the dragon.”

“They’re safe?” I ask, so relieved.

“Benjamin confirmed they made it to a nearby island.”

“What about my father?”

“I spoke with him as soon as you and Julian left his workroom. He’s supposed to meet us here.” Sterling frowns toward the door. “But he should have been here by now.”

We wait for what feels like an eternity, but neither Greg nor my father arrive.

“What do we do?” I ask, tendrils of panic winding around in my chest.

“We’ll wait just a few minutes more,” Sterling says, but he’s nervous.

What happened?

A knock at the door startles us both. Sterling crosses the room, stiffening when he opens the door and finds one of Julian’s vampires on the other side.

“Your brother requests you and the girl return to the parlor,” the monster says in his chilling voice. I shiver with foreboding, realizing the plan has gone off the rails.

Sterling gestures me forward, taking my arm. We follow the vampire, avoiding making eye contact with him or any of the others who have emerged from the depths of the house.

We enter the parlor. Julian and his men are still here, along with Benjamin. My father is as well. Benjamin’s jaw twitches, making me realize he’s not happy to see me again.

“Well?” Julian says pleasantly. “What will it be, Miss Delane? Will you play the heroine and marry your dear friend,

saving your father from a bad business venture? Or will you choose Benjamin, failing your father, destroying a friendship, and putting yourself in dire peril?"

Several vampires enter the room after us, pressing in closer than I'm comfortable with.

"Call down your vampires, Julian," Sterling says impatiently.

"I will as soon as we sign the betrothal paperwork," Julian says. "Miss Delane must give me an answer."

"There's no guarantee Father will create the sister serums for you even if Sterling and I were to wed," I say. "Why do you want this?"

But it's my father who answers. "If you marry Sterling, you will belong to House Renward. They would be responsible for your care, comfort, and happiness. Julian knows he will have the power to make your life incredibly uncomfortable if I don't cooperate. More importantly, he knows that *I'm* aware of that."

Julian's expression is still entirely too pleasant. "But on a brighter note, I would give your daughter the Renward name and all the benefits that come with it. It's a give and take."

Father's expression hardens. "Julian will also gain the legal rights to my current and future patents. When I die, all those things will pass to you, Elizabeth. If you belong to House Renward, you will have to relinquish them to him if he requests it."

"So that's it then. You want Father's research." I shake my head. "You're just playing a longer game."

"We can cut it short if you're tiring." Julian gestures to a nearby vampire. "Emile, step forward, please."

"If your vampire so much as touches Elizabeth, I will kill you," Benjamin warns, his tone deadly.

Julian looks amused. "Big words, Benji. But you know even if you manage to kill me, you'll all be trapped in a house

with dozens of hungry vampires. I'm the only thing keeping them from attacking dear Miss Delane."

Emile eyes me, his lips slightly parted, his dark eyes narrowed.

Right now, we're outnumbered four to ten, and five of Julian's men are vampires. Our odds aren't looking good.

"I'll make the sister serums," my father finally agrees. "Enough with your dramatics, Julian."

"We've passed the point of verbal agreements," Julian responds. "I want insurance. Either in the form of your daughter's name on a marriage license or with the venom running through her veins."

The room is tense.

"Fine," I finally say, standing. Boldly, I move my hair over my shoulder, exposing my neck. "If you're going to do it, get it over with."

"No." Benjamin rises immediately, causing Julian's guards and vampires to stand at attention. "Be reasonable, Julian. Colonel Delane said he'd make your serum. Isn't that what you truly want?"

"If we're being honest, I want both control of the colonel's daughter and the serum," Julian says. "And since you're all at my mercy, it seems I'm in the position to make demands."

Sterling and Father sit as if immobilized, likely fearing they'll set off the monsters if they move a muscle.

The room is tense. Julian waits, smiling because he knows he has us cornered.

Suddenly, Benjamin snarls, "I don't care how they do it, just get it done."

The outburst confuses everyone in the room—everyone but me. I recognize that look on his face.

He's talking to Greg.

BENJAMIN

“**W**hat was that?” Julian asks me. “Were you talking to...me...?”

“*Catriona has planned a few distractions,*” Greg tells me. “*She says to prepare for them.*”

I can’t ask him for details or Julian will figure out my dragon has returned to the island—and this time, he’s not alone.

“*Do you want me to go through the window again?*” Greg asks. “*You’ll have to tell me where you’re at.*”

I glance at the ground level door that leads to the courtyard, ignoring Julian. “That won’t work.”

“*What do you want us to do? You’re in charge. Make a decision.*”

“Just...figure it out,” I say.

“*Fine,*” Greg growls. “*We’ll take care of everything. Just tell us where you are.*”

I turn my attention to Julian. “This is a pleasant parlor, isn’t it? Ground level and gets morning light. Does that door lead to the courtyard? It’s nice. Very nice.”

“*Subtle,*” Greg deadpans.

Julian laughs, unnerved. “You’re acting a bit unhinged, Benji.”

Elizabeth edges away from the window, likely worrying the dragon is going to come through it any moment now. If it

wasn't on the ground level, he likely would.

I give Julian a wry, self-deprecating sort of smile. "I'm not good under extreme stress."

"I do seem to remember that. But I didn't realize you were mad."

"It comes and goes—but I'm feeling better now."

"I see." Not believing it, Julian narrows his eyes.

"Why don't we take a look at the marriage paperwork you've drawn up?" I say. "Let Elizabeth make an informed decision."

"And here I thought you liked the girl," Julian says.

"More than anyone." I hope Elizabeth knows it's true. I wish I'd told her I loved her last night when I had the chance. "And because of that, I'm not eager to see her infected."

"That's very noble of you," Julian says. "I had no idea you were—"

A man appears in the doorway. "Lord Renward?"

"What is it *now*?" Julian demands. "The dragon again?"

"No, my lord. There's a small ship in the bay."

"Deal with it."

"We have no boats, my lord."

Julian closes his eyes for a moment. When he opens them, he slowly repeats, "*Deal with it.*"

"Yes, my lord. One other thing..."

"*What?*"

"From what we can tell, the vessel has been abandoned."

Julian lifts his hands, a silent gesture for...deal with it.

"Yes, my lord."

Before Julian can turn back to me, a great boom shakes the house's foundation. Elizabeth screams, startled, and the vampires drop to a protective crouch, fangs bared.

Julian swears. He walks to the door, yanks it open, and steps into the courtyard. “What was *that*?”

Overhead, golden sparks bloom like a dahlia in the sky and then wink out.

“Fireworks?” Julian says dumbly, turning back to his men. “*What is going on?*”

Fireworks.

I nearly groan. If we’ve resorted to using Felix’s ideas, we might be in trouble.

The vampires slowly rise, disinterested in the show. But Julian’s human henchmen look just as baffled as he is.

“Go find out,” he snarls when no one moves.

The humans hurry out, leaving us with Julian and his five vampires. Our odds are getting better by the minute.

A vampire screech sounds from down the hall, almost immediately followed by a gurgle and a crash.

My backup has arrived.

Finally.

I reach for Elizabeth while Julian is distracted, swinging her behind me as I pull my pistol from the inside pocket of my jacket. I point it at Julian, cocking the hammer.

“You were supposed to check him for weapons!” Julian yells at Sterling.

Several more screams are followed by the sound of falling bodies, and then Atticus strides into the room, great sword raised and marred with blood.

The lamplight glints off his golden hair. Not a strand is out of place even though he flew atop Greg to reach the island. He hasn’t even broken a sweat after the fight in the hall, the wretch. He truly is obnoxious.

Ambrose walks in behind Atticus, stake in hand. It, too, is slicked with blood.

Waiting for a command, the vampires in the room twitch, eager to attack.

Ambrose scans the space, mildly disappointed. “Looks like you’ve got it under control, Benjamin.”

“You can’t kill me,” Julian warns. “If you do, my vampires will go free.”

“You say that like we haven’t all faced a roomful of vampires before,” Atticus says. “Send them at us. I could use a good fight.”

Cocky fool.

“Benjamin,” Colonel Delane says, he and Sterling slowly rising. “Before your companions test their abilities, would you please remove my daughter from the room?”

Ambrose pulls a pistol from his hip, pointing it at Julian. “Go ahead, Benjamin. We’ve got this.”

With my hand on Elizabeth’s arm, I guide her toward the door. A vampire hisses as we edge past him, baring his fangs. He quivers, barely able to control his bloodlust.

Before we’re to the door, Julian darts behind the monster closest to him and yells, “Attack them!”

Almost immediately, a shot rings through the air, but it hits Julian’s vampire shield. The creature screams and then lunges forward.

“Run!” I yell at Elizabeth, shooting the vampire that races for her, knowing it will only slow it down. I reach for the stakes hidden under my jacket, passing one to Elizabeth before I run for the vampire in front of us. He lunges for her, too close. I grasp hold of his shoulder, yanking him back around and slamming the stake into his chest, barely avoiding his teeth.

From the corner of my eye, I see Atticus raise his sword.

“For the door!” I urge Elizabeth, certain she’s not going to want to witness what he plans to do with it.

“My father.” She whips around just before we reach the hall.

He and Sterling are engaged in the fight. Colonel Delane punches one of the monsters, sending him stumbling back.

“He’s all right,” I say in a rush, knowing I have to get her out of the manor.

We run as soon as we clear the room, heading for a side door that leads outside. A storm moved over the island in the last few hours, and the misty night air greets us. I’m thankful for the shifting fog that shields us in its obscuring embrace, while acknowledging that it hides anything else nearby as well.

I pull Elizabeth into the trees, needing a moment to form a plan.

“Are you all right?” I demand, tugging her into my arms. For a moment, we’re safe. I wrap my hand around her neck, holding her close.

“Benjamin.” Her voice flutters with nerves.

It’s too dark. The manor’s lanterns are unable to penetrate the heavy fog and dense forest.

“What is it?” I ask, but when I pull my hand back, I feel it.

Hot, slick blood coats my fingers.

Elizabeth trembles against me. I feel like an icy ball of lead has been dropped into my stomach. The vampire bit her before I yanked him away.

“It doesn’t hurt very much,” she says, faking bravery. “How bad is it?”

“I can’t tell. We need to get to the light.”

“What am I going to do?” she whispers.

I pull a handkerchief from my jacket, feeling for her in the dark. “Tie this around your neck to slow the bleeding. I have antivenom in my—”

My kit. The kit that’s at the bottom of the sea.

My mind reels as I realize I left Elizabeth's last chance of survival in the manor. "Greg, I need you."

"Is it urgent? I'm torching vampires near the pier."

"Elizabeth's been infected." My voice is gritty, but I push the panic back. "You need to come protect her. I can't leave her out here alone, and I have to go back inside."

"Where is she?"

"On the southwest side of the manor, in the trees."

"Tell her I'm coming."

"Stay hidden," I beg her. "Greg's on his way."

Elizabeth grabs hold of my wrist before I can turn away. "Where are you going? You can't go back."

"I have to save your father."

"Benjamin..."

"I love you." I take her shoulders. "I can't lose you. I'm going to find the colonel, and Greg is going to take us away. You'll be fine."

"Don't die," she begs, sounding like she's trying not to cry. "Please."

I kiss her in the dark, refusing to acknowledge that this might be our last time. "Don't follow me—wait for Greg. Promise me."

"Promise me you won't die."

"I won't."

"Then I'll stay here."

I pull away, a sense of urgency pushing me forward. The colonel is fine. He was in the Staulusian Army. He survived those months in Saranica, and he's still in decent shape.

He's fought the monsters.

It's all right.

Before I reach the door, Julian steps out. He's just visible in the glow of the lanterns, his face grim.

“Surrender,” I command. “You’re on the losing end of this battle.”

“You just keep showing up, don’t you?” He walks with a limp.

There’s a hole in his trousers, the material around it soaked with blood that runs from a bullet wound. Ambrose must have shot him, but he got past. I don’t know what that means.

“Uninvited. Unwanted.” He pulls a dagger from the sheath on his belt. “I’m tired of dealing with you.”

“You’re running your family name through the mud,” I warn. “You’re already guilty of extortion and kidnapping. Do you want to add murder to that?”

“You’re admitting you can’t beat me in a fight?”

“Not my murder—Elizabeth’s.” I meet his eyes, hoping there’s something human left in him. “She’s been infected.”

He laughs a little, though he doesn’t sound pleased. “We could have saved everyone a lot of trouble if you’d just let me take care of it in the first place.”

“I need the colonel, Julian. If he dies, she dies. And her death will be on you. There are plenty of witnesses.”

His lips turn in a sneer. “You’ve ruined everything. You speak of death and guilt, but will you even acknowledge how many people will die because of your actions tonight? I *save* people, Benjamin. I *kill* monsters. Perhaps my methods are unsavory, but that’s why GHOST is inferior to Haverdell. I’m willing to get dirty for the greater good.”

“If you want to discuss ethics, fine. But at a later date. Let me find the colonel.”

He lifts his blade. “How badly do you want inside?”

“You’re injured—you can barely walk.” And I’m running out of time. Any second now, Elizabeth’s father could become a victim of one of Julian’s monsters.

“Then why are you shying away?”

I pull out my revolver, cock the hammer once more, and point it at him. “Step aside, Julian.”

He laughs. “You’d shoot me, Benji? Arthur’s upright, law-abiding lapdog is too pure to compel vampires, but he’s not above shooting a man who merely stands in front of a doorway he’d like to pass through?”

I walk forward, keeping the gun trained on him. He smirks, calling my bluff, until I’m directly in front of him. I press the gun to his forehead.

“Move,” I command through my teeth.

His eyes glint in the dim firelight. “Make me.”

With a flick of my wrist, I crack the grip of the gun across the side of his head. Julian lets out a shocked howl and falls against the door, crumpling to the ground.

I lean down before I go inside, hoping he’s still conscious enough to hear me. “I won’t kill you. I’m going to drag you back to Valette, pay for your hospital bills, and then witness against you in court. You’re finished, Julian. *Done.*”

I barely resist the urge to kick him while he’s down and push through the door, determined to find the colonel. I run through the halls, heading toward the parlor, hoping they’re still in the area.

As soon as I round a corner, I skid to a stop. There are more of the monsters now. The ones that aren’t swarming around Atticus, Ambrose, Colonel Delane, and Sterling are lifeless and bleeding onto the hall carpet.

How many vampires was Julian hiding underneath the manor?

Atticus and Ambrose are in the middle of the fray, looking a little winded. I do a quick count to see what we’re up against—five monsters.

No, four.

Atticus just decapitated another.

Colonel Delane and Sterling hang back, fighting valiantly with broken chair legs. I don't dare shoot, not when it would be too easy to miss my writhing targets.

Grasping my stake, fondly remembering my encounters with bloodless, bodiless wraiths in my apprentice days, I race into the fray.

"Why are you back?" Ambrose pants when I'm close enough to hear him.

"Duck," I command, my eyes on the monster behind him. The hunter immediately swoops out of the way, and I drive my stake into the vampire's chest.

Three left.

"Elizabeth's been infected," I say. "I have to save the colonel."

Atticus swings his sword, taking down another one, and demands, "What happened to the antivenom Arthur gave you?"

"Greg dumped my kit into the sea," I snarl, pushing him out of the way so I can get to the colonel.

Sterling is down, bleeding from a bite on his arm. I can't think about that now. One of the remaining two vampires stalks toward the colonel, crouching as he prepares to attack.

"NO!" I yell, rushing forward. But I'm too late.

The monster lunges. He and the colonel fall backward, crashing onto the floor. Half a second before I reach them, the colonel shoves the vampire off him. The wooden chair leg protrudes from the monster's chest. The vampire curls in on himself, grasping at the stake, and then goes still.

The colonel killed him. But not soon enough.

Elizabeth's father lies on the hallway carpet, bleeding from a wound in his neck.

Behind me, the last vampire falls, and the hall goes silent.

BENJAMIN

I drop to my knees next to the colonel, wishing I'd had some medical training. "Colonel Delane," I say urgently. "Besides the bite, are you injured?"

He takes a moment to answer. "My head...I...my head."

"Can you sit up? Are you disoriented?"

"I think...I think I'm all right." With a groan, he opens his eyes and attempts to sit. When it appears a wave of dizziness hits him, he leans heavily on his hand. His face is white, the pallor making me nervous.

"Give yourself a minute." I look back at Atticus. "I need assistance with the colonel."

"On my bookcase," Colonel Delane says heavily. "In my workroom."

"What about your bookcase?" I ask urgently.

"In a red book. It's my..." He draws in another breath. "Red book."

"It's a red book," I say, not wanting him to strain himself. "I'll find a red book. What am I looking for?"

"The sister...serums. I called the recipe...something to do with skin. Skin something." He closes his eyes, wincing as if overcome with pain. "I hid it."

Atticus kneels on the other side of the colonel. "Hello, sir. My name is Atticus. I'm going to assist you and Benjamin. We're going to get you to medical care. Is that all right?"

The colonel clutches my arm. “The book.”

“I’ll find the book,” I swear.

“Burn it,” he breathes.

“Burn it?”

“When I die, burn my body too,” he begs, but he’s obviously too disoriented to know if he’s dying. “Infected. I’m infected.”

“So is Elizabeth,” I tell him. “We need you to stay with us so you can make the antivenom, all right?”

He narrows and widens his eyes several times as he tries to focus on my face. “Elizabeth?”

“She was infected too.” Admitting it out loud makes it too real. My stomach rolls, and I resist the urge to be sick. “You have to save her.” I glance behind me. “Sterling too.”

The colonel lets out a gut-wrenching groan.

“We need to get him to a hospital,” Atticus says. “Greg will have to carry him to the boat. I’ll ride with him to make sure he doesn’t fall.”

“The abandoned boat?” I guess, finally getting a chance to ask how they got here.

“We anchored it in the bay, and Greg brought us to the island one by one.”

“How did you know to come here?”

“Ambrose and I tracked the monsters from Oakenridge to Hesper. When we reached the port city, we met with Catriona. Greg flew back after he dropped you off at the manor, finding Catriona and letting her know where you were. She was already chartering a boat when we arrived.”

It’s no wonder the ridiculous dragon slept in. After all that, he must have been exhausted by the time he returned to the islands. The wretched beast earned his cow.

“Ambrose is doing a sweep of the manor to make sure there aren’t any stragglers,” Atticus says. “Catriona is with

Elizabeth. She and Greg cleared the island.”

“I left Julian unconscious and bleeding in the courtyard. We’ll have to deal with him, too.”

“For now, let’s worry about the colonel,” he says, and I nod.

“You can’t get Saranican wolf saliva,” the colonel says, half-conscious as he rambles. “Common gray wolf...doesn’t work. Tried it...not immune.”

“All right,” I tell him, trying to keep him calm.

“Make it with weeping indigo and poison hemlock. Same as antiserum. Grows in Albrech. Create a tincture. Steep until the alcohol is deep blue. Use that instead of the blood.”

I worry he’s telling me something important, but I’m not following. I’m not sure he’s even coherent enough to know what he’s talking about. Together, Atticus and I heft the man to his feet.

Colonel Delane continues to ramble about the red book and wolves, making even less sense than before. Worry gnaws at me.

We emerge from the manor, entering the foggy night. Elizabeth and Catriona sit near the side entrance, in the firelight’s glow. Julian lies behind them, his wound bandaged. He’s also bound in rope and ready to transport—Catriona’s work, no doubt.

Elizabeth’s eyes widen when she sees her father nearly unconscious between Atticus and me, and she leaps to her feet.

“What happened?” The handkerchief at her neck is stained red, but she seems stable.

“He was infected. When the monster attacked, they fell backward. He hit his head on the floor. I think he’ll be all right, but we need to get him medical care.”

She nods, trying to be brave even though she must be close to her breaking point.

“Greg,” I call into the night, weary. “We need you.”

“He’s with the hostages,” Catriona says. “I’ll take over the guard.”

She disappears into the dark, and a few minutes later, the dragon arrives like a great shadow in the sky, lowering himself to the courtyard.

Ambrose exits the manor just in time to help us lift the colonel onto the dragon’s back. It takes all of us, as he’s fallen unconscious. Several times we check to make sure he’s still breathing.

“*Bind him to me,*” Greg says. “*So he won’t fall.*”

“Are you sure?” I ask, startled he’d allow it even in these dire circumstances.

“*Just do it.*”

Fifteen minutes later, the colonel is ready to transport. Atticus rides behind him, prepared to keep the colonel from falling should our ropes fail.

Elizabeth wrings her hands as Greg and Atticus leave with her father.

“He’ll be all right,” I promise her.

She inhales a shuddering breath. “I hope so. What about you? Are you all right?”

I nod, feeling guilty that I made it out of this uninjured when I failed to protect her.

“It’s a shame you’re our director.” Ambrose joins us. He loosens his long black hair, runs his fingers through it, and then pulls it up in a knot once more. “You’re a fine hunter.”

I look at Elizabeth’s neck and murmur, “Not fine enough.”

Her expression softens, and it looks like she’s going to say something. But Sterling emerges from the manor, looking like a wreck.

“Sterling,” Elizabeth exclaims softly, her eyes moving to the bite on his arm. “*No.*”

She crosses the courtyard, finally losing her composure. “Father will make the antivenom. We’ll be fine.”

“*Gretchen.*” His voice breaks, his anguish that of a parent worrying his child will soon become an orphan. He turns away, grasping his hair in his grief.

I give the friends a moment, accepting that they are close.

“I need to look for the book,” I say to Ambrose quietly. “Keep an eye on Elizabeth, all right?”

Ambrose nods.

It takes me a while to locate the colonel’s workroom, but the bookcase is easy enough to spot when I find it.

There’s no red book.

I sink to the floor in front of it, lowering my head into my hands. The events of the night catch up with me, taking their toll. I breathe hard, grateful I have a moment to collect myself.

ELIZABETH

I pause outside Father's workroom when I see Benjamin. He sits on the floor, bent over, head in his hands. He looks like a man at the end of his rope, and my heart aches for him. As Ambrose said, he's a fine hunter.

More importantly, he's a fine man. I desperately hope I have more than twenty-eight days left with him.

I walk in, shuffling my feet just a little so he'll know I'm behind him. He sits up immediately, clearing his throat.

"What are you doing?" I sit on the floor next to him.

He sighs. "I'm looking for a red book."

I quickly scan the bookcase's contents, but I don't have any more luck than he did.

"What's in it?" I ask.

"Your father's recipe for the sister serums."

I figured as much.

"I have his journal," I say. "I can't make sense of his notes, but I think it contains the original recipe. Maybe..."

But I don't know how to finish the sentence. Even if we can decipher it, what good will it do us if we can't get the ingredients?

Standing, I study the blue liquid simmering on the workbench. Benjamin joins me a few seconds later.

"What is it?" he asks.

“I believe it’s Father’s new antiserum he’s been testing.”

“What’s an antiserum?”

“He said it’s an antidote, except it prevents future infection as well. It also doesn’t create the compelling serum as a byproduct of its creation.”

I feel Benjamin staring at me.

“It’s not ready yet.” I stare at the bubbles as they break the surface of the liquid.

After a few moments, I turn back to the bookcase, scanning the titles one by one.

“If I die, you swear I won’t become a monster?” I ask, unable to look at him.

“You’re not going to die,” he vows, his voice rough. “Your father is going to be fine.”

“Humor me, Benjamin. If I succumb to the infection, what then?”

He’s rigid beside me, but he answers, “You’ll be gone. Passed. The shadow spirit and the human cannot share a body. Before it can claim you, you’ll have left it. You won’t become a vampire.”

I nod, my eyes stinging. “You won’t let my abandoned body hurt anyone, will you?”

“I won’t let you die, Elizabeth,” he says harshly. “I swear I will go to Saranica myself and uncover the secrets of the original serum before I let you fall to this.”

I turn to the hunter, knowing he means the words even if they’re impossible. His eyes glisten with determination and emotion, his lips twisted in a tight frown. I press my hand to his cheek, running my thumb over the stubble that now covers his jaw. “I love you.”

He closes his eyes, broken.

I lean forward, kissing him softly. “And I don’t think you’ll have to go to Saranica.”

Benjamin opens his eyes.

“I might have found it,” I whisper.

“What?”

I pull a brown book off the shelf and tap the title. *Red Death: Vampire Attacks Throughout the Years*.

Benjamin takes the book, quickly thumbing through the pages. He pauses, his eyes scanning the text on a page toward the middle of the book. Written in the margin is a recipe. A relieved smile passes over the hunter’s face, and he presses his forehead to the pages of the book. “Weeping indigo and poison hemlock.”

I take the book from him, reading the title. “Skin lesions.”

I recognize the notes, the steps, though most of them were scratched out the first time I read it. I laugh to myself, feeling like I’m going to cry.

“Just as I suspected, the journal contained his original recipe,” I say. “But this one is a little different.”

“These are the instructions for the updated sister serums.” Benjamin exhales long and slow. Even though he sounds exhausted, hope now brightens his face. He takes my hand. “You’ll have the antivenom before your twenty-eighth day, I swear. Even if I have to become an alchemist myself.”

WITH THE BOOK tucked safely under my arm, we step into the courtyard once more. Greg waits, back for his next set of passengers.

Still a little scared of him, I walk forward until I stand next to his massive head. “Thank you for everything you’ve done.”

He watches me, his golden eyes alert and knowing.

“Place your hand against his scales if you want to invite him to talk to you,” Benjamin says. “He needs the physical connection the first few times.”

Nervous, I do as instructed. Greg's scales are cool to the touch and smooth, like the inside of a shell. He's majestic and massive, and I cannot believe I'm standing this close to him.

"Say something, Greg," Benjamin commands.

"Am I a parrot?" a deep, rumbling voice demands.

I leap back, letting out a peep of surprise, and then I laugh. "I heard him."

"I vanquished your enemies," the dragon says in my head. *"And I have earned my cow."*

"Your cow?" I glance at Benjamin, and the hunter rolls his eyes. Smiling, I turn back to the dragon. "You've most certainly earned a cow."

"Climb on my back," Greg says. *"I'll take you to the boat."*

It takes a bit of work to get seated, but soon Benjamin and I are in place.

"Don't drop the book," Benjamin warns, holding on to me as tightly as I hold on to the book.

"I won't," I promise.

And then Greg lifts us into the air. I look down as we rise above the manor, hoping I never see the cursed island again.

ELIZABETH

The infirmary room is silent. I stand at the window, looking down on the courtyard below. The sun will rise soon.

Catriona is in her garden, gathering seeds from the spent flowers. A few other hunters go about their tasks as well, but it's still early, and the guildhall is quiet.

A cool breeze comes in through the cracked window and closed drapes, the fresh air welcome in the stuffy room. After several moments, I pull the window shut, latch it, and then close the drapes.

I sit in a chair at the foot of Father's bed, waiting for him to wake. The guild's doctor diagnosed him with a concussion and prescribed a quiet room and rest. It's been well over twenty-four hours, and the doctor said it's safe to let him sleep. But I don't want him to wake alone, so I came down early.

There's so much we need to talk about. So many questions I need to ask.

Not all of them will be pleasant. And I don't want to demand answers too soon, not when he needs rest to heal.

Absently, I lift my hand to the bandaged wound on my neck, wincing when I remember it's there. It's starting to itch, the skin healing even as the spirit slowly kills me.

It doesn't hurt, but I can feel it. I'm tired, but I can't sleep. My skin is pale, and I've been running a slight fever. I've almost injected myself with Father's experimental antiserum several times already.

But I have time. Twenty-three more days, to be exact. There's no reason to rush, not yet.

Father stirs a little, and I look toward the bed.

"Elizabeth?" he asks, his voice groggy.

"I'm here." I rise immediately, going to the head of the bed and sitting in the chair there.

He slowly sits up, looking toward the nightstand.

I hand him the glass of water that sits there. "How are you feeling?"

"My head still hurts," he says.

"The doctor said it would," I remind him, worried.

He inhales slowly, wincing when he accidentally nods. "I know, but it's difficult to be patient when you're in the bed."

I smile, taking the empty glass and returning it to the nightstand.

"Elizabeth." He studies me. "Open the window so I can see your face."

"Won't it bother you?"

"I'll be all right," he assures me. "Go on."

I do as he asks and then return to the chair. It hurts a little to look at him. I'm so grateful he's alive, but I'm upset as well. I've battled my anger since we've returned to Valette, weighing the situation. Sometimes, I feel the emotion is justified.

I grieved for him for over a year.

"Are you angry with me?" he asks, knowing me too well. He always has.

We're close, he and I. We have been since Mother passed away. He was an excellent father—caring, empathetic, stern when he needed to be, and always loving.

And because I want to be close again, I'm going to tell him the truth. "I can't understand why you agreed to Julian's terms,

knowing how your disappearance must have gutted me. Knowing I must have assumed you were dead.”

Grief shadows his face, and he closes his eyes.

“This isn’t the time,” I say. “It’s too soon, and you’re still healing.”

“The doctor has performed the cognitive testing, and I’m fine now,” he says. “And we need to talk about this before the chasm between us grows any wider.”

I nod, waiting.

“I was dying.” He drops his eyes to the white sheets. “And all I could think was I didn’t want to leave you alone. I was running out of time, and Julian’s offer was fresh in my mind. So I went to him, not knowing how long this process was going to take. I thought if I dedicated myself to the task, I could solve the puzzle quickly—like I did in Saranica. But the missing component baffled me. I didn’t know how to replicate it. All other ingredients that were impervious to the spirit were highly toxic to humans.”

I listen, letting him ramble a little. He’s always been like that, his mind following rabbit trails just like he is now. It’s reassuring in a way.

“And then I discovered it,” he says, looking up. “But I couldn’t in good conscience make the sister serums, not knowing how Julian was using them. So I attempted to make an antidote myself, not using the formula I obtained in Saranica as a base—I started from scratch. But Julian didn’t want that, as you’re well aware. Eventually, he lost his patience.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I ask. “Why didn’t you try to sneak me a message letting me know you were alive? You wouldn’t have had to tell me your location. A vague handwritten note would have been enough.”

“I was on an island, Elizabeth,” Father says gently. “I had no way to send a letter. I was completely at Julian’s mercy—and worse, I walked into it willingly. I didn’t know what to do except work harder.”

I know he's right. If I couldn't have asked Greg for help, I would have been in a bad place too.

"Did you know he sent his vampires to attack you?" I ask him.

"Not until the deal had been made," he said. "Though if I'm honest, I will admit I suspected it."

"Why didn't you go to Arthur instead?"

"He hasn't had antivenom for years."

He did, though. That one bottle. All of this could have been avoided, and just thinking about it hurts my heart.

"I'm so glad you're all right," I say. "But I don't think I want to talk about it anymore."

"Do you forgive me?" he asks quietly.

"No," I whisper. "I can't yet, but I will. I promise I will. Just give me a little more time."

He takes my hand. "That's fair and honest."

"I love you," I say, blinking quickly.

"I love you more." He pats my hand. "And I'm going to make the sister serums and save you."

I sniff and look up at him. Dropping my voice, I ask, "But then there will be more compulsion serum in the world."

"I'll destroy it," he vows. "And I'll never make it again."

"After this is over, I want you to keep working on the antiserum. Promise me you will."

"I cannot do that in Oakenridge," he says gently.

"I know. We'll stay in Valette."

He studies me. "Are you going to marry the guild's director?"

"His name is Benjamin." I swallow, feeling myself smile. "And I am."

"He seems like a nice man." Father returns my smile. "And you plan to remain in the city?"

“I do.” I feel like a traitor, but I’m at peace with my decision.

“Then I will gladly remain here and work on the antiserum.”

“Would Mother be sad?” I ask, swallowing hard. “She loved the house.”

“Your mother would want us to be together. And we’ll keep the house. We’ll call it our summer home—that’s very current, isn’t it?”

I smile. “I believe so.”

“Then it’s settled.”

The doctor knocks on the door and then pokes his head inside. “How are you feeling today, Colonel Delane?”

“Better,” he says. “Much better.”

BENJAMIN

Elizabeth sits in Arthur's study in the Cunningham's townhome, holding a piece of gauze to the inside of her wrist like Colonel Delane instructed. Autumn sunlight shines in through the window, but I'm frozen—too afraid of what the blood test will reveal to relax. I stand behind her chair, my hand on the back, waiting for the colonel to return.

Both of us are too nervous to talk.

In a few minutes, we'll know if the antivenom was successful. Colonel Delane administered it two days ago. That's how long he said it takes to work. Two days.

Elizabeth, Sterling, and the colonel only have five left.

If this didn't work, we're going to have to move to the experimental antiserum, and none of us are eager to use Elizabeth as a test subject.

The colonel is in the basement workshop Arthur created for him when they started their experiments years ago. It's where he'll continue his testing for the new antiserum.

He's already destroyed the compulsion serum that he had no choice but to create while making the antivenom, along with the supply we found in Julian's manor.

While searching for the compulsion serum, we discovered Julian was out of antivenom, which was apparently the reason he was so desperate. He died six days ago, succumbing to the infection before the colonel could finish this batch. We cremated his body and held his funeral. For his mother's sake,

we didn't disclose his crimes. He paid for them with his death, and it didn't seem necessary to taint the family's name.

Sterling is now head of House Renward.

The colonel returns to the room, sitting at his desk with a heavy sigh. Other than suffering from frequent headaches, he made a full recovery from his concussion—which is a relief because I wasn't sure I could become an alchemist in just four weeks. Though I would have killed myself trying.

“The antivenom worked.” He smiles. “Your blood is clean, Elizabeth.”

I bend at the waist, bringing my hands to my face. Relief washes over me in great waves.

“Send in Sterling,” the colonel says. “I'll run his test next.”

The others wait in the sitting room—Arthur and his wife, Catriona, Felix, Atticus, Ambrose, Sterling, Tansy, and Gretchen.

They watch us enter with worried, hopeful expressions.

“I'm cured,” Elizabeth says, earning a loud cheer from the small crowd.

Tansy leaps from the couch, hugging Elizabeth tightly as she sobs. “I'm so relieved.”

She's decided to remain in Valette, taking a position in the guildhall kitchen. I believe Elizabeth is happy she's staying close.

Gretchen joins the hug, not quite understanding what the fuss is about, but wanting to be involved.

Elizabeth bends over, picking the girl up. Her smile is radiant, and it lights my world.

“Are we going to visit Greg now?” Gretchen asks, as she has every day since her last visit. The two have grown quite fond of each other.

“Tomorrow,” Elizabeth promises. She then sets the girl down and turns toward Sterling. “Father says it's your turn.”

He stands, looking ill.

Elizabeth touches his arm as he passes. “If it worked for me, it worked for you.”

His gaze moves to his daughter. After several seconds, he nods and goes into the hall.

“We have much to celebrate,” Arthur says heartily. “But first, I believe it’s time to review your first solo job, Benjamin.”

“Right now?” I glance at Atticus’s smirking face, not looking forward to this.

“There’s no time like the present,” Arthur says. “When I tallied up the cost of the train tickets, the accommodations, the lost horses, the clothing, the wagon ride, the chartered boat, compensation necessary for the additional hunters, and the missing kit, you spent five thousand, seventy-three kevlings.”

I close my eyes, refusing to groan out loud. They’re never going to let me live this down.

“And how much did the job make?” Atticus asks eagerly.

“Zero kevlings,” Arthur answers with an obnoxious smile. “But Benjamin reused several crossbow bolts, which certainly must make up for the loss.”

“I’ll pay it,” I say wryly. “All of it.”

“No need. I’m happy to take care of this one.” Arthur chuckles. “We will need to fill out some paperwork, of course.”

“Let’s not forget how invaluable my father’s antiserum will be once he’s finished testing it,” Elizabeth says. “Surely that must count for something?”

Arthur laughs. “Knowing your father, he’ll charge us an arm and a leg for it.”

“I’m sure he’ll be willing to negotiate after Benjamin and I marry,” Elizabeth says.

No one looks particularly surprised by her announcement.

“Fraternizing with the client,” Atticus says eagerly to Arthur. “Add that to Benjamin’s list of transgressions.”

Catriona, however, looks concerned. “If you marry, where will you live?”

“Elizabeth and I have decided to stay in Valette so I may remain with GHOST,” I say. “Her father needs access to the city’s resources, so he’ll remain close as well.”

“What about Oakenridge?” Sterling asks, returning to the room with the colonel.

“Your tests?” Elizabeth asks them.

“Both clean,” the colonel announces, met with more cheers.

Somehow, we all made it through this.

“I plan to keep the house,” the colonel answers Sterling. “We’ll use it for holidays and whatnot, until a time comes when I wish to retire to it once more.”

“Hopefully by then, people will feel comfortable enough to return home,” Elizabeth adds, her voice a little sad. “There are so many families I don’t know how to contact.”

“It’ll be all right,” the colonel assures his daughter. “News will travel.”

“So tell us, Benjamin,” Lady Cunningham says. “Has the hunt made you eager to return to the field? Do you think you’ll take more jobs?”

“Not at all. I will happily live at my desk for the foreseeable future—once I find it underneath Catriona’s mess.”

“I think you mean you’ll live at your desk until Arthur decides you’ve lost touch with reality again and kicks you out the door,” Atticus says smugly. “Maybe next time, you can finish the job on your own.”

I smile at the hunter, promising myself I’ll assign him to a bog monster next.

We talk a while longer, and then Elizabeth and I break away from the group, leaving the Cunningham's townhome to get some fresh air.

We hold hands, happily proclaiming our engagement to any and all that we happen to pass. Elizabeth sighs as she looks at the trees. They're almost bare now. Soon, we'll have the first snow, and after that, the holiday season will begin.

"I'm always sad to see the last of the leaves fall," Elizabeth says wistfully. "But this year, it doesn't seem so bad. I know I'll see it again next year. Almost losing it makes you appreciate it even more."

I turn to face her. "Imagine how much I appreciate you."

She interlaces our fingers together, and then, after a quick glance down the street to confirm we're alone, she tilts her face up for a kiss. Our lips meet, promising each other many happy years.

"Thank you for everything you did, Benjamin." She smiles up at me. "I cannot tell you how grateful I am."

I brush my hand over her cheek, content. "It was a pleasure breaking all my rules for you."

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We plan to release a book every September until the series is complete. Atticus, Ambrose, and Sterling all have stories in the works! We'll also meet a few more hunters along the way.

If you like fun extras, check out the [soundtracks](#) page on our website. Benjamin and Elizabeth's song is up now, and we'll add more as we go. I'm sure we'll write a few bonus stories/scenes to send out to our newsletter subscribers as well.

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Wishing you the best,

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USA Today bestselling author Shari L. Tapscott writes romantic fantasy adventure and contemporary romance. When she's not writing or reading, she enjoys gardening, making soap, and pretending she can sing. She loves white chocolate mochas, furry animals, spending time with her family, and characters who refuse to behave.

Jake Andrews spent the last fifteen years driving a truck, and now he works full-time as Shari's content editor. (He prefers to be called her sidekick.) He is currently collaborating with her on *Crown and Crest*, the first series they've written as a husband/wife team. He enjoys video gaming, camping, hiking, and four-wheeling.

Tapscott and Andrews live in western Colorado with their son, daughter, and several extremely spoiled pets.

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