


OBSIDIAN QUEEN BOOK THREE



KNIGHTS  
OF  
OBSIDIAN

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
SHARI L. TAPSCOTT

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BOOK THREE

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# ALSO BY SHARI L. TAPSCOTT

## **Obsidian Queen**

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Knights of Obsidian

Obsidian Queen, Book Three

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# FACTIONS

## **Urocyon**

The Foxes

Masters of Stealth and Manipulation

## **Lupus**

The Wolves

Leaders

## **Gryphus**

The Griffons

Masters of Magical Intuition & Insight

## **Lepus**

The Rabbits

Animal Whisperers

## **Draconem**

The Dragons

Masters of the Elements

**Cervidae**

The Deer

Healers

**Passeridae**

The Sparrows

Jack of all Trades, Master of None

**Taurus**

The Bulls

Gifted with Great Strength

**Canis**

The Hounds

Trackers

**Cristatus**

The Peacocks

Gifted with Beauty and Grace

**Sciuridae**

The Squirrels

Tinkers and Craftsmen

**Rhopalocera**

The Butterflies

Masters of Light and Illusion

**Chamaeleonidae**

The Chameleons

Shifters

**Strigiformes**

The Owls



Alchemists

**Struthio**

The Ostriches

Ungifted

**Equus**

The War Horses

Metalsmiths and Enchanters

**Cathartes**

The Vultures

Thieves of Magic

# 1

IT'S all fun and games until your evil minions burn down the forest.

“We need to move!” Rafe drags me forward, away from the flame-engulfed mansion, his focus on Gray...or more specifically, on Gray's drawn dagger.

“Knowing what she is, how can you protect her?” Gray demands, his eyes flashing. As our team leader, it's his job to get us out of here unscathed. Except right now, he wants me very scathed. And by scathed, I mean dead.

As I glance between him and the fiery mansion behind us, I realize Gray is not just a man on a mission to destroy the Obsidian Queen—the fabled dark ruler who is expected to open the barred thresholds to our land of Aparia and take over the human world (AKA *me*)—he looks like a man betrayed. He stares at me like *I'm* the one holding the dagger—and the blade might as well be lodged firmly in his chest.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” Jonathan snarls at Gray. “The humans are going to arrive any minute, and the last thing we need is to be caught in the middle of this. Come *on*.”

Still, Gray doesn’t move. He just stands there, staring at me. The only thing keeping me alive is the fact that the point of Jonathan’s dagger is positioned at Gray’s back.

“We don’t have time for this.” Eric cradles my oddly calm hairless cat in the crook of his arm. Most unexpectedly, he hands me the cat and then, without hesitation or second thought, cracks the back of his fisted hand against Gray’s head. And just like in the movies, Gray stumbles forward, falling to his knees before his eyes roll into the back of his head.

“Eric!” I breathe, horrified.

The usually docile, six-foot-four Viking lookalike takes my horror in stride. “He’s fine—ancient Knights’ Guild technique. Very technical.”

He then crosses back to Gray and, with Jonathan’s help, hefts the Wolf off the ground.

Jonathan swears when he turns toward the garages and sees the fire has not only jumped from the mansion to the nearby trees, but also to the building that’s holding what *used* to be an impressive variety of rich boy toys.

“The Porsche,” Eric groans.

Well, that does it. We’re all dead. We might as well walk right into those flames because Gray’s boss, the man who loaned us the car for the long weekend, is going to kill us slowly when we return to Avon.

“My car is this way,” Rafe says, not even bothering to take a moment of silence to observe the loss of the hundred-thousand-dollar crossover. “Hurry up.”

I follow, half in a daze, the tattered hem of my black satin ballgown brushing the ground with each hasty step I take. I keep my eyes off the carnage—the carnage my shadow creatures created. This is all my fault.

*Mine.*

Granted, I never asked for this. I didn't even realize I had Obsidian magic until a few months ago—and I certainly didn't invite the beasts to join me here.

But join me they did.

My exhausted, heartsick brain tries to put the pieces together. Not even an hour ago, I was dancing with Jonathan. We were keeping an eye out for a wily Heron that we believed was seducing human men here in this luxurious mansion, killing them after, and then hiding their bodies somewhere in the woods.

But instead, we ended up finding a deranged pixie who, earlier this summer, decided it would be fun to play an elaborate game of cat and mouse with me. Not only did Trent orchestrate the entire charade to coax our team here, but he also posed as an undercover cop and aided my uninvited guests in wreaking death and destruction.

And that reminds me.

“Did you see Jenna?” I stop, yanking out of Rafe's grasp as I look back toward the mansion. Charles shifts, testing my hold on him, not as content with me as he was with Eric. There's no sign of the Heron, of course. What did I expect? It's not like the nefarious weather-wielder is going to pop up and yell “present!” just because I called her name.

I turn to Rafe. “Is she...” My eyes flutter to the numerous bodies littering the ground, and my stomach churns.

Rafe takes my arm again, tugging me forward. “No, I haven't seen her.”

I crane my head back to look at Jonathan and Eric as Rafe pulls me forward. “Did either of you see Jenna?”

Not looking where I'm going, I trip over a rock. Before I can fall on my nose, taking my cat down with me, Rafe scoops me into his arms. My heart freezes as I remember the last time I was in this position—but it wasn't with Rafe. It was Jonathan.

*No.*

Don't think about it, not yet. Not until we're away.

Rafe moves forward, a panther in the night, heading toward the staff parking, which is farther from the mansion than the fiery garage. Unable to help myself, I glance over my knight's shoulder.

Jonathan stares at the ground, grunting as he and Eric pull Gray's two hundred pounds of dead weight.

I whip my head forward, focusing on the sharp bite of my heels. They weren't designed for nights like tonight. They were meant for slow dancing in the dark, for leisurely moonlit strolls after dinner, for kissing in the shadows.

My eyes begin to sting, but I blink several times and take a deep breath. I'll cry later—tonight when I close my eyes and too many of the recently deceased humans stare back at me.

We make it to Rafe's car, and he unceremoniously drops me to my feet and yanks the back door open. I slide in, tugging at my skirt and the fifty billion layers of stiff tulle netting, trying to compress the fabric enough to get the door closed. Irritated, Charles leaps to the front passenger seat.

Rafe is just shutting me in when I begin to tremble. I'm still high on adrenaline and fear, but the night's horrific events are starting to sink in.

The other back door opens, and Eric says to Jonathan, "Get in. You pull while I shove."

The Griffon slides into the middle, pressing next to me as he turns and guides Gray into the vehicle. Gray's head lolls to the side, but no one seems to care about the crick he's going to have when he wakes.

My eyes move from Gray to Jonathan. His collar is ripped. So is his jacket. Thankfully, he appears to be nothing more than a little worse for wear.

Rafe's already pulling the car into drive when Eric launches into the front passenger seat and slams his door. And just like that, we're on the road, heading down the streetlight-

lit lane, dust flying behind us in the taillights as we scream for the main road.

*Please hurry*, I think to myself. The last thing we need is to meet a police car before we're clear. I begin to panic, wondering what the authorities will do when they find the dead shadow creatures. True, the human count is far higher, but my team is covered in slick, black blood for a reason—we weren't the only ones with casualties this evening.

Jonathan shifts next to me, trying to give me room. "Sorry," he murmurs, realizing his elbow is jabbed into my side.

I hadn't noticed, but I nod, unable to look at him.

"You okay?" he asks softly, keeping his voice low, talking only to me.

*Am I okay?*

"I'm cold," I mutter, unable to look at him.

The knight leans forward and tugs off his jacket, nearly smacking me in the shoulder with his elbow in the process.

"Lean forward," he commands once it's free.

Wordlessly, I do as he says. He drapes the material over my bare shoulders, wrapping me in the subtle scent of his cologne. Just the smell ties my stomach in knots. Then, as if it's the most natural thing in the world, he wraps an arm around my back and rubs his hand over my arm, trying to warm me.

Up and down it goes...up and down.

"*Stop*," Rafe says through clenched teeth, taking us all by surprise.

Jonathan freezes, his hand still on my arm.

"I'm trying to get us out of here, and I need you to keep your hands to yourself." Rafe sounds irritated, frustrated, and confused all at once, and that terrifies me. My knight doesn't do rattled.

Slowly, Jonathan removes his hand.

Eric looks into the back, a questioning frown on his face. He doesn't know that Rafe and I linked our magic, doesn't understand exactly what happened back at the mansion. What will he say when he finds out?

I can't meet either of the knights' eyes, so I don't. I stare at the seat in front of me while slowly clenching and unclenching my hands on the skirt of my dress. From the corner of my eye, I see Eric rubbing his face, his eyes narrowed in thought, but I pretend I don't notice.

Finally, we pull onto the main road, and the mad dash is over.

"Speed up a bit," Eric says to Rafe.

"I'm going the speed limit."

"You're going *exactly* the speed limit—who does that?"

Rafe flashes him a look, basically asking the Bunny if *he* wants to drive, but bumps the accelerator anyway.

We're a good thirty seconds past the turnoff for the mansion's drive when I hear the high wail of a siren. I lean toward Jonathan, looking out the front window. Sure enough, blue and red lights illuminate the road ahead, barely visible through the trees. It's a lone police car, racing through the night.

I grit my teeth, waiting for it to pass, irrationally worrying that we're going to be arrested right here, right now. But the officer flies past us, not even slowing when he goes by. I slowly turn to look out the rear window, mentally preparing myself, but I still gasp when I see the high flames dancing above the forest.

There are more sirens now—an ambulance followed by a fire truck followed by *another* ambulance. I watch the second ambulance pass, and an invisible hand squeezes my chest. The paramedics won't be rushing anyone to the hospital tonight.

"Do you have your phone?" Rafe asks Eric quietly, his tone as somber as I feel.

"Yeah."

“See if you can book us a room in Glenwood.”

Eric pulls up the internet, and the bright screen illuminates his face. “Why not drive home? It’s only a few more hours.”

Rafe glances at the still-unconscious Wolf next to Jonathan. “We can’t take Gray back, not yet. He’s dangerous.”

Eric frowns as he thinks it over but continues his search without question.

“Wait.” I rub my face, trying to think straight even though my brain is beyond foggy. “So what are you going to do? Lock Gray in a hotel room with us until we can convince him not to kill me?”

“Pretty much.”

“So we’re going to hold him *hostage*?”

Rafe meets my eyes in the rearview mirror. He waits for a beat before he repeats, “Pretty much.”



APPARENTLY, there's a marathon tomorrow, so most of the hotels are booked up. That leaves us with the option of choosing an expensive suite in a historic hotel in the middle of downtown or a postage-stamp-sized room in a cheap motel on the outskirts of town.

Which one do you think my team chose?

I sit inside the car, peering through the windows of the motel lobby, watching Rafe and Eric request our room. Glenwood Springs is a tourist town, so it's not like the area is terrible, but we're surrounded by minivans and sport utility wagons. Half of them boast stickers that proclaim things like: "My child is an honor student at..." Insert whatever school you like.

A hippie bus, also covered in stickers (but a different variety than the honor student type), pulls in next to us. When the dreadlocked man emerges, a cloud of smoke billows out

with him. I've never been so grateful for a closed window in my life.

I watch him amble after his buddy to the lobby entrance, yanking up his fair trade, organic hemp-spun pants and tossing back a scarf that was likely beaded by impoverished women in Indonesia. When he reaches the door, he throws an aluminum tea can in a wastebasket, forgoing the recycling bin sitting next to it, and pockets his thousand-dollar phone.

There was a time I would point out the irony to Jonathan, and we'd laugh. Oddly enough, that time was this morning. Oh, how quickly things change.

Jonathan shifts next to me. I watch him, but I try to be discrete about it. Gray sits on the Griffon's right side, slouched down in his seat, eyes closed, with his head back against the headrest.

He woke not long after we got onto the road, and let's just say he wasn't pleased with Eric's method of getting him into Rafe's car. Nor with the fact he's cuffed.

Now the three of us sit here in silence, with nothing but the orange glow of the parking lot lights shining in the dark car for ambiance.

Instead of dwelling on the death and destruction of the night, my addled brain decides to focus on the fact that I've kissed not one, but two of the men in the car. So basically, I've kissed one-hundred percent of the guys in the car.

Now one wants to kill me, and the other...well, I don't know where we stand.

I glance at Jonathan again, but he's staring out the front window, one hand resting on the dagger in his lap. It's a warning for Gray, a promise that he'll use the blade if he must. Which I believe means Jonathan truly cares about me—even though we can't be together because I had to link my magic with Rafe's so that I could send the shadow creatures back to the dark depths from which they came. Wherever that might be.

Feeling my gaze, Jonathan glances over. He's meticulous about his thick, dark hair, likely using more products than I even own, but it's a wreck tonight. He wears it short, but not too short. It's long enough you can delve your fingers through it—long enough to be messy, like it is now.

A few days ago, I would have teased him that messy looks good on him, and he would have told me I was welcome to make it messier. And then we would have laughed because we were just friends, and friends don't actually make out. They *certainly* don't test boundaries when they're working undercover, posing as husband and wife.

And because they don't do either of those things, they don't sit in a cold car in the parking lot of a motel, barely speaking. Since he and I are doing just that, I think it's obvious we took a wrong turn somewhere.

“Are you warm enough?” he asks, making me jump. He says the words quietly, but he might as well yell them.

I nod and look back at the driver's seat ahead of me. Jonathan, too, turns to the front, and the car is silent once more.

Rafe and Eric emerge from the office a few minutes later. They're both covered in the shadow creatures' blood, making it appear as though we had car trouble and they've been under a hood all evening.

Rafe carries a white envelope containing our room card. He looks as sick over the night as I feel, and when he takes the driver's seat, he lets out a weary sigh that I feel all the way to my bones.

Eric opens the passenger door and scoops Charles into his arms. As soon as the knight sits, he cranks up the heat. “It's freezing in here.”

Rafe backs out of the space, leaving the hippie van behind, and drives slowly through the parking area, stopping in front of our room. The motel is just a single level building, shaped like an “L,” and all the rooms are positioned one right after another.

The crooked brass “22” on the door is not a welcoming sight, but I swing my door open, more than ready to be out of the cramped car.

“I don’t suppose you got me a room of my own?” I ask Rafe as I press my palms to my lower back and stretch.

The knight jiggles the car keys in his hand, his dark blue eyes frowning though his expression is perfectly neutral. That impassive stare is a talent of his, but his eyes always give him away.

“I think it’s best if we’re all together right now,” he says.

I nod, figuring as much, and walk toward the door only to be yanked to a stop. Startled, I turn back to the car and realize I shut my skirt in the door. I glance up, hoping no one noticed—not that they’d tease me now anyway. But Eric and Jonathan are obviously pulling Gray from the other side of the car.

The knight growls as they tug him toward the room, fighting them every step of the way. Once the men are clear of the car, I go around the front and collect Charles from Eric’s seat.

I don’t have a litter box for him. I don’t have a water bowl or kitty toys. I also don’t have a dress that isn’t a voluminous black taffeta ball gown that makes me look like I stepped off the Hollywood set of a gothic vampire movie.

Rafe ushers us inside the room, holding the door open. Once we’re in, he sets the lock and draws the curtains. I look around, too numb to give the faded carpet or yellowing linoleum flooring in the bathroom more than a fleeting wrinkle of my nose. The blue and gold comforters on the matching queen-sized beds appear to be circa 1980, and the mirror is framed in scrolling plastic that was manufactured to look like brass.

It’s as good a place as any, I suppose.

I set Charles on the bed closest to the wall. He hunches down, flicking his tail back and forth as he cautiously sniffs the air, not sure he approves of our new digs.

As the cat slowly pads around the bed, I pull the remaining pins from my disheveled hair—most were lost long ago anyway—and toss them onto the dresser. “I need to run to the store, pick up some cat stuff for Charles,” I say, speaking to no one in particular. Then I glance at my wrinkled dress. “Maybe buy something else to wear.”

I look at the men when no one says anything. Rafe stands by the door, appearing torn. “Jonathan,” he says, his voice tight.

The Griffon looks over, more than a little wary.

“Take my car.” Rafe tosses Jonathan the keys, and out of reflex, Jonathan catches them.

At this point, only Jonathan, Rafe, and I know what transpired in the manor before Rafe and I stopped the destruction, but Gray and Eric are figuring out *something* happened, especially after Rafe’s reaction to Jonathan in the car.

The two knight marshals look between Rafe and Jonathan, trying to figure out what exactly is going on. Usually, Jonathan is our mediator, our peacemaker. He was the one who called Rafe when things fell apart in Tahoe, and he’s been soothing ruffled feathers ever since. But now there’s some serious tension between him and my knight.

Slowly, Gray turns his glare on me. Because, of course, this too must be my fault. Let’s just add it to the list.

There’s nothing quite like being on the wrong end of a noble Wolf’s glare. My jaw trembles, but I look away, pretending it doesn’t bother me that he thinks I’m the vilest creature in this world or any other.

“Watch him,” Rafe says to Eric, nodding toward Gray. “I’ll be right back.”

My knight then opens the door and jerks his head, silently telling Jonathan and me to step onto the concrete porch. It doesn’t slip my notice that with Gray in handcuffs, Rafe easily slides back into his previous role as team leader. I pass him,

meeting his eyes, wishing he'd take me aside and tell me what he's thinking. But that's not Rafe's style.

Interestingly enough, our magic no longer pulls us together; it's no longer desperate to connect. Now it's lazy, warm—simply content to be close. That, if nothing else, is a relief.

Jonathan immediately walks to the driver's door and gets in.

“Don't be gone too long,” Rafe says, dropping his voice. “Make sure Jonathan keeps his phone on.”

“Rafe—”

“Later. All of it later. For now, we need to focus on convincing Gray you're not trying to take over the world.”

I roll my eyes. He makes it sound like I'm the villainous lab rat in an old nineties cartoon.

The Fox then pulls his wallet out of his back pocket and begins thumbing through bills. “Here,” he says, shoving a wad at me. “You don't have your purse.”

Oh, right. It, my phone, and all my things were lost in the fire.

“Thanks,” I murmur. “I'll pay you back.”

“We're going to need Gray on our side,” Rafe continues, ignoring me, “especially if you're serious about opening the thresholds. So it's probably best that you're leaving for a while—giving him some space.”

Rafe's words sting, but I nod. I did drop a rather large bombshell on the team when I said I was going to open the thresholds to Aparia, a world parallel to earth but rich with magic. That's where our people are from. A hundred years ago, my distant grandmother, her knight, and a group of power-hungry Aparians called the Entitled decided they wanted to add North America to their growing empire. Fighting commenced, things got ugly, and Jonathan's great, great—lots of greats—grandfather destroyed the thresholds, locking most of the evil in Aparia. Unfortunately, quite a bit of

it had already slipped through. And now I intend to send it back where it belongs.

But don't misunderstand—I don't intend to keep the thresholds open. We're going to crack them long enough I can summon the shadow creatures, send them through, and then close them again. Problem solved.

I just need to figure out how to go about it.

“And you and Jonathan need to talk while you're out,” Rafe continues, oblivious to the way my mind has wandered. “We can't have the two of you tiptoeing around each other for the foreseeable future.”

“What do you want me to tell him?” I say, dropping my voice to a whisper.

“Why don't you tell him the truth?”

Fat chance of that.

I glance at Jonathan. He's in the driver's seat, looking at his phone, waiting for me. Shaking my head, I move closer to Rafe. “Something went wrong when we linked.”

“What do you mean?”

My throat begins to close, and I blink quickly. Just before we joined our magic, Rafe told me how he felt about me. The last thing I want to do is hurt him, but he needs to know. “I still *like* him.”

A grim smile crosses my knight's face. “I know—I can feel it.”

I stare at him. “You can...*feel* it?”

“And I'm nearly certain you can feel me too.”

I stare at him, slightly panicked.

“I'm hoping distance will help. Get away from here for a bit—let's see what happens.”

“Okay,” I whisper.

“Be careful,” he says just before he slips back inside the room.

Bunching my skirt in my hand, I open the passenger door and get into the car. Jonathan's already turned on the heat, and hot air blows from both the dash vents and the floor. I'm still in his tuxedo jacket. It's warm enough in here; I could give it back. I'm not going to, but I could.

Without a word, Jonathan pulls out of the parking lot and drives through town, over the new bridge that passes the hot springs pool, and hits the interstate, heading toward the west end where there's a strip mall and several restaurants.

The farther we drive from the motel, the easier it is to breathe, and I realize Rafe might be right. This isn't completely my melancholy hanging over me, though I'm certainly heartsick over the evening's events—it's my knight's. And it's all because we linked. Rafe swore he'd never let it happen, and now he's hating life.

"How are you doing over there?" Jonathan asks when he can take the silence no longer.

"Well..." I let out a slow breath. "My shadow creatures killed an entire mansion full of people. Gray wants to kill *me*. Rafe is beating himself up because we linked, and Jenna is still out there somewhere."

Jonathan glances over, not quite smiling. "Don't forget about Trent."

I growl, wishing he hadn't reminded me. "And then there's *Trent*."

I have no idea if the pixie got away before the fire consumed the mansion. I left him unconscious in a closet, maybe with a broken nose. There's no way to know.

Jonathan stares straight ahead, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel. "And what about us?"

The moment of truth.

It would be easy to admit I still want him just as much as before, to fall into his arms and take every ounce of comfort he's willing to offer.



But earlier this evening, I told him I'm not safe—that being with me isn't safe. And that was after a little imp attack. Now I have no doubt that getting close to me, as close as I want to get to Jonathan, is dangerous indeed.

I care enough that I don't want to put him in that position, don't want to feel the lung-squeezing terror of nearly losing him again. Last night was too much, but what happened tonight was a whole new level of horrifying.

My chest constricts as I make up my mind. Right now, in the dark, while Jonathan's eyes are on the road, I have the perfect opportunity to tell him what I want him to believe.

To lie.

"I'm sorry, Jonathan," I whisper, my heart beating too quickly.

The knight stiffens but eventually nods as if he expected as much. "Nothing at all?" he asks.

Several moments pass before I work up the courage to answer, "No. Nothing."

# 3

WE REACH OUR TURN, and Jonathan concentrates on driving through the roundabouts. After several minutes, he looks back, giving me an easy smile. “We tried, right?”

“Jonathan—”

“It’s okay, Madeline. We talked about this.”

“Will you hate me if I say I want us to be friends?” My voice begins to wobble, but there’s nothing I can do about it. “Because I really do.”

He pulls into the shopping complex and turns off the car. When he unbuckles, he turns to me and grasps my shoulder, leaning in. “We never stopped being friends. We’re fine.”

If it weren’t for his jacket separating us, I would think he touched me to read my mind—to see if I’m actually telling the truth. But he can’t read me when there’s a barrier of fabric in the way.

“So we’re okay?” I ask, searching his shadowed face.

“Yeah.”

But his tone sounds...off.

“What is it?” I ask too eagerly, perhaps hoping, just a little bit, that he’ll call my bluff. You know—pull me into his arms and kiss me senseless.

That would be all right too.

Stalling, Jonathan shifts back and fusses with his phone. After a long, tense minute, he says, “Do you have feelings for Rafe now? Did the link—”

“No,” I answer immediately, glad I don’t have to lie about that at least. “I don’t feel that way about him.”

“*Even* with the link?”

“Actually, even less than before. It’s like our magic has quieted now that it’s gotten what it wanted.”

“Okay.”

Okay...? What kind of response is that? After a moment, I parrot, “*Okay?*”

His eyes meet mine, and he offers a solemn smile. “Let’s go buy some kitty litter.”

---

WE RETURN to the motel an hour and a half later, both of us carrying several bags. I feel Rafe’s dark mood, but since I’m able to recognize it now, it doesn’t feel as smothering.

When I walk in the door, I see Gray is still in the chair in the corner. The Wolf eyes me, looking slightly less hostile. But that might be wishful thinking on my part.

Eric sits on the end of the bed, watching the television. A banner titled “Breaking News” stretches across the bottom of the screen in red.

“We still haven’t received word from officials about the cause of the Redstone fire,” a female newscaster says as a live video of the mansion comes on the screen. “But we do have

confirmation that several bodies have been located. Currently, the cause of death is unknown. We have a reporter on the scene...”

Eric glances at me. After seeing the stricken look on my face, he casually changes the channel, ending up on something sports-related.

I turn to Rafe. “Can I talk to you?”

He nods and follows me outside.

“Have you made any progress?” I ask as soon as the door shuts behind us.

“Gray’s not keen on talking to me either,” Rafe says. “Which isn’t anything new, but in this case, it might have something to do with the fact that he figured out I’m your knight.”

“Does he know we linked?”

Rafe crosses his arms and nods. “I told them, and I tried to explain why. They’re both still processing the news.”

I run my hands through my hair, wanting to cry or growl or *something*. “Gray saw me send the creatures away. It’s not like I was laughing maniacally as they reaped destruction.”

Rafe steps a smidgen closer, his face softened with something oddly compassionate. “You have to understand, Lexie, at the academy, the Obsidian Queen was painted with a less than flattering picture. She was a figure in black, pure evil. Doom and death and destruction.”

“So many ‘D’ words,” I murmur.

“It’s a lot for him to take in. You’re nothing like any of us expected—even me.”

“You thought I’d have black hair, right?” I joke because if I don’t, I’ll lose it.

My knight smirks. “Something like that.”

“How can I make him see that I’m not *evil*?”

Rafe takes a step back and shakes his head, looking just as frustrated as I feel. “You shouldn’t have to convince him. The idiot has known you for months now. He’s just too stubborn to admit you aren’t what he’s built up in his mind.”

Slowly, I nod. And then I get mad. Rafe’s right—Gray should know. How *dare* he act wounded and betrayed? The man pulled a dagger on me! If anyone has a reason to be hurt, it’s me.

With that thought bouncing around in my very addled brain, I turn on my heel and fling the door open.

“Lexie—” Rafe begins, but I ignore him.

Jonathan looks up when I storm into the room, and Eric even turns from the TV. Gray stares at me, just as he was before, his stormy eyes intense. I stop in front of him, standing at my full height. “Now you listen here—”

“I heard,” he says, his voice as neutral as can be.

That makes me pause. I tilt my head slightly to the side, narrowing my eyes, wondering why he thinks he’s allowed to cut off my tirade. But out of sheer curiosity, I ask, “You heard what?”

“You and Rafe.” He looks toward the ceiling, almost rolling his eyes. “I’m a *Wolf*.”

Oh, right. His particular faction has heightened hearing and all that.

Rafe comes in and shuts the door, looking almost pleased—as if maybe *he* didn’t forget Gray could hear us whispering through the thin motel wall. Setting my hands on my hips, I look back at Gray and purse my lips, trying to figure out how to pick up my rant. I wasn’t *finished*.

“I thought you were my friend,” I finally say, giving up, and just like that, all the fight leaves me. “I thought we were a team.”

The blasted Wolf watches me. Stars above, the man is handsome. He’s all dark hair, trim and toned muscles, and eyes

the color of a winter sea. Why does he have to look so good, sitting there disheveled and angry, handcuffed to the chair?

And let's take a minute to address my own shortcomings. A girl shouldn't be even the tiniest bit attracted to a person who wants her dead. I mean, do I have any self-preservation whatsoever? I'm like Chicken Little, all googly-eyed over the fox, ignoring all his shortcomings, following him blindly into his cave. Except in this scenario, I'm technically the fox. And there wasn't a wolf in that tale, as far as I can remember.

Anyway.

It's not that I want Gray—I don't. Been there, done that, learned my lesson. But still, we have history. And this hurts.

“Do you think this is easy for me? I *want* to believe you, Madeline,” he says solemnly, making me want to smack him. *And since when does he use my name?* “But I can't afford to. Let's say you're telling the truth—despite your magic, you want nothing but sunshine and roses and happily ever afters. But what if you stumble? What if the allure of power and control is too much? You could kill thousands—no, *millions* of people. Not only our people, who have an iota of a chance of defending themselves and their families, but humans, who are completely and utterly helpless.”

“I'm not going to stumble.” I let my hands drop, suddenly exhausted. “Not with you all by my side, supporting me, keeping me strong. Gray, surely you must see that. And you know me well enough to believe me.”

He watches me for a long time. “You said you're going to open the thresholds.”

I admit that might sound rather evil-queenish of me, but he needs to understand my motivation.

“I only want to send the shadow creatures back to Aparia, where they belong. And then Jonathan will close the thresholds once more.”

I take a peek at Jonathan, wondering what he'll think of his involvement in my plan since I haven't spoken with him yet.

He frowns but doesn't argue, at least not now—not in front of Gray.

“And what if our people on the other side aren't prepared to deal with an influx of that magnitude?” Gray demands. “Are you just going to leave them to it?”

To be honest, I don't want to think about that right now. Sure, it's crossed my mind, but I have no easy answer.

“I haven't figured that out yet.” I take a step forward, begging him to understand. “Gray, I don't even know where the thresholds are or how to open them. It's not like we're going to form a merry fellowship and take off tonight. It's going to take time. Give me a chance to prove myself to you. Later, if you decide I'm going to 'the dark side,' then fine. Kill me.”

Rafe growls, but it finally seems like I might be getting through to Gray.

To Jonathan, the Wolf says, “Read her. Tell me exactly what she's thinking.”

“She's telling the truth,” Jonathan answers. “I've been watching.”

“I want you in her head,” Gray barks, leaving no room for argument.

A knot forms in my stomach, and I slowly turn to Jonathan. I can't have that—not now, not ever. How am I supposed to keep up the lie if Jonathan can poke around my thoughts at his leisure?

The Griffon looks just as hesitant—probably because right now, he doesn't want in my head any more than I want him there.

But there's no other way.

Stepping forward, he extends his hand. I stare at it for a fraction of a second, and then I swallow my nerves and press my palm to his.

I keep my thoughts blank, focusing on the room alone. If I let my mind wander...

No.

Just the room. Charles sleeps on the bed, curled up in the crease between the flat pillows. His body rises and falls as he breathes, and though asleep, he wears a look of disgust on his feline face.

Think of kittens, think of Prada. Think of makeup, shoes, and purses.

“It’s all as she says,” Jonathan assures Gray, breaking the contact. I eye him, unsure how to respond. He stares back at me, his dark brown eyes enigmatic. We both know he didn’t learn anything from those few tense seconds. But he trusts me.

“And besides,” Jonathan continues, “if you turn her in, or worse—kill her, you’ll have to admit to the entire Knights’ Guild that you had the Obsidian Queen on your team for the last several months, and you never realized it.”

Gray’s gaze flickers between Jonathan and me, and dark amusement twinges his expression. After several long moments, he lets out a groan laced with a curse. “Fine. I won’t hurt her—take these cuffs off me.”

Rafe looks at Jonathan. “Is he telling the truth?”

“Yeah.”

Jonathan is just unlocking the cuffs when Gray’s phone rings. The leader of our team rubs his wrists, scowling, and then pulls the cell from his pocket. “It’s Finn,” he says, looking less than enthusiastic.

Neither he nor I are on the greatest of terms with his half-brother, who just happens to be heir to one of the highest government seats held by Aparians on this side of the thresholds—but for different reasons.

Gray’s still angry that Finn turned out to be a compulsive gambler and attempted to pay his gambling debts with less than legal means. I’m angry because the rat cheated on me with my best friend several months ago.

“Hello,” Gray says, sitting straighter, looking like he’s preparing for an inquisition. Surely by now news that the



Monroe Mansion burned to the ground has reached the guild headquarters.

I cross my arms, waiting. Eric, Jonathan, and Rafe focus on Gray as well, the first two looking slightly more concerned than the third.

“Fine,” Gray says, and then he hangs up.

Feigning indifference, Eric asks, “Well?”

“The four of us are to report to the Royal Guild on Friday,” Gray answers, excluding Rafe because the Fox isn’t technically a team member, at least not anymore. “We’re going in for questioning.”

But there’s more; I can sense it.

“What?” I ask, wary.

Gray shoves his phone into his back pocket. “Apparently the human responders found several unidentifiable animal carcasses at the site, and the media jumped on it before we had a chance to shut it down.”

Oh. Well.

That’s probably not good.

“PEOPLE all across the country are speculating about the identity of the creature remains found in the Redstone Fire,” a woman on the radio says. “We’ve brought in zoologist Richard Grevens to speak with us today and hopefully answer a few of our questions. Richard, let’s jump right in. What do *you* believe the authorities have found in Redstone?”

“Well, Annabeth, as you’ve said, people are already coming up with some crazy stories. We’ve heard everything from UFOs to chupacabras, Big Foot, and a plethora of other outlandish mythical monsters, but the truth is, we just don’t have enough information yet. I haven’t studied the creatures myself, but I have seen photographs of the remains, and I can truthfully say they’re not like anything I’m familiar with.”

“So...we truly might be dealing with something unknown?” Annabeth asks, lowering her voice like this is the most exciting thing she’s reported all year.

“I don’t want to stir an already bubbling pot, but I will tell you...” The zoologist pauses, chuckling to himself. “I’m very intrigued.”

“As are we. Thank you very much for your time—”

I unbuckle my seatbelt and reach between the front seats to flick the radio to a different channel, which also appears to be news. Thankfully, this reporter is going on about abducted fashion models in Las Vegas and not charred monsters in the Colorado woods.

Still, I’m not in the mood for that either, so I flick it off completely before I sit down again.

Eric glances at me from the passenger seat, smiling. “You know, I would have turned it off if you’d just asked.”

We’re on our way to the Royal Guild in Jonathan’s Hummer, off to explain what the heck happened. But it’s okay. Gray has a plan: tell them the truth. Most of it anyway. Pretty much everything except my part in it.

I’m confident it will go over swimmingly.

I glance at Gray, who’s next to me in the back. He’s been extremely quiet for the last several days, and I can’t tell if it’s because he’s nervous or merely indifferent to my presence. At least he’s not trying to kill me—I’ll call that a win.

Since he’s not part of the team, Rafe couldn’t accompany us today. If it weren’t for the fact that I would be hunted down for ditching an official questioning, I’m sure he wouldn’t have let me out of his sight. But he left me under Jonathan’s protection, though that is almost laughable. Griffons aren’t usually given the position of bodyguard.

Gray, true to his word, hasn’t pulled a dagger on me again. I feel we’re moving forward. Not that the five of us are going to be posing in colorful sweaters for a group Christmas card or anything, but it’s progress nonetheless.

Jonathan pulls into the Royal Guild’s parking lot and chooses a spot near the front. The building looks like a fussy law office. In truth, the Guild does have a few lawyers—Aparian not human. They’re licensed and legit, though they

mostly represent a nearby ski resort owned by a wealthy couple of Dragons and turn down most everything else.

Gray lets out a long breath as soon as Jonathan turns off the vehicle. “You all know your story.” It’s less a question and more a command. Basically, get this right or *else*.

The three of us nod.

Gray turns to me, his frown deepening. “You’re going to need to play the damsel in distress. The girl you were at the beginning of the summer would be hysterical right now.”

I study him, questioning whether that’s a compliment. I think it might be.

“I’m feeling pretty hysterical on the inside.” I dig in my purse for my compact and hold up the mirror as I dab a light layer of gloss on my lips. “It shouldn’t be a problem.”

Gray raises an eyebrow, and—wait—is that a smile? It’s barely there, but I swear there’s the tiniest curve to his lips. “Be all the princess you can be.”

I snort out a laugh, flip the compact shut, and stash the makeup back in my purse. The car is quiet for a moment as we each take a collective breath before the storm hits.

A few minutes later, we’re walking into the office. I’m wearing my favorite pair of sky-high, slingback black stilettos today—they make me feel brave—paired with a pencil skirt and a modest, amethyst silk blouse that screams beloved daughter of a respected Royal Guild official.

Part of me wishes my dad were here. Another part is desperately glad he’s in New Zealand.

And the last part? That part wishes *I* was in New Zealand.

Finn’s secretary waits for us outside the meeting room, her face creased with nerves. Agatha is about seven months pregnant with her fifth or sixth child—I lost count after the third. When she sees me, her face softens. I’ve always liked her, even if she didn’t bother to tell me Finn was cheating on me with Maisy. Maybe she didn’t know. Maybe she didn’t *want* to know.

“Madeline,” she says, crossing the room, her eyes too compassionate.

What the heck is waiting for us if she’s looking at me like I’m a lamb about to go to slaughter?

“How are you?” she asks before she looks me over.

I press a hand to my stomach, wishing I was only pretending to be rattled, but real tears sting my eyes. “Physically, I’m fine. But I want to forget the whole ordeal.”

She presses her lips together, giving me a genuinely sympathetic nod. Then she squeezes my hand. “It will be all right.”

“Are they ready for us?” Gray asks, as eager to get this over with as I am.

Agatha nods. “Yes. I was instructed to bring you in as soon as you arrived.”

Here we go.

Gray walks through the double doors first, followed by Jonathan. They each go tense the moment they’re in the room. Quite frankly, that doesn’t seem like a very good sign.

And then I pass the door and see why. It’s not just Finn, a couple suits, and maybe Gray’s boss waiting for us—no.

The head of the Knights’ Guild, Lord Traverly, is seated on Finn’s right. Gray’s boss, Brad, is to Finn’s left—he looks particularly agitated, likely due to the fact that we burned his Porsche to a crisp. Additionally, all four of the Grand Duke’s advisors are in attendance, including the highest in their ranks, Lord Bennet. There are half a dozen additional faces I don’t even recognize.

The men all sit at a gleaming conference counter, with the exception of Lord Bennet. He stands behind the table, in front of the back window.

The room is unnaturally quiet despite there being so many in attendance, and the tension could be cut with a knife.

“Madeline,” Lord Bennet says when his eyes meet mine. The man isn’t very tall, only five foot nine, and his brown hair is peppered with gray. He’s of the Draconem faction—the Dragons—a master of elements, specializing in fire. Despite his turbulent magic, he’s a kind man with a compassionate way about him. He’s the sort of man who puts people at ease, and it’s why he does so well in his position. People trust him. They value his opinions.

But right now, his eyes are hard, and his hands are clasped behind his back in a closed-off, too-official sort of way.

My stomach clenches, and there’s a fifty percent chance I’m going to be ill. “Hi, Dad.”

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FIVE HOURS LATER, we’re still in the interrogation. I don’t think I’ve ever sweated so much in my life—what a horrible decision to wear silk. I’ve cried several times—stoic, silent tears—my mind full of the faces of the people we failed to protect.

The men in the room think it’s because I’m an emotional female, and not because I feel personally responsible for the creatures’ destruction, so *yay me*. Does it hurt that I’m Lord Bennet’s precious daughter? Nope, it does not.

“I still don’t understand why such a large multitude of the creatures would flock to the mansion.” Lord Traverly leans forward with his elbow on the table, his eyes boring into Gray. “Something must have drawn them. Is there anything you’re forgetting to tell us?”

And to his credit, our Wolf doesn’t flinch.

Jonathan clears his throat, pulling the men’s attention to him. “There were so-called ghost hunters in attendance. Madeline and I paid them little attention, but one evening at dinner, they showed us a collection of their photographic evidence. Their ‘ghosts’ were shadow creatures. Perhaps they angered the beasts?”

Brad looks skeptical, but it seems as good a reason as any.

“It doesn’t matter at this point,” Finn says with a sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose. “We already have people cleaning up the mess the media made.”

My ex is handsome—dashing, dark hair, expensive suit. I was head over heels in love with him when I was young and stupid. “I don’t think there’s anything else we can do right now.”

He looks exhausted.

Lord Traverly sits back and turns to Gray. “I’d say your top priority should be to find the pixie who’s stalking Madeline, but if he has a *clipeum* medallion, I have no idea where you’d start. For now, get back to your regular duties and be cautious. I have a job for you—a chance for you and your team to redeem yourselves. I’ll speak with you after the meeting.”

“Yes, sir.”

The head of the Knights’ Guild looks back at me. “Also, I want one of you with Madeline at all times until this pixie is apprehended.”

Brad, Mr. Deceased Porsche himself, apparently isn’t finished. “You know what I want to know? What’s really eating me about this whole thing?”

We turn to him, waiting. The man is like a dog on a bone. My stomach has already tied itself in knots, but it gives another little tug just for good measure.

“Why did the shadow beasts leave, Gray? If there were as many as you claim, there’s no way you could have taken control of the situation. You should have died out there.”

The man doesn’t look at me—of course he doesn’t. Not only is the Obsidian Queen supposed to be dead, but no one knows I’m adopted. It’s not like he’s speculating I’m the cause. But with the way my throat closes, he might as well be.

“And that’s a question that might never be answered.” Dad rises, efficiently bringing the interrogation to an end. Calmly, he scans the room, letting his eyes rest on each man in attendance. “What happened was an unfortunate tragedy. But

these things *do* happen—even to our best knight marshals. The creatures are, and always have been, unpredictable. I am simply thankful we didn't lose any of our men. Or my daughter."

All in attendance murmur their agreement.

"I want to be compensated for my car," Brad grouches. "It was there on guild business."

"Don't you have insurance on it?" Finn demands, losing his patience.

The man's face darkens, and he mutters to himself.

Gray motions for me to rise, and the four of us turn to leave. I step through the door and suck in a lungful of air. The questioning didn't go well, and no one is particularly pleased with us, but it could have been far worse.

"I'll walk you out," Gray says. "Then I'll talk to Lord Traverly."

"Madeline," my father says from the door of the conference room, calling me back.

Slowly, I turn.

"I expect you at dinner," he says, using his *Dad* voice.

"Yes, of course."

And like mice fleeing from a sinking ship, the three traitors I call teammates attempt to make a hasty exit.

"Wait," Dad says, his tone commanding. "I expect you *all* at dinner. Is that understood?"

Jonathan and Eric exchange a look, but Gray nods. "We'd be honored, sir."



AS IF THIS day couldn't get any better, who should I run into on our way out of the guild but my dear friend Maisy.

Finn's fiancée's eyes widen when she sees me, and she glances to the left and then the right, so eager to escape she looks like a cartoon chipmunk. But she's not a chipmunk; she's an Owl—a gifted alchemist. She's also the legitimate daughter of an upstanding lord and the perfect wife for our future grand duke.

When she realizes she can't escape, she pastes a bright, fake smile on her face and nervously shoves a strand of shiny auburn hair behind her ear. "Madeline!"

"Maisy," I deadpan.

"It's so good to see you..." She steps forward like she's going to hug me. When she realizes I'm not meeting her, she falters for a second and then drops her arms, trying to act casual. "This must be your team!"

Her eyes flutter over the men and then widen.

*That's right, Maisy. I work with three wicked-hot knight marshals. Don't feel too bad for me, sweet pea.*

"Hello, Gray," she says when she finally turns to our team leader.

I glance between them, wondering how exactly they know each other. As if reading my mind, Gray quietly says to me, "Family dinners."

Oh, that makes sense. Except Finn never invited me to a family dinner. Sure, we've eaten together hundreds of times, but it was always at my house or just the two of us. Guess that shows how much I meant to him.

The thought makes me feel about a hundred times worse. All I want to do is go home, take a two-hour long bath, and sleep until next week. Two out of three of those things are possible.

"So..." Maisy says, wringing her hands. "How have you been?"

"You mean other than being part of a job that led to humans discovering shadow creature remains and a wildfire that's sweeping Western Colorado? I'm fine."

Her smiles freezes on her face, and so help me...I feel bad. For Maisy.

What is up with *that*?

I relax marginally, mostly because I'm completely worn-out and this aloof thing takes a lot of effort. "I'm good, Maisy. Congratulations on your engagement."

"Oh." She blinks several times, looking acutely uncomfortable. "Thank you."

"I'm sure you're busy with wedding preparations—spring will sneak up before you know it," I say, fighting for an ounce of civility. I can be the bigger person. I *can*. And even if I can't, I went to finishing school just so I could learn how to fake it. "We won't keep you."

I begin to walk past her, but then she goes and blurts out, “December.”

And I come to an abrupt stop. If I were a car, I’d leave tire marks on the road. “*December?*”

She purses her lips and nods.

“As in less than eight weeks away?”

“Six,” she whispers. “We’ve moved it up a bit.”

From late May to mid-December—I’ll say they moved it up.

“But...you just sent out the invitations. For May.”

“I know.” Her smile flutters with nerves. “But it’ll be fine. I’ll send out corrections at the end of the week.”

“Right.”

I feel a little panicky. I guess the evil queen part of me was hoping she and Finn would have a big fight and call off the whole thing, and justice would be served. Sort of. But six weeks? That doesn’t leave a lot of time. I mean, I have full confidence Finn will do something to muck it up, but the clock is ticking.

“I’m sure it will be fine,” I say as I’m questioning her sanity. Finn might as well be a prince. Their wedding is expected to be monumental.

“Though there is the duke’s heart attack to think about as well.” Maisy presses a hand to her forehead and blinks continually, fighting honest-to-goodness tears.

“What heart attack?” Gray interrupts.

She looks at him, blue eyes swimming. “You didn’t hear? Several nights ago, after...” She blanches, looking between us like she wishes she’d thought about her words more carefully. She swallows and begins again. “His Grace received some news, and he began having chest pains. One of his nurses found him on the floor. He’s currently in one of our hospitals in Denver, but they don’t expect him to hold out much longer.

He has hours...maybe days. There's nothing the healers can do for him at this point."

Oh my sweet tea. *We're* the news. My shadow minions killed the Grand Duke.

As I hyperventilate, several tears roll down Maisy's cheek. The men shift beside me, ready to dart. They can take down a troll, but a crying woman they barely know? Nope, not happening.

Maisy dabs at her eyes, trying to laugh it off. "It's just a lot."

"I'm sure it will work out," I hedge, feeling...stuff. Stuff I don't want to feel.

But Maisy's been my friend since, well...I can't remember a time when Maisy wasn't my friend. Our parents are close, and we've always gone to the same schools. We've even been on vacation together.

That's why it hurt so much when I found out she'd been sneaking around with Finn.

"We're leaving for Denver now," she says, glancing toward the closed meeting doors. "Just as soon as Finn is finished."

I nod numbly. Not only did my minions cause the duke's heart attack, but what if our mandatory meeting keeps Finn from saying goodbye? All kinds of guilt swirls around in my stomach.

"No one told me," Gray breathes.

I turn to him, realizing the duke is his uncle as well. "Gray..."

He rubs a palm over his forehead, looking stricken. When he drops his hand, he asks Maisy, "May I catch a ride to Denver with you?"

She looks surprised but nods quickly. "Of course. You're welcome to come with us."

I look away, feeling like I'm left out of something I was never truly a part of.

Gray turns to Eric and Jonathan. "You two are on Madeline duty."

They nod, but Maisy looks perplexed. "Madeline duty?"

"She's acquired a pixie stalker," Eric explains.

Maisy's mouth falls open, and then her face twists with indignant anger—and it appears to be on my behalf. "What was Finn thinking putting you in this apprenticeship! Madeline, I am so sorr—"

"It's fine." I force a smile. "I'm fine."

And let's be honest. What's Gray more concerned about? Trent finding me...or me going rogue?

Maisy steps forward, her eyes almost pleading with me. "Maybe when I get back, we could get coffee? Talk?"

My first impulse is to press my palm to her forehead and push her away. But do I do that? No, I do not. However, she must be able to tell that I want to because the darn Owl purses her lips, grasps hold of my arm, and pulls me to the side.

"I've been an awful friend," she whispers. "And the only reason I haven't come crawling back sooner is because I hate myself for how I handled this. I should have been honest with you in the beginning, and Madeline, I am so, so sorry."

I look away, not ready for this on top of everything else.

"Please, Mads. I miss you." Her eyes get misty again, and her pretty face crumples. "So much."

For the love of—

"Fine. We'll get coffee," I say in a huff.

She nods like a Bobblehead doll. "Yes? Oh, that's wonderful—"

I point a finger at her. "Don't get ahead of yourself. I have *not* forgiven you yet."

"Yet?" she parrots, her face lighting with hope.

Growling, I shoo her away. “Go. Get to Denver. Take care of Finn.”

Giving me a great big watery smile, she pulls me into a hug. I stand here, arms at my side, staring at the ceiling. It needs repainted.

I don’t wait for Maisy to disappear into the meeting room to leave. I turn as soon as she lets me go, feeling a pesky seed of warmth in my chest. I want to squash it, smother it, light it on fire...but it’s persistent, and as much as I loathe it...it feels kind of good.

Gray tugs me back before I make it even five steps, and before I realize what he’s doing, I’m wrapped in his arms, pressed against his very fine chest.

“Aw, princess,” he says into my hair. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” I mumble against his thin, soft, yummy-smelling T-shirt.

“That I doubted you.”

Slowly, I angle my head up, frowning as I meet his eyes.

A slow, crooked grin spreads across his face. “You’re far too soft to be evil queen material.”

Even though Maisy was quiet, of course he heard our conversation.

“I’m a doormat.”

“You have a sweet heart,” he says, giving me an extra squeeze.

“That was probably the sappiest thing I’ve ever heard come out of your mouth.”

He laughs and lets me go. I step away and find Eric grinning at us like the big puppy he is. “Are you guys good now?”

“We’re good,” Gray confirms. “Though when I get back, we will need to have a chat with Maddie about her choice of pets. The gremlin cat is bad enough. I am not a fan of these new strays she’s adopted.”

Eric grins, and I laugh a little even though his flippant reference to the shadow creatures makes me uneasy. I'd rather not talk about them at all.

Instead of joining us, Jonathan studies an ancient tapestry depicting a great winged dragon standing on top of a mountain and surveying its kingdom. It's a Draconem piece, created in honor of the duke's line. Seems to me a little gray fox in the dragon's place wouldn't look quite as majestic.

Jonathan glances over. "Are you ready to go, Madeline?"

Did it bother him that I was just so close to Gray? He seems all right, but maybe it affected him just a little? Is that why he broke away from the group?

Or is that me indulging in wishful thinking again?

"I'm ready," I tell him. "Rafe will be wondering what's taking so long."

We say our goodbyes to Gray, and then Eric, Jonathan, and I walk to the Hummer.

"So what's with this mandatory dinner tonight, Maddie?" Eric asks.

"Maybe my parents want to meet the team?" I say hopefully, already nervous. But my father and mother *are* the type of people who enjoy entertaining, especially my friends. Maisy was a common fixture at our table, and once Finn took the position as head of Magical Law and Enforcement it wasn't uncommon for him to join us two or even three times a week.

But there was something ominous about this request. It was less an invitation and more a decree.

"I don't think so." Jonathan pulls onto the main road. "He didn't buy our story."

Eric makes a thoughtful noise. "We told the truth...more or less."

"I think the problem is the truth we omitted," I say softly. I don't like the idea of lying to my parents. What am I going to do if they straight-up call us on our bluff?

If they learn what I really am...I could lose my family. I could lose my *life*.

Jonathan glances back and gives me an easy smile, his signature look. It's nothing like the knowing, far more intimate looks I received when we were pretending to be married in Redstone. "It's going to be all right. I promise."

"How can you be so sure?" I ask.

"Are you serious?" he says with a grin as he gestures to Eric. "We're crazy charming. Parents love us."

"Hmmm," I hum, laughing under my breath. "You think so?"

"I *know* so."

"And what about Rafe? You know he'll come."

Jonathan makes an exaggerated grimace. "We'll just have to tell him not to talk."



# 6

WE ARRIVE at Eric and Jonathan's condo at just after three. We've been here the last several days, dreading the meeting with the guild. I've only been here one other time, the night before we left for Redstone.

It seems like forever ago. Even though the team was only at the mansion for a long weekend, so much has changed. Unable to help myself, I glance at Jonathan.

*It's not like we were dating*, I remind myself. We only shared a couple days—yes, they were a couple amazing days. But it's too soon to whisper love, even to myself.

With time, we could have been something, though. Something brilliant. But Jonathan is also the least able to protect himself against the darkness that likes to plague me. The man's a Griffon.

*Yes, but a Griffon with a gun*, a not-so-helpful inner voice reminds me.

Wrestling with indecision, I follow Eric and Jonathan through the glass doors and into the elevator.

Avon is a ski town but not quite as ridiculous as Aspen or Vail. We're surrounded by mountains, get heaps of snow every winter, and don't usually top eighty-five degrees in the summer months. It's an alpine paradise in a pristine valley, and because the real estate is limited—and many people only flock here during the snowy months—condominiums are popular.

Jonathan and Eric live in an older one that's been well taken care of. It's not as ritzy as the newer buildings, but it's still nice.

Gray insisted we stay together for the time being, probably because he doesn't want me taking off on my own and summoning monsters in the dead of night—after all, you must be careful like that when you're harboring an evil queen.

Jonathan graciously gave me his room and has been sleeping on a cot in the living room. If you think sleeping in his bed is helping with my turmoil, you would be wrong. The high thread count sheets are exquisitely soft, and they smell like his laundry detergent. Every night, I imagine him there, his head on the pillow next to mine, and it's driving me mad. Considering the guilt I'm harboring over Redstone as well, I think it's no surprise it's been impossible to sleep.

Rafe's on the couch when we walk in the door, working on his laptop. Behind him is a wall of windows that lets in all kinds of light. There's a large gas fireplace too—a massive stone focal point—almost a prerequisite in a ski town condo. Charles lounges on a blanket on the hearth. He stretches when we come inside, letting out a welcoming mew when he sees Eric. Now that the cat has had a “sleepover” with the Bunny, I doubt the ornery feline will want to go home. As much as I like Eric, eventually, it would be nice to get my cat back.

I roll my eyes at the thought.

After I change out of my meeting attire and into jeans and a sweater, I take a seat next to Rafe.

“How did it go?” my knight asks.

“All right, I suppose. Brad’s a bit angry,” I say absently, not wanting to talk about it.

“He’ll get over it.” Rafe glances at me and then looks back at his screen. “Look at how many Hummers Jonathan has gone through, and he’s moved on.”

Jonathan grunts from the open kitchen, very much still sore about all the vehicles he’s had trashed while on the job.

“Oh, here.” Rafe hands me a white box.

I stare at it, surprised, and then look back at him. “You bought me a phone?”

“You need a replacement. The man at the store was able to transfer your data from the cloud.”

“How did you manage that? That’s confidential—” I begin, and then I stop abruptly.

He raises a single brow, waiting for it to click. Oh...right. Fox. He just persuaded the sales associate to help him.

“Thank you,” I say, opening the lid. Not only did he buy me a phone, but it’s rose gold—very feminine and pretty much perfect. I smile when I think of Rafe requesting it in the store. He’s more of a silver or black kind of guy.

“My parents have invited us for dinner tonight,” I say.

Rafe closes his laptop. “I thought they were in New Zealand.”

“Apparently they’re home.”

He nods slowly. Like me, he’s probably wondering if their trip was called short because of what I shall now refer to as *The Incident*.

“What are you doing?” I ask, motioning to the laptop.

He eyes me, and I can *feel* his indecision—which is freaky as all get-out.

Finally, he answers, “I’m researching *clipeum* medallions.”

“Then why do you look like a kid with his hand caught in a candy jar?”

He turns his dark blue eyes on me. They're narrowed with wry amusement, and for a moment, I remember what he was like before he became my knight—when we first met at that casino in Tahoe. There was something dangerous about him, something that screamed Fox. Something a bit forbidden.

In the last few months, he's become such a stoic protector, it's easy to forget that Rafe is a rogue at heart. But something about the way he's looking at me now—the angle of his dark brows, the crook of his lips—triggers the memory of that first night when he saved me from a mobster Fox, stole my phone, and started calling me Lexie. (Don't ask.)

Rafe is handsome, but not like Gray, who's the Hollywood superhero, let-me-take-off-my-shirt-and-wow-you-with-my-sculpted-physique, *man's man* type. Nor is he as put-together and disarmingly attractive as Jonathan or as boy-next-door-who-grew-up-to-be-a-drool-worthy-Viking as Eric. He's tall and strong, yes, but with sharper angles, moody eyes, and a cool shade of skin that contrasts with his dark hair. And there *is* something dangerous about him still, something impulsive, perhaps even irresponsible.

It makes me wonder how different a dynamic we might have if the title Obsidian weren't hanging over our heads.

My knight leans a smidgen closer, acting like he doesn't want Jonathan or Eric to overhear what he's about to say. While doing so, the scent of his aftershave drifts over me. It's different than the cologne Jonathan wears, less spice and crisper high notes. It makes me think of mountain air, cold streams, and nights under the stars—not that I've personally spent a night under the stars, mind you. I have not, and I have no desire to try it. Because of bugs. And bears. And despite the irony considering my magic, I'm still more of a night light kind of girl.

But that's what Rafe smells like nonetheless.

He stares at me for a moment, his eyebrows drawn together, and then he shakes his head, dismissing some thought, and says, "The sources I've been contacting aren't exactly guild approved."

I blink at him, trying to remember what we're talking about. Oh, right. He's trying to find someone who will know how to track Trent.

Thankfully, Jonathan and Eric are in the kitchen so they don't hear him. They're arguing over soda geysers of all things—more specifically, if regular soda would create the same effect as diet. Jonathan says yes. Eric says no. I have a bad feeling we're going to find out before the day is over. Hopefully, they're smart enough to conduct their science experiment outside.

I eye the pair, shaking off my strange wayward thoughts about Rafe, and then whisper to him, "Please tell me your contacts aren't part of the Entitled."

"My contacts aren't part of the Entitled," Rafe lies smoothly, raising his brows.

"You're just saying that because I told you to."

A smirk ghosts across his handsome face. It takes me by surprise, as does his mood. It's much less somber than it was earlier. Maybe he was as nervous about the Royal Guild's questioning as I was.

"Listen, Lexie," he says, "I'm going away for a few days."

"You're doing...what now?"

Rafe doesn't *leave*. He smothers—it's his thing. Like a hobby but less amusing.

"I have a lead I want to follow, but I can't take you with me. I don't want you associating with the people I need to meet."

"If they're that bad, maybe I don't want *you* around them." I tease him, but I'm wondering what kind of trouble he's thinking of diving into. Another part of me questions if he's distancing himself because of the link—because he doesn't think it's safe to stay too close to me.

Rafe doesn't trust himself with access to my magic, and for a good reason. It didn't end well when the last Obsidian Queen linked with her knight.

“I’ll be fine,” he says, looking at his phone instead of me. “Stop worrying.”

This link is...inconvenient. It’s almost as bad as Jonathan’s mind-reading. The only upside is that Rafe can’t tell exactly *what* I’m thinking.

“Who said I was worried?” I argue, just to be stubborn. Then I try to work up the feeling of detached boredom, just to see if it will work.

Rafe pulls his eyes from his phone to meet mine. They’re amused, sort of. “While I’m gone, I want you to work on your magic. You must always be in control, and right now, you’re a terrifyingly powerful novice. Practice with Gray if you get a chance.”

“Why Gray?” I ask, letting him get away with changing the subject.

“Because he’s nearly immune to your persuasion and charisma.” He glances at Jonathan and Eric, who are still arguing. “Those two aren’t.”

“You’re immune to me. Why can’t I practice with you when you return?”

“I’m not immune.”

And that makes me pause. “What do you mean? Of course you are—you’re a Fox. You’re an *Obsidian* Fox.”

“We’re linked now. I believe your will would press into mine. I’d be helpless to resist, just because you’re...” He shrugs and then, as if lacking for anything better, finishes, “Mine.”

The word hangs between us.

There’s a reason Aparians who allow their magic to link are usually married. It’s an intimate bond—one I didn’t fully understand before I jumped in, head first. Not that I had a choice or time to think it through.

“And what if you were to use your magic on me?” I demand.

He swallows and then drops the subject altogether. “I might be gone for a while. Promise me you’ll stay with a member of the team at all times?”

That’s enough of this—we can’t have this conversation here. I tug the knight up and pull him toward the door. “We’ll be back,” I holler to Jonathan and Eric, slapping my new phone on the counter as I go.

“It’s something in the artificial sweetener,” Eric argues, all but ignoring us.

Rafe lets me tug him out the door, not even bothering to fight.

“What do you mean you’re going to be gone for ‘a while?’ How long is that?” I demand once we’re in the hall, setting my hands on my hips. “You’re running away, aren’t you?”

He steps forward, his eyes darkening as he forces me back. Once I’m trapped, he leans in, resting one arm on the wall by my head. “You don’t understand. I *can’t* stay—not now that we’re linked and not when you have feelings for Jonathan. Do you have any idea how difficult this is for me? I’d rather punch him than look at him, and he’s my *friend*.” The knight takes a calming breath, though he doesn’t step back. His eyes search mine, almost pleading with me. “And I know where I’m needed—to protect you, I must dispose of Trent once and for all.”

Dropping my voice even though no one is near, I say, “I like Jonathan—I do. But you know more than anyone that I’m not good for *him*. He and I can’t be together. He’s a *Griffon*.” Lowering my voice even more, I add, “He might as well be human when it comes to defending himself against the shadow creatures. It’s bad enough he’s on the team. But if we were together, I’d put him in an incredible amount of danger.”

Rafe almost smiles. “Do you have any idea what a blow he’d take to the ego if he heard that lovely spiel? He’s a grown man, Lexie—a graduate of the Knights’ Guild Academy. I promise you he’s not as helpless as you believe.”

I shake my head, my mind already made up. I was scarred the night Jonathan was bitten by the poisonous imp and almost died; the fear ingrained itself in my very being. I won't put him at risk again.

"Please stay," I beg. "I'll tamp my feelings down, snuff them out. I've already told Jonathan the link severed any emotional attachment he and I had."

"I need to take care of this." Rafe says the words calmly—almost as if going off on an assassin's mission is nothing more than a quick trip to the grocery store.

"And I need you here," I whisper.

He can't leave, not now. He understands all of this, and I understand nothing. And what if the shadow creatures disregard my command? What if they return? I need his magic to control them.

Sensing my panic, Rafe's face softens. "You'll be safe with the team. The creatures are in hiding, and the guild has decided to move on—everything is all right, at least for the moment."

I begin to shake my head but freeze when he shifts his weight, moving closer to brush his knuckles against my cheek. "*Lexie.*"

It's a chastisement, but a soft one. His eyes tell me that I need to trust him, and I do. But that doesn't mean I'm ready for him to go.

I press my lips together, focusing on the feel of his hand. We stay like this for several moments, and I hold my breath, waiting for him to step back or...something.

Frowning, he trails a thumb across my cheek.

A few days ago, I couldn't stand this close to him without feeling as if I was going to self-combust. The magic taunted us, begging us to link, creating feelings I couldn't trust.

That's gone now. There's no magnetic pull, no maddening drug-like attraction. It's comfortable with my knight, and our magic is content. I can feel it moving through the link,



mingling like twining ribbons. Right now, this close, I can't tell where mine ends and his begins.

And without the magic blanketing my emotions, for the first time, I can *think*. It's like silence after a deafening buzz.

With that silence, that blissful peace, comes the realization that I'm still exhausted. Without thinking, I step forward, pressing myself into him, and loop my arms around his waist. "Promise me."

He hesitates for several moments before his arms slowly move around me. His clasped hands settle at the small of my back. "Promise you what?" he asks, his voice a little off.

"That you'll be careful." I tilt my head back to look at him and then offer him a small smile. "And that you'll keep your phone on."

Slowly, he raises an eyebrow. "Do you plan on texting me?"

"I'm going to send you cat GIFs until you come back."

"Do I look like Eric?" He adjusts his hold, shifting me closer but in the chastest way. "Do you think I'd enjoy that sort of thing?"

"On the contrary, I think you'd detest it. Just an incentive for you to return."

His expression changes, and something in the way he looks at me makes my breath catch again. "I've never needed an incentive to stay close to you, Madeline."

*Madeline.*

Then, without warning, he nudges my hair behind my shoulder and leans close to my ear. "Stay out of trouble while I'm gone," he whispers, his words tickling my skin.

I blink, startled by the contact...and slightly disconcerted that I don't dislike it now that it's just *us*.

And apparently, that's a goodbye. He pushes away from the wall, turning on his heel. Before he can escape, I grasp his wrist. "Rafe..."

He pauses and turns back, his eyes locking on mine. My mouth works as I desperately search for words, but I shake my head, helpless to come up with anything. I can feel his jumbled thoughts, and they match mine. Confusion and denial laces with something we each refuse to acknowledge.

And we stand like this for several heartbeats—my hand on his wrist, his body half turned from me, both of us silent. Finally, the knight gently tugs out of my grasp. Disappointment I don't quite understand settles in my stomach like a rock.

From the way Rafe's eyes darken, I know he feels it—and I don't know what to do about that.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, hating that I must explain myself and am clueless how to begin. "I don't know."

"You're feeding off of me," he growls. "And that's why I have to go."

This time, he does leave. I stand in the hall until he's out of sight. Slowly, the strange heartache lets up and then subsides.

He's right. I was feeling what he was feeling. I clutch my chest, aching again. I am chaos—complete disaster. It seems that no matter what I do, I cause turmoil.

The door opens, and Jonathan pokes his head out, looking concerned. I've been out here for a long time. He eyes me and frowns, more than a little perplexed to find me alone. "Where's Rafe?"

"He went pixie hunting."

The Griffon studies me for several moments, his chocolate eyes scrunched with concern. "Are you...all right?"

"I can feel his emotions through our link." I rest my head against the wall and close my eyes. "It sucks."

"Tell me about it," he deadpans.

I peek one eye open, giving him a grim smile. "If I remember right, you have to touch someone to get in their head, but I'll humor you. What am I thinking now?"

Softly, Jonathan closes the door behind him and leans against it, crossing his arms—the picture of ease. “You’re feeling guilty because Rafe has developed a standard case of falling in love with his charge, but since you’re desperately besotted with a certain dashing handsome knight on your team, you don’t return his feelings.”

And there it is, sunshine in the dark. It’s the reason my heart longs for Jonathan when it’s not being manipulated by the Obsidian magic.

“I don’t recall saying Eric is dashing or handsome, but now that you mention it...” I say, careful with my phrasing so he won’t catch me in a lie.

The Griffon pushes away from the wall and stalks forward, his chocolate eyes crinkling with amusement. My heart gives a leap, and then I panic. I told him this was over. He can’t look at me like that—I only have so much willpower.

“I was talking about myself. And you didn’t have to say it.” He stops in front of me. “You’ve thought it.”

My mouth goes dry because, dang it, I’m trying to be noble here. I’m *trying* to keep him safe. And the only way to do that is to stay neutral—keep a friendly distance.

“Jonathan,” I warn. “We talked about this.”

He nods slowly. “We did, yes.”

“Then *what* are you doing?”

He takes one more step forward, now far too close for my sanity or comfort, and a bright and very mischievous grin crosses his face. He reaches into his back pocket. “Giving you your phone. You got a text, and I thought you’d want to know.”

I’m careful not to touch him when I snatch the cell from his hand. I flash him a dry look and check the text. It’s from Rafe.

*Tell Jonathan the truth. There’s no reason for both of us to be miserable.*

Quickly, I put it back to sleep, relieved only when the screen goes black. Both of us? Does Rafe mean him and me? Or him and Jonathan?

“Anything important?” the Griffon asks.

“No.”

“Should we go then?”

I rack my brain, but I’ve got nothing. “Go where?”

Jonathan raises a teasing brow. “Dinner? Your house?”

“That’s not for another few hours.”

He sets his hand on the small of my back to lead me inside, nearly making me jump a foot in the air. “Yes, but we have to stop at the store on the way.”

“Let me guess,” I say once I catch my breath. “You want to buy Mentos and Coke?”

“How did you know?”

I stop abruptly. “You’re joking right. You two aren’t actually that juvenile?”

Jonathan only laughs.

# 7

FACT: you can create a soda geyser with diet *or* regular Coke, though diet appears to work better. Needless to say, Jonathan is awfully smug.

At least it's nice to know that even if shadow creatures are wreaking death and destruction, and western Colorado is ablaze, my guys can still find joy by making things explode.

With my phone pressed to my ear from a safe distance away, I watch the guys shoot another stream of amber liquid into the air. Several women have gathered around to watch the science experiment. Women love science—it's a fact.

I listen to the phone ring, expecting to get the voice mail again. All day, I've tried to call Misty, a woman I met in Redstone who left after her husband/boyfriend/whatever-he-was had a heart attack. Trent made a creepy promise to visit her, and I need to make sure she's all right.

Just when the phone is about to go to voicemail again, a woman answers.

“Hello?” She sounds slightly irritated—maybe because I’ve called half a dozen times in the last hour.

“Hi, Misty,” I say quickly, startled to reach her. “This is Madeline Be...Kingman.”

I only stumble over Jonathan’s last name for a moment. “We met this past weekend in Redstone?”

“Oh my goodness,” she breathes into the phone. “I thought...they said everyone died.”

“I wasn’t in the mansion when it caught fire,” I explain. “Listen, I was just calling to make sure you’re all right. The police have mentioned that there might have been some foul play involved.”

Lies. The police still have no idea what’s going on.

“Oh, I’m fine,” she says softly, probably because she’s thinking of Phillip.

“Just be cautious,” I urge. “Be careful who you talk to, just in case this whole thing was premeditated.”

“Sure.” She laughs softly, probably because this isn’t the most normal phone call. “It’s so good to hear from you, but how did you get my number?”

Gray looked it up at the guild.

“Oh,” I say, searching for an excuse. “You...gave it to me.”

“I did?”

“You did,” I say abruptly, pushing magic into the words, not even sure if they’ll carry.

“Right,” she says slowly. “I remember.”

Oh good, that makes my life easier.

“Just be careful, okay?”

“You too, Madeline. I’m glad you’re not dead.”

That makes two of us.

She ends up chattering for a while, and I listen, watching the guys set off their last geyser. The crowd finally disperses, and I say goodbye to Misty and make my way back to them.

“I hope you brought an extra change of clothes,” I say to Eric.

He pulls the sticky fabric away from his skin, grinning. Then without regard for little old ladies with heart problems who might be lingering nearby, he grasps the hem of his shirt and pulls it over his head. Which, of course, reveals a torso and chest that’s so perfect—so ridiculously sculpted—it causes a spandex-clad woman running with a stroller to steer into her friend.

The friend doesn’t even notice because she, too, is drooling over the shirtless Adonis who’s standing in the grass in the middle of the park. A man on rollerblades behind the women is forced to stop, and he glares at the guys and me.

“Eric, you’re causing a traffic jam.” I run my eyes over his chest because he’s on my team, and if anyone is allowed to look, it’s me. “Put your shirt back on.”

He flashes me a mock-sheepish grin. “It’s sticky.”

“Mine too,” Jonathan says, and when I glance over, it’s halfway over his head.

For the love of clothing.

“Would you two stop stripping?” I hiss, yanking Jonathan’s shirt back in place. “It’s bad enough you’ve already coated the grass in sugary soda. Must you draw more attention?”

Jonathan rolls his eyes, chuckling, but before he can answer, a female someone calls from the nearby parking lot, “Eric? Is that you?”

The woman is gorgeous. Her dark blond hair is up in a sleek ponytail. She’s slender and fit with curves that fill out her designer exercise-wear, and she has a smooth jog that

would make a gazelle look like a hippo in comparison. And she's headed our way.

I give Jonathan a knowing look and whisper, "Peacock. I'd bet your Corvette on it."

Ignoring my wishes, he pulls off his shirt and shakes his head. "You could bet your own car."

I'm blinded by tanned skin, taut muscles, and a lean build that makes my knees go as weak as a helpless princess in a tower. Why must he? *Why?*

"Sure, but what if I ended up being wrong?" I tease, averting my eyes, pretending the mere sight of him shirtless doesn't make me want to melt into a puddle of Madeline goo. *Look at something else.*

Oh, look...that's a nice tree.

Thankfully, Eric's admirer is almost here, and I turn my attention to her.

"Eric," the woman gushes, coming to a stop in front of the Bunny. She grins at him and sets her hands on her hips, slowly looking him over. "My, you're certainly looking...well."

I choke back a laugh, pretending to cough.

She turns my way, and there's not even the slightest sign of her sizing me up, which you might expect since she obviously wants the Bunny, and I'm here *with* him. Yep, she's definitely a Peacock—the *Cristatus* faction—unnaturally beautiful and graceful. Honestly, that's their magic. You know those models who are impossibly tall, impossibly perfect, and impossibly elegant? All Peacocks.

"Sara," Eric says, his eyes lighting a little more than I expected. Sure, she's beautiful, but Eric's not hard pressed for female attention. "It's been forever."

"Time has been good to you." With the confidence of a woman who's been told she's pretty every day of her life, she leans in, squeezes his bicep, and then exaggeratedly fans her face.

I'd gag if I weren't so amused. Peacocks are special.



“These are my teammates,” Eric says, motioning to us. “Jonathan and Maddie.”

“Madeline,” I quickly correct. I let the guys get away with the nickname occasionally, but it doesn’t need to spread.

“So...Eric.” She shakes her head, drinking him in. “What have you been up to since high school?”

“I went to the Knights’ Guild Academy,” he says. “Now I’m a knight marshal.”

She practically purrs, her eyes drifting over him. “It suits you.”

He grins in that *Aw, shucks, ma’am* way that’s not entirely an act—but not entirely genuine either. He knows he looks good. How couldn’t he?

“What about you?” he asks.

She flashes him a not-so-modest smile that’s about as humble as his. “I’m modeling.”

*What did I say?*

“I moved to Los Angeles after graduation,” she continues. “I’m actually here visiting family on my way to an expo in Vegas.”

That catches my attention. “The fashion expo?”

She looks at me like I might be slow. “That’s right.”

“The same one with the disappearing models?”

A shadow crosses her face, and she pushes a strand of wayward hair behind her ear, slowly nodding. “I was supposed to do a shoot by the shore in Carmel, but my agent managed to snag me a spot.”

I don’t know about her, but I personally wouldn’t be thrilled to be working a show where the models are being snatched up faster than the designer handbags.

“We should get dinner sometime,” Sara says to Eric, returning the conversation back to the Bunny. “You know, catch up.”

She's persistent; I'll give her that.

Another woman gets out of the car the Peacock just exited, cell phone to her ear, and she zeros in on our group. She's blond too, though her hair is a slightly cooler shade. There's a serious family resemblance though, so I'm betting she's the sister.

As soon as she finishes her call, she saunters our way, her eyes flickering over Eric and then landing on Jonathan.

"Eric, you remember my little sister, Sabrina?" Sara says as soon as the woman joins us.

*Called it.*

Sabrina gives us a thousand-watt smile and a little wave. It takes all of two seconds for Sara to size Jonathan up and announce that the four should go for drinks. As an afterthought, she looks at me and gives me this big smile—the kind you bestow on sidekicks and ugly puppies. "You can come too, of course!"

*Oh gosh, thanks.*

Sabrina smiles at Jonathan, and my stomach knots. I know how this works—it's Tahoe all over again. Jonathan and Eric have the uncanny ability to draw girls like flies to honey. I take another surreptitious glance at their bare torsos. Yep, the reason is a mystery.

"In fact," Sara continues, nodding faster. "Let's go tonight!"

I'm just opening my mouth to remind the guys we have dinner plans when Jonathan steps close, drapes his bare arm over my shoulders, and tugs me to his side like we're a cozy couple...almost as though he's making a statement.

And like a knee-jerk reaction, I instantly look down, checking my clothing, making sure I'm protected. But it's okay; I'm in a sweater—no exposed skin to touch *his* exposed skin.

"We're going to dinner at Maddie's parent's house," Jonathan says.

“Oh.” Sara eyes Jonathan, obviously confused. She must have assumed that teammates don’t get entangled in complicated relationships. Silly girl. “Well, that’s all right. We’ll plan something soon.”

Eric hands her his phone when she asks for it, and she gives him her number. “It was so good to see you,” she says when she hands it back. Then she has the audacity to hug him, pressing herself right up to the Bunny’s chest.

Subtle.

Sabrina flashes Jonathan a lingering look, and then she follows her sister to the jogging trail. As soon as they hit the pavement, they take off, their ponytails swinging behind them.

I shrug out from under Jonathan’s arm. “What was that?”

“What?” he asks, feigning innocence but failing miserably.

And my options are as follows:

A: demand to know why he’s constantly touching me and being so freaking charming *or* B: hide my head in the sand.

B it is.

“Aren’t you freezing?” I ask instead. “It’s like forty degrees out here.”

A slow, too-knowing-for-my-liking smile spreads across his face.

I turn to Eric before Jonathan can say something to get himself in trouble. “So, you’re popular, huh?”

“Was that *the* Sara?” Jonathan asks, not waiting for Eric to answer. He then begins gathering the empty two-liter bottles. “The one you were in love with in high school?”

“You dated a Peacock?” I ask Eric, trying not to laugh.

Jonathan’s grin turns truly wicked. “Eric loves *all* animals.”

I shake my head and follow Jonathan back to the Hummer. “So is this really how knight marshals spend their free time?”

“Bored of the inactivity already?” Eric laughs. “Ready to go hunt a troll or two?”

“No, I just think your idea of entertainment might differ slightly from mine.”

Jonathan looks at me over his shoulder and grins. “I bet we could find an activity we both enjoy.”

His comment isn’t necessarily flirtatious—except that he says it in this dark, tantalizing voice that makes my stomach all warm. I narrow my eyes, which only makes him smirk.

Since our conversation in Glenwood Springs, he’s been nothing but friendly, even a little standoffish. Now suddenly, we’re back to the way we were before, when flirting was easy and either meant nothing...or it meant everything.

Why?

Dread builds in my stomach. Did I say something to give myself away? Did our hands brush at some point? Do I look all forlorn and pathetic?

I dwell on it for a full minute before I decide it doesn’t matter right now. I have bigger things to worry about, namely why my father wants the team to join us for dinner. Maybe he just wants to get to know the guys I’m currently spending all my time with.

That makes sense.

Especially considering I just got myself in a mess of trouble with said guys.

Jonathan pulls a container of wet wipes out of the center console and grabs a couple for himself before he tosses them to Eric.

“You have wet wipes in your car?” I shouldn’t be surprised. He’s meticulous about his vehicles, so of course he wants to ensure the cleanliness of his passengers as well.

“Who doesn’t?” He meets my eyes, looking oddly serious.

I shake my head, laughing to myself. After the guys stash their soda-stained shirts in a grocery bag, two clean tees

magically appear. Apparently, they did plan ahead.

Once we're in the car, Jonathan buckles his seatbelt and looks back at me. "Ready?"

By this point, my nerves have knotted themselves into a nice little ball in the pit of my stomach. "Let's get this over with."

## 8

WE PULL up in front of my parents' house, and I slouch with dread. It's a nice home, large and spacious, in a well-to-do neighborhood with multi-acre lots and a mountain backdrop. I expected to own a similar home—right after I married someone high up in the Royal Guild. That dream was pretty much shot the moment Finn decided to place me on Gray's team.

I should probably think about moving out, finding my own place. I can't live with my parents forever, and it's not like I'm getting married anytime soon. Even if there was someone on the horizon, my link with Rafe would make it pretty much impossible.

It's the first time that lovely thought has occurred to me, and my mood drops even further.

*I didn't have a choice, I remind myself yet again.*

Jonathan parks in the circular drive and pulls Charles's newly purchased belongings from the back. I don't have any of my suitcases, of course, because they went up in flames.

Silently, I mourn the loss of my shoes—several heels, a ridiculously expensive pair of ballet flats, and boots that were almost as beautiful as the pair Rafe destroyed after we sent away a troupe of dark fairies in the woods.

And then I feel a sudden, sharp stab of guilt—I should be thinking of the people lost, not my wardrobe. What kind of sick person am I?

Also, here I am, wasting time worrying about my love life (or lack thereof) when I should be brainstorming ways to track down the thresholds.

We make our way up the wide landscaped steps. There are large pots of chrysanthemums near the entry that weren't there a few days ago, blooming in shades of deep gold and rich purple. Mom's not a fan of Halloween—she says it's vulgar—but she loves autumn. She must have decided with Thanksgiving in a few weeks, it's time to bring out a few fall touches.

Unfortunately, those fall touches make me think of the mansion my minions burned to the ground.

I open the front door, calling out a hello to whomever might be within earshot. Lillian, our housekeeper, is likely in the kitchen, but we have a few other maids who work when Mom and Dad are in town. There's a gardener too, but his shifts are during the day, and he rarely comes inside. Oh, and occasionally, the handyman Lillian drools over stops by. But most of the time, it's just her and me.

Eric clears his throat and stands a little straighter. He and Jonathan have been here before, but the house always has a different feel when my parents are home. My mother is all about class—nothing showy, nothing ostentatious. The entire house is done in a variety of cream colors, and there are hardwood floors throughout, covered with plush, neutral carpets and rugs.

I glance at Jonathan, wondering what he's thinking. He gives me an easy smile, looking entirely at ease in my mother's very stainable environment.

"Madeline," Mom says, stepping from the kitchen just as I'm leading the guys in. She pulls me into a tight embrace and then holds me back, taking me in. Her hair is cut into a long brunette bob—a lob, as her hairdresser calls it. She wears pearls in her ears, smells like a honeysuckle perfume that is neither too strong nor too faint, and her beige sweater and charcoal leggings blend perfectly with the rest of the house.

"I didn't realize you were coming home this soon," I tell her.

"We had planned to spend a week in Hawaii, but we boarded a plane the moment we heard about..." She trails off, smiling in her soft way. She then turns to Jonathan and Eric. "You must be Madeline's teammates."

Eric greets her, giving her a friendly smile that's nothing short of contagious. Then it's Jonathan's turn. For reasons unbeknownst to me, I find myself holding my breath.

As if slipping right back into his role as millionaire playboy, Jonathan takes Mom's hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Bennet. I'm Jonathan Kingman."

Her eyebrows shoot up. "Kingman? Of the Texas Kingmans?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Your mother and I went to Briarwood together, though I'm afraid we lost touch when she married your father and moved to Texas."

Briefly, a shadow crosses Jonathan's face at the mention of his recently deceased father, but he quickly hides it. "I'd be happy to give you her contact info if you'd like. I'm sure she'd love to hear from you."

"That would be lovely." Mom gestures toward the sitting room. "Please, make yourselves at home. I believe dinner is almost ready."



When I turn to follow the guys, Mom grasps my arm and drags me into the kitchen in a fashion that's quite contrary to her nature. Lillian must have dashed out for a moment because she's not in here, but about a thousand pots bubble on the stove.

"Are you all right?" Mom demands, running her eyes over me as if she's looking for a missing appendage. "Every time I tried to call, the number said it was disconnected."

"My phone was lost in the fire, but I'm fine," I assure her. "I got a new one today."

She purses her lips, almost as if she doesn't believe me. And then the strangest thing happens—my calm, cool, and perfectly collected mother sniffs. Her eyes begin to glisten, and I swear she's going to cry.

"Truly," I assure her, more than a little shaken, "I'm okay."

And just like she did when I was five years old, she brushes a stray hair behind my ear. "I told your father I didn't want you on that team, but he said Finn was adamant. The last thing we wanted was to draw attention to you by fighting it." She brushes a tear from her cheek with the back of her hand, desperately trying to keep herself together. Then she whispers, "Do the knights know?"

Something about her tone makes me go cold. "Know what?"

She stares at me for several long moments. "That you're a Fox."

That's *not* what she meant. But before I can ask her—demand she tell me—Lillian trots into the room. "Madeline!" the housekeeper says in her thick German accent, grinning as she hurries to one of her pots *just* before it boils over. "Burn down any forests lately?"

"Lillian," Mom chastises, but we all know it's a lost cause. No matter how a person might try, Lillian is impossible to subdue.

"Only one," I respond, earning an impish grin before she goes back to her sauce. Laughing, she adds a little of *this* and a

little of *that* until she's happy with the flavor.

"Where's Rafe?" she asks. "I saw the big, handsome blond one and the tall, dark, and scrumptious one with the nice tush, but I saw no Rafe." She thinks about it for a moment. "Or the underwear model. Isn't he on your team as well?"

Obviously, Gray isn't an underwear model, but she's right about Jonathan. He really does have a nice butt.

"Lillian," Mother says again, her tone more of a hiss this time.

The housekeeper wipes her hands on a dishcloth and gives us a *facts-are-facts* sort of shrug.

"Gray went with Finn to Denver to see His Grace, and Rafe..."

Yep, no clue how to answer that one.

"...isn't here," I finish.

*Smooth, Madeline. Go you.*

"Shame," she pouts.

Rafe is her favorite. Which is a good thing, considering he's here constantly, hovering. I'm pretty sure Lillian thinks we're dating, though I've told her about a million times we're not.

I imagine she'd be even more adamant if she knew that Rafe pretty much slept on the couch every night before *The Incident*. Luckily, she goes home at eight at night, and Rafe always left the house right before she'd show up the next morning.

She never figured it out. Or if she did, she's kept her mouth shut, which seems highly unlikely.

"Madeline, would you like to change before dinner?" Mom asks, eyeing my oversized department store sweater and jeans. I can tell she wants to know why I'd wear such a thing; it's killing her.

Since it's easier to do as she asks than argue, I nod and head for my bedroom upstairs.

Charles has already found his way to my bed, and to my surprise, he seems happy to be home. Before I step into the closet to look for something a little more Mom-approved, I spoon Pedigreed Perfection into his waiting bowl. He leaps off the bed, giving me a happy mew. Maybe he missed our routine.

As the cat happily munches on his dinner, I step into my closet and proceed to stare at the contents for far too long. Dinner is going to be ready shortly. I just need to grab something that's neither too sexy nor too matronly and throw it on.

I change five times before I end up in a navy wrap dress accessorized with nude kitten-heels and a thin matching belt. Just as I'm putting on a pair of silver drop earrings, there's a knock at my door.

Fully expecting my mother, I say, "You can come in."

The door swings open, but it's not Mom. My heart gives an extra thump when I turn and find Jonathan standing in the doorway. A bit more respectful than Gray has ever been, he lingers just outside my room, leaning against the frame.

"Yes?" I ask.

His eyes slide over me, and he raises his brows. "You look awfully nice for a dinner at home."

"My mother informed me I was underdressed."

"No complaints here."

My cheeks grow warm, which is ridiculous. What is it about this man that sets me all aflutter?

"Do you have a purpose for this visit?" I ask. "Or were you hoping to get on my father's bad side?"

A smile grows on his face. It's slow, and so warm, it could melt a chocolate bar in January. "The door's wide open. High school rules, right?"

"I wouldn't know."

And neither would he, but he won't admit that. The thing is, underneath all his bravado and bluster, Jonathan's a good guy. When you can read someone's mind as soon as you touch them, you tend to shy away from casual relationships.

"Lillian sent me up to tell you dinner is just about ready. And Gray texted about our next job."

The guild truly wants to send us out again this soon? Even after the last one went so badly? We barely got a slap on the wrist. I expected a week of unpaid leave at the very least.

"Jonathan, I have bigger things to worry about than a job."

"And what are we going to tell the guild? 'Sorry, Madeline can't come because she's babysitting shadow creatures and researching ways to open the closed thresholds?'"

A shiver runs down my spine, and I look away.

He glances behind him and then steps inside the room, softly closing the door behind him. "I need you to promise me something."

I can feel him staring at me as he waits for me to meet his eyes. Reluctantly, I look at him.

"Don't do anything rash, all right?" He steps a little closer. "Think about it for a little while before you start tampering with any of the thresholds."

"What if we don't have a little while? What if the monsters come back?"

"They've been lying low for a hundred years. I think we have some time."

I wish I had his confidence, but it feels as if the weight of the entire world is on my shoulders. I'm the only one with this magic—this curse. I'm the only one who can control them. If I don't take care of the problem, who will? And what if I wait too long, and they attack in mass again?

The massacre at the Monroe Mansion was minuscule compared to the casualties that a multitude of shadow creatures could create if unleashed on a city, or even here, in a small but thriving tourist area.

“I have to find a threshold first,” I tell him, overwhelmed with exhaustion once more. I take several steps back and lower myself onto the edge of the bed. “I don’t even know where to start looking. And I certainly don’t know how to open one yet.”

Jonathan hesitates for only a moment before he crosses the room and sits on the bed next to me. The mattress dips slightly, and gravity gently tugs me toward him. We’re hip to hip, shoulder to shoulder, and all I want to do is crawl on his lap and forget about the last several days. Thankfully, there’s no bare skin touching, so he doesn’t know that.

“I’ll help you,” he says softly. The words surprise me so much, I turn to him.

It’s a mistake. We’re a little too close, and he smells a little too good.

The memory of our last kiss ghosts across my mind—it was desperate, reckless. It was an end of the world, we-might-die-tonight kiss. There were no promises made. We both knew I was going to link with Rafe.

“You will?” I ask, my voice sounding startled even to my own ears.

He nods. “On one condition.”

“What?”

“Make sure this is what you truly believe is best. Step away for a few weeks, and if you still want to pursue it, I’ll help you find a threshold.”

I search his chocolate eyes, looking for signs of indecision. But his expression is calm, placid even.

“You could go to the Dungeons for even having this conversation with me,” I warn. “The guild would strip you of your magic, lock you away for life.”

“I know.”

“They’d label you as a member of the Entitled. Your family would be disgraced.”

He leans a smidgen closer. “I trust you, Madeline.”

Suddenly, I know exactly how Rafe feels. What if I’m not as strong as I hope? What if I drag him down when I fall?

I meant every word when I told Gray I would be stronger with the group beside me, but that doesn’t necessarily mean I’m actually ready to pull them into this. Do I want them? Absolutely. Do I need them? I’m afraid so.

But is it selfish of me to ask this of them?

*Yes.*

“I’ll give it a little time,” I promise, my voice lower because he’s so close. “*Unless* the creatures make another appearance.”

Jonathan nods, accepting my answer. He then looks down at our legs, so closely pressed together. His hand rests on his knee. Ever so slowly, he slides it toward my leg. I watch, mesmerized, as his thumb brushes just above my knee through the shielding fabric of my dress.

He shouldn’t touch me like this, not now. A girl pretending she doesn’t like him wouldn’t *let* him touch her like this. My heart beats faster, and I hold my breath.

*What* am I doing?

My eyes stay on his hand even when he looks up. I can feel him watching me, waiting for me to acknowledge it.

“Madeline,” he says softly, a dark catch in his voice.

“No.”

He chuckles—a dark, inviting sound. “I didn’t say anything yet.”

“It doesn’t matter what it is, the answer is still no.”

“Let’s play a game.”

Unable to help myself, I jerk my head up. “No games,” I say sternly, my cheeks heating as I remember last time.

“Just a simple round of yes or no,” he murmurs, his eyes sparking with mischief. “And look—you’re already off to a

great start.”

“Jonathan...”

We’ve played this particular “game” before. It didn’t end well. Or, rather, it ended *too* well.

“I realized something,” he says instead of asking me a question.

Though I’m terrified of his answer, I can’t help myself. “What?”

“We were both so desperate to avoid an uncomfortable discussion, we did it at night while I was driving.”

“What’s your point?”

He raises a brow. “My point is I couldn’t see you at the time—my eyes were on the road, and it was dark.”

I try to stand, ready to flee like a timid mouse, but Jonathan clasps his hand on the front of my thigh and keeps me in place.

“Let’s try it again.” He watches me intently, and I know I’m in trouble. “Now that you’re linked, do you have feelings for Rafe?”

“I don’t know,” I whisper, dwelling fully on the fact that Jonathan didn’t bother to move his hand off my leg. “It’s hard to tell when I can feel him through our connection. Our emotions get jumbled together.”

“Are you still attracted to me?”

Again, I try to rise. Again, he holds me down.

“That didn’t change,” I tell him, exasperated. “And we’ve done this already.”

“Did you lie to me in the car?”

I stare at him, refusing to answer—all the while knowing my silence is an answer all on its own.

Encouraged, he leans closer. “What did Rafe mean when he said you needed to ‘Tell Jonathan the truth?’”

I suck in a startled breath. “You read my text?”

“Your phone was on the counter. I happened to glance down and see it when it came in.” Then, not about to be redirected, he lowers his voice and says, “Tell me the truth about what?”

Thankfully—or maybe not—there’s a knock at my bedroom door before I have a chance to answer.

“Madeline?” Mom says as she swings the door open.



JONATHAN'S EYES GO WIDE—IT doesn't matter his age; no man wants a girl's mother to find him on her daughter's bed.

I act without thinking—letting raw instinct take over.

Mom steps through the door, followed by my father. Dad closes it softly behind them, and then they turn back to me, twin expressions of quiet worry on their faces. Neither notice Jonathan standing near the edge of my bed because I cloaked him. *Just* him. I didn't even know that was possible.

I glance at the Griffon, hoping to convey that he needs to stay still and silent. He stares at me, looking particularly gobsmacked.

I'm not good at cloaking—in fact, it's one of my talents that I have the least control over. To accomplish it, I must bend shadows, obscure light. If it were the middle of the day, with sunshine streaming through the windows, there's no way I could have accomplished it. Thankfully, the incandescent bulb

in the corner lamp doesn't do much to chase away the shadows in the room.

"We need to talk." Dad pulls the chair from my seldom-used desk and Mom sits next to me on the bed, claiming the spot Jonathan recently vacated.

I glance between them, taking in their somber expressions, and I suddenly want to run.

"What really happened in Redstone?" Dad asks.

"It was just as we told you in the meeting."

Dad leans forward, his usually warm eyes stern. "All right then. What parts did you leave out?"

"We know the creatures are drawn to you," Mom whispers, clasping my hand.

What?

Uncomfortable, Dad clears his throat. "There are things we need to tell you—things we should have probably shared long before now, but we were truly hoping this day would never come to pass." He leans forward, resting his elbows on his thighs, looking a little too worried for my liking. "Your magic is...different."

*No.*

They know? Impossible. There's no way they would have taken me into their home if they were privy to the truth.

I stare at them, waiting for them to get to their point. I'm certainly not volunteering the information—after all, what if I'm reading them wrong? What if they're not talking about my Obsidian magic at all?

"What we've told you is true—you're of the Urocyon faction," Dad continues. "But very rarely, there's an aberration in the magic. It can happen in any of the factions—"

"*Any* of the factions?" I interrupt. That can't be right.

Dad plows ahead, silently asking me to save the questions for after he's finished. "In these cases, the individual's magic is stronger—the innate talents concentrated, magnified. You're

one of these individuals. We can't discern the minute differences in the blood that's stored by the guild, but a Griffon can read it if he knows what he's looking for. In most cases, it doesn't make much of a difference." He pauses. "Unless you're a Fox."

"Why does it make a difference if you're a Fox?" I ask, but I know.

"Your persuasion is enhanced," Mom says, taking over. "You're capable of coercing things that other Foxes can't manipulate."

"Shadow creatures," I whisper.

She purses her lips and nods. "In history, female Foxes with heightened magic have proven to be terribly powerful. As you know, a hundred years ago, we revolted against the Entitled and destroyed the thresholds to keep the Obsidian Queen—your distant grandmother—from crossing the thresholds and conquering North America."

"Why did she want it? What was the point?"

"It was the eighteen hundreds here," Dad says. "Humans were traveling west, discovering gold and rich land, building towns and settlements. It was a new frontier. Suddenly, this human territory which the crown had deemed wild and unappealing became a temptation. The Aparian Empire had grown vast. It was at the height of its power, and Queen Carine decided the next logical step was to cross the thresholds."

"Though many agreed with her, most of our people did not," Mom says.

"But a few who did were trapped on this side of the thresholds after we destroyed them," Dad continues. "After all this time, they're still loyal to the crown, and they've built a following. Needless to say, they'll do anything to sink their claws into you if they find out you're alive."

"The Entitled," I murmur.

Dad nods. "To ensure both our people's and the humans' safety, a Griffon working for the Royal Guild infiltrated the

Entitled's ranks when we heard a rumor that you would be born soon."

I pull my hand away from my mother and cross my arms. "He was supposed to kill me."

She and my father exchange a look, realizing I know more than they assumed.

"He was," Dad says carefully, "but he knew it was wrong—you were a baby, an infant. Left in the corruptive hands of the Entitled, you would have likely grown up to be a dangerous threat, but he believed that it's the heart of a person, and not their magic, that defines them. He felt you deserved a chance. And so did we."

"You knew who I was," I say, feeling overwhelmed. For one moment, my hold on Jonathan's cloak flickers, but I control it just before it drops.

"He brought you to us," Mom says. "We'd been trying for a baby for many years, with no luck. When he showed up with you in the middle of the night, we knew you were ours. We didn't see evil in your face—we saw family."

My eyes begin to sting, but I shut the emotion off. "But essentially, you kidnapped me."

Their faces darken with pain—they knew the question was coming, and Dad responds first. "You would have been taken from your mother no matter what—the elites of the Entitled would have raised you. It would have been a cold, lonely life. Yes, you would have been treated like a princess—wanted for nothing, pampered—but you wouldn't have had love. I'm sorry, Madeline. I know this is hard to hear, but I have no regrets. You are my daughter, and that is that."

I'm quiet for several moments, reeling from the shock. They knew.

All this time, *they knew*.

It's time to tell them what's been going on while they've been traveling in the grand duke's place.

“I was abducted while you were in Spain.” I stare at the wall. “The man’s name was Curtis...”

I launch into my story, telling them everything I know—all the things Curtis said, the way Rafe disposed of him, about Trent, and what’s happened since. I tell them about the shadow creatures and my power over them, and finally, I tell them what really happened that night in Redstone—omitting the part where I linked with Rafe...and how I plan to send the creatures back to Aparia...also pretty much everything that transpired between Jonathan and me.

All right, so I don’t tell them everything.

Dad sits in the chair, bent over, hands over his face. “They all know?”

“Yes,” I answer.

“And Gray is with Finn now?”

“He is.”

Shaking his head, he looks up and lets out a world-weary sigh that makes him seem much older than his forty-eight years. “But you trust him?”

Without meaning to, I glance at Jonathan before I look back. “I think so.”

“You *think* so?” Mom demands, her voice a touch too shrill.

From the corner of my eye, I see Jonathan give me an encouraging nod.

“No, I do. He was upset at first—and understandably so—but we’re past it. He knows me.”

“And Rafe?” he demands. “You say he’s gone to the Entitled?”

“Only for information on how to track Trent.”

Mom shakes her head, not liking any of this.

“He’s a good man,” I say softly, desperately wanting them to have faith in Rafe. “He won’t betray me.”

“He worked for them—possibly works for them still.”

“He’s *mine*,” I say, the word touched with an air of finality. “They have none of his loyalty.”

Dad stares at me, his eyes sharp. “Whatever you do, do not link your magic. Do you understand?”

Little late for that.

“Your power very well could be a temptation he cannot resist,” Mom adds, her voice softer than Dad’s. “The Obsidian Knight is strong alone, but his magic works as an amplifier to yours. He doesn’t have your heightened powers of persuasion, and he won’t be able to unlock the thresholds without you—unless you give him access to your power. Cultivate an amicable relationship but keep your distance.”

Gulping, I nod. Well, this is awkward.

Standing, Dad glances at his phone. “Dinner is surely done by now. Lillian is likely in a tizzy, wondering what happened to us.”

“You go on,” I say. “I’ll be down in a moment.”

Dad nods and steps into the hall. Mom glances back before she’s through the door, her eyes far brighter than they were a moment ago. “Jonathan seems nice.”

“Oh.” My cheeks flood with heat. “He is.”

“Handsome too, isn’t he?”

“*Mom*,” I say, desperately trying to avoid the conversation.

Jonathan flashes me a crooked grin, obviously enjoying himself.

“He likes you,” she says, ignoring my embarrassment. “I can tell by the way he looks at you, how he introduced himself to me—as if desperate to make a good first impression.”

I bite the side of my cheek to keep from laughing from sheer mortification.

But, of course, she continues, “He’s from an excellent family too—his father was in oil before he began investing.

And his mother is one of the sweetest women you'll ever meet."

Wait—oil? Investments? That's what he said in Redstone. I thought that was only his cover.

"And you like him. No, don't bother to deny it," she says when I attempt to protest. "I haven't seen you that starry-eyed since Finn walked through our front door when you were seventeen years old."

"Okay," I say, shooing her out the door. "You should go."

Laughing, she finally leaves, and I press the door closed. For one moment, I stare at the painted trim before I turn and brace myself against the wood—almost as if I must ensure no one else will pop in.

My relief causes me to lose my grip on the cloak, and it fizzles away.

"Your mom thinks I'm handsome." Jonathan smirks, his dark brows raising.

"Go away."

"I can't." He stalks forward, his eyes on his prey—and his prey is *me*. "You're blocking the door."

I attempt to shift to the side, showing him he's free to leave, but I'm not quick enough. He cages me in, his chocolate eyes fixed on mine. His palms press against the door on either side of my head. "And she thinks you *like* me."

"She also thinks white should never be worn after Labor Day. We don't always listen to her."

"Hmmm." He lowers his head until his nose brushes the side of my neck. "You smell good."

"What is this?" I demand, my knees growing weak. "Are you a vampire now?"

Chuckling darkly, he opens his mouth and so, so gently pretends to bite my neck, placing his teeth against my skin. And yep, a teeny, tiny, breathy moan escapes me.

And only because this *must* stop, I grasp his glorious, thick hair and jerk his head back—not hard enough to hurt, but firmly enough he knows I’m not playing.

“No,” I say as if I were reprimanding a puppy. “We don’t bite.”

A slow grin spreads across his face. “How do you know? We’ve only just begun.”

“Jonathan,” I warn.

Ignoring my reprimand, he moves in and whispers, “Say it again.”

“What?” And dang it, my voice flutters. He’s never going to take me seriously now.

“My name,” he presses, the words tickling my skin. “I want to hear it on your lips, just like that—flustered and breathless.”

Wicked butterflies riot in my stomach.

He suddenly goes still, and his expression loses its playful quality. “I want you—I don’t want to pretend there’s nothing here when I *know* there is.”

“Don’t do this,” I beg.

“Madeline.” He meets my eyes, not about to be deterred. “Yes or no—*do you still have feelings for me?*” He draws out each word, but it’s pointless. He already knows.

“Fine. I’m still attracted to you,” I say, avoiding like a pro.

He shakes his head, laughing under his breath. “You’re going to make this difficult, aren’t you?”

*You betcha.*

“All right,” he relents when I don’t answer, but his eyes are a bit too bright to believe he’s going to walk away. “We’ll keep it friendly—no strings, no promises.”

“Jonathan—”

“I’m going to kiss you now. You have three seconds to command me to stay out of your head.”



“No, this is ridiculo—”

“One...two...” he begins, grinning.

“I am not—”

“*Three.*” And true to his word, the fool man kisses me. His mouth presses against mine, hot and impatient and sexy as a sultry night in the south. And I panic. Because *Jonathan*.

My brain short circuits for approximately two-point-three seconds. His hands find my waist, and his fingers dig into my sides in the best way. I’m pretty sure I’m going to ignite at any moment. If I were a Dragon, we’d already be on fire.

I grasp hold of Jonathan’s shirt, yanking him closer, breaking the kiss just long enough to push persuasion into my words as I command, “Stay out of my head.”

Then I meet him again, and it’s a lost cause. Either the magic worked, or it didn’t, but it doesn’t matter now. With my free hand, I run my fingers through his hair, earning a very satisfying groan out of him. He tightens his hold, pulling me against his chest. The room warms, and the part of me that thought this was a bad idea gets smothered with giddy anticipation.

The knight’s lips pull from mine and trail down my jaw. He pushes my hair from my neck and drifts down my skin, pressing a kiss where he pretended to bite just a moment ago.

“You want this?” I tilt my head back. “Then we’re going to have rules.”

“Rule One,” he says with a laugh, nibbling my skin. “No biting.”

“You’re already breaking your own rule.”

“Rule Two,” he continues. “Don’t scare Madeline by talking about feelings.”

I protest, trying to shift away, but he only laughs as he kisses his way back up to my lips.

He finally pulls away, meeting my eyes. “Rule Three—“

“We’re not dating,” I interrupt. “This is just...*this*. And we’re not public—this is a behind-closed-doors thing only, do you understand? You won’t tell *anyone*.”

He smirks and moves his hands to my shoulders, gently kneading away several days’ worth of stress. “Are you embarrassed of me, sweetheart?”

*I’m terrified I’m going to get you killed*, I think. Jonathan can’t hear me though, not at this moment.

“You know I’m not,” I say. “But this is a deal-breaker—take it or leave it.”

“I’ll take it.” He leans in once more, meeting my eyes before he presses a gentle, slow kiss to my lips. “For now.”

Something about the soft assault nearly breaks me. I move in, looping my arms around his neck, and kiss him back. It’s a slow exploration, something we’ve never had the time for before now. I breathe him in, reveling in the moment. I’m just parting my lips, inviting him to deepen the kiss, when there’s a knock at the door.

“Madeline,” Lillian says sharply through the wood. “Dinner is getting cold. What are you doing in there?”

“I’ll be right out,” I say, trying not to laugh. Jonathan lowers his forehead to my shoulder, shaking with mirth.

“Good. And phone your knight with the sexy butt. I sent him to fetch you, but he must have gotten lost.”

When I’m confident I can answer without laughing, I say, “Okay.”

The hall goes quiet. Jonathan looks up, meeting my eyes once more, looking entirely too pleased with himself. In a stage whisper, he says, “Your mom thinks I’m handsome, and your housekeeper thinks I have a sexy butt.”

Dissolving into laughter, I lean forward and press a hand over his mouth. “That’s enough talking for you.”

He gives my finger a playful nip and pulls my hand down. “We don’t have to talk...”

“No,” I say sternly. “We have to go to dinner before Lillian kills us both and plants our heads on spikes outside the kitchen to warn others not to miss one of her meals.”

“OH LOOK, MADDIE,” Eric says lightly when Jonathan and I step into the dining room. “You found Jonathan.”

I eye the handsome knight, but he only grins.

A glorious, golden beef Wellington sits in the middle of the table, waiting to be cut. If the puff pastry has gone soggy on the bottom because of my tardiness, Lillian really might come after me with a spear.

There’s peppercorn sauce and fluffy, buttery mashed potatoes along with two types of vegetables, a tossed salad, and Lillian’s famous rolls.

“It looks wonderful,” Mother assures Lillian. “Won’t you join us?”

But, as usual, the housekeeper declines and disappears into her kitchen to scrub something. We’re left with awkward, too

polite conversation, but even it drifts off as we tend to the matter at hand.

Eric and Jonathan watch with breathless anticipation as Dad cuts into the beef Wellington. Steam escapes, letting out the delicious aroma. I shake my head, laughing to myself, realizing neither of the knight marshals has experienced Lillian's cooking before.

Rafe grew used to it. In fact, I often wondered if it alone was the reason he was quite so dedicated to his job of nannying me.

Our stilted small talk dies off as we begin to eat. Even Mom, who is the picture of a good hostess, is silent for several moments as she enjoys the meal. When the conversation picks up, it floats to safe topics—our ailing Grand Duke, the weather and how cool it's been this year, and Aparian politics.

Finally, when we're done eating, Dad sits back from the table and crosses his arms. "I believe it's time to address the elephant in the room."

Jonathan and Eric share a brief look, and then they turn back, waiting for him to continue.

"We spoke with Madeline before dinner, and we are aware that you know of her Obsidian magic."

Eric looks startled, but Jonathan only feigns surprise.

"Because you protected her from the guild, I believe you are also aware that she's not the black-hearted future queen those of the Entitled have been hoping for."

They only nod, looking unsure how to answer.

"It is imperative to all our safety that they do not learn of her existence. This is a secret that will stay between us, am I clear?"

"Yes, sir," they both say, nearly in unison.

"Moving forward, you will continue your duties as expected. However, consider your marshal job to be your cover now. Your top priority is protecting Madeline. I admit I would like to have her removed from your team, but I can

think of no safer place for her than with you.” His eyes bore into them, very much a polite threat. In other words, it had *better* be the safest place for me. “I need you to swear to me now that you will protect her and the secret. I assume I don’t need to tell you how badly we’ll all suffer if the Entitled gets their hands on her.”

First Jonathan swears his loyalty and then Eric, and I cross my arms, nibbling my lip. The whole conversation is making me very uncomfortable. Suddenly, I feel like a government secret.

“Can you vouch for Gray?” Mom asks.

Together, they nod, and Eric answers, “Yes, ma’am. Gray is loyal to the team, and we’ve made this decision together.”

“And Rafe?” Dad questions. “I don’t know him well.”

Oh sure. They can’t just take my word for it—they want the opinion of the professionals.

“Rafe will die to protect Madeline,” Jonathan says, and it’s clear he’s not exaggerating.

A sinking feeling settles in the pit of my stomach because I believe him.

*Please be careful, Rafe.*

“Very well. We’ll speak with them as soon as we can.” Dad sits back. “For now, I’d like you to focus on your next job. I understand you’re leaving for Las Vegas this evening?”

“Vegas?” I interrupt. Jonathan said we had a job, but he didn’t say *where*.

Eric turns to me and grins. “You know the missing models? Turns out they’re Aparian, and they’re not missing—someone is sucking the magic right out of them.”

“The models are Peacocks,” I deadpan.

“That’s right.” Eric’s grin grows—he’s obviously enjoying himself. “And Jonathan is going to pose as one.”

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“Do you ever wonder why you’re always the bait?” I ask Jonathan as he tosses our luggage in the back of his Hummer.

“I believe you’ve played bait a time or two.”

It’s almost dark, and the temperature has dropped. I can’t say I’m going to mind spending some time in Vegas. It’s got to be warmer than here.

We’re supposed to be at the Cherry Creek Knights’ Guild in Denver by nine for an impromptu meeting with Gray, and then we’ll catch our flight. Gray is in charge, but because the scale of the event we’re covering is so massive, we’re joining forces with several other teams. Tonight, we’ll meet them, and Gray will go over our assignment.

All I know at this point is that we’re heading to the huge fashion convention that takes place every November—the one Eric’s friend Sara was talking about. There are about a billion individual shows, but Jonathan’s going to be working undercover somewhere in Menswear.

“Ever modeled before?” I ask Jonathan.

“No,” he answers, sounding less than enthusiastic about his assignment.

“Do you think you’ll have to walk a catwalk?” I hand him my old makeup bag—I haven’t had a chance to replace any of my things, so I’ll have to make do with what was lying around my closet. “Maybe you should practice strutting.”

“Thankfully, no. It sounds like I’ll stand on stage, maybe mingle with the audience a bit. It’s an expo, not a full-blown fashion show—which is bad enough if you ask me.”

My stomach flutters with sweet, sweet expectation, but for once, my response doesn’t have anything to do with the handsome knight. May I be honest? I’m ecstatic about the expo. This is precisely what I need right now—I’m finally going to be in my element. It will be nice to be the most knowledgeable one in the room for once. I might not know how to track an evil Aparian, but you better believe I know how to navigate the fashion world.

As Jonathan finishes loading our things, I browse the exhibit listings on my phone, trying my best not to drool. Several of my favorite designers are attending, and there will be events and seminars and—

“You’re thrilled, aren’t you?” Jonathan closes the back and glances at me.

“Yep,” I say, still looking at my phone.

“You know you can’t wander on your own, right? And we will have a job to do.”

I glance at him before looking back at my screen. “Yep.”

He lets out a frustrated laugh. “Are you even listening to me?”

“Nope.” I smile to myself. Then out of the blue, I ask, “So the whole ‘Jonathan Kingman: Oil Tycoon’ thing wasn’t a cover? It was real?”

Casually, he leans against the bumper and crosses his arms, studying me. “My great, great grandfather ended up in Texas at the right time, bought the right land. We have people who handle our investments, and my sisters and I have trust funds. But my dad expected us to work for a living—use our magic, practice our strengths. That’s what we do.”

I nod toward the Hummer, letting a smirk play at the edges of my mouth. “I don’t suppose you occasionally dip into that trust fund to support your vehicle obsession?”

A quick grin crosses his face. “Maybe.”

The money doesn’t matter to me. It’s nice having it, of course, but my family has plenty; I don’t need his. But I can’t help but wonder if the Jonathan from the mansion—the man who played my husband—was real, then what about the rest? Was that a real glimpse at what life could be like with him? Was it less of an act than I thought?

Not that it matters—it doesn’t. In fact, it’s best I don’t entertain these thoughts at all.

Eric joins us a few minutes later, carrying Charles.



“You’ve dressed him again,” I say, groaning. “What was wrong with the sweater I had on him earlier? Where did you even get *that*?”

Eric glances down at Charles, who’s looking particularly dapper in a dark brown leather bomber jacket complete with a tan fleece collar. The only thing he’s missing is a pair of aviator glasses, and he would look like he stepped out of a feline version of Top Gun.

But that’s not the disturbing thing—no. You see, Eric is wearing an almost identical jacket, just in gladiator size.

Absently, I picture the knight in Tom Cruise shades. Hmm...not bad.

“I thought it was fitting for his first flight.” Eric smiles in a way that tells me he knows matching the cat is beyond odd, but he simply doesn’t care.

“I still don’t know how Charles will do on the plane,” I say, reluctantly letting the outfit thing drop. (At least the jacket is better than the pumpkin sweater he had him in last week.)

When I called the airline after dinner, they said Charles may accompany me in the cabin as long as he’s crated—unfortunately, Charles isn’t a big fan of his crate.

Jonathan looks at Eric the way you’d expect a man to look at his best friend who’s playing dress up with a cat—like he’s questioning his sanity. Then he shakes his head, dismissing it, and turns to me. “Just take Charles out and let Eric hold him when we get to our seats. It will be all right.”

I open my mouth to tell him that the woman I spoke with said Charles must be contained, but then I pause. “I could,” I say slowly. “Couldn’t I?”

Rafe told me to practice my magic after all. I’m not sure *this* is what he meant, but what harm is there? Practice is practice, right?

“It’s not like you have to worry about him causing a scene midflight,” Jonathan says. “Eric can take care of him.”

I glance at Eric. “What do you think?”

Eric's smile becomes oddly tight, but he nods. "Of course."

"You okay?" I ask, tilting my head to the side to study him.

"Fine." The tension leaves his face, and he steps into the Hummer.

Well, that was kind of weird.

THE CHERRY CREEK chapter of the Knights' Guild is larger than the one in Avon even though Avon is the Royal Guild's US headquarters. The sign out front says the building is an administration office for an insurance company, but the Knights' Guild logo—two swords crossed over a mountain—grace the corner of the sign, telling me we're in the right place.

It's almost nine when Jonathan pulls into the parking spot, and clouds have gathered, blocking the moon. I step out of the car and take a deep breath—the air is crisp, cold.

“Do you think it's going to snow?” I ask the guys as they get out. Before he closes his door, Eric makes a little nest of jackets for Charles and gives him an extra dose of Bunny magic so he'll sleep while we're in the meeting.

Jonathan looks at the sky. “It might.”

Yep, I'm so ready for Vegas.

Eric, sweetheart that he is, opens the door for me with an easy smile. “Ladies first.”

I step into the office, glad the heat is turned up. We enter a tidy waiting area with a long reception counter. There are several potted plants, and chairs are arranged around coffee tables containing magazines. It almost looks like a dentist’s office.

A brunette woman about my mom’s age sits behind the counter, and she smiles when we walk in. “Hi there. Driver’s licenses and faction IDs, please.”

I set my faction card on top of my driver’s license. It claims I’m a Sparrow—a limited magic user.

“Thank you,” she says, checking our names off a list. “I’ll need to keep your licenses to make your security passes for the convention, but I’ll return them shortly. You may go on back.”

Jonathan nods, and we press through a door next to the counter that opens to a hall with several more doors off it. Yep, it’s very much like a dentist’s office.

“I take it you’ve been here before?” I ask the guys as they pass several doors with confidence, walking as though they know where they’re going.

“We work with the Cherry Creek chapter often,” Eric says.

The hall takes a ninety-degree turn to the left and then opens into a large room. With its couches and dozens of soft chairs, it looks more like a break lounge than a conference area. There’s a massive television on the back wall, and a bar along the right side that’s stocked with several large coffee thermoses, stacks of white mugs, and an assortment of sugar and cream.

Gray stands at the front of the room, quietly speaking with an older man in a suit. His face is solemn, and he looks tired even though it’s barely nine o’clock. When he spots us, he waves us over.

“Hey,” a short man with fire-red hair says in greeting, standing as we pass. He clasps hands with Jonathan and then Eric, doing the man-hug thing, and then turns to me.

“Madeline, this is Hudson,” Eric says. “Hudson, this is Madeline *Bennet*.” He emphasizes the last name, apparently wanting to stress who I am though I’d rather keep it quiet.

“Pleasure.” Hudson takes my hand and gives it a firm shake. I study him, trying to guess his faction.

“Hudson is a knight marshal on Donovan Hart’s team,” Jonathan explains. He turns back to the man. “Is your whole team here?”

“They will be.” The knight’s eyes are still on me, and it looks as if he’s trying to peg my faction as well.

“Passeridae,” I say, quenching his curiosity.

Looking surprised because Sparrows don’t usually work for the Knights’ Guild, he touches his chest. “Dragon.”

“Fire?” I ask, guessing what he specializes in. Dragons can manipulate all the elements, but there’s usually one they excel at.

“Earth.” He grins. “Are you one of our undercover models?”

I laugh, shaking my head. “No, Jonathan’s modeling.”

Hudson raises a fiery brow, smirking at the Griffon.

“Don’t start,” Jonathan says with a huff. “I plan to have words with Gray.”

“Madeline,” Gray says as if his name drew his attention, which it probably did considering his heightened hearing. “Come here for a moment?”

I excuse myself and make my way toward our team leader and the man in the suit. The man is older, probably in his late fifties, and he frowns in thought. “You must be Lord Bennet’s daughter.”

I nod, clasping my hands at my waist. “Yes, sir.”

“Madeline, may I introduce you to Ryker,” Gray says. “He’s head of the Cherry Creek Knights’ Guild.”

So he's the equivalent of Brad, Gray's boss and the owner of the newly deceased Porsche—important, but not quite as intimidating as Lord Traverly.

“Pleasure,” I say, shaking his hand when he offers it.

“Ryker,” Gray continues, “Madeline is the newest member of my team.”

“Faction?” the man asks, though technically it's a bit rude.

“Sparrow,” Gray says immediately. “She's smart, organized.”

I smile at him, grateful he's defending me but self-conscious that he feels he must. Select few people in this world know I'm actually a Fox, but it makes little sense that I, as a Sparrow, would be on Gray's team.

With a secret smile directed at me, Gray adds, “She's also good with a stun gun.”

“I must be honest; I'm surprised Lord Bennet agreed to this placement,” Ryker says. “Have you always been interested in a position with the Knights' Guild?”

“No, sir.” I grace him with a sweet smile, slightly irked by his patronizing tone. “I had hoped to plan charity galas.”

His face freezes in a pleasantly blank expression as if he simply doesn't know how to respond to that.

Gray chokes back a laugh and clears his throat. Before either find their voices, two more men walk in the room, both somewhere in their late twenties to early thirties. One has golden blond hair cut short, and the other has dark brown hair hanging to his shoulders. I glance at Gray, wondering who they are. They're average height, average build. Fit enough, but not knight marshal fit.

“Excuse us, Ryker,” Gray says, looping his arm through mine. “I need to speak with my team before we begin.”

Gray pauses when we reach the newcomers. “Brett, Thomas, glad you could make it. Where's Chloe?”

“Filling out a patent that must be filed by midnight,” one of the men responds. “But we’ll put her on speaker when you begin.”

Gray nods and motions first to the dark-haired man and then the blond, saying, “Madeline, this is Thomas and Brett. They’re going to be adding an extra layer of surveillance to the convention hall.”

I nod to the men as he finishes the introductions.

Several more people filter in as Gray and the two technicians talk, including a gorgeous auburn-haired woman in a fitted sweater dress/black leather jacket combo and a tall, sandy-haired man that has knight marshal written all over his chiseled chest.

The woman helps herself to coffee and then sits toward the back of the room by herself as if she doesn’t know anyone in attendance. The man joins Jonathan, Eric, and Hudson. I can feel his eyes on me, and I have no doubt he’s asking who I am and what I’m doing here.

“We’re about to begin,” Gray says. He excuses himself from Brett and Thomas and then guides me toward our team.

“Hey,” I say to the Wolf before we reach the others, touching his arm. “How are you? How’s your uncle? Did you get a chance to see him?”

“Yeah.” Gray looks down, and raw weariness washes over his handsome face. “He’s hanging in there. Finn’s with him now.”

“And how are *you*?” I press gently.

His light blue eyes meet mine. For a moment, I expect him to tell me he’s fine, but then his expression eases. “I’m tired.”

A part of me wants to hug him, try to ease his pain—but that part is stupid. The *sane* part knows he’d see the friendly gesture as something more, and that’s the very last thing I need right now. So I settle for a gentle smile and hope he knows I care.

When we reach our group, the sandy-haired knight steps forward. “Scott, Dragon faction,” he offers, thankfully bypassing all the awkward introductions. “And you’re Madeline, *Sparrow*...?”

And just like everyone else, when the knight says my faction, he gives me a funny look.

“Nice to meet you.” I sit next to Jonathan.

Immediately, as if he doesn’t even think about it, Jonathan extends his arm along the couch behind me. I bite the inside of my cheek, wondering if anyone else notices—wondering if they realize how badly I want to scoot closer to the Griffon just to see if he’ll drape his arm across my shoulders.

But I don’t, and he doesn’t.

Gray steps to the front of the room, surveying his audience before he moves to a laptop on a nearby table. The television comes to life, displaying a photograph of The Mediterranean, one of the most expensive hotel-casinos in the newer section of Las Vegas. “I want to thank you all for coming tonight, especially on such short notice.”

The room goes quiet as we wait for Gray to continue.

“Every year since it’s opening, The Mediterranean has hosted the MTR Fashion Expo in its convention center.”

The photograph changes to a slideshow of snapshots of the convention hall, and I get honest-to-goodness goosebumps. There are dresses...handbags...scarves...shoes...

It’s so beautiful.

*Focus, Madeline.*

“The event runs for a full month,” Gray continues, “from the beginning of November through the first of December, breaking only for Thanksgiving. This year, there are sixty-four exhibitors, fifteen designers, a hundred twenty-four models, and an expected six million patrons.”

I force my gaze from a display of not-yet-released Marsilla Mica handbags to Gray, trying to focus on what he’s saying.



“It’s a nightmare event,” he continues. “The humans have security, but during a series of stage rehearsals last week, five Aparian models of the Cristatus faction—three women and two men—were abducted at different times, drained of their magic, and left wandering on the Strip. None were physically injured or have a recollection of the attack, which leads us to believe persuasion or charisma was used on them as well.”

Thomas’s hand flies into the air like we’re in class. “Do you know how the attacker siphoned the magic?”

Gray shakes his head. “We do not. The guild’s researchers strongly believe a gargoye venom charm was used, though we must not discount the possibility that we could be dealing with a Vulture.”

An unnatural hush falls over the room, and a shiver travels my spine.

Griffons like Jonathan are rare, but Vultures—the Cathartes faction—are practically unheard of. The Royal Guild employs one, using his talents on the darkest of Aparian criminals, stripping them of their magic while they serve time in the Dungeons—our magical prison, deep under the earth. Only the strongest Aparians can fight a Vulture’s magic, and those individuals are very few.

“However, we strongly believe it’s the work of a Fox wielding a charm,” Gray assures us. “And to ease your concern, I would like to remind you we have a Griffon on our team, and he will be keeping a close eye on the crowds.”

Nearly everyone in the room looks at Jonathan with something akin to reverence. He gives them a modest nod that makes me want to laugh—he’s not really that humble, but he puts on a good show.

A man sitting on the couch across from us asks, “Do we have a motive?”

“We believe so,” Gray answers. “It took quite a bit of searching, but we found a request posted on an obscure human black market site that was willing to pay five thousand dollars for ‘Essence of the Peacock.’ We believe certain criminal

Aparians have begun using the website. The listing was taken down five hours after it was posted, but we were able to obtain it.”

“Contact information?” Eric asks.

“A phone number linked to a pay-as-you-go cell phone. When we attempted to call, it was already disconnected.”

“Could you trace the credit card that was used to activate it?” Brett asks.

Gray shakes his head. “They used a pre-paid gift card and paid for it with cash. We have no choice but to go undercover and hope they confront a member of our team. Jonathan and Annika will be posing as models.” He motions to the beautiful woman sitting alone in the back when he says the woman’s name.

Oh, she’s a Peacock. That makes sense.

“Is it wise to risk the Griffon?” the man on the couch across from us asks. “What if he’s attacked as well? His magic could go for fifty grand at the very minimum in the right circles.”

“It’s not ideal,” Gray admits. “But we’re taking every precaution, and Jonathan has a unique advantage in that he’ll see his attacker coming.”

I glance at Annika, wondering how she’ll take it that no one is particularly concerned for her safety. But she only sits there, ankles crossed like a prim and proper lady in a biker jacket, sipping her coffee.

Gray continues the meeting, making sure everyone understands their roles. Eric is posing as Jonathan’s agent, and I’m the Bunny’s assistant. When Gray arrives tomorrow, he, Scott, and Donavan—the man on the couch—will be working in security. Hudson will act as Annika’s assistant. Brett, Thomas, and their partner, Chloe, will be behind the scenes, handling their surveillance equipment.

“We’re also working with several of the Vegas teams,” Gray says.

“Do we have someone inside the event?” Donovan asks.

I’m starting to get a feel for the man. He’s pushy, opinionated, stubborn, and the leader of his team—pretty sure he’s a Wolf like Gray. This could be interesting.

“We do.” Gray shuts the laptop, and the television screen goes blank. “The director of Menswear is Aparian. We’ve been in contact with him and his team. He seems eager to help. His wife has an exhibit on the women’s side, and Annika will be working with her.”

Donovan nods, looking temporarily appeased.

Gray then picks up a stack of manila folders and sends them around the room. “All the details are in here. We’ll have another meeting tomorrow night with the Vegas teams after the convention closes. Any questions?”

Brett and Thomas have several, but seeing as how they’re a little too technical for my liking, I rise with the knights, feeling acutely out of place.

“A lot of testosterone in here,” a woman says from my shoulder.

Startled, I turn and find Annika. She gives me a hesitant smile, looking like she just might be glad for some female conversation.

“Don’t I know it.” I break away from the guys. “I’m Madeline,” I say even though Gray did another round of quick introductions before he gave us our individual assignments.

“Annika.”

“You’re on Donovan’s team, right?”

“No, I’m freelance, but I often work for the guild when an undercover knight needs a wife or girlfriend to adorn his arm while he ventures into a den of well-to-do Foxes.” She rolls her eyes. “No one expects any form of deception from a vapid Peacock, so it’s the perfect cover.”

I laugh, understanding far too well. People see my skirts and heels and tend to underestimate me also.

“So, you’re on Gray’s team,” she says, her eyes moving to the Wolf at the front of the room. Her gaze is a tiny bit hungry and way too familiar for my liking. “What’s that like?”

“Turbulent,” I admit, laughing again, but this time it’s somewhat forced.

“I imagine.” She pulls her attention away from Gray and looks at Eric and Jonathan. “Your teammates are easy on the eyes.”

“Yes,” I say absently, liking her attention on Jonathan even less. “And they know it.”

She flashes me a smirk full of genuine amusement.

“The Griffon.” She nods toward Jonathan. “Is he available?”

“Oh.” I look away, wrinkling my nose. “I...I don’t know. He’s pretty casual with his relationships.”

“Sounds like my type.”

I manage another laugh, this one less convincing. Annika doesn’t seem to notice.

“Well, I suppose I should go,” she says. “I fly into Vegas tomorrow. I’ll see you at the convention?”

I nod, and she saunters away, swinging her hips in a subtle way only a Peacock could pull off without looking like a wannabe stripper. Hudson watches her leave and then returns to the guys’ conversation, grinning. He says something that I’d bet good money is piggish, and Scott and Eric laugh. But instead of joining in, Jonathan looks my way.

He flashes me a subtle look, an almost-smile that barely tugs his lips but I feel all the way down to the tips of my toes. It’s the kind of look that makes a girl feel like she’s the only person in the room.

It’s not the first time he’s given it to me, but we were pretending before.

Or were we?

“Hey, princess,” Gray says from behind me, setting his hand on my shoulder. I turn, concerned by how tired he sounds. “I have to go back to the hospital.”

I nod, my heart aching for him. He hid his worry while he was speaking to the group, which is so like him, but it’s obvious he’s hurting now.

“I don’t know your uncle well,” I say quietly. “But it seems you’re close to him.”

“The man has his faults,” Gray says, “but he never made me feel like an outsider.”

“How’s your dad?” I ask, referring to his stepfather—Finn’s biological father.

Gray shrugs, looking away.

“And...” I grimace even though I know I must ask. “Finn?”

My distaste for my ex breaks through Gray’s sorrow, and he smiles. “Freaking out.”

“Good,” I say, brushing an imaginary piece of lint off my dress. “At least he realizes the weight of the responsibility he’s about to accept.”

I know *I’m* terrified of Finn stepping into the position of grand duke. Forgive me, but I don’t think his moral compass is particularly true.

Gray lets out a single laugh and meets my eyes. “Thanks for flying tonight. I know it’s a lot after everything.”

Jonathan, Eric, and I are the only ones going over this evening so we can be there in the morning. The rest of the extended team will arrive tomorrow.

“It’s better than staying here, dwelling on everything.”

He pauses and then steps in, lowering his voice to a bare whisper. “Have you seen anything *unusual*?”

“No. Nothing.”

“You’re positive?”

“You are going to have to learn to trust me again,” I say softly. “I’ll tell you if something happens. I promise.”

“Just be careful,” he instructs.

“I will.” I step away, ready to end the conversation.

As if receiving a signal, Jonathan joins us. “We need to leave, or we’ll miss our flight.”

I glance at the people who will be part of our team for the next week or so. It’s going to be harder than ever to keep my magic under wraps.

Looking back at Jonathan, I nod. “I’m ready.”

IT'S OFFICIAL. Everyone on the ten-fifteen flight from Denver to Las Vegas hates my cat. Really, though, they just hate me because *I* brought him. But how was I supposed to know big and brawny Eric is terrified of flying?

Charles lets out a yowl, the type that should come from a shadow creature and not a sweet little pink hairless kitty in a bomber jacket. His eyes spark with pure fear and hatred, and his tail whips about like an angry snake.

"It's okay," Eric says, cradling the cat with one hand while squeezing his own knee with a death grip that would make weaker beings cry. Over and over he says, "It's okay, it's okay, it's okay." Then he mixes it up and adds, "We're just thirty thousand feet in the air in a metal cylinder of death."

I sit directly to Eric's left, between him and Jonathan, and I've spent half the flight patting his shoulder like I'm doing now. "Only another forty-five minutes."

But apparently, that doesn't help because he stiffens like I just said the plane was going down.

Who knew a two-hour flight could be so traumatic?

A woman in front of us turns in her seat and scowls at Charles. "Shouldn't that beast be with the luggage?"

She's probably in her mid-twenties, with a no-nonsense look about her and dainty features. Her dark brown hair is pulled up in a high and hasty ponytail, and she doesn't have an ounce of makeup on her enviable fresh face.

"I'm trying to *work*," she adds.

"It's fine," I assure her again, pushing magic into the words. My persuasion must have already worn off. I only used a little on her when she first spotted the cat while boarding the plane—I'm trying to be conscious of my magic, and I don't want her as loopy as the poor bartender in Tahoe. But I guess I didn't use quite enough. "Be nice," I feel the need to tack to the end.

"You're going to have to do something about Eric," Jonathan says under his breath from my other side. He looks asleep, with his eyes closed, wrapped in a blanket one of the flight attendants brought him. Both have been tripping all over themselves to make the knight comfortable. They're so enamored, they might have forgiven me for taking Charles out of the crate even *without* my magic.

I reluctantly pull my eyes off the poor Bunny, who now has his head against the cushion. His eyes are clamped shut, and he's far too big for the seat—to the point he resembles a bodybuilder in a kindergartener's desk. Beads of sweat dot his brow, and he's rather pale.

"I can't," I whisper to Jonathan, matching his quiet tone. "I promised Gray I wouldn't use my magic on you guys."

We hit a tiny patch of turbulence, which makes the plane shake for half a second. Eric yelps like a little girl, drawing the attention of all those around us.

"He's going to have a heart attack," Jonathan insists, opening a single eye to look at me.



“Fine, but I’m going to ask him first.” I turn back to Eric, wondering how I’m going to go about this. “I can help,” I say softly.

“Help what?” he bites out.

“With your anxiety. I can make you feel better.”

Opening his eyes, he tilts his head to face me. Feeding off him, Charles lets out another eerie, shrill yowl. It’s the kind of sound that’s more painful than nails on a chalkboard and ten times as unsettling.

“What anxiety?” Eric purposely widens his eyes as if he can’t figure out what I’m talking about. “I’m fine.”

“You’re scared of flying.”

“No.” He shakes his head too quickly. “I’m not.”

“For the love of—” the woman in front of us says, leaning forward as if she’s looking for something in her purse. She then turns in her seat once more, giving Eric a grim, forced smile—looking very much as if she wears the expression rarely—and then extends her hand toward him. “Here.”

“What is it?” I ask, staring at what appears to be a handheld game device. Except I haven’t ever seen one like that before. It’s small and black, with a screen so bright and a picture so realistic, I swear it appears as if you’re looking through a tiny portal into another world.

“It’s a game.” She waggles it at Eric. “Distract yourself.”

He visibly gulps, and though he doesn’t reach for the handheld console, he does look intrigued. I’m not a video game kind of girl, and even *I’m* intrigued.

She raises her brows, gracing him with the universal look for “get on with it” and gives the game another shake.

“Go on, Eric,” I say, reluctantly pushing magic into the words. “Relax. Have fun.”

Pure relief crosses his face, and his shoulders sag. Yep—Jonathan was right. I probably should have done that sooner.

Immediately after, Eric pets Charles, soothing him. The cat stretches his back before settling onto Eric's lap. With a yawn, he blinks several times and goes to sleep.

The woman narrows her eyes, looking perplexed. Then, a little too astute for my liking, she slides her gaze to me and frowns. I force a pleasant smile and try not to fidget with the armrest.

"Thank you," Eric says as he accepts the game, realizing what's going on and taking the reins of the conversation. He studies the console, turning it over, perhaps looking for a logo. "I don't recognize this."

"It's a prototype." She bristles slightly and then turns in her seat once more. "Don't break it."

I lean close to Eric and murmur, "That was weird."

He nods but is already sucked into the game.

The rest of the flight goes by quickly, and soon we're dropping elevation, preparing to land. Jonathan stirs and clears his throat before prying his eyes open.

"Have a nice nap?" I ask, more than a little jealous.

I wish I could have slept. Last night was the worst I've had since Redstone, probably due to my anxiety over the meeting this morning. I tossed and turned, my mind mulling over my self-appointed task of sending the creatures back to Aparia. Every time I tried to close my eyes, I saw the humans I failed.

The monsters listen to me; they heed my words. I should have felt them—I should have sensed what was coming. Instead, I was too consumed with Jonathan. I glance at him, a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach.

I peer past Eric at the Vegas lights. After several circles, the plane touches the ground. I don't think I've ever seen Eric so relieved.

Going from Mountain time to Pacific means we gained an hour, so it's just now past eleven—still early by Vegas standards, but it might as well be the middle of the night for me.

We gather our things and stand, waiting to exit the plane. The woman in front of us turns to collect the game. To my surprise, I realize she's a good six inches shorter than I am—five-one tops.

At the same time I notice how short she is, she notices how tall Eric is. Slowly, she looks up at the Bunny, her frown growing as she takes him in, almost as if she's offended by the knight's extreme hotness.

He flashes her an easy smile, the one that makes women everywhere fall at his feet like groupies, and hands her the sleek device. "That is one of the coolest things I've ever seen."

"Thanks." She takes it and tucks it into her bag, dismissing him.

Undaunted, Eric sticks his hand in front of her, preparing to introduce himself. "I'm Eric."

Slowly, she turns, her eyes narrowing. For a moment, her gaze flicks to me and then back to the Bunny. "Eric *what?*"

His smirk turns into a full-on grin. "Let me take you to dinner, and I'll tell you."

She takes his hand, gives it a hard shake, and then steps into the aisle. "Not interested, thank you."

Eric watches her, looking particularly dumbfounded. Jonathan, on the other hand, is trying so hard not to laugh, his shoulders shake. His eyes begin to water, and if he doesn't have a chance to let it out soon, there's a real chance he might just up and explode.

"You just got rejected by a Squirrel," he laughs when we've exited the plane and are walking through the airport.

"A what?" I ask, startled.

"Squirrel, Sciuridae, a tinker."

"I *know* that. But she was *Aparian?*"

I don't know many people in the Squirrel faction. They're gifted with magic that lets them manipulate mechanics, are brilliant engineers and technicians, and are crazy smart. But

everyone knows that when you get a group of them together, it's only a matter of time before something explodes.

It's kind of their thing.

"That explains the game," Eric says, looking thoughtful—as if he still can't quite wrap his head around the fact that there's a woman alive who turned him down.

"You know," I say flippantly, "she probably didn't want to get involved with a man who not only takes his cat on vacation but dresses to match him."

Eric scowls and gives Charles an extra pet, probably worried I hurt the poor guy's feelings. "He's *your* cat."

I flash him a brilliant smile. "Yeah, but she doesn't know that."

"Stop picking on the Bunny." Jonathan sets his hand on the small of my back, directing me through the airport.

Stopping abruptly, I give him a pointed look, ignoring the amusement that crosses his face as he gets the point and removes his hand.

He just doesn't understand that we can't make this public. No one and *nothing* can know that we're...well, I don't know what we are. But whatever it is, it must stay under wraps.

Eric calls a cab, and by midnight, we've checked into our rooms. That's right—*rooms*. Plural.

I get one all to myself, which means none of Jonathan's crap invading my bathroom space. None of his clothes taking up prime real estate in the tiny closet. No one crawling into bed with me in the middle of the night when a fake ghost makes its rounds at three in the morning... Not that I'm expecting a ghost here. Obviously.

And that last one was totally a perk, even if it sounded like a con.

We end up on the eleventh floor of The Mediterranean. The hallway ends in a carpet-to-ceiling window, and Vegas lights up the night.

“What is it with criminal Aparians and casinos?” I muse out loud. First Tahoe, now Vegas.

“Hmm...free alcohol, loose morals, humans throwing away money, no clocks or concept of time,” Eric drawls. “Yep, I have no idea what draws your Foxy comrades.”

I laugh and follow them to our rooms. “So you think it’s a Fox?”

Jonathan looks at me over his shoulder. “Sweetheart, it’s pretty much always a Fox.”

“But why would a Fox want to drain Peacocks of their magic? What purpose would it serve?”

Though magic can be extracted, it’s a tricky substance. It’s a tangible thing, viscous in its raw state, but it’s not like you can drink it and assimilate the power—it would likely just kill you at full strength. Metalsmiths of old were able to enchant with it, manipulate it into their alloys. But how else could it be used? Just the thought of working with it is barbaric.

“That is an excellent question,” Jonathan answers. “One we will answer after we’ve all gotten some sleep.”

“Beauty sleep,” I tease. “Someone has to look his best for his modeling debut tomorrow.”

Jonathan scowls. Honestly, I’m surprised. I thought he’d love the attention, but he’s not feeling it right now. I think he’d rather let me practice my stun gun skills on him, to tell you the truth.

*Stun gun.*

I close my eyes, silently groaning. I left my only weapon at Eric and Jonathan’s condo.

“Keep the adjoining door unlocked in case you need us,” Eric says as I stop at my door.

“I will,” I say, shaking my head, still unable to believe I could be that careless.

“We can leave it open, too, if it would make you feel better,” he adds.

When I look over to assure him I'll be fine, I realize he's talking to Charles. Rolling my eyes, I slide the card key in the lock, forgoing my magic because it's late and I'm tired, and step inside when it beeps.

The Mediterranean is a nice hotel, and I'm sure their suites would be lovely. This budget room is fine too, I suppose. Certainly nicer than the motel in Glenwood.

The lights are already on, but the curtains are open to the night. Two queen-sized beds lie in the middle of the room, complete with white sheets, white pillows, and a white bed cover. Everything is inviting but sterile, which suits me fine—I'd rather they douse everything in bleach after every guest. Personally, I don't need to experience a bed bug infestation. I already have plenty of pests to deal with.

As is fitting for the name of the casino, there are a few Italian touches here and there, including an art print depicting a beach lined with old, brightly colored houses on a rocky hill.

There's a small table in the corner with a lamp and a chair, and then a bureau and a medium-sized flat screen television across the wall.

Jonathan steps in behind me. "I should check the room."

"For what?" I ask, scooting my suitcase to the corner. "To see if they left me enough towels?"

The main door closes behind Jonathan. He opens the small closet and then checks the bathroom.

"Seriously," I say, growing slightly nervous. "*What* are you looking for?"

Done with his sweep, he leans against the wall and crosses his arms. "I just want to be cautious after what happened in Redstone."

I can't fault Jonathan for that. Trent set the whole thing up to mess with my team and me. How do we know he's not behind this assignment as well?

"What is it?" Jonathan asks when a guilty look crosses my face.

“My stun gun—I left it at your place. I didn’t take it with us when we went to my house for dinner, and then I didn’t think about it before we left for Denver.”

“It’s all right,” he says. “You’ll have one of us with you the entire time we’re here anyway.”

I nod, but I’m still mad at myself. “Are you done checking the room?”

“Yeah.” Jonathan leaves the wall, closing the space between us. “And maybe that was just an excuse anyway.”

“Oh?” My stomach clenches as anticipation mixes with anxiety.

“Maybe I just wanted to get you alone again.”

“Jonathan...” I say, trailing off, my head at war with my heart. No matter how much I want it, this can’t end well.

But my protests are weak, and Jonathan knows it. He catches me around the waist. “Gray will be here tomorrow,” he says, nuzzling the crook of my neck.

“Why are you telling me that now?” I mumble. Goodness, he smells delicious for midnight.

He pulls back, meeting my eyes. “It’s going to be difficult to keep this from him when he’s here.”

I shrug, asking him to get to his point.

“Why are we hiding it?” he finally asks, sounding a bit frustrated—like he’s been thinking about this for the last several hours. “It’s not like we were subtle in Redstone.”

I might have kissed him in front of the team. Once. But in my defense, I was terrified he was going to die.

“Jonathan,” I say, unable to hold in a weary sigh. “I don’t think this is a good idea.”

He goes still, his arms and body becoming rigid around me. “You mean that.”

His tone is different—incredulous and surprised. And it hits me: he read the truth in my words. Let me tell you—

sometimes it's a real pain having feelings for a Griffon.

"I like you," I say quickly, hoping he reads that too. "But \_\_\_"

"Please do not finish that by telling me, *again*, that you're worried about my safety. That's what this is, isn't it? Just like after our confrontation with the imps."

"But I *am* worried about your safety." I stand straighter, stepping out of his arms.

The knight turns away, running a hand through his hair. "This is ridiculous. I'm here to protect you—not the other way around."

"Jonathan...you're a Griffon."

Slowly, he turns. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"You're..." *Don't say helpless.* "Not equipped to deal with shadow creatures."

"And Rafe is?"

The question takes me completely by surprise, and I blink at him. "What does this have to do with Rafe?"

Jonathan growls into his hands and then walks to the door, rolling his shoulders as if he's suddenly sore. "I don't know."

"Jonathan..."

The knight opens our connecting door and then knocks on the one that's still closed. In a moment, Eric appears on the other side.

"Hey, did you see the—" The Bunny stops abruptly when he notices the looks on our faces.

"It's safer if you leave the adjoining doors open," Jonathan says sternly as he stalks past Eric. "See you in the morning."

Eric widens his eyes, silently asking me what happened. Irritated with just about everything, I shake my head and turn toward the bathroom—the only place in the room I can hide. A



few minutes later, I step under the hot shower spray and do my best to forget the entire exchange.

THERE'S no amount of caffeine in the world that can make me look awake this morning. I spent the whole night tossing and turning, not only stressing over the mess with the shadow creatures but worrying about my argument with Jonathan too.

“Hey, Maddie,” Eric calls to me from the adjoining room. “Come here.”

Too tired to care that I'm in the middle of brushing my teeth, I wander into the room, toothbrush and all. The television is on a news station. The newscaster appears to be just finishing up her spiel, but at the bottom of the screen, the text states that the mysterious animal remains found in Redstone, Colorado were identified as coyotes.

*What?*

“The guild dealt with that quickly,” Eric says. “Poor coyotes. They get blamed for everything—they're really quite sensitive creatures, too. Vicious at times, but sensitive.”

I roll my eyes as I walk into the guys' bathroom to rinse my mouth, and then I step out. "What about the fire?"

"Ninety percent contained. And other than the mansion, no houses were destroyed. The deaths were all reported as being caused by the fire, too."

The guild has been busy.

I glance around the tiny room and quickly find something to be amiss. "Where's Jonathan?"

"He went to get coffee." Eric flips the television off. "That must have been one heck of a couple's spat you two had last night. He's still brooding."

I blink. "We're not..."

Eric raises a single brow.

Huffing out a breath, I flop onto one of their beds. "I ended it, okay?"

"Why?" he asks, looking more curious than concerned.

"Because..." I shrug. "It was the right thing to do."

The knight watches me for far too long before he finally says, "Okay."

Thankfully, my new phone rings from the other room. I stand, leaving Eric and his judgy eyes.

"Rafe," I breathe as soon as I answer. "Where are you?"

I texted him yesterday to let him know about the job, but he never answered—which is very unlike him.

"San Francisco."

"Have you found anything?"

"Not yet." Then, without so much as a pause, he asks, "What happened last night?"

I step into the bathroom and sit on the edge of the tub, toeing the door shut. "Nothing. We checked into our hotel. Jonathan is supposed to be at the convention by eight."

"Something happened," he presses, his tone too knowing.

I exhale slowly and let my head fall back. “We’re states apart. How did you feel that?”

“I’m not sure—it was just a twinge, but it was there. What you were feeling must have been pretty strong.”

“Jonathan and I got into an argument,” I admit, rubbing my eyes just before I remember I already put on mascara.

Great, now I’m going to be an Obsidian raccoon.

“You didn’t tell him what you told me, did you?” he asks.

“Maybe.”

“*Lexie.*”

“I know.” I sniff. “He didn’t take it well.”

Rafe chuckles, but at least it’s an *almost* sympathetic sound.

“Yeah, so here’s the thing,” I say, clearing my throat. “I kind of miss you smothering me. What if you just forget this pixie stuff and come to Vegas?”

“I can’t do that.”

I study the tile. “You could though.”

Since June, Rafe has been with me constantly. I didn’t realize I’d miss him, but I do.

“I’m sorry you’re hurting,” he says gently. “And I wish I could be there for you, but this is for the best. I trust the team to take care of you. I, however, don’t trust myself.”

And for the first time, I get it. This Obsidian magic is a heavy burden.

“Be careful, okay?”

“You too,” he says. “Don’t have too much fun.”

“I’m going to a fashion expo. What’s fun about that?”

With a laugh, he says goodbye, and we hang up. And here I am in the empty bathroom, staring at the floor, feeling more alone than ever.

A few seconds later, my phone vibrates with a text. I open it, and a smile creeps over my face. Rafe sent me a cat GIF.

I'm just trying to decide if I'm going to send one back when there's a knock at the bathroom door.

"You have your own bathroom, Jonathan," I say, trying to keep my tone light. "I don't have to share this trip."

"I have coffee," he says.

Setting my phone aside, I slowly open the door. I'm so uncomfortable; I can't even look him in the eye, so I go back to the mirror and do damage control on the mascara smudges.

Thank goodness it's not too bad. I'll go for a smoky look with a little extra eyeshadow and call it good. The blueish smudges under my eyes are a different story, however. No amount of concealer is going to hide those bags—not that it matters since my good stuff was destroyed in the fire anyway.

I really need to get some sleep.

Jonathan sets the white paper cup in front of me. "Latte with an extra shot and a touch of raw sugar."

Our eyes meet in the mirror, and my stomach twists.

The knight gives me a smile, but it's sad around the edges. All I want to do is press myself against him, hold him like there's nothing keeping us apart. Why couldn't I be a normal Fox? The kind of Fox who could fall for her Griffon teammate. The kind who's despised because people worry she's going to swipe their wallet and *not* because they think she's going to take over the world.

"Thank you," I murmur, taking a sip of the drink.

It's perfect. As usual.

"Are you ready?" he asks. "We need to get going."

I glance in the mirror, checking my makeup one last time.

"You look great," he says quietly.

Again, our eyes lock.

"Jonathan—" I say at the same time he says, "Listen."

“You go first.” I turn, needing to look at him even if it’s painful.

“I know we have something here,” he says, his dark eyes on mine. “And I am also quite confident in my skills as a *royal knight marshal*. But...I’ve been thinking most of the night about what you said, and I realized you’re right.”

Wait. What?

*What?*

“My duty is to protect you. If we were together, that would be a distraction.” He looks away. “I should have noticed something was amiss with Will while we were at the mansion—I should have picked up on the clues, but instead, I was too busy looking at *you*. I put you and the team in danger because of my negligence. And the humans...” He shakes his head, looking ill.

This is not at all how this was supposed to go. And the massacre wasn’t Jonathan’s fault—it was mine.

“We weren’t trying to find Trent,” I argue. “We were looking for a murderess.”

“But that’s the problem. *I* should have been looking for Trent as well. We knew he wasn’t going to give up that easily. And sweetheart, I guarantee he’s watching you still.”

A shiver runs down my spine.

“So we agree,” he says, his tone sounding awfully final.

This is good, isn’t it? It’s what I wanted.

My throat begins to close, and I look away. “Yes.”

Standing next to me, he places his hand on my shoulder. It’s warm, comforting, and completely platonic. “We leave in two minutes, okay?”

Nodding, I pick up my coffee and take a sip, hiding all these stupid, messy feelings behind the cup. “Thanks again for this.”

“Always.”

He leaves, and I stare at my tired reflection in the mirror.

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WE FLASH our staff badges to the security outside the convention hall, and the smiling man points to the director of Men's Casualwear. I blink several times, completely starstruck. Sean Luka Don Patrick is six-foot-two inches of masculine fabulousness.

And though the glorious sights of clothing, shoes, makeup, and accessories galore are completely enrapturing, Sean Luka steals all my attention. He spots us and walks our way. I watch him, my heart beating faster as he approaches.

“Are those men's pants?” Eric asks Jonathan under his breath. “Surely he stole those from his sister.”

“Eric!” I hiss.

My eyes rapidly dart over the man's outfit as he approaches, taking in all the details. He's in a navy dress shirt, with the top three buttons undone to show off the dusting of hair along his lean chest. His pants are slim fit, ankle cropped trousers in gray with the slightest hint of a silver sheen, and for shoes he opted for a more casual Derby instead of an Oxford in a sable brown. He wears a simple watch in a matching shade of brown leather on his wrist, and the tether of his staff badge hangs from his front pocket—shamelessly declaring he knows he looks good, and he doesn't have to try.

He used to model, back when he was young, but now he's in his mid-thirties and designs. Apparently, he is also the director of Men's Casualwear. And if he's here, that means his wife is likely here as well. And I won't embarrass myself by gushing, but let's just say I'm a big, *big* fan of Georgette Don Patrick's designs.

“You must be Jonathan,” Sean Luka says as he approaches, offering his hand. “And this is your team? Eric and...” His eyes move to me, and he gives me a crooked grin. “Madeline?”

Jonathan and Eric both shake his hand, and then it's my turn. I firmly tell myself to be cool. *Do not embarrass*

*yourself.*

“Mr. Don Patrick,” I say, my voice only a touch too eager. “It’s an honor to be here.”

He cocks his head to the side, taking my offered hand, studying me with a sharp eye. “You, my dear, are lovely. Is that blouse a Carla Brixon? You look fabulous in coral.”

“It is and thank you.”

*Sean Luka Don Patrick likes my blouse.*

“May I formally introduce you to Madeline Bennet, Lord Bennet’s daughter,” Jonathan interrupts, looking like he doesn’t particularly care for the way the man still clings to my hand.

Wait just a minute. Sean Luka Don Patrick is Aparian?

The director’s eyes widen, and he gives me a wink. “I had no idea we’d be graced with such illustrious company. Miss Bennet, the honor is mine.”

And I can’t help myself. “Is your wife in attendance today?” I blurt out.

He glances over his shoulder, scanning the crowd of fashionable worker bees as they prep to open the expo. “She’s here somewhere.” He looks back, smiling. “Would you like to meet her?”



STRUCK POSITIVELY MUTE, I nod.

“Let’s see if we can track her down.” Then, back to business, Sean Luka turns to Jonathan and Eric. “Our local chapter of the Knights’ Guild has assured me your team is the best in the business. I’m excited to see your work.”

He releases me and waves us forward, into the heart of the convention center. I trail like an eager-to-please puppy.

“We’ve found you a suitable wardrobe using the measurements the guild sent over,” the director says to Jonathan. “You’ll have seven wardrobe changes and stage appearances each day—nothing fussy. The rest of the time, you’ll simply hang out in Men’s Activewear.”

“Like a living mannequin,” Eric interrupts, his tone snarky enough I notice, but not quite so over the top Sean Luka picks up on it.

“Exactly,” the director says, fully oblivious.

Jonathan flashes Eric a warning look that almost makes me laugh. I might have trouble holding it in if it weren't for the fact that we're entering Women's Eveningwear, and I have better things to dwell on.

We pass through several heavy black curtains that section off the restricted area and end up in a space lit with freestanding lights so bright, they make stadium lights look puny in comparison. There are dozens upon dozens of people back here, many of them models in various states of half-dress.

I turn to the guys, ready to tell them to keep their eyes where they belong, and almost laugh out loud when I see the two of them eying the floor—both looking like they're ready to make a hasty exit. I don't know if it's the hustle and bustle of rolling carts filled to the brim with gorgeous clothing, the haze of hairspray that lingers in the air, or the semi-undressed women making them uncomfortable, but it's nice to see them out of their comfort zone for once.

But I don't have long to enjoy it because there, in black slacks, three-inch stilettos, and a sleeveless white blouse, is Georgette Don Patrick. She's facing a seated model, her knee casually up on a stool as she speaks with a woman next to her, gesturing toward the model almost as if giving a lesson.

Jonathan leans close and says under his breath, “She's a Peacock.”

So Georgette is Aparian too.

When the designer sees her husband approaching, she hands the eager-to-please makeup artist the brush and shadow pallet and turns our way. She's as beautiful as you'd expect a Peacock to be, about thirty but looking closer to twenty-five, with long blond hair in perfectly behaving waves, a simple gold tennis bracelet adorning her wrist, and a lanyard about her neck declaring her designer status—setting her apart from the flock of underlings.

“Darling,” Sean Luka says, sliding his arm around her back, “May I introduce you to Eric, Jonathan, and Madeline—Gray Tate’s team. Madeline wanted to meet you.”

The designer turns her eyes on me, and her smile grows. “Did you?”

I’ve never been one of those girls who would get all fluttery and emotional if they bumped into a hot Hollywood bad boy, but can I tell you what meeting Georgette is doing to my pulse? This woman is a genius. Several of my teen years were spent dreaming about designing, and I obsessively studied her early work.

I try my best to think of something witty and clever to say, but everything that flits through my head would make me sound like an obsessed stalker.

In the end, Georgette saves me. “Would you like to see a few pieces from the upcoming spring lineup?”

Um, yes.

“That would be great,” I say coolly, while inside, I’m squealing like a groupie.

She gestures for me to follow her. We end up in front of a rack of gowns that make me want to model so badly I can hardly see straight. I itch to touch the fabric, but I don’t dare. Georgette has none of my qualms, and she takes the pieces out and tells me about each, one by one.

“Ms. Don Patrick?” the girl Georgette was speaking with earlier says, clearing her throat, sounding like she’s reluctant to interrupt. “Do you want to check Hallie’s makeup before she goes on stage? There are some areas still giving me trouble.”

Georgette gives the girl a soft smile, slips the gown back on the hanger, and waves me forward as if I should come along.

“Poor girl,” Georgette whispers so only I can hear, subtly motioning to the waiting model. “Her magic was swiped last week—she must have cried for three days straight.”

I snap my attention forward, scrutinizing the sitting woman. She still has her height, her bone structure, and her lithe figure, but there is something a little off about her. There's the slightest hint of a shadow under her eyes, and a tiny blemish mars her jaw. No human would ever notice—but a Peacock is perfection in the flesh.

“She’s still modeling?” I ask.

Georgette hums. “She’s quite pretty, even if not as stunning as she was, and we don’t have a choice—we need these girls.” When we reach the model, Georgette offers her a warm smile. “You look lovely.”

The woman looks down, staring at her hands.

Georgette scrutinizes her, pursing her lips. “Your skin’s a bit blotchy though.”

The designer turns to the nearby table and pokes through a collection of cosmetics, tiny tubs of creams, and various bottles of lotions and sprays. Finding what she’s looking for, she ever-so-carefully dabs thick cream under the model’s eyes.

“Have you tried this?” she says to me absently, handing me the nearly empty tub when she’s finished. “It’s amazing.”

I take the jar, glance at the label—it’s a brand called Chaletta—and then sniff it. The cream has a pleasant scent, though I can’t place it. Something floral maybe. Kind of sweet. “I think I saw it in a magazine last week,” I tell her. “You like it?”

“Oh, yes.” Georgette goes back to the table and chooses a loose powder and brush. “Try some if you like—the company is one of our sponsors.”

I turn to a mirror and frown at my reflection. The skin under my eyes is several shades darker than the model’s. I wonder if this is Georgette’s subtle way of telling me I need a little help. I swipe a tiny spoon from the collection on the table and dip into the remaining cream, taking out a pea-sized amount.

It’s cool against my skin, as soothing as a spa treatment.

After I'm finished, I turn back to Georgette, who's just finishing up with the model's makeup.

"What do you think?" Georgette asks the woman, holding up a hand mirror.

The Peacock sighs, apparently pleased with her reflection. "Thank you so much, Georgette." She motions toward the makeup and the cream. "Where can I buy all that?"

I let out a little breathy gasp when Georgette lowers the mirror, revealing the Peacock. The dark circles are gone, and the blemish has disappeared. The model looks as amazing as a model should.

Georgette laughs at the look on my face and points at the tub of cream. "I told you. Good, right? Supposedly, there are rare Tasmanian botanicals in there, but I think the immediate brightening effect is thanks to microscopic mica particles that catch the light."

"Huh," I so brilliantly say, looking at the miracle-working cream with new interest.

"There's not much left, but take it with you if you'd like," the designer says, waving her hand. "I have plenty."

I glance back in the mirror. Sadly, I don't look like a model, but I do believe my under-eye skin tone appears a little more even. "Thanks," I say, dropping the tub into my purse.

A man with a massive watch and a scowl announces it's time to begin the next stage show, and Georgette leads me back to Jonathan and Eric.

"It was a pleasure to meet you," I tell her, reluctant to leave. Just give me a headset and clipboard, and I'll stay right here.

Sadly, even if Georgette went for it, the guys certainly wouldn't—thank you very much, Trent.

"All right," Sean Luka says when I return. "Let's get Jonathan to wardrobe."

I give the Griffon an encouraging smile, but he only shakes his head, looking like he wishes some other team had been

saddled with this case.

Just as we reach the geometric black arch that proudly proclaims we've arrived in the men's area, a blond-haired woman runs right for Sean Luka—an impressive feat in her four-inch stilettos. “Kenneth just fell off the stage,” she says, breathless, clutching a clipboard to her chest. “He tripped over a box of donuts and broke his leg. The paramedic took him away just a few minutes ago.”

“Who in their right mind would bring donuts into the convention?” Sean Luka demands. “Were any of the clothes destroyed, Sienna?”

“No, thank goodness....but we are down a model.”

Half a moment passes, and then, like synchronized swimmers, Sean Luka and the crazy woman turn to Jonathan. The Griffon takes a step back, already shaking his head. Before Sean Luka can make any suggestions, the woman's eyes slide to Eric—and there they stay.

“Hello,” she says, her voice deepening in a lusty way that I find mighty disturbing. “And who are you?”

“Modeling agent,” Eric barks out immediately. He holds his hands up as if to add, “Don't get any ideas, lady.”

“He's with Gray's team,” Sean Luka explains.

“I want him,” Sienna purrs, practically undressing poor Eric with her eyes. “He's perfect.”

“No.” Eric shakes his head. To Sean Luka, he says, “We have a job to do—you only get to dress up one of us, and that's not me.”

The woman looks back at Sean Luka, pleading. The director studies Eric. “He could pass for a Peacock as easily as Jonathan.”

“Oh, *easily*,” Jonathan leaps in, his face lighting with pure mischief. “Eric is the embodiment of all things Peacock. Look at him—he's the Grecian ideal of masculine perfection.”

“Jonathan,” Eric growls.

“And that *height*,” Jonathan continues, zeroing in on Sienna, schmoozing her in a way only he could pull off well.

I watch, amused by the turn of events.

“I suppose if it’s all right with the team, it’s up to you,” Sean Luka finally says, turning back to the harried woman. “Which do you want?”

“Now you wait just a minute—” Eric begins.

Before he can finish, a pint-sized woman dressed in black leggings, a gray fitted T-shirt, and super cute silver ballet flats walks up saying, “Sorry to interrupt, Mr. Don Patrick, but we...” She trails off when she spots us and narrows her eyes at Eric. “You again.”

Oddly, the Squirrel from the plane doesn’t look as surprised to see us as we are to see her.

“Are you acquainted?” Sean Patrick asks.

“Not officially,” she replies.

“Then allow me to introduce you.” Sean Patrick extends his hand our way. “Jonathan, Eric, and Madeline are part of Gray Tate’s team of knight marshals.”

He says it like the guys are famous. And who knows—maybe they are. I have no idea.

Sean Patrick continues, “And this is Chloe Rivers. She and a few of her fellow technicians are here from Denver.”

“You’re with the surveillance group Gray hired?” Eric blurts out without the slightest hint of tact.

Chloe stands a little straighter, her bright green eyes narrowing. “Technically, the *Knights’ Guild* hired us to add another layer of surveillance equipment, not Gray. But I suppose Gray chose us, yes.”

“What do the humans think of all this extra fuss?” I ask, feeling the need to change the subject.

“We’ve hired a Wolf to smooth ruffled feathers,” Sean Luka says flippantly.

Oh great. Another Wolf.

“A Fox might have been more efficient for this sort of thing,” he goes on, “but you never know if they’ll rob you blind.”

I barely resist the urge to roll my eyes, and I probably wouldn’t be able to help myself if Rafe were here.

Before they say something else that might lead me to get myself into trouble, a female voice calls out, “Eric!”

We all swivel, and there’s Sara-from-the-park, heading our way in a short skirt that shows off her model-long legs. She grins, eyeing the knight in the same way a lioness sizes up a zebra. “What are you doing here?”

Eric freezes—apparently he forgot Sara was working the expo. He looks oddly nervous, like he’s not as pleased to see her as she is to see him.

“Hey, Sara,” he says, looking shocked when the woman hugs him—and clings to him like a koala.

Chloe watches the scene, looking mildly put out. She rolls her eyes and says something under her breath that sounds vaguely like, “*Peahens.*”

I nearly laugh out loud because I’ve never heard someone use the correct term for the female of the animal species when referring to the faction. The Squirrel catches the amusement that crosses my face, and she gives me a hesitant smile.

After a moment, Eric pries the woman off his chest. “We’re working, actually. We found out we were chosen for the job a few hours after we saw you in the park yesterday.”

“That’s great.” She flashes him a knowing smile and crooks a brow. “Think we can get that drink later?”

Pretty sure the offer is for a drink *and* dessert.

“Oh.” And just like that, Eric’s eyes dart to Chloe. It’s only for a fraction of a second, but I catch it nonetheless. “I don’t know. We’ll have to see how it goes?”



“Okay.” Sara runs her hand down his arm, giving him a coy smile. “You have my number if you find yourself with some free time.”

Unable to contain her revulsion any longer, Chloe scoffs under her breath, which of course, causes the Peacock to turn her way. Without a word, Sara looks back at Eric and laughs. Before he realizes what she’s up to, she stands on her tiptoes and presses a kiss to his lips.

“Talk to you later,” she purrs, and then she turns on her heel and saunters away.

Eric stares after her with his mouth hanging open, trying to figure out what just happened.

“We were just discussing the accident,” Sienna says to Chloe, dismissing the entire exchange. “Eric is going to take Kenneth’s place.”

The Squirrel is about to say something, but she snaps her mouth shut. Her eyes sweep over the knight and narrow incredulously. “*You’re* taking Kenneth’s place? The guy who just crashed?”

“That’s right,” Eric says after a long moment, squaring his shoulders—stepping up to the challenge in her voice.

The smirk she flashes Eric should scare him. “Really?”

What has he gotten himself into?

“What about his cat?” Chloe asks Sienna innocently, though there’s some serious sarcasm in the undertone. “Are you going to hire it too? You were just talking this morning about that shoot Collette Cole did with the donkey.”

“Cat?” Sienna asks, glancing at Eric.

At the same time, Sean Luka says, “No cats! The last thing I want is hair all over the clothing. What a nightmare.”

“He’s hairless,” Jonathan of all people pipes up.

Sean Luka pauses, slowly turning to Jonathan. “Hairless?”

“Charles is a Sphynx,” I explain when Jonathan looks at me for clarification, though I don’t like where this

conversation is headed.

“Interesting,” Sean Luka muses.

*What* is going on?

“I want him,” Sean Luka suddenly decides. “Bring him while we get Eric settled.”

I begin to shake my head. “I don’t think—”

Jonathan grins, happily cutting me off. “Of course.”

“Do you think I get a say in this?” I ask Jonathan quietly as Sean Luka informs Eric of his new duties.

“Do *you* want to tell Sean Luka no?” Jonathan asks me.

No, I sure don’t.

“Then let’s get Charles,” he says. “And besides—the cat will be thrilled to spend the afternoon with Eric.”

This is the most ridiculous idea, but I reluctantly agree. Together, Jonathan and I leave the convention hall, off to fetch Charles.

“Are you all right with the new arrangement?” I ask Jonathan as we step onto the elevator that will take us to the main floor of the hotel.

He glances over, surprised by the question. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You’re not even a little disappointed Sienna chose Eric?” I study the framed posters on the walls as the lift slowly begins its descent. They advertise a smattering of fine dining options and gourmet buffets. Wrinkling my nose, I look away from the last ad for a show featuring scantily clad women dressed in feathers, sequins, and what I assume to be very reliable double-sided tape.

“It might make our job a little more difficult,” Jonathan admits, “as Eric won’t be able to look for magic in the people lurking near the models. But it will give me a chance to wander the convention.”

We're near the pool entrance when a funny look crosses his face. He stops, reading the hours of operation sign.

"What are you doing?" I ask him.

He loops his arm around my shoulders, drawing me awfully close. In my ear, he murmurs, "I think we're being followed."

My first impulse is to turn, but I hold still, staring at the sign with Jonathan.

"Come on," he says under his breath. "Let's keep going."

I press the "up" button when we reach the elevator that goes to our room tower. The moment I attempt to look over my shoulder, Jonathan says, "No, don't. Let him get closer so I can get a look at his face."

"You didn't see him? How do you know there's someone back there?"

"I felt his magic. He followed us out of the convention and showed up just after we exited the elevator."

"What faction?"

"I'm not sure."

The door opens, and Jonathan ushers me inside. He smiles, acting casual, but I can tell he's using this opportunity to look at the people nearby. Right before the doors close, a man reaches out, stopping the lift.

"That was close." He flashes us an artificially white smile. Then to me, he says, "Hit ten for me, will you?"

I press the button, and my heart begins to thrum.

The man is about four inches taller than Jonathan, close to Eric's height, and almost as broad-shouldered. He wears a beige sportscoat that clashes with his orange-hued spray tan, and the fabric does a poor job of concealing the slight bulge at his hip. The bump could be anything—huge cell phone, bulky side fanny pack, or a massive ring of keys.

But if I were to take a guess, I'd say it's a gun.

I STEP a little closer to Jonathan, practically kicking myself for forgetting my stun gun.

The man glances over, giving us another smile, and then nods toward our badges. “You here for the fashion convention?”

“That’s right,” Jonathan says.

“Yeah? Cool.” He quickly runs his eyes over us, all friendly like, but it seems like he’s sizing us up. “What do you do?”

“I’m a modeling agent,” Jonathan says smoothly, picking up Eric’s previous cover. “And this is my assistant.”

I force a smile.

“You have a model in the expo?” he asks. “Or are you scouting?”

“Both.”

The man nods several times, and then the conversation dies off. I hadn't noticed the casino's elevator music before, but now it sounds like it's blaring.

Finally, we reach the tenth floor. With a ping alerting us we've arrived, the door slides open. The man bids us a casual farewell, his eyes lingering on me for a moment too long, and then we're alone.

I brace myself against the back wall. Once the doors are closed and we're moving again, I press my hand to my chest and take a deep breath. “Well? Was that the guy following us?”

“I'm not sure, but he *was* Aparian,” Jonathan answers.

“Faction?”

He gives me a pointed look. “Urocyan.”

*Fox.*

“At least he didn't follow us to our floor,” I say, wondering if we're being a tiny bit jumpy. Sure, the man was a Fox. Sure, he was acting peculiar, and it looked like he was hiding a gun...

Never mind. I forgot where I was going with this.

“Yeah,” Jonathan answers, “but he saw our floor number on the lift.”

Jonathan opens the door to his and Eric's room, and I walk inside, passing through the adjoining door to my side.

“I don't suppose you have an extra gun lying around, do you?” I ask, mostly joking. Mostly.

“Gray would murder me if I gave you a gun.”

I glance back. “You know, I'm a grown woman. I could just buy my own.”

He crosses his arms, giving me a cocky smile. “True, but it takes a few days—and it would set off the metal detectors.”

I wave his concern away, though we both know I'm not serious. "I'd just persuade the guard to let me through."

"You've certainly been embracing your magic the last few days, haven't you?" he says with a laugh.

I turn to him, wondering how he feels about that. "Technically, taking Charles out of the crate on the plane was *your* idea. And Rafe told me to practice."

A shadow flickers across his face when I mention my knight—but it's only there for one moment before it disappears. "You can't control it if you don't know how to wield it," he finally agrees.

"Don't you have your gun and dagger?" I ask, feeling it's best to return to our original subject. "They didn't set off the detector."

"They're charmed."

I almost ask where he's hiding them, and then I realize I probably don't want to know.

"So," he says when it gets a little too quiet. "You can cloak other people? That's...different."

My chest tightens, and I look away. We haven't talked about what happened in my bedroom with my parents yesterday. Jonathan saw it all, my most vulnerable moment, and we chose to pretend it didn't happen—focused instead on what happened *after* my parents left the room. Until now.

"Jonathan..."

I'm not ready to talk about it. I love my family, and I have no doubt they love me. But I... I don't know how I feel. They stole me. Obviously, I am grateful they believed I should have a chance to live. But they knew who I was—knew I wasn't an orphan at all. Did their noble motives excuse the crime? I can't process it yet.

Sensing I'm not ready for this, Jonathan says, "We should probably find your cat."

"Right," I say, relieved.

I look around, wondering where Charles got to. I call his name and check the windowsill. When I turn back, I find Jonathan scowling at himself in the mirror, angling his head as if studying his hair.

“What are you doing?” I ask, making him jump.

He turns sharply, an embarrassed look on his face. “Nothing.”

“Right.” I walk to him. “What’s wrong with your hair?”

“It’s fine.” His expression tells me to drop it, but of course I’m not going to.

Studying him, I cross my arms. When it hits me, a laugh bubbles out, impossible to hold back. “You’re worried it’s falling out.”

The Deer in Dillon warned that the healing concoction we forced down Jonathan’s throat after the imp attack might cause certain side-effects—hair loss being one of them. But the chance was slim, and Jonathan’s hair is so thick, a person would never notice even if he lost some of it.

“A bit vain, are we?” I tease.

He shakes his head, and an irritated almost-smile tugs at his lips. “No.”

I take several steps forward, grasp hold of his chin, and angle his head so I can get a better look. “It looks fine.”

Better than fine, actually. Jonathan has great hair. My fingers itch to run through it. What would he do if I gave in to that impulse? My stomach flutters, and my mind drifts to far more appealing places to touch than the Griffon’s hair. For example, his shoulders, arms, chest, stomach...

“Madeline,” Jonathan says, reading my thoughts through the physical connection, his voice strained.

I drop my hand like I was burned.

“I’ll just...get Charles,” I say after a moment.

He nods, looking as if he’s already regretting our agreement from this morning. I certainly am, though I know

it's for the best.

If I have to sternly remind myself of that several times an hour, then so be it.

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“I REALLY DON'T LIKE THIS,” I say to Jonathan as we tote Charles to the convention hall. The cat isn't too pleased either. He was sleeping, dreaming of catnip mice and enjoying the peace and quiet, when we went and woke him up.

All those people who say you should let a sleeping dog lie haven't disturbed a sleeping Sphinx. You might be able to get away with rousing Fifi, but don't wake Charles unless you want to lose a hand.

The cat is ticked.

We end up in an elevator with a nice older couple. They pretend not to notice the yowling, but Charles is bound and determined to be heard. After several awkward floors, he decides to get all kinds of creative and starts slamming his body against the side of his carrier.

Jonathan adjusts his hold on the crate and ignores the racket. As soon as the doors open to the main level, the couple makes a hasty exit into the lobby.

“That was fun,” Jonathan says.

To which I feel the need to remind him, “This was your idea.”

We're almost back to the convention hall when my phone pings with a text. I look at the screen, expecting it to be Rafe. It's not.

“Gray just landed at the airport,” I tell Jonathan.

Jonathan thinks about it for a second and then nods.

“What's wrong?” I ask.

“He texted you first.”

“Is that a problem?”

“No,” Jonathan says with a laugh. “It's just...something.”



“What?” We’re almost to the entrance, so I tug him to a stop. The event opened to the public about ten minutes ago, and it’s already looking like a madhouse inside.

A frustrated smile crosses Jonathan’s face before he reluctantly meets my eyes. “Madeline, he still has feelings for you.”

“Yes, I’m aware. He *feels* he should probably murder me before I plunge the world into complete and utter darkness.” I set my hands on my hips. “He was pretty determined to kill me, remember?”

“He wouldn’t have done it.”

“If you were so sure, why did you pull a dagger on him?”

“I...” He looks away, shaking his head.

“No, tell me.”

“It was a warning, nothing else.” Jonathan frowns at the crate as Charles loudly protests his entrapment once more. “And I suppose I felt the need to proclaim my loyalty.”

My heart stutters before it begins to ache anew. “Are you saying you chose me over Gray?”

Looking acutely uncomfortable—not to mention ridiculously handsome—he shrugs. He clears his throat and then puts on a flippant expression. It’s an act—but it’s almost convincing. “What can I say? You kissed me, and I lost my mind.”

I should walk away, let this go, especially after what happened in the room not fifteen minutes ago. But I just can’t bring myself to take that first step. “That kiss was your fault.”

His dark eyes meet mine, shining with amusement. Dropping his voice, keen to play along, he asks, “How do you figure?”

“I think your exact words were, ‘I want to try something.’”

He chuckles lightly, shoving his free hand in his pocket, still carrying Charles with the other, and takes a step in. “That’s not the kiss I’m talking about.”

Oh—he means the one on the balcony. The one where there was no shield between us, where I unknowingly opened my thoughts to him, gave him full access, and he saw too much.

Just the memory makes me self-conscious and jittery, like a girl around her first crush.

Charles lets out another yowl, and Jonathan gives me a grim smile. “We should get in there.”

“Right.”

He raises an eyebrow when I don’t move.

After a moment, I force myself forward, through security, and into the convention hall. We find Sean Luka in Men’s Casualwear, but there’s no sign of Eric.

“Is this it?” Sean Luka motions to the crate.

“*Its* name is Charles,” I inform him.

Jonathan grimaces when Charles hisses yet again. “If you want to meet him, you best let Eric take him out. He’s not in a great mood.”

Sean Luka laughs. “Is Eric some kind of cat whisperer?”

“Worse,” Jonathan deadpans. “He’s a Rabbit.”

The director’s eyebrows shoot up. “Are you serious? I thought he was a Bull.”

It’s an honest mistake considering Bulls, the Taurus faction, are gifted with size and strength.

“Nope, he’s a Bunny Hugger,” Jonathan answers as he looks around. “Where is he anyway?”

“In Underwear.”

Jonathan jerks his attention back to the director. “What?”

“He’s in Underwear,” Sean Luka repeats slowly as if concerned Jonathan might be hard of hearing. “Specifically, he’s modeling for Camilla Hayden’s line. He took Kenneth’s place—I’m sorry, weren’t you here for that discussion?”

I glance at Jonathan only to find him gaping at Sean Luka. “You have a royal knight marshal modeling *underwear*? Say he finds the culprit, do you expect him to take chase while naked?”

And I’m sorry, but I laugh. I mean, how could I not? You try to get that visual out of your head.

“He’s not naked.” Sean Luka bristles. “Honestly, there’s no need to be vulgar about it.”

He then gestures for us to follow him through the crowded space. After we’ve woven past Men’s Accessories, we end up outside an arch claiming to be the entrance to various collections of men’s loungewear, sleepwear, and underwear.

“Eric’s going to kill you for getting him into this,” I whisper to Jonathan as we navigate the crowded area.

Jonathan chuckles—a highly amused sound. “Better him than me.”

The crowd gets thicker as we pass several elaborate displays. There seems to be an awful lot of women lingering in the men’s area. An event is live onstage, and I begin to get a bad feeling. A woman’s voice booms over the speaker, pointing out details such as cut and color.

“See,” Sean Luka says when we break through the crowd to the front of the stage. “He’s a natural.”

Eric stands dead center, in a Superman pose, head turned to the side, wearing nothing but a short robe and a scowl.

“Wow,” I say, fully aware that I’m gaping but unable to look away. “Eric’s got seriously toned legs.”

Jonathan chokes back a laugh that he’ll likely pay for later. Eric sees us from the corner of his eye and turns our way, flashing the Griffon a look of pure death.

“What is he wearing?” Jonathan asks me. “Surely that’s not fashionable.”

This year, it looks like they’re pushing floral prints in men’s loungewear. The robe is black satin, covered in huge watercolor roses in shades of mauve and coral. The hem is

crazy short, perhaps because Eric is so tall, and it showcases a pair of thighs that could probably leg press a semi.

To make it worse—if that’s even possible at this point—whoever put that robe on him decided the effect would be even better if there were an eyeful of bare Viking chest for the audience, so they left the top open. The result is a combination of sexy and ridiculous, and seeing it is sort of like staring at a train wreck—you don’t really want to watch, but you can’t seem to look away.

“Sienna tried to put him in boxer briefs instead of sleepwear,” Sean Luka says from my side. “But he refused.”

Unable to help myself, I giggle—earning a sharp look from the man on the stage.

After a few more minutes, Eric leaves the platform, replaced with a model in a full set of pajamas in a print and style identical to Eric’s. I’m not sure if it’s worse, but it’s certainly not better.

Sean Luka leads us behind the stage. Eric stands in his fancy robe, taking a big guzzle from a bottle of sparkling water. He watches us approach, looking just about as unimpressed as a man can be.

“Hey,” I say, offering him a peace-making smile.

Still silent, he levels me with a stare that makes me bite the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing again. Finally, when he does decide to speak, he points the bottle at Jonathan and says, “You owe me.”

Jonathan grins. “Yes, I do.”

Hearing Eric’s voice, Charles lets out a pleading mew. With a big sigh, Eric hands me his bottle and takes the cat’s crate. He places it on a nearby table, pushing aside makeup, coffee cups, safety pins, and a random sewing kit before he pulls Charles out.

A few of the nearby models give him strange looks, but no one comments.

“What do you want to do with him?” Eric asks Sienna, who just came around the corner. She eyes Eric, apparently liking what she sees.

“The cat won’t do well on stage,” she muses, pulling her hand back after Charles takes a swipe at her. “But he’ll look fabulous in photos. What do you think Mr. Don Patrick?”

Sean Luka studies Eric and Charles, slowly nodding. “Yes, I like it.”

Eric rolls his eyes, less of a good sport than usual.

I sidle up next to him and quietly say, “Don’t be too upset. You looked good out there.”

“They’re taking photographic evidence. I will never hear the end of this. I guarantee I’ll be posted on the bulletin board back in the office.”

“Yeah, but did you see that crowd? I’m certain most of the women out there weren’t here to see the sleepwear.”

“Now I just feel cheap,” he says before taking another sip of his sparkling water, but I spot his wry smile.

“Gray is supposed to be here tonight. Maybe he can talk to Sean Luka for you? See if he can move you to activewear?”

“Maybe.”

Another mini-crisis draws the attention of Sienna and Sean Luka, and Jonathan joins us. “See anything unusual yet?”

Eric gives his floral robe a pointed look.

“Other than *that*.” Jonathan rolls his eyes. “And stop whining. This works better anyway—now I’m free to walk the show and take inventory of all the Aparians in attendance. And you’ll have no trouble getting the models to start talking—you’re likable, right?”

Eric only grunts.

Sienna hurries over. “We’re doing photos in five, Eric.”

The harried knight marshal shifts Charles in his arms and rolls his neck, almost like he’s preparing himself for war. “Do

me a favor,” he says to us before he follows Sienna. “Go look at shoes or something. I don’t need you here to further witness my humiliation.”

I lean in to give him a sympathetic hug. At the last moment, I remember what he’s wearing and decide against it, settling for an arm pat instead. “Hang in there.”

Eric grunts and turns away. Jonathan digs a phone from his pocket and hollers Eric’s name. As soon as the Bunny turns, Jonathan snaps a photo. To me, he explains, “You never know when you’re going to need a good blackmail picture.”

“I hate you,” Eric says tonelessly and then follows Sienna through a doorway in the black curtain partition.

I shove my shoulder against Jonathan, silently reprimanding him even though I’m trying not to laugh. Poor Eric.

Jonathan glances over as the announcer makes another introduction, cringing when a scantily clad young fellow makes his way onto the stage.

“What?” I ask.

“There is entirely too much man chest parading around here. I need out of this section.”

Grinning, I grab his arm and pull him toward the exit. Selflessly, I plan to take him to Women’s Accessories. Who knows? Maybe a magic-stealing Fox is hanging out there.

“Do you have any idea how many of the models are Apari —” I begin but am cut off by an ear-piercing shriek.

We whip around, facing the door Eric just entered.

Jonathan takes off at a jog, his gun seeming to appear in his hand out of nowhere. People are already crowding the entrance. Models, agents, and assistants with Bluetooth microphones attached to their heads like fashion accessories all gather together.

“Madeline,” Jonathan reaches back when he realizes I’m not right behind him, beckoning me to follow him into the thickening crowd.

Just that one scream seems to have triggered an immediate response out of the humans. They're like sheep, bleating and shoving.

Jonathan pushes his way through, flashing a badge that I thought he only used as a prop to pick up women. People part for him, their eyes wide. Sienna emerges from the doorway, clutching her stomach. Several of the male models follow her, all of them looking either pale or puce, even under their heavy stage makeup.

Eric appears at the door just as Jonathan shoves his way past the front row of lollygaggers, and the two men nearly collide. The taller knight steps out of the way, and Jonathan swears as he enters the room.

Before I can go in behind Jonathan, Eric blocks my path. "You don't want to see that, Maddie."

But it's too late.

Just inside the changing area, there lies a puddle of black silk pajamas covered in gaudy watercolor roses. All that's left of the model who wore them on stage not five minutes ago is a desiccated corpse. Judging from the way the...skin...lies there like a discarded piece of wrinkly old leather, the recently deceased man's bones must have crumbled or disintegrated or *something* unnatural.

Like a mummy mask, empty eye sockets stare at the ceiling, and a mouth is open with shock—like the model gasped just before he fell dead.

The humans around us mutter to themselves, and several phones are held in the air as they capture the moment like dozens of nosy little members of the paparazzi. Soon the image is going to be all over social media sites, and the guild is going to have some work on their hands.

My phone vibrates, and in a half daze, I answer it.

"I just got through luggage," Gray says. "Did you rent a car? Can someone pick me up or should I get a taxi?"

I pull my eyes away from the body. "We have a bit of a situation."

“What kind of situation?” Gray demands.

Without another word, I hang up my phone, grit my teeth, and snap a picture. Two seconds after I send it, Eric’s phone rings.

“Oh, look.” The Bunny grimaces as he looks at the screen. “It’s Gray.”



THIRTY-EIGHT OF US sit in a small room just off the main conference area, waiting for Gray to begin. Chloe stands with Thomas and Brett, who arrived with Gray only five minutes ago. The trio of techie Squirrels talk amongst themselves, and though they're quiet, all the flailing hand movements lead me to believe their conversation is rather animated.

“Okay, let's get started,” Gray says, calling the room to attention. He stands at the front of the space, his expression unreadable. He has Wolf written all over him, and the crowd obeys so quickly, I almost wonder if he didn't accidentally slip a little persuasion into the words.

Once he captures the attention of his audience, he looks down at a print-off in his hand and gets right to the point. “According to his Massachusetts driver's license, Franklin J. Norton was twenty-seven years old, but our records confirm he was actually born sometime in the eleventh century to a

Cristatus family. He was one of the gifted, and his Peacock magic acted as an Aparian Fountain of Youth of sorts. When his magic was siphoned, his body succumbed to its age.”

The room is silent as we process that.

“Chloe and her team had not yet finished setting up their surveillance equipment in that section, but they have obtained the humans’ recordings. For privacy purposes, they didn’t have cameras in the changing area, so the siphoning wasn’t captured. However, there was a camera positioned at the entrance. Sienna and Sean Luka have watched the footage with Chloe, Thomas, Brett, and me. Approximately two minutes before the incident, an unknown man in a suit entered the changing area, confronted the guard, and slipped inside.

“An hour ago, the guard was found asleep behind one of the clothing racks, unharmed, and has no recollection of the meeting. The recording does not show the man in the suit leaving, but he’s nowhere to be found. Which leads us to believe he’s a shapeshifter.”

I groan under my breath, already knowing what Gray is going to say next.

The Wolf continues, speaking to the whole group, though his eyes lock on mine. “In light of this new information, we now are confident we’re dealing with a *pixie* with a gargoyle venom siphoning charm.”

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“No.” I toss my hands in the air, pacing the guys’ hotel room. They watch me, not yet speaking. “It can’t be Trent. Not again. This is ridiculous—he can’t be everywhere!”

“We don’t think it’s Trent,” Gray says from his spot on the chair in the corner.

I turn to face him. “But we don’t know for certain.”

Gray shakes his head. “Technically, no, but—”

“Wait.” I shift my attention to Jonathan, who leans against the wall. He stands with his arms crossed and his dark eyes

focused on me. “Did you see the surveillance video? Could you read his magic? Is it blocked?”

“I can’t read magic in recordings.”

I bite my tongue, barely trapping in a snarky retort. But seriously, is there a faction as limited as the Griffons?

“Madeline,” Gray says in an obnoxiously calm voice. “I’m nearly positive it’s not Trent.”

“Why?” I set my hands on my hips, challenging him to come up with a good enough reason for me to believe him.

“Because this started while we were still in Redstone—while Trent was posing as the cop.”

Oh. That’s a pretty good reason.

Slowly, I let down my guard and exhale, releasing the tension. “Okay. So it’s just a pixie?”

“This one is, though we have no way of knowing if he’s the only one. Multiple people could have responded to the ad while it was up. But he’s our key to finding the Fox that’s inevitably behind this.”

“Must we always assume it’s a Fox?” I demand, though I know I’m being snippy. “Can’t we just say, I don’t know, *villain*? Bad guy? Perp?”

“Perp?” Gray grins. “Have you been watching 90s cop shows?”

“Shut up.”

“Fine. He’s the link to finding our *perp*.”

I look at Eric for backup, but he’s laughing too. And yep, Jonathan is as well—traitors. Rolling my eyes, deciding to ignore them all, I look back at Gray. “If the pixie is still working, that means he has a way to contact the *person* looking to buy the Peacock magic, right?”

“Exactly.”

For most teams, finding a shape-shifting pixie in Vegas would be worse than searching for a needle in a Mount Everest

of haystacks, but luckily for us, we have a Griffon.

I turn to Jonathan. “Sorry.”

He gives me a questioning frown. “For what?”

“For thinking your faction was kind of worthless when you said you couldn’t read magic in videos.”

He chokes out a laugh, clutching his chest as if wounded. “Your confidence in me is humbling.”

Grinning, I walk into my own room and close the door. It’s after dark, nearly time for dinner. We’re going out to eat, and I should touch up my hair and makeup, but the day has been a blur, and all I want to do is fall on the bed and sleep until morning.

My phone rings as I pause in front of the mirror to check my hair.

“Hi,” I say to Rafe when I answer, attempting to adjust a bobby pin one-handed. We’ve texted back and forth most of the day, a little more frequently after I announced we found a nine-hundred-year-old corpse.

“Learn anything new?” he asks.

“Gray thinks the guy who stole the magic is a pixie.” When Rafe doesn’t immediately answer, I quickly add, “Not Trent.”

I give up on my hair and sit on the edge of the bed. Charles leaps up next to me, stretches, and pads across my lap, demanding love for the first time in days.

“What about you?” I ask. “Have you found anyone who knows how to track someone wearing a *clipeum* medallion?”

“Not yet, but there’s a disturbing amount of talk about you.”

“Me?” I sit up straighter and drop my hand. Disgruntled, Charles head-butts my arm.

“Not you specifically—not that I’m aware of anyway. But the Entitled has noticed the creatures have been coming out of the shadows. They know you’re alive.”

That's not good. The last thing we need is them looking for me. That's the whole reason Rafe disposed of Curtis—so I could live in peace. If the Entitled knows I'm out here somewhere, they'll stop at nothing to find me.

And as awful as that thought is, another one flits in its place: the Entitled might have the information I need—where the thresholds are located. Maybe even how to open them. If I could somehow infiltrate their ranks without them learning who I am...

It's dangerous, too risky.

But how else am I going to figure it out? It's not like I can waltz into the Royal Guild and demand the information. And I can't ask my parents. Jonathan said he'd help me, but where will we start?

"I need you to do me a favor," I say, lowering my voice. "Do you think you can learn the location of several of the thresholds, preferably ones located in the United States?"

"I can," he says immediately, no questions asked, no attempt to talk me out of it.

"So, where are you? You're not actually with the Entitled right now, are you?"

"No." He groans as if stretching. "Not right now."

"You're being careful?"

"Always."

There's something about talking to him that makes our connection feel stronger. I can almost see him standing in a small, somewhat dingy apartment. He wears a black leather jacket, and he's leaning against the wall. The picture is so clear; it takes me by surprise.

"Where are you?" I ask him suddenly.

"San Francisco, same as earlier."

"I know, but where? House? Hotel?"

"An apartment I'm temporarily sharing with the resident roaches."

“What are you wearing?” I demand, trying to ignore the insect bit.

The question takes him by surprise, and when he laughs, there’s a deep hitch in his voice. “Are you sure you want to go there, Lexie?”

I flush, realizing how it must have sounded. “Just humor me.”

“Jeans, shirt...”

“And your leather jacket?” I ask, narrowing my eyes as I realize I can see his expression clearly in my mind, even the questioning look that crosses his face.

He looks down at his clothing and frowns. “Yeah.”

“And your T-shirt is the burnt orange one with the falcon silhouette?”

In my mind, I see him glance at his phone, almost like he’s checking to see if we somehow started a video call and he didn’t realize it. “Yes.”

“I can see you,” I whisper. “You’re standing by an ugly table with an ashtray and an old corded phone. There aren’t any curtains on the windows, just beat-up mini blinds. Whoever lives there probably has a cat, because several of the slats are busted toward the bottom.”

Rafe swears as he turns to look at the window and then rubs a hand over his face when he sees I’m right.

“Do you see *me*?” I ask, though I almost don’t want to.

Rafe stares across the room, looking very much like Jonathan when he’s reading someone’s magic or mind. After a moment, the knight shakes his head. “No.”

“Did you actually try?”

“Do you *actually* want me to try?” He raises an eyebrow.

“Yeah.”

He laughs a little, shaking his head like this is crazy. He then rolls his shoulders and stares at the wall. “Okay, what do I

do?”

“I don’t know—just concentrate on my voice. Maybe picture me in your mind?”

He stands there, phone to his ear, looking like he doesn’t think this is the greatest idea. He then lets out a long breath and focuses. I know the moment he sees me. Our eyes meet, and it’s like I’m there, and he’s here, and it’s way weird.

“Hi,” I murmur, still talking into the phone.

He takes a step forward, his eyebrows twitching as a cautious smile spreads across his face. “How are we doing this?”

“I don’t know. Magic?”

His smile becomes a grin. “I didn’t figure it was a new service added to our mobile plan.”

“Imagine how cool it would be if it were.” Biting my bottom lip, I take a step forward and hold up my hand, palm out.

“I’ve seen this movie before,” he teases, but he raises his hand as well, mirroring mine.

When we’re here, standing face to face, I notice more than before. Like how tired he looks, how his dark brown hair stands in messy tufts like he’s been running his fingers through it.

“Indulge me.” I take another step forward, pausing when our fingers are only a few inches apart. My eyes lock with his deep blue ones, and several moments pass.

“Always,” he says at a whisper, and I can’t tell if I hear him through the phone or through our link.

I swallow, moving forward. Just when our hands should touch, Rafe’s fingers flicker like smoke.

“Oh well.” I drop my arm, trying to hide my disappointment. “We had to try.”

Rafe shoves his hands into his front pockets and shrugs. “Looks like it’s just a visual connection.”

Before I can answer, his gaze moves behind me. He jerks his chin toward the bed. “What’s that?”

I turn, wondering what embarrassing thing I might have left out. But the bed is made, and there’s not a bra or box of tampons in sight.

There is, however, a single white envelope on the pillow.

“The maid must have left it.” I cross to the bed, flick the envelope open, and pull out the folded paper inside.

As soon as I read the single line of typed words, my blood goes cold.

“Lexie?” Rafe asks, his tone sharp.

I snap my attention back to him, closing the note and tossing it aside. “Just a complimentary coupon for the buffet.”

He stares at me, and it’s obvious he knows I’m lying. I give him a smile, hoping he’ll let it drop because he must find the locations of the thresholds for me. The last thing I need is him flying to Vegas now. And I’m quite sure that’s precisely what he would do if he read that lovely message—link or no link.

A knock sounds at the door, followed by Eric hollering, “Hey Maddie. Let’s get some dinner.”

Rafe quirks an eyebrow and drawls, “Good thing you have a coupon for the buffet.”

“Yep.” I cross the room, avoiding his eyes, and grab my purse. “I’ll talk to you again tomorrow, all right?”

“Okay,” he says reluctantly, probably trying to decide if he’s going to demand I show him the note.

“Night.” I end the call, wondering what will happen now. Will we be stuck in each other’s minds forever? Because it’s a little disorienting. (Or a lot disorienting.) And what happens when it’s time to change or shower?

Never mind. I don’t want to think about it.

For several seconds, Rafe stands in front of me, but then he begins to fade. It must be his voice—a true connection no



matter how incorporeal it might be—that allows it.

When I'm sure he's gone, I look around the quiet room, trying not to shiver. Someone was in here, in my space. They could have snooped through my things, had their hands on my clothes and personal belongings.

I open the note again, my hands shaking as I read it one more time.

*Long live the queen.*

GRAY, Jonathan, Eric, and I skip the buffet and head to a casual café on the main level. As we wait for our food, I try to figure out how to tell the guys about the message that was delivered to my room in a way that won't cause them to freak the heck out. It sits in my purse like a dirty secret.

“So...” I begin when there's a lull in the conversation. As I put my words in order, I fold my paper napkin in half and then roll it into a tube. “Apparently someone broke into my room earlier.”

As expected, three sets of eyes snap my way, their conversation about sports forgotten.

“What?” Jonathan demands.

Instead of explaining, I pull out the note and hand it to him. The Griffon eyes me for a minute before he flicks it open, his frown deepening. He breathes out a curse as soon as he reads the brief message and then passes the note to Gray.

Eric reads over our team leader's shoulder. He looks at me, his face etched with concern. "How?"

Gray very carefully folds the note and places it on the table. He takes a slow drink of his soda and then looks at us. "First thoughts?"

"Trent," Jonathan says immediately.

Gray looks at me. "Does anyone else know about you besides us?"

I shake my head, helpless. But who knows who the pixie might have told?

Jonathan meets my eyes. "No, there's one other person besides Trent that most likely knows what you are."

"Jenna," I breathe. With everything that's happened, I completely forgot. If the Heron is alive, there is an excellent chance she saw me use my magic to control the creatures—anyone within a quarter mile of the scene would have.

If she's with the Entitled, she most certainly would go to them with the information. If she's not with the Entitled, and nothing but a money-hungry criminal, she might try to blackmail us. Everyone knows my family is well off.

"Someone wants you to know they're out there, but they're not ready to make their move," Gray says. "They just want to scare you—let you know they're watching."

"It sounds like Trent," Jonathan growls.

The problem with the pixie is that he can shapeshift into a maid, a hotel manager—anyone. And Jonathan can't read his magic because of that blasted medallion he wears.

"Maybe we need to find a War Horse," I say, referring to the Equus faction—the metalsmiths, the enchanters. In medieval times, they forged deadly swords and strong armor. They also created small enchantments like the *clipeum* medallion. Unfortunately, there aren't many left. Though their magic is strong, the gene that carries it is weaker than most. If a War Horse chose a spouse from a different faction, their children were rarely born with the smithing skill.

“Where?” Jonathan asks. “The few that are left still live in Europe. I don’t think I’ve ever heard of a family here in the states.”

“Then I’ll fly to Europe,” I say.

Eric laughs. “Spoken like a girl raised with money.”

I give him a dry look and then turn to Gray.

“I would let you go,” he says. “But not without protection, and I can’t spare Jonathan or Eric right now. I would request the team be transferred off the case, but it would raise too many questions at the guild. Your father made it very clear we are to act in a manner that avoids undue suspicion.”

“You spoke with my dad?” I ask, surprised.

“He called before the meeting yesterday.” He leans forward, lowering his voice. “You are our priority.”

I look away. “Yes, I know. You’ve been stuck with babysitting duty.”

“We’ve been charged with protecting someone invaluable—which is something I didn’t understand at first, and I’m sorry for that. It’s an honor, not a burden.”

A lump forms in my throat, but I manage to nod.

“But,” Gray continues, looking down, “since no one in the Royal Guild can know of your existence, including my brother, we must keep up appearances.”

“What about Rafe?” Eric asks. “Could he take her to Europe?”

Gray looks like he’s not about to let me alone with Rafe, but before he can respond, I say, “He’s concerned about our link and feels it’s safer if we keep our distance.”

It’s a logical reason—one that seems to satisfy Eric and Gray both. But in truth, I don’t want to pull Rafe from his task of searching for the thresholds. Trent is undoubtedly a nuisance—and a dangerous one at that—but the shadow creatures pose a much greater threat.

“What if it’s not Trent?” Jonathan asks rather suddenly. He turns to me. “Remember the Fox in the elevator?”

“But he got out before us,” I argue, surprised I forgot about the man. He was certainly acting suspicious. “All he saw was our floor number. There are hundreds of rooms on our level alone.”

Jonathan leans forward, and I can practically see the wheels turning in his head. “What if he called another elevator and followed us to our floor? If he hurried, there’s a chance he could have spotted us before we reached the room.”

And then he could have simply let himself in once we left. Hotel locks aren’t a hindrance to a Fox.

“We’re changing rooms after dinner,” Gray says. “And after this job, we’ll request leave and fly to Europe to find a Horse. I’m tired of screwing around with this.”

“Thank you,” I murmur, feeling guilty for all the fuss.

Before Gray can respond, three familiar Squirrels enter the café. Immediately, Thomas spots Gray. He lifts a hand and nods toward the empty table next to ours when the hostess greets him.

“Care if we join you?” Brett asks, and then there’s the chaos of moving tables together and the shuffling of chairs.

Chloe hangs back, looking less than enthusiastic about sitting with us—or maybe more specifically *Eric*. She eyes the Bunny with great distaste. Oddly, she ends up in the chair next to him when she could have taken the one on the end next to Brett.

She lowers her eyes to the knight’s fitted, long-sleeved tee. “I see you exchanged your robe for something more dinner appropriate.”

Eric turns his attention to the tiny Squirrel, his mouth twisted with wry amusement. “Saw the robe, did you? Were you spying on me?”

She bristles and looks at her menu. “Don’t flatter yourself. I’m in surveillance—I watch everyone.”

“Oh yeah?” He leans a little closer to her, not about to be ignored this time. “What about Maddie? I bet you don’t remember what she was wearing.”

Chloe’s eyes briefly flicker to me before they return to the menu. “Same thing she’s wearing now.”

Undaunted, he asks, “And what about Sienna? And Sean Luka?”

“Sienna was in a red dress, and Sean Luka had on hideous, high-water silver pants that were far too tight and a navy shirt that he forgot to finish buttoning.”

Of course Eric has no clue if she’s right, so he looks at me for confirmation. I nod, though I’m not sure I agree with her assessment of Sean Luka’s outfit. It was perfection, thank you very much.

“This is a game you’ll lose, dude,” Thomas says with a grin. “Chloe has a crazy eye for detail.”

“And a good memory, apparently,” Eric answers, still watching the Squirrel even though she’s pretending he’s not worth her time. Then he looks across the table at Jonathan. “Did you get a chance to meet Chloe?”

Jonathan studies Eric for half a second, and a smile ghosts across his face. He extends his hand in her direction. “Only briefly.”

She eyes it, instantly suspicious, but choosing not to be rude, she leans forward and gives it a quick shake. “Hi.”

As soon as she looks back at her menu, Jonathan flashes Eric a smirk and a subtle thumbs up.

*What are they doing?*

Eric raises his eyebrows, apparently pleased, and then places his arm on the back of Chloe’s chair. “Hey, I have a question.”

“I’m sure you have lots of questions, Bunny.” She slowly turns her eyes on him, shoves a lock of her dark hair behind her ear, and gives him a patronizing pat on the arm. “But don’t

feel too bad about it. We can't all be the smart ones—some of us have to be pretty.”

And that definitely was not a compliment.

“I broke my tablet earlier,” he continues, not about to give up. “Dropped it, and now the screen is blurry. Think you could fix it?”

“Most likely, but I’m not going to.”

“Why not?”

She turns to him, snapping her menu shut. “Because I’m here to do a job, not play nice with you.”

Without another word, she stands, flashes her team a scowl, and then walks out of the café. Eric watches her, looking particularly befuddled.

“Chloe doesn’t date,” Thomas explains. “Like, ever.”

He sounds a touch bitter about it too.

Eric rubs his chin and then looks back at Jonathan. “You gave me a thumbs up.”

Jonathan shrugs. “I don’t know what to tell you. She’s attracted to you; no doubt about it.”

Oh—sneaky. Jonathan read Chloe’s mind when they shook hands.

Eric takes a long gulp of his tea, sets it on the table with a heavy clink, and hollers to Gray as he follows the Squirrel, “I’ll pay you back. Box my food and bring it to the room, will you?”

Then he’s jogging out the doors, into the crowded casino. It will take a lot of luck to find her. You’d have to be a Hound to follow her trail in that chaos.

Gray shakes his head but offers the waitress a smile when she brings our food. “Can we get a box for the burger?”

Instantly besotted with the handsome Wolf, she nods.

I lean close to Jonathan. “That was a bit underhanded, you know.”

“What?” The Griffon shrugs. “Is it my fault I happen to be the world’s best wingman?”

He then steals a cucumber off my salad and pops it into his mouth. I jab my fork in his direction. “Get your own dinner.”

Jonathan offers a fry. “Trade?”

“Ew, no.” I lean back. “Do you have any idea how bad those are for you? Nothing but carbs and possibly hydrogenated soybean oil.”

“You sure you don’t want it?” His dark brown eyes meet mine, and he leans closer, dropping his voice to a silken whisper. “Sometimes it’s the things we tell ourselves we can’t have that taste the best.”

“You really can’t help yourself, can you?” I say, glad Gray is engrossed in a conversation with Thomas and Brett about cameras.

Jonathan smirks, and the clear challenge in his expression makes my stomach clench. Without breaking eye contact, I lean forward and bite the fry in half. He blinks at me, his lips parting with surprise.

After I swallow, I lick the salt off my lips and say, “Nope, it’s just a French fry. Maybe it isn’t as tempting as you think it is?”

Jonathan snorts out a laugh. He pops the rest of it into his mouth and turns back to his plate, giving the burger his full attention. “I don’t know about that, sweetheart. It was pretty good for me.”



I RUB my neck as I walk into our original room. We're repacking our things and moving to a different area of the hotel—different tower, different floor. And since Gray requested a suite so they can keep a closer eye on me, I'm going to lose my private bathroom.

Gray and Jonathan search the room. “Do you see anything, Madeline?” Gray asks as he pulls back the shower curtain. “You should be able to sense a cloaked Fox, even if you can't see him clearly.”

I look around the room, but I don't see or feel anything.

“I think you're clear,” Gray says, heading back to the guys' side. “Make it quick—I'm exhausted. Oh, and Thomas just texted to let me know we're good.”

Gray asked Thomas and Brett to check out the new room, make sure there aren't any bugs—just in case our culprit is a

hotel employee. (Or posing as one.) Thank goodness for friendly Squirrels.

Jonathan takes a seat on the bed, not about to leave me. I give him a smile and step into the bathroom. I'm eager to be out of these rooms. The thought of someone in here still sends shivers down my spine.

I pack my shampoo and conditioner and gather my makeup. When I open the lid of my case, I gasp.

"What is it?" Jonathan asks, immediately appearing at the door.

I motion to the letter and then back away, crossing my arms as if worried it's going to leap up and bite me.

The Griffon's expression darkens, and he rips open the envelope. His brow knits when he reads the note, and then he holds up a coupon—like the type that comes from the many magazine-style advertisements that clutter casinos. "A buffet coupon?"

My heart beats harder. "What does the note say?"

"I know where to find them," he reads slowly. "If you ask me nicely, I'll tell you where they are."

My hands begin to tremble, and I stumble against the wall for support.

"What does that mean?" Jonathan demands.

"He was still here earlier," I whisper. "He must have heard my conversation with Rafe."

Jonathan's expression goes from confused to murderous in two seconds flat. "Did you sense him at all?"

I shake my head. "No, but I didn't come in here. What if he was hiding in the shower? Or behind the drapes or in the closet?"

Jonathan swears under his breath.

"Jonathan," I whisper, dropping my voice to a bare whisper so Gray won't overhear from the other room. "He means the thresholds. That's what I asked Rafe to find."

The knight looks up, pinning me with his eyes. “You can’t trust this person.”

“I know.”

“Madeline, I mean it.”

“*I know.*”

“You two ready?” Gray asks, appearing in the doorway.

Jonathan wordlessly hands Gray the note.

“What does that mean?” the Wolf demands.

I shrug, not wanting to bring up the thresholds. “He overheard me talking to Rafe about the buffet. He must have been in here with us.”

Gray growls before he folds the note several times and shoves it into his pocket. “I’ll see if we can get fingerprints off it.”

“Fingerprints?” I scoff. “What are we? Human?”

“It’s the best I can do right now.” He runs his hands through his hair. “You’re sure he’s not somewhere in the room?”

I nod. “Pretty positive.”

“All right, grab your luggage. Let’s get out of here.”

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THE SUITE IS a lot nicer than my last room, which is awesome. I have to share the single bathroom with three guys, which is not so awesome.

Gray motions to the bedroom. “It’s all yours.”

“Thanks,” I say, eyeing the bed. It’s bigger than the last, fluffier, and has about a hundred pillows. It should do nicely.

I’m just wheeling my suitcase in when there’s a knock at the main door. I jump half a foot in the air and yelp like a startled cat.

“It’s just Eric,” Jonathan says, looking like he can’t decide whether he’s amused or concerned. “He doesn’t have a key

yet.”

Eric, right. Jonathan called him to share the info about the new room, and he said he’d head up. Guess I’m a bit on edge right now.

Gray opens the door. “Any luck with Chloe?”

“No.” Eric lowers himself onto the couch, looking like a dejected puppy.

“She’ll come around,” Gray says, and then he pauses. “Maybe.”

I disappear into the bedroom, glad I have at least this small space to myself. I change into sleep shorts and a camisole, clean off my makeup with a cleansing facial towelette so I don’t have to fight for the bathroom, and crawl into bed without bothering to hang any of my easily wrinkled items. I’ll deal with them tomorrow.

Just when I’m about to turn off the light, I hesitate. I take one last look around the room to assure myself I’m truly alone, focusing on the window and other shadowed areas. I can hear the guys on the other side of the door. They’re messing with the couches and the cot, arguing over who will sleep where. The shower runs; the TV is a hushed blur. I appreciate my privacy, but right now I feel vulnerable separated from them.

*Someone intent on breaking into the room must go through them to get to me,* I remind myself. That’s the nice thing about a suite—there’s only one main door.

Telling myself to stop being such a baby, I flick off the light, pull the blankets over my head, and attempt to fall asleep. The conversation slowly dies off outside the room, and the main lights turn off.

I can just make out the sound of the last of the casino’s evening street shows, and a police siren howls somewhere in the distance. No matter how many times I shift, I can’t get comfortable. I lie here, stiff and anxious, practically waiting for something to leap out at me.

For the millionth time, I wish I had my stun gun—I would sleep with it under my pillow, though I’m not sure that’s

exactly safe anyway.

Eventually, even the traffic falls into a lull, quieter now in the early morning hours. Sure, Vegas never sleeps, but it does slow down. This time of night, the hardcore gamblers have found a table or slot machine, and they're content to while away the night inside a casino, bleary-eyed, just waiting for that big win.

Tired of tossing and turning, at two thirty-seven in the morning, I slip from my room to get a nine-dollar bottle of water from the mini bar.

It's too dark to see well, but my nighttime vision is slightly better than most—a Fox trait, though not a strong one. I can make out Eric and Gray's silhouettes on the couches. Looks like Jonathan ended up with the cot. I'm not sure whether he won the coin toss or lost.

I'm just twisting the lid off my water when I sense movement behind me. I whirl around and find a man *right there*.

Just before I scream, Jonathan steps in and whispers, "Hey, it's me."

My heart beats double-time, and I take a deep breath, trying to coax my pulse to return to normal. "You scared me half to death," I say, keeping my voice low so I don't wake Gray or Eric. Then, trying to be normal, I take a gulp of my overpriced water.

"I noticed." Even though he's speaking quietly, I can hear the smile in his voice.

Once I can breathe again, I realize how close we are. The knight is only a foot away, wearing his regular nighttime uniform of just pajama pants. (And yes, I happen to know that he sleeps shirtless. People say knowledge is power, but believe me when I say too much isn't necessarily good for your sanity.)

I can feel the heat of his skin, smell the soapy fragrance of his shampoo and body wash. I assumed it was Eric in the bathroom earlier, as he often showers at night, but it must have

been Jonathan. Thoughts of showers remind me of Redstone and our ridiculous bluff of a conversation. Which reminds me of kissing him...which reminds me I can't kiss him now...

Which makes me want to all that much more.

"Can't sleep?" he asks.

He doesn't step back, but he doesn't touch me either. It would be all too natural for him to shift a little closer, maybe rest his hands on my hips. I could slide my palms up his bare chest, give him a clear invitation.

A spark ignites in my belly. The fire spreads, warming me all the way to the tips of my toes, making me wonder if staying away from him is a lost cause. Whether I want to or not, I imagine his lips on my skin, his hand moving to the small of my back and his fingers wrapping in the cotton fabric of my sleep shirt.

"No," I admit, finally answering his question. "I've been awake for hours."

"Me too," he murmurs.

A soft snore comes from one of the couches. We both freeze, acting as if we were caught doing something illicit instead of having this mostly innocent conversation—and I say mostly because my mind keeps trying to wander.

When the room goes silent once more, we both relax, and Jonathan shifts a hair closer. "Is there another water in there?"

"Yeah." I turn, glad for the chance to step away. I don't trust myself, and my reason for staying away from Jonathan is a solid one. I don't have to like it; I just have to *do* it.

His arm brushes my shoulder as he reaches past me into the tiny fridge. He leans down, which inadvertently presses his chest to my back. He's hot and chiseled and oh-so-tempting.

I grit my teeth, trying not to enjoy the contact quite so much.

"Come on," Jonathan says when he finds what he's looking for, and then he walks toward the bedroom. "We're going to wake everyone if we stay out here."

He leads the way, and I try not to hyperventilate when he closes the door behind us.

My mind frolics down a forbidden rabbit trail, but then Jonathan goes and flicks on the light, completely killing the mood. Well, almost. You see, we're not cloaked in the shielding cocoon of darkness anymore, but now I have a clear view of him.

The knight's pajama pants sit low on his waist, showing off his abs. Jonathan is built like a runner—agile, fast. A combination of hard work and genetics have created a body that's toned, lean, and just about as tempting as they come.

When I realize I'm basically ogling him, I rip my gaze up from his washboard stomach—just in time to see his eyes move from my bare legs to my face.

We stare at each other, both of us reluctantly acknowledging we were checking the other out.

Self-conscious, I brush the side of my thigh, wishing I'd thought to throw on a robe before I left my room.

As if he can't help himself, Jonathan's eyes follow the movement. "What happened to your flannel?"

And help me, his tone is all gravelly and deep. I gulp, realizing I'm in real trouble. "I didn't realize I'd be sharing a room when I was packing."

Slowly, his eyes travel up my short sleep shorts and matching camisole. When he meets my gaze, my chest tightens. Honestly, I'm decent. Everything important is covered—but I certainly felt safer in the ankle-length nightgown I wore to bed in Redstone.

"So this is your normal nightly attire then?" Jonathan cocks his head to the side, waiting for my answer.

"Usually."

He takes a step closer, and my heart begins to pound faster. "I like it."

*Be strong, Madeline.*

He takes another step, and my legs begin to tremble. *Another step*, and my mouth goes completely dry. And believe me, I'm not the only one affected. Jonathan's chest rises and falls with his quickened breath, and his eyes darken.

Without a word, the knight brushes his fingers over mine, just barely touching the outside of my lower thigh. I suck in a breath but try to hide it, though it's probably a lost cause. He's too close now to pretend.

Also, the Griffon is *touching* me—he's in my head, and I don't even care. Feeling reckless, I think of our last kiss in Redstone, show him exactly what it felt like to be in his arms, wanting him desperately.

Jonathan closes his eyes and tilts his head back with a soft groan, reliving the moment through my eyes. We're playing with fire, but right now, I don't care if I get burned.

*If a tree falls in the woods, and no one is around, does it make a sound?* I think, knowing Jonathan will hear.

“What?” he asks, startled by what he thinks is a really random thought. Looking half-drugged, he watches me through hooded eyes. A questioning smile dances at his lips, making me want to kiss him even more.

Feeling bold, I close the distance between us, pressing myself against him, running my hands up his bare back, skin to skin, without the slightest hesitation. Let him read my thoughts. It's far safer than admitting how I feel out loud.

Jonathan's muscles go taut with surprise. I can practically feel his indecision—that, and his hands hover barely an inch from the sides of my waist, giving it away.

Tilting my head back until I can see his face, I lock my eyes on his. *If a Griffon kisses a Fox in the middle of the night, do either of them have to admit it in the morning?*

The knight sucks in a sharp breath, drawing my attention to his mouth. His hands find my sides, and he lowers his head, his eyes still on mine, testing us both. My eyelids flutter when his lower lip barely touches mine. Our breath mingles; our hearts race.



I'm terrified, but I'm weak. As much as I need him, I know I should end this. But I'm not going to.

*I'm sorry.*

"For what?" He taunts me with those two words, his mouth so close to mine.

"For telling you we're through one minute and kissing you the next. Believe me when I say I can't stand that girl...but here we are."

He raises a brow. "You haven't kissed me yet."

"I'm going to."

A swift grin lights his face, and he looks down as if trying to hide it.

"Jonathan..."

When he looks up, his expression is different. Intent. "You still don't understand, Madeline. You don't have to explain yourself. When you touch me—when you initiate that contact, I'm there with you. I feel the war in your head." Then softly, he adds, "It matches my own."

"I don't want to risk you getting hurt just because I'm too selfish to let you go," I whisper even though he *knows*. "It would kill me."

He moves his hand to my cheek and brushes a strand of my hair behind my ear with his knuckle. "And I don't want to risk your life just because I'm too enamored to pay attention."

I lower my forehead to his shoulder, hating everything about my magic. More than anything, I wish I could cast it away.

Suddenly, a thought crosses my mind.

"No," Jonathan growls when he reads it.

I look up, my brain whirring at a feverish pace. "It could work."

"Your magic is too dangerous," he argues. "It's safer with you than anyone else."

Shaking my head, I push his protests aside. If I were to find the pixie with the magic-siphoning charm, I could claim it for myself—I could *use it* on myself.

No more Obsidian magic.

No more magic whatsoever.

I'd be as helpless as a human...but I'd be *free*.

“AND WHAT WOULD you do with the bottled magic?” Jonathan demands. Throw it in the ocean? Bury it like a pirate’s treasure? You know you can’t risk someone finding it.”

“We could be together—we could at least give this a chance.” My arms tighten around him as the idea solidifies in my mind.

“Let’s pretend the charm is strong enough to work on you—which I highly doubt it is anyway,” he says. “Now say you manage to safely dispose of the magic and find a way to hide it so no one could ever find it. Even then, you’re still forgetting two significant details.”

It doesn’t matter what he says; I won’t change my mind.

Jonathan leans down, looking at me at eye level, making sure I’m listening. “First, the process is known to be excruciating—why do you think the Royal Guild employs it?

It's pure torture. And second, if you give up your magic and break the link, *Rafe will die.*"

His words echo in my head, leaving me feeling more helpless than ever in my life. "*What?*"

"You're linked, Madeline. If you sever that link, it will kill him. It might kill you as well, but I'm not sure because you'd practically be human at that point."

I stare at the Griffon, breathing hard. "Surely there's a way around it."

We stare at each other, and I silently beg him to *think*.

"I guess, maybe—" Jonathan cuts himself off, shaking his head.

"What?" I demand.

"If Rafe found someone to link with before it was too late, he might live. But he'd only have a few minutes to accomplish it, maybe less."

It's impossible. Rafe didn't even want to link with me. What's the chance he would find another random person he'd accept such an intimate bond with?

I turn abruptly, overwhelmed with despair. I bring my hand to my face, refusing to let Jonathan see how devastated I am. For one brief moment, I saw a light at the end of my dark, cold tunnel. And just like that, it was snuffed out.

"Besides," Jonathan says softly, setting his hands on my shoulders and tucking my back to his chest. "I'm glad you were gifted with your magic."

"What?" I whisper, wondering how he could say such an awful thing. And what does he mean gifted? It was the luck of the draw, the curse of my bloodline. I certainly wouldn't call it a *gift*.

"Hear me out." He rubs his chin along the side of my neck, coaxing a smile out of me. "The Royal Guild fears the Obsidian Queen for a reason—you're more powerful than you realize. Thank goodness it was you, and not some other random Fox, who was born with the Obsidian magic."

I let out a mirthless laugh. “Because I’m not actually strong enough to create mass pandemonium?”

He leans over my shoulder to look me in the eye. “Because you’re strong enough to *resist the urge* to create mass pandemonium.”

“Do you honestly think that?” I whisper.

I want to believe him, but I have so many doubts.

“You’re the magic’s keeper. Haven’t you realized that? You see it as a burden, something that’s ruining your life. But when I look at you, I see someone I’m honored to stand behind. Every knight marshal in the world would kill to be in our position, even if they don’t know it now. You’re the first Obsidian Fox in history to stand your ground and refuse to let the magic control her.” He turns me in his arms, making me look at him directly. “Madeline—you’re the first one who is strong enough to wield your magic.”

I want to believe him—desperately. But I have fears and doubts and more weaknesses than I can list. And Jonathan knows it because we’re touching.

After a long moment, I clear my throat. “You really can’t say things like that.”

“Why?” His eyes narrow to questioning slits, and a smile toys at his lips.

I run my hand up the back of his neck, twining my fingers in the short hair at the base of his scalp, doing just as I imagined earlier. “Because my jaded heart is liable to fall in love with you, and then where will we be?”

He watches me for several long seconds, and then his eyes drift to my lips as he leans down. “Doomed.”

I nod, and my breath catches with sweet anticipation. “Exactly.”

“Turn off the light,” he whispers.

Swallowing, I use my magic to flip the switch. Simple as that, we’re cast into darkness. Unlike earlier in the night, it

doesn't feel ominous. In fact, it feels full of sweet, forbidden expectation.

I close my eyes when Jonathan's hands find my shoulders. With a touch so soft it would tickle if I weren't on fire, he runs his palms down my arms, exploring without sight. He trails his fingertips over my hands and up each of my fingers.

When he clasps my hand and presses a kiss to my wrist, butterflies flutter in my stomach. Apparently not finished, he then kisses the tip of each of my fingers, taking his time, leaving me breathless.

Never in my life have I wanted a man more. I've said it before, and I'll say it another thousand times: there's just something about Jonathan that calls to me.

He chuckles, reading my thoughts, and lightly nips my skin.

"Do I have to persuade you to stay out of my head?" I tease, but I'm practically breathless, so the warning is weak.

Instead of answering, his hands find my sides, and he coaxes me backward. When the backs of my legs bump into the bed, I sit, pulling him with me. He picks me up, moving us farther down. And then my head is on the pillows, and Jonathan is over me, his forearms pressed to the mattress on either side of me to hold his weight.

"Kiss me," I beg, running my fingers down his chest.

"Not yet." He lowers his lips to my neck. "I'm enjoying your breathless anticipation."

"You're wicked."

"And you're intoxicating."

I lean up, wrapping my hand around the back of his neck, about to take matters in my own hands, when my phone rings.

Startled to get a call at this time of night, I roll over and snatch the cell off the nightstand.

"It's Rafe," I murmur, and fear skitters down my spine.

“What happened?” I ask the moment I answer the call.  
“Are you all right—”

“Do you have any idea what time it is?” my knight demands, and the moment I hear his voice, I see him lying on a twin-sized bed, half-dressed in jeans, with his eyes closed and his arm flung over his head. “Please, *please*. Go to sleep.”

*The link.*

Just let me die—Rafe felt all that?

“Did I wake you up?” I ask, feeling extraordinarily stupid.

The knight is quiet for a moment before he answers, “Yes.”

His tone is funny, so I know there’s more to it, but I don’t dare ask—besides, I don’t want to know.

“Sorry,” I murmur.

The embarrassment merges with despair, and I rub a hand over my forehead. How is this ever going to work? If Rafe can feel it the moment I get close to someone, Jonathan and I are truly doomed. I swear if it’s not one thing keeping the Griffon and me apart, it’s twenty others.

“I’m going to go,” Jonathan whispers, and then he brushes the lightest kiss against my cheek. “You know where I am if you need me.”

I watch him leave, desperately wanting to call him back. But what good will that do? It’s not like I’m going to sit here and purposely torture Rafe.

But...this is too much. Because of the link, I’ll never be able to get close to anyone ever again—even when I’m careful to hide it, even when Rafe and I are five hundred miles apart.

“I couldn’t sleep,” I admit, tucking my legs to my chest.

“Well, it’s certainly a good thing Jonathan was there to entertain you.” Rafe’s words are abnormally sharp, and they sting.

“You’re the one who insisted I tell him,” I hiss into the phone, closing my eyes so I don’t have to see him. But look at

that...he's still there. Which means Rafe most likely saw me with Jonathan even though he had his eyes closed too.

Which probably didn't feel great.

"If Jonathan hadn't seen your text, none of this would have happened," I tell him, softening my tone a bit. "If you want to blame anyone, blame yourself."

Rafe finally opens his eyes, and we connect. Thankfully, it's like he's here with me and not the other way around—I certainly don't want in *that* apartment.

And though I know he's not actually on my bed, it looks like he's next to me. The illusion is unsettling.

"I thought the space would help," he says, looking weary.

"But it doesn't, does it? At least not enough?"

He shakes his head and stares at the ceiling.

I frown as I study him. He hasn't shaved in several days, so there's a thick shadow across his jaw. His feet are bare, and so is his chest. But what's with the jeans?

"Who wears jeans to bed?" I ask, changing the subject. "Isn't that uncomfortable?"

"I don't sleep in them." Slowly, he rolls his head toward me and raises a brow, waiting for me to figure it out.

He must have pulled them on before he called.

I glance down at my own nighttime attire and then cross my arms. I guess it's a good thing I was decent when I answered. Not that I had plans to get *un*-decent—I didn't. But still.

"Night, Lexie," he says, looking like he's about to end the call.

"Wait..."

He looks up, meeting my eyes. I purse my lips, realizing I don't know what to say.

"Never mind." I cross my legs in front of me and force an apologetic smile. "Sorry I woke you."



“It’s really not your fault. I just...”

“Would like to sleep?” I offer when it seems like he doesn’t know how to finish the thought.

The knight watches me for several moments, looking like there’s more to it than just that. But he ends up saying, “Yeah.”

“Okay. Well...get some sleep then.” I watch him for several seconds before I mouth, “Bye,” and end the call.

He fades away shortly after, leaving me alone. Not that I wasn’t alone before—I guess I was. This whole thing is weird.

It’s like having a ghost for a knight.

“HEY, PRINCESS, WE NEED TO TALK,” Gray says.

The expo opens in forty minutes, and we’re supposed to be down there in five. Eric left an hour ago at Sienna’s request, though he made sure we knew he wasn’t happy about it.

Jonathan looks between us, not sure what to do. He jabs a thumb at the door. “I’ll head to the convention center?”

Gray nods. Jonathan meets my eyes before he leaves, silently telling me to call if I need anything.

Part of me—a skittish part—wants to ask Gray if he intends to murder me. You know, so Jonathan will know the Wolf’s intentions *before* he leaves.

But I suppose that’s just me being paranoid.

Jonathan steps out the door, and I turn to Gray, feeling nervous. Since I called things off between us, we haven’t been alone together very much.

“Jonathan said you forgot your stun gun.”

“Oh.” I frown, though I’m relieved that this is all it is.

I expected something personal and highly uncomfortable—most likely something about Jonathan and me, and how we’re breaking all kinds of rules by sneaking around when he forbid fraternizing between team members.

“I left it at Jonathan and Eric’s place,” I tell him.

He nods, looking thoughtful. “I think with everything going on, you need something a little more effective.”

“Like a stronger stun gun?” I ask, surprised to realize I’m looking forward to an upgrade that doesn’t involve rhinestones.

I mean, stun guns sound lame, but I’ve taken out a full-grown troll with my beginner model. They’re pretty effective. And considering the hoity-toity, professional knight marshals won’t let me near a real weapon, it suits me well.

“Not like a stun gun,” he says. “Like an actual gun.”

I open my mouth and then close it. After several moments, I say, “Like..a *gun* gun?”

Gray crosses his arms, trying not to smile while we’re having this very serious conversation. “I wasn’t thinking a squirt gun.”

I cock my head to the side. “Is that a good idea? I mean, really?”

“I’ve asked Donovan to keep an eye on things this morning, and we’re going to a shooting range. I’m going to teach you how to use it.”

“Like...just us?”

Jonathan’s words from yesterday come back to me, but hopefully, he’s wrong.

The Wolf raises his eyebrows. “What’s wrong, princess? Scared?”

Um. Yes.

“This is your job,” I argue. “Are you sure you should leave someone else in charge? Won’t you get in trouble?”

“Listen, even if it’s just for my own peace of mind, I need to know you can defend yourself without using your magic.”

I set my hands on my hips, giving him a wry smile. “In other words, you don’t want me accidentally summoning my shadow minions if I were to find myself in trouble?”

He shrugs.

“All right.” I turn my head to the left and then the right, stretching my neck. “Let’s go shoot stuff.”

Gray’s eyes drop to my feet. “You might want to change your shoes.”

I look down at my very sensible open toe pumps—the heel is only two and a half inches—easy to walk or run in, at least for me. “But I’m always in heels. Don’t you think I should learn in them since I wear them all the time?”

He shakes his head like I’m crazy and rolls his eyes. “Yes, fine.”

---

THE PISTOL GRAY bought for me is tiny. He says it has an exceptionally low recoil for a gun this size, but I can still feel it.

“I don’t know about this,” I tell Gray after an hour, pulling off my earmuffs. Both my arm and shoulder are already sore, and I can’t hit the target to save my life. “I kind of suck.”

The Wolf nods, staring at my sadly pristine white paper target. “You really do.”

I sigh, carefully setting the handgun on the ledge in front of me before I remove my safety glasses. “I feel better though—no wonder Squirrels are always blowing stuff up. This sort of thing is quite the stress reliever.”

“Imagine how good you’d feel if you actually hit the target.”

“Funny.” I study him. “You’re in a good mood today.”

He pushes his ear protection back on, picks up the gun, takes aim, and fires rapidly, sending the bullets into the target with terrifying accuracy. When he's out, he looks back. "It's good to get away for a few hours."

I almost ask him how his uncle is doing and then bite my tongue. He doesn't need that right now.

"You're a good shot," I tell him instead.

He flashes me a cocky smirk, his light blue eyes sparkling. "Best in my graduating class."

"I don't see that title in my future, so I think I'd better stick with my stun gun."

"It's your choice." Finished for the day, Gray leads me out of the shooting room. "But now you have the option."

"Is it even legal for me to carry it?" I ask, leaning in and lowering my voice so no one will overhear. "Shouldn't I take a concealed carry class or something?"

"The guild makes special arrangements for its employees," Gray says rather cryptically. "If you want it, it's legal enough."

I take out the clip and check the slide to make sure it's empty, just like Gray showed me, and then hand it back to him. "I don't think I'm ready yet."

He nods. "We'll work on it some more when we get home, okay? I'd feel better if you had a real weapon on you."

"Too bad I'm not a Dragon, huh?"

Gray chuckles. "If you were a Dragon, we wouldn't be here."

Good point.

"Now what?" I ask him, a little disappointed the outing was for nothing. Another part of me was glad to play hooky for the morning.

"Now I guess we upgrade your stun gun."

"What about the gun?" I ask, feeling bad because he bought it just for me—pretty sure he doesn't want to run

around with that little thing.

Gray loops an arm around my shoulder, wrapping me in the smell of drug store deodorant and man. “Don’t worry about it, princess. It’ll be waiting for you when you’re ready.”

We leave the building, and Gray orders a taxi. While we wait, I look around, taking in the nearby warehouses and small businesses. Next door, there’s a small appliance repair shop, and several lots down, there’s a store that specializes in car stereo systems and speakers. Everything around here is beige—the buildings, the gravel landscaping, and even the faded signs.

“So what’s going on between you and Jonathan?” Gray asks out of the blue. He sits on a concrete ledge, staring at the half-full parking lot.

“Nothing.”

He angles his head to the side and flashes me an incredulous look. “You know, for a Fox, you’re a remarkably bad liar.”

Sighing, I brush off the concrete next to him and then sit. “What exactly do you think can happen between Jonathan and me when I’m linked to Rafe?”

Bitter doesn’t sound good on me, but that’s what he’s going to get if he goes down this road.

Gray watches me and then nods once. “Nothing.”

“See there? I wasn’t lying.”

“I know this is going to sound a bit hypocritical coming from me, but you shouldn’t date team members. I created the rule to save you from pain.”

I turn to him, making him meet my eyes. “You didn’t seem to have a problem with it in Tahoe.”

“Yeah, but you have to admit I kind of suck as a person.”

Even though I try not to smile, I fail. “Jonathan doesn’t suck.”

Gray's expression turns solemn. "I know, and that's why I'm concerned."

I look at my heels, flexing my feet. "If you're about to give me the 'Jonathan is a great guy and you better not hurt him' speech, please know Rafe has already beat you to it—and he gave me his blessing."

Or whatever you want to call it. Though I hate to say permission, that's probably closer.

"Was that before or after you and he linked your magic?"

"Before." I stand, needing to pace. "Listen, don't worry about it, okay? I get it. I understand. The moment I linked with Rafe, my chance with Jonathan, or anyone else for that matter, went up in a puff of Obsidian smoke."

Gray watches me without answering, though I can feel opinions oozing from his very being.

Frustrated, I turn back to face him. "But what was I supposed to do? Let you all die? Give the creatures free rein? I had *no choice*."

"I know."

"And furthermore—" I stop abruptly and turn back. "What?"

Gray stands. "I would have done the same thing in your position. You did what needed to be done."

I stare at him, not sure what to say.

"Listen, I just don't want to see the two of you hurt, all right?" He sets his hands on my shoulders and pins me with his light blue eyes. "We've had enough of that on this team. I know it's the last thing you want to hear, but maybe it's best if you and Jonathan agree to keep your relationship platonic."

My shoulders sag. "We've tried that. We're not good at it."

And frankly, I'm sick of trying.

"Then maybe it's time you were with someone else."

I stare at him, wondering how badly it will hurt my fist if I punch him in the stomach. Probably a lot.

“Not me,” he says quickly, having the decency to look embarrassed. “I meant Rafe.”

My stomach knots, and I step away. “It’s too dangerous—I know; he’s told me a thousand times.”

“Do you like him?”

Do I?

I want to say no, but the thing is...I’m not sure anymore. And being with him would be easy.

“I don’t want to lose my chance with Jonathan,” I say, my voice flat. “I don’t want to lose *him*.”

Gray’s face softens with sympathy—not my favorite expression on him. “Princess, that’s what you’re not grasping. You’re not *going* to lose your chance with Jonathan—you already have.”

---

GRAY and I walk into the convention, but he’s immediately stopped by Donovan. The Wolf greets me as well, but it’s obvious it’s Gray he wants to speak with. I take advantage of the moment and slip away, hoping Gray won’t notice.

I just need a few minutes by myself to breathe.

“Madeline,” Georgette Don Patrick calls, stopping me as I walk through the convention. The designer smiles when I turn to face her. “You look like a woman on a mission.”

“I’m looking for Jonathan,” I say. “Have you seen him?”

She shakes her head. “I’m afraid not.” She steps closer and lowers her voice. “There’s been another incident, I’m afraid.”

“What?” I ask. “This morning?”

“Sara Clarkson. She was paralyzed. However, that’s thankfully worn off. We were looking for her, though we didn’t know anything was amiss at first because Sienna received a text from her this morning saying she’d picked up a



stomach bug. Considering everything going on, Sienna decided it was best to send an assistant to the girl's room, and she wasn't there. One of the knight marshals on Donovan's team finally found her behind a vending machine in one of the employee halls."

Sara? Eric's Sara?

"That's awful," I say, suddenly feeling guilty for the less than complimentary thoughts I'd had about her. "Is she all right?"

Georgette nods. "As all right as she can be. She said whoever it was sneaked up behind her, so she didn't see anything."

"What about the security cameras?"

"The man was wearing a dark baseball cap and nondescript clothing. Supposedly, it was impossible to see his face."

This pixie is walking around right under our noses.

"You look tired," Georgette says, her voice softening. "Not sleeping well?"

"No."

"Guy trouble?" she laughs, giving me a knowing smile.

I look around the convention, wondering where the pixie is hiding. And is it only the pixie? Are there more of the criminals lurking, just waiting to get another Peacock alone?

"You could say that," I finally answer, letting my attention wander. Jonathan has to be here somewhere.

Across from us, the cosmetic retailers are bustling.

"Is that your sponsor?" I ask, nodding in the direction of the Chaletta booth. "The company that makes the face cream?"

Georgette looks over. "Yes, that's them. They're certainly popular, aren't they? You could probably use a bit of it yourself—brighten those eyes right up."

I make a noise of agreement. Several models loiter near the stand, taking their time choosing products. If they use them, they must be good, right?

“Actually, I just need some more concealer,” I say, dismissing the thought of going over there and loading up on products. “I lost mine during our last job.”

“There are several makeup companies represented,” Georgette says, looking like she’s about to walk away. “Try Claudette, if you’re looking for something light. I personally use Le Paon, and it’s fabulous. Oh, Austin Lane is a good brand too—great foundation.”

She then says goodbye, leaving me wondering where Jonathan might be. No doubt he’s looking for the pixie, but where?

I spot Annika walking from the cosmetics area, Chaletta bag in hand.

“Hi,” the undercover model says when she notices me.

“Have we found anything yet?” I ask.

“Not that I’ve heard.”

I nod toward her bag. “Get anything good?”

Looking guilty, she produces a small tube containing a product that claims to plump lips by twenty percent. “It’s supposed to be fabulous, but I tried it on, and I really don’t see it.”

Laughing, I shake my head. “That’s because you’re a Peacock—you’re already perfect.”

She shrugs as she walks away, swinging the bag. “It’s worth a try, right? The girls who’ve had their magic swiped are swearing by the stuff.”

---

“FIND ANY PIXIES?” I ask the Griffon when I find him in Women’s Eveningwear, the area Sara was supposed to work today. He watches a trio of women modeling long fitted jackets over their trim A-line gowns. They’d make the perfect

bridesmaid dresses for a snowy, outdoor winter wedding, but that thought does absolutely nothing for my mood.

Jonathan glances over as if surprised to see me. “Hey.”

I step up next to him. “I heard there was another attack?”

“Luckily Sara wasn’t nine hundred years old,” he mutters and then turns to me. “What about you? Did you have a good morning?”

“No.”

The Griffon’s eyebrows shoot up. “Well, you’re still alive, so it couldn’t have been that rough.”

“May I paraphrase my conversation with Gray?” I ask, and then I nod to the stage. “Any of them Peacocks?”

“One. And go for it.”

“The Wolf informed me that you and I would have to be idiots to think we can have a relationship when I’m linked to someone else. Oh, and he thinks I should start dating Rafe.”

Jonathan frowns. “He’s right.”

I shoot him a look. “Of course he’s right, but that doesn’t mean I want to hear it.”

Without a word, Jonathan takes my hand and pulls me through the crowd, finding a deserted corner by a water fountain. When he turns, I realize how tired he looks—apparently I’m not the only one who can’t sleep.

“Madeline...” His eyes search mine. “I can’t kiss you without Rafe knowing. I can’t even *touch* you.”

I rub my temples, wishing I could start this day over.

Jonathan looks over my shoulders, out into the convention hall. “I just don’t see how this can work.”

My stomach drops to my toes, and a dull warning registers in my brain.

He studies me, shaking his head. “Last night—”

“Was amazing.”

I know Jonathan agrees with me, but his mouth flattens to a thin line like he's going to argue. "I feel like I'm stealing you, Madeline—like you're cheating on him with me."

"But I'm *not*."

"I know that—I know." He runs a hand through his hair, messing it up. I want to push his hand away, smooth the strands back into place like they were before we started this conversation. "But what can we do? I've been over it a hundred times, and I can't find an answer."

I cross my arms and look away, obnoxiously close to tears. I hold my breath and angle my head back, refusing to give in.

Jonathan steps closer, tilting my chin so I have to look at him. "Listen to me. I have never felt about someone the way I feel about you."

I blink quickly. "Not helping."

"And I hate this—Madeline, I *hate* it. But for whatever reason, we're not meant for each other. You promised yourself to Rafe when you merged your magic with his—and sweetheart, you need to give it a chance."

A sob escapes me, and the dam breaks. And these aren't pretty, soft, feminine tears—no. They're blotchy, blubbery, where-is-a-freaking-tissue tears.

Jonathan tugs me into his arms, holding me like we're on a sinking ship. I cry into his shirt, soaking the fabric, and he doesn't even care.

It shouldn't hurt this much—we never made it official. We've never even been on a real date.

But, oh, it hurts something awful.

"So we're done?" I ask, trying to staunch my tears before they destroy my makeup, but I know it's too late. "We're not going to change our minds in the middle of the night, or tomorrow, or next week?"

The knight softens his grip on me and meets my eyes, using his thumb to wipe away my tears. He looks like

someone just ran over his dog, and seeing his pain just makes me want to die.

“Not this time.” He pulls me close one more time, resting his head on mine. “This time it’s over.”

MY PHONE RINGS—OF course it does. If Rafe felt me last night, he certainly feels this.

“Answer it,” Jonathan whispers.

I shake my head, refusing to let go of him.

Which Jonathan apparently takes as permission to reach into my purse and snatch my cell.

“Rafe,” he says when he answers the call. He’s quiet for a long moment, and then he says, “She’s all right, but she needs you. Pull your head out of the sand and get on a plane.”

After another long moment, he ends the call with a short, sharp goodbye and places the phone back in my purse.

“Let me guess,” I say, sounding just a tiny bit snide. “Rafe thinks it’s safer if he stays away.”

“No.” Jonathan takes a deep breath and then lets it out slowly. “He’s headed to the airport.”

Rafe is actually coming. For some reason, the thought of seeing him—in person, not through our strange link—is sort of terrifying.

I step back, feeling numb. This day didn’t go at all like I expected.

“I’m going back to the room,” I tell him, wiping my face one last time. I’m sure I’m a red, puffy mess, and I have damage control to do on my mascara. “Tell Gray, will you?”

“I’ll walk you,” Jonathan says, though he looks hesitant. “You’re really not supposed to go anywhere by yourself.”

This is fun, isn’t it? We break up—or whatever you want to call this, and I can’t even cry in the elevator in private.

“I’ll be all right. It’s not that far, and I’ll be careful.” If I had my stun gun, he’d probably be more apt to let me leave.

The Griffon straightens, putting on his knight marshal face. “I’m sorry, but I can’t let you go alone.”

“Fine.”

Jonathan follows me through the convention hall, staying just a few steps behind like a guard instead of a teammate.

I hate this.

If I could go back and slap myself in Redstone, I would. I should have stayed away from Jonathan, kept it light and friendly. At least then I wouldn’t know what I was losing.

“Hold up,” he says suddenly, dropping his hand on my shoulder.

I freeze, startled by the contact. “What is it?”

He ends up next to me, staring into the crowd. “There’s a pixie up ahead.”

I jerk my eyes in the direction he’s looking and stand on my tiptoes to get a better view. “Who is it?”

“Blond-haired man in a red shirt and dark-wash jeans, around six foot.”

A tall woman moves aside, and then I see him. He ambles through the crowd, occasionally stopping to look at displays. He seems like nothing more than a casual browser, but there’s something calculating about his movements—they’re almost too nonchalant.

“What do we do?” I ask, temporarily forgetting about my blotchy face. Who cares if you have mascara-tinted tear stains when there’s a criminal to catch? (Actually, I do, but I’m going to pretend I don’t.)

Jonathan grasps my arm, pulling me closer. “We follow him.”

---

IT’S OFFICIAL. The pixie is the most boring criminal alive. He wandered the expo for about an hour, stopping here and there, generally looking suspicious but not doing *anything*.

We then followed him into the casino, where he went from slot machine to poker table to roulette wheel, playing occasionally though never lingering anywhere for long. He then browsed some of the shops, buying a bag of jelly beans and an “I Heart Las Vegas” mesh-backed trucker hat. (And let’s stop right here and talk about suspicious behavior. Who would spend hours in a fashion expo and then buy that atrocity?) He also purchased a sparkly snow globe of The Mediterranean and a pound of peanut butter fudge.

Now we’re in the back row of a 4D movie theater, watching a show titled *Sea of Predators: True Horror Stories from the Deep*.

“This man is such a poster child tourist, he must be a criminal,” Jonathan whispers, apparently not interested in sharks.

I wince, not needing to see that much blood on a massive screen ever again. “I wish he’d just hurry up and attack a Peacock. I don’t know that I can take much more of this.”



Jonathan grunts in agreement.

“You don’t happen to have that tracking device that we used in Tahoe with you, do you?” I ask, knowing it’s a long shot. “I’d really like to get out of here.”

“No.” He then sighs as if deciding something that doesn’t particularly please him.

The onscreen shark suddenly chases a school of fish “into” the audience, and we’re sprayed with questionably clean water as the 3D image lunges for us. The crowd squeals and laughs, but I grit my teeth and wipe my face.

Today is not my favorite.

Ignoring the people around us, Jonathan takes out his phone, which is hopefully in a waterproof case, and sends off a quick text.

“What are you doing?” I ask, not sure if he hears me over another audience-wide shriek. Oh look, the man-eating shark just attacked another man-eating shark. More blood.

“I’m asking Gray if any of the Vegas teams have a Hound.”

And he doesn’t mean hound as in dog, but Hound as in the Canis faction—the trackers.

“And why didn’t we do that sooner?” I ask.

Jonathan gets that awful look on his face again. It takes me a moment to realize what it is, but then I roll my eyes.

“It’s like asking for directions, isn’t it?” I demand. “You’re a guy, and you’d rather muddle through it yourself.”

He levels me with a bland stare, which only tells me I’m right.

The Griffon’s phone lights up with a reply.

“Gray said someone named Parker will meet us in an hour,” Jonathan says. “Until then, we’re supposed to stay on the pixie.”

“Joy,” I deadpan, hoping the guy hurries. Then I settle back to watch some more shark carnage. The good news is the documentary (and I use that term loosely) is so disturbing, I can in no way focus on it. Meaning my mind is fully on the knight next to me.

Oh, wait. That’s not good news—that’s torture.

Finally, the film ends, and the lights go up.

“I’ve seen things I’ll never be able to unsee,” I say, staring at the blank screen.

Jonathan chuckles, and then he bolts upright and swears under his breath. People jostle by us, exiting the theater. I shift forward, out of the impatient tourists’ way, and follow Jonathan’s eyes, feeling like swearing myself.

The pixie is nowhere to be seen. Somehow, he slipped us.

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FORTY-FIVE MINUTES after we lose the pixie, Jonathan opens the door of our suite and motions me inside. He’s irritated with himself. I’m irritated with everyone.

We wouldn’t make the best company right now.

He walks around the suite, checking the bedroom, two closets, and bathroom for any unwanted visitors. I follow, looking for anything he might miss.

“Hurry and clean up. We need to meet with Gray.” He glances at his phone to check the time. “Parker is here, and Gray wants us to go back to the places the pixie visited to see if we can pick up a trail.”

I rub my neck, staring at the wall. “You go ahead.”

“Madel—”

“Go.”

Instead of leaving, Jonathan makes a call. “You close?” he asks, and after a moment he says, “Room 507.”

The Griffon then hangs up the phone and turns back to me. “Rafe just got to the casino. He’ll be up shortly.”

My stomach knots.

Jonathan meets my eyes, his chocolate gaze enigmatic. “I’ll let you have a few minutes to yourself.”

I can’t decide if I want to kiss him or slap him, though I know this isn’t his fault any more than it’s mine. All right, I suppose it’s sort of my fault.

Crossing my arms, I stand a little straighter, boldly meeting his eyes. “When it comes down to it, I’d rather watch you walk away now than have let you die at Redstone.”

The whole “doomed if you do, doomed if you don’t” thing is really starting to resonate with me right now.

Jonathan’s eyebrows twitch, and he presses his lips together. For one moment—one brief, tension-filled second—I think he’s going to cross the room, yank me into his arms, and kiss me like he did at the mansion.

But he doesn’t because he’s decided what we’re doing is wrong. And Jonathan, above all else, is a good guy, just like everyone claims.

“Call me if you need me,” he says, looking away. He pauses just before he’s out the door, with his back to me. “I mean it, Madeline. Even though we can’t be together, my blade is yours.”

I close my eyes, near my breaking point. After a moment, I open my eyes and stare at the back of his neck. “Just your blade? What about your gun?”

Slowly, he turns, and his eyes lock with mine. “I believe you know what I mean.”

Holding my breath, I nod.

He made a knight’s vow, a promise—initiated in Redstone, confirmed just now. The good, noble Griffon just swore his allegiance to the dark queen. Apparently, I have two knights.

And then he’s out the door, leaving me alone in the suite.

I stumble to the bed and lower myself onto the edge. I spent all my tears earlier, and my eyes are dry. But now I just

feel hollow, which seems worse.

After several long moments, I pull out my cell phone, bring up my contacts, and stare at the screen. I end up making the call without truly deciding to, and I almost hang up.

“Madeline?” my former best friend says after the second ring, sounding shocked to hear from me.

“Hey, Maisy.”

And because she’s known me forever, she instantly picks up on the off tone of my voice. “What’s wrong?”

I can’t tell her about my magic. I can’t tell her about Jonathan or linking with Rafe or anything that’s really important. I just wanted to do something that feels halfway normal—and calling her after an awful day feels normal.

“I’m working on a case,” I say. “And I have a question.”

“Okay, sure.” She murmurs something to someone in the room, sounding like she’s excusing herself, and then comes back on the line. “How can I help?”

“Have you ever used extracted magic in your potions?”

“Extracted magic?” she parrots, sounding horrified at the thought. “Mads, not only is that incredibly forbidden, but it’s downright creepy.”

“We’re looking for a man who put up an ad on a human black market website requesting ‘Essence of Peacock.’ We’ve linked it to Cristatus magic. I’m trying to figure out what someone might do with it.”

The alchemist makes a humming sound as if thinking. “Anything can be infused in a potion, really. I’m assuming the liquid magic would act as a charm—Peacock, you say?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, the first thing that pops into my head is a lotion—like an anti-aging cream. Once applied, the effect would be nearly instantaneous, but because the magic would have to be blended with organic items that break down, it would only be temporary—like any other potion.”

My heart thumps just a little faster, and I stand, going into the bathroom. “Like maybe a face cream?”

“Yes, certainly, if it were liquid based.”

“If I send you a sample, could you deconstruct it?”

“You mean break down the ingredient list?” she asks, sounding intrigued. “Most likely.”

“I’ll get it in the mail today.”

I flip open my makeup case, looking for the small container of eye cream Georgette gave me yesterday, wondering if there’s enough for Maisy to test. As soon I see the contents, I let out a gasp and take a step back, getting a serious case of déjà vu. A crisp, white envelope lies on top of my cosmetics.

“Are you okay?” Maisy asks.

“Yeah. I’m fine. Thank you for checking it out, Maisy.” I stare at the note. “I appreciate it.”

“I’m really glad you called,” she says, and the sentiment sounds sincere. “I’ll let you know what I find.”

“Mmmhmm. I’ll talk to you soon.”

I hang up and slowly set my phone on the counter. As I’m staring at the envelope, the sound of the lock mechanism sounds from the main door. I close my eyes, relieved Rafe’s just outside. Knowing he’s here gives me the courage I need to snatch the note and rip it open.

I stare at it, surprised to find the envelope empty.

“I thought it might be best to deliver this message in person,” a man says from behind me.

I whirl around, letting out a startled yip. My eyes go wide as I take in the Fox from the elevator.

“How did you—” I start and then cut myself off. “What do you want?”

Slowly, keeping his eyes locked on mine, he bows. “To serve you.”

I could deny who I am, but what's the point? "How do you know me?"

He takes a step forward, and I shift back. As if that amuses him, he smirks. "We have a mutual friend."

Grasping blindly, not about to take my eyes off him, I flick on my curling iron and pray I have sixty seconds to wait for it to heat. He doesn't even appear to notice.

"Who?" I demand, wondering if it's Trent or Jenna.

"That's not important."

"You're with the Entitled?" I say.

He smiles, running his eyes over me. His fake tan looks especially orange in the bright bathroom light. "We've been waiting for you for—"

"A very long time," I interrupt. "I *know*."

They're like a bunch of broken records. You would think in all that time, they would have worked on their speech.

"What's your message?" I demand, wrapping my hand around the styling tool's handle.

"Come with me, and I'll tell you."

Unable to help myself, I laugh. "Not happening."

He takes another menacing step forward. "No is not really an option."

And then he lunges for me, arms wide like he means to capture me in a menacing bear hug. I wield my curling iron like a sword, swinging it wildly toward his face. It must have gotten hot in those few seconds because the Fox lets out a deafening roar when the metal connects with his skin, and my stomach rolls like I'm going to be sick—the sizzling sound isn't pleasant.

The man stumbles backward, clutching his face, screaming obscenities that make my ears burn. He does *not* have nice things to say about me, and if he intends to make good on half his threats, I'm as good as dead.

I yank the cord from the outlet, ready to run but not about to leave my only weapon behind, when the man suddenly stumbles forward and crashes to the floor, unmoving.

I freeze in place, shocked, and slowly pull my eyes up.

Rafe stands in the doorway.

His indigo eyes meet mine as he lowers his gun. Slowly, he raises a brow. "Hello, Lexie."

MY KNIGHT LOOKS at my weapon of choice with an unflappable, if not slightly incredulous, expression, but I can *feel* his chaotic emotions—fear, relief, anger, and if I’m not mistaken, he’s even a little impressed.

“Hi.” My hand shakes as I manage to set the curling iron on the counter. My head gets a little fuzzy, but I’m hoping that’s because I skipped lunch and not because of the dead man on the tile floor.

Slowly, Rafe’s gaze drops to the lifeless Fox. “Something tells me the envelope didn’t contain buffet tickets.”

I snort out a laugh and then promptly sit on the side of the tub and fight back tears. “It’s been a really bad day.”

Wordlessly, Rafe steps over the body and kneels in front of me, resting his arm on his leg as he crouches. His teak-colored hair looks like it’s been recently trimmed, and there’s a hint of shadow along his jaw. In his dark jeans, black jacket, and



boots, there's an air of danger about him. But that might be the dead body talking.

He offers me a smile, one that reaches his eyes, and nudges my knee. "Bad day, huh? At least your hair looks great."

I laugh, just as he hoped, but it turns into a groan. "How are we going to get rid of him?"

Visions of the two of us pulling the Fox's bleeding body down the hall dance in front of my eyes. There might be garbage bags involved, but I don't really watch mobster movies, so I'm not terribly familiar with how this all works.

"Easy." Rafe pulls his phone from his pocket, and I see Gray's name pop up on the screen. My knight raises his eyebrows, smirking at me when the Wolf answers the phone. "We need a clean-up on aisle five."

"You just got into town, and you're already working on your body count?" I hear Gray say.

"Nah, this is Madeline's. I just finished him off."

Gray says a *really* bad word, and then he asks where we're at.

"In your room."

Go figure—Gray doesn't like that much either.

After another moment, Rafe hangs up. "Help is on the way."

---

"HE DIDN'T TELL ME ANYTHING," I explain to the team plus Rafe. "He just wanted me to go with him, and when I refused, he attacked me."

I sit on the couch, fiddling with a pair of handcuffs Eric left lying around, frustrated I didn't coax the man to talk more when I had the chance.

Eric chuckles and shakes his head.

"What?" I demand.

“Just thinking about the curling iron.” He grins. “You’re brutal, little Fox.”

“I didn’t have a lot of options.”

Jonathan sits in the chair by the desk in the corner, drumming his fingers on the hotel stationery. He hasn’t said a word this entire time, and I know he’s blaming himself. This is exactly what he worried would happen—he let down his guard for a few minutes tops, and I was attacked.

“But he knew about your magic?” Gray questions. “And he was the one leaving you the notes?”

“I believe so, yes.”

Rafe leans against the door, arms crossed. “But he might not have been working alone.”

Gray nods, and then he turns to Jonathan. “And *why* exactly did you leave her by herself?”

“Because I asked him to go,” I say before Jonathan can answer—I refuse to let him take the brunt of this.

“No, it’s my fault,” Jonathan argues, and it’s clear from his tone that the matter is closed.

Gray looks between us, and then recognition dawns on his face when he realizes what happened—as he should, considering he was the instigator.

“From this point on, under *no* circumstances, will Madeline ever be left alone,” the Wolf finally says. “Is that clear?”

“Do I get a say in this?” I demand.

“No.”

I grit my teeth, wanting to lash out but afraid I’ll end up sounding like a spoiled teen. And I get it—unless I want to unleash a whole lot of darkness, my magic is limited when it comes to protecting myself. On top of that, my training with human weapons is minimal.

This was a good lesson, however, that I need to carry that stupid stun gun with me everywhere. I won’t accidentally

leave it behind again.

“Props to Madeline for her resourcefulness, though,” Eric says. “Am I right?”

All eyes turn on me, and Rafe smirks when I squirm.

I attacked a man with a curling iron. I’ll never live it down.

“What are you doing?” Eric suddenly asks, looking at my hands.

I glance down at the cuffs, frowning at them. One is locked over my wrist, and without really thinking about it, I’ve been working my magic this whole time, trying to get it open. “I was practicing.”

“Those are charmed specifically to block Fox magic—you can’t pick the lock, and as long as you wear them, you won’t be able to use your persuasion. How else would we contain you criminal types?” Eric laughs. “You’re not getting it off without a key.”

Jonathan clears his throat and crosses the room, kneeling in front of me, making my heart break anew. Without a word, he produces a key and frees me.

“Thanks,” I murmur.

He meets my eyes and nods.

Gray’s phone chimes, saving us from further interaction. “Parker is getting impatient,” he says. “We need to get to the convention center.”

“I think it goes without saying that this afternoon’s events don’t need to be shared with anyone outside our team,” Rafe adds as the guys stand. “This was about Madeline—not the case.”

They all nod, and Eric asks, “Did you know him, Rafe? Had you seen him before?”

“He looked vaguely familiar, as if maybe we were acquainted when I was younger. But I can’t place him now.”

I think of the man, wondering what the guys did with his body. All I know is it’s not in the bathroom anymore, and none

of them were arrested while they were disposing of it.

“I need to speak with Madeline,” Rafe says. “You three go on down, and we’ll meet you in a bit.”

Gray nods. “Parker wants to walk the area with Jonathan anyway—follow the trail he and Madeline took earlier. It might take a while.”

Unable to help himself, Eric says, “So Jonathan is literally going to take the Hound on a walk?”

Rafe snorts, but Jonathan only shakes his head, not in the mood.

My teammates filter out of the room, off to work on the real case. Jonathan is the last to leave. He pauses by the door, looks between Rafe and me, and then steps into the hall without another word.

Rafe frowns and turns to me when the door closes. “All right. What’s going on between you and Jonathan? Why did he demand I fly here?”

“Do you think we should go with them?” I ask, ignoring the question. “They might need our help.”

“Lexie.”

“Did you find anything about Trent’s medallion?”

“No.” Then, not about to be distracted, he asks, “Why did you ask Jonathan to leave you alone earlier?”

“I think we need to find a War Horse to question—Gray said we’ll request leave and fly to Europe after this case so we can look for one.”

“You’re avoiding, Madeline.”

“It makes sense, right?” I babble on. “If anyone would know how to get past the medallion’s magic, it would be a Horse.”

Rafe crosses the room and sets his hands on my upper arms, making me look at him. Our magic twines together, utterly content. He’s masking his feelings and doing a fine job of it. I can’t feel them over my own chaotic emotions.

“Talk to me,” the knight says gently. “I flew five hundred miles just to see you.”

“Jonathan and I came to the conclusion that things will never work out between us,” I finally admit, giving up. It’s not like Rafe can’t already tell I’m suffering a major case of a broken heart.

“You broke up?” he asks, his brow wrinkling.

“We weren’t exactly together.”

You can just slap a cover on that statement and call it the story of my life. My first love was Finn, and he used me. Then I stumbled into a severe case of blind lust with Gray only to find out he’s a dog. And then...Jonathan.

I’ve never had a real relationship, though I can skirt around the edges of them like a pro.

“This is because of the link, isn’t it?” he asks.

I shrug, looking at the knight’s T-shirt. It’s nice and soft, dark blue like his eyes.

When I do finally answer, I say, “Jonathan said he feels like I’m cheating on you with him.”

“We’re not together.”

“I told him that.”

“We’ll learn to block the link—we’ll practice.” Rafe searches my eyes. “Last night...I was tired. I wanted to sleep, that’s all.”

I scoff, knowing that’s not *all*.

“There was something else going on, but you wouldn’t tell me,” I say. “You’re here now. You flew five hundred miles just to see me—*so talk*.”

The knight narrows his eyes ever so slightly, and a strange look crosses his face. “You don’t need to know.”

“Is that how this is always going to work?” I step forward, growing angry, and then I hold up a finger, about to list his transgressions. “You tell me what to do and think, expecting

me to blindly obey. You continue to omit facts and truths in the name of ‘safety.’ You take off because you think it’s a good idea, not even caring how I feel about it.” I give up on the list, and I press a finger against his chest. “I don’t need a nanny, Rafe. I need a *knight*.”

His eyes flash, and I see a glimpse of challenge in his gaze. He turns the metaphorical tables and takes several steps forward, urging me back.

Not about to be a herdable sheep, I stand my ground and tilt my chin up, refusing to budge another inch.

“You want to know the rest of the story?” he asks, lowering his voice. “Why I was sharp with you when I called? Fine. I dreamed about you—my subconscious answered the call of your emotions. But in my head, it wasn’t Jonathan’s hands on you—it was mine. It wasn’t him who coaxed you onto the bed. It was *me*.”

I hold my breath, acknowledging that I really need to learn when to keep my mouth shut.

“But there is one big difference between the Griffon and me,” he continues, dropping his voice even further.

Unable to answer with actual words, I draw in a slow breath through my nose and wait.

Rafe leans close, meeting my gaze, his expression unreadable but intense. “If I were about to kiss you, I guarantee you wouldn’t have bothered to answer your phone.”

I stare at him, eyes wide, heart beating madly, no clue how to respond. I swallow and catch my bottom lip between my teeth, trying to collect myself.

The knight cocks his head to the side, waiting for me to answer—*daring* me to respond.

“See there?” I finally say, keeping my tone light—or at least attempting to. “Was that so hard?”

A crooked smile plays at his lips.

*Is it warm in here? It feels warm.*

I clear my throat, sternly telling myself I will not fan my face like some flustered southern belle. “Now that we’ve cleared that up, I should probably join the team.”

But before I can escape—and believe me, I try—Rafe catches my arm and pulls me back. “Now hold on just a minute. If we’re being so honest, how about you tell me why you needed me to leave San Francisco immediately.”

“If you’ll remember, it was Jonathan who said you needed to leave San Francisco—not me.”

Rafe takes a step closer, studying me in a way that’s not altogether friendly. It’s not necessarily *unfriendly* either...but it still makes me gulp. With mock patience, he presses, “And *why* did Jonathan ask?”

He wants to know? Fine.

“Because he and Gray have it in their fool brains that we should give”—I motion a hand between us—“a try. Because we’re linked—because we’re stuck together anyway.”

“They do?” he asks, his voice void of emotion.

Frustrated, I throw up my hands. “I told them you don’t want that, and I—”

“I never said I don’t want it,” he cuts me off, taking another step in. “I said it was dangerous. Those are two very different things.”

Unfortunately, with this lovely conversation comes guilt. You see, even though Jonathan feels like I’m cheating on Rafe with him, right now, I feel like I’m dangerously close to cheating on *him* with Rafe.

Even though we’re not together.

My knight’s expression softens as my sudden despair crashes over him, and he gently grasps my elbows and pulls me close, holding me like a friend.

“It hurts,” I murmur. And why not? It’s not like I can spare his feelings—he already knows.

He sets his hand on the back of my head and slowly strokes my hair. “For what it’s worth, I’m truly sorry.”

I turn my face forward, resting my forehead against his chest. “It was my choice—I demanded we link.”

“Do you regret it?”

He’s nervous of my answer—there’s still so much guilt emanating from him. It circles him like a vulture, preying, taunting.

“No.” Slowly, I look up, meeting his eyes. “We had no choice. I know it; you know it.”

Maybe Gray is right—maybe I need to make the best of this, even if it’s not the path I would have purposely chosen. I would be with Jonathan if I could—even now my heart aches for him. I want to scream that this isn’t fair, that life shouldn’t be so cruel. Part of me even wants to resent Rafe, though he fought the link tooth and nail, giving in only when our world was literally falling to pieces.

But what’s the point? I’m not a child, and if I’ve learned anything over the last few months, it’s that life isn’t always fair.

Am I ready to move on, however? Not yet.

Fighting for control, I step back, hugging myself. I need to be strong—I also need to stand on my own two feet. I’m not going to run into Rafe’s arms like I did with Gray when Finn hurt me—I’m not going to use him like that.

Rafe is my friend, my partner, my knight. And when and *if* the time comes I choose to involve myself with him romantically, it will be because I want him—not because I want someone else I can’t have.

And not because we’re linked.

“What is it?” He shoves his hands into his pockets. “You’re thinking awfully hard about something.”

I’ve spent nearly every moment of the last three months with this man—day in, day out. We’ve talked, argued, watched sports I couldn’t care less about, shopped for clothes he



couldn't care less about, looked for houses, shared meals, and sent away more dark things than I can count.

“I missed you,” I tell him, meaning it with my whole heart. I might not love him...but I love him. If that makes sense.

And I'm glad he's here.

His expression softens, and he tilts his head to the side, studying me. “I missed you too, Lexie.”

I WALK through the door of the room off the convention center where we all gathered after we found the nearly mummified Peacock and stop in my tracks.

There's a newcomer in the group, someone I don't recognize. She's five-nine—easily five-eleven with her heeled boots. She wears crazy tight black pants in some kind of stretchy leather, a fitted white T-shirt, cropped olive-green jacket, and her ash-brown hair is up in a sleek ponytail. She looks sexy and dangerous, and I'm pretty sure she's packing more than a sparkly stun gun.

She's also touching my Griffon.

I suck in a breath, taking in the sight of her standing with her hand on Jonathan's bicep, yelling at myself to knock the jealous crap off. One, Jonathan's not mine. Two...

*Jonathan's not mine.*

The woman is basically everything I never knew I wanted to be, and all my insecurities rear their stupid heads.

“Madeline, Rafe,” Gray says, calling us. “You’re here. Come meet Parker.”

Hold it. Just back that bus up.

*That’s Parker? The tracker? I thought she was a guy.*

“Hi, Madeline,” Parker says, stepping away from Jonathan and giving me this great big, super friendly smile—the real kind, not even a tiny bit fake. “It’s such a pleasure to meet you. Gray’s team is renowned.”

This is the part where I should tell her I’m more like a mascot than a member.

Instead, I nod, feeling out of my league. Parker turns her head to ask Gray something, and a sliver of a tattoo peeks out from her neckline.

Sure, she’s tattooed too. Tough girl. Probably trained at the Knight’s Guild Academy. Probably can take out a troll with her little finger.

“Parker thinks she has the pixie’s scent—”

“*Trail*, Gray,” she corrects, laughing as she shakes her head. “I’m a Hound, not a dog.”

Oh, there are so many things that come to mind, but none of them are nice, so I chastise myself and try to pay attention.

Gray grins at the Hound but continues, “And she, Jonathan, and I are getting ready to leave. Eric’s at his post, keeping an eye on things here.”

I glance at Rafe and then back at Gray. “What do you want me to do?”

“Stay with Rafe—do *not* leave his side.” He points at me like I’m ten years old. “Do you understand?”

Sure I understand—they need me out of the way. I might as well have stayed in the room.

“Got it,” I snap.

Parker looks between us, her eyebrows drawing together with concern. Before they go, she flashes me an apologetic look, like she's sorry she's taking off with my knights and leaving me here. I watch them go, wanting to run after them and demand they let me tag along.

"How much do you hate her right now?" a woman says from my side, surprising me.

I glance over...and then down. "Hey, Chloe," I say, unsure where she and I stand. She's kind of a prickly little Squirrel.

"Allow me to let you in on a secret about knight marshals," she says, crossing her arms. "They never stick around for long."

She then turns on her heel and walks away, disappearing into the crowd.

"Someone got burned," Rafe says.

"That's Chloe," I tell him. "Have you met her?"

Rafe shakes his head, "No, but she looks familiar."

"Eric's been chasing after her, but so far, no luck."

"No kidding."

I flash him a smile and then start toward cosmetics. "Hey, while we're here, I want to check out something."

"Is this about the boots I promised to replace?" he asks, falling into step beside me.

We weave through the crowd, walking toward cosmetics. "No, but you still owe me those."

It's incredibly crowded today. Cameras go off every few seconds, music blares from various sections, and different lines are being announced from stages. I should be having the time of my life, but it feels so unimportant in light of recent events.

"I don't think you have anything to worry about," Rafe says when I pick up a tiny container of the Chaletta multi-use brightening and anti-wrinkle cream. Though it's less than an ounce, I know it's going to cost me a pretty penny. But Maisy

is going to need more to study than what's left in my little sample jar.

I smile at my knight, refusing to speak about it here, and head to the register to pay for my purchase. Rafe nearly chokes when the total comes to two hundred and five dollars, plus tax.

"It's amazing," the girl gushes. "You won't believe the results."

I'll bet it is.

Before we leave the cosmetics counter, I stop in front of the Le Paon makeup section and browse the concealer.

Rafe narrows his eyes at the display. "What is this?"

I flash him a look. "Makeup. You know, foundation, blush, concealer..."

"I got that part."

"Georgette Don Patrick uses it—I haven't been sleeping well since Redstone, and I've had these awful dark circles."

As I talk, I flip the container over, looking to see where it's produced. I'm sorry, but I won't pay forty-seven dollars if it's imported from overseas.

"Paon means Peacock in French," Rafe says.

I find the distribution information—Georgette Don Patrick Cosmetics. No wonder she uses it—it's hers. "That makes sense."

"It does?"

I tap the name on the bottom. "It must be part of Georgette's line."

He stares at me blankly.

"Georgette is a Peacock," I tell him, wondering why he's looking at me like that. "You just said Paon means peacock—she named it after her faction."

"Georgette Don Patrick? As in the director's wife?"

"Yes..."

“I read the file on the plane.” He glances around and then steps closer, lowering his voice. “Georgette is an Owl.”

An alchemist? Just like Maisy?

“Are you sure?” I ask, and my brain starts skittering places I don’t want it to wander.

“Positive.”

Just then, the girl attending the display decides to join us. “Would you like a free makeover?” she asks.

I make the poor girl jump when I bark out a horrified, “No.”

Her eyebrows shoot up, and she takes a step back. “O... okay.”

Rafe grasps my shoulders and propels me forward. “Don’t be shy, sweetheart. Go ahead.”

I flash him a look over my shoulder. He shoots one right back.

“I don’t mind waiting,” he says as though he’s an indulgent boyfriend.

I find myself in the chair. The girl immediately jumps to work, using a wipe to wash off what’s left of my previous makeup. “You have fabulous cheekbones,” she says.

I murmur my thanks, terrified I’m about to have stolen Peacock essence smeared all over my face. Surely not, though. Not Georgette.

But she was the one who was nudging my suspicions toward the face cream...

“Tell us about the line,” Rafe says casually, leaning against the makeshift wall. “Has it been around long?”

The girl smiles at Rafe. “It belongs to designer Georgette Don Patrick. She introduced it less than six months ago, and it’s taken off like crazy. We only use the most natural, skin-loving ingredients.”

I shiver as she squirts a small amount of the foundation primer onto a wedged sponge and try very hard not to leap out of the chair when she dabs it over my face.

“So the line is doing well?” Rafe asks.

“Oh yes. In fact, half the models here are wearing it.”

That gets Rafe’s attention. “Really?”

“Mmmhmm.”

Rafe picks up a container of pressed powder and studies it. “What are the natural extracts?”

She gives him a friendly smile. “I’m afraid I’m not at liberty to say—it’s kind of like a secret recipe.”

“Oh, you can tell me,” Rafe says, smacking her with a hefty wallop of charisma.

She blinks and then glances at him again, looking up at him through her eyelashes. “I’d tell you if I could, but I honestly don’t know.”

Disappointed, Rafe nods to me. “That’s all right. Go ahead and finish up.”

Five hundred and twenty-two dollars later, we leave with a little of everything—and I look like a runway model. My lips are full, my skin is smooth and dewy, my eyes are bright, and my lashes are the color of midnight. If this stuff doesn’t end up being tainted with magic, I’m buying the entire line.

It’s as we’re walking to the room that I notice something on the side of the bag.

“It looks like you got something too.” I turn the glossy white gift bag so my knight can see the Sharpie phone number written on the side.

Rafe snorts out a laugh and turns the bag around, not-so-subtly proclaiming his disinterest.

We’re supposed to meet the team in the suite in five minutes, and I’m itching to wash my face. Sure, I look good. But this is seriously creepy.

We walk through the door and find the guys are already here...the guys and Parker. And look—Parker is next to Jonathan on the couch, laughing at something he just said.

That's cool.

I try very hard not to meet his eyes. The last thing I want to look like is a crazy, obsessed almost-ex girlfriend, but I can't help it.

The Griffon's eyes widen as he takes me in, and he slowly stands. I'd like to think it's because I'm having a Maybelline moment—you know, that my hair is flowing in the slight breeze from the central heating and cooling system and I just look so darn good his jaw drops to the floor. But I'm pretty sure that's not the reason for his reaction.

"Madeline..." he breathes.

I have this insane desire to run to the bathroom and scrub my face for an hour.

His eyes sweep over me, and he shakes his head, baffled.

"Just spit it out," I snap.

"You're covered in Peacock magic."

Rafe leans against the wall, smirking in a satisfied way. "Called it."

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"SO LET ME GET THIS STRAIGHT," Gray says, pacing the room. "Georgette is stealing the models' magic and then selling it back to them as makeup?"

"That's right," Rafe answers.

"But *why*?"

"Besides the fact that she's raking in serious money—"

"They don't need money," I interrupt. "Her and Sean Luka are rolling in it. Seriously."

Rafe purses his lips, silently asking if I'll let him finish.

"Go ahead," I say with a sigh.



“This is a tough industry—there’s a lot of pressure on models to keep up their looks if they want to keep working—”

“Poor things,” Parker says, grinning even though her tone is downright snarky. She flashes the smile at me, sharing the joke, being all *likable*.

Rude, right?

“But Georgette had a handicap,” Rafe continues. “She’s an Owl. Yes, an extremely beautiful Owl, but she didn’t have any help in the magic department. I believe she concocted a potion to prolong her career, and then she eventually realized how lucrative it would be to sell.”

Gray turns to Jonathan. “Did you notice anything off about the woman?”

“I only met her briefly, and...she looks like a Peacock.” He crosses his arms. “I should have read my handout a little more carefully.”

“And the display? You didn’t sense the magic on it?”

Jonathan shrugs. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but there are a lot of Peacocks roosting in that convention center. If a Peacock was working the display, the products would have blended with her magic.”

Eric sits on the bed, hanging out with Charles, as usual. He looks a bit downtrodden, as if this job is wearing on him. I end up crossing the room while Gray, Rafe, and Jonathan argue and sit next to him. “I think some Bunny needs a vacation.”

He smiles. “Clever.”

I bump his shoulder. “You okay?”

“I’m a nice guy, right? Friendly? Good-looking enough?”

Ah. This is about Chloe.

“You’re a great guy,” I assure him. “And extremely hot.”

“Yeah?” He gives me a hopeful look.

Laughing, I nod. “The hottest.”

He looks down at Charles. The cat is lolled on his back, snoring as if he hasn't a care in the world. "*Why* doesn't she like me? I told her that nothing was going on with Sara, but I don't think she believed me."

"Pretty sure some knight marshal out there broke her heart."

The knight slowly meets my eyes, giving me a soft, sad smile. "We're pretty good at that, huh?"

I huff out a breath. "Pretty darn good."

"Do you think I have a chance?" he asks, dropping his voice. I'm pretty sure he doesn't want the other guys to hear. "Even a slim one?"

I pet Charles under the chin, smiling when he yawns. "I do, actually. You're a catch."

"You know," he says, his tone turning mischievous. "I'm the only one on the team you haven't kissed. I think you can see why I'm starting to get a complex."

I know he's only messing with me, but I answer anyway. "Don't get too worked up—I haven't kissed Rafe either."

"Really?" he asks, sounding more than a little surprised.

"Really."

Gray suddenly stands, drawing us back to the main conversation. "I'll call Lord Traverly and see if he believes we have enough evidence to arrest her."

"Madeline looks like a Peacock," Rafe says. "What more evidence do you need?"

Lord Traverly obviously agrees with my knight because five minutes later, we get the okay.

THE PLAN IS EASY ENOUGH—WE'RE going to knock on the Don Lukas' door and arrest them both. It's after the expo hours, around nine thirty. Jonathan, Eric, Rafe, and Parker form a semi-circle outside the door, guns drawn, looking like a deadly lesson in geometry.

I stand toward the back, wishing I had my stun gun. Maybe I should have accepted the pistol Gray bought me, but I wouldn't shoot it and risk hitting one of my guys—not with my terrible aim. According to Rafe, this should be an easy arrest anyway.

Gray knocks on the suite door, and we wait. We know they're in there; Parker said their trail is fresh, and no one's left since they went inside.

A few moments later, Gray knocks again. Still, they refuse to answer.

“Rafe?” Gray asks.

Immediately, Rafe unlocks the door. I'm about to protest—I could have done it just as easily, and I'm actually on the team. Before I can speak up, Rafe shoots me a warning look and then glances at Parker.

Right. She thinks I'm a wimpy little Sparrow, like the rest of the magical world.

Gray swings the door open, and the team charges inside, catching Georgette and Sean Luka on the couch, in the middle of making out like teens.

So surprised by the intrusion, Sean Luka jumps up, inadvertently knocking a glass of scotch off the side table. The glass falls to the ground, bouncing harmlessly on the carpet, not even bothering to break—somewhat anticlimactic if you ask me.

“Wh...what is this?” the director stutters.

Georgette watches us, her lovely face pale. There's recognition in her eyes, making it clear that she's not innocent in the whole scheme.

“You will cooperate,” Rafe says calmly, pushing persuasion into his words. “Did you put an ad on the internet, requesting Peacock magic?”

“*What?*” Sean Luka gasps, but his wife...

“No,” she says adamantly, shaking her head. Three seconds later, her face crumples, and she starts to bawl. “I hired someone to do it for me.”

Rafe rolls his eyes—some people are easy to break. He didn't even press yet.

“Why?” I ask, stepping forward, devastated to see a woman I admired so much with her arms behind her back as Jonathan snaps a pair of magically-enhanced cuffs on her slender wrists.

She proceeds to launch into a Scooby-Doo-worthy villain monolog about how the Peacocks don't deserve their beauty... how they are conceited and ungrateful...how it serves them right to lose their magic and then have to spend an arm and a

leg for makeup that would make them beautiful again. Blah, blah.

Apparently, Rafe was right. She first concocted a potion after she hired a pixie—most likely the one Jonathan and I followed—to steal the magical essence from a particularly snotty co-model. After that, the enterprise grew, likely because she began having an affair with the pixie. (As we all know, in general, they're not known for their moral fiber.)

Sean Luka stares at his wife, his mouth agape, looking like he was just punched in the gut.

“You better come with us,” Rafe says to the director. “They'll want to question you too.”

Gray turns to Jonathan and Parker. “Can you track the pixie? We have enough to make an arrest.”

The pair nods, and my stomach ties itself in knots. I understand why Gray is sending Jonathan with Parker. I really do. She can track the criminal, and then Jonathan will need to identify him.

But I don't have to like it.

“Madeline,” Gray continues. “Will you and Rafe find Donovan and let him know we've made an arrest? Eric and I will take these two down to the local guild for holding.”

“Sure,” I say, glad I have something to do, even if it's trivial. For a minute, I was pretty sure he was going to send me back to the room.

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WE FIND DONAVAN, his team, and Thomas and Brett in the main foyer.

“Georgette?” Donovan says, surprised when we tell him we made the arrest. “Are you serious?”

I nod, ready to be done with the whole thing. I think it's time I go home, sleep in my own bed, and finally figure out how to track Trent and send some monsters back to Aparia.

“We’ll meet Gray at the guild,” Hudson says, and then he gives me a big smile and shakes my hand. “It was nice to meet you, Madeline. Hopefully we’ll see you at Lord Finnegan’s wedding?”

Oh, that. Right. Somehow, I managed to block it out.

Gray sends me a text just as we’re parting, asking if I’ll grab paperwork from the room off the convention hall.

“We’ll come with you,” Brett says, motioning to Thomas. “We have some stuff to grab too.”

The center is oddly quiet, just a few attendants and the cleaning crew wandering about. The meeting room is completely empty, though there’s plenty of our junk lying around.

Rafe and the Squirrels start talking about past jobs, and I listen idly as I look for the briefcase. Suddenly, a strange emotion emanates from Rafe.

“What’s the matter?” I turn around and then freeze in place.

“Brett?” I whisper, staring at the cuffs the Squirrel is putting on my knight. They look just like the guild-issued ones I played with in the room earlier.

Rafe’s livid, but there’s the unmistakable twinge of fear as well—though it’s not for himself. It’s for me. He stares at someone behind me, his nostrils flaring. Just as I begin to turn, a hand settles on my shoulder.

“Come with us peacefully, and we won’t harm your knight,” Thomas says, holding a gun to my head. Then, before I can process what’s going on, he slips a cuff around my wrist as well, effectively blocking my persuasion.

Oh no, not him too.

This isn’t right—they’re *Squirrels*. Tech-loving, a little geeky, harmless.

Rafe’s eyes flash. “If you touch her—”

“You’ll what?” Thomas asks, shaking his head like a teacher answering a difficult student as he finishes cuffing me. “What are you going to do while you’re cuffed, Fox? You can’t access your magic.”

Another man walks into the room, and we all look his way. I hold my breath, hoping he’s on our side. No such luck. It’s the man Jonathan and I followed, the magic-thieving pixie.

Wait—that doesn’t make sense. This is about me and my magic, not Georgette’s twisted makeup line. Right?

My heart hammers in my chest as he crosses the room, his eyes on me even as he heads toward Rafe. Scoffing, he says, “Funny Squirrels. You don’t honestly think that will stop the Obsidian Knight, do you?”

“No!” I scream as the pixie reaches for Rafe.

All it takes is a touch, and the knight crumples to the ground. He’s conscious, but something is very wrong.

“Rafe!”

“I’m fine,” he grits out, looking as if he’s unable to move his limbs.

“What did you do to him?” I demand, swinging toward the pixie.

He pulls a chair from one of the round tables, swings it around, and sits in it backward, staring at me with a smile on his face. “Just a little temporary paralysis. Beautiful, simple. Highly effective, wouldn’t you say?”

Thomas steps in front of me, blocking Rafe and the pixie from my line of sight. In an incredibly reasonable tone, he says, “Listen, Madeline. We don’t want to hurt you, and you have no reason to fear us. Here’s how this is going to work. You’re going to come with us and open one of the closed thresholds. After that, we’ll let Rafe go.”

Notice he doesn’t say he’ll let *me* go?

“Why do you want the threshold opened?” I demand.

“We’ll explain it all soon, but right now all you need to know is we require access to Aparia so we can send scouts and see what we’re dealing with on that end.”

“You have no idea what’s waiting for you—it’s been a hundred years. I can’t just open a threshold indefinitely—who knows what might cross over.”

“It’s a chance we’re willing to take.”

Of course it is, because humans are the ones they’re truly putting in danger, and the Entitled has never cared about them.

“How did you find me?” I ask, stalling for time. If I can postpone long enough, maybe the next person to walk through that door will be one of my guys. “How do you know who I am?”

“Ah, pretty girl. I’m hurt,” the pixie says from behind Thomas. “You don’t recognize me?”

My heart goes cold, and I take a step back.

Thomas rolls his eyes and steps aside, letting me speak with the pixie.

“Trent?” I ask, though my head can’t wrap around it. How does he keep popping up? He’s like a Whack-a-Mole.

“The pixie showed up in San Francisco a week ago,” Thomas says. “He claimed he’d found the Obsidian Queen in Redstone. We didn’t fully believe him until Chloe saw you use your persuasion on Eric aboard the plane.”

*Chloe.*

Oh, no—not her too. Poor Eric is going to be heartbroken.

Thomas shakes his head. “You know, a woman pretending to be a Passeridae shouldn’t use Urocyon magic in public.”

“How is this even possible?” I demand, focusing on Trent. “You were working with Georgette too?”

“No,” he says with an easy laugh, rising from his chair and sauntering toward me. His current form is boy-next-door, as friendly as a golden retriever. It’s just *wrong*. “I jumped into the fun to throw you off.”



“But...Jonathan saw your magic.”

The pixie shrugs. “I pocketed the medallion—you were expecting Trent with the mask, not a simple pixie with a gargoyle charm. See how well it worked? And can I tell you how much fun I had leading you and Jonathan around earlier? I watched the two of you panic when you lost me—I bumped into you, and you didn’t even realize it was me.”

Trent saunters a little too close, and Thomas pulls a gun on him. “Keep your distance, pixie. I don’t trust you.”

“Good call.” Trent laughs.

“How much are they paying you this time?” I ask, seething.

The psycho pixie winks. “A lot.”

“Enough of this,” Brett says, his voice shaking. “We need to go before Gray comes looking for her.”

Oh, look. Guess he figured out my brilliant plan.

Thomas steps forward with a strip of cloth and frowns when I jump. “Don’t worry—it’s just a blindfold.”

Rafe growls, sounding like he’s fighting the pixie’s magic...and close to winning. He manages to move his legs, followed by his arms.

Thomas immediately aims his pistol at my head and snarls at Rafe, “Don’t. *Move.*”

My breath catches, and my heart hammers in my chest. Sweat beads on Brett’s forehead, making me nervous. He’s on edge, and all it would take is a split second of bad judgment to kill my knight.

“Rafe,” I say softly, trying to keep myself calm so my fear won’t push him further. “Please don’t.”

My dark knight meets my eyes, trembling with rage. He’s going to kill them, I know it. I don’t know when or how, but they signed their death sentence the moment they threatened me.

He looks at Thomas, a feral smile on his face. Even on the floor, he's threatening. "Do you realize what you've done? You've pulled a gun on the true heir of Aparia—a woman who has the power to command legions of nightmarish monsters from the hellish depths. How do you think this is going to end for you? She has them in hiding now, but I guarantee if they feel her fear, her pain, her struggle, they will swarm." He waits a moment, making sure he has their full attention. "And you will die."

"He's bluffing," Brett says after a moment, his gun trembling in his hand.

Suddenly, Trent giggles. It's a sick sound, the same no matter what shape he steals. "Oh, funny Squirrels, he's not." He looks back at me, raising his eyebrows slowly, staring at me with unbridled lust. "She is magnificent. In fact, let's prove it—kill her knight, do it slowly. Let him writhe in pain and agony until he screams for his own death. Her temper will be a beautiful thing, I promise you."

"I'll go with you without a struggle, but only if Rafe comes with me," I say to Thomas, drawing his attention back, fighting the anger that's already threatening to consume me. Is Rafe right? Will the beasts sense my emotions and flock? Am I *that* dangerous?

"But I refuse to wear the blindfold," I add.

Thomas's Adam's apple bobs as he thinks. "Fine."

RIDING in the back of a pickup is miserable, especially when your hands are bound behind your back. I sit next to the wheel well, in the dark under a camper shell. Autumn nights in the desert are cold, and the grooved metal bed doesn't make for a comfortable ride.

I focus on Rafe, telling myself everything will be all right because he's with me. He's doing better now. The paralysis must nearly be out of his system because he managed to push himself up to a sitting position not long ago.

We've been in the truck for hours. The first stretch was through stop and start traffic, navigating busy Vegas streets. Then we hit the highway and drove until we pulled onto a dirt road. Now we're bumping along, hitting every rut imaginable.

Squirrels can't drive.

Another jarring bump causes me to hit my head on the side again, and my vision temporarily blurs.

I have a headache, I'm dying of thirst, and I am starving because I haven't eaten a thing today since my coffee and skimpy protein bar at breakfast.

I close my eyes, dreaming of pizza the way Jonathan ordered it in Tahoe. I don't normally eat those kinds of carbs. Or fat. Or cheese, for that matter. But my growling stomach demands copious quantities of calories, and if I get out of this alive, I'm going to indulge it.

"Are you all right?" Rafe asks from his side, his voice sounding ragged. The emotions pouring off him are suffocating. The Squirrels might not know it, but they should be terrified. I'm a little scared, to be honest.

"My foot is asleep." I shift in an attempt to stretch it in front of me. "But other than that, I'm okay."

He shifts, making his way to me as best he can, scooting on his butt with his hands behind his back. I'd laugh in different circumstances, but there's nothing funny about this. When he reaches me, I collapse against his side as he leans into me. We sit shoulder to shoulder, waiting for this awful road trip to come to an end. I had no idea we were going off-roading.

Despite the rough ride, I end up dozing against Rafe's shoulder, drifting in and out of consciousness. I have no idea what time it is, but it feels like three in the morning.

When the truck takes a sharp right and comes to a bumping stop, I lift my head and blink, wondering where the heck they've brought us.

The doors open and close, and then the camper shell latch opens, and the tailgate falls. The guys have flashlights, and the lights are harsh against the night, making me squint.

"Come on out," Thomas says, expecting me to crawl to him.

I stay right where I am, refusing to make this easy.

That, however, is a mistake because he grabs my ankle and pulls, nearly making me fall back and crack my head once more. "Today," he gripes, losing what little patience he has.

Rafe struggles against his bonds, but it's no use.

Because I don't want Thomas touching me again, I shimmy toward the exit, wary and yet oddly exhilarated.

If they're right about the location, I'm going to see a threshold tonight—a link to our old life, to our history.

“You staying here, Fox, or are you coming with us?” Thomas asks Rafe after he helps me onto my feet. I yank away from my kidnapper, hating that I needed his help to get off the tailgate.

My hair has fallen flat, and strands of it hang in my face, lifeless and irritating. I can't even use my hands to push it behind my ear.

Rafe doesn't answer Thomas. Instead, he scoots forward, keeping his thoughts to himself. He even manages to leap from the back without falling on his nose, as I would have done had I attempted it unaided.

I look around, taking in the scene. The moon is a sliver in the sky, and the stars are bright. We must be quite a long way from civilization to see this many of them. The Milky Way spreads above us, a ribbon of stars spilled across the sky.

The air is cold and fresh, and the smell of sand and wet rock hangs in the air.

It's lonely out here in the vast, seemingly empty desert. I feel exposed, vulnerable. There are mountains in the distance, maybe the Sierra Nevadas, maybe something else. I'm not sure how far we drove—or what direction for that matter.

“Hope you're ready for a hike,” Brett says, joining Thomas. He straps on a backpack.

“I didn't exactly have time to change,” I say when he scowls at my shoes. “Forgive me, I didn't know we were taking a field trip.”

Brett grunts. Trent ambles over, looking entirely too pleased with himself.

I sidle up to Rafe and whisper, “I don't know what Trent's up to, but watch yourself.”

The knight keeps his voice low. “I think he’s already told us—he wants to make you desperate enough you’ll lose your temper and call the creatures.”

“But he’ll die,” I argue. “Surely he knows that.”

Rafe shrugs. “He’s insane—was the entire time he worked for Morris. Trent wants pandemonium. Worse, he wants to be the instigator of that chaos. If he dies in the madness, then so be it. He’ll have made his mark.”

“Sounds like someone stole his favorite rubber duck when he was a wee pixie,” I say, trying to lighten the situation. “Maybe his mom didn’t hug him enough?”

Thoughts of parents not turning out to be exactly what you hoped are the last thing I need to be thinking about, though. The joke was supposed to make things seem less dire, but the thought just leaves a sour taste in my mouth.

“Stop whispering,” Thomas says, nodding me ahead. “Get on with it.”

Brett’s phone glows in the night, and he leads the way into the desert, following coordinates on a GPS.

“You know, you really had me,” I say, struggling to keep up on the rock-riddled path. The loose sand and random patches of slickrock under my heels are making for a tricky terrain to traverse. There are scraggly bushes too, along with nasty sharp weeds, and they scratch my bare ankles, making me wish I’d worn pants this morning. “I thought you were kidnapping me, but it looks like you just wanted to go Geocaching. Did you bring a pen? You’d hate to get all the way to the ledger and realize you’ve left it behind.”

In answer, Thomas pushes my shoulder, silently telling me to shut up and keep walking. He doesn’t realize that you just don’t shove a girl in spiky heels on uneven ground. I stumble forward, and my heel catches. There’s no way to regain my balance with my hands behind my back, and my ankle folds. I crash to the unforgiving ground, unable to protect my face. Sharp rocks dig into my left cheek, and pain spreads across my shoulder and chest.

Rafe yells from behind me, and Thomas curses like it's *my* fault I'm on the ground.

I roll over, groaning, helpless to brush the sand, grit, and spiky pebbles off my face.

As Brett and Thomas deal with Rafe, Trent saunters up next to me, kneeling by my head. "This must be very humbling for you. How upsetting it must be, how humiliating."

The pixie brushes hair out of my face, and I twist my neck, trying to bite his hand like a rabid dog. He jerks his fingers away just in time and chuckles.

"So naughty," he says.

He trails his hand down my neck, even when I try to roll away from him. His hand digs into my shoulder, and he pushes me back, pressing me into the hard ground. "Why don't you save yourself? Call your minions, *Your Majesty*," he mocks.

And for one moment, just a fraction of a second, I think about it. If I called to the creatures, they would come. They would do my bidding, and my abductors would pay.

Trent, Thomas, Brett—all three would cry out for mercy, begging me to spare them—

*No.*

I grit my teeth, refusing to think of it for even another second. Revenge, though sweet in that brief flash of anger, festers into something vile.

"Get away from her," Thomas snarls, ripping Trent to his feet. "*Move.*"

The Squirrel bends over and pulls me to my feet. Blood runs down my face, and I can see the dark stain of it on my arm as well. Acknowledging it makes the pain triple, and I wobble, feeling woozy.

Rafe ends up by my side, and I lean against him for support. His anger intensifies, building like a storm on the horizon. It sparks and crackles, nearly spilling into me.

“I’m all right,” I whisper. “Really.”

“I’m going to kill them,” he swears.

I take a deep breath and step forward. “I know.”

We walk for hours, following Brent and his blasted GPS. The stars begin to fade as a hint of light shows in the eastern sky.

My shoes wear blisters onto my feet, and yet, we still press forward. Silent tears run down my face because everything *hurts*.

And then we stop.

I look around, wondering where we are.

Thomas sets his hands on his hips and folds over, stretching after the long trek. “There,” he says, motioning to an arch high on a sandstone incline.

I give him a questioning look and then turn my attention back to the natural hole in the rock. “There what?”

“That’s the threshold. Open it.”

He’s insane—there’s nothing there. It’s just a ledge, eroded by wind and water. When I tell him as much, he snarls, “Do not toy with me, Fox. You are worthless to us if you’re difficult, and I can make your life most uncomfortable.”

“What do you want me to do?” I demand. “I don’t see *anything*.”

Thomas whirls around to Brett. “This is the correct spot?”

Brett nods, looking around. “I believe so, but where’s Chloe?”

Thomas pauses. He jogs forward, looking for her near the arch. He even calls her name, but there’s no response. When he walks back, his pace fast and agitated, he nearly rips the phone from Thomas’s hand. “Where’s the original map? You saved it to your phone, didn’t you?”

Brett grunts, not looking too pleased to be spoken to like he’s an idiot.



“This is it—the landmarks overlap.” Thomas shoves the phone back at Brett. To me, he says, “Get up there and open it.”

Right, I’ll just scale the slippery sandstone in high heels, with my hands cuffed behind my back. For a moment, I debate taking off the shoes, but the rocks are sharp, and I think I’ll fare better with them on. Not seeing how I have a choice, I move forward. I find a path—narrow and sandy, and eventually, make it to the base of the arch.

“What do I do?” I demand, killing time.

They have a plan, but I have one too. The minute they pass through for their little scouting mission, I’m going to lock the threshold behind them—if I can figure out how to go about it.

“What do you mean?” Thomas yells. “*Open* it.”

Trent laughs from atop a nearby boulder. He sits like a child, with his legs crossed in front of him. At least someone is enjoying himself.

“You’re a Fox,” Thomas says, losing the last of his patience with me. “*Unlock* it.”

Oh...so that’s how it works. A threshold is the ultimate lock, something only Obsidian magic can work. But there’s still one problem—how am I supposed to unlock something I can’t *see*?

“Madeline,” Rafe says, oddly calm. “You don’t have to do this.”

Thomas pulls his gun on Rafe. “Yes, Madeline. You do.”

I swallow and turn toward the arch, feeling for some kind of mechanism like I do when I’m unlocking a door.

But there’s nothing—absolutely nothing.

“You know, this might be easier if you’d unbind my hands,” I say, inspecting the rock—for what, I have no idea. But I inspect it all the same.

I’m about to remind the Squirrel that I can’t exactly access my magic with the cuffs on when a shot sounds in the night,

and pain, hot and fast, crashes over me.

“No!” I scream when I find Rafe on his knees. His head is thrown back, and I can feel his agony.

“That was just his foot,” Thomas says. “Next time I’ll shoot his arm, then his thigh, then his belly, then his head. STOP PLAYING STUPID.”

I whirl around, shaking, frantically looking for something.

“Hurry up!” Thomas hollers, and then the gun fires again. Rafe yells into the night, and I nearly fall to my knees. Tears roll down my face as I sob, searching, searching, searching.

Nothing. There’s nothing!

Suddenly, Thomas lets out a gurgled yell, and I swing around to find him and my knight fighting for the gun. Rafe’s free—somehow, he was able to break out of his charmed cuffs. But how?

Brett runs forward into the fray, hoping to help his friend, but I freeze.

Slowly, I turn, searching for the pixie.

“Looking for someone?” he says from behind me, inside the arch.

I yelp and stumble back. He stalks forward, a dark figure in the night, looking more animal than human. His eyes glow, and his lips curl back, revealing a sickening grin.

This is it; I can feel it. One of us dies tonight.

And it won’t be me.

I feel for my Obsidian magic, let it swirl around me—coaxing it, begging it to rise to the surface. My hair moves in a nonexistent breeze, and the air around me begins to glow.

Trent freezes, his eyes wide with sick pleasure as he watches. “Yes. Call them,” he whispers, stalking forward, half-crouched, moving like a goblin. “CALL THEM!”

I focus the magic, give it my command, and scream into the night.

And easy as that, the charmed handcuffs fall from my wrists at the exact moment Trent lunges. Just before he tackles me, I yank off my shoes, preparing to finish this for good.

The pixie smashes into me like a linebacker. We fall, tumbling down the sandstone hill, crashing into the unforgiving ground. Something snaps, and my head cracks against a rock.

Around me, the dust settles, and I gasp for breath. Slowly, I take stock of my bones. I'm pretty sure several are broken. Agony wraps my middle, making it hard to breathe.

Trent lies face-down next to me, unmoving.

A gun fires, and I flinch, terrified that Rafe just received a fatal wound. The bang is immediately followed by raised voices—lots of them. Several yells are chased by two more gunshots, and then it goes completely silent.

“Madeline!” a male voice yells seconds later, sounding frantic. “Where is she?”

Jonathan.

It's *Jonathan*.

“I'm here,” I call out, but my voice is tiny and pathetic. I wheeze and clutch my chest—pretty sure I busted a few ribs too.

Moments later, the Griffon is here, leaning over me. “Madeline,” he breathes, followed by lots of things I can't focus on yet.

“Trent.” I roll my head toward the still pixie. “Check him.”

Jonathan jerks when he realizes Trent is so close. Immediately, he turns to him and then barks out a curse.

“Is he dead?” I demand.

“He's dead,” Jonathan confirms, probably shocked by my choice of weapon.

I don't have the stomach to look, but I know there's a heel lodged into the side of the pixie's neck. Death by stiletto.

“Self-defense,” I mutter, needing him to know. “I didn’t murder him. I didn’t call my monsters either.”

Jonathan cradles me after checking me over, pulling me onto his lap. “I know.”

“I almost did.” I blink up at him, feeling my emotions threatening to spill over. It’s going to be messy. I mean, I just killed a man. “I almost called them.”

“But you didn’t.”

“I didn’t,” I breathe. *I didn’t give in.* I try to sit up and then cry out in pain.

“Stay still,” Jonathan says. “We’ll have you out of here shortly.”

“Rafe?” I ask suddenly, realizing I can’t feel him past my own pain. “How is he?”

“Shot three times, and he’s still kicking.”

That’s all I need to know.

“Stay with me,” I beg.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

I close my eyes and let myself drift in and out of blissful unconsciousness.

THERE IS something genuinely disorienting about waking in a hospital bed. I blink several times, feeling groggy. The room is bright and cheerful, done up with comfortable farmhouse décor—soft whites with warm wood accents. It’s nothing like a cold, human hospital room.

“Oh, thank goodness. You’re awake,” my mother says from near my head. “How do you feel?”

“Fuzzy.” Slowly, I try to sit. Everything is sore, but nothing screams.

“I had to put you out for several days.” Mom sits next to me, grasping my hand. Tears shine in her eyes, and she chokes up, looking away. “It took forever to knit your bones.”

There are some serious perks to having a Deer for a mother. Everyone should have a healer in the family if you ask me.

“How many were broken?” I ask, accepting a glass of water she hands me. To be honest, part of me doesn’t want to know.

“Several ribs, three carpal bones, and your left fibula. You also had internal bleeding, a concussion, and third-degree abrasions.”

I stare at her, wondering if I heard all that right.

“It was awful, Madeline.” She clears her throat, choking back her emotions.

“And Rafe?” I ask.

“He’s fine—we had him fixed the day he came in. He only suffered from a few bullet wounds.”

Right. Only bullet wounds.

A light knock sounds at the door, and I look down to make sure I’m decent. The soft white blanket covers my lower half, and my T-shirt style nightgown conceals my top—Mom must have bought it so I wouldn’t have to wear one of those awful hospital gowns. (One thing Aparian medicine sadly has in common with human.)

Mom stands to answer the door, and then she glances back over her shoulder after she peeks into the hall. “Are you up for company?”

“The team?” I ask.

She nods, and I tell her it’s fine.

The four knights step in as she slips out. They look acutely uncomfortable, standing stiffly, holding a strange variety of hospital gifts—Gray with a teddy bear, Rafe with balloons, Jonathan with flowers, and Eric with a card.

You don’t have to be a mind-reading Griffon to know they’re hating themselves right now.

“I’m fine,” I assure them, pushing my hair behind my ear. I must look awful—almost dying has a way of doing that to you.

Jonathan watches me, his expression unreadable. I pull my eyes from him, not sure what to say.

Rafe is the first to come to the bed. He frowns at the bright balloons like they're personally offending him and sets them on the nightstand. "There is no way to tell you how sorry I am."

"Because you didn't read the Squirrels' minds? Yeah, I'm a bit disappointed about that too." I nudge his arm. "I'm going to start interviewing for a new Obsidian Knight."

He frowns, but his eyes are a little brighter. "You were brilliant, Lexie."

"The guild's record of the event officially has "stiletto heel" as the weapon used for self-defense in the file," Gray adds. "That's a first."

"Record?" I ask, my heart leaping into my throat.

"Yes, it seems Lord Traverly has come to the *accurate* conclusion that Trent, Thomas, and Brett kidnapped you in hopes of collecting a ridiculously high ransom from your father. It seems a note was even found at your house."

"It was?" I say, wondering which one of the guys planted it. "And...what do Thomas and Brett have to say?"

Rafe's eyes harden. "Dead men aren't generally questioned."

I shiver, but I can't say I'm going to mourn them for long.

"How did you find us?" I ask, turning my eyes to Gray. "How did you know we were even missing?"

A strange smile flits over Eric's face. "I received an anonymous tip via text."

"Anonymous?"

He nods.

Who else knew? Thomas didn't mention anyone...wait. There *was* a Squirrel who failed to show up at the threshold—one who Jonathan swore liked Eric even though she's avoided him like the plague.

Could it have been Chloe? I have no idea, but maybe. Just maybe.

“When we found out you were missing, Parker and Jonathan were halfway to you,” Gray says. “Parker was already tracking Trent, though we didn’t know it was him at the time.”

I can’t even say I care that it was Parker who found us before we bled to death—I kind of like being alive.

“Also,” Jonathan says, speaking for the first time. “We found a surveillance bug in our suite. We believe Thomas placed it when Gray had him check the room.”

“They were watching us?” I ask, aghast.

Jonathan nods, and I feel like I’m going to be sick. That at least explains how they knew the moment Jonathan left me alone.

It’s too much, and I’m suddenly too tired to talk. I slouch back as a wave of nausea washes over me. I’m all in one piece, but it will be a few more days before I’m healed.

“We should go.” Gray places the stuffed bear on a corner table. “Feel better. If you need anything, let us know.”

Eric crosses the room, hesitating before he hands me the card. “I thought this might cheer you up.”

He then says his goodbye and steps into the hall. I open the envelope and bark out a laugh that makes my still-sore muscles ache. Eric must have had the card custom-printed because on the front, the knight himself is stretched out on a black velvet settee in his favorite floral robe. He wears a sexy, solemn, dare I even say *pouty*, expression. Charles, in all his hairless glory, sits on the back of the couch, staring at the camera like he owns it.

I smile, tucking the card back in its envelope, and turn to the remaining knights.

Jonathan and Rafe both hover as if waiting for the other to leave. Gray looks between them and then frowns before he follows Eric out the door.



Rafe eyes Jonathan and then nods to himself. He turns to me, meeting my eyes. “I’m going to grab some coffee. I’ll be back in fifteen minutes.”

In other words, Jonathan had better make it quick.

“Okay,” I murmur.

The Fox shuts the door behind him, and Jonathan and I are alone.

“Hey,” I say.

“Hey.” He crosses the room, looking unusually hesitant. So much has happened, but there’s still a barrier between us.

“Madeline…” Jonathan begins, and then he trails off as if unsure what to say. He stares at me for another few seconds before he shakes his head and takes the final two steps to the bed. He sits next to me, and I fall into his arms, letting him hold me.

“Never do that to me again,” he whispers, making me look at him. “Do you understand me? Not ever.”

“What part?”

“The disappearing part. The nearly dying part.”

“I’ll do my best,” I say, trying to laugh.

He sits back abruptly—as if it hurts to be this close. He runs a hand through his hair, looking like he wants to say something but doesn’t know how to start.

I wait, knowing he’ll get to it eventually.

“They wanted you to open a threshold,” he finally says.

After studying him for a moment, I nod. “But I think they were wrong about the location. I didn’t sense or see anything.”

He nods, half laughing, looking like he’s about to groan.

“What is it?” I ask, tired of waiting.

Again, he turns, meeting my eyes. “You couldn’t see the threshold?”

“If that *was* a threshold, then no, I suppose I couldn’t.”

“Madeline.” He presses his lips together and then lets out a slow breath. “*I can.*”

I freeze, wondering if I heard him right. “You can what?”

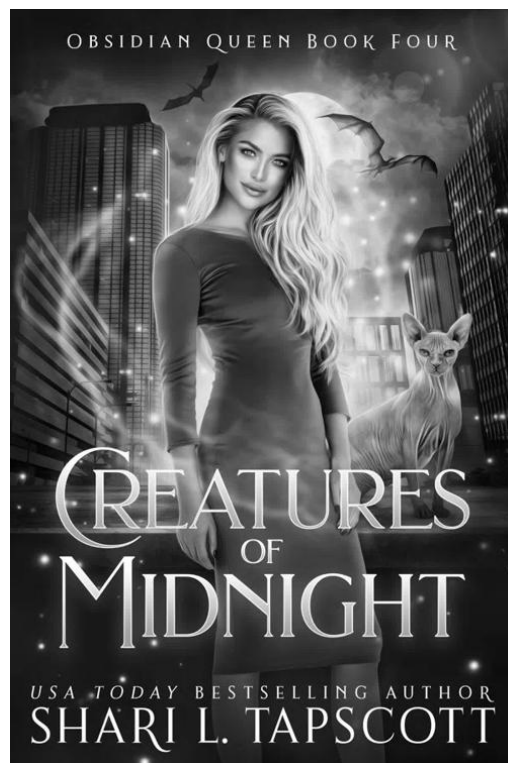
“See the thresholds.” His eyes meet mine. “And now that I know what their magic looks like, I can find them for you.”

“And help me open one?” I whisper.

He nods slowly. “And help you open one.”

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*The story continues in [Creatures of Midnight](#). Also, don't forget to read [Traitor of the Entitled: An Obsidian Queen Novella](#) for Chloe and Eric's story!*



Hello!

Thank you so much for reading! I hope you're enjoying the story.

If you'd like to listen to the *Obsidian Queen* "theme songs," I have them [listed on my website](#). While you're there, you can [subscribe to my newsletter](#) and receive updates on releases, sales, and free content.

If you'd like to talk about the series with me and other readers, [join my reader group](#). (Just don't forget to answer the questions so I can let you in!)

Wishing you the best,

Shari

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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.

Tapscott lives in western Colorado with her husband, son, daughter, and several extremely spoiled pets.

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