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Magically Wild

An Urban Fantasy anthology

Magically Wild

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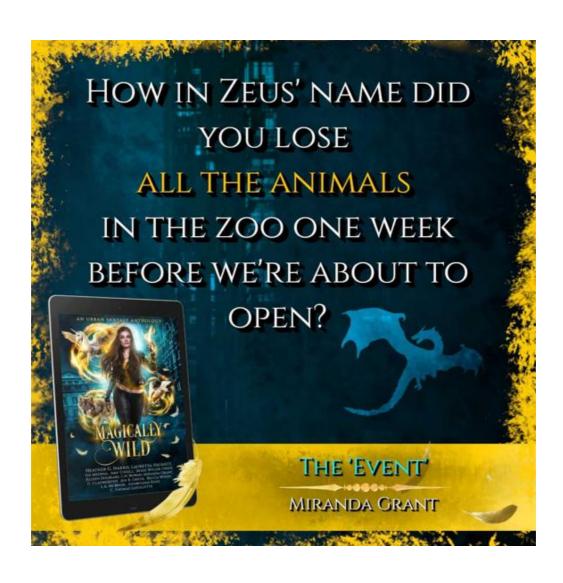
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The 'Event'

BY MIRANDA GRANT



The 'Event' by Miranda Grant

The Kingdom of Tails and Feathers is getting ready to open its doors to the public. But, um...there's just one small hiccup.

All the animals have disappeared.

I stare at my assistant as she bounces on one foot and then the other. Aeria clears her throat as a blush flares across her freckled cheeks. She looks anywhere but at me, her green eyes roaming around my still-to-unpack, box-crammed office before lingering on the off-white wall just behind my shoulder. But it seems even that is still too close to my gaze, so she quickly looks away, back down at the red fern-patterned carpet she is standing on. She clears her throat once more, but it is soft and wheezy, as if she already knows how pointless the gesture is.

"How in Zeus' name," I say slowly as I place both palms on my dark mahogany desk and rise, "did you lose *all the animals one week* before we're about to open?"

My pulse spikes. Sus Oklina, the head journalist at the *Otherworld Adventures* magasine, who is supposed to be here on opening day, is not going to pull any tentacles when she arrives, and we don't have a single animal. We're supposed to be *the* upcoming attraction, where we have at least one of every type of mythical creature out there in large natural habitats that will protect them should any disasters happen to their species in the wild, allowing them to not go extinct. We've kept ahead of all safety protocols. We haven't even lost a single zookeeper to a chimera or a dragon – something the Otherworld Zoo, the current biggest attraction, had happen *three times* before they opened. And now we've lost all our animals?

"How, Aeria?" I push out.

"Ah... Well, um... You see..." That soft, wheezy noise expels from her lips again as she rubs a toe into my carpet. "There was a glitch in the transportation spell..."

My jaw locks as I try very, very hard not to fall to the floor under the force of the sudden headache slamming into my skull. "A glitch?"

She nods meekly. "Yes?"

"You're telling me, Aeria."

"Ah, of course..." She clears her throat again. "Yes, ma'am. A glitch."

"That transported all the animals elsewhere?"

She nods a bit stronger this time.

My headache starts to relax a bit as I sigh. "Okay, well, that doesn't sound too bad. We'll just go to this spot and recollect..." I trail off at the sight of her wide, panicked eyes. The pain in my skull starts to increase again. "What is it, Aeria?" I ask, a knot twisting in my stomach.

"Ah... Um... well... you see, the glitch was uh...pretty big, and uh..."

"Spit it out."

She swallows audibly, her face going from hot red to worryingly pale. "They all ended up somewhere differently."

"Somewhere. Differently," I say slowly, not liking where this is going at all. "But all on Earth, right?" I ask hopefully even though deep down, I already know the terrible truth.

"Ah... No..."

"On the same plane of existence?"

"Uh..."

"On the same timeline, at least?"

She shakes her head, looking horribly sick.

Groaning, I fall back into my chair. "Zeus' hairy balls." Getting them all back before our opening next week is going to be one Underworld of a task. I'm going to have to bring in the Rangers...

My eyes flick to the *Otherworld Attractions* magasine on my desk. If we get a horrible article about us, we will lose our public support and funding. Then how will we be able to feed the animals? The dragons alone eat a whale every other week. My eyes flick to Aeria. She might be a troll, but she's still too freaking small to be anything more than a snack.

Sighing, I push the big red button under my desk. In an instant, a vampire phases in, his slicked back white hair and dark-red eyes as crisp as the suit he's wearing. "Yes?" he asks, a smile on his lips at the idea of going hunting.

"Call everyone in," I say.

His eyes light up even more. I've never had to call in more than a few Rangers at a time. He doesn't ask questions, his training keeping him silent until I have finished with my orders, but I can see the slight shaking of his hands. The head of the Rangers is absolutely obsessed with the hunt.

"Protocol Tartarus." AKA: everything has gone way past Hell and into the pit where the worst of the worst resides. "You're going across multiple timelines and worlds. Be discrete, wear the bracelets." One silver and one gold, they'll hide the Rangers' real forms and allow them to communicate with whoever – or whatever they need to. I pause a second, then add, "And if you need to break any laws to get the more dangerous creatures back..." I trail off, unable to actually give him an official order to do that without losing my job.

Zenin smiles slowly nevertheless. "Understood, ma'am."

He disappears to round up the troops, and I drop my head into my hands. "Zeus' hairy, sweaty balls," I mutter. But hopefully, the Rangers will be discreet...

And fast.

Preferably collecting everything in time for the opening.



A Manticore on the Loose

BY G. CLATWORTHY



A Manticore on the Loose by G Clatworthy

Two strange men arrive at the Magical Liaison Office in Wales, asking about a lost manticore. Can Agent Jones find it before it causes any trouble?

Chapter One

I pinched the bridge of my nose and leaned back in my chair before turning my attention to the two people seated in front of my desk. "So you've lost a manticore."

One of them fidgeted with a gold bangle, one of two – the other silver, around their wrist. Magic emanated from it, and my hand went to the magic dampening cuff around my arm.

"We have discussed this already, Agent Jones." The smaller one sighed. I frowned. My eyes told me that his lips didn't quite match his speech, and it was giving me a headache.

My nostrils flared. They weren't human, but they weren't a supernatural race I'd encountered before either. Their scent held a whiff of brimstone mixed with something sweet.

"And you can't tell me who you really are," I said.

The large male blanched, but the smaller figure just twitched his lips and shook his head. I tapped my cuff again. Who was I to judge if they wanted to hide their true nature? My cuff was designed to hide my own abilities from those who could sense magic, after all.

"Or why you're keeping a manticore despite them being a protected species."

"We have all the relevant permits."

"I'm sure you do." I sighed. "And you're certain it's somewhere in Wales." It was a stupid thing to say. Even if it was outside my jurisdiction, I'd help hunt it down. Manticores weren't pets; they were dangerous creatures. A class five on the protected species register, ranking them as high, and as vicious, as the man-eating basilisk. Or, as I preferred to call them – dzraking dangerous. They were only permitted in named habitats that had the reserves to make sure they didn't get out.

"We are."

"But you're not going to tell me how you know that." It wasn't a question. These two had shown up at the Magical Liaison Office with an urgent request but no real information other than there was a manticore running around Wales somewhere.

I leaned back in my chair and turned my glare up a notch. "I'll make some calls, but until we get a more precise location, there's not much I can do." I didn't like the idea of relying on a member of the public to call it in. Most mundanes – people without magical abilities were all right rubbing shoulders with dwarves and elves, but they got twitchy when monsters started walking down the street. That was where my team came in, trying to protect the balance between magical beings and mundanes without it devolving into a killing spree. But I didn't have the resources to send people on a wild manticore hunt across all of Wales.

"But-"

I held up my hand to stop the protest. "Do you know how big Wales is?"

"Do you?"

I gave the little one a half-point of grudging respect, but if he thought he could outmanoeuvre me, he was wrong.

"Maxi, how big is Wales?" I asked.

The young human blinked up at us from behind the pile of motherboards on his desk. He ran his hands through his blonde hair, causing it to stick up in a mad professor style that sat at odds with his youthful round face. "About twenty-one thousand square kilometres give or take."

I let out a low whistle. "Really?" That was big.

"Wales is often used as a unit of land measurement because it's easily identifiable and—"

"Thank you, Maxi." I didn't want a speech on comparative country sizes, and Maxi was gearing up to a full-on lecture.

Turning back to the two sat in front of me, I said, "See. Unless you have the resources to survey that large an area..."

They hung their heads. They didn't have resources. If they did, they wouldn't have come to me.

I stood, intending to see them out when Dot appeared at my side in a blur of vampiric speed, a phone in her elegant hands.

"You're going to want to take this."

Frowning, I took the phone and listened to the breathless elf on the other side. I met the gaze of the two people still sitting at my desk.

"Looks like you're in luck. Someone's found a rogue manticore. We're going to Breconia."



The Breconian nature reserve wasn't too far from the human settlement of Brecon in Wales, but it had powerful magical shields to deter any mundanes that might wander in by accident and keep in the many dangerous creatures that lived there.

I parked the van with a screech of brakes in the huge carpark on the outskirts of the reserve. The elves made the excuse that modern vehicles couldn't go any further in case it upset the delicate balance of nature or something, but I didn't see them avoiding the internet or mobile phones.

Behind me, the two strangers who had given me fake names – *John and James Doe. Come on. At least use some imagination* – squirmed as they tried to figure out how to undo their seatbelts. I frowned. There was something off about these two.

"Just click the red button. Haven't you used a seatbelt before?" I climbed out of the van and stretched, cracking my neck after hours of being cramped in the driver's seat. Dot stood by my side, surveying the green valley that stretched out below us at the foot of the cliffs that housed the carpark. The dark forest nestled right in the centre of the dip housed the elven city of Breconia.

"What do you make of them?"

"Heartbeats are a little faster than a human's, but that could be from your driving."

"There's nothing wrong with my driving. Anything else?" I trusted her vampire senses almost as much as my own, but she just shook her head.

"Something's weird. They didn't want the scarves."

I turned my snort into a cough. Thanks to her vampire speed and passion for crafts, Dot turned out knitwear like it

was going out of fashion. If it had ever been in fashion. That sort of catwalk wasn't my thing; I stuck to business suits and sportswear. During the journey to Breconia, she'd whipped up a scarf for each of them, her needles having clacked in time with the nineties pop blaring out of the radio. They'd tried to refuse, but she'd pressed the woollen offerings into their hands with a toothy grin, and they'd backed down, holding the scarves up at arm's length as they'd studied the knitting.

My phone beeped with an alert. It was Maxi – someone had to man the office, and he was our best researcher – sending through all the research he had found on manticores. First mentioned in Persian myths, they had the body of a lion and the tail of a scorpion. They were about the size of a lion, and so on – nothing I didn't already know from a quick check of the magical species database. I closed the report as soon as I'd read the summary; I didn't need a twenty-page essay on manticore sub-species. Should be easy enough to catch it with the elves' help.

Our two guests managed to get out of the van. They now stood beside us, the scarves tied around their waists. Weird fashion statement, or did they not know what scarves were? I frowned. There was more to them than met the eye. But we had a manticore to track.

"Where is the manticore?" the taller one – I think it was James – asked.

I sighed. We were in elven territory now, had been ever since we had crossed through the magical barrier on the way to the carpark. I couldn't just waltz in and demand to speak to someone about the manticore. We had to wait for them to come to us. Even if they had invited us. Anything else and there could be an incident, and no one wanted to aggravate the elves. They had a good propaganda campaign thanks to a flurry of high-fantasy stories in the twentieth century, but they lived for hundreds of years and could hold a grudge.

Above us, wings sounded, and the breeze brought the scent of big cat and bird crap to my nostrils. Sometimes my keen shifter senses were more of a curse than a blessing. Dot and I both tilted our necks so we could watch the elves approach.

The other two copied us, and I wasn't sure if they possessed supernatural senses too, or if they were trying to blend in.

The gryphons landed with a graceful thud on the packed earth of the carpark. A tall, slender elf slid off the first one. She was dressed in the golden uniform of the King's Guard, complete with helmet and sword. Her armour had several dents and a large scuff down the breastplate.

"Which one of you is Agent Jones?" she demanded.

I stepped forward. "I hear you've got a manticore problem."

"Captain Sylvana," the tall elf introduced herself. She gripped my forearm in a warrior's greeting. The gesture surprised me – elves normally bowed to strangers – but I returned it, testing her strength. We sized each other up for a moment before she released me. "I hope you're ready. This is like nothing I've seen before."

A fresh cut grazed her cheek, and her hand went to the scratch that dented the front of her gold uniform.

"Show me"

"Mount up." The elf gestured to the gryphons, and the halfeagle, half-lion creatures lay down at the command of their riders so we could mount them.

I noticed the unease of the two strangers, but then, riding a mythical creature wasn't an everyday occurrence. I should cut them some slack. Except, I didn't trust them as far as I could throw them. *Bad analogy*. I didn't trust them as far as Maxi could throw them.

Climbing onto a gryphon was simple, although my fitted suit stretched uncomfortably around my thighs. My cat instincts told me that I should be chasing this bird, not riding it, but I quashed that down. The elf mounted behind me and reached forward to grip the reins.

I opened my mouth to ask a question, but the wind stole the air from my throat as the gryphon ran over the edge of the cliff. A strangled yowl escaped my throat as we plummeted towards the emerald-green ground.

The gryphon's wings snapped open, and we slowed to a glide just before we hit the tops of the trees at the bottom of the valley. I gripped on tight as we flew towards the elven city of Breconia.

Chapter Three

The gryphon touched down in an open landing space among the trees. Several paths meandered away from the clearing into a well-maintained forest. Any leaves had been swept to one side to keep the soft, mossy paths clear. The paths curved through the forest, gracefully carving a route around the trees. Shafts of sunlight beamed through the foliage, creating a pattern of light on the mossy floor. The trees themselves were huge. Red and brown wooden trunks reached towards the sky where a canopy of green and gold leaves shimmered in the breeze.

I half slipped, half staggered from the gryphon's back. Both my human and lynx halves were thankful to be back on solid ground. I resisted the urge to hug the moss-covered forest floor and instead straightened my suit and checked my bag was secure. Once I was sure I could speak without my voice wavering, I turned back to the elf.

"So where's the manticore?"

The two men glanced round as if it would appear between the soaring trees at any second. They'd recovered from the flight faster than me. *Lucky dzrakers*.

"Follow me," the elf captain said, setting off towards the main, inhabited part of the city.

Winding staircases made of thick vines were twisted around each large trunk as we got closer to the city centre. Elves walked up and down the trees on different flights of steps and disappeared into the trees through doorways that looked like knots in the trunks. Vine bridges without handrails connected the trees together just below the canopy, meaning that none of the elves had to touch the ground to go from one end of the city to another.

I walked just behind her, easily keeping up with her long strides. A small band of guards accompanied us, walking with the eerie silence that elves had perfected. Fear rolled off the civilian elves that scurried across the treetop walkways. A frown creased my forehead. Manticores were nasty, but an elf could avoid them by climbing a tree.

"What's wrong with them?"

The elf guard eyed the citizens. "Just wait 'til you see."

"See what?"

"This." The captain stopped abruptly, and I walked into her back.

Utter destruction lay before us. I stepped into the centre and took it in. A sharp tang curled my nostril hairs; the stench was like lion's piss, only worse. The manticore had scented this place. I moved to a tree that leaned at an angle; it was out of place in the neat, curated elven forest. I ran my hand along a claw mark etched deep into the wood.

Large splinters littered the ground along with scraps of clothing. A smear of blood darkened the pale trunk of another tree, and the metallic tang of it fought with the manticore's scent mark. My teeth lengthened as my fighting instincts kicked in, an automatic response to danger.

I took a moment to get back under control. "It killed someone?"

Sylvana nodded, her face a grim mask of grief. "A civilian."

"A manticore did this?" Disbelief laced my voice. Manticores weren't much bigger than a lion, even if they were a lot more dangerous. There was no way they could knock over an enchanted tree.

"It was like nothing I've ever seen. Huge, half as big as one of our home trees, and —" She swallowed. "It had wings."

"Then it wasn't a manticore." I folded my arms. "I need to know what we're dealing with. Has one of your gryphons gone rogue?"

Even as I said it, I knew I was wrong. Gryphons didn't get that big.

She marched over to me, invading my personal space. The elf pushed my shoulder. "I know what a gryphon looks like. This wasn't it. It's nothing I've seen in the forest before."

That was saying something. The elven reserve of Breconia that surrounded their city was home to all sorts of creatures.

"Alright, we'll figure this out." I held my hands up in a placating gesture. Sylvana backed up. "Let's go hunt a manticore or whatever this thing is."

Chapter Four

We tracked the trail of destruction away from the inhabited part of the city and into the surrounding forest. The further we got from the dwellings, the wilder the woods became as manicured topiary and perfectly spaced trees gave way to the chaos of nature.

An elven arrow stuck out of a gnarled oak tree. I sniffed. More blood. My fingers twitched over the crossbow I'd strapped to my thigh. Standard issue for the Magical Liaison Office, the weapon could cope with most magical threats. With the ash bolts tipped with silver, it usually gave me comfort, but having heard about the size of this thing...I longed for something more high-powered.

"Was this the manticore too?" I whispered, the closeness of the forest making me more aware of the predators that lurked within. It wasn't just rogue manticores that roamed the wilds of the Breconian nature reserve.

The captain nodded.

"What happened?"

"We decided we needed help." Anger flashed across her face. Elven pride didn't easily allow for outside help. Things were bad.

"How many did you lose?"

"Five of my best. I was lucky to get away with a flesh wound." She kept her gaze straight ahead. "Others weren't so lucky."

I swore under my breath before turning to survey our troops – a handful of elves, me and Dot. We needed more backup. A shifter and a vampire counted for a lot, but if this thing had taken out a band of elite elven warriors, then we were in trouble. And I didn't think I could rely on the two weird men in a fight.

I sniffed the air and followed the creature's scent to a stream that flowed around the clearing, innocently gurgling through the forest.

The manticore's potent stench disappeared into the water. *Dzrak*. My gaze rested on the two strangers staring across the stream, and I strode over. Time for some answers.

The large one turned to look at me an instant before I slammed him back against a tree. The silver bracelet flew off his hand at the impact. "What the hell is this thing?"

"M...manticore," he gasped, his throat tight under my forearm. Then he garbled some made-up words I couldn't understand.

"Don't mock me."

The smaller man placed his hand on my shoulder. "Let him go."

The compulsion made me step back before I realised what had happened. I whirled round and faced the little guy, my teeth bared and my hands shaking as I fought to control my anger and stop the shift rippling through me.

"Don't ever use compulsion on me again."

A crossbow clicked.

"Want me to hit them somewhere it hurts?" Dot asked in a singsong voice, as if she was chatting about the weather or her latest crochet project.

I raised an eyebrow at the two strangers. "Your move."

The taller one swallowed hard, beads of sweat trickling down his forehead. The smaller one, John, sighed. "Enough. It is a manticore."

I opened my mouth, but he held up a hand to stop my outburst.

"I swear it, but...it is not of your realm."

"What the dzrak does that mean?"

Another sigh. "I cannot tell you everything."

I stepped forward again. These secrets were going to get us killed.

"Who are you?"

"We are merely servants. All I can say is that it escaped. It is larger and stronger than the manticores you have here. We were sent here to retrieve it..." He plucked at the gold bracelet on his wrist. "You can leave if you so desire. We will handle the manticore." John swallowed again, and James looked like he might faint.

I inhaled deeply. "Like dzrak you will. This is under my jurisdiction. People have been hurt. I'm seeing this through."

"And I," the captain chimed in, "I will not have you risk elven lives if you fail."

"I'm in too," Dot said, smiling so we could see her fangs.

"Now that that's over with..." I stopped. A thumping sound came from the forest. I spun round, my crossbow aimed towards the noise. "We've got company."

The wait felt like an eternity but was, in reality, less than a minute. All of us tensed, ready to face an otherworldly manticore.

Out of the corner of my eye, a flash of silver shone between John's hands. He had conjured a net of spider-thin silk. I hoped he knew what he was doing because that thing didn't look like it could hold a fish, let alone a rampaging manticore.

Hairy legs burst through the trees. Ten of them. Not a manticore, but a hideous tarfangtula. The oversized spider creatures that lurked in the nature reserve resembled a red-kneed tarantula... if the spider had ten legs, ten globular eyes, and was bigger than a pony.

Everybody froze.

"What are the odds it's passing through?" Dot said out of the corner of her mouth.

Its ten bulbous eyes focused on our party. Unable to pass up free food, it lunged for the closest elf.

"I think that answers your question."

I shot off crossbow bolts, aiming for its bulging eyes, and was rewarded with a screech of pain and yellow gunk running down its ugly face.

The spider-like nightmare lashed out, its fangs clacking at elves as they darted in, their blades flashing to cut its bristling legs.

Clicking sparked off in the surrounding forest. More tarfangtulas crashed into the clearing.

I shouted a warning as they surrounded us.

Clawed legs towered above us, half the height of the enormous trees that soared towards the sky. I dodged as one came down where I had stood.

Dot snatched a blade from a fallen elf and dashed around the clearing with vampiric speed, hacking at their tough legs. I shouted and waved to draw their attention before firing off another crossbow bolt at the nearest one.

The two men, or whatever they were, from another realm backed up against a tree, holding up their net as if something that flimsy could protect them.

Sylvana had her elves well trained. Using their superior agility, they weaved among the monsters, hacking and shouting.

I spotted the pattern. They wanted to drive the creatures away without more injury. Dzraking elves and their respect for life. All well and good until you were up against fae abominations that wanted to kill you.

Dodging legs and aiming my crossbow, I made my way to the captain.

That horrible clacking came again as the tarfangtulas clicked their mandibles together in some spider language. Those that could move ran into the forest, disappearing into the shadows of the trees. A pathetic, half-dead tarfangtula dragged its oozing body across the ground in a desperate attempt to reach its comrades. I put it out of its misery.

"Why did they just leave?" Sylvana asked, looking around the clearing in confusion.

"Almost like they were afraid of something..." The words died on my lips as a gigantic creature leapt through the undergrowth.

The musky scent of male lion mixed with sulphur filled my nose, and my eyes watered as I choked on the stench. As I blinked back tears, I took in the huge cat.

Cat was an understatement. This monster was bigger than a van, bigger than the enormous tarfangtulas which had fled just moments ago. It was dzraking huge.

It had the tawny body and head of a lion on steroids, with a bushy red mane sprouting from its neck. Its fur ended at the base of its tail, where it faded into dark scales with crimson spikes dotted along the ridges. The spikes grew larger as they reached the pointed end where an enormous scorpion stinger pulsed. Two gigantic blood-red wings sprouted from its back, tucked against its golden-brown fur.

It growled when it saw us, and its cat body shuffled, preparing to pounce.

I yelled a warning, recognising the behaviour all too well.

The manticore leapt, pinning an elf with its massive paws, crushing the armour as if it were cloth.

I loaded a silver-tipped bolt, careful to avoid the stinging metal, and aimed my crossbow at its head. It moved at the last second, and the arrow grazed its skin. But it was enough.

The creature whipped round, its tail up, ready to strike. I readied another bolt, fired, then rolled as it pounced towards me.

Not fast enough. The tips of its claws grazed my arm, drawing blood as it cut through my jacket. *Dzrak. This was a good suit*.

Dot zipped forward, her sword in hand. It growled and swatted her with one paw. The manticore's claws closed in.

Dzrak this.

The change rippled through me as I shifted into my lynx form, my clothes and crossbow disappearing into the magic of the change. The sudden shift heightened my senses, and I sneezed as the manticore's sharp scent hit the back of my throat.

I leapt at the creature, landing partway up one of its huge hind legs. I clawed my way to its back. It yowled at the pain and whirled round to shake me off.

I sank my teeth into its rump, the taste of bad eggs and fresh blood filling my mouth along with its thick fur. It howled with pain and reared up. I jumped and clawed through the thin membrane of its wings. At least now it couldn't fly out of here.

My ears twitched at a change in air pressure, and I released my grip, dodging to the side as its tail stabbed down, venom dripping from its scorpion stinger. This close, I could see the dark-red bristles that dotted its pulsing poison sac.

I jumped down, landing lightly on the mossy ground.

The elves had formed a circle around the creature, aiming to contain it.

Dot was back in the action, joining the elves, her sword up, looking for a place to strike.

The two men had their net ready, approaching it from behind, speaking softly as if the manticore was a stray dog they needed to calm.

It reacted to their voices.

But not how they wanted.

Instead of calming the manticore, their soft tones enraged it. Its slitted yellow eyes narrowed, and it spun round, lashing out with its tail and knocking them to the ground. The net flew from their hands, landing in grass damp with yellow tarfangtula blood.

The men's bodies sprawled across the ground. I hoped they were unconscious and not dead.

No time to check.

Enraged, the manticore leapt over the elves, spun round, and swiped two away. I ran in while it was distracted and launched myself at its softer underbelly, raking my claws into its furred skin before darting away.

The captain stabbed at its flank, using her elven agility to jump gracefully over its dangerous tail as it jabbed at her. A drop of acid green venom dripped onto her arm, and she yelped as her armour started smoking.

Don't let the poison touch you. Good to know.

I darted over to her and pulled her out of reach of its tail with my teeth. She panted hard and muttered her thanks as she got back to her feet and transferred her sword to her other hand.

Gritting her perfect teeth, she ran back in, rallying the rest of her team with a cry. "To me!"

I joined her, and Dot appeared at my side in a blur of speed. One full frontal assault. We could do this.

The manticore faced our small team, planting its feet as it stared us down. With a roar, it breathed out searing hot flames at the elven captain. I knocked her aside, sending her sprawling on the ground.

The stench of singed fur caught my nostrils as someone shoved into me.

I skidded across the clearing, roaring my grief as Dot's pale skin blistered under its fiery assault. She fell to the ground.

Now it's personal. No one lays into my team except me.

Roaring my defiance, I darted in again and again, using the adrenaline spiking through me to avoid its attacks.

The elf captain was back on her feet, stabbing at its furred head to distract it while I carried out my assault. It swiped with one massive paw.

A scream cut through the air. The captain flew across the glade, thudding into a tree. She didn't get up.

Dzrak this. We hadn't slowed the manticore at all despite the flesh wounds we'd given it. And even in my lynx form, I was no match for an oversized lion with a dzraking poison tail.

A flash of silver caught my eye. The net. That was how I could end this.

I shifted back to my human form, rolled to avoid its spiked tail, and picked up the net. My hands burned on contact with the flimsy material. *Dzrak it. Why does it have to be silver?*

I gripped it more tightly, the knotted squares scorching my skin with cold as every instinct told me to drop it and get as far away from the evil metal as I could.

But I dealt with close contact to silver every day. The metal tipped my crossbow bolts for a reason; it was effective against most supernaturals. That didn't mean I had to like it.

Panting hard, I shifted into my lynx form, letting out a roar of pain as the silver merged with my magic, burning into the change, making it a hundred times worse than normal. I staggered as the silver clouded my mind. I shook my head and fought to think straight.

The manticore reared up, its claws flashing in the dappled light that shone between the forest leaves.

I leapt.

I landed on its furred back and dug in my claws. The creature roared out in pain and whirled around, trying to shake me. I crawled forward, inching my way along its massive body, my teeth gritted against the pain of silver. I had one shot at this.

I reached its neck. Its thick, greasy mane got in my mouth, choking me. It shook its head, rattling my brain. I hung on.

It lunged forward, aiming to scratch me off with a tree. *This was it.*

I shifted to my human form. The agony of the shift while holding silver sent spots of white light across my vision and stole my breath. I pressed the net against its skin as it collided with the tree, sending me sprawling down the trunk. But the net did its work.

It expanded, fuelled by whatever magic it contained, wrapping the manticore's head in the light silvered webbing.

The manticore roared in frustration, then whimpered and sank to the ground, clawing weakly at its restraint as it fought a yawn. What sort of knock-out magic was this? The net grew again, trapping its front paws before snaking up its body and entangling every inch of the huge creature from its nose to its wicked spiked tail. The manticore didn't mind; it had already fallen asleep, and innocent snores huffed from its wet nose.

I pushed myself up from the floor. Every part of me sang in pain. The impact with the tree and the silver had taken its toll even on my quick healing body. I might have to take the weekend off to recover. I snarled at the thought.

John and James stepped forward, looking ruffled but otherwise no worse for wear. Either they had strong glamour, or they were tougher than they looked.

John walked up to me. He said something in a language I didn't understand, and his human form wavered, revealing a tiny demon complete with forked tail. I blinked. But he was back to his usual self. *How hard did I hit my head?*

He adjusted the bangles at his wrist, and when he next spoke, his words were in English.

"Thank you." He held out his hand.

I stared at him but shook it, enjoying his slight wince as I squeezed with my shifter strength. Yes, it was petty, but I wasn't sorry.

Behind us, James conjured a sparkling portal that swirled with a black so dark it sucked the light from the clearing.

"You have a favour from Hades should you ever be in need of it."

I started to ask who the dzrak Hades was because they couldn't mean the god of the Underworld, but they had grabbed the net and disappeared through the portal before I could ask the question.

Forming a fist, I thumped the tree and groaned as pain lanced through me. I scanned the forest for my teammate and found Dot curled on the ground. I hurried over, half crouched, half limping, my teeth clenched.

It was impossible to tell if she was alive. Her vampire skin was badly burned but cool to the touch; vampire pulses were so slow, I couldn't use that as an indicator. There was only one way to know for sure. Holding my breath, I brought my forearm in front of her face and let blood fall from the open wound onto her lips.

Her tongue flicked out, licking my blood. Dot lunged forward with inhuman speed and plunged her fangs into my arm. I winced at the initial pain before the anaesthetising effect of her saliva took over. At least my arm didn't hurt anymore. When she opened her eyes, I knew she was alright.

My head swam. "That's enough, Dot."

Her eyes flashed red, but she withdrew her fangs and licked the wound, helping it to close. "You taste like wet cat."

"You're alive then."

"Just give me a week's leave to recover. That should be sufficient."

I snorted out a laugh. "You can have a day."

She sighed and lay back down. "Fair enough."

The captain of the elven guard blinked and rubbed her forehead as she used a tree to prop herself upright. She lifted her sword. "Where is it? What happened?"

I filled her in. Her eyes widened when I got to the part about the portal, but she kept silent until I'd finished.

"That was...something," she said.

"Yup."

Sylvana grimaced as she stared around the clearing. "My team..."

Dot answered. "All heartbeats are stable. If you've got a healer, I suggest you start with that one." She pointed at a

prone elf lying crumpled on the ground. "He's lost a lot of b—" She took a deep breath before she finished the word, forcing it between her fangs like it had done her a personal wrong. "Blood."

The captain called it in, and soon a band of elven healers appeared, their green, soothing magic filling the clearing with the scent of fresh-cut grass. One of them offered to heal me. I considered brushing them away, but the scorching sting of silver still scoured my skin, so I accepted and only sneezed twice as the unfamiliar magic brushed against my shifter healing abilities, making me woozy.

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "I need a drink."

Sylvana smiled, her elven hearing picking up my whisper. "I can help with that."

She slipped a carved hip flask out from somewhere under her armour. "I always carry it. For emergencies."

The elf handed me the bottle, and I sipped, coughing as the harsh liquid burned its way down my throat. "Fire whisky?" I croaked.

She shrugged and took the flask back, taking a drink herself. "Sometimes honey mead just doesn't cut it."

The elf went up in my estimation. "You're not so bad...for an elf."

"You're not so bad yourself...for a shifter."



Back at the office, I sank into my chair, enjoying the familiar smell of musty books and old leather.

"How'd it go?" Maxi asked as he brought me my coffee, black and strong. Just how I liked it.

"Weird." He gave me a look, and I amended my answer. "Weirder than normal."

"And Dot?"

"She's got the rest of the day off."

Maxi let out a whistle. He knew things were bad when I let the team take unscheduled leave. Normally, we needed all hands on deck just to keep up with the dzraking paperwork.

I took a swig of my coffee, savouring the bitter taste. "Any fires I should know about back here?"

He coughed. "Funny you should mention that..." Maxi placed a report on my desk. I scanned the first page. Some idiot witch with a pyromaniac complex. With a sigh, I downed my coffee and reholstered my crossbow. Just another day in the Magical Liaison Office.

Want to read more of Agent Jones' adventures?

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About G Clatworthy

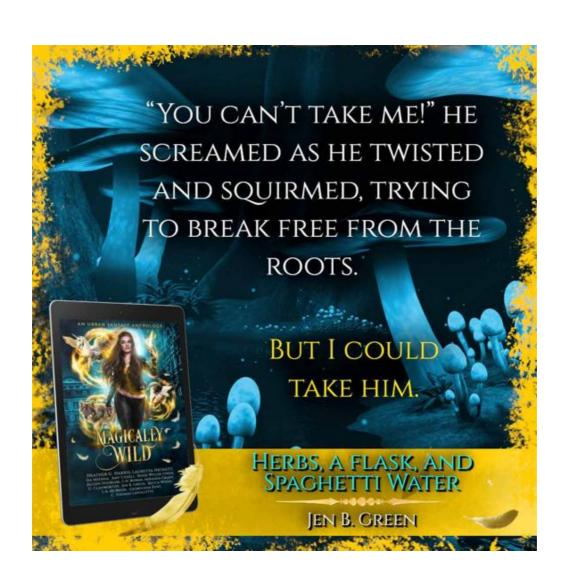
G Clatworthy started writing during the 2020 lockdown. Her first book was called *The Girl Who Lost Her Listening Ears*, which tells you all you need to know about lockdown! She soon switched to fantasy, and she loves mixing the magical with the mundane, especially if it involves dragons! She lives in Wiltshire, UK, with her family and two cats. When she's not writing, she enjoys playing board games, drinking tea, and eating chocolate.

G Clatworthy also writes children's books as Gemma Clatworthy.

You can become one of her bookwyrms by signing up for her mailing list at www.gemmaclatworthy.com for free stories, and you can find her on facebook at www.facebook.com/gemmaclatworthy and instagram at www.instagram.com/gemmaclatworthy.







Herbs, a flask and Spaghetti Water

BY Jen B. Green

Herbs, a Flask, and Spaghetti Water by Jen B. Green

When a mushroom starts causing havoc in a park, two Greens are called in by Enforcement. Powerful Greens can handle all things plant related. But Lucy and Lina are only pretending to be Greens, so how can they survive the mission?

Chapter One

"I'm not a mushroom expert, so why me?" I asked Lucy, dipping my head so my blonde bob obscured my lips, even though our observers were in the next room. You could never be careful enough when you had secrets to keep. I reached down to help her pack the backpack she dropped at my feet.

"They had my name down somehow, and I can't actually do anything about it," she murmured, angling her head toward mine. "But you can. Grove leadership sent Enforcement to our house and we're the only ones here. There's a problem at Mills Park and so I need your help." I angled the backpack so she could slide her handful of herb and dried flower packets inside, though why anyone would bring burdock and cornflower petals to check out something mushroom-related was beyond me. And was that *catnip*?

With a cheeky grin, she wiggled a flask into the backpack, then a jar with a lid that told me it once held spaghetti sauce. Now the jar seemed to hold water.

I had learned to trust Lucy's intuition, but spaghetti water?

"Yes, spaghetti water."

"I didn't say anything!" I protested.

"You didn't have to. Your face said it for you. For the herbs, I can't see what I need to bring, but the water will be important."

We stood, and she raised her voice so the people in the kitchen could hear, tucking her long dark hair behind her ears. "Can you come along to assist me?"

Lucy was perky, petite, and strong enough to handle herself, but she was listed as a Green while she was here under our protection. Her Green skills weren't up to this. They weren't even real. Silently, I wrapped two glass beakers in a towel and grabbed a set of slides and stains, a scalpel, a magnifying

glass, and some spore paper from the top shelf in our workroom. I tucked them into the bag beside her random collection of herbs and spaghetti water, pressing my lips together as she handed me the backpack and turned toward our audience.

Lucy taking the lead was probably best. I would monitor my reactions, but masking that hard always took a toll on me, whereas Lucy actually enjoyed the challenge of acting. It was better to let her be their focus. She would direct their attention where she wanted it, and my job would just be not to draw more attention to myself. Besides, they thought she was the mushroom expert here.

As it so often did when I was under stress, my brain went into computer mode. Despite their plant-like appearance, mushrooms are actually members of the Fungi kingdom, which is very different from plants. In fact, mushrooms are more closely related to animals than plants, biologically speaking. Used for centuries as medicines and for their hallucinatory properties, they also play a critical role in decomposition.

The mental recitation calmed me. We could do this. I picked up a familiar bit of rope from the supply cabinet, patting it and letting it settle in place on my wrist with a gentle squeeze. Then I grabbed my water bottle and smoothed my face into as neutral an expression as I could and followed Lucy's light steps to the kitchen. Two people stood stiffly at the table, their untouched cups of herbal tea abandoned on the table and still steaming merrily. Of course, Lucy had given them herbal tea, and probably overheated it in frustration after the summons. Angling my head down and slightly away, I managed to keep my face still as I examined the intruders.

The woman was of average height and build, just like me. She had stick-straight hair and a permanently creased brow that made her look older and very serious, despite a funky black leather jacket with silver studs on the shoulders. The taller man next to her was thin and gawky, his body angled slightly toward her to show that hint of deference that told me she was in charge. Both were dressed in unrelieved Enforcement black from head to toe, which gave me little hint

of their magical affinities. Both looked uncomfortable and like they were fighting not to show it.

Neutral, neutral, neutral.

Lucy took the lead. "All right. My assistant, Fistulina, will come along."

The two in front of me stiffened at the name and I kept a straight face with nothing but a lot of practice. Trust Lucy to mess with us all—Fistulina Hepatica was another name for the Ox-Tongue Mushroom, also called the Poor Man's Steak. But the name sounded like an oozing sore. At least she hadn't chosen one of the poisonous varieties of mushrooms to mock us with. What if they had interpreted that as a threat?

"Call me Lina," I said, my voice shockingly calm and even.

"Lucy and Lina," the woman parroted in a flat voice, eyebrows raised and forehead crinkled.

After several moments of awkward silence, Lucy darted back into the workroom for another jar of water. Then she extended her hand to the Enforcement officers in invitation and they sidled out the door, never turning their backs on us while simultaneously not crashing into anything in front of them. Lucy smiled, and I felt the corners of my lips curl before I flattened them again. Yes, we were dangerous, but if we had to show that part of ourselves, it would be bad for all of us. They were Enforcement, so they were dangerous, too. We would all have to behave to get through this.

The man opened the door to their predictably black SUV and gestured us toward it, but Lucy and I both shook our heads. "We'll follow you," Lucy said, and a bit of the tension clenching my belly released. "We have things to do this morning after we help you with your issue, whatever it is."

"We prefer you come with us," the man said, raising his voice. His hand twitched and I took a couple of steps away, leaving myself more room in case he decided to do something about it.

"I know, but that doesn't work for us," Lucy said. She turned her back on them and headed toward our truck,

shoulders relaxed and hands swinging at her side, seemingly uncaring of their reactions. I was ahead of her, so her eyes were glued on me for warning if she needed to react.

Lucy continued her languid walk as I watched our visitors. The silence stretched thin, but before it shattered, the woman said, "That's fine, John. I'll ride with them and brief them as we go. You lead the way." Her lips stretched thin over her teeth as she waited to be led to our vehicle. Lucy glanced back at me and I shrugged, surprised they had acquiesced so quickly. But Lucy seemed happy, and this morning was all about The Lucy Show. The Enforcement woman and I lengthened our strides and caught up.

"Very well," Lucy said as she made her way toward the old farm truck we used for chores around the Grove. Apparently, we weren't being friendly enough to take her nicer car. The truck was not only old, it was loud and worn, and with just the one bench seat we'd be up close and personal for the trip. And the gear shifter in the middle just made everything even more awkward. But the officer had chosen to ride with us, so I didn't mind making her uncomfortable. Lucy managed to keep her grin under wraps, too, but I knew her well enough to see it peeking out every now and then. "And what shall we call you?" she asked as she slipped into the driver's seat.

The Enforcement officer had picked her way through the plants, rocks, and stumps in our yard without flinching. When she saw the truck, her eyes widened, but she quickly got them back under control. "Officer Smith is fine. Please, go ahead." She gestured for me to get into the middle seat of the truck, where I would be stuck between Lucy and her. I cleared my throat.

"No, ma'am," Lucy piped in. "The passenger seat is always Fistulina's spot. Just because you showed up and decided we needed to come with you doesn't mean she needs to give up her seat."

"It's molded to my behind," I added helpfully. At least I restrained myself from smacking said behind in demonstration. I pulled my black onyx worry stone from my pocket and held its comforting weight in my hand. The tension

was getting to me, and while I never felt like the black onyx did all the anxiety relieving it was reputed to do, giving my hands the freedom to move as needed kept my attention focused.

Officer Smith closed her eyes and let out a sigh before giving in. She was either extremely powerful, which wasn't good for us, or unafraid of us, which wasn't wise for her. It would have been nicer for us all if she would just ride with her partner. Then we wouldn't know what we were getting into, of course, but it would spare us from these not-so-subtle power plays. I climbed in after her, giving her what space I could on the bench seat, and the black SUV pulled onto the street behind us. Lucy turned the key. The old farm truck roared to life with a belch of exhaust and a clatter of leftover woodchips in the bed. We knew where Mills Park was, but since the officers were determined to lead, she followed the SUV. I turned to keep an eye on the officer, keeping my hands on my knees, where I could reach the door handle if necessary. Her eyes dropped to my hands as I rubbed the smooth indentation in the stone with my thumb.

"My commander said your address had some powerful Greens, one of who was particularly skilled in mushrooms. We have had some incidents in the park, and we're considering the possibility that it's related to a mushroom several people have reported seeing."

The Grove did have some powerful Greens who could do all things plant related, but neither Lucy nor I were one of them. The real mycology lover and powerful Green had stayed in our cottage for a couple of weeks while she sorted out a domestic situation with her home Grove. Since Groves are like clans, movement through the Groves like that wasn't normal, so we didn't want to advertise that fact. Then again, things associated with me were rarely what you might call "normal".

"What mushroom? And what kind of incidents?" Lucy asked, slamming the shifter down into third and narrowly missing the officer's knees as the truck whined and accelerated.

"All I know is that a park patron reported finding a mushroom they've never seen before. No description and no other information given in the report. There was a couple chasing their dog through the park, and they all disappeared. There's video of them entering, but not leaving. That's the incident we have the most information on. We have a few other missing people with connections to the park, but I don't actually know if they are related."

"So multiple missing people, but you don't know how many; and you think it's due to mushrooms, but you don't know what kind or where?" Lucy's voice rose. "We aren't trained investigators. Why can't you just search the park?"

"Maybe multiple missing people. We don't have confirmation of anything. And we have searched the park. We can't find strange mushrooms. There's nothing anywhere, except for some people who get sick after they search."

Lucy turned her eyes to the officer but didn't say anything. It was another power play, and Officer Smith fell for it. She continued, "They feel faint and can't finish searching, and several have passed out. There's nothing unusual to see in the park from a helicopter, and nothing we can find from searching on foot, but we have intelligence that it's something that a Green can help us understand."

Magic had come roaring into the world after space Dust blew in around the turn of the 20th century. It had killed off a large swath of people, animals, and plant life, but some of those who survived the Dust cloud discovered they could manipulate magic. They were divided into clans or other groupings based on their affinities, which were mostly along color families. People with a Green affinity had magic related to plants, whether it was growing them or communicating with them. Enforcement coming to us with what they thought was a Green problem probably meant they didn't have a Green in among their Enforcement group to ask.

When Lucy didn't ask, I spoke up. "Why don't you use your own Greens?"

Officer Smith hesitated for a fraction of a second, then shrugged her shoulders and lifted her empty hands.

Those were textbook mannerisms for, "Trust me, I don't know." I know because I had memorized the textbooks. But her hesitation told me she had some ideas and she didn't want to tell us about them. That could be dangerous for us.

Before I could ask for clarification, Lucy said, "Weird assumption. We're on loan to you from the local Grove, but you can't ask us to hurt ourselves. We need to be ready for whatever this is. Should we have brought gas masks, or maybe hazmat suits?"

Officer Smith shook her head, her long black hair bobbing. "Neither of those have any effect. People still react if they're going to, no matter what protective equipment they are wearing."

"You're not giving us confidence that anyone is safe there, Officer Smith," I said.

"You'll be just as safe as we are."

"Like I said, no confidence."

Chapter Two

Mills Park was nothing special in terms of plant life or aquatic features. Our area of Wisconsin boasted a wide variety of trees, from stunning sugar maples to the solid white oak, and there were just the usual suspects in sight in terms of plants. What Mills Park lacked in uniqueness, however, it more than made up in human activity. The perimeter buzzed like a kicked wasp nest with enforcement vehicles and people in black, while what I could see inside the park was calm and empty of people. This was far too many Enforcement officers to be just a small incident. In fact, this was probably multiple groups of officers from different areas and different specialties.

What was actually happening?

I climbed out of the truck and backed along it, grabbing our backpack from the bed as Officer Smith slid out and leapt down to the ground without using the running board.

Maybe she had some Crimson affinity? I couldn't check without outing my own non-Green skills.

Lucy came around the truck and the three of us stood, each waiting for the other to lead the way to the cluster of black garbed people. I didn't want one enforcement officer in front of me and another behind. The only clue Officer Smith showed of her annoyance was a subtle flattening of her mouth, but I caught it. She was becoming more demonstrative of her annoyance, which didn't bode well. I flicked Lucy a glance as we trailed behind and her tiny nod told me she saw it, too. We weren't on solid ground ourselves, so we couldn't push too hard. We couldn't make enemies of Enforcement if we wanted to stay free.

Resetting my face into my impassive mask, I let Lucy watch for trouble while I breathed in the forested park and opened my connections to the plants. The air felt charged, but it was hard to separate the plants and growing life in the park

from the agitation and fear of the people that milled around the perimeter. I really did have some strong Green skills, especially with trees, but I could do mushrooms, too. Green was all I could show here. It just wasn't my real strength. Lucy also had other strengths, so this would need to come entirely from me. And we'd need to get away from close observation to figure it out.

The breakdown they gave us at the scene was nothing new. The area where the dog walkers had disappeared was near a small clearing bordered by a mix of red oak and white pine trees. Grasping the bag with my equipment and her random selection of herbs, Lucy and I squatted at the edge of the park and put our hands into the unmown growth. The country had long ago banned cultivated lawns and gone back to natural prairie grasses and native plants.

I saw my own magic as threads of color, and I could pull what I needed to use depending on the situation. But these plants didn't have any interest in me. I could barely connect, even if I tried hard to enough to make my eyes bleed. Sunshine, moisture, insect life, and the family of bunnies nearby weren't important to me. And the grasslands were completely unconcerned with anything humans would care about. I pushed out a few more green threads to feel the energy of the switchgrass and bluestems. Maybe a higher buzz than I would expect, but no more than the anxiety from all the pressure of the situation might make me project. At my side, Lucy tensed, and when I glanced at her, she shrugged.

"Just feels weird doing this with an audience. They're all puffing out their chests and staring at us," she murmured.

I felt the weight of their eyes, so I looked for myself. The whole contingent of Enforcement types had formed a line where the pavement met the vegetation. They stood in various power poses as they watched us. My response to intimidation was usually to push back, but my situation now meant that I rarely could. Definitely not with anyone in black. I waved a hand at them and turned back to Lucy.

"Let's go to the trees," I said. They were easier for me to read and farther from the line of demarcation Enforcement had drawn. I stood and turned away, but Lucy cleared her throat and used her head to indicate the bag.

Right. I was the assistant here.

I shouldered the backpack and tromped toward the copse of trees, inhaling the loamy scent of the forest. It had rained not long ago, and the dampness lingered in the pleasant way of healthy, growing things. The trees here were unhurried and steady, boulders in the rushing river of the rest of forest life. Trees didn't much concern themselves with grasses, rodents, insects, or even humans. They probably classed us all together —if they even recognized us at all.

In a low voice, Lucy asked, "So hands on the trunk, right?"

I hesitated. I had never needed to explain it to anyone, but that seemed like the easiest way to put on a show. "You do that. Find a big tree in their line of sight. That's probably what they'll expect, and they'll be watching you. I'm going to be as subtle as I can and I'll let you know what to tell them."

Lucy mouthed a skeptical, drawn-out, "O-kaaaaay," at me, but found a thick tree at the edge of the copse in sight of our observers in black. She shook out her hands and stroked a nearby branch before selecting a knob, laying both hands on the trunk, closing her eyes, and tilting her head back to look up at the canopy.

I winced. That might keep our observers' attention, but it wasn't going to be a sustainable position with her neck cocked back like that. I slipped into the trees and bent to unlace my boots and slip out of my socks. Ideally, I'd just walk beneath the trees and enjoy the beauty, but that wasn't in the cards for today.

Trying to keep my face blank, I put my bare toes onto a visible root and began to trace its path away from its tree and deeper into the copse. The wood of the root was rough and damp beneath my feet and I could feel the gentle hum of the tree families in the grove. Green magic felt low key enough to be almost passive to me, like sending out the request to connect to the old dial-up internet, waiting through the screeching noises, and then getting a halting, weak connection.

Information came back to me from the network, but it was slow, and interpreting it was what took work. Connecting with the trees while avoiding the tender observation of Enforcement made it even harder. And I wasn't a big fan of anything on my bare feet, especially something so damp and roughly textured.

But I didn't want to advertise my investigation over Lucy's farce, so I fought down my sensory processing differences and focused on what I knew about trees, letting my mind connect to the plant life around me.

Trees and their nearby fungi have a network among themselves. The technical term is the mycorrhizal network, but people who know about it usually just call it the Wood Wide Web. Trees pass chemical signals as they are attacked, damaged, or in need of resources. The other trees respond by building up their own defenses to the danger and passing resources between themselves to strengthen their copse.

I had grown more used to the sensations of rough wood and dampness on my feet, so I brought my awareness back to the physical root I was balancing on and the information I could glean from it. There was a steady buzz of energy that felt like a generalized warning, but it was low level and not of extreme concern. The trees and fungi weren't on alert. They hadn't recognized whatever happened here as a serious, active threat.

The rope at my wrist squeezed a warning and I jumped as a small, sharp jolt of electricity stung the bottom of my foot. I knew that trees could send slow electrical signals through their mycorrhizal network, but I had never felt one before. The root looked the same under my foot, but I got a general sense of unease from behind me. I turned and saw nothing notable. Lucy was lazily circling the tree she'd chosen, her hand trailing the smooth bark, eyes mostly closed. Through the branches, I could see the black line of Enforcement still standing guard at the roadside. I couldn't hear them. When had they gone silent? I closed my eyes to concentrate better, but I couldn't tell what caused the pang of unease from the trees.

"Notice anything? Or feel any lethargy?" I called, pitching my voice loudly enough that Lucy could hear but our Enforcement pals could not. When she didn't respond, I opened my eyes and turned to see her staring right through me. "Lucy? Lucy!"

She didn't respond.

I pulled the straps tighter on my backpack and paced back to my boots and socks. My rope pressed into my wrist again and I spun around, but I didn't see a threat. As I bent to get my footwear, my head bashed into something and I sat down hard. Bright splashes of light danced in front of my eyes. I glanced all around, shaking my head to clear it. I couldn't see anything close. What had I hit my head on?

My rope wasn't squeezing, but I reached my non-dominant hand out, just in case something injured me, and brushed against what felt like a wall. There was nothing I could see, but I could feel the energy spillover of the boundary even as I traced the smooth coolness that kept me from Lucy.

It felt like a wall, and I had somehow gotten trapped inside. Possibly a ward of some kind? There were rumored to be mages with powers like this, but they were of the metallic clans and no one knew anything about them. Rumors and fan fiction about people with purported metallic magic were rampant, though.

Lucy meandered around a few feet away. She turned toward the line of Enforcement officers, eyes glazed, and wandered in their direction before sitting with a thump in the grasses. Her head moved slowly, looking toward me and then toward the road, but her eyes were unfocused and her breathing shallow.

I pushed on the ward holding me back, but it was solid and unmovable. I used both hands to shove at it, then ran my hand along the boundary in all directions. It seemed solid. I tried knocking on it with no response. It didn't look like anyone on the other side could hear or see me, and it didn't seem like I was getting out until whatever kept me here decided I could go. And the odds of that weren't looking good, based on the history of people disappearing here.

My wrist pulsed and then squeezed tight. I wanted to rub the sting away, but I turned at the warning and was nearly tackled by a large, fluffy dog trailing a leather leash. I couldn't tell what breed he was, but his thick fur was buff colored and soft. He sniffed me and eagerly dripped drool on my hands, then my feet, while I wrestled his collar around. It said his name was Teddy and gave a phone number. I slid the backpack off and fumbled around for my phone—I hadn't even considered trying to call someone.

My phone had no signal. Of course. That would have been too easy.

"Hello?" I called out. "Can anyone hear me?"

There was no answer, either from Lucy and the officers or from whatever was deeper in the woods where Teddy came from. I scratched Teddy's fluffy head and checked his tongue as he panted. He looked dehydrated. I poured some water from my bottle into a clean specimen jar and held it out him. He almost knocked me down and spilled it in his rush to get the water into his mouth. Poor Teddy. I poured him three more drinks and rubbed his back. I had my water bottle, plus Lucy's jar of spaghetti water and whatever she had put in the flask. It looked like water, but you could never be sure with her. And who knew how long that would have to last?

Three Enforcement officers rushed into the park toward Lucy and I tensed, but she didn't respond as they scooped her up and carried her back to the truck. I saw one of them try to assess her before she shooed him away. Then she sat on the side of the truck and stared at the area I had disappeared into. Her eyes seemed to focus as she spoke to Officer Smith, gesturing enthusiastically. I had to hope she was healthy and able to handle herself while I saw what there was to see here.

Since bare feet probably couldn't help me, I wiped the dirt and drool off them with the towel from my bag, wishing I could really clean them. I would just have to cope with the discomfort. I pulled on my socks and boots while fending off the enthusiastic advances of Teddy the slobbery helper—because clearly, I was near the ground so I could play with him. My attempts to turn away from his kisses only made them more urgent. I stood, my face safely out of his reach.

"Okay, Teddy. Where are your people?"

He didn't respond in words—not that I anticipated he would. But he wagged his tail and bounded away deeper into the woods and down a slope. With a last glance at Lucy, who still seemed to be staring at me even though I knew she couldn't see me, I got my backpack resettled and set off to follow my eager and slobbery escort.

Chapter Three

I trudged down the slope after Teddy. The first thing I noticed was the scent. I had been smelling the damp green air of a heavily deciduous forest, but as we walked, a more earthy scent started to dominate. There was an underlying sweetness in the air as well. I knelt and put my hand to the base of a tree, but I couldn't differentiate any warning or threat. I pushed a bit of green thread into the tree and waited, but it didn't respond with more information. Then I had to stand up or risk being tackled by my eager canine partner. My wrist cord had stopped responding to Teddy as a threat.

I could no longer see the road or the people there.

The air thickened and I rubbed at my eyes, like I was facing a high pollen count. I sneezed hard, surprising myself and several rodents and birds in my immediate area. I wasn't normally allergic, but whatever this was made my eyes itchy and my breathing heavy. Teddy bounded back to me as I gasped in a breath, his tail wagging and his tongue lolling across his jaw. I put my hand on his head and he pressed his big body against my leg, helping me steady myself. As I pushed forward, the earthy scent was overtaken by a sickly sweet one, like I had been buried in a pile of slightly spoiled flowers between one step and the next. A glance around showed no visible changes, but the air was redolent with the sweet floral scent.

The good news was that my eyelids were no longer itchy. But the bad news was that they now weighed a million pounds each. This had to be magic—but I could not go to sleep here. Teddy nudged me and I cautiously took another step toward the small hollow ahead. I forced my eyelids open and shook myself, then took another step. The cord at my wrist pulsed and I paused.

"Hello?" called an airy tenor voice from the hollow. "Is someone there?"

I was feeling desperately sleepy again, but I pulled out my onyx worry stone for clarity and took another step. I debated calling out, but I couldn't tell if the voice came from friend or foe, so I waited. I heard the voice mutter something and Teddy growled and bumped me again, startling me from my lethargy.

I trusted his judgement. Probably foe. But my body was so heavy, and all I wanted to do was lay down for a while.

I backed away one step at a time. Before I could reach the point where I'd noticed the change in the air, a teenager dressed in black came bustling out from behind a tree in the hollow, rubbing his hands.

"Ah, there you are," he said.

An adrenaline spike gave me a bit of wakefulness. I scooted back a few steps to fresher air. "Hello," I said, still muddled.

"Where are you going?" the boy asked, his soft blond waves floating in the breeze. "Why don't you come have a seat here? I bet you're getting tired."

I was tired, but I didn't want to sit with him. At my side, Teddy growled and bared his teeth at the boy. Right. The teenager wasn't affected by the sleepiness, and he wasn't panicked about it, so he likely knew or was the cause of it.

I was feeling better further away from the floral scent, but I was still a little woozy. He stepped purposefully toward me and I took a couple more steps back.

"I am tired," I told him. "What's going on? I was with someone and now she's gone, and there's a dog without his people." I gestured to Teddy, who put himself between me and the boy and growled. The boy stopped his approach and smiled a bright, happy smile that was out of place. Normal people weren't happy in this kind of situation.

"Oh, there are a few people here, but everyone's really tired today. Must be something in the air." He gestured with one hand and my ears popped as the sweet scent of flowers drifted over me again. He was good. I barely saw the thread of magic he manipulated and sent my way. Immediately, my eyelids gained a ton each and I forced them open.

I was either going to have to burn my cover story as a Green, or I was going to fall asleep here and suffer whatever fate everyone else who was here had faced. I set my backpack down and opened it, fishing for something that might help. The herbs were useless. But Lucy said I'd need the spaghetti water, right? I picked up the jar and stood.

"Please don't. I don't want to be trapped here," I said, trying to play on his emotions with a tiny purple thread of my own. I was still feeling the effect of his emotion threads and maybe some Crimson body magic, but loosening my hold on my own magic had given me a little bit of a boost.

If he was using more than one family of magic, he was likely some kind of rogue. Maybe even a prism mage. They were supposed to be rare and tightly controlled, but I knew from personal experience that wasn't actually the case.

He narrowed his eyes and tool another step toward me. "How are you still awake?" he asked, throwing what looked like a handful of purple-tinged red threads my way this time. I let them dissolve around me. He wasn't even trying to hide his magic. I unraveled a bit more sympathy and friendliness of my own and threw it at him. He didn't notice.

"I just want to help," I answered. I took a step toward him, and his bloodshot eyes widened. "Tell me about it." I sent another thread of purple to him and he stared into the space over my head, his shoulders drooping.

"I'm just trying to get away," he said. "I just want to get away." He slumped to the ground, his body folding in on itself. Dry sobs wracked his frame.

That was both quick and overacted.

I fought the urge to comfort him and pat his soft hair. Instead, I rubbed my worry stone and held my ground awkwardly, keeping a watchful eye on him. When he'd calmed his sobs, he raised his tear-streaked face and said, "Enforcement wants to train me, and I don't have a choice. But I want to get away, do something else with my life. They had to move me, and I knew that if I got free near here, someone could help. I heard there's someone here who will help people who have prism

magic, and I don't know what else to do. I need to get out! Can you help me? Please?"

I looked at his soft hair, his red eyes still overflowing with tears, and his bowed shoulders. I could help him. That was why I was in my current situation. But if he wasn't genuine, then it put a lot of other people at risk, including me. Teddy bared his teeth and looked at me, and I patted his head before turning to the boy. "I hear what you're asking, but I can't help you."

"Can't or won't?"

Won't. "Can't."

He met my eyes and saw something in them that told him I wasn't buying it. Immediately, his tears stopped flowing and he scrubbed at his face. "What gave me away?" he asked. "You couldn't have seen me spindle your emotions that last time."

"I'm just a Green," I told him. "But I don't do emotions well, especially with strangers, and I wanted to come hug you and tell you it'd be okay."

He scoffed. "Yes, and? That's what women do."

I laughed. "Some women, for sure. Some percentage of the population, no matter the gender. With a little more life experience, you'd learn that you can't make those generalizations and try to force it. I know myself. I would never hug a stranger. So it had to be you manipulating me."

The boy stood, raising his hand. "You think I was manipulating you. Fine," he said, and grinned again. He opened a hand and a gout of fire flew from the palm of his hand toward me.

Chapter Four

It wasn't a lot of fire, but any fire in a forest is bad. I sidestepped. Teddy shied to the side and barked. All around me, the air buzzed with alarm from the trees. Fire got them going.

An adrenaline surge threw me into a time distortion; my awareness heightened and my mental processing speed increased. It felt like time slowed as I considered my options. I could use fire magic, probably better than he could, so I could just snuff the fire out. But I was only a Green here, so while I could technically get away with weaker use of magical affinities in the blue-green-purple spectrum, fire was not on that menu. Water was the obvious affinity I could use to combat fire and keep my Green label pristine, but the water I used would have to come from somewhere. I had a small amount of spaghetti water, but not enough. If I pulled too much water from the trees and ground, I would likely damage or even kill them. Since I was connected to them, I'd suffer with them, and most Greens would choose almost anything else. Ice magic had the same limitation. All that was good if I had a witness and needed to stay Green.

The other option was to do something to take out this boy using whatever magic I had to. I could probably counter anything he threw at me if I didn't care about showing my own magic. I wasn't against killing, but I didn't want to do that unless it was a last resort. Especially someone so young. And it hadn't escaped me that he was dressed in all black, so he was likely some kind of Enforcement trainee. The rumor was that all prism mages were broken and put into special duty Enforcement units. I couldn't guarantee that I'd beat him, and I wasn't that desperate yet.

Time sped back up. I raised my hand and threw magic threads of pure terror at him. I don't think he was expecting it, because he covered his face and screamed as they landed. I opened the jar and splashed him with a small amount of spaghetti water while he had his face covered. I wiped my stinging eyes and used my own fire magic to put the fire out. The water helped clear the burning and I could think clearly. I reached down and touched the ground. The trees were alarmed but not seriously impacted.

Yet.

The boy uncovered his face and screamed again, his face contorted with rage as he swiped at the water and blinked. The spaghetti water seemed to burn his eyes. Teddy ran past him and out of sight.

"You think you can summon enough water to keep my fire down? I can hold you in my snowglobe until you burn!" he yelled, taking a step back and still scrubbing at his face. I wondered if Lucy's spaghetti water was supposed to burn when it had the opposite effect on me.

"What kind of creepy person threatens to keep someone in a snowglobe? This was supposed to be about mushrooms!" I yelled back. I used my connection to warn the trees about this boy, trying to get them to understand fire and danger. I needed them to be willing to act.

He laughed. I pulled a thread of terror and tossed it at him again. While he was distracted with sidestepping, I tugged a purple thread of doubt loose and floated it his way. He focused on me again. "Oh, there are mushrooms, Green. These are my own special brand. Maybe I can be just a Green, too." He kicked the ground by his feet and the sweet smell clotted the air again.

I tried not to choke on it. From behind him, sounds came crashing through the underbrush. He turned as Teddy streaked toward me, bumping into the boy on his way by. I threw more self-doubt at the boy and charged forward. He swung his head around to me again and stumbled back against a tree when he saw how close I was. The earth beneath him shivered and he slipped, sliding to the ground as tiny tendrils of vines and roots curled around his limbs. He fought to clear them, but I kept feeding the tree and fungal network images of fire and death and then pushing my own power into them.

The fire he had thrown had woken the trees, and they were afraid.

He threw another burst of fire. I kicked his stomach to distract him while I sucked the oxygen away from the fires near me and dampened them. This fire had been even smaller than his first volley. Fire wasn't his strongest power.

"You can't take me!" he screamed as he twisted and squirmed, trying to break free from the roots.

But I could take him. I threw my wrist cord at the boy. It flashed visibly as it landed on his shoulder. "Disable, please. Don't kill," I called. The boy was focused on the plant tendrils and didn't notice as my cord wrapped around his throat. As it tightened, he suddenly couldn't suck in more air. His face turned red and I put out the last of the fires as I walked over to him. He was still struggling to rip the cord off as it blocked blood flow to his brain. His eyes glossed over and I put one hand to his wrist. He still had a pulse. I used my own magic to assess his health and metabolic rate and used a somewhat larger than necessary crimson thread of body magic to keep him sleeping while the roots continued to grow around him and lock him down. As long as he didn't wake up, he couldn't burn his way out of the plants that held him.

"Thanks, Zephyr Blue," I said as I picked up my cord and put it back on my wrist. It was a silly name, but my usually rope-shaped friend had chosen it with the help of one of my favorite songs, and I wasn't going to argue. The rope tightened once on my wrist and I patted it.

"Let's find those mushrooms and get out of here, shall we?" Teddy sank into a play bow and wagged his tail, then let out a happy back when I moved to follow his lead. He scampered ahead, running back to nudge me on.



We hadn't walked for more than a minute through the trees when I came to a small clearing and saw 6 bodies on the ground, lined up like matchsticks. As I got closer, I couldn't help but sputter. It was so clichéd.

"Really? A fairy ring?"

Fairies were stories told in the times before the Dust. There was never any proof of anything like fairies, and with the development and understanding of real magic, belief in fairies had dwindled. I liked to read old books, so I knew that rings of mushrooms, also called fairy rings, were never a good place for humans. I also read science texts and had been recently fixated on mushrooms, so I knew that the ring was actually the visible part of a fungus that grew underground. The mycelium sprouted from the ground around the edges of the buried fungus, and that was the part that people saw.

But no one inside the ring of mushrooms was moving. I couldn't even see their chests rise or fall. Teddy sat at the edge of the ring and whined. I approached cautiously, waiting for another collision with an invisible force. I made it right up to the mushrooms before a sharp bark from Teddy stopped me. He was panting and tense as a bowstring drawn taut. Nothing about this seemed right.

I slipped the backpack off my back and dropped to my belly to examine the mushrooms. They were pale, moist, and tiny. The earthy scent of mushrooms and forest rose, and Teddy yipped at me and crowded close. I felt my head spin again, so I pulled back to my knees and immediately felt better. Since I was alone, I could relax my hold on my magic. I blew out a breath and waited, and all the magic in the area lit up.

The trees and plants barely had a green luminescence in my magic sight—just the bare hint of what connected a Green

with plants. The people in the circle didn't glow with magic at all.

Not a good sign.

I looked at the mushrooms. They were a livid, angry green. Then I had to breathe in, and the magic sight dropped, but I kept looking at the fairy ring. These were magic mushrooms, and not the fun, trippy kind. I opened my backpack and grabbed a small glass specimen jar and forceps before getting close to the mushrooms again. This close, I could see clusters of tiny, translucent mushrooms poking their caps through the mycelial mat, catching rays of sunlight and reflecting opalescent colors. Holding my breath, I plucked a pair of the gossamer thin stems and tucked them into my jar, screwing the lids on tight. This time, I didn't feel lightheaded.

Before I could tuck the sample away, a loud crack came from everywhere all at once and I winced, rolling away from the mushrooms and into a ball to protect myself. Next to me, Teddy shivered and stood when I did. I couldn't identify the source of the sound, but the air felt different. I repacked my bag, including the little sample jar of mushroom, and shouldered it. I was about to walk back and check on my captive when the scent of smoke assaulted my nostrils.

"No!" I yelled, running toward where I'd left the boy sleeping. The scent of smoke was stronger now, and I heard yelling. I burst through the trees with Teddy at my heels and found a horde of black clothed people in the forest where it had been sealed off. The ward must have fallen.

Two Enforcement people were using their own magic to tamp small fires. Several more held the boy between them as he kicked and lunged. His eyes were open, his pupils tiny pinpricks, and he was spitting with rage. One of the men in black tapped the back of the boy's neck and he went limp as they carted him in the direction of the road.

Lucy ran and launched herself at me. I braced and nearly went down myself, especially with Teddy's joyous help, but I managed to keep my feet. "What happened?" she asked. "I

was doing Green stuff with the tree and then you just disappeared."

"Doing Green stuff, huh?" I smiled as I let go and Lucy stood next to me, shaking a finger at me. "I just walked a few feet further in and suddenly, you couldn't hear me and I couldn't come back out."

Officer Smith appeared at my side. "We'll need to debrief you, of course. What kept you from the rest of us?"

"I didn't feel anything on the way in, but when I tried to come back out, it felt like a wall of glass. I couldn't hear you, and none of you could hear or see me. The kid called it a snowglobe."

"What kid?" she asked.

"The one those guys just carried out of here kicking and screaming. I'm guessing trainee, probably a prism mage."

Officer Smith cleared her throat and stared at me. "I didn't see any kid. Maybe just someone running through the woods, or the missing people? I see you've found a dog."

I stared back for an uncomfortable moment. Officially, Enforcement couldn't take young recruits, but it was an open secret that they did. And officially, prism mages were rare and kept thoroughly controlled with other criminals. If I actually explained what I saw and extrapolated, I would face scrutiny—which I might not be able to stand up to—and a lot of problems. I sighed and patted Teddy's head.

"Yeah, I can show you what I found. Can we have other people come so they can pull us out if needed?"

I led a group of black clad people to where I'd seen the fairy ring and the people. Cautiously, one of the women in black nudged the mushroom circle and a cloud of sweet, musty scent erupted. She collapsed on the spot and another guy dragged her away. He knelt and felt for her pulse, nodding grimly.

Officer Smith nodded back and then turned to Lucy and me. "She's still alive, but I don't see the people inside the ring breathing."

I winced. "Me either. How do you get inside safely?"

"No idea. You guys are the Greens here."

Kind of. If only she knew the truth.

I took Lucy's hand and lowered our hands to the ground, breathing in and pushing threads of power into the ground. The mushrooms didn't respond to my prodding, except to radiate malevolence, but that could have been my own projection. The trees sang out their pain from the fire damage. I tried to dampen them and focus on the mushrooms, with no luck.

"Lucy?" I asked. She shook her head. "The trees—"

"The trees have been too close to fire and aren't happy." Lucy broke in. I squeezed her hand, satisfied. That was right, and she was supposed to be the expert. "The mushrooms here are wrong. I think they're magic-twisted."

Officer Smith sucked air between her teeth. At my side, Teddy sat and leaned into me.

All magic users had different strengths and skills. Some could work at a cellular level, and when they experimented, sometimes things came out wrong. This had that feel to it. We were still kneeling at the edge of the circle when the air changed. Teddy bared his teeth. I turned and saw a tall, lanky man, dressed in black and gray fatigues with a beanie hat pulled over his head and sunglasses on his eyes. Something about him screamed, "I'm in charge! Look at me!" and sure enough, everyone around us turned and looked at him. I looked, too. I couldn't help it.

The Enforcement officers around us sprang to attention, and he nodded at them. I couldn't see his eyes from behind the sunglasses, but I could feel them focused on us—on me. Black and gray probably meant he was a prism mage, and that was not good for us. I had to think purely Green thoughts.

His voice was cool and commanding. "Step back, Greens. We will take it from here."

I nodded and pulled Lucy up, walking right past the man on our way back toward our truck. Officer Smith held out her hand for Teddy's leash and I passed it to her. I bent down and scratched a somber Teddy's ears. "Please take good care of him."

She nodded.

Eyes burned into our backs as Lucy and I clutched each other's hand and followed the informal trail up the slope. Just when I thought we were clear, a deep male voice rang out, "Green! We'll take the sample from your backpack, too."

I froze and Lucy looked at me, mouth slightly agape. I hadn't forgotten, but I wanted to study what I had. If whatever this was got turned loose on the world, we wouldn't know how to neutralize it until we studied it. But he had seen the mushroom's magic from outside my backpack. He was a prism mage. We couldn't fight that fight and win. Without turning, I put my pack down, opened it, took out the sample jar, and set it on the ground. I zipped my backpack and put it back on as a black-clad arm snaked around me to reach for the jar.

His voice was soft, almost a purr. "Anything else we need to take?"

I started walking again. "That was it," I said without meeting his eyes.

Once we were out of sight of the fairy circle, I let my posture droop some and blew out a deep breath. We passed a charred area of plants and a tree; Lucy and I headed to them without discussion. We may not be true Greens, but we couldn't let the plants suffer. I held out my hand again, and she took it, and with her help, I was able to heal what had been burned. One last patch still smoldered. I almost used my fire magic to smother it when I felt eyes on me again. I turned around and saw the newcomer staring at us. I pulled Lucy's jar of spaghetti water from my backpack and poured the last of it on the burning patch. Steam hissed from the pile of brush, but no more smoke. Then, since he was still watching, I fought through my exhaustion and healed it alone. An Amplifier was nearly unheard of, and if Lucy was caught, her magic would be used mercilessly, whether she wanted that or not.

Then we walked unhurriedly to our truck, despite feeling like we were being hunted by a big lanky predator. We got in and Lucy drove away before I'd even buckled my seatbelt.

In the car, I opened the backpack. "Okay, the spaghetti water came in handy."

"Charged water," Lucy corrected.

"Okay, charged water," I agreed. "Wait. Charged water like Wiccan charging, under the moon?"

"Yes. There is a lot more to magic than just whipping up plants and throwing your strength around."

"Fine. It certainly came in handy there. Why did you bring the herbs?"

She laughed. "I needed to do something while I recruited you, and I didn't know what to bring, so I just chose those at random"

"And the flask?"

"Yes, the flask." We weren't home yet, but Lucy pulled off the road and into a superstore parking lot. "Get that out."

I did and held it out to her.

She put it to her mouth and drank, then held it out to me.

I took it and sniffed. "I can only smell the alcohol. What's in it?"

Lucy smiled. "Courage."

I sipped and coughed, wiping my mouth. It was strong, but at least the herbs in it didn't leave that terrible aftertaste. "What kind of potion can you brew that gives courage?"

"Courage and a reward for dealing with Enforcement. It's straight vodka. Cheers."



We'd just finished our shopping and were heading back to our truck when three black SUVs pulled up and parked us in. The Enforcement boss rolled down his window but stayed in his vehicle. I glared at the SUV that was blocking us in.

"Keep it together," Lucy said, noticing my tension.

"I've got it. I just thought we got away."

Before Lucy could answer, Officer Smith got out of the lead SUV and struggled to close the door. Teddy leapt out and she shook her head, slamming the door shut after him. I braced myself as Teddy made a beeline for me and greeted him, ignoring Officer Smith for a moment. Then I stood and met her eyes. She passed me a sheaf of paper.

"What's this?"

"We have another incident with mushrooms that we need your help with," she said. "Several, actually. Your Grove has approved the request. We'll pay a generous daily fee plus expenses and give you a contact there."

I hadn't even seen the details, but I already didn't like this. "Why me?"

"Ms. Skidimon came clean. We know you are the mycologist and she's an apprentice. She told us about the bet."

I closed my eyes and flattened my mouth to keep back the laugh and the frustration. A bet? Why was Lucy ridiculous even now? "Fine. Why me and not a Green on your payroll?"

"We haven't seen anyone capable of handling this kind of situation in this area. It's just a few hours away, and you're here."

"I didn't even handle it here, and I have other things on my schedule." I glanced at the paper and rolled my eyes. "The Come On Inn? Really?"

"That's where we've had some mushroom related incidents. See the details on the paperwork. And you did exactly what you needed to here."

"Do I have a choice?"

Officer Smith's voice turned serious. "Enforcement can pull you from any work if it's deemed national security. If you have the skills—"

"Yeah, yeah, if I have the skills, I have to comply." I had the skills, all right, but I didn't want to make them public.

"Good. We'll need you on this today. And Teddy's people didn't make it, so it's you or the pound." Officer Smith turned and walked to her vehicle without waiting for an answer. I couldn't give her anything but a yes to either statement, anyway. Teddy's tail wagged frantically as he ran to the truck and jumped in the cab. The Enforcement boss tugged his cap at me, and all three black SUVs pulled out of the lot.

Shaking my head, I climbed into the truck and dodged Teddy's kisses as I got buckled in.

"Here," Lucy said, tossing me the flask and the other jar of charged spaghetti water. "You're going to need this."

Want to learn more about color mages to decide what kind you are?

Continue Lucy and Lina's (and Teddy's!) story in **Shaded Mage: Book 1 of the Prism Mage series**



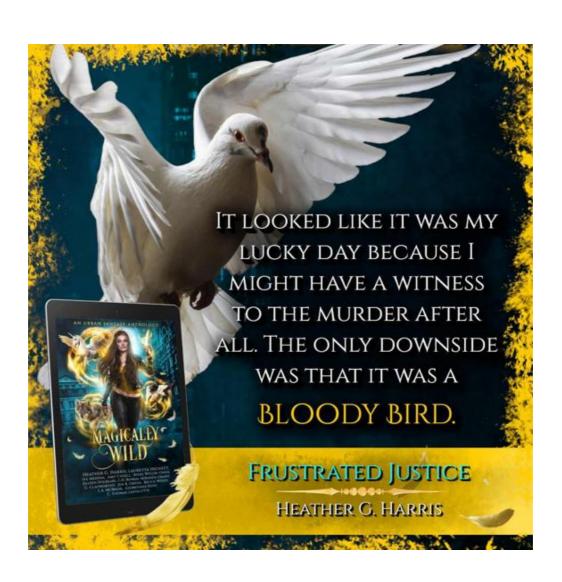
About Jen B. Green

Jen B. Green has lived in five countries on four continents with her three sons, two daughters, and one great guy. She reads anything that stays still long enough, plays piano, and bakes everything sweet.

After earning her Ph.D. in psychology, Jen tried writing a novel for Nanowrimo and was hooked! Her days are spent traveling the world, teaching undergraduate psychology, and wrangling her growing homemade army, but her nights are for writing Urban Fantasy with magic, snark, and sometimes mushrooms.







Frustrated Justice

BY Heather G. Harris



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Stacy is the only cross-over cop in Chester, making every magical case hers. So when a body is found, so pulverised it couldn't have been done by a Common – one without magic or knowledge of the Other, she must solve the case with the help of a magical bird.



It was a testament to my self-control that I didn't blast the idiot in front of me through the wall. He swayed where he stood, three sheets to the wind, while the woman behind him tried to make herself as small as possible. She had burn marks around her wrists.

Everything about them riled me.

'I fucking hate cops,' the drunk fire elemental snarled as he hacked and spat at my feet. Luckily the glob missed my shoe, otherwise the last shards of my self-control would have disappeared and he would have been sailing through a pile of bricks. That sort of thing called for paperwork, though, and visualising the forms was enough for me to rein in my magic.

My remarkable self-restraint continued as I shoved down the urge to say that the hatred was mutual. 'Regardless of your feelings towards me,' I said calmly, 'you need to step aside.' I looked at the terrified woman behind him. 'Ma'am? Are you okay?'

She cringed visibly and didn't make eye contact. 'You're making it worse,' she whimpered. As she turned away, I saw burns on the left side of her face. Outrage roared through me.

I gathered the magic within me and let my intention grow and swell. I was either going to use my magic to blast the abusive fire elemental off his feet or to protect myself and my partner from the blast of fire that he was surely gathering. I would prefer the latter – the paperwork was easier for self-defence.

I waited a beat and, sure enough, the asshole held up his hands to gather a fireball. I let it grow, making sure to angle my bodycam towards it.

'Sir,' I spoke clearly, 'lower your flames or action *will* be taken against you. You are posing a threat to me, my colleague and civilians. If you do not bank the flames, I will bank you.' I

grimaced internally; it was not my coolest threat but it would be enough to absolve me for what was coming.

Unlike the Common police force, the Connection actively encourages forceful behaviour in dangerous situations. The Connection is the magical equivalent of the police force and government rolled into one; as long as you speak your warning out loud, there is no such thing as 'excessive' force. That's part of the problem with the organisation but right now, squaring up to this asshole, I was less bothered by protocol than usual.

'Ma'am,' my greener-than-green partner muttered. 'What should I do?'

'Air shield,' I barked. Christ, what did they teach at the academy these days?

In case he wasn't quick enough, I expanded my intention to include him. As the fireball left the elemental's fingers, I released the magic coiled within me with a casual flick of a finger. Most wizards prefer to use words as their release mechanism, but the academy trains us to release non-verbally as often as we can; that way we give our opponent no indication of our next move. And I have more moves than most.

In addition to being a level-five wizard with exemplary control of the IR – the intention and release – I'm also a subterfuge wizard, also known as a sub-wizard. I keep that on the down low; as the name suggests, it doesn't always make me the most popular wizard in town. For some reason, people hate that you can sneak into their minds like a ninja. No one likes the idea that someone else can fuck with your thoughts. My parents worked hard to instil a strict moral code in me, so I don't do that – but I could if I really wanted to. If I was so inclined, I could make the prick in front of me forget his own name, but the camera was on and I had those pesky morals so I didn't.

I let the flames hit the shield of air I'd built. The heat was broiling but it rolled around and away from Detective Channing and me. When the drunk elemental lifted his hands for another pass, I could have slipped into his mind and made him lower them but doing that in front of witnesses was a sure way to reveal myself as a sub-wizard.

So I blasted him through the wall instead.

It looked like I'd be doing that damned paperwork after all. Son of a bitch.



I signed the last of the forms, checked them all carefully then filed them in the folder marked 'For the eyes of Chief Superintendent Thackeray only'. The note was superfluous because the witches had painted an invisible privacy rune on the file so no one but myself or the CS could open it, let alone read it.

Thackeray couldn't afford to be outed as a wizard any more than I could. The Other realm, a secret subset of society that is made of magic, needed to stay hidden. The real world wasn't ready for dryads, dragons or vampyrs. Unfortunately, the popularity of social media was making the Connection's job even harder. We had staff everywhere trying to keep a lid on the atomic bomb of our existence.

Channing cleared his throat and put his hands behind his back. 'I froze,' he muttered miserably.

I looked up at him briefly. 'You did,' I confirmed brusquely. At the slight wilting of his shoulders, I relented. 'But you did the right thing – you checked in with me. The academy is all well and good but a real-life situation is different to practising the theory. You'll get used to it.'

'I won't let you down again.' He stood to attention.

'See that you don't.' I kept my tone mild. No, he wouldn't let me down again; like all things, it was a case of practice making perfect. Only being exposed to danger over and over again inures you to it. Or kills you.

I checked the time: it was already gone eight and we'd been on shift for more than twelve hours. 'Clock off. See you tomorrow.'

'Good night, ma'am.'

'Night.'

Channing made his way through the office, smiling at the other officers as he went. They gave him very little back; they knew he was working with me and he was a leper by association, even if he didn't know it yet. He was still optimistic, bless him.

I replied to some emails and was just signing off when my phone rang. Louise was calling. I swiped to answer. 'Don't,' I pleaded.

She gave a half laugh. 'Sorry, Stacy, you're up. An anonymous call reported a fight at the address. When officers attended, they found a body. Murdered. Location 51 White Friars. DS Roberts and DC Atkinson already attending, but early indications are that the vic was from the Other. We need you to take this one.'

Of course they did because I was the only cross-over cop in Chester. Every magical case was *my* case; that was why Channing had been drafted in to join me.

I rubbed my face. Exhaustion was dragging at my limbs. Thank goodness for energy drinks. 'I'm on it.'



The dead body was pulverised – not just a little beaten up, but completely smashed beyond recognition. No need to verify if he was still alive or not; nothing, not even the hardy and long-lived creatures of the Other Realm, could have possibly survived this.

I studied the corpse for a moment to be certain that none of the wounds were healing, but nothing so much as twitched. I grimaced; it was going to be one of mine all right – it had all the hallmarks of an ogre attack.

Detective Sergeant Roberts frowned for exactly the same reason. 'You're taking it?' he asked, his voice resigned but with an underlying huffiness that let me know he wasn't happy.

'Yes,' I said simply. 'I'll send a note to the Chief Super that I'll be heading this one.'

His mouth tightened but he didn't argue. Besides the fact that I was one rank above him, a detective inspector to his detective sergeant, he also thought that I worked for MI5. I didn't, I worked for the Connection, but as Roberts was as Common as they come he didn't know anything about the Other. All he knew was that certain cases were allocated to me and I usually worked alone with mysterious resources at my disposal.

I'm not a spook, though, I'm a wizard – like Harry Potter, but older, female and without a wand. I have some scars, too, though none of them are shaped like inclement weather.

'Do we have an ID on the BB?' I asked Roberts. BB stands for 'brown bread', Cockney rhyming slang for 'dead'. Cop humour is dark humour, but without it you'd go mad. The question was mostly rhetorical. We were in a residential townhouse in Chester and the BB was mostly likely the owner. It should be straightforward.

I glanced around the flat. There were no pictures on the walls, no books on the bookshelves and no cushions on the sofa. The whole house was bare, like a rental property where a minimum amount of furnishing had been supplied. Maybe it wouldn't be so straightforward.

The only thing of note in the whole room was a small, white, dove-like bird sitting in a golden cage. It stared at me unblinkingly with its beady black eyes.

Roberts sighed. 'The name on the rental agreement and the ID found on the body say the body is John Doe.'

'Seriously?'

'Seriously.'

John Doe is the name allocated to unidentified dead bodies, so the fact that the one in front of me was using that moniker felt like either a sick joke or a true premonition. Maybe I'd need to consult with the seers on this one.

'Where are we up to with SOCO?' I asked. Just like on *CSI*, the scene of crime officers do what their name suggests – dust for prints, preserve evidence and take photographs of the crime scene.

'They're on their way.' He checked his watch. 'ETA ten minutes.'

Roberts' partner, Detective Constable Atkinson, was outside the flat guarding the property. As I'd arrived, he'd been rolling out the police tape to secure it. If I only had ten minutes before SOCO arrived, I'd have to quickly see what I could find through magical means.

I snapped on gloves. My feet were already covered in bright-blue shoe covers and I had tied back my curly brown bob.

I stalked through the flat. Like most buildings in Chester, this one was old and the ceilings were high. Despite that, the apartment was warm in the chilly April weather. The cost of living was skyrocketing but whoever lived here – John, or whatever he had called himself – hadn't been worried about the cost of the energy bills. The fridge was full, mostly with

beer, rum and Coca Cola. There was little food in the flat and I surmised that the deceased had eaten a lot of takeout. And yes, the pizza box folded in the recycling bin was one of the clues.

The corpse, wearing comfy joggers, was splayed out on the living-room floor next to a velvet armchair that had toppled over. His abdomen was a mess: it looked so garish that it was almost cartoonlike. When my stomach roiled, I told it firmly that the body wasn't real, it was a waxwork by Madame Tussaud. But the stench and the huge pool of congealing blood belied that. A log fire was still burning in the grate in front of the body, so the death must have occurred recently otherwise the fire would have died too.

I moved into the next room. The bedroom smelled significantly better and showed no signs of conflict. The bed was neatly made and there wasn't so much as a shoe out of place. When I looked in the bedside drawers, however, my eyebrows shot up at the sight of a Glock G19. Getting a gun licence in the UK is tricky, so the dead man had probably worked in the police, the armed forces or private security. Or – perhaps more likely – he hadn't bothered to get one, in which case, he was from the other side of the track. Given the way his body had been minced, I was betting on the latter. John Doe had just got a whole lot more interesting.

I rifled through his wardrobe and found an array of black outfits. The Other realm's inhabitants have a preoccupation with wearing black. I couldn't throw runestones because I was wearing a black suit, though at least it was broken up by a white shirt, as per the specifications for a Connection inspector's uniform.

There was nothing of interest in the pockets and no clues as to the real identity of 'John Doe' in the next room. Great. Hopefully his prints were in the system.

There was a locked safe behind his wall of suits. Opening safes was beyond my skillset unless I blasted it open, and that sort of thing would be difficult to explain to my Common police colleagues, so I left it as it was and went into the bathroom.

The mirrored cabinets held little of interest, but I did find a discarded outfit in the laundry basket. I dug through the pockets and frowned when I pulled out what looked like a Connection inspector's ID. I say 'looked like' because it was fake: the ID had letters mixed in with the numbers, and ours are all numerical. I pocketed it; it wouldn't mean anything to the Common police, so it would be better not to send up any red flags.

There was a faint tang of copper in the air, and when I touched one of the trouser legs my gloved hand came away with a hint of red. Because I was alone, I hastily opened the battered briefcase I always carry with me and took out a swab. I dabbed it into the wet patch on the trousers then dropped it into a vial of clear liquid to test for blood. The vial lit up and glowed a soft pink: dryad blood. I grimaced and stoppered the vial. It was still glowing when I shoved it into my briefcase.

I closed the briefcase, locked it securely and carried it back with me into the living room. 'There's something on the dirty trousers in the laundry basket in the bathroom,' I told Roberts. 'Smells coppery. Make sure the SOCO take them in for testing.'

He nodded. 'Did you see the Glock?' he asked.

'Yeah. Looks like there's a reason he was calling himself John Doe.'

'Did you check the safety was on?' Roberts asked.

I shot him a hard look. 'Glocks don't have safeties.'

'Oh, don't they?' He gave me an innocent look which I didn't buy for a second. He knew full well that they didn't and he'd been hoping to show me up. Nice.

The caged bird sniffed loudly. I held its gaze for a minute before telling myself it was ridiculous to have a stare-down with some sort of dove.

Roberts was still doing his thing and taking notes: notes I would probably never see. We were on the same side but not on the same team, and he hated that I operated outside of the usual chain of command.

'Stupid bitch,' the dove squawked.

My jaw dropped. Roberts was still scrawling and didn't react to the bird's words, which meant he hadn't – couldn't have – heard them. When the bird had stared at me with intelligence, I'd been suspicious but now I knew: it was magical.

It looked like it was my lucky day because I might have a witness to the murder after all. The only downside was that it was a bloody bird.

Chapter Three

'Have you called the RSPCA?' I asked Roberts casually, hoping he hadn't already phoned the animal charity.

'No, not yet.'

'I'll deal with it,' I said firmly. I stepped back into the deceased's bedroom to fake a call. No way was I letting that bird be taken into custody before I'd had a chance to question it, whatever it was. I'd never met a phoenix but I knew they were supposed to be far bigger than doves. It wasn't big enough to be a roc, either. Unfortunately that was the extent of my knowledge about magical birds. I'd never realised it was a hole in my knowledge until now.

Fake call made, I marched back in, lifted the cage off the stand and looked at Roberts. 'I'll take care of the bird. I've already put in twelve hours, so for now the scene is yours. You're responsible for maintaining the chain of evidence and getting the evidence box to the station. Let SOCO in and make sure all reports are copied to me. I'm signing off for the day until a formal ID is made – make sure that it's expedited. Get Atkinson to canvass the neighbourhood for witnesses.'

Roberts grunted acknowledgement. I couldn't expect more from him than that; if anything he was being kind by not chewing me out for teaching him to suck eggs.

I hurried down the stairs with my briefcase in one hand and the cage in the other. It was oversized and banged against my hip with every step, but it was too heavy to hold at a distance from my body. I wanted the bird away from the scene before the SOCO team arrived.

I plonked the golden cage on the ground as I considered my options. They were annoyingly limited. I nodded to Atkinson, who was still guarding the scene. 'I'm going to take the bird to the RSPCA.'

His eyebrows rose – we don't usually do drop-offs. 'It's on my way home,' I lied. 'I'll wait for SOCO before I head off.' I carted the bird to my car and plonked it on the back seat then slid in next to it. I pulled out my phone and held it to my ear so Atkinson would think I was on a call if he glanced over.

'All right, talk to me,' I said to the bird.

It ruffled its feathers. 'Stupid bitch,' he repeated.

I narrowed my eyes then reached for the door handle. 'If you don't have anything helpful to say, I'll hand you in to the RSPCA.'

'No!' it squawked in alarm. 'You ask. I talk.'

I kept things brisk; I didn't even look satisfied that I'd won. 'Who's the dead guy?'

'Rude Jingo,' the bird said with an unimpressed whistle that sounded like a fart.

'Jude Jingo?' I corrected and gaped a little. Jingo had been a thorn in the Connection's side for years. He was a wizard like me, but unlike me he had no morals and no qualms about using the IR to further his own shady agenda. I'd seen his rap sheet once and it was as long as a porn star's cock.

The bird made a derisory noise again. 'Rude Jingo. Jingo Rude. Glad dead. Smash-smash.'

Lovely: I had a vengeful pigeon on my hands. 'Who smash-smashed him?'

The bird gave a hop and a shrug. I hazarded a guess. 'An ogre?'

'Not ogre, stupid bitch.'

'I am not a bitch. Call me that one more time and I'll tell the RSCPA that you clawed your last owner to death.' My threat was ridiculous and completely empty, but the bird seemed to take it seriously.

'Pig?' it asked hopefully.

'Are you seriously asking if you can call me a pig?'

'Pigdog?'

I glared. 'My name is Inspector Stacy Wise.'

It squawked again, 'Inspector Dumb not Wise. Not ogre.'

'Those wounds were made by a mace,' I argued.

'Your face made by nightmare,' it countered.

Chuckleberry Finch was back to insulting me. It had been a long day – I'd already worked a shift and then some – and now the damned bird was talking back to me. If it hadn't been a material witness, I would have passed it over to the RSPCA in a flash. As it was, I needed to do something with the bloody thing because I couldn't explain the situation to my Common colleagues. It looked as if the bird was coming home with me. It wasn't exactly the roommate I'd dreamed of.

The SOCO van pulled up and the occupants piled out. They started pulling on their protective white overalls, booties and masks.

'Stay here and be quiet,' I instructed the bird. I cracked the window of the car a little to give it some fresh air. 'I'll be back in a minute.' I put my phone away and climbed out. 'Hey,' I greeted the team.

Today's officers were Henry, Ed and Frankie. The latter flashed me a friendly smile before donning her mask. 'Hi, Stace. How are you?'

'I was better before I saw the body in there. It's a mess,' I warned them.

'So we heard,' Ed grunted.

'Samuel not coming?' I asked casually.

'No, he's already on another scene – another messy one. Someone stabbed a girl to death with scissors,' Henry volunteered.

I hoped it was true that Sam was on another scene, but lately I'd had the distinct feeling that my ex was avoiding me. I wasn't exactly sure why he'd be avoiding me now, as

opposed to when we'd actually broken up, but I hadn't run across him in weeks and it couldn't be a coincidence.

'Roberts is in there, but it's my scene,' I ordered. 'Copy all reports to me.'

'You got it,' Henry said cheerfully, like he wasn't about to go and check out a body that looked more like pie innards than a man.

Ed looked at me and gave a little nod. Like me he was from the Other realm, and like me he'd been hired by both Cheshire Constabulary *and* the Connection. You'd think more people would volunteer to be cross-over staff and collect a double wage, but in truth the Connection's pay is shit, and trying to get holiday leave from *both* organisations is like trying to lick your elbow. I didn't regret my choice but I could see why not many others chose to do it.

When the Connection was set up, it was designed to promote unity between the various magical and supernatural elements in the Other realm. Now, some eighty years later, the organisation had the lumbering speed of an arthritic elephant and the bite of a lion with severe gingivitis. Don't get me wrong, I believe in the work I'm doing; I believe in justice – but I also believe that both could be better served than by what the Connection is doing right now. Corruption is depressingly rampant; that, tied with a good healthy dose of nepotism, means that it isn't the most efficient of beasts.

'Ed, a moment,' I said lightly. 'I saw an amazing sport yesterday. I know you'll love it.'

To give Ed and me a cover story if someone overheard our many weird conversations, we'd concocted a story that we both loved outlandish sports. It was nothing more than an excuse to have a private word, but we'd had to come up with some weird stuff when put on the spot and consequently I now genuinely researched some seriously strange sports. It had become a real hobby – not that I was going to tell anyone about it.

'What is it?' he asked curiously.

The other two were talking with Atkinson, so I told the truth quietly. 'Come and see this bird.' Keeping my voice low, I walked him to my car. 'It's from the Other realm and it can talk. Any ideas?'

He studied the bird before shaking his head. 'Not anything I've seen before. It's not the phoenix or a roc.'

'I know that,' I said impatiently. 'Any idea what it actually is?'

From inside the car the bird said loudly, 'Inspector Dumb.'

Ed cracked a smile. 'It's a clever bird.'

'Fuck you,' I sighed.

'Was that all you wanted?' He raised an eyebrow.

'Yeah. Go and examine the crime scene. It looks like a murderous ogre got over-zealous, but the BB wasn't wholly innocent. There's a gun in a drawer and dryad blood on some trousers in the washing basket.'

'Not ogre!' the bird squawked, affronted.

'The bird doesn't think the vic was killed by an ogre?' Ed asked.

I shrugged. 'For all we know, the bird doesn't think. Period'

He grinned. 'I don't know about that. He certainly seems to have some opinions about you.'

'Doesn't he just?' I muttered. 'Little pipsqueak.'

'Pigdog,' the bird mumbled back. It was better than 'bitch', so I let it slide.

'What sport did we discuss?' Ed threw back over his shoulder as he walked away.

I blinked. 'Ostrich racing. It originated in Africa but is now done all over the world, including America. They can run up to forty-five miles an hour.'

'Now that I'd pay to see.'

'Ed?'

'Yeah?'

'We need an ID. The bird says the body is Jude Jingo.'

Ed stumbled a little. 'What?' He pivoted on his heel to face me.

'You heard me. When you get a chance, take prints and run them through the Connection's database.'

'Jesus. So basically we have Al Capone in there?'

'According to the bird. Don't fixate on it. The bird could be lying.'

Ed grinned. 'This is one of the more fun conversations we've had.'

I sighed again. He wasn't wrong. 'Text me when you know more.'

'You got it.'

He entered the building, leaving me alone with a bird that may or may not have been a total dingbat. Hard to believe I was considering building a case around its squawk...

Some days it was better to stay in bed.



I was driving myself and the bird home when my phone rang. I groaned when I saw who was calling but I swiped to answer it through the car's hands-free system. 'I'm on my way,' I lied.

There was a beat of silence. 'You're late.'

'Dead body.'

My mum sighed. 'Why couldn't you have been a lawyer?'

We both knew the question was rhetorical; from the moment my dad had died in the line of duty, there had been no other path for me. 'See you soon,' I hung up. 'Change of plan,' I said to the bird, feeling ridiculous. 'We're going to dinner at Mum's house. Can you please refrain from insulting everyone?'

'Food?'

'Food.'

The bird gave a happy ruffle of its feathers and settled down to wait. At least it wasn't squawking obscenities at me.

I changed direction and headed for Hoole where Mum lives in a large semi-detached house with my brother, Rupert. At twenty-nine, he is the youngest of us but, unlike me and Julian, he has yet to fly the nest. I suspect that's because he can't bring himself to leave Mum and I'm grateful for that, but equally it twists me up inside that my youngest brother isn't living his life to the max.

My hands tightened on the steering wheel. As the eldest, I should have been the one living with Mum but I work long shifts and keep weird hours, plus she hates seeing me in the Connection uniform. Our relationship is a match made in arguments, so I'd moved out.

As I parked up, I removed my suit jacket with its tell-tale pin on the breast pocket. The pin showed the symbol of the Other realm: three triangles inside each other in everdecreasing size with a circle wrapped around them.

When you're in the Other realm, everyone is supposed to display that symbol somewhere on their person. As a wizard, I have it emblazoned across my forehead, minus the circle – a sign and warning to everyone that I am in the Other realm and I have full access to my magic. The creature elements of the Other realm – trolls, ogres, dryads and dragon shifters – don't have the same mark but they are supposed to wear one of the pins so that even at a glance someone can see they are in the Other.

The issue is that dragon shifters, amongst others, look human until they're in their dragon form, and some factions don't like that they can pass as human when they're anything but.

I pulled on a maroon hoodie that said *Your ambition* outweighs your skills. It had been a gift from Rupert because he thought he was being funny, but it was better than strolling in with the jacket. Mum would still frown at the suit trousers but she'd get over it.

I looked at the bird. 'If you don't behave, I'm putting you back in the car.' It gave an affirmative shriek and closed its beak with an audible clack. I stifled a smile as I opened the car door and grabbed the cage.

I had keys but I couldn't be bothered to find them while juggling the bird house, so I rang the doorbell. Mum opened the door and her mouth dropped open. Her brown hair, darker than mine, is dusted lightly with grey but her face has remarkably few lines and she looks a full decade younger than her sixty-one years. 'You've got a pet,' she said faintly.

'He's a witness. Can I come in?'

'The bird is a witness?'

'Yup.'

'Just when I think the Connection can't stoop any lower,' she muttered not quite under her breath.

'Hello, beautiful!' the bird sang to her, giving a happy hop.

Mum clutched a hand to her chest in surprise even as her smile grew. 'Oh! Aren't you a darling?'

The bird preened. 'Thank you.'

'And so polite too! Does it need to be in the cage?' she asked critically.

'It's magic and I don't know what species it is, so yeah. It's staying in its golden cage for now.'

'Prisoner,' the bird squawked sadly.

'You poor thing!' Mum shot me a disapproving look. I ignored it.

'Can I come in?' I asked again, pointedly.

'Of course, love!' She moved back so I could wrangle the cage inside. 'Everyone's already at the table.' She paused. 'Rupert has a new ... friend.' She didn't bother to hide her distaste.

'You're not a fan?'

'Make you own judgement call.'

I went through the hall to the dining room. The conversation petered out as I walked in.

'What's with the bird?' Rupert asked with a grin.

'New pet,' I lied, setting the cage down on the wooden bureau that nestled against the wall. 'Behave,' I reiterated to the bird.

'Not pet,' it snarked at me.

I sighed. 'I know. I'm tired. Sorry. What sort of things do you eat?'

'Meat.'

I blinked. Sure: of course the dove-like bird would be carnivorous. 'I'll get you some,' I promised then moved around the table to greet everyone in turn.

'Hey, Jules,' I greeted my brother Julian. 'Grant,' I air-kissed my brother's husband. 'You both doing okay?'

'Can't complain,' Grant replied.

'But he will,' Julian rolled his eyes. Grant smacked him lightly on the top of his arm, which made me snicker.

I gave Rupert a quick kiss and eyed his date. She had big round blue eyes, huge boobs, a tiny waist, and a dress that hid nothing – she was way overdressed for dinner at home. To my eyes, the glittering necklace around her neck looked real, not costume jewellery. She also had a garishly large diamond ring on one hand and matching earrings. Her nails were ridiculously long and covered in glittery nail polish. She had clearly never done a day's manual labour in her life.

'Ava, this is my sister Stacy,' Rupert said.

'The inspector!' Ava breathed, eyes wide, like I was the most fascinating thing she'd ever seen.

'That's the one.' I gave her a smile.

I sat at the end of the table opposite my mum. Each place setting had a small glass of red wine and a glass of water next to it for hydration. Next to my glass of wine was a can of Dr Pepper. Mum knows me well.

'To family,' Rupert said a shade pompously as he raised a glass.

'To family,' we all repeated. Grant and Julian exchanged mushy glances. Grant took hold of Julian's hand under the table and gave him a loving smile.

I opened the can of Dr P and took a good slurp – the sugar would help with my tiredness. As I put the can down and speared the meat on my plate, I tried not to remember the times Sam had been by my side at this table and Rupert was relegated to the single seat at head. Now he had a girlfriend and I – I had a foul-mouthed bird. Wonderful.

Chapter Five

As the pudding bowls were being cleared away, Ava asked me, 'So what made you get a caladrius?'

Huh? 'A what?'

'The bird,' she pointed to the cage. 'It's a caladrius. My dad has one.'

Rupert sighed, 'Of course he does,' he muttered. 'Your dad has everything.' Ava patted his hand sympathetically but didn't deny it.

I leaned in. 'What can you tell me about them?'

'Well, they're very clever and they're supposed to be able to heal you from near death. The only problem is they're fickle – they have to bond with you before they'll save you. I don't think my dad has bonded with him. It's not very nice, not like your one.'

The bird preened. 'Thank you.'

'Do you know anything else about them?' I asked. 'Are they dangerous?'

She shrugged. 'I don't know. They're super rare and very expensive. Dad doesn't let his out of its cage.' That didn't seem very fair, but not much in the Other realm is. 'I don't know if he doesn't let it out because it's dangerous or because he doesn't want to risk losing it.'

Mum cleared her throat. 'Ava, would you like to help me with the dishes?'

'Mum, no,' Rupert groaned. 'Ava had her nails done this morning.'

'I don't mind,' Ava said gamely, pushing away from the table. 'I'm happy to help.' She tottered to the kitchen on her ridiculously high heels with Mum.

I waited until she'd left. 'She seems nice,' I said conversationally.

Julian snorted. 'She's out of your league,' he said to Rupert. Grant kicked him under the table.

Rupert sighed. 'I'm well aware of that.'

'Where did you meet her?' Grant asked.

'At a charity ball my law firm sent me to. We were sponsoring it. Her dad owns one of the biggest legal firms in the country and he'd taken her along.'

'Which firm?' I asked.

'Greys Aldridge. He's the Grey part.'

'What is she?' Julian asked rudely.

'Jules!' I chastened. It is incredibly rude to ask what species of Other someone is; besides, it would become obvious in time. I was betting she was a siren or a witch. She didn't have the tension that wizards carry or the faraway look that seers often have.

'What?' Julian said defensively. 'We're his family. We deserve to know who's coming to our table.'

'You know *who* is coming to the table – Ava Grey,' Rupert retorted.

'Fine. I deserve to know what is coming to the table.'

I opened my mouth to argue but Rupert held up a hand to forestall me. 'It doesn't matter. He's going to badger me until I tell him. She's a siren.'

'I knew it!' Julian crowed. 'Has she used her powers on you?'

Rupert glared. 'Obviously not.'

'So how's work?' I asked Grant hastily to draw the conversation away from the apparently contentious issue of Ava Grey.

'Busy,' Grant said. 'But good.'

Julian and Grant are both doctors and wizard healers. Rupert is a lawyer: his firm, KHR Law, specialises in helping Other clients get out of Common trouble. With a doctor and a lawyer in the family, technically I am the black sheep. Mum certainly sees it that way.

In the next room we heard her tinkling laugh and we all stilled. I couldn't remember the last time I'd heard her laugh; it was certainly before Dad's death. 'If Ava's used her powers on Mum...' Julian started.

Rupert stood. 'Fuck you. She never would. She's different – we're different. I really like her. I shouldn't have told you what she is. We're going!'

'Rupe,' I started.

'It's not your job to mediate between us,' Rupert snapped. 'Especially when Julian is being an asshole.'

Grant's arms were folded; he obviously agreed that his husband was being an asshole.

Rupert walked out, making sure to slam the door. 'Whoops,' the bird said. 'Cranky.'

'You're not wrong,' I said to the caladrius. I stood up as well. 'It's late. I'd better make tracks.'

'It's 9.30pm,' Julian said flatly.

'That's late when your day starts at 5am.' I kissed him and Grant on the cheek, grabbed my bird and went to the kitchen to say goodbye to Mum. She was putting away the crockery. There was no sign of Ava or Rupert.

'I misjudged her,' she said as she put the last bowl in the cupboard. 'She was lovely and she helped without a qualm.' She paused. 'I had to tell her how to dry the dishes because she has servants do that for her, but she was very nice about it. And game to learn.'

I searched Mum's eyes for the tell-tale vacancy that would tell me if Ava had used her powers on her. There was none. I resisted the urge to slide into Mum's mind to check; she'd made it very clear she would never forgive such an invasion, no matter the motivation.

'She seemed nice,' I said lightly. 'Rich.'

Mum swatted me. 'And what's that got to do with anything?'

We live in a nice semi-detached house in a good area. We're not poor – but we're certainly not rich. We'd never been rich. The house had been paid for largely by Dad's life insurance but we hadn't had anything left over. I'd had clothes with patches, days without fruit, and days I'd had to walk to get into town because the car was out of petrol and Mum didn't have any money to put some in. Things had been tight, though I would never say we were poor. We were always clean, had clothes and never went hungry. Mum kept a roof over our heads and fed all three of us on a part-time salary, juggling kids and a job; it had been tough as a suddenly single parent.

'Nothing. Just saying. She comes from money. Different worlds, you know? Harder to build a joint future.'

'I know.' She sighed. 'But Rupert is making his way up in the world. He's senior associate already,' she said with obvious pride. 'I'm sure it won't be long before he's a partner – he certainly puts the time in. He'll be moving in different circles to us, if he isn't already.'

'And what about you, Mum? Are you okay?'

She turned on the kettle. 'I'm fine,' she said with her back to me. 'Why wouldn't I be?' Because if Rupert was serious about Ava, it would change the status quo; that had to be hard for her to take.

Rupe had dated a series of women, but Ava Grey was the first one he'd invited to Sunday dinner. She must really have caught his attention. It was a big deal, and that was part of the reason why Julian was acting the way he was. If Rupert had finally fallen, we wanted it to be for the right person.

I suddenly found myself fighting shitty thoughts I'd never had before. I'd never given a fig what anyone was – siren,

wizard or centaur. But now I was thinking about Ava and wondering if she had her hooks in my brother. The thought was ugly and judgemental, and I hated that it even strolled into my mind. But after eight years of being a police officer, I'd seen the underbelly of the Other and the Common realms and both were equally ugly. I was rarely surprised by the lows that some people stooped to. Still, that didn't mean I had to look at my brother's date in that way. She probably wasn't a serial killer.

Even so, I'd check her out. Because that's what big sisters do.

Chapter Six

My house is haunted. Ghosts aren't supposed to be real – they're not a recognised being in the Other realm – but my flat has always been weird as hell and the only explanation I can come up with is that it is haunted.

I put the cage down on the dining room table and switched the kettle on. The kettle immediately flicked itself off. 'Quit it,' I mumbled, turning it back on. This time, it stayed on.

I'd declined my mum's offer of a cup of tea before I headed out, but now I needed a brew before I hit the hay. I gave the bird some more water and offered it a few slices of ham. 'What's your name?' I asked, as I sat down with my hands wrapped around the hot mug.

'Bird,' it said finally in disgust.

'Not much of a name.'

'Not much of an owner,' it countered. 'Fuckhead.'

'Are you male or female?' I asked, not having the faintest idea how to tell the sex of a bird.

'Male!' he said immediately, obviously insulted.

'Jingo owned you?'

He made a derisory sound. 'He thought.'

'Who killed him?'

The bird looked at me for a long moment. 'Dryad,' he said finally. 'Chop chop chop.'

'Anyone you knew? Can you give me a name?'

He tilted his head. 'Nope. Dryad.'

'Okay, thanks.' It was better than nothing. 'Do you need anything before I go to bed?'

'Free?' he said hopefully, and my heart melted a little. But I wasn't stupid; most of the deadliest things in the Other realm can fly.

'Sorry, Bird, not yet. Let me learn more about caladrius then we can work out what to do with you.' The Connection's database would have something on the bird, but I was absolutely exhausted and sleep was calling my name loudly and incessantly. Bird would have to wait.

He made a farting noise and pointedly turned on his perch so his back was to me. 'Pigdog,' he muttered.

'Yeah, yeah. Night, Bird.' I turned out the light and he squawked pitifully. 'What's up?' I asked in the darkness.

'Light?' he asked in a small voice. My little bird was afraid of the dark.

The frost around my heart melted some more. 'Sure.' I flicked on a table lamp. 'Is that enough?'

'Enough,' he replied.

As I walked into my bedroom the bird called softly, 'Night, Pigdog.'

'Night, Bird.'

My job is often weird, and juggling the Common and the Other is headache-inducing at the best of times. Today had been a little weirder than usual, even for me. Here's hoping tomorrow would be a cake walk.



When I woke, there were two messages on my phone. One was from Ed and simply said: *Positive ID on Jude Jingo*; the other was from Roberts: *No wits on canvass*.

I grimaced: of course no one had seen anybody coming or going from the murder site of a glorified mobster. But I had a lead – albeit from a bird, and I could go and speak to the dryad community. For that, I'd need to go off the Common grid.

I replied to Roberts: Following leads. Keep me appraised on the forensics.

This is why Roberts hates working with me, and I can't blame him. He thinks I'm a jumped-up asshole, and without telling him the hows, whats and whys I'll never convince him otherwise. I long ago resigned myself to my colleagues being exactly that: colleagues. I don't need friends; I need to do the job and do it well.

I prefer to work alone, but Thackeray had thought I was overworked and drafted in a new Connection detective to help me. So far Channing had been more of a hindrance than a help, but I tried not to hold that against him. Although I sometimes felt like I walked out of the womb jaded, I must have been that green and eager once.

I hesitated before texting him. A partner – especially a rookie one – complicated things. I really do prefer to go solo so I don't need to worry so much about hiding my sub powers. But Thackeray's word was law, so I messaged Channing: *Meet me at Union Street at the entrance to Grosvenor Park at 0900*.

I showered, dressed, then wolfed down a cereal bar and a cup of tea. By the time I was pulling on my coat, Channing had responded: *On my way*.

'Take me?' Bird said hopefully.

I hesitated. He might be able to identify the dryad killer but carrying around a bird cage was going to cause issues.

I had ten minutes before I needed to leave, so I logged on to the Connection database and searched for 'caladrius'. The resulting page was sparse, but the important part was the threat assessment on the top right of the file: low. If that was correct, the only thing the bird could do was peck me. Its magical properties were intelligence, the ability to talk – and apparently it could heal someone close to death.

I turned to the bird. 'If I let you out, will you come with me to meet the dryads? To identify the killer?'

The bird cocked his head. 'Yes.'

I didn't believe him for a second. 'Your oath, Bird.'

He huffed. An oath isn't a minor thing in the Other realm; breaking an oath or a geas can get you killed, and an oath death – when magic itself kills you – is not a pretty thing. Plus your name will be stricken from the roll of the Other.

Bird ruffled his feathers. 'My oath. Will stay. Find killer. Then can go.' A warm light glowed around him as the oath took hold. Good enough.

I unlocked the cage and let him out. He gave a happy warble, spread his wings and flew around the room in exultation. When he landed on the back of one of my dining room chairs, he trilled his joy.

I couldn't help but feel I'd done something right – even if what followed went very, very wrong.

Chapter Seven

As I stepped out of my house with Bird flapping above me, my senses went on high alert. Two men were stalking towards me, their eyes fixed on me and malevolent intent in every line of their overly muscled bodies.

The first man had flames dancing on his head; the second man was a wizard like me. Even though there were two of them, it still wasn't an even playing field because I'm a levelfive wizard. I am rarer than a vampyr with a conscience.

I snapped out my extending truncheon, not because it was especially useful as a weapon compared to my magic but because of the message it sent: *Bring it on, lads. I'm no victim.* If I'd been a werewolf, I would have bared my teeth. I shifted my weight to the balls of my feet.

'You the cop bitch investigating Jingo's death?'

'That's me,' I said, manfully ignoring the bitch part.

The fire elemental came closer, and I could hear the flames crackling as they danced on his head where hair would have been if we were in the Common realm. A spark flicked in his hands, and I gathered my intention in an instant. There were no walls to blast him through, but I could shove him off his feet with a blast of air.

I held my nerve. I hadn't switched on my camera yet. I had options.

'I got a message for you from Reed.' Reed was Jingo's number two. I guessed that with Jingo's death he was now number one.

'Go on.'

'You find the killer, you bring them to us.'

'I'll consider it.'

'Consider it really carefully or we'll take a visit to your Mum's little house in Hoole,' the wizard sneered.

Rage flared and my magic whipped out, not to blast air at either of them but to slide into the wizard's mind and assess what manner of a man he was. He had almost no mental shield and I slid in as effortlessly as if I were tearing a piece of paper.

I waded through his recent memories in an instant. This was Lenny, one of Jingo's enforcers, and the things he'd done made even me sick to my stomach. He was a vile human, and I had long ago gotten used to being judge, jury and executioner. It was the Connection's way.

I didn't want him dead, though: I wanted him to be an object lesson. Poor Lenny was about to have a really bad day, but I felt no sympathy. He'd felt none when he'd held down a woman the previous night. She'd been a young dryad and he'd held her still whilst Jingo had stabbed her to death with scissors. The brutal murder must have happened mere hours before Jingo's death.

Lenny had mindlessly done what Jingo had ordered without knowing the girl's offence or her name. Now he wouldn't know his own. Justice in the Other realm is rough and ready, and only the strong survive.

With a slash of my magic, I ruptured his cerebrum. I left his cerebellum and medulla unharmed so he could walk and breathe, but he wouldn't have any memory of who he was. He wouldn't be able to think.

'If you threaten my family, you get a fate worse than death,' I snarled at the fire elemental.

He blinked then turned to stare at poor slack-jawed, vacanteyed Lenny.

'Len?' he called but his pal didn't respond. He just stared right ahead. 'What did you do?' the fire elemental growled, growing the flames in his hands.

I narrowed my eyes. 'Pay attention. I already told you - a fate worse than death. Now take him and go. I'll find the killer

and I'll bring him to justice. Tell Reed that if he even *thinks* about touching my family, he'll start a war with the Connection that he'll never come back from.'

The elemental baulked a little at that. The Connection had once come down on an organised crime syndicate like a tonne of bricks. That had been at the start of the Connection's history, and it had been a shockingly horrific bloodbath, but a message had been sent and it still resonated eighty years later.

'Leave!' I snarled.

'You heard the lady,' a baritone voice said firmly from behind me. 'Go.'

The elemental's eyes widened at the sight of the man behind me. 'No disrespect is intended to you, Your Excellence.' He grabbed Lenny and dragged him away as he made a hasty exit.

I turned quickly to see who had crept up behind me, though the title was a big clue. Even so, I blinked at the sight of the ogre. I recognised him and I was aware of his reputation – I know all the movers and shakers in the Other realm – but we'd never been formally introduced.

I recovered my aplomb. 'High King Krieg, my honour to meet you.' I touched a hand to my heart and gave him as shallow a bow as I dared. I held it for the count of five and straightened. If I showed too much respect, he might think I was a walk over; too little respect and he'd take off my head. The Connection would fine him, and no doubt he'd pay up, but I'd still be dead. Most creatures fear the Connection and its inspectors, but the ogres and the griffins? Not so much.

'Inspector Wise,' Krieg responded, studying me openly.

'How can I assist you, Your Excellence?' I returned his gaze though I was careful not to hold eye contact for too long. Like cats, ogres see that as a dominance thing, and I didn't want to accidentally challenge the king of the ogres. Hell, I didn't want to challenge him on purpose either.

Krieg had tousled black hair and a clean-shaven, chiselled jaw; the only thing that marked him as an ogre was his hulking

size and the tusks that protruded from his head: a small one on his forehead and a larger one behind it. He stood well over seven feet tall. I'm nearly six feet tall and I tower above most people and creatures, so it felt odd to have to look up at him.

'I came to assist you,' he said finally.

I was confused. 'With what?'

'I thought you might wish to see me about the body in White Friars.'

I tilted my head. 'And why would I want to do that?'

'My understanding is that the body was dispatched with an ogre's mace. I came here to assure you that we were not involved.'

'I didn't think that you were.'

His raised an eyebrow in question then pulled it back down. I'd surprised him. 'You didn't?'

'No.'

He faltered and looked almost frustrated. He put his hands in his pockets. 'Well then.'

He looked behind me, following the movements of Bird as he continued to do some aerial acrobatics. A fat lot of good the caladrius had been against Jingo's men – not that I'd needed him. But it reinforced my belief that he wasn't a violent creature.

Krieg held out a hand and gave a light trill. To my surprise, Bird flew to him and rested on his outstretched finger. Saying nothing out loud, the ogre looked at the bird – but I'd seen enough non-verbal conversations to know that one was going on without me.

I waited whilst they spoke silently; it was only out of respect for Krieg's title – and a desire to live – that I held my tongue impatiently.

As a barely audible huff slipped from my lips, Krieg's eyes snapped to mine. They were a striking shade of grey, almost mercury-silver, and different to any human eyes I'd ever seen.

He was a creature of the Other realm but, unlike me and the other human elements, he didn't have to re-charge in the Common realm. He could exist wholly within the Other and never run out of magic.

My skin had started to itch viciously, which told me that my little spat with Lenny had used up the last vestiges of my magic and I needed a recharge urgently. Damn it, I'd have to text Channing and tell him to meet me at the hall instead. I couldn't go in there without backup. I scratched absently at my neck. The itch was agonising and I wanted to tear off my skin to make it stop.

Krieg reached out and pulled my hand away from my neck. I realised with sudden panic that I was still staring into his eyes. Shit – I was challenging the king of ogres! I tore my gaze away and lowered my eyes to his chest. 'No disrespect was intended!' I blurted out.

'None taken,' he said mildly. 'You used up your magic on the wizard?'

I said nothing: I wasn't going to admit that I was running on empty. I had no reserves and if Krieg started a fight with me... I tightened my grip on my truncheon. It would be as much use a water pistol against a forest fire, but it was all I had.

Krieg reached into his pocket and I tensed, but all he pulled out was a vial. I frowned. Ogres don't believe in taking healing potions because they consider it to be a sign of weakness. Injured ogres heal or die: that was it.

'You know Amber DeLea?' he asked. It was clear from his tone that he knew I did, at least a little. Amber and I had met on a few occasions but we were no more than acquaintances.

'I do.'

'This is her Other Realm Additional Length potion. It allows the imbiber to rejuvenate their powers without attending the portal.'

'I've heard of it,' I said cautiously. I wondered what the ogre was planning to ask me for in exchange for the rare and

expensive vial. As far as I knew, the witches had pretty much mainlined all of the poorly named ORAL potion that had been produced so far. Getting one was harder than obtaining an original Banksy.

'Here.' He held it out to me.

I took it reflexively even though I had no intention of taking a potion from a stranger. Not even a royal one.

Bird squawked, 'ORAL potion.' Nothing in the file about the caladrius suggested he'd be an expert in potions, but he'd just had a five-minute chat with Krieg. If anything, that made me even more suspicious of the contents of the vial.

Krieg sighed and ran his hand through his black hair – no doubt that was how he achieved his tousled look. 'I swear on my oath as an ogre that this is a vial of Amber DeLea's ORAL potion. If you imbibe it, no harm will come to you. Should I lie, let the realm strike me down as an oath breaker. So mote it be.' He glowed yellow as the oath took hold.

My mouth dropped open.

'You have my oath. Now stop being stubborn and take the potion before you scratch yourself raw,' he growled.

With effort, I pulled my hand away from my arm where it was now frantically scratching. I dislike being ordered around – it's the reason I've accepted that I'll never attain a rank higher than DI. Still, the itching was killing me...

I wanted to slide into Krieg's head, to see his motivation in helping me, but he'd just proved he had some skill in the mental arts because he'd spoken silently to Bird. Besides, my mum had taught me not to peek into others' minds. Lenny was different – I'd gone inside him out of necessity. I'd be looking inside Krieg's head out of curiosity.

Krieg was still glowing from the oath he'd sworn. I waited a beat then pulled out the cork stopper and downed the potion in one. Instantly the vile sensation of itching left me, and when I gathered my intention I felt the answering swell of my magic. Relief and amazement washed through me. I was back to being fully powered.

But the question remained: why on earth would Krieg want to help me? And what did he want in return?



I didn't thank him for the vial. In some subsets of the Other realm, that would acknowledge and create a debt between us. 'Why did you give me that?' I asked instead.

Krieg smiled a little. 'Have a good day, Stacy Wise.' To my surprise, he held a hand to his heart and gave *me* a bow, lower than the bow I'd given him. Before I could recover, he turned on his heel and walked away.

I watched as he strolled to a Range Rover, unlocked it and climbed in. Interestingly, the king of the ogres appeared to be alone. Rumour had it he always had a murder of crows around him, but even they were absent. That felt ominous for some reason, as if Krieg hadn't wanted any witnesses to our conversation.

I watched him drive away. As he passed me, his silver eyes met and held mine. Then he was gone leaving me somewhat confused as to what the fuck had just happened.

The ogres were well-known for *not* helping anyone other than their clients. Had someone hired him to help me? That seemed far-fetched, not least because there was no one with sufficient money who would care about my wellbeing. But if a client didn't have a vested interest in my health, why the hell was the king of ogres helping me?

If he thought he could butter me up, or bribe me, then he had a surprise coming. I didn't curry favours, and I didn't accept bribes.

A sharp shriek from Bird pulled me out of my mental confusion. I needed to hustle if I wasn't going to leave Channing waiting for too long. I strode off purposefully towards Grosvenor Park.

As I approached Union Street, Channing was leaning against a wall looking uncomfortable in his Connection uniform of a black suit, white shirt and a pin showing that he

was in the Other realm. Like me, he was a wizard and he had three triangles displayed on his head, so the pin was somewhat otiose. I didn't explain or apologise for my tardiness. 'We're here to question the dryads,' I said brusquely. 'A witness confirmed that a dryad killed Jingo.'

'Who's the witness?'

I hesitated. 'The bird.' I gestured to the caladrius flying above us.

Channing's jaw dropped.

'You need to work on your poker face,' I muttered. 'Come on. Let's go to the grove.'

I led the way through Grosvenor Park, twenty acres of ornamental Victorian parkland. Scattered throughout the greenery were ornaments and statues, and there was even a miniature steam railway for kids to enjoy. I bypassed all of them and walked straight to the grove that the local elder dryads operated out of.

The dryads used their magic to gently repel away Common realmers, so there was no one around as we entered the glade; more forcefully, they also shield against anything that seeks to harm them. Luckily, I had no intention of harming anyone so Channing and I stepped easily into the clearing.

Their elder tree was in the centre of the grove. I touched my hand to my heart and bowed to it then gently touched its bark and let a wisp of my magic travel through it. It was the magical equivalent of a polite knock. I let my hand fall away from the ancient tree and stepped back.

I wasn't kept waiting long before three elders stepped out of their trees. Their skin was a vibrant green; like all skin tones, the exact colour varied but, like all skin tones, it didn't matter a damn what shade they were.

The female elder, Lily Briar, had flowers woven into her hair, but the flowers themselves were connected to her, unplucked and undying. They grew from her directly as if she were the soil beneath their roots.

I gave all three of them a brief bow. 'Thank you for seeing me.'

'The Connection is always welcome in our glade,' Lily said flatly, but she did not smile and I did not feel overly welcome. 'How can we assist you?'

'Jude Jingo was killed by a dryad,' I stated boldly. God, I hoped that Bird wasn't taking me for a ride.

Not an iota of surprise between them – none of the elders so much as blinked. Bird wasn't lying: a dryad had killed Jingo, and the elders knew all about it.



'You know who killed him,' I said evenly.

'We do,' Lily confirmed. 'The killing was ratified by the elder council,' she continued calmly. 'Jingo has been bullying the Other community for too long, and he was trying to force us to use our import business to smuggle his drugs. We declined to cooperate. In retaliation,' her voice broke slightly, 'he killed one of our saplings, a young girl called Ivy Blossom. She was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Jingo stabbed her to death with some scissors.'

Lily closed her eyes. 'Our retribution was swift. An ally provided his address and the rest is history.'

I thought of Lenny, Sam's 'messy' case and the dryad blood I'd found on Jingo's trousers. I kept the grimace off my face with effort.

'An eye for an eye,' Lily intoned.

She wasn't just quoting the Bible. There are a couple of overriding principles for the Connection. First is the 'in-house rule': the Connection doesn't interfere with internal species' politics unless it is asked to. The Connection works to keep the peace between the different magical species. If a fire elemental killed a centaur we'd step in, but if two fire elementals killed each other it would be none of our business unless we were invited in.

The second principle is 'an eye for an eye'. If someone like a wizard mobster killed a dryad, for example, and the dryads retaliated it was considered an eye for an eye – as long as no one else was harmed. Done and dusted. If the mobster's men retaliated then we were at 'a leg for a leg', at which point the Connection would step in before things got messy. Messier.

'I want to speak to the killer,' I said firmly. 'I need to know that he has definitely finished.'

Lily nodded once and touched the base of her tree. A moment later, a male dryad stepped out of another tree. She frowned at him, and the ancient branches of one of the elders groaned in the wind.

'Name,' I demanded.

'Ash Aspen,' the young man said with a faint smirk.

'You killed Jingo?'

'Yeah.'

'How?'

He gave a shrug. 'With an ogre's mace.'

'Why did you use that?' I asked curiously.

He shrugged again. I was itching to arrest him but it wasn't appropriate in the circumstances. I hated the eye-for-an-eye rule. 'Do you intend to kill anyone else?' I demanded.

'By this grove, I do not intend to harm another living soul.' His eyes glinted.

Something in me didn't believe him. 'This vendetta is done,' I said firmly. 'Do you hear me? Not further retribution will be sanctioned or condoned.'

'Try telling that to Jingo's men,' Ash laughed.

'I will,' I said firmly. 'But for you, this is done. If not, I'll be back and you'll be in cuffs quicker than you can say "perennial flowers". Are we clear?'

'Yes, Inspector Wise,' he responded, but his eyes were still mocking me.

I let it go with an effort. 'The vendetta is done,' I repeated, this time meeting the gazes of the elders.

'So mote it be,' Lily responded. 'Good day, Inspector.' With that, the elders sank back into their trees. After a beat, Ash Aspen followed suit and was slowly subsumed into the bark behind him.

I turned to Bird. 'Was that him? The killer?'

Bird cocked his head. 'Was,' he confirmed. 'And was not.'

'What? What do you mean?' I demanded impatiently. 'Did Ash Aspen kill Jude Jingo?'

'Yes,' the bird confirmed.

'Okay. Well then, you're free to go.'

'Bye, Pigdog.' Bird leapt into the air and did a bunch of aerial acrobatics that made me smile despite myself.

'Bye, Bird,' I murmured quietly, watching him fly away.

As he fluttered out of the clearing, I suddenly tensed as I saw two figures beyond the grove. One had a net which she used to flaile at Bird as she tried to capture the magical creature. Bird gave a cawing laugh and easily dodged his pursuers. Caladriai are rare, and I guessed they were used to being hunted. Bird launched himself up and away and in moments he was gone from sight, leaving his would-be capturers swearing loudly, holding nothing but empty nets.

Chapter Ten

I typed up the last of my report. I'd already asked to be put in charge of Sam's scissor case, the murder of Ivy Blossom. Thackeray would see it was transferred to me and then I could tie up both cases with a fancy bow. The Common police would simply mark the file as closed and confidential, and it would be stored with the highest level of security. If hacked, it would simply say: *Refer to the Other file*.

After I'd finished, I showed Channing how to submit the reports to Thackeray then I cut him loose for the day. Next I searched out an address for Reed. The vendetta might be over for the dryads, but there was little chance that Jingo's men felt the same – my visitors this morning had confirmed that. If Channing had been a little less green, he'd have known what was coming.

I clocked off and walked to Reed's last known address. Reed was a siren: he could make men and women throw themselves at him with a perfectly practised smirk. Luckily I have some immunity to sirens. My skills as a sub-wizard mean I have well-constructed mental shields that give me an element of protection. The rest of my protection comes from my badge.

Unlike Krieg, Reed wasn't king of anything and he wouldn't get away with my murder. Harming me would come with a hefty price tag.

I surveyed the property for an hour but saw no signs of movement. Finally, a familiar Range Rover appeared and pulled up next to me. Krieg wound down his window. 'Reed's not here. Get in and I'll take you to him.' I didn't like the idea that he was keeping tabs on me, even if his motivation *seemed* to be to assist me.

'Why?' I asked bullishly.

'Maybe I just feel like a drive. Get in, Inspector.'

In the end, my need to deal with Reed won over my indignation at being ordered around by a civilian, albeit a kingly one.

Krieg drove us to the rougher side of town and parked outside a well-known pub called Lion's Nest, a den of iniquity owned and run by the murderous griffins. It was not somewhere the law ventured and I hesitated. 'I've got your back,' Krieg promised solemnly. 'No one will harm you.'

I turned to stare at him. 'Why are you helping me?'

'I'm relocating here,' Krieg said finally. 'It's always good to know who's who.'

'Why are you helping *me*?' I repeated stubbornly.

Krieg smiled faintly. With no hint of irony he said, 'Maybe I'm just a big fan of the law.'

'Uh-huh. You're not telling me, are you?'

'Not today, Inspector. Not today.'

I opened the car door and slid out. With a grimace, I removed my suit jacket and the pin and left them in the car – at least that way I didn't scream Connection to anyone walking by. If they looked at my forehead, however, the triangles tattooed on my forehead told everyone who I worked for. Needless to say, that makes undercover work tricky. You end up wearing a lot of hats.

I pushed open the pub door and the room fell silent as I walked in with Krieg at my back. 'Timmy,' the ogre greeted the barman. 'A beer for me and a Dr Pepper for my companion.'

How the fuck did Krieg know that I drank Dr P?

Reed was sitting in a booth at the back of the bar. He had a half-naked woman on his lap and two fire elementals standing guard; one of them was the twat who had accosted me that morning. He glared at me; I glowered back.

I stalked towards Reed and Krieg let out a sigh. Grabbing my Dr Pepper for me, he followed me over. 'Your Excellence,' Reed greeted him.

'Reed,' Krieg responded coolly.

'And who do we have here?' Reed asked, looking me up and down like he was undressing me with his eyes.

Krieg gave a low rumbling growl. Reed blinked and stopped letching instantly. If I'd felt more confident that I knew what was going on, I would have enjoyed the moment. 'You know who I am,' I spat. 'You had your men threaten me this morning.'

Reed's eyes went wide in a display of faux innocence. 'Oh no, that wasn't my intention at all. Flame Boy, did you threaten the good inspector?'

'No,' Flame Boy replied. 'Lenny did.'

'Ah. Poor Lenny,' Reed said facetiously. 'That didn't work out so well for him.'

I smiled. 'It didn't, did it? I'll do the same – or worse – to anyone who dares to threaten my family again.'

Reed held his hands up in mock surrender. I clenched my jaw and continued. 'I'm here about Jingo. He was killed by a dryad. I want your word that there will be no further repercussions. It has been ruled an eye for an eye – he killed a dryad first and they retaliated. The vendetta is done.'

Reed's smile reminded me of a shark's smile: feral, with far too many teeth. 'Of course.' His smile widened. 'I give you my word: no further harm will come to the dryads in this city from any command of mine. It is water under the bridge.' He glowed with the oath then laughed like it was all a good joke.

The problem was, I had no idea what the punchline was.

Chapter Eleven

Krieg was driving me home when Ed texted me with the result of the autopsy: *Jingo is a bloody doppelganger!!!*

'Oh fuck!' I swore aloud. 'Take me to Union Street! NOW!' I barked at Krieg.

Krieg didn't bat an eyelid at being bossed around, and I didn't have a minute to wonder about that. Jingo was a doppelganger: that meant his death was anything but.

At the moment of death, doppelgangers assume control of the nearest living body, which is usually their killer. I suddenly remembered how slowly Ash Aspen had sunk into the tree, the perplexed frown Lily had given him, and the creaking warning of the elder tree. And Bird had said Ash 'was and was not' the killer because Ash Aspen *had* killed Jingo but he was no longer Ash Aspen: he was Jude Jingo.

'Fuck.'

'Will you stop swearing and explain the reason for the expletives?' Krieg asked, hands tight on the steering wheel. 'Are you in danger?'

'Not me,' I said grimly. 'But the dryads are. Jingo is a doppelganger.'

'Fuck,' Krieg said.

'Exactly.'

Krieg put his foot down harder and the car leapt forward towards the grove. The smug look that had been in Reed's eyes when he'd sworn no harm to the dryads from him made me think that we were already too late – but we had to try.

We stopped the vehicle and ran into the park towards the grove. The sound of wailing carried on the wind, and I knew we were already out of time.

We entered the grove and immediately saw the five dead elders. More sobbing dryads were huddled around them. Sitting on a chair made of vines was Ash Aspen, a bloody dagger in his hands. He smiled at me. 'Hello, Inspector. Nice of you to drop by again so soon, but this doesn't concern you and you're not invited in. This is an in-house matter.'

I gritted my teeth because *technically* he was correct. And that summed up everything that was wrong with the Connection. Because it was dryads killing dryads, I was supposed to walk away. 'We both know that's bullshit, Jingo.'

He laughed and clapped his hands slowly. 'Ah, bravo, Inspector! And you put the pieces together all by yourself.' His mocking voice made me want to lash out with my magic and destroy him where he sat, but that wasn't law and order. Killing Jingo would make a mockery of everything I had been raised to believe in – but God, how I *wanted* to kill him.

'You've got what you wanted,' I snarled. 'Now leave these people in peace to grieve and rebuild. You don't belong here.'

Jingo held a hand to his heart. 'You wound me. True belonging is when you don't need to change yourself for others.' His expression turned wicked. 'I don't just change myself *for* others, I change myself *into* others.' He laughed. 'I belong just fine, Stacy.'

'Don't speak her name,' Krieg growled. 'She's Inspector Wise to you.'

'Your Excellence,' Jingo drawled. 'How lovely to see you again.'

'You'll be seeing more of me. I'm moving my operations up here. Consider this your courtesy call.'

Jingo's expression hardened. 'How delightful,' he murmured. He pushed up from his throne of vines. 'Then no doubt we'll be seeing more of each other.'

'No doubt.'

Jingo looked at the gathered dryads. 'Do remember what happens when you say no to Jude Jingo. I'll be back to discuss our importing business another time.'

I gritted my teeth as he sauntered past me. I was dying to attack him with my magic, but my hands were tied by the law. Technically he was a dryad right now and as such this was an in-house matter. But he was on my radar and I'd be damned if I didn't get the prick for something else. Whether he knew it or not, his days were numbered.

And next time, I'd make sure there wasn't another host for him to jump into.

Chapter Twelve

Krieg drove me home in silence. I couldn't face going back to the office; I'd type up the 'incident' from home instead. I knew Thackeray would be just as outraged as I was; it was this sort of bullshit that had made him work his way up the ranks. I had no doubt he had his eye on the position of Chief Constable, and it would be a real coup to have an Other realmer in that position.

'Thanks for the lift,' I said to Krieg. 'Your Excellence,' I tagged on abruptly. I still had no idea why he'd helped me today, but I wasn't one to look a gift unicorn in the mouth.

'It was my pleasure,' he replied. He drew the last word out, making my skin prickle. Was he *flirting* with me?

Absolutely not, I decided. He was being polite and I was just as politely going to get the fuck away from him. I climbed out of the car and walked away without looking back though I knew he was still watching me. My neck prickled with his gaze.

I fumbled the key in the lock and gave a sigh of relief when I successfully got inside. 'I'm home,' I called out as if I had someone waiting for me. For all I knew, whatever haunted me was waiting.

I went into the kitchen-diner and switched on the lights – then swore when I saw that I truly wasn't alone. The caladrius was sitting on the back of my dining-room chair. He bobbed his tail at me in a wave. 'Bird! You scared the life out of me.'

'Window open,' he said defensively.

The dining-room window was open a couple of inches for fresh air, but I'd be shutting it from here on out. I had paid a witch handsomely for protective runes around my house, but apparently they didn't extend to chatty birds. 'I suppose it was,' I said drily. 'What are you doing here?'

Bird shuffled his feet. 'Dark,' he said finally. 'Men after me. Stay here?'

My mouth fell open for a moment. I'm not really the pet type, but I *had* seen the two hunters going for him. I sighed. 'Sure, why not? For tonight, anyway.'

Bird gave a happy trill. 'Thank you, Pigdog!'

'Fuck's sake,' I muttered.

I went to the fridge and gave him a few slices of ham, then busied myself making a brew. I booted up my laptop and started typing up my report for Thackeray. God, the whole thing was such a mess.

After an hour of clicking away, I hit send and shut down the computer for the night. I had even sent a condensed version of the report to Channing's Connection email address; he needed to know why we wouldn't be on Jingo's case the next day.

I snaffled a whole packet of Jaffa cakes as I drank my tea. I didn't feel too bad about it – they were comfort calories and after the day I'd had, I needed them.

I'd been played from the beginning, we all had. Jingo had been two steps ahead of me the whole time. He had killed Ivy Blossom solely to start a vendetta that had ended with his supposed death, then he'd leapt into his attacker's body and taken control of it. He'd used his new body to walk through the dryads' normally impenetrable defences to kill the naysayers who had refused to do business with him. No doubt the dryads would now be working with Jingo's organisation.

If Ash Aspen hadn't gotten hot-headed, maybe we would have tracked Jingo down for Ivy's death. Instead, Ash had lashed out, created a vendetta and protected Jingo under the eye-for-an-eye rule. Later, Jingo had killed his now-fellow dryads. Once again, that fell outside the scope of the law because it was an in-house matter.

Regardless of how well Jingo knew the laws and tap danced around them, I would get him. I didn't like being played.

I stood up to go to bed. 'Night, Bird.' I paused. Bird didn't seem like much of a name and if he was sticking around, I felt

like I should call him something else. Anyway, Bird was the name Jingo had given him. 'Shall we give you another name?'

'What name?' Bird asked.

I thought for a moment. 'Loki?' I suggested to the cheeky caladrius.

He clacked his beak in thought. 'Loki,' he agreed, sounding happy. 'Loki trickster!' He ruffled his feathers in approval.

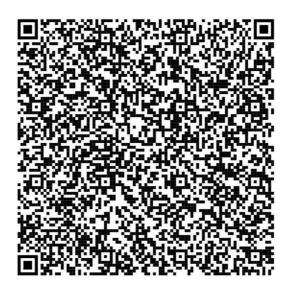
I stifled a grin. Trickster was one word for it; in my view, Loki was a wanker. 'Goodnight, Loki,' I said to the bird. I left the table lamp on for him.

'Good night, Pigdog.'

I don't know what it says about me that the nickname made me smile. I headed for bed feeling lighter than I had for days. I consciously put the last couple of days behind me, but I put Jude Jingo before me. I had my sights on him and whether he knew it or not, his days were numbered.

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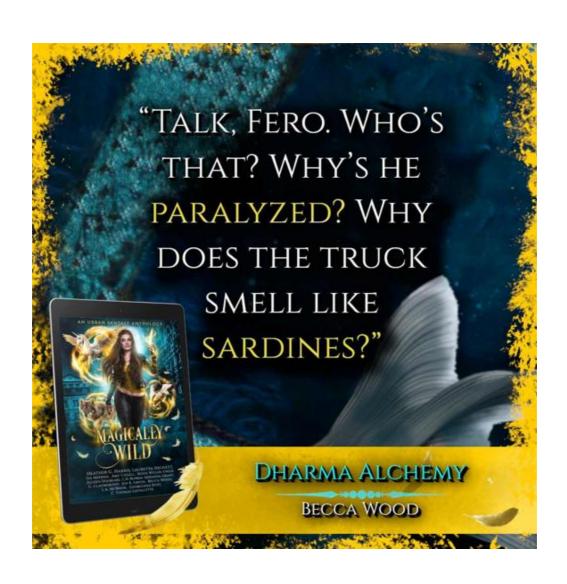
About Heather G. Harris

Heather went to university in Liverpool, where she took up skydiving and met her future husband. When she's not running around after her children, she's plotting her next book and daydreaming about vampires, dragons and kick-ass heroines.

Heather is a book lover who grew up reading Brian Jacques and Anne McCaffrey. She loves to travel and once spent a month in Thailand. She vows to return.







Dharma Alchemy

BY Becca Wood



Dharma Alchemy by Becca Wood

Pulled out of bed by an emergency call, this doctor must tend to a creature that can easily eat her. But will she lose her life trying to save theirs?

Chapter One

I've never claimed to make smart life choices. I was angry, screaming along with Rob Zombie's "Dragula," and overdriving my headlights on the deserted rural roads. As is common with midnight call-outs from Jack Fero, more curiosity than was healthy polluted the purity of my anger.

He'd said to meet him at his house, and that turned my anticipation up to eleven – for which there were valid reasons. Jack lived at an ostensibly abandoned airstrip hidden on a ranch south of Austin, and his private room in the top of a converted control tower remained a mystery. His landlord was a spry geezer with an outrageous French accent who could turn into an albatross. The first time I'd been to their airstrip, we left in a shady ambulance on a rescue mission, followed by identical goth banshee sextuplets driving a pink hearse.

Am I bragging? Absolutely.

Going there for an undisclosed medical call in the middle of the night had me guessing at what new, bizarre doctor skill I'd have to pull out of my ass. That enticing possibility didn't stop me being testy. My Saturday night date had gotten well into the good part, and I had a thing or two to say to Jack about poor timing. He wouldn't share anything about the problem, our ultimate destination, or why he needed me specifically. Right before he disconnected, he asked almost off-handedly if I was menstruating.

I parked in front of the hangar, well away from the softly glowing lights outlining the small airstrip. The night air was cool and slightly damp, a waft of diesel exhaust coming from the ambulance idling on the tarmac. After tying a bandana over my unruly red hair, I checked my boot laces and pulled my pack from behind the jeep's back seat. Jack had also kept mum on what supplies I needed, so I brought only my beloved 'ohshit bag'. It held everything needed for the first ten minutes after you say 'oh shit'. Leaving human emergency medicine to

tend to the non-human folk of Central Texas had meant significant changes to its contents.

I pasted on an appropriately stern expression and threw open the ambulance doors. My partner in crime lounged on the bench seat, completely at ease, smug, and annoyingly sexy. When the term 'handsome devil' was coined, they were looking right at Jack. He's hard to stay mad at, but I was determined to try my best. And remember that I was technically his boss.

Facial expressions are only window dressing around Jack, so I don't know why I bothered. He's half succubus and can 'taste' mental signatures. He swears he can't read minds, but he is spot-on with emotions. He describes everyone's brain as having a 'thread,' and he senses the vibration, flavor, and movement of them. Whenever I push for a better explanation, he says "you can't explain blue to blind folk."

Maintaining a strong physical and emotional front failed; my active bitch face and my righteous head of steam deserted when I needed them most. Whatever I was expecting, this wasn't it. A nude man sat on the stretcher. He had that pretty, too-clean, waxed-chest look that shields rich frat boys and that most girls swoon over. In reality, they're devoid of personality and survival skills. In a lifeboat situation, the sort of human you eat before they can deplete the supplies.

He wasn't moving. Not even a blink. Eventually his chest rose and fell. My initial, very specific concern over the presence of a corpse scarpered, replaced with a generic concern about catatonic naked underwear models and why they'd be in our ambulance. And why it mattered if I was menstruating.

I had a lot of concerns.

Throughout my survey, and the ensuing internal debate over what was most concerning about tonight's flavor of what-the-fuckery, Jack smiled at me with his whole face. He could manage little-boy excitement, big-boy 'undress you with his thoughts', and bad-boy 'imminent shenanigans' all in one look.

Time to find out which boy I had to worry about tonight.

Chapter Two

"Talk, Fero. Who's that? Why's he paralyzed? Why does the truck smell like sardines?"

Jack's eyes laughed at my machine-gunned questions. He leaned forward and braced his forearms on his knees. "All excellent questions, love. Ready? You're driving."

I hated being called out on a night off, and I wasn't shielding my emotions. Jack is prey to the feelings of anyone around him; mine were likely threatening to eat a hole in whatever it was in his head that processed that stuff. One of the hazards of being both half succubus and of working with me.

"If you're here babysitting Naked Guy, who's manning the clinic?" My tone accused him of shirking, but my brainwaves were undoubtedly carrying my need for more information. He'd been on tonight's duty roster.

"I switched shifts for something more important. Your continuing education awaits."

I squinted at the ambulance's interior. "He's not even blinking."

"I told him he couldn't move except to breathe." This seemed to please him.

Jack's other half is siren, and he'd used it on our 'guest.' "Why?"

"You don't recognize him, do you?" Ah. Our game of answering questions with questions was afoot.

"Should I?" My grip on the doors tightened. He perked up even more as my mental signature shifted from exasperated to full-on curious. Jack sipped me like fine wine.

I'm almost positive he puts up with me entirely for my unique brain.

"GPS is already programmed. Try not to kill us on the way there?"

The last time I'd driven Jack's ambulance with an unwilling 'patient' on board, we'd fed a triple murderer to a giant axolotl thingy, Jack's childhood pet Spot. When he outgrew his pond, he became a free-range alien in the waterways of Austin. Why the exuberantly friendly and curious beast hadn't already spawned urban legends was a miracle surpassing understanding.

Obeying the GPS, I wound my way southeast, eventually parking in front of a disturbingly familiar boathouse. I turned in my seat to glare back into the patient compartment. This was the same place we'd disposed of the previous bad guy.

"Is this another 'let's feed Spot' outing? Why am I even here?" I knew my unasked questions were carbonating my brainwaves and pummeling him like shoppers at closed Black Friday doors.

Jack shifted his voice into a siren's command register. "Get out."

I had long ago learned to resist, which, oddly enough, made Jack enjoy being around me more rather than less. I guess not having to worry about collateral damage was nice. But along with most creatures, the tanned and muscled human on the stretcher lacked my ability, so he climbed out and put his perfect feet onto the sandy driveway.

"Walk into the boathouse and wait at the end of the dock," Jack ordered.

Tears streamed down the man's unblinking face as he marched like an automaton into the shadowed interior of the structure encasing a wooden walkway and moored boat.

I put a hand on Jack's chest and raised one eyebrow. I tried out my 'enough is enough' face. He tried out his puppy dog eyes. Neither worked.

Jack said, "We're turning lead into gold. Trust me?"

"You know I do, but the secrecy's getting old. And unnecessary. Whatever this is, I'm pretty sure it's not

something I'll be telling anyone about." I softened my voice a bit, and whined, "Does someone actually need our help?"

Jack nodded.

"What does Adonis have to do with it?"

Jack smiled. "He's a medical supply?" His face turned stony, grin gone. "His beauty's barely skin deep."

This was another one of Jack's adventures, the two of us on the hunt for something. I ground out, "I feel even more uninformed than usual. And that's saying something."

"There are worse things."

I finally laughed and dropped my hand from Jack's broad chest. "Yeah, I could be that guy."

Chapter Three

The boathouse's sheet metal skin echoed with something akin to whale song, out of place on Austin's Lady Bird Lake. This stretch of the Colorado River was wide and deep, unburdened with human owners.

Jack pulled a glass vial from a thigh pocket and dumped its yellow, viscous contents on the man's blond head. An odor both musty and cloying filled the air, mixing with the water smells of algae and fish. A cold wind swept off the water and rushed over us.

"Rub it in," Jack ordered.

The man rubbed. Last time, the contents had been green, and told Spot it was okay to devour the human whose head had been anointed. Last time, Jack had sung underwater to summon Spot.

"And what does that tell Spot to do?" I asked.

"Don't eat, relocate." Jack looked down at the massive white blur of Spot circling in the black water beneath the dock. "That was a hard trick to teach. I persevered." He straightened, a proud look on his face.

A thick, pale tail broke the water and whacked a dock piling. If Spot was already here, Jack must have done a bunch of set-up prior to roping me in.

I sighed and twirled a finger in a 'hurry up' gesture. "I left a bed full of warm and willing girlfriend for this."

"Just one?" Jack raised an eyebrow and smirked at me.

I felt that the fact that I could be sucked into a conversation about date night said something about my ability to accept how odd my life had become. A naked, paralyzed stranger stood on a dock with yellow goo in his hair while my sirensuccubus partner dressed me down for only having one bed partner on my night off. And I was actually distracted from said stranger by Jack's ribbing.

I sighed and scrubbed my face. Maybe when I opened my eyes again things would make sense.

"Who was it?" Jack asked.

"Are we really having this conversation?"

"Embarrassed?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"Can't I be curious?"

I gave in, if only to move this along. "Relatha."

I'd managed to surprise him. "You slept with one of the *gorgons*?" When I didn't say anything, he threw his head back and roared. "I knew it. You've got some kind of sex bingo card, don't you?"

"I respectfully request we get back to *your* what-the-fuckery, please."

Jack chuckled. He had this low, throaty laugh that made folks' panties fall off. "Patience, Otter," Jack said.

"Grasshopper." Patience, Grasshopper."

"Nope, I know it's Otter because I was the one what gave you the nickname."

I groaned. "I give up."

Jack never gets my human cultural references when they come from movies or TV shows. Sad really, because that's where most of my humor originates. Someday, I'll chain him to the floor and force him to watch every Monty Python production ever filmed. And a bunch of other stuff too. Someday.

The soft ethereal song I'd been hearing since we entered the boathouse got louder and the water brightened. Any further complaint died in my mouth when I leaned over the edge of the weathered planks. Two ghostly forms floated in the gloom

below Spot, solid black eyes bulging from pale faces. Feathery white tails flicked in and out of view in the murk below.

"Cave naiads?" I whispered.

Describing them is beyond my meager vocabulary. Otherwordly, fluttering, undulating beauty just visible beneath the surface. Everything but the naiads faded into the background, my thoughts suspended in a starburst trance. Their song charged the very air. I felt it on my skin, in my ears, to my core. Parts of me I'd thought nothing could touch vibrated. I was immersed in a fantasy, stunned and calm, and I didn't want it to end.

My frequent emotional shifts normally give Jack whiplash. I know because he complains about it a lot. But not tonight. When I feel like this, he says I'm tasty. Maybe that's why he'd insisted I come along.

"Yep." He'd given me time to bask, but finally confirmed that these were, indeed, the long-awaited cave naiads.

Jack pushed the man into the water.

I didn't flinch. This was my flex – acting as if stuff like this didn't faze me. "How many gloopy potions you got?"

"Just the two so far. Training him's not easy. Short attention span."

Bubbles and thrashing reduced underwater visibility to zero. When it cleared, everyone was gone. I could have watched the graceful movements of the naiads for hours. Their absence left me feeling sad and empty, and I didn't know why.

Jack turned toward the shore and said, "Overland route is this way."

"Do I need -"

"Gear's already down there." He extended a light on an elastic cord. "Have a headlamp. Just in case the walls aren't bright enough."

I grabbed the ohshit bag anyway, and stomped after him. "You're being even less forthcoming than usual."

"Am I?"

"It's folk like you what cause unrest."

Chapter Four

I gracelessly followed Jack down a barely-used gamepath, cedar branches and shrubbery catching on my t-shirt. He never stumbled, silent feet moving forward and broad torso avoiding everything I ran into. Sometimes I think the whole of existence moves around Jack, and I'm the only entity refusing to be sucked into orbit around him.

The time we'd spent training me in non-human medicine on his home planet of Mul-Apin, courtesy of a gate outside of Austin, had changed things between us. I'd originally been educated as a human ER doctor, accustomed to acting fast and orchestrating from the driver's seat. Now, I was slower to question, more likely to follow his lead. Mostly because I was tired of ending up looking like a twat. As the main purveyor of medical care to the hidden, non-human community of Central Texas, my learning curve had been steep. Jack had been my guide. Sometimes my Virgil, sometimes my Beatrice, we'd moved through all the levels of heaven and hell together.

Earning each others' trust hadn't been easy — on either of us — but the Herculean effort had been entirely worth it. He'd never admit it, but I knew our partnership was one of his most cherished accomplishments. It was certainly mine. The community at large was adjusting more slowly to my presence. The non-humans from Mul-Apin (whether born here or immigrants) called themselves Inners. Humans are Outers. We hadn't quite decided what *I* was yet.

The path ended at a boulder fall next to a small limestone cliff, typical Hill Country terrain. Jack pulled out a little fob and one of the boulders disappeared. It didn't hinge open or roll up, it was simply gone. High tech gadgets showed up with alarming regularity, even more strange given the Inner community's propensity toward seasons, nature, and balance. It gives me access to insanely cool medical gear though, so I don't look at the teeth on that horse.

The limestone of Central Texas houses an extensive cave network, but according to Jack, the section we were entering had never been seen by human eyes. None that lived, anyway. It wasn't my first time to walk where no human had ventured before, but it never failed to impress. Feeling special is a nifty sort of high, but one that I'd learned comes at a cost.

I peered into the passageway which should have been darker. "What's the catch? Spiders? Ankle-biting cave gnomes? Psionic rocks that'll try to convince me I'm suffocating?"

"Such a pessimist. Who hurt you, Otter?"

"Seriously, what's going to try to kill me in there?"

"Nothing will try to kill you. But we have to follow the crickets." He grinned, like that should make me happy and totally answer my legitimate question.

Now I wished I'd brought Galli, the alien feline who thought I was her mother. She could hunt the shit out of some cave crickets. Jack pulled a mesh cage from his backpack. It was filled with faintly glowing, white, cricket-like creatures, climbing over one another, clicking and thrashing their feathery antennae toward the cavern entrance. He placed the enclosure on the ground, and turned to me with his hand on the door clasp.

"When I let them out, we have to keep them in sight. They'll head for the main cavern, getting brighter on the way down. We follow. Grab that twine there." I picked up a stick with thick twine wrapped around it. One end was tied to the wall just inside the door. "I'll lead, but don't lose sight of me. And don't drop the twine. We'll need it to get back out."

This was a bit too minotaur-esque for comfort. "What happens if I drop it?"

"Do not do that."

I ran one middle finger up the side of my face. *No pressure, Jack. Don't menstruate, don't lose sight of the crickets, don't drop the life-line*. None of this had been covered in med school or residency. I had so many new life skills, and I couldn't put any of them on my resume.

The boulder-door reappeared behind us, plunging the corridor into near darkness. As my eyes adjusted, the crickets

seemed brighter, pulsing slowly in time with the walls, which also glowed faintly in patches.

"Ready?" Jack asked.

"Does it matter if I say no?"

Chapter Five

He threw the cage door open. Crickets burst out, bouncing onto walls and floor and flying down the corridor. Jack whooped and bounded after them. I fumbled the twine stick before realizing I needed to hold one end and let the twine unwind off the back end. Give the klutz the life-line. Great plan, Jack.

With a death grip on the stick, I ran. I wondered if he was picking up the mental signatures of the insects. His movements mimicked their spastic, popping course as we wound deeper into the earth. It soon became apparent that the twine was essential. Side passages were everywhere. Nothing was marked. We twisted and turned through the glowing walls, cricket chirps coming louder, the echoes bouncing off the stone surfaces in much the way the little jumping insects pinballed up and down, back and forth, in front of us.

Soon I was breathing hard and the way forward had narrowed considerably. We were descending faster, and I'd have broken my neck at one drop had I not seen Jack spring off a boulder ahead of me. He dropped eight feet to a sandy landing, spun around, and caught me before I could splatter my brains against the wall.

He cradled me against his chest like I was some damsel in distress and took a deep breath in through his nose. Apparently I smell like ambrosia to Inners, something else we hadn't quite figured out yet.

"Hi, Doc." He did that thing he does with his seduction eyes that also makes folks' panties fall off.

The headlong chase of the crickets and my focus on keeping hold of the twine had caused me to let the mental walls fall entirely; I stopped a spurt of giggles from bursting forth. I got ahold of myself, and using the same tone of voice I would for a puppy chewing on my shoe, I said, "No! Bad touch! Down, Jack, down!" I bopped him on the nose with the

twine stick. When he didn't move, I added, "The crickets are getting away!"

"It's fine. We have arrived." He set me on my feet, and swept an arm at a last, tight section of rough stone.

We emerged into a space of cathedral proportions, seeming even larger after having traversed such cramped corridors. It was dominated by a deep, crystal-clear pool. Soft light emanated from every surface, a bioluminescence strongest around a rocky central island. It was hard to believe we were still on Earth.

"Why is everything glowing?" I asked.

"The microbiome of the cave exists in a symbiosis with the naiads. I don't understand the biology, but the light is an accurate barometer of the clan's energy."

I squinted. "Okay..."

Jack's teaching moment was cut short by Spot shooting from the water, webbed feet slapping the stones and claws scrabbling. His wide tongue lolled sideways from an even wider mouth set in a heavy, broad head. He butted Jack's face and chest. Thousands of clear tendrils draped from his sides and belly, and bright red gills extended into a ruff between his head and a mane of thick, floppy appendages shaped like pointed cones.

Spot greeted us in his version of those internet videos of dogs reunited with long-away owners. Wriggling in ecstasy, his thick tail slammed into the wall, then almost knocked Jack into the water.

"Spot! Settle!"

Spot rolled, pawing the air, never ceasing his wiggling and squeaking. He popped back to all fours and shook himself like a sodden, twenty-foot Afghan hound – covering everything in a fine mist of water and goo. Galumphing toward me, he bowled me over, snuffled me thoroughly, and ended with a slurping lick of the entire left side of my head. Looking pleased, he chirped and clicked at Jack before somersaulting

into the water. Spot surfaced expectantly, tongue out and leonine head bobbing.

This muppet exuberance alerted the entire cave to our arrival. Smooth white naiad torsos, clustered about the pool's central island, pivoted our way. The whole scene was framed by stalactites and stalagmites reaching for each other since time immemorial. Sheets of flowstone formed unmoving draperies at the edges, and several large columns stretched from the island to the roof of the cave. The untouched majesty of the cavern sent goosebumps over all four of my limbs. It felt sacred. More worthy of protection and awe than any traditional holy place.

A haunting chorus swelled from the gathered clan, and Jack closed his eyes as his head fell back. I noted the first signs of his 'succu-drunk.' Too much delicious emotion does to him what old, smooth whiskey would to anyone else.

"Aren't they gorgeous?" he breathed.

On the surface, they were anything but. Appearances can be deceiving; in the alien refugee community of Central Texas, they usually were, especially seen through a human lens. Humans taught their children to fear witches instead of the people who burned them alive. Jack's genetic curse, passed on by a succubus mother, subjected him to every emotion and psychological signature nearby. It also gifted him a glimpse of folks' true natures. The naiad clan was blindingly beautiful.

An awkward child waddled from the pool to grab Jack's pants leg. Black eyes occupied most of its face, and its flippered feet were ungainly on land. When it smiled, the lipless mouth formed a rictus exposing a crowded army of needle-sharp teeth. It had no external ears, and the face was flat where a nose should be. Jack placed a hand on the hairless head, translucent skin shot through with visible veins.

"Azoh, tiny one." He crouched and pulled an oilskin bag from a pocket. The source of the ambulance's sardine smell. "Make sure to share."

The child tried to pull Jack into the water with the hand not gripping the gift bag.

"We're coming. You go on," Jack laughed.

A bent elder came to collect the toddler and shot Jack a snaggle-toothed smile.

"I expected them to have tails. Mermaids have tails. The ones at the dock had tails," I said. It was all I could say. My brain was short-circuiting on everything I was seeing, including the sheer age and majestic beauty of the space.

Jack grinned. "They're a subspecies, perfectly adapted to subterranean amphibious existence." He shrugged. "Cave mermaids, if you will. This clan split from one in the cenotes of Mexico. When they put their legs together, their feet and calves transform into an impressive fluke. They're half-shifters, just like the mermaids and the centaurs. Shuck anything you don't want wet. We're going in."

"Wait – what about him?" I pointed at the limp form of Adonis, draped face-down over some rocks on the other side of the water. Spot had followed the directive, 'don't eat, relocate.'

Jack never looked up from unlacing his boots. He was unsteady on his feet, voice ever so slightly slurred from the ambient emotion and beautiful chorus swirling in the cavern. "Don't need him yet."

"Should we be guarding him or something?" Allowing a human knowledge of the presence of non-humans was punishable by death or deportation back to Mul-Apin.

"Relax. They never survive the underwater trip."

Jack had done this before. He seemed too dismissive for my liking, and I worried that he was under the influence of too much good feelings, without enough available bandwidth for other, scarier things. I kept one eye on the slumped human shape across the pond and unlaced my own boots.

We undressed together as we had many times before, often under stranger circumstances. Inners have zero nudity taboos. Bodies are bodies, and no reason to cover them up or be ashamed of them. The water felt cool, but not cold, as we swam naked to the central island. Spot was absorbed in munching a fish and didn't follow.

Long fingers tipped with thick claws traced my skin and pulled my attention away from the human. They bumped over the scar tissue that covered my entire back, and a low murmur swept through the adults clustered around me. Inners have a thing about scars; if it looks like something awful happened to you and you're still alive, you achieve some sort of weird strength status. Not victim, but survivor. I stopped swimming, treading water for a better look, and the naiads closed in.

Several of them stroked my red hair while Jack clambered onto the rock pile beyond. A few sang their haunting, whale-song chorus reminiscent of ancient, lost echoes. It vibrated through my chest to leave a spiritual longing for a place and time that might never have existed at all. Strong, translucent tails created currents that buffeted me and furthered the illusion of time standing still. Their feathery ends brushed my legs from all sides. I felt warm, buoyed, as though it would be perfectly fine to stay right there as long as the world would let me.

I ignored Jack's wave to hurry up, and touched the head and shoulder of one of the naiads who'd touched me. When in Rome. The skin was smooth and slick, but not slimy, and the same temperature as the water.

The naiad clicked and burbled, then lisped, "Welcome, Friend of the Singer."

Jack was an all-access pass to infinite wonder.

Helping hands pressed into my buttocks and thighs as I climbed the rocks on the central island. A very pregnant naiad sat in a ring of other women. The skin of the mother's swollen belly was stretched so thin it showed the child within, making ultrasound obsolete. A breech birth was obvious from the tiny flippers protruding between her thighs. Older clan members clustered around, stroking her head and offering her morsels of fish she didn't eat. Her breasts were large and swollen, in stark contrast to the women around her. Only later did I think to

wonder at amphibious life having a need for milk producing glands.

The part of my brain that kept reminding me I was a doctor and not a tourist sat up and poked me. I asked, "How long has she been laboring? How different is their birth process from others I've studied? Time to start filling me in. Devil's in the details."

"Devil's in the human pantheon, not ours." Jack combed his shoulder length, black hair back from his face, water flattening the natural curl to reveal horn stubs he habitually failed to file flush with his scalp. "Three rules. Move slowly. The birth itself should take place underwater. And do *not* bleed, whatever you do."

Aha. One mystery solved. Good thing I wasn't menstruating. Or wounded from that cricket chase.

"Given the anatomy, why don't we just reach in and pull the baby out?"

"Okay, four rules."

"Seriously, Jack. She's breech." I lowered my voice and spoke through gritted teeth. "There are little flippers sticking out!"

"It's gotta come out that way. The last contraction shoots it out backward to push water and microflora into the gills. If it was coming out head-first, *then* we'd have a problem." Jack grinned and patted my head. I slapped his wrist.

"Why are we here?" I sounded tired, a little defeated. Not that I wasn't immensely grateful to be here. Being a doctor is the greatest sort of gift, given by the ones you treat. You're allowed, welcomed even, into another's sacred space. Births, deaths, and all of life's rites of passage.

"Wanted you to see this. To broaden your horizons. If I'm unavailable one day, you might have to help them. I trust you. They trust me, and after today, they'll trust you too."

"Lead into gold?"

"Aren't you glad I dragged you out of bed?"

Bastard.



As the contractions drew closer together, the cavern dimmed and the clan's singing intensified. Everyone was focused on the mother. She filled the cave with her screams, needle teeth bared and claws carving gashes into the rocks. A gush of clear fluid erupted around the baby's legs, and the women supporting her sprang into action.

"It's time," Jack said. "Grab the kit. Sometimes we gotta clamp and cut the cord."

I suppressed an urge to scream loud enough to fill the cave. As I fumbled my way off the island and swam for shore, I murmured curses centered around why we hadn't brought it with us in the first place and how I would punish Jack later. He really must be altered.

The sweep of my arms made eddies of light in the water. As I climbed out, I raised a hand, and droplets shone as they fell to the rocks and sand beneath. I had to rake my hair back and squeeze out the water as I crouched to open Jack's pack. A smaller, zippered bag contained cord clamping equipment, and I gripped it while considering whether I should take the whole thing out and avoid a possible second trip.

Motion in my peripheral vision startled me and I rose instinctively. Adonis swayed, one hand grasping a stalagmite. Not dead after all. Maybe Jack should choose less physically robust specimens. Or pay more attention. Why hadn't he sensed the human was still alive?

Adonis's eyes narrowed, and recognition crawled across his chiseled face.

"You. I know you."

I scrambled through memories and came up blank. Had he been a patient? Unlikely. Any humans I'd treated in the last decade had been in disaster zones outside the United States. I froze, and glanced sideways for Jack. His attention was

elsewhere. Was I too far away for him to feel what was happening?

"You and that other freak stole from me." He moved closer. "Took my property. A whole shipment. Bunch of little girls beat the shit outta me and my guys."

Realization dawned. White-hot rage followed. I remembered the night with Jack and the banshee clique. They'd brought me along to treat the women they were rescuing. I still didn't remember the man himself, but at the time, I'd been focused on something else entirely. Flashes of pain and horror flooded my brain, snatches of the women's stories replayed in my memory. Lists of injuries flew like ticker tape across my vision. I've worked in plenty of refugee camps and outside war zones, and despite the rescue having happened just outside Austin, it had felt just the same.

I snarled, and completely forgot I was underground, naked and wet, facing a stranger. He was no longer someone Jack had kidnapped and dragged here to die. He was a human piece of filth if he'd been involved in that catastrophe. It had been months ago, so Jack must have kept tabs on him.

"People aren't property. You're lucky you're not dead." The irony of my words hit me as soon as they left my mouth.

"You cost us tens of thousands. You made lots of angry clients." He kept inching toward me. "You have no idea what you've done, you little skank."

"Big talk for someone in your position." Why wasn't he freaking out and begging for help?

He lurched forward, leaving me without time or space to dodge. I hit a sharp rock, then fell into the pool. The fall and the blow to my head were disorienting, and I thrashed, unsure which way was up. Adonis grappled at my arms and torso, fighting for a hold. He was a big man, with strong, soft hands. He tried to pull me to him with his legs, and one hand closed around my throat. He was above me, keeping me from surfacing for air. He pulled me to him, and I rammed one knee into his crotch as hard as the water's resistance allowed.

He sucked in water, and his grip loosed just enough for me to push off of him. I braced one foot against a big rock and propelled myself farther away, staying underwater. I got as far as my dwindling air supply let me before surfacing. I sucked in air, gasping and coughing while I tried to figure out where I was and where my attacker had ended up. Blood ran into my eyes.

I was bleeding. I wasn't supposed to bleed. No matter what.

If things hadn't already been confusing enough, Spot entered the fray, slamming into both of us. The water frothed, Adonis punched and kicked, and Spot's exudate goo turned everything slick. I couldn't tell how far from shore I was, and I lost sight of the human. I was thrown sideways into shallower water, my head and torso above the surface. I wiped my eyes and spat.

And then the singing stopped. Abrupt silence sent a chill down my spine and twisted my gut. A wail from the laboring mother broke the eerie stillness, and was followed by a splash. Adonis surfaced with a naiad child in one arm, opposite hand around its throat. Jack's gift was still clutched in its tiny hands. Its tail slapped against the man's muscled thigh in an irregular spasm.

Adonis whirled, sending shining water arcing out to make ripples on the disturbed surface. "Lemme outta here or I'll kill whatever the fuck this thing is!" His snarling had taken on a shrill edge, and he finally looked properly confused and afraid. He was facing down a petite, naked redhead and a twenty-foot-long amphibian whilst holding a baby albino mermaid.

Spot had regained his footing, and I put out a hand.

"Spot! Settle!"

I tried emulating the commanding voice that came so easily to Jack. It must have worked, because Spot stilled and looked at me. This was going to be dicey, and his interference would only muddle matters more.

Beyond and behind Adonis, the clan advanced, teeth bared. A hissing sound filled the cave, and where blood dripped from

my head into the water, the microflora flared brightly.

I reached deep down for any small negotiating abilities. Not a personal strength. "Just put the kid down. It's not involved in this. It's just a baby." I should have known this would have no effect. Everything I knew about him said he'd never shown any concern for a life not his own.

He sneered and tightened his hold. The panting child whimpered, then screamed. He slapped it. Adonis roared back at me. What I saw and heard of this man created a polluted black stain inside what had been a scene of indescribably pristine and shining beauty until minutes before. "Shut up! Do you know who I am? Let me the fuck out! You have no idea who you're dealing with!"

No, but Jack does. That's why you're here. And why you're never leaving.

Adonis turned his back on me and spread his stance to face the oncoming naiads. I looked down at the bag I somehow still held. There were scissors inside. Sharp, with long, tapered blades. I eased them out, holding them in my left hand, and met Jack's gaze across the pool. He nodded.

It was going to be one of those nights. Doing bad things for good reasons, out of options. With no regard for my own safety, I swam toward the human's back. The child's cries echoed off the ceiling, then were lost in a scream of the mother in her next contraction. Adonis was no longer paying me any attention – he must have assumed I wasn't a threat.

In the moment, that may have pissed me off as much as anything else, because once I was just behind him, I murmured, "Say hallo to my leetle fren."

Movie quotes are my coping mechanism. That and bourbon, of which I'd need a decent amount later.

I shot forward and up, thrusting my arm between the human's legs from behind. I fell back to bury one scissor blade deep into his inner thigh, then yanked down with my entire body weight. My aim had been true. Luck and hard-earned anatomical expertise were on my side. I'd punctured one or

more femoral vessels and the strong, downward motion opened them fully. His life's blood poured into the pool, and the water flared with light. The hissing intensified, and the naiads surged toward us.

I stumbled back to the safety of the unbloodied shore and of Spot. He placed himself between me and the water. My legs were shaking, and I couldn't work up the energy to be embarrassed about it. I looked down at the bloody scissors, still gripped in my left hand, and dropped them. They fell onto dirt, and the blood soaked in. The metal sparkled with the water's phosphorescence. It shouldn't look beautiful. But it did.

A circle of torsos rose up around the failing form of Adonis who was clutching his groin and screaming, his hostage nowhere in sight. The wound I'd inflicted was far too large, and nothing would save him now. Pink, sparkling water ran in rivulets down the naiads' pallid bodies as clawed hands reached for the man's darker, quivering flesh. Their mouths stretched wide, showcasing rows of sharp teeth surrounding dark red tongues. Ribs and hip bones tented their white skin, and their limbs seemed too long. Each joint swelled past the bones it connected, giving them a bumpy appearance. Despite it all, their movements were fluid and graceful.

Instead of a maddened feeding frenzy, they held their prize aloft, swimming him back to the pool's center. In their red wake, the water shone most brightly in the blood trail. Their singing overtook the grunts and screams emanating from the mother. The cavern was ablaze with their song, pulsing with a life and light that should have been impossible in this forgotten, underground space.

Jack crouched alone atop the island and tore his gaze away from the knot of females surrounding the birth. When my eyes met his across the water, he nodded again. Without looking away from me, he joined his siren voice to the swelling harmony. The sight of the human sacrifice descending into the clustered bodies was discordant with the ethereal choir reverberating through the air, water, and stone. I searched for the child who'd been held hostage, and found it being

comforted, maybe by the same old one who'd come for it earlier.

Wanting to be closer, but unsure if it was safe, I gave Spot a gentle push toward the water. He turned his cartoonish head and dipped down to lick the blood off my face. I scrunched my eyes shut in submission, more interested in being blood free than avoiding axolotl spit. When the licking stopped and he butted me with his forehead, I looked down at the gentle giant. Splayed flat, he slapped his tail on the stones and meeped.

I laughed, the sound coming out hollow and quiet, remembering the last time I'd ridden Spot. Running from danger then, too. I murmured, "Literally nothing about my work has anything to do with how a normal person does anything."

Spot swam me to the opposite side of the island, and we both climbed up to join Jack. The alien axolotl towered over our squatting forms, and we all looked down to watch this vanishingly rare event unfold.

The singing intensified as the baby slipped free to float motionless and limp just past its exhausted mother. No one moved to assist, and Jack grabbed my forearm lest I forget where I was and instinctively jump in to help. He knew me well. The adult naiads shredded the human corpse, parceling it out while reserving the rich organ meats for their two weakest members

As the water turned crimson, light surged around the naiads and exploded out to the edges of the pool. The thing that had been Adonis broke apart. It returned – in component pieces – to rejoin the interconnected weave of a broader sphere. Inners believed every living thing adds its own thread to the universal warp and weft of all beings. The sludge of his misused existence was drunk down by the clan's elders, pulsing transformed energy out in a wave.

The surface above the baby was disturbed, bubbles and waves erupting to the surface. The mother submerged, human heart in one hand and liver in the other, into water too bloody to see through.

Chapter Seven

Much later, Jack and I relaxed on a dry stone slab at the edge of the cavern, sharing a flask and watching Spot give rides to naiad children. All traces of blood and tissue had been consumed, either by the naiads or their commensal microflora. The clan was less skeletal, their singing buoyed with joy. The newest of their number was being passed from one adult to another, accompanied by body language that must be universal.

"You didn't need me. I didn't do a single doctory thing," I groused. "In fact, I was explicitly anti-doctory. I killed a man."

"Nonsense. You were a healer tonight. You saved that youngling's life, and the lives of every creature that monster would have enslaved and tortured after today. More specifically, you provided a vital medical supply. No different from epinephrine for anaphylaxis or D-50 for hypoglycemia."

"She didn't need our help. You said this was a 'difficult birth'."

"It was. It always is. The child will wither and die without the strength of the clan and the energy of the diatoms in the water. They can subsist on fish and invertebrates, but for a new life, they need more," Jack said.

"You've brought them humans before." I entertained visions of Jack laboring to do this on his own, stalking bad guys and luring them into his ambulance. Part of me was torn as to the ethics of this. Remembering the man I'd just killed, and his victims, a bigger part was not.

"Yes."

"Why?"

Jack leaned back into the cavern wall. "They'll kill to keep a baby alive. Someone with my skills can make absolutely certain some innocent doesn't end up down here. I bring them the worst I can find. The universe is a cruel and random place, generally devoid of justice. I enjoy putting a finger on the scales."

"Why not a cow or something?"

"The worse a thing is, the more harmful and out of step with the greater warp and weft of life, the better. No mere animal can manage that. I sent a huge boar through once, and the child died, so never again. Their transmutation of evil fuels a new, pure life."

I must have still looked confused, so Jack forged ahead. "You're protected in a way, getting to empathize without others' emotions being forced on you. But I'm not. I felt it all. His victims' pain, his pleasure. He wasn't in it just for the money. He reveled in what he did. That's why he died today. Why we've removed his ripples from the pool of this world and replaced them with new ones."

I digested this, leaning against the stone and listening to the happy squeals of children at play.

After a time, Jack said, "They are eaters of cruelty and decay. Like fungi of a forest floor, they ingest what would otherwise choke and befoul – converting it to beauty and love. They are the alchemists of the earth, and I am merely their delivery boy."

I sighed and tossed a pebble into the water to make rainbow ripples through the glowing pond. I had seen so much shining beauty tonight, but it was tempered with having ended a life. Even if it would have happened anyway. "I'm knackered. I would shank a bitch for a cozy blanket nest, some Willie Nelson, a bourbon nightcap, and fuzzy socks."

"That is oddly specific. And probably enough shanking for one night." Jack side-eyed me.

I side-eyed him.

"What, too soon?" Jack asked.

"Why is it that when I work with you, amazing shit happens, but I also almost die with alarming regularity?"

Jack grinned and threw his arms into the air. "I know! Isn't it great?" He leaned closer and lowered his voice to something approaching intimate. "It's kinda our thing." He cocked his head. "Wanna know about my potentials for next time?"

"Save the lead for the ride back. I'm enjoying the gold."

Want to Be the first to know when Debuts debut book comes out?

Join her Facebook group: The Babblewitch



Waking Rynn will release fall 2024, and it follows the band of misfit first responders serving the hidden mythological community of the Inners.

About Becca Wood

Becca is recovering from being a literary non-fiction writer by embracing urban fantasy like towels fresh from the dryer on a cold and rainy day. She's an ER doc, former medic, former 911-dispatcher, and former director of a suicide hotline; twenty-seven years of dealing with other people's emergencies created a deep well of crazy night shifts, ecstatic joy, and crushing pain to turn into stories. Her work celebrates the morally grey and chaotic-neutral heroes amongst us, and explores what it means to find one's place and come of age as an adult.

She lives in the Texas Hill Country outside of Austin to maximize her 'tree to people' ratio and access to breakfast tacos, and is proud to be the only person she knows to have earned a hospital discharge diagnosis of 'caffeine toxicity'.



The Magpie and the Wobegone Wizard

By Jilleen Dolbeare



The Magpie and the Wobegone Wizard by Jilleen Dolbeare Deciding it's better late than never at thirty-odd years of age, Oliver summons a familiar so he can attend wizarding school. But he never expected the trouble the magpie would bring!



Oliver Franklin stared at the window. The magpie stared back at Oliver. The bird looked young, maybe freshly on its own for the first time. It was marked with the typical black and white feathers, although it was thin, and a bit scraggly. This couldn't be the familiar he'd called for, could it?

He almost turned away, ignoring the bird, but the keen intelligence in its eyes stopped him.

He wasn't a great wizard. In fact, to say he was "fair to middlin" would even be a stretch. He had power, but training? He hadn't been able to afford wizard school. He'd scraped along with whatever learning he could find. Usually from books, although most of those were fakes. He'd had a wizard friend in high school that had shown him a few things, but he'd moved to the lower forty-eight and Oliver never saw him again...

At slightly over thirty years of age, he should have had a familiar long ago. He brushed his hand through his hair, leaving it standing up. Resigned, he opened the sash, and said, "Come in."

The magpie hopped through, landing on the sill. It cocked its head as though awaiting instruction. Oliver blinked at it. He scrambled back to the kitchen to the spell he'd marked in the library book. It had worked, he'd called a familiar, so it was probably a real magic book. Too bad he'd have to return it.

He read the passage again. He still needed to complete the bond. Did he want the magpie to be his familiar? He stared at it. He'd been hoping for something impressive, like a bear, or a wolf. But cut-rate wizards should expect cut-rate familiars. His shoulders sagged.

Then he straightened. Even if magic was generally known and accepted, not many people would be comfortable around a familiar that was an apex predator. He'd be limited where he could go with a bear. The magpie was a smarter choice, and a much better familiar for apartment living. Plus, corvids were bright, right? Right.

He looked back at the bird. "You up for this, bird?"

It tilted its head the other way, even though the bond hadn't been completed, it seemed to understand.

"Here goes nothing!"

He read the spell out loud. Nothing happened. He looked back at the instructions. "Ah, I forgot the blood."

This time, he pricked his finger. He approached the bird. "I need to rub this on you, don't bite, OK?"

The bird didn't answer of course, although he'd heard most corvids could be trained to speak. He squeezed his finger until a ruby drop appeared, and he hurriedly wiped it down the magpie's feathers. It turned its head, and he snatched back his hand to avoid a bite. The bird just seemed curious; it didn't attempt to peck him.

"OK, here we go again."

He intoned the spell. The bird squawked loudly, and he felt what seemed to be a searing hot pain through his heart. It flared and retreated so fast; he was left gasping. The bird hopped up and down and fluttered its wings. It must have felt the same sensation.

He rubbed his chest over his heart with the palm of his hand. He stared at the bird. He should be able to understand it now and communicate with it.

"Uh, do you have a name?" he asked.

Nothing.

He pointed to himself. "I'm Oliver." He pointed to the bird. "Who are you?"

The magpie didn't speak, but he had a clear picture pop into his mind of a stream tumbling over rocks. "Brook?" he asked.

He had the strong sense he was wrong. He tried again, "Water?"

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No.
"River?"
No.
"Stream?"
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No.

After that he picked up his phone and googled synonyms for river. He slowly ran through them until he saw a golden glow around the image and felt a positive sense from his new familiar.

"Rill. Got it." He approached the bird slowly. "Are you hungry, Rill?"

The bird squawked, and he took that as a positive. However, he had no idea what magpies ate. He knew bread was bad for birds, he'd heard that somewhere. Birds were supposed to eat seeds or something.

He quickly checked on his phone. "Magpies are omnivores. They eat insects, small rodents, seeds, and fruits."

Oliver didn't have any of that. He'd have to shop tomorrow. He had a partially eaten rotisserie chicken in his fridge. Was feeding a bird *chicken* cannibalistic? He looked at the bird. They weren't the same species. He shrugged and pulled off a piece of chicken. He broke it up into small pieces and set it on a plate. He set it down on the table and invited the bird over.

It inhaled the food.

Huh.

"So, Rill, are you going to enjoy apartment living, or do you have a nest?" The bird blinked at him, and he had the distinct feeling that it wanted to stay.

"I'll get you some supplies tomorrow. I don't think the pet shop is open today."

The bird didn't reply.

"We're going to do magic together, Rill. Both of our luck is changing."

It was true. He felt like luck was building up around him. He rubbed his hands together. Now that he had a familiar, he'd finally get a chance to learn how to be a real wizard. Better late than never.



Oliver fed Rill some more chicken in the morning before he needed to leave for work. Since he couldn't get a writ to practice magic and earn his living that way, he had to work at a mundane, human job.

His grandfather had left him the apartment building, and he had income from it, but the building was so rundown, that the upkeep sucked every penny of profit he made. So, he'd taken a real job so he could keep the lights on and food on the table. He was an assistant manager at the Walmart in Midtown Anchorage, Alaska.

His Walmart had a small pet department, but probably not enough stuff for a larger bird to live comfortably. Plus, he was hoping to talk to an expert that would know how to care for a magpie. He'd wait until after his shift, and then hit up the pet store.

With a plan formed, he made sure the window was open for Rill, walked out of his apartment, and down the stairs. He then folded his six-foot three-inch frame into his ancient Corolla and headed to work.

He was aware that residents referred to his store as the ghetto Walmart, but that was because of its location, rather than the store itself. Frankly, it was a nice store—neat, clean, and well managed—a place to be proud to work in, if that was the work you wanted to do. He wanted to work for the Guild, so it was always a struggle to turn off that part of his thinking and keep focused on customer service.

Now that he had Rill, he could apply for night classes, and finally get the training he needed so he could eventually qualify for the Guild. That kept a smile on his face and made his work easier. Tonight, he'd take care of Rill, and fill out the paperwork. *Finally*. Even a screaming customer couldn't get him down today! When the lady kept coming at him to demand a discount on something that was already discounted,

he whispered a spell he'd read in the same book as the familiar spell, and she immediately calmed and left smiling. Even his magic was better since Rill showed up. You couldn't beat that.

He was whistling when he walked to his car in the parking lot. It was high summer, so the sun would be out almost all night as well. And having the sun fill his metaphorical batteries, added another layer of happiness to his mood.

He found the pet store. It was in South Town, not that far from work or home. Anchorage, for all it was the largest city in Alaska, was still not that large. The pet store didn't have an expert on magpies, but they looked up information and he got proper food, a perch, some pet pads for under the perch, and some toys for Rill.

The ride home was exciting. He'd take care of his familiar and apply to wizard school. He was on top of the world. Too bad that being on top meant you had further to fall.



There was a note on his door when he arrived home. He wrangled his packages over to one arm, to unlock the door and rip the note down. He dumped everything on the couch and read the note.

"Dear Mr. Franklin, I've tried to ask nicely but the items that need to be fixed have not been attended to. If you don't respond by tomorrow, I'll have no choice but to complain to the housing authority. Thank you for your prompt attention, Julia in 2F."

"Shit," he said. He'd been putting her off mostly because he didn't have the money for all the repairs. Actually, he had the money, but it would mean he'd have to put off wizard class for another term. This was finally his time, dammit.

As the landlord, he was responsible, and her requests weren't outlandish, her sink was broken, and the laundry room downstairs only had one working washer and dryer at the moment. The broken ones were past repair and had to be

replaced. He could probably put her off by saying he'd ordered them, and they were delayed in shipping. That happened a lot in Alaska. He'd offer to take a hundred bucks off the rent or something so she could go to the laundromat. Maybe, just maybe, he could fix the sink. He checked on Rill and set out a bowl of food for him.

He dug through his spare room until he found his toolbox. It was buried under Christmas decorations and clothes he intended to donate. He hurriedly dressed in work clothes and headed downstairs to 2F.

He knocked on the door. A pretty, thirty something woman answered it. Her blonde hair was tied up in a messy bun, and she was wearing workout clothes. She blushed prettily when she saw him.

"Uh, Mr. Franklin, I wasn't expecting you." He didn't know what she meant; *she* left a note on *his* door. He frowned.

"I thought I'd try to fix your sink. Faster than a plumber," he mumbled, embarrassed.

She looked behind her, then said, "Sure, yeah, come in."

She opened the door wide and stood back so he could enter.

Oliver waited until she shut the door behind him, and then followed her over to the kitchen sink.

"Please don't mind the dirty dishes," she said. "I have the water turned off to the sink, because of the leak."

He nodded. "Where did you notice the leak?"

She pointed.

He smiled. This might be easier than he thought. He might be able to just replace the faucet and voila, problem solved. He made a show of checking everything carefully. Turning the water back on and rechecking. He told her he'd need to replace the faucet, and he'd be back in a bit. Then he left and ran to the home improvement store. For a hundred and eighty bucks, he'd averted that disaster. He could still save the night, by applying to school once he'd installed the new faucet. His good mood was back.

The new faucet went in like a dream. He wanted to fist bump Julia, but that would be unprofessional. He told her the lie about the laundry facilities and told her to take a hundred off of the rent. She looked happy. He felt bad about the lie, but he could replace them next month. This was only a slight delay. Everything was back to sunshine and roses.

He almost ran back to his apartment. Rill was on the new perch, blinking sleepily at him.

"Hope you enjoyed your meal, buddy," he said, and was reassured by a warm feeling of contentment.

He settled in at his kitchen table, where his ancient laptop rested. He opened it, cracked his knuckles, and searched up the "University of Anchorage Wizarding School." His computer whirred, the fan blasting away like an old lawnmower engine. It was old and probably didn't have much life left. The site opened. He clicked on registration.

He filled out the obvious, name, address, experience, etc. and finally scrolled through enough to get to the part that had held him up so far. Familiar. He marked Y for yes, and under species he put magpie. He'd never gotten that far on the application before, so he didn't know what would pop up after.

He took a deep breath and held it as he waited for his computer to flip to the next screen.

"List three of your familiar's top skills."

Skills? What the hell?

He looked at Rill. Did flying count? Eating? Crap.

"Rill, do you have any skills?"

Rill made a distinct, "Beep."

"What can you do?"

Rill hopped from foot to foot. Then flapped his wings and flew out the window. Oliver's heart fell. Was the bird leaving him already? Had he annoyed it?

He looked through the rest of the questions. Apparently if the familiar had a strong skill, one skill would do. He sighed and

looked out the window.

A few moments later, Rill was back. His heart leapt. What skill did the bird have? He waited, impatiently.

Rill flew right to him and dropped a quarter on the table next to the computer. His heart fell. That was his trick? Disappointed, he stroked the bird and thanked him, and turned back to the application. Not this term. He started to close the lid of the laptop.

Rill gave a trilling sound, trying to get his attention. He choked down his disappointment. Why did a crappy wizard like him think he'd be able to call a top notch familiar? He should have known he was doomed to *never* get better.

Rill gave a squawk this time, so he finally looked up. Rill looked towards the window. He gasped at what he saw there. Birds were dropping coins on his windowsill. It looked like twenty so far, but more and more streamed in, dropping coins of all sizes.

Rill gave a sharp whistle. His breast fluffed up in pride. Oliver patted his head gently and started shoveling coins into a cap he had sitting on the chair.

"You're the pied piper of birds!" he announced.

Rill cocked his head at him, and he felt an overpowering sensation of satisfaction. He smiled and opened his laptop. Under his familiar skills, he put, "can control other birds." He finished up, paid the class fees, and closed the laptop. This had been a great day.

Chapter Three

The first thing he did when he woke up was check if his application had been accepted. Nothing. He wasn't surprised, the workday hadn't even started, and he'd turned it in after work, but he was still disappointed. He looked at the bird perch, but Rill was gone. His eyes flicked to the windowsill. The sill, the floor around the sill, and the ledge outside the window were covered with coins.

He hurried over and started scooping the coins off the ledge. He didn't need coins dropping on unsuspecting residents or people walking by. He couldn't afford to be sued. If Rill's new friends were going to keep dropping off money, he'd better set up a better spot.

His grandfather used to keep a greenhouse on the roof. He hadn't checked on it lately. Maybe he should turn it into an aviary for Rill. He checked the time. He had time to go look before work. He ran up the steps to the roof exit, propped open the door, and walked the five steps to the greenhouse.

The greenhouse wasn't large, but his grandfather had made it. It was solid. The plants and planters inside were empty. No plants, no dead plants, just an empty building with pots and planters and gardening implements. It'd work. He walked to the edge of the roof that looked over his living room window. Birds were still zooming around it, dropping coins. He needed Rill to direct his buddies to bring their offerings up here. They could drop their coins in the empty planters.

He headed back downstairs, showered, and dressed for work. He made a sandwich to take for lunch and considered shutting the window. He didn't dare. What if Rill tried to get in? His bond was too new, he wasn't sure if Rill would come back if the window were closed. He shook his head and left for work. Maybe he'd have an answer when he got home.

It was a long day keeping his smile up and concentrating on his work while anticipating the thing he wanted most in the world. He made himself stop and pick up something for dinner, but that's all the time he could stand.

He unlocked his door and rushed in. It hadn't even closed all the way before he had his laptop open. Rill was asleep on his perch, and the pile of coins had grown. While the computer booted, he scooped coins off the ledge. Doing so woke Rill. Rill squawked, and he had the distinct feeling that Rill was pleased to see him.

"Hey, bud, could you have your friends drop the coins upstairs?" He thought hard at the bird, showing him the image of the greenhouse and the planters where the birds could leave their offerings.

Rill fluffed his feathers, and he hopped over to the window. The next few birds received a talking to, and then it all stopped. Rill hopped back to his perch, then seeing the open laptop, he flew over and perched on the top of the screen.

Oliver jumped when he landed, but then absently stroked a finger down the bird's breast as he waited for his email to open.

His breath caught when he saw the email. It was marked, "Urgent."

He frowned. That didn't sound good.

He moved his hand to the mouse to click on the email, when someone pounded on his door. Rill rocked back and forth from foot to foot, agitated. "It's OK, buddy. Calm down," he said. He stood and walked quickly to the door—mainly so they'd stop pounding and bothering Rill.

He opened the door to see a stern man, dressed in the robes of a master of the wizard's Guild.

"Are you Oliver Franklin?" the master said.

"Uh, yeah. I'm Oliver," he mumbled, shocked.

The man stared at him, his foot tapping on the ground.

"Sorry, come in." Oliver stood back so the man could enter.

Oliver's heart was pounding, and his ears felt hot. He knew his color was high. He hated that every reaction he ever had always showed on his face. It was the curse of the red-headed. Pale skin that showed every change of mood.

The master wizard handed Oliver a heavy folded parchment. Oliver looked at it curiously. Was this an official acceptance letter? Did they hand deliver those? Or was it something else? He stared at it long enough that the master wizard cleared his throat loudly.

"What is this?" Oliver asked, not daring to open it without a warning.

"Open it," the wizard commanded.

Oliver unfolded the paper. It was written on the official letterhead of the University of Alaska Wizarding School. He began to read:

"Dear Mr. Franklin." Nothing that started that way was good, the stray thought supported the slightly sick feeling in his stomach. "It has come to our attention that your familiar is a rare type that can control others. You will bring your familiar and report immediately to the Wizard's Guild of Alaska. Sincerely, Dr. Ibrahim Salozar, MWtD."

He looked up at the master wizard. "What's this about?" he asked.

"You'll find out. Collect your familiar, I'm bringing you in." "What?"

"Your familiar is highly illegal, it's also possible you stole it from the Guild itself. I'm bringing you in. If you resist, I have been authorized to use magical force."

Oliver blinked at him a few times, then the weight of what was happening hit him. He was in real trouble. More importantly, he was responsible for it. He hadn't checked on familiar rules since he hadn't known there were any. He was such a great fool. He'd just ruined all of his chances to be a real wizard.

There was a crash. He looked over. Rill had knocked the computer off the table in his haste to escape. Before he could fly out the window, the master wizard waved a hand and the window closed. He produced a wand, and with a few mumbled words, and a flourish, there was a puff of smoke, and Rill was suddenly confined in a cage.

"Hey," Oliver protested. But the master wizard aimed the wand at him. He shut up and followed him out of the apartment. Rill floating along beside them.

Chapter Four

"Sorry, Rill," Oliver said to the bird, after they were placed in a cement room with an iron door. Iron was one of those things that made magic difficult. Not that he was a magical threat to anyone. Rill beeped at him and sent him an image of both of them in a tiny birdcage.

"That's about it. They said I stole you from the Guild, and your gift is illegal. How was I supposed to know that your ability to control other birds was frowned on?"

Rill cocked his head. He sent an image of the birds flying in and dropping coins on the roof, in the planters. "You are a good bird, thanks. I know you did it for me."

Rill squawked at him. And sent him the image again. Oliver didn't understand, he could tell Rill was trying to tell him something important, but that was all he got. So, he shook his head. Rill continued to send him image after image, but he still didn't understand what he was trying to say. Finally, the bird stopped and started pecking the walls of his cage. Oliver tried to reach inside, but although it looked like a wire birdcage, the walls were solid. He couldn't even poke a finger through.

They sat like that for hours in the room that contained only a table and two chairs. At least, it felt like hours. He didn't have a phone or a watch. For that matter, they'd taken his belt and shoes as well. He slouched in the chair, defeated. He'd never work for the Guild now, even if he didn't end up in magic jail—which was looking possible.

When he felt like he couldn't take another minute locked up like a criminal, there was a brisk knock, the door opened, and a wizard in full robes entered. He looked like a caricature of a wizard, from his tall, pointed hat to his long grey beard. He was average height, grey-eyed, and a little pudgy around the middle. He was carrying a briefcase.

Oliver sat up a little straighter, his stomach roiling and his hands sweaty.

The new wizard held out his hand. Oliver stared at it. The few wizards he knew rarely shook hands. He wiped his hand on his pants, then took the offered hand gingerly, waiting for magic to strike him. Nothing happened.

"My name is Geoffrey Hamilton. I'm your lawyer," he said.

Oliver shook his head. He didn't know what was going on. Lawyer? "I don't know any lawyers. I don't have the money to pay you either," he said reluctantly. Who sent for a lawyer? He *needed* a lawyer? The enormity of it all hit him. He slouched back down, defeated.

The lawyer waved him away. "No worries, my boy. I'm not worried about payment right now. Let's get you out of trouble, shall we?"

That sounded good. He couldn't be in trouble or go to jail. He'd never so much as broken a traffic law. He'd never been in trouble, not even growing up. He was a good student, dependable, and an obedient child. He'd always done his chores, he paid his taxes on time, took care of the building as best as he could. He didn't know how to be a criminal. He even returned his library books on time. That brought an errant thought of the magical library book sitting on his kitchen table. If he didn't get out of here it would be his first late return, ever.

He was hyperventilating now. Geoffrey frowned, "Are you alright, my boy?" he asked.

Oliver tried to control his breathing, but it made it worse. He started to feel lightheaded. Geoffrey stood up and came around. "Put your head between your knees, boy, before you pass out," he commanded.

Oliver did as he was told, and a few minutes later he had control again.

"Don't worry old boy," Geoffrey said with a wry grin. "We'll get you out of this."

Rill beeped at him as well. That did more good than anything. Rill was with him. He'd get out of this for him.

He took a few deep breaths and wiped his hands down his pants. "Who hired you?" he asked. A little suspiciously.

The old wizard laughed. "Well, that's a bit of a long story. We'll talk, but I want to get you and your lovely familiar out of here and away from the control of the Guild, so you are going to be quiet and let me work." He opened his briefcase and fumbled around the inside of it. "Ah, here it is." He pulled out a paper and shook it. "They've charged you with theft of a valuable animal and possessing an illegal familiar." He examined the paper closely.

When he was done, he looked up. "Those are serious. The first charge could strip you of any rights as a magic user, effectively taking away your magic and leaving you as a mundane. The second charge will get you locked up."

Oliver's eyes flew open with horror. His heart sank, and he felt like hyperventilating again. He whispered, "Guild jail?"

The old man nodded. "Yep. So, tell me what happened from your point of view."

When Oliver opened his mouth to speak, the wizard held up a finger and looked around. "One moment, I'm going to make it so we have true privacy." Then he spoke a word and snapped his fingers.

Oliver didn't see or hear anything. He looked around.

"Don't worry, my boy, no one will hear you now."

Oliver nodded.

"Let's start with how you gained your familiar."

Oliver told him the whole thing. From the library book to Rill's friends and the coins.

The lawyer nodded and had him clarify a few things and jotted notes down on a legal pad. After Oliver finished, Geoffrey turned to Rill.

"Your turn. Tell me your side of the story."

Oliver raised his eyebrows and squeezed his eyes shut. All of this and his lawyer was nuts to boot. He was doomed.

"Now," the lawyer continued. "Why did you fly in Ollie's window?"

Rill cocked his head, and then chirped and beeped and squawked. The lawyer took down notes.

"And the other birds, were you controlling them?" Geoffrey asked.

More bird sound. It looked for all the world like the two were having a conversation in English over a cup of tea.

Oliver shook his head. He might as well just yell, "I'm guilty."

Once Rill fell silent, Geoffrey turned back to him. "You're in luck."

Oliver slouched; he didn't feel lucky. He felt like a man about to walk up the steps to the gallows.

"You speak to birds?" Oliver said incredulously.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you. Yes, I do indeed. I'm an avis loquens."

Oliver blinked at him uncomprehendingly. "A what?"

"Oh," Geoffrey laughed. "I forgot you have no formal training. An avis loquens. A wizard that can speak to birds. Every wizard has a unique talent."

They did? Well, if that were true then his was the unique talent of *bad* luck.

"I don't want you to think I'm ungrateful, I'm not, but you act as though you know me. I don't remember meeting you before," Oliver added.

"Yes, yes, well. You were quite small the last time we met. I'm your uncle."



"Well, great-uncle to be precise. I'm your grandfather Bill's brother," he clarified.

"Brother?" Oliver repeated stupidly. "How come I don't know you? I didn't know grandpa had a brother."

"That's another long story. I'll give you the highlights. Bill, my brother, never had any magic. He was jealous of me. After your dad died, he pushed everyone out of his life. He forbade me from seeing you, and from doing magic in his presence."

That was a *very* short version. Now Oliver was burning with curiosity. He didn't know anyone else in his family was a wizard. This was part of why he wasn't able to get training—not having family to sponsor him. Now he felt betrayed by the man that had raised him and who he loved like a father.

His thoughts must have shown on his face because Geoffrey came closer and patted him on the back. "There there, boy. Your grandfather did the best he could. He didn't know what it would be like for someone with the power you have. He thought he was doing right by you. Now, let's get you out of here for the night, and clean this mess up."

Oliver was overwhelmed. All he could do was nod. "OK."

Geoffrey knocked on the door, and it opened. He stepped out and Oliver and Rill were alone again. He realized he'd forgotten to ask what Rill had told Geoffrey. He looked at his bird. It was an adjustment having a familiar. He'd have to consider the bird now in all of his dealings. It was his job to protect Rill, and he'd been worried about himself. If Rill was labeled illegal, would they have him destroyed? The thought was so painful, he felt tears well behind his eyes.

No. He'd pull it together and get them both out of this mess. He had family now, and someone on his side. That was better off than he'd been this morning. And Rill? Well, although their bond was new, he felt a missing part of him had been slotted in like a puzzle piece. No matter what happened to him, it was worth it to have Rill in his life.

It felt like several hours, but he really had no idea how long it was before his uncle returned. While he waited, he wondered about the relationship between the two brothers. Also, why did they have different last names? Maybe they'd had different fathers, or one of them had changed their name.

Rill must have felt his unease and terror, because he worked to keep him entertained, hanging upside down from the perch, and jumping around acting silly in the cage. Oliver laughed, and Rill chirped at him in amusement as well. Finally, a single knock and the door opened, admitting Geoffrey.

"Alright, my boy, we can go."

Oliver stood, stretched out his back, and picked up Rill's cage. "Can we get him released from this?" he asked.

Geoffrey looked solemn. "We'll talk about it once we get you home."

Oliver frowned, but conceded, and they walked out together. He put the cage in Geoffrey's roomy sedan and climbed in the front seat. The car was an older model Cadillac, in mint condition. The seat was comfortable, and he immediately felt exhausted. He shook his head to wake himself up as Geoffrey climbed in the driver's seat.

"Why do we have different last names?" he asked after Geoffrey started the car.

"Well, that's because your grandfather didn't want to be associated with the Hamilton wizarding family."

"We are a wizarding family?" Oliver asked.

"Ancient, and powerful."

Oliver felt a deep melancholy at that statement. All he'd ever wanted was to go to wizard's school and learn how to do magic. Here he was from an old and powerful family, and he could barely do anything. Then, the first real magic he did, calling Rill, had landed him in trouble. It wasn't fair.

"Now, now, boy. You're still young, you'll have plenty of time to reach your potential," Geoffrey said, noticing the funk he'd fallen into.

"Not if I'm in jail, and Rill is dead," he sulked.

"Well, that's where I come in, isn't it?" He threw a smile at Oliver, although it was mostly lost in his beard.

"Is it possible to get us out of this?"

"It won't be easy, but it is doable."

Oliver sighed and looked out the window. It didn't feel doable, and he was sure that nothing would ever go right in his life again.

Geoffrey parked the car at his building and followed Oliver to his apartment on the top floor.

The guards had returned his property, so he had shoes, his belt, keys and his wallet back. He unlocked his door and set Rill's cage on the kitchen table. He picked up his laptop from the floor and set it down next to the cage. For the first time in a long while, he didn't want to get on it immediately to check his email or gaze at courses for school.

"Do you want something to drink?" he offered his uncle.

"Do you have coffee?"

He nodded and took a moment to set up the coffee maker.

"How do we release Rill?" he asked from the kitchen. The place was old, but it'd been designed well, and the top floor had tall ceilings and an open concept living room and kitchen.

Geoffrey was quiet for a few moments. "That's a tricky answer, my boy."

Oliver felt a chill run down his spine. He was out of jail; it didn't make sense that Rill had to stay in his cage.

"How so?" His voice was cold, and he felt bad. Geoffrey had been nothing but positive and helpful. It wasn't his fault.

"Well, it seems that the Guild thinks that Rill escaped from their experimental program. That's how come you were accused of theft." Geoffrey moved from the living room to join him at the kitchen table. They both stared at the cage as Rill cocked his head for all the world as though he were waiting for an answer. "I already cleared you of that charge. If he escaped, and came to you on his own, there was no way it was theft. However, if he is the same bird, they have a claim to him, and they consider him dangerous."

Oliver shook his head. "He's not dangerous. He's smart, friendly, and compassionate. He just spent however long trying to cheer me up in that holding cell." He glanced at the clock. He'd been gone for nearly thirteen hours. It was the next day, morning, from when they picked him up. He was glad it was his day off; he'd be miserable if he had to report to work after a night of zero sleep and nothing but stress.

"You stated on your application that he can control other birds. I know what Rill said about it, but do you want to explain why you think that?"

Oliver blinked a few times, but rather than explain, he decided to show his uncle what had happened. "Come with me, I'll show you and you can decide."



He checked the coffee, it was filling, but wasn't finished yet. He led the way to the rooftop greenhouse. There was still a steady stream of birds of all types dropping coins. The planters were not only full but overflowing. There were so many coins he gaped at them.

"Ummm, I asked Rill if he had a skill. He flew out the window, and brought back a coin, then the stream of birds started." He shrugged, nonchalantly, but at the same time, he was worried. If Rill hadn't taken control of the birds, why were they still bringing coins? Also, could he get them to stop?

"Hmmm." Geoffrey said. He looked at the coins, and turned and watched the stream of birds appear with coins. "I don't think any of these birds are the same." He said after a long silence.

"What do you mean? How could you tell?"

Before he answered, he spoke to a bird that had just dropped a coin. It stopped, and looked at him, then fluttered over to the wall and landed. It trilled and whistled.

Geoffrey answered, and the bird flew off.

"That was interesting."

"What did it say?"

"Something I hadn't considered." He tapped his finger against his lips, and although Oliver kept prodding him with questions, he remained deep in thought.

"I've got to go, my boy, I'll give you a ring tomorrow. Get your rest."

He started to hurry towards the stairs.

"What about Rill? How will I feed him? He can't stay locked up for much longer. It can't be good for him."

"I think you'll find Rill will be fine." He hurried through the roof door and was gone.

Oliver considered the mess on the roof and tried to make a quick plan on how to take care of the coins. He figured the bank wasn't going to be happy when he showed up with buckets of coins. He figured he'd deal with it tomorrow and slunk down the stairs himself.

He was exhausted, and the pot of coffee didn't look the least inviting. He switched off the machine and dumped the carafe down the sink. He didn't feel like eating or drinking as long as Rill couldn't. He glanced at the cage.

He expected Rill to be staring with his head cocked to the side, but the cage was empty. He started.

"Rill?" he looked all around the house. He was about to lean out the window, when Rill came zipping through it, chittering and beeping at him. Rill landed on Oliver's shoulder. "How did you get out?" he asked the bird. Who sent him an image of the door opening and him flying out. Oliver looked at the cage. It didn't have a visible door. He poked at it, and it was still solid. A mystery for sure.

Would they both get in trouble if the Guild saw the empty cage? He could feel a tiny bead of sweat gather at his hairline and start to roll down his forehead. He wiped it away. "Well, let's feed you, buddy," he said, trying to forget about his problems and have a moment of normalcy.

He filled Rill's bowl, but before he could put the food away there was a knock at his door. He whirled around so fast; seed went flying over the floor. He swore and set down the bag. He looked at Rill and the cage. What if it was the Guild again? He swallowed. And his heart raced. He looked from Rill to the cage, but he had no idea how to put the bird back in.

There was another knock. Now he was sweating profusely. He wiped his brow and considered ignoring the knock. But if it was the Guild, he'd be in more trouble if he did. He wiped his hands down his pants and strode to the door. He gripped the knob and turned it slowly. He placed his foot behind the

door and opened it about six inches, dreading what he'd see on the other side. It was Julia from 2F.

He moved his foot and opened the door fully. "Hi, Julia. Is something wrong?" he asked. Although right now the last thing he wanted to deal with was a leaky faucet.

She shook her head. Her honey blonde curls bouncing. "No, in fact, I brought this as a thank you."

He looked down to see she was holding a plate of cookies. "Oh," he said stupidly. He wasn't that smooth with women. He knew it. He'd always been a little awkward and didn't know what to say. It was worse when they were pretty. Julia was very pretty. Her hair was like warm, sunlit honey, and her hazel eyes sparkled.

He reached out to take the plate. "Thank you. You didn't have to do that."

She smiled. "I wanted to. Having the sink fixed is such a relief, and you were so sweet about the rent and the laundry. I wanted to do something nice."

He blushed. He knew she had to see it. His face would be red and his ears were so hot they were probably glowing. He didn't know what to say, so he just said "Thanks." Again, like a dumbass.

She smiled prettily, gave a cute little finger wave and walked off, her hips swaying. He swallowed. He shut the door and leaned against it, holding the cookies. He was such an awkward fool. She was flirting...maybe? She was, wasn't she? Should he have said something? Invited her in to have one of her own cookies? Hell, he didn't know. He didn't have a clue about women or what their motivations were. Maybe she was just nice. He plucked a cookie from the plate and took a bite. Chocolate chip, his favorite.

He set the plate down on the counter and poured himself a cup of milk. Cookies were a good breakfast. Especially since he was just going to shower the sweat and stress off and go to bed for a few hours. He ate half of the cookies. Rill was on his

perch gazing out the window. He stroked the bird, who beeped in pleasure, and he went to the bathroom to get ready for bed.



Four hours of sleep was all he got. He didn't dare sleep longer, he was worried, and Rill was standing on his face.

"Ach," he said as tail feathers brushed his nose, and he went to brush whatever off his face before he realized what was going on. He sat up slowly, so Rill could flutter safely off his face, and blinked blearily at the bird.

Then he heard it. The knocking at the door. He was beginning to despise that sound. Before all of his troubles started, the only time he had a knock was a resident dropping off the rent, reporting an issue, or an occasional delivery. That was all. Now he didn't have a clue what disaster lurked on the other side.

He hurriedly scrubbed his hands through his hair, trying to move the thick floppy stuff into something that didn't look like bedhead, and hurriedly grabbed a pair of jeans from the floor. He shoved them on and stumbled to the door.

He glanced at the microwave clock as he passed by, it was barely afternoon. So, it could be a resident or, he grimaced with distaste, the Guild.

He opened the door carefully keeping his foot positioned to stop it from opening fully. It was a strange older man. He was wearing a suit, clean shaven, his hair in an expensive cut. He was holding a cardboard container with two coffee cups, and in his other hand a briefcase. He stared at the briefcase then back at the man. "Uncle Geoffrey?" he asked, befuddled.

The man smiled, and said, "Of course, were you expecting someone else?"

Oliver still looked confused.

"Are you going to invite me in?"

"Yes, of course." Oliver stood back, opening the door wide and allowed his uncle to enter.

"What's with the huge change?" Oliver waved a hand indicating Geoffrey's attire as Geoffrey set the coffees down on the kitchen table. He noticed that Geoffrey had found one of Julia's cookies. "And the suit?"

He chuckled. "These are good cookies." He held up a halfeaten cookie. Chocolate chip. My favorite."

"And the suit?" Oliver repeated.

"Well, I figured it was time to *look* like a lawyer."

Oliver froze. "Aren't you a lawyer?"

"I am, of course." He looked away. Maybe looking for another cookie. There were only a couple left on the plate.

Oliver felt a sinking feeling in his gut. "When was the last time you defended someone in court?"

"Let me think." He tapped his finger against his chin, and his eyes shifted to the left. "Nineteen ninety-seven, I think." He picked up one of the coffee cups and started to sip it. "Still hot."

Oliver sank into his kitchen chair. "I'm screwed." Rill whistled his agreement from his perch.

"I didn't stop practicing; I just haven't needed to go to court that often. Trust me, my boy, you'll be fine."

Well, he seemed sure of himself. That gave Oliver a bit of a boost. He brushed his hand through his hair which was sticking up everywhere. He grabbed his cup of coffee and sipped it. It was hot, and he burned his tongue. He swore and set it back down and popped off the lid so it would cool faster.

"What's the plan?" he asked.

"Well, I've set my team on verifying Rill's story, once we have the proof, we'll get everything dropped. Today, we go in and plead. You will plead *not* guilty."

"OK, just for kicks, what happens if we go to court and lose?"

"We won't."

"Please, Geoffrey, what will happen?"

He sipped his coffee, and stretched out his legs, looking down at his toes. "Well, my boy, it won't be good. The Guild will take Rill, and his fate will be in their hands. More than likely, they'll have him destroyed, or continue whatever they were doing with him before. You will end up in Guild prison."

"How long?" Oliver gulped. He felt the blood drain from his face and his head swam.

"Minimum? Twenty years."

Oliver wanted to curl up in a ball. "What if I plead guilty?"

"Magic stripped, they still take Rill, and three years' probation."

Oliver slumped in his chair, then he leaned forward, elbows on the table and pressed his face into his hands. His life was over either way—if he lost, or if he pled guilty. He looked at Rill. The bird was so small, so delicate. Could he condemn him to a life of experimentation or immediate death? He was an animal. A bird. Heck, a magpie, most people thought of those as skyrats. He shook his head. No. Rill was special. He'd only known him for two days, and he was ready to fight for him.

Geoffrey watched his nephew, a pensive look on his face. Oliver looked up and his eyes were steely. "OK uncle. We will plead not guilty and hope you can save us both."

Rill added his "beep."

Geoffrey nodded once and brushed his hands down his thighs. "Let's go check out your greenhouse situation. Would you accompany us Rill?" he asked the bird politely.

Rill hopped over to Oliver's shoulder, a definite yes.

"What did Rill tell you?" Oliver kept asking but so far, his uncle had put him off. He wished with all his heart he had the ability to speak to birds like his uncle.

"I don't know if you want to know."

He reached up and brushed a finger along Rill's breast. "I do."

"If I tell you this, and the Guild does a mind search of you, it could mean they send out their goons and make you disappear."

Oliver swallowed and rubbed the back of his neck. "That stuff is really true? They make people disappear?"

Geoffrey shrugged. "Yup."

Oliver thought he should rethink his goals based on that statement, but he'd probably burned those bridges already. "It's fine. I need to know how to protect him."

They climbed the stairs to the roof and headed out.

"If you're fine then you should know Rill did belong to the Guild. He was part of an ongoing experiment to increase the intelligence of common familiars. But they were basically using magic to manipulate their genetics. They did something else, but Rill's explanation was vague. Because of how traumatic it was, some of the familiars weren't right, mentally. Rill has a few horror stories. They were also tortured to bring forth new abilities. Rill was lucky to be so smart. The second he had a chance; he escaped the Guild. He said he found you because your spirit was bright and loving."

Oliver found that statement very touching. He had to blink back tears, as he looked at Rill. "Thanks, buddy."

Rill beeped at him.

Geoffrey looked around the greenhouse, at the coins and other items. But he didn't say much, probably because Rill had already told him all he needed to know.

"So, we should be heading out in thirty," Geoffrey said.

Oliver led them back to the apartment, and he hurried to get in the shower.



Clean, and in his only suit, Oliver was as ready as he could get. According to his uncle, this would be a simple, go in, they read the charges, he would plead not guilty, and they'd get a court date.

He left the window ajar for Rill and followed his uncle to the Cadillac. Even though the Guild court was its own entity, a lot of what they did mirrored the mundane world, so just like Geoffrey said it would happen—did. The Guild building was intimidating. All marble and authoritative. They went into a room, where a wizard sat in formal robes, with the flat square hat that declared him a judge. He pled not guilty, and after a calendar search by the judge, they were given a date.

After court, they walked out. They had dropped the theft charge, but the illegal familiar stood. Now, it was up to his uncle, and whoever his investigator was to prove the rest. Until then, he wasn't allowed to use overt magic, but he was free to go to work and run the building. They assumed Rill would remain locked up and he didn't disabuse them of that option.

He didn't know what they expected would happen to his familiar if he were locked up with no food or water, but they probably wanted Rill dead anyway. He was glad Rill was too clever for them.

Geoffrey dropped him off, and he dragged his feet up the stairs to his apartment. He hadn't had time for more questions, and Geoffrey seemed to have it well in hand. He probably didn't know the why behind anything anyway. He was just lucky that Geoffrey knew the law. He had to leave for work in an hour, but until then, he could have a little break. He stopped a few feet from his door, because there was something in front of it. He approached and picked up another plate of cookies.

He frowned. She was definitely flirting. What did he do? Just the thought of speaking to the pretty woman made him sweat.

He stuck a finger in his collar and tried to pull it away from his throat. When that didn't work, he loosened his tie, and unbuttoned the top button. He picked up the plate and unlocked his door. He saw that there was a note under the cellophane, so after he set it down on the kitchen counter, he picked it up and read the note.

"I was making cookies and thought maybe you'd like some more. Enjoy, Julia."

"I will enjoy, thanks, Julia," he muttered to himself as he snagged a cookie and took a bite.

Once the court thing was over, he promised himself he'd ask her out, no matter how red his ears got while he did it.

Rill wasn't in the apartment, so he decided to take a walk to the roof and figure out what to do with the coins. He'd have to shovel them into buckets at this rate. He pushed onto the roof.

Rill was up there, with several other birds. It looked for all the world like a general marshalling his troops. He was chattering on as magpies do, and the others watched intently.

Oliver noticed that the coins were now interspersed with various items. He noticed a watch, some rings, necklaces, some random jewels, crystals, basically anything that glinted in the sunlight. Coins, he could take to the bank, he probably had several hundred dollars' worth. But the jewelry? If he pawned it, and someone had reported it missing or stolen, he could be in big trouble, or at least more than he was already.

He picked up an interesting looking crystal. It was largish, so a bigger bird must have dropped it off, maybe one of the huge ravens that lived around town. The crystal might have been quartz, but he was no expert. It drew him to it, and he plucked it up and held it to the sun. It felt warm in his hand, and when it caught the light, he felt a zing of magic run through it into him. He was intrigued. He tucked it into his pocket.

The birds finished listening to Rill, and lifted off at once, flying in various directions. Oliver was curious and asked the bird what he'd asked the others to do. Rill sent him several

pictures in rapid fire, but he didn't understand. "Can you ask them to stop dropping things off?"

Rill cocked his head and beeped. He wasn't sure what that meant, but he had the distinct feeling that Rill understood. Rill hopped into the pile and using his beak and one foot, sorted through the various items until he found something he wanted, he picked it up and flew down to the apartment. Oliver turned to the stairs to follow.

He went inside to find Rill waiting on his perch, a shiny brass key of intricate make in his beak.

He looked at the bird with his prize curiously. "What is that, Rill?"

Rill hopped over to the table and dropped the key, "Proof."

Oliver started in surprise. "You spoke!"

"Yes."

Oliver looked at Rill sharply. There was a lot more to the bird than he had thought. Rill had depths and skills more than an average familiar. Not that he was that well versed, but it was enough to spook the Guild.

"You told Uncle Geoffrey, didn't you?"

Rill beeped and he felt the positive answer.

"Is there a reason you aren't speaking now?" he asked Rill.

Rill sent an image. Oliver couldn't interpret it, but he had the impression that speaking in English was difficult, and images were easier. Oliver stroked Rill's breast to show he understood.

"What's the key to?" He held it up to the light and examined it. It had swirls and curlicues, but the key itself was basic, it looked like it would fit a standard, modern lock. He didn't find any writing on it, no numbers, nothing, but it gave him a slight magical zing when he touched it, like a shock after you've scuffed your feet on the carpet and touch something metal.

Rill sent him a picture. An intricate wooden cabinet in a cold sterile white room. He followed that with a sense of urgency.

They had to get there fast and open the cabinet with the key.

Oliver sat down hard in a kitchen chair. "Rill, I don't know where this is."

Rill bounced back and forth on his feet, and beeped, then he looked at the window.

"You know where it is, and you want me to follow you?"

Rill beeped and sent a positive feeling. Oliver was curious, so he grabbed his car keys. The old Corolla wasn't pretty, wasn't big, but it was reliable, so he climbed in and started it. Rill flew in his open door before he shut it and perched on the steering wheel.

Oliver chuckled and indicated that Rill should move to the dashboard or his shoulder. Rill hopped up on his shoulder. Oliver backed out and drove to the street entrance. Rill beeped and pointed right with his beak. They were off.

It wasn't a perfect arrangement, and he made a few wrong turns before Rill guided him to the intimidating Guild fortress in the south of town. He sighed. "Rill, I can't get in there. They'll kill us both for sure."

Rill gave him a low trilling sound. It was a sad and disappointed sound. Then Rill started hopping around and fluffing his wings, he sent image after image into Oliver's mind that was a confusing tapestry of animals, torture, and people in white coats. He had to beg the bird the stop, the images were giving him a headache.

Since Oliver had only been in one room in the Guild building for court, he wasn't really sure what would happen, but since he was on the Guild shit list, he knew they weren't going to roll out the red carpet. But Rill's need was urgent. He had the distinct feeling that it was life and death. So, he parked in their mall sized parking lot, unbuckled his seat belt and unfolded himself from the car.

Rill shot out and fluttered around his head. He frowned. "Rill, the Guild can't see you."

He thought, then opened his shirt and directed the bird to climb in. It was a looser fit golf shirt, but he had a hoodie over it, so hopefully the amorphous thing would hide the slight lump that was Rill.

Rill dove down and wiggled into his shirt. It tickled and he resisted the urge to scratch. Rill gave him a beep and quit wiggling. He could feel the bird cling to his chest hair, which was uncomfortable, but it kept him alert. Once Rill was situated and not moving, he headed up to the main doors. Huge glass double doors. He walked through onto a marble floor and an intimidating wooden desk that you couldn't avoid. Behind the desk was a row of elevators, and some fake plants and some seating.

He didn't know why, but there was no one at the desk. Maybe the person had left to go to the bathroom, so he walked on past as though he had business and knew where he was going. He went straight to the elevators and hit the button.

The elevator door to his right slid open, it was empty. He walked inside and waited for the door to shut. "Where are we going?" he whispered to Rill.

Rill sent him a picture of the button, and Oliver pressed B4. The elevator lurched and headed down to the basement.

Chapter Nine

The elevator glided to a smooth stop and the doors zipped open. Oliver leaned out and looked both ways. There was some activity at the end of the hall, but no one was looking his way. He didn't think he could sneak anywhere—his flame red hair, and tall gangly form was unmistakable and drew attention. Plus, he'd never done anything so outwardly law breaky. His face and ears had to be aflame. But everyone he saw was focused on getting somewhere, so no one looked at him.

He reminded himself to go boldly and act as if he belonged. So even though his ears were glowing with heat, and he knew his face was flushed, he strode confidently down the corridor, trying to follow Rill's mental images as he went. He only hesitated once, when he wasn't sure if the direction was to go right or left.

He pulled out his phone as though that was the reason he'd hesitated, and then he spotted a landmark from Rill's visions, a wilted plant at the end of the right-hand corridor. He strode off, until he saw the room labeled "experimental lab."

Rill wriggled in his shirt and beeped at him softly. This was it. The white, sterile room with the intricate cabinet. He looked right and left, no one was around. He twisted the knob. Locked. "Son of a bitch," he swore softly.

Rill poked his head out of his shirt, and he looked down when the bird's talons raked his skin. He had an image in his head that showed him standing only an inch from the door, so he moved as close as he could get. Rill reached out and tapped the door with his beak. The lock snicked. He turned the knob and it opened.

"Clever bird," he said. "Glad I didn't add breaking and entering skills to your skills on the application to wizard school."

Rill sent him a feeling of amusement. He slipped in the door and closed it quietly behind him. The white room from Rill's image spread before him. Only from this angle, he could see that it was mostly filled with lab equipment. He looked around, but the room he had entered was empty of people. He could see another room beyond this one through the doorway in front of him. He walked silently forward and peered in the next room.

He could hear the quiet buzz of equipment, and the thrum of electricity and magic pressed him from every side. He could smell something that reminded him of ozone, but it looked like a normal lab with people in white coats, and microscopes and other mundane lab equipment. Rill's little heart beat faster against him. The bird was frightened. So was Oliver, he was terrified of getting caught.

There the cabinet stood on the far wall, incongruous against the sterile white room and the sight of all the high-tech gadgetry. It was strange, ancient looking. Waves of magic poured from it, so strong that even his weak skills had no trouble detecting it. Rill wriggled some more in his shirt. He was anxious, terrified, excited. The emotions washed through him quickly, changing. Oliver had no idea how he was going to get to the cabinet without being seen, stopped, or arrested.

He kept back and leaned against the wall out of sight of the other room. Rill suddenly burst out of his shirt, like the alien in the Alien movie and flew around the room in a flurry of movement. After a single pass, and lots of carefully whispered "get back here's" by Oliver, Rill spotted what he wanted. There was a fire sensor on the ceiling. Rill flew straight at it and whacked it with his beak. Nothing. He did it again and again until finally the fire alarm screamed its warning and the lights started to flash. The door to the lab started to swing shut, so he dove behind it. Sure enough the people started streaming through pushing the door back open, hiding him from their sight. No one noticed him behind the door. The last person jogged out and passed through the outer door. He held the inner door from shutting, and he and Rill, who'd hidden himself as well, were in.

"We'll have to be fast, buddy. That isn't gonna be a longterm solution."

Rill trilled at him. He reached in his pocket and dug out the key.

The lock on the cabinet looked new and shiny, it didn't match the style or age of the cabinet at all. It'd been replaced and not too long ago. He put the key in the lock and received a strong shock for his trouble. He yelped and snatched back his hand.

He smiled sheepishly when he looked at his hand and it was unharmed. He reached out slowly and braved the electric feel of the magic to turn the key. The lock was tight, but smooth and the key set with a solid click and the door swung open.

It was filled with a variety of knickknacks. Mostly crystals and polished stones. Some metallic items as well. Rill squawked and dove inside, where he plucked out a crystal and dropped it in Oliver's sweatshirt pocket. Then he grabbed two more and indicated that he was done. Oliver arranged some objects to cover the missing one, and then carefully relocked the cabinet and pocketed the key.

Now to get out.

He encouraged Rill to climb back in his shirt and hurried out. He hoped that people were still exiting. Maybe he could blend in with the numbers of people streaming out. The halls were empty. He jogged to the elevator bank, a hand supporting Rill in his shirt, so he didn't fall out the bottom.

He climbed in and hit the button to the lobby. The elevator glided to a stop at the lobby, and the doors whooshed open. Oliver was faced with a crowd of people who were trying to go back to work.

Awkward.

His heart pounding and sweat running down his back, he strode out confidently. His ears were probably visible from space at the moment, he thought as he kept his focus on reaching the main doors. He almost made it. Once he was around the reception desk, a voice rang out.

"Yo, dude with the red hair. Stop right there."

He didn't stop. He sped up slightly and pushed through the inner glass door. Five more steps and he'd be out in the sunshine. One, two, three, four...A hand came down on his shoulder. He froze.

"Dude, you dropped this. I tried to stop you!"

A shorter man, with dark hair, probably close to Oliver's age and wearing a power suit handed him the shiny brass key. It must have slipped from Oliver's sweatshirt pocket in his haste. He felt a wave of panic, but the man didn't recognize the key or act suspicious. He must be mundane if he didn't feel the key's power. He held out his hand and the man dropped it in his palm. No zing. Or the power was spent. Lucky break. He frowned at the key slightly, then gave the man a charming smile.

"Thanks, man," he said, and walked out the door.

He collapsed into his car seat with a sigh. Rill scrambled out and hopped up onto his shoulder, and they drove home.



Once home, he emptied his pockets of the items they'd stolen. Two crystals, and a smooth stone of varied color.

He had no idea why Rill wanted them. Rill tapped one of the crystals with his beak and hopped around squawking. Oliver could feel his focus and agitation about the crystal, so he picked it up. Rill sent him images of Oliver hiding the stone. He looked around the apartment. He didn't have anywhere that would be a good hiding place.

Rill grew more and more agitated, even flying around the room. So, Oliver put the stone in his cereal box and put the box back in the cabinet.

Rill seemed satisfied. He gathered the other stones, but Rill wasn't agitated about them. He tossed them in a bowl of decorative rocks he kept on his coffee table. They stood out a bit, so he pushed them to the bottom and put the other rocks over them. Hidden.

Rill settled down, content, and Oliver prayed no one would remember him or review any video while they were in the Guild headquarters. He'd be turned into a toad; he was sure of it

So, the knock at his door, which he now detested hearing, made him jump and tremble. He went to answer it after indicating that Rill should hide.

He opened it to his uncle.

"Well, Ollie, there's been a hubbub at the Guild." he shook his head. "Someone waltzed into a secure area and stole some items of great importance. What's the world coming to? They must have been great wizards to do that."

Oliver blushed to his hairline. He stretched out his collar, which was choking him.

Geoffrey noticed. Oliver could see the realization hit the bright older man. "You? How?"

"Me and Rill. Umm, we got lucky? I just walked in. Then Rill set off the fire alarm."

"What were you thinking, taking him there?" Geoffrey asked, less angry then surprised.

"He took me!" Oliver protested. "He insisted we go."

Geoffrey looked confused.

"There was this key, see..."

"Key?"

"Yeah." Oliver dug in his pocket and found the brass key. He handed it to his uncle.

Geoffrey examined it carefully but didn't act as though the magic had stung him like it had Oliver.

"Did it give you a shock?" he asked his uncle.

Geoffrey frowned. "No, what does it go too?"

"A cabinet in a secret lab in the Guild building." Oliver sat down heavily on the couch, he suddenly felt exhausted. "Look, Rill insisted we go in and get in that cabinet. We did. He took three stones from there, and we left."

His uncle gave him a sharp look. "Stones?" he said cautiously.

Oliver nodded and dug one out of the bowl on the coffee table. He tossed it to his uncle, who caught it and stared at it.

Geoffrey's hands started to shake.

Oliver grew worried and leaned forward. "What is it?"

"The answer. This will solve everything, but it will be deadly dangerous if we don't do this right."

Oliver felt like his heart skipped a beat. Rill had told him it was proof. Proof of what? What was going on at the Guild, and why would it be dangerous? The Guild was supposed to protect and govern the wizards. Were they corrupt? He shivered and goosebumps rose on his arms.

"What are those rocks?"

Geoffrey placed the crystal back in the bowl and covered it. "It's a soul."

The shock rocked Oliver back in his seat. "How?"

"It's the blackest of magic. Someone is stripping the souls of familiars. And using them to control the beasts."

Oliver thought of the cabinet full of crystals and stones. How many were there? Definitely hundreds, maybe more. He'd only taken three. Why those three? What of the others?

"Does that mean one of those is Rill's?" Oliver asked, looking at the bird who had settled on his perch.

Rill looked up and beeped at him. An affirmative.

"I'm so sorry, buddy," he said.

"How do we give the souls back?" Oliver asked.

Geoffrey shrugged. "I don't know, my boy."

"Rill chose them. I assume he has two friends still in whatever horrible experiment this is."

Geoffrey nodded slowly, thoughtfully.

"How do we stop this, this, horror?"

Geoffrey perked up and looked at him, his usual humor returning. "Leave that to me, it's the tricksy part. You, are going to stay here, work with Rill, and be ready to give your statement in court."

Oliver felt useless. But he knew nothing of supernatural law, and nothing about magic, so he was useless. He sagged in his seat. Then he thought of all the crystals and stones the birds had dropped on the roof among the coins. Were some of those souls as well?

"Can you tell a soul from a regular old crystal?" he asked the older wizard.

Geoffrey nodded.

Oliver plucked up the crystal he'd retrieved from the roof and handed it to his uncle. "What do you think?"

His uncle clutched it and closed his eyes. Then they flew open surprised. "This is no familiar soul; it's a wizard."

"Well, shit." Oliver said, thrusting his hands through his mussed-up hair. "I think Rill stumbled on something big."

"I think you are right. We are going to have to trust some people to get this fixed, but it's dangerous. We don't know who's involved or what they'll be willing to do to keep this secret."

"Yeah."

After that, his uncle left, the wizard soul in his hand. Oliver had to trust his uncle knew what to do since he surely did not. He looked at Rill, still grateful for the bird, although this level of crazy wasn't in his comfort zone. What was he going to do? He was poor, undertrained, a crappy wizard, and he worked at Walmart. He wasn't cut out for this level of intrigue and danger. He stood and paced.

Well, at least he'd hidden the souls they'd stolen, but looking around his apartment, it all seemed inadequate especially if multiple powerful wizards were involved, or worse the entire Guild. What a disaster. All he wanted was to learn to be a better wizard, and instead, he'd stumbled into something dark, scary, and entirely out of his depth.

He had to work in the morning, but he was too amped up to sleep or rest, so he called in sick. He was one of their more dependable employees, so his boss was shocked, but he had tons of sick leave, and this warranted taking it.

He slept fitfully and finally got up and went for a run. He hadn't heard from his uncle for almost twenty-four hours and was growing worried. When Geoffrey finally knocked on his door, his anxiety was so tight, he nearly had a heart attack.

Oliver opened the door, his trepidation so high, he felt sick.

His uncle handed him a paper. He took it with shaking hands. "Hold tight to this, study it. We're going before the High Wizard."

Chapter Eleven

Oliver had a set of wizard's robes that he'd never taken out of the package. He was waiting until he was less of a shit wizard before he wore them. But Geoffrey insisted he be appropriately attired. At least the robes weren't as uncomfortable as a suit and tie.

Geoffrey was waiting in the Cadillac as he got ready. He and Rill entered the old car, and Geoffrey pulled out on the street.

"Did you read your instructions?"

"Yeah." He swallowed hard. This was outside of his comfort zone in a billion ways. He wasn't a performer. And this would require one.

They arrived at the Guild. This time he had the right to be there, since he had an appointment. He adjusted the pointed hat on his head and straightened his dark purple robe. His was plain, since he had no skill or specialty, but his uncle's was emblazoned with all kinds of stitched symbols indicating his rank, his specialties, and his magical abilities. Oliver felt like a fraud wearing a robe at all.

They passed the reception desk, and this time a woman was seated behind it. Geoffrey approached and told her that he had an appointment. She directed them to take the elevators to the top floor.

Oliver wiped his sweaty palms on his robe and followed his uncle. He noticed that his shoes squeaked on the marble floor and cringed. They climbed into the elevator, and his uncle pressed the last number. The doors shut, and Oliver hoped they weren't heading towards their doom. Everything depended on the High Wizard being uncorrupted—he couldn't know about the soul stealing or they were as good as dead.

The elevator opened on the top floor, and Oliver and his uncle walked out into a splendid room. The focus was the huge wooden desk where a receptionist awaited. The man at the desk took their names and seated them in a small waiting area and offered them refreshments. Oliver took a bottled water; his mouth was dry as the Sahara.

They didn't have to wait long. Oliver barely twisted the lid off, before a man came out of a discrete door and entered the elevator. The receptionist escorted them to the same door and ushered them in, then he left.

They were in a grand office with a wall of windows, plants and greenery, and a large glass table. A wizard rose to greet them. He looked a lot like his uncle, being about the same age, and with the same amused expression and twinkly eyes.

"Geoffrey!" the High Wizard exclaimed.

"Ralph!" his uncle said, and both men embraced.

Oliver stared, confused.

Geoffrey gestured at him and said, "This is my grandnephew, Oliver."

"Sit, sit." the High Wizard said, and they did.

"What can I do for you, old friend?" he asked Geoffrey.

Well, that answered that, they were friends. Oliver relaxed a slight bit, maybe everything would work out.

"Well, that is complicated and is going to require an open mind. We might have stumbled over a corruption that runs deep in the Guild. It involves..." his voice dropped to a whisper, and everyone leaned forward, "black magic and soul stealing."

Ralph, the High Wizard leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers. "That is a dire accusation indeed. Do you have irrefutable proof?"

"I do."

This was the tricksy part. How to produce the proof without being accused of the deed itself. Being in possession of a soul stone was a crime by itself his uncle had told him, but that was the proof of the crime, along with the cabinet in the basement lab. "You're going to have to listen to the entire story first, without judgment, my friend," Geoffrey said.

The other man nodded. "Yes, I can do that." His face had grown darkly serious, and Oliver knew that this was the High Wizard, not the friend.

Geoffrey stood, and started to pace as he laid out the whole story, nothing omitted from beginning to end. Oliver was nervous when his crime was discussed, but to stop this thing from happening or continuing to happen, the High Wizard had to know everything.

To his credit, Ralph kept focused through the whole thing, not even letting his eyes wander to Oliver. When Geoffrey was done speaking, the High Wizard bowed his head in thought.

"This is bad. You have no idea who is involved?" Ralph asked.

"No, only guesses. But if you can find who's running that lab in basement level four, I think it'll give you an idea who it is," Geoffrey replied.

Ralph nodded. "Yes. Where is the crystal?"

Geoffrey pulled the large crystal that the birds had brought Oliver and laid it gently on the desk in front of the High Wizard.

He reached for it tentatively, and grasped it lightly, then he bent over and examined it with his wizard's senses.

He snapped back. "This is black magic indeed." His eyes sharpened. You are lucky I can discern the flavor of magic, and thus know this is not your work."

Oliver's uncle nodded.

That was part of Oliver's reading that his uncle had given him. He was back up. He had the same knowledge as his uncle and a spell to help him escape if he needed to.

"I'm having the charges dropped against your nephew." He nodded towards Oliver, who nearly collapsed from the relief. "Although I can't condone breaking in, and stealing, it was

justified in this one instance." He looked directly at Oliver, whose ears flamed hot.

"And you and I are going to sniff out these dark wizards and flush them from the Guild."

Geoffrey grinned and the two wizards shook hands.

"I'm sorry I broke into the Guild. I won't ever do anything like that again." Oliver hesitated, worried about adding to the debt he owed the High Wizard. "What about Rill?" Oliver hated to interrupt when everything had been going his way. But the whole purpose to all of this was to make sure he and Rill were exonerated.

The High Wizard took out a sheet of parchment. It had the letterhead of the Guild. He scribbled a few lines, signed it with a flourish, and pressed a wax seal at the bottom. He handed it to Geoffrey, who also signed.

"Your pardon along with your familiar's. I think your feathered friend has earned his permanent freedom. Hopefully, we can all work together to make sure they are all freed."

Oliver felt gratitude to his toes.

"Thank you, sir."

"I'll meet you in the car, my boy," Geoffrey said, and Oliver knew he had been dismissed. He clutched his official pardon tightly and headed to the car.

He didn't have to wait long; Geoffrey was only about fifteen minutes longer. When he climbed in the car, Oliver could sense the satisfaction rolling off of him.

"What did you talk about?" he asked, desperate to know.

"Well, my boy, not only have you brought a scandal to light, the High Wizard, in a grand show of gratitude, has granted you a full scholarship to the University of Anchorage Wizarding School. Effective as soon as the Term begins. Congratulations, you're going to get that training."

Oliver couldn't believe it. He was going to be a real wizard, and he was going to stop the black wizards from stealing

anymore souls from familiars and wizards. He couldn't wait to tell Rill. His life as a wizard had just begun.

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Brigid Donovan is going through a nasty divorce. The idea to buy and restore her family's old mansion won't leave her alone. A visit to the property shows more damage than she'd been braced for, yet despite all the cracks and decay... the house calls to her.

On a crazy whim, she signs on the dotted line, following her destiny down a path which will change her broken life forever. Only, the broken-down mansion comes with a 25-pound Ragdoll cat—a cat she's sure she's met before as a kid, but that's impossible, isn't it?

Brigid is going to find that there's more to the cat, and herself, then meets the eye. Which is good because when a magical foe with a grudge comes calling, Brigid is going to need all the help she can get...

About Jilleen Dolbeare

Jilleen Dolbeare is the author of the Shadow Winged Chronicles, an urban fantasy series about a shape-shifting bush pilot in Alaska, the Splintered Magic Series, about a woman rebuilding her life and learning about magic with the help of her cat and the Paranormal Portlock Detective series, a fish out of water tale about a woman fleeing London and ending up in Alaska with her dog.

She loves riding horses, warm ocean beaches, and long walks in the mountains, none of which she can do in the Arctic, so she writes. Her activities are riding her four-wheeler on cold ocean beaches (often frozen or covered with ice), and long walks to and from work when it's 40 below—in the dark. She does keep her stakes sharp for those vamps that show up during the 67 days of night.

Jilleen lives with her husband and two hungry cats in Alaska where she also discovered her love and admiration of the Inupiaq people and their folklore.







Waif in the Wilds

By Lauretta Hignett



Waif in the Wilds by Lauretta Hignett

When Chloe stops at a dive bar on her way to kill the final person on her list – the man who trained her to be a killing machine, she's harassed by a bunch of drunk werewolves. But when they 'lure' her outside, she finds a friend in the most unlikely of places...



The bartender put another drink down in front of me, wiping the bar as she moved away. Petite and skinny, with bleached hair and lots of tattoos, she worked quickly, with almost frenzied movements, kind of like a spider on meth. "Last one for a while, hon," she said shortly, not looking at me. "You're throwing them back too quick."

She didn't care about my alcohol tolerance. She just didn't want to have to take care of me. One little glance at her was all it took for me to know that.

It was just as easy as watching a video play on a screen. This skinny, hard-faced woman wiped the bar with jerky movements and imagined what would happen if I got too drunk. Her train of thought played out like a movie, projected in front of her within the hazy blue aura that surrounded her body. The images flickered as she wiped the bar and stacked glasses. I caught a glimpse of myself, and I couldn't help but watch.

Her thoughts showed a pretty, preppy, fresh-faced young woman accidentally getting too drunk in a strange bar, in a strange town. I watched as my violet eyes grew heavy-lidded, my movements slowed, my speech slurred. Then, my head hit the wood in front of me as I lost consciousness.

The bartender didn't want to have to look after me if that happened. She'd have to help me, and she didn't want to.

It just made everything harder for her, and she had enough tough things to deal with. In her aura, I watched an image of her scream with rage and frustration at the passed-out blonde girl on her bar. She despised me for putting her in that position.

I glanced away before I saw anything else. I didn't want to know what was going on in her head. I had enough pain of my own to deal with.

At least she wasn't planning on kicking me out. It was already dark outside, just past seven at night, and the wind had begun to howl ominously—the telltale precursor to a storm rolling in.

"Don't worry about me," I told her, throwing her a playful grin. "I'm a kappa kappa delta girl. My tolerance is so high now it takes me at least a couple of bottles to even feel the alcohol." I was lying. After three glasses of wine, I was starting to feel both buzzy and numb. But not numb enough.

She stopped wiping the bar for a moment and glared at me. "It's Anna, right?"

"That's right!" I blinked up at her. "How did you know? Oh," I gave a sheepish chuckle. "You carded me when I walked in. You've got a great memory, you know that, uh..." I peered at the name embroidered on her apron. "Cherry." I met her eyes again and had the privilege of watching her fantasize about slapping me for being such a perky idiot. "Nice to meet you, Cherry."

She didn't smile back. "Nice to meet you, Anna."

My name wasn't Anna. That was what my ID said, though. My real name was Chloe. I used the name Anna a lot, with various surnames. It was simple, unmemorable, and, for me, a long-running secret joke. *My name is Anna. Anna Sassyn*.

Cherry pursed her lips. "Just take it easy, okay, Anna? I'm not carrying you out of here."

"Oh, you don't have to worry about me, Cherry." I met her gaze easily and smiled. I was already a little drunk.

The lies fell off my tongue as easily as breathing. For the first sixteen years of my life, all I did was lie. I wasn't just good at it, it was who I was. Or rather, it was who they trained me to be.

A liar and a killer.

I'd been both of those things since I was old enough to form full sentences and hold a razer blade in my pudgy little hand. The man that built me made sure I was the best at what I did. He gave me everything I needed—unlimited training,

money, resources. He created me. He was Frankenstein; I was his monster. He pointed; I killed. It was my normal. It was my life.

Then, fate decided to T-bone the trajectory of my life, and for the last ten years, I'd been... asleep. I am awake now, though.

And I wanted to die.

The bartender—Cherry—must have sensed my overwhelming despair, because she hesitated in front of me again. I could feel her hard eyes studying me. I didn't have to see her thoughts to know this woman had lived a rough life. She was used to being lied to.

But I was too good.

Cherry cocked her head. "Just take it easy, okay?"

I nodded, and she turned away, wiping the bar and dumping soggy coasters in the trash behind her. I took a big slug of my wine, keeping the irritation off my face. This bitch was going to ruin my plans.

I should have chosen another bar. Unfortunately, I needed to be around people right now—my soul was screaming for human company—I just didn't want them to pay too much attention. But this hard-eyed bartender noticed, and it annoyed me. I wanted to get drunk.

I *needed* to get drunk. The memories whirling around inside my head grew louder when the sun went down; they had started to tear and scratch and scream, and it hurt.

I'd do anything to make them shut up. If I could drink myself to death, I would. I'd tried so many times in the last two weeks. I'd even put a gun in my mouth, but I just couldn't pull the trigger. Apparently, my survival instincts overruled the desperate need to escape the horrors in my head.

It was just my luck. I had a death wish *and* an uncontrollable impulse for self-preservation.

One of the men from the other side of the bar wandered over to my side. He waved two fingers at Cherry, leaning on

the bar next to me with deliberate casualness. She got busy pulling another beer.

I sighed inwardly. He could have just ordered his drink from that side.

He leaned closer. "Hey there. I haven't seen you around here before. Where are you from, honey?"

I swiveled my head like an owl towards him, eyes open as wide as I could, and deepened my voice dramatically. "Do you like... trains?"

He hesitated for a fraction of a second. "Uh, yeah, sure I do. So, you're from around here?"

"I love watching the switchers the most," I said, not blinking. "Most rail fans don't, but I love the locomotives. The T-one-twenties. The old English shunters. I could watch them all day."

"That's great." His smile faltered, but he plastered it back on and tried again. "I'm Benny. I run the cement works down in Wildwood Canyon. What's your name?"

"I've got eighty-seven hours of English bogey T-four-sixthree-two in my audio files," I deadpanned, tilting my head slightly. I still hadn't blinked. "I listen to it at night to go to sleep."

"Uh. Okay. Do you-"

"In Niles Canyon, they got an old S-P-six-four-three-zerothree. They used that old hydraulic to pull a passenger train from Oakland to Truckee."

"Right." Benny blew out a breath and tapped the bar in front of him. "Have a great night, honey."

He practically ran back to the other side of the bar.

I glanced at my watch. Twenty-eight seconds. I should give lessons.

It wasn't even the crazy train enthusiast-talk, the deep voice, or the unsettling lack of blinking that did it, although those special touches hurried things along. The truth was, most men didn't know how to cope with a woman that just didn't listen to them.

Cherry moved back my way, her frenzied wiping slowed down a fraction. She was looking at me again; I could feel her assessing my face and body carefully, trying to figure me out. What was a girl like me doing in a dump like this?

We were probably around the same age, mid-to-late twenties, but she looked older, and I looked younger. Her hair was a brassy bottle-blonde; mine was a soft ash. She was wearing a tight white tank top, showing off too-perky, round fake breasts; I was wearing jeans and a designer t-shirt, expensive-looking but casual enough that I could wear it anywhere. Cherry obviously had a rough life; it showed in the tension around her eyes and the tiny wrinkles around her eyes and mouth. I'd had a rough life too, much worse than hers, but the difference between the two of us was billions of dollars' worth of training and resources. I could see a few faint scars underneath her tattoos. Most of my own scars had been healed by high-tech lasers and plastic surgery.

Curiosity got the better of her. "You alone, hon?"

I shook my head, eyes glued to the glass in front of me. "No. I'm with my dad. We're on a road trip."

"Your dad, huh?" Cherry glanced around the bar. It was a tiny place, a kitschy road-house style bar just off the Redlands freeway in California. There was a group of five grizzled, hard-looking men laughing uproariously in a corner booth, and a handful of lone, mostly silent middle-aged men scattered around the other side of the bar, including Benny, who was now quite deliberately looking away from me. An older couple shared one of the few small tables. I got the feeling everyone was a local apart from me. Cherry would know. "Is your dad around?"

"He's gone to visit an old girlfriend not far from here."

"Leaving you here alone?"

"I made him drop me off. I didn't want to cramp his style." I curled my lip up slightly.

Cherry huffed out a breath, understanding dawning in her eyes. She thought she knew why I wanted to get drunk. "Oh, I got you." She was still a little worried about me, though. "So, are you staying here in Calimesa tonight?" She started stacking glasses vigorously. The frantic movement drew my eye, and before I knew it, I was looking right at her again. Watching her thoughts.

She was thinking of me as if I was an innocent little baby deer that wandered into a den of wolves.

It was kinda ironic—the men in the corner were all werewolves, but Cherry didn't know that. She was human; she still had the veil over her eyes so she couldn't See, but she knew danger when she smelled it. She thought I had the words easy victim - come get me! tattooed on my forehead.

It wasn't the werewolves that she was worried about, though. The rugged group of men in the corner booth were keeping to themselves; none of them had even glanced my way. So far, anyway. I wasn't sure what I'd do if one of them approached me.

Maybe I'd pick a fight. Hopefully, one of them would kill me.

But Cherry wasn't worried about them. She was thinking about an older, dark-haired man with a distinctive square jaw, a man who would hurt me if he got hold of me. A man who knew exactly how to torture a woman until she begged for death. A man who knew how not to leave any marks for the cops to see. An image of him ripping into my body while I screamed floated through her aura like some sort of horrific snuff movie.

I tore my eyes away from her, feeling sick. "We've got a hotel in the valley," I replied, trying not to slur my words. "Dad'll come pick me up in an hour or so, and we'll head back there. Once he's done with his girlfriend." I wrinkled my nose.

Cherry nodded, obviously relieved. My drunk ass would be someone else's problem very soon. "Oh, okay. Great."

Dad wasn't picking up anyone. I murdered him two weeks ago.

He'd been first on my list.

Chapter Two

Cherry hesitated again and threw her rag down, huffing out a sigh. "Broken homes are tough, huh?"

"You got that right." I took a huge slug of my wine, draining my glass. "Y'know, Cherry, when I was a kid, I didn't know if I was a weapon or a resource."

"That's if they actually want you around in the first place."

"That's right." I wiped a dribble of wine off my chin. "Sometimes your whole existence can be ... inconvenient."

"Exactly." Cherry thought about the time her mom started bringing multiple men home when she was five years old. I thought about the time the CIA got hold of one of my partial prints after I murdered an archbishop, and Dad threatened to disayow me.

"It makes it harder when only one of them has any money," I added. "And the one that has the cash never deserves it."

She nodded, blowing out a slow breath. "Ain't that the truth?"

Look at us. Bonding over our childhood trauma.

After a beat, Cherry snagged the bottle of wine and refilled my glass, a touching act of solidarity. I glanced up and saw her fears for me had melted away. The monster with the hard jaw wouldn't touch me; not when I had another man looking after me—a man who obviously had resources, based on my expensive outfit and the casual way I talked smack about his money. Cherry's monster preferred to torture vulnerable women.

"Thanks," I said, taking a big sip. "I don't really want to have to listen to my dad talk on the way back to the hotel."

She nodded, her expression still hard. "If you need to puke, do it in the bathroom, okay?"

"I will."

She hustled away.

Talking to Cherry had been a nice distraction. I sipped my wine, trying to focus on the sounds around the bar so that my thoughts didn't start to scream at me again. I already had a little buzz; I just needed another distraction to keep the screams at bay until I could get drunk enough that they were silenced completely. In the meantime, I let my ears prick up, listening to the people around me.

The werewolves in the corner kept their voices low, their words drowned out by country music on the cheesy jukebox and the howling wind outside. Strangely, they had something in a small crate on the table, covered with a ratty blanket. Occasionally, one of them would lift the corner of the blanket, poke at whatever was inside, and laugh.

I assumed it was an animal of some sort. Cherry had glared at them a few times but said nothing. Her thoughts told me she wasn't allowed to reprimand them.

The lone men scattered on the other side of the bar were silent, too, glued to a football game on the TV. Occasionally, one of them would call out to Cherry for a refill. The old couple behind me were also quiet, their faces both turned to the window.

Everyone had settled in. Rain pelted down outside, driven almost horizontal by the blustering wind.

Everyone was too quiet, though. The music was terrible. Turning slightly on my stool, I re-crossed my legs and glanced around surreptitiously, trying to distract myself until the alcohol dulled the pain in my head. Within half a second, I'd neatly categorized every person in the room.

Apart from the wolves—and whatever little animal they had in that covered cage on the table—the bar was full of humans. None of them could See.

They were lucky. Ignorance was bliss.

I knew that better than anyone.

Chapter Three

For the first sixteen years of my life, I knew nothing of the supernatural. All I knew was lies and death. I didn't know who I was, other than what I'd been told to be.

Then, one day, not long after my sweet sixteenth, my father sent me on a new assignment. I was supposed to infiltrate a school, the most secretive and expensive college in the country, in fact—Sacred Heart Academy in Washington DC. The school itself sat on prime real estate, land that my billionaire developer father was desperate to get his hands on. Dad had been chasing that hunk of land for more than thirty years and had been frustrated at every turn. He wasn't used to losing. Eventually, he pulled in the big guns. Me.

My assignment was to enroll in the school and destabilize the institution from the inside. The directives would change depending on what I reported to my handlers, but the general plan was that I would murder the principal, then his replacement, and a handful of key students, all while making it look like an accident—perhaps the work of a terrible disease caused by mysterious mold floating up from the ancient buildings, or suicidal psychosis induced by radiation deep under the lush green grounds. I had a great imagination. My handlers gave me a lot of leeway to design the kill methods myself. Once the students started dying, the parents would panic and pull their kids out.

That was the plan, anyway. But my handlers didn't account for one thing. The school was actually an academy for supernatural creatures.

Old witch, shifter, and vampire families didn't send their young ones there to learn magic. They were there to do the usual stuff; math, science, literature. In most respects, it was a normal, albeit expensive and exclusive, high school.

But the kids were also there to learn how to live in the human world—how to hide their fangs and fur and magic.

Supe laws were strict, secrecy was paramount, and exposing yourself to the normies was a crime punishable by death. The academy let a handful of dumb normie kids enroll so they had someone to practice on.

Apparently, the supe parents loved that particular part of the curriculum. Their precious babies could get used to hiding their magic in a controlled environment, and not worry about the authorities coming down hard on them for breaking the rules. The normie kids would get their memories magically altered quickly and easily if one of the supe kids messed up.

My father knew none of this. He was just after a hunk of prime real estate. He'd been trying to get me enrolled in the school for years under different aliases, but despite offering millions of dollars in tuition fees, he'd always been turned down.

Then, out of the blue, one of my father's billionaire buddies received an offer for a place at the academy for his son. The boy was a handsome, dim-witted, but cheerful kid. It made no sense to us at the time why the school would offer a place to such a moron, but we ran with it. We used the connection to get an interview, and I designed my cover based on the perky moron who had scored himself a place. I went in under my real name—Chloe West, daughter of Harry West, billionaire property developer—and played a sweet, dumb, young teenage girl.

At my enrollment interview in that stuffy dark office, Principal Mannix decided immediately that Sweet Dumb Chloe would be a perfect addition to his school as a practice normie. Then, because he was a lazy asshole, and he didn't want to have to deal with me if I accidentally got exposed to the supernatural, he put a spell on me to fix me exactly as I was.

He meant to fix the veil on my eyes in place so it wouldn't lift no matter what I saw. But the words he used in his spell had an unintended side-effect.

He didn't know that Sweet Dumb Chloe was a character I was playing. And the words of his spell fixed me *exactly* as I

appeared to be, right in that moment.

As the spell hit me, the razor-sharp child assassin I used to be disappeared almost completely. She was buried deep down at the bottom of my subconscious, and, for the next ten years of my life, I was Sweet Dumb Chloe.

It was pure bliss.

I made friends at school—the best friends I'd ever have. I eventually dropped out to become a hairdresser. My friends and I opened a salon together. I dated. I partied at clubs. I had sleepovers. It was heaven.

My father was apoplectic with rage. It was three weeks before he realized I was really gone. He had no idea what had happened to me—his favorite tool, his weapon of choice. At first, he shoved me through endless psychiatrist appointments, trying to get me back. Then, he tried torturing me out of my Sweet Dumb Chloe persona.

I didn't like to think about that time. I remembered it as who I was now; but as Sweet Dumb Chloe, I repressed it. Sweet Chloe couldn't process the idea of her own beloved father waterboarding her or holding her legs open for his friends to take turns with her. So, she blocked it out.

But I remembered now.

That's why he was my first target once I woke up.

My father was at the top of my list. I'd never had a vengeance mission before, but I was approaching it like I'd done all my assignments in the past—strategically, logically, thoroughly. And mercilessly.

This wasn't a video game; I wasn't going to battle all the little bosses before I went for the big one. My dad needed to die for what he'd done to me, and he was going to be the first.

It took me less than a day. It was almost too easy. He'd been in jail—Sweet Chloe had put him there, funnily enough—and it was as easy as flicking a tab of metamethamphetamine into his mouth during visitation. I stayed in that room long enough to watch the panic in his eyes as his heart seized up, long enough to make sure he understood that

I'd done it, and that he was going straight to Hell for all eternity for what he'd done to me.

His death gave me no satisfaction at all. But I carried on.

After that, it was just a short skip to the cells, where I took out two of my handlers who were also in jail at the time. Slitting their throats with my own hands felt more appropriate, but it gave me no peace.

It was then that I understood that no matter what I did, I would probably never find peace ever again. But I had a list, and I was going to cross off every name on it.

None of their deaths would ever be traced back to me. I was too good. My father's death was officially a massive heart attack, and the handlers were the tragic victims of a vicious prison fight.

Since then, I'd been working my way around the East Coast, killing every single mark who had clambered over my body when I was young. I murdered every single CEO, politician and billionaire who my handlers assigned to kill their siblings, parents and wives for them. I took special care with the men who had hired me to kill children. There were lots of those.

My hands would never be clean. I wasn't trying for redemption; I knew that was never an option for me. I just wanted vengeance.

So, I went to work, and read the headlines the next day. A senator overdosed on sedatives and drowned himself in the bath. A banking executive jumped from the forty-eighth floor window of his building. A famous actor put a bullet in his temple. No one had any idea it was me.

I was good at suicides. It was the extra touches that sealed the deal. Nothing says "I'm going to kill myself" like a cleared browser history and a note to a lawyer about an up-to-date will. Most of the time, you don't even need to leave a suicide note. If you hack into their phone and send a vague "I'm sorry for everything" text to an emergency contact, the police will shrug, and the coroner will slam the file closed.

I was good at suicides, but my specialty was tragic accidents. It was almost an art form—fatal mishaps took vision and creativity. A judge accidentally strangled himself with a belt during an auto-erotic asphyxiation masturbation session. A congressman choked on a grape in the toilet, of all places, and no one could get through the locked door to save him. A billionaire lobbyist slipped in a river while fishing; his waders filled with water and dragged him into the current. They found his bloated body almost two miles downriver.

I crossed off all the names on my list from the East Coast, then made my way to the west, hitting the cities of California. A tech billionaire tragically overdosed after mixing up his ADHD meds with party pills. A trust fund baby tripped and fell off his rooftop garden. And just yesterday, an entertainment lawyer severed an artery on a smashed whiskey glass and bled to death in his office before any of his staff found him.

It was all too easy.

The only hard part had been dodging the woman who lifted the spell on me. Marcheline chased me all the way to New York before I lost her.

My chest ached, piercing the alcohol induced numbness in my body. God, I missed Aunt Marche. I missed my old life; I missed all my friends. There was no chance I could go back, though. They loved Sweet Chloe. They'd never love me as who I really was.

I didn't deserve love, anyway. There was far too much blood on my hands. I was too damaged, too broken. Even now, with alcohol numbing the pain in my body, I still had the impulse to kill.

A heightened prey drive. That's what my handlers called it.

Aunt Marche had meant well. She only wanted to remove the spell the principal had put on me so the veil on my eyes would lift, and I could See. But Marche, the High Priestess, was too powerful for her own good. As well as removing the spell that fixed me as Sweet Dumb Chloe, she removed the veil on my eyes, letting me see the supernatural creatures around me. Then she went a tiny step too far and removed another veil by accident; a barrier that wasn't ever meant to be lifted.

Some people might call it a gift, but being able to see people's thoughts was just an extra layer of torture on my already-overloaded psyche. It sickened me, and it made me more dangerous. Nobody on this earth had ever had this ability, and nobody ever should.

It made my job easier, though. And, once my mission was over, I'd remove myself from this plane of existence. Problem solved.

I was almost done. There was one name left on my list, and I'd left him for last for a couple of reasons.

First, he didn't live in one of the major cities like most of my marks. He lived in the middle of nowhere—in a little town hidden between the California Badlands and San Bernardino National Forest.

That's why I was here, getting drunk, numbing my unbearable pain in a dive bar. I was on my way to Castlemaine to kill the last person on my list.

There was one other reason I'd left him for last. Out of all the men I'd murdered in the last two weeks, he was the one who was most likely to kill me first.

He was the man who trained me.

There was an odd poetry to it all. I'd started with the man that built me; the man who put the monster together. And I was going to finish with the man that taught the monster how to kill.

Chapter Four

Cherry filled up my glass again. "Don't puke on my bar," she muttered. "And if you're not gone in an hour, I'm throwing you in a cab and sending you back to the valley on your own dime."

She was worried about me again, and she hated me for it. She didn't want to have to protect me. She couldn't even protect herself.

I looked up at her blearily. Someone unfamiliar suddenly appeared in her thoughts. A child—a little girl, seven or eight years old, maybe. Someone she loved more than life itself. An innocent girl who was no longer in her life. *Her* child?

I peered closer at the images swirling in her aura. Yep, it was. Cherry had a kid.

It was easier to watch her thoughts now that I was so drunk; I could view them more dispassionately, like I was watching a drama on TV. Cherry had a little girl who had been taken away from her, and she wanted her back desperately.

She couldn't get her back, though. She couldn't protect her daughter. The square-jawed monster rampaged through her thoughts, and Cherry shoved her daughter away from him.

Maybe the monster was a metaphor for addiction or something. I'd already clocked the old track marks on Cherry's arms.

"Hey." She tapped the bar in front of me. "You hearing me, Anna?"

"I'll be fine," I slurred. I was really seeing double now. Sweet Chloe could never handle her alcohol, which was ironic considering Child Assassin Chloe could out-drink a sailor at twelve years old. Being able to function while wasted was important; it was something I'd trained for. I'd lost count of

the number of times I'd been drugged almost unconscious and still managed to pull off a job successfully.

New Chloe hadn't managed to build up a tolerance, yet. I was grateful for the small mercies. The screaming in my head was quiet for now. At some point—as soon as the storm died down a little—I'd stumble outside and go to sleep in my car. It was only another hour or so to Castlemaine. I'd make the drive easily in the morning. Then, either I'd kill my mentor, or he'd kill me.

I wasn't sure which one I wanted more. Both, preferably.

A weird hissing noise jolted me out of my fuzzy thoughts, and I glanced behind me, almost falling off my stool in the process. The werewolves were bellowing with laughter. One had lifted the corner of the blanket covering the cage on the table and was poking a plastic knife at the animal inside.

I caught a flash of bright-white feathers. What was that? A chicken? A duck, maybe?

Why did a bunch of werewolves have a duck in a cage in this bar?

One of them saw me looking. He caught my eye and leered at me. I was having trouble focusing now; the edges of my vision were blurry, but even from across the room I saw his thoughts projected in his muddy-green aura. He imagined himself walking up to me, turning me around roughly, yanking down my jeans, and holding me down on the bar, one hand fisted in my pretty blonde hair. He visualized taking me from behind while his friends watched and hooted with laughter.

I'd seen worse. My stomach lurched, and I turned back around so I wouldn't have to look at him again.

One more to go. One more name on my list. After that, then I could pick fights with werewolves and try to get myself killed.

The thing in the cage let out another odd hiss; my ears pricked up, but I forced my curiosity down, and didn't turn to look. To my chagrin, I heard the squeal of wood on linoleum

—the sound of a chair being pulled back—and a man's voice muttering something to his friends.

The others guffawed loudly in response.

I sighed. It sounded like the werewolf who I had accidentally made eye contact with was coming over to chat with me.

Only one more to go.

Sometimes, the best way to solve a problem was to remove yourself from the equation. So, I slid myself off my barstool, mentally congratulating myself for not stumbling, and walked as gracefully and as quickly as I could towards the bathroom.

The werewolves groaned, mocking their friend, who was already halfway across the room, heading towards me. I didn't even look. I walked down a tiny hallway and pushed open the door to the restroom.

I was absolutely shitfaced. I hadn't realized how badly I needed to pee until I stumbled into the dark, cramped, ramshackle bathroom. The restroom was tiny, only one cubicle and a little space outside for the washroom and sink. My eyes darted around the space quickly, cataloging everything with the ease of training and conditioning.

Peeling black paint, graffiti, and garish posters covered the walls. The floor was scuffed, cracked linoleum. The single tap only provided cold water. There was a slight leak in the pipes; a tiny puddle of water pooled on the floor. To the side of the sink, a rusty metal dispenser provided paper towels, the rough kind that hurt your hands if you wiped them too hard. The dispenser had a bin attached for the used towels. My brain cataloged it all and offered up scenarios for me.

The mark slipped on the puddle of water and cracked his head on the porcelain sink. The toilet was overflowing. The mark vomited, passed out, tragically drowning in the bowl. The lip from the dispenser bin fell off, leaving sharp metal edges. The mark accidentally smashed their wrist down on it while breaking off a paper towel, severing an artery, and bled to death on the floor.

My bladder throbbed.

I darted into the cubicle as an old memory assaulted me. It was a good memory, though, so I let it come. Three years ago, Sweet Chloe had actually peed her pants in a club downtown. I remembered vividly hiding in the bathroom, sobbing in drunken embarrassment, trying to soak up my sodden jeans with toilet paper until Prue, my best friend, found me, bullied me out of my clothes, and hustled me into a brand-new dress. I remembered weakly protesting as she pulled the beautiful dress over my head, assuming she'd stolen it off some other poor girl.

God, I missed her so much.

I squeezed my eyes shut and concentrated on staying upright on the toilet. I did my business, buttoned my jeans, and walked back into the bar, sliding up onto my barstool.

The werewolves were taunting the creature in the cage again. I kept my eyes averted and waved at Cherry, who was watching the werewolves in the corner, her thoughts a steady whirl of disastrous scenarios. "One more?" I batted my eyelashes at her. "Please? My dad called, he's on the way." The storm outside hadn't eased off, but I was nearing blackout drunk, anyway. I still had to find my way to the carpark and climb into my car. I had a little bottle of tequila in there that would finish me off.

Cherry glared at me but splashed a little more wine in my glass. "Last one," she said firmly. "And if you rat me out to your dad for letting you get drunk, I'll have you skinned alive."

She really meant it. I let out a burst of laughter, blinking at the images that danced around her aura. If I got Cherry into trouble, there would be consequences. She belonged to the monster, and the monster would rip me apart if I damaged anything that belonged to him.

I chuckled into my wine glass. It wasn't often that I came across someone almost as miserable as me. Poor Cherry's addiction really ruled her life. Idly, I wondered if her addiction was active or not. Her eyes were bright, and she moved almost

manically, so I'd say it was. If I had to guess, I'd say she was getting just enough to function.

Just then, as if her thoughts brought him to life, the square-jawed man—the monster—walked out of the door behind the bar.



My mouth fell open.

I didn't realize he was real. Cherry's thoughts painted a picture of a man so terrible that I thought he was a metaphor.

Cherry visibly stiffened, and started wiping the bar frantically again, moving quickly to the other side, away from me. The big, dark-haired man swaggered up behind her, visibly enjoying the fear he provoked in her. He lingered for a second, then grunted. Cherry turned around, her face wary. I couldn't hear what he said, but she nodded quickly, and murmured a response.

The monster turned and saw me. His closely set eyes lit up, and his thin lips twitched into a smirk.

He was a big man with the heavy physique of an old football player who tried to keep in shape—broad shoulders, barrel chest, thick legs. His jaw, which was almost a caricature in Cherry's thoughts, was ridiculously hard and square. A paunchy gut slowed him down, but he swaggered, moving slowly towards me with astonishing arrogance.

I kept my face neutral, watching his thoughts dance around in his aura.

My face was the main feature. I was a pretty little bird, sitting alone at his bar, ripe for the taking. He wanted a new bird for his cage, in fact, he needed one. Cherry, his current pet, was old, and he'd worn her out, almost broken her completely. My skin prickled as I watched this monster remember some of the things he'd done to her.

He kept her chained to him with a little taste of his needles, just enough to keep her thoughts scattered and her body vulnerable. But what really did it was the photos he kept in the hidden safe in the office—devastating pictures of Cherry that would destroy her if anyone got hold of them. My stomach churned as I saw what he'd done and how delighted he was.

He'd manipulated her, humiliated her, and subtly blackmailed her, and he was so proud of himself.

A regret flitted through his thoughts—the face of Cherry's young daughter. That little bird had escaped. The only thing that made him keep Cherry around for so long was the chance that he might eventually get his hands on her.

But he needed to get rid of Cherry soon. She'd used his address for long enough to almost be considered a de facto partner, and he didn't want her getting any ideas. It was a shame she had to use his address at all, but her unemployment cheques needed to be sent somewhere.

Not that she was unemployed. She worked every single hour the bar was open.

The monster reached me. He put his hands on the bar, leaning casually towards me. "Well, hello, beautiful." His voice was deep and oily.

I gazed back at him, my head tilted right back. I was trying to avoid the sickening images in his aura of what he wanted to do to me. "Hi."

"You're a pretty young thing. What are you doing in my bar all alone?"

I frowned. "Is this your bar?"

"It is."

"I've been here for hours, and I haven't seen you."

"The game is on," he said, leaning closer. "I've got a TV in my office. You want to come watch it with me?"

"I thought it was Cherry's bar." I pointed at her drunkenly. "I've been here for hours. She's been doing all the work."

A shadow blasted through his thoughts, and he stiffened. If he didn't get rid of Cherry soon, legally, she would have a claim on his bar. Not that she would try. He'd broken her spirit, as well as her body. But the monster didn't like to take chances. Cherry was pouring a drink, her back to us, but her shoulders were so stiff they looked like they would shatter if someone knocked her the wrong way. She was terrified. The monster eyed her lazily for a second and smirked.

"Well, you know, I gotta keep Cherry busy," he rumbled. "She's like one of those farm dogs. She needs to work."

"Charming," I snorted, throwing back the last dregs of my wine. "Since you're here, I'd like a refill, please." I waved my empty glass at him.

The monster chuckled darkly, imagining the fun he'd have breaking my body in two. He turned, picked up the bottle of white from the fridge behind him, and filled my glass almost to the top. "So where are you from, honey?"

"The depths of your nightmares," I slurred, throwing half the glass straight down my throat. I'd have to leave now, anyway. Remove myself from the equation.

Just then, I sensed a presence behind me. Smash glass on bar, thrust to the carotid.

The monster was still talking to me. I forced myself to concentrate on his words. "I'm going to hazard a guess and say you're from LA," he said, his tone oily. "What are you doing in our little town?"

"Don't bother, Javier," a man's voice said from behind me. "Her daddy is on the way to get her."

The monster—Javier—looked behind me and scowled at the man who had spoken. "Nobody asked you, Jeff."

A stocky, middle-aged man with greying stubble shuffled in next to me. One of the wolves. "Oh, I'm just doing you a favor," he said, chuckling. "Looking out for a friend, y'know? She's a military brat." He gave me a sleazy smile. "Her daddy is some bigwig marine or something."

I threw back the rest of my wine. The edges of my vision were completely blurry now. "That's right," I said thickly. Glancing up, I made eye contact with Cherry, who had clearly lied to the werewolves when they asked about me while I was in the bathroom. Javier and the werewolves might risk

messing with me if my dad was some pencil-pusher, but if he was high up in the military, they would definitely think twice.

She'd made up a lie to protect me. How sweet.

I waved my phone. "He'll be here in a minute," I slurred, meeting her hard blue eyes.

She blinked and turned away. Poor Cherry.

Javier's thoughts boiled. He'd been hoping I was some spoiled runaway; someone he could trap and slowly ruin just like he'd done with Cherry. But, like me, he knew when to retreat. "Well, I hope you enjoyed your time in our town," he said, turning away. He walked straight back through the door to his office.

Cherry let out a soft breath and topped up my water glass. "Sober up a little before daddy gets here, would ya?"

I nodded, my chin bouncing off my chest.

The werewolf—Jeff—slid himself onto the seat next to me. "It's a shame you're leaving."

"Really?" I swung around to look at him. Werewolf thoughts were a little more snarly, harder to make sense of. I couldn't really understand the faces that whirled around in his aura. Or, it could have been because I was absolutely hammered.

"Yeah," he grinned at me. "Me and the boys caught the craziest thing."

"Wh-what? You mean the thing in the cage?"

"Yeah." His smile grew wider.

"What ish it?"

"It's a battle goose."

I narrowed my eyes. "A what?"

"A battle goose," he said, chuckling. "Caught it down by the river."

I frowned. The feeling of my forehead wrinkling was weird. Idly, I pushed at the corrugated skin on my brow, trying

to push it flat again. Jesus, I was drunk. "What the hell is a battle goose?"

"We think it's some kind of secret military experiment that escaped from his cage or somethin'. It looks like a normal goose, and damn, it's as ornery as a normal goose, but the thing has... extra parts."

I closed one eye, so I could focus on just one Jeff, not the doubled-up version. "What kind of extra parts?"

"Well, for starters, he's got a razor-sharp beak."

"A razor... sharp... beak?" I wobbled my stool a little.

"Yeah. Sharp enough to cut straight through rawhide." Jeff's amber eyes rolled over me, appreciation and regret in his expression. "That thing would cut your pretty skin to ribbons." He seemed sad about the fact that he wouldn't get to see me bleed.

I blew a raspberry, accidentally spraying him with spit. Or, maybe not so accidentally. "Bullshit. No way."

"It's true." He wiped a glob of my spit off his chin. "And there's something up with his neck. It's like... diamond-plated, or somethin'." He shook his head. "He gets real big, and his feathers harden up when he fights. He doesn't fight like a goose, neither. A normal goose will come straight at ya and poke you with his beak, but this one uses his neck like a whip. And he's *mean*."

"Well. Normal geese are mean."

"Well, this little bastard is *bad*. It ripped a gash in Sammy's arm and tore one of Liam's eyes out with its claws," he said, chuckling like it was the funniest thing in the world.

I laughed along with him merrily. "I'm going to assume you're exaggerating. Laughing about your friends being maimed is some shhtraight-up psychopath shit, dude," I giggled, slapping a hand on his chest.

He didn't know I could See. So far, no supe had clocked me as one of them. From what I understood, some supes could tell by looking into someone's eyes, like I did. Werewolves would be able to smell the difference between species. But my eyes were unique, and I smelled like a human.

Jeff thought I was some dumb drunk college girl. "No, really," he chuckled, leaning closer so he could sniff me. "It took a whole pack of us to corner it. That thing is a weapon. It's gotta be a covert government experiment or somethin'."

I huffed out another laugh. "That's crazy. You're *crazy*, Jeff." I smacked his chest again, way harder this time. "I bet it's just a normal goose with an extra-sharp beak and claws."

"Naw," Jeff drawled. "This creature is something else. It already sliced through the wooden crate we had him in. The bastard almost got away; we had to get one of our metal baby crates and shove him in there."

"Metal... baby..." I peered at him, then let out a giggle. "Oh. You're teasing me."

He grinned. "Sure am, sweetheart."

He wasn't. His pack put their pups in crates when they acted up.

Most shifter packs were actually just loving, close-knit families. But the ones that *weren't* were not nice places to be.

Jeff's pack wasn't nice at all.

"We're gonna find out just how bad this goose can be." He leaned closer, whispering conspiratorially. "There's a shed out back; Javier uses it for dogfights on Saturdays. I got my two old fighting dogs with me. We're going to throw Ruby and Margot in the pit with the goose and see what it can do."

I blew another raspberry. A glob of spit landed on Jeff's bushy eyebrow. A flash of irritation twisted his face, but he quickly masked it. He'd put up with much worse to lure me out of this bar.

He was braver than Javier. Or just more stupid. For a second, I watched his thoughts.

The other wolves wanted to play with me, too; I could see they had all talked about it while I was in the bathroom. They'd take their time. The fun they could have with me would easily outweigh the consequences, as far as Jeff thought, anyway. If there were some formidable man coming to pick me up, the pack could take out some human marine easily. Jeff's alpha was one of the most powerful wolves in the states, and although he'd be pissed at Jeff for making trouble for him, he'd still cover it up.

Jeff had already planned his excuses. Sorry, Alpha, we had no idea who she was! She was just some dumb blonde who was stupid enough to get blackout drunk in Javier's. You should have been there, boss. You would have loved it.

I rolled my eyes. "Two pit bulls would rip a goose to shreds."

"Not this one. He's bred for battle. I think Ruby and Margot will have their work cut out for them."

I pouted. "Aren't you worried about your poor pooches getting hurt?"

He didn't give a shit about his dogs. "Naw." His eyes lit up. "Wanna stay and watch? Call your daddy and tell him to give you another half an hour."

Absolutely fucking not.

I stared at the werewolf, trying to focus. "Can I see the goose?"

"Sure, honey!" He grinned widely and slid off his stool. I stumbled off mine. Jeff steadied me and turned around. "Hey, fellas! This pretty lady wants to see our new pet."

The other four werewolf men bellowed happily. "Come on over, baby!"

Jeff took my arm, loosely cuffing his hand around my wrist, and led me over to the table. Judging by the way I stumbled and bounced around in his iron grip, while he remained as steady as a rock, his strength was phenomenal.

I'd never fought a werewolf before. Somehow, I couldn't bring myself to care that he might kill me before this night was over.



His friends waited at the table, grinning, their eyes glittering with excitement.

"Come over here, honey." Jeff pulled me close to the table and lifted the corner of the blanket.

In the cage was the most beautiful creature I'd ever seen in my life.

My mouth hung open as I stared at him. He was an Embden goose, or an American Buff, maybe, I wasn't sure which breed exactly. There was something off about his coloring, but he was *extraordinary*. Blazing, snowy-white feathers, a magnificent thick, long neck. His body was heavy, packed with muscle and power. The wolves were right—his bright orange beak had a razor-sharp edge that looked like it could cut the very fabric of our universe. Besides the obvious sharpness of it, the lower mandible was shorter than usual, his culmen looked overly thick and hard, like a rock. The bean on the end of his upper mandible dropped down further, curving into an almost claw-shape. I looked closer. The edges of those beautiful wings had a diamond-hard sheen. They weren't normal feathers.

Oh, yeah. This guy was, indeed, a battle goose.

I blinked, caught off guard by his beauty. Those little glittery eyes were like the coals from the fiery pits of Hell. He glared at me, vibrating with an intense, overwhelming anger that felt like a punch to the gut.

The words drifted out of my open mouth. "He's... beautiful..."

"Ain't he something?"

I swallowed roughly. Something about this goose made me want to howl in anguish, but I wasn't sure what it was.

Blinking back tears, I focused, staring at him with my new sight.

Scars.

That was it. This magnificent creature was covered with battle scars. You couldn't see them through his feathers, in fact, his plumage was perfect. But I could see them.

He was just like me. Beautiful, deadly, and scarred on the inside. He was a monster, just like me; obviously built for killing, just like me. Some sadistic megalomaniac had put him together, just like me, and kept him in a cage, just like me.

I blinked back tears as our eyes met. The fire dimmed as our gaze connected; he, too, recognized a kindred spirit. Wistful images of still bodies of water filled his aura—duckweed ponds and marshy swamps. His thoughts yearned for peace. He imagined himself all alone, because he was too damaged to deserve love from his own kind.

My lips felt numb. "Damaged things deserve love too."

Jeff coughed. "What was that, honey?"

I jerked. "What?" I hadn't realized I'd said it out loud.

In the beat of awkward silence that followed, I suddenly realized that the screams in my head had also gone mercifully silent.

Damaged things deserve love too.

Jeff chuckled uncomfortably. A sticky sheen of sweat rose on his brow. "What did you say?"

I laughed stupidly and shook my head. "I don't know. So, where's this dog fighting ring, then? I've only got fifteen minutes before my dad gets here."

"Come on." He took my wrist again, and, not particularly skillfully, lifted my phone out of my pocket with his other hand. "I'll show you." He palmed my phone and held it behind him. "You're going to love it."

"Great!" I grinned happily at him. My eyes were crossing
—I was still shitfaced—but even I could track his movements

as he passed my phone to his buddy sitting in the booth behind him. The other werewolf slipped it into his own pocket and nodded at the others, grinning.

They had me now. A helpless drunk girl, all alone. No phone, no way of calling for help. They would have the pleasure of absolutely destroying my body while my father bumbled around in the bar next door, looking for me. The thought delighted them all.

"Alright!" With whoops and hollers, the other werewolves clambered to their feet. "Let's go!"

"Awesome." I grinned, feeling my pulse slow. The scent of the hunt filled my nostrils; goosebumps rose on my skin. "Lead the way."

I walked out, sandwiched in between the group of werewolves. I didn't turn to look at Cherry, but I knew she was watching me.

Just before I walked out the door, I heard her call my fake name, her voice tinged with desperation. I ignored her.



"Watch your head there, baby." Jeff pushed his hand on the back of my head, forcing it down far further than it needed to clear the low doorway of the shed. "In here."

I stumbled inside. The building was squat, with a steel door, thick concrete walls and a low ceiling, obviously purpose built for illegal dog fights. An overhead light cast a harsh direct beam over the sunken ring. The bare concrete floor was stained brown with old blood. The air was musty and smelled foul.

I wrinkled my nose. "Someone needs to open a window in here."

There were no windows. The wolves laughed. "Dump the goose in the ring, Terry," Jeff ordered. "We might as well have a little pre-show entertainment."

I blinked at him, my eyes wide and guileless. "What does that mean?"

"Nothing, baby," he chuckled roughly.

The werewolf Terry opened a gate in the barrier surrounding the pit, bent down, dropped the crate carelessly in the ring with a thud, whipping off the blanket at the same time. The goose hissed in outrage, bristling, his beautiful feathers filling the cage completely.

Through the door behind me, another one of the werewolves brought in two enormous pit bulls. Jesus, those things were massive—one tan, one dark brown, both with huge dribbling maws and thick slabs of muscle on their heavily scarred shoulders.

My skin prickled for a moment, the echo of an old terror. I'd been hunted with dogs before. I forced my panic down.

Terry pushed the dogs through the gate into the pit, a fivefoot drop down, then he knelt on one leg, and hit a springloaded latch on the cage with his foot. He pulled himself up and quickly swung the barrier gate closed. The pit was deep, and the barrier came up to my chest. None of the animals were getting out in a hurry.

The crate swung open. The werewolves all cheered and took their places around the ring, their faces disappearing into the shadows.

Jeff moved behind me, pushing me up against the barrier with his hands on either side of me. He pressed into me with his crotch, taunting me a little. Turning my head slightly, I gave him a puzzled look, and he smiled back, licking his lips slowly.

He wanted me to start feeling uneasy now. Jeff was drawing this out like an expert, waiting for that delicious moment when I finally realized how much trouble I was in. He savored the anticipation, knowing that very soon, I'd start to panic.

Don't hold your breath, Jeff. I turned around and looked back down into the ring.

The goose stepped out of the crate, ruffling those magnificent feathers, making himself appear as large as the pit bulls. He was so beautiful I couldn't stop staring; for a long moment I forgot where I was, and what was about to happen.

The fight began.

The brown dog lunged immediately, the battle goose met his strike and slashed with his beak. A stripe of red opened up on the dog's muzzle. She let out a yelp and backed away, circling more warily. The tan one leapt towards him. In a lightning-fast movement, he struck out with his feet, ripping a small slice in her belly.

I couldn't let this happen.

My eyes scanned the room quickly, assessing everything in one quick sweep. The deep pit below, illuminated by the spotlight hanging above us. The snarling dogs, more wary now, circling the goose, who stood, razor-sharp wings held wide, letting out a low hiss that sent a chill down my spine. The four other werewolves, still firmly in human form, cheering and hollering, shrouded in darkness, standing in a circle around the five-foot wooden barrier of the pit. Behind me, Jeff, pressing his revolting hardness up against my spine.

One door. One way in and out.

Things were going to get messy. In the back of my mind, I could hear my handlers curse at me. If they were still here, I'd be punished for being so reckless. If this was a job, the only option would be retreat quickly and melt into the night outside.

There were only two rules. Don't blow your cover, and don't leave a mess.

I never left a mess. That was how you got caught.

Jeff rubbed his erection up against me again, a little harder this time, and mentally, I shrugged. It didn't matter anymore. I didn't care. It was only an hour drive to Castlemaine. In the morning, my list would be complete, and I'd be dead.

Shifting on my feet slightly, I winced. "Goddamnit, these shoes are killing me." I lifted my foot and casually scratched the skin on my calf, at the same time releasing the latch holding my favorite blade—Stubby McStabby, I affectionately called it. Fat and only three inches long, both sides were razor-sharp.

"You alright there, sweetheart?" Jeff asked in a thick guttural voice. His excitement was starting to overwhelm him. His hands still boxed me up against the ring, but his eyes were glued to the dogfight.

"Oh, I'm fine."

He didn't even see me move.

My first strike went straight into his collarbone. I hit his subclavian artery without even looking, first the left, then the right, cutting both within a split second, destroying the blood supply to his head. Jeff's eyes bulged in horror; his mouth gaped wide, but I wasn't done. I spun in his arms, ducked out

of his grip and slammed my knife into his kidney with a quick pop.

Five seconds, and he was already dead. A proud glow suffused my chest. I was still horribly drunk, but I'd hit my mark perfectly. Jesus, I was a monster. So was Jeff, though.

I let his body slump over the barrier and gave a loud shriek. "Jeff? Jeff! Are you okay?"

The sound of the dogs barking was almost deafening, but I heard another werewolf chuckle in the darkness. "I smell blood. Jeff, buddy, did you pick that scab on your ass again?"

The other wolves laughed.

I patted Jeff's prone body, hanging lifelessly over the barrier. "I think there's something seriously wrong with him!"

The man closest to me shouted. "He might need a moment. Come over here, honey. I'll keep you company."

I tiptoed towards him.

This is why I was so good at what I did. None of them sensed any danger at all. None of them would ever believe in their wildest dreams that I, a pretty, drunk blonde girl, was a vicious, cold-blooded killer. Skittishly, I stumbled a few feet to my right, heading towards the man who had spoken—another paunchy, barrel-chested man with greasy salt-and-pepper hair pulled back in a ponytail.

He didn't even look at me as I approached. His eyes were glued to the bottom of the pit. I didn't look down. My focus was on my prey.

"Look at that thing go," the man muttered as I approached, still watching the fight. "That damn goose almost seems like it's been in pit fights before." He held his arm out to me without looking, waving me closer. "Come watch, honey."

I walked behind him and thrust my blade straight into his kidney.

The kidney was my favorite spot. It was always an excellent target, your victim died within seconds, and the pain was so excruciating it was hard to even draw breath to scream.

These were werewolves, though; they could heal if they shifted in time, so I had to make sure he was dead quickly. My next thrust severed his carotid. Boom. Done.

Blood poured down his chest. It was messy, but that couldn't be helped. My cover was probably going to be blown in a second, anyway. I swiveled on my feet, pushing with my hip slightly. His body slumped over the barrier, and he went tumbling down into the pit. Only three more to go.

I pointed and let out a high-pitched, terrified scream.

The other men hollered at him. "Darryl! Darryl, get the fuck out there, you're ruining the fight!"

"Somebody, help him!" I strode over to the next werewolf, screaming at the top of my lungs. The man didn't even look at me; he shouted down at his buddy in the ring. Moving as gracefully as a ballerina, I popped his knee out, dropping him down a couple of inches with a quick jerk, and thrust my blade into the base of his skull, severing his spinal cord.

He dropped like a puppet with the strings cut.

It was a miracle I could do this while I was still so drunk, but my movements were well-practiced. I'd done these thrusts and stabs a million times; I could probably do it in my sleep. I suppose it was a bit like making waffles in your kitchen after coming home blind-drunk from the bar. As long as you kept moving and let your body take control, everything went perfectly.

Two to go.

The remaining wolves were both too busy screaming down into the pit for Darryl to get out, they didn't notice their friend drop dead behind the barrier. "Get out of there, you fuck-knuckle, what the hell are you doing?"

Darryl's body lay motionless, face down on the stained concrete. Blood puddled out underneath him, thick and ruby-red under the spotlights.

"Darryl!" The wolves jolted. "What the fuck? What the actual fuck?" A grizzled-looking man with a scruffy beard

lifted his head and looked around the shed, his eyes wide. "Jeff? Terry?"

"Help him!" I screamed, pointing down into the pit. Someone should give me all the Oscars.

Scruffy Beard's eyes narrowed on me. "Hey! Hey, you!"

Uh oh. There goes my cover. He was still uncertain, though, so I milked it a little as I deliberately stumbled over to him. "What is going on?" I screamed. "What is happening?"

He clamped his hands on my upper arms, his grip strong, and I writhed hysterically. "Stop moving, bitch," he hissed at me.

He should have pinned my hands. Idiot.

I wailed like a baby, whirled around, and slammed my blade into his groin, destroying his femoral artery. "I'm so scared!" I sobbed dramatically, drowning out his shout. "What is *happening?*" With another quick thrust, I drove my blade up into his throat so he couldn't shout anymore.

Whoops, there goes the blood. The arterial spray hit me dead in the face. I quickly ducked out of Scruffy Beard's embrace and pushed his body into the barrier. He toppled over, landing with a sickening thud on the concrete next to Darryl.

I risked a glance down into the pit. The battle goose's white feathers were covered in blood, but he was holding his ground, his thick powerful neck stretched out and hissing as the pit bulls attacked from each side. The dogs were covered in angry red slashes; one had a gaping wet hole where her eye had been.

My gut churned. I had to get him out of there.

One more wolf to go.

Unfortunately, it seemed like the jig was up. The man changed as he came at me, snarling. His thin lips stretched out into a muzzle, razor-sharp teeth pushing out of black gums. Adrenaline scorched through me, fear burning away the last of the alcohol in my veins.

My brain throbbed, and in a split-second I ran through possibilities. How? How was I going to get through this?

Any thrust of my blade would start to heal immediately in his wolf form. He had over two hundred pounds on me, and he was coming at me *fast*. In no time at all he dropped down, moving to a quadrupedal gait. The wolf's shift was lightning-fast, his skin rolled and boiled, exploding in a heavy mass of thick-packed muscle and dark gray fur as he moved towards me. It was too late to even think, so instead, I surrendered to my instincts.

I froze.

Time slowed down, my pulse thudded, my eyes scanned the wolf as he charged towards me. His thoughts were snarly and feral, but I could still see them clearly. A vision blazed within his blood-red aura, an image of an enormous, vicious gray wolf leaping in the air and slamming his enormous paws into a young woman, shoving her to the ground, raking his claws into her, ripping off her soft breasts before tearing out her throat with a sickening rip of his huge jaws.

He jumped. I twisted sideways at the very last second, and he flew by me, smacking headfirst into the concrete wall. He hit the ground, let out a soft whine, shook his head and got back up. A low, bowel-watering snarl came out of his muzzle as he turned and faced me again.

I backed up until I hit the barrier of the pit behind me, shaking my head in terror. "No! Please... no!"

The wolf stalked towards me, saliva dripping from his gaping maw. He let out a low growl, deep in his chest, then he sprang.

I dropped.

The wolf sailed over my head, landing in the pit.

The dogs both let out a yelp and backed away from the blood-covered goose. Now that one of their masters was in the pit with them, they submitted immediately. Ruby, the tan one, scuttled away and lay down next to Darryl's body. Big brown Margot hid behind Scruffy Beard's corpse.

The werewolf scrambled and leapt back up at me immediately, huge jaws snapping and flinging spittle. I moved too late; his claw ripped into my shoulder, tearing fabric and skin. I screamed and slammed my blade into his face sideways, hoping to hit the jugular. I wasn't trained to kill werewolves, though; I hit his cheek, slicing open his muzzle. He reared back, snarling, and scrambled back up the wall, hanging over the barrier, trying to get to me. I swung my blade again frantically, and he snapped, fetid hot breath washed over me, his vicious fangs missed me by a fraction of an inch.

Desperately, I swung my blade, burying it in his neck. The wolf snarled, reached out, hooked his claws back into my jacket and yanked me towards him. Just then, his back paws lost their grip on the wall, and he fell, taking not only Stubby McStabby with him, but me, too.

We both tumbled down into the pit.



I rolled and sprang to my feet. The wolf's eyes locked onto me. Stubby McStabby was still deep in his neck; the handle protruded from the fur like a sinister mushroom, but he acted like it wasn't there. Like me, the wolf was ignoring his injuries.

I backed away, my eyes fixed on his gaping, slavering muzzle.

This was it—I was dead. If the wolf didn't finish me, his fighting dogs would. Both pit bulls were still hunkered down by Darryl's body. Then, I spotted Margot, surreptitiously ripping open the skin at Darryl's back where I'd stabbed him in the kidney.

Oh. They'd been starving the dogs.

Ruby, too, was lying on her belly, her face buried in the stomach of the other dead guy, Mr. Scruffy Beard. They were not a threat, not for now, anyway, not by the way they were frantically and desperately devouring hunks of their dead masters.

I flicked my eyes back to the enormous gray wolf. He had me now, and he knew it. He lowered his head, black eyes fixed on me, two bottomless pits of despair, exactly like the one I'd just found myself in.

He stalked towards me. There was nowhere to run.

No escape.

I kept my eyes open, staring death in the face as it approached me. Images flashed in my mind's eye.

A memory slammed into me.

I was crying. "I'm so sorry," I sobbed. "I can't believe I did that. Again."

Prue waved away a cloud of acrid smoke and hugged me. "Don't worry about it, babe. We'll just get a new microwave. Try not to put any aluminum foil in the next one, okay? And let's keep the timer on low. Under ten minutes, maybe, just to be safe."

I sniffed wetly, inhaling a quivering breath. "I don't know how you put up with me. I'm such an idiot."

"You're not." Prue patted my head gently.

"I am. I don't deserve you."

"Of course you do. Everyone deserves love, Chloe. So what if you're a little absent-minded sometimes! I don't love you because you're a little goofy, you know." She lifted my chin, forcing me to meet her eyes. "I love you because you're creative and imaginative and driven. I love you because you're loyal, and I know you'd defend me to the death. Honesty, Clo," Prue said, laughing. "I wouldn't care if you were a serial killer. You're my best friend, and I love you. I don't care how damaged you are."

Tears filled my eyes. I blinked them back, watching the huge gray wolf stalk towards me.

Suddenly, the air was filled with red feathers, and the most spine-chilling noise I'd ever heard in my life.

A honk of fury.

The blood-soaked goose flew out of nowhere. Lightning-fast, he flicked his neck like a bullwhip, the razor-sharp beak slicing over the werewolf's eye.

What the fuck?

The wolf staggered away, but the goose was relentless. Hissing, he ducked his long neck; and with a *fapfapfap* of furious feet, he charged towards the wolf and whipped his deadly beak under the wolf's muzzle, tearing a ragged hole in his fur. Another expert slice severed tendons on his back paws, then another, cutting a gash in the wolf's belly. With split-second timing and phenomenal ferocity, the goose sliced the giant werewolf to pieces.

I stood and watched, my mouth hanging open.

The concrete floor grew slippery with blood. The gray wolf staggered, skidded and fell. The goose spread his mighty gore-splattered wings, leapt up on his back, let out a honk of triumph, and sunk his upper mandible into the wolf's other eye, plucking it out and tossing it to the ground with disdain.

I couldn't move. I couldn't even breathe.

Then, as if I hadn't seen enough, the goose let out another blood-curdling battle honk and whipped his neck back-and-forward across the wolf's neck, ripping into his skin with his beak like some sort of mutated frenzied excavator. Within seconds, the goose had dug through the hide, exposing the spine.

Moments later, the wolf's head rolled onto the floor.

"Holy shit," I mumbled.

The goose spread his magnificent wings, threw his heck back, and honked in triumph.



I edged forwards slowly.

"You're... You're beautiful."

The goose lowered his head, his pitch-black demon eyes fixed on me. It was like looking directly into the void itself. It was so strange. Within the shiny dark depths of the battlegoose's eyes, I felt an odd sense of peace.

"You didn't need me to save you, did you?"

He cocked his head. Images swirled in his aura—a vision of himself raising his wings high in triumph, a practiced movement. He was used to winning fights. The image was tinged with sadness, though. He didn't like being a killer.

"Me too, buddy," I whispered softly. "Me too."

His thoughts shifted, showing me an image of him hiding his head under his wing, ashamed. He was a great killer. He was praised for it. It made him feel both proud and desperately ashamed.

I knelt down on one knee. "I understand," I whispered. "It was the same for me. I got rewards and praise for killing. If I did a good job, if I completed an assignment quickly and cleanly, he would be *so* proud of me." My voice hitched. "And I started feeling proud of myself, too." I let out a bitter chuckle and gestured around the pit. "He would have had a heart attack if he saw this. So much mess..."

The concrete floor was soddened with blood. Jeff, my bravest tormentor, lay dead over the barrier above my head. The two dogs were still gnawing at the corpses of their masters. I could see the shame and anguish in their eyes, too.

We were all so damaged.

The goose let out a soft honk, showing me a picture of a bucket of grain filled to the top. His victory prize. It made him feel so good.

"I know. I used to get ice-cream sundaes, and I got to pick out a new dress," I said softly. "What's your name, buddy?"

The goose hesitated and lowered his head. For a long moment his thoughts were jumbled and confusing, and I realized his real name couldn't be spoken by a human mouth. After a while, he changed tactics. An image popped into his aura—an enormous, musclebound bald man.

I recognized him and frowned. "Your name is Rock?"

The goose shook his head.

"No? Is it... Johnson?"

Another shake.

"Don't tell me." I pressed my lips together, trying not to giggle. "Your name is Dwayne."

He let out a soft honk in the affirmative and hopped down off the werewolf's corpse, padding on the concrete towards me. His feathers were splattered with blood. Dwayne the battle goose.

"Huh. Nice to meet you, Dwayne." I couldn't tell if he was injured or not; I couldn't see any new wounds, but I could see all his old ones with my enhanced sight.

He nuzzled me, carefully at first, gently, keeping the sharp edge of his beak away. His thoughts made me want to howl in anguish.

"It's okay," I whispered. "Damaged things deserve love, too."



The door banged, the knock echoing around the shed. I didn't even think. I scooped up the goose and tucked him under my arm. Dwayne's feathers felt silky against my skin, even covered with blood.

The knock came again.

"Hello?" a voice bellowed through a tiny crack in the door. "Are you in there, dude?"

I frowned. It was a man's voice. He sounded... weird. His accent was baffling, like a character from a nineties movie or something. He sounded like a young guy from a teen buddy comedy.

"Bro," another male voice called out. "Are you okay?"

"We're here to take you home, dude!" The door rattled. "I hope you haven't killed anyone important," he added in that weird, sing-song voice.

I looked down at Dwayne. He seemed... resigned. "Do you know those guys?"

He honked out a snort.

"I'm going to take that as a yes." I grimaced. "Are they the ones who created you?"

The goose shook his head.

"No?"

He shook his head, quite pointedly. His thoughts told me he wasn't afraid of them. That wasn't necessarily good news for me, though. I was standing in an inch of blood in the middle of a dog-fighting pit, with dead men lying all around me, their bodies in various stages of desecration. Whatever these guys wanted, I doubt they'd keep quiet about this, even

if they thought I was an innocent girl who'd gotten mixed up in a horrifying situation and needed help.

I sighed and met my feathery friend's eyes again. "Is it safe to talk to them?"

He gave a distinctive goosey shrug.

Right.

I sighed. "Thanks, buddy."

I needed to get out of here. First, I needed to get out of this pit. It was five feet deep, but the barrier was another five feet at least. The gate in the barrier was locked from the outside. The ring was small, though, and perfectly round. If I took a run-up, I could use centrifugal force to get myself up the wall high enough to snag my fingers on the edge of the barrier.

Another bang on the door made me flinch. "Dude!"

"Okay." I took a deep breath and gently put my battle goose down. "I can do this."

Dwayne honked. I looked down. In his thoughts, he was resigned. Sad, even. The men outside were his keepers; they were here to take him away. They were strange men, powerful. High-tech gadgets and magical charms blinked and shimmered in their hands.

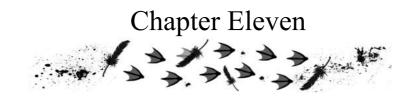
They were coming here to secure the battle goose. They were going to lock him away. The enclosure he showed me in his thoughts was big, with an artificial pond. But it was still a cage. He'd be alone, which he was okay with. But nobody would love him.

Nobody would ever love him.

Tears welled up in my eyes; I tried blinking them back, but they kept coming. Oh, shit. It was finally happening. My mental breakdown was long overdue. I picked up the goose again, burying my face in his silky feathers, and sobbed like a baby.

The door banged again and crashed open.

Fuck.



A man's face appeared over the barrier, looking down at me. His curly blond hair was a nice little mop, and he wore a boxy cropped t-shirt. He blinked down at me. "Ohhh," he drawled forlornly, taking in the scene. "This is *most* non-triumphant."

Another man's head popped over the barrier. This one had dark floppy hair, and a matching vacant expression on his face. He wore a black vest over a t-shirt. "Whoa. Most bodacious babe, do you require any assistance?"

"Oh, no," I said, wiping the tears from my face. "I'm okay. I'm doing just fine."

With twin expressions of disbelief, the strangers looked at the mangled corpses on the concrete, the body hanging over the barrier, and finally, at the two enormous pit bulls munching on the corpses in the corner. "Just fine, huh?"

These men were *so* strange. I stared at them, mentally cataloging the outfits, the hair, the odd, gleaming thick metal bracelets on their wrists. Their eyes were intelligent and sharp; their expressions didn't match the dumb nineties rock-dude accents.

It wasn't just a cover. These two weren't even slightly human.

The goose wasn't some military experiment. He wasn't from this dimension. Of course, the keepers who'd come to get him weren't either.

I cocked my head. "You boys aren't from around here, huh?"

The blond turned to his friend, wide-eyed. "Dude, I *told* you! You gotta pick a reference from *this* decade."

"Bro," the dark-haired one replied, fiddling with a thick gold bracelet. "I *did* choose a reference from this decade. This excellent male is one of the most popular dudes in this realm right now."

The blond let out an exaggerated huff of exasperation and turned to face me. "Most beautiful babe," he called down. "Let us assist you. Pass us our little bird friend, there."

"No."

They both frowned in tandem. "Naw?"

"I won't let you take him."

They blinked, confused. The blond one cleared his throat loudly. "Uh... I don't want to scare you, babe, but that lil guy is *most* bogus. He is unfortunately dangerous."

"Well... yeah. But so am I. I think he should stay with me."

Twin expressions of disbelief rolled over their faces. "We're good dudes, I promise," the dark-haired one called out. "He'll be in *most* excellent care."

I stared at their thoughts for a moment. I couldn't make sense of most of the images I was seeing—puffy figures with gentle expressions bounced around slowly within their auras, a little like marshmallow men cavorting happily on the moon. Was that their actual form?

"We gotta keep him safe, babe," he added.

It was bizarre. It didn't matter, though. I wasn't going to let Dwayne go.

I shook my head. "I'll keep him safe."

"No, like keep the general public safe from *him*, I mean," the blond drawled. "He's had a most bogus existence, you know. He might snap."

The dark-haired one nodded enthusiastically. "He's, uh, like, a rescue. He's damaged."

The tears immediately welled up in my eyes again. I clutched the goose tighter. "Damaged things deserve love, too."

"Whoa," they said in unison. They leaned back, facing each other.

"That beautiful babe is *most* unhinged," the dark-haired one drawled.

"Yuh. The gur'akkavon seems to like her, though."

"They're best buddies already."

"Compadres."

They nodded at each other seriously.

"Well... what do we do? The keeper is expecting us to bring back a rescue."

The blond cleared his throat awkwardly and turned back to me. "Uh... Babe?" He tilted his head, looking down at me. "Have you considered, like, therapy?"

I laughed and wiped my face again. The tears just wouldn't stop. "All the therapy in the world will not fix me."

"Bogus," they said sadly, perfectly in unison.

"I need him." My voice trembled. "We need each other. I'll take care of him, I promise. He'll blend in well here, nobody will suspect anything. I'll make him as happy as possible."

The strangers huddled together. "Old gur'akkavon should get the chance to be happy, dude."

"She should, too. That babe is *most* distraught."

"Will gur'akkavon make her happy?"

"Maybe. He might kill her, though."

"Huh."

"Huh."

The dark-haired one leaned over the barrier again. "Y'know, I read that most people in this realm find happiness in service to others. Do you think you could maybe... serve people? *That* might make you happy."

"I don't know how to serve people." I shrugged. "I'm only good at killing people."

The dark-haired man hesitated for a second, then brightened. "Have you tried... killing in the service of others, then?"

I stared at him for a long moment. "Killing... in the service... of others?"

I'd only ever killed on assignment before. And now, for vengeance. What did "killing in the service of others" mean?

Suddenly, an image of the bartender, Cherry, popped into my mind. Cherry was a prisoner of the monster, Javier. If Javier were gone, Cherry would be free. And she'd inherit the bar.

How had this never occurred to me before? "Killing in the service of *others*?" I breathed out slowly.

"Yuh!" He grinned at me happily. "Like, do it to help other people!"

"Dude." The blond nudged him. "I think your translator cuff might be broken. Killing means, like, murder."

"Well, the customs in this realm are pretty brutal."

I choked back a laugh. "Listen," I called out. "If you have to take a rescue back with you, why don't you take those two girls?" I pointed at the blood-soaked pit bulls. "They're orphaned and damaged. They need a home. Just tell your boss you messed up."

The strange men frowned, turned, and faced each other again. "Dude."

There was a beat of silence.

"I mean, we could." The blond shrugged.

"Or we could tell her that gur'akkavon got his mava*click*ammi activated, and he went through his *rrrr*ikkavon. We'll just tell her that those two are gur'akkavon's final form. She won't know."

The blond nodded. "It's not like she's studied vara'moglians in their own realm, or anything."

"And I don't really want to try to wrangle gur'akkavon into a porsnakkstarna. Especially if he doesn't want to go. He'll put up a fight, for sure."

I watched them, my eyes wide, as they clicked and popped their way through the words that obviously didn't translate into human early-nineties rocker-speak.

They both shrugged in unison. "It could work."

"Excellent." The blond turned back and fiddled with the gold bracelet on his wrist for a second. Then, he opened his mouth and let out a series of weird barks and growls.

The pit bull's heads jerked up. They watched the blond man snort, tilt his head, lean to the side, and pointedly yawn. After a second, both dogs got to their feet and trotted towards them.

The strangers opened the gate. Both scarred, bleeding, vicious dogs obediently leapt out of the pit.

"So, bodacious babe," the dark-haired man blinked at me. "Do you need any help?"

"Uh, no." My eyes were bugging out as I watched the blond draw a line in the air from above his head, right to the ground. A dark fissure appeared, a crack in reality. Silver sparkles zipped around within the darkness. "I... I think I'll be okay."

The dogs both leapt into the crack. The blond gave me a wave and jumped after them, disappearing into nothingness. I blinked.

"Excellent," the dark-haired nodded, grinning. "Bye, babe! Catch you later, gur'akkavon, dude!" With a happy wave, he jumped into the crack and disappeared.



I tapped at the window. Javier had his back to me—I could see his head facing towards the TV on the opposite wall. The volume was way too loud. He couldn't hear me over the blaring game. I tapped again.

Dwayne was safely stashed in my car, happily munching on the trail mix I kept in my bug-out bag. He had wanted to come with me—he wanted to help—but I talked him out of it. This was what I was good at.

It took me two minutes to clear the scene in the dogfighting shed. I grabbed my phone from the dead werewolf's pocket, retrieved Stubby McStabby from the other guys' neck, wiped Jeff's palms down, removing traces of my DNA, and left a few blonde hairs tangled in his fingers.

The hairs weren't mine. I'd gotten them from a particularly nasty groupie that had been hanging around with the entertainment lawyer I'd killed yesterday. I stashed her hair away in my cover-up kit. I had blood samples, hair, and bits of broken nail all neatly catalogued in my kit for this very purpose. The groupie had looked a little like me, and, as a bonus, her name had been Annalyn. When the police descended on the blood-soaked dogfighting shed, they wouldn't find any trace of me. They'd find mangled bodies and men who'd obviously gotten into a vicious knife fight.

Chloe West had never been here. I just had one more thing left to do.

The stranger's words kept rattling around in my brain. *Kill in the service of others*.

The idea made me feel.... Hopeful. Yes, I was a monster. I was good at killing. I craved the hunt. I savored the triumph of besting an enemy and relished the satisfaction of a clean kill, even when it brought me shame and pain. But, maybe, if I killed other monsters...

Maybe one day I would find peace.

I was more than happy to test my theory, and the perfect test subject was only a few yards away. I tapped on the window again, harder this time. Javier's head jerked. He turned around and saw me in the window.

My face was still tear-stained. I waved at him despondently.

A slow smirk came over his face. He hit the mute button on his remote and got up, swaggering towards the window. As soon as he unlatched it and cracked it open, I let my lip wobble. "I'm sorry to bug you like this."

His eyes ran over me, hot and hungry. "What's up, darling?"

"My dad got held up," I whimpered. "There's a tree down over the freeway. He's not coming, not tonight, anyway."

"That's too bad." Javier's thoughts shifted. He would have plenty of time to get rid of my body...

"I'm still a little drunk," I pouted. "Those guys from before said I could sleep it off in that shed out back, but they're being *so* mean to me!"

Javier chuckled darkly. "Is that right? You want me to come out to that shed and have words with them?"

"Uh-huh," I said in a little voice. "I just want to go to sleep."

"No problem, sweetheart. I'll come rescue you. Wait out here for me, okay?"

I nodded and backed away from the window. He took sixty-three seconds to make his way out the door. As it swung open, I spotted Cherry behind the bar, watching her monster as he walked out.

She was holding a phone. Her hands were shaking. The desperation in her thoughts cut me to the bone.

She was going to call the police.

The tears that welled up in my eyes were genuine. *Hold on, Cherry. Give me five minutes.*

"Come here, sweetheart." Javier put his arm around me, pulling me close. "That shed isn't a good place to sleep, you

know," he said. "It's not safe." A smirk pulled at his lips. "I don't want you to have a tragic accident."

I smiled up at him, twirling Stubby McStabby in my fingers behind my back. "That's so sweet."

I was good at suicides. But tragic accidents were my specialty.

Want to Read More about Chloe and the Battle Goose?

Check out the first book in the series: Vicious Creatures



You can also find the rest of Lauretta's books here.



About Lauretta Hignett

A raving fangirl for all things paranormal, supernatural, magical and fantastical, Lauretta writes fun, fast-paced Urban Fantasy – unique, kickass characters and madcap adventures with a dash of romance and loads of laughs.

She's a massive fan of anything shifter, witch or vampire, she loves a plot twist, hates cliffhangers, and always keeps her readers on their toes.

When she's not writing, Lauretta enjoys crazy fad diets, sunshine, her two little children, weird craft projects and massive amounts of dark chocolate. You'll often find her staring into space or muttering to herself in weird voices. Just ignore her. She'll come back to reality eventually.







The Song of The Wild

By C.N. Rowan



The Song of the Wild by C.N. Rowan

Aicha Kandachi, Moroccan princess and Killer of Men, is forced to fight a dangerous, yet beautiful beast in order to save the idiot she's guarding. Will she survive the night and gain a new title to her name? Or will she die staring up at the stars?

Chapter One

Mount Lebanon, 3 May 1211



Many men are said to be educated. Many need said education corrected. Mainly by a swift, precise kick to what they believe makes them men.

The man sitting in front of me is a prime example of just that. He prods at the pile of sticks he has unsuccessfully attempted to set alight, wearing an expression as though a djinn might have stolen away the flames when he wasn't looking. His outrage with the state of the campfire, though, is not enough to interfere with his diatribe. Or to ask for my help, considering I could ignite them with a thought.

'... and, of course, the Guardian, peace be upon him, is too literal in his understanding. A wise man—' The man by the fire's stressing of this does not lend belief to his claimed credence. '—but all too literal in his interpretation of the texts. Women are just naturally less *civilized*, more ruled by their emotions than by the truths revealed by the scholars and the stars. I mean no offence to you and your sex of course, *lalla* Kandicha, may you ever be blessed by your ancestors and guided by their wisdom.'

Beautifully couched. The poetry of a scholarly education. And yet I have yet to discover a time that a sentence that assured no intent for offence did not, in fact, deliver it.

That Zakariya feels confident enough to say such things in front of a woman capable of setting his brain on fire is due to three reasons:

One, his standing as the Guardian's assigned successor. As the wisest of the Druze elders, his wisdom is respected throughout the Arabic world. As the Guardian of the Aab-Al-Hayaat? The whole *talented* world respects his *talent* and power.

Two, his drinking of the Aab-Al-Hayaat, the Waters Of Life, which has given him immortality. Indestructibility. Any damage wrought on his form heals. Instantly.

Three, what dangles between his legs. Which is why I remain firmly of the opinion that jolting them *-hard-* remains the best course of correction for the faults in his education.

I am beyond wearied by my time in the company of this man. Of men in general. They have rarely stood themselves in good stead in my eyes. Not in my first life – before I found magic, discovered my *talent*. When the swaying of my hips swayed the Portuguese raiders who'd come to slaughter my people. Who found their own throats slit by my cold blade instead.

I saved them all. And my reward? The cold closure in my husband's eyes when he saw me after. Naked and bloodbathed. So glad to be alive. So sickened by the sight of me.

Hypocrite.

"... areas of strength, of course. The culinary arts for example. A form of poetry all of its own..."

Zakariya drones on, as he finally gets the fire going. His voice isn't unpleasant. He's a skilled orator – the voice of the Guardian, fulfilling his day-to-day roles. Guiding the tribes. Protecting the Druze. Keeping the Aab-Al-Hayaat secret and safe. He's the Guardian's trusted right hand. The man all go to if they seek his guidance.

It's funny what a hundred years of gifted authority will do to the male ego though. Not that it takes much to inflate it.

I've been with the Druze, as outsiders call this most recent offshoot of Islam that flourishes in this region, for almost as long now. Found a form of peace here. Dark roads brought me. I've studied *talent* when offered. Demanded to learn it when it was denied, forcing their acquiescence. Learned by blade and book. And often?

I've needed to correct a learned man's education.

I'm not a Druze. Not of the tribes. Not born *Tanoukhiyoun*. Not truly of the *al-Muwahhidun*. But they've accepted me.

And in their strange faith, I've found a truth that resonates. Of a life lived over and over. Many lives. Souls reborn into new forms. Memories forgotten but unchanged. A path to enlightenment.

A path to peace.

At least until Zakariya opens his mouth.

"... even you must accept that, eh, *lalla*? The natural superiority of the male?"

Fascinating. Nearly a hundred years we've known each other. Nearly a hundred years since the Guardian opened his door to a half-wild woman demanding teaching. Even then, the flames leapt to my fingers on demand. The earth shook when I danced if I desired. The winds wailed like a grief-stricken widow to rend the clothes of any I marked for the grave.

Nearly a hundred years of living this close. And still he sees only a woman.

He doesn't see the wild.

I steady myself. Check my rising ire. Remind myself of the love I bear for the Guardian. That he has asked me to accompany Zakariya, to guide him on this journey, to keep him safe. Even from his own idiocy and my temper. Of course, he can heal. But he can't fight. Not like I can, anyhow. Healing doesn't keep you from being captured, used as a tool in forced negotiations. We cannot seem weak. Thus I am here. For now. Once the Guardian goes – once he chooses to move on, I, too, will move on, I think. The idea of living under Zakariya's purview doesn't suit my temperament. I shall seek enlightenment elsewhere.

Although I may educate Zakariya before I do so. Remind him of the humble, intelligent scholar he was when we first met. His ego has inflated at a rate greater than his waistline after having gained the stature of anointed successor.

The mountain air carries the indescribable freshness of a crystal-clear stream, running untamed despite winter's grip. That same cleanness. Snow over the tracks of forgotten feet. That's what it makes me think of. So different from the hot,

cleansing smell of the sands I crossed on my way here from the coast of Casablanca, which is angered at being disturbed. Hungry when stirred. Quick to flense.

The trees are still so exotic for me. Permanently cloaked in greens. Oaks and pines make me think of the Atlas Mountains. I only walked those after Al-Jadida turned its collective back on me. Where once I was duchess, princess, protector of my people. A people who rejected me just as my husband did. They drove me away from my home for using my body to save them from being razed to the ground by Portuguese pirates. A leader must bear the cost even when her people would never pay it.

These are not those forests. Any more than those mountainside forests were the palm groves of my Casablancan coast.

The ignorance of men, however, appears universal.

'Zakariya.' I draw breath. Refuse him his honorific of "anointed". His addition of *lalla* to me, supposedly to pay me homage? A form of deceit. Dishonest. I'll not play his game. If I cannot perform the physical act I wish, then I shall castrate him verbally. No lies told.

Except. Except, as I inflate my lungs to deflate his ego, I see something. A glimpse of flashing blond. An ivoried spear, unimaginable in magnitude. Too long for a lancer. Too high for a spear-bearer to hoist.

And it is not a spear either. Not a smooth tapering blade-length. Instead, along it are nobbles, as though the remnants of sawn-off branches from a tree of bone, each with a hollowed hole in its centre. Those breaks along the blade do not disguise the weapon which I can now see is coming out of a creature's forehead as it steps daintily out from among the darkened trees.

'You must acknowledge the truth, Aicha!'

At any other moment? That overfamiliarity might have been the final snapping point. Where I snapped something off him. Then possibly fed it to him afterwards.

'You must shut up now, Zakariya!' I hiss at him.

All my attention stays riveted on the creature in front of me. I am from a people who appreciate horses, who love the equine in both capacity and beauty. Many are the poems written to describe a single, particular stallion's grace. The way their muscles ripple beneath sheen-coated skin in a movement that flows like shifting sands. The hammering beat of hooves travelling up the backbone until you can taste them in your teeth. I have had horses I valued more highly than any of my people, my family. And who proved their worth more than any of them too.

This is not a horse. No. This is what horses might pray to when left alone and the dark draws in.

It is white. Something that, in itself, marks out the creature. I have never yet seen a white horse. Heard tell of them, but they have never come to the shores I've crossed. Not at home in Morocco. Not across the Caliphate as I travelled east.

And then there is the size.

Were a giant of legend – Sufax, perhaps, or Teryiel herself to climb onto its back, I doubt it would bow or break. Its fetlock reaches my chest at an estimate. Beautiful as it is, I'm not about to approach and measure myself against it. Because I can see its eyes.

These are not the dewy, lash-crowned eyes of a soft-hearted mare. Nor the staring challenge of a stallion in heat. Not even the maddened blood-streaked gaze of a wild and wounded horse, blood and foam flecking its muzzle.

No. These are the eyes of something else. A creature one would make an error in mistaking for a beast. Clever. Cunning. And very aware.

Zakariya has caught on now. It took him a moment as he was spluttering in outrage. I have no doubt he was preparing to launch into a diatribe. How dare I? Who do I think I am?

I know who I am. That is why I dare. And no man will force me not to. My own choice. Always.

Luckily for him, the gigantic horn-crowned equus has now caught his eye. And his head twists, his mouth dropping open

to gape. Amazement. Perhaps something else. I see the widening of his eyes, then the narrowing. Fear? Contemplation?

Avarice?

'Shadhavar!' One word, hardly said. A breath more than a word. It catches me by surprise. Tickles a half-remembered story told among the heat of the cooking sands. Huddled in the shade, waiting for the moment to dig dinner back out of the ground. Tales to the children from the collective mothers in the palm-shadows.

Shadhavar. The hollow-horned horse. Of course. Zakariya shows, for a moment, his scholarly leanings. The knowledge and learning accrued. The wisdom that gained him the position of Anointed One.

Before the title went to his head, apparently choking out the aforementioned wisdom as it went. At least based on our time together. And, of course, based on what he does next.

The shadhavar tosses its head. Its mane spreads and shimmers like a thousand filigrees of white-gold thread. Muscles bunch in the glistening neck, thicker than my chest. And the horn...

Sings.

Not loud. Not a celebratory chant of male victory in war or over women, the sort sung after battle or before bed. Nor the keening high notes of the elders. Or the songs when the women gather in private. Where whispers of who we once were, who we should be might get passed about.

No. This is more like the hush lowing of a mother to a beloved offspring. One who is distressed, restless. When they seek to calm with soothing noises that need no syllables. Just a message passed to their child. Reassurance. "Here I am, and here you are." A promise of place, that all is right in the world.

Such is the promise the notes carry across the clearing to us. Peace. Belonging. It is wonderful. Wondrous, even. Something to be drunk in, luxuriated in. A creature of such rarity that even for those awake to the world below, the world

of *talent*, it is but a tale. And a tune gifted to us that, perhaps, no others in our time will ever hear. Something beyond precious.

Zakariya steps forward. The movement pulls my attention back to him. The glitter in *his* eyes is not tears.

'They say,' he murmurs, his eyes transfixed on the creature across from us. Not by the song though. 'They say Umayya ibn Abd Shams himself, God's mercy to him, owned the horn of a shadhavar. That when the weight of the caliphate or the grief of life bore down upon him, he would bring it from his most guarded of storerooms and play but a single note on it. And all the shadows would flee from his soul.'

He takes another step. 'And that when he played two notes to gathered nobles and dignitaries, all would weep and acknowledge him the greatest of men.'

Ah. Of course. That is what he takes from this present we have been gifted. A further opportunity for stature.

'Zakariya...' I try to breathe so much into that one soft word. Warning. Caution. Threat. Promise. Whether from the shadhavar or from myself.

He hears none of it. Of course he doesn't. Instead he steps forward once more...

And the shadhavar startles.

Its head twists towards him. Notes roll out, wind-guided down the branches, through the horn's hollow. The tune is jauntier, edgier. Its front hooves scuff, then push. The creature rears up, tree high. Not male, apparently. Or, at least, I see no manhood. Perhaps I do it a disservice to assume it would be so proudly displayed as a stallion. Or a man.

It moves. Kicks, twists, a half-leap that turns it around, its hooves finding purchase on the cool soil underfoot. Zakariya, the thrice-accursed fool, draws his sword and stumbles forward. His feet scuff at the looser earth; grass is kicked up behind as he tries to run.

The shadhavar does not stumble. It is grace incarnate as it breaks from its half-turn, straight into a gallop, twisting around

the dense-packed oaks...

Then it is gone.

And a second later so is Zakariya. He regains his footing and follows. Lurching around bough and sapling. Swallowed by the dark of the woods.

He is not grace incarnate.

I stand alone in the flickering of the fire's warmth. Where safety is. Where we should stay.

Running alone into the forest at night is the path of fools. A quick route to an early grave.

This is what happens when men are allowed to act without restraint – preferably the sort that chain them up and keep them silent. Women might actually get things done without everyone killing each other to prove who has the biggest sword.

Incidentally, the answer to that is "me". I have the biggest sword. Men tend to start feeling quite inadequate when I use it.

I sigh.

Losing Zakariya to the *wahsh*, the wild and untamed world beyond, would not bother me. But it would deeply upset the Guardian. And so, once more, I do what I would not choose to do. Venture from safety to a threat I would have naught to do with. And all to save a fool from his own choices. Because it is expected of me by others.

There is a reason I have spent much of the past few hundred years alone.

But I do care for the Guardian. For the unnecessary kindness he showed me from the day I showed up at his door. And for the Druze who took me in when the *wahsh*, the wild, inside of me became too loud. When the threat of it becoming all of me became too strong. It is essential for us to remember our humanity sometimes, to reconnect. It is too easy, otherwise, to forget there is value in any life. In anything but ourselves.

I will not be consumed by the dark. I will not fear it.

And so I sigh. Pulling on my *talent*, I send out a dancing were-light that bobs and weaves round bough and branch, lighting up my path. I follow the tracks of a fool into the night's embrace.

I am not a shadhavar in grace. Thankfully, neither am I Zakariya.

Chapter Two

Mount Lebanon, 3 May 1211



I do not flow through the forest gaps. Do not leap and pivot through the awning of leaves. The bracken fronds break under my feet. They do not spring back as at the shadhavar's light touch.

I could not have tracked the creature. Not in this light. Not even with my magic. Luckily, I do not need to.

Zakariya has marked his passage well. Cracked branches hang from every tree like a man after the drink has taken his belly – bent double, heaving out his poor choices. Longer grasses are torn, strewn about left and right. As I continue, I smell the tang. A smell that takes me to the fetes in Al-Jadida, when sheep are given up in celebration, half-muttered sidewords offering them as sacrifices to those gods we worshipped before.

That takes me back to those happy times. Among my people. Leading the celebrations. Slitting the lamb's throat to the cheers of all.

And it takes me elsewhere to. To a room full of drunken Portuguese pirates. Acting for my people. Dancing. Seducing. Kissing lips. Before cutting throats, though none cheered me on.

I know the smell of blood.

So tracking my charge isn't difficult.

The fronds may break as I pass, but they are like those raiders were in their final moments. No sounds of protest. No raising of alarms. The trees do not rake at me. Their slimmed and longer reaching twigs may be like claws, but I am the wind. I dance around them as they whistle. No shadhavar, perhaps. But I have grace enough. Sufficient that the forest and I might whirl around one another, and neither leaves a mark.

Deep shadows flitter. The moonlight breaks through the canopy enough for that. All it does is add depth, make the umbra undulate, though it's still solid and impenetrable. Almost. There is a path to the heart of the dark. Walk it only if you are sure.

I am not. One day, I might walk that way. Out of the world men have built. Cementing their asinine braying into the very earth itself. Structures constructed from ego and power. Worthless as a whole.

But not as an individual. That is what I seek. Not the masses. Too often they disappoint. And their leaders? Almost always. Even when achievements are laudable, oftentimes their motivations are laughable. And those led are so often reduced by those above. By force. By choice. I've not seen much to convince me otherwise.

No. I'll not be kept human by the whole of our species. Instead, I seek out singular value. Find me the exception, not the rule. The open hand offered out. And not for praise. Not in expectation of return. But because it is right.

Those guided by love. Who do not turn their back on those who pretend to do the same, even if it leaves them skindrenched and heartbroken.

My skin is not drenched now. Not yet. But the first sweat beads are forming. I can feel that premier half-hitch in my throat, a prediction of the gulps, the gasps I could start needing if I push just *that* much harder. No wonder I can smell blood. Zakariya must have scratched himself half to pieces to have moved at such a clip.

But it still doesn't make sense.

The shadhavar is home. That first leaping bound into the foliage's maw should have been enough. We are not wolves to lope after a fleeing prey. And even the fastest of such predators could not keep pace here. In the daylight on horseback? Perhaps a human might stand a chance. Even then, though, the odds would be minute at catching the beast.

And yet Zakariya has not lost its trail. Something that should have happened about five seconds after the creature started moving.

We are now minutes into this impossible hunt and that makes no sense. Zakariya's destructive blundering through the woods might keep him ahead of me. But it should not keep apace of the shadhavar.

Something is wrong. And it is enough to make me quicken my pace, to push till the breaths are gulped down at last. For the Guardian, yes. But it seems I have kept some of my humanity after all. Because Zakariya is my charge.

The Guardian's heart is so big, he might forgive me his loss. My pride will not.

So I push myself as I always have. To be faster. To be stronger. To be better than I am expected to be. The expectations of others are always so narrow, so petty, so marred. I have my own expectations.

Those are what I live up to.

Of course, a key ingredient in that is *living*. Rock soup without the rock is just water, after all. So when I see the clearing ahead, when the breeze brings stronger that smell of iron and loam that speaks of earth and blood, I release my were-light and surround myself in the dark. But I do not plunge out into the glade, treating the air like a swan-dive into a mirrored water's surface. Do not lunge from the dark's embrace towards the moon-lit sward however much I want to.

And I do want to. Because I can hear the shadhavar's song.

Chapter Three

Mount Lebanon, 3 May 1211



Travel has defined me. This new me. The one after my first life. The one who walked the deserts for two hundred years, seeing the stories about me grow. At times being the monster the stories made me into. The me who rose from the ashes of a burnt down life. Who tasted the flames and found her *talent* in the scorching sands.

The one only a hair's breadth away from becoming the ruinous creature tales already make me out to be. Aicha Kandicha. Killer of Men. Death to see. A vengeful djinn. A tale twisted because of what I did to save those I loved. For daring to use my body and my blade. And sometimes?

Sometimes it would be all to easy to become her.

The things I've done: battling ifrits – towering columns of dust and fire the desert brought to malevolent life; seeking words in the whispers of long dead sorcerers, kept inside bottles that sought to drink me down to keep them company; fed on ghouls I tore limb from limb to learn what their hunger taught them, then smiled at the knowledge through bloodpainted lips.

And I have walked alone. For most of the time. Accompanied by the music that sings the world into existence, life itself. Wheeling bird cries to accompany the drumbeat of my feet falling in the dust, carrying me onward, away from the world of the Talentless, of their precious normality that judged me and made me a thing to fear in the legends that sprang from lies spun off a few tiny fibres of truth.

Always moving forward. But when I paused in my journeys? Touched once more into the world that men have made? It was to see art.

And what is more artful than encountering a true master, one who can twist a lifetime of study into a single moment, a single note? When you encounter a singer, a musician, perhaps both. who's aged, gnarled like the twist of their strings around pegs. An unavoidable quaver embedded in their song voice by years gone by.

But, oh, what depth it gives. When they sing their heart into the world. Not only love, no. The whole of their heart. All that it has been made into by life's wonders and woundings. Their scar tissue peeled back, cracked open to let what lives inside out.

Those are the moments I treasure. The ones I let still ring in my ears to keep the *wahsh's* voice at bay.

The shadhavar? Sings with a thousand lifetimes in a single note.

I cannot put it into words. I have heard the poets talk of describing a colour to a blind man. This is not that. It is more like describing warmth to a block of ice. To explain to a buried stone what it feels like for a feather to ruffle in the breeze of the winds aloft. To explain what it is to be alive to the unhearing dead.

I can almost understand why Zakariya ran headlong in pursuit.

Almost.

Because beautiful though it is, enticing as it is...I recognise a snare. The urge to draw in is the tightening noose.

I am no hungry coney. Nor am I easily led.

So I edge towards the edge of the light-pool, the illuminated opening, the trees pulling back to allow in the sky. The strength of the moon, waxing bright even for normal eyes, is like a summer's dawn after the forest's Stygian enfolding, the inky pitch-black of the depths of the undergrowth.

Enough that I can see what the clearing holds from some way back. Death. For most.

Zakariya is luckier than most. Although I doubt he feels very lucky right now.

He is in the clearing. And all over a good part of it too. No wonder the smell of blood was strong even from a distance. So much has been sprayed across the glade that it is as though the grass is metal, a rusted clockwork wonder made to amaze a long-dead Caliph. That the grass dances under the weight of all that is shed on it? Perhaps because of the breeze. Or perhaps even nature itself dances when the shadhavar sings.

The creature has my charge pinned to a barrel-chested oak. But not cleanly. Not from a single strike straight through the heart. Something simple for him to dangle from. No, it looks to have pierced him through his belly, a low-bent strike for such a gigantesque creature. My guess is Zakariya tried to fling himself backwards out of the way. Failed with the same grace he couldn't manifest in his madcap chase.

Either way, the horn protrudes out from between his shoulder blades. It must run up through a large part of his insides.

I cannot imagine that is very comfortable.

Of course, for most, it wouldn't be very comfortable for only the briefest of moments. The mind would blank, flee away from the pain even as the body gives up. The spirit would be gone mere moments after.

Most have not drunk of the Aab-Al-Hayaat. The Waters of Life that do not allow us to die unless we choose.

Judging by his screams? Zakariya is not far from making that choice.

In a way, he does me a favour. The song of the shadhavar is muted now. I guess he must have skewered my charge just before I approached. It's hard to sing when its horn's holes are blocked by human flesh.

Not that the shadhavar looks bothered. Blood is pouring down the holes and grooves and streaming down along its muzzle while its rough tongue swoops and mops at it blissfully.

Many would say it were not so pretty now, its face painted in the claret of a man. They would be wrong. This is its natural state. It is beautiful.

Chapter Four

Mount Lebanon, 3 May 1211



I have hunted in desperate hunger. When my belly screamed a curse upon ever having been brought into being. When my mind saw nothing but an emptiness so driving, I could have wept had I the moisture to spare.

When I caught something? A rabbit, a desert fox, a wounded hatchling fell from a tree?

I painted myself in my eagerness to consume every morsel left. And it was glorious. Gobbling down gobbets of flesh that tasted better than the finest candied fruit. Blood that washed my face and tasted sweeter than any spiced wine. Responding to our needs. Reverting to our natural state. There is an honesty in that. One we lose in the layered lies-upon-lies that make up the politesse of a society.

The shadhavar is truth. This is what it is. A predator who sings for his supper. And bathes in what is brought to its mouth by what is both bait and blade. I cannot blame it for that. And I can appreciate the beauty in its brutal truth.

I pick my way through the leafy undergrowth. Cling to the shadows. My eyes are hooded by my hair, keeping their whites obscured while still allowing me to see. Nothing betrays us in the dark more quickly than the eyes do.

Some of you may consider me cruel. Uncaring. Perhaps even deliberately leaving him to a slow death. Certainly, it'd make my life easier. And my ears less sore. And my sword hand less itchy each time he speaks.

But no. Because if Zakariya were at any real risk – were he just a normal mortal man, he'd be dead already. That horn must have passed through several of the parts keeping him alive. I'd be amazed if his heart isn't pricked.

But Zakariya is not a normal mortal man. As he'll take great delights in pointing out to you if you are ever unfortunate enough to get with him for any length of time longer than the turn of a single sand clock. He is the Guardian's anointed successor. And so has drunk from the Aab-Al-Hayaat. The Waters of Life themselves. His body is indestructible. He is unkillable.

Although you wouldn't know it from all his blubbering and screaming.

That, at least, does me a favour. My forest craft is good, and I have always been light on my feet, but still. The light is all inside the glade. That helps me by making it easier for the murky surrounding trees to hide me. But it makes seeing where I'm going testing. Particularly in terms of remaining utterly silent. An occasional leaf crackles by a misjudged foot fall, and I freeze. My heart pounding. Expecting the shadhavar to react, to turn readied.

Each time, Zakariya manages to wail at the right volume at the right time. Masking my mistake. Well, well. He has his uses after all, upon my heart's life. I would never have guessed. Not based on the last few decades of puffed-up buffoonery anyhow.

His body shakes, trembles like the last leaf of a storm-wrecked tree. He is not dead. But he could be. If he chooses. And that would displease a man I have chosen as a friend, which is rare for me. It's worth protecting my relationship with the Guardian.

Worth taking a risk for.

I've made it behind the creature now. A tail like silvered starlight swishes in rhythm to the gulping sounds. A drumbeat to Zakariya's screams. I wonder if it is truly music to the shadhavar's ears. Or if he finds it annoying that this particular prey won't hurry up and stop with all that noise.

The flickering hairs are almost hypnotic.

Then the tail lifts, and the shadhavar performs a bodily function anyone who has followed behind a horse has witnessed often. Apparently, even the magical must be mundane at times.

Clearly, I have gained some favour in a life lived before. There is a gap between creeping ivy vines and close huddle branches. One I can pass without a crack or even a rustle if I angle myself right. A sidewards torso twist, my eyes still fixed on the creature preoccupied by turning Zakariya into what is coming out of its rear. I lift my left leg and twist it to clear a grasping thorn-covered vine. Stretch out and down. The right is kicked back. Horizontal. A pivot on the left leg led by the shoulder. And I am back, planted square on two legs, my sword in hand

And the shadhavar none the wiser.

I'm not far from it. Probably ten large strides...if I were foolish enough to advance towards the creature in such a loud and ungainly fashion.

No. I am cautious. Careful. A foot lifted. A knee rotation, slow and soft. No whistle of fabric. No clicking of bones. I'll not risk even my own skeleton betraying me.

Zakariya wails again, and I use the cover to plant my foot. And then it all goes the way of what drops from the shadhavar's behind.

Because Zakariya's eyes, closed previously in agony, come open. Perhaps jolted by the horn's intimate internal examination. Perhaps just because I clearly also did something *wrong* in a previous life, and Zakariya is my punishment for it.

Either way, his gaze, rolling around in his face, fixes on me. And locks there.

'Aicha, *lalla*, save me!' He shrieks at the loudest volume his voice will allow. How he manages it with all the noise he's been making, I have no idea. One would have thought he'd have gouged out all the sounds his throat could make. But no. Somehow he is louder still than when he screamed. An impressive feat.

Of course, it's more than enough to alert the creature whose horn he is impaled upon.

Chapter Five

Mount Lebanon, 3 May 1211



I have no idea if it speaks our language. If it can parse the meaning from the words. I am sure it isn't a necessity. Zakariya couldn't have given me away more if he were my father handing me off into marriage. Nor as quickly as that particular moment happened either.

My only slight satisfaction is that Zakariya pays for it more instantly than I do. The shadhavar rears onto its back legs and wheels around. As it does so, its impaled victim clearly slips another inch or two farther down. The accompanying noise sounds like the jointing of mutton for the fire. Zakariya's expression – and accompanying wail make it obvious how pleasant an experience that was for him.

All my efforts ruined. I purse my lips. Vexatious, to say the least. Now I face off against a legendary beast. Sword against horn...and hooves. And muscles behind them the size of my whole body bunched to stomp me into a tiny little Aicha puddle.

There is only one comfort in that. If the Caliph, ruler of the Islamic world, owns a horn of a shadhavar, they must be killable. I will not be less than one of the soldier men of the Caliphate. Not in this lifetime. That much I swear.

And if I am that bad, this will probably be my last action of this lifetime. So I won't have time to rue the breaking of my vow.

Looks like taking the creature by surprise has won me some respect, at least. It doesn't just charge, aiming to add me to its meat skewer. Instead, it keeps its eyes on me, its head twisting to make sure of it. That's not a delight for Zakariya. Shame. Maybe next time he'll be less blasted obvious.

I make a few testing swings of my blade. Sure enough, the creature is clever enough to understand. Each time the blade

probes, the shadhavar twists back, and Zakariya's body is there to block my path. Each time, I pull back and start searching again.

'Aicha! Aaah!'

Well, almost each time. The shadhavar put the idiot too quickly in my path, so the sweeping sword has just cut a crease across his buttocks.

'It'll heal, Zakariya.' My sympathy levels are low. He will reform instantly from what happened. I will not if it happens to me.

'It still hurts!'

I am almost impressed. I'd imagine with all the agony he's in right now, he'd struggle to notice a little bit more.

'I can't help it.' The shadhavar is regaining its confidence. Now it is not simply blocking my testing forays. The horn's movement is more planned now. It looks at me from under the body-shield it has made of Zakariya, and I can see it's looking for a gap of its own.

I will not survive if it finds one. 'Get out of my way!' If I can get a clean blow in, we might still stand a chance.

'I can't!' he shrieks at me, wailing sobs breaking the syllables up.

'Use your hands. Push against the horn. Get yourself free.' If he tears himself off it, he'll be healed in an instant. Then we can be two versus one. Then we stand a chance.

'I...I can't... I can't!' He just keeps gabbling, blood flicking away from his mouth each time he does.

I spit. I can't help it, though I don't look away. Again, not stupid. But I find this display distasteful in the extreme.

Perhaps you stand in judgement of me. See me as lacking empathy. Uncaring. Fine. I care even less for that than I do for Zakariya's cowardice. For cowardice I name it.

Don't get me wrong. Fear is petrifying. Turns your blood to stone. Your mind grinds to a granite halt. And pain can also grip your thoughts. Throttle them until they turn blue and cease to move.

But Zakariya is to be the next Guardian. And that is not simply a ceremonial title, a floral addition to the leader's name. The Aab-Al-Hayaat must be protected. There will always be those who seek to take what is not theirs. And what is more tempting to the unworthy than a quick route to immortality?

I have sparred with the current Guardian. It had been centuries since a man even came close to besting me in combat before him. If I am honest, it's one of the reasons I have remained. Peace is what he hopes I will learn from our time together. Perhaps I seek only to prepare myself further for war. Of course, he does not seek me to cease being a warrior. But that isn't the battle he would have me win.

He sees the *wahsh* behind my eyes. And he would not lose me to its song.

The horn Zakariya is on is razor-sharp. I have no doubt he is caught around his bones, hanging from his ribs like a maiden's crown on her wedding night. Horrible. Agonising. Debilitating.

Breakable.

My fights with the Guardian have been no holds barred. I've pruned him like a deadwood tree at times. His limbs flew off. His hands scattered left and right as he flipped his weapon from reformed grip to reformed grip without hesitation. The crunch of gristle as my sword lopped off a kneecap to gain the higher ground. Ligaments snapped like a kora's strings, too taut, over-tightened.

And still I never beat him in a battle.

Yet, here is his successor. The warrior-born, apparently, who is going to lead this hidden section of a secretive offshoot of Islam. The Druze have not been named as heretics yet. Not for their beliefs in the cycle of life, where souls are reborn into the world, nor for their dualistic claims of two gods – an evil

creator to balance out the pure spirit from which we came. Not named as heretics.

Yet.

It is only a matter of time.

And when that comes? When, perhaps, those who know of Zakariya's abilities come seeking what he holds? Will he still be such a coward then?

'Pull yourself free!' I cannot hold back some of that visceral disgust. It sits heavy on my tongue. I can taste it in my mouth, a thickening fuzz that coats everything. It makes my teeth tingle.

'No! No, no, noooo!' Still he wails. Still he laments his own situation like a mother on news of her offspring's death. Still he writhes in continuous pain because he is too afraid to take a greater amount for a single moment to see himself free.

Unforgivable.

Of course, during this time, the shadhavar has not been still. Hasn't simply accommodated our discussion. Nor even offered us a cup of sweetened tea, as all civilised beings must drink during a dispute. No, it continued to probe at me as I returned the favour. Each of us wove and sought with our blades. Looking for that momentary opening that would announce an imminent end. This will not be a long battle when the fight properly begins.

The shadhavar canters back a step and turns its head over its left shoulder as though looking behind. For a moment, I think it will break, flee with its new, never-ending buffet still skewered. I ready myself to dive for Zakariya's foot to seize him. To tear him free. Force upon him the action he is too afraid to perform.

It does not seek to flee. Instead, it cracks its head back towards me so viciously, my first thought at the *crack* I hear is it is from the speed, pulling sound from the air like a slingshot's song.

It is not. It is Zakariya's spine.

He howls a new noise – more guttural, more entirely primal. The agony must be unbearable. And yet, still he does not seek to free himself. The fool.

I, however, do not have much time to consider that. For his now loose-swinging legs come hurtling towards my face. And behind that is the rumbling thunder of the shadhavar's hooves.

The speed it can reach from stationary is astonishing. Thankfully, so is mine. I push to the right, launching from my left foot, my blade up to parry. Zakariya's spine is already reforming, cracking back into place, so his legs are pulling back. Not fast enough. The left boot is hurtling towards my temple...

I'd say I'm sorry. But I'm really not. My sword's edge angles and takes off his foot at the ankle. He screams, but I am not knocked unconscious. I remain in the fight. He should be thanking me, really. Perhaps that is what the gurgling, high-pitched keening he is currently performing means.

The cutting mid-air strike yanks me round. I am close to the beast, so close I can smell its breath – hot fetid air that carries with it a smell like salted beef left six days in the sun. The curing no cure for the rot beneath.

For a moment, I think it is enough. I've twisted with my blade, turned so I'm parallel to its flank. There seems to be time to take it all in, to see the way the rib-wrapped muscles press the skin, stretching it to glow like forge-worked silver in the moonlight. The shadhavar is passing next to me, and I have survived the first foray. Escaped. I think it is enough.

And then its hind leg snaps out.

Chapter Six

Mount Lebanon, 3 May 1211



It is a harder angle for it to strike from, and for that I can be thankful. The shaggy hoof, pulled sidewards instead of cleanly back, doesn't connect with my chest. If it did, I suspect it would be the end. Even I would find it hard to fight with one side of my rib cage — and everything contained within obliterated. Hard to fight and hard to live.

Instead, it only connects with my right knee. I can be thankful. The blossoming colours of the pain's sensation as they paint their way up my leg, through my belly, lighting it on fire before grabbing my chest like constricting bars makes it hard to concentrate on giving thanks though. Instead, I concentrate on how I land.

Thankfully, that was my trailing leg it hit as I spun, and my left-hand side is underneath. Falling on my broken knee would risk me blacking out. Not something I suspect I'd survive. Instead, I make contact with my left knee, my shin down. I kick my right leg back from the hip to keep it from contacting, ignoring the scream the knee gives, the reds and purples that appear around my vision. As long as my sight stays spotted with pain, I can live. If it all goes grey, my odds are slim.

I keep my head up. Sure enough, the shadhavar hasn't stopped to take stock. The speed it was travelling at forced it to the other end of the clearing, but it's already wheeled, already closing in on me. I'm posed like a swan, elegant and stable, but in no place to fight. And now I need to make a choice.

Up until now, I've held off from using magic. There's a very good reason for that. I am far from any territory I can claim as mine, meaning there is no connection to draw on, no power to have except what I carry inside myself without rest or meditation. And already I've depleted some, aiding my vision as I tracked the shadhavar's path through the forest's

shadows. My resources are limited. And the chances are high in this particular combat that I will need to heal after.

Plus, many magical creatures are resistant to magic itself. Perhaps the shadhavar isn't. Perhaps when I crept up behind it, I could have lit it up like a bonfire, covered its body in writhing flames that consumed it down to ashes.

Or perhaps it would have done nothing but made it a fire-covered murder horse and made the fight even more impossible than it already is. In situations like this, I have a preference for a more mortal approach. Stick a foot of steel in most thing's hearts, magical or otherwise, and they tend to be at least incapacitated. A simple plan but effective. Or it would have been if Zakariya hadn't been such a loud-mouthed idiot, of course.

So now I have a choice. The magic I have might let me heal completely. I could push it out into my shattered kneecap. Gather splintered shards back together and weave them like a rug repaired by a weaver's skills.

Or I could do this.

The air under the shadhavar pulls inwards. The movement is enough to make the creature stumble slightly. What I'm making – a ball of the air itself that's compressed together follows underneath it, snug between its forelegs as it races back towards me, its speed reduced but far from stopping.

We Berbers have an affinity with the elements. All magicians and magical beings I've encountered connected to our tribe do. Don't ask me why. I can't answer that question, but it remains the truth. And all have our preferences. Mine is fire. But I understand the air too.

I once met a djinn – a real one, not as I've been named by scurrilous, superstitious rumours. He was a master of the air, made of it, a swirling cyclone with storm-cloud eyes. We became friends of sorts. He showed me that there are different parts of the air. Parts that allow us to breathe. Parts that are poisonous if grouped together more tightly.

And parts that love the fire's flames.

I worked the air as I compressed it, filtered it out, spun away the unwanted parts, gathered only that section that seeks to burn. And now, I grant it what it wishes.

I ignite the invisible explosive air underneath the shadhavar's mid-section.

The look on its face – its expression as its forward momentum is changed by the ignition underneath it, carrying it upwards, away from the earth, its hooves flailing for contact in the cool night air, its hind end lifting faster, tilting the beast, so I can see its eyes clearly – the surprise there, utter bafflement and bemusement as to what could possibly be happening, is more comical than any capering by an actor I ever did see.

It definitely didn't spot that coming.

Chapter Seven

Mount Lebanon, 3 May 1211



The shadhavar is not bestial, not stupid even when gifted with sudden flight. Our eyes are locked. It knows who did this. And I see the moment. The moment it decides to try to turn this to its advantage.

The moment when it lowers its head further. When it aims its horn.

Because it's coming back down now. And fast. The momentum it was carrying before getting airborne has not dispersed.

It's coming straight for me.

And I am almost done. One leg out of operation. In this ridiculous position, one leg kneeling, the other splayed back like some morning ritual to warm the body and ready for training. It gives me a good position to wield my blade to parry a horn-strike from ground level. It does not provide any defence against a hurled spear descending at incredible speed from the sky, with an elephant's weight of furious muscle packed up behind it.

I may not have made the best decision here.

No time for regrets though. Just time to move. I hope.

It isn't graceful. I've nothing in contact with the ground to allow me real leverage. No foot or hand to use as a spring, to launch myself away. If I go right, collapse on that knee, then the blackness might take me. All I can do is let my body weight carry me left. Pivot over the lower part of my left leg. Fall with intent. Carry myself away from the descending missile.

It's almost enough. Almost.

The horn doesn't spear me through the chest bone. That was the aim. I could read it in the creature's eyes. It wanted to pin me straight through the middle, lock me – dead or dying onto the grass-anchored soil below.

It doesn't manage that. It hits my right arm instead, sliding into the upper muscle as I roll away. Arrests my movement left. Spins me back towards it and brings me crashing to the ground. And the full weight of Zakariya collides with me as the horn penetrates through and buries deep into the earth behind.

For a moment, I can't breathe. The combination of the collision, the crushing weight, and the fresh detonation of furious mind-overloading pain is too much. My right knee sings a harmony of deleterious screams with my now horn-pinned bicep too.

There's grey round my vision's edges. A darkening grey. The blackness is close, coming calling.

But I'm not ready for visitors. In no mood to accommodate them. Because beneath the pain, there is a part of me that is astonished. Zakariya might feel crushing. But the impact of the shadhavar behind it should have been an instant ending. Tonnes of muscle crushing me like a popped grape. And it is only as I push the darkness back, habituate myself to the new crescendos of pain, embrace and accept them, that my mind plays back what happened.

A noise I didn't register at first – pain blind, dumb, and deaf. A crack that echoed off the trees themselves. That even now carries back to me off distant boughs. The shadhavar's horn has snapped clean off.

I blink my vision back, force it to see once more, to take in the clearing. Above me, Zakariya is still weeping and screaming, unaware of how fortunate we are that I am still alive. He would have survived being crushed by the shadhavar. I would not have, taking away his only source of rescue. Casting my gaze around, I spot the shadhavar. And see how ridiculously lucky we got.

The creature has crashed to the ground less than a foot's length from my left side. A jagged half-spur of bone, the length of a throwing knife, still protrudes from its forehead. It

lies on its side, its chest heaving, steam pouring from its muzzle.

What it isn't, is dead.

It should be. That explosion was a deadly impact for most creatures. It should have shredded its underbelly even more effectively than the horn strike did to Zakariya. Loops of pinkred intestines should be strewn back the length of the clearing.

The shadhavar should be dead. But it is not.

It is stunned, that much is clear. The two impacts – first the explosion, then the ground have taken the wind from its sails. Not to mention, however horrendous the snapping horn must have felt.

But it is not dead. And it is not disarmed. Not fully. That knife-blade forehead still looks devastatingly effective. Plus one quick stomp of a hoof through my forehead will be enough to bring my story to the swiftest of closings.

And it is starting to come around.

It shakes its head, pink foam blossoming out, falling to cling like dew on the grass. Then it bends its forelegs and rolls, panting, starting to seek regaining its feet.

We don't have much time.

Zakariya is just above me. He twisted on impact, the horn having torn into a new and undoubtedly agonisingly interesting position. Although it's still not enough encouragement to make him tear himself free. What it does mean is he, too, can see the shadhavar through his blubbering tears. And that he can twist his head enough to see me. To make eye contact.

'Please, *lalla*,' he whimpers. 'P...please... pl...ease save me...'

Him. Just him. I am now, most definitely, furious.

'I have!' The words are hissed out, venomous as a coil sprung snake. 'I've done everything! Pull yourself free! Finish the shadhavar while you can! Show your worth, you useless cretin!'

He shakes his head, showering me in spit and blood and his pathetic tears as he does so. Unwilling or unable. It makes no difference either way.

A useless cretin he remains.

So I keep my eyes on him. Transfix him like a snake about to strike. Let him read the inexpressible fury therein. I ignore the huffing snorts of the creature less than a body's length away, seeking to regain its feet and finish us off. I keep him in my view, make him watch as I do what he cannot, will not.

I tear myself free.

What a peculiar sensation that is. There is some sympathy in us, as thinking creatures. Some understanding we can get from an action even if it is not done to us. So when we slice through meat, when we joint a beast ready for cooking, when the blade bites into the flesh and we feel the fibrous substance slice and part? There is something inside us that can understand it. That can contemplate it and think, a butcher's knife passing through my own tenderised meat might feel like that. It's the same part of us that understands what a substance we would never put in our mouth would taste like. That knows the feel of a textured artwork without needing to touch.

The most peculiar thing of slicing through my own arm on a razor sharp horn is that it feels precisely like I imagined it would the split moment before I did it. And yet it still hurts more than I could ever imagine.

I dig the fingers of my left hand into the cold, damp earth, wondering as I do if it is wet with the night's tears or with all we've shed from our bodies across it in the last few minutes. Then I start to heave. To drag myself out from under Zakariya's good-as-dead weight. He doesn't help me. But I never stop staring either. Never release him from witnessing it. I force myself free and roll back onto my left side, dismissing him as I go. Then I look to what really matters here and now. Pushing myself back up onto my left knee, my right arm dangling, blood pouring out like libations onto the ground, I look to the shadhayar.

The creature has righted itself. Forelegs bent under, it is pushing itself back up to standing, though there's a glassiness to its eyes. I'm glad I've managed to stun it. Even if it's taken everything I have.

The very last of my *talent* is being forced into my right knee. Not enough to heal it properly. Enough it might let me put some weight on it. Hopefully. There's a dribble, a dying spring's gasp, left over to slow some of the bleeding from my right arm. That's a mess. Chances of me healing it properly without at least twelve hours of sleep is zero. But not bleeding to death is a priority still.

The shadhavar raises its head, and again our gazes lock. It continues to cautiously regain its feet, rising slowly. Reaching my left hand out, I push up, swing my left foot flat, and mirror it, standing again. My sword is nearby, the blade-glints catching the corner of my eye as I move. Once I've enough balance so as not to topple straight over, I reach out and wrap my left hand around it, grip it tight.

As one, in synchronised rhythm, a bloodied horse with a coat like liquid moonlight and its ragged little shadow, the shadhavar and I rise.

Chapter Eight

Mount Lebanon, 3 May 1211



We stand here for a moment. If you can call what I am doing standing. The toes of my right foot touch the ground, but all my weight is on the left. My sword is up – a half-salute. It does not waver. I will not let it. And not once have we dropped our eyes from each other. But I know without any doubt, I am dead. The explosion I wrought hardly hurt it. Almost did little but wind it. Oh, sure, I've snapped the horn off its face. But the jagged remnants will still gouge just as effectively. Besides, it has no real need. Those enormous cloven hooves will finish me off with little difficulty.

So I stand. Waiting for my death. With my sword raised. And never a waver.

Then the moment breaks. The shadhavar flicks its eyes down. Its head follows – a half bob of acknowledgement. And then the enormous, apparently indestructible, gigantic *equus*...

Turns. Trots. Canters. Gathers speed. Gallops and leads into the shadowy underbrush. It is gone.

I let out the breath I was holding most deliberately. I expected it to be my last; I wanted to savour it. So I take a few more, really just enjoying the experience of my chest heaving in rhythm, of the stillness and the silence when warfare ends suddenly and unexpectedly.

The burbling groans behind me ruin the moment. Of course.

Turning around, I half-hobble back over to where Zakariya is staked firmly to the clearing's soil. The patchwork healing I've done on my knee lets me put my foot down, albeit gingerly. A couple of steps is all it takes to reach him.

The base of the horn, shining like a white-flame torch in the moonlight, still looks razor sharp. 'Just pull it out for the sake of all that's holy!' Zakariya screams at me, apparently

conveniently forgetting my hands won't just heal instantly if I slice them to ribbons.

Or that I only have one hand working.

I tear a strip of fabric from Zakariya's shirt. His screaming curses only make it all the more satisfying. With my teeth, while trying to ignore how proximate it has been to the fool of a man's skin, I wrap it around my hand. Then I grip the top of the horn and work it free.

I might possibly lever it back and forth a little more than is strictly necessary. Oops. I'm only a silly woman, after all.

By the time I work it out completely, Zakariya is, of course, once more entire and whole due to having drunk from the Aab-Al-Hayaat. He leaps to his feet.

'Quick, Kandicha!' There's a manic gleam to his eyes, a fury there. I wonder if it's really at the shadhavar, whether it's not truly aimed at himself. 'Get after that demon spawn accursed creature. It's disarmed by all that's holy! Kill it!'

I lean my right armpit on the top of the horn that cracked away smoothly. No slicing razors there, at least. I use it like a crutch stick. Stare at the bloodied mangled wreck that is my upper arm. Track down to where my whole right leg feels as though someone drained away my inner fluids and replaced them with liquid fire. Work across the ground and up to the fully healed *idiot* who is hopping about in rage from foot to foot in front of me. Test lean on the horn some more, see how much of my weight it can support. *Enough*, I decide.

So with great deliberation and even greater force, I swing my right foot up hard enough into his testicles as to make sure they explode. Even as my kneecap does the same.

Worth it, I think to myself as the blackness finally overwhelms me. Totally worth it.

Chapter Nine

Mount Lebanon, 3 May 1211

It takes two minutes for Zakariya to heal, of course. Probably not even that. He's complete by the time I come back from the world within. And he didn't slit my throat while I was unconscious. Quite astounding. He does keep his distance though.

Two minutes for him to heal. Two days for me. Sleeping by the fire. Zakariya makes that. Gathers fallen brushwood and builds it with care and attention. Threading sticks through and over to form a stable structure. Lights it with effort.

I lie, holding my sword, my eyes fixed on his actions. He looks over. Briefly.

'You won't need that, *lalla*.' The words are soft. Emotionless. Or else the emotions themselves are as soft, as quiet as the words, so that I can't hear them in his tone. 'I'll keep you safe.'

About time you were less useless, is all I have time to think before I go again, back into the dreamless otherness.

When I come back round next, it is daytime. The light makes shadow-play waves of the treetop branches, dancing their shaded dappling across the glade. Light washes across the space, fighting with the gloam of the tight-knit forest surrounding us.

The fire is still lit. And now there is what looks like a brace of coney rabbits, skinned and roasting on it. The smell is joyous, that browning change that tells you a meal is made and ready to be celebrated. Occasional sizzling fat drops are the only sound other than distant birdsong.

It is peaceful. And even Zakariya's presence cannot spoil that. In fact, considering I can only assume it was he who hunted and cooked the rabbits, he is almost welcome. Assuming he gives me some of the meal he has prepared.

He does. All of it. He brings me the meat, carefully cut from the bone, presented on a clean piece of fabric he must have carried secreted about his person. Certainly nothing we are wearing would be suitable for serving food on or could even be vaguely considered as *clean*.

'It is yours,' he insists when I attempt to pass him what remains. 'Your need is greater. I cannot starve. Perhaps it would do me good to go hungry for a while again.'

Hmm. Interesting. But not as interesting as the meal he has prepared, which, simple though it may be, is beyond heavenly. The taste is like a mouthful of spiced bread after a week-long fast. It explodes on my tongue. So I'll happily take another explosion on as my burden. I'll not deny him his right to fast. To contemplate.

We sit in a silence that, if not companionable, is closer than it has been at any other point since the Guardian sent us forth. I assume, at first, this is part of his new contemplative state. It turns out I am correct. But what he is contemplating takes me by surprise.

'When we return...' The words are startling. I didn't expect them. The sudden breakage of silence is a cold-water morning bath. And that it took me by surprise makes me realise how much I have relaxed. How much I believed he would keep me safe.

'When we return,' he starts again, carefully, almost stumbling, like a child seeking to find the words that will make his father see his growth, admit his entry into manhood, 'I will speak to the Guardian. I will ask him to remove my title as the Anointed Successor.'

My first thought is astonishment, that he is giving up the title he loves. The second, slightly uncharitably, is to note wryly that he still manages to make the capitalisation of that title clear in his speech.

'I am not worthy.' Words softly spoken. Almost breathed. It's hard to believe they have come from Zakariya's mouth. 'When I faced true danger, I – I failed. I could not overcome my fears. The Aab-Al-Hayaat deserves a protector worthy of that title.'

I say nothing. There is nothing he has said that I disagree with. Nor can I congratulate him for something he should have realised long ago. What I do not realise is what he is going to say next.

'I am going to recommend you take my place to the Guardian. That you become his Anointed One.'

There are very few moments in my life that have caught me by surprise. My husband's rejection at the blood-soaked carnage I wrought to save us all, perhaps. When the shadhavar turned and left me alive instead of trampling me to death, certainly. And this moment right here. I can feel my mouth hanging open. Unacceptable. I snap it closed.

But Zakariya hasn't finished. He looks at me, and there is something in his expression. Perhaps anger again? No, not anger but certainly passion. Not lust or love either. He is not that stupid. And if he is, I can happily kick him in his manhood as many times as it takes to dissuade him of that idea.

'You are worthy.' There is certainty there. 'Ever since you came to the temple, it has changed. The Guardian has changed. Life has come back to him. He has reconnected to the acolytes, to his duties, and I...'

He breaks off, pauses, recomposes himself. 'And I have been jealous. Of that closeness. Of that investment he has made in you that he once made in me. It has taken what has transpired here —' He waves his hand at the clearing around us. 'For me to realise he never stopped caring about me. He simply did not wish to see what his caring *made* of me.

'For me to know just how jealous'—he leans forward, lets me see in through his eyes, into his soul—'I have been of you. Because I see he treats you as he once did me. But that you will not change. Will not corrupt yourself with a title. You are better than me. And I am not worthy of the one that was bestowed on me.'

He bows his head on those words, falls silent. I'm not sure how to reply. 'Shukram,' I say. Thank you. I don't really know

what for, but let him decide which bit he wishes to be thanked for.

Of course, it will not happen. The idea that the Guardian will choose *me*, an outcast from another part of the world instead of a born Druze for that most sacred and vital of roles? Laughable. But it is to Zakariya's credit that he will put forward the argument. And that he has gained any credit at all is –indubitably– proof beyond measure of one thing.

The best way – perhaps the only way to educate men?

A swift, precise kick to what they consider makes them a man.

And that is a lesson I shall make sure to hold on to for however long I live.

Want more of Aicha saving idiots even when they're the MCs?

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About C.N. Rowan

C.N. Rowan ("Call me C.N., Mr. Rowan was my father") came originally from Leicester, England. Somehow escaping its terrible, terrible clutches (only joking, he's a proud Midlander really), he has wound up living in the South-West of France for his sins. Only, not for his sins. Otherwise, he'd have ended up living somewhere really dreadful. Like Leicester. (Again – joking, he really does love Leicester. He knows Leicester can take a joke. Unlike some of those other cities. Looking at you, Slough.)

With multiple weird strings to his bow, all of which are made of tooth-floss and liable to snap if you tried to use them to do anything as adventurous as shooting an arrow, he's done all sorts of odd things, from running a hiphop record label (including featuring himself as rapper) to hustling disability living aids on the mean streets of Syston. He's particularly proud of the work he's done managing and recording several French hiphop acts, and is currently awaiting confirmation of wild rumours he might get a Gold Disc for a song he recorded and mixed.







Finding Fae Pets

BY Isa Medina



Finding Fae Pets by Isa Medina

As an ex-member of the Magical Artifacts Retrieval and Research Institute, Maddie desperately needs a job. So when a little Fae girl comes to her about her missing pet, what else can she do but venture into the terrifying Fae world to find it?

Chapter One

Artifact hunting was a very rewarding business, in the pride and satisfaction of a job well done, if not exactly money. Which was how I found myself standing on a chair in the corner of the basement office where I was currently squatting, looking for cell reception. A Post-it on the door with my name announced my current occupancy, and I was still using a stolen keycard to access this level of the huge building that was the Hub.

From its position on the wall by my desk, a rainbow flying cat on a poster gave me an approving stare.

Yes, that's right, this was a judgment-free zone.

A bar finally appeared on my phone, and I hurried to make the call.

"What do you want, Maddie?" came the brusque feminine reply.

"Hi, Marta," I said cheerfully. "Did you have time to look into the artifact for me?"

As a current member of the Magical Artifacts Retrieval and Research Institute, Marta had access to their database of Fae artifacts.

As an ex-member of the Magical Artifacts Retrieval and Research Institute, I did not.

"No."

"Aww," I cooed. "Are you sure?"

"I sent you an email."

Her email had contained three lines, all of which I already knew because she had copy-pasted them from my text.

Artifact name: Flower of Dreams

Magic type: Dreams

Status: Missing

Fae artifacts were objects imbued with Fae magic, and they always took some kind of payment to activate. In this case, once the magic inside was activated by a Fae or part-Fae, the artifact would gift a wonderful dream for a night but induce several horrible nightmares in return.

Artifacts' effects ranged from the very dangerous to the mundane, and it was the Institute's job to find and retrieve the dangerous kind. There was a thriving underground Fae artifact market that dealt with powerful items—a market I was kind of adjacent in given my current position as an independent artifact hunter.

Not that I'd ever find dangerous items without giving them to Aidan, my boyfriend and head of the Institute.

I might be squatting, but I had principles.

"No mention of the previous owner?" I asked, full of disappointment. In my experience, old owners accounted for a big percentage of artifact thieves once they realized they wanted their shiny back. Not that I had that much experience, mind, but I had been at this for three months, and that was a long time in the artifact world.

"I have my own missing cases, Maddie," Marta said. "Would you like to become one?"

"Did the file say which Fae made it, at least?" I asked, still hopeful.

"Goodbye."

The call ended, and I hopped off the chair. Tying up my straight brown hair like I meant business, I looked at the murder board I'd created on the wall by taping a few blank pages together. A drawing of the missing artifact occupied the middle, with the current owner's name written under it and three suspects underneath—distant cousins who were aware of the world of Fae magic.

The Fae lived in a humongous cavern under the surface, leaving the surface to unsuspecting humans and part-Fae like me. Occasionally, artifacts made their way to the surface, even if the Fae did not. They preferred to live in their world, where magic was alive and plentiful, but that didn't mean they couldn't access the surface through portals—self-made or created by others.

And speaking of self-made portals from Fae to the surface, a familiar pool of inky black goo began to form on one of the gray cement walls of the office.

Usually, I only received two kinds of visitors—Greenie, my Fae hound companion, or Lord Velei, the very powerful Fae Lord who was currently sponsoring me through the meticulous use of blackmail and grocery funds.

But this pool of goo—also known as a self-made Fae portal—was a little different from the kind they usually produced. Much smaller.

I approached to take a better look. It looked like the same kind of goo, but just to make sure, I poked it with my phone. It had the same oily rubbery consistency.

A small hand stuck through.

I jumped back, barely restraining myself from throwing my phone at it.

The hand's fingers wriggled.

Okay, this was new.

I poked the hand with my phone.

The wriggling intensified.

Oooh. It was stuck!

Beaming at my impressive mental acuity, I grasped the little hand and pulled.

A kid of eight or nine popped free of the goo and landed at my feet. She scrambled up, dusting her brown linen pants and white shirt. Her hair was a dark midnight-blue, braided around her head, and her green eyes were bright with determination. The black goo portal on the wall shrank out of existence, leaving gray cement behind.

"Hello," the girl said in accented English, hands fisted on her hips. She gave my sneakers-jeans-hoodie ensemble a haughty look.

"Uh, hi."

I had visited Faerie on many occasions and had encountered my fair share of Fae, but I had never seen one of their children. As far as I knew, they were extremely rare and very protected.

How had this one made it into my basement office?

"Did you open that goo-portal?" I asked, amazed. I almost wanted to poke her again, check if she was real.

The girl huffed.

"Do your parents know you're here?"

She gave me a cutting what do you think look, and I was immediately reminded of Marta. The thought made me grin.

"What?" she demanded suspiciously.

"Nothing," I said, my grin widening. "Want a snack?"

The girl's eyes widened into saucers. "Human snacks?"

"You don't get many of those in Fae, huh?"

Her head shook so violently I thought it was going to snap right off and fly through the door.

Speaking of which... I closed the door, turned the lock, and returned to my cheap desk and the equally cheap metal file cabinets stacked to the side. Whoever had used the office before me hadn't really cared for comfort. Then again, I doubted they'd lasted long in here, and at least they'd left me the rainbow cat.

I opened one of the drawers and took out a chocolate bar. The huge, labyrinthine basement of the Hub was always cold, which made it perfect for saving money on a mini fridge.

The girl's eyes followed the chocolate bar like it was the finest, most impressive artifact to ever grace the world of Fae.

"Sit." I pointed at the visitor's chair—a slightly uncomfortable thing I'd stolen from the neighboring office.

The girl plopped down with alacrity.

I sat across and held the bar just out of her reach. She tried to take it anyway, almost falling off the chair.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Lila." She looked really vexed now, so I gave her the chocolate bar before she tried to put a spell on me.

She tore the packaging open and took a huge bite. Her eyes got so big and bright as the chocolate hit her taste buds that she entered anime territory.

Watching her eat her chocolate bar—tiny bites now to make it last longer because nobody had ever said the Fae weren't smart—I wondered what to do. Should I take her to Lord Velei? But what if she belonged to a different Fae faction? The Fae loved to spend their time on political machinations and the occasional assassination attempt. A totally normal and healthy hobby, I had been told.

I didn't think Lord Velei would harm a child, but I had no doubt he'd use her as a political pawn if he could. On the other hand, if someone else found her first, I didn't know how they'd treat her. I had seen the inside of Fae jails, and they were nothing to write home about. Awful bathroom facilities, one star, would never visit again.

"I'm hiring you," Lila said between bites.

I perked up immediately. "Hiring me?" Currently missing dream artifact aside, jobs had been...absent lately. So what if this was a child? Work was work.

The girl finished off the bar and put the wrapper on the desk. She stared at me with solemn eyes. "I want you to find my pet."

"Your pet?"

She nodded. "My pet."

"I usually don't search for pets." Not that I was against it in principle, of course. It was just that pets didn't look as nice as artifacts on an artifact hunter's resume. "Did you ask your parents?"

Her gaze fell to the side, and she squirmed. "No."

"Why not?"

She murmured something that sounded lyrical and lovely.

I leaned forward, tilting my head to hear her better. "Say that again?"

"They don't know about the pet," she muttered in English.

Sneaky. But then my mother didn't know about my Fae hound pet either, so it wasn't as if I could throw stones. Who would throw stones at a child, anyway?

"Maybe you should tell them, and they'll help you?"

"I can't!" she exclaimed.

Anyone could see where this was going. "You found your pet outside your rooms, didn't you?"

I heard a rhythmic thumping, and I looked under the desk. Her small booted foot was hitting the leg of the chair in a nervous pattern.

"Let me guess," I said as I straightened and put on my most conspiratorial expression. Nobody liked a prissy, stick-up-their-butt possible employee. "You've been sneaking out without anyone noticing, and if you tell the adults, they'll stop you from getting out, *and* they'll probably take your pet away too."

My mind went back to some of the bloodthirsty, scary Fae creatures I had encountered along the way, and I suppressed a shiver. I was with the adults on this one.

Lila nodded enthusiastically, excited now that I totally got her. "They would! I sneaked out today to come see you." That brought up another excellent question—how did this girl even know about me? "Why me?"

"I heard you're good at finding stuff."

I sat up straight, my chest puffing a little, an idiotic smile curving my lips. "You did?"

She nodded again. "I heard the adults mention you."

Oh, my God. I was famous! Famous!

Mentally, I punched the air. The office exploded into glittering confetti. From its position on the wall, the flying cat left the poster and bounced around my desk, leaving a rainbow trail in its wake. Wait until I told Marta.

"Are you going to find my pet?" Lila asked, bringing me back to reality.

If I didn't, she'd probably try to find it herself, and who knew what kind of mess she'd end up in. Most Fae needed a pre-made portal to come to the surface, but this little girl could already make her own. That meant a lot of power, which meant a lot of trouble—for herself and others in her way.

But Maddie Dover, artifact hunter extraordinaire, was well versed in finding *and* getting out of trouble.

"I'll help." The girl let out a squeal of happiness, but I lifted my hand in warning. "But if I can't find it today, you'll confess to your parents."

"Yes!"

Hmm. Suspect. Fae couldn't lie, but I had an inkling this Fae girl would not admit defeat so easily. Perhaps in her mind, she meant it because she was convinced she'd find her pet before that. Advantages to being a child, I supposed.

"Okay," I said. "Tell me about this pet of yours."

Lila's brows dipped, her expression all business now. She reached under her shirt and pulled out a folded paper. "I made a drawing."

"Let's see it."

Small pink tongue peeking out between her teeth, she concentrated on carefully unfolding the paper on the desk. Adorable.

I switched my gaze to the sheet, expecting to see a mass of black crayon with red eyes and a drooling mouth or some similar monstrosity, and instead found something resembling a five-year-old's rendition of a cow with long ears.

"Ahm," I said. Maybe it was upside down? I turned the paper around, but Lila returned it to its original position with an imperious tug of her hands.

Okay, then.

I studied the blobs on the paper. At least it didn't look dangerous? "Do you know what it is?"

"It's Squibbit," she answered with an implied *duh*.

"Ah...uh, squibbit?"

She tapped the drawing impatiently. "A squirrel with rabbit ears. Squibbit!"

"That's not a cow?" I asked, amazed.

Lila's mouth fell open in outrage. "Squibbit!"

"Okay, okay," I said, fighting a grin. And Marta thought my drawings were bad. Hah! "Why do you think it's missing? If you met it—"

"Squibbit," she repeated obstinately.

"If you met Squibbit outside your home, maybe it just moved on," I finished kindly.

She shook her head. "She's my friend. She always comes for her food." Suddenly, her expression broke down, and she stifled a sniff. "She hasn't come in three days."

I passed her a tissue. "Maybe she's just taking a break? Give it more time."

Lila blew her nose. "No. I found her ribbon collar on the floor. Something has happened to her. I know it!"

"Maybe one of the adults found her and relocated her?"

"No. Something's wrong." She looked up at me with renewed determination. "You have to help me find her. What if she's gotten lost, or someone captured her?" Her lips wobbled. "What if she's hurt?"

Or dead. But I wasn't about to say that out loud. Besides, Fae creatures could be pretty sturdy—I had reason to know.

"I'm sure Squibbit is safe." It was a miracle I managed to keep a straight face saying that name.

"But what if she's not?" Lila insisted.

"No point in assuming the worst," I told her sagely as I stood. "I'll figure this out. For now, let's get you back."

She scowled up at me. "I'm going with you."

Uhh. "No, you aren't."

She crossed her arms and hooked her feet around the chair's legs. "I am!"

There was no way I was taking her around with me. It'd be hard enough to keep myself out of danger; I didn't want to endanger a precious Fae child on top of that. Things could get dicey outside Fae lords' mansions and their protected patches of land.

Plus, what if someone from another faction found her and used her as leverage?

She must've read my thoughts on my face because her eyes narrowed into slits. "Take me with you or I'm cursing you."

I shook my finger at her. "Blackmail is not a nice way to deal with problems."

"Why not? Everyone else does it."

Trust the Fae to lead by example. "Just because other people do it doesn't mean you have to do it, too."

"Pfff "

"You don't really want to deal with the consequences of a curse." As with most Fae magic, it'd involve a give-take situation. "The magical payback will be harsh, even if you're a

kid." Especially a kid who already had enough magic to open her own portals.

"I'm not a kid!" She seemed to think about things for a few moments, then her expression brightened again. "I'll pay you."

"Oh?"

She reached into a pocket of her pants and brought out a tiny round pebble, which she dropped into my hand. The surface was smooth and iridescent like a pearl, and who the heck knew what it could do.

"What is it?"

"My payment." And there went the implied *duh* again.

The kid might be young, but she was already well versed in the act of stating the obvious. I grinned. "Good answer."

"You'll help me?"

I considered my options. On one hand, I could drag her to Lord Velei and dump her on him and hope if she wasn't one of his, that at least he'd be good to her. On the other, if I did that, she might try to curse me for real—for both of our detriments.

I pocketed the pearl in my jeans. "We'll take one look—"

"Yes!"

"—and then we'll see."

Surely, a fast look in the middle-of-nowhere Faerie couldn't be that dangerous, could it?

Chapter Two

"Let's go, let's go!"

Lila made a run for the wall, but I intercepted her. "Let me take care of that."

Concentrating, I sent the mental Greenie-signal.

A few moments later, a huge pool of oily goo spread over the wall, and Greenie jumped out, eliciting a yelp from my young companion.

No way was I traipsing through the land of scary Fae without my favorite Fae hound and biggest backup.

Greenie was a huge Fae hound resembling a wolf but made of moss and leaves and twigs and was as tall as my shoulder. His big bright-green eyes found me immediately, and his tongue lolled out in happiness.

"No," I warned.

Greenie jumped forward and gave me a long lick from neck to temple.

"Ugh." I pushed his face away and looked down at the girl. She was staring at Greenie like he was the most amazing thing she'd ever seen, and I couldn't help the pride infusing my chest at the sight. Yup, Greenie was the absolute best and could eat her Squibbit any day.

In fact, Greenie had a propensity for eating other Fae creatures, especially ones made of goo.

I grabbed the picture and showed it to him. "Squibbit is friend, not food."

"What?" Lila squawked.

"It never hurts to be prepared," I told her.

Greenie sniffed at the paper, then lowered his head to look at the girl.

She stood completely still, wide eyes tracking Greenie's movements.

"This is Greenie," I said, patting his side. "Greenie, this is Lila. We do not eat Lila, either. Unless she's mean to us."

Lila gave me a panicked glance, but I just smiled serenely. It was good to establish some ground rules.

Greenie finished his inspection of the kid, then went back to looking at me expectantly. He was fully aware that me calling on him often meant chaos and mayhem—his favorite hobby.

"We're going on a tracking adventure," I said.

Lifting Lila—and good lord, kids weighed a lot more than they looked—I helped her onto Greenie, then used my chair to get onto his back behind her.

Greenie huffed, annoyed that he'd been denied his favorite game of watching me try to get onto his back by myself, then trotted toward the wall. The pool of goo had already formed, waiting for our passage.

"Try to imagine the last place you saw Squibbit," I told Lila. "See it in your mind, then concentrate on passing it to Greenie. He'll do the rest." Or at least, I hoped so. That was how it usually worked between us. Just in case, I concentrated on Greenie, mentally telling him to go wherever the girl was trying to communicate.

It seemed to work because Greenie suddenly jumped forward into the wall, and then we were bouncing through the ley lines running right under the Hub.

Ley lines were corridors of concentrated magic crossing under the surface and Greenie's preferred way of fast traveling. After several minutes of running across the watery surface coating the tunnel, Greenie jumped into another pool of goo and took us into Fae proper.

As usual, the sight stole my breath away. We had landed in a small clearing inside a vibrant-green forest, allowing us a view of the ceiling far, far above us, completely covered by orange and green trees growing upside down. A soft ambient light gave everything the hue of a cozy late-evening sun, which meant we were on the edge of a Fae lord's or lady's domain.

Faerie didn't have sun and night cycles like the surface. Fae lords and their mansions produced the light illuminating their domain, and anything else was perennially drenched in complete darkness.

Lila mumbled something and tried to get off Greenie, nearly pitching forward face-first. I grabbed her at the last second, and Greenie helped by planting his butt on the floor and almost sending me rolling down his back.

"Thanks, Greenie," I muttered ungraciously as I dragged the Fae child off his back.

Greenie answered with a wag of his bushy—literally—green tail and a huff of doggy laughter.

I laid Lila on the floor and waited for her wits to gather. Full Fae had trouble traveling through the ley lines unprotected—something about the purity of magic was too much for their systems, leaving them confused and kind of drunk.

While I waited for the poor kid to return to her normal precociousness, I took a better look at our surroundings. The opening was wide and clear of stumps, the ground covered with a soft layer of grass and tiny wildflowers. I went to pick one up, but then thought better of it. Given my luck, it'd probably be spelled with something like *pick a flower*, *lose a finger*.

"What do you think, Greenie? Smell another Fae creature?"

Greenie thumped his tail some more. A butterfly flitted past and alighted on his nose, making the scene picture-perfe—

His tongue shot up, grabbed the butterfly, and stuffed it into his mouth. He grinned in happiness, showing me all his teeth.

Moving on.

Lila mumbled some Fae words and tried to stand. I gave her a hand, and soon she was stumbling around, trying to get her bearings.

"Sorry about that," I said. "I should've warned you. Is this where you usually met Squibbit?"

She opened and closed her mouth a couple of times, rubbed her eyes, then nodded solemnly.

"She usually comes here." She pointed at a small bush on the first line of trees. "Hops out of the bush and scurries up the tree."

We both followed the tree trunk up to the canopy.

"Squibbit!" Lila shouted. "Are you there?"

Nothing moved.

"She only did that the first time," Lila conceded.

"What does she usually do the other times?"

"I sit there." She pointed to a spot on the ground. "And she comes to me. Then I give her some candy, and we play for a bit."

"Was anything different the last time you saw her?" I asked.

Lila shook her head. "It was the same. We played and then she hopped into the bush, and...and..." She blinked rapidly. "And she never came back."

Time for the professional to do her job. I approached the bush and looked behind it. Nothing seemed amiss. No broken branches or signs of struggle.

"Where did you find the collar ribbon?"

Lila pointed to the roots of another tree. "It was lying over there."

The roots looked like normal tree roots to me. I'd had some experience with sentient man-eating trees, but these didn't look like that. Mostly because they hadn't attempted to eat me yet.

These were the kinds of keen observations that had made me famous among the Fae. "Let's have Greenie try to follow her smell." I gestured to Greenie. "Let him sniff the ribbon."

Lila didn't look very sure about approaching the giant Fae hound, but she gathered her courage and thrust her hand forward. "Smell," she commanded.

Aw, a little Fae lady in the making.

Greenie sniffed at her hand, then gave me a woof of agreement and a wag of his tail.

"Good boy," I said proudly. I helped Lila back on top of him, then attempted to jump into position. A loud *humph* escaped my lungs as I landed on my stomach and began to slide down, aided by Greenie's body shaking in silent laughter. "Bad boy!" I managed.

"Miss!" Lila grabbed at my hoodie and tried to stop the slow slide of doom. I grabbed Greenie's mossy fur and hauled myself forward. After some more squirming and climbing, my leg finally made it across and I managed to sit upright on Greenie's back.

Greenie and I needed to have a long conversation about doing things like this in front of clients. Again. I was a professional now—I had a reputation to maintain.

"Go, Greenie," I said, holding Lila securely in front of me.

Greenie let out a happy sound and shot forward between the trees and into the underbrush. I protected the kid's face, earning myself a mouthful of soil and leaves as we popped out into what looked like someone's abandoned backyard back on the human surface. A dirty picket fence surrounded a wide space, the pickets leaning at an angle. Wild bushes and weeds ran the base of the fence and grew tall by a small tree on one side. A mountain of trash bags had been piled on the back deck of a rundown one-story house with grimy windows and a sagging roof. The cloudy skies made everything look even more dismal.

Lila scrunched her nose. "Ew."

Couldn't have said it better myself. I leaned over her shoulder to talk to Greenie. "Are you sure this is it, Greenie?"

Greenie woofed and approached the tree, then leaned down to smell the ground.

"Let me take a look around." I slid down Greenie and used my sneakers to poke between the weeds and bushes around the tree. Images of screaming rodents jumping at my face filled my mind, and I stopped poking.

"What's that?" Lila asked, suddenly standing by my side.

I jumped and swallowed down a curse. The kid's parents would probably not thank me for teaching her human bad words. She was pointing at a rusted half-open tool locker by the fence.

"That's where human dreams of maintaining a home garden go to die," I told her.

She nodded solemnly.

Soft rustling noises behind us had us spinning on our heels. A group of weeds and long grass was moving as something made its way across.

I swallowed hard. I had seen this movie before. Could Greenie take on a velociraptor?

The rustling intensified, and I put a hand on Lila's shoulder, ready to drag her behind me.

Then the most adorable creature ever jumped out of the vegetation and looked at us with huge black eyes. The body was that of a brown-and-white squirrel, her nose twitching enchantingly, and a set of long furry ears rose from where its pointy ones should've been.

"Squibbit!" Lila exclaimed with delight, moving forward.

Greenie let out a sudden growl, his head snapping toward the house.

I grabbed Lila and dragged her behind the tree.

She kicked at me. "Squibbit!"

"Shh," I admonished, putting a finger over her mouth. "Something's wrong."

Lila stilled, eyes growing wide with fear. Greenie joined us behind the tree, his mouth pulled back into a silent snarl.

Nothing happened for a few long moments, and Lila started squirming in my hold, then the back door of the house slammed open.

Someone shouted in a strange language, and loud thuds announced the presence of two people as they rushed down the deck and into the backyard.

I watched Squibbit hurry across the grass and weeds, then disappear into the base of the fence.

The thuds on the ground followed, along with loud exclamations.

Greenie, Lila, and I moved sideways to keep the tree between us and the newcomers, whoever they were. Fae? Their language didn't sound remotely familiar, and thanks to my lack of clients, I was very familiar with language learning applications.

One of the strangers—a woman from the sounds of it—said something, and the other replied. More rustling followed, and I assumed they were poking along the fence.

Time to go.

As usual, when it counted, Greenie offered no complaints and lowered obediently to let us get on top of him. In the next blink of an eye, we had jumped into the grass and away from the two newcomers.

We came out inside a copse of trees in the middle of nowhere. Fields extended left and right, and a group of houses clumped together far in the distance. The rumble of cars told me there might be a road or highway closer but not within direct view.

Considering Fae were secret to the human world, Greenie really was the most considerate when choosing where to pop out.

"Who were those people?" Lila asked. "Why were they looking for Squibbit?"

Good question. "Are you sure they were looking for Squibbit and not you?"

She appeared offended by the question. "I've never seen them before."

"Doesn't mean they weren't looking for you."

"But they were poking at the fence."

"Good point." I patted Greenie's side. "Greenie, can you find Squibbit?"

Greenie pawed at the ground here and there, then let out a woeful sound.

We had lost Squibbit.

Chapter Three

"What do we do now?" Lila whined.

I appeared to think about it for a few moments just to impress the kid, but the solution was obvious, wasn't it?

"We set up a trap."

"A trap?" she echoed.

"We go back to the spot where you found her first and set out some candy."

"But I already tried that, and she didn't come!"

"Hmm."

"Can we do some other kind of trap?" she ventured.

"Yes, we can." Just because candy hadn't worked, it didn't mean something else wouldn't, which meant—research time. The foundation of any artifact-slash-pet hunter worth their salt.

Taking out my phone, and glad to see we were within cell range, I called the best man on the planet.

"Hello, Maddie."

As usual, Aidan's deep rumble of a voice made my insides melt. He knew it, and he totally did it on purpose. As any proper boyfriend ought to do.

"Are you busy? I need to do some research."

"Come to the Institute."

I glanced at Lila. "I, uh, can't go anywhere public at the moment."

"What did you do this time?" he said with a long-suffering—and very insulting—sigh.

"Nothing!"

"Are you safe?"

"Yes. Greenie is with me."

Greenie let out a woof.

"Wonderful," Aidan said grimly. "Who did you piss off this time?"

"Nobody, I swear."

Lila tugged at my sleeve. "Squibbit trap?" she whispered.

I nodded. "I need as much information as you can gather about Fae pets. What they like and how to trap them."

"Did you find another Eye?"

"Nope, something different. Pretty please? It's important."

"Fine. Where do I meet you?"

"What about that ice-cream place we found the other day?" During one of our rare dates because Aidan lived for his work. Good thing I had plenty of friends, interests, and one Fae pet to keep me company.

"I thought you said you couldn't go anywhere public."

"Nowhere Fae-Fae public, if you know what I mean."

"Sadly, I do. Be there in an hour."

"See you there!"



Lila stared at her cup of mint choco-chip ice cream with huge eyes. I attacked mine with unconcealed gusto.

"It looks so wrong," she said in almost awed tones.

We were seated at one of the two tiny tables inside the small ice cream parlor. It was a hot day, and the place was doing brisk business. I had taken off my hoodie, and Lila had shoved her shirtsleeves up to her elbows.

"Try it," I said. "It's really good."

Perhaps not the best combination for someone who had never had ice cream before, but Fae were adventurous, and green fit the mood.

She used the tiny wooden spoon to scoop some ice cream and touched her tentative tongue to it.

Lila reared back, startled. "Oh." She went in for a full lick. "Oooh."

"Good, huh?"

She stuffed her mouth and nodded enthusiastically.

"Don't eat too fast, or you'll give yourself a headache."

"A what? Ow!" She put her hand to her forehead. "Owowowow!"

I patted her bent head. "You'll be okay."

"Is it *spelled*?" she asked, eyeing the ice cream with deep suspicion.

"Nope, just a normal reaction." Although her question made me look at my ice cream with new appreciation. Perhaps there was some kind of Fae magic in human cooking. Eat too much ice cream, get a headache. Eat too much Mexican... Well, you get my drift.

"Did you find your pet in your job?" Lila asked, taking another brave bite of her ice cream. She relaxed when no further bodily horrors happened.

"Yup. He came along with the first artifact I ever found." The one I'd found in my old temp-job basement. I recalled the adventure fondly. Aidan and I had had some great adventures trying to get out of the basement while being spellbound together and chased by a Fae creature. Good times.

Aidan had a slightly different recollection of the events, one a lot less fun, but that was why I was sticking to him—he needed someone to point out the good parts of life.

"What else have you found?" she asked, all interest.

"A few artifacts, another pet," I said, as if it was not a big deal. "One time I even found someone in Fae jail."

"Ooooh."

I tried not to look smug.

"Do you think we'll find Squibbit?"

"Of course." We found it once; we'd find it again—a great artifact hunter motto if I said so myself. I should put it on my business cards.

Someone knocked on the window by our side, and I found Aidan smiling at me. He was tall and impressive in his jeans and a T-shirt, with short, dark hair, the beginnings of stubble covering his jaw, and the most amazing nose. I wasn't usually much of a nose girl, but the perfect width and depth of his had made me a convert.

We were still in a judgment-free zone.

I waved enthusiastically, then trashed my empty cup and dragged Lila out of the shop. Feeling no shame, I threw my arms around his neck and pulled him down for a kiss.

He brushed his mouth against mine, but his attention was fixed on Lila.

"Who is this?" he asked with deep, deep suspicion.

I let go of his shoulders and smiled brightly. "My new client!"

His eyes narrowed.

Lila crossed her arms and returned the scowl.

"Maddie..." Aidan began in his most lecturing tone.

I decided to nip the lecture in the bud and patted his arm. "Don't worry about it. Act like you haven't seen her."

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "To my car." He pointed down the street. "Now."

I winked at Lila and offered my hand. She huffed but took it as we walked by Aidan's side to a small parking lot. His expression stayed completely neutral, but I could see the gears turning in his head. It was obvious Lila wasn't from around here, and he was probably trying to recall which Fae families had young kids, and in how much trouble I was going to get if they thought I had kidnapped her.

Truly the best boyfriend.

We got inside Aidan's car—Aidan in the front, me and Lila in the back.

"Did you find any information about Fae creatures?" I asked the moment his door slammed shut and before he could get started on a lecture again.

He sent me a mean glare but answered, "You already know more than enough about them. You asked me about how to trap one."

I nodded encouragingly. "You thought of something?"

He brought out a wooden box from under the seat, and my heart fluttered. No other reason to show us a box unless there was an artifact inside

I was right. He opened the box and brought out a small glass sphere with a myriad of white particles floating inside.

"What's that?" I asked as he allowed me to take it from him.

"The Heart's Wonder. It shows you wonders but makes you forget everything else while you use it."

Talk about stereotypical Fae magic. "Isn't it very dangerous?" Aidan didn't usually keep dangerous artifacts at the Institute's collection—he destroyed their magic.

He shook his head. "It has a limit. The user eventually drops from exhaustion after a few hours, and the spell breaks off"

"Excellent for distracting people. But once you activate it, won't it lure you into using it, too?"

Aidan handed me a ring dangling from a thin chain. "This will counteract it."

Aww, he was giving me his personal anti-Fae-spells pendant! I took it reverently. "I'll treasure it with my life!"

A long-suffering look crossed his eyes. "Please don't say that."

"I'll treasure it a lot but will chuck it to the side if I need to run for my life?"

"Thank you."

I grinned and pocketed the pendant. "Will the Heart's Wonder work on pets?"

"If you concentrate on the animal when you activate it, it should."

"I promise I will not use it for evil."

He leaned toward me, his gaze falling to my mouth. "Just promise you will return safely."

I leaned forward, licking my lips. "Always."

"Can we go now?" demanded Lila. "We need to get Squibbit."

Aidan looked at the kid, decided it was better if he didn't ask questions, and drove us to the nearby patch of greenery we had used to come over.

There, I had Greenie take us to a random spot in Fae, where we tested the artifact on him and found it worked, kind of. He didn't appear overly fascinated, but it did attract his attention. That should be enough to make Squibbit appear, though.

We returned to the original opening in the forest where Lila had befriended Squibbit and set up the artifact.

"Put it here," Lila demanded, pointing toward one of the bushes.

I set it on the grass some distance away. "In case it decides to take it and make a run for it," I explained at her stormy look. I had lost an artifact to a Fae creature before, and I didn't want to repeat the experience.

"Oh," she said, then nodded as if it had been her idea. She stuffed her hand into her pocket and brought out a few pieces of hardened yellow and white lumps. "Candy so she knows it's safe."

A tickle of magic in the air raised the hairs on my arms. Hastily, I snatched up the artifact and took Lila's hand. The candy fell to the ground.

She seemed to have noticed the shift in the air, too, because she followed me around the closest tree without complaint.

A silvery pool appeared on the grass, and two Fae jumped out of it. Were these the same people as earlier? By my side, Lila stifled a gasp and molded herself to the tree. Did she know these two?

One of them spoke up. I couldn't understand his words, but they definitely sounded like Fae language, and the voice was different from the two people earlier. Just how many people were after Squibbit?

Lila stiffened, her eyes widening in panic. From the rustle of grass, the two Fae were walking right toward us, as if they knew exactly where we were. They must be using a Seeker, I realized—a common Fae artifact that led you to your greatest desire or your complete doom. They must be desperate to use such a thing.

"Please save Squibbit," Lila whispered, looking at me with huge eyes.

I wasn't sure what had prompted that, but in the next moment, she stumbled from behind the tree and ran into the clearing.

The two Fae let out exclamations of surprise, then one seemed to talk in admonishing tones.

I dared a peek around the tree. One Fae had taken hold of the girl's hand, and the other was shaking his head and letting out a veritable lecture in Fae language. Lila looked contrite, her mouth pouting and her gaze fixed on the ground, rather than scared or panicky.

These must be her keepers. No wonder they were risking a Seeker to find her. She must've realized this, and that's why she had chosen to show herself rather than keep running. Damn, that was so brave and adorable.

The least I could do to repay this sacrifice was to find her pet, no matter what.

Chapter Four

Once the trio had disappeared into another silvery ground portal, I got busy setting up our Squibbit trap.

I set the sphere in the middle of the clearing and gathered Lila's candy around it. Then, concentrating on the squirrel-bunny animal, I activated the artifact.

The white dust inside began swirling lazily, forming a hazy pattern that reminded me of something. I waited, watching it take form. It was familiar, but the exact memory escaped me. It just needed a little time, and then it'd take shape, and I'd know. Just a few more seconds, and I'd know. I'd—

No.

With a mental shake, I tore my gaze away from the artifact and activated Aidan's pendant. The sphere immediately lost all intrigue and was just a piece of glass sitting on the ground.

Phew, that'd been close.

"Let's hide, Greenie."

But Greenie was watching the sphere like it was a delicious piece of prime Fae dinner. I touched his neck, and he immediately shook loose of his fixation. He looked at me expectantly, and I nodded toward the trees. "Over there, Greenie."

We moved around the tree and waited.

And waited.

And waited some more.

I was about to give up when faint rustling sounds alerted me to another presence in the clearing.

Squibbit peeked from inside one of the small bushes at the tree line, then advanced, its cute little nose twitching. First, she smelled one of the candies, but instead of grabbing it and

going to town, she ignored it and went for the artifact. She poked the sphere, rolling it a bit, then sniffled it everywhere.

I wished I could take a picture, she was so cute.

Would Aidan agree to me getting another pet? This one was much smaller than Greenie, and bunny food couldn't be that expensive, could it?

Squibbit straightened suddenly, her attention now completely focused elsewhere. Had something spooked her?

Before she could bolt, I shot out from behind the tree and dove toward her. I managed to grab her before she could move, literally eating grass on the way.

Artfully rolling with my prize (no, not really), I got to my feet and jumped behind the closest tree just as a man and a woman entered the clearing. They spoke to each other, and I recognized the voices as the two who had burst into the abandoned backyard earlier.

Okay, so these two were clearly going after Squibbit, not the Fae kid. Good to know.

One of them said something in an awed tone. The other didn't respond. I gave them a few more seconds, thankful that Squibbit was squirming in my hands but not trying to bite, then peeked around the tree.

The two were kneeling by the artifact, completely mesmerized by it.

Perfect.

Yes, I was taking full responsibility for this wonderful extra byproduct of my great plan.

Approaching carefully, I studied the two strangers. They looked human enough, dressed in jeans and T-shirts. The woman had long hair gathered into a ponytail, and the man sported a close shave. They lacked the beauty the Fae seemed to have encoded into their DNA. Half-Fae, perhaps?

I looked down at Squibbit, who had stopped wriggling. "Now, why do these two want you so badly?" I whispered, wary that any loud noises might break their trance.

Squibbit twitched her nose, as if saying, who knows what goes through hooman minds?

She began wriggling, extending one of her arms. Was she trying to point at something?

I leaned toward the woman and noticed a strange-looking bracelet on her wrist. It was metallic, not a watch, and didn't fit the casual theme of her clothing. An identical bracelet graced the man's wrist. Artifacts? Some sort of homing beacon that allowed them to follow Squibbit?

Ah, well, Aidan would be happy to study these.

I tugged them off their wrists one-handed and put them on mine. Usually, I would be risking some sort of anti-theft spell put on them, but as long as Aidan's pendant was active, any spell affecting me would remain dormant.

"Let's go, Greenie," I whispered, turning to my faithful hound.

Who was watching the sphere like all his Fae hound dreams had come true.

I touched his neck, and his attention immediately switched to me and Squibbit. His tongue lolled.

"Friend, not food," I reminded him. "Lower, please."

Greenie did so for a change, and I squirmed on top of him. In the next moment, we were out of the clearing and somewhere else in Fae—among tall, thick trees that blocked most of the little ambient light. I didn't step off Greenie. This far from someone's territory, the scary type of Fae creatures could attack at any moment, but I held Squibbit in front of me.

"Are you someone else's pet?"

Squibbit blinked.

"One blink for yes; two for no."

Squibbit scratched her nose.

"I'm serious," I chided. Fae creatures were a lot more capable of understanding than people gave them credit for.

Squibbit gave up the act and looked at me intently.

"Do you want to be with the little Fae girl who's been feeding you candy, or do you want to remain on your own?"

Squibbit looked at me like I was stupid. Greenie huffed a snort.

Okay, fine, not my smartest question.

"Want to go to the little Fae girl?"

One blink.

I waited for another, but Squibbit simply began scratching her nose again, so I took that as a resounding yes.

After my experiences with Greenie and other less-savory Fae, it was important that all Fae creatures, humanoid or not, got a say in their future, no matter how insistent cute Fae kids were.

I urged Greenie forward, and he found another spot in which to jump.



Greenie took us to the mass of upside-down trees growing from the ceiling of Faerie. We made our way carefully down the branches until we reached a brick-and-stone house. By Fae standards, it was of a decent size but by no means enormous. Nothing compared to Lord Velei's huge mansion with its sprawling wing.

Greenie stopped by one of the walls, and I alighted carefully, making the rest of the way on foot. The thinning branch swayed under my feet, reminding me that a huge, gaping void opened only a few layers of foliage below. Luckily for everyone involved in this tale, I was a big believer in fate and luck, and my self-preservation levels were at a healthy low level that generally amazed those around me.

I shaded my eyes against the glass of a window with one hand and saw a small room with lovely timbered walls and a four-poster bed dominating one side. Lila sat on a rug in front of it, a mulish expression on her face and her arms tightly crossed over her chest. A tray with a mug and a plate full of cookies sat by her side. We had reached the hunger strike stage, apparently.

With a grin, I knocked on the glass.

Her gaze snapped to me, and her expression transformed into one of surprise, then absolute happiness as she noticed the squirming form of Squibbit in my other arm.

She jumped to her feet and hurried to open the window.

"Squibbit!" she cried, then bit her lip. "I can't get out. They reinforced the wards."

I could feel their magic thrumming along my senses. They definitely did not want the Fae kid to get out via personal portals or windows a second time.

Or a hundredth

"Doesn't matter," I said and tossed the squirrel-rabbit at her.

She caught it with a gasp and a squeal of happiness. "Squibbit!"

Squibbit wriggled out of her hold, hopped to the floor, and approached the cookies.

Having already forgotten me, Lila slammed the window in my face and ran to join her new pet by the tray. I could see her yammering away, no doubt telling Squibbit all about our adventures to rescue her.

I probably barely made an appearance in her version of events, but that was all right. I smiled as I returned to Greenie and asked him to take us back to the surface.

As I said before, artifact hunting paid in pride of a job well done, if not exactly an increase in my bank account.

Once on the surface, I met Aidan and handed him the two bracelets. After he had disposed of them safely, I took him to the clearing with the two strangers.

The couple were gone, but they had left the artifact behind.

"Probably back to whoever hired them to go after Squibbit," I guessed.

Aidan put the sphere and his pendant in their original wooden box, and that went into his backpack. "You know there must be a reason for that, right?"

"For them to go after a super cute squirrel-rabbit hybrid?"

"A Fae creature, yes."

I shrugged. "Eh, can't be that bad. Greenie didn't even try to eat it."

Aidan eyed my hound. Greenie wagged his massive tail.

"Good point," he admitted. "Ready to go back?"

"Sure thing, boss," I said with a cheeky salute.

"I'm not your boss anymore," he reminded me. And, because he was a total nice guy, he helped me get on top of Greenie.

After I was settled, he jumped on behind me and put an arm around my waist. My stomach fluttered at the contact, and I put both my hands on top of his big one. It was warm and confident as it splayed over my belly.

"Thank you for not asking too much," I said.

He nuzzled the side of my head with his cheek. "I know better than to ask."

Best boyfriend ever.

And to think we'd started this relationship as polar opposites!

As Greenie took us back through a more scenic route, I was reminded of all our adventures—our first meeting over a maybe-dead body, our escape through the basements of the Hub, that time I had to spring him from Fae jail, and that other time a tree had tried to eat him, and I'd had to fight a mudpuddle monster to free him. Not to mention all the other excitement I'd had with Greenie and all my other allies in pursuit of invaluable Fae artifacts. So many good memories!

I couldn't wait to see what came next.

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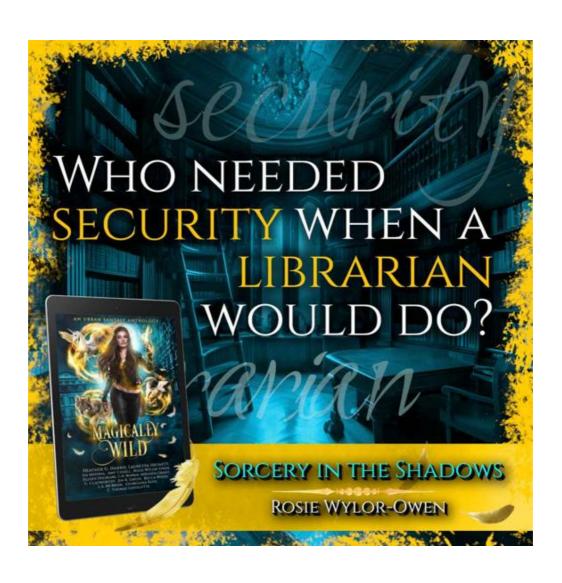


About Isa medina

Isa Medina loves writing and reading Fantasy and Urban Fantasy books, playing MMORPGs, and scouring the Internet for pet pictures and beautiful art. If it has Fae, ghosts, vampires, demons, mythical creatures, or magic in it, she's all in.







Sorcery in the Shadows

BY Rosie Wylor-Owen



Sorcery in the Shadows by Rosie Wylor-Owen

After being abused for far too many years, nineteen-year-old Beatrix Bishop finally finds friendship in a magical cat. But can she also find her freedom?

Chapter One

A tile slipped under my foot, and I threw myself onto my front on the steeple of the roof, grabbing it with both hands to steady myself. I huffed a breath as it dug into my solar plexus. You'd have thought after the number of times I had climbed this roof that I wouldn't make such silly mistakes.

I shimmied myself into a more balanced position and then got up on my hands and knees, crawling along the top of the roof to a flat part that was surrounded by turrets. The old building that had been converted into flats had its nooks and crannies, and this one was mine alone.

I hopped over the turrets and unzipped the tent I had put up there to house my things while I was away. Inside, I had a small collection of snacks and drinks, blankets, and most importantly, my diary. I smoothed my hand over the bare leather cover and breathed in a hopeful breath. Maybe today would be the day I could finally record the words I had longed to write: I used my powers for the first time today.

As a nineteen years old druid, I was far too old to have not used my powers yet. Maybe it wouldn't have mattered if I didn't have so much riding on it. I was Beatrix Bishop, and in our family, you didn't leave home until you got your powers.

I brushed away a curtain of chin-length blonde hair from my face - my grandmother would never let me grow it out - and stood the diary on top of one of the turrets, like I always did. It was a part of my nightly ritual after everyone went to bed: to try and use my powers and to use my diary as motivation. The moment I could write the words "I used my powers for the first time today", adventure and freedom would follow. The pages would see adventures like I had never written in it before, and I couldn't wait to do it.

I pulled the drawstrings on my tattered hoodie tighter - I would have to ask for a new one for my birthday - then I stood and focused on the diary. I was going to do this. Tonight.

Tomorrow, I would be able to pack my bags and get out of here.

I closed my eyes and focused on the power inside me. I could feel it there, sealed away like it was behind prison bars. But I would break it out today, one way or another. I was gentle with it, called to it with a whisper and beckoned to it. It reached for my call but it bumped against the barrier between us. Why was that damn thing still there? Why wasn't it ready yet? How much longer would I have to wait?

But I wasn't going to give up that easily. This would be the time; I could feel it. I pulled at the barrier within me, trying to break through it, but it bounced back like unbreakable latex.

I gritted my teeth as I grabbed for it more desperately, but it continued to elude me. What was it about my power that made it want to hide inside me? I was unlucky and had been my whole life. It wasn't just what I thought, but my grandmother had told me plenty of times. I had been unlucky to not have my power, for both my parents to have died not long after I was born, and though I wouldn't say it out loud, to be trapped here.

Guilt wracked me so violently that I shivered. How cruel of me. My grandmother had had to take care of me since I was born, and I was sure she wanted me out of her house as much as I did. But here I was, taking up space, all because I was too stupid to make my powers work.

No. I threw back my shoulders, though my head remained low. Tonight would be the night. It had to be.

I raised my arms and pulled them back to my body as I launched another attack on my powers. But my elbow nudged something, and I whipped around just in time to watch my diary topple over the edge of the turrets. It happened in slow motion before my eyes, and I threw myself over the gap between the turrets, my stomach landing on the stone as I shot my hand out to grab the diary. I snatched it out of thin air.

"Hah," I said, beaming at my rare luck.

But I lurched downward as the stone beneath me gave, and I scrambled back, landing on my butt as a giant chunk of stone broke away from the turret and toppled out of sight.

A giant crash, followed by another, echoed around the night. The dogs started to bark from their kennels near the front door. I scrambled to the edge and watched in horror as the dogs strained on their chains as they barked at the giant chunk of turret on the front lawn. Then a light flashed on, illuminating the front of the house. Grandmother's room.

I swallowed, hard. Oh shit. If she caught me up here, my hiding spot - my only truly solitary area - would be busted. I had to get back to my room.

I threw my diary into the tent, zipped it up, and dashed back across the roof. Eking down the old metal pipes, I slid through the window to the upstairs hallway. As quietly as the creaky old floorboards would allow, I hurried to my room. The door was shut so as not to alert anyone, and halfway down the hall, in the middle of the house. My own tiny window was but a slit in the wall, too small for me to squeeze through, which made sneaking out to the hallway necessary every night.

I quickened my pace as my heart hammered faster and faster with each step. I was so close. But the second I was outside my door, the door at the end of the hall swung open, and my grandmother stood there in her dressing gown with a face like thunder.

Chapter Two

"What are you doing out of bed?" Grandmother snapped. "And why are you covered in blood?"

Blood?

I looked down at myself. In all the excitement, I hadn't noticed the gash on my palm and the blood it had inked all over my pyjamas. My handprints were pressed all over my dressing gown and trousers, all in crimson. I must have cut my hand on something as the turret collapsed.

"I was just getting a snack, and I cut myself with a knife," I said.

She would yell at me for it. I wasn't allowed to get things out of the kitchen myself, only eat what I was given at mealtimes. But her thinking I was sneaking food was way better than her finding out I had a hideout on top of the tower. It was my only sanctuary; the only place I could exist without criticism except my own, and that was bad enough. And the last thing I wanted her to do was find my diary.

"Incompetent girl." Grandmother swept out of her room and down the corridor. "You know you aren't allowed to get your own food."

She snatched up my hand and brought it up to inspect. "It isn't deep. You will have to heal that yourself to teach you a lesson. No magic."

"Yes, grandmother."

She dropped my hand. "Go back to bed this instant. If I catch you out of bed again, you'll be spending the night in the cellar."

I dashed into my room without another word. Not the cellar. I had spent more than one night down there among the sacks of potatoes and firewood on a pile of straw without a single blanket. Everyone had spent a night down there at some point

in their lives. I was just the only person left to suffer the punishment. It was dark and cold, and there were mice on good days and rats on bad. No matter how many times grandmother set the dogs off down there.

The moment I shut my door, the lock clicked as grandmother locked it from the other side. I kept my groan to myself in case she could hear it. Having my door unlocked was one of the few privileges I ever got, and having it locked meant I wasn't even getting out until lunchtime.

Heart heavy, I went to my bathroom and washed my hand under the sink. I winced as it stung, cleaned it, and wrapped it up with gauze. I flexed my fingers as I got into a fresh new set of pyjamas and went to my tiny window and stared out at the night.

The stars didn't look nearly so beautiful from here, only with the odd dot visible. So it wasn't tonight, but one day I would get out of here.



Quite aside from my expectations, I was allowed out of my room for breakfast the next morning. I ate porridge at the kitchen table alone, as usual, the lingering smell of eggs and bacon still in the air from when my grandmother, aunt, and uncle had had their breakfast an hour before. I didn't remember ever having tasted bacon before. I was curious if it tasted as good as it smelled.

But the reason for my early release became apparent when my grandmother came into the kitchen and ordered me to go down to town to pick up her order for potion ingredients from the apothecary. My heart lightened at the thought.

I had no money and wasn't allowed a job, but running my grandmother's errands allowed me to visit the one place I could go in town without money: the library. There weren't many books to read in the house, and certainly no novels. I hadn't long finished the last novel I had picked up at the library and needed to return it anyway. Of course, if my

grandmother had known, she probably would have yanked those privileges too. Every secret I kept from her was laden with guilt, but it was the only way I could maintain a sliver of sanity.

I knew I was selfish, but maybe even I was allowed a tiny bit of grace?

I walked down to town, from our house on the hill. The day was sunny, and there were few clouds. The town was old, with no new buildings having been built for over a century. The community had collectively decided that renovating the existing buildings was the only acceptable thing, and as such, there was a small tourist season in which people flooded to see the town that time forgot.

Once I picked up her order, I headed down the cobbled streets and arrived at the library, which had once been an auditorium. It was a big, circular thing with a glass domed roof and windows running all around the outside of the ground floor. Despite the age of the building, the insides were up to date with modern shelves, self check out systems, and computers which I occasionally used to see what the internet was all about.

As soon as I stepped through the sliding doors, I made a beeline for the action and adventure section. There was one genre that had had me in its grasp for years: pirate adventures. Having researched the history of pirates, I knew that most of the fiction I read was a romanticised, glorified version of how things had really been, but they were too fun to ruin with realism.

I walked up and down the shelves, looking for one I hadn't read yet. There were only a few and after that, I wasn't sure what I was going to do. A librarian had suggested I get some e-books from online but I hadn't the heart to tell her I had no money to purchase them. Still, I could re-read my favourites for a time, and hopefully by then, my powers would have emerged.

I grabbed one I hadn't read before off the shelf and found myself a booth to read in beneath an open window. I was tempted to read outside, but I didn't want anyone I knew seeing me. My aunt had an annoying habit of wanting to take things from me that she knew I enjoyed. It was almost as if seeing me happy in any way made her uncomfortable. And I couldn't have anyone taking away my novels.

I kept an eye on the clock above the librarian's desk as I got lost in a world of Anne Bonnie, who had a far more lucky life in this book than in real life. But then I flinched as something moved outside the window. A large cat, or at least I thought it was a cat, rushed across the road and pattered to a stop right outside my window. Its fur was a smoky blue, and its pointy ears had white wisps coming out of them.

Its eyes were an odd colour, silver, and they focused on me with an intensity I could feel under my skin. It leapt up to the open window and dropped down in front of me. With a little mewl, it pressed a paw to my hand. With a gasp, its feelings flooded through me. Fear, insecurity, and it was asking me... would I help it?

"You're not a regular cat," I breathed. "You're a Grimalkin."

They were magical cats, able to communicate by speaking to the spirits of people. I had read all about them, and they had all manner of other powers, such as identifying if someone was good or bad, and even manipulating people's powers. What was a Grimalkin doing here?

"What do you need?" I asked.

It apparently trusted me enough to ask for its help, and I could only imagine whatever it was scared of was a legitimate concern

The Grimalkin jumped down onto the seat next to me and pawed at my bag. Curious, I opened it, and the animal tried to jump inside.

"Hang on," I said. I grabbed grandmother's bag of ingredients and put it on the table.

The Grimalkin mewed and jumped into my bag, curling up but with its eyes peering out above where the zip ended. I wanted to ask it what it was hiding from, but before I could, two pairs of heavy footsteps echoed around the library. Two men dressed in tan uniforms, one of them with a large net in hand, dashed up to the library desk. The librarian jumped back, bewildered, with a hefty Bible in her hands.

"Have you seen a Grimalkin?" one of them asked.

Chapter Three

I balked and zipped up my bag to hide the Grimalkin even more. Were these guys zoo keepers or something? Grimalkins didn't belong in a zoo. They were usually communal creatures that lived in packs together in the wild. Very rarely they were the familiars of supernaturals, but mostly they were respected as spiritual creatures that were not to be imprisoned.

Whoever these guys were, they had no place taking this poor baby.

The librarian's jaw dropped, her eyes bugging as she thrust a sharp finger at the muddy footprints smeared into the carpet.

"Out," she snapped. "Now."

"But-!" One of the zoo keepers spluttered, pointing with his net into the library.

"I won't say it again." The librarian picked up a gnarly wand off her desk and brandished it at them. "Get out, or you'll be chasing that Grimalkin without any trousers."

I stifled my snigger in my hand as one of the zoo keepers bolted for the door, while the other grabbed hold of his waistband and waddled after him.

Who needed security when a librarian would do?

The Grimalkin poked its head out of my bag and extended a paw, brushing the back of my hand.

A shiver ran through me as a spiritual line shot up my hand and through my arm right into my soul.

Thank you.

I swore into my hand. Spiritual creatures like Grimalkins could communicate to anyone through their souls, but it was a rare privilege. How big of a favour had I done this creature by hiding it?

The Grimalkin disappeared back into my bag as the zoo keepers dashed past the window again. I had to get this poor baby out of here.

"This might be a bit uncomfortable," I said, pulling the zip up on my bag. "But I'll take you somewhere safe."

Safer than here, anyway. If my grandmother found it, the worst she would do was kick it out. If only I had that option.

The Grimalkin's eyes sparkled like galaxies through the crack in the zip, full of trust and ease. The poor thing. What had it been through to trust the first person it met?

I took five minutes to put my rucksack on as carefully as I could and tiptoed past the librarian who was squirting water onto the mud stains with her wand, muttering furiously under her breath. The second I was out on the street, I dashed toward home with the magical creature curled up in my backpack.



There was nobody at home when I got back, so I hurried to my room with little concern and opened my rucksack on my bed. The Grimalkin hopped out onto my duvet and stretched.

"Make yourself at home," I said, gesturing around the room.

Considering I couldn't stretch both arms out either side of me without hitting a wall, there wasn't much room to make oneself at home. In fact, the Grimalkin had traded in one prison for another.

"Do you have a name?" I asked, as the Grimalkin padded up to me and rubbed its ear against my leg.

I didn't even know if it was a girl or a boy. Did magical creatures have genders? How did they reproduce; like regular mammals or through magic?

The voice that had reached me through my soul had felt gentle and calm, maybe more feminine. What with her abundance of magic, there was only one name that sprung to mind.

"How do you feel about Hecate?" I asked, running a hand over her silky fur. "Goddess of magic?"

The Grimalkin purred. Well, that was as good a sign as any.

On the scruffy vanity against the window, I caught sight of a potion bottle filled with pink liquid. Grandmother had left my daily potion out for me to take. This was why I kept all my important things on the roof; she could and did walk in here whenever she felt like it. It would have been nice to have some privacy, but then, this wasn't my house. One day, though. One day.

I walked over to the vanity and reached for the potion; I'd be in huge trouble if I didn't take it. But before I could pick it up, Hecate jumped up on the vanity and batted the bottle clear off the table. I gasped as the vial smashed on the stone slabs, the potion exploding up the leg of the vanity.

"What are you doing?" I looked around for something to clear up the mess with and settled for a ratty towel draped on the radiator. "I needed to take that!"

Sweat beaded on my forehead as I cleaned up the potion and collected the pieces of glass into the towel. Would missing it this one day make a difference? Would it set me back even further than I already was?

Hecate jumped down next to me and pressed a paw to my forearm, and yet another message emerged in my soul.

That potion is harmful to you.

"Harmful?" I winced as a piece of glass dug into my fingertip and blood beaded on my skin. "Without that potion, I'll never get my power."

Surely a Grimalkin of all things would know things like that.

I hurried to the kitchen and emptied the glass shards into the bin, careful to cover them up with other garbage. If grandmother found out, I'd be toast. Hecate padded into the kitchen as I shifted from foot to foot, my hands balled up at my mouth. Regardless if she found out or not, if I didn't take that potion, it might take even longer for me to get my power. I had to take one. Would there be another in the potion lab?

"Yes, you had better help me find one," I agreed, as Hecate followed me into the living room. "This is your fault, after all."

I pushed open the panel that doubled as a door to the potion room and slipped inside. I wasn't exactly supposed to be in there by myself, but I didn't have much choice. Grandmother wouldn't understand even if I explained, so I just had to fix it myself.

I rummaged through the shelves of potion bottles, all labelled with beautifully calligraphic writing. But my potion wasn't there. Even when I peered into the locked glass cabinet looming over the spell circle and cauldron, I couldn't see any potion that even resembled the one I took.

Did grandmother make it fresh every day? That didn't seem like her. She stockpiled for days, and longer if she had important engagements going on.

Hecate padded over to a section of the wall between the glass cabinet and the ingredients shelves and pressed a paw to the wall panel. With a creak, it opened up, just like the potion room door did. There was a secret room within a secret room in here?

I stepped over the melted candles around the spell circle and peered through the gap in the door. But Hecate was braver than me and skittered inside. The moment she crossed the threshold, the candles on the walls lit themselves, casting an eerie light throughout the room.

I edged in a little nearer. It didn't look like it was meant to be a room, and perhaps it had once been a corridor. Long and thin shelves lined the walls, full to the brim with potions and jars of ingredients. What was this place? Extra storage?

But Hecate made her way down the hall and jumped up onto a shelf stacked with potion bottles...my potion bottles. Why would grandmother keep them in here?

I joined Hecate and found not only the stockpile of my potions, but the ingredients next to them. Grandmother's system was that if she needed potions regularly, she would put the potions and the ingredients together on the same shelf so they were easily findable if she needed to make more at a moment's notice. But considering the dozens of potions on the shelf, it didn't look like she'd need to do that any time soon.

But as I looked a little closer at the ingredients, my heart began to pound. Dried strangulating knotweed? Why would that need to go into the potion? As far as I knew, that ingredient suppressed magic, not enhanced it. And a pot of crushed bay leaves, which possessed similar properties.

Hecate stretched a paw toward me, and I met her halfway, her message coming through to me the moment her paw touched my hand.

This potion isn't going to help you. Please don't take it.

I swallowed, hard, a conflict battling inside me. Grandmother had never liked me, but she surely wanted me to get my power? I was a burden to her, after all. She wanted me out of here as much as I did. Maybe even more. Okay, maybe not that much.

But something was off about my potion being in this hidden room, and even more so the ingredients that appeared to be in them. Was Hecate right? Was this potion harming me? But why would my grandmother do something like that, especially when she didn't want me under her roof?

My thoughts were interrupted by a soft thumping somewhere behind me, so gentle that I wondered if it was actually my own pulse. But Hecate's ears twitched in the same direction, and she placed her paws on my shoulder, stretching tall as if searching for something.

Any curiosity that had piqued in me smashed into a million pieces when the creak of the front door opening sounded.

Chapter Four

My heart slammed against my ribcage as I bundled Hecate into my arms and sprinted toward the exit. I couldn't even fathom what grandmother would do if she found me in this place and with Hecate. She might lock me in my room for months. It wasn't like she hadn't done it before.

I yanked the secret door closed and ran through the potions room and living room. Just as the door joining the front hall and the living room opened, I slipped into the hallway and dashed toward my room. The majority of me felt as though I had gotten away with it, but there was no way I could be sure. Not yet, anyway.

With the care of a mouse in the crosshairs of a cat, I bolted into my room and closed the door behind me. Hecate jumped out of my arms as I rested my back against the door and slipped down it, hugging my knees to my chest.

"Hide," I whispered, in low tones as Hecate sprung up to rest her paws on my knees.

But the Grimalkin didn't budge, nuzzling her face against my kneecap. Didn't she understand what was at stake here? My freedom? Her safety?

Footsteps and voices made their way down the corridor toward my room, and every muscle froze in place, my jaw aching with the tension. My heart beat so quickly that my breaths struggled to keep up. But if I breathed too loudly, they might hear me.

The footsteps passed by my door, the voices also fading away toward my grandmother's bedroom, and when her bedroom door shut, I finally exhaled. My chest ached with all the exertion, and a muscle in my calf spasmed as I gradually forced each limb to relax.

Hecate reached out a paw and touched my hand. *This place* is not safe for you.

"Where else would I be safe?" I whispered. "They're my family."

Unease was trickling through cracks in the barrier I had built around myself. There was no room for my real feelings in this place, surrounded by these people. I had to protect myself, and the only way I could do that was by being as small and take up as little room as possible, and certainly show no emotions.

Hecate might have been right in that this place wasn't comfortable for me, but not safe?

The idea churned my stomach. If I wasn't safe at home, where was I safe?

* * *

The weight of everything I had discovered that day pressed on me like slabs of stone crushing me inch by inch. I holed myself up in my room until dinner, trying to lose myself in a novel, but even the thrilling adventure of the Emerald Assassin couldn't distract me. Scents of vegetables and gravy wafted in from the kitchen, and when grandmother called me in for dinner, the tension returned to my limbs.

She doesn't know, she doesn't know, she doesn't know. I thought to myself as I walked to the dining room and sat down at the table. If she did, she wouldn't have hesitated to punish me.

The four of us ate dinner in silence, but for the short conversations between the three of them, gossiping about other people in the building and other family members who had moved out. There was no shortage of criticism, but my input was not welcome.

Halfway through dinner, a knock at the door had my aunt's critique of the lady next door's new dress cutting short. Grandmother got up and left the room to answer it, but not long after, someone all but burst their way into the dining room.

"Sorry to interrupt." A man with a beard but no moustache straightened up his black uniform as he stood aside to let his smaller colleague and my grandmother back into the room.

A gold pin badge in the shape of an athamé gleamed on their uniforms. My fork clattered onto my plate, but nobody noticed. What was Nexus, the supernatural police force, doing in our dining room?

"How can we help, officers?" Grandmother clasped her hands together in front of her, the biggest, fakest smile spreading across her face.

In the corner of her eyes, I could see the tension, and the thinly masked fury at having her house barged into would erupt as soon as they left. But grandmother would let nothing taint how the world outside saw her. It was a very different person to the one I knew.

"We have been going house to house asking if anyone has seen a missing siren." The main officer pulled a photo out of his pocket and showed my grandmother before passing it to my aunt.

The photo made its way around the table to me in no time, with nobody barely looking at the picture for more than a second. I took it in both hands and looked closely.

The picture looked like it had been taken professionally, perhaps at a studio. His jet black hair was styled with product, and he had on a long-sleeved shirt rolled up to his elbows, the top two buttons undone. He had the smouldering confidence of someone who knew his worth and wanted everyone to know it. His mouth was set into an unamused line, but his eyes enticed me. Someone like that probably got into all sorts of trouble.

"Has anyone here seen him?" the officer's colleague asked as I handed him back the photograph.

I shook my head as my aunt, uncle and grandmother answered 'no' verbally.

"What's so important about this siren?" my uncle asked.

Sirens had the ability to coerce people into doing what they wanted with a touch and a word spoken in the right way. In my eyes, they were all special. How glorious it would be to have power like that.

I flexed my fingers in my lap. Or any power at all, really.

The officer with the photograph frowned at my uncle, who lifted his chin and wrinkled his moustache.

"This is a missing person, sir," he said. "Whether or not the person is special is irrelevant. What's important is that they are found."

"Of course, officers. We will be sure to keep a look out for this young man," my grandmother said.

With one wicked look back at my uncle, the officers left the room, my grandmother following quickly behind them. My aunt and uncle exchanged looks. I grabbed a piece of chicken off my plate, and stuffed it in my napkin and into my pocket.

Hecate would likely be getting hungry.

"Surely they could have picked a better time than dinner," my grandmother grumbled as she came back into the room.

"Rude is what it is." My uncle drank some wine, dousing his moustache in red velvet.

I shovelled food into my mouth as quickly as I could and excused myself once I was finished. My grandmother, aunt, and uncle didn't care to notice, too busy grumbling between themselves at the imposition.

"Here you go, Hec." As soon as my bedroom door was closed, Hecate jumped down from the bed to greet me, and she grabbed the napkin I produced with both paws and dragged it down to the ground.

I had barely even unwrapped it for her before she got stuck in, eating with fervour.

Wow, she really had been hungry. I wondered when her last meal was.

While Hecate was eating, I mosied over to the window and looked outside. The police officers were standing across the street, talking over the tops of their car with their doors open. Strange that someone was missing in this town. Crime wasn't exactly high, and missing people were even rarer than someone having their house broken into. Maybe whoever was

kidnapping people could kidnap me while they were at it. Anything to get out of this place.

Hecate jumped up on my vanity and pawed at my arm.

I held out my hand to her. I was starting to understand that she wanted to talk to me when she did that. She touched her paw to my palm.

You need to return to the hidden potion store.

"But why?" I whispered. "I found everything there was to find."

And the look of it had unnerved me, but what more could I do without thinking on things? What my grandmother put in my potions didn't exactly change anything. What was I going to do? Stand up to her? And go where and do what? I had nothing and nobody outside of this place.

No, you didn't. Trust me.

Okay, that was interesting. I looked to my door, my lips scrunching up. I wondered what else my grandmother was hiding in there.

* * *

When everyone had gone to bed, I snuck out of my room with Hecate leading the way. Anxiety gnawed at me all the way down the hallway to the living room. But it wasn't enough to dampen my curiosity. It might even be worth getting caught to find out what Hecate was so concerned about.

We sneaked into the potions room and pushed open the panel into the secret room. Hecate immediately jumped up onto one of the shelves and carefully picked her way down it to a spot in the middle. I followed her and tried to peer between the jars she was pawing at. Unable to see, I pulled a few jars off the shelf and put them to one side.

When I pulled one of the jars off, I froze as I caught sight of another pushed all the way to the back.

Pounding on the side of the jar with both fists was a teeny tiny version of the siren I had seen in the picture.

Chapter Five

Hecate mewled and pawed at the jar. So that's what she had been talking about.

I grabbed the jar and dragged it to the front of the shelf. The siren wobbled and fell on his backside.

"Ooops, sorry," I whispered.

He sat up, looking bewildered. His clothes were ruffled, and he looked infinitely more sunken than his picture. How long had he been in here?

"What are you doing in here? How did you get in here?" I asked.

"All I did was sell that crazy lady some powdered sabre cat tooth, and she shrunk me down and locked me in here," he said.

Hecate batted the glass, and the siren flinched.

"Okay, okay," he snapped. "It might have been cut with plaster dust."

I pulled a face. "You tried to rip off my grandmother? I mean, I could have told you that was a mistake."

Having said that, I couldn't have predicted that my grandmother would have imprisoned him like this.

"She's had me in here for days, and I'm not the only one she's trapped. Just last week she shrunk down a fae and milked them for fae dust," he said.

My blood ran cold. Grandmother did always seem to have an unusual supply, despite the reluctance of most fae to part with the dust their wings shed.

"There's...there's no fae in here," I said, looking around the other shelves.

"No, because she was given a forgetfulness potion and sent on her way." The siren got up and placed his hands on his hips. "I'm telling you, your grandmother is a psychopath, and I have no idea how long she plans to keep me in here. If she even plans to let me leave!"

I started chewing my nails and immediately stopped. If grandmother caught me, she'd slap my hand.

This was all too much information. Hecate thought my grandmother was up to no good with my potions, though I still didn't really know what they did. And now it turned out she had the missing siren locked up in her secret potion store? She hadn't batted an eye at dinner when the Nexus officers asked her about it.

Was it really so easy for her to do this to someone and lie about it?

Curiosity got the better of me, and I grabbed one of my potions from off the shelf and held it up to the glass.

"Do you know what this is?" I asked.

"Yeah, it's a binding potion. She batch made some the other day," the siren said.

My breath left me. "A...a binding potion? Like for...for powers?"

"That's exactly what it's for," he said. "I don't know who's powers she's binding but she means business."

This was impossible. My grandmother wanted me to leave. She was always saying that I was getting in the way and a drain on her resources. Why would she possibly want to keep me from discovering my powers?

Hecate placed two paws on my arm and stretched up to paw at my face. As she grazed my cheek, the words, *I told you, this place is dangerous for you*, entered my consciousness.

Any retort I had stuck in my throat. Hecate and this siren both had insight into my situation that I had been completely oblivious to. But none of it made sense. What was my grandmother's motivation for this? Banging in the kitchen had me jumping. Damn it, someone was up. What if it was my grandmother and she checked up on me to see I wasn't there?

I had to get back to my room, but I needed more answers than time allowed.

I snatched the siren's jar off the shelf and dashed out of the secret room, careful to close the door behind us properly. If anyone found out I had been in there, I would have been in enough trouble. But something told me that uncovering what I had would lead to punishment even I had never experienced under this roof.

At the kitchen door, I took a deep breath and peered inside. My aunt bustled around making herself a midnight sandwich. That was unusual for her. Maybe she was stress eating again.

She had her back to me, slathering butter on a thick piece of sourdough. My mouth watered at the sight of it, but a tap of Hecate's paw on my leg brought me back to reality.

I sneaked back to my room and shut the door. Hecate jumped up on the bed and waited expectantly as I set down the jar next to her. I unscrewed the lid, happy to see that at least my grandmother had poked holes in the top and laid the jar carefully on its side.

The siren - who's name I still didn't know - made his way down the glass with his hands out either side of him and clambered onto the rim. He stared up at Hecate with wide eyes.

"Actually, I think I'm going to stay in here," he said and climbed back down into the jar.

"She won't hurt you," I said, kneeling down next to the bed

I was pretty sure of that, although I hadn't long seen her wolf down a piece of chicken three times his size.

"Now, what's your name?" I asked.

"Asher." He sat down on the rim of the glass. "Could I get a cushion or something? I ache everywhere."

After sleeping on glass for a week, who could blame him?

I looked around for something comfortable but while there were no cushions so tiny, I pulled my old baby blanket out of a drawer and rolled it up into a nest for him just outside the jar.

Apparently, the idea of comfort far outweighed the need for safety as Asher climbed back up the rim of the jar and jumped into the blanket.

"Aaaah yeah." He spread out as if he was making snow angels, his face relaxing and sporting a Cheshire cat grin. "That's the stuff."

"I'm Beatrix by the way." I sniffed.

I didn't have much experience with socialising, but as far as I knew it was customary to exchange names when meeting someone for the first time.

"Right, right. Thanks, Bea."

Bea? My face flushed. I'd never had a nickname before. I liked it.

Hecate curled up next to the blanket and rested her head on the edge of it, slow blinking. Gods, she was cute. I started stroking her and an otherworldly purring sound emanated from her, causing the blanket to tremble a little. Asher linked his hands together at the back of his head.

"And a massage chair. I could get used to this," he said.

"Okay, that's enough." I tapped the blanket, jolting Asher from his serendipity. He glared at me, and a part of me wanted to shrink away beneath the bed.

I was ten thousand times bigger than him at that point.

Gods Bea, have some spine, I thought. Hmmm. I *did* like that nickname.

"All I'm saying is that we need to work out what to do with you," I said.

I couldn't very well put him back in the jar in the cupboard. For the first time in my life, I wasn't sure I knew my grandmother as well as I thought I did. The fact that she was

capable of basically farming fae for their dust and punishing her enemies by putting them in jars, was beyond what I imagined.

"You know how to make potions, right?" Asher asked.

"Yeah, of course I do."

"Great, just checking."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "What makes you think I couldn't?"

Asher spread his arms wide, a petulant expression just visible on his tiny face. "Possibly the fact that you've been dutifully drinking potions to suppress you for who knows how long. Makes a guy wonder if you decided to give up on magic altogether."

"I didn't know the potion did that," I said, through gritted teeth

Gods, this guy made me want to save him less and less.

"Well good for you. Any chance you could whip up a potion to undo this?" Asher gestured over the length of his body.

Hecate pawed at my arm. Even without her psychic voice in my head, I knew what she meant. Who was this little... twerp to speak to me like that?

"Who needs a potion?" I asked. "I could just feed you to Hecate."

Asher rolled his eyes, massaging his temples with both hands. Okay, time to up the ante.

"Or maybe I put you back in that jar and shove you in the cupboard where I found you," I said, folding my arms.

"No!" Asher scrambled onto his stomach, all sarcasm wiped from his face.

The moment his tiny shout had sounded, footsteps echoed in the hallway outside.

Oh, cranberries.

Without a moment's hesitation, I scooped Asher back into his jar and placed him as carefully as I could by the side of my bed. I dove into my bed and switched the bedside light off, Hecate curling up under the duvet with me.

My bedroom door opened with a spine-tingling creak.



I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to breathe normally as silence fell.

Though I couldn't see who it was, only my grandmother would check up on me. What must have been thirty seconds felt like an hour under her fierce scrutiny. After an endless period, the door finally creaked shut, but I still waited until her footsteps had disappeared before I turned on the light.

"You see how difficult it is to get a minute's peace around here?" I grabbed the jar and placed it on my bedside table. "I'm going to need at least half an hour to make a potion."

Asher wobbled around inside, pressing himself to the side of the jar for stability. But when Hecate poked her head out from under the covers, he stumbled back and fell on his butt.

"Well, luckily for you, you're in the presence of an *expert* stealthatician," he said.

I chewed the inside of my cheek as Hecate curled into me for cuddles, and I obliged, scratching her under the chin. "Stealth...a, what?"

"You might have noticed I've had *nothing* to do around here." Asher stood up, rubbing his behind. "So I've been keeping tabs on your family's schedule, in case it came in handy. And I've noticed that there's a good two hours between three and five am where nobody is walking the corridors. That's your chance."

I rolled the idea around in my head for a few moments.

No matter how much of an ass Asher was - huh, Asser was a better name for him - didn't I have a moral responsibility to release him? If I hadn't discovered that my grandmother was suppressing my powers, maybe I would have thought twice. But something wasn't right with all this and I had to get to the bottom of it.

Perhaps, with Asher and Hecate's help, I could get my grandmother to let me in on why she wanted to keep my powers concealed. Hecate hadn't just warned me about what my grandmother was doing, but she had led me to Asher. As a spiritual creature, Hecate wouldn't lead me astray. As uncomfortable as it made me feel, I had to escape this place, even if I had nowhere else to go.

"Fine," I said. "Three am tomorrow, I'll make your potion. But only if you help me get out of here."

"Deal." Asher pointed at the blanket on the bed. "Would you at least shove something more comfortable in here? I'm sick of sleeping on glass."

I reached over and grabbed the blanket, feeding half of it into the glass. The other half stuck out at a weird angle, but Asher plumped up what he could reach and curled up on it. Hecate had already taken her place as little spoon in my bed and stretched as I turned the light off.

I'd never had a sleepover before, but something told me having a Grimalkin and a shrunken siren present wasn't exactly typical. But I couldn't deny the warm feeling they gave me just by being there.

* * *

I awoke with a resolve I had never felt before. Perhaps speaking with Asher and Hecate had broken a glass ceiling in my mind. Being kept here when I wanted nothing more than to go out and live my own life suddenly felt like a cage that I now had the key to.

After a shower and dressing, I gave Hecate one last pet before heading down to breakfast, leaving Asher snoring softly in his jar.

My heart pounded all the way through breakfast, and not because I sneaked rashers of bacon into a napkin whenever nobody was looking. Grandmother chatted with my aunt across the table, ignoring me like always, except to slide the potion I was supposed to take across the table. I eyed it but didn't reach for it. Knowing now what it did made me feel sick, and the questions it raised burned so fiercely within me. But my heart's frantic beating warned me of the repercussions if I asked my grandmother what all this truly meant.

Despite the sheen of sweat all over my body, and the veritable palpatations, I finally forced the words past my lips.

"Grandmother," I said, my voice croaking up my dry throat. "What does this potion do?"

My aunt's knife and fork slipped from her hands and clattered onto her plate. Every head turned in my direction and every pulse in my body threatened to burst.

"You know what it does, Beatrix," my grandmother said, her tone laced with ice. "It's supposed to help your powers emerge. Of all the good it appears to be doing."

"Well...that's what I want to talk about," I said. "If the potion isn't working, maybe it'd be okay if I stopped taking it for a little while...just to see...?"

I trailed off as my grandmother's pupils turned to pinpricks. "Absolutely not. Without that potion, your situation will only get worse."

"But what if there's a chance it doesn't?" I asked. "I want to go out into the world and find a place for myself and-"

"Beatrix." She said my name like a knife cutting through flesh. "I don't know where this defiance has come from, but while you're under this roof you will do as you're told."

"All I'm asking is-"

"You are not asking anything. You are *insulting* me and my decades of experience as a witch," my grandmother snapped. "I know what is best for you, and you will not leave this house until you are ready, just like everyone else. Now drink it."

I chewed my lip so hard, it hurt. "I just want to-"

My grandmother stood up so suddenly that all the china on the table rattled. "You are *weak* Beatrix. Unfit for the outside world and would be a burden on society if I ever let you leave. Until you realise that, you're as much of a nuisance in here as you would be out there."

Tears burned my eyelids.

This was what she really thought. That I had no talent or skill or...worth. But how did she know what my worth was unless she allowed me to discover my power?

"Drink it," she said. "Or I will cast you out into the street as you asked. Nobody will suffer you the way I have, and you will starve out there. You'll be lucky if anyone mourns you."

The tears spilled down my cheeks, the shame and guilt I knew would come of this interaction swallowing my core, and any will to argue.

I took the potion, uncorked it, and drank it. My grandmother sat down, her face as blank as if she had just witnessed a boring stage play.

"You'll stay in your room for the rest of the day," she said, as she returned to her breakfast. "And any more talk of defying me will see you in there longer. I hope we understand each other."

"Yes, Grandmother." I got up from my chair and hurried to my room.

Once I shut the door, I rested my back against it and slid down it until I reached the floor, wrapping my arms around my knees. My entire body rocked with the sobs that erupted from my very soul.

I had always dealt with loneliness, never meeting anyone my own age and being ignored by my family. But I had never felt so isolated than in that moment. The true weight of my uselessness crushed me like a pile of boulders. I would always be other at best and undesirable at worst...and from the words my grandmother had just spoken, to be undesirable was all I could hope to be.

Hecate jumped down from the bed and padded over to me, nuzzling my arm. I lifted it up, allowing her to squeeze into the space between my body and my legs. She rumbled with purrs and pressed a paw to my cheek.

The memories of what had happened at the breakfast table shot to the surface of my consciousness, and Hecate hissed, pawing my face with tender care.

But even her affection couldn't banish the feelings of inadequacy that drenched my entire sense of self like an oil slick that would never truly dissipate.

* * *

I spent the day curled up in my bed, all but comatose. Asher had commented, or tried to, but Hecate had batted a paw at his jar every time he tried to make a sarcastic comment. Instead, he spent most of the day trying to eat the giant piece of bacon I had slipped into his jar.

By the time he had slumped against the glass with his hands on his belly, the bacon looked like an ant had only nibbled on it.

Asher had voiced his concerns that I would sleep through our three am deadline but I was still wide awake and watched the digits turn to 3:00. I had long extracted the bacon from Asher's jar, but I still had to hold it with both hands. It was greasy.

My body felt oddly numb as we sneaked to the secret potion store. Maybe it was all the crying. Once inside, I put Asher's jar on the floor and set about creating his enlarging potion. Hecate stayed by the door, keeping watch.

"Listen," Asher said, pacing back and forth in his jar as the potion simmered. "I know I haven't known you long but you kinda seem...more miserable than usual."

"Do you care?" I rubbed my eyes, sore from the tears.

"You're making a potion to save me, so...yes?"

"Wow, I hope your loved ones get more certainty than that."

"That's actually about as certain as I get. So take that as a compliment if you have to," Asher said. "My point is...what's up?"

"Nothing." I added a pinch of rosemary to the concoction.

"Come on. You can tell me."

"Yeah, I could. And then you could roast me about it. So just shut up and wait for your potion."

"Okay, jeez." Asher threw up his hands before shoving them into his pockets and paced around the jar.

At this point I wasn't even sure if I was helping him escape because it was the right thing to do or I wanted my grandmother to have some kind of repercussion for all her hatred of me. There was no reason it couldn't be both.

I finished the potion and grabbed a pippette, sucking a little of the potion into it. I put the jar on its side so that Asher could climb out and squeezed a droplet of the potion into his open mouth.

Asher coughed and spluttered as the droplet doused his face but a second later, he rocketed into his normal size, knocking the jar with his foot. It skittered across the floor and smashed against the leg of a shelf.

"Gods!" He windmilled his arms as he threatened to topple over backwards, his shirt ripped in several places as some particularly tight seams had failed to adjust in time.

I grabbed his arm and yanked him upright.

"Wooo, thanks." Asher ran a hand through his hair, smoothing the stuck up bits.

I eyed him in full size for the first time. He was even better looking than his picture; he had an oval shaped face, a cute little nose, and big blue eyes that looked fully capable of wooing anyone all by themselves. Shame he was such a jerk.

"Listen." Asher noticed the tear on his shirt and cringed, but he quickly ignored it and turned to me poised in a crouch. "I'm an asshole, I know, but I don't think I can just leave you here."

"What do you mean?" This was the place I had grown up in. I hadn't known any other place.

Hecate trotted up to us, her ears pricked.

"You're as trapped here as I am," Asher said. "That's obvious to anyone. If you come with me, you could finally be free. Not to mention, you might actually get that power you're so desperate for if you get away from here."

Hecate pressed a paw to the back of my hand. Go with him. You don't understand how much better your life will be.

It was impossible. I could never leave this place...could I? After everything my grandmother had said...if I left, wouldn't I end up in poverty and left to die alone?

"I'm not cut out for a life out there," I muttered. "I'm not strong enough." Or anything enough.

"That's not true." Asher rolled onto his knees to edge a little closer. "I don't know what they've told you, but you're a strong person. You rescued Hecate and me didn't you?"

Well...that was true.

"And you did it off your own back, without anyone telling you to do it. That tells me that you're not just a strong person, you're a *good* person," Asher said.

A tear slipped down my cheek. Why was he saying that? He could leave any time he wanted. Why was he sticking around to make this point?

"I have nowhere to go," I said.

"You're not the first person I've ever met who's had nowhere to go," he said. "There's lots of us, actually. We all support each other."

I sniffed and scratched my nose. "You mean I could stay somewhere? With you?"

"For as long as you wanted."

I stared into the bubbling potion. My life had only ever ventured in one direction - down an inevitable, familiar corridor, alone and powerless. How had I ended up at this crossroads with a *choice*? And now that I was standing there, which path did I choose?

The door to the potion store flew open, and a tightness enveloped my throat. Asher and I were lifted into the air, clawing at our necks as telekinetic power squeezed the air out of us.

My eyes bulged at the sight of not just my grandmother, aunt, and uncle, but my entire family gathered in the potions room, all with looks of pure venom.

Chapter Seven

Under the force of my grandmother's telekinetic power, Asher and I were dragged out of the secret room into the potion's room. We were slammed against the wall, our limbs pinned to it, and the pressure finally released around my throat.

I drew in a rasping breath, and Asher coughed repeatedly at my side. Hecate dashed after us, but my uncle picked her up by the scruff, and she dangled in the air, hissing.

"It's worse than you thought, Mother." My aunt Georgina had her hands on her hips as she looked between me and Asher. "She isn't just rebelling; she's sabotaging your work."

"After all I've done for you," my grandmother snapped. Her hair was still in rollers, but it didn't detract from the severity of her face. "I should have locked you up and thrown away the key years ago."

"But why?" I asked. "What did I do-?"

"It's nothing you did; it's what you *are*." My cousin rolled her eyes. "And you can't change that, can you?"

"What she is?" Asher exchanged confused looks with me.

But in a split second, it dawned on me. "My power. That's why you've stopped me from getting it, haven't you? You're scared of it."

What power could I possibly possess that would cause them to repress it against my will?

"It doesn't matter." My grandmother plucked me off the wall with her power and held me a foot off the ground. "I should have known you would abuse your freedom. From now on, you will be confined to your room at all times. You'll never see the light of day again. And as for *you*." She shot Asher a murderous look. "You're going back in your jar, and if you grovel just hard enough, I might release you. One day."

An almighty roar filled the room, and my uncle snatched his bloodied hand to his chest. Hecate landed paws down on the ground, her eyes wild, but she didn't skip a beat and dashed toward us. She launched herself through the air and pressed a paw to my exposed ankle.

Her power shot through my body and to my core, sparking an explosion that had my back arching and my head falling backward. I inhaled a breath that filled me entirely for the first time. With a jolt behind my navel, I fell out of the air and landed on my feet.

Asher dropped down next to me as power rippled through my body, but it was strange...some of it felt like it didn't belong to me. Orbs of power, all with different sensations, floated through me, as if lost in a maze.

Hecate leapt up into my arms, and I held her as she pressed a paw to my neck. A vision flashed before my eyes, of my grandmother, much younger, sitting in the living room with me on her lap, merely a toddler. A lady I didn't recognise sat next to her on the loveseat.

"Her ability will surpass any power your family has yet seen," the stranger said. "Removing the powers of others and being able to utilise them as her own. Well...it's almost unprecedented."

"You're sure that's what you saw?" my grandmother asked. "Your visions aren't always set in stone, you said so yourself."

"Never has a vision of mine appeared so clearly." The Seer, I realised now, looked upbeat, even happy about what she had revealed.

But my grandmother stared at me with the hard look I was so used to.

"Thank you for your insight into Beatrix's future," she said. "I'll take it from here."

The vision ended so suddenly that my head snapped forward, and Hecate nuzzled my face as I struggled to get my bearings.

So *that* was my power...and my grandmother had been so intimidated by the idea that I could take away *her* power that she had tried to ensure I would never receive it.

"You were really going to keep me here under false pretenses for the rest of my life?" I asked. "*Pretending* that I was just unlucky that I would never get my power?"

"And what if you went rogue with it?" Georgina asked. "Then we'd all be powerless and you would have control over the whole family."

"Oh, it's too late for that." I transferred Hecate into my left arm and flexed the fingers of my right hand.

Their powers pulsed beneath my skin, encouraging me to free them. But I had no knowledge of how to use them.

"Beatrix." Grandmother's tone sounded calm, even tender, and it hit my ears wrong. Insincere...and all in another desperate attempt to control me. "Return our powers to us or-."

"Or what?" I asked.

"Oh, enough of this," Georgina snapped. "Restrain them and get rid of that damn cat. This isn't anything more potions won't fix."

Her husband, Douglas, stepped toward us and Asher took a smart step back. Douglas was an easy 6'4" and lifted weights, although considering how lanky he used to be, I suspected there were some magical steroids involved in his build.

But my grandmother's power surfaced first, and with a jolt of my hand, Douglas was thrown back, smacking against the wall. Cries and shouts echoed around the room as the power submitted to my will and parted a walkway through my family members. They tried to fight the telekinesis, but their limbs could only twitch.

Asher whistled. "I know you were in two minds before, but...fancy running away now?"

For the first time in my life, I had no doubts.

Without a second thought, I walked through the crowd of people who had once been my family, with Hecate in my arms,

toward a world I knew nothing about.

Chapter Eight

The moment we were out on the street, Asher flagged down a taxi, and we bundled inside. I grasped the seat with my free hand as Hecate settled on my lap. I'd never been in a car before.

Asher pulled my seatbelt on for me, and I leaned into the seat, my eyes glazing over.

"Thanks Hec," I said, stroking her.

Hecate mewled at me. Hopefully she knew how much I appreciated all she had done. Without her, I would have been stuck there forever.

"That cat is something else," Asher said, stretching his legs.

"She's a Grimalkin."

"Right, right. Nice work back there, Bea."

My face flushed. If anyone had complimented me, it was too long ago for me to remember.

"Thanks," I muttered. "What...what happens now?"

"Well." Asher intertwined his fingers and stretched his hands out, cracking all his fingers. "I get the feeling I owe you big time, Bea. Couldn't have gotten out of there without you. So, I guess you can come and live with me and my merry band of misfits for a while. You know, just until you get on your feet."

"Merry band of misfits?" I snorted.

"Hey, don't laugh. They're like my family. None of us have one of those traditional ones, and I guess you don't either, now."

I spent a long moment exhaling. As far as I was concerned, I'd never had one. Although, given that I had just taken off with all their powers, I doubted today would be the last time I ever saw them.

"You're not going to want me there," I said. "I don't fit in anywhere."

"Yeah, neither do we. That's why we get on so well," Asher said, with a shrug.

Hecate rolled over onto her back, waving a paw in the air, and I stroked her belly. It was the least she deserved.

When I thought about it, my whole life I had been in a place I didn't fit because the people around me made me feel like I didn't belong. Who knew who I would connect with now that I was finally free of them?

As we drove away, my future looked blank and uncertain. But two things were for certain - I couldn't go back, and for the first time in my life, I *had* a future.

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About Rosie Wylor-Owen

Rosie is a USA Today Bestselling author of urban fantasy and paranormal romance books.

An avid reader, Taekwondo black belt, and travel enthusiast, she draws on her real life and fictional adventures to inspire her fast-paced, slow-burn, magical novels. In her spare time, Rosie practices colourful calligraphy, creates blueprints for fantasy buildings, and plays a tonne of video games.

She highly recommends her favourite authors, Deborah Harkness, Kat Ross, and L.J. Smith, who are equally responsible for her addiction to reading.







Alchemy of Revenge

BY L.A. McBride



Alchemy of Revenge by L.A. McBride

Olivia Monroe is a Shadow, trained to observe, infiltrate, and eliminate supernatural targets on the Enclave's command. But when a mission pops up in her home town, she has to decide what matters more: the job or revenge on the man who set her up ten years ago.



The last time I sat in this booth, I'd been a scared sixteenyear-old with nowhere to run. The cheap vinyl seat had stuck to the back of my thighs that day as well. Of course, sliding back into a life I'd outgrown should be uncomfortable.

A decade later, the same farmers sat at the center table, huddled over steaming white coffee cups while they complained about the price of a bushel of corn. A middle-aged waitress with tired eyes and a strained smile still made the rounds for refills. Even the décor was the same, the pheasant-themed photographs a tribute to big city hunters who tipped far better than the locals.

The only thing that seemed to have changed in the time I'd been away was me. Back then, I'd been another small-town South Dakota girl planning prom dresses and college visits. Now, I was a killer with a score to settle—even if I didn't look like it.

I was the kind of woman others thought of as the girl next door. When people met me, they rarely saw past the rosy cheeks, petite build, and strawberry blond hair. In my line of work, that served me well. No one expected a Pomeranian on a junkyard chain. They never guessed I was a Shadow, trained to observe, infiltrate, and eliminate supernatural targets on the Enclave's command.

I didn't choose the job, but I was damned good at it.

To ensure I passed for a fresh-faced college girl this morning, I'd donned frayed denim shorts and a South Dakota State t-shirt with a cartoon jackrabbit on it. I borrowed both from my mother's closet. Other than peach lip gloss, I hadn't bothered with makeup. The goal was to look as wide-eyed and naïve as the day I left. I took another bite of my scrambled eggs and got into character.

"Olivia Monroe?" A woman with short, permed hair and an embroidered shirt paused at my booth. "As I live and breathe, it is you."

I shouldn't have lingered over the eggs. "Mrs. Larson, it's good to see you," I lied.

Betty Larson lived a quarter mile down the road from my parents. My mother had forced me into three hellish years of piano lessons with the woman before I was old enough for after-school activities to crowd them out. The only thing that gave Betty Larson a bigger boner than her piano was a good comeuppance.

"Your mom said you were coming, but I didn't believe her." She huffed. "How long has it been since you've visited your poor mother?"

"Ten years." My voice was flat, but I forced a polite smile.

If Mrs. Larson noticed my lack of enthusiasm, she didn't let on. "It's a real shame." She shook her head and sighed. "You had so much potential." She said it as if I were a personal disappointment to her.

Maybe I was. There was a time when I'd been the coven darling. Yankton was home to a small but tight-knit community of witches, including Betty Larson and my mother. I'd been a rapt student from the age of thirteen when I'd begun my training. From memorizing incantations to meticulously crafting potions, I'd soaked up every bit of magical knowledge the elders shared with me. Back then, the coven took as much pride in my accomplishments as I had.

Then came my fall.

If the coven had guessed I was a fire elemental, they would've been even more disappointed to lose me. But at sixteen, my power had just started manifesting. Most witches could only harness small amounts of magic from the four elements—earth for potions, air for incantations and wards, water for divination, and fire for focus. Elemental witches were as rare as they were powerful because they could tap into a single element at a much deeper level. Earth elementals were

the most common and fire the rarest. Although none of them knew it, I was the coven's first elemental—one of the strongest fire elementals alive, in fact.

Betty Larson's lips turned down as she studied me. "Such a shame," she repeated.

I took a drink of my scalding hot coffee, letting the burn numb my tongue before I said something I'd regret. I'd be gone in a week, but my mother would have to listen to all my shortcomings long after I left. I changed the subject. "How are you? Still teaching piano lessons?"

"Of course." Mrs. Larson looked insulted. She tilted her head. "So, what finally brought you home?"

Home. That illusion was shattered along with my freedom the night I was taken away in magic-canceling handcuffs, my coven not meeting my eyes. They hadn't known where I was taken that night. They still didn't. As far as my coven and parents knew, I'd served a year in a cushy group home for troubled young witches before landing a job singing on a cruise ship. The notion was ridiculous. But thanks to a passable singing voice and a community eager to wash their hands of me, no one had questioned the cover.

Mrs. Larson frowned, scanning me from head to toe. "I suppose you're here for the reunion."

"Reunion?"

She let out an exaggerated sigh. "Your ten-year high school reunion this weekend."

I cringed before I could catch myself. "God, no."

At her pinched expression, I remembered that she was the self-appointed high school reunion coordinator. Ten year, twenty year, fifty year—didn't matter—if it involved paper streamers and crappy punch, Betty Larson was going to be in the thick of it.

I downed the last of my coffee. "I'm just here to catch up with an old friend." It would be a reunion of sorts, just not the kind she would organize.

Mrs. Larson squinted at me, probably mentally running down the list of the friends I hung out with as a teenager. I smothered the urge to laugh. My so-called friends were all too happy to turn their backs on me. Not that it would have made a difference even if they hadn't.

"A friend, you say. Who might that be?" she asked.

"No one you know." I didn't wait for her to object and play guess-the-friend. I threw a twenty-dollar bill on the table and slid out of the booth, forcing Mrs. Larson to take a step back. "It was good to see you. But if you'll excuse me, I have some errands to run."

I ordered an assortment of kolaches and an extra-large coffee to go. Then, I headed to the hardware store across the street. The old man working the cash register didn't so much as blink at my selection—a sturdy metal gas can, a roll of duct tape, a utility knife, heavy-duty black contractor trash bags, and sixteen feet of welded steel binder chain. I hummed to myself as I packed everything in the trunk before swinging by the gas station to fill up.

With any luck, I'd get a chance to put my supplies to good use before this week was over.

Chapter Two

The girl looked like a volleyball player, all long legs and sleek blonde ponytail. With a ready smile for everyone she encountered, Kinsley Johnson seemed harmless. But I, of all people, knew how deceiving looks could be. It would take a while to determine how deeply she was involved.

After a morning of tailing her as she ran mundane errands, I'd been sitting at this antiquated computer for the last twenty minutes. It had a clear view of most of the room, including the children's area where Kinsley led summer story time. The city library was a popular place for high schoolers to rack up volunteer hours that looked good on college applications. Another thing we had in common. I'd spent many days here volunteering when I was her age.

Kinsley hadn't bothered with a chair, sitting in the middle of the circle with her legs tucked underneath her and a toddler in her lap. When she finished reading the third book, she relinquished the toddler before standing to stretch. As I suspected, Kinsley handed her name badge to the front desk and glanced around before ducking into the special collection room.

Although it was housed in the public library, the special collection was a coven repository of old grimoires and books on witchcraft. It was heavily warded. Only coven members could enter. The ward was set up to repel non-witches, making most library patrons give it a wide berth.

I gave Kinsley a couple minutes before following her. Hopefully, the coven hadn't revoked my status. I reached for the door, relieved when the ward granted me passage.

Inside, the space was far bigger than it appeared from the outside. While there was only a single entry, the room ran half the length of the building. The front area held library tables, each equipped with a table lamp and notepads. Beyond the tables were rows of bookcases arranged by access level. The

first two were filled with books that may as well have been housed in the main library—generic history, plant encyclopedias, and general reference books. The next few contained instructional books for novice witches. Nothing too dangerous or too exciting.

You had to get five bookcases deep to discover anything worth coming in here for. A demarcation line carved into the floor lit up with visible magical wards to warn off the unauthorized. Beyond the line were the collected grimoires of the founding families, books on sigils and summonings, and tomes that skated the edge of forbidden magic. The ward was keyed to only let authorized individuals pass, which limited access to coven leadership. *And, at one time, me*.

As a teen, that section had drawn me like a moth to flame. It had taken me almost a year of weekly attempts to learn how to bypass the wards. Once I gained access, I'd spent countless hours back there hunched over old books. Since there was no sign of Kinsley, she'd obviously figured out how to get past the wards as well. *Strike one*.

Rather than heading straight to the back, I paused to pick up a book on magical plants. I felt the zing of power as I crossed the line to the forbidden section. Surprisingly, the coven hadn't discovered that I'd granted myself access all those years ago and hadn't bothered reinforcing their wards.

I shook my head. Any sensible witch would refresh the wards at least annually, but the thing about small towns was that even when something bad happened, everyone convinced themselves it was an anomaly. *If only that were true*, I thought as I searched for Kinsley.

I found her bent over a familiar book, a little library pencil and scrap of paper in her hands.

"Hello," I said brightly. My voice startled Kinsley into fumbling the book and dropping the paper. She toed her notes behind her and kept her eyes on me.

A flash of guilt crossed her face before she caught herself. Kinsley shielded the book she'd been reading against her body and glowered at me. "Who are you?" She squared her

shoulders and faked bravado, the telltale shake in her hands the only giveaway.

The trembling hands sealed it. She was in over her head. It was impossible to look into her eyes and not see sixteen-year-old me gazing back.

"My name's Olivia, but my friends call me Liv."

She frowned. "Did you just move here or something? I know everyone in the coven."

"I grew up here." I waved the plant book I carried as a prop. "Came home for a visit and a little research."

I was going off script here, which meant there was a solid chance my boss would have my hide when I returned to the Compound. Aleksei only agreed to let me on this job in an observational capacity. When begging hadn't worked, I'd convinced him that my ties to the community would be an asset. I had access to spaces others would not—like this one—which was a boon during surveillance. But Aleksei had made it clear that my personal history limited my role. Eyes only.

He'd sent Grif along to mete out justice should the investigation prove Eli was back to his old tricks. Although she didn't know it, Kinsley was bait. And good bait was expendable. To Grif, this op was another day at the office. He would be content to sit back and watch the disaster play out, whether it cost Kinsley her life or not. I should follow his lead.

I peered over the top of the book she clutched to her chest. "Whatcha got there, Kinsley?"

She swallowed nervously and snapped the book shut. She slid it back into place on the bookshelf before meeting my eyes and tipping her chin. "I was doing some genealogy research. Looking into my ancestors." Her brows pinched. "Wait. How do you know my name?"

I smiled. "I heard you introduce yourself to the kids during story time."

She nodded, but her posture didn't relax. Smart girl.

"Genealogy, huh?" I tapped the spine of the book she'd been holding. "You might have better luck finding your great-great-grandma's name in one of the founder's grimoires instead of a book of forbidden incantations."

Kinsley shifted her weight and glanced behind me to the door like it was a lifeline. Her pulse kicked up, and her breathing shallowed. She was edging toward panic. Time to cut this short.

"Hey, don't look so scared. When I was your age, I snuck back here, too." I winked at her. "I'm not going to rat you out."

Some of the tension left her body. "Thanks." She offered me a shaky smile. "I should go."

"Wait." I bent down to retrieve the paper that had fallen to the floor earlier. "You dropped this." I offered it to her without looking at it.

When she took it, I used the opportunity to slip the bug in her pocket. It was a standard surveillance bug, but I'd spelled it to be undetectable for the next twenty-four hours.

"It was nice to meet you, Kinsley." I let her pass. "I hope I'll see you again." I meant it.

Chapter Three

Grif stepped out from the side of the building to intercept me. *Shit.* I thought he was hanging back at the motel until I delivered the intel.

Grif and I rarely worked together, and for good reason. Vamps and witches didn't often play nice, but it was more than that. We were as different as two Shadows could be. Not only did Grif have that whole tall, dark, and deadly vibe people expected from assassins, he'd been a butcher before he was turned. That type of skill, paired with the demon he now carried inside, made Grif ideally suited for this kind of work. He could take apart his targets with methodical precision, making death as quick or as protracted as the situation called for.

Me? Despite all of Aleksei's teachings, I had too much fire in my veins to do things by the book. Grif had little patience for my tendency to improvise on the job—which was probably why Aleksei had assigned him as my warden.

He didn't bother with courtesy, getting right in my face. "What do you think you're doing?" he demanded.

I smiled. "Would you believe renewing my library card?"

He didn't dignify that with a response. He grabbed my arm and shoved me toward the alley. I didn't try to jerk out of his grasp. He was too strong for that. Instead, I concentrated on my magic until my fingertips sparked. "Hands off," I warned. Vampires and fire didn't mix.

He released his grip and stalked ahead of me, leaving me to trail after him like a good little Shadow. When he stepped into an alcove, I pressed my back to the wall beside him.

He turned to scowl at me. "You're compromising this op. Be a fucking professional for once."

Grif was all about cold efficiency on the job. There was nothing he hated more than someone going off script. He was the most uptight vampire I'd ever met, and that was saying something. The man probably ironed his underwear.

I sighed. "You're overreacting. I wanted a closer look at the girl. That's all."

His eyes flared vampire red. "Don't lie to me."

"What do you want?" I countered. "We shouldn't be seen together."

Grif leaned in, his breath fanning across my cheek. "I want you to do your job, so I don't have to clean up your mess. And leave your petty vendetta at home."

I bristled. There was nothing petty about my vendetta. Eli set me up ten years ago and watched me take the fall. Worse, he drained half a dozen witches with the magic I gave him. He'd groomed me for a year, telling me all the things a sheltered sixteen-year-old wanted to hear. He'd showered me with praise and attention and fanned the belief that I could make a difference.

It took me months to get his potion right, and all the while I worked on it, I believed every lie he fed me. I thought I was making an additive that would extend the shelf life of donated blood. So many nights, I'd rested my head on his chest and gazed up at the night sky while he spun tales of a new, more humane food source for vampires. A reality we could create together.

When he gave me the potion instructions, I hadn't questioned where he got them. After countless afternoons combing through books in the special collection, I eventually located the right incantation to activate it. When I'd handed over the perfected batch, I ignored the flutter of unease that snaked through me at the triumph on Eli's face. That night was the last I saw him.

By the time the bodies were found, Eli had gone to ground, and every breadcrumb led straight back to me. There were enough traces of the potion in the dead witches' blood for the

coven leaders to identify it as forbidden magic. In reality, the potion had been the magical equivalent of MSG for bloodsuckers. It enhanced the flavor of Eli's victims and transformed their blood into a powerful vampire aphrodisiac that—once bottled—he'd dubbed Nectar and sold for big bucks on the underground market.

Even with a limited supply, Eli had made a lot of money off the lone batch I'd brewed. My only consolation was that no other witch strong enough to brew him another batch would be dumb enough to fall for his bullshit. *Until Kinsley*.

The week I made the potion, Eli deposited enough money in an account under my name at a local bank that the investigation was quickly tied up with a neat little bow. He'd walked away a rich man and left me to suffer the fallout.

If it hadn't been for my fire magic manifesting in the days following my arrest, my life would have been forfeited. But a fire elemental was too powerful to waste. As the governing body for the supernatural world, the Enclave hoarded power like I stashed chocolate. I may not be a natural like Grif, but—thanks to Eli—the Enclave honed me into another kind of weapon in their arsenal.

Grif glared down at me. "Did you make contact?"

"Yup." There was no point in lying. "I planted a bug to speed things along." And hopefully give me enough ammo to trigger a kill order before Kinsley did something she couldn't come back from.

"That wasn't the plan."

"Plans are overrated." I shrugged. "I saw an opportunity, so I took it."

Grif swore and stalked away, his burner phone already to his ear, so he could tattle to the boss. I waited until he'd disappeared before heading to my car.

My steps slowed as I recognized the man getting out of the truck next to my parking spot. It was too late to turn around since he'd already spotted me. In a town this size, it was

inevitable that word would get out about my homecoming. But the timing sucked. At least, Kinsley was long gone.

Martin was the most dangerous of Eli's vampire sidekicks, with the build of a shifter and the disposition of a shark. His eyes lit with malice as I froze. He crossed the distance between us with a smile on his face. "If it isn't Little Miss Goody Two Shoes, slinking home in disgrace."

He crowded me against a nearby Jeep, and I let him. Although it rankled to let this lowlife think he scared me, I had an image to maintain. More than my vengeance depended on it.

"I don't want any trouble." I made my voice small and dug my fingernails into my palms to keep from attacking.

He chuckled. "You never do." After I cowered enough to satisfy his ego, he took a step back to size me up. "Back for the reunion," he mocked.

Cripes. Even this deadbeat thought I'd come back for the chance to relive high school. The worst was that I had to play along. "I couldn't miss my ten-year class reunion," I whispered.

Martin smirked and eyed me like a rare steak. "I'm happy to give you a reunion to remember." His fangs dropped, and he blocked my exit.

"Olivia!" Mrs. Larson speed walked across the parking lot, waving a pop star biography in the air. By the time she reached us, she was out of breath. "Be a dear and give this book I borrowed back to your mother." She handed me the book and turned to face Martin. "I suppose this is your friend?" She took in his grease-stained blue jeans and Sturgis t-shirt with a grimace.

The book probably wasn't even my mother's. Busy body or not, I'd never been happier to see Mrs. Larson. "No, but I'll be late if I don't get going."

Grateful for the excuse, I grabbed the book from her hand and rushed for my car. As I pulled out of the lot, I glanced in my rearview mirror, taking great pleasure in the shell-shocked look on Martin's face as Mrs. Larson continued making small talk.

After driving across town, I parked in front of a busy grocery store where I was sure not to run into any more of Eli's vampires. After grabbing the listening device and a spelled map from the glove compartment, I took a sip of lukewarm coffee and grimaced. I unfolded the map and recited the tracking incantation. Kinsley's location lit up like a beacon. She was headed home.

I checked the time—a little past noon. Vamps might not be allergic to sunlight like pop culture claimed, but Eli rarely ventured out before dark. With hours to kill, I walked to my favorite café for lunch. By dessert, my listening device switched from background noise to a one-sided phone conversation.

"I found the incantation right where you said it would be." Kinsley's voice was threaded with excitement. "Tomorrow is the full moon, but I don't know if I can gather all the ingredients that fast. Maybe we should wait until next month." There was a long pause as she listened.

When she spoke again, she had the good sense to sound nervous. "But the only way to get the rattlesnake venom is to steal it from the coven's secure vault. With the gathering tonight, it's too risky. The place will be overrun with witches."

Bingo. There weren't a lot of spells that required snake venom. But I knew of one. Between the unusual ingredient and the incantation Kinsley had copied in the library, it was more than enough proof that Eli was pressuring her to make another batch of the potion.

"I know it's important, but Eli, what if I get caught?"

I fist pumped under the table. She said his name, and I got it all on record.

Kinsley sighed. "Okay. I'll get it somehow and meet you there by ten." She hung up.

After paying the check, I jogged to my car to call Aleksei and make my case. Means, motive, and opportunity. It had to

be enough for him to green light taking Eli out.

Chapter Four

"What more do you need?" I clenched my jaw. Despite replaying the conversation for Aleksei, he wasn't willing to send Grif in to finish the job.

"What I need is to catch them red-handed," Aleksei said.

I gripped the steering wheel until my knuckles hurt. "And what does red-handed look like, Aleksei?" I asked, already guessing his answer. "Will a completed potion be enough to nail him?"

"You know it won't. Eli needs to use the potion on someone to warrant a kill order."

Most vampires were careful when they fed, taking only enough to replenish the blood magic needed to sustain them before compelling their food source to forget the encounter. But a vampire ingesting Nectar fed in a frenzy. A victim could be drained in the time it took for Grif to get to them, and we both knew it.

I closed my eyes. "Someone could die."

"That's the nature of the job, Liv. People die." Aleksei's smooth, cultured voice was devoid of emotion.

Usually, I understood Aleksei's detachment—envied it even. Before being put in charge of the Compound, where all Shadows were trained and dispatched from, Aleksei spent years in the field. He remained tight-lipped about anything that veered into the personal, but it wasn't hard to guess the things he'd done. Detachment was the only way to survive this kind of work, something he'd drilled into me from the day I arrived at the Compound as a sixteen-year-old sentenced to a life no longer my own.

I still struggled with it though. Maybe it was my nature as a fire elemental, or maybe it was the need for vengeance that constantly simmered beneath my skin. Whatever it was, it

prevented me from achieving the kind of detachment that Aleksei and Grif mastered long ago. Since stepping foot on South Dakota soil, I hadn't been able to marshal even a sliver of detachment, no matter how hard I reached for it.

I swallowed past the growing tightness in my throat. "What about Kinsley Johnson?"

Aleksei sighed. "It's unlikely he'll try the potion on his meal ticket."

He was right. Eli would undoubtably have a test subject bound and waiting like he had the night I delivered the first batch of potion to him all those years ago. He'd use someone he deemed disposable. After all, Kinsley was worth more to Eli as a witch than as a demonstration.

Even with the spell and ingredients in hand, Eli needed someone to brew his potion. He wasn't about to settle for any witch. He wanted a powerful witch at the end of his leash. I'd shown him the potential, but Kinsley could be his golden ticket.

Most people assumed brewing a potion was like baking a pie from a family recipe. It wasn't true, of course. Magic was far from static. Not all witches could harness and channel it the same—the more powerful the brewer, the more potent the result. It wasn't Kinsley's age alone that made her a target for Eli. Despite being young, she already possessed strong magic. I sensed that much from our brief interaction in the library. Because of that, he'd keep her alive.

But death wasn't the only danger Kinsley faced. Eli would force her to watch. She would be powerless to stop it as one of Eli's vampires drained the victim until there was nothing left but a husk, easily discarded. Kinsley wouldn't be the one taking the life, but she'd carry the burden. That kind of guilt carved a piece out of you that you never got back.

"It'll destroy her." I should know.

"That's a price I'm willing to pay," Aleksei said.

"I can stop this if you let me," I gritted out. Eli might not get a death sentence without indisputable evidence of his evil,

but what we had on him was enough to confine him. It would fall short of justice, but at least Kinsley would walk away from this mess.

"No. You can't," Aleksei argued. "You're not authorized to take the hit. Do I make myself clear?"

"Crystal." Because Grif was the Shadow officially assigned to this op, he was the only one authorized to use deadly force. Barring self-defense, I was as good as neutered. My fingertips heated, and I forced myself to inhale a calming breath. Losing control and bursting into flame on main street was a surefire way to get thrown off this op.

"I assume you have her location?" Aleksei asked.

I took a deep breath, so I could do what needed to be done. "Yeah. I've got a tracking spell on her," I confirmed.

"Good. As soon as you have the meetup location, text the coordinates to Grif. And Olivia," Aleksei warned. "Let him do his job. Once the potion has been administered, he'll take Eli out, and you can finally put this behind you."

If only it were that easy.



No one expected to find evil in the middle of a sunflower field. Yet, there he stood.

With the moon at his back, Eli waited in the clearing in front of a dilapidated farmhouse. Thanks to a compact thermal imagining camera that plugged into my smartphone, I identified one human inside the building. Because vampires didn't have enough body heat to show up on my camera, I couldn't be sure how many were on the premises. Eli was the only one in sight, but I knew he wouldn't be here without an entourage.

Crouched among the sunflowers with my pile of supplies at my feet, I studied the man responsible for stealing ten years of my life. Everything seemed bigger when I was sixteen, my ex included. Back then, Eli had possessed that edge of bad boy danger that drew me. I wondered if it was the same attraction for Kinsley. After years working in the field with men like Grif and Aleksei—men with big builds and killers' hands—Eli no longer looked like a dangerous man. He was shorter than I remembered and reed thin. Even so, he was a vampire, which meant he was far stronger than he appeared.

He hadn't aged a day despite the years that stretched between us. Bathed in moonlight, Eli was still otherworldly beautiful, with model cheekbones, cold eyes, and dark blond hair that teased his shoulders. The only thing threatening about Eli was the predatory way he watched the young witch crossing the yard to meet him.

I kept my distance as he greeted Kinsley, relying on the listening device in my ear to track their conversation. As soon as she reached Eli, Kinsley wrapped him in a full body hug. He stiffened but didn't pull away. She didn't notice. I wondered how many times he'd done the same while embracing me. Another tell I should have picked up on.

Eli patted her back before disentangling from her arms and getting down to business. "Did you bring the ingredients?"

Kinsley held up a plastic grocery bag. "Right here."

"Good." He gestured to the clearing. "Let's get started."

Now that she had everything in hand to make his potion, Eli didn't waste time romancing her. He handed her an old, tattered page I recognized. Torn from a demon book of spells, it held instructions for making his potion.

Kinsley took it with a trusting smile. She added a folded sheet of paper from her pocket with the incantation needed to activate the potion. She laid both on a folding table set up in the center of the clearing, adding a small rock on top to prevent them from blowing away. She piled her long blonde hair into a messy bun before setting out ingredients and supplies on the table. Then, she rummaged through her bag and pulled out a can of spray paint. After marking a protective circle on the ground, she began.

My instructions were clear—text Grif the coordinates and wash my hands of it. I pulled out my cell phone, careful to shield it with my body so the light of the screen didn't draw Eli's eyes. I typed out a text with the coordinates and hit send. Grif would be on site in fifteen minutes, tops, but I made no move to leave. I wasn't ready to entrust justice to someone else's hand.

I watched the screen for a confirmation that never came. *A simple response would be nice*. Tucking the phone into my pocket, I turned my attention back to the clearing.

Kinsley was as studious as I had been at her age. She didn't rush—checking and double-checking her work along the way. Satisfied with the base, she picked up the vial of rattlesnake venom. She handled it cautiously, counting out ten drops before setting the rest aside.

Only one ingredient to go.

I checked my phone again. Nothing. I sent another text. *Status?*

Even at the rate Kinsley was working, she'd have it done before Grif reached us if he wasn't already en route. Of course, I wouldn't put it past him to be on his way without responding to my text. For Kinsley's sake, I hoped that was the case.

One of Eli's men opened the farmhouse door and stepped onto the porch. Eli covered the distance between them in the blink of an eye. He was faster than I remembered. They were too far from the listening device for me to make out their conversation, but I didn't like the way their eyes tracked Kinsley as she worked.

Unlike our magic, demon magic couldn't be fueled by the elements alone. It required blood. Kinsley sliced her hand with a small dagger and held her bleeding palm over the potion as she began the incantation. Although I was thirty yards away, I could feel the magic pulsing in the air as she powered the spell.

I read the hunger on the two vampires' faces as they scented her blood. Eli might have enough willpower to resist, but the vamp standing next to him must be young because he lunged toward the witch. Startled, she fumbled the dagger and took a step back.

Eli grabbed the other vamp and shoved him back into the house before soothing Kinsley. She retrieved the dagger from where it fell and resumed her incantation even though her hands trembled.

Damnit. She was minutes from completing it, and there was still no sign of Grif. I texted Aleksei with an update and a request to take Eli down myself.

Unlike Grif, Aleksei's response was immediate. *Stand down*.

And if Grif doesn't get here in time? I held my breath, hoping he'd be reasonable.

There was a slight pause. I shifted my weight to the balls of my feet, ready to launch into action the minute I had the green light.

You've got eyes on him?

Ido.

Record it. Once we have the evidence, Grif can take him out after the fact.

Fire raced through my blood, heating my fingertips until my phone warmed in my hand. I concentrated on my breathing until I had it under control again. I can stop this before he drains someone else. I had zero doubts about how this was going to play out. I'd stood by once and watched Eli steal the life from a scared old man who had been unfortunate enough to serve as a test subject. I couldn't do it again. Please. Make an exception.

I can't do that. You're too close to this. Get the footage, Liv, and then get out. Under no circumstances are you to be the aggressor. Repeat it, so it's clear you understand.

I will not be the aggressor.

Aleksei didn't respond. Before putting my phone away, I snapped a few photos, knowing they'd come out as vague blobs in the darkness. There wasn't enough light out here for photographic evidence. Had I known how tonight was going to go down, I would have brought better spy equipment. Without Grif here to bear witness, all we'd have is some grainy photos and audio recordings. Would it be enough, or would this drag out until Eli killed again and again? No one would take my word as gospel. I had too much of a personal stake in the outcome to be considered objective.

Kinsley finished her incantation and quickly bandaged her palm. Then, she handed the potion over to Eli and turned to follow him inside.



Grif wasn't coming. And Eli wouldn't stop. I stared at the pile of supplies at my feet. If I couldn't go after that bloodsucker, I'd get him to come after me.

Now that I was alone in the yard, I got to work. I opened the gas can and poured a steady stream as I circled the farmhouse. If I needed to stall, this would be a good way to keep the vampires contained. Lucky for me, fire was always at my fingertips. After stuffing my remaining supplies next to the house, I retreated to the sunflower field, gathering a handful of rocks as I went. I stopped at the edge of the field where I'd be visible. I grabbed the spare surveillance bug and set it to record before sliding it into my pocket.

Thanks to endless hours of practice throwing knives and fireballs, my aim was dead on. The first rock hit the middle of the door, the second right behind it. I didn't have a chance to lob the third because the young vamp jerked the door open and stared straight at me. I gave him a little finger wave, keeping my mouth shut. Aleksei knew me well enough that he'd realize I instigated this confrontation, but as long as the bad guys made the first move, I'd be in the clear.

The vamp wasn't one I knew, but then, Eli was always recruiting. I twisted my t-shirt in my hands like I was nervous and widened my eyes. Between my youth and small stature, it wasn't difficult to look like prey.

"You." He pointed at me. "Don't move." He put a heavy dose of compulsion behind the command.

I froze. Shadows were trained to resist vampire compulsion, but this guy didn't know that his mind control wouldn't work on me. He poked his head back inside and called for Eli. Remaining still was a challenge for me at the best of times, even without the flood of adrenaline in my system. Now? Torture. I fought the urge to scratch my nose as we waited.

When he stepped outside, Eli's eyes flared wide as he recognized me. I forced myself to stand still as his gaze traveled the length of my body.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't little Olivia Monroe, all grown up. Martin said you were back." He stalked closer. "Looks like the Enclave didn't have the heart to put my sweet girl down."

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep myself from hurling insults back.

Eli crooked a finger at me and motioned me toward him. "Come. Let me get a good look at you."

My steps were even as I crossed the yard to where he stood. As soon as I was within arm's reach, he curled a hand around my throat and yanked me closer. "What are you doing here, Olivia?" He lifted me until I balanced precariously on my toes.

I didn't have to fake my shock. Even though I knew he was capable of violence, this was the first time he'd demonstrated it on me. I swallowed against the fingers that spanned my neck. If I were too forthcoming, Eli would suspect a trap. "I came home for a visit," I said.

He narrowed his eyes and squeezed my throat until my hands clutched his, and I gasped for air. "Let's try this again. Why are you here?"

"I saw Kinsley at the library," I choked out.

Eli loosened his grip.

"When I noticed the book she was copying from, I knew it had to be for you. I followed her here."

He brushed his lips against my cheek in a mockery of a kiss. "Did you miss me?"

"I came to stop you before you hurt someone else."

Eli laughed. "And how did you plan to do that?"

Every nerve ending in my body was primed to attack, but I tamped my anger down and looked at the ground like I was afraid of him. *Not yet*. I repeated it on a loop in my head until I had myself back under control. Now was the time to gather the

evidence. Soon, I'd get my chance to wipe the smug grin off his face. I swallowed.

He released me, and I staggered on my feet. His gaze dipped to where I rubbed my throat, and his smile widened. With my pale skin, bruises were probably already forming.

"It's not too late." My voice was hoarse. "You can give me the potion and let everyone go."

There was no chance Eli would hand it over, but thanks to the tiny device in my pocket, I was now on record sounding exceedingly reasonable.

He barked out a laugh. "I have a better idea." Eli wrapped his hand around my wrist, dragging me toward the house.

As soon as we were inside, I catalogued the threats. I counted four vamps including Eli. The guy who had caught me outside now stood in front of a hallway. Maybe he was blocking an exit, but my money was on the human test subject being down that hall. The vamp had greasy hair and twitchy fingers, indicating he was freshly turned. That made him the least dangerous predator in the room.

I turned my back on him to face the two remaining vamps. They were steadier, a sick anticipation on their faces as they watched me. These two, I knew. One was Martin. Both had been part of Eli's seethe when he'd set me up.

Kinsley sat between them on a threadbare floral couch covered in questionable stains. An abandoned house like this in the country served as a popular party destination for local teens, as the pyramid of cheap beer cans in the corner proved. Kinsley tried to stand, but Martin shoved her roughly back into her seat. From the tear tracks on her cheeks, she'd already figured out that Eli used her.

"You shouldn't have followed me," she whispered.

I met her eyes. "It's gonna be okay."

While the men made jokes about my survival odds, I triaged the threats in the room. I'd take Eli out first. Then Martin, followed by his buddy on the left. The young vampire would be a runner. I'd have to time it, so I could light the ring

of gas outside to contain him. Before I could do any of that, I needed to isolate Kinsley and whoever they had stashed in a back room.

Show time.

Chapter SEVEN

"Let her go," I pleaded, looking in Kinsley's direction. "You have me. You don't need her anymore." He'd never let her walk out of this room, but I had to try.

Eli pushed me into a chair, a sneer marring his handsome face. "It looks like I'm getting two witches for the price of one."

I met Kinsley's gaze. She was no longer crying, which was a good sign. A hysterical person acted in unpredictable ways. This, I could work with. "Run the first chance you get and don't look back."

She didn't nod, but her quick glance at the door told me she'd do it.

Eli bent down until we were nose to nose. "Neither of you are going anywhere."

I directed my next words to Kinsley, but every one of them was for Eli. "I called the coven and told them where we were."

"You stupid girl." Eli's face mottled with rage, and he backhanded me. My head snapped to the right, and my cheek throbbed. "Martin, go check."

The vamp licked his incisors and eyed my bruised neck as he passed me. "Leave some for me."

Eli chuckled. "Don't worry. We'll all get a taste," he promised, like I was leftover pizza. He turned to the youngest vamp and pointed at Kinsley. "Secure her in the back room and bring out the old bat. If we're about to be interrupted, we better test the merchandise before we pack up."

As soon as Kinsley was out of sight, I breathed easier. With only two vampires in the room, this would be the easiest time to take them out. But if I struck now, I'd be signing my own warrant. Aleksei had made two things clear. One, Eli needed to use the potion on someone to seal his fate. And two, under no

circumstances was I to be the aggressor. I leaned back in my seat and waited for the baby vamp to return with the sacrificial blood donor in tow.

He came back with a squirming body tossed over his shoulder. From this angle, all I could make out was pristine white tennis shoes and a generous denim-clad backside. They'd duct taped the poor woman's arms and ankles and, from the muffled protests, her mouth as well. Eli pointed to the couch, and the baby vamp dumped her onto the open cushion.

"Shit," I muttered as I got the first clear look at her face.

Even with duct-tape over her mouth, I'd recognize Mrs. Larson anywhere. Her gaze darted wildly around the room until it landed on me. She glared at me as if I was the criminal mastermind behind this whole operation. I rolled my eyes, earning me a muffled lecture from the bound woman on the couch. Eli moved toward her, potion in hand.

I sighed. "Please," I bargained. "Use it on me and leave her out of it."

Eli jerked his head toward a still mumbling Mrs. Larson. "Shut her up," he told the vampire sitting next to her. One blow to the back of the head, and she was out cold. *Probably for the best*.

"Sorry boss," the vamp said. "It was just a tap." Not from those meaty fists, it wasn't, but I kept my mouth shut.

Eli grabbed me by the hair and pulled me to my feet. "No matter. I'd hoped to save you for dessert, but it looks like you've been promoted to the main course."

The door opened, and Martin returned. "No one is coming," he said with a nasty grin.

Eli wrapped a fist in my hair and yanked my head back. "That's good. We can take our time."

"Let go of me," I said loud enough to erase any doubt who Eli was threatening when the recording was played.

"Open her mouth," he ordered.

Eager to make up for knocking his first victim unconscious, the vamp left Mrs. Larson on the couch and crossed the room to force my jaw open wide.

"Drink up, love," Eli whispered in my ear as he poured some of the potion down my throat.

I had no choice but to swallow.

Eli handed the leftover potion to the other vamp and turned me to face him. "Some things never change." He tsked. "Ten years, and you're the same naïve little girl desperate to save everyone but yourself." His eyes turned red with blood lust as he stared at my pulse beating erratically in my neck. "I'm going to enjoy this."

He watched me for a long second as if savoring my fear. Then, he struck, sinking his fangs deep into my neck. Most vampires used compulsion to calm their victims and to numb the pain. Not Eli. Beneath that mask of civility he wore, he was a cruel bastard. He wanted me to feel every pull.

"One thing has changed." I let him have a good taste before wrapping my arms around him, locking my wrists, and becoming a living torch. Everywhere our bodies touched danced with the flames.

Eli released his bite, but it was too late.

I'd never burned hotter, and in a matter of seconds, he was engulfed in fire. A better person wouldn't have reveled in his scream. I waited until the fight left his body before releasing him. By then, the other vampires were racing for the door. I threw a fireball at Martin, hitting the coward in the back. Then, I took out the one who had pried my jaws open with a blast to the legs.

As I suspected, the baby vamp was a runner. I darted for the door, lobbing a fireball over his head to light up the gas circling the farmhouse. This one, I needed alive to corroborate the recordings. While he frantically searched for a break in the flames, I retrieved my supplies. Between the duct tape and the chain, he was trussed up in no time. After freeing Kinsley and Mrs. Larson, I retrieved the fire extinguisher I'd brought and

doused the remaining flames inside the house. By the time I came back outside, both women were gone. I didn't blame them.

The accelerant around the house burned itself out long before Grif arrived. "Where the fuck were you?" I snarled as he approached. Now that the danger was past, I had to fight back the full body shakes that threatened to overtake me. "I texted you an hour ago."

"I got hung up," he snapped, but he wouldn't meet my eyes.

Kinsley could have died. If one thing went wrong, I could be facing a death sentence. Because Grif couldn't be bothered to show up when he was supposed to. And he had the audacity to call me unprofessional. I sat down on the porch steps and took several slow, steady breaths. "We're in the middle of nowhere. What could've possibly hung you up?"

Grif frowned and muttered something under his breath.

I fought to keep my voice calm. "What?" It had been a long night, and I didn't want to play guess the excuse.

He cleared his throat. "I said I was in the bathroom."

"You were in the bathroom? For an hour?"

His face flushed red, and he sighed. "I ate some bad Chislic from the corner gas station. It tore me up."

Vampires didn't need to eat to survive. The demon tethered to their human souls were enough to keep them alive. Some vampires still did it for pleasure. Grif had a weird hobby of taste-testing the local cuisine wherever he traveled.

I stared at him with my mouth hanging open. "Are you serious?" I finally managed.

"It was venison," he said defensively.

I shook my head. "Cripes, Grif. You're what? Eighty years old? And you don't know better than to eat undercooked meat from a gas station?"

The tension that had been riding me all night broke as I thought about the big bad assassin huddled over a motel toilet,

sweat-drenched and miserable from food poisoning. I threw my head back and laughed. He stiffened, which only made me laugh harder. By the time Aleksei called, I had tears in my eyes and a stitch in my side.

"You're on cleanup." I shoved the trash bags into Grif's arms.

He took them without complaint, leaving me to answer Aleksei's call.



Despite the overwhelming evidence, the Enclave spent a week vetting my version of the events before I was summoned to Aleksei's office. I knew the news was bad the second I spotted him lounging in one of the matching leather armchairs. The only reason he'd pass up the opportunity to lecture me from behind his monstrosity of a desk was to cushion the blow.

"Close the door, please," he said. Please wasn't a word normally in his vocabulary.

I was screwed. With a heavy sigh, I closed the door and sank into the seat across from him. I braced myself for the worst. "Let's get this over with."

He frowned. "You're not in trouble."

"Then, what's all this?" I gestured between us.

Aleksei smiled and unbuttoned his suit jacket. "Am I that obvious?"

I arched a brow, and he chuckled. If I'd met Aleksei Volkov out in the world, I would've sworn he was a pretty billionaire playboy. With his expensive tailored suits and Italian loafers, he was handsome, cultured, and charming. He was also one of the most lethal supernaturals on the planet. He wasn't the kind of man who went out of his way to make people under his command feel comfortable.

"Yeah. You're that obvious."

"You've been cleared of any wrongdoing. Between the audio and the witness statements, the Enclave is satisfied that you were not the instigator."

I snorted. No shit.

Aleksei stood and poured us both a drink before settling again in his chair. He handed me a crystal tumbler.

I took the glass. "So, if I've been cleared of wrongdoing on the op, why are you pouring me a triple shot of your pricey whiskey?"

"You've misunderstood. They've vacated your sentence."

I sat my glass on the end table untouched and leaned forward. "I've been cleared of everything?" I imagined my mother's relief when she heard the news. She'd carried my shame for too many years.

Aleksei sipped his drink and nodded. "You're a free woman, Olivia."

I didn't fight the laugh that bubbled up. "That's amazing."

Ten years was a long time without a choice. Now that my name was cleared, I wouldn't be held to the same restrictions as those still serving their sentences. I could take a vacation or live off site. I could pick and choose my assignments.

"Does this mean I'm getting a fat salary and a benefits package?" I asked with a grin.

Aleksei picked up my glass and handed it back to me. "The Enclave has deposited a decade's backpay into an account in the states. They'll buy you a first-class ticket to wherever you want to go."

My smile dimmed. "For vacation?"

Aleksei rested his hand on my knee as if he expected me to bolt. "For good. You served a sentence you didn't earn, Olivia. There's no undoing that. But it's time for you to go reclaim your life."

I jerked away from him and staggered to my feet. "What life?" I looked around at the four walls closing in on me. "This is all I know. All I'm good at." I swallowed past the emotion choking me. "Aleksei," I reasoned. "Plenty of Shadows stay employed after they've served their sentences." Shadows like Grif and Aleksei.

He stood and dropped a hand to my shoulder, those uncanny pale blue eyes of his full of compassion. "You

deserve better than this life. You're so young, and now you're a rich woman. Go home, Liv."

I stopped fighting the tears. "I can't go back."

Aleksei walked to his desk and returned with a manilla envelope. He handed it to me. "Then, go forward."

After wiping my eyes on the sleeve of my shirt, I peered inside. There were bank statements with jaw-dropping balances, a fresh passport, and enough cash to buy my own first-class ticket.



I landed in the Kansas City International Airport two days later with a single suitcase and a ball of anxiety in my stomach. It had been so long since I felt the pressure of what to do with my life that I didn't know how to navigate the possibilities.

"Olivia!" A chorus of voices greeted me as I stepped outside. My aunt Janis was hanging out of the back window of an old station wagon in the pick-up lane. She waved again to make sure I saw her. Janis was old enough to be my grandmother. There was a twenty-year age difference between her and my mother. She was the more free-spirited of the two. With her long henna-dyed hair and hippy skirts, Janis was the favorite aunt who never failed to make me feel welcome.

I forced a sunny smile and headed to the idling car. All four women climbed out of the station wagon to wrap me in a group hug. Along with my aunt, Alyce, Bea, and Helen were four of Kansas City's most powerful witches. Ranging in age from sixties to seventies, they hadn't hesitated when I'd asked to stay with them until I got on my feet. I couldn't tell them about my job as a Shadow—the magical oath I took bound my tongue—but they were smart enough not to believe I'd spent the last ten years singing for my supper.

Helen pulled away first, wrestling the suitcase from my hands. She shoved it into Bea's arms. "Make yourself useful

and stop catcalling men young enough to be your children."

Bea huffed but took the suitcase. After stashing it in the back of the car, she nudged my shoulder. "I signed you up for a dating app, but we'll need to take some pictures." She scanned my t-shirt and jeans with a grimace. "You can borrow my clothes." I didn't have enough cleavage to pull that off, but I didn't argue.

Janis shooed her away. "Leave the poor girl alone. She just got here. You can corrupt her later."

I winked at Bea over the top of the car before sliding in the front seat next to Helen.

Alyce clapped her hands. "Oh wait. We got you a homecoming present!"

Home. I'd have to get used to that.

Alyce leaned inside the car and reached for something on the floor. I looked at Helen.

"He was your aunt's idea," she said.

"He?" I spun around to peer over the seat.

Bea shrugged. "We think so. It's hard to tell. We couldn't get him on his back to check."

Alyce climbed back out of the car and walked around to my still open door.

The guy in the car behind us honked his horn and yelled. "What are you doing? You're holding up the line!"

Helen flipped him the bird, and we all laughed.

"The little guy bit me." Alyce held up a bandaged finger before thrusting a shoebox onto my lap. "No rabies though."

Something definitely moved inside the box. "I'm afraid to open it," I admitted.

"Don't be a wuss." Helen scolded me.

I cracked the lid and peeked inside. "You bought me a rat?"

"He's a packrat," Janis said from the back. "We found him in the walls of the shop. He made a terrible racket, scratching

and scratching."

The four women owned and operated a fabric shop they'd cheekily named the Stitch Witch. And apparently, this little guy had taken up residence.

"He kept stealing sequins and bits of thread. He even swiped a thimble," Alyce said. "We wanted you to have him."

"Um. Thanks." I closed the lid. With his rounded ears and earnest black eyes, he was kind of cute. But what the hell was I supposed to do with a rat?

Helen pulled away from the curb, cutting off the guy behind us who had tired of waiting and was trying to drive around us. He honked his horn again. This time, all four women flipped him off.

"Did you know," Janis started. "That pack rats set up their nests like we set up our houses. They make rooms for everything. Their urine crystalizes into little cement-like walls."

I pulled my visor down and looked at her in the mirror. "And you thought I should have one?"

She smiled. "You need a home. He needs a home. You can help each other get settled."

"Now that you're here, where do you want to go first?" Helen asked as she pulled into traffic like a Nascar driver.

I glanced at the box on my lap. "I guess we need to stop at a pet store for supplies. Henry here can't live in a shoebox." Helen raised a brow when I pulled a wad of cash out of the manilla envelope I'd stuffed in my purse. Henry was going to get the best damn hamster cage they sold.

The rest I could figure out tomorrow.

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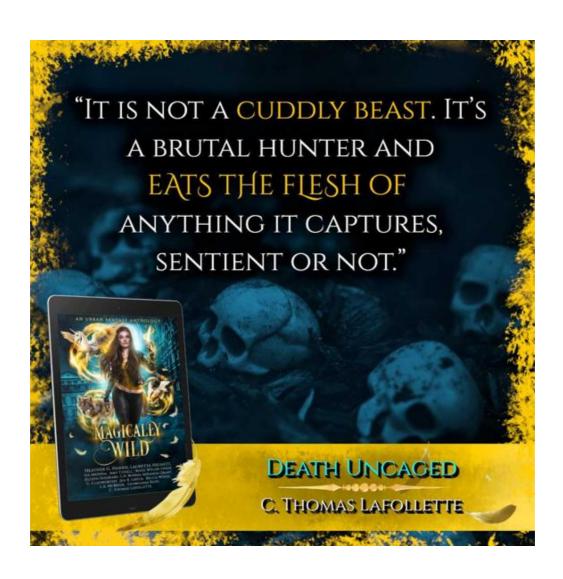


About L.A. McBride

As a child, L.A. McBride loved all things vintage and Halloween. Fortunately, she moved to the Kansas City area where she discovered the wonders of old stockyards, world-class barbecue, and some of the greatest haunted houses in the country. When she's not writing urban fantasy, she spends countless hours treasure hunting in thrift stores and attempting to win the devotion of a flock of chickens named after Buffy the Vampire Slayer characters.







Death Uncaged

BY C. Thomas Lafollette



Death Uncaged by C. Thomas Lafollette

When a supernatural creature from another realm is turned loose in Red City, Dax is the only one who can track it before it starts feeding on the souls of the innocent.

Author's Note: This story contains some Louisiana French Creole words that use the Creole spelling.

Chapter One

Something in the aether felt...off. Narrowing his eyes, Dax stared down at the antique clay teacup in his hand, wondering what could be causing the feeling. Perhaps the life threads that connected everyone to the tapestry of the universe from birth to death and beyond were vibrating those intersecting with his thread. Or it could be lingering paranoia after being shot several times the previous month.

Getting shot not once, not twice, but many times would do that to a person. He and Tomi still didn't know who all the various shooters were, though he'd removed one of them from the game board—he hoped. He hadn't heard from Jamie since he'd rescued her and her family, and he doubted she'd pick up a gun again, at least to use against him.

Perhaps he was just feeling peckish. As if to tell him that was the reason, his stomach grumbled. He wished Tomi's mother Adele had the kitchen up and running on the soul food restaurant. Tomi and Dax had used the money they'd stolen from the bikers to expand their tiny business empire, but unfortunately, she was still waiting for inspections and licenses. Across the street for pho would have to do.

Dax drank the last of his tea, gave the cup a rinse behind the bar in the tearoom, and headed out to the front of his dive bar. "Tomi, going across the street to pick up some pho. Want some?"

"Sure, boss, the usual sounds good," the tall, fat Black man replied as he reached into the undercounter cooler to pull out a tallboy of PBR for a customer at the bar.

Strolling through the sparsely occupied tables, Dax pushed the door open, slipped out onto the sidewalk, and waited for a few cars to pass before jogging across the street, the chain across each of his boots jangling with every step. Once he stepped up onto the sidewalk, he reached out to open the door but stopped. A photocopied picture of a young Vietnamese woman on it stared back at him.

Missing—Minh Dang

Last seen Monday the 11th.

Pulling open the door, he strode in and stopped at the counter in front of an older Vietnamese man with gray streaks in his hair. "Thuc, I just saw the poster on the door. What the hell? What happened?"

Thuc's whole face sagged. He looked older and more tired than Dax had ever seen him. "We don't know, Dax. She just didn't come home after her shift three nights ago. We called the police, but they refused to do anything until she was missing for at least forty-eight hours."

"I'm so sorry, Thuc. I'll put out the word to some of my contacts to see if they've heard something."

A note of guarded hope perked the man up a bit. "Really? Thank you, Dax. I don't know what to do. The police said to call them if we hear anything, but they didn't seem that"—he sighed—"interested in helping."

Dax nodded. The cops in Redemption City were at best disinterested in helping most of the citizens they were supposed to be protecting. The daughter of the owner of a small convenience store wouldn't rate much effort. Now if Minh was the daughter of a man with money and power, something might get done. But likely the energy to take the police report would be the last effort the Red City Police Department would spend on Minh Dang.

"Are you sure your contacts will help?" The old man looked up at Dax hopefully.

"I'll owe them a favor, but if anyone can find Minh or knows someone who can, she will."

"Oh, thank you. If she can help bring my Minh home, I'll do whatever I can to pay your friend back."

Dax gestured with his head toward the cooler. "I'm going to grab a couple bowls of pho, and then I'll go call my

acquaintance."

Thuc nodded and sat back onto the stool he kept behind the counter. Dax grabbed two bowls of ready-to-make pho and paid Thuc, taking a couple copies of the flyer with Minh's picture on it from the counter. The old man looked like a hopeful puppy as Dax walked out.

When he returned to the bar, Tomi was busy dealing with a bit of a surge, so Dax lifted the bowl on the way by to the tearoom. After stashing Tomi's bowl in the undercounter cooler, Dax turned on the kettle to boil some water for his pho and some tea. While the water boiled, he fished his phone out of his pocket but nearly dropped it when it vibrated in his hands. He rarely received phone calls, especially if he was in the same building as Tomi.

Dax picked up the call. "Manman Delphine, just the person I was about to call."

"Bonswa, cher. I'm glad you were thinking of me, but you may not be so happy after you hear what I have to say." Notes of the trans Black woman's characteristic humor laced their way through Delphine's New Orleans Creole accent.

Dax's eyes narrowed as he ran his hand through his shoulder-length black hair. "Oh? That sounds ominous. What's up?"

"Let's just say I have a mystery, and I might need your help."

He snorted. "I guess we can do each other a favor then. I have a mystery for you."

Delphine chuckled. "Are you free now? My mystery is currently in my shop."

"That time sensitive?"

"Blood tends to make things a bit more urgent," she replied. "I hope not yours." His voice tightened as his words sped up.

She laughed. "No, cher, but I appreciate your concern."

"Do I have time to call someone in to cover the rest of Tomi's shift?" His kettle beeped.

"Did I catch you making tea?"

"No. About to warm up some pho."

"Sorry to interrupt your lunch. Eat your meal, that'll give me some time to unravel things a bit more on my end. See you shortly." She hung up before he could reply.

Pursing his lips, he stared at pho fixings for a moment before shrugging and pouring in the boiling water. Normally, he'd fix a cup of tea to go with his meal, but instead he blew aggressively on his food to cool it down enough to put in his mouth without scalding himself too badly. If Delphine had a mystery, that made him nervous. When he slurped down the last of the broth, he rinsed out the bowl and set it behind the counter.

He grabbed the flyers, leaving one on the table, and folded the other before putting them in his pocket. After grabbing his helmet out of the office, he stepped up front and waited for Tomi to finish with a customer.

"Tomi, I need to go talk to Delphine. Minh Dang has gone missing, and I'm going to ask Delphine if she knows anyone who might have heard something. Plus she's got a favor of her own to ask me."

Tomi's jaw dropped. "Minh? Gone? What...what happened?"

"No idea. Thuc said she just didn't come home a few nights ago. I told him I'd ask around."

Bracing his hand on the bar to steady himself, Tomi slowly shook his head. "I wondered why I hadn't seen her at the store the last couple of days. Damn. Can you wait until I'm off my shift?"

Dax shook his head. "No. I think Delphine is waiting on me. I'll keep you in the loop, and we can meet up when you're done." Tomi sighed. "Alright, boss. Damn, Minh... Call me if you find out anything."

Dax reached out and squeezed his friend's shoulder. "I will."

Turning around, he walked out the side exit into the alley and straddled his custom chopper motorcycle. After he strapped on his helmet, he fired up the bike and pulled out onto the street, pointing the bike toward Manman Delphine's voodoo shop.

Chapter Two

As Dax approached the entrance to Madam Thibodeaux's—as the sign above the door proclaimed it—the lock clicked open though no one stood on the other side of the door. The bell tinkled when he opened the door and stepped through.

"Dax, cher, get your skinny white butt back here," Delphine called from the back room. Her New Orleans accent always grew thicker when she raised her voice.

Behind him, the door clicked to the locked position. As he wound his way through the narrow and packed aisles of voodoo and other magic supplies and bric-a-brac, he heard her conversing with someone with a masculine voice in Creole. But as he approached the midpoint of the store, the voice shifted as did the accent, slipping into what he thought were multiple languages chaotically overlapping each other.

"What in the world..." Delphine said.

Dax sped up, slipping around the counter and pushing aside the beaded curtain leading into the back room. A man sat on a chair, holding his head in his hands. At least Dax thought it might be a man. He shifted forms in a blurry chaos from a Black man to a white man to a robed skeleton and back around again while mumbling in several languages at once. Finally, he screamed in pain and clawed violently at his wrists until he dislodged a pair of bracelets.

A creature Dax had never seen before sat on the chair, breathing heavily. It wore what looked like green and brown leathers more reminiscent of a Ren Faire than a modern city like Redemption City. Its hair had a green tinge to it, and pointy ears poked out from the long strands. It had a long dagger slung from its belt.

Manman Delphine backed away, mumbling in Creole while grasping at something hanging around her neck. Dax, not

entirely sure what he could do against such an odd individual, stepped in front of her.

"Remove the dagger," he said.

Shaking his mane of greenish hair, the creature tilted his head and furrowed his brow as if confused. He shifted in his seat, looking like he was about to stand.

"Stop!" Dax barked out.

The creature stopped moving, his hands hovering at shoulder height. He—it was only a guess based on his more masculine appearance—said something Dax didn't understand, though it had an Irish lilt to the syllables.

"Do you speak English?" Dax asked, his tone more reasonable now that the creature had stopped moving toward his dagger. Dax tapped the side of his mouth. "English?"

The creature looked puzzled then his eyes opened wider, understanding seeming to dawn. He shook his head and pointed toward the one of the bracelets. Delphine squatted down in her brightly colored red and blue dress with a matching turban next to the bracelet he'd pointed toward. Eyes narrowing, she concentrated on it, holding her hand a couple inches above it.

"Magic?" Dax kept his eyes on the creature.

"Wi, cher. Very potent," she said.

"Dangerous?"

"Hard to tell. It's not a magic I'm familiar with or have run into before. But I don't think so. There's...almost a sense of seeking and knowledge."

Dax's eyes flicked to the other bracelet. "What about that one?"

Delphine moved over to the other one, concentrating on it for a moment. "It's different. Seeking, again, and...visual harmony or camouflage."

"But not dangerous, directly at least."

The manbo chuckled. "Everything can be dangerous in the wrong hands. But inherently? I don't think so."

Dax nodded then pointed to the creature. Reaching down, he patted his hip then pantomimed drawing a weapon and dropping it away from himself. The creature's jaw clenched, but he nodded, slowly lowering his hand. Maintaining eye contact, the creature drew the dagger and extended his hand to the side, dropping the dagger with a clank that didn't sound steely.

"Delphine, nudge it aside with your foot. Don't touch it with your skin."

"Wi, cher." She stood up and followed the instruction, careful to keep her distance from the odd creature.

With the dagger out of reach, Dax felt a little more relaxed, though not entirely. Getting used to a limited human brain still caused him issues when he couldn't access the vast knowledge he used to have before his banishment to live as a human in Red City. He might've known what the creature was and spoken its language before.

Sighing, he took a step back. "Can you say something to him in Creole? He seemed to be doing fine before I showed up."

Delphine nodded. "True. But it was almost too perfect. Too crisp and textbook, if there is such a thing for Creole." She rattled off several sentences, but the creature responded to each with confusion and a shake of the head.

"So, he can no longer speak to you or understand you." Dax paced back and forth, thinking. "Hmm. I showed up, he threw off those bracelets, and now he can't understand or speak to us."

"It's the bracelets. The one must let him speak and understand." Delphine grabbed a leather glove off a shelf, put it on, and picked up the bracelet they guessed was the linguistic one.

"And the other must change his appearance."

Delphine nodded. "Until you walked in." She chuckled. "Your presence short circuited them, cher."

"I guess so." He sighed. "Do you feel safe if I go back to the front of the store?"

"Wi, cher. He caused no issues while we were alone."

Nodding, Dax grabbed the other glove and picked up the dagger, careful to not let any part of it touch bare skin in case it was enchanted to harm anyone touching it besides its owner. "I'll just take this with me to be on the safe side. Give a yell if you need me."

"I will. Now scoot." She shooed him out.

Dax stopped by the front door, standing out of the line of sight of anyone outside. "I'm up front now."

"Thanks, cher."

"Thank you," the creature said in English, his voice halting and a bit strained. "Your friend has a very...imposing presence."

Delphine chuckled. "That he has. So why don't you tell us a bit about yourself since you're obviously not from around here."

"You are correct. I am from...faerie."

"And what brings you to our fair city?"

The fae laughed bitterly. "I do not mean to cause offense, but this city would not be considered fair to anyone. It has not been to me...and my companion."

"Where is your companion?" Delphine asked.

The fae sighed. "That is, I'm afraid, how I came to be injured and in your shop."

"Go on. My friend is here to help you if he can."

"I'm not sure I can afford his kind of help. Do you not know what he is?" The second sentence was hissed lowly.

Delphine chuckled. "I know him well enough. He is a person of integrity. He has helped me and others in the past. If

anyone can help you, he is one of the few in this unfair city you can trust."

Dax's eyebrows shot up. He didn't realize Delphine held that strong of an opinion about him. They'd only just met, though she'd helped him several times and he'd paid the favor back by helping a terminally ill member of her community pass painlessly. Or she could be speaking thusly to get the story from the fae creature, though he suspected she did like him.

He hated that this city forced him to be jaded and suspicious of everyone, especially strangers. But there were good people, too. He'd been fortunate to meet Tomi and his mother Adele when he first arrived to begin his exile as a human. And they were the ones who introduced him to the voodoo priestess.

"You can try to look for someone else to help you, but your luck won't be great. You're right. This is a shithole of corruption and all that it breeds. Whatever threads woven through this city brought you here to me. I can offer help. Though if you don't inform us what you need, then it can only be limited. I won't endanger my community."

The fae creature didn't reply for a while, then sighed loudly. "You speak fairly. You may call me...Rory."

"You may call me Delphine. My friend out there is called Dax."

"I appreciate your aid, Delphine. I'm what is known to my people as a ranger. I came here with a fellow ranger to hunt a beast who'd found a crack in our realm and slipped through. We were following it in our realm and jumped though the crack before it could escape or the crack could shift to a new destination. We were lucky and landed where there was a trace of the beast, but the delay allowed the creature time to get a lead on us."

"What kind of creature?" Delphine asked.

"I do not know what it might be called in your language or if there's even a word for it. But it is not a cuddly beast. It's a brutal hunter and eats the flesh of anything it captures, sentient or not."

Delphine whistled. "That's not good."

"No, it is not. It doesn't even wait until its victim is dead before it starts feeding."

The manbo inhaled sharply. "That's terrible."

"Indeed. We tracked it and found evidence of its...feeding. This city is big, and there are too many places to hide. We tracked it down last night. Its presence was fresh and immediate. We thought we'd finally caught up to it, but when we saw a glimpse of it, my friend and I were ambushed."

"Is it still free?" Delphine sounded deeply concerned.

"No. Whoever ambushed us had already caged the creature. I managed to fight off the men who'd jumped me, but my companion was captured along with the beast. I ran and hid, only emerging when I thought it was safe. I don't know what brought me here, but whatever it was felt like I was being pulled along a thread."

Dax's eyes opened wide again. He'd thought he'd felt a vibration in the life threads intersecting with his own. And he'd been right. Dread flooded his gut as he thought of the other threads he had connections to...Minh.

"Delphine, ask him how many days ago they arrived."

"I don't know. Let me think," the fae said, going silent for a few moments. "It was three nights ago."

Chapter Three

Delphine, her brow furrowed and lips pursed, stood in front of Dax with her arms crossed. "What are we going to do, Dax? There's enough unnatural death in this city; we don't need a supernatural creature creating more."

Dax nodded reluctantly. "You're right. There are too many unhoused spirits in this city already." He thought back to the morgue he'd visited and the horror of shrieking spirits who'd failed to be carried on to the next realm. Before he'd been exiled, he would have ensured the souls were carried across the veil to their final home.

"We may have to postpone the favor you were going to ask of me."

His shoulders and face dropped. "I'm worried they may be linked. I had a bad feeling before you called. And when you did, I linked it to your news." He sighed. "The daughter of the man who owns the convenience store across from the bar disappeared three nights ago."

Delphine's eyes opened wide as her jaw dropped. "Oh, no... Do you think the beast ate her?"

"Normally, I'd just say it's a coincidence."

"It's hard to believe in coincidence around you, all things considered."

He scowled, frustrated. "I'm not a harbinger of doom."

"My apologies, cher. I didn't mean you were, just that you're linked into the threads of life and death more than others." She shook her head, folding her arms under her breasts. "Your presence here in Red City has set things in motion. The life threads... They're being plucked, and you are"—she chuckled—"the spider feeling the vibrations."

He wasn't sure he liked the analogy. He didn't weave the life threads into a web to hunt, nor did he seek to manipulate them toward his own ends. His function had been to reap without prejudice or malice, seeing off the souls toward whatever their destinies were. It wasn't his decision where they went, and he gained no power from it.

And for his neutrality, he'd been ganged up on, betrayed, and exiled to live as a human.

He sighed, running a hand through his hair. "I didn't build the web, nor do I hunt it. But I understand what you mean. I'm just trying to live my life, such as it is."

The manbo laughed her rich laugh. "Cher, you don't get to choose what happens to you, only how you react to it. Be human, but you can't hide from the fact that you're so much more."

"But I walk the line as it is. That part of me is no more. Or it might as well be because if I dip a toe too far over the line..." He shook his head, fearing he might have revealed too much to the powerful voodoo practitioner. He liked her, but he wasn't ready for that level of trust.

Delphine looked at him pointedly. "So, what is your choice?"

He drew in a deep breath then let it hiss out. "I guess I'm here"

She slapped him on the back. "There you go, cher. What do you want to do?"

He raised his voice to ensure Rory could hear it. "It'll be hard to do anything with you if we can't understand each other. Can you change the enchantments on your communication bracelet so it only translates English? Otherwise, it will pick up too much from my mind."

"I do not know. It is attuned to my life force. I will see what I can do," Rory replied.

"Good. If he can make that work, that'll make our lives a bit easier. Don't suppose you know someone in the magical community who has the kind of power to capture a magical fae beast while managing a pair of rangers." She shook her head. "Not where the fae are concerned." She leaned in conspiratorially, an excited grin on her face. "I didn't even know they were real until you short-circuited his disguise."

"That's going to make things difficult, then."

"We can always call Boudreaux," she replied.

He raised an eyebrow skeptically. "Boudreaux? Does he have more magical connections than you do? I thought he was a mundane human?"

"I don't know, though I know he knows about the magical community. But there's nothing mundane about him." She raised a hand to forestall him. "Oh, he doesn't have any powers that I know of, at least in the magical sense. But he's got a lot of connections in weird places."

"Boudreaux it is."

Delphine pulled out her phone. "I'll give him a call."

Chapter Four

Boudreaux had to finish his EMT shift before he could meet with them, so Dax decided to have Tomi join him at Delphine's shop after his shift. Dax, Tomi, and Rory could pile into the car and investigate the scene of the crime, as it were. Perhaps Dax could pick up on one of the threads and follow it to its source.

Since Rory couldn't wear the disguise bracelet around Dax—he'd fixed the translation bracelet to work only on English—they resorted to the expedient option of having him wear a trench coat and a bucket hat to hide his ears. The green hair was no issue, not in a city with tons of people who dyed their hair a wide variety of colors. Rory finished the look with a pair of leather gloves he'd had folded over his belt.

When they walked out to Tomi's car, Rory stared at the door. Dax had no idea if the fae man couldn't touch iron or if he just didn't know how to open it. Dax had used the time while he waited for Tomi to look up a bit about the fae, though he had no idea if the internet was a reliable source for information about a real magical person from the land of faerie.

He had never talked about it with the Morrigan— He cut off the thread of thought before he could go deeper, but anger furrowed his brow and set a fire in his gut. Rory shrank back, terror filling his eyes.

Returning to the core of his human body and the feel of the car door handle in his hand, Dax held his breath before exhaling. He had no desire to scare Rory over a momentary slip of mental discipline. He couldn't let thoughts of her possess that kind of power over him.

"My apologies, Rory. My anger wasn't related to you, but to a past...incident." He opened the back door for Rory, waving him in. Rory, giving him a wary eye, slipped into the backseat and scooted to the other side of the car to sit behind Tomi. Shrugging, Dax slid into the passenger seat and buckled his seatbelt. He took a couple calming breaths then reached out to find Rory's life thread so he could get a sense of direction.

The ranger had offered to direct them to the place where he and his companion had been ambushed. Dax hoped the fae man knew how to navigate his way through a modern human city, but if he was a ranger, he probably could. Being in the car might make it trickier, though.

Rory had no issues guiding Tomi through the turns and straightaways to find where he had been ambushed, leaning between the seats and pointing as he recognized landmarks. Soon, they parked on a dark side street and slipped out into the night.

They blended in with the limited foot traffic as they followed closely behind Rory. Soon, they entered a part of old town Redemption City with narrow streets and narrower alleys. It would have been the perfect place to hunt, with corners to hide around and alleys to disappear in.

Reaching out with his senses, Dax found plenty of evidence of cut life threads, some old laying like fraying lace over the streets while others felt fresh, very fresh.

He had trouble sorting through them all, trying to find where they might intersect with Rory's. Pushing away, Dax pulled his awareness back into his head and let Rory guide them into a particularly dark and smelly alley. Here, he could practically feel the recent death surrounding him.

Finding a cut thread with possibilities, he let it lead him to a nook next to a dumpster.

"This fucking stinks, Dax. Why do we always have to go to the worst places?"

Dax chuckled. "You could have stayed at work, but you asked to come."

"Someone has to drive your motorcycle-having ass around." Tomi crossed his arms over his broad chest,

grumbling.

Waving Tomi off, he squatted down and found a dark stain on the ground. A large amount of blood had been spilled here. So much so that the victim had succumbed to the wound.

He stood and backed away from the blood. "You two go stand at each end of the alley. I need to concentrate."

Tomi nodded and headed back to the end of the alley they'd entered from. Rory narrowed his eyes, flicking his gaze from Tomi and back to Dax a few times. Sighing, he twitched his shoulders and walked toward the other end of the alley.

There was little he could do within the cage of his human flesh. Drawing in the shadows, he pushed them out around him and let his skin, muscles, and other tissue disappear, revealing the form he'd been forced into as a part of his exile.

The ratty black cloak fluttered in the light breeze. Returning to the pool of dried and coagulated blood, the bones of his feet clacked on the hard pavement of the alley. He stopped and squatted, reaching to touch the blood. With the bleached white bones of his fingers, he dragged his forefinger and middle finger through one of the patches that looked wetter and brought it up to his face to examine.

The life force of the victim pulsed strongly in the blood. In life, whoever had bled it must have been robust. Tuning into it, he let the blood sing the victim's last verse...

The creature. Furious at being challenged. Lashing out. A slip of a foot and the slash of a claw. Blood spurting and a triumphant roar.

Dax latched onto the roar and followed it.

Indignation. Fear, so strange and unfamiliar. Desperation. Nothing.

Straightening to his full height, he looked around to where the last bit of the creature's essence ceased. He thought he saw scrape marks on the ground—large ones. A cage?

Returning to the spilled blood, he squatted down and returned the bloodied fingers to the pool and rummaged

around for the other side of the cut life thread. If he could find the piece still tailing from the body, perhaps they could find the corpse and the men who'd removed it along with the creature and Rory's companion.

"Dax... Shit. I can't see you. You almost done, boss?"

"Almost." His voice came out hallow and oddly disharmonic.

There. There were the frayed edges of it. He grabbed onto it and fixed it in his mind, walking toward the side of the alley where Rory stood sentinel.

"Go get the car and meet me where I emerge."

"Fuck, boss. You can't be walking around like that. You'll cause a panic."

Tomi was right. Though Dax wondered if he could refine the aura of shadows to walk in a tight crowd, now was not the time to experiment, not after just discovering he could manipulate darkness a bit despite having most of his powers stripped upon his exile.

Holding tight onto the thread, he let his human form take control. The shadows snapped out, letting light flood around him. The thread felt fainter, but it was still there.

Rory, seeing him in his human form, looked paler than at any point since Dax had first met him. A barely controlled tremor ran through his body as he watched Dax walking toward him. Rory backed away, letting Dax have a wide berth.

"Rory, go with Tomi." Dax passed him by without looking at him.

Rory, pressed up against the brick wall of the alley, slunk along it until he felt far enough away from Dax to turn and run down to the other side of the alley.

Apparently, Rory could see through the shadows. Dax tried to brush it off, but he didn't like causing terror in people, even magical ones like Rory. His job had not been to terrify but to release people from life and let them begin their soul's next journey.

He put Rory's reaction out of his mind. He needed to concentrate on the thread so he didn't lose it in this human form with all its absurd obliviousness. When he finally popped out onto one of the main streets near old town, he pulled out his phone and sent his location to Tomi and waited.

Soon, Tomi and their ranger stopped in front of him, and he climbed into the passenger seat. Rory appeared to be pushing himself up against the door to get as far away from Dax as possible.

Tomi cleared his throat. "Considering we're doing this on our free time and Dax hasn't asked for anything in return, I think you could be a little more polite. It's not any different than your magical bracelets Manman Delphine told me about."

"That's OK, Tomi. I think I just gave our new friend a fright." Dax turned slowly in his seat and let a grin spread slowly across his face. "I'm sure he's glad to have me on his side in the effort to find his friend."

"Dammit, Dax"—Tomi snorted and shook his head, trying to hide a chuckle—"That ain't gonna help."

Dax laughed and turned around. "Drive. We're heading vaguely west. Keep on that direction, and I'll let you know if we need to make changes."

"Bro, does it look like I have a compass? Do I need to find a tree and see what side the moss is growing on? It's after dark. You got finger. Use it."

Pointing straight ahead, Dax sank into his seat to get comfortable and waited for Tomi to pull out into traffic.

They wove through the streets of Red City and then into the western 'burbs. Occasionally, Dax would point out a direction if they were at an intersection or a T with no western option. Eventually, Rory calmed down a bit and moved more comfortably onto his seat.

"We're going to run out of town pretty soon, Dax..."

Dax shrugged. "All I'm doing is following where the thread leads, but it makes sense. Whoever is powerful enough to capture scary magical beasts and fae rangers is probably keeping his new pet somewhere a bit more quiet than the local suburb's PTA- and HOA-riddled confines."

His predictions proved true as they left the city limits of the last western suburb and drove out into farm country. When he pointed toward a turn ahead, the sign at the junction read, "Redemption Reservoir 5 Miles."

"I don't think there are any houses up this way," Tomi said, taking the turn. "This is state land."

"I don't know, but it feels like we might be getting close to the end of the thread."

"You don't think they dumped the body in the reservoir, do you?" Tomi asked.

"If they did, that's rough. Got killed on the job then had his body treated like litter."

"From what I hear, at least he won't be lonely down there."

"What...what do you mean?" Rory finally broke his silence after the fright Dax had given him.

"Rumor has it, the reservoir is a favorite dumping ground for the mob and other violent gangs. If you like fishing, you can catch big catfish there. I love catfish, but I sure as fuck ain't eating any that were caught there. I'm not into being a secondhand cannibal." Tomi shook his head vigorously as he slowed to follow Dax's pointed finger, indicating the reservoir's parking lot.

"I'm not sure that's how cannibalism works."

"I don't care. Still not going to eat any local caught catfish. Just like I'm not going to eat much pork from around here. Mob's got to have lots of options to get rid of their handiwork, and there are definitely some sketch pig farms around this city." Tomi parked. "Now what?"

Dax wasn't about to make a comment on Tomi's dietary choices. It was a dead animal to be consumed. Did it really matter what it had eaten on the way to the plate? The spirit had passed on by the time the murder victim was fed to whatever

hungry animal happened to be convenient. The human part was gone.

"The thread continues out into the lake."

"Did you happen to bring a boat with you? Maybe hidden in the pockets of your other outfit?" Tomi smirked.

"My robe doesn't have any pockets." Dax sighed, his shoulders slumping. "Looks like I'm about to get wet."

Tomi turned in his seat, an eyebrow raised. "Can you... uh...breath underwater in your other form?"

"We're about to find out." Dax opened the door and pulled off his socks and shoes, then stripped down to his underwear.

"No bare ass on my seat!" Tomi barked.

Standing up, Dax stripped down to nothing, tossed his undies into the car, and flipped Tomi the bird before dashing off to the shoreline. At least he'd have dry clothes when he got back from his little expedition.

He stuck a toe into the water, then drew it back, shivering. Sighing, he decided to make the switch now. He didn't perceive temperature in the same way with his other form. With an exhalation, he sloughed off his human form. As soon as the last remnant of living flesh disappeared, his black robe settled over his head and shoulders, draping him in darkness.

Water tugged at the hem of his robe as he waded into the shallows of Redemption Reservoir. Holding his breath as he sank up to his waist, he paused for a moment before forging on. The thread felt much stronger in this form. Too strong.

Something wasn't right with the corpse.

He forged on, sinking over his head. Even though water filled the space inside his ribs, he felt no urge to inhale sharply to gasp in air. He relaxed, his clavicles and shoulder blades dropping.

Testing the strength of the thread, he tugged on it lightly then more firmly. It held. With a gentle push of his toes, he floated up and pulled himself along the thread, moving much quicker than trudging along the debris—natural and improperly disposed of garbage—silt, and rocks of the reservoir's bottom.

If he'd had lungs, he'd have expelled air in a stream of bubbles as a white shape practically leapt out of the darkness. Stopping, he looked at it—hollow-eyed skull to hollow-eyed skull.

Whoever it had belonged to must have been down here for a long time to be so thoroughly stripped down to bare bone, though it appeared algae and other water weeds were enjoying the new surfaces to grow on.

Reaching out with his empty hand, he fumbled for the thread that had tied this person to life. Nothing remained except a defleshed skeleton and a thread cleanly shorn. Whoever had once inhabited this osseous cage had moved on to whatever afterlife it believed in. A quick tug of the first thread put him back on course.

By the time he found the end of the thread, the limited moonlight barely penetrated this deep. But Dax could still see the frozen expression of horror on the man's face, captured in his final moment of life. However, unlike the last skeleton, this one was fully fleshed and still inhabited by its former denizen.

That's why the thread felt a bit thicker than normal. It didn't matter what this man had done in life, Dax doubted he deserved to be trapped inside his decaying corpse at the bottom of the dirty-watered reservoir.



Staring into the vacant eyes of the cadaver, Dax tried to ignore the impermanent parts—the flesh—to focus on what was going on with the soul. The rigor of the terrified expression captured in its moment of death mirrored the feeling of the soul trapped in its body.

Dax had seen souls trapped in bodies before, recently too. Jason, his bartender who'd been murdered, had been trapped inside his body by the bullet meant for Dax. This felt different. There was a sense of stasis about this soul. This one felt trapped in an ongoing torment beyond just having not moved on.

Letting go of the life thread, Dax forced his feet down so he could slowly walk around the body without all the information the life thread wanted to spill into his head distracting him.

He made two passes before he stopped, a gossamer thread—nearly imperceptible—floated off in another direction. As he reached out to grasp it, he paused before actually making contact with his bony thumb and forefinger. A sinister power pulsed off the line.

Touching it lightly, he released it immediately and let his mind sort through the brief surge of information. He didn't want to alert whoever or whatever was at the other end of the thread that it had been detected. Concentrating, he let his vision blur out.

That was it. Whatever was at the other end of the thread had the same feel and essence as the creature that had killed the man. And the energy pulsing along the thread, away from the body, painted a sick picture. The creature had linked itself to the man's soul to feed on it.

If he didn't do something about it, the soul would disappear entirely to power the creature, and it would never get a chance to move on to its next destination. Dax had never weighed the souls of the departed. He'd never judged them. Never measured their deeds against their villainies. His task had been to sever the soul and help them move on. His position wasn't to judge this man's crimes. The man had clearly died perpetrating one, but he'd paid the price.

Reaching into the aether, Dax pulled out his scythe. He stepped away from the body and brought the scythe around in a powerful arc, slicing the gossamer line feeding the heinous creature.

A snap and a pulse of water pushed him back, blowing his robe out behind him. He laughed, his bottom jaw clacking against his top jaw. A few fish swam around inside his ribs.

Concentrating on the man's life thread, he found it. The soul still hadn't moved on. Whatever the creature did to the man had kept the soul firmly ensconced inside the body. No doubt it was a mechanism to allow it to return and continue its feast at its leisure if it were to be disturbed. And without knowledge of the beast, Dax had no idea if killing it would allow the soul to move on or if it would remain trapped for eternity until it eventually disintegrated into nothingness.

He nudged the body with the end of the scythe's shaft and the body bobbed away before floating back as it reached the end of the chain tethering it to the cinder block holding it down. Stepping back and spinning around, he brought the scythe around and sheared through the man's body, bisecting the chest and cutting the heart in two. The vibrations along the blade as the thread dragged over it, catching on a few nicks, told him he'd made contact.

And then it snapped. The soul would be free to move on.

The gentle current caught the sliced off top of the body and carried it away with a slight upward trajectory. Sometime in the next day or so, someone would find half a man floating on the surface. It would likely ruin their day, not to mention the day of whoever the man worked for. Dax didn't mind that part a bit.

Turning around, he walked back across the lakebed. It seemed to take forever without using something to drag

himself along. Once he emerged from the surface, he stalked forward, looking for his friend and the ranger. At some point, he'd gotten off course and emerged about a hundred yards from where his friend waited by the car. The ranger stood next to Tomi.

Cold water dripped from his bones and robes as he walked along the beach. Pulling in a bit of shadow to shroud himself, he made for the ranger. He had some questions for the fae about this creature.

Before he let the shadows slough off, he reached out and found Rory's life thread. The thread felt rich and potent in his fingers, extending back a long way. The flavor of it felt different than that of a creature from this world, from Earth.

Stepping out of the shadow, Dax pulled hard on the fae's life thread. Rory squealed, staggering toward Dax.

"Fae, you're going to tell me what kind of creature this is."

"It's just a dangerous beast from the fae realm. It's dangerous, but nothing special..."

As anger rose in Dax, blue flames appeared in the empty sockets of his skull. "Nothing special?" He increased the hollow, eerie harmonics in his voice. "It steals the soul of its victims by pinning it to their body. It's a horror." He twisted Rory's life thread between his thumb and forefinger, eliciting a scream.

Rory writhed but couldn't move, gasping air in desperately.

"Dax, I'm sure he'll explain more fully now that he comprehends where he stands," Tomi said, as his eyes danced back and forth between Rory and Dax.

He stared at the fae for a moment, letting the flames in his eyes burn hotter for a moment before relenting, though he didn't let go of the fae's life thread. "Speak."

Rory nodded hastily. "It's a very dangerous animal." Dax squeezed the thread again and Rory squealed. "OK. OK. It's—I don't know the proper translation—but maybe...eater of souls?"

"Why is a creature such as this allowed to exist?"

"They're carefully controlled. One has never escaped before."

Dax let the flames return to his eyes. "That's not what I asked."

Rory gulped and nodded. "They're used as a form of execution for the most heinous of crimes."

"You...you use those things to punish people?" Tomi shivered. "That's fucked up, man."

Dax agreed. Death was supposed to be a transition point—a mercy to the aged or the body too damaged to heal and freedom for the soul. To kill someone then rob them of this was truly monstrous. He had no idea how sentient the beast was, but the ones who used it to punish their criminals were truly the monsters.

"It is, Tomi. I could feel the torment in the man's life thread. The creature not only eats the soul, it feasts on the terror and pain it inflicted on the body and then the soul. To willingly inflict that on someone makes the sentencer just as vile as the creature used to carry out the punishment." He sighed. "But right now, that thing is in our realm and who knows how many people it has feasted on. Our priority is to remove it from our city. Then we can send our fae *friend* here packing with a message for his masters."

He released Rory's life thread with a shove, and the fae stumbled backwards, falling on his ass. Ignoring Rory's whimpers, Dax strode up to Tomi's car and grabbed his clothes. With a quick shift back to his human form, he rushed to put his clothes on. Though he'd shifted from his skeletal form dry, the chill of the water still lingered, raising goosebumps on his skin as he scrambled to dress.

"Good thing it's dark out, or the glare off your pasty white ass would blind us all," Tomi teased.

Dax shook his head and raised his hand over his shoulder, lowering all his fingers save for his middle one. Over the years since becoming a human, he'd grown quite fond of the gesture, especially since he wasn't the most loquacious of individuals.

Tomi leaned on the car over the driver's side door. "While you were out super skinny dipping, Boudreaux called. He's off work."

"Did you explain the situation?"

Nodding, Tomi stepped back and opened the door. "Sure did. At least what I knew at the time. He's going to check in with a couple contacts and get back to me."

Dax sank into his seat and caught Tomi's phone.

"Don't want to give the cops around here reason to pull me over for a DWB." Tomi buckled his seatbelt and turned the car on.

"Dee-dubya-bee?" Rory asked as he got situated behind Tomi.

"Driving while Black." Tomi put the car in reverse and drove away from Redemption Reservoir.

Dax snorted quietly, shaking his head. At least one soul would get a chance of redemption, whatever that was. That had to count for something.

Chapter Six

They met Boudreaux outside Delphine's shop. She'd long gone home, but it was a central place they all knew.

Pushing off the wall, the tall, handsome Black man strode toward Tomi and Dax. They'd left Rory in the car since Dax was still unsure how much the manbo's friend knew about real magic and magical beings.

"Tomi! Dax!" Boudreaux stuck out his meaty hand, shaking both of theirs. "It's good to see you."

"You, too." Tomi smiled.

Dax nodded.

"So you looking to get up to some more trouble? Hopefully the profitable kind?" Boudreaux raised an eyebrow.

"Looks like it," Tomi said. "You don't capture a beast, kidnap its keeper, and make a body disappear in a single night without having some resources at your disposal."

Dax held up a hand to stop Tomi from continuing. "I don't know how much of it will be available, though. If we can rescue the kidnap victim and take care of the beast without helping the perpetrator move onto the next world, then we will. Unless it's the biker gang. In that case, there will be no mercy."

"Damn straight!" Boudreaux raised a fist and directed it to Tomi, who tapped it. "Nazi bikers can fuck off."

"Hell yeah," Tomi said.

Dax nodded and bumped Boudreaux's fist when it was moved in front of him. "So, you said you have an idea?"

Boudreaux folded his arms in front of his chest. "Less an idea and more a contact who might know what's going on with a weird animal in Red City. Since you didn't give me any

details on the critter, I couldn't pass any on. But my friend said he'd talk to you. He owes me a favor or three."

"And we'll owe you a favor in return, no doubt?" Dax asked.

"Nah, I'm still rolling fat from the last score you hooked me up with. Y'all are good."

"I appreciate that." One side of Dax's mouth quirked up slightly.

"Fair warning, this cat..." He laughed. "Maybe not the right word in his case. But he's an odd cat."

Dax didn't know what the joke was, and neither did Tomi. If Boudreaux didn't want to explain, perhaps they'd find out later.

"Do you want to ride with us?" Tomi hitched a thumb over his shoulder, pointing toward his car.

"Nah. I'll ride my bike. I'll text you the address he just gave me in case we get split up." He threw a quick wave and strode off toward a custom chopper that looked like one of the ones they'd "liberated" from the bikers.

Tomi's phone buzzed a moment later before the bike roared to life.

"That's it. Let's go," Tomi said.

Dax followed him back to the car and climbed in. Soon, they were zipping through the streets of Red City toward an address in the industrial section of the city. As they approached, the air, never the sweetest within city limits, grew more metallic and dingy.

"The air is so"—Rory coughed—"disgusting. How can you stand to breathe it?"

"Welcome to Red City," Tomi said. "It's not like we got a choice. It costs money to move to places with pretty air."

Rory grumbled and sat back in his seat, arms folded, a grimace spreading across his face. Dax had never known anything else. He'd breathed his first human breath of air in

Red City. And a few months ago, he'd almost drawn his last. The thought still haunted him. Would anyone come to liberate his soul from the prison he'd been sentenced to? If the enchanted bullet had pinned his soul to his body, would he eventually become an unhoused spirit like those who haunted the morgue Boudreaux had snuck them into?

Who reaped the reaper?

His body shivered involuntarily. Trying to shake it off, he pulled out his phone to check for any messages, though the one person who regularly sent him messages was too busy driving.

Ahead of them, Boudreaux's brake lights flared, and he pulled into an alley, then stopped. Tomi parked behind him and turned off the car. The three of them popped out of the car before Dax could warn Rory to hang back until they could brief their friend about the fae man.

Boudreaux dismounted the bike and turned around, his eyes going slightly wide and his jaw starting to open before he regained control and returned to his normal placid expression. "Who's your friend?"

"This is Rory. He's the, uh, one who lost the animal." Tomi stepped aside so Boudreaux could get a look at their companion.

"Alright. My contact is waiting just ahead. So when he comes out, just remain calm. He won't hurt you, but he's a wary fellow."

Dax's curiosity piqued as he followed Boudreaux into the shadows. For a brief moment, he grew concerned about following a virtual stranger into a dark and largely abandoned part of town at this time of night. But Manman Delphine hadn't steered him wrong yet, and she'd hooked them up with Boudreaux, who'd been an enormous help previously. Forging forward, he caught up to Boudreaux as he turned down another alley and waited at the line where the light of dim and distant streetlights met shadow.

"Boudreaux?" A high, squeaky voice drifted out of the shadows.

"Yup. It's me. I've brought the people I mentioned." He turned around. "Be calm and hold still."

Anxiety seeped in Dax's veins as he waited to find out why. Squeaks and scrabbling feet drifted toward them until the shadows on the ground undulated. At first one, then another rat poked its head over the line of shadows, raising their whiskered noses to the air to sniff.

After the first few determined it was safe and strode into the dim light, more followed, cautiously approaching Boudreaux then the rest of them. With Rory and Tomi, the rats walked right up to them, even venturing to reach up and prop themselves on the shoes of the subjects of their curiosity. Several approached Dax, but stopped, none coming closer than a foot away.

More rats surged out of the shadows and surrounded them. Tomi, doing his best to stay calm, looked around frantically, though he didn't move his feet, even a little. Rory seemed delighted by the little creatures, some less than little, chuckling in delight as a few rats climbed up his coat to sniff under his hat. None of the rats breached the halo around Dax, though they didn't seem to be agitated or particularly scared.

"What a curious trio," the high voice said. "Very curious."

A moment later, a short, scruffy man with a scraggly beard stepped into the light. He wore clothes that were too big for him, though they looked in OK repair and didn't seem too terribly dirty despite the owner looking like an unhoused person.

He pointed toward Rory. "You they like, despite never meeting anyone like you before. Although..." He looked back over his shoulder and paused as if listening, then nodded and faced them again.

"You, they can sense your discomfort and fear." He grinned at Tomi, a spark of wildness tinting his eyes. "They won't

harm you. They sense no cruelty in you." He stepped closer to Boudreaux. "You bring me interesting people to meet."

"I'm glad you approve."

"But you"—the short man pointed toward Dax without directly leveling a finger at him—"they have a healthy respect and fear of. Usually fear drives them to hide or attack. You, though... They don't wish to insult you. Very curious indeed. I will follow the judgement of my little friends."

"I'm Dax." He laid a hand on his chest then pointed to his companions. "This is Tomi, and that's Rory. He's the one who needs the help."

"You may call me 'The Rat." He chittered a high-pitched laugh that almost sounded like a squeaking rat.

Dax nodded, acknowledging the name. "Please to meet you, The Rat."

He brought the tips of his fingers together, tapping them against each other repeatedly and chuckling. "Yes. Yes. I like that. The Rat. Perhaps I should refer to myself in the third person." A rat scrabbled up his pants and sweater to curl up along his neck. "What do you think, my little friend? Should The Rat refer to himself in the third person?"

Dax blinked. It almost looked as if the rat had shaken its head.

"No? Very well. I shall remain in the first person." He laughed again. "So Boudreaux tells me you've lost a little pet, eh?"

Dax held up his hand to stop Rory from speaking. "I don't know if I'd call it a 'pet.' It's a horror that feeds upon the souls of its kills, and we need to get it out of our city before it gets loose again and runs amok."

"Amok? Amok, you say? Hmm." He scratched at his chin. "We don't like amok. We like tranquility, don't we, my little friends?"

The thought of amokness sent a shiver of consternation through the horde of rats. A rat, larger than most, pushed its way through its fellows to sniff at Rory, climbing up his leg until it sat on his shoulder, sniffing at his face and hair.

"What now?" The Rat tilted his head, looking at Rory. "Is your lost friend like you?"

"Yes. She is a fae ranger, like me. We are hunters seeking to return this beast to our realm." Rory reached up and scratched the rat behind its ears.

"Fae? Interesting. Interesting, indeed. Hmm. My little friend says he has come across one smelling as you do. And a creature with a hungry maw that devours." The Rat and the rat on Rory's shoulder shivered, the gesture rippling out from them in waves. "I think I know where to look next. There is one who seeks creatures such as your beast and your friend. One who thinks magical beings are things to possess. He is a cruel man, a rich man, a connected man. He is known as 'The Collector."

Chapter Seven

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Tomi called from the front of Boudreaux's black Sprinter van.

"This seems like the fastest way to get into The Collector's compound." Dax lifted his hands to show the cuffs bound around his wrists. He didn't like being bound, but he wanted to reassure his friend. "These are of no moment."

"But we don't know what kind of hardware he has in there. How many goons. He could have magical shit that we don't know about that could hurt you."

Tomi's concern warmed his heart. He was Dax's only friend, though he felt more a part of the family, especially as much as Mama Adele doted on him, trying to fatten him up or at least take the edge of his "scrawny ass" as she liked to call it. They'd been the first people Dax had met when he landed in Red City to start his banishment. They'd saved each other, and now they were all inexorably linked.

"OK..." Tomi still didn't sound sure.

"Don't worry, bro, I got my boys standing ready if we need to break him out." Boudreaux reached over from the driver's seat and patted Tomi's shoulder loudly.

Though Dax didn't know if any of Boudreaux's "boys" were supernatural, most of them had the bearing of well-trained military men. Dax had reaped enough soldiers and warriors in his day to know what one looked like at a glance. Boudreaux had been an army medic, and Dax guessed his boys were more military friends. If he did get in trouble and need the help, he was glad Boudreaux and his friends were there to back him up.

"Alright, we're about to pull up to the compound. Look more dejected and shit," Boudreaux called.

The van stopped, and Boudreaux rolled the window down. "Hey!"

"Unless you have an engraved invitation, turn this piece of shit around and get out of here," the security guard barked.

"I hear your boss likes collecting interesting specimens and will pay for really good ones." He hitched his thumb over his shoulder. "I got one in the back."

The guard paused, then sighed. "This better not be a hoax, or I'm going to pistol whip you."

Boudreaux raised both hands, protesting innocence. "Nah, man. This is the real deal. A unique one, too."

"You both stay here. Is it secured?"

"Yup, cuffed and secured to the bed of the van. Back door is unlocked if you want to check it out, just don't get too close. It still has teeth." Boudreaux chuckled. A second later, the light on the ceiling of the cargo area flicked on.

That was Dax's signal. He'd practiced it a couple times. It wasn't always easy to hold his transformation in a partial state. Drawing in a breath, he let his human skin slough off but stopped before his human clothes joined his flesh and his robe appeared.

"Looking good," Tomi whispered from the passenger seat.

Dropping his head, he did his best to look like a defeated and captured magical creature. He didn't have to work too hard at it. This whole charade was demoralizing, if necessary.

A wave of fresh night air wafted into the van, and a flashlight flared in his eyes.

"Holy shit," the guard mumbled. "Hey, you. Look at me."

Slowly, Dax lifted his head and turned to face the guard.

"Can you make him move more? I want to make sure this isn't a really good fake," the guard called out.

Boudreaux turned and slapped the cage separating the cargo area from the front of the van. "You. Dance for the man."

With the chain connecting the cuffs to the floor of the van, Dax didn't have a lot of slack to work with, but he lifted his legs and shook them a couple times, gritting his teeth all the while.

The guard chuckled stupidly and mumbled to himself, "Dancing."

He shut the back of the van and walked around front. "I think my employer will like this one. I'm going to open the gate, pull through and stop. I'll get on a golf cart and lead you around to the back. Don't do anything stupid. There are plenty of men with guns around."

"I understand, hoss." Boudreaux turned on the car and pulled through the gate, stopping to wait for the guard.

Staring out the back window, Dax watched a shadow creep along the top of the wall and climb down to chew on the cable of a security camera. The Rat's minions had arrived to help ensure there weren't any records of their visit or anything that might transpire. That eased a bit of the hot ball of tension in his center.

Reaching out, Dax tried to find the life threads of everyone nearby, excluding Tomi and Boudreaux's. Another man approached and passed by the van as the initial guard moved inside the gate. Further out, he could feel men patrolling around the house. All told, he could feel about ten individuals moving around the outside of the house. When he extended it to smaller creatures, he was forced to pull back his awareness at the hundreds of little threads that surged around the property.

As he pushed in, he focused on the house, but couldn't breach the perimeter of it. Looking for any cracks, he tried to find a weak spot to force his awareness through, but he couldn't. The house was warded. He might be able to break it, but surely the use of that much power would trip the wards and alert whoever had set them.

He stopped a growl of annoyance in his throat before it could sound. Shaking his head, he vowed to learn more about

the various types of magic that existed in this realm. Perhaps the manbo could help him.

He sighed. He'd tried to avoid getting entangled in the never-ending economy of favors with her, but it seemed that they were going to be inextricably linked, at least for a while. Though she'd proven to be a good ally so far. It could be far worse.

Jamie—the girl who'd tried to kill him after getting entangled with an outlaw motorcycle gang—had learned the hard way about whom to get involved with. Though it had been her deadbeat dad who'd been the origin of the problem. She'd been fortunate Dax was merciful and that Tomi had stopped him from making any rash decisions. He wondered how she was faring.

That would have to be a query for later. The van crept forward, braking occasionally to not overrun the security guard's golf cart. A couple minutes later, they parked. Boudreaux turned off the engine and rolled the window down.

The guard stepped up to the window. "Wait here. I need to fetch the boss's factor."

"We ain't got nowhere better to be," Boudreaux replied.

The silence stretched as they waited for the factor to show up. No doubt a lowly security guard didn't have access to The Collector. The Rat didn't know The Collector's name, just where his collection resided. The mansion sat on the bluff where most of the city's big money congregated, but even by the standards of the bluff, the Collector's house was particularly palatial.

"Lights on," the security guard said, announcing his return.

Dax checked to make sure he hadn't slipped out of his partial form. Everything felt right. A second later, the doors opened again, and a flashlight was shined in his face, adding weight to the lead ball of tension in his center. He could only make out two silhouettes.

"You weren't kidding," a new voice said. "He'll definitely be interested." He pulled a phone from his pocket and made a call. "Yes, sir. I think you'll definitely want to see this specimen. It's...unlike anything I've ever seen." The factor put away his phone.

"Can you move it?" the security guard asked loudly enough for Boudreaux and Tomi to hear.

"Yeah. I've got some manacles we can put on his ankles, if that'll make you feel more comfortable. But I'm going to need to bring out my shotgun to make sure he doesn't try to get up to trouble," Boudreaux replied.

"I've got a gun," the security replied, his voice going serious.

"But yours isn't loaded with magical bullets. How do you think I captured it in the first place? Lead or steel jacket, your gun might as well be a pillow. Don't worry, Mr. Security Guard, we'll get him manacled, then I'll holster it and you can keep your gun on me to make sure I don't get up to any mischief."

Dax had no idea if the bullets were magical or not, but it was certainly a good bluff.

The security guard and the factor mumbled a hasty conversation. When they finished, the guard jogged off and returned with three more of his comrades.

"OK. You're clear to come back and manacle the specimen," the factor said. "We have four guns ready, so be slow and deliberate."

"Gotcha." Boudreaux slipped out of the driver's side. Tomi joined him as well.

Standing to the side of the open back doors of the van, Boudreaux leveled a sawed-off shotgun at Dax. "No movements, or you'll regret it."

Tomi climbed into the back of the van and quickly applied manacles to Dax's ankles, then unlocked the chain from the floor of the van. Yanking his chain, Tomi stood as high as he could in the cargo area and walked out, pulling Dax out behind him.

The guards surrounded their little party, guns raised. They were all human as far as Dax could tell, but they acted as if he wasn't the first supernatural being they'd seen. Even a thoroughgoing professional might be thrown for a loop when their target wasn't a standard issue human. These men showed none of the signs of fear or wonder one might see when encountering magic for the first time.

Boudreaux, nonchalant as always, strolled behind him, his hands in his pockets as he looked around, admiring the architecture and then the fine furnishings once they entered the back halls of what looked to be the main part of the house.

They didn't see a single living being as they walked the winding hallways. Occasionally, Tomi would tug on the chain to speed Dax up a bit, but no one said anything as the factor led them to their destination. When he stopped at the end of the hall next to two doors and turned around, Dax nearly ran into Tomi's back, stopping himself before they created a pileup.

"Does your creature talk?" the factor asked.

"I can speak for myself," Dax said, letting a touch of the creepy harmonics slip into his voice.

The factor shivered but quickly quashed it. "Very well. Are you a creature of the night, or can you stand the daylight?"

"I may walk at all hours."

The factor nodded and opened the door to the right, waving the two nearest security guards in before following and waving Tomi forward. The other pair of guards brought up the rear, shutting and locking the door behind themselves.

If Dax had eyes, they would have widened in shock. He stood in a large solarium with tropical plants and trees. Save for the back wall they'd just emerged from and the adjoining one to his right, the rest of the walls and the ceiling were glass. As he swept his gaze around, periodic perfectly straight lines and metal stood out in contrast to the natural layout of the greenery.

The factor gestured for them to follow. Tomi kept his eyes pinned to the factor's back, but Dax, keeping his head still, looked around him. They passed a pair of empty cages on their way into the solarium. When someone gasped to his left, he found the source of the sound.

Shit.

Minh.

He had no idea she was a supernatural, unless she was here for some other reason. At least she hadn't been a victim of Rory's beast. Willing Tomi not to notice, he forced himself to look away from Minh and stare a hole in Tomi's back. But when Tomi stopped, Dax plowed into his back and shoved him forward. Fortunately, Tomi picked up the hint and continued behind the factor.

Minh probably recognized Tomi since he stopped at the convenience store regularly when she was behind the counter, but Dax wondered if she'd recognize his clothes. They weren't the most unique combo—dark jeans, motorcycle boots, a black T-shirt, and a leather jacket—but in the context of being there with Tomi, his secret might have just spread to one more person.

A wave of hunger slapped Dax and drew his attention. Forgetting Minh for the moment, he grasped onto the hunger and found the life thread attached to it. They'd found Rory's beast.

The factor stopped near an empty cage. "I think near our newest specimen will make for a nice display."

A guard jogged over and unlocked the cage via a punch pad lock.

"Put it in the cage," the factor said.

Tomi moved toward the cage, but Dax stopped, refusing to follow. Two barrels were shoved into his back.

"You can go in the easy way or the hard way. Don't matter to me. Either way, I get paid." Boudreaux shoved again. Reluctantly, Dax took a halting step then another after the barrels poked into his back again.

The factor followed at a discrete distance, stopping about fifteen feet from the cage's entrance. "Leave the chains on him. We can handle them later. Or if the boss isn't interested, you can take him with you."

Dax backed into the cage, bumping into a bar along the entrance. Nothing but the feel of hard metal translated through the touch. The cage appeared to be perfectly mundane. He'd have no problem with the metal bars when it came time to spring their plan.

Dropping the chain Dax had been led in with, Tomi stepped away. The guard swept in and closed the door. A faint click sounded, but Dax thought he heard it in the mundane realm and in the aether. He looked around the cage. Something had changed when the door was closed.

"Don't touch the bars. Not if you value your health," the factor said, turning to the guard who'd shut the door on the cage. "Let the wizard know we have a potential new display for the boss's menagerie. The boss will want his opinion. And have him check on the cage to make sure it'll actually hold... whatever it is."

The guard nodded and jogged off.

Wizard? That meant that whatever had activated with the closure of the door was likely magical. Dax had never met a wizard. He wondered if they actually manipulated magic or if they were a charlatan, though he wasn't sure which would be preferable. A charlatan would be easier to escape from while a real wizard—whatever that designation meant—would be a curiosity worth checking out. Especially since this wizard pedaled in pain and misery.

"There's a bench down there. You two may wait there while I go apprise the boss of your offer." The factor didn't wait for a reply, turning and walking back toward the door they'd entered through.

A pair of guards pointed with their guns. One grunted and chucked his chin toward the bench. Taking the less than subtle hint, Tomi and Boudreaux strolled in the direction they'd indicated, using the opportunity to scope out that end of the solarium.

Looking around his new home, Dax found a seat waiting for him. He sat on it and looked around. A brief shadow passed over head. Looking up, Dax smirked. A large rat shaped shadow skittered along the glass roof. A second and third joined it. If he had lips, they'd have quirked up in a sinister grin.

Now all they had to do was wait to see who this "Collector" was.



Dax had no idea how long the factor and his boss kept him cooling his heels. He didn't have his phone, watch, or a clock on the wall to check. Nor could he ask Tomi or Boudreaux since they weren't friends for this scenario. Plus, the guards kept them away from him and any of the other "exhibits."

He was only able to sit for so long before he had to stand and pace about the cage like a...caged animal. After a while, he grew tired of the limited circuit and its view—only an empty cage and some night plants. His mind clouded by annoyance, he leaned up against the bars. A low-level shock pushed him away and made his body tingle. Shuddering a few times, he clenched his body and forced the involuntary twitching to stop.

Reaching up, he ran his bony fingers over the shoulder of his leather jacket where it had touched the bars. He felt no lingering warmth or any damage to the coat. This time, he extended his arm and carefully let the back of his fingers touch a bar.

His hand clenched involuntarily, drawing his fingers away from the bar. Several hard shudders ran over his body. As he shook, he tried to back away from the bars so he didn't accidentally trip into them. The charge had been much more intense against his unclothed fingers.

"Quite an interesting sensation, isn't it?" a new voice said.

Once his body returned to his control, Dax looked up to see a man in a conservatively cut bespoke suit. The factor stood a discrete distance behind.

"My factor says you can speak. A neat trick for a monster." The man's lip rose in a sneer.

It took a moment for Dax's mind to clear, but the man looked familiar—not in a generic rich white man kind of way, but in a definitely have seen him before kind of way.

Everything about him looked average, from his height to his build to his haircut. The only thing that set him apart was that he was wrapped in the trappings of extreme wealth. The man had a rich voice, but each word dripped with a haughty disinterest for everything around him.

"It's been quite the week for my little menagerie of the paranormal, hasn't it, Gabriel?"

"Yes, sir," the factor—Gabriel—replied.

It was the voice that finally tripped Dax's memory. Bruce DeForbes IV. The DeForbeses were considered one of the founding families of Red City. And if half the rumors about the current scion of the family were true, Bruce had more than supernatural beings in his menagerie.

He had politicians ranging from local to national in his pocket, as well as a wide array of cops, public defenders, prosecutors, and judges who gladly overlooked a bevy of sins for a little taste of the pie. People said—if they risked speaking about him at all. People who spoke against him rarely did so twice within hearing of anyone—he could shoot a child in the face and the authorities would say the child had it coming.

In a city of corruption, Bruce DeForbes IV wasn't just at the top of the pyramid, he was one of those who formed the base, driving, creating, and exploring exciting new ways to plumb the depths of abuse of power and wealth.

"We found that sweet, little thing down there"—he gestured vaguely toward the cage that held Minh—"though I'm not sure what she actually is save for magical. We captured that fearsome beast and some sort of elf the other day. And now you..."

Dax stared at the finger leveled at him.

"What are you? Besides an ambulatory skeleton dressed like a dirtbag." Bruce tilted his head and took a step closer, examining the mouse caught in his trap. "Gabriel. Pay the men the going rate and see them out."

"Yes, sir." Gabriel turned and stalked off toward Tomi and Boudreaux.

Dax turned his head to follow the movement of the factor.

"Plotting your revenge against your captors?" Bruce looked at the fingernails on his right hand before returning it to behind his back with the other one. "I suggest you put those sorts of thoughts out of your mind. You're now a resident of this... terrarium. Amuse me, and maybe I'll give you a bigger cage and a few luxuries like a bed. Cross me... Well, no one crosses me twice."

As Tomi and Boudreaux passed behind Bruce, he turned and pointed at them. "You there. What does it eat?"

Tomi shrugged. "Cheap beer and hamburgers. Whatever I guess? It's not like he's my pet."

Dax hoped Bruce took Tomi's poorly delivered line for timidity and fear of the famous wealthy man and not bad acting.

Bruce shook his head and chuckled. "Hamburgers and cheap beer. At least it's not an exotic diet. We still haven't figured out what that beast eats. It snubs its nose at any food we've offered it."

Dax hoped Bruce and his lackeys never figured out what the fae creature ate. He had no doubt the corrupt rich man would simply round up unhoused people to feed to it or use it like its previous masters had—as an implement of torture.

"Is that what you actually eat?" Bruce took a step closer. "Now's the time to speak up." He tilted an ear toward Dax. "What's the matter? Cat got your tongue." He laughed. "That's right. Skeleton. No tongue."

Dax's anger built as the rich bastard amused himself. To Bruce, Dax and his fellow prisoners were nothing but things he'd acquired because, like the rest of his ilk who had too much money hoarded, he needed to spend it on exotic hobbies and acquiring rare collectibles. This menagerie represented both.

Clenching his bony fists, Dax wished he could reach through the bars and strangle the man. Dax wasn't a possession. He was a being with rights. Minh wasn't a collectible. She was human with rights. And whatever the crimes of the fae ranger were, they didn't deserve to be caged behind bars that likely were deadly to the touch.

The beast, though...

It needed to be eliminated.

Dax swung his gaze back to Bruce, who seemed to be waiting for an answer, growing more annoyed without receiving one. Not having his questions and demands answered immediately was probably a new experience for the man who'd been raised with obscene wealth, privilege, and power.

Perhaps the beast deserved a last meal.

"You will release me and all those you have captured against their will immediately." Dax pushed the spooky harmonics in his voice to the extreme.

Bruce gave a full body shiver, then smirked. "That's a neat trick. But I don't think you fully understand the situation."

"Release us, now."

"Or what?"

"Or suffer my wrath."

Bruce laughed hard, bending over and wheezing until he finally stopped. "Oh my. That was good. I haven't laughed that hard in a while. I'm going to enjoy owning you."

Dax leapt forward, grabbing the bars.

Pain surged through his body, and his hands grasped tighter, not letting him release. Attached to the bars, he shook violently. Instead of a scream, a gurgle fell from his lips.

In the background, the factor had returned from escorting Tomi and Boudreaux out of the solarium. He stood passively, his hands clasped in front of him despite a slightly wild look about the eyes as they flicked from his boss to Dax and back. Bruce just stared at his handiwork, a bloodthirsty grin of amusement splitting his lips.

Finally, he exhaled noisily, as if the whole thing was an imposition, and pulled something out of the inside of his jacket. Whatever it was dangled from a silver chain, the pouch at the end resembling a gris-gris or some other magical pouch. Striding over slowly, he chuckled as the pouch swung back and forth.

"Perhaps you'll learn to be more respectful of your betters." Bruce let the pouch come close to the bars, tugging it away at the last second. "Oh, well. I guess I did pay good money for it." He swung the pouch at the bars, and it impacted on a bar.

The pain ceased, and Dax slumped to the floor, breathing heavily, his façade flickering between full reaper and human. Fortunately, Bruce had turned and was walking toward his factor. Before anyone could see, he pulled himself together and settled his image on the skeleton in Dax's clothes.

Bruce's head snapped toward the entrance into his private zoo as a scream shattered the silence. Overhead, rats ran over the glass roof in waves to descend down the side. One skittered over Dax's hand, stopping to look up at him. Their relief had arrived.

Chapter Nine

Rats flooded into the solarium, squeaking and scrabbling about. A gunshot rang out from the hallway, and then silence after another scream. Bruce and his factor looked around, eyes desperate.

"Guards! What's happening? Guards!" Bruce yelled.

Shaking his head to jog himself into action, Gabriel placed his hand over his ear and spoke into a hidden mic like he was a secret service agent.

While they were distracted, Dax rose up on shaky legs. Drawing in his calm, he let the last of his human appearance—his clothes—slip away to be replaced by the black tattered robes of the Grim Reaper. Standing to his full height, he reached out with his empty hand and pulled his scythe from out of the aether. With a quick check at the ceiling of the cage, he expanded until his head nearly touched the bars.

"Bruce DeForbes IV..." Dax pushed all the creepy, dark disharmonics into his words. The plants shivered at his voice as it echoed off the hard glass and walls.

Bruce fell backwards onto his butt and tried to back away in a wobbly crab walk. Reaching out, Dax wound Bruce's life thread around his finger and yanked. A ragged yelp escaped Bruce's lips as he fell backwards onto his back and twitched.

Too angry and annoyed to make a speech, Dax drew back his scythe and brought it around in a devastating swing as he forced his power into the jagged and notched blade of his infamous weapon. When it made contact with the cage, the blade sliced through the bars and ignited them as if they were tissue paper before the torch.

Dax raised a hand and inhaled, drawing in more power and shoved it out, obliterating the rest of his prison.

Bruce held up his hands to stop Dax. "Please... Please, I didn't... I I I didn't...know."

From a door Dax hadn't seen, a handful of guards burst into the Solarium, leveling guns at him as they stopped just inside the door.

"Shoot, you fools!" Gabriel pointed at Dax as he backed away hastily.

Shots rang out and splattered into the foliage around Dax, spraying plant debris around. The plants undulated in waves as the rats ran towards their guards. They backed away from the new unseen threat, then the one nearest the edge of movement screamed as rats swarmed up his legs and over his body. He swatted ineffectually at them until he fell under their weight. Frozen in fear, three more guards were quickly swarmed.

Only two guards remained. One turned and sprinted out the door they'd just entered. The other screamed and sprayed bullets at the waves of rats swarming toward him, no doubt hitting those who'd fallen before him. One guard's thread snapped. And the other threads were near to snapping, frayed almost beyond their ability to bind soul to body.

Dax stepped out of the confines of the ashes that had been his cage, stalking slowly toward Bruce. "You have deprived innocent beings of their freedom. Kept them caged for your amusement. The very threads of your rot wind through this city and create misery, pain, and death." Until that moment, Dax hadn't decided how he wanted to deal with the man, but with one slice, he could stop one vein of corruption and free who knew how many beings held against their will.

He raised a hand, leveling a boned finger at the billionaire. "You have wasted your life. And now it is time for it to end."

"Please, I don't want to die. Name your price. I'll do anything. Have mercy." Bruce tried to force his face into some semblance of contriteness.

"Death is mercy."

Dax brought the huge scythe around and cut Bruce DeForbes IV in half. When the vile man's life thread snapped against the blade, Dax laughed, the dry, spooky sound causing every living being in the solarium to shiver and cower.

Bending over, he snatched the chain with its pouch from the hand of the severed torso. As he stood, Tomi and Boudreaux burst into the solarium from the door they'd been escorted out of.

Boudreaux stopped, pressing his back against the wall as he fumbled in the collar of his shirt for something. "Chango protect your soldier..."

"Boudreaux, it's OK. Dax won't hurt us."

"Dax? That ain't the scrawny white man... That's death" Boudreaux raised a shaky hand to point across the room.

Ignoring them, Dax turned and stalked down the central path toward the cage that held the fae beast. It looked like some sort of demon dog with leathery skin flaps flaring out from the side of its head as it hissed sinisterly at him like the spitting dinosaur from Jurassic Park. Though unlike a dog, dark red scales the color of coagulating blood covered the beast. Its tongue flared, drool dripping from what amounted to sucker covered mouth tentacle. Backing away until its butt neared the end of the cage, it stopped with a small yelp. A growl that would have dropped a human to their knees rumbled up from deep within its chest. Soulless hunger burned in its eyes.

Dax tossed back his head and laughed. "You do not frighten me. You feast on death, but I am he who devours all."

Casting baleful flames into his eyes, Dax slowly moved his head lower. The beast yipped and crouched onto its belly, whimpering. Tomi stopped near Dax. Somehow, he'd talked Boudreaux off the wall, though he stood a good fifteen feet behind Tomi, holding a gris-gris bag in his fist as he mumbled invocations to the lwa. Dax caught a few familiar names mentioned every now and then as he repeated his litany.

Dax let his mind slip into the world of threads, seeking a certain one. When he found it, he coiled the thread around his

finger and tugged gently. Nearby, Rory squeaked and stepped out from behind a tree.

"Tomi." Dax chucked his head toward Rory.

With a quick nod, Tomi snatched Rory by the shoulders, shoving him forward. Seeing something to do to stay on Dax's good side, Boudreaux jogged over and took an arm so that each of them could move the fae ranger closer.

The other ranger, wearing green and brown leathers like Rory's, stood still in the middle of a cage set near the beasts. She looked similar to Rory but had a reddish tint to her hair and more feminine features.

Dax turned to Rory. "You will translate for your companion."

Rory nodded vigorously, eager to do whatever was necessary to keep his life thread unsevered. Bruce or his factor had likely taken the bracelets from her.

"You were both sent here to collect this creature and return it to its master." Dax waited until Rory finished translating. "I am its master now."

Spinning, Dax carved the air with a wide upward swing that reached its peak before descending through the cage and pierced the soul-eating beast, pinning it to the ground.

"No..." Rory whispered.

"That creature is an abomination and has no place in the world of the living. To use it as a punishment is beyond evil." Dax turned on Rory. "Tell your master, whoever it was who sent you to collect this creature, that I know the kind of being they are. Put the rest of these beasts down or I will come looking for them." He let go of Rory's thread with a shove.

"Now take your friend and return to your realm." To emphasize it, he turned up the heat pouring from his eyes.

Rory nodded hastily, mumbling promises to do as he was told. Dax held him with his gaze for a moment then stepped away, swinging the magical pouch into the cage that held the other ranger, deactivating it. Then to save the effort of finding the key, he sliced through the lock with his scythe.

"Go!" He pointed toward the exit.

Tomi pulled the door open and the other ranger darted out, hugging Rory, both of them shaking. Once they parted, they took a few hesitant steps away then burst into a mad dash out of the building.

"Dax. They're gone. I think you can turn off the theatrics now." Tomi nodded toward Boudreaux who'd returned his hand to his gris-gris, though he no longer chanted for intercessions from the lwa.

Nodding, Dax let go of his anger and his reaper form and diminished into his human shape. He sighed, looking around at the mayhem he'd created. The beast needed to die, but killing someone like Bruce DeForbes could only lead to trouble. Before he could take a deep dive down that well of pain, The Rat, strolling along with his hands in his pocket and whistling a jaunty tune, rounded the curve of the path and came into view.

"A fine mess. Yes. Fine mess." His high-pitched voice caught Dax off guard. "But The Rat fixed it. No cameras left. No security. My little friends had busy teeth tonight." He sighed sadly. "Though some of them will not go home at all." He perked up quickly. "But not many. My little friends will mourn then celebrate. We found the kitchens."

"Enjoy." Dax nodded respectfully at The Rat. "Thank you for your help."

"No thanks needed. Boudreaux pays with favors." He winked at Boudreaux. "And we're not sure we wish to owe you any favors."

"Fair enough."

Rats flooded out from around the solarium and gathered around The Rat, chittering at him as they swirled in a whirlpool of fur. Without another word, he turned and strolled away, reaching up to scratch behind the ears of a rat sitting on his shoulder.

Dax shook his head and chuckled. There were some weird people in Red City, but then again, he was one of them.



Once Boudreaux calmed down, he called in the boys, who'd reported the rest of the security guards had fled before the army of rats. That left them alone to take a spin around after freeing the remaining creatures of the "menagerie" of Bruce DeForbes, starting with Minh, who said nothing but slipped behind Tomi to avoid talking to or looking at Dax. It definitely wasn't the time to find out how and why she'd ended up in a cage here. He'd give her time to recover before making polite inquiries.

"You got someone keeping an eye out for cops, right?" Tomi asked.

Boudreaux's brow furrowed and his eyes narrowed. "Tomi, bruh, I'm offended you even have to ask. Now I want to see what Thurston Howell has in the garage."

Dax gestured around. "I'm sure there are loads of valuable shit in the house."

"True, but I don't have a contact for Imperial French antiquities. And unless you know where the safe is and how to crack it, I don't have time enough to get a cracker in. Cars carry themselves, and I can move them."

Tomi chuckled. "He's got you there, boss. Who knows? Maybe there's something down there that'll tickle your fancy. You've been bitching about riding your motorcycle in the rain. And it's not like you can really afford much without a stiff discount."

"Won't it be traceable?" Dax asked.

"Don't worry, I'll take care of it." Boudreaux laid a hand on his shoulder and squeezed it. "You're keeping my wallet fat. Least I can do."

Dax was glad that Boudreaux had calmed down now that the skeleton form had been put away. He liked the goodnatured fellow, who wasn't afraid to commit a few felonies along the way.

"Besides, we're like Robin Hoods." Boudreaux laughed. "Robbing from the rich and the bad and giving to the poor"—he rubbed his hand over his bald head—"and the devilishly handsome."

Dax nodded and joined him in the laugh. What was a little friendly wealth redistribution among friends? He tucked himself in line after Tomi as the trio worked their way toward the garage.

When Boudreaux opened the door leading from the house into the garage, he stopped and whistled appreciatively. "This is going to be a nice little pay day."

His boys were already inventorying the cars and had a few running and ready to go.

"Dax, you go take a walk and see if there's anything you like."

Nodding to Boudreaux, he strolled into the garage and walked past lines of modern luxury cars and sports cars. None of those fit his tastes. Also, they'd stick out like a sore thumb in the neighborhoods he frequented. He'd almost given up when he reached the back corner and found a classic—a 1965 Lincoln Continental hardtop sedan.

"This is it." Dax walked up to the driver's side and peered inside the window. The upholstery looked perfect.

"It's canary yellow, Dax," Tomi said, looking into the window next to him.

Dax stood up and turned around. "Boudreaux, can you paint a car for me?"

"Paint? Shit yeah, that's easy," he called from the other side of the garage.

"This Lincoln Continental is mine." He set his hand on the hood.

"I'll call Tomi when it's done. What color?"

"Black."

Boudreaux stood up from the car he was inspecting and threw back his head and laughed, the deep rich sound filling the garage. "Of course."

Want to know more about Dax?

Read the first book in his series: A Shot for Death



About C. Thomas Lafollette

C. Thomas Lafollette is a student of history and a world traveler. He's dined with a Prime Minister, read poetry with Yevgeny Yevtushenko, and drank beer with monks. He's the author of the action-adventure urban fantasy series *Luke Irontree & The Last Vampire War* and the forthcoming *Red City Reaper* series. Besides reading and writing, he loves a good action movie, be it a Hollywood blockbuster or a classic Samurai flick, as well as the occasional rom-com. He lives in Portland with his partner – the devastatingly talented author Amy Cissell – his stepdaughter, and their two jerkface cats.







Hunting the Guide

By Amy Cissell

Hunting the Guide by Amy Cissell

Archibald is a magical cat, trained to be the Guide for the First Valkyrie. However, when an enforcer comes to take him to stand trial for his crimes, the two of them run into even more trouble. Now forced to fight alongside each other, can Archibald and the enforcer put aside their differences long enough to survive the night?



Archibald paused at the edge of the tree line and looked around.

When he deemed the road clear of traffic and anything else that might be a danger to an enterprising young magical cat, he darted across the road and beelined toward Frankie's home. Well, her parents' house, actually. But she was his to guide, and wherever she lived was home for both of them.

When the shimmering barrier—invisible to humans—that marked the magical protections surrounding the Ström family home finally appeared, Archibald slowed to a brisk walk. He'd been gone for a few days, ever since the last funeral, and he was eager to see Frankie again.

He'd heard her complain to her sister Becky that he was unreliable, and although that was a very catlike tendency, he wanted to be there for her as events hurtled her forward. But first, he had to figure out how to tell her his secret and convince her not to kick him out.

Archibald sat a few yards outside the magical border and contemplated the best way to reveal he was a fraud, a cheat, and a liar, without sounding like a bad guy.

He snorted. It sounded like the beginnings of a hairball being regurgitated rather than a noise of self-derision. But he couldn't help it. Back when he'd first met Frankie and she'd been dithering about calling her parents, wondering what to tell them after her ten-year absence with no contact, he'd told her to just say it. Rip off the band-aid, to use the modern earth parlance. It's better to do something you dread and have the outcome be terrible rather than live in fear.

It'd been good advice then, advice she'd eventually followed, and it was just as apt now.

Archibald licked his front right paw and smoothed it over his long, ginger fur, luxuriating in his silky softness. He longed for a mirror at the moment, but no matter. He looked fabulous, as always.

After a few more minutes of careful grooming, he had to admit to himself that he was stalling. He was no better than a human at this point. Part of the job of the First's Guide was delivering uncomfortable truths. He must have been playing hooky the day they covered how to approach the subject if the difficult conversation was about oneself, though.

"Might as well get it over with," he muttered. He stood, stretched, and ambled towards the barrier, each step slower than the last.

When he was fewer than two feet away, something wrapped around his rear left ankle and tightened too quickly for him to register what was happening, much less evade the trap. In seconds, he dangled upside down, caught in a simple snare no doubt set by some unethical hunters trespassing on Frankie's land.

Archibald closed his eyes. This was ridiculous, and cats hated to look ridiculous. He'd rather wear a Halloween costume and parade up and down the street than be found hanging upside down due to carelessness.

"What have we here?" a voice crooned. "It looks like a pretty little kitty."

The voice sounded vaguely familiar, but Archibald couldn't place it. It must belong to one of the newer Valkyries he hadn't yet gotten to know. Being found like this was mortifying, but at least it wasn't by someone he knew.

"I would appreciate it if you'd cut me down," he said. "This is terribly undignified."

"Of course, pretty kitty." The voice of the unseen speaker was higher pitched and lilting.

A couple seconds later, the rope stringing him up stretched tightly and a sawing noise grated on his ears.

The rope gave way, but just before it snapped, his rescuer put their arms under him to support him. "Thank you so much," he said. "Now, if you'll just set me down, I'll head in to see Frankie. I'm hoping you can forget this ever happened, and the next time we meet, we'll meet as strangers."

"Not a chance," the person hissed. "This will be the last time we meet, and we are definitely *not* strangers."

The support under him disappeared, and for a moment, he floundered to turn over before he hit the ground. But he needn't have bothered. He landed with a soft whump much more quickly than he'd anticipated. The ground was also not as hard and definitely rougher than he'd expected. He was in a bag.

Archibald squirmed and thrashed, aiming for the opening at the top of the bag where he could see blue sky and freedom. "Let me out. Do you know who I am?"

A face appeared in the opening of the bag, blocking the light and the possibility of escape.

"Oh, I know who you are, traitor, and I know exactly what you did. And now, I'm taking you back to the Heart, where you will stand trial for your crimes and be judged and sentenced by Frigg herself." The woman smiled down at him, but there was no mirth evident on her face.

"I'm not a traitor," Archibald protested. "Frankie needed someone right away. She needed me! She couldn't wait for whatever other tests and trials we all needed to pass to help her!"

"Do you know who I am, *traitor*?" Her grin was feral now, and her mouth was full of what looked more like feline fangs than human teeth.

Her voice was so familiar, but he'd never seen her before. He shook his head. "No. Just please, please let me go. I'll take you to meet Frankie—" It dawned on him that that was a terrible idea. He didn't know who this person was, and it was entirely possible that they were an agent of Loki's or Hel's and not someone searching him out to take him to task for his crimes.

No! Not crimes. Maybe he'd broken a couple rules and circumvented a few processes that had been in place for centuries, but he hadn't actually crossed the line into illegality, had he?

"Oh, I'll be seeing Frankie, and when I do, I'll tell her everything. I'll tell her that you failed out of the Guide training program, stole the information that was set aside for the first in class, and chased her down, pretending to be something you're not. I'll let her know you took the place of the true Guide, someone who has the knowledge and the skills to help her on her way. And I will make sure she knows you killed for this, and because of that, you have been apprehended by the one whose position you stole."

"Pixie? Pixie Sunshine?" Archibald's jaw dropped as he stared up at the human—well, human-ish—face in the bag's mouth. "But you're..." There was no polite way to accuse her of not being a cat, and even though he was being arrested for some very minor crimes, that was no reason to not be polite to her. Wait a minute... "Did you say I killed someone? Who on the nine realms did I kill?"

"You've left a trail of bodies, presumably to hide what you've done, although that will be for Frigg to determine once you stand before her in chains." She closed the bag. A zipper slid shut, and after that, the click of a padlock held it in place.

Archibald sagged inside and resigned himself to this ignominious end. He might be able to teleport, but he needed line of sight to do it. He should've told Frankie, or at least not stopped outside the barrier like an ignorant animal. He'd stand in front of Frigg and confess every last misdeed, and maybe she could tell him who he was supposed to have killed, because for all his faults, murder wasn't one of them.

The gentle bouncing of the sack against Pixie's back lulled him, and he gave up trying to figure out why she looked human and who she thought he'd slain. Instead, he closed his eyes and let himself drift off, thanking the gods that he was a cat and never suffered from insomnia.

Chapter Two

"Well, well, well... What do we have here?" A man's voice woke Archibald. For a moment, he thought he'd fallen asleep on Frankie's couch, and it was one of her brothers-in-law talking to him, but then the memories rushed back.

He arched his back, raising his hackles, and hissed at the man who'd spoken.

The man, tall, whipcord thin, and scarred on his face and hands, walked around Archibald, an appraising look in his eyes. When the man bent to take a closer look, lank, greasy black hair flopped into his pale blue eyes that did nothing to stand out on his equally pale, white skin.

Archibald swiped up at the man, but instead of the empty, chilling eyes of this new captor, he hit something solid. He sat and looked around, trying not to appear too intelligent. He didn't need the man to think him anything more than an average cat.

There was nothing there, nothing that would suggest he wasn't sitting on a table completely free of any cage or catnapping sack.

He swiped again, but more slowly this time. The same barrier stopped him as before, but this time, a piercing electric shock accompanied it.

He yowled in protest and glared at the man.

"Now, kitty cat. Don't be trying that again. You've had two warnings, neither of which damaged you in the least, but the third one will hurt."

Archibald curled into a ball and regarded his captor with baleful eyes. He wanted to question him but wasn't sure if the asshole knew he could speak. He wasn't about to give away anything, no matter how slight, that could help him escape later.

"What, nothing to say? What if I add a little incentive to loosen your tongue?"

Archibald held back a snort. Did this guy know he sounded like a bad movie villain?

His nervous amusement disappeared when the pale, oily looking man reached down and hauled Pixie up by her hair.

"Pixie?" Her name slipped out before he could stop it.

Pixie was still in human form—kind of. Her face had definite feline qualities extreme plastic surgery, makeup, or a trick of the light couldn't explain away. Her nose was flattened and a delicate, soft-looking grey, and her ears had a definite furry point about them. When her eyes met his, he saw the slit of her pupil dilate into a wide, black circle, thinly surrounded by a field of blue.

He almost missed the look of triumph on the man's face, but the slow, sardonic grin that appeared did not go unnoticed.

"I knew I had the right animal," he said.

Archibald had assumed that this man was one of Pixie's crew sent to haul him in, but the expression of fear on her face indicated his assumption had been wrong. Fear crawled down his spine, poofing his tail in an unacceptable display of emotion.

"Don't say anything," Pixie whispered. "Shut up, for Frigg's sake."

"No... Tell me everything I want to know. After all, I need to make sure I have the right magical talking cat. Don't want to unnecessarily torture the wrong creature, do I?" The smile on the man's face was predatory. He didn't stop with vague torture threats, though. "A lot of cats are declawed. I think it'd be a good look for you, too. My pretty face would be safe from you, then, wouldn't it?"

Archibald's claws retracted into his paws at the thought of it. He'd met a few declawed cats in his time in the Santa Fe rescue waiting for Frankie, and they were all miserable. But at least they'd been anesthetized beforehand. He didn't think tall, dark, and smarmy would bother.

Still... He might not be the legitimate guide for the First Valkyrie, but he was still her guide and her friend. He would not give her up, no matter the cost.

Archibald remained silent. He kept his gaze on Pixie, refusing to give their captor the time of day.

Out of the corner of his eye, Archibald saw the catnapper's smile widen into a rictus of horror. "You chose the way I'd hoped. Why don't you stay put"—he smirked—"and I'll be right back with some pliers and a bit of gauze."

"Gauze?" Pixie asked timidly.

"For the blood, you idiot," the man said. "The cat's and yours. Because no matter what form you're in when I get back, you'll be losing your nails, too."

The man left the room.

Archibald glared at Pixie. "What are you playing at?"

"I don't know who that man is!" Her face was regaining her humanity, and she looked even angrier than she had when she was reading him the list of his real and imagined sins. "He grabbed me when I stopped at a motel. It's almost like he was watching you."

"Don't blame me for this. He may have snatched me—us—but he did so only after you'd done the same. Had you not catnapped me in the first place, I would be safely ensconced within the barrier at the Valkyrie's home."

Archibald glared at her, although he couldn't ignore the increasing felininity of her features. If he was honest with himself, something he prided himself on being, he'd always found Pixie Sunshine to be the most attractive of cats, even though she was stuck up, self-important, judgmental, and most importantly, a catnapper.

"Your presence in this world, your arrogance, and irritatingness have probably been more than enough to inspire hostility and anger the world over," Pixie countered. "If you don't know him, that only speaks to the sheer number of enemies you have made by your very existence. And now, I'm caught up in whatever trouble you've brought on yourself."

Not for the first time, Archibald wished he could roll his eyes. "You're caught up in my trouble? As I pointed out, succinctly, I might add, neither of us would be here if you'd just left me alone to do my job."

"Your job?" she scoffed. "You mean *my* job. And I didn't catnap you. I apprehended a criminal to bring him to justice."

They were almost in danger of falling into the not-quite-friendly banter they'd shared in the past, and Archibald wasn't ready to do that. Not when she'd just reiterated that he was a criminal. "So, you're a bounty hunter? That's not a job I would've ever expected to see you in. I'm surprised you'd permit yourself to fall so low."

Pixie snarled. "I am not a bounty hunter. I am not an enforcer. I am the one who found you, proving once again that I should have been the one to guide the First. You are unworthy."

Whiskers sprouted from her face while she harangued him under her breath, and Archibald watched in fascination.

"How do you do it?" he asked, hoping he was changing the subject away from his unworthiness, at least for the time being.

"Do what?" She narrowed her eyes, slitted pupils the only sign of her feline true self that hadn't been absorbed by her seeming humanity.

"Look like that. Change into a human."

Her whiskers disappeared. "It is a gift from Freya, the ultimate gift given to the one chosen as the guide. Had you truly been the one, you would have this ability. It is all the proof needed. There need be no arguments in court. All I need to do is shift between forms, since you cannot do the same, and your guilt will be established."

Archibald knew there would be no way to successfully argue his innocence. Disputing the facts that he'd dropped out of training, waylaid the messenger who'd brought the news that events around Frankie were accelerating more rapidly than expected, and found his way to Frankie's side would be

futile. But the existence of incontrovertible proof made any attempt at defense useless.

He seldom allowed himself to fully use the human English vocabulary, particularly the words they used to express great emotion, but there was no other word that could perfectly encompass his feelings right now.

"Fuck."

Chapter Three

After Pixie's revelation, all conversation between them ceased. Archibald curled up and tried to nap. He didn't know what was coming next. He believed that Pixie didn't know their abductor, but as she wasn't locked up in a clear, electrified bubble, he wasn't inclined to believe that she was anything more than collateral in whatever plan was unfolding. For once, sleep was slow in coming, which might have something to do with the terror churning in his stomach.

He'd been afraid before. A few months with Frankie and the monsters who kept coming for her made fear a regular companion. But this roiling sensation was new. Before, his fear had mostly been for Frankie, and he'd always been confident that she'd get them both out of whatever situation they found themselves in. But she wasn't here, and because they'd never bonded, she couldn't show up and rescue him.

"I can't get out," she snapped, as if answering the thoughts he hadn't voiced. "I am just as much a prisoner as you."

He opened his eyes and narrowed them at Pixie. "Do you get electrocuted if you move too far?"

In answer, she walked to the door, the only thing marring the smooth white walls, and grabbed the doorknob.

Electricity sparked from the metal knob to her hand, and she vibrated with the force of the shock. She hissed and yanked her hand away, shaking it to relieve the sting.

Pixie turned, sweating and wild-eyed, and glared at him. "Happy now?"

"Not particularly. Your pain is not enjoyable, no matter how much my suffering amuses you."

"You idiot," she seethed at him. "I don't want you to suffer." She paused, considering, then continued, "At least not much. Not like this. I want you humiliated, forced to admit

your wrongdoings, and cut off from Freya's line. Not physically tortured."

"Sounds like a light sentence for one who's apparently committed multiple murders," Archibald said, struggling to keep his voice even.

Pixie rolled her eyes. "You didn't even adequately render unconscious the messenger bearing news of Frances Ström's imminent awakening. The string of deaths that follows in your wake, though, is suspicious and many who don't know your cowardice and weakness the way I do are making connections that reflect very poorly on you."

Although it was nice to believe Pixie didn't actually believe him to be a murderer, her reasoning cut him to the quick. It wasn't something to argue about, though. Asserting he was brave and strong enough to murder any number of people was not likely to be helpful.

Still, arguing about his sins, both real and perceived, was a welcome distraction from thinking about the fate that was almost upon them. "Did you or anyone else consider that death followed in my wake because I was accompanying—guiding—a Valkyrie being tested by the goddesses? Add to that the presence of Loki in her life and the recent addition of a reaper into our company, and there are many reasons death stalked us."

Pixie emitted a noise best described as an unholy screech, reminiscent of a catfight at midnight.

For once, Archibald found himself at a loss for words. He stared at Pixie as her body rapidly cycled between a human with catlike features and a cat with a terrifyingly human visage.

Once she'd regained her composure and there was no sign of fur anymore, Pixie collapsed on the ground.

"Had you not considered any of those possibilities before?" Archibald asked. "It doesn't seem like you to ignore any evidence. You're much too calculating for that."

She narrowed her eyes at him, and the harsh fluorescent lights glinted off them, flashing a red glow at him. "Loki? You traveled with Loki and didn't think to mention this before now? You are doubly a traitor, then, if you consorted with the trickster and allowed the First to be influenced by him."

The fur on Archibald's neck bristled, and his tail poofed out. "I did not consort with him. He was already in her life, influencing her, trying to corrupt her, when I arrived. I removed her from his sphere of influence as soon as I could after I realized who he was, and he did not arrive at the Valkyrie's Aerie with us. Perhaps if the First had been as well-watched as she should've been, Loki's infiltration into her life would've been noticed early enough to prevent him from planting self-doubt into her mind and leading her down the road of addiction to which she was already predisposed, two things that still negatively affect her. Loki's presence was not my doing, but his absence was."

"Is he dead?" Pixie asked, her voice once more even and calm.

"I sincerely doubt it. I have seen him die two times and encountered him after the first. A Valkyrie's sword could kill him, but although Frankie called lightning, she could not channel it with the skill and focus a trained First would." Archibald settled again, wrapping his tail around himself. As much as he hated to admit it, arguing with Pixie had settled his nerves enough that he could contemplate sleep again.

"It may be Loki and his henchpeople who are responsible for this, then." She waved her arms around, encompassing the magically warded prison they were enclosed in. "If he believed you were responsible for the First's separation from him, he would hold you accountable, and may be seeking either retribution or a way back into her life. He could easily take your shape and insinuate himself back into her circle of trust, as long as he had a trusted escort to take him through the wards at the Aerie."

"That's why you awaited for me outside the barrier, isn't it?" Archibald hadn't thought much of the barrier. It allowed anyone who shared blood with Katrin, Frankie's mother,

through. But only those keyed to the wards could invite others in. By rights, Archibald shouldn't have passed without Katrin's personal invitation. "Why did it allow me through? Frankie doesn't hold the key. Perhaps any animal can pass without hindrance."

"If so, I would've been able to walk through," Pixie countered. "And I could not. It didn't hurt, not like the magical wards on this place, but it was impenetrable."

"Did you attempt it only in your human form?"

"No. I could not pass as my feline self, either." She tapped her chin with her index finger.

Archibald huffed. He didn't like feeling helpless, but he couldn't see a way out. Any attempts to escape at this juncture would result in failure and a great expenditure of energy he would need later. "I am going to take a nap."

"You can't give up. Not now."

Archibald opened one eye and looked at her. "Do you see a way out? Do you have a plan? This room is warded enough that you cannot get through, and I am doubly trapped. At some point, our situation will change. A door will open, food will be brought, wards will be dropped. I need all my energy for that eventuality. I recommend you do the same."

Archibald closed his eyes again, crossed his paws, and settled his chin on top of them. He took a deep breath and sighed it out. Tension seeped out of his body, and he slept.

Chapter Four

"Wake up!" Pixie's voice reached Archibald's ears through a long tunnel.

He yawned and stretched, letting his senses return gradually. He was in no hurry to come to awareness in captivity again.

"Wake up!" Pixie hissed again.

Archibald climbed to his feet and looked at her, irritation bubbling to the surface along with thirst, hunger, and a rather urgent need for a litter box—not that he'd ever stoop so low as to do his business in a plastic box. "This had better be important. I was having a lovely dream that didn't include you."

"The door is open."

Archibald tensed. His head swung towards the wall, and sure enough, the door was cracked.

"Who left it open?" he whispered. "I didn't hear anyone come into the room."

"I don't know," Pixie replied in an even softer tone. "I fell asleep, too. When I woke, there was a tray of food and a glass of water for me and"—she wrinkled her nose a bit and grimaced at Archibald—"a bowl of water and a can of wet cat food for you."

Archibald sniffed. "I don't smell any food or any people, for that matter. Did you eat it all?"

"No, of course not. There's no way I'd eat mysterious food that appeared out of supposedly thin air in prison. I'm not stupid. And that wet food they provided smelled foul. It was not, as the label proclaimed, a seafood delight."

"The open door is a trap," Archibald said. "They're waiting to see what you'll do."

"Agreed," Pixie said. "But I don't want to let this chance go. They might be watching, but this might be my only chance to get out of here alive. They don't know what I am, I don't think, and might not think to watch for a cat to sneak out—especially if you're still right here."

Archibald closed his eyes. Pixie might have been the top cat in Ásgarðr, but she did not have enough street smarts to survive long on her own. "You've said several contradictory things," he pointed out. "You think they're watching me, so they won't be looking for a cat. But if our captor was paying any attention at all, he'd have seen your struggle to hold your human form when you're angry. And besides, your eyes give it all away."

Pixie's hands flew to her face. "What do you mean, my eyes give it away? They're perfectly normal eyes. Pretty, even!"

"They're gorgeous," Archibald said, then winced internally. He wouldn't have revealed that he found her attractive for all the tuna in the ocean. The stress and exhaustion were getting to him. "But they're cat's eyes. Humans have different shaped pupils. You play a good human, but I'd suggest wearing sunglasses if you're going to keep the charade up on earth for very long."

"We can talk about my eyes later. It doesn't matter if he, whoever *he* is, knows I have an alternate form. What matters is the door is open, and I can get out. I hate leaving you here, but I can't save us from inside, and you're no help at all. I have to take the chance."

She wasted no further time. Pixie took a few tentative steps towards the door and nudged it further open with her toe. She froze, but when nothing happened, she pushed it a little more. Then, she touched the doorframe.

Archibald waited with bated breath. He didn't want her to leave him alone, but if she could escape, that was one fewer person for whoever was behind this to torture.

She stepped out into the hallway, then turned and looked back at him.

"Go!" Archibald urged.

She mouthed something Archibald didn't quite catch, but it might've been "I'm sorry." Then, she shrank into a petite, solid black cat, blinked once with her perfect blue eyes, and disappeared into the darkness.

Archibald stood stiffly, staring at the open door, and wishing he could will it shut from where he was. He sighed. Telekinesis wasn't a skill granted to cats, and wishful thinking never did any good.

Foot falls echoed down the hall Pixie'd just disappeared into, and Archibald's tail swished in time with the echoing steps. He backed up instinctively, wanting to put as much space between himself and whoever was striding toward him.

It was only when his back paw slipped off the edge of the metal table that he realized the barrier around him was just as absent as the wards on the door.

He jumped off the table, darted into the corner closest to the open door, and shrank himself into the smallest, readiest ball of fluff he could manage. If he'd thought to test the barrier before Pixie left, they would both already be on their way out. Instead, he made fear-based assumptions and almost ended up trapped for no good reason.

He still might be trapped, if whoever was on their way got the wards up again before Archibald got out.

Archibald tensed, held his breath, unwilling to give away even the smallest sound of breath, and waited.

Almost...

A brown, tasseled loafer stepped halfway into the room and halted. After a few nerve-wracking moments, the door was pushed all the way open so violently that it bounced off the wall, nearly catching the person in the face on the rebound.

A low, muttered curse in a language Archibald didn't understand was the cue, and the feet stomping to the table where Archibald had been held was his chance.

He sprung forward, leaping out the door and barely evading the inhumanely fast grab from the man in the room. He ran full speed down the hall in the direction Pixie'd disappeared. He hadn't gone more than three steps before a loud klaxon rang. Doors slammed shut, echoing down the dark corridor. And that's when he knew why Pixie was able to escape.

The alarms weren't for her. They were for him.

Pixie wasn't the only one after him. She was right, after all. He had made more enemies than he'd realized, and it'd be a miracle from Freya and Frigg themselves if he escaped this alive enough to stand trial in the Heart of Ásgarðr.

Lights blared to life in the corridor, and someone screamed, "I see him! Hallway four!"

After that, there was no time to contemplate his eventual fate. Immediacy was all he had.

He channeled all his magical cat power, no matter how low-level he was, and he ran.



The quietude of well past midnight settled over the alley, and Archibald's pulse slowed with each minute of silence.

Along with the lessening of the adrenaline that came with the cessation of the chase came the return of his other senses that had been redirected to flight and hearing. Most particularly, his sense of smell was back online, although he wished it wasn't.

He'd finally found refuge in a garbage dumpster behind a dive bar. There'd been just enough of a gap between the two, large flaps for him to slip into, and after rousting a couple of opossums, he'd settled into the back corner and hoped that the improbability of a large cat like him fitting through such a small opening, the dark, and the stench would throw off any pursuit.

It'd worked, but now he was covered in putrid garbage. He tried not to think about the odors that might be omnipresent in the leavings of a low-brow drinking establishment, but he couldn't avoid the combination of vomit and stale beer that enveloped him.

Archibald exerted every bit of self-control he could muster to keep from leaping from the dumpster, hacking and gagging. Going this far and wallowing in this much filth needed to count for something, and he would not let himself be caught because of an offensive smell.

A scene from Frankie's favorite movie flashed through his memory. "What a wonderful smell you've discovered," he muttered.

Once he was reasonably sure the alley was empty of any living creature other than a few rats scurrying around, he pulled himself through the opening in the dumpster and jumped down, quickly diving into the shadows and holding perfectly still.

Nothing disturbed the night. Fog rolled in, low and thick. It was an unpleasant feeling, matting his fur even more than the garbage already had, but it further muffled his already barely audible footsteps and hid him from the view of all but the most sharp-eyed predators.

A poem popped into his mind. A far cry from Star Wars, but Carl Sandburg had correctly described fog. Most of it, anyway. This, however, wasn't most fog.

A surge of power swirled through the fog, enveloping him further. His fur tried to stand on end, a feat the damp and refuse disallowed.

Footsteps echoed through the fog. Archibald shrank into a dank, shadowy alcove in the alley and waited.

The sound drew nearer, then faded into the distance. Just a person out for a midnight stroll in the fog. That happened. It wasn't suspicious. Not everything was about him.

"Do you need a warm place to get clean and have a good meal?"

The voice came from behind him, and the shriek that erupted from his body as he jumped into the air was embarrassing.

A woman, bent nearly double, stood behind him in an open doorway from which streamed a warm, welcoming light, flickering with the echoes of fire.

She smiled encouragingly at him and swept her arm back to welcome him into her home.

Her lair, more likely. He knew enough about contemporary storytelling to know that hunched, kindly old ladies with welcoming fires were almost never the good guys.

The smell of roast chicken wafted out the door, and he swore he could almost taste it and feel the warmth. A vision of curling up in front of the fireplace, belly full of warm food, filled his mind, and he wavered.

She wrinkled her nose. "You'll need a bath, though, of course. I know cats don't like to be bathed, but it would be a

mercy for everyone if you'd submit."

He couldn't argue with that. In fact, he was finding it difficult to argue with anything. The warmth from the doorway streamed out, wrapping him in its tendrils and almost pulling him inside. He'd undergo almost any indignity to be clean, warm, and fed right now.

"That's a good boy," the woman crooned. "Let's get you clean."

Archibald took a step forward. Then another. He brushed against the old lady's leg, and she shrunk back from him, then violently sneezed.

"Ahhhh-CHOO!"

The noise and the vibrations of her body jolted Archibald back to his senses. The odor of roast chicken turned rotten and no longer tempted him, and the light from the doorway was more industrial yellow than fireplace orange.

"Sorry," the woman muttered, pulling out a handkerchief and blowing her nose. "I'm allergic to cats."

Archibald's ears flattened back over the top of his head. This was Ash. Loki. And Archibald had almost let himself be trapped.

While the old woman—Loki—got her sneezing under control, Archibald took a few careful steps backward. When he deemed himself far enough away to avoid being caught up by a sudden grab, he turned tail and ran for the second time that night.



Archibald stumbled forward on bloody, aching feet. The thin light of a winter sunrise penetrating thick fog allowed him to see his surroundings for the first time in hours.

Green spires rose out of the clouds hundreds of feet above him, and rough pavement gave way to wet, cool grass.

His limbs trembled. He'd long since lost any sense of direction and wouldn't be able to lead anyone back to Loki's gingerbread house or the cold, sterile building he'd been held in before his first escape.

Now that he could see where he was, he could teleport away. Cats may not be blessed with telekinesis, but the ability to move from one place to another with improbable and alarming speed belonged to all cats, magical and mundane. But for those blessed by the goddesses, there was more to it.

It wasn't the true Stepping the Valkyries could do, walking from one location to another with a step while also carrying others with them. But he could hop short distances, as long as he could see where he was and knew where he was going. It allowed him to mysteriously disappear, creating awe and wonder in his wake, and it shortened journeys.

Once he and Frankie properly bonded, he'd be able to see through her eyes and appear at her side whenever she needed him. He'd held back on completing their bonding, though. He told himself it was for her sake. She'd gone through so much already and finding out she had to do a ceremony to tie her mind to a cat's was a lot.

But really, he'd been afraid it wouldn't work, and she'd discover him for the fraud he was.

Right now, though, he didn't care. If he had the energy to transport himself anywhere, he'd go to her and confess. He'd will himself back to the Heart to stand trial. He'd deliver himself to the goddesses in Ásgarðr and lay his throat bare to

them. Anything to stop the throbbing and to quell the pangs of hunger. He didn't even notice his stench anymore. The pain wracking his body took precedence.

"Archibald?" a quiet voice called.

He tensed and glanced around quickly, looking for a place to hide

Undergrowth was prominent in the park, and the shadows and remnants of fog should keep him hidden for a while.

"Archie? It's Pixie."

He hissed a bit at "Archie," but didn't have the energy for anything but the most spurious of protests.

Pixie appeared out of the fog, looking like a goddess. Her long, black hair was plaited and hung down to her waist, and her soft, brown skin stood stark contrast to the grey of the fog. She was almost as beautiful in human form as she was as a cat.

"I can get you out of here," she said. "Come with me."

As willing as he'd been moments before to fantasize about turning himself in for a bath and a meal, he now found himself unwilling to submit to further captivity.

"I'd rather not," he said, backing away carefully. "Frankie needs to know Loki is on the move in Portland. She's unprotected, uninformed. There is no one to guide her!"

Pixie snorted and took a large step toward him. "Unprotected and unguided? She lives with the former First and several full Valkyries, in addition to a true shifter, a powerful psychic, and an enchantress, not to mention a reaper and a goddess. She is protected."

"An enchantress?" Archibald ignored the hurtful fact that his presence was superfluous at best to fasten onto the revelation that there was someone at the Aerie that he didn't know about. "I haven't seen anyone like that. Everyone else you mentioned, yes, although the goddess isn't always there. But not an enchantress, which sounds a little sexist, by the way."

"Would you prefer witch?" Pixie countered.

"It's not about what I want." Archibald had never wanted to say "duh" so much as he did right now, but he held it back. No need to pull out slang now when he'd resisted this long already. "Once she is identified, she will decide. But if she is part of our pantheon, she may want to be called vølve." He tilted his head and thought about the word and its near homophone. "Or perhaps not. Regardless, it will be up to her."

In her human form, Pixie was perfectly capable of rolling her eyes, but it was unsettling to see her slitted pupils flick upwards in exasperation.

"This is not the point," Pixie said. "Your absence will not negatively impact the First. In fact, it might make her life easier if she is not having to keep track of an incompetent sidekick."

Of everything she'd said, accused him of, and called him, nothing hurt as much as being called a sidekick, no matter how true.

Archibald took another two careful steps back. His muscles trembled; he was at the end of his strength. It didn't matter how much longer he tried to resist capture. If she waited a few more minutes, Pixie would scoop him up without a fight when he collapsed.

"Please." Cats didn't beg, but the expected wash of shame didn't arrive.

Her expression softened for the length of a tail swish, then disappeared. "You have to be held accountable for your crimes."

Archibald collapsed. "What's to stop Loki and his minions from taking us both again?"

Pixie held up her hand. Two tall figures formed out of the fog and stepped forward. They wore leather cuirasses that left their slimly muscled arms bare and carried unsheathed swords. Their faces were mostly covered by the nose guards on their dull-grey helms.

"This time, I have backup."

Pixie scooped up his unresisting body and slid him into a cat carrier, then covered it so he couldn't see out to teleport, not that he had enough energy to, anyway. It was superior to a sack, but not large enough to be comfortable. Archibald didn't care, though. A blanket cushioned the hard rigid plastic of the carrier, and he could rest.

Chapter Seven

Archibald jolted awake as he crashed to the ground. His crate rolled end over end, finally sliding to a halt. The door sprang open, and he jumped free and looked around wildly. He didn't know exactly where he was, but the ache in his muscles and the soaring spires of the St. Johns Bridge proved he hadn't been taken far.

"Pssttt..." Pixie's voice hissed from somewhere below him.

He looked around but couldn't spot her.

"Down here," she whispered.

Archibald crept downhill on his belly, eyes darting as he tried to spot Pixie. It occurred to him that instead of Pixie, he might be walking toward Loki. He dashed into a blackberry bramble, wincing as thorns tangled in his fur and pierced his already bloody feet.

"What are you doing?"

Archibald didn't answer and give away his position, just burrowed further into the bramble.

After a few minutes of silence, disembodied blue eyes appeared at the edge of the bramble. A second later, he could make out the outline of her feline form. "Archibald, I know you're in there." Pixie sounded exasperated, a tone Archibald had come to know well in the years they'd known each other.

For the first time in his life, he cursed his gorgeous, fluffy orange coat and wished he were small and black like Pixie. A whiff of garbage floated by his nose, reminding him he was likely more grey than orange, but it wouldn't matter what he looked like. She—or Loki, or anyone with a nose—could follow his stench.

"What's the first thing you said to me when we met?" he asked. He didn't know if Loki could steal memories with

form, but if he could, Archibald hoped the god wouldn't have grabbed onto something that seemed so inconsequential.

She sighed. "I told you a ginger cat had never passed training, and you'd be no different. Orange cats are not known for either their brains or brawn." Faint regret tinged her voice. "Of course, I was right. You didn't pass, did you?"

How he could find this cat attractive was a mystery. She denigrated his appearance, his intelligence, his courage, and his morals regularly. But still, those eyes...

"Ask me another one," she said.

He wracked his brain for something that would offer proof she was who she said she was. It had to be nothing to do with him. If Loki was stripping some memories when he shapechanged, he might have stolen all those related to Archibald.

"Who was the favorite to come first in our training after the first year?" he asked. This was not only a question that had nothing to do with him but designed to tweak Pixie's whiskers.

It worked. Her voice was sour when she answered. "Mottlegill Deathcap. That mangy, pretentious fur ball had no business being there, much less beating me in every contest."

"But what position did he actually finish in?" Archibald prompted.

"Third," she replied immediately and with deep satisfaction. "And he dropped out soon after. He couldn't even outlast you."

Archibald started crawling toward her. Maybe she was Loki, but even if she was, there might be food forthcoming. "You're very judgmental about the pedigree of other cats, considering you come from the Sunshine family. No one in your line has ever been a Guide, either."

She sniffed disdainfully. "Maybe not, but my great-grandmother pulled Freya's chariot twice, which is more than can be said for either Mottlegill's or your ancestors."

Archibald finished wiggling out of the blackberries, fully convinced she was who she said.

"Where are your guards?" he asked, looking around.

"Dead, both with an arrow in each eye."

Archibald took a few tentative exploratory steps forward and surveyed the area. They were halfway down a steep bluff. The bodies of the elves who'd served as the additional guards lay a few yards away, and the bright pink cat carrier was a few feet from them. Below them was a large industrial area intersected with roads and railway spurs. It crawled with trucks, the rumbling of engines reaching them even this high. He knew this place.

"Swan Island," he said grimly. The last time he'd been here he'd watched Frankie battle Loki, slaying him with lightning channeled through her as-yet-unnamed sword. It was a bad omen to be here again if Loki considered it a place of power.

Pixie followed his gaze. "It doesn't look like a place swans would frequent, nor does it look like an island," she said doubtfully. "Are you sure?"

"I don't know how it got its name. Perhaps once it was beautiful. But this is where Frankie slew Loki for the first time. I don't like being back here."

"Well, let's go up, then, instead of down," Pixie said, heading up towards Willamette Boulevard.

Archibald followed her for a few wobbling steps, then sank down onto his haunches. "I don't know if I can. But I know I don't want to. I've no desire to stand trial, especially if the outcome is already predetermined. I can stay here until I regain enough strength to walk easily. The rats here are fat and lazy and will make an easy meal to bolster me." He gagged inwardly at the thought of rat. He was, after all, a cat of discerning taste. "And once I've recovered, I can go home."

"That's all I'm asking," Pixie said patiently. "For you to come home. I'll help you."

"Not back to the Heart. My home is the Aerie, with Frankie." Or the safe house where Frankie stayed when the chaos at her mother's home grew too much for her. If he was correct, that house was only a couple miles away. If he could get there without being followed, he'd be safe behind Valkyrie wards and able to rest and recover. Frankie or Dusana would find him quickly, and if not them, one of Frankie's sisters.

Pixie blurred in his vision, and her human form stood in front of him once again. She scruffed him and pulled him into her arms. He fought against her, but to no effect. She was too practiced.

"You are coming with me," she declared. "I don't care who comes after us. I will get you there or die trying."

"It's the 'die trying' I'm worried about," Archibald muttered.

Pixie replied with grunts of effort as she half-climbed, half-crawled up the steep, bramble-infested hill towards the road above. Her feet slipped frequently, and her hold on him loosened. He could have leapt free of her, but for now, he was content to let someone else do the hard work. There'd be time to get away when they were at the top, and she was complacent about her hold on him.

Chapter Eight

Pixie dropped to her stomach, nearly smooshing Archibald, who held back a startled meow—he never made that noise if he could help it. It wasn't natural.

"What are you doing?" he whispered as softly as he could.

"There are a bunch of people up there milling around," she breathed. "No bicycles or vehicles in sight, and they do not look as if they are out for any other exercise."

Archibald wiggled underneath her. Her hold had loosened, and he could easily escape. "Let me see." If Loki's agents spotted them, they'd be snatched up—again. Archibald's limit for being kidnapped was zero, and he'd already surpassed that by four times in the last twenty-four hours. He would not take the risk of being captured again, even if he got away from Pixie.

After all, Loki might want information, but he would not ask nicely and let Archibald go when he had it. At least if he went back to the Heart with Pixie, he'd live. He might be in trouble and either imprisoned for a short while or banished for the same amount of time, but he would not be executed, even if they somehow proved he'd murdered several people.

She must have known that between her and the other people looking for them, she was preferable. She let him go, and he crept up beside her. Once she no longer had to hold on to him, she let her form slip back into that of a black cat. Loki's agents were looking for cats, but it was still easier to slip by in the feline form than as a human and her cat.

"Now what? Do we wait them out?" Archibald asked.

Pixie side-eyed him. "Do you think that would work?"

Ordinarily, Archibald would've said yes, but with his reserves as low as they were, he wouldn't be able to hold out for long. He was starving, freezing, and exhausted. The longer

they waited with no food or water, the weaker he'd become, and the less likely it was he could make a quick escape.

"Can't you just call your people?" Archibald asked. "You had those other guards. Why not call for new ones?"

Pixie was silent for a long time before responding with a single, clipped syllable that brooked no argument. "No."

There had to be a way if she was unwilling or unable to call for additional help. "Can you teleport us?"

"No. I don't know where we are or where to go, and I couldn't take you with me, anyway. Carrying others was not a gift I received."

Archibald wanted to ask about the other gifts besides the ability to take human form, but now was probably not the time. Unless... "I don't suppose telepathy was one?"

"Why?" Pixie didn't look at him, keeping her gaze focused on the tableau in front of them, but her left ear turned a bit to better catch his words.

"I know where we are, more or less, and I am familiar with the neighborhood. I can show you a path to safety."

She scoffed. "And let you run away the second you're out of my sight?"

"Look at me." He waited for her to turn her head, something she seemed reluctant to do. "I am exhausted. I can barely stand for more than a minute or two at a time. I haven't eaten, and I spent hours running last night. And when I wasn't running, I was shivering in a dumpster, covered in stale beer and vomit. I can't teleport at all, or else I would already be gone, and since the people over there are likely looking for me, I wouldn't get very far even if I made a run for it. The only risk to you hopping to safety and coming back for me later is that they'll find me first, something I very much don't want to happen."

"What do you suggest?" She sounded more amendable to listening to his response now.

"Frankie has a safe house not too far from here. I don't know your range for teleportation or telepathy, but if you can pick the images and directions out of my head, you can get there virtually unseen if you wait until the sun sets."

"Why after sunset?" Pixie asked.

"You're a black cat, and it'll be a lot easier to hide in the shadows," Archibald pointed out.

Pixie nodded. "Okay, makes sense. But then what? If it's a safe house, it's unlikely that I'll be able to just walk in. Not that that's the only problem with your scheme."

Smugness crept up, just a little. Having a plan that was nearly fool-proof and getting to explain it to the cat who excelled at strategy felt really, really good.

"Frankie's house is warded, but there is an emergency button. It's the same button that most magical beings have somewhere on their property. People can't get into the house, but they can call for help should they need it. I'll tell you where that button is. Frankie or one of her sisters will show up to find out who needs help. Be warned, if it's Frankie, tell her you know me and are trying to save me from Ash before anything else. She's turned into a bit of a 'stab now, ask questions later' kind of person."

Pixie took a deep breath. "That takes care of one problem, but there's still another."

Archibald cocked his head and tilted his ear a little closer to her. When she didn't keep talking, he prompted her. "Yes?"

"My telepathy and teleportation skills are weak. I can't go more than a couple blocks at a time, and I'll lose any telepathic connection as soon as we're out of sight of one another." She sounded sheepish, maybe even ashamed.

"If I give you the image and direction you need to get to Frankie's, can you take short line-of-sight hops until you get there? Then, once you're there and Frankie arrives, you can..." This part of the plan was the most useful and the hardest to talk about. "You can bond with her, as you should've, and that will make you both stronger."

"You'd give her up like that, just to save your own life?" Scorn dripped from her words.

"No! Of course not. But I'd give her up to keep her safe and to save your life." He closed his eyes in resignation. He hadn't meant to say that last part. He certainly didn't need her to have any further leverage over him.

Pixie leveled a look of contempt at him. Humans could make that expression, but cats had perfected it, and it pierced him to his soul. "So getting me to the First's safe house is completely devoid of self-interest?"

Archibald's temper flared, then died out quickly—he had nothing to sustain it. "You know it isn't. I don't want to die on a bluff in Oregon, and I don't want to be captured. Again. I'd rather you take your rightful place at Frankie's side and bring me back to the Heart for judgment." He sighed. "It'll be better for her, too. You have knowledge and skills I could never have. I've not only usurped your position, I've put Frankie in danger because of my hubris."

Archibald couldn't read the look Pixie gave him, but he hoped it was at least tinged with a little compassion and understanding.

"Okay."

He cocked his head. "Okay?"

"I'll do my best to get to the safe house. Once there, I'll call Frankie, bond with her, and we'll come get you."

Her "to take you into custody" hung in the air.

"If it..." He took a moment to take a deep breath so he could get through the rest of the sentence. "If it's too late for me, please tell Frankie I love her and that she's going to be so much better off with you. Take care of her, please."

"I will, but you'll see her again."

"Promise me," Archibald said fiercely. "You have to promise."

Pixie nodded. "I promise."

Relief sagged Archibald to the ground. "Thank you. Now, let's go through what you need to know, and as soon as the sun sets, you can leave."

Chapter Nine

"Wake up!" Pixie shook him, and Archibald groaned with the movement.

He blinked rapidly, clearing the fog from his mind. "What time is it?" he muttered.

"A few minutes before sunset, not that you can even see the sun in this accursed place. Is it grey and rainy all the time?"

Archibald became aware of two things at the same time. One was the damp permeating his body due to the rain dripping through the blackberry brambles concealing them. The second was the warmth of Pixie's shivering body pressed against his.

"From what I understand, this is typical weather for autumn, winter, and spring," he said. "It's warmer than the weather in the Heart, though."

"Warmer, maybe, but I'd rather bitter cold and snow than chilly and wet." She stood, and the sudden removal of her warmth sent a shudder through his body. "Are you ready?"

Archibald sighed. He wasn't ready. The sleep had done nothing but sustain him. The magical healing that blessed his kind hadn't been able to kick in with his energy reserves so low. He'd need food and proper rest to heal his feet, assuage his pushed past endurance muscles, and restore his energy so he could again teleport. "I wish I'd bonded with her," he whispered. "If I had, she'd be able to come to us."

Pixie crawled up the bluff and peeked over the edge. When she scooted back down beside him, she shook her head. "The number of goons out there has tripled during the day. They can't find us, but they know we're here. If you brought Frankie here, you'd be putting her in even more danger. It'd be better if you could pull yourself to her side."

"Even if we were bonded, I wouldn't be able to, certainly not and take you with me. But you're right, bringing her here would be a mistake. This is why it should be you. I'm sorry. I've screwed everything up and put you in danger." Regret consumed him and the ache in his chest he'd assumed was nothing more than exhaustion and cold intensified with his guilt.

Her next words were wry. "Maybe that makes us even, then, since this situation could've been prevented if I hadn't defied Freyja's orders and come to take you in myself."

"You did what?" Archibald kept his voice to a whisper. They didn't know what creatures were waiting for them to emerge, but they likely weren't all human and might have enhanced hearing.

"Fuck," she muttered under her breath.

Archibald would've grinned if he'd had the energy. "Let's concentrate on getting out of here, then I'll come with you to the Heart, and on the way, you can tell me about your rule breaking."

"They're here!" A voice shouted a few yards above them. "Both of them, hiding in the bushes."

Pixie and Archibald looked at each other, frozen with fear. Footsteps echoed in the fog that was dropping over them like the softest of blankets.

"What do we do?" Pixie's voice echoed tentatively in his mind.

Even though they'd practiced their telepathic link earlier that day to prepare for their escape attempt, it was difficult to grab onto her words and respond.

Archibald sent the equivalent of a mental shrug. "We should have gone earlier instead of waiting for the darkness to hide you."

"What's done is done. We need to move to Plan B."

They hadn't made a Plan B. Pixie hadn't come up with any other viable ideas, and Archibald had been certain his idea was

foolproof. It was the same sort of hubris that'd gotten them both into this mess.

Ash's minions were nearly on top of them, and although they hadn't been spotted yet, Archibald saw spears being methodically stabbed into the undergrowth. A few more yards, and they'd be on them. The best they could hope for was to be missed. If they made a break for it now, they'd be heard and seen, and either captured or killed before they could go more than a few feet. At least Archibald would. Pixie might get away, especially since they weren't really after her, anyway.

He closed his eyes. "You should run," he thought at her. "It's me they want. You still have a chance."

"I will not leave you," she replied fiercely.

He sighed. He'd had a feeling she was going to say that.

The spears were getting closer, and Archibald curled into himself, making as small a target as he could, hoping he'd fall between jabs. Pixie did the same, although she was much smaller and less conspicuous than his twenty-pound orange fluffy self.

They were on him now.

A spear jabbed through the brush and pierced his tail, pinning it to the earth. He tried to hold back a yowl of pain, but it was too much.

"Frankie!" he screamed, as agony shot through his body. He'd failed her, failed Pixie, failed the Guides of Frigg and Freyja, and now he was going to die filthy, covered in garbage and mud, fur matted and bloody with blackberry thorns, at the end of a spear wielded by a minion of Loki's.

Consciousness started slipping away, but he willed himself to stay awake long enough to see Pixie's fate.

Whether the spears had missed her, or they'd stopped looking once they'd found Archibald, he didn't know, but she was safe for the time being.

He gave into the fear and pain, and let it pull him under.



Awareness returned slowly, and with it, the sound of metal against metal.

Archibald opened his eyes. The setting had changed little since he'd passed out. The steep bluff leading down to Swan Island was on his right, and Willamette Boulevard curved to his left.

His interest in his location paled compared to the battle raging in the middle of the street, though. Frankie fought the creatures who'd been hunting him. Several were already motionless on the ground, but there were still more than half a dozen surrounding her, and she was slowing down. She was holding her own at this point only because she was faster and her sword was better suited for close-in fighting.

Pixie must've gotten to the safe house after all. Hopefully, they'd bonded, and Frankie could draw on Pixie's strength and vice versa.

As if his thoughts had conjured her, Pixie entered the fray in her human form. She relieved one body of a sword and sliced off the head of the creature who rushed at her.

The head sailed through the air and rolled to a stop at Archibald's feet. The face was pockmarked, leathery, and pale. It had ear holes and nostril openings with no cartilage to form features and bulging, nearly colorless eyes. What its teeth lacked in quantity, they made up for in sharpness. Venomous fangs, Archibald amended, seeing a bead of liquid appear on the tip of a fang, then drop, sizzling, to the ground.

He'd never seen its like before, and although he'd dropped out of the academy, he'd excelled at both history—what a human might call mythology—and the biology of magical and supernatural beings. But this thing looked like an unholy amalgamation of a draugr, one of Tolkien's goblins, and Nosferatu.

Archibald stood, wanting to get away from the severed head as quickly as possible. He braced himself for the inevitable wobble of muscles strained past endurance, but it didn't come. Instead, a surge of strength ran through him, and some of the pain in his pierced and torn feet dissipated.

In front of him, Frankie stumbled and barely deflected a spear aimed at her midsection. Pixie spun around, hamstrung the offending monster, then danced back, disemboweling it when it sagged to the ground.

"Back-to-back!" she cried.

Frankie turned, sliced the legs of the one she was battling, then whipped her sword back around. The creature fell back out of range, but it was down for the count.

After that, Frankie and Pixie moved around the street in what almost looked like a dance.

Every time Frankie flagged, Archie held his breath, willing her to fight harder, to be stronger and faster. It worked—or at least it seemed to. Pixie must be sharing her energy, and as was true for all bonded Guides and the Valkyries, the energy shared increased for both, rather than depleted either.

Archibald was on his feet, pacing, tail whipping back and forth, as he watched the battle.

There were only a four more of the monsters left, and victory seemed all but assured.

Out of the corner of his eye, Archibald caught movement. Another creature crept out of the shadows of one of the enormous conifers that lined the street. It was cloaked in black and held a dagger at the ready.

Neither Frankie nor Pixie noticed it, too intent on their own fights.

"Noooo!" Archibald yelled. He launched himself at the monster, claws extended, and landed on its chest. He leapt off as the creature tumbled backward, then scrambled onto its face, raking his claws through the creature's globular eyes. Jelly-like clumps erupted from the ruined sockets, and the

creature screamed. It batted at Archibald, but he'd already darted away.

Frankie rushed forward, lopped off the head of Archibald's victim, and smiled at him.

"I am so glad you're okay!" she said. "Don't go anywhere —and thanks for saving us."

Us. She and Pixie. As it should've been from the beginning.

While Frankie'd been dispatching the straggler, Pixie'd taken care of another one in the main fray. There were three left. Seconds later, two more were gone.

The remaining one dropped his weapon and held up his hands in surrender. Pixie raised her stolen sword, but Frankie put a hand on her arm. "No. I want to question this one. Can you restrain him while I call in backup?"

Pixie smiled. "Of course, First. I will hold him until you say otherwise."

Archibald didn't wait to see what she did. The battle was over. Frankie and Pixie were safe and bonded. He'd promised to go face his fate in the Heart, but he didn't have to wait for Pixie to do that. He knew the way.

There was no reason to say goodbye and every reason to disappear.

He trudged up the street, sparing only a single backward glance for the Valkyrie he'd come to love and her new Guide, who he'd loved for years.

Chapter Eleven

Archibald sat in the center of a large circular room with a spotlight trained on him. He couldn't see much beyond the few illuminated feet around him, but he'd been here before and could picture it clearly in his mind.

It was a horseshoe-shaped theater. The center of the curve held two large chairs, each carved from a single tree with comfort in mind and decorated with fantastical and intricate animals. In the past, Odin and Frigg had occupied them. Now, with the gods exiled—at least for now—from Ásgarðr, Frigg claimed Odin's seat and Freyja the other.

The rest of the seats were occupied. He could see faint movement, and whispers—both scornful and curious—reached him.

A bell sounded, deep, low, and vibratory, and the arena quieted so immediately it was eerie.

The lights brightened, and Archibald saw Frigg and Freyja standing in front of their thrones. The seats had changed since he'd last seen them. The ravens that'd decorated Odin's throne had changed into Frigg's owls, and Frigg's former seat, which had only been adorned with flowers, was now decorated with cats in various states of rest and play.

Archibald stood and bowed his head towards the goddesses.

An olive-skinned young woman, tall, willowy, and with delicately pointed ears, stood and unrolled a scroll. Her low, musical voice filled the arena. "Archibald Maelstrom, you stand before us today accused of assault on a sacred messenger of the goddess Frigg, usurpation of the role and responsibilities of the Guide, and seven counts of murder. How do you plead?"

His tail switched. He didn't have a lawyer—this wasn't an American court, after all—and was expected to speak for

himself. But it was difficult, despite his resolve, to admit to his wrongdoings.

Still...

"I assaulted the messenger to keep him from following me," he admitted. "And I usurped the place of the true Guide in my haste to get to the First's side. But the only creature I've ever killed was a monster who attacked Pixie Sunshine and Frances Ström five nights ago."

Freyja leaned forward. She wore a simple white dress, and her flaxen hair was intricately braided and draped over her shoulders to pool in her lap. Two large cats sat to her left—her chariot cats, most likely. She placed her chin on her folded hands. "What was the message?"

Archibald spared a moment to be grateful for his inability to visibly sweat. "A minion of Loki's had compromised the First."

"And why did you decide to act on this information rather than bring it to one of us, or any of your instructors, immediately?" Frigg demanded. Even sitting, she was tall, and her dark skin was a stark contrast to Freyja's pale complexion. She wore a brilliant yellow sheath-dress and an intricate golden crown perched on her curly black hair. A reindeer with two owls, one on each set of antlers, stood to her right. It might be his imagination, but it looked like the deer and both owls were glaring at him.

He'd dreaded this question, even as he'd known it was inevitable.

"He gloated."

"Speak up," Freyja demanded.

Archibald looked at the goddesses. He'd made a lot of mistakes, but he would not cower. "He gloated. I ran into him by chance. He shared the information as if it was gossip and said he was off to the pub. He sneered at me, and when I said he needed to accompany me to hand over the message, he burned the missive, told me no one would believe a failure like me, and challenged me to do something about it. So I did." He

stared defiantly. "I should've tried at least. I know that now. But I didn't."

"What happened next?" Frigg asked, her tone gentler than it'd been before.

"I went to Midgard, to Santa Fe in New Mexico, in America," he clarified for those not familiar with the geography of Earth. "I followed her for a couple days, long enough to verify she was in trouble and in danger, then allowed myself to be apprehended and placed in the animal shelter where she worked. I confronted her the night her powers were close to the surface and accompanied her to the site of the fire where they woke, then stayed with her after. I encouraged her to abandon the man who claimed to be her friend, and had finally persuaded her to do so, but his trickery outmatched my determination."

Freyja tapped her finger against her mouth. "Were you with her in the desert when I first met her?"

"Yes, lady," Archibald said. "As was the trickster."

She nodded. "I'd wondered if it was him who tried to harm me. Odin's ravens were nearby, but he is virtually powerless—except as a messenger. Had I known Loki was nearby, though..." Her hands curled into fists on the arms of the throne, and the wood creaked in protest.

"I've tried to aid her as much as I can without coddling her. I've given her what knowledge I have, listened when she needed it, and encouraged and bolstered and scolded when necessary. I am not the Guide, though, and my actions put both Pixie and the First in danger." He hung his head. "I have murdered no one, but I am ready to accept the judgment and punishment for the crimes I did commit."

Freyja and Frigg rose as one. He braced himself as they exchanged a look.

"Wait!" Pixie's voice rang across the space, echoing against the far walls. She strode forward in her human form, then shrank into the small, black cat she'd been born as. "Do you have something to add, Guide?" Freyja asked, the mildness of her tone edged with irritation.

Pixie bowed her head. "I am not the Guide."

Archibald stared at her. "Of course you are. You bonded with her, fought with her so seamlessly it looked like a choreographed dance, and your energy bolstered each other. That's why she was there, how she saved me."

"No." Pixie's tail switched back and forth. "She appeared as soon as you were speared, sword in hand and spitting mad. She'd killed three of Loki's creatures before they even registered she was there."

"How did she find us?" Archibald asked dumbly.

"Look at your feet," Pixie directed.

Archibald stared at her but did as she instructed. He sat back on his haunches and picked up a single paw to examine it. It was fuzzy and pink, as always. He cocked his head at Pixie.

"Your feet were shredded," she pointed out. "You could barely walk, and yet you sprinted away after the fight ended on whole feet and with more energy than I'd seen you with the entire time we were together. And the First's strength was bolstered when you woke. *You* bonded with her. You are her Guide."

Archibald shook his head to negate her words. "I didn't bond with her. I didn't want anything to go wrong in the ritual, just in case I'd remembered it wrongly."

"Maybe not fully, and yet..." Pixie said.

Archibald sank into himself. If he'd screwed things up so badly that he'd bonded with her when it should've been Pixie, they'd have no choice but to execute him. Only death could sever the bond.

He bowed his head. "So be it," he whispered. "Please make it quick."

"Make what quick, Archibald?" Freyja asked.

"Death. I know I've wronged you over and over, but please have mercy." The words nearly stuck in his throat. So many mistakes.

"He tried to sacrifice himself to save her," Pixie said. "And she cried when he left. He is not the Guide I would've been, but he is strong, clever, and loyal."

Frigg and Freyja strode across the arena to stand in front of the cats. "And you would abdicate in favor of him?" Frigg asked.

Pixie crouched next to him. "I would, especially if it means you won't kill him."

"Then we accept your recommendation and your resignation in favor of Archibald Maelstrom, but with two conditions." Frigg looked between them.

"What are they?" Pixie asked.

Archibald raised his head in amazement, unable to believe what was happening.

"Archibald, you must complete the ritual as soon as possible. You have bonded with her, but until it is complete, neither of you will experience the full benefits. It is fortunate that it works as well as it does." Freyja crouched in front of the cats. "Pixie, you must guide him as needed. You have more knowledge and very different skills. You will be a partner at times, a mentor at others, and a friend when needed. Do you accept, Pixie Sunshine?"

She nodded her small, furry, black head. "Yes."

"Archibald Maelstrom," Frigg said, crouching next to Freyja, "do you agree to treat Pixie as a teacher and mentor as well as a friend?"

"Yes. Oh, yes," he said fervently.

The goddesses rose. "Then it is done." Freyja winked at them. "And you're welcome for the open door..."

The ground shook, and dust rose, blinding him.

Chapter Twelve

When he blinked away the dirt-caused tears from his eyes and looked around, forest rather than an arena surrounded him.

"Archibald?!" Frankie's voice rang through the forest, and he scrambled to his feet.

He dashed towards the voice. As soon as she was in view, she crouched in front of him, and he jumped into her arms.

Frankie buried her face in his fur and held him close. "I'm so glad you're okay. I thought you were gone."

"I had to turn myself in. I lied to you. I broke rules." His voice was muffled against her sweatshirt, but he didn't care.

"Pixie explained everything to me." She raised her head and stared him in the eye. "You shouldn't have lied to me, but I'm glad you did what you did. I'd rather have you by my side than any other cat in the universe." She rose to her feet in a single, graceful motion, and walked down the road toward the house he knew was around the bend.

"I'm taking you home," she said. "And you are going to stay by my side for a good, long while."

Archibald closed his eyes and snuggled deeper into her arms. "Yes. Let's go home."

Want to Read more about Archibald and Frankie's Adventures?

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About Amy Cissell

Amy Cissell is a USA Today Bestselling Author of urban fantasy and paranormal romance novels. She lives in Portland, OR with her husband, her haunted house-obsessed daughter, their two cats, and the murder of crows she's conspiring to turn into her vengeful army.

Although she reads anything and everything, her first love has always been fantasy. Eleven-year-old Amy discovered fantasy when she 'borrowed' her father's copy of The Hobbit and an enduring love affair (mostly with dragons) was born.

There are few things Amy loves more than a well-timed pun, a good book, a glass of wine, and traveling to fill her creative well and tame her wanderlust until she moves to Portugal.







Keys of Promise

BY Georgiana Kent



Keys of Promise by Georgiana Kent

When the fate of multiple people collide, time starts to get interesting...

Chapter One



The dog walker turned off The Mall and headed into Green Park. Keeping to the dimly lit pathways that criss-crossed through the park, he headed north towards the bustling high street of Piccadilly, expelling plumes of warm air with each exhale. His Dobermann trotted happily by his side, so well-trained it needed no lead. And if it wandered to inspect new smells, it soon returned, never straying too far from its companion.

Looking up as the lights of Piccadilly brightened the horizon, Amberson Solway smiled over the bright chatter of tourists breaking the usual monotony of the city. Whilst his hometown of New York held bucketfuls of charisma, there was a charm to London he hadn't found anywhere else. He always enjoyed his time in The Old Smoke – how the British often referred to London. Though its pace was far more sedate than that of New York, there was a buzz in the air that was intoxicating.

He was African. Tall and burly, with close-cropped hair and muscles suggesting he knew how to look after himself. But that didn't stop his keen eyes from sweeping his surroundings more carefully than most. Besides his practical clothing and boots, he wore a well-stocked utility belt around his waist.

His Dobermann picked up on a scent and wandered off the path, sniffing around the shadows of a nearby oak. The hackles on the back of her neck suddenly rose, and she bared her teeth, growling deeply.

"Lily? What's the matter, girl?"

Her whines turned to yips of excitement as he hastened closer.

The shadows appeared to wobble, and before he could react, a hand flew from their depths, catching his wrist in a steely grip even he couldn't fight.

Pulled forward, he stopped inches from a pale face with red eyes and gleaming fangs.

"Boo!" The vampire grinned.

"Knock it off, Nathaniel," he drawled.

"You're such a spoilsport, Amberson," Nathaniel grumbled in his lightly accented voice. Those with keen eyes would notice no warm breaths left his lips.

He let go of Amberson's wrist and bent to fuss over Lily, reaching into his jacket pocket for a treat. Her tail wagged happily as she accepted it from his hand. "At least one of you is always happy to see me, isn't that right, Lily? He can't help but be a grouch. No, he can't," he cooed, petting her behind the ears.

"Really? She's a dog, not a baby." Amberson lifted a brow.

Rising to his full height, the Korean only just reached the man's pectorals, but that didn't stop Nathaniel Lee from being one of The Union's best Soul Gatherers. "You said you had a job for me," the vampire said, lighting a cigarette. The flare of the lighter illuminated his sharp features and topknot.

"Two, actually," Amberson said, fetching out a brown manila envelope from a pouch on his utility belt. "One for now, one for later."

"My, my, you're spoiling me, *hyung*." Nathaniel winked, his fangs flashing as he perused the contents.

"The first is a Canadian gang based in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Their leader is Daniel Scott. They do the usual: drugs, arms, girls, but they're untouchable. The police are their lap dogs. And they're getting sloppy. Their last confrontation with a local gang left over fifty dead. It's beginning to look like the OK Corral. Complete with plaid shirts. They have a job planned around Christmas. I don't know when exactly. You'll need to do some legwork."

Nathaniel looked down at his legs with a quizzical look. "But my legs are fine."

"As in 'research'."

"Well, why didn't you say so?"

Amberson sighed. "If I hear anything more, I'll let you know, but they need... *tending* to. They'll be all together for the job. It would be a good opportunity to tie up loose ends."

"Consider them tended to." Nathaniel folded the envelope and placed it in the inside pocket of his leather jacket. "I don't know why you don't go into the SPD. You wouldn't have to keep your vigilante justice secret then. With your skill set and Fæ abilities, you could make a real impact."

Amberson shrugged. "I like to keep one foot in this reality. Otherwise, you forget there are actual mortals involved. Anyway, I didn't think you'd complain about free food!"

"I don't eat them!" Nathaniel snapped before taking a drag on his cigarette and blowing out a perfect smoke ring. "I just take a nibble here and there. And I'm not complaining. They're tastier than the supplies I get. Anyway, you said there were two things."

"There are." Amberson passed him a second, smaller envelope. "It's a shipment."

Nathaniel opened it and whistled. "The D'Acapos?! You finally have some dirt on them!"

"You can talk."

"Hey, we've been clean for years!" Nathaniel looked affronted.

"Is that what you call it?" Amberson smirked.

"I know some of my ancestors have been shady. Okay, really shady," he said, seeing Amberson's sceptical brow. "But the Lee Family haven't dealt with arms or girls in years. I've made sure of it. I've had enough of that shit."

"And drugs?"

"Our focus is on property. You know that," Nathaniel said with a sniff.

"Good job too, or I'd be coming after you."

"In your dreams, *hyung!*" Nathaniel laughed. Avoiding his friend's keen gaze, he perused the contents of the envelope. "So the D'Acapos have a shipment of girls arriving..."

"Yes, they're due to arrive sometime between Christmas and New Year's. I'll confirm the exact details when I know. If we time it right, we could bring the D'Acapos down *and* save the girls."

"It'll be a busy Christmas."

Nathaniel's mobile phone buzzed as a bell chimed from Amberson's utility belt. Amberson pulled out a reception counter bell, its black metal shining brightly as it caught the light of the lamps that illuminated the paths to the park. Lily cocked her head to one side, her tail wagging in anticipation.

"I can't believe you still use that old thing," the vampire grumbled, unlocking his phone.

"At least it's portable."

"Only just!" Nathaniel scoffed, taking a drag of his cigarette as he read his phone. "Oh, it's a case of..."

There was a scuffling sound like that of many feet running through the undergrowth. Then a pack of dogs emerged through the trees. They came to an abrupt stop when they saw the two men and Lily. The hounds were of various shapes and sizes, but they weren't your typical strays. In fact, they weren't dogs at all. Dark, swirling shadows made up their bodies, and crimson eyes blazed through the dark. Their snarls revealed dripping canines. The fetor that rolled off them was stomach churning.

"Blood Hounds..." he finished, trailing off.

Lost Souls. Demonic souls of dogs that had failed to receive a proper burial and whose vengeful souls were free to wander. And to kill. Any killed by them would become a Lost Soul. Animals turned by them would become Bloodlings, demonic animals made up of shadows, whilst humans would become Wistfuls, Lost Souls driven mad by the injustice of their death.

Great, he thought as the pack of dogs lowered their heads and growled. This was just what he needed to kick-start his evening!

Chapter Two

Michael

"Come on, Ashayla. Let's go!" Michael Nicholas called, fastening his three-quarter jacket and tucking in his silk-lined muffler. He was tall, with broad shoulders and aquamarine eyes that contrasted against his ochre skin.

A slender female entered the hallway. Its bare feet padded across the tiles, the bells about its anklets tinkling merrily with each step. The Færie was slight, with shimmering silver hair and skin that gave off an ethereal glow. Despite the late autumn weather, it wore clothing made of light cotton. A crescent moon tattoo decorated the centre of its forehead, whilst a streak adorned its nose. The glow from these markings was vivid in the dimly lit hallway: its essence. On its left hand, it wore an ornate slave bracelet.

Ashayla hastened forward as Michael pulled on a pair of leather gloves.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

It nodded. "I fail to see why The Guild could not just send a note with the date of the meeting of the District Councils. Waiting night after night in the cold is a pointless activity."

"You know The Guild," Michael said, removing a delicate amulet from the pentacle on the wall. "They're a little stuck in their ways."

"Really? I had not noticed," Ashayla deadpanned, its pupil-less dimming in irritation.

Michael gave a wry smile.

He held out his hand, and the amulet glistened from the centre of his palm. It was his periapt. An iridescent stone encased in delicate silver filigree. Within the filigree was a tiny key-shaped relief. It was a device that bound its Færie, enslaving them and their elemental magic to this earthly plane and their KeyMaster. It wasn't a tradition of The Guild he was

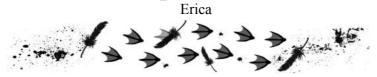
comfortable with, but one he endured. Especially since he knew first-hand the horrors of slavery having spent his childhood working on a plantation.

"Ready?" he repeated, donning his top hat.

Ashayla nodded. Its essence flared through its tattoos and magic sparkled as the Færie diminished to its elfin form, swirling around Michael before streaking towards the gem at the centre of his periapt. Disappearing within it, the jewel pulsed brightly.

Tapping the periapt, he cast the Ignorant Charm and vanished from view. The front door opened moments later, pushed by some unseen force. Closing, the handsome black door with its brass knocker vanished into the brickwork of the house, melting away as if it had never been there.

Chapter Three



It was moments like these, Erica thought as she stared at the wailing spirit at the bottom of the stepladder, when she wondered what 'normal' felt like.

It's not that she didn't try to *do* normal. It just never seemed to work out.

Take today, for example. The day had begun normally enough, with her usual frantic race across London. She'd arrived at work, breathless and late, under the disapproving gaze of Hincks Percival, the store manager. Then, in the staffroom, her friend Marc Deveril had teased her about her lateness

"Have you ever been early?" he'd asked as Erica had stowed her purple hat and scarf in her locker.

"Oh, and you're so perfect!" Joslin Singer had scoffed, coming over to join them.

"No," he had replied, his green eyes twinkling. "But I am punctual."

A look of concern had quickly replaced his smug smile, two lines appearing between his brow. "What happened?"

Erica had looked up, only then noticing the exposed burn on her forearm.

Damn! The bandage must've worked itself loose...

Quickly tugging down the sleeve of her cardigan to cover the blemishes, she'd smiled nonchalantly, casting a quick eye over the floor for the bandage without success. "Oh, that? It's, erm, just from the tap. The hot water's been hotter than normal. I think there's something wrong with the boiler."

"You ought to get it looked at," Marc had said, still worried. "That's quite a burn."

He was sweet. He was always looking out for her and offering to help.

"You're right. I'll tell my landlord tonight."

Lie. One of many that rolled off her tongue far too easily in the name of self-preservation. He might be one of her closest friends, but she couldn't risk anyone finding out the truth.

Danger averted, she'd then followed Joslin and Marc down the service stairs to their floor. From there, they'd separated into their different departments—Marc in 'Antiques & Collectibles' and Erica and Joslin in 'Health & Diet'. With their departments being next to one another and with them sharing many shifts—not to mention similar senses of humour—they'd become firm friends over the last year when she'd moved to London.

It had come as no surprise that she'd lost to Joslin at their usual game of Rock, Paper, Scissors to decide who would be on the shop floor. She often did. And it had also been no surprise when Gertrude Watkins, the resident ghost, had sought her company either.

Once nearby spirits discovered she was a medium, they often made a beeline for her—desperate for company. She was used to it. Though seeing spirits had scared her as a child, especially when their touch burned, she'd overcome her fear by focusing on them and their lives. Not their deaths and the fact they were see-through. It made them feel more human and less scary. Her first friend had been a spirit, and it was he who'd helped her come to terms with her gift. Or curse, as it sometimes felt.

But she couldn't complain. Not really. It had been from the other spirit's life stories that her interest in history had started. Sparking a chain of events that had ultimately brought her to London to study History at University College London.

But that was where normal had ended for Erica. At least for today.

Gertrude was usually a kind spirit, often chatting happily away whilst helping Erica with any shelving she had to do.

Dressed in the grey staff uniform of the retail store Simpsons of Piccadilly (a large retail store from the 1930s that had formerly occupied the building), Gertrude helped break up the monotony of Erica's job, and she enjoyed her company. Although she was prone to hysterics.

Today was such a day, it would seem.

Erica beheld the wailing spectre below her. She had several hours left of her shift but was ready to call it a night.

Most people felt the wails of a spirit as nothing more than a cold draught rippling through the different planes. However, some people also complained of cold shivers down their spines. Any who spoke of echoes displayed a closer bond to the supernatural. But Erica had met none of those. It was just her and her mum since the gift only ran in the female line of her mum's family.

"Gertrude! Whatever's the matter?" she hissed, casting a fretful eye about her as she hastened down the stepladder. Luckily, she found herself nestled between rows of bookshelves; the last thing she needed was for people to find out about her ability to see spirits. No one would understand. They'd just see her speaking to thin air and think she was a freak.

Stay hidden.

Stay quiet.

Stay safe.

Wasn't that what her mother had always told her to do? Just like all the female ancestors before them? At least she wasn't a twin. Her mother said twins were supposed to be born with an even greater gift. Not that she ever elaborated on what that was. But one thing was for sure, it couldn't and *wouldn't* lend itself to 'normal'. At least Erica could keep her gift hidden.

Usually.

"I thought you were my friend!" Gertrude lamented, her distress rolling off her in icy waves. The temperature plummeted.

Sneezing several times, Erica took a hasty step backwards. She had no wish to receive another burn today. Not if she could help it.

Bewildered, Erica ducked at the last second as the spirit hurled a book at her. It hit the opposite set of shelves, landing on the ground with a heavy *thunk!*

She gaped from the spirit to where the book lay. "Gertrude! What's got into you?!"

Gertrude looked momentarily stunned before heartbreak twisted her features. "You forgot!"

"Forgot what?!"

The spirit looked from her to the book lying forlornly on the carpet. A mischievous smile quirked her lips, and she brazenly summoned a shelf of books to launch into the air.

Erica watched, her emerald green eyes growing rounder and rounder every second the books hovered overhead. "Now, Gertrude... Let's talk about this..."

She glanced feverishly over at the spirit, her fingers twitching by her side.

"You forgot!"

Still none the wiser, Erica launched herself for the spirit just as Gertrude let go of her hold on the items. They came crashing down, the sound booming out over the shop floor. Shielding her head as they landed around her, Erica nursed her crown. "What's got into you?! You'll give me away!"

"Erica?!" Joslin's voice floated over the shelves to her. "Are you okay? *Brr!* Why's it so cold over here? Is the AC on the blink?"

Cursing, Erica turned furious eyes on the spirit.

Gertrude's look of anger crumpled to misery as she disappeared through the shelves, her wails echoing after her. "You forgot my deathday!"

Erica blanched in realisation, guilt hitting her hard as the icy air dissipated.

Joslin rounded the corner to find Erica surrounded by books, her hands still poised over her head. She whistled.

"What happened?" she asked, gazing up at the now empty shelf.

Erica dusted herself down. "I don't know. They all just fell off."

Joslin lifted a sceptical brow at the shelf. "They just 'fell off'?"

Trying to stop her eyes from shifting guiltily away, Erica feigned shock. "I know, right? How odd is that? I'll tidy it up, don't worry."

"If you're sure," Joslin said, passing Erica a book.

"Yeah, I'll be fine. Thanks."

Erica continued to collect the books as Joslin turned and left. Counting to ten in her head, she slumped against the bookcase, leaning her head back. *Dammit! How could I have forgotten?! No wonder Gertrude was pissed!*

Inspiration struck. She checked her watch; there was only an hour until her shift ended. She quickly returned the books to their shelf.

"Hey, Joslin," she called, walking round to the till carrying the stepladders. "Do you want anything from the café? My treat."

Joslin looked up with a smile. "Aw, thanks. I could do with a drink."

"Mocha?" Erica asked, stowing the stepladders safely away.

"Yes, please."

"Marc, do you want anything from the café?" she asked, walking through to his department.

He poked his head around the bookcase closest to her, making her jump. She flicked him playfully, and he laughed.

"Sure. Want me to get them?"

"No, no, my treat."

"Oh, okay. Thanks. I'll have a latte, please."

With a wave, she descended the main staircase to the café located in the basement. A grin of determination settled on her lips.

She was going to make it up to Gertrude.

And she had an idea how.

Chapter Four



Nathaniel sniffed in distaste. The stench was overwhelming for his heightened sense of smell. He flicked away his cigarette with a scowl as his talons grew.

The alpha, a shadow that resembled a Bernese mountain dog, yipped, and the pack turned tail and ran, fleeing back the way they'd come.

Lily snarled before leaping forward in pursuit.

"Head them—"

"Already on it!" Nathaniel called, his fangs glinting as he slid into the nearest shadows.

There was a whooshing! sound and he disappeared.

"Round them up, girl!" Amberson cried, sprinting over the lawns after Lily.

Despite his bulk, his long strides made short work of the gap between them. They were heading west towards Constitution Hill and Hyde Park beyond. He could see the hulking shadows of the Blood Hounds in the distance. They kept in a tight formation behind the alpha, weaving in and out of the trees and shrubbery.

Out of the shadows, Nathaniel burst like a god of death. Leaping, he crashed into the alpha with a snarl, tackling it in a tumble of fangs and claws. Whimpers and yelps mixed with Nathaniel's growls.

Darting forward, Lily cut off the rest of the pack from their alpha. A smaller Blood Hound advanced. With a snap of her teeth, Lily forced it back. Squaring off, she lowered her head, eyeing the hounds warily as a low, guttural bark rumbled at the back of her throat. Heeding the threat, the rest of the pack gathered together, their hackles raised.

As Amberson approached, they formed a protective circle, their eyes blazing crimson in the gloom. Their gnarls reverberated through the night.

The centre of his palm began to glow, and with a flick of his wrist, he magicked a bladed cestus and a tomahawk axe out of the thin air. The charge danced along his hands, jumping to the weapons he plucked from the air. In the same instant, the glamour on his Fæ features melted away, leaving behind glowing silver hair and eyes.

His magic glowed, quickly intensifying to morph into a crackling maelstrom of electricity as he summoned lightning. A sharp whistle escaped his lips before he leapt into action, flinging the axe into the nearest Lost Soul with a deadening *thunk!*

Lily bounded forward, swatting the nearest Blood Hound with her sharp claws before going for its neck with sickening ferocity. But instead of gushing blood, the shadowy beast exploded under her touch in a flurry of black petals. The blossom dissipated on the breeze, drifting higher and higher to corkscrew to the heavens above.

The other Blood Hounds stilled at the loss of one of their pack, their red eyes trained on the disappearing petals. Then their attention returned to Lily and Amberson, and they snarled, launching themselves forward in anger, their teeth gnashing.

Amberson was ready. Thrusting his bladed cestus to the path, he summoned an ultrasonic blast to pound the earth. It rumbled, and plasma tore through the ground, creating a fissure that snaked forward, splitting the ground where most of the Blood Hounds had gathered. With their footing disturbed, they stumbled into the crevice, but not before Amberson had summoned a fire attack. The inferno roared through the opening, engulfing the trapped Blood Hounds in its hot embrace. With a series of yowls, the Lost Souls evaporated as a squall of black petals.

The remaining two Blood Hounds eyed him warily through the flames.

Amberson spied Nathaniel pinned under the alpha hound, its teeth snapping at him. Raising a knee, the vampire pushed off, sending the alpha flying. Before the demon could get its bearing, Nathaniel launched himself forward, knocking it down. It snarled, its teeth inches from his face, and he snarled back, his fangs unhinging. Taken aback, the alpha hound took in the sharp points of his teeth. With the Lost Soul distracted Nathaniel plunged his fist into its shadowy mass, slashing with his talons to eviscerate it in one blow.

Black petals erupted, flurrying around them as they regrouped.

"Are you okay?" Nathaniel asked, dusting himself down.

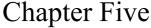
"Yeah, I think we—"

Frenzied barking interrupted them as Lily lunged at the two remaining Blood Hounds. They separated, one fleeing south to The Mall and Buckingham Palace whilst the other, a smaller one, headed north, back towards Piccadilly and its busy High Street.

Amberson swore as Lily bounded after the one headed for Buckingham Palace.

"Meet you back here?" he called as he stumbled after Lily.

But Nathaniel was already gone, a black blur whizzing over the lawns in pursuit of the one bound for Piccadilly. The shadows scattered as tendrils in his wake.



Nathaniel



The chase was on!

With the lights of the high street fast approaching, Nathaniel launched himself at the small Blood Hound. They tumbled, rolling onto the pavements of Piccadilly. Tourists and passersby scattered with shrieks and cries as the Lost Soul escaped his clutches, scurrying for the shadows of the dark park.

With a feral snarl, he dashed after it, slashing at it with his talons before it escaped, tearing the beast to shreds. Black petals burst forth, engulfing him with their silky softness.

Thinking it was some sort of magic act, the tourists applauded, smiling and *whooping!* enthusiastically.

Straightening his leather jacket with a wry smile, he bowed in thanks. Checking his topknot was still in place, he dived into the crowds.

He glanced down at his phone. 2100. He would have to rejoin Amberson so they could report to The Union in Limbo and fill in the necessary paperwork for the Blood Hound attack. Moving along Piccadilly, he was about to slip into the shadows when he realised that he'd never walked it like this. Normally, he was chasing Lost Souls down alleyways and backstreets or using his Umbrageous Teleportation to jump from place to place through the shadows. It made a pleasant change, soaking in the atmosphere and seeing the window displays gearing up for Christmas.

Slowing his pace, he decided a couple more minutes wouldn't hurt. Lily had probably chased the Blood Hound halfway across London by now.

He'd passed The Ritz and was approaching the main thoroughfare. It was then he saw her stepping out of a building. Erica.

He froze, caught unawares, his mind reeling in wonder and confusion.

What?!

A man walked into him, letting out a torrent of curses. Ducking out of the way with an apology, Nathaniel kept to the side.

Is today the day we meet?

She was with two friends, smiling and listening excitedly to their chatter.

He could hardly believe it was her! After all these years!

But it was definitely her. He'd know those curves and those lips anywhere. God, he'd missed the feel of them against his. The taste of her. It was as if she'd stepped straight out of his memory and into his reality. He smelled the air, his nostrils flaring at her familiar scent: jasmine and vanilla. If he still had a heart, it would be pounding against his chest right now.

Time travel was a mind-boggling thing. But one he was familiar with, thanks to Jade and Future Erica.

Future Erica had visited him much over the past centuries. Hell, if it hadn't been for her, he wouldn't be who he was now. She was the one who'd nursed him as the bite from the Strigoi took hold, killing him and transforming him into a vampire. Over the years, she'd taught him English and believed he was more than the monster his family treated him like, locking him away and using him to their advantage. She believed in him. This belief led him to become a Soul Gatherer and sort out the Lee Family's illicit dealings in Seoul's underworld. She saw the real him, yet she loved him unconditionally. She saw his potential and gave him hope.

She had always been vague about dates to avoid any ripples in SpaceTime. But he knew things happened during the winter of her second year at university. That they would meet at Christmas at her parent's house in the countryside. Future Erica had revealed that much between their kisses.

Which meant *now* couldn't be the right Time.

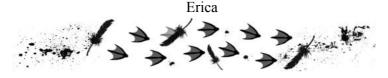
" $\mathcal{O}(\mathcal{O}/\Delta!)$ " He snarled in frustration, rolling his shoulders to ease out the knots of tension there.

Until then, whenever 'then' was, Present Erica didn't know about him or the supernatural world. Hell, she didn't even know of her own abilities to manipulate Time. But she would. One day. Just like he knew they would meet and fall in love. It wouldn't be smooth. Future Erica had warned him about that. That she would be with Michael when they first meet on this timeline. But he knew that they would end up spending the rest of their days together.

They were destined to be together.

It was fine. He'd waited so long, he could wait a bit longer. He just needed to be patient.

Chapter Six



"You ready, Erica?" Joslin asked, closing her locker.

"Yep!"

Together, the three friends exited, filing down the stairs and out of the main entrance. Joslin was excitedly telling them of an audition she had coming up.

It was only when they stepped out into the chilly night air that Erica's hand flew to her head.

"Damn! My hat!" she exclaimed. "You two carry on without me. I'll see you tomorrow."

Parting ways, Erica smiled apologetically to the security guard and retraced her steps to the staffroom. Opening her locker, she spied the fluffy purple item straight away.

There it was! Exactly where I'd left it...

Grinning, she checked the coast was clear and lifted her hat to reveal the chocolate muffin she'd bought from the café earlier. Though she'd remembered Gertrude mentioning her deathday when they'd first met, about how she had slipped and fallen down the central staircase, she had completely forgotten to make a note of it in her diary. She'd make sure she added it when she got home later. Gertrude obviously cared about her deathday, unlike many other spirits.

She glanced at her watch, aware that the security guards had begun their rounds. She didn't have long.

Sneaking onto the shop floor, she crept past the bookshelves until she came to where Gertrude had been earlier. The aisle was empty.

"Gertrude!" she hissed, turning on the spot, the muffin cupped in her hands. "Gertrude!"

Nothing.

She sighed. Sometimes it took spirits a while to sense her presence, but they usually came. The draw of a medium was too irresistible.

Deciding to make a card whilst she waited, she moved over to the counter and set the muffin down. Grabbing a piece of paper and a pen. It was as she was putting the finishing touches to her design that the temperature plummeted.

She glanced over her shoulder to find Gertrude standing before the central stairway, face blotchy from crying.

"Gertrude!" Erica cried, taking a step forward.

She was about to fling her arms around the spirit, but the shimmering spectre flinched away.

"I'll burn you."

Erica smiled and pulled her into an embrace. "I don't care."

Ignoring the searing pain of her touch, Erica held her close. Gertrude burst into tears.

"I'm so sorry! I almost gave you away! I didn't mean for you to get into trouble!" she said, sobbing into Erica's shoulders.

"But you didn't," Erica said. "You were upset. I understand. I'm sorry I'd forgotten your deathday. Here, I got you a little something."

She handed her the card she'd just made. She'd drawn a stick-person version of Gertrude wearing a party hat with the words 'HAPPY DEATHDAY!' above it.

Gertrude drifted over, tears washing her eyes once more as she picked up the card.

"Sorry, I'm rubbish at art," Erica said sheepishly.

"No! I love it. No one's ever made me a deathday card before."

Erica smiled. "I'm glad you like it. And here's your cake," she said, revealing the muffin with a flourish.

Gertrude giggled excitedly and Erica began singing the 'Happy Birthday Song' to her, replacing the word 'birthday' with 'deathday' each time.

Finishing, she passed the muffin to Gertrude. "Sorry, I couldn't find any candles."

Gertrude accepted the muffin, her face beaming. "That's okay. I love it. Thank you so much!"

"You're welcome. It's the least I could do. Happy Deathday, Gertrude."

Chapter Seven

Nathaniel > > >

Erica reached for her head and he overheard her say something about a hat. He watched her bid her friends farewell and return to the shop.

Had she forgotten something?

He glanced at the time on his phone 2115. Amberson would no doubt be waiting for him so they could go together to The Union.

Maybe I should go back?

Worrying his lip, he deliberated what to do. He didn't want to risk disturbing the timeline, but the desire to see her again was too great. There was something alluring about her innocence to what was to come.

Five minutes later, he was about to give in when she stepped out of the shop's doors once more. She pulled on a woolly hat against the evening chill.

A smile curled his lips on seeing its colour. Purple, of course.

Excitement tingled through him.

Amberson won't mind if I'm a little late!

She set off, and he followed in a daze, not quite believing she was there.

The sudden urge to approach her overwhelmed him. But he didn't want to mess up Time. He knew from Jade about just how delicate SpaceTime could be. And he knew better than to go against Future Erica's instructions. She hadn't failed him these past five hundred years.

He hesitated.

He really ought to find Amberson, but he couldn't resist her despite knowing he couldn't—shouldn't—interfere.

Desire getting the better of him, he followed her toward Piccadilly Circus and the Underground Station there. He *ummed* and *ahhed* over whether to take to his shadows—it would be quicker—but he didn't want to watch from their dark depths. He wanted to enjoy every second of her in the here and now. Especially if it could be months until he next saw her again.

Descending the steps after her, he bought himself a ticket and pushed through the barriers, all the while keeping one eye on her. She was completely oblivious to him trailing her. Hopping on the escalator after her, it took every ounce of willpower not to strike up a conversation with her.

Once on the platform, it quickly filled up with people. Slipping in and out of the crowds, Nathaniel drew near to Erica, unable to take his eyes off her. She was exactly as he remembered. From the stubborn tilt of her chin to the silky gleam of her black locks. She was everything he'd fallen in love with and more.

Ears detecting the rumblings of an approaching train, he looked up. Seconds later, the train thundered from the tunnel, rattling as it came to a screeching halt. Climbing onto the same carriage as Erica, he stood nonchalantly nearby, his hand gripping the safety pole as the train clattered forward.

The train sped away, and Nathaniel smiled when Erica retrieved a book from her bag—reading for a history assignment, no doubt. Passengers came and went with each stop. When the train lurched randomly to one side, he snarled when a young man caught her as she stumbled, having lost her footing. Anger roared through him at the sight of the other man's hands on her. Barely controlling himself, Nathaniel flashed the man a predatory look that made him step away.

The rest of the journey passed without further incident. Coming to a halt, Nathaniel followed her out of the carriage and onto her platform. She ascended the steps to the arcade above, and Nathaniel was just garnering his courage to talk to her when he saw her falter, her steps freezing mid-stride.

What had she seen?

Interest piqued, he followed her to see a smartly dressed man standing to one side of the arcade, one eye on the frieze that decorated the circular space and the other wistfully eyeing the passersby.

Recognition flashed.

Michael Nicholas.

 $O(O) \triangle !$ I forgot about the stuck-up Time travelling KeyMaster!

Eyes flashing, a guttural hiss escaped the back of his throat, and he sidestepped into the shadows, welcoming their dark solitude.

He had no wish to see the two get friendly.

Chapter Eight

Erica

He was the most handsome man she'd ever seen, from his ochre skin and chiselled jaw to his full lips and stunning aquamarine eyes. He was truly breathtaking. Not that anyone else had seemed to notice. All the other pedestrians either walked past him or artfully avoided him as if repelled by some unseen force.

The man's attention was on the carved frieze that decorated the arcade and the date there. Then, as if sensing her, his gaze shifted, blue eyes colliding with her green. A look of surprise washed over his fine features, causing an unexplainable thrill of anticipation to run down her spine. As if the hand of Fate herself had caressed her.

Dammit, Erica, get a grip on yourself! She scolded, shaking herself. Don't be ridiculous! As if any of that existed.

But that didn't mean she couldn't enjoy the view while it lasted.

Biting her lip as she passed, she allowed herself to slow and take in every inch of him. *Good God, he's divine!*

With no move made, she suppressed a sigh.

See? She scoffed. Don't let your imagination get carried away!

Though he looked like he was waiting for something... Or someone.

She checked her watch. Maybe if she came back again tomorrow, she might just see him again... Might. A hopeful smile lit up her face, and she continued up the arcade to the glowing lights of Kensington High Street. The moon rose above the rooftops, illuminating them with her cool glow, bathing the streets and Erica in her light.

Turning left onto Wright's Lane, Erica passed a bustling café and continued down the street towards her home. It was then she felt it. That distinct feeling that someone was watching her. A chill ran down her spine.

Her head jerked toward the shadows across the street.

Am I imagining it, or are they moving?

Frozen to the spot, she gazed intently at their black depths but they were just shadows. Nothing more, nothing less.

It must've been my imagination. As if there could be anything hiding in the shadows!

Chapter Nine

Michael

Rolling his shoulders, Michael sighed. It was almost eleven o'clock and The Guild hadn't yet contacted with the date for the District Council meeting. Not that it was unusual. They weren't the most punctual with such things. But there was still time. The meeting wasn't due for the next week. Shaking the chill off his shoulders he turned to leave.

"Come on, Ashayla. Let's go home," he murmured.

"Thank goodness for that. I thought I would die from boredom. I was contemplating gouging my eyes out just for something to do," said Ashayla's voice in his ear.

He'd been standing in the circular arcade of High Street Kensington Underground Station since early evening. Besides the cold, he rather enjoyed watching the passersby. As KeyMaster, he had the responsibility of documenting and safeguarding Time and all those living within it. In addition, The Guild prohibited him from having contact with anyone from Actualle, the present. Just in case their interaction had irreversible effects on SpaceTime. Hence the Ignorant Charm. It kept him hidden and safe and kept Actualles away. However, he could have sworn that the girl with the green eyes had seen him. A tingle ran down his spine at the memory of their gazes colliding.

"Are you going to see Annabelle tonight?" Ashayla asked in more nonchalant tones than the presence in his mind suggested.

"Later. I must attend to my Loggias first. There is much to finish."

Turning off Kensington High Street onto Wright's Lane, he walked with long strides toward Cheniston Gardens and his home. Autumn was giving way to winter and he was looking forward to a cup of tea to warm himself up after standing in the cold for so long.

It was as he crossed the road that the shadows in front of him warped and wobbled. Freezing once he was safely on the pavement, he peered into their dark depths.

"Could it be Nathaniel? Amberson did say they would be on patrol together tonight," he mused.

There was a pause as Ashayla contemplated the shadows' depths. "No, I don—"

Darkness descended, blanketing them in its thick blackness. It was all-encompassing—blocking out the moon and its stars and even the light of the streetlights.

Ombre Totalus.

"Wrathful!" he hissed, leaping back and summoning his sword.

"But that's impossible! I have received no warning!" Ashayla snapped.

"There is no other Lost Soul capable of such magic," Michael argued, scanning the shadows as Ashayla flew from its periapt to land beside him, growing to its full height. Baring its teeth, it hissed at the blackness. Its fisted hands flickered with white hot plasma.

Taking up position behind him, they stood back-to-back and waited. A skittering sound, like that of dried bones rattling along the roadside, came from their left. Whirling round, that was when they saw it. An oozing mass of shadows that writhed towards them from the opposite side of the road. Springing to the side, Michael swiped with his sword as Ashayla shrank back into its elfin form, leaping to attack. The Wrathful gathered the blackness within it, consuming it until it towered above Michael. As it lunged forward, red eyes blazing with malice and baring teeth as sharp as needles, Ashayla struck, sending a folly of lightning strikes to hit it square in its chest. The Wrathful shrieked in pain, its shrill screams echoing up the street.

Michael slashed at it with his sword, distracting it whilst Ashayla clambered upon its back. It was panicking now. Wriggling away from Ashayla, it twisted this way and that, trying to buck the tiny Færie from its back. Dislodged, the Færie lost its grip and fell.

"Ashayla!" Michael cried, leaping forward to help.

Flinging out a fist, the Wrathful howled as Ashayla grabbed hold, slowing its fall. It summoned lightning to crackle and fill the creature from within. Falling to its knees, the Wrathful roared in defeat before exploding in a blinding flash.

Michael shielded his eyes against the glare and called out for his Færie. "Ashayla! Ashayla!"

"I'm here!" it coughed, stumbling away from the flurry of black petals that had engulfed it. The petals were all that remained of the Wrathful.

"You're alright, my friend?" he asked, casting concerned eyes over it as it grew to its normal size.

"I am, thank you."

They watched in silence as the petals eddied through the cool evening sky, drifting higher and higher over the rooftops.

"Well, I hate to admit it but you were right."

"And you received no notification of its presence?" A frown had appeared, darkening his brows as he regarded the petals disappearing into the heavens.

"No. No. I did not."

They shared a sidelong look.

"An accident, perhaps?"

Ashayla snorted. "You know that is highly unlikely."

I did. So what did it mean?

And does it have anything to do with the woman with the green eyes?

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About Georgiana Kent

Georgiana Kent is an emerging author of mature young adult and new adult fantasy series. She has always been creative and loves telling stories of fantasy worlds filled with magic, mystery and more. Her books are fantasies on an epic scale with unique world-building, and a host of strong, diverse characters waiting for you to fall in love with. For fans of contemporary fantasies featuring mystery, shifters, time travel, and slow-burn romance, the Soul Dominion series is a must-read. But if you prefer steamy fantasy romances with morally grey characters, you'll love her Warring Hearts series.

When she's not child-wrangling, she's plotting her next book with magical adventures, strong heroines and morally grey bad boys. She and her family share their home with their two rescue cats, affectionately known as 'Panda Cat' and 'Bat Cat'.







The Opening

By Miranda Grant



The Opening by Miranda Grant

The Kingdom of Tails and Feathers is about to open. With (mostly) all their critters back, can they get a good review in the most prestigious attractions magasine? Or will something else go horribly wrong?

Chapter One

Huang screams as a jet of blue dragon fire shoots towards us. I, on the other hand, do something much more productive.

I shove my employee in front of me.

His arms flare out, windmilling in his panic, and his heels try to dig into the gravel. The bucket of seaweed he's carrying flies out of his hand and sails upwards as he loses his balance completely. He kisses the ground hard with his face. A groan, then a whimper comes from him as he wraps his arms around his head.

In front of us, Riona, an eviera dragon, chuffs inside her enclosure, finding it all hilarious. Her large feathery body shakes as she laughs.

A blush hits my cheeks and flares all down my throat as I realise what I just did.

"Oh my gods!" Kallum, another zoo keeper of mine, who has been working at the Kingdom of Tales and Feathers for over ten years, howls from a few feet away.

Holding my clipboard to my chest, I rush forward to help Huang, trying to pretend that I wasn't the one who shoved him to the ground in the first place. "Huang – Ow!"

The bucket he threw up into the air lands on my head and soaks me in stinky seaweed.

Kallum laughs harder, and the dragon collapses to the ground, her feathery wings beating hard, as if she's pounding the ground with a fist in glee. Smoke billows out of her nostrils as her large body shakes.

I glare at her, trying my best to look stern.

But she's the size of a two-storey house, and I am only five foot eleven. I'm nothing but a morsel to her, a mouse glaring at a cat. Her grin widens as she lifts her car-sized head, her electric blue-slit eyes dancing. She puffs out her cheeks like she's about to blow flames at me, and I flinch even though I know nothing but noise and smell is able to pass through the magical ward around her enclosure. I shake my head at myself for having forgotten that, but her sudden pounce and burst of fire earlier took me well off guard.

She laughs again, her roars deep and rumbly as I pull Huang to his feet. I wrinkle my nose and half-gag at the smell now seeping into my skin.

"Thanks, Viera," Huang says.

"You're *thanking* her?" Kallum wheezes. "She shoved you...in front of...her." His two buckets *thump* onto the ground a second before he wraps his arms around his waist and bends in half. Tears flow down his face. I narrow my eyes at him, but he doesn't seem to care.

"Well, she helped me up," Huang stammers. "It's only polite to thank her for that even if she did try to kill me when it wouldn't have made a difference to her survivial."

My cheeks flush hotter. "Well, it's not like you would've survived if I hadn't pushed you," I mutter.

"That is true," he says thoughtfully.

Kallum laughs louder. The dragon bounces around in her enclosure, fluttering her wings but not taking flight. The rocky ground shakes as she moves. Her purple forked tongue lolls out, and her tail wags back and forth like a naughty puppy.

Sighing, I turn to Huang. He's in the middle of trying to clean his glasses on his khaki work shirt. "I'm sorry I pushed you," I say. "I didn't think about it."

He places his round glasses on his nose. "It's okay," he says with a genuine smile. "You blocked the majority of the seaweed from hitting me."

I wrinkle my nose, but he is right. There isn't much on him, just a few bits in his hair, and he doesn't smell anywhere near as bad as me.

Having finally stopped laughing, Kallum comes over and points at me. "You need to put on some weight," he says, "you look too much like a snack."

"I knew you thought she was a snack," Huang says sagely, nodding.

Kallum jumps away from me. "Ew. No way," he says. "She's *old*."

"Hey!" I protest. "You're older than me."

"Yes, but I'm a vampire who was frozen at twenty, and you're a human....who's well —" His eyes flick down my body. "Let herself..."

My eyes narrow at him, and he wisely turns his attention to his colleague. "And that includes you too, Huang. Riona likes to pounce on the small fry, so you need to beef up."

The guy looks like someone stretched him in Photoshop – all limbs, no mass. A palm tree rather than an oak.

Huang grins as he locks his fingers under his chin and flutters his long black eyelashes. "Head Himbo thinks I'm a snack," he coos.

"Ugh." Kallum shakes his head, and I grin, but I'm not ready to let his 'let yourself go' comment go. So I tuck my clipboard under my arm and hold out my hands.

"Hand me your buckets," I say with the authority of being his boss. "I'll feed the kelpies while you clean this up."

He shakes his head. "Sorry, ma'am. But no can do. If you try to feed the kelpies smelling like their breakfast, they'll pull you in and eat you."

"Kelpies don't eat people. That's a myth. They're vegetarians."

"Oh yeah, my bad. They'll pull you in and drown you. That's so much better," he says, looking at me pointedly.

I purse my lips, but I don't really have anything to say to that.

"I reckon it would be better to be drowned than get eaten by a water horse," Huang says, nodding. "Their teeth are for crushing and grinding, not slicing clean like a shark, you know?"

"I don't know," Kallum counters, shaking his head. "If they get their teeth right over your skull and crush, then it'll be a lot faster."

"But that would be super scary, having your head between their teeth."

"Not as scary as being pulled down to the bottom of their tank, knowing you'll never reach the surface in time to —"

"Okay! I get it!" I cut in. "Go feed the kelpies, and I'll make sure there's another bucket of seaweed ready for you when you get back to the kitchen. But do me a favour and let me know how the kelpies are. If they're too stressed over their adventures" —they were just brought back in a couple hours ago—"I'll need to one-way their ward." That will let the public see, hear and smell them, but the kelpies won't be able to sense them at all. Kelpies normally like watching people though; otherwise, their ward would be one-way at all times. Like it is for the shyer animals. Just because they need to be seen to bring in funding for conservation and educating the public, as well as building empathy in humans, that doesn't mean they have to be stressed the entire time it happens.

Kallum nods, and the two of them leave.

Blowing out a sigh, I glance at my clipboard. There are wet stains on it, but my To Do list is still legible.

- See if the chimera ward needs to be made oneway
- Reinforce the manticore ward
- Get 16 glamour and 29 communication bracelets to the Rangers to replace those that have been lost
- See if the kelpie ward needs to be made oneway
- Meet with Pitta, the lead researcher in gur'akkavon, as I have no idea what to do with

its new forms. Though they are very cute

The list goes on, but at the moment, I need to focus on the issue at hand. Pulling out the walkie talkie on my waist, I say, "Clean up needed outside Riona's enclosure."

"Again?" someone asks.

The dragon preens, and I fight back a smile.

"Yep." I slip my walkie talkie back onto my belt, then turn to her. "That was a really good pounce," I murmur, my heart breaking just a little.

Eviera dragons are as intelligent as crows and are pack animals. So what she really needs is a flock to play with, but there are only two of her kind left. When Sebastian the Ancient Destroyer and Rakian the Call of Ragnarok raged war across the Seven Planes millennia ago, they destroyed Persic, the dragons' home world. She was found as an egg, a believed decoration until she started to hatch. Then the couple tried to keep her, thinking she was cute, but they had no idea what they were doing. One day, when she was about the size of a wolf, Riona ate the wife. So the husband tried to kill her, but she escaped their house, and a good samaritan spotted her in the skies, recognised her as a nearly extinct species, and called us to come get her.

Fortunately, though, the only other eviera dragon is a male, so rebuilding their population is possible.

Unfortunately, Draco does not like her.

At all.

I glance at the enclosure beside hers (he was put there with the hope she'll grow on him), but I can't see him anywhere. He's probably flying over the sanctuary somewhere – his enclosure reaching high into the sky and further out once he goes up a couple dozen metres. He also has a wind tunnel, as does Riona, but unlike her, he much prefers the open world. I'm hoping to commission a pocket universe for him if we can get the funding.

Nerves prickling my skin at the thought of failing him and all the other creatures relying on me, I drag my hand through my hair. Now bored with me, Riona flaps her wings and takes to the air. I glance at the display in front of her enclosure and tap on the screen to pull up the footage of her flying. There is a very small camera on the end of her snout, pointed towards her so we can watch her soar. Draco doesn't like wearing one – even though I doubt he can actually feel it, like a bit of dirt on one's skin, but whatever his reason, it's his choice. Us humans –the term for every humanoid shaped creature– destroyed his world; the least we can do is let him do whatever he wants in the pitiful section he has left.

"I'm going to commission you a pocket universe," I murmur with determination. Although that is going to take a lot of money – money that can be better spent on the needs of way more creatures, I'm going to make the Kingdom of Tails and Feathers so damn successful, that it doesn't matter.

Nodding firmly, I stride towards my office. First things first though. I need a shower and a change.

The Kingdom of Tails and Feathers opens tomorrow, and I need to make sure everything is shipshape by the time, Sus Oklina, the head journalist at the *Otherworld Adventures* magasine, gets here.

But just as I open the door to my building, my radio crackles to life. "Code black! Code black! The eunixa has escaped!"

My blood running cold, I spin around.

Just in time to see a large slimy beast with eight tentacles charging at me, its four-split, teeth-lined beak open in a roar.

Chapter Two

With no one nearby to shove between me and the eunixa, I throw my clipboard at it, then dodge to the left. But it simply swats the item away with one tentacle, making it fly into the door of the building with a hard *thump*, and reaches for me with another. Its slimy limb is just about to wrap around me to haul me into its gaping mouth when Zenin, the head of the Rangers, appears out of thin air right beside me. As a born vampire, he has the ability to phase, a skill he utilises once more as soon as he grabs hold of my arm.

We blink out of existence, then reappear inside my office. My stomach revolts, my body not used to phasing. I gag, then cough, but I manage to keep everything down. Before I can tell Zenin thank you for saving me though, he's gone again, and I rush to my window and throw it open.

I peer out to see him already back on the ground, his tranquiliser wand up and aimed. More Rangers appear from various directions, some phasing in if they have the ability, others running or flying or galloping. Each creature in the sanctuary has a non-invasive tag on them, which is how we managed to track them all down in order to bring them back to the sanctuary (though there were issues with some) and how these Rangers knew where the eunixa was without me having to radio it in.

I suck in a breath when the eunixa dodges the sleepy spell Zenin just fired at its face with a pre-loaded wand given he can't use magic himself. Only witches can.

The eunixa morphs into a puddle of an oily-looking substance before lunging to the left and morphing back into its gigantic, slimy shape. The white-haired vampire takes it all in stride as he phases behind it. The other Rangers keep their distance, letting him draw the creature's attention while they all take aim with their own wands. Two of the Rangers are witches, and their hands move as they build a giant net of

magic, the tattooed runes on their skin glowing lightly with their power.

My heart thuds in my throat as the eunixa suddenly spins on its mass of tentacles and charges at three of the Rangers blocking the path on its left. Two of them manage to fling themselves out of its way in time, but the third, a pink-haired centaur, holds his position as he fires a sleeping spell with his wand. A single preloaded spell isn't strong enough to take the beast down on its own though; they'll need to hit it with at least five more. So the creature roars, then grabs hold of the centaur with six of its slimy tentacles.

The Ranger screams as he's hauled towards the beak, which opens like one of those paper fortune tellers, with two rows of sharp teeth on each side. The eunixa's tentacles start to crush the centaur's bones, squishing him into a shape that'll fit nicely in its mouth.

Pulling my walkie talkie up to my lips, I demand all the healers get to the area *now*.

My eyes dart to Zenin, wondering why he isn't jumping in to save one of his own. He's had plenty of time. But as my gaze tracks across the chaos below me, I quickly realise why.

The two rangers that jumped out of the way are now repositioned with their tranquiliser wands aimed at the beast. They fire, but despite their proximity to the eunixa, their shots are the last ones to hit as the sleepy spells from all the other Rangers are already flinging towards the beast now that it's stationary. The giant net the two witches created also flings forward and wraps itself around the slimy beast.

The centaur's screams slowly die, and the eunixa's red bulbous eyes start to close. It wobbles on its tentacles for a few seconds, then falls over, having been hit with nearly a dozen sleeping spells nearly at the same time.

Zenin approaches with his wand still up. As soon as he nudges the creature and makes sure it's really out, he gestures for the healers to come in. They rush over, and with a team effort, the Rangers help separate the eunixa's tentacles from the centaur as they both stay asleep. Once the pink-haired half-

man, half-horse is free, the healers surround him and wrap his body in a white light, straightening his limbs and healing the pucker bruises the eunixa's tentacles left on him.

I breathe out heavily. Thank gods, they're both okay.

Although basically every zoo has a shoot-to-kill policy for eunixas due to them not attacking to get free or because they feel threatened but rather just because they like attacking anything and everything, everyone who works here loves animals before themselves. Which is why there is also a giant, legally-binding sign at every entrance of the sanctuary saying that to enter is to do so at your own risk, and the animals' welfare will come first.

After shutting my window, I hurry down the two flights of stairs to outside. Zenin comes up to me.

"Thanks for saving me," I say.

He shrugs.

"So how did she escape?" I ask, glancing over his shoulder at the eunixa, who is now being lifted by the two witches to be taken back to her enclosure.

"She just arrived, and the sleeping spell they had on her wore off during transportation. They found her on a different dimension to ours."

I shake my head. "They should have realised different dimensions affect our spells in odd, unpredictable ways."

"They're new."

My eyes widen. "And they went after an eunixa?"

"There was a mess-up with the trackers. They thought they were going after a micro unicorn."

"How did they manage to capture her?" I ask, my jaw slack.

"Lucky bastards found her while she was asleep. They tranged her some more before trying to bring her back."

Which then went horribly wrong. I shudder as I imagine their surprise when she woke up. "Are they okay?"

"Yeah."

Iri, his second-in-command, walks up to us, shaking her head of red hair. "What he means is they died."

"Zenin!"

He shrugs. "Okay is neutral. Dead is neutral. Same thing."

Before I can say anything to that, he walks off. I shake my head as I turn to Iri.

"Please make sure all the Rangers understand what can happen in interdimensional travel."

She nods. "I will."

"And make sure the centaur -"

"Rony."

I nod. "Make sure Rony goes to therapy."

She nods, then turns on her heels to talk to her squad.

Leaving them to it, I pick up the clipboard I threw at the eunixa earlier, then trudge back up to my office, nerves twisting my gut.

With luck, tomorrow will go a lot better than today...

Chapter Three

As soon as the sun rises the next morning, I'm running through the Kingdom of Tails and Feathers, my clipboard in hand as I do the last checks before opening. After a hard seven days of scrambling around who knows how many planes, timelines, and dimensions, the Rangers have managed to retrieve all but a handful of the animals we lost when the transportation spell went haywire.

Aeria, my troll assistant, comes up beside me as I head over to the kikimaras enclosure – creatures that looks like a squirrel with rabbit ears. There's supposed to be twelve of them, but it's been marked that only eleven have returned, so I just want to see which one is missing. Hopefully, it isn't Delilah, whose favourite past time is eating people's faces off.

Thank gods, it isn't. She's there, lying on her back while she's being groomed by the other kikimaras.

"Hades called again," my secretary says as she goes through her notes of things to tell me. I check my watch, then groan as I stride towards the front gates of the sanctuary. We're to open in thirty minutes, and I need to cut the big red ribbon, letting everyone in. I do not have time to deal with Hades right now.

"What did you tell him?" I ask. I've been dodging his calls all week, ever since he found out that the demons he'd sent over to help me, as I didn't have enough Rangers, have been handing out favours to people in various worlds and timelines on 'my' behalf. Something he did not authorise.

"I told him you were busy, but you'd call him back as soon as you could."

I wince. That was the third time she's told him that in as many days; I doubt he'll accept that answer again. I'm going to actually have to call him back at the end of the day.

"Thanks. I'll do that this evening," I say begrudingly.

"Shall I let him know?"

"No." There was a good chance I chickened out again. Although we were friends, and he was a lot more mellow than the stories around his name – much preferring to stay home and read rather than steal people's souls, he absolutely had the power to force me into servitude so I could carry out all the favours his demons have been offering to random people in order to get my animals back.

"Get D'jin-smak to write up a list of where the favours were given," I say. He's the head eknor demon on loan from Hades, and hopefully the list he makes will all be places and times in other dimensions. That way, it won't be this world's Hades who has to honour the favours. It'll be that world's Hades (if he so chooses). *Please gods, let it be so*.

Aeria nods as she hurries away, and I breathe out calmly as I reach the gates of the sanctuary.

I can hear a loud buzz of people on the other side if the large, wide wooden doors.

"It's a huge crowd," Zenin says as I approach. "You've done well."

I smile nervously. "As long as nothing goes wrong. Like an animal escaping during opening and eating all the children."

"If that happens, I'll make sure to eat Sus so she can't report it." He licks a fang.

I laugh. "Yeah, okay. That is your job today."

He nods, looking way too serious, and as always with him, I can't quite tell if he's joking. Deciding I don't want to know, I climb up the ladder that's temporarily leaning against the gates and stop on the platform attached at the top of them.

My heart drops into my shoes at the sight of the crowd before me. It takes a moment for people to notice I'm here, but once they do, the chatter of the crowd drops away as everyone stares at me expectantly.

I clear my throat. "Thank you all for coming here today on our grand opening." A giant octopus-like creature at the front of the crowd catches my eye, and I pin Sus with a customerservice smile. "We have thousands of creatures in the Kingdom of Tails and Feathers, many of which are vulnerable in the wild. Us humans have a duty to protect not just the planets we live on, but the creatures who live on them with us. They might not be able to voice their emotions, but I hope by visiting us today, you will come to realise that they all feel just as much as we do.

"So at the front of each enclosure is a board talking about their lives, as well as the human dangers they face in the wild. If you are touched by their struggles, then there are also petitions for you to sign, demanding more protection for these beautiful creatures. There's also pen and paper if you want to write to politicians directly."

I breathe out. These animals are my babies, and I want everyone to care about them as much as me. "Anyway," I say, clearing my throat and smiling wide as I descend down the stairs on the other side of the gate. As soon as I'm on the ground, a giant pair of scissors is offered to me, and the platform I was just on vanishes. "Thank you so much for supporting the Kingdom of Tails and Feathers on opening day. May you enjoy the familiar petting zoo, where you can potentially find your new companion as they are up for adoption." There is excited whispers from many young witches in the crowd. "As well as the talks about all the animals."

Grabbing the big scissors, I turn to cut the bright khaki ribbon wrapped around the heavy wooden doors. As soon as I slice through the satin, the crowd erupts into cheers, and the doors are pulled open from the other side.

I step back so people can start to file into queues at the ticket gates, a wide smile on my face as they slowly start to trickle in. Sus Oklina slides towards me on her tentacles, and my smile widens.

"Thank you so much for coming today," I tell the journalist. She nods her bulbous head.

"The weather is lovely for it too," she says. "You picked a wonderful place to house the sanctuary."

I beam. "The Tibetan plateau is the most remote place on this planet. It takes twenty-one days for Earth humans to get here," I say, glancing at the rugged terrain outside our doors.

"Thank gods, we can portal in then," she says. "I'm not in shape to climb all these mountains."

"Nor am I!" I laugh.

The tension in my shoulders easing, I show her around the sanctuary, and not one thing goes wrong.

At least...not until after we get an amazing review by Sus in the *Otherworld Adventures* magasine a few days later.

Then my radio crackles to life as I'm sitting in my office.

"Code blue! Code blue! Delilah is eating all the other kikimaras."

And is it bad that my first thought is: thank gods she didn't do that in front of Sus?

Jumping to my feet, I race out the door. The jobs of a zoo keeper are never done.

Want to get traumatised by Miranda Grant's usual work?

Venture into her **Book of Shadow series** – as long as you DON'T have ANY triggers.



About Miranda Grant

Miranda Grant is not a serial killer.

As an author of fantasy and paranormal romance, she just needs to know some things, like how many dead cats can fit in a bathtub (34, 52.5 if blended), what human meat tastes like (dry pork), how to get away with murder (it's really hard to tell the difference between a drowning accident and a drowning murder, just saying), etc.

This non-serial killer lady lives with her partner, who often drags her outside, claiming 'sunlight is necessary' and 'social interactions are a good thing'. Given her questionable search history, she goes along with it, thinking it'll be better to have less 'aloof serial killer vibes' should the police ever knock on her door...



