

OBSIDIAN QUEEN BOOK TWO



PRINCESS
OF
SHADOWS

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
SHARI L. TAPSCOTT

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BOOK TWO

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The Queen of Gold and Straw: A Rumpelstiltskin Retelling

The Sorceress in Training: A Retelling of The Sorcerer's Apprentice

Princess of Shadows
Obsidian Queen, Book Two
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FACTIONS

Urocyon

The Foxes

Masters of Stealth and Manipulation

Lupus

The Wolves

Leaders

Gryphus

The Griffons

Masters of Magical Intuition & Insight

Lepus

The Rabbits

Animal Whisperers

Draconem

The Dragons

Masters of the Elements

Cervidae

The Deer

Healers

Passeridae
The Sparrows
Jack of all Trades, Master of None

Taurus
The Bulls
Gifted with Great Strength

Canis
The Hounds
Trackers

Cristatus
The Peacocks
Gifted with Beauty and Grace

Sciuridae
The Squirrels
Tinkers and Craftsmen

Rhopalocera
The Butterflies
Masters of Light and Illusion

Chamaeleonidae
The Chameleons
Shifters

Strigiformes
The Owls
Alchemists

Struthio
The Ostriches
Ungifted

Equus
The War Horses
Metalsmiths and Enchanters

Cathartes
The Vultures
Thieves of Magic

“HE’S FINE,” Eric assures me, growing exasperated.

I face the Viking warrior lookalike with my arms crossed. “Then why won’t you let me see him?”

“Because he found this whole experience very traumatizing, and I don’t think he’s ready to face you.”

Just stab me in the heart, why don’t you?

I turn away from the knight marshal, unable to even look at him any longer. How *dare* he separate me after I’ve been this worried? It’s been over a week and a half.

Eric sets a hand on my shoulder. “Maddie, sweetheart. Let him sleep for now.”

The knight is going to have to let me in soon because we’re moving out of our suite in Tahoe this morning. For the last few weeks, we’ve attempted to track down a deranged pixie who was murdering bank tellers and impersonating them to steal private customer information to sell to identity thieves.

Though the pixie got away, we opened a whole can of worms while we were here. Now the Royal Guild wants us back in Avon. Plus, we have to go home to deal with the tiny matter of my ex-boyfriend fraternizing with a criminal casino owner bent on using magical means to exploit humans out of their money.

Jonathan, my other teammate, walks through the door, ready to grab more bags to take down to his Hummer. His short-but-messy black hair has been meticulously styled in such a way it looks like he rolled out of bed looking sexy—but it actually takes him thirty minutes to pull it off.

As if reading my thoughts, the Griffon—member of the Gryphon faction and reader of magic—smirks in my direction. “You were just checking me out, weren’t you? Don’t deny it.”

“I was actually thinking I never want to share a bathroom with you again.”

He opens his mouth, that wicked look growing as he thinks of something suggestive to say, but Eric cuts him off. “Shut up, you two. He’s sleeping.”

Jonathan rolls his eyes. “He’s fine, Bunny Hugger. So his dinner was twelve hours late, and you fed him Kitten Nibbles instead of Pedigreed Perfection. He’ll live.”

Try telling that to Charles Archibald Argyle III, my pedigreed Sphynx hairless cat. He thinks he’s royalty. (With the price I paid for him, he probably is.) He still hasn’t forgiven me for the evening I didn’t feed him. I had a good excuse—I was being held hostage. The cat’s going to have to get over it.

Gray steps into the room, not far behind Jonathan. “Are you still coddling that stupid cat?” he asks Eric. “You barely remembered to throw granola bars and bottled water at me after I was shot.”

“We found you a healer—it’s not like we left you in the humans’ care for long,” Jonathan says. “Besides, we all know Maddie was your preferred nurse.”

I turn my eyes to the floor, uncomfortable.

Things are weird between Gray and me, especially now that his ex-partner/nemesis and I are friendly. And by friendly, I mean Rafe’s my dark knight, and I’m his dark queen. Together, we’re destined to open the magical thresholds to our land of Aparia and take over the world, ruling over Aparians and humans alike using black magic and monsters from the nightmarish depths of darkness.

Since I haven’t figured out a way to break that piece of news to my team, it’s been hard to explain why Rafe’s stuck to my side like glue—and not the flimsy, white school stuff. The super glue type. The type that you must be very, very careful not to touch because the Obsidian Knight must never enter into a romantic relationship with his Obsidian Queen.

Which is ridiculous, because I’m *not* embracing my Obsidian Queen identity or planning to open the thresholds—even if I can command monsters as black as night to do my bidding. And frankly, that’s something I’m still trying to wrap my head around.

On top of all that, I don't even know if I *want* Rafe. Sure, he has that dark, broody, aristocratically handsome thing going for him. His magic also calls to mine like a siren on a rock...

But still, I've had a bit of a rough patch with men, and I believe I need to take a break from dating altogether. A guy diet, of sorts.

But I digress, things are awkward with Gray. I probably shouldn't have indulged in a rather steamy makeout session with him when we first arrived in Tahoe. Hindsight and all that.

"Where did you disappear to this morning?" Jonathan asks Gray as he grabs a couple more duffel bags and one of my three rolling suitcases.

Gray stalks across the suite, checking for odds and ends we might have left behind. He's in a particularly rotten mood today, and his icy blue eyes are stormier than usual—which is bad considering Rafe's not even here right now. "I sold my car."

The room goes silent. His car isn't just any car. I don't actually remember *what* it is, but it's a classic, as sexy as a car can be, and if Gray can be believed, it's wicked fast too. I know it means a lot to him.

No one dares speak first, so Jonathan, Eric, and I share a look, each waiting for someone to jump in. Because the two knight marshals are gutless, it finally falls to me. "Why would you do that?" I ask.

Gray doesn't bother to look at me. "I paid off Finn's debt."

Again, silence. This time it's so heavy it's almost suffocating.

"You did *what*?" Jonathan demands, finding his tongue. He and Gray consider themselves to be vehicle connoisseurs—though Jonathan prefers new, and Gray gravitates toward restored—and the Griffon looks personally offended by the news.

"How much did you get out of it?" Eric asks, not the slightest bit worried about tact. Finn owed over seventy-five thousand dollars. Did Gray really sell his car for that much?

"Enough." Gray's answer is curt, which tells me he doesn't want to have this conversation. "I took the money to Morris this morning and politely explained that I redeemed Finn, and now *I* own him."

"When you say politely explained, do you mean you held a gun to his throat?" Eric grins.

Gray rolls his eyes, but his stormy expression lessens slightly. "Of course that's what I mean. What else?"

The team's official job is to track down Aparians—magic users like

ourselves who come from a land we've been separated from—who are using too much magic around humans. We don't, however, usually step in unless they're using said magic to violently maim, kill, torture, or extort humans.

Trolls, sprites, and other unsavory creatures are on our radar as well. And even though we try to limit our own magic use, my teammates are quite free with their human weapons. I myself have a stun gun. It comes in handy more often than you might think.

“Madeline, did you get all your girly junk out of the bathroom?” Jonathan asks.

“Not sure.” I check my hair in the mirror hanging by the door. “All of your manly-metro junk was blocking it.”

He walks by me, his arms full of luggage, and whispers, “You know you want me.”

“Never denied it,” I tease as he lugs our things out the door.

“Where's Rafe?” Gray asks abruptly, surprising me by mentioning the knight at all. For the most part, he's done his utmost best to pretend Rafe doesn't exist—even when he's in the same room.

But now that the Knights' Guild is under the impression Rafe's position in Tahoe is blown, he's coming back with us. Of course, only I know Rafe is more than a double agent. He's a free agent, working only for himself. And for me, if I can trust him.

I drop my hand from my curls and turn to Gray. “He had a meeting with his realtor this morning.”

Rafe is selling his house—his absolutely *gorgeous* house on Lake Tahoe—so he can follow me back to Colorado.

Gray grunts and then goes back to checking drawers, cupboards, and anywhere else we might accidentally leave something. He frowns at a notepad and tosses it back on the desk. “Are we ready?”

Eric comes out of the bathroom with an armload of tiny hotel soaps and shampoo bottles. “Let me fetch Charles.”

“He's *my* cat,” I say to the knight's back.

Eric grins at me over his shoulder and then disappears into the suite's bedroom. “Yes, but he doesn't like you right now.”

Giving up, I roll my eyes and walk into the hall. If Eric wants to wrangle the feline demon into his crate, then more power to him.

I trail after Jonathan, carrying one little makeup case and a lightweight jacket.

“No, it’s okay,” the Griffon says, juggling the large duffels and my suitcase. “I’ve got it. Thanks for asking.”

I match his speed and jiggle my makeup case. “Oh, good. I was hoping you could take one more.”

He grins and purposely bumps into me with a duffel bag.

“So, what happens when we get home?” I ask as we make our way to the elevator.

“That depends.” Jonathan turns his head and pins me with his dark chocolate gaze. With his warm complexion, dark eyes, and almost black hair, he’s handsome in a way that makes grown women sigh. “Have you decided if you’re going to stay on the team?”

That’s a question that has been weighing on me for the last week. I don’t really have a reason to stay, and it was a fraudulent apprenticeship anyway. Unbeknownst to me, Lord Finnegan—aka Gray’s half-brother and my ex-boyfriend—only put me here to keep an eye on the team and serve as a distraction so he could pay off his gambling debt without the team noticing.

“You know I don’t really add anything to the mix,” I tell him. “You’re already the pretty one, so that title is taken.”

“You’re not leaving the team,” Gray says from behind me, startling me and Jonathan both. I didn’t realize he followed us out. “Not with Trent still on the loose.”

But the thing is, I’m not sure I really need the team’s protection from the pixie. After all, I already have my own personal knight. Of course, Gray doesn’t know that yet.

“We’ll see.” I move ahead, not wanting to have this conversation.

But Gray, alas, doesn’t want to postpone it. Still irked about selling his precious car, he sets his hand on my shoulder and stops me.

Jonathan, traitor that he is, continues down the hall. I flash him an irritated look when he reaches the elevators, but his only reply is a crooked smirk.

I return that smile, silently telling him he’s going to pay for deserting me.

“You’re not leaving the team, Madeline,” Gray says, oblivious to the exchange between Jonathan and me.

Even though I’m a respectable five-seven, Gray’s a head taller than I am, even when I’m in heels—which I usually am—so I have to look up at him.

Way up.

“Are we back to this caveman act of yours?” I demand, standing a little

straighter, giving myself as much height as possible.

“That depends.” He levels me with a cool stare. “Are you back to your prissy princess thing?”

I don’t want to fight with him, not again. We were getting along so well before I found out he basically sleeps with anything female, and I was just another line waiting to be notched in his belt.

Thankfully, I found out Gray has a bad habit of getting friendly with all his female teammates *before* I let myself get carried away. First, he was with a girl at the academy who had been temporarily placed on their team, and a few years later, he slept with his best friend’s almost-fiancée.

His best friend who happens to be Rafe, my knight and the former leader of the team.

As you can see, my life is a little messy right now—hence my man hiatus.

I look at the Wolf, getting ready to say something scathing, when all the irritation slowly fizzles away. “I don’t want to do this again. We’re past this.”

Gray narrows his eyes, but after a moment, his expression softens. “You’ve been avoiding me.”

“I know.”

“Is it because of Rafe?”

That, Gray darling, is difficult to answer.

“I know something transpired between you two after he rescued you.” Gray looks past me instead of *at* me. “And I want you to know I understand. Please don’t let that be the reason you choose to leave the team.”

Basically, he’s telling me he doesn’t want me to leave and be murdered, which is what happened to Rafe’s girlfriend. The poor team is still suffering. Rafe, Gray, Jonathan, and Nicole all trained together; they were friends since their days in the Knights’ Guild Academy. I know they feel her loss every day, and sometimes, I wonder if I’m making it worse. Resurrecting old pain.

I step forward and wrap my arms around Gray’s middle in a very chaste, very brotherly hug. “I’m not involved with Rafe. I’m not involved with anyone. After everything that happened with Finn and...” *You*, I think. “... I’m not ready to date. I need some time alone.”

The Wolf tentatively wraps his arms around me, holding me loosely. It’s the first time we’ve touched since the night before I was kidnapped. He’s freshly showered, and he smells like soap, deodorant, and freshly-laundered cotton. Combine that with the feel of his ribbed abdomen under his T-shirt, and you have an experience that’s downright habit-forming.

As if Gray can tell what I'm thinking, his muscles tighten ever so slightly. And...that's my cue to move back.

"Hey, Maddie." Eric steps out of the room with Charles tucked safely in the cat crate. "I think it's a little too warm for Charles to be wearing the sweater, so I took it off. Oh, and don't forget to apply a little sunscreen if you take him outside. He's been stir-crazy, so I ordered him a harness and leash. It should arrive at your house in a few days."

I shift away from Gray, glad for the distraction.

All Aparians are gifted with a unique type of magic that's passed down to them by one or both of their parents. Eric's of the Lepus, or Rabbit, faction. They're the animal whisperers. Most people like to call them Bunny Huggers. We say it with love...most of the time.

The fact that Eric, our Norse god in the flesh, sexiest man this side of Norway, is a Bunny is sort of hilarious. Except when it isn't. Like right now.

"What's Charles going to do when I take him home?" I ask. "We're going to have to set up playdates for the two of you."

Eric waves my mock concern away. "Don't worry about it. I'll visit."

I shoot Gray a look as Eric passes me. The leader of our team presses his lips into a thin line, trying not to laugh, and sets his hand on my shoulder to guide me down the hall after Eric. He doesn't bring up the subject of me leaving the team again—not when we're in Jonathan's Hummer, not when we stop for the night, and not when he and the guys drop me off at my house.

We turn into the drive, and I stare out the window, taking in the home I grew up in. It's large and lovely, part of a sprawling subdivision. Mom's roses are in full bloom, and the lawn has recently been mowed. Everything is as it should be, but it's weird to be back.

Rafe's silver car pulls up behind us. Gray glances back as he and Jonathan help me carry my things up the front entry and frowns. "Until we apprehend Trent, we'll set up a guard rotation. I have some paperwork to fill out at the office, and then I'll be back."

"No need," Rafe says as he jogs up the steps. "I'll watch over Madeline."

Gray turns his eyes on me, asking if that's what I want. There's only one right response, and it's not the one I'm going to give him.

"I'll be fine with Rafe," I say.

The Wolf looks at my knight, not even bothering to hide his irritation. Rafe doesn't flinch—he doesn't respond in any way. He merely stands there, waiting for Gray to leave.

“Who’s a good kitty?” Eric says to Charles, peering into the crate as he walks up the wide entry stairs, oblivious to the testosterone showdown happening between Rafe and Gray. Before he hands me my cat, he asks, “Are you sure you don’t want to leave him with me for a few more days?”

I take the carrier, rolling my eyes. “I’m sure.”

“Remember, when you take him outside—”

“Sunscreen,” I interrupt. “I got it.”

Amusement creases his eyes, and he steps in, enveloping me in an all-consuming bear hug. I wrap my free arm around him, squeezing him right back. It’s a goodbye hug. A farewell hug. An I-know-you’ve-decided-to-leave-the-team hug.

“Bye, Eric,” I murmur, feeling oddly emotional.

He steps away, and Jonathan moves forward. The Griffon drapes his arm around my shoulders in a friendly side embrace. “We’ll see you around.”

Gray lets out a low growl. “What is with you two? She’s not going anywhere.”

I meet the Wolf’s eyes. I am, and he knows it. He just doesn’t want to admit it yet.

“Goodbye, Gray.” I wonder if he’ll hug me, wonder if he’ll demand I send Rafe away so he can tell me that I’m wrong. That I was special. That I wasn’t just a nameless girl in the parade of females that waltz through his bedroom.

But he doesn’t.

He only nods, his eyes hard, and turns down the steps, barking at Jonathan and Eric to hurry up so they can get to the office.

I hold up a hand as Jonathan pulls from our circle drive, a listless goodbye.

“Want some help with your things?” Rafe asks after they pull onto the street and disappear behind our distant neighbor’s landscaping.

“Yeah.” I turn to my knight and give him a hesitant smile. “Thanks.”

Together, we haul my luggage into the house, and I close the door on a very brief, but very memorable, time of my life.

I GET a serious case of déjà vu as I barge into my ex's office. Finn's at his desk, frowning at a stack of paperwork. When he looks up, he seems less than surprised to see my not-so-smiling face.

"Hello, Finn," I say curtly, absently noting the similarities between him and his half-brother. Dark hair, blue eyes, philandering ways. "I'm here to discuss my new apprenticeship assignment."

A strange emotion flits across his face. It appears to be a combination of guilt and nausea. It's not a good look for him. "What kind of apprenticeship are you looking for?"

That's more like it.

"Something in hospitality."

"Are you...sure?"

Why does he look like he swallowed a toad?

I step forward, walking across his plush rug, leaving stiletto imprints in the fibers. "I'm quite sure. In fact, if you'll remember, I've wanted a space in hospitality for quite some time."

My tone is snarky, and he flinches like I slapped him.

Encouraged by his response, I continue, "We'll just pretend this little hiccup in my plans never happened. Thankfully, your brother saved you from spending a nice vacation in the Dungeons, so you're available to shift things around."

"No, I know that..." He clears his throat and turns to his paperwork like it's the most fascinating thing he's seen in his life. "I suppose Gray mentioned that I'm now seeing Maisy? I thought you might find the apprenticeship uncomfortable..."

I clench my teeth so tightly, there's a real chance I'm going to chip a tooth. After a moment, when I feel I can contain myself, I give him a tight smile. "He didn't mention it."

Finn nods, still too gutless to meet my eyes. "Oh, well. I am. Officially seeing Maisy. Now."

"Good for you."

He winces. "So...you would still like in hospitality?"

I almost say yes out of spite, but the fact is I don't want to work that closely to Maisy, especially now that they're together. What kind of girl has an affair with her best friend's boyfriend? My dear friend Maisy, apparently.

Now that I think of it, however, if I take the position, I could enjoy a front row seat to their eventual breakup. But still.

"Is there anything else?" I ask.

"The Knights' Guild could use another office girl," he so graciously offers as he rubs the back of his neck. "Though it would be a significant cut in the pay level you're at now."

Office girl.

"How about this." I set my palms on the desk and lean forward, making him meet my eyes. "You give me a call when something else comes up. You know how to reach me."

"Does this mean you're leaving Gray's team?"

I narrow my eyes. "I think we both know I never really had a place on it."

Finn gulps and then gives me a very small, very fearful nod. Without another word, I turn on my heel and walk from the office.

"THERE'S a man here to see you, Miss Madeline," Lillian says as she pokes her head into my bedroom. Her dark brown hair is pulled up in a severe bun that's softened only by the laugh lines around her eyes. Because my parents are gone, she's exchanged her usual attire for jean shorts and a bright red tank top, and she's wearing sparkly flip-flops instead of her usual white tennis shoes. She looks like she's going to an afternoon barbecue.

Instantly wary, I sit up straighter in my chair by the sleeping fireplace. The last stranger who came calling ended up hiring a pixie to kidnap me and then lured gargoyles to attack in the night, just to see if I had the power to

control them.

“What does he look like?” I ask.

My thirty-seven-year-old German housekeeper smirks. “Delicious.”

I roll my eyes. There are a lot of delicious men in my life at the moment. Not exactly a bad problem for a girl to have—unless she’s taking a break from men, that is. “That only narrows the options.”

“Tall, dark, handsome...”

Raising an eyebrow, I deadpan, “Blue eyes or brown?”

“Brown. And a butt you could crack walnuts on.”

Jonathan.

“That’s disturbing.” I laugh despite myself and shake my head, trying to remove *that* mental picture from my brain.

I follow Lillian downstairs and find the handsome Griffon sitting on a couch in the living room, flipping through one of my mother’s magazines.

“Have you noticed,” he says to me without looking up, “that these headlines all seem to say ‘Lose Twenty Pounds in One Afternoon!’ and yet there’s usually a chocolate cake on the cover?” He tosses the magazine aside, meets my eyes, and gives me a crooked smile that he knows is charming. “What is that?”

I don’t even bother with the codeword we devised to make sure the pixie wasn’t impersonating anyone on our team. No one can do Jonathan but Jonathan himself.

“What are you doing here?” I ask him after Lillian excuses herself and pointedly closes the door behind her, giving us privacy.

“A little Bunny told me you officially left our team,” he answers.

“Does that Bunny look like he should be aboard a ship with a dragon on the prow?”

Jonathan stands, stretching, and meanders toward me, taking his time to cross the room. “As a matter of fact, he does.”

I knew this discussion would be awkward. I’ve only been part of the group for a few weeks, but a lot has happened since then. It would be a lie to say I wasn’t going to miss them at least a little bit.

“Gray’s livid,” Jonathan informs me. “Just so you know.”

“I’m sure he’ll get over it.”

“Eric’s heartbroken.”

“I’ll give him visitation rights with Charles.”

He smirks. “I’m not upset though.”

I cross my arms, a smile stealing across my face without my permission. “You’re not?”

“Nah.” He stops about a foot in front of me, that smirk turning into a wicked grin. “I know why you left. It’s because you want me, isn’t it? Because you know we shouldn’t be together if you’re on the team.”

He raises an eyebrow, giving me an exaggerated come-hither look.

I laugh. “Yes, Jonathan. You got me—that’s exactly what it is.”

“There’s a troll in Pueblo,” he says, abruptly changing the subject. “We’re supposed to arrest him. Thought you might like to know.”

Grimacing, I shake my head. “You’re trying to lure me back with a troll?”

“You say that now, but you haven’t seen the upgrades I’ve made to your stun gun.”

“Upgrades?”

He pulls the little weapon from his back pocket and grins.

The afternoon light shines through the west-facing windows, lighting the room with gold, making it warm and inviting. It also sparkles on the hundreds of rhinestones that now adorn the familiar little weapon in Jonathan’s hand.

“You decorated it?” I ask, incredulous, taking it to inspect further. Sure enough, it’s the same one...but now it’s sparkly. I look up. “Is that even safe?”

Jonathan frowns as if he didn’t think that far into it. “I have no idea.”

Laughing, I hand him back the small stun gun. “I’m sorry, Jonathan. I really am. But I’m not cut out for this life.”

He nods, giving me a smile that’s somehow more of a frown. “I had to try. We’re gonna miss you, you know.”

“Nah. You’ll like having a bathroom all to yourself.”

The Griffon chuckles and tugs me into an embrace, looping his arms around my back. This isn’t like yesterday’s draped-arm move. It’s a real hug—though one considerate enough to stay clear of skin-to-skin contact so he won’t have access to my thoughts.

I’ve never been this close to Jonathan before. He gave me a piggyback ride when I sliced my foot open in the streets of South Lake Tahoe, and I’ve sat next to him in the car, but we’ve never actually embraced. At six foot, he’s shorter than the other guys, but he’s still five inches taller than me. It’s sort of nice not to feel entirely dwarfed.

I relax into him, relishing the physical contact with someone who doesn’t want or expect anything from me.

“You’re short,” Jonathan says after a moment, and then he pulls back and looks down at my bare feet. “You’re not in heels.”

“I’m at home.”

“Your toenails are hot pink.”

“Don’t tell my mother.”

He gives me a rueful smile as he lets me go. “You sure I can’t change your mind?”

I shake my head.

“All right.” He points at me as he heads to the door. “But I’m keeping your stun gun.”

“Now the truth comes out,” I tease. “You said you added sparkles for me, but you secretly wanted it for yourself.”

The Griffon’s at the door now, but he pauses halfway out. He stands there for a moment, looking like he wants to say something else. “See you later, Madeline. Don’t be a stranger.”

And then he’s gone. Half hiding behind the curtain, I watch him jog down the landscaped entry, heading toward his silver Corvette.

Part of me—a stupid part—wants to stop him, tell him I’ll come back. But why? What’s the point?

Just as he’s leaving, an Audi coupe pulls up. Some of the weird melancholy leaves me as dark-haired, tall and scrumptious Rafe steps out of the driver’s door. He laughs as he stops to talk to Jonathan.

The two knights eventually part, and I open the door and give Jonathan one last wave as he pulls away. Rafe’s halfway up the steps when I say, “And here I thought you changed your mind about the whole personal knight thing.”

He’s been gone most of the day.

Rafe gives me one of his signature smiles—the one where his mouth barely moves but his eyes shine. They’re quickly becoming one of my favorite things ever. “Next time, you’re coming with me,” he says.

“I stayed in the house, as promised.”

It’s weird having a personal protector, someone born to keep an eye on me, do my bidding. It’s even weirder that Rafe seems to be taking this whole Obsidian Knight thing so seriously. It would probably be different if it weren’t for the bloodthirsty pixie on the loose.

“Yes, but I see you let Jonathan in.” His cobalt eyes meet mine, and I can’t tell how he feels about it.

“Well, yeah. It’s Jonathan. Was I supposed to ask Lillian to turn him away?”

He steps a little too close, pulled by the strange magnetism our magic creates. “You can do whatever you want.”

“He tried to lure me back with a sparkly stun gun,” I tell him.

Rafe’s eyes crinkle with amusement, but he doesn’t respond.

“So…” I step into the foyer, knowing he’ll follow. “Did you find anything you liked?”

With his house in Tahoe up for sale, he’s been looking for something here in Avon. From what I understand, his parents are thrilled to have him home again. Even dark-hearted members of the Entitled love their baby boys.

“Nothing yet.”

Lillian steps into the foyer, beaming when she sees Rafe. She’s a big, *big* fan of all the new men in my life. “Rafe, are you hungry? Thirsty? I made a fresh batch of lemonade this morning. Come into the kitchen. I’ll pour you a glass and make you a sandwich.”

She leaves the foyer before he can answer.

He flashes me an amused look, and we follow Lillian into her gleaming kitchen. She’s already set out an array of fixings, and she’s pulling out a homemade loaf of soft, chewy white bread from the breadbox. There’s a carrot cake under the glass dome in the corner and apricot bars in the cookie jar.

Staying thin in this house is a daily battle.

In the blink of an eye, Rafe has a double-decker Black Forest ham sandwich, cut into wedges, a generous portion of deviled-egg potato salad, one sweet pickle that Lillian canned herself, and a piece of cake on the side.

“Will you be staying for dinner?” she asks as she pours him a glass of lemonade to wash it all down. “Madeline likes to eat light when her parents are away, but I can make scampi.”

Rafe gives her a rare grin. “It’s after five o’clock. Isn’t *this* dinner?”

She waves the question away like he’s joking and simultaneously pushes a sliver of cake toward me and hands me a fork.

“Oh, Lillian, I shouldn’t—”

“No preservatives,” she says in her thick, lovable accent, reading my mind. “All homemade—I grated the carrots myself. It’s practically health food.”

Sure, health food. Except there’s enough sugar in this small slice to kill a

giant.

But there are starving people in the world—it would be wrong of me to turn this down. I’m not exactly sure where the logic is there, but I’m going to go with it.

Lillian leaves the kitchen, and I take a bite and close my eyes, savoring the rich, silky cream cheese frosting. When I open my eyes, I find Rafe watching me.

“What?” I ask.

He shakes his head and takes a bite of his sandwich. Self-conscious, I dab my mouth with a napkin.

Once we’re finished, I glance at him, unsure of myself and our odd situation.

“Now what?” I ask.

His deep blue eyes meet mine. “What were you doing while I was looking at houses?”

Painting my toenails hot pink.

“Not much.”

“Just do whatever you’d do if I wasn’t here.”

That’s so much easier said than done.

“What about your job?” I ask him, sliding off my stool, wrapping the rest of the slice and tucking it in the fridge for later. “Won’t the Knights’ Guild put you on another assignment?”

“I resigned this morning.”

I gape at him. “You *resigned*? How are you going to buy a house? Afford to live? Surely you can’t stay by my side twenty-four hours a day.”

Because I’ll go crazy. I’m not ready for that kind of relationship, even if it’s purely platonic.

Kinda platonic.

Mostly platonic?

Guy diet, Madeline.

“I don’t need to work,” he answers most cryptically.

Of course he doesn’t.

Perhaps reading the panic on my face, he says, “After we catch Trent, I’ll give you as much space as you want. For now, I feel more comfortable staying close.”

Stupid pixie. We haven’t seen any sign of him in over a week, and he’s still making my life difficult.

“Okay...” I glance around, looking for something to do.

“There’s a game on this evening,” Rafe finally says, helping me out. “That’s more than enough to keep me entertained.”

“Is it all right if I go to my room without you?”

A mischievous look crosses his face. It’s subtle, just a small quirk of a dark eyebrow and a tilt of his closed lips, but it’s there. “Would you rather I join you?”

“I’ll show you to the living room,” I squeak. “You should be comfortable in there.”

He chuckles under his breath and follows me out of the kitchen.

Once he’s settled, I awkwardly stand in the arched doorway.

“It’s fine, Lexie,” he says, using a nickname that’s his own private joke. “You don’t have to entertain me.”

But leaving feels so wrong.

I set my hands on my hips, not wanting him to see my discomfort. “You say you’re here to keep an eye on me, but I think you just want a free place to watch the game since you’re currently houseless.”

“You got me.” He winces at something on the screen, already engrossed in a pastime I’ll never understand.

Since I have nothing better to do, and going upstairs seems really awkward, I sit next to him. The guys in the yellow shirts are playing the guys in the green shirts. Someone throws a ball, another someone runs. There’s a lot of yelling, and I’m already yawning.

I end up playing on my phone, browsing through mindless social media. In an hour, my back is pressed against the armrest, and my legs are up on the cushions. It’s nearing the end of the game, and Rafe is leaning forward, his eyes glued on the screen.

That’s when I hear the faintest mew from outside the window behind us.

I sit up, listening. “Did you hear that?”

It’s not Charles. That spoiled cat is up in my room, lounging on his fleece blanket atop my bed. Apparently, he’s finally forgiven me. Either that or he’s using me for my pillows.

“Hear what?” Rafe asks, instantly on guard. He straightens, his muscles tensing.

“I thought I heard a cat.”

“Oh.” His stance softens, and he looks back at the screen. The announcer is saying something, and people in the stands look mad. “No, I didn’t.”

I stand, sure I heard something.

“Where are you going?” He’s already pulling himself to his feet.

“No, you stay.” I wave him back with my hand, not wanting him to miss anything. “I’m just getting some water.”

But I don’t head right for the kitchen. I take a right, moving toward the entry. It’s still light out, but the evening shadows are getting long. Slipping out the door, I make my way around the house, heading toward the east side. It’s darker over here, the sun blocked by the house itself, and the landscape is thick with shrubs. I stand on the lawn, bent over, looking into the bushes to see if I can spot the source of the noise.

Just when I’m about to give up, I hear it again. I step forward, dropping to my hands and knees. “Kitty?” I say, looking under the bushes. “Kitty, kitty?”

Something shifts in the shadows, something cat-sized.

“Come on,” I coax, patting my lap. “It’s oka—”

Before I can finish the words, the branches part and a small, taloned monster lunges right for my face.

3

I SHRIEK before I can stop myself. It's not a little yip but a full-out, shrill yell that will have the neighbors calling the cops in ten seconds flat. Then I fall back, hands over my face, waiting for the attack.

But sharp fangs never find my skin, neither do razor talons.

I peek my eyes open, my heart racing.

A black feline creature stares back at me, her eyes molten pools of gold. Ebony velvet wings are held close to her body as she sticks her head out, sniffing me. Two very long, sharp incisors grow from her mouth, taking away from the fluffy cuteness.

"Madeline!" Rafe yells, rounding the edge of the house, dagger in hand.

The winged cat hisses the moment she sees Rafe, and then she stretches out, revealing limbs that are longer than any domestic cat's. She's like a tiny panther, well-muscled for her size and *angry*.

Rafe curses under his breath, skidding to a halt, holding up his hands in surrender.

"What is it?" I demand, not sensing any immediate threat.

"Winged cat."

Well, obviously.

After the scare, my heart rate finally returns to normal. "Why are you acting like she's a rattlesnake?"

"She's worse. One bite and you're dead."

I peer at the furry monster. If a cat fell in love with a bat, this would be their offspring. "Are you sure? She doesn't look that dangerous."

Rafe edges forward, trying to place himself between the cat and me. "She's highly venomous."

She doesn't look quite so cute now.

The cat hisses at Rafe, the short fur on her back standing along her spine. She holds up her velvet wings, stretching them out, making herself larger.

"I think you should stop moving," I say to Rafe, growing nervous. Though I don't think she has any immediate intentions of hurting me, she looks like she'd be happy to attack Rafe.

Thankfully, the knight is smart enough to keep his distance. "I need you to send her away."

He wants me to *what*?

And then I realize. He wants *me* to *send her away*—this creature of the night...a monster that should be well hidden in the shadows and is yet out at dusk.

"Go home," I tell her, skeptical it will work. The gargoyles might have been a fluke.

She backs up and sits on her haunches, studying me. The longer I look, the more I decide she's not a sweet little kitten. Her face is angular, and her eyes are narrow and exotic. She has the look of a feral creature, something that will eat you if you give her half a chance. Her eyes shift to Rafe, reminding me of the way lionesses watch strollers at the zoo.

"Try again," Rafe urges. "I don't think she understood."

"Away," I command, motioning for the sky.

Still, she stays put.

"It's not working," I tell Rafe, growing more and more nervous. What does it mean? Maybe I'm not who Rafe thinks I am. And maybe *that* means she's going to sink her teeth into me at any moment.

"It's not dark enough," he answers, looking around.

"So what do we do?"

He backs up. "We return after nightfall and see if she's still here."

"You want to just *leave* her here? What about the neighbors?"

"Do they normally go crawling through your bushes?"

Funny.

I slowly back up, hoping not to spook the little, fanged monster. She watches me, eyes glittering in the shadows.

"Go home when you can," I command, remembering to put magic into the words.

She tilts her head to the side, making me think I got through to her this time.

Slowly, I join Rafe. The cat crawls farther into the shadows, hiding, only her glittering eyes visible from under the bushes.

We move away slowly until we turn the corner. When we step into the rich evening sunshine, Rafe closes his hand around my shoulder and propels me into the house. “Just going to get a glass of water?”

I look up at him, feeling somewhat guilty. “I took a small detour.”

He rolls his eyes, walks me into the living room, and plops me down on the couch next to him, resting his hand on my leg to keep me in place.

In no time, Rafe’s wholly engrossed in the game on the television, and I’m wholly engrossed with his hand. It’s right there, on my bare skin, just above my knee.

Finally, the game ends, and the nightly news comes on. It’s a Denver channel, and they’re talking about a local school that started a community garden.

The knight’s hand is still on my leg.

A newscaster announces another wildfire started just outside of Colorado Springs.

The knight’s hand is still on my leg.

There was a shooting on Colfax.

The knight’s hand is still on my leg.

I’m practically burning up, waiting for Rafe to remove it, caress my skin, maybe slide his palm higher.

But he simply leaves it there, holding me down, making sure I don’t take off again.

About the time I’m debating whether I’m going to throw caution to the wind and swing my leg over his lap and seduce the man, Rafe holds up the remote and turns the television off. “Let’s see if she’s gone.”

Or here’s an idea—we could stay right here.

He stands, not seeming to notice the turmoil I’ve been in these last few hours. Armed with a dagger and a pistol and who knows what else, the knight steps into the night.

Armed with a *flashlight*, I follow.

“How are you with light spells?” Rafe whispers.

“I’m decent.”

“Then what’s with the flashlight?”

“What’s with the gun?” I retort.

He laughs quietly as he steps closer, keeping me near. We creep around

the landscape, and I shine the light into bushes, trees, and flower beds. The smell of the neighbor's freshly cut grass and my mother's night-blooming vines is in the air, along with a cool, fresh breeze from the surrounding mountains.

We search for almost an hour, but the winged cat is gone.

"What was she doing here?" I ask Rafe as soon as we go back in the house.

He looks slightly uncomfortable as he slides his dagger into a sheath at his side. "She came looking for you."

Maybe it's his ominous tone, or perhaps it's the words themselves, that causes a shot of ice to travel my veins. "Why would she do that?"

With a flick of his wrist, Rafe manipulates the door lock with his magic. We Foxes, members of the Urocyon faction, are good with locks...though we're better even at picking them.

Rafe doesn't answer, which makes me extremely jittery. He begins to walk in the direction of the living area, but I grab his arm, yanking him back. Our magic moves between the connection, begging me to press against him. It's almost as disconcerting as his silence.

"Tell me what you're thinking." I use a bit of persuasion on him, but it's not on purpose. It just came out.

His brow crinkles. "Did you just use your magic on me?"

"It was an accident." I drop my hand.

He moves toward me, forcing me back. I try to dart to the side, but his hands capture my hips, and in one smooth move, he presses me into the wall.

My pulse jumps, and my stomach flutters.

It's a little bit harder to remind myself I'm staying away from men when Rafe's this close. And does my traitorous body care that my mind thinks I'm deplorable for the fickle attraction I'm having to the men in my life? No. No, it does not.

All it cares is that Rafe's against me, and our magic is begging us to touch—no matter the consequences or how I'll hate myself if I give in.

"You know it won't work," he informs me, making me scramble to remember the last thing that was said. Oh right—I used my persuasion on him.

"I know." My voice is husky, and from the way the knight's eyes darken, I assume he notices. Gulping, I add, "I didn't mean to."

Is that what this is? Punishment for using my magic? Because this doesn't

feel like punishment. It feels like—

Rafe grips my hips tighter, and my mind goes blank. Perfectly, completely blank. His fingers dig into my sides, but not in a painful way. No, it's definitely not painful. He steps closer, pressing us flush.

Unable to help myself, I close my eyes and tip my head back, resting it against the wall behind me. "I thought we weren't supposed to go here."

"We're not." His jaw is near my ear, and his hands move from my hips, up my sides, over the thin fabric of my shirt. The tips of his fingers skirt the bottom of my ribs.

Fire follows the trail of his hands, making me want more. I'm just pressing closer when I freeze.

Rafe never lets us get this close.

"You're distracting me," I murmur, feeling foolish.

When I reluctantly force my eyes open, I find the knight's mouth crooked with humor.

I give him a little shove, pushing him back. "Why did the cat seek me out?" I demand.

"Because you're her master."

I take a moment to process those words. "Excuse me?"

The amusement fades from his face. "The dark creatures—the creatures of the shadows—know you're alive now. You've used your magic on them, and they are acquainted with the feel of it. I'm afraid when you sent away the gargoyles, you gave yourself away."

"*They?* Are you saying there are going to be more of them?" I breathe, terror finding its way into my heart.

The monster cat wasn't all that bad, but I've heard what kind of beasts lurk in the dark, and I want nothing to do with them. I certainly don't want them showing up here, expecting me to...what?

"What do they want from me?"

"Instruction."

They're waiting for me to open the thresholds.

I bring my hand to my brow, feeling faint. This can't be happening. One minute I'm graduating from finishing school, minding my own business, and the next, monsters are showing up on my doorstep.

My eyes search Rafe's as I step forward. Desperation laces my voice as I say, "I don't want this. I'm not *evil*."

I'm not, right? Surely I don't have to be, even if my magic wants it. I can

choose my own path—Rafe said so himself back at the house by the sea where Trent left me for dead.

Rafe frowns. “If you continue to send them away, maybe they’ll get the point.”

But he doesn’t sound too sure of that, and I’m not either.

THREE MONTHS LATER

I SIFT through the mail Lillian left on the counter, pausing when I spot an elegant envelope. It's cream-colored, and the paper is a nice weight.

“What’s wrong?” Rafe asks from across the counter, his hand halfway into the ever-full cookie jar. Immediately, he abandons his snack and comes around the island. “What is it?”

“A wedding invitation.”

I stare at the names written in cursive, my irritation growing by the second.

“Whose wedding?” The knight steps beside me, reading over my shoulder. “Oh.” His tone is flat, even a bit wary.

I’ve been patiently waiting for Finn to break Maisy’s heart so I can step into my place in the guild. But he apparently proposed to her instead.

The young girl who was in love with Lord Finnegan cries a little on the inside, but the jaded woman I’ve grown into wants to crumple the invitation, toss it in the trash, and then light the whole thing on fire.

It seems Finn is capable of commitment—just not with me.

“Are you all right?” Rafe asks.

I can feel his eyes on me as he waits for me to show some sign of emotion. I slide the invitation back into the envelope and leave it on the counter for my parents to find. They got back from Belize a few days ago, and they’re leaving for New Zealand tomorrow. Now that the Grand Duke is half senile, my father has stepped up his duties, traveling more than before, making sure Aparians around the world are keeping in line.

What would Lord Bennet do if he knew who his daughter really was? Would he and Mother have adopted me when I was an infant? Would they claim me now?

I’ve never been shown anything but unconditional love, but what if this is too much for them? With the revolving door of dark creatures that have been making their way through my yard, I’m beginning to wonder if it’s too much for even me.

It didn’t end with the cat—*no*. I’ve now been visited by all kinds of monsters, from the furry cat creatures that have become a downright nuisance to leathery, cackling hobgoblins. A month ago, I had to send away a two-headed serpent that was as thick as my waist.

I've been nervous since my parents got home. Thankfully, it's been a slow week for the shadow monsters, and Dad and Mom are none the wiser.

Our neighbors, however, are beginning to notice something is amiss. Greg Anderson decided it was time his wife start attending AA meetings when she began going on about seeing a black wolf with yellow glowing eyes sniffing around her lilacs last week. Dan from down the road reported a missing poodle, and Millicent Denton claims she spotted a *crocodile* swimming in her pool when she was up getting a drink of water in the middle of the night a few days ago.

Rafe was wrong. No matter how many I send away, the creatures are not getting the point. Not at all.

"I'm fine," I answer Rafe, dismissing the invitation, taking a sip of coffee. Now that the weather has cooled, Lillian keeps a fresh carafe on the counter. It's my favorite time of year. I like it creamy and sweetened with just a touch of raw sugar. Lillian keeps me well stocked.

"Are you sure?"

I look up, pinning Rafe with my eyes. We've grown closer these last three months, though he's still closed off when it comes to anything personal. That initial fire between us has cooled to a simmer, something manageable most days—mostly because my Obsidian Knight is suffocating.

He takes his duty very seriously. I'm waiting for the day he demands I stop wearing heels because I risk twisting an ankle.

"I'm not getting my apprenticeship, am I?" I ask out loud, talking more to myself than my knight.

Rafe frowns, his cobalt eyes creasing at the corners. "It's not likely."

Without a word, I walk from the kitchen and collapse on a couch in the living area. Lillian vacuumed today, and the rug still bears the lines from where she went back and forth.

Lillian has a job, one she enjoys. She has a purpose.

Rafe has a job, one he seems to enjoy even if he's driving me mad. He has a purpose.

I have no job, nothing I particularly enjoy. *I have no purpose.*

It seems my only lot in life is sending away monsters. I'm nothing more than a glorified neighborhood exterminator.

I look around, taking in the room that's full of my mother's decor. It reflects her, reflects my father. And though I feel at home, it's not mine. I can't sit around my parents' house forever, hoping some eligible Aparian

man will knock on the door and sweep me off my feet. I won't even find a man if I'm in this house all day, getting plump on Lillian's cooking. (I'm winning the battle against her baked goods now, but it's only a matter of time, especially with the holidays looming on the horizon.)

As I'm sitting here, wondering what's the *point*, the doorbell rings. The loud, deep chimes slowly fill the house.

Rafe won't let me answer the door anymore, so I don't even bother to rise. I hear his boots against the hardwood as he walks into the entry, and then voices after he opens the door.

"You have visitors, Lexie," the knight says when he steps into the room, still stubbornly refusing to drop the nickname.

"And we're standing right here," a familiar someone announces, "so don't bother coming up with an excuse to send us away."

I turn, startled by the voice I haven't heard in over three months. Jonathan stands next to Rafe and Eric, grinning.

"What are you doing here?" I demand, rising to my feet, trying not to burst into tears. I'm so ridiculously happy to see them. I thought they hated me. I haven't heard a word from anyone on the team since I left, not even Eric.

"Charles has been heartbroken," I tell the Bunny, throwing my arms around his middle. "How could you up and abandon him like that?"

I'm talking about the cat, of course. I, myself, am fine.

"Gray forbid it." Eric's chest rumbles with laughter.

I back up, narrowing my eyes. "He...forbid it?"

"He's a bit of a grudge-holding Wolf," Jonathan says, stealing me from Eric. "And therefore he wasn't pleased when you left the team."

Stepping forward to meet him, I let Jonathan wrap his arms around me. His hand cups the back of my neck as he pulls me closer. The Griffon smells good, like subtle cologne. I breathe him in, clutching him a little tighter.

It's pathetic how much I missed these two, how abandoned I felt when we drifted apart.

"Aw, we missed you too, sweetheart," Jonathan murmurs next to my ear. "We just couldn't risk the wrath of the Wolf."

I step back, startled, and then realize his hand is on my bare skin.

When he grins, I smack his chest. Hard. "No listening to my thoughts."

Jonathan raises a cocky brow, not even trying to deny it.

"Why are you here?" I ask, pulling my eyes from Jonathan.

“We want you back on the team,” Eric says. “In an official capacity—none of that rubbish Finn set up last time.”

“No.”

But it’s not me who declines—it’s Rafe.

I turn to him, setting my hands on my hips. “Don’t you think that’s for me to decide?”

The knight gives me a grim smile, one that says we’re going to have a fight on our hands if I push the issue. I shoot him a stern look, but he doesn’t budge.

“What if we start on a case by case sort of basis?” Eric extends his large hands, palm up, in a pleading gesture.

“Why do you need her?” Rafe demands.

Jonathan glances from Rafe to me. “Gray can explain all that when we meet.”

“If Gray wants me back, why didn’t he come himself?” I ask.

The two exchange a heavy look, and then Eric, ever the diplomat, says, “He doesn’t know we’re here.”

Rafe snorts, his posture relaxing.

“You can’t invite me back without Gray’s approval!”

Jonathan, looking more amused than I think the situation calls for, steps forward. “Gray wants you back—he never wanted you to leave. But he’s stubborn.”

Eric grins. “His exact words were, ‘If she wants to come back, she’ll have to crawl on her hands and knees. I’m not going after her.’”

“She doesn’t need *all* the details.” Jonathan gives his friend a withering look, and then he takes me by the arm, pulling me to the side of the room as if he’s going to let me in on a secret. “Recently, men have been disappearing in Redstone. They’ve all been married, all richer than sin. The only other thing they had in common is they’ve stayed in a mansion that claims to be haunted. Now the well-to-do and bored are flocking there in droves, eager to see the mansion for themselves, too stupid to realize something truly dangerous is going on. People are claiming ghosts, vampires, aliens—you get the point.”

Despite myself, my interest is piqued. “But there are no ghosts, vampires, or aliens. They aren’t real.”

“Exactly. The guild believes there’s an Aparian up to no good, and they’re sending us in.”

“So where do I come in?”

He holds up his finger, asking me to wait a moment while he digs out his phone. He ends up showing me a picture of a forty-something woman in a tan polyester, button-up shirt and a scowl under a hint of a girl ’stache.

“Um...?” I ask, frowning at the woman.

“The only men who end up missing are on vacation with their wives. The guild wants to send one of us in with *Linda* for a long weekend getaway, hoping we’ll be targeted.”

“But she’s old enough to be your mother.”

He makes a disgruntled noise and shoves the cell into his back pocket. “That’s why we need you.”

“Wait.” I hold up a hand between us. “Who’s playing the husband in this scenario?”

As Jonathan told me his story, Rafe and Eric slowly made their way over, so they’re close enough now to hear my question.

“Since the department suspects the men are being seduced and then led to their deaths, Gray is out of the picture,” Eric says. “We all know how his willpower is when it comes to women who want to jump him.”

A low noise escapes me—not dissimilar to one of Charles’s angry hisses.

“And I can’t read magic,” Eric finishes.

That leaves Jonathan. Relaxing, I turn to the Griffon and raise a brow. “Why, Jonathan, is this your way of proposing?”

A slow, delicious smile spreads across his face, making me laugh. “That depends on your answer. What do you say? Want to marry me for a weekend?”

“It’s not safe,” Rafe says, cutting me off before I can answer. “She’s not going.”

Jonathan and Eric both give Rafe questioning looks.

“I *am* going.” In fact, I made up my mind this very moment. Call me as stupid as a human, but I want to see this haunted mansion myself. And let’s face it—Rafe is making me crazy. We could use a little break from each other. “I’ll be with the team. They’ll watch out for me.”

“Like they watched out for you with the pixie?” Rafe crosses his arms, challenging me.

Jonathan clears his throat. “I hate to break it to you, but both times Trent stole Madeline, she was in your care.”

Rafe narrows his eyes, looking like a serpent before it attacks. I laugh a

little, a nervous sound, and step between them. Then I look at Rafe. “I’m bored to death—and my only chance at getting the apprenticeship I want went up in smoke the moment I opened the wedding invitation. We haven’t seen any sign of Trent since he kidnapped me. He’s probably moved on.”

The three knights don’t look convinced of that.

“You can’t keep me here forever,” I press, lowering my voice a little. “It’s all right if I leave the house occasionally.”

Looking confused and more than a little concerned, Jonathan and Eric’s faces go carefully blank. They eye Rafe, wondering what exactly is going on here.

“You’re not going, and that’s final,” Rafe says as if it’s the end of the conversation.

I meet his eyes, and the two of us stare at each other in a silent standoff. One I fully intend to win.

“I’M GLAD YOU’RE BACK,” Eric says as we follow a waitress to the table Gray is holding for us.

I start to say something, but Jonathan cuts me off. “Yes, we know. Just this one time. The point is we’re wearing you down.”

I don’t bother to answer because I’ve spotted Gray at a far booth, where he’s looking at his phone. His face is solemn enough you might think he’s decoding a bomb at the very center of the Earth’s core, but I suspect he’s playing games.

He looks up, catching me staring at him, and our eyes meet. It’s a tense few seconds, but it’s ended quickly because I run into a table.

Yep.

Super smooth, Madeline.

Good thing Rafe’s not here—he’d probably decide the table must die for being in my way and light it on fire.

In fact, Jonathan had to swear on his life *and* the life of his car that the team would keep me safe before Rafe finally agreed to let me leave the house without him. I best keep myself out of trouble, or Jonathan’s beloved Corvette is toast.

“*Madeline,*” Gray says when we reach the table.

I stare at him, willing my chaotic emotions to calm. He looks good, just as I remember him. “*Gray.*”

We continue our stare-off as Jonathan slides out my chair and gently pushes me onto it. “Yes, I think we all know each other’s names. I’m Jonathan; that’s Eric. We get the picture.”

I shoot him a look, but the Griffon only smiles as he settles in next to me.

Gray folds his hands on the table in a businesslike fashion. “I understand you would like to rejoin the team?”

And suddenly, with him acting all self-important, I can see the resemblance between him and Finn—which makes me want to stab him with my heel. A bit graphic, I know. Sometimes that whole Obsidian magic makes more sense.

“Really?” I ask sweetly. “The way I understand it, the team *needs me* and would like me to come back. Maybe you need to ask nicely.”

“The team never abandoned you, princess.” Gray leans forward, his expression growing hard. “You did that all on your own. I’m not going to fawn over you because you’ve decided you want to play again.”

“Who’s up for fried okra?” Jonathan says loudly. “It’s a little slimy, but if you use enough ranch dressing, it’s not too bad.”

I lean forward, matching Gray’s stance. “I was never a real part of this team, and you know it.”

“You could have been!”

“Finn—”

Gray stands suddenly, sending the salt and pepper shaker flying along with a dessert menu. “I don’t care what my moron brother did! We accepted you, and you ran off with Rafe. And what the heck, Madeline? You answer to him now? You ask permission to even breathe? Jonathan told me what’s going on, and it’s twisted.”

Silence.

Complete and total silence.

And not just from our table—oh no. From the entire restaurant. Every eye is on Gray, and once they’re done looking at him, they look at *me*.

“*Awkward,*” Eric drawls under his breath.

Slowly, Gray sits.

“So is that a yes for the fried okra then?” Jonathan asks after several long, tense moments.

Eric snorts, but Gray shakes his head like this won’t work.

“I’m sorry,” I say softly, the words so quiet I’m not sure anyone at the table but the Wolf with heightened hearing will make them out. “I thought you would be relieved when I left.”

“We weren’t,” he says.

A few moments pass, and then Jonathan lets out a heavy sigh, sets his menu aside, and turns to me. “I hate to say it, but Gray’s right. You can’t just parade into our lives, wearing those short little skirts and crazy high heels, taking up far too much time in the bathroom, using *my* shampoo—”

“I did *not* use your—”

“And then just up and leave us,” Jonathan continues, ignoring me completely. “We went through some serious Madeline withdrawals.”

“I had to punch a troll,” Eric says, joining the conversation, *scowling* at me. “With my hand. Like a brute.”

Unable to help myself, I crack a smile.

Jonathan glances between Gray and me. “Now that we’ve got that out of the way, can the two of you please shut up and get along? Because I do not want to be married to Linda.”

Eric and Gray both shudder as if the prospect isn’t a pretty one.

After a moment, I nod. Gray joins me.

“Good,” Jonathan says, nodding as well. “Now let’s talk haunted mansions.”

5

“EXCITED?” Jonathan asks, probably half exasperated that I won’t sit still.

It’s Wednesday afternoon, and we’re on our way to Redstone, Colorado in the back of a flashy red, four-door Porsche crossover. Our driver—aka Eric—is up front, flying on the corners, driving the car like he stole it.

But we didn’t steal it. We borrowed it from Gray’s boss, and we were told that if we so much as get a scratch on it, we’ll lose our pay for a year. I think he was joking. Mostly.

A few yellow and red leaves cling to the aspens and oak brush, but most of the deciduous plants are bare. We missed the fall colors by a few weekends. Now it’s early October, and the leaves that lit the mountainside are littering the ground.

“I am excited,” I readily admit.

I looked up the mansion earlier in the week, browsing through various social media sites for pictures, and I’m in love. It’s a massive, sprawling structure, white and grand, with cedar beams and rustic Colorado accents. And it’s only a mere twenty-five *thousand* for a long weekend.

The Knights’ Guild is coughing up a lot of money to send us in—money they intend to get back when we catch the nefarious Aparian behind the disappearances.

We pass the historic coke ovens, a waterfall, and the Redstone castle. We turn off the main road, take several twisting backroads, and fifteen minutes later, we park in front of a towering black metal gate with a call box. The lane beyond is surrounded by trees and brush, and it’s impossible to see where it leads.

Eric leans out the window, pushing the button with the confidence of a

man who's been a professional driver his entire adult life and not all of four hours.

I roll down the window as we wait. The mountains smell like campfire smoke and fresh air, and even though the sky is a perfect canvas of blue, there's a touch of winter on the breeze.

"Mr. and Mrs. Kingman," Eric announces when the man on the other side of the speaker asks who's calling.

After a moment, a lock clicks, and the gate very slowly rolls open.

"Remember," Jonathan says, leaning close. "You're very rich and very important."

"Please," I scoff. "I *am* very rich and important."

He grins. "That's right. So am I."

I shake my head, laughing under my breath. What Jonathan lacks in connections and titles, he makes up in charm.

Eric drives through the gates, going much slower than before. Old-fashioned streetlights line the drive, the kind with black poles and lantern-style tops. Since it's the middle of the afternoon, they're off now, but I imagine they're impressive in the evening.

After several minutes, the trees open, revealing the mansion on a slight rise in the landscape. It's just as statuesque and grand as it looks in the pictures, with a bronze elk statue out front and a fountain that's down for the season. The lane leads to a circular drive where another guest has just arrived.

"I feel like we're in a game of Clue," I whisper to Jonathan. "I want to be Miss Scarlet."

He laughs as Eric parks behind an expensive-looking foreign car in front of us. It's purple, quite shiny, and I have no idea what it is.

A woman steps out of the driver's seat. Her platinum hair is up in a chignon, and her clothes scream money. I admire her purse, wondering how she already got her hands on it. It's not supposed to come out for another week.

She pulls off her dark glasses, scanning the mansion and surrounding area. As if pleased, a small smile plays at her somewhat thin lips. A man comes down the grand steps to greet her, someone equally as posh as she. In greeting, he presses her against the side of the car, kissing her in a way that has me blushing.

What a welcome.

When the two come up for air, the man glances at our car and then

quickly dismisses us. The pair walks around the side of the mansion, leaving the purple car in the staff's care.

I watch them from behind the privacy of the darkly tinted windows as Jonathan and I wait for Eric to open our doors. They disappear as Eric offers his hand to assist me from my seat.

Once we're out, Eric collects Charles's carrier from its strapped-in position in the passenger seat and then follows us to the door. We walk up several wide, stained and stamped concrete steps. There are massive pots along the edges of the walk, each containing miniature pine trees, only four or so feet high, and fall-blooming chrysanthemums.

Several pumpkins—most large but one humongous—sit in the generous entry, surrounded by a few bales of straw and a designer, handcrafted scarecrow. To complete the fall ensemble, tall black lanterns flank each step, all with thick, tall candles, ready for evening.

All in all, it's just about the coolest place to spend a weekend in October.

Eric frowns as he scans the covered entry. "There's no doorbell."

Jonathan nudges him out of the way and picks up the huge brass knocker secured to the door. He then knocks several times.

"Do you think they'll hear—" Eric's words die abruptly when a young woman answers the door. She's around my age, extremely pretty with long blond hair that falls in soft curls to her waist, and big blue eyes framed with thick black eyelashes. She wears a long cardigan sweater over a tight white tank that dips low enough to show off a generous helping of cleavage.

Her eyes flutter over Eric, and then they fall on Jonathan.

"You must be here for the weekend," she says, her voice soft and wispy.

The men stare at her, mouths slightly agape, likely because the poor dear is about to fall right out of her top.

I internally roll my eyes and then step forward, extending my hand. "That's right. I'm Mrs. Kingman."

It's a weird thing to say, especially since we decided to go with Jonathan's actual last name.

The girl takes my hand, holding it softly for a brief moment before she lets it go. "I'm Olivia. Welcome to my home."

"Your home?" I ask, wondering how she could own all of this at such a young age.

She smiles. "Well, my parents' technically."

We walk inside a foyer and are immediately greeted with two sweeping

staircases, one on each side of the room, that lead up to the balcony-style second level. Directly ahead, the entry opens into a great room, like a massive hall, and a fire crackles in a ceiling-height granite fireplace.

There are more autumnal touches about—wreaths of colored leaves, pumpkins, and big, fat, orange pillar candles atop black candelabras.

Despite the obvious holiday spirit, everything is terribly tasteful—no tacky fake spiderwebs or plastic, gruesome skeleton figurines to be seen. A wedding party could march through the doors this very minute and have a venue that dreams are made of.

Not that I'm thinking about weddings. No, not with Finn marrying Maisy and me posing as Jonathan's wife for the weekend.

It's a weird thing. I always figured I'd marry, and I assumed it would work out seamlessly. I went to one of our exclusive Aparian academies in Denver, graduated at eighteen, finished the next four years at Briarwood School for Young Women, and then expected the perfect apprenticeship and a marriage offer within a year. In fact, I thought I'd already be in a serious relationship by the time I graduated from Briarwood.

Instead, I have a curmudgeonly hairless cat and an overprotective knight who's making me too crazy to picture marital bliss. Something is wrong with this picture.

"Your room is on the third floor," Olivia says, leading us up the staircase on the left. "Breakfast is served in the sunroom from seven to nine. We set out a variety of cold cuts and salads for lunch, and then dinner is in the dining room at promptly six-thirty."

"When do we retire for brandy?" Jonathan asks, earning a good nudge in the ribs from yours truly.

Olivia doesn't realize he's joking and turns back, smiling at him over her shoulder. "Father has an assortment of fine liquor in his study, and he welcomes guests to join him in the evenings."

We reach a room at the very back of the hall, and Olivia produces a key out of thin air. She certainly doesn't have pockets in that skintight outfit, and I'm pretty sure Eric and Jonathan would have passed out if she'd pulled it from her bra, so I have no idea where it came from. Is the girl a Fox? Have we found the culprit already? I hope not. I'm rather looking forward to my weekend in this not-so-spooky mansion.

Olivia hands me the key. "If you need anything, please let us know. You'll recognize the staff by their green polo shirts." Her eyes flit to

Jonathan. “Or you can find me.”

My faux husband wraps an arm around my shoulder and affectionately tugs me to his side. “Thank you for making my wife and me feel so welcome.”

She gives him an airy, vacant smile, nods at Eric, and then drifts down the stairs, probably off to meet the next guest.

Without bothering with the key, I let my magic drift into the lock, feel the pins and the intricate way they work together, and then open the mechanism.

“Impressive,” Jonathan says from beside me.

“I figure I should practice every chance I get.”

If I’ve learned anything from Gray, it’s that I’m terrible at controlling the stealth magic I was born with. I need to learn to be in command of it—just to make sure it doesn’t get away from me at some point.

I have a secret fear—probably a ridiculous one—that I’m going to open the thresholds to Aparia completely by accident.

Our room is opulent, with a massive king-sized bed built of logs that have been scraped clean of their bark. Twinkle lights wrap the upper posts, and a few more fall touches dot the room—a wreath here, a candle there.

“Was the girl a Fox?” I ask Jonathan as soon as Eric closes the door behind us.

He shakes his head. “Human.”

“Are you sure?” I was certain I felt something off about her. “Maybe she wears a medallion like Trent?”

“Those are terribly rare,” Jonathan says. “I’ve never even seen one, and Trent’s the only person I’ve heard of actually possessing one. The chance of her wearing one as well is slim to none.”

Then we’ll just have to keep looking.

“I’m going down for your luggage,” Eric announces like the good chauffeur/bellboy/Bunny he is. “And then I’ll head to the staff quarters.”

That’s right—staff quarters. The people who visit this place are so ridiculously rich, they can afford to put up a portion of their employees as well. Of course, they don’t sleep in the main house—let’s not be silly. They’re in the guest house out back.

This is, of course, ideal for us. Gray will arrive later, posing as Jonathan’s personal assistant. I probably could have thought of an excuse for Rafe to come too, but let’s face it—I needed a break from my dark knight.

“Keep an eye out for women trying to seduce you,” Jonathan says to Eric.

The Bunny grins as he heads for the door. “It’s my number one priority in life.”

He closes the door behind him, and I wander the room, looking everything over. It’s not like a hotel room, all sterile and impersonal. There’s character here—knickknacks, a full bookcase, and a basket of goodies on a sideboard. I browse the contents, intrigued. There are fancy hot chocolate mixes, a bakery box of fresh pumpkin scones, herbal tea in varieties that might make even a diehard coffee drinker like myself give them a try, and a dozen pods of dark roast for the Keurig that sits on a built-in marble shelf to the side of the room.

“Nice,” Jonathan says as he spots the balcony doors. He steps outside, admiring the view of the mountains.

“It’s beautiful here,” I say as I join him, my voice a touch wistful.

The Griffon glances over, his brow wrinkling. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” Well, not really. I just wish I was here for pleasure instead of work.

I close my eyes for a moment, enjoying the way the cool breeze toys with my hair.

“Can I ask you something personal?” Jonathan says after a moment, turning himself so he’s leaning against the rail, looking at me.

“You normally don’t bother asking for permission.”

“Why do you put up with that overprotective thing Rafe has going? Not that I don’t understand why he’s that way, after Nicole, but still. I didn’t peg you for that kind of girl.”

Wondering if it would be easier to let Jonathan think my knight and I are together, I study him for several seconds. He’ll eventually learn the truth, and I don’t want to lie. Being a Griffon, he could see right through it anyway. “Rafe and I aren’t dating.”

Now he looks confused.

“We’re just friends,” I add.

That is true, at least I hope it is. Yes, I needed a break. Yes, Rafe’s smothering. But I’m grateful to have him. I never realized how few people I have in my life that I can really rely on until Finn and Maisy betrayed me.

Now that all my casual school acquaintances are busy with their apprenticeships, and my parents are always gone, all I really have is Lillian and Rafe.

And Jonathan, Eric, and Gray a little voice in the back of my head says.

Maybe I have them too. Well, perhaps not Gray.

Probably not Gray.

“Well, that’s a relief.” He turns back to the mountains and grins. “I wondered if he was going to murder me for existing this close to you for an entire weekend.”

With anyone else, I might be nervous about sharing this grand room, might worry I’d let myself get carried away. But Jonathan feels safe. He has from the very beginning.

True, he’s the very definition of a player. But not with me. I’m on the team, and that’s too important to him—he said so himself after the pixie tried to kidnap me the first time. Granted, he had his hands on my bare legs at the time, and he had just read my mind as I was thinking how hot he is...but the moment wasn’t nearly as tawdry as it sounds.

I rock to the side, nudging him in a friendly way. With my heels, he’s only a few inches taller. “I trust you.”

He turns his chocolate eyes on me, studying me so intently I almost step back. I give him a quizzical frown, wondering why he suddenly looks so serious.

I don’t like it.

“Good,” he finally says. “Then answer me something else. Why does your magic feel identical to Rafe’s? I’ve been around my share of Foxes—the ribbons of magic look gray. Wolves are silver. But you and Rafe are hard to peg—you’re something right in between. It’s why I had so much trouble the first day we met, and why it’s so interesting that the two of you have formed such a strange bond. It’s like you know something the rest of us don’t.”

Darn that Griffon intuition.

“You got me,” I say lightly. “I’m secretly queen of the Foxes, and Rafe is my knight.” I lean closer and whisper, “We’re expected to take over the world.”

Jonathan pauses, his eyes narrowing. “Say that again.”

I watch him for several beats before I laugh, hoping to mask the terror that spikes my veins. With the way he’s looking at me, it’s almost as if...

And then it hits me—he read the truth in words that should have looked like a lie. It’s nearly impossible to straight up deceive a Griffon. I should have known better.

My whole life, I’ve hidden my magic type. This is no different, but I let down my guard. I should have been far more careful.

It might not matter though, because a dark shape grabs my attention. It lingers near the edge of the trees, staying in the shadows, waiting for nightfall.

Waiting to come to *me*.

If it doesn't disappear on its own, Jonathan's going to figure out what I am anyway.

Jonathan looks back, into the forest, following my eyes. "What is it?"

I have two seconds to figure out how to distract him. So I do something ridiculous—something really, *really* stupid. I grab his head, pull him back to me, and then I lean forward and press my lips to his.

And maybe it's because I haven't been kissed in months, or maybe it's because Jonathan is really freaking hot, but I forget the monster in the woods, and my body reacts in a way I don't expect. My stomach flutters; my chest grows tight and warm. It's like I'm back in tenth grade, kissing a boy for the very first time.

However, the kiss must have the opposite effect on Jonathan because he's gone completely still. He's warm against me, but his hands don't find my sides, and his lips don't move under mine.

What have I done? I think belatedly, my mouth still pressed to his.

Jonathan is my friend. The last thing I want to do is ruin it, especially when I have so few people who care about me. At the same time, what does it say when the man who sleeps with anything that moves doesn't want me?

I break the kiss, pulling back, feeling so completely ridiculous my eyes start to sting. The only good thing is that Jonathan is definitely not paying attention to the shadow at the edge of the forest.

The knight studies me, his brows drawn together, his eyes impossible to read. After a moment, he presses his lips together as if processing the kiss.

Finally, he says, "You honestly haven't been kissed in months? What *have* you been doing with Rafe?"

Only now does it fully hit me that you have to touch to kiss—obviously. But that means Jonathan just had access to my thoughts. My really embarrassing, ridiculously needy thoughts.

Abruptly, I turn to go inside, feeling like an idiot. Jonathan pulls me back. He touches my arm, which is safely covered by my sleeve.

I yank against him, horrified by my rash behavior. "I told you. Rafe and I aren't together. *Now let me go.*"

But he doesn't let me go. He turns me around and tucks me against his

chest, wrapping his arms around my back in a way that's just a little too sweet.

"I'm sorry," he murmurs. "It's not right I can hear your thoughts—and I swear I don't do it on purpose. But I can even things up a bit if you want."

My cheek is against his shoulder, and his hands are looped around my back, clasped loosely.

When I don't answer, he continues, "My thoughts went a little something like this: *Oh my gosh, Madeline's kissing me—*"

"You did not think 'Oh my gosh,'" I mumble against his shirt.

"Shhh. I'm PG-ing it up for you. I was actually thinking something that shouldn't be uttered in front of a lady."

I smile against his shirt.

"Okay, where was I?" He pulls me a tiny bit closer. "Oh, right. *Oh my gosh, Madeline's kissing me. Then, Madeline has the softest lips, and she smells like an upscale lingerie store.* That's when I started thinking about you in lingerie—pink and lacy, if you must know. Very tasteful...mostly."

"You're getting distracted."

He laughs, and I can hear his grin. "Anyway, that led to thinking about Rafe killing me slowly because *I imagined you in lingerie.* Then my thoughts got interrupted because, hello, *Madeline thinks I'm hot.* I mused on that for a while, and then you got to the part where you started to panic, where you were worried that you ruined our friendship. Where you admitted you're lonely."

He pauses long enough, I lift my head to meet his eyes. His are warm, kind, inviting. Then his smile turns wry. "And *then* you had to go and think that I sleep with 'anything that moves' and what it says about you if I won't even kiss you back."

I look down, unable to keep the eye contact.

"But I'll tell you what it says," he continues, his voice a touch softer. "It says you're not *anything*. You're Madeline—you're special. You're my friend. And I was so dumbfounded, I swear my brain up and short-circuited. About the time I was reviving, you stepped away."

I peer up at him. "I've never thought about it, but how do you handle your magic? How can you bear to hear a person's thoughts every time you get... close?"

A swift grin crosses his face, one that I find intriguing. There's a secret behind it, one I very much want him to let me in on.

“I have my ways,” he says. “I’ll tell you another day.”

He unclasps his hands, letting me step back. I give him a smile that’s still a little embarrassed around the edges and then move toward the room.

“Not so fast, sweetheart.” He catches me by the wrist, gently tugging me back. “We still need to discuss this monster in the woods business and why you felt the need to kiss me so I wouldn’t notice it.”

6

OH PEACHY. Guess he heard that too.

The way I look at it, I have three options. I can try to lie to Jonathan, which won't work. I can use my magic on him, which is wrong. Or I can tell him the truth.

Of course, there's always the fourth option: kiss him again. Since that probably won't work either, I just stare at him for a ridiculously long time, trying to figure out what to do.

"Come on," I end up saying, turning back to the room and pulling him with me. "I'll just show you."

He follows without question, though he pauses before the door. "Just a minute."

At some point, Eric must have returned with our luggage because it's neatly stacked by the bed, and Jonathan heads to it now. Hopefully Eric didn't see me basically attack Jonathan on the balcony—I'll never hear the end of it. Just the thought makes my cheeks go hot.

As I wait, Jonathan goes to his suitcase, rifles through it, and produces a dagger much like Rafe's. He belts on a sheath, slides the blade into it, and then pulls a jacket on to hide it. When he walks back, he offers me my sparkly stun gun.

"Thank you," I murmur, somehow touched that he remembered. Then I give the slight bulge under his jacket a pointed look. "You carry a dagger too? I thought that was Rafe's thing."

Grinning, Jonathan pulls out the blade and offers it to me. "No, it's a Knights' Guild thing. We don't carry swords anymore, but we all receive a dagger when we graduate from the academy and are sworn into the guild.

You'd be surprised how often they come in useful."

Maybe not as surprised as he might think since I've seen Rafe kill a man with one.

Jonathan's dagger is heavier than it looks. His position in the guild, royal knight marshal, is engraved in the shiny, silver blade, along with his full name.

As I hand it back to him, I ask, "Do you think Aparia has progressed like we have here? Do you think they have technology like ours?"

Jonathan returns the dagger to its sheath. "I have no idea, honestly. It's been a hundred years. It's impossible to know how different things are."

Especially since most of the darkness was closed on that side. I think about that now, wonder about the people there. We protected the humans when we closed the thresholds, and our families here as well, but what about the rest of the Aparians? What became of them?

We walk through the opulent house, greeting a few guests as we go. Hoping we're free to explore the grounds, I lead Jonathan outside, toward the back property, to the spot where I saw the shadow.

I'm not sure what kind of monster it is this time. It was too large to be a winged cat, too small to be a gargoyle. Hopefully it's gone, and I can laugh it off as a figment of my imagination.

But as we draw closer, I see the brush move. I can almost feel the beast's eagerness.

"Stay back," I say to Jonathan. "Keep behind me."

"You're leading me into the dark woods, looking for some sort of *monster*, and you think I'm going to hide behind you?"

I shake my head, knowing he won't, and continue into the safety of the trees. I'm hoping to get far enough in that no one from the house will be able to see what we're up to. Once I find a spot that should be safe, I set my hands on my hips and turn toward the thick brush. "Show yourself," I command, using my persuasion.

Immediately, the bush rustles.

Jonathan tenses. "What the—"

"Shhh," I whisper, accidentally throwing magic into it, rendering Jonathan speechless.

First, one gnarled foot emerges and then another. Long toenails curl over fat, wrinkled toes, scraping the leaf-littered ground.

The goblin's hairless, much like Charles, but he's gray instead of pink,

and there are rough, calloused patches of white, flaking skin on his joints. He stands three-foot tall, hunched over, and his knuckles nearly drag the ground.

Drool drips from his open lips, and his teeth are yellowed and decaying. He also emits a particularly unpleasant fragrance...something like old meat, left in a dumpster, rotting in the sun for a week or two.

When he sees Jonathan, he lets out a loud, phlegmy roar. The knight's already drawing his dagger, trying to force me back, but I hold my ground.

"Leave us," I say to the goblin, not the slightest bit worried. I've dealt with his kind before. "Go back to the dark depths where you make your home. Harm no one on your way."

The creature falls to his belly, far more pliant than the winged cats I most often deal with, and crawls back into the brush. The whole thing takes less than a minute. It's a bit anticlimactic actually.

I turn to Jonathan. He stands, mouth open, dagger at the ready, looking completely stupefied.

"They usually wait until dark, but they always leave," I tell him.

When the Griffon doesn't say anything, I cringe and lift the magic I accidentally used on him. "You can talk now. Sorry about that—I didn't mean to use a charm on you."

"What did you do?" he demands.

"I told it to go home."

"How?"

"With my magic."

The gobsmacked man stares at me, mouth working but no words coming out.

"You can't tell anyone," I say, stepping forward. "Please, Jonathan."

"*What are you?*"

I could take offense to that, but I know he really means what *faction*. Because it's obvious I have unique abilities not associated with your average Fox.

I launch into the story of Trent kidnapping me, of Curtis luring in the gargoyles to test me. Jonathan's naturally tan skin goes pale when I get to the part where Curtis explained my lineage.

He takes a step back. "You're the Obsidian Queen."

His tone is too even, the words flat and lifeless. He apparently knows what it means. In fact, the Griffon probably knows more than I do.

I move forward, needing him to understand that I'm still *me*. "I didn't

know, Jonathan. I had no idea.”

The Griffon holds up a hand, demanding I stay back while he thinks. “You’re supposed to be dead. When I attended the Knights’ Guild Academy, we learned the Obsidian Queen was executed when she was an infant.”

“Well, she *wasn’t*,” I hiss, a little ill at hearing the words. When he says it that bluntly, it makes me wonder if the Royal Guild is any better than the rogue members of the Entitled. Who murders babies? “She was secretly given to Lord and Lady Bennet, and they raised her as their own.”

“Do they know?” Jonathan demands.

I shake my head. “No. They thought I was just a Fox, just the daughter of thieves who didn’t want me.”

“*Madeline*.” The word is filled with anguish, like he cannot connect me to the person I claim to be. Like I’ve deceived him and crushed his heart.

I dare another step forward, though I’d be lying if I said I’m not a tiny bit worried he’s going to lunge at me with his dagger and finish a job that should have been completed twenty-two years ago. “Look at me.”

He does, but his eyes are too wide, and his nostrils flare. I can’t tell if the emotion on his face is fear or anger.

“It’s my choice what I do with my magic. I don’t *want* to be evil.” I take another step, eying his dagger. “You know I’m telling the truth. You can read it when I lie.”

“Let me touch you,” he says after a moment, and thank goodness, he sheathes his blade and holds out his hand.

And though I’m scared, though it terrifies me when he gets in my head, I step forward and press my palm to his.

I pull up memories—the night on the California coast in the house crawling with gargoyles. I remember the fear, the confusion when my magic successfully sent them away. I show him Curtis and then the monsters appearing at random, starting with the winged feline. And though I’m careful to keep Rafe out of my thoughts, I know the knight’s there. I know Jonathan sees him.

After several long, painful minutes—Jonathan suddenly tugs me against his chest, hugging me so hard it hurts. “They’ll kill you,” he whispers into my hair. “If the Guild finds out who you are, they’ll hunt you—they’ll make *us* hunt you.”

“Please,” I say, though that’s all I manage.

Please don’t tell them.

“Does Finn *know*?”

I shake my head. “In my file, it only says I’m a Fox.”

“Rafe,” he murmurs.

“He has done nothing but protect me. Don’t turn on him—he’s your friend.”

Jonathan clutches me closer. “He’s one of them.”

“He’s not. He’s *mine*.”

I always knew in the back of my mind that the Griffon would be the one to learn the truth first. Maybe that’s the real reason Rafe didn’t want me to come.

Again, I look up, meeting Jonathan’s eyes. “You know, aside from having to send away monsters every once in a while, my life isn’t all that different.”

He shakes his head, a grim smile on his face. “What am I going to do with you?”

I watch him for several seconds. I can trust him. I know I can.

Finally, I say, “Pretend to be my husband and take me back to our room so I can get ready for dinner in the haunted mansion?”

The Griffon studies me for a bit longer, and then he snorts. “I suppose that’s as good an idea as any.”

JONATHAN WAS INFORMED when he booked our visit that dinners in the mansion are formal, a little fact that worried me. How were we supposed to ever make it on time if Jonathan and I were fighting over the bathroom?

But so far, we’re doing all right. I fixed my hair and then came into the bedroom area to do my makeup in front of the standing mirror in the corner.

I glance at the closed door. Jonathan’s been in there forever, preening like the pretty boy he is. But that’s all right because it’s given me plenty of time to stress over dresses.

Three lie in front of me on the bed.

Option One is short and red.

Option Two is emerald, long, and curve-hugging, with an off-center front slit that travels my thigh.

Option Three is the shortest of the three, black and lacy.

The last of my evening attire is hanging in the wardrobe, waiting for

Saturday night's masquerade ball. The gown the guild commissioned for the event is stunning, and I can't wait to wear it. If I'm lucky, they'll let me keep it.

"Don't come out yet," I holler as Jonathan opens the bathroom door.

Quickly, I shimmy into the short dress that's the color of red roses. It's satin, comes to mid-thigh, dips scandalously low in the front, and is strapless. I step into a pair of tall black stilettos and say, "Coast is clear."

I'm just looking over my makeup and hair in the mirror when Jonathan walks from the bathroom.

And...yum.

There's really no other way to describe the deliciousness that is Jonathan all dressed up. I watch him in the mirror's reflection, a smile playing at my lips. The Griffon's tweaking a cufflink, not paying me any attention. He's in a tux that fits just right. His dark, thick hair is tamed, and the bright white shirt complements the rich warmth of his skin. He wears the finery like it's a second skin.

We had formal evenings at Briarwood, but none of my dates cleaned up as nicely as the Griffon behind me.

He finally looks my way, and our gazes lock in the mirror. His eyebrows raise ever so slightly as he pulls his eyes away, letting them sweep over me. Unable to hold back a grin, I turn to face him.

Hello.

He looks even better in the flesh.

"Don't you look handsome," I say lightly, toying with one of my chandelier earrings, pretending to straighten it.

His eyes drop again, taking in the front half of me, his gaze darkening with appreciation. "Same to you."

"I look handsome?" I tease, thankful that no matter how good he looks, it's just Jonathan, playboy extraordinaire, my teammate. The man who didn't kiss me back.

Safe, my mind randomly supplies.

He's not condescending like Gray or smothering like Rafe. He's comfortable, easy, reliable.

And I don't plan to ruin that. Sure, if I played my cards right, he might take me to bed. But then I'd hate myself. And him.

"No, not handsome—beautiful," he says, stepping forward. "Tempting even." A smile tugs at his lips as he slowly drops his eyes to my feet. "And

what are the narrow straps around your ankles?”

I look down. “They’re part of the shoes.”

“I like them.”

“Linda probably has a pair just like these.” I extend my foot, giving him a better view. “If you’d just given her a chance, she might have worn them for you.”

He flashes a grin that’s nothing short of wolfish. “I wouldn’t be having these thoughts if Linda were here instead of you.”

It’s just banter—it’s what we do. But for one fleeting moment, my stomach clenches, confusing me.

“What do you say we skip dinner and stay in for the night?” he asks, and this time, I’m sure he’s only playing.

“I don’t believe the guild would like that.”

Jonathan hands me the black clutch on the dresser. “Then let’s go. I’d rather show you off anyway.”

We meet a few other guests in the hall, and we make small talk as we head downstairs, toward the dining room. As we draw near, strains from a violin fill the air, sweet and subtle. The staff has changed for the evening, forgoing their polo shirts for white button-ups and black slacks. A man opens the door for us, bidding us a good evening.

“I feel like we’re in a Fred Astaire movie,” I whisper to Jonathan.

He leans close, giving my dress a pointed look. “I thought it was a game of Clue, Miss Scarlet.”

“I changed my mind.”

To my surprise, an actual violinist stands in the corner, creating the music I assumed was coming through well-hidden speakers.

The woman smiles when she sees us and nods a greeting without missing a note—an impressive feat. When I was eleven, my mother decided I should take viola lessons. I never managed to make the instrument sound like anything other than a tone-deaf cat, so I’m abundantly impressed.

Jonathan’s hand drops to the small of my back as he guides me into the room. The dining room is massive, and the table is miles long, bedecked with a burnt orange runner topped with autumn greenery, tiny gourds, and flickering candles galore.

“I want to live here,” I inform my temporary husband as we look for the place cards bearing our names.

When we find them, Jonathan pulls out my chair.

He takes his seat next to me, pulling off the carefree look of casual money like nobody's business. He drapes an arm around the back of my chair and leans back in his own, looking bored but approachable.

When he catches me looking at him, he smiles, and his eyes crinkle at the corners. "What?"

"You play the part well," I say quietly.

He leans close, probably looking like he's whispering sweet nothings in my ear to those around us. "It's easy when everyone's eyes are on you."

Suave as always.

But the truth is, yes, I'm getting a little attention—but so is every other woman here. They're all scrutinizing each other. The really snooty ones are ranking their competition. Each guest is adorned in diamonds, pearls, and designer everything. I know this world, and yet even I feel a little overwhelmed.

A couple stops behind the seats across from us. The man is in his forties, and his handsome features are marred only by a receding hairline. His wife or girlfriend or date for the weekend is gorgeous with creamy tanned skin and brunette hair pulled up in a sophisticated updo. She's twenty-five tops. Her dress is black and stretchy, showcases what I suspect is a wicked good breast enhancement, and is complemented by a generous helping of sparkle at her throat.

The man leans across the table, extending his hand. "Phillip Bridges, from the Cincinnati Bridges. We're in software."

Jonathan doesn't miss a beat. "Jonathan Kingman, of the Texas Kingmans."

Phillip studies him for a moment. "Oil?"

"Originally."

"Good industry—terrible taxes."

Jonathan sits back. "The bane of our existence. That's why my parents moved most of our assets to investments in the eighties."

The man flashes us a very white grin. "Risk takers. I like that."

Jonathan gives him an easy, almost bored shrug. "What's life if you don't take some chances?"

I do everything I can not to gape at him.

"I'm Misty." The woman gives me a little curtsy bop before she sits. She glances around, looking half scared to death. She might be mostly plastic, but my heart softens. She leans forward and lowers her voice. "My dad's a

telemarketer, and my mom cuts hair in a boutique in their backyard.”

Yep. I like her.

“It’s nice to meet you, Misty. I’m Madeline.”

She grins. “M and M—like the candy.”

Phillip shoots her a look, and she sits back, looking chastised.

What a *jerk*.

“I like the green ones the best,” I tell her, shooting Mr. Software a smile—the snooty kind I perfected at Briarwood. It works a little something like this: nose in the air, lips pursed and ever so slightly tilted, eyelashes lowered just the tiniest bit. If you walk away from finishing school and only learn one thing, it had better be The Snub.

The man smiles back, onto me, and then he looks back at Jonathan. “Did you and your girlfriend arrive today?”

“Wife,” I correct, getting a tiny zing of pleasure when I say the word.

Phillip nods toward a certain bare finger. “I’m sorry. I noticed you weren’t wearing a ring.”

Oh...not good. That’s sort of a big deal in these circles. How could we forget that?

Jonathan leans close, startling me by brushing a kiss on my cheek, just in front of my ear, as he simultaneously produces a band from his pocket. “That reminds me, sweetheart. You forgot this on the bathroom counter.”

I blink at the massive, princess cut diamond solitaire and interlocking wedding band. Momentarily mute, I hold my hand out, allowing him to slip it over my finger. Who knew such a thing could feel so intimate? Oh right, probably everyone who’s ever had a wedding.

Jonathan meets my gaze, amusement shining in his eyes.

“I’m so bad at that,” I say, just loud enough for the people around us to hear. “I swear you’re single-handedly keeping the diamond industry in business. What is this? The third? Fourth?”

He sets his hand on my bare shoulder, and his rich brown eyes meet mine before he leans in and kisses me like it’s the most natural thing in the world, lingering for one...two...three seconds. It’s a simple kiss—closed lips, soft and gentle. When he pulls back, he says, “Fifth, if I remember correctly. But who’s counting?”

My cheeks flush, still warm from the surprise. That’s twice in one day, but like he just said, *who’s counting?*

Since Jonathan’s hand is still on my shoulder, I try not to think of how

ridiculously warm the room has grown. I *certainly* don't entertain the idea of persuading all these people to leave so I can crawl onto his lap and make him kiss me again, see if I can find out for myself what all the hype is about.

"I heard that," he murmurs, his smirk positively wicked as he sits back in his own seat and removes his hand, giving me much-needed space, air, and privacy.

Misty widens her eyes, silently acknowledging that the exchange was so smoldering, we should be smoking. Thankfully, most of the guests and our hosts have arrived, and waiters begin wheeling in the first course on silver carts, allowing me to temporarily forget those brief moments when I forgot this was a ruse.

"Caviar, *Mrs. Kingman?*" a familiar voice says from behind me.

So startled I almost jump in my seat, I turn and find a certain Obsidian Knight standing next to me, brandishing a platter of fish eggs and crackers.

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“RAFE!” I say far too loudly, drawing attention from those around us—all of who are probably wondering why I’m addressing the help. And they’re judging me for it.

I clear my throat and put on a haughty look, purposely turning my eyes to his name tag. “That’s your name, correct?”

“Yes, *Madam*.”

“Well, Rafe, please tell the chef these look lovely.” I take one and pop it into my mouth, trying not to dwell on the fact that caviar is the nastiest thing known to man. Who eats fish eggs? *Who?*

He watches me, wry amusement in his sparkling blue eyes. “Certainly. Would you like another?”

“No.” I gag a little as I swallow the last little bit. “Thank you.”

My knight gives me a long, lingering look as he turns to the next guest, offering his tray. The woman is at least seventy years old, about two hundred pounds overweight, and she leers at Rafe like he’s on the menu. But he’s the picture of charm.

Jonathan leans close. “Did you know he was going to be here?”

“No.”

“Did he see all that?”

“Most likely.”

The Griffon shifts even closer. “Tell me the truth. Right now, do you think he’s plotting a way to murder me?”

“Also likely.”

He nods and turns to the waiter who’s taking orders for the bar. “Something potent. Anything will do.”

“So, Madeline,” Misty says, reminding me she and Phillip are still across from us. What do you make of all this ghost business?”

And that’s all it takes to draw nearly every eye in the room to her. There are about thirty of us, not including our esteemed hosts and their daughter. The trio sits at the head of the table, and they too look our way.

“Oh,” I say, glancing around, unsure how I feel about the sudden attention. “I suppose I don’t know.”

“I think it’s exciting,” she says, lowering her voice though she’s still loud enough for everyone to hear. She sets her hand on Phillip’s. “And a little spooky.”

He gives her an indulgent smile. “We’re here because Misty is fascinated with the supernatural.” He then turns to the man at the head of the table. “Rodger, can you tell us about the history of the house?”

Rodger Monroe, our host, is a distinguished gentleman who appears to be in his sixties. His hair is white and thick—likely the envy of every man over thirty-five at the table, and he wears eyeglasses with thin, black frames. He seems entirely at ease in his haunted house. “We bought the property after I sold my portion of the textiles business my grandfather started in the fifties. Building commenced in the summer of ‘93. It was a turbulent year. We had more thunderstorms than usual, and when the sky was clear, the temperatures were sweltering.”

Waiters make their rounds, silently distributing a green salad with toasted pumpkin seeds and a dressing that smells like heaven. But no one pays the food any attention. Our eyes are on our host.

The candles flicker on the table, lighting the faces around us. With a start, I realize someone’s lowered the lights, adding ambiance to Rodger’s story.

Clever. So very clever.

Seeming to enjoy the attention, our host continues, “While the construction team was putting up the gables, a storm moved in, fast and angry. Several members of the crew were on the roof, trying to set the beams in place before the storm hit. I’ll never forget the afternoon—the sky was dark like twilight, and the wind whipped about, pulling on our clothing, moisture slapping our skin. Just as the men were climbing down, lightning struck a man by the name of Andrew Pillert—the owner of the construction company. He fell three stories and broke his neck when he hit the ground. We have no idea if the lightning or the fall killed him.”

Even the violinist has ceased her music as we listen to the grim history

lesson.

“Just weeks later, a pallet of tile broke as a forklift operator lifted the load to the second story. Andrew’s brother, Henry, was under the pallet. He was crushed.”

Misty sucks in a soft gasp.

“And just four weeks later, when the house was finally complete, we found Nathan Pillert, the last remaining Pillert brother, hanging from the balcony in the entry.”

“He killed himself?” Misty gasps.

Rodger nods, his face grim.

A flash of lightning illuminates the room, and we all jump at the crash of thunder that immediately follows. Misty and several other women scream, and a stout man three seats down from Rodger knocks over a glass of water. Afterward, most of the guests laugh, though the sound is nervous and slightly high-pitched. I meet Rafe’s gaze across the room.

The sky was clear this afternoon. Surely a storm hasn’t moved in this quickly.

Rafe gives me a subtle nod and then slips through the door, toward the kitchen, off to investigate this sudden change in the weather.

There are Aparians—those of the Heron Faction, who can manipulate a very small dome of weather, no more than half a mile wide. It’s very possible one is in on the haunted ruse.

Perhaps it’s my Fox blood, but if people weren’t disappearing, I’d be impressed by the whole operation. It’s obviously very well-constructed and lucrative.

My eyes move to Olivia, who sits next to her father, looking just as spooked as the rest of us. She gives me a hesitant smile when she catches me looking, and then her eyes move to my faux husband when I pretend to look away.

Interesting.

After a long moment, she returns her attention to the man by her side, a younger gentleman by the name of John Callahan. His wife is on his right, but most of his focus seems to be on Olivia’s décolletage.

There’s another flash of lightning, and then the lights flicker. Misty looks up at the chandelier, pressing a hand to her throat. She appears terrified—and it’s obvious she’s loving every minute of it.

“We have a backup generator,” Rodger assures us, though he looks

slightly disconcerted himself, which I find interesting. He motions to his plate. “Please, eat. Everything is organic and seasonal, prepared by a classically trained chef from New York.”

The food is...exceptional. And the best part is it just keeps coming. The salad course is followed by a squash soup with a decorative drizzle of cream. The soup is followed by a delicate fish. The fish is followed by a lamb chop with green beans, and that’s finally followed by espresso and apple crostata.

Each course is ridiculously small, but since there are eight billion of them, I’m stuffed.

Occasionally, a flash of lightning or rumble of thunder will cause a pause in the conversation, but the topic never returns to the history of the house.

Rafe appears halfway through the dessert course, taking his place like he never disappeared. When he meets my eyes, he shakes his head. I’m not sure if that means it was a natural storm or if he didn’t catch the culprit behind it.

After the last of the plates have been cleared, Rodger stands. “Again, we’d like to thank you all for visiting us this weekend. We hope you have a pleasant stay. Anyone who’d like to join me in the study for refreshment is welcome. Also, you are free to leave the grounds at any time, but remember the gates close at ten, and they won’t open again until eight in the morning.”

The group then discusses a few of the events that are planned for the week—an outing to a local winery that offers hard cider in the fall, a trip to a brewery that specializes in organically made beer, and a wine tasting event. I’m sensing a trend.

By the time Jonathan and I leave the dining room, it’s after nine, and I’m feeling the bite of my stilettos. Misty and Phillip are just ahead of us, and she clings to his arm, teetering in her heels, just a bit too tipsy. There’s more thunder, and the lights flicker ominously. Misty squeals, pressing herself against Phillip as they make their way up the stairs.

It’s not hard to see why he agreed to the weekend in the “haunted” mansion.

Just behind us, the man who met the champagne-haired lady at the car earlier says, “Pretty sure he’s getting his money’s worth tonight.”

His name is Will, and his wife is Lindsey. They sat close to the Monroes. From what I picked up, they have old family money, with a smattering of businesses located across the country.

I frown at the crass comment but don’t bother to call him on it, especially when I was thinking nearly the same thing.

“Would you like to get the lock, or should I?” Jonathan asks when we reach our room.

“You go ahead. I’m exhausted.”

He opens the door with an actual metal key—a novelty—and then gestures for me to go ahead.

“Such a gentleman,” I say as I walk past him. I’m barely through the door when I bend over to undo the straps at my ankles and kick off my heels. I let out a happy moan as soon as my feet touch the rug.

“You’re going to make this as difficult on me as possible, aren’t you?” Jonathan teases from behind me, loosening the bow tie at his throat.

Straightening, toying with my bracelet, I watch him remove the black strip of fabric and then unfasten the top buttons of his tuxedo shirt. I probably stare a little too long because he gives me a questioning look that makes me snap out of my Jonathan trance.

“Want to start a fire?” he asks after he pulls off his jacket.

When I give him a blank look, he nods toward the fireplace in the corner of the room. It’s gas, but there’s still a hearth. On top of it lie a few throw pillows, a soft, cozy cashmere blanket, and—of course—another pumpkin.

So he means an actual fire. For a minute, I thought it was a metaphor.

It is a little chilly in the room, but I shake my head. This man hiatus is making me think weird thoughts. I have no idea what kind of trouble I’d get myself into with the help of soft, romantic light.

Maybe we should see.

I glance at Jonathan—safe, comfortable Jonathan—remembering the way his lips felt against mine.

No, that’s bad.

It’s just the deprivation talking. Three months is a long time—no wonder I impulsively kissed Jonathan earlier. I’m going through withdrawals.

“I don’t think we need one.” I walk toward the mirror, enjoying the way the soft rug feels on my bare feet, and begin to take out the pins that secure my half updo. “I’m not cold.”

Jonathan checks his phone for messages, removes his cuff links, and idly runs a hand through his perfect hair, mussing it up.

It’s insanely domestic in here.

Outside, gentle rain begins to fall on the balcony. It pats against the asphalt-shingled roof and tinkles on the iron railing. Again, lightning races across the distant mountains, but this time, the following thunder is more than

fifteen seconds away and nothing but a low rumble.

When I turn around, finished with my hair, I find Jonathan lighting candles.

“What are you doing?” I demand, my voice almost a squeak.

He raises an eyebrow, probably wondering why I sound like a cartoon chipmunk. “I thought we should light them in case the Monroes cut the power. I, personally, wouldn’t put it past them.”

Oh. That’s a good point. Or, rather, a good enough point.

“Then maybe we *should* turn the fireplace on?” I ask. “You know. For lighting purposes.”

Lighting purposes?

The Griffon gives me the strangest look—not unlike the one he bestowed on me when I used my stun gun on my first troll. “Sure.”

I flip the switch, and seconds later, the flames come to life, dancing around the ceramic logs.

Hello, ambiance.

“Are you on the couch tonight, or am I?” I ask, unable to look at him.

“You take the bed.”

I walk to the massive king-sized piece of furniture, feeling beyond weird. We shared a suite in Tahoe, but I had the room all to myself. And a door. And two other guys. (Which, again, sounds tawdry but wasn’t.)

Not that we’re entirely alone. Charles is here.

I glance at the cat, who’s currently crashed out on the chair in the corner. He stretches his back legs, snuffles, and then goes back to sleep.

Yep, that’s my chaperone.

“Are you going to sleep in your dress?” Jonathan asks when I move the pillows and pull back the covers.

Pausing, I look down at myself. “Uh. No?”

“You can have the bathroom first if you want,” he offers, smiling to himself, thoroughly enjoying my discomfort.

I stare at him.

A slow smirk builds on his lips, and he finally looks over. “Or you can change out here.”

There’s the rakish Jonathan I know and love—the one who reminds me as often as he can that he’s just as bad as Gray or Finn. Worse even.

And I absolutely refuse to get all stupid over a man who’s had as many women as I’ve had nail appointments.

“Not happening,” I say as I disappear into the bathroom, shutting the door firmly behind me.

“Are you sure you don’t need help with the zipper?” he calls. “Those can be tricky.”

“Good of you to offer.”

“No problem. In fact, any fastening you have trouble with, you just let me know.”

I laugh and change, feeling about a hundred times better. What the heck was I thinking? It’s *Jonathan*.

With that in mind, it barely phases me when I step out of the bathroom and find the knight shirtless, in flannel pajama pants that shouldn’t be sexy but so *are*. It might be his sculpted abs, defined pecs, and broad shoulders giving off the vibe. Or maybe not. Maybe it’s just the squirrels printed on the fabric.

Squirrels are sexy, right?

“It’s unfair, you know,” I say as I walk to the bed.

His eyes shine with humor when he takes in my full-length granny nightgown, complete with lace-trimmed collar. “What?”

“I have to lie in the sun for hours to get a tiny bit of color, and you don’t even have to try. You’re naturally tan.”

Growing more amused, he quirks an eyebrow. “I’m not sure if I’m offended or not.”

“I’m just saying you shouldn’t show it off when it makes us pale people feel bad about ourselves.”

“Is that your way of asking me to throw on a shirt because you’re all hot and bothered by the sight of my bare chest?”

“That is—”

A light knock sounds at the door, nearly scaring me to death.

Humor gone, Jonathan holds up a hand, commanding I stay put. He walks across the room and cracks the door, positioning himself in front of the opening.

“Madeline’s not answering her texts,” Rafe says from the hall.

Instantly, my muscles relax, and I melt into a sitting position on the bed. The knight comes walking in, and his eyes fall on me. He takes in my granny gown and grins—actually grins. But it only lasts a minute before the expression becomes a scowl. “Why aren’t you answering your phone? And why is Jonathan half dressed?” He turns his narrowed eyes on Jonathan,

taking in his pajama pants. Only now do I realize that several of the squirrels are holding signs that read, "Protect thine nuts."

"You should burn those," Rafe says.

Jonathan looks down. "Hey now. Eric gave me these for my birthday."

"What's with that man and squirrels?" I ask. Then I wrinkle my nose. "He gave you *pajamas* for your birthday? That's oddly personal."

Rafe gives me a pointed look.

Oh, right. My phone.

I frown, looking around, wondering what I did with it. "I think it's in my clutch. I didn't hear it."

"What's going on?" Jonathan asks, pulling on a T-shirt.

"Gray wants to know if you spotted any Aparians at dinner."

Oh...yes. The job. The reason we're here. We should probably discuss that.

Jonathan shakes his head. "No, no one."

"What about the storm?" I ask. "Did it look magically created?"

Rafe paces the room like an edgy panther. "Not that I could tell. It must have been a well-timed fluke. How many married men are here?"

"Ten," I say, proud of myself for paying attention earlier, "including Jonathan. Maybe eleven. I'm not sure about Phillip and Misty's relationship just yet."

Jonathan nods. "But only five, once again including myself, are in the age bracket of the men who have disappeared."

A total of four men have gone missing, and they were all between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five.

"There's a cop here as well," Rafe says.

That's news to me.

"Who?" Jonathan asks.

"His name is Will. He's supposed to be undercover, but the rumor mill is well-oiled in the staff quarters."

"He's with the elegant woman with the white-blond hair. Her name's Lindsey," I say, hoping to jog Jonathan's memory, surprised Will is the man with human law enforcement. "She arrived just before us, got out of the purple car."

And that does it. Jonathan nods. "He's what, in his late thirties? Just a little older than the men who have disappeared?"

"Probably." Rafe frowns, looking like he has more to tell us but doesn't

really want to. “Eric’s done some asking around, spoken with the regular staff. All the men who disappeared have been having marital issues—tiffs with their wives in public. That sort of thing.”

“Why would that matter?” Jonathan asks.

Rafe stops pacing. “Gray believes our mark is getting pleasure from destroying the relationships.”

I hug myself, wondering if we’ve gotten into something a little more sinister than I expected. “What if we’re wrong? What if the person behind the disappearances is human and all this is just an elaborate hoax?”

“It’s certainly something to keep in mind.”

There’s a lull in the conversation as we mull it over. Finally, Jonathan asks Rafe, “You’re actually speaking with Gray?”

“I’ll do whatever it takes to hurry this along so I can get Madeline out of here.”

This would probably be a good time to let Rafe know I’ve let Jonathan in on our little secret. But I really don’t want to...so I think it can wait.

Rafe starts for the door. He looks at Jonathan, his eyes narrowed. “You will keep an eye on her, do you understand? Unless she’s with one of us, do not let her out of your sight.”

I expect Jonathan to say something snarky, but he solemnly answers, “I will.”

The dark knight turns back to me before he goes. “The moment you decide you want out, you tell me. Nothing is keeping you here.”

I nod. I’m well aware that we’re only doing this because he’s humoring me.

Rafe appears reluctant to leave, and Jonathan glances between us, growing uncomfortable. “I’m just going to...” He searches for an escape. “Make sure they gave us enough towels...”

As soon as the bathroom door shuts, Rafe crosses to me. “Are you comfortable with all this?”

He pointedly looks at the flickering candles and the warm, cozy fire.

“It’s fine. I’m going to sleep on the bed, and Jonathan will sleep on the couch.”

I fight the way my magic tries to pull me closer to Rafe. It feels as if it’s hoping to control me—like it’s bound and determined to keep me close to my knight and my dark purpose.

When Rafe still looks unsure about leaving me, I lean close and whisper,

“Men who sleep with anyone and everyone aren’t my type. You know that.”

My knight’s frown deepens like I’ve said something he wants to correct. But he’s wrong. I don’t want a playboy. I want something real—something I might be able to pursue with Rafe if this blasted magic would just leave us alone. As it is now, I don’t trust it—and I certainly don’t trust my feelings around him. I feel like I’m being played with, and I don’t like it.

Plus, Rafe treats me like I’m made of glass. That might be fun at first, but it gets old fast.

“Be careful, all right?” he says, stepping away.

I nod.

“And lock the door.” He pauses, letting a smile break through his serious exterior. “By the way, I like your choice of nightwear.”

I look down, sweeping a hand over my nightgown. “You don’t think it’s too revealing?”

He grins again. “You’re showing a lot of bare ankle, but other than that, I think you’re fine.”

“Hey, Rafe,” I say as he’s opening the door. He looks back, waiting for me to finish. “Thank you for watching out for me.”

“You hate it.”

“I do,” I agree. “But that doesn’t mean I don’t appreciate it all the same.”

My words are rewarded by one of his rare, soft smiles. “Night, Lexie. Sleep good.”

“You too,” I murmur.

And then he’s out the door, and I’m crawling into the ridiculously luxurious bed.

“You should be so jealous of me right now,” I say to Jonathan when he comes out of the bathroom. I snuggle a little farther into the covers. “This is crazy comfortable.”

“Don’t tempt me, sweetheart. I’ll steal the bed and kick you to the couch.”

I laugh as he blows out the candles and turns off the fire, and then I close my eyes, hoping to eventually relax enough to fall asleep before morning.

8

I WAKE WITH A START, my senses on high alert. A noise—that’s what woke me. Something loud. Next to me, snuggled under the covers, Charles raises his head, tensed. He lets out a low growl that has goosebumps traveling the skin on my arms.

It’s dark beyond the curtains, still the middle of the night. The room is *freezing*.

“Jonathan,” I whisper.

“You heard it too?” his groggy voice answers.

Before I can respond, a low moan echoes through the mansion. It’s so ghostly, it could be on a haunted house soundtrack. And who knows, maybe it is. But it still sounds pretty darn creepy in the dead of night.

“What time is it?” Jonathan asks. I hear him shuffling around, looking for his phone. A moment later, a screen illuminates, and I can just make him out in the dark. “Just after three.”

Seriously? They had to wake us up at three? Couldn’t they have done the spooky stuff around midnight and then left us to sleep?

Several minutes go by without another peep out of the not-ghost. Maybe that’s it for the night. I lie back, snuggling into the covers, trying not to be freaked out because I *know* ghosts aren’t real. I’m just drifting when I hear it again.

Jonathan curses, obviously as irritated as I am. I pull the covers over my head, studiously attempting to ignore the theatrics, and snuggle Charles toward me, using him as a security blanket. Of course, the cat wants nothing to do with it, and he squirms away.

“Are you warm enough?” I ask Jonathan after a few minutes. The

Monroes must have turned the thermostat down to add to their haunted show.

Instead of answering, Jonathan stands and crosses the room to the fireplace. With a flip of the switch, flames leap to life, casting the room in warm, merry light. The soft whir of the fan promises to send heat into the room. “At least they didn’t shut off the gas.”

He pauses on his way back to the couch when there’s another low moan, this one sounding as if it’s just beyond our door.

Unable to help myself, I shiver again. Over and over, I tell myself this is just a hoax. Eventually, I might even believe it.

Jonathan shakes his head, grumbling under his breath, and heads back to the couch. Barely peeking out from the covers, I watch him, envious of the couples who don’t have to sleep alone.

Company would be nice, especially since my cat deserted me. Jonathan’s got to be miserable over there, and there’s plenty of room in the bed. It’s on the tip of my tongue to ask him to join me, but the last thing I need to do is give the Griffon the wrong idea, especially after I kissed him yesterday.

Our ghost eventually goes quiet, and my mind wanders to this afternoon, to that blasted kiss.

At some point, I must finally fall asleep because I wake to the sound of the shower and the smell of coffee wafting to my nose. Bleary-eyed, I blink, letting my eyes adjust to the morning light. Steam rises from a tall mug on the nightstand, and the aroma of caffeinated goodness calls to me.

Jonathan’s couch is empty save the blanket he used last night, which is neatly folded with his pillow on top of it. He’s opened the balcony drapes, letting in the morning light.

Slowly, feeling as if I could sleep another five hours at the very least, I sit up. It must have gotten cold last night because a thin layer of frost decorates the edges of the glass, but it’s warm in here with the fire going.

My movement disturbs Charles, and he mews at me from the end of the bed, a friendly feline greeting. His eyes are innocent like he’s pretending he didn’t abandon me last night when the ghost made its rounds.

The hairless cat stands, stretches his back, and yawns wide. Then he pads over to me, crawls on my lap, and begins to purr.

Rolling my eyes, I stroke his back and pull the coffee toward me. There’s just the right amount of cream, exactly how I like it. I take a sip and sigh.

It’s perfection—strong, creamy, not too sweet. Also, it tastes like he used the raw sugar I like—not the bland white stuff.

I've finished half of it by the time Jonathan emerges from the bathroom. I avert my eyes, just in case he should step out in a towel.

Not that I'm thinking about Jonathan in a towel. Of course I'm not—that would be unprofessional.

Taking another sip, I flick my eyes to the door...and find him fully dressed.

Which is good.

Obviously.

I mean, he could have forgotten a shirt. That would have been all right.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" He pauses by the door, narrowing his eyes suspiciously.

"I'm wondering why you joined the Knights' Guild when you so obviously missed your calling as a barista."

The suspicion is replaced with pleased amusement. "Are you serious? Talk about a dangerous job. Word has it that just three months ago a barista in Tahoe was viciously attacked by a mob of murderous squirrels."

I smile against the edge of the mug before I take another sip. "You know, I think I heard about something like that."

He raises his eyebrows, giving me a wicked look as he heads to the dresser. "It was nothing compared to the Placerville attack of '64."

"Is it on Snopes yet?"

"No," he scoffs. "But I keep checking."

"Thank you for the coffee." For some reason, I bite my lip after I say it, hiding my smile, feeling all kinds of weird and warm and fuzzy.

It's disconcerting.

Jonathan looks over and smiles. It's not one of his flirtatious smiles—it's just a nice, warm, it's-completely-natural-for-us-to-share-a-room-and-do-morning-stuff smile.

And it makes my stomach feel off. Not bad off, just off. Maybe a little confused.

My mind drifts to Rafe. We've spent a lot of time together recently, but we've never shared a morning like this.

"Where'd the ring come from?" I ask, trying to brush away this weirdness.

Jonathan looks back at the open drawer. "Hmmm? Oh, I picked it up before we left town."

I look down at the solitaire. "You...picked it up? It had to have cost a

small fortune.”

He shrugs. “Details are important.”

“Can you return it after we’re done?”

“Probably.” He crosses the room, sitting on the edge of the bed, right by my legs. He smells like soap, and his dark hair is still wet. “As long as you don’t actually lose it.”

“I’ll be careful,” I swear.

“I trust you.”

His words hang between us, heavy. *He trusts me.* Even though I’m the Obsidian Queen.

I search his chocolate eyes, but I don’t see any sign of flippancy. Not only does he mean it, but he wants me to *know* he means it.

“Are you hungry?” he asks, changing the subject.

My throat is tight, so I nod.

When I make no move to leave the bed, he leans forward, that familiar wicked gleam returning to his eyes. I press a hand to his chest, stopping him. “Whatever you’re going to say, *don’t.*”

Then I toss the covers back and swing my legs off the side of the bed.

“What?” He holds out his hands, the picture of innocence.

Laughing, I roll my eyes, pull a pair of fitted jean leggings and a tunic-style sweater from my suitcase, and head to the bathroom.

After I shower, I fuss with my hair for a while and end up with a braided updo that would make Pinterest proud.

“Yes?” I ask when Jonathan knocks at the door.

“I need to brush my teeth. Are you decent?”

Mascara in hand, I swing the door open, allowing him to enter. I stand to the side, leaning over the marble counter, brushing the black wand over my eyelashes as he squeezes toothpaste onto his brush. I smirk at the meticulous way he rolls the tube from the bottom—so careful to squeeze out every last drop.

“My grandmother does it the same way,” I tease.

He looks at me and pops the brush in his mouth, his eyes bright as he shakes his head. I put the mascara back in my makeup kit and sort through the contents, looking for a neutral shade of lipstick.

It’s strange to get ready with someone, side by side, sharing a bathroom. Before Maisy was a boyfriend stealing tramp, we’d spend the night at each other’s houses, do our makeup and hair together in the morning.

This is very different.

Just as I'm swiping the nude lipstick over my lips, there's a knock at the door. Since Jonathan's mouth is full of bubbles, I step out of the bathroom and open it myself.

"Where is your phone?" Rafe demands as he steps past me into the room. "And why are you answering the door and not Jonathan?"

I frown at my knight. "Jonathan's brushing his teeth, and I thought I turned it off silent."

Then I cross the room and find my phone in the clutch I used last night. Sure enough, I have several calls and a slew of unanswered messages. No surprise, they're all from Rafe.

"You know," I say as I browse them. "You're a little needy."

When I look up, I find the knight giving me a frustrated look that shouldn't make me smile but does.

"Did you meet John Callahan last night?" he asks me, dismissing the phone conversation for now.

I think back, remembering the tall man with the brown hair and freckles. The one Olivia was lavishing attention on. "I remember him."

"He's apparently missing—disappeared last night. His wife says he left the room to check on something in their vehicle and never returned."

My stomach tightens. "Missing?"

"It's the word used to describe when someone vanishes unexpectedly," the knight deadpans.

Setting my hands on my hips, I give him a bare smile. "Oh, is that what it means? I've always wondered."

"Word has it the Monroes are quite upset—one of the maids mentioned she overheard Rodger making a phone call early this morning, requesting some sort of assistance."

"Do you think it's an act?" I ask. "Maybe John and this maid are in on the hoax?"

Rafe shrugs, and it's obvious he couldn't care less. "It's hard to say."

"Hey," Jonathan says, stepping out of the bathroom, giving Rafe a nod. He glances between us.

My knight turns to Jonathan and points at me. "She does not open the door again."

"She?" I scoff. "Not even Lexie, just 'she?'"

Rafe turns back to me. "For all you know, Trent is out there, posing as

one of the guests, waiting to get you alone.”

I roll my eyes. “We haven’t seen any sign of Trent for months. He could be all the way on the eastern coast, terrorizing more bank tellers.”

“The point is, we don’t know where he is, and you need to be cautious.”

Gritting my teeth to hold back several unsavory words, I slide my hand into my pocket and produce my stun gun. “Happy?”

His eyes flick down to the sparkly weapon. “Marginally.”

Jonathan’s phone rings, breaking some of the tension. He looks down at the screen. “It’s Gray.”

The Griffon answers and then walks toward the balcony.

“See? Jonathan has his phone,” Rafe feels he must point out.

“Well, then maybe you should have tried to call him.”

Rafe gives me another look, frowning, obviously disliking this arrangement, and then steps to the door. “Keep your phone on you.”

I widen my eyes, silently telling him to chill. “I will.”

“I mean it.”

Unable to stop myself, I let out a frustrated laugh, ready to boot him out the door. He pauses halfway out, his hand on the door frame.

“What now?” I ask, wary.

He meets my eyes, his expression guarded. After a moment, he says, “You look nice.”

“Oh.” Surprised, I look down and brush a stray piece of lint off the sweater. “Thanks.”

The knight nods once and then steps into the hall, closing the door behind him.

9

WE SLEPT IN TOO LATE, so by the time we arrive in the large breakfast nook, most everything has been cleared except for several silver carafes of coffee and a plate of assorted pastries.

“This is the largest ‘nook’ I’ve ever seen,” I say absently, glancing around the sunny room that’s as big as most starter houses. It’s set with several cozy round tables, each topped with a small autumnal centerpiece. On three sides, it’s surrounded by windows. The remaining side backs to a gleaming, state-of-the-art kitchen that boasts marble counters and stainless steel for as far as the eye can see.

“What was on the agenda today?” I ask, wondering why it’s so quiet. We didn’t even pass anyone in the hall or on our way down the stairs.

“I think everyone’s out front,” Jonathan answers, “waiting for the bus.”

“The bus?” I ask, incredulous. I can’t imagine this lot stepping foot on public transportation.

“The Monroes booked a local hot spring for the day,” he says absently, choosing a chocolate-filled croissant. “They’ve chartered the bus to take everyone there—I’m assuming because the alcoholic beverages will flow freely.” He takes a tentative bite, chews thoughtfully, raising his eyebrows in appreciation, and then takes another larger bite. Once he swallows, he asks, “Should we go?”

Memories of a certain night spent with Gray in a hot tub drift into my head, and I wince. “Maybe not a good idea.”

As if remembering finding me outside the room that same night, soaking wet, wrapped in a towel, Jonathan pauses with the croissant halfway to his lips. “Right.”

“Right.”

We stare at each other for a moment before I clear my throat and look away. “Do you think we can explore the mansion a bit?”

“I don’t see why not. There’s a map in the room we can take with us.”

I laugh under my breath, picking up a chocolate muffin. “Can you imagine? A map to a house?”

Before we leave the breakfast nook, Jonathan grabs three more croissants, stating he doesn’t want them to “go to waste.” I shake my head, once again wondering how the food-loving Griffon stays so fit when he eats like a linebacker.

“You want one?” he asks, offering me the chocolate temptation.

“I’m good, thanks.”

He shrugs, a “suit yourself” sort of gesture, and starts on his second pastry. We stop by the room, grab the map, and idly wander the mansion for several hours. It’s an impressive structure, beautiful and grand. Nothing about it screams haunted. It feels more like a ritzy resort than a ghostly hangout—the kind you’d find in Vail or Aspen.

We pass a few people, stragglers who didn’t want to soak in the hot springs either. But no one is overly friendly, nor do they seem to be concerned about last night’s disappearance.

Like me, I think they’re wondering how much is real and how much is a show.

On our way back to the room, we pass the ballroom. The doors are open today, and I peek inside. The mansion’s staff is already preparing for Saturday’s masquerade. At the far end of the room, several men and women run vacuums, dusting fixtures.

A massive crystal chandelier hangs dead center, easily as large as most dining room tables, and a man stands on a ladder directly under it. He appears to be polishing each crystal by hand, one by one.

Poor man. I hope he’s paid by the hour because he’s going to be at it for a while.

“It’s quite the process, isn’t it?” Olivia says from behind us, startling me. She smiles, a soft apology for making me jump, and looks up at the man on the ladder. “I’ve always loved that chandelier, but I don’t envy the person who gets stuck cleaning it.”

Her blond hair is up today, held high in a sleek ponytail. She wears a white, chunky cable knit sweater, dark-wash jeans, knee-high riding boots,

and a plaid scarf. The ensemble makes her look slightly less youthful, a little less doe-eyed and innocent.

I think of John Callahan's disappearance and can't help but wonder if she's connected.

She turns back to us, her eyes flitting over Jonathan as they did yesterday. "You didn't go to the hot springs?"

I give her a one-shouldered shrug. "I was eager to check out the house."

Olivia smiles. "Do you like it? I designed the seasonal decor myself."

"It's beautiful," I say almost grudgingly, a bit jealous she got to run free in the mansion, adding touches here and there. What I'd give for that sort of task. "You did a great job."

She smiles, lowering her eyes, embarrassed by the praise. "I wanted to go into interior design, but Father says it's not a real career. He said I should study something worthwhile."

"What did you end up with?" Jonathan asks.

Her gaze falls on him, and her cheeks go pink. "I began working toward a law degree, but it wasn't for me, so I came home to figure out what it is I'm good at."

Maybe she's good at seducing married men and leading them to their deaths?

A commotion comes from the main entry, and together, we turn from the ballroom. Rodger, his wife Elizabeth, and a man and woman I don't recognize come walking through the door. Their voices echo throughout the foyer.

Or maybe I should say *just* the newcomers' voices echo throughout the foyer. I take the pair in, pursing my lips. It would be snobby to say they don't quite fit in with the other guests...but they *don't* quite fit in with the other guests.

The man is about thirty and tall and scrawny, like a scarecrow. His hair is the color of straw, and it sticks out all over the top of his head in a messy, just-rolled-out-of-bed sort of way—and not like Jonathan's sleep-tousled, sexy style. No, this man looks like he lost his brush several weeks ago and doesn't know where to purchase a new one.

He wears a black T-shirt that hangs off him like it's several sizes too large, and there's a curious text printed across the front that reads: *They're watching you. Who's watching them?*

Oddly enough, the woman wears the exact same shirt. Hers, however, is

several sizes too small, and it clings in a way that's not entirely flattering. For a moment, I wonder if they each grabbed the wrong one out of the closet and ended up swapping on accident.

The rest of her outfit is made up of black combat boots and a pleated gray skirt with a chain hanging from the front. Her dark brown hair parts in the middle and falls down her back, straight and fine. Some women would kill for her hair, but she simply lets it hang.

They're quite the pair, but their somewhat odd appearance doesn't bother me. What has me raising my eyebrows is the strange arsenal of radios, cameras, and other bizarre electronic devices they have strapped to their bodies.

"Oh, Olivia," Rodger says when he spots his daughter standing with Jonathan and me. "Come over and meet Clarissa and Joel."

The man holds up his hand. "Actually, the 'J' is soft."

"J-oel?" Rodger asks, softening the "J" to make an almost "sh" sound, looking somewhat stumped.

Joel nods, obviously used to correcting people.

"Right," Rodger says slowly before he turns back to his daughter. "Meet Mr. and Mrs. Barnes."

Jonathan and I exchange a look and casually follow Olivia over to the group.

"You're the ghost hunters?" Olivia asks, just as skeptical of the pair as I.

Ghost hunters.

Like...*ghost hunters*?

Jonathan makes a noise of amusement, but he somehow manages to choke the rest of the laugh back.

Clarissa nods, her face solemn. "Yes, but we prefer the term 'seekers.'"

"Seekers?" Elizabeth asks, clearly not a fan of the pair. Something tells me the lady of the house didn't request their presence.

"As in seekers of the supernatural realm," Joel calmly explains. "We carry a variety of tools, including a full spectrum video camera, night vision light, high tech digital thermometer, audio recorder, and several devices of our own making."

I want to ask if they also have backpacks to suck up pesky poltergeists, but I resist the urge.

"They come highly recommended," Rodger says, his eyes flicking over Jonathan and me.

By who? Is there a Home Advisor for paranormal services?

Clarissa takes something that looks like a handheld radio from her belt, extends a long antenna, and then turns the device on. It crackles to life, letting out a low hum.

“Interesting,” she murmurs, taking a step forward. “It seems it’s picking up something already.”

As she moves, the hum grows louder. She frowns, continuing forward until the radio is in a positive tizzy—and it just so happens to be pointing right at my chest. She looks up, baffled. “That’s odd.”

“Well, darling,” Jonathan says lightly, “it looks like you’re a ghost.”

Clarissa scowls at the device, smacks it several times, and then points it at Jonathan. Still, it hums.

“What’s it doing?” she finally asks Joel.

“Perhaps there was supernatural activity here last night? It’s likely picking up residual signs.”

The woman’s face smooths, and she nods like that’s the most logical answer ever. “Must be a strong ghost. I don’t think I’ve ever heard it get quite that loud.”

Joel nods and turns to Rodger. “It’s wise you’ve brought us in. We might be dealing with a Class Five poltergeist—maybe even a Class Six.”

I exchange a look with Jonathan, wondering why in the world their piece of junk equipment would pick up on what I can only assume is our magic. Surely the humans haven’t constructed something that only Griffons can detect?

“The house is yours to wander,” Rodger says, looking impressed while both his wife and daughter continue to wear skeptical frowns. “If you need in any of the guest rooms, please inform us, and we’ll set up a time.”

Jonathan and I excuse ourselves as they finish their conversation, heading back to our room.

I turn to him as soon as we close the door. “What was *that*?”

He grins. “I don’t know, but I’m getting the strangest feeling we’re not human.”

I roll my eyes. “We should tell Gray.”

“I think he already knows.”

“*About the ghost hunters.*”

Jonathan walks to the bed and stares at Charles, looking like he’s trying to decide if he’s going to pet him. “Do you think they’re going to get in the

way?”

“I guarantee they’re going to get in the way.”

When he lowers his hand to the cat’s head, Charles backs away, tail flicking, looking miffed.

“Maybe they’ll be just the distraction we need,” Jonathan says after a moment, shaking his head at the prickly cat. “Let our succubus be suspicious of them and not us.”

“Succubus?”

“A female sprite who feeds on lust.”

I cross my arms, thinking too hard. “That’s awful. Those don’t actually exist, do they?”

He gives me an incredulous look. “Just how sheltered have you been exactly? Did you learn anything at Briarwood?”

“I know how to properly fold towels, make an exceptional cup of coffee, and set a table for any sort of dinner situation.”

“Did you learn anything useful?” His mouth stretches into a grin, and his chocolatey eyes light with pure amusement. “Specifically things that will keep you alive in our business?”

“No.” I match his grin. “Not really.” Then my face falls. “Is that what you think our murderer is? A sprite?”

“No, there hasn’t been a succubus spotted for hundreds of years. As far as I know, they’re extinct on our side of the thresholds.”

Something chills me, and though I don’t want to say it out loud...I don’t think I have a choice.

“Jonathan, when you say sprite, you mean an actual sprite, right?” I look down. “Not like a shadow creature?”

“No,” his voice softens. “Not one of the nightmare beasts. An actual sprite.”

I look up, biting my bottom lip as I nod. His words are a relief, but I still worry that something larger than I realized happened when I commanded the gargoyles that night by the shore.

Strange things are emerging from the shadows, and I can’t help but think it’s my fault.

AT DINNER, it seems no one can speak of anything but John Callahan's disappearance and the strange new "seekers of the supernatural" who showed up most curiously this afternoon.

I walk in with Jonathan, adjusting the whisper-thin diamond and emerald belt I wear over my forest green gown. It's ostentatious, not something I have many opportunities to wear at home, and I'm glad I packed it on a whim.

Dinner doesn't start for a few more minutes, so we're loitering in the dining room, and small clusters of people stand here and there, talking quietly amongst themselves. As soon as Misty spots Jonathan and me, she waves us over. She looks uncomfortable surrounded by the Wall Street types.

Phillip appears to be in the middle of a story, and he has the circle's rapt attention. Olivia stands in the group, engrossed in whatever it is that has Misty bored to tears.

As I make my way to her, Rafe catches my eye. His expression is dark and obviously displeased.

But there's no time to dwell on my knight because Misty breaks away from Phillip to join me. Jonathan is apprehended by a man from Vermont who wants to talk oil, and he nods me along, wordlessly telling me to go ahead.

"That *dress*," Misty says, admiring my outfit. "And what a belt. You look fabulous."

I pull my eyes away from Rafe.

Before I can respond, she says, "You didn't come to the hot springs."

"We slept in and then decided to tour the estate instead."

She flashes me a look of sympathy. "You would have loved it. The water

was sublime, and we had the whole place to ourselves. I feel so relaxed, I swear I could fall asleep right here on the floor.”

As we’re talking, Clarissa and Joel walk into the dining hall, wearing outfits straight out of an Addams Family movie. Clarissa holds her tracking wand in the air, making me wary.

“What do you think of those two?” Misty whispers.

“We were here when they first showed up,” I say quietly. “I don’t think Mrs. Monroe or Olivia are too impressed.”

“Can I tell you a secret?”

I look back at her, my interest piqued.

“I’d love to get my hands on their equipment.” She laughs softly, almost embarrassed. “Can you imagine? Skulking around the mansion at night, searching for ghosts?”

I can imagine it, but honestly, it sounds awful.

“Evening, ladies,” Will, the undercover cop, says as he walks our way. His wife is on the other side of the room, speaking with Elizabeth.

Misty’s cheeks go pink, and she stands a little straighter. “Hello, Will.”

He’s handsome, I suppose, but considering I have no lack of handsome men in my life, and he’s a little old for my tastes, he doesn’t do anything for me.

Still, it looks like Misty’s reaction pleases him.

“I don’t think we’ve formally met,” he says, extending his hand. “I’m Will Tillman.”

“Madeline Kingman,” I answer.

I don’t stumble over Jonathan’s last name, though my stomach warms as I say it.

Instead of shaking my hand, he brings it to his lips. “It’s a pleasure, Mrs. Kingman.”

Though I have a strong urge to yank my hand away, I wait until he drops it. Then I lower my voice so only he and Misty will hear. “You sat close to John at dinner last night. What do you make of his disappearance?”

I almost use persuasion on him, but I decide against it. The last thing I need is to blow up Clarissa and Joel’s ghost detecting device.

Will shakes his head. “It’s hard to say. Hopefully he’ll show up soon.”

“Did his wife leave the mansion?” Misty asks.

“I believe so.” Will then steps away from us, and his eyes linger on me as he walks off. “It’s a reminder to all of us to be careful.”

“There’s a phone call for you, madam,” a dark voice says behind me.

We turn, and Misty widens her eyes, not prepared for the sight of my dark knight standing behind us, looking entirely too tempting in his waiter’s attire.

“A phone call?” I ask, glancing at Misty.

Rafe watches me with a cool, indifferent expression that I know is anything but. “Yes, on the landline. Perhaps you’ve forgotten your cell phone, and someone wishes to reach you?”

Ah.

Yes, that explains it.

I nod, silently telling him to lead me away. “I’ll be back,” I promise Misty. “If you see Jonathan, will you let him know I had to take a call?”

“Of course.” Her eyes wander back to Rafe, looking suspicious—but in the most delighted way. “Just...take your time.”

I follow Rafe into the hall. “You do realize that she now thinks I’m going to have a tryst with a waiter in some dark closet?”

“Where’s your phone, Lexie?”

At least if he’s using my unwanted nickname, he’s not too upset.

“I forgot it, all right?” I set my hands on my hips, challenging him. “What do you need?”

“Nothing.” He cocks his head to the side, challenging me right back. “I just wanted to see if you have it. And, surprise, surprise—you don’t.”

“You are slightly infuriating; do you realize that?”

He takes a step in, his dark blue eyes never leaving mine. “*You* are slightly infuriating; do you realize *that*?”

We’re close, probably too close, but this darn magic just keeps pulling us together.

“All I ask is for you to carry your phone.” The knight takes another step in, which brings us together. His chest presses against mine, the smell of his dark aftershave filling my senses. “Do you really think that’s too much to ask?”

I’m just debating whether I’m going to set my hands on his shoulders when voices drift to us from just around the corner. Immediately, I step back...only to realize my belt is caught.

“Rafe!” I hiss, looking down. The clasp has snagged on his shirt.

Without the slightest hesitation, he presses a hand against my back, pulling me flush against him, and pushes us through the closest door—which just so happens to be a storage closet.

The knight swings the door shut just as the voices turn the corner and then *stop* in front of our door.

It's a tight space, filled to the brim with plastic storage totes and shelving. I cling to Rafe because there's nowhere else for me to go.

"Could you have picked a more cliché hiding spot?" I whisper so the people on the other side won't overhear.

"I thought girls liked closets." The low words rumble in my ear. Our magic's pull seems stronger in the dark, when sight is gone and other senses are heightened.

Entirely without my permission, my hands slide up his chest—and it's not because I want to feel his muscles flex under my touch. *No*. I'm merely trying to get a better grip so I don't fall on my tail.

But then his muscles *do* flex, and he sucks in a hiss that lights a fire in my core. Before I know it, my hands are roving up his shoulders and then back down again, trailing to his sides, which are like solid rock under his shirt.

The Knights' Guild certainly knows how to sculpt them.

"Stop," he commands under his breath, every inch of him rigid with control. There's a torrent of persuasion in the word, but it's hard to take him seriously when his hands move to my sides, his fingers splaying to touch more of me at once.

"You stop," I whisper, my voice breathy in the dark.

"Madeline," he growls, his fingers tightening over the silky material of my evening dress. "Why do you continually test me? Believe me when I tell you that if we're not careful, our magic will link."

I've heard of magic links before, but I've never thought much about them. They're brought on by a strong connection, and they can't be severed. They're rare; I know that much. Usually, it's a conscious decision, something you must do to make the connection happen.

But in our case, with our magic begging to merge, I can see how it might happen by accident.

"And that's bad?" I murmur, past confused.

Why is our magic doing this?

"Of course it's bad," he growls. Then, as if losing the will to fight, he drops his face to the crook of my neck, making me nearly self-combust. I wait for him to kiss me, to brush his lips against my skin, to do *something*, but he never moves.

After a long minute, he pulls back. "They're gone."

I gape at him in the dark.

“Come on.” He opens the door, pulls me into the empty hall, and deftly disentangles my belt from his shirt. “It’s clear.”

Every inch of me tingles, and my pulse continues to race. I stare at him for several moments, until my breathing slowly calms, and my heart resumes a normal pace. “I suppose it’s a good thing you have more willpower than I do.”

I turn to leave, but Rafe catches my arm before I get too far, pulling me back. “Don’t give me too much credit.” There’s a white-hot spark in his eyes, something that mimics the one deep in my chest. “It’s dark enough in the hall I could have cloaked us if I’d wanted to. We didn’t need to hide in the closet—I *chose* to.”

With that, he releases me and turns on his heel, heading away from the dining room.

I stare after him, off-kilter. As soon as he’s gone, my magic calms and reason returns.

What was *that*?

The magic is making me crazy.

Shaking my head, I make my way back into the dining room. Jonathan’s in the same seat as yesterday, looking edgy.

Right next to him, in my seat, sits Olivia. She leans into him, laughing softly, the vision of a Hollywood starlet in her sleek green gown. Her hair falls down her back in a soft cascade of blond.

I pause, startled to find them together. The part of me that’s here for the job thinks I should hang back, let this play out. The part that’s Jonathan’s friend says not to trust her—to keep her away from him at all costs—because sweet, player Jonathan won’t be able to resist whisking her to bed, and I’d rather he not end up dead.

So I hover near the entrance, unsure what to do.

Olivia ever-so-subtly brushes her hand over Jonathan’s. He winces but doesn’t move. I recognize the look in his eyes, the way he processes her thoughts. What does he see?

“You look a little lost,” Will says from behind me, pocketing a phone like he’s just returning from a call he had to take—maybe his was a real one.

The cop smiles, his eyes wandering over me but not in a lascivious way—or at least, not too lascivious.

I force a light laugh and press a hand to my temples. “I’m feeling a little

lightheaded from the champagne. I shouldn't have had any on an empty stomach."

"I'd be happy to escort you to your seat." He glances at Olivia. "But it looks like it's already taken. My wife just retired with a headache. Perhaps you'd like to sit with me?"

The offer startles me, and so does the connotation behind it.

"Oh...I..."

Before I can finish, Jonathan glances at the door. He relaxes when he sees me, but there are questions in his eyes.

"I think I can make it all right," I say to Will, and then I head toward my occupied seat.

Olivia follows Jonathan's gaze and frowns when she sees me coming. Her displeasure is quickly hidden, and she sweeps out of the chair, giving me a welcoming smile. "You look lovely, Madeline." Then she laughs lightly and leans in. "I love your dress."

I look down at the sleek green gown, with its thick straps, low neckline, and slight flare at the bottom, realizing we almost match.

That's fun.

Jonathan stands, setting his hands on the back of my chair, inviting me to sit. Olivia glides away, and I take my seat.

Misty watches me from across the table, widening her eyes, though I don't know if it's due to Olivia's audacity or because I disappeared with a handsome waiter.

"Sorry," I murmur. "Phone call."

Then I set my hand on Jonathan's. *I forgot my phone again*, I think, knowing he'll hear me. *Rafe wasn't happy*.

He looks at me, smirking just a tiny bit, probably because I got in trouble. I remove my hand before he can pick up anything else that transpired between Rafe and me.

I feel weird about it, confused. At the time, Rafe's all I wanted. But now that I'm away from him, now that my magic isn't playing tricks on me...

It doesn't make sense. I don't feel that way about my knight, at least I don't think I do. But when I'm with him, the pull is so strong.

Thankfully, the mansion's new ghost hunters steal my attention, as they do most everyone else's. They sit at the end of the table, near the Monroes. Not only do they explain each of their gadgets to anyone and everyone around them, but they share stories of hauntings as well.

I listen idly, trying not to roll my eyes. When you know what things truly lurk in the dark—shadow monsters, murderous pixies, and lust-feeding sprites to name a few—fictional ghosts seem more than a little ludicrous.

Still, that’s what most of the crowd is here for, and with Halloween only a few weeks away, their tales are timely.

“We waited until almost two in the morning,” Clarissa continues her story, leaning forward, captivating her audience—though half of the guests look as skeptical as I am. Still, we can’t seem to look away. “And then I felt it—a brush against my leg, like a cold, clammy hand.”

Misty sucks in a breath, her eyes huge, a napkin balled in her hands.

“Our meter started going crazy,” Clarissa continued. “It was obvious the spirits had dark intentions.”

“But we got the pictures,” Joel interrupts, proud of himself.

“Do you have them?” Misty asks from our end of the table. “Can we see?”

Joel nods, his eyes bright, and digs out his phone. “I save all of them in a file. You can go through them if you like.”

He stands and passes the phone down the line. On the way, people murmur over evidence that was likely manipulated.

“They don’t look human,” Misty breathes when she finally gets the photos and pours over the photos like a tween with a new fashion magazine.

“The spirits take many forms,” Clarissa says knowingly. “Some are humanlike, but others resemble gruesome animals.”

Clarissa leans across the table to hand me the phone. Because everyone’s watching, and Jonathan and I are supposed to be here because of the mystery of the haunting, I take the cell, pretending I care.

And then I see the pictures.

My breath catches in my throat, and I go cold. The first picture is a pixelated, green and black night vision image of a gremlin, half hidden in the trees. The next is a hobgoblin. I flip through them quickly, staring at each, growing more uncomfortable. Dark nymphs, monstrous wolves, winged cats...gargoyles. And countless more beasts I have no name for.

Jonathan looks at the pictures over my shoulder, and I can feel his scowl.

“Where did you say you took these?” I ask, handing the phone to the woman on my left.

“All over North and South America and some in Europe when we went last summer,” Joel answers. “But we’ve gotten more lately. There’s been a

recent, unexplainable surge.”

“Have you taken any here?” the woman next to me asks. “At the mansion?”

“We only arrived today,” Clarissa says. “But we hope to capture some tonight.”

Misty twists the napkin in her hands. “Are they dangerous?”

“They are at night, in the dark.” Clarissa glances at Joel before she looks back, her expression growing serious. “Always carry a flashlight or lantern with you. It chases them away.”

From down the table, Will smirks and lowers his voice, doing a fair impression of Vincent Price. “And be sure to sleep with your lights on.”

Nervous laughter fills the room, replacing some of the heavy tension from moments ago. Joel’s phone makes it back to him, and he frowns at the album before he slips the device into his pocket.

When everyone is distracted with their meals, and the conversation drifts to lighter things, I dare a glance at Jonathan. He meets my eyes, his expression grim.

Over and over, I replay Joel’s words in my head. *There’s been a recent, unexplained surge.*

I STARE AT THE FIRE. It's long past time I was supposed to be asleep. Jonathan is on the couch again, crashed out as far as I can tell.

As I lie here, I wait for the ghost to make itself known again. It's almost three, the same time the disturbance started last night. I keep thinking of the pictures on Joel's phone.

What if it's not an Aparian abducting the men—what if it's a blood-hungry shadow creature? But that doesn't make sense either. How would they get inside? Even at night, the mansion leaves dim lights on in the halls and living areas. Plus, the creatures of shadows don't usually carry haunted house soundtracks with them.

No, something else—someone else—is behind the disappearances. I think of Olivia and the way she latched onto Jonathan at dinner. I forgot to question him about it when we got to the room; I was so preoccupied with the pictures. But now I mull it over.

Jonathan said she's not Aparian, but what if he's wrong? What if she's found a way to mask her magic, like Trent?

I close my eyes, willing myself to sleep. My body is exhausted, but my brain won't quiet. I'm just feeling myself drift when the ghostly cry echoes through the house.

Charles raises his head and hisses, startled by the abrupt noise. I groan, spooked and irritated. Jonathan stirs, grumbling. The sound continues, just as it did last night.

Suddenly, there's a crash of thunder. I yip, startled by its sudden arrival. Lightning streaks across the sky, illuminating the room. Rain begins, pelting against the balcony's glass door.

Jonathan sits up, the covers falling from his bare torso. The firelight dances over his muscular chest. I'd appreciate the sight if it wasn't for the mansion's ghost making its way down the hall and the sudden, well-timed storm.

The knight picks up his phone, glares at the time, and lies back down, taking the blanket with him. "Just try to ignore it," he says.

I might be able to accomplish it if it weren't for the sudden knock at the door. My eyes fly open, and my pulse begins to race.

Then the door handle jiggles.

Jonathan, bless his knightly heart, is up in a flash, moving toward the door, off to check for the boogie man. Lightning flashes again, sending momentary harsh light through the drapes.

Cautiously, Jonathan swings the door open. Dim light glows in the hall, washing over him. He stands, bare-chested, with a dagger in his left hand. In the other hand, he has a pistol—he's not messing around this time. But there's nothing on the other side.

The Monroes are toying with us, making sure we get the full experience. Is that all this is? An elaborate ruse?

After a moment, Jonathan closes the door, flips the lock, and makes his way across the room to the bed. "Scoot over."

"Why?"

"Because it's frigid in here, and the bed has got to be warmer than the couch."

I happily make room for him, glad for the company—but I won't tell him that. "That's an excuse if I've ever heard one."

"Shhh," he says, crawling in behind me. "I only want you for your body heat. Be a good little bed heater and hush."

He unexpectedly pulls me to him, molding the front half of his body to my back half, and wraps an arm around my waist, locking me close.

I freeze for half a moment, but then I soften against him. He's right—it's a lot warmer.

"What happened to your shirt?" I ask, snuggling closer, thankful for the flannel gown between us.

"I can't sleep in one." After a beat, he says, "Don't you find it difficult to sleep in a nightgown?"

"Not happening."

He chuckles, his breath moving my hair. "Can't blame a guy for trying."

Another moan rings through the house, this time followed by a high-pitched shriek. The hair on the back of my neck stands on end.

That one sounded awfully real.

“Do you think we should investigate?” I whisper after a long, too-quiet moment.

Jonathan shifts, attempting to get comfortable. “Do we have to?”

“That’s why we’re here, isn’t it?”

The Griffon growls, his breath very near my ear. He then lets out a disgruntled sigh and tosses the covers back, letting in the cold air. “Fine, Nancy Drew. Let’s go look for a ghost.”

JONATHAN PULLS ON A SHIRT, and I slip into the bathroom to change. The last thing I’m going to do is walk around the mansion in my nightgown. A few minutes later, I step out, in the middle of pulling my hair into a ponytail. Jonathan shoots me a funny look.

“What?” I ask, looking down, wondering what’s wrong with my outfit.

“You’re in jeans and shoes you might actually be able to run in.”

“It seems like a bad idea to trot around the house in the middle of the night in heels.” I tug on the hem of my soft sweater, suddenly self-conscious of the seldom-worn tennis shoes.

But Jonathan only grins. “No arguments here. You look cute.”

Cute? What does that mean? Toddlers are *cute*. Puppies are *cute*.

“Are you ready?” Jonathan slides the pistol under his jacket. “Let’s go hunt some ghosts.”

“Isn’t that illegal?” I eye the hidden gun, thinking of the undercover cop.

Jonathan holds the door for me. “Not if you have a concealed carry license.”

“And you do?”

“Of course I do.” He smirks. “I got all the skills.”

I choose not to respond.

It’s been at least five minutes, and we haven’t heard another peep out of our ghostly visitor or any more screams. The lights are dim in the halls, but voices come from downstairs, so we’re not the only ones up.

We hurry to the bottom floor to join the others, hoping to hear some of

the gossip. But what we find is Misty sobbing against Rodger's wife in the grand entry. The younger woman's hair is a mess, her mascara runs down her face, and she's dressed in a men's terry bathrobe. Rodger stands nearby, speaking with Will.

Clarissa, dressed in sweatpants and the T-shirt she arrived in, prowls the room, holding various instruments in the air. She murmurs to Joel, who follows her around like a puppy as he takes notes.

Olivia stands next to her mother, hovering closely, looking like she doesn't know how to help.

"This must stop," Rodger says to Will, his voice almost haggard.

Will looks like he's going to answer, and then he sees Jonathan and me.

"We heard someone scream." I cling to Jonathan's arm like I'm scared—which I sort of am. Dread pools in my belly, making me cold. "What happened?"

I'm going to assume it's not a good sign that my question renews Misty's sobs.

Olivia glances at the woman, flashes her a sympathetic look, and then hurries over to us. Dropping her voice, she says, "Phillip had what we believe to be a heart attack. We've called an ambulance. They're on their way."

"Is he all right?" I ask, knowing from the state Misty's in he's not.

Olivia shakes her head. "He passed away."

Was it a heart attack? Or was he murdered? Phillip was far older than the men who disappeared, but could it be connected?

"The ghosts are vengeful," Olivia says softly. "My father has made them angry by playing up the story of their demise. We use their deaths for profit, and they're lashing out."

The girl looks like she genuinely believes what she says, which means she's either an excellent actress, or she's not in on the hoax.

"Why the guests?" I ask, wondering if she has a theory, still not convinced she's innocent in the whole thing. "Forgive me, but if that's the case, wouldn't it be your family they are angry with?"

"I don't know." She glances at her parents. "But there is a rumor I've heard—though I don't know if it's true."

"What is it?" Jonathan asks.

Olivia lowers her voice even more. "There are whispers that the men who disappeared all entered into an affair with my stepmother during their brief stay in our home."

Now that *is* interesting.

“Stepmother?” I ask, looking at Elizabeth.

Olivia nods, flashing the woman a very brief scowl. “My own mother passed away when I was a baby. Elizabeth was my babysitter—she took care of me while my mother spent her last several months in the hospital. She married my father before my second birthday. She’s the reason Father built the house—she grew up here, in Redstone. Word has it she was involved with all three of the Pillert brothers before and *after* she and Father were married.”

“And now they kill anyone who...enters into a relationship with her?” Jonathan whispers.

The blond girl nods. “But who knows for certain?”

Who indeed.

Several more guests wander down, all wondering what the commotion is about. The police show up not long later, and Rodger sends us back to our beds, asking us to let them do their jobs.

It’s almost five in the morning by the time we reach our room, and I trudge inside, feeling very much like we’re in over our heads. I turn to Jonathan as soon the door is closed. “I’m worried we’ve walked into some serious human drama. Do you think there’s a magic user involved at all? Maybe it’s all smoke and mirrors.”

“My money is on Rodger.”

“Rodger?” I ask, a little surprised. “Why?”

“If my wife were bedding half the guests in my home, I’d be a little murderous.”

I sit on the end of the bed, kick off my tennis shoes, and pull my legs underneath me. “Do you think we can trust Olivia?”

Jonathan shrugs. “It’s hard to say.”

“If he was involved in Phillip’s death, he’d have to figure out a way to off him and make it look like a natural death. How do humans do that? Serums? Injections maybe?”

“Also,” Jonathan adds, “why wouldn’t Rodger just divorce her? Why keep her around?”

I think about it. “Because twenty-five thousand per couple *per* weekend? They’re raking in the money with this little enterprise. And who knows, maybe he’s in on it? Maybe he gets a sick thrill?”

Jonathan stares at me, incredulous. “You have a twisted mind, sweetheart.”

Rolling my eyes, I say, “I’ve watched a few crime shows, okay?”

“Is that what they’re calling them now?” A slow grin builds as he holds up his fingers in air quotes. “*Crime shows?*”

“Don’t make me use my stun gun on you. Because we both know I will.”

He chuckles and then starts for the couch. “I’m going to catch another few hours of sleep.”

I almost ask him why he’s not headed to the bed, but I bite my tongue and crawl under the covers, still fully dressed. I’ve been sleeping all by myself like a big girl for twenty-two years. I can manage tonight.

Jonathan growls after he’s comfortable. “I forgot the light.”

“No problem.” I hold up my hand, feel for the switch with my magic, and flip it off.

“You can do that?” he asks, easily impressed.

“Light switches are about a hundred times simpler than locks.”

“You’re a handy girl to have around.” He yawns, shifting on the couch to get comfortable. “I think I’m gonna keep you.”

I smile against my pillow, already feeling the tug of sleep despite the chaotic night.

BREAKFAST IS A WHOLLY UNCOMFORTABLE AFFAIR. We're in the kitchen nook. A basket of cheerful chrysanthemums adorns each table, and though the spread is still luxurious, it's far less formal than dinner. There are buffet tables across the northern wall, all filled to the brim with platters and chafing dishes with all manner of breakfast goodies—croissants and other pastries, assorted meats, five different types of egg dishes, and beverages galore.

It seems most guests have heard about Phillip's unfortunate end, and they're guzzling coffee and mimosas, trying to process the rough night with copious quantities of caffeine and alcohol.

"Pick your poison," Jonathan says, champagne in one hand and coffee in the other.

I accept the coffee, proud to be a member of Team Caffeine.

Not surprisingly, very few are loading plates. A few people nibble here and there, but we've all developed a sudden loss of appetite. Everyone except for Jonathan.

I eye him, mildly jealous of his iron stomach. "How can you eat?"

"What?" He helps himself to several strawberry and cream crepes. "I barely knew the guy."

He grabs another plate and loads it with more crepes. Then he shoves it into my hands. "This is a twenty-five-thousand-dollar breakfast. It's a crime not to eat."

"Thank goodness someone's hungry," a woman says from behind us.

We turn and find Elizabeth, lady of the dark house herself.

She's about my height, with slim hips and a slender build. I study her as Olivia's words from last night bounce around in my head. The woman's

brunette hair is expertly highlighted and cut into a tasteful bob, and she wears simple pearls in her ears and a fitted black apron. Nothing about her makes me think she's the tawdry mistress of sordid desires, but I suppose looks can be deceiving.

She carries a platter of what looks and smells like pumpkin waffles. "I made enough for an army, and no one's eating."

Startled, I turn back to the table. "You made all this?"

"No, not everything," she says with a soft, motherly laugh. "I order the pastries from a bakery in Frisco, and Jenna helps."

"Jenna?" I ask.

I turn to where Elizabeth gestures and find a young woman pulling an industrial-sized tray of muffins from the oven. She straightens, notices us looking her way, and gives us a smile. She then takes off the oven mitts and pushes a lock of chocolate brown hair behind her ear, toward her tidy braided bun. Even from here I can tell her eyes are sky blue and striking.

Jonathan makes a funny noise, one I assume is because the girl is gorgeous.

"Our chef," Elizabeth says, "She does most of the cooking, but I insist on taking the lead with breakfast. It's my favorite meal of the day."

She casts an affectionate look toward her stepdaughter, who's talking to Will's wife. "When Olivia was young, we'd make breakfast feasts for her dolls. Obviously, we'd have gobs of leftovers, but after our staff had their fill, I'd take as much to the local food banks as I was able. They weren't as strict about things back then. Now it's hard to even donate fresh vegetables from the garden."

She shakes her head, realizing the conversation has gone astray, and then sets down the platter and waves at the rest of the spread. "Anyway, please eat."

Jonathan is happy to oblige. "If you're worried about it going to waste, I know a couple guys in the staff quarters who would be happy to help you dispose of it."

Jenna joins us, bringing a platter of steaming muffins. She gives Jonathan a smile that I don't particularly care for. "We feed them well, don't you worry."

Yes, wouldn't want the lowly underlings to starve.

The woman offers Jonathan a muffin from the top of her stack, and he accepts it, giving her his full attention.

“So you trained in New York?” he asks, recalling Rodger’s praise for her abilities from the night before.

“I did, though I studied in France for a summer as well.” She has the faintest hint of freckles across her flawless, porcelain skin. As if that’s not enough, she also has high cheekbones and perfectly shaped eyebrows. Olivia’s pretty, but this woman is gorgeous. “Best three months of my life.”

“I’ve been to France,” Jonathan says easily. “What area were you in?”

“Most of my time was spent in Paris, though I did have a chance to tour Saint-Cirq-Lapopie and a few of the other medieval villages. I had hoped to go to Italy, but I never got the chance.”

“There’s nothing quite like the Mediterranean. If you ever make it, tour Southern Italy’s Amalfi Coast.”

“Not Rome?” she asks, smirking in a way that borders on flirtatious.

“Everyone goes to Rome. If you’re looking for an experience that will change you, go south.”

What has this well-traveled, romantic man done with my Jonathan? Not that he’s mine in particular. No, I mean the team’s Jonathan. *Our* Jonathan.

Like a pet.

“Is that where you’re from?” she asks. “Italy?”

“My heritage is a mishmash of many ethnicities. My great, great grandfather was rumored to be Spanish, but the rest of mother’s family hailed from various parts of South America. My dad’s a true blue, American mutt. Mother claims we’re mostly Brazilian on her side.”

Lies, lies, lies. Like most Aparians, there’s likely a little human blood in Jonathan’s family tree, but he’s as alien to this world as I am. Wherever Jonathan gets his dark hair, chocolate eyes, and delicious tanned skin, it was beyond the thresholds, in a place we’ve never seen. As foreign as Wonderland.

It hits me quite suddenly that it’s a strange thing, knowing I’m meant to rule over a land I’ve never set foot in and can’t even imagine.

As if remembering I’m standing next to him, playing the role of his wife, Jonathan smoothly slides an arm around my waist. “I’d like to take Madeline to Brazil some day.” He meets my eyes. “Maybe to a resort on the beach, somewhere secluded that looks out over the ocean. Just the two of us.”

Um. Yes, please.

“That sounds lovely,” Jenna says, her voice wistful.

After giving myself a mental slap, I yank my gaze from Jonathan, set my

plate of crepes aside, and drain the rest of my coffee in one gulp.

“Go now,” Elizabeth says, rejoining the conversation. “Before you have children. Everyone should live a little before they fully settle down. I never got the chance, but I wouldn’t change it for the world.”

“What do you say, Madeline?” Jonathan asks playfully. “Should we fly to Brazil? Lie on the beach all day? Dance in the sultry night air when it gets too dark to swim?”

Cue breathless swooning.

“I’d like that,” I say lightly, doing my best not to visualize *that* little picture. My best fails, and my cheeks warm.

Jonathan narrows his eyes slightly, and he gives me the strangest look, one that has me subtly checking the placement of his hand, making sure he’s not in my head. But his palm rests harmlessly at my side, a layer of fabric separating us.

“Maybe someday I’ll be fortunate enough to meet a man as dotting as you,” Jenna says, giving Jonathan a come-hither smile that would make me grit my teeth if he were truly mine. Without another word, she walks back to the kitchen, sashaying her hips ever so slightly as she goes.

Another guest calls to Elizabeth, and our hostess excuses herself as well.

“Guess who’s Aparian,” Jonathan practically sings in my ear.

I turn to him, surprised. “Jenna?”

Noticing my cup is empty, he pours me more coffee. “Now guess what she is.”

“Peacock,” I deadpan, referring to the faction that’s known for nothing but beauty.

He snorts out a laugh. “Worse. She’s a Heron.”

A weather conjurer.

“Are you sure?” I demand.

Jonathan gives me a look, the kind that asks why I’m doubting his superior Griffony skills.

“So when you were flirting with her, you were actually trying to pique her interest so she’d attempt to pursue you?”

He gives me a long look, the kind where one eyebrow crooks ever so slightly. “I wasn’t flirting with her.”

“Please.” I make a scoffing noise and mimic, “*If you’re looking for an experience that will change you, go south.*” I roll my eyes and take a long sip of coffee. “I won’t even mention all the talk of beaches and oceans and

dancing in the dark.”

Laughing just once—a sound that’s more of a low snort than a laugh—he takes the precious mug from my hands, sets it on the table behind me, and steps in so close I find myself swallowing. “I thought you’d realized—I wasn’t flirting with her. I was flirting with *you*.”

It’s such a Jonathan thing to say, nothing new. But the way he’s looking at me, with his lips slightly parted in a small smile and eyes intent on mine... that is new.

And scary.

And if I’m honest...I kind of like it.

But Finn hurt me, Gray was bound to, and Rafe and I have this magic thing I need to figure out.

Oh, and let’s not forget that Jonathan doesn’t do relationships.

“Excuse me, *Mr. Kingman*,” Gray says from beside us, scaring me so badly I let out a peep of surprise.

Where did he come from? Darn Wolf has the stealth of a Fox.

Either that, or we were just that distracted.

The perfect picture of guilt, we stumble apart. Jonathan composes himself before I do. “Hello, Gray.”

“I hope I haven’t caught you at a bad time, *sir*,” the leader of our team says, deadly serious as he plays the role of Jonathan’s personal assistant. His eyes, however, glimmer with something less than friendly. “You have the phone conference in twenty minutes, and I wanted to make sure you remembered.”

“Of course,” Jonathan says, nodding. “The phone conference.”

Yes, the *phone conference*. Or as I like to call it, Meeting Time with the Big, Bad Wolf.

I TRAIL Jonathan and Gray up to our room, listening to them jabber about a fictional business. We step inside and find Eric and Rafe waiting for us. Rafe stands by the balcony, looking outside, on guard as always. I pause when I see him, my stomach still in knots from last night’s closet escapade.

Eric sits on the bed, cradling Charles, telling him what a good kitty he is.

“What is he *wearing*?” I demand, gaping at my fussy hairless cat. He’s

dressed in an orange pet sweater straight from a cheap department store. And if that's not enough, he's wearing a *pumpkin hat* with his ears sticking out. It even has a little green stem crocheted on top. If anyone but the Bunny tried to put that on him, they'd look like a pincushion.

"It's festive," Eric says, holding the cat up for further inspection. Under the Bunny spell, Charles simply yawns and lets Eric show him off. He looks like a well-weathered, hairless gnome that outgrew his pumpkin home and decided to carry it with him like a hermit crab.

"It's disturbing," Jonathan mutters, a sentiment that the other two men in the room heartily agree with.

I point at Eric. "When we're done here, I'm staging an intervention."

The big, burly Bunny chuckles like I'm joking.

I'm not.

The men begin talking about Phillip's death, but I walk to my knight. He turns his head when I'm near. Things are...awkward, which I guess means he's feeling a little out of sorts as well.

As soon as I reach him, he says, "I'm sorry about last night."

Rafe's looking straight ahead, out the window, avoiding eye contact. I rub the back of my neck, uncomfortable.

What got into us? Why does our magic have so much influence?

"Me too," I say.

Finally, he looks at me. "It was a mistake. We'll be more careful from now on."

Nodding, I agree.

We study each other for a few moments, and then we each relax as we put the ordeal behind us.

"Look here." I dig into my pocket and produce my cell, wagging it back and forth in the air. "I remembered my phone."

"Good girl. Would you like a cookie?"

"Do you have one?"

He chuckles and then looks back out the window and frowns. Just above a whisper so as not to draw attention from the other three in the room, he says, "We have a small problem."

I step next to him, almost close enough my arm presses against his shoulder. I breathe in the light, now-familiar, fragrance of his aftershave, and our magic winds together, making me feel stronger. Right even.

It's irking me in a big way.

“They’ve followed you.” Rafe subtly nods his chin toward the forest at the back of the house. It takes me a moment, but I see the creatures there, in the wooded shadows. They’re too well hidden to see what they are, but they’re small, far smaller than the winged cats. And there are lots of them.

“I’ve already sent away a goblin,” I admit. “The day before yesterday.”

Rafe turns to me, frowning, his forehead knitting. “How did you lose Jonathan?”

I suck on my bottom lip, hesitant to tell him. From the way his mouth opens with surprise, I realize I won’t have to.

Disbelief shadows his expression, and he looks at me like I’m the most foolish girl alive. And maybe I am. But I don’t regret telling Jonathan.

“I trust him,” I whisper. As I say the words, I glance at the Griffon. He’s sitting on the end of the bed, hands resting behind him, perfectly at ease in his designer jeans and soft, blue knit shirt. The clothing is expensive but casual—a necessity when it comes to pretending you’re a gazillionaire, and he wears it well.

Sensing me looking at him, he turns his attention to me, and our eyes meet. He gives me a smirk. It’s a soft smirk. A warm smirk. A smirk that says I’m the only girl in the world. An honest-to-goodness smolder.

Darn it, he’s good. And he’s doing it on purpose.

I bite back a smile, rolling my eyes and holding in a laugh.

His smile grows, and then he turns back to Gray and continues their conversation like he’d been fully engrossed in it the whole time.

“Besides,” I say to Rafe, my eyes still on Jonathan. “All it took was a few minutes alone, and he was already asking questions, already seeing through my lies.”

Rafe shakes his head. “I knew it was a bad idea to leave you with the Griffon.”

It’s the worry in the knight’s tone that makes me nervous. I turn back to him. “You trust him, don’t you? He’s your friend?”

The knight’s hand finds my elbow, a subtle touch that brings us closer—anchors us together. Though it makes my magic swell with pleasure, it makes me jittery.

“I would trust him with my life,” Rafe answers. “But not with yours.”

“I can’t hide in my parents’ house forever,” I point out. “I do have to live. It might get messy—I know that. But you can’t expect me to stay locked in my tower.”

He nods, a resigned smile ghosting across his lips. “Just be careful who you let your hair down for, princess.”

“Not you too.”

The fact that he still calls me Lexie is bad enough. Rafe does not need to adopt Gray’s snarky pet name for me as well.

My knight drops my elbow like he’s going to step back, but he leans in, making sure only I will hear him. “Haven’t you realized it yet? You *are* a princess.”

I glance outside, worrying my lip as I search the trees. “And monsters are my subjects. Quite the honor.”

An enigmatic look crosses his face, and he steps closer. “Just say the word, and I’ll make you a queen.”

His words, along with our magic twining, make me shiver. After the sensation passes, I meet his gaze. “Sometimes you worry me, Fox.”

He grins, and his dark blue eyes spark with humor. “I just like to keep you on your toes. After all, you’re the one who always claims to be bored to death.”

“More like scared to death. I know those creatures won’t attack me. But what about the humans? Or the team? Maybe I *should* hide at home, even if it’s just to keep the people around me safe.”

Of course, when I stay home, there are “crocodiles” in the neighbors’ pools and reports of golden-eyed wolves prowling at night.

Rafe doesn’t answer, not even to idly assure me everything will be all right. I step away from him, needing to break the connection.

I join the team’s conversation just in time to hear Gray say to Jonathan, “Find a way to get close to Jenna; see what you can learn.”

Jonathan glances at me, frowning ever so slightly. “Shouldn’t we wait for her to come to me?”

“When do you wait for a girl to come to you?” Gray demands. “This is a cake assignment—you were *born* for this assignment. Go be all the player you can be.”

“Right.” Jonathan shakes off whatever is plaguing him and gives us his signature devil-may-care smile. “Shouldn’t be too hard.”

“Good. Now all of you out,” Gray says, his tone authoritative—almost like he’s begging someone to argue with him. “I need to talk to Madeline. Alone.”

“AND WHY EXACTLY DO YOU need to talk to Madeline?” I ask after the men shuffle out of the room, one more reluctant than the others.

Gray crosses his arms, raising a single brow. “Did you just refer to yourself in the third person?”

“Never mind that.”

I have no idea what Gray needs, but I know his time is limited. It was hard enough convincing Rafe to leave me alone with the Wolf. I’m not sure how long he’ll stay gone.

“I’ve made many bad decisions in my life,” Gray says without a preamble. “Some of them I regret more than others. Some I don’t regret at all.”

I wait, arms crossed, wondering where he’s going with this. He pauses, studying me as if he hasn’t actually seen me for months. He looks different in the suit and tie he’s wearing for his personal assistant persona, a little more intimidating. Scary handsome. Dark hair, icy blue eyes, broad shoulders, broken dreams.

The memory of our kiss flits into my mind, making me sad. The distance I’ve put between us never had anything to do with a lack of chemistry.

He shifts his weight. “And while you are one I don’t regret—won’t regret—I’m sorry things are like this between us now. I hate it.”

I wish I’d known this was the kind of conversation he had in mind. I would have run.

I’m not good at dealing with these things—these emotional things. My magic wraps around my body, itching to cloak me and hide me away. But it’s too light in the south-facing room.

“I...” I bite my lip, working out my words. “I don’t want to go back to the way things were between us.”

“I know.” He steps forward. “And I understand that—I respect that. But you need to know you weren’t just another girl to me. And I’m sorry that you ever thought you were.”

Part of me wants to cross the room, throw myself into his arms. He’d have me; I know it. But something holds me back, and it’s not that I don’t believe him. Because I do.

After a few moments, I nod, accepting his apology. It’s all I can give him.

The Wolf continues to study me, and finally, he frowns. “What’s going on with you and Rafe?”

There it is, the actual reason I’m here—the real reason the chasm fell between Gray and me. Rafe. My knight. His former best friend.

The man he brutally betrayed.

“He’s a friend,” I answer, though I still don’t know if that’s true. Rafe has done a fantastic job of distancing himself mentally while nearly smothering me physically.

“Friends aren’t that protective, princess.”

Despite myself, I smile at the nickname and the affectionate way he says it. Lately, it’s been more a dagger than an endearment.

“We’re not dating—if that’s where this oh-so-casual hinting is leading.”

Gray straightens, shaking his head, putting on a surprised face even if he’s so very guilty. “What? No. That’s not—”

“I’m not seeing anyone. I’m taking a break.”

“A break?” His hand moves to the back of his neck. “A break from what?”

“Men.”

He cocks his head to the side, not believing me. “So you’re not flitting between Rafe and Jonathan to make me jealous?”

A laugh bubbles from my chest, warming me. I let it out, reveling in the feel of...happiness.

Weird.

I had no idea what a burden this tension between us was, but now that we’re making amends, it’s lifting, making me feel about a hundred times lighter.

“I take it that’s a no,” he says wryly.

“Have you always been this narcissistic?”

“Pretty much,” he deadpans.

“Oh, right. It’s a Wolf thing.” I grin so he knows the jab is a friendly one. After several moments, he steps forward, extending his hand as if he expects me to shake it.

“What is that?” I eye him. “What are you doing?”

“My name’s Gray.”

“Um...yeah. I know.” I give him a weird look.

Undaunted, he steps closer, hand still stretched toward me. “We’re starting over. *My name is Gray.*”

What a strange olive branch.

Slowly, I step forward. “Madeline.”

He gives my hand a firm, friendly shake. “Welcome to my team, Madeline.” He meets my eyes, smiling. “We’re happy to have you.”

And...*oh*. The words hit me right in the heart, even make my eyes sting a little.

Refusing to get all emotional about something so stupid, I step back. “Do you mean that?”

“I do.”

I wonder if he’d feel the same way if he knew I was his sworn enemy, if he knew I could command the creatures of shadows, open the thresholds, make his life an honest-to-goodness nightmare.

“We have a few rules,” he says.

I raise an eyebrow. “Yes, I’m aware. No persuasion or charisma. No bunny in a hat tricks.”

“No dating members of the team. We’re a family. We respect each other. As I well know, romantic affairs cause everything from tension to turmoil, and I don’t want that for us.”

He’s making the rule for me, to put me at ease—to reassure me that he’ll treat me just like one of the guys and won’t pursue me again.

Oddly enough, it kind of works.

“Thank you, Gray,” I whisper. “Truly.”

He nods. “Now get out there and catch the bad guy.”

“Or bad gal?” I smirk. “I’ll do my best.”

I start to leave, but Gray calls my name, making me look back. “Hmmm?”

“Watch Jonathan’s back, all right? Make sure he doesn’t get in too far over his head with all this.”

“Awww.” I dramatically bring a fist to my chest as if overwhelmed by emotion. “It’s sweet you’re worried about him.”

The Wolf shakes his head, trying not to smile, and points at the door, dismissing me.

“You do realize this is my room, right?” I tease.

“Get to work, princess.”

“WHAT DID HE WANT?” Rafe asks when I meet him at the back of the mansion.

I glance at my knight as we make our way to the forest. Hopefully no one will see us together. I’m not sure what kind of scandal there will be if I get caught sneaking into the woods with “the help.”

“Lots of things.” I stare ahead, into the shadows. “Firstly, he questioned my recent promiscuous behavior.”

Rafe turns to me, startled. “Promiscuous?”

I shake my head, smiling to myself. “He thought I was using you and Jonathan to purposely taunt him—to get back at him. Though that’s ridiculous. After all, he really didn’t *do* anything. I decided to step back.”

Rafe makes a scoffing noise, this one rather dark. I turn my head, meeting my knight’s eyes. “What?”

“Nothing.”

“That was not a nothing sort of snort.”

He walks next to me, tall and handsome, dark hair short and tamed, eyes on the forest. “I’d like to think that if you were using me to get back at Gray, we’d do a more convincing job of it.”

My stomach clenches, and I stop at the edge of the woods, just far enough into the trees we shouldn’t be visible from the house.

What was *that*? And what did it mean?

Immediately, my mind travels to the storage closet. It was a mistake—we both agreed on it. And yet...

I eye him. “If I did a better job of it, it wouldn’t be because of Gray.”

“Don’t,” Rafe says abruptly, his voice growing darker as he turns toward me. “Don’t say things like that.”

“Why?” I’m exhausted of the game our magic is playing. Sometimes, I

just want to give in.

“Because we *can*’t.”

I cross my arms, tilting my head to the side, more curious than anything. “Do you want me, Rafe? Even a little bit?”

His nostrils flare. “No.”

He’s as convincing a liar as I am.

“So you don’t feel it?” I make him meet my eyes. “This pull? This desperation to be close?”

With a clenched jaw, he shakes his head.

“Lucky you.” I look away, irritated.

“It’s the magic,” he says finally. “It’s intoxicating. But you don’t feel that way about me, Madeline. It just wants you to think you do.”

And I know that—I do. But when I’m with him it’s all-consuming. And I think it’s getting worse.

I nudge him with my elbow as we continue through the brush. “You called me Madeline.”

He smiles. “Sorry about that, Lexie. It won’t happen again.”

I glance at him, feeling wicked. “Oh, look at that. He jokes. What’s it been? Three months?”

The knight chuckles under his breath, making me feel a little better. The tension is more bearable now.

With my eyes on the brush, I reluctantly say, “I need to ask you something.”

There’s a short pause before Rafe finally makes a noise of agreement.

“In history, did Obsidian Queens ever marry?”

“Obviously. Otherwise, you wouldn’t exist.”

I flash him an amused smile. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but I believe there have been children born out of wedlock before.”

The trees and brush grow thicker, and fallen leaves and twigs snap and shift under our feet. There’s a crisp quality to the air, something that makes the forest feel fresh, soothing. Everything is falling asleep for the impending winter.

“They married,” Rafe answers. “It was usually a political betrothal, similar to the arrangements made by humans in royal families.”

“But how? How did they stay away from their knights?”

I’m admitting more than I want to, but it’s not like he doesn’t already know.

He pulls me back with a hand on my arm. “Do you want the truth?”

“The truth? *No*,” I scoff lightly. “I want you to lie.”

Rafe smirks as he holds up a scrawny, low-hanging limb so I can pass. “Obsidian knights were noble. They stepped aside, protected without letting feelings interfere.”

I peer at him as I duck under the branch. “Is that the lie or the truth?”

“That’s the lie.”

“Then what’s the truth?” I come to a stop in the middle of the deer trail.

“The truth is more complicated.” Rafe waits for me to look over, and his gaze locks on mine when I finally comply. “I’m afraid it most often involved clandestine meetings, dark bedrooms, and forbidden unions.”

My knees weaken, but I keep my balance. His words bring forth a few interesting mental pictures that I definitely need to block.

“And do you know what happened the last time?” he asks.

The scent of evergreens and fallen leaves surrounds us, and the foliage protects us from prying eyes.

“What?” I say, wondering if I want to know.

“The queen who entered into a relationship with her knight gave too much of herself, allowed him too much of her power. It drove him mad, and he took control—murdered hundreds, forced himself onto the throne.” He pauses. “The thresholds were destroyed because of a queen and her knight.”

I stare at him, processing the information.

He steps closer, still not touching me. “Can you guess the moral of the story?”

“Don’t be evil?”

“You can have *all* of me,” he says, ignoring me, “but I can’t be trusted with *any* of you—so don’t tempt me.”

I blink at him. “Do you think any of that is going to happen to us?”

“No.” He takes several steps back. “I won’t let it. We will never link our magic—it’s too dangerous.”

“And if I were to kiss you, say right now, our magic would link?”

He watches me, his dark blue gaze locked on mine. I can feel the answer—my magic is begging to merge with his.

After a moment, I look away, unable to hold his gaze any longer, and then lightly say, “Tell me the truth. Are you using me for my power? Is that why you’re actually shadowing me?”

“Oh, Lexie.” A grim smile spreads across his face. “If I were using you,

rest assured I wouldn't be keeping my distance."

Due to the content of this fun, impromptu history lesson, those words shouldn't make my stomach clench. But they do.

Rafe makes to walk away, but I pull the knight back with a hand on his shoulder. "Do you think I'm foolish? For not opening the thresholds?" Then I finally admit a thought that's been heavy on my mind since that madman Curtis revealed my magic. "Sometimes I wonder if people—our people—on the other side are suffering. Like maybe I'm supposed to save them from the darkness we created and locked on that side."

Big words, little Fox.

Rafe's eyes search mine. "Do you think you're foolish?"

"I don't know," I whisper. "I don't want to release a tsunami of evil here. Obviously. But what if there's a greater purpose? What if I'm supposed to *do* something? Something only I can do?"

A hint of a wicked smile plays at Rafe's lips. "I don't see a lightning bolt on your forehead. No lightsaber thrust into your hand. No ring in your pocket you're destined to destroy."

I let out a soft laugh, grateful. "I'm being ridiculous, aren't I?"

"I don't know."

At least he's honest. Which is ironic, considering he's a Fox.

After a moment, I shake my head, stepping forward. "Last night's lack of sleep is making me fanciful."

Rafe never answers. He follows, protecting my back, watching out for me as usual.

"All right," I call, setting my hands on my hips, stopping in what I hope is a safe spot. "Out with you."

One by one, tiny winged creatures flit from the bushes, hovering in front of me. With their diminutive size, gossamer wings, and ethereal appearance, humans would probably call the creatures fairies. But they're shrouded in darkness, with golden eyes like the rest of their shadow kin.

As always, they eye Rafe, suspicious of his presence. A few hiss, sounding much like Charles when he goes on a car trip.

"What are they?" I ask the knight, at a loss.

He gives me a sideways look. "Fairies."

Well, what do you know—I guess we call them fairies too.

More and more reveal themselves until we're nearly surrounded. Their wings move the air, creating a sound like a swarm of angry bees.

The creatures are unsettling, especially with the way they dart back and forth, moving too quickly to track.

“Leave as soon as it grows dark,” I command, growing bored of the same old line. “Back to your homes. Harm no one on your way.”

They involuntarily bow as the magic washes over them, and then they disappear into the trees and bushes, hiding until they can fly away undetected.

I stand here for several moments, making sure they are out of sight.

“This must stop,” I say to Rafe as we turn back the way we came, returning to the mansion. “Someone is going to see them if they just keep showing up like this.”

“If only they’d call first,” he says, flashing me a smirk that makes my pulse jump.

Before I can respond, he sets his hand on my arm, drawing me back. His eyes are focused on something in the garden on the other side of the trees. I follow his gaze, wondering what’s caught his attention and half-worried some poor fool is going to take our same path and be carried away by the pint-sized demon fairies.

I frown when I take in the scene in front of me. Jonathan stands halfway between the woods and the mansion, in the shade of a gazebo by a creek that I’m ninety-nine percent sure is man-made. Jenna the Storm-creating Heron is with him. She laughs at something he says, leaning forward to absently press her hand against his arm as if she just can’t help herself.

Which is just absurd because Jonathan isn’t that funny. And what is with all these women fawning over the Griffon?

I narrow my eyes at the pair, glad to be hidden in the forest. My magic swells as it tries to cloak me, just like it always does when my emotions run a little higher than usual.

“What’s this?” Rafe says, looking at me instead of the couple in front of us. “I’d almost think you like him.”

I turn to the Fox. He wears a strange expression, curious perhaps. Maybe even a little jealous—but that’s likely the magic talking.

“Don’t be absurd. It’s *Jonathan*.”

The Griffon’s not part of the equation, and he never has been. Gray, Rafe—those are the two I have to guard my heart against. Not Jonathan. He’s just...

He’s just Jonathan.

And let's be honest. Even if I did feel a teeny, tiny tug toward him—*which I don't*—he didn't kiss me back.

There's nothing more foolish than spending your time pining after a man who doesn't want you.

"There's just something about that woman that rubs me the wrong way," I tell Rafe, studying the pretty Heron. "And considering she's the only Aparian Jonathan's seen since we've been here, she very well might be the one behind the death and disappearances."

Unless it's Olivia, though I can't back that theory up.

"I guess we'll just have to see if she tries to seduce him," Rafe answers.

Right.

But what about Rafe and me? Right now, we're stuck in the forest, with a swarm of seriously creepy evil fairies at our backs.

"We can help things along," Rafe offers. "If you want."

I look at my knight, slightly unsettled by his offhanded tone. "How?"

He turns to me. "Give me your boot."

"My...boot?"

He makes an impatient "gimme" motion with his hand, much like a demanding toddler. Since he seems adamant, I set my hand on his shoulder and do as he asks.

"Do you remember when you said you wanted that new pair you saw in the magazine?" he asks as he turns the boot over, clasping the three-inch heel. "The one you were looking at when we were sitting in your living room a few weeks ago?"

Way to narrow it down. That's all we've done for the last three months. He's watched games, and I've flipped through countless magazines, showing him dozens of shoes. And dresses. Scarves. Earrings. Makeup—

"What are you *doing*?" I hiss as Rafe takes my three-hundred-dollar, brown suede, goes-with-everything, knee-high boot, and *snaps the heel off*. "Rafe!"

"I'll buy you the new pair." Ever so casually, he tosses the heel into the bushes behind him as I hyperventilate.

I fist my hand in his shirt, yanking him toward me. "What is *wrong* with you?"

He purses his lips, looking very much like he's trying not to laugh—which is wise because the knight's only one stupid move away from being punched. Then, as if he can't help himself, he feels the need to point out,

“You didn’t even get this upset when you received Finn’s wedding invitation.”

“You’re walking a thin line, knight.”

My magic hits me all of a sudden, magnetized to his. I realize how close we are. His breath is on my lips—soft, warm, tantalizing.

Rafe must feel it too because his expression grows darker. He shifts closer. “A thin line? And just what will you do if I cross that line? Do you think you can take me?”

And the strangest thing happens. My magic screams at me to close the distance between us—leap into his arms, wrap my legs around his waist, kiss him with wild, passionate abandon.

But...no. My head won’t have it.

And it’s not because we could create mass pandemonium. Nope. It’s because he *snapped the bloody heel clean off my favorite boot*.

I step back, practically panting. “Why did you murder my shoe?”

Rafe looks just as rattled as me. “You can’t murder something that isn’t alive.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s already lifeless—”

“No,” I interrupt, wondering if my elemental magic is strong enough to call up a fireball.

Scratch that. I’d probably end up burning down the forest.

“Why did you rip the heel off my boot?” I clarify.

As if remembering his purpose, Rafe hands me back the mutilated shoe. “Put this on.”

“It’s worthless now.”

Still flustered, he steps close—too close—and very carefully says, “You have three seconds to put on that ridiculous boot, or I swear I will push you against the closest tree and kiss you to oblivion and back.”

Do I picture it? Yes, I do—twigs jabbing into my back and all. But do I debate it?

Yep, I do that too.

My mouth goes suspiciously dry as I take the boot from his hand and slip it onto my foot. “Happy?”

He meets my gaze, and I can see the want there. The desire. The let’s-destroy-the-world-now-and-think-about-the-consequences-later glint in his eyes.

“Not especially,” he finally answers.

We stare at each other for the longest time, and I end up shaking my head. “This is insane.”

Rafe exhales, stretching his neck. “It is.”

“I don’t even like you.”

He raises an eyebrow.

“I mean, I like you,” I amend. “I just don’t...*like you*, like you.”

It’s like we’re twelve years old all over again.

“I understand.” He offers his arm. “Now let’s try to control it long enough to hobble to the garden.”

We follow our path, and I try not to trip over any exposed roots or rocks. Jonathan sees us when we break free of the forest, and his face shadows with concern.

“Madeline?” He abruptly leaves Jenna. “What happened?”

“She broke a heel.” Rafe pushes me just a little further from him, pretending to look uncomfortable when he spots my *husband*.

“I was taking a walk,” I say, glancing at Rafe, figuring out what his angle is. I raise my voice just slightly, making sure it carries to the gazebo. “This nice...kitchen boy...found me and aided me back to the estate.” I let out a fluttery, guilty laugh—one that I hope sounds like a cheating wife who desperately wants to appear innocent.

“Kitchen boy?” Rafe whispers under his breath.

“I haven’t had as much practice at this as you,” I hiss back.

Jenna joins us, looking from me to Rafe, frowning. “You were taking a nature walk in heels?”

Her tone is nothing less than condescending.

I smile, really disliking her a whole bunch. “I can do all kinds of things in heels.” I glance at my faux husband and give him a come-hither look. “Just ask Jonathan.”

The Heron raises her brows and looks at my poor, broken shoe. “Apparently all kinds of things except walk through the woods.”

I was doing just fine until Rafe came along, thank you very much. But seeing as how I can’t tell her that, I bite my tongue and slip off the other boot, stepping onto the smooth, paved walkway.

“Let’s get you back to the room.” Jonathan holds out his hand, playing the part of the dotting, naive husband. I take it and step to his side.

Then, to really sell it, Jonathan pulls out his wallet and flicks Rafe a

hundred. “Thanks for the help.”

Rafe pockets the money. “Anytime, sir.”

Knowing Jenna’s studying us like the nosy little fowl she is, the dark knight then lets his eyes linger over me in a subtly seductive way—like he’s thinking all kinds of illicit thoughts and can’t wait to get me alone again.

He does it well enough it makes even me uncomfortable, and *I* know this is a game. I take a step closer to Jonathan. “Can we go inside now?”

“Of course.” Without so much as a warning, the Griffon leans down and scoops me into his arms. I let out a tiny yelp and throw my arms around his neck, gaping at him.

Jonathan’s chocolate eyes meet mine. They crease at the edges, shining with amusement. “Wouldn’t want my bride to get a thorn in her foot.”

Jenna scoffs under her breath—an excellent sign. Not only is she jealous, she now hates me.

“Over the top much?” I whisper as Jonathan carries me away.

He chuckles. “No one can say I’m not committed.”

I glance back at Rafe. He watches us leave, his arms crossed and his expression enigmatic.

“WHY IS it you always seem to end up carrying me around?” I ask Jonathan when we’re almost to the balcony terrace that looks out over the garden.

“Because you’re constantly hurting yourself or busting your shoes. Either way, it usually has something to do with those wicked heels you insist on wearing.”

“I was wearing ballet flats in Tahoe,” I point out, though technically I was barefoot when I sliced my foot open, running from the demented pixie.

He pauses, meeting my eyes. “Fine, it’s not the heels. But you have to admit you’re very good at finding clever ways to end up in my arms.”

“This was Rafe’s doing.”

Jonathan raises his eyebrows, curious.

I scowl. “He snapped my heel.”

He lets out an incredulous chuckle. “Brave soul. I would think that goes in the same category as ordering you tea instead of coffee.”

Not that it isn’t enjoyable being carried around by my handsome not-husband, but I grow extremely conscious of his hand on my thigh through the lightweight fabric of my skirt, so I tap him on the shoulder. “I think it’s safe to set me down now.”

“Oh, you want down, do you?” He gives me a grin that’s nothing short of wicked.

“Jonathan, don’t you dare—”

I squeal as he pretends to drop me. After I catch my breath, I point at him, my finger close to his face. “Not funny.”

“Come on.” He flashes me an innocent look that would have grandmothers everywhere handing him cookies. “It was kind of funny...”

And he does it again.

“Jonathan!” I laugh despite myself, clutching his shoulders to keep my balance. “Put me down.”

“Hmmm...no.” His smile grows.

I squirm in his arms, trying to twist away, but there’s iron under that designer shirt. And he’s enjoying himself a little too much.

“Why do I get the feeling you have siblings you grew up torturing?”

“Because I did,” he says matter-of-factly. “Seven of them.”

The only child part of me recoils. “Seven?”

“And every one of them a girl.”

It seems he might be done with the game, so I relax in his arms. “You don’t just have seven siblings...you have seven sisters?”

“Alanna, Cortina, Georgianna, Salina, Katerina, Morgana, and Fauna. Ironically, Fauna married a Deer, and they have a five-year-old daughter named Bambi.”

“Are you serious?” I ask.

“Unfortunately.”

“Where do you fit in there?”

“I’m the baby.” He smirks. “My parents kept having children until perfection was met.”

We’re on the balcony now, and it’s been swept recently. Jonathan could let me down. But I ignore that for now.

“How many of you are Griffons?” I ask.

“Just me.”

That’s not all that surprising considering it’s an incredibly rare gift.

“What about your parents?” Magic passes through blood, just like genes. In order to get a certain set of magical traits, you must have it in your family.

“Mom’s a Sparrow,” he answers. “Dad was a Dragon.”

A Passeridae and a Draconem. The first has trace amounts of magic, and the second is a master of the elements. It’s an interesting pairing.

“The Griffon must come from your mother’s side then?”

Because the Sparrow guild is for all those who are only moderately gifted, no matter their magic type, anyone of any faction can have a Sparrow child. Just like anyone can have an Ostrich—a child as free of magic as a human.

Jonathan nods as we near the garden doors—two massive French-style creations that lead out to the balcony.

“How far back was the last Griffon?”

From what I understand, there can be several in every generation, or there might be centuries between them. It depends on the bloodline.

“If our family records are accurate, about a hundred twenty years ago,” he says, looking ahead. “My distant grandfather was a Griffon.”

“What faction did your sisters end up in? Are they Sparrows or Dragons?”

Even with the doors open, it’s warmer in the house than outside. The sun shines brightly, but there’s a definite chill in the air. Jonathan carries me in a few feet and then sets me down on the rug just past the entry.

“They’re all Dragons,” he says, which makes sense because elemental magic is such a dominant gene. “All except Morgana, who’s a Sparrow. Dad said she didn’t practice enough.”

He laughs, knowing it doesn’t work that way—*everyone* knows it doesn’t work that way. But Dragons are stubborn.

And I should know. I dated one, even contemplated marrying him. Now the reptile is marrying my former best friend.

“So let me get this straight,” I say. “You grew up in a household with a bunch of girls who can wield copious quantities of fire?”

“And ice, water—”

“Did they ever get close to leveling the house?”

Jonathan laughs, heading in the direction of the stairs. “Just about every week, especially since Cortina has a raging temper, and she favors lightning. Thankfully Katerina and Fauna specialize in earth.” He gives me a sidelong glance. “You could say they keep her *grounded*.”

“That was so cheesy.”

“Really?” He walks in front of me, going up the stairs backward. “I thought it was pretty good.”

“You were wrong.”

He grins, making his eyes crinkle, which in turn makes his handsome face even more appealing—if that’s even possible. “You still want me.”

I shake my head, rolling my eyes, trying not to laugh because that will only encourage him.

We head to our room so I can change my shoes, and once the door is safely closed behind us, I say, “You and Jenna looked cozy.”

“So did you and Rafe.”

I turn, setting my hands on my hips. “Do you think he and I pulled it

off?”

Jonathan shrugs. “I believed it.”

It’s a strange thing to say, especially when he’s frowning at his phone, only half-looking at me.

I realize that the sight of his “wife” coming out of the forest in a state of disarray with one of the mansion’s waiters might have been a blow to his ego.

“I’m sorry, Jonathan. I was just playing the part,” I say softly. “We were trying to make her feel indignant on your behalf.”

He looks up, smiling with his eyebrow half-cocked like he can’t figure out why I’m apologizing. “Yeah, I know. You did well.”

Maybe I imagined it after all.

I turn from him, walking toward the balcony. “What do you know of the Obsidian Queen?”

The question startles Jonathan enough he doesn’t answer right away. After a moment, he asks, “What do you want to know?”

“Specifically, I want to know about the Obsidian Knight.”

“Rafe.”

I look over my shoulder, frowning, and then I nod.

Jonathan tosses his phone on the bed. “I don’t know much.”

I look out past the forest, to the mountains beyond. It must have snowed recently because there are patches of white up high. It will stay there until spring. “Our magic keeps trying to manipulate us.”

He sits on the bed, likely as exhausted as I am from our sleepless night. “Manipulate you how?”

Sighing, I turn back to face him. “It keeps trying to pull us together.”

The Griffon frowns, not understanding.

“Like romantically, and yet it’s not, because I don’t feel that way about him. This is more…”

“Physical,” Jonathan supplies, raising his eyebrows, his eyes bright with humor.

“Yeah.”

He leans back, resting his hands behind him, pressing into the soft mattress. “And I assume that’s a problem for you?”

I cross the room and sit next to him, sighing when I sink into the comforter. “He said things went very badly when the last Obsidian Queen and her knight became involved.”

Slowly, he nods. “They raised the army that led us to destroy the

thresholds.”

“How do you raise a dark army?” I muse out loud.

He nudges me. “Is that a general question or *research*?”

I flash him a look, and he smirks, letting me know he’s only teasing. Together we sit in silence, me lost in my thoughts and Jonathan in his. After a few moments, I look back at him. “How do you destroy a threshold?”

Jonathan looks a tiny bit uncomfortable, any trace of mirth leaving his face. “You unravel the magic that holds them together, weave it in a knot, make a total mess.”

There’s something about the way he’s looking at me that catches my attention. I study him. “You have to see magic to be able to do that.”

“You do.”

“It was a Griffon,” I murmur. “A Griffon destroyed the thresholds, trapping the queen and her army on the other side.”

The knight’s chocolate eyes lock on mine, but he doesn’t respond. Slowly, it clicks into place.

“Jonathan, you said the last Griffon in your family lived about a hundred years ago.”

Coincidence? Maybe, but it doesn’t feel like it.

The knight slowly nods.

“Was it your ancestor? Did he unravel the magic?”

The man by my side looks away, giving me a noncommittal shrug. “Well, that’s what the records say. There were too many for him to deal with personally, but he was in charge of their destruction.”

I feel like the wind has been knocked out of me, making it difficult to catch my breath.

Jonathan looks back, and his frown deepens. “Are you all right?”

“Your distant grandfather and my distant grandmother were basically sworn enemies.”

At that, a smile lights his face, and he leans closer. “Sweetheart, your distant grandmother was basically *everyone*’s sworn enemy.”

I laugh, but I still feel unsettled. Something is starting to feel very ominous. What are the chances the three of us would be tossed together by accident? And if we weren’t, what does that say about Gray and Eric? How are they connected?

“You’re thinking awfully hard about something,” Jonathan says after a moment.

“What if...” I lick my lips, scared to say what’s on my mind—scared because I don’t want to end up with a knife in my chest. “What if it’s time the thresholds were opened?”

“What?” Instantly wary, he shifts away.

“Never mind.” I shake my head. “I need more sleep.”

Suddenly, he takes me by the shoulders, leaning in close. His dark brown eyes lock on mine, concern shadowing them. “Don’t talk like that, not ever. I don’t care what your blood or your magic says, you are not one of the Entitled.”

Slowly, I nod.

“We’ve separated ourselves from Aparia to protect the humans, to create a safe place to raise our families—as we have for generations. You open those thresholds, and there will be turmoil.”

Unable to help myself, I press forward, needing him to listen. “But how do we know that? It’s been a hundred years, Jonathan. A lot changes in a century. And there’s so much darkness still trapped on this side—I know.” I lower my voice to a whisper. “It likes to visit me.”

He snorts out a laugh, and then he raises his hand, brushing a stray hair away from my face. I barely notice; I’m too trapped in my thoughts.

Princess of shadows—that’s what I am, that’s why they come.

“You don’t look like a princess of shadows,” he says, answering my inner ramblings.

I go still, realizing he’s touching me, processing the fact that his fingers are brushing across my temple. His skin is slightly calloused—a strange thing for a man as pretty as Jonathan.

“I prefer strikingly handsome to ‘pretty,’ thank you very much,” he says, easily picking up the thought through our connection. “And I’m not exactly a stranger to physical labor.”

Unbidden, I picture Jonathan, shirtless and sweaty, standing in the mountains, fixing livestock fences in the heat of summer, wildflowers growing in the meadow beyond.

He smirks. “That’s certainly a flattering picture.”

I should pull away, but his touch is light, and he’s not pushing the connection. And it feels good, this friendly contact that doesn’t demand, doesn’t expect, doesn’t *want*.

“Do they scare you?” he asks.

The monsters, the creatures, the beasts.

“A little,” I admit. I think of the fairies from earlier. There was something incredibly spooky about them. And gargoyles—they still terrify me. Thankfully, they’ve mostly kept their distance since the night on the coast.

Jonathan frowns as memories flit through my mind.

“I just wish I knew what they wanted from me,” I say, letting my mind wander over the last few months, happy to share this with him. “I wish I knew how to make them leave me alone.”

The Griffon frowns, watching the memories like they’re a documentary made just for him. He shifts closer, finding a more comfortable position.

My mind wanders to the first time Jonathan was in my head, the first time he gave me a piggy-back ride through the streets of Tahoe. Specifically, the closeness. His hands on my legs. My chest pressed against his back.

Jonathan makes a dark noise of surprise in the back of his throat.

“Sorry,” I say, jerking away, my cheeks growing hot as I flush with embarrassment.

He stands abruptly, looking incredibly uncomfortable.

“We should...” He shakes his head, probably trying to clear his thoughts. “The *wine tasting*. Yes, we should go to the wine tasting. Make an appearance.”

If he could read my mind right now, he’d know how sorry I am for making him uncomfortable, how sorry I am to lose the amicable touch that I didn’t know I’ve been craving.

He’d also know how incredibly toad-like I feel. What’s wrong with me? He’ll cozy up to any woman alive, but he completely freaks out when I come a little close to the line.

But that’s my problem, I suppose. Maybe I should ask myself why I keep stepping up to that line in the first place.

“YOU’RE SUPPOSED to spit it out,” I whisper to Jonathan, laughing under my breath. “Otherwise you’ll be trashed by the time we’re finished.”

He smirks, tips another wine sample to his lips, and downs the whole thing.

“Did you even taste it?” I ask.

We’re on a local winery’s massive lawn, and they have tables and canopies set up for the event. Many of the guests from the mansion are here, along with people staying in various places around nearby Glenwood Springs.

“I’m not really a wine kind of guy,” Jonathan says after he sets the tiny glass on the table with the rest of the discards.

“Then why did you suggest we come?”

Because you had sexy thoughts about him, and he didn’t like it.

Sure, Jonathan’s comfortable holding me around all these people, keeping his hand on my waist or back, pretending we’re still newly married, still clingy and overly affectionate.

But that’s because this is a show, and that...wasn’t.

And if he thinks he’s the only one who’s confused about where my mind wandered, then he has another think coming.

I’ve been over it a dozen times, wondering what’s wrong with me.

If I’m going to have those kinds of thoughts about anyone, it should be Rafe. After all, our magic is already kindling them.

What I shouldn’t be doing is having those thoughts about Jonathan, the man I’m spending a romantic weekend with—the man who doesn’t want me but will date any curvy, long-legged college girl who steps in his path. The

man who's becoming the closest thing to an actual friend I've had in a long, long time.

And let's be honest, if I can overlook Jonathan's philandering ways, then I might as well go back to Gray.

Guy hiatus, Madeline.

Right. This just proves that I'm not ready to move on. I'm still a mess.

Rodger and Elizabeth stop near us, musing over a sample of cherry wine. Jonathan turns to them, his arm wrapped around my waist, his thumb moving over my thin sweater.

"Found a favorite?" he asks our host and hostess.

Elizabeth swirls the sample in her hand and then takes a delicate sniff. "I liked the Zinfandel," she says, and then she smiles up at her husband. "But Rodger liked the Cabernet."

Rodger wrinkles his nose—a funny look on a distinguished man his age. "In truth, I prefer something a little stronger."

Jonathan gives them a disinterested look and holds up a small sample of the winery's signature cherry. "I've already had fifteen of these, and I'm not even buzzed."

I purse my lips, trying not to laugh. He plays nonchalant millionaire so well.

I nudge him gently in the ribs. "As I said before, that's not really the point of the outing."

He chuckles under his breath, tosses the empty glass with the rest, and tugs me to him. His hand splays across my back, keeping me firmly pressed against his chest. "You entertain yourself the way you like, and I'll entertain myself the way I like."

The light smell of his cologne surrounds me. My stomach clenches, and I'm torn between swooning or laughing at the game.

It's quite the conundrum.

And herein lies my problem. I'm afraid I'm allowing myself to become twitterpated with fake Jonathan—the role Jonathan is playing. The suave, smooth, extremely appealing man who's holding me in his arms, pretending I'm his entire world.

And what girl alive could blame me? The Griffon looks at me like he desperately wants me, like I'm the only girl he'll ever look at from this moment on. Add that to the feel of his ring on my finger and our cozy room waiting for us back at the mansion, and you have a recipe for trouble.

It's intoxicating.

But it's fake. Just a lie. A really appealing lie.

And we have a job to do—and I'm going to hurry up and do it.

I reluctantly pull myself away from Jonathan. "The police didn't stay long this morning."

Rodger cringes, obviously not wanting to speak of it. "There was no need as far as they were concerned. Phillip had a heart attack, and that was that."

"And what about you?" I ask, lowering my voice, adding a strong dose of persuasion to the words. "What do you think it was? Let's be honest, there's a lot of smoke and mirrors behind the scenes—and what an excellent job you've done. In fact, Jonathan and I were just saying this morning how this is the classiest haunted getaway we've attended. But this feels...real." I drop my voice even further. "You don't think there's an actual ghost, do you?"

Rodger glances at Elizabeth and then turns back to me, my magic affecting him. "People like to be scared—they pay well to be scared. Everyone knows these things are a farce. We hired an electrician to come in, put speakers in the guest rooms and hallways to play the ghost noise recordings and set up dimmers on all the lights, which we've set to timers. There are mirrors scattered about the mansion that occasionally show ghoulish images, random decor will suddenly float in the air—that sort of thing. It took a small fortune to install."

"So are you saying there's not a ghost?" I ask, bumping up the persuasion to keep the words flowing.

The man glances around. "That's the concerning part. We only staged the first disappearance—everything that has happened since has been unexplainable."

He swipes a napkin off the nearest table and dabs his forehead. "And now we've had a death."

Elizabeth looks at her husband, concerned. "We don't know what to do."

Here's a thought—stop inviting guests to your mansion.

"Do you have any idea who's behind it?" Jonathan asks, though his words lack a certain Foxy appeal.

Rodger frowns at him.

"Well, do you?" I ask.

Elizabeth shakes her head. "We're beginning to think it's a real ghost, that we've drawn it in with our theatrics—made it angry."

Her husband nods.

They must be telling the truth—they're not Aparians, so they can't block my magic.

"How do you create the storms?" I ask.

Again, the pair shares a glance, then Elizabeth steps forward. "We don't. They just...happen. They started before the first real disappearance."

The pair has no idea they have a magic user in their midst.

"I have one more question," I say, glancing around. When I'm satisfied that no one is near enough to hear me, I turn to Elizabeth. "Are you seducing the men? Coercing them into having an affair with you? After which, you kill them and dispose of their bodies?"

Rodger sucks in a gasp, but I hold up my hand, demanding silence.

"No," Elizabeth says, horrified, stepping back.

Hmmm. Well, there goes that.

"Forget we had this conversation," I say, making sure they each meet my eyes. "We talked about wine and vacations in the Hamptons. You like us, trust us, think we're a nice couple."

They blink at me, making me feel a little bad. But we're not going to get anywhere if I don't help things along.

"Nice chatting with you." I loop my arm through Jonathan's and tug him as I leave.

"Tsk, ts," he teases when we're several yards away. "You used a good dollop of magic on those two, didn't you?"

I turn to him. "Were they lying? Could you tell?"

I'm still not convinced there aren't more *clipeum* medallions floating around. Trent the Missing Pixie doesn't seem clever enough to find something that rare.

He shakes his head. "I can only read truth in Aparians—I watch the way magic shifts and jumps when a person is lying."

Interesting. "Can you get in their heads if you touch them?"

"Yes."

"But you can't tell if they're lying like you can with us?"

"Nope."

"Can I be honest?" I turn to face him. "That's a bit inconvenient."

Jonathan laughs. "Sorry to disappoint you."

"Have you had enough wine?" I wave to the tables.

He sets his hand on the small of my back, leading me away. "I had enough before we showed up."

The mansion is nearly empty when we return. Most people are out, enjoying the mild weather, trying to forget about the corpse that was wheeled out under a sheet before dawn.

“I want to find the mirrors Rodger was talking about,” I say, tugging on Jonathan’s sleeve, making him follow me.

“Shouldn’t we find Gray and tell him what we’ve learned?”

I turn, giving him a pleading look. “Come on. Humor me.”

We’re doing better—the awkward tension has dissipated. It’s almost like the moment in the room never happened.

Jonathan runs a hand through his thick hair. He’s torn between responsibility and pleasure. Pleasure finally wins. He nods, following me as I walk the halls.

“Maybe it only happens after dark,” Jonathan says after we stop at yet another mirror and find only our reflections in the glass.

Voices drift to us from down the hall—two women speaking. One voice is soft and fluttery; the other is rich and seductive.

Olivia and Jenna.

They turn the corner, both startled to find us standing in front of the mirror.

The picture of ease, Jonathan turns toward the women. “We heard a rumor,” he explains, giving them a sheepish shrug.

Jenna smiles at him. Just him. Him alone. “About the mirror?”

He nods.

She gives it a thoughtful look. “People say you can see our ghost in the reflection, but only in the flash of a lightning strike.”

“So not very often,” I deadpan, slightly miffed to be so thoroughly ignored.

Jenna finally looks at me, narrowing her eyes slightly, sticking her nose up in the air. She’s totally giving me the “The Snub.”

“We have a lot of *unexplained* storms, especially after dark,” she says.

Unexplained. Please.

“But I don’t suggest you wander the mansion at night, not even to see this particular phenomenon.” She continues walking and then looks back at Jonathan, singling him out. “But if you do, and you find yourself in need of anything—*anything at all*, my room is on the second floor, third door on the left.”

That weather-wielding *tramp*.

Jonathan has the decency to look uncomfortable. Olivia gives us a stunned half-smile, her eyes darting between Jonathan and Jenna. Then, with a frown, she hurries after her friend.

When they're gone, a slow, wicked grin spreads across my faux-husband's face. I press my hand over his mouth. "Don't."

His eyes flicker, and I realize he can read my extreme, and slightly irrational, annoyance.

Get out of my head, I think loud and clear.

He pulls my hand down, still looking far too amused. "Stop touching me, and I will."

I scoff, but he's got a point.

"She was lying, by the way," he says.

"So she doesn't want you to sneak into her room in the middle of the night so you can have your way with her?"

Annoyance passes over his face, and he steps closer. "Oh no—she meant that. I mean about the mirror."

"Not actually haunted, huh?" I frown, feigning disappointment. "That's a shame."

He chuckles, jamming his hands into his pockets.

"All right. Let's go arrest her." I reach into my purse. "I brought my stun gun just in case."

"What?" he asks, startled.

"Jenna. She's the only Aparian here. She's controlling the storms. And she just invited you for a midnight tryst, at which she obviously plans to end your life."

With a wicked glint in his eye, the Griffon cocks his head to the side. "Do you think I should go tonight? Just so we have evidence?"

"Is it evidence you want?"

His eyes widen with surprise, and he barks out a laugh.

I mean, *come on*. He'll consider sleeping with the murdering Heron, but he freaks out when I accidentally remember the feel of his hands on my legs? There's something very wrong here.

"You forgot something important," he says.

"What?"

He glances down the hall. "How would a Heron kill someone and make it look like a heart attack?"

I think about it for a minute, and then it all falls into place. "She shocked

him,” I say, growing excited. “With her lightning—disrupted the natural electrical current in his body.”

Jonathan stares at me, thinking it over, slowly nodding as he realizes I’m right.

Oh my gosh—I’m right.

He grabs my hand. “Come on. Let’s find the team.”

“ALL WE NEED IS A CONFESSION,” Gray says to us, and then he turns to me. “You shouldn’t have any trouble extracting that from her.”

There you go—official permission to use my magic. I give Jonathan a smirk.

The five of us are gathered outside the stables, in the corral, where Eric has decided he needs to have a therapy session with a grumpy horse that has a habit of throwing her riders. The Bunny is running the mare on a lunge line, working out all kinds of traumas and whatnot. Despite the cool evening, the man pulled off his shirt about twenty minutes ago and tossed it over the fence.

Needless to say, he’s gathered a small crowd of bored, rich women. One actually fans her face as she ogles his bulging muscles.

The woman who runs the stable sits on the fence, long braid running down her back, practically salivating. She obviously doesn’t have a problem with Eric working with her horse. She’s probably wondering how she can convince him to work on her next.

I shake my head and look back at Gray. “What do you want us to do after Jenna confesses?”

“Do you have your stun gun?”

I pull it from my back pocket, and the rhinestones glisten in the sun. Gray frowns at the weapon, glancing at Jonathan in question, and then rolls his eyes, dismissing the sparkles. “Take the Heron out and then call me.”

Rafe stands near us, on his own, pretending to watch Eric work, though he’s close enough he can hear what’s going on without making it obvious he’s part of our group. He’s silhouetted by the setting sun, which is low

though it's only early evening. It'll be dark soon.

"Find a way to get her alone at dinner," Gray instructs. "Make sure there's no one around."

I nod absently, my eyes on Eric. Broad shoulders taper to a narrow, defined waist, and his muscles ripple as he moves. His skin glistens in the setting sun, and his short hair has gone gold. Never has he looked more like a Norse god than right now.

He moves with the horse, pivoting in the center of the arena as she runs. I watch him, feeling the stress melt right from my body. I'm not sure how it's supposed to help the mare work through her anxiety, but the show is doing wonders for me.

Jonathan snaps in front of my face.

Blinking, I look at him. The Griffon shakes his head, looking slightly disgusted.

"Come on," he says. "It's almost time for dinner, and you still have to get ready."

"I love how you say that like *I'm* the one who takes forever," I answer.

"You know," he says offhandedly, "we could cut out some of that time if we share the shower."

"Jonathan," Rafe warns, though he never turns to acknowledge he's with us.

The Griffon grins and extends his hands in front of him, playing innocent. "What? It saves water too. Better for the environment."

I roll my eyes and grab his arm, pulling him toward the mansion, waving goodbye to Gray as we go.

"Is that a yes to the shower thing then?" Jonathan teases as we walk, earning himself a light jab in the ribs.

If I were evil, I'd mess with him. After all, he's all talk when it comes to me.

"Well...it would be faster," I say slowly, pretending to think it over. "And who doesn't want to save the environment?"

Okay, so maybe I am a *little* evil—but he started it.

Jonathan comes to an abrupt stop, his arm slipping from mine. I look back, careful to keep my face blank.

"What?" I ask. "It's not like I've got anything you haven't seen before."

He has that weird, edgy look. The kind that betrays he's about to declare we need to go to a wine tasting.

I stare at the knight, my face impassive, waiting for him to admit he was bluffing. He stares right back, his dark eyebrows drawn together.

The sun is now behind the mountain, and the evening grows dusky. I cross my arms, chilled in my lightweight sweater. “And you certainly don’t have anything I haven’t seen before.”

A crooked smile tugs at the corner of his mouth. “You’ve gotta stop trying to lie to me, Maddie. It doesn’t work.”

Right.

Pressing my lips together to hold back an embarrassed smile, I turn for the mansion, knowing Jonathan will follow. I suppose he won that round.

I use my magic on the lock as soon as we reach the door and walk into our room. Jonathan trails in behind me.

“You go ahead first.” I step inside the tiled bathroom to quickly grab my brush so I can get out of his way. “But be quick about it because I—”

I come to an abrupt stop when I turn and find Jonathan. He’s so close I run into him. My hands fly to his chest to steady myself, and I accidentally thump him with the hairbrush.

“Oops—I didn’t know you were behind me.” I laugh and make to step away.

But the knight blocks me, wearing an expression that is nothing less than cryptic. A smile ghosts across his lips, and his eyes are on mine. He takes a step forward, making me move back. I’m in my last remaining pair of heeled boots, so I only stand a few inches shorter than him. Our faces are awfully close together.

Startled, I drop my hands to my sides, and my pulse jumps.

“I thought we were conserving water.” He raises a brow, his eyes still locked on mine. He then takes the brush from my hand and sets it on the counter.

Holy crow. What’s he doing? We’re alone—there’s no one here to fool.

“I was only teasing,” I say lamely, my chest growing tight.

He inches forward. “We’re going to play a game.”

I dart around him, ignoring the way my breath hitches. “We’re going to be late for dinner. Save the games for later.”

Before I’m out the door, Jonathan catches me around the waist and pulls me back, locking me against his chest. He’s warm and firm under his shirt. His expensive cologne has worn off during the day, leaving behind the subtlest notes of man and drug store deodorant.

For some reason, I like the fragrance just as much. Maybe more.

“Humor me,” he says, his voice deeper than usual.

And, *help me*, my body responds.

“Are you still hung up over Gray?” he asks. He’s careful to keep his hands away from my skin, and for that, I’m past grateful.

“What?” I ask, dumbfounded, finding myself studying his chocolate eyes. They’re so dark, so mesmerizing.

Jonathan really is a beautiful man—smooth, tan skin, perfectly sculpted nose, dark eyebrows that are neither too full nor too thin. With all the chaos, he didn’t bother shaving this morning, and now he’s sporting a five o’clock shadow that takes away some of the pretty and shoves him right over to dangerously handsome.

“Are you still hung up over Gray?” he repeats.

“No.” I gulp. “We talked. Had closure. All that.”

He nods slowly, processing my answer. “Are you romantically involved with Rafe?”

“No.” And we never will be—not unless I decide it’s cool to destroy the world.

Again, Jonathan nods, and I realize with a start that *this* is the game. He’s reading my answers, watching for lies.

“Are you romantically involved with *anyone*?” He shifts a hair closer.

I shake my head.

Jonathan leans in, his lips very near my ear. “Use your words, please.”

A dose of pleasure shoots through my veins, making me think very foolish things indeed.

“Not that I’m aware of,” I whisper.

He pulls back, trapping me in his gaze once again. “Do you want to be?”

My knees weaken, but he steadies me, his hands firm at my sides.

Why is he doing this to me?

“I’m not in a great place right now,” I answer truthfully, suddenly regretting pushing him on the way back to the room. It’s obvious he’s far better at this game than I am, and I was foolish to provoke him.

The Griffon almost smiles. “I didn’t ask you that.”

“Someday? Maybe,” I say, the words unsteady. “Are we done now? It’s getting late.”

“Answer just one more question.” His tone is dark and delectable, and his eyes are bright and teasing. “Are you attracted to me, Madeline?”

“Jonathan.”

“It’s not difficult. Just answer the question.”

“Dare.”

My answer surprises him, and he gives me a questioning smile. “Dare?”

“I choose dare. I’m done with truth.”

“Fine.” His smirk grows. “I dare you to tell me the truth.”

I laugh. “Did you ever play the game? It doesn’t work like that.”

“Fine,” he thankfully agrees. “I have a dare.”

Too eager, every muscle in my body tightens, and I lean a margin closer.

“I dare you to use your persuasion on me,” he says carefully. “I want to try something.”

There’s a strange look in his eyes—even a flash of vulnerability, but it’s only there briefly before it’s gone.

“What exactly do you want me to persuade you to do?” I ask, wary.

“Tell me to stay out of your head when I kiss you—command I block out your thoughts.”

My muscles forget they know how to hold myself up. I get as wobbly as a newborn deer, but he braces me, keeping me steady.

But what does he mean? *When* he kisses me?

“Does...” I clear my throat. “I mean...will that work?”

“Let’s find out.” His hands move to my hips, nearly making me moan. “Humor me—for curiosity’s sake.”

Curiosity’s sake. Right.

“Jonathan...”

His hands tighten. “It’s just an experiment—one only you can help me with.”

“I don’t know,” I say absently, trying to tell my racing heart to slow the heck down. “Gray and Rafe both can use persuasion. Why don’t you ask one of them?”

He grins. “They’re not my type.”

Ignoring him, I clarify, “Just an experiment?”

Yep, I’m caving.

“Just an experiment,” he assures me.

It’s for science after all. Who am I to say no to the pursuit of higher education?

I nod, take a deep breath, and put magic into the words when I say, “You won’t hear my thoughts—you will block them out when you...if you...kiss

—”

“When.” He tugs me against him, his breath on my lips. “*When* I kiss you.”

“You should know, I’m technically on a break from men right now,” I say, panicking more than just a little. “My emotions have been very chaotic, and I’m not sure this little experiment is a good idea—”

“Are you going to let me kiss you or not?” He flashes me a grin, humor laced with frustration.

“I just—”

“*Yes or no.*”

Well? Am I?

Thinking far too hard, I run my palms up his chest, stopping when I reach his shoulders. His jaw hardens as if he’s enjoying the touch. His reaction isn’t helping my willpower one tiny bit.

It’s been three months since Gray—since the mess with Finn. *Three months.* I’m allowed to move on. It’s time to stop punishing myself. And if that means I must kiss Jonathan to do so, then so be it.

“Okay.” I try to sound brave, nonchalant even, but the word comes out a squeak.

Before I have a chance to change my mind, Jonathan closes the bare distance between us, and his mouth meets mine.

Despite his bravado, the kiss is tentative at first, just the soft brushing of warm lips as our breath mingles. I melt into him, letting him hold me.

“So?” I say against his lips, my voice wobbly. “Is it working?”

He makes a ragged noise, presses me a tiny bit closer, and angles his head further to the side. “Too soon to tell.”

“More?” I manage.

“Mmmm, definitely more.” And then, as if he’s reached the end of his self control, he deepens the kiss. Makes it *real*.

A sound escapes me—a sigh, a moan, a peep of surprise. In response, Jonathan’s fingers spread at my sides, and he tugs me against his chest—holding me against his hard planes and angles, making me deliciously lightheaded. His stubble scrapes my skin, a shock to my senses, a contrast to his soft, insistent lips.

I’m just moving in for more when he suddenly pulls back, breaking the kiss, leaving me practically panting. I barely resist the urge to yank him back.

He studies me for several long moments, his eyes hungry, his breath

uneven. I stare back, just as shocked.

“Well?” I finally manage.

The Griffon frowns and clears his throat. Then he abruptly turns on his heel and marches out of the bathroom.

“Jonathan!” I exclaim, trailing after him. “Did it work?”

Studiously ignoring me, he tosses his suitcase on the bed and rummages through his clothes. I set my hand on his arm, my stomach knotting, my lips still warm with the memory of his kiss. “You can’t just ignore me.”

In response, he quickly turns into me, snakes an arm around my waist and captures my lips again. It’s a quick kiss—hard and fast and toe-curling. He then sets me back, steadying me when I wobble. “It worked.”

Before I can catch my breath, he stalks toward the bathroom, leaving me weak-limbed and blinking.

“And I shouldn’t have done it,” he calls back.

I stare at the door after he closes it, my mouth agape, wondering what in the world is wrong with the man.

“It was your idea,” I holler, pressing a hand to my fluttering stomach as I lower myself to the bed. I’m so befuddled, I almost miss the edge and tumble to the floor.

“I know,” he answers through the door, and then he turns on the shower, cutting the conversation short.

“ALL ALONE THIS EVENING?” Will asks as he crosses the room to greet me. Dinner is a little late tonight, so we’re lingering in the foyer outside the dining room, nibbling on appetizers the servers carry on silver trays.

I give the man a smile. “My husband went off to the kitchen, hoping to speak with the chef about possibly catering an event we have this January. We’ve heard the mansion closes its doors to guests during the winter months, and we were wondering if she’s available.”

Jonathan has avoided me like the plague since we left the room. To say he’s making me insane is an understatement. I’m about ready to corner the flighty man and shake some sense into him.

And kiss him again. And then shake him some more.

Will swipes a flute of champagne from a passing waiter—a waiter who just happens to be Rafe. “She’s an incredibly talented young woman, isn’t she? I’m afraid the Monroes will lose her before long if they’re not careful. Someone will sweep her away, take her off to bigger and better things.”

I laugh. “I assure you, we have no desire to steal her from the Monroes.”

Rafe, handsome in his white and black waiter’s attire, raises a brow, giving me one of his subtle, smirky smiles, and moves on without saying so much as a single word. I watch him for a moment, feeling a tiny bit guilty for what transpired between Jonathan and me earlier.

This is all too chaotic. I’m beginning to think I need to abandon the group entirely, settle down in a tiny town and marry a human. We could live off the land, raise cattle, grow tomatoes. I could even learn to sew my own clothes.

It sounds brilliant.

All except the live off the land, raise cattle, grow tomatoes, and sew my

own clothes bit.

“So how do you feel about all this ghost talk?” Will asks, taking a sip from his glass. He lets his eyes wander over me, obviously liking what he sees. “If you’re here, you must be one of those women who enjoys a little... excitement. I, myself, like a good adventure.” He leans in and lowers his voice. “If you know what I mean.”

I glance around, wondering where the champagne-haired woman went to. She should keep better tabs on her husband. Or maybe they’re not even married—perhaps they’re posing like Jonathan and me.

“I’m afraid I’m only here for the food.” I force a laugh as I walk away, looking for somewhere safe to wait for Jonathan.

The cop catches my arm, his palm resting on my skin. “May I speak plainly?”

I stare at him, refusing to answer.

He lowers his voice. “There’s a rumor circling, one that you’re free with... favors. If you’re bored, there are better options than the waitstaff.” He raises an eyebrow, making sure his point gets across.

Apparently, Jenna has a loose tongue.

His hand moves up my arm, an unwanted caress. “I’ll make it memorable.”

It’s like I’m a magnet for the creepy types. Maybe they’re unknowingly drawn to my Obsidian magic, to the darkness.

I remove his hand from my arm and narrow my eyes. “Good evening, Mr. Tillman.”

He watches me walk away, and I resist the urge to shiver—or to go take a shower. A bad taste coats my tongue, and though I probably shouldn’t, I head right for Rafe.

His expression darkens when he notices the look on my face. “What happened?”

“The cop just propositioned me.”

Rafe’s hand tightens on his platter. “Propositioned or threatened?”

“Pretty sure it was a proposition.”

“Do you want me to kill him?”

My mouth parts in surprise. “Are you...serious?”

The knight looks at me like I’m daft. “What do you think I’m here for?”

I lower my voice. “You’re here to murder cops who hit on me?”

He shrugs, his dark blue eyes amused.

“I kissed Jonathan,” I blurt out.

What the heck, Madeline? Where did that come from?

Even calm, collected, murder-happy Rafe looks taken aback. After a moment, he says, “All right.”

“All right? That’s all you’re going to say?”

He looks around, sets his half-empty tray of champagne on a table, and pulls me out of the foyer, into the hallway that got us in trouble before. “What do you want me to say?”

I look down, smoothing an imaginary wrinkle in my little black cocktail dress. “I don’t know. It just felt like something I should tell you.”

“Be careful with Jonathan.”

Snorting like a lady, I look up. “You know, it’s funny. That’s exactly what he said about you and Gray when we were back in Tahoe.”

Rafe crosses his arms. “I don’t doubt it—and those are wise words as well. But there is a small difference.”

A couple walks down the hall, looking very rich and stately. They narrow their eyes at us, disapproving of me standing with the waiter. Maybe they’ve heard Jenna’s rumor about our little rendezvous in the forest earlier.

“Why’s there a difference?” I ask after the couple passes into the adjoining room.

Rafe steps closer, and our magic knots together, pulling and twisting and confusing me more than ever.

“Jonathan was worried about your well-being.”

“All right.”

My knight smiles. “As his friend, I’m worried about *his*.”

I let the words soak in, and then I set my hands on my hips. “What, exactly, is that supposed to mean?”

He studies me for a hair too long. “Jonathan talks a good game, and we’ve never stopped him—we’ve encouraged it even. But let me assure you, he’s not as free with his affections as he would like the world to believe.”

“Is that it? You’re only going to give me that lovely little vague message?”

Rafe laughs under his breath. “Yes, Lexie, that’s all I’m going to give you.”

“What about us?” I ask abruptly, needing an answer to that question more than any other.

The smile in his eyes disappears. “What ‘us?’”

I motion between us. “The magic.”

He stares at me.

“Don’t you dare pretend again that it’s not there—not when we almost ripped each other’s clothes off in the woods.”

That earns a tiny lift of his eyebrows, and I have the inexplicable urge to punch him in the nose.

“I am your knight,” he says, the careful patience in his voice sounding a wee bit strained—like a father telling his sugar-high child for the fifteenth time that he won’t buy another cotton candy at the amusement park. “You are my queen. We are not lovers—and we’re not meant to be. You want to be with Jonathan? Go for it. You need my blessing? *You have it.*”

I stare at him, narrowing my eyes. “You just said lovers. Like an eighty-year-old woman. Or Lillian. Is that a word you’re trying to resurrect?”

A real smile passes over his face, but he does his very best to bite it back. “Go away. Find Jonathan.”

I turn, but then I look back. “You flirted with me at the brewery. When we played pool, before Trent finally managed to kidnap me.”

After a moment, he nods.

“Why?”

He makes a noise in the back of his throat and looks past me, down the hall. “Perhaps I was trying to fool myself into believing that you weren’t *her*—that you were just a pretty girl with mesmerizing eyes and a smile that hits a man in the gut.”

I inhale sharply through my nose, and I swear the world stops rotating for several moments.

“But you are *her*, Madeline. I know my place, and it’s by your side, *but not with you*. Jonathan is a good man—despite how he’d like the world to believe he isn’t. Far better than Gray, if you want my honest opinion. If you like him, and he likes you, don’t let me or our magic stand in your way.”

JONATHAN SEES ME, and relief crosses his face. “I was wondering where you’d gotten to.”

“I see you’re talking to me again. Were you afraid I’d been stolen away by a pixie?”

“That’s not even funny,” he says, giving me a stern look. “Especially not when Jenna’s disappeared, and no one knows where she went. I was terrified she’d abducted you.”

“She’s *gone*?”

“That’s why dinner’s late. The Monroes are in a tizzy, wondering if something’s happened to her. They’re trying to keep it quiet so the rest of the guests don’t find out.”

“Do you think she figured out who we are? What we’re here for?”

Jonathan shakes his head. “I have no idea.”

“Now what?”

He shakes his head, at a loss.

“I was talking to Rafe,” I explain after a moment.

A funny look crosses the knight’s face, one that looks the tiniest bit... jealous. “You don’t have to give me a play by play of your whereabouts, Madeline.”

“No? What if we were talking about *you*?”

That makes him pause.

“I told him about the kiss,” I admit.

“What?” He blanches. “Are you trying to have me killed—”

“And he shared the most interesting thing.”

Suddenly, the knight’s face goes curiously blank. “What did he share?”

Though he asks, he doesn’t look like he really wants to know.

“This incredibly enigmatic spiel about you being a better man than you want the world to know.”

Relief washes across his face, and he takes a long gulp of what looks like a scotch on the rocks. “Lies. All lies.”

“What does Rafe know that I don’t?” I step a little closer to my faux husband, remembering the way it felt to kiss him. “What are you keeping from me?”

“We need to find Gray.” He sets the glass aside. “And there’s no time like the present.”

Curiosity burns inside me, but I let him change the subject and lead me away. We leave the mansion, stepping onto a terrace. Wispy clouds float through the sky, masking a waxing moon. The blueish dim light illuminates the garden, creating deep shadows.

Though I can’t see it, I feel there’s something just beyond the garden, waiting for me. I try to avoid confronting the beasts at night. There’s

something less terrifying about the dark creatures in the daylight, when they are confined to the shadows. But this is their hour. Their time to leave their crevices and caves and dark, dank holes and move freely.

I shiver and then sternly tell myself to think of something else.

“You’ve got to be freezing in that,” Jonathan says, instantly pulling off his tuxedo jacket. He settles it over my bare shoulders, wrapping me in Jonathan-scented goodness. He put on a little more cologne before we left, something that complements the tux nicely. It envelops me, makes my mind wander.

I peer at him from the corner of my eye, wondering what’s up with his mood swings. One minute he’s kissing me, the next he won’t talk, and now he’s handing me his jacket.

“Did the guild rent the tux for the weekend?” I ask as we walk, figuring it’s a safe question, trying to keep my mind off whatever it is that loiters in the trees.

“No, it’s mine. I bought it last year.”

“What for?”

Jonathan glances at me and then looks ahead. “A ceremony thing.”

“What *kind* of ceremony thing?”

Why are the men in my life being so ridiculously vague about everything all of a sudden?

He chuckles, though he looks distracted. “A Knights’ Guild event celebrating our team’s supreme awesomeness. Gray made a speech. We drank some champagne.”

I have a feeling it was a bigger deal than he wants me to know, and I wonder what they were being rewarded for.

“There was one thing that was actually pretty funny.” The knight turns, gently swatting my arm, already laughing at the memory. “Halfway through, Eric—”

Neither of us expects it when the monster lunges from the shadows and leaps on Jonathan’s back.

I scream, stumbling back. “No!”

More of the creatures surround us, several landing on Jonathan, their talons digging into his flesh, their leathery wings fluttering like mad.

Imps.

“Stop—” Before I can finish the command, a taloned hand wraps over my mouth, trapping the words. The imp clings to me, holding me like a koala

hugging a tree as its friends attack my Griffon. Several more jump around on the ground, only two feet tall, screaming with mirth, egging their friends on.

I wrestle with the beast as Jonathan fights. Recovering from the initial surprise, the knight pulls out his dagger and stabs one in the belly. It lets out a gurgled cry, and black blood oozes from the wound. Jonathan fights his way to his feet, grasping one around its scrawny neck and heaving it across the garden. More come to the monsters' aid until there are dozens of them, all attacking Jonathan.

Finally, I work an arm free and yank up my dress, reaching for the stun gun strapped to my thigh. I zap the creature who's wrapped himself around me, aiming blindly. He jolts and then falls to the ground.

"STOP!" I yell into the night.

And just like that, the pandemonium comes to an abrupt halt. Three imps hang from Jonathan, and they turn to me, at full attention, their six-inch ears quivering as they await my command. They look like winged gremlins, with too-large golden eyes and thin, hair-like black fur covering their bodies.

Looking seriously ticked, Jonathan turns to the creature grasping his shoulder and punches it square in the face, sending it flying to the ground. The other two scramble away from him, terrified.

"How *dare* you touch me," I say to the one at my feet. Rage like I've never felt builds in me, making my magic spark.

The creature crawls back, babbling nonsense in a language I don't understand.

I look at Jonathan. "Are you all right?"

"One of the demons bit me," he says, scowling at his arm. Blood seeps through his white tuxedo shirt.

If I were a Dragon, I'd light them all on fire.

"Why did you attack?" I demand, not even sure they understand me.

A brave one crawls forward, his belly dragging on the ground, and positions himself in front of me. He then turns and caws at Jonathan. More follow suit until I'm worried they just might lunge on the knight again.

"They're protecting you," Jonathan says, his tone flat. "The monsters... are *protecting* you. From me."

"You will not attack Jonathan," I command, just in case the last dose of persuasion is about to wear off. Then I turn back to the Griffon. "But *why*?"

"I hit you."

"*What?* You didn't hit—" I begin to scoff, and then I remember. Jonathan

got excited, was going to tell me what ridiculous thing Eric did at the ceremony, and he swatted my arm. It didn't hurt—not in the slightest. But technically, yes, he struck me.

And my band of evil minions attacked.

Unable to help itself, one hisses at Jonathan now, looking very much like it would like to sink its teeth into him again.

“What do I do?” I ask.

Jonathan stares at the small monsters. “How about you send them away.”

“Right.” I turn to the beasts. “Go home. Hurt no one on your way.”

They turn to face me, their eyes...pleading. It's almost like they don't want to leave, but they can't resist the magic.

Slowly, they lift into the sky, squalling at me as they go, looking over their bony monster shoulders, watching me for as long as possible until they disappear into the night.

“This is not normal.” Jonathan shakes his head and then looks back at his arm and swears.

“They're not venomous, are they?” I ask as soon as the thought pops into my head. My heart nearly stops. I rush to the knight, ripping back his shredded sleeve. The wound is several inches wide and dripping blood. Horrified, I meet his eyes. “Jonathan, *are they venomous?*”

“I have no idea. You're more a monster expert than I am.”

I can't breathe. I can't even think.

What have I done?

I start to panic, rational thought going right out the window. I grab my phone, grateful I have it for once, and immediately call Rafe.

“What happened to you two?” he asks in lieu of a hello. “We just started serving—”

“Jonathan's been attacked.”

“Where are you?” he demands.

I look again at the bite on Jonathan's arm, and my world gets fuzzy around the edges. “Out the south-west doors, past the terrace, in the garden.”

“I'm on my way. What attacked him?”

“Imps. At least I'm pretty sure they were imps—they stood about two feet, a little hunched over, had leathery wings and long ears.”

“Was he bitten?”

“Yes,” I choke.

“Were they black or gray?” Rafe asks, his voice clinical, all business.

“Black.”

My knight swears a string of words that would make a sailor blush, not sounding quite as calm as he did a moment ago.

I’m about to demand he tell me what black means when he bursts through the mansion door, running to us like there’s a dragon on his heels.

“GUYS,” Jonathan says, looking at the two of us like we’ve lost our minds. “I feel fine. It’s just a bite.”

Rafe yanks Jonathan’s arm so he can look at it closer.

“Now it’s *dislocated*, thank you very much,” Jonathan grumbles. “But it was fine before.”

“Idiot,” my knight growls under his breath. “Why’d you let it bite you?”

Jonathan scoffs. “Oh, I don’t know. He looked hungry, so I offered my arm.”

“Okay.” Rafe steps back, ignoring the Griffon’s feeble attempt at humor. “There’s a Deer in Dillon. We need to get you to him. We have one hour, maybe two, before you’re dead.”

“We can take the Porsche,” I say.

Jonathan pales and starts shaking his head. “If I get so much as a drop of blood—”

“Shut up,” Rafe commands, dosing the words with a substantial amount of persuasion.

It’s so potent, even I flinch.

Jonathan glares at Rafe, unable to fight the magic, helpless to do anything but obey.

“I’ll stay with Jonathan,” Rafe says when we reach the staff’s housing. “Go up and find Eric and Gray. We need to let them know what’s going on.”

“What if something else attacks?”

The two men tense, neither wanting to admit they can’t fight something dark and scary without me.

“For the love of—you go tell them,” I command Rafe. Before he

disappears into the building, I add, “And get the keys!”

I turn to Jonathan. “You can speak again.”

“The two of you need to knock that crap off,” the Griffon immediately says when my magic releases him from Rafe’s charm. He works his jaw like it’s been days since he uttered his last word and not mere minutes.

“How are you feeling?”

He frowns. “My jaw’s a little tight.”

That can’t be good. Do imps paralyze like the winged cats? Is his heart going to slow to a crawl and then finally cease to beat?

I start to panic all over again. “Can you feel all your appendages?”

Jonathan flashes me a look that’s entirely inappropriate for the situation.

“Which ones are we talking about specifically?”

“Legs, *Jonathan*,” I say, impatient. “Arms, toes, fingers.”

Before he can answer, the rest of our team comes barreling out the door in various stages of undress. Well, it’s only Gray that’s undressed.

“What were you doing?” I demand as he finishes zipping up his pants, and then I realize I probably don’t want to know. “Never mind.”

Eric swears when he sees Jonathan’s arm. “I’ll wrap it on the way.”

“I’ll drive,” Gray says.

Rafe is already propelling me toward the staff parking area to the east of the house. “Madeline and I will follow in my car.”

I glance at the wounded Griffon. “But I want to go with Jonathan.”

Jonathan’s gaze falls on me, and his face softens. “Stop fussing over me. I feel—” Suddenly, he stumbles as a bout of dizziness hits him.

“Jonathan!” I holler, but Eric’s already got the Griffon by the good arm, and he’s dragging him toward the garages where the rich people’s toys are kept.

Jonathan shoves Eric off. “I got it.”

Eric waits to make sure Jonathan doesn’t topple over, and then he steps back. “If you say so.”

Before anyone can stop me, I cross to Jonathan, cup the back of his neck, and press my lips to his in a brief but hard kiss. It’s the kind of kiss that says, “*I’m so sorry my imp minions poisoned you*” and “*if you die before we make it to the healer, I’ll murder you.*”

Kisses don’t have to make sense.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see our team members tense, but I ignore them.

Jonathan looks...conflicted.

"I'm sorry," I breathe when I pull away. "I'll see you there, all right?"

Jonathan wobbles again, but he nods. "I'm good, I swear."

Then he passes out.

"HMMM," the Deer says as he examines Jonathan's arm.

Our Griffon is awake again, but barely. He's too pale. Perspiration beads on his forehead, and each breath looks like it's going to be his last.

I want to scream at the man to get on with it, but I hold my tongue, waiting impatiently with the rest of the team.

We're in the healer's home, right in his dining room, and Jonathan is stretched out on a sheet on the dinner table. The man's wife was surprisingly accommodating considering she was having a dinner party when we arrived. Her guests lit a bonfire in the backyard of the acreage, grabbed jackets, and moved the party outside.

I'll have to send her a thank you card when we get home. Unless Jonathan dies because the healer insists on taking his time, saying variations of "hmm," and "well" eight billion times before actually *doing* something.

The Deer stands back, rubbing his chin. "Well...hmmm."

Rafe sets a hand on my shoulder, probably sensing I'm going to wring the man's neck.

"An imp, you say?" The man directs the question at Rafe. "Very strange. I don't think we've ever seen any around here in these parts."

"It was an imp, sir," Rafe says, just as impatient as me but far calmer.

"All right." He turns again to Jonathan and studies him. "I'll mix something up, but there will be side effects."

"Side effects?" Jonathan manages to ask.

"A few."

"Such as?"

"What does it matter?" I bark at the knight. "It's either side effects, or you *die*."

"Nausea, vomiting, and possible fever," the man answers, and we relax. Those are all preferable to death.

"Very rarely hair loss—"

“Hair loss!” Jonathan croaks, his eyes widening. “Absolutely not.”

I clamp a hand over the knight’s mouth, resisting the urge to use my magic on him. “Anything else?” I ask the healer.

The man, who should be in the *Sloth* faction, nods slowly. “I’ve had one case of impotence, but it’s hard to say if it was related.”

“Let me die,” Jonathan mumbles, groaning.

“You would rather *die* than never be able to have sex again?” I demand, knowing he’ll surely realize he’s being ridiculous when he hears it out loud.

“Who wouldn’t?” Eric asks, and every single one of the fool men in attendance *nods*.

“Heal him,” I snarl at the Deer, packing the words with persuasion. I’m done. “*Now.*”

Immediately, the man turns and hurries away.

“Never persuade a healer,” Rafe says. “Do you have any idea how much trouble you can get in for that? Didn’t you read the book of law Finn gave you?”

I lean close, whispering so the others won’t hear. “I am an evil queen, remember? I’ll do what I want.”

Rafe looks like he would be amused if his friend wasn’t moments from death.

As we wait, I pace the room. Jonathan once again drifts into unconsciousness, but he’s still breathing. Occasionally, Eric checks his pulse.

I’m about ready to march into the back and see what’s taking the man so long when he finally comes through the door, carrying a steaming mug.

The aroma of the concoction drifts to us, and I almost gag. It smells like someone boiled the contents of a teen boy’s gym bag in a vat of tomato juice and bananas.

No wonder nausea and vomiting are side effects. How couldn’t they be?

“One of you is going to have to open his mouth while I pour it in,” the healer instructs.

The three grown men gape at the concoction, looking about ready to be ill themselves.

I growl and step forward. “What do I do?”

Minutes later, the Deer is force feeding Jonathan the mixture, while I’m staring at the ceiling, holding my breath, tears running down my face as I try to keep Jonathan’s mouth open.

The Griffon has no idea how fortunate he is that he passed out again.

“There,” the man says, finally finished. He produces a roll of paper towels and attempts to clean Jonathan up a bit. Then he steps back and looks at his watch. “Five minutes.”

“Five minutes until what?”

“Until he vomits it all up.”

I gape at the man. “What if he doesn’t?”

“Oh, he will.” The man goes into the kitchen to wash his hands, and then he pops back. “My wife has extra steaks. Anyone hungry?”

How can anyone think of eating after *that*?

“Sure,” Eric says, and then Rafe and Gray chime in as well.

“What’s wrong with you?” I exclaim. “You can’t just leave him here!”

Gray frowns. “There’s not a lot we can do.”

“Fine.” I wave my hands. “Just go.”

Which, of course, is female for “*You, sir, are a schmuck.*”

Gray and Eric follow the healer to the backyard, but Rafe crosses the room and sets his hands on my shoulders. “He’s going to be fine, Lexie.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because it’s part of the job. We’ve all been the unconscious one in the corner, waiting for a healer’s concoction to take effect. It just happens to be Jonathan’s turn this time.”

“This was my fault.”

He gives me a dry look. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“It was. The imps wouldn’t have been there if it weren’t for me.”

“Don’t beat yourself up. These things just happen.”

“The creatures don’t belong here.”

Rafe frowns, his eyes searching mine, probably wondering where I’m going with this.

“They should be in Aparia,” I say. “Not here.”

“I’m not sure what you’re getting at.”

I stare at him. He knows what I’m saying. He knows.

But before he can think of a way to respond, Jonathan throws up one minute too early.

“I FEEL LIKE DEATH,” Jonathan whines from his seat next to me in the back of the Porsche.

“We’ll get you up to the room, and you can sleep,” I promise him.

“You should have let me die.”

I roll my eyes. He can pull a gun on a sprite without blinking, but now that he’s a little queasy, he’s a wreck.

“At least the healer fixed your arm and all the talon wounds.” I point out.

“That’s good, right?”

Jonathan lets out a low groan and tips his head back against the seat.

After what feels like forever, we pull up to the mansion’s gates. From the driver’s seat, Eric makes a disgruntled noise. “It’s after ten.”

“So?” I ask.

The Bunny turns to look at me. “The gates are locked.”

Of course they are. I’m *this* close to completely losing it.

I throw my car door open and step into the cold autumn night. The cool breeze swirls around my bare legs. I’m still in my too-short, too-revealing black cocktail dress—which ended up being overkill for the evening’s events.

I march to the gate, wondering where to direct my magic.

Headlights flash behind me as Rafe pulls up next to the Porsche. Leaving the car running, he joins me. “What are you doing?”

“The gate’s locked. I’m trying to figure out how to work it. I’ve never done something like this before.”

“I got it,” he says, nudging me toward the Porsche. “You’ll freeze out here.”

Normally, I’d argue that I should learn, but tonight, I’m just too tired, so I

leave him to it. It must be tricky because we sit for quite a while, and I'm grateful I'm not standing out there with him. I do, however, stay alert just in case something else decides to pay us a visit tonight.

When the gate opens, Eric slowly drives through, taking us down the light-lined lane. I was right the first day we showed up—it is pretty when the lantern-style lamps are illuminated.

“What about cameras?” I ask. “Surely they've got security on the gate.”

“Rafe will have taken care of it,” Gray answers, surprising me by saying something that almost sounds positive about my personal knight. “He's thorough.”

We park, and Eric pulls Jonathan from the car. The five of us make our way to the mansion, and I watch the shadows, waiting. I don't feel anything, not right now, but it doesn't hurt to be cautious.

We pause to part ways with Rafe and Gray at the terrace outside the doors. Rafe takes me aside, just for a moment. “Keep your phone on you. You do still have it, don't you?”

I produce it, giving him a withering look.

“Call if you need me. Even if it's the middle of the night.”

Nervous, I glance around the darkened landscape. “Are you worried about something in particular?”

He shakes his head. “No, it's just hard for Jonathan to take care of you when you're taking care of him.” He cuts me off when I open my mouth to protest. “Yes, I know you can take care of yourself. But everyone's stronger in pairs—pairs with two healthy teammates.”

“I promise to call if I need you.”

Satisfied, he steps back.

Eric helps Jonathan up to the room. Thankfully, it's late enough we don't pass anyone in the halls.

Charles is on the other side of the door, just waiting for us to come inside. He yowls, beyond ticked that his dinner is several hours late.

Immediately, Eric scoops the cat into his arms. “Poor guy.”

“Yeah. Sounds like he had a really rough evening,” Jonathan snarks, heading for the couch.

I take his arm and redirect him toward the bed.

“I'll take Charles for the night,” Eric says, stroking the cat's back. “Let him unwind a little.”

Rolling my eyes, I make shooing motions with my hands. “Fine—go. His

food is in my black case by the dresser.”

“I already stocked up, just in case.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m serious about that intervention, Bunny.”

Eric grins with the content kitty in his arms, but he pauses in the doorway. He glances at Jonathan, who’s already sprawled on the bed, dead to the world. “This is a rather cozy setup you’ve got here.”

I press my lips together, refusing to respond.

“Tell me something.” He leans in, his deep voice teasing. “If I get attacked next time, will you kiss me and let me share your bed too?”

“Good night, Eric.”

He laughs as he steps out the door. “Night, Maddie.”

After I flip the lock, I kick off my heels and groan. Too tired to change, I head to the couch.

“Stay with me,” Jonathan mumbles, apparently still awake.

I turn to face him, but I don’t answer. He must be half-delirious.

“I’m not in any shape to make a move on you,” he points out, prying his eyes open to watch me.

“Maybe I just don’t want to sleep with you, Griffon.”

He smiles, his lazy, exhausted gaze on mine. “Liar.”

And I am. All I want to do is to climb into the bed and stare at him all night to make sure he doesn’t stop breathing.

Even though I’m not sure it’s the greatest idea, I cross the room and crawl on the bed, slipping under the covers because I’m not going to freeze for the sake of modesty. Plus, we’re both dressed.

“Why are you so far away?” he mumbles.

I stare at his back for several moments before I scoot closer. Then, when he doesn’t promptly change his mind, I wrap my arm around his side and press my forehead against his shoulder blades. “I’m so sorry.”

He turns so he’s lying flat on his back, and then he slides his arm under me, tugging me to him. My nerves hum as I scoot in, my stomach pressed to his side, my head on his shoulder. It’s an intimate position—too intimate really, but I don’t care if he doesn’t. With my hand resting on his chest, I can feel each breath he takes and monitor the steady thrum of his heart under my palm.

My forehead is against his neck, touching skin to skin, but I’m too exhausted to care.

“Are you still nauseous?” I ask.

“Not really.” The words rumble through his chest. “I just feel like I was run over by a truck.”

“I panicked,” I say softly after several silent moments. “They attacked so fast, and I screamed instead of taking control of the situation.”

“No, that was me shrieking,” he teases. “You just thought you were the one making the racket.”

I smile against his shoulder. “You didn’t scream, and we both know it.”

“The wretched monster wrapped itself around your face,” he points out, closing his eyes. “That’s not your fault.”

“It was keeping me quiet,” I murmur. “So I couldn’t control it.”

I shudder at the thought, and Jonathan tucks me a little closer to his side.

What’s he doing?

“It didn’t want you to interfere while they tried to save you,” he murmurs.

“It’s a bit disturbing, isn’t it? That they’re that clever?”

Let’s not even mention the way they looked at me when I told them to leave. Dejected. Anguished.

It’s all bizarre and unsettling.

“It’s done now,” he says. “Don’t dwell on it.”

I move my hand over his chest in gentle circles, soothing myself as much as him.

“I’m glad you’re here,” Jonathan says, sounding like he’s about to drift off. “You’re a good friend, Madeline.”

My heart swells, making me feel all kinds of warm fuzzies. It’s a sweet moment, so of course I have to diffuse it.

“Eric’s a good friend too,” I murmur. “Would you cuddle with him?”

Jonathan lets out a laugh that turns into a groan. “Are you kidding? You know a man that large must be a bed hog.”

I grin and snuggle in closer, breathing him in. His normal scent is tinged with the healer’s disgusting concoction, but I don’t even care. I’m just glad he’s alive.

“Would you get the lights?” he asks, nearly asleep.

I flick them out with my magic, pull the covers up around us, and drift to the feel and sound of Jonathan’s rhythmic breathing.

BEFORE I FULLY COME AWAKE, I remember the night before. Specifically, I remember falling asleep in Jonathan's arms.

My eyes fly open, and I find the knight lying next to me, partially propped on his side, his head resting on his hand. He lost his shirt sometime during the night. "Morning."

He looks well rested and healthy, while I probably look like death warmed over.

"No ghosts last night?" I ask, extremely conscious of possible morning breath.

"Not sure. We might have slept through the racket."

I study him, feeling my cheeks growing hot. "I've never actually slept with anyone before."

The Griffon arches an eyebrow.

"You know what I mean."

Though I haven't done *that* either.

"How do you feel?" I ask, slipping out of the covers, needing to put a little distance between us. Last night, it felt like friends connecting. This morning, it feels like...more.

Much more.

"I'm fine, though I woke up in the middle of the night and had to brush my teeth. Just *what* did that healer give me?"

I shake my head. "You don't want to know."

His eyes pass over me, taking in my wrinkled black dress and mussed hair. His gaze becomes hooded, and my stomach clenches.

"What?" I ask, self-conscious. I purposely avoid the mirror so I don't have to look at myself.

"I'm trying to commit the moment to memory." He lies back on the sheets, still taking me in. There's the familiar teasing gleam in his eyes, the one that says he's going to brush this off as something playful.

He stretches his hands over his head, showing off his well-muscled arms. The warmth of his skin is a juxtaposition against the stark white sheets, and it does funny things to my chest.

To distract myself, I point out, "You know, yesterday all I had to do was fleetingly think of your hand on my leg, and you darted so fast, I'm surprised you didn't trip over your own feet."

"Why don't you come here and see if I dart today?"

Back to the bed. Back to him.

“I’d rather stay here.”

A slow, wicked, *beautiful* smirk stretches across his face. “So many lies, Madeline.”

“You’ve got to stop that.”

“Or you could just tell me the truth in the first place and save us both a little trouble.”

“What happened to your clothes?”

“I changed when I got up to brush my teeth.”

“Into...pajama pants?”

His smirk grows. “Naturally.” When I’m still hesitant to come back to him, he jerks his chin, motioning for me to join him.

I only have so much restraint.

My nerves hum as I walk back and crawl over the fluffy bedding toward him, sitting on my knees and looking down at him when I reach my side of the bed.

Not that it’s *my* side per se. Because then it would stand to reason that there is a *his* side, and I’m absolutely not ready for that.

Jonathan rolls to his left, facing me, once again propping himself up with his arm. I try not to stare at his bare torso—I really do. But, I mean, it’s *right there*. Very distracting.

“I don’t do relationships,” he says.

I pull my eyes to his. “That seems to be a reoccurring theme with the team.”

“It’s difficult when we travel—that’s the reason the guys don’t find a girl to play house with. But it’s not my reason.”

Realizing he’s about to tell me something important, I hold my breath.

“You asked how I manage intimacy when I can read a woman’s thoughts, remember?”

I nod.

“I don’t.”

It takes several moments for the words to soak in, and then I frown. “You...don’t?”

He shakes his head. “I date, I flirt—absolutely. I’ll brush a girl’s arm, see what she’s thinking, usually do what I can to make her feel special and valued. I listen to her, respond in a way she needs. But I don’t kiss. I don’t touch. I don’t get close.”

I think of our kiss on the balcony, when I surprised him, of how still he

became.

“Isn’t that...lonely?” I soften my stance on the bed, pulling my legs out from under me and crossing them.

He smiles, but it’s distant, tinged with something achingly sad. “It’s better than the alternative. Believe me when I say a person’s thoughts aren’t always complimentary. They shift, bounce to things you’d never expect. At best, they’re distracting, at worst, they’re on another guy.”

“Jonathan.”

“I tried to block it out when I was younger—eighteen, nineteen. I was training with the guild, feeling pretty cocky and sure of myself. I thought I could manage it.” He laughs once, just a quick release of air. “I was wrong.”

A question burns in my brain, but I don’t dare ask. I nibble my lip, studying him.

“Just spit it out,” he says wryly, and I look down to make sure he’s not touching me. But his hand is a safe distance away, which means he’s only reading my face.

“Have you ever...?”

Enjoying my discomfort, the Griffon smirks. “Have I what?”

“Been *with* a woman?” I swear my cheeks are on fire.

Slowly, he pushes himself up, matching my cross-legged stance, and leans forward. “No.”

My mouth falls open, though I quickly shut it. *That’s* what Rafe was talking about.

Jonathan’s smirk grows, but there’s something self-deprecating about it. “Needless to say, that’s not gossip we need to be spreading.”

“You’re not a player,” I whisper.

His eyes flash with amusement. “I’m not a player.”

“You’re practically a nun.”

He tilts his head, silently asking me if I need to do this.

“Like...super pure,” I continue, grinning. “Virginal even. Like a blushing bride in white.”

The Griffon rolls his eyes, and I’m thoroughly enjoying his embarrassment until something strikes me that doesn’t seem quite so humorous.

“What’s wrong?” he asks.

I give him a look, trying to tease to hide my actual disappointment. “You only like me because I can give you silence.”

“No.” Jonathan glances away, laughing softly, shaking his head. “That’s not why I like you.” He then meets my eyes, the playful glint falling away. “And I do like you, Madeline. Very much.”

I bite my lip, sternly telling myself I’m going to stay on my side of the bed—no, not mine. *This* side of the bed.

Whatever.

From the way the corner of his mouth twitches, I believe he’s enjoying my turmoil. However, the amusement slowly fades from his face as his eyes lock on mine. “But your magic *is* why I allowed myself to touch you. And I wish I hadn’t.”

Without permission, he grasps my waist and pulls me onto his lap. The move startles me, and my hands fall to his bare arms as I steady myself. His skin is warm, smooth, kissable. I imagine trailing my lips down his shoulders.

Jonathan groans under his breath, and I realize he saw the thought.

“Why do you wish you hadn’t touched me?” I ask, crossing my arms to break the connection.

He leans in close. “Because now I know what it’s like to kiss you, to wake with you next to me.”

We have to be so careful with the way we touch. My legs are bare, but they’re over his pajama-covered legs. His hands are still at my dress-protected sides. My arms stay crossed so I don’t give in to the temptation of running my palms down his skin, running my fingers over his defined biceps, but they itch to touch him.

My eyes move to his arm. There’s no sign of yesterday’s wound. “The healer did a good job,” I say.

Jonathan follows my gaze and flexes, testing the muscles. “I’m a little stiff, but it doesn’t hurt.”

“You’ll probably be achy for a few days,” I reason. “From the poison.”

Again, guilt hits me. It’s swift and debilitating. I close my eyes, trying to block out the memory of Jonathan fading so quickly.

“Hey,” he says softly, risking a knuckle to my cheek. “Stop that.”

But I can’t. And I also can’t ignore that this feels like the start of something—something we need to discuss.

“What are we doing, Jonathan?” I ask, sighing to myself as sense comes barreling in, destroying my bliss like a bull crashing through a china cabinet.

“What is this?”

He doesn’t answer right away. A shadow crosses his face, and I can feel

him mentally withdrawing, putting a fence between us—a friendly fence, a little white picket one that’s easy to chat through. But it’s a fence all the same. He stays on his side; I stay on mine.

“We can’t do this, can we?” I whisper. “Not while I’m on the team.”

“It’s impossible to create a balance.”

And the team means the world to Jonathan. I’ve only been around for a little while, and even I can see it. I won’t take that from him.

Even if that means I have to crawl off his lap and pretend the last few days haven’t chiseled away at my heart.

I eye him, wondering what our group dynamic is going to be like. It’s not going to be easy to watch him flit from girl to girl like he has in the past, not when I’ve developed a teeny crush on the handsome Griffon. I frown as I remember the girls from Tahoe.

“You’re thinking awfully hard about something,” he says.

“I have a question.”

He nods, silently telling me to ask him.

“So you didn’t sleep with Bikini Girl Number One or Blonde and Bubbly from the brewery?”

I’m almost positive the girls had real names, but they weren’t nearly as easy to remember as the ones I gave them.

“No, I didn’t sleep with them.” A slow grin builds on Jonathan’s face, one that makes me kind of want to slap him. “You were jealous.”

“I was *not*.”

“You were, or you wouldn’t remember, and you wouldn’t have cared. What names did you give Eric’s dates?”

When I pause, he raises an eyebrow, the man looking too wicked for his own good.

Crossing my arms, I give him a stern look. “That’s not the point.”

“Well, I suppose we’re even because I purposely interrupted you and Gray,” he says bluntly.

I stare at him, confused by the abrupt change of subject. “What?”

“The night Trent first tried to kidnap you, before you met Rafe for dinner, I interrupted the two of you on purpose. I couldn’t stand the idea of you with him.”

It was right after I confronted Finn about the fictitious assignment. I asked Gray to kiss me—dared him to kiss me. He happily complied, but before it could go too far, Jonathan came into the room, waving my phone,

telling me I had work to do.

He did it on purpose?

“You did it for the good of the team?” I question slowly, licking my lips.

The Griffon shakes his head, his chocolate eyes intense. “For my good alone.”

My heart twinges. I like Jonathan; he likes me. *And* he’s not a player.

Except for Gray’s new militant rule and the fact that I possess Obsidian magic, there’s no reason we can’t give this thing between us a try. But those are two massive hurdles.

After a minute, Jonathan pulls me from my thoughts. “As much as I hate to say it, we still need to inform Gray that Jenna disappeared.”

I nod and climb from his lap, accidentally/totally on purpose rubbing my legs against his, making him groan.

“I take it you’re stealing the bathroom first?” I ask as he tosses the covers back and heads that way.

“I’m taking a shower.” He looks over his shoulder and raises an eyebrow. “A cold one.”

“BEFORE WE GET into the assignment, I think it would be prudent to restate the rule that there is to be no dating between members of the team,” Gray says, addressing us all from in front of the balcony door in our room in the mansion.

Eric holds up a hand, disturbing Charles, who’s asleep on his lap. The cat fusses and then goes back to sleep. “Uh, boss? Since when was that a rule?”

“Since yesterday morning.”

I sit back in my chair, nibbling the inside of my cheek. Funny how it seemed like such a sweet gesture yesterday.

“Since it’s possible the rule has been recently violated, I feel it’s a good time for a reminder.”

The rule was *possibly* violated? I freaking kissed Jonathan in front of the entire team. Of course it was violated.

“You’re a contemptible troll of a Wolf,” Jonathan says under his breath, plenty loud enough for everyone to hear. He softens the words with a laugh, but it too is irritated.

“That may be, but I care about this team—I care about each of you as if you were my actual family, and I don’t want us to suffer any more fallouts.” Gray’s not looking at Rafe, but the room goes still as if he is. “The first was devastating. You all know what I did; you saw what happened. Don’t be me. As Jonathan so eloquently put, I’m a contemptible troll of a Wolf.”

I glance at Rafe. He stands toward the back, separate from the team, but still here, and he listens to Gray with a masked expression.

“What if I don’t like your rule?” Jonathan sits on the end of the bed, calm as you please.

Butterflies flutter in my stomach, and I don't dare look at the Griffon I spent the night with.

Gray turns to Jonathan, and the two study each other. The Wolf looks mildly surprised, as if he fully expected Jonathan to toe the line. "Then you and I will discuss it further at a later time, but for now, let's figure out where Jenna disappeared to."

After a long, uncomfortable moment, Jonathan nods. I release a held breath.

Gray seems to relax as well, if only marginally, and he glances down at his phone. "Also, after the fluke imp attack last night, I called Callie at the guild."

Who's Callie? And *why* does he know so many women?

"Apparently, in the last few months, there's been a strange influx of the shadow creatures making themselves known across the globe. There have been hundreds of attacks, far above the norm. We were advised to be especially cautious until the guild can pinpoint what's drawing the beasts out of hiding."

My heart nearly stops. Gray's announcement aligns with what Joel said when he passed around his phone. But hundreds of attacks? *Hundreds?*

This is my fault.

I used my magic, and now they're gathering. Relying themselves for some kind of mass assault.

"Madeline," Gray says, scaring me half to death.

He gives me a curious look when I jump like a cat doused with water.

"Yes?" I manage.

"You and I are going to use our persuasion on the guests and staff to see if anyone knows where Jenna is. I'm tired of screwing around. This is our last day."

"What do you want me to do?" Eric asks, scratching Charles under the chin.

"How about you put down the stupid cat?"

Rafe snorts, and I turn my eyes on him, surprised. It's slow, tedious, and generally frustrating as all get-out, but I think he and Gray are making progress.

Gray ends the short meeting, and Rafe comes to my side. "I'll see what I can find out about the Heron as well."

I grasp his arm, my fingers digging into his skin. "Why didn't you tell me

the beasts are coming out of the woodwork?”

Nonchalant as can be, he studies me. “What would you have done?”

“I don’t know. *Something.*”

“All right.” He pats my hand like an old man. “We’ll get right on that *something* when we’re done here. You do want to help the team find the Heron, don’t you?”

I nod, though I’m still feeling ill.

“Okay then.” He starts for the door, but I pull him back.

“Thank you for all this,” I tell him grudgingly. “I know you’re humoring me.”

He nods, not even bothering to deny it. I give him a small smile and then slip out the door with Jonathan, off to use my magic on a bunch of unsuspecting, wealthy humans, trying to ignore the mass monster uprising that I’ll have to deal with very, very soon.

I STEP up to the old-fashioned, wooden refreshment stand next to Will, my least favorite cop, accepting a glass of cider from the man distributing refreshments. Today’s outing has brought us to a local orchard. They’re pressing the apples right out in the open, where everyone can watch.

A pumpkin patch sprawls in the field next door, and it’s filled with big orange pumpkins. Families have shown up in droves on this beautiful Saturday afternoon, and they load wagons as they make their way down the rows.

It’s a perfect autumn afternoon, but I can’t enjoy it, not when I’ve spent so many fruitless hours trying to find someone who knows where Jenna went. The smarmy police officer is the last person I have to question.

“What do you know of the chef’s disappearance?” I ask, cutting to the chase and putting a wallop of persuasion into the words. “Any idea where she might be?”

The man frowns, the strangest expression crossing his face. He doesn’t look stupefied or pliant. In fact, he looks rather unaffected.

Then, as if it takes the magic just a little longer to kick in, he leans forward conspiratorially. “I’m going to tell you the truth. I have no idea.”

I frown. “None?”

What kind of terrible cop is he? A woman disappears, and he hasn't the slightest idea what happened to her?

He shakes his head, and then he leans closer and drops his voice. "Doing a little detective work?"

I give him a one-shouldered shrug.

After studying me for several moments, he says, "If you could be persuaded to have dinner with me, I might be inclined to help you out."

"Aren't you married?"

"No more than you." He lifts his glass to his lips, taking a long drink. I study him, wondering if he's acknowledging we're both married...or that he knows I'm *not*.

Giving him a tight smile, I infuse magic into my words and say, "How about you tell me what you know, and we skip dinner?"

A slow smile builds on his face. "That doesn't sound like nearly as much fun."

Honestly.

The man doesn't know anything or he wouldn't be able to resist, which means he's worthless to me.

I walk away, not even bothering to excuse myself, and head for Jonathan. He's standing with another couple, subtly questioning them the old-fashioned way—without magic.

As I make my way over, he subtly shakes his head. He's got nothing.

We've questioned everyone present, nearly everyone staying at the mansion, and it's all the same thing. Nobody knows anything.

It's our last night, our number one suspect has up and disappeared, and we have no idea where she went. The masquerade is in a few hours. My only hope is that Jenna will return to attempt to snare another victim.

"Let's head back to the room," I say to Jonathan. "I want to take a nap before tonight. You know they'll have something magnificently spooky planned, and right now, I'm not up for it."

Jonathan thankfully agrees. When we return, the mansion's staff is busy at work, decorating the ballroom. I stand by the door, peering in, a large part of me wishing I were in charge. Setting up tables and adorning them with large black lanterns and fall-foliage wreaths looks a lot more satisfying than trying to find a murderous Heron who disappeared in a puff of smoke.

"You don't have a lot of time to rest," Jonathan reminds me as I linger in the doorway.

I turn from the room and head down the hall, toward the back stairs.

It's been tense between us since Gray's lovely reminder that teammates can't date. We've kept our distance, even in public. We barely speak as we make our way down the hall, past a bunch of mirrors that only reflect our image, and we don't walk too close together.

I glance around when we enter the room, expecting to find Charles, only to remember Eric still has him. Soon, I'm going to have to sue for custody rights.

"You know," I say to Jonathan, walking to the floor-length mirror, removing pins from the bun I pulled my hair into this morning. "Jenna's disappearance might be part of the haunted mansion hoax. Maybe they always have her disappear the night before the masquerade, just to add a little more excitement and mystery."

"I didn't think of that." Jonathan sits on the couch. "Did you speak with Elizabeth or Rodger?"

"No, I haven't seen them today."

"Olivia was at the cider tasting. She cornered me when you were talking to Mr. and Mrs. Ingram."

I turn to him. "What did she want?"

"Nothing really. She talked a bit about the cider."

"Are you sure she's not Aparian?" I ask, taking the risk of sounding like a broken record. "There is something really off about her. She was with John the night he disappeared, I saw her talking to Phillip before he died, and she's enamored with you." I pause, realizing something. "You don't think she abducted Jenna, do you? The Heron disappeared right after Olivia saw her invite you to her room."

Jonathan frowns, mulling the words over. "She carries no magic—she's as human as a..."

He trails off, looking for the right word.

I give him a wry smile. "As a human?"

He grins, a welcome sight. "Yeah."

"And there's no chance she has a medallion?" I ask.

"There's always a *chance*, but we're talking slim to none. Like, win the lottery twice in a month kind of chance." He gives me a rueful smile. "I'm sorry, Maddie. I don't think it's Olivia."

I sigh, feeling he's probably right. "Nevertheless, I think she likes you."

"What's not to like?" he teases, crossing the room, stepping behind me

and meeting my eyes in the mirror. I pause, watching him in the reflection, wondering what he's doing. He brushes my hand away from my hair and carefully uncoils the bun, setting my curls free. They cascade past my shoulders in blond-gold waves.

"I thought your hair was straight," he murmurs, running his fingers through the locks. The gentle tug feels so good I almost close my eyes and focus on the sensation.

"Only when I straighten it," I answer. "It's naturally wavy, so it curls easily, especially when it's been up all day."

"You should wear it down tonight." Our eyes lock. Softer, he adds, "I like it down."

Every inch of me grows warm, and my stomach flutters.

We're alone. Technically we can do whatever we want—we're adults after all, and Gray's not here to act as a chaperone.

But what do we want? What does *Jonathan* want? He's been sending some pretty serious mixed signals.

Jonathan doesn't do casual relationships, and I don't know that I can commit to something serious, not when being around me is proving to be dangerous.

"What is that look?" he asks, brushing my hair aside. He hesitates only a second before he throws caution to the wind and presses a kiss to my neck, making me shiver. Giving in almost immediately, I tilt my head to the side, allowing him easier access.

That's right—my willpower is astounding.

You almost died last night, I think, knowing he'll hear me.

He trails his lips down my neck, undaunted. "Please. I was fine."

You weren't.

In response, he gently scrapes his teeth against my skin, sending a riot of butterflies winging in my stomach. "Stop dwelling on it," he murmurs.

I turn, pulling away from his soft, delicious kisses, needing to face him for this conversation. "I'm dangerous, Jonathan. I didn't fully realize it before. But I am. Knowing me, being around me...it's not a good idea."

A shadow crosses the knight's face, but he chuckles, thinking I'm joking. "Madeline—"

"Did you hear Gray? The beasts are coming out of hiding. For more than a hundred years, they've stayed in their dark crevices. And now they're gathering—because of *me*." I set my hands on his shoulders, my eyes

searching his. “You shouldn’t get close to me—none of you should. What if next time we can’t find a healer in time?”

“Don’t,” he says softly. “You can’t push me away before we’ve even begun.”

“I can’t put you at risk—I *won’t* put you at risk.” I press my lips together, trapping in a whole lot of messy emotion. “I don’t have enough friends to lose my very favorite.”

He pulls my hands from his shoulders and clasps them in his own, his jaw working. “Madeline, listen to me. I am a knight marshal—one of the highest-ranking knights in the guild. I have trained since I was five. Let me assure you, I can take care of myself.”

“Then what happened last night?”

“I let my guard down. That just happens sometimes.”

“Because I was a distraction.”

He frowns as the memories of the night flit through my mind, passing to him through the connection. If nothing else, that’s a perk to his magic. I don’t have to explain myself—he understands me like no one else ever will.

I don’t hold back—I let him feel the panic that clawed at me, the crippling fear that we might lose him.

I can’t go through that again, Jonathan. Please don’t make me.

After a long moment, he breaks the link, pulling his hands back. He stares at me for a long while, his expression shielded. One heartbeat passes, then a few more.

Finally, he says, “All right.”

But it’s not all right. It’s *never* going to be all right because these creatures don’t belong here. They’ve never belonged here.

“I need to...” Jonathan trails off, looking toward the balcony—searching for an excuse to leave. After a moment, he turns back, looking at me but *not* looking at me. “Rest a little if you can. It’ll be a long night. I’ll meet you downstairs before the masquerade starts.”

He then heads toward the narrow wardrobe, pulls out a tux, and walks out the door.

I stare after him, a dull ache in my chest. It’s better this way.

It is.

And very soon, I’m going to deal with the shadow creatures. I just have to figure out how.

IT LOOKS like I walked into a scene from a movie. One thing about the rich—they don't spare any money on their costumes. There's a multitude of ball gowns in dark, jeweled colors, and the masks are nothing less than works of art.

My own black strapless gown molds to my chest and then flairs dramatically at my hips, falling to the ground in a glorious bell of fabric.

I turn, searching for Jonathan, confident I'll recognize him behind his mask. The foyer outside the ballroom is full as we wait for the Monroes to toss open the doors. Already, strains of eerie music filter to us. It sounds like they have a small orchestra on the other side, including an organ.

A touch at my back startles me, and I turn, sending my gown swishing around me.

Jonathan.

He wears a tux, as he did at our dinners, but this one has tails. Though some of the men have added top hats to their ensembles, Jonathan's gone without. But his hair is tame, and he's freshly shaven.

"Nice mask," I say, hoping to put the awkwardness from the room behind us.

He touches the simple swatch of black fabric that covers his eyes. "I look like a raccoon."

"Yes, but a dashing raccoon," I tease.

His eyes wander over me, lingering momentarily at the tight, corseted bodice that I swear is suffocating me. "You are..." He shakes his head, acting as if he's almost at a loss for words. "Stunning."

It makes my heart hurt.

Before I can answer, the doors slowly open, not an attendant in sight. Low lying fog billows out, most likely a product of smoke machines by the entrance.

The massive crystal chandelier lights the dance floor. The perimeter, where the tables are set, is dark. Candlelit lanterns act as centerpieces, creating a spooky, romantic ambiance.

The crowd presses forward, murmuring, all eager to enter. I watch, enchanted by the costumes. They're brilliant. Many of the women have masks that mimic animals—peacocks, butterflies, foxes, deer—and their dresses are made to match.

“I feel like I missed an opportunity,” I whisper to Jonathan. “I could have been a fox.”

He chuckles under his breath and presses a guiding hand to my back as we walk into the room.

I look around, wondering if Jenna is here somewhere. Maybe she's hiding in the masked crowd. I spot Elizabeth almost immediately. Her gown is cream, Italian Renaissance in design, and her mask has a plume of white feathers that cascade from the side. Rodger stands next to her, his white hair a beacon that gives him away. He too wears a design that's Italian in nature.

Olivia stands to the side of them, petite and perfect in her soft pink gown. To complete the outfit, she wears long black gloves and a matching mask, and her hair is styled in shiny pin curls. She looks young and vulnerable in the big room. Her eyes fall on Jonathan as we step through the door, and a smile flutters over her lips.

Despite Jonathan's insistence that she's not Aparian—can't be Aparian—I still don't trust her.

“Not even a little wisp of magic?” I ask Jonathan, nodding subtly to the young woman.

Jonathan pulls his eyes from a massive jack-o'-lantern flickering from a table next to us. He follows my gaze and shakes his head. “Sorry, Madeline. Nothing.”

I nod, trying to squelch the growing feeling of certainty in my stomach. I'm positive something is not as it appears.

Food tables line the back wall, and punch bowls steam. I have no doubt the food will be excellent, but I can't eat, not now. My nerves are wound tight as intuition tells me something is going to happen tonight—I just don't know what.

Will strides past us, heading toward Rodger. The two begin a whispered conversation as the rest of the guests filter into the room.

Clarissa and Joel stand near a table. Somehow, they've already found the buffet, and they each have a plate in their hands. Clarissa looks like a chocolate cupcake in her voluminous, brown polyester gown, complete with a Victorian satin bonnet, though I'm not sure dessert was the look she was going for.

Joel's gone for a full-out steampunk look, with a ruffled collar, multiple chains and buckles adorning his jacket, and a top hat with a set of aviator goggles perched on the brim.

Their equipment sits on the table next to them, and I have no doubt they'll soon prowl the room, wands in the air, looking for signs of ghostly activity.

"Should we dance?" Jonathan asks as the dance floor begins to fill.

Of course I want to dance—there's nothing I want to do more than lose myself in the night. But we have a murderess to find.

"Come on," he coaxes. "It will be easier to keep an eye on the room from the center of it anyway."

Good enough.

I feel like I'm practically floating in my gown as we cross the great room. Jonathan steps close, presses one hand to the curve of my side, and takes my hand in the other. "Nice gloves," he says wryly, nodding to the material that keeps us separated.

So very thankful he's teasing me again, I grin. "Thanks."

The music begins, and Jonathan leads me into a dance that's not quite familiar but easy enough to get the rhythm of.

"You dance?" I ask, surprised to find he knows what he's doing.

"My grandmother made me take lessons when I was eight. She said it would help my fencing.

"Your *fencing*?" I widen my eyes. "You took fencing?"

"It's a requirement. We have to take a certain number of years of all kinds of things before we're accepted into the academy."

"What else?"

"Gunmanship, various martial arts."

I bite my lip, hiding a wicked grin. "And ballroom dancing."

He rolls his eyes. "That wasn't exactly a requirement, but I did graduate top of our swordsmanship class at the academy, so maybe she knew what she was talking about."

“Do you see your family often?”

He nods. “Fairly often. Dad died a few years ago, so we try to go home to visit Mom as much as possible.”

“I’m sorry,” I murmur.

It’s obvious he still feels the loss, but he dismisses it for now. “We miss him, but we’re getting by.”

Remembering that I’m supposed to be watching the guests, seeing if I can spot anything out of the ordinary, I sweep my eyes over the room. But all I see are people enjoying themselves—some sip cider, many dance, a few get cozy in the dark corners.

My eyes land on Will. He stands near the edge of the dance floor, and he watches Jonathan and me with a strange, almost hungry expression that I find disconcerting for several reasons. The first is that it’s downright creepy. The second is that it’s familiar. I look away, racking my brain, trying to figure out why the police officer is giving me an unwelcome case of *déjà vu*.

“See any sign of Jenna?” Jonathan asks, pulling my attention from Will.

I shake my head. “Nothing.”

Suddenly, the chandelier above us flickers. A hush falls over the crowd, and the music slowly comes to a stop. After a moment, the light steadies.

But just as the crowd is releasing a collective breath, the light goes out completely, and we’re plunged into darkness.

People begin talking abruptly as they shift around. The only light comes from the lanterns on the tables and the glow of the candle-lit jack o’ lanterns.

As we’re standing here, literally in the dark, a ghostly howl echoes throughout the room. It sounds as if the apparition is with us, shifting as it moves over the guests.

A woman screams, and other people press together, ready to run. Jonathan grasps my arms, holding me close as those around us begin to panic.

Even though I know it’s fake, the hair stands on the back of my neck, and goosebumps prickle my arms. A crash of thunder practically shakes the mansion, and a gust of wind beats against the wall of windows, speckling the glass with rain.

Jonathan tenses. “She’s here.”

“It was part of the trick,” I say, excited. We just have to find the Heron. We push our way to the exit, but there’s a mass exodus, and we’re stuck in the very middle of it. Another woman screams from behind me, and then another.

Just as we're almost to the doors, the lights flair back to life. Harried guests look about the ballroom, sure they're going to spot the ghost.

But the room looks just as it did before.

Clarissa and Joel, ghost hunters extraordinaire, cower near the wall. Several women clutch their chests, diamonds glittering as they tremble. Even the men look more than a little shaken.

I think deep down, most of us believe it's a farce, but it's still disturbing, no matter what your head tells you.

I'm just gaining control over my breathing when I spot the bodies on the ground. They lie motionless, blood pooling from their necks in a gruesome display. People begin to shriek, practically bleating like sheep.

"Wait!" Rodger hollers from the back of the room. "Everyone needs to calm down."

But no one is listening to our host.

"It's not real, is it?" I ask Jonathan, my eyes on the women and the very convincing-looking blood oozing from the slashes at their necks. "This is part of the show?"

Jonathan pulls away from me, crossing the room to the closest woman. He kneels, checking her pulse even as others shy away. Our eyes lock, and he frowns.

She's dead.

And that's when I sense the creatures in the room, hiding somewhere in the shadows. My throat begins to close, and I scan the area, frantic.

I don't know what they are, but I can *feel* them.

The lights flicker once more, and the people who didn't manage to flee scream again. In the stuttering light, I see movement on the high ceiling, several shadows making their way to the center of the room, gold eyes shining.

"Jonathan!" I yell, pointing to them.

He looks up just in time to see the grand chandelier wobble.

"Get back!" I pull several people with me.

Olivia stands dead center, looking bemused. Jonathan lunges for her and shoves her out of the way as the room goes black and the massive collection of glass and crystal comes crashing to the ground.

"Jonath—" I start to yell, but a hand wraps around my mouth, and I'm yanked backward.

"Pretty, pretty girl," the cop says in my ear, and memories flood back.

“What a delightful mess you’ve created.”

I struggle against Will, but he continues to haul me back. I kick out, trying to catch the door jamb with my foot, but the man pulls me from the ballroom and down the hall, forcing me into the same closet I visited with Rafe.

“Your little pets are getting dreadfully out of line, don’t you think?” he says.

Desperate to get him off me, I bite his hand. He jumps, startled, and releases me. Unfortunately, he’s still blocking the door.

“Let me out, Trent,” I snarl, mentally berating myself for not realizing sooner that Will the Smarmy Cop is actually Trent the Smarmy Pixie. I glance around, eyeing the mops. Maybe I can smack him over the head with one.

“Oh, tsk, tsk.” The pixie leans against the door, crossing his arms. “That was terrible. Maybe if you used your persuasion?”

With a mocking raise of his eyebrows, he gives me a slow, sick grin.

“What are you doing here?” I demand. Though the pixie terrifies me, I try not to let it show. He feeds off fear, off desperation.

“Killing humans,” he says almost as if we’re having a friendly conversation. “I thought you noticed.”

He takes a step forward, and I instinctively step back, though I don’t have anywhere to go. “What do you mean?”

“Isn’t that why you’re here? To find the villain who’s abducting the mansion’s guests?”

You have got to be kidding.

“It’s been *you* this whole time?”

He holds his hands out, dipping his head as if acknowledging praise—praise I certainly didn’t give. “I infiltrated the Knights’ Guild, sent your team on the assignment, lured you here. I even suggested they pair your good friend Jonathan with Linda. I knew the knight wanted you, knew he’d jump at the chance to get you to himself. I wasn’t wrong.”

I stare at him, feeling ill. He did all that? He’s been messing with us for the last three months, and we didn’t even know it?

“I hired Jenna to spook the humans—made them wonder if their ruse didn’t get away from them. And I’ve been here, orchestrating the whole thing, keeping it running smoothly.”

I stare at him. “But your eyes...you look normal.”

He gives me a gracious smile. “It takes a few weeks to settle into a role, but I like to think I’m skilled once I have the feel of the character. Will’s wife fell for it, and you can imagine the perks I’ve been enjoying thanks to this arrangement. I buy her pretty things, and she’s been most generous in return.”

My chest squeezes painfully as I realize that Will—the real Will—isn’t Trent’s creation. He’s an actual man—an actual man Trent murdered.

“All the men who disappeared—that was you?” I ask, still unable to wrap my head around it. “And Phillip’s heart attack? How did you do it?”

“I’m afraid I can’t take credit for that one, though I wish I could.” The pixie looks truly saddened by the fact. “He simply didn’t have the constitution to keep up with his brunette minx. But don’t worry about poor, sweet Misty. I’ll track her down when I’m done here, offer her my unique brand of comfort.”

His words make me nauseous, but I fight the urge to be ill. “And Olivia? Was she in on it too?”

Trent’s expression becomes wicked. “No, but she’s delightfully promiscuous, isn’t she? What a perfect suspect she made, especially since I myself led your team to believe they were looking for a woman when I gave them the initial reports.

“I have to tell you,” he continues, “she had her eye on Jonathan, but I needed Jenna for that role.” He takes a step forward, his gaze growing sick and hungry. “I expected him to succumb to her, but he never did. I think he likes you.”

“You are a *snake*, Trent.” He has me cornered, and panic claws at my chest, squeezing my heart.

“Oh, darling, don’t be angry with me. You looked so lost and confused earlier, using your magic on me. I almost felt bad.” He steps forward, his eyes darkening further. “If you’d shared my bed, I would have told you.”

“This whole time you’ve been toying with us when you could have just snatched me.”

He makes a noise of agreement in the back of his throat as he presses forward. “That’s because you need to learn—you’ll never escape me. I am a cat, and you are a delectable, helpless mouse. We can play for years if you want, but in the end, the mouse is mine.”

“How did you lure the creatures here?”

Trent tips his head back and laughs. “That’s the best part—I didn’t. It’s all you.” He meets my eyes. “You brought them here. The chaos in the

ballroom is your fault. The swarms flocking the mansion even as we speak... that's *your fault too.*"

Swarms flocking the house?

"That's right," Trent all but purrs. "They're in the staff quarters right this moment."

The staff quarters?

Trent runs a finger down my collarbone, far too close to me now. "Someone cut the electricity so they could enter." He looks up, raising his eyebrows, silently laughing at my terror. "No clue who."

BACKED INTO A CORNER, I yank up my skirt, reaching for the stun gun that's strapped to my thigh. As I hoped, Trent's eyes follow the movement, and he doesn't notice me grabbing the mop handle with my other hand.

Without the slightest bit of finesse, I jam the handle into his chest. He hollers out in pain and surprise, and I shove past him. Just before I reach the door, he grabs me. I ram my head backward, hitting his face. There's a sickening crunch as I connect with his nose.

And ow.

Pain echoes through my head, making me momentarily dizzy. It hurts so much more than it looks like in the movies.

Still, it gives me a chance to escape. He crumples to the ground behind me. I dart through the door, running down the hall, bursting into the ballroom.

"Enough!" I scream into the darkness. Most of the guests are gone, have fled for their lives or are dead, but a few attempt to fight the beasts. "Cease your attack!"

"Madeline!" Jonathan hollers from somewhere in the middle of the room.

I run for him, tripping over something that feels a whole lot like a body. He finds me and catches me in his arms.

"What happened?" he demands.

"The shadow monsters are in the staff quarters," I say, out of breath from the run.

"Are you sure?"

I'm already yanking him toward the doorway. "Trent told me. Thank goodness for evil villain monologues."

“Trent?” Jonathan demands.

“He’s here—he’s *Will*. He’s behind everything, said he lured us here himself. I left him unconscious in a closet. We’ll deal with him later.”

Jonathan runs with me, right on my heels. He throws open the large entry door and then promptly yanks it shut.

There are hundreds of them out there—every monster you can imagine and more. They’re in the sky, crawling on the ground, running about, creating destruction and havoc. The storm stretches across the sky, dark clouds sinking to the earth. It’s far larger than the work of a Heron, but it feels equally as ominous.

“I’ll go out first and command them to back down,” I tell the knight. “Then we can go to the staff quarters together and do the same.”

He nods, not liking the idea of sending me into something that looks very much like the apocalypse. “Be careful—don’t let anything grab you.”

I nod, taking a deep breath. I can do this. After all, this is my mess to clean up. Feeling like I’m going to be sick, I step out the door, closing it quickly so nothing can slither inside. The noise is deafening. It’s a buzz of pandemonium, and I almost put my hands over my ears to block it out.

“Stop!” I yell into the night, throwing all my magic into it. “Back down!”

Many of the creatures near me come to an abrupt halt, falling to their bellies. But the others don’t hear me.

“ENOUGH!” I scream again, but it’s to no avail. Panic rises, threatening to choke me. What am I going to do?

Quickly, I dart back into the mansion and slam the door behind me. “It’s not working!” I tell Jonathan, desperate. “It’s too loud—they can’t hear me.”

The Griffon’s tux is ripped in several places, and his hair is a mess. He has a gash on his cheek, but thank goodness, he seems to be free of bite marks.

He swears and runs a hand through his hair as he thinks. Then he looks up. “You need Rafe.”

“What?”

“He’s your knight—you need him. He has the same magic—you’re stronger when you’re together. You’ll be stronger if you link.”

Jonathan’s right. I don’t know how I know it, but I do.

I pat my hand over the dress, realizing I have a problem. “I don’t have my phone!”

The irony.

Jonathan produces his, and I frantically call my dark knight.

“Where’s Madeline?” Rafe demands the moment he answers. There’s screaming and crashing and general chaos in the background. It sounds like he’s standing in the middle of a battlefield.

“It’s me,” I tell him. “I think I need you.”

“Just a minute,” he says. There’s a loud, guttural scream followed by a gurgle that sounds...well, it sounds bad. He then comes back on the line and demands, “Where are you?”

“In the house, right at the entry. I tried to send the creatures away, but they couldn’t hear me over all the noise. Jonathan thinks we need to link our magic—that maybe it will make it stronger.”

There’s a long pause. “We can’t.”

Two gunshots are followed by a really disturbing screech.

“Do we have a choice?” I demand, raising my voice so he can hear me over the noise.

“Stay put. I’ll come to you.”

“No, wait—”

He ends the call before I can finish. The fool knight isn’t going to try to cross the garden, is he? Surely not. They’ll eat him alive.

“I’m going out there,” I tell Jonathan, heading for the door. When he begins to protest, I assure him, “I’ll be fine.”

His hand latches around my wrist, and he tugs me back, twirling me to face him. I stumble, startled by the abrupt change of direction, and fall against his chest.

“Madeline,” he breathes, his dark eyes on mine, his fingers twining through my hair.

Then he kisses me.

And *oh*. It’s not a sweet, soft kiss, nor is it a friendly peck. It’s a lips-crushed-together, can’t-breathe, tasting, touching sort of moment that sears into a girl’s memory for the rest of her life.

The outside world melts away. I grasp the knight as I sink into him, and he wraps his arms around my back, holding me steady.

His lips move with mine—demanding, giving, needing. Desperate. I press against him, wanting more, digging my fingers into his shoulders, begging him to continue this sweet assault to my senses. He makes a noise deep in his throat, one that fans flames low in my belly.

“Madeline,” he growls, a man starving. His hands move from my back to

my rump as he lifts me higher. Without hesitation, I wrap my legs around his waist, letting the skirt hike up around my thighs. I cup a hand around the back of his neck, diving my fingers into his glorious, thick hair.

It's just him and me. No death, no monsters, no darkness.

Just Jonathan. My Griffon. The man I can't be with because I'm cursed with vile magic.

"I'll understand," he says, never breaking the kiss.

"You'll understand what?"

"That you won't want me after you link with Rafe. I'm telling you so you don't feel guilty—so it won't plague you."

I pull back. "What are you talking about?"

"Once you connect—once you use his magic..." His eyes search mine. "You're his. He's yours. That's the way it is."

"Are you serious?" I demand.

But before he can answer, dancing light catches my attention. It almost looks like—

Jonathan swears under his breath, letting me down. "They've lit the house on fire."

The flames come from the ballroom. The heat reaches us, and we're not even that close.

Behind us, Rafe bursts through the door. I rush to him, surprised to find him whole. "How did you get through it?"

He gives me an incredulous look. "I cloaked."

Oh...right. Unlike me, he knows how to be a Fox.

I glance at Jonathan, who looks like he's trying to decide if we can put out the fire at this point, or if we're going to have to let it burn. After half a heartbeat, I turn back to Rafe. "What happens if we allow our magic to link?"

A shadow crosses Rafe's face. "We can't."

"Is there any other way to stop them?"

Black stains cover his shirt and jeans. It looks like oil and grease—like he spent the last few hours under a car. But it's blood from the beasts. He's been fighting them, and successfully judging from his lack of wounds. But there are too many, and I can feel more coming.

He closes his eyes, looking like he's going to be ill. "I don't know."

Jonathan steps forward and squeezes my hand, silently telling me it's going to be okay. Telling me he believes in me.

My heart aches—I want him. I *want* to want him, want to see what could

grow between us if we were just given the chance.

“You’re the only one who can control them, Madeline,” Jonathan reminds me, reading my mind. “If you don’t do it, we’re all dead.”

I stare at him, conflicted, my brain and my heart at war. He finally nods, telling me it’s time.

Terrified, I turn to Rafe.

My knight.

“You’re strong,” I tell him. “And a good man. You can resist the pull toward evil. I know you can.”

He barely shakes his head. “What if I can’t?”

“You have to.”

His dark, dark blue eyes search mine. He wants to believe me—he needs to know that I believe myself. And I do.

I extend my hand, my magic already twisting and writhing inside me, gleeful. After a long, heavy moment, Rafe accepts.

Our magic twines together as it always does, but it feels what’s coming. It knows.

“Are you ready?” he asks, squeezing my palm, holding it tight.

I give him a bare nod.

Together, we toss open the doors. The sight is surreal—there are just so many of them. A multitude of monsters.

My heart races; I can feel its thrum in my throat. I cling to Rafe, terrified. What if this doesn’t work?

“What do I do?” I yell to Rafe, hoping he can hear me over the noise.

He turns to me, clasping my other hand so we’re standing face to face, surrounded by madness. “Take my magic.”

“Take it *how*?”

“Just take it. It’s yours anyway.” He stares into my eyes. “*I’m yours—I have been since I laid eyes on you.*”

Apparently it’s a night for heartache.

“Rafe...”

“I know, Lexie,” he says, using my nickname, breaking me. “I know how you feel about Jonathan. I understand.”

“He says—”

“He’s right. Are you sure you want to do this?”

That’s the thing—I don’t have a choice.

Without answering, I tighten my grip on Rafe’s hands and purposely

twine my magic through his. Then I pull it toward me, *into* me. And suddenly, it's one. We merge together, my knight and me, becoming something stronger, brighter, infinitely more dangerous. And it's the most natural thing in the world—like breathing.

Rafe wears a look of pure agony—like he cannot believe he's allowed this to happen.

Fortified with his magic, I turn toward the night sky. "Cease your fight!" I command, my magic carrying far past my voice. The power of it nearly knocks us over. The creatures fall from the sky in waves, landing on the ground, bowing before me.

The magic crashes over me. It's a heady feeling, this power, addicting. I allow myself to revel in it, just for a moment.

Finally, when I feel I can control it, I look at the dark legion before me. "Away! Back to where you came from, hide yourselves." Then I pause, taking in the army of beasts, scared to death. "I have plans for you—plans for you all. I will call you soon enough. Do not venture from the depths until you hear my voice."

For several moments, the world is perfectly still. The storm quiets, and the creatures are silent. Then the winged beasts take to the skies. The slithering beasts make for the trees, as do the ones on foot.

I stand, watching, supervising, making sure they heed my command. It takes ten minutes, possibly more, until the last of them disappears into the night, leaving only their wreckage behind.

It's a sobering sight. There is so much destruction. Guests fled the mansion only to meet their death in the once beautiful garden.

The only living souls before me form a bedraggled trio of knight marshals.

Jonathan watches, his expression carefully blank. Eric looks dumbfounded and slightly confused—but no more than the hairless cat in his arms.

But *Gray*.

The lead knight marshal's face is hard, his eyes like unyielding, glittering granite. Without a word, he draws his dagger and stalks toward me, single-minded focus evident on his face. He means to kill me.

Rafe steps in front of me, drawing his own dagger. "Don't," is all my knight says. His voice is low, calm, deadly.

"She's the Obsidian Queen." Gray's voice is nearly toneless. "She must

die.”

But it’s not Rafe who comes to my rescue. It’s Jonathan. Neither of the knights notices him pulling his dagger, not until he places the tip of it at Gray’s back, between his shoulder blades.

“What are you *doing?*” Gray snarls, turning his head to face the Griffon. “Didn’t you see? She speaks to evil, and the *evil bows before her.*”

“Madeline’s not evil,” Jonathan says calmly. “You know that. Don’t be a fool.”

“What I know in my head can’t belittle what I saw with my eyes.”

“No, he’s right,” I say, my shoulders falling with exhaustion. “You are right to fear me.”

Jonathan flashes me a questioning look.

I straighten, drawing the last of my strength. “Because I’m going to send the monsters back where they belong.”

I’ve made up my mind. This can never happen again. Countless people died today. Rodger, Elizabeth, Olivia, the ghost hunters...they’re all here, their eyes unseeing, their blood soaking into the ground.

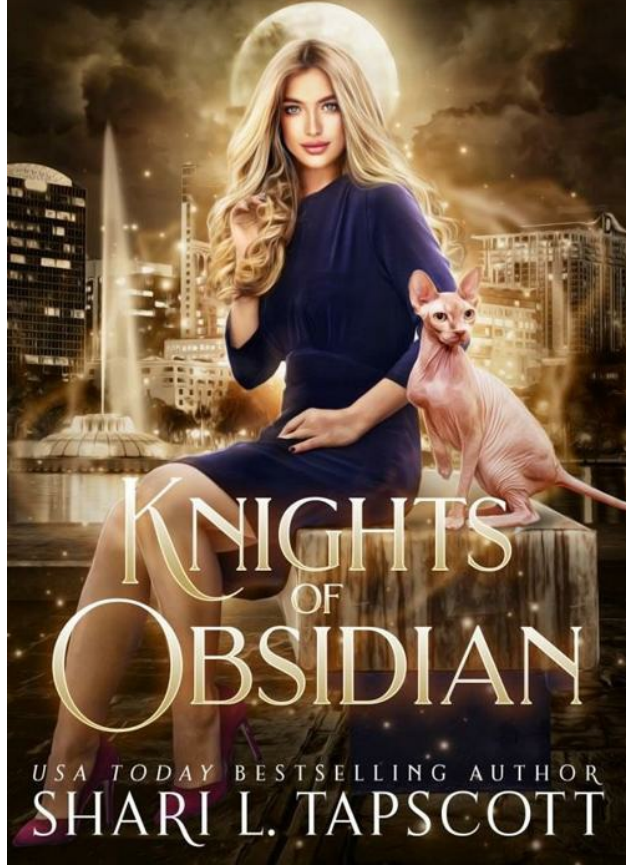
It’s a gruesome sight, one that makes my stomach twist and knot.

“What are you saying?” Jonathan asks, the blade still positioned at Gray’s back.

“I’m going to open the thresholds to Aparia.” Slowly, I meet their eyes, going from man to man, letting them know I mean the words. “And I’m going to need your help to do it.”

The story continues in [Knights of Obsidian!](#)

OBSIDIAN QUEEN BOOK THREE



KNIGHTS
OF
OBSIDIAN

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
SHARI L. TAPSCOTT

Hello!

Thank you for reading *Princess of Shadows*! I hope you're enjoying Madeline's story.

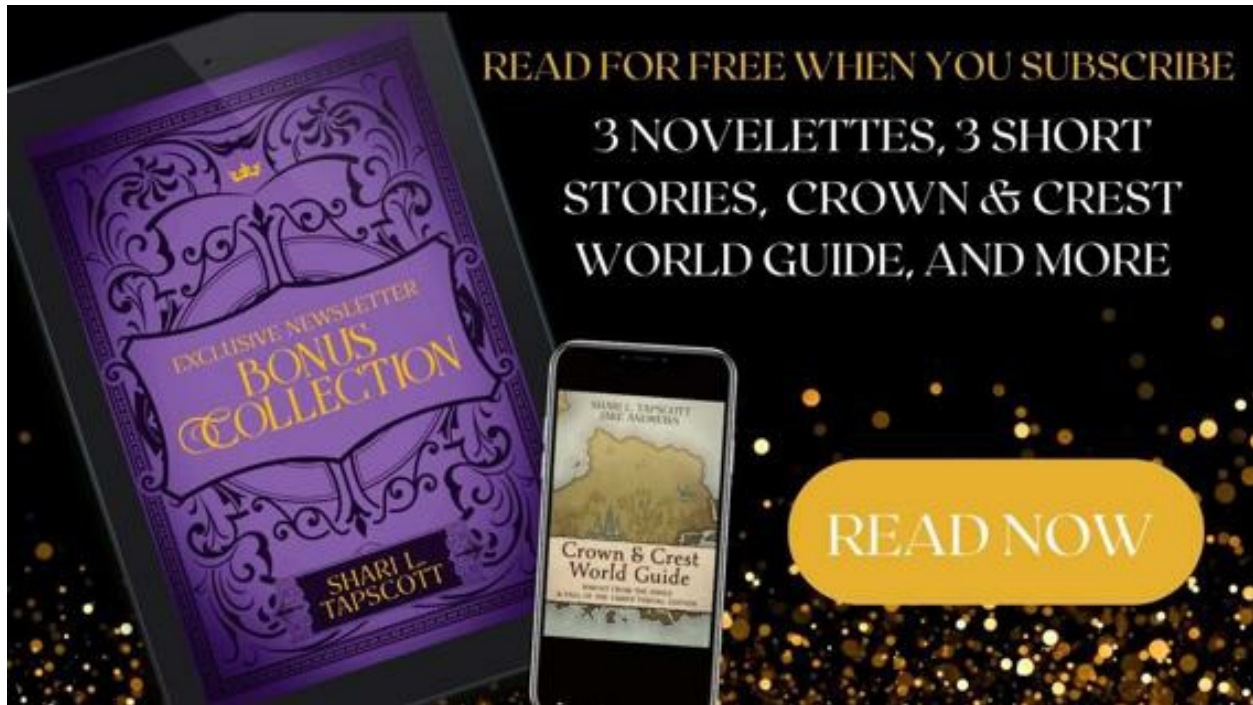
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Wishing you the best,

Shari

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today bestselling author Shari L. Tapscott writes romantic fantasy adventure and contemporary romance. When she's not writing or reading, she enjoys gardening, making soap, and pretending she can sing. She loves white chocolate mochas, furry animals, spending time with her family, and characters who refuse to behave.

Tapscott lives in western Colorado with her husband, son, daughter, and several extremely spoiled pets.

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