

PRINCE OF FLOWERS

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WILD



HEARTS

NAZRI NOOR

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THE BIGGER THEY ARE, THE HARDER TO CALL.

At least that was what Father used to say about forging pacts with mythical creatures, the great beasts of legend. But hey, if a grand summoner said it, it must be true. Father had walked so I could run, and all I had to do was follow in his footsteps. His big, intimidating footsteps. Some day, maybe, I would fulfill the dream he had for me, become a grand summoner myself.

But right then, in that forest, wearing my ranging gear and clutching my father's big, cumbersome grimoire, I was just Locke, college burnout and super senior. Super, super senior, actually. Don't ask.

Call on a flock of seagulls, a swarm of rats? That's freshman stuff, easy peasy. Want the ability to summon an entire dragon? Better be ready to pay the price. I negotiated the forest carefully, every step deliberate as I weaved between branches, avoided twigs. No sense calling too much attention to myself. The only calling I planned to do was out into the ether, for the express purpose of contracting something supremely powerful.

Biting on my lower lip, I thought of what price I might have to pay myself. A dragon would be nice, sure, but I'd settle for a dire wolf, a unicorn, hell, even a lion. "But every summoner starts small," said the voices of my many professors in my head. A sweet sentiment, except for how I was supposed to have upgraded ages ago, no longer sticking to summoning starlings and doves and chickadees.

"I summon you, great power of the cosmos," I muttered under my breath, running my finger across the pages of my well-worn grimoire, practicing the recitation of the first part of the binding spell for the thousandth time.

The task was simple enough — in theory. Explore the forests surrounding the great and ancient academy of the Wispwood. Follow the traces and tangles of spiritual force lingering in the cool, misty air. Find a thread leading to the ideal familiar — an eidolon, rather, a being of great arcane might to which you can bind your soul, form a mutually beneficial magical relationship. And hey, presto! You've forged a contract with an eidolon.

Again, simple stuff — in theory. The Wispwood forests weren't exactly known for being home to truly powerful creatures, the kind I would need to acquire my Crest. But I was getting desperate. Beggars can't be choosers. I switched hands for my grimoire, worried that the sweat on my fingers would imprint on the old leather-bound cover.

It was a summoner's book of shadows, a tome of spells. Within the context of the Wispwood, it

was really more of a glorified textbook. I'd inherited my father's copy. I was supposed to inherit his wealth, too, but the old man had made it so that I'd only gain access to his ridiculous riches if I actually secured my Crest, with a capital C. It was close to the equivalent of a college graduation, only harder. Okay, a lot harder.

Scrape by enough classes, get enough credits to qualify for my degree? Easy, even if I spent half my schooldays cutting class, eating chips, and playing video games. But this was like getting a master's degree in summoning. Scratch that, a master's master's degree.

Father had forged contracts with dragons, with vengeful ghosts, with the guardian spirits of raging volcanoes. I had huge shoes to fill. Massive.

Sometimes I wondered if I was even meant to continue the family business. I chuckled under my breath. Now and then, I would quietly joke to myself about taking the easy way out. I could always hawk the Wilde grimoire at the Black Market and live off the proceeds, at least for a few years.

Grand Summoner Baylor Wilde's personal grimoire? This thing could fetch a pretty penny indeed. I grinned absently to myself, imagining how sweet life would be without the pressure of living up to Father's name, of constantly being harangued by both the faculty and the student body.

And that was when I stepped on the world's loudest, crunchiest twig.

"Summoner filth!"

Oh, fuck. The rasping voice had come from underground, briefly preceding the eruption of the grass and soil not three feet away from where I stood. A blood-red flower the size of an armchair emerged, its petals velvety and dewy as they unfurled to reveal a beautiful woman. Not a woman, actually, but a wild alraune, one of the half-human and half-plant creatures who made every trip through the Wispwood forests a pulse-pounding, potentially dangerous adventure.

Want to take a hike? Try Los Angeles, I hear the hills are lovely. Want to be accosted by a flower-person able to strangle or rip you apart with its vine-like tentacles? Head on over to the Wispwood, where the trees are misty and violent dismemberment comes free of charge.

The alraune stretched out her hand, a volley of thorns whistling at me from between her fingers. I slammed the grimoire shut, tucked, and rolled, no doubt picking up blades of grass and forest floor debris in the curls of my hair, but never mind that. I could shower all the dirt away later. No chance I could shower away being dead.

"Nice to see you again," I shouted over my shoulder as I took off running.

The alraune screamed and shook her fist, the ground already rumbling as her vines snaked through the earth to chase me. I always wondered why some of the supernatural denizens of the forests hated us students so much.

Frankly I was convinced that the Wispwood professors, hell, maybe even the headmasters themselves were paying the alraunes and all the other woodland critters to be as nasty to us as possible. I wouldn't put it past them to believe that frequent attacks and ambushes were good for building character, if not stamina. I kept on running, the grimoire clutched against my chest, the muscles in my legs burning.

I wouldn't consider myself a slouch in the athletic department, necessarily, despite my steady diet of snack cakes and video games. I performed the prescribed academy exercises as well as I could, mostly calisthenics and bodyweight routines. And I could proudly say that I was pretty damn fast on my feet. That sort of thing comes in handy when you're in danger and you try to summon help that doesn't want to show up.

Or when you're running from an angry alraune, for example.

I risked a glance over my shoulder, my heart thumping when I caught sight of the ground rippling

closer and closer toward me. The vines could burst out of the earth at any moment, loop around my ankles and break them. And then the alraune would drag me back to her waiting blood-red bloom, eating me for lunch and using my life essences to water her thirsty roots.

For a moment I tried to recall whether alraunes were carnivorous, but I decided that both my brainpower and my muscles were better devoted to the singular goal of escaping her clutches. Never getting to find out whether she ate people for lunch was probably the better option, right?

I held out my grimoire, the pages fluttering as it followed my silent orders, opening to the section that had one of my favorite summoning spells. Ah. Good enough. My eyes scanned the page hurriedly even as the disembodied voices of my professors rang inside my head, scolding me for still not memorizing this one simple thing.

“Yes, yes, I know,” I snarled, answering the imaginary insults and complaints out loud.

I blinked hard as I spotted a new predicament: all that running had taken me straight toward a ravine. Well, crap. Actually, wait. This was perfect. If I cleared this thing, then I’d be free to slow down and take my time once I reached the other side. No way in hell that alraune’s vines could reach me across the gap.

Of course, the first step was actually crossing the gap alive. My mind raced through the final words and motions of the spell, a recitation that I once again promised I would learn by heart. Soon. Eventually. I thrust my hand out, the magic curled and gathered in my blood uncoiling all at once, bursting through my skin in triumphant release.

Around me the air thrummed with the beating of wings, feathers falling all about my hair, my ears filled with gentle, friendly cooing.

“Thanks for coming,” I muttered, grinning at the flock of doves that had answered my summons. “Let’s do this, boys.”

I pointed at the ravine, my heart pounding against my ribcage as the doves flew alongside me, gathering me up in a cloud of wings and feathers. My foot struck the earth one final time, my cloak rippling behind me like a flag as I very literally threw all caution to the wind.

Dozens upon dozens of doves carried me between the cliffs, my stomach swooping as I caught sight of the raging white river far below. I turned around and stuck my tongue out at the alraune, her teeth bared and her fists clenched as she yelled at me from her end of the gap.

She flung another salvo of thorns toward me, deadly barbs zipping through the air, but the beating wings and reinforced feathers of my little buddies warded them off effortlessly. We touched down on the other side, unhurried, unharmed.

I reached into one of the pouches attached to my belt, casting handfuls of breadcrumbs and birdseed onto the grass. The doves went straight for the snacks, their reward for helping, my hungry boys.

“Until next time, pals,” I said, giving them a small salute as I continued on my way, a smile on my face, a spring in my step.

Yes, I know. Under regular, mundane circumstances, there was simply no way that a flock of doves could deliver a gorgeous, leanly muscular, curly-haired ruffian of a man across a ravine, or protect that same handsome-sounding fellow from a hail of thorny projectiles.

But that was the thing about a summoner and his, uh, summons. When a summoning bond receives enough care and watering, even the most mundane creatures can become imbued with a summoner’s magic, touched and changed by the process. If I tried hard enough, I could make them stronger, sturdier, sleeker.

My doves couldn’t ever fly me from LA to NYC, for example. But in a pinch, the vestiges of my

magic that clung to their wings could mystically enhance their feathers, give them just enough power to fly my beautiful body short distances instead of letting it plunge into an angry river.

I took a few minutes to regain my bearings, craning my neck to look for the alraune. No sign of her, which meant I'd need to be especially careful on the trip back. But hey, I could cross that ravine when I got there. The doves were disappearing one by one, popping out of existence as they returned to whichever part of the world they called home.

I unhooked a flask from my belt, checking first to make sure that it wasn't one of Bruna's potions before taking a swig of cool, lightly lemon-flavored water. Bruna was an extremely talented alchemist, but I wasn't in any mood to serve as one of her human guinea pigs. I had an eidolon to catch.

Right. I drew the back of my hand across my mouth, wiping at the wetness. I crept onward, more wary of my movements this time, which was when I caught a whiff of it on the wind. The smell of something supernatural, something I'd never encountered before.

I held the grimoire against my chest. My heart beat against its cover as I reached out with one hand, scanning, sensing. There. The almost immaterial tangles of wild magic, something surging, lurching in the spaces between Here and wherever the hell There was.

You never did know with the Wispwood. It was one of those places that dwelt between worlds, the fleeting glimmer of imagination and anticipation that lingers as you turn another page in a riveting book, the flicker when you blink. Like a thoroughfare of sorts, a crossroads where different corners of reality overlapped. Were these woods in Germany, Peru, or the Bornean rainforest? All of the above, actually, all at once.

The invisible entity's breath rushed on the breeze, seductive and strong. The faint beat of its heart sounded like the playing of a distant drum. Above all else I could taste the overwhelming power on the tip of my tongue, a palpable flavor of strange, alien magic.

I had to have it. I needed to earn my Summoner's Crest. It was finally my time. I had to make my father proud, wherever he could be. I thrust my hand out, the grimoire levitating at eye level, pages fluttering in an eldritch wind as it turned to the correct section. The binding, the forging of a powerful contract.

"With iron will and stalwart heart I beseech you, great force of the ether. Make yourself known. Manifest. In the name of the summoners that have come before me, hear my words. Heed my call."

A new wind swirled at my feet, sending leaves tumbling upward, whipping at the branches. Gooseflesh rose all over my skin, my body's response to the tingle and thrum of gathering power. Something was here. Something was responding.

Time to finish the incantation, the barest minimum for me to qualify for the Summoner's Crest. Time to complete the Pact of the Unknown.

"I invoke you, thing of the ether, unseen and unnamed. Grant me time and space enough to bargain and barter, to forge a bond that may yet be fruitful for us both."

The wind howled, ripping at my cloak, shearing through my hair, screaming into my ears. It was coming.

It was here.

Time to bring it all home.

"Nameless of the ether, dweller in the unknown, I call you. I summon you. Come forth. Reveal yourself!"

Grass, leaves, and petals exploded in a burst from the center of the clearing, filling the air with a swirl of green and gold. I shielded my eyes, watching through the gaps in my fingers. Had it worked?

It must have. I said all the words correctly, channeled the torrent of great magic through my soul, my flesh. Nothing short of a god could have resisted my summons.

And there he knelt in the center of the glade, his head low, his neck loose, a powerfully built man wearing leather trousers and little else. He propped himself up by one hand, groaning, rubbing at his forehead with the other, like someone recovering from a hangover. A side effect of the invocation, possibly.

Black hair fell in soft wisps over his brow, across his pale gold eyes. They took their time to focus, then filled with defiance, with wild mischief. He glanced up at me, eyes widening, mouth turning up in anger. But even in fury the man was devastating. That face, those lips, that — oh, gods, that body. He was the most beautiful man I'd ever seen.

And then he opened his mouth.



“WHY, I CAN HARDLY BELIEVE THE UNMITIGATED GALL OF A HUMAN — A PITIFUL HUMAN, OF ALL things — to summon me, pluck me out of the ether.”

My mouth hung open as I stood there in shock, as I studied the malice in the lines of his face. I should have noticed how his pants weren’t actually made out of leather, but something that appeared to be plant matter.

I should have noticed the pointed ears.

This man was fae. I backed away uncertainly, unsettled by the discovery. The fae had left the Earth for centuries, only recently returning to our reality. Why they left, no one could rightly say, and why they returned was even more hotly contested by the supernatural community, the denizens of the arcane underground.

We understood far too little of the fae and their realm. What was widely known, however, was that these creatures were dangerous. Blisteringly hot, I had to confess, but dangerous nonetheless.

I gave him the response that I’d been practicing in my head. “It was a summoning spell. I just reached out and asked for whoever would answer because I sensed you nearby. And — ”

“And what?” he said, snapping his fingers to hurry me.

I pursed my lips. Okay. I didn’t care how hot this man was. Being beautiful didn’t give him any license to be such an entitled asshole.

“I already explained my side to you,” I answered through gritted teeth. “I don’t know what else you want to hear from me.”

He stood arms akimbo, emboldened by how nervously I was responding. This fucking guy. He quirked his eyebrow, his chest thrust out — oh gods, his chest — as he preened up and down the clearing. He prattled, too, complaining endlessly, his mouth going a mile a minute. More of a strutting rooster than the all-powerful entity I was hoping to contract.

Was this guy really the same invisible thing that was moving through the clearing, leaving traces of its power on the wind? I could hardly believe it. But the energy around him was unchanged.

Mythical creatures, magical beings, they all possessed their own arcane signatures, a sort of pattern by which you’d recognize their presence. Perceiving these patterns was something that came more readily to someone trained in magic, like me. Sufficiently enough, at least, to know the difference between a shift in the wind and a powerful creature passing through the forests of the Wispwood.

But this was just some dude who was far too big for his britches. Even though those britches, which, on closer inspection appeared to be made out of moss, fit him really well. A little too well, in fact. The way he turned from side to side as he paced arrogantly back and forth gave me a very clear view of his ass as well as his package.

I drew my eyes back up to his face, reminding myself yet again that I was out here in the woods trying to look for an eidolon, a partner to help me earn my Crest, and not a hookup. As if I would ever hook up with someone who was as big a prick as this.

But speaking of big pricks.

Gods, I could have slapped myself. I bit down on my tongue, trying to focus on the fact that this guy was kind of an asshole. Maybe I could release him and unbind him from the spell, let him go on his merry way. He could go back to wherever he came from. The Verdance, perhaps, the realm that the fae called home. Free once more to hit the gym and take infinite selfies, or whatever it was that gorgeous fae men with terrible attitudes like him did in their spare time.

The man rambled on and on. My thoughts returned to the clearing as I caught the end of what he was saying.

“And there I was, minding my own business, and whoosh — as if something had plucked me from a great height. Like I’d fallen.” He narrowed his eyes as he stalked toward me. Close. Dangerously close. “I’d fallen because of you,” he said accusingly.

Fallen for you, the stupid autocorrect feature in my brain told me with a whisper and a titter. I shook the thought away, meaning to give back as good as he could dish out.

“What have I done?” I asked, looking him up and down, wanting him to feel my derision cut into his skin. “Of all the things I could have summoned, you showed up. Gods above and below.”

The fae man’s eyes went wide as he broke into mocking laughter. “Gods above and below, he says. Where are these precious gods of yours? No. Power belongs to those who stand firmly upon the earth of this realm.” He stamped his foot in the grass. “There. Like so.”

I had a hard time distracting myself from how he really wasn’t wearing anything much apart from those pants. Those pants, my hamster brain reminded me again, that he was wearing so exceedingly well.

“This place is not for the gods,” he said conclusively, like his words were gospel.

I drew myself up, resistant, defiant, despite not really giving one or two shits about the gods myself. “Then it’s meant for humans. Clearly. We were here first.”

The fae man scoffed. “Not for long.”

He crossed his arms, the muscles in them bulging. It was getting harder and harder to avoid staring at the sight of so much flesh, his skin smooth and perfect, his body rippling with tight muscle. How could someone so breathtaking be so foul?

But wasn’t that what everyone said about the fae? It was in their nature to be so beautiful in unearthly ways, and yet so malicious and cruel. I hadn’t spent five minutes with the first fae I’d ever met and he was already ticking all the boxes. Aloof? Check. Arrogant? Another check. I never expected the fae to be so damn obnoxious.

“Whatever this is,” I said, putting on a bored expression, rotating my hand at the wrist dismissively, “I don’t think I want any part of it. I’m a summoner, someone who forges pacts with powerful creatures, supreme beings of arcane might. Not random men who strut around the woods half naked while flapping relentlessly at the mouth.”

Again the man scoffed. He seemed even handsomer in anger. How very annoying.

“If you’re looking for powerful beings, arcane might? Then look no further.” He lifted his chin,

one eyebrow cocked. “Don’t you know who I am, human?”

Again I looked him up and down, as slowly and deliberately as I could, to impress without words his total insignificance. Kind of challenging, considering at least one half of me — the lower half — was also very interested in checking him out.

“No idea who you are,” I said, giving him a slow, mocking blink.

His lips twisted into a sneer. “And yet you thought to summon me.”

I held out my grimoire, opening it to the page of the spell I’d used to call him. “Look. Look if you don’t believe me. The spell itself is named the Pact of the Unknown. You being the unknown in question. Don’t know you. Never heard of you.”

He recoiled as if someone had spat in his face while peeing on his bare feet at the same time. The fae man seemed to grow several inches taller, his muscles bulkier, the shadows at his feet lengthening.

“I am Prince Sylvain, high fae of the Summer Court, and you will show me the respect I am due.”

Again I shrugged, thoroughly enjoying how very angry I could make him with only the movement of my shoulders. “Never heard of you. And again, it’s not like I owe you anything.”

His chin tucked against his chest, at a loss for words. But then he opened his mouth again.

“I’ll have you know that I am among the most powerful of the high fae, a member of royalty. A summoner you may be, but I outrank you, human insect.” He pushed his fists into his hips again, smirking to himself, somehow becoming exponentially more pompous with every sentence. “You would do well to forge a pact with me.”

Fascinated by his arrogance, I burst out laughing. Sylvain, was that his name? It was hilarious how he’d swung so quickly from wanting to leave to trying to sell himself to me as a potential pact, an eidolon.

The man was mischief personified. I could smell the trouble on his skin, and a faint, pleasant scent of musk and grass, the smell of someone who spent his days in nature. And laced through that heavy, intoxicating fragrance was something sweet, like honey, like nectar from a rare flower.

“As if I would accept,” I told him coldly. “No way am I working with you. No way am I forging a pact with you.”

My insides churned as I struggled to decide whether I was lying through my own teeth. The man was hot as hell, the kind of guy I might consider for a one-night stand, even knowing I would really, really hate myself in the morning. If I ran into him at a pub in the Black Market — fuck it, why not? His body alone suggested he’d make for a good time, a rough tumble in the hay.

But we were talking about forging a long-term contract between summoner and eidolon. Depending on how things went, that could last a lifetime, even longer. I must have meant what I’d said. There was no way in hell I could work with someone like him. So infuriating, so full of himself.

And so dashing handsome. Even without all the negatives, I already knew I’d have a very, very hard time maintaining a professional summoning bond with someone who looked like Sylvain. His chiseled body, the malicious twinkle in his eyes, those thick eyebrows that curved like daggers, that noble nose.

Sylvain was taken aback — no, positively stunned by my refusal to enter a pact. Standing like that, with his mouth closed, without any of the obscenities spilling past his lips? Gods above and below. The way the sun struck the jet black of his hair made it gleam with gold. If I tilted my head, I could envision him wearing a royal circlet, or a crown.

But then his lips drew back in anger, and all of that went whooshing away with the wind once more.

“Oh, wonderful,” he said. “Me, a prince of the Summer Court, so many responsibilities and so

much to do with my life. And you think I would accept a pact with you? A human? Spare me.”

The sarcasm dripped like venom from his fangs — actual fangs that protruded from the sides of his mouth, almost past his lips, the more his anger mounted. Why did I find that so sexy? There was something wild, almost feral about him, how his body, his very features shifted with his mood. Was this how the fae worked? Part of me found it frightening. Yet part of me wanted to learn, to discover more.

“Oh, sure,” he said. “I’ll accept and become the errand boy of some feeble, frail, soft — ”

The wind whipped again, rustling through the grass at our feet, kicking up debris like a stirring dust devil. I looked down to see the leaves whirling in a pattern around the two of us, a spiral, inscribing a circle in the grass.

“Oh no,” I muttered, the pages of my grimoire fluttering once more, flapping like the wings of a silent bird. It opened to the pages of the Pact of the Unknown, the letters on the vellum burning gold as they sealed the terms of my contract. “No. No, no, no.”

Sylvain took a step back, a hand on his chest. “What — what was that? I felt something. What did you do to me?”

I raked a hand through my hair, slammed my book shut, and tucked it under my arm.

“Great job, genius. You accepted.”

He glowered, taking one step toward me. “I did not.”

I matched his step, leaves crunching underfoot as I stomped forward. “You did, too. And look where you got us. Now we’re stuck together.”

“I refuse,” he said, backing away, his arms stretched out as he turned in a circle, huge eyes searching the clearing like he was looking for the invisible powers that had forged our bond. “I was joking. I was obviously being sarcastic.”

“As if the ancient forces that govern the pact between a summoner and the conjured would ever understand the nuances of sarcasm. Don’t you know anything?”

He glowered again, stalking toward me, jabbing an accusing finger in the air between us. “No, don’t you know anything? I have things to do back in the Verdance. Real, actual responsibilities, and I won’t have you — ”

He’d come too close. The tip of his finger jabbed against my chest, not in a way that would really hurt me, but with enough force to express his anger. The poor guy really didn’t know the first thing about summoners and pacts.

The very moment his fingertip made contact, a jolt of white light launched him away from me, a thunderous blast of crackling magic sending him sprawling across the ground. He sputtered, spitting out blades of grass, hurriedly brushing his hair out of his own face.

“What in blazes just happened? You attacked me!”

“I did no such thing,” I said, clutching the book to my chest protectively, covering the part of me where he’d jabbed me with his finger. See? If anything, he drew first blood. By, uh, poking me a little bit. “You entered a pact with me, and as your summoner, that means that you can’t hurt me. That’s how it works between a summoner and a familiar.” An eidolon, I nearly added, but didn’t, figuring it was too much work to explain all the context.

He sat up, eyes wide in panic. “A familiar? No, no, no. This can’t be. I am no mere familiar. I am — ”

“Sylvain, right,” I said, rolling my eyes, turning on my heel. “Prince Sylvain, high fae of the Summer Court.”

I could hear him scrambling to his feet, leaves and grass rustling as he raced toward me. I

swiveled on my heel, ready to bash him in the head with my grimoire. Shame to mess up such a pretty face, but what if he was pissed off and ready to rumble?

“Then you can release me,” he said, more afraid than angry. Oh. “You forged this bond, so you can let me go. Can’t you?”

“It’s not that simple. There are terms to this pact. We’re bound together, whether you like it or not.”

“For how long?” he snarled, his teeth gleaming and sharp.

“As long as it takes us to figure out whether we’re meant to work together,” I said curtly.

He groaned and threw his arms up in exasperation. “Then the pact should have been moot from the very beginning.”

“I think cosmic forces are trying to give us a chance to work things out together, dubious as that sounds.”

I paged through my grimoire absently, not really looking for anything, knowing that this truly was just a matter of time. Sylvain had a point, though. If the powers that bound us in a pact knew that carrying on would be disastrous, then our link should have been severed almost immediately.

For all I knew, the cosmos was punishing him for being a sarcastic little shit, and by extension, punishing me for — for what, exactly? I didn’t deserve this. Sylvain sidled up to me, looking over my shoulder.

“There. That’s the answer. There must be some solution to this in that great, big, stupid book of yours.”

“You’re standing far too close, there,” I said warningly. The heat of his body was scorching, that sweet and vaguely musky scent of his sending jolts of excitement straight up to my brain, and down to my —

“Right,” he said, backing away cautiously. “Right. I don’t want you throwing me on my ass again.”

“For the last time, it wasn’t me, okay?”

He crossed his arms and turned his lip up, sulking. “You haven’t even apologized for that, I noticed.”

Again I rolled my eyes, trudging in the opposite direction, snapping twigs and crunching leaves be damned.

Sylvain jogged up to me, sprightly and quick despite his bare feet, or perhaps because of them. “Where are we going?” he asked, wide-eyed, curious, helpless, like a puppy.

“We?” I chuckled bitterly. “Whatever happened to being too good to work with a lowly human?”

He sniffed, folding his hands behind his head as we walked. “I changed my mind. Fae princes are very good at changing their minds.” Sylvain said it like it was a good thing. “Wherever we’re going, I hope the amenities are fitting. After all, I am accustomed to luxury. Oh, and I should probably inform you about all of my dietary requirements. Let’s see.”

I sighed, deep and low. I got myself an eidolon, all right.

And enduring his endless rambling was my price to pay.



THE ALRAUNE DIDN'T HARASS US ON THE WAY BACK THROUGH THE WISPWOOD. INSTEAD I HAD TO PUT up with the constant stream of complaints falling out of Sylvain's mouth — harassment of an equally unpleasant sort.

I wondered if I would have preferred dealing with the alraune instead. All she really did was scream and throw a few dozen thorns in my general direction. Sylvain, on the other hand?

"Is this really the best forest your world has to offer? It's not very impressive, is it?"

Sylvain dripped with derision, sniffing as he knocked on the bark of the nearest tree, harrumphing. I didn't think a harrumph could make someone so damn punchable. It sounded like he'd gotten a lot of practice doing it, too, probably from turning his nose up at servants over the years, narrowing his eyes at lavish dishes that didn't meet his exacting standards.

"There are prettier forests, maybe," I said, controlling my voice, barely disguising my annoyance. "But yes, the Wispwood is grown from old magic. These woods are ancient, and strong. You won't find trees quite like them anywhere else in the world."

It was true. The Wispwood sprouted from a point on which many of the world's biomes intersected, different parts of reality overlapping on the same spot. That made it home to some truly unique species of flora that couldn't flourish anywhere else.

He sniffed again, running his finger down a tree trunk, then inspecting it, like he was so displeased by the dirt he'd found. I almost opened my mouth to make some wry remark about how we didn't have minions to dust and polish our trees for us, but thought better of it.

"Oh, I don't think they're very ugly," he said, examining his finger again. "Just dull, is all."

"What's dull is this conversation," I grumbled, picking up the pace as I navigated the forest. "I'm half tempted to leave you out here to get lost."

"Very funny." He stuck his chest out — and a very good chest it was, I thought grudgingly — thumbing at himself proudly. "As if I, a prince of the Summer Court, could ever get lost in a pitiful stack of cordwood."

I gritted my teeth. "I sincerely doubt it. You'd find it very difficult to make your way around the Wispwood because of its magic. You'd need to turn your clothes inside out to get a fighting chance."

Sylvain paused and cocked his head at me, thoroughly confused. "Turn my clothes inside — now what in the world are you talking about?"

"Never mind," I said, turning away.

But it was true. The academy at the Wispwood was shrouded in enchantments that kept it veiled from people of a more nonmagical persuasion. Its true geographic location was a guarded secret, accessible from many corners of the globe, yet magicked to keep it hidden from the eyes of those who had no business being at the academy.

The Wispwood was everywhere and nowhere, all at the same time. In general, only students and faculty were supposed to be able to find the campus. Over the years it had become a running joke, almost tradition. Older students would tell freshies that turning their clothes inside out was a guaranteed way to keep from getting lost in the surrounding woods.

Not that Sylvain had much clothing to turn inside out to begin with. I kept forgetting how he wouldn't know much of anything about the Earth reality, down to these stories and superstitions that, ironically, were only children's fairytales.

We knew so little of the fae that it was hard to say which parts of folklore were actually true. They'd been missing from the world for so long, retreating to the Verdance for reasons unknown. And yet here Sylvain stood, someone who could potentially answer every burning question I had about the fae — except that simply talking to him was so infuriating.

"So," he said. "Locke, was it? Interesting name. Where exactly are you taking me?"

And it was an innocent statement — interesting name, as opposed to strange, or bizarre, or any other qualifier that could have approached insulting. Yet the annoyance drove into my side like a spike. This Sylvain person reminded me of a rose. Pretty, yes, with an intoxicating scent, but so very, very thorny, too.

"The Wispwood," I explained to him. "It's one of the foremost academies of magic on Earth. We specialize in studies of the arcane that are adjacent to nature. Alchemists, summoners, druids, that sort of thing."

He cocked an eyebrow. "An institution for learning, then? A private academy of sorts?"

"Yes."

"With doors that close, and your own quarters?"

I cocked an eyebrow back. "Yes. Naturally."

Sylvain grinned, the mischief somehow making his teeth glint with wetness, his eyes sparkle with mirth. "That's a funny way of saying that you intend to have your wicked way with me somewhere private."

I sputtered, felt myself blushing, and thoroughly hated that I couldn't fire off a comeback before he opened his mouth again.

"Oh, don't be so ashamed," he purred. "I see the way you stare, and I don't mind it, one bit. I mean, look at me." He flexed his arms, his chest, muscles bulging obscenely. "I'm stunning. Radiant."

This fucking prick. I allowed the anger to fill my blood, flushing away my embarrassment.

"Put those away. Where we're going, you're going to need some damn clothing. It's a place for learning, not for — for whatever you think you're doing right now."

He scoffed. "Pah! You humans and your false modesty. You cover up all the time and somehow remain the most perverted of all creatures in existence. Spare me."

I opened my mouth to answer, but clenched my teeth again, knowing I wouldn't get anywhere. Sylvain was a ridiculous creature, and yet despite his ridiculous proclamations, the bravado, there was the tiniest grain of truth in his words.

"Tell me again what manner of human you are," he said, his head tilted, demanding, but curious. "You were going on about it earlier, all this talk of summoning."

Deep breaths, I reminded myself. Only a hundred or so feet away until we reached the entrance to

the Wispwood, and then it was a short trek to the office of Dr. Euclidean Fang, perhaps the one person in all the academy who could tell me how to rid myself of rude, rambunctious fae princes.

“I’m a summoner, like my father was. That’s what we do: summon creatures, then bargain with them for favors, or portions of their power. The greatest of summoners can call dragons down on a battlefield, command golems of ancient rock to burrow from forgotten depths to raze entire armies.”

A bit too poetic, maybe, but I was recounting passages from the old stories, the ancient books. My gaze went distant as I remembered the legends, quite a few of them involving my own father, how the summoners of old worked with outrageously powerful eidolons, fought alongside them in battle.

And there I was, master of a couple dozen doves.

“Yes, yes,” Sylvain said, nodding distractedly. “Very impressive,” he added, in a way that suggested he didn’t entirely mean it. I decided to switch to his favorite subject — himself — expecting a more favorable reaction. No surprises there.

“I’ve heard about your kind of magic as well,” I said. “Not so distant from ours.”

He chuckled. “Not so distant, perhaps, but better, I’d wager. Why, all the things you humans can do, the fae can do as well. Again, perhaps better. Call lightning from the clouds, conjure fire, change our very faces with glamor, and — ”

“Yes,” I said, cutting him off. “Glamor. Speaking of which, it would be wonderful if you could, you know, modify your ears a little.” I motioned at my right ear, drawing a curve along the rim. “So it’s not so obvious, maybe? The people of the Wispwood might react, um, differently to your presence.”

Sylvain’s cheeks puffed up, indignant. “You ask me to change my appearance when it’s already pristine, dare I say, perfect? These ears are part of my identity. You’d think the fae would receive a grander welcome than this.”

“Yeah, you’d think,” I grumbled. “Go on, then. Change them. No, rounder.”

Sylvain muttered and complained the whole time, but I watched in fascination as he sculpted the sharpness away from his ears, the flesh bending to follow the line of his fingers. They were the only features that marked him as anything but human.

The Wispwood had its own population of nonhuman students, of course. But the fact that Sylvain was fae came with its own issues, the distrust that the Earth’s magical community harbored being the biggest one. A fae glamor was still only an illusion — not a completely physiological change, like the incredible transformations that someone like Namirah could pull off. It would serve, though, and hopefully prevent widespread panic.

Sylvain could bitch all he wanted. This was for his own safety as much as it was for the Wispwood. It was kind of cute, really — not the rounded ears, but the way he fussed and pouted. There wasn’t much room for arrogance when he was being a sulky little brat. He caught me watching and glowered back, the corners of his eyes crinkling, the color of them going darker. How was it fair that he became even handsomer in anger?

“That’s good enough,” I told him. “Oh, don’t sulk so much. It’s just a temporary measure.”

He crossed his arms and stomped the whole way after me. “In the Verdance, these ears are celebrated. Praised.” I couldn’t make out the rest of his grumbling, but again, it was oddly adorable.

I didn’t have the heart to tell Sylvain that my entire motivation for hauling him back to the Wispwood in the first place was getting Dr. Fang to perform an unbinding. Risky? Possibly, except that I had no way of calling her to meet me outside the academy instead.

Some members of the arcane underground were okay with incorporating technology like smartphones and laptops into their daily lives. Dr. Fang was one of them, but my summoning

professor wasn't in the habit of giving away her phone number to pesky students.

Either way, she wasn't going to be happy about me dragging an entire fae prince — alleged prince, sorry — all the way into the heart of the Wispwood. I patted at my pockets, checking again for a pen, maybe a loose receipt. No way was I ripping out even a tiny section of my grimoire to use as scrap paper.

And besides, could I trust any of my eidolons to deliver a proper message, and to a specific person, to boot? Of all the birds I'd befriended through summoning, why hadn't I bothered finding a single homing pigeon?

So drag the fae man into the Wispwood it was. This Sylvain person — prince or no prince — was stunning, yes. Possibly in the top three most gorgeous men I'd ever met in my life. But I didn't believe I could handle much more of his attitude, and that was summoner rule number one.

A summoner and his eidolon had to work together in order to work together, whether through friendship, grudging mutual respect, or even fear. I glanced at Sylvain sidelong, trying to imagine myself in a position where he might see me as a friend, offer me respect, or fear me. Nope. Nada. Zilch.

Unlucky that I didn't somehow ensnare a dragon or a unicorn instead, really. See, summoning didn't just call out a member of your choice of species at will. A summoner had to forge those bonds, give those relationships the proper care and feeding to flourish. Some summoners did that through fear, others through love.

Based on the notes in the Wilde grimoire, I was pretty certain that Father was one of those who believed in ruling through fear. He didn't simply reach out to contract his eidolons, but defeated them in combat first, beating them into submission. Interesting way of doing things. Personally, I believed in asking nicely. Saved everyone from a savage and unnecessary thrashing.

A summoner's bond with their eidolon was unique, in short, not at all like any other relationship, something that was ideally one of give and take. There was a reason that the summoners of old were so revered, among the most powerful of mages in the known cosmos, and it all fell to how well summoners and eidolons worked together.

I'd even heard rumors of some falling in love, but no known records of it happening seemed to exist. Not in any of the dusty tomes I'd had to study in preparation for the Crest, and certainly not in any of Dr. Fang's lectures. I chewed my lower lip, studying Sylvain, considering the bizarre alternate universe where something like that could possibly happen between us. He noticed me staring, turned his nose up, practically growling when he spoke.

"What? What is it?"

The two of us, lovers? Much less eidolon and summoner? Fuck, no. Never. Absolutely not.

"Here," I told him. "Just through these trees."

Sylvain looked left, then right, eyes narrowed. "I don't see what's so different about these trees compared to all the others. Quite common-looking."

I inhaled through my nostrils slowly. Through the trees, into the Wispwood, and up to Dr. Fang's office. Then, and only then would I be free.

I didn't dignify his snarkiness with a response, only certain that he'd never seen anything like this before. Some of the more technologically savvy of the Wispwood students would sometimes bring movies for us to enjoy in the common areas. And because of those movies, and because I was especially attentive to our electives on human sciences — and video games too, fine — I knew of the existence of keypads and keycards. Wonderful devices, really, meant to safeguard nonmagical humans, enhance the security of their homes and workplaces.

From my understanding, intruders would need to deal with the sounding of a horribly obnoxious alarm, which would then summon enforcers to the premises. Which was a curious concept, sure, but one that I always thought would be enhanced if tripping the alarms also magically animated some nearby trees to rip the interlopers limb from limb.

But that was humans for you, bloodthirsty and violent and fascinated with death, except, of course, when they weren't. I found it so interesting how rapidly modern human technology had advanced, far enough that it was threatening to catch up with the effects of magic in so many ways. And yet here we were in the Wispwood with a form of security that still outmatched anything that humans could create.

Nothing against regular, nonmagical humans, naturally. Again, I loved video games myself. Couldn't live without them. A fantastic innovation, in my humble opinion. I was only a firm believer in selecting the right tools for the job. Part and parcel of my own path as a summoner. The cleverest among us knew to call in the right eidolon for the right situation. And in this situation, instead of panels and keycards, we had our sentinels.

I traced my fingers in a series of memorized patterns over the smooth, silvery bark of a particular tree. Its true purpose was to serve as one of the primary gateways into the Wispwood, a pair of sentinels stationed at every entrance. And yes — under the right circumstances, their branches could be awakened and mobilized to tear intruders into tiny little pieces. See? I wasn't just talking nonsense.

Yet these slender, almost metallic trees blended in with their surroundings, just common plants to the untrained eye. And to Sylvain as well, apparently. I watched out of the corner of my eye as I completed the gestures necessary to access the academy, an array of glyphs lighting up along the bark. Sylvain's mouth had fallen open in fascination. I tried and failed to repress a smirk.

"Still think that this is unimpressive?" I asked.

His lips snapped shut, his eyes hardening like he'd just remembered that he was supposed to be an asshole.

"Just carry on, then," he grumbled. His lips twisted, refusing to give in and admit defeat.

"If you say so," I said, my voice slightly singsong, the laughter embedded in my throat. "If the sentinels don't impress you, perhaps the school itself will."

I took a step forward, then noticed that he hadn't matched my pace. He was hesitating. My forehead furrowed as I studied him, wondering what was holding him back. The droop in his shoulders, the tight line of his lips, the creases in the corners of his eyes. Was that apprehension, and maybe even a little fear?

Whatever. I grabbed his hand. Sylvain, as impertinent as ever, sputtered and resisted, possibly even offended by my audacity. Imagine, me, a human commoner, laying my filthy peasant hands on his precious person. His mouth opened like he was about to say something sharp and cruel, but his lips closed again, his cheeks flushing.

From embarrassment, I told myself, and from nothing else, fighting to ignore the strength of his hand as his fingers laced through mine, the roughness of his palm. Prince or no prince, Sylvain was clearly used to a bit of hard labor. Then again, a man didn't end up built like him on accident.

"Come on, then," I said, tugging him toward the invisible gateway, past the threshold.

The familiar sensation of the Wispwood's magic tingled along the fine hairs on my skin as we passed through the veil between the mist-shrouded forest and the academy proper. Our steps no longer crunched over forest floor, over grass and twigs. This time, each of our footfalls pounded out echoing steps, on ancient stone, on noble ground.

I released Sylvain's hand. He was too busy gawking to shoot me an insulted glare, too enraptured

by the sight of the place that was at once my school and my home. I smiled as I took in his expression. The snobbish, hard-to-please prince could no longer contain his wonder and excitement.

His huge eyes reflected the spectral blue light of the sacred well in the courtyard, his mouth so open that one of the ghostly wisps hovering above it could have flown past his lips and down his throat. Again it struck me how innocent and beautiful Sylvain looked when his features weren't etched with anger or arrogance. I made a low bow — mocking, teasing, perhaps — but I couldn't help myself.

“Welcome, oh great prince, to the hallowed halls of the Wispwood.”



SYLVAIN TURNED IN A SLOW CIRCLE, JAW LAX AS HE MARVELED AT THE STONEWORK, THE COURTYARD, the trees and vines.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” he breathed.

An appropriate reaction. I loved watching first-timers absorb the Wispwood for themselves. That was the best way to take in the sights of the academy’s great courtyard, after all, getting a full, gorgeous view from the ground floor.

The stone walls of the interiors stood around the central Wispwell, making the entrance courtyard an oddly soothing combination of natural and manmade structures. The rest of the academy radiated from the well, its glow bathing the courtyard in its soft, ghostly light.

Was it an ancient stone fortress overrun by nature, or the castle of a long-dead mage lord left for the trees? Both things, actually.

Students sat under great oaks and willows that grew straight out of the rock. Those using the stairs to the higher levels ran their hands along bannisters sculpted out of branches and twisting vines. Grass poked up from between the cobblestones, tendrils and saplings sticking out of the gaps in the walls, curious little visitors.

Nature wasn’t merely allowed to run rampant here. It was encouraged to do so.

“Is it drinkable?” Sylvain asked, motioning toward the Wispwell.

The question was so earnest that I almost laughed. But he was serious, staring hard at the water.

The Wispwell was a large pond that glowed with its own eerie blue light. Tiny motes of magic floated up from its surface to drift across the plaza, or to hover up to the upper floors and the high ceiling.

And it ran deep, but how deep, exactly, nobody knew. The only living things that benefited from its waters were the flora that thrived throughout the castle despite the improbable conditions. I encircled Sylvain’s wrist with my fingers and guided him away from the edge.

“Theoretically, the water should be safe. But drinking it isn’t advisable. The Wispwell is sacred, the oldest part of an already ancient institution. It was here before the castle even existed. We don’t really use its waters for anything. If you’re that thirsty, I can maybe find you something to drink?”

He held his hand up and shook his head. Sylvain’s eyes hadn’t met mine since we’d walked into the academy, too busy looking at the courtyard, the trees, the stairs to the upper levels.

“No. I was only wondering. I’m all right. Thank you.”

My eyes widened at the softness of his words, the almost-kindness of them. This wasn't the brat I met out in the forest. Sylvain seemed so changed, his face suffused with childlike wonder, the pale gold of his eyes tinted blue by the light of the Wispwell. I'd always heard that the Verdance was a magical place, beautiful beyond measure. Could the Wispwood really be so stunning in comparison?

And speaking of stunning, the other students milling about the courtyard seemed to have noticed my handsome companion. They nudged each other as they passed, whispered from behind the fronds of willow trees. Laptops and grimoires alike were temporarily closed, so many fingers used as bookmarks as the curious paused their studies to indulge in some sweet, sweet eye candy.

Yes, I'd said it a hundred times, but it was worth repeating. Sylvain was gorgeous. It was impossible to pretend he wasn't, standing there with his muscles and his radiant, stupid face. If only everyone knew about his potty mouth.

But about those muscles — I scratched the top of my head, staring at the dark, sleeveless tunic he was suddenly wearing. What in the — where the hell did that thing come from?

"Sylvain," I hissed. "Am I imagining things, or did you just steal a shirt off someone's back?"

He locked eyes with me, scowling, never one to pass up a chance for a fight. "Don't be preposterous. You were mewling on and on about my nudity and human propriety, so here I am, garbed in clothing. I conjured it myself as we were passing from the forest into this — well, wherever this is."

"The Wispwood," I corrected. "It's called the Wispwood. Well, it suits you, I'll say that much."

He said nothing, but reached for his chest and scratched, slightly mollified. His tunic rustled. Again. What the hell?

"What is that thing made of, anyway?"

Sylvain smirked. "Leaves, ornately crafted by my hand within the blink of an eye. Fits me like a glove, too, I should say."

He stretched his arms out and flexed, the already enticing curves of his muscles bulging obscenely. More heads turned, more eyes drawn toward him, and after we'd gone through the trouble of putting up a glamor, too. Well, I wasn't at all involved in reshaping his ears, but the point stood.

I hunched closer, muttering under my breath.

"You're drawing a little too much attention to yourself, Sylvain."

He grunted as he finished his ridiculous flexing routine, offering passersby an occasional smile and a wink. Damn showoff.

"Just a small demonstration, that's all. I'm confident that they're as enticed by my clothing as they are my body."

Gods, this man was full of himself. I couldn't be bothered rolling my eyes anymore. They were that tired. I folded my arms and shook my head.

"That's because no one has seen anything quite like what you're wearing. It's unique, to say the least."

An understatement, truthfully, because I didn't want to give him more reasons to make a spectacle of himself. It was hard to tell from a distance, but the tunic really was made out of dark leaves, overlapping in a pattern that reminded me of scale armor.

The temptation to reach out and examine its texture was strong. Not that it had anything to do with what was under the tunic, mind you. More of a scientific curiosity than anything. The alchemists of the Wispwood had their own methods of turning natural materials into armor and weaponry that was sturdy, flexible, and lightweight.

But none of it hugged the torso quite as scandalously as Sylvain's combination tunic and

breastplate.

“Unique is right,” Sylvain said, running his fingers down the surface of the tunic. “Our warriors wear their own kind of armor, but mine is shaped and dismissed by my own hand as the need arises.”

The leaves rustled as his hand passed, lifting and fluttering as if blown by a sudden breeze. Between the gaps I caught flashes of Sylvain’s skin, the ridges of the muscles in his torso.

Why did this feel so much dirtier than just looking at his bare body? Was it because he was tricking me into staring, giving me no choice but to take in the sight of him? The behavior definitely checked out. We didn’t know very much about the fae, but we certainly knew all about their love of trickery and deception.

I wrenched my gaze away from Sylvain and his body, clearing my throat.

“We generally have no need for armor within the Wispwood itself. If you see anyone wearing it around the academy, it’s more for ceremonial or symbolic purposes. Most of us stick to simple clothing.”

I indicated around the courtyard, though Sylvain could of course see all the variations in Wispwood uniforms for himself. We preferred to stick to a very sensible palette: appropriate colors like moss, leaf, bark, stone, and sky.

Practical clothing, for the most part, like the sleeveless tunic I favored for excursions out into the forests surrounding the academy. Lightweight, and lightly enchanted by its makers with minor protective magics. It even came with a matching cloak. Neat.

I watched in stunned silence as Sylvain reached out, thumbing the material of my tunic, running his fingers from the peak of my shoulder down to my waist. I tried to gasp, but the breath caught in my throat. It felt as if every pair of eyes within the courtyard was watching us.

But what was the big deal? Just one guy feeling the fabric of another guy’s shirt. Wasn’t that completely normal behavior, even in the Wispwood?

And maybe it was wishful thinking, or my hamster brain working on overtime once again, but Sylvain’s fingers weren’t just inspecting the light wool of my top, or the braided cord and leather of my utility belt. Those fingers were probing. I’d been with enough men to know the difference.

Not to brag, but I wasn’t exactly a slouch in the looks department. When I wasn’t tripping over my shoes and spilling entire glasses of ice water down my shirt, I could be very charming. Very wet, yes, but very charming, indeed.

“Would you look at that,” Sylvain muttered, standing so close I could see every one of his lashes. “I have my hand on you, and yet you haven’t used your brutish magic to send me flying halfway across the plaza. Should I take it as a sign that you’re starting to like me?”

My toes curled, the hairs on the back of my neck rising. I swallowed as I prepared an answer.

“I already told you. It’s part of the pact. An eidolon can’t harm their summoner. Not under normal circumstances, anyway. The pact will repel you, unless you get a little more creative.”

Why did I have to say that last part? Creative? I didn’t need Sylvain to start thinking up clever and interesting ways to murder me.

“This word. Eidolon. Very curious. What does it mean?”

“It’s the perfect version of something,” I said automatically, reciting something from one of Dr. Fang’s lectures. “The ideal, the exemplar. In terms of summoning, it means a creature who could very well be the paragon of their species. An idol. Like I said. Perfect.”

Sylvain’s tongue ran across his lips. He smiled. “By my own understanding, what you’re saying is that I’m perfect. A champion of the fae. Very accurate. Entirely truthful.”

I drew myself up and sputtered. Gods, I’d walked straight into that one. “I said nothing of the sort,

Sylvain.”

“Ah, if you say so.” He smoothed out the creases in my shirt and nodded in approval, his lips pursed. “Very comfortable, and very practical, too. The gray suits you. It goes with your eyes.”

I bit down, commanding my body to stop itself from flushing, instructing the other parts below my waist to please keep from getting too excited.

I chose to wear my uniform in stone and slate for exactly that reason, because the colors complemented my eyes. I chose the sleeveless style for the freedom of motion. For the comfort, too, depending on the weather.

The wool had never felt stifling or heavy or thick, but the skin on my torso burned regardless, especially in the warm trail that his hand had left across my chest, my stomach.

“Uh, thank you,” I stammered.

“And for the record,” Sylvain added, his eyes flitting down, then up my body, “I take back what I said about you being feeble and frail and soft. Perhaps I’ve given you less credit than you deserve. Quite firm, actually, in some of the right places.”

I placed my hands on my hips and laughed, keeping things casual to disguise my giddiness, framing our exchange as a joke between friends. Wait. Were we becoming friends? What was going on here?

No. Eyes on the prize. I needed to remember the whole point of coming here, of bringing him to meet Dr. Fang.

“We at the Wispwood do value physical fitness as well,” I said, struggling to play it cool. “All the academies believe that the body must be honed as sharply as the mind. A mage has limited stocks of magic, after all. At the end of the day, you might still need to rely on your feet or your fists. Or even a blade.”

I patted at my waist, at the dagger sheathed there for use in emergency situations. In truth, the blade served more practical functions than simply working as a weapon. It was an athame as well, a tool for use in ritual magic.

But it also had survivalist applications, helping greatly in harvesting plants, for example, or cutting an innocent woodland animal loose from a net. Or, as I found myself doing most frequently, cutting myself free from an alraune’s choking tendrils. Rough customers, those alraunes.

Sylvain lifted his chin, a knowing smile playing on his lips. “So you’re saying that the students here are trained in martial combat as well. Most interesting.”

I shrugged. “Hey, we like to keep things versatile.”

Sylvain grinned, his teeth sharp and blindingly white. I’d walked right into another trap. “I suppose I’ll soon find out just how versatile you are.”

I couldn’t stop the heat from rushing to my cheeks, flustering as I motioned for him to follow me up the stairs. We needed to see Dr. Fang. I grabbed the bannister, its gnarled twists, grateful for something sturdy to hold on to.

Maybe this wouldn’t be so bad, after all. Maybe we were starting to get along. Would it be worth a shot, trying to work things out with Sylvain as an eidolon?

Sure, it was unconventional. Contracting beasts of magic and mythology as eidolons was far more common, but there were also historical records of summoners contracting humanoid eidolons. Angels, as in Grand Summoner Celestina’s case, or djinn, sylphs, and other classes of spirits besides. But these were very rare examples, the exception and never the rule.

I checked over my shoulder to see if Sylvain was still following me. He watched the courtyard distractedly as we ascended the spiral staircase, fascinated and transfixed by the sight of this

academy I'd taken for granted.

So maybe he wasn't a dragon or a unicorn, and his moods changed as swiftly as the wind. But wouldn't this make for an interesting experience? At the very least it was something I could shove in Evander Skink's stupid face.

Sylvain did say he was a warrior, after all. The implication was unavoidable, how his tunic served more as armor than clothing, how his muscular build and steady gait hinted at a body that was conditioned for battle. And then there was the roughness of his hands.

I reached the top landing, the bark of the bannister worn smooth over decades of students and professors gripping it as they climbed. No real substitute for the feel of Sylvain's fingers, his hands worn from training, and — from doing what, exactly?

There was something so irresistible about the combination of strength and roughness in a man, his solidity so at odds with his fae beauty. I clenched my fingers tight, steadying myself so I wouldn't swoon at the remembrance.

Dr. Euclidea Fang's office was somewhere a couple of floors up, her door appropriately decorated with geometric sigils and symbols. Sylvain reached for the knob, opening it for me, like an actual gentleman. I nodded my thanks stiffly, but my insides quivered like pudding.

What the hell was going on? How could my opinion of him have taken such a quick one-eighty? Telling Sylvain that I didn't want to contract him only made him want to bond with me more. Was he only turning on the charm to make me reconsider?

Maybe Euclidea had some answers. The crisp scent of citrus and vivid greenery hit my nostrils as we stepped into her office. Dr. Euclidea Fang was nothing if not classy. Her workspace resembled a modern Earth office more than a traditional magic-user's laboratory, with its cubical couches, the sleek brushed-metal floor lamps.

"Oh, no, don't knock," said Euclidea's voice from somewhere inside her office. "My door is open to strangers, nagging students, and would-be assassins all hours of the day."

We found her at her desk, sleek black hair spilling down to her shoulders, trendy, thick-framed glasses perched on the end of her nose. She nudged them up, eyes focusing on my face.

"Lochlann Wilde," she said. "To what do I owe the displeasure of this visit?"

I winced at the mention of my given name, sputtering as I tried to form a response. But Sylvain hadn't even noticed her using it. He was too busy poking at sprigs of dried herbs, bouquets of rare and desiccated flowers.

"Sorry, Doctor," I said, "but I attempted a summoning in the forest today, and — well, you were the first person who came to mind." I glanced meaningfully at Sylvain. "I think we need to talk."

Dr. Fang's gaze shifted from my face to his. Her eyes went wide. She stood bolt upright, hands planted on her desk. Her voice was unsettling, serene, yet ice-cold. The surface of a frozen lake, moments before disaster.

"Gods above and below, Lochlann. Did you really think that bringing a fae into the Wispwood was the smartest idea?"



SYLVAIN POINTED A FINGER AT HIS FACE, CONFUSED. “BUT — THE GLAMOR. HOW DID SHE — HOW could you know?”

“The candles, Lochlann,” Dr. Fang hissed. “Has their existence eluded you, somehow?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose, frustrated with myself. How could I have forgotten? The return of the fae to our world had started with an influx of the extremely nasty kind. Killers, in short, bent on cleansing our reality of humans in order to pave the way for a grand retaking of Earth.

The members of the magical community — the arcane underground, as we called it — pooled their efforts to create methods of detecting the fae. Those who walked among us cloaked in glamor would be stripped of their illusions. Any method strong enough to dispel full disguises would also easily deal with smaller changes in appearance. In Sylvain’s case, that meant his ears, now back to being pointy again.

I blinked at the candle in the glass lantern right next to Dr. Fang’s office door. Its glow burned bright enough to expose any passing fae with its purifying light. The Wispwood might have scaled back on glamor-glow candles now that the fae intrusions had dwindled to nearly nothing, but no one would pull the wool over Euclidea Fang’s eyes.

Dr. Euclidea Fang, true to her name, believed in power through precision. A skilled summoner, she had accomplished much for a mage who was only in her early thirties. I’d never met someone who so stringently demanded geometric perfection of her students, hovering over our shoulders as we struggled to draw our summoning circles.

I’d never seen Euclidea in battle — what a sight that would be — but I knew that she favored divine and mythical beasts. She counted a dragon among her eidolons, even a phoenix. But that was summoning for you. Like attracts like. Power attracts power, and Euclidea Fang could level mountains with a single glare.

Her last name meant “square” in Chinese, as if she’d been destined from birth to become an exacting summoner. But its English meaning held true as well. Euclidea was sharp, and sometimes cruel. She was an excellent teacher and a talented summoner — and someone who didn’t like me very much at all.

I was about six feet tall myself, and Sylvain was even taller. Euclidea was shorter than either of us by far, but her professionalism and ferocity made her the tallest person in every room she entered. Yet despite her sternness, or perhaps because of it, Dr. Fang also knew to be unfailingly polite when

it came to matters of dealing with otherworldly entities, the fae among them. She composed herself with a long, deep intake of breath.

“Greetings, child of the Verdance,” Dr. Fang said to Sylvain, her voice droning, speaking purely out of etiquette. “And what brings you to the Wispwood?”

Dr. Fang invited us to sit on the two leather armchairs opposite her desk, affording me a better view of all the decor that only reinforced her fascination with shapes, patterns, and numbers.

A bronze relief of the golden ratio hung behind her head, the metal battered and beaten into the shape of a nautilus shell. Euclidea didn’t particularly appreciate the more traditional writing instruments often used by practitioners of magic, instead keeping a metal container filled with pens, pencils, a compass, a ruler, all in the same uniform brushed steel.

Even the plants in the corners of the room and on the edge of her desk appeared to have been selected for their mathematical significance. I narrowed my eyes as I glanced at the leaves. It wouldn’t have surprised me to learn that each of these potted plants correctly represented the Fibonacci sequence in nature.

And yes, maybe it was just as nerdy of me to recognize it, but never mind that.

“Sylvain,” he answered. “My name is Sylvain. I thank you for your kind welcome. As for what brought me here, well, the answer is sitting right next to me.”

I gasped in offense, staring at him open-mouthed. He kept his eyes on Dr. Fang’s face, deliberately avoiding my gaze like he knew how much it would annoy me.

“And I am Doctor Euclidea Fang.” She folded her hands on top of her desk, resting them over a stack of papers. “Again, how may I help you gentlemen?”

Her tone was more polite, bordering on kind, which was something that I rarely experienced with Euclidea Fang. I could tell that she was putting on airs for the sake of our visitor.

“To keep a long story short, I was minding my own business, drifting in the layers of the cosmos between your realm and the Verdance.” Sylvain jabbed an accusing finger toward me. “And then this uncouth individual over here decided to pluck me out of the wilds, no doubt because he found my charms and my countenance so very irresistible.”

Betrayal. I knew it. Where was all that sweetness from before? I crossed my arms and groaned.

“Now how in the world would that even be possible when I couldn’t see you? I could sense you on the wind, but that was it.”

One of Dr. Fang’s eyebrows raised far above the frame of her blocky glasses. “Lochlann, is this true? Did you really summon this gentleman with your magic?”

I hugged my grimoire close to my chest, tapping my finger on its cover, making a repetitive and reassuring sound.

“Hear me out, Doc. I used the Pact of the Unknown. I know, I know. It wasn’t ideal. But I felt this powerful presence on the wind, and I just had to give it a shot. You know I’ve been trying to contract a greater eidolon for ages now. Doves are nice and all, but how could I pass up an opportunity like this?”

Sylvain bit his lower lip. He crossed his legs and linked his fingers behind his head, leaning back against the armchair.

“A powerful presence, eh? Is that really the only reason you summoned me, Lochlann?”

I clenched my teeth. Gods, I hated how he’d learned my true name. The good news? All that we understood of the fae suggested that the myth about them abusing the knowledge of someone’s name was just that — a myth. It didn’t truly give the fair folk any kind of power over humans, or even each other. Hopefully.

The bad news? Just knowing that he had something new to taunt with me had my hackles rising. I wasn't a fan of the name Lochlann. Who was? It felt so formal and made my skin crawl without fail, each time a Wispwood faculty member or admin staffer invoked it. It didn't help that I associated its use with Father and his lectures. What a tough man Baylor Wilde was. Long gone, but the memory of his sternness never forgotten.

So I went with Locke, like lock, but with a silent E at the end. Because why not? It sounded cool, sophisticated, mysterious, all the things that I aspired to. All the things I wasn't.

Dr. Fang bent across her desk, smiling sweetly at Sylvain, a truly rare and borderline terrifying sight. "May I offer you a drink of water, Sylvain? I'm afraid that's all I have on hand at the moment."

"I'm quite all right," Sylvain said. "But thank you for the offer."

Again I remembered how Sylvain had seemed so curious about the waters of the Wispwell, and again I wondered why he was so interested if he hadn't been so thirsty.

"Lovely," Euclidea said. "No water, then. In that case, could I trouble you with giving Lochlann and myself here a little bit of privacy? I'd like to speak to him about some matters regarding the academy. Student and professor things. Very boring, I assure you."

She tilted her head, her smile going even brighter, almost reaching her eyes. I felt my heart stop. Gods, none of the other students would ever believe me. Sylvain looked between us like he suspected something was up, but he shrugged and relented.

"Very well, then. Where should I wait?"

Euclidea got up from her desk and guided him toward the other end of her office, which opened up into a balcony filled with even more plants. Dr. Fang had the privilege of a beautiful corner office with high windows and plenty of natural light.

I moistened my lips as Sylvain stretched his muscles out on the balcony, his body unfurling, a cat basking in the sunlight. He selected a seat between two ferns and placed his hands behind his head, but not before snapping his fingers.

Sylvain's shirt disintegrated into a trail of leaves, every scale on his armor blowing away with the wind. I watched, mouth agape. He wasn't joking. He really did have the ability to manipulate plant matter, and in a way that I'd never seen before.

I rose from my chair, still gawking at Sylvain, allowing myself to do so because he had his back to me. I pointed toward the balcony and hissed under my breath as Euclidea returned to her desk.

"Doctor Fang, did you see that? Did you see what he did with his tunic?"

She sat back down, nudged her glasses, and once again folded her hands on top of a stack of papers.

"I saw, and I understand. Gods above and below, Lochlann Wilde. What have you done this time? You've contracted one of the fae, of all things."

The defiance bubbled in the pit of my stomach, something inside me resisting. Maybe it was how her tone reminded me so much of Father. My spine straightened and my shoulders squared. I lifted my chin and answered.

"A fae prince, actually."

Wow. When had I defaulted to actually defending him? Even saying that last bit out loud felt off, boasting about it as if I knew the first thing about fae royalty. Perhaps I just so desperately wanted to impress this upon Dr. Fang, me, finally achieving something in the field of summoning worth bragging about.

Dr. Fang leaned back, clapped her hand on her forehead, and groaned. "Honestly, Lochlann. You dragged a fae prince all the way back from the Verdance. We know so little of them." She cast her

finger toward the balcony windows. “Look at him out there.”

And so I looked, because it was impossible not to.

Sylvain was stretched out there with his eyes closed, oblivious to the world, loving the touch of the sun on his skin. I hated how much I loved the sight of him, too. The light truly was doing his physique justice.

Euclidean sighed. “Out of all the students who have streamed in and out of these hallowed halls, you decided to wander out into the forests and find yourself a fae prince. Honestly. Whatever happened to a nice, classic dragon? Perhaps a basilisk, or a rock golem? No. You had to be special and bring back — this.”

Her words trailed off as Sylvain adjusted himself on the chair, turning to give us a polite wave, as if to say that he was still waiting to be let in. Like a puppy, I thought. His bicep bulged as he gestured, the muscles in his chest and his arm rippling.

I pursed my lips and nodded in understanding. “This,” I said, wagging my eyebrows. “Yeah. I know, right?”

Dr. Fang banged her fist on the table, flustered, but collected herself again. “That’s not the point and you know it. We at the Wispwood have a better understanding of the fae and their ways now, well and good. But for you to contract one of them as an eidolon — and royalty, no less? What are the repercussions?”

“It’s not like I did it on purpose. This was purely coincidence. It’s not like we have dragons and unicorns traipsing around the forests here. Pact of the Unknown. I told you.” I folded my arms and grumbled, my grimoire pressing tight against my chest. “And I can handle it,” I added, forcing strength into my voice despite my own disbelief and lack of confidence.

How the tables had turned, really. I still couldn’t believe how I’d come to Dr. Fang’s office wanting to unbind myself from Sylvain. But now, the more she told me it was a bad idea to work with him, the more I wanted to prove her wrong.

“You’re not saying that I should unbind myself from him, are you?”

Dr. Fang pushed her palms on the table, stood up, and scoffed. “Please. Do you really expect me to believe you’d give up a catch as rare as this? Something to rub in everyone’s face? I know you better than you know yourself, Lochlann. You’ll lord this over Evander Skink for the rest of your days.”

The mention of my nemesis successfully raised my blood pressure a couple of notches, but she’d given me room to maneuver, and I wasn’t about to give it back.

“Then you’re wondering yourself, too,” I said, lifting my chin, quietly triumphant. “You can’t help your own intellectual curiosity, Doc. Wouldn’t this be an excellent opportunity to learn about what the fae can offer us summoners?”

Her nose wrinkled as her lips drew back. I prepared myself for the scathing barrage she was about to launch, but she managed to distill the venom into three simple words.

“Your Summoner’s Crest.”

Fucking ouch. Like a dagger to the heart. Euclidean Fang was nothing if she wasn’t surgical and precise. She knew exactly how to cut deep.

“Didn’t you tell me yourself? You want to finally acquire your Summoner’s Crest this year.”

I twiddled my thumbs, staring at the tangle of fingers in my lap as I wrung my hands together. “Yes,” I answered glumly.

From above me, Dr. Fang sighed. “Lochlann, it’s been long enough,” she said, her voice softer, almost kinder. “I agree. It is way past time that you go on a quest and complete your studies here at the

Wispwood. I don't mean this to humiliate you, but — gods, Lochlann. You're probably the oldest senior we have on campus."

I could feel my ears burning, but none of what she'd said was untrue. Maybe I should have been a bit more forthcoming about my status. At the ripe old age of twenty-four, I really was too old to be taking and retaking the same classes at the Wispwood.

Namirah had stayed to refine her talent in magical shifting. Even Bruna had graduated years back, so skilled in alchemy that she'd gone on to become a professor at the academy, with her own office and everything. Not as spacious and sun-filled as Euclidea's, but that wasn't the point. What did I have to show for it?

The only reason they never kicked me out was all of Father's contributions to the institution, whether financial or otherwise. That's right. By most measures, I was a failure, only tolerated at the Wispwood for Daddy's donations. At least he wasn't around to witness how his only son was a tragic disappointment in the exact path of magic he'd already mastered.

But there was also the question of the inheritance. I'd scrimped and saved for years, doing odd jobs, doing my best to stay frugal while showing a happy face, like I was leading a comfortable lifestyle. But time and money were both running out. This was my last chance to collect, as Father's directions stipulated.

"This is unorthodox, to say the least," Dr. Fang said, "but yes, developing a bond with a humanoid eidolon should be entirely plausible. It's been done. Again, uncommon, but not impossible. Grand Summoner Celestina comes to mind."

Her hand perched on my shoulder, squeezing gently. I hadn't even noticed her stepping around her desk.

"But Lochlann, don't you think that this is too much for you? Read through all the great scrolls and tomes of our discipline. There is strong historical basis for working with all sorts of eidolons. Why wouldn't you want to follow a path already paved for you? A template has been provided, a plan already set. There is no plan, no information for what transpires between a summoner and one of the fae. Wouldn't you want to know the rules before you go about breaking them?"

My gaze shifted toward the balcony. Sylvain had fallen asleep, a hand over his eyes. The tips of my fingers dug into the spine of my grimoire. I'd never really been one for following the rules.

Dr. Fang's voice lowered as she bent toward me. "Do we even know what he's capable of? Beyond crafting sexy clothing out of leaves, I mean."

I cleared my throat and shifted uneasily in my chair. "I'm sure there's more to it than that, Dr. Fang. I sensed it, on the wind — his power. It's kind of depressing how little faith you have in me."

She shook her head as she walked back around her desk. "It isn't that I have little faith in you, Lochlann. The path you are taking toward your Crest is difficult, completely untrodden. There is no guidebook for this, no formula to follow."

"Then maybe I just have to write my own," I said, my lip turned up, my teeth clenched.

Gods, I was sick of it. I'd always known that I was a failure, how often it was impressed upon me by teachers, even by other students. Evander Skink of all people wouldn't shut up about it. Couldn't this be my one real opportunity to prove myself competent? Couldn't I make this my chance to show that I wasn't an embarrassment to the Wilde name?

And if I didn't get my Crest yet again this year, was I really going to be next year's twenty-five-year-old super senior still clinging like a barnacle to the Wispwood? A weed, more like. Or a parasite, still hoping against hope that I would find a contract with an eidolon gracious enough to take pity on me.

Then to add insult to injury: no inheritance whatsoever. Farewell, Baylor Wilde's fortune, whatever it was he kept in that vault.

I glanced out at the balcony again. There was something calming about the steady rise and fall of Sylvain's chest as he dozed.

"Maybe I can make this work," I muttered.

"Maybe," Dr. Fang said. "But pray, don't get too distracted now, Lochlann. This is about securing your Crest, not going on a hot date."

I scowled up at her, my cheeks burning hot. She was smirking. Actually smirking. The nerve. "I'm sure I don't know what you mean," I said, hugging the grimoire closer for comfort, using it as a shield.

She sighed as she massaged her temples. "I can't believe I'm doing this, but yes. This may yet be your best shot at earning your Crest." Dr. Fang gestured toward the balcony. "Call him in, Lochlann. It's time I assigned the two of you your quest."



AS A PROFESSOR IN MY DISCIPLINE — AS A SUPERIOR, MY MENTOR — EUCLIDEA HAD THE POWER TO issue challenges and tests. They served the same function as exams in any regular school, though the requirements could be somewhat more extreme.

Sylvain shut the door to the balcony and took his place at Dr. Fang's desk again. The new shirt he'd crafted out of a fresh batch of leaves was almost similar to the last one, cut off at the sleeves. But even the sight of his bared arms and taut biceps couldn't get me to relax.

Every muscle in my body tensed as I waited for Dr. Fang to continue, my breath streaming in and out of my nostrils. She rested her elbows on her desk, her hands clasped, fingers steepled.

"Now, Sylvain. It appears that you and Lochlann here will be working together for the foreseeable future. If there are no objections, then I would like to lay out a task for the two of you to accomplish. Here at the Wispwood, a summoner is only officially recognized as a summoner upon completion of an assigned quest. Are you willing to cooperate with Lochlann Wilde, son of the legendary Grand Summoner Baylor Wilde for the length of this journey?"

I cringed, wishing she hadn't added that last part about Father. Sylvain smirked, his teeth and the curve of his eyebrow sharp as he assessed me out of the corner of his eye.

"How bad could it be? Here's to new experiences. I'll try anything once."

I said nothing, only reminding myself that perhaps I should be more grateful. I'd completely lucked out. Here was this otherworldly being, brimming with so much power and potential that I could feel it radiate from his skin even as he sat beside me.

Yes, Dr. Fang was right. We hadn't seen him do much more than create pretty clothes out of a pile of leaves. But there was something more to him. I knew it in my bones. I could sense it, right there in her office, the way I could sense it on the wind.

I would rather cut my tongue off than confess it, but Sylvain could be doing whatever it was that fae princes did in their spare time instead of deigning to help me.

This was a rare opportunity, something I needed to take advantage of. Butter him up and massage his ego just enough to get him to work with me, refine our bond as summoner and eidolon. And once I secured my Crest, well, then I could decide where to go from there.

"And you have no reservations about this." I lowered my head as I stared at Dr. Fang, as if a single look could encapsulate everything we'd discussed while Sylvain was out on the balcony.

"None whatsoever."

“Perhaps it’s not an appropriate time to ask,” Sylvain said, “but you humans are awfully trusting of me. You say you have your suspicions about my kind, yet you welcome me with open arms. Why?”

Dr. Fang smiled the way a cat smiles at a cornered mouse. “We stand to mutually benefit from learning of each other’s capabilities, don’t you think? And the laws of the pact that bind you to Lochlann here prevent you from doing true harm to the students, or the academy itself. You’re certainly free to try, but unless Lochlann himself turns you against us, there’s quite little risk to the Wispwood, really. Quite little. Yes.”

Sylvain leaned forward like he was still negotiating, like he’d forgotten how he was already bound by the pact’s terms. “And theoretically, if Lochlann were to turn me against you, whatever that means — what would be the repercussions?”

“Oh, expulsion, certainly. Perhaps extermination as well. Yes.” Dr. Fang’s grin sent chills running up my spine. “Still, for your own safety, Sylvain, I’d caution you to keep your identity secret. Oh, and I’m sorry, extermination is meant for vermin. I must have been thinking of execution.”

I resisted the urge to dig my fingernails into the Wilde grimoire. The cover was dinged enough already. “Got it. Vermin. Execution. Can we please get this quest stuff out of the way? The suspense is killing me.”

“Yes, yes. Very well. Now, normally, the objective of a summoner’s quest is to find a new eidolon, using all they’ve learned to overcome the obstacles on their journey. But Lochlann here seems to have skipped right to the finish line.”

I didn’t know whether to feel smug or offended.

“And so the task must be something that still presents a challenge for you both. I require some Blood of the Earth for my research.”

“Sounds grim,” Sylvain said, his forehead wrinkled.

“It’s not as sinister as all that. It’s simply another name for earth essence, a concentrated form of the element. Venture out into the world, acquire a sample for me, and return here with your limbs and your lives intact. Succeed, and Lochlann receives his Summoner’s Crest. Sylvain receives a wealth of experience and knowledge to bring home to the Verdance, and we’re all the better for it.”

Sylvain cocked his eyebrow and scoffed. “That’s it? Really? We wander out and fetch something for you? Sounds simple enough.”

“Not exactly.” My chest puffed up at the promise of a rare opportunity to show off my knowledge. “Elemental essence is valuable in all kinds of arcane applications — ritual magic, alchemy, the list goes on. Earth essence appears in the form of a green gemstone, smooth and tumbled, like something you’d find in a riverbed. But it’s almost always guarded by a powerful creature of the same element. To harvest any Blood of the Earth, we’ll need to get past a rock golem, maybe a sentient tree.”

“Sounds fun,” Sylvain said, cracking his knuckles.

I appreciated his enthusiasm, but according to everything I’d learned at the Wispwood, elemental guardians weren’t pushovers by any means. Sylvain and I would find out together, then.

The difficulty of confronting guardians was part of why I hadn’t completed my quest — or exam, or trial, whatever. Different professors liked to use different terms. It all boiled down to the same thing, though. This wasn’t going to be a walk in the park.

Dr. Fang tilted her head, her chin resting on her knuckles. “Why, I’m touched, Lochlann. You do listen to my lectures, after all.”

I tried not to look so pleased with myself, even knowing that she was mocking me.

“Excellent,” she continued. “Some Blood of the Earth, then. By the end of the week should suffice.”

“Wait, Doc.” I blinked at her, horrified. “But it’s Wednesday.”

“Then the two of you should hurry. I don’t work weekends.”

Sylvain shrugged. “These words mean nothing to me.”

“I didn’t say it was going to be easy, now did I?” Dr. Fang selected one of her metal pens, signed the bottom of the parchment in a flourish, then pressed a seal against it, leaving a bright red sigil. “There. That makes it official. Happy hunting to you both. I’m glad this went well, gentlemen. And to think that we almost attempted to unbind your pact, the way that Lochlann here originally intended.”

My blood froze.

Sylvain’s jaw clenched. “Lochlann wanted to do what, exactly?”

The anger was etched all over his face. I held my hands up, trying to placate him, but trying to defend myself, too.

“That wasn’t what happened, Sylvain. Let me explain.”

Dr. Fang cocked an eyebrow. “Oh, is that so? Then why did you march straight up to my office to see me in the first place? Surely it wasn’t to celebrate, or else you would have gone to your friends instead.”

I gaped at her, speechless. The woman knew me too damn well. Probably knew how to make some fabulous soups and stews, too. She was obviously very good at stirring the pot.

“A little tension works well for testing the bond between summoner and eidolon, I find. The spice in the seasoning. I trust you know your way out, gentlemen.”

Dr. Fang flicked her hand up and outward. My stomach swooped as my armchair glided backward, the legs scraping against the floor. Sylvain’s chair did the same. Behind us, Dr. Fang’s office door flew open. And just like that, we were dismissed.

I cradled my grimoire to my chest as I followed Sylvain out of her office, his hands balled into fists, his shoulders squared. Uh-oh. We stepped into the corridor. Behind us, the door slammed shut. Damn it. Why did Dr. Fang have to do all that?

Sylvain rounded on me, a single finger wagging between us like he was dying to scold and lecture. But instead of words, all he could produce was a bunch of angry, blustery noises.

“Well, well,” a familiar voice purred from further down the corridor. “Fancy meeting you here.”

Sylvain froze, his anger subsiding so fast it made my head spin. His expression rearranged itself into eerie calm, his face utterly neutral, prepared to react in the most favorable way possible. He ran his fingers through his hair like he was only trying to push it out of his eyes. Even as his hand moved his ears changed shaped once again, rounding at the peaks, becoming human.

Huh. Slick, changing his mood as quickly as he changed his shape. Wow. Was this part of royal etiquette over in the Verdance? Whatever it was, it got me off the hook for at least the next few minutes.

I turned toward the sound of the voice, finding Namirah exactly as I expected her: arms and legs crossed, leaning casually against the wall, a twitching pair of cat ears perched on top of her head. Standing next to her was Bruna in her witch’s hat, an empty glass in one hand.

Damn eavesdroppers. I shook my head. With friends like these, am I right?

“Sylvain,” I said, pretending we weren’t about to launch into an argument mere seconds ago. “I’d like you to meet my best friends.”

I’d almost called them a pair of snoops, which would have been more accurate, but never mind that.

“Pleasure to meet you both,” Sylvain said, offering a scintillating smile. “My name is Sylvain.”

The anger had vanished completely, shoved to some corner of his brain, saved for later. I

clenched the muscles in my stomach, as if to steel myself. Okay, so maybe I did want to break the pact initially. I never expected to meet a softer, more pleasant side of him so soon.

But that only brought its own concerns. Why did his mind change so suddenly about becoming my eidolon, about helping me find the Blood of the Earth? Something was fishy here. So many questions. Too many.

“I’m Bruna. Bruna Hernandez. Part of the faculty here, actually. Alchemy.”

She tugged and adjusted her hat by its brim, one of those conical ones favored by witches and wizards, its end flopping over. Not for lack of quality — Bruna cared as deeply for fashion as she did her work, and her students. She was my age, young as far as professors went, and already well-loved.

As good as she was with people, Bruna could still get flustered and excited to meet anyone new. I always suspected it was deliberate, her friendliness and vulnerability, a way to catch others off guard. Bruna had the aura of someone who could be a little clumsy, though she was anything but.

It took accuracy in timing and measurement to truly succeed at alchemy. The woman could brew powerful potions like nobody’s business. Just so happened to be a good cook, too, in all sorts of cuisines, but especially Filipino food. How she could stuff a full serving of stew or a shaved ice dessert in a glass phial was anybody’s guess.

“A teacher?” Sylvain said. “A noble profession. You’re very different from the woman I just met. Softer. Sweeter.”

Bruna tittered and lowered her head, blushing under the safety of her hat. Sylvain really could turn it on and off like a spigot, his charm stashed away somewhere inside his handsome skull, probably on a shelf right next to the anger. A little scary, and fuck, okay, a little sexy, too.

“Right,” I said, my eyes narrowed. “Very soft and sweet. What’s that you’ve got in your hand there, Bruna?”

“Oh. Oh, this? I needed a drink.” She stuck her lip up in defiance. “And I drank it. So, there.”

“And you just happened to be standing right here in this corridor, waiting for me and Sylvain to show up.”

“Some of the students saw you coming up to Dr. Fang’s office,” Namirah said. “People were talking in the courtyard, that maybe you’d forged a pact at last. Is it true, Locke? We’re very proud of you.”

“Thanks,” I said grudgingly, still suspicious.

I wasn’t new to this game. I’d used empty drinking glasses to listen through doors before. Didn’t work all that well. But it didn’t matter if Bruna missed some of the juicier parts. Namirah would have easily heard everything with her very obvious cat ears.

“But yeah, it’s about time, isn’t it?” I gestured toward Sylvain with both hands, making a show of it, like I was presenting my new boyfriend. Eidolon. I totally meant eidolon. “Sylvain here is an alraune. You know, half-plant, half-man.”

“I am? Oh. Yes. I am.” He tightened his fists, straightened his back. “I am an alraune. Again, I am pleased to meet you, Bruna. And, uh — ”

Namirah placed a hand over her chest and nodded, her bangles and earrings clinking. “Oh, where are my manners? Namirah. Happy to make your acquaintance. I’m a student here at the Wispwood. Possibly forever.”

Her laughter tinkled as musically as the jingle of her gold jewelry, which looked spectacular against her bronze skin, the sleek jet-black of her waist-length hair. Namirah carried herself like a supermodel — regal, statuesque — and in fact very much looked like one. But her incredible gift for shapeshifting meant she was most at home at the Wispwood.

She wasn't kidding about being a forever-student, just in a different way than I was. Namirah collected degrees like I collected demerits, going down yet another track and mastering yet another animal form. She wasn't born a shifter. The metamorphosis wasn't rooted in her blood, something that came naturally to werewolves. No, Namirah changed her shape through the use of magic.

Of course, sometimes she could forget to change bits of herself back. I tapped the top of my head. "You've still got those fuzzy — yeah, those cat ears. Yep. Right there."

She laughed again, this time nervously, holding one hand to her chest and covering her mouth with the other. "Oh, would you look at that? I was just — experimenting. Yes. That's right." The cat ears shrank, disappearing under her hair.

I crossed my arms and frowned, looking her from head to toe. "Experimenting. Right in the hallway outside Dr. Fang's office. How convenient."

Sylvain scratched the end of his nose and shrugged. "I don't see what's wrong. Excellent work, I say. It's an admirable quality, being able to transform your appearance. Why, some of the best changelings in the Verdan — "

I shoved my elbow up and into his stomach. He grunted and doubled over, coughing. I braced him by the back, patting and rubbing in circles, but not before mentally recording how incredibly tight his abdominals were. And yeah, the shoulders were pretty great, too. Damn it.

"What Sylvain meant to say is that he's met creatures who are very good at changing themselves, out in the verdant forests surrounding the, um, the Wispwood. You know alraunes. They get around. Hah."

"We heard everything," Bruna cried out, shortly before clapping her hands over her mouth. Namirah rolled her eyes and groaned. "Everything. Verdance, prince, fae, all of it."

I grabbed her by the shoulder, shaking her a little for good measure. "Will you keep it down?" I hissed. "The two of you are the worst. I was going to tell you anyway."

"What?" Sylvain crossed his arms and turned his nose up. "But the very frightening woman behind this door right here told us that I am not, under any circumstances, to reveal my identity on Wispwood grounds. Goodness. Imagine it. I could be mobbed. I'm sure no one has ever met fae royalty before."

"She didn't say any of that," I snapped. "And no one is going to mob you. They're going to run away screaming. Don't worry about Namirah and Bruna. We can't trust them not to eavesdrop, but we can trust them to keep a secret. Right, you two? Right?"

"I swear it on my mother's grave," Namirah said, holding her hand up.

"Her mother's still alive," Bruna mumbled.

Namirah's lips drew back. "She knows what she did."

"Guys, focus." I held my hands up, making sure they understood. "Nobody can find out, okay?"

Another voice drifted in from behind me, ethereal and taunting, the sound of it boiling my blood.

"Nobody can find out about what, Locke?"

I turned around in a slow, plodding semi-circle. Despite their snoopiness, I was always happy to see Namirah and Bruna. This newcomer, though? Not a bit. He stood there with his hands clasped behind his back, my nemesis, my rival, slender and coquettish and sweet. A pretty, perfumed flower.

But I knew exactly what he was like on the inside: positively brimming with poison.

"Evander Skink," I said, my words pushing through a smile filled with clenched teeth. "So nice to see you."



EVANDER SKINK GRASPED AT HIS CHEEK WITH LONG, ELEGANT FINGERS, HIS HEAD TILTED, ALL COY AND teasing.

“Please, Locke. I always tell you that you can call me Evan instead. All of my good friends do. I mean, how long have we known each other now?”

I clenched my teeth, knowing what was coming next. He blinked slowly, the fan of his lashes as pale blond as his glossy, longish hair, eyes huge and wet, like a doe, or a kitten. A very punchable kitten.

“A while,” I said, trying to keep my distaste for him under the surface.

“That’s right. A while. You’ve been here longer than I have, after all. Which isn’t the worst thing in the world. I don’t blame you for staying. It’s so nice here at the Wispwood.”

Okay, wow. What a prick. Technically true, of course — I’d more than overstayed my welcome at the Wispwood. But seriously, who said stuff like that?

Even without looking I could tell that Namirah’s muscles were tense, too. And while Bruna liked to give people the benefit of the doubt, preferring not to cast judgment where it wasn’t necessary, even she acknowledged that Evander Skink was kind of an asshole.

We even had our own secret name for him: Evander Skink, the Evil Twink. I knew that it wasn’t the most rhythmic nickname to give him, but it checked all the boxes. Evander Skink was ethereal and beautiful with his delicate features and fingers and hair, his fair skin and sophisticated fashion sense.

He looked like someone who could have climbed out of the Wispwell, like one of the ghostly wisps that haunted its waters had been granted the gift of human form. Before the fae returned to our world, I thought that Evander was what one of the fair folk must have looked like.

Now I just knew that he looked like someone I wanted to dropkick in the throat every time I saw him. He was an excellent summoner, a model student, and the cherry on top: three years my junior. Evander Skink was the anti-Locke, in short, my exact opposite in so many ways. It also meant that Dr. Fang liked him more. Much more.

“This doesn’t concern you, Evander,” Namirah said. “Besides, this was supposed to be a private conversation.”

“A funny place to have a private conversation, out here in the hallway.” Evander grinned, showing off his flawless teeth. “You do have an interesting notion of privacy, don’t you?”

Bruna cleared her throat, the only member of our group willing to play nice with Evander. “We

were just discussing how happy we were that Locke has finally contracted an eidolon.”

“An eidolon, you say? Congratulations are surely in order, Locke.” Evander tapped the side of his perfect cheekbone with the tip of one meticulously buffed fingernail. His eyes traveled the entire length of Sylvain’s body, his gaze lingering too long for my taste. “Well, well. Fresh meat.”

Sylvain looked down at himself, then up at me, confused. I shrugged back. He puffed his chest out, the muscles in his arms going taut.

“I’m an alraune,” he announced. I nearly smacked myself in the forehead.

“Are you, now?” Evander’s eyes flitted across each of our faces, settling on Sylvain’s again. “Aren’t there a lot of your kind in the forests around the Wispwood? Quite common.”

Sylvain flinched, his jaw clenching. I imagined that no prince, fae or otherwise, would deal well with being called common. Still, I hoped he had enough common sense to keep everything that Dr. Fang had told us in mind. I was used to Evander Skink’s low-grade, sugarcoated bullying. Sylvain, though?

“Oh, have I offended you?” Evander gave us a simpering grin. “I do apologize. I just thought that the son of the Grand Summoner Baylor Wilde himself would contract something a little more, shall we say, exotic. Not an unattractive option by any means, though. Quite the contrary.”

I studied Sylvain out of the corner of my eye. It looked like he couldn’t decide between being flattered or offended. Seriously, though, Evander was taking this too far. Wasn’t insulting my eidolon enough? He had to start flirting with him, too?

“Don’t get me wrong, Locke. I, for one, think it’s fabulous that you’ll finally have a shot at securing your Summoner’s Crest.” He examined his fingernails, a twinkle of malice in his eye, because with Evander Skink, a compliment was never just a compliment. “Why, I’m getting mine soon, too. Wouldn’t that be funny? Oh, not the part about you taking forever, I mean. Just, it would be nice for us to be colleagues at last, equals in our chosen profession. It doesn’t matter how many years it took each of us to get there.”

And there it was. What a fucking prick. I rolled my eyes. “Get over yourself, Skink.”

Screw Evander for bringing up my super, super seniority yet again. I didn’t need my delay rubbed in my face all the time, an unfortunate combination of many things. My own laziness, admittedly, but more than that, it was a fear of never living up to Father’s name. And there was the added stress of having to excel after acquiring my Crest, of becoming a better and better summoner.

Completing my studies at the Wispwood was one thing. Actually carrying on as a summoner was another entirely. That was when the true test began, when the true learning started. Gathering my own eidolons, hiring my magic out to the highest bidder. There was the matter of the inheritance, too — my funds were running low, and this was the obvious way out.

The greatest summoners collected eidolons like they were trading cards, a tool and a weapon for every situation. A mage might call lightning out of the sky to smite their enemy. A summoner might call on a thunderbird, or several of them instead, achieving even more spectacular results.

And yes, mages could match the power of summoners with the correct spells and rituals, but nothing strikes fear in the hearts of your enemies quite like the sight of a mythical beast of legend: a manticore come to flay and poison, or a nightmare charging forth on flaming hooves.

In a similar way, little can be more rousing for those fighting on your side. The piercing war cry of a noble gryphon, or the thundering drumbeat of footfalls as a giant stomps into battle. There’s something poetic and deeply primal about the art of summoning, how it can fuel both fear and inspiration.

And there I was with my birds and a small handful of other creatures — a tattered old wolf and a

grubby cat. I'd always aspired to become the more versatile kind of summoner, contracting eidolons of various elements to round out my repertoire. The keyword there being aspired, of course, to be someone like Father.

There was no one right way to be a summoner. I liked the idea of collecting a flexible assortment of eidolons, but others preferred to specialize heavily in a single type, deepening their mastery and command of those creatures and their unique abilities.

Grand Summoner Dorian was known for dealing exclusively with dragons, banking on the idea that the only thing more terrifying than a single dragon was an entire flock of them blotting out the sun. Grand Summoner Celestina had her angels.

Evander wanted to be like them, specializing in the most unlikely sort of creature. My eyes fell on the silver ring on his finger, the filigree as delicate and pretty as its owner, crafted in the shape of a single butterfly.

Evander clapped his hands once, grinning, the butterfly on his finger glimmering as it caught the light. "Why don't we practice what we've learned, hey, Locke? A brief and friendly demonstration of our power. One summoner against the other."

The hairs on my nape bristled. A challenge? Sylvain could sense it, too, the leaves making up his armor rustling in a nonexistent breeze. Bruna lifted her chin, putting on her teacher's voice.

"I don't mean to treat anyone here like children," she said, the insult aimed at Evander, and sprinkled with sugar. "But as a professor of the academy, I don't recommend that sort of thing in common areas."

"And that's exactly why this is so perfect, Professor Hernandez. Your presence makes this official, and safe. I repeat. This is an excellent opportunity for practice, a culmination of all our education. Or is Locke here content to hide behind your skirts? It's hardly fair, this favoritism, him being friends with an authority figure, and —"

"My skirts?" Bruna said, all pretense thrown right out the window, her expression deathly cold. A shitty thing to say to begin with, and besides, Bruna was very sensitive about her skirts. "You're on thin ice, Skink."

"Mea culpa," Evander said, bowing his head. Gods, even his feeble attempts at apologizing smacked of insincerity.

"I'm fine, Bruna." I cracked my knuckles. "I can handle this. Sure, Skink. You wanna go? Let's go."

He gave me a Cheshire smile, laughter in his eyes. "Gladly."

Namirah sucked on her teeth and tutted, muttering something that sounded very much like "man-child" as she leaned against the wall to watch. Bruna sighed in defeat, patting herself down in search of a potion. She pulled a phial from her belt and poured its contents in a line along the ground. A barrier of light erected itself around us in the corridor.

A wall of force, just like Evander said, something to make it official, and safe. Safe for anyone watching, that is. Students gathered close, rubbernecks and passersby alike chattering excitedly. The door to Dr. Euclidean Fang's office swung open.

Everyone fell silent. She narrowed her eyes, studying the faces within the forcefield, then nodded her approval.

"Skink. Wilde. Of course. Just as expected."

Dr. Fang stood there with her arms crossed, like she was waiting for us to carry on.

"Really, Dr. Fang?" Bruna asked. "You have no issues with what's happening right now?"

"Let them kill each other if they like. May the best man win."

Damn. Tough love. And speaking of which — I leaned closer to Sylvain.

“I’m still not entirely sure what you can do with your power, but I think you’ve pieced together what’s happening here.”

He shrugged. “I’ll snap him like a twig.”

I frowned. “Don’t underestimate him. Evander Skink is a terrible person, but a very talented summoner. Look out for his butterflies. He enhances them with magic, part of his summoner’s bond, years in the making.”

That was the difference between a summoner’s eidolon and a regular creature of the species. The average butterfly could be lovely to look at, but hardly posed a threat. Through time and practice, by expending his own arcane essence and investing it in his beloved butterflies, Evander had turned them into dangerous weapons.

Dying by Evander Skink’s hand would be humiliating, but at least it would be a beautiful death. If I had the talent and patience for it, I could have done something similar with my doves. But that was the different between me and Evander Skink.

“Your warnings are taken into consideration, and I thank you for your concern,” Sylvain said, his voice calm, the surface of a pond. “But to be clear, I still hate you.”

I’d almost forgotten that he did. Maybe Dr. Fang’s presence had served as a helpful reminder.

“We’ll deal with that later. Right now, I just want to wipe that stupid smirk off Evander Skink’s face.”

“Something we can actually agree on,” Sylvain said. “I’m not allowed to kill him, am I?”

I considered it for a moment, imagining a world free of Evander Skink and his taint, when the asshole in question called out in a musical, singsong voice.

“Oh, boys,” he said, the syllables mockingly stretched. Evander’s sickly-sweetness made my skin crawl. “I’m waiting.”

The onlookers cooed at the sight of him standing in a cloud of butterflies. Their wings were luminous, a glowing, gaudy pink, a color I didn’t think could be seen in nature. I did know that bright colors signaled danger, and poison.

Very appropriate, actually, for the Wispwood’s resident evil twink.



“A SIMPLE DUEL,” BRUNA CALLED OUT TO THE HALLWAY, LAYING OUT THE TERMS OF THE BATTLE. “First blood wins. Nonlethal magic only. Violating these rules will be cause for disciplinary action. Understood? Do you accept these terms?”

Evander and I each nodded our assent, standing twenty or so feet apart. Sylvain lingered at my side, his breaths coming faster, deeper, the excitement manifesting itself on his very person. I wished I had more time to marvel at how some of the leaves on his chest had come loose, floating lazily in a slow orbit around him, as if dancing on an unfelt breeze. But Evander, dirty rat that he was, made the first move.

They rushed forward like a whisper on the wind, his swarm of butterflies, as swift as paper planes, as pretty as flowers. I placed my hand on Sylvain’s shoulder, pushing the force of my will through my skin, through his. He gasped, no doubt feeling the thrum of power coursing through his blood.

Summoners, again, came in all different flavors. Evander infused his minions with his own magic, augmenting their delicate wings and bodies to turn them into deadly weapons. I could do the same, lending Sylvain a portion of my arcane essence to do with as he pleased, amplifying his abilities in turn.

That was another difference between us. Some summoners, like Evander, preferred to exert total control over the actions of their idolons, directing the precise flight pattern of his butterflies, their speed, as well as the angle of their approach. I’d done the same with my doves, but depending on the situation, allowing an eidolon to make their own decisions could be even more effective.

It was a matter of trust. As much as I wanted to win this duel, what I wanted even more was to see what Sylvain could do in a fight. A risky proposition, maybe, for a new pact between summoner and eidolon. But a little trust could go a long way.

Sylvain thrust his hand forward. Every tree that grew up to where we stood on the upper levels, perhaps even every plant down in the courtyard rustled, seemingly coming alive as their leaves detached from the branches, speeding toward Sylvain.

I joined the rest of the students with the low murmur of my awe. The torrent of leaves spun in a whorl at the edge of Sylvain’s palm. He looked over his shoulder at me and winked. My heart did an unexpected somersault.

“We’re only borrowing them for the moment. I’ll return them once we’ve won.”

Confidence. I liked that. The spinning wall of leaves served as a shield between the two of us and Evander's murderous butterflies. Evander gasped as he understood what was happening, but too late. Each of his minions winked out of existence as they attempted to pass through Sylvain's barrier.

A tingle of excitement went up my spine. Evander liked to enchant the wings of his butterflies, making them as hard and as sharp as knives. Sylvain could do the same, apparently, only with leaves.

It was tempting to tell him what to do, but with a self-satisfied chuckle, he extended his other arm and did exactly what I would have done. Ah, so he worked well independently, plus we were on the same page, anyway. And Bruna did say first blood, didn't she?

Well, she never mentioned how many pints.

The leaves rustled like the wings of thousands of insects, the tranquil rush of them in the breeze of Sylvain's making so relaxing compared to the bloody danger they presented to exposed flesh. Evander muttered a curse as the leaves swirled and hurtled toward him, every blade like a razor, a little knife.

He held his hand out, more of the butterflies materializing, coalescing into the shape of a massive, glowing pair of wings. A shield. Incredible. Evander and Sylvain were evenly matched. The leaves battered his shield like raindrops, like bullets, smashing again and again in their eagerness to break through, to break skin.

"Curious," Sylvain muttered, tilting his head, assessing our enemy, waiting for Evander's next move.

And move he did, gesturing again as he dissolved his shield into another swarm of butterflies. Evander muttered to himself, another spell. Their wings turned bright orange, tiny flames dancing along their bodies. Predictable. I opened my mouth to warn Sylvain, but he held his hand up.

"Incendiary enchantment," he said. "Most curious indeed."

My lips closed again. Sylvain was more experienced in identifying spellwork than I'd expected. I shuffled my feet, clearing my throat as I rearranged my grimoire's position in my arms, which had already been fine to begin with. Why was Sylvain's competence and power so damn hot? Such an inconvenient time to get turned on, too.

Evander stretched out his arm, then dropped his hand. The butterflies sped forth. As ancient as the structure was, the seemingly fragile stonework of the Wispwood was hardly at risk. Something about the Wispwell kept both the stone and the trees exceptionally strong. Even without the barrier Bruna had erected, everything would be perfectly fine.

What we needed to worry about was getting our limbs and entrails scattered by these beautiful flying bombs.

But again my freshly bonded eidolon proved his worth. Sylvain slashed his arm through the air, leaves launching from his hand like a fan of knives, each zinging at deadly speed toward a separate butterfly. The little explosions were glorious, as long as I reminded myself that the butterflies were simply crossing back to where Evander had summoned them from, and not actually dying.

What was even more satisfying, though, was the look of shock on Evander's face. He composed himself quickly enough, his features shifting back to a place somewhere between anger and determination, but that moment of vulnerability had been worth it. Maybe Sylvain really was a blessing in disguise, after all.

And then Evander snickered. He snapped his fingers and one last butterfly dropped from above us, somewhere close to the ceiling. How did we miss that one? My heart jumped as it sped toward Sylvain, burning, fiery wings prepared to welcome him in their explosive embrace. Sylvain's mouth fell open, too surprised to react. I stepped in, my body between the butterfly and the prince as I held out my grimoire.

The nice thing about a summoner's grimoire was how it served as much more than a combination journal, sketchpad, and textbook. In a pinch, a summoner's arcane essence could be expended to reinforce it, much in the same way that it could reinforce an eidolon. Funny how the damn thing got weathered over time anyway, the parchment yellowing, the cover going dry, when just the right amount of essence could make it nigh indestructible.

Energy pulsed from within my soul and out through the palms of my hands, encasing the grimoire in its own personal barrier. The butterfly collided with its cover, my magic absorbing the force of the blow, my fingers feeling the residual heat of the enchantment, and nothing more. From across the hallway, Evander cursed again.

Sylvain's chuckle was throaty, bemused. "Impressive. I didn't think you could do that."

"There's plenty you don't know about me." I gave him a wink, surprised to see a twitch in the corner of his eye, a faint blush in the apples of his cheeks. "But there's time for that later. Let's end this."

"Agreed."

Sylvain composed himself, holding his hand aloft. This time the leaves whirled and reformed into a blade, a sword crafted out of hundreds of individual parts. Now that was impressive.

We rushed as one toward Evander, Sylvain with his sword, and me prepared to deliver an almighty thrashing with my reinforced book. Gods, but this felt incredible, swooping into the fray alongside my eidolon, fighting shoulder to shoulder. I wondered if this was how Grand Summoner Dorian felt as he rode his dragons into battle, an entire flock of them blackening the sky.

I wondered if this was how Father felt.

"Stay back," Evander shouted, his hand held up in front of him, his supply of butterflies dwindling. "No. Stay back."

Evander was too good for tomes and grimoires, thinking himself above them, relying only on wings and butterflies. I'd never really seen him fight up close, his magic more suited for ranged combat. But something was wrong. That look in his eyes wasn't one of anger, or even confusion. It was fear.

Sylvain slashed his sword in a vicious diagonal, a strike that would have cut Evander's chest open. He danced away, as graceful as his butterflies, but his eyes huge as he watched the edge of Sylvain's blade.

"Sylvain, stop," I said.

His teeth bared, his eyes burning, Sylvain lunged forward, slicing this time in a wide, horizontal arc. Evander dodged again, but his step faltered. Sylvain raised his sword a third time. I couldn't take it. I sprang forward, my grimoire held up. The collision clanged like metal, the strength of Sylvain's blow vibrating down my arms.

And then Bruna's voice called for the end of the duel.

"First blood. Evander Skink wins."

I felt at my cheek, wiping away the trail of blood. Fuck. I'd barely felt the butterfly's wing grazing my skin. Defeat and Evander's cowardly betrayal hurt much more. From somewhere behind me, he had the nerve to chuckle.

Sylvain threw his arm out and curled his fingers. At once the blade in his hand and the leaves adorning his body fell away, swirling in impossible curves and patterns back toward the trees around the academy, his borrowed implements returned to nature. The sight of this man standing in a silent whirlwind of emerald green could have been so tranquil, except for the part where he was openly glaring at me.

He stalked toward me, hands clenched into fists. I stood my ground, lifting my nose, my chin. This was part of the summoner's song and dance, after all, understanding the temperaments of our eidolons, the push and pull of their whims and fancies. Those who worked with creatures of fire, for example, might need to prepare for explosive outbursts. Creatures of elemental air were literally flighty themselves, their moods liable to shift like the wind.

But this beautiful man and his curious talents were an unprecedented mystery. A challenge, exactly like Dr. Fang had warned.

"I could have ended it," he snarled. "If you'd just allowed me to strike him, we could have won."

"You're forgetting everything we discussed," I said, struggling to keep my tone calm. "Dr. Fang said that you couldn't harm other students because of the terms of our pact, but now I have my doubts. You're too wild, Sylvain. It still falls on me to rein you in."

Oops. Maybe I could have phrased that differently. Sylvain's lips drew back, his bared teeth wet and sharp.

"You compare me to a common carthorse. A beast of burden. I'm beginning to think that you're confused about your position in this arrangement."

The blood rushed to my cheeks, both from anger and from the fact that the onlookers around us were now watching a different sort of fight. A summoner and his eidolon, bickering out in the open. Oh, and Dr. Fang was there, too. Great.

"My position? It's your fault that we're in this position to begin with, you and your big, stupid mouth. You didn't have to seal the pact, and yet you did, all because you couldn't control yourself. Words have meaning in this world, Sylvain. They can bind you, destroy you."

"You want words?" A cruel smile played on his lips. He raised his hand, one finger pointed at my chest. "I have words for you, little human. You are a conniving, sniveling, unbearable piece of —"

His finger connected with my body. The pact took over. A pulse of light flashed between us, hurtling him across the hallway with massive force. Sylvain yelped as he flew, as fast and as hard as if he'd been kicked in the stomach by a giant. He slammed into the wall with a meaty thud and a pained grunt. Scratch that — as if he'd been kicked in the stomach by a giant wearing steel-toe boots.

"Sorry?" I called out. "I'm a piece of what? I didn't catch that."

Sylvain groaned. Namirah clucked her tongue as she approached him, presumably to help snap his bones back into place. Bruna sifted through the pouches and phials attached to the leather belt she wore, looking for a healing potion. I stood sulking with my arms crossed, my grimoire across my chest like a shield, or a security blanket.

And Dr. Fang shook her head, pushed her door open, and disappeared into her office. Great. Just great.

Between the compliments and congratulations going Evander's way, he still found the time to sidle up to me and offer one last taunt.

"Trouble in paradise, Locke? If it doesn't work out — and it looks like it won't — be sure to send him my way. Perhaps I can tame him."

I stared at Sylvain as he guzzled a crimson-colored potion, as he stared sullenly back at me with eyes brimming with anger and hurt.

I wondered if anyone could tame him.



I REALLY DID HAVE THE BEST FRIENDS IN THE WORLD. NAMIRAH AND BRUNA HELPED SYLVAIN UP THE steps to my bedchambers, which was just as well since he didn't seem to want me anywhere near him. I kept my eyes on the back of his head, imagining I could bore holes through his skull with the force of my annoyance.

Dr. Fang had warned him about harming the other residents of the Wispwood, and he'd seen firsthand how the pact would react to any sign of physical threat to a summoner's person. Not my problem. Was I really the bad guy for making sure that Evander Skink walked out of our duel in one piece? I mean, Skink was a walking pile of human garbage, but no one deserved to be bisected at the torso like that.

Sylvain could grouse all he wanted. And grouse he did, all the way up the stairs, through the door to my room. The ladies tried to help him onto a chair, but he insisted on sitting on the floor. Bruna was kind enough to lay down a couple of throw pillows for him, his butt and his thighs lovingly cushioned on embroidered emerald and gold.

Personally, I would have liked to lay down a thrashing, but never mind that. This was supposed to be a place of peace. My room was my sanctuary away from the rest of the academy, nothing too shabby, but nothing too flashy, either.

A nice four-poster bed, courtesy of the academy itself, the same as the rest of the mostly mahogany furniture like the dresser and the end table. A couple of matching clawfoot sofas upholstered in emerald green and gold, the colors of Wispwood — kind of old-fashioned, but very comfy.

We could decorate however we liked, but the academy's colors would always find their way into a student's room. In my case, the colors appeared in the form of the college-style pennant that hung above my writing desk, or the coffee mug sitting on that same writing desk, right next to my laptop.

Over there was my flatscreen TV, with a couple of game consoles, and next to it, a small personal refrigerator. It would have been an odd sight for the more magically-inclined students, seeing the Wispwood's ancient furnishings next to mundane, almost vulgar human technology. But all put together, it spelled comfort for me.

And apparently for my irritating new roommate, as well.

"Thank you very much," Sylvain said, his voice hoarse, his eyes half-lidded, like he was exhausted. "I never thought that humans could be so helpful, so kind."

"It's only regular human decency," Namirah said. "Really not a big deal at all, Sylvain. No

worries.”

Her eyes locked with mine for the briefest second, a flash of hardness in her stare. I flinched. What? Like it was my fault? Sylvain was the one who poked me while gearing up to say something very unpleasant. The melodramatic bastard. He was milking this for all it was worth. And worse? He was winning my friends over, too.

Bruna pulled another phial from her belt, the crimson liquid sloshing around within the glass. “I’ll brew up some more healing potion, just in case,” she told me. “If he’s in any pain whatsoever, come see me and I’ll have it ready for him.”

I narrowed my eyes at Sylvain. “I’m sure Prince Sylvain over here is still strong enough to crawl his way to your office and uncork a bottle with his teeth. He’ll be fine.”

Sylvain clutched his stomach and doubled over, his lashes fluttering as he gasped. “Your kindness is exemplary, Bruna. I thank you again.”

This fucking guy. Not once over the course of our duel did anything strike him in the stomach. Just another excuse to draw attention to his abs. All eight of them. I clenched my fingers, curled my toes.

“You know, you were really quick to declare Evander the winner back there,” I told Bruna, eyes still narrowed.

She placed her hands on her hips, frowning. “Locke, you know how it works. All those terms are binding. The Wispwood would know if I played favorites. Even worse, the headmasters would know.”

The Wispwood was watched over by three separate headmasters, all working as a triumvirate. Why we needed three of them I would never know. I suspected it had to do with all the various arcane tracks the academy offered, many of which might have conflicting ideologies.

More importantly, in most any situation, it was best not to draw their attention. Even the friendliest of the three could be difficult to deal with. Unpredictable, to say the least.

I shuddered. “Okay, fair point. I guess I’m still a little sore about losing.”

Namirah tutted and shook her head gravely. “Very inappropriate and insensitive thing to say, Locke, when your eidolon is right here hurting in your place.”

My mouth fell open. Sylvain really had charmed my best friends, and he didn’t even need his sneaky fae magics to pull it off. They were too busy judging me and clucking their tongues to notice that Sylvain had looked up long enough to throw me a triumphant smirk. I gritted my teeth, my blood simmering.

Bruna and Namirah left shortly after, though not before being treated to some more of Sylvain’s manipulative whining and mewling. As soon as the door shut, he stretched his arms out and sighed. He rested his hands behind his head and crossed his legs, making himself right at home.

“Not the most offensive accommodations in the world,” he said, glancing around my bedroom. “I was expecting worse.”

I held one finger up at him, glowering. “You’re a piece of work, Sylvain, you know that? Pulling my friends around on your puppet strings.”

He blinked at me, eyes brimming with innocence. “Whatever do you mean? I like the changeling girl and the potion-maker just fine. In fact, I might have preferred being bonded with one of them instead.”

“Please, Sylvain,” I grumbled, rubbing my temples with the tips of my fingers. “Enough of this for one day. Let’s just make it through the night and get on with our quest in the morning.”

It hadn’t even been a very long day, but I was just so exhausted. Part of it came from contributing my own arcane essence to the fight. Magic-users of all kinds channeled the arcane essence in their

souls to fuel spells. Summoners like me used it to conjure and empower our eidolons. But those energies were limited. Mine in particular were running pretty low.

“Ah, of course,” Sylvain said. “The Blood of the Earth.” He picked at his skin, rubbing at his stomach like he was dusting something off. “Good thing I didn’t bleed much, if at all, tonight. I’d still like a wash before bed, though. Where do you keep your washtub, human?”

“We don’t do washtubs. Well, I don’t, anyway. It’s a different world, Sylvain. Here. Follow me.”

I led him to the bathroom. The towels, the armchair, and the fainting couch — again, it came with the room — were all in the academy’s familiar green and gold. Yes, we were spoiled senseless at the Wispwood. Maybe that was why I stayed as long as I did. Sylvain ran his fingers along the rim of the clawfoot tub, nodding appraisingly.

“Yes. This will do nicely.”

“Or,” I said, “or, you could give the shower a shot.”

He looked at me like I was speaking a foreign language, which, considering where he came from, it probably was. I led him to the shower stall, explaining the knobs, handing him his own towel. Sylvain pointed up at the shower head, one eyebrow cocked.

“And you say that water is meant to come out of there? Like rain? Fascinating.”

“Right,” I said. “Could you — you can let me out now.”

In all his interest he’d managed to squeeze the two of us deep into the shower stall, his lips parted as he examined the plumbing. And yes, in some alternate dimension where Sylvain and I could be more than summoner and eidolon, I would have liked for him to examine my personal plumbing as well. But we don’t always get what we want.

“Yeah, if I could just squeeze past — yes, there you go.”

That was deliberate, how he stood in my way. Must have been, how I was forced to brush up against the bulging musculature of his shoulder, his waist, and his ass, how his hip was cocked to one side. And then I remembered. Wouldn’t he need a change of clothes, too?

I held up a finger, motioning for him to wait as I retrieved something from my dresser. I presented the boxer shorts proudly. A gift, a peace offering.

“These are much too small for me.” He glanced down at my waist, the pale gold of his eyes obscured by the ridiculous length of his lashes. “You’re very slender.”

I stiffened, unsure if that was meant as an insult or a compliment. But as was our dynamic, I defaulted to firing back with annoyance. “I can’t help that I’m built this way.”

Sylvain shrugged. “And I can’t help that I’m built with so much muscle.”

Okay. I’d walked right into that one. Damn it.

He turned away and sighed, snapping his fingers. Leaves rustled, every single one falling away from his body and spiraling out through the door. My jaw fell open as I stared at his bare ass.

Sylvain glanced at me over his shoulder, so nonchalant, like going fully naked in front of me meant nothing to him. “So I just turn these knobs, then?”

“Yes,” I sputtered. “Right. Goodbye.”

I sprinted out of the bathroom, my heartbeat racing. I knew that Sylvain’s top half was gorgeous, but I wasn’t expecting to see his bottom half so soon, or ever. Yes, it was just as great, and no, I didn’t get a peek at his —

Coq au vin. Oh. Wasn’t coq au vin on the menu tonight? I wasn’t feeling especially hungry, but surely Sylvain needed to eat. Every morning I’d find a menu from the kitchen imps on the breakfast table, our choices for meals written delicately out on ivory card. Say what you wanted about imps, brusque and beastly as they could be. They sure had incredible penmanship.

Every student naturally had the option of eating in the dining hall or one of the common areas, but meals were guaranteed to be delivered ensuite, too. Yes, again — the Wispwood spoiled its students silly. Wouldn't you stay, knowing that French cuisine would appear in your bedchambers upon request?

I brought the piece of card up to my face, making my selection. "I'd love the coq au vin for dinner, please. Maybe in ten minutes?"

"You got it, kid," a gruff voice answered.

The sound could have come from anywhere in the room, but I knew that it had come from the menu, a rectangle of card stock enchanted to serve as a walkie-talkie. I firmly believed in being extremely polite to those who worked in food service. Those jobs weren't easy by any stretch, and adding more strain to the situation by being difficult or unpleasant didn't appeal to me.

And besides, the Wispwood was exactly the sort of place where being nice to the kitchen and waitstaff paid off in spades. Sometimes the kitchen imps delivered me a nice extra helping of chocolate mousse. Students who hadn't learned to be decent people prior to arriving at the Wispwood learned to change their tune very quickly.

This was the sort of place where the question "Who pissed in your cereal?" prompted a legitimate answer. Imp urine burned on the way down, too, or so I'd been told.

So yes: comfort and complacency were a few of the reasons I'd partially fused myself to the academy. I'd been at the Wispwood so long it was a wonder they didn't force me to move somewhere more appropriate. My own bell tower, for example. A condemned wing of the academy, perhaps, that I could haunt while clutching a candelabra and wearing a tattered white gown.

The knobs in the bathroom squeaked. I cleared my throat, my hand going to the top of my head as my fingers teased out the ringlets of my hair. What the hell was I doing? This wasn't a date, nor a one-night stand. A few minutes later the door opened, issuing wisps of steam, as if Sylvain needed an even more dramatic way to make an entrance.

"Right, my turn," I blurted out, practically elbowing my way past him into the bathroom. "Food's coming. Check the table. Chicken cooked in wine."

"I'm not hungry," Sylvain said, toweling his hair, his skin still damp.

Whatever. I shut the door and slipped into the shower. I washed myself clean, focusing only on the soap and the shampoo, all while resisting the overpowering temptation to reach down and touch myself.

Gods, how inappropriate would that be? With Sylvain just outside the door? "Have some restraint," I muttered to myself under the safety of rushing water, watching as the suds and my shame gurgled down the shower drain.

I emerged wrapped in a towel, hurriedly dressing myself with a shirt and shorts plucked out of my dresser. I fought to avoid looking at Sylvain, to check whether he was watching me. He must have been. My skin burned.

"So I take it that we're sharing the bed," he said, his voice almost sultry, or maybe that was only my mind playing tricks on me.

"Absolutely not," I said, tearing through the room and arranging an unholy number of pillows on the ground for him. I threw on a couple of silks and blankets for good measure. I thought he'd put up more of a fight, but Sylvain laid down on top of the pile, testing the pillows with his hands, kneading and stretching like a cat.

"I've slept on worse."

I wrested my eyes away from the sight of all those muscles rippling under his skin. Fuck. I looked

at the breakfast table instead, at the plate of coq au vin that had clearly been demolished.

“So. I thought you said you weren’t hungry?”

“Pixies. You must have an infestation of pixies. They ate the food.” He patted his stomach, one hand to his lips as he stifled a belch. “I imagine it must have been very delicious.”

I rolled my eyes, accidentally glancing at his body again. The urge was overwhelming. I had to check if he’d somehow managed to squeeze himself into those damn shorts.

Okay, so maybe I wanted to see how parts of him would bulge through them, too.

I allowed my gaze to travel down his body, surprised to find him wearing what appeared to be a fairly comfortable pair of leaf-shorts. What the hell?

“Where are the shorts I gave you?” I asked.

Sylvain pointed. “There, on the dresser. I simply couldn’t fit. I was worried I’d rip them apart.”

I gulped, hoping he didn’t notice the lump in my throat bobbing. The way Sylvain phrased things didn’t make the thought of sleeping in the same room with him any easier.

“So how did you make the pair that you’re wearing? There are hardly any plants in here.”

“Oh, these? I noticed a potted plant next to your dresser, and another little one on your end table. They suffice for my purposes. And don’t fret, I’m only borrowing their foliage. I’ll return them when I’m finished.” The corners of his lips curled upward as he grinned. “Unsoiled. Unsullied.”

Gods, this man knew exactly the things he was doing to me. I soldiered on. “But how would your magic work in a place without any flora?”

He frowned. “Don’t be preposterous. There are plants everywhere, Locke. Everywhere.”

I flung my arms out. “There are many, many places in this world that have little to no plant life in them whatsoever, Sylvain.”

He scoffed. “I’ll believe it when I see it. And not to worry. I can function perfectly fine without them. I call, and the flowers answer. I beckon, and they’ll cross nations, even worlds.” He winked in a way that made my heart skip a beat. “It’s so very touching that you care.”

Again my defensive instincts kicked in. “I only care because we might get in a fight somewhere with no plants.” I struggled to come up with examples. “Like — like a city with really terrible urban planning. Or the inside of a factory.”

Sylvain rested his chin in his hand, grinning out of the corner of his mouth. “You say the strangest things, summoner. You worry too much. No matter. Tomorrow our quest begins, and then you’ll see how silly you were to doubt me.”

I gaped like a fish as I struggled for a snappy answer, but Sylvain had already lowered his head onto his pillow, his hands resting on his stomach. It didn’t take long for his breathing to soften, to steady. All the while my mind raced through arguments I could make in the morning, for the inevitable fights we’d have while trying to secure the Blood of the Earth.

Though I did notice one crucial thing. He’d never called me a summoner before. Wasn’t that the first time? As much as I hated to admit it, Sylvain’s very mention of the word gave me a warm feeling in my stomach. It still mattered, that acknowledgment from my eidolon of who I was, the part I played in the world.

I turned off the bedside lamp and placed my head on my pillow. I shut my eyes and fell into the loving darkness, yearning to dream of the grand summoners of old, of dragons and gorgons and unicorns. That night I was still a burnout, a disgrace to the Wilde name, perhaps the oldest super senior at the Wispwood.

Come morning? I could finally be a summoner.



BIRDS TWITTERED FROM SOMEWHERE OUTSIDE THE WINDOW. I RAN MY FINGERS THROUGH THE FAMILIAR slash of warmth on the otherwise cool sheets, where I knew that a single stubborn ray of sunlight would always find its way through the heavy curtains.

I opened my eyes smiling, something that never happened. Maybe I hadn't exerted enough of myself in a long time, the exhaustion of a truly busy day giving me an excellent night of uninterrupted sleep. I smacked my lips, feeling rested and refreshed — and feeling something else in the bed with me.

Or someone.

I froze, my gaze swiveling toward the pile of cushions I'd set up in the corner of the room. No sign of Sylvain. So the large, warm shape pressed up against me dozing and purring like a wildcat was — oh.

Oh gods. Panic prickled at my skin. Did I smell nice enough when I went to bed last night? Good thing I bothered to shower. But wait a minute. Why was I getting all flustered when this was an invasion of my privacy? By an eidolon, no less.

And yes, I knew that strengthening bonds between eidolons and summoners was crucial to the process — as Dr. Fang cruelly and repeatedly insisted — but this wasn't exactly what I had in mind.

Still, was this really the worst thing in the world? The hard ridges of Sylvain's muscles pressed against me. Even with my back to him I could detect hints of my soap on his skin, my shampoo on his hair. It smelled different on him, somehow. Sharper, crisper. A forest at the bottom of a mountain, or whatever the hell the bottle said, only amplified.

He really was hottest guy I'd had in my bed in a long time. Scratch that: the only guy I'd had in my bed in a long time. There were no rules against dating other students in the Wispwood, but I never had much luck. Maybe no one was very interested in the guy who was fated to haunt the academy forever. Like a hundred-year weed, or petrified wood.

And speaking of petrified wood.

There was, of course, the small problem of his boner pressing up against my ass. Which, in fairness to Sylvain, was not a very small problem at all. Like I needed more proof that the fae were as human as humans. Apparently morning wood was a thing, whether you were a burnout super senior summoner or a fae prince. He groaned softly as he shifted on the mattress, his cock pushing insistently at my ass. I bit my lower lip. This was awkward, but fuck if it wasn't so hot.

“I know you’re awake,” he purred.

I stiffened. Not like that, but I was definitely moments away from it, too. And then I sprang off the bed, as graceful as Namirah in one of her animal forms, quick as a cat, lean as a lion. Or so I liked to think. My foot snagged on the corner of my blanket. I stumbled and spun in place, barely saving myself from face-planting right on the floorboards. My pull on the blanket revealed just enough of Sylvain’s lower half to tell me that he’d changed outfits again since I last saw him.

Changed out of, rather. His leafy britches were gone, replaced by, well, nothing. I glanced away, my ears burning, fighting my hardest not to look. Okay, maybe I tried to take a quick peek. But Sylvain had already pulled the sheets over that part of him, smirking like he wanted me to know I’d just missed the show. He stretched out along the bed, muscles rippling as he groaned in a way that made me wonder what he was dreaming about to make him that hard.

“Very impertinent, looking at a prince like that. Why, in the Verdance, I’d consider having you whipped.” He groaned again as he rose from the bed, stretching one hand and one arm out, the other still covering him from the waist down. “But I like you enough that I might consider whipping you myself.”

I straightened myself up, gathering the last bits of my dignity before it all fell through the cracks in the floorboards. “This is highly inappropriate, Sylvain. You are my eidolon, and I am your summoner. This relationship should be one of mutual respect. And anyway, who gave you permission to sleep in my bed?”

Sylvain gnawed on his bottom lip, lowering his head for a beat before looking up at me through his lashes. Pitiful, pouting. Gods, he knew exactly what he was doing.

“It was so cold there, alone on the floor. You know, back in the Verdance, I would have others to warm my bed for me. You should be so thankful, Locke, having a prince to keep you warm at night.”

I stamped my foot, childish, yes, but indignant. “Highly unprofessional, Sylvain. And not very polite.”

He scratched the side of his jaw, looking at me sidelong. “Neither is letting your eidolon sleep on the floor, oh great and powerful summoner.”

Right. Touché. He got me there. But what else was I supposed to do? Standing by my bed with a shaft of light in a slash across his torso, nothing but my sheets to cover his privates, he looked like a statue. One sculpted from unbelievably beautiful proportions, like someone had scanned the contents of my head and acquired an image of my ideal man. His slender waist, his broad shoulders, that powerful chest.

And based on the hardness pressing against me when I woke up, the glimpse I caught of him in the shower —

Paper rustled on the breakfast table. I blinked, remembering how I didn’t feel much like eating last night, and rushed over to scope out the day’s menu. My last meal in the Wispwood before leaving for our quest-test, and I was ravenous. Just a biological kind of hunger, mind you, not a euphemism for any other sort of starvation or thirst.

Sylvain slunk over to the table to join me, one hand still holding the sheets against his crotch, the drape of the fabric emphasizing the obscene downward slope of the muscles at his pelvis. What were they called again? An Apollo’s belt. Yeah. Like I needed more reasons to compare his perfect body to a Grecian god.

And Apollo was damn fine, according to all I’d heard from the lucky few students who had successfully petitioned him for one favor or another. But I would happily settle for a fae prince any day of the week. A fae anything, really, as long as he looked like Sylvain. He stood just behind me,

skin blazing with heat, like summer, like sunshine.

"I'm not hungry," he said, head turned away from the breakfast table, very obviously peeking at the menu out of the corner of his eye.

"Right. Just like you weren't hungry last night."

"Very well." He sighed like he was only giving in because I'd twisted his arm so hard. "But only because you insisted. I'll have a pain au chocolat — no, make that two — and a café au lait."

I blinked at him, surprised at how smoothly the French rolled off his tongue. Sexy, but that was beside the point. Did our dashing prince of the Summer Court grow up with a French instructor, or did he visit Earth more than he cared to admit? I decided to let it slide. There were far more important things to deal with. His excruciatingly tempting nudity, for example.

"Right," I said, bending toward the menu to repeat our order. "Four pains au chocolat and two cafés au lait. Uh, s'il vous plaît. Hah."

A gruff voice answered. "Real cute, kid. Coming right up."

Sylvain picked up the menu and turned it over in one hand. "Fascinating. We could use this sort of technology back in the Verdance, you know. Would make it more convenient for me to replenish my energies, seeing as how the banquet hall is such a long, long walk away from my bedchambers."

I rolled my eyes, already so rudely reminded of how insufferable he could be. "Yes. Right. Banquets, bedchambers. Come on, let's get you into something a little less revealing."

Sylvain chuckled, deliberately rubbing against me with his shoulder as he swept past. "I'm perfectly comfortable like this, and I assure you I'll dress much more modestly out in your academy. But if you insist."

He headed straight for my dresser unprompted, sheets dragging on the ground, covering his front — but not his back. The bastard was doing it on purpose. Gods. The shoulders and the back muscles were eye candy enough, but that ass, those thighs? Even just walking the muscles in them rippled powerfully. How much more would they bulge if he was in the middle of —

"Locke?" he said, batting his lashes at me over his shoulder. "The clothing. You wanted me to cover myself?"

I clenched my teeth, my fists, embarrassed to be caught staring. I made a beeline for the dresser, averting my eyes and rifling through the drawers, when something clattered and puffed from the breakfast table behind us.

We turned as one to find the tiny pot-bellied man with a hooked nose and metallic skin struggling with a plate of pastries. He huffed and grunted before he noticed us staring. He stared back.

"Oh. Uh. Hello. Usually you're in the shower when I show up with the goods. I. Uh. Didn't think you'd have company."

I held my hands up, shaking them wildly. "No, no. It's not what you think!"

The imp mirrored me, holding his hands up as well. "Hey, it's none of my business. Good for you, kid. You deserve a little action now and then."

"It's nothing like that at all," I stammered, painfully aware of the smugness painted all over Sylvain's face. I glared at him, eyes flitting meaningfully toward the imp. "Why won't you say something?"

Sylvain shrugged, then draped one muscular arm across my shoulders. "Say what? That we had a wonderful first night at the Wispwood, that you woke up in my arms?"

My skin could have burst into flames. The imp whistled, grinned, and gave me the thumbs up before vanishing in a puff of smoke.

The voice from the menu — the same imp — hooted. He'd forgotten to shut off the link. "Hey,

boys, my kid got himself a piece of ass last night. Finally!’

A kitchen full of imps gave up a ragged cheer. Even the Wispwood’s invisible service staff had been desperately rooting for me to get laid. They probably had a betting circle, too.

“What a charming creature,” Sylvain said, showing me his bare ass yet again as he selected one of the pastries for himself. “Not unlike our pixies in the Verdance, I imagine. Wonderful, isn’t it? All our differences. All our similarities.”

He locked eyes with me as he took his first bite, the crust of the pastry flaking seductively between his teeth, a spot of chocolate staining the corner of his lips. He sent his tongue out to collect it, licking before he gave me another smile.

“Enough of this already,” I grumbled, turning back to the dresser, praying with all my might that I wouldn’t spring a boner myself. I’d been embarrassed enough for one morning.

I pulled out the only thing that would possibly fit him and disguise his ears all at once: a sleeveless hoodie. A soft, comfortable jersey knit, the color of stone, with the school’s crest on its chest.

Dr. Fang was right. Sylvain was a big boy — a very big boy indeed, and he could dress himself just fine. But we had to look out for the glamor-glow candles, at least on campus. Sylvain was already perfectly capable of causing a commotion without showing off his ears.

“Here,” I said, holding out the hoodie, carefully ignoring everything below his face, which was difficult enough to look into on its own.

Like staring into the sun, too lovely for words. Did he use glamor to enhance his features, too? Couldn’t be possible, considering how the points of his ears had reappeared as soon as we walked past the candle in Dr. Fang’s office. Any other glamor he’d cast across his body should have faded as well, unless fae royalty had some extra special talent for illusion I didn’t know about.

Sylvain crammed the rest of the pastry into his mouth, chewing aggressively. He took the hoodie between his thumb and forefinger, grimacing, dangling the thing at arm’s length like it was a dead rat.

“It’s hideous.”

“How could you possibly know that? You haven’t even tried it on yet.”

Sylvain turned his nose up. “I don’t need to put a bit of rotting meat in my mouth in order to tell you that it’s rancid.”

“You are so dramatic, Sylvain, gods above and below. Just try it on. Please. You’ll only need to wear it for a short while. Just until we make it out of the Wispwood.”

He rolled his eyes and sighed, dropping the sheets at the same moment that he gestured toward a corner of the room. I kept my sights locked firmly on his face, never straying, even when the plants strewn around my bedroom rustled and contributed their quota of leaves to — a new pair of leafy britches for the prince, maybe? Like I said, I wasn’t looking.

“Because none of your trousers will fit me,” he explained, pulling on the hooded vest.

“I didn’t ask. I get it. You’re so muscular, and I’m so tiny.”

Sylvain blinked once, the mockery and mirth in his eyes gone missing, for once. “I never said you were tiny.” He shrugged the hoodie into place, adjusting the fabric over his chest, stretched taut by his muscle. “I think you’re quite pleasant to look at.”

Gods above and below. Acidic one minute, and charming the next. I reached over his shoulders, grabbing the hood of the vest, deliriously conscious of how close our faces were. I pulled it over his head and stepped back. Sylvain frowned.

“I must look ridiculous.” He scratched his chest through the vest, reached over his shoulder, scratched again. “And this material, it itches. I don’t like it. Not one bit.”

“You look fine.”

And I meant it, too. The hood kept his ears hidden, but it also emphasized his features, the absence of sleeves drawing plenty of attention to his arms and his shoulders. Yes. The better to distract everybody who’d seen our little scrap with Evander, to remind them that this man was indeed an alraune, and nothing more.

I tried a kind smile this time instead of sarcasm, or frustration. “In fact, I think you’re quite pleasant to look at.”

Sylvain chewed on his lower lip, recognizing the echo, biting back his smile. I thought I saw the faint beginnings of a blush, but it might have just been the morning light. Maybe the two of us would make it out of Euclidea’s test alive, after all.

“If you say so,” he mumbled, uncharacteristically bashful as he stole glances at his reflection in the mirror.

“Let’s finish breakfast before it gets cold.”

I ushered him back to the table, eagerly reaching for my coffee. After that, a quick check of my supplies, and it was off on our quest.

Time to find the Blood of the Earth.



“NOW REMEMBER,” BRUNA SAID. “THESE ARE FOR HEALING.”

She swished the little phial around. The liquid sloshed against the side of the glass, red like blood, churning in its own whirlpool. She shook a second bottle in my face. This one was filled with a bluish potion, the liquid emitting a pale glow.

“And these are for restoring arcane essence.”

I rolled my eyes. “Thanks, Mom. Geez, Bruna. I know this is your specialty, but I have seen potions before. Even drank some of them. That you made yourself.”

She pushed the phials into my hands, gesturing toward my brown leather backpack. “Just making sure you remember. Put them away somewhere safe. And visible. I’ve been doing this forever and I still mix potions up sometimes.”

“Don’t worry about that. I’ve got a system for these things. I gotta drink the red stuff if red stuff is coming out of me. See? Very sensible.”

Bruna quirked an eyebrow. “And about the blue stuff?”

I puffed my cheeks up indignantly. “The blue stuff is the stuff that isn’t the red stuff. And that’s the stuff I use for replenishing magic.”

“Smart-ass.” She rolled her eyes, then flicked me on the end of my nose. I yelped, grabbing it to rub away the pain.

That was a small part of the challenge as well, the preparation aspect. A little help here and there wasn’t discouraged. In fact, the Wispwood espoused the importance of community, how a tree is just a tree without a forest. A couple of potions to help stay alive wouldn’t be frowned on.

How much preparation was up to the student, of course. Any rich kid could blast their way to victory loaded with a fortune’s worth of magic scrolls purchased from the Black Market. But nowhere was it truer that a cheater was only cheating themselves.

It was part of why I’d taken forever to acquire my Crest. I could stock up on some of Bruna’s rarer potions, like the one that granted super strength, punch my way through my exams. I would get my Summoner’s Crest, sure. Easily. But would I have deserved it?

And speaking of trees and forests, as a summoner, community was the most important thing of all. What was I without my eidolons? Just some loser with an old book and a very sad bank account, that’s what.

“Just be sure to make us proud, okay?” Bruna got up from her side of the desk and walked around

to give me a huge hug. “Oh, what am I saying? We’re so proud of you already.”

Her ample bosom blotted out the sunlight streaming into her office as she pressed closer. Exaggerating, of course, but it was very hard to overlook considering the cut of the dress she’d selected for the day. Most of her dresses, actually. Okay, all her dresses.

I genuinely admired how Bruna lived her life. Maybe I was a little envious, too, how she had such a positive sense of self, how she felt so comfortable in her own skin. I thought I looked decent with my shirt off — all those calisthenics the Wispwood put in their curriculum actually helped, worming their way into my routine. But I still didn’t love the idea of walking around shirtless, not in front of, I don’t know, Evander? And definitely not in front of Sylvain.

Anyway, Bruna gave pretty nice hugs, too, her skin and hair always smelling so pleasant. A mix of flowers and herbs, maybe. It happened naturally when you were an alchemist, and a professor of potions, no less, working in your own combination office, laboratory, and indoor garden.

The garden third of Bruna’s office was where Sylvain had parked himself. He poked at Bruna’s assortment of rare potted plants, sniffing at this flower, cooing softly at the next, like he was whispering to it, telling it strange secrets. Kind of cute, actually.

Bruna glanced over at him, waggling one eyebrow at me. “So, I trust you guys are getting along a little better?” She waggled both eyebrows, eyes wide. “And I see he’s wearing some of your clothes. Has to be one of yours. He is stretching that hoodie out. Gods, is he stretching it out.”

I shoved her lightly in the shoulder. “Knock it off. Don’t tease me. It’s the only thing that’ll keep his ears hidden while we make our way over to the portals.”

She ushered me from my chair, the plushness of it and the warmth of her office the very opposite of Dr. Fang’s rigid seats and creeping cold.

“Right. The portals. Okay, you best get going then. The sooner you boys go and get that Blood of the Earth, the sooner you can come home and celebrate with us.”

She swept aside a lock of my hair, smiling. I tried not to look so pleased. Bruna was one of my best buddies, but she was also like a sister to me. It was nice, as someone who grew up with no siblings and barely had any parents around.

Bruna had always looked out for me with even the littlest things, cheering me up when Evander Skink’s razor tongue got me down. Sometimes that involved more serious favors, like providing me with the potions. Those things didn’t come cheap, either. It was the nature of the business.

Expensive ingredients resulted in more potent potions and concoctions. A talented alchemist could stand to make a load of money across their career, and yet here Bruna was focusing her time on helping others, whether it was me, or Namirah, or her students. I’d always known she’d become a great teacher, exactly the way that she was a great big sister to me.

Namirah wasn’t always as good at expressing her feelings in that sense, but I saw her as a sister as well. And the ways she helped me were often more physical — tough love, you might say. Sparring sessions, or quick lessons in defending myself.

Hey, I wasn’t completely helpless without eidolons, all right? I didn’t spontaneously develop reflexes during my duel with Skink. Though to be fair, Namirah had never taught me how to protect an annoying rival summoner from being chopped in half using a book.

“Have you seen Namirah around?” I asked. “I would have liked to say goodbye before we left.”

Bruna gave me a flat, knowing smile and shook her head.

“She’s probably prowling around the castle, as usual. You know how she is. Don’t worry, I’m sure she wishes you well, and I know she’ll be very happy to see you just as soon as you get back.” She clapped me on the shoulder and squeezed tight. “Now, get going. The day’s not getting any

younger.”

Bruna herded us out of her office, somehow even more excited than I was about the prospect of attaining my Summoner’s Crest. Out in the corridors, Sylvain attracted just as much attention as I expected him to, raising more than a few eyebrows with his combination of a too-tight Wispwood hoodie and his leafy green pants.

His outfit from the day before had sort of matched, at least. It was the scandalous hooded vest. I was sure of it. Maybe once we’d retrieved the Blood of the Earth and got safely home, I could convince him to wear something to match. Sweatpants. Yes. Those gray ones that tended to emphasize a man’s ass — uh, assets — and left nothing to the imagination.

He walked ahead of me, like he even knew where we were heading. It didn’t really bother me much that my own eidolon thought he was the boss — something that Father and even Dr. Fang might have something to say about — but lingering behind Sylvain in particular wasn’t a bad deal at all. I snuck a glance at his butt.

“A fine collection,” he said, just as I was trying to identify the curve of his ass behind the layers of leaves.

“Hmm?” I said, playing innocent.

“Your friend, Brunas? She has an excellent assortment of flora. Though I would have liked to see a rafflesia myself.”

“A rafflesia?” I cocked my eyebrow. “Seriously? Those are very rare, Sylvain. And besides, you would know if there was a rafflesia in her office from the smell alone. The whole floor would know, probably.”

The rafflesia was the biggest flower on the planet, up to three feet from petal to petal, found only in the rainforests of a single island in Southeast Asia. The flower itself was lovely, a rich red with whitish spots. But its smell? Truly putrid, like dead, rotting flesh. Or so I’d read. Part of our education at the Wispwood, really, a basic knowledge of Earth-based plants, the mythical ones included.

“Some people incorrectly call it a corpse flower, but that’s a different plant entirely,” I continued, more than happy for the opportunity to show off. “And it’s native to the island of Borneo. You know, out on Earth. This planet. This world.”

I crossed my arms, glanced at him sidelong.

“You know, Sylvain, from all our conversations, it never sounded like you knew very much about Earth. But now I’m learning that you can speak a bit of French, that you know about our flowers. That’s a little suspicious, if you ask me — especially for someone who speaks so highly of the Verdance.”

His eyes darkened, the gears in his head turning as he reached for a response.

“First of all, I am a fae of the Summer Court.”

“A prince,” I said. “So you keep saying. Please keep that part down,” I added in a lowered voice.

He kept on rambling, indignant. “It’s only natural that I would know about all sorts of flora and fauna. Some of them find their way into our world. Some of them originated from our world. And besides, who said that humans had a monopoly over words? The fae speak all sorts of tongues. There are fae everywhere in your world, all throughout history. Have you perhaps considered that we have communicated and commingled the way you have? Made one or two trades, exchanged coins, shared our cultures, even languages?”

“Huh,” I said, staring off. “I guess I never thought of it that way.”

“Clearly, you never have.” He huffed triumphantly and kept on walking.

I shook my head, already growing accustomed to Sylvain's mood swings. Gods above and below. When I decided to go down the path of a summoner, I never once thought that having an eidolon tag along with me twenty-four seven would be part of the bargain.

See, most eidolons didn't actually live with their summoners, or even accompany them. It was built into the name of our profession, wasn't it? We summoned monsters and creatures of myth as we needed them for various purposes, whether that was battle or for achieving greater feats of magic.

My doves, for example, came from around the world, answering when I called, appearing through little portals that my magic opened for them. The same applied to Evander's butterflies. Rumor had it that Evander's family owned a butterfly farm, something that he had never made any attempt to correct. But that was hardly the most irritating thing about him, anyway.

And so the same worked with other summoners, whether they were calling on a phoenix, a golem, or an entire school of merfolk. We used arcane essence to erect these portals for them: a command, a plea for help, or an invitation, depending on the summoner.

Eidolons would, of course, have the choice of whether or not to answer. In a pact of absolute mutual trust, the process might be near-instantaneous. But whatever thing a summoner attempted to conjure still had the choice to finish up on the toilet, or to scarf down their last few bites of breakfast before they stepped through a portal to answer the summons.

Yet here was Sylvain, not only strutting around the Wispwood, but taking up space in my quarters, taking showers, eating meals. I adjusted the straps on my backpack, testing its weight to make sure my grimoire was still in there. None of those pages and none of the other tomes I'd ever read had told me that forging a bond with an eidolon was the equivalent of getting myself a new roommate. A really hot, but honestly kind of annoying roommate.

"Up these stairs," I told Sylvain, gesturing toward the spiral staircase that led up into darkness. He shrugged and led the way again, the main character of his own story.

"Quite dim in here," he said, glancing past the landing behind us, trying to angle for a glimpse of the lower levels. "Quite unlike the rest of the courtyard and the castle. Does the light of the Wispwell not reach here? The wisps themselves?"

"No," I said. "But it won't be dark for long. Some places in the Wispwood, you might need a lantern or some magical light to make it through. But not this place. There's nothing to worry about."

He puffed his chest out. "I'm not worried at all."

Yet he lingered on the stair, stretching his neck as he looked over my shoulder, still searching hopefully. For what? Yet another view of the Wispwell?

"Do you think that if we placed a measure of the Wispwell's water in a phial that it would glow, provide its light? I would like to see if that would work."

I looked behind me precisely as one of the motes from the Wispwell floated up past my face, a ghostly little speck. Why was Sylvain so focused on the Wispwell? He'd even asked about drinking the stuff on that first day, even if he wasn't thirsty.

The Wispwood was beautiful, sure. Maybe that was it, something I took for granted, a sight he secretly admired when he wasn't bragging about his beloved Verdance. But you see something daily and it starts to blend into your everyday, just part of the background.

I turned back to him, nudging him up the stairs. "Maybe we can try and test its luminescent properties once we come back. Or Bruna might know and we won't even have to."

"Come back from where?" he asked, distracted, hesitantly ascending by a single step. Wow. Progress.

"The Blood of the Earth," I said, nudging him more.

Sylvain stopped on the stairs again so abruptly that I bumped into his back. His very muscular back.

“But the exit is down there,” he said, pointing. “Or there?” He pointed at a different side of the courtyard. “Hmm. I can’t remember where we came in. But surely it isn’t up these steps.”

“You’ll find out when we get there. Come on. Get moving.”

The spiral staircase grew brighter as we ascended, the blank stone walls eventually featuring windows as we went round and round. Light streamed in through the glass, filtered at first, as if seen from beneath a forest canopy, then brighter, like we were climbing toward the sun itself.

According to the headmasters of the Wispwood, this was one of the areas of the castle that had been preserved from before it was even known as the Wispwood. The sprawling campus, both a castle and a fortress, had once belonged to a powerful ancient mage lord, one who attempted to bend nature to his will. And as the present state of the Wispwood would indicate, nature positively refused to bend.

Sylvain jerked in surprise as we reached the top landing, possibly from the sight of three human portraits staring him dead in the face. Maybe I should have warned him. Well, two human faces, and something else.

There were sets of these paintings stationed around the school, one portrait never found without the other two, like a triptych. Each featured the face of one of the Wispwood’s three headmasters, a constant reminder of the forces governing and guiding the academy.

Campus gossip suggested that the portraits were actually remote scrying mirrors that allowed the headmasters to peer out of them at will. Telepathically-controlled security cameras, in a way, giving the three complete coverage of the academy grounds.

“I don’t know these faces,” Sylvain said, looking to me for an explanation.

“That’s Headmaster Cornelius,” I said, pointing at the first portrait of a smiling older gentleman.

His white beard like a wisp of cloud, the half-moon glasses, the floppy, weathered conical hat, Cornelius was very much a wizard in the classic sense. Cornelius Butterworth was an old man indeed, but wise, and a wisecracker, a ridiculous man with a ridiculous name. Always a twinkle in his eye, even in his portraits, the closest to warmth we’d ever find among the three headmasters.

“And that’s Headmaster Belladonna Praxis.”

A stern woman stared out of the second portrait, her gray hair styled into an intricate bouffant. With her reedy neck and the sharp, angular collar of her dress, Headmaster Belladonna resembled a silver rose, beautiful and prickly. While Cornelius Butterworth evoked warmth from his name alone, Headmaster Belladonna was cold as ice.

But none could be colder — almost literally — than Headmaster Shivers. In the third portrait was a figure in a cowed robe, the gap where the face should be filled with darkness and mist. Peeking out of the sleeves were embroidered gloves, and past the bottom hem of the robes, a pair of silken boots.

“Oh, I don’t know about that one,” Sylvain said, shuddering. “Gives me the chills.”

Possibly the most appropriate reaction to Headmaster Shivers, really. It was so rare to encounter them out in the halls, practically gliding more than walking, a cloud of mist given vaguely human form. The air seemed colder when they were around. Headmaster Shivers hardly spoke, but when they did it sounded like a whisper from another room, a cold draft blowing in through a crack in a window.

“Not much I can tell you about Headmaster Shivers, I’m afraid.” And I was afraid, really, even just from looking at the headmaster’s portrait. Where were the eyes? If the rumor about the portraits was true, how were we being watched?

“Come on,” I said, trying not to shudder as I pulled my eyes away from the final portrait. “We’re almost there.”

We continued down the corridor, the walls at last opening up into a grand room. The statuettes of mythical creatures and the stone reliefs seemed too ornate to have been carved by human hand. On each of the room’s four walls were enormous stained glass windows. Sunlight poured in, scattering colorful patterns and images across the floor.

Sylvain gasped at the sight, gravitating toward the center of the room as if magnetically drawn. He turned in a circle, gaping at each of the four windows.

“And this is how we’ll get there,” I told him, smiling, somehow prouder than ever to be a student of the Wispwood. “Welcome to the Spire of Radiance.”



SYLVAIN SCRATCHED THE BACK OF HIS HEAD, GLANCING AT THE PASSAGE BACK TO THE STAIRCASE, UP AT the windows, and back again. Confusion looked good on him, too. He wore every expression well, in fact. Infuriating. Still, standing beneath the many scattered colors of glass, painted by sunlight, anyone who stepped into the Spire of Radiance became a wondrous sight, their skin transformed into a brilliant mosaic.

“But we didn’t even walk very far,” he said, lips loose as he stared up at the high ceiling, at all the colored glass.

“We didn’t. You’re right.”

“Then how is it so bright here?” He brought his hand up, shielding his eyes. “As if we’re so high up. As if your sun is right outside, shining through the glass. But how?”

If only I could give him a straight answer. Physics and reality didn’t really behave as they should at the Wispwood, which wasn’t all that unusual for magical places. So I shrugged, and gave him the most honest response I could.

“Magic.”

Sylvain frowned. “You must know how unsatisfying an answer that is.”

“I don’t know what to tell you. You want the long answer? Fine. Those who built this place made it so that different parts of the world would overlap, here, right where we’re standing. There are ways to magically travel spread all throughout the castle, these windows among them. Oriels, they’re called. Very convenient, and considerate, since our students come from all over the world.”

That was the gist of it. We could travel to most corners of the globe from within the Wispwood itself, whether it was through a portal guarded by sentinel trees, or by other means. Maybe it was a painting that led into the forgotten storage room of a museum in Italy, a slab of stone that offered passage to an underground burial cavern in the Philippines.

“And these,” I said, pointing at each of the four main windows, “are the oriels. Portals to the four elemental challenge grounds. Luminal space, it’s called, where the magic makes the light bend, merging all those layers through these windows. It makes the impossible happen.”

He nodded along, lips pursed and eyes narrowed, deep in thought, processing.

“You didn’t understand a word of what I said, did you?”

Sylvain pushed his chest out, picking between defiance and being proud to be a dum-dum. I could see the coin toss in his head. Dum-dum it was, then.

“You’re obviously used to traveling by magical means, Sylvain. How did you get here from the Verdance?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” He cocked an eyebrow, smirking. “So, I imagine we’re taking this oriel thing to our destination, wherever that may be.”

“I told you. One of the challenge grounds. This one is the Oriel of Earth. It’s where we’ll get the stone Dr. Fang requested for her test.”

Sylvain placed his hands on his hips, admiring the stained glass and its many panels, like a fancy bay window. This oriel featured an ornate depiction of an oak tree. Sunlight streamed through the gaps in its branches, its leaves so lush I could hear them rustling in the wind. If you looked closely, you might find the gnarled face on the great oak’s trunk.

The old mage lords who built the castle discovered pockets of luminal space that intersected with our own, places that offered frighteningly high concentrations of the four elements. These windows had been magicked to link to those very places, enchantment breathed and blown into the glass, stirred into the pigment.

Convenient for the sake of harvesting strange and unusual reagents, of course, the Blood of the Earth among them. And with the castle under the governance of the three headmasters, these four oriels and their corresponding dimensions found plenty of use for academy exams and trials. What better way to learn about a sylph or a dryad than to see one up close for yourself?

But that didn’t mean they were very safe. Every so often Headmaster Shivers would drift into one of the oriels to personally scrape up someone’s remains. Sometimes it was a staffer, and sometimes it was a hapless student who’d grown too big for their britches.

I clenched my fists, tugging on my own britches, or pants. Whatever. We were going to be fine. I had a powerful, if alleged fae prince at my side. A quick in and out job, no sweat.

“So how do we get in?” Sylvain asked, scratching the end of his nose. “Do we jump? This is all very silly, isn’t it?”

“You and your big mouth. Yes. That’s exactly what we’re doing. You act like you’ve never traveled through a mirror or a painting before. It’s the same principle.”

“I haven’t,” he said, nervously, at first, before he broke into one of his standard glowers. “That is so oddly specific, too. Why would I travel through a — ”

“Because of your precious, perfect Verdance,” I snapped. “You’re always going on about how much better it is. Shocks me why you’d bother coming here at all. And how did you even get here in the first place, anyway?”

He crossed his arms and stamped his foot, a big, pouting boy. “Well, I was teasing at first, but now I really won’t tell you.”

I groaned, yet again questioning the worth of sealing a pact with this moody man-baby. How old was he, anyway? Were all fae this flighty regardless of age? The lore certainly checked out.

“Enough, already. Let’s just get this over with.”

I reached for his wrist. He sputtered and resisted, exactly like a stubborn child. But I laced my fingers through his, the roughness of his palm against mine, and he relented. It could have been a stray shaft of light from the stained glass of the Oriel of Fire, but his cheeks and the skin around his chest seemed redder.

Was he blushing? Oh, whatever. I squeezed his hand. His muscles stiffened. He swallowed, eyes flitting around the room, avoiding my gaze.

“We’re heading in,” I said.

“Right,” he replied, softer than before.

“Here we go.” I tugged on his hand. He stumbled, still hesitant. “Sylvain? We have to go now.”

“Where?”

“Gods above and below — into the oriel, Sylvain. Follow my lead.”

“I don’t see how this is going to work. What if we shatter the glass and bits of it get into my — oh, oh no.”

He ran alongside me despite his rambling, the two of us building momentum across the floor of the Spire of Radiance. Our footfalls rang in my ears, layered with Sylvain’s panicked muttering, which soon turned into a shout. Wow. He really was terrified of getting a face full of broken glass.

My feet left the ground. So did his. I stole a peek at his face as we leapt toward the window, the light on his skin shifting green and gold and brown. His eyes were shut, his teeth clenched, but he still made the jump, still held my hand.

Our bodies struck the Oriel of Earth, but it didn’t break, no smashing of glass. Reality parted for us, the membrane between worlds warm, soft, like clay in the sun, like earth. Sylvain opened his eyes, gasping as the Wispwood and the chamber fell away behind us in fragments of stone and glass, jewels tumbling through the air.

I held my breath. He was radiant.

My feet touched solid ground, the crunch of grass, twigs. We’d arrived. Excellent. Sylvain blinked hard, letting my hand go. With both hands he threw off the hood of his vest and stared around us, mouth open, eyes blazing gold in the sunlight. I smirked at him and folded my arms.

“So. Better than the Verdance this time?”

“Hush,” he said, nudging me with his hand. “Nothing’s better than the Verdance. But this — this is beautiful.”

Different corners of the world converged in this strange and wondrous place. Plants found their way into the dimension and simply decided to set down roots — climate, soil, humidity be damned. A coconut tree grew next to a pine, their fronds and needles swaying in the same breeze, coconuts and pine cones littering the forest floor beneath them.

They owed their survival to the dimension’s high concentration of elemental earth, the ground beneath us rich in nutrients. A student could observe many of the world’s fruit and flowers on a casual jaunt around the Oriel of Earth, provided they didn’t get eviscerated by the locals first. If we were lucky, or unlucky, depending on how he’d react to the smell, maybe we would even find a rafflesia for Sylvain to sniff.

But with the flora, of course, came the fauna.

“Hold on,” Sylvain muttered, his ears pricking. “Do you hear that?”

I scanned the greenery surrounding us. Birds, somewhere far, and a soft breeze. But yes — there it was. More footsteps trudging over the forest floor. They weren’t trying to be subtle, either. I didn’t like the implications. That normally meant the approach of something that didn’t need stealth or sneaking to gain the upper hand.

“On your guard, Sylvain,” I said, a hand on his shoulder. “Something dangerous is coming.”

“A brilliant deduction, oh wise student of the Wispwood.”

“Hey. I’m only trying to be helpful.”

He pulled the hooded vest off his body in a single motion. Smooth, like he’d taken his clothes off in a hurry hundreds of times before. My cock twitched. Why was that so fucking sexy? He shoved it in my hand without even giving me a second look. Still warm from clinging so tightly to his body.

A little sweaty, too.

I fought the impulse to stick the bunched-up jersey in my face and take a deep, long sniff. My hand

shook as I stuffed it into my leather backpack instead, an extremely inappropriate part of my brain explaining to me that we were only saving it for later. I reached for the Wilde grimoire and bit on my lower lip, praying for the sudden sharp pain to distract me from inconvenient horniness.

Success. I balanced the tome in my hand, prepared to charge it with power or summon a flock of something nasty to really fuck our enemies up. Okay, a flock of doves. Sylvain swept his hand to the side, leaves emanating from the forest, gathering on his torso, arranging themselves into a breastplate of scale armor. Damn. That would always look impressive to me, no matter how many times I saw it. It would always look pretty sexy, too.

Fuck. I needed to focus. Get it together.

The foliage ahead of us rustled, branches snapping. The things were fast approaching, footsteps almost thundering now. Was it a pair of something humanoid? No, too many legs. A whole squad of them, then. A tree collapsed. Both Sylvain and I backed up, exchanging alarmed glances. This was bad. More leaves streamed toward his hand, melding into the shape of a sword. He brandished his blade. Another tree fell, the ground reverberating.

“I think you’re going to want a bigger sword,” I said.

Sylvain opened his mouth to snipe back, then stopped when the source of our apprehension stepped out of the woods. Ah. Of course. Because something humanoid would have been too easy. It wasn’t a whole swarm of them, either.

It was a colossal plant, its enormous maw lined with jagged spines. Sharp as teeth, and each one as long and thick as Sylvain’s sword. Wriggling under its heaving bulk were its many legs, oversized tendrils that afforded the monster freedom of movement. Over a dozen thick, heavy vines slammed into the ground in succession as it dragged itself across the grass.

Definitely not a rafflesia.

Sylvain’s sword hand fell to his side. He looked at me in disbelief. “This has to be some kind of awful joke.”

I blinked. “Can you control it?”

He whipped his finger toward the monstrosity and frowned. “That thing has a mind of its own. I can manipulate leaves and petals, not an entire organism. What makes you think I could possibly — ”

The creature opened its tremendous mouth and roared.

Venus flytraps were native to the Carolinas, accustomed to the swamps where they could thrive on a diet of delicious bugs. As for this big boy? A specimen must have ended up in the Oriel of Earth somehow, its growth supercharged by the otherworldly fertility of the dimension’s dirt.

Had it developed an appetite for larger, meatier things instead of insects? Possibly. Birds, rabbits, whatever an overgrown carnivorous plant would enjoy munching on. Were we next on the menu?

Oh, yes. Most definitely.

“Run!” I shouted, turning tail and fleeing for my life.

“What? Locke. Lochlann! You coward. Get back here right this — ”

The fee-fi-fo-flytrap came thundering forward. I didn’t bother checking over my shoulder to look, knowing it was closing in on us. Slower than I’d expected, honestly, those cumbersome legs making it more ungainly than mobile. That was a good thing. The more distance between me and its teeth, the better.

Sylvain raced to catch up with me, huffing and puffing as he threw me one of his lovely scowls.

“Why are you running?”

I kept my eyes ahead. “Why are you? I’m not getting eaten before I even get my Crest.”

“These are supposed to be challenge grounds, Locke. Face the challenge. Stand your ground.”

“What the hell do you expect me to do? Throw my book at it?”

“Try something,” he said, kicking up leaves and dirt as he skidded to a halt. “Anything. Fight with me. This is your quest. Our quest. Is this what your father would want?”

My pace faltered. I stopped running as a spark of anger kindled within me.

“Not that it’s any of your business, but this has nothing to do with my father. I’d rather conserve my energy, find the Blood of the Earth, save my essence for what confronts us then. But you want a fight? Let’s do it, oh great and powerful Prince Sylvain.”

He said nothing, but I could taste his anger in the air. Maybe he was from a different world, but he could still sense mockery when he heard it. Good.

The giant flytrap lumbered closer and closer. At least I knew this thing was still confined within the Oriel of Earth. That was part of the danger of the four challenge grounds. Sometimes a creature from within an elemental window would find its way to one of the realities that intersected with the dimension, slipping past the borders, through the cracks.

One of Earth’s many magical organizations would then swoop in to neutralize the threat and wipe the minds of anyone who’d witnessed its existence. The luckier creatures were absorbed into the arcane underground, at times even set loose in environments appropriate for their species. The dangerous ones were terminated on sight.

This monster fell under the second category.



I WISHED I KNEW WHAT I WANTED TO PROVE, WHETHER TO MYSELF, OR SYLVAIN, OR THE SPECTER OF my missing father. The practical thing to do was to save my arcane essence for the rest of the journey. We had the potions, but we still needed to ration them.

How was I supposed to predict what else we would face in the Oriel of Earth? Not even two minutes into arriving and this potted plant from hell had already showed up.

I splayed out my fingers, allowing the grimoire to lay flat in my hand. Its pages fluttered as I drew power from its depths and called in my best and only real option for projectile weapons. Multiple tiny portals blinked into existence around me, heralding the arrival of my doves.

My little birds zipped forth bravely. The grimoire turned pages on its own, landing on a quick spell. Yes. Perfect. I could enhance the doves with magic. Okay, so maybe I did learn one or two things in that duel with Evander, a quick refresher. I made a mental note to actually try and memorize the spell going forward.

Enhancing eidolons was supposed to be second nature to summoners, and it was supposed to do more than just getting my doves to help me hover across ravines. This could be worth it. I sent out threads of my arcane essence, clothing each dove in a field of shimmering force. They glowed silvery-gold as they hurtled toward the monster.

With their magical armor, with augmented beaks and claws — and maybe a little luck — my doves were equipped to do some serious damage. The Venus flytrap tilted its head at the flock's approach, feathers and beaks and bodies gleaming in the sunlight.

Any closer and they would punch through the flytrap's body, drill it full of holes. I gripped the grimoire tight, licked my lips, waited for the doves to strike.

The flytrap moved far quicker than its massive bulk should allow. It parted its jaws and snapped them shut around the cloud of doves as soon as they came within range. And then: total silence.

I blanched, the sweat on my skin turned to ice. Gods, at least I'd bothered encasing the doves in magic. I clenched my fist, dismissing the conjuring and sending them all back to their homes, safe and sound.

"Well, fuck," I muttered. "That was close. Did you see? That thing just ate them all in one go."

Sylvain shook his sword in the air, literally rattling his saber. "This wouldn't have happened if you could summon a flock of dragons instead."

Oh, right. There was my other weapon, standing right next to me. Too bad he was being so

annoying about everything. The germ of an idea formed in my head. I jabbed my finger toward him, never touching.

“Hey, man. These are all the eidolons I’ve got, plus a senior wolf and a grubby cat from Brooklyn. And then there’s you. So maybe you should have done something about it yourself — eidolon.”

Sylvain drew his lips back, golden eyes boring into mine. Without breaking his gaze he threw his arm to the side and wrenched his fingers into a fist. The wind howled as leaves erupted in enormous torrents from the forests around us.

I held my breath, utterly refusing to show Sylvain even the littlest trace of awe. Very difficult to do in the face of this stupendous display of fae magic, a veritable whirlwind of green spiraling around him.

Sylvain thrust his sword forward, pointing its tip at the Venus flytrap, a general commanding his troops. The leaves whistled through the air, every blade rendered as sharp as a razor by his magic.

This time the flytrap only stared at us dead-on with its goofy, eyeless head. It didn’t open its mouth, either. Picky eater. Guess it didn’t like salad. It trundled forward, unperturbed by the storm of leaves.

Even from afar I could hear the unmistakable sound of little blades cutting and hacking into the horrible creature’s hide. But it was too strong to penetrate, too leathery, like thick, rubbery armor.

Sylvain cursed, dropping both his hands. And I clapped mine slowly, making my applause as sarcastic as humanly possible.

“Great job. So impressive. And this whole time we could have been running, but no. Instead we’re standing here with our energies expended, like sitting ducks. And Huge Hungry Henry over here is clearly in the mood for duck meat.”

“It was worth a try,” Sylvain snarled. “At least we made an effort. At least it’s better than you bolting at the first sign of danger, like a coward.”

The flytrap snapped at the air with its enormous teeth. I backed away a couple of steps, trying to match its pace. The thing wasn’t a fast mover, sure — but what if it was building up for a sudden lunge? And then what would we be? Lunch. That’s what.

I had to act quick. I rounded on Sylvain again.

“I pick my battles, unlike you: a big, boisterous idiot who rushes into fights headlong. Remember, you would have killed Evander if I hadn’t stepped in and saved him with my book. And then where would you be? Cast out of the Wispwood, if not slain by the headmasters outright.”

Sylvain threw his head back and scoffed. “Oh, I would love to see your precious headmasters try. They would have thrown you out first. What’s the word you use for it? Expelled? In fact, I’m surprised they’ve kept you around so long considering your utter inability to perform in absolutely any capacity. Was that really the best you could do?”

I gestured up and down his body. “And this was the best that you could do. You’re supposed to be my eidolon. What the hell was that? A puff of leaves?”

Too late I wondered if I could have empowered the leaves he’d sent out toward the flytrap. Whoops. But would it have made any difference? In truth, I wanted to see how Sylvain would function in a genuinely dangerous situation. Dr. Fang lesson one hundred and something or other: assessing your eidolon.

But Sylvain could be useful in other ways.

The flytrap was still approaching, its head cocked questioningly, like it was wondering why we weren’t desperately trying to escape like before. Poor Hungry Henry probably wasn’t accustomed to

his food standing around and yelling, arguing with their dicks in their hands.

“You’re the summoner,” Sylvain said. “I’m the eidolon. And so this is your fault.”

I scoped out the Venus flytrap. Only a few dozen feet away now, with Sylvain standing between us, his back toward it. Good enough. I could work this angle. I sucked in a huge breath of air, making myself bigger, gearing up for the final blow.

“This is hardly my fault.” I shoved Sylvain in the chest, and immediately told myself to stop thinking about his chest. “You’re clearly the weakest link here. Perhaps you should go crawling back to the Verdance where you belong, big fish in a small pond.”

It was a gamble, but it paid off. Sylvain’s anger got the best of him, as expected, his eyes glowing from rage, his muscles tightening, the vein in his forehead bulging.

“Little human. I’ve had just about enough of you ordering me around like I’m some common servant. I am a prince of the Summer Court. And you are nothing but a — ”

And just as expected, there came his hand again, except this time it wasn’t a jab from his finger. Sylvain shoved me back, the heel of his palm slamming against my shoulder. The Pact of the Unknown took over, a flash of white blazing between us as the magic repelled him.

Thunder cracked. Sylvain catapulted away, fired by an invisible slingshot. I muttered a soft apology, but it had to be done. He shouted as he flew through the air, his trajectory taking him straight toward the mouth of a very hungry carnivorous plant.

Sylvain’s instincts kicked in, the great warrior that he was. He twisted around to face his adversary, sword at the ready, still screaming, both in anger and terror.

I reached out with my hand, called from deep within my soul, and enrobed him in a shield of arcane essence. His skin sparkled with silvery-gold light as my magic took effect. My breath came ragged as I watched, waited for Sylvain to make contact. A human cannonball. Well, no. A fae one, rather.

The flytrap opened its mouth.

A grotesque squelching echoed throughout the woods. Sylvain tore through the back of the monster’s mouth in a single blow, his strength augmented by my magic.

The creature screamed, pale green slime oozing out of the new hole in its head. It wavered in the air, swaying from side to side, tendrils convulsing. At last it stopped its shrieking and collapsed to the ground. The earth shuddered from the weight of its corpse.

My heart raced. Surely something out there must have heard the flytrap’s dying screeches, if not felt the vibration of its fall. But more importantly, where was Sylvain?

A tree snapped. Then another. Uh-oh. Two were enough to slow down the speed of his flight. He smashed into a third one full bore, the tree ending his streak by staying firmly rooted in place. I winced when I heard another crack. A branch breaking overhead, or was that one of his bones?

Oh no. I murdered him. Oh no. Oh fuck, oh no. I sprinted toward the broken tree, making sure to circumvent the dead carnivorous plant-monster still flopped over on the ground. You never knew with these things.

Sylvain bellowed, clutching his shoulder. “Ow. Help.”

I rushed to his side, falling over myself.

“Not you,” he yelled. “Anyone else, help. Save me from this traitorous bastard.”

“Will you keep it down?” I hissed, trying to get him to settle. “You’ll alert something else to come and kill us. Something worse. We’re already spent.”

“Fuck,” Sylvain cried, his head thumping against the tree trunk, so hard that the branches shuddered.

I gulped, my mouth parched from the fight and the panic, but also out of the weird thrill of hearing him curse. Why did it sound twice as obscene? And somehow sexy? Gods, I needed to stop.

“Are you just going to stand there gaping, or are you going to fucking help me?”

“Oh. You’re right. Sorry. Right.”

I set my grimoire aside and shuffled closer. Putting a magic shield around him had been the right thing to do. A fae of his power and stature was supposed to be hardier, more resistant to damage than the average human. But he could have ended up in worse shape if I hadn’t armored him with my essence.

“Sorry, Sylvain,” I said, really meaning it this time.

He didn’t acknowledge the apology, only clenching his teeth as he held back tears of pain. “I didn’t think these challenge grounds were going to be so bad. Why didn’t you tell me?”

I huffed as I got on my knees and into position. Whoa. I really needed to get some more cardio in. “To be fair, this is supposed to be the safest of the four elemental oriels. Imagine — gods, I think I’m cramping — imagine how bad the Oriel of Fire would be.”

“I don’t want to,” he said. “I’m still imagining how wonderful it would feel to put my fist in your face. Now hand me one of those potions that Bruna gave you. The red one.”

“You knew? You were checking out her plants. I didn’t think you were paying attention.”

“I’m always paying attention. I’m serious, Locke, this really hurts. I demand that you unstopper one of those phials right now and pour it down my — ”

“Calm down.”

I placed my hand against his jaw, my fingers grazing his cheek. He blinked up at me, stunned into silence by the gesture, and by the stream of magic I was sending into his body.

A large part of being a summoner involved using magic to augment our eidolons, to strengthen or improve them in ways that only our special bonds would allow. It was how Evander and I could grant various enchantments to our respective winged minions of choice.

Regenerative magic fell under that umbrella as well, allowing summoners to sustain injured eidolons for longer periods of time, to keep them on the battlefield. Sylvain didn’t look like he was going anywhere, but I at least owed him the equivalent of a painkiller or two. He shut his eyes and leaned against the tree, a relieved sigh escaping through his lips.

“I can heal you a little, but I can’t heal myself. Not trying to be selfish, but I hope you don’t mind if I save the healing potion just in case. And I’m sorry I tricked you into getting angry with me again. All right?”

He rubbed the front of his arm, eyes still deliberately avoiding mine, lip turned up in a pout. “Just. Well. Some warning would be nice next time. All right?”

But then the pact wouldn’t have kicked in if I’d warned him. Would it? Hopefully there wouldn’t be a next time, and the two of us could start treating each other as allies, if not as friends. I clapped him on the shoulder.

“Promise.”

Maybe it was time we dealt with challenges the way summoners and eidolons were supposed to, with cooperation and trust. No more deception.

“And now that I feel better,” Sylvain said, leaving the end of the sentence hanging.

He sprang to his feet. I jerked away, already unsure I could take him in a fight. But the pact would protect me anyway, unless it had decided I’d been enough of a manipulative jerk and refused to continue repelling him with magic.

He stalked past me instead, sword in hand, eyes focused on dead old Hungry Henry. Teeth bared,

he plunged his blade into the limp plant over and over again, grunting with every strike.

“Sylvain. Stop. It’s already dead.”

And then the corpse moved.

Sylvain leapt away even as I came closer, ready to tug on his wrist and really, actually take off running this time. But the flytrap wasn’t really moving. It started from the edges, its tendrils and the tips of its spines going brown, wilting at an alarming pace, so much so that the dried-out bits of it crackled as they broke off.

Within seconds the entire thing had gone bone-dry, brittle to the touch.

“Whoa. Was that supposed to happen? Wait, Sylvain. Don’t — ”

He prodded the strange husk with the end of his sword. The remains of the flytrap crumbled, the sound like the hoarse rasp of a dying man. The dust blew away with the wind. I stared at the ground disbelieving. It was gone, all of it. Disintegrated. I pointed at nothing.

“Okay. What the fuck just happened here?”

“The Withering,” Sylvain muttered.

I opened my mouth to ask the first of a barrage of questions, but the breeze picked up again. This time it was warmer, pleasant, and with it came a sigh, a moan, a whisper on the wind. Laughter came from above us. Sylvain brandished his sword. Like a fool I brandished my book.

“And what have we here?” said a woman’s voice, up from the treetops. “A sapling, and a princeling. Most curious.”

There, among the leaves, the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen. She wasn’t sitting on the branches, but floating among them. The sunlight around her seemed to shimmer. My eyes might have been playing tricks on me, but I detected the faintest golden aurora surrounding her, the wavering of a mirage.

And her face — as clear as the sky, as lovely as a rainbow, as bright as the sun itself. The woman was radiant, like an angel. Or a goddess.

Uh-oh.



I SHIELDED MY EYES FROM THE SUN AS THE STRANGE WOMAN DESCENDED FROM THE TREETOPS. SHE tilted her head, studying me, then Sylvain, her hair billowing in the breeze. Her chin dug into her hand, her elbow resting on her knee, her legs crossed, like she was sitting on an invisible cloud.

The face of an angel, the mischievous smile of a demon, and the luster of a goddess.

My heart clenched.

“Gods above and below,” I muttered. Sylvain looked to me with recognition, hearing something I’d said a dozen times before. He understood, and so did I.

Entities walked the Earth the way that creatures of myth and legend did. The gods and goddesses of old, angels who dwelt above, and the demons who dwelt below. All were beings of unknowable power who lived in between realities, in the hidden corners where men never looked. A more ambitious or foolish kind of man could ask to contact one of these entities for favors, for power. But there was always a price.

Sometimes the entities reached out to humans themselves. And as someone with more than a passing knowledge of Greek mythology — basic course at the Wispwood, really, freshman stuff — I knew that the attention of the gods wasn’t always a good thing.

The woman crossed her legs in the opposite direction before she touched the ground, her bare feet padding gently on soft grass. Flowers sprouted where she stepped, the jewels and tiny bells dangling from her throat and barely covering her breasts tinkling as she moved. Every gust of the balmy breeze that tousled her hair smelled like flowers, like succulent fruit. It smelled like a favorite perfume, an orgasmic dish, the scent of a lover’s hair on a pillow.

She stepped around us in a slow circle, her hair so long and lush that it nearly touched the ground. Her hands stayed clasped coyly behind her back, as if to say that she meant us no harm. Sylvain looked on warily as she walked a path of petals around us. More and more flowers blossomed in her wake.

“If you’ve come for a fight,” Sylvain said, “then we’re more than ready.”

I wished I could have punched him right in the chest. That was a barefaced lie, the prince once again relying on bravado to deal with everything that came our way.

The woman covered her mouth, her laughter like wind chimes, like glass bells.

“Silly man. How do the humans like to phrase it again? Make love, not war? Oh, I know you fae are only newly returned to this reality. But surely you’re not already so hungry for blood so soon after

your fresh kill?"

I threw Sylvain a warning glare when she wasn't looking. "You'll forgive him," I said through gritted teeth. "I think he's only trying to say — respectfully — that we are not interested in conflict with your majestic person."

Sylvain puffed out his chest, this sexy, savage, sexy brute. "That's not what I meant at all."

I really, really wanted to kick him in the shins, smack him in the face with my grimoire. Again the woman tittered.

"Such sweet words you say to me, sapling, and yet they ring empty. There's no need for false platitudes, sweetness. You can be honest with me, the way the two of you are honest with each other. Is that not how things are meant to work between summoners and eidolons? A question of trust."

I looked guiltily at Sylvain, who was very much mirroring the expression on my face. What did he have to be guilty about? I was the one who'd tricked him. Multiple times, too, though not always on purpose, except for that one incident where I'd launched him like a rocket to take down a giant man-eating plant.

"Trust," I said. "Right. So you know about our arrangement?"

"Oh, yes, yes," the woman said. "I've been casually observing your profession over the ages. Summoners and eidolons, it's such an interesting dynamic, don't you think? How everything within your art easily comes down to relationships. In many ways, the bond between a summoner and their eidolon is one of love — or at least one of loyalty. Don't you agree, princeling?"

I thought I could hear a low rumble coming from deep inside of Sylvain's chest. Again, not the time to think of how sexy that was. But he could stand to be a little more polite to the woman who was almost definitely a goddess.

"But I think the two of you have done quite well for yourselves. Look at that massive, engorged thing that you just took down. Enormous, aggressive, turgid, and yet with a single blow?"

The sentence hung in the air. I shuffled my feet, half-certain that we weren't talking about slaying monsters any longer. What was up with all the horny innuendo?

She shook her head and tittered. "They're named after me, you know? The thing you killed. Venus. Or Aphrodite, as I prefer these days. Ah, but what's in a name?" She held her hand over the softest lips I'd ever seen, feigning a gasp. "Oh, but I misspoke. What if this handsome fae prince uses my true name against me?"

"Use your name against you?" Sylvain scoffed. "That if I could. You stink of power, woman."

Aphrodite drew her hands back, flipping her great tresses over her shoulders as she let out a peal of delighted laughter.

"Oh, you really are such a flatterer, princeling. I've been told that I stink of fruit, and flowers, and sex. But I've never been told that I stink of power." She winked at him, grinned harder. "I think I quite like it."

Sylvain growled and grumbled to himself. His sword made of leaves still hadn't been dismissed, I noticed, clutched in one white-knuckled hand. The other hand was bunched into a tight fist.

"Gods above and below," I muttered. "It's really you. You're Aphrodite."

She curtsied, the flowers at her feet swooning. "In the flesh."

Accurate. So much flesh — and hair, and jewelry, but barely anything else. Alluring. That was the word to describe her. But I had to keep in mind that all this beauty about her had been engineered specifically for the purpose of seduction. The sparkle, her scent, the flowers.

"Color me curious," I said, because I absolutely was. "Why are you visiting us? Why here?"

She crossed her legs again, hovering in midair, sitting on a throne that we couldn't see.

"I already told you, summoner, sapling. I am very curious about how this is going to work out between the two of you. I heard it on the wind, you know? This spell that you cast to seduce this beautiful princeling boy from out of the ether."

"He entrapped me," Sylvain said, crossing his arms with a huff, glancing away.

The sword fell from his hand, dissipating into a flurry of leaves, returning to the forests once more. I would have gotten mad at him for that thing he said about entrapment, but at least he'd accepted that this wasn't going to be a fight. Good enough for me.

"Oh, entrapment seems so harsh," Aphrodite said. "Isn't there a more pleasant way to put that? Ah. Ensnarement, perhaps. You were drawn to this luscious young summoner, this sapling with his fresh, sweet droplets of nectar. His thick, rich honey. You simply couldn't resist, could you, princeling?"

I blushed. Sylvain muttered under his breath. "Rancid honey, perhaps."

Aphrodite clapped her hands in delight, the bangles on her wrists jangling. "Oh, how exciting to see all this tension between the two of you. And so early on in what will no doubt be an exciting and contentious relationship. Pact. Sorry. I meant to say pact, of course. It's quite unprecedented, you know? None of the grand summoners throughout recorded history have ever contracted one of the fae, and certainly not a fae prince."

I nodded along as she spoke, curious myself. "You pay a lot of attention to summoners, do you?"

"Why, yes, I do. It's as I said. The basis of summoning is really just respect, trust, and perhaps even love. I've known you for so long, little sapling, and I thought it was time to introduce myself. You've known me practically all your lives, the two of you, and yet we've never met."

Sylvain and I exchanged confused glances. All our lives?

"I've known you forever, Lochlann Wilde." Aphrodite offered me a sad smile. "Every time you wished to become more like your father, to become a better summoner, you prayed to me."

"That's not entirely true," I murmured, kicking at the grass. Yet it wasn't entirely false, either.

"And I've never met one of the fae myself. Oh, as handsome and marvelously chiseled as I'd hoped, Prince Sylvain. My people can never hope to enter the Verdance, but every harsh whisper, every shuddering moan you uttered as you claimed your many, many, many bedchamber conquests reached my ears all the same. As sweet to me as birdsong, as music, your prayers."

"I would never," he said, reddening. I wondered about this odd resentment he seemed to harbor for Aphrodite — for all the gods, really — but I was also wondering about those incredibly many conquests. "I would never pray to your kind."

"And yet you did." Aphrodite smiled in triumph. Her perfect teeth sparkled in the sunlight. "I'll be watching the two of you. How curious."

"Not too closely, I hope," Sylvain said, his eyes narrowed.

The goddess laughed and wagged her finger. "You're very funny, you. I quite like you. Now, since I'm here anyway, perhaps I could ask the two of you for a favor. I have a little problem that you can help me solve."

"Not bloody likely," Sylvain said.

Aphrodite pouted. "Oh. Well, now I don't like you so much anymore. I'll speak to the sweeter of the two of you, then. The sapling."

She turned her eyes on me. My heart jumped. She hadn't even asked me for anything, but I knew that I would give it. Were the entities really this powerful? A goddess of love, too. I wasn't into women myself, but that didn't matter. I knew I could never resist Aphrodite. No one could. And an entity asking us for a favor? A reward was imminent, that was for sure.

“I promise, it won’t be a bother. It’ll be on your way, besides. Very convenient. I see that you’ve noticed this odd wilting of the forest creatures. Well, at least of the one you’ve slain. You can be certain that it doesn’t end there.”

“The Withering,” Sylvain said.

“Ah,” Aphrodite said, smiling at him once more. “The princeling speaks correctly. This Withering, as you call it.” She pointed where the Venus flytrap’s corpse had disintegrated into brown dust. “The corruption of my namesake offends me. Find the source of the Withering. Destroy it. Tell me what you learn and I shall reward you.”

Oh, and that was the other thing about entities. Fickle, petty, to the core. Especially the Greek pantheon, for some reason, more human than human at times, based on all the old stories.

I shrugged. “We’re not entirely sure that this mission of yours aligns with what we’re planning to do.”

Aphrodite flipped her hair, her brow furrowed, the corners of her eyes creasing. This was the closest I’d seen her approaching anger. The entities didn’t like it when they didn’t get their way. But she remembered herself and smiled again.

“I can assure you both that this enormous creature you’ve destroyed is not the last of these withered beasts. Something has desecrated these forests — and the forests of your home as well. Is it not true, princeling?”

Sylvain’s eyes stared hard into hers, and then into mine. He nodded once.

“Then this is settled,” Aphrodite said. “Find information. Slay more of these beasts as you encounter them. Tell me what you learn. Simple. That is all I ask.”

I threw my hands up in resignation. “Fine. Whatever we find, we’ll let you know. Whatever we learn.”

Aphrodite beamed. My heart skipped a beat. “See? Was that so hard to agree to? Sapling, starling, little darling.”

My ears burned. This was a little embarrassing, and almost sweet. Yet I still needed to remember that this was a goddess, an entity, a supremely powerful creature whose lifespan far outstripped mine. Was she doing this out of genuine concern, or plain boredom? And if the gods themselves didn’t know what was happening with these withered creatures, what hope did Sylvain and I have of finding out?

“I trust you’ll learn something interesting,” Aphrodite said. “I’ll be visiting the two of you again. Until then, I do hope you’ll behave. Rather, I hope you don’t. Oh, you know what I mean.”

“Oh, it’s — it’s not like that.”

I’d blurted the words out, defensive despite the relative innocence of what she’d said. Sylvain studied my face, only adding to the awkwardness. I couldn’t read the look in his eyes, whether he was relieved or offended. Could have been both, really.

“Well, gentlemen,” Aphrodite said. “Whatever happens, happens. Such a rare and precious occasion indeed. I hope that you do not squander this valuable opportunity for — ah, let’s say experimentation.”

She let the word linger, as if I didn’t have constant problems just breathing the same air as Sylvain already. In every sense, really. No one had ever triggered my fight or fuck reflex quite like this.

“For advancements in the field of summoning of course,” Aphrodite clarified. She pressed a finger into her cheek, like she’d memorized where the dimple was long ago. Her last sentence she spoke in a rhythmic hurry. “And also in the name of love.”

Again I sputtered, reaching out, a finger raised to correct her. “It’s not like that.”

Sylvain crossed his arms and grumbled. “It really isn’t.”

Aphrodite disappeared on the wind, leaving behind a sigh, a moan, a whisper.

Oh, and peals of ecstatic laughter.



“THERE,” I TOLD SYLVAIN. “SEE? THE TENT’S FULLY GROWN. WE CAN GO IN NOW.”

I lowered my head as I entered the structure, a trellis of vines and branches grown over five or so minutes using a single seedling. Leafy protrusions served as the tent’s canopy, the wispy tendrils spilling down the sides meant to keep out drafts, sunlight, and rain.

“Very impressive,” Sylvain said, nodding approvingly as he unfurled his bedroll on one end of the tent. I followed suit, bedroll tucked under one arm, backpack under the other.

The Wispwood never left its students unprepared. These tents were part of every standard provisions kit, enchanted seedlings smaller than a fingernail. They’d grow into shelters within minutes, then naturally break down over the course of days to rejoin and feed the earth.

I passed Sylvain his share of rations, eaten unquestioningly, maybe because of how famished he was. Nasi lemak for dinner, a Malaysian delicacy: a heaping serving of fragrant coconut rice topped with spicy relish, tiny fried fish, a sliced hardboiled egg, roasted peanuts, and some fresh cucumber, all conveniently wrapped in a banana leaf, shaped like a green pyramid.

And for snacks? Trail mix, jerky, dark chocolate, and colorful pressed juices kept chilled in glass phials. Bless the kitchen imps, seriously. They were over their French phase, which was probably for the best. I didn’t mind French cuisine, but couldn’t imagine tucking into it out in the woods.

Stuffed full of dinner and a phial of apple juice, Sylvain stretched out on his bedroll, munching absently on some trail mix while paging through a large book. He sighed as he scanned the pages, like a schoolboy going through some unpleasant required reading.

Where did he even get that thing, anyway? Even better question. Where was he keeping it? I squinted at the book, recognizing the cover. *An Annotated History of the Wispwood*. Yikes. No wonder he looked so bored.

“Hey. You stole that from my bedroom.”

“Borrowed,” he said, lifting a correcting finger without removing his eyes from the pages. “And I don’t see why you care. This thing just prattles on and on about your academy. Headmaster this, Wispwell that. Mind-numbing.”

“Then find something else to do, Sylvain.”

He flipped onto his stomach, kicking his legs in the air. “Talk to me, then. Tell me a story, oh summoner.”

I winced, annoyed each time he called me that, though the sarcastic edge of it seemed to be

wearing away with every repetition. I didn't want to snap back and snarkily call him an eidolon, which, yes, I'd done once or twice already. I didn't think of the doves or the old wolf as servants, but friends. Why couldn't I afford him the same courtesy? So I set my food down, stretched my legs out on my bedroll, and sighed.

"What do you want to hear, Sylvain?"

"Regale me." He thrust his arms in the air, yawning, then leaned back onto the bedroll, his hands under his head. "Back in the Verdance, the courtiers would fall over each other, desperate to entertain. The jesters, too."

I squinted at him. He'd said that on purpose. "No offense to jesters, Sylvain, but I'm not one of them."

He opened one eye, winked. "I know. Too pretty to be a jester."

I tucked the compliment away for later. The corner of my mouth quirked. I could try to find some way to amuse Sylvain, or I could let him talk about his favorite subject, get him to entertain himself.

"Jesters and courtiers," I said, tucking my knees up to my chest. "It sounds like a fairytale, Sylvain."

"It may as well be. There may be kernels of truth in the stories your people make up about us."

He held his arm out, sweeping his hand across an unseen horizon, painting me a picture.

"The Court of Summer is a place where the sun shines just so during the day, where the weather is never too stifling nor too hot. And by night the breeze is soothing, the trees filled with the soft, lullaby chirping of birds and insects. A perpetual, perfect summer. And the fruit — oh, you've never tasted fruit so succulent, Locke. So ripe. Sweeter than sugar."

Sylvain rolled on his side, elbow on the bedroll, chin in one hand as he smiled at me.

"Everything is sweeter in the Verdance."

"Sounds lovely." I chomped down on another bite of dinner, keeping my face busy so it wouldn't betray how I felt. Seduced, for sure, and yes, a little horny.

"In fact, your Spire of Radiance reminds me of a similar location back home. There is a point in the Verdance where the four courts converge, perhaps the only place in all the realm where the rulers of the seasons can meet without ending up killing each other."

"Then there's conflict, even among the fae. Somehow I thought it would be gentler, a changing of the seasons sort of thing." I leaned forward, more curious than judgmental, making sure I conveyed that with the evenness of my tone. "Not picking a fight, mind you. I'm genuinely interested."

He held up one hand. "I said the Verdance was sweet. I never said it was perfect. Summer and Spring are the lighter aspects of the fae, the Seelie. And Unseelie is the name we give to the Courts of Autumn and Winter, the darker ones. But even light and dark are no guarantee of good and evil."

I nodded as he spoke, appreciating the nonchalance of how he explained things. He wasn't talking down to me, treating me like a young child who might have a harder time understanding. This was the real Sylvain, I realized, a man who could speak eloquently about his life and his passions. It was alluring, so very, very attractive.

"Spring brings life, you see, but the Spring Court is also famous for its talented poisoners, artists who specialize in designing only the most painful of deaths. Autumn has a reputation for sapping and brittling life, for heralding decay. Yet the Court of Autumn also excels at preservation. Pressing a leaf in the pages of a book writ large, the arts of healing, of extending life. Not as simple as light and dark, Locke. Never as easy as good or evil."

I smiled, genuinely enjoying this side of him, so measured and composed. "I like how you put that. You're much, much smarter than you let on, Sylvain. You must get some of that from your father. I

don't know very much about the fae, but I've heard that the King of Summer is famed for his wisdom."

Sylvain nodded slowly. "The King of Summer is a good man. He rules with justice, metes it with a fair hand. Well, as fair as the fair folk can make it. But what of Baylor Wilde? I've heard his name mentioned once or twice. I sense you save no real fondness for your father."

Gods, where to begin?

"You sensed correctly," I said, sighing. "He was a stern man, and we didn't get along very well. After my mother passed, everything really went downhill. Our fights escalated to the point where I couldn't decide if his anger or disappointment hurt more. And one day he just disappeared. Too many rumors. That he was killed in a private duel, or that he vanished because of ritual magic gone wrong. And you know the worst part?"

Sylvain's lips were loose, his mouth half open. I didn't think he'd be so interested in hearing about my father, of all things.

"I feel guilty for being grateful that he went away."

That was something I'd never truly confessed to anyone, that I'd barely expressed to even Bruna and Namirah. Something about Sylvain made him the right person to tell. Maybe it was the awareness that he didn't know the same people that I did, not even the same world. It felt like he wouldn't judge me despite his entire personality pointing to the contrary. From the way he pressed his lips into a sympathetic line, how he nodded in silent understanding, I knew I was right, too.

"At least he left his inheritance," I said, chuckling bitterly. "Once we finish here and acquire my Crest, I can breathe a little easier. Pay what I owe for lodgings at the Wispwood, maybe even find somewhere new to stay. It must be nice for you, being royalty, how you obviously don't have that problem yourself."

Sylvain grunted, scratched his fingernail along a random spot on his thigh. "Right."

"Though I really do like it at the Wispwood. Meeting Bruna and Namirah, learning about summoning and nature and flowers. And rafflesias. You know, Sylvain, you're so good at conjuring nature. You're really kind of a summoner in your own way. Why not just conjure a rafflesia?"

He picked at a blade of grass, flicking it gently back and forth with the tip of his finger.

"But isn't that one of the great joys of life? Experience, even if the experience means the stench of rotting flesh. Besides, I'd need to see one for myself before I can conjure it. In all my travels to Earth, I —"

I smirked at him expectantly. He sat up and glowered.

"Oh, fine. Fine! So I visit every now and again, all right? Perhaps I sneak back and forth through the portals between Earth and the Verdance more than the average fae should. And why not? A prince should be free to explore and discover."

I clucked my tongue, teasing. "That's an explorer's job, not a prince's job."

Sylvain folded his arms and huffed.

"But why did your people leave in the first place? Ages ago, I mean. The fae were as great as any of the powers of the Earth."

"Right," he said, reluctantly at first, but I recognized the spark of interest in his eyes. "The fae were as great as the gods, the angels, the demons. The gods have their domiciles, the others have heaven and hell, and yet they still squabble over the Earth. I wish I could tell you a single answer, but our scholars have argued over this for centuries."

"And what have you concluded?" I asked. "Again, not mocking. I really want to know what you think."

Sylvain inhaled slowly, eyes distant as he considered his answer. “Perhaps at some point my people felt the need to focus on our own realm instead of straddling the line in between. Why stay here and be at war with the entities when we had the Verdance to worry about? That’s my thinking, at least. Earth, I believe, can be a nice place to visit. Except for all the gods who seem to think it belongs to them.”

It was strange, how what he’d said still smacked of an attachment to my world, an unspoken possessiveness. “So that explains the resentment,” I said. “Between you and the gods. I remember how you were with Aphrodite.”

He picked up the book he stole from my bedroom. “So that explains the resentment,” he said, like that was his final answer. “I’m all out of words, Locke. Fancy that. You’ve finally talked my ear off.”

I laughed. “You’re the one who asked me to.”

Sylvain shook his head. “I’m joking, of course. Thank you for indulging me. Thank you for listening. Now I suppose it’s back to suffering through this horrendous book.”

He lifted the book to his face, opened the cover. Something fell out, rustling as it dropped onto his bedroll in a heap. I blinked.

“Sylvain. Is that a gossip rag?” I bent closer. “Gods, it is. That paparazzi stuff with all the celebs on the covers. Yikes.”

He snatched the magazine up, stuffing it back between my history book’s pages, cradling it all to his chest defensively. “I understood virtually none of the words that left your lips moments ago, but I know when I’m being insulted.”

“Where did you even find that thing?”

His eyes darkened. “One of your stupid gas stations that you leave all over the place. You and your consumption. If the Withering doesn’t ruin your beloved Earth, then good old pollution will.”

I sat there in shock, knowing that anything I said to the contrary would make me sound like the asshole. I wasn’t very well educated about environmental issues, but surely taking the side of oil spills and deforestation would make me the bad guy.

“Whatever,” I mumbled, tucking myself into my bedroll. At least his good mood had lasted long enough for me to learn a couple of new things about the Verdance. And a couple of new things about him, too.

I imagined Sylvain sneaking back into the Verdance with some stolen old magazines, a pile of weathered, brittle books, like a reverse magpie. Too unrealistic. Too ridiculous. I stifled a laugh, not wanting to annoy him further.

As I settled in, I thought I heard the flipping of pages from Sylvain’s bedroll.



I WOKE UP TO A BLOODCURDLING ROAR, STARTLED, BUT SO GROGGY I MUST HAVE BEEN ON THE WRONG end of a REM cycle. I sat up with bleary eyes and my hair in my face, shaking as I pulled my clothes on, flinching when a second roar came.

What the fuck was that? A wildcat? I picked up the closest thing within reach and tossed it at the sleeping lump on the other bedroll. Sylvain snorted and woke up with a start.

“Some warrior you are,” I hissed, “alert senses and all. Something is prowling around the outside of the tent.”

“I am a warrior-prince,” he hissed back, untangling himself from the bedding. “I fight well, but I sleep well, too.”

Always something with this guy. Where was my shoe? My other shoe? It came flying at my head. I caught it in one hand. Oh, right. The thing I’d thrown at Sylvain.

“Get ready,” I said, grimoire in hand as I approached the tent flap. He furrowed his brow and nodded. “On the count of three. One, two, and — ”

We burst out of the tent, sloppily dressed and barely ready to rumble. But there was no wildcat in sight. I turned in an irritated circle, scratching my head.

“Then what the hell was all that roaring?” I asked, searching for a tiger, a panther — could have been anything. This was the Oriel of Earth, after all.

Sylvain stretched his arms out and yawned. “Clearly just your imagination. Aww, did Lochlann have a bad dream? Throwing shoes and all. Let’s just go back to bed.”

A nearby bush rustled. We whirled as one, a sword already forming in Sylvain’s hands, magic streaming from my soul and into the grimoire. But then the next bush rustled, and the next one, and the next.

“Oh, fuck,” I muttered. “Oh, shit. Armor. Sylvain, armor, now.”

For once he didn’t argue, summoning a fresh wave of leaves from the trees, clothing himself in his usual breastplate. I placed my hand on his shoulder, forcing a pulse of magic to run through his body, encasing him in a silvery-gold shield.

“What is it?” he asked, unafraid, but quiet, careful.

“Bush babies,” I said, knowing better, my skin crawling.

Sylvain straightened himself out, dropping his sword hand. “Bush. Babies. Are you — Locke, seriously, now. Are you joking?”

The little bastards came tearing out of the undergrowth, chittering and shrieking. Whoever named these horrible monsters should have picked something better. Even Ermengarde Frost's *Treatise on Mythical Animals and Creatures* had them listed as such. A cruel joke, because these assholes were a far cry from galagos, those adorable furry creatures with the huge eyes back on Earth.

No. The bush babies of this Oriel were actual sentient bushes, so named for being so small and unobtrusive, and for their very, very irritating screams. Their natural camouflage and propensity to hang out in great numbers added to their threat, making it easy for them to gather near unsuspecting victims. Or even around them, fencing them in, the way these babies had done to us.

A bush ambush. Holy crap, I hated these things.

"The skeletal structure of a central trunk and branches," I explained hurriedly. "Lots of thick, leafy foliage, makes them tough. And watch out for poison."

Hence my warning for him to throw on some armor. Whether it was by squirting their berries or delivering their juices through crudely fashioned darts and arrows, the bush babies could quickly overwhelm a vulnerable traveler.

Oh, and that was the other thing — they were smart enough to make their own weapons, using sharpened branches as spears, shorter twigs as daggers. Nearly as intelligent as goblins, and just as nasty. Fucking assholes, every single one of them. What I wouldn't do for a dragon, a baby salamander, anything to torch these monsters to hell and back.

"Pitiful," Sylvain said, hands at his hips. "Why, I can end this fight in one go. Hah!"

He clenched his fingers. I waited for the satisfying screams of the bush babies, watching for the carnage of leaves being ripped off their bodies — but nothing. Sylvain stared down at his hand in open horror.

If I ever met Ermengarde Frost, I could teach her at least one thing. Maybe she wasn't as thorough about mytho zoology as I'd believed. These things only looked like plants. If Sylvain's power couldn't destroy them, then it meant that they were actual flesh-and-blood creatures that only resembled tiny bushes. Great. Gross.

And if that was true, then what the hell were their berries supposed to be? Super gross.

The bush babies screamed, lifting their sticks and blowguns in the air. I bared my teeth, encasing my grimoire in a layer of magic with one hand, drawing my dagger with the other. A cluster of four, five bush babies approached me, chittering and shuddering.

I threw the book at them. Literally. The empowered grimoire smashed two in a single blow, their crushed bodies leaving wet, greasy smears in the grass. So gross. I slashed with the dagger, thrust it at another sentient bush, roaring the whole time, going slowly insane from their wailing, their constant ululation.

"They communicate with that horrible shrieking," Sylvain shouted, slashing his sword at one of the bush babies, directing a flurry of leaves against another. "It's how they coordinate."

I hadn't even noticed that, assuming they were only battle cries at first. There must have been some semblance of language in there, not that I could pick up on anything — the chitters came too quickly, never differing in cadence or rhythm, at least to my ears.

But the maddening sound of their shrill little voices filled the night as they attacked, in batches, in lines, these faceless creatures with their eerie sense of strategy. They fired their flimsy weapons, tiny darts and arrows shooting out with pings and whizzes. Their trajectories were weak and limp, the poisoned barbs missing us completely.

Still, one of them was bound to land on a patch of bare skin soon enough. I retrieved my book, flicked the bush baby goo away, and spread it open, letting it levitate before me to use as a mobile

shield while I considered my options.

These tiny assholes would just shoot down my doves if I called them in. And the grubby cat — he was scrappy, but they would overwhelm him with their numbers and tear him to shreds. But the wolf? Hmm. That just might work.

“Sorry, Old Man,” I said, gesturing with my fingers, murmuring the first words of the summoning spell. A howl drifted in on the wind, a call from a world away as he answered my summons.

I blinked, and there he was, ancient and tattered, but majestic in his own way. The gray wolf I’d come to think of as Old Man had been on his last legs since forever. Every time I summoned him I feared the worst, expecting the portal to open and spit out a pile of fur and bones. This wolf needed a younger wolf to chew his food for him. This wolf was supposed to be in a home playing mahjong and bridge.

But I loved him dearly, called him whenever I could, adoring the excitement in his eyes every time he appeared. Old Man just wanted to be useful, to see the battlefield as often as possible before he went up to wolf heaven to have endless wolf orgies for all eternity.

Old Man bared his teeth at the bush babies, prepared to rend and tear, but I went down on one knee, patted him by the scruff. He pushed his head against my hand, greeting me in kind.

“It’s been a while, Old Man. Give us a show. Let’s hear you sing.”

He tilted his head at me, eyes like gemstones blinking as I infused him with arcane essence. And in perfect understanding, Old Man threw his head back and howled, as loud and as free as his ancestors. Old Man sang to the stars.

I sprang away, covering my ears. Sylvain did the same. It didn’t help.

Old Man’s howl could penetrate all barriers, shatter glass. The trees around us shuddered as his voice reached the sky, shook the very ground of the Oriel of Earth. My mouth hung open in amazement as the bush babies themselves trembled in terror, unable to hear each other through the sheer power drowning out their panicked chitters.

One of them exploded, spattering the ground in goo and bush baby guts. Then another. Gross. Cool, but gross. The surviving bush babies scrambled, disappearing into the undergrowth, heading for the trees.

“Yeah, that’s right,” I shouted, shaking my fist. “You better run.”

This time I wasn’t afraid of attracting more attention with all the racket. Old Man howled as if he was the size of a dragon, bigger and louder than Fenrir himself. Nothing in the Oriel of Earth would dare come looking.

His voice trailed off at last. I uncovered my poor ears, hearing mostly ringing, but also Old Man’s happy panting, his tongue hanging out of his mouth. He’d sung better than any wolf he’d ever met.

“Good boy,” I said, tickling his scruff, laughing when he pawed at my body, licked my cheek. “The best boy.”

I retrieved my backpack from the tent, offering him the choicest cut of meat from our rations. Old Man pounced on it with delight, growling and gnawing. He could stay as long as he liked. He could finish his meal and wander back through his portal when he was good and ready.

“Locke,” Sylvain groaned. “A little help here?”

Sylvain was leaning against a tree stump. He hissed, pressing at his shoulder. “One of them got me. It burns. Fuck, it burns.”

I rushed to his side with backpack in hand, already searching through it for the healing potion, beyond grateful that we’d saved it. I could help relieve pain and heal an eidolon’s minor injuries with my essence, but actual poison?

“They’re gone now. It’s okay. Where did it sting you?”

He lifted his hand away from his shoulder, a mark like a bruise already forming. I willed my hands to steady as I uncorked Bruna’s potion and brought the phial to his lips. He drank gratefully, then sighed in relief.

“That helps with the pain,” he breathed.

“It should help with the poison, too. Too late to suck out. It gets through your system quickly, but you’re fae, so I don’t know how the effects will differ. Fever, for one thing, and chills. I think you’ll be fine.”

“Just glad I’m alive,” he said, gritting his teeth. “Good work back there. Quick thinking with the wolf. Impressed by your ability to sleep light.”

I laughed, relieved to know he was going to make it through. “It’s more that you sleep like the dead. Come on. I’ll help you back to the tent.”

With a quirk of his finger the leaves adorning his body returned to the trees. I helped him to his feet, supported him with my shoulder as we crawled back into the tent. He panted and grunted with every movement, his skin slick with sweat.

“One bedroll,” he said. “Share it. I’ll conjure something to protect us while we sleep.”

“Anything you want,” I said, leading him onto mine.

Sylvain grunted as he summoned up a cocoon of vines to surround us, an extra layer of defense for the night.

“It’s all I can muster.”

“And it’s all that we need. Thank you for protecting us.”

Sleeping together made sense, if only for the safety of the vines. Only for safety. Nothing else. Not the contact with his body, nor my quiet, calm concern for his well-being. Bush baby poison was rough, but it wasn’t normally fatal. Still: just to be safe.

“Thank you for — well, just, thank you.” He shifted on the bedroll, hugging himself tight, shivering. “I’m cold, Locke.”

“There, there,” I said, wrapping my arms around him, sharing body heat, knowing the cocoon would warm up a little more soon enough. “Bruna’s potion will take care of you. And I’ll keep you warm. You’re okay, Sylvain. Big, strong man.”

“Big,” he mumbled, pressing up against me. “Strong.”

I pushed small doses of my essence through my hands, wanting to save more for the rest of our journey, but hating to see him suffer. Within minutes he’d stopped trembling. Another minute more and he’d dozed off, breathing gently in my arms. As I drifted off, I wondered if the old masters of our art had ever needed to cradle their injured idolons to sleep.

As I drifted off, I decided I didn’t mind it very much at all.



MORNING CAME, BLISSFULLY, WONDERFULLY UNEVENTFUL. NO MORE MIDNIGHT AMBUSHES, OR whatever time it was that those creatures had decided to attack us unawares. I woke up alone, secretly disappointed that Sylvain wasn't there to casually rub his cock against my ass.

But I did wake up to a lot of aggressive grunting and moaning. The cocoon had been dismissed from around our bed. I emerged from the tent quietly, hoping to catch Sylvain jerking off. You know, like a pervert.

What I found was almost as gratifying. Bare-chested and glistening in sweat, Sylvain dangled from a sturdy tree branch, using it as a makeshift pull-up bar. He grunted as he lifted himself up, his muscles rippling obscenely with every repetition.

"Rise and shine, lazy bones," he called out, the Summer Prince himself gleaming in the sunlight. I hated how chipper he was, but I didn't hate looking.

I grumbled something in response, mussing my hair as my brain tried to piece together the puzzle of getting coffee without a small army of imps to make it for me. Oh, right. I had to brew my own somehow.

Yes, spoiled brat, etcetera, I know. I turned toward the tent, dead set on searching through my packed rations for coffee, when Sylvain's voice trilled energetically again.

"Time for your morning constitutional, young Lochlann."

"Don't call me that," I growled under my breath. "It's too early for calisthenics."

It was always too damn early for calisthenics. The headmasters had made sure to fold regular exercise into our curriculum, in any shape or form a student might enjoy. Namirah had somehow pressured me into doing all this bodyweight stuff.

Sure, I appreciated how it made me leaner and fitter than I'd ever been, enough that I could look into a mirror and say, "Yes, I would hit that, repeatedly." But gods did I hate every second of it.

I'd heard it was required at one of our rival schools, too. Grayhaven, an academy of the so-called elemental elite. Bunch of bigheaded jerks. Those guys were ripped, but boy, were they self-centered assholes, too.

But all that spellcasting practice meant that they were also really, really good with their hands and mouths — or so I'd heard.

Okay, fine! I went on a date with one of them. No big deal. He looked fantastic in his uniform, and he said all these really sweet things that made me giddy. He liked the black curls of my hair, he said,

how the color of my eyes seemed to change depending on how the light hit them. Most of all, he said he liked my smile.

He said some very, very complimentary things about my physique, too. Fine. Maybe exercise wasn't the worst thing in the world. We made out, did stuff with our hands and our mouths, which was how I learned that Grayhaven's academic skills had applications in other areas. You know, like under the pants.

No second date, though. The guy was handsome, talented, and smart. He knew it, too, and he wouldn't stop talking about it. I couldn't handle all that Grayhaven attitude. And now, like a consolation prize from the universe, I'd been sent an extremely aggravating ball of energy and attitude, combined in a single gorgeous package.

"Regular physical exertion is a wonderful thing."

Sylvain practically sang the words at me, the world's most annoying gym instructor. I mentally paged through my tomes and textbooks, trying to remember if I could order my eidolon to snap his own neck.

Fifty burpees later, drenched in sweat and wanting to die, I caved to Sylvain's pleading and followed him toward something he'd discovered not far from the campsite. And to be fair, the sight alone was worth it.

"Isn't it glorious?" he asked, smelling of sweat, and for some reason, the fresh scent of earth.

"Oh," I said. "Oh, wow."

A pool of still water surrounded by a grove of trees, clear enough to peer into, clean enough to wash off in. It looked beyond inviting, and I really, really wanted a decent scrub. Without saying another word, Sylvain turned away from me and gestured, dismissing his britches, his personal version of modesty.

I goggled, then wrenched my eyes away from the tantalizing sight of his perfect ass, taking the opportunity to shuck my own clothes, drop them in a pile by the pool, and sink into the water.

"Gods above and below," I groaned, the water so pleasantly warm, wetter than wet. I leaned back, my eyes shut against the sunlight piercing the forest canopy. Water sloshed and splashed as Sylvain got in after me. I opened my eyes.

This was glorious, but also completely awful. The water felt fantastic, my tension dissolving the more I soaked, but it was also stirring up some activity in my nether regions, improving my circulation a little too well. I couldn't think of anything I wanted more than to touch myself, and I clearly couldn't. Gods, the taboo just made it even hotter. Did that make me a pervert? Maybe.

The problem was Sylvain, just sitting there stewing in the same water with me, butt naked. The woods around the pond were lovely to look at, granted. But how could I focus on anything else when Sylvain existed? Simply sharing this space made me anxious, and yet so impossibly aroused. I couldn't even move my legs, afraid that I'd brush against his under the water. He might take it the wrong way. Worse, I might enjoy it too much.

Sylvain dripped water over his head, scrubbing at his scalp, then sweeping his hair up and away from his eyes. As if I needed to see more of his face. And the way he cupped water with his hand, letting it spill from his fingers and run down his chest, the taut muscle of his neck? I couldn't pinpoint why I found it so attractive, yet I did, his glistening skin, the veins in his arms, those powerful hands.

He looked down at himself as he scooped more water onto his collarbone, scrubbed, scooped again. His lashes fluttered as his eyes met mine.

Sylvain grinned. "Do you like what you see?"

I rolled my eyes — convincingly, I hoped — and chopped my hand against the water, splashing

him in the face. He sputtered, splashed me in return, and we went back and forth for some moments, laughing like boys, like people who could be friends.

“Enough,” Sylvain said, drenched and dripping, hair stuck to his forehead again. “I yield. For now.”

I shook my head, chuckling. “You know, back when I cast the Pact of the Unknown — when I found you in the forest? This wasn’t what I was expecting at all.”

Sylvain furrowed his brow. “You mean when you abducted me in the midst of my travels.”

“Don’t start.” I stretched my arms out, sighing. “We’re having such a nice time, too. A little break before something bursts out of the foliage to try and kill us again.”

“Hmm. Nice. Yes. I would have preferred bathing with a goblet of wine in hand. Don’t you have any in that rucksack of yours?”

“I don’t carry wine around for questing, Sylvain. I’d rather keep my head clear in case we run into danger. And besides, I’m not really much of a drinker.”

Sylvain threw his hands up in frustration, splashing more of the water. “Well, there has to be some way to make this more festive. Ah. I wonder. Perhaps this.”

He snapped his fingers. My eyes grew wide as flowers bloomed on the surface of the water, petals unfurling, like pink and red stars. He’d conjured them out of nothing, caused them to grow out of thin air — or water, as was the case. Sylvain laughed triumphantly, clapped once.

“Even here they obey me. Wonderful.”

“They’re beautiful. This is amazing. But oh, would you look at that? I can’t help noticing there are far more flowers on your side of the pool than mine.”

He groaned. “Always something with you, isn’t there? I can’t help it. The flowers love me. I am their prince.”

A prince of flowers, huh? How very fae, truly, in every sense of the word. I didn’t voice my thoughts, but the title suited Sylvain just fine. He was beautiful, almost impossibly so, his fragrance intoxicating, whether he was clean or soaked in sweat.

He’d sooner die than admit it, but as strong as he was on the outside, built to fight and to kill, Sylvain was the most fragile person I knew. Yet it didn’t make me pity him, or even dislike him. There was a tenderness within him, a softness that lived behind all his sulks and pouts.

“Fine. Here. I’ll bring you some of your own bloody flowers.”

Sylvain stood up, gathering handfuls of the new blossoms in his hands. Apparently, in contrast to his hidden softness, there was a hardness, too. Right below his waist. A great, big hardness. Huge. It wavered as he worked, droplets of water falling back into the pool each time he leaned over to collect another flower.

“Gods above and below, Sylvain. Put that thing away.”

His laughter was boisterous, almost a bark. “Has a mind of his own, he does.”

I sent daggers at him with my eyes, staring between the gaps in my fingers. “I can’t — why are you even this hard? What the hell, Sylvain?”

He cocked his hip to the opposite side, the simple, completely innocent bit of body language made so unbelievably vulgar by the twitching of his cock, the rippling of his muscles.

“Maybe he knows that I see something I like.” He looked down at himself and shrugged. “You obviously know that you’re a good-looking fellow, Locke. I know that. My cock knows that. And the two of us are very curious as to what you’re planning to do about our predicament.”

It was a compliment, but one couched in so much filth. I wasn’t exactly a prude, but no one had ever talked to me like that before. And I hated just how fucking much I loved it.

The water sloshed as he approached. I backed away, then discovered, remembered I had nowhere to back away to. I stayed rooted to the spot, glancing away from his cock, looking again to memorize it for later, for when I could finish myself off, glancing away again.

“You did say you wanted to have a nice time,” he said, a wildcat’s purr, a murmur.

I held a stern finger up. “I said we were already having a nice time.”

“Ah. That’s actually true. But as nice as this is, are you saying that a little physical intimacy between friends wouldn’t improve it even more?”

I swallowed thickly, entranced, incapable of tearing my eyes away. Gods, it was so hard that it pointed at an angle up into the canopy. This man would split me in half.

“I — I didn’t realize we were friends,” I said, my stomach dropping in disappointment. I felt stupid. What was I even expecting? He was an idolon. I was a summoner. That was that. “And what’s this about physical intimacy?” I added, my mouth parched.

“Oh, don’t be so coy,” he said, a hand on his hip, even the slightest motion making his cock twitch.

But it was right there, staring me in the face, throbbing in defiance. Sylvain leaned his hips forward, his cock bobbing, looking ridiculous and beautiful, flowers in each hand, turgid and rock-hard and ready.

I couldn’t help myself. I reached out, ran my fingers under his balls, getting harder as he chuckled. I wrapped my hand around his cock. Sylvain sighed. The flowers fell from his hands and into the water. He moaned, the sound of a man tasting his favorite dessert, indulging in his favorite thing in the world.

“You’re so hard,” I breathed. Too hard, almost, or had it just been a while since I’d touched somebody? And so thick, too.

“Thank you kindly.”

Sylvain’s voice was alarmingly polite, nonchalant as he began to thrust between my fingers, the muscles on his torso rippling with every obscene movement. I pulled up, swirled the bead of fluid on the tip of his head, felt myself throbbing under the water when he hissed and threw his head back.

“Use both hands. You’ll need both hands, anyway.”

“Don’t tell me what to do.” But he was telling the truth. There was — gods, there was so much of him.

“You’re right. I shouldn’t be the one issuing commands here, oh great summoner.”

I let that one slide, instead focusing on — well, on sliding my hands up and down his cock, working his shaft, ensuring that my palm made contact with his pink, wet head. Gods, this was awful and gorgeous and terrifying, all at once. I was mesmerized. Did fae cocks come with their own magic?

“You keep licking your lips, Locke. Like you’re thirsty. Or hungry.”

Guiltily as charged, but like hell was I going to admit that. Bad enough that I was giving my idolon — my fucking idolon a hand job on our very first mission together. Sucking dick was out of the question.

Maybe on our second date. Mission. I meant mission.

The guilt was still there, building like a heavy stone in my stomach. This felt good. Amazing. But it was wrong, too.

“Sylvain,” I whispered. “I’m not supposed to do this. Summoners and idolons — we’re not supposed to do this.”

“Oh?” he muttered back. “Is there some great, dusty tome in some crumbling library in the

Wispswood that says I'm not allowed to play with your cock?"

I froze. Did I just hear him right? I licked my lips, gulping for what must have been the hundredth time. "I thought you wanted me to — "

He grinned, a hungry tiger, a trickster holding back his laughter, the very exemplar of his people. "What kind of friend would I be if I didn't return the favor?"

Would Grand Summoner Celestina engage in physical intimacy with the angels she famously conjured in battle? Gods, would Father have done something like this? I shook my head, clearing the thought from my mind, even though it was useful for numbing some of my arousal.

But wasn't that why Aphrodite appeared to us in the first place? Maybe I was supposed to allow this to happen, something to strengthen the bond between eidolon and summoner. Trust was an important aspect of summoning, and in some ways, so was love.

Festive, he said. All the flowers, their wet petals caressing my skin — more romantic than anything. But this wasn't love, anyway. This was lust, raw and filthy. It felt dirty, sitting in that pool of pristine water, knowing we were doing this. Despite the scrubbing, the feel of clean on my skin, I'd never felt dirtier. I'd never felt better.

Sylvain reached under my arms, hoisting me easily up onto the edge of the pool. Water dripped from my torso, the air cooling my skin where it met the damp, but the chill didn't linger. It was just too hot.

He ran the rough pad of one finger down the center of my chest, through the ridges of my stomach muscles, down all the way through the hair at my crotch. My breath misted with every exhalation, the anticipation almost enough to make me come on its own. Fingers closed around the base of my cock.

I didn't come. I wanted to, and yet I didn't want to, biting the inside of my cheeks, fingers curling into grass and dirt as Sylvain ran his strong, huge hand up and down the length of my cock.

"Beautiful. You're enjoying this. I can tell. The way you're throbbing, and that slickness — that isn't pond water. We're not really all that different, you and I. Human or fae, we all love our cocks being stroked just the same."

I gritted my teeth, holding myself back, the pleasure tearing through my body with every last one of his torturous strokes. Were we the same, though? I'd always been pretty pleased about my size, but I never once thought I'd touch a cock as perfect as Sylvain's. How thick was too thick? How long was too long?

And the roughness of his hands — gods above and below. Call me a spoiled urban brat, never mind that I basically lived in a castle in the middle of the woods. My hands were my hands, and my cock recognized their touch, the skin of my palms and fingers fairly smooth — again, especially for someone who technically lived in the woods.

But Sylvain, dearest Prince Sylvain had the rough palms and powerful fingers of someone who worked with their hands. A builder, a woodcutter, a sculptor. The way he grazed the slit of my cock with the length of his thumb, the other fingers gliding in excruciating rhythm against my shaft, the faint scratch of his palm?

These weren't my hands, my body screamed. These weren't my hands, and these were better. The best.

And the whole time his eyes, pale and gold, burned as they stared into mine. No malice in them, for once, nor mischief, only an intense, almost feral curiosity. A wildcat studying its prey. He was assessing me, examining my features for every last tremor and twitch, taking pleasure in my pleasure, wanting to know how much I liked it.

I liked it a lot, in short. I fucking loved it.

“Very different,” I finally answered. “We’re very — fuck. Sylvain, slow down.”

He didn’t, only made things better, or worse, resting his cock against mine, stroking the both of us off with two hands, a maddening tangle of fingers.

I couldn’t take it anymore. My muscles tightened, my body going stiff as I cried out, white heat spilling past his fingers, spattering my belly. Sylvain pushed his nose against my hair, bit the corner of my neck as ropes of his come joined mine, a glorious, glinting mess on my torso. We stayed there for a minute, panting, shaking, until I spoke.

“Gods,” I murmured, still dizzy, still dazed. “I could use a nap after that.”

Sylvain chuckled. “No naps, oh summoner. We’ve got to find that Blood of the Earth the scary woman asked for. And we need to fix breakfast, too.”

A vision of Euclidea Fang’s scowling face flashed in my mind long enough to sober me up. I shook my head to clear it, about to dip into the pool to wash myself off. And then Sylvain did the last thing I expected.

He dragged two fingers through the slurry of come still staining my torso. He brought them to his lips, sucked, tasted. Oh, fuck. Breakfast was served. If I didn’t know we needed to get a move on, that alone would have been enough to make me hard again, to bargain for a second round.

Sylvain kissed me, tongue pushing past my lips, searching for mine. I tasted him, and me, and us, faint traces of sweetness left in his mouth, the ghost of honey.

The jury was still out on another myth about the fae, a popular one. Eating fae food supposedly came with a curse, giving the fae power over the eater. I almost laughed, but smiled against Sylvain’s lips instead.

I wondered if the same applied to swallowing fae come.

He broke away, then gently, quietly lowered me into the pool once more. He cupped handfuls of water, pouring it down the sticky ridges of my stomach. Wordless, he pressed a kiss against the corner of my mouth, stroking sensitive fingers around my waist, the hair at the base of my cock, cleaning me, caring for me.

I stared at him, panting, sated, disbelieving. Eidolon, fae prince, whatever else Sylvain was, I’d never felt more adored.



“WHERE, OH WHERE IS THIS FABLED GUARDIAN OF YOURS HIDING?” SYLVAIN THREW HIS HEAD BACK AND groaned. “I have half a mind to start shouting. Maybe then we’ll lure it out.”

“Please. Don’t. Old Man’s howl was loud enough to frighten most anything. Well, most things. Some things. And you, you’re — different.”

I ran the back of my hand across my forehead, dabbing away the sweat. Just hours ago we were chilling in our own private pool in the woods. And it was hot then as well — very, very hot, in fact — but at least we had the water to cool off with.

The rest of my thoughts I kept to myself. For example, how Sylvain’s obnoxious shouting would only attract woodland critters who wanted to shut him up. He could be so charming, but Sylvain’s default setting made him the sonic equivalent of a toothache.

When he was being annoying, that is. When he was in the mood to pleasure, though, whether it was himself or someone else? Gods above and below. How had I stopped myself from swooning into the pool and drowning that morning? Those hands, that body, that cock.

And that mouth. Gods, that mouth, at once the best and worst thing about him. He still hadn’t stopped jabbering.

“Will you please quit your whining, Sylvain? It hasn’t been hours. Okay, a couple. I’m not sure. Anyway, you’d think a self-proclaimed warrior-prince would be more resilient when it comes to a trek in the jungle.”

Or forest, I added in my head, or a rainforest, or a swamp. The Oriel of Earth didn’t discriminate, climates and biomes be damned, just like the Wispwood itself.

“I’m a prince-warrior,” Sylvain said with a huff. “The prince comes first. We’re not accustomed to so much strenuous activity.”

“And yet there you were this morning practically uprooting trees with your bare hands. Do you really just switch things around based on what’s convenient for you?”

He squared his shoulders and sniffed. “It’s what a prince does. And what this prince wants is another wash. I can’t believe how sweaty I’ve gotten.”

I tried not to sneak glances at his sweatiness, the sheen of the skin on his powerful neck, the gloss that made his arms even more delectable to look at. My cock expressed its curiosity, tingling and stirring.

Okay, so I looked, damn it. He was bare-chested, because of course he was, beads of sweat

drawing lines down the groove in his chest, his abs, those muscles that dipped under the line of his — no. Stop. I bit the inside of my cheeks, focusing on the task at hand.

“Guardian first,” I said. “And then we grab the Blood of the Earth, and it’s back to the Wispwood. You can wash as much as you want.”

Sylvain scratched the side of his chest, grinning lazily. “Only if you join me.”

My cheeks flushed with heat. “Let’s not do that right now. I’ll be the first to admit, it was a good time. A really, really good time. But we’ve got a quest to complete. We finish that, and — well, I don’t know what comes next.”

“Whatever it is, it’s sure to be fun.” He bumped our hips as he passed me, the scent of his sweat mixed with something subtle and floral. “There. Up on that hill. A better vantage point. We crest it, and perhaps we’ll spot your great, lumbering brute of a guardian from there.”

“Excellent point,” I said, letting him go ahead of me as I quietly cleared my throat and adjusted my package. No time for casual boners, I reminded myself, readying my legs for the climb.

Not so steep after all, as it turned out. It was more of a mound than anything, not so much a climb as it was a short, slightly uphill jog. I joined Sylvain on its peak, giving him a funny look as he placed his hand over his eyes, shading them from the sun.

“Hmm,” he said. “Yes. Very interesting.”

I folded my arms and smirked. “Do you even know what you’re looking for?”

“No,” he said, squinting at the horizon. “But that won’t stop me from trying.”

I cocked my head at him, studying his features. It was hard not to find Sylvain’s little quirks attractive, how his lip turned up when he had his heart set on something, how the sun made the gold of his eyes even richer when it struck them just the right way.

He stamped his foot in frustration. “Fuck it. What are we even looking for, anyway? A large tree among many smaller trees? Ridiculous. We’ve been walking around for days.”

“Hours,” I corrected. “Don’t exaggerate.”

“Well, it feels like days.” He stamped his foot again. “If only we could fly somehow. What did I tell you about dragons? Go and summon one. Go on, then.”

I rolled my eyes, then considered. “You know, technically, it’s not really flying, but my doves can —”

The ground rumbled underfoot. A passing tremor, or was it building up to an earthquake? I grasped Sylvain’s shoulders, trying to steady myself, but he was losing his footing, too.

“I wasn’t expecting this,” I shouted. “But an earthquake in the Oriel of Earth? I guess that checks out.”

Sylvain cast his finger out toward the surrounding forests. “Those other trees aren’t moving. It’s just this mound.”

My stomach swooped. Oh, shit. We found our guardian.

I scrambled for my grimoire, finding the recitation for the doves. To my surprise I’d somehow memorized part of the first half already. That was after years of only loosely summoning eidolons. Maybe this was how proper summoners did things. You know, through practice and repetition? Dr. Euclidean Fang lesson three hundred and fifteen: Lochlann Wilde, you are an incorrigible idiot.

With one hand I grabbed Sylvain’s waist, gestured with the other, the grimoire very politely levitating itself so I could cast the summoning.

“Is this really the time to grope me? We should run, except I know we’ll tumble if we —”

“Hang on tight, Sylvain.”

I finished the spell. Feathers filled the air as the doves burst onto the scene, billowing forward

like a white cloud. My heart raced as we leapt toward them. With Sylvain in my grasp, my cloak rippling behind me, I felt like a superhero. His panicked scream turned into a whoop of delight, the two of us borne gently down to safety by a flurry of shimmering white wings.

“Snacks later, boys,” I told the doves, but they were already vanishing. They had their priorities. Escaping the creature awakening inside the mound was much more important than breadcrumbs.

“Locke,” he shouted, pumped up. “That was amazing.”

“That’s sweet, but we’ve got another problem right now.”

Clumps of dirt and grass fell away as the guardian righted itself, stretching up and up until all the earth had been dislodged from its body. It stood in the vague shape of a man, not carved out of wood, but grown that way, gnarled in places, stout and powerful in others.

Lush clusters of leaves grew out of its crown — the natural spot for them on a tree, but on the guardian’s humanoid frame they resembled a head of hair, a bushy beard. A pair of eyes stared out of the whorls and knots that made up its face, a lustrous amber. And in the center of its forehead was the deep green gemstone we came for.

“The Blood of the Earth,” I muttered, staring up at the creature in awe.

Oh, and did I mention that this thing was twenty feet tall?

“Hah! I’ll end this quickly.”

I almost smacked myself in the forehead. Sylvain curled his fingers. A smattering of leaves issued from the top of the guardian’s head, nowhere near enough to cause any real damage. It opened its mouth and roared.

“You plucked some hairs from a giant,” I said. “Are you happy now?”

“It was worth a — look out!”

A massive clump of earth came shooting toward us. Sylvain tackled me to the ground. The wind wheezed out of me as we fell together in a grubby heap. The hunk of debris missed us, swooshing overhead before smashing into some nearby trees. Crap. The guardian was using the dirt it shook off its body as missiles. Very resourceful.

“Thank you,” I said, straining to catch my breath and get back on my feet. And that was when I spotted the boulder. “Sylvain, look out!”

I slammed my hand against his shoulder, forcing arcane essence through his blood, protecting him in a silvery-gold sheath. At the same time he summoned a burst of foliage from the trees, dismissed his own armor, forming it all into a dome made of leaves.

The dome blocked out the sunlight. I stared at his silhouette in the darkness. Our first reflex had been to protect each other. That had never happened before.

Stone struck Sylvain’s shield, the impact of the boulder causing the entire structure to shudder. The leaves clanged like metal, hardened with his power. He dismantled his dome, the leaves swirling around him, as deadly as Evander’s iron butterflies. The great guardian was crouching, reaching for something else to throw.

This wasn’t sustainable. We were bound to run out of juice eventually, and then we’d be easy pickings, a pair of vulnerable bullseyes for the guardian’s target practice. I clenched my teeth, hesitant to summon the last of my idolons. But this was important. This was a matter of life and death.

I needed to summon the cat.

“Oh, gods,” I grumbled, reading through the incantation in my grimoire, tracing the gestures. “This never ends well.”

“A little warning,” Sylvain said, eyes hard as he stared at me. “You promised we’d start warning each other.”

“Right, yes. This is the only eidolon I’ve got left. It’s — it’s a cat.”

“Only a cat?” he said, almost laughing. “I don’t see why you’re so nervous over summoning a measly — ”

A blur of orange rage erupted from the portal I’d opened, yowling, hissing, spitting. I could barely focus long enough to imbue the cat with my essence, but that was Scruffles for you.

Scruffles was an angry ball of orange fur with an appetite for only two things: kibble, and destruction. Scruffles fought like he was on his ninth life, giving absolutely zero fucks about what happened to him as long as he caused heavy bleeding and extensive property damage in the process.

In short, Scruffles always made for an excellent, if wildly uncontrollable distraction. I squinted, watching for the glow of light around his paws, his constantly exposed snaggletooth. Good. My magic had taken effect.

Scruffles launched himself at the guardian’s leg, scratching and scraping at the wood. The guardian howled as yellowish sap leaked from its bark-like skin. A boulder slipped from the creature’s grasp and thudded in the dirt. Good. Now we had an opening.

“A rope,” I told Sylvain. “The biggest rope you can conjure, something to tie its legs together.”

“Consider it done, oh summoner,” he said, the word no longer dripping with sarcasm. And that look in his eye. Was it admiration? Why did it feel so good?

Sylvain raised his hand, then slashed it forward. The air cracked. A thorny vine materialized in his hand, conjured by his power. It was long enough to immobilize the guardian and lined with barbs to guarantee ensnarement. He swung his arm in a circle, then roared as he cracked his whip. Oh, gods. Why was that so sexy, too?

The vine stretched and stretched as it approached the guardian, striking its shins, wrapping around its legs several times over. It bellowed as Sylvain tightened the vine like a lasso, more sap dribbling down its bark as Scruffles did what Scruffles did best.

Sylvain roared again as he pulled, felling the guardian. Scruffles leapt off just in time to avoid being flattened under its weight. The ground rumbled as the guardian slammed heavily into the earth, throwing up clods of dirt and grass.

Pity swelled in my chest. I felt sorry for the creature, but this was part of my trial. Once defeated, the guardian would leave behind its seedling, regrow anew. And so it was time for the killing blow. We couldn’t wait for Sylvain to slowly pluck the guardian to death, and it sounded inglorious, a terrible way to go. I wanted to make it fast, as painless as possible.

“Allegra’s Lament,” I muttered, selecting a spell I was normally too weak to cast.

Grand Summoner Allegra was one of the greatest, known for forging pacts with eidolons who created magic with the power of voice. She worked with sirens, banshees, even mandragoras. According to legend, her eidolons had fallen one by one in battle against a rival mage. Allegra distilled what remained of her arcane essence into a destructive outpouring of mingled terror, grief, and anger. She obliterated her opponent.

Allegra’s Lament was a desperation tactic, a last resort, something a summoner would only turn to in times of great need. This was one of those times.

I pulled our last potion out of my backpack, the blue one for restoring arcane essence. I choked it down in huge gulps. A little minty, like a faint mouthwash. The whole thing, down the hatch. Arcane essence flooded my body, my insides humming. Gods, this was exhilarating, but far too much for me to contain. A more experienced mage could control the flow, sculpt it into fine spellwork. I needed to unleash this before it tried to unleash itself through my orifices all at once.

The Wilde grimoire read my thoughts, levitating, spinning to face the guardian. It opened its cover,

spreading its pages to the spell. Allegra's Lament was one of the few spells I'd heard of that didn't need recitation, only requiring an unholy quantity of arcane essence. I touched the grimoire's spine, felt the magic reverberating in my body. It rushed out through the pages in a single raging blast.

A colossal torrent of neon fire shrieked out of the grimoire, my essence channeled and magnified through the parchment. The guardian's dying screams merged with the horrible clamor of Allegra's Lament, the magic wailing as it spilled out of my soul. The spell wrenched at my body, draining my strength even as it drained my last stores of essence. I fell to my knees as it ended, mumbling an incoherent apology to the fallen creature.

The guardian was still, at first, the luster of its amber eyes dimmed. Then like the Venus flytrap it shuddered, crackled, sighed as the entirety of its body became a dry, brittle brown. The remains of the great creature disintegrated, then blew away in the wind. Something had infected these forests, sickened the guardian.

I reached for the gemstone the guardian had left behind. Deep green, polished, tumbled, just like the doctor ordered. Somehow the victory felt hollow.

"That wasn't supposed to happen. It's supposed to dig back into the dirt, plant a new version of itself. The cycle continues."

"So now you see," Sylvain said. "The first creature we fought, and now this? The Withering has come to your world."

I gritted my teeth as Scruffles clambered onto my shoulder, his claws digging into my skin. Good thing my magic had already faded or he might have shredded me to ribbons. I dug around in my backpack, retrieving the little baggie of kibble I saved for him.

Scruffles went wild at the sound of the treats, dashing from one of my shoulders to the other. Sylvain chuckled, because he wasn't the one who had to deal with the claws and the yowling and the — just the sheer Scruffles of it all.

I appreciated the lightness his laughter brought, because at least it helped drown out the low drone of concern building in my stomach. We'd give Dr. Fang her Blood of the Earth and tell her about the Withering. Then she'd forward it to the headmasters, who together would figure out how to heal the land in the Oriel of Earth. Right?

No sweat. There was nothing to worry about. We won.

Right?



I SIGHED AS WE EMERGED FROM THE BALMY WARMTH OF THE ORIEL OF EARTH, RELISHING THE FEEL OF a sturdy stone floor under my feet. Home, or the closest thing to it. I threw my arms high into the air, roaring in triumph. Beside me, Sylvain laughed.

And beside me, to the opposite side, a man cleared his throat.

I jerked away in surprise, then flushed in embarrassment. The man in the floppy wizard's hat quirked a smile at me, his glasses perched on the end of his nose.

"Headmaster Cornelius," I said. "I apologize, I didn't see you there."

"And why would you apologize for celebrating your victorious expedition, hmm?" The headmaster grinned, the patterns of the stained glass windows like kaleidoscopes in his eyes. "Congratulations, Lochlann Wilde. You've completed your quest and officially earned your Summoner's Crest."

I beamed at him, then second-guessed myself. "Hold on. Does one of the headmasters wait in the Spire of Radiance for everyone who passes a challenge?"

He widened his eyes, then burst out laughing, but there was no mockery in it. An invitation to join him, rather, and so Sylvain did, chortling alongside the headmaster. Cornelius Butterworth really was the warmest of the three.

"No, no, though it would be quite interesting, wouldn't it? I just happened to be passing by, making my usual rounds of the Wispwood. Still, I'm very proud of you, Wilde. It's taken a little time for you, but it's finally happened. I imagine that this fine gentleman with you must be at least part of the reason. Your eidolon, I presume."

"I'm so sorry," I said, to both Cornelius and Sylvain this time. "I should have introduced you. Sylvain, this is one of the three headmasters of the Wispwood, Cornelius Butterworth. Headmaster, this is Sylvain, an —"

"Alraune," Sylvain said automatically, his chest expanding as it always did when he declared it as confidently as fact. "Pleasure to meet you, headmaster."

I noticed that his ears were round again, apparently something else that had become a reflex for him. Nicely done, Sylvain. I kept a hand on my backpack, reminding myself to hand him his hoodie later.

Cornelius smiled. "A pleasure to meet you, too. How wonderful. Thank you for lending Wilde here your power. I'm sure that this is only the beginning of a long and fruitful relationship."

As he turned to leave, Headmaster Cornelius tapped the top of his own ear.

“I sense great things in your future, gentlemen. I look forward to hearing tales of your exploits. You’re always welcome to come to my office and bend my ear.”

Headmaster Cornelius turned the corner, his footsteps echoing as he descended the tower. Sylvain and I stared at each other. Glamor or no glamor, Cornelius knew, all right.

Our next stop was Dr. Fang’s office, Sylvain already changed into his hoodie disguise. He pulled the cowl back when her door was closed, preferring to let his ears breathe. I didn’t like that he had to be uncomfortable to move around the castle, but maybe we’d find some other way to keep his ears hidden.

“Color me impressed,” Dr. Fang said, the three of us gathered around her desk, the Blood of the Earth in the center. “Phenomenal work, you two.”

I smiled at Sylvain. “Couldn’t have done it without him.”

He scratched the back of his neck, the end of his nose. I could get used to seeing him a little embarrassed like that, slightly flustered. It was pretty cute.

“If it’s all the same to you,” Sylvain said, addressing Dr. Fang, “I’d love to sit out on your balcony again.”

She parted her hands, gesturing toward the windows at the end of her office. “Be my guest. You’re more than welcome.”

After the door closed, I shrugged. “I think he restores his energy from basking in the sun or something. Either way, he seems to enjoy it a lot.” I peeked out through the glass, where Sylvain was shirtless again, eyes shut and smiling into the sunlight like a cat. “Again, I genuinely couldn’t have done it without him.”

“Oh, don’t worry. I believe you. Especially considering your roster of all-stars.”

I leaned back in my chair, frowning. “Hey, now, don’t be mean. Everybody helped. The doves, the wolf, the cat, too. But — okay, don’t look at me like that. Yes. Fine. It was ninety percent Sylvain.”

Dr. Fang smacked the top of her desk. “Incorrect. Give yourself some credit, Lochlann. You’re the summoner.”

“Good point. And well, I did use that spell you told me about. You know the one. Like screaming from the very bottom of your soul. Totally rocked the earth guardian’s shit.”

“Allegra’s Lament. Oh, gods, didn’t it feel incredible? Very cathartic. Tell me everything.”

And so I did, from the Venus flytrap to the bush babies and the guardian itself. I skipped over the part about Aphrodite. It didn’t seem important, a goddess’s whimsy. She never even showed up after we’d killed the guardian. I skipped the part about the pool, of course. I mean, honestly.

Fang rested her elbow on her desk, leaning her shoulder toward me, her chin in her hand as she nodded. The two of us looked like coworkers exchanging gossip over lunch. It was such a simple change in her body language, but I’d never felt more welcome, more seen as someone who could some day become her peer, maybe even her equal. An actual summoner.

But I had to mention that thing about the guardian. Well, and the flytrap, too, how they’d dried up almost instantly, their brittle corpses blowing away with the wind.

“And the guardian didn’t leave a seedling behind,” I said, still unsettled by what had happened. Did we kill it permanently? I shuffled my feet. “It’s called the Withering, Sylvain says. Something that affected the Verdance, and now it’s here, too.”

Dr. Fang shook her head, frowning. “I’ve never heard of something like that. I’ll have to consult with the faculty, maybe the headmasters, keep the Oriel of Earth sealed until we’ve figured things out. I’m sure it’s nothing.”

Hearing that kind of talk from an authority figure should have been reassuring, and yet I still had my doubts. And then there was that other lingering doubt. I couldn't stand it. Sylvain was still out on the balcony, enjoying the sunlight. I had to take this chance to ask someone who would know.

"Doc? Now that this is over, does that mean Sylvain is still my idolon, or do I have to dismiss him?"

"Interesting way of phrasing that. Why would you when he's invariably the most powerful idolon in your arsenal now?"

"They're supposed to go home. My doves, Scruffles, Evander's butterflies, they all go home once they're done with their tasks. Why has he stayed?"

She pursed her lips in thought. "I have a feeling this is a little out of my area of expertise, Lochlann. This isn't about summoning anymore, is it?"

I shook my head, staring at the top of her desk.

Dr. Fang sighed. "Maybe he has a reason for staying. Think on that. Perhaps he craves the thrill of power he receives when you infuse him with magic. Or it could be as simple as him enjoying your company. Have you paused to consider that?"

"I just wish I knew for sure."

She bent across the table. "Then ask him. Gods above and below, haven't I taught you to be inquisitive all these years? Always ask questions. Never be afraid. There is no such thing as a stupid question."

I rolled my eyes and sighed. "Only stupid people."

"Aww. You do listen in class. I'm so touched."

I rummaged through my belongings, pulling out the Blood of the Earth, the stone so warm in my palm. I reached across the table, presenting it proudly. Dr. Fang blocked me with her open hand.

"Yours to keep. Consider it a souvenir."

She snapped her fingers. A panel opened in the wall behind her, the edges of it so seamless that I never would have noticed it myself. Inside was an array of glass phials and jars, one of which contained what looked like a dozen Blood of the Earth stones.

I threw my hands up in frustration. "Are you serious? Then what was the point of asking me to grab another one?"

"Hang it on a cord and wear it around your neck. Pawn it and buy yourself a Playstation. I don't care. The point is that you were assigned to acquire one, and so you have. Consider it a bonus. Congratulations either way. You've done well. I'll speak to the headmasters. We'll have your Crest for you soon."

I tucked the Blood of the Earth into my backpack, confused as Sylvain and I left Dr. Fang's office. Happy, but mostly confused. Exhausted, too. I wanted nothing more than to take a shower, maybe relax with a beer or two. Sylvain seemed very refreshed considering everything we'd done all day, maybe from that time spent basking under the sun.

"We should go and see Bruna," he said, hand reaching for mine. "Come on. We should tell her how much her potions helped us."

"I was going to ask her and Namirah over to my room for drinks later, but — hey. Let go."

Fingers laced through mine, Sylvain led me down the corridor in search of Bruna's office, strutting like he owned the place. I tagged along, embarrassed, avoiding the gaze of every student and faculty member we passed. Childish of me to feel that way, perhaps, but I wasn't used to holding hands with anyone in public. I wasn't used to holding hands at all.

But then I remembered that this was how I'd introduced him to the Wispwood, guided him by the

hand. This was how we leapt through the stained glass window, how we entered the Oriel of Earth. The echo only made me blush harder.

“When someone gives you a gift — especially one as useful as a draught of healing — it is considered polite to demonstrate appreciation. We should thank her for her aid.”

He was right. We couldn’t have done it without Bruna’s potions. I mustered my energies, trying to match Sylvain’s level of enthusiasm. He opened the door to Bruna’s office. Confetti exploded. Paper horns tooted in my face.

“Surprise!” Bruna and Namirah cried. “Happy Summoner’s Crest Acquisition Day, Locke!”

I beamed at the two of them, picking bits of colorful paper out of my hair, beyond flattered and touched. “There’s got to be a more graceful way to say that.”

Bruna shrugged. “Can you believe they don’t sell greeting cards that say that? Terrible.”

“You two are so sweet,” I said, accepting the plate Namirah pushed into my hands, a slice of chocolate cake on it. “How did you know we’d head here so soon?”

“Because I would’ve beaten you half to death if you hadn’t come here to tell us everything,” Namirah said, handing Sylvain his slice of cake. He took a bite, shutting his eyes with pleasure as he savored the chocolate. Damn it. Too adorable.

I laughed, perfectly aware that Namirah was capable of taking me down in a fight with both hands tied behind her back, beyond grateful I’d followed Sylvain’s advice. I took my first bite of cake, hummed delightedly against the fork. Ah, the simple pleasures of civilization.

“Sylvain here said that we should come and thank you for your potions.” I nudged him with my elbow. “So thank you, Bru. Seriously. You’re a lifesaver.”

I pecked her on the cheek, careful not to leave any crumbs. She rubbed her face bashfully, smiling. Sylvain, dense as the cake we were having, and just as sweet, kissed her on the other cheek. Bruna could have burst into flames.

“Gods, it was nothing and you know it,” she said. “But you’re so welcome. I’m glad they helped. You should thank Namirah, too.”

I quirked my head at her. “Um. Thank you? I think?”

Namirah tilted a flute of champagne past her lips and smiled. “Who do you think woke you up in time for that bush baby attack?”

My mouth fell open. The roar. That was Namirah in her lion form. I shook my head, smiling so hard I thought my face would split in half.

“You really do look out for me. Thank you.”

She pressed a kiss against my forehead. “Always, baby boy. I was in the area anyway. Bruna had some ingredients that needed gathering, so I ducked into the Oriel of Earth for a spell.”

My eyes almost widened, remembering the events at the pool. But I controlled myself. “Did you — did you happen to stick around the next morning?”

Namirah blinked at me. “No. Was there another interesting fight? Why do you ask?”

“N-no fight. And no reason, really.”

“Utmost respect for changelings,” Sylvain said, cutting into the conversation. “An incredible art form.”

He’d saved me with the subject change, holding his champagne flute up to Namirah. But wait. Where the hell was mine?

Namirah clinked their glasses together. “Cheers, darling. You’re not so bad yourself.”

“Me,” I said, reaching out with greedy hands. “Where’s my champagne?”

“Prosecco, actually,” Namirah said. “Just the Italian sort of bubbly. We love you, Locke, but not

enough to grab the best stuff.”

“Don’t care. Gimme.”

“Only if you promise to tell us everything that happened,” Bruna said, handing me my flute. “And I do mean everything.”

I chugged from my glass, unable to hold back a smile as the bubbles spilled down my throat. Italian, French, I wasn’t picky. I was with my best girls, my two best friends in the world, and the man who had apparently charmed his way into our circle.

Namirah went to pick at some more snacks. Bruna looked for a second bottle of bubbly. Sylvain leaned over to me, whispering.

“Aren’t you glad we came?”

I smiled, trying not to look so forlorn. Of course I was glad we came.

I just wished I knew he was going to stay.



I SLUNG MY TOWEL OVER MY SHOULDERS, HAVING DRIED MY HAIR AS VIGOROUSLY AS I DARED WITHOUT rubbing myself bald. I hated going to bed with wet hair, but I also didn't love blowing it dry. I know, I have such massive problems.

And my biggest problem of all was in the shower, taking his turn after graciously allowing me to wash up first. I couldn't quite wrap my head around the situation, but Dr. Fang's words lingered. Was this really Sylvain deciding to stay with me? I still needed to figure out for myself why I wanted him to.

"I want him to," I murmured, sitting at the table, staring at the day's menu, the words meaning nothing. That was all I knew. As contentious as our relationship had been, I couldn't deny Sylvain's power. I especially couldn't deny my attraction.

But what were his reasons for staying, if he was, in fact, staying? He'd felt the rush of magic each time I'd augmented his strength with my essence, each time I'd taken his unusual talents to another level. Was that all?

And yes, the attraction wasn't one-sided. Clearly. That morning at the pool had been extremely eye-opening in more ways than one. Yet I still had my doubts. Sylvain could have jerked me off out of boredom, or worse, pity.

I heaved a deep sigh, knowing I should be a little less sulky about everything. I'd qualified for my Crest, for fuck's sake. My life was headed somewhere, and Father's voice in my head could finally shut up. Couldn't I celebrate that, at least? Yes. With a nice, hot meal, straight from the kitchens.

"We'll have two of these, please," I said out loud, pointing at the bottom of the menu. "And some grated parmesan on the side?"

The gruff voice answered. "No sweat, kid."

Bless the kitchen imps. Hardworking bros, every last one of them, and well-compensated by the headmasters.

"I thought you'd have dressed yourself by now."

Oh. I never heard the water shut off. Sylvain stood by the bathroom door, a towel wrapped around his waist, another on his head. The man was burning through towels like nothing, but the laundry imps were bros, too, so there was that.

I gestured at myself. "Boxers. See? Nice and comfy."

He wrinkled his nose. "And yet still too tight for me." He rubbed a towel through his hair as he

approached, stopping just behind me to read the menu in my hand. “Oh, is that ravioli? Yes, I’ll have some. Thank you.”

It took some restraint to hold back the obvious question, but I was too exhausted to interrogate him, at least that night. I was never going to get a straight answer out of Sylvain. To save on frustration, it was best if I started thinking of him as a very well-traveled exchange student whose favorite hobbies were playing dumb and pretending he was born yesterday.

Plus he was so close to me, his skin smelling of my soap and shampoo again. Where was I going to find the room to get angry or think straight when the scent of him was taking up so much space in my head, in my body?

“I already ordered for you, don’t worry. I figured you might like the ravioli. Call it a hunch.”

Sylvain grinned and poked a finger into the hollow of my cheek. “You’re so considerate.”

Weird. I liked this playful side of him. But not the side of him that was okay with sitting on my bed while wearing a wet towel. I frowned.

“Get off the bed, Sylvain. I don’t want to sleep on damp sheets.”

He kicked his feet up, leaning against the pillows, a defiant brat. “I’ll sleep on this side, then. I don’t care.”

I frowned harder. “And who said you were going to sleep on the bed tonight?”

“Surely you aren’t going to make me sleep on the floor again. Oh no. That look on your face says you want me to — honestly, Locke? After all we’ve been through? In the words of your ancestors, this is bullshit.”

He pouted and smacked his hand against the mattress, close to my backpack where I’d left it. The flap was unfastened. Something long and cylindrical rolled out of the opening.

“Goodness gracious.” Sylvain’s eyes went wide. “What is that thing, and how is it meant to fit up your bottom?”

“It’s not a — oh, stop it, Sylvain.” I stepped over and snatched the candle off the bed. “You’ve seen one before. It’s a glamor-glow candle. I thought it would be interesting to — well, I don’t know what I was thinking. Look. I’m sorry. I have trust issues, okay? Disappearing father, and a disappearing mother, too? That messes with your head.”

Sylvain rolled his eyes. “I’m not offended, if that’s what you think. It’s all part of fae nature to be deceptive, so on, and so forth. Go ahead. Light it. I dare you. Try and see if I’ve deceived you.”

I stared at the candle, sorely tempted, if only for my own peace of mind. I’d snuck one from Dr. Fang’s office. The first fae that reappeared on Earth had been a very unpleasant and violent sort, walking among humans under cover of glamor, executing dangerous surprise attacks.

The members of the magical community — the arcane underground — banded together to create objects that could be used to dispel glamor. The attacks were also how we’d learned that several of the fables surrounding the fae were untrue. Names didn’t give them any real power, and iron didn’t work.

But the glamor-glow candles did, created by the Flickering Flame, one of the great guilds of artisans found in the dimensional bazaar known as the Black Market. I shrugged, reach for a box of matches on my bedside table, and lit it, the scent of the spark fleeting, the candle’s glow permeating the room.

I held it up to him, close enough to check. His ears sharpened before my eyes, the rounds of them extending into tapered tips. I stared hard. Nothing else changed. Sylvain turned his hands up and shrugged.

“See? As handsome as ever.”

“Oh, shut up.” I chuckled, amused by his ego, but also relieved.

A bead of wax dripped from the tip of the candle and onto his chest. I gasped. He hissed, baring clenched teeth.

“You did that on purpose. You do like to hurt me, don’t you?”

“It was an accident! I think. And maybe. Only a little.”

“I can’t hurt you, but you can hurt me,” he growled. “That hardly seems fair.”

“We should probably stop trying to hurt each other,” I said, struggling to avoid looking at the shape growing underneath his towel.

“Agreed.” He grinned, his teeth flashing in the candlelight. “I’m far more interested in pleasure, anyway. You know yourself. Remember what I did to you at the pool? What we did to each other?”

Porcelain clattered. I started away from the bed, candle in hand as I whirled toward the noise.

“Oh,” I said. “Hello.”

“Don’t mind me.” The poor imp wiped at his forehead with a polka-dotted handkerchief. He probably wasn’t expecting to see a bit of light kink on his rounds. “I was just bringing your dishes and then — okay, bye.”

“Thank you,” I said, wanting nothing more than to vanish. The look on the imp’s face told me he was thinking the exact same thing.

“Yes,” Sylvain said, happy to include himself in the conversation, to emphasize that he was still half-naked in my bed. “Thank you very much, friend.”

The imp disappeared in a puff of smoke. The menu on the table made noise again. This time the imp sounded like he was speaking through tears of joy.

“My kiddo is getting so much ass, you guys. I’m so, so proud of him.”

The kitchen erupted into cheers. Pots and pans rattled. I sprinted toward the table, picked up the menu, and set it on fire. The sound warbled, then cut out as it burned to ashes. I blew the glamor-glow candle out.

“Well,” I said, composing myself, gesturing at the table. “I suppose we should have some dinner.”

“I’m not very hungry just now,” Sylvain said, his grin transformed into a smirk. “At least not for food.”

My ears burned. I gulped.

Sylvain waggled his eyebrows, placed his hands behind his head. “Your imp friends seem to think that you have recently acquired a significant quantity of ass. And here I thought you were far more interested in my — ”

“Stop it. Whatever it is you’re doing right now, just stop.”

He sat up, hands planted on the mattress. “Stop what? I thought we were being playful.”

I waved a hand at him, at the room, at nothing in particular. “I’m so confused, Sylvain. You’re hot and you’re cold. You say all these things, but I can never tell what’s what. I need to start over. We started out at each other’s throats, and that’s not how it should have happened. Let’s learn to be friends.” I thrust my hand out, knowing I must have looked and sounded absolutely unhinged. “Hi. I’m Locke.”

“Maybe I don’t want to be friends,” Sylvain muttered. “Maybe I want more.”

I wrenched at my hair. “You can’t tell me things like that unless you mean them. Summoner. Eidolon. This kind of thing doesn’t happen.”

“And why can’t it?” Sylvain rose from the bed, scowling. “Show me in your books. Where in your human history does it say that this is forbidden? Why are you so afraid of this, of me?”

“Because I’m terrified you’ll disappear,” I shouted. I never meant to shout. I panted, catching my

breath. Was I sweating, too? “I’m scared you’ll just go away, like everything else. Everyone else. After the battle’s done, idolons go home, Sylvain. The doves go home. Evander’s butterflies go home. And soon you’ll go home, too, and I can’t fall for you knowing that’s going to fucking happen.”

My outburst had sucked all the anger out of the room. I never meant to sound so pitiful, so pathetic. But it was the truth, wasn’t it? For once, I was telling him the truth.

Sylvain spoke in a gentler voice. “Why would you think that?”

I shook my head. “Trust issues. You know, I think I hate my father. Or I must. I don’t know why he left, or even how, but even before that all he ever did was judge me, criticize me. I’m not becoming a summoner to follow in his footsteps. This is for me, now. And my mother, I miss her, but — gods, listen to me. I’m just rambling now.”

“Then we can ramble together,” he said. “I listened to you. It’s your turn to listen to me.”

“Okay,” I said, relieved that I could stop embarrassing myself. “I’m listening. Now you.”

“I think I might be falling for you.”

My body froze, the breath suspended in my throat. I blinked at him, cautious.

“This isn’t one of those cute, annoying things you try to do, is it? Where you deliberately misinterpret language, like acquiring ass?”

“No, it isn’t! You’re infuriating. You order me around like I’m nothing. And what’s worse, you consort with gods. Sometimes I can’t stand being around you. But I can’t stand the thought of being away from you more.”

I watched, taken aback, as he paced up and down the room. It was almost cute, the way his eyes kept flitting back and forth, the confusion so clear on his face as he ranted. He stalked up to me, so close I could feel his breath on my cheek.

“Your clever mouth, your sharp tongue — no one ever speaks to me the way you do. And it drives me wild. You challenge me, show me things I’ve never known before, brought me to new heights. It feels — it feels like the sun is shining for the first time in ages.”

I swallowed in the silence, thrilled, terrified, unsure of what to say.

“This wasn’t part of my mission. To seek out the Withering, to find a way to stop it back home? You weren’t part of the plan.”

The lump in my throat bobbed painfully as I swallowed, thirsty, and hungry. Fresh food and drink sat on the table behind me, but I knew I needed something else to slake my thirst, to satisfy.

“So where does that leave us?” I asked, slowly. “What happens now?”

He pressed his lips against me, tongue searching for mine, the roughness of his hands groping — my lower back, a nipple, the tenting bulge in my shorts. I moaned into his mouth, bucked against his body, all questions forgotten, my insecurities vanishing like froth on the shore. I broke away. Not here. He lunged after me, but I held him back.

“Sylvain. Bed. Please. Now.”

He obliged. I yelped when he took me by the waist, whirling me across the bedroom floor, as if in a dance. His towel fell from his hips, his cock thumping against the side of my thigh. I almost laughed, except this was so ridiculous, so hot, how much he wanted me, how much I wanted him.

He dropped me on the bed, the mattress cushioning my landing. That time I actually laughed, mildly flattered at how he was holding back his strength, playing rough, but almost too gentle when he laid me down.

Maybe he’d be rough where it mattered.

Sylvain headed for the bedside table, pulled out the drawer, and extracted the bottle of oil I kept there for — for personal use. He held it up triumphantly, brandishing it, like a treasure discovered at

the bottom of a dungeon.

“Aha.”

I leaned up on my elbows. “That’s, I, Bruna gave it to me for my — hands. Yeah. She said it was good for, you know, rough, calloused skin.”

“Don’t lie to me, Locke. I’ve felt your hands. I’ve felt them on my cock. They’re soft as anything.” I blushed, then flinched when he threw an accusing finger in my face. “This luscious essence of coconut is used specifically for self-pleasure. Admit it.”

My lips drew back, because who were we if we weren’t squabbling over the littlest things, even seconds away from intercourse?

“You can also use it to fuck me, you know.”

Sylvain’s cock twitched, like it knew its presence had been explicitly requested. He unstopped the phial, poured drops into his palm, all without looking, staring so hard at me and my body I thought I would burst into flames. He smeared the oil all along the length of his cock, sighing softly at the sensation as he drew closer.

“Off,” he commanded, nodding at my shorts. “Now.”

I obeyed, tugging them off hurriedly, my cock hard as anything when it flopped out. I stroked myself once, biting my lip, then moaned fully when Sylvain’s slick fingers searched my ass, probed at my hole.

“Oh, fuck, Sylvain.”

“Oh, fuck, indeed,” he rasped, breaking eye contact at last, concentrating on preparing me to take him.

“If you had asked me,” I breathed. “Back at the Oriel of Earth, at the pool. If you had asked to fuck me, right there, I would have let you.”

“No, you wouldn’t have. You hated me. Perhaps you still do, a little.”

“No, I don’t. I like you. A little.”

“You didn’t like me this much then,” he said, taking my cock in his oil-slicked hand. I threw my head back against the mattress, the smoothness of the oil, the roughness of his palm sending sparks flaring throughout my body.

“Don’t,” I said. “Please, don’t. I’ll come if you keep going.”

Sylvain obeyed, removed his hand. “As you wish, summoner.”

He shoved his cock inside me instead. I bit on my knuckles, holding back a scream that threatened to rip from the very bottom of my soul. He went slow at first, testing the waters. Maybe he was worried about the pact, or maybe he genuinely didn’t want me hurting.

And when he heard me whimpering, saw my eyes rolling into the back of my head, Sylvain went all the way in, and out, and in again, building to an excruciating, ecstatic rhythm.

“Look at me, Locke. Look at me.”

I wrenched my eyes open, seeing the bright gold of his as he drove himself into me, over and over. So much of him. Almost too much.

“Beautiful,” Sylvain said. “You’re fucking beautiful.”

I ran a hand along his torso, fingers digging into his gorgeous chest, his abs, those insane lines at his pelvis, telling him with my touch what I thought of him. I moaned, incapable of speaking, every last one of my breaths focused on keeping me alive, on holding on to this overpowering sensation.

Sylvain dipped his head, mouth and tongue working at my nipple, eyes burning into mine. I groaned, terrified that I couldn’t hold myself back. He watched me throughout everything, wanting to see how I would react to his slightest touch, the smallest adjustment of his powerful hips. I felt so

wanted, so important. I felt adored.

I threw my head back, feeling his fingers tighten around my throat. Not hurting, not choking — claiming me, possessing me. A reminder that the writhing, whimpering thing beneath him belonged to him and him only. Fine. I could let him have that. I was happy to. This one thing for the prince.

“Play with yourself,” he said, never letting up his rhythm, never slowing. And I knew it would make me lose all control, but I obliged, gritting my teeth as I stroked myself, my cock throbbing, my insides glowing hot.

Maybe that was what I needed, to be told what to do, a summoner commanded by his eidolon. I laughed into the air with understanding. I was giving myself over to him, body and soul, letting an eidolon ravage me, do as he pleased.

Father would hate this. Maybe that was why I loved it. And what would Aphrodite think? I had no way of telling, but no way of hiding from the entities, either. Was she watching? For the first time in a long while, all the burden of shame fell away from my body, my shoulders light, my body limber.

Fuck it. If the gods and demons were watching, then let them.

I was happy to give them a show.

“Fuck me as hard as you dare,” I growled, relishing the shock in his eyes, how quickly it changed to delight. Here was a man so unused to being told what to do, and here I was, his summoner, his caller, for once actually ordering him to do my bidding.

He plunged into me again and again, slamming against my ass, his inhuman strength and fluidity driving him into the brightest, most electric parts of me. The bed frame creaked, begging for mercy. If we broke the bed, he could fuck me on the floor.

So huge. So strong. I’d never felt more ravenous, and yet I’d never felt more complete.

“Fill me,” my voice said, hoarse and scraping through the room, the sound of it so foreign to my ears, like it had come from someone else’s mouth. “Sylvain — fuck, oh, gods.”

I came harder than ever before, in thick, hot slashes across my belly. The sight of it broke Sylvain’s stride, momentarily threw off his rhythm, and then he thrust deeper, deepest, the animal within him groaning, roaring as he trembled from release.

And I shuddered, a mound of quivering flesh underneath him, panting, gasping for breath. Sylvain planted his hands to either side of my head, kissed me hard, pulled away again. With eyes like twin suns he stared into my soul.

“Was it worth it, oh summoner? Was I worth it after all?”

He collapsed against me, heavy, huge, solid, the most solid thing in my life. Every muscle on his torso printed sweat against my skin, the scent of his musk something I would wear like cologne.

I tangled my fingers through his wet hair, filled with his adoration, filled with him. I stared at the ceiling, my vision swimming, dizzy and exhausted by his performance, perhaps, or dazzled by the sunlight of his eyes.

Satisfied, spent, and utterly out of breath, I couldn’t answer. But it was true. Despite the taboo and the tantrums — maybe even because of them — Sylvain was worth every second.

He was worth every inch.



I OPENED MY EYES TO THE SOUND OF RUSTLING, SOMETHING THAT HAD BECOME SO FAMILIAR IN RECENT time that it was almost comforting. I was alone in bed.

Sylvain was standing nearby, no longer quite so naked, the last of the leaves he'd summoned adhering to his thigh to complete his garment. He'd crafted himself a pair of his favorite leafy britches, his strong chest stretching out the gray hooded vest I'd given him.

But why did he look so — I don't know. Crestfallen. That was the word.

"Come back to bed," I mumbled.

"Go back to sleep," he said, giving me a small smile.

I pushed myself off the mattress, sat up. "What's going on?" I rubbed at my eyes, my hair, headed toward the breakfast table. "If you're hungry, I can just — oh, right. I burned the menu. Well, I'm sure we can find you something to — "

"Locke. I have to go."

The words trickled over me like drops of ice rain.

"Wait. I'm confused. Was it something I did?"

I detested how pathetic I sounded in my own ears. He started for me, and I leaned away. He stopped again, doubt, maybe some hurt etched on his face.

"You did nothing wrong. You were wonderful." He gestured around the room with one hand. "This. All this has been wonderful."

Past tense. That wasn't very reassuring. "So where are you going?"

"Back to the Verdance. But not for long, only to see if I can stop the Withering."

I gripped the back of a chair, trying to steady myself. "But we don't know for sure what can stop it. Unless — did you find something?"

His eyes fell on a book he'd left on the table, the same one he'd complained about when we were setting up camp. *An Annotated History of the Wispwood*. He was only pretending. He'd actually read it, or at least the parts of it that mattered. I shut my eyes, pushed my palms against my face.

"The Wispwell. That's why you've been so curious about the Wispwell."

He wasn't thirsty when he arrived, but had been so eager to learn about it. All those questions. And the book. The damn book. Why didn't I put all the pieces together?

"What if its waters can cure this decay, Locke? The book says that the Wispwell's waters run deep, make the castle and its forest strong. Perhaps it could counteract the Withering, even in some

small way. And I swear, it won't be long. You need only call me, and I'll return."

"You could have just asked," I said, my head spinning. "You didn't have to sneak your way around this, then sneak your way out again."

"But I said I would come back. Don't you believe me? I've lingered here long enough. The Withering is taking over our corner of the Verdance, and I fear it's only going to get worse. Nothing odd about wilting and browning leaves. I'm used to it. But this much desiccation? You saw so yourself when the guardian crumbled to nothing, when the first creature we killed did the same."

I held the chair again, staring down at my belt draped along the back of it. Wait. Was that a slip of the tongue? What was all that about dry leaves? I didn't know enough about the Verdance, but the courts — back at the tent, Sylvain mentioned a perpetual summer.

"You said it was always summer in your corner of the Verdance."

Sylvain glanced away, his lips quavering as he searched for an answer.

"There's something else you need to know."

In one quick motion I unclasped the guard of my dagger's sheath. The sparkle of summer, the blossom of spring. And what came in fall?

"The Withering," I breathed. I rushed at him, placed my dagger against his throat, knowing he could overpower me. He knew it, too, but the sadness in his eyes told me that the drawing of my blade had been hurtful enough. I steeled myself.

"You — you betrayed me. All that talk of the Summer Court, the Verdance, and your father, the Summer King."

"I said that the King of Summer was a good man. I never said he was my father. You put those pieces together yourself."

He'd been so careful. I searched my memories, my eyes flitting all about the bedchamber. He was right about that part. I'd only assumed.

"Yet you lied about everything else." I bared my teeth, pressing in, the dagger so close to drawing blood.

"I didn't lie about falling for you."

The two of us stood like statues. I drew breath in one moment, and he exhaled in the next, the silence in the room so stifling.

"I don't expect you to believe me, Locke. Not after all this. But I never lied about my feelings for you."

"Stop it. That's all irrelevant right now."

And there I was, lying to him myself. The lump in his throat bobbed as he swallowed, not out of fear. Only sadness. But how could I trust him?

"Everything, Sylvain. Tell me everything."

His gaze went to my lips, then up into my eyes once more. Sylvain sighed.

"I lied because you would have mistrusted me even more. The Autumn Court, we're the darker aspect of the fae, right next to the Court of Winter. It's what everyone knows. I thought if I presented myself as someone from the lighter half, then — you don't believe me, do you?"

"You're doing the talking right now," I said, so unconvincing to my own ears, my hand gripping the dagger so close to shaking. "So talk."

"Locke, you have to understand. I came here to investigate what your people knew of the Withering, come to find out that it's only just spread to your world. How would you have treated a fae of the Autumn Court, knowing that some accursed plague is sapping the life from your forests?"

He had a point there. I would have suspected him on the spot, no question. But the anger still

coursed through my blood, the betrayal too fresh.

“Tell me, then. Are you even a prince, or are you pretending about that as well?”

“Does all that really matter anymore?” His words came sullen, glum. “If I showed you proof, you still wouldn’t believe me.”

And he was right again.

“The Withering is true. My feelings for you are true. I need to help my people, Locke, but I will return.”

He took his chance, slowly raised his hand to meet mine, edging my dagger away from his throat. My arm dangled at my side, defeated, useless. I couldn’t hurt him like that. I could never.

“Lochlann, listen to me. I want to be by your side, if you’ll have me. I won’t be gone long. You need only call, and I’ll answer.”

I said nothing, my insides a storm of confusion, anger, hurt. He brought my hands to his mouth, pressed his lips against my knuckles, like he was too afraid to kiss me.

“Summon me, summoner,” the Autumn Prince said, his voice trembling. “And I will tear through the walls between worlds to fight at your side.”

I wanted to tell him the right things, to say I believed him, that yes, of course he could earn my trust again. Instead my gaze fell on the floorboards, the dagger slipping from my fingers, clattering onto the wood.

Sylvain sighed, footsteps padding away from me. He paused and lingered at the doorway. Maybe he was waiting for me to say something, to wish him well, to give him words of reassurance. But I couldn’t bring myself to look at him, my chest in a painful twist. The door creaked, and he was gone.

Too much said. Too much to process. Overwhelmed, alarmed, I did all I could to put things as they were again, retrieving the dagger, placing it back in its sheath. I pushed on the knob, made sure the door was shut.

Air. Fresh air. I needed to breathe, to clear my head. I rushed to the window, parted the curtains, threw the glass open.

The breeze blew in, not the brisk chill of night that I’d expected, but something balmy, and vaguely perfumed. She made her presence known on the wind. This time, she didn’t reveal herself.

“Ah, sapling. Is this a bad time?”

“Hello, Aphrodite.” I sighed, leaning my forearms against the windowsill. “Yeah. Bad time. I guess you could say that.”

Not just a bad time, I wanted to tell her. The worst, and could she please just go and leave me to my thoughts? But that wasn’t the sort of thing you said to powerful, ancient beings who were known for being vindictive, who thought that turning humans into random animals was hilarious.

“I only meant to ask about the Withering, sweet sapling, but it seems so insignificant, does it not? Right now, I mean, compared to the withering of your heart.”

My fingernails dug into the windowsill.

“Oh, goodness, no. Did I strike a nerve? Why, I only meant to tease. I know what dwells in your heart, Lochlann Wilde. You’re wondering whether your princeling lingered for power, or for love. You’re wondering if he’ll ever return again.”

I massaged my temples with the tips of my fingers. “Aphrodite. Please. Why are you tormenting me? Aren’t you supposed to be the goddess of love?”

“That I am. And of all the things that come with it, besides. Heartbreak is one of them. But chin up. You’re a summoner, are you not? Prince or no prince, he is your eidolon. When you need him, call. He shall answer. It’s as simple as that.”

“You can’t know that. How can you possibly know that?” I sighed. “With all due respect, Aphrodite, I’d rather not talk about — well, about anything right now.”

She sighed, too. “Ah. Another time then. Until we meet again, sapling, starling, little darling. Fare well. And I do mean that.”

The wind shifted, carrying the echo of her voice far from the Wispwood. And from outside came a gust that brought only cold, as the night intended. I chuckled bitterly. The cold that I deserved.

Call him. If I reached out through the ether, summoned him in the ways prescribed by our ancient art, would Sylvain answer? Would he respond as an eidolon, or as the man who sneered at me in the clearing, who bathed me in the pool, who protected me from death with his power?

I clenched my teeth in anger, hating how I felt, hating more how it made the first of my tears fall on the windowsill. Call, Aphrodite said, and he would answer.

But what if he didn’t?



MORNING. I OPENED MY EYES, HOPING FOR A WEIGHT ON THE MATTRESS BESIDE ME, ARMS AROUND MY waist, the light snore of a man slightly taller than myself, yet big enough to envelope me. But nothing.

I sat up, rubbed my eyes, my hair, feeling like an idiot all over again. Of course he wasn't coming back. Why would he? He got what he wanted. If the water of the Wispwell really could cure the Withering, then that was it. Problem solved.

A net positive for the world, or at least for the Verdance. And hey, presto — we could draw water from the Wispwell ourselves, bring it into the Oriel of Earth, reverse the effect of the Withering. No more desiccation and death, on this side of the Verdance or anywhere else.

Yet I felt so empty. Stupid. Selfish. I wanted him to come back, never mind the lies, the betrayal. I wanted him standing in front of me so we could talk, and fight, and fuck, and talk again.

Had Sylvain really done anything truly unforgivable? He only wanted to save his people, and he was right, anyway. My first reaction to learning that he was from the Autumn Court was to freak out. I cringed as I remembered the singing of my blade when I drew the dagger, held it to his neck. He was right to lie.

"Gods above and below," I muttered. "Locke. You idiot."

I trundled over to the breakfast table. My stomach was rumbling, but I was in no mood to eat. Fuck it. I plucked some clean clothes out of the dresser, dragged my walking corpse to the bathroom. I went through the motions in the shower, because if I was going to be the heartbroken fool aimlessly pacing the courtyard, I should at least have the decency to be freshly bathed.

Finally I could live out my fantasy of haunting my own wing of the academy, candelabra in hand, drifting through the corridors as a fragrant, soap-scented ghost. I chuckled at the thought, my first laugh of the morning. A small win, at least.

With my eyes shut, I groped for the phial of liquid soap I always used, risking broken glass in the stall like I did every day of my life, tempting fate by stubbornly refusing to use something else to wash myself. Listen, Bruna could do no wrong with her formulations. I would drink that liquid soap if I could.

But it was missing. I opened my eyes, wondering if I'd knocked it over. Maybe Sylvain had poured it all down the drain, washed out the phial to use it to collect his precious Wispwell water. I got angry at the thought of it, then got angry at myself for resenting his concern for his people. Fuck. I was the asshole, wasn't I? I reached for the bar of soap I hadn't used in ages instead, so old that it had

crusted over and fused to the porcelain.

Half an hour or so later I'd fulfilled my own prophecy, hovering aimlessly in the courtyard by the Wispswell. I'd brought my backpack with me, too. And what exactly was I going to do? Access the sentinels, leave the academy, go tearing through the forest outside in search of the man who'd fucked me senseless?

So senseless, in fact, that I actually was considering going after him. I scoffed under my breath and shook my head. Maybe this was all Sylvain's fault after all, literally fucking my brains out with that perfect cock, holding me in his sway with that perfect body, that perfect face.

We had a good time, and that was that. The things he'd said about wanting to see me again, about coming back? He was a charmer, so seductive that I deserved to be forgiven for being smitten, for falling for his tricks. Those were only sweet words to lull me.

Maybe he didn't think I'd wake up when I did. It was just as likely that none of this mattered. What I needed to do was turn my ass around, head back up those stairs, and crawl back into bed. Draw the curtains, clock a couple more hours of sleep. After that I could track Namirah and Bruna down and have a good, solid cry.

So I turned around, intent on going up to my room. But Evander Skink stood in my way, summoned by my misery, his arrival so sly and unexpected. Unwanted, too, like a clump of weeds. Or a wart. He blocked my path to the stairs with his body and his punchable face.

"I'm not in the mood right now, Skink."

"Oh, you do wound me, Locke. Shouldn't we be on a first-name basis by now? It's Evan. Your friend, Evan Skink."

"Right, then. Okay." I rolled my eyes, hungry, tired, angry. "What the fuck do you want, Evan?"

He narrowed his eyes. "I'm not sure I like your tone, Locke. You look like shit yourself. Rough night?"

"Just get the hell out of my way, Skink."

I tried to shove past him, but he placed his hand on my shoulder. I rounded on him, ready to deck him in the face, when I noticed something there I'd never seen before. What the — was that sympathy? A glimmer of humanity fighting its way out of the shriveled lump that was Evander Skink's heart?

"Listen. I know I've given you plenty of grief over our time here together. I guess it's not totally your fault that you're such a mess."

I shook my head and grimaced. "Wow. You're kind of an ass even when you're trying to be nice. At least you're consistent."

Evander crossed his arms and shrugged. He sighed as he spoke again. "It's in my nature. Look. Maybe I misjudged you. I thought you were just some daddy's boy deliberately doing your absolute worst because you'd never have to work for anything. Nepotism, or something like it. Grand Summoner Wilde did pay for — oh, what was it again? A renovation of a wing of the old library?"

Of the entire library, actually. Every square foot of it, to preserve all knowledge to be found in the Wispswood, but also to ensure that people would speak Baylor Wilde's name with pride. More the latter, I always thought.

I didn't correct Evander. "Something like that," I said. "I'll tell you right now, though. I'm no daddy's boy. I wasn't his favorite child, and I was his only son. And yes, Father was very wealthy, but I'm not."

The corner of Evander's mouth curved downward, a frown in the making. And was that pity in his eyes? Why was I telling him all this?

"You know, it's none of my business," he said, still making it his business by talking. "But

sometimes we have to find our own family. You have Bruna and Namirah. That's something in itself. That's more than what I have."

Evander was right. I had my sisters at the Wispwood, and I'd never really paid attention to it, but all Evander really had was the company of his butterflies. Maybe keeping others at arm's length with his arrogance was rooted in something deeper.

I looked away, hoping he couldn't see the pity in my eyes in turn. I opened my mouth, unsure of what I was even about to say. Something comforting? But he raised his hand and stopped me.

"Don't. Let me speak. I know we haven't actually gotten our Crests yet, so who the hell am I to dispense advice, but — from one summoner to another? I don't think you have much to worry about. He'll answer. He'll come when you call."

How did he know? I watched his face out of the corner of my eye. "What have you heard about me and Sylvain, exactly?"

"Nothing. But I do know that the two of you have been inseparable since he showed up here, and now he's nowhere in sight. Was it a disagreement and he's holed up sulking in your room? None of my business. Or has he gone running from the castle by dark of night, but not before dipping a bottle in the Wispwell to collect some of its water? Who knows, really. Again, it's none of my business."

He swept his hand up and back through his hair, the gleam of the butterfly ring on his finger drawing my attention. And then I noticed it, the butterfly perched up on the wall behind him. It fluttered gently, its wings a ghostly blue to blend in with the light of the Wispwell.

The sneaky bastard. How many of these things did he have positioned around the academy?

"If you wanted to get me expelled," I told him slowly, my fists clenched, "there are easier ways than planting security cameras all over the place."

Evander scoffed. "Don't be ridiculous. I enjoy tormenting you, Wilde. I don't want you gone. Even after I get my Crest, I might just want to stick around so I can torment you more. And so I can pick up the leftovers when this thing between you and your eidolon finally blows up."

I grimaced. It was pity. It had to be. Why else would Evander even risk being seen talking to me, and this time without goading me into a fight?

"You're more confusing and infuriating than he is," I said through gritted teeth.

He raised a finger to correct me. "Don't forget gorgeous, too. More gorgeous. I do believe he'll come back, you know. And even if he doesn't? Compel him with every ounce of arcane essence left in your body. Pull him forcibly out of the ether."

"Summon him, you mean. The way I did when we first met. Right. I'll keep that in mind. Thanks, I guess."

Evander wrinkled his nose like the mere thought of exchanging kindness between us repulsed him. "Don't get sappy on me now, Wilde. We still aren't friends, you know."

Ah, there it was. Good old terrible Evander, back in full force.

"I'm just saying," he continued. "That's an eidolon you shouldn't give up on so easily. If a man who looked like that walked up to me and asked for directions to a toilet, I'd get on my knees and point to my open mouth."

I barked out in laughter, then clapped my hands over my mouth. Heads turned in the courtyard, drawn by my voice, no doubt, and the unnatural redness of my face.

"Evander! You can't — you can't say shit like that."

"I can, and I will. Made you laugh, didn't I? See? I'm not as terrible as you think I am."

My chin began to itch, or maybe it was my body finding something to do to dispel the awkwardness. Maybe he wasn't a complete garbage-fire of a person, after all.

“Oh, and Wilde? I suppose I should thank you for defending me when your eidolon attacked me with his sword.”

“It’s nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

Evander Skink, who rarely ever raised his voice, cupped his hands around his mouth, shouting loud enough for everyone to hear.

“Tell your eidolon he can shove his sword inside me any old time he wants.”

He flipped his hair and laughed as my ears burned, relishing my embarrassment. A few steps more and he was gone, fluttering away like one of his butterflies. I wasn’t foolish enough to pretend that Evander Skink and I had somehow become friends. But I did know that he’d always be an evil twink.

I hiked my backpack up on my shoulders, prepared to go — well, somewhere, anywhere. Up the stairs, or out into the forest? A lovelorn fool in search of his Prince Not-So-Charming.

But I noticed the odd light emanating from the courtyard, a rich green, the color of deepest forest. I turned toward the Wispwell, the light swinging, changing direction with me as I moved. My heart clenched.

That glow. It was coming from inside my backpack.



I RUMMAGED THROUGH MY BACKPACK, MY HEART POUNDING. IT HAD TO BE THAT TINY BASTARD. Grimoire, flask of water, mini deodorant. Where the hell was it? The glow should have made it simple to find, except that my whole backpack was glowing. I upended the entire mess onto the floor in frustration.

The Blood of the Earth rolled out like a marble, like it had only been stuck in my backpack's flap the entire time. Little asshole. I had no idea what was going on, but the stone's sinister radiance, the black veins spidering across its surface couldn't be a sign of anything good. I lifted my leg, ready to stomp and shatter it to pieces.

A pulse of energy flashed from the stone, sending me flying halfway across the courtyard. I rolled with the impact, my cloak saving me from the worst of it, but I still scraped my arm, my shoulder. Wow. Now I knew how Sylvain felt each time he violated the pact.

The courtyard was filling with students and faculty, faces peering from the top levels bathed in green as they rubbernecked in confusion. I dove straight for my grimoire, my hands trembling as I fumbled through the pages. It flipped itself open for me. Yes, perfect. Good boy.

My lips flew through the incantation, my breath coming in ragged spurts as I recited the words faster than ever. I had to warn everyone, put the academy on high alert. I swept my arm out, the magic launching out of my body as little portals blinked open all around me.

Doves flew up to every level of the Wispwood, flapping and cooing. Old Man pawed at the ground, lifted his grizzled muzzle to the ceiling, and howled loud enough to reach the Spire of Radiance. And Scruffles — well, Scruffles did his thing, yowling as he tore up the stairs, scratching at classroom doors.

We needed everyone to be ready, or at the very least aware of this thing in the courtyard that was slowly absorbing the nearby trees. Plenty of material for it to work with, too, all the oaks and willows in the courtyard, the bushes on the ground floor, the planters higher up.

Disparate bits of plant matter drifted together, leaf and branch and root, the gem at their core. I recognized the nascent shape of the guardian from the Oriel of Earth, but this was an awful mockery of the majestic creature, its features twisted, its branches sharp, the leaves blackened and browned. It was still no taller than a man, but if this bizarre magnetism kept up —

Gods, Sylvain was right all along. If I'd known about his heritage I would have accused him outright. The Withering, and then the strange perversion of the guardian? What was causing all this?

At least my budget warning system had worked well enough to alert my two closest friends in the Wispwood. And Evander, who was re-entering the courtyard just as Bruna and Namirah were rushing down the stairs.

“Gods above and below,” Namirah breathed, eyes focused on the ever-growing guardian. “What is that thing?”

“Oriel of Earth guardian,” I said. “No time to explain, but it’s corrupted.”

Bruna was already hurriedly searching through the potions clipped to her belt. Some were unlabeled. Several were similar colors.

“Oh no, oh no. I can’t remember which one. Namirah, don’t look at me like that. I was in a hurry and this freaky cat was trying to claw its way into my office and — oh, crap.”

Namirah slammed the two of us out of the way as the guardian shot forth its horrible branches, its evil wood creaking with the smallest movement, a product of malignant growth. In the same motion she transformed into a hawk, spiraled around the courtyard, building speed.

I helped Bruna off the floor, her eyes still on the two identical potions in her hands. Namirah’s cry pierced the courtyard as she dove straight for the corrupted guardian’s face — and for the gemstone embedded in its forehead. I should have thought of that.

Namirah’s beak and talons glinted like metal, empowered by her magic. She scratched and clawed at the guardian’s face, but to no effect. The guardian swatted and raked at the air, my heart lurching each time its barbed branches nearly connected with Namirah’s body.

“We have to do something,” I muttered, my mind racing. None of my eidolons could do jack squat against this thing. If Namirah and her magic couldn’t scratch its bark, what hope did Scruffles have, even with a boost from my essence?

That was it. Allegra’s Lament. I wouldn’t have enough essence on my own to perform such a powerful spell again, but with one of Bruna’s potions, I had a shot. Except she was double, triple-chugging potions, desperately looking for something that would help in the fight.

“Yes, that’s the one,” she said, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, belching as she smashed a phial against the floor like a frat boy smashes a beer bottle. “That hit the spot.”

She charged the guardian, physically unchanged on the outside, but made monstrously powerful from within by one of the many, many potions she’d poured down her throat. Bruna tackled the creature to the ground, its branches creaking as it crashed against the stone. But its body was still stretching, growing.

From around the courtyard the students of the Wispwood contributed their magics, hurling elemental spells. Whatever combination of potions Bruna consumed had made her both stronger and tougher. The guardian screeched each time magic struck its body, but Bruna just shrugged off the spells, keeping the creature pinned to the ground.

And then came the convulsions.

“Oh no,” she stammered, breaking away as the guardian slipped from her stranglehold. “Oh crap, oh fuck.”

She scrambled for the edge of the courtyard, her hair shortening and lengthening, her face warping before my eyes. I rushed to help her, horrified, but she shooed me away.

“This’ll pass,” she gurgled out of her second mouth. “Go help Evander and Namirah.”

A snarling lioness had pounced on the guardian, knocking it back to the ground. Namirah darted away as a volley of orange butterflies collided with the creature, its body almost nine, ten feet tall. Fiery explosions rocked the length of its trunk, but the bursts of flame cleared — and still nothing. Every leaf and branch still in place, none of them ignited, completely unharmed by the bombs. Even

Evander looked shocked.

“We’re fucked,” I muttered. I could sense it in my body. I had just enough essence left to wreathe the grimoire in magic. But would that be enough to bludgeon the guardian into submission?

No. I had to swallow my pride and my sadness. I shut my eyes, stretched out my hand, and tugged on the invisible string that bonded my soul to Sylvain. I clenched my teeth, wishing, willing, pulling through the ether. I choked back my uncertainty, my fear that it wouldn’t work, this culmination of all my learning, this link to someone I liked. No. Adored.

Yes. That was it. I adored him.

Leaves rustled, a warm wind swirling through the courtyard. I opened my eyes. There he stood before me, facing the guardian, strong of spine and shoulder.

And he was wearing his gray hoodie, too.

Sylvain grunted. “Huh. Truly? We’re fighting this thing again?”

I swallowed, then spoke. “You came. You actually came.”

He frowned at me over his shoulder. “I promised, didn’t I? Don’t be silly. Come. We’ve got a thing to kill, and I’ve been dying to try this.”

No further instructions necessary. I placed my hand on his shoulder, gripping tight, pouring every last drop of arcane essence left in my body into his. Sylvain mirrored my gesture, the second link in our chain of two, his arm outstretched, fingers curled.

The wind picked up again, but the few leaves remaining on the trees in the courtyard didn’t budge. The guardian screamed. Sylvain was plucking away all the matter it had stolen, twig and leaf and root, returning everything, restoring the trees of the Wispwood.

The guardian of the oriel had been too big, too powerful, but Sylvain’s magic was actually working on this version. The corrupted guardian shrank smaller and smaller, a terrible screeching emanating from the knothole in its face that served as its mouth. And there went the mouth, too, the section of bark torn away, floating back to one of the oldest oaks in the courtyard.

Reduced to twisted bits of dead leaf and rot, the guardian shriveled into nothing, leaving only the Blood of the Earth on a pile of blackened dust. I blinked in disbelief. We did it. It was over. The students cheered.

“Wait,” I said, scanning the courtyard. “The trees here are all fine. No Withering. No decay.”

“It’s the Wispwell,” Sylvain said. “I’m telling you, there’s some magic in it.”

“And did it work?” I asked, too excited and hopeful, but genuinely curious about his answer. “The water you brought to the Verdance. Did it work?”

Sylvain did that weird thing that looked like a cross between a nod and a shake of the head. “That remains to be seen. I only brought back a few phials, after all, but the court alchemists are conducting tests as we speak.”

“Well,” I said, reaching a hand out for him to shake. “Thank you for coming. I appreciate your —”

Sylvain pulled me close, crushing me in his embrace. Students catcalled and whistled from around the courtyard. Bruna and Namirah would have joined in, too, but one was too busy slobbering at the mouth while she rode out the effects of the six or seven potions she chugged, and the other was busy trying to slap her out of it.

I buried my face in Sylvain’s shoulder, smiled against his hoodie. I inhaled, and slightly regretted it.

“Man,” I mumbled. “This hoodie needs a good wash.”

Sylvain patted me on the back. “I agree. Let’s find me some spares.”

I pulled away, hopeful as ever, searching his face for the truth. “Does that mean you’re staying?”

He grinned, nodded, pressed his fingers against the base of my hip. I could have kissed him right there, but we’d made enough of a spectacle for the students already. Besides, Evander Skink was in position, his phone whipped out, ready to record the moment. For his spank bank, or for blackmail? Either way, nope.

With their work completed, the doves, the old wolf, and the crazy cat began pecking and pawing through what was left of my backpack, searching for their favorite snacks. They deserved all that and more. A few of the students cooed as they approached my faithful, my very first eidolons, wanting to feed and pet them. Old Man was good at taking pets, despite being from the wild. Scruffles was the deadlier option.

But knowing we were surrounded by dozens of people, I could sense an especially intense set of gazes boring into me. I looked up, then tried not to flinch at the sight of the three headmasters standing on the second floor landing, hands on the railing, eyes on my face. Had the headmasters been watching this entire time, refraining from helping? Did they intentionally leave the killing of the guardian to us students as some sort of test?

Cornelius Butterworth gave me the subtlest nod of his head, his mustache twitching as his mouth bent into a smile. Headmaster Belladonna Praxis frowned. And Headmaster Shivers — gods, who even knew? They looked on in silence, our three very different academic figureheads with their three unique temperaments. Sweet, sour, and — well, whatever Headmaster Shivers was. Minty?

Heels clicked from the far end of the courtyard. Expensive ones, if I had to guess, based on who was wearing them. Dr. Euclidean Fang strutted in like she was going down a catwalk. She definitely looked the part, wearing a casual suit jacket and cuffed pant combo, a chic handbag dangling from her elbow. She stopped by the Wispwell, put her hands on her hips, and groaned.

“I take one Saturday off — just the one — and everything goes to hell. All right. Who’s responsible for this? Trick question, I already know. Lochlann Wilde. Explain yourself.”

“What, I — hey! No fair.” I didn’t ask how she’d guessed, but to be fair, wasn’t it kind of her fault that I’d brought a corrupted Blood of the Earth into the academy in the first place? Right? Maybe? A little?

I told her everything rapid-fire, making sure she knew that this wasn’t actually my fault, because how was I supposed to know, and could she please expedite the whole Summoner’s Crest thing and not expel me, thanks very much?

My words ran out at last. I stopped to catch my breath. She looked up at the headmasters, as if waiting for a signal, a response. None of the three moved. None spoke. Dr. Fang turned back to me, assessing my face with pursed lips.

“Fine. We believe you. For now.”

We?

Dr. Fang picked up the stone, let it lay flat on her palm. A burst of blue light erupted from her hand, spiring upward. I gasped. It reminded me of Allegra’s Lament, only channeled without a grimoire, fired straight out of her skin. Man, if only I could do that, be as cool as Euclidean. Maybe some day.

“There, it’s cleansed,” she said, announcing it for the benefit of the courtyard, holding up the gemstone. “No more of this nonsense. I’d like to see it make a comeback from that.”

“Then it’s over,” Sylvain said.

I heaved a sigh of relief. “It’s finally over.”

He bumped against me with his shoulder, attempting a small smile. Without words he reached for

my hand, squeezed tight. My doubts rushed out through the palms of my hands, the soles of my feet, unimportant. Sylvain answered. He came back, just like he promised.

I smiled, squeezed his hand back, harder. It didn't matter that he was the eidolon, that I was the summoner. He was the man who'd come running when I called, leapt through time and space to fight at my side.

He could be a prince of summer, of autumn, or a prince of flowers. I didn't mind either way.

I just knew that he was my prince.



I BIT ON MY LOWER LIP AS I STARED AT THE CREST, TRYING TO STOP MYSELF FROM GRINNING LIKE A loon. I did it. I threw myself onto my bed, kicked my legs into the air, and reached for a pillow to stifle my excited screaming. I finally did it.

Dr. Fang and Headmaster Cornelius had given it to me together, each expressing congratulations in their very individual ways. Dr. Fang once again told me to keep the Blood of the Earth, assuring me that it had been cleansed, no longer a threat.

She also, once again, told me to buy myself something nice. “Maybe a Nintendo Switch.” Like I didn’t have one already. The Blood of the Earth sat in my bedroom under a glass jar, away from my plants, and also away from my Nintendo Switch. You know, just in case.

Headmaster Cornelius had offered me something else: a glossy, holographic sticker of a unicorn riding a rainbow. “May it bring you luck, and power,” he said, winking as he pressed it into my hand. I considered putting it on one of the grimoire’s pages — Father would have a conniption — but what if it served some other purpose? You never really knew with Cornelius Butterworth.

And then there was the grand prize. The Summoner’s Crest resembled a medallion more than anything, shiny and brass, an intricate rosette. Two nested uppercase Ws were hidden among the trees depicted on the Crest, forming their trunks.

I liked how the Wispwood was very cool about letting us pick how to wear them, too. I could pin mine to my chest, hang it on a chain around my neck, even affix it to the cover of the Wilde grimoire. The point was to show, at a glance, that the bearers of the Crests were Wispwood alumni.

Alumni. I was one of them. Me, an alumnus. I’d officially finished my studies.

“Hell, yes,” I shouted at the ceiling of my bedroom. “Hell. Yes.”

Though I wasn’t in any real rush to move out. Neither was my roommate, apparently, who was in the shower, presumably getting all steamy and sexy even as he cleaned himself up. I hoped he didn’t hear all my yelling, even though I knew he was just as happy for me.

“Something to celebrate, sapling?”

I yelped and jerked away from the side of the bed, pulling my feet up on the mattress like I was worried a monster would catch me by the toe. There she was, sitting on the edge of a potted plant, kicking her little legs. A tiny version of the goddess Aphrodite. I squinted at her.

“Respectfully, Aphrodite — this is a very weird way to come and see me.”

“Oh, this?” She waved a hand along her body, presenting her legs, the swirls of her hair, little

pieces of jewelry tinkling as she moved. “This is just an avatar. A representation of my essence, sent to speak with you. Meet Tiny Aphrodite.”

I curled my lips and grumbled under my breath.

“Oh, come now, sapling. Are you still sour about our talk from that one night? What happened to all the sweetness? I only wanted to tell you. I still owe you a little present for all that you’ve learned about the Withering.”

“Nothing you don’t know already,” I said. “I’m sure you know about what happened in the courtyard, too.”

“Hmm, yes. A battle well-fought. But a stone corrupted, and a stone cleansed? And the Wispswell, too. Fascinating. Thank you for your findings, little dove. Sapling, starling, little darling.”

Tiny Aphrodite vanished in a dramatic puff of smoke, not unlike one of the service imps. Just in time, too. The door from the bathroom clicked open.

Sylvain strutted out with his towel. With it, mind, not wrapped in it, just holding it against his butt, giving me a full view of everything in front. He spread the towel out with both hands, grinding his hips from one side to the other, like a porn star, a go-go boy. Oh, yeah. Sylvain definitely knew way more about Earth than he’d ever let on.

“Put that thing away,” I said, my voice faltering, a little unconvincing. “Maybe a little later. I swear, Sylvain, you’re going to wear me out.”

He grinned as he pulled on the stone-gray sweatpants one of the laundry imps had found for us. He let the waistband hang low on his hips, and just under the two little cords on the front — yes. There it was. Success. Bulge accomplished. Gods, how could he look even sexier than when he was fully naked just seconds before?

“Wear you out? Doubtful. You’re much stronger than you let on, little human.” He blinked, paused. “Sorry. Does that offend you? It’s meant to be a pet name, not a pejorative.”

“I don’t think I mind much. I’m only a couple inches shorter than you, but it works for me. It’s cute.”

“You’re cute,” he growled, pulling close, guiding me up from my bed by the hips.

I chuckled, tickled by the touch of his strong fingers digging into my waist, entranced by the clean smell of him, the droplets of water still dripping from the ends of his hair and onto his collarbone.

“Enough,” I said, pushing him away, wishing my hand hadn’t landed on his abs, as if I needed to be reminded of how hot he was. “Let’s just hang out for now. I’m just — yes. I think I’m just happy that you’re here.”

As if Sylvain could grin any wider, this beautiful man and his radiant smile.

“Told you I’d come back, and you wouldn’t believe me. Then when would I ever get to show you my special secret?”

“Is it a second penis? Gods, Sylvain, I can only handle so much.”

He giggled — actually giggled, my personal trickster — and gently placed the index finger of one hand against my lips. He twirled his other index finger in a lazy circle, like he was swinging around an imaginary set of keys, or a little hoop. And then it materialized, spinning around his finger. A golden circle, like an ornate halo, big enough to fit on a man’s head.

“Your crown,” I breathed.

“Well, my circlet.” He twirled one last revolution with his wrist before laying his hand flat, the circlet making a perfect landing on his palm. “I’m a prince, right? Too young and sexy and supple to be a king, so I have this for now.”

“For now?” I smirked. “Do you mean you have aspirations? Do you want to be king, Sylvain?”

His lip turned up, his unconscious, automatic response to the slightest of slights. Adorable. I wanted to kiss the sulk right off his face.

“Don’t mock me. I could be king. I could most certainly become king. I think.”

“Then my eidolon would be the King of the Autumn Court.”

“Now, hang on a minute. It’s much more complicated than that.” He held up his hand, glancing left, then right. “And keep it down. Someone could be listening.”

I clamped my lips shut, because he was right. I narrowed my eyes at the potted plant, daring Tiny Aphrodite to make another appearance. I scanned the walls and the ceiling, checking for ghostly blue butterflies. Evander Skink would do it, too, that pervert.

“But never mind all that right now,” Sylvain said. “Watch this.”

He played with his circlet again, spinning it around his finger. I blinked, then looked again. Was it wider? Oh. Oh gods. It was stretching. I backed away. The thing had grown as big as a hula hoop.

“This is a little odd, Sylvain.”

He grinned at me out of the corner of his mouth. With a flick of his hand the hoop slid off and fell onto the floor. The floorboards gleamed where the unusually large circlet touched the wood. Sylvain placed one arm behind his back, made a flourish with the other, and bowed.

“Be my guest.”

“Oh,” I said, the syllable stretched out, understanding. “It’s a portal. What in the — wait. This isn’t going to the Verdance, is it? I mean, I’d love to see it some day, but I don’t think I’m ready just yet.”

Sylvain quirked his mouth in thought. “Well, it’s a part of the Verdance, I suppose, but it’s very private. Exceptionally private. So private that only I know about it.”

I held my hands up. “If this is your personal masturbation room, count me out.” My gaze fell on his pelvis, the V-line that pointed straight toward the treasure under his sweatpants. “You know what? On second thought, outta my way.”

I stepped into the circle, a flash of searing golden light overwhelming my senses. And then darkness. I stumbled forward once, then stopped again. How was I going to find my way around — well, wherever this was?

But a warm Sylvain-shaped presence appeared at my side, freshly arriving through the portal himself. He reached for my hand in the darkness, like he knew exactly how to find me, then snapped his fingers.

A flame flickered, then another, then dozens, then a hundred, a myriad of candles obeying their prince’s command. I blinked, letting my eyes adjust to the sudden brightness. My jaw fell to the ground.

“Sylvain. Gods above and below, what is this place?”

“Call it my collection,” he said, proud as a father of his hundreds of strange children.

We were in a grotto somewhere, its immensity revealed by the light of the candles. Nature had hewn the cavern into the rough shape of a circle. Quite a large circle, too. In the center were pieces of mismatched furniture, all in random styles, yet all still clearly from Earth.

Against one wall, an arcade machine, its screen dark, but polished to a loving gloss. Against another, a vending machine filled with discontinued chips and candy, its glass kept meticulously clean.

And everywhere else, running the entire length of the grotto, were shelves upon shelves of stuff. Human stuff. Magazines, collectible figurines, empty cans of soda, and just so many books.

This wasn’t a collection. This was Sylvain’s bachelor pad.

“Oh, gods,” I muttered. “It’s a man cave. A literal man cave.”

He crossed his arms, forehead creased. “I have never heard these words used together, but I suppose it makes sense.”

Understanding dawned on me. I rounded on him, eyes wide. “You knew all along! You love human junk as much as anyone. I mean, anyone human. Human food, human cities. No wonder you knew all that stuff. All that moaning about how my side of the world sucks, and look at this. Sylvain? Come on. You didn’t have to pretend.” I cupped the corner of his strong jawline, staring into his eyes with kindness. “It’s fine with me that you’re a colossal dork.”

He flinched, pulled away. “I don’t know that word either, but I know when I’ve been insulted. Listen. I’m trying to be honest with you, Locke. No more lies. I suppose I do like human things. Very much. And I might be starting to like humans a little more. Yes. I do think I like one very, very much in particular.”

The blood rose to my cheeks. I couldn’t help grinning. I shoved him in the shoulder, broke away from him so I could explore — and then immediately stopped in my tracks again.

“Sylvain,” I said, pointing at a shelf that held only a single glass phial. A familiar one, at that. “What is this?”

“Ah, yes. I lied about that, too. Very sorry. No more lies. After that one, I mean.”

It was the phial of liquid soap that had gone missing from my shower. I lifted it up, even the weight of it familiar, the contents hardly changed from when I’d last used it.

“That was more of an emergency measure than anything. If by chance I couldn’t make it back through the membrane between our worlds, if something held me away, then I would have something to inspire me to return. It smells like you. It smells like your clothes, and your bed. I hope you’re not too angry that I took it.”

I never thought I’d be so happy to have something stolen from me. And it was far, far too sappy to say out loud, but Sylvain had stolen my heart, too.

“You can have it back,” he said, glancing at the ground, rubbing the back of his neck. “If you like.”

I shook my head. “I can always ask Bruna for more. I really don’t mind. But wait. How did you smuggle the Wispwell water back to the Verdance?”

“Bruna’s healing potion that you fed me. Well, and the essence potion you drank, too. I saved the bottles, washed them out, collected some of the Wispwater.” He shook his head. “The alchemists are still looking into things. Perhaps we need to give it more time.”

I took his hand, squeezed it encouragingly. “Perhaps we’ll find a solution together.”

“Together,” he said, wistful, soft. “When I first saw you in that forest, I thought you were the prettiest human I’d ever seen. Handsome. Lean of limb. Strong. Willful, too. And all I could think of was bending you over the nearest tree stump and taking you. Again, and again, and again.”

I gulped, suddenly aware that I didn’t know where he kept the exit, and then remembering that I was okay with being taken three times over, and more, if he was hydrated enough. I chuckled, playing it off as a joke.

“That’s very, uh, romantic of you, Sylvain.”

“I’m doing my best,” he said, sniffing. “I just want you to know about this thicket of thoughts and feelings in my chest that I’m trying to untangle. I think your Wispwood is a very lovely place indeed. I think Lochlann is a very handsome name. And I think I would very, very much like to stay with you. That is, if you’ll have me. As your eidolon, as your bedmate — I care not. As long as I am at your side.”

Fuck. How could I resist that? I pulled myself closer, my fingers hooking possessively into the

waistband of his sweatpants. His sweatpants! I'd gotten a fae prince to wear sweatpants. This should have never been about taming his wildness, bending him to my will. The old masters had different methods. Father had his.

And I had mine. Sylvain was my eidolon, and I was his summoner. But the ruthlessly precise Dr. Euclidean Fang would want me to reduce that statement to an even simpler one, to hone its meaning to a sharp point via subtraction.

Sylvain was mine, and I was his.

But it wasn't all wine and roses, of course. Still plenty to do.

I had to have a sit-down with Dr. Fang to discuss my career options, something I was optimistic about, for once. Aphrodite's reward was a toss of a coin, either something great, or something truly, truly horrible, knowing the gods. And there was the matter of collecting my inheritance, now that I'd met the terms, now that I was properly a summoner.

Oh. And maybe, just maybe, we could actually visit the Verdance some day, too.

Sylvain tilted his head, his brow furrowed. "What are you thinking about, Lochlann?"

I shrugged, smiling at him. "Nothing. Everything. The future."

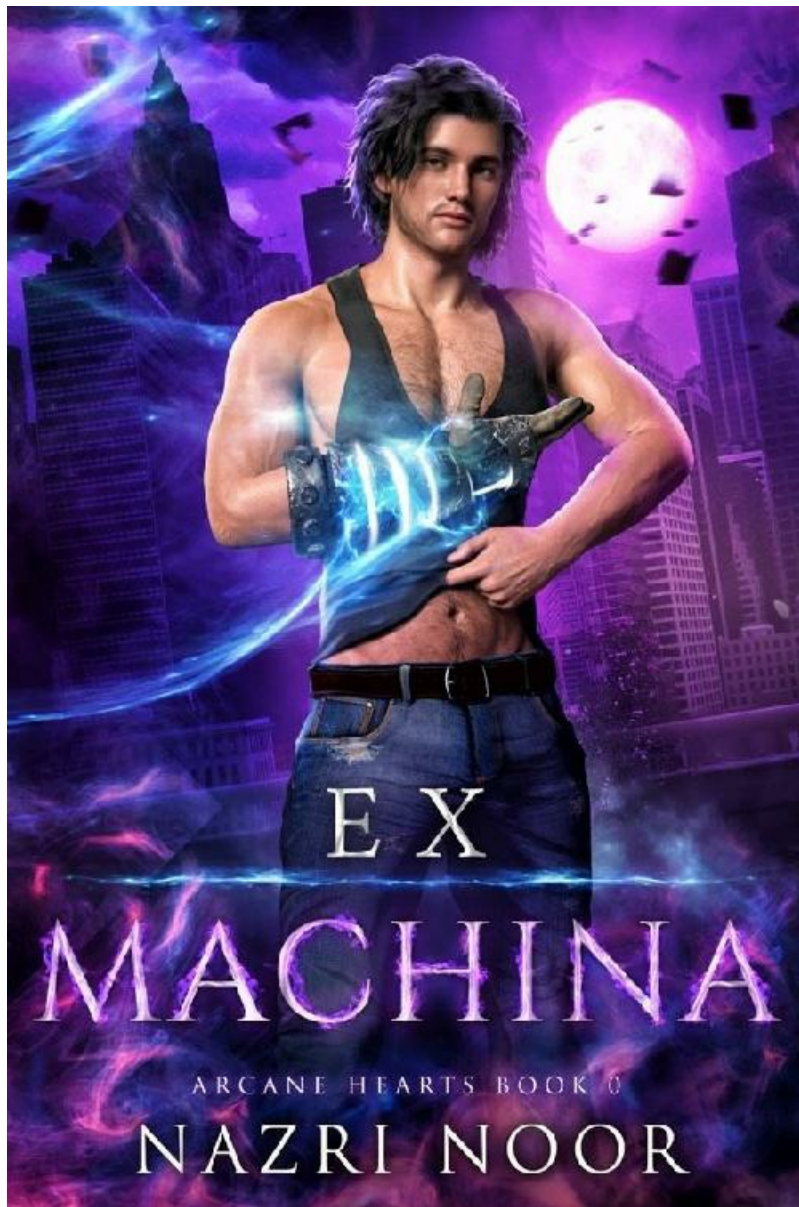
He gathered me up in his arms, pulled me close. "Be with me for now. Stay here, with me. In the present."

So much to do. So much. But there was no rush. I kissed him, long and slow, relishing the warmth of him. My prince claimed to be from the Autumn Court, but he smelled of summer, tasted of honey.

And I was going to savor every drop.

SEE WHERE THE STORY BEGAN.

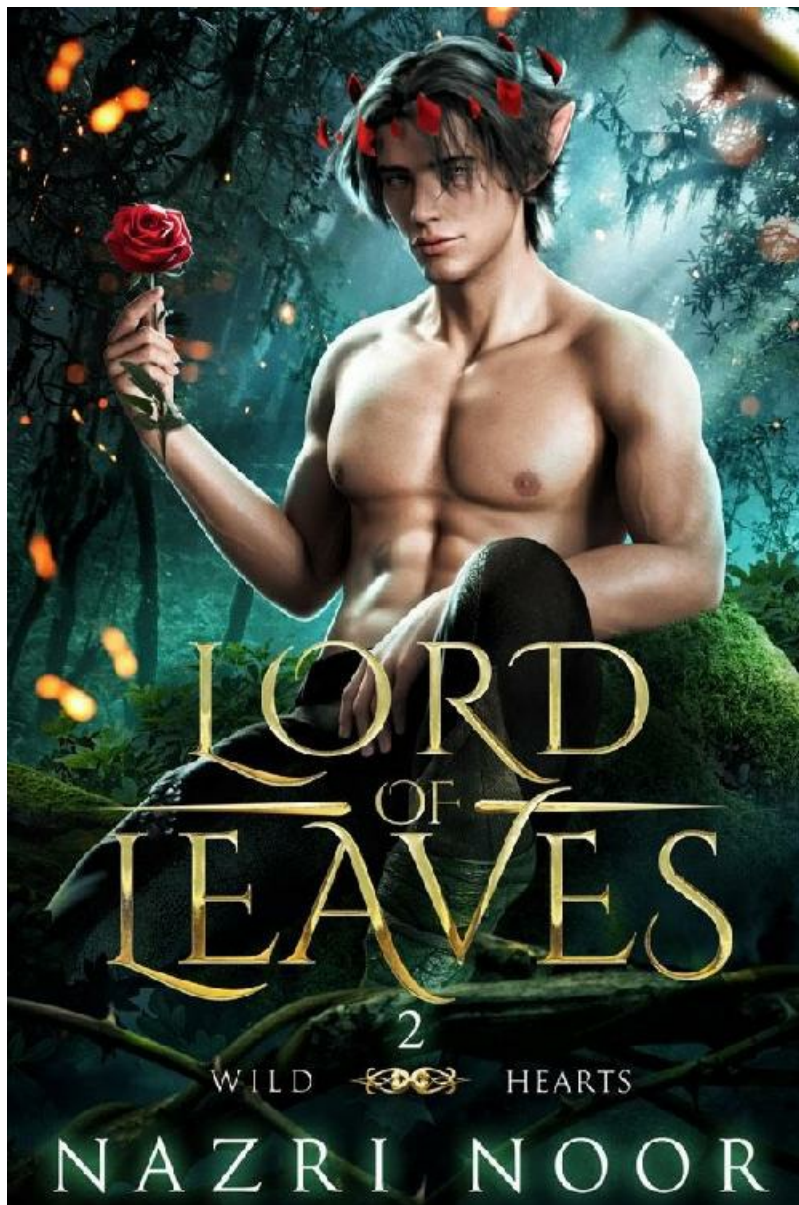
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hi, I'm Nazri, a Filipino-Malaysian author based in California. I'm trilingual, but I really only write in English. I can also speak just enough Sindarin and Valyrian to impress absolutely no one.

My urban fantasy novels feature heroes who use wits, style, and their wildly unpredictable magic to save the day. Think sass and class, while kicking ass. I write stories filled with humor, horror, and heart. I write about snarky magical men who strive, sweat, and bleed for the ones they love. Most of all, I write about hope.

If you'd like to hang out, come and join me in the [Arcane Underground](#), my reader group on Facebook. We talk about books, but mostly we share funny memes. Thank you for reading, and thank you for supporting independent authors.

To see more of my work or simply say hello, visit me online at nazrinoor.com.