

Feral Magic

An Urban Fantasy Romance-Thriller

SWIFT CODEX BOOK 1

by

Nicolette Jinks

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You may contact the author via email: nicolette.jinks@gmail.com or check in at [Twitter](#),

[Facebook](#), [Google+](#), [GoodReads](#). To follow the author, her blog is

www.nicolettejinks.wordpress.com, where she writes about writing and life.

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Short Blurb:

Feraline Swift finds herself outside of her home, battered and bruised, wearing shredded clothes and having no memory of how it happened. In fact, she has no memory of the last three days at all. What's more, her magic has returned and unless she can control it and find out what happened, she may be incarcerated—forever.

Chapter One

My last conscious memory was the final Amazonian life leech larvae falling from my tweezers into the earthenware spice dish, where it wriggled with the rest like animated saffron stamens. After this, incoherent maybe-dreams.

I lay at the edge of a field outside the barn which was both my workshop and living quarters. My back hadn't appreciated the dead grass I'd slept on. When I sat upright, a grasshopper chewing tar on my chest went his own way with the click of wings.

"Railey?"

My voice was a croak, weak and scratchy. Aside from the wind rustling through the grasses and disturbing the trees by the creek, the countryside was still and hushed and bigger than it ever had been before. There was no one else here.

Neither was there the close hug and awareness of magic, like I'd hoped to feel again.

The first few fine flicks of rain sent up tiny bursts of dust on the ground beside me. I knew that I had checked the other ingredients: the chamomile flowers, ox blood, eye of newt, mandrake root, and the two fungi known by names I could not pronounce. None of them were bad, so the potion shouldn't have done this. Unless it had something to do with the way the witch doctor had neutralized the fungi and larvae. All the trials I did proved that the mixture was split-second heart stopping. But what had she done? I couldn't remember. Not now.

"Railey, you 'round?" I asked.

The crests of wheat grass waved about my elbow in place of a reply from Railey. I sighed. I hadn't been expecting her voice.

"Guess the old woman knew what she was doing after all," I grumbled. Old. That triggered the start of a memory. Old in the magical world meant dangerous.

With a flash of lightning, it started to rain. It rained like it always did in the desert, with gale-force winds whistling through the tin roof and the crack of thunder making the hair on my arms stand up.

I was being melodramatic. The day before had probably gone something like this: the witch doctor arrived, we talked, did the treatment, she saw me to my bed and eventually left, and after that I'd gone sleep walking and took a nap under the stars. This was my usual stargazing spot, after all.

Before me stood a barn door, square with the boards in the center arranged like a Z. Its chipping red paint was peeling. The door wasn't latched when I touched it. It rocked inward of its own accord, grating over the floor.

Spider webs met my face when I stepped inside. A faint glow of stormy skies lent my home a haunted sheen made ghostly when a flash of white lightning illuminated the recesses. I blinked. My books had been pulled from their shelves and piled onto a clearing in a wreckage of broken trinkets. Several books were laid open, the pages lifting and falling in the brush of wind. My herbs scattered across the floor, leaving only a few sprigs and bits of twine dangling from the rafters.

Great.

That had to have been one bad mandrake trip. Or the witch doctor had used it as an excuse to search through my stuff. I hadn't thought of that, usually I was so careful.

Just fantastic.

I stumbled towards the table and bopped a paint can with my bare foot. I hissed in pain before I actually felt the expected sting. Where was my shoe? The stubbed toe felt warm, numb but warm. Numb was a good word to describe all of me. Electricity ran through my nerves coupled with the thought, *Railey hasn't gone poltergeist, has she?* A chill ran down my back, and I felt like this was happening to someone else and I was just an observer.

"Railey!" I meant to call her down and demand an explanation, to see if she was her usual ghostly self or just a shadow of what she once had been, but the effort of yelling caused a sharp pain in my chest.

It forced me to sit and breathe. Back to coughing. Rain on the tin roof, pattering away the minutes as I focused first on calm breathing then on subduing the sudden tremors in my limbs. My leg hurt, a lot. I knocked a vial off the work counter and onto the floor as I reached for my music player.

A couple minutes later, big band swing burst from speakers. I discovered the cause of one of my pains was a hand-sized burn on my calf. How did I get that? A boiling cup of water? But it didn't look right for a liquid burn. Nor like something I'd get from an ember. Like a spell burn? I was beginning to feel a little afraid. Untwisting the top of a jar of salve, I realized that my hands were still encrusted with grime. One of my dreams had been bones, carved with demonic symbols, bleeding black magic.

I hadn't walked to the pioneer's cemetery while tripping out on the witch doctor's potion, had I? I looked again at my dirt-encrusted nails and remembered my dreams about bones. The cemetery was a couple miles off. I doubted I could have sleep-walked all the way there, but it wasn't completely impossible. Once mandrake potion was involved, I did crazy stuff.

I hobbled over to the utility sink, wondering: should I be panicking? Should I be afraid? I didn't know. But the burn was hurting and my hands were shaking and I wasn't feeling like eating anything any longer.

"Railey, any chance you can tell me what happened?"

I might as well be speaking to air. The ghost was gone more often than not these days, but for some reason this time it felt more complete. Like she wouldn't come back.

The wind wrenched open the shutters to the window above the sink, thrashing a few plump tomatoes to the ground as the shutters clattered against the siding. Rain rushed inside, sending flurries of icy drops across the counter. I scrambled to seize the shutters, fighting with the tomato planted outside—and that was when I realized what was wrong with it.

The tomato had become bushy. Suckers had sprouted between the main stalk and the leaves. Last time I had pruned it was the day before the old woman had come. That would have been probably the day before yesterday. Why did I see at least a week's worth of growth on the plant? It was hard to deny the overripe tomatoes which had been green, and the sudden abundance of yellow flowers splayed up and down the plant.

"Must have had a warm couple of days," I told myself. Tomatoes grew fast in good heat. But now a buzzing disbelief threatened to overtake reason.

A week!

It took me four tries to twist the knob for hot water.

How could it have possibly been a full week?

I knocked over the soap bottle.

Impossible. Straight-up impossible. *Just get cleaned up, eat something, you'll feel better, Fera*, that's what Railey would tell me. To stop my yammering and come down to planet Earth.

Bubbles stung like salt in an open wound, but I scrubbed down my hands, arms, face. I really was starting to feel better when I took off my outer shirt. Then my fingers went through holes.

I stared at the gouges down the back, at the slashes which I had ignored when wrestling the shirt over the top of my head. Gouges which looked like a beast had drawn three sharp claws against it.

The water in the basin was pink and there were drops of scarlet blood. My stiff back took on new meaning and instantly began to radiate stinging pain. I grasped the sink to steady myself.

What had the witch doctor done to me? Had she made me her scapegoat? That's the thing about mixing lambs with magicians, the non-magic-users can be taken advantage of. And on my calf there was the burn. Could it be the burn left by a paralysis spell meant to stop a fleeing suspect?

Panic waves washed through my belly, sweeping up my chest and arms, seizing my throat. My shaking grew uncontrollable. I tried to drop the shirt, to free myself from that tainted reminder of what I could not remember, but it snagged on the rough edges of a broken nail.

Breath coming in frantic pants, I shook my hand. Shook it harder. And harder. Until I smacked it against the sink and the wet shirt slapped concrete floor, soaking my shoe and one bare

foot. Slowly, as if a puppeteer had taken over and was guiding me, I felt my knees bend to the concrete in one smooth motion. I watched myself untie my shoe and take off my sock, then my jeans and other clothes, leaving brownish blood streaks on everything as I tossed one item after the other into the washing machine.

The storm raged on, the wind battering through cracks in the walls, and I was lost in it like a leaf tossed in its fury. Naked, I stepped into the metal grain silo which I'd converted into a shower, let the tepid water pour down, watching blood and gritty soil spiral down the drain. Eventually the water heater kicked on, choosing the boil-my-skin-off setting all by itself. I didn't bother to turn up the cold water, just slumped on the floor and lathered up the soap, getting rid of the evidence. As thinking intruded on the peace the puppeteer had given me, I scrubbed more frantically and more and more until I was raw with pain and panic.

A million thoughts eddied through my mind like a tempest smashing a ship against rocks over and over again until nothing made sense and the battered remains of my thoughts were the ruined wreckage of reason. Eventually, my breathing calmed and my vision cleared.

I was curled up on my side in the shower, the water had cooled to a reasonable temperature again. My back, when I felt it with my fingers, was bruised and had been scratched though it was not even a full skin break. I'd been lucky. Once I realized this, I was lax with relief and could think again.

So I listed the facts. Things I knew for sure.

1. I had no solid recollections of the days prior.
2. I did have a long-standing meeting with a witch doctor right before this black-out.
3. I thought I knew what happened during this meeting.
4. But maybe I had it wrong.
5. Worse, I seemed to have come in contact with the magical community. It was entirely possible I'd been used.
6. And if I had been used, it was to achieve a nefarious end.
7. Which meant that either the Constabulary or the witch doctor would be banging down my door at any second.
8. Or the maybe even witch doctor's other victim. The one I'd been used to commit a crime against.
9. Or I had taken a bad mandrake potion. That could have happened, too. ...and, acquired my injuries how, exactly?

My eyes returned to the burn, staring at it as if it could somehow speak to me and put everything into place.

I found my stack of *Thaumaturgical Tribune*. The most recent paper boasted a picture of me on the front page within an article issued by the Magic Constables.

It was a want ad.

Then I realized today's paper said Thursday, and the last paper I remembered reading was Sunday's. Which meant I was missing three days. Coincidentally, the ad had been issued for the last two days. It said simply, **Report any sightings immediately.**

Almost simultaneously, I was hit with three instincts. Run and hide; run and beg Uncle Don to take me as his client in case there were any charges to be made; and lastly to investigate my missing days by myself. But the words "volatile and highly dangerous, do not approach" would definitely put off any potential interviews.

I sank down to sit on the counter, where I remained for several puzzled minutes, feeling again like the leaf in the wind or the boat being cast against rocks. I didn't even understand how I could be considered volatile and highly dangerous. I had lost my magic years ago. Yes, I owned trinkets and things with enchantments, but a decent sorcerer should not find that dangerous. I didn't know what to do. I'd never had so much as a speeding ticket before.

"Do I have to go to the Constabulary?" I asked myself, feeling my tentative control crumple like a piece of paper ready for the fire.

Maybe. Or maybe that was dumb, given my past.

I turned off the water, dried off, and applied half a jar of salve from toes to head. The bleeding stopped, scratches healed. Not too many deep wounds, however the burn on my calf blistered. The rain pounded harder on the roof, trickled through a spot I thought I'd fixed. I put a cup on the counter to catch the drip. Thunder again.

Determined not to fall to pieces, I tried to re-assemble what I knew had happened—or what I thought I knew—as I dressed in clean-smelling clothes and fed myself cold cereal with milk and trail mix. And I chewed down one too many painkillers, too. Next: to bear arms, both of the magical and knowledgeable kind.

On wobbly legs, I climbed onto the counter and reached on top of the rafters. My fingers found a small box with the best trinkets I had. When I opened it, I found my appointment book. I flipped to the witch doctor's appointment and instead found a note written in white ink on black paper. A crow feather fell out of its fold.

Miss Feraline Hope Swift,

I usually do not aid my agents but I feel this case is an exception. Allow me to give you a few tips. First, you have one more use of your compass. I recommend you read the papers before deciding where to go. Second, I recommend you read the headlines, but not the articles. I fear the articles themselves are inaccurate. Third, your after-life is mine to use as I choose. No

significant action needs to be taken on your part, except to behave as nature so inclines you to do. I have handed you this first case, but for the ones following, you need simply to watch for circumstances which break the natural order of life.

Make me proud.

-Death.

P.S. Do not die again. It is terribly troublesome.

I was almost beyond shock. Almost. The letter crumbled in my hands, breaking apart into feathers, the writing becoming the shine of light playing over them. I sort of stared at them for a long time before I resolved to take these feathers to the Constabulary and ask for their help. See if they could get to the bottom of this. If this was a big, crazy prank then it was well beyond me.

Then I heard the bubbles start rattling in a blue willow kettle, and it began to whistle, corporeal steam issuing from its spout. For an instant, my spirits perked up: I'd bought the thing from a fair booth and had not been so certain of its alleged speaking capabilities. I lifted my head and listened as it said, "They are coming! They are coming! Leave now, Master, leave now!"

Warning enchantment, or did it cry out for other reasons, too? I debated staying or running. If it was the Constabulary, I'd be better off not fleeing from the law. I put on my best trinkets from the mess on the floor and slipped on some shoes, my blood pulsing with hot adrenaline. There was someone outside!

Collecting my thoughts, I listened to the shuffle of people outside adding to the din of the storm...a storm which suddenly seemed mute compared to their every movement. How many there were it was hard to tell, but they hadn't spoken a word, and I thought all law enforcement had to identify themselves. Yet still, I waited, dreading when I'd discover who had tracked me to my home.

I readied myself, seeing one escape route after another closed off. Too many people to try to fight, no matter how I did it. Hiding in the loft would buy a few minutes, tops. I knew that I'd have to face these intruders, that even if I ran away and somehow reached the Constables alive, I would still have to face the law and hope they believed my story. The more I knew, the more convincing I'd be. My heart raced in my veins, I envisioned that someone stood at the main door, facing me, and motioned to the others that their victim was inside.

There was an explosive crash and splintering wood as a spell shattered my door. An icicle shot through my tea pot. Mist filled the room and the temperature fell, making me shiver on the spot. In the clatter of falling bits of door and pottery, I remembered reading but not acknowledging the single word: REWARD.

There came noises all around as they surrounded the building and I felt time creak by slower

and slower, knowing they, too, were going to cover all my exits. Still I had doubts. Was this the law, or was this a bounty hunter? The mists cleared.

It was a tall man in black robes. A spell clung about him which made my eyes drift over him. He reminded me of the figure in my dreams, the one who had killed me.

“Feraline Hope Swift,” he said. Our eyes met through the spell for just a second, and though I could tell nothing else about him, he looked like a man who would do anything to not lose everything. Then he curled his hand in the start of a spell. “You are dead.”

Heat flooded my body. That wasn't something law enforcement would say. I rushed the side door, meeting it with flat hands and all my weight.

The hinges were rusted as thin as a leaf so the door toppled with me on top of it. Whoever was on the other side broke my fall, grunting as they were smashed into the dirt.

“Stop right there!” I heard the man shout from behind me.

I didn't. Several feet away, the barnyard turned into a pit where the farmers of days gone by had pushed all the big boulders together. I entered this pit just as a spell skimmed my shoulder. A boulder cracked.

I yelped.

I knew they would come right after me. I also knew they'd outrun me. I sprinted behind a boulder where the ground was too hard for footprints, muffled my breathing, and found my invisibility ring.

“Get her! Which direction did she go?” The man sounded disgusted when no one responded immediately.

I thought frantically. I'd gone in the wrong direction for my car, and they'd probably hit it when it went down the very straight driveway, anyway. There was no time to make a proper portal, not that I could power it without magic, and definitely no time to rig up the compass to act as the power source. This meant I'd need to use the compass to go someplace I already knew—it was a good trinket, yes, but it had its constraints. I had to assume that the compass was only good for one jump, and that jump had to take me where I could ditch the trackers when they did find me again.

A single lonely place came to mind.

I heard the men yelling and someone scuffing gravel. Loud footsteps coming in my direction.

Almost out of breath, I withdrew the compass and closed my eyes. The wind kicked up around me. The magic would attract their attention soon.

I couldn't wrap my head around it. An hour ago, I had been out here, a bad potion the worst thing on my mind.

Now I was wanted for doing something to someone I'd never met before, a powerful someone who had enough money to send a task force to hunt me down. Now I had fled the scene.

Now I was scrambling to stay alive.

A man in black rounded the corner and saw the distinctive dust devil marking my portal. His eyes bulged and the last thing I saw was his lips moving in a spell. Then brightness struck and I felt like a freight train had smashed me as the portal tried to take me away.

Chapter Two

I was nervous. Facing the music seemed scarier than running, more permanent.

Sweat coated my palms when I looked down at my mug shot yet again. Though the subject had wild hair and was coated in dust, I knew that was my necklace in the photograph. I'd carved it from ebony wood and painted the butterfly wings with pigment from Picasso's paints.

This whole ghost town was nothing but a series of portals. It was a dead railroad stop, still boasting the remains of a water tower for old steam engines. Shells of buildings surrounded me. Scattered in various remote locations, there were plenty of these portal stations.

Charitable organizations and for-profit businesses were the primary contributors to these places. I liked Silverton because it was seldom used and I didn't have to elbow commuter traffic. Also, I'd managed to arrange for all of my favorite places to be linked up here.

I let out a shaking breath, watching the pine trees for sign of the ghosts I felt tickling my skin. If I would have had my magic, I would have thought it was nothing but a guard spell. My gut twisted and I looked at the newspaper rolled up in my fist.

PLEASE VISIT CONSTABLE BARNES AT DOOR 921, KING'S RANSOM MAGICAL ANTIQUITIES, IF YOU HAVE ANY INFORMATION.

A shop door? It was likely the easiest portal to access. Portals in the sorcering community came in all sorts of shapes and sizes, both literally and figuratively. For a simple single-rider Point A to Point B portal, a sound trinket or spell could do the trick. However, for a place which sees a lot of foot traffic, it was safest to establish a permanent portal. Father had taught me to think of it like a slide with a set start and end. Then there were the Open Door Portals. Any number of beginning points would take the rider to the destination. A professional had to make those, for very good reason.

Myself, I didn't have the ability to cast spells. Yet, coming from a family of magically-inclined people, I had to have some sort of portalling capability. Meet my compass. It was simultaneously my most treasured and most abused trinket, enchanted with the best Earhart spell that grovelling could buy.

Though I always had taken care of my Earhart compass with such pride, there was a crack over the glass and the brass on the back had gouges through etched roses. I wished I'd known what happened to it, what had happened to me.

Door 921 was on the remains of a livery.

And someone was already there, waiting. A skinny man with slicked back blond hair and a

showman's smile. He was trying the portal I wanted to use. Relief hit me. For a second, I'd thought that it was someone who meant trouble.

"Is there something wrong with the portal?" I asked, trying to act all normal.

"No. But it is locked. Shopkeeper is likely out. It's lunchtime, I think."

"Oh." I considered this information. Chilling out around here wasn't an option. Not with a bounty on my head and hunters on my tail. I didn't want to go down the doors I did know, and I didn't want to find out where the others went. Civilization was fifty-one miles away as the crow flies, to speak nothing of the mountain roads curving back on themselves. Hitch-hiking wasn't in my repertoire, and I didn't have the strength to use the compass. Not yet. Assuming that "Death" was wrong and the compass would work yet again. I glanced at the lock on the door.

My key would fit the slot. Except that was forced entry. Hmm. I imagined it would be easier to explain why I broke into a building than why I hadn't turned myself in.

Leave, I urged the man. Leave.

We stood there, neither one of us leaving although we both ought to take the hint and return later.

"Fera?" he asked. My heart triple pounded in my chest as I recognized a voice from the past. "Do you recognize me?"

Not at first, no.

And then I knew him in a flash.

It was Griff, the creature who cursed me to a magicless existence ages ago. I thought I'd be angry when I saw him next, but I wasn't. Terror froze me in place, I couldn't have spoken even if I knew what to say.

Suddenly, taking a random mystery door seemed very appealing.

"How would you like an alternative to going to the dungeons?" he asked, rooting me to the spot.

"I am not going to the dungeons."

He lifted one shoulder. "There is a slim chance our old friends may temper the sentence. They've grown up to be judges, have you heard? You'll see them if you go through that portal."

"Who?"

"Leif and Lilly Frey. Who else?"

Great, so of the original five, one of us is dead, two are law-abiding perfectionists, and one of

us is on the run. Griff's name had been mentioned before in my presence. It was said he hadn't turned out too well. But he knew things, and I didn't.

"Supposing I would go to jail. What would it be for?"

"Breaking and entering. Vandalism." His lip slanted in a faint smile. "Theft."

Ironically, all the things that I thought my barn was a victim of. I tried not to panic. "How would you know?"

"It is my business to know."

Yes, yes it was. He was supposed to know all sorts of things. If someone wanted some spell made and they hadn't the money to afford his prices, he accepted another form of payment: information. Which made me really wonder why he was here, of all places, when he hadn't dared to show his face to me in years.

The last thing I wanted was to be connected with him. Especially not to owe him something. I said, "I'll be fine. I'm innocent."

I tried to remember the dreams I'd had earlier. Bits came to me as I paused to breathe and wipe the sweat off my brow, or to rest my burned leg. Eventually I remembered a few things, which may have been real, or may have been tied together with strings of imagination.

I had gathered the list the witch doctor had sent me within days, but I had spent a full week experimenting before I sent for the witch doctor. The larvae and fungi was my big issue. Nothing had worked, and if she had a trick, I wanted to learn what that trick was. Potion commissions were few, but paid enough to keep me going. Which was why I was thinking of a booth at Oberon's Market, perhaps.

"You are absolutely sure? Would you happen to have a watertight alibi for the last few days?"

Shit.

"I have a feeling that *you* do," I said sweetly. Because of course he would. There was a reason he wasn't in the dungeons already. I swallowed. "They can do whatever truth spell they want. It'll be fine."

He gave me a big smile. "I do love that about you."

"What?"

"Your resilience. So quick to make the best of a bad situation."

He could be toying with me, but I couldn't tell. "How bad?"

"Oh, I cannot speak without any hard evidence, naturally."

"Naturally."

"But, I suppose as we have nothing else to do but burn time, we can catch up on gossip."

I couldn't believe he was going to tell me. Thank goodness. "What kind of gossip?"

"The kind that starts with your most recent client. The mysterious Meredith Cole."

I vaguely remembered her. Too vaguely. As if I was remembering a dream...from last night...

"Oh," I said. "Wait."

In the notebook where I kept all my records, I flipped to where a letter was held between the pages.

Miss Feraline Swift,

I write you in the most urgent matter. My house is out of control. It wants to kill me. Please help. I will pay double your asking price.

Madame Meredith Cole.

Had I answered it? Maybe. Probably.

I had in my dreams. I'd been in a spook house with Railey. There had been a ghost hiding from us. It had been a nice house, a sorcerer's house. It was strange to see a ghost, even that of a child, living with spell-casters. The two seldom mixed. There had been a secret room with black magic written on the walls and a book depicting ceremonial bones.

Except those were just mandrake dreams. Had to be.

In the real world, then. Would I answer it?

I thought back to the cupboards empty of all but rice and lentils and what I'd eaten for breakfast. All my savings lately had gone to buying potion ingredients. I probably would have gone to put food on the table and earn the entry fee for a booth at one of the magic marketplaces.

Griff was waiting. I tried to blow the letter off. "So the woman was a bit paranoid. What of it?"

I didn't like Griff's smile now. It was the Oh-Deer-Didn't-You-Know smirk of a jerk who was going to get his face punched in, except I didn't want to risk him not telling me what I didn't know.

"What?" I demanded.

"Suffice it to say, she did not write that letter."

"Why not?"

"Ah, but I don't feel like standing out in the heat any longer. It's so miserable. I'm afraid that unless we can go talk someplace private and cool, I won't be able to answer your questions." He stared pointedly at my closed fist. "And Olrick mentioned paying you with a certain key

which makes all doors magically open themselves.”

“Did he?”

“And if I leave without cooling down, I may find a nice bar to cool down in, where I'm sure people will be asking where I've been and who I've seen.”

I was going to regret this.

I huffed a sigh and dug out the key. My other ear popped in a moment of agonizing bliss, and I took a few seconds to savor it. Of course, I would win out on the air pressure battle just in time to go through another portal. Shrugging, I knelt down and ground my key into the lock.

I felt it tug and twist as it formed itself to the tumblers, as it met with spells and soothed them down. Under my fingers, the key rotated and I heard a click, then the grind of a deadbolt, and the slip of a chain. It was as though a person were behind the door, unlocking it.

The door glided inward easily even as it passed through two feet of cow dung and straw stratified over a century of ill use. The inside of the livery faded after a few inches, and I saw a wooden airplane hanging from a glass ceiling. Wooden flooring superimposed over the muck of an abandoned stable, and I knew I was seeing two places at once, like one photo printed over the top of another.

“Shall we?” Griff extended his arm with a sweeping bow, inviting me to lead the way.

Behind me the dusty ghost town was exactly as it always had been, but I thought I heard the distant chug of a train and the whistle of cowboys calling their dogs. I shivered. Taking a final breath of mountain air streaked with sweet tobacco, I braced myself for a rough portal. Best to get it over with. See what crimes I'd done that I couldn't remember. And pay for them. I stepped inside.

The movement was as easy as stepping into another room, one filled with spider webs which caught on my skin. Shuddering, I rubbed my arms and shook out my hair, watching the floor for creepy crawlies even though I knew the sensation was probably a warding spell.

I turned around and found myself in the promised antiques shop. I was alone. I blinked in confusion, not sure what to think.

“Hello?” I called.

The reply was a lazy draft which smelled of dust and old books.

I examined a stack of news papers, then saw where more stacks of it piled up behind the counter. Trinkets of all kinds—pens, barrets, jewellery, belts and letter openers were the most common—shone in the light beneath a glass display case. I waded through narrow isles, admiring the rows upon rows of books. Curiosities lined the walls, a sarcophagus, a suit of armor, a narrow tapestry depicting farmland and a dragon in her den.

“Clever trinket Olrick made. We did not even set off any wards,” Griff said admiringly, shutting

the great arched door behind him. "Lord Meadows would have cut our conversation uncomfortably short had he known that he had intruders."

"Lord Meadows?"

"The man who runs this establishment. He has a reputation for being the sort of man that one does not cross for any reason."

Of course not. Just my luck. "I guess this is why he's in the same social circle as Constable Barnes?"

"Same coven, not just social friends. And Leif and Lilly, too."

My actions were starting to look very bad. "What is this about Meredith Cole? Why didn't she write the letter? She dead?"

"Some would say so. The official word is that she's on vacation. A very long one. Same with their son."

"So, either someone else is using her name, or she hired me to cleanse a house she no longer lives in." Just-so-coincidentally this was while I was tripping out on mandrake. Or something. I doubted that I'd actually go on a house call while semi-lucid, which made this whole thing so much more confusing.

"And, that isn't all. The missing Meredith Cole has also hired numerous other bogey busters. None of them have been seen since."

"Any rumors?"

"All too few. In fact, there is a conspicuous lack of house staff in the Cole residence."

"It's not like house staff is common anymore."

"It is if you live on as much money as Mr. Cole has."

"Ah." This wasn't looking good. "This is all suspicious, but it's nothing substantial."

"If you want substance, you'll have to find it yourself. How about it?"

"How about what?"

"Come along with me. You've escaped his grasp this long. Others are keen to learn how. I can keep you safe."

If I went along with the likes of Griff, Uncle Don, my father, and all the Hunters would swoop down to give my sorry butt a whooping unlike anything the dungeon guards would dare to do. Facing the music was one thing in my family; hiding beneath a sketchy gryphon's wing was entirely another. "No."

"If you stay to talk with the constables, what will you tell them?"

"The truth."

Griff made a crooning noise. "The truth from a trixster is a slippery thing." He paused. "Are you sure you won't come with me? I can calm Cole's wrath, protect you from further suspicion, and train up your magic."

I rolled my eyes at him. "No one has been able to remove that curse."

Griff paused, his eyes glinting all too cheerfully. "Death has."

"Impossible."

"Perhaps a demonstration is in order. If you're feral, your magic will come to help you. And if you can't control it, perhaps you will reconsider my offer."

"Griff, what are you—"

As I watched, he deliberately set off the shop wards by raising his hand and blowing a decorative wooden screen into smithereens. Half swung on its hinges, half flew through the air, exactly the same spell as the one which had broken into my home.

Shards pelted the floorboards; one struck my arm. Blood seeped around my fingers. When I looked down, I saw bright red drops on the floor.

"Griff!"

He reached into a pouch at his belt and poured pea sized pebbles into his hand. Almost too late, I realized they were stones charged with spells, ready to be used in an instant. Muscles suddenly alive, I dove behind a bookshelf just as he threw them.

They smashed upon an invisible wall. Sparks flew at the contact, and spells poured out of the stones and combated with the wards of the shop in a hissing and spitting battle of ice against green flames. Invading spells against the defending wards. Glad as I was not to have set them off myself, I was hardly happy to be in their path now.

The flames spread, running down the lines of the floorboards and shooting up like a welding torch. My heart stopped in my throat when the flames rushed towards me. I scaled onto a bookshelf the height of my shoulder, wobbling on it as green flames ate the empty space I left behind.

I smelled something molten. The discarded pebbles bubbled in puddles on wood planks. The shop itself, and its contents, remained exactly as they used to be, as though the fire around them was a mere illusion. But I felt the heat burning my skin. And I felt the air thinning in my lungs. I didn't know what I'd do, besides filter the air through my shirt and hope to outlast the invader.

Griff tossed a fresh batch of pebbles. More hissing. I heard the wood groan all around me, in the floor, in the bookshelves, in the wall and ceiling. A fresh shiver went through me as I thought that the glass above could shatter, and I'd be in the way of its fall.

"What are you doing?"

This time the flames died a little lower. Griff called fog around his fingers, occasionally revealing glimpses of a ball of ice growing in his palm. He knelt down and rolled the ball. It parted through the walls of flames and stopped in front of the register. Mist streamed away from the ice, snuffing out flames as it went, growing taller and stronger as Griff grew more strained.

The wood groaned louder and louder, as though it were calling out. I felt bad for the wards and wished there was something I could do—but there was nothing, I hadn't been one of the people to put them up.

Griff held onto his spell longer, just enough to clear the front portion of the shop, and his eyes opened and he stepped inside. He called out, "I have tripped the wards! They burn everything that does not belong. You must know by now that the only way out is with me. Step forward, and I will take you back with me. You can't stay in the flames for long."

I felt a chill at his words despite the sweat dripping down my back. My skin felt red, as though it were starting to blister, and my actual burn hurt. It hurt a lot. Griff had stopped his mists a mere five feet from where I hid, and I saw now that it formed a frost circle around him exclusively.

"Why should I come with you?"

"I think the two of us can help each other out."

I snorted and rubbed my arms, trying to hide them from the heat and not succeeding. I said, "You've come for my bounty."

His smile was a crease through taut skin. Sweat marked his hairline. His circle of frost receded a few inches. Griff lifted the *Tribune* and held it in the air. "Not for this bounty. Why would I bother talking to you? I'll teach you how to control it."

Control what? I thought, but felt a shiver run down my spine as I suspected his answer. Was it possible that I had regained my magic? But if I had, then I should feel it, I should know that it was there, I should be able to make it do things. I didn't feel it. I couldn't control it. It wasn't there, couldn't be there. Nevertheless I found myself saying, "Why should I go with you?"

"If they believe whatever you tell them, and if you can find someone to take guardianship over you, you'll be as good as chained. You'll be under house arrest. You won't be able to go into public. You won't be able to do so many things. Come, now, it must be getting hot."

I hid my arms under my shirt now. It felt like a sunburn was growing on the back of my neck.

Griff smiled and extended a hand in my direction. Frost went where he pointed, advancing toward me. I scooted backwards and slipped on my invisibility ring as he said, "You were a scint. But your magic is back now, and you can't control it, can you? Not many scints can overcome feral magic, but you've done it. That makes you valuable. Step forward. Come away. I'll teach you how to be a sorceress again. You won't get such an offer from a

constable.”

For a second, I stopped scooting.

If my magic was back and it had come back feral, then he was right.

Even though I didn't believe him, I did know that people in such a position were never treated well by law enforcement. It was a magical equivalent of unmedicated schizophrenia. The magic had a will of its own. It could take over a body and use it the way a sorcerer uses magic.

I didn't know who he worked for. Then again, I also didn't know Constable Barnes.

I felt like I was torn in half. His words made sense. Griff was clearly powerful, to be able to walk into a sorcerer's warded home ground like he had just done. He could keep me safe from those who hunted me. He could teach me.

But I didn't trust him.

I wanted to be here, even if I didn't know why.

It had been a bad idea to come here in the first place. Everything involved in this was just a bad idea.

The airplane swayed above me. A burst of wind tore through the busted door, ripped the paper out of his hand. The flames leaped around me, growing high and strong and hot.

Griff laughed and held out his arms, his coat billowing about his waist as he embraced the wind. His frost circle drew tighter and tighter about him.

“You can't control it at all, can you?” He turned to me and stretched out an arm. “At least you can speak coherently. You have a chance, if you come along.”

I didn't say anything. The wind was running through my hair, breathing fresh air over my skin. I drank it in, felt the way it flowed down my throat, filled my lungs, the way it left my nostrils, the way it woke up every cell in my body and pulsed with every beat of my heart. I began to feel the way it funneled in one door and poured out a portal, kissing the flames with renewed power to drive back Griff.

I felt my magic. I had magic again. Yet, I couldn't control it.

Griff uttered quick, sharp words which slanted through the air, cutting through the wards of the shop, and gouged a hole into the fabric of the world. A tear in space appeared before him, on the other end a building began to come into focus.

“He's coming back.” Griff snapped, his fingers moving in a hurried motion to finish the portal. “You need to come to me right now! Come!”

His words spiraled through my thoughts, using my fear and indecision to batter my resolve and weaken reasoning. What had made sense before no longer did. It had been a mistake to

come here, hadn't it? I should have realized that the witch doctor had gotten it right, that I did have my magic back, and that the last thing I should do was turn myself in. He was right. They'd chain me up one way or another, be it with physical restraints or treatments or even legislation. What had even convinced me to come in the first place?

Yet my gut still said *stay*. Why?

I stopped myself from crawling, realizing: he had put a spell on me! He wasn't inviting me to come along, he was coercing me.

Pain stung my ears as the spell slipped, and I cried out as we fought a battle of wills. Through bleary eyes, I saw him intensify both portal and the spell on me, letting his protective ice fade. I felt my body scream in agony, demanding that I go forward, that I go with Griff. But if I were to so much as move a finger, I felt the air about me thicken, as though I were moving through water instead of air.

"Come along!"

I clapped my hands over my ears, feeling my illusion ring slip from my grasp and fall into my lap. I had meant it to be a distraction, but now I could only fight my own body, fight to contain panic as my own magic crushed in about me and I was drowning.

Power surged through the shop and the flames bolted to the ceiling, flashing before my eyes so brightly that it felt like someone had flipped on the lights in the middle of the night. I squinted my eyes open in time to see a man step through the fire, his hair seeming to be the flames. Relief and nerves hit me at once, and my magic abandoned me to fan the fire about his hands.

Green parted around him like a curtain, and he grabbed an ember and threw it. It struck Griff's frost shield, which collapsed about him.

Griff jumped through the portal, taking with him a large vase slung under his elbow. Why he wanted it, I couldn't even guess. To make it look like a robbery? As the vase went by, I thought I should know the face painted upon the white surface, but I shook my head. The painting was a common motif of a blonde haired blue eyed beauty, and nothing more.

"Stop!" yelled a shorter man who appeared just after the first. He moved much faster than his middle age and stature suggested. In a dark streak, he made it through as the portal was closing.

The first man muttered something and ran to where the portal had sealed up. Jewels on his fingers glinted in the firelight. He seemed ready to try to open the portal again, but something stopped him. He turned and looked around, knowing that something was off but not understanding what that something was. The green and red of his eyes made my breath hitch. He had vertical pupils which blinked into normal eyes so quickly that I thought I had imagined it.

The shopkeeper, *Lord Meadows*, if Griff's rumors were true, snapped his fingers. The green warding fire sucked back down through the floorboards. Cracks in the wood all around me swelled shut and the floor reflected light with polish. The man closed his eyes and breathed in. Then he said, "Who is my trespasser?"

Trespasser. I remembered what Griff had said my crimes had been. Breaking and entering. Vandalism.

Theft.

That slippery eel!

All along, Griff had wanted that stupid vase!

He'd set me up and I'd gone and put my foot in the trap, all for a couple of *rumors*.

Chapter Three

My heart started to pound again, my mouth went dry. Black pepper and smoke filled the air, tinged with a trace of honeysuckle, replacing the scent of old books and dust. I swallowed twice, failing to swallow my nerves, then said, "I came to see Constable Barnes."

He pursed his lips. In the absence of flames, I saw that he was a head taller than me and his hair color ranged from red-blond to auburn, as though it were in a pattern which I couldn't see since it hung about his shoulders in waves. He said, "You just missed him."

My heart continued to thud in my ears. I rubbed my arms. I asked, "And you are?"

"Mordon. Come out of hiding, and we'll talk. You'd best drop whatever spells you put in place. Don't lie to me. I don't take well to thieves, but I'm even worse to liars."

I wanted to object that I hadn't put up any spells to keep myself safe, but I didn't know that for certain. Not if what Griff had said was true and my magic was working without my knowledge. I would never have come if I'd known, if I'd suspected that my magic had returned.

Mordon set to work finding his newspapers and putting them into stacks. With the exception of papers strewn over the floor and a busted door, the shop showed no sign of a forced entry. He paused when his gaze came across blood on the floor.

Nervous, I let my invisibility ring slip off my finger, revealing myself sitting cross legged on the shelf. The man's brows bolted up. "That where you were hiding?"

I nodded.

Mordon frowned and held out his hand. "Give me my trinket back."

"This is mine. I haven't taken anything from your shop." My fingers closed into a tight fist.

"You have a trinket of that quality?" His brow furrowed, not believing me. "Where did you get the money for it?"

"Busting bogeys."

"Is that what got you tangled up with that scum?" Mordon asked, crossing his arms. He was implying that we ran a scam together, Griff putting nasty spells in place, and me cleaning them up for a fee.

At first I was angry with the implication, then I wondered how I had come to have Griff on my trail. I searched my memory in vain. "I'm not with him."

"What?"

"I just ran into him. I didn't know he came to steal."

He went very still. "Don't lie to me again."

I licked my lips, then rubbed my arms, smearing blood. Mordon sighed and crossed to me in three quick strides. The air thickened and chilled. Mordon turned both of his hands palms up and said, "Let me see your arm."

My stomach flipped, but I felt the air soften then flow away. Biting my lip, I put my legs over the bookshelf and prepared to jump to the floor. Hands about my waist helped me down. I was surprised by their warmth, by how they didn't have the numbing tingle to them. I thought that I must have spent too long in the presence of a ghost. Real hands felt good. It had been a long time.

A rag dabbed at the blood, then Mordon's fingers prodded the area around the sliver. When I looked down, I saw a rough bit of wood lodged into the underside of my forearm.

"It's not deep. Do you want me to pull it out or wait for a healer?"

Seeing the wood jutting out of my skin made me feel sick. "Just take it out."

Mordon wriggled it back and forth, then gave a quick tug. The shard came out. He rubbed the wound. Some blood flowed, but not enough to be worrisome.

He led me to the front, and pulled a wooden box out from under the counter. Inside was what looked like a surgeon's kit from a museum.

"Not going to do a spell?"

Mordon's eyes met mine. "Healing isn't my specialty. Is it yours?"

I didn't answer. Nothing seemed like a good reply.

Mordon drew up a stool for me and sat down on a sea chest carved with Celtic knot work. He washed the cut out with alcohol and then wrapped it up.

A minute crawled by with me staring at the floor and him staring at me. At last Mordon asked, "What brought you here to see Barnes about?"

My voice lodged in my throat. I'd had so long to think over what it was that I would say, but I couldn't think of a single thing to say now. They all seemed so wrong, so terrible. They sounded so fake, and even worse now with what Griff had told me. I considered bolting for the door.

Mordon put elbows on knees and tried to catch my eye. His brows were raised, a nonverbal prompt. I realized that I'd been holding my breath.

"I don't think I should tell you. I need to speak to him."

"He'll tell me. I doubt I will even leave while you talk."

"Because you're a coven?"

"Two of the four."

"That doesn't entitle you to my business."

"It does."

I gave it some thought. When sorcerers formed covens, they indeed did share all their information. If a sorcerer couldn't trust their coven, who could they trust? Back when this was *just* a simple matter of mandrake, witch doctors, lost memories, and bounty hunters, it made sense to come clean. Now that I apparently had magic which did not want to conform to my will, I was suddenly a danger to myself and those around me. There was one responsible thing to do.

I took a step towards a side door. "It's not something that needs urgent attention."

"It is urgent enough that you felt the need to break into King's Ransom."

That bit of the day was something I would forever regret. How would I talk out of that?

"The thief opened the door. I came in after him. This isn't the best time for you, I'll come back when you're less busy." I twisted the doorknob. Locked.

"What did I say about lying?" Mordon asked. He moved behind the register, pulling out two chairs in a not-so-subtle invitation. "We can discuss why you broke into my shop. And how."

"I didn't take anything."

"I have not accused you of such a thing. Take a seat. Tell me what my thief was saying. It might help me understand why he took what he did."

I braced myself and neared his arrangement. Seeing how he controlled if the shop kept or released me, my options were limited to co-operating or not. Either way, I would see Constable Barnes. But one way, I could make a favorable impression on his friend. Mordon watched me closely, not the way a man does a woman, but the way a trainer studies a new horse.

There were two chairs. One was a comfortable-looking wingback with a blanket tossed over an arm. The other was a vintage metal garden chair, the kind with a heart-shaped back found in cutesy bistros. Not sure which one to take, I remained standing by the counter, hoping that he would sit first. Mordon cocked his head to the side. I gazed down at the line of ticking pocketwatches. He moved to my other side, grabbed the bistro chair, and sat down in it, effectively cutting off my escape.

Uneasily, I went to the weathered wingback. To keep myself from falling through padding meant to hold someone far bigger than myself, I had to slip off my shoes and tuck my legs up underneath me. Even so, I smelled him. Black pepper, spices, and the earthy musk of a man.

Mordon rested his elbows on his knees, his legs clearly taking the weight off his chair. He leaned forward, those odd eyes of his watching my whole body, reading me like a book. "Who are you?"

“Feraline.”

“That is your name. Who are you? A bogey buster?”

I blushed, not entirely sure how to answer. “Well, I gave you what you gave me.”

A smile spread across his face. “This is true. I am Mordon Meadows, Drake Lord of the Kragdomen Colony, sole proprietor of King's Ransom Magical Antiquities, Protector of the Coven at King's Ransom. At your service.”

Such a formal introduction. “So, do I call you...?”

“Mordon.”

“Ah.”

“Shall we try you again? Who are you?”

“Miss Feraline Swift, house cleanser and potion-brewer.” I almost added, *wanted by Constables and bounty hunters alike*, but I thought the better of it.

“Why those trades?”

“They're safer versions of the family business.”

“Which is?”

“Demon hunting.”

He lifted an eyebrow in a high arch. “A serious business.”

“Oh, yes. I got out before I could get into too much trouble.”

Not that that did me a lot of good, I thought, seeing my recent mess.

Mordon chuckled, a warm and rich sound which instantly sent happy little tingles across my body. Early in life, I'd learned that a man's voice was my weak spot. Specifically, rumbling voices with a foreign tinge to their accent. I could overlook all sorts of flaws if a man had a voice that resonated exactly the way Mordon's did.

“I wasn't speaking of your parent's business. I meant yours. Genuine bogey busters are a rare find.”

I preened at the compliment, even as I thought, That was smooth. Off-handed compliment right when I show signs of softening. Still, it worked. I'd have to risk it sooner or later. “I have something to show you.”

A slight cock of the head was my response.

I showed him Madame Meredith Cole's letter. As he read, I folded my hands in my lap and tried to remove their icy chill by putting them between my thigh and the chair. What would he think of it? Or of me? Not worrying about it was impossible.

“When did you get this?”

“A couple days ago, I think.”

“Did you answer it?”

I froze in indecision.

Mordon said, “You can tell me.”

I imagined what would happen if I told him that the last thing I remembered was moments before a witch doctor's appointment on Sunday? That Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday were gone as entirely as if the whole world had played a prank on me?

“I heard that Meredith Cole hasn't been seen in some time. And there's talk about cleansers going missing. It seemed suspicious. I wanted some advise on the matter. That's all.”

“So you haven't made contact with the sender of the letter?”

I shook my head.

He considered me, holding the letter in his hand. Evidently it bothered him more than he was letting on, if I had managed to distract him from the whole breaking-and-entering conversation. When he looked up again, he said, “I will show this to Barnes when he returns, but it could take some time. You look tired. Come, you can wait for Barnes upstairs.”

I opened my mouth, ready to object.

“It's the coven's communal quarters, not my personal living space. Entirely safe, and more comfortable than here.”

He was right. I *was* tired. My body hurt from a dozen different things. Even my eyelids slid closed right there folded up in his monstrous chair.

Chapter Four

A door slammed. I woke up on a pink couch in a strange house with no clue why I was there.

Feet came up the stairs. A quick, purposeful stride which wasn't stomping.

Waves of red hair crested the banister. I recognized the shopkeeper and recalled that I'd zonked out in his chair. He must have moved me to the coven's common room.

"Where am I?"

"You, Miss Swift, are a liar. A good liar, but untruthful nonetheless," Mordon said with a *Thaumaturgical Tribune* in hand. He wore the usual sorcerering robes, black with traces of dust and cobwebs on them, and polished shoes. Quite a fetching look when combined with all those rings on his fingers and a long triskele necklace dangling against his chest. It made him look a bit dangerous, but in a sophisticated way. He wasn't my usual manly-man type of guy, so I couldn't figure out why I was so into him. Had to be his voice.

He didn't sound angry.

So neither did I when I accused him with, "And you put a sleep spell on me without my permission."

I stiffened, realizing what he'd said, staring blankly at my surroundings. Off to one side was a kitchen with a nearby breakfast nook armed with benches and a chair for the head of the table. A set of stairs behind the nook lowered down to what was Mordon's antiques shop.

On all sides of the living room were various doors, each in their own style. One was a panel door with peach stenciling, one was plain white, another was painted tan, a fourth had runes carved in the door frame, and the final was a set of french doors with light pouring through gauzy curtains.

I'd heard rumors and warnings of sorcerers who riddled their residences with portals to other places. Open a wrong door, or reach into a cabinet, and a stranger could find himself half way across the world. Or in a volcano. Whichever suited the sorcerer's fancy.

"You were a flight risk," Mordon said. "Are you ready to tell me the truth?"

No need to flip out yet. Who knew which lies he'd found out about?

"Sure," I said.

How much had he learned? How far back had he gone? Had he discovered the link between me and Griff? Worse, had he found out how I'd gotten Railey killed at that spook house on Ferret Drive? I wished I'd tucked in my self-sufficiency and gone to Uncle Don instead. At least he knew the whole truth.

Except I'd never tried to tell Mordon about it, so I couldn't be lying.

This had to be about something else.

"What do you want to know?" I tried to act uncaring. "Did Constable Barnes say anything about the note?"

"The note is where this gets interesting. According to the decomposition of the spell which burned it to you, you received it on Sunday."

"Sounds right."

"And the Constabulary received a report of vandalism from Gregor Cole on Tuesday, claiming the damage had taken place late night Sunday or early Monday morning."

"Oh. That's unfortunate."

Mordon raised a brow. He unfolded the paper. "What is unfortunate that he claims she did it."

My face snarled back up at me from the *Tribune's* want ad. It wasn't the best photo, though it would be hard to deny being the wanted person.

"And?" I asked, feeling breathless.

"And when you fell asleep downstairs, I moved you upstairs. This fell off your neck." He held up my butterfly necklace, complete with Picasso's paints. "You happen to resemble this photo and that is definitely the same necklace."

The air was positively pregnant with the expectation of a full, unconcealed disclosure. If there ever was a time to come clean with the deal, all of it, it was now. He was willing to listen, he'd seemingly forgiven my earlier transgressions. A fresh start would get this ordeal straightened out in no time.

Resigned to my inevitable fate, I said, "Well. This explains why I had bounty hunters crashing down my door at first light."

Mordon was as surprised by my comment as I was.

"It's the truth. I had no idea. One of them busted open my door and said, 'You're dead.' I got out of there as fast as I could."

"If you were clueless, why did you insist on coming to see Constable Barnes?"

"I did happen to read that article in the *Tribune*. And I did want to check up on the note, too. I just didn't feel comfortable telling you about the whole home invasion. It seemed like a tall tale on the heels of the theft."

Mordon sighed, dropping the paper down on the table. A bit of his agitation seeped away.

Mordon asked, "So how are you involved with the thief?"

"He said he wanted to cool off from the heat. Then, he offered to train me."

Mordon shook his head again. "Why would he train you? What specialty are you?"

Sweat broke out over my neck and I said, "Nothing. I have no specialty. I'm scint."

Mordon's eyes darted over me. He snapped his fingers, and an ember appeared between his thumb and forefinger. He flicked it at me.

I ducked, but watched in shock when the ember stopped mid-air, the tail of the flame waving first one way then the next. I thought Mordon was controlling it, but when I wished it was farther away from my hair, the ember moved. Blinking in surprise, I held my hand out to one side, and the air moved it toward my hand, stopping just before touching skin. I held out my other hand, and the flame migrated to that one, then back towards my first hand. I made a circle in the air and the ember followed.

A smile broke out over my face. I laughed.

Mordon's face softened into a smile, too. He said, "No, you're not scint."

I blew on the ember and it glowed brighter. I cupped my hands over it and felt it die down, then released it and flicked it back at Mordon, who snuffed it out entirely. I stared at him, mind buzzing with possibilities. "But this doesn't make sense. I haven't felt it in years."

"Wind magic," Mordon said. This time the shake of his head was in admiration. "There aren't nearly enough of your element."

His face fell.

"They'll want to take it away, won't they?"

"Most likely." Mordon looked like he didn't agree with the action, but knew it was probable.

I took in a slow breath and said, "I won't let them."

Brilliant eyes met mine, peering into me. Mordon raised a brow. "No? What when your magic shows how feral it is and decides to overtake you?"

"I won't let it." I was surprised by the conviction behind my voice. I was surprised by how absolutely certain I was. No, not certain. Determined.

Mordon reached up to stroke his chin as though he used to have a beard there. He looked down at his empty hand and shrugged. He said, "And what about a teacher, since you snubbed your last offer?"

I licked my lips and tried not to look around. "If all else fails, there are books to read."

"Indeed there are," Mordon said, as though that wasn't a very good option. Then he said, "How did you get in here? Who let you in?"

I felt a little pale, and produced the key from my pocket. All that was left was a handle and a round bar. The teeth were completely gone, as was the magic. I gave it to him.

He turned it over in his palm and smiled. "Made by Olrick. Beautiful craftsmanship, but the man himself is a thieving scoundrel." Mordon looked at his door thoughtfully. "At least I know now that they have come up with a way to silence my wards. I'll have to work on that."

I was still sweating, but this time not from the heat. I folded my hands, wriggling my toes so he wouldn't know how nervous I was.

It was not long before I heard the door rattle, a woman yelled at the locked door, which soon obligingly swung open the door with a jangle of goat bells. The woman called for Mordon. Two more sets of feet follow, their steps as muted as their voices. The woman's voice blazed at Mordon, pausing long enough to hear his one-syllable answers.

I smiled to myself. Mordon seemed to understand that the way to endure a woman like that was to take her anger quietly.

"...had to hire Grog for the remainder of the day. If any other protector had left the Constable like that, they'd be in the streets within the hour..." the woman let her voice trail off, having reached the front counter. I couldn't see them yet, but I could hear her voice slip past the bookshelves.

When she came around the shelves, she wore a diplomatic smile. Her eyes were lit with indignation, and dark auburn hair was tied in three places down her back. A gray cowl sat about her shoulders, and she took a second to remove it, hanging it on a hook.

I thought I recognized her. Lilly? It had been a long time, so I wasn't certain. Her neutral smile did not fade, nor did her eyes register any sort of recognition for me.

Mordon stayed back, contented to lean against the front register and watch. The man who had gone chasing after Griff, apparently Constable Barnes, sidled next to him and started a whispered conversation.

A tall, slender man with a bald head and almost-pointy ears gave Barnes and Mordon a twitched frown. Mordon mouthed 'later', and the third man dropped his eyebrows in a resigned sigh, then pulled three chairs from behind the counter for me, the woman, and himself.

The new man sat across from me, and I was struck by his magnetic blue eyes. Recognition zipped through my body, and I suddenly felt hopeful—and terrified. His eyes were the only thing unchanged, dark about the rims, bolts of crystalline blue in the center.

That woman was Lilly, and this man was Leif, her brother. We had not talked since before the incident with Railey. Did they blame me? Did they miss me? Should I say who I was?...then again, this was Leif. I swallowed hard and gave him a tentative smile, which he returned with the same warmth that a host uses to make his customers comfortable.

Lilly skimmed her eyes over me, but she was looking at my various gashes and bruises, not in the least impressed. "I need to get a couple things from upstairs. Be right back."

Leif nodded, not taking his eyes off me. His lips pursed and he squinted. A smile snuck on his

lips. "Feraline, it is you."

"Leif, I..." I didn't know what to say, my hands shook in surprise and excitement. I swallowed and tried again, "Leif, I've wanted to see you two for forever."

He patted my back. "I know. It's been too long."

"I take it that you know her well?" Mordon asked.

Leif hesitated, then cast sad eyes on me, "We used to be good friends, years ago. Such good friends, we were bound to be a coven one day. She, me, my sister, a girl called Railey, and a stray." He met my eyes, but I looked away before he could pry memories from me. "Called Griff."

He waited again for me to respond, but I stared at the floor. Leif continued, "One day, Griff was gone and Fera wouldn't talk about it. The next day, Railey was dead and our friend seemed to have lost her voice altogether."

I had no doubt that was a dig at my mute refusal to speak of what happened with Railey. Shame and anger raged through me at once.

I slammed the burnt letter on an empty shelf between us. "That wasn't the only thing I lost."

Crystalline eyes darted to the singe marks on the letter; he put his head in one hand. "Your magic. I thought the rumors were rumors."

"Leif," I started and stopped, embarrassed by my temper.

Leif shrugged. "It's old news. I've learned during my short time as a judge that people will talk when they are ready for it. I know your soul well enough to know that whatever you did then, and since then, you did with the best intentions."

I blushed, and for a minute I stared at the crinkled remains of my letter.

"How will Lilly take the news?" I asked.

"Mmm," Leif cut himself off as Lilly came back with a clutch purse. She dug in it and dropped a small jar of salve on the table.

"Start with that on your cuts," Lilly instructed, not looking at me. I screwed the top off the jar and applied a syrupy salve to my scratches. As soon as I moved to a new cut, the old cut became pink skin, then my ivory tone. She unwound the bandage and tapped along the unbroken skin next to the splinter, muttering something. It healed.

Lilly sighed and straightened out her robes with flushed cheeks, "It's just been such a long day, then the thing with Mordon and the stuff he brings home—no offense."

I nodded.

She squinted, leaning and staring, her face all lines. Then the lines went away. Lilly's face

paled, her eyes opened wide, and her gaze darted up at me, over to Leif, back to me, to Leif, then me, and rested her eyes on Mordon. For a few seconds, nobody moved.

"You can't be," she said. I nodded. Lilly spoke again, her voice higher, "No, you can't be! Fera...Fera would never in her life wear that." She motioned to my jeans and tank top, and I found myself agreeing with her, and within seconds I felt heat rise on my cheeks.

"Railey would have," I said, remembering a warning my parents had given me about living with a ghost. They were memories, they were imprints of life, and when they spent enough time with a living person, that person would gain the ghost's stronger traits. Railey had been subject to the whims of style. I'd been frightened of sunburns to the point of wearing long-sleeves year round. Whatever would hide my skin, I'd wear it, and it never looked fashionable. Much had changed.

"Railey?"

"Has been my partner for the last ten years." I should have said *had been*. Old habits die hard.

Lilly seemed to have stopped breathing. "Sure, of course she has been. And there haven't been any photos or way to identify Feraline, so who could say that you are who you say you are?"

"I can," said Leif. "And she is."

Then Lilly faced me again, her eyes brimming. She launched herself through the distance between chairs. Her chest rose and fell like she was sobbing.

"Lilly?" I asked. She looked up and I realized she was half-laughing, half-crying.

"You're here—you're finally here." Lilly pushed herself up, sitting on my legs without any concern for them.

Barnes' barking laugh rattled over the table. He said, "Heal while you talk, little one."

Lilly blushed harder, bright red spots appearing over her already pink skin. Dabbing the syrupy goo on cuts I'd missed, Lilly said, "What have you been up to these last...I'd say about, a week? You have more spells on you than you have cuts! Drink this."

She pulled a vial from her purse. I gave it a long, studying gaze before I raised my eyes to her and asked, "This isn't going to be like the time you mixed tomato sauce and baking soda and told me to drink it?"

Lilly rolled her eyes. I drank.

She pressed, "Where have you been?...not that it matters, Leif's been keeping me up to date whenever he found a new article in the *Tribune*. I bet that one of your cases bumped you into us." She pulled from her purse a dozen cut out articles that had been carefully read, folded, unfolded, and read again many times.

I scanned through the articles. They were written as though they were a miniature detective novel, and I knew the cases even though the names of people and places had been changed. Well, all the names but my last name, and the real names of the creatures. One of the articles still had the header on it. *Thaumaturgical Tribune*, it read.

"You, err...Miss Swift...has quite the fan base!" said Lilly. "Though everyone thinks its fiction, you know. It's how it's written."

What I did to earn a quick buck knew no bounds. I'd been earning tidbits from my interviews for two years now. "How long has this been going on?"

"Three years or so," said Leif. "I was privately assured the stories were accurate. Are they?"

I nodded, thinking sourly that I was owed a year or so's worth of interviewing. Leif winked. "What's the story that got you entangled with Mordon? One word, what is one word to describe it?"

Barnes and Mordon had been watching with lukewarm interest up until now; Mordon was stroking his chin, as though wondering if I was an adventurer and journalist, or if I had been leading him on. I was not looking forward to sorting out my story with him. Barnes leaned just a little, and Lilly watched me with sparkling eyes.

In one word? I sighed mentally. Leif knew exactly how to cut to the heart of the matter with me. "Death."

* * *

I spent the next couple of hours enduring a variety of spells to check my head. Lilly spent most of her time with her nose in a book, making notes on the results of spells while she muttered, "Stranger and stranger." She wouldn't give an explanation.

Lilly sat next to me with a new book and ran through another spell.

I cradled my head in my hands and wondered about Railey. She couldn't really be gone, could she?

My body ached, particularly my lungs and throat. I was already missing the comforts of home, the open air through unglazed windows, all the trinkets I had left behind. Leif and Barnes took Lilly aside for a consultation, and I breathed a little easier.

I listened for a time to the conversation behind me, but I couldn't make sense of it.

"What are they talking about?" I asked.

"The spells on you," Mordon said. "They are working out a way to remove them without causing an adverse reaction."

Once again I wondered what I had been doing the last three days, but I just had to give Mordon a quizzical glance to see him shake his head. Railey would have spied on conversations, on newspapers and books, and she would have told me. Having her missing was half of my heartache; I needed to know what had happened to her. Had she crossed over? I would miss her if this was the case, but still I would take some comfort in it. But what if whatever had happened to me had harmed her, too?

My thoughts consumed me while the others laid their spells down over me, making my magic stir once or twice, but not with near the force that it had earlier. From time to time, Mordon would look up from his book and remind me to be calm. I watched a calligraphy pen spin between each of his fingers, twirling around his thumb to start the routine over again.

At one point, Barnes' spell clapped over my ears and I snapped at him. One of the french doors rattled in accompaniment to my snarl, and Lilly declared, "That should be enough for one day. We should give this some time to heal over first."

Having them step away made me feel like a puppet whose strings had gone lax. Lilly brought me a cup of tea—lemon and rose hip, with so much hibiscus flower that it had to be made from a bag. I sipped at it to be polite. When Leif, Lilly, and Mordon had stepped aside to discuss my rehabilitation plan, Barnes grunted, "Let me see that."

Did he mean the tea? I cast him an inquisitive glance, then gave him the cup. He brought out of his vest a small metal flask, topped off my cup with it, and returned the cup to me and the flask to his vest. It smelled sweet and alcoholic. I asked, "And this is?"

"Elderberry liqueur. Don't tell the others, they think I make brandy. They'll be asking me to make that for them if they find out."

After a moment's consideration, I sipped at the drink, and found it soothing on my throat. Settling back into my chair, I rubbed my forehead, surprised at how exhausted I was.

"Don't close your eyes yet," advised Barnes. "You'll sleep through the night better if you wait."

Much as I wanted to agree with him, I nodded off once the tea was finished. I woke to Lilly shaking my shoulder, hesitantly, as though she were afraid of what I would do if I were startled. A hot cup of broth replaced my tea, and she told me to drink it. I sipped, and fell into a fit of revolted coughing. What was this, an infusion of shrimp brains?

Leif laughed loudest of the men, and Lilly shot me a glare. Did I say that aloud? My cheeks colored.

"Drink it," Lilly said, insulted. "I'll be back once I'm done making your bed. There's no other furniture in there yet, but it will be safe. Leif, come on."

Lilly marched through the french doors.

Leif sobered and said, "We're going to put up wards around your doors and windows. Keep you safe."

"And me from leaving?"

He paused, and decided to not reply. He left. When the door clicked shut, I sighed and glanced at Barnes and Mordon. "Why do I feel more at ease with the two of you than them?"

Barnes said, twitching his mustache, "It is often easier to start a new acquaintance than to renew an old."

I frowned but accepted it, and gulped down the broth to get it over with. Time passed in silence, except for the sound of Mordon rolling his pen between his fingers.

Leif and Lilly emerged again, and I gave Lilly back the cup and stood up.

The carpet met me when my knees gave out. I saw the three men exchange a glance. Mordon got up while I was trying—and failing—to make my legs work.

I brushed at his hands when he put one arm around my shoulders and scooped up my knees in his other arm. My eyes burned in embarrassment.

Mordon's low rumble said into my hair, "This is common. They had to mix your magic in with theirs to take away some spells. Not many people can move around after that."

My feet brushed the curtains as he carried me. Though his words did help, they didn't make me any less frustrated. "I'm not like this. I'm not—"

A bed pressed against my back, embracing me. Mordon found a quilt over the bottom of the bed and dropped it over me, his rings flashing in moonlight coming through the windows. The air was so still here. So stuffy.

"Wait," I called to Mordon's retreating back. I motioned to the window. "Do you think you could...?"

His face fell into a relieved smile, and he nodded. He muttered a spell, opened the window, and said, "The air can come in, but nothing goes out."

I swallowed the lump in my throat and blurted, "I'm the woman in the paper."

"What?"

"I'm the woman in the paper," I repeated, feeling worn now, tired. I'd spent hours worrying and fretting, and now I was worn out.

He stared at me again, then shook his head. "Impossible. She's dead."

Now I stared at him. She was...dead? But I had been so certain! If she wasn't me, then she looked exactly like me, and she had my necklace. However, I obviously was not dead.

Was I free to go, or had I gotten myself in trouble by breaking in?

Mordon studied me a little longer, then asked, "What made you think that you were the woman in the paper?"

“Because of my lack of memories.”

He shook his head. “And the necklace? It could be a duplicate. Makers do that now and again.”

“But...” The words caught in my throat. I ran my fingers over the cloth wrapped around my arm. “I don't have any memory of the last three days. When I was scint.”

Mordon arched an eyebrow. “I can think of a few people who would like to speak with you, then.”

“I won't talk with them,” I snapped, feeling the air thicken again.

Mordon either didn't notice, or was taking it in stride. He smiled. “No?”

That expression sent a chill through me and I wondered if I had a choice in the matter now that I'd told him. I met his green and red eyes squarely and said, “Not unless they won't take my magic away.”

He opened a hand. “They'll agree to let you keep it if you have a teacher.”

“Then you be it,” I said, before I could stop myself.

Mordon turned his head to the side and narrowed his brows together, considering. He held out his hand, palm up. I hesitated, unsure what to make of the gesture, then placed my hand flat against his, palm touching palm. For a second it was my cold fingers resting against his wrist, then I felt the heat of an ember forming.

It was a test to see if sorcerers could partner in spell-casting, one of the first things I had learned as a child. Usually cooperation between sorcerers and their elements was not a problem, but if there was a conflict, then the cause had to be identified and corrected.

When I rocked my hand palm-up, I saw a pearl of light lift and glow from my skin.

I touched it with a fingertip. The pearl was so bright that I couldn't gaze at it for long. I said, “I haven't done this since Railey.”

“Railey?”

I pulled my hand back. The pearl faded to a speck of dust. “She died.”

Mordon raised a brow, but resisted commenting. He sat back and rubbed his forehead, then looked towards the paper. He said, “If you were that woman, then you need to know that you made a great many powerful sorcerers very angry. It would be better for everyone involved if you were dead.”

My heart stopped and mouth went dry. I said, “What are you saying?”

“I'm saying that you need to choose: do you want your magic, or your life?”

I bit my lip and closed my eyes. When I opened them, I was staring into green and red eyes. I

said, "Living without magic isn't much of a life."

"So what do you want me to tell Constable Barnes and the others?"

"You don't believe me, do you?"

"No," Mordon said. "I think you're tired of living on the fringes of society and you see this as a way to break into it."

I couldn't blame him, but I still felt a swell of disappointment. Then I had a thought. I unclasped the butterfly necklace from my own neck and dropped it into Mordon's hand. He turned it twice over in his palm, and asked, "Where did you get this?"

I looked down at my arm, and felt the cool trail of a breeze run down my back. "Tell them I found her body, or what was left of it, while hiking in the mountains. I could only bring this back. It was around her neck."

"It seems the least I owe you is a new key, as we were all too busy to answer the door in good time." Mordon's jewelled fingers closed over the pendant, and he gave it some thought. "I will teach you, if you'll stay in the rooms provided by the coven. Feral magic is a sensitive business."

He opened his palm, and a flame drifted up over the butterfly, making flecks in the paint gleam. Mordon said, "An oath between us. What we spoke of earlier has no place, except in the past. The two of us will never mention it again, to anyone. So says I, Mordon Meadows."

I held my hand over the tip of his flame, feeling a brush of wind stir between us. "And so says I, Feraline Hope Swift."

"Now rest. You need it."

Despite myself, I did.

I fell asleep loving fresh air over my skin.

Chapter Five

Morning found me sprawled over the enclosed patio of my new temporary home, the pages ripped from my journal and mottled with notes. Paving stones beneath me left indents in my skin. I poked at the ridges in my skin when I ran out of ideas and needed to think.

One page had a list of herbs I knew which might cause a black out of memory. Another page had potions. Yet another page detailed biological possibilities, though the odds of such a selective and perfect erasure of memory hardly made any medical sense, at least to my knowledge. On another page, I listed everyone who had the motive and opportunity to have caused this. It was an impressive list, to be certain, everything from disgruntled clients to demons.

But...none of them would have chosen to give me magic. Unless they somehow knew that I had lost it, and that giving it back would mean I would have to tango with feral magic. No one I had spoken to had suspected my magic would return feral. Healers had presumed it would return as domestic.

I considered that a reason for my memory blanking out was because of my magic. If it was in control, would I remember anything? What little I had learned of feral magic had not encompassed such an idea. It was much too early for me to pester another person with these questions. And I wanted to be left alone for a while.

For over a year, I'd lived completely alone in the barn with a ghost, and I'd been very happy with the arrangement. Being around so many people, so quickly, made me feel as though I couldn't breathe.

I had watched the sun rise through floor to ceiling windows. Even the roof was made of glass. Someone had opened up the exterior wall with giant roman-style arches so I could look into the living room. Slate flooring covered the entire home, the walls were plaster. Windows reigned supreme, even the side that should be facing the common area with Leif, Lilly, Barnes, and Mordon. There were two doors in this house, the french doors which led to the common area, and the door I was staring at which led to a deck overlooking a cliff. All doors and windows were locked, except for the french doors.

True to Lilly's word, the bed was the only furniture. I had not even a rug to my name. What she hadn't told me was how many plants there were. The sun room looked like a green house, bright with blooms and shadowed beneath vines and potted trees. I frowned at them, trying to calculate their life expectancy now that I was in residence. Around me, plants loved to thrive if they were outside plants. It should take me about two months to murder all these lovelies.

A knock stirred me from my musings. I didn't have the chance to answer before the french

doors opened and Leif stepped through, closing the door with care as though to not rouse the others.

"I'm back here," I called.

He came, his feet light and soft. Leif wore his serious expression, pulling out his elfin heritage.

A single *Tribune* scrunched in his fist, and while he stood beside me, reading my notes, I saw a photograph of a woman snarling at the viewer, her face contorted into an expression rather like a cornered raccoon, her hair a nest of tangles. Her eyes were glassy. The caption beneath read, *Wild magic animates corpse, terrorizes homes across the nation.*

It was me.

My heart stopped and I snatched the paper from his hand.

Wild Woman Caught, Constables Still Taking Damage Reports

BY SIMONA ECCLES / AMERICAN SORCERERING TODAY

The animated corpse marauding houses across the country has been found and cremated, according to an official report issued by the Federal Constable Council. The corpse was unidentifiable and was incinerated upon unsuccessful cross-reference to missing persons reports. The report states, "...wild magic is to blame for the corpse's antics, which though disturbing and frightening, caused damage to property and no harm to any persons or animals involved in the case." The cause for the attacks is unclear, and there are no apparent connections between homes attacked. Damage sustained by the so-called Wild Woman includes mangled lawns, torn rose bushes, a single case of breaking and entering a cellar, and the emotional trauma caused by witnesses viewing the corpse.

"People are wrongly calling this a zombie," said Julian Provost, leading researcher in necromancy. "There's a fine line between zombie and this state of natural re-animation..."

I didn't have the stomach to read what that 'fine line' was. I let the paper fall from my grasp, and groaned, cradling my head in misery. Swallowing, I said, "So...this is me."

"Yes."

I gazed at him, and saw that he was staring steadily at me. I promised Mordon I wouldn't speak of what I'd told him, and so I wouldn't, but how was I to answer this? Acting as stunned as I felt, I said, "And I was...dead. Like, really, truly, dead, or like bullshitting-the-public dead?"

Leif's mouth softened, but he didn't smile. He said, "Really, truly, absolutely dead."

I didn't believe it. I couldn't. It was impossible. I shook my head. "No, there must have been some vital signs that other people just missed. Like, a walking coma or something."

But he shook his head. "We found you on Tuesday. Ripping up a rather ugly bush, and breaking sticks over rocks. Lilly confirmed death, and at the time we thought it was a rogue necromancer, a novice who lost control. But...well, the first spell woke your magic. See, if you were all dead, your magic wouldn't exist."

I held up a hand. "Wait, wait, wait. For now I'm going to pretend this...corpse was someone else because this whole thing just doesn't make sense. Like, if I were dead for a day or more, wouldn't there be enough decomposition to make living again impossible?"

Leif's brows raised and his mouth formed the word, "Well..."

I cut him off. "Fine, whatever, things get weird when magic happens, right, let's leave it at that. I'll ignore what little I know of biology for now. What do you mean, all dead?"

He shifted. "See...there are two parts to being dead. There's bodily dead, and then there's brain dead. I'm using terms you're probably familiar with. A person's only all dead when both parts stop working. Since we are enlightened, I'll tell you that a person's power is closely linked to that 'brain dead' part, though the body part should be tied to the heart instead of the brain, but let's not go there right now. Some spells can kill a person's power. Some spells can kill a person's body. And there are a few which can kill both, but those are more myth than anything..."

I held up a hand, leaning on my other hand, feeling the floor beneath me in an attempt to ground myself. "Wait, I thought murder happened the same here as elsewhere?"

Leif shrugged. "A knife can kill all dead as surely as a spell. There's a lot to be said for willpower. I mean, people can undergo such trauma as to burst their heartstrings and die of a broken heart. Sometimes one death follows the other, sometimes people live when they should die. If a sorcerer is going to cast a death spell, he or she is going to do it in such a way that they aren't going to get caught. This means not leaving a chance of there being one half still living. It can be accomplished by performing one type of spell first, then the other," Leif said, taking a breath. "I've had some time to think about Railey."

I blanched, looked away.

"I was thinking that you two encountered one of the rare spells, or were hit with two different types of kill spells. Railey got hit by a body-kill spell, and you were hit by a magic-kill spell. Except it didn't work perfect, you two shared each hit. It...it took her a little while to die. I was with her when she—" Leif closed his eyes and continued, "—when she used what remained of her strength to become a ghost. She felt guilty, and we weren't sure if you would live, and... she wanted to be there for you."

"Railey's gone now," I said, not daring to look at him. "She was with me before. I don't know what happened. I need to find out."

"I know," Leif said. Silence stretched between us for several minutes, the shadows of plants

flickering up and down the bricks and ripped pages of notes, before Leif cleared his throat and said, "What I meant to say was...I think that the spell somehow cut off your link to your power, but didn't damage the power itself. When you physically died, that block to your magic was broken and your magic sustained you. It's all in theory. There are too many unknowns to be certain, but the will to survive is powerful. And it's the only thing we can think of which would account for this."

My head hurt. Releasing a slow breath, I realized I could feel the tug of air, command my power from one room to the other. I sighed. "I need to go after her."

Leif knew I was talking about Railey. "Yeah, I know."

"I want to go now."

"Don't."

I frowned, though I had been expecting that answer. "Why not?"

Leif shook his head. "People are jumpy, there have been odd things in the news, and anyone who can't throw a good kill spell has a shotgun on hand. They don't know you. You haven't been introduced to anyone. There aren't that many sorcerers around, you know?"

I bit my lip. It was true. There were enough to fill a small city, but the point of the matter was that strangers did not randomly approach sorcerers. If someone was outside the community, it was thought that there was a reason for it. I wouldn't get anywhere by nosing around.

"Do you have another idea?" I asked.

"How feral are you?"

I shifted and looked away, wondering that same thing. "I'm not sure."

"I can't have you here if you aren't in control. I can't risk the lives of my people hosting someone who keeps secrets."

I swallowed and looked away. But he was waiting for an answer. "One way or another, I went from alive to dead to alive again. I went from no magic to all magic to an uncertain balance. I should be able to pull through."

Leif inclined his head, but his voice was cold. "You had better. Now, listen to me well. Only a few people go through their lives without forming alliances with other sorcerers. You don't have the pure physical or magical strength to be on your own. You need to find others to be there for you, no matter what."

I felt a sinking sensation following his words. He was too right. And I would be considered a burden more than a benefit, at least until I learned to control myself. Even once I had gained control, I would have a limited skill set to offer to my friends. Lilly and Leif were judges. They had jobs which angered people, and they needed to be surrounded by people who were powerful, who could guard and protect them. I had no place.

"Stop thinking like that," Leif cut in. He crossed his arms, and I saw him counting on his fingers when he said, "Lilly thinks with her heart, Barnes is stubbornly independent, and Mordon does whatever he wishes without warning. We're divided. Lilly and I are family, where the other two have lived alone and been accountable to no one. Barnes respects me and cares for Lilly like a daughter, but he's lived long and has seen much. I'm too lawful for him, and Lilly too innocent for him to consider us confidants. Mordon... He wasn't raised human. He doesn't always understand us. I need someone to glue us all together. Someone a little rogue, a little daring, a little goodie-two-shoes, and a little girly."

"You need a chameleon."

"You have shown that you understand the other two. They have accepted you. I wasn't sure I needed your influence, but...maybe it will work."

My breath stilled. I said, "You want me to join your coven?"

Leif shook his head. "No. But I didn't want the other two, and I didn't want to be in the same coven as Lilly. It happened. We were both elected, and a random draw put us both at Merlyn's Market. It clustered us together. There was another Constable, one who I appointed because I knew him, and I will say, I wish I would have listened to your call on his character."

"Who?"

"Griff."

I felt like a stone had settled in my stomach.

Leif nodded. "He crumpled under pressure. We dismissed him, and a new constable was transferred, Constable Barnes. He was one of those who actually managed to live solo. We were looking for a guardian to watch over Lilly...bridenapping and whatnot happens sometimes. And Lilly has always been pretty. Barnes saved her once or twice, by then everyone in the market assumed we were a coven. There weren't any other good alternatives, however we didn't take up residence here until Mordon."

"How did he get involved?"

Leif smiled. "I'm afraid I'm honor bound to not disclose the details. But I can say that drakes consider it a prerogative to form alliances rather than admit to having rivals stronger than they are."

I tapped my pen against the book, thinking. "Mordon was the one who insisted on establishing a formal coven?"

"And he bought the shop, filled it up, and arranged for all the portals to be linked to our personal homes. The one we are in came with the sale, I guess whoever owned the shop before Mordon bought it had this as their personal residence."

My pen clattered to the ground. I had been trying to copy Mordon's trick.

Leif watched me pick it up and try again. He said, "You see, I didn't plan on these people, but they're good. And the most wayward two have chosen you, so prove yourself. Prove that you'll adhere us into some sort of functional coven, that you are in control, and that whatever is in your past won't be our undoing, and you will have a place here."

I nodded, feeling a knot in my gut.

Leif snapped his fingers and said, "Two weeks."

"What?"

"That's when the ball is. Don't give me that look. If you want to meet Prince Charming and get swept off your feet, then feel free. But, the point is this is where social niceties are performed. Formal wedding announcements, betrothals, birth announcements, formations and modifications to families and covens. It's no private affair, not if you want it to be acknowledged."

"Magic doesn't care," I objected.

"Perhaps not, but people do."

I sighed, knowing he wouldn't budge. "Fine, fine. Two weeks. I have a lot to do in two weeks."

Through the glass roof, I could see clouds passing by, and I felt like I was among them, adrift and prone to the will of the wind. I lifted my head. I would see my way through this, one way or another.

Chapter Six

I stared at the valley below. A creek babbled by the house, lined with columbines, poppies, and heather. A castle huddled against the mountain across the valley, hiding behind mist. Crisp honeysuckle came in on the wind; at first I thought it came from outside, but I realized later that the scent followed me.

Soon enough, I had organized my notes to satisfaction. I went in search of food. There was a refrigerator in the kitchen, though it had the style dating back to the sixties or so, mint green with a cream pinstripe. The oven matched. The counter was decaying asbestos. I sighed, ran quickly through the empty cupboards and found a pantry at the end of the dining hall. Bare shelves lined the pantry, set up for potion ingredients.

Nothing left to look at in my little home, and so I went through the double french doors.

The living room from yesterday greeted me. It was basking in sunlight, blushing furniture, and a chocolate carpet. Contrary to what Leif had indicated, I did not see anyone around. There was a book on a side table; I flipped through it. Latin, of course. Maybe one of Leif's books?

A clatter came from the kitchen. I jumped. My magic rushed to investigate. Mordon was pouring himself a thick, dark drink. He came out from around the cabinets, brushing his hands at my magic as though to dissipate it.

He smiled when he saw me. "Forget where you were?"

"Just didn't know I had company," I said, trailing after him to the breakfast nook. I sat across from him, feeling a little unsteady, still unaccustomed to the press and constant motion of the air against all my senses. He sipped at his drink. I asked, "What is that?"

"Something from home," was all he said, blowing over steam, rustling a *Thaumaturgical Tribune* before him. I'd already skimmed over the copy Leif brought, though I hadn't finished that one article. I would rather remember myself as a person who didn't break into houses and terrify people.

The vapors teased my tongue, I licked my lips at the salted undertones drifting on the steam. Though I had never been one for craving salt, much less indistinguishable drinks from unknown origins, my stomach growled. Embarrassed and seeing he was occupied with the paper, I went into the kitchen, made myself three eggs, and wolfed them down.

"You should probably have some toast, too," Mordon said. I cocked my head at him, wondering if he was teasing me or perhaps making one of those none-too-kind comments men sometimes make to tell a woman to mind her weight. He sighed. "Or a piece of fruit or something. Your metabolism is going to be working hard to keep up with your recovery. Eat double what you normally would, for at least a week."

"Leif said I had a busy day ahead of me, but you're the only one here."

"I'm the only one without a 'normal' job," Mordon said.

I stuffed my fist against my lips to keep from giggling when the image of Mordon as a stay at home father popped into my head. I cleared my throat and went to cruise the kitchen again, coming back with a slab of cold roast beef and a mug of milk.

"No breads?" Mordon looked amused.

"Sounds nasty," I said, though I couldn't account for why the thought of bread or anything sweet turned my stomach. When I finished, I asked Mordon again about his drink.

"They call it 'brew'. I know that isn't a real name, but there you are. It's the common beverage, served at all times of the day. There are a few variations, but..." Mordon shrugged, then teased, "Want some? Most people find it to be an acquired taste."

I nodded before he had the chance to retract his offer. He raised a brow, pushed his mug towards me. It was thick as gravy, and tasted like it had been made from lamb broth. Copper lingered on my tongue, pepper bit my lips. For an instant, I warred between finding it revolting and comforting. Comfort won out. Reluctantly, I passed it back to Mordon.

"Dare I ask what you think?"

I frowned. There was something familiar about it. "That's something only drakes have?"

Mordon shrugged. "A few people have taken a liking to it who aren't. Why?"

"I can't get over the feeling I've had it before."

He went back to reading the paper.

I rubbed my forehead. "Can we get out of here? The air's so stale."

He cocked a glance at me. "You are doing well so far. Do you want to push your limits?"

I dove for my shoes, making Mordon chuckle. "Don't seem so eager."

"I don't like four walls and closed doors."

Somehow, Mordon beat me to the door.

To my surprise, Mordon did not take me "out" so much as "into the shop". I held my tongue to avoid sounding like a child complaining that her toy wasn't the exact shade of fuchsia that was on the box. Nevertheless, my hesitation made Mordon turn around.

"We're going to run through some tests first. Depending on how you do, we will go into the market while it's quiet."

The door dropped us behind the counter with a jewellery case and a vintage cash register.

"What's with the sarcophagus?" I asked.

"Templar. Nothing too exciting, but you never know what you will get when you buy the contents of a locked dungeon."

I was not sure if I was curious or repulsed by the thought of sharing this place with a dead body.

"Close your eyes and feel out the environment," Mordon said.

"What?"

"With your magic. It's an advantage only some types have. I can't very well walk into a new place and send tendrils of fire over everything, but that would have saved me from headache. Light and dark elements may be able to do it, but it's fairly noticeable when they do. Flickering lights? Dark elementals love that trick. But the wind, it's invisible, and it works everywhere." Mordon spoke with a mixture of envy and practicality.

What wasn't he telling me? I was uneasy, but I couldn't put my finger down why. "What will happen?"

Mordon spread a velvet pad over the jewellery case and tipped a wooden box over it. Jewels flashed in the light, some tumbling from the box, some on his fingers as he picked apart tangled chains. "There's one way to find out."

I put my hand on my hip. "There's always more than one way."

"That's the spirit," he said. He righted the box and sorted rhinestones straight into it.

I sighed, realizing that he wasn't going to just tell me what he had in mind. I was going to have to find out for myself. The next straightforward solution was to just do as he suggested and hope for the best.

My eyes closed and I let out a breath. Nothing happened instantly and I felt foolish. How had I done this last time? Why was this magic so pressing and urgent at one second, and absent the second I wanted it?

Mordon chuckled.

My eyes squeezed but I resisted opening them. "Are you going to tell me to let go of my conscience stream of thought and relax into meditation or whatever?"

"No."

The word startled me into staring at him. Mordon's fingers flew through the jewels now that he had necklaces lined up by their chains. There came a steady *plunk, plunk* as he tossed one pin after the next into sorting boxes.

"Why not?" I asked.

"There's always more than one way." He held a stone up to the light and stroked his chin as though it were a beard. Lowering the ring down, he made a fist behind it. Green glowed in the

gaps between his fingers. When he opened his fist, a flitting flame illuminated the gem.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Once more I felt that breath expand and continue, seeming to fill my body from my throat to my toes. I felt the air as it passed over my skin like my own finger touching my cheek.

When I looked upon the shop, I felt dizzy and heady, as though I had inhaled too much perfume. At first, the wind moved of its own natural current from floor to ceiling. Then I focused on it and I realized I could touch the bookcase with the air, as though through a glove.

Controlling the air was like guiding a trickle of water through impressions made with a stick in the dirt. Sometimes it worked well and the air followed the path I wanted. Sometimes it chose its own path.

My magic skimmed along the edge of a carved cross on the sarcophagus. Heat blazed through me, seeming to start at my heart. I froze, confused, and put a hand to my chest. Heat scorched through my veins. I yanked back from the sarcophagus, but something wouldn't let me go.

I panicked at first and tried to pull back harder. My mouth was dry, and I couldn't voice a scream. The air had gone still.

With a frantic struggle, I threw all my strength against the foreign spell. Nothing seemed to happen. Dryness spread down my throat.

Whatever was happening, struggling was doing me more harm than good. Fighting off panic, I forced myself to relax. I counted to ten, slowly. Then I yanked my magic back. I felt resistance, then a popping sensation as the spell let me go. I staggered, put a hand to my throat, and coughed.

"What did you do?" Mordon asked, sounding concerned. "You didn't break anything, did you?"

Gasping for air and with a mouth too dry to respond anyway, I answered him by giving him a one-fingered salute.

"I do believe that's a rude gesture. Mind explaining why I've earned it?"

It took me a minute to work my throat. This gave me enough time to both take control of my anger and to feel shamed for my vulgarity.

I said, "Because you were more worried of what I broke than if I was fine."

Mordon had by now sorted through his jewels and was arranging the remainder in the case below. He snorted dismissively. "There is not a thing in here which would actually harm you. Even if you did hurt yourself, I'm supervising."

"Thanks for making me sound like a child," I said. Now my face was hot with anger again.

"If you were, this would be much easier. Think of it this way: you are virtually a child who has been picked up and deposited in an adult body. The magic is clumsy, strong, and is just as likely to respond to the whims of the moment as it is a deliberate command. If you want someone who will be there to hold your hand and help you open doors, then I'm not the one you want. So, tell me, do you want a teacher who will guide you to the toilet?"

Indignation and anger boiled through my every thought. Magic pooled around me, bundled up tight and ready to spring. Then I knew he was intentionally antagonizing me.

I wondered for a second if he expected me to retaliate, if he would see backing down as a sign of weakness. My eyes met his and I refused to look away when I saw the dance of flames in them.

I said, "If I'm too much of a burden, please do tell me, and I will see if you can't trade me for a gentle lamb."

Mordon snapped his fingers and the air exploded into fire.

Adrenaline shot through me. I gathered the air and shoved it away from me when I saw the flames leap at their touch. I held my breath and pushed all the air out from me, leaving me in a vacuum in the center.

The flames fell to coals. Lightheadedness made my vision swim, but I held the vacuum. Mordon flicked his fingers. The coals and fire died.

I gripped the corner of the counter to remain standing.

"A promising start," Mordon said. The display had not so much as made his breath hitch. I knew. I could feel its regularity. "You would not have been allowed to do that any less than six weeks into the rehabilitation program we are supposed to be following."

There was something twisting my stomach. I couldn't so much as nod to reply. For a few seconds, I gulped at cool air. Feeling better, I said, "Sarcophagus."

Mordon stared at me for a puzzled minute, then said, "Ah, yes. You go straight for the toughest challenge, don't you?"

Before I could reply, the door opened behind me. I jumped and caught a glimpse of a flying carpet in the background before the visitor shut the arched door. I was still coming to terms with the flying carpet when Mordon greeted the man in a scarcely-polite voice.

"Gregory Cole, what brings Your Humanness to my domain?"

"My name is Gregor."

My jaw dropped as a man from my nightmare stepped up to the counter.

Gregor Cole was a man as tall as a hanged skeleton and with all its vivacity. Black clothes draped his shoulders. Though he did not so much as acknowledge me, terror froze me stiff as

a board.

"Lord Meadows. I received a copy of the official report," Cole said. "I know there was no body which was cremated."

Mordon nudged me aside and stood nose to nose with the taller man. Silence suspended between them, a scent like a butcher's shop wafting on Cole's lips. Mordon did not seem to care or notice.

"It was a quiet ceremony," Mordon said.

"One that excluded me."

"Yes."

Cole wrinkled his lip, and said, "Very well, if that is how you will have it. As a pure-blood to a pure-blood, I am giving you advice it is best you heed: quondam ferus, fera, semper."

Mordon's face remained neutral. He said, "If that is all."

"That is all." His eyes darted to mine, and it felt like he rammed his fist into my gut. Those eyes were dark and dull.

There was a whisper as his cloak trailed him out of the shop, and a resounding echo as he slammed the door. Though the man had left all the more suddenly than he had entered, his scent remained.

Mordon immediately bolted to a bookshelf and took a spine as thick as two hands into his arms. He was muttering something.

I shuddered. "Why did he smell like that?"

"Later, later," Mordon said, then his face pinched together in tight lines of concentration. "What did he say? Quon-something...something semper. The last is obvious. But the rest..."

I repeated the phrase. Mordon looked up the words. Then he cocked his head at me.

"Are you positive that is what he said?" Mordon asked. I nodded. Mordon added, "How? Did you write it down or use a mnemonic device?"

"Just good memory. It's genetic."

"Yes, I should be accustomed to it by now," Mordon said.

"What's it mean?"

Mordon frowned, and then said, "You refer to the phrase? 'Once wild, always wild', more or less. It's clearly an allusion to you, but why he would warn me about you is very interesting indeed."

Mordon fell to staring at me. When I moved away, his eyes did not follow. He stared into empty space.

“Mordon?”

“Hmm?”

“What was with the fire?”

His eyes snapped to mine and he shook his head as though clearing it. “Still thinking of that? It was a test. See what you would do when threatened a little.”

I scoffed. “I wasn't really threatened.”

Disbelieving, he cocked a brow at me. “No?”

“Aren't you a little afraid of me? After what Cole said?”

“What could you possibly do to me?” Mordon asked.

Now my brow furrowed and I considered not answering him. But, this Cole had a point. If Mordon were to let his cockiness get the better of him, I wanted him to know full well the danger I could present.

I approached Mordon and laid one hand down on the book. Then I reached up and I cupped his nose and mouth in my hand. I stopped the airflow.

Mordon looked confused at first, then his eyes widened. I pulled my hand away. He coughed. Then he shut the book, his eyes clouded in thought.

“Yes,” he said at last. “There is that. Doesn't take much, but it would take some time.”

I looked down at my hands. They were shaking. I shrugged. “I thought you should know.”

Mordon slid the book back in its place, and gave me a long, considering look that I couldn't place.

* * *

Mordon didn't warn the others about my suffocation abilities, at least not as far as I could tell. When Lilly came home in a gray robe covered in vomit, she only glanced at where we sat reading through Mordon's Latin book. He had been learning the language, and was mere days ahead of me in lessons.

Mordon sniffed and bared his teeth. “Goblins?”

“They don't like being told 'no',” Lilly huffed, then disappeared into her quarters.

“Wait,” I said, blinking. “A goblin intentionally threw up on her because he didn't like what she had to say?”

Mordon did not look surprised. “If you ever see a goblin, be sure they don't see you.”

His finger tapped the page, and I proceeded to slaughter the pronunciation. The book responded by bolding the words I got wrong. I tried it twice more, and succeeded only in

adding to the bolded characters.

"Well, fine," I told the book, "why don't I just do this the way I know I can?"

Lilly entered and stood before me while I translated a passage about interpreting dreams.

Lilly cut me off, "While that is fairly accurate, the point of learning Latin is more so you can cast spells."

"Why Latin?" I asked, thinking to myself that she had not gotten all the smell off despite her wet hair and evidence of a shower.

Lilly sighed. "Didn't you listen to my mom? I know it's been a while, but..."

"Railey and I were usually doing other things," I admitted.

Lilly blinked at me, then turned to Mordon. "I need to return to the market. Anything that you two need?"

"One or two things," Mordon said, and the two of them worked out a quick list.

I searched my memory, and remembered an experiment Railey and I had done. Spells were created by training magic to behave in a certain way at a certain set of words. Someone who tried to train their magic in their own language only resulted in unpredictable spell casting. The magic would have to be trained to sometimes obey the commands, which meant on occasion a spell would not work when it was needed, or would occur during conversation.

"Can I do Anglo-Saxon? This whole romance language thing just isn't working out for me."

Both Lilly and Mordon gave me equal blank looks. Mordon was the first to fall into a thoughtful expression.

"It is a dead language," he said.

Lilly shook her head. "You'll still have to learn Latin. Very well. And translate it over into Saxon."

I shrugged. "If memory serves, I could make a coin fly even to nonsense words like 'Goopy Giggly Dook', but then I'd have to eventually put together a working grammar and extensive vocabulary so I could work more complicated things. You know, Klingon or Tolkein's Elvish would be pretty interesting. Imagine being on the other end of those spells."

Lilly put a hand to her lips to hide the strangled laugh that threatened to come forth. She cleared her throat. "You should still learn the basics. To understand how it works."

"Yes, yes," I said, waving dismissively at her. "You should go back and tell Leif I'm going to do my spell casting in Saxon, Elvish, or Klingon. I expect he will call it an early day."

Lilly shook her head in wonder. "I thought life was interesting with a drake and a constable."

She left, and I heard her laughing as she went.

Mordon said, "Once again, you go straight for the most difficult tasks."

"You can't tell me you aren't interested."

"Oh, very," Mordon said, closing up the book we were clearly done with. "I just find it intriguing."

"Which part?"

He studied my face and cocked his head to the side. "You see, I cast spells in Saxon."

Now that was interesting. It didn't take long before I had him agreeing to teach me Saxon. The price was I would have to dedicate myself more in Latin.

Mordon and I worked through several basic spells, including making light, boiling water, and teaching me how to use the air as a cushion against an attacking spell. My strength sapped away in greater and greater portions until I could only go through the motions without putting any thought into anything.

"That will be more than enough for a day," Mordon said, "It's time for a good meal, and-"

The goat bells clanged against the wall when the front door was thrown open and Barnes' rough voice bellowed up the stairs, "Goblins and pixies are at it again! Come join in the fun, Mordon."

Mordon's lip curled. "Pixies. Do they have thumb tacks?"

"Needles! But Julia is working on enchanting those."

"Wonderful," Mordon said though he did not look in the least bit pleased. He looked up and down the room and growled out a spell too quick for me to understand. Then he said, "Right, I will be back in a few hours. I've activated the wards, so you will be fine. If you come out into the market, know that it's all for themselves at the moment, and those pixies know how to shove a needle under your nails. And goblins don't run out of vomit."

My stomach didn't need the extra twist when he added the part about the goblins. I curled my fists protectively around my fingernails. I glanced at the room, realizing that I would have a few hours of quiet if I remained, as well. "I think I'll stay here."

Mordon swung a cloak made of thick leather over his shoulders and grunted. "Good. Rest up. Tomorrow won't be any easier."

"Let's go, Mordon! We will miss out on the chaos." Barnes sounded all too joyful, as though he lived for such free-for-alls and wished they would happen more often.

Even Mordon's gait had a bounce to it as he skipped stairs on the way out, but he shut the door softly behind him. The last clank of a goat bell descended into nothing, and I was left with only a distant buzz to fill the instant quiet that clapped over my ears. I shifted position on the couch.

"What to do now?" I asked the empty air. It felt like a void, like nothing. It felt like before I had magic back. Hesitantly, I let out a breath and sent a wisp of wind over the hat rack Mordon's cloak had been hanging on. It was cold, metal painted to look like wood.

For a few seconds I tried to envision pixies and goblins starting a brawl in Merlyn's Market, but without knowing what the market looked like, the scene was cut short. I shook my head in wonder, and secretly hoped I would be able to witness such a scene soon. But not now. Now I didn't have the motivation to even climb down the stairs.

I considered making soup. We had the pot of water in the kitchen, still hot from bringing it to a boil. I really should make food. Even if I felt too tired to do it.

A chill ran down my spine. There was nothing I could see to make me nervous, and as far as I knew Mordon and Leif would have been certain to riddle the place with wards. Mordon had told me he activated the ward, right?

My brow narrowed. He had said that, but had he ever told me what type of ward it was? How strong was it? Would it keep something out, or was it only a warning device to those in the residence?

For several minutes, I scanned through the pages of the potions book Mordon had been looking through. Not finding anything of interest, I crossed over to the couch and gave up fighting sore eyes and weak muscles. Sleep refused to come in its entirety, but I could encourage it to arrive.

Time passed as I listened to absolutely nothing, but soon I found that I was actively listening for...what? Something, but what? I couldn't tell, but my back tingled in warning.

A feeling of dread filled the pit of my stomach for no reason. The commons lounge was exactly as it always had been, though it had become darker. I lit the oil lamp by the couch, and the hairs on the back of my neck rose when I heard scratching at the door. I reasoned with myself. There was no scratching. I was hearing things.

But then I heard it again. I told myself it was a woodpecker on the outside of the house. Or something reasonable. Then there was a scrape, and the door to King's Ransom opened on its own.

My mouth went dry. It had to be the wind. I was tired. I'd been training with Mordon. I might not feel the ebb and flow of the air. And it might be nothing more than Leif and the others silently returning so they didn't disturb me.

But then the bells on the door rattled, shaking violently. There came a growl, deeper and more raspy than a dog, at the foot of the stairs.

Chapter Seven

Fear drove through me, sending my heart racing. I bolted upright. Definitely not the others. *Curses!* Where had Lilly put my trinkets? I hadn't been wearing them, since Mordon had told me that their spells might entangle in my own.

Then there came the dull snap of a breaking string, and the bells fell to the floor. I listened, still frozen. Something began to crawl up the stairs.

Energized, I sent out my magic in a panicked search for my trinkets. They were in a wooden box beside the couch. I dove for it, seizing a plain silver ring first. I dropped it, then snatched it again.

I slid it on my finger. In an instant, my body faded into invisibility. The greatest disadvantage to invisibility was that I couldn't see what I was doing. Grabbing rings out of the box was every bit as difficult as doing it blindfolded.

Meanwhile, I heard a dry sniffing and the scraping of claws as something climbed the stairs. I shivered and tried to focus.

My next thought was to both get someplace safe and a place where I could watch. Whatever had—or hadn't, as the case may be—made it through the wards, I wanted to see what it was before doing anything rash. Running away just might be a better solution, but I wanted to see whatever it was.

Quietly as I could, I climbed onto the kitchen counter and pulled my legs up. Dignified? Not by a long shot. Cowardly? Perhaps. But it was the best vantage point. My other option was to hide in my room, but even terrified, I was fascinated and curious.

I tried to ignore the grunts and scraping of claws as the thing scaled the steps. It smelled like a decomposing leaf pile long before I caught sight of the thing.

Teeth and dried skin was what I saw first of the face. I fought the urge to gasp, and made myself think. It looked like it was a horse skull, even if it had fangs and tusks like a boar. It moved as a human would on all fours, but it had claws in place of fingernails.

It swung its head one way then the other, sniffing at the air through holes where there had once been cartilage. Horror warred with wonder. What was this thing? Had I ever read about anything quite like it before? Why had it made it through the wards?

I considered stopping the airflow down its throat, but its sides didn't move. I held my magic just before the creature, and it swung one way then the other, trying to follow the trail. Frowning, I realized that the thing didn't breathe. It wasn't alive.

How was I to kill something that wasn't even alive? I considered the broom handle resting against the end of the cabinets. True, beating at it with a stick might be successful in the end,

but my stomach went sour when I thought of the mess it would make. We would never get the smell out.

I could almost laugh at the absurdity of the situation. Me, perched on the kitchen counter, staring at an undead thing, thinking about poking it with a stick and worried about making a bit of a mess. For a second, I wondered if this was another test constructed by my friends.

My strength was fading with every second, even with the boost from terror. I had one shot at a spell. I had to make it count. But what was I to do? Air wouldn't make this thing stop. I couldn't call up a flame, no matter how small. Anything more than the few spells we had already done were beyond me.

I watched as the creature angled its head in my direction and advanced, its claws scraping on the tile floor. My heart stuck in my throat. I ran through a short list of options: my few spells, the invisibility ring, the opal ring which made an illusion, and the earring which sent sparks everywhere.

Then the thing's back arched, and it gathered itself up on its back feet, wobbling slightly like a bear. Black ooze drained from gashes across its abdomen.

I didn't dare to breathe.

I tossed the earring. It bounced off the skull, hit an arm, and slipped through a slash in the hide. The creature's head swung in my direction and it made a rattling noise in the back of its throat.

Sparks flew from the gaps in its gut, and the creature tried to look down. It swayed, beating at its stomach with claws, and gave another growl.

I whispered the command for water to boil. The thing jerked towards me and it ran, half-falling, for the counter.

Terror held my body captive. I forced a jerk of muscles. I dove towards the charging thing, ducking beneath its arms and rolling over the floor.

There came a sickening wet slap as the creature hit the counter. It whimpered like a kicked dog. The sound tore at me, and I wondered if the thing even wanted to be here.

Pity gone as quick as it had come, I seized hold of a stockpot we had used to boil water. Behind me was a sucking noise like mud on shoes. The thing was pushing itself upright.

I hurled the simmering water, pot and all.

Water gushed everywhere, soaking bread on the counter, racing down the cabinet doors, pooling around the black sludge of decay from the creature. But the thing did not scald. The water didn't even soak in, just rolled straight off the hide.

The pot had done more damage. Two teeth were cracked in half, and one wriggled by a thread. Its chest was dimpled in where steel had broken bone. Slashes in the abdomen gaped

open.

It took a step, slipped and fell to its knees. One tooth fell out. A hand went to its abdomen. It stared at the wound.

I climbed up on the counter again. Black spots danced across my vision and expanded. The boiling spell was draining me of whatever strength was left in my body.

A strangled noise escaped the creature as it pulled itself across the floor. A shaking claw reached up for me, caught nothing, scraped the cabinet door on the way down, furls of paint clinging to its claw.

The entire floor was boiling now; the loudest bubbles came from the black mire in the thing's gut.

I scooted against the back splash so I wouldn't fall. My skin was becoming opaque as I lost consciousness.

Voices cut through the fog of fatigue. My eyes cracked open. Someone yelled my name. Lilly.

"Fera? Fera!"

I blinked into the darkness and groaned. She was going the wrong way, into the living area. I took a breath. The stink invaded my nose. Bile rose in my throat. I kept from throwing up, but only just. It was bad. Almost as bad as the pain in my shoulders and the thudding ache behind my eyes.

"Fera, where are you?" It was Leif this time. I took off my invisibility ring.

"Kitchen," I said, "Careful."

Leif whispered a spell and a blue tinged orb appeared in the air above his fingers, casting harsh light into the quiet. Pain seared behind my eyes. I shielded them and curled into a ball.

"What happened?" Leif asked while Lilly shrieked, "Oh! That is disgusting."

Her tone bounced around my skull. I winced. "Not so loud. Migraine."

"What did you do?" Lilly continued in her pitch, as though scolding a dog. "Find a trash bag and cook it on the floor?"

"What?" I croaked. I opened my eyes despite the pain in my head.

In Leif's light, Lilly's assessment of the situation seemed fair. The tattered hide of the creature, boiled for goodness knows how long, had dissolved it into a bag-like skin, and the decomposing insides looked like burned sausages which had been in the garbage for a week. The smell was beyond anything I had ever known.

Leif clapped his hands. There came a hiss and a whoosh as gas sconces lit on the walls and a chandelier over the stairs lit. Light filled the home. I put my hand over my eyes again, fighting nausea.

Barnes cursed. Leif yelled an exclamation. Lilly was mute. And Mordon said, "Curious."

"The smell." I groaned.

"You are the one who can control that," Lilly snapped. "Sort out the gasses or whatever. At least try."

Her words offended me. I was about to say that I could hardly climb onto my elbows, much less work magic, when Barnes spoke.

"Common misconception. Wind sorcerers have control over pressure and not the air itself. Besides, she doesn't look too good. Can't say I blame 'er. These walking animations can be a drain."

I was glad to not need to explain. I considered. He had given me an idea. I laid a blanket of air pressure over the 'walking animation' and hoped that would help cut the smell.

I scooted down the counter and got off at the end. The movement made my entire body throb. I thought for certain I was going to be ill. Lilly laid a hand on my forehead and said a few words. The pain lessened, but now I felt cold.

Barnes explained what a 'walking animation' was, since they did not appear to be very common. "They're a kind of artwork, a piece from one body, a piece from another, as grotesque as the maker wishes to be. Necromancers can make them, but it is more common for osteomancers since these are more skeletal than muscular, and bones hold more power than flesh. That said, osteomancers usually prefer to consume the bones in some way. Only e'er seen two or three of these things. Not very powerful, but the fear paralyzes their victim. Makes 'em stupid. Saw a walking animation rip a soldier into pieces. All the man could do was stare. Not even a scream. Same with the next three men."

Mordon crouched and was trying to look at it from all angles. He shook his head. "What form did it have? It's hard to tell."

I shuddered at the memory of it climbing up the stairs, then banished the thought from my mind. I wouldn't go on the rest of my days seeing that thing when I closed my eyes at night. "Horse head, human body, and claws. None of it in good shape, but still...juicy. It made these sloshing noises."

Lilly went pale. Leif seemed unsettled as well, but the other two were fascinated. Barnes said, "Not too shabby. I mean, there are cleaner ways to stop it than whatever it was you did. What did you do?"

"Boiling water spell. Like I said, it was sloshy."

"If you cut off the communication between the spell-caster and the animation, that will drop it," Barnes said, twitching his mustache in thought. "Don't suppose you've learned that yet."

"Tomorrow's lesson," Mordon said, holding a handkerchief up to his nose while he lifted some of the skin up with the broom handle. It made a sticky noise and Lilly escaped to the next room. Leif cleared his throat.

"Mind how much you push her," Leif warned, but there was no heat to his words. "You mentioned you two had a visit from our dearest mortician. He was greatly insulted by our negligence in giving him an interesting body. I think he will find plenty of interest in this one, don't you?"

Mordon nodded, then called over his shoulder, "Lilly, we need you. You can stand where I am. Stop looking so pale, Fera is holding the smell at bay one way or another. We'll send all organic tissue and hope that cleans it up."

Barnes took a piece of chalk out of his pocket and made a quick circle, then drew symbols at different points on the circle. Though they were tired, they made quick work of a spell. The circle glowed white, increasing in strength until nothing could be seen of what it contained. I covered my eyes. It was making my head hurt again. When the light faded, I lowered my hand.

The thing was gone, but there were still water marks on the floor where it had boiled dry, and a few tiles had cracked. Lilly threw the loaf of bread away. They looked at one another.

Leif rubbed his brow and said, "It has been one long day."

No one said anything after him, but their expressions were in varying stages of agreement or exhaustion. Mordon took me by the elbow and insisted I sit at the head of the breakfast nook. So I sank down, put my elbows on the table and my face in my hands. I closed my eyes.

I heard the opening of windows and blessed the fresh air streaming through the house. It seemed as eager to cleanse the place as I was.

When Mordon next bumped my shoulder, I saw that it was to pass me a cup of herbal tea. Leif and Lilly sat on one side of the table, and Barnes and Mordon on the other.

I explained everything I could remember, doing my best to not envision the creature itself. When I was done, Barnes said that there had been a spell or two on it to induce fear and the 'freeze in terror' response. He also said he thought that my previous experience in bogey busting had built up a resistance to the fear spell. When I asked if I would have been better running, Barnes said that would have intensified the effects.

"The longer you run from what you fear, the harder it is going to be to turn 'round and face it."

I nodded. When I realized no one else had asked the question, I said it. "Why? Why bother making that thing? Why send it after me?"

Leif shrugged. "Who says it was after you? Lilly and I should have been home by then. We might not have fared too well against the animation itself. If it hadn't been for the pixie and goblin scuffle, we would have been home."

At my frown, Lilly said, "Being guided by conscience doesn't always make you friends. Judges get threats and assassins. This is certainly more clever than usual, but we see some strange things."

Barnes had no comment on the subject, and Mordon was occupied staring into the empty air and stroking his nonexistent beard. I shifted uncomfortably. "It smelled like Cole."

Barnes barked out a short laugh and gave me a broad smile. "That it did!"

"Not that you should say it to his face," said Leif with a frown at Barnes. Leif looked to me. "I see you don't like the man. Good. But know he comes from pure human bloodlines and his family has been in the ruling council as long as it has existed. They do as they like when they like and the laws only apply to them when another pure-blood catches them in the act and decides to press charges."

My heart sank. Of all the people to resent, I had to choose someone untouchable. I sighed. "I am duly and thoroughly cautioned."

"You'd better be." Leif searched the faces around him. He pulled out five coins. "We need to check the other dwellings. Fera, you are out." Leif shoved one coin in the center of the table, then passed out the remaining coins. "Heads or tails. Person to call it right stays with Fera. The rest of us get to make sure nothing else walked by the kitchen."

Lilly ended up being the one to remain while the men went together from one home to the next. Though I was contented to remain seated, Lilly was all too busy drawing on the table.

"Checking wards," she said when I caught her gaze.

Sensing an opportunity to get answers, I said, "Are they wards to prevent intrusions or wards to just sound the alarm?"

Lilly did not so much as look up. She said, "The ones on this place warn. But, the only way to this door is through Mordon's shop door, and that is enchanted to high heaven. We didn't think it was necessary to have anything more on the door here."

I supposed that now that would be changing. I let out a yawn despite myself. "But if his wards didn't keep it out, does that mean that he let it in?"

Lilly froze. Her gaze darted up to mine. "What do you mean to imply?"

"I wasn't questioning Mordon." Should I be? "I just meant that, what if it came in while the doors were open to visitors, or if the thing came in with permission disguised as something else? Then it would not have triggered the wards."

Lilly's eyebrows twitched together. Her hands stilled. She did not reply. I thought it was best to

leave the conversation where it was.

Then the men were back. Barnes grunted, "Nothin' turned up. I'm goin' now. Nite."

Leif followed after. Lilly caught up to him. Mordon helped me to my feet, then to my rooms.

When I saw the dark shadows in the hallway leading to my bedroom, I couldn't stop envisioning teeth glinting in the shadows. I couldn't stop hearing the rattle in its breath, the scrape of claws on stone. I shuddered and spun before Mordon could shut the doors behind me.

Panic made my limbs shake. I stammered, "I can't do this. I just...I can't." Embarrassment rushed to my cheeks at the confession. "Maybe I should stay with Lilly or something."

Mordon shook his head. "She's staying with her brother. She does that now and again. It's been her that most attacks are focused against."

"Oh." My fingers were numb now. I looked back at the empty house in apprehension. For an instant I wondered if I might be better to sleep on the couch, but that had been where I was when the goat bells chimed. I shivered.

"It's perfectly safe."

I nodded, remembering that Barnes, Mordon, and Leif had all cleared my residence and found nothing. The knowledge did not ease my anxiety. Swallowing, I admitted, "Railey used to stand guard sometimes. Especially after the terror houses. Things followed me home every now and then."

Mordon sighed, but there was understanding written over his face. He made a green flame in the palm of his hand and led the way. "I'll be by your door."

Surprise and pleasure coursed through me at once. I staggered after him. "You don't have to—I didn't ask you to stay."

"Yes you did. Unless you'd rather I leave."

I gripped his forearm, a little too desperately. I let him go and curled my hand into a fist. I said to the floor, "Thanks."

"That animation made my back tickle, too," Mordon said.

It was the last thing I remembered him saying before I laid on the bed. The last thing I saw was him with his back pressed to my door, one leg straight out, one leg at an angle, as he drew symbols on the floor by the light of his green ember.

Chapter Eight

. . .The last Amazonian life leech larvae fell from my tweezers into the earthenware dish, where it wriggled with the rest like animated saffron stamens. I checked the other ingredients: chamomile flowers, ox blood, eye of newt, mandrake root, and two fungi with names I could not pronounce.

The healer was late.

Though the healer shuffled, it did not take her long to reach me. “I like the workshop. What did it used to be?”

“A dairy barn,” I said, thinking that it had not changed much aside from gaping holes in the wall and places where the boards in the loft had rotted through, allowing straw to fall onto herbs hanging from the rafters. At least I had a concrete floor, a very plush thing for a barn this old—it even had a rut carved at the back of the stalls to make cleaning easier. I used the trench as a track to run my cart up and down the workshop. I heard her staff drag over the edge of it as she came.

One word came to my mind when I saw her: Babushka. Little old Russian lady, the sort who had thirteen cats and wore a scarf to cover her thinning white curls. Frail, thin, the woman that pedestrians took by the elbow to help mount a curb. Alarms went off in my head, crawling across my skin like a nest of baby spiders. Nothing fragile lived to old age in the magical world. I saw now standing before me a very advanced femme fatale.

The woman saw my set-up on a board secured to the stall, and nudged me aside, muttering under her breath about contaminating the potion. True, this wasn't a standard kitchen with a hazelwood chopping block and a heavy cauldron, but it was an improvement over asbestos countertops and an electric stovetop. She raised her hands in exaggerated motions and scooted me back so I could not see her working past her plaid shawl.

“How is this not going to kill me?”

“Have faith,” crooned the witch doctor. “I did tell you that it would be best if I gathered the ingredients.”

“And you would not have told me about the life leeches and fungi.” Both toxic. Terribly toxic.

“Pity you wouldn't let me bring them. These are barely old enough.” She hissed under her breath. Bowls clanked together. “It is done.”

The woman turned to me, armed with a paste that looked like purple oatmeal. Her arms shook, as though to underscore the babushka impression, and her smile was soft even if her eyes weren't.

I was not impressed. After all, I was a Swift, which meant I knew a few different ways to

prepare mandrake, and clanking bowls together was akin to cooking steak by beating it with a mallet and eating it raw.

Over her shoulder, in the window, a crow craned his head in. They usually didn't come so close to the barn, perhaps they would land in my wilderness of a garden, but that was it. I didn't like the way he was watching.

"Eat," the woman said, "and be cured."

The air felt thick and charged, the way it did during a thunder storm while lightning split trees in half. Nerves, I told myself. Just nerves. The bowl felt cold as lead against my fingertips.

The witch doctor's eyes widened as I raised the spoon to my nose. Past the swampy scent of wriggling larvae, earthy fungi, and flowery herbs, I smelled nuts. Bitter almond. Very faint, but it was still there. Recognition jolted through my veins. The potion splattered over concrete. "Life leeches, fungi, and cyanide? What fool do you take me for?"

"Eat it. It's a cure. You will be fine."

"No."

"You have been the most impossible mission I have had in a hundred years! Eat it! Yes, you'll die, but I'll bring you back, you'll be cured, and I can finally go to my grave."

"Mission?"

An angry cloud darken her eyes. She yanked up her staff and shouted, "*Sisto cor!*"

It missed. She reared back to try again.

"*Fera!*"

I came awake instantly with someone looming over me, his hand on my shoulder. Bolting to my feet, I shoved a man onto the bed, switching places with him. Wind raged in my ears. Shutters banged. A cold sweat on my skin. The man on my bed held out open hands, crooning words soft and low and in a strange tongue. I hesitated, not knowing who he was or why he was in my room.

He stood, took a step towards me.

I sidled away.

"Feraline Hope Swift, listen to me." Gone was the soft tone. In its place was an order, demanding obedience right this instant. Mixed with my full name, I had to hear him, even as I searched for Railey and wondered how he'd gotten in. "You will wake up. *Leothuwaceh.*"

His emerald ring flared.

A jolt raced through my heart, stinging when it reached my fingertips. I realized, as the pain faded, that I stood opposite from Mordon, my heart thumping, my element howling through the open windows. I gasped, sinking to the bed, my strength gone.

I clutched my chest, taking myself through slow breathing exercises. The wind died gradually, by degrees, as I relaxed. I collapsed on the bed, hid my head in shame.

The bed dimpled as Mordon sat down beside me. "How are you?"

"Pretty embarrassed."

"There's nothing to be embarrassed about." He leaned back, putting his arm behind me, yet not touching my night shirt. The starlight surrounded us, rendering the room into a surreal scene. "You were deep in that nightmare. What was it about?"

"I..." I sighed. "It's one of those things that you'd have to talk about forever before you can even broach the subject."

"I take it that it wasn't the walking animation?"

"No."

He cocked his head to the side. "I'm listening."

But I didn't know how much I wanted to tell. "What was that spell you did on me?"

"Just now? *Leothuwaceh*. I commanded you to become calm. It's one of the most useful spells I know."

"It doesn't feel very calming."

"I apologize. It is not a pleasant thing to awaken to, but it does feel soothing under normal circumstances."

"It's fine." I curled my legs up underneath me, wanting to be hugged but feeling too naked for it. "Someone was trying to kill me. A hag."

Mordon raised a brow. "A hag in the true sense, or in the general terms?"

"What's a hag in the true sense?"

"They masquerade as humans, but they're a small form of troll in reality."

I paused, wondering. "I don't know. How about wicked witch?"

"Sounds fine. What did this wicked witch want?"

"Me dead. Said it was her mission to fix me of my cure."

"And the method of cure was execution?"

"Apparently so."

A line formed between his brows. "Odd. I seem to have heard that before."

A chill tickled my back. I shifted, rubbing my foot to restore life to the toes. "It was just a dream."

"Are you certain?" Mordon asked, his eyes luminescent as they studied me.

I clasped my hands together. "What do you mean?"

"Are you certain it was a dream, not a repressed memory?"

"Of course it was a dream. How else would I be alive now?"

Mordon nodded. He stroked his chin with one hand, gazing off into nothing.

Eventually, I returned to my pillow, hiding under a blanket. Mordon didn't move from his spot, stroking his bare chin and thinking.

Chapter Nine

“Do you mind if I borrow these?”

Mordon wasn't precisely in a temper, but from the way the shop was closed up today and he wasn't conversational, he clearly wasn't having the best of days. I stood at the door to a back room, a stack of books in my arms, wondering what I had said to offend him. Too sheepish to ask.

He put a bookmark in the text he was reading, slowly closed the cover. It was dark and blank, just like his expression. “Take the whole lot if you want them.”

Was that an invitation or a threat? I had no idea. “Should I put them back? I'll put them back if you don't want me to read them.”

Leaning the cluttered table with both hands, he breathed out nice and slow. When he lifted his head, he had an apologetic smile. “No, it's fine if you wish to borrow them. Take them up to your sun room.”

“Okay.”

As I returned upstairs, I felt as if I were slinking away like a scolded dog. What he was upset about, I didn't know. It stung after the intimacy following the nightmare last night. Guess that's what I got for reading too much into basic kindness.

For today, I needed to focus on one thing at a time.

I'd start with Griff's theft.

Why did he want that vase, and was even was it?

As is the conundrum with all researchers everywhere throughout time, I found myself easily distracted. In part, this had to do with the fact that I had to browse through the books in order to find any references at all to vases, women, and art. I accidentally found something called Death's Merlot. Also called Death's Wine, Death's Drink, or Revival Spirits.

It brought the recently deceased back to life.

Naturally I wanted to know all about it. Where it came from, how it could be obtained, what the symptoms of having had it were, if it was foolproof or if there was margin for error.

I found my answers.

All too many of them.

My notes looked something like this.

How to get Death's Merlot

1. Local apothecary cooking wine mixed with vinegar
2. At the mouth of the River Styx
3. In a barrel beside the Fountain of Youth
4. Summer rain holy water infused with blackberries fermented in a cathedral cellar then purified by dipping the toes of a saint in it
5. Dry out Merlot, powdering the residue, combined with melted tallow of a recently killed wild Scottish boar
6. Make a raven cry
7. Cider pears in the urine of celestial virgins

I pretty well gave up on creating lists after examining this one. Amongst those who claimed to have been given a second chance at life, their stories varied by the individual. However, there were some common trends.

Basically, every person reacted differently to living again after death. Some gained magic they never had, going so far as to switch elements, others lost touch with it altogether. A few developed 'a grotesque intolerance' for previously-beloved foods. Others were seized by wanderlust, leaving all friends and family behind.

Now, how people reacted to these revived people was understandable. A couple were declared divine intervention. Another was attacked and left for dead. Many, many others had shocked observers who soon found ways to write off the whole incident as a case of “we only *thought* you were dead, but you must not have been.”

I supposed, it confirmed that my after-life experiences were within the realm of normalcy.

Exciting times.

One of the pages mentioned a vase, and it had the illustration of the item Griff had taken from Mordon's shop. Intrigued, I put some effort into studying it.

There was an incredible lack of information about the Lady of the Vase, only a short article that was written by Mordon in an artifacts book. The Lady was essentially Death's nameless sister, presiding over what could only be called purgatory or prison; during the turn of the Egyptian Wizarding Empire (there were no non-magical references, so I had no clue when that was) the Lady's reign was restricted to those souls who were so unwise as to touch the mouth of the vase.

Apparently there was a vacuum effect once one person touched the vase, so it was highly recommended to stay as far away from her vase as possible. During the Arthurian Era, it was

used to contain the most wicked of all sorcerers, including the infamous Morgana. Mordon wrote in the notes that Morgana was also called Moragan, Morgan, Morgana Le Fey, and Morgain, as well as any spelling variations imaginable.

Despite a whole afternoon of looking for more information, there was none to be found.

While I knew now what the vase was, I still couldn't be sure why Griff wanted what was essentially a mobile prison holding the most dangerous wizards in the world. Unless he wanted to release one or more of them, which had so far never been managed in history.

Of course, it was entirely like Griff to attempt the impossible.

Fantastic.

I was taking the books downstairs when I bumped into Mordon on the stairs.

"Watch where you're going."

"You ran into me. I was standing here," I said. "I was going to give you these back. Thank you for letting me borrow them."

He blinked. "Oh."

I waited for an apology or something. None came. I crossed my arms. "What did I do to deserve this treatment?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all."

With that, he tromped down the stairs and into his shop. I reached out into the air and pretended I could strangle him, letting out a small shriek. The doors rattled as the air pressure changed.

"I could do that to him when he gets like this, too," came a slow, gruff voice from behind me. It was Barnes.

"What is his problem?" My face had gone bright red. I had to focus on controlling my voice.

"I always presume it's a drake thing. This time around, I think he's frustrated about not making headway with the theft. That shop is his hoard, and nobody steals from it. They're more like dragons than they care to admit."

"And how do you cope?"

"I get into a brawl with 'im then start pouring my latest brandy wine recipe."

"Mmmm," I said. Though getting into a brawl with him sounded appealing, I also doubted that I would come out the victor. "What about Lief and Lilly?"

"Lief gives 'im one a those long lectures an' when he's had enough, Mordon goes on a long flight and comes back normal...Lilly, well, she tells 'im to suck it up and stop scaring the customers."

"I doubt there will be much more talking between us," I muttered and fell into the breakfast nook. Had losing my temper with him done anything productive?

"You did good," Barnes said, coming to sit next to me. "What you need now is something to distract yourself."

A distraction? It sounded enticing, but I knew what sort of 'distraction' Leif, Lilly, and Mordon would encourage. "Nothing involving books, magic, or keeping it civil."

Barnes grinned, revealing a chipped tooth. "Perfect, you can come with me for a day trip."

"Oh?" I asked, skeptical and intrigued. "And what do you do for recreation?"

"Ever gambled on snail races?"

I raised my eyebrows. "Snails?"

"Comin' or not?" he asked, heading across the living room floor.

"You mean, right now?"

Barnes twitched his mustache and checked his pocket watch. "The races start soon, and there's no bettin' once the snails get goin'."

Wasn't there someone I should tell first?

Barnes saw my expression and said, "You a twelve-year-old girl living with Mummy or somethin'?"

The taunt rankled, but I didn't take it out on Barnes. He was just bold enough to say it.

I followed him across the living room, crossing my arms in defiance. Barnes nodded his approval. He paused at the wall near my door and barked, "The Mermaid's Tale!"

I wondered if he had been hitting the brandy already, but the wall began to morph before my eyes, a door gradually emerging from the plaster. Though the frame matched the trim work around our house, the door itself was strange. Purple paint was peeling, revealing a rust red coat below it. In some place I could see navy blue beneath that. The door handle housing was missing a couple screws so when Barnes grasped it, the whole assembly wriggled and twisted.

Barnes looked over his shoulder and said, "Well?"

What could I say? He had my curiosity piqued, and my restless mind would not be able to focus with while imagining what happened at snail races; it couldn't be as dull as it sounded.

Barnes held open the door for me, and I hesitated another second before stepping over the threshold. The room swayed. I staggered, found the wall supportive until my dizziness passed.

When my eyes adjusted and Barnes stood next to me, I saw tavern with low lighting coming

from thirteen candle chandeliers over thirteen tables with an odd number of chairs to each table. Pipe smoke billowed up around my face. I waved at the sweet scent as I walked through the haze. A cheer greeted me as Barnes followed.

Cries of welcome came from all angles, one after the next so quickly that I couldn't identify who was saying what.

"Constable! Told ya he'd be here!"

"Nick of time, as always!"

"...can I change my bet to his?"

"Who's this you bring with you?"

I felt very small once an assemblage of patrons crowded about us, sweaty faces peering at me and flushed men eyeing me from across the room. The ambiance of the room made my magic feel relaxed even as I felt nervous; it was a peculiar sensation I couldn't describe.

"She single?" called one man, thankfully one who was more or less my age.

"Outta the way, folks! I got a bet to make." Barnes pushed through the crowd. They reluctantly parted ways for me as well. They wanted me to stop and talk, but I wasn't willing to leave Barnes' side.

We came to a table that stretched around a bar shaped like an island; it had a sandy bottom with various obstacles scattered throughout the track such as leafy twigs, bits of chopped fruit, rocks, and shells. Sixteen tick marks were spaced evenly along the track. These corresponded with a billboard behind the barkeeper. The man passed Barnes and me each a sheet of paper numbered one through sixteen and three lines below it.

"You write down your top picks for which snail will reach each marker," the barkeeper explained.

Barnes hid his paper and refused to allow anyone to sneak a peak, taking furtive glances at the odds for or against any particular snail.

I sat staring at the snails for a few seconds, nodding absently while the barkeeper talked jovially about his favorite snails: a garden snail with animated flames painted on its shell, a black snail with a yellow shell, and a red rams horn snail. I was soon lost in the variety of snails available—several looked as though they were primarily aquatic, but this track did not seem to bother them. Possibly that was due to some spell.

In the end, I went with my gut. I picked a purple-fleshed, cream-shelled snail for my favorite up till marker 14, then the garden snail to finish the race. When I passed the paper back to the barkeeper, his eyes opened and he said, "Where did you learn to bet?"

I gave him a smile and a few coins I thought weren't too valuable, hoping that I might see some of that money come back to me. With thirteen snails in the race, I doubted it.

“Final call for bets! Final call!”

A few more sheets were turned in, then the barkeeper held his wand up and a countdown started in the air.

The crowd chanted with the numbers.

“Thirteen...twelve...ten...nine...eight...seven...seven...six...”

I wondered if the miscounting was because they had been downing too many drinks. At my less-than-impressed expression, Barnes whispered, “Double numbers don't have a place here. You know, numbers like eleven, twenty-two, thirty-three, and the others. Bad gambling numbers.”

And they double-counted seven so the total number would still equal thirteen, or some such thing. There was a tiny gun fired into the air. Bubbles around the snails popped. The purple snail started to wriggle forward while the others appeared interested in getting to know their neighbors.

“How long will this race last?” I asked.

“The record is 45 minutes for the first snail to cross. Average is an hour and a half. Takes about two or three hours for all of them to cross, if it's a quick day,” said Barnes.

I cocked my head at him. “And what do we do in the meantime?”

Barnes waved his finger in a circular motion, perhaps to indicate all corners of the room.

“Whatever you can think to do in here! Ya can't leave; if you do, you forfeit your bets.”

“Ah,” I said, feeling like this might be dull after a few hours. “Can't have that.”

“Not with the way you bet!” He clapped a hand on my back.

“Is that good or bad?”

“Doesn't matter! Here, Barkeep! Two orders of fish and chips, a heavy stout for me, an' your best guess for my friend Miss Swift!” Barnes thumped a fistful of coins onto the bar. A waitress caught my eye and giggled.

“Constable,” she said, her scold more of a purr from beneath low eyelashes and high breasts.

“You know I tend to the food orders.”

“Of course, but I can't order around such a pretty thing as yourself.”

The woman winked at me. “I'll have the food right out, doll.”

Still feeling uncertain about joining the crowd the way that Barnes did, I took a seat at the bar and watched the race with half my attention. The snails were only starting to leave their stalls, and two were more interested in getting to know each other intimately than sliming their way across the finish lines.

A blush colored cocktail landed in front of me, a bright cherry sitting in the bottom.

"That's from the man in brown," said the barkeeper, motioning to the corner of the room. "It's an Avalonian variation. Berry juice, ginger ale, and a splash of vodka. He was very specific."

I wondered at first if it had been the man who had asked if I was single. I squinted through the haze and recognized him, though not the woman on his arm.

"Who sent that?" asked Barnes.

I pointed.

In a flash, Barnes was on his feet, cutting through the crowd, and getting acquainted with the lady. I blinked. That couldn't be...could it? What was he doing here, of all places?

Barnes waved me over to their corner booth. I picked up my drink and the two baskets of fish and chips the waitress passed to me. I slid into the booth next to my brother.

He looked a fair deal like me; his hair was more brown than golden, though, and his eyes were more green like Mother's. He was slender like she was, too, while I was stockier like our father. His hair laid in chunks about his chin, not blending very well when it was not styled in the traditional spikes called for by mediators between feys and fairies.

The woman next to him was so pale as to be nearly translucent, golden freckles scattered over her small nose and down her fine neck. Her hair was carrot red, hanging down about her elbows in thick ringlets.

I had not expected my brother to end up with a fairy.

"Mother's going to flip," I said with an evil smile.

"How do you know Leazar?" asked Barnes across the table.

My brother smiled. "Simbalene, you know Constable Barnes. This, here in The Mermaid and sitting quite decently with magic, is my sister Feraline. Fera, this is Simbalene, my wife."

"Pleasure to meet you," I said, more than a little numb at the news. "I didn't know you were engaged."

"Engagement is...pretty much a human invention," said Leazar.

"A rather silly one," said Simbalene. "If you need the transition time, there's nothing to stop you from taking it, but I prefer to do the thinking beforehand, make a decision, and just do it."

That could have come straight from my brother's mouth. "You two seem very well-matched."

"Barnes is one of my most trusted friends," Leazar said, as though he felt he owed an explanation to me. "And I thought he should be the first to know, followed by family. I would have extended the invite to you if I'd known you were on this side again."

He raised his eyebrow, as though accusing me of being the one who didn't share news. I said,

"I still can't do flames. The last time I tried to burn a letter, it burned."

Simbalene laughed, a delicate laugh like tinkling bells. Leazar had inherited Father's rumbling laugh, and I was suddenly curious what their children would laugh like.

Simbalene said, "I will ask my husband to mention your good fortune in our letter, then."

"So, sister," said Leazar, pulling me up to him with an arm over my shoulder. "There are plenty of men with eyes on you. Know any of them?"

I rolled my eyes and shook my head. It was just like him to jump straight from his own marriage to the prospect of mine.

Barnes' rough voice surprised me. "Sure she does."

"I do?" I asked, certain that I didn't know anyone else here, and at the same time suspicious of what it was that Barnes was going to say next.

"Who?" asked my brother, leaning forward as though he were involved in a secret.

Barnes leaned forward with a conspiratorial smile. "Mordon Meadows."

My stomach did a little flip and I caught my breath.

"Mordon? He's that drake that hangs around Merlyn's, right?"

Defiance made me find my voice. I said, "I've already had this talk with his parents. There's nothing between us. What do you mean he likes me?"

"Beware. When you meet the family, you should know a little something," said Leazar. At my confusion, he said, "They dock the hair of rejected prospects."

I crossed my arms. "I learned some of your diplomacy, dear brother."

He shook his hair at me, showing several places where it had been dyed green, red, and blue. "My own considerable diplomatic skills haven't saved my hair."

I said, "He hasn't shown me any particular regard."

Barnes snorted. "Two times."

The number of times he'd seen Mordon come out of my house with me first thing in the morning. Was it two times or once, I wondered, but I pursed my lips in warning. I suspected I knew what he was going to say.

Leazar asked, "Three times what?"

Barnes grinned, so broad I saw for the second time today his chipped tooth.

"Don't," I growled.

"Why not, feyling? Why, I'm honor-bound, with being best friends with the man and you being his younger sister," Barnes said.

"I'll tell the others about the elderberry liquor."

Simbalene, while very much enjoying the conversation, looked confused by my threat. My brother thought about it for a second, then asked, "Do you mean to say our dear Constable has expanded on his brandy line?"

Barnes tapped his finger on the table, then said, "You win for now, feyling."

"Good."

But he didn't look defeated. Not by a long shot. Barnes said, "Mordon's always looking at you."

I pointed at Barnes with the Avalonian. "I haven't seen him even look at me for longer than a second."

"What kind of a man would he be if he let himself get caught?" said Barnes. "Getting caught comes once you're certain she returns the affection."

"Besides," added Simbalene. "Your best angle is when you walk away and turn to look at something."

I stared at her, feeling slightly violated. "That's terribly specific."

"I would have sent you the Avalonian if your brother hadn't."

I choked on said Avalonian. "You're practically my sister."

She shrugged. "Now you know what to expect when you meet my friends."

From there we went into a lengthy discussion of fairy culture and ritual, ending in a game of dare which went around the table.

By the time the last snail crossed the line, Barnes had stood on the bar and yodeled, Leazar swept the entire room into a square dance, Simbalene dusted two sparring lovers with fairy glimmer, and I coaxed nine drinks out of strangers without so much as talking to them.

Even when the barkeeper stopped giving me alcohol, I still received a couple more "IOU" ginger ales. Barnes collected on our earnings—it was a good deal, much of it coming from my guessing twelve rankings perfectly—and declared it was time we move go home.

I had multiple people request I come back, and even promised my brother to meet up with him again. It was a good thing the barkeeper knew our portal door because neither of us could enunciate well enough to open a portal to get home.

When I stepped through the portal, this time I found myself stumbling instead of swaying.

The living room was blindingly bright with sun streaming through open windows. I tumbled into the first chair I found and stared blankly at my surroundings, my mind wandering between the conversations at The Mermaid's Tale, Mordon's possible infatuation with me, my possible

infatuation with him, and the sensation that the floor had turned into the sea.

Barnes made his way over to his door, appearing only slightly better than I felt. "I got some hangover be gone potion, be right back."

"K," I said, mind swimming through exhaustion and booze, wondering if Barnes would even be able to come back again.

His door shut behind him, and I stayed exactly where I was. Eventually the floor stopped wriggling and I just felt thirsty and tired.

Curling into a ball, I snuggled up on a blanket and basked in the sun.

The wainscoting door downstairs slammed shut, waking me from my rest; I was much more alert than I anticipated being, and when I heard Mordon's weighted footsteps moving quickly up the stairs, I let out a quiet groan. This wasn't going to be good.

Mordon stood in front of me, hands on hips, frowning. He looked tired, beyond tired—but if he had been trying to do a teamwork spell without me, then I felt he should suffer for it.

He asked, "Where were you?"

"Safe."

"I should be the judge of that. Where did you go?"

Was this some sort of a test to see if I was lying? Anger heated my veins, but guilt made me blush. I dismissed both feelings, using a bouncy voice and one of the smiles I used to gather drinks.

"With Barnes, and now I'm going to get some rest." I brushed by him, heading to my door.

"Excuse me."

Mordon grabbed my elbow. "It's nine in the morning, past time to get to work. I need your help for the festivities."

"So," I hissed, yanking my arm away from him, not caring when I staggered. "For days you treat me like I'm going out of my way to annoy you, and when I find someone else to be with, you get jealous."

Mordon's face turned to stone. "I am supposed to keep you safe. How am I supposed to do that when you disappear?"

"Aren't you the least bit worried about what I did or who I was with?"

He winced. Clearly, he had thought about it. "I am not jealous."

"So you said." I sighed and rubbed my forehead. "I was with Barnes at a snail race. We gambled, cleaned out the house, had too much to drink, met up with my brother and his wife, and I was the biggest flirt in the joint."

Mordon stared at me for a minute, then his stony expression cracked. He seemed instantly older as he sank into a chair. "I know."

I stared at him, wondering for an instant if he had tracked down a couple of people from the Mermaid. Most people who had been there were in worse shape than I was. Heart stopping for a beat, I realized how he knew. "You followed me."

Had I seen a glimpse of him? I couldn't remember. The haze and drinks combined with the bustle of the night made everything blend together. Now that I studied him, I noticed dark circles under his eyes and oily skin. Mordon did not confirm my accusation, but he didn't object to it, either.

I sat next to him. "Alright. I'll make you a deal. If you can keep your temper under control for the next few days, I will help you in the shop and I won't dart out the back door."

His eyes were vacant for a few seconds, then he shook himself. "Good. Get cleaned up. We aren't going to go easy on your magic because you had a few drinks."

"Clean up, yourself. You look like you've spent half a day and an entire night hiding in a tavern."

"You're one to talk," Mordon said, but there was a smile in his eyes.

I stood up and glanced at him over my shoulder, with a hint of a smile. Then I went through my french doors, shutting the curtain in between them.

Chapter Ten

When I next saw him in the commons room, Barnes was too hung over to waste time on the niceties of conversation. He said, "The two long legged optimists are out in the world already."

Mordon nodded.

Barnes met Mordon's eyes and said, "I talked to him. He said no, but I think that she needs one. I'd say 'just in case anything happens', but it already has."

"What are we talking about?" I asked, snatching an apple off the counter.

"Can't tell you," Mordon said. To Barnes, he asked, "What's the risk?"

I bit into the apple. Disappointingly, it wasn't crisp and sweet—it was mushy and bland. A worm hole burrowed through its white flesh. I spat out the unchewed mouthful and tossed away the apple.

Barnes was watching me. He chewed on the edge of his mustache. "That she'll do things without us."

"I do that anyway...with or without whatever you're speaking about," I said. I gave up on finding food when a search through the cabinets uncovered canned beans and another loaf of bread with nut butters and jam next to them. "You guys need some variety."

"Then bring it home," Barnes said.

"I will, once I'm out from under house arrest."

"That's more than enough," cut in Mordon. He said to Barnes, "You were scolding me for giving her ideas."

Barnes scowled, waving a mug in the air to emphasize his words. "Lot a good it's doin' 'er, with animations walkin' about. The fight's in 'er home, Lord, no matter where that 'home' is. It's 'er fight. Somethin' dark touched 'er and there's nothin' you or I or all the world kin do ta keep the two a 'em apart."

Mordon's brow narrowed. "What sort of something dark?"

Barnes's eyes went black, becoming dull voids as he stared at me, his cheeks thin and his lips white. My breath caught and I instinctively reached for a frying pan. Then the look was gone and Barnes shook his head. "Dunno. But it's old. Old things are old for good reason."

I shuddered, slowly releasing the frying pan. Even Railey had had similar moments, but they had been rare, and creepy as all could be.

I thought back to the letter I'd read, the one from 'Death', and now I wondered: had it been real? Had it been part of my imagination? If it was real, did it have anything to do with what

Barnes spoke of?

"Then," said Mordon, "let us give our wind elemental the best chance she can have."

Mordon took the stairs in a rush, clearly expecting me to follow. I glanced at Barnes and said, "You're a dark elemental."

"Means I've got good night vision."

I paused when I reached the top of the stairs. "Sure it does. Keep the shadows safe for me, will ya?"

Barnes smiled and ran a finger over his mustache, smoothing it out into handlebars again.

"Hurry on after him, girl."

I did so, finding Mordon cleaning the counter downstairs.

He said, "It scares most people when he does that."

"It's a scary element, but I trust him well enough."

Mordon cocked his head at me in contemplation.

I said, "So, what was all this cryptic nonsense about?"

Mordon motioned to encompass the whole shop. "I have a small task for you. There's something in this place which is yours and not mine. Find it."

My brow narrowed and I ran through a mental list. Was I missing anything, trinkets or otherwise? Not that I could remember.

I walked among the shelves. "What am I looking for?"

"You will know when you find it," Mordon's voice drifted over the top of the shelves. Sound had an odd way of carrying here. The shop seemed to know how to transfer a voice so a person never had to yell to talk to someone else, even if they were far apart.

A string poking out of a binding caught on my small finger. Curious, I pulled the book out of its place on the shelf. I slid down a post and sat on the wooden floor, opening the book in my lap.

It was a slim volume. I didn't even notice the title before opening it and letting my fingers travel the pages, one after the next. Several people had written in the book, or I should say, several people had written the book, apparently all at different times. Certain entries had been written then crossed out with new information beneath it. Intrigued, I fell to reading it.

When Lilly entered the shop and announced it was lunch time, I got up and followed her to the table upstairs. When I sat I realized I still had the book.

"You found it then," Mordon said. "Which one is it?"

I showed it to him, feeling distracted as the coven discussed constructing a better, newer ward, and made a point to exclude me from the procedure. They certainly could use my help,

though, and I didn't have to look hard to see that. The more power that was put behind a ward, the better it made the spell. No one told me that I just might mess it up, though. I was unpracticed. I was unpredictable. And I was certainly not strong.

Mordon turned the slim book over in his hands with an appraising eyebrow. “*Skills of the Thaumaturge*. It is one of the handwritten and bound copies, the first one written in English. It hasn't selected a user in a very long time.”

Interest got the better of my foul mood. I leaned forward.

“Some books are not particular about who writes in them, but this one is. It burned down the library of a couple Victorian households before Barnes confiscated it, and it remained with him until it changed into my hands.” Mordon spoke too quickly for me to insert a question, and he reached for a quill then passed it to me. “Let's see what it likes about you. Open it up.”

Hesitantly, I took the book back and let it fall open. It was a blank page, which surprised me at first—there had not been any empty pages when I had been looking through it last. Ink rose to the surface of the page, and words drew themselves.

A Study of Bogarts

BY FERALINE SWIFT

Mordon's face brushed mine when he leaned to read it upside down. “Bogarts? Come to think of it, there isn't an actual solid article about them in most books. You'll have your work cut out for you.”

“Why?”

“Because it'll hold its information ransom until you pay it with words. Best get writing. This book is enough of a teacher for anyone. Any question, any recipe, about anything that you need to look up, you write in the book. Treat it well, and it will treat you well. The more you put into it, the more you'll get back out.”

The book prompted me by writing the words:

What is a bogart?

I was not in the mood to humor an inanimate object, but Mordon was distracted once Leif appeared. The four of them began to talk about warding plans. Since no one was ready to spend the time to tell me what they were discussing, I wrote a research list of terms and spell names as they were mentioned on the next page.

The book, thankfully, did not mind me making this list in it. For the time being, the entire book was nothing but blank pages. Mordon had been serious when he said the book would hold

information ransom.

When the others went into the living room, I saw it was to move furniture and roll up the carpet—which was not tacked down so much as being more of a wall-to-wall rug. Lilly snapped her fingers and I felt a ripple in the air as she swept the floor. As the dust washed away on the spell, it revealed a granite floor with faded traces of drawings.

I studied the drawings and diagrams Barnes etched out in chalk. He was the fastest, the most sure with his hands and the placement of various characters. Once or twice he argued with Leif or Mordon, but he didn't change the drawing. Annoyance over her lips, Lilly glanced at me.

“No guests for this one. It's too easy to get magic entangled in it.”

A blush rose to my cheeks. I left, shutting the french doors behind me with a hand shaking in sudden anger.

I snorted and muttered to myself, “Too easy to get entangled.” I bit the tip of my tongue, let out a sigh. She might have a point. She probably did have a point. She was likely right.

I pulled the pins out of my hair, felt it tumble down my back. I pursed my lips at the book in my hand. A thought occurred to me.

I wrote on a blank page, *Can you suggest a way to recover lost memories?*

The words remained stationary on the page for a minute. My hope faltered. *Spotches appeared beneath the question, and words formed.*

There are several methods as described by Mary J., Thomas O-M, and Caerwyn. Each has its own list of requirements and rituals. Success varies depending upon circumstances of the loss of the memory, the skill of the sorcerer, the accuracy of the recording, and the accuracy of the recreation.

For a little, I pondered the last sentence. Then I wrote back, *The people doing the recording might not have written it right?*

The book seemed to think. It replied, *Rarely were these sorcerers and mages educators. Only during fits of fervor were they inclined to record detailed notes, perhaps even in those times they did not think it necessary to record common knowledge or procedure.*

So, I could be missing steps. Possibly very important steps which were not recorded merely because it was considered common knowledge. How many old-timey stew recipes instructed that the cook pot be put over heat? I did not need to be reminded of all the cautionary tales I had heard about getting spells right, particularly about the memory.

Can you teach me these methods? Supposing I were to provide details and record the experiments? I wrote back.

The response this time was quick.

Yes, yes, yes. The price is ten (10) articles for this information, no set word count or length on the articles, but the count will be higher for articles of lesser quality to compensate. Are we agreed?

Ten articles of unknown length? Uncertainty rolled in my gut. But if it was what I would have to do to find out what had happened to Railey...I let out a sigh.

Yes.

I was going to be writing for a while.

Chapter Eleven

Several hours passed, Mordon giving a nonstop lecture broken up by questions which I wondered if I had answered correctly. Mordon and I drifted from King's Ransom to the communal quarters upstairs, having gone through the motions of closing shop: locking the doors, snuffing out candles in their holders, totaling the receipt book and comparing it with the till. Only during counting did the shopkeeper go silent, and immediately afterwards he resumed where he left off. The topic of the time had been dwarven goldsmithing, a sidetrack I'd set him on to dodge questions about Railey. As we shut the wainscoting door, the hair prickled on the back of my neck and I was seized by an unnerving urge to look at the shop again. But it was silly wariness on my part. Mordon wasn't concerned at all.

By dinner, I stood over a pot of water, trying to master a spell to make it boil. Barnes napped on the couch, snoring; Leif read a crime thriller; and Lilly fought a losing battle with a tangle of coral yarn resisting the crochet hook. Mordon remained nearby, examining a book on potions and asking a stream of questions so fast I could hardly answer one before he popped the next. I put my hand on my hip and stared at him until he fell quiet and met my gaze. I pointed to the pot.

He said, "Then make it bubble."

Leif's voice came from the armchair. "If I didn't know better, I would say she is educating you."

"It's remarkable. I have never encountered such a diverse wealth of information."

A blush heated my cheeks, and the water started to release tiny trails of spiraling bubbles. "If I had my books, I could talk you through even more. Illustrations are difficult to replace with conversation."

Already I missed the little comforts of home—my stash of herbs, full-leaf tea, the lavender goats milk soap made by the lady down the road, and in particular all my books. It hadn't been much, but it had been almost a period of study and reflection. I had been surrounded by gifts bestowed over the years and trophies earned with blood. Trinkets, books, lessons—all things I wouldn't have had if my life had taken a different turn. The water exploded into a rolling boil with steam puffing off the top and a slight froth on the surface.

"That will do," Mordon said.

Too bad I couldn't feel my magic acting. Ah, well. I took a cup and scooped water into it as though it were a ladle. Into the lime green and hot pink striped mug went one of Lilly's teabags, the one from a box ambiguously labeled 'Breakfast Tea'. Within three dips, the water was already black. I'd gotten spoiled on my Assam and Darjeeling.

"What do you think? Drop milk and sugar in, and it's pretty good," said Lilly, yanking out the

previous row of her knotted scarf.

What I really thought was that the tea was actually the dusty trimmings swept off cutting machinery and stuck in a bag, hardly worthy of being called tea, but what I said was, "It should perk me up."

I felt tired and worn, but I didn't want to sleep now and wake up in the middle of the night.

Lilly said, "Mordon, we need to have a talk about revising the wards. Do you have the time?"

He rolled his shoulders, clearly not too keen on the idea. He glanced at me and snapped his fingers. Mordon said, "Have you notified anyone about where you are or how you are doing?"

The question came out of the blue. I blinked rapidly. "Uh, no."

"Take a few minutes to burn a letter to someone."

"Uhh...yeah." I didn't have the guts to complain, *but it's fire*.

"It's a simple enough exercise."

I shifted, not wanting to humiliate myself in front of the whole coven. "Do you mind if I go down to the shop? It'll be quiet there, now that it's closed."

Mordon nodded not suspecting a thing, but Leif wasn't so fooled.

* * *

Holding out the letter, I repeated my parents' names three times and focused on their faces. Breaking from ritual the way I always did, I took my lighter to the corner. Instead of being instantly consumed by the flames and disappearing in a puff of smoke, the letter burned normally with lots of smoke from paper laced with silk. Half-burned, I tossed the letter onto the ground and stamped it out with my foot. Flustered, a thought sunk in as I stared at the singed paper at my feet.

Perhaps I hadn't regained my power, after all. I swallowed a lump in my throat, folding up the remains of the letter. No, the more reasonable explanation was that I was exhausted. Running out of energy was nothing to be ashamed of. Nevertheless, I could not bear the thought of seeking out Mordon to have him burn a new letter. I should not get anyone prematurely excited.

I crumpled the letter into my pocket and took to wandering the shop. Cabinets and organizers took up most of the floor space, but there were wandering isles and a few large, clear areas. One of these cleared areas had a wizard's circle seared into it, and I would be curious to investigate it properly later.

As I walked past a suit of armor, it drew its hand over its chest and said dramatically, "Welcome and welcome, fairest lady! Many and many and many a splendid night and day did we await your arrival!"

Jumping at first, I was left with the impression the armor wanted me to reply. "Thank you... who has been waiting for me?"

"We, we, all of we held within these walls," it said, motioning to the shop as a whole. With power and time, these buildings formed their own ideas and personalities. The building did not want me to leave. I would have to ask Mordon if this was a common reaction or if his building was choosy about its occupants. The armor resumed its at-ease stance and was immobile.

Heavy, slow footsteps advanced from the front of the shop. Barnes lumbered to a stop a few rows away, staring up at the night sky through the glass ceiling.

"Are they done talking about the wards?" I asked.

"They're arguing a point. Mordon should be done soon."

"Ah."

Barnes pointed to my singed letter. "Trouble with fire?"

"I have never gotten along with it. Back in the day, I had a lighter which would send the letters for me, but I don't have it anymore."

"I can send it for you."

I held it, wavering back and forth between handing it over and not. "No. I want to win."

Barnes laughed, a thin hoarse sound. "There is no winning against yourself."

"Sure there is, if you set the bar low enough."

"Is it a win if you do that?"

"Huh. I don't know, I'm just rambling because I'm fed up with the letter and tired, and now the shop is talking to me."

"It will do that now and again." Barnes turned slowly on his heel, angling himself to watch both me and the wainscoting-disguised door. "Don't you string him along."

The calm way he said it was more unnerving than the implied threat. "You talking about Mordon?"

"He's never shown an interest in any woman since I've known him. Mooning over some old heartthrob takes up his spare time."

My heart sunk to the bottom of my stomach. "Oh. What was the deal with her?"

"No one knows."

“So he's never talked about it?”

Barnes twitched his mustache. “Not directly. He'll talk of love, he'll talk of loss and heartbreak. But he'll never talk about *her*.”

“He must have been very loyal, if he's still staying true.”

“He is. When he cares for someone, he cares.”

I nodded. “I can see you must care for him, too, and since we're having this conversation now, does that mean you aren't so confident in me?”

Mordon appeared in the wainscoting door, but he stopped to talk to someone on the stairs. I didn't know if I wanted him to hurry or take his time.

Barnes said, “You haven't come clean with the whole truth since I've known you. You lie, you sneak, and you know how to manipulate your way out of a situation. You've got determination, I'll grant you, and you're clever, but some of the worst worms in history are determined and clever. I like you. You are easy to like, but I don't trust you. Until I know what makes you tick, I won't take my eye off you.”

“You sound like my Uncle Don.” Moving slowly, I came to a stop in front of Barnes. “What you say is reasonable. I'll consider it, but you have to understand. There is a lot to tell, it is easily misconstrued, and I have seen firsthand how badly my past can be mangled. Makes it hard to trust anyone, much less people who I've only known for days.”

Barnes's mustache did a little circular dance. “What of Leif? He says you have not told him about Railey.”

“My parents moved the family immediately after Railey died. To give a fresh start. You know, make it easier to accept that I would have to live out the rest of my life without magic. I haven't had contact with him until recently.”

“But you have not told him now.”

“You're right. I guess, I hadn't thought of it.”

Barnes grunted. “Think about it.”

He left. Mordon talked to him for a minute, laughed, and continued on to me.

His hair had a way of catching the sliver of moonlight, making him appear very non-human.

“Barnes said you struggle with fire.”

I tucked a stray strand of hair behind my ear. “I do.”

“Want to know a secret?” Mordon asked, playful.

“Don't I always?”

“I have an incredibly hard time getting wind to do anything for me.”

"What? It's hardly like you would need to use it for anything practical. Unlike sending a letter."

Mordon grinned. "Practical? How about portals? That's wind magic. Or search spells. Also wind. Then there's spying and the amplification or suppression of sound."

"Scrying is water."

"True, but spying is wind. It is a pity you don't realize how much you call on your magic every day around me."

"I do?"

"Yes."

"Huh."

I wondered if it was because my magic was half-feral and not under my control. Mordon must have reached the same conclusion, his cheerfulness died. Serious, he tapped against a blue seashell which hadn't been returned to its proper place yet.

"Our good Constable brought to mind that we should talk about a guardian for you. Being an unmated, youthful female without a strong family presence in Merlyn's Market."

"That would be a smart thing to appoint, wouldn't it?" I said, staring up at the airplane and admiring the night sky. Mordon dropped a drawstring bag next to my elbow. It sounded full of coins.

"Only the most powerful of sorceresses have decided against it."

"I don't fit well into that category, do I?"

"Maybe not in terms of magic," he whispered, yet another one of those asides I thought he didn't intend for me to hear. Louder, he said, "Leif doesn't have a ward, and he's highly regarded. Barnes would be stretched a little thin, but you two do seem to operate very well together."

I laughed, enjoying its pitch under the stars and the moon. "Barnes! The grumpy man." I shook my head, noticed a couple rat tails in my hair, and combed them out with my fingers. "We're no good for each other."

"What do you mean by that? You get along wonderful." Mordon sounded bitter.

I kept unknotting my hair. "Because he's a dark elemental. He's got these urges comin' in though his magic, and I'll bet that every time he walks onto a crime scene, he feels what made it come about. He feels the victim's panic, and he gets a thrill the same way the perpetrator did. And when the case is over and he looks at his empty home, he is swarmed by the emotions and passions of every single case he ever worked on. So he goes and lives on the wild side, just enough to exhaust those feelings so he can limp to the couch and sleep for three hours."

I stared into the plane's cockpit and let loose a small sigh that carried the weight of a decade of nightmares.

"You've felt it?"

"Railey did. She was a dark elemental, too, not as strong as Barnes but maybe she would have been with time."

"...and when she became your ghost, her memories, her nightmares became part of you."

I let out a shuddering breath. "I still feel her when all is quiet like this."

Mordon nodded, staying quiet next to me.

Much as I didn't want to disturb the peace, I was itching to know something. "Is it real or rumor that drakes have a second form?"

A surprised laugh burst from him. "You mean, are we a dragon version of werewolf? In short, yes, with some notable differences. The ability to shift forms is hereditary, while the skill to do so is learned. In werewolves, the ability to shift comes with bites and the skill is instinctual."

I nodded. "I was just wondering. I haven't heard talk of too many drakes."

"That is because there are few to our race, and they prefer to stick to themselves."

His voice was so lonely when he said that.

What are you doing here? I wanted to ask, but this was one of those peaceful moments in time when it was wrong to press for more disclosure.

"Can I ask you something?" Mordon asked.

"Shoot."

He hesitated. "Does shoot in this context mean 'yes'?"

"Shoot in this context means yes, go for it."

"I want to know the full story about what brought you to my door."

"I take it the ward-modification-conversation got sidetracked?"

Mordon frowned.

I shrugged. "Barnes mentioned something similar. If you're all wondering about it, I'll tell. Just not right now. I'm too tired right now."

"I believe we all are. I thank you in advance. I know it is not easy to speak of such personal troubles."

We stood there and gazed at the stars around the airplane.

Chapter Twelve

“Lilly, I get why everyone wants to know, but I'm feeling corralled into it.” I sat in my nighttime sun room, in the middle of removing baby spider plants from a giant torso-sized mother plant. Lilly blinked at me with wide eyes, holding a bag of household décor magazines.

“That's not why I'm here,” she said. “Your house is so barren.”

“Yeah-huh. It is.”

“You don't believe me.”

“I think you had multiple reasons for visiting.” I brushed the old potting soil off on my trousers. The little plants would either grow in the pots with their older companions, or they'd die. Knowing spider plants, they'd take off as if they were in premium rooting soil. “I'm not going to tell you in advance of the others.”

“I don't think you plan on telling us at all. You drip-feed us tidbits and act surprised that we can't connect the breadcrumbs. In your opinion, the whole episode should just be swept under a rug and forgotten about. Barnes has gone through the old reports, you know.”

“I wonder what those have to say.”

“That's not funny.”

“I'm not joking.” A pot jumped out of my hands, crumbs of soil scattering over clear sealed bricks. A touch of honeysuckle twisted under my nose, the wind rumbled by the house. They'd dismissed too much. I'd heard so many people say that. Wheels of justice, indeed. Breathing slowly, I forced the anger back. “Let's talk about duvets or whatever they're called.”

Lilly frowned, the expression creasing a line above her nose. I thought she was going to press the subject. She said, “Duvets go on the bed. You already have a comforter. We could get a duvet, though.”

Tension eased out of my body. “Right, so what sort of thing were you thinking of?”

“Can I start up some drinks? I brought decaf and my InstaBrew pot.”

“Sure.”

The atmosphere settled as Lilly put milk into one chamber, coffee into the other, and used bottled water once she realized the kitchen sink poured turmeric colored water. It hissed and bubbled. I remembered my blue willow pot sadly.

When we were situated again, it was much more peaceful. I could almost forget that everyone wanted me to lay out the part of my past I was ashamed of.

She spread out a variety of magazines. Each came from a different store. Illusions filled the

room with each flip of a page, showing how the furniture looks. It was rather amusing to arrange things with the drop of a page.

“We need to get you a wardrobe for the clothes you'll be getting,” Lilly said over steaming drinks. Lilly had a list in one hand and a flamingo feather quill in the other.

My butternut latte was too sweet, so I drank it slowly. “Mordon has a chest in the shop I like. It has space distortion enchantments.”

Lilly's quill wobbled in her hand. She said, “If that is what you want. Now, we need to get you potion brewing equipment.”

“Why don't you take me to the shop you like, and let me pick what I need? I keep hearing that Swifts are different in their techniques.”

“You should have some home pots, too, and plates. And towels, linens, something to sit on. It's too much all for one day. Right. Prioritize. Living essentials first.”

“Potions first.”

“Do you do anything but work?” Lilly shook her curls.

“Why don't we get a table and chairs, some towels, and a cooking pan? That will be basic enough.” I added a smile. “And then I can have some time to get my potions closet organized.”

I wondered how I was going to ever pay her back. The money I saw changing hands was all in coins, and different coins than I had ever seen. I didn't know their value, and was too embarrassed to ask.

“Did you and Mordon fight?”

The question brought me out of pondering money matters. Surprised, I said, “What makes you say that?”

Lilly jabbed her pen at me. “He's never so quiet and distracted. What happened?”

“Did he say something?”

Lilly sighed. “Fera. What's going on? He came out of your house.”

“Nothing's going on,” I said, suddenly bright red with a blush.

Lilly tapped her quill on the page, then shrugged. “If that's how you want to be. Just...he's a drake. As far as I know, they don't go on dates or have awkward first kisses or ask for your phone number.”

“Not that anyone here would ask for my number anyway,” I muttered, thinking about how the magical community didn't use phones.

“Fera, you know what I mean. I'm saying, don't break his heart and don't break your own.”

"We're not doing anything."

Lilly raised up her hands. "I'm not saying you are. Well, fine, I am, but my point is, make sure you two are on the same page?"

"Fine, fine," I muttered, leaned back and crossed my arms. A smile drifted onto my lips and I added, "But he is handsome."

Lilly laughed. "I think he's sort of funny looking, but if you like him..." Then she sighed and said, "Fera, just be careful."

Now I frowned. "There's not something about him you want to tell me, is there?"

She looked alarmed. "Like what?"

"I don't know. He doesn't lose his temper or anything?"

"Oh!" She said, startled. "Not that I've seen. No more than anyone else."

I sipped at my cooled coffee. Anything sweet had been starting to turn my stomach, and I assumed that was due to the mandrake potion. I considered Mordon in a new light. Suppose that he did care for me? I could certainly be interested in him.

And Mordon hadn't given me any indication of wanting to enter a relationship.

These thoughts turned one way then the other as we browsed magazine after magazine. I eventually picked out an unvarnished wooden table which would work as a cutting block, and five mismatched chairs in case the coven ever decided to gather at my house.

I didn't pay attention to the towels Lilly selected, and soon came to regret that decision when I realized they boasted floral arrangements which had buds which opened and closed as I watched them. By then I was too tired to object.

Lilly was exclaiming over a recent too-cute set of rugs when I flopped on the bed. I turned off the gas lights. She sat down beside me, a blue orb floating overhead.

"You going to stay the night?"

"I'll leave once you're asleep. Meanwhile, so many decisions to make."

I shook my head and pulled back the covers.

A curled piece of parchment caught my eye lying in the very center of my pillow.

"... I mean, clouds went out last year, but look at these!"

I stared at the small scroll, unable to answer. I recognized the seal on the gold wax holding the parchment closed. It was a stylized, elegant G with two feathers draping overhead.

Beneath the imprint the letter was addressed in graceful handwriting to MISS F. H. SWIFT. There was a faint scent of smoke lingering on it. The skill required to burn a letter so it arrived on a pillow ... that was precision.

It unrolled in my palm. Nothing was in it. As I watched, letters appeared. Not in the ink-rising-to-the-surface way of my book, but in the wet, directly applied way.

Be careful

or

you will be

Unwritten

Just like the other cleansers

He needs souls to take

one

from Death's grasp

Family secret

has been kept for

generations, barely legible

I cannot resist this challenge,

but

I cannot let him claim you, too.

Stay out of his Market.

I will do what I can

to slow him but

he will not be

stopped.

-G

“Lilly,” I said, stiff with shock. “Do you see this?”

“The waterfall shower? It's cool, but—” Lilly stopped talking once I turned on the lights, realizing that I held a scroll. “What is that? Who sent it to you at this hour of the night?”

“I'm not positive. But I think I am holding a death threat.”

Chapter Thirteen

"I think it's a warning," Leif said.

"That detracts from the excitement, though." I cradled Mordon's favorite mug against my chest, not drinking the brew. No matter how hot the cup was, my fingers remained ice. Scorched a bit on one side, but still ice. My legs were folded up underneath me in Barnes's arm chair. Anything to keep from shaking like the last leaf on an autumn branch. "It's so dramatic to get a death threat."

"Not funny, Fera," Lilly said.

Wind rattled through gaps under doors, chilling everyone on a sultry summer night. Under other circumstances, this would be welcome. But now, I was cold enough without my magic playing feral. Gas lamps like hissing fairies cast eery shadows on worried faces. It felt like a spook house, and that brought out the professional side of me. The me that this coven had not seen before. No one had caught on how to handle me yet.

"Constable, can you confirm the scroll was burnt to me?"

Barnes twitched a handlebar mustache. "It was the first thing I did. It was sent within an hour ago."

"That was while Lilly and I were talking. It's a relief that I didn't have an intruder." I rocked forward, pointing with my shadow. "Be careful or you will be Unwritten. Capital U. Think it means anything?"

Mordon said, "It is possible that it is synonymous with *killed*, or it could be a reference to the Five Unwrittens."

A thrill went through me. The Five Unwrittens were spells so dangerous they had been ordered erased from record and memory. What they did was a matter of scholarly debate, because even that detail had been lost to prevent temptation.

Leif leaned in. "It's impossible. After the Ninsheen Coven was arrested and their minds wiped, there haven't been any other practitioners."

"I thought the Black Claw Cult were the last," Lilly said.

Barnes shook his head. "Ninsheen was recent. Ten years ago. The White Wizard Council kept it hushed up. Couldn't panic the general populace."

Mordon stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Ten years ago is living memory and the note says family secret, barely legible. Which implies it was recorded."

We sat in silence as the ramifications of that comment sank in.

“What's this about the cleansers?” I asked.

Barnes frowned. “Not a clue. Never heard of anyone going missing, much less Unwritten.”

“Huh.” I wondered if I should mention that Griff had indicated otherwise, decided against it.

“Who were the ones behind doing the mind wipe?”

Silence.

I didn't know how to interpret the present mood of the room. I continued, “Suppose that whoever was meant to be doing the mind wipe decided to keep the information for themselves?”

Lilly pursed her lips. “It says family secret.”

“Yes, but it doesn't say how long—oh, I guess it does say 'for generations'. Nevermind. I'm a conspiracy nut.” I rolled the mug between my hands, sipped it. “Keeps life interesting to trust no one, you know.”

Leif held both hands out in an appeasing gesture. “Fera.”

“You're all wondering it, so I'll get it out of the way. I think Griff sent this. It's his signet ring, his handwriting, his cooler-than-thou style. I think it is indeed about the Unwrittens. He would be all over a project like that. Exciting. Challenging. Dangerous. Probably why he stole Mordon's vase.”

“What?” Mordon's nostrils flared, his eyes got vertical pupils.

“I thought I told you? No? Not between then and now? Oh.”

“He's a gryphon.”

“He's got a human form. It's one of his spells. A challenge. One of his portfolio pieces, I'm sure.”

Barnes said, “You should have filed a report if you knew who the thief was.”

“Sure, and then I'd have had to explain why it was my key that let us into King's Ransom, and fess up to another lie to Mordon, and take a step back to explain how I knew what Griff looks like as a human, how he sort-of tricked me with rumors—and I'm making absolutely zero sense at the moment, I can see it in your faces.”

Mordon stood. We all watched him take three steps, put his face in his hand, and just stand there. Slowly, he returned, towering over me. Black pepper and nutmeg enveloped me, making me feel lightheaded and all nervous. I swallowed a lump in my throat. He knelt in front of me. Our eyes were at level.

“I think,” he said, “it is time you started from the beginning. The whole unfiltered truth. Doesn't matter if it takes you three full days to tell it. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

It felt like signing a contract. The fact that there were other people in the room no longer mattered. *He* would be the judge if I was telling all. And I did want to make it up to him.

The lines around his eyes softened, but he was still commanding as he asked, “Will you tell me what happened that night at the house on Ferret Drive?”

He knew the address. I crossed my arms, shivering. “You must have been reading some old Tribunes.”

“I was. The case came to a very abrupt halt, and owing to your age at the time, the reporters were very scant on the details.”

“Yeah, my age was a nice excuse for a cover-up.”

“If you do not wish to tell me. . .”

“No, not that. Just thinking of how to phrase it. I still have nightmares about that night. The night truly starts back earlier in the day, when I got into a fight with Griff. He cursed me. Claimed to have put a lock on my magic, and that he'd unlock it later. Oh, goodness, I don't remember the details. But I didn't believe him. Fast forward a little bit. Railey saw ghosts. It was a gift and a curse. She was vulnerable to them. I was supposed to keep her safe. I used to be in your role, you know. Protector of the youthful coven. Cocky as all could be, too.”

Mordon smiled. “Is there any one of us who hasn't been cocky at one point or another?”

“True. But this is where things get hard. Railey's parents didn't believe in magic. That changed in a big way afterward, the episode caused some kind of mental break and now they're sorcerers like anyone who has been wielding a wand since they were ten. Anyway. They thought we were friends playing childhood games, even if Leif was a tad old for such things. Railey thought that I was the only person she could go to about her haunting. And I wasn't going to ever turn her down when she needed me.”

“It was your duty.”

“She woke me up the night I didn't believe Griff and said she was going to the spook house we had seen about a week prior. She said it haunted her. The ghosts wanted free. I was not usually frightened when Railey talked like this, but this time there was something different in her expression.”

“You two went.”

“We had to walk. Nearly two miles one direction. That's quite the walk when you're feeling sick from having your magic locked. So we got to Ferret Drive, and she started digging. I was having second thoughts. Thinking that I should have told my parents, let them look into the whole fiasco. But, you know, twelve years old is an interesting time in life when it comes to decision-making. I guess I thought nothing would happen.”

I rubbed the back of my neck. "There was something in the house, a living shadow. I can't remember the details of the attack; I'm certain I fought against it. We were ambushed? I think? It's all such a mess, I don't remember. Leif told me about kill-spells, and I was thinking about that. He said that Railey and I might have shared a spell, but I don't think so."

Mordon stroked his chin, brow deeply furrowed. His fingers stopped stroking his non-existent beard. "Griff's magic lock. The one that blocked you from accessing your magic."

"I'm glad you think so, too. I was thinking, that lock prevented the kill spell from taking out my magic. Due to the lock being present, it kept me alive."

"But damaged the lock enough to make it permanent."

I nodded. "It makes sense."

"It does."

"When I finally woke, I was in the meadow behind Leif's house. His mother was kneeling over me, and I heard my parents answering a Constable's questions. No one needed to tell me what happened. I could feel it, inside my heart. My world stopped that day. No more dreams of five friends rising the sorcering ranks and transforming the world. No more stealing brooms and trying to bewitch them. No more pulling pranks on the others with Railey as my conspirator. No one had to tell me that thing killed Railey. It killed her, and I don't know why, and I don't know why the investigation stopped so short. What I do know is, I was left alive, magic-less, and with a ghost who swore to watch over me."

Mordon put his hand over the back of mine. "Thank you for telling me."

I leaned against his shoulder, needing the comfort, wondering what his story was. What made him connect with me so strongly?

He pushed me gingerly away and said, "Continue. What happened after this?"

I blinked. "After?"

"Between then and the time you first spoke to me."

"Ah. Yes." I cleared my throat. "Well, when it clear that I didn't have any magic and people were talking, my parents packed us all up. We left overnight. Whole fresh start deal. I was against it. Especially since Railey showed up as a ghost and served literally as a daily reminder that it wasn't all a crazy childhood game of play-pretend. Years went with me trying to get my magic back. We went to healer after healer, gave medical doctors an attempt to see if there was anything 'wrong' with me. Nothing. One of the healers told me with he had never before seen anyone so dead to the ether as me, much less than the average non-magic user even.

"I devoted myself to herbology and the study of magical trinkets. My parents involved me in the occasional demon hunt. Though I could pull an impressive stunt or two using various

trinkets and a well-timed potion, I didn't go with them on anything too dangerous. They didn't want me to be hunted. When my name was starting to get mentioned by devils, I agreed it was time to retire from their circle.

"I got into the house cleansing business after I'd taken all the chemistry and greenhouse classes I could stomach at the local college. In return for eradicating an attic of bogarts and storage ghosts, a farmer gave me a small corner of his land where there a dairy barn, a chicken coop, and a random shed. I earned enough to pay for groceries and the occasional new trinket. And this is where the story picks up again. A witch doctor contacted me, saying she could give me a cure."

"Oh?"

"Yes. I thought, why not? Got a list of potions ingredients from her. Half the list was toxic. I thought, maybe she's got some nifty method which I can use myself. By that time, the ghosties were getting a bit freaky and I'd perfected my potion recipes. I thought I could retire to making potions in one of the markets, maybe Oberon's or Merlyn's. So I made the appointment for Sunday. Next thing I knew, it was Thursday morning and the bounty hunters were hot on my tail."

Mordon nodded. "Then what?"

I blinked. "I came to King's Ransom."

"You picked up Griff along the way."

"Ah. Yes." I plunged into that story, repeating as best I could all his rumors and exact quotes. It surprised me a little to see how shocked Barnes was as he recorded my words.

"Are you sure that is the transcript?" Barnes asked.

"Very close to it. That was a conversation I devoted to memory."

Mordon shook his head. "And you couldn't recall if you'd told me about Griff?"

"I thought about telling you a lot. I must have decided against it."

He ran his hand through his hair.

Picking up the warning note, Leif said, "What comes next is deciding what to do about this."

They'd evidently been thinking about it while I'd been talking, because answers were forthcoming.

"I will look into the other house cleansers. See what shakes out," Barnes said.

Leif nodded. "I'll ask some contacts if they've encountered anything with the Unwrittens lately."

Lilly set her shoulders with determination. "I will keep an eye out for any strange activity from

Griff. I'm getting good at finding those who have business with him."

Mordon stared pointedly at me. "And you, Fera?"

"I'm too busy wrangling with my magic to bother with anything else. I'm out. And I'm going to sleep in this chair unless you let me go to bed."

Mordon raised a single, skeptical brow, as if asking what I was really going to do.

The answer was so straightforward I wondered why none of them accused me of it.

I was going to find out what happened between witch doctor and waking up on the ground with Gregor Cole on my tail, and it just-so-happened that I had finally finished up my 10 articles for a recollection spell from Skills of the Thaumaturge.

Chapter Fourteen

Sneaking out of the house was easy with the invisibility ring. Even though I had made an illusion of my still-closed door and employed that while slipping through it, I need not have bothered. The four of them were so thoroughly wrapped up in spell-casting that they did not notice me behind them. There were advantages to all my years of startling ghosts; it made me sneaky.

My hardest challenge would have been to keep the goat bells from signaling my exit, but no one had put them back up yet. They still sat on the banister at the top of the stairs. This was going entirely too well. I expected that my return trip would be far more problematic.

Once in Mordon's shop, I took a guess that the market was accessed by the main door. I thought perhaps the market was down the street, but I realized my error once I opened the door, stepped out onto a deck—and ducked a flying carpet.

I had imagined a farmer's market-style thing with tables and tents sprawled out over a park or something. I was utterly wrong.

A maze of boardwalks spread before me, doors like Mordon's lined the walls as far up as I could see through the gaps in the decks, and continued as far down. There was no reason to the doors, either. Though they each had a number, they were not ordered by their address nor were they ordered according to category or style. They simply sat next to each other like friends in a classroom.

At first I didn't see any way to go up or down a deck, but when I walked to the end of a boardwalk and peered over. I saw one carpet rolling up towards me, creating steps as it went. On the other side, a carpet rolled down.

I wandered up a deck and observed that the vendors—who docked at the boardwalk on portable floating platforms—arranged themselves by level according to their wares. A fair number of the shops were closed up. I wondered if I could find what I needed.

I found my own way to the place where potion ingredients were sold. After asking one well-stocked vendor about a couple of items, she immediately referred me to someone else named Agnes. Then she went back to talking about who her daughter was courting to the woman standing next to her.

The person I had been referred to was a squat woman with small hands and authority in her eyes. At a glance, I thought she was ancient, but her hands were sure as she tied a scarf over her hair. Keen eyes examined me from head to toe.

“Let me see the list,” she said.

I gave it to her. Only when Agnes scowled at my handwriting did I wonder why I agreed. Did

she have some sort of spell on me?

She stared at it, then at me. "Is this for recollections or for desensitizing?"

"Recollections. Caerwyn's potion." Once again, I was dumbfounded by my instant compliance. I shifted, suddenly noticing how dry my mouth had become.

"And your parentage is...?" Agnes asked.

I bit my tongue. Why should it matter?

"Different races have different tolerances," Agnes said. "What are you?"

What would it hurt? "Fey and human."

Agnes blinked and her eyebrow raised. "That is all?"

"That I know of, yes." I had discovered the fey part because there needed to be some explanation for the reason the trees followed Mother. I couldn't be positive about my father, though. We hadn't discussed genealogy round the dinner table.

"Mmm." Agnes did not look convinced. She said, "What is your surname?"

This one caught me by surprise. I rubbed my arm and said, "Swift."

"Swift," Agnes repeated, then faced her wall of tin canisters armed with my list. "Potion makers. Fine ones. Love their cursed forest. Good to see one of their ilk out in the world. They lose too much time. You come to me, youngling, and I will give you fresh goods."

Her words made me smile, even as I had no idea what to think of half of the things she had told me. Forest? Losing time? Then I remembered. "Will you trade? I don't have coin, but it's a trinket."

"What sort?"

"I brought a few," I said, displaying the rings on my hand. I had chosen the ones I was ready to part with.

Her brows shot up in surprise. She tapped her finger on the table, thinking. "Craft workmanship on the lot. You have a bargain for the copper, and some credit on the next time you visit to make it fair. Give me a few minutes."

I agreed, feeling a little sad to be parted with the ring but it hadn't been a gift. Plus, I did not use it as much as I thought I might. I examined her other wares, beads and pearls and horns of all sorts.

Though it had been behaving so far, my magic now chose to wander between the items on the table, things I wanted to touch but didn't dare. I felt the surprisingly rough twist of unicorn horn, the grit and silk of pearl powder, the unsanded edges of a box.

Something wriggled beneath a strip of velvet ribbon. A flash of gold poked out from under the

ribbon. I said, "Something's moving there."

"Mmm?" Agnes squinted. A thin smile touched her lips. "Ah. Pick it up. I want to see which one it is."

Would it bite? Was she joking? I checked her expression and decided Agnes was serious. I drew the ribbon back, and saw a nest of dragon shaped rings, each one in different poses and with different styles, some with stones, some without.

The ring which had come alive was unfurling itself from protecting a star sapphire. The dragon opened a ruby eye and yawned. I admired its teeth with apprehension, held out a finger to it. The golden dragon sniffed my hand. Blinked. It slithered into my palm, clutching the sapphire with envy. Once settled in my hand, confident that I wouldn't unsettle it, the dragon stretched her wings. Like a cat grooming itself, the dragon set about cleaning tiny scales.

Seeing it, Agnes nodded and went back to work. I reached down to let it back with the other rings. Tiny claws dug into my skin like burrs on seed heads.

Bolting up my wrist, it crossed to the back of my hand, between my fingers, around my wrist and thumb as though it were an obstacle course. I smiled, tried to coax it off my hand, but only succeeded in making it race around my fist like a squirrel on a tree trunk.

As though to steady itself, the dragon looped its tail over my finger.

"Use all I give you," Agnes said. I looked up, saw she held a linen bag for me by its drawstrings.

When I looked back, the dragon had fallen asleep hugging my finger and the stone. Worried, I tried to gently pry it off. Needle thin teeth bit me. I jerked my finger away, bleeding through pinpricks. I glanced at Agnes.

"Um...? Can you get it off?"

Agnes put her hand on her hip. "The ring isn't mine to take away. It goes where it goes with whomever it wishes."

I rubbed my forehead, wishing I had kept my magic to myself. I said, "What does it do?"

Agnes's smile was no comfort. "It looks pretty and stays put. For a time."

For a time? What did she mean by that? "It isn't going to turn into a dragon?"

"No, not a dragon, my dear."

Alarm shot through me. Then what did it turn into? I held the copper ring out as though it were a coin. "I've learned not to walk away with half-explanations. What is it, what does it do, and when will it come off?"

Agnes arched an eyebrow. "Only here would you use that tone on me. Nevertheless, I can smell your fear. It's nothing to worry over. It's a ring, it looks pretty, and it lets go when it is

ready.”

She plucked the copper trinket from my grasp and placed the bag in my hand. She patted my elbow. “Come see me again, my dear Miss Swift.”

Her answers were no answers at all. I opened my mouth to say so, then thought the better of it.

Mordon had been right, I stood out in my street clothes, and I would like the fewest number of people to see me.

I stewed in silence for a few minutes under invisibility.

Returning to the shop, I lost my way once and almost a second time. The market was not hard to navigate; I just forgot to pay attention when my mind wandered. Still, I was greatly relieved when I saw the door to Mordon's shop.

Hoping it wasn't locked, I put my hand on the door. It slid open as though inviting me in. Was that a welcoming sign or an ominous one? I walked in, shut the door. It locked with one scraping thud, then a click higher up on the door, and then the grind of a deadbolt.

Huh.

I didn't know what to think of this.

My eyes adjusted to the dark. Odd, the market had been fully bright. Was there a time difference, or was it artificial lighting? No matter what the case was, I had to feel my way through the shop.

My shoes made nearly no sound as I strode for the door up stairs.

“I wouldn't go up there yet if I were you,” Mordon's voice made me jump and stifle a yelp.

He was behind one of the shelves, finger on a line illuminated by moonlight. I bit my lip, gazed at the door.

“Do they all know I went out by myself?” I asked.

“Not unless they knocked on your door. I smelled your trail when I came for quiet,” Mordon said. Was he angry? Distressed? But if he could smell my scent, he could have followed after. Clearly he hadn't thought that was necessary.

I joined him. He was rubbing his temples over a diagram like the one Barnes had drawn.

“What are they 'being loud' about?”

Mordon's eyes were wide in the night, giving him a dangerous presence. “You.”

“But if they think I'm behaving myself—”

“And therein lies the argument. You're no child, but caution would have you treated as such.”

"Ah," I said, not knowing what else to say. There seemed no point in explaining myself to Mordon. He understood my position and I would gain nothing by airing my frustrations to him. I asked, "What's the spell?"

An eyebrow quirked in surprise. "You should know this. We just did it upstairs."

Was I wrong? I got a better look at the book. I shook my head. "The drawing was different. Same symbols, but different scale. Oh wait, this one is different. Does scale matter?"

"It does in this case," Mordon tapped the drawing and the page went blank. "Draw it if you can."

So I drew it, though the lines wriggled and I had to fix two symbols.

Mordon grinned upon seeing it. "I am not alone in underhanded endeavors. See here and here? Barnes brought a little of your magic in the spell, as a sort of secondary spell-caster. That was probably what started the argument. I wondered."

I couldn't tell one symbol from the next. I just remembered them. Mordon said, "What is in the bag?"

"Something for the book," I lied. I didn't want anyone else in my business. I didn't want to depend upon him, or anyone.

Mordon's face went slack. "You aren't alone, you know."

"I could be."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Things happen."

Mordon scowled. A thought crossed his face. "Two twelve-year-old girls go out at night. The one that came back did so realizing that life is fragile. Are you going to let that knowledge hobble you with fear?"

He struck more than one nerve. I couldn't think. "Leave off," I snarled and crossed my arms. I considered storming off upstairs and entering into the fray.

"That wasn't kind."

"The world isn't kind, either."

"And that is a reason for you to be crude?"

I pressed my knuckle against my eyelids, rubbing them. I turned back to Mordon. I admitted, "I like you. People I like end up dying or disappearing or pushing me over."

Mordon cocked an eyebrow and frowned, unimpressed. "It happens to all of us."

I kept back a snap, thinking to myself, *Let him finish.*

"We all have loved ones who die. We all have friends who stop talking to us. And we all get betrayed. What makes you different, I think, is you use independence as a balm. It is good to an extent, but community is the thing which will make a culture, achievements, and an existence beyond survival."

Well. There wasn't a single thing I could deny. Though I had survived for the last several years, that seemed to be it.

I bit my lip and said, so softly I could barely hear it, "It's for Caerwyn's Recollections potion."

Mordon's brow shot upward. "That has mandrake. Do you know—? Of course you do, you're a Swift. Not used to seeing them walking around."

Why was I hearing that so much lately? My mother's family seemed to have quite the reputation. I had always supposed that it was not so spectacular, but it seems I was wrong.

Mordon said, "You could make a pretty penny specializing in those potions."

"I do," I said.

Mordon was intrigued. "Do you make custom changes?"

I winced. "Simple ones. I don't understand how magic makes everything go together. The chemistry classes only teach so much. I just follow instructions. Mother taught me the basic things."

Mordon fell to musing over this bit of information. I shifted, awkwardly, still thinking about what he had said earlier. Our conversation fell flat, and my thoughts drifted to Leif. "Are you going to tell them?"

"Hmm?" It seemed I had disrupted this thinking. Mordon shook his head. "It's your business, not mine. But if I'm ever to guard you and you try to escape, let this be your warning."

"Let this be yours," I replied.

Mordon grinned and his eyes sparkled in the silvery light as the moon shined after a cloud. "This is going to be fun."

Warmth flushed my cheeks. I squirmed under his gaze. Then I declared, "I'm going to see if they're still fighting."

Mordon's chuckle made my cheeks burn more.

Upstairs, I found Leif and Lilly in a heated argument which Barnes had apparently abandoned just the same as Mordon had. Closer inspection found him twitching his mustache and scowling. I met his gaze. He tapped his ear in warning. Just then, Lilly's voice pierced the air, cutting through it in a way which made my ear drums split.

"Ow," I said.

The voices stopped.

“Fera? What are you—I thought—” Lilly said, the color leaving her face.

“You didn’t need any help, so I went out to run errands.”

Lilly gaped at me, then her voice rose. “You snuck out to the market alone? Fera!”

“Why are you yelling? No one else is. Do you conduct yourself with grace at the market but not here? Do we not deserve respect?”

She was going to argue. I said, “I will speak with you in a conversational tone. If we need to take a fifteen minute break, then we should take it and talk again after that time.”

Lilly’s face went bright red, her nostrils flared. Her voice was tense and rushed. “You went to the market. What if something happened?”

“Then I would have been proven very foolish.”

“You were foolish. You don’t know what could have happened. You broke the law. Did you know that?” Lilly was keeping her tone steady but it was a fight. “You are feral. You aren’t allowed to be unescorted. What if you lost control again? What if—?”

“If you want to report me, then do so. It was a quiet time, and nothing did happen.”

Leif said, “This is an official warning. Do not leave without telling anyone again.”

Lilly stared at the floor. Barnes watched Leif, who watched me. I said, “I am warned. But am I to be treated like this all my life, or until I pass some sort of test?”

When no one answered, I said, “You have talked about me but not with me. What is the time line? Is there one? May I exit the room without permission or must there be a supervisor to ensure I don’t go digging up the neighbor’s roses?”

“That’s not fair,” snapped Lilly.

“No, it’s not, not from anyone’s perspective. But if I am to be imprisoned the rest of my life due to magic, I may as well go without it.”

Leif’s eyes fastened on mine. He said, “You don’t mean that.”

“I might,” I said, but I looked at the dragon ring.

“No,” Leif said. “You don’t. I’ll put a council together and address your concerns. Yours is a special case.”

“Thank you,” I said. I meant it.

Chapter Fifteen

A light rap on my door interrupted me from studying the scant instructions for Caerwyn's Recallation Potion. I jumped, thought about hiding the evidence, and called, "Yes?"

"It is me." That was Mordon's voice. Relief hit me first, then wonder. What did he want at this hour of the night?

"Come in."

The door opened, and I heard no voices behind him. Good. If the others had gone to sleep, I was glad to not have their interference. Mordon shuffled, as though he were holding something. Then came the dull thunk of wood on slate.

I peered around the corner and saw he had a chest. "What's that for?"

Mordon made certain the door was secured. He flashed me a grin. "If anyone else asks, it's for your clothing."

When he picked it up again, his face strained. I pursed my lips and stepped out of his way. Mordon set it down again in the center of the dining room. It was a decent enough height to act as a chair or perhaps a very short table, I considered.

"And if I ask what is it for?"

This time his smile showed white teeth. I found myself mirroring it, without knowing why. Mordon said, "A convenient vessel for contraband."

This was exactly the sort of thing that Railey would have done. I put a hand to my lips, trying to hide my pleasure, trying not to notice the gleam in his green and red eyes. I cleared my throat and said, "To what do I owe the honor of such gifts?"

"Barnes thought of it." He popped open the locks on the chest. As he opened the lid, I caught the musky scent of storage combating with oak. Velvet lined the inside of the chest. I thought I recognized the hue of it from somewhere, but no longer cared once I saw what was inside.

I gasped, and found myself kneeling beside him before I knew I'd even moved. It was my iron cauldron and my set of pots and bowls. Silver, copper, steel pots, and even the gold-lined mini pot were there. My fingers shook as I picked it up. "I had these hidden. How did you find them?"

His eyes dilated. "In some ways, we aren't so different from dragons." He looked away, and said, "Barnes and I made an excursion to your workshop and gathered up what we thought was important. Barnes thought the expensive items were a good bet."

"That they were," I said, lifting the pots out of the box. I teased, "It's like you two want me to stay."

"It was Barnes' idea," Mordon said, but he added, "Though it was me who suggested that living here wasn't too comfortable at present."

I appreciated the notion, though the thought of the two of them going through my home was a little odd—but no worse than all the roommates I'd had over the years in college. When I reached in for my cauldron, I noticed that the empty space left by the pots was now filled with books. I laughed.

"What is this? How's this box work?"

"Like it?" Mordon asked. "It's a portal of sorts. All sorcerers have at least a couple of items like this—cupboards, wardrobes, chests, small jewellery boxes, anything enclosed works—it goes to a vault. Leif and Lilly have a vault each at Silver Leaf Storage. It's good enough if you would like to get your own. Right now your items are at my castle. Personally I think we have better guards, but I am biased."

"You have a castle?" I said, surprise making me laugh again. Was he serious? If it wasn't for the casual way he mentioned it I would have thought he was jesting.

Mordon pulled the cauldron out for me, since I had been distracted. He said, "Not mine in sole ownership. If anything, it owns me."

"Then what are you doing living here and running an antique shop?"

"Antiquities, my dear, antiques don't have enchantments," Mordon said. "I'm acting as a watcher for the colony. We always have someone on the outside world, keeping tabs on the other races, updating the colony on important events and new developments."

I seized the opportunity to learn more about where he had come from. "Colony? Are they in isolation?"

Mordon smiled, and shook his head. "Odd to hear that coming from a Swift; that's one clan who sets a high standard of isolation. But no, the colony is not considered formally isolated, though they avoid contact with other races and wandering drakes, people not in any colony or clan. There are some colonies left, but not as many as there used to be. The clans keep themselves secret. You see, we aren't particularly liked by dragons, humans tend to fear us, the same with most other races. The conquest of 1066 slaughtered nearly all drakes, and led to the formations of colonies. But raids, mass murders, and internal squabbling have decimated a lot of colonies."

I drummed my finger on the rim of the cauldron, thinking, wondering what questions to ask him first. Mordon ran a ringed finger through his mane, then helped me pull books out of the box.

"I am the heir to the Kragdomen colony. A ruler has to understand what it means to work in every role. It means the leader can make changes and understand the ripple effect his actions have on the colony. Being a watcher is the last role I have to complete. It is done when it is

done. I could be here for ten years or ten days, it is impossible to tell.”

Mordon and I kept pulling books out of the chest; I hadn't realized how many I had collected over the years. It made my head spin. Did I need them now that I had *Skills of the Thaumaturge*? On the other hand, it would be nice to get an answer when I needed it and not after the book had received payment.

My hand hovered over a book when I had a thought. “What happens if a person, say, nosedives into the box? Or if a kid tries to hide in it? Would they get transferred to the vault?”

Mordon's brow furrowed and he looked at me. “I wouldn't intentionally attempt it, if that is what you are asking. It might send you to the vault, but the spell isn't set up for living things, so it might refuse. In either case, there would be no leaving the vault by your own actions. Someone would have to go get you. I haven't heard about anything like that happening.”

After we stacked the books on the floor, Mordon handed me a few plates and drinking glasses, some basic towels, a cutting board, and a knife set my father had made for me. Thus ended the home wares department of my house.

Mordon climbed up on his feet, brushed at his shins, accustomed to sweeping dust off himself. He noticed my clutter on the counter. He said, “Can I watch you make the potion?”

At first I thought he wanted to supervise, but he held his hands behind his back and was reading the same line on the book over and over again, then looking at the herbs as though lost. I stood. “Sure. I'll even explain what is going on.”

He smiled, then sobered. “I don't want to distract you.”

“Are you going to pull on my hair?”

Mordon looked alarmed.

I laughed and took up herbs on the cutting board. “I lived with a ghost, remember? They feed off attention, and the older they get, the more they demand. I'm pretty certain I can brew a potion with another adult standing nearby.”

Mordon nodded. “If there's anything that I can do...well, that I'm allowed to do.”

“Doesn't the colony have a potion maker?”

He shifted uncomfortably. “Yes, but the training is reserved for hand-chosen apprentices. I am not that apprentice.”

“Why are you flustered?”

Mordon gave me a wry grin and shook his head. “It is a position reserved for my future mate.”

“Ah,” I said, feeling my cheeks take on color for no reason at all. I busied myself with arranging my pans. “You can wash the pots. Three bowls, the little ones, I just use them to put the prepared ingredients in. The stockpot, the gold pot, and the silver.”

Mordon's eyes gleamed, amused. "Mere minutes after I inform you I am heir to a kingdom, you tell me to scrub the pots like a scullery maid?"

"If you want to be in my kitchen, you'll do as I say," I told him as I started shaving the mandrake root.

Mordon eyed the knife. "While you're holding that thing, I'll do as you say no matter what. Just pay attention to what you're doing and don't hurt yourself. Who taught you to handle a knife? Does it need sharpened?"

Hurt myself? Who did he think he was? I had been cooking and cleaning and potion making for years. I sighed in annoyance and pointed it at him. "Not yet. Hush."

Wait. How long it had been since I sharpened it? A year? Two? Hmm.

Mordon obeyed and let out a startled grunt when he turned on the tap water. I glanced over. Water poured out turmeric yellow. "Let it run for a few minutes. The pipes might need to flush."

He gave me a no-duh expression and cranked the water on full blast. "Or your water source is polluted. I can go check."

I scraped the mandrake shavings into a corner of the board. Before he could leave the kitchen, I said, "You know where this house is? Like, where in the physical world?"

Mordon gave a noncommittal shrug. The man did know, but he didn't want me to know. I wondered why. Of course it would make sense that Mordon would have checked into the surroundings of the house when he first purchased it and the shop.

He crossed over the sun room. He went out that door. The locked door I dearly wanted to get through for the sole reason that it being locked made it desirable to unlock. I listened to the scuff of boots on the deck until they faded to silence.

Why the secrecy? What was he hiding? As if those questions weren't enough, I would have been happy to just feel the open air across my skin.

Before I could forget, I flipped to the page with my list and added: *Learn to Unlock Doors (later)*.

Though I wasn't expecting a reply, the book wrote back: *Difficulty will vary depending upon the skill of the sorcerer who cast the seal, and the strength of the seal itself.*

I bet it would.

I resumed preparing the potion, slicing mugwort leaves into strips. Soon I was out of space on the cutting board. By this time, the water poured clear, so I washed the bowls.

The sliding door scraped open. Mordon came back inside. His hair was damp, as were his shoulders. He removed shoes caked in mud.

"You seem a little flushed. Everything alright out there?"

“Just needed a purification spell. It brings the rain,” Mordon said. He chased me away from the sink, rolling up his sleeves and resuming his task. He watched as I transferred the herbs to the bowls.

To be sure, I read the instructions again, and said, “So I'll need quiet now. I need to be able to listen.”

I did not tell him that I was fudging the potion recipe a little. Caerwyn did not specifically state how to treat the mandrake. Since the other ingredients were right for the recipe, I was going to use one of Mother's methods, but it wasn't my favorite to do in front of an audience.

Humming, I worked through the rest of the ingredients and warmed the pots. I changed tunes often, keeping the bowl of shaved mandrake close to me, listening for it to join in with me. When the echinacea tincture was steaming, I worried that the mandrake wouldn't sing back, that the plant had been lifted from the ground dead or under too heavy of an incantation to silence its screeching.

Mordon caught one of my tunes and hummed along with me. The mandrake started to sing, too. I stopped and listened to Mordon's rumbling voice and the mandrake's high, soft tones.

Mordon stopped, seeming to remember that I'd asked for silence. I prompted him, “No, go on. I don't know the whole song.”

Mordon raised an eyebrow.

I explained, “I don't know if you can hear it, but the root sings. Don't give me that look, it's embarrassing enough to admit in solitude. Just sing. Good grief.”

My cheeks were on fire, and they burned more when he noticed.

Mordon went back to singing, his own cheeks with a bit of color. The mandrake resumed its song, and I hummed along, trying to remember. Where had I heard the song? Certainly not my mother; I knew all her songs well.

When the mandrake's voice was smooth and steady, I stirred it into the tincture, then added the remaining ingredients and cooked it until all I could hear was the potion. I tipped the pot and poured gradually, careful to not pour any chunks into the gold pot. The mandrake's song slowed as the potion cooled and became the color of milky tea.

Mordon peered at it, as though he could hear its voice dying, too. For the first time since contemplating the potion, I felt a twist in my gut. What if I had misread the instructions? What if I couldn't remember everything, if I had converted the measurements wrong, or Caerwyn's plants were different from the ones I knew by the same name? I had checked and double-checked according to the time period, but one could never be too careful.

The song was almost gone now.

The final instruction made me shake. Upon the mandrake's last breath, I was to drink the

potion, as much as I could in one swig.

Nothing did I hate more than consuming potions. So much could go wrong.

The mandrake's song grew softer and softer, weaker and slower. I bit my lip. Mordon was going to ask a question. I held up a finger to keep him silenced.

A final raspy gasp drifted off the surface of the potion, vibrating little ripples against the bowl. I tilted my head back and drank, the final line humming down my throat.

It reminded me of the first time I ever ate yogurt. The potion was a little thick, a little slimy, still runny, a bit sour, and a whole lot of weird. Never did the taste get to me—I was accustomed to drinking infusions and tisanes without sugar, but this was a special sort of texture that was entirely unappealing.

The pot made a clatter when I half-dropped it to the counter, my hand on my chest.

“Fera!” Mordon advanced, clearly alarmed.

I held out my hand and restrained myself from coughing. Coughing would lead to vomiting, and that would do me no good.

“I’m fine,” I said. My voice didn’t sound fine. It sounded like the mandrake’s last gasp. I dared to clear my throat, and this time my voice came out normal. “That just tastes nasty.”

“I didn’t know you were going to take it right now,” Mordon said. His eyes were dark, and he looked equally concerned and angry.

Perhaps I should have warned him. Ah, well. That’s what I got for assuming that he already knew the basics of mandrake brewing. I said, “That’s the way this potion is. Any time you drink that much mandrake, you don’t sit around and let it get stronger.”

Mordon’s brow shot up. “What do you mean ‘that much mandrake’? Are you sure this was a good idea?”

His outburst made me uncomfortable. I laughed. Couldn’t help it. “It isn’t a good idea. Anything including mandrake is never a good idea. It’s a desperate one.”

I staggered over to the chest and sat, taking slow breaths in through my nose and out through my mouth. Gain control. Don’t panic. Breathe in, breathe out. Settle the stomach. Clear the mind.

My throat felt like I had swallowed cotton balls. I coughed.

Warmth hazed through my body, spreading across my throat and out from my stomach. Reality became fuzzy as the heat touched my forehead, my fingers tingling.

“Fera,” Railey whispered, her fingers tickling my neck. My hairs rose. I swatted at her.

A girl in brown pigtails and a striped skirt sat in front of me, giving me a smile with a tooth

missing in the front. I was sitting on my favorite bedspread, purple with fairies, the one Mother hated but never said why.

Railey struck a match in the dark and whispered, "There's a bad spirit in here, Fera. Can you see it yet? I see it. Just over your shoulder. No, no, don't look. Don't look. Even if you did look all you would see is black. Look elsewhere, look everywhere, hurry, take the match."

I tried to take the light, but my arms were heavy, as though someone held them. I tried harder. The match started to sputter. Railey was talking again, but not to me.

"I see you. Yes, I see you, you ugly sunnagun. Think you smell flesh? Nah, just me. Bet I'm good 'nough for you, though, ain't I?"

Railey! I wanted to tell her to stop, to think. I couldn't speak. My throat was locked. I tried to yell, but all that came out was a whisper. My heart pounded, but I couldn't move.

"Look 'round you fool! I'm doing this for you. Look, look! I'm doin' this so you can see, so look!"

I opened my eyes. A set of wooden blocks, blue with yellow letters painted on them, scattered over a carpet. Sea green paint, peeling on the wall next to me. A leather tomb held open with a bone bookmark weeping ink. And then Railey's battle scream, a scuffle, and a yelp.

I tried to call out for her. I couldn't. All was dark.

Wheezing began. The distant jangle of goat bells. The scrape of claws on stairs. The stench. Decay and blood and ink. The scraping mixed with whimpering. Railey's whimpering.

I sat in the kitchen, tucked up on the counter, frozen in terror when the walking animation crawled up the last step and opened its mouth. It had Railey's pigtails, and her voice poured out of it. "Look 'round you fool! Look, look! At the walls, the walls, look!"

And I looked at the walls. Sea green and peeling, gouged with a knife, bleeding from the wounds. Moaning of a hundred voices filled my ears. I stared at the scars in the wall, at what had been done to them, and I couldn't move.

Hands held me. Hands on my ankles. Hands on my wrists. Hands on my head. Hard hands, stiff hands, thin and all bone. Children's hands, men's hands, women's hands. Fine and clean. Rough and filthy.

The walking animation stood before me, rasping decay into my face, oozing sludge from gashes in its abdomen. It gurgled. Saliva dripped down its tongue. Railey's voice whispered between its teeth, "Give in. Give in to the will. Let it go. Let it go or die, you fool. Let it go or die."

Voices wailed in my ears. My heart thudded in my chest. A claw touched my thigh and pain coursed through my veins. I jerked, yanking hard against the binding hands.

* * *

My nose stung where it met the floor. My heart echoed in my ears. Something moved behind me. I flipped onto my back, finally able to move, calling magic around me in a cushion so thick it made even my breathing hard.

A man stepped back, hands held outward. Soothing words came from him. Stock still, I waited. He made no move to advance on me. Black pepper, nutmeg, and musk stirred on the breeze. Familiar scents. My head reeled. I was lost, so lost.

Slate floors were beneath me, stealing away my heat. Dim light outlined Mordon standing in the doorway. It was Mordon, not the animation? Would he turn into it, the way Railey had?

I caught his scent again, then the oak of the chest and the distant song of mandrake. Was I in this world to stay or would my surroundings fade again? When would the nightmares weep forth from the walls?

Mandrake. The potion. Distantly, it all came back to me. My last morning in my home. Silverton, the antiques shop. Magic, feral magic. It seemed like a dream to me now.

Mandrake had a way of doing that. It made what was real seem bizarre and what was bizarre seem natural. I had been in this state before, I would emerge from it well enough. Knowing this, though, didn't make enduring the effects any easier.

Curling my knees to my chin, I heaved a breath which came out more like a sob. The heat drained from my body. Shivers shuddered through my body. Mordon dropped a blanket over my shoulders. I didn't say anything. He pressed a hot cup into my hand. I felt too sick to try it.

"Have a taste before it becomes cold," Mordon's tone was not soothing, but icy; he was angry, definitely angry.

For lack of anything else to do, I complied, and was surprised when a salty drink met my lips. Drake's brew. I blinked, supposing that meant that he had not called our healer in residence to make her tea.

"Thank you," I said.

"You can thank me by not ever doing something like that ever again."

Mordon was concerned? But why? He hardly knew me. This wasn't real. It couldn't be. I laughed, reveling in the fey giggle. "Why should it matter to you what I do in my free time? If it's too much for you to handle, I can go into it alone next time."

Iron manacles grasped my upper arms. Only when I focused my gaze did I see those weren't manacles at all, but Mordon's hands. Which was the real world, which was the dream? A green flame bobbed in front of me, first to one side then the other. I blinked in confusion when it split into three.

"You are still under its influence." Mordon sounded disgusted, as though I had taken mandrake for the fun of it. I didn't care.

“Most certainly.” I giggled.

“How long?”

Was he going to be one of those people? Mordon must have never been around a potion-brewer. My giggle faded into an annoyed eye-roll. I tried to answer him seriously.

“Dunno. Spell didn't say. But I guess it would last for about six hours? The most I ever done was way back when when I was still going to healers a lot and once they gave me a dose double that and that lasted for nine hours, and I was seeing hiccuping pink elephants and floating islands and it wasn't until years later that Leazar told me he thought I was fun to mess with and he was showing me surrealist paintings from some book and playing all these cartoons which only make sense if you're high on drugs anyway. Speaking of, do you got any a that stuff that you can write on so spells won't actually happen? I think I got some stuff to draw and things.”

Mordon raised an eyebrow at me. He said, slowly, “You are speaking of disenchanted parchment. Yes, I do, but no, I don't think you need that in your current state. You'd be just as likely to draw scribbles as anything of use. Nor am I willing to go downstairs to get it. And I'm not willing to leave you alone. Who is Leazar?”

His eyebrows moved in the most strange way. First down so his face was all wrinkles, then up to meet his hairline, then all over his forehead in diagonals.

I said, “My brother. Older brother. He's a peacekeeper.”

“Good. Ironical given his teasing, but good. I much prefer you this way than drooling and screaming,” Mordon said.

“I don't drool.” I yawned, pulled Mordon to sit next to me, then put my head on his shoulder and snuggled under his arm. It felt good to be warm.

* * *

The steady pattering of rain on a glass roof roused me. It was still dark, but there was an early morning light filtering in through the leaves of houseplants. Outside, a bird and a squirrel screamed threats at one another.

It felt like I had glue for tears. My entire body ached. I lifted my head, and was rewarded with a skull-splitting pain over my temples.

Groaning, I pushed my face into my pillow. It shifted and yawned, moving in a stretch.

“Morning, Miss Cling,” Mordon said.

What had him here, and why was I curled up on his chest? Thank goodness my hands hadn't wandered anywhere awkward during sleep.

Despite the aches, I pushed myself up on my elbows and blinked until I could focus. Mordon

sat up, the movement dizzying. I squeezed my eyes shut again and rubbed them. "What do you mean by Miss Cling?"

"You took hold and wouldn't let go."

"You're stronger. You could get free," I said, easing myself into a sitting position.

"Didn't have the heart," Mordon said. He winked at me.

I ran my fingers through my hair, and found it tangled beyond recognition. Wincing, I pulled back and started finger combing it out at the ends. "Honestly I wasn't sure you were even here. Things got pretty strange."

"Yes they did," Mordon said. "But you are being yourself again, much to my relief."

Then Mordon jumped to his feet and ran into the kitchen. Perhaps neither one literally, but at the pace my brain was working at, normal speed seemed like racing. A paper slid under my nose and I squinted at it. "What is this?"

"Disenchanted parchment. You asked for some. It seemed like the most reasonable thing you told me all of last evening," Mordon called from the kitchen.

How did he move so fast? I must really be feeling like crap. I stared at the paper and rubbed my eyes. I remembered, gradually, the events of what was apparently last evening.

Previous encounters with potions made it quicker to regain my senses and to sort out the truth from the ramblings of the subconscious mind. It was mornings like these that had started my journals. I looked around for *Skills of the Thaumaturge*.

The dark crept in on me. I shuddered and eyed a shadow with suspicion. "What time is it?"

"Five-thirty," Mordon said. There was the hiss of water in the sink. That shut off, replaced by the clanking of pots and a click as he turned on the stove.

"What did I tell you?" I asked. Suddenly I remembered how Railey had stood behind me and transformed into the animation. I twisted, agony ripping down my back, and heaved a breath of relief to see it was Mordon drying his hands on a towel.

"A lot of very colorful things. Pink elephants. Talking lilacs. Dancing squirrels having tea with mice. And throughout this whole narration, you kept on talking about the walls bleeding." There was a question in this statement, and it jarred a memory.

"No," I said. "Not bleeding. Painted. Symbols painted on the walls, in such a hurry they didn't try to stop the drips. Do you have a pen?"

Mordon pointed to the ground next to me. A quill rested there, I picked it up. A shiver ran down my back when I put the tip to the parchment and envisioned the first symbol.

It was a memory, I reminded myself, a memory and nothing more. It can't hurt me. And I can't unknowingly cast it now, not on this parchment.

Feeling sick nonetheless, I pushed my memory and I forced my hand to move. I had thought I would feel some sense of accomplishment now that I had a fragment of memory back, now that I had tangible evidence of what had happened. But I did not feel accomplished. Merely tired. Not to mention confused. And very, very guilty.

No matter what had truly happened, I knew that Railey had met a terrible end trying to protect me. Again. And this time, I didn't even have the goodness to remember her sacrifice. I gave the paper to Mordon, who frowned at it. "This is something for Barnes."

I nodded and followed him out, but I seemed to have fallen into a trance, trapped in memories and the after-effects of mandrake. While Leif and Barnes examined book after book following the symbols, I sat on the couch and brooded. I remembered that night when she was at my window. I remembered her voice, the tapping on my bedroom window. I remembered digging. I remembered her scream and a struggle. I remembered her death.

I had sworn that never again would I feel so helpless, so useless, so unprepared. Yet here I was again. I turned back to my book, determined, even as I found nothing.

Chapter Sixteen

Five Reasons a Mandrake Potion Has Different Results Than Intended

by Feraline Swift

It's easy to get a mandrake potion wrong. For the sake of this article, I'm not discussing the numerous ways to kill yourself by attempting a potion. Yes, *Skills*, we can do that article later. This focuses on when the aftermath of a potion is not what was anticipated. We'll start with the obvious.

1. You did not use *Mandragora venenificii* as opposed to any of the other species in the *Mandragora* genus. If you made this mistake and are still alive to read this, I want all your lucky stars.
2. The plant was drawn from the earth dead. You need a plant that was screaming bloody murder to the moon and back. Otherwise the magic has already been transferred to the seeds (if the plant was too old) or it seeped away into the soil (if the plant was maimed or removed too slowly). Should you get one of these plants from a vendor, do not return to that vendor. Ever.
3. You let the potion sit around after it was made. Mandrake potions age. Typically they get stronger with time. Sometimes, they interact with other ingredients to change the properties of the mandrake. Follow the times carefully. For instance if the recipe calls for 10 minutes in a copper kettle followed by 12 weeks in a brandywine barrel, remove the potion from the barrel exactly 12 weeks later.
4. You did not follow the instructions exactly perfectly. This is another good way to get yourself killed, by the way. But if you happen to have fudged the potion *just a little bit*, know that it may have changed the outcome of the potion. Keep record of these variations and what you notice. You never know when you'll want to repeat a mistake.
5. You substituted one plant for another without knowing all its active chemical compounds. Herbs have chemistry behind them. It is possible to find a chemical match, but you'll need a good book to list the properties of the plant in question in order to find the correct substitute.
6. You had false ideas of what the potion would do. Sometimes, names of potions are misleading. Look into the history of the potion to make sure that that word means what you think it means.
7. You're stressed. Stress releases cortisol and other stuff into your body. This influences how your body absorbs things like blood sugars. Prolonged stress also does other negative stuff that I frankly am not medically-minded enough to really know. In the short term, stress

isn't that terrible. In the long term, not so great. And when your body isn't doing so great to start with, that makes it hard for it to accept potions. Cut out the stressors and see if the end results work out.

... and that's it. This is probably not what you wanted to hear, but it's true. You're in charge of how the potion turns out, except in the instance of receiving a dead plant. That is one thing you can't know until it's too late. Sort out what went wrong, and try again.

So, what went wrong with mine? That was the question I mulled over while I stared at the article and made a few minor revisions. Part of the advantage of being a novice was constantly checking everything. Part of the disadvantage of not being a novice was thinking you knew it all when you didn't. I didn't know if I'd been too cocky or what.

"Mordon, what do you think?" I asked, interrupting his cooking. Tonight was eggs, baked beans, buttered mushroom caps, and fat rounds of black pudding. It didn't necessarily look the best, but I was hungry and it smelled tasty. It was also the first meal in my new mint-green kitchen. Nothing made this house feel homey quite like its first meal.

"Hmm?" Mordon asked, brought out of his own thoughts.

I showed him the article.

He raised a brow at me. "You could elaborate more on the conclusion."

"That's not what I meant."

"Your potion worked."

"I guess."

"In my humble opinion? You were stressed about a healer's appointment, got yourself killed and brought back to life, tormented your neighbors on a day-and-night terror spree, won out against feral magic, had an attempt on your life, and have recently relocated into a new life and culture."

I scoffed. "You think I'm stressed."

"I smell it on you."

Wait, what? Setting the book down, I considered him afresh. "You can *smell* stress?"

"Naturally."

"No. Really?"

A smile tugged on one corner of his mouth. "It is a physical state. Many animals can scent it, too."

"So ... you can smell other emotions, too?"

“Euphoria, fear, excitement. And other things.”

“What other things?”

A full smile spread across his face. His eyes flickered down my body, a quick dart, fast enough to not be rude yet clear enough to bring the heat to my cheeks.

“Uhhh, I ... umm.” I felt like I'd gotten my hand caught in the cookie jar.

Mordon plated the food without spilling anything anywhere. Since we didn't have a place to sit still, we stood with the plates on the counter and the stove between us. He said, “It is considered polite to not mention moods unless a person's behavior is out of line.”

While that eased a bit of my tension, I still felt a bit rankled.

The black pudding was different. Sort of spongy. I simultaneously didn't like it and craved it.

Mordon said, “I did not intend to make you feel uncomfortable.”

“It's not exactly that.”

“I would appreciate understanding why you are withdrawn.”

Rubbing the back of my neck, I thought about what I felt and why. It wasn't that he knew I *liked* him in that way, it was that I didn't know if he returned the affection or merely tolerated mine. How I stated my predicament was like this, “I don't have the same advantage you do. With the smelling thing.”

“That would be inconvenient.”

Predicament wrongly worded. How did I get my answer without sacrificing all my pride? I dove back into my food instead of trying again. We finished the rest of our meal in silence.

I did the dishes. He lingered near at hand, drying everything, putting it away into incredibly barren cabinets. I realized: he'd never stopped smiling.

“You're toying with me!”

“Am I?”

I crossed my arms, propping my foot against the wall in defiance. “Yes. If you aren't interested in me, say so. It's fine.”

He placed his arm on the wall beside my head, leaning so close I could smell the faint scent of old books and dust on his clothes. My breath caught. Slowly, he took a blonde strand of my loose hair and let his fingers slide down it. It tickled my scalp. I shivered.

He spoke in a low voice, taking his time to form each word, punctuating it like poetry. “I find you very interesting. Ever since you accused me of putting a sleep spell on you, I have been wondering how that mind of yours works. What you would think of my favorite books. Your opinion on offspring. What your dreams are. What you want your average day to be in ten

years. In short, I have spent days wondering if your life goals work with or against mine."

"And men are supposed to be the sex that thinks below the belt," I said, blushing harder than I'd ever blushed before.

"I have have too many responsibilities to afford that luxury. Do you have answers for me or am I to be kept guessing?"

"You asked it all at once."

He cocked his head to the side. "Your life dream then."

"Not worrying about a roof overhead and keeping food in the house would be a great start."

Mordon laughed, warming me from the inside out. "Let's take this from another angle. Say you're old and dying. If your life doesn't change from now on, what would you regret?"

A list of things sprung to mind, surprising me. "Not settling down and having a family, not going out and exploring the world, not passing on all the potions Mother taught me. Not doing a vegetable garden every summer. Not finding a place I belong and people to share it with." I licked my lips, my heart beating wildly at the soft lines around his mouth. Barely breathing, I asked, "Does that work?"

"Yes." He was so close, that one word made all the tiny hairs on my neck stand up. "That works."

"Does it work with you?"

His nose brushed against the lobe of my ear as he whispered, "It may."

I tilted my head, not sure if we were going to kiss, thinking we might.

"*Fera!*"

I jumped. Mordon did, too.

Lilly barged into the house, clattering the sliding glass doors in her enthusiasm. She stopped at the door, quieting the noise, still shouting, "I saw Griff meet with Gregor Cole!"

And she had to tell me now?

Mordon burst out laughing and stepped away, the merriness in his eyes clearly saying, *you should see the look on your face*.

I did not find it so amusing.

She continued, still excited but not as loud, "The others are showing up in a few minutes. I just had to tell you first." Lilly saw my scowl and glanced at Mordon. "I wasn't interrupting?"

Mordon shook his head. "We just finished talking."

"Oh, good. I hate it when you're in the middle of something important and someone else

barges in.”

* * *

It wasn't long before the entire coven gathered in my sun room.

“What, what's all this about?” I asked. “Griff and Cole and five people missing? I hope you can explain it better than Lilly did.”

“Quickest answer first,” Leif said. “Lilly witnessed Cole and Griff argue. After this, Griff concealed something in a locker. Who knows what it was, though.”

I exchanged glances with Mordon, who was the only other person comfortable sitting on the floor. He stroked his chin, brow furrowed, seeming confused to not have a bear to touch before repeating the process over again. His eyes lost focus.

Lilly had talked about what she'd heard from the other two, but it hadn't made any sense while my mind was on the conversation with Mordon. Now that I'd wrapped my hear around the change in topic, things were starting to snap together.

“Am I right to assume that our good Constable here turned up some missing cleansers?” I asked. “That's what it sounds like I'm hearing. And what's with the interest in them, anyway?”

“Genuine bogey busters have a degree of magical talent, but not enough to be a threat to a full-fledged sorcerer. Lack of paper trail also makes them easy targets. There is nothing in the Constabulary records, but they only serve the sorcerers not the lamb population as well. I spoke with Cole's personal assistant. She revealed matters in a different light. In addition to Meredith Cole, Gregor's wife, there have been five house cleansers hired to the Cole residence. Zoe Harper, age fifty-two, from Clear Springs. Jim Davis, age thirty-six, from Desert View. Ethan Stagg, age sixty-eight, from Goblin Valley. Jasona Hill, age forty-four, from Redfish Lake. And Feraline Swift, age twenty—”

“—something. That's not important. Thank you.”

Mordon cocked his head, suddenly brought out of his thoughts. “Is it on the upside or downside of twenty-five?”

“It doesn't matter, alright? I'm not a kid, but the second people know I'm under thirty, that's all I hear about.”

“That is a downside,” Barnes said.

Mordon's brow furrowed. “You're under twenty-five?”

“Barnes!”

“Man's got a right to know.”

“Yeah, if I'm under eighteen, which I'm not. It's hard to be taken seriously in my line of work unless you look experienced and sagely.”

Mordon raised a brow. “Sagely?”

“For bogey busting, anyone young is assumed to be out for a couple of cheap thrills. Fun midnight storytelling, not work. And for potions, who wants someone new to the career when their health is on the line?”

Barnes twitched his mustache. “She has a point.”

“Everyone I saw on the potions deck had daughters or granddaughters my age. It's hard to be established before then.”

Leif held up a finger. “Back to the subject, please. Barnes, the missing people?”

“The assistant did not call them missing. The term was *formerly hired*. But I checked with Sheriff Bruder and he confirmed that no one has heard or seen of these people since.”

Sheriffs navigated the murky water between the police and the Constables. They tended to be in rural areas, and there were very few of them. Being both from the murky water and a rural area, I happened to know Sheriff Bruder. I sighed.

“What did Sam want to know?”

Mordon raised a brow. “Sam?”

“Sheriff Samuel J. Bruder, presently the only hired law enforcement from Bald Eagle Ridge to Goblin Valley. He's not a very cordial fellow. And he never gets back to you unless it is in his immediate best interest. So what did he want?”

Barnes shifted his weight into a stronger position and crossed his arms. “I promised him five IOU's on your behalf.”

My jaw dropped. “Five?”

“One for each name.”

“Fantastic. He's going to use them all at once here in a few months when he's in a tight spot, you know. Mark my words. We'll all regret this.”

“It won't be that bad.”

“Yes, it will. He'll use them when he's in such a bad place that no one else will come near him with a ten foot pole.”

“He was glad to know you were safe.”

“I'll bet. He's always glad to keep useful people in his pocket.”

Mordon cocked his head, intrigued, but I wasn't interested in going down that rabbit hole. I'd get myself so worked up that I wouldn't break free from the frustration for days. All I said was, "Some things are better left in the past. You'll hear the whole deal when he cashes in on those IOU's."

Barnes saw I wasn't going to speak again. "The fact remains that the Cole residence was the last place any of these people were seen alive. With the exception of you."

Lilly paced back and forth, wondering aloud, "Why? What does he want with a few ghost chasers?"

Leif said, "I heard rumors that Gregor Cole has an item that stores individual lives. It's an access point into the after life. And that someone can exchange one life for another. In short, that you can bring a person back from the dead."

Mordon frowned. "Is this item a vase?"

"They did not say."

"If it is what I think that it is, then I know that is not how the 'item' operates."

Leif shifted restlessly. "They seem to believe they can trade lives across Death, and that some people's lives cost more to exchange than others."

I felt a stone sink in my stomach. Slowly, I asked Mordon, "How did you get the Lady of the Vase?"

A flash of surprise crossed his face. "It was a trade for an Earhart compass much like yours."

"Did you know what the vase was?"

"If I had, I would not have agreed to the transaction."

I nodded, considering how Mordon must have felt once he had finished up his research on the vase only to find out that he was in charge of a mobile evil-wizard prison. "And now you think it's your responsibility."

He lifted a shoulder.

Lilly said, "I feel like I'm missing something."

Mordon said, "We need to get it back. Or at least out of Griff's hands. That is what is important."

Interesting that he didn't want to tell everyone the full story behind the Lady of the Vase. He'd had no trouble with writing it down in the antiquities book. He must have his reasons. Maybe he thought it was all a strange bit of lore, not fact with solid sources.

"So," I said, "we have a supposedly soul-trading item that Griff may have stolen from Mordon and now Cole is harassing Griff, who proceeds to hide something in the market. Think it's

connected?”

“Seems likely,” Leif said. “Do you have an idea of how?”

I shook my head. “Not exactly. I think we first need to find out what Griff doesn't want Cole to have.”

Lilly said, “He'll bolt if he sees Barnes, Leif, or me. And Mordon draws too much attention.”

“Easy solution. I'll do it. All we have to do is find a way to let me inside without anyone freaking out about feral magic.”

Chapter Seventeen

Oddly enough, I was the only one amongst us eagerly anticipating the coming day. My priorities, as it was stressed on all too many occasions, were to keep a low profile and to find out what Griff was hiding in his box. A confrontation with the gryphon himself was to be avoided. Me being me, I rather wished I could pin him down by his lion tail and get him talking. The next morning, I suspected I'd have to settle for answers from Mordon, however.

Mordon was waiting for me, reading a paper and drinking some brew. He had a second cup for me. With a glance at the clock, I asked, "Aren't we opening today?"

"Today's the day for the street vendors to have a fair. I have a prior commitment, so Lilly has offered to take you around the market today."

"What are you hiding?"

Mordon scowled. "What makes you think I'm hiding anything?"

I looked at the shadows beneath his eyes, the way he held his jaw, and the dull exhaustion in his eyes. He'd go quiet if I pressed the matter. It was his choice if he wanted to trust me, and if he didn't make the decision to do so soon, I would pretend to not be interested until I had the opportunity to scout out the shop. So I smiled and said, "You just look tired, that's all."

"Haven't had the brew yet."

I handed it to him and said, "Bottoms up, then. You need a bit of perk."

When he finished it, he did look healthier, but still as though something were bothering him. I crossed my arms. "Is there something you would like to talk about?"

He gave me a sour expression over the top of a cardboard box filled with books. "No."

I didn't move out of his way, and he had to brush my legs to get by me in the narrow aisle.

"You aren't going to be one of those men who expects me to read your mind, are you?"

He shot me a peevish glare, the way children did when their parents nagged at them.

At another time I might have backed down, but I only settled in more. I started to trail him.

"Because that isn't going to work. See, you and I were raised different. If you do something to offend me, I'm going to tell you about it as plainly as I can. I expect the same from you."

He set the box down. The jewels on his fingers caught light as he ran his hand through his hair and sighed. "Sometimes, I just need my shop to myself."

"That's all?"

"That's all."

I studied him, an unexplained doubt nudging at me. After a minute of observing, I saw a

leather bound book hidden beneath a stack of newer potion recipe books, then I saw candles lying in a box with a knife and chalk.

I lifted up my hand and backed off. "Alright. If you want some quiet time, then I will give it to you. You just have to say so. I'll find Lilly or Barnes."

"I just sent for Lilly," Mordon said. "She'll be here any minute. She's been dying to take you shopping."

I arched a brow and took his cup of brew, sipping at it and thinking that Mordon's habits were rubbing off on me, for better or for worse. I asked, "And what about the whole 'quarantine' thing?"

"It's a holiday. There will be so many people everywhere today. You won't be noticed unless you go out of your way to draw attention. Which you won't."

"Of course not."

I hoped I wasn't lying again.

From the way Mordon stared at me, he hoped so, too.

What was he planning, and why did he want me gone?

The wainscoting door opened and Lilly appeared, dressed up and positively glowing. She took my hand and said, "Come on. Let's get you out of here for a bit."

As we left, I waved at Mordon, but he was already going back to work, going in the direction of the spell book. I tried to hang back, but Lilly's fine fingers dug into my arm in her excitement.

Lilly flung the arched door open and swept her arm out to encompass the area.

"I love the market," she said, smiling at me so broadly that I had to grin back at her or feel rude. Nevertheless, I resisted the urge to open the door again after she closed it, then I realized I was faced with a transformed Merlyn's Market. Gone was the lazy boardwalks, and in its place was an active beehive.

Voices reached me first: singsong calls of goods for sale, conversational chatter, musicians playing in the distance, rising and falling as naturally as a busy day. I smelled cooked meats on the breeze, roasted and fried strips of tender meat and shellfish, as well as spicy and woodsy ingredients.

Lilly took me by the elbow again and pressed our way through the throngs of people. I would have been either lost or completely stuck without her guidance, so I clung as close to her as I dared. When we stopped at a coffee shop, I felt relieved to be able to get my bearings. The potions deck was just above us.

Lilly led the way to an ice cream cart. I automatically asked for cone with bubblegum ice

cream, stopping short before I picked out a flavor for myself and watching mutely as the vendor scooped extra on top with a wink at Lilly. Lilly got hazelnut chocolate banana.

We sat on the deck, Lilly's legs dangling off the edge. I ate the ice cream at the speed of melting. Lilly poked me in the shoulder. "What's with the long face? Feeling guilty for ice cream first thing in the morning? It's got a waffle cone. That's sort of breakfast."

My teeth hit a bit of gum, and I shuffled it around before it could thaw and become chewy. I lifted the blue and pink heap in the air. "Not that. It's...after a case, particularly a freaky one, we'd go get ice cream together. I always put Railey's order in first because she always wanted the same thing: bubblegum."

Lilly's face drained and she said, "Oh, Fera. I'm sorry. If you want something else..."

"No."

As I ate, Lilly kept giving me sympathetic glances, and I felt guilty. Who knew what had happened to Railey?

Before I could fall into brooding, I heard a flute coming from a deck below, the sound fluttering around me, piercing through the chatter and clamor of market life, bringing children out from their places next to their adults and begging to "go see it". Intrigued, I peered over the edge.

There was a stage assembled about ten feet long and about as high, the props were on a small scale, and I saw an assortment of puppets hanging up by their strings. I could have sworn I saw one puppet bop a gryphon puppet on the nose, but it happened so quickly I couldn't be certain.

Music from a flute of kinds still wound its way through the market, rounding up children and parents and a good chunk of adults who had no reason to be there other than to see the puppet show.

"What's this?" I asked Lilly.

"It's a new project we've been working on to help the races to understand each other, promote commerce, discourage squabbling and warfare. There's a different spokesperson for each race, and they present an aspect of their history and culture. Yesterday we had a traditional mermaid harvest feast. It was...very seafoody."

Lilly hated everything seafood. I snorted when I tried to contain a burst of laughter imagining her reaction to a feast of fish. "As a Market Judge, I'll bet you had to partake."

Her beautiful, wide eyes narrowed to slits at my tone. "I had a seaweed salad."

"I take it, you are obligated to attend this show, too?"

She lost her sour expression. "Technically. But these shows are quite good and a large attraction."

The immediate area about the stage was already packed, so Lilly hailed a carpet for us. I stared at it. Lilly smiled. "I thought you'd be over your heights thing by now."

"I am," I snarled and gingerly collapsed onto the carpet next to her. Lilly gave me a smug, disagreeing smirk and guided the carpet into a position close to the front, but behind children. Once I saw we were only eight or so feet off the deck below, I released my death grip on the carpet and gazed around at nothing in particular.

"You must be mortified when you have to fly," mused Lilly when the flute had died down to let the crowd settle.

"Not at all."

"Yet you can hardly climb a ladder. Go figure."

"Look," I said. "Things that were supposed to fly have wings. Birds have wings; dragons have wings; planes have wings. Carpets do not have wings. End of story."

Lilly looked like she was going to object, possibly cite incidents of levitation or whatnot, but she pointed to a pebble stopping in front of the set. Too late, I realized that helicopters had blades and not wings, but I had never been fond of them so my point still stood.

"It's starting!" Lilly said.

Fog drifted up from it, expanding and soon filling the set.

A voice boomed from the mists, echoing off the listening walls and walkways, engulfing me in deep, rhythmic words that had all the charm of a circus announcer introducing the audience to the three rings.

"'Let who you are reflect in all you do, and you will have not one regret of your life.' Such is a drake's proverb, and today is a tale about two individuals of opposite walks of life who possibly were the foundation for this proverb. While what they were held them apart, who they were founded a new civilization, a new culture, and a new hope. Without further ado, I present The Farmer and The Widow."

The mists receded to show a puppet man hoeing a small garden, a straw-thatched roof painted behind him with a couple of small fields with livestock painted on them; the background moved with bobbing sheep heads, two frolicking calves, and even a cat that walked along the rock fence. The narrator's voice ebbed over the scene.

"At a time when the dragons and the humans had nearly killed each other completely, there was a farmer who had lost all his family to the war against the dragons. He did not hate them, though he was afraid. His family had a bargain with a local dragon, promising to deliver every lame or old or ill creature to the bottom of the mountain. In return, the dragon would not take any healthy livestock from the farm."

The farmer puppet approached one of the cows painted on the background, and then guided

it out of the painting and onto the road. The cow puppet walked with a heavy limp and appeared very skinny and frail. They walked up a trail winding past trees and over a creek, then they stopped at a pasture where the mountain started climbing.

The cow remained in the pasture, and the farmer walked back to his house. Lights dimmed, and a spotlight shone on the cow like a moonlit night. Then it brightened again, and the farmer made his way back up to the cow.

"But the next day, the cow was still there, and same with the day after, and the day after that. The farmer's reasons are not explained, but he decided to walk the cow up the mountain to the dragon's lair. Perhaps he was lonely. Perhaps he was concerned something had happened to his dragon, and he would have to make a deal with a new one. Perhaps he was going to see if the dragon had moved on."

The puppets walked into the backdrop, and the it became a mountain that emerged from the painting and spilled out, the foothills ending at the toes of the first row of children, who played with the miniature boulders and trees carefully.

The cow and farmer stumbled and rested their way up the mountain, coming at last to the mouth of a cave. The side of the mountain became invisible, and the crowd could see the caverns and the curled up form of a dragon deep in the cave. A nervous farmer walked into the darkness, and his lame cow limped after him.

"Dragon? Dragon? I have a cow for you," the farmer called, his voice echoing as though he were in a cold, hollow cave. "You haven't come to get her in days, and she's very close to dying."

The dragon puppet lifted her head, but listlessly, as though she did not care. "I am here," she said, her voice weak and cloudy.

The farmer came the rest of the way, he and his cow kicking rocks and pebbles around, dull echoes coming from them. When he saw the dragon, he held still, and his cow fell over.

"Thank you, farmer," she said, but did not get up.

"What is wrong, dragon?"

"My mate was murdered by those who seek to kill all dragons," she said. "It has been quite some time since I've eaten."

"Then, let us eat, for my cow has just died."

The narrator's voice cut in as the two puppets appeared enraptured in lively conversation.

"And for his bravery and kindness, the dragon gave him a ring from her hoard, which he used to buy a fatted calf for a meal the next month, and so their relationship grew, each one caring for the other, talking and dining. It is not said how many months this occurred, but it was all too soon when others took notice of their peculiar behavior."

The lights dimmed and there were two spotlights, one on the cottage with the farmer, one on the lip of the cave with the dragon. There was a mob of red-faced human puppets wielding swords made from wood and painted silver. One had chain mail armor that looked like it was made from a jewellery making kit, but the children were very enchanted by it.

"We are here to end the war!" the one in chain mail roared, a very loud voice for such a small puppet, "Do you know of any dragon lairs nearby?"

"No," said the farmer.

"Have you had any stock go missing?"

"None but the hens the foxes take."

The conversation switched over to the dragon's lair, where two strange dragons were talking to the widow.

"We are here to ask permission to slay humans in your territory, Madame," said one.

"No," she said.

The two looked at each other, then said, "Asking you is a formality. Will you help us locate humans, or return to your lair?"

"I will not allow you to harm them," she said.

One of the dragons lurched to attack her, and she fought back. A fierce puppet fight ensued, one in which there seemed to be no strings, no artificial material. They flew, they dove, their necks entwined and their mouths bit. The widow, being smaller and quicker, damaged her opponent's wing and his friend snarled, calling off the fight with the widow. He went over to his friend and growled back at her,

"I will be back very soon."

And then, he took hold of his fellow's bad side and the two flew away very awkwardly into the backdrop.

"I shall go to the high mountain where the eagle resides," she said to herself, "and have him change me into a woman so the farmer and I can escape all of this."

Back at the cottage, the farmer had a similar idea. "I have heard of a creature on the tall mountain who can perform miracles. Maybe he can change me into a dragon so I can help her when the hunters come—for they will come in time."

The narrator once again spoke as the two puppets ascended the mountain in the distance from opposite ends. "And so, they had no knowledge as to the other's predicament and plan, and they encountered the eagle at different times with their request. To each one, the eagle said, 'Yes, there are others who wish to transform as well, and you may join them. However, you must keep your eyes closed until the ceremony is over.' And they both agreed, neither

knowing the other was present. It is said that the others who wanted transformation were caterpillars.”

The backdrop expanded on the mountaintop, where it now became the sole mountain. A giant eagle the half the size of the dragon widow stood at the back, preening and gleaming in the moonlight as the others assembled.

A storm boiled in the clouds as the eagle started to glow, causing all the tiny caterpillars, the dragon, and the farmer to glow as well. There was a dragon body forming next to the farmer, and a woman's body next to the dragon. White, fluttering clusters formed on the ground about them.

“And the caterpillars gained a second body, a body with white wings. They cast off their worm-like bodies without a second thought, but it was at that moment a flash of lightning illuminated the room, our heroes opened their eyes and each recognized the other. Each tried to anticipate which way the other would go; dragon or human? But when the eagle's spell finished, neither had decided, and so they embraced both bodies.

“Ever since, each of us drakes begin as one body and when the time is right, our second form appears to us, and we have the choice to accept one or the other—or both, though it is not an easy task to accomplish.”

“Huh,” whispered Lilly, almost talking over the narrator's final comments. “I always wondered how that works.”

Before I could ask to stick around—I had a sudden urge to discuss something with the puppeteer, though I wasn't sure what my question was—Lilly yanked the carpet up to the next decks. “It'll be a madhouse for a good half hour if we don't beat it now.”

Nodding, I agreed past a lump in my throat. When she was navigating a tricky intersection of carpets, I leaned over the edge and watched longingly as the set faded and the puppets answered questions from a young and eager audience. Settling back into the middle of the carpet, I tried and failed to suppress a sigh.

“Something wrong?” Lilly asked when we came to a stop.

Bailing off the carpet and onto whatever walkway we were on, I shook my head and said, “No, nothing.”

Lilly was not convinced, and neither was I.

My mood was soon shaken off as Lilly led me through more sights of the market, I was distracted by the cobbler, the glassblower, the wildflowers, the raw foods deck, and the umbrella merchant. We had moved on to see the man who sold warding stones by the time Mordon decided to join us.

We saw a musical instrument vendor and Mordon all too cheerfully volunteered me to play a cello that played itself. Lilly laughed, then grew interested in something else and wandered

off. Mordon teased me about becoming flustered at the attention the crowd gave me, then grabbed my arm and pulled me somewhere.

After a bit of weaving between crowds, I demanded, "Where are we going?"

We slipped a ways from the prying eyes, then I stepped in front of him and jabbed him in the chest. Mordon chuckled, and I worked hard to keep his smile from being contagious.

"Can we find some place to talk?" I said sternly at first, then my voice deteriorated into of a laugh. I coughed and straightened up. I wanted to ask him about what he was doing that was so secretive. Though I could and would find out on my own, I wanted him to tell me.

Mordon said, "We can go back home to talk. It's getting late."

I had to agree with this. "Why doesn't it appear to have any time change here? The light is the same as when we entered."

Mordon led the way and was at the start of explaining all the doors and different time zones and the wizards who generated the original spells when a voice cut us off.

"Mordon!"

We turned. Lilly was heaving and waving her arms, diving down at us from a red carpet. I glanced at Mordon's face, wondering what was going on. His mouth was drawn thin and his pupils were wavering between human and dragon.

"Mordon," she called again. "Intruder breaking through our boundaries up high! Must go now!"

My heart dropped. They wouldn't want me around. I tried to hide it with a smile and a shrug; after all, I wasn't supposed to draw attention. I said to Mordon, "Off with you, then."

Mordon pointed his emerald jewelled-finger and let it tap the tip of my nose. "Stay here with the vendors. I won't have harm come to you. I will return as soon as I can—and this time, I mean to answer your questions."

I mutely nodded. He stepped on the carpet. I watched as the two of them hunkered low and the carpet dodged other carpets, disappearing from sight around a deck.

I held one elbow as I watched the carpet race around a deck above me. Periodically I saw flashes of red in the far distance. Word spread quick here, and vendors were packing their most valued wares, shoving them roughly into boxes that never seemed to fill. Lesser items tumbled on the ground and, unless the vendor had a child to help, they let those goods lie. A few people hoisting canes or staffs or wands got on carpets. They swept up above all the other decks, going to join in the fray.

I walked towards the huddling vendors.

I heard a crash echo and debris cascaded past me.

I jittered in place, edging closer to the vendors. They kept retreating, carpets flying out of the

decks like a buzzing swarm. I was soon abandoned, surrounded by barren boxes and scattered goods.

A burst of wind shoved me to the ground, bruising my knee. Was my own magic pushing me around? Alarmed, I started to sit up. A carpet whizzed over my head. One of the tassels caught on my bun, yanking hair from scalp. I snatched my bun, relieved to find it loose but in place, having acquired a tassel for decoration. Laying low, I kept as still until carpets stopped brushing my head.

Glancing around, I saw that the stream of carpets had at least paused. I crawled forward, not sure where to go but knowing I should move. A wailing noise drew my attention, something I had never heard before. I peered over the edge and saw a creature flying below.

The creature was as graceful as she was unusual. Her face was fox-shaped, teal and purple markings about her head and eyes, white fur on her throat, peacock feathers making up a crown on her head. Her slender wings banked and she angled up to buzz me. Sweeping tail feathers brushed my skin as I ducked.

Turning her head at the discarded merchandise and stray trinkets, she settled down not far from me. She walked towards a wall of lock boxes. I had seen merchants use them to store their personal affects in, sometimes a change of clothing. What did the creature want with that? In any case, it was stealing if she was after something.

I fumbled with a black rock with a letter carved in it. While trying to puzzle out what it did and keep an eye on the creature, I dropped the rock. It bounced twice and came to a rest in the center of the walkway. It lay still for a few seconds, then light shot from the letter and fireworks crackled in the air. The creature shrieked and changed her path in a big circle around it.

I looked at symbols marking the stones. There seemed to be six or so different spells, and they were helpfully color coordinated. Tossing one of each in a different direction, I singled out the fireworks and put them in my pocket, then cast all of the fogs and mists across the walkway. Within seconds, the entire area was filled with rolling clouds; I reached out to my magic just enough to keep the drafts at bay so they wouldn't take away my cover.

I felt her dive through the air. The first two times she missed the walkway by inches, but the third time she careened into an overturned cart then rammed into a wall. She shook herself.

The creature gave a final shriek of frustration, then forgot about me and started to peck at the wall, her mouth striking wooden storage boxes that were sunk into the stone.

"What's it looking for?" I asked myself. Mists and green and purple smoke filled the walkways and floated over the open space, changing color from the gray and white clouds they used to be. I hoped this did not signify that the enchantment was ending. I frowned and snatched a pole, feeling the ground in front of me to make sure I did not step off the side.

I waved a purple puff from my face and caught a glimpse of a peacock crown. The creature

had located an individual box and began to tear into it. A staff fell from above, clattering near her. She raised her crown, leaned a long neck forward, and sniffed, taking several steps away from her target to investigate the mysterious staff. I saw past her to the mark on the box, a jagged “G” painted on the box's brass plaque. Griff's logo.

What did Griff have in his storage box that the creature—or rather, that whoever controlled it—wanted so badly? I was more convinced by the second that she should not have whatever she was after. Pocketing several more stones I hoped to be fireworks or other startling images, I advanced to the wall slowly and quietly. I tapped the wall, felt around with my hands, and was rewarded with finding Griff's box. It was locked. The creature had not done much to damage it yet.

A head the size of my body crashed into the stone wall me, casting away the green smoke I had been hiding behind. I stared for an instant into clouded eyes, then saw a collar disguised by her feathers. Pouncing on the tail end of the rope collar, I started untying the knots. Between grasping her feathers and hopping to stay with her thrashing body, I undid the first knot. She swung her head and rammed me into the stone wall.

Gasping for breath, I fumbled in my pocket. She pressed me harder. Finding a few round stones, I weakly cast them against her shoulders. She quivered her skin, and the stones tumbled to the ground. My ribs were giving beneath the weight of her crushing skull. I could no longer draw a breath, and my lunged burned.

The stones shot up in screams, shooting little bees into the air. They buzzed around until they gave a *pow* and exploded. The creature swirled to meet this new threat, several feathers already flaming with foul-smelling smoke. I put my invisibility ring on and stayed still, trying to catch my breath. I rubbed my citrine illusion ring and pointed to a place down the walk. I wasn't sure what played back on it—my eyes were closed as I tried to not cough or allow tears to come, but the illusion seemed to work.

I felt a rustle of wind against my skin as she pounced on the image; I covered my ring before she could reach it. The illusion died. She stood where it had been, snapping and darting her head through the mists in confusion.

I slunk closer to her, remembering an entrapment circle Mother taught me years ago. Touching the ground, I unleashed my fey circle around her. It visibly cut through the mist. She simply cocked her head and looked at it, realizing she should run only after it had her entirely encircled. She bopped her nose against it. It held. She gave a little shriek, struck it harder.

This was fey magic, and unlike other magic circles, it grew resilient when energy was used against it. Without magic to feed it, the circle would die soon. My hope had been that she would cast a spell or two, but she seemed to know to headbutt it. I tossed all my firework stones against its side to charge the circle with their magic—assuming it would work.

The stones lay unmoving for a few seconds. She rammed her head against the entrapment

circle. Cracks appeared. Then the first stone began sparking and the circle absorbed every spark that hit it. Life zipped through it in waves, getting stronger and stronger as more stones exploded in a variety of fireworks.

The mists were dissipating now, so I touched my magic again to bring the air through to let me see. I tried to place her from the book my mother used to read to me as a child, a book filled with fanciful mythical beasts and stunning illustrations. On this occasion, the artist hadn't needed to embellish nature.

She was a simurgh, a benevolent animal who preferred sunny meadows to stealing from busy marketplaces. They had about the same intelligence and social desires as elephants.

"You were probably the smartest creature they could catch. We need to keep you here until Mordon or Barnes comes. I hope they'll know what to do with you," I said to her, kneeling so I could scrounge for whatever trinkets were left. From the falling debris and yells coming from above, I could tell the fight upstairs wasn't an easy one.

So much for laying low and avoiding attention, I mused, but a quick check at my surroundings showed that no one had witnessed me performing magic. As long as my coven was the first one to find me and the simurgh, I had nothing to worry about.

I found a bag of charged stones—little ones, just enough energy for a very basic spell—when a fresh cascade of wood splinters, dust, and vegetables fell around me. I bumped into a booth, narrowly avoiding a falling watermelon.

A man's drawn-out voice slid through the air. "What are you doing here all alone? Thieving?"

My heart leaped into my throat. It was Gregor Cole.

Goosebumps rose to my skin, but I refused to be goaded, instead I smiled to him. "Cleaning up. Would you care to help?"

I did not trust his convenient timing, not so soon after the simurgh had been trapped and prevented from doing her duty.

"I don't believe you," Gregor said, his voice cold as ice and as smooth as an eel's belly. "You will come with me."

I bolted up taller, put a hand on my hip. I said, "I will do no such thing, but I will put in a good word with the judges if you volunteer to help."

"In stealing?"

A cold breeze rolled over my back; I advanced on the him. "I do not believe we have been formally introduced."

Even for a hardened dark sorcerer, it was hard for him to deny civility when he was faced with it. "No, and I do not wish it. I do not interact with creatures."

Creature? It seemed a bit harsh, but I played along. “Then you will not interfere with my duties further.”

“I am going to take you to the proper authorities. Please come with me.”

I recognized the smooth flow of words now, but I did a second look, then squinted my eyes. He sounded and acted very much like a vampire, but there was something strange about him, something very alive yet dead. I frowned and took an involuntary step backwards. “What are you?”

His eyes narrowed at me. “Impatient.”

Acting on instinct, I hurled the bag of charged stones at the circle. They shattered with pops of light. The circle absorbed their energy, growing smooth, elastic, and powerful.

“Insolent creature.” He raised his wand and muttered words, a red glow emanating from the wand tip. Though I felt a wind curl protectively about my body, I knew that whatever I did, this could not end well. Father’s advice came back to me, about how sometimes the best way out was a few choice words.

“Mordon is my guardian,” I said. Each word hanging crisp, snapping through the air as though I’d yelled it.

Gregor’s eyes darkened and he snarled. “What?”

“Did I mumble?”

“He has no ward, you liar.”

“I am his ward,” I said, my heart skipping a beat at my own unplanned announcement—I managed to not slap a hand over my mouth or otherwise give evidence to weaken my claim. Gregor stared at me, glaring in anger and not willing to risk his plans over a tiff with me.

“Give me one piece of evidence to keep me from taking you straight to the dungeons.”

I raised my left hand, splayed my fingers, and pointed to the dragon ring. “This.”

Gregor blinked and raised a ball of light, illuminating the sapphire. He drew back. “It cannot be.”

“It is,” I said, faking understanding of the significance of the ring, hoping I wouldn’t say something to betray my utter lack of knowledge. “Will you leave me alone, or shall I call Mordon?”

He snapped his teeth—they were normal teeth, not jagged like a vampire’s, but I was still suspicious—then recovered his composure. “My congratulations are in order. Give my regards to your guardian.”

“I insist you give them yourself,” I said, challenging him to stay, wondering what he meant by *congratulations*.

Gregor gave me a smile that could have been a grimace. "It would be my pleasure, but I regret I must go through the remaining decks and search them." He gave one long look at Griff's storage box before he left.

I waited until I was certain he was gone.

Giving one last glance to make sure I was alone, I marched to the box in the wall.

Someone wanted this whatever it was in this box, and they sent a big critter upstairs to keep Mordon and the others busy while the simurgh stole and made a getaway. When the simurgh had not returned, they sent an agent to retrieve the item. Gregor must have hoped I would run upon seeing him, or that I would be an easy person to make disappear. My news about Mordon deterred him for now, but next time I might not be so fortunate.

I used another trinket hanging from my necklace, a seemingly decorative skeleton key Mordon had given me with the promise it was better than my last. I slipped it in the hole and gave a couple twists, and the small door popped open. Inside there was a half sheet of notebook paper folded into a small triangle. I took it and tucked it into the heel of my sock. Someone was coming. I shut the door and locked it.

Squinting up at the sky, I caught sight of movement. I sat on a crate, listening to the drum of wings coming closer and closer.

A red dragon flashed his wings to a stop, lowering onto the walkway as though it were a plank. Three people climbed from his shoulders, sliding down a black streak. I walked up to meet the group, catching my breath as his golden eyes met mine and narrowed. Mordon snorted in disapproval. He started to shift, regaining his clothes as he lost his scales. Stupid modesty-enchanted clothing.

"Don't give me that. I stayed here, didn't I?" I defended, taking smug satisfaction in having subdued a simurgh using magical trinkets, a little of my magic, and not once did I worry about going feral. Nothing could bring me down from my feeling of pure accomplishment.

Lilly gasped at the simurgh in the circle, then turned to stare at me with wide, green eyes. "Tell me you did not do this alone!"

"Not to worry," I said. "Mr. Cole came to check on me and left when he saw everything was under control."

"Humph!" Barnes inspected my circle as well as the simurgh inside.

Mordon frowned at me, his brows wrinkled, though his disapproval was nothing compared to the glare Leif gave me. If ice daggers could shoot from his crystalline eyes, that would be happening right now.

"And what did Gregor want?" Leif asked, keeping his tone cautiously neutral so he did not call attention on our conversation. Mordon was the only one not devoting admiration onto my fey circle.

“He didn't say,” I said, but Leif held me in those eyes. Mordon put his hands on his hips, making a remarkable resemblance to a husband who was determined to get the bottom of something.

I was temporarily saved by Barnes musing to Lilly, “Throw a spell at it.”

Leif looked over to them. “Don't touch that circle.”

“I'm ready for the simurgh,” said Barnes.

“It's not that,” said Leif, frowning at me. “I do not want to charge that circle any further. Fera will need to take it down, and I'd rather she didn't get a big bolt of energy when she does.”

In other words, he disliked how I used magic so soon and did not want a sudden rush of it to tip me back over into feral magic territory. I sympathized with him, but I also felt that I needed to practice with magic so I could use it when it became necessary. Today had been a sip of my power, nothing more, and I would not have stood up to Gregor alone without losing control. The circle had been a good, solid step, that was for certain, but I wanted to push myself.

“Leif,” I said. “I should take it down before too many spells get cast around it.”

He sighed, then nodded.

“Ready?” I asked Barnes before I touched the circle.

It was like nothing else. My fingertips tingled and quaked as raw power drained into me, filling my body with electric jolts and making my heart beat powerfully in my chest. I could feel blood coursing through my veins and air passing through my lungs, heating my muscles as though I had jumped into a hot spring from a snowbank. I could feel the air pass between my friends, swirl around rat-sized hobgoblins stealing anything that sparkled on the floor, even the pattern of currents cutting through the marketplace.

At that moment, I felt I could do anything. If I wanted to, I could jump off the edge and call the air under me. I could fly without the need for wings. The raw energy passed. I let it ease out of my body on one long breath. My hands shook; I hid them behind my back so Leif and Mordon would not see.

Had I ever felt that much power before? No, I did not think so. It could be addicting if I was not mindful of it. I felt weak, and hurried to sit before my knees collapsed.

“Fera?” Lilly's hand was on my shoulders and I smelled her lilac perfume.

“Just tired is all,” I said, carefully avoiding Mordon's gaze.

Barnes's voice rolled over me, “I will burn a letter to that one group, whats-their-names? Care for Creatures in Distress or whatever, an' let 'em know t' come git this one.”

“Very good,” said Leif. “Lilly and I will get the clean-up crews started.”

“But, Fera—” objected Lilly, and Leif overrode her.

“Needs rest and a solid meal, and she'll be good as ever. Mordon, I want you to take it easy as well. Don't worry, I can already see Grog coming out to help us.”

I stood up on heavy legs, glad they did not fail me. Mordon motioned me in the right direction.

“Who's this Grog they keep talking about?” I asked.

“Lilly's guard from before she was a judge.”

“And you think he's good?”

“Trolls do tend to be.”

“Ah,” I said, thinking of how I was going to squirrel away that stack of books in Mordon's shop and do some reading tonight—and open up that blasted paper that was irritating my heel with every slow step back home.

Chapter Eighteen

When we reached King's Ransom, the market was already righting itself and resuming business as usual, the merchants thinking nothing of cleaning up debris from their own stalls. I gave them a wary glance before brushing past Mordon holding open the door for me. I muttered a "thank you" and stumbled when I tried to pick books up off the floor. *Skills* had suggested them for me.

"Let me," said Mordon, sweeping them up before I registered he was even next to me. He read the titles. "Light reading?"

"I got light reading for you in my shoe," I slurred. I sounded drunk. Forget that, I felt drunk and hung over rolled into a nice ball with a dose of sleeping drug stirred in.

Mordon pitched his eyebrows in a surprised, if not confused, expression and held open the wainscoting door for me as well. "Careful up the stairs."

"Yeah, yeah."

I didn't remember climbing the stairs and staggering into the breakfast nook. I didn't even remember Mordon starting us steaks the size of my head and as thick as both of my hands put together. Mordon closed a dusty book I didn't remember blankly leafing through, and pushed it out of the way, replacing it with a plate and a fistful of wet wipes. He cleaned his fingers and seized the rare steak in his hands, chewing ravenously.

"There are knives in the kitchen drawer if you want serving ware," he said. I thought it was too much effort to get up and search through the drawers, so I joined him in eating like cavemen.

Half way through the meal, Mordon said, "You almost pushed yourself too hard."

"I hate being weak."

"What's so important?"

"Gregor doesn't like me."

Mordon snorted and shook his head. "That man doesn't like anyone." But he dropped the subject.

I was bleary-eyed, warm, ready to sleep, and Leif seemed no where near ready to come home, according to the letter Mordon received once dinner was put away. So I decided to entrust Mordon with the paper that had by now conformed to the shape of my foot.

"While you guys were fighting up there, that simurgh was after this," I said, digging the triangle out of my sock and slapping it on the table.

Mordon accepted it, frowning. "No one has complained of missing a parchment."

"Not gonna hear a complaint, neither," I said, slipping into Railey's speech. "Cuz 'e wasn't supposed t' have it."

"What is written inside?" Mordon's fingers refused to unfold it.

"Nuthin' good, that's for sure, my bet is it's somethin' that's not supposed t' exist." I giggled, my voice shrill. "You shoulda seen the way Gregor scattered once I told 'im I was your ward."

"I thought you said you were going to work on your lying," said Mordon without any venom behind his voice. He smiled. "How fast did he scam?"

"Real fast once I showed 'im this," I said, stretching out my hand with the sapphire dragon ring on it before that tiny voice of reason could break through the haze, yelling at me to stop.

Mordon's good humor iced over and he stiffened. "Where did you get that?"

"Agnes. When I got the potion stuff the first time round." I didn't need to explain further. He knew the rest of the story. I sobered up some at the furrow in his brow, but my brain was still filled with clouds.

His voice was carefully neutral as he said, "I see...you're exhausted, go get rest. I'll take care of this thing when the others come home."

I stood up slowly and wandered off to my suite, wishing that it was as easy to piece together what this ring meant as it was to spy on the parchment without the risk of unleashing spells.

I deposited the books on the cobblestone floor and dropped myself in the middle. Lilly might want to go furniture shopping, but I secretly hoped that we would not manage to; I liked the floorspace. The moon and starlight made my room bright and peaceful. As though Mordon's ill humor had been a douse of water over my head, I was suddenly awake.

I might not be able to uncover what the ring meant, but I had another mystery I could solve. Setting my citrine ring on the floor in front of me, I drew three symbols in the air above it. The ring shone and glowed, then sent up an illusion of the paper. While the real paper had had several anti-spy spells on it, this method of copying was not covered; I had not been positive it would work.

Gingerly, so as to not break the illusion, I unfolded it one crease at a time until an octagonal paper laid in front of me. I struck my lighter and held it close, transcribing the symbols onto one of the disenchanting sheets I had slipped into my clutch. Much to my disgust, I realized I had turned into a bit of a thief as well as a liar.

I need not have bothered with the disenchanting sheets, I learned when I used one of Mordon's books to translate the symbols.

It was not an Unwritten, one of the spells so bad they had been intentionally forgotten and made illegal to record. Griff's spell was not an outlawed spell. It was not a socially-forbidden spell. It was simply a socially-unacceptable spell, detailing the conversion of a human to

another shape.

The spell wasn't even completed yet, though I knew well enough the pattern of transformation spells to guess what would be needed to complete it—that is, if I knew what the human was supposed to be changing into. Griff had already done spells for himself to change between human shape and gryphon, so I assumed that he was trying to make something else.

I thought about Gregor and his almost-but-not-quite-human appearance, and I wondered if Griff was working for him. Suppose that Griff wanted more money that Gregor didn't want to pay? But what could it be?

Whatever it was, Griff had spent weeks to get this far on it. It was by far the most technically-accurate spell I could spy within all four of Mordon's books even with the variations. Unlike all other transformation spells, this one had an astonishingly high chance of being a complete and utter success—permanently. Despicable though I found him, Griff could be a downright genius.

What Cole wanted with this, I didn't know.

I'd been hoping to find Mordon's vase.

This doubtless meant that Mordon was even more determined than ever to suss it out.

I made my way to work. I was early. It seemed that Mordon was taking longer than I had. Not sure if I should open up without him, I instead wandered through the shop until I discovered a nook behind one of the antique room dividers.

Candle stubs sat in molten piles of wax. Fresh candles littered the floor, a book left open in the middle of them. I skimmed the page. A tracking spell. Was he that bothered about Griff's theft? Why was Mordon hiding this instead of asking Leif for help?

I resisted touching the book, not knowing if he had done something to ensure that no one tampered with it. A breeze swept over the floor and fluttered the page, turning it for me.

The spell called for the blood of the caster.

Blood was not used in sorcering-approved spells. It was hardly the worst spell I had ever read, but spells like these were seen as gateway spells to darker ones; the power rush that came from them was additive and tainted the mind.

The White Wizard Council had a longstanding tradition of grouping spells into one of three categories. Naturally, over time this or that enchantment might be switched from the white list to the gray list or whatever. Point was, the spells were supposed to be classed based on how dangerous they were. Hence, black magic, white magic, and the lesser-known gray magic. Lilly only did white magic. Leif probably only did it, too. Barnes, who knows? Now, Mordon, he'd struck me as sticking to the white list, too. Apparently, he dabbled a little bit.

Frowning, I stepped back into the cluttered shop. Mordon could try all he wanted to do that

spell, but he wouldn't succeed. It wasn't for lack of power or skill. It was out of his element. His was fire, and while he had limited abilities with other elements, he had no ability with wind. Clearly he had tried, and he was going to keep trying. My gut churned at my next thought.

I could do it. I could hunt down the Lady of the Vase. Did I dare to admit it to anyone? Mordon was headstrong and reckless. People expected this sort of a spell from him or Barnes. They wouldn't think I could control it.

Could I?

I wanted to find the vase. Too much time had passed since my last lead, and I wanted to free Railey. Sometimes, when I slept but wasn't tired, I dreamed I was part of a shadow dragon, fighting to keep my memories separate from the others, wondering if that most recent memory was one that I'd forgotten—or if it was never mine to begin with. Leif would dismiss me on the spot if he found out that I had done a gray spell like this. Barnes might turn his cheek. Lilly would be astonished.

Mordon...he would be suspicious. But he needed to find the vase, and he would never succeed on his own. I didn't want to approach him about it—it would mean acknowledging that I wasn't telling anyone else. It might make Mordon even more uncertain about me and his ability to put trust in me.

I needed to make it seem as though he was the one doing it. If I waited with him and worked the spell in secret, he would know. Now, what I needed was to enchant something—something that he would use during the spell at an appropriate moment.

His knife. Whatever he was using to let loose a couple drops of blood would be perfect. I'd just need to find what it was and borrow it...

"Ready?"

I jumped at his voice.

Mordon laughed. "Caught you daydreaming?"

"I suppose so," I said, not that he was paying me much mind. He seemed distracted, too. After all the attention I got last night in a wrinkled shirt and pants, I felt a little miffed that he should be oblivious of me in a dress.

I soon forgot all about that when Mordon opened the doors and people poured in. I wore my best smile and tried to look helpful, and was rewarded with customers with full pocketbooks. They quizzed me on the history of items in the shop, and I surprised myself with how much I had learned by mutely nodding at Mordon and browsing through his books. When I didn't know something, we found Mordon.

The sentient shop solidified its relationship with me, shifting the wind for me to follow a trail or moving books subtly to one side.

During the lunch lull, when I still saw more customers than I had seen in all the days before, Lilly brought us food. I sat in a chair, resting my head against a column. In my head, the shop rumbled and purred like a kitten. It stopped when I pulled away, but I felt relaxed and calm for the remainder of the day.

Mordon said farewell to the last customer, closing the door after him. We had worked well past dinner. My feet ached. I sat on the counter and teased, "What's our register at today?"

A thoughtful expression passed over his face and he started rifling through coins and bills.

"I wasn't being serious."

"Nevertheless, you were above and beyond today, and I think it should be payday."

"That ball thing is supposed to be here soon, isn't it?"

What had happened to my time to bring the team together? I at least seemed to have contained my feral magic, but I didn't have the strict obedience that most sorcerers imposed on their magic.

"It's coming soon," Mordon said and sighed, then gave me a smile.

We were quiet for a minute. I set my jaw and said, "I want your knife."

For three heartbeats, Mordon did not move or breathe. "Why?"

"I need to open a box." I realized too late that once again, I was lying to him.

"What are you going to do with it?" he asked, very slowly.

"Railey needs me to find her, and it's been weeks of waiting. You're very close to finding the next link in the chain, but without a modification to the knife, you won't get any closer than the next set of candles."

He let out a breath now. "Tell me what needs done and I will do it."

"You don't have the time and knowledge. I will give it back to you first thing in the morning."

Mordon stood in front of me and locked eyes for a second. He had the control to not let magic take over, but the piercing intensity of his gaze struck home. "Why haven't you told anyone else?"

"I need to find Railey, and I know you can keep from going any deeper into the dark arts. That spell is a loaded gun, but I don't fear guns. I fear those who are behind them." I watched the fire in his eyes, and my hand brushed the rough skin of his cheek. "I don't fear you. I don't fear my guardian."

Mordon looked away. "It is customary to ask."

I jumped off the counter, my bare feet touching wood floor. "It's never been a question since the beginning, has it?" I picked up my shoes and walked to the wainscoting door. Mordon

opened it for me and held out his hand.

In it rested a knife. Taking it and hiding it beneath my shoes should I bump into one of the others, I went upstairs.

* * *

Lilly pursued me with a bowl of stew and Barnes brought out a jug of brandy he had been hiding for several years in a cabinet; I had to plead a change of clothes in order to hide the knife. When I stashed it away, I stared ruefully at it, then donned fresh clothes and went back into the commons area.

Mordon lounged in a chair with a bowl full of broth and meat chunks and the other two were setting up Kill Dr. Lucky. Mordon and Barnes had never seen it before, but I had played it. It was Leif's favorite game.

Someone somewhere along the line had modified the board to enact the scenes described on the card, which made trying to kill Dr. Lucky to be rather entertaining. Though Barnes was particularly skeptical, he was soon having the most fun and touching his drink the least. By the time Lilly killed Dr. Lucky with a candlestick (he tripped over it and rolled down the steps, coming to his death in the library), it was past midnight and each of us had taken a bit too much brandy.

Sweet as it had been, the amount of time the game took up made me irritated. It meant I had that much less energy to figure out how to enchant Mordon's knife to make it look like a simple modification, but in reality be the entire spell he wanted to perform. It also meant that since my mind was fuzzy, time slipped by all the faster. I was more willing to take uncalculated risks, for better or for worse.

The first thing I learned was that I had to transcribe the spell onto disenchanted parchment, but not in a way that anyone else would be able to see. I settled on an illusion, which worked better than I'd hoped. From there it got tricky: enchantments always were particularly finicky. After a crash course in enchanting and going through two practice items until my results were passable, I got to bed at two in the morning.

* * *

Lilly roused me a few hours later with all the vigor and enthusiasm that four cups of coffee, several dashes of sugar, and a heap of chocolate combined gave her. I tossed a shoe at her when she flung herself on the bed and yanked the covers off me. While I was still wondering

how I happened to have had a shoe handy in bed, Lilly caught said shoe midair then presented me with a pair of silk loafers.

“Wear this today,” Lilly ordered, tossing a red dress at me. “You can’t have return customers seeing you in the same thing twice.”

Once I fought back the urge to snarl, I examined her from head to toe, thinking. “What are you up to?”

She blushed and looked down at her nails. “I have no idea what you mean.”

“The last couple of days you’ve been...absent mentally.” I hadn’t paid it any real attention earlier. I’d been preoccupied. But today she had dressed in a slinky skirt and blouse, and wore lipstick and false lashes.

Lilly wrung out her hands, then burst, “Put on your shoes. I’ll work on your hair—you never do anything with it!...well, I met someone. He’s such a romantic!”

I paused while working a shoe over my heel, wincing as Lilly tugged a hair out. I asked, cautiously, “Anyone I know?”

She gave my hair a yank that could not have been accidental. “No. I’m keeping mum until I’m good and ready.”

“Fine by me.” If it was no one I knew, her odds of success were pretty decent.

“There, done,” Lilly said. “You’d better get moving. I hear half the customers are lining up to see you.”

“Ha!” I shouted after her, then I saw her hurt expression and I wondered if she was being serious. “Lilly?”

She crossed her arms. “You’ve always been this oblivious, haven’t you?”

“What?”

“Griff. Boys at school. Now you’ve only known Mordon a couple weeks and you have him trailing after you, too.”

I frowned at her. “Lilly. You’re not jealous of me, are you?”

“Of course not!” Lilly shook her head in amazement. “You don’t do a thing with your hair, your cuticles are horrid, and half the time you don’t wash your face before appearing in public. Yet they’re drawn to you so effortlessly. You don’t even try, and here I am, admired like a statue and just as loved.”

I tried to think of something to say. Did I deny her statements? Promise to at least wash my face every morning? Tell her that she was loved? Ask if her new beau didn’t respect her, after all?

Lilly pressed on before I could form words. "It's your mystery. Men love a mystery. They want to solve you. I can mimic beauty from across time and place, but I can't mimic that. I'm just not the same type of woman as you."

"Don't try to be."

"I'm not. But I am jealous of it. You're so free."

A harsh laugh burst from my lips. "I'm so free, even as I'm quarantined and told I can't go anywhere or do anything without an escort."

Her eyes turned cold and angry. I felt her magic in her words as she hissed, "Yes. Even when you are fettered the way I am, you are still free to do just as you please. I've been doing this my entire life, and I have yet to learn your devil-may-care flippancy."

"What brought all this up?" I asked, confused beyond all measure.

"Nothing," Lilly said. The crystalline edge to her words were gone. She tried to smile. "It's been stressful the last few days. That's all."

"Right."

Lilly said, "I'll see you around today."

"See ya."

Confused, I trailed her to the door, tapping my fingers on the wall as the french doors shut behind her. Shaking my head, I turned around, and saw that there was the unmistakeable clutter of spell-making all over my floor, and an acrid hint of gray magic still clinging in the air.

* **

I slipped Mordon his knife when I came down the stairs. He put it in the sheath on his belt and said, "You're late."

"Not by much. I had to tidy up, you know." I winked, then became part of the ebb and flow of customers yet again.

This day was just as busy as the last. many people only wanted to look around, but the ones who bought got the expensive items. One man seriously thought about buying the airplane, and I was glad when he decided it was six inches too long.

It was nightfall before we quit, and Barnes had Mordon pulled aside with an attempted thief when Leif came to sit next to me. My gut twisted when I saw his taut frown.

"Give me one reason to not throw you to the dungeons right now," Leif whispered.

"It is in your best interest not to."

"It is in my best interest to keep someone performing dark magic?"

Lilly must have told him. Mother had always told me to clean up my messes after I'd made them, and her point was very well-taken now. I shrugged. "It's gray magic."

His voice dripped with scorn. "That is so much better."

I shot him a glare. "Yes, it is, and you need to knock off the drama before you do something stupid."

Leif's blue eyes stared into nothing. He did that for a few seconds, pursing his lips and then not speaking. Finally he said, "Convince me."

"I'm your link between you and the rest. No, I'm not gooey sweetness like Lilly, crass like Barnes, or loyal like Mordon. I'm much more like you, but I'm backed into a corner. I understand the others in a way you cannot. Now, this means that you are going to have to trust me. They trust me, or they are learning to. It is a little hard to trust a trixster, but also it's endearing in a way, isn't it? Or so I've been told. They trust me more as a partner in crime. Would you rather they keep to themselves, or that they have someone who can decide if their secret is worth keeping?"

Leif sighed. "What is going on?"

"Mordon wants his vase back. I'm helping."

"And you think it'll help you find Railey."

"Yes."

"Peculiar leap in logic."

I shrugged. I didn't dare to tell him about my dreams. "I know they're connected, just not how."

Leif crossed his arms and leaned back, watching Barnes and Mordon who were ending their talk with the kid. Leif said, "You're deeply entrenched in the feral magic. Can you trust it?"

"If I can't, then I can't trust any decision I make."

Leif stood. "Do keep me in the loop."

He approached Barnes and Mordon while the boy left with his father.

Was I wise to be doing this? All of this? Leif was right. I was just as feral as I had been while I was terrorizing the nation. The only difference was now I had a smile and calm manners. Without magic, I had felt lost, but I'd had much more freedom. I was every bit as chained as I was enabled. I sighed. Too late for reflections and worry.

I set about planning my introduction illusion.

Chapter Nineteen

The day of the ball, Lilly came over to my suite, her own dress shoved in a bag slung over her shoulder. She glowed as usual, humming songs her mother taught her, singing the snippets she could remember. She set to twisting and yanking my hair, muttering a spell here and there to make things stay or curl or flatten, or do whatever it is that hair can do.

She brought a wash basin out of her bag and gave it to me. "I got a new one," she said.

"It matches the tile in my bathroom," I said suspiciously, recalling a passing comment she had made just an hour ago about how barren my suite still was.

"Does it? I suppose I already knew that. Maybe that's why I'm giving it to you."

I smiled, knowing full well that she'd bought it for me. "Thanks."

She didn't let me see what I looked like. I didn't have a mirror handy to check, the walls of the bathroom being devoid of mirrors and boasting only a single hook for a towel. When I asked about my appearance, she laughed it off.

"Do you no longer trust me about beauty?"

She found my evening dress without asking where it was, held it up to the fading light and gasped.

Lilly pointed at me and said, "You are going to be luscious in this dress." She clamped the frock to her chest and screamed, "I've always wanted to get you all dressed up! Daily wear clothes are such a crime!"

I blushed at her enthusiasm. "What on earth did you drink to get so hyper?"

"It's a special blend of safari ants, chocolate, coffee beans, and sugar." Lilly drew a chocolate bar in a silver wrapper out of thin air. "I should have given you some."

Now that I'd asked, she wouldn't let me refuse. While Lilly had taken two of the squares scored into the bar, I only took one. I got a little jittery from it, but less than when I had two cups of coffee.

Once again Lilly wouldn't even let me get a decent look at the dress before putting it on me, barking at me to stand chin up while she fastened the back. It was dove gray with soft blue and burgundy flowers. Sleeves draped off the edge of my shoulder, light and almost transparent. I tugged at one, trying to coax it up on top of my shoulder instead of hanging on my arm.

Lilly slapped my hand. "Respect the dress."

I stopped fidgeting with it.

Lilly got dressed herself, slipping into a red V-neck dress also with a gathered hip, but her skirt had diagonal layers of many fabrics running down it. She snapped her fingers and muttered “curl” and her hair sprung into spiral curls, ready for the night.

“I spent a long time training it for these events,” she said as an explanation.

“Do you know how I'd train my hair for this?” I asked.

“Yes, with a stick, a twist, and a bun,” she said with a look telling me that wouldn't cut it. I smiled. She shook her head.

We went in to the commons area.

I started pacing to the window, to the couch, back to the window, slipping my rings on and off my fingers, holding a ring in my hand, switching it between palms, putting it back on its finger, moving to the next finger.

Lilly snatched up my hands and gripped them hard.

I blinked. “What?”

“You're making me nervous just listening to you from the kitchen,” she hissed, lips pressed firmly together.

“Not nervous,” I said, as though speaking the words would make it true. In reality it only made my stomach knot again. I felt overdressed, over primped, and downright ridiculous, and I couldn't believe Mordon was going to see me like this.

She shook her curls at me, “You sure you had enough time to prepare?”

“For an illusion?”

She pressed her lips together again, then sighed, “I know you're prepared for that. I meant, to see all the people.”

“I'm hardly crowd-shy,” I said, raising my brows.

“I mean that the Fitzgeralds will be there.” She did not say that Griff would be there, too, though it hung in the air more prominently than any worry about the Fitzgeralds.

“You know what,” I said, “it never made sense to me that they would blame another kid for Railey's death. It's not in their nature.”

“Grief does odd things to people.”

“I suppose.”

“If you aren't nervous about them or the introduction, what on earth are you afraid of?”

“Ladies,” came a velvety voice from the side of the room.

I didn't look at him, and my cheeks caught fire. Here I was looking like some sort of wanna-be

fairy princess, and Mordon was going to spend the night trying to not think about laughing.

Lilly looked at him, then she looked back to me and said, "Oh. I see."

I wanted to tell her that she didn't see, that I just didn't want to be humiliated in front of him.

"See what?" asked Mordon, walking closer to us, straightening out his dark burgundy cuffs as he came into my vision. My stomach twisted upon seeing him.

"Nothing," sang Lilly, walking past me and toward a door in the corner. "I'll go see how Leif and Barnes are coming."

"Ready?" Mordon asked me, still standing away from me, now tugging on his vest, a matching dark burgundy with a black paisley relief on it. His cravat was cream.

"I would be if I could dance." I meant to say teasingly but it came out flustered and rushed. My cheeks flared. I resisted the urge to tug up on the bodice of my dress or play with my sleeves again. Lilly's slap still lingered on my hand, and I was mindful of her words.

"You can't dance?"

"I just remembered," I said, timidly.

Instead of being annoyed, his stance relaxed more and a small smile came to his face. "We will slip into the crowd. Follow my lead, have some confidence, and you'll be fine."

I nodded, and realized we'd both stopped fidgeting.

Leif and Barnes came out. Leif wore dark green, Barnes wore cobalt blue. They had a similar style to Mordon's clothing, but Barnes had a double-breasted jacket. It suited him. Lilly passed tea cups to everyone for a quick drink.

"Miss Swift," said Barnes in a particularly slow voice. "It might yet still be early, but I am honored to have you as part of my coven."

"Here's to making it official," said Leif, raising his cup. We each took a sip.

Before anyone else could comment, a rap came at the door that appeared next to my french doors. I managed to constantly forget about that door. I put my hand out to the wall and felt for the house the same way I did for the shop, and was a little sad when the house gave me no indication of having a presence. Perhaps it was still too young.

Leif opened the door, and a skinny footman stood and announced, "Two carriages, Sir."

"Perfect timing," Leif said, setting his cup down on the coffee table. Everyone else did likewise while he said, "Barnes, Lilly, and I will go in the first carriage. Mordon and Feraline will follow."

Leif left first, then Lilly took Barnes's arm. She gave me a supporting grin, heading out into the colored evening sky. They got in an olive and royal purple carriage pulled by four white pegasi, the creatures talking softly to each other about the sunset and feasting on oats to

come. As soon as the footman closed the door and got in place, they pricked their ears forward and launched into the air, the carriage following after lightly.

Our carriage landed. It was a smaller black and gold carriage pulled by two black pegasi. The footman opened the door for us. I was glad for the wide step and the shoes Lilly gave me which had a low heel. Inside the carriage was remarkably like being inside a classy car, except it had a round top and round sides, and the handles were brass and the windows had curtains and the seats were like overstuffed velvet couches. So it was really nothing like a car at all, I was just mentally yammering to myself to fill the silence. With a crack of a whip in the air, we lifted off.

Eventually, other noises entered the void: the creaking of leather; groaning of wood; wind rustling through the windows; my heart thumping loudly. This was ridiculous. It was one thing to be embarrassed; another thing to be nervous about performing a spell in full view of everyone I would be seeing for the next decade or more; but it was just stupid to be so flustered. I was in a costume to appease the public, and so was Mordon.

But Mordon didn't look like a clown.

"I can't believe it's been weeks," I stammered.

Mordon cocked an eyebrow at me. "No? What does it seem like?"

I paused. That was actually a very good question. "Like a second and an eternity."

A smile broke over his face. "I know."

I stared out the window for a second, then lifted my eyes to his chiseled chin. I couldn't stop talking. It just kept blurting out. "It wasn't what I thought it would be—getting my magic back, that is. I guess I didn't put a whole lot of thought into it—didn't want to get my hopes up. Don't get me wrong, these last two weeks have been great, they've just been...different. Fun sometimes, irritating as could be other times, but when I look at what I've gained and what I've lost...I still feel sad." I was thinking of Railey and how I was frustratingly slow in getting her free. "It's just all so different than I thought it would be, you know?"

I expected a confused arc of his eyebrow, but was surprised when I saw a distant glaze to his eyes and he gave a slow nod. "You've said it much more eloquently than I ever could have."

I wondered what he was talking about. Thinking back on my words, they were vague enough to be applied to anything. He absently fussed with his cravat. I saw the lines on his face and resisted an urge to brush a stray red strand of hair back from his eyes. My stomach churned. I looked away. The carriage changed direction, surging forward on strong wings.

"Will you let me know when you're planning on following the vase?" I asked. I had included an alarm spell in the knife to let me know when he used it, but I would rather be ready.

"Of course," he said, then added, "Even before I started on that spell, I had a feeling that it connected to your case."

“When are we going to...?”

“After the ball, when everyone is sleeping it off. Sorcerers like their parties and they like their slumber.”

I nodded.

“Look,” Mordon said, having pulled back a curtain. “The moon is starting to rise.”

I leaned on his shoulder and peered through the window where the sky was lightening between the slopes of two large hills. A sliver of silver shone past the edge of the earth, lighting the tips of the trees below. I smiled. It rose rapidly, showing now a wider slice of the moon, the sky about it becoming a light gray color. We watched as the full roundness peeked over the hills, then the moon's curve started to slim again, leaving the same gray hue on the ridge it had crested.

“It's the same color as your dress.”

“It is.” I blushed, suddenly feeling like the thing was horrifically low-cut even though it hardly showed a hint of curve.

The carriage dipped downwards and for an instant my stomach fluttered upwards. I burst out in laughter, regaining my composure as we levelled out and the wheels touched ground. I took in a breath, hearing the footman outside.

Mordon smiled, warm and peaceful for the moment. I blushed again, not sure if it was at his smile or if it was the warmth that look spread through my body. The footman opened the door.

Mordon got out first, then bowed his head down, holding his hand out for mine. I stepped down on the sturdy step rungs, then was gratefully on the ground.

We slipped in through a side door. Leif, Lilly, and Barnes stood waiting. Others were in line before us. A beaming pair of new parents cradling a young baby, a couple to announce their engagement, and an uncle and niece. The uncle was taking guardianship to train her to be a potions maker. Even Barnes visited with the others in line, smiling a smile that enveloped his entire face and transformed him in a way words could not describe.

We were shuffled forward as the others before us made their announcement at the top of a grand staircase. The engaged couple went first, simply stating who they were and that they were getting married. The crowd was split on encouragement of this decision, but the couple didn't care, too enraptured with each other.

The baby went second, a simple announcement including the parents names and the name of their baby, to the applause and cheering of the crowd. The uncle and niece went next, an announcement including their names and how the niece was found to have potions magic. They cracked open a vial they'd made together, casting up an illusion of a series of vials, each which popped to show her interests: healing, weather, and illusion.

We stepped to the top of the stairs, looking down over a brightly dressed crowd. We formed a semicircle with me in the center, Mordon to my right, Lilly to my left, Barnes next to Lilly, Leif next to Mordon. Had I been alone, I might have felt hundreds of eyes inspecting me, but I wasn't alone, and I wasn't intimidated. Mordon caught my eye and gave me a little nod. Leif's voice cut through the murmur of the crowd and filled the air up to the high rafters and back down, reaching even the farthest corner of the room with apparent ease.

"I am Leif Frey, Judge of Merlyn's Market, head of the Coven at King's Ransom, here with me are: Lilly Frey, Judge of Merlyn's Market; Constable Barnes, of the Ninth Circuit; and Mordon Meadows, Drake Lord of Kragdomen. We are proud to announce our fifth and final member, a woman who has spread her wings in the short time she has been reunited with our number, a woman with incredible talent and keen mind, a woman with a knack for getting in trouble and an even larger knack for getting out of it again." Leif's addition gained the expected chuckle from the crowd, and he humored it for a few seconds before cutting them off. "Miss Feraline Swift!"

Leif let them clap. Heads nodded and murmurs ran through the crowd.

I had planned on talking to Mordon in the carriage about my illusion, but it had slipped my mind. It would be a surprise, seemingly lacking of magic but at the same time relishing it. The thing was, I would need a bit more energy than I had at my disposal. I had to hope Mordon would understand me without having to use words. We stood close enough no one could see past my dress when I reached over and hooked two fingers in his palm. He gave me a light squeeze.

I raised my free hand, cupped it in front of my face, then clenched it, looking up to the ceiling, envisioning how the illusion would unfurl now that I'd seen the venue. I opened my hand, revealing a single dandelion plant with a full, white seed head sitting in my palm, its leaves cascading over my fingers. It didn't glow, it didn't sing or dance. It simply was one of nature's childhood fascinations, and as I focused on it, I made it seem to each person below that they held it in their hand.

I blew lightly, casting the seeds high, whisking them across the ballroom on a breeze. Where each one touched ground, a tree sprouted—corkscrew and weeping willows, apple and cherry trees, firs and junipers, and some river birch cropped up from the glossy white floor. Grass spread out from the base of each tree, flowing until it reached another patch of grass. Clumps of irises, columbines, lilies, lupines, heather, and baby's breath formed in beds, ready to burst into bloom but holding back.

Grass carpeted the stairs. A honeysuckle vine raced up the banister to us, arching high with its buds filled to bursting. The energy I borrowed from Mordon felt warm and tingly as it passed from one hand, through my arms, and out my other hand. I took one last dose of Mordon's energy, then raised my hands in one sharp clap.

The ceiling sprung out into shooting stars, a silver moon hanging low in a dove-colored sky.

The flowers burst into bloom, releasing dainty white moths to flutter about in the air. A few came to rest on ladies' hairpieces, flexing their wings. I received astounded applause, especially when we descended down the stairs and the illusion remained. I hoped Mordon would notice the white moths were the same ones that had been used in the puppet show. He eyed them. I thought he appreciated the gesture.

Lilly watched a moth descend toward her hair. She smiled when it landed on her finger. "I didn't know you can make the illusion stay!"

"Mordon helped," I said. "I don't know how much longer it will continue. At least an hour?"

The orchestra struck up, and I heard a passing whisper about how they had turned away anyone with an enchanted instrument, much to the disappointment of many street performers who had bought one with the intent of being paid well.

Mordon held out his hand as couples began a whirling dance. "Shall we?"

I blushed and took his hand.

As promised, he took me someplace where people weren't so intent on watching us, though we still got many looks. I had a feeling we would have been looped into conversations if Mordon's reputation had not been so fierce. Throughout the dance, I stumbled over his feet, half-fell several times, and even went forward when I should have gone back.

He greeted each misstep with a raised brow and a nudge here or there. I caught on to the second dance, a simple square dance, and he introduced me to some twirls and spins.

When I was good and dizzy, Mordon leaned me back into a dip. I gave a little shriek and clung to him, my vision filled with his twinkling eyes. He spun me away. I came back and fell into a fit of giggles, which Mordon tried to ignore, only to start chuckling himself. I loved that rich, smooth voice of his more than even his lion eyes.

I cleared my throat. He smiled and wiped his eyes with a carefully folded handkerchief.

Someone tapped my shoulder. I gaped, open-mouthed at the gryphon standing before me. I jumped into Mordon, the air about me getting thick with my magic. The illusions flickered, but no one noticed.

Griff's real form was golden with honey undertones in his fur, his eyes were chocolate and seemed dulled in a sickly way. His shoulders came up to my hips. He cocked his head at a slight angle to look up.

"Lord Meadows, if you would be so kind as to get drinks, I believe your ward is parched," Griff said, an air of superiority about him.

"Decided on your true form for this occasion?" I asked.

"It is a formal event, and I do think my appearance is much smarter this way, don't you agree?" Griff replied.

Mordon's brow twitched but he didn't ask what we were speaking about.

I heard snippets and bits of conversation follow me. By the time I understood they were discussing my involvement with Railey's death, Mordon said, "I will only be two minutes."

As he left, he whispered into Griff's ear.

Griff waited until he was lost to the crowd.

"You were wise to select a drake for a guardian. They're so protective," Griff said. "They chase off all but the most adamant of admirers, and I will say he is doing a fantastic job of teaching you to dance. Why, ten years ago you were three left feet."

"Griff," I said, finding a seat against the wall that was decently sheltered from eyes. "What are you doing?"

He kept his feathers slicked back the way an Ivy League school boy gels his hair, and he said, "I intend to court you, Miss Fera."

My jaw dropped. I had been about to ask him about the transformation spell he was doing for Cole. "What? Court me?"

Griff grabbed a champagne glass from a waiter's tray, polished talons gleaming in the light alongside wine bubbles. "This is America, dear, the great melting pot! Why, there's hardly a pure human in this room—possibly that Gregor Cole, but I'm pretty sure he has some demon blood in his heritage. You yourself are human, fey, and a few dashes of something else—I can't tell what, but my point still stands: This isn't Europe. We're a more sophisticated society."

I wasn't sure where to start. "Griff, I've already turned you down most insistently once."

"Ten years ago, yes, and you were quite right as it turns out, we were both too young, did things we both regretted. But we are adults now, and it is time to forgive and forget."

My jaw dropped. "You cursed me. I had to die to get my magic back."

"And you've got it again, no harm done." He took a drink. "What say you to my proposal? It'll be a most beneficial arrangement."

"I think you should stay away from me, and nothing beneficial will come of your dealings with Cole," I hissed.

Griff dropped his glass, causing several people in the crowd to turn. He grabbed my elbow. "Don't walk out on me," he said.

At my challenging glare, he whispered, "Or this entire hall will know just how pitiful your attempts were to save your friend."

I stared into his eyes, and for an instant I thought I could see that night, thought I could see two girls escaping from a shadow with glowing eyes. Fire ran through my veins. "You were there. You were there, and you did nothing."

The arrogant shell that surrounded him shattered, replaced by guilt. He sagged and let go, casting his eyes to the ground. "There's something you should know. It's happening soon."

"What is?"

"They haven't told me, but I thought you should know."

"Then stop it."

Griff shook his head. "I'm no hero."

He walked away.

Mordon emerged from the crowd, and it occurred to me that he had been watching.

I asked, "Hear anything?"

He handed me water in a frosted cocktail glass. "No, but you did not look very happy. I take it he wanted to speak to you about matters of the heart. I do hope you were cordial."

"He's in one piece and still has all his feathers and fur, doesn't he?"

Mordon chuckled. The rich sound made me relax. He sipped at a glass with a foamy top. Seeing me examine it, he said, "I suppose you would want a taste? It's the ceremonial cream brew; that Trish from the Black Kettle is doing the drinks, and she makes a delectable drink."

I nodded, moving to take a sip from his glass, but he held up a jewelled hand. He reached behind his back where he had been hiding another drink on a table.

"I knew you'd want some, and it isn't proper for a young lady to drink from her guardian's glass," he said, tugging on his vest in a very proper manner and looking down his nose.

The drink was spicy, creamy, and a little bitter. I snickered. "Proper, indeed."

"We must keep up appearances unless you wish to drive suitors away," Mordon said. "What would you like me to tell those brave enough to approach me?"

Barnes's voice cut through a crowd before he swaggered to us. "You can tell them they need to beat her in the snail races. No right and proper man would set foot in an establishment that entertains such a vulgar source of debauchery. And any man willing to save her from it had better be darned close to his instincts to outwit our feral lady."

"My dearest Constable," I said, speaking with a poor imitation of the soft way I heard women speak here. "Do tell me that you have not been spreading rumors on my behalf."

"Only those which speak to your beauty and wit," Barnes said with a half bow.

I rolled my eyes and smoothed out the front of my dress. "Can't wait to get out of this thing."

"Then do help yourself to the food. I have trouble to rouse, ladies to insult, and entire list of social niceties to exploit," said Barnes, sweeping up my hand to kiss it. "Have a fair evening, my dears. Do try to have one good social scandal, it keeps our coven at the top of the rumor

mill.”

No sooner had Barnes left than Mordon directed us towards the area where waiters hovered in particular concentration. We found Leif brooding by the banister at the foot of the staircase. I snared several items off passing platters, stopping when I was sure I had crossed over the line of how many it was polite to take at any one time.

Leif watched Lilly spinning gracefully between three partners. More lined up to wait their turn. She smiled, flowing with the song as gracefully as an angel, her feet barely seeming to touch the ground.

“Do you think,” said Leif. “That she would leave our coven to join his, or that they would remain in separate coven?”

“When she decides to marry?” mused Mordon. “I don't know.”

“I don't think either of you need to worry about that. She's enjoying her prime far too much to be tied down right now,” I said.

Leif sighed. “One of her secrets?”

“It isn't so secret. It's her,” I said. According to Lilly, marriage in sorcering communities varied from Victorian marriages arranged for optimal power and social status to bride kidnapping to the standard love story. It was all about who your friends and family were. “She's got Barnes as a guardian. No one would cross a Constable, much less one with his dark element.”

“True,” said Leif, then his blue eyes sparkled. “What social faux pas are you two going to do? I spiked the punch.”

“Is this something you all do?”

“Every year, it's tradition,” said Leif proudly.

“My tradition is to dance with no one,” said Mordon. “But I've already broken that.”

“It would be terribly rude of us to refuse other partners, would it not?” I said.

Leif nodded. “It'll get tongues wagging. You should do it, and scarcely sit out a dance.”

“Fine,” I said. “That's what we'll do.”

Especially if it meant we couldn't be approached by anyone else who thought they should be entitled to court me. I winked and held out my arm to Mordon. “Ready to be trampled by my three left feet?”

Mordon raised an eyebrow, then got a mischievous grin. “Ready to dance like a butterfly?”

I snorted. He winked, and we very impolitely danced the night away.

Chapter Twenty

My house was dark. Deep shadows sliced over the floor, new furniture made the rooms feel as if I were a stranger in my own home. Laughter softened behind me, the closing french doors quieting my coven as they bid farewell to a night of scandal. A crisp click of the latch. I was alone.

I remained in the entryway, transfixed by the house before me, feeling senses sharpened from years of practice of haunted houses. I knew I'd stood like this in a sorcerer's house the night I died and lost Railey.

And now I remembered what had led to that decision.

I needed to find a way to get rid of the witch doctor. She was struggling with a whirlwind trinket at the moment, but that wouldn't last. Digging through my jewellery box with uncertain fingers, I felt ghostly breath on my neck and the hairs prickle on my arms.

"Railey, what kept you?"

Railey pointed to the charm bracelet I was looking for. She must have moved it, and not managed to put it back.

"She threw five hundred and forty-nine grains of sand on the entryway floor."

I fumbled with the charms. "You were counting sand?"

That did not bode well. It used to be she would not look twice at things meant to confuse ghosts.

The whirlwind died and the witch doctor drew near. I grabbed the thing in my fist and brandished it.

She scowled at the cross charm I held in front of me. I did not know if it would have any power against someone of her caliber. Likely not, but long shots had worked for me before.

"Truce," she said. "I lost my temper. Let us talk."

I was glad my hands at least looked steady while I squared off before her. "You will leave me be?"

"I know a woman who needs you. Take her case."

Desire for work tangoed with the taint of its source. I tried not to look pre-inclined to accept.

"You are in *my* workshop, I make the demands. Tell me why you want me dead, and who sent you."

"You would not have been dead for long. I was going to bring you back."

"With *what*?" There wasn't anything that could reanimate a person. Nothing reliable, at least. Or that was what I'd thought back then.

"Merlot."

"Get out," I said.

The witch doctor smiled, her thin lips cracked into a chilling grin. "Very well."

She brought her staff down once. Light burst forth, blinding, accompanied by a *boom* that shook straw down from the loft. My vision went black.

Seconds went by. I rubbed my eyes, coughed and looked about, blinking and waving dust. The woman was gone.

"A sorceress! Railey, will you..."

But Railey ran away from me, shrieking and charging at the crow who had been watching us. It went with the flap of wings and a caw that sounded like laughter. Railey's eyes blacked out and teeth transformed to fangs.

I realized that yet again, my gamble for getting magic returned had resulted in snake eyes. I sat down. "Maybe it is time I give up. If someone is out for me, they know where I live now."

Railey split into several smaller shadows to search the house for anything strange. She was back in a minute, slowly stitching herself back into one full ghost.

A black feather floated down to my workbench, transforming from a feather to an envelope with fine handwriting scrawled over one side.

I looked to Railey, but she was still putting herself back together. I opened the envelope, and a note fell into my hand.

Miss Swift,

I write you in the most urgent matter. My house is out of control. It wants to kill me. Please help. I will pay double your asking price.

Madame Meredith Cole.

"This must be the case she wanted me to take. Looks like that old sorceress is going to get me killed one way or the other, Rails."

Railey solidified and lost the dark element, standing on the workbench, staring out the window.

“What is it?” I asked her.

The distant form of a bird flew behind a tree and disappeared, as though it had never been here. Her voice was weak and fragile, a whisper heard over quarreling squirrels.

“That crow serves Death.”

“The smart thing to do would be to walk away.”

Railey stuck out a lip and rolled her eyes. “Death comes to all us in his time. Might as well go out with as big a bang as you can.”

I wondered if that was what had happened to her, if that was why she had roused me from my bed and taken us on a fool's errand to a spook house all those years ago.

“You think I should take Cole's case?”

“I think it doesn't matter to Death if you do or not. And it is getting boring here.”

We needed the money. Or rather, I did. And Railey needed the excitement.

“Alright,” I said. “We'll go check things out tomorrow. I've had enough for one day.”

Railey shot me a grin that spread from one pigtail to the other.

Mordon entered my home with a dying chuckle and reached out to touch my bare shoulder.

“Is anything wrong?”

“No.” I shivered at the contact, his hand so warm and strong.

He lifted a single brow. I felt a smile spread itself unbidden across my face. His shirt was wrinkled with the damp heat of dancing, all the formal parts of his dress now cast aside. He'd never been so attractive as he was now, slightly rumpled and with eyes that knew me all too well. And the best part was he wasn't going to let me get away with it. Or try to suppress it.

“I would be honored to know what is on your mind.”

I expected it was just a phrase, but I felt a tingle spread down my body to my toes. “You'd be honored?”

“I would.”

My smile faded as I considered telling him. “I was reflecting on one of the biggest mistakes of my life.”

“Tell me.”

“I'm not completely sure of everything myself.” But, even so, he knew a lot. Talking about it might put everything in its place.

I told him.

Mordon stroked his chin. "After this, you went to Cole's house?"

"I believe so, yes."

He went still. "Knowing that you would die."

I frowned, weighing what he was implying. "I think if I were presented with the same situation now, I would rather take the fight to my opponent than wait for them to come find me."

"Cole may have left you alone."

"True, but the witch doctor wouldn't have. She gave me a chance to pick how I died. Very few people get that opportunity."

"You chose suicide."

I rolled my eyes, thinking of Railey's habit rubbing off on me. "I did not choose to take my own life. I may have gone into danger, but let's be reasonable. I was asked to perform a job. Not invited to jump off a bridge."

Mordon was unconvinced.

I said, "Suicide would have been if I'd chosen to overdose. This was taking a risk."

"There were other options."

"Tell a Constable? Perhaps Barnes would have listened to a scint, but no other sorcerer would have. Besides, what proof did I have? A crazy witch doctor and a note? The Constabulary didn't even know of the missing cleansers, not did I know who Barnes was until I saw my own want ad. I could have bothered my parents, but they are away for vacation. Besides, I'm on an independence kick, proving I can make my own way in life."

"By getting yourself killed."

I hit myself upside the head as if coming to a realization. "Goodness golly, you're right. I made my own noose and dangled from it after downing a dozen types of pills. Thank you so much for making me see this."

Mordon sighed. "Fera."

I walked towards my bedroom.

He grabbed an arm, spun me around to face him.

"Let me go."

He did, holding both hands open in surrender. "If you want to leave, I won't stop you, and I won't pursue someone who doesn't want me."

I crossed my arms, feeling dumb in this glitzy dress, regretting the argument already.

He mirrored my stance and said, "What are we doing, Fera?"

"I don't know. All I know is, I can't undo what has been done. If I had a chance, no matter how slim, to make a last stand—I'd do it. Can't you understand?"

He hesitated. "I know."

I blinked hard.

"I hadn't fully realized how limited your options were." He came nearer, slowly slid an arm over my shoulder. I hung back, tense, then pressed against his chest, wanting comfort. He stroked the curve of my shoulder, whispering, "I was concerned, and I chose a foolish way to show it."

I nodded and felt the strain of the evening seep away. We stayed like that, him stroking my shoulders, until my feet ached and my body demanded sleep.

"I need to go to bed."

He nodded. "Want help out of the dress?"

I said, "just get the buttons down the back," before I realized what else he might very well be offering.

My pulse skittered as he unfastened my gown. Without the press of the bodice against my chest, I felt oddly like I couldn't breathe. I felt open and vulnerable. Excited and wary. I clutched the gown to my chest, realizing how bare it was against suddenly cool silk.

"Anything else?"

"Not right now."

He nodded. "I will see you tomorrow, then. For our spell."

"Don't start without me."

"Wouldn't dream of it." He took my free hand to kiss the back of it.

I thought about asking him to stay, but I didn't know what I wanted from him, so I watched him leave instead.

Chapter Twenty-One

I tried to read my book, succeeding only in staring unfocused at its pages, a hint of smile on my lips. Warmth spread over my cheeks when I remembered Mordon's hands about my waist. To say nothing of the way his voice made goosebumps rise on my arms. The dragon ring on my finger stirred, lifting its head and licking my skin. Reminded of its presence, I felt a chill.

I wasn't falling for Mordon.

I refused to admit to the notion.

Not that it was anything against him. It was that I had sworn myself to a life of hermit-hood. I snorted. Worthless. It was all worthless. My hormones would do as they pleased, but perhaps that desensitizing potion Nest had mentioned might help matters. I had to watch my own actions, keep a firm rein on my fantasies, and hope that Mordon didn't grow to fancy me any more than he already did.

Resolved in my course of action, I returned to reading *Skills*.

It had a focus exercise for me which involved extending the senses to include the press of an item within the chosen element. Magic could be sensed similarly to any of the five senses, and practicing that sense led to greater control.

I held a crystal ball in my hand and rolled it around my palm, feeling for the way it carved a path into the air, feeling for a sense of anything.

When I closed my eyes, I felt the crystal warm on one side and cool on the other as it went around and around. I turned my hand and felt magic cup it, straining beneath the weight. It started to feel heavy. I focused on lowering the crystal ball to the wood floor.

The door to Merlyn's Market opened; I compensated for the rush of air but the speed of the ball increased. The door slammed. Air clapped over my ears. With a cry, I covered my ears and hunched over in a wince of pain.

"Leif, don't do that," I snapped, then rubbed a tear away from my eyes.

"Where is Mordon? He's supposed to be watching you."

"He's sorting stock," I lied and made a motion to the far end of the shop. Mordon was looking up those symbols I'd drawn, but he had been wary when I suggested he look for them in colonial-era texts.

Leif hissed an angry sigh, but before he could start to pick a path towards the back end of the shop, Mordon's boots padded towards us.

"Where were you?"

Mordon raised a brow at Leif. His eyes widened when he saw me. He pulled a handkerchief out from his pocket and approached me, his boots crunching on broken shards of crystal upon the floor.

"I'm fine," I said even as I realized that my ears were muffled.

Mordon's rings caught the light when they reached for my face. He dabbed at my ear, and when I drew away, I saw a trace of blood on the pale cloth. Mordon frowned, and his voice only held a hint of anger when he said, "There was a reason I had the doors shut and the closed sign up."

"You shouldn't have been practicing here. It isn't a controlled environment," Leif said. His face held the regret that his tone did not.

My hands were shaking. I tried to hide it by holding them behind my back.

Mordon said, "This is where I am strongest, except if I were back home. I see nothing wrong with our chosen venue. It is certainly better than in the commons lounge where a mistake could interact wrong with any one of five magician's spell-casting."

Leif crossed his arms and sighed. "She's going into shock."

I wanted to object that I was not, but I'd had enough accidents to identify the foggy dizziness and weak stomach as shock. Pulling up a chair, I sat and focused on relaxing and pulling myself back together while Mordon grumbled, "Of course she is. You broke her out of full concentration. What made you do that?"

From my new vantage point, I could see that Leif was wearing a ceremonial hood draped down the back of his gray formal robes. He must have attended a formal meeting, and whatever the conclusion had been was not a pleasant one.

"What did the council say?" I interrupted the two men. "I take it they did not want to meet me?"

Mordon looked at me; I squared my shoulders and folded my hands in my lap, noticing that though my fingers were cold at least they had stopped shaking. When he looked again at Leif, Leif seemed utterly defeated. Leif took a tiny fork off Mordon's counter and flicked the tongs, letting loose a simple stream of notes. Leif said, "There was...opposition to you by some individuals with a lot of sway. I was able to soften their demands, but you are to be quarantined until a 'more agreed-upon' decision is made."

"Was the actual word quarantine?" I asked, looking for a loophole.

"The actual wording was 'restricted to quarters until the subject's safety may be properly assessed'," Leif said the words as though they tasted sour.

Mordon was frowning. "But Fera needs a variety of experiences which would be insufficient in her quarters alone."

Leif rubbed his head. "I know."

I watched as both men kept words back. I said, "Thank you, Leif, for doing what you can. Mordon, would you please help me up the stairs?"

"Fera, I'm—" Leif stopped himself before he could say sorry, and just opened the wainscoting door.

Mordon was quick to take my arm. Mordon's muscles twitched in his cheeks and his face had grown red. I took the stairs slowly—until I saw the door close behind us with Leif on the other side.

Taking the stairs two at a time, I bounded up the rest of the steps. I cocked a grin over the edge at Mordon. "Hurry it up. I've wanted an excuse to try this."

Mordon stopped with one foot held over the rung, confusion pinching his brow. He said, "You're feeling perky."

The tone was accusing. I raised my hand and shrugged. "I recover well. But I needed an excuse to abscond with you without drawing suspicion—unless you don't want any part of my schemes. In which case I'll send word to Barnes."

Mordon shook his head, but started back up the stairs again. "You were just told you were quarantined, and that the council wants to see you stripped of your magic."

I shrugged, "Do you want me to mope about that? I was afraid it would happen. When I'm afraid of something, I make plans. Frankly I'm just glad they didn't bust down the door and seize me."

"I would have laid them flat three times over before you could so much as wave a hand."

The way Mordon said it surprised me. He said it as casually as I said good morning. He said it as though he were answering a question. Though I had thought he would help me, I had not expected such a level of commitment. I had thought he cared for me, but I didn't think that he cared that much.

I said, "I have no doubt you can."

But I was still surprised that he would.

Mordon stood before me, and I realized that with him two steps below me, we were at eye level. So often I forgot how short I was, and compared to the breadth of his chest, I seemed positively tiny. It was a disorienting realization. He said, "What's the plan, then?"

I shot him a grin. "It seems that I have a big backyard to play in, but the door to get out there sticks a little."

A slow smile crossed his face. He followed me as I crossed the common area. Mordon said, "You were just waiting for an excuse to break the rules."

Flinging open my french doors, I shot him a serious look. "I don't wait for excuses. I just need a little help with one part of the locking mechanism. I thought I'd take advantage of your mood."

As he followed me into my rooms, he said, "I'm glad you did."

I blushed.

Mordon unbuttoned his shirt, revealing a dark gray undershirt beneath, one which was not covered in lines of dust and cobwebs. He said, "Show me how far you've gotten. I'll see if I can tell where you've gone wrong."

I reached for my book, watching as he looked around, then placed the black button down on the edge of my counter. Flipping through the pages, I stopped when the book fell open to a page filled with words which quickly swirled into blank page. I let out a groan.

A second sorcerer is present. Will they be aiding today? The book wrote.

Looking at Mordon, I showed him the question. He reached over me and used his fingernail to trace words on the page, which the book filled with its own ink. He wrote, *My name is Mordon Meadows. I will be assisting Feraline.*

The book paused. Words receded and the original page came back again. Beneath it, the book wrote, *Since the most basic unlocking spells have been unsuccessful, it is time for more. Construct a ward. The spell will be built within the ward, which will prevent others from sensing the construct of the spell, and prevent any damage should the spell go awry. Feraline Swift will need to drop the ward at the same instant that the incantation is finished, which will hit the locking enchantments with a sharp force.*

Mordon frowned at the book.

"What is it?" I asked.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a candle. "If this goes wrong, you could be in the path of a major recoil. I'm speaking about broken bones and burns. Not to mention, getting the timing right is a little tricky."

"Tricks are my trade," I said, but I took his words seriously.

"I think the book is playing into that." Mordon handed me the candle. "I'll be prepared for any recoils. Get to the ward, if the book has taught you."

The book hadn't taught me, but I knew anyway. I thought for a moment, to make sure I had the steps of the warding spell clear, then I took a deep breath. I lit the candle with my lighter and muttered, "*Beorgan.*"

The candle flame turned orange and green. I held it still for a minute, waiting until I smelled melting beeswax and the tingly sting of a spell in progress ran down my arm. Then, mindful to not let the wax drip, I walked a slow circle around the sun room, speaking words at certain

corners, timing the spell a little too slow so I had to hurry through the words by the time I reached the beginning. Facing Mordon, I said the final "*beorgan*." The candle snuffed itself out all at once, leaving behind not even a trace of smoke even though the wax was still wet.

Mordon arched an eyebrow. "Very good. But most people don't learn one like that until much later. There are simpler ones."

"My father said that if I were to learn one ward, it had to be that one." I felt the ward shift as I spoke, and hastily turned my mind back to it. Splitting concentration was something I had been working on in private, but having another person around was surprisingly distracting.

Mordon took the candle back, his fingers brushing mine. My heart skipped and I nearly lost the ward. When the ward was again stable, I heard Mordon talking.

"...strong enough for most all purposes, easy compared to other advanced wards. Makes it very efficient. What did you say he did for a living?"

"They hunt demons. I got out when it became too risky."

Mordon's brows shot upward in surprise. "You assisted them while scint? I'd love to hear some of those tales."

I realized he was preparing the spell for me, setting out the chinks and tearing a silk scrap, giving a silver dish a quick shine. I said, "It was a time I'd rather leave in the past."

"Understandable. Come read your book."

I did. I read it twice, checked on the items, then I began. I picked up the silk scrap and envisioned that it was the locking spell on the doors, an enchantment made of words woven together to be strong with one another. Then I pulled a string off the end of the fabric, imagining that was what I was doing to the spell outside. The more threads I pulled, the faster the scrap disintegrated. I dropped the strings into the dish, realizing at some level that I needed to do something with them so they wouldn't become entangled. The book mentioned nothing on this point, so I assumed that whoever had recorded the spell had their own method.

I straightened out the threads across the dish, imagining the words of power adhering to the house as a protective skin.

Then I spoke the words in the book, feeling the air thicken with the invisible structure of the spell. I suppressed a shudder and the worry that someone would distract me; even a small mistake would send words flying like shattered glass. Intimidating though it was to be doing spell-craft again, I was glad for the second chance.

The strands in the bowl were glowing, light running from one side down to the next, the thicker strands gleaming brighter. I stroked them with my fingers, not sure why but not sure why not. They rose into the air and hardened, angling towards the doors like needles.

As I took a breath, I met Mordon's gaze and pursed my lips. He crouched when a cluster of silk needles moved in his direction. Taking the chalk in my fist, I crumbled the sticks and let the debris fall. It didn't reach the floor, instead the dust and small bits suspended in the air.

I said the final words and dropped my ward.

It sounded like Mother's shotgun. My ears pounded and I heard the shards of the locking spell crash to pieces. The house shuddered and windows rattled in their frames.

Then empty silence washed over me.

Mordon stood. "Impressive."

My heart was pounding. "Did it work?"

"It worked fine, the question is if it succeeded," Mordon answered. He walked towards the outside door. "I am glad I didn't have to defend us against your spell, though. This opens up very exciting opportunities for precision spell-crafting, you know."

I laid a hand over my heart and exhaled, feeling both relieved and giddy at my success, but also apprehensive of trying again in the future. "I can't promise a repeat of today. I hate doing structured spells."

"More's the pity." Mordon reached for the door, but it opened of its own accord. With a flourish, Mordon said, "After you."

Already the spell-casting whittled at my energy, but for now I didn't care. I stepped out onto the porch and my breath caught.

All around me was open skies, with the house situated so near the cliff as it was. The clouds seemed huge, white cotton fluff against a blue backdrop. When I looked down the cliff, I saw that a set of stairs led to a slope which plummeted into the valley.

Standing at the edge of the porch, I took in the scenery. With a glance back at Mordon, I teased, "How much of this do you think that I could claim was my backyard?"

Two hands seized onto my shoulders and he pulled me back from the edge.

It was then that I saw the first of the dragons emerging from a cloaking spell in the clouds. Mordon's fingers tensed on my shoulder, and when I looked back at him, his jaw was set and his eyes were focused.

"Go back inside," he said.

The first dragon, a mottled brown and blue male with the lankiness of an adolescent, dropped low and blew flames above a small hut. A cry came up from the fields, and a man ran towards the house.

"Go now," Mordon commanded, and I saw scales taking over his skin.

Before this instant, the full meaning of the title *Drake Lord* hadn't really sunk in. I'd heard of people with second forms, even encountered a werewolf once, but I hadn't stopped to think that *drake* meant that Mordon could change forms. To me, he'd always been that slightly-odd human shopkeeper. Seeing him change was peculiar. Perversely, I was disappointed that his sorcering robes were enchanted to gracefully disappear with the advance of scales.

Did he know I was ogling him? I was totally ogling him.

“Go!”

I nodded, startled when he looked at me with bulging vertically-slit eyes. By the time I made it to the door, the entire porch moaned beneath the weight of his dragon form, and a red tail with yellow and black stripes flicked towards me. It twitched and whisked over the porch as Mordon took flight, fully in dragon form, and scarcely as large as the youngest dragon.

For a brief second, I considered watching. But then I felt the air against my skin coming through the door. I sighed, feeling bad about lying to Mordon, and I put my invisibility ring on and went outside again.

Chapter Twenty-Two

If I remained in the shadows or where there was a lot of vegetation, I would not be very visible even to dragons who might see through my trinkets. What I knew for absolute certain was that I had to be out here, but I didn't know why. My feet shuffled down the path, halting when I came to a garden path with wisteria and honeysuckle draping over it in a series of arches. Screams came from the valley now, both human and dragon, some screams the cry of fighters, some screams the panicked call of parents to their children. I smelled smoke now, as a house went up in flames, and the air tasted cold and wet as white clouds turned gray and the world darkened.

Magic ran over my skin, drawing my hairs up like before lightning strikes. I wished that I'd stayed inside, now, or that I had a good place to take shelter. Rain broke out of the clouds, drops as fat as marbles and cold, soaking my clothes in seconds.

Up in the sky, the rain weighed down the larger dragon wings, and I felt a wind sorcerer moving the air and swaying the battle. If I closed my eyes, I could feel how the combatants cut through the air, how much heavier the dragons were and how much they lightened when one tucked in his wings and spun to shed the water. I felt the air suck out from under one dragon and nudge a drake out of the way of a dragon's dive. I felt bodies plummet through the vacuum beneath them, or soar when they hit a ramp-like cushion.

I was so enraptured by the battle that I nearly missed the odd dragon as he pulled out from the rest of the group and set his wings into a dive at the ground. He was coming in my direction. My breath caught and I froze, unsure what to do about the green beast hurtling towards me.

Between him and me I felt the wind as it parted at the dragon's lips, rolled down his neck and split over his wings, humming at the edges of his wing membrane, then swirling with the motion of his tail.

Calling on all my strength, I whipped the air up at his wings. He compensated by angling downward. I yanked the air down at his shoulders, making even the tops of grass bend with the burst.

The dragon plummeted from his dive straight into tree limbs. A squeal of agony pierced the air and I felt hot drops of blood tumble to the ground, smelling his scent of molten rock and damp straw.

Next I knew, I was kneeling in pine needles and my shoulders were wet with rain. Black and purple danced across my vision. I rubbed my eyes, realizing that I needed to remove my ring.

"Who is there?" called a voice I thought I should recognize.

Surprise ran through my veins and I instantly wanted to remain hidden. Then, as magic faded from my senses and my vision began to return, I saw the shape of an elderly woman.

“Agnes?”

She looked towards where I was. Her brow narrowed, and she said, “Come along! That won't keep him for long.”

Agnes' face came into focus. I looked around, but the ground blurred with the motion. Pulling my ring off, I went to Agnes, who led me along a narrow path uphill. I trudged behind her, moving so sluggishly that she told me to hurry along at least twice. I barely kept my feet under me until we paused by a door. While her hands shook the handle to make it open, I saw that we were standing at the base of a wall, and the door went into a tower.

The air was now thick with smoke and screams, but as far as I could tell there weren't very many who had taken the fight to the ground. It seemed less like a battle and more like a brawl.

The door opened easily once the latch cooperated. Nest went in first, and when I stepped inside I didn't lift my feet high enough. I tripped over the threshold, grabbing a table to keep from falling over entirely. Nest shut the door and the room plunged into darkness.

“*Leoht*,” said Nest, and oil sconces on the wall flickered to life, casting darting shadows across rakes and hoes resting against the far wall. The table wobbled when I steadied myself, noticing it was covered in dried flowers and snipped stems.

“Where are we?” I asked.

“I use this as storage. We will wait here until the attack is over. The castle's defenses are active, and I won't go about annoying them. Take a seat,” Nest said, sitting in a chair with tears in the fabric.

I took an old dining chair which had met several times with claws on its legs. Casting a glance at the way Nest situated herself with a short piece of branch, I said, “You don't seem surprised to see me.”

“Of course not. I knew it was a matter of time before Feraline Swift came to see us, but I will say I am surprised at the timing,” Agnes said. She pulled a knife out of a leather sheath about her waist, and started to whittle away at the stick.

“Why?”

Bits of wood flew as she spoke. The tower made a dull thud as someone hit it, but Agnes didn't look up from her whittling even as I eyed the ceiling with apprehension. Agnes said, “Attacks so rarely happen. The last time we had a visitor during an attack was when Mordon's father came with six warriors and helped us repel the enemy...but I think at the time those were pixies. Thirteen clouds of them, if I remember correctly. I was picking thorn shivs out of hides for a week following.”

Fascinating though the story was, that did not answer my question. I shook my head. "Why were you expecting me? I received no invitation."

Agnes' teeth looked ominously large in the soft light when she smiled at me. "Yes, you did."

"Why don't you want to tell me what I want to know?"

Agnes' whittling stopped. She said, "Would you rather that I cry alarm and have those ropes bind you?"

I held up both hands. "Alright, alright. Your house, your rules."

She stuck out her jaw and jerked it in a nod. "You're going to learn every one of them. And my secrets, but you only get those if you learn the rules first."

I had no clue what was going on, but it was without a doubt one of the most curious conversations I had ever had in my life. Since I was rightfully in her home and technically caught trespassing, I thought it would be best to play it nice.

"Anything you would like me to do?"

Agnes went back to her whittling. She said, "Just listen to me."

And she began to sing a slow, low melody. It was a soft tune, crooning, and one that the rock in the walls seemed to pick up and hum back at her. The light in the sconces grew, and the chill left the room. I eased back in my chair. My eyes grew sore, and I closed them. Agnes' song became distant.

I was in a sea, surrounded in all sides by black water. I couldn't tell which was up and which way was down. I tried to swim first one way then the other, but it made no difference. My lungs were burning. I needed air. Panic set in. My heart pounded. I wanted to scream but instinct kept my mouth closed, forcing me to not dare to breathe.

A bubble escaped my lips and floated upwards. I swam after it, but something snared my pants. I kicked several times and the thing released me. The bubble was waiting for me, but no matter how hard I swam for it, it didn't get any closer. Then I focused on it, and in the metallic sheen of it, I saw Railey's missing-tooth smile beaming at me.

The bubble changed shape, morphing into the ghost who reached out her hand to me. "Took ya long 'nough," she said, but the sounds came not from her mouth but from underneath my elbow.

Her laugh came from next to my ear. "Don'tcha look there, silly. Keep yer eyes on me."

She pointed to her chest and began to swim. I followed, and then I wasn't swimming any longer, but was being sucked along a current, going faster and faster until the water rushing by my skin rubbed it raw. Then it was light and we broke the surface of the sea.

We fell into the sky. I tried to grab the water as it passed my head, but when I did so, my

hands closed in on bones. Memories like muscle strained beneath my weight and some peeled away from the bone, revealing runes scratched into the surface, the bone bleeding marrow from the wounds while a stranger's voice recited lines from a Shakespeare In The Park dinner party. That memory wasn't mine. I knew it wasn't, but somehow I remembered it as though I had been there, laughing on a blanket over the lawn and quarreling with a friend over a slice of cheese from the picnic basket.

"Let go," hissed Railey in my ear. "This is no place for you. Not yet. The Lady wouldn't like you being here. Go."

My hand wouldn't release, but the body strained and joints dislocated. A half-eaten face lifted empty sockets toward me, and I saw a feathered snake crawl out of its skull.

It was then I realized that the whole sea was not water, but bodies. Heaps and heaps of bodies. Tears stung my eyes and my chest hurt.

"They're souls," hissed Railey. "Now let go."

I did.

The sea and the bones and the memories which weren't my own faded as I drew away from them, until I was just a body suspended in the air, alone in empty sky. All around me were clouds and brilliant light.

For once, the thought of falling didn't terrify me.

It freed me.

I ruled the wind. The wind ruled me. I didn't care which way it was. I loved it, relaxing in the feeling until the clouds closed in and darkness overtook me.

* * *

The shake of the door lever roused me. My neck ached where I had slept with my chin on my chest, and my shoulders complained when I rolled them.

I remembered where I was and how I had come to be there, then I searched the room for Agnes. She was sitting where I had last seen her, but now she held in her hands a simple flute instead of a stick.

She was starting to get up when the door opened and Mordon's face peered inside. "Nest? How did you fare?"

"I've endured more fearful thunderstorms," she said and walked over to him. They spoke quietly in the doorway for a couple minutes. I stretched, drawing his attention.

Then his eyes met mine and his brow furrowed. “Fera.” His soft tone of disappointment was more effective than any other screech or scolding I'd ever had before. A pit welled in my stomach. I gave him a weak smile. He didn't return it. “You said you'd go back inside.”

A hot blush ran over my cheeks. “Technically I did go back in. I just came back out again.”

He shook his head, looked like he was about to say something, then stepped back from the door.

I heard the crunch of his boots on the gravel path.

Glancing at Agnes, I found no pity in her gaze—but no condemnation, either. She said, “He doesn't take well to lying. That man's too kind for his own good.”

The pit of shame in my gut was transforming into an angry cat of nervousness, intent on tearing my stomach to bits. Springing to my feet, I ran after him, but the man could move when he wanted to. I was jogging to catch up to his quick walk.

“Mordon!” I called softly, since there were people around. They were involved in their own projects, but I didn't want to attract attention. I had a feeling that just by being a new face, I would be looked at scornfully enough.

He stopped, but didn't look back.

I nearly tumbled into him. My legs had gone numb in the chair, and now I was feeling the painful prickle as life flowed back into them. I gasped, “I didn't mean to lie.”

“It didn't just happen.” Mordon's voice was cool, almost cold. It made my heart skip.

I licked my lips and tried to see his face. “Look, you might not always be able to trust what I say. Alright? But I wouldn't do anything to harm you. I didn't mean...”

“How am I to trust the words you are saying right now?”

I blanched, then I took his elbow in my hand and rested my head on the back of his shoulder. “Then don't. Never trust what I say. Trust in what I do. I don't know why I came back out. But I had to.”

Mordon let out a sigh. For an agonizing minute, he said nothing, only had his shoulder to me. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a man straighten up from examining a rock wall, stretching his back, looking at me, but trying not to stare.

Mordon said, “It was you, then, who put the green dragon in the fir tree?”

“Yes. He came after me...or Nest. Not sure which.”

“I'm still angry with you.”

“That's good.”

“Is it?”

"If you said you weren't, I'd know that you were lying to me. Which is bad, because a great leader doesn't lie to those he cares for."

Mordon turned his head to look at me. "Does that mean that you will stop lying, then?"

"For all my lying, I should think that the end result of my actions are predictable. The way you behave is less transparent, even when you stand by your words. In any case, what does my honesty have to do with your being a great leader?" I asked, putting hands on my hips and stepping back. I didn't like the way we were being watched.

Mordon didn't have an immediate answer, but he stepped to study me, particularly my face. He said, "You've changed."

The comment was more alarming than it should have been. I licked my lips. "How so?"

Mordon tipped my chin up with a single finger. His eyes held traces of anger, and were now mostly fascinated. After a few seconds, he said, "You've grown into yourself."

What did he mean by that?

Before I could ask, he resumed walking up the path. Glancing again at the man who had half his attention on the pile of rocks, I followed after Mordon.

Chapter Twenty-Three

We passed some doors along the castle wall, then took stairs leading out onto a walkway on top of castle walls. I walked to the side and leaned over the wall, staring out to the valley below. A large creek cut through green fields where white sheep, colored goats, and a variety of cattle grazed around the occasional thatched-roof cottage nestled under trees.

"Who lives out there?" I asked.

"Those who are a bit more independent," Mordon said then added, "You might want to be a little careful who you talk to. It's been some time since a human was here, and there are still some hard feelings lingering from the days when humans were on an anti-dragon spree."

I nodded, thinking that I should be mindful of my words and try to be as friendly as possible. I couldn't blame them if they were wary of me.

"Should I claim to be fey?" I asked.

He shook his head, but his eyes lingered on me, as though seeing me for the first time. "You don't look much like one."

I giggled. "That's half of the deception."

His brows shot up in surprise, and he gave me a half smile. Mordon placed my voice now. "I thought you laughed too shrilly."

I giggled harder.

"Stop, stop," he said, "You're going to give me nightmares."

Stopping wasn't easy, especially when I had somewhat forced it to begin with. When this became obvious, Mordon grabbed me about my waist and hoisted me onto the wall's edge. I shrieked and seized his shirt between my fingers. He laughed and set me back down. I watched as people came out of their houses to herd the livestock into barns.

"It will take them a little bit to get everything sorted out," Mordon said, frowning. "We have people who will set to getting things back to order, often without so much as a blade of grass out of place. It makes the dragons frustrated to see how easily their handiwork is undone."

We entered a larger tower and descended to a mead hall where several men and women sat around a rectangular table engulfed in loud conversation. They spoke in gravelly accents so thick I had to mentally replay their words before they made sense, piecing it together by their hand gestures and expressions.

When I hesitated at the top of the stairs, Mordon paused and smiled. I took the stairs slowly, growing accustomed to the ebb and flow of the hall's conversation. No one paid us much heed until Mordon took a mug off the table and drank from it.

At the head of the table was a beefy man with a muscled jaw and broad shoulders. He had the same hair and eyes as Mordon. The man bolted up, knocking his chair over backwards. "Mordon!"

All heads turned to face us; some studied me, some frowned at Mordon, some smiled broadly. Mordon's face was taut and he had a strained smile.

"I am pleased to see you home, boy!" thundered his father, striding to embrace Mordon. Mordon hugged him back timidly. His father turned to face me. "And whose chicklet did you bring with you?"

"She's my ward," said Mordon.

His father waved his hands in the air, setting one hand across my shoulders and making my knees buckle under the weight. His father smelled of pipe tobacco and a touch of women's perfume. He said, "Names, names, as my son is not forthcoming. I am Aeron. That woman with the black hair and delightful scowl is my mate, Enaid."

Aeron made a round of introductions up then down the table. Eyes examined me from head to toe. Most were not impressed, though one or two of the younger men were admiring. I nodded in each turn, obliged to smile when I was introduced yet again to Agnes, this time under the name Nest.

Unannounced, a swarm of children rushed past my knees and I ducked as a pony-sized dragon careening for my face. Mordon caught the child and it morphed into a laughing boy.

"Inside form, children!" scolded Nest, her hair pointing straight up from her head.

"Mordon's here!" They yelled, as though they expected everyone to be eager to see him. Their eager clamor reached the far buttresses of the great hall's ceiling and drew my attention to a crystal chandelier featuring dragon figurines in a downward spiral, catching candlelight and spinning as though real. I saw the speckled dots of a broken rainbow upon the walls, now that I looked for them.

"Can we have another story?" one begged, then the sentiment was echoed through the ranks of the children. "Yes! Yes! Please, Mordon? Please?"

There were one or two dissenters, the older children trying to act grown-up, leaning against light gray marble pillars which provided contrast to dark granite walls and floor. The younger children ignored their elders and continued to prod Mordon.

"Only," said Mordon, leaning down. "If you go straight back to your nanny and listen well to her."

He received a round of knee-hugs and then a bedraggled woman came to collect the children. The child Mordon had caught gaped at me and tugged on Mordon's sleeve.

"Who's she?" he asked, pointing at me.

"My name is Feraline."

"That's a strange name."

I chuckled. "You can call me Fera."

"Come now," said the nanny and ushered the children away. Mordon's eyes lingered after the children as they filed back out of the room in a much more orderly fashion than they'd entered.

The joy left with them. Enaid became grim, sitting heavily. Aeron went to her.

"You came at a convenient time, but I do wonder why," Aeron said.

"Fera has taken up residence in the old fire watching station, and I couldn't keep her from exploring any longer," Mordon said, crossing his arms.

"And she's taken full advantage of your soft heart. Truly Mordon, I wish you'd take a liking to an independent female." Enaid shook her head and frowned. My skin prickled when she examined me. I clasped my hands together and tried not to glare at the small-framed woman with hair a brown version of Nest's.

In the rows of faces, a few were amused, several looked like they'd heard this discussion before, and the rest sank back into their chairs, resigned. While I thought this would be a private conversation, clearly everyone else expected it to be public.

"What makes you say that?" I asked, more intrigued by what brought his mother to her conclusion than offended by the implications.

"I am the colony's skill seeker," Enaid said. "It does not take much talent to see that you inherited fey magic, even if you appear strong."

"Then you know foremost of my skills is to deceive," I said, then shook myself from petty squabbling. "Does this matter?"

"No," Aeron said.

"Yes," Enaid said, giving her husband a slanted-eyes glare. She continued, "If we gain one guardian and one dependent, then we haven't gained a thing."

Mordon and Aeron began to argue with her and soon the entire table was divided in the debate. Apparently whatever was an issue for Mordon was an issue for everyone. If someone would quiet down, I would explain that they didn't need to even consider me. I frowned, noticing that Nest alone watched me, her keen eyes seeming to say something.

Words drew my attention back to the table.

"—what when you decide to marry her, our shifting will be a recessive in the offspring."

Words I definitely did not want to hear from his mother, much less anyone else.

Alarmed at where this conversation was going, I reached out to the railing on the staircase and asked the castle to amplify my voice.

“Enough,” my voice boomed, seeming to come from all the walls. The people at the table jolted and stared at me. I let the castle go from my will, but it kept my voice loud, fading as I spoke.

“What happens or does not happen between Mordon and me is between Mordon and me, and I will not tolerate speculation.” I locked eyes with Enaid's green and yellow ones. “I rely on Mordon for teaching, not as a bodyguard.”

Enaid narrowed her gaze. She said, “You're a brave one, aren't you? I don't think you understand what it means to be Lady of Kragdomen. We aren't part of any nation but our own. My word is law. I could order you imprisoned and charged with disrespect. What do you have to say to that?”

Aeron knitted his brows at her in an expression I often saw on Mordon's face when he disapproved.

I lifted my chin. “Lady Meadows, you seem to be under the impression that the laws of the living govern me. You see, I died. My heart pulses so I can hunt those who break Death's laws. I have only broken magic and scattered memories and four friends to call my allies in all of this world. Nothing you can say or do compares to what I face when I close my eyes every night. If you approve or disapprove of me is entirely your own affair.”

Enaid's face was drawn tight, and she looked at Mordon. “Mordon?”

He shrugged. “We are still working out the details.”

“How did you entangle with her?” Enaid said, her eyes fixated on me.

I crossed my arms. “The only thing I did today was walk in the hall with Mordon. I have not claimed Mordon as a mate or even as a potential mate, and this display is certainly appalling no matter the circumstances. I am a Swift, a potion maker of no small talent, and I find the insinuation that I am begging for a mate to be very condescending and undervaluing. Since I have neither been offered drink nor a space at the table, I will take the hint and continue on. Find me when you are done, Mordon.”

Not daring to speak another word, I left. Mordon half-reached to me, but sighed and sat at the table instead. The silence following my departure was broken by my footsteps as they rounded a corner and went down the hall.

The calm of empty corridors soothed me, and I was suddenly shocked by my own rashness. What was I doing, speaking like that in front of strangers? What good would come from it? I wasn't even certain that Death's letter to me had been real and not some figment of mandrake root or exhaustion.

I took a corner, and found myself curving even deeper into the keep's hallways. There were a

few hallways tall and wide enough to allow access for a dragon form, but most of them were on the human side of things. All the openings to other rooms were not shut off by a door, but by a wall hanging. I checked behind several of these wall hangings until I realized I was walking into bedrooms.

For several minutes I wandered onward before stopping in my tracks and admitting it: I was lost, and I was being followed.

When I next stopped, as though to admire the needlework on a tapestry, I relaxed into my magic and waited until I felt movement.

Spinning around, I used the wind to push a hanging aside.

A girl of about eleven stood in the doorway behind me. She waved a sheepish hand. "Hi."

I motioned her forward. "I don't think we have met yet."

"I'm Denise." She advanced. "You're Fera. The whole keep is talking about you."

"That doesn't surprise me," I said, then motioned down the hall. "Care to show me out to the fresh air?"

Denise nodded. She had light brown eyes and thick brown hair which tried to hide her freckles even though she always pulled it back from her face.

Denise asked, "Don't you want to know what they're saying?"

I raised a brow at her. "Is there anything I should know?"

Her step faltered. "Wait, you mean are they planning to imprison you or anything like that?"

"Are they?"

Denise shook her head, too hard, and nearly bumped into an arch. She said, "But, aren't you curious?"

"As a fox."

It was all the encouragement Denise needed. "It's been ages since a strange female showed up here. Ages. But we aren't supposed to talk about the one before...see, she was from another colony. When there were other colonies."

I caught the scent of fresh earth on the air and felt my muscles relax a fraction as Denise continued.

"She was obsessed with Mordon. She said it was their destiny to start a new colony together." Denise paused at a tower, as though uncertain if we should go up or down. She went up and spoke at the same rate as she walked. "But Lord Mordon, see, he was already in love with his doppelganger."

"Doppelganger?" I repeated, as much confused by the way she used the word as by the way

she was so freely blurting out information. I ducked a low-hanging beam.

She paused on the step. "Ummm...I think the best word is 'invisible friend'."

"Imaginary? Ghost?"

Her brown eyes flitted to me. "The friend is real, it's someone's spirit. Not everyone gets doppelgangers, just a few people every now and then, so it's real special when it happens. Mordon was seventeen when he first met her, he said he saw her as a dragon, but he swore he would never forget her laugh. A few years later, she was in trouble and he couldn't help her."

Denise's eyes were glazed over, remembering the tale she'd told over and over.

"And?"

She was waiting for the prompt. "And he never saw her again, though he swore to never give up on searching for her."

Something clicked about my chilly greeting. "Enaid and Aeron, they didn't much like me because they thought I was there to make him stop looking."

"Are you?"

"I didn't know about any of this," I said, considering what she had told me.

"True," said Denise, "but now that you do, are you going to leave him be?"

I rubbed my face with one cold hand, realizing that this was the reason she had been telling me what she had. In any case, Mordon's choices were his own to make as he would.

"Dreams must be seen through," I said, wondering about what she'd said about doppelgangers. I held back a laugh and it came out as a snort.

"What?" Denise asked.

"I had an invisible friend."

"Oh?"

"His name was Thessen."

Denise giggled. "I hope imagination was all he was. Was he a dragon?"

"Human—or so I thought. I guess, I got more of a feeling of who he was and I could talk to him, but I didn't really see him."

"Imagination," said Denise with a firm nod, then she came to a wooden door. She reached for the handle but it wouldn't move.

"Stop that!" Denise hit the wall, skinning her knuckles. "We are not going anywhere far, let us through."

The door swung open of its own accord, revealing the top of the walls again. When we walked onto the rampart, I asked Denise, "What was with that?"

She rolled her eyes. "Ancestors. We bury them in the catacombs below. They think it's their sacred duty to occupy the keep and watch after us. They've taken a liking to you, but they're always trying to recruit fresh blood."

"Is that why I couldn't find my way out?" I had thought it seemed odd that I would get lost in such a seemingly simple floor layout.

Denise held out her arms and breathed in the air. "Not sure. You can't be sure. But...I was wondering... Everyone else is getting apprenticeships, and I want to start up an apothecary but the only potions Nest knows are the ones meant for the Lady. I don't want those, and we don't need them since Nest and Enaid know how to make those kind anyways. If you know potions, can you teach me?"

Me, a teacher? Denise took my silence the wrong way.

She pressed, "Mordon can take me to and fro, or I can walk up to the old fire watch station if you'd let me in your house."

"Why don't you have an apothecary?"

Denise motioned to a house in the distance. "Old Man Jerald and his apprentice both died in a pixie attack years ago. No one knew what to make of his book. We tried a couple of things in it, but...we got this blue slime that ate through copper instead."

I smiled as I remembered. "I did that once when I was a kid. Made Mother so angry I ruined her pot."

Denise's brows shot up, disappearing into her curls. "How old were you?"

"Six? Seven? Something like that."

Denise's jaw dropped in an unvoiced 'wow'. "You've been making potions that long?"

I ran my hand along the wall, leaning out and taking a deep breath scented with rain. "Mother wouldn't have it any other way. Even my brother can mangle a mandrake well enough to get a viable potion from it, and he has no interest in brewing whatsoever. He prefers swordplay and ballroom dancing."

Denise likewise leaned on the wall, I noticed. She said, "Where did he learn that?"

"Father. I did some of it, too, but I haven't trained in ages."

"You still haven't said you'll teach me potions."

"I'll need to ask Nest and Enaid about it first. If they agree, then I'll see what I can teach you."

Denise lifted her chin. "I'll learn it all," she said and stared out over the valley, a smile on her

lips. Denise was soon pointing out people and telling me who they were and what they did.

“—and that one is Svenro the Brave. He came with Aeron, and his son is Dagr, he's so nice, I....” Denise trailed off when she saw Mordon walking on the rampart towards us.

With a few skips, she greeted Mordon before he could reach us. “Fera says she'll teach me potions!”

“If Enaid and Nest agree,” I amended. “I don't want to step on any toes.”

Mordon raised a brow. “Think you can interpret Jerald's old book?”

“I've done so with *Skills*, and half the time the writers didn't know what they were doing, either. Plus, I do have my own potions,” I said with a shrug.

Mordon nodded. “I'll bring it up at the next meeting, then.”

Denise looked between us, seeing that Mordon had something to say to me, and he didn't want an audience. Denise rubbed her arms and said, “Well! I have to go do something important right now....so...bye!”

I smothered a laugh. Mordon watched her until she was gone, then he turned his attention to me. “Fera.”

I looked out over the valley, seeing where farmers were walking their alfalfa fields. “I'm not going to apologize for what I said.”

Mordon covered my hand with his. He said, “I'm not asking you to.”

Lightning bugs came out with the dusk. When the air grew cold, Mordon said, “But we both should go back to the coven. I have a feeling that we'll be needed. And you'll be missed.”

I began to turn away, but stopped when he grabbed my elbow. “Yes?”

“Nothing. Let's go.” Mordon dropped my arm and stepped away quickly. Frowning after him, I decided to simply follow.

Chapter Twenty-Four

It turns out that we weren't missed. Not at all. In fact, the others had been busy in the aftermath of the great big party, and so I was left pretty well alone to mind the shop with Mordon.

Finally, we had some peace.

Until we didn't.

Scratching noises went through the shop, echoing off the walls and vibrating in my ears. I stood up, book in hand, not sure what was making the sound yet strangely unafraid of whatever it was.

I followed the noises to the main door and watched as it warped into the tall, wide mouth of a cave. The shop did not feel worried and my shoes did not seem to want to leave the floor. I waited, enraptured and intrigued.

A cool breeze drifted from the opening. Sulfur and mineral water wove past my hair.

"Hello?" I called, stepping forward to peer into the darkness.

Scraping like that of iron on stone came from the cave, associated with new smells: wood smoke and ashes. A dragon heaved himself into the shop. The shelves and artifacts scrunched back into a heap against the walls to make room. Even so, his face came level with the wooden plane and it would have been no matter for the dragon to have put his neck through the ceiling.

The dragon dropped his head down to the floor. I craned my head to meet his cloudy eyes. Instinctively, I rested my hand on his cheek, noting the ridged scales, the flakes and dust under my palm.

"A fair day to you, Childhe," he said. "I am known as Thessen, the first dragon to educate my flock, guardian of the Verdant Realm. And to whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?"

"My name is Feraline Swift."

His throat scales scratched against wood as he sniffed me. "I know you by your deeds. It is an honor to make your introduction."

Thessen. The name was familiar, and not just from bedtime tales.

"The honor is mine." I said, still trying to remember where I knew the name from. "Shall I find Mordon for you?"

Thessen cocked his head. "I did come for the Drake Lord of Kragdomen, but I was not anticipating finding you, nor Aethel's book."

"I thought this was a copy," I said, holding it away and looking at it. And who was this Aethel? A previous owner?

"Her essence is in the book, and she brought the dawn of an era of hope—and it appears, it shall be so again."

I looked at the book and noticed it seemed to have fewer scratches in the leather.

Mordon's voice sounded a little distant. "Fera, did I hear someone enter?"

The dragon turned cloudy eyes to me, waiting.

"Yes, Thessen came to pay you a visit."

There was a pause, then he repeated, "Thessen?"

"Indeed," said Thessen, rumbling the floor boards and clattering glassware together with his speaking voice. "I have come."

Something heavy fell to the floor near the back of the store. Mordon appeared from around a tower of newspapers, his hair tousled and clothes dusty. He bowed quickly. Thessen inclined his head.

"Drake Lord of Kragdomen."

"Guardian of the Verdant Realm," Mordon said, his voice tense. "Your visit honors my hovel, though you will not be offended if I ask why you have come?"

"I take no offense," Thessen said, the accompanying rumble starting to shake the shop. "And methinks it a cozy hoard."

I caught a terrarium on its route off the edge of a shelf and put it on the floor, frowning.

Mordon said, "Your last visit was not so pleasant, Thessen. What brings you here?"

Before the dragon could open his mouth again, I interjected. "Thessen, can you talk softly? I would appreciate not having to reorganize all this." I turned on Mordon and gave him a glare. "And you, quit the attitude."

Mordon's jaw slackened.

"You do your brother, Leazar, justice," Thessen said, affectionately rubbing his nose across my back. I stumbled a couple of steps before I regained my balance. Thessen continued, "Your ward is courageous and cunning, Lord of Kragdomen."

Mordon's jaw dropped even more and his eyes bulged. He cleared his throat. "Thank you."

"Childhe is most wise to accept his offer," said Thessen, his voice just a hint of rumble. "And the Lord of Kragdomen would be just as wise to watch over her closely during these troubling times ahead."

Mordon's brow furrowed and he said, "What has happened?"

“Trickery.” The shop rattled at the word, and Thessen corrected himself, speaking softer.

“Misfortune has befallen the dragons and they blame the drakes. Likewise, the drakes blame the dragons. I have convinced the Youngers to meet in peace with Drake Elders, but the Drake Elders will not agree unless their home is secure.”

Mordon looked like he had heard this before, rubbing his forehead. “You’ve come to ask me to guard the colony so my father will attend the discussions.

“I have.”

Mordon frowned and paced anxiously. “I would, but my responsibilities here...”

I had a hunch he was speaking more about me than he was about the other three. “I’ll come with you,” I said. “Lilly and the others can make do for a few days.”

Mordon stared at me, then shook his head.

“You must go, Drake Lord,” said Thessen. “Childhe can watch over the colony’s hatchlings in relative safety.”

Mordon rubbed his forehead, then sighed and said, “I will consider it, but I must speak with the others before I commit to anything.”

“Very well,” said Thessen. “I shall take my leave. Drake Lord of Kragdomen, Childhe Feraline Swift, my blessings be about you both.”

Thessen gave me one last nuzzle, then turned with surprising grace he scraped his belly back through the cavernous opening. His tail disappeared in the darkness then the cave retreated, leaving behind the original door. When I looked at the rest of the shop, I found it had restored itself to its prior condition as well.

“Why did he call me Childhe?” I asked.

Mordon blinked, raised an eyebrow, then he said, “Ah, yes. It means he likes you.”

His face fell back into darkness and he stroked his nonexistent beard. I stared at his habit, wondering what was with the way he would stroke his chin, furrow his brow, and look at his empty hand.

“Your dragon form has a beard,” I snapped my fingers in triumph. I was surprised I hadn’t put the two together before. He seemed to enjoy the beard, and I wondered if he could not grow one in his human form. I had never seen him with a 5 o’clock shadow.

One eyebrow went up and the other down when he twitched his mouth in an unspoken question. He looked down to his empty hand, and revelation crossed his face. “Ah, yes.”

“Mordon,” I said and waited until he looked up to me. “We’re going as soon as we can talk to the others, so stop worrying.”

He nodded but wasn’t comforted. I tried to think of something else to say.

The front door swung open, rammed the wall, and rattled back on its hinges. Leif ran to the door leading upstairs without looking at us and treated that door with the same courtesy as he had the first door. My eyes narrowed and I snared Lilly before she could repeat Leif's actions.

"What is going on?" I demanded, surprisingly irate by their rough treatment of the shop.

"Oh!" Lilly said. "We got called to mediate between the gryphons and sphinxes"

"Mediate?" I asked, shaking my head. "I thought you were judges."

"Emergency protocol. All the mediators are called out, and we left instructions that if any party in Merlyn's has an issue for us to sort out, they are to report to the dungeons and remain there until our return."

"All the mediators are called out?" Mordon asked.

She blinked and said, "Yes. Why? What's happened?"

I explained about Thessen's visit and she frowned.

"Think all this chaos is coincidence?" she asked Mordon.

"No," said Barnes, who had slipped in without my noticing. "I'd bet someone planned this while we were busy with the festivities, hoping by the time we sorcerers were back on our feet it would be too late. Which is why we all have to go do damage control before it really gets out of hand."

"Is Fera going with us or Mordon?" Leif called from his position at the base of the stairs sorting out three packs.

"With me," Mordon said.

"Good," said Leif, passing the packs to Barnes and a frowning Lilly. He turned to look at me.

"The carriage should be here about now. The sphinx Anhur swore to guard us, whether Mordon came with us or not."

"Anhur is worth his word," Mordon said. "He was the one who sought your help, was he not?"

Barnes twitched his mustache in annoyance and nodded. I had a feeling he did not much care for Anhur.

"You can go with Mordon, Constable," Lilly said kindly.

"I won't abandon my ward," Barnes said, though he did look tempted by her offer.

A loud rap came from a door upstairs.

"We will burn a letter when we are finished," Leif said.

Lilly gave me a hug. They bolted upstairs at a second, this time demanding, banging on the door. I listened to their footsteps fall away, knowing that with each second, we were using time that we very much needed. The finding spell would have to wait—it was even possible

that we would not need it now that the trail had picked up.

Mordon snapped his fingers. The lights dimmed, the ceiling became shaded. A series of grinds and clicks ran through the shop as it locked all the doors. I put my hand on a beam and reached out to the shop. It gave a long, slow groan that sounded reminiscent of a yawn.

“Bye, shop,” I said. “We’ll be back soon.”

Mordon rushed up the stairs, into the commons room and through his stone dungeon-like door.

I hesitated, but he beckoned me inside.

Shadows filled the room until Mordon clapped his hands. Candles on a chandelier flickered to life. The lights played on curved shelves lining the circular walls. To my surprise they weren't filled entirely with books—puppets in various stages of production sat grinning at me, wooden heads held up by strings attached to the shelf above them.

Round gnomes clustered together, one cradling a tiny kettle. There was also a dragon I distinctly identified as Thessen. I didn't recognize the other gnomes, nor did I know any of the various elves, gryphons, unicorns, or random creatures. An aged wizard in a blue pointy hat with a long white beard sat close to a knight, seemingly in conversation while a beautiful witch in black leered at them.

“Is that supposed to be Merlyn, Arthur, and Morgana?” I asked.

Mordon checked where I was looking. “Yes?” he said, doubting his creative abilities.

I laughed and poked at Arthur's visor. “I think they're adorable.”

Arthur stood, his strings suddenly gone slack as he brandished his sword at me, declaring in a small voice, “Unhand me, Giant! Excalibur will smite you!”

I tried to not laugh as Mordon groaned. “You woke him up.”

Arthur turned on Mordon now, sticking his sword into the wood of the shelf and leaning on it as he said, “Ah, 'tis you, Benevolent Giant. What quest have we on this fine day? Where are your hatchlings?”

I cocked my head at Mordon.

He put his head in his hand.

“Arthur,” I said. “No quests yet. I was merely curious and woke you up.”

Arthur pulled his visor back and leaned to look at me better, a small smile on his wooden face. “What a peculiar way you say my name! But it matters not. You are pardoned, Fair Giant Lady!”

He dropped his visor back over his eyes and became still again, leaning on his strings.

Try as he might to avoid my gaze, I noted that Mordon's cheeks had turned to a lovely shade of scarlet. He coughed and motioned we should go up the spiral staircase, leading the way so all I had to see was his stiff back. Apparently, this was where he kept the good books. They spiraled up the stone side of the stairs, the other side a railing allowing an unparalleled view of Mordon's living area. Much as I was tempted to read through the titles, I had a better thought in mind.

“So...your hatchlings?”

Mordon coughed. “Not mine, exactly. I'm the colony's historian, and it's my duty to teach our stories to new colony members.”

“Ah,” I said, fondly remembering the puppet show. “Like back at Merlyn's Market?”

I belatedly realized that he was the one pupeteering the show at the market.

Chapter Twenty-Five

We entered the mead hall where Enaid, Nest, and Aeron stood around the table with several others, looking grim and making plans.

"It looks like they're expecting an attack soon," Mordon said, frowning.

Aeron and Enaid became grim, sitting heavily in their chairs.

"You're here to get us to go talk," said Aeron.

"At Thessen's request."

"And you brought with you that woman," Enaid shook her head and frowned.

"Mother," scolded Mordon. "Fera has had combat experience."

"Any of them dragons? Has she even sparred with you?"

"Fera is more than capable."

I coughed. Eyes turned to me.

"Wasting time," I said. "Mordon, I know you support me. You don't have to fight with your mother to prove it. I will stay with the children and hopefully my assistance will not be required."

Mordon had his mouth open to object, but the crackled voice of Nest halted all other conversations. "I will stay as well."

Aeron said, "We will need you at the talks."

"No," Nest said in her slow voice. "Not this time."

Enaid bit her lip but agreed they could do without. "You will stay with the gate guard."

"No," Nest said, raising a shaking hand to point at me. "I will stay with Feraline and the offspring. Give my regards to Thessen."

No one tried to object this time, but inquisitive gazes kept coming my way throughout the remainder of the preparations. Though it happened rather quickly, it seemed to be ages before the Drake Elders were assembled—most older than Nest—and the troupe departed.

* **

The children were busy playing with clay by the time we could hear the start of a fight outside. We were in one of the innermost sections of the castle. The inhabitants expected one final

battle while the discussions were ongoing.

Nest said when it came to making peace with dragons, the Drake Elders would talk with the most influential and powerful dragons. Then those dragons would strongly encourage the other dragons to stop. Usually strong encouragement involved pain. While the drakes lived in a community, the dragons did not, nor did they much appreciate being told what to do.

At the start of our waiting period, when the children were excitable and still settling into the thrill of another battle, I found a boy's body. He wasn't dead, but he almost seemed like he was. I couldn't wake him up.

I had called for Nest and the children gave me a very odd look, as though I had not found a gravely ill child, but rather a sleeping one. Nest came, looked at the boy, and called his name twice.

A dragon the size of a large dog tottered over and blinked at us. Nest said something to him, and he approached the body, reached forward a round snout, and touched the chest. For an instant, nothing happened, then there was a flash of light and the other children pressed forward to watch, cutting off my view. Next I knew, the dragon was gone and the boy was running around the room with his arms held out like wings.

"He's earned his second form early in life," said Nest, and she would say no more on the subject. The boy animated, bragging about his accomplishment. Older children who hadn't shifted yet watched enviously while he went back and forth between shapes. After a time, he went to sleep and we regained some normalcy.

I had grown accustomed to the relative silence when Nest brought out figurines from her pouch and set them one by one on the floor where we sat. The older children grumbled, recognizing the layout and cast of characters at a glance.

"We've heard this one."

"It bears retelling," Nest said, snapping her fingers. The clay cracked about the surface, then each figure burst into motion, a layer of dust falling about their feet. The wizard blinked, stretched his arms out, and brought his staff down on the floor, a surprising snap coming from the fist-sized man.

"It's not as good as Mordon's," someone said quietly.

Nest laughed. "That is as it should be, one generation improving from the last."

The room went quiet as the clay wizard spoke.

"Camelot is lost without us, Morgana."

I missed Morgana's reply when Nest scratched her head and asked if she should restart the figures from the beginning. The children insisted this is when it wasn't boring anymore, and they would not stand to watch the introduction again.

Morgana's clay figure was much more enchanting than Mordon's rendition. This version gave her thick ringlets, a delicate face, and a lean figure. Morgana walked to join Merlyn, an aged figure with knee-length beard and slightly crooked back.

"Merlyn." Morgana's figure drew away from him. "It is too late for Camelot."

"No, it is never too late," Merlyn said. He looked at her. "Why do you know this?"

"When I was captured—I had a choice. You, or Camelot, and you're too important."

He slammed his staff and Morgana fell. I heard the battle coming nearer—it seemed some dragon had slipped inside and was coming towards us.

"Camelot is my life!" he yelled. The room shook, dust fell from the ceiling. I didn't think the clay puppet caused it.

"As it grows, you die. Let someone else raise Camelot!"

"Never."

Morgana cried out, "I cannot lose you!"

"My life will one day be forfeit," Merlyn said. "But Camelot was to continue! And now you say my life's work is gone! Gone, and by your choice!"

"—Merlyn—" The door rammed and shuddered as someone tried to break it down. The children didn't seem to notice—at least the younger ones didn't.

"No! Begone from my sight! You are a traitor! A cold traitor! Set to destroying all I love! Begone from me now!" Merlyn yelled, and brought down his staff. Morgana shrieked and her figure went back to being motionless clay.

The children cheered, but I exchanged a sad look with Nest. The difference between good and evil, black and white, was not a clearly painted line, but rather it was a smooth gradient.

The room gave another rattle through its timbers, shaking us to the very quick. Nest cast one glance over her shoulder, as though to check that no one had broken through yet. "Bring the babies here!" she called.

The babies were brought forth, and Nest muttered a couple of words that seemed somehow familiar, yet I was confident I had never heard them before. One by one, she pressed two fingers against each child's forehead. Their eyes fluttered closed and they fell into a deep sleep.

"That will help you hide," Nest said, then waved her hands. "Off with ye! To the wind!"

The older children—many I suspected were siblings—took the younger children and ran to the walls. Pulling aside tapestries, they revealed hidden tunnels just large enough for a grown man to crawl through.

I hesitated, not sure where I should go. I had a feeling I should stay and fight, but I also had a notion that a human like me would be in very poor shape against fire-breathing dragons.

Nest turned to me, her eyes wild and morphing into the blood orange eyes of a dragon. “Go with Denise and the baby! Get on the walls and watch for dragons. Denise will know where. Denise!”

The girl broke from the rush and came forward. With one last glance at Nest—whose wrinkled skin was transforming into the ridged scales of a dragon. Denise said, “This way!”

Denise pulled aside a tapestry that no one else had gone to.

The tunnel made several twists and turns at the very beginning, apparently to deter flames and any claws or tails that searched after escapees, then it was straight and angled upwards. Denise and I traded carrying the baby.

It seemed to take us a long time to travel. We were both pressed to go faster. I didn't know where the other tunnels let out, but I wanted to be there to guard the opening before anyone started emerging.

“They're supposed to stay at the mouth of the tunnel 'till we give the all-clear, but that never happens,” Denise said.

Our tunnel rattled and a crack formed between us. We held still, breathless, until it stopped shifting.

“Better hurry,” I said. She nodded, eyes wide, and bolted. The tunnel grew lighter and lighter, then I was passing the baby to Denise so I could tumble out of the opening. We stood on the ramparts. For an instant I was dizzy as the air was cut through by dozens if not hundreds of dragons. I slumped against the wall and held my head, but only for a second.

“There!” Denise pointed to the foot of the wall where several small forms—some dragon, some human—raced across open ground to a hut. A dragon turned from his course and swooped.

I couldn't think. My heart stopped. All I could do was watch as the dragon loomed closer and closer. Three children made it to the hut, but the others were on a collision course with teeth and claws.

The wind changed, falling out from under the red dragon. He dropped downward, his face and claws digging into cobblestone. He rammed into a cart and let loose an angry shout, “Wind drake!”

The children made it to their hut. I thought I saw something small—something child-height but rounder—peer after them, but with the bat of an eye, the thing was gone.

“Did you do that?” asked Denise, then pointed to the next group before I could answer.

The next group was spotted, but I had enough sense to cast an illusion of a tree right in front

of them. The dragon drew upward sharply, confused.

It was all I could do to keep myself sane. The movements in the wind attracted my attention any time I let it wander. I felt like I should be doing something, I felt that I knew how to put an end to this, but I had no clue what it was I could do. I wanted very, very much to be up there in the wind. I knew where each dragon was going, what feints they were using, what their weaknesses were. But I was down here. On the ground. Watching. Waiting.

A dragon had been observing us for some time, the way a cat eyes a mouse before pouncing. I tried to urge Denise to go, but she refused to leave before everyone was safe. The dragon made her descent, and it was too late.

The dragon landed in front of us, the walkway crumbling under her weight as she leaned forward. Smoke billowed from her nostrils as she spoke. "Lost, little drake?"

Denise shook her fist at the dragon, yelling, "Just you wait till I can shift forms!"

The dragon blinked. She hadn't expected the girl to reply. She ignored Denise altogether. "Pay me respect where it is due. Show me the female that has taken the Lord's heart."

I frowned. "If you are talking about Mordon, I don't know what you are referring to."

"Don't insult me," the dragon snapped. "I know what you are. The world knows what you are. Look in your reflection."

"Look—" I started.

The dragon growled and slammed her foot down. "You look and see past your own tricks, there by your feet."

Trees were burning at the base of the wall and I shifted the wind, coating us in a thick cloud of smoke. I grabbed Denise's hand and bolted under the dragon's belly. We almost collided with a back leg, then ducked around her tail and streaked for the tower.

"You might be able to hide from me, but you can't hide from yourself!" roared the dragon before she took flight again.

Denise and I pressed against the wall,. The baby was waking up from Nest's sleep spell. His face was pressed into red wrinkles. It came as no surprise when he wailed. I bounced him a little and held him close. Denise was no help, instead growing angry.

"Ohhh...that female!" Denise shook her fist at the door. "She gets worse as time goes on."

"You know her?" I asked. I was under the impression that dragons and drakes did not introduce themselves to each other very often; she was a most confusing creature, though right now I needed to focus on the present and not wonder about her words.

"She was the one from another colony."

Something hit our tower. A few stones wriggled, casting dried chunks of mortar about my feet.

We made our way down the stairs.

The top of the tower caught fire. I nudged Denise to keep moving. We were almost to the point where a fall wouldn't kill us, but smoldering pieces of roof were falling. I worried about being hit by them.

I pulled us into a doorway—it was locked—and waited until bits of burning shingles fell by us, mist rising when fire met puddles of water on the steps. Panting, Denise looked up to me. Having nothing to say, I bounced the baby on my hip.

At last the shingles stopped falling. We continued, and I pressed our pace harder, until my calves and thighs seared with exertion and a fresh rain of shingles came down on us.

We ducked into a doorway and stood there, panting. The baby was contented now to make a fist and beat the air, his face bright red, though he had grown quiet except for the occasional scream.

“Good thing Nest gave us the one who doesn't like to talk,” Denise said.

“Don't you know his name?”

Denise stared blankly at me. “I like plants.”

“Ah,” I said, not much blaming her for not wanting to deal with the nursery.

“You haven't left Mordon alone,” she said, her voice soft as someone flew overhead.

“He hasn't left me alone.”

I rubbed my face with one cold hand. Rain was starting to fall down the shaft now instead of ashes.

Denise shivered in a draft. Calling my magic to me, I built an air cushion over the top of the tower. Rain bounced off it and the tower stopped losing heat.

“You might not be so bad,” Denise said at last.

“High praise.”

“You have no idea,” Denise muttered, but when I looked, she was smiling.

As we waited for Nest, first Denise then the baby drifted off to sleep. I picked up a piece of polished metal and looked at my reflection. It was the same as always, though more bright than last time, more feral. What had I been hoping to see? A glimpse of what I saw in all the people here? I shook my head and set it down.

A jiggling handle rattled through empty space, waking me from a light sleep. I lifted my head, rubbing my eyes. A door at the top shuddered under a blow. I checked on my sleeping companions. Creaking, the door gave way.

“Fera!” It was Mordon's voice, in little short of a panic. “Fer-a!”

"Here," I called and waved my arm. Denise groaned and hid her eyes in my shoulder, the baby squeezed his eyes shut tight.

Mordon was down the steps and kneeling next to me in no time. His eyes shimmered with fire. His shoulder bled.

"Are you well?" Mordon asked, brushing my hair back from my forehead. His fingers touched a bruise. I winced.

"I'm fine," I said, pushing myself upright. "But you look rough."

"Young dragons. They wanted to cause mischief more than actual damage." Mordon put his arms around Denise and picked her up. I stood, careful to not move the baby too much. My arms ached from holding him.

"Come," Mordon said. "We should get these two back to what's left of the nursery. They'll restore that first."

I trailed him, mostly not paying attention to where we were going, yet as we passed a mirror, the reflection made me pause.

A large gray eye, purple slit for a pupil, stared back at me. I blinked. It was gone. I dismissed it as fatigue or imagination, but the image lingered in my mind.

Denise wasted no time upon waking to retell every detail of our adventure. Like everyone else, except a few farmers who went to sleep in their barns, I slept on the floor of the mead hall.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Shadows wriggled in a house, eerie and sharp. Sounds from the past wormed their way to me—tile floors creaked like wooden panels, the dry bathroom sink made dripping noises. Cold drafts seemed to chase me everywhere as I wandered through the house. My mind drifted between my body and Railey's slippery presence. Never before was our bond so strong as when she drew strength from me.

"Railey?"

She formed next to me in the dust caught by a beam of a night light, her pigtails ruffled with spider webs.

"I'm not having any better luck."

"Are you sure it's not a bogart or wisp?"

For each *tick* of the grandfather clock, I had been hopeful that the spirit would decide to come see us, but so far nothing. We had tried rearranging the rooms and burning sage, and received a response, one that seemed scripted by a spell. Too stereotypical of what people thought ghosts said or did.

"It is a boy. Nothing else."

"Are there any spells on the place?"

"There's something cold coming from that room." She pointed to a door, and I checked it. Nothing fancy, a white panel door with a knob that opened by twisting. It was locked.

"Railey, is there any way the boy ghost will come talk to us?"

She closed her eyes and glowed a little, then the glow left with a breeze. "Maybe."

I worked on pulling the battery out of my phone, thinking that any spells inside the door might take the charge from the battery. The last thing I needed was to supercharge a ward while I was breaking in. "Railey, get that door."

I saw her pass into it, making it glow with soft blue. I felt breath on the back of my neck, rotting meat wafting over my nose.

Shrieks and hisses came from Railey's door just before her voice echoed in my ear, "Wards are gone."

Railey cracked the door open for me. I slipped in. I flicked the light switch. Not working. Rubbing the amber pendant about my neck created illumination as strong as any flash light, though I could not see the entire room at once.

"The walls!" called Railey. I turned the light onto the writing, reading slowly as ever the spells

inscribed there.

Fear gripped me from the gut to my every limb. I wanted to curl up in a corner and hide under blankets until morning came. I recognized the impulse. Terror spell. I'd encountered many of them in the past, hauntings to torment someone who did not know of magic. Focusing was difficult. I resisted looking over my shoulder.

"Skip ahead to here." Railey tapped on the wall at a place where the symbols were different from the rest. She said, "They're colonial-era demonic. This spirit we've been chasing, it isn't a spirit, or not a spirit alone. It is a spell, a spell guided by spirits trapped in it."

I squinted, but couldn't make out the symbols, as though they were words on a sign passing by too quickly. I raised the amber pendant up to the wall. The symbols wriggled before my gaze, disguising themselves. I tried to not look directly at them. That helped.

"There are nine spirits woven into the spell," said Railey. "They need four more. A spirit, a creature, a human, and a 'life-life' person."

She hesitated over the last one, as though she did not understand it. I didn't, either. Never heard the term before. "Zombie? Reincarnation?"

Railey shrugged. "Doesn't say 'death-life' or 'rebirth'."

That was a puzzle, then.

An ebony desk with a leather bound spell book caught my gaze, and I walked over to it, mindful not to step into the magic circle drawn on the floor. The book title read *Le Morte de Morgain*, and a string of lacquered phalanges served as a bookmark; I opened the book, feeling a chilled finger trace down my neck.

I dare not take the book; not only was there a risk of tripping spells, but these books tainted their caretakers, made them go mad, made them do the dark thoughts in their soul. This page marked three-quarters completion of a spell, and I couldn't stop my fingers from backtracking, from looking at the previous steps.

I paused, seeing a drawing of ceremonial bones carved with ash painted into them, trapping the souls so another could draw off their energy over extended periods of time. Unlike ordinary books, magic books would make room in the text for their users to record their spell making, becoming a series of journals as well as an educational text. It was signed Coal at the bottom of several entries. Coal kept very detailed records, and had a surprisingly crafted hand at drawing.

"Railey. That's the house."

The house she died at. The house where I lost my magic. And the date...the date was the day we went there.

"Fera," whispered Railey, though it should have been a scream. "Run."

I didn't. I wasn't going to let her slip away in this place, of all places. Fistful by fistful, I yanked out pages, tearing and maiming as many as I could. A ghost hand reached about my throat and squeezed, an uncomfortable sensation but nothing more. Screams and wails buzzed my ears, clouding my hearing so I did not know anyone was near until the door exploded in flying slivers, embedding in my back. A man stood where the door used to be.

The man was lean with an almost awkward head and hawk like nose. He wore sorcerer's robes and was as tall as a hanged skeleton.

Gregor Cole raised a wand and I screamed as white filled my vision.

"Fera, wake up. It's not real. Wake up."

I jerked away, pain searing through my muscles and down my spine. Arms and legs wrapped around me in a hard hug, tightening when I flinched. My heart raced, every beat a fresh agony. I writhed, he held firmer. I didn't know where I was or who held me. Then I smelled black pepper and spice, heard a man's low voice murmuring my full name.

"Leothwaceh."

The word was familiar. The voice was Mordon's. Sharp pains in my body lessened to an ache. My muscles went lax. My heart still rammed at a too-fast tempo, but the burning pain was tolerable.

"Leothwaceh," he whispered again.

The pain in my chest fled so suddenly I sobbed with relief.

"Fera?"

"It hurts."

"Are you awake?"

I nodded, tried to conceal a strangled gasp. Sweat turned cold.

"Get up."

"Why?" I sat up and put my arm down onto something firm yet squishy. It growled, and I remembered that I was in the colony and everyone slept on the floor of the mead hall until repairs were done. Several people were moving, disturbed from their dreams.

Quietly, I followed Mordon out of the hall littered with sleeping bodies.

In the night air, I shivered and clutched my blanket.

Another bit of memory, not just a nightmare. Funny how I hadn't considered what it would be like to actually witness that part of my lost days.

A breeze made me shudder.

“How do you hurt?”

“Oh, it's gone now.” I rubbed my chest where I'd felt my heart sear. “I'm sorry. I didn't know I was going to have that happen tonight. I didn't think I would get any other memories from Caerwyn's Recollection. What a scene to make. They'll all think I'm crazy.”

“The others will understand.” Mordon wrapped me up in a warm hug, rubbing up and down my arms.

“You'd get better sleep without me.”

“I don't prefer to sleep alone. I prefer you with me. What hurt you in the dream?”

I wasn't sure that I wanted to go back there yet. I said simply, “I died.”

He was silent for a minute, holding me a bit closer, a bit tighter. When he spoke, his voice was strained. “Tell me how.”

I was having a hard time breathing. “It doesn't really matter.”

“It matters to me. You were murdered and I need to know how.”

What chilled me most was how he said it, so collected and commanding. It felt strangely final to hear it in words.

“Why do you need to know?”

“Because I care.”

That tone. It was the one I used when I wasn't going to accept no for an answer. It was what had kept me pressing on when I thought I should give up. It was one thing Mordon and I shared in equal measure.

Heaven forbid we ever lock horns.

“The last thing I remember was when he lowered his wand. It hurt. It hurt so bad. My veins felt like fire, and my heart like it was being cut out. Why? Why would I feel that now if it happened in the past?”

“You feel pain in dreams, the same as everything else.” Mordon tucked the tail of the blanket under my arm. “The spell must have attacked your heart directly. It would be clean, efficient. Near instantaneous.”

“Not split-second?”

“You'd have been able to move for a very short time.”

“I don't get it. How did I get free?”

“The walking corpse Barnes was in pursuit of was very quick to use an Earhart compass

exactly like yours. I don't suppose you had that on hand?"

"I never go anywhere without it." I would have shown it to him as it hung about my neck tonight, but I was too wrapped up. "You think that was how I made my getaway?"

"You had limited options."

"Huh." A tickle of breath on my cheek made me relax. "You're getting to know me too well. I must be predictable if you can guess what I'd do when you've known me for such a short time."

"I feel like I've known you much longer."

"Me, too."

"The drakes have a saying. My heart speaks to your heart. It means that people can talk without using voices."

"Do you believe it?"

"Yes. It is said that two hearts must speak as one before a pair can be one of blood, one of mind, and one of bone." He paused, rocking gently back and forth. "Think you can sleep?"

"No." I kissed his hand resting on my shoulder. His fingers curled. I scraped my teeth over his knuckles.

"No?" he asked.

I tugged my hair off my neck, exposing bare skin.

"And what," he asked in my ear, "do you want me to do with this?"

A finger trailed down my neck.

I gasped. *Shut up and kiss me*, I didn't have the breath to say.

"As you wish," he said and pressed his lips to mine in a long kiss under the open skies.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

When the wind came up while we were mending the thatching, I subconsciously rerouted the air to blow ten feet higher so our roofing wouldn't be cast away. I put breezes on sweaty brows and fanned cooking fires. Using my magic had become second nature. I wondered when that had happened.

I lost track of everyone that I knew, but I felt at home surrounded by strangers. They smiled kindly and were more than eager to press something in my hands to hold until they needed it. Sometimes it was square nails, sometimes it was a drink, sometimes a wand, and on several occasions, a young child who couldn't decide between dragon and human.

My body grew tired. The wind broke my barrier and whipped through construction areas a few times before a man tapped my shoulder and lifted up his hand.

I felt the wind lift off my magic. He also was a wind elemental. I smiled; I didn't get to meet many like me.

"Go get your rations," the man said and motioned me back to the main hall.

"Thanks," I said.

Outside the hall, Nest ladled lamb stew into bowls. Hours before, I'd been with her preparing a breakfast oatmeal which included onions, sage, and slices of lamb. After this, I'd fallen into the construction activities. Any resentment people had had for me was now replaced by curiosity, and a couple of Mordon's contemporaries paid me a bit too much admiration for my comfort.

"Here you are, Feraline," Nest said as she handed me a bowl.

"Feraline!" Enaid called, shaking free of the planning committee to come see me.

She led me a discreet distance from the others and steered the committee away with a glare. "Feraline, I must give you my regrets. I was judgmental and bitter without reasonable cause. You have repaid me with far more kindness than needed."

"I didn't realize I was being particularly kind to you," I said, confused.

Enaid looked around where the workers had made most buildings new again. "I meant with your help. Guests typically don't wake up at dawn to make breakfast gruel then get passed around the colony as a helping hand."

I shook my head. "I am glad you came to talk to me, but I did this because it's natural to me—not to garner favor."

Enaid nodded, looked back at the crowd awaiting her, sighed, and moved to join them.

I climbed up stairs to the wall and sat on the scaffolding, gazing over the valley. I ate my stew quickly, savoring the coppery aftertaste in the broth. The lamb itself tasted florally with a molasses-like sweetness to it, the way the air here smelled.

"May I join you?" asked Mordon, seemingly appearing from thin air, startling me.

I glanced over my shoulder, noting that all remnants of his fights were erased from his skin. He'd changed out of his wizarding robes and into a tan tunic—though I appreciated him in other colors, tan suited him best. Nest had provided me with a similar tunic last night. It was soft and plush.

"Denise told me what she said to you." Mordon sat beside me. "I suppose you have questions for me?"

"No."

"No?" He leaned towards me, and I was relieved the scaffolding stayed in place. "Are you sure?"

"Mordon," I said. "I'll help you look for her if it's what you want."

His hand touched my cheek and I shivered. "It's not," he said, pulling back at my hesitation. "I have been chasing a ghost for years."

"Then," I asked. "What is it you do want?"

Mordon smiled, wrinkles forming under his eyes. "I think it's fair to ask what you want first."

I chewed on my lip and let out a huff of breath, saying the first thing that came to my mind. "I want to go flying."

He let out a short laugh. "And beyond that?"

"I never was much of a plan-ahead sort of person."

"Completely contradicting everything I've seen with you and your tricks."

"I think of them on the spot, I don't plan them out ahead of time."

"What if you did?"

"Really?" I asked and he nodded. I shrugged. "I get bored with them...unless I have someone to play a trick on. I did that a lot with Leif and Griff—"

"Griff?"

I sighed. "He was accidentally turned into a human and we were determined to help him. He grew jealous when I had a crush on...someone else. When he left, it wasn't a happy ending."

"And it led to you losing your magic with that curse." His voice was ice, and I shivered at the venom in his eyes.

I drew back. "I'd rather not talk about it."

"I should not have said anything," said Mordon, changing subjects. "We have some time until Leif burns us a letter. We could return to King's Ransom, or we could stick around here. I think the colony's quite taken with you."

I looked into his lion eyes, glad they were warm once again. "Think this could be home away from home?"

"Could be." He wagged a finger at me. "You've taken to this much better than Lilly had."

I laughed. "There's not a baker in sight! That woman lives on breads and sweets."

"This is true," Mordon smiled, motioning to the open, calm air over the horizon. "Feel like an evening flight? Nothing like watching a sunset from mid-air."

"People are still working."

"Different people than before. We're both out of rotation. Or is that a way to decline me?" Mordon stood up and offered his hand.

I took it.

We walked along the wall until we came to a place where there were steps carved into the cliff leading to a large flat area. Mordon called it the landing zone. Above and around, the cliff had been scraped to be completely smooth so enemies couldn't scale it easily.

Once again I was distracted examining my surroundings and didn't notice Mordon had changed until I stepped backward and tumbled over his tail. With some scraping, Mordon turned to face me, hot breath blowing in my face.

"What are you doing down there?"

I bopped his nose, succeeding only in jarring my knuckles and making him laugh. A fleck of fire fell onto my pants and I patted it out.

"You're ornery as a dragon."

He pulled his lips in a smile, revealing jagged teeth. "Would you like to go or not?"

"One sec," I said, snaring a golden red stream of hair beneath his chin. "So this is the beard you're always playing with."

A claw reached up to rake talons through it. "Ah, yes. I had not realized it was a habit of mine until you brought it to my attention."

I climbed onto his shoulders and gave him a slap. "Ready when you are."

"Hold on tight," Mordon said, his muscles bunching beneath me as he lowered into a crouch.

He launched. I had to grab him tightly. We fell a little, then he beat his wings, each powerful stroke carrying us higher and higher. I stretched in the wind, feeling how his wings sliced

through the air. We cut into a stream and he locked his wings in an effortless glide.

We weren't the only ones in the air. I caught a glimpse of a young couple—one dark red dragon and a moss green—weaving in and out of mist from a geyser, dodging away before it erupted. One of my earlier conversations had been about the geyser and how it was quite the romantic place to go. Younger drakes would challenge each other for who could stay in the stream longest. The parents did not like that game very well—it would be adolescence before the young grew scales thick enough to truly withstand the heat.

Mordon tipped to the left and brought us to face the sunset.

“We going to just sit here, or you going to show me some moves?” I teased.

Mordon looked back at me, his red scales glowing in the setting sun. “Daring little thing.”

“Let's do a barrel roll!”

I wasn't anticipating him to dip down, gather up speed, then pull up. My entire orientation abandoned me in the whirl of ground, sky, and air. I thought we were plummeting straight upwards when suddenly the ground rushed at us, then Mordon turned the opposite direction I thought he should. We continued like this for a few more loops before he flattened out. I swayed.

“Hold on,” he said. “I don't want to catch you.”

I laughed, my stomach settling again as he took things slow.

“Rolls are a tactic to slow yourself so you don't overshoot a target,” he said. “Also a way to check the air and avoid a grapple fight.”

“And dives gain you speed.”

“Yes.” A chuckle ran through his chest. “My favorite way to depart the colony is to dive off the cliff, but I did not think you would enjoy that very much.”

I shook my head, though Mordon couldn't see it.

The two drakes we had seen earlier were now doing aerial acrobatics, each was doing a barrel roll like Mordon had been, but they were at opposite ends of the roll, forming a spiral through the air.

“Rolling scissors,” mused Mordon. “Not something anyone wants to become entangled with. The first to leave has a distinct disadvantage.”

We discussed other aerial maneuvers and watched the last of the orange and purple fade from the sky. Mordon demonstrated a few more moves when I prodded him about it.

“You understand,” Mordon said as we came out of a roll where he clamped his wings to his body and spun in a dive, then shot back into the air, “most riders are happy with a leisurely glide.”

“Since when am I like most people of any sort?” I giggled as he let his body fall a little, sending my heart up to my throat.

“You are fortunate to have selected one of the best acrobats in the colony,” Mordon said proudly.

“Not the best?” I teased.

A puff of smoke washed over me. “The day anyone out flies Nest will be a day for celebration.”

“Denise said something about there being other colonies?”

“There were. Half of them were just gone, lands and all, one day. Those that were left behind suffered a series of onslaughts—everything from unicorns to gnomes and humans. Many of the survivors slipped into human villages and lived life that way. Others limped here to the colony, and we have been living like this since.”

“The children are all quite young,” I said.

“Yes. After my sister and I were born, the colony had troubles. One thing after another. We were eventually discovered one of our own was behind it, and we've had some successful hatchings since, my sister's young included. I must thank you for taking good care of him.”

“The baby? I didn't know who his parents were.”

We landed. I slipped down his shoulders. Aeron walked the last steps to speak with Mordon.

“Pardon me, but we have matters to discuss,” Aeron said in the same cool tone he used on everyone else in his colony. I gathered this meant he saw me as one of his own, not as a foreign human.

I nodded, gave Mordon a little wave, and went down to the main hall.

* * *

Enaid told me that Nest wished to speak with me, and how to find her. I followed the tunnels down until they opened up to a forested area tamed with various wildflowers.

“Nest?”

“Here, in the roses,” she said.

I came to her in a sitting area. Nest was trimming up a bush that had gone wild.

“Every year,” Nest said. “I prune these, and every year they grow back thick and luscious and boast more blooms than those which grew at their own pace. That one by your side? It started life beautifully, was strong and ready to bloom its first bud. Then came along a goat, and it ate

the bush to the ground. Oh, how I wept!"

Nest plucked off several damaged leaves with her thumbnail, rubbing them in her hand, making them disappear into nothing as she continued.

"Years passed by with no sign of improvement. I thought it had died. Nothing would grow in its place, either. But just these last few days, it grew into this. And look at it now, ripe with buds and thick with leaves, ready to burst with color. Seldom before have I seen a blue-gray rose."

I reached out, caressing a round bud with my forefinger, the bud cool and alive. A breeze whisked through, casting dogwood tree blossoms about me. The bud shuddered on my finger and expanded, unfurling rows and rows of tiny petals until a cherry-sized bloom cascaded over my fingers.

"Such a sight," said Nest, "brings me great joy."

A lightning bug glowed to life and flew up to tap my forehead, then joined other glowing bugs in illuminating the darkening sky.

"Agnes," I said, shivering. "What is this? What's going on?"

"This is my garden," she said, "and every creature's life is represented here by a plant."

She pointed next to me, to a tall rose bush with long thorns and dark scarlet petals, the two rose bushes tangled up in each other with the draping vines of the blue-gray rose wrapping about the towering scarlet stems. A moth fluttered first on a scarlet rose, then down to the blue-gray rose as Nest spoke.

"That bush is Mordon's, and this is the first year it has bloomed since the other one died."

"...what are you saying?"

Nest smiled at me and patted my hand, "Welcome to your home, future Lady of Kragdomen."

Nest soon left me sitting on a stone bench, breathing in the faint scent of honeysuckle as the moon rose and the stars came out. There was something terrifying in that rose which had bloomed in my hand, something more terrifying about Nest's prediction and the way that moth had come to rest on both flowers.

I put my face in my hands and breathed in cool air. I stared up at the purple sky with pinpricks of silver light cascading all about me. It turned leaves into waxy gleams, dark flowers darker, light flowers lighter. While most flowers closed up into a tight bulb for the night, a few opened to drink in the moon's rays. My rose, Mordon's rose, they both stayed wide and receptive of the honeysuckle breeze's caress.

I smelled pepper and nutmeg, felt the heat from searching embers before I heard Mordon's boots crunch on the path behind me, coming down the hill. His flames stood out in the moonlight, a translucent green with opaque red tips the same color as his rose had been in the evening sun. Wondering if it was common to see another wizard's magic more plainly than

your own, I made a mental note to look it up in *Skills*, no matter how many articles it made me write for the information.

When Mordon sat down beside me, he chose to be close, our knees almost touching. My stomach fluttered. He gazed at the joined rose bush before us, eyes lingering over the almost-black petals resting against the nearly-white petals. My breeze stirred them to life, a tiny dance like ripples on a pristine spring.

Mordon took in a deep breath. I wondered if he smelled my magic the way I smelled his spiced flames flicking in fine wisps around us, excited, nervous, joyful. I met his eyes engorged with the dim light of the evening. I lingered on his lean jaw, his wet lips. He glanced away, his magic shied back. I smiled just a little.

"Nest," I said, letting my voice flow casually, "said that gray-blue rose just came up to bloom."

He smiled and shook his head, "That woman never tells anyone which plants represent whom. Tradition, you see. She tends the garden, and depending how well she tends it is how well the colony survives. It's a role passed down from one tender to another."

I looked up the hill, past the bushes, and saw the shine of a window high up on the hill. The colony might help me restore the overgrown path to it. My tongue dashed over my lips again as Mordon's hand brushed my leg when he leaned forward in contemplation.

"I wonder who that bush is. A potent child? A newly shifted adult? I wonder..."

"The red bush is you," I murmured.

"And the other?" he whispered, casting a long look down to my ring, his eyes intense and bright with hunger.

I flushed, too tongue-tied to admit who the gray rose was, equal parts terrified and giddy. My mind seemed to float with the tingling in my fingers, the sudden loss of breath. For an instant, I felt like I was floating over my body, expecting my skin to shift into scales.

Then that instant was gone, and Mordon's fingers were on my cheek, snagging my soft peach fuzz with calloused skin. He ran his knuckles gingerly over my cheekbones, held my ear lobe with searching fingers, curled then under my jaw and pulled my face closer to his.

My heart thumped, not in a wild manner, but in a strong tandem, seeming to beat in rhythm with his. Heat rolled off his skin, cold air tickled my back and down my throat. I gazed into his lion eyes, swallowing when I saw love radiating from him deeper than the passion of the moment. I was chilled to the bone with the realization that I felt the same.

When had I fallen in love? Who was he? But when he brought his lips close to mine, his fingers ruffling the loose strands of my bun, I did not pull back; I slid forward.

My lips met his warm, soft ones, feeling the snare from a healing bloody lip I hadn't noticed he'd gained, feeling his lips enveloping my bottom one, feeling his tongue flick my parted lips.

I shivered. He did it again and I opened my mouth more, but his tongue darted in to stroke the inside of my lip.

I was breathing honeysuckle and spice now, the air around me thrumming with the life of waving fire. A noise—a moan—escaped my throat, and I blushed hotly when he pulled away, a smug grin dashed over his face. There was a flame inside his eyes, and my face grew hotter at what they implied. His strong arm eased me against his chest. He rested his chin on my hair. I listened to his heart slow and quiet beneath my ear. He kissed my head, gave me a possessive squeeze.

I wanted to feel his lips again, but he wouldn't let me move from my position, most likely for the better. I pried loose one arm and reached up to stroke his rough jaw, meeting with his nose by accident. His wet lips enclosed my fingertips and his teeth gave a slight nip. I giggled, a shrill noise in the plant life that somehow fit in place as easily as dewdrops, and drew my arm back to my body.

“What would you like to do now, My Beloved?” his voice thrummed through his chest.

The answer came without thinking. “I'd like to teach potions. Proper classes.”

“You could hold them at King's Ransom.”

“It's what I was thinking...and you? Going to do more puppeteering? I can't sew or carve, but I could help with a good light show.”

His hand froze midway from stroking my arm, as though he hadn't thought about puppeteering professionally. “You could make Merlyn's spells look real, and the kids wouldn't have to just rely on acting.”

“Easy.”

“I'd still like to keep my shop.”

I snorted. “You mean your hoard.”

“I sell stuff,” he defended without fervor. “Though, not the good stuff.”

“Mm-hmm,” I said and snuggled into his arms.

“Well?”

“You don't need my permission. Besides,” I added, twisting to lay light kisses on his jaw since that was all I could reach. “I need a meeting place for classes.”

He drew in a ragged breath, held tensely still until I drew back, then kissed me roughly, one hand supporting my neck, one hand on the small of my back. I lost track of time to the heady pleasure, stretching out my neck to invite him, and he happily accepted.

I caught sight of an ember burning in the air above us, a paper forming in the reverse burn of a letter being delivered. It landed in his hair, still burning. I plucked it before the fire could

spread.

He smelled the smoke, settled back and sighed. “Who?”

“Later?” I meant for it to be assertive, but it came out as a question.

That smug grin took hold of his face again as he took me in, more than half sprawled in his lap. I flushed and sat up, not caring when the letter disappeared from my hand.

“We should go,” he said.

“In a bit.” I kissed him. He kissed me back, but wouldn't be tempted to linger his lips on my neck again.

“We should get you to bed.”

I snuggled up to him. “Yeah, we should.”

“To our respective beds,” he growled as he shook me off.

As we hiked back up the hill, the cool air devoid of spiced honeysuckle brought some sense back into me. I watched his back, grateful that one of us had the mind to keep a vigil on what we were doing. Focusing on the twists and turns of the colony's castle helped keep my mind distracted from lavishing attention on his powerful chest, his thick arms, his lean waist.

When we reached my door, I found my wiles hadn't been banished. I insisted on a goodnight kiss. He chased me away when my fingers sought bare skin up the back of his shirt. Holding me tight in a fierce hug, he whispered roughly, “If you really, really want me to stay I will.”

It was enough to jar me back to reality. I let him go.

He gave me a kiss on the forehead. I listened to his footsteps fade away like the pulse of my heart.

The rooms here had no doors in case a child became stuck in their dragon form. Curtains instead hung in the arches, appropriate to the individual's taste and style. My room had a garden tapestry hanging in the doorway, and I contemplated the embroidery in silence.

I looked at the bed, poked it, and discovered a straw-filled mattress scented with lavender flowers. The bedspread itself was a simple blanket made from black and white wool, a twill pattern woven into it. I flopped down on the bed, knowing there would be no sleeping tonight. I laid awake.

What was I doing slobbering over him like...like some lamb swoons over a vampire reeking with glamour magic? I had to keep from thinking of his eyes, or else my pulse would quicken again and I gained a goofy grin that belonged to a teenager. I had my own future to tend to... didn't I?

One way or another, it included him. I couldn't—I wouldn't—abandon Leif and Lilly. *Mordon*, I reminded myself, *stop switching subjects*. How would our changed relationship influence the

rest of the coven? Did I want to announce it? Was it even possible to deny it at this point? I could tell him to ignore me.

Mordon would do as I wanted him to.

The thought rocked me. I knew he would, because he loved me and would respect whatever wishes I had, but the thought of him ignoring me stung. I wanted to pull out my hair, fed up with my own indecision.

A noise came down the hall. Scratchy, gnarly voices that rang in my distant memory. Gremlins. I held still, moving my hand up to the narrow chain about my neck, slipping the invisibility ring on my finger. I flattened myself on the floor, watching under the tapestry.

A knee-tall troupe passed by. They pulled aside a curtain, peered inside, and grumbled about if the occupant “could work” or not. They were overwhelmed about their options.

Gremlins were possibly the only creature popular artwork did justice to—large ears, large eyes, angular faces, dumpy frames, gangly arms and legs. I'd had a few encounters with them in the past, and always when I was around my parents during an active mission. They were rumored to have been bred by a dark overlord of times long gone, suited for fodder and only the most basic of missions, though their nasty teeth and claws made up for their lack of mental capacity.

I undid my shoes and followed after them in my socks, not in the least bit tired after everything Mordon had given me to think about. To my disappointment, most of the time I spent following them was relatively uneventful and I had too much time to ponder on my relationship with Mordon.

I almost ran into the gremlin trailing the rest, stopping and leaning comically over him, my arms outstretched for balance. He squinted and studied my face. I held my breath. He took one gnarled finger and swished it under his nose in an exaggerated itch, then stuck his nail up one nostril and pulled out an orange string of mucus. He looked at it, frowning and making a “hmm” sound. Then, he ate it, smacking his lips with a toothy smile.

He walked away. I took a minute holding my hand up to my mouth, just breathing and focusing on not gagging. Had it meant that I would not have been subjected to seeing that, I would have gladly been caught eavesdropping.

I followed at a greater distance now, coming within hearing range just in time to witness a gremlin spat.

“Master wants one fast!” a green one said and shoved a brownish one into a wall.

“Master needs a right one! One chance, he said!” defended the brown. The others hissed and cheered on the fight.

“Chak missed one chance with children running away,” the green one accused.

“Kek spent too long in field waiting for perfect time that never came,” the brown one, Chak, reprimanded, “must be a shifter! Kek never going to catch shifting drake in the field. Let's take one from the bed. Then Morgana be Master.”

But Kek had had enough of tolerating Chak. With one pounce and shredding claws, Chak was left as a bloodless heap upon the ground, nothing more than a shredded rag with no face, no heart, no dead eyes to glaze over as the life left the body. Just a brownish, tattered pile of decomposing burlap, a puppet with its strings snapped.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

I started the morning brew in the kitchens off the end of the mead hall, waking up even the notoriously early-rising Nest. Wiping sleepers from her eyes, she took the cup I offered her without comment. I was on my second cup, my mind spinning between my new heart flutter and the image of the damp burlap laying at the foot of the castle walls.

“Nest?” I said, then stopped. Then tried again and failed.

“A drake does not learn to fly with slow wing beats. It dives off the wall and lets the wind fill its wings. Even if it only glides, it has soared farther than the one too frightened to jump off a table,” Nest said, sipping at her drink steaming in the morning chill.

“I wasn't asking about flying.”

“Weren't you?”

“Why did he kiss—” I started, then stopped, realizing she'd answered that question.

“How can I—” I stopped again. She'd answered that question, too.

“Jump off the wall, little one. Then you'll fly.”

It hardly seemed like good literal advice to give to the wingless variety of creatures, but I considered its value.

“How do you know?” I finally asked a question her cryptic answer hadn't already answered.

“I know all my colony does,” Nest said, then raised her head, regarding me proudly. “And so will you, future Lady of the Kragdomen Colony.”

My heart stopped, and I shook my head. “I don't know.”

“Over time. Over time, the lady will grow in you and I will train it. You have time, so long as I have time.” Her cup set down on the table with a thump. “You already have your first task as lady. You saw the gremlins that have been here. It is up to the Lord and the Lady to tend to such trifles. Go, go bring him his breakfast now. I will tend to the others.”

I wasn't positive which curtain was Mordon's and it took a bit of walking around asking questions to early risers to find him. I didn't mind, despite the curious glances, knowing smiles, and the occasional wink. I was too busy thinking of this morning to ponder on their actions.

While my relationship with Mordon was an option, Nest had taken me as her successor and would not let me loose from my duties with her—at least not for any extended period of time. I considered these turns in my life. How Death hadn't given me an option of getting my magic back or not. How Railey had just been snatched away. How Lilly had assumed I would rejoin

her coven. Had I agreed to everything all along?

I could have refused to meet Death. Railey had. I could have turned away from Lilly. I hadn't. Perhaps part of life was accepting change, making the most of it, and being amiable when it changed yet again.

I stared out the window at a sky with pink and orange clouds. Every dawn was the same routine, but with minor changes that never repeated themselves. I looked down at the morning brew that had stopped steaming, then ducked into what I hoped was the right curtain.

Mordon had an easterly facing window in his room. He smiled upon seeing me. He was out of bed wearing pants, holding up a shirt and poking his finger through a ripped hole. The rush from the morning brew now hit me thickly, heat racing across my body.

"Brought you brew to drink," I said, putting the cup down on a small chest, the only furniture in the room aside from the bed.

When I looked at him, I'd expected—or at least hoped—to find his chest to be muscles and big ribs. I hadn't expected to see his front and back cross-hatched with fine white scars from what could only have been a fight he hadn't fared too well in. Encouraged by Nest and possibly the brew, I stepped forward and ran my fingers over the scars. Mordon shivered, offered no explanation for the scars, and brought my chin up into a long kiss. Tracing my shoulder blades, his fingers came up over my shoulder. I playfully batted his hand away.

"You come here just to tease?" he growled, holding me close.

"I came to bring you breakfast."

"That's what I thought," he said and kissed me again. When I tried to squirm away, he sunk his teeth lightly into my shoulder. I shrieked in surprise. A smile crooked lopsided over his face as he met my eyes. "You have no idea what that means, do you?"

I scowled. "Nest."

He laughed his rich velvet laugh and let me go, reaching for his drink. "I should have expected, my apologies. It isn't the first time she's done this to someone, though she's never done it to me before."

I sat on his bed, too flustered to squeeze by him to slip away, but also I had a desire to not leave. I needed to stop letting my emotions get the better of me. "Isn't there some ceremony you drakes have before...you know...or is it a socially accepted free-for-all?"

He choked on his drink, coughed, and laughed. Annoyance shot through me. Though I doubted he was laughing *at* me, staying up all night had cut my tolerance short.

I pushed past him and thundered my way to the mead hall, intending to...what, give Nest a piece of my mind? Ask her my question instead?

I ended up sitting in the morning light. Nest brought me out a bloody, seared steak and eggs

just as runny. I accepted the apology and ate them, nursing a slightly achy bitten shoulder. Bites? Really? Then again, he did have a dragon form, and biting was something I could very easily envision dragons using as affection.

Enaid too casually paused by my table. "I heard you brought my son breakfast this morning."

I tried not to roll my eyes or scoff, failing in both attempts. "Nest suggested it. Mordon enlightened me on the hidden meaning."

"Ah," Enaid said, casting a look half way between a question and a glare at Nest. "And how well did that go over?"

"I escaped with only one bite."

Enaid snickered and hid her smile behind a fist, then said, "Nest...is Nest, and I'm afraid she never explains to anyone what she does nor why. Are you well?"

"Fine. Though, a bite?"

"It means he likes you," Enaid said, then added brightly, "Oh, yes, I packed you two some meat and supplies in that bag by the door."

Enaid left at the first sign of trouble: two men bickering over a chicken that looked like age had maimed it more than the dog cowering behind the other man's legs.

Mordon entered the main hall, fully dressed and positively preening over my morning visit, too jovially accepting the verbal calls, jabs, whistles, and growls that were directed at him. Not able to pinpoint a specific issue I had with him, I instead ignored him.

I ignored the crack of the letter as he opened it. I ignored the sag of the bench as he sat beside me. I stuck out my lip and ignored him between curious glances.

Sitting in the yellow glow of the sunlight through a stained glass window, he bore a calm smile, eyes too intent on reading and rereading the letter before him. The jig was up when his lion eyes darted up from the letter to meet mine.

I sighed, not able to either maintain my false irritation nor resist my curiosity any longer. "What does it say?"

Mordon arched an eyebrow, and I wondered if he was going to be a jerk about telling me. In the end his lips curved into the barest hint of a smile, something I might have been imagining.

"Leif wants us to physically retrieve them. Apparently Barnes removed all portals when the delegation members started to either leave or kidnap other members. The gryphons won't use their magic in front of humans, and the sphinx won't let humans construct portals without going through the proper zoning and permit regulations, and all three of them being representatives of the law, they can't claim ignorance."

For some reason, this sort of thing tended to happen to Leif. I pointed to the bag by the door.

“Your parents gave us meat and who knows what else. Also, you should have all the children kept indoors today.”

“Why?”

I pulled the small chain from under my shirt to show him the invisibility ring. He recognized it.

“What if someone saw you?” His face darkened, his furrow appeared heavy between his brows. “How are you supposed to stay safe if you look for trouble?”

I leaned back and crossed my arms. “How can I resist when it walks by my door?”

Mordon reached for me, but checked himself, and settled for folding his hands together. “You aren't on your own anymore. You have me—you have a coven who relies on you.”

“Didn't stop me before, won't now,” I said, knowing full well he meant that he relied on me. I pushed on before he could correct me. “I think they're planning to resurrect Morgana.”

“Morgana?” he repeated, looking around.

“Unless there's a living one running around, but I thought it was on the 'banned' names list.”

Mordon's circle flared to life around us, burning hotter than necessary to keep eavesdroppers away.

“If you're going to talk like this,” he said, jabbing his thumb at the flames around us. “Circle. Always.”

“Noted,” I said. “I think they've been seeking out components for bringing her back. It's the only thing that makes sense—don't give me that look, I helped my parents on a case of demon resurrection and it was just like this, except we didn't know until Father was in the sacrifice circle. I think we can trap these guys, but we have to do it before they take anyone here.”

Mordon had his hand up to stop me. “They want one of us?”

“A 'shifter'. So, I was thinking—”

“Who did you hear this from?”

“Drakes aren't the only creatures here,” I said airily. At his raised brows, I added, “Gremlins.”

“And they said all this at your door?”

“There was following involved. So, as I was saying—”

“Did you get any sleep at all last night?”

Glaring at him, I heaved a breath and said, “No, and even if I had gone to bed, I wouldn't have slept, Sir Smoochalot.”

“What are you talking ab—”

"The short version is that not once have I had dating turn out well. Can we get back to planning?"

"For someone with poor experiences, you're terribly keen on me."

"You're...you're..." I dug around for a word, any word that would describe how I lost my senses around him. "I don't know."

My cheeks were hot, my stomach roiled, and I felt a sheen of nervous sweat break out on my back. Mordon was looking at me. I couldn't look back. Forget what Nest said about taking a leap, looking over the edge was too mortifying to imagine actually taking the plunge.

I jerked a little when Mordon cupped my chin in his hand. Reluctantly, I met his gaze.

"I will never cause you harm. I have made few other promises in my lifetime. I can't be certain of how you feel, but know that you are the one and only I shall love. You are the song in my heart, my comfort, my joy, and I will do anything for your well-being."

I don't know why I said what I did next, but it spat out at him like cold water skitters over a hot pan. "And what of your gray dream dragon? Will I be so quickly dismissed?"

His brow furrowed. I realized with a chilling stab that my words had cut deep. His grip on my chin tightened just a little and each word he spoke fell neatly into the air between us.

"I scoured the earth and the heavens for her. She's dead or gone, and I do not care which at this point. Were she here, I would not cast a glance her way." His words did not soften, but grew more intense. "You have my brood ring—that is the ceremony you asked about, the ceremony before consummation... You have my heart, my body, my soul, and I ask you not take that lightly."

I was spellbound, my heart still in my throat, his circle around us a wall of fire reaching up to the ceiling, the floor beneath bubbling molten rock, and through it all, he did not notice nor did it put a dent in his energy reserves. Not able to speak, I simply stared at him.

Someone yelled at him to stop melting the floor, and without even looking at it, he calmed the circle down to snapping embers.

He looked down to the table and I could breathe again.

"Tell me your plan."

I was dizzy. My plan? *My* plan? Why didn't we just forget *my plan* and turn his flames onto whatever building they were using instead? I'd known he was powerful, but perhaps even Barnes did not know the magic of the Drake Lord they had roped into their cozy little circle. Even as I was thinking this, the practical side of me took over control and started talking.

I told him my plan, and for an instant he seemed remorseful, as though regretting his outburst. The practical side of him came to light, too, and he said, "I will be the bait."

"I thought you'd be the anchor."

"Leif is a better anchor, Barnes a better tracker, and you need to guard Lilly."

"I won't have you go alone." Though from the way the floor still gave lazy burps and Mordon was unphased, my objection was moot even to myself.

"I'm the best option."

I smelled the boiling rock and sighed. "Fine. Do you still have that knife I enchanted?"

Chapter Twenty-Nine

I worked on the final preparations for Mordon's finding spell while waiting for Mordon to ferry the rest of our group to me. Three more times I explained the plan, once each to Lilly, Leif, and Barnes. Or rather, I explained it twice to Lilly. Barnes saw the spell I was working on and finished it for me.

"There has got to be a better idea than playing storm the evil fortress!" Lilly declared.

"It's this or we go to the sorcering council and jump through heaps of loops and by the time they are willing to do something, it will be too late," I said with a shrug at her oversimplification. Sadly, it was an accurate description.

"I don't like it," she said.

I didn't much like it, either.

"I like the Storm the Evil Fortress Plan. Simple, to the point, and best of all, it sounds like war," said Barnes with a toothy grin.

Lilly rolled her eyes.

Leif looked up from helping Mordon stabilize my compass trinket. "Constable, I hope if this is reminiscent of combat it is closer to a battle than to a war."

"We will see," said Mordon. "Here's the knife, Barnes. Fera, you'll have to give him a breath of wind as soon as—"

"—as soon as he does that hand-wavy thing and flicks his fingers."

Mordon nodded, but his eyes were wary. He hadn't liked me using his spell with modifications for the entire group, but there wasn't much to be done about it.

Lilly hesitated. "This is gray magic."

I put my arm over her shoulder. "The coven that grays together, stays together."

Leif stared at me, unamused, while Barnes snickered. Leif said, "That was terrible."

I gave him a mock-bow.

Barnes started on the spell, this one more of a ritual using hand motions rather than one which required words. Though I followed it in my head without problems, one look at Lilly was all it took for me to see that she was utterly lost. Leif was only a little better. Mordon's mouth was a grim line.

I was eager for my cue in the same way a hound anticipates a fox hunt. I shouldn't be so excited for this, but I was. I should be frightened. I was frightened. My palms were sweaty, my throat had a lump in it, and my hands quivered. But I was also looking forward to my second

chance to get this right. This time, I would have Railey. I had to.

Mordon finished his part of the spell and drew the blade over his palm. Blood welled in its wake, dripping off his little finger onto the center of the circle on the sand. As drop after drop fell, I suddenly felt sick. Just the sight of him bleeding made me feel nauseous and dizzy, surprising me very much. If it were me bleeding, I wouldn't think twice about it. Why fret over a simple skin break?

I almost missed my cue, but I remembered just in time to make the wind follow the pattern on the ground. I was entranced by the pattern itself. Closing my eyes, I felt like I was winding through a maze, washing up each turn, racing down the straightway, then spinning in the center. For an instant, I felt I was being pulled into a tunnel like water down a drain. On the other side, I felt the enemy, standing guard, ready.

I swayed on my feet, and realized I was back with the others and Barnes was solidifying the spell. I had never left, but I couldn't think of a rational explanation for what I had experienced. Mordon's eyes darted up to mine and I gave him a weak smile.

I said nothing about the ambush as the others were preparing to step through the gaping black hole in the air in front of Barnes. I had an idea about how to cope with it, and I didn't want the others to freeze up or be nervous.

"Barnes and I should go first, with Mordon taking up the rear," I said with an authoritativeness I didn't feel.

Leif approved, though he frowned at me, knowing I wasn't telling all. I refused to offer the information. Barnes put his hand through the hole. "After you."

I stepped into the darkness and was swept off my feet by a current, almost losing the invisibility ring I was putting on. I rolled with hard twists and turns, the magic pulsing about my ears and chilling me to the bone with its clammy touch. Something tried to snag my clothes. It might have been my imagination or the wind in my ears. I gasped for a breath, inhaling the stench of molding seaweed.

My feet skidded across stone and gritty sand. Rolling, I stopped in a kneeling position. Before my eyes could adjust to the dim light or the other side could start their trap, I touched the ground and cast a fey circle. Spells rammed it before the circle fully closed and the circle sprang to life, casting luminescence into the shadows. Several more spells energized the circle when Barnes thudded next to me, not even disoriented.

"Gremlins, pixies, and an ogre," Barnes said. He pointed, almost hitting me in my invisible face. "Take down the ogre, I'll work on the rest."

I touched the circle and the energy flowed into me, but instead of releasing it harmlessly like before, I pulled it together into a ball the size of my head and shot it into the shadowy area Barnes had indicated.

Much to my relief, the ogre was closer than I thought. The energy bolt sunk into his chest, blowing him backwards and taking smaller opponents with him. The ogre hung in the air for a second, then his head cracked against a stone and he was still.

I staggered, dizzy, my vision darkened for a few seconds. I could hear Barnes and gremlins fighting in the distance, but I couldn't see them. Someone else entered the fray, skidding like me, landing on their butt. Then another two people came through. There was a shriek and two muttering voices.

Flashes of Mordon's fire bolts illuminated Leif helping Lilly to her feet. Mordon's fire was directed at the pixies amassing in swarms. Nest had once referred to pixies as clouds. Now I understood why. They were like thunderclouds made from gigantic hornets.

No one tried to make a light yet, letting Barnes take advantage of the dark for as long as was possible. I ducked a flaming bolt and tried to organize my scattered thoughts.

Lightning streaked from Leif's wand, dropping several pixies to the ground. The line through the cloud was quickly filled back in. Closing my watering eyes against the blinding light, I focused on the wind around the pixie swarm closing in on the trio.

I could feel their wing beats, frantic as a hummingbird and just as noisy, and I reached out to the air, making the resistance against their wings stop. They fell to the floor, shouting in high-pitched squeals. Despite needle-like swords, Leif crushed any underfoot that he could, searing them with lightning while Mordon shifted into his dragon form.

With one fiery breath melting sand to glass, the pixies stopped moving. Molten earth and overcooked dinner filled my nose; I sneezed. Mordon swung his head and didn't stop in time. I ducked beneath his chin, brushing it with a hand, finding that his scales were warm from breathing fire. Mordon smelled me and looked away.

The air filled with thousands of humming wings. I winced, not looking forward to when they came. The noises from Barnes and the gremlins had stopped. I hoped that was a good sign.

"Fera? Where are you?" It was Leif.

"By Mordon."

"Can you do that again?"

I felt the wind and gritted my teeth. "They're farther apart this time. It's too big an area."

Brilliant light filled the cavern, making me squeeze my eyes shut. Even so, I saw red through my eyelids and I could not adjust to the pain fast enough, my heart thudding from being startled. I should have asked Lilly to hold up a light so we couldn't have been blinded like this.

Eyes watering, I forced them open, saw past purple splotches. Barnes was in physical combat with a woman, wrestling for her staff.

Buzzing grew louder and louder in my ears. We were ringed by thousands of hovering pixies

—and below them, ten sorcerers were in the beginning of a chant. I didn't know what chant it was, but my bet was that it wasn't going to be good.

Sucking in a breath, I pulled the wind into a single burst, crashing pixies and tiny swords down into the flesh of the sorcerers. It was more effective than I thought it would be, causing several to jump in surprise, a couple to cry out in shock—which disturbed their neighbors—and one pixie even jabbed his sword into another's eye. Not every sorcerer was distracted, though, and I blinked watering eyes in time to see a wand lowered in my direction. A green light exploded from its tip. I sprawled over Mordon's claw, coming to rest on hot, ridged glass.

Glad I hadn't cracked my head over the stone, I pulled the invisibility ring off and stowed it in a pocket. If there were at least two vampires here, it wouldn't do me any good. Magic-using vampires were a bit of a rare find, and I wondered who had the money and connections to bring them together.

“Lilly!” cried Leif.

Lilly lay unmoving over a bed of stones, a glowing trail of smoke leaving her chest. Leif was not far, but he scarcely took one step before pixies dove on him.

“Get the eyes! The eyes! The nose!” a chorus of shrill voices cried, but they weren't after Leif. Above us was cloud so thick they blocked out the light.

I yelled, “Mordon! Get away from here!”

He stopped his snapping, each mouthful slaying a swarm, to look at me and nod. As he moved away, most of the pixies went with him.

“Leif, hold your breath.”

My energy was whittling already but I put my hands together then pulled them apart, drawing air away from around Leif's head. My hope had been that the pixies would fall, but as they fell they clung to his clothes, ears, and face, stabbing him. He worked with his hand, shooting bolts, then took to grabbing them by the handful.

My vacuum fell, and he took the panting pixies, crushing them beneath his boots. He reached Lilly, coming under fire from sorcerers, his cheek a pincushion to so many swords.

I took a step towards them, walking into a puddle of melted ice. The cold seeped up my leg, numbing up to my knee, and my skin grew even more frosty. Crawling up my leg was a black shadow, dark cirrus clouds leading the way up my thigh. I couldn't feel my foot past dull deadness and thumps against the floor.

“Leif!” I yelled, taking the compass from about my neck and hurling it. He caught it.

I didn't know where Barnes was, but when I checked on the sorcerers next, there were only five still standing. Barnes moved from one shadow to the next in a way that didn't seem possible for a human to do, striking his opponents and disappearing before they could turn

around.

A roar shook the cavern as Mordon crashed to the floor in a roll, squishing pixies, his tail flashing out and hitting Griff. I ducked beneath a wing, receiving a pixie across my shoulders. It giggled and stabbed me, thrusting the needle deep into the muscle in my back. I slammed my hands together and the air crumpled the tiny form, smashing it as effectively as two heavy books would have.

The shadow was now about my hips, and I was losing all sensation. I fell to my knees, checked that Mordon was on the ground, and started to pull the air around in a slow dust devil. It caught the pixies off guard. I smashed them into a wall. I heard more buzzing, but it was distant. Too distant. The shadow was up to my ribcage. I fought to maintain connection with my magic.

Gregor's voice flowed through the cavern. "I knew it would be too great a task for you to manage this ambushade, Griff, but I do love being proved correct. Get out of my sight. Let me contain the situation."

Leif had not yet left; he didn't seem to know how to make the chain longer and Lilly was pale. Leif was shaking, kneeling over her still body, deflecting spells as they came. Since I couldn't walk, I rolled to them when Gregor closed his eyes.

Gregor raised his arms and shouted two words that hung in the air like knives. I crawled over Lilly to yank more links into the chain. She had no response. No breathing. I saw now why her brother had failed to lengthen the chain; he could scarcely clench his fist for all his shaking.

"You can't do any good here," said Leif, gritting his teeth. "You'll need to come back with us."

"Two is the limit for the compass. You and Lilly. Get her better," I said, tossing the chain over both of them before Leif could object.

The compass took them away.

I let out a slow breath, wondering what was to be done with the thing wrapped about my waist, wondering how Mordon was going to get away with his life, wondering what I had gotten us all into. Determined, I examined the situation again.

Gregor no longer looked very human. His bones were growing, stretching skin that somehow kept getting thinner, becoming a nearly transparent membrane. Decay and lesions mottled his body and the stench of the grave wafted off him, coming with each breath past his bloody lips. Sunken eyes, shoved deep in their sockets, glowed red as he looked about.

"A wendigo," said Barnes in my ear. I jumped. He pulled me into a sitting position.

"What is it?"

"It's what cannibals can turn into. With every victim, they grow in proportion to their meal so their hunger only intensifies."

Gregor spoke, his voice raspy and clotted, as though it came from a throat filled with soil, "You have recited the Mother Goose version of the tale. Tell her the Brothers Grimm. Tell her what happens when I eat sorcerers."

My stomach lurched. I had a horrific idea that black magic, cannibalism, and sorcerers equaled out to be a terrible monster...a monster with great magic and greater greed. Barnes read my expression and said, "It's worse."

I didn't want to find out what could be worse than that. I was fighting back images of Gregor wearing a suit, sitting to a candlelit table and calmly eating a serving of human steak, washing it down with a glass of wine. That was how I saw him doing it, at least at first. Later, would he simply rip into raw flesh? Tear into it with all the savagery that cannibalism conjured?

And I realized the reason for the ambush. I did not know who his victims had been, but they weren't as high profile, or as powerful, as any one of my companions.

"Barnes?" I asked, but he was already thinking the same thing, and from the annoyed twitch of his mustache, Barnes was not going to have anything to do with being a meal.

"Imagine. After today, I will be peerless." Gregor spat thick specks of blood past long, broken teeth.

"You won't touch her," Mordon growled, the rumble making dirt tumble down from the cavern ceiling.

"I was not planning on it. Not yet. Once Morgana Le Fey assumes her body, I will eat them both. Imagine, a sorcerer worse than the sworn enemy of Merlyn. The lambs will have no choice but to submit, and once again the sorcerers will have no reason to hide behind portal doors and pretend they do not exist."

Gregor could have continued, but Mordon interrupted him with a burst of fire unlike anything I had seen him do before. The rocks oozed and bubbled and pixies too close had their wings combust, then fell onto the lava before folding into the mire. I almost felt bad for them. The firestorm continued as Barnes turned to me.

"Is there any way to get this thing off?" I asked, holding my arms away from my body. From the armpits down, I was lost in black clouds. I couldn't feel anything anymore, but with my chest growing colder, I was encompassed in shakes and shudders.

Barnes reached for a curl of the fog and seized it. He started pulling it back, pulling it away, but it slipped out of his grasp time and again. Brow sweating, he tried again, and again, until the ground shook as Mordon's body collapsed against it and the cavern trembled with his pants.

"It's like there are hundreds of wills fighting my own," said Barnes.

My nightmares were becoming real.

A wet, hacking laugh echoed to us. Past the waving heat rays and the red flows of rock stood the wendigo, his skin blackened and peeling back to reveal bleeding flesh and white bone.

"Barnes," I whispered. "You and Mordon find a way to get out of here. He can't have your strength."

"I can't leave you," said Barnes. "And neither will Mordon."

I shut my eyes and I felt the tug of the sea. "Barnes," I said. "I know how to do this."

Mordon's roar echoed through the cavern again, and I saw the wendigo on his back, tearing up scales with bony claws. Barnes scrambled up Mordon's shoulder, his hands black with magic.

Ignoring the stench of seared rotten meat, I turned back to the vase, looking at the painted woman, noticing her blue eyes. My hand shook on its path toward her.

A dark, forked tongue wrapped around my arm and pulled it toward the misty mouth of the shadow around my waist. It squeezed. Looking down, I saw a serpentine shape taking the form of an eastern dragon. I thought that I'd dreamed him sometime.

I couldn't breathe. If he didn't let go of me, I was going to drag hundreds of souls with me. I hesitated, and the dragon gained a few more inches. Then I stretched out my arm again, my fingers wavering, almost ready to touch the vase when something hit me over my head and my eyelids dropped.

Chapter Thirty

My consciousness faded in and out, but I awoke to the rustle of feathers, the scrape of talons, and an eagle's white head jutting over me. Propping myself up onto my elbows, I snapped at the gryphon before me. "What do you want? Where am I?"

"Awaiting your destiny," Griff said, his talons gleaming as they crossed the dusty floor.

It was like a dream, one where I was aware that it was happening and knew that reality was askew.

Despite my dizziness and the distant tingling in my arms and legs, I pushed myself to sit upright. "I'm fine with destiny, but I don't want to wait."

The shadow was still about my body, however it seemed to have stopped about my shoulders, as though it were sleeping. It was as though it were waiting for Griff to speak with me.

Gryphons had unusual and uncharted powers. They preferred to keep it that way. I realized that the place he held me in was not a real place, not quite. It was half way between reality and a dream.

Griff didn't seem to have heard me. He was enraptured with his own image reflected in the remnants of a shattered mirror. He said, "That drake is dead, and you are destined to be Morgana's vessel...unless you give me your consent."

I narrowed my eyes. "You wouldn't have something to do with my destiny, would you?"

Griff spoke to the mirror, laying his impeccably clean feathers flat as he ignored my words. "I left a small scroll for you in your pocket. Read it and you can join me in the skies. It is what you have always dreamed: To fly free, to soar through the clouds. Read it. Come with me."

I found the tightly wound scroll no longer than my forefinger. I unfurled the roll, but I didn't read it. "You said the drake was dead."

Griff answered with a nod, a sharp jab with harsh eyes, a completely inhuman response.

"Which drake?" I pressed.

The gryphon cocked his head in the mirror. "The one that's been tricking you. He led you into this. He endangered your life, and I am here to save you."

Griff had read too many of the old fairy tales. He possibly thought humans easy to manipulate—which they might well be, but I wasn't just human. I was part fey, and feys didn't take well to being toyed with.

"Tricking me?" I repeated.

“Perhaps himself, too. He doesn't love you—he might think it, but the only one he will ever love is his dream dragon. Trust me, I know how these drakes work, and I swear to you you will lose him as soon as she sticks her nose into the room.”

I shouldn't have listened to a word Griff said, but I did. His words struck a chord, no matter that just an hour or two earlier, Mordon had told me otherwise.

My body shook as I got to wobbling feet, to no apparent interest of Griff. Even now he wouldn't spare me a dart of the eyes. I wondered if it had something to do with whatever spell he had put in place just now. The parchment crumpled in my fist. “You swear that Mordon, Drake Lord of Kragdomen, is dead.”

Now Griff looked up at me, his feathers slicked back on his head. “I do.”

He went back to admiring himself, fluffing up feathers ringing his neck.

I took one finger and pushed the mirror on its fragile stand, and it fell with a crack of brittle wood, the glass popping out of its place, tinkling on the floor in a thousand shattered pieces.

Griff's feathers raised up on his head as he watched the last shard of glass come to rest by his talon, a talon I now noticed had deep ridges and cracks in it. His eyes, all-black in the shadows, looked into mine.

“Then,” I hissed. “Understand my answer.”

I focused on the paper, remembering the first time I smelled Mordon's spiced embers. A small spark flew from my ring, nothing more than a sheen of light bouncing off the star streaked sapphire, and that spark touched the tip of the parchment.

With a breath of honeysuckle perfume, the paper bolted into flame so completely it left not a cinder, not a whiff of smoke to mark its passage.

Griff stared at that one shard near his talons.

Despite myself, I wondered what had gotten him tangled up in this mess—and then I knew.

A resurrection needed a skilled enchanter and scroll maker. It would not have taken long for Gregor Cole to realize that Griff's questionable business dealings made him easy to blackmail—particularly when Griff wasn't on the best terms with the market judges.

“I won't let you leave,” said Griff.

I took a breath and said, “You don't have a choice.”

I forced my eyes open.

Yells, chants, and crashes rushed back to me as I regained awareness on the floor. Wet earth was beneath my cheek, and a deadly shadow tightened about my neck. Hundreds of souls made this monster around my waist real. Each soul was trapped into slavery.

As I came back awake, I wondered if Griff had been a hallucination, a dream, or a strange spell. At the moment, I didn't care. Gathering up the last of my strength, I yanked my hand free of the shadow and grabbed onto the lip of the vase.

The world went dark, and then beyond dark. It was like night out in the desert where there was no moon or stars to shine, no light for hundreds of miles, and out in that dark there was something even darker, something that made goosebumps rise on the back of my neck and secretly plead for a sliver of luminescence.

With the soft breaking of clouds, the moon did come out, and the black shape was revealed as the haunted house of Ferret Drive, and the something even darker was the back of Railey as she dug a hole by the garden gate.

"I'm tellin' ya, help me or leave!"

I stood just behind her, laboring under fever and cold sweats as muscles ached up and down my body. I hadn't told her then about my new curse—I had been too afraid that speaking about it would make it real. I hoped that if I told no one and continued on life as normal, the curse wouldn't take form.

But the aches had grown worse and worse since Railey had tapped on my window. I had kept the secret then, but I thought perhaps I could change the outcome of that night now.

"Railey, I have something to say."

"Quit yammerin' and git diggin'."

I stared at her back, at the height of the house. I was going to stop and tell her, but next I knew, I found myself digging, wondering if I could remember where the attack had come from. It was all a jumble, a blur, shattered into a thousand forgotten nightmares until all that was left was a shadow.

Then I realized, this was no shadow, and this was no dream. It was happening again.

This was purgatory.

The shadow dragon woke from beneath the dead bushes and he struck Railey, his teeth sinking into her chest. She screamed.

I froze in place, my eyes scrunched shut just as they had been before I ran. I had returned, of course, but much too late.

Was I doomed to repeat this forever and ever? Was this purgatory as unchangeable as the past? Was this some demented movie I played in to amuse the Lady of the Vase? Or was it a lesson?

Magic-less, past the point of exhaustion, and my muscles cramping at every twitch, I faced down the shadow dragon with Railey's shovel in hand. The wood and metal passed harmlessly through the shadow, but I couldn't stop.

I screamed at it to leave and let Railey go. It had no effect, but I wouldn't back away. Gripping Railey by the waist, I pulled her. She screamed in pain as the shadow dragon's teeth cut her skin.

Nothing I could do was working. Nothing I could do would save Railey. Nothing could change the past, just the same way that nothing I could do would change the future. I was being drawn into the dragon, being taken into it with every scratch he made.

...but if there was nothing I could do, why was I so worried?

I let go of my friend, and for an instant, both she and the dragon stared at me. I took the shovel in both hands and drove it deep into the hole at my feet.

The dragon dropped Railey. She fell to a heap on the grass. I struck the earth again and again. Claws tore at my back, at first shadow claws, then real ones, slicing my back to slivers.

Then came a beak pecking at me.

I smacked the gryphon with the shovel and feathers fluttered down to my feet.

There was a femur in the hole. I reached for it.

"Stop! It's black magic!" Griff's voice hissed in my ear. "I'll give you yours back if you stop now."

Would he have come out if this was how I had done this ten years ago? Would he have revoked his jealous curse?

I did not care.

"Get out of my life!" I cried, knocking him aside.

When he hit the ground, he was no longer a gryphon, but instead a woman. A tall, slender woman with coal curls luxuriating down her back, lips like embers, and eyes dull and sunken. She wore a noble woman's dress, burgundy and sable, velvet and silk, embroidery on the hem, tiny pearls sewn in the bodice.

"Morgana."

The woman stood, and the dragon curled his head beneath her jewelled hand. "We should not fight. Not mother and daughter."

If she said it to stay my hand, it worked. She had succeeded in rousing my curiosity. I said, "You are not my mother."

"Not directly, but you are a descendant of the feys. And am I not Morgana Le Fey, mother to all feys who swore to protect and guard their sacred mother?"

It was a phrase I had heard my mother use, but it was widely accepted that the sacred mother meant mother earth, and tending to her with farming and gardening—not worshipping the

world's most wicked witch.

"I do not know you, nor do I want to," I said, hefting up the shovel again.

"Side with me, and I will restore your lover to his full health. What is more, your friends will survive and accompany you. Be my willing host, and I will find a new one swiftly, and I will pass from you without harm. While you are here, my pet will guard and protect you against the darkness in your soul."

I considered it for a heartbeat. After all, I was not so sure that my shivering hands could deliver even one more blow. The ache in my legs made me want to curl into a tight ball and rub them. The fever overrode my sensibilities, and I wished to feel better.

Then I knew that though my friends may survive, Morgana made no other promises. They could be slaves, or worse.

I placed the shovel tip over the femur. I jumped on the shovel once, then twice. I used the blade like an ax and I chopped at the bone, striking it over and over until I became coated in sweat and blood. Cold teeth sunk into my shoulder, but I ignored them.

Then the femur split in two with a blinding flash.

Falling hard onto my tailbone, I heard Morgana cry in anger. Light pierced my eyelids as the shadow dragon collapsed into a burst of stars. Somehow I knew those stars were souls.

Morgana's hands were about my throat and she squeezed, lifting me off the ground and high into the air. She took me over the porch, past the roof line, over the trees and into the clouds.

"You will pay for your betrayal."

There was no more air. By comparison, I was a tiny woman. A weakling. I had no hope of defeating her, not by a contest of brute strength. Even my cleverness was failing me. She was the founder of it all.

But I couldn't give up.

Darkness in your soul. Her words came back to me, and I realized that only Morgana could defeat Morgana.

I focused my slim illusion magic and made several illusions of myself from across time in my life when I had been facing challenges. Morgana giggled, a shrill noise that sounded as though it should have come from me, and she flicked each illusion aside with her finger, shattering them.

"Is that all you can do? I'm ashamed to call you kin."

"Look again," I said.

She turned her eyes to the broken mirrors scattered around her, and then she began to scream. Reflected in each piece was a dark memory. She broke the shards, making them

smaller and more numerous.

I didn't know what it was she saw. It was for her eyes only. If I were to look, I would be caught in the same trap she was.

"No!" Morgana shrieked, and when I glanced at her, she was reaching for one of the shards. "Merlyn."

I hit her forearms and fell free.

I fell down through an endless sea of clouds, staring upwards, knowing that at some time, my back was going to hit the ground and I was going to die. Or was I dead already? Could I die again, and be truly dead this time?

A claw caught me, a frosty claw that gave too much before the second claw stopped my descent. I was lowered to the ground, staring up at a silvery gray dragon.

Railey appeared at my side, whispering, "Thanks, bud."

"I wish we weren't all going to be stuck here in dreamland," I whispered back.

"That could be arranged," said a new voice.

I looked at the new woman coming out of the house. She took the porch steps gracefully, blue eyes ones that I had seen before on the outside of the vase.

"Lady," said Railey, bowing, then bobbing her pigtails up in a grin.

"You have contained my most famous prisoner. You have my gratitude," the woman with blonde hair said.

"You will let us go?" I asked.

"I will let one of you go."

I was tempted to step forth myself, but I knew I could not stand to live with having abandoned Railey. I could send her, but then that didn't help the other souls. "I want to send the dragon back. He came here as one piece."

The woman paused, considering my request. A line formed between her eyebrows and she almost seemed to glare at me, so deep was she in her thought. My stomach twisted. At last she said, "Very well. And you shall remain."

"Fera," said Railey, but just like that, I felt her being pulled away from me, drawn out into the world beyond. I shivered.

"Can I strike a bargain for the release of my soul?" I asked the Lady of the Vase.

She smiled. "I do such bargains frequently. You may leave after three hundred years."

I crossed my arms. That would not do, not at all. "I have something you want."

Her cool eyes studied me skeptically, wondering what I could have that she did not. Certainly no material items. "What might that be?"

"Everyone else has one but you."

She sighed in annoyance. I was taking up her time and using up her patience.

"A name," I said. Before she could dismiss the idea, I continued, "It will be a trade because it will be my name, not some random thing I appoint to you. Unless you like being called Lady of the Vase."

She frowned and stared into open space. It was a contemplative expression, cold and moody. Then she said, "I want to know the name before I commit."

"And I want out of here. It is a fitting name."

The Lady of the Vase crossed her arms, too. "Perhaps. But once you give it to me, you may no longer use it."

"I won't. But if you prefer I can change all legal documents."

The Lady shrugged and her eyes lit on mine. "I don't care for the laws of man. Very well, tell me what it is and I will consider it."

I shook my head. "None of us choose the names we are given. Do we have a bargain or not?"

She bit her lip. She let out a sigh. "Very well. We have a bargain, and I expect you to inform the world that from now on, I am to be referred to as...?"

"Hope."

The Lady—or rather, Hope—smiled as though she had won a bet. "It is fitting and a little cryptic, is it not? Very well. For your services, I have a gift for you. I was going to give it to you when you were released, which I suppose is now. You have always had it, but never known it. Be wise what you do with it."

Hope touched my forehead with one skinny finger, and I felt a strange crawling sensation overtake my skin. My pulse quickened, then grew stronger, pulsing harder through my veins. In an instant I was dizzy yet not weakened. My bones ground together and my skin stretched, pulling taut.

"What is happening?" I asked, but there was no one around me anymore. I was alone, and I was swimming in air; not falling, just swimming, held in nothing as a breeze soothed over my aches and replaced them with pleasure.

The wind shifted and blew me this way and that, but I was not afraid of it. I realized I wasn't swimming but flying, flying through this strange land and back to reality.

Chapter Thirty-One

Light surrounded me, piercing my eyes and making me shut them tight. Heavy. I felt so heavy, my shoulders pressed snug to the floor, my breathing labored. I twitched my fingers burdened by invisible weights. Breathing hurt. My arms and legs were bound so tight I had lost all sensation to my limbs. I would have been panicked if I wasn't feeling oddly disconnected from my body.

Once again I forced stiff eyelids open, only to find a cloud of pixies in front of me.

The cavern's roof had collapsed in one place, and outside a flash of lightning struck the lip of the cavern. A roar of thunder quaked the ground, causing a spray of soil to cascade down on me. I shook my head, knocking dirt into my hair. Craning my neck, I squinted in the sudden dark for the others.

A body lady on the floor next to me. It was Barnes. Panic went through my veins. His hair was matted, his mustache frayed, and his skin was a mismatch of wet and caked blood. He couldn't be dead. As I watched, he took a rattling breath and let it out again. I let out a slow breath of relief.

Where was Mordon?

A second roar of thunder answered my question. I saw him pinned to the ground by three large shadow beasts, creatures conjured by three still-standing sorcerers. On his neck, a frenzied wendigo tore at his scales, ripping them off one by one like a chef picking the scales off a fish with the tip of a knife.

Blood was everywhere. It coated the floor in a trail, smudged marks when Mordon had been on the ground, large drops when he had been flying or leaping. Some was boiled thick and syrupy next to scorch marks. A dismembered sorcerer's corpse sprawled over several feet, the man apparently having become a meal for the active wendigo.

The red dragon seized himself into a roll, tossing off his attackers. The wendigo dug his claws into Mordon's wounded haunch, and the dragon cried out in pain. The other creatures slammed against his shoulder, and Mordon crashed to the floor. One leaped and bit the tip of Mordon's wing, pinning it to the ground, while another trapped his tail and the third pounced on his head.

I couldn't believe this was happening. Not now, not ever. And here I was, watching. The wind and magic did not respond to my distress; I was floating over my body, unable to make it move even enough to avert its eyes.

So I had stopped Morgana and released the souls. That suddenly seemed a very tiny victory when compared to what Gregor Cole was going to become. With the deaths of Mordon and

Barnes, he would have the strength to overcome any sorcerer—and keep on killing.

But this was worse than all that.

Mordon.

Gregor laughed, a choking hack coming through a mouth with a broken lower jaw and a smashed nose. He stood back, and looked at my body, looked at Barnes, then smiled at Mordon, a smile of sharp teeth and bits of flesh.

“You will be part of something far greater, don't worry,” the wendigo said, though it was nearly impossible to make out the words. He walked closer. Mordon struggled, flailing against the creatures. They held him down all the tighter.

I was not going to let this happen. I didn't know what I could do—no magic, no strength, nothing but the presence of mind. I had to do something. Anything.

A forgotten memory struck me, about how I swore I saw a dragon in the backyard during the crescent moon. Mother would deny it, then she would track down my father. The fable of the farmer and the dragon. The boy I thought was dead with Nest, but had actually gained a second form. And most pressing of all, the way I yearned to fly.

The wind was compressing about me, dust stirring together with rain drops to form a blob, wind pulling sections out on the front and back, wind cutting and shaping and molding. I couldn't see into what.

Words came to me. *Creature. Dragon. You're part fey, but is that all?*

I was still dizzy, but now I felt more solid. I took breaths, felt a heart thrum in my chest. It was happening so slowly, yet so fast. It seemed to take an eternity, but in reality it was a few seconds. My wings flared out and webbing spread between the bones. I clenched my claws, swung my head. My skin formed round patterns, turning into scales, then hardening.

I was fey, human, and drake. Mixed blood, the result of the Melting Pot

I embraced all of it.

Time broke back into motion again.

Gregor had his fist high above his head, claws curled, what might have been a grin on his face as he targeted Mordon's exposed throat. He brought his claw down.

I ploughed into him, my teeth sinking into his chest. Gregor's claws dug at my eyes. I heard the buzzing of pixies coming for me. A cold mouth clamped over my tail. I flung the shadow creature into the wall. Two sets of claws dug into my back.

I tightened my grip on the wendigo, folded my wings to my sides, and rolled. The shadow creatures dispersed, reforming next to their casters just as the first pixies swarmed.

I wouldn't think that needle-sized swords would do any damage to a dragon, but those pixies

found every nook and cranny in between my scales. The sensation was comparable to sticking sewing pins underneath fingernails, except it was all over. My neck, my back my belly, even under my tail. With every prick and stab, I crushed harder on the wendigo. He did not bleed when my teeth punctured his dry hide; his bones would not break under my jaws, but rather flexed and bent.

"I've tried that before," Mordon said behind me.

Tossing Cole against the wall, I stepped back and reconsidered my strategy. Since I was new to being a drake, I had to assume that Mordon knew better than I did. I also had to assume that he had tried everything that came instinctively to me in my dragon form. As Barnes was human, I had to assume that Barnes had done what a human would think to do.

I had to think like a fey. To think like my mother...and Morgana. Seeing a weak part in the ceiling, I jumped up and scratched it, sinking my claws deep until I felt a ridge, then I yanked. For an instant, the ground groaned beneath me. Then the roof fell and I scarcely darted away before debris trapped the wendigo.

"That won't last long," Mordon said as a warning.

"It doesn't have to," I said, aiming to land near Mordon. I, however, was on a path to overshoot him and land in a deep gulley which had appeared while I was in the vase.

Not sure how to stop myself, I brought my wings up sharply. I dropped like a stone, landing on so many pixie swords that it felt like I had fallen onto fire instead of ground.

"My hero," Mordon said.

I twitched my tail and tried to grin. "You bet. Can you transfer me any energy?"

Even in dragon form, Mordon could cock his eye ridge skeptically. "Why would I do that?"

"Just do it!" I snapped, realizing that he did not recognize me as Feraline, just some random dragon who had appeared from nowhere. I had no time to explain. "Unless you want to unleash a wendigo the size of a fire drake on the world."

"I'll have to shift," he said, and now I noticed that the sorcerers were huddled together, planning a spell.

"Good. Take your friends with you. I don't want any more harm to come to them." I was also wondering if I could chomp away on one or two of the sorcerers. There was probably a reason why Mordon either had not, or had not succeeded. "Just hurry."

Mordon snorted—a much more intimidating noise when he was a dragon and I was a dragon. I realized I was still a mere third of his size, perhaps even less than that. Unlike him, my limbs were slender and willowy, covered in silvery gray scales with hints of blush underneath. Golden eyes marked some of my scales, making me curious to see what pattern they formed.

Mordon shifted, his body transitioning from dragon to human. As a human, he had welts up

and down his arms and face. "Give me your nose."

I lowered it down, holding back a cry as a shadow creature began ripping scales off my shoulder, like taking a clump of hair and pulling it out. Whipping my tail from one side to the other, I knocking a creature off my body, but earned a sharp reprimand from Mordon. "Down here!"

Mordon laid a hand with two busted fingers on my nose and closed his eyes.

This energy transfer was a razing jolt that seized every muscle in my body from the hook of my nose to the thin taper of my tail. For those three seconds, my senses were heightened. The sores from the pixie's swords throbbed, the pull of scales ripped as their tiny roots became dislodged from my hide, the wendigo stank of broiled skunk, and I could hear the pixies returning from their trip with a fresh batch of swords.

Another scale tore from my hide, roots snapping and releasing in a mix of pain and relief. My muscles let go and when the transfer stopped, and I kept from staggering.

"I've given you what I've got left, don't waste it," said Mordon, looking me square in the eye.

I spun and launched back into the air, feeling out the current. It coursed under my wings, soothing the aches just a little. The shadow creatures couldn't keep up with me. Rocks from the rubble moved where Gregor was buried. I needed to hurry.

Mordon moved quickly, even with wounds, snapping the ropes to my human body and throwing it over his shoulder. Bending down, he grabbed Barnes by his collar and pulled him.

The sorcerers were not absent in their duty. A fire bolt struck me full in the chest and I hit the ceiling, bruising and scraping my wings against the rough surface. I hadn't even started to fall before a second bolt rammed my belly below the ribcage, forcing the air from my lungs. A third bolt—electric—slapped my face against the roof. I didn't even have the ability to let out a shriek.

A gaunt hand burst from the soil. A mound shook as a snarling Gregor emerged from the swollen earth. He howled and ran towards Mordon. The sorcerers raised their hands, shouting out the final words to a spell.

It was now or never, but would it be enough? Would it have the effect I needed, or would Mordon meet a gruesome end? How much energy had he kept for himself? My mind was too frazzled to gauge my own strength, but I knew it was fading very, very fast. It was the way all first shifts were, and this was one bad time to test endurance.

I took a deep breath and amplified the wind current, sucking it in one hole in the ceiling and blowing it out the other, letting it move in a large circle until it had built up momentum. No more than ten feet away from Mordon, the wendigo dropped into a launching position. I lowered the current down to the ground, the arc ripping at Barnes' pants and tangling Mordon's hair. Gregor dug his claws into the ground, fighting against the fullest brunt of the

current.

The sorcerers shouted out a final word. Lightning struck, and the cavern gave a tumultuous tremble. Thunder punctuated the crack of the earth and the ravine opened up deeper, going down so far that the air pulled down into it and came back hot.

I dodged falling ceiling, managing well but for a rock that gave me a bloody nose, and Gregor jumped high into the air, landing safely on the other side of the ravine.

Sucking in another breath, this one tainted with my own blood, I altered the wind's course. It rushed down to the sorcerers, and one of them cast a shield. It slowed the wind, knocking them almost to the other side of the ravine, but they fell just short of reaching safety with Gregor.

A monster down below roared, followed by their pitiful wailing as they were eagerly consumed. The monster belched fire, flames reaching up well past the level of the floor.

Confused, Gregor paused before he went back to attack Mordon. The pixies, I was satisfied to note, had been sucked of of the cavern and into a natural air current, where they were fighting to maintain their position.

I dove, cutting through my wind tunnel to gain momentum. The wendigo leaned over the edge to catch a better sight of the lava tentacles finding footing as a giant octopus crawled upwards from the bowels of the earth, reeking of rotten eggs.

Adjusting my wings, I aimed myself squarely at Gregor.

My claws embedded in his chest, hitting him with a thunk that jarred my teeth and took the air clean out of Gregor. We rammed into a rock. I felt bones crunch. I bit his arm and yanked with ferocity, feeling muscles tear and ligaments strain. His fist met my jaw. I opened my eyes the next second with my wing contorted painfully beneath my side. My head throbbed. The wind died down to a lazy breeze.

Gregor kicked me in the jaw. Purple swam in my vision. I wondered how far Mordon had gotten. When I didn't move, Gregor stomped to the ledge, peering once again at the monster making his ascent. There was hunger in that twisted smile as the wendigo watched the monster.

He laughed, a gleeful noise. "Those infernal sorcerers have exceeded my expectations! Pity that at least one of them didn't survive, but such is life." Then Gregor paused. He said, "You've exceeded my expectations, too. I wasn't expecting you to be a drake, but a weaker one I have never seen."

I snapped my jaws. "I hurt you."

Gregor kicked my nose. "As soon as I eat that thing, whatever it is, I will be well again, and stronger than if I had eaten you and your friends."

That must have been what had happened to the dismembered sorcerer. Gregor had used him to regain his power. I snarled, "You will not!"

I pounced on him, pulling him away from the ledge, filling my mouth with his burnt skin and muddy blood. He hit me with two fists, knocking me on my back.

I opened my eyes and held my breath.

I watched Gregor jump. When he reached the monster, it opened its mouth and Gregor extended his claws.

Out of strength, I let the illusion fail.

Gregor fell straight through the monster, emitting a howl of shock and fear as he tumbled head over heels down and down the sheer rock face, his nails scraping the rocks but not gaining any purchase as he plummeted towards bubbling lava. He broke the surface, screaming.

A foul stench of burning hair reached me.

For a minute, I stayed where I was, taking in slow breaths and resting, hoping beyond hope that the lava would keep the wendigo out of my hair for good. If he emerged from that crevice like something out of a bad horror movie, I was going to laugh myself to death before he could kill me himself.

It wasn't a funny thought. Not by a long shot. I just preferred laughing to crying.

My body was so heavy again. The tiny needles under my scales no longer hurt, they just spread a warm feeling of numbness across my body. For all I knew, the things could be poisoned.

I needed to get up. I needed to find my human body and do whatever I needed to do to join my two forms. And I needed to do it soon.

A whistle, a tune from a long gone era, caught my attention.

A ghost, a boy about the same age as Railey but wearing colonial clothes, standing in the doorway called, "Your friends are outside, come along! That girl Railey told me to get you on your feet."

At his words, I rocked back and forth twice, then pulled myself up. I had to fly over the cavern, my back leg slipping on the other ridge when I landed. I pretended to have not slipped.

I walked next to him, not wanting to fly even though I was sure he could keep up. We talked, and I tried to not think that this body had been a part of the shadow dragon that enslaved Railey and tried to kill me.

We approached an opening into a backyard. The boy said, "She'll come to say farewell."

"Who?"

“You know who. The girl.”

I entered the light of day, the sun drying rain drops on grass, and behind me was the back porch of 613 Ferret Drive. The yard on this side was as thriving and as manicured as the drake's farming fields. Five spirits stood on the back porch and watched me.

I turned my attention to Lilly putting away her last healing scroll, to Leif holding her, and Mordon cradling my human form with his back to me. Barnes nodded.

I didn't know if he understood who the dragon was before him, but he motioned to Mordon. Mordon set my human body down. A deep, red furrow formed between his eyes and I expected him to breathe fire. He bolted to his feet and yelled, “What are you doing here? Go before I make you.”

I must have reminded him of the doppelganger from ages ago. I couldn't help but curl my mouth into a smug grin. Why had I ever been jealous?

Trying to remember how the child had joined his two forms back together, I sidestepped Mordon, then reached to touch my human body.

A fire bolt flung my claw wide, missing Lilly only because Leif pulled her away in time.

“I won't let you force a joining with her!” snapped Mordon. Force a joining? I didn't know that was even possible, and I was merely guessing at the meaning of the phrase. It was yet another thing I needed to learn about.

“Barnes.” My voice startled me with the way it rumbled through the air. “I'm tired. Can you keep Mordon from going crazy?”

Barnes shrugged. “Mind your manners, Mordon.”

I snorted. He grinned. No one else noticed him.

Lilly's tiny hand slapped my nose. “I won't have you take Fera's body, either.”

It was nothing more than a bump to me, something to make me blink, but her hand was scraped and starting to bleed—not that she cared.

I couldn't sense anyone's magic in my exhaustion, but I guessed that they were on guard. Folding my legs under my belly, I laid down in one smooth motion so I would be a little less intimidating while refusing to be chased away.

“Leif,” I said. He looked up at me, listening. “I really did see that dragon land in Mother's rhododendron.”

Leif stood in front of me, put his hand on one side of my face and pushed it lightly to turn my head. I let him nudge me this way and that until he found a feature which triggered recognition.

Mordon was well past any of that, obsessively clinging to my faintly breathing human form.

Satisfied, Leif stepped back and mused. “Yes, I see that now. It makes sense why your father was awake at the hour, and the dragon mysteriously disappeared right before he showed up. Mordon. Let your guard down.”

“No,” Mordon said.

“Mordon,” I said and sighed. “I'd like to walk again on the streets at Merlyn's Market. And it would be hard for me to fit in the antiques shop like this.”

“Antiquities,” Mordon corrected. He blinked at me, staring. “Fera? But you're...you're...you should have remembered the dreams, too.”

“It would have helped if you had told me your real name. I thought I had an invisible friend named Thessen,” I said, reaching forward again to touch my body. This time no one stopped me.

Skin and scales blended, smoothing into one another, the bones lining up, my wings folding in on themselves, disappearing into a human back. My low hips shifted into a higher position, my nose shrank. Disoriented, I closed my eyes and listened to small pops and creaks of my skeleton reforming, feeling the stretch of muscles. Aches spread through my body, then abated as my joining completed.

I lay facing skyward on wet ground.

Mordon's harried face filled my vision, too close to come into focus with my spinning head.

“Let me sit up,” I said when he just stared at me.

Mordon pulled me in close, cradling my face in his hands. My vision dimmed to black and purple, then color came back. Several days ago, I wouldn't have thought him to be a worry wart; now it seemed like I had a knack for making him concerned.

“I'm going to want a thorough explanation for your actions, Lady,” Mordon said, but his voice was soft.

“Sometime,” I said, taking his face in one hand. I brought his cheek to my lips, and planted a light kiss on his rough skin. “Later.”

“Hey, now,” Leif said. “All of us need to have a long meeting to piece this all together.”

I had a feeling he also meant what had Mordon and me swooning, but that could wait. I was alive, Mordon was alive. We all were alive.

Nice as it had been to have scales for armor, I did enjoy being back in my own skin—would I come to accept the dragon form as being “me”, too? I dropped my hand down to the grass, and the sapphire ring fell off.

Confused, I picked it up again—it looked the exact same as it had before, and wasn't broken.

Mordon sighed. I couldn't tell if it was of relief or heartbreak. He said to those around us, “Her

ring isn't just a ring—it's a family heirloom, a trinket that customarily was presented to potential mates. The ring wouldn't fit if someone was unsuitable, and the ring wouldn't come off if the candidate was a good match. Well, it would come off, but only once the two people had enough of an understanding of each other to decide where to take the relationship from there.”

“Sounds handy,” Lilly said, twirling her hair around her finger.

“Hardly novel,” Barnes said, twitching his mustache in annoyance.

Leif was looking between us, thinking.

Barnes said, “Fera might take a day or so to consider. She's such a tough character, throwing a man into the mix will be a challenge.”

Stringent officer as Barnes was now, I would bet he had been the neighborhood boy who caused all kinds of havoc. Perhaps he was not only jesting Mordon, but giving me advice.

I nodded, and put the ring on my pinky finger. The ring tightened its tail until it held comfortably.

Mordon looked away so I wouldn't see the pain in his eyes. It was like being proposed to and delaying an answer, but I needed time. Unlike my brother, I had had enough whirlwind romance. I needed to let my brain catch up.

Mordon was raised in an utterly different culture. Though I had enjoyed my time in it, making our relationship work would take a lot of effort and understanding.

Barnes caught my eye and nodded. We knew what my answer would eventually be, but also that I needed to acclimate with my choices.

I gathered my strength and wobbled to my feet, accepting the offered hands and shoulders until blood flowed into my limbs again. I shook free of everyone and took three steps forward. I stretched out my lithe body, letting a zephyr swirl by me, tugging on my shirt and tousling loose hair.

I smiled.

I was a creature of the woods and sky, unafraid of the darkest shadows, thriving in the light and open horizons.

Chapter Thirty-Two

I hibernated for days after. When I woke up, they informed me that Lilly had discovered the name of the head ghost in control of the others. It was a boy by the name of Jacob Heimer-Snitzgoodle, a boy from the lost colony who died and fell victim to the manipulations of an Unwritten spell.

Before the other souls could rest, we would have to give his remains a proper burial. Apparently, said remains were found in a search of Gregor's home while I was “playing sleeping beauty on the floor in my sun room.” Mordon slept hard, too, but no one gave him crap about it.

Yawning still, I wandered into the commons area and joined Mordon at the breakfast nook. As he had brought out just one drink of drake's brew, I stole half of his. He didn't object. The *Thaumaturgical Tribune* lay before him, unopened as his glazed eyes stared unmoving at a picture of the crowd at the ball. Now that I looked at it, it played recordings of each person's introduction. I missed seeing my illusion from an outsider's perspective to look around for the others—I hadn't seen Lilly since she left my room, and I hadn't seen Leif or Barnes at all.

On cue, Barnes busted down the door, rubbed his hands together with a twitch of his handlebar mustache, and said, “Alright! Lilly has the cleansing powder, Leif has a plot ready, I have posted an announcement, all that's needed now is for everyone to attend!”

“It's kinda early...isn't it?” my voice was a little hoarse.

“It's ten,” said Barnes with too much perk in his voice.

I wondered what I'd been doing for two and a half hours. I looked at Mordon. He raised his eyebrows and shrugged.

“Drakes hibernate for a reason.”

I felt moderately more awake, I supposed.

Getting to my feet, I followed after Barnes in a haze, not noticing the vendors, the food, the drink, the salespeople who hung back only because they caught Barnes' glare. Over time, I started actually taking notes on where we were going. Barnes led the way to the sacred ground, several decks up and quite the walk to the east. I caught my breath when I saw it, a floating plot of lawn, headstones, and lots of bouquets. Mordon put his hand on my shoulder and I took solace in it.

Flower stalls lined the grounds, and I was impressed how many people came to pay respects—it was much busier at any given time than a normal cemetery. Lilly and Leif each had a cluster of forget-me-nots, and Barnes went to buy a bunch as well. Mordon guided me to an open vendor, and looked at me expectantly.

The woman tending the booth lifted aged, hooded eyes up to me as well, but her hands shuffled some bunches so I could better see what she had in stock.

“Stargazer lily, gladiolus, and—” I hesitated, trying to remember.

“Yes?” the woman said, having already selected the stems as I spoke them.

“And a pink rose some cyclamens. Do you have pink ribbon to tie them with?”

The woman scarcely inclined her head before snipping off a length of pink ribbon and tying a bow with hardly a glance at her fingers. “Thirty.”

Mordon paid the woman with three coins, took the gladiolus sprig for himself and gave the others to me. I held Mordon's elbow with one hand and the flowers in my other, and he showed me around the crowd to where Leif and the others were. Leif was at the head of a small casket, Lilly stood next to him, and Barnes next to her. Mordon and I stood at Leif's other side. The remainder of the crowd stood facing us, quiet and solemn.

Leif began to sing, and was accompanied by a violin and a cello off to the side. Both the instruments had the symbol of a certain wizard who sold enchanted instruments.

A draping graced the top of the coffin, a simple light blue silk with three white doves on it flying up to the sky. They animated, nosed one another mid-flight, and encouraged the smallest to fly up ahead of them.

They disappeared into fluffy clouds at the top of the draping and a shifting beam of light replaced where they once were. I sensed only illusion magic from it and was not as impressed as others were.

Next, Leif led a short ceremony in Latin. I did not recognize a word except “mortem” and “vita”, which came to mind as 'death' and 'life', although I would have to check to make sure.

He signaled to Lilly. She opened a fist-sized bag, took a bit of it, and tossed it around the coffin. He said some more words, she dribbled the rest of it on top of the draping. He said what seemed to be a prayer, and the crowd responded with, “Amen.”

I wondered if Leif was a New Age Wizard, and thought to myself that I still hadn't asked anyone about it. Later. Later, later, later. I seemed to be saying that a lot.

A crisp breeze shook me out of my hazy almost-asleep status. I took in a deep breath and looked upward.

Clouds parted and sunlight poured through the skylight, drenching the coffin. Not seeming to notice the cleansing light, the crowd stepped forward one by one and dropped a flower around the coffin.

Our circle added the flowers last, but I held on to my rose and cyclamen bundle. Lilly gave me a sad, knowing smile. When Leif laid his forget-me-not on the casket, it began to sink, taking the flowers with it, the soil pulling back like water until the casket was several feet deep.

Dirt covered the top and continued settling, then the grass flowed over and filled in, not a scar left on the land. One of the funeral employees set a small headstone down at Leif's feet. It read:

Jacob Heimer-Snitzgoodle

Beloved Child, May You Finally Rest

Below the etching was a lamb with a long tail playing on a hill with a single dove just beginning to fly.

Leif and Mordon began to talk in quiet whispers, but as I read the headstone over and over again, I saw the lamb leap and bound, up the hill, down the hill, back up again, kicking up his heels and wagging his long tail. The dove swooped and soared, diving and spinning, coming to land on his back. They looked off the side of the stone, and then came two adult sheep, peering at him. They called the lamb, and it ran happily over to nuzzle them. As one, they walked off the stone and were gone.

A breeze swept over my skin, and I closed my eyes, smelling honeysuckle and spices. When I opened my eyes again, the headstone was as it had been before: a lamb with a dove on a hill.

"Feraline?"

It was Lilly. The crowd was gone, and the men were involved in their talks. She held out her hand to me, and I took it, letting her show me through the rows and rows of headstones, taking me to the one old weeping willow in the corner.

She pulled aside a curtain of leaves, where a concrete bench nestled in front of the trunk. A small patio was there, concrete formed to look like rocks coating the ground. I walked the rest of the way alone, and read the seat of the bench.

Willow Railey Fitzgerald

Dedicated to Providing Love and Shelter for the Weary

You Will Always Be With Us

Mumma, Poppa, Lilly, Leif, & "Griff"

It had no decorations other than a scallop around the edge of the bench. While it was a lovely display, tears stung my eyes to have been excluded from the stone. I would have been here.

Would have, if I could have.

"Feraline, look up. Read the back," urged Lilly.

I raised my head, amazed I'd looked down first rather than at what faced me. Instead of the formal, all-caps lettering, this one was in Railey's hand, as though she'd written it down and they had transposed it directly.

To my friend:

You were here first. You were here last. You were here when no one else knew I needed someone to be here with. You were the one I told my secrets to and held them close. You were here to help me clean up when I made messes. You kept your promises, all of them. I promise to you, I will be there for you now when you need someone.

Railey

I stared at her promise to me. I remembered the times she had shown up to me as a ghost, the things she had helped me accomplish, and how she had disappeared again. Now I had a circle, friends again, and even a man who loved me. I didn't need her anymore.

I sat on the bench, laid the flowers down, and let quiet tears trickle down my cheeks. I stayed that way for some time, recalling our times together, realizing that now those times really were gone forever. I had her in my heart, and that would do.

Honeysuckle brushed my face on the wind, and I opened my eyes to see Railey's parents standing together silently with Lilly. They'd grown older, gotten a bit rounder, earned a few wrinkles and some gray hair. But the biggest difference was in their faces, how they no longer held resentment and anger, but sadness.

Railey's mother raced over and hugged me fiercely, then backed off and hid behind a yellow handkerchief. Her father was a man of few words, always had been, and little affection. He walked to me and dropped a hand on my shoulder, then put it on the bench behind me. I slipped by him and stood with Lilly and Railey's mother, watching.

"We've thought of this for some time," Railey's mother said.

Her husband finished his quiet words and stepped back.

A border carved itself around Railey's letter, and above it the concrete started to morph and chip. A couple flourishes showed up first, then the words, one letter at a time.

Our daughter wrote this and guided her friend through her challenges, and healed what time could not.

Thank You, Feraline Swift, For Being All Our Daughter Needed.

We read it slowly and everyone was silent, letting the peace fill in the gaps that years had torn open. There was nothing that needed to be said, yet something required that we stay. A whiff of honeysuckle announced Mordon, Leif, and Barnes coming through the willow tree's curtain. Leif held Railey's mother, Barnes went to Lilly, and Mordon stood next to me.

I sought out Mordon's hand and leaned in to his chest.

"I love you," I whispered. He wrapped his arms around me and gave a quick squeeze. I heard someone shuffle, but didn't pay them any attention until Mordon lifted my chin and nodded back to the bench.

Railey's father had changed the original inscription. Curious, our entire group moved as one to read what he had done. The stone now had, "And Especially Feraline" on the end of the message.

Mordon stroked my back and nodded at Railey's father. We started to turn and leave, but a child's laugh brought our eyes back to the bench. In a ray of light, glowing with a light of her own, was the pig-tailed, overall-clad Railey. She was smiling, smelling the roses and cyclamens I'd left there. She giggled again.

"Hi, Leif. I told you you'd grow up to be tall. And Lilly, you'd better still have that doll I gave you."

Lilly nodded.

"Barnes! Aren't you glad I rewrote your schedule so you'd meet Fera."

Barnes' mustache twitched in annoyance, but he nodded.

"Mor-don," Railey gave her best diva sigh and fluttered her lashes. "You're a dreamboat. But you'd better take care of her, or else!"

Mordon grinned as she waved the flowers at him like a pointed finger, then tapped them in her palm, not minding petals falling off. Railey turned to her parents.

"Mumma and Poppa, I love you so much. And you've done the right thing here with my memorial, I love visiting my tree. Don't be in any rush to come see me.

"Feraline, it's been loads of fun and I'd do it all again, but I got other places to go now. I'll play with your clutch, I promise!" She giggled at my slack-jaw reaction to the word *clutch*. Children. Drake children. It was all I needed.

Railey kept moving, taking the ribbon off the flowers and tying it around her neck. She gathered up the loose stems and gave them one big toss into the air, and when they hit the ground she was gone. The flowers themselves dug through the concrete and rooted, each

one growing into a blooming plant.

The rest of us walked out of the tree sanctuary, and into the bright midday light.

Thank you for giving *Feral Magic* a read! I hope you enjoyed it. Want early access to future fantasy novels, giveaways, ect? Then sign up for my newsletter at nicolettejinks.wordpress.com. Thank you!!

Swift Magic Preview

Chapter One

The Coles were planning something, and whatever it was, it was going to happen before the verdict was passed tomorrow at 3:15 pm. I should have realized that without Mordon sleeping alongside me, I would be unprotected.

The house creaked, the exact source of the noise impossible to track. Wind howled outside, causing rustling from cracks around the windows. I snuggled a teddy bear up to my chest, its button eyes cold under my fingers. Who was it a gift from? I told myself it was from Mordon, but that might not be right. I heard voices in the hallway. I licked my lips. It must be a random night-check, if they weren't knocking.

"What's on the schedule today?" I tried to ask, but it came out all muffled and slurred together.

The voices stopped.

"Rrrrrrrrruuuuuuushhhhhh," sounded the seashell, a constant reminder of why I'd never be able to poke around the wards myself. Perhaps the one advantage of so much sleeping and so little doing was that my house stayed clean.

A light turned on in the hallway. I wondered if it was morning again, or if they'd gotten word and my wrongful death case had been resolved.

The thought made me feel nauseous, and all I wanted to do was hide under the covers and wish that it would all just go away and I would never have to find out if my life was officially over. The chicken and nettle soup I'd requested for dinner now seemed like a poor choice. I should have eaten nothing, just settled for a hot shower with Lilly's assistance.

One of the truth spells, *Veridad*, gave me cottonmouth. Drinking water only gave me a sore throat. Spell burns healed beneath layers of salve and wrappings which covered more of my skin than my lightweight nightgown. Lilly said they wouldn't scar, even so Mordon still winced in sympathy whenever he saw the bandages or the blistered skin beneath.

A loud scraping of keys in the doorknob roused me. It must not be anyone from my coven. They knew we kept the inner doors unlocked. A wedge of bright white light sliced through the blackness of my room, sweeping across the floor and one wall before finding my bed. Seized in the spotlight's beam, my eyes burned with the intensity. I squeezed them shut and drew the covers up to my nose.

I gathered all of my strength together and rolled onto my other side. I pried my eyes open. Would it be Council members this time, or was Mordon with them? I just wanted an ounce of normalcy again, to sit across from him with a cup of brew and the *Thaumaturgical Tribune* discarded to the side as we talked about nothing.

"Get up." The woman addressing me sounded accustomed to being obeyed. I squinted at her.

Sleep interruption was forbidden, not on behalf of my well-being, but to prevent me from being able to take action. While I was still thinking this, the woman caught me by the wrist and hauled me to my feet. I stumbled forward, pain blazing through an unprepared ankle. As I took my first trembling steps in her wake, I dragged my blanket with me.

Eyes tearing, I flicked my gaze to the floor as the woman led me down my hall towards the dining room. She tripped over the fold in the runner carpet. I didn't laugh. It was hard enough to stand on my own two feet. The woman snared my elbow, dragging me.

Sluggish as I was, the air was growing thick and oppressively scented with honeysuckle. My magic trying to come to me, an unwieldy jumble of energy waiting to be told to do something, anything. It was as clumsy as when I'd first gotten it back. I doubted I could have shaped it into a spell even if I'd had my wits about me. My feet touched the cool floor of the dining room.

Winded from the effort of essentially half-carrying me, the woman tossed me into the nearest chair. The mismatched shabby-chic décor which Lilly had largely picked out for me was an absurd contrast to what could only be an illegal interrogation or cold-blooded murder. When I had the thought, I didn't panic. The knowledge was oddly disconnected to the experience. Was it the seashell at work, or had all my recent experiences with the court desensitized me?

As I remembered, my house was spotless. Very unusual. Also very pretty. It made me wonder where they'd put all my projects and if I would get all the pieces back in the end if this very pretty-cleanliness didn't end up as a crime scene. Behind me the sun room overflowed with plants which were miraculously thriving despite my care. Piles of books rested on end tables and on the shelves Barnes had secured to the walls while watching the contractors put up wards. Gas sconces hissed on the walls, turned up to what I now knew was mid-level,

showing my mint-green fridge and stove.

The woman kept staring at the appliances as if they might spontaneously explode. Which meant she wasn't used to electrical appliances, which meant she came from the upper-end of the sorcering community who believed that unless inventions were made by fellow sorcerers, and that it was not acceptable to own any of those inventions. It was probable that the man sitting across from me came from the same sort of people.

I shivered, causing my chair to rattle against the table. Sleep still clung to me like the aftermath of a disease. I wrapped my legs in the blanket and realized that I clutched the teddy bear.

Who it was in front of me, I couldn't tell. He and the woman both had disguise spells on them, so I couldn't look at their faces without glancing right on by.

What I could gather was that he might have been a bit on the short side. They both wore dark clothes, either black or very dark blue, maybe uniforms. The woman was heavier and stronger than the man. I had the impression she was the brawn behind the operation and he was the brains.

"So, you are the famous Feraline of the Swift Clan," the man said. Hearing my name only made the hair stand up on my arms and my entire body start trembling. I was conscious of my nightgown. The way it wasn't opaque, so darker skin showed through. I positioned my teddy bear strategically across my chest. Scraggly hair hung in strands down my back. He folded his hands in front of himself and said, "I have been looking forward to meeting you for some time."

I focused on keeping my teeth pressed together. Being silent would force him to do the talking.

He didn't speak for quite a while, choosing to just look at me instead.

At last he said, "You're not what I expected."

I raised my eyes to his, but that obscuring spell got in the way, and my gaze came to rest on the table again. The table showed signs of life. It was like a breath of fresh air, a reminder that I wasn't stuck in some dreamworld where I picked up after myself. Used coffee mugs, tea cups, and even a beer bottle riddled its surface. Then there was the conch shell. Stupid thing. The only other item on the table was a small glass vase filled up with irises and sweet peas. Those I knew Mordon had brought me. Red and orange and various hues of blue. They scented the entire room.

"You are to be tried for the wrongful death of Gregor Cole," the man continued, his finger tapping on the back of his hand. "Do you know why it is that I am here?"

"I do not know. Would you tell me?"

What I'd learned in court could be summed up in two short words: plausible deniability.

"You mean to tell me that you have no idea what has brought me to your home where I have to be subjected to this infernal noisemaker?" His jab at the seashell was the first sign I'd seen of his irritation.

"No."

He straightened his back and tapped his finger against the table. "Then make a supposition. Why do you think it is that I have been sent here?"

I tugged my blanket closer to my shoulders, hiding a reach for my necklace with the trinkets I still wore to bed out of habit. "The only reason I can think, after enduring the Merlyn Market Council's wrongful death trial, and being in anticipation of a resolution in my favor which would displease the Coles very much, is that you have been sent under their authority to do what the Council surely will not. By which, I mean you could only have been sent to kill me."

The man stopped tapping his fingers and the woman sucked in a quick breath. I'd surprised them. I kept from using my trinkets. "Then," he said. "What reason would I have for this interview?"

"Perhaps you intend to torture or torment me."

"Is that what you would expect of me?"

"It is what I would expect of certain members of the Cole family."

"You do not hold their name in high esteem."

"Gregor Cole was a wendigo. A cannibal with insatiable hunger for flesh and power. I would be very surprised to find that the apple had fallen far from the tree."

"You hunted him."

I spoke calmly, just like I did before the court. "It was not I who did the hunting. As a predator, he should have been wiser about his prey."

The man resumed his finger taps. "If all this happened as you say, then why have you ignored the summons?"

I frowned, hiding my surprise. He had to be taunting me, confusing me with conversation and redirections, a way to get me to contradict myself. "You do realize that anything I say here holds no sway in Merlyn's Court when it next convenes. Besides, arguments are concluded. I have nothing more to do other than wait."

"Feraline of the Swift Clan, has it ever occurred to you that there may be other parties who have taken an interest in your actions?"

"Since the thing you call an infernal noisemaker has entered this house, not much has occurred to me. Even now," I yawned, "even now it's putting me to sleep."

"Is that what it does?" The man paused, evaluating me. Having decided that I did look ready

to fall asleep in the chair, the man raised his staff and brought it crashing down on the seashell. The silence following its destruction felt perversely incomplete and eerie. The man sat down again. "There. Does that improve the situation?"

"As much as I want to hug you and call you a friend for life, the Council won't be happy."

"I do not take the sorcerer's council into consideration with regards to my actions. But now tell me, can you think of no others who would be interested in your guilt or innocence? Have you had no correspondence?"

Now that my head was clearing, I was beginning to wonder. "If you want to see all my letters since moving here, they are in the top drawer at the end of the kitchen." The woman immediately found them and began to shuffle through the envelopes. "The Council has been regulating my mail. It is possible that things have been sent to me which I did not receive."

"You still wonder if I was sent to assassinate you?"

"It would be odd of you to ask after my mail if that were the case," I admitted. "But I cannot think of who else you might represent. The drakes have expressed no desire to pursue a sorcerer's problem. The sorcery community itself I have addressed and am enduring their rules. I cannot think ..."

"Does the title Vanguard of the Battalion mean anything to you?"

My brow furrowed. "I haven't heard reference to the Vanguard in years."

The woman glanced our way.

"It's clear," she said. Then she made her way to where I always did my structured spells on the floor of the sun room. She seemed to be starting on a portal, but how she intended to break out of this place, I had no idea.

"Well," the man said. "This would be why we never received confirmation."

"You're feys. From the Verdant Wildwoods." I looked between them, very puzzled. "I didn't think they wanted to have anything to do with me."

"It was wise they sent us first, instead of the Hunters," the woman said. "Though it was a courtesy in respect to your family, and not routine. I am glad we will not have to force you to return with us."

"I cannot leave with you now. If I go before the sorcerer's council has given their verdict, I will be a fugitive. Can my arrival before the feys be postponed until tomorrow afternoon?"

The man balled his hand into a fist. "We have our orders. I am sorry. If the Wildwoods finds you innocent, you will be granted asylum there."

Leaving everything I had worked so hard to build here was not an option, but arguing with these two would be bad. So I shuffled over to their spells on my sun room floor, examining

them, buying time. “You can't just portal out. The wards are the same as the ones on the dungeons.”

The woman said, “We would not have come if we did not first have a way out.”

Wordless, I stood behind her, reading what she put down on the bricks. Seeing that I wasn't fighting or running—not that I had anywhere to run to—the man joined her and worked in synch. There was a portal, but there was also an area attack spell, and a modification which would direct the full force of the attack in one direction. The portal contained the same directions and a slight delay.

“You mean to pierce through the wards and follow after with the portal?” I asked.

“It has worked before,” the man said. “If you would remain quiet, please. The details are important to be correct.”

I nodded and watched as they became involved in their calculations and mathematics. When they spoke to one another, I slid my fingers down my necklace, found the invisibility ring, and I put it on. Trinkets had been my link to the sorcering world when I hadn't been able to use magic of my own, now they supplemented my limited strength and control. I stepped out of the blanket and stood in the corner of the room.

Something made my hair stand on end, but it was just a feeling, a premonition. I'd never go so far as to call myself a Seer, but I had a pretty good knack for knowing when things weren't adding up right. While I was looking at the feys and trying to understand what was wrong, the door the watchmen used opened. People entered.

They weren't the watchmen.

Their uniforms weren't made of cloth, but of some pliant plate armor which reflected like dark hide yet shifted like metal. Five people wearing full black fatigues entered my home. They froze upon seeing the fey Vanguard, and the Vanguard froze upon seeing them.

“Ah, Blackwings,” said the fey man. “Always a minute too late and over-encumbered with weapons. Tell me, what honor is there in slaying a sleeping girl?”

The Blackwings had a reputation as being the hired thugs for the sorcerer's ruling class members, but I knew little else about them. They were perhaps like a privatized SWAT team. Ah, here were my assassins.

“Lyll Limber,” said the first Blackwing, easing a wand out of his uniform. “This night has already improved when I can add your head to my trophies.”

Lyll lost his disguise spell and he smiled. “I share your enthusiasm. Run along while you still can.”

I decided to take that as my cue. I made for the french doors which would portal out into the commons lounge.

"Give us the girl. We haven't come for her head," a different Blackwing said. I hesitated, then decided to keep moving.

The man stepped forward as if to start a fight, nearly bumping straight into me as I cut across his path. Heat skimmed through my veins. Trust me to get between two feuding forces. I relaxed fractionally when I was on the french door side of the room.

The wind stirred the gauzy curtains. I tried to quiet my magic, but it wasn't happening. They'd notice it soon. I reached for the door, planning on wrenching it open and flinging myself through the opening. And I'd just hope against hope that my coven was still awake on the other side, that the room wouldn't be empty, that they'd be able to fend off the unexpected arrival of the Blackwings and maybe the Vanguard. Lyall had told me to run, right?

"Halt!"

A bolt of electricity singed through the air. It struck the door I was about to touch. I jumped, but instead of withdrawing, I pushed myself forward. The doors opened as there came the scuff of boots. I felt my feet lift from the floor as there was a grunt and other spells showered me. The glass panels cracked. Something hit my back, propelling me forward.

Chaos exploded behind me.

I knew they would fight each other, but they would prefer to lay hands on me first. The portal itched as it passed over my skin, as if it were an elastic barrier considering not letting me through.

"Come on!" I didn't know if I said it or just thought it. Had someone modified the portal so it wouldn't let me through? The Blackwings had entered through the usual official entrance, they'd been let in by someone. Had cutting off my escape route also been part of the plan?

"Lyall!" I didn't know why I called to him, I didn't even know how much time had lapsed, just that I didn't seem to be going forward and I couldn't turn my head to look back. If it was another prison spell, I wouldn't be at all surprised.

There was a muttered word right behind me. I felt a groping hand snatch the thin fabric of my night gown. A bit of teal green collided with the portal. With a jolt of white-hot energy, I yanked myself out of my pursuer's grasp. The portal enfolded me, suffocating in its presence, utterly unlike anything I'd experienced before.

Chapter Two

I stepped through into my coven's commons lounge, breathing a sigh of relief. The urge to rush to the others and tell them everything hit me at once, but I wasn't sure if that was a great idea. If my coven went and got in the middle of a fight between the Vanguard and the Blackwings, I'd be hard-pressed to get any answers ahead of time. Still, how long could I ignore the idea that my house was a battle site? So long as no one followed me here, I was relatively safe.

I shook my head and took a couple steps into the commons lounge. It was a living, dining, and cooking space which linked to everyone else's homes using portals like mine. I felt the rooms with my magic: no one in the couches or armchairs, everyone except Lilly Frey was around the table. She was in the kitchen.

She was younger than I was, but better filled out, her hair dark auburn and ever gracefully put up. Seldom did she show true happiness, and I thought it was because she hadn't found it within herself yet. Today she didn't wear the gray judge's cowl, it was hanging up on its hook. Lilly had taken to using a pink willow teapot but used it with her sachets instead of the sencha I'd contributed to the cupboards along with a massive cache of food which was now whittling down to nothing without my presence to maintain it.

I'd been so quiet no one had noticed me yet. And they were so calm, I had to assume that no one had come to check on my house yet this morning. It must be very early, then.

Mordon Meadows said, "We need to tell her before these Hunters come. Before was understandable, but this is a serious matter."

My breathing halted. Alarm and the urge to demand an explanation hit me first, then fury. But I was too stunned to say anything. And Mordon looked so worn down. Oh he'd showered recently and his hair was puffed up, its red curls combed out into a disorder which made the darker and lighter stripes stand out even more than usual. But his hazel eyes didn't have the gleam that I was accustomed to.

Across from him sat Leif Frey, a slender man with a head that never grew hair so his nearly-pointy ears stood out. Lilly's hair at least hid her ears. Nevertheless, the two were distinctly siblings. Leif was a bit older than me. We'd spent the days together while we were children. No matter how often I saw him, his crystalline blue eyes always startled me.

Leif said, "It's not so simple as that. There are ways to handle delicate situations such as these."

"Put her brother on the case."

"Conflict of interest. My words, not his, but no less valid. They couldn't take him seriously."

Leazer had been a few years older than me, and we'd drifted apart as we'd gotten older. Still, he was the family member I talked to the most. Now that Leazar had been mentioned, I had to find my way to the bottom of this. Fury gave way to a sort of calculating vengefulness which I shouldn't let get the better of me, yet I couldn't stop myself. Still mindful of my thinly-clothed body, I snatched a coat off the hook and drew it tight. Then I popped my invisibility ring off.

"Good morning, Coven," I said, even fooling myself into sounding like there was nothing wrong.

Mordon folded the *Thaumaturgical Tribune* when I entered the dining nook where Leif and Constable Barnes were huddled in a muted conversation. Biting the inside corner of my lip, I glanced at where Lilly was pouring herself tea, missing the cup as she tried to act normal.

"Fera! Wow, you're up early. Like, you're never up ... I thought you'd sleep in after yesterday. You should, you know, all those spells thrown on you at once disrupts the system, so what do you need? I've got something for a headache." Her hands flew to the cabinet above her, reaching for some sort of potion.

I had no doubt that whatever was in the glass vial she was digging for would put me to sleep instead of dousing my headache and the other various pains I'd recently acquired. Just the very thought of what it might taste like made my stomach roll and twist. Then there was a part of me that didn't believe what had just happened, that that was a delusion and this was reality.

"You're spilling on the counter," I said as I sat down on the edge of the bench, avoiding looking at the others.

What I wanted to do was yell that I'd almost been kidnapped by two different parties, but I couldn't get the words out. Plus, there was a perverse part of me which took pleasure in the thought of leading them on like normal before dropping the "oh-by-the-way-I-had-two-home-invasions-just-now" bomb.

What conversation there had been was now as dead as it would have been if I'd tossed it into the lava pit after Cole. Rubbing my temples, I asked, "Who leaked to the paper, and what's it say today?"

Barnes shifted. Was he shorter than I was? If so he would be the shortest one amongst us, but that didn't make him small. He was built like a caboose and had the power of a freight train equipped with a handlebar mustache that he liked to twitch. He was Lilly's guardian, to keep the less-nobly-minded males from packing her off to wife in the middle of the night. Officially, Mordon was my guardian; we'd caused a bit of a stir by deciding to get together.

Barnes answered, and it took me a couple of sentences to get past the accent and focus on his words. "...another case fer the ruling class to push for revoking the creature immunity clause. But others like ye too much ta let you hang, so it's a duel of words in the paper."

Not much new. There had been a great deal of commotion over the death of a prominent

pure-blood human, no matter how generally disliked he had been, but that had tapered off gradually to old news. I thought about dropping the bomb now, but couldn't quite voice it. I used the mug that Lilly put in front of me as a finger warmer, and tried not to so much as inhale the fumes.

"Leif, I thought the hearing went over as well as it could. There isn't something you're holding back from me?"

Bright blue eyes lit on mine, and he ran a hand over the blonde stubble of his skull as he stared at me, calculating something in his head. "It did. And the Drake Colony sees no reason to hold any formal event, but...there's the fey. Your use of illusions lead to the death of a man, and they like their powers to be used with thought of the consequences. To them, you killed Gregor, and that must be accounted for."

I'd helped the Hunters every now and again when I was younger. Many of the members knew me, but I hadn't been involved in their politics beyond being largely excluded from them. Mordon let out a grumbled mutter that only Barnes and I could recognize as a drake swear word.

Leif continued, "The fey demand that their kin leave to see the assembly immediately upon receiving a summons ... and if you're awake, you'll get it soon. Now will you go back to sleep?"

I eyed Mordon's drink, wishing for my own cup or three of the thick, salty breakfast that was more akin to gravy than to coffee. "You need to teach me how to make drake's brew."

Lilly sighed and whisked the potion out from my hands, knowing better than to try to force me to drink it. Leif was too tired to object, same with Mordon.

Barnes said, "The fey assembly isn't the sole challenge. Half of it is getting there. The Verdant Wildwoods aren't tame. They're the woods that you hear of in all those old stories. The ones that have trees with eyes and an occasional ent. The ones with wolves the height of a draft horse. The ones that will lead you astray with will-o-the-wisps. See, the feys don't believe in dealing out punishment. They believe the woods and the land will do it for them. They scatter their ashes over it, hold daily rituals to encourage the woods to have its own heart and laws. It is them and they are it. If you're guilty of your crimes, you won't arrive to the assembly. If you do arrive, I'm not certain what will occur, but it won't be easy on you."

My throat tightened. It was physically painful to play this oblivious, but they'd know something was wrong if I didn't act contrary. "If I choose to not obey the summons and convince the Hunters to leave me alone?"

"Your innate fey abilities will fade away. Supposedly this will happen anyway if you do not visit your ancestral home to recharge."

Upon thinking about it, Mother always had gone on a yearly vacation, never telling me her

destination. I'd always suspected where she'd gone, but it didn't feel better for me to confirm it. Tiredness swept my body. I was both unwilling to forfeit my heritage and concerned that the loss of half of my powers would leave me very vulnerable. Even in my dragon form, I was rather pathetic. Children just out of their single digits were much stronger than I was, in large part due to my late-in-life ability to shift, but nevertheless I needed every edge I had.

I rolled my head back to stare at the ceiling. Perhaps this fey-forest-visitation was in part why I was feeling a fatigue which would not go away. I checked the stack of mail on the table. No summons was present.

"How do you know I'm going to receive a summons soon?"

Leif leaned back and ran his fingers over his scalp, closing his blue eyes. "The feys have been working on correcting their reputation as mean-spirited tricksters and villains."

"Come clean, Leif."

He darted blue eyes to Mordon and twitched a half-formed smile. Leif said, "I tried."

Then he reached into his pocket and brandished a letter, holding it out for me.

Absently, I rubbed life into my fingers. Then tugged the letter out of his fingers.

A stinging jolt, not very strong but enough to notice, twinged through my fingers and up my arms. The basking warmth of a camp fire washed over me, for an instant driving the weariness of days prior away. There was a faint whistle like a flute or a bird, and the sound of distant laughter.

"Activation trap. She's committed now," Barnes said.

"So now the sender know I have handled the letter?"

Barnes nodded. I opened the letter and read, "Feraline Swift, on the honor and prestige of your clan, past, present, and future, you are called to answer for your actions. Please enter the Verdant Wildwoods upon receiving this summons. You may take with you one other living being. Choose wisely. Failure to respond to this letter will result in exile and a place on the Hunter's List." My brow narrowed. "It is signed by thirteen members of the Wildwoods Council. I'm lucky I have a relationship with the Hunters, or they would be here by now. In force."

I thought of Lyall Limber and the woman. Good thing they'd come. If they hadn't, I'd have been easy prey for Blackwings.

"Doesn't that mean they should have given you more leniency?" asked Lilly.

"Thirteen names is leniency, usually they call it good at one or two," I said, rubbing my forehead. What else had my mother talked about with the feys? The scattered snatches of conversations I could recall weren't doing me any favors. Chief among my concerns were what happened next. A nagging voice trembled through the air, invisible lips mouthed on my

ear, *Go now.*

I paused at the feel of the paper and the raised surface of the ink. I smelled it. "Cottonwood fluff? And is that sap?"

Barnes said, "Yes, that is cottonwood. The paper also has spider silk, nettle, and dandelion seeds. It is pressed with other seeds, too, which sprout after you bury the letter in your garden. What comes up depends on how well they like you."

I raised a brow at him. How did Barnes know all of this? Not that it mattered right now. I'd always thought that Mother had been a mother-earth-style hippie, the way she planted letters.

When I looked up at Leif, I studied his face for signs of guilt as I said, "My uncles take names off the Hunter's List. It's not a first-time offense that gets someone listed there. How many other letters have there been?"

Leif stared at me, straight-faced. "You needed to answer to the sorcering community first. It was one of their members who died. I wrote to the Wildwoods Council explaining the situation."

I sighed and rubbed my forehead. "Leif?"

"This is the third."

The third letter? It was a miracle they weren't pouring in through the windows! The two Vanguard's had been a polite invitation compared to what I'd earned. I tapped the letter in my hand, trying to not be angry. The others watched me. At last, I said, "I have no time to lose, then."

"Fera, you aren't supposed to have that. I can't say that I gave it to you, and neither can Lilly, nor Barnes," Leif said, implying that the Judicial Division had not approved of me receiving even this letter.

"I could claim it," Barnes grumbled.

"And you'd be reassigned," I said, my thoughts clear and calm even while my blood simmered and my gut twisted. "No, you three must deny all knowledge of this. It also means you can't come with me."

Not that they'd want to volunteer. Barnes had once ventured that he would rather walk a mile over hot coals without magic than spend ten minutes in the Wildwoods, and the rest were even less inclined.

"I'll go with you," said Mordon. His words surprised me, in large part because his other form was a fire drake, and that particular combination was heavily disliked by the feys. I eyed him, frowning. Was it wise to take him with me? Would I be better off arriving by myself?

Mordon took my hand in his, rough callouses scraping over my knuckles. I closed my eyes and let out a breath. How could I tell him no? Mordon's voice held a smile in it when he said,

"I haven't met your parents yet, after all." Then he cocked his head to the side. "Fera?"

"Hmm?"

"Might I ask why you're wearing Barnes' constable coat?"

I glanced down at the blue sleeves wrinkled up about my forearms so the cuffs wouldn't flap off the ends of my fingers. "Oh, it's because I didn't have time to get dressed between the Fey Vanguard rousing me and the Blackwing mercenaries attacking them while they started their plan to whisk me away to the Wildwoods."

There was absolute, perfect silence while they tried to decide if I was serious. Was my humor *that* dry? They seemed to think so. I said simply, "I thought it was best if we let the two of them duke it out. That way we'd just have to take care of the victors."

Barnes got to his feet and crossed the living room. He opened my french doors. There was the creak of the benches as the other coven members craned to watch. Without flinching, Barnes let out a terrible growl and flung the doors wide.

We joined him.

Beyond his shoulders, my house was trashed, no sign of the intruders. All I could think was *my poor plants*. My friends turned one by one to stare at me accusingly. I shrugged.

"I hope Lyall is alright. Guess we'll see when we enter the Wildwoods."

Thank you for giving *Feral Magic* a read! I hope you enjoyed it.
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The Swift Codex

Feral Magic

Feraline Swift finds herself outside of her home, battered and bruised, wearing shredded clothes and having no memory of how it happened. In fact, she has no memory of the last three days at all.

When bounty hunters come looking for her in the name of the Magic Constabulary, Fera runs for the man heading the case in the hopes of getting help. Instead, she finds her magic has returned and she has no control over it ...

Swift Magic

Fera killed a man and the fey community has called her to stand before them or lose her family and the magic derived of that heritage. But first, she has to survive the Verdant Wildwoods to reach them.

Can she pass the tests of the Wildwoods and face the fey assembly alike? Tricks and illusions abound and nothing will be as it appears, putting her new relationship with Mordon to the test.

Lost Magic

In the quiet hours of closing up a shop in Merlyn's Market, Feraline Swift, a novice agent for Death currently floundering with the rediscovery of her magic, finds something unusual: A woman running from Death's enemy who entrusts Fera with her child—right before bursting into flames.

Swarmed with questions, Fera seeks answers no one wants to give. Who was the woman, where did she come from? Why did she self-incinerate, was it a curse, or was she a Creature? And why do the dark sorcerers want the child so badly?

Stand Alone Titles

Black Locust Letters

A morning show host must unearth the truth behind the murder of a special forces operative

and relay coded messages to the troops before the nukes fly on a very secret military base.

Betty Cratchet sat upon her favorite willow bench in Sunny Glenn market to watch the gremlins scurry up the tower with their wrenches to change the hands for tea time. Betty had boring blue eyes and somewhat dark hair and her father's military jaw. She was not whiskey in a teacup, nor was she bubbly sweet soda, she was more akin to a cup of hot milk or perhaps spiced eggnog on the days she really had her wits about her. In short, she was best had alone, right before bed, in place of any dessert. Long had she accepted her solitary station in life, but that made it no easier to swallow, and it could not make her home any warmer.

Nor would the murder she is about to witness.

Bloodstone

Cornelius, a prince of Sacria, has died, leaving his country to make peace with his enemy. His love, the stubborn slave girl Belle, is now charged with killing the man who took Cornelius' life—until she discovers that the clues to ending Sacria's curse are entrusted with her intended victim. As she struggles to appease her vengeful monarch the Queen Isabella and maintain her usual duties, Belle is embroiled in a doomed romance with the foreign prince's assassin and first in command, Shadow. Will she be able to find the true heir to the throne before the old-world magic destroys the kingdom?

The Blissed Short Story Series

Season 1

A university student, Brandy, goes to pick up her room mate from a party house. Despite warnings from a neighbor Brandy is determined to take her friend home, but gets forcibly injected with Bliss, a drug used by the Bliss dens to steal magic from victims. She is rescued from Thaimon by Nicholas Wraithbane who works for the thaumaturgical witness protection agency which operates under the guise of the Black Kettle Cafe. Brandy becomes involved in the Kettle's affairs and intrigued by both the magic Bliss has awoken in her and Bliss itself.

Episode 1 Knock

Episode 2 Bliss Den

Episode 3 Lady Luck

Episode 4 Bone Mine

Episode 5 Blood Oath

Episode 6 Slave Trade

Episode 7 Silent Sentinels

Episode 8 Cold Forged Iron

Episode 9 Hex-Breaker

Episode 10 Wild Hunt