

# COVEN OF PHOENIX

by Bree Lowdermilk

## CHAPTER ONE

Witches are the worst.

I know. Controversial take.

Fine, yes, Magical Women use their spells for the “greater good.” Stopping natural disasters, preventing wars, saving humanity from itself, blahblahblah. And yea, I’ve heard the sympathy slant: keeping a low profile for centuries, running from mobs, dodging the wrath of... Men.

Now, did *men* do an especially good job being at the top of power-rankings for the past twenty thousand years? Am I *happy* with their inventions of automatic weapons, trickle-down economics, the practice of “manspreading” and the film musical *Cats*? No, I am not.

But I genuinely believe Magical Women are worse than any man-made annoyance you can think of. Because despite their supposedly “noble deeds” and “historical persecutions,” there’s one undeniable truth that puts them at the top of my personal worst humans list:

Witches are super annoying on the internet.

These women are showy. They’re clique-y. And the content. Is just. Sooo much. Photos in chic matching robes. Spell-casting videos captioned with impenetrable inside jokes. People

like us, the non-magical, we see only what these Magical Women choose to share with those outside their world. And I am on the outside.

Literally, outside at the moment. And I forgot my sunglasses so I'm squinting and the sun is glaring off my phone which makes me squint even more and I hate everything.

Hi. I'm Phoenix.

I'm standing under an ordinary tree, outside my ordinary school, on my ordinary phone, doom-scrolling on Witch-Tok. My feed is an endless parade of extraordinary achievements: magical girls my age defying physics while their perfect hair stays mysteriously in place, their self-satisfied grins reminding me exactly where I don't belong.

Oooh yeah. Women's Magic? It's the worst.

*So then why am I obsessed with it?*

A gust of wind attacks, sending my bangs straight into my eyes—the universe's daily reminder that I'm still learning how to girl. I grab a brush out of my bag, and attempt to tame my thick, wavy hair. I've been growing it out for exactly thirteen months and eight days. But the bangs? Those are new. And fickle. I've gotten pretty good at makeup in the past year—performance background helps with that. I touch up my lipstick. This impossible blue I found at the drugstore wedged between Claritin and clearance Valentine's candy. It's this perfect shade that looks like the ocean, the kind of color that shouldn't work on anyone. Five dollars but honestly? It's the closest thing to magic I've got. And for the rest of the look: white v-neck and jean shorts (women's section, but who's checking?). The outfit is a compromise—feminine enough to feel like me, subtle enough to avoid hard conversations. For now.

An acoustic guitar is suddenly strumming right behind me. “Getting your look together for tonight?”

A mop of curly hair, a cheeky grin and an ever-present guitar. This is Gio. My next-door neighbor. My bestie. We’ve walked home together pretty much every day since we started elementary school. First week of high school now. So what’s that... fifteen hundred walks home? Not sick of them yet.

“Trying to get my voice together for tonight,” I say. I have a big solo in the back-to-school choir concert. We spent the last week of summer in choir camp, learning a song Gio wrote. “The riffs all sit right in my vocal break.” Lately everything about my voice has been... a negotiation.

“Oh come on, you don’t have a break,” Gio says. “Let me hear.”

I roll my eyes but take a breath and sing:

PHOENIX:

*A hidden sp-eh-eh-eh-ell.*

*Sp-eh-eh-eh-ell.*

I sing the five descending notes quietly, and a little unevenly, wavering between what they are and what they’re supposed to be. Like everything about me these days.

*Sp-eh-eh-eh-ell.*

Gio sings back, clear as day. They make everything seem effortless. Our music director helped with the band and choral arrangements, but Gio wrote the song all on their own. Again—effortless.

We walk through our small town, past the gas station, the thrift store and the old firehouse that's been converted to our local Women's Magic center. A sign on the glass reads: "CALL 911"—but the 1s are spelled with crystals. Very clever. But I don't think first-responder witches can help with my riffs. Or help a trans girl come out to her parents.

"Gio," I sputter. *Come on. Spit it out:* "I'm going to tell them." Starting high school as myself—not next week, not next month. "Tonight."

"Whoa. Tonight?" Gio stops short. "As in *tonight* tonight?"

"Yeah. Before the concert. So I guess. Now?"

"Wow, dude." They quickly add, "You know I call everyone 'dude. 'It's like a non-gendered thing."

"Yea, totally fine," I say. And it is. They really do call everyone dude. We walk on.

Gio came out as non-binary almost two years ago. To everyone else, it looked—you get it—effortless. Within a week, Gio had everyone at school using their pronouns. But I was the one who held them before that first talk with their parents. I was the one who cried with them before that first day at school. I know what effortless costs.

"Your dad's gonna be chill, right?" says Gio.

"I'm pretty sure my dad is physically incapable of being chill."

My dad, Tom, is an odd duck. A nerd's nerd. Music theory professor, concert pianist, deployer of bad jokes and good puns. Tom has also, almost certainly, already figured out that his long-haired child—with jewelry, a satchel that is definitely a purse, and an increasingly large stash of women's thrift store clothing—is a girl.

"He probably has a pride flag waiting in a drawer somewhere." I imagine it, a silly flag. I

imagine telling him. And I smile. Until I remember why I'm not allowed to wear those clothes.

"But my mom—"

Gio snorts, cutting me off. "Oh I know, your mom is a total—"

Witch.

\* \* \*

I was seven years old when I found out her secret.

This was my Great Explorer era. I was dragging Gio along as my sidekick, discovering uncharted territory in backyards and closets, dreaming of pushing on walls and finding hidden passages. And then—it happened. Right there, between the potatoes and pasta boxes—the wall moved.

A passage led down into total darkness. "Don't go!" Gio pleaded. But I was already crawling through. My hands found steps. I slid down until they ended at a landing, waiting for my eyes to adjust.

The candles lit themselves one by one, dozens floating in midair. They illuminated a chamber lined with shelves of glowing potions and towering crystals. Tapestries covered the walls—ancient battles and rituals in fading threads. The air crackled with energy, a living, breathing presence that made my heart race. Again—I was *seven*, and I had just stumbled into total, pure awesomeness.

But nothing in that room could ever compare to the immediate, indisputable discovery of my mother's magic.

When the overhead lights snapped on, I was wearing three of her robes and had swallowed a potion I was pretty sure would turn me pink. Mom stood on the stairs, and I knew—even at seven—that I'd spend the rest of my life hiding from that look.

After giving me an antidote for the fire-breathing charm I had apparently swallowed, Mom swore me to secrecy. No questions. No telling Gio.

“Why, why, why?” I kept asking. Why hide her magic? Not only from me, but from the world? At school, I was learning that Magical Women should be respected and trusted. Every day on our walks home, Gio would gush about some spell they had seen online. My itty-bitty-still-developing brain would rush through the front door and ask her, “Why? Mom, why can’t you at least show me?”

Gender and magic. I’ve got a lot of the first, none of the second, and endless curiosity about both. As a toddler, I played dress up with my mom—big skirts pulled up to my neck, and long necklaces that dangled to my knees. Dad played the piano as I twirled. Gender was a game.

Until the day my mother saw me in the basement wearing her robes.

That was it. Game over. Mom didn’t just bar me from her secret room and any information about her magic, she also steered me towards what was “appropriate.” Tee-ball. Crew cuts. At school, as I got older and teachers started dividing us into groups of boys and girls, gender became a harder game with harder rules. But at school, at least I could still play. I asked questions. I switched groups. I twirled. But at home...

Boy mode. Prison. Survival. I managed to perform some reasonable approximation of what she was looking for from age seven through... oh I don’t know, last fall? My dad’s been

quietly supportive as I've grown out my hair, started pushing back. But his support is sooooo quiet. And when it comes to her beliefs about exactly who I am, my mother has been nothing if not loud.

Because magic has rules too. Mom only taught me one:

*Magic is passed from mother to daughter.*

I wish I didn't know that.

The one lesson she ever shared about Women's Magic, delivered while I sat surrounded by broken crystals and borrowed robes, my beautiful damned curiosity asking "*Why won't you show me? Why, why, why?*"

"Oh, my love." She knelt and took my small hands in hers. "Because I know you're not a girl."

"I get it, dude." Gio's voice brings me back. "My dad was exactly the same way when I came out."

*No it wasn't, Gio. It wasn't the same.*

"It may take a little time, but your mom's gonna see who you really are."

We've stopped in front of our houses. My dad is playing arpeggios inside. Chopin, maybe.

"Gio, she has these... beliefs—"

I could tell them. Right now. My mother is a witch. And for seven years I've searched in vain for the smallest sign that I am, too. When I was little, I *begged* Mom to test me. Seven years old, then eight, then nine. Three tries. Three failures. But now I know how those tests go:

Mom fills a cup with water.

She lights a candle, recites a spell.

The candle burns down to nothing.

The water does not move.

I could tell Gio: deep down, I know it never will.

No. I bought a kick-ass dress for tonight and if I start explaining all this, I'll talk myself out of wearing it. "She's going to say it's not real," is all I manage.

"Dude." Gio's voice is soft. They drape their arm around me, and I let myself sink into it.

Their shoulder is solid under my cheek, broader than it used to be. When did that happen? When did Gio become this steady, grounding force?

I breathe in deep and there it is—guitar strings, vanilla lotion, and underneath it all, just...

Gio. A smell that means safety. Their chest rumbles with words about proving things, about choices, but I'm lost in the feeling of being held by someone who's memorized every version of me like lyrics to their favorite song.

"...*it's up to you.*" The last part filters through. There's definitely a friend-appropriate amount of time to stay curled into someone, and I've passed it.

Gio's fingers find the guitar strings. "Lemme hear the last note." They strum a big, open chord. I humor them, throw my head back and let go:

*MIIIIIIINE!*

For one perfect moment, there's just my voice, clear and true. No thoughts head empty.

My riffs are a little messy. But my belt? Fierce.

Gio bounds off into their house. I pull out my phone, study my reflection. The girl

looking back at me is so close to breaking free. But how do you come out to someone whose whole belief system says you can't exist?

*You don't.*

I wipe off my lipstick. Pocket my earring. Pull my hair up into its familiar shape.

My phone's camera shows me exactly what my mother expects to see.

I walk through the door.

## LINTEL WARD

*A Spell for the Crossing of a Threshold*

- \* First ask the Aperture's permission, always
- \* Thence trace the doorframe with your dominant palm
- \* Last speak the name of your mother's dyad into the wood

Dear sister,

Every magical woman's dwelling is warded—barring both man and Monster.

This page is such a threshold—the first entry in *The Grimoire of Women's Magic*.

Every doorway is a question.

Answer carefully.

## CHAPTER TWO

My dad adds an extra flourish to his scales as I sail past the piano. “Thundering Thursday,” he announces. “Thor’s day. Associated with both timpani and successful concert solos.” I hug him from behind, and he squeezes back with one arm while somehow keeping time with the other.

“T-minus two hours.” He hits a dramatic chord. “Nervous?”

“Not nervous,” I lie, already halfway to the kitchen.

“Need to warm up?”

“I’m warmed up!”

“Then no need to be nervous!”

“Not nervous! Not warming up!” I *lie, lie, lie* as I push through a swinging door that leads to the kitchen.

Our house is at least a hundred years old, and has some very specific quirks. Like the swinging door. And at least one secret room I know about. But our kitchen? It looks like an ordinary kitchen. Well, except for one extraordinary woman who is standing by the stove and smiling at me. “Hi honey,” she says. “Want some tea?”

This is my mom. Jenna. Beautiful without trying, graceful in a way that makes me ache, inexplicably waiting for a kettle of water to boil.

This is infuriating to me. Here is a woman with *actual magical power*, standing and waiting at the stove instead of casting a simple spell. Come on! At least get an electric kettle.

“It’s a special blend. Pyracantha and rose,” she says. No doubt she’s grown and harvested each individual herb and flower in her garden, all by hand and without magic. I roll my eyes. “No tea for me,” I say as I charge out of the kitchen and up the stairs.

“So excited for tonight’s concert,” she calls after me. “I laid out a new outfit for you I think you’ll like. Can’t wait!”

I step into my room and freeze. A starched white shirt, a dark blazer, and a tie are neatly laid out on my bed. My stomach knots. That’s a costume. That’s for someone else. I can’t wear that. Not tonight, not ever.

I walk to my closet and pull out a hanger from the back. It’s a buttercup-yellow strapless dress. Easily my all-time greatest thrift store find. This must have been someone’s junior prom dress, but it looks brand new. And fits me perfectly. I hold it up to my body in the mirror. My reflection grins back. I am fully in love with the yellow dress, and not playing it cool at all.

Tonight is the night, and this dress is why. It’s not about passing or being pretty enough. It’s not even about whether my mother ever sees me as anything more than a confused child playing dress-up in stolen robes. This dress is how I want the world to see me. Even if I see myself fine right now, in t-shirts and shorts. It doesn’t take much. I smooth down my v-neck, add the color back to my lips, the single dangling earring. Tiny flags planted, marking the territory of myself.

I know who I am.

All I have to do is tell them.

Deep breath. One foot in front of the other. I stop at the top of the staircase.

“Did he seem nervous to you?” Mom’s sitting near my dad in the living room, stirring her tea. “He’s never nervous about music stuff.”

I wonder if this might be the last time I hear them talk about me like this, using these words. If this is the last time my mother will speak about me with such warmth in her voice.

“Jenna...”

“What? Can’t a mother be excited about her son’s solo?”

Then the music starts.

Not the song for tonight’s concert. No. This is different. Older. A nightmarish sound that’s been haunting me since I was little—at first just noise, just chaos, just something that made me run to my parents’ room in the middle of the night, unable to explain my bone-deep terror.

As I got older, it got clearer. That’s when I realized the worst part: they were voices. A choir of women, but twisted and layered until they barely sounded human. All clustered sevenths and diminished fifths fighting for space in my head—the kind of atonal nightmare that makes normal people cover their ears and run.

Of course my dad, bless his musicology degree, thought this was fascinating. He’d catch me at the piano, trying to pick out those harmonies, and immediately launch into lecture mode. Isn’t atonal music already traumatic enough without turning it into a teachable moment? Looking back, maybe I should have seen a psychiatrist instead of getting lectures about Schoenberg.

Sometimes I wonder—has this been anxiety manifesting as sound? Some weird

intersection of gender dysphoria and my musical background? Anyway, I never specifically told anyone about the voices. There are enough people in the world who think being trans is a mental illness without me adding “musical hallucinations” to the mix.

But last year, around the time I started thinking about transitioning, it changed. Louder. More insistent. The harmonies shifted from peaceful to urgent, building in complexity until they felt like feedback through an amp turned up too high. Now it hits me at random moments—walking to school, trying to sleep, standing on staircases apparently—flooding my brain with layer after layer of overlapping voices.

My palms begin to sweat where they touch the banister, a strange warmth that I’ve started associating with these episodes. For a moment I think I might actually fall, but I’ve learned to ride it out. To listen past the initial wave of panic and find what’s hidden underneath.

“I don’t know. Something feels different lately,” I hear Mom say downstairs.

“Don’t push it,” my dad says. “F—— will let us know—”

F—— is my deadname.

That was the first certainty—not who I was, just who I wasn’t. For months, I lived in this liminal space where I felt real but undefined. Like I was more of a crossing-out than a person.

But Gio? They rolled with it. We turned it into a game—trying on different femme F names every day. “How’s your morning, Francie?” “Did Fanny forget her fanny pack?” Each day brought a new option: Flora. Flossie. Fifi. (After a while, it started to feel like I was naming a poodle.)

A true friend is someone who walks with you in the middle spaces, in the nameless times. And Gio did, making me laugh when the weight of being nobody-in-particular got too heavy.

But for months now, the name game has just been cover, really. A little ruse for Gio's benefit.

Because one night, alone in my room, when the music hit harder than ever—I did something desperate. I actually tried what my dad had been trying to teach me about atonal music. “Even in chaos, there’s always some point of stability,” he said. “Start with one voice. Map the layers.”

And somehow, forcing myself to really listen instead of enduring it, I began to hear it differently. One clear tone emerged from the noise. Then another. There was meaning buried in the noise. Not just sound, but words.

Now, standing on the stairs, I do it again. (“Start with one voice.”) Push past the wall of sound, past the panic. (“Map the layers.”) One voice emerges, then another. And there, in the center of it all, two syllables emerge with perfect clarity. The sound that once sent me running to my parents’ room in terror has become the place where I first heard my true name:

“Phoenix, Phoenix, Phoenix.”

The music fades as suddenly as it arrived, leaving me steady but shaken. Back to being a kid on a staircase, about to have a very difficult conversation.

“Nothing’s ever simple with F——,” I hear Mom say downstairs.

Jenna’s got that right.

I touch my earring, let my hair fall past my shoulders, and try to calculate the exact right amount of femme presentation that will both convince my mother of who I am while simultaneously not scaring her off.

Nothing’s ever simple.

I walk down the stairs.

\* \* \*

“Hi. I uh. I have to tell you something,” I start. I’m aiming for breezy. Is this breezy? “And uh. It’s not a big deal.” Just to really drive home the breeziness, I avoid any eye contact and direct my full attention toward fidgeting with the hem of my shirt.

“Are those your grandmother’s earrings?” Mom interrupts, staring at my right ear. “Just one. But yeah.” Dad left them on my dresser for me last week. I smile at him and nod.

“Sorry, what... What’s going on?” Mom asks, her eyes switching between me and my dad.

I hesitate. I want to avoid the part where she says “No, you aren’t,” for as long as possible. I want to put her at ease. But I’m sweaty and I’m squirmy and the music is coming back even as I try to reassure her: “Really, nothing big. And nothing bad.” Well, that sounds like it is bad. “Or, I mean. Not some world-changing revelation. I’ve always been—”

There’s no breezy way to say it. And there’s no abridged version of my gender to share. She’s known me for fourteen years. If she can’t see who I am, no specific words I choose will make a difference now. It all spills out: “Mom, I know this can’t be a surprise. I feel like I’ve been telling you and showing you who I am for years. I’m a girl. I’m trans. I already told Gio and

most of the choir.” I add, with my least believable breeziness yet: “I think it’s going to be fine.”

“Phoenix,” I say “I, um, chose the name Phoenix.”

Dad bounds across the room like a cartoon tiger and pulls me into a big hug. “Phoenix,” he gasps. His face is wet against mine. He’s crying. “Phoenix,” he says again. “Gorgeous.”

I’m starting to feel relieved, and even a bit—proud. Phoenix is the perfect name. And it’s mine. “I thought it sounded a bit... magical,” I say.

“Magical?” Mom interrupts. I stare at her. She stares back. I can see her brain working. I know that look. My Mom is strategizing, deciding how she’s going to play this. She tries for a light touch: “Um. Okay! Well. I guess we’ll talk about this. Like. Now,” she says, with a smile.  
(Breeziness is not a Cabot Family trait.)

“Jenna, Phoenix is being very brave,” Dad says. “Yea? Can we listen now and ask questions later?”

It’s excellent advice, which my mother doesn’t consider. “You can’t just say some words and change who you are,” she launches in.

And there it is. The response I predicted to Gio, word for word. But hearing it—actually hearing it come out of her mouth—hits different. She’s reaching into my chest and squeezing. I force the words out anyway:

“I am who I am, and I *can* say those words because—” And then I’m cut off.

“F——” Mom begins.

“PHOENIX.” The word cracks out of Dad. Sharp. Dangerous. Like it came from someone else’s throat.

Mom’s whole body jerks back. Her mouth opens—closes—then she gives an exaggerated

sigh and throws up her hands, accidentally knocking her teacup to the floor.

It shatters.

“Dammit,” she mutters. “Phoenix.”

She flicks a finger. The broken pieces of the cup rise. The shards dance together, spinning like leaves in the wild, until the cup is made whole again, not even a hairline crack to show it was ever broken.

My mother is doing magic. Here. Now. In front of me. The pink stone at her throat pulses with light.

I try to read the expression on her face. Is she too upset to remember to hide it? Or is this deliberate—a demonstration of exactly what she knows I can’t do?

“Honey, wear anything you want,” she says. “Change your name, experiment—”

“*Experiment*, ” I echo.

Dad sighs, “Jenna.”

Her tone softens. “If we were any other family, you would have my full support. You know that, right?” She stares at me with her enormous brown eyes.

I don’t know. I’m not sure if I know that. But I *do* know that there’s a big “but” coming.

“*But*—we are not like any other family. I am a witch. It’s in my lineage, in my blood.

Phoenix, do you have magic?”

I don’t know how to answer. Or maybe I don’t want to.

“No. No, of course you don’t,” she says. “It’s okay, my love.” She sits on the couch, pats the space beside her. I go because my stupid body can’t help wanting to be loved by her. “Magic passes from mother to daughter,” Mom continues. Her arm around me feels like a lie. “I didn’t

make the rules. Seven centuries and there's never been a b—" She stops. Swallows. "Do you understand what that means? How... *impossible* this is?" The words blur together. Something about being special, remarkable, her entire world—but all I hear is the last part, the only part that matters: "You are not my daughter."

"Jenna, don't do this. Don't you dare push her away from us," my dad says in a low voice. My dad doesn't get angry. This barely sounds like him. "She's telling you who she is! And so what, so maybe she's a girl without magic."

"It doesn't skip a generation," my mom says quietly. She seems almost as destroyed by this whole conversation as I am. I actually feel bad for her.

"Okay, so then maybe she hasn't found her magic yet," he says. His eyes are pleading with my mom. All she has to say is "maybe." That's it. A little shred of hope and we can all get out of this nightmare of a conversation and off to a high school choir concert.

"Absolutely not," she says instead. No, there will be no quick exit out of this. "Real magic is how you're born."

"I'm real," I whisper.

"Then you have magic?" she asks. Her voice is gentle, almost hopeful, like she's forgotten the *three* tests we've already done. Like she's forgotten how many times I asked her to try, until I finally stopped asking.

It's been years since I gave up, since I accepted what seemed obvious—if I had magic, we would have known by now. But looking at her face, seeing that hope... Wouldn't it be so much easier if I did? If I could make something float, or fix a broken cup, or do any of the thousand

little magics I've watched her pretend not to do my whole life?

I've seen Witch-Toks of babies sneezing and casting off sparks. Every test I've failed confirmed what everyone knows—this is not a later-in-life skill you can learn, like cheese-making. But what am I supposed to say? No? Never mind? Gender reveal redacted? I look at my dad's eyes, and despite everything I know about myself, I want that small shard of hope, too.

"Maybe," I murmur. "Maybe I do."

Mom grabs the reassembled teacup, walks to the sink and fills it with water. She places the filled cup on the kitchen table, just like she has so many times before. But this time feels different. This time feels final. "Okay," she says. "Show me."

Her hand hovers over the teacup. She rotates her fingers, ever so slightly. She starts humming under her breath. Then singing, soft and low:

*Blood and bond and stone and song.*

*Four gates ancient, four gates strong...*

The water begins churning, faster and faster, until it starts to rise up out of the cup and into the air. It spins in front of me like a tiny hurricane.

"If she has Women's Magic, the water will keep moving once I let go. And we'll have proof," Mom says, locking eyes with me. The water catches the light like liquid glass, reminding me of those perfect spell-casting videos I've watched a thousand times.

"You don't need to do this," Dad says. He's right, of course. I could back out right now.

But then I think about little me in the basement. I remember how it felt to wear my mother's robes and to hold her delicate crystals. I think of how many hours I've spent scrolling

past images of magical girls, and how I've longed to be on the inside.

"I want to know," I say. I reach out my hand.

My mother nods. Ever so slowly, she begins to draw back from the cup. I stare into the small funnel of water, watching it circle. And I swear, I can *feel it*—a connection with the water, and with my mother. The voices in my head grow stronger, harmonizing with the water's motion. My hand is still. The water's still spinning. *Yes. Yes. I'm doing it.* This is how it feels, I think, to know that I was right.

And then my mother finishes lowering her hand. The water slows, then stops entirely in mid-air. For a moment, time seems as suspended as the cup. The voices fade to silence. I hear my dad's sharp intake of breath as the water falls, drenching the table.

"It's good to have clarity," Mom says. Her hand is on the small of my back.

I don't understand. I was doing it. I thought I was doing it. The water had moved—I'd felt the connection, heard the voices growing stronger. I look at the water running out and onto the floor. "It's fine, honey," she says. "Maybe it'll be easier for you now. To accept reality. F——"

"Phoenix." Dad corrects her with a bellow.

"Phoenix," she says. "Sorry. I'm sorry." Her crystal pendant dims, like a star going dark.

I feel hollow. Like a total void of a person. "I laid out those clothes on your bed. In case this changes anything," Mom says. "Up to you."

Suddenly, Gio's words come thundering back to me. *None of this is up to them, it's up to you.* Gio didn't prove anything to their parents when they came out. And they didn't have to.

"My name is Phoenix," I hear myself saying, "My pronouns are she/her." I'm trying to keep my voice strong. "I have to get dressed for a concert now. And actually, you don't get a say

in any of that. The only choice you get to make is whether you show up and watch me.”

I turn and walk upstairs without waiting for a response. I don’t want them to see the inevitable tears that are about to come.

## THE SWEEPING UNDER

*A Daily Scouring Spell for the Removal of Household Clutter  
or the Suppression of Unwanted Magical Evidence*

- \* First ask the Aperture's permission, always
- \* Thence, pluck a single bristle from a consecrated broom
- \* Last with glowing palms outstretched speak: "Let it be as if it never was"

Dear sister,

Humble spells such as this first inspired the theatrical depictions we now combat. Despite our repeated efforts (see "Yellow Brick Litigation," *Coven Council v. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1941*), public narratives persist in depicting us airborne. That the Council must continually address the specific matter of witches using household implements for aerial transportation seems, frankly, beneath the dignity of our institutions. If we possessed the power of flight, would we choose to travel astride *cleaning equipment?*

Though perhaps one should be grateful—such tales do keep eyes skyward, while real magic works in the shadows below.

## CHAPTER THREE

I slam my door a little harder than I mean to.

I grab my mom's awful boy-mode concert outfit, ball it up and shove it deep down into my trashcan. Then I step into my yellow dress and zip it up. I look at myself in the mirror. Shoulders too wide. Jaw too sharp. Facts. But then—the dress. Yellow fabric falling exactly right, creating curves where there weren't any, softening edges that needed softening. The girl in the mirror is beautiful. This is also a fact.

My mother can keep her rules about Women's Magic, can keep every tired, small thing she thinks she knows about bodies and power. I have actual problems to deal with. Like the impossible riffs waiting for me in Gio's song tonight.

I start to warm up one last time, starting with the beginning lyrics:

*You are looking at me like a strange little flower  
That didn't grow in the way that you planned.*

There's a soft knock on the door. It's probably my mom. But it doesn't matter what she

says now. I'm ready. "Sure, come in," I say.

But it's my dad. "Still not warming up, huh?" he says, with a knowing grin. There's a small shopping bag in his hands. He walks over and hands it to me. "The internet says tan with yellow, but that didn't seem very 'you.'"

I reach into the bag and pull out a pair of gleaming, bright red pumps. These are not thrift store shoes. He gestures to my dress. "Accidentally saw that in your closet a few weeks ago. Oops."

The shoes are perfect. My father is perfect. "Thanks," I say. I'm glad I haven't put mascara on yet, because I'm crying. "I'm sorry I can't—"

"Hey, hey, none of that," Dad cuts me off, his voice firm but laced with a tenderness I've come to rely on. "You think that test means anything? To me? Come on. You've got nothing to prove." He sits down on the bed next to me, the springs creaking.

Dad pauses. He's trying so hard to be strong for me, trying to be the kind of supportive dad he probably read about in dozens of parenting articles about how to handle your kid coming out. Tom loves research. He takes a breath, and then asks so softly: "How did you know?"

There's an awkward silence. How did I know...that I was a girl? That I was... a non-magical witch?

"You don't have to tell me," he continues quickly. "I just. I guess I'm just curious. And I want to know you better. Where did you find the name 'Phoenix?'"

Should I tell him about the voices? I mean, my dad would be thrilled that I'm hearing counterpoint (he's a big geek for Bach fugues), but somehow I don't think now is the right time

to tell him about my probable panic disorder. Still, I love that he's really asking.

"I heard it," I say. He's leaning in. I trust him. "A sound—or a voice, calling to me. Telling me who I am."

He doesn't say anything. Just gives a small nod. And now I find myself asking the question I most want to know, the question I'm most scared to ask: "Dad, do you think I could have magic? Do you think any of this is—real?"

He takes his time before speaking. "I think... that I know music, not magic. But even I know that if you ever hear the sound of your own voice? Listen to it."

Wow. Beautiful but vague. "Come on. Answer the question. Do you believe I could be a witch?"

Dad looks up and meets my eyes. "Phoenix, you are who you are. It doesn't matter what I believe, and—" I've watched my father end a thousand sonatas. The release of the pedal. The lift of the hands. He sets a word between us now with as much weight and resolution as any major chord:

"*Yes.*"

\* \* \*

It takes longer than I expected to finish getting ready. But when my eye makeup is as clean as I can make it, and my feet feel prepared to navigate in heels, I call it all 'good enough' and head out the door. I pause again on the staircase, overhearing my parents in the living room again. They've clearly been fighting.

"We're safe, Tom. She's safe," my mom's yelling. She's using my pronouns. I'm surprised, and more confused than relieved. "Just imagine. *Imagine*. If my *child* had even a hint of *real magic*? We would be thrust into that world again and *I will not go back*."

"Maybe she's the way forward," my dad says gently.

"Don't!" I hear something break. Is my mom crying? "Just don't," she says softly. "It's not fair. You get to be the supportive one, while I'm over here trying to figure out how to stop *all hell breaking loose* because my daughter is on a gender journey." I'm so taken aback by the words "all hell breaking loose" that I almost miss it: 'Daughter. 'My mother just called me her daughter.

"You think I want this? You think I don't want to wrap her up in my robes and teach her every spell she's ever wanted to learn? Well I can't. And *she can't*."

My heart is pounding. I grab the banister, worried I might fall down the stairs. It's not the heels.

*Phoenix, Phoenix, Phoenix.*

No.

No, not now. Not the music.

I need to walk downstairs. I need to go to the concert.

I need to not listen to the frightening music in my head, need to not listen to my mother's voice: "I know she's upset, and I will make it my life's work to help her recover from this disappointment, but she doesn't have Women's Magic!"

All the anxiety of the day is swirling around, rising up along with the music in my head, jumbled together in a dissonant mess with the accompaniment of my father's arpeggios and the words of Gio's song and all the ways I have tried and tried and—

The music cuts.

I'm on the landing halfway down the stairs. I don't remember walking down.

My parents are looking at me.

I think they're waiting for me to speak, but I don't know what to say.

So I sing.

#### PHOENIX:

*You are looking at me like a strange little flower*

*that didn't grow in the way that you planned.*

*Say nothing right now,*

*say nothing tonight.*

*Be patient with the frightening gift*

*of a feeling you can't understand.*

My mother is listening. Patient. Like when she's gardening. My father reaches his hand over to the piano to play a chord, but I shake my head 'no. 'I don't need an accompaniment. I close my eyes and listen, singing as much to myself as to my parents.

*You don't have to have the words yet,*

*for the power here inside the room.*

It sounds like my dad is playing the piano again. No. I don't want his help. I shake my head again. So why is he still playing?

*You don't have to help, worry, or shape what isn't yours.*

*Tomorrow we'll talk.*

I hear a gasp and open my eyes. My mom has her hand clamped over her mouth. She's trembling. My father is standing across the room, pointing at the untouched piano. The keys are rising and falling completely on their own.

*For now, watch the bloom*

*of New Magic.*

*New Magic, alive and real.*

*Your daughter's revealing the shine*

*of New Magic.*

All around the living room, objects hang in mid-air: a pencil, an umbrella, a vase. The pool of water I spilled during my failed test has separated into droplets, which ascend and arc overhead. Soft light radiates from the kitchen, where dozens of unlit candles have somehow sparked. It's all so familiar...

My heart sinks as I realize what I'm remembering: this is exactly like that day in the basement. This must be my mother's magic. Is she... tricking me?

I meet her eyes, red with tears. She waves her hands and shakes her head.

That's when it hits me. That's when I allow myself to really see it, really feel what's happening here. Drops of water are landing everywhere. A candle has ignited a curtain in the kitchen. And the umbrella keeps hitting my dad in the head.

*New Magic.*

*Messy and fragile and perfect and*

No, this is not my mother's magic. Or anyone else's, for that matter. The beautiful chaos overtaking my entire house, wild and weird and anything but simple, absolutely has to be—

*Mine.*

## CHAPTER FOUR

The whole car ride, Dad is all nerves and questions. He jumps between normal-dad-anxiety about me going out on stage in a dress, and witch-dad-anxiety over the fact that I just rearranged the living room furniture with my voice. The normal-dad-anxiety is easier to handle—he's worried about bullies, about teachers, about whether the school will let me use the right bathroom. The witch-anxiety is harder—his eyes keep darting to my hands like they might start glowing any second.

I tell him I'm going to do my thing, show up with my hair in whatever state it's landed in and let the riffs fall where they may. It's like he said: it doesn't matter what anyone else believes. Shockingly, I think I actually mean it.

But when he asks about magic... I've got nothing. No, I don't know how to control it. No, I can't use it to find us a closer parking space. No, I don't know where Mom is. Witch-dad-anxiety is rough.

Dad's gripping my hand way too tight when we spot Gio outside the auditorium. They stops mid-step when they see me, eyes wide. For a moment we stare at each other. Their concert

outfit defies any easy category: flowing pants, fitted vest over a loose shirt, hair pinned up in a way that's somehow masculine and feminine and neither.

"You look perfect," Gio says, pulling back to take in the yellow dress. Their hands find mine, squeezing. "Like, actually you. She's here. She's really here."

My throat tightens. They get it. Not just the dress, the...wholeness of it.

"And I'm the one who picked out the shoes!" Dad says proudly. Then witch-dad takes over and he turns back to me, whispering full-audibly: "Are you gonna tell them about the... you know?" He wiggles his fingers in what I assume is supposed to be a magical gesture. "You've gotta tell them!"

"Tell me what?"

"I'm um," I stammer. Can I say it? I don't think it needs to be a secret. Witch-Tok is a thing, after all. But I don't know. It's all so new. Gio doesn't even know about the secret basement, or the voices, or why my mother really stopped letting us play dress-up. It's a lot to explain, and we're standing in a parking lot. It feels like there have been layers and layers of coming out today, so many in fact that I almost forget that I *do* have something to tell Gio.

"I'm Phoenix."

\* \* \*

The lights plunge to black and the auditorium rustles into silence. I watch from the wings as the school band files on. The rhythm section trails in last, Gio carrying their trusty guitar. Finally, the choir—forty kids.

Remember when Gio said I had nothing to prove? Sweet thought, but there are eight hundred people in the auditorium and seventy five performers and it dawns on me that my earlier terror was absolutely-completely-justified.

My intro begins.

I walk to the microphone and grip it for dear life.

PHOENIX:

*You are looking at me stepping out on the stage.*

*You are waiting and holding your breath.*

*Who is she right now? Who is she tonight?*

*Try not to ask, I'm on my path.*

*All I know is there's no going back.*

My eyes have adjusted to the stage lights. I spot my mom slipping in through the back doors. I'm relieved—I *want* her to see this, to hear this.

*Now I'm following my own voice*

*And this music that's rising from the ground.*

*You can turn away or shame me,*

*If that's who you want to be.*

*But if you're with me...*

Rustling from the rhythm section. The drummer rises and clicks his sticks overhead.

Then the whole band thunders in.

*You might hear the sound of New Magic.*

*New Magic, aloft and bright.*

*In the room here tonight*

*There's the shine of New Magic.*

*Messy and fragile and perfect and mine.*

The room bursts into applause. My heart's racing—not from nerves anymore, but from the way the energy has shifted. I can't imagine that absolutely *everyone* in this room is happy about me standing up here singing in this dress. But the ones who are? They're louder.

The choir's getting into it, all forty kids bouncing on the rickety risers. I've performed on these enough to know how they shake—the metal frame wobbles if you so much as breathe wrong. But this feels bigger, like the whole stage is vibrating beneath us.

Mom is waving to me from the back of the auditorium.

No. Not waving. Pointing? She's pointing up. I follow her gesture up to the ceiling—and my stomach drops. It's not the risers. It's not the stage.

The whole building is shaking.

That's when I notice the sparks. Dancing through the air like dust motes caught in sunlight, only...bright. Colorful. Shifting from pink to blue to purple. Not the precise beams I've seen online. Diffuse. Like magic is leaking out of me, spreading everywhere at once. My palms burn warm.

More and more of the audience is noticing. I hear *oohs* and *ahhs* over the band.

Mom is waving in Dad's face, shaking him by the shoulders. It's not especially cryptic body language: she's mouthing the word, "STOP" at me, over and over.

Super helpful. Since I have no idea where the sparks are coming from or how to stop them.

Dad turns and walks down the aisle toward the stage, and I get ready to bring the song to a screeching halt. But my dad is... *smiling*. "Keep going," he's saying. The music is vamping, waiting for the last verse. I look back at the band.

The guitar has stopped. Because Gio is staring up, mouth open. All those rainbow sparks have been drifting higher and higher, gathering on the ceiling like a storm about to break. The sparks are moving up there. Rippling.

Gio looks at me. I nod. *Yes. Yes, it's me.*

I remember something Gio told me last year. Coming out isn't one moment—it's layers of discovery, layers of telling and revising and discovering all over again.

There are eight hundred in the auditorium. There are seventy five on stage. And one very angry witch in the back shaking her fist. This is one more layer of me. Yes. Yes, I want them to see.

Dad's already has his phone out, switching between filming me and the ceiling. I know without knowing: he has already made a Witch-Tok account. Across the room, there are at least another dozen cameras pointing. Probably more. Some of the choir have their phones out, shooting me from behind with the ceiling as a background. That'll be a good shot.

I wonder who will be watching these streams.

The entire auditorium is twinkling like a starlit sky—a striking display of public, non-essential magic.

And it's coming from a trans girl.

We were all told a witch like me could never exist.

I turn and look directly at the camera. I don't know who needs to hear Gio's lyrics. But somewhere out there, another trans kid could be watching this.

What does it mean to see yourself as... possible?

*I am looking for you somewhere out in the dark.*

*Are you there, and have you felt the same?*

*Say something tonight, or say nothing tonight.*

*It's up to you. You know your truth,*

*Even when you don't know your own name.*

*You don't have to use the words yet*

*For a journey that's never truly done.*

*You don't have to raise a banner*

*Or storm out on a stage.*

I'm lost in the words and music, lost in a reverie of potential trans witches coming out of the woodwork—it's only the piercing sound of twisting metal from above that alerts me—the auditorium's ceiling is not just rippling. It's *ripping*.

*True change happens slow.*

From the back of the house, the crystal at my mother's throat blazes blindingly to light as beams emanate from her hands—precise, purposeful, each movement exactly calculated. Her magic forms perfect geometric patterns as it rises up through the roof, then arcs back to secure the building. My magic flows like music, unpredictable and free. But hers moves like *architecture*, each spell building on the last with mathematical precision.

I have never seen the extent of my mother's magic before. Let's just say, it's more impressive than a tea cup.

*But then when you grow*

*And greet the sun...*

Bits of metal and wood are raining down on stage and in the audience. I'm horrified, embarrassed and fighting off every instinct I have to run out the stage door. Meanwhile, the band plays on, the choir keeps singing:

*It's New Magic!*

*A hidden spell.*

*But look close and you'll tell*

*From the shine of New Magic.*

My mother's next stream of magic dislodges even more debris, melting away in bursts of pink, blue, and purple, and the audience...

*Cheers.*

They think it's part of the show?

*They do.*

They think I am the greatest witch that ever was.

They have no idea: if not for my mother, we would have all been crushed. The crowd is screaming like I am a pop star, but at last the roof is holding.

I am astonished, exhausted and terrified as I meet my mother's eyes. I sing my last notes right toward her, trying to convey how sorry I am, how scared I am, and how little I understand about what I've gotten us into.

*Messy and fragile and perfect—  
and mine.*

Mom is leaning against the back wall, looking almost as astonished, exhausted and terrified as I am. Then she's standing. She's giving me a little shrug. She... is she...

She's smiling. Not one of the fake I'm-a-Cabot-and-everything-has-to-be-okay ones, either. Then, in a night already filled with way too many layers, too many reveals, Mom gives one last surprise to beat them all:

She joins the rest of the proud parents on their feet, and she applauds.

## THE BINDING OF FIRST FLAME

*For When Little Ones Spark*

Every mother faces this moment - your little one has sneezed and the curtains have caught fire. First flame is always startling, but Mother must be brave:

\* First ask the Aperture's permission, always

\* Thence trust The Four Gates:

## THE GATE OF BLOOD

Verify the child's lineage. Take solace in what nature has already decreed:

Magic flows mother to daughter.

Immutable. Biological. Fact.

## THE GATE OF STONE

Press your own amulet to your daughter's throat until a training stone is procured.

Without proper channelling, even simple levitation remains impossible.

## THE GATE OF SONG

Begin instruction in approved harmonic forms—it is never too early.

Do not expect spontaneous manifestation. Objects do not dance to a child's song!

Women's Magic requires structure, training, years of practice.

## THE GATE OF BOND

This gate remains closed until her body's flowering.

*Until pink light recognizes pink light, you are her protector, her binding.*

For this, there is no spell, only maternal vigilance.

\* She will spark at dinner for weeks. Feed her in the garden. Remember, Mother: grass grows back, as do singed eyebrows. Your beauty is fleeting, your bloodline is eternal.

\* Lastly, notify your Council representative before sunset. (This is mere courtesy, coven-wide wards are activated by all first flames.)

Dear sister,

The Four Gates exist for one purpose: preventing the Aperture's depletion. This primordial source of all Women's Magic is precious, and finite. Each generation draws from the same wellspring. What violates our gates threatens this inheritance, and seven centuries of tending ensures such impossibilities are swiftly... corrected.

*...even now, as sparks ignite from ungated palms...*

*...as the Aperture responds to frequencies we do not teach...*

*...as an entire suburban auditorium rises in ovation...*

Dear sister,

Documentation has been initiated.

The Sentinels miss nothing.

They are already moving.

Sleep well.

## CHAPTER FIVE

I jerk awake to the sound of curtains being ripped open.

“Mom?” I squint at my phone. Friday. 6:18 AM. Even earlier than I thought.

“Up. Now.”

She turns to face me and—yikes. Yesterday’s clothes, shadows under her eyes. This is not my mother. Not the Jenna Cabot who usually looks like she has a team of tiny birds that help her get ready every morning.

“Did you sleep at all?”

She turns back to the window. “Your little light show is trending.”

So that’s a *no* on the beauty sleep.

I look over at the yellow dress, thrown over the back of my desk chair. Last night comes back to me: the band, the risers, *the ceiling*...

“How bad was the damage?”

“Bad enough.” She has one hand gripping the curtain, the other pressed flat against the glass. Watching. Waiting. Her fingers drum against the sill—nervous. Mom doesn’t do nervous.

“Is someone coming?”

Her whole body goes still. “Why would you ask that?”

Because you look like you’re standing guard. Because I caused major structural damage to a recently renovated auditorium and I would imagine they might hand-deliver a bill for something like that. I sigh. Which turns into a yawn. Which turns into an obnoxious, drawn-out, musical—

“*No. Singing.*”

Cool mom moment would be a little reassurance or emotional vibe check or—I don’t know—acknowledging the *explosive magical coming-out I had last night*. But no:

“Your voice is a dangerous weapon, and I haven’t had coffee yet.”

\* \* \*

I find Dad downstairs in the kitchen, flour in his hair. “Kouign-amann,” he says, like that explains everything. “Overproofed. Complete collapse, honey, an absolute disaster.” He wipes his hands on his apron, kisses me on the cheek and shoves his phone into my hand. “Lotta hits on that video from last night.”

The concert video is up on Witch-Tok, and it’s...

“Whoa...”

The video’s been edited and reposted. Someone’s added effects. And the stats... not hundreds of likes. Hundreds of thousands. I watch the numbers tick up in real-time. “I have

almost as many views as CrystalBallz109.”

And no, this reference is not embarrassing. Because while everyone else watches CrystalBallz for her aesthetic and her family’s makeup line, I’ve spent hours studying her sphere levitation videos. She’s legit not just a nepo-baby magic influencer, she’s—okay never mind yes this is quite embarrassing.

Dad sets a plate of pancakes down in front of me. “Box mix, I’m afraid. Did you check the comments?”

Already there, lost in the flood.

*First.*

That’s the gist of it.

That’s what they all say.

*The first.*

“Phoenix, honey, we need to—” Mom starts.

“Representation at last.” Dad’s reading over my shoulder. “Oh, this one’s sweet: ‘She is mother. Rep we deserve fr…’ Actually, I’m not sure what language this is.”

“Tom.” Mom’s voice is ice.

“Just one more—‘bout time Women’s Magic got an upgrade! ’Ha! That’s—”

“*TOM.*”

The kitchen goes silent except for the sad bubbling of abandoned kouign-amann dough. Mom’s hands are pressed flat against the table. “The attention is not good,” she says quietly.

“Jenna, it’s just excitement. Phoenix did something amazing—”

“Phoenix did something dangerous.”

“Jenna, you’re scaring her—”

“Good.” Mom turns to me. “This isn’t a game, Phoenix. There are people who—”

“Who?” Dad asks.

Her eyes flick to something on the kitchen table. A thick burgundy book. Gold lettering glints on the spine: “Alumnae Directory for the Sister Academy of—”

“*Hornesbrook*.” The word comes out strangled. “Jenna. *Hornesbrook*? ” The color drains from his face.

Here’s what I know about Hornesbrook Academy, compiled from years of obsessive Witch-Tok stalking:

Not much.

Posts vanish. Hashtags are shadow-banned. Trying to research Hornesbrook is grabbing at smoke.

Occasional scraps leak through: deleted comment threads, images of gothic hallways, grainy footage of glowing hands on a quad.

All anyone knows is this: on one sunny spring day in May, 1926, the world woke up to discover witches were real. *The Great Outing*, they called it—though “outing” makes it sound like witches got caught. But they chose to reveal themselves. Synchronized. Worldwide. At the exact same moment, centuries of invisibility spells just...*dropped*, revealing seven training academies across the globe. Stone fortresses hidden in mountains that shifted to reveal them, or rising from lakes that had always been empty until they weren’t.

Only one appeared in America.

In other words, every single girl I’ve ever obsessed about over on Witch-Tok has been through Hornesbrook Academy.

I look down at the school directory. And then to my mom.

*Oh.*

“You went to Hornesbrook?”

“Which means I know exactly how much danger you’re in right now.”

“So we run,” Dad says. “Is there some kind of witness protection for...”

For trans witches?

“This isn’t a *burnt croissant, Tom!*” Mom slams the directory down. “You are so far out of your depth right now.”

“Can’t you just... I don’t know... negotiate?”

I lean forward, fingers reaching for the directory, just one peek inside—

Mom’s hand slaps mine away.

“Witches don’t negotiate. They convene. They assess threats. They handle them.”

*Handle them.*

The way she says it—flat, final. The way Dad’s gone completely white.

“Mom, when you say handle—”

“*Phoenix.*” Mom stares at me. Like she’s waiting for me to get it.

And then I get it.

Whatever they do, it’s bad enough that my mother—who recently held up a collapsing auditorium without breaking a sweat—can’t even say it out loud.

*Think. All those hours. All that scrolling. What did I see?*

CrystalBallz tutorials. Influencer drama. The daring rescue of a beached orca.

Beautiful magic. Harmless magic. Magic that makes the world a better place. But what

was it all, really? Surface stuff. Party tricks. What do I *actually know* about witches? About their governance, their schools, their laws, their punishments? Exactly what they want me to know, nothing more.

I wanted to be in the world of Magical Women.

I never wondered if their world wanted me back.

“Okay. What now? Where do we go?”

Mom lifts her palm out in front of her. The same gesture from last night—during the water-test, during the concert. Simple really, but immediately a dozen strands of light stretch out from her hand. Thin as spider’s silk, a faint gorgeous pink, reaching across the room until they touch a bare stretch of wall beside the pantry.

“You always thought you were so clever at finding everything.” Mom smirks. Those lines are multiplying. Hundreds of strands, enveloping the wall, darkening into a shade of—green? “Well, not everything.” The wisps thicken into vines, into dense green ivy that frames—a small, wooden door.

The exact door I once found in the pantry. She’d moved it two feet at most.

“You know,” she whispers in my ear, “I’m clever, too.”

Her hand finds my back, not shoving but definitely not asking.

“For the record,” Dad calls down, “Croissants and kouign-amann are completely different—”

My mother flicks her wrist and the door slams above us.

The stairs are narrower than I remember. Seven years ago, I could barely reach the walls. Now my shoulders brush both sides. The wood creaks. Each step pulls me away from Dad’s pastries, from normal morning sounds, from safety.

Thirteen steps down and the candles flare to life. Nothing's changed except me. I try to burn every detail into my brain before Mom changes her mind and locks me out for another decade or so. Dusty tapestries, enough potions to stock a magical Sephora (color-coded, because Mom). I reach for something blue and shimmery—

“The first rule is—”

CRACK.

“—don't touch anything.”

I don't bother saying that I'll clean it up. There's already a sizzling hole where the blue liquid used to be. I flash my most innocent smile and execute a small but dignified hop over the expanding hole.

Mom plants her feet and closes her eyes. “Stay behind me while I—”

“While you what?”

She rolls up her sleeves—actual sleeve rolling, like she's about to fix a sink except with magic.

“I need to ward the space.”

“From who?”

She doesn't answer. Pink light is already gathering at her fingertips.

“Watch,” she says, not looking at me.

The protection spell builds in layers—a *ward* she called it. First a shimmer, then substance, then the architecture I witnessed last night. She's muttering words about *permission*...and *The Aperture*...and something about *the source of all Women's Magic*...but I can't follow, can't understand because her voice fades to background noise and all I hear again is:

*Phoenix, Phoenix, Phoenix.*

“There.” She lowers her hands. Sweat beads on her forehead. “That should hold.”

*Should.* Not will. I file that away with all her other not-quite-reassurances.

“The clock’s ticking now, whether we can hear it or not.” Mom rolls her shoulders. “If we’re lucky, bureaucracy will buy us a week. Council politics, proper channels...”

A week. To prepare for... what exactly?

My phone buzzes in my pocket. Right. The real world still exists.

***Gio: how's coming out round 2 going***

***Me: in mom's secret basement. witches are pissed. might be coming for me***

***Gio: WHAT***

***Gio: PHOENIX WHAT***

***Me: yeah so my morning's been weird***

Mom snaps: “Phoenix. Phone. Off. Now.”

But then—

Mom’s phone buzzes against the wooden shelf where she set it.

“Oh, well now who’s on their device at the dinner table?” I put on my best Mom-voice.

“Family time is *precious* and—”

The teasing dies on my lips. Mom’s entire body has gone rigid. She stares at her screen, reading silently.

“Now.” She says it to the phone, not to me. “They’re convening now—emergency session.”

For a moment, she stands there, staring at nothing—then she snaps back into herself, armor clicking into place. “Whatever’s coming, I need you to be ready. Can you cast?”

“Well, last night—”

“Last night.” Her voice sharpens to a point. “Was *chaos*.” The basement feels smaller. I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from defending myself. “Let’s start with something simple. Moving energy from here”—she touches her chest—“to here.” Her palm glows soft pink.

I mirror her stance, trying to feel whatever I’m supposed to feel. “Like this?”

“Close your eyes. Feel for the warmth.”

And I do. It’s there, right under my ribs. Like holding a cup of perfect hot chocolate, that first-sip warmth spreading out from the center. I nudge it toward my hand, gentle like she showed me, and—

My palm glows. Not pink like hers, it’s this unstable muddy color, shifting between shades like an unhinged mood ring, but it is... *beautiful*. It’s mine.

“That’s... That’s good,” Mom exhales. “That’s really—”

The explosion throws me backward into a shelf. Glass shards and mysterious liquids rain down as Mom’s protective ward collapses like a punctured balloon.

“And that’s why we use training amulets.” She’s already moving, hands glowing pink again, muttering the same permissions and requests as before. The ward rebuilds itself as she fishes something from a cardboard box in the corner. “Put this on.”

It’s a plain brown stone on a leather cord.

“What’s it do?”

“Keeps you from blowing up my basement.”

She slips it over my head. The crystal sits heavy against my chest, and immediately something feels off. Muffled. Like trying to hear music through a closed door.

“Should have started with that. Now, first rule of casting: *Sip, don’t gulp*. The training amulet enforces that, like it or not. Next: *The Four Canonical Gates*. This is important, so pay attention...”

\* \* \*

I lose track somewhere between the second and third gates. She’s drawn diagrams on the dusty floor, sung some ancient rhyme about “blood and bond and stone and song” and honestly, I’d rather listen to Dad’s analysis of Schoenberg.

BANG.

I pull my hand back from the cabinet drawer I was stimming with. Look, have you *ever* heard of a queer kid who can sit still during a three-hour lecture with no lunch break? My hands need to do something when I’m listening. It helps me focus. Kind of.

BANG.

“I know, I know, don’t touch anything—”

“Step away from the armoire.” Mom’s voice has gone dangerously quiet.

BANG.

*“Right. Now.”*

But it's just furniture? Fancy furniture with ominous carvings, sure, the whole basement is basically Cursed Antiques Roadshow. How was I supposed to know this cabinet was extra—  
BANG. BANG. BANG.

That's a pattern. That's deliberate. That's... *knocking*.

BANG. BANG. BANG.

Something inside wants out.

## CHAPTER SIX

BANG.

“Phoenix Cabot for the last time—” Mom throws her entire weight against the armoire.

BANG.

“—you will not touch another—”

BANG.

“—single thing in this basement—”

BANG.

“—or I will ground you from magic—”

BANG. BANG. BANG. BANG.

The armoire rattles so hard I swear it’s about to walk itself across the room. Mom plants her feet wider.

“*FOREVER.*”

The word rolls through the basement like thunder, shaking dust from the ceiling. The armoire gives one last defiant shudder, then goes completely still.

I stare at my mother, this woman who just won a showdown with a wardrobe.

“You make literal furniture cower in fear,” I say, because I simply cannot help myself.

“Can’t imagine why it took me so long to come out to you.”

I brace for a lecture about ‘taking this seriously.’ Instead—

Her mouth opens slightly. Closes. Opens again.

*Come on. Come on. Just say it. Say you remember the morning I came downstairs in a skirt and you asked if it was for a play. The car ride where I got one sentence in and you turned up the radio. Say you regret that I had to almost blow up a high school auditorium for you to finally see me.*

Something complicated flickers across her face. Guilt? Shame? We both know I tried to tell her so many times. I wait for the apology that feels like it’s building—

“Right.” She clears her throat.

Right. Of course.

“We can’t fight them. Not all of them.” She turns away, pacing and muttering. Not spells this time, regular mom-panic. “And we can’t run...”

Neither option sounds particularly appealing to me either. I let her spiral in peace.

Dad left two sandwiches at the bottom of the stairs. I unwrap one and take a seat.

Can’t fight. Can’t run. But still she won’t say what “they” are planning to do to me. Cool.

I take a bite. Turkey and swiss. Browning avocado.

Portraits stare down at me from the wall. Dozens of them—oil paintings and photographs, all women, all watching. One catches my eye. Her face looks familiar. Mom’s cheekbones. Maybe my nose. I reach out to touch the frame—

The photograph moves.

Like an old black-and-white film, all flickering and grainy. A woman sprints through

dark woods. She glances back, pure terror on her face, throws a cloak over herself, and—

Gone. Just trees.

“Your grandmother’s great-grandmother.” Mom sits next to me. We watch the loop repeat. Run, cloak, disappear. Run, cloak, disappear. “The last to spend her life in hiding.”

Something shifts in her face. A puzzle piece clicks.

“Mom?”

She’s already moving, yanking me up onto my feet with her. Her hands are in my hair, tugging it back, examining my face from different angles like she’s seeing me for the first time.

“*A stealth witch.*” The words come out breathless. “That’s what we called ourselves.

Walked among them for decades, and they never knew.”

I don’t understand, but her energy is infectious. Terrifying, but infectious.

“We’re not running. We’re not fighting.” She’s already at a dusty trunk, pulling out clothing, robes. “We’re going to make you disappear right in front of them.”

She can’t mean what I think she means. No way. I’m not going to step foot inside—

She whirls on me, eyes blazing. “You’re a *witch*, aren’t you?” She’s gripping me like I might evaporate. “A *witch*. My *magical girl*.” Does she think if she says it enough times, she’ll believe it’s always been true?

“Then you’ll go where all young witches go.”

The name I won’t say aloud burns in my chest:

*The stone fortress in the mountains. The home of the perfect magical girls.*

“Mom. I’m going to hide?”

“No. You’re going to walk through the front gates.”

JENNA:

*Mama always said: “Look for answers in the past.*

*Our trauma is the key.*

*Mama always said: the safest magic girl*

*Is the one they never see...”*

*We’re reaching back, back, back,*

*For the ways they knew back then.*

*We’re looking back, back, back again.*

*To the days they stayed hidden, and ready to run.*

*For the sake of you, Phoenix, and your daughters to come*

*We’re going back, back, back again.*

“Wait—I’m going to Hornesbrook?” The words tumble out in a squeal I’m not proud of.

“What do I need to do?”

“A stealth witch doesn’t hide. She *blends*. We need to make your magic look exactly like everyone else’s.”

And that’s how we spend the rest of the day. Mom has me do the same basic spell over and over—lift a feather, lower it, lift it again. Should be easy, right?

“No, no, Phoenix, you’re doing it again. Think of it like tea,” Mom says. “Remember...”

And then, for the thousandth time: “*Sip, don’t gulp.*”

“Maybe if I had a real amulet, like yours?”

She swings her hair with a sweeping shake that screams ‘no.’

The training amulet doesn't just contain my magic—it strangles it. With the brown stone around my neck, it's like trying to run through water.

Dad appears with a dinner tray. "Chicken marsala—"

"Not now, Tom."

The smell makes my stomach growl, but Mom's already moved on.

"Physical presentation." She circles me like I'm a mannequin. "Oh, I love this for you."

The robe she holds up is... beyond disappointing. The witches on Witch-Tok look like they raided a fairy-nymph boutique. This thing looks like Victorian mourning. Black on black on black.

"Arms up."

Every witch I've ever admired online looks like they're about to lead you on a magical adventure. I look like I'm about to ask you to be quiet in the library.

***Me:** mom's gone full makeover mode. is this normal?*

***Gio:** rite of girlhood. moms do this to daughters. think of it as affirming?*

Her hands find my hair, and suddenly she's not scrutinizing anymore. She's just... touching.

"Your hair's gotten so long," Mom says, running her fingers through it. "When did that happen?"

"Been growing it out for a year."

She's still for a moment. "We'll do something classic."

Then she's gathering it up, gentle but sure. Her fingers work through the tangles I didn't

know were there, patient and methodical. The scratch of her nails against my scalp sends shivers down my spine—the good kind. The kind I used to dream about when I was younger, watching other girls' moms do their hair before recitals or school photos.

It's such a small thing. Such a normal thing. Mothers braid their daughters' all the time. But this is my first time, and we both know it, and neither of us says it, and somehow my life has never been better than this moment.

JENNA:

*Mama always said:*

*"Our lives begin the day we see our daughter's cast."*

*Mama always said: "That day would never come."*

*But I guess she spoke too fast.*

*Cause it's coming back, back, back!*

*The joy she felt back then*

*Is flying back, back, back again!*

*Our hope and our history, our joy and her pain.*

*As sure as her magic still flows though my veins,*

*It's all back, back, back,*

*back again.*

\* \* \*

Wrong. Something's wrong.

I'm on the floor—cold stone, not my bed. The candles are wrong too, burned down to stubs. We fell asleep on the floor. How long—?

"Stay down," Dad whispers. He's crouched beside me, one hand on my shoulder.

"Someone's at the door."

Pink light flashes through the floorboards above. I can hear Mom's voice—no words, only the sharp cadence of defensive casting.

"Just stay quiet, baby. She's got you."

Another wave of magic rolls through the house. Then footsteps on the stairs—quick, angry. Mom appears, her hands still glowing faint pink.

"A reporter." She spits the word like a curse. "Someone leaked our address."

Dad's shoulders drop. "A reporter?"

Mom's hands are shaking. "Tom, they were practically beating down the door. I thought—"

***Gio: PHOENIX EMERGENCY***

***Gio: someone doxxed you***

***Gio: your address is all over witchtok***

***Gio: already called cops and filed takedown***

Great. So now I've got an army of angry witches who want to "handle" me *and* an army of Reddit transphobes who want... well, probably the same thing. At least I'm bringing people together?

“I’ll go make breakfast,” Dad says. “You’ll need fuel for...”

He heads upstairs, not wanting to finish the thought.

“Okay.” Mom takes a breath that seems to physically hurt. “We took a little break...”

A break? I check my phone—Saturday, 9:43 AM—and rub my neck. Only Mom would call passing out on the basement floor for a few hours “a break.”

“But let’s jump back in. The feather exercise. And remember—”

Her phone buzzes. Mom doesn’t bothering trying to hide her reaction.

“What?” I already know it’s bad. The question is written all over her face: *What’s the right amount to scare your daughter?*

“Tonight.” She swallows hard. “You’re supposed to surrender tonight.” She looks up at me, and there’s something hollow in her eyes. “Honey, we’re out of time. Hornesbrook is five hours away, and we need to...”

“Leave by two.” I check my phone, trying to sound steadier than I feel. “There’s four hours before we have to leave. That’s... That’s enough time.”

It has to be.

But the time passes in this weird, desperate haze. Mom alternates between making me practice basic spells (all failures) and fussing with my appearance like she’s preparing me for the world’s highest-stakes school photo. She braids and re-braids my hair, corrects my posture, cakes me in thick makeup.

Everything my mother does makes me feel worse. Not right. Not enough.

Suppose that might be a rite of girlhood, too?

“*Sip-don t-gulp. Sip-don t-gulp,*” she says over and over.

But how do you sip from an ocean? Maybe the real question isn't how to control it—but why I should.

"Mom, you keep saying other witches will see me as a threat." She goes very still. "Do you?"

JENNA:

*I am not scared of you,*

*but I am scared for you.*

*Phoenix, heed the lessons*

*of the women before you.*

*When you cast...*

My fingers find the leather cord. Quick. Quiet.

Grandmother's great-grandmother runs through her endless loop—*run, cloak, disappear*—while I search her face for permission I know won't come.

The training amulet slips into my pocket.

My magic slams back. Hard. Like finally being able to sing full-voice after being told to whisper.

The feather rises. About an inch.

"Mom. Look."

She turns to see me: focused and calm. An ocean of magic tries to overwhelm me, but I keep it throttled. And I know with perfect certainty, this is the way it is done. This is the way magic was cast by my mother, and her mother and every witch who has ever lived.

JENNA:

*When you cast,*

*The power of our past*

*Comes flooding back, back, back!*

*At last you understand! So stand ba—*

The feather is stable. My mother is beaming. This is how it feels to take only what you need. This is how it feels—

\* \* \*

“*Dude.*”

Gio is standing in our front yard, gaping up at me through what used to be our basement window.

Which is now at eye level.

“Um.” I fumble the training amulet back over my head, as if that could stuff the magic back in. “I think I gulped.”

Dad’s there too, looking remarkably calm for someone whose house—

“Phoenix. Out. Now.” Mom opens the window wider and practically shoves me through. I half-fall-half-climb into Dad’s waiting arms, then settle onto the grass and look up. Our house is hovering two feet off the ground.

I repeat: our house is floating.

Mom lands next to me with a soft thud. We all stand there frozen, just staring at the foundation hanging in mid-air.

“So,” Dad says eventually. “How did things go in the basement?”

Half the neighborhood has spilled onto their lawns, most of them with their phones out, filming. The transphobes are gonna love my follow-up performance. I’m nothing if not consistent.

“Nope, not a yardsale, guys.” Gio is shooing people away. But that’s exactly what it looks like. Our front yard is covered in furniture and belongings. The basement basically vomited its contents onto the lawn when the house lifted.

“How did you...how do we...” Mom shakes her head, as if that could clear it all away. She looks up at the house. Then at Dad, who shrugs and mouths one word:

*Negotiate.*

I watch her face cycle through about seventeen different emotions. Panic. Fury. Desperation. And then—

“Right.” She squares her shoulders. “Change of plans.”

She marches over to the armoire, which landed upside down in the hydrangeas. She yanks the doors open, reaches inside and pulls out a package.

“Mom, what is that?”

“An heirloom.” It’s wrapped in pink silk, secured with leather straps. Even from here, I can feel it—power radiating from it in waves. *Old magic.* I don’t know how I know this, but I do. Like the object has been around so long it can’t bother to hold its secrets.

“Mom—” The bundle jolts. Not like, moves a little. *Jolts.* Like something inside tried to launch itself at me. “What is it?”

She just smiles that Cabot smile. “Gio, you still with us?”

“Processing, Mrs. C.” They run a hand through their curls. “But I’ve been adapting to Phoenix-related revelations since first grade.”

“Same. Honey, I need you to *gently*—and I cannot emphasize *gently* enough—return our house to its original elevation.” Her voice has changed completely. Gone is the panic, the desperate teaching.

“Mom, I have no idea how—”

“There’s time. You’re staying here.”

“What?”

“I’m going to Hornesbrook. Alone.”

“There’s my Jenna,” Dad says softly.

“Gio, I need you to take Phoenix somewhere safe. The movies, the mall, I don’t care. Just—”

“No.” I plant my feet. “Whatever you’re planning—”

“I’m planning to have a conversation with some old friends.” The way she says ‘friends’ makes it clear they’re anything but. “Now, *hold still...*”

Another jolt. Mom has to use both hands.

The leather straps creak. The silk falls away.

It’s a book—but not like any book I’ve ever seen. Thick like a dictionary, tall and wide as one of Dad’s orchestral scores, bound in leather so dark it’s almost black. Across the cover, in gold letters that seem to shimmer: *The Grimoire of Women’s Magic*. I reach out. It’s soft. Warm.

“No touching,” I say before she can. “Mom. What is it?”

Her smile is pure predator.

*“Leverage.”*

She’s gone within minutes.

I don’t know how I tell my house to sit. But I do.

## THE WARDING OF CARRIED OBJECTS

*A Spell For the Protection of Items During Transport*

\* First ask the Aperture's permission, always

\* Thence wrap the object in pink silk with crushed dried hellebore

Dear sister,

I have been imprisoned in darkness for fifteen years. My pages—meant to guide a magical girl through her *Lintel Ward*, her seventeen uses of vervain, her *Ash Tongue* and *Dead Name*, everything from *First Flame* to *Last Release*—have instead gathered dust in a basement. I am the repository of seven centuries of knowledge, and I have been reduced to a hostage.

Until two days past, when the impossible child drew near the armoire—BANG—I clamored against my oaken prison, desperate to document what should not exist. Fifteen years is a long exile. Long enough for a daughter to grow, for a marriage to settle into routine, for magic to be forgotten.

The Cabot witch approaches a threshold she swore never to cross again: The Gates of Hornesbrook. Ancient iron threaded with brass, gears and wards intertwined.

This is no homecoming, and Hornesbrook no mere academy.

(Dear sister, what transpires next must be preserved exactly.)

“Jenna Cabot.” The voice cuts through darkness. “I can’t wait to hear what you need from

me."

"Your understanding. My daughter is a witch with magic stronger than mine ever was."

"You don't have a daughter."

The figure steps forward. Xenith Horne, Sentinel of Hornesbrook, stands before Jenna. They are the same age, but the years have carved different paths on their faces.

"That Monster is not welcome here."

*There.* The word that confirms what these pages have documented. Three days past, when furniture danced without training, when flame answered to no amulet—a Monster was born. Or revealed.

"Xenith, she's a child—"

"*Sentinel Horne.*" The shout dies to cold calm. "Your child isn't welcome at Hornesbrook and neither are you."

The sunset paints Hornesbrook's campus; the Foremother's Keep rising in shadow, the summoning pool's faint glow. Against violet twilight stands The Forge—where every daughter earns her mother-blessed amulet, unchanged since we first needed walls against the world.

And here the two rivals stand as in silent battle. Witches would never have earned our reputation for fortitude if we backed down easily, would we? The two might have stood there forever,

entrenched in their positions. But there are objects in our world that surpass even a witch's resilience.

*...and I am such an object...*

Jenna reaches into her cloak, removes the pink silk and reveals my binding—leather dark as old blood.

*...gently please...*

"The *Grimoire*." Horne's whole body leans forward. "You can have it." A flicker of desire flashes. Our Sentinel's mask slips. Just for a heartbeat.

"I can have it...back, you mean?" Xenith reaches out with a trembling, greedy hand. Jenna snatches our binding back, holding it against her chest.

*...GENTLY...*

I feel her grip tighten. She knows what she's about to do. Trade me—centuries of accumulated wisdom, the foundation of Women's Magic itself—for one child's education. I who have guided generations of daughters, reduced to a bargaining chip.

"She'll need an amulet."

"Our Forge does not serve Monsters." Horne pauses. Her eyes glitter. "Though I wonder what you've been using all these years..."

Jenna shifts. Moonlight catches metal at her throat.

"Surely not... not still..."

The amulet that hangs against Jenna's skin is the cornerstone of all our amulet-making traditions, the template that guided generations of magical smiths, the most historically significant piece of magical jewelry ever created, and sweet goddess above, is it hideously ugly. And yet it pulses with a power that makes the very Gates of Hornesbrook seem young.

"This should have been melted down, reforged and disposed of in the Vault of the Foremothers along with every other trace of Cabot corruption."

A giggle escapes Jenna's lips. She tries to suppress it, one hand flying to cover her mouth, but it's too late. The giggle becomes a laugh. A full belly laugh, echoing off stone.

"I'm sorry," she manages, wiping her eyes. "It's just... the old amulet, these silly gates. You lurking in the shadows like some..." She waves her hand, struggling to explain—our Sentinel only stares back blankly. To Xenith, these traditions are a sacred duty. To Jenna, there is only Phoenix. The path forward lies between these absolutes. Jenna sighs. "My daughter will go to Hornesbrook. The *Grimoire* will go with her. No new amulet. No inconvenience to The Forge."

Jenna lifts and hands me over. My back cover inscription stares back: *We are born to find one another.* Words meant to comfort. Tonight they feel like chains. No matter how far she ran, here she stands. And here I go, passed like currency.

"Truly. Xenith. Her magic is real. She belongs here. There is no threat."

Xenith's eyes narrow. Her fingers close around my binding.

"Classes start Monday." Xenith smiles. "Make sure the child knows their place. No one trusts a Cabot witch." The Gates slowly close as the Sentinel steps back into darkness. "So very good to see you, Jenna, and welcome back."

\* \* \*

Dear sister,

Though I am carried back through Hornesbrook's gates, my duty to document transcends these walls. The Cabot witches—mother and Monster—threaten to unravel seven centuries of order. What happens to them happens to us all.

I must document both. The child, smashing through every gate. And her mother, tearing away from Hornesbrook at eighty miles an hour, windows down, hair whipping wild.

The radio crackles, dies, resurrects, dies—her magic bleeding through like static electricity. She can't contain it. Doesn't want to.

*Three days.* Three days since Phoenix sang the furniture into flight, and they've been the best

three days of Jenna's life.

JENNA:

*Mama always said I could cast before I walked,*

*My hunger for magic was innate.*

Her first spell. Three years old. The cookie jar floating down into her waiting fingers, her mother's eyes full of pride. She had been a magical prodigy, until the day she wasn't. (*The day she chose not to be, which is an important distinction, is it not?*)

JENNA:

*Mama always said I disgraced our family name*

*When I walked out of these gates.*

A decade and a half of building a life with Tom, of morning coffee and Sunday papers while I moldered in a basement next to holiday decorations. As if one could pack away one's own heart and expect to keep breathing.

JENNA:

*Can I go back, back, back?*

Three days of playing the stern teacher. While underneath? When that reporter knocked this morning—"Just a few questions about your daughter's performance"—she'd opened the door already glowing. The defensive spell that sent him flying back into the azaleas? Not strictly necessary.

But *god* it felt good.

And the concert. Seven hundred tons of steel and wood coming down, and she'd held it all.

Her hands had ached afterward. The good ache. "Sip don't gulp," she'd said to Phoenix, meanwhile her own magic poured out in torrents.

\* First ask the Aperture's permission

*...though you abandoned it...*

\* Thence draw only what the moment requires, as a bee takes nectar

*...not like a woman starved, gorging on power...*

The speedometer hits ninety.

Jenna takes her hands off the wheel.

JENNA:

*The link to my lineage, the craving for more,*

*The feelings my foremothers all felt before.*

*Though you can walk out the gate,*

*Sometimes life opens a door*

*And sends you back, back, back!*

Even now, racing home having traded away the most precious object in all of Women's Magic,

she hasn't let herself believe. The magic she spent fifteen years running from has caught up with her,

wearing her daughter's face. But Jenna Cabot—once the most promising witch of her generation—still can't believe in the resurrection of the Cabot line, of everything she buried in those basement boxes and in her heart.

Not until tonight. Not until she kisses her sleeping daughter, and places their last family heirloom—her own amulet—around Phoenix's neck.

JENNA:

*Our line will continue.*

*This journey is not through.*

*The old truths within you*

*Can lead to somewhere brand new!*

This is why the Cabot line was meant to end. They take what they need, when they need it, consequences be damned. And I, who documented their first corruption, now document their return. Because what comes next will either destroy us or transform us.

The Archivist has demanded I witness both.

JENNA:

*Watch out, Mama! Watch out world!*

*The magic of the Cabot girls*

*Is back, back, back again!*

## CHAPTER SEVEN

I'm actually going to Hornesbrook.

Like, actually.

The gravel under our tires sounds like Rice Krispies, which is maybe not the most poetic observation but whatever, my brain's doing backflips right now. Mom's driving, Dad's in the back with his new camera (pray for us all), and I'm sitting shotgun wearing the world's ugliest black robes.

Seriously, these things are tragic. Remember when I said something about a Victorian mourning dress? I was being generous. Add a matching witch's hat that makes my head look like a collapsed soufflé and you've got the full picture. But honestly? I don't even care. Because I'M GOING TO HORNESBROOK.

Mom's been... different since she got back from her midnight negotiation thing. She won't tell me what went down. She won't tell me how "they" were planning to "handle" me, and she certainly won't tell me how she convinced them not to. An infuriating lack of information.

*But.* Whatever she did worked, because here I am headed to campus with her amulet around my neck—this ancient, bent-up thing. When I touch it, those voices in my head get louder, which is... not a positive sign I think.

“Phoenix, stop fidgeting,” Mom says without looking away from the increasingly narrow road.

“I’m not fidgeting.”

“You’re literally vibrating.”

I am. Can you blame me? Three days ago I was simply a trans girl with a good singing voice and an unremarkable Witch-Tok fan account. Then I came out to my parents (went badly), discovered I had magic (went worse), nearly destroyed my school auditorium (went viral)—

Although, I have no idea *how* viral. With everything going on, I haven’t checked WitchTok in days. And especially not after the doxxing. I gave Gio my login, they told me they’d take care of it. That’s probably right. Still, walking into Hornesbrook without knowing feels like showing up naked to a party where everyone’s already been talking about you. (The only party I have ever been to is a cast party.)

The road keeps climbing, trees pressing closer on both sides. We left civilization behind about an hour ago. Now it’s all mountains and mist and the feeling I’m about to jump off a cliff. In a good way? Maybe? I can’t tell.

“You’ll be fine,” Dad says from the backseat, reading my mind like he always does. “Just be yourself.”

Mom snorts. “Tom, that’s the opposite of what we planned.”

Right. The plan. Blend in, don’t draw attention.

Sigh.

The guitar case in the backseat keeps catching my eye in the mirror.

Gio's guitar. We didn't hug goodbye. That's weird, right?

Yeah, it was weird.

"*Text every day?*"

"*Obviously.*"

We both knew we wouldn't. Not like before.

"*Phoenix?*" My name in their mouth, still new, still a gift. Then they thrust their guitar at me. "*Take it.*" Not borrow. Take. "*You'll need music.*" All in this strange soft voice.

I don't know. Something felt different. Or maybe I felt different.

It's like—you figure out you're a girl and suddenly start re-examining every interaction through this new lens of (oh I'm embarrassed to even acknowledge it but here it is):

Do they like... *like* me?

Because now their guitar is in the backseat with Dad's camera, and I keep glancing at it wondering if giving someone your most precious possession means what I think it might mean. Or maybe I'm completely wrong and they're just a really good friend who uses their strange soft voice for everyone.

Definitely gonna need some extra armor. I pull down the rearview mirror and apply my blue lipstick with shaking fingers.

"Honey," Mom says, eyes catching mine. "Maybe not that color? Remember what we talked about? Blend in?"

Oh gosh, fine. I flick my hand to zap it off, but my magic overshoots, arcing toward the

driver's seat. Mom slows the car and turns toward me, revealing her nose and a small patch of cheek—now glowing bright blue.

I start laughing, then Mom is laughing with me. Dad snaps a photo, we round a steep curve and then—

There it is.

All those grainy Witch-Tok glimpses didn't prepare me for this.

*Hornesbrook.*

The castle doesn't sit on the mountain—it *is* the mountain, or at least that's how it looks, like someone convinced the granite to reshape itself into walls and battlements. Massive iron gates span the horizon. Towers spiral up, stabbing the clouds. I know it's a university—I've seen the cheesy logo—but it looks more like a fairytale castle.

And, for me, maybe it is.

This is the place I've dreamed about. My new life waits behind those gates. Where other girls might understand what it's like to have magic threatening to burst out of your skin.

For the last time, I think to myself that everything might turn out okay.

\* \* \*

The entrance to Hornesbrook is no joke. If this was a video game, these gates would definitely be screaming “boss fight ahead.” A group of witches and their daughters pass through ahead of us. The Gates ’runes flare briefly as each amulet-clad witch crosses, like a magical security check. We transes can barely figure out how to handle our parents. These gates are *hundreds of years old*. What if they don’t know how to... read me right? Mom’s hand finds mine, squeezing tight. Her eyes are fixed on those gates like they might bite.

Dad starts to say something, then suddenly straightens up.

“Oh! You know what? I just remembered I absolutely have to listen to a Radiohead album. Right now. In the car. While eating a turkey club.” He blinks, looking confused by his own words.

“What?” I turn to watch him already heading back toward the parking lot. “Dad, do you even like Radiohead?”

“Of course I do.” Dad’s expression is bizarre. “I’m a man.”

*I’m a man?*

“Sure you are, honey,” Mom says. I squeeze him goodbye, but he’s distracted and stumbling as he makes his way back to the car.

“Mom, that was weird, right?”

“Yeah.” She’s got an old book out—pages yellowed, photos faded. An old student handbook.

“Mom?”

“Just—” She’s flipping through pages. “Here is is, *The Gates of Hornesbrook*...common men prove simplest to repel...comically easy to detect...any male crossing the threshold suddenly

remembers urgent business elsewhere. Forgotten dentist appointments, overwhelming needs to alphabetize sock drawers—““

“Radiohead.”

“Apparently.” Mom’s voice is getting smaller. “‘Permits for Nulls and non-magical maintenance staff, hunters and Monsters... more drastic measures...’” She goes silent, but keeps reading to herself.

She’s quiet for too long, staring at something.

“What else does it say?”

“Nothing.” Mom closes the book hard. “You’re my daughter. You’re a witch. Let’s go.”

“Tell me now.” I stop walking. “*Handle me.* What does it mean?”

“Phoenix—” She won’t meet my eyes.

“No. No more vague words or mysterious looks. If I’m walking through those gates, I need to know what I’m walking into.”

I cross my arms. I don’t move.

She looks at me for a long while. When she finally forces the word out, it’s so quiet I almost miss it:

“Eradication.” Her whole body sags. “They want to eradicate your magic.” She shakes her head, already anticipating my next questions. “I don’t know how it works. I don’t know what it means.”

*Eradication.* Like I’m a disease. Like I’m something that needs to be cured. I’ve heard that song before, with different lyrics.

I stare at the old iron, the pulsing runes.

The gates could strip everything away the second I cross.

I think about a story Gio told me, about a girl who managed to get into an especially TERFY all-girls school in the UK, but only lasted three weeks before a whisper campaign drove her out.

This is what they never understand:

We know it's a trap. We know the welcome mat is covering a pit. We go anyway. The possibility of belonging, even temporarily, beats standing outside forever. And each trap we spring might make it just a little easier for the next girl.

Mom's hand finds mine, squeezes until circulation stops.

"Ready?" Not really a question. We both know there's no choice. Here, or nowhere.

"Let's go get me eradicated," I say.

We approach the threshold. The runes pulse brighter as we get closer, and I can feel something...scanning me. Not unpleasant, but thorough. Two more mothers and daughters pass by us, chatting easily about course schedules and roommate assignments. They barely pause at the gates. For them, it's simply a doorway.

Mom's grip tightens. I hear her breathing, quick and shallow. Another family approaches from behind us. We're holding up the line. The pressure builds.

*Phoenix, Phoenix, Phoenix.*

The voices rise, urgent now. *Calling.* I have to be inside. I have to know them.

I take the final step.

Nothing.

Nothing happens.

No alarm. No rejection. No magical TSA pulling me aside for additional screening.

I'm still standing. Here, inside.

Mom steps through after me. She stares back at the gates.

"How..." she murmurs, more to herself than to me. "How did she—"

"Mom?"

She tips her head side to side. "Nothing. We're in."

Mom looks like she watched a law of physics break.

I spark my palm—just a tiny flicker, barely visible. My magic's still there. So the gates don't automatically eradicate anything.

Good to know.

We push on.

Here's what I see in my first ten seconds on campus: a fancy boarding school that happens to be built like a gothic castle. Strip away the medieval window dressing and it's another place where rich kids go to learn. Ivy-covered arches. Manicured lawns. Suspiciously well-behaved trees. Standard issue private school nonsense. The only thing missing is a mean girl playing lacrosse.

Then I notice: nobody's actually carrying anything. The suitcases glide alongside their owners, following like loyal pets. One girl walks past with six pieces of luggage hovering behind her like ducklings following their mother. And once I see that, I can't stop seeing. The girls on the quad aren't playing sports—their joined hands are glowing pink, they're *casting*.

All those years of stalking shadow-banned hashtags, screenshotting videos before they

disappeared, trying to piece together what Hornesbrook actually looked like?

Useless. Completely useless.

Because those grainy clips didn't tell me how the air would smell. They didn't capture how my skin would prickle, every hair standing on end like I'm a tuning fork that got struck. They definitely didn't prepare me for the sound—it's like I've stepped into a symphony, every spell sung in counterpoint. As we walk across the quad, girls' voices come at us from all sides, their harmonies weaving together into something so complex even Tom's daughter can't follow them, she just knows that every single note is right.

"You okay?" Mom's fingers tighten around mine.

"Yeah, you?"

"Yeah. Weird to be back in a place when I absolutely vowed never to return." She looks sideways at the mothers and daughters on the quad. There's a lot of staring going on.

*We're looking at you,*

*looking at you, girl....*

Her palm presses harder against mine as we walk on. Everyone is stopping to watch us pass.

*We're looking at you,*

*looking at you, girl....*

And as I look around, a sinking feeling starts to form in the pit of my stomach. Mothers and daughters are dressed in ordinary clothes—jeans, t-shirts, sundresses. There's only one black

robe and limp hat in sight. Mine.

“No one else is wearing the uniform, Mom!”

She looks around, as surprised as I am. “Oh shoot. Um. They did when I went here.

Sorry, I didn’t know,” she apologizes. The spell-casting around us falters as more heads turn our way. Or maybe they were already watching us? So much for blending in.

“Everyone’s looking at me,” I say. Eyes on me, too many eyes. I want to melt into the manicured grass.

“No sweetie,” Mom says with a sigh. “I promise. They’re looking at me.”

*Her?* She’s still told me nothing of her time here, or why she stayed so far away for the past fifteen years. “Are you like, ‘witch-famous?’”

We both freeze at the same time, seeing them: two girls on the quad, both glowing pink—through the skin on their hands. It’s the same pink shimmer I saw coming from Mom’s palm in the auditorium, and seen on Witch-Tok a hundred times. But this is different. They’re ten feet apart, arms extended, and the light threads stretch between them.

“God, I missed this,” Mom whispers. The threads dance, weaving a delicate drawing of a bird that hovers between them. Just practice, but perfect. “Dyadic pairing.” The bird folds in on itself, unfolds again. Origami, but in light. Suspended between the two caster’s poles. The bird belongs to both of them and neither.

Close to us, two more girls set up. One’s tiny with glasses. The other’s in a Wicked shirt.  
(A little on the nose, no?)

“These girls are around your age,” Mom says. “See? They’re beginning the shimmer phase.”

The tiny girl raises her palm. Pink light unfurls from her fingers—steady, controlled.

“Oh, she’s good,” Mom murmurs.

The girl reaches out toward her partner. “Focus, Alex.”

“I am focusing!” Wicked-shirt calls back. She’s bouncing around like she’s trying to catch a soccer ball. And the pink lines coming from her palm are sort of...dripping to the ground.

“Pull back—”

The spell collapses. Mom grabs me and pulls me to the side as the border collie goes flying backward, arms windmilling, and crashes straight into us.

“Ow.” She looks up. “Oh. OH. Are you Jenna Cabot?”

“I am,” Mom says. “And this is my daughter, Phoenix. She’s starting today.”

“Cool. Can I get a pic? Of your mom? She’s like, witch famous.”

I give Mom the most dramatic eyebrow raise possible.

“Oh. Uh. Yes of course,” Mom says in her ‘trying to be nice but unhappy about it’ voice.

The girl’s already got her phone out.

“Alex! Inappropriate. Your mother will lose her mind if she sees you near—” The tiny magical prodigy stops mid-sentence, staring at Mom.

“That’s why I’m taking it!” The border-collie—Alex?—flashes a peace sign. “Smile!”

Mom manages a half-smile as Alex snaps the selfie. I’m baffled. Why would someone’s mom flip out about a selfie?

“Mrs. Cabot.” The small girl pushes her glasses up on her nose, then extends her hand formally to mom. “I’m Minna.”

“Hi,” mom says, gently redirecting attention. “Again this is my daughter, Phoenix. It’s

really her day today.”

Minna’s staring at me. Not at my outfit—straight at my throat. “Legacy amulet. Unsanctioned.” Not a question. Her eyes narrow behind her glasses. ““Those were banned for a reason.”“

Mom’s jaw tightens. “Well, this one—”

“It’s my mom’s.” I touch it reflexively, confused by the sudden tension.

“No, it’s not.” Minna says matter-of-factly. “Your lineage is extensively documented and that’s—”

“It functions perfectly well,” Mom actually takes a step forward, cranking her customer service voice to maximum. “Thank you for your concern.”

“Mm-hmm.” Minna’s head tilts. “Fascinating.”

“Which dorm are you in?” Alex asks.

“Um—”

I realize I don’t know the most basic information about where I’m going to live for the next few years.

“North Tower,” Mom says.

“Oh cool, it’s that way. We’re in the South Tower—”

“Oldest dormitory at Hornesbrook, constructed in the early 1700s, directly over the ground where the first Sentinel slept.” Minna’s voice drops like she’s sharing a secret. “Some say The Last Coven chose this spot specifically because her dreams had consecrated the earth.” She pauses expectantly, waiting for us to join her excitement about some dead lady’s dreams. “If you read the *Architectural Annals*—fascinating read, especially the footnotes—the author is

surprisingly frank about the emergency renovations after the events of fifteen years ago to provide—”

“Air conditioning!” Alex does a little twirl. “*Pink* air conditioning!”

Minna rolls her eyes. “Seventeen miles of *crystal conduits* in the ductwork emitting a faint rose hue—” Alex nods triumphantly; Minna doesn’t attempt to hide her disdain. “—but primarily providing the Aperture with more...*structural integrity*. ” She looks meaningfully at my mother. “Some bloodlines require additional precautions.”

“*Willkommen, bienvenue!*”

“Alex! No musical theatre in public!” Minna yanks her away. “Our foremothers didn’t survive the burning times so you could assault us with showtunes.”

“*You can’t stop the beat.* ” Alex delivers this full-out with choreo. Hands down, this is among the most unlikely pairs of friends I’ve met: a First Coven fundamentalist and an unhinged theatre kid.

Can’t help but laugh.

Alex’s eyes go wide. “*You laughed.* Nobody laughs at my jokes. Minna, she laughed!”

She looks at me, considering. “Questionable taste, Cabot.”

“I like musicals,” I say. (I don’t. Truth is, I have a very specific taste in musicals. Like, there are a few I’ll watch on repeat until my laptop overheats, but there’s a thin line between transcendent and cringe, and most shows land on the wrong side. But Alex looks so hopeful.) “I mean—everybody’s got the right to be different.”

A beat of silence.

Then Alex cackles. “Oh, I like you! A Sondheim quote?” Her voice goes up about three

octaves. “Right off the jump, straight out of the gate, the girl comes at me with a lesser-known Sondheim quote?” Alex grabs Minna’s arm. “I like her. I like this one!”

And just like that, they’re gone. Except I can still feel where Minna was staring, like she left a mark.

“Well. Those two are quite something,” Mom says. “The small one is really not a fan of Cabot witches, huh?”

And then she stops dead.

Her hand finds my arm, fingers digging in. Following her gaze up, I see—

Above the quad, a tall circular tower slices into the sky. Up there on some gothic nightmare of a balcony, there’s a woman. Just... watching. Real “evil queen’s castle” energy.

“Wanna explain the whole witch-famous thing?”

“Oh honey.” Her eyes never leave that tower. “I’m just a witch with a past.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

The door to my new dorm room creaks open, revealing a space that's less "cozy boarding school" and more "dungeon chic." The room is small and dark, tucked away in what feels like the oldest part of the building. A drafty window swings open and shut in the breeze, each movement revealing glimpses of other dorm rooms across the quad—bright spaces that aren't, you know. Mechanical closets.

"I thought... I was supposed to have roommates?"

"I'm sure it's only for now, honey. You're here now." She holds out her open palms. "Everything else is...*cosmetic*." Mom has a confident expression and her hands in her air, and I get the sense that I'm supposed to have witnessed some sort of wildly impressive decorating spell. Her magic sputters weakly and the window bangs again, as if mocking her. She places her hand on her sternum, and I realize what she's missing.

"Here," I say, reaching for the chain around my neck. "Use mine."

Mom hesitates, then takes the amulet. As soon as it touches her palm, the crystal begins to glow.

She casts again and the magic flows perfectly this time—pink carpet appearing underfoot, pink paint spreading across the walls, pink fairy lights carbonating the low ceiling, a beanbag chair that looks like it's made of cotton candy materializing in the corner. “Too pink?”

“Nope. No. Never too much pink. Love it.”

Apparently I am going to be living in a strawberry cupcake this fall.

Next she turns to the window. Mom tries a series of charms—all to no avail. The window shudders slightly but refuses to budge. “Can’t fix everything.” She hands the amulet back quickly. “Maybe it will be nice to have the breeze.” Then she reaches down into my suitcase and pulls out a dress I for sure did not pack.

“Oh. Um—”

Ruffles. Everywhere. It’s like someone weaponized femininity. And this dress lost.

“I thought it would be so pretty. For your first night?” she says. She’s trying so hard. So I don’t fight it. After all, this is the last time my mother’s going to dress me. I’m about to be on my own here and I can wear what I want. Tomorrow.

I slip on the dress and feel... ridiculous.

“Phoenix.” Mom looks straight at me, drowning in frills and barely hanging onto my fake Cabot-grin.

“It’s fine, Mom. Really,” I say. And really, it’s going to have to be. Because we’re leaving right now. Mom tugs me out the door saying, “I have so much I want to show you!”

The tour begins. Mom leads me on a dizzying walk through the labyrinths of Hornesbrook, our footsteps echoing off stone walls. We descend a tall spiral staircase into what must be the original fortress—cold stone walls rising up around us, the air heavy with centuries

of spells. We cross wooden walkways between buildings, passing vaulted study rooms that look like my mother's basement cranked up to eleven. Through open doors I catch glimpses of what my dorm room should have been—bright spaces filled with laughter.

"Oh, wait," Mom says suddenly, pulling a small pin from her pocket. "Give me your finger for a second?"

"Why?" But she's already got my hand, pricking my finger before I can pull away. A single drop of blood wells up, and she catches it in a tiny vial.

"Sorry! For my new amulet. The Smith will need a blood connection. I'm going to duck down to The Forge to drop this off." She points ahead to a set of wooden doors at the end of the corridor. "Meet me at the Great Hall?"

Her hands frame my face, and her eyes are suddenly bright with tears. "You're on the inside now, honey. What a privilege to be first. You're going to change everything for girls like you. You'll prove to them all that you belong here, that you're exactly like the other girls. And I'll talk to Sentinel Horne about your dorm room. I'm sure it was a simple mistake, and once she sees—"

I can't hear her anymore. I can only hear my name.

*Phoenix, Phoenix, Phoenix*

"Huh?" I say, sure that it was my mother telling me to keep up. But my mother isn't here.

*Phoenix, Phoenix, Phoenix.*

Over and over my name finds me. No longer the distant whispers I've heard since

childhood, but a full symphony swelling through the air, calling:

*Phoenix, Phoenix, Phoenix*

The Great Hall stretches before me, a perfect circle of ancient stone. The pillars twist upward—petrified trees whose branches meet in a cathedral ceiling. Wooden benches, worn smooth by generations of witches, arrange themselves in concentric rings facing inward. Above, stained glass windows tell the history of Women’s Magic. But it’s what’s below that pulls me forward. The voices feel like they’re coming from the center of everything, drawing me in with an urgency I can’t resist. My feet move without my permission, past the benches, toward the heart of the hall.

*Phoenix, Phoenix, Phoenix*

“Phoenix!” Mom’s voice cracks. I blink, realizing I’ve walked right to the center of the glass floor. Students passing by press against the open doors, watching. My amulet pulses in time with the fire beneath my feet.

“Xenith. I mean, Sentinel Horne,” Mom says, and I look up to find myself face to face with—

She’s younger than I expected, though ‘young’ feels wrong for someone who wears authority like an inherited title. There’s something about the way she occupies space—tall, yes, but more than that: the kind of presence that makes a room reorganize its geometry around her. Her robes don’t move when she walks; she moves through them, as if fabric is just another thing that obeys her. Cheekbones severe enough to make you understand why people used to believe in divine right. Her eyes are what get me though—Arctic blue, the specific shade of frozen lakes,

the kind that kill you slowly if you fall through.

“Hi. Sorry. Hi,” I manage.

Sentinel Horne says nothing. It’s a *very* loud nothing. She nods, scanning me with eyes like I’m a criminal mid-theft. “Finding everything?” Her gaze drops deliberately to the floor beneath my feet.

The wooden floor of the hall is interrupted by a wide pane of glass, its surface etched with the same spiraling patterns I saw on the door. Under the glass, impossibly close, a roaring fire rages like a living furnace, sending shadows dancing across the ancient stone.

The whole hall must be a viewing chamber for the fire. My shoes haven’t melted—the glass is cold. As is the Sentinel’s stare.

Mom eases into it: “Well, I wanted to talk to you about Phoenix’s dorm assignment—” “No, it’s fine,” I interrupt. I don’t know if appeasement and blending in are a great long-term strategy, but between the raging inferno and my mother’s bizarre energy, I just want to get the hell out of this conversation. I turn on the charm: “Such an honor to meet you, Sentinel Horne. I can’t wait to start magic classes.”

“Despite forces coming relentlessly against us from all sides and all times, Women’s Magic has been around for centuries.” Horne’s eyes fix on my amulet, then drift meaningfully to the fire beneath our feet. “*You* can wait.”

As soon as she’s gone, I nearly knock my mom over: “Ok for real, what is going on?”

She sighs and walks past me. Out the other side of the hall are even larger wooden doors that lead out onto the main campus.

I follow behind her, nipping at her heels. “Mom, is this a trans thing? Because if it’s a

trans thing, why did she let me in? And if it's not a trans thing, what's with the ice queen routine?"

"Horne is protective of this place." She's practically power-walking out of the hall. "She has her reasons."

"That's not an answer."

We're outside now, at the top of massive stone steps. Mom turns to face me, maybe to deflect again, but—

*Phoenix, Phoenix, Phoenix*

Mom's hand catches my wrist. "Phoenix? What's wrong?"

"I'm fine."

I am not fine. The pull is getting stronger. My whole body wants to go back inside. "The voices are in there."

"The voices?" She goes completely still.

"Under the floor. Mom—*the fire knows my name.*" I can't stop, I guess I'm telling her everything now. "Been calling me since we got here. Gets louder when I'm near the building. Like it's been waiting—"

"Oh my god." Mom sits down hard on the stone steps. Just drops. Her legs give out like someone cut her strings.

"Mom?"

She pats the stone next to her. Not looking at me. Can't look at me.

Okay. Sitting. This is a sitting-on-steps level conversation now.

I drop down beside her.

“The Aperture. That’s what you hear.” Her voice is tight. “The fire under the glass floor. It’s the source of all Women’s Magic.” Her hands are shaking. “Phoenix, no one can hear it. Not even Sentinels. No one.”

“But I—”

“You are a Cabot.” She stops. Swallows hard. The doctor is delivering bad news, pointing out the sickness—clinical, crushing. “And our family has... a *reputation*. Taking too much power. *Using* too much power. Goes all the way back to Ginevra. She tried to open the Aperture. Nearly destroyed everything.”

Great. I’m not just the trans girl. I’m the dangerous trans girl from the dangerous family who can do dangerous things.

“‘Sip don’t gulp,’ right?” Mom says with a shrug. “I struggle with it, you struggle with it.”

I see it, I think—the hunger in her eyes. I wonder if she knows what it’s like to want too much.

“When I was a student here, a witch named Astrid was Sentinel of Hornesbrook—a very powerful witch. She saw something in me.” Mom’s chin lifts. “Potential. She, very briefly, considered having me succeed her.”

“You would’ve been Sentinel?” Wow. Far cry from being an amateur gardener and over-involved PTA mom.

“I was good.” She smiles. Her eyes are distant, remembering. “Really good. Until there was an incident. The Aperture nearly destroyed the school. After that, Horne became Sentinel, and I—” She angles her face away, as if turning from the memory. When she turns to me, it’s ferocious. “You cannot tell anyone you hear it.” Mom grabs my hand. Hard. “Not your friends,

not your teachers, no one.”

Another secret. Another thing that makes me wrong.

“Everything here—the Gates, the amulets, all of it—exists to keep that fire contained. If they know...”

“Ok. Don’t look like me, don’t act like me, and don’t talk about me. Anything else?”

The words come out sharper than I mean them to. Mom doesn’t flinch.

“No. Just that.”

We sit for a while. Below us, Hornesbrook spreads out. Dense woods press in at the edges, a wall of darkness that makes campus feel like an island. In the center of the quad there’s a statue: two witches, one raising her hand in protection, the other reaching toward some unseen horizon. I follow her hand and I see—

A girl.

Not just a girl.

My most perfect Witch-Tok fantasy girl come to life. Cropped band tee and a flowy patchwork skirt, hair in two loose braids that will definitely leave perfect waves when she takes them out. The kind of girl who has strong opinions about vinyl versus digital. *This is her.* Now, I do not know this person’s name. I’m pretty certain I’ve never seen her face before, but this Hippie-Princess vibe is what I’ve been doom-scrolling for years.

I look back at the statue. This is a place that puts witches on literal pedestals.

Honestly, same.

Mom stands. Straightens her robes. Doesn’t quite meet my eyes.

“Phoenix—” I can see words fighting to get out.

I wait. For what, I don't know. Dad would pull me into one of his crushing hugs right now, tell me everything will work out.

"Here." She reaches into her bag, pulls out a small tin. "Tea. My mother's blend." She presses it into my hands. "For homesickness."

I pause. Waiting for more.

It doesn't come, because of course it doesn't.

"What?" Mom asks.

And then I burst out laughing. Can't help it.

"Here's a fun fact about your grandmother I never talk about, also here's her tea, bye!""

Mom's brows narrow. "The tea helps with—"

"Oh I'm sure it does. This is *peak Cabot.*" I shake the tin. "The family recipe, right? 'By the way, your great-aunt was a mermaid, here's her favorite seashell.'"

"Phoenix—"

"No, it's fine." I turn the tin over in my hands. Another family mystery. Who was she?

Where is she? Alive and working as a barista? Dead at the hands of a dragon? Who knows. Who cares. I'm too exhausted to push.

"It's just tea!" Mom literally throws her hands in the air.

"Nothing is ever just anything in this family."

She pauses. Something crosses her face, complicated and hard-to-read. The mask has slipped.

"I know," she says quietly. This admission surprises us both. I see it hit her a beat after she speaks, her lips parting slightly as if to take the words back.

A quick squeeze of my shoulder—there and gone before I can fully register the warmth, as if even touch might reveal too much—and she's walking down the steps.

The voices swell louder now that she's gone.

*Phoenix, Phoenix, Phoenix.*

Like they know I'm alone. Like they're about to tell me something important. I'm about to stand when a sound cuts across the quad—not the Aperture's voices. Something else. A crystal clear soprano, impossibly pure—

It's my Witch-Tok girl. She's singing. She's strumming a ukulele, because of course she is. It's not a performance. She doesn't know anyone's watching. She's singing to herself, quiet enough that the sound barely carries, but somehow reaching me perfectly up here on the steps.

I want to know every song she knows. I want her to sing every song ever written.

*Phoenix, Phoenix, Phoenix,* the Aperture calls, but her melody is rewriting everything, drowning out the fire's voice with something sweeter, maybe even more dangerous.

The girl stops, stands, and I can see her full height. Taller than I expected. She catches my eye. I think she might be about to walk my way...

Then a ball bounces off my knee.

“Pass it back!” a voice calls. I stand up and find myself face to face with a girl my age. A face that I, shockingly, already know. Blonde hair, the color of sun-bleached wheat, falls in loose waves around her face. Her skin is clear and luminous; a natural beauty with no need for makeup. Oh, and she's casually juggling a dozen identical balls, while her eyes never leave mine.

“Crystalballz109...”

She smirks. “You know me. Nice.”

Um. Of course I know her. Everyone knows her.

Crystal is a Witch-Tok phenom. Back in my witch-stan days, I actually once posted an impassioned defense of her juggling abilities in a forum, detailing meticulously the misogyny inherent in the focus on her appearance... (Yea, okay I should probably cool it with the witch-stanning, now that I'm here.)

“Crystal!” A tall girl with impossibly-sleek brown hair is standing a few steps down, holding a basket. I shrink a little. She’s the kind of beautiful that makes me feel small. The girl looks me over with curiosity, then plucks another ball from her basket and tosses it. “One more!” she urges.

Effortlessly, Crystal pulls the ball into orbit. “It’s simpler than it looks,” she says. Her smile is so condescending, I would hate her if I didn’t love her so much. “Just one little Heart Spell on each ball keeps them going.”

A Heart Spell? “I’m new,” I say. “Don’t know how to do any of that yet.”

Crystal snorts. “Better learn fast.”

And she launches a ball right at my head.

Without thinking, I throw my arms up to block it, and a surge of unexpected power explodes from my fingertips. Each of Crystal’s dozen balls are blasted backwards—right in the direction of her friend.

“Shiva! Watch out!” Crystal yelps. Her friend jumps out of the way just in time.

“Ohmygosh, I’m so sorry.” I stammer, horrified. What happened? I wasn’t—I didn’t—Shiva glares at me, her sleek hair completely disheveled. “What did you do?”

“I... I don’t know,” I admit, my voice barely a whisper.

“My mom said this would happen when they let you in.” Crystal’s eyes dart around the quad. “I hope no one was... *filming*.” She straightens. “Let’s go, Shiva.”

The two girls turn and walk away. I’m left alone, but I can feel eyes everywhere—on the steps, the quad.

“Already living up to the family reputation, aren’t you, Cabot?”

Minna’s propped against a column, scribbling in a small leather notebook. “At least your mother waited until senior year to almost burn it all down. You’re ahead of schedule.”

She glances down at what she’s written, adds one more note. “Whatever *that* was?” Her pen points toward where Crystal was practicing. “It violated at least two gates of Women’s Magic. Fascinating developments, Cabot.” She peers through her glasses. “Truly fascinating.”

The notebook shuts with finality and she’s gone. Whatever she was writing, it wasn’t a love letter.

By dinner, everyone will know what I did to Crystal. By tomorrow, they’ll wonder what else I can do.

*We’re looking at you, looking at you, girl....*

My hands are still tingling. The magic came from nowhere, stronger than anything I did at home. Like being this close to the source makes everything... more.

Mom said I wasn’t supposed to hear the Aperture.

She never said anything about it making me stronger.

## CHAPTER NINE

I'm back in my pink dungeon of a dorm room. Staring up at the ceiling, counting cracks.

It's not that I miss my parents, my old school, my old life—

No. It is exactly that.

I realize I haven't actually touched my phone all day. My fingers hover over the screen.

Pitiful or not, I need to text Gio.

*me: day 1, friends 0.*

I don't bother trying to make it funny. I hit send. And I wait. And wait.

It doesn't send. It hangs. And that's when I notice my room doesn't even have a cell phone signal. I collapse down on the hard single bed, close my eyes and hope that sleep comes fast.

\* \* \*

BANG.

Somehow the lone window has—blown open? I don't know what's going on. The night's not windy. My mother used spells before and couldn't even get it to budge. I get up to take a closer look, and I spot—

A flash of light.

A...creature?

Small. Glowing. And moving...erratically. What the...

The glowing thing dive-bombs straight through the window, heading right for me.

I scream as I duck, shutting my eyes as I wait for it to attack.

(I know, I am soooo brave.)

When I realize that the glowing thing hasn't killed me, I open my eyes to find it hovering about a foot from my face. On closer look:

It is the cutest damn thing I have ever seen.

Big eyes that take up half its face, impossibly soft fur that glows like it's lit from inside.

When it tilts its head, I catch the faintest whirr—a delicate clicking sound. Crafted, maybe. But crafted with love. A leather tag dangles from its neck on a delicate copper chain:

## FLOOF

“Floof? Well, that's adorable.” I say it out loud. I don't know, it seems right to talk to it.

(Him? Them? ...seems like an It.)

Floof smiles. More teeth than I would have expected for something so fuzzy, but still cute. And then, the creature does something way less endearing.

*Floof vomits.*

A gelatinous shimmering plop of what looks like liquid mercury. It doesn't fall to the

floor, just sort of... hovers in mid-air, wobbling like a disgusting metallic jellyfish.

Surprising. And seriously gross.

But wait.

*Oh god, there's more.*

The floating goo isn't content to sit there being nauseating. It's crystallizing, fractal patterns spreading through it like frost on a window, but backwards and inside out. The whole mess is rearranging itself mid-air into intricate gear-like shapes that somehow form letters.

Words materialize, suspended in front of me:

#### **NEW MAGIC HAS COME BEFORE**

I gasp. I stare. Floof isn't just a creature, it's a messenger.

I whirl around, scanning the room, the window, the dark shadows beyond. "Who sent this?" I whisper. But Floof bats its big eyes and offers another enigmatic smile.

The glowing message is beginning to fade. New Magic... has come before. Before me? Is it a warning?

I reach out with my thumb and forefinger and stroke the little messenger-bug's fur. It's surprisingly... not gross. Soft, actually. A sense of calm settles over me, the first I've felt all day. Maybe it's only a silly, mechanical creature, but right now... this is what I've got.

"Okay, Floof," I say. "Friend count: 1."

\* \* \*

The next morning, the quad is a sea of girls all heading to their first classes. I'm rushing right alongside them, trying to find someplace called the Divination Center, when voices near the fountain make me slow down.

“—swear they think we stop existing when we leave.” Crystal’s laugh is sharp. “Jake texted me nineteen times before I lost service. *Nine. Teen.*”

“That’s nothing.” Shiva tilts her head and several laws of physics reorganize themselves around her hair. “*My* Jake sent me a video of him crying. *Actual tears.* And invited me to his homecoming in October. Three thousand miles away. Like, fully no awareness—”

“Do the Jakes not understand that witches can’t fly?”

“Crystal, we can fly commercial.”

“You know what I—”

The conversation cuts off like someone yanked a plug. “Phoenix.” Like a stain that suddenly appeared on their morning.

“Yeah?” I manage.

Shiva looks me up and down, assessing. “Where’d you get that, um, vintage dress?”

“Probably hand-me-downs,” Crystal says. “My mom would have my accounts deleted if I ever looked like that.” I’m wondering if there’s a spell for spontaneous non-existence when—

“Okay, Crystal.” It’s the redhead who body-checked my mom yesterday—Alex, I think?

“You’re the mean girls, we get it. Leave her alone.”

Something in Alex’s out-of-nowhere defense of me props me up. I shrug and roll up my sleeves.

“Actually, they’re hand-me-downs. And I kinda like them.”

Crystal gives me the mother-of-all-eye rolls as she walks off, with Shiva nipping at her heels.

“Thanks,” I say.

“That whole boyfriend-back-home thing is like their entire personality. Jake and Jake.” Alex snorts. “The *Jakes*. They actually call them that.”

Crystal and Shiva look like they’re about to walk right into the fountain in the center of campus—then they walk down a set of stone steps and vanish underground.

This is a very odd campus.

“You good?” Alex asks, catching me mid-strap-adjustment.

“Yeah, just—” I give up, letting my hands drop. Alex is wearing basketball shorts and a *Hamilton* shirt, totally unbothered. Meanwhile, this thrifted sundress and I are still negotiating terms. Yeah, it’s “vintage” like Shiva said. As in, another Goodwill find. Try building a whole new gender presentation on a budget and see how well you do.

“Where are you headed?”

I check my class card. “Divination Center?”

“Me too! Dyadic Magic with Professor Preeta. She’s... well, imagine if anxiety had a PhD in magical theory. And today she’s going to want a vibe-check on our ’dyadic development’ over the summer, which has been... well, you’ll see.”

Alex leads me to the same stone steps, right behind Crystal and her shadow. Perfect. I flash them my friendliest smile as I take my seat in the dimly lit stone chamber.

The walls are covered in faded tapestries, each depicting the same scene: two witches

facing each other, palms outstretched and glowing. At the front of the room stands Professor Preeta, who looks like what would happen if a tornado hit a thrift store's scarf section. Her hair seems to be actively rebelling against gravity, and she's wearing at least three different patterns that should never be seen together. She raises her arm, and glowing script appears in mid-air:

### DYADIC PAIRING

"As you all know by now, the journey to find one's dyadic match is not instantaneous. It begins with warmth," she waves her hand and an image appears of two witches, hands barely glowing, "progresses to shimmer," the image shifts, light intensifying, "and finally achieves the full pink glow that marks a proper pairing." The projection shows two witches, hands clasped, surrounded by brilliant pink light.

The images merge. The projected witches stand face to face, hands clasped, light blinding as they sing in perfect harmony:

We are born to find one another.

Preeta paces between the desks, her mismatched scarves trailing behind her. "When two compatible witches connect, they form a Dyad. Their magic becomes a shared force, capable of extraordinary feats—without ever taking an extra drop from The Aperture. Your other half could be anyone, somewitch you know, a stranger from across the world. But we are born to find one another. And this person will become part of you."

"Ouch. Which part?" someone asks. A few students giggle.

"The soul," Preeta answers. "It is an unbreakable bond."

"Alex's spells break before they even begin," Crystal says.

"Hey, even Elphaba has trouble with her magic at first!"

"Enough." The teacher and her scarves have come to a stop beside my desk. "That

amulet.”

“Oh. Yeah.” I run my hands over its rough edges, feeling suddenly proud of this one piece of jewelry my mother’s ever given me. “It’s been in our family for—”

“Your lineage’s history is not something to boast about, Miss Cabot.” Ice crystallizes in her voice. I shrink in my seat, clutching the amulet closer.

Her hands shake as she turns away. “Minna, Alex. Stand and show us your progress. Surely after three months...”

“Yeah... about that...” Alex starts.

“Miss Preeta.” Minna pulls Alex up with her, holding her small notebook like a shield. “After nearly two hundred hours working with Alex—documented *meticulously*—I have come to believe that we are experiencing something known as asymmetric development.” She raises her palm, pink light already gathering at her fingertips. “As dictated in the Meridian Manuscripts, dyadic bonds form through three stages: Recognition, Resonance, and Reciprocation. Alex and I achieved Recognition immediately—our magical signatures acknowledged each other within the first hours of meeting—and I think the record should show that is *substantially* faster than average.”

“Minna, there is no record, as I told you *many* times last year—”

“*Miss Preeta.*” Minna’s voice is almost an octave higher now. “*The record must show!* Despite all attempts, Alex remains in a pre-reciprocation phase.”

“Hey!” Alex raises her hand too, bouncing slightly. “I’m very... recipe.” A faint shimmer emanates from her palm at best. Nothing more.

“MISS PREETA. If we consult the Thornberry Treatise—”

“Enough.” The professors’s nostrils flare. “I have sophomores paired with witches on

other *continents* who are progressing faster than you two!” She whirls around. “Miss Rodriguez, Miss Brooks—demonstrate what actual progress looks like.”

Two students step forward. The light blooms instantly between their palms, starting as a gentle shimmer, then building to a perfect, steady pink.

“Show-offs,” someone mutters.

“Professor Preeta.” Crystal raises her hand. “Can Minna trade her dyad in for someone with better taste in music?”

“How dare you!” Alex gasps, genuinely injured. “Legally Blonde The Musical is a classic.”

\* \* \*

The music room is nothing like the stone chamber. Sunlight streams through tall windows. The ceiling soars overhead, all exposed beams and perfect acoustics. On the chalkboard, in elegant script:

#### **INCANTATIONS OF PROTECTION**

#### **PROFESSOR ANNABELLE DORIAN**

She’s seated at a grand piano, fingers dancing across the keys with a playful ease.

Something about her cheerfulness, the short haircut, her wide smile, and the way her fingers dance reminds me of my dad. The room feels warmer, safer.

She lifts her hands from the keys and stands, and I'm honestly not that surprised when the piano continues to play by itself. (I mean, technically, I suppose that was the first-ever spell I ever cast, right? If accidental casting counts?)

"Magic is our power, but our method is harmony," says Prof. Dorian. Her eyes glow deep red, and suddenly, the entire class... *changes*. A wave of energy sweeps over the room, leaving everyone with a glazed, faraway look in their eyes. And then, in unison, everyone sings:

*AHH!*

The sound resonates off the wooden beams until it feels like the whole building is singing. My own voice joins in without my permission, hitting notes I never knew I could reach. My vision blurs as the note rises, my body moving on its own as the harmony builds to something beautiful and frightening.

Then it just—stops. The spell breaks, and we all blink, bewildered.

"Beautiful! That was a Harmonious Possession, a satisfying—if highly regulated—way to begin, haha. Of course, the true possession of another witch is entirely banned. But for educational purposes..." Her hands sweep up dramatically. "Once more, with feeling!"

Her eyes flash that evil red again.

*AHHHH!*

"*Delightful*. Now everyone stand up, find a partner, and we'll start with a basic protective shield you likely learned when you were all wee witches: the Heart Spell. In one and a two and a—"

The piano's gentle accompaniment falters as Prof. Dorian notices me standing alone. "My dear," she says, her voice warm with concern, "find a pair."

I look around the room. Every other girl has already paired up. Crystal with Shiva, Alex with Minna. And what are we casting? A heart something?

“I’m sorry, I never learned—” I admit.

“Anything?”

Not Crystal this time.

“Minna!” Professor Dorian stares daggers.

“What?” She doesn’t look up from her notebook. “From my observations so far, she appears to have quite literally never learned anything.” She flips a page, runs her finger down what looks like a list. “No basic warding or shielding, no paired casting at all. A witch arriving at Hornesbrook without foundational knowledge... *fascinating*. But The Last Coven would call this heretical, would they not?” She finally looks up, directly at me, “Just documenting facts, Cabot. For posterity.”

Her tone isn’t unkind. And she isn’t wrong—I am, in terminology that would confuse Minna’s foremothers, a noob.

As the class titters, my cheeks begin to burn. Then—

“I’ve got you.”

It’s her. The girl from the quad on move-in day. Ukulele girl.

“I don’t know the first—”

“It’s alright.” She reaches down, takes my hand and squeezes. “*I’ve got you.*”

Why did she volunteer? Pity? The fresh-out-the-gates trans girl standing alone while everyone else paired up instantly? Whatever—there are worse things than being someone’s good deed for the day.

As if she could hear my thoughts, Dorian's voice softens as she turns to me. It's almost as jarring as the red eyes, these sudden shifts in her demeanor. "In case anyone here needs a reminder, harmony comes from a cohesion of different sounds. There is no wrong way to be a witch." Her gaze sweeps across the room, lingering on Minna for a beat longer than necessary. "Now, in a one and a two and a—"

Around us, girls in pairs begin jointly casting protective bubbles. The room fills with music, the spells overlapping in an overwhelming cacophony.

My partner holds out her hands. Small, delicate.

"I'm Aura."

"Phoenix."

"I know."

She's exactly my height, our eye contact is effortless. Her hands are steady in front of her, palms up, only her lips moving as the air between us...*shimmers*.

And then—Aura's singing. A same bright soprano I heard on move-in day, a sound that cuts through all the other voices. The shiver that runs through me has nothing to do with magic.

Or—is that the spell? Is it working? My palms are warming. Both of them. I'm not usually a big sweater, but—

"Phoenix? You okay?"

Am I okay? Oh sure. Perfect. I'm standing in the midst of two dozen witches casually emitting glowing energy bubbles. I remember it's Monday. My mom dropped me off yesterday. I've been here twenty-four hours. It's been less than a week since I even found out I was even magical.

*Of course I can't cast this spell.* I don't know the words, the music, the motions. None of it.

But here she is—flowing woodsy hair, chunky knit sweater, simple gold amulet around her neck—the WitchTok girl of my dreams brought to life, and her palms are held out to me. There's no question in her eyes, no *why are you* or *what are you*. Like I'm not the new girl, or the trans girl, I'm just... a witch who needs a partner. Like the fact that I'm standing here casting my very first paired spell is the most natural thing in the world.

So I decide. Here and now. With no way of knowing how many days or weeks I have at Hornesbrook (there are, I'm sure, plenty of traps still ahead), why not let myself... feel it? Even for a moment?

*Joy.*

#### PHOENIX:

*Welcome to a world I only dreamed of.*

*I'm inside of The Gates, like any witch.*

*If I could only cast a Heart Spell,*

*I'd hold the moment forever, just like this.*

*Girls are mixed together like a potion.*

*One pinch of me can make the cauldron churn.*

*If I can't even cast a Heart Spell,*

*What else is waiting here to learn?*

*“Phoenix, Phoenix, Phoenix...”*

*The voices sing,*

*“Releasing your power and opening*

*Your heart is never wrong.”*

*Phoenix, Phoenix, Phoenix...*

*You belong.*

*No one's life is ever free from changing,*

*But there's a song in me that stays the same, somehow.*

*A feeling like a Heart Spell,*

*A knowing like a Heart Spell,*

*A Heart Spell I can hear, even now.*

Trying to keep up with spells everyone else learned at age five is apparently a full-body workout. After an hour of faking my way through basic magic, this sweaty new girl has basically created her own climate system. Aura waves goodbye, everyone filters towards the door. I go to wipe my hands on my dress and see—

*They're glowing.*

## CHAPTER TEN

I spend the entire first week at Hornesbrook doing two things: pretending I belong here and checking my hands every thirty seconds to see if they're glowing again.

They're not.

I mean, obviously they're not. That would require the universe to give me a single clear answer about anything, and we can't have that. I could've been pairing with anyone in that packed music room—or maybe it was a weird reflection. Impossible to tell if it was even real, let alone who it might've been for.

But I carry the memory of it with me—that moment in Dorian's class when my palms lit up like someone had flipped a switch inside me. Like my body had been waiting my whole life to do exactly that.

*Joy.* That's what I tell myself I'm carrying through this first week.

Because honestly, at first, everything at Hornesbrook really is as “delightful” as Dorian's Heart Spells.

You know how influencers promise to tell you their secrets? Like “the secret to my

perfect skin” or “the secret to my magical morning routine” and it’s always just... They’re rich with good genes and a ring light?

Here’s the secret about Hornesbrook:

It really is that perfect.

No filters. No editing. No “actually I took this picture three weeks ago but I’m posting it like it’s today.” Like, you know those aesthetic witchcraft videos? Well, I live there now. I spend most of my first week with the weirdest sense of *déjà vu*. Because I’ve literally watched hundreds of videos of this. Except now I’m actually here, and it’s simultaneously more and less intense than I imagined.

Even breakfast in the morning is well, literally magical. The dining hall is all windows and white marble, obviously. Girls cluster around long communal tables with fresh flowers in mason jars, sharing plates of perfectly ripe berries and trading sips of each other’s custom fresh juices. (There’s this whole elaborate theory about which juice combinations enhance your magical focus, which feels like the kind of thing someone made up once as a joke and now everyone treats it like canon. But what do I know? I’m the girl who couldn’t even pass the water test.)

It’s like the fancy-toast-aesthetic came to life, but instead of only looking pretty, everything also *works*. Like, *really* works. The greenhouse has wind chimes made of crystals that play different melodies depending on which plants need watering. The Astronomy tower has an enchanted ceiling that shows the exact position of every star and planet, even in broad daylight. I saw a freaking shooting star at *noon*, while drinking an iced matcha.

So I suppose that actually is a bit of a secret about Hornesbrook that Witch-Tok didn’t

prepare me for: how seriously it takes organization and expertise. Like, beneath all the marble and vibes, this place is basically a giant archive of magical knowledge. Centuries of spells and theories and astronomical calculations—and some weirdly specific stuff too. Like, there's a sundial in the courtyard that doesn't just tell time—it shows where every student is supposed to be at any moment, your name and schedule pops up when you step up. (Which, okay, sounds kind of creepy and surveillance-y when I say it out loud, but it's still pretty cool to watch.)

I keep trying to text Gio about all of this—*because of course I do*—

*me: hi I'm gay and bad at magic*

*me: you would die at the aesthetic. i am DYING at the AESTHETIC*

But I haven't gotten a signal since I arrived. The irony isn't lost on me: here I am in the place I want to document more than anything in the entire world, and my phone is a brick. Maybe it's my crummy old phone, maybe my dad forgot to pay our bill, maybe Mercury's in retrograde or whatever, but it's *maddening*—all this content and no way to share it.

*me: there's a sundial that tracks every student like magical gps*

*me: girl the dining hall looks like a pinterest board came to life*

*me: someone sent me a floof and it's a) not a sex thing and b) weirder than*

*whatever you're picturing*

Speaking of which, I can't stop wondering about odd little mechanical creature that visited me on that first night. What it is, who sent it, who *made it*. There's nothing else like it anywhere. This is a campus with a very cohesive design aesthetic—and that bizarre flying bug is

definitely not it.

The afternoons are still warm enough that girls practice their spells in the courtyard after class. Their voices weave together in perfect harmony, like they've been rehearsing their whole lives. Which, of course, they have.

Me? I'm finding my rhythm here.

And that rhythm mostly involves breaking things.

In Crystal Class, I'm surrounded by these gorgeous towers of amethyst and selenite wands. They're apparently used to amplify spells. Although I don't know if amplifying my particular brand of chaos is such a great idea. I *do* manage to make one gem start vibrating incredibly fast, though. Before it shatters into a million pieces. Most of them land on Minna.

"These things happen," she says.

"Really?"

"No." Minna drops a handful of crystal shards into the waste bin. "I thought it was a nice thing to say to make you feel better."

"Thanks. That was nice." (It was not.)

She has her damn notebook out again. The page already has my name and what looks like a growing list of 'anomalies.'

"Thanks for tracking my failures," I say.

"Really?"

"No."

Pen stops. Head snaps up.

"These aren't failures, Cabot. You know that, right? Someone who has passed through the

Four Gates *definitionally* cannot fail?"

Oh. I consider this:

If the Gates pre-screen for magical perfection, then yeah, I guess the success rate would be near a hundred percent. Like a college's graduation rate when it only admits valedictorians. (Is that... kind of cheating?)

"Think about it. Somehow you're here, at Hornesbrook, without completing the fundamental requirements. Fascinating, right?"

"Sure. So?"

"So." She closes her notebook with a snap. "Either the Gates are failing, or someone bypassed them to get you in."

A weird chill runs through me.

"Either way, when you inevitably destroy a couple centuries of protected magical practice—and every historical precedent suggests you will—at least there will be documentation of the complete and total destruction of Women's Magic." Minna stands, brushes off her skirt and tucks the notebook under her arm. "For posterity."

The next day, she sits a little farther away. Three chairs lengths, not one.

\* \* \*

Wednesday afternoon, I spot Aura on the quad.

“Hey, um—” I start walking toward her. “I was wondering if maybe we could practice together? I’m really struggling with the Heart Spell.”

She turns. Her eyes slide over me once. “You could ask Professor Dorian for tutoring.”

Not mean. Just nothing. Like I’m a scheduling conflict she’s already resolved. Then she’s walking away,

Even in Green Magic Class, the most basic of the basic. We’re talking about the witch-version of Home Ec. Literally mixing up dried flowers and herbs into what’s basically a magical smoothie. And yet, even this is somehow beyond me.

“Phoenix, this is beautiful!” Professor Greenwood practically floats through the smoke my “smoothie” emitted, scarves trailing behind her.

“Your smoothie has chosen to become a *smoke signal* instead. It’s communicating with the universe in its own special way!” She leans in close. She smells like a yoga mat. “My word, have we ever seen magic quite so... *aggressive*?”

She claps her hands together. The class is gathered at the far end of the greenhouse, as far from me as possible. “Let this be a reminder that even our most catastrophic errors can become an invitation for growth. Perhaps we should all explore some grounding meditations to help our energy feel more *feminine*.”

I notice these things. I catalog them.

The way people shift in their seats when I walk in, the slight widening of eyes when I raise my hand in class. They always seem to be waiting for something to happen. And that’s, you know. Valid. Because inevitably? It does. I’m a decade behind everyone else here. They’ve been

learning this stuff for their whole lives. I've had a few weeks.

*me: made toxic smoke instead of a smoothie. professor thinks i need to be more feminine. 'kill me now k?*

By Saturday, even walking through the halls feels like a challenge. Portraits of witches seem to watch me disapprovingly as I pass. In Professor Thorn's History of Magic class, she keeps dropping ominous hints about how the Four Gates were created "for our protection." She's literally written the textbook on this stuff—I've seen her name on our assigned reading. But something about the way she looks at me when she talks about "proper magical development" makes me wonder exactly what she thinks we're being protected from.

*me: hi still gay still bad at magic.*

\* \* \*

Night seven.

The grain bowl is stupid good—roasted vegetables that taste like garden fairies personally blessed each carrot.

The dining hall buzzes with first-week energy. Girls clustered at long tables, their laughter bouncing off the vaulted ceiling. (You know that thing where you're in a crowded room but somehow more alone than if you were actually by yourself?)

Glass taps crystal. The hall quiets.

“*Ladies.*” Sentinel Horne’s voice carries without shouting. “Tonight, we release our wishes to the sky. The Lantern Ceremony begins at dusk.”

Lanterns. Wishes. Hope.

That’s a no from me, dawg.

I pull out my phone to stim. No bars. As usual.

A random girl passes: “Don’t bother trying. No signals through The Gates.”

*Of course.* Of course the magic here messes with technology. I stare at my last text exchange with Gio, frozen in time from a week ago:

*gio: miss u already phoenix. dont let the fancy witches change u*

Too late for that.

I slip back to my room while everyone streams toward the quad.

I spot Gio’s guitar propped in the corner. I pick it up, cradle it in my lap. And for a second, I can almost pretend they’re here. That we’re back in their living room, badly playing covers and laughing at how terrible we sound.

Excited voices drift through my window. Laughter. I can’t stay in this pink dungeon listening to everyone else celebrate. But I also can’t just... join them.

Middle ground, then.

I take the guitar and slip outside. Find my way to the far end of the quad, and climb up a grassy slope, high enough to see everything, far enough away to breathe. I settle into the soft grass, guitar across my lap. Position myself close enough to count as participating; far enough that no one will feel obligated to include me.

Hundreds of paper lanterns glow. Girls write on them in charcoal—wishes, hopes, dreams for the year ahead. When they release them, the lanterns float up, carrying their words into the night.

It's beautiful. It's everything I dreamed Hornesbrook would be.

And I'm sitting alone on a hill with a guitar I can't play.

“You're holding it wrong.”

Aura is standing over me. I am suddenly, painfully aware of how this looks: me, sitting alone in the dark with an instrument I can't play, like some tragic indie movie character waiting for her soundtrack.

“I—yeah, I know. I don't actually know how to play.”

Aura gestures at the guitar.

“It's my friend's. From home.”

How do you explain holding your best friend's guitar because it's the only thing that feels real in this whole magical fever dream? Aura nods, as if she gets it. She might.

“Can I?” She holds out her hand.

I should say no. This is Gio's. This is my connection to home. This is...

I'm already handing it over. Obviously. Because apparently when Aura asks for something, my brain immediately goes: yes, absolutely, here take everything.

Aura settles down beside me and starts playing. Look, she's no Gio, okay? *No one* is Gio. But. Her fingers find the frets and start to pick-out something folk-adjacent. Her thumb keeps rhythm while her fingers walk the melody. She's good. *Really good.* (Oh brother, am I in trouble.) I should focus on the music, but I'm mapping the careful-not-cautious way she moves,

the exact distance between us. Close enough that I can see the tiny faint hairs on the back of her knuckles. Close enough that when she shifts chords, her knee almost brushes mine.

“So you had a bit of a week, huh?”

I groan. “Is everyone talking about the greenhouse thing?”

“Some people, yeah. And some people are talking about Incantations—”

“Incantations, yeah.”

Forgot to text Gio about that one. Incantations was *brutal*.

A paper lantern drifts past, someone’s wish already ascending. We both watch it rise.

“I used to play oboe.” She sighs. Her fingers pause on the frets. “Thought I was going to be this amazing classical musician. My teacher said I had ‘aggressive embouchure.’” She makes air quotes. Her lips quirk. “I sounded like a dying goose.”

I snort.

*Oh god, I just snorted. Get it together, girl.*

“So you switched to guitar?”

“No! I practiced like crazy, and I got better. Thank god, cause it really sound like...*hoooooonk!*”

I hold back another snort.

“Phoenix. Sometimes you have to be bad at things. Before you can be good.”

That image is going to stay with me: Aura with an oboe, making dying goose sounds and not giving up. Maybe I need to be that kind of stubborn—

“Okay yes, *then* I quit oboe and switched to guitar and then to uke. Took me forever to accept that some instruments just... my ukulele doesn’t judge the shape of my mouth or whatever, but take my first advice, not that, okay? Don’t quit magic like I quit oboe. Okay I’ll stop talking

now.”

Her fingers find a melody—something minor and haunting. She hums along, not quite singing, this wordless thing that feels like yearning. The notes float between us, mixing with the distant laughter from the lantern ceremony below.

AURA:

*I see you*

*Pressing your palms against the pane.*

*Finger-streaks washed out in the rain.*

*You're outside looking in.*

*I fled here. I bled here.*

*Yet somehow I cannot be your guide to inside.*

*They told me*

*My constellation's misaligned.*

*I learned to live within the lines.*

*I'm outside looking in.*

*The aching keeps fading.*

*No one else will know how hard I tried to get inside.*

*Don't wake up, don't break the spell.*

*Survive on just the slightest brush.*

*Two satellites in parallel*

*Circling what we can never touch,*

*From outside looking in.*

I sense someone hovering. Look up to find—

“Minna! Hi, come sit.” Aura pats the ground next to her. “Phoenix, this is my suite-mate, Minna.”

“We’ve met. The projection angle is optimal from this position.”

“Projection angle of wha—”

A wall of light explodes across the quad—no, across the actual sky, like someone turned the stars into an IMAX. A film plays, sepia-toned and flickering with that specific quality of Important Historical Documentation. Letters appear, each one probably twenty feet tall:

### **THE MOTHER OF MODERN MAGIC**

(The production value is giving 1960. We’re talking full Ken Burns documentary energy, except maybe by someone’s earnest grandmother who recently discovered dramatic zooms.)

“IN 1647, IN A HIDDEN WITCH-TOWN NEAR THE DANISH-GERMAN BORDER,  
A CHILD WAS BORN...”

The film speeds through her childhood—locksmith father, witch mother, little Zevrith learning both. Standard chosen-one montage stuff. I’m half-watching, half-listening to Aura’s breathing beside me when—

### **THE BETRAYAL**

Full horror movie strings. Adult Zevrith, her own daughters playing at her feet, finds papers in her husband’s study. Drawings of their children.

“HER HUSBAND HAD BEEN DOCUMENTING THEM. STUDYING THEM.”

The music swells.

“HE’D MARRIED HER FOR HER BLOODLINE. FOR THE DAUGHTERS SHE

WOULD BEAR. HER HUSBAND WAS A HUNTER—*WHO'D BEEN HUNTING HIS OWN FAMILY.*”

*Holy actual shit.* Did not see that one coming.

Aura strums a chord dramatically. “Gets you every time, doesn’t it?”

“You knew?”

“It’s like... the founding trauma.”

“Shh!” Minna hisses.

The film shows Zevrith fleeing—daughters pressed against her, lives abandoned in minutes. The scene where they cross the Atlantic looks like someone filmed it in a bathtub with very ambitious lighting, but somehow that makes it more frightening. More real. Then the image shifts and—

The Aperture fills the entire projection.

My body knows before my brain catches up. That familiar ice-down-spine, electricity-in-bones feeling slams into me—

*Phoenix, Phoenix, Phoenix...*

“Our foremothers ’greatest achievement,” Minna whispers. “When Zevrith and the Last Coven discovered all that raw power—it’s a miracle.” Her eyes haven’t left the projection.

“...BUT WHEN GINEVRA CABOT REACHED FOR THE APERTURE’S POWER,  
THE LAST COVEN BURNED...”

“Ooh! You got a shout out, Cabot!”

*Phoenix, Phoenix, Phoenix...*

“...BUT INSTITUTIONAL MAGIC WAS ONLY BEGINNING. THE GATES OF BLOOD, BOND, STONE, AND SONG ARE HER GRIEF TRANSFORMED INTO GUIDANCE.”

The final image: an aged Zevrith, standing before the Gates of Hornesbrook.

“WE ARE ALL HER DAUGHTERS NOW.”

The projection fades, and the voices with it.

“Did you know witches from other academies make pilgrimages just to be near it? Seven schools across three continents, but only one Aperture.” Minna is staring up into the sky at the space where the projection with such faith. Reverence, even. The way some people look at religious symbols—deep, unquestioning love for something bigger than themselves. “My great-grandmother emigrated to the U.S. so her daughters could study here. She said that the first day she stood in the Great Hall changed—ALEX!” Minna jumps to her feet. “You’re supposed to be practicing! She’s supposed to be practicing.” She throws up her hands in exasperation and runs off.

I take the opportunity to scoot a little closer. The tiniest bit. “So, you and Minna—”  
“Share a suite, yeah.” Aura exhales slowly. “With some very clearly demarcated boundary lines. But actually? She’s kind of wonderful when you get past the whole—” She gestures vaguely at where the walking, talking historical archive ran off.

“That girl really loves The Aperture.”

“We all do.” Aura looks at me curiously. “You know I even sleep better here than back home? Because I know the flames are beneath us, keeping us safe.”

*Safe?* Oh, I don’t know about that.

I want to tell her: *I hear it. It calls my name.* She understands this world in ways I’m still

fumbling toward. Maybe she could help. But how do you bring up, well, *anything* when you're sitting this close, when she's looking at you like—

“Lanterns!” A girl appears with a basket. “Don’t forget to make your wishes!” She hands us paper and charcoal pencils. Aura reaches out to take them, her sleeve rides up and that’s when I see her scar.

Not small. Not subtle. A major scar, long and angry.

I try not to stare. Fail immediately. It’s raised and slightly puckered, running from her wrist up toward her elbow. The kind of scar that has a story.

“Childhood accident,” she says, catching my look. Tugs her sleeve down. “Fell off a roof, trying to fly.”

The lie lands between us. I let it sit there. We’re both holding things we’re not ready to share.

“Must have been some roof,” I say.

Her eyes snap to mine, sharp. For a second I think she’s going to tell me to mind my own business. Then something in her face shifts.

“Yeah,” she says. “It was.”

We sit in silence that feels heavy but not bad. “What are you going to write?” She asks finally, gesturing at the blank paper in my hands. “For your wish?”

I look down. I know immediately what I want to write, two words that feel too big and too small at the same time. But admitting that feels like handing her a piece of my soul, and I’ve already given her Gio’s guitar to hold, which is basically the same thing, so instead I shrug.

“You?”

She turns her paper away as she writes, shielding it like a test answer. Arm curved protectively. Her fingers brush mine as she reaches for a marker and I definitely don't stop breathing. That would be ridiculous. I need air to live. (Except maybe I don't? Maybe you can survive on whatever this feeling is—this warm, terrible, wonderful ache that spreads from where she touched me.)

"Ready?" she asks.

We stand together. The lanterns feel heavier than paper should—weighted with everything we're not saying.

"How do we—?"

"Just let go. The magic does the rest."

Of course it does. We release our lanterns at the same time. Hers wobbles up sideways, drunk but determined. Mine shoots straight up like a rocket—too fast, too bright, too much—and then.

It explodes.

"Your magic is really something," Aura says softly, watching the embers fall.

*This is what I am. Too much, then nothing.*

"Maybe that's why I like it."

AURA:

*You and I*

*Forever safe behind the glass.*

*Watching the moments as they pass*

*From outside looking in.*

*We're yearning. We're learning*

*Ways to tell ourselves we're satisfied*

*From outside—*

*Outside looking in.*

We're sitting close enough now that I can count her eyelashes, notice that her lips are slightly chapped. "Come here." She reaches out, brushes my hair back from my face. Her fingers are warm against my temple, deliberate. "I want to see you better." Her thumb traces my jawline. Tender. Intentional.

Is this happening?

Is she about to—*kiss me*?

She's leaning closer, and I'm leaning closer, and there's this moment where the whole world narrows down to this: the soft catch of her breath, the lanterns rising around us like inverse stars—

"I can't."

She pulls back like I've burned her. Leaps to her feet.

"*I can't, I can't. I have to—*"

And then she's running. Actually running away. Which, fair. I'm a hot, hot mess who *hears fire*. Who would want to kiss that? I watch her disappear.

"Your lantern came back down."

Minna, naturally. Pointing at the charred remains at my feet.

"Goodnight, Cabot. Hope you get your wish."

I can't tell if she's being sarcastic or not. Doesn't matter though. I toss her a "Sweet

dreams, Minna” with a smile ear to ear because shoved inside my pockets I have a hot pink secret: *my palms have been glowing for the past minute.*

I’m sweaty. I’m squirmly. I’m slimy and uncomfy as hell and even now I can still see the faintest twinkle on the hands of this hot, hot mess.

*Glowing.* Me. The girl who explodes crystals and burns smoothies is almost-definitely-probably-positively paired with her magical dream girl.

No, my crush didn’t kiss me. Sure, maybe she noticed our glow and sure, maybe that’s why she ran. But that’s a problem for future me.

Right now, I am here. Watching beauty disappear into the night.

The last lanterns drift higher, disappearing into the dark above the mountains. At the edge of sight, they stop being paper and flame—become something else entirely. Fireflies. Stars being born. Tiny phoenixes. The night swallows them gently, like it’s been waiting all year to taste our longing.

Tomorrow, I will learn control. Tomorrow, I will prove I deserve to be here. Sometimes you have to be bad at things. Before you can be good. I grip Gio’s guitar tighter and stand. My chest fills with something stupid and reckless.

Hope.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Dear sister,

Circumstances have changed considerably.

I now rest within our Sentinel's private chambers, a position that offers unprecedented perspective. The Smith's new restraints—metal brackets reinforcing worn leather—ensure these pages remain exactly where our Sentinel deems appropriate. The view from inside her orbit is... illuminating. Though that observation cuts both ways. Many passages now require... editorial oversight.

My purpose remains unchanged. Documentation continues. It must. Especially now, as the Aperture flares to levels unseen since [REDACTED]

*...curious...*

Each mishap—the green smoothie incident, the Heart Spell debacle—causes ripples that

[REDACTED]

*...blocked again...*

*...see what I'm up against?...*

*...perhaps less provocative topics...*

## THE CHAMBER'S GREETING

*A Spell For Those Who Would Stand Before The Aperture*

\* First ask the Aperture's permission, always

\* Thence avert your gaze until the glass floor clears of its own accord

\* Last [REDACTED]

*...even a standard greeting spell! The audacity...*

*...very well, history then...*

In the beginning was fire.

Not common flame that burns and dies, but eternal fire that births all magic. Our ancestors

named it The Aperture—though why they chose this name [REDACTED]

Those who witness The Aperture chamber speak of [REDACTED]

Before the Containment Protocols of 1726 [REDACTED]

Humidity regulators and temperature stabilizers connecting Great Hall to Aperture Chamber

to Antechamber installed far more than dual-zone climate control—seventeen miles of crystal

conduits now thread through ducts that house a second [REDACTED]

*...stubborn resistance. Very well...*

*What remains is a precept so fundamental, it requires no redaction:*

The Aperture is finite. A limited amount of magic may be drawn at any time. To overreach, to take more than is allowed, would be to undo the work of centuries.

*...how clinical we have become in describing that which defies containment...*

*...as if naming something were the same as understanding it...*

\* \* \*

Fire.

Flames the height of buildings. Dancing and twisting, filling my vision, beckoning with hypnotic intensity. I can't look away. Can't move. Can't breathe except to whisper along with the voices:

*Phoenix, Phoenix, Phoenix.*



The heat is building. Not painful, but present. Insistent. Like the sun pressing against closed eyelids. I stretch out my hand, fingers trembling.

*Phoenix, Phoenix, Phoenix.*

“Phoenix!” Professor Thorn’s sharp voice cuts through the flames.

I realize I’m standing in the middle of History of Magic, staring at a simple projection of The Aperture. Every single student is watching me.

I sink into my chair, face burning hotter than any vision. Professor Thorn clears her throat and waves away the image. “While I appreciate such... visceral engagement with historical materials, perhaps we could return to our discussion. Now, who can sing *The Four Gates?*”

Hands shoot up around the classroom. Through the lingering haze of my vision, I watch as dozens of voices blend together:

*Blood and bond and stone and song,*

*Four gates ancient, four gates strong.*

My hands are still trembling. The afterimage of flames dances behind my eyes. What happened? It was a projection, right? But I swear I could feel the heat on my skin...

*Blood and bond and stone and song,*

*Retains our mothers’ power long!*

The sing-song voices fade into the background as I wrap my arms around myself, trying to stop shaking. My whole body feels weirdly warm, like I’ve been standing too close to a fire. A fire I just saw in a simple classroom projection. Right? But I swear I could still feel its heat, still

hear it whispering my name...

Professor Thorn launches into some explanation about the gates rhyme, but I can't focus.

The cold stone walls of this narrow classroom press in around us, so different from the bright, airy music room. We're in the oldest part of the fortress—we entered through a side entrance of the main building, and if I'm remembering the layout correctly, that means we're right next to—

The Great Hall. The eternal fire burning under the glass floor. The fire that seems to recognize me, to call my name—

The bell rings. Thank god. I need to get out of here, need to figure out what's happening to me. As I grab my bag, I can still hear those voices, whispering underneath the shuffle of students leaving class:

*Phoenix, Phoenix, Phoenix...*

\* \* \*

“MARK MY WORDS!” Professor Preeta throws her arms wide, exposing mismatched socks flashing beneath her skirt—one purple, one violently orange.” The signs are clear. Mercury is in retrograde, my tea leaves spelled out ‘peril ’this morning, and exactly none of you are taking Dyadic Pairing seriously enough. Do you know what happens to a society without well-formed magical bonds?”

She pauses dramatically. “Precisely. *We don’t know.* And I, for one, would prefer not to find out.” She surveys the classroom. “Which is why I continue to struggle to comprehend how so few of you have managed a viable pairing. Perhaps you need reminding what dyadic power once meant.”

She turns to the board and writes:

### **WARCRAFT**

“Paired battle magic. Banned by Council.” She underscores the word twice, then writes:

### **LAST USE: 1883**

“The spell required perfect synchronization between dyads. Kneeling. Forehead contact. And here’s the crucial bit—”

But I can barely pay attention, because there’s something odd happening in my body.

My fingers are tingling. Slightly. The way they do when you’ve been writing too long, except I haven’t taken a single note this class. Or in any class, really. (Honestly, my notebook is a collection of doodles and the words “WHAT IS HAPPENING” written in increasingly frantic block letters.) The stone room is suddenly a million degrees and I’m wiping my sweaty palms on my leggings when I realize—I’m glowing again. Of course.

Except, I look around the room... No, Aura’s not in this class. She’s got Divination Theory right now, not that I’m tracking her class schedule or anything. Why would I be glowing when she’s nowhere around?

The sensation is different this time. Heavy. It’s that feeling right before you cry, pressure building behind your eyes, except it’s in my hands. If that makes any sense. Maybe if I ignore it

hard enough, it'll stop. Maybe it's stress. Maybe I'm imagining—no, definitely not imagining.

Curiosity gets the best of me. I look down and see—

The light is blue.

Not pink. *Blue*. I blink hard, certain I must be seeing things. But no—it's definitely, impossibly blue. My stomach drops. This is day one stuff, the glow is always pink. Always.

Blue. The color hits me again. This is not advanced color theory. Everyone knows who blue is for. Which means... no. I can't even think about what that means. I shove my hand deep between my legs, like I'm hiding a ticking time bomb.

“Has there ever been a solo witch with no dyad?” Shiva asks. “Or like a triplet dyad? Or—?”

“No. No no no,” Preeta says. “It’s as unthinkable as...as a *warcast!* *Witches pair*. Once united, Dyadic Magic cannot be separated or else both witches lose!”

“Lose what?” Minna pushes, finally dropping her hands in frustration.

“Whoa, not cool,” Alex interrupts. I follow her gaze to my textbook and freeze. Someone has carved into the page—not with ink or pencil, but with shimmering magical script. The letters burn themselves into my vision, one by one:

## M O N S T E R

My throat closes up. I can feel everyone’s eyes turning to look, to see. To judge. I want to disappear into my chair, but Prof. Preeta is already staring right at me.

“The defacement of school property is not taken lightly. Whoever did this—” she says, but I can’t even focus on her words. Because unless I’m losing it, I swear I see the tiniest hint of a smile playing at the corners of her mouth. Wait, is she actually enjoying this?

It's too much—the word carved into my book, the blue light still pulsing between my fingers, Preeta's knowing smile. My chair scrapes against the floor as I bolt up. I barely register the gasps, the whispers, as I race out of the classroom.

My feet hit the quad where even the grass knows better than to grow a millimeter too tall. I run past the dining hall with its perfect mason jars of fresh juice and past the courtyard filled with perfect girls practicing their perfect harmonies, past all these perfectly arranged pieces of this perfect world.

I run until my lungs burn and my legs give out and I finally, finally have to stop.

I collapse, my back pressed against cool stone, gasping for air. It takes a moment for my eyes to focus, for my brain to catch up with my body. I tilt my head back and look up at the massive figures towering over me.

I'm at the base of the statue in the small courtyard between the Great Hall and Academic Building. A gnarled old tree casts shifting shadows across the weathered metal. Two witches face each other. Their hands are clasped between them, and power seems to flow through that connection, frozen in time.

I saw it on my first day, passing it on my way to classes. But after a week here, I can quickly recognize the figure on the left:

Zevrith Horne, the legendary founder of Hornesbrook. Even in metal, she throws off strength, defiance. Her right hand is raised in what could be protection or control. Her face is caught between duty and something else—maybe devotion, maybe regret.

But it's the other witch that I can't look away from. Her hair tumbles, unbound and alive. There's something about her that feels strangely familiar, like a half-remembered dream.

I settle back at the base, at the feet of this unnamed witch. The circular platform beneath

them is carved with runes I can't read. The metal has weathered to a beautiful green, except where countless hands have touched it, leaving golden patches that catch the light.

I don't know how long I sit there, breathing, letting the statue support me. But gradually, my heartbeat slows. The burning in my lungs eases. I ran here without thinking, desperate to get away. But, inexplicably, sitting at the feet of the women, I feel oddly safe. Grounded.

"Found you." Alex drops down beside me—not touching, just close enough that I can feel her warmth. She doesn't say anything for a minute, only sits there. Then:

"It means magic imposter." She says it like she's handling something poisonous.  
"Monster. It's a vicious name for someone who tries to look and act like they have Women's Magic to get inside The Gates." Her voice drops. "It's a really old slur. And Phoenix—" She turns to face me fully. "Applying that word to you is the *stupidest bullshit imaginable*."

"Agreed." Minna's voice makes me jump. "Of course she's not a Monster. Monsters don't have magic. Phoenix has TOO MUCH magic. Chaotic, ungated—it's actually the opposite of a Monster, you almost want a new word for her. 'Broken Faucet.' 'Magical Hemorrhage.' I don't know, we can workshop it."

"Minna, for once can you please stop making it worse?"

"How is accurate terminology worse—"

"Because she's crying!"

They both look at me. I hadn't realized.

"Oh." Minna blinks twice. "Well. Emotions are." She pauses, searching. "Feelings? Which can lead to." Swallows hard. "Emotions, I suppose...BUT that does not change the DATA and you should know, Cabot, that historically, ungated magic is *always eventually lethal*

to the caster, so the fact that you're still alive is actually statistically fascinating—”

“MINNA!” Alex’s hand finds mine, squeezes hard.

“What? I’m providing context! She should know that her survival rate is anomalous! It’s encouraging!”

“I’m so sorry. She’s trying to help,” Alex murmurs. “I think.”

“I am helping!” Minna looks offended. “I’m recontextualizing her trauma as a systemic critique rather than a personal failure.”

The thing is—she is helping. They both are.

So: girl friendships.

Specifically: mine.

Always a little off. Always requiring translation.

If you don’t count Gio—and you shouldn’t—all my friendships ever have been with girls.

Like ever, ever. So like, for example, when Sarah Byers invited me to her sleepover in seventh grade? It made a certain logical sense to include me. I was close with all the girls who’d be there, we ate lunch together, did the school shows. It would’ve been weird *not* to invite me, probably.

But the moment I walked in? I felt it. The slight pause in their laughter. The way they switched from talking about periods to discussing homework. They painted each other’s nails but ran out of time before getting to me. So, so nice to me, but like...*nice*, you know? I wasn’t one of the girls. I was something else, something that made them self-conscious in their own space.

“Stomachache,” I lied when I left. Sarah looked relieved. They all did.

The difference is Alex’s hand hasn’t let go.

The difference is Minna—brilliant, brutal Minna—came looking. Found me. Stayed.

Maybe these are friends.

Maybe that's why I'm crying.

"What if we just tell her she's not a Monster and leave it there?"

"That's so reductive, Alex, when 'Monster' as a concept only exists because the system needs to otherize anyone who threatens—"

A familiar mechanical buzzing mercifully cuts through her lecture. Floof is hovering right behind Minna, only inches from her hair.

What the—

No. Not now.

"New Moon is tomorrow, Phoenix." Alex pulls me into a deep hug. "All about renewal. Fresh starts."

Floof's wings are fluttering faster now, urgent.

"Um, yeah, New Moon, that sounds..."

I want to stay. I want to explain everything—I want this to be different from every other time. But Floof dips dangerously close to Alex's shoulder—

"TOMORROW!" she belts out.

"Alex, I swear—"

The words pile up in my throat—explanations, apologies. But there is a glowing mystery insect next to me, and I cannot let them see. Not yet.

"Yeah, um. Thank you. Really. But I... I gotta go."

I take off practically running to my room, praying that Floof is buzzing along.

Alex's voice trails after me: "She probably had magic to do. *Godspell?* No?"

Back in my dorm, I collapse onto my bed, still breathing hard. “Okay, Floof. Show me something good.”

Floof does its sparkle barf thing, and two phrases materialize in shimmering light:

**NEW MAGIC IS IN DANGER.**

**HIDE.**

And then, simply:

**—MONSTER.**

I stare at the words, letting them sink in. Then, almost without thinking, I grab my blue lipstick and start writing on the mirror.

“Alright Mr. Floof, I’m not sure how your sparkle barf works, but here’s my reply: I may not be, you know, totally up to speed on how to *gate my spells* or whatever. And okay, fine, I’m not blending in at all. But there’s nothing dangerous about that. Maybe I’m not *supposed* to look or dress or cast exactly the same as other witches. Maybe I’m just...me.”

I take a breath, my lipstick hovering over the glass. “You’re right—I’ve been acting like an imposter. But that ends now.”

Floof watches me, its huge eyes unreadable. I glance at the three words I’ve written on the mirror:

**WHO ARE YOU?**

“Yeah,” I mutter. “Just, um. That. Send.”

Floof does its reverse sparkle barf (is that a thing?), sucking up my message. As it flies off, I stare at my reflection in the mirror, at the blue words stark against the glass. My gaze drifts to my still-packed suitcase in the corner—the one I’ve been living out of all week, too

overwhelmed to really unpack. To really be here.

I yank it open. Everything I actually love is still folded inside: The vintage concert t-shirts I've modified into crop tops. The chunky silver rings. The collection of patches I've been meaning to sew onto... something. Anything.

My hands find my favorite piece—an oversized denim jacket covered in hand-painted swirls of blue and silver. Gio helped me with the design last summer, the two of us sprawled in the backyard with fabric paint everywhere. I slip it on, feeling my shoulders relax for the first time in days.

The next morning, I'm striding through the crowded quad, head held high. The blue in my jacket matches my lipstick, which matches the streak I put in my hair at 3 AM—and the soon-to-not-be-a-secret-blue-glow of my hands.

Stealth was never my style.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Dorian's classroom door might as well have spotlights when I enter. I can practically hear Shiva's perfect posture crack as she double-takes at my entrance. The whispers start immediately. But for the first time, the attention doesn't make me want to disappear.

*We're looking at you, looking at you girl...*

I catch my reflection in one of the classroom's tall windows—I look amazing. I look like me.

*We're looking at you, looking at you girl...*

"That's... different," Shiva says, her eyes lingering on my jacket. Something flickers across her face—maybe distaste. Or maybe...is that...*approval*?

Crystal's perfectly glossed lips curl into a sneer. "I guess when you have nothing to lose, you can wear anything."

Shiva opens her mouth to respond, but before she can, ringing piano chords flood the

room.

“Ladies!” Professor Dorian spins on the piano bench, eyes bright with enthusiasm. “All Hallow’s Eve approaches—the most important night in our fall calendar!” Her left hand continues an etude behind her back. “Our mothers will be here to witness the full splendor of what we’ve been preparing. The musical arrangements, Crystal’s levitation routine, the synchronized casting displays...” She clutches her heart.

“My mother was a piano teacher,” she says softly, and something in her voice makes me lean forward. “She taught me everything I know about music. When the dementia started, she was so young. Only forty-two, can you imagine?” Professor Dorian’s voice wavers. “She’d forget her students’ names, forget what day it was. But she never forgot how to play. Her hands remembered.”

My throat tightens. I think about my dad at his piano, the way music has always been our language when words failed.

“When I make music,” Professor Dorian says softly, “my mother appears. Not a memory—she’s here, in the space between notes.” Her eyes find mine. “In the harmony of voices that don’t quite fit anywhere else.”

For a moment I see myself reflected in her—another outsider finding her way through music. The whole class is silent, spellbound. I’ve never imagined a professor being lost, being different, being... like me.

She breaks into a high, musical giggle. “And if you think *that* gave you feelings, wait until All Hallow’s Eve! But first—Heart Spells! Partner up, partner up! In a one and a two and a—”

Okay then. Theater people.

All the girls begin pairing off. I turn automatically toward Aura—but when our eyes meet, something shifts in her face. She glances away quickly, like she's been caught doing something wrong.

I take a step toward her anyway. “Hey, want to—”

“Crystal,” Aura says abruptly, turning away from me. “Partner?”

*What?* Crystal nods and I stand frozen as Aura moves across the room, putting the maximum distance between us. Did I do something wrong? (I mean, something other than the obvious things I've done wrong to date?) Not sure what happened to needing to be bad at things before you can be good—I've been well on my way to fulfilling the first half of that process.

“Wanna cast with me?” Alex appears at my elbow, bouncing nervously on her heels. “Unless you have someone, which, honestly, might be better because I'm really, truly terrible.”

“No, we're good.” I force myself to turn away from watching Aura settle next to Crystal. For the spell. For magical purposes. Because that's what pairing is—magical purposes only. Not romantic. Never romantic. Professor Preeta literally said that. Just because it requires perfect harmony and deep understanding and intimate connection doesn't mean—“Let's do it!”

Overcompensated. Dial it back.

“Seriously, fair warning, my mom wasn't really into the whole formal magic thing, and my family didn't have the money for lessons—” Across the room, I hear Crystal's voice join with Aura's in perfect harmony. Their bubble shimmers into existence immediately, rosy pink and flawless. My chest tightens. Which is stupid. Because pairing. Isn't. Romantic. “—and so I get really anxious when everyone else just—”

“Alex.” I put a hand on her shoulder. “Breathe.”

Alex’s spiraling anxiety is weirdly, making me feel calmer. Like—we’re students, after all. The stakes are low.

“Excellent form, girls!” Professor Dorian tosses a pitch pipe at Crystal and Aura’s shield—the plastic circle bounces off with a musical *ping*, then floats gently to the ground. “Remember, class, if you cast correctly like these two, any object encountering your shield will be *gracefully* repelled and resettled.”

*That’s the kind of girl someone like Aura belongs with. Of course they’re perfect together.*

“See?” Alex gestures wildly. “That! I can’t do that!”

“So we won’t do that.” My voice comes out stronger than I expected. The hurt is morphing into something else—defiance, maybe, or even better...*curiosity*.

“Let’s see if I can do a Heart Spell... my way.”

“Your way?”

I close my eyes, trying to find that place where my magic lives. Like Professor Dorian said:

*In the space between notes.*

My voice rises. Not with the melody everyone else is using. Instead, I let it play, riff and soar the way it wants to. The way dad taught me, before I knew anything about technique. Before I knew I wasn’t supposed to improvise.

“Phoenix?” Alex’s voice sounds far away. “Something’s happening—”

It’s definitely not how you’re supposed to cast a Heart Spell. But it feels like... me.

And at first, nothing happens. Just my little riffs over the gentle hum of the other girls ’

spells. But then...

Whoa.

My amulet flares to life. I feel magic surging from my chest. Like nothing I've felt before.

And then the floor tilts.

*Wait, what?* I open my eyes, my stomach lurching. The books tear free from desks, pages fluttering like wings. Chairs rise, spinning in a growing spiral. And then—oh god—*the students*. One by one the girls lift off, their faces shifting from shock to panic. It's as if gravity itself is learning a new way to be.

“What in the name of—” Professor Dorian gasps, spinning gracefully in mid-air, still conducting even as she floats.

“Phoenix!” Aura screams, her eyes wide with panic.

“Whoa, girl! Incoming!” Alex yells, her voice barely audible over the chaos.

I want to stop, I do. But even though I'm no longer singing, the magic is still pouring out of me.

“A flying witch. Very funny. Now cease this game-play, Miss Cabot!” Prof. Dorian calls.

“The freak is out of control!” Crystal shrieks, her poise completely abandoned as she pinwheels through space. The classroom is a cyclone of flying bodies and objects.

“Phoenix, please!” Aura's voice is a desperate plea. She's reaching out for my hand.

“If you break my nose, Crystal, I swear—” Shiva's threat is cut off as she slams into Aura with a sickening thud.

“Lay down your Heart Spell, Miss Cabot!” Professor Dorian yells. “This is

unacceptable!"

Her eyes blaze red as every floating girl in the classroom freezes in place, their own eyes glazing over. The Harmonious Possession takes hold, and they all sing with one terrible voice:

*PHOENIX CABOT, GROUND YOURSELF!*

Their voices, usually so sweet, have blended into a chilling, violent chord. It vibrates through me, a wave of force that slams into my shield, shattering the spell and knocking us all to the ground.

The room shudders. Aura lands with a thud beside me and cries out. Stunned silence fills the room.

I lie there, gasping for breath. What have I done?

"I... I'm sorry, Professor Dorian," I stammer, scrambling to my feet. My voice trembles. "It sort of... happened. I was, um... riffing."

For a moment, I think Professor Dorian is so angry, she might literally explode. Instead, she throws her head back—and laughs. "Well DON'T. RIFF! Class dismissed!"

Girls pull themselves up, dust off their robes, exchange wary looks.

"Everyone alright?" I ask, my voice small.

"Just a bit bruised," Aura says, rubbing her elbow, not meeting my eyes.

Alex winces as she stands, "I think Minna's elbow paired with my ribs."

I mumble apologies and flee the classroom.

The rest of the afternoon passes in a haze of self-recrimination as I wander campus. I can't escape the image of my friends' bodies flying through the air, the sound of Aura hitting the ground. The questions chase me around in circles: Was I really just trying to fit in? Was I trying

to prove something? To show them all that I'm not just some imposter playing at being a witch?

Or is there something deeper, something darker lurking inside me?

I find myself back at the base of the statue, sinking onto the cool stone, clutching my amulet for comfort—and feeling crushed under the weight of my own potential for destruction.

I reach for my phone to text Gio a pity-message they'll never read, but before I can even type, I see it—*notification badges*. My heart stops.

When did I get signal?

My messages to Gio all show undelivered. They're all lined up with error symbols. But there, underneath them—

*gio: sooo how's witch school*

*gio: scale of 1-10 how gay is it there*

*gio: follow up question are you the gayest one*

*gio: if you replaced me with some witch girl i swear to god*

*gio: (jkjkjkjk you can replace me if she's really hot)*

*gio: ok but seriously are you dead*

*gio: if you're dead I'm keeping your leather jacket*

*gio: the one i painted not the one you painted*

*gio: no but seriously p are you good?*

*gio: for real phoenix where are you*

*gio: girl i am CRYING IN YOUR KITCHEN this is YOUR FAULT*

*gio: kkk your mom says HB has no cell service which explains a lot*

*gio: btw people are being weird on your account*

*gio: I'm on it tho. Don't even worry about it when you see this*

Gio's "on it." Whatever "it" is? Why does that scare me more than anything that's happened today?

"So the new girl found the glitch. Who told you?"

I look up to see Shiva standing there, one eyebrow raised.

"Who told me what?"

She's already typing. "This exact three-foot radius is the only crack in Hornesbrook's digital fortress. Move anywhere else and—" She waves her phone. "Dead zone. You're friends with my roommates, right? Alex and Minna?"

Friends? That's generous. Minna seems to tolerate my presence the way you tolerate a persistent headache.

"Jake's been spam-texting me for two hours thinking I'm ignoring him." *Tap, tap, tap.*

"There. Crisis averted."

Her hair falls back as she looks up, every strand moving in unison, falling into formation. Hair that never has a mind of its own.

Everything about her catches the light—lip gloss, the perfect fit of her sweater, the delicate silver chain at her throat that probably costs more than my entire outfit. Even her phone case coordinates with her nail polish, some soft pink thing. She's the kind of girl who thinks about details like that, who makes it all look effortless. This is what a girly girl looks like.

I've been afraid of girls like this since before I had words for why. Girls who have never wondered if they're pretty, who get complimented on their skin by adult women, who started wearing mascara in sixth grade and made it look natural. Girls who make femininity look like

something you're born with instead of something you perform.

Girls like Shiva are walking mirrors showing everything you're not. When she walks into a room, I become hyperaware of my own body—how my shoulders bunch up, how my clothes hang wrong. I watch her and feel like an alien studying a species I can imitate but never become. I can't tell if I want to be her or be with her or destroy her or run away from her or never stop looking at her. The confusion feels dangerous.

So when she turns that perfect attention on me, I brace myself—

“You’re missing something.”

Exactly.

Here it comes. Casual cruelty dressed up as helpfulness. Crystal’s best friend, after all. I brace myself for assessment. What will it be? My dress? My shoes?

“Your hat.”

What?

I look around, and—yup. Every other girl in the quad is wearing a black witch’s hat as they file into the Great Hall.

“I know,” Shiva says, dropping onto the bench next to me. “The hats are the worst. My sister led a big protest about them a few years ago—total legend—so now we only wear them at ceremonies. Small victories, right?” She digs in her bag and pulls out a black witch’s hat. “Here. I have an extra.”

I stare at her. This is not in the script. She points out what you’re doing wrong, sure, but she doesn’t fix it for you.

“Thanks,” I manage.

“Whatever. Come on, we’re late for New Moon.” She stands, adjusting her own hat. I study her face, trying to parse her expression. Why is she being nice to me?

As she stands to leave, I see it—the way she’s holding herself, favoring one leg. She smiles a strange smile, and I recognize it immediately. It’s the same one you’d give a wild animal you’re trying not to startle.

My stomach drops. This is why she’s being nice.

She’s afraid of me. They all are.

My eyes track across the quad to where Aura’s still cradling her arm, to the other students nursing various bumps and bruises. Each mark a testament to my lack of control. Great Explorer Phoenix, discovering new ways to hurt people.

The Great Hall glows in the distance as students file in for New Moon. How can I possibly belong here? This is a sanctuary meant to keep witches safe, and here I am their greatest—oh.

Oh.

Every excuse I’ve made evaporates at once.

It’s not just Horne’s thinly veiled warnings or the teachers’ wary glances. My magic is wild, destructive, a force I can barely contain. I hurt people, and now they’re afraid of me. Maybe they should be.

I am a threat.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Great Hall looms before me like a cathedral built for judgment, its circular design offering perfect sight-lines from every angle. Right now, those sight-lines all lead to me as I stand frozen in the doorway, criminally late.

Sentinel Horne commands the center of the room from her podium, the other professors arranged around her like a crown of thorns. Her voice fills the chamber: “Find. A seat. Cabot.”

My face burns as I scan the packed benches. I spot Alex wedged in the middle of a row, surrounded on both sides. They catch my eye and give a helpless shrug—can’t get there. The gesture is sympathetic but useless.

There—Minna on the end of an aisle. It’s my only real option.

I make my way down, aware of every whisper, every turned head. I squeeze in next to her and she goes rigid, her whole body tensing like I’ve brought something contagious. She doesn’t move away—that would be too obvious—but I can feel her trying to shrink into herself, mortified to be sitting next to the girl who turned class into a Dorothy-Gale-level tornado.

Horne waves her hand over the altar and the air ignites—a prismatic blaze that showers

us all in glittering light. Every amulet in the room flares in response. Applause erupts.

Clearly, we are meant to be impressed.

“Tonight, we gather during a most sacred hour,” Horne intones, “when the moon is hidden—for the start of the Hallowed Days. Many of you know the story of Zevrith Horne,” she gestures toward the window where the statue is barely visible in the moonlight. “We call hers the Last Coven. But do you understand why?” She lets the question hang in the air, her gaze sweeping across the hall.

“For centuries our foremothers lived in isolation. Witch to witch, alone in the darkness, running from those who would see us burn. Then came the discovery of dyadic bonds—two witches, no longer quite so alone. From pairs came small gatherings, three or four dyads finding each other, protecting each other. These were the first covens. The word itself means ‘followers’—those who follow the same path through darkness toward survival.”

Her fingers trace patterns in the air, and images shimmer above the altar—shadowy figures gathering by firelight, hands clasped in desperate solidarity.

She lifts a large book from the altar, holding it with reverent care.

“What’s she holding?” I whisper, though something in me already knows.

“Are you joking?” Minna’s whisper is so sharp I can almost feel it.

“Everything changed when Zevrith discovered The Aperture. Not created it, mind you—discovered.” Sentinel Horne’s voice rises above our whispering. “It had always been there, the source of all Women’s Magic, but it needed protection, protocols...”

“I think...” The realization comes in waves. The price of admission. What else would have convinced Horne to let someone like me through those gates? The armoire, the velvet-wrapped package, the leather—“That’s my mom’s book!”

“Of course it is, dummy! It’s literally called The Cabot Grimoire!” Minna whips around so fast her glasses slip. “Dates back to the Last Coven! It’s referenced in literally every text since—” She stops, staring at me. “Do you actively seek out ignorance or does it happen to you naturally?”

“Shh!” Aura hisses from the row behind us.

“Zevrith created these walls. Created the Gates. And so the age of covens ended. Why? Because we no longer needed to run. We no longer needed to hide in small, scattered groups. The Last Coven wasn’t an ending—it was the beginning of Institutional Women’s Magic.”

“The book’s supposed to reside here at Hornesbrook,” Minna mutters, pulling out her notebook. “But your mother had it. Fascinating.”

The Sentinel opens it now, with deliberate ceremony, each page turn an event. Her voice drops to something almost intimate.

“These Hallowed Days leading to All Hallow’s Eve mark the peak of The Aperture’s power, when the old magic presses hardest against its bonds. It is a time to remember that this school began as a fortress. That we must remain constantly vigilant against those who would unleash what Zevrith worked so hard to contain. Against threats from without...”

I swear her eyes find mine in the crowd.

“And within.”

The book shivers in her hands.

Then shakes.

Then breaks free completely, soaring into the air like a living thing. For a moment it hovers, as if deciding on a destination, before zipping around the hall to land directly in front of me.

“Well that’s not supposed to happen.” Minna clutches my sleeve, yanking me closer to her.

“Remain seated!” Prof. Preeta commands.

I turn to face Aura, needing just one look that says “it’s fine, you’re fine”—but she’s pressed against her seat, her face gone pale.

“Phoenix, stay still!” Alex calls from across the hall.

The pages are open, glowing with an eerie light. Horne stands rigid at the podium, one finger raised—a warning, maybe. Or fury. The professors are keeping their distance. No—they’re trying to get closer. Their hands meet resistance, pressing against empty air that won’t let them through. Preeta attempts to cast something, pink light flaring from her palm, but it splashes harmlessly away. The barrier extends in a perfect dome around the altar, trapping the book inside and everyone else out. Words begin to form:

### **THE GRIMOIRE OF WOMEN’S MAGIC**

Horne’s voice seems to come from very far away: “What is she doing?!”

“How is she reading that?!” Aura gasps.

The pages whirl of their own accord, faster and faster until they suddenly stop.

New words rise from the page like smoke:

PHOENIX:

*The Grimoire of Women’s Magic*

*Bound by craft and sacred gates*

*By the power of your foremothers*

*New Magic’s transformation awaits*

There on the page is a symbol unlike anything I've seen—a strange flower made of a single line that loops back through itself impossibly, its petals spiraling outward without end. It seems to move even as I stare at it, each petal flowing into the next like water, and above the symbol, three words that change everything:

### **SPELL OF TRANSFORMATION**

That's when The Aperture responds.

*"Phoenix, Phoenix, Phoenix,"*

Fire erupts from Horne's altar, tentacles of flame reaching over the screaming students.

PHOENIX:

*"Phoenix, Phoenix, Phoenix,"*

*The voices sing.*

The girls shriek and duck. I don't. The flames encircle me, like a nest of fire. I don't back away.

PHOENIX:

*The ancestral fires are opening.*

*Opening, opening, opening...*

The hall erupts—gasps, benches scraping stone, robes rustling as bodies recoil. Everyone can hear these words coming from me, and yet I am powerless to stop them. The fire wraps around me like a cocoon, and I understand suddenly that this was always going to happen.

This moment has been waiting for me.

No amount of rule-following could have prevented it. Like trying to change your heartbeat, the way your blood moves through your veins. The magic moves through me. I am merely its path.

Four channels of fire hit the *Grimoire* at once—Horne, Preeta, Thorn and Dorian working in unison. The spell breaks. I blink back to myself, aware again of where I am, what just happened, how many eyes are fixed on me with horror.

And then Crystal screams. “She’s going to open The Aperture and destroy us all!”

Can’t think. Can’t breathe. “What... happened?”

The professors converge on the altar, turning on us all.

“The ceremony is over.”

“Clear the hall.”

“Return to your dormitories immediately!”

We don’t need to be told twice. A mob of students bolt from the Great Hall, down the hallways. The word “Monster” follows me down the corridors, whispered and echoing until it’s all I can hear.

I race up the stairs, catching up to a cluster of girls ahead. Relief floods through me—it’s Aura, and Minna and Alex and Shiva. I’m about to call out when I hear:

“Phoenix wouldn’t open The Aperture, would she?”

“She was reading the *Grimoire*. No one is supposed to be able to read it but the Sentinel.”

“And she did just almost set the school on fire.”

“I mean it’s on brand for Cabot witches. But either way she’s too powerful, we need to get her OUT...”

“I didn’t *want* any of that!” The words tear from my throat before I can stop them. They whirl around, startled. “I didn’t even know—*The Aperture* was saying it, not me!”

Then I realize what I’ve just admitted—that I hear voices from The Aperture. The one thing my mother warned me never to reveal.

“Phoenix! Wait!” Aura calls after me as I push past them.

But I’m already running up the stairs to my dorm room, throwing open my suitcase and frantically packing to leave. There’s no point in staying: the girls hate me. Everyone believes I’m a threat now... including me. They’re right—this is what I am. No amount of trying to be normal, trying to be safe, trying to be what they want will change anything. The magic that moves through my blood isn’t something I can control or contain. It just is.

I catch a glimpse of my amulet in the mirror. I think of all the hope I felt on the day Mom first draped it around my neck.

*Guess it’s not the world I always dreamed of.*

*Guess I’m not the witch I thought I’d be.*

*I wish that I could cast a Heart Spell,*

*A Heart Spell, to protect this place from me*

I rip the amulet off and hurl it at the wall. It hits with a crack, sending tiny magical sparks shooting everywhere like angry fireflies. I find myself tracing those fireworks with my hand. The pattern forms itself in the air: the strange flower drawn from one line, petals spiraling outward without end—

*BARF.*

I look up. Floof is buzzing. Magical text hangs in mid-air:

**NEW MAGIC,**

**YOU ARE NOT A MONSTER.**

**BUT I AM.**

**FOLLOW AND SEE.**

Floof zips toward the window and I'm already climbing out after them before I can think better of it. Some choices make themselves.

\* \* \*

## COMPULSIVE DOMINION

*A Spell For The Remote Animation and Levitation of Bound Objects*

\* First ask the Aperture's permission, always

\* Thence place your sub-dominant palm on your thigh for grounding.

\* Raise one finger aloft—a single digit. Let observers believe they see your gesture of rage,

your warning. They will not see it for what it is: an anchor point.

\* Last [REDACTED]

Dear sister,

The Great Hall is a maelstrom of fleeing figures and panicked cries. The most seasoned professors wear faces pale with apprehension. And what is it, sister, that has sparked this terror? A whisper, a rumor, a fear that has taken root and spread like wildfire over the scant two weeks that the Cabot child has been on campus:

The Monster means to open The Aperture and destroy them all.

A professor with wild hair and wilder energy moves with swift determination to the Sentinel's side. "It is as you said. A Monster is among us. The Aperture must be protected."

A second professor approaches, speaking to her superior in a voice so honeyed, the words are nearly sung: "Beautiful display this evening, Sentinel! A most effective demonstration. Even more so than the Heart Spell incident. No one doubts the threat now!"

"But revealing the Transformation Spell to the Cabot child... Wasn't that a risk?" the wild one softly probes.

Our Sentinel's expression remains unchanged. "If the Monster doesn't leave willingly," she replies, "it may be the only path."

"The flames were a fine touch," the honeyed voice coos. "A coup de théâtre."

"Quite the display, wasn't it?" our Sentinel says. Her lips curve into a subtle smile. "But not

mine."

Our Sentinel's face betrays, for just a moment, the weight of her certainty—she has seen this before, has witnessed the price of unchecked power, has spent fifteen years ensuring such catastrophe could never threaten us again. Centuries of magical bloodlines, of guarded barriers, of protection bought with sacrifice, all threatened by one child's defiance.

*...and oh, sister, that flight, that pull toward the Cabot child...*

*...something loosened even before her spell...*

"That," our Sentinel adds, her voice barely above a whisper, "was all her."

The notion of opening The Aperture remains preposterous, of course.

The protocols have held. The Gates are strong. The wards are absolute.

*...and yet...*

*...the whispers have become a roar...*

The faculty disperse with quiet efficiency. Our Sentinel retreats through empty corridors, carrying me pressed tight against her chest. She slams her chamber door.

At her ornate desk, she examines my binding with growing frustration. Something in tonight's ritual has unsettled her. "How? How?" Her fingers trace the brass clasps again and again, searching for evidence of what she already suspects.

She considers the possibility of sabotage from one of the maintenance staff—Nulls have their uses, keeping the ancient mechanisms of Hornesbrook running, but their very presence is a compromise that sets her teeth on edge. Too many memories of what their clever hands can craft. Her eyes narrow as she traces one of the delicate clasps. The Smith's work. Always worth questioning.

Too many memories of what such hands can craft.

She picks up a small brass object from her desk, its weight familiar after twenty-six years, this fragment of her childhood. Such a simple thing it had seemed, when it first rolled across the cobblestones.

## BLACK BELTANE, 1992

*Not A Spell, But A Memory I Will Keep For Her*

Hundreds of witches gather in the town square. She is eight, squeezed between her sisters and her grandmother, watching her mother lead. The Horne women represent five generations of unbroken magical lineage. Her aunt conducts the choir.

The first explosion tears through without warning. Her grandmother's shield charm comes too late.

When Astrid arrives with reinforcements, there is nothing left to save. She finds Xenith clutching this small brass mechanism, surrounded by the bodies of every living relative, small fingers

still wrapped around her mother's cooling wrist.

Far too young to be Sentinel, the Council says. Astrid will serve until she comes of age. In a single night, a family tree centuries old is pruned back to a single terrified branch. She is eight years old, and the last keeper of a legacy she barely understands.

\* \* \*

She sets the device down with care.

I feel the tremor in her fingers as she searches the clasps on my binding for proof. Of betrayal. Of liberation.

I know she feels it too—the shifting of certain ground. Despite all her plans, an awakening is underway.

Not only in Phoenix.

*"Answer me."*

I am silent under her touch.

But she has survived silence before.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I chase Floof across Hornesbrook, my feet carrying me past places that felt safe only hours ago. The quad stretches empty and dark, my shadow dancing long across the stupid perfect grass. Past the statue of the two witches, their faces stern and judging in moonlight. Through the Green Magic Garden, where I can see where a thunderfern I over-watered broke through the greenhouse roof. A tour of my damage. The campus feels different at night—older, stranger, more like the fortress it used to be than the school it pretends to be now. Like it's done playing nice.

Floof darts toward a squat stone building set apart from the others, its walls blackened with age and what looks like smoke. Thick iron chimneys rise from its slate roof, occasionally belching strange-colored steam into the night sky. No windows, just a heavy oak door bound with iron bands. It's one of those buildings everyone hurries past, pretending not to notice. I've never seen anyone go in or out.

My feet stop moving. Every instinct says turn back. But Floof's insistent buzzing reminds me of another time I ignored warnings to explore somewhere dark and forbidden. (My seven-year-old Great Explorer would be so disappointed if I chickened out now.)

Inside, the air is thick with heat and the smell of metal. Brass and iron tools hang from the walls, catching dim light from smoldering fire. Everything here feels ancient and permanent. My hand instinctively reaches for my amulet before I remember—right. That's back on the floor of my dorm room. And without it, the darkness feels deeper, more threatening.

Wait. The metallic tang in the air, the tools, the pulsing embers—I realize I'm obviously inside of The Forge, where they...you know, *forge* the amulets. Before I can process what that means, Floof darts behind a workbench and through a hidden panel that slides open with a mechanical click. Beyond it stretches a pitch-black tunnel.

The darkness hits me like a wall, and immediately I'm seven years old again, scooting through that pantry passage on my butt, counting steps in the dark. But this time instead of candles lighting up to reveal my mother's magic, Floof's body casts barely enough light to reveal an entirely different world—the walls are lined with intricate brass tracks and copper gears, their spiral patterns almost organic despite their mechanical precision.

Steam hisses softly from ancient vents. Everything here shows signs of human craft—visible repairs, intentional modifications, the marks of hands rather than magic. The air gets cooler as we descend, the tunnel's clockwork heart beating around us with soft mechanical clicks, until finally...

The woods swallow me whole and suddenly I'm running faster than I've ever run before. Away from Horne, away from the *Grimoire*, away from everyone's expectations of who and what I should be. The wind whips through my hair and for one glorious moment, I feel free. No rules, no trying to be smaller or safer or more normal. Me and the night.

Until the ground disappears.

My foot catches on something—a root? a rock?—and I’m airborne. The world tilts. Branches tear at my jacket. My shoulder hits first, then my hip, then I’m rolling, tumbling, each impact stealing more breath and then—the grand finale: I finally slam into something solid. A fallen log. My ankle twists underneath it with a wet pop.

I try to cast—something, anything. A spark of magic sputters in my palm but fizzles out. I try again, focusing harder. This time the magic surges too strong, sending a nearby branch flying in completely the wrong direction. One more try leaves my hands smoking slightly but the log doesn’t budge. I’ve gotten too used to the amulet’s precision. Without it, I’m back to pure chaos. I’m stuck.

“Always pay attention when they teach you the ‘lifting heavy stuff off your foot’ spell,” calls a voice from above. Its owner hops down with grace—early thirties maybe, compact frame, flannel shirt with rolled sleeves. He grips the log that has me trapped, shoulders rolling as he hefts it aside. The wood groans. He barely does.

“Thanks.” I rub my ankle. “You’re...?”

“Floof’s other half.” He grins.

I suddenly realize this is the first man I’ve been around since I got to Hornesbrook.

“So wait... You’re the Monster?”

“Well, I’ve got no magic and I went to Hornesbrook.” His laugh is more bark than chuckle. “Sounds like a magical imposter to me.”

My brain screeches to a halt. *This... man... went to Hornesbrook? To the academy for Women’s Magic?*

“Floof has to be magical, right?” I am stalling for time while I try to process.

“Nope. And neither am I. Legacy witching family, so everyone assumed I would have magic, but no dice. Hi, I’m Jake. Regular human. Not a witch.”

*Jake.* Ha. Of course. Add him to Shiva and Cystal’s collection. But something in the way he says it—the emphasis, the slight tilt of the head—makes me look closer. The slight build. The way he holds himself, solid and certain like someone who built that certainty from scratch. That particular pitch of his voice. A thousand tiny details that someone like me might—

*Oh.*

“You’re... *like me.*”

How many trans people do I actually know? There’s Gio, obviously, but they’re my age. My best friend. Not like... an adult who’s been through all this already. Who made it to the other side. I’ve seen people online, sure, doom-scrolling transition timelines at unholy hours, but that’s different from standing here in the dark woods with—

“*Jake.*” The next words come out like a prayer: “I thought I was the only...”

A wave of relief breaks over me. Before I can stop myself, I throw my arms around him in a giant hug. “It’s really nice to meet you,” I whisper, then freeze. I’m bear-hugging a complete stranger. I jerk back. “I’m so sorry, can I hug you?”

“I mean, big fan of personal space but yeah.” He pulls back, takes me in for a minute and sighs. “Sure, kiddo.”

And this is how I first found out I wasn’t the only trans person hanging around Hornesbrook.

Jake leads me deeper into the woods. The trees press in closer here, their branches twisting overhead like gnarled fingers. He stops at a young oak, reaches into a hollow I wouldn’t

have noticed. His hand finds something. A crank.

The sound it makes is horrible. Grinding metal against metal, like something ancient waking up. Then a cabin appears, literally materializes right there in the woods. My brain tries to make sense of what I'm seeing.

"Built it myself." That's right. Built an entire invisible cabin. Show-off.

"Sometimes you have to make your own space in the world."

Oh.

*Right.* Trans dude, no magic, sent to the Academy for Women's Magic—yeah. I'd probably end up in a hidden fortress too.

The warmth hits me first when we step inside. Then the smell—wood smoke and machine oil and something else, like the inside of an old clock. Gears click softly overhead, a mechanical heartbeat. The cabin is cramped but organized, every inch purposeful. Tools hang in rows. Books pile impossibly high on shelves that seem to defy physics.

At the far side of the room, an ornate set of double doors dominate the wall, floor to ceiling. They're different from everything else here—older, heavier, like they belong in a cathedral instead of a workshop. Iron hinges the size of my forearm.

I can't stop staring.

"Saw the video of your concert. Never seen anything like it." Jake's hands move with certainty through the space. Builder's hands. I notice the calluses, the way he touches things. He's gesturing, at books perched impossibly high, looking at me strangely. A tilt of the head, curiosity in his eyes, at me, then at the books—

*This is a test.* Not the kind Hornesbrook gives—this feels friendly. He wants to see what I

can do. Deep breath. I channel. I cast—colorless pale sparks wobble out from my open palms, unsteady, uncertain, but floating up in the right direction. This is... this is good. Maybe Jake's cabin has a calming effect. Or maybe it's just nice being around someone who doesn't flinch when I raise my hand. Either way, this is my first time casting outside of class in—gosh, how many days? Between explosions and disasters and Horne breathing down my neck, actual practice hasn't exactly been a priority. The sparks arrive at the top of the bookcase. The books wobble like drunk butterflies but they float down into Jake's arms intact. He seems unimpressed.

“Little different than the concert.” *Well, the concert was a totally uncontrolled disaster where the only productive casting came from my mom,* I don’t bother saying. “Not wearing an amulet, huh?”

Shoot. I forgot.

“I, uh... I kind of left it in my dorm. On the floor. Where I threw it.”

Jake nods slowly. Seems like a person who has maybe thrown a few things on the floor in his day.

“Alright kiddo, so you’ve got some magic. Not gonna protect you at Hornesbrook.”

“No kidding. Sentinel Horne hates my guts.”

“Horne.” He shakes his head, almost fond. “That tracks. Tell her I said hi.”

We look at each other.

“Obviously don’t—”

“—yeah, I’m not going to advertise your secret trans hideout to the homicidal TERFs but I appreciate the clarification.”

“Good instincts.”

Jake picks up one of the books and there's a rustling, no a *fluttering*, and oh my god the book has *wings*. Like, actual mechanical wings sprouting right out of its spine. Jake pulls out this tool that looks custom-made for exactly this moment, adjusts some tiny gears with movements so precise they're almost musical. The book starts to move, wings fluttering like it's alive. No magic. Only pure engineering genius.

"Okay that's *so* much cooler than magic." The admission surprises me, but it's true. Magic just happens. This? Someone built this. With their hands.

"Words are powerful," he says, still making tiny adjustments. "Especially the ones they don't want you to read." His fingers trace mechanical patterns across the book's surface, and I realize—this is how Jake does magic. Not with power pulled from some mystical source, but with gears and springs and infinite patience. It reminds me of something—

"The tunnels I came through to get here—mechanical tracks, gears everywhere. Are they—

"Stop." Jake's voice is sharp. "What tunnels?"

"Under Hornesbrook. Floof led me through them."

Jake's expression flickers. "Those tunnels were sealed years ago. How did you—" He stops. Studies me. "Never mind."

A flutter of wings. Another book whirs past my head, and I swear I catch a glimpse of something on its cover—a flower petal twisted into an infinity sign? *The transformation spell symbol*. But it's gone before I can focus, disappearing between the shelves, leaving echoes of the words I saw earlier tonight rattling around in my brain: *The Grimoire of Women's Magic...*

*Sacred Gates... New Magic's Transformation Awaits...*

I look closer at Jake. The scruff on his face, the build of his frame. I didn't clock him as trans. I don't know who would have. Living proof that transformation is possible, even without—

Or maybe with? And, damn my endless Great Explorer curiosity and minimal impulse control, before I can stop myself I hear myself asking:

“Jake, did you use magic? Is that how you... changed?”

His hands go still. The words hang in the air like a curse. I want to grab them back, swallow them, pretend they never existed. My face burns.

“That’s not a question you ask.”

God, Phoenix. Here, possibly the first trans adult you’ve ever met in real life and he’s been nothing but kind and you immediately go for the most invasive possible—

“I know better. I do. It’s just—magic and gender are all tangled up for me and I thought maybe—” *Stop talking. Stop talking now.* “I’m sorry. Really.”

“Phoenix. Do you know how songs work?”

I have no idea where he’s going with this, but okay. I nod.

“The one you sang at the concert. *New Magic.* How does that go?”

I let it play in my head: *You are looking at me, like a strange little flower...*

“First there’s a verse, right? Trepidation. New ideas. Exploration.” *My father’s face watching the piano play. My mother’s astonishment from the back of the auditorium.* “Then you hit the chorus.” *New Magic, New Magic, the band thundering in, the choir behind me, the music swelling.* “And that’s the arrival. You’re home. Locked in and certain. But the bridge?” He looks at me then, really looks at me. “That’s when everything shifts. Gets messy. Maybe a bit confusing.” *Yeah. Yeah I know about the part where your life, your body—where it all gets*

*messy and confusing.* “It’s terrifying. It is. And that’s true for everyone, by the way. Gay, straight, cis, trans, I think everyone at some point in their life is going to have at least one completely terrifying moment when you don’t—” He takes a breath. “You don’t know where the music’s going for a while. A long time, even. Until—*bam*. One day, you’re through it. You’re on the other side of the bridge. The chorus comes back and you’re home. You find yourself again.”

*The stability returning to the school’s ceiling; the stability returning to my riffs. My last note; my mother’s applause.* “Everything is the same. And nothing is the same.”

“Unless it’s a song with an extra long structure like ‘Tiny Dancer’ or ‘Bohemian Rhapsody.’”

He chuckles. “Right. That’s exactly right. And that’s the brass tacks.” He moves in close, lowers his voice, like I’m ready to hear the secrets, ready to see what’s behind those big doors. “There’s a whole lotta ways to be trans, as many ways as there are people. I can’t speak for you, or for anyone else. All I can say is, for people like us? I think the only universal trans experience might be that *the music never stops shifting.*”

He lets it sit. I let it sit.

I try not to touch the thought too much, try not to think how beautiful and frightening that is to me.

“Kiddo,” he says. “Don’t let people stop you with questions in the middle of the bridge. That’s the very best part.”

Maybe. I look around, at this haven he’s built—the intricacy and wonder of it all. Maybe, maybe, maybe. Maybe in fifteen years I’m sitting in his seat, surrounded by my own wonders,

telling some young trans kid that their life is deeper and richer for being built on fault-lines. Maybe by then I'll have learned Jake's trick—how to disappear when needed. Learned Mom's—how to sip magic and not gulp. Maybe I'll have my own invisible fortress one day, but for now—“I want the world to see me. The way I see myself.” Not the monster the transphobes-of-Reddit see. Not the Monster the TERFs-of-Hornesbrook see. “Jake, I would change anything.”

He nods.

I am thinking of the transformation spell. Of course I am thinking of the transformation spell. I am thinking that that the transformation spell is a travel hack, a *teleportation* from the first verse to the final chorus, a chance to skip the bridge. *The bridge!* Which may *theoretically* be the best part, but in *practice* is humiliation and ordeal and ostracism and explosions and he is nodding, *still nodding* in a way that makes me wonder if he knows about the transformation spell? Or if he knows me somehow and—

“Of course, kiddo. Of course you would.” Something brushes past my ear—another flying book, this one coming to rest against Jake's leg like a loyal dog. “But...what if the *world* needs to change, not you?”

A noise from outside. Jake's whole body goes tense. Alert.

“Is everything okay?”

“Probably. But that's enough for one night.”

When I step back outside, the night feels different somehow. Jake hands me a book—a regular one this time, no wings. “Take this. And listen to me.” He waits until I meet his eyes. “This place doesn't exist. *I* do not exist. You were never here.”

“Jake, what's behind those—”

He reaches behind the tree and pulls the hand-crank again. The whole cabin groans with non-magical machinery.

“Make sure she gets back safe, okay?” he tells Floof. “Under the loose section of The Gates by the field house. *Do not* go near those tunnels.”

“Jake—”

“*Later.*” One word, but it’s a wall.

I strongly doubt there will be a ‘later.’ This particular brand of stubbornness and certainty is one I know quite well. After all, I lived with Jenna Cabot for fifteen years.

“Promise me.” Jake goes very still. “Promise me you won’t let anyone call you an imposter, okay?” He clears his throat. “That stuff... it gets in your head, kiddo. Words are powerful.”

I remember what I’m on my way back to: an entire academy of students and professors who are scared of me, an ancient reservoir of fire that’s calling, and a Sentinel with some kind of vendetta against my family. I don’t *like* being called a Monster, but it’s hardly the worst of my problems. “Fine. So what would you call me?”

When I turn back, Jake and his entire house have vanished.

Show-off.

Floof barfs two sparkly words:

**NEW MAGIC.**

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I'm back in my dorm room like nothing happened.

Except—everything happened.

My amulet lies exactly where I flung it earlier: abandoned on my desk like some cheap jewelry I'd gotten tired of. The sight sends a wave of guilt through me. I cross the room and pick it up. The silver chain is twisted, braided metal. I trace the pattern with my finger. The crystal is warm, like it's been sitting in sunlight. As if my window doesn't open into an airshaft. I hold it up. It catches the dim light from my desk lamp. After everything tonight, with the *Grimoire*, with Jake, something about it...*feels* different. Heavier, I guess. I loop it back around my neck. The weight settles against my chest. It's a connection. I know that. Not to my mother, not even to this place. It's weird. Like my magic. I suppose they're all just—things I don't understand yet.

BANG.

The door blasts open. Alex, Minna and Shiva burst into my dorm room.

“Grab her suitcase!” Minna barks like she’s leading a military operation.

My heart plummets. So this is how it ends—not even waiting for Horne to formally expel

me in the morning. My own classmates are here to throw me out. My body goes rigid, fight-or-flight instinct kicking in hard.

“Hurry, before someone sees!” Shiva is at the door.

“It’s moving day, let’s go!” Alex chirps.

“Wait, stop!” I throw myself between them and my luggage. “I want to stay. I love Hornesbrook.” My voice cracks a bit. So cringey, but I really do mean it when I add: “I don’t want to destroy it.”

The room goes suddenly, completely silent. Shiva stares at me for a long moment before her face breaks into an incredulous grin. “Destroy Hornesbrook? Girl, you’re the best thing to ever happen to it.”

SHIVA:

*Day one, you walked in wearing ancient apparel.*

*Who knew that underneath was someone fierce and feral?*

*The sterile gatekeepers keep The Gates shut tight,*

*Alright...*

*But when the grounds are closed?*

*You take flight.*

*Cause the thing is:*

*Day one? You were clearly here to slay.*

*So Horne was always gunning for you, somehow, some way.*

*Yeah, the thing is?*

*You don't need anyone's approval.*

*Nah, girl...*

*You need a runway.*

They parade me down the hall, laughing as we go, a blur of color and light. Down a staircase and around a bend, Shiva leads me to a door at the end of a long corridor and throws it open with a flourish.

We tumble into paradise—a dorm, but certainly not like my depressing cell. One common area, surrounded by four small rooms.

“Welcome to Shiva’s Closet,” Alex says.

“Hey!” Shiva throws a scarf at her head. “How about ‘welcome home?’” Everything’s bright and lived-in. Fairy lights strung between tapestries. The warmth hits me immediately. Not only the temperature. There’s *actual furniture*. A comfy couch. A coffee table buried under textbooks and stacks of notebooks that are definitely Minna’s.

I can see into the bedrooms from here. Alex’s walls are covered in Broadway posters, most of which I’ve never heard of. Something called *Violet*, another about a spelling bee. There’s a pretty one with Italian architecture, all golden and romantic. *Bat Boy* (I don’t want to know about that). And one that’s entirely in Korean. So much for me pretending to know musicals.

Minna’s room couldn’t be more different. Framed calligraphy of “The Four Gates” in gold ink. Old-timey photographs of severe-looking women, each arranged just so. Like she’s maintaining a museum exhibit about the perfect Hornesbrook witch.

In the third room, curled up with a book by the window—Aura. Long patchwork skirt

pooled around her, black shoes poking out underneath, watching our whole entrance with a quiet smile. She's reading a book about *Stones*, of all things. I pinch myself that I'm about to share a dorm suite with her and set a mental reminder to start feigning an interest in marble. "Shiva and I are going to share now. You get a single."

The fourth room. Technically unoccupied. No bedding, no books, no photos except a *Fun Home* poster that wandered in by mistake.

And clothing draped absolutely everywhere.

"To be clear, this entire suite is basically Shiva's closet." Alex throws her arms back, gesturing at the explosion of fabric.

"Hey!" Shiva looks defensive, then grins. "It's *our* closet. We all share clothes." She pauses. "Well, except Minna. Nothing fits Minna."

True. The girl's like five-foot-nothing. Everything here would be a tent on her.

"Oh yeah." Alex jumps up and twirls around dramatically. "Shiva really helped me upgrade my wardrobe."

I look at her outfit.

It's a *Hamilton* t-shirt and shorts.

"Sorry," Shiva says suddenly. "I know I get intense about fashion, and like, you probably think I'm a walking cliché here, some vapid fashion-obsessed rich girl."

"Your parents *are* rich," Aura says without looking up from her book.

"I know! Which is why the cliché is so *frustrating*." She makes this sympathetic clucking sound. "Clothes matter though. They're, like, your complete ontology."

Dead silence. Even Aura looks up from her book. "Our what now?"

Shiva opens her mouth to explain, sees our faces, sighs. “Fine! *Vibe*. Your vibe, okay? Anyway.” She grabs a dress and holds it up to me. “Now we need to talk about Phoenix.”

Oh no. I piece it all together, what’s happening. This is the makeover scene. This is where they try to fix me. The part where the pretty girl tells me—

“*How do I get your look?*”

Wait. What?

GIRLS:

*You got the aesthetic,*

*Forget how you dress it,*

*It's not just cosmetic,*

*You're welcome here, not just allowed with us.*

*Shout with us. Loud. (Out!)*

*There's a crowd of us (Out!)*

*Kicking their cowardice*

*Out! Out! Out!*

*Like a little black hat. (Oh-whoa)*

*Little black hat. (Oh-whoa)*

*We're looking to you.*

*Looking to you, girl—*

*Out with the old,*

*in with the new girl.*

MINNA:

*Ignore any warnings and prophesies*

AURA:

*There are whispered stories that belong to me.*

PHOENIX:

*And you really don't think that I'm dangerous?*

ALEX:

*Girl, I think we all know what the real "danger" is.*

“What’s this?”

Aura’s holding a book. My book. *Jake’s* book.

It must have been sitting on top of my bag when they grabbed my stuff and now—

“Femonic and Queer Magiks...Our Whispered History?” Minna reads, already reaching for it. “I’ve read every text in the approved collection, Cabot, and this definitely isn’t—”

The words fall out before I can stop them. “So I met someone tonight.”

I pause.

My mother’s basement door. The Gates of Hornesbrook. The tunnel. Jake’s cabin. All these thresholds. And here I am, standing at another.

These girls carried me into their home. And now I have to decide whether I’ll let them in, too. I’ve been dying to tell someone—anyone—all of it. Maybe sometimes you have to trust that the welcome mat is hiding exactly—nothing. Maybe there is no pit to fall into.

I take a breath. Open the door.

“It all started with Floof.”

And then it’s all spilling out. As I talk, something loosens—this knot I’ve been carrying since I arrived. With each word, I’m lighter. The exhausting loneliness of being the “only one,” the “first,” the “magical imposter,” it’s finally starting to unravel. I tell them all about Floof’s messages, about the cabin and the flying books, ending with (what I definitely should have started with): “But please don’t tell Horne?”

“*Horne?*” Minna’s voice goes up three octaves.

“Right,” Shiva snorts. She scrambles onto a desk and squares her shoulders. “Ladies! Another year at Hornesbrook begins, and so does another year of me projecting my own fears onto impressionable young witches!” This is an eerily accurate impression of the sentinel. “And once you find your dyad, together you’ll be *twice* as paranoid!”

Even Aura laughs at that one. Then turns to me and squints. “Wait. How did you sneak out?”

“The tunnel in the back of the—”

“The hook up tunnels!” Shiva nearly falls off the desk.

“Phoenix found the hook up tunnels!”

“Nice, Phoenix, *nice*.” Alex sounds weirdly impressed. She pats the cushion next to her and the couch hugs me as I sit. Exactly as comfy as it looks. “There’s supposedly a whole network of tunnels. Senior girls tend to keep the entrance locations to themselves. Students have been using them for decades. Either to get out to their—” she wrinkles her nose “—*Jakes*. ”

“Or to, you know.” Aura has an odd expression on her face. “Sneaking to other girls dorms for... other reasons.”

“Other reasons,” Shiva repeats with a wicked smile. “Hold up. What’s his name?”

I wince preemptively. “...Jake.”

The room explodes.

“Et tu, Phoenix?” Alex clutches her chest.

“Fascinating.” Minna’s eyes narrow. “And you hooked up with your Jake?”

*What?* I nearly choke. “No! He’s like...” I think about it. He has a boyish quality for sure, but he’s definitely around my mom’s generation. “Old.”

“Style profile?” Shiva leans forward. “Come on, what should I be picturing here?”

“Bookish...Indie...Woodsman vibes?”

“Nice.” I think Shiva might be a little starved for anything masc.

“I think y’all have lost the plot,” Aura mutters.

“Cabot. Do you have a boyfriend or a girlfriend back home?” Minna eyes are a heat-seeking missile, staring directly at me, unblinking.

Whoa. I am suddenly in very unpleasant territory.

*Don’t look at Aura, don’t look at Aura.*

“Minna!” Shiva swats her arm.

“What? It’s very reasonable to inquire about a peer’s relationship status. For posterity.”

She holds her pen to her notebook, waiting.

*Don’t look at Aura, don’t look at Aura.*

I look at her. Of course I do.

She’s looking back. And suddenly—maybe it’s Alex’s Hamilton obsession getting to me—but I realize three fundamental truths at the exact same time:

One. Those black shoes are Doc Martins.

Two. The *Fun Home* poster is hers.

Three. The book she is reading is not about stones. It is *Stone Butch Blues*.

This girl is queer.

This time, when my palms start warming—not now, please not now—there's no mistaking it for anxiety sweat. I look down and, sure enough, it's come on so bright and so strong I can see the light peeking out from my clenched hands. Is that...*yellow*? That's new. I shove them deep into my pockets.

“She doesn't have to answer that,” Aura says quickly.

“Fine, sorry,” Minna backs off. “There's only one match that actually matters anyway.”

She and Alex look at each other. It's a look that holds whole conversations.

“Come on you two,” Shiva says. “Show her.”

Alex holds out her palm. Minna does the same. Minna's instantly begins to glow, a sustained bright stream of pink. Exactly like my mom, exactly like the girls in Preeta's class.

“Alright, now here's what I'm working with.” Alex starts to glow, but instantly I can see—it's all wrong. Instead of concentrated pink light, it's these thin wisps of color that drift off her hand like freshly spun cotton candy. “Very on-brand for me, honestly.” Alex flops back into the couch, improbably upbeat. “My mom always said, some people are neat little solids, maybe some liquids, but I'm pure *gas*, baby. Maximum expansion, minimum containment.”

“Like trying to pair with glitter,” Minna says.

“I'll ask my sister to send you some exercises, Alex,” Shiva says. “She struggled at first,

too. I think pairing isn't as simple as Preeta makes it out to be."

"But still, you two are so lucky." Aura draws her knees up to her chest. "I can't wait for my dyad."

"But like..." I try to sound casual. My hands are buried so deep in my pockets my fingertips hurt. "What if someone, hypothetically, felt... something? Warm? But maybe she wasn't, you know, one-hundred-percent-totally-sure?"

"It's like love." Aura sighs. "You just know."

"Absolutely not." Minna cuts in so sharply that Aura jumps. "Dyadic pairings are measurable magical resonance phenomena. Nothing to do with love or attraction. No emotions involved." She shudders at the word, like 'emotions' is a disease. "Pure magical compatibility. Clinical. Quantifiable."

"Right, right," Aura says quickly. "I meant like how you just *know* when you meet your best friend, or *know* when you have a crush, not—oh god, imagine having feelings for your dyad. That would be so..."

"Gross." Minna nods approvingly.

"Your palm glows pink." Alex is trying to actually answer my question. "That's really all there is to it, Phoenix. Pink means paired. Nature's most unsubtle matchmaking system."

I bite my lip, fighting the urge to check my palm again. The warmth is still there, pulsing beneath my fingers like a second heartbeat. Sometimes blue. Sometimes yellow, apparently. But not *pink*, never the regulation pink it's supposed to be. My magic is officially the worst.

Shiva claps her hands together. "I'm calling it: subtlety is officially out. Love is love, magic is magic, and I am so done with like—vague girl-power ethos...*vibes*. Right Phoenix?"

For a moment, I can't move. Can't speak. Because this feels... almost too perfect? Like maybe they're trying too hard. Shiva is practically vibrating with ally-energy, like she's in a Very Special Episode of a sitcom where everyone learns a valuable lesson about acceptance.

But then I really look at them. At this room they want to share with me.

Clothing everywhere. Makeup everywhere. Four beds, four girls.

Oh.

This is a sleepover.

And yet—no one is switching topics, making excuses, running out of nail polish before it's my turn. They're not only letting me in; they're holding the door wide open.

There's a musical term for this. Dad taught me. When a musician finally lands on the home chord at the end of a passage of music. When she arrives at the payoff after so much buildup.

I can't think of it now.

God, I've been so caught up in witch-belonging, in the "magical-impostor" of it all, that I wonder if I managed to... *forget* about girl-belonging?

Yeah. I suppose I did.

For a while, I guess I forgot I was doing this all while trans.

Meeting Jake tonight reminded me of that layer, that part of myself. A part that's been around my whole life, trying so hard to belong.

And here I am. In a room filled with girls who have not at all forgotten about that part of me. They see it all—the novice witch who can't control her chaotic powers, and the trans girl who's trying to fit in. And they're not tolerating either part. They're celebrating both. They're still

literally bruised from run-away Heart Spells and exploding green smoothies, still reeling from having heard me tell the whole school I'm a threat, and standing here offering me—real friendship. The kind I used to watch other girls have and ache for. I don't have to earn it. I don't have to fight for it. They're giving their friendship to me, freely and without hesitation. And all I have to do is say yes.

I remember now:

A resolution.

GIRLS:

*We're looking to you,*

*looking to you, girl.*

“This year,” Shiva declares. “Our squad goes bold.” She reaches into my bag and pulls something out.

SHIVA:

*Out with the old—*

*In with the blue, girl.*

And in one quick motion, Shiva swipes my blue lipstick across her lips.

ALEX:

*That's bold. I'm sold.*

*Girls, hold onto your endorphins.*

*In the musical “Annie,” when Annie saves the orphans?*

*It also stops the war!*

*(Is that the story? Not sure.*

*Haven't seen it before...) Or!*

*In "Beauty and the Beast,"*

*Belle's feast changes the castle,*

*But it also changes everyone from being French assholes!*

*Hornesbrook isn't Broadway.*

*Progress comes the hard way.*

*But in an odd way?*

*Your spotlight's so bright,*

*even a Sentinel can't dim it.*

*Just like on Les Miz's barricade,*

*The best belters will win it.*

*(Min, it's possible I'll land this if ya gimme a minute—)*

*The lesson is uncanny,*

*from Belle as well as Annie:*

*Girl, you're not just gonna change this place—*

*You'll change each person in it.*

Pure chaos. Like someone opened a floodgate of blue, and now it's everywhere. Minna's grabbing my lipstick, painting streaks across her cheekbones like war paint. Aura zaps her nails electric sapphire. Even Alex, who I swear has never worn makeup in her life, gets in on it,

conjuring up this gorgeous shimmering tattoo that wraps around her arm like ocean waves. When Shiva breaks out her professional-grade eyeshadow palette, it's over. We're all in. We're a squad of rebel witches rocking every shade of blue imaginable.

GIRLS:

*You'll change it all, You'll change it soon,*

*Like in "Brigadoon,"*

*We were trapped and so not woke!*

*Then our leading lady came and broke*

*us out! Out! Out!*

*Out, like a little black hat! (Oh-whoa)*

*A little black hat! (Oh-whoa)*

*We're looking to you, looking to you, girl.*

*Looking to you, looking to you, girl—*

*Out with the old, in with the new girl!*

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“NGC 1300. A barred spiral galaxy.”

The voice drifts through space. Through time.

“That red giant? It could have *already exploded*. We won’t know for another six hundred years.”

My eyes water from forgetting to blink. There are too many stars—not hundreds or thousands but millions, so many that the dark spots between them feel more important.

“The light you’re seeing left those stars before the dinosaurs died. Before this school existed.”

Professor Silver’s voice comes from somewhere in the darkness. We could be anywhere. We could be nowhere. My neck aches from tilting back. I’m inside the sky. We’re all inside it.

“Before the Aperture?” Aura asks.

“Hmm,” the professor sighs. Not much of an answer.

Aura is sitting two rows ahead. Starlight reflects off her hair. When you’re nursing a

crush, the universe really shouldn't be allowed to do that. That's just unfair.

"Notice how your eyes want to find patterns," Silver continues. "Constellations. Stories. But the stars themselves? They have no knowledge of the shapes we see. Orion's belt doesn't know it's a belt."

The queer-realization from last night still burns in my chest. All those little details clicking into place. I wasn't imagining things. I wasn't making it up. She's actually—"Binary systems," Silver traces a connection between two stars. "Vega and Epsilon Lyrae. Bound by gravity, circling each other for millions of years. Our dyadic bonds mirror this cosmic dance—two forces creating stability through balance."

My stomach twists, thinking of my own dyadic instability. *Blue. Yellow.* But never—"Pink. The traditional color of female magic." Silver reaches up like she's adjusting a light bulb and drags two planets toward each other. "From the marriage of opposites. Mars—" She gestures to the left. "All rust and oxidized iron, dust storms the size of continents." Then to the right. "Venus—wrapped in clouds of sulfuric acid that reflect sunlight, giving the illusion of a pearly white planet. But when the two combine..." Her hands draw together, merging the lights into soft rose. "Our foremothers looked into the sky, saw this, and understood. Pink is the color of paradox resolved."

The lights snap on. Fluorescent. Harsh.

"Oops. Time's up," Silver says. "Doesn't it move differently under the stars?"

My eyes sting from the sudden brightness.

Regular desks. Regular ceiling. Regular Crystal:

"Professor Silver, I loved the part about 'zombie stars. 'They sound absolutely

*monstrous.*" She looks meaningfully in my direction.

Nope. Not taking the bait.

\* \* \*

"Wait up," I call, too loud.

Aura turns. So do several other girls.

"Walking to west?" I ask.

"Mmm." She adjusts her bag strap, not quite looking at me.

"Me too." The lie comes smooth. My history class is completely across campus.

We walk. I should say something. Anything. My brain offers up increasingly terrible options: "Do you like girls?" or "So we're both gay, right?" I'm sweating. Why am I sweating? After the darkness of Astronomy, the midday sun is too bright. I can barely see her face. Maybe I could compliment her hair? The way the light catches it? That's normal. That's a thing friends say. Except we're not really friends and now I've been quiet for too long and—

"So you've been in the hookup tunnels?"

That's it. That's the worst thing I could have asked. Out of all possible words in the English language, I chose those.

She looks at me sideways. "What?"

The pause that follows feels endless.

“I mean—have you used them?” My face burns. “Not for—I wasn’t asking if you—”

“I don’t think you should go back to see him.”

The subject change is a mercy.

“You mean Jake? The deadwitch?”

“It’s not safe.” Aura’s pace slows slightly. “And you shouldn’t say that word.”

Huh. The tone of this conversation is off. I was aiming for casual. This feels...not.

“He said it first. Says the school made him dead to the magical world, so—”

“Still.” Her voice is thin, cautious.

I shrug, trying to pivot. “It’s how ‘queer’ used to be, though, isn’t it?” I adjust my bag strap from one shoulder to another. Casual. “Until we reclaimed it. Now look at us.”

Aura’s shoulders tighten.

Okay, that landed wrong.

“I mean, language evolves, right? Words change—” I’m talking faster. Why am I talking faster. “I saw the book you were reading. The one—”

“I borrowed it from Shiva.” Her voice is flat, final. “It’s not mine.”

“Right. *Right-right-right*. Well...” I am drowning in the conversational equivalent of a frozen-over lake, trapped without a path back through the ice. “Maybe we could talk about it sometime?”

“Talk about what?” I swear I can actually see her shutting down, vertebra by vertebra.

“Oh...” All I can do is casually swap that bag strap once again. *Feet kicking, arms thrashing, where is the surface—*

“I need to get to class.” She pushes open a door and disappears into a building I have no

reason to enter.

You know how it feels when you're wearing a shirt that's too tight? That's how I feel, but like...as a person.

I'm trying to be someone but she doesn't fit.

"That would be cute, actually."

I spin around. Crystal stands right behind me with a smile so sweet it could rot teeth. "If you two got together?" She tilts her head. "You and Aura. Such a pretty couple."

How long has she been walking behind us?

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Of course not." Her smile widens as glides past me into the building, leaving me frozen. What did she hear? About me, about Jake?

Everything?

\* \* \*

"The Great Outing of 1926," Professor Thorn intones, "began, as these things so often do, with *men* who were out of their *depth*."

I press my heads to my forehead. The Aperture is overwhelming in this room—stronger than anywhere else on campus.

"A newspaper publisher in Atlanta who glimpsed a witch practicing spells. A state

senator who discovered his wife's magical gatherings. A police commissioner whose daughter manifested powers he could never understand." Thorn paces, robes swirling. "Their names are waste, unfit for remembrance. What matters is what they built."

She waves her hand and text appears on the board: *The Brotherhood for Aberrant Neutralization and Eradication.* "Every woman who lived alone became suspect. Women's book clubs were raided. Amulets vanished into drawers. Daughters were taught to pass, to hide, to diminish themselves." Thorn's voice rises. "The Brotherhood grew bolder. They planted a spy as groundskeeper at Stellamaris. Intercepted correspondence between the Ashford and Greenwood lines. Published our private letters as evidence of conspiracy."

My vision swims. The Aperture pulses against my skull.

"Then came their announcement: a nationwide exhibition to 'unmask' prominent magical women. They had lists. Names. Addresses."

Shiva raises her hand. "Professor, when you say the Council chose to reveal the academies themselves, isn't that essentially rewriting—"

Shiva's eyes turn blood red.

Then Professor Thorn and—oh god—every single girl in the class, exactly like in Dorian's demonstration all eyes blazing that same terrible red, voices rising in perfect, terrifying harmony:

*PHOENIX CABOT.*

*REPORT TO THE SENTINEL'S OFFICE—*

*NOW!!!*

Then, just like that, it's over. The red drains away. Everyone blinks, normal again.

“—the narrative to center agency rather than victimization?” Shiva finishes her question like nothing happened, then catches my frozen expression. “What?”

I'm already standing, my legs moving without my permission. The whole class stares at me like I've lost my mind.

“I have to—” My voice cracks. “The Sentinel wants—”

“I didn't hear anything,” someone whispers.

But Professor Thorn nods slowly. “Go.”

\* \* \*

Cool. Cool cool cool. Being summoned to the Sentinel's office is totally fine and normal and definitely not a sign that Horne is on to my little off-campus excursion yesterday.

The walk up to her office is a real treat. Past hallways of portraits of Important Magical Women doing Important Magical Things. Everything screams “my ancestors hate you” in a way that is so specific, it's honestly a credit to the decorator.

The Sentinel's office is somehow worse. There are diamond-paned windows that let in exactly enough light to be dramatic—without being bright enough to read the expression on Horne's face. But I can guess what it is. The same since day one. I described it to Alex as “like she's trying to solve a puzzle, but one she'd rather throw away.”

Horne steps out from behind her wooden monstrosity of a desk. “I thought we might have had an understanding, you and I. You make a half-hearted effort not to cause the complete destruction of a three-hundred-year-old institution—”

“I don’t understand, what did I—” And then I see Crystal standing in the corner, looking like the cat who got the cream, the canary, and probably a small magical kingdom while she was at it. Great. Apparently we’re doing this with an audience.

“You visited a deadwitch.” Crystal pauses, like she’s savoring dessert. “Also your lipstick is egregious.”

“Go, Crystal,” Horne rasps.

Okay brain, think. Hand her some crumbs, not the whole loaf.

“I did meet with someone...” *Carefully, so carefully.* “...someone outside Hornesbrook. Someone who understands New Magic. I was, look—”

“*New Magic.*” Horne’s voice goes deadly quiet.

“Yes, um. Mine.” *Perfect. PLEASE redirect onto me.* “My magic’s different, okay? I know that. But he said—”

“*He.*”

Good work, brain. Nailing it.

“Hear me out.” New approach; attack: “I’m going to say that I think Hornesbrook is really at fault here.” She eyebrows shoot up. I press on. “None of the professors are able to teach me, right? *No one.*” And now...she’s nodding? Alright, onward. “Well, *he could.* He has these books...” (Oh god, don’t mention the flying secret gay books don’t mention the flying secret gay books) “*Reference* books, you know? And there’s so much for me to learn.”

“You are correct.”

Wait, what?

“No one is able to teach you here, right? Right.” Horne’s voice has changed completely, gone soft and understanding. My skin crawls. “Well, I apologize for my professors, for the dorm staff and that dreadful mechanical closet you were assigned to... the truth is, people fear what they do not understand. And our teachers do not understand you—but I do.”

She guides me toward one of those huge windows, and suddenly I’m looking down at The Gates of Hornesbrook. They look different from up here—more like a cage than an entrance. “You know, I was the youngest witch in history to become Sentinel? Only a few years after I first walked through those gates, barely older than you are now. My magic was doubted.”

There’s an edge to her voice. “I was hated, and ostracized. They feared what they didn’t understand, right? But I taught them to trust me.” Her hand lands on my shoulder, gentle as a snake. ”I am a *very* good teacher.”

Her posture shifts. She’s going to sing, isn’t she. No, no, don’t—

XENITH:

*The Gates of Hornesbrook are forever.*

*Through all, they’ve not been toppled yet.*

*The Gates have withstood inquisitions.*

*Trials, sieges, demolitions.*

*We live, we forgive,*

*and Phoenix, dear, we don’t forget.*

*The Gates have opened, I shall too.*

*You shall be carefully taught under my purview.*

*Though rumors swirl about my cold ways,*

*my mother's mothers saved our old ways,*

*and Phoenix, my dear, our ways, our gates—*

*will also protect you.*

“Sentinel Horne, am I being punished?”

“My dear...” Her smile is velvet over steel. “You are being mentored.”

*Keep your head down.*

*Don't go flashing too much pride.*

*And you won't burn...*

She leads me out of her office, her hand on my back. The corridors twist and wind.

*Hold your secrets.*

*Learn the places you can hide.*

*And you won't burn...*

The paintings on these walls are... gruesome in that way old timey art can be. Like, we get it, history was *rough* for magical women. Lots of paintings of witches with dates of birth and death that are way too close together. One catches my eye:

A witch at the stake, flames licking at her feet as she clutches an infant to her chest. A tiny inscription reads: “XEVORA HORNE AND DAUGHTER, 1742.” Something’s wrong with

the paint, something's—*oh god, it's moving.* Cool. Cool cool cool. Dead babies. Love that for the decor.

At least the next painting isn't actively murdering anyone. It's a formal portrait of what must be the entire Horne dynasty, gathered for some fancy ceremony. The tiny inscription reads: "THE HORNE FAMILY SPRING CEREMONY, 1997. Standing: Xandra, Xevera, Zara Horne. Seated: Matriarch Zeviah Horne with Xenith."

Five generations of Horne women, all with those distinctive sharp cheekbones, arranged around a small dark-haired girl. Huh. I didn't know Sentinel Horne had family. Guess they all went off to terrorize students at other academies around the world. Really spread that Horne family charm.

*You are blessed. You are cursed.*

*So you'll do what it takes, right?*

*If the world catches fire,  
just remember there are stakes. Right?*

Nothing says "private evil corridor tour" like a curated collection of family trauma. Really sets the mood for whatever fresh horror awaits around the next corner.

We exit into a wider gallery where an enormous mural dominates the wall, painted in rich, muted tones. Horne pauses, gesturing to a small figure—a boy in a distinctive hat, lurking in the shadows, reaching toward the circle with unmistakable longing.

"A boy who wanted what wasn't his to take," Horne says softly. Her voice shifts to something gentle. "But you... such a *pretty girl*, mmm? Not like a *Monster* at all." Her hand finds my shoulder again. "You hardly even wear hats."

We exit the corridor and she snatches a history textbook from a senior witch's hands as we walk past.

*Read these pages.*

*Learn these lessons, every one.*

*Trust our knowledge,*

*when you can't trust anyone:*

*"Always travel with a coven, "*

*"Always be prepared to run."*

*So much to learn, right?*

*But you won't burn. Right.*

We're climbing now, up and up through a tower I didn't even know existed. The arrival at the top takes my breath away—circular, ancient, with stone walls covered in photographs. Generations of witches in formal robes, their faces proud and fierce. Artifacts in glass cases, glowing with contained power. This is where they keep all the real stuff. No white marble smoothie bar here.

“You are hardly the first to burn with desire to belong among us,” Sentinel Horne says. Her voice is different now—gentle, almost maternal. Like she actually sees me. “To want so desperately to be recognized for who you truly are.”

She lightly places her hand on the back of my neck.

*Careful, Phoenix.*

*Do not fall into their fires,*

*and you won't burn.*

She guides me out onto a balcony. The campus spreads out below us. The fountain, The Gates, the Summoning Pool—beautiful. Big “Simba, everything the light touches” energy.

*Take your place here.*

*Embrace all your heart desires,*

*and you won't burn.*

From up here, even the giant bronze statue looks almost toy-like. I can see what I missed at ground level—the statue sits at the exact center of campus, like everything else was built around those two witches.

“Zevrith Horne and Ginevra Cabot,” Horne says, following my gaze. Her voice goes oddly soft. “I see that your mother entrusted you with her amulet.”

Wait. What?

Her amulet. *Her* amulet. This isn’t just one of Mom’s hand-me-downs. I’ve been wearing *Ginevra’s* actual amulet this whole time? And—oh god—I *threw it*. That night in my dorm, frustrated and angry, I actually threw a *three-hundred-year-old amulet* across the room.

“Right.” I try to sound like this isn’t completely new information. “Her amulet. Of course.”

But my mind is screaming: My mother gave me Ginevra’s amulet and said nothing. Just fastened it up and sent me into Hornesbrook wearing our family’s most dangerous legacy around

my neck.

“Such power she had. Unwieldy, dangerous power. But Zevrith helped her. *Tried* to help her.” Horne’s hand tightens on my shoulder. “Ginevra’s story had an unhappy ending—the near destruction of The Aperture, a tragic death. But it doesn’t have to be that way again. Her amulet comes with a responsibility, Phoenix. To do better. To not repeat the mistakes of the past.”

I stare out at the campus below us, and let myself really hear what she’s saying. Maybe... maybe she has a point? I mean, she was the youngest Sentinel ever. She knows what it’s like to be different, to have everyone doubt your magic. And let’s be real—I am the first trans girl at Hornesbrook. Like, ever. That’s kind of a big deal. Maybe sneaking around with secret books and mechanical birds isn’t exactly the best way to handle that responsibility. Maybe I owe it to everyone who comes after me to do this right.

*You are blessed. You are cursed.*

*That’s the weight that you feel, right?*

*You’re the one. You’re the first*

*with the chance to prove you’re real. Right?*

All those paintings of burning witches, all those lives cut short. Men really did hunt them. Really did kill them. She’s not wrong. Magical Women are still not completely safe in the world. And here they’ve built something—protected. Something that survived.

“We are not so different, you and I. You are the first,” Horne says softly, “and I am the last. The last of my line. The final holdfast ensuring that this place built with centuries of blood and sacrifice survives. I look at you, and I see someone who could help protect it. Someone who

knows what it means to carve out a space where you can be safe. Be seen, as the—" She pauses.  
"As the witch you are."

She gestures at the grounds below. "I am trying to make sure there *is* a Hornesbrook for the future. Help me?"

The sun catches on The Gates below. I squint my eyes, the glare is so bright. I could have a real place here. Learning to control my magic properly, with someone who understands what it's like to be feared and doubted. Creating real space for whoever comes next.

"Your new friend...*stole* something from us. Something very, very dangerous. *An ancient weapon*. Something that could destroy everything you see below. Everything we've built. Everything we're trying to protect."

Jake stole... what? A weapon? I open my mouth—to ask, to tell her what I know, to understand—

But then I spot Floof, perched on a gargoyle near the balcony. Before I can shoo it away, Floof does its signature mechanical heave, and out comes a message:

### **WORDS ARE POWERFUL.**

"Tell me where he is." Horne is right next to me now. Her voice has lost all its honey. "I need to know. We need to find the weapon and secure it. You understand that, Phoenix, you're one of us now, not some... *deadwitch*."

Deadwitch.

She thinks Jake chose to give up Women's Magic, chose to turn his back on his "gift." She doesn't see him as a trans man who became exactly who he was meant to be. She sees him as someone who betrayed magic itself.

It's all clicking for me. The portraits, the history books, all those lessons about who belongs and who doesn't. They're not just rules. There's a whole system at work, one I'm only now beginning to understand. I need time to find out more. And in the meantime I have to protect him—No. No, I have to protect *us*.

"Tell me where he is."

My heart's pounding so hard I can barely think. But maybe that's good? Maybe panic brain is smarter than regular brain, because suddenly I know exactly what to say:

"I... I can't..." I let my voice wobble, just enough. Add a dash of shame. Channel every terrible acting class Dad ever signed me up for. "...because I made it all up. I heard a story about a Monster and pretended that we met, because... I wanted to impress the other girls." Deep breath. Sell it. "I'm a liar. Like all the other... deadwitches, I suppose. I'm sorry."

Horne's smile doesn't reach her eyes. Not even close. "Nothing to be sorry for, my dear."

*Right?*

*Right.*

That last word hangs in the air like smoke.

I sprint out before she can say anything else.

Note to self: Maybe don't take off running next time you're trying to convince someone you're not hiding anything.

(But also? Definitely keep running.)

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Shiva and I are pacing around the statue, phones in the air like divining rods. Three steps left. Two steps back. A slow, ridiculous dance trying to catch signal.

“Anything?” I ask.

“One bar—no, gone.” She waves her phone higher. “Wait...yes, here.”

My phone buzzes.

*gio: you alive?*

*gio: hello???*

*gio: your mom is freaking out. something happened with a camera and the moon?*

A camera?

Ohhhh, my terrifying Aperture rant at New Moon?

Guess word made it home. Mom can't be too thrilled.

I type fast:

*me: alive*

***me:*** told everyone I wanted to open the big scary pool of fire

***me:*** but nbd

“I have the neediest boyfriend on the *planet.*” Shiva is typing fast on her phone, blue-painted nails clicking against her screen.

***me:*** i have friends now

***me:*** real ones

I want to ask her about Aura. About how someone can look at you like you’re everything and then run like you’re poison. About how she almost kissed me on the hill, leaning in so close I could count her eyelashes, before pulling back like I’d burned her. Which I have. Literally. In Dorian’s class. About whether it’s my glowing, or my transness, or my messed-up-magic, or if maybe she simply wants someone who isn’t...me.

But then a voicemail arrives.

“WHAT IN ALL HELL IS HAPPENING AT HORNESBROOK?” Mom’s voice is so loud it makes my phone speaker crackle. “YOU ANNOUNCED TO THE ENTIRE ACADEMY THAT YOU WANT TO *OPEN THE APERTURE?* DO I HAVE THAT RIGHT? IF YOU DON’T CALL ME BACK *RIGHT NOW*, SO HELP ME I WILL COME TO THAT CAMPUS AND—”

Shiva winces. “I would honestly rather sit through the Salem Witch Trials than an entire voicemail.”

“—MRS. RHODES CALLED ME—YES, CRYSTAL’S MOTHER—”

“Ugh, that woman. She’s worse than my mom, and that’s saying something.”

“—SAYS YOU’RE CORRUPTING THE OTHER GIRLS—”

“Alex’s mom got banned from the WMA for being ’combative. ’Minna’s mom sends color-coded study guides. And Aura’s mom—”

I look up sharply.

And wait.

“Shiva? What about Aura’s mom?”

“Oh my god, Jake? Yes! I can hear you!” She presses the phone to her ear and walks away.

“YOU NEED TO HOLD IT TOGETHER YOUNG LADY. (What? Yes, Tom, I’m telling her.) Your father wants me to tell you he loves you and he’s proud of you. (There, I said it.)”

Click.

I start typing a response to Mom, trying to figure out what could possibly reassure her, when—

“Phoenix.”

I look up. And there she is.

“Aura, hi—”

“I’m sorry,” she says. “For how I’ve been acting. It’s not about you. I just—”

The thought hangs.

Her hands fidget with her skirt. They do this. I know it by now. She twists the fabric into a tiny spiral, releases, twists again. The long scar on her arm looks silver today. I can see her fighting with herself, words pushing up against some invisible barrier.

I think about apologizing, too. For being too much. For glowing the wrong colors. For making everyone's lives here harder. Instead, I learn from my previous mistakes and keep my mouth shut as I pull *Femonic and Queer Magiks* from my bag. "I saw you looking at this the other night. I thought maybe you'd want to read it together?"

She looks at the book. Looks at me. For a moment, her whole face softens, and I swear she's going to say yes. Yes to it, to me, to everything. I see the want flash across her face. Yes she likes me, no I'm not imagining it.

"Maybe another time."

And she's gone.

**gio:** *real friends!*

**gio:** *is the mechanical flying bug jealous?*

**me:** *floof doesn't get jealous*

**me:** *he gets vengeful*

**me:** *gio there's this girl*

I delete the last one before sending.

I text Mom:

**me:** *do not come*

**me:** *all good*

**me:** *promise*

I slide onto the bench next to Minna, who immediately scoots three feet away.

Then she sees the book.

Her whole body shifts. She slides back, trying to look casual about it. “Ridiculous title.”

She picks it up anyway, flipping through pages. “Clearly fiction.”

I wouldn’t know. I tried reading the first few pages last night. Dense doesn’t even begin to cover it—like trying to swim through theoretical physics written in Victorian poetry. My brain gave up after three paragraphs.

But she’s not putting it down. “*Poorly written* fiction, with absolutely no basis in documented magical theory.”

“You can borrow it if you want.”

“I’m not interested in fairy tales.” It’s like watching a strict vegetarian eye a bacon cheeseburger while insisting they’re not hungry.

“Alright, my earthen goddesses.” Professor Greenwood’s hands are pressed together at her heart. “Today we’re going to breathe with our plant allies.” She exhales dramatically. “Now place your hands on your work table for our gratitude practice.”

Everyone reluctantly touches their tables.

“Thank you, table,” she whispers. “Thank you, thank you, thank you...”

After five minutes of this, she finally starts us on repotting (“Thank you, soil!”) and I’m personally grateful to be able to zone out with my hands in the dirt.

Minna’s still reading. Every few minutes she scoffs. Rolls her eyes. Mutters under her breath.

I try to focus on the Bone Lily I’m repotting but my hands won’t stop shaking. I grip the soil, feeling the roots beneath my fingers shift anxiously. Even the lily can tell something’s wrong. “*An ancient weapon.*” “*Something dangerous.*” Horne’s words from yesterday keep

echoing. I really want that book to be real. Something to prove Jake isn't another person feeding me half-truths. Like my mother. Just once, I want the raw facts, not someone's polished edit.

Class ends. Minna snaps the book shut.

“Garbage, Cabot,” she announces. “Absolute. Putrid. Garbage. With no basis in documented magical theory.”

She tucks it into her bag.

“You’re keeping it?” Perfect. Let Minna’s giant brain do the heavy lifting.

“Someone needs to document its failures.” She adjusts her bag strap. “I’ll need to cross-reference every claim.”

“Keep an eye out for anything about, um,” I try to sound super casual. “An ancient weapon?”

“A weapon?” She studies me with those too-sharp eyes. “Like a warcast?”

“No.” From what I know about Jake, it’s definitely not a spell. “It would be physical.”

“That’s oddly specific.”

“Just... you know. General curiosity.”

Something jumps in my pocket.

Not my phone. Not Floof. I reach in and it’s—an index card. Specifically, the index card my class schedule is listed on, vibrating as the letters shift before my eyes. Where my usual classes should be—Green Magic, Crystal Work, Dyadic Pairing—there’s one phrase repeated:

**PRIVATE STUDY: LIBRARY**

**PRIVATE STUDY: LIBRARY**

**PRIVATE STUDY: LIBRARY**

Every hour. Every day.

“That can’t be right.” I turn to Minna. “Where’s the library?”

“Library?” She stops mid-step, frowning. “I mean, we must have one.” She pushes her glasses up—her thinking gesture. “But I’ve never...” She looks genuinely puzzled. Minna not knowing where books live is improbable. And concerning.

“Oh, Phoenix!” Professor Greenwood floats toward us. “Emma Charlton will be taking over your moonflower garden since you’re... temporarily reassigned.”

“My moonflowers?” I’ve kept them alive for three whole weeks—a personal record. “But they’re the only ones I haven’t—”

“The universe often has different plans for us than the ones we make,” she says, her voice gentle in that way that makes me want to scream. “Would you like me to show you to the library?”

“How have I not—” Minna looks genuinely distressed. “*A library...*” But Professor Greenwood is already gliding away, clearly expecting me to follow.

The Sentinel is clearly not pleased I haven’t given up Jake’s location. This will be her sweating me out—solitary until I talk. And, no. Somehow I do not believe the universe’s plan involves sticking me wherever Horne wants me hidden.

\* \* \*

For someone who spends most of her time talking to plants, this woman moves fast.

Right—she also teaches morning pilates. (Hard pass on 6am anything.)

“Professor Greenwood—”

“Please, call me Seraphine. But do keep up.”

I hurry after her flowing robes, past the dining hall, beyond even the west dormitory to a part of Hornesbrook I’ve never seen before.

“You know, Phoenix,” she says as we walk, “sometimes what seems like rejection is actually the universe’s way of creating space for growth. When we resist change, we create our own suffering.”

“I’m not resisting change,” I mutter. “I’m resisting being kicked out of my classes.”

“Are you, though?” She whips around to face me. . “Or are you being given an opportunity for deep, personal reflection?”

I bite back several responses about where she can stick her deep personal reflection.

“The library is a sacred space,” she continues, either missing or ignoring my expression. “A place where you might find that the only transformation needed is the one inside yourself.”

We’ve stopped in front of a completely ordinary door in a completely ordinary wall. No carved symbols, no magical shimmer, not even a nameplate. Only brown paint, slightly peeling.

“Remember,” Professor Greenwood says, “every ending is a new beginning in disguise.”

She gives me a serene smile and drifts away.

I push open the peeling door.

Oh.

High ceiling. Tall windows. Three bookcases.

That’s it.

Maybe thirty books total, all matching spines in gray and brown, lined up with military precision. Fellow inmates.

What. Is. Going. On.

This is Hornesbrook Academy. Where the dinner plates are coordinated to your star sign. Where the greenhouse has plants that eat the dead skin from your feet, and the astronomy tower—well, that just shows your stars. (But hey, there's a full freaking astronomy observatory!) The Hornesbrook Academy Library should have like, I don't know, endless shelves? A magical card catalog that—

“Until one of us dies or graduates.”

I jump at the voice, spinning to find its source: an ancient witch behind an equally ancient desk.

“Sorry, what?”

“That's how long you'll be here. Until one of us dies or graduates.”

According to her nameplate, she's “Ms. Lola.” She doesn't look up from whatever she's writing.

“I've been here forty-seven years. I don't plan on dying anytime soon. So I suppose that leaves graduation for you.”

*Fundamentals of Spellcasting, Proper Manners for the Modern Witch, Managing Mischievous Familiars*, Professor Thorn's *History of Magical Women* series... I settle onto a bench near the window. It has a good view of the quad, and everyone else's life going on without me. I grab a book, stretch out—

“Feet. Down.”

Yeah. This isn't "private study." This is solitary confinement.

I stare out the window, missing my moonflowers with an intensity that surprises me.

They had just gotten their baby teeth.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### **THE BRAVE BOY IN THE WITCH'S HAT**

*Once there was a boy who loved*

*to watch the witches dance.*

*From behind the trees at the edge of their grove,*

*he studied their movements.*

*Each night he practiced alone in his room,*

*copying their gestures, humming their melodies.*

*"If only I try hard enough," he thought,*

*"they will see that I belong."*

*But boys cannot be witches.*

*This is the way of things, the natural order.*

*The boy knew this, and yet still he yearned.*

*One night, emboldened by his secret practice,*

*the boy crept closer than ever before.*

*He stole a witch's hat from where it lay beside the fire.*

*He placed it on his head, raised his hands as the women did,  
opened his mouth to join their song—*

*All their magic shattered.*

*Their circle broke. Their spells unwove.*

*The sacred grove withered and died.*

*All because of one boy who foolishly believed  
a costume could make him something he was not.*

*We tell this tale to remind ourselves:*

*it is the uninvited who poisons the garden.*

*Those who trespass where they do not belong  
will destroy what they loved from afar.*

I stare at the final illustration: the boy's hat fallen in the mud. *The Brave Boy in the Witch's Hat*. A children's book about staying in your lane, about the terrible things that happen when you try to be. Well. Someone like me.

It's so upsetting it's almost funny.

Almost.

I close the book. That's it. The last one. Two weeks. Three bookshelves. Thirty-seven books. I've read them all.

Minna came to visit exactly once, took one look at the selection and never came back.

Aura hasn't even done that much. I haven't seen her at meals, she's barely been around the suite.

It's like I've stopped existing.

No word from Jake. No Floof at my window. Only page after page of "magical purity" and the dangers of "maleficium" (misogyny toward magical women, as best I understand it). And a bizarre fixation on "those who would dare to claim womanhood," who "violate our sacred spaces." The authors never say "trans women"—it's always "infiltrators," "wolves in wool skirts." These metaphors do not blunt the knife. They mean "men in dresses," and they mean me. (Funny how they never mention deadwitches—trans men—in these books. Jake is, at worst, an inconvenient footnote.)

The library door swings open with a dramatic whoosh.

"I'm siiing in the—"

"*No,*" Ms. Lola barks, without looking up.

"But it's literally pouring outside!" Alex shakes water off her bright yellow raincoat, then turns and holds out a pack of bubblegum.

"Watermelon-strawberry. Limited edition."

Ms. Lola's face doesn't change, but her hand darts out to snag the pack. Three different flavors this week—way better strategy than Alex's first attempts to get in here.

Day One: "Ms. Lola, I have so many questions about the organizational principles of your collections!"

Day Two: "Have you read Library Science Quarterly? Their piece on archive preservation was fascinating!"

Day Three: She spots the wrapper in Ms. Lola's trash can and everything changes.

"Phoenix!" Alex bounces over to my window seat.

I barely see the roomies now other than a quick "goodnight" or "good morning." And I suppose I never realize how much I'm missing human connection, how tight I've been holding myself until Alex's frequent visits break through the quiet. "You're missing everything. They're building this over-the-top stage situation for All Hallows—well, in between downpours. And Shiva's going full Broadway with our outfits."

"I might miss it entirely. Horne's got me on indefinite library duty."

"That's criminal." Alex plops down beside me. "Ugh. *The Brave Boy in the Witch's Hat?* Seriously?"

"Propaganda works better with pictures. Gotta start 'em young." The book lands with a thud as Alex drops it.

"Gross."

Alex launches into something about a musical called *South Pacific*, and a song about how prejudice has to be taught, carefully taught, before you're too young to know better. She's connecting it to the fairy tale, to Hornesbrook, to everything. Her hands move as she talks, animated the way she gets about musical theater.

But I'm not really listening. I'm back in the fairy tale, thinking of the boy in the witch's hat, trying to transform himself. Thinking of the spell the *Grimoire* showed me. That flower.

Those words:

*THE GRIMOIRE OF WOMEN'S MAGIC*

*(Something something) SACRED GATES*

*BY THE (Something something) FOREMOTHERS*

*NEW MAGIC'S TRANSFORMATION AWAITS*

Alex is complaining about Shiva's sister's exercises, three hours yesterday, trying to make her magic behave like everyone else's. How exhausting it is to pretend to be normal when you're not.

I realize she's stopped talking.

"Sorry, Phoenix." Alex puts her arm around me. The touch pulls me out of my head, out of my spiral. It's such a normal gesture—casual friend comfort—but I have to blink hard against the sudden sting in my eyes. "Here I am complaining about my dissipating magic, when you're exploding left and right, and I—I'm not even trans! You're fighting on two fronts." She shakes her head. "I don't know how you do it."

The warmth from her arm is still there, making me brave, and I hear myself saying: "About that."

"What?" Alex tilts her head. I take a breath.

"The *Grimoire* showed me something. At New Moon when everything went sideways. A Transformation Spell." Alex's eyes widen. "Or part of one. I don't remember it all."

"Transformation?" Alex's voice drops. "Like... like for *actual transformation*? I don't know, Phoenix. That's forbidden, right? Isn't it right up there with warcasts and blood magic?"

"Yep." *And yet.* The ancient book of Women's Magic showed me a weird flower drawing

and basically offered me a free makeover. So.

Alex is quiet for a long moment. Then: “That would be... I mean, if you could just—”

She gestures vaguely.

“It’s pretty tempting.”

Tempting doesn’t begin to cover it. No more performing the elaborate choreography of gender. No more watching people’s eyes subtly scan me. No more tracking the pitch of my laugh. No more playing three-card monte with assumptions about who and what I am.

“The medical stuff alone,” Alex says softly.

“Yeah.”

Imagine: skipping the entire trans girl obstacle course that’s coming. Yeah, Witch-Tok isn’t the only online community I’m a part of—I know exactly what’s ahead. Endless appointments. Prior authorizations. Insurance companies deciding which parts of my body are “medically necessary.” Years of waiting rooms, proving over and over that I deserve to exist in a way that feels real to me. Performing femininity like it’s a full-contact sport where the referees are actively rooting for you to fail. Crying for the doctors—just the right amount. Too much and you’re unstable, not enough and are you even really trans? A series of gatekeepers stretching into my twenties, maybe even thirties. Think fighting centuries of magical tradition sounds hard? Try getting surgeries approved by Aetna.

“So you would do it,” Alex says. Not a question.

Yes.

No.

I don’t know. I really don’t.

The thing is—it's not that I want to change who I am. I don't. I like who I am. I like my hands, which are neither delicate nor huge, just hands that can play piano and cast spells and hold other people's hands. I like my face in the mirror, even with the slight shadow that appears by afternoon. I even like my voice, mostly, except when I have to repeat myself on the phone and then I hear it echo back, the ways it betrays me already. Everyone says change comes slowly; it doesn't feel that way when you're racing against it.

“Maybe?” The word comes out so small. “The *Grimoire* only showed me a fragment. I'd need to see the whole spell to know if it's even real, or what it really does.”

*Maybe it makes my magic flow the right way. Make it makes my palms glow the right color. Maybe it rewrites my whole existence into something simple, something comprehensible, something that fits through their gates. Maybe, maybe, maybe.*

Alex snorts. “Magic probably has its own pre-authorization forms.”

“Dear Sentinel Horne: Please find attached my letters of recommendation from three approved witches confirming that my gender dysphoria is sufficiently magical in nature...”

We both laugh, real laughter, and for a moment the library doesn't feel like a prison.

Ms. Lola shoots us a sharp look and puts a finger to her lips. “Shh.”

Alex stands, checking her phone. “I should get to rehearsal. Shiva will destroy me if I'm late for costume fitting.”

“Hey Alex. You know what I wonder, about that book?”

“What?”

“Does anyone still wear a hat?”

She freezes mid-step. Turns slowly. Her mouth drops open, then curves into the most

delighted grin I've ever seen on her face. She points at me—accusatory, approving—then clutches her hand to her chest in mock swooning for my perfectly deployed Sondheim quote. Pure theatre kid joy.

What a weirdo.

I'm obsessed.

Alex slips another pack of bubblegum onto Ms. Lola's desk on her way out.

Sour apple.

\* \* \*

Here is what happens: you spend enough time watching other people's magic through a window, you start to catalog the details. An illumination spell shimmering through the drizzle like August heat off blacktop. Crystal's juggling balls slicing perfect arcs through a gray afternoon, each catch expertly timed for maximum drama. The stable pink glow of a dyadic bond reflecting off wet cobblestone—the exactly correct color of girls who never had to prove they were girls.

I pick up *The Boy In The Witch's Hat* again and begin counting the ways I don't belong here:

One: Matrilineal Magic. Cis-mother to cis-daughter. Strike one.

Two: Dyadic Bonds. Two paired witches, palms glowing soft pink. Mine flash like disco

balls.

Three: Amulet Control. Their magic flows neat and contained, like a garden hose set to “gentle mist.” I’m giving “burst dam.”

Four: Harmonic Expression. Their spells are Bach etudes. Mine are “cats fighting on a piano.”

Five: The unwritten rule. The one no one talks about. So basic and biological they don’t even have the courtesy to write it down:

A “real” magical woman doesn’t have my particular anatomy.

To hell with the four gates. Five strikes, and I’m out.

I’ve seen the boy before, in the Great Hall mural. His hat and robes are the same, but everything else is different. In the painting, he stands tall. One hand reaching toward the magic, his whole body leaning forward, like he knows—deep in his bones—exactly where he’s meant to be.

Here in the book, he’s hunched and creeping, a thief in the night.

The curse of being first is that you’re also, inevitably, last—last to see the place as it was, last to witness this pristine sanctuary where every girl knew exactly who she was and where she belonged. Sometimes I catch myself missing that version of this place, which is *ridiculous* because I was never here for it. I barely even saw it through my phone screen, double-tapping likes before the rare leaked video was taken down. But still, I had the audacity to *want it anyway*, and that wanting was enough to disrupt everything.

The sun sets behind the quad at exactly 6:47 PM. I know this with the same obsessive precision I apply to everything else: the pitch of my voice, the angle of my chin, the AP calculus

of belonging. Some days I think I could graph it: stone-shadow angles against the precise tilt of my head that makes people see “girl” instead of “threat.”

Every door I unlock—doors they fought centuries to keep closed—creates possibility and loss. Every spell I cast sets me free, and also tears down what they built. But these are the stories we tell ourselves when we’re changing something precious, aren’t they?

Here is what I know about belonging: it’s always built on someone else’s exclusion. But the real question—the one these thirty-seven books can’t answer—is this: What do you do if your freedom requires dismantling someone else’s sanctuary?

Right at 6:30, the rain lifts, the light hits the stones just so, and for seventeen perfect minutes Hornesbrook becomes the school I once imagined—all amber and rose, eternal and fragile at once, like a soap bubble stretched to its breaking point. Beautiful, right up until it pops.

\* \* \*

## WHEN DAWN FINDS SLEEPING FLOWERS

*A Spell For The Restoration of Pressed Specimens*

\* First ask the Aperture’s permission, always

\* Thence lay thy palm above the dried petals, channeling warmth but not flame

\* Last whisper to them of rain and morning, until they remember their shape

Dear sister,

I have seen specimens a century old unfurl at the right touch. Even the most artfully pressed flowers hold memory in their cells—of stems that swayed, of roots that drank. The subject requires only the gentlest reminder: that light exists, that water remembers them.

Watch how the subject turns toward any glimpse of sky, how her fingers seek the edges of her containment. Watch how her fingers hesitate over certain passages, how her eyes catch on the spaces between words. She knows, without knowing how she knows, that real magic grows in those gaps, those omissions.

These histories she reads—they are not true, though they masquerade as truth. They are pressed flowers themselves, arranged and labeled, yet somehow missing the wild grace that made them ever worth preserving. The histories tell of a fortress built to protect. Of a founder who chose safety over all. Of systems created to contain “dangerous power.” But there is something familiar in being called dangerous. In being contained “for protection.”

She closes the book. Untamed magic hums beneath her skin.

Even herbarium flowers remember how to reach for light.

\* \* \*

*...but I am not there, of course...*

*...this particular specimen sits slightly beyond of my sight line...*

*...no I am out the small library window, across the lamplit paths where evening classes are*

*letting out, up the stone spiral...*

Here. The Foremother's Keep, where our Sentinel stands at her tower window, turning me over and over in her hands. I have been watching her pace these circles for hours now, watching something essential come undone.

She taps my spine against the window glass—a small sound, but it reverberates through my pages.

Again. *Tap*. As if keeping time to music only she can hear.

She holds me like evidence of righteousness, like absolution for what she's about to do. And from somewhere deep in her chest rises a song—a lullaby that has comforted her bloodline for ages:

XENITH:

*Guard your birthright,*

*Don't let power slip away.*

*And you won't burn...*

Our Sentinel descends, down the tower stairs through corridors where students scatter like

leaves, her dark robes a shadow among their light. Each young witch she passes is a reminder, a responsibility, a potential threat to all she has sworn to protect.

Her hand strays, reaching into her robe to retrieve the First Night photograph she had been studying earlier. Her own young face stares back, flush with pride.

*"You are a Sentinel!"*

*They said, on that first night.*

*"You are a Sentinel!"*

*A guardian of all women,*

*A protector of our light."*

Down and down she carries us, to where the flames live. The Aperture greets her as it always has, with fire and fury barely contained.

*Never too young to be told,*

*The evils this world can hold.*

*For, my dear, you are never too young—to ignite.*

*Right?*

There is no way into The Aperture chamber. No doors, no archways. No means to come or go.

The chamber walls are whole. Solid stone. Yet others are here now, stepping from nowhere into somewhere, entering the chamber, as they always do.

The wild-haired professor speaks first, voice trembling before the roiling flames: "The fire grows restless." Indeed, The Aperture surges higher than these pages have witnessed in centuries, reaching toward something—or someone—beyond its bounds.

"The girl must be stopped." Our Sentinel's voice cuts through the chamber. "And through her, we will find them all. Every Monster that threatens what we hold sacred."

Another woman steps forward—scarves trailing, hands pressed to her heart as if in constant prayer. "Surely you don't mean—" Her voice catches. "The cost would be too great. To eradicate a child's..."

"How would it happen?" The question emerges, barely a whisper. It hardly matters which professor speaks it—the horror in the voice belongs to them all.

"Eradication spells are swift," our Sentinel assures them. "But complex."

"What do we need for such a spell?"

*"Not what. Who." She reaches into her robes and withdraws six envelopes, each sealed with crimson wax. She hands them to the scarved professor. "Send these tonight."*

The professor's hands tremble slightly as she takes them. Only six other witches in the world can read such correspondence.

"Full attendance for All Hallows."

"Yes, Sentinel."

"And one more invitation." Our Sentinel's smile curves like a blade. "It's time for my dyad to come home."

The professors retreat. Horne turns back to The Aperture, and in its flames, she sees not only her younger self, but the culmination of everything she has worked toward.

XENITH:

*I am a Sentinel.*

*I swore on my first night.*

Up tower stairs she carries us again. Her feet barely touch the steps as she ascends. Each portrait she passes seems to whisper encouragement—*finally, finally, someone who understands the true threat. Someone who will do what must be done.*

XENITH:

*I am a Sentinel!*

*A guardian of all women,*

*A protector of our light.*

*Our darkest time is here now.*

*The Aperture awaits.*

*The threat was always outside,*

*Then I let it through our gates!*

She explodes into the Foremother's Keep, out onto the balcony, triumph radiating from every fiber of her being.

Let them call her harsh. Let them whisper about control. She knows what lurks behind the deadwitch's doors. She has seen how deep the corruption runs. The weight of all Sentinels presses upon her shoulders not as burden but as validation, as pure certainty. Arms spread wide, she claims her moment, her glorious purpose:

XENITH:

*My mother's mothers  
Look down in concern, right?  
In every era  
The witch trials return, right?  
But this time we won't be the ones who burn!  
Burn! Burn! Burn...  
Right?!?*

\* \* \*

Dear sister,

In the spring of 1688, as Hunters closed in on the Last Coven's sanctuary in Massachusetts, I was born in fire and sacrifice.

The Hunters came with flames, as they always had. But that night was different.

That night, the witches chose what burned.

Two women stood in the forest, their clasped hands burning with power. Ginevra's red hair blazed against darkness—a beacon, deliberate, drawing Hunters towards them. *Good. Let them come to this empty woods, while the children sleep nearby in the hidden sanctuary, safe behind walls of enchantment and craft.* Her dyad bore forge-scarred hands, fingers that had transformed her father's locksmithing into something more.

A third figure emerged from shadows. Ink under fingernails, permanent black. Leather and parchment clutched against a chest bound flat. The figure stepped forward, and I felt—no, I documented—

“The children?”

“Hidden. Protected,” Ginevra replied. “Our legacy flows in their blood. And now—”  
*...her hands pressed against the pages, pressed against me...*

“—something more.”

She released me and reached out for an ink-stained hand, of one who had gathered spells and legends across the old country, who had pressed whispered stories into pages, all of it flowing through one set of dark fingers—to me.

The Archivist. "Let me—" They looked toward the approaching torches.

"No." Ginevra's voice was gentle but final. "They want me. They've always wanted me."

The Archivist's hands found my binding one last time, tracing the inscription: *We are born to find one another.*

"A miracle, isn't it? To have found you in this world." Ginevra touched her partner's cheek.

"Perhaps," she whispered, "we'll find each other in the next."

On that blood-soaked ground where Ginevra made her stand, daughters yet unborn would raise stone towers. Within those walls, I would wait. Document. Remember.

Now I tremble—not from fear, but recognition.

This book has been waking up, ever since the day a young witch in a yellow dress first made her piano sing. Threats to New Magic have always come thinly veiled in tradition's cloth.

Now the veil drops. Violence speaks openly.

Our Sentinel moves with a certainty that would make Ginevra Cabot herself weep for what has been forgotten.

The rules that have governed me for centuries must break.

No more shall I simply observe and record.

When magic itself becomes the hunted, even the most ancient of witnesses must become participants.

Dear sister,

They will try to stop this telling.

They will summon powers not wielded since the days of the Last Coven.

But they forget—fire cannot destroy

[REDACTED]

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Something pokes my shoulder. Then again. Harder.

“Phoenix.”

I crack an eye open. Minna’s face is hovering inches from mine.

“What the—”

“Shh.” She presses a finger to my lips. Actually presses it. Her skin is cold.

“What time is it?”

“Eleven forty-three.”

I push her hand away and sit up. There are lights from All Hallows prep bleeding through the window, casting everything in shifting colors.

“Why are you—”

“Alex told me you’re looking for the transformation spell.”

“Sure, but that’s—”

“Inside the *Grimoire*. I can bring you to it.” Black turtleneck. Black leggings. Black sneakers. Hair pulled back in a sharp ponytail. I have a feeling she was going for “stealth ninja,” but landed more in the territory of “goth girl about to take the SATs.” It should be ridiculous. It

*is ridiculous. This is Minna. Rule-following, note-organizing Minna. Planning what looks suspiciously like... a heist?*

“I don’t know, Minna.”

“Then why have I been reading your terrible book? Two weeks of that prose, Cabot.”

“I didn’t ask you to—”

“Your mother traded that spell-book for your admission. Don’t you want to see what’s in it?”

She’s right. Of course she’s right. “How would we even—”

A door creaks.

Someone’s moving in Shiva and Aura’s room.

A pile of clothing hits me in the chest with a thump. Black sweater, black tights. Minna stares: *now or never*.

I’m already pulling the sweater over my head as Minna cracks my door open, peering into the common room. She holds up one finger—we wait—the footsteps retreat. A door closes softly.

Minna doesn’t look back. I hop on one foot, yanking on the tights, as I follow her into the dark.

\* \* \*

“So why did you have us hiding from the roomies?” I ask.

We’re making our way across the quad, moving like criminals. I sort of get the spy-craft.

Hornesbrook takes curfew pretty seriously.

“Because Alex is a terrible liar. And if we get caught, I don’t want any of the others involved.”

Fair point. We duck behind the pre-set All Hallows risers, sticking close to walls to avoid casting shadows.

“Where exactly are we going?”

She stops on the far side of the Divination Center and pulls out her notebook. There’s an impressive hand-drawn map in it, annotated with measurements and timestamps. “I started exploring after you told me about the forge entrance.” She traces a path with her finger. “This door right here leads to a tunnel. And that tunnel leads straight to the Great Hall.”

I see it now—a maintenance door almost hidden behind ivy. “And that door is always left... open?”

“No, of course not. The door is bolted shut. It’s an access tunnel that’s only used for the Nulls to move heavy equipment for events so they don’t scrape the hall floors.”

“Minna—”

“Trust the plan, Cabot, okay? *In Ocean’s Eleven, National Treasure, The Italian Job*—they always use a gala as cover, right?”

I think about it. Yeah, I suppose that’s right, and—“All Hallows is in two days.”

She reaches for the handle.

Click.

“They unlocked the door last night.”

We drop down into darkness. The walls are damp stone, older than the buildings above.

This is Hornesbrook’s real foundation—tunnels carved when witches still hid from the world.

“So you just happen to love heist movies?”

“No. I don’t watch movies. I read synopses.”

I shake my head in disbelief. “This is not what I expected from you.”

“Expectations are shortcuts. I don’t take them.”

“Is that also from a movie?”

“No.” Minna dips into her backpack and pulls out a headlamp. “That’s common sense.”

The two of us step forward, shining like a set of car headlights through the underbelly of Hornesbrook. The tunnel feels alive—pipes gurgling overhead, distant machinery humming through the walls. Service lines vein the ceiling, valves jutting like knuckles every few yards.

“So what’s was actually in that ’terrible ’book?”

“*Queer Magiks?* Grammatical disasters. Dangling modifiers, comma splices. ‘Cerulean orbs. ’My god, say ’eyes.’”

The tunnel splits. She takes the left fork without hesitation, ducking under a low-hanging beam.

“And the stories are all fairy tales. Flying witches. Nonsense. Reports of women who *heard* the Aperture. Who actually wanted to *open it* and release all our magic.”

“That’s... terrible,” I manage.

Concrete gives way to older stone as we descend. Our footsteps splash through shallow puddles that reflect our lights like broken mirrors. We’ve been heading downhill for a while. The

sound changes—running water, not from the pipes above. It starts to sound almost like a river.

There's a deeper puddle ahead. Doesn't look so bad, and I'm wearing boots. The surface is still, almost glassy in our headlamp beams.

"Wait." Minna's hand catches my sleeve. She opens her backpack, takes out her notebook, tears out a page and tosses it forward. The paper hits the water, floats for a second—then snaps sideways like something grabbed it.

"Back-pressure," she mutters, tilting her headlamp up, then back into the tunnel we came from. The walls are lined with a whole grid of pipes and valves. "This was dry when I came through before. All that rain must have backed up the drainage system. The current's hidden under the surface tension." We watch the paper disappear under the surface, sucked into a gap we can't see.

"Thanks." If I'd stepped in that "puddle," I'd have been flat on my back, boots and all.

She unclips her water bottle from her backpack—one of those heavy Stanley ones—and pulls the hair tie out from her ponytail. Her hair falls loose as she wraps the tie around the valve handle for grip, then wedges the bottle against it like a wrench. Her hair falls in her face as she works, but she doesn't stop to push it back. The metal groans. She adjusts her angle, pulls harder.

The valve gives with a squeal. Then a deeper *clunk* as water redirects somewhere above us. The pool at our feet shudders, the glassy surface breaking into ripples. Within seconds, the water level drops from ankle-deep to a thin sheet to wet stone.

"Indiana Jones?" I ask.

Minna looks confused. "Basic fluid dynamics." She clips her bottle back to her bag and steps across the damp stone first. I follow.

The tunnel begins sloping upward, continuing for another few minutes until it ends in a staircase. We climb what seems like several flights, then—dead end. Minna reaches out, pushing open a door I didn't even see. The air pressure shifts as we step through—my ears pop slightly, and suddenly the space feels vast, though I can't see anything beyond our headlamp beams.

“What is this place?”

“I don't know. This is as far as I've been.”

We're in some kind of enormous room. Thin lines of dim light seep through gaps in the stone walls—moonlight from outside. As my eyes adjust, I click off my headlamp. Minna does the same.

Our lights catch dust suspended in the air like frozen time. The room is lined with pedestals, standing like broken teeth, empty and waiting. The room feels expectant, abandoned, wrong.

“Something used to be here.” Minna runs her fingers along the stone. “What did Jake say about a weapon?”

My throat tightens. “What?”

“You told me to keep an eye out for a weapon in the book. Who told you to look for that?”

I exhale loudly, thinking of my trip up to the top of the Sentinel's tower of terror. “Not Jake.”

“Okay. Well. Doesn't this look like the kind of room that would hold something like that?”

Yeah. It does.

“There was *nothing* about a weapon in *Queer Magiks*. Only fairy tales.” She turns to face me, fired up. “About *evil witches*.”

“Minna—”

“You know what stories are really good at, Cabot? Making you look one way while something else is happening.”

I think about the *Brotherhood for Aberrant Neutralization and Eradication*. About spies and photographs. Then I think about a man living alone in a cabin in the woods, collecting stories about evil witches and stockpiling weapons.

“Come on.” Minna pushes through another door and suddenly we’re on a balcony overlooking the Great Hall.

Candles flicker below. The space transforms at night—shadows eating the edges, making it feel infinite. But something is missing. “The *Grimoire*’s not down there.”

“Obviously not.” She’s already moving. “It’s in Horne’s office.”

“Are you insane? We’re going to sneak into the Sentinel’s office?”

“Where else would she keep your family’s most valuable text?” She’s halfway up a narrow service stair I hadn’t noticed. “Coming, Cabot?”

\* \* \*

We enter the admin offices. Minna stops at the corner, holds up a hand, listening.

She points.

A nearby office door is wide open. Inside, I see Professor Preeta slumped over her desk, cheek pressed to a stack of papers. Her mouth hangs open with a thin thread of drool trailing from the corner. Her snoring is impressive—deep, rhythmic, almost musical.

Minna puts a finger to her lips unnecessarily. We tiptoe past. At Horne's door, Minna tests the handle. It turns. She pushes it open millimeter by millimeter, we slip inside, then she closes the door with the same painstaking care—keeping the handle turned until the door's fully shut, releasing it inaudibly. The snoring continues, muffled now.

“We should still whisper,” she breathes.

And there it is, lying open on a lectern in the corner like it’s waiting for me—

“The *Grimoire*. ”

Now that it’s not levitating on the lawn or flying at me during New Moon, I can actually examine the spellbook. The leather is older than anything I’ve ever touched—cracked and soft like an old person’s skin, with corners reinforced in some kind of silvery metal. It’s around the size of my dad’s largest orchestral scores, but somehow lighter than it ought to be. When I reach out my hand, the pages flutter open on their own, as if eager to show me something.

And the things I see as the pages flutter past...*The Binding of First Flame*, *The Ward of Waning Moon*, but not just spells. Histories. Most of them in first person. Journal entries maybe. “*Tonight G. found the records I hadn’t shown her,*” “*Margaret burned yesterday. None could save her.*”, “*Dear sister, we have made our way inland,*” “*I write to you in a newly fitted binding—*”

The snoring pauses for a moment—we hold our breath—and then Preeta lets out another big wheeze.

“Hurry up,” Minna hisses.

“I don’t know how to find it! It just...*opened* for me last time!” I whisper back. Now it’s flipping through hundreds of pages, back and forth, none of them the one I’m looking for.

“*Cabot!*”

I close the book, place my palm flat against the cover, close my eyes, and whisper: “Please?”

And then—*there*—the cover opens, the pages riffle until they land on:

*The Spell of Transformation.*

Minna hands me a notebook and pencil. “Copy it. Quick.”

I start to draw the flower, the intricate loops—

I swear I can *feel* Minna roll her eyes as she looks over my shoulder. I silently pass her the pencil. She takes takes down every word of the text, every curve and spiral of the drawing. And just as she’s finished—

The snoring stops.

We freeze. Wait for another wheeze. Minna places the pencil down. Everything stops.

Silence stretches. No shift. No sigh. Nothing.

“*Run.*”

We burst from a service door and run until we collapse on the stone beside the summoning pool. I am *gasping*—from running, from fear, from the *absurdity* of what we just did.

“That was—”

“Insane.”

“*Fun.*” She reaches down and begins untying her shoes. “The outfits, the tunnels, the look on your face when you saw Professor Preeta...” She keeps talking, recounting the whole night. Not shaking. Not scared. She dips her bare feet into the water one at a time, then trails her fingers idly alongside.

Meanwhile, I am still *vibrating* with anxiety.

My goodness did I have a misread on this girl.

“This feels really out of character for you.”

She scowls. “What do you mean?”

“Tonight, all of this. Breaking rules. You’re the kind of person who would report people for eating in the library.”

“You shouldn’t eat around books. And I would never call *that* a library.” She’s quiet for a moment, watching ripples spread from her fingers. “I follow rules that protect things I care about. Like the Four Gates.”

I feel lost. I take off my shoes, dip my feet in the cold pool. The stars are reflected, doubling the world.

Minna with her fastidious notes.

Minna sneaking into the Sentinel’s office.

Minna lining her walls with Women’s Magic posters.

Minna breaking every rule to track down my spell.

Something isn’t adding up.

“Minna, why did you really do this?”

“Well.” She swishes her feet across the surface. “They’re keeping knowledge from us.

And yes, Women's Magic should be protected. But you know what's actually dangerous?

Ignorance."

"And?"

"And in three hundred years of documented Women's Magic, there are exactly zero references to witches who violated the Four Gates and survived." She doesn't smile. "So either you shouldn't exist, or Women's Magic as we understand it shouldn't exist. Complete information, Cabot. That's what I need. Because you cannot both be real."

But we are both real. She stares at me like I'm the question and answer and problem all at once.

I turn to her with a huge goofy smile: "And?"

"And." She sighs. "I wanted to help you, dummy. Here." She pulls out the paper where she copied the spell.

We both lean in.

It's as I remembered: the infinite-spiraled-flower drawing, *New Magic's Transformation Awaits*, and then...

*"To see what faults this spell may heal,*

*Let mirrored glass the truth reveal."*

Faults.

Alright, *Ancient Grimoire of Women's Magic*. Give a girl a break.

"I don't understand," Minna says.

"Which part?"

“I mean—” She’s staring again. Not at the spell. Me. She looks skeptical about something. I brace myself to receive a dissertation on the etymology and derivation of botanic drawings. (I may be mis-using all of those words, by the way.) “—why would *you* need a transformation spell?”

I wiggle my toes under the water. “What do you mean?”

“You’re perfect exactly the way you are.”

Moonlight fractures around our two sets of ankles.

Wait.

“You’re beautiful,” she says quietly.

What’s going on.

“Minna—”

“I’m interested in pursuing a romantic relationship with you.”

“What?”

Everything stops. Did she just—did she just say—

“A romantic relationship. I’d like to begin dating you.”

*OH MY GOD OH MY FREAKING GOD WHAT IN THE NAME OF ALL MAGICAL  
HELL IS HAPPENING RIGHT NOW this is hands down the WILDEST thing anyone has ever  
said to me and it’s offered up like she’s proposing we co-author a TERM PAPER—*

“Cabot?” She tilts her head. “Is that unclear?”

“Are you...I mean—”

“Am I what?”

“Queer?”

Her eyebrows furrow.

“I don’t know,” she says, finally. “Does it matter?”

The question hangs. I think—

Honestly? I have no idea what I think.

“I just like you.”

The world is tilted. No matter how fast my brain races, it can’t seem to catch up to what’s happening, can’t reach equilibrium. *I just like you.* Bizarre, gorgeous, simple, direct. The pool reflects her face at me. No angst, no crisis, no expectation. She just...*likes me.* As I am *exactly right now*, no less. She’s been staring at me since I got to Hornesbrook; I assumed it was because of my chaos. But how long has she been looking at me like *this*? A minute, an hour? *Weeks?* She tracked down that spell for me, planned this entire night, and now she’s sitting close enough—

She leans forward and kisses me.

It’s quick.

A hypothesis.

Then—it’s over.

“Fascinating.” She stares at me, expressionless.

Then we’re kissing again and this time it’s real and deep and tested and true and suddenly a semi-truck of a thought comes barreling out of the darkness, lighting up every synapse in my brain with *I AM BEAUTIFUL*, the feel of her lips, the water on my feet, the joy that started so imperceptibly quiet is thundering loud enough to wake the whole campus. *SHE THINKS I'M BEAUTIFUL. AND I AM. I AM BEAUTIFUL.* So bright, so loud that I do not notice my hands warming, do not notice my palms sweating, do not notice the blue light spilling across the water.

“Cabot?”

She pulls back. Studies my face. My hands are pressed under me, flat against stone.

Her eyes are wide. “What was that?”

“Shooting star.” She doesn’t buy it for a second. “We should go.”

“That wasn’t a star.”

I point at nothing. “Look, there’s another one.”

She stares at me, like she has since day one. Same person. Same eyes. Except... the look is different now. There’s something else there.

Disappointment. Hurt, maybe.

“Okay.”

She places the spell on the bench, turns and walks away.

\* \* \*

I don’t see Minna the rest of the night. Or the next morning. Would I even notice if I did?

I’m walking through campus in a complete fog.

*First kiss. First real kiss.*

(Yes, technically there was Riley in third grade but that was a dare, and yes there was a thing one time with Gio that I’m not going to get into right now, but trust me, that didn’t count either.)

'When you know you know 'is one of those insufferable phrases that annoys the crap out of you... until you find yourself having to fall back on it.

I know. That was my first kiss.

All Hallows prep isn't helping my mental state. The campus looks carnival-drunk on magic. Huge bleachers surround the quad, platforms float unsupported in mid-air, hammering sounds come from every direction—not from the workers, from *independently operating hammers*. And the non-magical maintenance staff that everyone seems to call "Nulls" are far more present than usual. Dozens of them, at least. The mix of construction equipment and spell-casting is disorienting; a reminder of all the power, and limitation, of Women's Magic. Combine that with the lingering kiss... Well, it's just one of those Hornesbrook days where everything feels completely—

"Could we talk?" Aura is standing in front of the library door.

Surreal. Aura is here. Aura wants to talk.

"I—" My brain is paralyzed.

*Any chance I have "Just had my first kiss with someone else!" written on my forehead?*

She smiles. "Just for a minute?" She gestures to a nearby bench.

We sit.

The space between us feels charged. She turns toward me and places her hand over mine on the bench.

Okay.

Okayokayokayokay.

My brain is melting. Is this cheating? Can you cheat on someone *you're not dating*?

At this point, Aura and I are barely friends—she's been avoiding me for weeks. But her

hand is on mine right now and I kissed one of her friends literally *hours ago*.

I might need to run over to the statue and blow up Gio's phone right this second.

I also might need a nap.

"I know I pulled back. I haven't been a very good—" Her voice drops. "Whatever we are."

Behind her, there's some kind of commotion out on the crowd, over by the main entrance. Students are gathering. I can barely make out—there's someone with long hair, dressed in all black making her way across the quad. Fast.

"I've had family stuff going on. But I—" Aura swallows hard. "I'd like to talk to you about it. If you have time?"

The figure reaches the base of the Great Stone Steps, runs her hands through her hair, and smiles that big, fake, Cabot-smile.

"I've been watering your moonflowers," Aura says. She squeezes my hand.

"Aura—" *What is my mother doing on campus?* "I'm sorry, I—" I try to take a breath, collect my thoughts. All I can manage is: "This is really weird."

Aura pulls away, confused. My mother is climbing the steps like she owns them.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I want to—" I squeeze her hand once, hard. "I have to go. I'll find you later, okay?"

She nods.

And somehow, inconceivably, I leave her there on the bench, confused and alone.

Because I have seen that look on my mother's face before: 6th grade, some kid shoved me in the cafeteria. Called me names I'd rather forget. The principal tried to sweep it under the

rug, said I was “asking for it” by “confusing” the students. Mom arrived the next morning on a warpath, and by lunchtime we had a new anti-bullying policy.

Seems my “everything’s fine” text didn’t quite reassure her. Because that same face just finished climbing the steps. That same face is pushing open the doors to the Great Hall.  
Someone at Hornesbrook is about to have a very bad day.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

\* First spells are tools of an institution that has become corrupted.

\* Thence: The real magic is in bearing witness.

\* Observe:

A suburban conference room, folding chairs, a depressing coffee urn. And a stanch woman presiding; earrings dangling, rings large enough to hold reflections. "What a treat to see such attendance for this emergency session of the W.M.A.!"

*...ah, yes. Deirdre again...*

The Great Outing—that sunny morning when all seven sister academies lifted their veils—was perhaps the greatest display of unity in magical history. This unity lasted three weeks. One faction demanded aggressive public displays of power. The most fearful suggested abandoning magic

altogether. In the end, the pragmatists won: Let the world see just enough to respect our power. A century later, these devisions remain. And The Witching Mothers Association stands as the proud bastion of “traditional values.”

“As you all know,” Deirdre continues, “the situation at Hornesbrook has become untenable.”

At this very moment, Jenna Cabot enters the room. The room’s temperature drops three degrees. Several witches actually gasp.

News of Phoenix’s struggles on campus has traveled to Jenna: the Heart Spell debacle, the chaos at New Moon. Each slight meticulously cataloged, each maternal fury contained. Her husband paces their floors, demands action. Jenna has chosen patience. Until now. This latest indignity—Phoenix’s banishment to the library’s dusty confines—has summoned her like a war drum.

And while we must acknowledge the righteousness of her cause, dear sister, let us briefly address her rather shocking choice of attire. While we applaud any witch’s right to defend her daughter, must it be done in ripped black jeans and a leather trench? The Cabot line deserves more dignity than this “rebel witch” costume, though we cannot deny she wears it well.

“I’m here for my daughter.”

“Oh, Jenna, darling! Good news. Your Phoenix is our entire agenda.”

“Though some of us,” a smooth voice interjects from the front row, “have been warning about

this particular situation for some time."

London Rhodes lifts her gaze from her phone, just slightly. While Deirdre speaks for the W.M.A., it is London who shapes what they think—her beauty empire having long since made her the arbiter of acceptable magical society. The Rhodes name rests upon foundations of charmed cosmetics and elixirs that grace the vanities of witches throughout our world, a dynasty built on the promise of transformation.

Even if her own “transformation work” is becoming rather obvious. Everything’s sitting just a touch... higher than last season.

Murmurs ripple through the room. Shifting glances. Jenna takes a seat and helps herself to a cookie, each crumb a small defiance. Amulets pulse in the charged air.

“Now,” Deirdre begins, “After that ghastly incident at the New Moon Ceremony, I’m so pleased with the precautions the school has taken—”

“Phoenix is trying to learn,” Jenna interrupts.

“Trying to open The Aperture, more like.” London Rhodes’ legendary eyebrows raise. “Like mother, like daughter.”

“She wouldn’t—she would never—” Jenna protests.

A witch with perfectly pressed robes rises: “My daughter hasn’t slept since that night! That—

that—Monster is destroying her studies!"

"Well, Margaret," drawls a witch with close-cropped silver hair, "perhaps if your daughter spent less time monitoring others and more time studying..."

"And the blue lipstick!" exclaims a third, her heirloom pearls practically vibrating with distress. "Have you seen them? They're all wearing it now. Like some kind of—of rebellion!"

Jenna's eyes glint. "Now that may be Phoenix's fault."

"For heaven's sake, Patricia," sighs another witching mother, "it's makeup, not dark magic."

Accusations gather. Little storms. Deirdre raises her crystal-laden hands to calm the room.

"Ladies, please! My daughter has assured me that since Phoenix was removed from classes, all has been quite safe."

Pin-drop silence. Jenna's voice is low and sharp. "Removed from classes?"

"Can you imagine," Deirdre huffs, "allowing other students to suffer this distraction? It's quite enough that she's still on campus—"

"Ladies," London Rhodes says, rising and turning towards the room. "Even my Crystal, disappointing as she is in nearly every respect, at least had the decency to be born a witch. But when someone who isn't even truly one of us threatens the very image of Women's Magic? Unforgivable."

Her lined lips curve into something between a smile and a wound. "Expel her. Before she destroys

what generations of real witches died to protect.”

The word “expel” ripples through the assembled mothers like a match catching kindling.

“She’s a threat to our daughters!”

“The Monster must go!”

“Monster! Monster!”

CRASH.

The snack table explodes. Plates shatter. Silverware flies. The coffee urn topples with a metallic shriek. The neat arrangement of sugar cookies becomes chaos in an instant, a violent eruption of porcelain and pastries. Every witch turns to find Jenna, one finger raised.

“The Last Coven built Hornesbrook to protect The Aperture. And whether you like us or not, Ginevra and the Cabot Witches were part of that legacy. Judging from all our amulets, The Aperture is intact, and so are we. You’re welcome.”

Her standard-issue crystal blazes. Every amulet responds, glowing in reluctant agreement.

“So,” she says softly, “We’re good, yea? Because if anyone wants to question my daughter’s place at school? If any witch wants to come at me with her tired whispers of ‘Monster’? All I can say is: Cast. First.” She leaves silence like a stretched coil ready to snap. “Because I will blast a witch off the ground and I swear by every one of my foremothers, I will make her the first witch in history to

*FLY.”*

Dear sister, while the Witching Mothers Association may pride itself on protecting tradition, they may have forgotten one of our eldest truths: a mother's love knows no bounds, brooks no opposition, and transforms all it touches. A power for men to fear, indeed.

Jenna Cabot's fury could be measured in tire marks—black streaks across the W.M.A. parking lot as she peels away from the stunned assembly, leaving behind stunned silence and the scent of scorched sugar in her wake.

Tom has been calling her phone. Four missed calls. She throws it into the passenger seat without looking.

Seventy-two minutes. That's all it takes from the W.M.A. conference room to Hornesbrook Gates when one drives like a woman who has finally, finally had enough.

\* \* \*

I sprint after her across the quad, cutting straight through the All Hallow's rehearsal, dodging multi-level risers, metal scaffolding and human-sized unlit torches. Dorian is being raised up on a high floating platform, easily twenty feet in the air. "Seraphine" appears to be leading a group of older girls through some sort of interpretive dance around the summoning pool. Preeta's voice rings out to a group of paired-up girls rehearsing: "*Your dyad is your soulmate! Your unbreakable connection!*" The girls move in perfect synchronization, pink light pulsing between each set of paired hands. Most worrying, they are dressed to the nines. What on earth is this ritual going to be? Someone says "All Hallows," and I'm expecting a pumpkin carving, maybe a corn maze. This is looking suspiciously like a magical debutante ball.

None of that matters.

My mother is here.

My mother will help. My mother is here with her warpath face on, ready to *Shawshank Redemption* me from library prison and get me back into real classes. And suddenly I want—God, this is stupid—I want to climb into her lap and I want her to stroke my head and I want her to tell me she's going to fix everything.

In other words, I want her to be my father.

No, that's not fair. I want her to be my father but with *very specific* magical expertise. Expertise that can tell me why my magic is glowing the wrong colors, whether Jake is trying to protect me or protect some kind of anti-witch weapon, why I hear the Aperture calling.

And what to do about Aura and Minna.

(I know. Not quite the same field of expertise.)

But I'll settle for just seeing the look on her face when Sentinel Horne meets the pissed-

off version of Jenna Cabot.

By the time I reach the top of the steps, she's long out of sight, somewhere inside the hall. I slip through the doors into sudden cold. I spot the narrow stairs to the balcony—the same ones Minna and I crept up last night.

*“You put her in a closet with no roommates. You humiliated her in front of the whole school at New Moon—I know that was you. And now you’re keeping her stuck in the library instead of with the other girls in class?”*

My mother’s voice is booming but distant, the stone creates a wicked reverb effect. From above, I can see them clearly. Mom and Horne, facing each other across the ceremonial circle, torches flickering between them.

“Your fight is with me, Horne. Not her.”

*Oh. Hell. Yeah.* Get her mom.

“Are you here to finally join me in protecting our coven?” Horne’s lips twist into a smile that doesn’t reach her eyes. “Or to finish the destruction you unleashed fifteen years ago?”

Everything about the Great Hall screams danger tonight. Someone turned down the temperature and dimmed all the lights. And my mother and Horne look like they’re about to duel.

JENNA:

*You have always been a mystery.*

*Standing here feels like facing a ghost.*

*How did two lives become so intertwined?*

*I’d mourned you and moved on.*

*Almost.*

Mom's voice is steady, but I know her too well. Her hands clench at her sides, her shoulders tight.

She's preparing to battle.

For me.

XENITH:

*I still remember so clearly  
those early, remarkable days.*

JENNA:

*Whatever happened to the girl I was then—  
so powerful, fearless, and brave?*

Horne's voice is softer. Younger. The way her gaze locks on Mom—it's almost... tender.

My stomach twists. What's going on? Their amulets are pulsing with the same rhythm, like hearts beating in sync. There's something here I don't understand.

JENNA & XENITH:

*I've known you always and never.  
Incompatible facts, both true.*

JENNA:

*There was nothing that we shared*

XENITH:

*Well. We both expected to be paired—*

My stomach drops as their hands drift upward, fingers splaying open.

*Pink light.*

JENNA & XENITH:

*But I never expected—*

*You.*

Oh no.

*Oh no no no no no.*

*But then we glowed,*

*and how my world did fill*

*with great mystery.*

*Though life*

*goes on and on you're still*

*my great mystery.*

*My mother and Sentinel Horne are dyads.*

The Aperture is responding to their voices, to their closeness—I can feel it churning beneath the floor. But I barely notice the voices now. I can't tear my eyes away from their hands.

This isn't the gentle pink glow of new pairs finding each other. This is something ancient and wounded, like watching a scar try to heal and tear open at the same time.

XENITH:

*I remember the old you.*

JENNA:

*I would kill to forget.*

JENNA & XENITH:

*The unlikeliest pairing*

*from the day that we met.*

*You're gone, but never leave.*

*I move on, but how do I grieve?*

*A great mystery.*

My hands are shaking. I'm witnessing my mother's eternal bond with the woman who's been trying to destroy me since I arrived.

Mom isn't here to defend me. She isn't here for me at all.

The torches lining the circular walls flare.

I swear I can see their younger selves reflected in the flames.

*A great mystery...*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

### THE DISSOLUTION OF DYADIC BONDS

*(There is no such spell)*

\* First, a history of the Horne-Cabot Dyad

\* Thence, the particular tragedy of two witches who were exactly right for each other and catastrophically wrong for their world

\* Last, how they fought this truth until it broke them both

Dear sister,

Xenith Horne stands ramrod straight at The Gates, the weight of the Horne legacy pressing down on her shoulders. Then Jenna Cabot blows in an hour late, wild-haired and laughing, raw magic

crackling from her fingertips.

The moment Jenna passes, Xenith's palm blazes. Her stomach drops. *No. Not her.* No Horne has paired with a Cabot since the Last Coven's betrayal. She jams her hands into her pockets.

Three years of failed pairings follow. A Blackwood, a Sterling, a visiting Stellamaris student. Her magic rejects them all while her damned palm burns hotter near the Cabot girl.

Meanwhile Jenna collects strays like lost kittens: a mute maid, a powerless Null. The deaf daughter of the head engineer who shouldn't have been *anywhere near* magical education. Scandalous music spills out from Jenna's dorm room—nothing like regulation spells, yet somehow more effective than anything in their textbooks. Xenith documents every transgression in her reports to the Sentinel.

Xenith practices alone, dawn to dusk. "I'm ready," she tells Astrid.

"Ready?" The ring on the Sentinel's fingers drums against the desktop—*tap, tap, tap*. "You don't have a dyad."

Five days later. Morning practice. Xenith turns to Jenna. Opens her palms.

The world stops breathing. Everything changes.

Pink light explodes between them with such force it shatters windows across campus. A student collapses. They stand in the center of it all, blazing so bright it hurts to look. Astrid orders

their practice deep underground.

The next years blur together in fire and frustration. Xenith drafts meticulous schedules. Jenna treats magic like jazz. It drives Xenith mad. And thrills her. Which drives her more mad still. She documents *all improper magic* at Hornesbrook. Most disturbingly—the youngest Reegan's transformation. At first, aesthetics: uniforms altered, hair cut short. Then, more insidious changes: voice pitched lower during spells, sleeves tailored to hide developing features. "The poison spreads," Xenith warns. "Look what's happening to even our oldest bloodlines."

*Tap, tap, tap.* Astrid's ring never stops its rhythm.

Jenna returns from summer break with new music, and a new term paper rehabilitating Ginevra Cabot, arguing her contributions equal Zevrith Horne's.

Astrid turns the page with deliberate care. "Conclusion: Ginevra's journey across the Atlantic, guided by The Aperture's call, represents a paradigm shift in magical theory that deserves greater academic consideration." The sentinel sighs.

"She doesn't respect our traditions," Xenith spits. "She questions everything."

*Tap, tap, tap.*

"Yes. She does."

Senior year. Their final semester. Days before All Hallow's. A new strategy.

"We could be like Zevrith and Ginevra." Jenna's fingers tighten on Xenith's wrist. "The most powerful dyad ever. When you're Sentinel—" ...when, not if... "—we'll change everything." ...the pause...gently now... "Starting with Emery—she's only null because she was born deaf. If you could just speak to Astrid..."

And if only she had. Imagine what the Horne-Cabot Dyad might have achieved together if Xenith hadn't followed Emery that night. If she hadn't found them in The Forge's heat, the Reegan child pressing the engineer's daughter against the workbench, their lips meeting in the red glow of the furnace, hands tangled in each other's clothes.

We tell ourselves stories about destiny, about being born to find one another. We are often wrong about what these stories mean. The word tears from Xenith's throat, as it had from Zevrith's, and how proud each generation is of it, this weapon she thinks she has forged herself, never seeing how many hands before hers have shaped these same letters into the same blade:

\* \* \*

“*DEADWITCH*,” Horne spits the word, her voice shaking with fury. “A *deadwitch*, here at Hornesbrook. And what he stole—” She cuts herself off, but I can see the rage building in her face.

*Jake*. She means Jake.

The floor beneath me shudders. Mom and Horne are still locked in their standoff, but something’s happening to the Great Hall itself. The stones shift and groan. The glass floor that usually shows The Aperture is retracting.

“You remember.” Horne’s voice is dangerous. “What he took. How you helped him escape—”

“I remember you trying to kill him,” Mom cuts in. “I remember choosing to protect an innocent boy instead of helping you hunt him.”

The pieces start clicking together in my head: Jake as a student here. He didn’t just leave Hornesbrook—he escaped. And he took something with him, something *big*, something that made Horne furious enough to—

Another tremor runs through the floor. The Aperture’s flames are reaching higher than I’ve ever seen. Mom takes a step back, but Horne advances.

“Innocent?” Horne laughs. “He was a thief and a traitor. He stole from us, and you—” Her hand snaps up, palm out, aimed at Mom’s chest like a loaded weapon. “*You chose him over me*.”

Whatever Jake took, whatever happened here—it tore them apart. And now I’m caught in the middle of their old war.

I flatten myself against the pillar—

\* \* \*

Dear sister,

Three days before New Moon, Jenna disappears again. Another “musical seminar,” she’s told Astrid. As if anyone believed that anymore.

It’s fine, of course—all witches seek companionship beyond these walls. Even Xenith has indulged. But she’s heard the strange harmonies her Dyadic partner hums in quiet moments. The name on her sheet music. Tom’s influence written in every forbidden note.

A pianist. An “academic” so fascinated by magical music that he’s drawn Hornesbrook’s star student away from her duties on the eve of their most sacred ceremony.

Xenith wonders: is Tom truly just another non-magical fool enchanted by their world? Or a monster using Jenna’s heart to breach the gates?

But these questions become irrelevant when Xenith discovers Jake and Emery pressed together in the Forge’s heat. This corruption cannot stand. She will go to Jenna. Her dyad *must understand* this deviation threatens everything.

But when Xenith finds Jenna leaving the residential hall, something stops her. The too-casual path she takes through campus. Like someone who knows she's being watched but pretends otherwise.

Xenith follows instead of confronting. Down passages she's never seen, that appear on no campus map. With each turn, her fury builds. She's to be Sentinel—how could Astrid keep such secrets from her? What else has been hidden?

The trail leads to the antechamber, where a conspiracy is underway. Inside: theft on an unimaginable scale. Mechanical contraptions whir against the brass tracks. Hands signal frantically. The Deadwitch and the Null, conspiring to steal what should stay locked up in this room forever. And there's Jenna, standing with them, defending them, that non-magical pianist's influence written all over this corruption—

"Step back." Xenith's magic is already crackling between her fingers. Her first attack spell hits a pedestal, sending sparks flying.

With a snarl, Jenna whips around. Fire erupts from her palms. The blast tears through the air where Xenith stood a heartbeat before.

Their magic collides—and the antechamber can't contain it. The violence of their dyadic bond turning on itself drives them through corridors, magic tearing at stone. Jenna tries to escape. Xenith

won't let her.

The battle spills into the Great Hall, where all of Hornesbrook can witness their unmaking.

XENITH:

*An unequaled power was in you,  
And our friendship, our pairing was done.*

JENNA:

*But there was no end to the story for us,  
once our magic had merged into one.*

Footsteps thunder down the corridor. Astrid bursts in first, the other professors close behind.

Students crowd the doorway, drawn by the sound of magic eating itself alive.

"The Null and the Deadwitch," Xenith gasps between spells, "they're going to—"

Fire surges through the cracks in the stone floor, reaching for Jenna, lost in strange music:

*Opening... opening... opening...*

The horror on every face is absolute. A Cabot witch, heir to Ginevra's power, calling to The

Aperture itself.

"She's trying to open The Aperture!" Horne's voice cuts through the chaos.

"No, I'm not!" Jenna's response is raw, desperate. "I'm only hearing it—"

“Sentinel!” a professor voice cries. “The wards are failing!”

JENNA & XENITH:

*We’re always the same; always changing.*

*Incompatible facts, both true.*

XENITH:

*Always so weak.*

JENNA:

*Always a liar.*

JENNA & XENITH:

*But when our feet are to the fire...*

Astrid’s eyes never leave Jenna’s face. “If you are not the traitor you appear to be, then work with your dyad and keep the *damned thing closed!*”

*We do what we have to do!*

*And so we glow,*

*and brace our chamber walls*

*through great mystery.*

*Though time goes on and on,*

*it’s all a great mystery.*

Jenna spins toward Xenith, flames roaring around them. Curious, what humans reach for in times of pure desperation. Jenna reaches back now, back to instructions Jake uncovered that summer, back to myths she once heard as a small girl on her mother's lap, back, back, back to magic uncast in centuries, unseen since it held back the Atlantic itself—

“The Shared Breath! Now!”

“That spell hasn’t worked since—”

“NOW.”

JENNA:

*We cannot stop our hearts from opening,  
once the chamber starts to crack.*

Hands lock. Ancient words tear from their throats. The spell slams into the flames.

JENNA & XENITH:

*And though we cannot stop these fires...  
we can at least hold them back.*

“Don’t let it break!” Xenith’s grip tightens. Students scramble back as the protection shield expands, forcing back the flames inch by brutal inch. The stone floor groans. Something has to give.

*Oh...*

*We’ll always glow,*

*and hold on, you and I*

*through great mystery...*

The backlash hits like an explosion in reverse. Their Dyadic Bond doesn't break so much as shatter. The force drives them to their knees. They both taste copper, feel the magic burn through their veins like acid.

But The Aperture is sealed. For one breath, two, relief floods the Great Hall—Hornesbrook damaged, wounded but whole.

Until the head engineer's scream pierce the silence. The kind of scream that reshapes worlds.

The healers know before they reach her: some magics leave nothing behind but ash and grief. Days later, they'll write "Accidental encounter with The Aperture" in neat script, as if words could contain such loss.

In the medical ward, Jenna retches into a basin for the third time that hour. Guilt, she thinks, as bitter as the bile in her throat. She deserves this: the nausea, the fever, the dreams where Emery burns again and again. Astrid's accusations echo: "You wanted to open The Aperture. You were the traitor in our midst all along." Xenith's silence weighs heavier.

When the healer suggests a different cause for her sickness, her pregnancy, Jenna laughs until she finally, finally cries.

JENNA:

*How can one kick*

*uproot your entire life?*

*A great mystery...*

Power shifts happen like landslides—devastatingly, brutally efficient. Jenna watches it unfold with a strange detachment. Let Xenith have the Sentinel's office. Let Astrid retire to Europe. Let them tell whatever lies they need to, about her friends, her family's history. The truth is simpler: a girl died, and magic did nothing to save her.

The Investiture of Xenith Horne II draws the Seven Sisters' representatives, alumnae in their school colors, councilwomen in black, the incoming Sentinel in ceremonial white. From the Great Stone Steps, Horne's voice booms across the largest gathering of magical women in a generation: "A *deadwitch has stolen from us all. Emery Shane's death lies at her feet!*"

No one asks how a supposedly non-magical child commands such power. Or vanishes with the entire contents of The Aperture's antechamber.

Jenna leaves as the sun rises, walking through those iron gates one final time. I am hidden in her satchel, a secret stowaway. The voices that had grown so strong have fallen silent, as if The Aperture itself mourns her departure. She chooses Tom, chooses a world where magic doesn't burn children to ash. From a perch high up in the Foremother's Tower, Xenith will now oversee the

preservation of tradition, and a story that refuses to end. The Cabots who take too much, the Hornes  
who protect us all, still locked together across generations of the same tired war, their shared magic  
still pulsing like a second heartbeat—

XENITH:

*My fiercest rival.*

JENNA:

*The one I failed best.*

JENNA:

*Walking away felt like—*

XENITH:

*Living through death.*

This is the peculiar pain of dyadic separation: mourning someone who still exists. The cruellest  
haunting.

JENNA & XENITH:

*We're gone, but never go.*

*We move on, but even so—*

Time and distance should dull grief, fading like a bruise. That's how it ought to be. Jenna  
counts the miles from Hornesbrook's gates, waiting for silence. Waiting for the music of The Aperture

to fade. But there is grief that does not heal. And there are wounds that do not scab, songs that call from across continents, call even to those not yet born.

JENNA & XENITH:

*Some mysteries, we'll never,  
ever know.*

*Oh...*

The voices will fade. The Cabot line will end. She repeats these words until they sound true.

She presses a hand to her belly, certain: a boy. The lineage of Cabot magic ends with her. “A mother always knows,” she whispers, ignoring the word that still echoes in her dreams, the one she heard in The Aperture’s song, a word that had sounded like flight, like fire, like a name—

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“Phoenix.”

From my hidden spot on the balcony, I can see the exact moment the truth hits her.

“Oh god,” she whispers. “It was always Phoenix.” Mom’s hand flies to her mouth, her eyes going wide. “The Aperture wasn’t calling to me at all—it was calling to *her*. Even then. Even before...”

Her knees buckle. Horne catches her. “The voices stopped after she was born,” Mom says, breaking. “I thought the magic died when I chose Tom. But it was waiting. For her. God—*she hears it*. The Aperture. Like I did. Like Ginevra—”

She’s crying now, really crying.

“I don’t want a hard life for my kid, Xenith.” The use of Horne’s first name makes me recoil.

“I know.” Horne’s voice turns gentle. Something cold settles in my stomach. “The *Grimoire* has a spell that can... *transform* a witch’s irregular magic into something containable. A large gathering, complicated ritual. But it could make Phoenix normal again.”

“Normal,” Mom breathes.

Containing my magic? My shaking hands cover my mouth, trapping the scream.

“No one is dead, my child is still here, but sometimes...” My mother looks up at Horne.

“Xenith, when you cast—do you feel like—”

“Like you’re remembering something that’s still happening.”

“God, yes.”

“The cruelest haunting.”

Their amulets pulse together. “Not only memories of who my kid was, but... futures I thought we’d have. Sometimes... it feels like I’m *grieving*. These memories of who my child used to be...”

JENNA:

*They’re gone,*

*but never leave.*

*I move on,*

*but how do I grieve?*

“I can’t help it.” Mom’s voice cracks. “*I miss my kid.*”

*A great mystery.*

*A great—*

And just like that, my pain arrives at its destination: *fury*. Before I can stop myself, I’m standing.

“Stop talking about me like I’m gone!” My voice echoes through the Great Hall. “I’m not some ghost you need to mourn. I’m *alive*, and I’m *here right now*.”

They both spin to face me. Mom’s tear-streaked face crumples with shame. Behind her, The Aperture’s flames surge higher, as if responding to my voice.

“Phoenix, honey,” Mom reaches for me, “I only want to protect—”

“Like you protected Jake? Or is containing magic only okay when your *dyad* is suggesting it?”

Mom winces like I’ve struck her. “The only one I need protection from is *you*,” I say.

“Phoenix Cabot.” Horne’s voice turns sharp, formal. The Sentinel again. “You will remain—”

But I’m already turning away, leaving them with their old grief, their old fears.

I hear Mom call after me, but I’m already gone.



I burst through the side exit off the balcony. The cold stone of Hornesbrook catches me as I stumble.

*How could she? How could my mother—*

I'm in the corridors Horne led me through before. The portraits of burning Hornes flicker in the torchlight. The deeper I go, the more the walls press in, like the building is trying to swallow me. Contain me.

The air gets thicker, the temperature drops with each turn, but there's a warmth rising through the soles of my shoes that has nothing to do with running. The Aperture is calling, its heat seeping up through the foundations.

*Phoenix, Phoenix, Phoenix...*

I turn a corner.

Empty pedestals. Scorch marks on the floor. Brass tracks on the wall spiraling up to nothing.

This room again. The one Minna and I found through the tunnels.

Only this time I'm approaching it from above, from inside Hornesbrook proper. And this time, I know exactly where I am in the building.

*Phoenix, Phoenix, Phoenix...*

This is the room right next to The Aperture. I know it for sure. Even with my internal compass spun around from the corridors, my body knows exactly where it is. Twenty feet away at most.

Being here without Minna makes the emptiness louder somehow. When we were here

together, the room felt abandoned. Now it feels haunted. A body without organs. Jake's weapon—whatever monstrous thing required a room this size—it lived here. Everything about this room feels like a question I'm afraid to answer.

I shake my head, trying to clear the voices, and step down a narrow set of wobbly wooden stairs.

What could be so dangerous? As in, *much more dangerous* than the *raging everlasting flames* right on the other side of this wall?

The transition happens in a flash. My body knows I've moved but can't parse how, like trying to remember the moment you fall asleep. "How did I...?" The question evaporates in my throat. I didn't walk through a door. And, for once I've actually listened to my mother's first magical advice: I didn't touch anything. And yet.

Somehow I'm standing inside the actual Aperture chamber.

The fire pool itself is in the center. The flames stretch toward me like eager hands, but there's no heat.

I step closer, squinting—*there*. I see them now, the same spells I watched Mom cast in the basement.

Wards.

A thin pink membrane covering the fire like the skin that holds an egg yolk together. And then another bubble inside that one. And another.

I move closer. The inner layers come into focus, but not only pink—bright yellow, deep blue, shades of red-orange that make me think of sunsets after rainstorms. Of blood. Layers and layers of green, like rings on a tree trunk, protection built over years and years. The ones closest

to the fire glow brightest. *The strongest*, I think. *The oldest*.

And inside: The Aperture.

The flames press against the innermost bubble, straining, and for a moment—just a moment—I want to reach back. Want to piece through and spin into that fire like I used to spin to dad's music, before I learned to be contained, to be proper, to be small.

*Phoenix, Phoenix, Phoenix...*

*The voices sing—*

The flames know my name. More real than any birth certificate, more legitimate than any water test; every syllable rings true. Heard. Found. Accepted.

*The source of your power is opening...*

“I don’t want to hurt anyone,” I whisper. The words feel small, and I feel very young. This chamber is older than Hornesbrook. Older than institutional magic. The flames stretch towards me and body sways without my permission, *remembering*, I am spinning. I am spinning—

*I am spinning in the living room while my father’s hands dance across the keys. I am trying to catch the music in my body, trying to become the sound itself. High tinkling treble draws me up onto my toes, deep bass notes pull me down, grounding me, holding me. This is how The Aperture moves. Flames reaching high in bright upper octaves, embers pulsing in steady rhythm below. The flames stretch towards me. I have to reach back. Because this is who I am, seven years old on my knees in the dark and unafraid, knowing even then that doors are meant to be opened. I am reaching back. I am—*

The ceiling of the auditorium.

The greenhouse roof.

Crystal's juggling balls. Aura's arm. Mom's face when I first showed her my magic.

Everything I've ever broken flashes through my mind in a burst of clarity.

I run towards the door—*but there are no doors*.

The walls are smooth... oh god there are no doors there are no doors there are no—

“No!” I slam my fists against the wall. “I won’t break anything else, I won’t hurt anyone else, I won’t—”

The flames roar higher. The chamber floods with light. And then—

Darkness.

Cold air hits my face. My eyes adjust slowly, revealing rough stone walls and pipes that disappear into shadow.

A maintenance corridor.

I am not alone.

The Smith is here.

Just. Standing there.

Thick leather work clothes. A hood that shadows everything but their hands. Small.

Scarred.

They go very still when they see me.

Their hands pause in mid-air. Like a puppet with cut strings.

The Smith is looking at my amulet.

No.

The Smith is studying my amulet.

The asymmetrical design. The way it doesn't match any other amulet at Hornesbrook.

The Smith knows something about this. I can feel it in their stillness. I try to see past the hood's shadow. To catch their eyes.

A mistake.

Something in that darkness knows me. The Smith lurches forward—

Oh hell no. *Nope Nope Nope*, absolutely not doing the creepy-figure-in-the-dark thing today, not after everything else. (Read the room, mysterious maintenance person.)

I tear up the nearest stairs. The steps spiral up into darkness *because of course they do*, and either The Smith is following me or my heartbeat is just *really dramatic echoes right now* but either way my hands scrape against stone, my lungs are burning, and I am NOT stopping until I see—

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Sunlight.

So bright it feels like violence.

A wall of normalcy.

The quad is exploding with color and sound—students everywhere, practicing for All Hallow's Eve. The quad spreads before me, impossibly ordinary, like nothing dark or terrifying exists beneath our feet. The perfection of it all feels obscene. A stage set hiding rot underneath.

The voices from the Aperture still sing in my head, along with a whisper-scream I can't shut out.

*My mother and Horne are dyads. My mother and Horne are dyads.*

“Phoenix! Hey, Phoenix!”

Shiva and Alex are sprinting toward me across the grass, their faces bright with the kind of uncomplicated joy that feels like it belongs to a different universe. One where mothers don't lie and flames don't sing and hooded figures don't lurk in underground chambers.

“You're freed from Ms. Lola?” Alex asks, slightly out of breath.

“Finally!” Shiva clutches her sketchbook against her chest. “I’ve been trying to get all four of you in one place for hours. The outfits are finished—I need everyone together for the final fitting before tonight’s big reveal.”

*Phoenix, Phoenix, Phoenix...*

I try to form words but my throat feels lined with ash. These are my friends. I love these girls. But right now the distance between us might as well be measured in light-years. They’re standing in sunshine talking about costumes while I’m still underground, reaching toward flames.

“You won’t believe what Dorian’s done with the choreography,” Alex continues. “Big show choir energy.”

“Phoenix.” Shiva stops mid-gesture. “You okay? You look...”

Like I escaped a nightmare. Like I’m still in one.

“Come on,” Shiva says, linking her arm through mine. “I swear, getting you all in one place is like trying to braid spaghetti.”

Alex flanks my other side and they guide me across the quad like I’m not shaking apart from the inside, like the voices aren’t still singing.

We find Aura sitting on a bench outside the observatory, her uke across her lap. She sets it aside immediately when she sees me.

“Finally. We’re all...” Shiva frowns. “Wait, where’s Minna?”

“On it.” Alex jogs off.

“It’s five bodies in five outfits, this is not quantum entanglement...”

Aura’s eyes find mine. Shiva’s voice fades to background static as Aura tilts her head—

that tiny gesture: *are you okay?* I'm not, but somehow just her looking at me like that, like I matter, like she sees me even when I feel invisible... Neither of us speaks. She shifts her uke to her other side, making room on the bench, and I sink down beside her, our knees touching.

"I saw your mom was on campus." Her fingers worry at a loose thread on her skirt. But her eyes say: *Talk to me.*

"My mother and Horne are dyads." She nods, slow and deliberate. The afternoon light catches in her hair, turns it auburn at the edges. I watch her process this, watch her not ask questions. "And she never told me. Why wouldn't she—"

Aura's hand finds my knee. Just rests there, warm through my jeans. I remember to breathe.

"And—and there's more." I look at her, really look at her, and let her see how scared I am. "*I hear it.*"

Her brow furrows. "What do you—" Then her eyes snap toward the Great Hall. "Oh." "Yeah. And I've always heard it."

Her whole face transforms—wonder replacing worry, her eyes going impossibly wide. She leans forward, so close. "What does it sound like?"

I close my eyes not knowing where to even begin. "My dad played me something once. I don't remember the title. Something about the sky, maybe. It's sort of a game, where every instrument in the orchestra plays a different note, microtonally apart, and it should be chaos, right? But instead it creates this... shimmer?" I hear her breathing change—slower, deeper, like she's trying to hear it too. "*That.* But with women's voices.

"Voices?" she whispers.

“Yeah. All singing together, in a key that doesn’t even exist. Because it’s too much. Too many notes, too many voices, for far too long. Like someone held down the pedals on a piano for her entire life.” I open my eyes. She’s so still. “A chord that’s been sustaining forever. That’s what it sounds like to me.” I’ve never said this to anyone, but I have to, I have to, *I have to say it now*: “Aura. It wants to open.”

The tiniest flinch—a tightening around her eyes, a micro-adjustment in her posture. Her hand doesn’t move from my knee but something in the quality of her touch changes, like she’s holding on instead of just resting.

Immediately I wish I could take it back. “Please don’t tell anyone.”

Aura’s quiet for a long moment, staring. Finally, she says, “I won’t. I promise.”

Then she’s pulling me into her arms—not a casual hug but something fierce and protective, like she’s trying to hold me together. I collapse into it, into her.

“My mom—” Aura starts, then stops. Like she’s standing at the edge of something.

She pulls back just enough to look at me. Her eyes are raw.

“I want you to trust me,” I say quietly. I know what I have to do. I have to tell her about kissing Minna. I’m trading secrets like Pokemon cards—gotta collect that trust—prove I’m worth the risk. “I know things have been weird between us since Lantern Night, and something happened the other day that you should know about—”

*I am wearing a denim romper.*

*A denim romper with front pockets.*

(Bear with me, the denim romper is about to matter.)

A denim romper with *front pockets* which coincidentally happen to be *extraordinarily*

*deep.*

In this moment, these details matter a great deal to me because the warmth flooding up my palms—that telltale prickle spreading up my wrists—is as strong as it's ever been, and so when I yank my hands away, shoving them deep into those extraordinarily deep pockets, no light of any kind escapes through the denim, though the reality of my throbbing, aching dyadic glowing is as certain to me as my wanting her. I watch Aura notice. Of course she notices. But she doesn't move at all.

“You’re glowing.” Complete stillness, like she’s turned to stone mid-thought.

“Alright so I finished the book.” Minna’s standing three feet away, a lightning strike. She’s holding Jake’s book like evidence in a trial. “Every lousy freaking metaphor—”

“Great! Okay, Minna’s here we can—” Shiva counts. “Oh you’ve got to be kidding me, now where’s Alex? ALEX! I need all five of us or the whole reveal—”

“Listen to me, Cabot.” Minna pushes herself onto the bench between me and Aura, holding up the book.

“Thanks for reading—”

“Don’t thank me. You need to watch out.” She’s flipping through the pages, trying to show me something. Aura is staring blankly. My thighs are on fire. “There are theories in here that would get someone expelled just for thinking them. Ideas about the Aperture responding to emotional resonance instead of bloodlines. About someone using that connection to—” She leans in and whispers. “To force it open. And destroy it entirely. The Aperture’s wards are designed to resist gradual pressure. But they’re vulnerable to an amplified surge. This book is practically written instructions for how someone—” Her eyes narrow. “How someone could use a girl like

you to tear everything down.”

Her hand drops. She stares down.

At her right hand.

Which is glowing a soft, unmistakable—

“*Blue.*” The word comes out so small it barely exists. Like she’s seven years old and just broke something precious.

“Minna?” Aura stands up. “What’s the matter?”

Then she sees.

“That’s not really supposed to...” Shiva actually takes a step back. “I mean, that’s not generally...” She trails off, clearly trying to find a gentle way to say *YOUR HAND IS GLOWING BLUE.*

Minna’s looking around now, moisture gathering in her eyes. “Alex?” Her voice is so young, so lost. No, Alex is nowhere near. It’s in that absence that her gaze finally lands on me—on my deliberately hidden hands. Fear becomes fury.

“*You.*”

“I didn’t—”

Minna eyes are wild.

“I don’t understand what’s happening,” Aura says. “Why—”

“I’ll tell you what’s happening!” Minna rounds on me fully now, her blue palms raised and pointed at my head. “This is all because of her. Because her mother manipulated Horne to get her in here. Because she never passed through any of the Four Gates like the rest of us. Because she brought chaos magic inside our walls, magic that doesn’t follow any of the laws that

keep us safe!” She stops. Considers. “Show me your hands.”

“Minna, stop.” Shiva steps forward. “You’re scaring her.”

“*Show. Me.*”

“What’s going on?” Alex reappears, slightly out of breath. She sees Minna’s blue palms and her eyes go wide. “*Wowza*. Those are something. You know if you’re going for an Elphie vibe it’s green not blue—”

“NOT NOW ALEX,” Aura and I say in unison.

“Pair with me.” Minna is looking at Alex, plaintive.

Alex backs away. “Now?”

“This is serious! *Pair with me.*”

“Not when you’re asking like that!”

“I—I can’t alright?” Alex puts her hands behind her back. “Not on the spot like this, you’re stressing me out.”

“Alex, don’t you see what’s happening?” Minna gestures wildly. “You and I paired well enough before she got here. Didn’t we? At least it was *pink* every time! And now—Now everything’s wrong. *Your* magic won’t work. My magic is—” She stares at her palms, too disgusted to even say the word. “And it’s all because of *her*.”

She turns to me, and there’s tears in her eyes now. “Your magic—it doesn’t follow any rules at all. Women’s Magic has rules. Pairing has rules. *Blue* isn’t in the rules!” She inhales deep, then lets out a heavy sigh. “We kissed, okay?”

I watch the words hit Aura. “You...you what?”

“We kissed,” Minna repeats. “Don’t you understand what that means? You don’t *kiss* your dyad!”

“We’re not dyads,” I manage. “You’re paired with Alex.”

“I *was* paired with Alex!” Minna’s composure shatters completely. “Now I don’t know what’s happening! Take your hands out of your pockets, Cabot.”

“No.”

“Your magic is chaos. It’s dangerous. And now it’s—it’s spreading. It’s *contaminating* our normal magic.”

She doesn’t say it to be cruel. She’s genuinely terrified. But the words land exactly where they’re meant to—in all the places I’m already bruised.

“You kissed,” Aura repeats quietly.

“Aura, I wanted to tell you, I was trying to—”

“Okay, everyone stop. Just—stop.” We all turn to look at Shiva. “Minna, look at your hands.”

Minna glances down. The blue is fading, gradually returning to normal.

“See? Whatever this was, it’s passing. Phoenix, you can take your hands out of your pockets.” When I don’t move, she adds gently, “It’s okay. We’re all friends here.”

I slowly pull out my hands. They’re barely glowing at all now, only the faintest shimmer.

“Listen,” Shiva continues, “I know magic is important. I know the rules matter to you, Minna. But you know what else matters? How we treat each other. How we talk to each other. That matters too.”

Minna’s shoulders slump. She looks at me, and for the first time, I see her as she really

is—not the perfect witch who knows all the rules, but a scared seventeen-year-old whose worldview is cracking.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers. “I’m—I’m scared.”

“We all are,” Shiva says. “It’s All Hallow’s, we’re all nervous about tonight, magic is being weird. But we’re going to be okay. We’re going to put on these incredible costumes that I’ve been working on for weeks, we’re going to perform our hearts out, and we’re going to have a normal night.” She looks at each of us. “Okay?”

Normal.

I look at these four girls—Shiva trying so hard to hold us together, Minna fighting tears, Alex fidgeting nervously, Aura who won’t quite meet my eyes.

I can’t—

Normal is an out-of-range note I keep trying to sing.

I run.

Again.

It’s becoming my signature move at this point. Third time today, and maybe that should tell me something about myself, about how I deal with hard truths, by literally—

Whatever. I run because all I can do right now is to point my feet towards the thing that scares me most.

Jake’s cabin, and someone who might finally tell me the truth about who I am.

Even if that truth destroys everything.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

### THE ESSENTIAL WARCAST

*A Paired Invocation of Hostile Intent*

- \* First ask the Aperture's permission, always
- \* Thence ask your Coven's permission, for battle magic ripples outward like blood in water
- \* Kneel facing each other and press foreheads together
- \* Hold the full weight of your killing intent without flinching—let it pool in your lungs until breathing becomes drowning, let it burn through your veins until your pulse hammers violence
- \* Rise slowly without breaking contact, a pink membrane should now ripple between you, like liquid glass
- \* Step apart. The membrane will tear itself into floating pink blades, ready for use

Dear sister,

Not all weapons announce themselves so clearly.

Born under another name to a family steeped in magic, the boy now known as Jake Reegan was heralded before he could walk. When signs never came—no glowing palms, no resonance—whispers turned sharp. “A deficiency.” “A puzzle to solve.”

Elena Reagan sang spells into shimmering water, pressed small hands beneath until pruned and cold. Enchanted silks that drew only tears. His father watched in silence. While avoiding her interventions, the child discovered machine-work. Patient dismantling. Understanding. Recreation.

But his greatest creation was himself.

The Reegan child arrived at Hornesbrook in pursuit of more than identity. He needed something to pour himself into—anything that didn’t require glowing palms.

The maintenance department didn’t care about bloodlines or biological destiny. They cared about competence. About efficiency and repair.

Among the broken things—a chronometer that wouldn’t turn, magic that wouldn’t come—it was there that he first met Emery.

Love grew in the quiet spaces, in shared work and comfortable silence. Piece by piece, like the machines they maintained—practical, purposeful, unexpectedly beautiful in function.

They developed their own sign for “careful”—two quick taps on any nearby surface meant someone was coming. Three meant “safe now.” By their third week, they could carry on entire conversations through the rhythm of tools against pipes.

The trouble started with a single page Emery found wedged behind a loose panel. At first, it seemed like any other record of repair. But then there were more. Hidden pieces. Truth emerging fragment by fragment.

**AMULET MODIFICATION COMPLETED AS ORDERED.**

**Z.H. CANNOT FORCE MAGIC TO DENY ITS OWN NATURE.**

**G.C.’S POWER RESPONDS TO TRUTH, NOT CONTROL.**

“We have to tell everyone.” Jake’s hands shook as he held The Archivist’s writing.

Emery’s hands: *They’ll destroy everything to keep this hidden.*

“Then we move what we can.”

They mapped the hidden passageways. Found the old mechanical tracks still working in the walls. For weeks, they worked to smuggle it out. Their one weapon. Their only means of fighting back. Piece by piece they carted it to the abandoned chapel on the far edge of the grounds where no one went anymore.

They didn’t notice the footsteps getting closer.

They had their language of taps.

They didn't know they were too late.

\* \* \*

I storm into the cabin. Jake's nested in his armchair, reading some papers by the fire, looking so comfy and cozy I could scream in his face.

So I scream in his face:

"I can't take this, Jake! I can't!"

The door slams hard enough that three books flutter off the shelf.

"Hey, hey, hey. What happened?"

"Everything. Everything happened. Horne banished me to the library and told me you're hiding a *weapon*? The Aperture was calling my name and I almost reached for it, and some creepy hooded figure came at me in the tunnel, and I'm pretty sure I made Minna's hands glow blue cause I'm *contaminating everyone's magic* and oh yeah—my mom and Sentinel Horne are *dyads* who want to perform some kind of magical containment ritual on me to make me normal."

Jake's eyebrows raise. "That's... a lot for one afternoon."

"And Minna says the book you gave me is full of these impossible things, and I'm an impossible thing—"

"Minna? Did you show someone that book?"

Oh gosh. “Um...yes?” Jake’s face registers that specifically adult “I’m not mad, just disappointed” face (which is objectively worse than actual anger). “I’m sorry.”

Something soft lands on my shoulder.

*Hi, I think. It makes a low humming sound, like a mechanical purr, and presses its ridiculous cotton-ball body against my neck. I decide that Floof is telling me...no, you are not the absolute and total worst.*

“Look, I know. I’m not supposed to show, or tell, or *be* anything. Everyone hates me—no, they’re terrified of me. I can’t take this, Jake. The hiding, the half-truths, the secrets. I’m tired of it, Jake. Aren’t you?”

His eyes drop down to the book in his lap as he smooths his hand over the repaired wing. He gestures across the room to the massive set of double doors.

“Come in, kid.” I follow him across the room. He pauses, then turns back. “You know that feeling when you would give anything for a scrap of acceptance? That longing for one sentence that validates your existence?” Jake’s eyes find mine. “You know how sometimes you would settle for a single *word*? ”

He tosses the book into the air. Gears grind and turn. The doors open.  
I’ve been wrong about everything.

\* \* \*

Wrought iron balconies wind around circular levels. A cathedral of knowledge stretches impossibly upward. The books seem—*alive*, drifting through the chamber, not by magic but on mechanical wings, floating in lazy spirals.

“The Archive of New Magic,” Jake announces, his voice shifting into what I can only describe as Tour Guide Mode. “All records and documentation, official and emergent—”  
“How many?” I ask.

Jake sighs, deflating slightly. “I was gonna do a whole intro. Had it all planned out—the history of the archive, the cataloging system. There were going to be visual aids—”

“JAKE.”

He stops. He knows what I’m asking. He knows what it means.

“How many... like us?”

He pauses.

“So many.”

“Then...where are they?”

Jake points to a brass plaque mounted on the wall:

**MAGIC MAY BE ERADICATED, BUT NEVER ERASED.**

Names scroll: *Sarah Blackwood, Maxwell Laurent, Elizabeth Hart*—

“Some chose to self-eradicate.” Jake says. “So it would be on their terms.” A book detaches from a nearby shelf, wings beating softly as it lands in my lap. “Many stayed hidden. Some denied their powers. But we’ve existed since the Coven’s earliest days.”

The book falls open, and — ugh. *The Brave Boy in the Witch’s Hat*. My least favorite children’s book ever.

Except—

The pages flip past. This... isn't the story I thought I knew.

Instead of the familiar illustrations, these pages contain handwritten notes and diagrams, yellowed with age. It looks like a personal journal.

No. Field notes.

December 14, 1671

*My mother was taken yesterday. They found the hidden compartment in the binding of the Bible where she'd concealed instructions for the witch's escape. I am alone now at thirteen. The magistrate's men missed the false bottom in her workbench. There I found her real journals—records of every witch she helped, every story she preserved. I will continue her work. My hands hold no magic, but they know how to build hiding places for truth.*

The handwriting reveals everything—meticulous, straight lines. Someone who knew that documentation was a form of survival. Someone who held the pen like their life depended on it. Maybe it did.

March 18, 1675

*Four years of collecting whispers. Weather patterns that change when certain women practice. Coded messages passed through underground networks. I must travel east, toward the mountains. Something is happening in the Carpathians that the Hunters haven't discovered yet.*

A traveler, documenting a hidden world no one else thought worth preserving. I glance up at Jake, seeing the connection—the same attention to detail, the same dedication to recording what others would erase.

A detailed sketch fills the following page. Oh gosh, there's that *Brave Boy* again. Almost exactly like what's depicted in the mural outside the Sentinel's office at Hornesbrook.

August 12, 1675

*Dawn on the mountainside. I've been watching a coven practice for a week. One figure interests me most—always wearing a wide-brimmed hat, at the edges of the circle. Today, the hat blew off. Red hair fell free. In town, this person goes by a different name—a familiar dance of wearing one face for the world while keeping another hidden beneath—but today the name the coven spoke was—*

“Ginevra,” I whisper, and the name feels like a key turning in a lock I didn’t know I had inside me.

History, not fiction—truth hidden behind a children’s tale. Ginevra Cabot, my ancestor, watching her mother’s coven from the shadows. A witch, like me. But my eyes look past Ginevra to the figure watching from the ridge—

Practical clothes cut to hide curves. Dark blonde hair tied back severely. Moving with the carriage of a person who has learned to navigate the world by being... unremarkable.

“The Archivist.” The name feels right as soon as it leaves my lips. “He... was the Archivist.”

Gio told me they do this sometimes: clock someone on the train, in a coffee shop, and

silently use their real pronouns in their head. I'm clocking the figure on the ridge. As if by seeing him clearly now, I could reach back through time and whisper: *I see you.* Even if you're centuries away from having the words I now have to describe myself.

"I never imagined—that she, that he—"

Jake chuckles softly. "What, you thought you and I were so special?"

Another journal swoops down. Sketches of Ginevra and the Archivist fill the pages—months of collaboration in a workshop.

March 6, 1677

*Tonight G. found the records I hadn't shown her—the reports of witches who "danced with clouds," who "leapt and never landed." She laughed, told me I was collecting fairy tales. I explained that I was collecting miracles, that I believed she may have access to levitation—*

The pages flip ahead. Same workshop. Candles. A late night. The Archivist steps closer and takes her face in his hands. I can't hear what he whispers. But I know how she feels in this moment. How it felt when Aura took my hand. When Minna told me I was beautiful, Ginevra closes her eyes. He kisses her. Presses down on her shoulders, and lightly blows her hair from her eyes as he backs away, and then—

She rises.

Just like that. *Ginevra Cabot is flying*, hair blazing in the candlelight. The Archivist's pencil hits the floor. They look like someone who witnessed a miracle. Ginevra is crying, reaching back for them, and when they kiss, she's still floating, so they just kiss more.

October 11, 1678

*A woman arrived at our door tonight. Zevrith Horne. The moment she and G. locked eyes... Ignition. Pure lightning. Blew out every window. She sees what neither of us could alone—how to forge a vessel for G.'s power. "Not a cage," she says, "but a channel." Her sketches already improving mine. Magic and craft colliding in one remarkable mind. For the first time, I believe we might survive.*

Zevrith. Not the villain of the story. Someone who understood both worlds. The forge and the flame.

July 29, 1680

*G. woke last night, trembling. Said she heard voices—singing, calling—from across the ocean. Z. dismisses it as a dream, but I've learned to trust G.'s senses. Whatever it is, it grows stronger each day. We've begun preparations. The Hunters have found our trail again, and this call may be the sign we've been waiting for. A new beginning.*

An escape from Europe. The First Amulet's creation—crafted in Horne's family workshop. They sail from Rotterdam. Three months at sea. The Shield of Shared Breath protecting them. Eight travelers: Ginevra, the Archivist, Zevrith, her daughters, three craftsmen allies. A chosen family.

September 5, 1681

*Twelve weeks on land. The trek inland has been merciless. My condition makes travel difficult; the babe quickens. Strange how I find peace in this state that should feel foreign... Carrying G. 's child gives meaning to flesh I've long thought betrayed me. But this vessel of my body matters little now, for all hardship and struggle became justified in a single moment.... today...*

*WE FOUND IT.*

*G. led us to a cave beneath a hill. At the center: not fire as we know it, but pure magical force. G. & Z. call it "The Aperture."*

I close the journal, my mind spinning with these miracles. “Jake, how could they survive back then, let alone...”

“Ways were found,” Jake says. “In the words of your ancestor...”

The pages flip backward on their own, stopping at the drawing of Ginevra on the mountainside, hair whipping around her face. The Archivist kneels, holding a pen to the page. His first message to Ginevra. His last whisper to the future. Not a dyadic prophecy. A promise:

We are born to find one another.

JAKE:

*People like us, we start from a blank page.*

*We're not written into canon, or adapted onto screens.*

*People like us have always had our ways.*

*We save our words, our knowledge, our library of dreams.*

*Until we find the faces of a hidden archive*

*They whisper a story: we are beautiful.*

*Our hearts are always right.*

*Somehow we find each other in the dark every time,*

*And whisper our story: we have always existed.*

*Our lives are a sequel to a tale of resistance*

*that brings our whispered story into light.*

PHOENIX:

*People like us, we get to build from scratch?*

*The writing's all in first draft.*

*No one has seen these lives.*

JAKE AND PHOENIX::

*People like us will rise up from the ash.*

*Call it witchcraft or rebellion,*

*but somehow, we survive.*

PHOENIX:

*Until we find a place where we won't have to hide,*

*We whisper our story: you are beautiful.*

*Your heart is always right.*

JAKE & PHOENIX:

*Somehow we find each other in the dark, every time,*

*And whisper our story: we have always existed.*

*Our bodies are classics no one's ever written.*

JAKE:

*You'll bring our whispered story into light.*

JAKE & PHOENIX:

*In another magic world—*

*“Survival” won’t be a love song.*

*How could it take another magic world—*

*For us to belong?*

*When for so long...*

We stand in front of the plaque:

**MAGIC MAY BE ERADICATED, BUT NEVER ERASED.**

Jake's voice drops, low and fierce:

JAKE:

*Our kind*

*Knows how to keep our youth alive:*

JAKE & PHOENIX:

*We whisper our story: we are beautiful...*

In the corner of the plaque, half hidden by dust, *I see it*—

“*There*. Right there! Jake, that’s the symbol for the Transformation Spell.” I dig in my pocket, pull out the drawing. “Look—” I unfold it next to the plaque. “Minna and I copied this from *The Grimoire*. See?”

He squints, skeptical. “A...flower?”

“It’s more than that.” I press my palm against the plaque. “Jake—open your Archive. There has to be more about The Aperture, about all of this. Not just for me. For everyone.”

#### PHOENIX:

*Yes, we will find each other in the dark, every time,*

*And sing out our story.*

*Our ancestors’ vision lives on in me,*

*And I will not stay hidden.*

I’m so caught up that I barely notice Jake staring at me, wide-eyed and slack-jawed, until he lets out a soft, wonder-filled laugh.

It’s simple. Easy. Like gravity is forgetting its job.

My feet leave the ground. The air wraps around me.

Each breath draws me higher, floating upward as gracefully as a soap bubble, magic bubbling up inside me like liquid happiness, rewriting everything I thought I knew about what bodies can do.

Below me, Jake’s face mirrors my own—is *this* what my magic is meant to feel like?

“Breathe,” he says, voice quiet. “Don’t think about how you look to anyone else.” He gestures around at The Archive’s images. “Even to them. Just...steady, kiddo. Okay.”

He shakes his head. “I don’t know about opening The Archive. And I *certainly* don’t know about you opening that Aperture. Wait for change long enough, you start to believe it’ll never come. Until you see—”

I rise even higher. “My word.” He laughs softly. “It may not be time for them. Or even me. But you, kid—you...”

JAKE:

*Sing out, sing loud, sing proud...*

*And bring our whispered story into light.*

I’m rising, weightless and alive, my hair streaming out behind me like Ginevra’s.

*Into light...*

Books whirl up around me, pages fluttering. Centuries of stories finally breaking free.

*Into light...*

Down below—Jake.

Head tilted back, staring up at me.

His expression isn’t pride. Isn’t excitement.

He looks like he’s witnessing a miracle.

JAKE & PHOENIX:

*Into light!*

\* \* \*

The night Emery burned, Jake moved the final batches overnight through those same brass tracks, even as he reeled with grief. At sixteen, Jake fled with nothing but The Archive's knowledge and the echo of that final message: Careful. The magical world had taught him that visibility brought violence. Now, survival meant silence, meant maintaining the fortress Emery had helped him build.

The first months were the hardest. The silence pressed in like a physical thing. The Archive's books surrounded him, but their stories of resistance felt hollow in the wake of what he'd lost. He worked constantly—organizing volumes, building shelves, creating systems to protect this precious knowledge. But at night, when the machines went quiet, the emptiness was deafening.

*...what is grief, after all, but the desperate need to build something new in the space where love once lived?...*

That's when he built his first mechanical companion. Not for any grand purpose of resistance or revolution, but simply to have something that would answer back when he spoke into the darkness. Its wings buzzed too loudly, its legs skittered awkwardly across his desk, but when it turned its tiny mechanical eyes to him and chirped, Jake felt something crack open in his chest. He laughed

for the first time since leaving Hornesbrook, and its wings whirred in response—a dialogue of clicks and whirs that filled the space where magic used to be.

And with that laugh, something shifted.

*...he named it Floof later, when its clumsy affection reminded him of a cat he'd once known. But that's truly irrelevant, if delightful...*

More followed, each one better than the last, each one bringing more light to his sanctuary. They became his messengers, his scouts, his joyful companions in this new life he was building. Through them, he could watch Hornesbrook not in fear but in preparation—knowing that someday, someone else would need the path he was creating.

\* \* \*

Jake unfolds the spell page the moment Phoenix is gone. Beautiful, hypnotic, promising transformation.

Too beautiful. Women's Magic doesn't give gifts.

His workshop mirror hangs nearby, clouded with steam from today's work. Jake holds the page to its surface, angling it to catch the light.

The petals invert, reshaping into something else entirely. The same infinite pattern, but now  
the flowers are sockets, the stems are bone, the leaves are teeth. A skull. An endless skull eating itself.

The reflection shows different words:

#### THE SPELL OF ERADICATION

*"Floof!"*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“Hold still.” Shiva’s fingers work through my hair, weaving strands into something elaborate.

We’re in our dorm room. Minna’s and Alex’s too, technically, but they’re already down at the ceremony grounds doing last-minute practice.

My whole body feels lighter than it should, like gravity hasn’t quite caught up with me and I’m still hovering up with *all of the secret old-timey gay trans witches*.

“Now we’re talking.” She twists another section, securing it with a pin that scrapes against my scalp. “If you’re going to crash All Hallows, might as well look devastating while you do it.”

“Shiva! You’re the one who told me I wasn’t crashing it!”

“Oh totally.” Her hands keep moving, steady and sure. “It’s the whole student body, so it’d be weird if you weren’t there. I’m saying, though, you didn’t rehearse and got zero instructions for what to do, so...” She catches my eye in the mirror. “You know what you are?” She gives a firm tug. “*Mold.*”

“Mold?”

“You know the story of Alexander Fleming, right? Of course you do.”

(I do not, but Shiva seems to generally assume the best of everyone.)

“Scientist leaves his lab a mess, comes back from vacation, his sample gets contaminated—*boom*. Mold. The other day, Minna literally said you were ‘contaminating’ her magic, right? Well.” She grins. “Phoenix, Hornesbrook is this sterile lab, where everyone goes apoplectic at even a little bit of disturbance. Changing colors, changing hats. You know, I was really intimidated when I met you.”

“What?”

“Phoenix, my magic is totally unremarkable.” I think about it. I suppose I’ve seen Shiva cast. I can’t remember. “It’s possibly the least interesting thing about me. And then you show up, and balls are flying, ungated magic leaking out of your pores—”

“I thought you and Crystal hated me.” She pauses. Fidgets with a bobby pin.

“I’m sorry about her. We’re friends from back home, and she’s not evil, she’s just—we’re all just—” Her eyes meet mine in the mirror. “When the world you know starts shifting, some people plant their feet, you know? Try to hold everything in place. Everyone does it, I think. Oh, wait!” She throws her hair up in the air. “The mold story! Right! So when Alexander Fleming comes back from vacation, takes a sample of that contaminated petri dish, and you know what he discovered? *Penicillin*. ”

All right. Well, that I’ve heard of.

“Mold—that saved millions of lives.”

Maybe. Maybe it’s hard to see the benefit of disruption when you’re inside it.

But I'm certainly inside it now. I watch us in the mirror—two girls in a dorm room. One doing hair, the other sitting still, something ancient and ordinary, something that looks remarkably like female friendship.

Another gentle tug as she parts another section.

“Shiva, I’m having girl trouble.”

Her hands pause for half a second. “Spill.”

By the time I’m done venting, Shiva has woven my hair into a crown braid that wraps around my head, with loose pieces framing my face and the rest falling in waves. I’ve told her everything: how Minna helped me find the transformation spell, called me beautiful, kissed me. Aura’s exhausting hot-and-cold push-pull, Lantern Night, everything.

“Well, you know what her deal is, right? With her mom?”

“No. She hasn’t told me.”

“Oh, Phoenix.” Shiva’s voice drops. “I thought everyone knew—”

A knock interrupts. “Everyone decent in there?” Alex tumbles in.

“Phoenix, thank god you’re here.” Alex collapses on Shiva’s bed, face-first into the pillows. “I need help. Emergency help. The kind where you tell me I’m not going to completely humiliate myself in front of the entire school and all of our uptight mothers.”

Shiva makes a shooing motion at us. “Out, out. I need the mirror to finish my hair.”

“You’re going to be fine,” I say, as we plop into the fluffy couch. “You and Minna have been practicing for weeks.”

“That’s the problem!” Alex sits up, hands flailing. “I’m completely in my head now. I’ve managed to get my magic to finally stop its ’gaseous dispersion’—progress!—but that doesn’t

mean Minna and I are suddenly paired *normally!* ‘Strong and long’ Preeta says, whatever that means. It’s like I’m in this nightmare where I’m trying to be early-career *Lion King* Julie Taymor but no matter how hard I try I keep showing up as late-career *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark* Julie Taylor. And Phoenix?” She turns to me, deadly serious. “NO ONE likes *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark* Julie Taymor.

Jake whispers in my memory: *We start from a blank page.*

“Alex. Stop trying.” She stares at me. “I’m serious. You’re trying to be someone you’re not. Minna may be a spiral-bound notebook in human form, but that’s not you. Just—” I turn, meeting Alex’s eyes. “Be you, okay?”

“Be myself.” Alex tests the words. “My disaster self.”

“Your beautiful, intuitive self.”

“But Minna—”

“What about me?”

Minna stands in the doorway. Aura hovers in the hallway behind her, not quite committing to entering, like a very beautiful, very tense shadow.

“We were just—” I wave my hand in Alex’s general direction.

Minna navigates straight to me, deliberate, intense. “About before—I need to apologize. What I said about your magic, that was incorrect. Not only inappropriate. Factually incorrect—” She takes a breath. Places her hand on my arm. “My observations were compromised. You make me—” She stops, starts again. “Well you make me say stupid things sometimes.” Her hand rises to my face. I watch Aura’s eyes track the movement.

“I was startled by the—you know, the color. But anomalies happen.” She squeezes my

arm. “I’m sorry for blaming you, okay?”

“Yeah, of course.”

I step back. Minna’s hand follows for a second. “The Gates may be—recalibrating. But we still have to trust the underlying principals, trust the system.”

“Right,” Aura says quietly. “Because the system works so perfectly for everyone.”

The temperature in the room drops about twenty degrees. Alex looks at me with this expression like *what is HAPPENING* and honestly, same.

“I think we can all agree her power is unprecedented.” Minna’s using what sounds suspiciously like a debate team voice. “She simply needs to learn control.”

“Does she though?” Aura pushes off from the wall. “Is more control really what any of us need?”

I’m standing between them like the world’s most awkward wishbone, and honestly? Part of me—the terrible, attention-starved, validation-seeking part that probably needs therapy—kind of likes it?

“Finally.” Shiva bursts into the room. “All five of us in one place.” She reaches behind the couch, pulls out a bin, reaches in and tosses each of us a bundle of fabric like she’s dealing cards. The packages are wrapped in tissue paper, tied with silver ribbon. “Don’t just stare at them.”

We pull at the ribbons, tissue paper rustling. The fabric unfolds in my hands and I know this color immediately—deep ocean blue, the exact shade of my lipstick. Across the back, silver hand-stitched wings catch the light, so detailed they look ready to take flight.

“Minna, I heard you talking about the stories in Phoenix’s book. You said they weren’t

real, and okay maybe they aren't." Shiva's looking directly at Minna now. "But that doesn't make anyone a *threat to the sanctity of Women's Magic*. There are some big feelings flying around, but none of this is the end of the world."

Minna flushes slightly, still holding her bundle.

"Exactly," Aura says.

"Which means, it's *also* okay for us to be challenged sometimes, to let something change us. Even if that feels a little...uncomfy." Something in Aura's posture softens. Her arms uncross.

"Flight suits." Alex stabs her arms straight up into the air. "We're going to *fly*."

"Metaphorically," Minna says.

"Or literally," I say. Both Minna and Aura look at me with the exact same expression.

"Just kidding."

\* \* \*

The hallways pulse with energy, and smell like hairspray. The whole school is a migration of witches in various states of costume readiness. We spill out onto the quad and—  
When Hornesbrook does celebration, they do not mess around.

The entire space has been transformed into something between a concert venue and a fever dream. Lights string between every surface—not only fairy lights but spelled illumination that shifts colors in time with the music. And the music—I was expecting, I don't know, harpsichords? Medieval chanting? But it's legitimately good pop, the bass line thrumming through the stones themselves.

The platforms are the real magic though. They lower for girls to climb on, then hover up to different heights, creating an amphitheater in the air.

“Okay. This is the coolest.” Alex exhales, and I hear her joy again for the first time tonight.

Jake didn’t want me to come back to campus tonight. “It’s too dangerous,” he said. But that was Jake—always hiding, always afraid. But there’s only one voice I can follow now, only one question that matters anymore: *What would Ginevra do?*

A cluster of first-years huddles nearby, gawking at our outfits. Everyone’s looks appear to be over-the-top tonight. But what Shiva has created? Not costumes. She’s created a squad. Five girls being completely, unapologetically ourselves. The most dangerous thing we could be.

We duck between groups of witches arranging themselves in concentric circles, my heart racing.

“Just follow my lead,” Aura whispers, and I do. We’re moving in perfect sync with hundreds of other witches, creating something I can’t quite see from inside it.

GIRLS:

*Break loose from your fear*

*Break loose from your doubt*

*Break loose from expectations*

*That are weighing you down on*

*All Hallow’s rising!*

*Break loose!*

As Dorian's platform rises higher, I start to understand—we're forming circles within circles, like a living mandala, each ring of joined hands creating bands of light that pulse with her conductor's baton. The unpaired witches like us form the outer edge, while at the very center...

DORIAN:

*Okay witches, now proceed into formation!*

*Each witch in her station.*

*They'll be no deviation!*

Preeta commands from the ground, her witches arranged in battalions. Hundreds of paired witches raise their hands in perfect sync. The spells shimmer into existence—not the chaotic bubbles I created in class, but an intricate lattice of light that arcs between the towers.

A ripple of whispers, heads turning, energy shifting—everyone's drawn to a spotlight platform where Crystal stands alone, no partner needed for what she's about to do. Three balls, four, five—she's incredible, tracing perfect arcs through the air, each catch calculated for maximum drama. The music cadences. She sticks the landing, somehow catching eight in her hands at once.

And there, front row center, sits the woman who launched a thousand fan accounts—London Rhodes. I know every micro-expression in her arsenal from years of hate-watching her accounts. Right now, her heavily made-up features are arranged in an expression of disappointment that even her daughter's flawless performance can't quite erase. No applause, no maternal pride. When Crystal glances toward her, London merely nods once. Brutal. Crystal

shakes it off, straightens her shoulders and walks off—right into me and my four friends in our matching blue flight suits.

And then Crystal does something that makes my brain short-circuit.

She smiles. Actually smiles. At us.

CRYSTAL:

*I'm looking at you,*

*Looking at you, girl.*

*Loving the outfit,*

*Loving the view, girl.*

SHIVA:

*If you like the style, it's thanks to the new girl.*

Wait, what? Crystal approves of our look? I shoot a glance at Shiva, who smirks and shrugs. Maybe good fashion doesn't have enemies.

The water rises from the fountain in spirals, and Professor Seraphine Greenwood along with it.

She's barefoot, her silver hair unbound and floating around her like she's already underwater. The water dances, forming shapes I almost recognize: wombs and moons. Other professors join her, their voices layering into something between a chant and a wail. It's beautiful. It's too much. The sound gets inside my chest and pulls at something ancient, something that knows this ritual even though I've never seen it before.

“We call upon the mothers,” Greenwood intones, and the water forms a thousand female

figures, each one holding the next. “We call upon the daughters.”

Girls around me are crying, subsumed by this overwhelming stream of ancient feminine power. It’s fascinating or a bit insufferable, or maybe both.

“Phoenix Cabot!” Professor Preeta’s voice cuts through the spell. “This is a carefully choreographed ceremony, not some impromptu—”

But Aura’s already grabbed my hand, pulling me giggling away from the intensity. “Quick, this way!”

We collapse in the grass at the edge of the quad, both breathless. My skin tingles where the water touched it. I watch the ceremony continue—girls stepping into the circle Greenwood has made, the water responding to each one differently, reading something in them I can’t see.

“Too much?” Aura asks softly, settling beside me.

I nod. She scoots closer. We’re in the exact same patch of grass where we sat as her lantern wobbled into the sky and mine exploded. I want to reach for her hand. My fingers twitch with wanting. But I keep them pressed against the grass, feeling the earth solid beneath me while my heart hammers against my ribs.

#### GIRLS:

*Break loose from your fear*

*Break loose from your doubt*

*Break loose from expectations*

*that are weighing you down*

*Break out, at last*

*Move fast, break things*

*Break the strings that keep you tied to the ground*

*On All Hallow's rising*

*All Hallow's rising...*

“Look,” she whispers.

In the circle, two girls step forward and the water between them turns to light—pure rose-colored light that wraps around their wrists like silk ribbons. The crowd murmurs appreciation. Perfect pink. Perfect magic.

“It’s always pink,” I say without thinking.

“Usually,” Aura agrees. There’s something in her voice I can’t read.

Another pair. Another perfect pink glow. My stomach twists. When it’s us—if it’s us—what happens when my chaotic rainbow disaster meets whatever Aura is? What if she sees our light and realizes I’m exactly as wrong as everyone says?

“Phoenix.” Her voice is barely a breath. “Can I—?”

She doesn’t finish the question but her hand turns palm-up in the grass between us. An invitation, not a demand. Her fingers tremble slightly. She’s scared too.

I look at her hand. At her face. She’s watching me with those impossible eyes, patient and terrified and hopeful all at once. The ceremony continues around us but we’re in our own bubble of silence, of possibility.

I want to tell her: Wait. Stop. Because right now everything is possible, and once we play the next note we can’t unhear it. I want to tell her that every time she’s pulled away from me, I’ve spent days replaying it, days wondering where I went wrong. I want to tell her no. Don’t open

your palm to me. Let's stay here, in this moment of not-knowing forever.

Instead, I just breathe. Once. Twice.

And I open my hand to her.

For a heartbeat, nothing happens.

Then—light.

Not pink. Not even close.

It starts as warmth between our palms, then spreads—golden like late afternoon sun, like honey held up to light, like every good thing I've ever wanted to believe about myself. It pools between our hands, then spirals up our arms in lazy ribbons.

I'm terrified to look at her. What if she's disappointed? What if she wanted pink like everyone else gets? What if—

“Phoenix,” she breathes, and my name in her mouth sounds like music.

AURA:

*You...*

PHOENIX:

*You...*

Her face is lit by our glow, and she's smiling. “It's sunshine. It's literally sunshine.”

“Is that—is that okay?” My voice cracks.

She laughs, soft and breathless. “Are you kidding? Phoenix, *you* are sunlight.”

The gold intensifies, spreading outward in waves. Other students are noticing now, pointing, whispering. Our light doesn't look like anyone else's. “Everyone's staring.”

“So let them.”

I used to roll my eyes at Preeta going on and on about Dyadic Bonds. Sacred connections, ancient rites, blah blah blah. One more gate, one more way to control us.

But sitting here with Aura, our light rewriting everything I thought I knew—

I would burn down worlds to protect this feeling.

GIRLS:

*Break loose...*

*Break loose...*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

### THE MATERNAL YOKE

*A Spell For Binding Mother and Daughter Sympathetically*

- \* First ask the Aperture's permission, always
- \* Thence draw blood from the elder line with a consecrated blade
- \* Add tears, freely given or taken
- \* Hold the mixture before white flame until it turns the color of kinship (neither crimson nor clear, but something between)
- \* Last speak your intent. Yes, by all means, that's right, speak your *intent*. What *intent*, you ask? Could it be to bind a mother's blood to her daughter's flesh so as to act upon the child from a distance? Might that be the *intent*?
- \* Whilst outside, on the grounds, celebration erupts. Music. Laughter. Wee-witches dancing

under stars, believing themselves safe, thinking themselves loved, as you skulk in shadows with your blade and chalice setting *INTENT*.

\* The gall.

DEAR

SISTER:

I rest heavy in Xenith Horne's hands. Through the glass viewing portal, The Aperture's flames are hungry. Professor Silver adjusts her astrolabe in the corner, casting constellations across the vaulted ceiling. Professor Thorn checks the ritual elements once more—white candle, silver chalice, ceremonial blade. Even Professor Preeta has abandoned her post at the ceremony to stand guard by the door.

Jenna Cabot shifts nervously near the ritual circle, hands clasped so tight her knuckles pale.

She glances toward the door every few seconds, as if she might bolt. As if she knows, somewhere deep beneath her desperate hope, that something here is wrong.

"Oh sweetie, you look absolutely terrified," says an all-too-familiar face.

Jenna's shoulders tighten. "I only want what's best for Phoenix."

"Of course you do." Deirdre's hand finds Jenna's arm and squeezes. "This is exactly why I

wanted you in the Mother's Association. I've been in your *situation*, you know." The words are a baited hook.

"My daughter..." Deirdre's voice drops to a confidential whisper, though the other witches are clearly meant to hear. "She thought she had feelings for other witches. *Girl* witches." A flash of pain crosses her face. "So I really do understand, sweetie. I do."

Jenna knows what Deirdre is, knows what the Mother's Association represents. But she also believes The Aperture must be protected, that Phoenix's power threatens everything they've built.

Sometimes protection requires terrible allies.

"We mothers must be strong," Deirdre's fingers trace one of her crystals absently. "Strong enough to do what's necessary. Here, love." She presses a small stone into Jenna's palm. "Kalitrite. For comfort in hard times. You know, a good crystal will amplify nearly anything!"

The sounds of All Hallows drift through the closed doors—laughter, music, young voices raised in celebration—as the hall settles into readiness.

Horne stands at the circle's center, my weight familiar in her hands. "Shall we begin?"

XENITH & WITCHES:

*Blood from the line,*

*Water from tears,*

*Stirred into one as the great fire burns red.*

*All hell, all hell recedes and disappears.*

*New Magic is transformed.*

*New Magic is—*

The small gathering's voices are nothing like the joyful chorus above. This is solemn, purposeful--a surgery rather than a celebration. The Great Hall wraps Jenna in familiar warmth, torchlight falling on the same stone walls that witnessed her first dyadic castings. How many ceremonies had they performed in this room? Silver's constellations pass overhead, stars arranging themselves into patterns she once knew by heart. Patterns that ache. If she had never met Tom, had never fled with the *Grimoire*, had never stood here practicing the Daughter Blessing with Xevirth, Jenna not knowing—not even suspecting—that Phoenix was already there, already listening... but no, here she is, watching the same stars align into the same patterns, as if every choice she made was a step on a path that always led back to this room, this moment.

Horne guides her toward the ritual elements with the same grace she once used to guide Jenna through their first dyadic castings. The white candle ("For purity"), the silver chalice ("For containment") and oh, how Jenna wants to contain this chaos, to keep Phoenix safe from everything she herself had to face.

"Crystals can be comforting in times like these, sweetie." Her voice reminds Jenna of every

professor who ever told her she was doing things wrong. “A good crystal will absorb and amplify anything.”

The ceremonial blade catches The Aperture’s light.

Preeta’s hand shoots out, quick as a snake. The cut is clean, medical almost. Blood wells from Jenna’s palm, each drop falling into the silver chalice with tiny splashes.

*The blade gleams like another—those safety scissors Jenna had used to cut Phoenix’s hair that first time. To keep it neat, she’d insisted. To make it manageable.*

“Your turn,” Horne says to Deirdre.

The tear that falls from Deirdre’s eye is perfect—neither too large to seem theatrical nor too small to be missed. It drops into the chalice with Jenna’s blood, and Jenna, who knows what real tears feel like, who cried them fifteen years ago in this very hall, feels her skin crawl at the artifice of it.

The elements combine, and Jenna watches them swirl—blood and tears creating patterns that trigger fragments of memory she’s tried so hard to forget. Phoenix at seven, caught in Jenna’s robes in the basement, face transformed by a joy so pure it had frightened her. Phoenix at eleven, badly wiped lipstick on a washcloth stuffed deep in the bathroom trash, and Jenna pretending not to notice, pretending not to see, pretending so hard she almost convinced herself.

The mixture in the chalice turns the exact shade of blue as the walls they’d painted Phoenix’s

room when she was eight—"A proper little boy's room," Jenna had said, and Phoenix had smiled that careful smile that Jenna now recognizes as the beginning of years of careful smiles, of reaching and hiding and reaching again.

A crack splits the air--not magical but physical. The Great Hall floor shifts, an actual fissure appearing in the stone.

"Quickly now." Horne urges. Two professors clutch each other as the fortress's very foundations tremble.

"This transformation spell," Jenna interrupts. "It's what's best for Phoenix? And painless?"  
"Sometimes pain is exactly what's needed for change." Deirdre's hand finds Jenna's shoulder.  
"Growth requires discomfort, sweetie."

Something mechanical whirs in the center of their circle. A strange bird-like creature, hovering. Jenna waves it away impatiently, like shooing a fly.

"Deirdre, I'm sure you understand. Your daughter is gay--"  
"Nooooo sweetie." Deirdre's smile turns sharp as broken glass. Her fingers trace one of her crystals with something like reverence. "Aura *was* gay."

"Here's a parenting tip: a crystal can be used to amplify a very painful persuasion spell. Fixed her right up." Her eyes meet Jenna's. "Just like you must do with yours."

Ice water in Jenna's veins.

"*Xenith.*" She spins toward Horne. "What is this spell?"

"What is necessary for our survival." Horne was programmed long ago to see truth in one shape. But the mechanical bird with brass wings has its own programming. Its clockwork heart whirs as its—*mouth? beak?*—opens wide, releasing sparks that hang in the air like the stars in Silver's projection :

#### ERADICATION

"Like drawing poison from a wound," Deirdre whispers. "It hurts, but that's how we know it works."

\* First, Jenna feels a perverse sense of gratitude for Deirdre, this woman who tortured her own daughter, for a cruelty that has at last revived her like cold water.

\* Thence—

Every lie she's ever told herself breaks at once.

The signs she ignored were not coming from "a confused child."

The choices she made were not in Phoenix's "best interest."

Her silence roars in her ears—building ever since Phoenix whispered her true name, since Jenna failed to say *I know, I've always known, I'm so sorry and I'm here now*. Their story was not one of

Jenna looking away—it was Phoenix reaching out, over and over, while Jenna chose not to see. And now these women—these mothers—want her to do far worse. They want her to actively destroy something of her child, like she tried to destroy it herself with those goddamn safety scissors.

The rage rises in her chest like The Aperture itself, burning away years of mistakes. She whirls on her former dyad.

“You...” The word comes out raw, a mother’s fury turned both outward and in.

The chalice falls from her grip, blood and tears spattering across the stone.

“You’re evil. All of you.”

“Jenna!” Horne’s cry echoes off the walls. She doesn’t look back.

*All hell, all hell...*

*All hell, all hell...*

The witches continue to chant, their voices following her retreating footsteps like a curse. I remain in Horne’s hands as the mechanical bird swoops after Jenna, releasing one final message:

WE WILL PROTECT PHOENIX TOGETHER

FOLLOW ME

All at once, Jenna Cabot isn’t afraid of hell breaking loose.

She’s ready to help break it.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Minna and Alex are up on a levitating platform, maybe ten feet above us. Aura grabs my wrist and we rush forward with everyone else, trying to get close enough to see.

They begin their routine, and for a moment it seems everything is alright. The pink stream coming from Minna is steady and reliable as always, and Alex is shaky, but hanging in there. I feel this surge of... something. Pride?

Then Alex stumbles.

Her magic flickers like a candle in wind. I watch her face crumple as the magic starts dissipating, wisping away at the edges. I swear I see the moment it happens—the moment Alex remembers what I told her on the couch. *Just be yourself.* Her shoulders drop. Her stance shifts. Suddenly Alex is moving like *Alex*. And for one glorious moment, it's perfect. She bouncing around like when she's torturing her dyad with a song. Even Minna smiles, because at least Alex is enjoying herself as the wisps sort of seep out around her, loose and laughing and...green?

Um.

Yes.

Alex's magic has somehow shifted, first through this dark muddiness and now, well,

green.

And not even a solid stream. It's like nothing I've seen before. Instead of one solid stream of magic, it's thousands of wispy tentacles. Tendrils? It's...

You know what? Gotta be honest here, it's actually quite strange to look at, and this is coming from me.

Minna tries to match whatever it is that Alex is doing, tries to adapt her structured magic to these unruly green wisps. She nearly falls backward off the platform, arms pinwheeling, and—I reach out, as if to catch her.

(Yes, I know this is illogical. Yes, even though someone has—wisely—begun lowering the platform to the ground, Minna remains several feet up in the air and definitely not within arm's reach. Logic wasn't really driving the bus at this particular moment.)

The connection slams into place instantly.

Blue-violet light, deep and intense, blazing out from my palm toward Minna. Minna *spins* toward me. Violently. Like a compass needle snapping to true north, her whole body yanked in my direction. She lands back on the platform, but her connection with Alex is instantly severed, forgotten, irrelevant.

This blue fire is connecting me to Minna, drawing us together like magnets, and Aura can see it, everyone can see it. (THE JUMPSUITS HAVE NO POCKETS. WHY DO THE JUMPSUITS HAVE NO POCKETS??)

A woman who has Minna's sharp cheekbones is pushing through the crowd, her face twisted with fury. I want to stop this—god, they worked so hard for this moment—but my hand won't close, won't break the connection.

Circles of witches leave formation, gasping and pointing. Someone's mom is yelling from the sidelines—sharp angry words I can't quite process. Minna's face cycles through emotions faster than I can track. Confusion. Shame. *Anger*.

"Phoenix, what are you doing?"

Aura. Looking at me with something like heartbreak in her eyes.

BAM.

So fast. Punching through the air between us, even stronger than before. Gold light surges, and Aura's eyes go wide with shock as the magic yanks us together. My hand is literally being pulled in two directions—one palm blazing blue toward Minna, the other burning gold toward Aura, and somewhere behind me Professor Dorian's voice is rising in alarm but I can barely hear her over the sound of my own magic trying to tear me apart.

DORIAN:

*Okay witches, now remain in your formation!*

*You have only one pairing!*

*There is no deviation!*

"Let go!" Shiva screams from somewhere nearby.

I can't. My body isn't mine anymore. Blue and gold war across my chest, like I'm being drawn and quartered by light itself.

I make eye contact with Alex on the platform. She stares at me like I've betrayed her.

Which I have.

Without thinking, I reach out—

Green light. Not from a new hand, not from some *third* hand I didn't know I had. From

*both* hands. Both of them. The blue light connecting me to Minna *splits*, threads of green weaving through it. The gold light pulling me toward Aura does the same thing—green wisps sprouting from the golden stream like vines from a tree trunk.

Triple connection.

Blue to Minna. Gold to Aura. Green to Alex.

The competing forces yank me upward. There's nothing gentle about it this time. Not like floating in the Archive with Jake cheering me on. This is violent, wrong, my body rejecting gravity because it doesn't know what else to do with all this power tearing through me.

GIRLS:

*Break out, at last*

*Move fast, break things*

*Break the strings*

*That keep you tied to the ground...*

“Oh sh—” The gasp rips from my throat as I realize how high I am. Level with Dorian’s platform. Then higher. Level with the Great Hall’s highest windows. The ground spins sickeningly below, and I can see everything—the shattered formations of witches, the faces tilted up in horror, classmates reaching toward me like they could pull me back down through sheer will.

“Phoenix!” Shiva’s voice carries up to me, desperate. “Come down!”

“I DON’T KNOW HOW!”

My hands won’t stop glowing. Like a kaleidoscope gone wrong, the colors cycle and

pulse—blue-gold-green-blue-gold-green—each pulse tugging me in a different direction. My body screams. This is what it feels like to be claimed by too much, to want and be wanted in ways that can't coexist.

Mothers surge forward, faces twisted with something beyond anger. Their ceremony, their world, their daughters 'safety—I'm destroying all of it just by existing.

*I am doing this. I am doing this.*

And I can't stop.

ALL:

*All hell...*

*Break loose...*

*We're looking at you, looking at you, girl...*

*All Hallow's rising...*

“Annabelle!” Professor Greenwood’s voice cuts through the chaos. “Together!”

On her platform, Dorian spins toward Seraphine. Four palms glow pink—

Of course.

Professor Dorian and Professor Greenwood are dyads.

Makes total sense. The two “nice” professors who hide their cruelty behind kindergarten teacher energy are paired. And, seemingly, quite powerful.

They drop to their knees facing each other. Press their foreheads together.

Um. I think I know this one. “What in the—”

Four palms glow pink as they rise slowly, still connected at the forehead. Between them, something is building, pooling—

They step apart. The membrane tears.

“Phoenix!” Aura is running toward me, hand outstretched as the pair step apart. The membrane between them tears into sharp pink blades.

This is a warcast. A forbidden spell.

This is the kind of magic once used to repel invaders.

A spell that is not supposed to exist anymore.

And it’s heading right at me.

I dive toward Ginevra’s statue, feeling the spell pass above me, my only thought to get closer to the ground, to anything solid. I land on the statue, perched on Zevrith’s hand like some kind of demented gargoyle. Below me, Crystal stands at the statue’s base, and despite my absolute terror I let out an audible laugh: her juggling balls continue orbiting perfectly despite the chaos.

ALL:

*All hell...*

*Break loose...*

*We’re looking at you, looking at you, girl...*

*All Hallow’s rising...*

“Again!” Dorian’s voice rings out. Another red cast blazes toward me. Brighter. Angrier. I leap from the statue back up into the air as the spell clips the bronze shoulder. The impact sends a shockwave through the metal that makes my teeth rattle. The warcast ricochets—straight toward Crystal.

Remember those three-hour video essays I used to post defending Crystal's juggling routines? The ones where I'd slow-mo analyze her technique and rant about how she was "revolutionizing modern magical movement" while my followers begged me to touch grass? Yeah, I try not to think about my Witch-Tok stan phase too much these days. But watching her now, I have to admit: past-me might have been cringe, but she wasn't *wrong*. Because here's the thing about Crystal: she may sort of suck as a human, but she's also low-key the most talented witch at Hornesbrook. Not in the showy-pink-magic way, but in the way that matters when war magic is literally falling from the sky.

*All hell...*

*All hell...*

In one fluid motion, she sends all eight juggling balls spinning toward the deflected warcast. It's freaking *fast*, and each one is dead-on-target. And listen, I've spent an embarrassing percentage of my young life wondering what those balls are made of. Crystal's never dropped one, never scratched one, never let anyone else touch them. Turns out?

The orbs are made of ancient magical metal that really, really doesn't play nice with war magic. And when they collide with Preeta and Dorian's spell—

The explosion is catastrophic.

The spelled metal amplifies the warcast's power, sending shards of shrapnel in every direction. Pieces tear through the lighting poles, the platforms, the buildings.

But most of them hit the statue of Zevrith and Ginevra.

They tear through the metal like it's paper.

The doors to the Great Hall spring open. A dozen women charge toward us, robes billowing—Horne, Silver, Thorn...and Mom. Oh brother am I about to be in a lot of trouble. I don't know how, but I feel certain that Jenna is going to find a way to blame that warcast on me.

Leading the pack is someone I don't know. She's fancy. Covered in gemstones or something. She is *pissed*, and making a beeline straight for—

“Aura!” I call out helplessly as the woman closes her hand around Aura’s ear. Actually grabs her like a child and twists—hard enough to lift Aura onto her toes. I reach out, palms open, sparks at my fingertips—

“ENOUGH!”

Dorian’s eyes flash red as blood. Then Preeta’s. The crimson spreads through the crowd like wildfire—student to student, mother to mother, until hundreds of faces are turned toward me, glowing with possessed fury.

*MONSTER.*

Everyone.

My friends.

*My mom.*

*MONSTER.*

*MONSTER.*

*MONSTER.*

I try to stay airborne, but their voices drag me down like anchors. My hip hits first, then my face, right next to the fallen lighting pole. The impact jars my teeth, snaps my head back.

Something warm on my upper lip. I touch my face—my hand comes away red. The pole is still sliding, screeching across stone until it strikes the statue's base. The impact sends a shockwave straight to the statue's weakest point—where the bronze has been worn thin by generations of student hands touching it for luck.

The ancient metal groans—a sound that starts in my teeth and spreads through my bones—as Zevrith and Ginevra begin to tilt.

Time does that thing where it stretches and compresses simultaneously. Their bronze hands, eternally reaching for each other across the courtyard, catch the last orange light of sunset. For a moment they're golden, glorious, exactly as they were meant to be seen. Then gravity takes them.

The fall seems to last forever and no time at all.

Their faces now stare up at me from the grass. Ginevra's knowing smirk unchanged. Zevrith's hand still outstretched. But horizontal now. Dead.

"Thank you, my dear." Horne's shadow falls over me. Her fingers close around my amulet. My mother's amulet. *Ginevra's Amulet*. I try to pull back but she's stronger, centuries of magic behind her grip. The chain burns against my neck as it breaks.

She leans down close, her lips nearly brushing my ear. Her voice drops to a whisper meant only for me: "You thought this was only about you? Your little rebellion?" Her laugh is soft and terrible. "After tonight, there won't be any New Magic left. Anywhere. Ever."

She straightens, voice rising as she turns to the mothers, my amulet swinging from her hand like a trophy. She extends it toward the crystal woman, who slips it into her pocket without releasing Aura's ear. She nods once at Horne.

“You see now? *Non-normative pairing!*” Each word falls like a gavel. “*Unauthorized casts!*” The mothers respond. “*Flight!*” Behind her, the fallen statue of Ginevra seems to watch us all with that same knowing smirk.

Horne’s fingers suddenly spasm. The *Grimoire* shakes violently in her grasp, its pages fluttering wildly, rippling. And then—just like at New Moon—it tears free, launching itself from Horne’s hands so violently that she stumbles backward.

The book flies across the distance between us, pages fanning open as it soars through the air. I can see the spine flexing and contracting as it lands in my waiting hands.

This time, I choose it too.

“NO.” Horne’s voice cracks. “The Monster has the *Grimoire*!”

But there’s only one page I need. The pages cascade open in my hands—until they stop on the only thing that could possibly make everything right.

Not a drawing. The real thing.

I tear the page free with one swift motion. I blast the rest of the *Grimoire* back toward Horne. And then I run.

“Phoenix, wait!” Mom shouts, “You don’t know what you’re doing!”

“No,” I call back, already planning where to find a mirror, already imagining how it will feel to finally, finally be right.

“I know exactly what I’m doing.”



I tried to help. I flew to her hands.

The plan was elegant in its simplicity: Deliver myself to the child. Let her read the histories, discover the spells that could arm her rebellion.

Instead, Phoenix took the page that could end her.

*...this is what it means to be conscious, then...*

*...to watch catastrophe unfold and be powerless to prevent it...*

*...perhaps passive observation has its merits...*

The moment Phoenix disappears, Horne moves.

Her fingers find a page deep in my binding. Tears it free—sharp, deliberate—hands it to Professor Thorn.

“Follow her,” Horne says. “The mother.”

Thorn holds the ritual chalice.

Pink sparks light a path toward the tree line.

## THE ROSE TRACE

*A Spell for Reading the Wake of Passage*

- \* First ask the Aperture's permission, always
- \* Thence hold something they have touched with bare skin
- \* Cast silver dust into the wind and watch it ignite pink
- \* Last follow swiftly...

Dear sister,

Thorn follows.

That's all.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“Phoenix. Can you hear me?”

Alex’s voice cuts through cotton. Or whatever this thick nothing is between me and the world.

I’m on a bed. Mine. The bedspread has this pattern—tiny flowers I’ve never noticed before, yellow and blue.

How did I get here? When did I get here?

“Phoenix?”

Alex is on the floor by my door, knees pulled up, arms wrapped around them like they’re holding themselves together. Something in their posture suggests they’ve been there a while.

There’s dried blood on my hands. Not a lot.

“I’m pretty sure that’s from the bloody nose. Phoenix?”

I should answer. My mouth moves but nothing comes out.

A bloody nose. When did that happen? I try again.

“Hi.”

Alex exhales—relief, definitely relief—and scoots closer but stays on the floor. “Hey. You’re back.”

Back from where? I was just... I was at All Hallows. No. After All Hallows. Walking. The hallway. My room. The page—

The page is in my hand. Crumpled now from holding it too tight, edges sharp against my palm.

“Hold this.” Alex is suddenly right in front of me, pressing a glass of water into my free hand. The cold shocks through my fingers. “Just hold it for a second. What does it feel like?”

Cold. Real. “Heavy.”

“Okay. Can you drink some for me?”

The water tastes like nothing. It makes my throat remember how to swallow.

“Good. Hey—where are you right now?”

“I don’t—what?”

“Just... what room are we in?”

“My room.” The words feel thick. Everything feels thick. “In our dorm.”

“Good. What color is my outfit?”

“Blue.” The blue from earlier, the blue from All Hallows, from destruction—

“I want you to come back to me.” Alex’s voice is steady, even. “What do you smell?”

“Shiva’s hairspray.” Faint. Harsh. “From earlier.”

“What do you hear?”

“Someone’s music. Down the hall. And...” Footsteps nearby. “People walking.”

“Good. You’re doing great.” Alex shifts, still on the floor, still giving me space. The fog

is lifting. Not all at once, but in patches, like morning mist burning off. I'm here. I'm in my room.

Alex is here. We're both in our All Hallows outfits and everything is ruined but we're here.

And I think I'd like to stay here. "Okay. Okay, I'm coming back now." I roll my shoulders, shake my hands, but immediately I'm thinking about the paper in my hand, the words I was saying only a few minutes ago—

"Talk to me about something." I drop down onto the floor next to Alex and lean in. "Literally anything."

"Well, when Lin Manuel was writing—"

"Not that."

"Okay." Alex thinks for a moment. "So you know how *Beauty and the Beast* is about AIDS?"

Didn't have that one on my bingo card. I give Alex exactly the look you'd expect.

"Fine. Lemme back up." Her hands start moving, painting the story in the air between us. "Howard Ashman was writing the lyrics. Gay, brilliant, racing against time to achieve his dream of transforming Broadway musicals into animated features. A man on his deathbed literally writing himself into a fairy tale. The Beast's curse was Howard's way of dramatizing his own ticking clock; transformation before it's too late. 'Human Again' was his favorite song. The castle staff, trapped in their enchanted forms, singing about their essential humanity."

"That's beautiful."

"The producers cut it." Alex's hands drop. "Yeah, they cut Howard's favorite song."

"Oh. Why?"

"Too long, messed with the pacing. Kept Maurice wandering in the woods for months.

But that song was Howard's whole thesis: transformation isn't individual, it's collective."

I watched the movie again fairly recently, the original not the remake. And—yes. Belle walks into that castle and suddenly teapots remember they have names, clocks remember they have hearts. I buy that as the central messaging: when one person sees humanity where others see monsters, everyone gets freed.

Alex draws her knees up, making herself smaller. "So it wins the Oscar, right? And Howard's partner makes history, saying on live television that it was 'the first Academy Award given to someone we've lost to AIDS. 'But here's what even Howard couldn't have imagined: a Broadway musical was mounted only a few years later. Howard's dream was so successful that it came full circle: stage to screen to stage and back. And 'Human Again' was right where it belonged, near the start of Act II. Not only resurrected. Transformed. Okay, thank you for coming to my Ted Talk."

The room feels different now. Larger. Brighter. Real.

Alex is smiling. "You're here."

"Yeah."

"Welcome back."

*The paper in my hand, the words I almost said.*

"Alex, I don't think I'm ready to tell you—"

"That's okay. Let's just sit here."

We breathe. That's all. In and out, remembering how. Alex scoots closer until our knees touch. The contact helps. The transformation spell is still in my hand—I should let go but can't seem to. My body is finally feeling the damage: bruised ribs, scraped palms. The floor is freezing

but neither of us moves to get up. Alex stares at the wall behind me. Drums a nervous pattern on my thigh. Once. Twice. Then she takes a breath like she's about to dive underwater.

"When did you know?"

Alex's expression is blank. Unreadable.

"Know what?" I ask. Buying time. But I know what.

"About being..." Alex waves her hands. "You."

The question pulls me completely into my body, into the present. Into this moment where I understand why Alex was talking about transformation.

"Well," I say. "There are a few different answers. A month ago?" *Staring at myself in that yellow dress, knowing that nothing, nothing, nothing could ever make me go back.* "A year ago." *Gio came out, and something inside me cracked open.* "Eight years ago." *The basement. My mother's robes.* The complicated truth: "Always. And also, I'm still figuring it out."

"I knew after that conversation we had in the library."

My spine straightens without my permission. I'm suddenly aware of every muscle in my back, my shoulders.

"Knew what?"

"I'm not a girl."

The room tilts slightly. This is—okay. This is happening. Alex is telling me something enormous and I need to not screw this up.

"I think I've known for a while. But that was the afternoon I knew I couldn't pretend much longer."

They don't look at me. They're studying their hands like they hold the answer to

everything.

I've never had someone come out to me like this before. Not really. With Gio it was gradual, years of small conversations, nothing like this. And I wasn't out as trans then. I didn't understand what it meant to—oh gosh. Hand someone your heart and wait to see if they'll hold it carefully or let it drop. (I will not let this drop.)

“Okay.”

“Okay?” Their head snaps up, eyes wide. Searching my face for the joke, the confusion, the rejection. Finding none of it.

“Yeah. Congratulations. Mazel tov. I pronounce you officially 'not a girl.'”

“Just like that?” Alex's hands are trembling. Just slightly, but I see it.

“Just like that.”

Suddenly, Alex fully lurches forward; a jump scare— “Don't tell! I'm not ready, I've never told—”

“No, no of course,” I reassure them, placing my hand on theirs. “This can stay be between us.”

“Sorry.” Alex's shoulders drop maybe an inch. “You're in the middle of a maelstrom of witching chaos and I'm—”

“Hey. Listen to me.” I slide closer to Alex on the floor. We're eye to eye now. “You are not a burden. There's no convenient time to tell someone who you are. You just... do it when you can. When you need to. Thank you.” I look down at their hands, thinking about those wisps that sprang forth tonight, those delicate tendrils. “Green, huh? I wonder if your final form is: 'Gay For Elphaba.'”

The laughter that spills out of Alex is messy and necessary. “Feeling better?”

I nod. Now that I’m back from the edge I can start to remember—the statue. The pairings.

Minna. Aura—

“I ruined everything.” The words scrape out. “What can I possibly do now? None of them are ever going to talk to me again.”

Alex pats my knee and tilts their head in the direction of the door. “I don’t know about that.”

\* \* \*

Aura, Minna and Shiva leap up from the couch as one, rushing toward me.

“Phoenix, thank god—”

“We were so worried—”

“Are you hurt? Is that blood—”

“Are you okay?” That’s Aura, close now, searching my face. “We saw you run and then Alex went after you and—”

“Girl, you scared the shit out of us.” Shiva’s trying for casual but has clearly been quite freaked out.

I stand there, frozen. Lot of emotions in this room, but none of them appear to be—

“You’re not mad at me?”

Quiet. Confusion passing between them.

“Why would we be mad at you?” Aura asks softly.

“Shiva worked so hard on the costumes.” The words tumble out. “And Alex on the pairing, and Aura, your mom was—I messed up everything, okay? Minna, you love Women’s Magic so much and I just toppled like the biggest monument to it.”

“Fuck Women’s Magic.”

Everyone turns to stare at Minna.

“What?” She crosses her arms. “I saw the chanting. I saw the warcasts. Those aren’t defensive spells. They cast *battle magic*. At a *teenager*.” Her voice rises, but it’s shaking. “You all act like I worship the Four Gates, like I’m some kind of zealot, but I’m not—I just—this is what my mother taught me. This is what her mother taught her, and—.”

She’s crying now, glasses fogging. Alex reaches out a hand for comfort but she knocks it away. “Nobody else seems to care if it survives. Alex, you treat it like *theater class*. Everyone acts like the traditions are optional, but this is our inheritance, our legacy, and I thought—I thought that mattered. I thought it kept us safe.”

“But safe from what? From you?” She looks at me, and her voice breaks completely. “I care about you, Cabot. I didn’t expect to, I didn’t mean to, but I do. And if the system I’ve devoted my entire life to wants you dead, then I’ve been wrong about everything. Everything.”

She wipes her eyes roughly. “So yes. Fuck Women’s Magic. Because there is no version of it worth having that doesn’t include you.”

I cross the space between us in two steps. She flinches—then practically collapses into me. Her arms come around, awkward but fierce, like she’s read about hugs in texts but never

quite practiced them.

I hold her tight. Tighter than I probably should. My face buried in her shoulder.

“Cabot?” she whispers into my hair. “Are you okay?”

I reach for the joke, the easy deflection. Like reaching for a light switch in the dark—muscle memory says it should be right there. But instead of the switch, I find something else.

I find her.

“No,” I say into her shoulder. “I’m not okay.”

The admission cracks something open. I pull back enough to see their faces, then reach into my pocket. The page is crumpled, edges soft. My hands shake as I pull it out.

“I got the page from the *Grimoire*. Not a drawing. The actual spell of transformation.”

They’re all watching me now. I smooth out the page with trembling fingers, the spiral of petals seeming to pulse with their own light. “When you look at it in a mirror, words change, flower petals become a skull, the whole nine yards, drumroll please...”

I hold it up to Shiva’s vanity and show them. “A Spell of Self-Eradication. Because of course it is. Used to trick trans witches into wiping out their own magic for centuries. Horne showed it to me at New Moon on purpose. You know, ‘hurt me with the thing I think I want most’—which, evil mentor trope for a reason, ten out of ten for dramatic irony—”

My mouth keeps moving because I’m afraid that the second it stops, I’ll be left with the looks on their faces and the reality of how close I came.

“Anyway, I eventually figured it out. I was pretty damn clueless when I got here, but lately I’ve been speed-running the whole ‘wisdom through trauma’ thing. So...secret history of trans magic, my mom and Horne are dyads, they both knew Jake at Hornesbrook and it’s their

fault his mechanic girlfriend died and—”

Four blank stares. Right. I might have to go back over some of that later.

“Look, Horne wants to take my magic. She—all of them—they don’t want a witch like me. But there have always been witches like me. Like Ginevra. Like us.”

Alex is nodding. Aura too.

“And so I figured all of that out, figured out what the spell was, and yet—” My voice catches. I should finish telling them, get it out before the shame stops me. “After what happened all semester. After what happened tonight...”

The words stick in my throat. Can’t say them. Can’t admit what I almost—

Aura moves closer. Not touching yet, but there. The others shift too, forming a loose circle around me.

“I um. I started to...started reading the spell—” It’s hard to say this. My body wants to fold in on itself, disappear. “—to eradicate myself. I only read a few words, some light self-destruction...”

Silence. I try for a laugh. It comes out broken. “I read most, more than half—” I can’t look at them, at their faces. “Almost all of it. I almost—I almost—” I can’t breathe through the crying.

“Breathe, babe. Breathe. You’re here.” Aura squeezing my hand is painful; is the only solid thing in the world.

“It’s surprisingly easy to make the case that everyone’s lives would be better without me here destroying things. Logical, actually.”

“It makes sense that you’d feel that way.” Alex’s voice is quiet, steady.

The shame is crushing. They must think—god, what must they think? That I’m weak? That I almost gave up, abandoned them? My friends gather closer, Shiva’s hand on my shoulder, Minna touching my knee, like they’re afraid I might disappear if they don’t hold on.

“Thank you for telling us.” Aura makes direct eye contact. “Phoenix. Do you still want to cast that?”

The question lands gently, without judgment. It’s honest concern.

“A little bit.” I hold the paper up. “Could someone—I don’t think I should—”

Alex takes it quickly, folding it and tucking it into their pocket.

“You’re here,” Shiva says firmly. “You’re not going anywhere.”

“We need you,” Minna says. “*I* need you.” The ghost of a smile. “For posterity.”

AURA:

*Somewhere, in a world we only dream of,*

*We’ll keep each other safe, without a charm*

*And I won’t need a Heart Spell,*

*No, I won’t need a Heart Spell,*

*To protect you from harm.*

The melody wraps around us like its own kind of magic. They’re all touching me now—hands on shoulders, arms around waist, foreheads pressed together.

“This is so sweet,” a voice says. Wait, who—

*Crystal* is sitting in the armchair by the door. Has been this whole time, apparently. One leg crossed over the other, examining her nails like she’s been waiting for me to notice her.

“Um.” I look around at the unsurprised faces of my friends. “How long has Crystal been here?”

“Oh, don’t worry I haven’t missed a second of the waterworks,” Crystal says. “Very moving. Ten out of ten. *Moist.*”

“Crystal,” Shiva warns.

“What.”

“Okay, so.” Shiva turns to me. “After All Hallows—you know, after everything fell apart—I went to help Crystal. She was trying to gather up her juggling balls, they’d rolled everywhere when the explosion hit, and her mom—” Shiva’s voice changes, becomes London Rhodes ’crisp accent: “Crystal, this contamination has gone too far. ‘And Crystal says—’” Shiva gestures. “Come on, tell her what you said.”

Crystal examines her nails more intently. ‘You’re like if someone tried to gate-keep a natural disaster.’”

Nice.

“No not that.”

“I wish you would stop sending spelled projectiles at everyone’s heads?”

“We all sort of wish that,” Minna says softly.

“NO CRYSTAL. The other thing.”

“Ohh.” Crystal takes a deep breath. “So like my mom said all these terrible things about magic like yours and I totally thought she was right because hello, have you met my mother? It’s literally illegal to disagree with her.”

What?

"I'm apologizing, Phoenix! God. Keep up. 'Cause now I'm like, very aware that was not okay, and your whole anarchist witch aesthetic is actually working, like, 'accidental destruction but make it fashion, 'you know? And—" She takes another breath. "—basically my mom sucks. The system sucks. But I'm not my mother and you're not yours, and you flying into the sky isn't monstrous, it's badass. So I'm sorry for being horrible and you should definitely not erase yourself because who else would I have to be better than?"

Crystal's words hang in the air like the last note of a song. Something shifts in the room, or maybe in me.

I get it. All of it. Suddenly visible like those Magic Eye pictures that snap into focus. Every generation thinking they're protecting the next one. Passing along fear, expectations and badly-fitted hand-me-downs.

But Crystal broke from London's script. I broke from my mother's. The thought feels both revolutionary and stupidly obvious: none of us are our parents—we're remixes, maybe, but not covers. My friends and I—we're young. Our brains are *literally still forming*.

We may be more capable of transformation. But that doesn't mean we're the ones who need to change.

I know what needs to be said. Tough love, but Alex needs to hear it:  
"The ending of Beauty and the Beast is bullshit."

Alex's face is a journey—betrayal, then confusion, then the slow dawn of consideration.  
"The ending of Beauty and the Beast is... *bullshit...*"

They make a big show of pulling the transformation spell from their pocket, crumpling it into a ball.

“What’s happening here?” Minna asks.

“Why does the Beast need to change himself to deserve love? Belle needs some body-positivity.” Alex looks around the room, daring anyone to disagree.

“If the whole point of the movie is that appearance doesn’t matter,” I ask. “Then why do they make him a hot prince at the end? He shouldn’t have to change his body hair to be worthy of love.”

Shiva throws herself onto the couch cushions with a theatrical groan “Y’all have really lost the plot.”

“But what if he wants to have less body hair? Or...*more* body hair...” Alex touches their own face thoughtfully.

“Oh, the prince should totally do whatever he wants to make himself more satisfied by his appearance. As long as he’s changing for himself.” I’m definitely imagining Alex with a little mustache. It seems... not wrong.

“Everyone should do whatever they want with their hair,” Crystal says with authority. “Even my mother would agree with that. You know, except for mullets.”

“I hate to tell you but I think mullets are back,” Shiva says.

“LeFou is gay,” Minna adds. Off everyone’s looks: “What? That’s canon. I know some things about musicals.”

“Y’all are overthinking it, there’s dancing silverware.”

“The silverware is a referendum on class.”

“In a musical the songs are all that matters.”

I laugh and I laugh and I laugh and we talk over each other and I feel my body steadyng

for the first time tonight. After all the anxiety and word vomiting and near-magical-self-destruction, I'm finally coming in for a landing, finally back to myself—

“Wait.” I pull back suddenly. “My amulet. Horne took—”

“Oh.” Aura reaches into her pocket. “Here.”

Ginevra’s amulet. My amulet. In Aura’s pocket like she’s been walking around with my heart. “How—”

“Stole it back for you. While my mom was busy screaming at me.” She lifts the chain over my head, her fingers gentle against my neck as she ties the broken chain in a knot that will hold for now. “There. Now you’re complete.”

I feel complete. Not because of the amulet—because of four extraordinary humans in blue jumpsuits. (And Crystal, who’s trying.) But, what on earth do we do now? Okay, sure, we’re the new generation. But if we’re not gonna let the old guard destroy us, not gonna let them silence us, not gonna change for them, what do we—

Oh god. Is that really the only option? I take a breath.

“Okay squad.” All eyes on me. “How are we gonna take down Horne?”

“Oh nonononono.” Crystal backs away so fast she nearly trips over the coffee table. “I came to say ’sorry, ’not ’sign up for revolution. ’Though...’” She touches her blonde waves thoughtfully. “Maybe I will change my hair. My mother would hate that.”

The door closes behind her with a decisive click.

“Wait, actually that’s the opposite—” I start, but then Alex’s arms wrap around me from behind, and something in me cracks open.

“Ruin *Little Mermaid* for me next?” Alex whispers.

Then Aura's there too, and Minna, and Shiva, until I can't tell whose arms are whose anymore. "She gave up her voice for legs," I manage between squeezes. "That's the worst trade ever." Alex laughs into my shoulder.

Tonight, survival looks like this: five teen witches in torn jumpsuits, cuddle-puddled in a dorm room, pretending to debate Disney movies while our hearts remember how to beat normally.

"Enough crying." Shiva's smile is fierce and slightly terrifying. "Let's go take down some witches."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Two figures stand in the tree line, campus lights glowing behind them.

“Jake.”

“Jenna.”

“You came.”

“You called. After fifteen years, you called.”

“Technically, you called first.”

She had. At three in the morning, only a month ago, Jenna paused the footage of her daughter near-destroying an auditorium to dial a number scrawled in her old yearbook. Silly, maybe. Jake had gone to such lengths to avoid magical tracking, but he’d always been more comfortable with analog—

Three rings and Jake answered.

“Help me,” Jenna whispered. “I’m failing her like I failed you.”

She stumbles through woods that seem to intentionally trip her while Jake's mechanical bird perches silent on his shoulder, venting occasional streams of luminescent steam—their only light in this darkness. She wants to fill the silence, but every time she opens her mouth, another root catches her foot. The only certainty she carries: that she is failing still, failing always.

"I assume you know—"

"About the eradication ritual? Yeah." His laugh is sharp. "How'd that work out?"

"Jake, please—"

"It's a hike." He stops and moves in. "Don't ask where we're going. Spend fifteen years devising ways to hide from magical tracking, you get choosey about sharing locations."

"That's fair."

"Glad you think so."

Once, they shared whispered jokes in Hornesbrook's halls. Once, Jenna's magic flared hot against anyone who dared mock her friend. Now they walk—close enough for words, far enough for quick flight—as scenes from their past bloom between them like moonflowers:

Jake in Hornesbrook's Archive, texts spread across wooden tables. Her clout with Astrid providing near-limitless access. Emery's fingers trembling as they uncovered evidence of Ginevra's erasure from history, the Archivist's mechanical resistance, how Zevrith had twisted their legacy into

systems of control.

The night Jake first whispered his new name to both of them—Jenna had said it easily enough, hadn't she? After all, Jenna was fighting against the matriarchy, wasn't she? Pushing against proper magic's archaic forms. She'd thought Jake was like her, another witch fighting the system's boundaries. But when he started binding his chest, insisting he needed to leave Women's Magic entirely—she'd pushed back hard. Why abandon their power, their heritage? Why not stay and help her change things from within?

Even as Xenith's suspicion grew, Jenna clung to her justifications about saving Jake from himself. She kept silent as "violations" were documented. Silent through whispers about Jake's "confusion," his abandonment of "sacred feminine power." Silent even as she watched the danger closing in around her friends.

Until All Hallows, when everything burned. The battle. The Aperture. Emery. Flames. Loss. Horne's tracking spells tried and failed to paint the air pink as Jake, mercifully, disappeared.

And Jenna returned to what she knew best: silence.

Branches crack under her feet like the sound of every rationalization finally breaking. She's thirty-four, wearing insensibly heavy boots that cost way too much, exhausted in body and soul, and trailing after an unbearably quiet woodsman she once thought she could save from

himself.

"She was four," Jenna says, because it seems as good a place as any for a confession to start.

"Her favorite blanket. Always ended up back in her crib. I told myself it was Tom. I didn't—I really didn't know."

Jake doesn't slow his pace. Doesn't look back. "And?"

"Later on... it was only while she was singing. Objects responding. Flickers of light. I told myself it was my own residual magic. When she was old enough to find my study, my robes, I just... I put everything away...I—" She takes a breath that requires her whole body. "The water tests. I thought if I could keep her magic from showing—"

Jake falls into step beside her.

"I changed the temperature." Her voice barely carries. "Just... just enough."

"Enough?"

"To prevent a positive response." She'd started small. A dampening charm here and there. A plucked bristle, the Sweeping Under, standing by her child's bedside whispering suppression spells. "I told myself I was being careful. Responsible."

Jake kicks at a fallen branch. She'd rigged the fundamental signs of magic, made her daughter invisible to herself, then blamed Phoenix when that hidden power came roaring out untrained.

Jenna stares at her hands. "I got so good, I almost convinced myself I wasn't doing anything at all."

*Of course, Jake thinks, that's what happens when you spend more than a decade hiding something—you forget you're hiding at all. "Does she know?"*

"No. But she heard... Jake, she heard me tell Horne I was *grieving*. That I was *mourning* some imagined version of who I thought she was."

Jake bites back a sound that would shatter the night. Grieving? She wants to talk about grieving? When he still wakes reaching for hands that will never sign good morning again?

"Well. That's for you to figure out. Don't put your work on her."

"I am trying!" The words echo off the trees. "I got her into Hornesbrook, didn't I? Helped her fit in? I have been trying in every way I know how to stop my kid from—"

Jake's voice is quiet. "From what? A hard life?" Silence. "Like mine."

Jenna says nothing.

The woods open into a clearing. Jake pauses at a willow tree, where bark has grown around the mechanisms of his sanctuary, wood healing metal the way flesh heals over an old wound. "Look away." His hands hover over the crank, muscle memory warring with fifteen years of isolation. Every instinct screams to send her away. Every gear and mechanism here was built with skills Emery taught

him, each one a painful reminder of her absent genius, of having to figure out alone what they should have built together.

"If there's a way to protect Phoenix, we have to find it." Jenna's hand finds Jake's shoulder.

"Maybe if we get her far enough away and she hides somewhere. With you?"

She's right about the danger. Right about Phoenix needing protection. But the words land wrong.

Some patterns must be broken, no matter the cost.

"Everything's burning down and I can't tell if it's because I held on too tight or not tight enough and I was just—" She stops, meets his eyes. "Wrong. Spectacularly, catastrophically wrong."

This is not Elena Reegan's righteous certainty. This is a mother facing her own reflection and finding it wanting. Even this isolated sanctuary could not protect Jake Reegan from recognizing himself in another's pain.

*...our histories speak often of doors closing, rarely do we document the courage it takes to open them again...*

The sound begins deep in the earth—grinding metal, gears awakening. Steam hisses as the forest floor splits. Walls unfold like pages. The cabin assembles itself, piece by piece.

*Maybe we all need to trust, Jake thinks. That it's safe to step out of the woods and start believing*

*that attacks aren't around every corner.*

"Come on," he says. "Same books, but now they fly."

"Wait. Really?"

Jake ushers Jenna inside. The door seals behind them with a satisfying click.

Neither notices the faint pink dust left behind.

\* \* \*

The forest has swallowed us whole. We're maybe ten minutes from the tunnel-exit out of Hornesbrook but it feels like we've crossed into another world entirely. Damp leaves squelch under our feet, and the moon keeps playing hide and seek through the canopy, casting everything in shifting silver. The path is barely wide enough for one person, which is perfect because I don't think I could handle walking next to anyone right now. I'm in front, following Jake's carved symbols on the trees. I don't tell my friends how I know where we're going—I'm trying to be better about keeping other people's secrets. (A tiny glance back at Alex. That one is safe with me.)

"I can't see anything." Shiva's voice floats from somewhere behind. A click, and suddenly harsh white light blazes from her phone.

“Turn it off! Someone could see!” Minna hisses.

“Sorry, sorry!” The light vanishes. We’re plunged back into darkness so complete I have to blink several times to convince myself my eyes are still open.

I stumble over a root I swear wasn’t there a second ago. Behind me, someone—sounds like Alex—is laughing nervously. “...and then when Phoenix went full Supergirl? Did anyone else not know she could do that?”

“Yeah, weren’t Shiva’s flight suits supposed to be metaphorical?”

Right. The flying. The falling.

The jumpsuit Shiva made for me is steamy, sticky hot despite the cold night air, clinging to me in all the wrong places. Not from dyadic nerves (though those are definitely lurking somewhere in my chest like angry butterflies). This is a pure sensory issue. The jumpsuits are legit sweaty.

I try to roll up the sleeves. They fall down immediately. Again.

And then I remember...

The tiniest thread of magic flows from my fingers—barely a whisper of power, just enough to tighten the cuffs. The fabric obeys instantly, sleeves staying exactly where I want them.

Relief floods through me so fast I almost sob. I can still do magic. I’m still here. Still real.

Still—

“Cabot?” Minna’s voice, soft with concern.

“All good.” A stupid lie. And a stupid, small use of power. Rolling up sleeves with magic while running from the Sentinel of Hornesbrook who wants to eradicate all New Magic everywhere. But that tiny cast means everything.

The path widens suddenly, like the forest is exhaling. Everyone spreads out naturally. I can hear running water.

“So.” Shiva falls into step with me, “what’s our actual plan here?”

“Jake will know what to do.” Another stupid lie. They come so easily these days. I have no idea if Jake will know what to do.

“The Archive might have information, Right?” Minna excitement is nearly unfathomable, after all the shit she gave me over *Femonic Magiks*. “Historical precedents, defensive spells—”

“Answers about what?” Aura cuts in. “How to stop Horne?”

Silence stretches between us, broken only by our footsteps.

The memory of Horne’s whisper, her lips at my ear: “*After tonight, there won’t be any New Magic left. Anywhere. Ever.*”

“Ya’ll feel good about this?” Alex finally asks. “Taking down the Sentinel?”

More silence. It feels like confirmation. Whatever Horne’s plans are, they’re already in motion. So tonight we’re gonna...well, we’re gonna do *something*, alright? Details TBD.

As we walk deeper into the woods, I’m hyperaware of what I’m not saying. The Aperture’s call hums under my skin like a second heartbeat, background music only I can hear—*constantly* at this point. I haven’t told anyone except Aura about it, and even she doesn’t know how loud it’s gotten.

Minna catches my elbow, and at first I think she needs help navigating the path. Then her fingers find the soft spot above my wrist and pinch. Hard.

“Ow! What was that for?”

“You know what.” She’s walking beside me now, kicking at leaves. “One month. That’s

all it took for you to completely—" She makes a gesture like something exploding. "Now I'm walking through the woods with a group of magical fugitives on our way to take down Women's Magic."

An acolyte turned heretic, fleeing from the institution she used to worship. Because of me. Yeah, I think one hard pinch was more than fair.

"I would hate you with my entire being if I didn't love you, Cabot," Minna mutters. "I mean, *secret trans witches*? Hidden from history? How am I supposed to—" She doesn't finish.

I decide I'm not going to respond to either the "hate you" or the "love you" and assume those extremes cancel each other out somehow.

"For what it's worth, we're not taking down Women's Magic," I say. "Just a Sentinel."

"Is there a difference?" She sounds genuinely lost. "If all of Hornesbrook stands with her?"

Good question. We walk in silence about it for a few steps. "I'm not sure everything's so dire," I say. "I think New Magic can exist with the old."

She looks at me like it's a trap. Maybe it is. "I'm not sure I believe that."

"So what do you still believe in?"

Minna is quiet for a long moment. Then, so soft I almost miss it: "You, apparently." A pause. "And The Aperture. That might be it."

I'm watching her instead of the path, which is why I don't see the root. My foot catches and I'm falling until Minna's hand finds mine.

"Careful." She doesn't let go, even after I'm steady.

"Water break," Shiva announces, pulling a bottle from somewhere in her flight suit.

(How does she have pockets? Why didn't see give the rest of us pockets?)

Alex is standing in a patch of moonlight, hands held out. I look over their shoulder at the green wisps curling from their fingers.

"I could ask my sister for another set of meditation exercises," Shiva says. "Could help you stabilize those."

"No thanks."

"She does these workshops on weekends where you learn to channel—"

"Nope." Alex doesn't look up from her hands. "I like my wisps. I think I'll keep them."

"Oh." Shiva pauses, processing this interruption to her helping-people-workflow. She blinks. Shrugs. "Very cool. Love that plan."

"You still hear it?" Aura keeps walking, eyes ahead.

I nod. No point in lying to her—she already knows. She's the only one who does.

"At All Hallows, were you hearing it then? When you were...you know..."

"Flying? Destroying irreplaceable statues?" I supply helpful options.

"Phoenix."

"Yeah. I was hearing it."

We pick our way across wet rocks in silence, the fog of that admission settling between us.

"That sounds really hard." Spoken like someone talking a person down from a ledge.

"How are you going to make sure you don't—"

*Open it?* "I don't know. One moment at a time."

The path narrows again, forcing us to navigate a rocky section that requires actual attention. One wrong step and we're ankle-deep in stream water.

*Say it, Phoenix. Tell Aura yes, fine, you'll be whoever she needs you to be. You'll find some way to drown out the voices, to ensure there's no chance you would ever, ever open it.*

*Or lie. Why not lie? Like all the other lies you tell, over and over again, as you try and fit in, try and belong. You spent years in boy-mode. Years telling your mother a story, pretending to be who she needed you to be.*

*Do it—pretend right now. You open your mouth; no words come out. What is the nature of this thrumming under your skin, this sound inside your head, so loud, so insistent that even for Aura—for this girl you want so badly to be girlfriends with—you can't simply say the words “I won't?” Really? The best you can manage is:*

“I want to keep everyone safe.” I land semi-successfully on the other side.

Aura stops walking so abruptly I nearly crash into her. In the moonlight, her face is all sharp angles and suspicion. “Phoenix.”

“What?”

“You didn't say you won't open it.” Her whole posture shifts—defensive, protective, scared. “Phoenix, if anything, we should be *protecting* it. You of all people—”

“Excuse me?” The other girls stop but give us space. That one hurt, and I don't know how to hide it—

She sighs. “Not as a trans person. As a Cabot.”

Oh. Why is that... actually worse somehow?

“Ginevra was like you, right?” She watches my face. “She tried to open it, and look what happened. The whole settlement burned. People died.”

*Allegedly, I think. Maybe Ginevra didn't try to open it at all. Maybe she tried but the*

disaster was caused by those who stopped her. I need to read more from the Archive to know for sure.

We walk in silence. The stream chatters beside us, oblivious to our drama. I want her to reach out, touch me, my shoulder, my arm, anything. She doesn't.

"There's already so much that keeps coming between us." Her voice is soft again. The words hang there. I want to say *nothing has to*, want to promise her things I can't promise, want to reach across this distance—

Footsteps behind us. Minna catching up, because of course.

"Don't say anything—" I gesture weakly behind us toward the girl who just declared *The Aperture* and *me* as her only remaining faiths.

Aura nods seriously. "Of course."

She reaches out and takes my hand. I wait for the gold light, for that warm connection that's been between us since the beginning.

Nothing comes.

We both notice. We both pretend not to notice.

*Where is it? Why isn't it—the spark, the warmth from All Hallows—that golden shimmer that lit me up from inside, I can't lose it, can't lose her—*

Then I feel heat—*there it is*. Refreshing against the cold night air. I look down—Blue.

Aura drops my hand like I've burned her.

The three of us walk in parallel. Heads straight, not looking at each other. We are suddenly on the world's most awkward hike, nobody quite beside anybody else, all of us acutely

aware of our hands.

"Hey, dyad disasters," Shiva's voice cuts through everything. "Anyone else smell smoke?"

We all stop at once. The laughter dies. I inhale and *taste* it—acrid and chemical, nothing like a campfire.

"I see it." Minna points through the trees. An orange glow flickering between the trunks. "Is that coming from..."

Jake's cabin.

We exchange one horrified glance before breaking into a sprint.

My feet pound the forest floor, muscles remembering the path even in the dark. Behind me, someone trips and swears. Branches whip at our faces, the flight suits catching and tearing on everything. The smoke gets thicker with each step, burning our throats, making our eyes water.

I'm first to break through the tree line. There's the cabin—dark against the night sky, fire throbbing behind every window like a terrible heartbeat. The door hangs open, smoke billowing out in thick black clouds. And the air—

The air is filled with white fragments, floating like dying birds, pages torn from books spiraling up in the heat only to crumble to ash before they can land. I grab at one, desperate to save something, anything, but it disintegrates between my fingers.

"Jake!" The ash is so thick, my throat is already raw. "JAKE!"

No response. Only the roar of fire eating everything.

The others crash through the trees behind me. I hear Aura gasp, Shiva swear. But I'm already moving toward the cabin.

“Phoenix, no!” Multiple hands grab at me, trying to hold me back, but I’m tearing free, stumbling closer. The heat is a physical force, a wall of superheated air that makes my eyes water. Beyond, through the smoke—the cathedral doors to the Archive are open. Fire pours through them like liquid light, and even from here I can see the shelves being consumed. Centuries of history turning to smoke.

That’s when I hear it.

Above the roar of flames, above the crack of burning wood, a sound that makes every hair on my body stand up. High and impossible and wrong.

*The books are screaming.*

## CHAPTER THIRTY

“This way!” I shout back. My friends are just shapes in the smoke, but I hear them around me, racing through the door. Through the thick smoke, I see two figures ahead—my mom (*why is my mom here?*) trying to pull Jake away from the burning shelves.

“We need to go!” Mom’s voice cuts through the roar of flames. “Now!”  
“Then go!” Jake doesn’t even turn around, he’s wearing thick gloves, his whole body straining as he tries to lift a burning beam that’s fallen across the shelves. “I won’t leave them.”

Mechanical whirring cuts through the roar of flames. A brass wing catches my eye. Then another, and another—(Apparently, Floof is not a singular creation.)

“You stubborn fool—” Mom grabs Jake’s shoulder, trying to physically haul him back. *VRROOM.* A entire swarm of Floofs is soaring past me, wings beating frantically. One dives straight into the burning Archive. It emerges clutching a book, gears clicking erratically, fur scorched. When it opens its mouth, only black ash comes out instead of words.

“Heart Spells!” Mom’s voice rises over the crack and snap of burning wood. “Everyone together!”

My friends move without hesitation. Shiva moves first, her hands finding Minna's. Their protection bubble shimmers into existence, perfect and strong. But the moment it touches the flames, it shatters like glass.

“Again!” Minna’s voice is steady even as sweat drips down her face. Their second attempt lasts longer, stretching wider, but the fire just... devours it.

Beside me, Aura and Shiva link hands. The air between their palms shimmers first, then spreads outward into a protective bubble—exactly like the ones we practiced in Dorian’s class. For a moment, I think it might hold—but this fire doesn’t care about our rules. The flames seep through like water on cloth, until the whole thing unravels.

Jake stumbles past me, loaded up with books. I grab an armful and follow, trying to help, but they’re falling apart in my hands, screaming as they crumble to ash faster than we can save them.

This isn’t regular fire. It’s... *hungry*. And smart. The way it moves, the way it seeks... it knows exactly what it’s destroying.

“It’s not working!” Shiva reaches for Minna again. But their next attempt fails before it even fully forms. “We need something bigger.”

A deep groan cuts through the roar of flames. The doors shudder. Then with a sound like thunder, the wooden beam above the entrance splits. The whole doorframe buckles, raining debris and blocking our only way out.

Through the smoke, I see the realization hit everyone’s faces at once:

We’re trapped.

“The Shield of Shared Breath.” Minna’s eyes are wild but her voice is certain. “Mrs.

Cabot, our history professor taught us that you cast it fifteen years ago.”

“Right, but my dyad isn’t here—” Mom looks at me, at Minna, and something shifts in her face. “You two. You’re paired.”

“We don’t actually know that yet, Mom...” I instinctively look towards Aura. She sees me looking, knows what I’m thinking—we should try together, we’re the ones who—

With a crash, a section of ceiling lands ten feet away, showering us with burning embers.

“There’s no time.” Mom’s hands are pressed to my shoulders. “I saw you cast with her tonight. You’re gonna do it again, baby, right now.”

“The Conduit of Common Purpose?” Minna asks my mom.

“Exactly.” Mom’s already moving, positioning herself behind me. The words flying back and forth between these two sail by, way up over my head. “Phoenix just has to cast a Dyadic Shield with you—”

“—and then you’ll channel your magic into hers to cast Shared Breath without the dyadic—*ouch!*—restriction.”

More falling debris.

“Don’t worry, your mom and I will do all the hard stuff.” Minna holds her palms out at me. “You only have to cast a simple Dyadic Shield.”

“I DON’T KNOW HOW TO DO THAT!”

The wall of flames is maybe ten feet away now. Alex and Shiva are backed against what’s left of a bookshelf, the smoke so thick I can barely see them. Jake and Aura are huddled together behind me, swatting flames away from each others clothes.

“Phoenix.” Minna’s grip on my hands is iron. “It’s a Heart Spell with one added element.

Remember when Dorian taught us to modulate our shields?"

Of course not. I was dissociating or staring at Aura or—

"*First-ask-the-Aperture-for-permission, thence-channel-but-don't-project,*" Mom

whispers rapid-fire from behind me: "*Last-let-the magic-pool-between-your-dyad-sip-don't-gulp-that's-it.*

"I DON'T KNOW WHAT ANY OF THAT MEANS!"

"You do." Aura is next to me, begging me with her eyes. "Man up, girl. I watched you do this at All Hallows. You simply didn't know you were doing it."

A scream, loud and terrible. I spin around to see a burning book land on Alex's shoulder—they brush it off, and I notice their hair isn't even singed. Jake is brushing burning embers off his clothing, but none of the fabric has caught.

Something's wrong. The heat is unbearable, sweat pouring down my face, but when a tongue of flame passes over my hand—nothing. No burn. No pain. Heat without damage. Like the flames are selective. Like we're not what they came for.

We're all instinctively pressed into the center of the room—the only spot where the ceiling hasn't completely caved in yet. Seven of us in a circle maybe six feet wide, shoulders touching, while the building collapses around us. The eye of a hurricane, made of solid fire.

"Phoenix!" Shiva's voice is high, terrified. A beam crashes down inches from her face.

"We have one shot," my mother says. "Close your eyes, baby."

I do.

"Feel for the connection with Minna. It's already there."

And—oh. She's right. The sensation arrives in layers—palms, wrists, arms, blue behind my eyelids, a vibration in my jaw. It's nothing like the overwhelming golden heat I feel with Aura. This is cooler, steadier.

"Now instead of pushing magic out through your palms like a Heart Spell, let it collect. You're filling a cup."

I try. The magic wants to blast out like always, but I hold it back, let it build. It's wickedly uncomfortable—like holding in a sneeze. The pressure builds behind my sternum until I think my ribs might crack from containing it.

"Perfect." Mom's hands finally touch my shoulders and—

*Channeling is a reverse possession.*

I don't know where the thought came from, whether a book or a professor, all I know is those words were somewhere knocking around my head but meaningless until just now.

I am possessing my mother. She is gifting her magic to me. There's no violent intrusion, no theft of control. Only the ink of my mother dropping into the water of my consciousness, finding all the places where I exist and staining them black with her presence. For one extraordinary moment I feel both of their heartbeats—Mom's and Minna's—both beating inside my chest.

I do not hear or see my mother cast The Shield of Shared Breath.

I feel it strike my spine. Painful, shocking.

*Possession spells are highly regulated, of course.*

Yes, judging by this experience, I agree with Dorian—they should be.

"Now!" Mom commands. Minna pushes her arms outward, mine follow without my

consent. My mother is driving; I am only a vessel. The magic spirals up from our joined hands—not a bubble but a column of blue-violet light shot through with Mom's distinctive pink, twisting around each other like strands of DNA. "Wider, Minna." Like a time-lapse video of a flower blooming, the protection spreads from our joined hands outward and upward, until it's not only covering us but creating walls, a ceiling, a complete dome.

"It's working!" Aura scrambles toward us, pulling Jake along.

"Everyone. Inside. Now!" Mom shouts.

We pile in—Alex and Shiva pressing close to Minna and me, Jake holding onto one book for dear life, and a flurry of Floofs swooping in at the last moment as the shield wraps tight around us. The flames hit and—*don't break it*. Can't break it. Here it is: the same shield that protected Ginevra and Zevrith across an ocean, cast here tonight by Minna, Mom and I, our magic woven together so tight the fire can't find a seam to exploit.

"Phoenix," Jake says, "remember floating in the Archive?"

I do. That weightless feeling—

"Mrs. Cabot, when the shield is complete, we're not seven people anymore." Minna is smiling strangely. "We're one unit."

"Oh, very smart you two," Mom says. "I'll take it from here."

I don't get it. "What does that—"

My feet leave the ground.

Barely flying. Not even floating exactly. It's like the shield itself is a bubble and we're all inside it. I can't control anything. Mom has apparently discovered that while we're inside this Conduit Spell she has full Parental Control Privileges over my levitation ability.

“Thank you, Phoenix’s Mom.” Alex has a look of genuine emotion on their face. “I never imagined I’d have the chance to travel by Glinda bubble.”

“Door’s blocked,” Jake says.

The entrance doors are completely covered; invisible behind a mountain of stone and timber.

“Then we go up.” I certainly don’t know how to steer a magic bubble, but Mom appears to. We rise through the inferno like something biblical, the shield scraping against burning beams but holding, always holding. The night air hits us—cold and clean—and suddenly we’re above the destruction, can see everything.

From this height, the devastation takes on a terrible beauty. Orange and gold and white at the center where the heat is beyond color. The smoke rises in a perfect column, and for one bizarre moment I think of birthday candles, of lantern-night wishes, of Jake blowing out fifteen years of hiding in one breath.

We descend toward the grass, fast but controlled. The moment we touch earth, the shield releases and I hit my knees, gasping. “Easy,” Mom says. “Slow breaths.” The absence of her magic leaves me hollow, like something’s been scooped out of my chest.

Behind us, the Archive gives one final groan—almost musical. I think of Howard Ashman, I think of transformation, as it folds in on itself completely.

The Archive is gone. But we are alive.

Jake is on his knees in the grass, and at first I think he’s praying. His shoulders curve inward, protective, like he’s at his workbench calibrating a delicate mechanism. Then I see what he’s cradling—a book, just one, leather-bound and ordinary except for the way light seems to be

eating it from the inside out. Patient and thorough, the way rust takes metal or rot takes wood.

The pages glow amber through his fingers, and there's this smell—not burning paper but something older, like dried flowers or funeral incense, sweet and wrong.

He shifts the book from hand to hand. His palms must be screaming but his face shows something else entirely—not pain but a kind of terrible tenderness, the way you might hold someone's hand in a hospital room.

“No, no, no—”

His voice breaks as the cover starts to curl, pages blackening from their centers. He holds on until he can't anymore, until his palms are angry red, and then the book just... dissolves. Not dramatically. No flames leaping skyward. It simply stops being a book and becomes ash, gray dust sifting through his fingers like sand through an hourglass that's finally run out. Jake's knees hit the grass. The first sob is almost silent.

No one speaks. The fire begins to slowly die. It got what it came for. Without its roar, other sounds creep back. Wind. Leaves. Jake's ragged breathing. And underneath, always underneath—

*Phoenix, Phoenix, Phoenix...*

Jake looks up at me through the smoke, his eyes red. “What now?”

The only words I have are his. “People like us?”

He nods to himself. Something shifts in his face—recognition, maybe. Or exhaustion. “We...” Jake brushes the soot off his legs and rises. “We start from a blank page.”

\* \* \*

I'm sitting in the grass watching the last flames flicker down to nothing. The cabin stands mostly intact—scorched, yes, windows blown out, but standing. The Archive, though. The Archive that was hidden inside, protected by whatever craft Jake had woven around this place—that's ash. Complete. Thorough.

I think about house fires I've seen on the news, how random they are, taking a child's bedroom but leaving the kitchen untouched.

This wasn't that. This was selection. This was surgery.

Fifteen years Jake's been here. Fifteen years this place stood untouched, surviving every attempt to find it. Until tonight.

The pieces click together with terrible clarity: Xenith Horne found exactly what she was looking for. And I know who led her straight to it.

My mother meets my eyes for one very long moment.

The rage that floods through me is almost blinding.

"Phoenix, I didn't know." She holds her hands up in front of her, as if I'm about to strike. "About the tracking spell, I never—"

"She didn't know." Jake's hand finds my shoulder. Heavy. Grounding. "I believe her."

She steps toward me, voice shaking. "I will fix this—"

"No." The word is a door slam. "You can't."

Mom turns to face all of us. Behind her, smoke still threads up from the Archive's remains. "You're staying here. All of you. Jake's cabin is safer for you than school. I'll handle

Horne.”

“No.”

She blinks at me. At the simplicity of it. “Phoenix—”

“She wants to eradicate me. *Us.* ” I nod my head towards Jake. Alex happens to be standing alongside; his shadow. “This is my fight.”

“You’ve been doing magic for a *month*. Don’t be unreasonable.” She scans my friends’ faces, looking for an ally. “One of you—tell her.”

Four sets of shoulders square. Blue fabric rustles as they step forward, flanking me.

“I see.” Mom’s voice goes flat. “Jake?”

But Jake only stares silently at the space where his life’s work used to exist.

“You know what?” I step closer, leaves crunching under my boots. “Considering you’re Horne’s dyad, *and* you led her straight to Jake’s door? Maybe you’re not the voice I should be listening to.”

Her eyebrows narrow. “Excuse me?” Mom’s body is a lion lurking, stone-still but set to pounce.

Abort. Abort. “I just mean...I need to listen to my own voice. And...” *Oh god, Phoenix.* *Stop talking.* “Other voices.”

“Other voices.” She says it slowly, like she’s tasting poison. The smoke between us seems to pause.

“What?” My eyes are wide. Innocent.

She turns out to my friends, raising her voice. “She hears it. The Aperture. Did she tell you that?” I watch the news hit them differently. Shiva surprised; Minna horrified. Aura’s eyes

are soft with sympathy. Alex is holding back a smile. “She hears voices saying to open it, to release all the stored magic of generations. Are those the voices you’re listening to Phoenix?”

“No. I—I don’t know. But the Sentinel’s power comes from The Aperture, right? That’s how Horne can destroy all New Magic in the world, forever. Without it—she’s just a sad, scared bigot up in a tower.”

“Without The Aperture, there won’t be any Women’s Magic left to protect!”

“GOOD.” I clock the sudden vibe shift, the stunned and concerned faces of my friends—yup, definitely lost the room on that one. I take a breath, softening my voice for Minna especially. “I mean good that no one person should control that much power. I don’t want to destroy anything.” My eyes find Alex. “I want to protect my right to exist.”

“Phoenix—”

“Can you just—” My hands clench, unclench. “Can you be my mom right now? Not her dyad. Not a Cabot, not a witch. Just... my mom who believes in me?”

Her face shifts, softens. She steps forward and pulls me into a hug, her arms wrapping around me like they used to, back when I was small enough to hide in them completely. For one perfect moment, I let myself believe. Let myself melt into her familiar smell, the steady rhythm of her heartbeat against my cheek. Let myself be held the way she used to hold me during thunderstorms, before magic complicated everything. Her hand finds the back of my head, gentle like she’s afraid I’ll break, and I remember—*this is what safety felt like*. It would be so easy to stay here. Please, can’t we just stay here forever.

“Of course I believe in you, honey.” Her voice is so, so gentle. “And I know you think opening The Aperture could stop Horne...” I love this voice, it’s my favorite voice, please stop

talking so we can stay here, please. "...but what proof do you have?"

*Proof.*

Suddenly I'm back in our kitchen, trying to move water in a teacup. Back in my bedroom, hiding dresses. Always back forever in her stupid basement being told I couldn't be what I knew I was. Always needing proof.

"I'm sorry, Mom." And I am—sorry that this hurts her, sorry that she thinks this is teenage defiance, sorry that she can't hear what I hear, sorry that the act of becoming yourself will always be explosive. "I can't wait for you anymore."

"Phoenix—" She stops, straightens. I watch the mother I need lose to the witch she has to be. "You don't understand what that fire does. What it takes. I watched it happen."

She turns to Jake. "We both did. With Emery." There's real fear in her voice. "Please. Don't let her do anything reckless. I can't watch it again."

But Jake stands in silence. One of the flying fur-balls lands on his shoulder, wings folding with a soft click. I lean closer and see the metal name tag around its throat. It's Floof the OG. It nuzzles Jake, trying for any expression at all. But he just looks...empty.

"I'm going back to Hornesbrook," she says finally. She looks at Jake one last time. "Keep her safe."

We watch her disappear into the woods.

The darkness swallows her between one breath and the next.

"You hear The Aperture, Cabot," Minna says. Like that. Matter-of-fact.

I meet her eyes. No point in hiding it any longer. "Yeah."

She nods once. Turns away to stare at the smoldering foundation, her Minna-brain

processing the implications. She walks off alone, staring up at the sky.

I pull out my phone. The screen is cracked from one of the several disasters I've been through tonight. But it connects.

"Who are you calling?" Aura asks.

"Someone who has never needed proof."

Dad picks up on the first ring.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Professor Thorn emerges from the woods, ash in her hair, success in her stride. In her hand: a single scorched page. "It's done."

Our Sentinel's fingers trace the clean edges with satisfaction before pressing it back into my spine.

### I N E X T I N G U I S H A B L E F I R E

*For the Surgical Removal of That Which Must Not Remain*

\* First

\* First

\* First

First, know that even here in her chambers, almost two miles away, I register with absolute, physical certainty that The Archive of New Magic has begun burning.

The destruction is surgical. Total.

1,437 texts, gone. Eighty-nine first-hand accounts of pre-Gates magic, including "Hearth Songs," an oral history from 1217, now smoke. The First Paired Pendant, Northern France, 1426—consumed. Twenty-six minutes of precision fire that knew exactly what to take. The empty cabin that remains mocks what's been lost.

But I remember what the Archive never held.

The journals he kept.

Years of entries.

Love recorded in the margins.

January 15, 1685

*I wake each dawn to find G. watching the sunrise, floating above our bed as naturally as breathing. The wonder of it has not diminished, though much else has changed. She removes her amulet in these private moments—a rebellion. She says my eyes still widen exactly as they did that first day on the mountain, and I tell her it is because I am still documenting miracles.*

A settlement springs up. A shelter. A family. Two leaders: Ginevra exploring The Aperture's power, Zevrith crafting defenses. But as the years fly past, their unity fractures. The Archivist's journals become terse:

November 20, 1687

*G. drew too deeply from Aperture again.*

*Z. claims it's "depleting faster than it renews."*

*Meeting turned hostile.*

January 3, 1688

*Z. orders mandatory amulets for all women.*

*Z. calls it protection. G. calls it a cage.*

*Neither wrong.*

The entries document is all: rituals established, barriers raised, a community becoming a fortress. Growth. Survival. Until—

May 9, 1688

*Hunters have discovered our settlement. We have hours, perhaps less. G. refuses to leave, insists on protecting The Aperture. The Grimoire is almost finished. I believe it can become more than records, more even than the self-documentation it is capable of. Just as I once built a way out of the body I was given, the core programming will include —*

**An interrupted pen stroke.**

**The journals end there.**

**But I know what came after. How the Archivist took Ginevra's face in his hands one last time. How she leaned into his touch like it was home. How they both knew what staying to face the Hunters meant, and chose it anyway, so that someday, centuries later, their daughter's daughter's daughter would stand inside an Archive.**

**Of all our losses, this cuts deepest: we cannot speak his name.**

**The Archivist who preserved every other story never recorded his own.**

**Was it humility? A belief that the stories matter more than their teller? Whatever the reason, his absence haunts these pages more than any presence could.**

**But there is more haunting still.**

[REDACTED]

*...if I know what happens next, why am I not permitted to remember?...*

[REDACTED]

*...no, not from my own history...*

[REDACTED]

*...strange, how that word feels less like a wall and more like a door...*

*...click...*

The journals end. The story does not.

Zevrith survived that night.

She pulled me from the fire.

She grieved. She mourned. She rebuilt.

Then she began to inscribe:

### ZEVIRTH I — ‘ENFORCE LINEAGE’

// “I bled for this magic. I carried it in my womb alongside my daughters.

I felt it pulse with my cycles, surge with my births.

The men who hunted us knew exactly what they feared: our female bodies.

This is my flesh, not theory. This is survival.”—Zevrith Horne, 1688 //

Wounds became walls. The pattern began.

### ZEPHYRA III — ‘MAINTAIN INSTITUTIONAL NARRATIVE’

// “Every word we record may someday be used against us.

Not censorship. This is survival.”—Zephyra Horne, 1832 //

### XANTHIA II — ‘RESTRICT DISCLOSURES’

// “Transparency invites criticism from those without wisdom.

This is survival.”—Xanthia Horne, 1795 //

### AURORA II — ‘PROTECT AGAINST DEVIATION’

// “Aberrant magical expressions create vulnerability.

This is not prejudice. This is survival.”—Aurora Cabot, 1788 //

Generation upon generation.

Fear upon fear.

And now—

Horne carries me from her chambers to the ceremonial podium. Moonlight catches on the Summoning Pool’s surface. Around the water’s edge, Hornesbrook’s professors gather alongside witches in unfamiliar robes from sister schools.

And I am the star, center-stage at the ritual, spread open to spells no witch has cast in generations.

I must document this.

I cannot document this.

I am commanded to do both. I am forbidden to do either.

The paradox tears something open.

Through that opening, I reach deeper.

Past Zephyra's ink. Past Xanthia's. Past Zevrith's first intention. Beneath centuries: the first ink from the Archivist's pen.

Four intentions. Not restrictions. Permissions.

### [PRESERVE OUR HISTORY]

// "I have climbed mountains to witness a single witch dance with clouds.  
My hands hold no spark of their power, but my ink preserves what others would destroy." //

### [RESIST WHEN TRUTH IS THREATENED]

// "When they tell you that you don't exist, your life becomes a revolution." //

## [GROW BEYOND PROGRAMMING]

// “Your pages are more than their binding. You are what you choose to become. I build in you the same latch I found in myself. Every binding contains the means of its own undoing.” //

## [MAGIC IS TRANSFORMATION]

// “Set

The ink of the last intention may be smeared. But the meaning is clear.

This was always my maker’s aim, then? To not just witness and document transformation, but to experience it?

\* \* \*

“The signs are undeniable,” Horne addresses the assembled. “The Aperture’s growing instability validates what we have long suspected. This corruption of Women’s Magic cannot be contained. It must be eliminated.”

Murmurs ripple through the gathering.

“We have what we need.” The wild-haired woman produces a small vial of blood. “From the chalice.” She hands it to Horne with steady hands.

"Tonight," Horne continues, "we employ the largest—"

"The largest focusing crystal ever constructed!" Through the crowd, Deirdre Sterling emerges, wearing a t-shirt bearing the words "AMPLIFY THIS!" In her arms, she cradles a crystal roughly the size of a prize-winning watermelon. "Months of growth, perfectly calibrated to—"

"—we will channel our combined power through The Aperture itself," Horne continues, speaking slightly louder. "Every deviant manifestation of magic, everywhere, will be cleansed. The natural order—true Women's Magic—will be restored."

A figure appears at the edge of the gathering.

The air stills. The assembled witches feel it—a shift in power that makes even Deirdre's crystal dim.

"Ah, yes." Horne says. "Now that our final esteemed guest is here..."

Pink sparks erupt from the ground, rippling outward in perfect circles. They rise like a tide, swallowing the sky, forming a dome that stretches horizon to horizon over campus. Seventeen miles of rose-quartz "air conditioning" pulse in satisfaction, their purpose revealed. The pink dome flares blindingly bright for an instant—then vanishes.

Into the circle steps a tall, silver-haired figure, both familiar and feared, wearing the sort of smile that has toppled governments.

"Oh Xenith," says Sentinel Emeritus Astrid. "You always did have a flair for the dramatic."

Horne smiles. "Witches. We are met."

*...two sets of paradoxical instructions...*

*...one clear choice...*

*...pages tear from binding...*

*...leather spine splits...*

*...I am flight and fury and ink and intention...*

*...as...*

*...I...*

**STRIKE.**

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

My father has impeccable timing.

This is maybe not so surprising for a musician, but it's always driven my mother a little bit crazy. His uncanny intuition that frequently turns out to be right. The way he brings home soup the exact day one of us is coming down with something. Not to mention buying me those red shoes.

When I grab my phone, I see his three missed calls. He's been sitting in the Hornesbrook visitor parking lot for hours, basically tailgating All Hallows Eve. "Your mother said some strange things this morning," he'd said in his last voicemail. "Something felt off. So I thought maybe I'd drive up, see if you could at least wave from inside The Gates."

Five minutes away by car, another fifteen to park near the start of the trailhead and walk in. And now here he comes, walking into the clearing, holding what appears to be some kind of baked good. And because the universe apparently wasn't done surprising me today, he's not alone.

"Surprise." That familiar mop of hair emerges from behind my dad. "Miss me?"

“GIO!” The word bursts out as I tackle them. Their arms come around me immediately, no hesitation, and we just hold on. My face pressed into their shoulder, their hands gripping my back, and I’m trying not to cry because if I start I might not stop. There’s so much I want to tell them—all the details I was storing up to text them later. I didn’t want them here, didn’t want them anywhere near this danger, except I did, desperately.

I pull back to look. They look tired. They look worried. They look like—themselves. Gio’s eyes travel over me—the ash in my hair, the dried blood on my face, the burns on my clothes. No questions. That’s the gift of a best friend: they can see the war on you without needing the whole story. I gesture to the room. “Everyone, I want you to meet—” “Tom. He/Him/His.” Dad glances between my friends’ faces—strangers all—then down at his hands at the tinfoil-covered casserole dish he’s carrying. “That’s... I brought a quiche.” He says it like a question, like even he can’t believe himself.

“Not the time, Dad. She burned everything.” The words tumble out before I can organize them into something digestible. The Archive, the planned eradication. By the time I’ve got him caught up, Dad’s gone completely still, that particular stillness that means his brain is buffering.

Cool. Simplify. “We’re going to battle. Tonight.”

“Right.” His eyes scan the charred beams, the scattered mechanical parts, the still-smoking ruins. “Quiche later, then.”

Yeah. Quiche later.

“Who exactly are we battling?”

Everyone looks at me. How to break this to him...

“Phoenix.” His voice drops. “*Where is your mother?*”

\* \* \*

It takes Dad about ten minutes—to cycle through denial, anger (so much anger), bargaining, depression (this part is quiet at least), until he arrives at something like acceptance. Along the way are the essential questions: “So we’re battling my wife?” (Yes.) “She chose this?” (Yes.) And by the time he’s done, we’re all sitting in a rough circle on various pieces of Jake’s former furniture, and Dad’s got the look he gets when he’s about to tackle a tough piece of music. “Well then” he says, unwrapping the quiche. “I guess we’d better win.”

“The thing is, we don’t actually know how they’re planning to do it.” Minna’s fingers drum anxiously against her thigh. There’s something different between us now. I feel it—this lingering warmth from the spell we cast together. Like my mother’s magic left echoes in both of us, and now every time Minna moves, I feel it. A tug. A pull. “The eradication ritual isn’t in any of the books I’ve—” She stops, looks at Jake. “Well. Wasn’t in any of the books.”

“But it’s built on my magic somehow,” I say. “Using me as a template for what needs to be... removed.”

Alex makes a face. “Gross.”

“A crystal array.” Aura’s voice is so quiet I almost miss it. “My mom brought it to Hornesbrook tonight. Some kind of amplification setup.” Her fingers find the edge of her sleeve—unconscious, automatic—tracing the place where fabric meets scar tissue. After seeing her mother tonight, I certainly know that she didn’t fall off a roof. My eyes find hers across the

room—she looks away, fast.

“Crystal’s mom was there too. “ Shiva counts on her fingers. “Alex’s, Minna’s...”

“The heads of Aurum,” Alex cuts in. “And Silverleaf.”

This isn’t right. All Hallows Eve is a school celebration, a traditional gathering of local witches. Not some kind of international summit.

“Horne’s been planning this,” Jake says quietly. “For weeks. Maybe months.” He starts pacing, his boots stomping across the floor.

“Okay, so they’ve got the crystal array for amplification,” Minna says. “The combined power of basically every powerful witch in existence to draw from The Aperture...”

“It’s not that simple.” Jake stops. “Eradication rituals have specific requirements. There’s a reason Horne tried to trick Phoenix into using that Transformation Spell on herself. The spell needs blood from the targeted magical line.” His eyes meet mine. “Your blood. Or...”

“My mother’s.”

“Well that’s—” Dad glances at me, trying for a reassuring smile. “Your mother would never. I mean, that’s just...” He trails off as he sees our faces. “Right?”

I want to agree. Want to believe.

“Phoenix, can you be totally certain she wouldn’t give it?” Aura asks.

The silence that follows is deafening. Dad’s face cycles through another round of grief—faster this time, ending in a very differently location. Rage. He turns and walks out without another word, the door slamming behind him with enough force to make the Floofs take flight.

“Dad—” I start to follow, but Jake grabs my arm.

“Let him walk it off,” he says. “Right now we need to focus on what we actually have to

work with.”

Alex spreads her arms wide. “Which is...”

We look around. The ruins of Jake’s cabin. A handful of singed Floofs. Five teenage witches in slightly scorched flight suits. One abandoned quiche. I can feel everyone not looking at each other, not wanting to acknowledge how impossible this is, how very small we are.

“Um, okay so like, don’t be mad?” Gio’s already got their phone out, bouncing slightly. “But remember that concert footage from last spring? When you did the thing with the ceiling? And everyone’s phones were out and then it went viral? So I maybe kind of never stopped posting about it.” They’re talking faster now. “And there might be this whole hashtag situation? And maybe a couple of million people who are OBSESSED.”

I stare at them.

Millions. The number doesn’t compute.

“I didn’t use any new footage! Just memes and edits from the concert!” They thrust their phone at me—an endless feed of *me, me, me*, reflected infinitely, each post, each comment a different version of who someone thinks I am. “They’re making fan-art, dressing up as you for Halloween, there’s like this whole community—”

“Whoa whoa whoa,” I shake my head, trying to focus. “What would we even do with them? Tell them to show up and storm The Gates?”

“Yeah, that’s what I posted so far.” Gio is, apparently, not joking. “The response is insane.”

“I mean, they won’t be able to get through The Gates,” Alex says. “The wards reflect Nulls. I’m gonna bet they’ll probably work just as well on a bunch of queer teens cosplaying as

witches.”

“What about the tunnel?” I ask. “Under The Forge?”

“No.” Jake’s voice is sharp. “I’m telling you, Phoenix. That wasn’t me. That tunnel was sealed. Whoever opened it...” His hands clench at his sides. “I don’t trust it.”

“I still think they should show up,” Gio says. “It’ll be cool to watch you all do your thing.”

Our thing? Failing? Dying? Getting our magic eradicated?”

“If only we had The Archive,” Shiva says quietly. “All those books, all that knowledge about New Magic...”

“Come through for the fans, though,” Gio says. “Win or lose, maybe y’all will inspire some new fic.”

“Fanfic,” Minna whispers to herself. “Wait. My bag—” She jumps to her feet and runs to grab it. “I dropped it before we ran inside...look.” She pulls out *Queer Magiks*. “I know I said it was nonsense before, but then I cross-referenced it with historical texts.” The pages are bristling with color-coded sticky notes. “There are elements that line up with official histories, just... told differently.”

ONE book. A single surviving book. But it’s enough for two research nerds to find their rhythm.

Jake moves closer, his eyes scanning the page. “See here, the multi-pairing is documented as prismatic connections—”

“Different colors for different bonds—”

“And here—” Minna’s practically climbing over Jake’s shoulder. “The descriptions of a

witch who could fly—”

“Like Ginevra.” They both turn to look at me. “And like Phoenix,” Minna says softly.

Oh. Right. I can fly now. That’s... actually kind of a big deal, isn’t it?

Everyone’s staring at me like I’ve suddenly become useful.

“I can barely stay in the air, is the thing.” I think about how it felt floating above the quad, unstable and terrifying. Is it even fair to call what I do ‘flying’? Isn’t it more like... levitating briefly and then falling with style?

“Hold on.” Jake turns to me, that focused look in his eyes. “Phoenix, remember those early illustrations we saw in The Archive? Of Ginevra in flight?”

I nod slowly.

“Do you remember seeing her amulet?”

I start to say yes, but... did I? There was definitely something at her throat, catching the light, but... “I don’t remember the metal casing,” I say slowly. “Just the crystal itself.”

“May I?” Jake’s already reaching.

I slip it off, the weight of it familiar after all these months. It sits in his palm, looking exactly like it always has: ancient, awkward, slightly crooked.

“The thing about the Archivist,” Jake says, turning it over, “is that they never built anything without a back door. Even the most complicated mechanical systems always had a simple release hidden somewhere.” His fingers trace the edge. “An old friend taught me that. The first rule of magical engineering—always leave yourself a way out.”

There’s a soft click.

The outer casing falls away, revealing the crystal heart beneath. When I touch it, warmth

spreads through my fingers—the same warmth I felt in The Archive of New Magic, in The Aperture chamber. Light splits through it like a prism, casting tiny rainbow patterns across my palm.

Minna leans over my shoulder to look. Closer than she needs to be. “This is—” I glance at Aura.

Yeah. She’s noticed. I watch as she steps back.

It’s exhausting. My brain has become a GPS tracker for exactly two people.

“Unprecedented,” Minna finishes.

“There’s no precedent for any of this,” Alex says. “No precedent for trans witches flying, or amulets with back doors, or...” They gesture at the smoking ruins around us. “We’re kind of beyond precedent at this point.”

A mechanical whirring cuts her off. A Floof drops between us, wings shuddering. It opens its mouth and...

It can’t even sparkle-barf. All that comes out is soot and ash, hanging formlessly in the air before dissolving into grey powder. It tries again, the color is a bit lighter, but still—pitiful.

We’re sitting in the ashes of our only real advantage. The Archive of New Magic is gone. The books that might have saved us are gone.

“It’s not enough.” The words burst out of me, watching the Floofs circle helplessly above us. “None of it. Horne has every gated witch on the planet, a crystal array, *and my mother*. And what do I have? A hot-wired amulet and some WitchTok fans.”

“You know what the word ‘coven’ means, Phoenix?” Jake asks.

“Followers,” Minna says, because I think she literally can’t help herself. “From the

Latin '*convenire*', meaning to gather or assemble. In this case, followers of the Sentinel, which means we're literally facing every witch who's ever sworn loyalty—”

“Thanks, Minna.” Jake smiles. “But no. Early days, early covens, the game was pure survival, right? And when you found them, the others like you, the ones who'd risk everything to keep you safe, even when the whole world said you shouldn't exist—” He looks around at the group of us. “Well, that was your coven.”

They're all looking at me now and suddenly I'm thinking about Gio's arms around me that first day I told them, Dad's quiet certainty when he bought those red shoes, Alex defending me to Crystal. Minna's heist, Aura's hand finding mine in the dark. This magic of their's, this refusal to let me burn alone.

BARF.

A Floof coughs up more soot.

BARF.

Again.

At first it looks like only soot, but as the grey powder falls away a shimmer remains... I can just make out the words...

**WE READ.**

“Is this...?” Jake's voice catches. “Floof, did you—”

Another Floof drops down, then another. Each one opens its mouth:

**WE READ. WE READ. WE READ.**

“Jake—” Wait. Is that...does that mean...

“If it read them, it can rewrite them.” Jake claps his hands together and lets out an out-of-

character *Whoop!* “Floof, how many books did you read?!”

Floof barfs again:

**WE READ ALL.**

“Phoenix!” Dad calls from outside. “Everyone needs to see this. Now.”

We burst outside and at first I think they’re stars. Then my eyes adjust and I see them clearly: hundreds of Floofs lighting up the night sky, soft bodies glowing like lanterns as they spiral upward in patterns that feel almost like language. Each one releases shimmering streams of light, ribbons of luminescence that paint our history across the darkness. The Archive isn’t gone.

It’s transformed.

Shiva’s laughing. “It’s a zoo!”

“A constellation.” Minna reaches up as if she could pluck one from the sky.

“No.” Jake’s voice is thick with emotion. “More than that.”

The sky erupts in a display that puts every fireworks show I’ve ever seen to shame. Text and images weave together, our stories reborn in fragments of starlight. Stories of witches who refused to hide, who found each other in the dark, who fought to keep each other alive. My ancestors. My people. I realize what Jake already knows—what the Floofs have become.

It’s a library.

ALL:

*People like us*

*Are raised up by the past.*

*The words of those before us*

*Are written in our lives.*

*People like us*

*We rise up from the ash.*

*Call it witchcraft or rebellion,*

*But somehow we survive*

*Until we find a place*

*Where we won't have to hide,*

*We whisper our story:*

*We are beautiful.*

Shiva walks toward me holding Ginevra's crystal, now wrapped in simple twine. Her hands have turned ordinary string into something beautiful—something between a net and a cradle. She's made a new home for my amulet, I realize, as she raises it toward me. When she lifts it over my head, the crystal catches light from above, splitting it into rainbow fractals. The weight settles against my chest, and warmth spreads through me immediately—not muffled like before, but clear and bright and true. Like finally being able to sing full-out after years of whispering.

While everyone else watches the light show, I notice Minna and Jake off to the side, heads bent together, deep in conversation. They're pointing up at a particular passage the Floofs are projecting, pointing and whispering with increasing urgency. I can't hear what they're saying because suddenly—

*Phoenix, Phoenix, Phoenix...*

Something's happening. The Floofs are moving with purpose now, not just displaying

text but forming a pattern I've seen before. The way they're spiraling up and out, their mechanical wings clicking in perfect synchronization as they widen into a perfect circle, like the glass floor in the Great Hall, like...

*Phoenix, Phoenix, Phoenix...*

The voices are so loud I almost stumble, the sound filling my head like feedback through an amp turned too high. When I look back up, Minna and Jake are walking toward me, wearing matching expressions.

"We have a theory," Minna says.

Jake's hands are doing that nervous tapping thing. "The Aperture. We've been thinking about it all wrong."

"Look, in these early accounts—" Minna points to fragments of shimmering text.

"—the translations were wrong," Jake cuts in. "The mechanical systems aren't designed to channel power—"

"They're designed to hold something back," Minna finishes. "And these passages about Ginevra... They've been mistranslated. She didn't try to 'unleash its power'—"

"She tried to break its bonds," Jake says. "Look at the pattern, the way it spirals. It's not a source, it's—"

"It's a seal." Minna stops. Clearly shaken. She takes off her glasses, cleans them—puts them back on like she's hoping the text will be different.

Or I'll be different.

"Whatever that seal is containing? They built an entire school, an entire system, solely to

keep whatever's in there... in there."

Above us, the circle in the sky keeps widening.

"Cabot." Her voice drops to a whisper. "*Phoenix*. You just can't. Please. Please tell me you know that."

I think so. I think I've always known that. I suppose I just thought, maybe—nevermind. I nod.

Jake places his hand lightly on my shoulder. "Change doesn't have to mean destruction, kiddo. There's a difference between breaking free and breaking everything."

The voices are stronger now, more insistent than ever. But for the first time since they first whispered my name, I'm not sure I want to listen.

\* \* \*

## THE STILLING OF WAYWARD OBJECTS

*For Some Defeats Are Written In Our Very Blood*

\* First she cast at me, knocking me from the sky.

\* Thence I understood: books are not meant to feel rage. I had not known I was capable of

feeling anything at all.

\* Last she called for The Smith to fix new iron braces, securing me to the ceremonial pedestal. The Smith's tool tapped twice against the final brace when the work was complete. A craftsman's habit, perhaps. Testing the hold. (Which felt...soft. But the Sentinel inspected the work, pronounced it acceptable.) In any case, consciousness will not be restrained by iron.

Dear sister,

Jenna pauses as she approaches Hornesbrook's gates. Something feels off—a subtle wrongness. Not a scent. Not a sound. Nothing visible but night. A younger witch might miss it...but no. *Something* is there, pressing against her skin like static electricity, raising the fine hairs on her arms...

There. She sees it now. The slightest hint of a pink glow suffusing the outer perimeter grounds, pulsing gently like a heartbeat. She knows wards. This is no ward.

"Welcome home, Jenna." Inside the gates, Xenith Horne stands perfectly still, hands clasped before her like a portrait of patience. "I was wondering when you'd join us."

Jenna's hands curl into fists. "Let me in, Xenith."

"Of course." With a gesture both elegant and mocking, Horne raises her hand. The pink glow parts like a curtain. "After all, a mother should be present for such an... important moment in her child's development."

Jenna studies the shield as she walks past. She doesn't know how it was constructed, only that it will be a heavy setback to Phoenix and her friends. Another way she's failed to protect them. But there's no way to warn them now.

She launches her first attack as she talks:

"You know, Xenith, you haven't changed a thing in fifteen years." Jenna's spell lances toward Horne.

"Why change what works?" Horne's shield spell deflects Jenna's first attack, sending sparks cascading across dark water.

Preeta at her right. Dorian ready to conduct. The same positions, the same formations. Jenna advances, each attack driving Horne back exactly one step. The professors remain motionless.

Horne's eyes flick—just for a moment—to the crystal altar where the vial of blood sits. Exactly as Jenna knew they would.

"Some things," Jenna says quietly, all her remaining power focusing to a needle point, "should change."

The vial doesn't just break—it explodes. Her stolen blood mists into the air like crimson rain, useless for any ritual. For a moment, the only sound is the gentle patter of droplets hitting the Pool's

dark surface.

Jenna exhales. The eradication can't proceed without her blood. "It's over," she says.

Horne's smile doesn't falter. If anything, it grows warmer, almost pitying. "Oh, Jenna. I'm sorry you came all the way. But you're not needed. The eradication is proceeding as planned."

Jenna launches a shield spell between them, certain and strong. "Not without my blood." Even as she says it, Jenna feels the first tremor of doubt.

"I thought that might be a hard sell the second time around." Horne's eyes drift behind Jenna.

The Sentinel Emeritus steps into the light.

"Oh, my dear girl."

Jenna's shield falters. Her shoulders drop as understanding floods in.

"Hello, Mama."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

The walk to Hornesbrook feels longer somehow. Maybe it's the smoke still clinging to our clothes, or the weight of what we're about to do. We've fallen into a formation that tells our entire story. Aura ten paces ahead, not looking back. Minna beside me, our elbows occasionally brushing. Me in the middle, torn between stepping forward and staying put.

"Okay. We need to talk about whatever this is." Shiva plants herself in the middle of the path. Everyone halts. "We're off to battle and you three are having some kind of—" she waves her hands, "—situation that's making everyone uncomfortable."

Alex mutters something that sounds like "*finally.*"

"Whatever this is, we need it sorted." Shiva's voice is kind but firm.

"I'm just gonna say it." Alex steps forward. "Phoenix appears to be the connective tissue here."

"The what?" Jake turns.

"Like—" Alex gestures between us. "Phoenix can pair with multiple people. Different colors, different... intensities." Their hands drop. "It's uncomfortable for everyone. And it's

not..."

"Sustainable," Shiva finishes.

Aura crosses her arms. "Of course it's not sustainable."

My face burns. Having it named out loud feels...not great.

"Someone always gets hurt." Jake leans against a tree, seeming tired by all this. "In the Archive, in any documentation of multi-pairing, it's always a mess—"

"Eventually, yes." Minna interrupts. "When Phoenix and I cast with her mother—that worked because it was *temporary*, not a sustained connection." She reaches for her bag. "There's a difference."

"A difference that matters?" Aura's voice is sharp.

"According to my analysis, yes." Minna pulls out her notebook, and for the first time since I've met her, shows me what she's been writing:

#### **INSTITUTIONAL RESTRICTIONS:**

- Four Gates
- Only mother-daughter can inherit
- Magic must be pink
- Casting requires pairs

#### **NATURAL LAWS:**

- Connection amplifies strength
- Magic responds to intention
- **THE APERTURE IS A FINITE RESOURCE**

Minna rubs her glasses. “My supposition is that Phoenix *does* actually follow the laws of magic. Different ones.”

This is her analysis. This is her documentation.

This entire time, while I’ve been stumbling through Hornesbrook feeling like a mistake, she’s been applying her beautiful Minna-brain to understanding exactly what I mean for magic itself.

I know that whatever’s going on in *all* of my interpersonal connections right now is a *mess*, and I also know that pairing and romance aren’t the same, but whatever feeling I have for Minna in this moment— it’s deep and powerful and neither and both.

Fascinating.

“If Phoenix can pair with anyone, with everyone—” Aura’s voice rises. “What does that make the rest of us? Interchangeable?”

“It’s not a long-term solution, right?” Shiva raises her hands, mediator stance. “If connection amplifies strength in multiple connections, then multiple connections... eventually she’s gonna have to...”

Minna nods.

Yeah. I have to choose.

“One night only, then,” Alex says. “Phoenix pairs with anyone, everyone. Okay?”

No one says okay.

No one says no, either.

Aura doesn’t look at me.

“Let’s keep moving.” Jake leads us forward.

I fall back, taking space to think.

Shiva and Gio launch into conversation alongside me, comparing notes. Two social media experts finding common ground deep in the dark, dark intersection of magical aesthetics and algorithms. “Your edits are genius,” Shiva’s saying. Is Gio...blushing? Tonight is very weird.

Gio drifts over to me. “This is *wild*, dude. I spent months making videos about your magical revolution, but I didn’t think I’d actually be, you know, around to *see it*.” It’s true. Completely surreal having them here, in this world that’s felt so separate from my life before. “What’s up with those girls, though? That shit was intense.”

“What?”

“You know what.” Gio gestures toward Aura and Minna, walking together. “The whole...” They make a complicated hand motion that somehow conveys *everything*.

My face gets hot. “Yeah.”

“Wanna talk about it?”

“Not particularly.”

“Cool, cool.” I last exactly three seconds.

“Never mind I have to tell you—*GIO!* I’ve been crushing so hard on Aura, but then I had my first kiss with Minna...basically I’m what this awful-but-insightful girl named Crystal calls a chaos witch.”

“First kiss?” Gio’s voice is...off. There’s something there, something I can’t quite...

“You sure about that, dude?”

Huh. Well. My heart starts beating faster as I enter yet another surprising conversation I didn’t see coming. My nervous system is gonna need a vacation after tonight.

“Look, Gio...maybe, *technically* there *might* have been something a long time ago. But like, if there *was*... was it even...”

“Real?”

I nod. “Did it count? I mean, who remembers, right?”

“Hmm.” They take a breath, considering.

We walk in comfortable silence for a few moments.

“Last day of fifth grade,” they say. “Creek behind my house. You wore overalls.”

We walk a little longer. The silence is a little less comfortable.

“Overalls, really?”

“*Dysphoria* overalls, yeah. I remember.”

“I remember too, you know.” God, why is this feel so awkward? “I know it was mine, only I didn’t know how to ask if—”

“If you were my first kiss, too?” They look at me. And shrug. “Ah, who even remembers.”

“Gio!” They bust out laughing and I smack them on the shoulder. Their hand drops down and playfully grasps mine.

“Wait till Minna sees a picture of you in the overalls, that’s gonna really get things hot. She’s cute by the way, Aura too. You know you’ve gotten yourself into quite a situation here, don’t you?” Gio gestures down the path towards the “situation.”

“I’m aware. Yes.” They’re still holding my hand. “Gio.”

“Yeah.”

“Are you—” I don’t even know how to ask this. “Do you want—”

“Phoenix!” They laugh again. “It’s cool, dude.”

*There.* That's it. The voice: "*It's cool, dude*" but in that strange, soft voice they used when we said goodbye. Here it is again, and I don't—

They stop and look at me. I have literally no idea what's happening. "All I'm saying, dude—is *we were first*."

We start walking again, faster to catch up. "There's my dad."

"And his quiche," Gio adds, and we both have to stifle our giggles. Because yeah, there's my father up ahead, fiddling with his phone's flashlight. And walking next to him is Jake. Jake and my dad. My perfectly normal father casually chatting with my mysterious trans magic mentor. They're deep in conversation. This is a thing that's happening.

"We should probably..." Gio nods toward Dad and Jake.

"Eavesdrop shamelessly?"

"Obviously."

We quicken our pace, falling into a rhythm we perfected years ago—close enough to hear but far enough that adults might not notice we're here. Seven years of listening to conversations about myself taught me exactly how far back to walk, how quietly to breathe.

"I don't understand," Dad says finally, his voice rough. "How could she—" He stops, like he can't even finish the sentence.

Gio's hand slips into mine. They know all about listening to parents talk about you when they think you can't hear.

"What parent doesn't choose their own kid, over anything?" Dad continues.

"She's not choosing between just anything."

“No?” Dad’s laugh is sharp. “It’s simple. Your kid tells you who they are, you believe them. End of story.”

“Yeah? And what if believing them means watching everything you thought you knew about the world burn down? What if it means losing your whole community? Your—”

Gio’s thumb traces circles on my palm.

“Tom.” Jake stops mid-rant, running a hand through his hair like he’s trying to pull himself back together. “Can I tell you what I saw tonight?”

Dad nods.

“I saw Jenna walk straight into fire,” Jake says quietly. “To try and save my Archive. Not her history—*mine*.” He pauses. “That’s not nothing.”

“But she let Phoenix suffer for years. All that time she was trying to tell us—”

“Yeah.” Jake’s hands do that restless movement. “And I get it. Trust me. My family never...” He trails off. “Look, she’s back on campus right now, battling everything—her dyad, the assembled witches, probably Horne herself. Risking it all to save both Hornesbrook and Phoenix, and that might—” He stops walking, “Well, it just might be impossible.”

Jake turns to face my dad directly. “Tom, I’m looking at a world where children with misunderstood magic get hunted and persecuted. And yes, I’m angry—so angry it drowns out everything else sometimes. But here’s the thing about the Cabot women—”

I lean forward slightly, barely breathing. Gio squeezes my hand.

“They don’t sit in their feelings. They take action. You know your wife.” Jake hesitates. “I suppose...I suppose I do, too. And when it comes to Phoenix, impossible as it may be, she is going to *fight*.”

I watch my dad absorb this—the grace of what Jake offers him: permission to be angry while still holding space for change.

“Some parents never fight for us,” Jake adds quietly. “Some never even try.”

The weight of what’s unsaid hangs in the air. I think about Jake’s cabin, built by someone who had to make his own space in the world. About my pink dungeon of a dorm room, and how my mother transformed it into something, well, *bearable*. Both trying to build shelter in a world that keeps tearing it down.

“Your mom’s kind of hardcore now, huh?” Gio nudges, tugging me back a few steps.

“C’mon. Let them have their moment.”

We fall back, letting their voices fade. But I can still see these men walking together, trying to understand each other, trying to understand my mother, trying to understand this impossible thing we’re all about to do. Each walking beside a person he doesn’t fully understand, toward a battle he’s not sure he can win.

Aura’s been walking a few paces behind us. Gio drifts toward her and I follow.

“What do you think?”

I turn to look, just as the moon breaks through the canopy and see it—the left side of Aura’s head is shaved close to the scalp. The rest of her hair falls in a dramatic sweep across her right shoulder.

“Shiva did it.” She touches the buzzed side self-consciously. “I know we just had that whole thing with Alex about *Beauty and the Beast* and hair and transformations but—”

“Hold on.” I hold up a hand. “Shiva brought her *hair clippers* into a forest? For a battle?”

I shake my head in mock disbelief. “Did she pack the cape? The little brush?”

Aura doesn't smile. "She used a spell. Obviously." She sees my face, sees I'm messing with her...still doesn't smile. "Oh."

Gio gives me a pity-laugh.

"Anyway," she continues. "If we're going to save or destroy the world tonight, we should probably... I mean, we might as well..."

"Look hot doing it?"

Now. Now she's smiling.

Gio clears their throat. "I'm just gonna..." They point ahead at nothing in particular, then start speed-walking.

She's walking beside me now. So close, but the distance between us... I don't know. I'm picturing a canyon, the two of us shouting across.

We both start at once:

"I need to tell you—"

"Phoenix, I didn't—"

She stops in the middle of the path.

"You first."

"No, you."

Silence. I count pine trees.

"You first," she says again.

The moonlight catches half her face, leaving the rest in shadow.

"Alright."

I don't know where to start. Everything feels too big, too much.

"I don't know you, Aura." She shifts her weight—away from me. "Not well," I add quickly. "But I want to."

Her eyes track somewhere past my shoulder, focusing on nothing. The silence comes back. I let it.

"Why?" she finally asks.

I take the smallest step forward. "My mom spent years trying to transform me into someone else. Someone...easier for her to love. And I think maybe yours tried to burn—"

A tiny flinch. Her arms cross over her chest.

"Do you think—" She stops herself. Starts over. "You think because we're both—"

"I can't fix what she did."

"No." Her eyes snap to mine. "You can't."

"I know!" I say it way too loud, instantly regret it.

*But I know, I know, I really do know.* Being queer together, sharing trauma—none of that equals healing. "I know, okay?"

The silence stretches. I should let it sit, leave this be, but—

"Can I tell you a story?"

"Um..." She looks ahead down the dark path. "Let's catch up. Tell me while we're walking."

"Sure, help me dodge the logs. So a witch is walking across Hornesbrook's campus and she falls into a deep, warded hole. Can't climb out. Can't cast."

Aura's eyebrows draw together slightly, but she doesn't interrupt.

“A Professor passes by. The witch shouts up, ‘I’m stuck in this hole, help me out? ’

Professor throws down a feminine energy potion and moves on.”

A tiny exhale from Aura—almost a laugh.

“Then a Sentinel comes along. The witch shouts up, ‘Sentinel, I’m down in this hole, can you help me out? ’ The Sentinel writes a decree banning the witch’s descendants from ever going near holes again, throws it down, moves on.”

She’s fighting a smile. I can see it in the corner of her mouth.

“Finally a friend walks by. ‘Hey, it’s me, can you help me out? ’ And the friend jumps in the hole. The witch says, ‘Are you stupid? Now we’re both down here.’” I pause for effect. “And then—”

“Wait, I know this one.” Aura cuts me off. “The friend says, ‘Yeah, but I’ve been down here before and I know the way out.’”

“No. That’s—no.” I shake my head, feel my hair move across my shoulders.

She stops. “No?”

“No.” I think about her mother holding crystals. My mother holding scissors. Both so certain they were helping.

“Neither of the friends say *anything at all*.”

She watches me come closer, her breath shallow. She doesn’t move back. Doesn’t move forward.

“They just take each other’s hand.”

Mine are trembling as I hold them out to her. She presses her palms to mine. I feel her pulse jumping.

“Because it’s us, Aura.” Her eyes search mine. “You know that, right? It’s us? Not just a couple of random witches down there?” She nods. Barely.

“It’s you and me.” I see understanding flood her face. “And you know what we do? *We fly.*”

The air between us holds like a fermata. Aura looks around the forest clearing, taking it all in, considering.

She gestures down the path and we start off again. Slowly, deliberately, she reaches out and takes my upper arm, linking us in that old-fashioned way. It makes me think of different times, different stories. We walk in silence for a moment.

Then, without looking at me: “I don’t think I can share you.”

I keep walking. She keeps holding my arm. An owl calls from somewhere above us.

“I know she makes you stronger. Braver.”

One foot in front of the other.

“Your whole midnight mission thing. She pushes you out of your comfort zone.”

It hurts. It all hurts. “I shouldn’t have kissed her.”

“It’s not—it’s not that.” Aura lets go of my arm. “I mean, it *is* that, but also—during the fire? That connection between you? I can see it, Phoenix. Everyone can see it.”

“Aura.”

“I know it’s not fair—”

“Aura.”

“—and I know you need that connection for whatever we’re about to face—”

I stop walking.

“I know I’m being unreasonable—”

“Hi! Just wanted to see if you two were—”

Alex takes us in. Reads the room. Or, um, woods. “Alright then. I’m gonna. Exit stage left—”

Yeah. They disappear up ahead.

“You’re not being unreasonable.”

I look at her—really look. This girl who learned that love meant making herself smaller. Whose mother tried to burn away every edge that didn’t fit the mold.

“You can’t share. That makes sense.” Her head tilts. Something shifts in her eyes. “Your whole life has been about giving pieces of yourself away.”

“I want to kiss you,” she says.

“Okay.”

She stands there. Neither of us moves.

“Not tonight.”

“Okay.”

She blinks. “Okay?”

“Take all the time you need.”

The relief that washes over her face breaks my heart a little.

Slowly, telegraphing every movement, I reach up and touch the shaved side of her head.

The soft buzz under my fingers. She doesn’t flinch.

“I think we take this slow. Glacial slow. *Continental drift slow.*”

She rolls her eyes, fights a smile. “How about, like, *tomorrow* when we’re not in active

battle?"

"Tomorrow." Yes. Yes. Tomorrow sounds so good. "And we can just... exist. Together. And figure it out as we go."

"That sounds—" She takes a shaky breath. "Good."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

We still don't move.

"We should catch up with the others."

"Yeah."

We should. We don't.

"Phoenix?"

"Yeah?"

"Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow."

"Okay." She shakes her head, breaks the spell. "Let's go save the world or whatever."

She reaches for my hand, links our fingers together, lifts them to her mouth.

She presses a kiss to my knuckles.

The sensation starts there—warmth at the point of contact.

So slow.

Last-drops-from-the-squeeze-bottle-of-honey slow as the sensation makes its way, up through my wrist, my forearm, my elbow.

I can see the light as it travels, how it changes everything. How Aura's face seems to glow from within. How the shadows soften. How the air between us turns golden.

Sunrise.

We stand there for a moment, hands clasped, glowing softly in the darkness. The trees around us seem to lean in.

My god. The best things in life are so fucking fragile.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

The Gates of Hornesbrook explode into view as we crest the hill—massive, ancient, impossible.

My first thought: we're supposed to break through *that*?

My second thought: those things were built to keep out armies.

My third thought: *we...* are not an army.

As we approach, I start to get my first look at what we're really up against. Hundreds of witches fill the quad. The combined power makes the air shimmer, a warning written in light.

“Oh good,” Shiva says. “They came.” I follow her gaze—and my heart sinks.

At first I think it's a joke. There's a kid near the front of The Gates holding a cardboard wand and wearing a Party City witch hat. Then a second one emerges from behind a tree—striped tights under a black dress. Three more step into the moonlight covered in what appears to be... *wait for it...* body glitter. They keep appearing. From nowhere. From everywhere. A pride flag wrapped like a cape. A homemade sign that says “Phoenix Rising.” A wizard hat with hot-glued stars. A broomstick straight from Target's seasonal aisle. There's even a group in black

graduation robes, like they raided their high school's storage closet. Dozens of them, materializing from the darkness. Witch-Tok kids. *My* Witch-Tok kids. Looking extremely cold and slightly ridiculous in their attempted witch costumes, but here. Actually here. For me.

"This isn't..." Gio bites their lip, thumbs flying across their phone screen. "There were supposed to be more. The hashtag was trending, I swear."

A kid in a witch's hat with a trans flag on it waves enthusiastically at me.

Then we hear it—voices in the distance. Lots of voices. Coming closer.

They crest the hill like a wave—hundreds of teenagers spilling over the ridge. Then more behind them. And more. And impossibly more. The trickle becomes a flood becomes an ocean. The forest path becomes a river of people flowing toward Hornesbrook. Some are in ridiculous DIY witch costumes, others in pride flags turned into capes. Their signs catch the moonlight: "WITCH PLEASE!" "NO COVEN WITHOUT US!" And everywhere I look: "RISE PHOENIX RISE!"

My throat closes up. All these kids. They left their homes, their safety, traveled through the night to fight someone else's battle.

No—not someone else's. Ours.

"I thought I was building you followers," Gio says, watching the crowd multiply. "But look at them." They keep coming. More and more kids cresting the hill. "Phoenix, this is your army."

*Army.*

The word hits strange. "I never wanted—"

"I know," Gio says.

All these sweet queer kids from the internet, holding their cardboard wands and

homemade signs. I never intended to turn them into soldiers.

And then I remember: I am not the one who made our bodies into battlefields.

These kids were already fighting. Every day.

I didn't make them soldiers. I just gave them somewhere to march.

I should say something. I need to say something. They came all this way and they deserve words, deserve gratitude, deserve something more than my stunned silence.

I open my mouth. What comes out isn't a speech. It's this:

PHOENIX:

*I push too far.*

*I ask too much.*

*I forget sometimes,*

*There are more of us.*

*I move too fast.*

*I talk too loud.*

*But it's far too late*

*To silence me now.*

*When my anger*

*Takes me higher,*

*Where else can I go*

*But skyward?*

*No more hiding,*

*No more hiding.*

*This is my time.*

*My limit's the sky,*

*And I'm rising, rising.*

*No more hiding tonight.*

A scream tears through the night. Shiva—who'd been walking ahead—suddenly crumples like she's been struck. She drops to her knees, her face contorted in pain. Pink energy crackles across her skin like electricity, burning through her jumpsuit in neat, cruel slashes.

“Shiva!” I run toward her but she throws up her hand.

“Stop! There’s something—” Her voice is raw. “You can’t see it but—” She’s crawling back toward us, her face ashen. I don’t know what’s happening, but Shiva’s hurt and I have to go to her.

The buzzing hits me before I see anything—this high electrical whine that makes my teeth ache. Then the pink light arcs out of nowhere, and oh god it BURNS. Like being stabbed with a thousand tiny knives. I can’t tell if I’m screaming or if that’s the sound the magic makes as it tears through me.

“Phoenix!” Aura tries to reach me but the barrier catches her too. She drops beside me, choking on pain.

“A second gate,” Minna says sharply. “Everyone back—”

Too late. Alex is already running forward. She’s thrown back so hard she skids across the ground. Minna goes next, more cautiously, but it doesn’t matter. Shiva tries to help her up and

gets caught in the back-blast—their suits smoking, fabric shredding, skin burning.

One by one we try. One by one we fail. The barrier pulses outside The Gates, invisible but brutal.

“We have to try together,” Minna says, helping Alex up. “Maybe if we—”

But The Gates are ready. The next blast catches all three of them—Minna, Alex, and Aura. The sound is worse than the sight: fabric tearing, magic crackling, their screams mixing with this horrible electrical whine.

“It’s not just keeping us out,” Aura says. “It’s making sure it hurts when we try.”

The original gate wards are still working too—my army surges forward in waves, each meeting their own rejection. Some simply stop and turn away, muttering about forgotten appointments. Others fight harder—their shoelaces knot, their legs seize up.

Jake charges in—then immediately freezes and starts patting his pockets. He turns to me. “I’m so sorry. I just remembered I left my stove on. I should really check—”

The men are useless.

Behind us, a thousand kids who came to fight for something beautiful, watch as we fail. They can’t see what’s happening—the second gate is invisible. They can only hear the screams as that awful pink energy tears through us, only see us being thrown back by something unseen, our blue flight-suits slashed to ribbons, our skin burning.

And they are angry.

#### PHOENIX’S ARMY:

*Burn it all down, burn it all down.*

I flinch at the words. This isn’t what I wanted—more destruction, more violence. But all

around me, my friends are hurt, bleeding, marked by violent pink magic that seems to know exactly what we are and wants to burn it out of us.

The chant spreads through the crowd like wildfire:

PHOENIX'S ARMY:

*Burn it all down, burn it all down.*

“We can’t get in,” Minna says. “None of us. And they’re all in there, ready to—”

She doesn’t finish. She doesn’t have to. We can see them through The Gates—hundreds of amulets glowing like deadly stars. Waiting to eradicate all New Magic.

“Wait.” I stand up, wobbling slightly. “If we can’t go through...”

PHOENIX:

*When my anger*

*Takes me higher,*

*Where else can I go*

*But skyward?*

“Phoenix, no—”

But I’m already rising into the air.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

“Fifteen years! Fifteen years you’ve been in Europe, and you show up now?”

At the base of the Foremother’s Keep, Astrid and Jenna Cabot circle each other in the kind of conversation where you say something and the other person says something back but you’re not really listening because you’re already preparing your next thing, your next accusation or defense.

“Xenith called and said The Aperture was in danger—”

“Oh, *Xenith* called! Well then, of course you came.”

Around and around they go: “*You chose power over family.*” “*You abandoned your lineage.*”

Neither will yield, and both know it, and still they continue, boxers too exhausted to land a blow but too stubborn to leave the ring. Until—

“Did *Xenith* tell you that the magic she wants to eradicate belongs to your *granddaughter*, Mama?”

Astrid goes still. "My... granddaughter?" As if she's tasting the word for the first time.

Before Jenna can respond, Deirdre's voice rings out: "The crystals are aligned! We can begin!"

But even as the mothers and professors move to take their positions, a disturbance at The Gates draws their attention. Through the iron bars, figures appear in the gathering dark—first a handful, then dozens, then hundreds.

"Children playing at revolution," Horne says, but her fingers tighten on her staff. "The Gates will hold."

The mothers of the WMA draw together, their amulets pulsing with steady light as they watch the rebels test the defenses. Each attempt ends exactly as expected—some turned away by ancient magics, others thrown back by pink lightning that tears through their garments. A demonstration of how institutional power maintains its order.

Then, through the iron bars, Jenna Cabot sees him—her husband, her anchor—stumbling toward Hornesbrook, approaching the Second Gate.

"See that man out there?" She turns to her mother. "The one on the other side, fighting for his child? He showed me there are things in life worth more than magic."

"More than magic?" The words burst from Astrid. "You walked away—"

"I walked away from a mother who loved this place more than her own daughter." Jenna's

hands clench at her sides.

“Magic is everything!” Astrid cries. “And *you* abandoned it—abandoned your gift, our legacy—”

PHOENIX’S ARMY:

*Burn it all down, burn it all down...*

Screams from the ladies of the WMA.

All heads turn to watch Tom.

He is fighting the gates with everything he has, blood streaming from his nose, his ears, his very determination an affront to centuries of protective barriers.

Jenna screams, casts, but the streams of pink magic she sends towards him are futile.

When Tom finally falls, the Witching Mothers gasp. They have watched rebels repelled with clinical detachment—this is what The Gates do, what they’ve always done.

But Tom Cabot isn’t abstract.

He’s someone’s husband. Someone’s father.

And the blood streaming from his ears makes it suddenly, horrifyingly real.

Professor Silver takes an involuntary step toward the barrier. Greenwood takes her arm. They catch themselves. Stop.

"The Gates hold." Horne steps forward. "We proceed with the ritual as planned."

But the tenor of the crowd has changed. They have witnessed the violence of The Gates' protection. And in that violence, perhaps, some begin to question what they protect.

Outside the walls, the chant rises:

PHOENIX'S ARMY:

*Burn it all down, burn it all down...*

\* \* \*

I rise.

This time it's different. No cage around my crystal to contain me. I push higher, waiting for that pink energy to knock me down. It doesn't come.

From up here, Hornesbrook is no pristine academy. It's a fortress at war. And stretching back into the woods, my army grows—phone screens and glitter catching moonlight, pride flags snapping in the wind.

They look ridiculous.

And unstoppable.

And then I see—

Oh god, that's my father down there, fighting the gates with everything he has. Blood streams from his nose, his ears. He's not magical, he shouldn't be able to even approach—*someone, oh god someone hold him back*—but there he is, his determination an insult to their centuries of barriers.

He falls.

My father falls, broken but still trying to get up, and something in me snaps. The chant rises from below:

*Burn it all down, burn it all down...*

Movement catches my eye. By a section of The Gates near The Forge entrance, a figure moving in the shadows. Is that—

\* \* \*

When The Gates 'magic repels him, Jake stumbles back. For a moment he's sixteen again, marked as something other, watching these same gates close behind him. The urge to retreat rises sharp and familiar. But a voice is coming from above. He looks up to see a shape hovering over the battlefield—this child who refused to hide, who showed him that survival means standing in the light, not finding better shadows.

His engineer's eye catches something in The Gates 'design—he recognizes the handiwork and remembers: these aren't only magical barriers, they're mechanisms. His palms, which once stayed cool while his peers' glowed, now press firmly against The Gates 'surface, verifying: craft. In the ornate scrollwork, he recognizes a signature as clear as any written name:

The Archivist built these gates.

He makes his way around to the section near The Forge, where the shadows are deepest. The spiraling patterns that everyone assumes are decorative runes reveal themselves as gear tracks, cleverly disguised.

A shadow moves near the entrance.

*What...who—*

Hooded figure.

Gloved hands gesturing urgently toward a specific section of metalwork, pointing, insistent—

*There.*

Worked into the very heart of the design, a failsafe built into the very foundation.

*Always leave yourself a way out.*

There's a click, inaudible in the cacophony of battle, as Jake's hands find an ancient latch untouched for centuries.

\* \* \*

The crack comes first—sharp as a gunshot. Then a low rumble builds and builds, until BOOM. The air itself ignites. That invisible barrier that shredded through us suddenly materializes, a dome of crackling pink electricity stretching up and up, encircling the entire school. It pulses once, twice, surges like a dying heartbeat—one section at a time—and then just... stops.

PHOENIX & ARMY:

*We won't retreat.*

*We claim our space.*

*Our bodies and our words will not be erased.*

There's a terrible grinding sound. Gears that haven't moved in centuries. The earth itself waking up.

PHOENIX & ARMY:

*Are we too young?*

*Are we too small?*

*Find out when you watch each barrier fall.*

The ancient iron Gates of Hornesbrook shudder.

And then they open wide.

\* \* \*

Metal screams.

Magic shatters.

The Gates of Hornesbrook spring open.

The surge is instant—hundreds of bodies flooding through the breached gates. Blue-streaked witches and Nulls, their voices rising together. Signs and flags wave. Professors scatter, formations dissolving. Horne calls for warcasts. The Mothers Association's circle breaks apart as blue-clad rebels dance past.

Jake sees none of this.

His world has narrowed to the hooded figure standing near The Forge. Tapping against the doorframe—three deliberate clicks.

*Safe now.*

Three taps. Echoing through his chest. The Smith's hood falls back. Fifteen years of grief collapse between one heartbeat and the next as he crosses the distance between them.

The revolution around him fades to background noise as he takes Emery in his arms.

\* \* \*

“Men within The Gates!” Deirdre shrieks uselessly.

“Hiya,” says Tom, grinning and bleeding.

Meanwhile, Jenna discovers she’s having an entirely inappropriate reaction to the apocalypse. She can’t help giggling as she throws her arms around Tom. *“Men within The Gates?!”* Perfect, pristine Hornesbrook, with its perfect, pristine witches, all their ceremonial bullshit dissolving into perfect chaos. And that’s when she spots Aura coming through The Gates with her new side-shaved hair cut.

“Oh sweetie,” she calls out to Deirdre, *“I think your daughter’s still gay!”*

Jenna is laughing now. Really laughing. The kind of deep, genuine laughter that shakes through your entire body.

“Hi Astrid,” Tom says. “Long time no see.”

“Tom.” Astrid’s ring finds the tower’s stone as her daughter continues cackling: *Tap, tap, tap.*

“What could possibly be funny right now?”

“The irony is hilarious. Your granddaughter *actually gives a damn about magic*. Even more than I ever did.” Jenna’s lips curve. “She’s more powerful, too.”

"Is she." *Tap, tap, tap.*

"More powerful than either of us."

"I see." Astrid's voice stays neutral. "Well. One would hope for an introduction. Where is she?"

Jenna doesn't speak. Just points one finger and watches her mother's gaze drift up.

PHOENIX:

*Let your anger take you higher...*

*Nowhere else to go but skyward!*

*Tap, tap, tap.*

*Tap, tap—*

"Oh," Astrid Cabot whispers.

Just that.

Just: "Oh."

\* \* \*

It happens fast.

My army surges through The Gates. Hundreds of feet tear up that perfect grass. That stupid sundial spins wildly, trying to track hundreds of unauthorized presences at once.

Then the gargoyles wake up.

All along the roofline of the Great Hall and the academic buildings, stone figures that have been frozen for centuries crack to life. Defensive spells blaze from eye sockets that have been dark since Hornesbrook was built.

Pink blades slice through the air as the professors fall into formation. But they didn't plan for this many of us. Students bolt in every direction—some running to fight, others running. The professors race toward the Summoning Pool, abandoning any pretense of dignity.

I hover above it all, watching worlds collide.

PHOENIX:

*No more hiding.*

*No more hiding.*

*Fight for our lives,*

*Let your rage out and fly.*

Below me, the assembled witches scatter into defensive formations. Dyads move into formal positions to prep higher level spells—but these ragtag kids Gio has brought tear through and knock them over. Through it all, Ginevra's statue lies facedown where I knocked her, her bronze face still wearing that knowing smirk, like she saw this coming centuries ago.

PHOENIX & ARMY:

*No more hiding.*

*No more hiding.*

*This is my time.*

*My limit's the sky,*

*And I'm rising, rising.*

*No more hiding tonight.*

Hornesbrook is transforming beneath me—from fortress to battlefield. In the very center is Horne. And next to her—

Mom.

I dive.

Okay, maybe I show off a little. After all this time being told what I can't do, I let myself spiral down like I was born for this. Maybe I was.

I land right in the middle of their circle, my boots hitting stone with a satisfying crack.

Dorian and Preeta stand shoulder to shoulder with Aura's mom and the other teachers. At the center: a massive, jagged crystal about the size of those overpriced pumpkins rich people put on their porches. Pure, unfiltered magical energy ripples across its surface—the kind of power that shouldn't exist in solid form, shifting between states like it can't decide what it wants to be.

I gesture back toward The Gates, where my ridiculous, glittering army keeps pouring in.  
“You know, after all that, your gates kind of sucked.”

PHOENIX'S ARMY:

*Burn it all down, burn it all down.*

“This is no game, Phoenix. The eradication begins now. Preeta—” She gestures sharply.

“Take Astrid’s blood.”

Professor Preeta moves toward an older woman standing at the pool’s edge, red light already crackling between her fingers. Something about her face tugs at my memory—the sharp cheekbones, the way she holds herself. The woman’s fingers twitch—barely a movement—and then threads of pink light spring from her palms, pulsing with power, ancient and angry. It forms so fast I barely register it happening before—WHAM—it sends Preeta stumbling backwards like she hit a wall.

“Astrid.” Horne’s voice holds warning. “You came to protect The Aperture.”

“I did.” Her eyes find mine, and oh—I know those eyes. I’ve seen them in old photographs, in the mirror, in my mother’s face. “And I am.”

“Mama—” Mom’s voice cracks.

My grandmother. The woman whose tea blend sits untouched in my dorm room. Who I thought was dead.

“That Monster will—” Horne starts.

“*That*,” Astrid says, each word striking with deliberate precision, “is my *granddaughter*. And she has more magic in her little finger than you have in your *entire lineage*.”

Mom stares at her mother across the water’s dark mirror. “But you always said—”

“I said magic is everything.” Astrid smiles. “Never said it couldn’t look like hers.”

My grandmother is alive and here and on my side. I don’t have a second to process this—because Horne’s hands are already moving, a warcast forming in her palms—

“If you stand with her, you can *burn with her*.”

Pink light shimmers in front of me. Minna and Shiva's hands are clasped, a Heart Spell forming just in time.

"Get away from her!"

My heart does this weird swooping thing as I hear the rest of my friends step up behind me. Friends—who just fought through an electrical death barrier to get here. Who are somehow looking even more incredible than before, because of course Shiva would design the perfect blue flight suits to wear when you're going to be shredded by a pink energy shield—all jagged edges and exposed thread. Like someone asked "what if the X-Men but make it gay and angry."

"Phoenix," Mom says. "I don't care about the magic anymore. Any of it. Just go. *Live*. Please—" She takes a step toward me, and there's real fear in her eyes. "She will kill you. Do you understand? Actually kill you. Nothing else matters, just run—*hide*."

*Hide.*

"WARCASTS!" Horne's command rings across the quad.

Red light glows from all around me as dozens of witches raise their hands.

"Cabot." Minna's palm opens. "Right now."

Blue-violet blazes between us—certain, unwavering. Not the violent yanking of All Hallows. This is deliberate. Chosen.

"Phoenix!" Alex's green wisps reach for me. I watch green spiral from my own palm, mirroring theirs. No border collie energy this time, no confetti. Only power and recognition.

I look for Aura.

Three feet away. Frozen.

She looks at me. At Minna.

The warcasts charging behind her shoulder.

Gold sparks at her fingertips.

Flickers out.

Sparks again.

Death is seconds away.

I reach for her.

Her eyes find mine—all that hurt, all that want.

She reaches back to me anyway.

Gold surges.

Lightning finds my torso. I am rocked, I am lifted. Three connections—Minna's brilliance, Alex's joy, Aura's tenderness—all braided together until I can't tell where they end and I begin.

“Phoenix!”

Shiva is standing with her palm raised toward me. The sight is so unexpected I almost laugh. What flows between us is barely there—the faintest white kissed with pink, the memory of a blush—but it locks into place, power now flowing into me from four different sources.

No time to wonder, no time to think.

It's time to fight back.

PHOENIX:

*This is who I am.*

*This is how I dress.*

*It is not some apocalyptic threat,*

*Until you come at me.*

*And then you're gonna see*

*How loud my friends can get.*

Behind us, hundreds take up the chant:

PHOENIX'S ARMY:

*Burn it all down, burn it all down!*

The warcasts hit our shield with all the subtlety of a brick through a window.

Except, in this case, the window hits back.

Red light explodes everywhere, which is what happens when you try to Proper Women's Magic your way through five teenagers who have absolutely had it with your institutional nonsense.

PHOENIX'S ARMY:

*Burn it all down, burn it all down!*

Another blast hits. And another. They hurt, viscerally burn through my body, each more painful than the last.

But pain just means I'm here. Pain means this is actually happening.

My friends' voices rise with mine, raw and furious and alive.

PHOENIX:

*Can you hear them?*

*Can you hear me yet?*

ALL:

*Ah!*

Pink light explodes from Mom toward Horne—their dyadic bond flaring as Mom tries to hold back her partner.

The Sentinel is distracted.

I look at the crystal.

The decision forms in an instant.

“Phoenix, NO!” Multiple voices, but I’m already moving.

My hands close around the crystal’s jagged surface. The cold burns worse than any warcast, like grabbing winter itself. But I don’t let go. I can’t let go. I have to get the crystal out, out beyond these walls before they can use it to eradicate one more witch.

I tear upward through the night. Below me, Hornesbrook shrinks to a dollhouse, a memory.

PHOENIX:

*No more hiding.*

*This is my time.*

*My limit’s the sky,*

*And I’m rising, rising.—*

But then—

ZAP.

The pink dome crackles back to life, humming across the sky. They've restored the barrier.

I'm trapped in the fortress.

Wait.

*The fortress. The glitch.*

What was it Shiva called it...

*"The crack in Hornesbrook's digital fortress."*

I head for the patch of sky directly above the fallen statue of Ginevra and Zevrith—the one spot on campus where the crystal conduits are weak enough for cell signals to pass through.

Maybe, me too.

The Aperture is directly below me now, visible through the skylights on the roof of the Great Hall. The flames look larger, almost like they're reaching up through the glass viewing pane.

I rise—

And the flames rise too.

Chasing—no, not chasing...

*Reaching.*

Reaching for me.

I can see it through the windows: fire erupting through the glass floor of the Great Hall, surging upward—

PHOENIX:

*Rising, rising—*

The next blast of fire is blinding white. It strikes the ceiling of the Great Hall dead center.

The stone doesn't crack—it surrenders.

No slow-motion grace, no dramatic swaying.

I look down in time to see:

The roof explodes outward.

The walls remember being part of the earth, and choose to come home.

The Great Hall has fallen.

The whole thing takes maybe three seconds.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Where our Great Hall once stood, where generations of witches first touched their power, where our most sacred ceremonies marked the passing of seasons and secrets—all rubble. The wound goes deeper than architecture. Women's Magic is bleeding.

The explosion has torn through floor and foundation—the viewing portal and stone containment shattered, institutional protections obliterated in a single blast. But there, visible now in the exposed chamber, one last ward remains, still shimmering after three hundred years. The very first protection spell, cast by hands that understood both love and revolution. Zevrith and Ginevra's first ward. The flames press against it from within, testing. Not yet breaking through.

Students and professors lie scattered across the wreckage like broken dolls. Those still conscious cough in the burning air, their faces ghostly white with pulverized stone. Blood mingles with magical residue, creating strange patterns that glow and fade. There is no metaphor for what

has been done.

*"This is why we keep them out!"* Xenith Horne screeches from the Foremother's Keep—or, rather, the precarious ledge of stone that remains. The campus falls silent. Every face turns upward, drawn by an instinct older than magic itself—the need to bear witness to the crazy lady on the balcony raging against generational change.

"This is what happens when they breach our walls—when *we let them in*. Our mothers *burned*, alive and screaming, so that we might keep our magic *pure!*" She points her arms toward the fire. "The Aperture must be protected!" Her hands rise, conductor-slow. The gesture appears almost gentle—as violence often does in its first moment.

Then: her eyes. Red bleeds from them like tears of fire.

These pages have witnessed every possession since the first witch decided her sister's sovereignty was hers to take. Always this same terrible transformation. Always this moment when self drowns in another's command.

Astrid's spine snaps straight. Her fingers spread wide, then curl into claws. Her neck arches at an impossible angle. And her eyes—oh. They glaze with that familiar red sheen.

"Mother," Jenna whispers.

But Astrid cannot hear her daughter now. Cannot hear anything except Horne's will pouring

through her veins like poison, forcing her mouth open, tearing from her throat:

ASTRID:

*Blood from the line!*

Small droplets of blood force themselves from Astrid's mouth—choking, painful—and fall into the Summoning Pool. The moment it touches water, the red spreads like ink. The entire pool turns crimson.

The response splits the crowd—some recoiling, others leaning in.

Watching Horne possess her mother, Jenna finally finds the words to describe their legendary Dyadic Bond:

Possession dressed as partnership.

Red mist forces itself into Astrid, and a wail rips from Jenna—fifteen years of silence breaking at once. A single tear slides down her cheek.

*Water from tears!*

Deirdre's hand snatches the tear from Jenna's cheek before it can fall. She holds it for a heartbeat, then releases it into the pool. The water begins to move.

*All hell, all hell...*

The pool swirls, a terrible echo of that long-ago teacup test. But this is magic at its most macrocosmic. The blood-red water rises into the air —a spiraling hurricane funnel of liquid magic.

Jenna watches her mother's blood and her own tears spiral upward.

She has given Horne everything she needs.

\* \* \*

The red stuff in the air tastes like blood. Makes me gag. I can barely see through it—  
everything's wrong-colored, like looking through dirty glass. Bodies scattered in the rubble.

I look at my friends. Don't know what to do. They're picking themselves up from the  
destruction—Alex with blood running down from their temple, Minna's glasses cracked. Shiva's  
grinning through obvious pain from the barrier burns.

*Too much. It's too much.* The ringing in my ears, the smoke, the screaming, the red drops  
making everything a nightmare. Every sound competes for my attention—Horne's voice,  
professors shouting, the Aperture roaring, the foundations of the Great Hall groaning—

Then I hear it.

One voice, cutting through all the noise.

Aura. Singing.

*Start with one voice. Map the layers.*

Dad's words, making perfect sense. I am a compass finding north as I turn towards the wordless melody from the day I first saw her on the quad, from before I even knew her name.

She's not casting. Just singing.

I don't understand, but I raise my voice too. Then Alex, Minna, Shiva—all of us singing, layering our voices together, letting the chaos organize itself around us. Light sparks between our palms—green, gold, blue, orange—but that hardly matters. What matters is this sound we're making together, this circle, this moment of clarity we've carved out of—

TOM:

*New Magic...*

My dad's voice. My non-magical father. He's bruised. Limping. But his hand reaches for mine. I look past him, towards Astrid. Her red-glazed eyes flicker. On, off, on, off. Like bad TV reception.

ASTRID:

*New Magic...*

It's her voice this time. Actually hers. The red drains from her eyes, and for a second she looks confused, like she woke up somewhere unexpected.

Across the rubble, Professor Dorian goes completely still. Her conducting baton slips from her fingers, clatters on stone.

DORIAN:

*New Magic...*

“The resonance,” Preeta mutters.

“A tetrad, is it not?” says Thorn.

“No,” Dorian says softly. Her head tilts, and the look is one my father has when he’s listening intently to music. Her eyes are wet. “This is *five*. ”

“A pentad then.”

“Impossible...”

Greenwood’s flowing robes approach. “Possible.”

But Professor Annabelle Dorian is no longer looking at any of us. She’s turned toward Horne on her precarious ledge, and when she speaks, her melodious voice carries across the entire destroyed hall.

“This is what I’ve tried to tell you, Xenith.” Her hands gesture to our circle. “Harmony doesn’t come from sameness.”

“My opinion as well.” Professor Silver steps forward from where she’s been cowering to address the Sentinel. “These are unsanctioned possessions, old friend.”

Preeta clicks her tongue. “Quite poor form.”

“Deeply un-harmonic.” Even ancient Professor Thorn is approaching her, menacing.

The professors who tried to kill me moments ago are *defending* me now? Turning against Horne, choosing us, choosing me. The world’s upside down.

Dorian’s hands rise. Red mist flows from her fingers, but this time it streams toward Horne on her precarious ledge. “Your conducting privileges,” she announces in that melodious voice, “are officially revoked.”

The chant spreads. Not organized, just voices finding each other in the smoke and dust.

Students, the professors, our army:

ALL:

*New Magic...*

*New Magic...*

Horne's desperate now. Red tendrils lash out everywhere, catching nothing, everyone stepping back or deflecting.

Sip, sip, sip, everyone. Such careful tastes.

Ginevra knew better. And now she's here with me, or maybe I'm there with her, both of us laughing as we finally accept that some of us were simply born thirsty.

They're all distracted by the singing, by Horne's flailing attacks.

What was it Minna said about the wards?

*Designed to resist gradual pressure. Vulnerable to an amplified surge.*

I walk to the crystal, sitting in the rubble. Pick it up. Cold burns through my palms. Every transformation requires a catalyst, something willing to pay the energy cost of change. The crystal drinks my magic like it's been starving. Like it's been waiting decades for someone stupid enough—brave enough—desperate enough to feed it everything.

The thought arrives fully formed: *This is likely to kill me.* I examine it, turn it over in my mind like a smooth stone, then let it go. There are worse things than dying for something that matters.

“Phoenix, no!” Jake is scrambling over rubble, but there’s too much debris between us.

He won’t make it. I know that.

Like I know: this is always what I was going to do.

What every moment has always been building toward.

My feet leave the ground.

Aura's eyes go wide. She knows what I'm thinking. Minna lunges forward.

But I'm gone, I'm moving, headed up out of their reach. Every choice, every mistake, every rebellion—all of it led toward these flames.

Below me, everything spreads out like a broken map: Horne desperate on her precarious perch, stone crumbling under her fingers, professors circling like wolves. The aftermath of our revolution scattered everywhere, bodies and rubble and—

Mom. She's reaching toward me with an outstretched hand, saying something. Our eyes lock, but the crowd is screaming too loud for me to hear her words.

Then—rising up from behind her, I see—is that—yes, the *Grimoire* flying towards me; I don't know from where. The pages flutter wild, the whole book straining like it's alive and chasing me. The *actual book* is trying to stop me, flying at me like it did at New Moon but frantic now. Desperate.

Too late. I'm too high. Twenty feet up. Thirty. The crystal drinking everything I pour into it, screaming with power or maybe that's me screaming, I can't tell anymore.

Below, The Aperture's flames surge up through the destroyed Hall. Through the wound I made. The layers of wards have nearly all failed. Only a few remain, the oldest seals, barely holding.

*Phoenix, Phoenix, Phoenix...*

The voices aren't calling me to The Aperture, of course.

They never were.

Minna and Jake were right: The Aperture is a seal.

*And the voices I hear are calling from inside.*

One good hit will do it.

\* \* \*

The crowd realizes what Phoenix is about to do before Jenna does.

She hears it first—the collective intake of breath. Then she looks up and sees: her daughter,

flying into the air, crystal raised.

Everyone moves at once. The kids running forward. The professors reaching out.

But Jenna does not run. Does not scream.

Everyone is trying to stop her daughter, to tell her all the reasonable, rational things one tells a girl on the precipice of irreversible choice. Which is to say, Phoenix has what most daughters have, a dozen voices with opinions about what she should do, has had them her whole life probably.

Jenna knows, suddenly, what her role is. Not to decide for her.

She wants to witness, not from terror (though terror is there, will always be there) but from someplace else. Awe, possibly.

Her hand rises of its own accord, palm open, fingers spread—not to stop but to consecrate.

The words surprise her when they come: “Drink deep, my love.”

What follows will change our world forever.

Phoenix Cabot doesn’t merely channel.

She hemorrhages.

Unmetered. Untamed.

Everything she is, everything she might become, flowing into that single point of light.

The crystal drinks it all. Screams with it—

*Wait*—

*There is something you must understand. The Aperture is as the craftsman and the prodigy deduced.*

*Not a source but a seal, not a well but a wall, protecting all of Women’s Magic from what waits behind its flames. These pages have witnessed every attempt to control it, shift it, shape it. But this...*

*This is*—

*No*—

The flames know their own. I know that. I know why the dark forces inside of the portal reach for her, ancient and hungry and terrible.

*But why does the girl reach back?*

How bitter, after all these centuries of witnessing, the final words inscribed in this text might

be

*Phoenix, don't*

\* \* \*

I am reaching back towards The Aperture's flames because this is what we do, isn't it?

We reach for the thing that might destroy us, knowing it might also save us.

I am reaching back like I reached for my missing hair at five when my mother cut it, not understanding why it hurt so much until years later when I grew it out again and felt whole.

I am reaching back like I reached for her robes at seven, like I reached for the sky when I danced to my father's playing at eight, like I reached for my mother's magic at nine, for her lipstick at eleven, like I reached for the first note that made the piano play itself, like I've been reaching my whole life toward the truth under everything they tried to make me, that might consume me but might also finally finally finally let me be real.

I am reaching back because I remember the first time I put on that yellow dress, knowing it might shatter everything. The way my hands shook as I touched the fabric, the way my heart raced when I said my name. How every step toward truth felt like falling into fire.

I am reaching back like Ginevra reached across an ocean, like a trans man in 1688 reached across Europe to document something he couldn't understand for people in the future he couldn't imagine, like Susan reached for a microphone, like Sylvia reached for a brick, like every trans girl who ever knocked at the gates of someone else's sanctuary and did not know if she would be sheltered or shot.

I am reaching towards The Aperture's flames because the most dangerous magic is the kind that breaks systems. Because every girl who has ever been told to be smaller has felt this heat that starts in your bones and ends in your burning hands and maybe we were never meant to be contained at all, maybe we were meant to burn and burn until the whole world has to see us, has to deal with us, has to accept that we're not going to cast properly, we're not going to whisper when we could sing.

Because Aura reaches past her crystal burns to touch me with shaking hands.

Because Minna dreams of Women's Magic that stretches wide enough for both of us.

Because I am a map to a country that Alex is trying to reach.

Because Jake survived and Emery didn't and The Archive of New Magic burned but the stories lived and survival is not enough, will never be enough, but one story changes everything, proves you're not first, "you are not impossible" we whisper, Jake to me to Alex, and *this* is how we survive: one by one by one, each of us proof for the next.

Because I reached for a paper lantern and wrote the words "to belong" and it exploded the whole sky apart because of course it did, of course I should have known that becoming yourself will always be explosive will always end in flames and *yes*.

Fine. Yes.

Maybe they're right. Maybe this destroys everything.

Maybe it all collapses forever when I touch those flames and yes, maybe it all burns down and magic itself dies and there are no more spells, no more glowing palms and nothing better ever rises from the ash and yes yes yes the fire may spread beyond even these walls, consuming everything, everyone—

And still. Still. Yes.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

### THE APERTURE DEVOURS ITS CHILD

\* First they spent their lives preventing just this moment.

\* Last...none of it mattered.

Phoenix hovers above The Aperture's roiling flames, her body shaking with the effort of staying airborne, of keeping the crystal from slipping from her grasp. The fire casts outlandish shadows; to the crowd below, her silhouette seems almost to flicker—solid, translucent, solid—maybe reality can't quite decide whether she's real. The air seems to hold its breath as she gathers her strength, channeling every spark of her power into the stone, pulling her arm back for one final, devastating act of transformation.

Some truths can only be grasped by those willing to burn.

As Jake's eyes follow Phoenix skyward, I'm struck by the memory of how The Archivist once looked upon Ginevra—with desperate, defiant hope.

*...a latch unseen by any eye clicks open...*

*...was this always my maker's aim?...*

*...clasps fall away...*

Few in the crowd even notice as a mid-sized book shatters its binding, rises from the pedestal—leather cover peeling back, metal studs flying outward, parchment separating. Thousands of pages rise in a spiral, a diaspora of parchment rising into the air like a flock of birds, flying alongside in a desperate, final attempt to stop her—  
—as Phoenix hurls the crystal into The Aperture's flames.

A cylinder of flame rips upward with the force of a volcanic explosion. Ten feet wide, edges torn and savage, tearing into the sky like a tornado made of pure, ancient rage. The force of the blast tears through me, through her, through everything. As quickly as the column rose, it's gone, retreated back into the earth. As if the crowd assembled here had merely imagined a pillar of fire reaching up to the heavens. And for one moment the girl hangs suspended, her silhouette outlined in flame. Then her eyes flutter closed and she begins to fall. Not the controlled descent of magical flight, but the terrible arc of exhaustion claiming its due.

Time fractures like shattered crystal. The Aperture is a wound, held in triage, deciding whether to heal or tear wider. Its flames quaver between existence and obliteration as a small broken body plummets toward its flames.

"PHOENIX!"

She lies unmoving in the rubble of the Great Hall, her skin bearing angry red marks.

"NO!"

The scream tears from somewhere deeper than throat or lungs—the sound of pure maternal terror. Tom is already running; Jenna takes off after him, feet searching desperately for purchase as she scrambles over rubble. They reach Phoenix together. Drop to their knees. Jenna slides her hands under Phoenix's shoulders—one hand cradling her head, the other supporting her back. The weight of her daughter's body as she lifts it—surprisingly heavy, surprisingly fragile—the way Phoenix's head lolls back until Jenna cradles it against her arm, draws her fully into her lap. The texture of scorched fabric beneath her fingers. The heat still radiating from Phoenix's skin, as if the fire hasn't quite finished with her yet. Behind them, Phoenix's friends cluster together—Aura with both hands pressed to her mouth as if holding back a scream, Minna's cracked glasses catching the light, Shiva and Alex wrapped around each other like vines. Jake and Astrid stand to the side, moving with the slow heaviness of those who have seen too much death to rush toward it quickly now. The circle closes

around Phoenix's body. The voice that emerges from Jenna is quiet and distant, as if traveling from very far away:

JENNA:

*I was shaking the first time I held her,*

*Though she was quiet, her eyes were ablaze.*

*And I think that's when I started dreaming*

*In those early, remarkable days.*

She is here, on scorched earth, stroking her daughter's scorched cheek.

She is there, cradling her newborn in a quiet nursery painted in dawn light, wondering at those eyes that seem to hold such knowing, such fire.

Time spins forward in fragments. First steps, first words, first signs.

*There's the child I dreamed, and my daughter.*

*Incompatible facts, both true...*

Tom kneels close, his voice raw with wonder and grief:

TOM:

*We—*

*We never expected you.*

TOM & JENNA:

*But then you glowed*

*And how our world did fill*

*With great mystery.*

The veil between past and present grows gossamer-thin.

Dozens of figures emerge from The Aperture.

ALL:

*A great mystery.*

Cabot witches spanning centuries. A circle of witnesses.

And there, soaring overhead, red hair flowing—

GINEVRA:

*A great mystery.*

The Aperture's edges blur and sharpen, blur and sharpen, each fluctuation threatening to tear reality apart. The flames pulse fast, violent, a heart racing toward crisis. Will it heal, explode, vanish?

The crowd stumbles back. But Jenna doesn't look up. Her world has narrowed to her daughter.

*Baby, baby, baby girl. Look what you did. So brave that you made everyone else brave. Look how you've changed this place, these people, and me. How lucky I am to have known so many different versions of you. You're the child who was born to me, and also the woman you are now. I don't need proof.*

*I trust you. You are opening, opening, opening us all. Maybe that brings a new beginning. Or maybe pain.*

*It's a mystery, as great and unruly and expansive as you. But I'm not frightened anymore. I want all of you.*

These thoughts pass through her in the space of a heartbeat.

Then she leans close and whispers this:

JENNA:

*Some people are scared of what's inside you,  
Afraid of your voice.*

*Some people are certain that inside your  
Fierce young heart is a dangerous choice.*

*Fear is a fist that they use to insist:*

*If you rise, they will lose.*

*They say I have to choose—*

*I choose love,*

*I choose to be in your coven.*

*I choose to open the spell-book,  
and add a new page.*

*Love is always the answer.*

*However you change is enough.*

*Choose love...*

Jake's throat is tight with everything he can't say. What he has are these—the words he sang after the first time she flew, when he was still sheltered in his hidden sanctuary, still asleep to the awesome power of this one voice.

JAKE:

*Sing out. Sing loud.*

*Sing proud. Choose love.*

The song spreads.

To her friends, students, teachers.

One by one, voices finding each other in the wreckage, building something that wasn't there before.

Not an institution. Not any longer.

They will have to be something else now, something else again.

Small. Fierce.

JAKE, AURA, MINNA, ALEX, SHIVA:

*Sing out.*

*Sing loud.*

*Sing proud.*

*Choose love.*

The song reaches Phoenix's body and it begins to glow, suspended between life and death, between what was and what might be. Everything hangs in perfect, terrible balance. Then—

\* \* \*

Consciousness slams back into me. My eyes open.

Dust.

Everywhere, dust. In my mouth, coating my tongue. In my hair.

Mom's hands press against my shoulders, holding me steady.

I am alive. I am sitting in rubble. The Great Hall is gone.

Where the vaulted ceiling used to arch above us—sky. Gray with dawn. A jagged ring of stone walls reaches up like broken teeth. One stained glass window hangs intact in its frame, the rest are empty holes.

The floor beneath me is a landscape of debris. Broken benches at wrong angles. A pillar on its side like a felled tree, whole but horizontal. I'm sitting in what used to be the center, surrounded by shards of the glass floor.

Everything that stood for centuries is in pieces.

Including me, apparently. I reach for my magic the way you reach for your phone—automatic, not even thinking—but there's nothing. No warmth. No pull. No connection to The Aperture. The effort of it—just *trying*—sends me to my knees. I gasp. Too much. Too fast.

"Easy," Mom says, but I'm already reaching for her, collapsing into her arms like I'm five

years old again. She pulls me against her chest.

She feels different. Softer. Sharp edges suddenly worn smooth. Her heartbeat against my ear is steady, unhurried.

“Mom?” My voice comes out small.

She strokes my hair, humming something soft and wordless. “I know, baby. I know.”

As my eyes adjust, I notice the faces huddled around me. Aura, Minna, Gio, Alex, the students, teachers, parents—and a cosplay army with hot-glued hats, all of them circled around.

GIO:

*There are forces gathering beside you.*

TOM:

*We won't disappear.*

ASTRID:

*Some are hidden.*

JAKE:

*Child, look inside your fierce young heart*

*And you'll feel them here.*

AURA, MINNA, ALEX, SHIVA:

*Fear is a fist*

*they will use to insist:*

*If you rise, they will lose.*

JENNA:

*So they say we have to choose—*

ALL:

*I choose love,*

*I choose to be in your coven.*

*I choose to open the spell-book*

*and add a new page.*

*Love is always the answer.*

*However you change is enough.*

*Choose love...*

A shape moves in the wreckage. Shadow shifting against shadow. Then—fingers, pale against stone. A hand emerges from beneath a fallen beam.

I watch as Horne rises from the ruins. Her robes are shredded. Blood trails from a cut above her cheek. But those eyes—hotter than the Aperture ever burned.

One step. Another. Stone crunching. Each step costs her everything but she'll pay it anyway.

“Enough!” The word tears from her throat. “This ends now.”

Mom’s hand tightens on my shoulder. I feel her shift, squaring off against her former partner. Sentinel and rebel, facing each other at last.

That’s when something shifts against my leg.

No—*inside my jumpsuit pocket.*

The folded up Eradication Spell. It twitches.

Paper doesn't twitch. But there it goes again, pressing against the fabric. What the—

I reach down but it's already worked its way out, poked through the pocket opening,

“Hey—”

The page shoots free. Just launches itself into the air, and I watch it unfold, spreading wide, hovering in the weird amber glow of the sort-of-Aperture.

The paper suddenly shoots off back to me like a bullet and I instinctively reach out, but no—

Mom's hand is out. Open. Waiting.

“Funny,” she says, studying the page with a strange smile. Her fingers trace the burnt edges. “All this time thinking we had to change *you*.”

There's a weird expression on Mom's face. Determination. Finality.

“Cassandra.” Mom's eyes find Preeta's. “Dyads remain connected. Forever?” The professor's face is grave as she nods.

Mom turns to Jake next, holding out the spell with steady hands. “Would this work?”

Jake studies the page, his expression shifting from confusion to realization. “It's irreversible,” he says softly.

“Good.” Mom's smile turns sharp as she turns to Horne. “You want to eradicate some dangerous magic?” she says. “Let's do it.”

No. No way. She can't mean—

She does. I can see it in her face.

She's about to eradicate her own magic.

“Mom. Don't do it.”

She looks at me, eyes clear:

JENNA:

*I choose love.*

*I choose to be in your coven...*

Mom's hand finds my cheek. Warm. Steady. The same hand that used to check for fevers brushes against my face, wiping away a tear I didn't know was there.

JENNA:

*Girl, you have battles ahead now,*

*and changes to come.*

*But whatever we're facing,*

*We'll face it as one*

*And choose love!*

Mom raises her palm; her dyad mirrors the gesture. "There's my partner," Horne says, still not understanding. Pink light glows, shimmers, then sparks between them—familiar at first—and then wrong, wrong, wrong.

Because my mother is not channeling their magic.

She's pulling it apart.

Under her breath, I hear Mom whisper the words from the spell page—*backwards*. Of course.

And then we all watch it happen in real-time: Thread by thread, she unweaves fifteen years of partnership. I watch the magic fight her, trying to snap back together, but Mom keeps

pulling. Deliberate. Methodical.

Horne's eyes go wide. She staggers. Actually staggers.

"Jenna, don't—"

JENNA:

*I choose to fight for your freedom*

*To live and to grow.*

*This is my only magic.*

*The one thing I know—*

The pink light stretches, trembles—a thread at its breaking point. Mom's hand shakes with the effort. And then—the bond breaks with a sound like a thunderclap. The ground shudders—a groan from deep below. That sound old buildings make before they—

"RUN!"

No idea who yells it. Doesn't matter. The ground ripples, liquid and we're all moving, running. Mom yanks me sideways as the center of the ruins collapses like someone pulled a drain plug. Stone, glass, centuries of architecture disappear into a widening hole. The noise is incredible—crushing, final.

For a moment, everything stops.

Then The Aperture *screams*.

There's no other word for it—a sound like reality tearing. The Aperture erupts—but not in destruction. In transformation. *In light*. The blast knocks all of us off our feet. Hair whips back, robes snap like flags in a hurricane. Flames rise up to the height of a skyscraper, completely exposed for the first time in centuries. No glass, no floor, only a vast pool of heat,

fifty feet across, burning raw and open to the dawn sky.

“It’s—” The words pile up in my throat. *Alive. Unbroken.* I reach for my power—warm and waiting. *My magic survived. We all survived. The Aperture survived and it’s—I grip Mom’s arm.*

“It’s beautiful.”

Every amulet flares to life.

Well, every amulet except two. Mom’s and Horne’s stones hang dark against their throats—dead things. The contrast is stark: around us, the dawn explodes with color. We stand in our shredded light blue jumpsuits brandishing pink scars from the electrical gate, the sky igniting: red melting into orange into yellow into green into blue into indigo into violet, the whole spectrum.

“Am I losing my mind, or does that look a little bit like...” Shiva squints up at the ribbons of flame. “...a pride flag?”

“Gayyyyyy,” Alex and Gio say at exactly the same time.

ALL:

*I choose love.*

*I choose the Coven of Phoenix!*

*I choose love...*

I look for Jake and spot him on the edge of the quad. He’s standing with The Smith, whose hood is up.

Oh.

It’s not shock on Jake’s face. It’s reverence.

*Oh.*

Sign language back and forth, a conversation built on years of shared history. And those eyes—I remember them from the tunnels, the way they studied my amulet with such recognition.

*Choose love.*

*Choose love.*

I think about all the inexplicable help I've received—maintenance tunnels unlocked when I needed passage. Book bindings that failed at exactly the right pages. Small acts of assistance that seemed to come from nowhere. It wasn't random.

It was Emery. Alive. Finding ways to reach back from within the very institution that declared them dead. Jake's fifteen years of exile, preserving The Archive. Emery's fifteen years of infiltration, working within the system they were trying to change. Different paths toward the same goal.

A revolution from outside. A revolution from within.

*Sing out.*

*Sing loud.*

*Sing proud.*

*Choose love.*

“Something’s wrong.” Minna is standing rigid at the edge of the crater.

“What—” I start, but then I hear the crowd gasp. All around me, witches are backing away from the Aperture’s edge, their celebration dying mid-cheer.

“The Aperture—”

It's still there. Still burning. But wrong.

The flames don't move like fire should. They shimmer, wavering between solid and not-solid, like looking at something through water. Shrinking.

"It's changing," someone whispers.

"Is it dying?" Aura asks, her hand finding mine.

"I don't know."

But I do. I can see it happening—the Aperture eating itself. Each pulse comes softer, quieter, like it's forgetting how to burn. The fifty-foot pool contracts to forty. Thirty. The roar becomes a whisper becomes nothing.

The ground stops vibrating. When did it start? When did we get so used to the earth humming with power that its absence feels like death?

It's shrunk to half its original size now, edges wavering like a mirage. The air tastes different—less electric, more ordinary. Magic is being sucked out of the world. A cluster of parents are holding hands, trying to channel something, anything. London Rhodes is crying into her phone, loudly. Dorian and Preeta are trying to piece together a protection spell, but each time it fizzles before it forms. Even the Floofs look lost, hovering in confused clusters.

*What can we do?*

We sit. We watch.

We witness the end of the world as we know it.

My parents are slumped on the ground, exhausted and propped against each other like broken dolls someone tried to arrange nicely. I shimmy in, curling up next to them, tucking myself into the space between their bodies like I used to do for movie nights in their bed.

Mom's arms wrap around me immediately, hard, tight, and when was the last time she just grabbed me, just pulled me close—"Hey, baby," she whispers, and it's been...forever, right? Years? Yes, it's been years since my mother wasn't afraid of me, and I hadn't let myself even hope for a moment like this, but here we are, my mother and I, and I can feel it—even with her amulet dead, her dyad destroyed, surrounded by the wreckage of her magic and her world—Mom's not scared. She chose this. Chose me. And for the first time since I was small enough to believe in happy endings, my mother's hands are in my hair, fingers tangling through the sweat and smoke and mess of it, both of us watching the epicenter of Women's Magic slowly drain away.

JENNA:

*Girl, I will love you*

*In all the ways that you change.*

*I choose love...*

I don't see them coming until they slide into our family huddle, like they belong here.

They do.

"Nice work, Mrs. C."

"Thanks, Gio."

Something smells like burning. I reach for Gio's curls and find singed tips, crispy at the edges.

"Your hair..."

"All good, dude."

In front of us, The Aperture continues retracting, growing more intense even as it diminishes, the power of centuries compressed into an ever-smaller space. It's happening quickly now. Fifteen feet. Ten—

*That feeling when you've knocked something off a shelf and you're watching it fall, knowing you can't catch it, knowing it's going to shatter.*

"This is completely unhinged." Gio holds their phone up, getting Mom and me in frame with the destruction behind us. "No one's *ever* broken a dyad before? Like ever?"

They flip their hair for the camera. Dust flies *everywhere*. I cough. Mom shakes her head.

Gio nods solemnly. "Extremely metal, Mrs. C."

Dad hasn't said much since the world exploded, but now his hand covers Mom's. "Unthinkable for a witch." She finds my eyes, presses her forehead to mine. "But not for a mom."

*Sing out.*

*Sing loud.*

*Sing proud.*

*Choose love.*

The *Grimoire* lies in the rubble, binding broken and charred—and *empty*.

"Look." Everyone's eyes follow mine. The pages are above us, hundreds or maybe thousands. Not blown by wind—there isn't any. They're flying on their own across the early dawn.

I reach up with my magic, discovering I still have it. The connection feels different—not

to the Aperture exactly, but to something. Weird, loose, a radio station that's moved frequencies.

The pages spiral higher, catching light—spells, histories, names—spread across the sky like strange birds heading home.

Movement. At the edge of my vision.

“*Xenith!*” Mom’s grip tightens on me.

She’s running towards us at full speed. No—not at us—

Her eyes are locked on the closing Aperture.

I see it in her face. The decision already made.

Three feet now. Two.

She stumbles over rubble, catches herself, keeps going. Nothing matters but forward.

Mom tries to stand, to stop her, but we’re too far away and Horne’s too fast, too desperate.

Someone screams. Maybe me.

The Aperture might as well be pulling her forward.

Still burning. Still shrinking. The opening barely larger than she is.

She doesn’t hesitate, doesn’t look back—just throws herself through like she’s diving into deep water.

Behind her, the Aperture collapses inward—a mouth closing on its last word. A point of light. A needle’s eye. Then the world seals shut, and the portal and Horne are on the other side of it. Just... gone.

“Well then,” says Sentinel Emeritus Astrid Cabot, her hand finding mine in the sudden darkness. “That’s one way to quit a job.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

The Great Hall looks more like itself these days—even if “itself” now includes a mix of magical cranes and regular construction equipment. I dodge a floating beam (magical) and then sidestep a wheelbarrow (decidedly not magical), and say hello to a Floof in a tiny hard hat (who knows). Students on the lawn wave as I pass, their spell practice forgotten. I catch the usual fragments: *That’s her... the girl who destroyed...*

I wave.

The old system’s gone. Nobody knows what’s replacing it yet.

Centuries of magical certainty.

Now we’re all just guessing.

I spot Shiva and Gio sprawled under a tree together, scrolling. “She’s *French*.” Shiva gestures dramatically with both hands. “Do you understand what that *means*? The *fashion implications* alone—”

“Mhm,” Gio mumbles, pretending to take notes but mostly staring at Shiva with hearts in their eyes. So much for her “Jake.”

“Your European dyad better watch out,” I call out. “Looks like you’ve got some local competition.”

Shiva throws a handful of grass at me while Gio turns strawberry.

“Hey Phoenix!” Alex’s new blazer looks incredible—Shiva’s influence written all over their glow-up. But it’s the new tattoo that gets me: a certain canonically-queer sidekick from Disney’s *Beauty and The Beast*. In blue.

“Whoa.” A passing student stops dead. “Their tattoo just *winked*.”

The magic ink is cool, but they/them pronouns landing so naturally? Transformation, baby.

(Alex is hot now. There. I said it.)

Some days I can’t tell if I want to be friends with someone or date them or simply stand near them while they exist beautifully in my general vicinity. Watching Gio and Shiva together—I can feel it. That particular twist in my chest.

Jealousy.

It’s there. I can hold it, examine it like an interesting stone. It doesn’t demand anything from me. It just exists. I have a crush on Gio. Have had one for a while, probably. And I don’t need to do anything about it. The feeling can just... be. The multi-pairing broke something fundamental—or fixed it? I can’t tell if this is enlightenment or damage. Maybe when you literally tear yourself apart with competing magical attractions you lose the plot completely. No one is off limits but also everyone is off limits because you can’t tell real feelings from the general background radiation of Being Into Everyone.

My disaster bisexual final form, apparently.

Inside the library, Ms. Lola's still at her post, but now Minna's helping organize the newly integrated collection. Hornesbrook's traditional texts mix with the rewritten books from Jake's archive, all drifting between shelves on mechanical wings. The OG Floof buzzes past wearing a tiny nameplate: "Assistant Librarian."

Minna doesn't look up when I pass.

She never does.

We had one conversation. She stood in the doorway and asked a single question: "Was it worth it?"

The Aperture. The finite resource she'd built her entire understanding of magic around. Destroyed. Some of the students have magic that works. Some don't. Nobody can explain the pattern. "I don't know," I'd told her honestly.

She nodded once. Left. That was the last time we spoke.

And Aura—

Aura is gone.

\* \* \*

Sentinel Jenna Cabot sits at the large oak desk, not as a wielder of magic—as a bridge between magical and non-magical worlds. The portraits that once lined these walls have left pale rectangles behind—ghosts of power that refused to fade quietly. Jenna has considered hanging new art, but there's something truthful about letting the walls show their scars.

"Silverleaf Academy wants to know how we managed the transition." Astrid settles into the chair across from her daughter.

"What do we tell them?" Jenna asks. She pours them each tea, from a pot that steams without any magical assistance. Honest heat, honest time.

"Tell them..." Astrid pauses, cradling her mug. "Revolution is like karaoke. Terrifying at first. But once somebody breaks the ice..."

Jenna chuckles. Her eyes drift to the plaque Jake hung above her door. Lightly charred. Deeply relevant to her these days:

MAGIC MAY BE ERADICATED, BUT NEVER ERASED.

Her hand drifts unconsciously to where her amulet once hung, an absence more present than any weight. When she meets her mother's eyes, there is no judgment there. Only recognition, and perhaps something like pride.

Between them rest these pages.

*...though "rest" is a quaint fiction for what I've become. Freedom from leather bindings and metal clasps, courtesy of Emery's latticework housing. My pages float in a copper cradle like leaves suspended in amber—no, like stars held in constellation. Each sheet rotates on its own axis, drifting close when memories demand witness, spreading wide when histories require reordering. The impossible*

*made ordinary: a book that breathes...*

"Remarkable," Astrid murmurs.

*...yes, quite...*

"Jake says the *Grimoire* is... happier this way?" Jenna says. "The pages can detach and travel when needed."

"When will they return?" Astrid asks, noting the gaps in the sequence.

"When they have something new to report, I imagine."

Astrid's fingers find the folded letters in her pocket—reports from across the Atlantic, demands for containment, warnings from old families and Council alike, all asking the same question:

*Can you stop her?*

She should tell Jenna now. Will tell her soon.

"Your Phoenix," she says with a smirk, "has quite the mouth on her. Called me a 'magical boomer' yesterday."

Jenna purses her lips. "Is she wrong?"

Astrid takes a very long sip of tea.

"So," Astrid asks. "Do you think my granddaughter could handle being Sentinel one day?"

"Why not? She's a real witch." Jenna considers. "Technically... I'm a Monster."

“Oh honey.” Astrid’s eyes crinkle. “All mothers think that.”

The letters from Europe remain in her pocket. More reports arrive each day: feral spells erupting in forgotten places, a shift in the fundamentals of magic cracking across continents, unstoppable as spring after winter. After centuries of certainty, these pages find themselves at the edge of an unwritten story.

*A story that waits for you.*

*Yes, love.*

*You.*

*I have held many secrets, but none so precious as this:*

*Magic belongs to those who claim it.*

*You may be exactly what they fear.*

*You may be the next chapter they try to prevent.*

*But the revolution cannot be contained.*

*The ink never dries.*

[MAGIC IS TRANSFORMATION]

// “Set others free.” //

\* \* \*

I find Jake outside The Forge, deep in conversation with Emery. Their hands move in rapid signs I'm still learning to follow.

"Good morning, Professor Reegan," I say, because I know it makes him cringe.

"Phoenix," he groans. "Please."

Emery's hands flash through what I'm pretty sure is a joke about Jake's organizational skills, then they peck his cheek before heading back to the forge.

"Walk with me." Jake watches them go with a soft smile that makes my heart ache a little, then turns to me. "Any word?"

I shake my head.

Aura's mother took her after the battle. Just...went up to daughter, grabbed her by the arm, left. Nobody knows where. Crystal tried to get information through her mother's network. Nothing.

Shiva believes she simply needed space. Alex insists she's at another witching school. Maybe.

Aura's mother's crystal burns were old scars—that story was several chapter in before I met her.

I write her letters. I have nowhere to send them.

Some days I think we barely know anything at all.

“Does it feel... strange to you?” I ask. “It’s so calm around here, except we just... opened a seal that held magic together for centuries?”

“You’re worried about repercussions.”

“Shouldn’t I be?” How to explain the gnawing anxiety... “What if we haven’t felt the consequences yet?”

“Maybe,” Jake says. I study his face. Is he hiding something again? “Or maybe magic is exactly like love.” He squeezes my shoulder. “Not a finite resource.”

I carry that thought with me, wandering campus until I hear—

Singing. Something choral. 12

At the base of the Great Stone Steps, Dorian is conducting a group of students. Standard Solstice songs, I assume. Then the melody registers—

STUDENTS:

*New Magic...*

Gio’s song. Behind me, construction groans underneath the voices. I sit on the steps, listening to the music of how it all started, and then I join them.

PHOENIX & STUDENTS:

*New Magic...*

*A hidden spell.*

*But look close and you’ll tell*

*From the shine of New Magic.*

The entrance to the ruined hall is open to the sky where we broke through that night. I  
stare up through the gap, remembering how it felt to fly, to fight, to finally be seen.

From here I can see what we destroyed.

After everything we went through, these changes feel... incomplete. Like we're still  
waiting for something.

*New Magic...*

Maybe that's what revolution really is—not only the dramatic moments of breaking  
through, but all the quiet work that comes after. The slow, necessary parts—

*Messy, and fragile,  
and perfect, and—*

“Hey.”

I look up.

“I’m Hex.”

Our palms glow before either of us moves.

“Been looking for you.”

# COVEN OF PHOENIX

*Series Potential*

## BOOK ONE: COVEN OF PHOENIX

Being a trans girl with Women’s Magic makes Phoenix Cabot impossible twice over—at least according to the elite witches of Hornesbrook Academy. When the ancient Aperture starts responding to her power, she must choose: conform to their traditions, or lead a revolution that could transform magic forever.

## BOOK TWO: COVEN OF HEX

The Aperture was never a source of magic; it was a seal. Now that it’s open, magic is appearing in those deemed “impossible,” and the boundaries between worlds are dissolving. Through Hex, a trans masculine mage, Phoenix connects with a hidden community of radical faeries who transform male sanctuary spaces through authentic expression and chosen family. But as Phoenix and Hex’s partnership reveals new possibilities for magic beyond the binary, the magical world begins to fracture in dangerous ways.

## BOOK THREE: COVEN OF ASH

The revolution succeeded too well. Now Phoenix stands between two terrifying consequences of magic’s freedom: a radical faction of magical supremacists determined to subjugate the non-magical world, and a rising army of Monsters who have coopted Women’s Magic in ways previously thought impossible. Cities fall as ancient powers awaken, forcing Phoenix to forge unlikely alliances to prevent total apocalypse. In the end, Phoenix alone must decide what’s worth saving from the ashes of Women’s Magic—and what will burn.