



# All Out of Flux (Stolen Hearts #3)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Time is running out.

Leon Alcantara and Max Drake are finding help in the most unlikely of places. A third dragon has manifested, promising Leon untold elemental power. Another specter from Max's past returns to haunt him, presenting a tempting offer.

But everything comes with a price.

Perhaps the risk is worth the reward. More anomalies are erupting across Dos Lunas. The boys need all the help they can get against the rogue time mage responsible. The Quartz Spider has finally shown his hand, and only Max and Leon can stop him.

But how can they stop the enemy when the enemy is time itself?

**Total Pages (Source):** 17

# Page 1

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1

LEON

The room was dark, cold, lit only by stray slivers of moonlight. Max cast an imposing figure, muscles taut as he leaned forward, jabbing his finger at the wicked man's face.

"How many more times do we have to go through this? No. We've had enough. You've worn us down. This has to stop."

My heart thumped, beating with longing for this assertive, powerful man, but also with fear. How much longer did we have to suffer?

"We've had enough," I echoed, hating how small and weak I sounded. "Please. No more."

Max glanced toward me, eyes sparking with fervor. "This must come to an end. We aren't going to take any more of this."

"But you know why I've summoned you here," said the wicked man, the lenses of his glasses flashing evilly in the moonlight. "I have such sights to show you."

"Babe," groaned a fourth man. "They're right, though. We can't keep this up. I haven't slept a full night in a week."

The glasses came off. Roscoe blinked, no longer quite so wicked as he studied our

faces with big, hopeful eyes. “But I thought you guys liked doing this. It’s our special late-night treat. Remember when that brick hit that one guy in the face?”

Johnny Slivers — the fourth man — laughed out loud. “Okay, that one was pretty funny.” He caught me and Max staring daggers at him, then cleared his throat, dragging his hand down along his jaw as if to rearrange his features. “Leon and Max are right, though. You need to stop calling them to the shop to watch your traps at work.”

“Aww. Okay. Sorry, you guys.” Roscoe’s shoulders sloped as he stuck his hands in his pockets. He kicked at an imaginary pebble, somehow looking even more dejected.

Well, now I was just going to feel bad. “This is the last one, okay, Ross? But let’s make it count.”

Max threw his arm around Roscoe’s shoulders. “Yeah, and you can always send us security camera footage, right? The fun isn’t actually ending.”

We were somewhere inside the unlit interiors of Unholy Grounds, hidden from view behind the counter, and again behind chairs stacked on top of tables. To Roscoe’s elation and Johnny’s chagrin, their coffee shop and bar had become a favorite target for a band of very persistent small-time criminals.

And as if that wasn’t enough of a problem, they were all thugs working for the Brillante family, too. And not just Divina Brillante, either. The Masques had dealt with her, as far as we knew, Max’s horrible mind-controlling cousin. I was confident we wouldn’t be hearing anything from Divina for a long time.

That didn’t really help matters much, though. The Brillante clan was large, its members numerous. Like cockroaches. Max’s words, not mine. Word of Max having a stake in the café — whether emotional or financial — was enough. It was entirely

possible that this swarm of thugs was coming from different Brillante factions, all come to harass the shop.

Unsuccessfully, if that. We'd seen the goons grudgingly drag themselves to Unholy Grounds knowing that they'd get their asses kicked one way or the other. It was a game to Roscoe, a way for him to apply his extremely versatile arsenal of spells and protective glyphs.

Johnny had made him promise to stop using the fire traps, as destructive as land mines, really. So Roscoe had improvised. One night, he cast a spell that effectively turned the café's windows into rubber. They still looked like glass, which was why that one guy had been so gung-ho about lobbing a brick through them.

The brick came bouncing back, naturally.

The normal, nonmagical cops found the man on the sidewalk the following morning, dazed in every sense of the word, a brick still in his face. Roscoe even got me involved to prepare for a different night, infusing one of his traps with the essence of my fear hexes, sending an entire gang of Brillante thugs screaming into the night.

But like Johnny said, we'd worn out all the fun, and we definitely needed our sleep. Roscoe did so much to keep the shop safe, not to mention help me and Max out with his wealth of arcane knowledge. Neither of us had the heart to turn down his giggly midnight calls summoning us to the shop to watch another thug eat a mouthful of pavement.

The lack of sleep had made Max extra grumpy, which I oddly found extra sexy. I knew he wasn't sleeping much because I'd been sleeping over even more, his little asides about exclusive partnership tickling that quiet, forgotten part of me that wanted to be pampered, romanced, and sometimes, fucked into a million quivering pieces.

We were ready for bed that night. In fact, we were dressed for it too, mostly, tank tops and boxers. I had to pull on a pair of jeans because I'd just end up swimming in any of Max's comfier pants. He himself had opted for gray sweatpants, the bane of everyone with a pair of eyes and a love of the male physique.

Little known fact: gray sweatpants aren't actually a form of clothing. They're just an excuse for highlighting a man's bulge and butt, possibly invented by some genius fashion wizard who just wanted to ogle big packages. Front and rear deliveries, thank you very much.

Even now he was standing too close to me, here behind the counter. Even as we talked to the guys, my gaze couldn't help swinging back to admire the way Max's plain white tank hugged his torso. Those biceps. Dear God, those biceps looked delicious. I bit hard on my lower lip, resisting the urge to bend over and take a nibble out of those ridiculous muscles.

I did actually bite down on his shoulder once before. Chomp, chomp. Max yelped and called me a cannibal. Yet I also remembered him rubbing the sore spot while throwing me intrigued glances, as if he didn't already know that I found him irresistible. The teeth marks didn't last all that long, anyway, and he was irresistible. Like squeezing a baby's cheeks.

Speaking of which, one time he walked out of the shower and it took everything I had not to sink my teeth right into that perfect butt. I ended up slapping it instead. Poor Max, honestly, having to deal with me and my lack of self-control.

"Fine," Roscoe said, wearing a small smile. "You're right. You guys indulged me plenty already. I'll make some highlight reels, edit them together."

Johnny pressed a kiss against his cheek. "That's a mighty fine idea, Ross. Now, let's check out tonight's patsy. I mean victim. I mean — well, whatever."

We gathered around the glowing oblong in Roscoe's hands. A regular tablet, in fact, and it felt weird that I had to mentally clarify that. But some people in the arcane underground, like our unfriendly neighborhood Masque, actually projected tiny screens in their hands, an odd melding of magic and technology.

The fuzzy black and white image flowed into motion when Roscoe tapped the screen. He was connecting to one of the café's security cameras, which meant that we were watching the man in the back alley in real time.

At least this guy bothered with dark clothing. It seemed like the bare minimum. I thought I spotted something gleaming on his neck. One of those magical diamond tattoos, probably, that designated him as a minion of the Brillante crime family. He wended his way between the crates and garbage, frowning at all the debris.

"You promised to clear all that junk before the evening's over," Johnny said, clucking his tongue. "I don't need the city on my ass about trash and blocked exits, Ross."

"I said I would, didn't I? Don't worry about it. I wanted to arrange it sort of like a maze this time. Can't believe he's actually following the exact path."

Max shook his head. "Like a rat in a maze. Not that he has a choice. There's only two ways into this place. At least he's changing it up and trying the back door."

I chuckled. "Three ways, if you count a broken window. But we know how that worked out the last time."

The thug tested the door. A rattle came from the back room, matching his movements. He pushed it open. We all hit the floor.

"Did you leave the door unlocked this time?" Johnny hissed. "What were you

thinking?”

Roscoe shoved his glasses back up his nose, lopsided after our sudden move. “I didn’t, I swear. They must be sending the smarter ones. Thugs with unlocking spells, maybe.”

I glanced between the three faces, bathed white by the glow of the security feed. “What the hell do we do? We can’t kill him.”

There wasn’t much I could do in my state, in fact. As far as I knew, Bakunawa was still asleep inside my body. Or my soul. I never did figure that part out. Side effect of ingesting so much water and saving my life, and Max’s, among others. But it also meant I had no dragons to call on.

“I could make him crap his pants.” I pushed myself up, kneeling instead of lying prone on the floor. “Fear hex, straight into the brain.”

Max grabbed my wrist, protective, possessive. “No way in hell. They’re sending in people with actual magic now. Who knows what else he has in his arsenal?”

“This trap was supposed to be like a bucket of water over the door.” Roscoe raked his fingers against his scalp, shaking his head. “It would have covered him in muck, made him stink for days. Except it didn’t trigger. Why didn’t it trigger?”

“Not helpful right now, sweetheart.” Johnny rose from the floor, rolling up his sleeves, revealing his strong forearms as well as his incredible collection of tattoos. He cracked his knuckles. “No choice, then. I’ll knock his lights out, make him regret coming to this — hey. What’s that on the screen?”

A dark blur streaked in through the open back door. Another Brillante hire? And a more powerful one, at that. The others leapt to their feet, practically elbowing each

other as they hustled toward the back room. I took a quick moment to review the footage, scanning back a few seconds.

I smiled. I recognized that shock of wavy black hair. That was definitely someone on the Brillante payroll. But this person was on our side. I went over to join the others, unhurried because I knew the first thug was in big trouble, but still moving fast enough so I wouldn't miss the fireworks.

We arrived in the corridor leading to the back exit. The man in the dark clothes and the balaclava pulled over his head froze, but only for a moment. His hand fell to his hip. Was he reaching for a gun? Preparing a spell?

Roscoe muttered a string of words in a language I didn't understand. Johnny waved his hand, conjuring a floating array of needles. And Max held his hands up, his diamond daggers at the ready. Hot. Very hot.

And me? Again, I didn't have much that could help. But we wouldn't be needing any extra help.

It was too late when the thug noticed the rapid footfalls coming up behind him, the approach of heavy boots. A final step and his pursuer left the ground entirely, leaping into the air and kicking him with both feet at once.

Max screamed first. "Tina, you fucking killed him!"

"Did she dropkick him?" Roscoe sputtered, forgetting his spell words entirely. "Oh, God, I think she dropkicked him. Right in the back."

"I heard a crack." Johnny dismissed his needles, eyes wide with worry. "Did anyone else hear a crack?"



The thug groaned. At least we knew he was still alive. Kneeling on his back, triumphant and smirking, was one Guillotina Hernandez.

“You assholes never invite me to your dumb little midnight parties. I only knew because I sensed Max was in the area.” She bent low, speaking just by the thug’s ear. “Hey. New fish. Who sent you? And who gave you your magic?”

She tugged on his arm, wrenching it against his back in a painfully unnatural position. The thug lifted his head as far as it would go and howled.

“No magic! They gave me a key. That was all. It’s in my pocket.”

Tina wrenched on his arm again. “Which one? I swear if I find anything gross down there — if this is giving you some weird boner, I will rip your dick off.”

Again the thug wailed. She didn’t even pull on his arm this time. Tina’s threat was more than enough.

“Hoo, boy,” Max said. “I’d listen to her if, I were you. She collects them, you know. Dries them for her charm bracelets.”

“Nuh-uh,” I breathed. “Is that for real?”

Ross threw his hands up, turning to Johnny. “I swear I haven’t been handing out spare keys to Brillante goons.”

It didn’t take long for Tina to rummage through the thug’s pockets. She grimaced when her fingers found it, before she even pulled it out. It was a key, but large and ornate, like something that didn’t even belong to the current century. Her gaze met with Max’s, her eyes darkening.

Max stood straighter, his shoulders broadening, his face stony and hard. He spoke only two words, yet they were somehow enough to fill me with dread.

“Gustavo Brillante.”

## Page 2

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MAX

Seeing Guillotina dropkick a man in the back had woken me right up, a jolt of caffeine to my system. Bitter coffee, angry and black. Poor bastard was lucky that she wasn't aiming directly for his spine. But finding out that he was sent by one of my uncles? That was like having that same cup of coffee dumped over my head.

My ears were still hot, my skin blazing as I drove us from Unholy Grounds to a different destination. Roscoe finally accepted that we'd had way too much excitement for one night, staying behind with Johnny to close up shop and head home. But I needed something to settle my nerves. A little nightcap. Silk would have exactly what I needed.

No way I could fall asleep so soon after all that adrenaline. Leon clearly felt the same, mouth going a mile a minute as he sat in the back seat. I nodded along as he nattered away, waiting for the right moment to interject. I kept my focus on the road, trying not to get too unsettled now that I knew Tío Gustavo had his eye on me and my friends.

"That was beyond incredible, Tina. You took that guy down before he even knew what was happening." Leon smacked his hands together. "Wham! Just like that."

Sitting in the passenger seat, Tina shrugged and clucked her tongue. "What can I say? I was born to do this."

I shot her a quick glare, lingering just long enough to convey my displeasure, refusing to be an irresponsible driver. “Don’t be so cocky, Hernandez. You could have killed him. And boots off the dashboard, how many times do I have to tell you?”

She scoffed, putting her legs down and complying. “As if. How many times do I get to ride in your car anymore, now that you’re spending all your waking hours with Witch Boy over here? All your non-waking hours too, apparently.”

Leon pulled himself forward, his smile like a bright crescent moon as he popped his head between the two of us. “Aww, Tina! Are you really jealous? You can hang out with Max any time you want, you know.”

She threw me a steely glare. “Don’t you think I know that? It doesn’t bother me, really. I just worry. Max is very, very happy right now, and when your world is tinted pink and rosy, it’s harder for you to notice when something dark and dangerous is creeping up on you.”

I could see the shit-eating grin spreading across Leon’s face. I squirmed in the driver’s seat, feeling my neck going hot. Even when Tina was just trying to express that she cared, she was so damn brutal about everything. The honesty, most of all.

“Tina, fucking — shut up, okay? I’m not that happy.”

Leon waggled his eyebrows, so confident I’d see him doing it in the rearview mirror. “You seemed pretty happy when I did that thing last night.”

My skin was on fire. Tina fiddled with her door. “How do I roll down these windows? I need to throw up real quick.”

“I keep the child safety on.” Perfect. Deflect with humor, toss in a random insult, and maybe he would let this go. “You never know with Leon, can’t control his limbs

sometimes. Like a goddamn octopus.”

But it didn’t work. “A sexy octopus,” Leon said, as if that made any lick of sense. And yet I found it adorable anyway.

And sexy, in a stupid kind of way, because he really was irredeemably handsy, pawing and groping at me whenever we had a minute to ourselves. Unbelievably flattering, to be so wanted. Part of me was tempted to leave Tina out on the highway, find somewhere to park, bend Leon over the hood to pound him all through the night.

My hands crushing the steering wheel, I raised my voice, counting on the volume to drown out all the teasing I was receiving from two fronts.

“The point is that I am still perfectly capable of perceiving danger, especially when it’s right in front of me. Thank you very much, Tina.”

“Welcome,” she grunted.

“Tío Gustavo being the prime example. Good God. Can’t believe he’s getting in on the action, too. Business can’t be that bad.”

“Okay, I give up.” Weight dragged on the back of my seat as Leon shifted, adjusting his butt, getting comfortable. “Clearly there’s much more to this Gustavo Brillante I don’t know about. Shoot.”

“Antiquities dealer. That’s his bag. Likes to trade in relics, artifacts, anything rare and exotic. Doesn’t matter if it’s mundane or magical, which only complicates matters because he gets to hide dangerous and useful things among all the regular vases and sculptures and knickknacks.”

Leon gasped. “So he’s like a smuggler. A relic smuggler.”

“Worse,” Tina said. “The man loves the challenge of passing off worthless lumps of nothing as powerful artifacts. It’s a point of pride for him. That wand you bought might work the first couple of times, and that’s by design. If you bother coming back to complain, he’ll have his thugs scare you off.”

“That sounds sketchy as hell. Isn’t that illegal?”

“Does it matter?” Tina shook her head. “He’s a Brillante. He’s an accomplished enchanter, too, and that’s what makes him so infuriating to deal with. And sometimes, it’s not just a dud. He loves selling cursed objects, too. You buy something from one of Gustavo’s shops. Say it’s a jewelry box, tiny and pretty. Makes music when you open it.”

I barked with bitter laughter. “Except it also comes with an illusion. One of his favorite tricks. Maybe it triggers a headless woman to walk across your bedroom at night. By that point it doesn’t matter if you get rid of the box. The illusion has stuck. So you have to hire someone to get rid of your ‘ghost.’ And that someone also works for him, so he profits all the way down. ”

Leon frowned into the rearview mirror. “But that sounds like so much work for, well, not a lot of money. Depending on how much fake exorcisms go for these days, anyway.”

“That’s the thing,” I said. “Tío Gustavo doesn’t do it for the money. He has plenty to begin with. He does it for the thrill of getting away with the scam. The deception. He’ll steal your wallet with a smile, then make you pay to get it back.”

A briefest moment of silence, I noticed, Leon’s eyes flitting to either side as he tried to phrase his next question. “Wait a minute. Then those counterfeits he makes, they could totally end up muddling a finder’s work. Like, what if a finder went out and acquired a fake by accident, did more damage to their client in the end?”

My lips curled. “Why do you think I hate the bastard so much? It’s how Guillotina and I knew instantly from that key in the thug’s pocket. It’s a skeleton key. Lets his crooks slip into almost any door they find. But it only works in a Brillante thug’s hands. Gustavo’s specialty.”

“They used to be close,” Tina said. “Close enough that Gustavo believed he could make Maximo his protege some day.”

Leon’s mouth fell open, a perfect circle. Cute, but story hour was over, and we’d arrived at our destination, anyway. I parallel parked not a block away from Silk, wanting to get a few last words in.

“And believe it or not, there was a time when I thought I wanted to be his protege, too. But you spend enough time being a Brillante, and eventually you realize being a Brillante isn’t what you want to spend your time on. Not if you have a conscience, at least.”

No trouble at the entrance, considering Leon’s outfit, and mine. We threw our jackets on in the car, but I did have concerns that the sweatpants would get me stopped at the doorway. Maybe it was because we knew Silk’s rotation of bouncers well enough, coming to the bar for work all the time. Haruko was nice enough to let the sweatpants slide.

I couldn’t say the same for Vera Loong. The Jade Spider shrieked at the sight of me, as if I’d walked in wearing a mud-stained potato sack from the waist down.

“Maximilian Drake! What have you done to yourself? What on earth are you wearing?”

I grumbled under my breath as I kissed her hello on the cheek. Trust the woman who lived out a Hollywood boudoir fantasy to be horrified by the sight of a cotton-

polyester blend.

Vera wore a flowing sapphire garment that was sheer and gauzy in places, silken and fitted in others, part nightgown and part dress, like something a movie star might wear to sleep. The Jade Spider held a hand to her chest, taking a deep breath.

“Is Auntie Vera not paying you boys enough? It hurts my heart to see you living in such squalor.”

Leon chuckled as he bussed her on the cheek. “Come on, Vera. The jogging pants aren’t so bad. At least you get to see all the goodies.”

She looked down, gasped, and shrieked again. I felt myself blush, my hands flying to cover my front. Fucking Leon. He was going to pay for that one.

Guillotina groaned as she drifted by, making a beeline for the bar. “Spare us the dramatics, Vera. It’s just a dick and balls.”

I gulped, struggling to make myself look modest, especially as I hobbled over to the bar to order. After I collected our drinks — two white Russians, because Leon had a sweet tooth — I hurriedly slid into one of the booths with the others.

Vera steepled her fingers, eyes wet and sparkling as she smiled. “What a rare and wondrous treat this is, seeing you visit Auntie Vera for something beyond the mundane drudgery of finder work.”

Leon took a sip of his cocktail, then set it down, tongue quickly sweeping at his milk mustache. “Oh. Did you have another job for us?”

“Oh, I knew it. Your fondness for Auntie Vera is only transactional.” She held a hand to her forehead and choked out a fake sob. “Why would you even come to me if not



for money?”

Tina groaned, the ball of ice in her whiskey clinking as she lifted the glass to her lips.

Leon flashed one of his sunny smiles as he patted the back of Vera’s hand. “There, there, Vera. We love you, and we love your money.”

I sighed, nursing my own drink. “Job or no job, I’m just happy we haven’t heard from the Quartz Spider again.”

“Or is that such a good thing?” Tina asked. “No news is good news, except it could also mean he’s planning something awful.”

Vera shook her head. “No news, indeed. Last I heard of him was when I hurled the lot of you into the spider dimension, when he followed you into that place of silks and cobwebs.”

Ah, yes. That ghastly, greenish place, where strands of silk fell from an unseen ceiling, where the distant corners of the dark dimensions bristled with the skittering of a million spiders.

“Couldn’t sense you at all,” Tina said, looking me dead in the eye. “I usually have a vague idea of where you are, but that night? You just sort of — disappeared. I would have come to help otherwise.”

I squeezed her hand. “I know you would have. Thank you.”

“But it’s precisely as I explained it.” Vera framed her face with her hands, her fingers splayed out to vaguely resemble a spiderweb. “Some of us spiders dedicate ourselves to the Mother. Hearing her whispers is merely one of the perks. Access to this little dimension is another.”

“That’s why she knows so much,” Leon muttered to Tina. “All the whispers. Her hair is full of secrets.”

Vera fluffed her hair, throwing him a disapproving look. “I wonder if you boys can see where I’m going with this. The Quartz Spider is extremely talented at covering his tracks. How he followed you into the spider dimension, then left safely again of his own accord? Why, it can only mean that he has dedicated himself to the Mother Spider as well.”

I could feel the corners of my eyes crinkle as I studied her face. “So what you’re saying is that we should speak to this Mother Spider of yours, see if she would throw one of her own children under the bus.”

“Arachne may not be so pleased to learn that one among her brood is dabbling in strange magics far beyond her sphere. The Mother approves when we dabble in secrets, in stealth, in the use of poisons.”

Vera dipped the end of one fingernail in her drink, dropped it onto her tongue. The liquid hissed on contact.

“With the right offerings, the right cajoling? She may well be convinced to betray Brendan Shum. Listen to me, selling out one of my own brother spiders. But again, these are the very things that Arachne would approve of. Quick tip: she also approves of fortune cookies.”

Leon cocked an eyebrow. “Huh? Fortune cookies?”

The phone by Vera’s hand lit up, its wallpaper a ghostly jade green. She held it up to her face, eyes scanning the message. When she smiled, her teeth were tinted in the same venomous shade.

“Gentlemen. It appears I have a job for the two of you, after all.”

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:29 am*

3

LEON

What a damn night. Max and I walked into Silk to enjoy a nightcap. We didn't expect to walk out with two whole assignments. Well, the finder job was definitely an assignment. Something about a statuette.

That second thing, though. A communion with Arachne, the spider-woman of ancient Greek mythology? Seemed like less of an assignment and something closer to a nightmare.

But I slept extremely well, thankfully. No nightmares to report. I slipped into my apartment, my mood going as shabby as my surroundings. It was the following morning. I'd come home to pick up a few essentials.

Max had dropped me off before going around town to work on some errands. I spent so much time at his place that it almost felt like giving up my apartment would be more convenient for everybody. I smirked at the emptiness of it, scoffed under my breath.

As if that was such a wonderful idea. We'd barely started dating. Max was a great guy, but I didn't want to scare him off by showing up at his place with a bunch of cardboard boxes, the rice cooker that was the only appliance I actually owned, and the framed picture of my mother.

I plunked onto the bed, smiling at her as she smiled at me. I kissed the tips of my

fingers, pressed them against the glass. “I’m home. Sorry, I know I’m barely around these days.”

Not that she cared or even minded. The dead stayed dead, even in a place as miraculous as the arcane underground. And yet it brought me so much comfort, spreading myself out along my rickety bed, chitchatting as if she could hear my endless rambling.

“A communion, Mom. Like, an actual ritual to contact an entity. A queen of spiders. Wow.”

I stared up at the ceiling, wondering whether that weird, grubby spot had always been there. I mean, didn’t I have enough gods meddling in my affairs? Technically, only Tiamat was an actual god. Bakunawa and Arachne were legendary figures, but not quite deities. That didn’t make them any less powerful, though.

Or any less scary, for that matter. Communing with spirits was nothing new to the Alcantara witches, nor to any witches in any tradition, I imagined. Cast a summoning circle, make the offering, spill some blood, and chant the words to entice them, call their attention.

But speaking as someone who had received ancient sea dragons in his apartment? I generally preferred not to call the attention of fickle, centuries-old creatures equipped with volatile powers and potentially even more volatile tempers.

“And more of those thug attacks, Mom. Roscoe used to be so confident about fending them off, but this felt different. And I felt so helpless. What am I without a dragon to Emanate? I knew you taught me the blasting hex, but it was always so hard to pull off.” I rubbed a tight circle around my wrist, pouting. “And painful, too.”

I was never more honest than when I had these little one-way convos with my

mother. I hadn't felt so vulnerable in a long time, what with Bakunawa still asleep inside my body. I never did perfect the blasting hex, even knowing that it was an effective way to get someone the hell out of my face.

The problem was how it seemed to hurt me almost as much as it hurt someone else. I sighed, pretending I could hear my mother scold me. "Yeah, yeah. I know. Practice makes perfect."

"Why would you rely on such pitiful spells, little lion, when you have the raw power of draconic might waiting in the wings?"

Tiamat's voice drifted in from the busted, unfurnished open area I thought of as the living room. Strange. I could smell the seawater in the air, hear the faint rush of waves. Somehow I hadn't noticed her coming this time. Maybe I was too wrapped up in bitterly complaining to my mother.

"Hi again, Tiamat," I said, playing it cool and casual as I peeled myself off the bed.

I walked into the living area, carefully avoiding the puddles of saltwater. Honestly, I had to mop the place every time this woman made an appearance. There she stood, her gemstone scales sparkling in the sunlight that trickled in through the ratty curtains.

"What brings you to my peasant hovel on this fine morning? And mind you, an Alcantara blasting hex can really ruin someone's day. It's not just a pitiful spell."

I knew the lady could bathe me in her bluish-green dragonfire with a simple snap of her fingers, but I figured I'd throw that in. I had to stand up for my lineage. Dragon goddess or no, I couldn't just let her badmouth my many mothers.

"My apologies, Leonardo Alcantara. Of course, of course. Human magic can still be

very potent indeed. But why limit yourself to curses and hexes when the window to Emanation remains wide open?"

A shiver ran down my spine. I tried not to give those little moments too much thought, the bursts of exhilaration and sheer power I experienced each time one of the dragons Emanated through my body. But I couldn't deny how deeply I enjoyed every instance, whether it was channeling Tiamat's hellish flames or Bakunawa's raging waters.

She was about to introduce me to another dragon.

"Ah. Then you've deduced why I am here. I will not dally. Come forth, brother."

A hot breeze blew in through the window, stinging and brisk. This wasn't the same warmth of ocean wind that accompanied Bakunawa's coming. That had felt like a rush of breath, nearly comforting, a reminder of the many islands where I was born. Memories of beaches, the rush of waves.

This wind was different. Older, something that had been blowing for far longer. But above all else I could not ignore its heat, almost suffocating in its dryness. Even the lightest touch against my skin seemed to sap me of my energy, and I'd only just woken up.

And then there he stood, a figure swathed in robes. White, I imagined, to stave off the desert heat, and loose enough to let the air circulate all over the body. Not that this man needed to worry about such things. I had to remind myself that these were only dragons wearing human skin.

These vestments were only symbolic, a way for them to mark the cultures and civilizations they hailed from — or perhaps, most appropriately, the ones that remembered them. He stared at me with piercing eyes, his beard full and dark,

swarthy skin weathered by the sun and wind.

On his head, a white cowl, to protect him from the glare of the sun. The cloth was affixed in place by a golden circlet, almost like a crown. This was someone ancient, important, perhaps even as old as Tiamat herself. It was odd to think of the sea dragons in terms of age, but Bakunawa came from a younger place, a newer nation.

This man filled the room with his presence, clotted the air with the smell of time.

“It is an honor to meet the one they call Witch Boy.”

His voice was kindly and soft, the wind through the palm fronds, a refreshing breeze at an oasis. This was someone who could afford to speak so sweetly, adjusting his tone and volume for fragile human ears, a delicate human mind. If I closed my eyes, I knew I would hear it in the depth of his voice. This dragon was as old as the world itself.

I bowed my head, something I hadn't intended, and something I didn't recall happening when I met either Tiamat or Bakunawa.

“The honor is all mine.”

What was I saying? This wasn't me, and yet something about the man in the white robes commanded authority. I had no idea who he was, or where he came from, but his very existence tugged at that inherent Filipino impulse to respect my elders.

Tiamat smiled as she gestured at the man, arm flourished as if presenting him at a grand event. “This is Bahamut, among the oldest and greatest of our kind.”

He shook his head and chuckled. “I am humbled, sister.”



“Oh, humility isn’t called for here, dear brother. I merely speak the truth. How do you refrain from attributing greatness to a serpent who carries the very world upon his back?”

My jaw fell open, but I quickly snapped it shut. It was coming to me now, if only in bits and shreds. There were so many different versions of this same story, of some colossal creature bearing the actual Earth on its back, the only thing preventing our world from plunging into a great ocean of void.

The beast in question changed with each of these creation myths. Sometimes it was a great turtle, a gigantic fish. In this case, Bahamut was a serpent. A sea dragon, just like his kin.

“Or so the story goes in old Arabia,” Tiamat continued.

Bahamut bowed his head, eyes twinkling as he smiled. “Or so the story goes.”

Tiamat took one step back, placing Bahamut squarely between us. “If you will allow it, little lion, my brother would very much appreciate the opportunity to manifest through you. To Emanate.”

“Yes, little one. It truly has been so very long.” Bahamut sighed as he rolled his shoulder, squeezing it in one hand.

I might have been imagining it, but I thought I felt the ground tremble. Bakunawa had done something similar, demonstrating his power when we first met, when I got too mouthy. But this was different. Bahamut carried the world upon his back. What great miracles and disasters could I conjure by Emanating his power?

“Before anything — with all due respect — I do have two questions. Tiamat? I haven’t heard from Bakunawa since the, ah, incident. He had to absorb a huge

amount of water to save my life, and he said he needed to sleep it off.” I gestured at myself. “Well? Is he still in there?”

She smiled, sharp teeth glinting. “I am pleased to report that my brother has vacated the premises. It would be quite unwieldy for you to carry two great dragons within your body, would it not?”

I looked down at my stomach. “And he never even said goodbye? Dang. As for my second question — Bahamut, no offense, but I’m curious about what your true form would look like.”

When the man in the robes chuckled, I thought I heard a distant rumble. Great boulders tumbling from a mountain, rocks scraping and stirring to life. And yet it could have just been the deepness of his voice.

“No offense taken, little one, and take no offense from my words when I say this in turn. If you were to gaze upon my true form, it would drive you mad. If I raise my head to the heavens, the stars shall fall. If I shrug, nations shall crumble.”

I raised my own head, looking past his body, trying to conceive of just how enormous Bahamut actually was. Tiamat sniffled as she flipped a lock of her hair.

“Not for nothing, but I, too, maintain a majestic form. Some of us still remember how to manifest in ways that would not shatter the fragile human mind.”

Bahamut held a hand to his chest. “And some of us have forgotten, or have never learned.”

“Indeed.” Tiamat extended a single clawed finger. “And it is through your generosity and talent, little lion, that we are able to experience this reality without breaking it. Step onto its soil without cleaving the planet in twain.”

The promise of power. This time, a dragon so colossal it would fracture my mind if I attempted to fathom his greatness. Would I earn the gift to make the earth shake with fury? To call on stone to erupt and break the bones of my enemies?

Would I earn the power to make the Quartz Spider quake in terror, the power to put an end to his sorrow and madness?

I extended my hand to Bahamut. “Allow me to be your gracious host. My name is Leon Alcantara, and I’ll be your guide on this journey.”

Tiamat laughed softly, because no one could resist an Alcantara’s charms. And Bahamut smiled as he reached for my hand.

“How very kind of you. I pray you survive our binding.”

“Survive our what, now?”

His hand closed around mine, the roughness and warmth of strong, weathered fingers brushing against my skin. The breath left my body. I wheezed, gasping for air. Why did I always forget about the pain?

And a different flavor of it, every time. Tiamat’s flames, the stinging salt as Bakunawa’s oceans entered my skin. And now, Bahamut’s sands scouring my body from the inside out, grating and scraping at my flesh as it raged through my veins.

Every time. Every goddamn time.

I fell to my knees and screamed.

4

MAX

They say that white lies aren't supposed to hurt anybody. Then how come they hurt so much to tell?

I'd told Leon that I was off to run some errands after dropping him off at his place. I needed to pick up more of that peanut butter and chocolate ice cream he loved so much, stash it in the freezer to make sure he had an ample supply. Witch Boy had a sweet tooth and a bottomless pit for a stomach.

But I didn't tell him that I was also going to spend some time trying to scope out what Tío Gustavo was up to. Lying to his stupid, earnest face with those big brown eyes and that brilliant smile? God, it wrecked me. This was really all Leon's fault, actually. His fault for being too cute to lie to.

It'd be easier this way, going on my own. Tío Gustavo wouldn't try to hurt me upfront, but I didn't need him knowing that Leon existed, either. The things I'd do if the Brillantes ever laid a finger on him. The faces I'd break. The blood I would shed.

I parked across the street from the shop, face partially hidden behind a pair of aviator sunglasses, and then again by ducking a little behind the steering wheel.

Leon once tried to explain to me that the aviators only drew more attention to me, but what did he know? I had to cover my eyes, which were among the most stunning of my features. I couldn't walk in there being too handsome and radiant.

“But maybe he has a point,” I muttered, reaching over to the glovebox, pulling out a baseball cap. Someone would have to hold me at gunpoint to get me to wear a cap on regular days, but this wasn’t a regular day. This was me trying to be something of a snoop.

I held the cap over my head, hesitating. If only I could get my Dissipate spell to last a little longer, turn myself into an invisible hunk of diamond for more than a minute. If only I wasn’t such a visible hunk instead.

Something high-pitched squeaked and twittered in the back of my head. I couldn’t make out the words, but I recognized it as my brain’s interpretation of how Leon might sound when he was nagging me.

That’s a terrible disguise , the voice said. Didn’t I tell you to keep a change of clothes in the trunk?

I scoffed, dismissing the Leon-voice. Was he nuts? The only change of clothes back there was just as stylish as everything else I owned.

But maybe he had a point. Maybe I needed to dress down sometimes, especially if I was trying to do something a little stealthier. What kind of a finder would I be if I wasn’t open to adapting, to finding more ways to become more efficient with my work?

This wasn’t the day for that, though. I wrinkled my nose at the ball cap, flinging it into the backseat. Fuck it. If Tío Gustavo happened to be in there, he’d sniff me out in an instant, anyway. Didn’t matter if I walked in wearing full drag, tits and all.

I stepped out of the car, chest thrust out, rolling my shoulders to make sure that my leather jacket fell over my body in just the right way. I nudged the aviators up my face with the tip of my finger. In the back of my head, the vague, twittering Leon-

voice whistled and catcalled.

“Yeah,” I muttered to myself. “I know, right?”

And so I strode toward the shop. The place? Hermanas Arcanas, loosely but not quite translated as “magical sisters.”

It was, in fact, owned by a pair of magical sisters, who in turn were owned by Tío Gustavo Brillante himself. He had his fingers in many of the pawnshops and curiosities shops sprinkled throughout the city, whether they were mundane or magical. Tío Gustavo wasn't picky like that. In his opinion, everybody was worth scamming.

Hermanas Arcanas, however, was most definitely a magical establishment. No one who wasn't supposed to know could tell from the outside, of course, the same way it worked for Unholy Grounds. Only those in the know could really know, whether from the buzz of ambient magic that hung in the air, or from the quiet power held by the sisters themselves.

I couldn't spot either of them as I approached the front door, but Teresita and Luisita Mendez were accomplished mages in their own right. You'd have to be to work around enchanted objects. It took a certain amount of arcane awareness to correctly identify the business end of a magic wand, for example, or to know whether that cursed ring would fuse to its wearer's finger.

Little chimes above the door rang as I entered. Tiny brass bells. No magic within them, but the ringing lingered throughout the interior of the shop.

A labyrinth of vintage furniture and décor covered so much of the shop that I could hardly make out the walls and the floor. It almost seemed deliberate, how a path had been defined for traveling through this maze of antiques. Would I find a minotaur at

the end? Not if it found me first.

It smelled of incense, old books, ancient wood, the better to give the right impression to the impressionable. Much of it was smoke and mirrors. That was the entire point. Look, smell, and sound mystical enough, and it might just lead to a sale.

“Feel free to look around,” said a voice from behind an armoire to my left.

Was that Luisita or Teresita? I could never tell, anyway. They were twins, after all, the kind that enjoyed playing it up by dressing alike, talking alike, and finishing each other’s sentences.

A head poked out from behind a bookshelf on the other side of a store, the eyes only giving me a passing glance. “Yes, yes. Let us know if you need anything.”

The sister vanished again in a rustle of cloth and the faint tinkle of jewelry. I only caught a glimpse of black hair done up in an elaborate coif, then finished off with a single yellow rose.

I coughed and said something polite in answer, keeping my head down. Neither had found me very interesting. Good. They didn’t need eyes on their customers, given that they had multiple methods of security in place. The cameras, for one thing, because only the most foolish of mages would forego the benefits of modern technology entirely.

But they had wards, too. I was sure of it. Magical glyphs and traps, not unlike the ones that Roscoe liked to use to defend Unholy Grounds. This wasn’t the sort of place where you could stick something in your pocket and walk out. Setting off the alarm at the door wasn’t the big issue here.

It was whether or not the thing in your pocket was rigged to explode. A crude and

violent way to deter theft in the arcane underground, but that was why finders had to be very careful about our work. That did add an extra layer of complexity to my problem, though. I had a second reason for coming to the shop that day.

The Jade Spider's new assignment.

It was a simple statuette of indeterminate origin, made out of a mineral that had been smoothed out over the ages. A pale, almost tan sort of stone, carved centuries ago into the approximate shape of a human. Now the features had been worn away, whether from natural weathering or indelicate handling over time.

Which did strike me as odd, because Vera had explained that the statuette itself was hardly magical. Maybe its influence was stronger, once, but now it only held a remnant of its enchantment, described to me and Leon as a very primitive luck charm. That made it even more of a challenge to hunt down.

We had ways of finding enchanted objects in the arcane underground. But whereas a book of shadows that once belonged to a powerful witch might stand out as sharply as a blazing bonfire, a shabby old lucky charm might only burn as bright as a birthday candle.

Not that I could even detect artifacts on my own. Simply didn't have the talent. Someone like Roscoe might manage, given plenty of time and concentration.

But the idea of going window shopping with Roscoe, of all people, made me glad enough to do things the old-fashioned way. Loved the boy to pieces, but hours upon hours of him talking my ear off about arcane minutiae and ancient history? The very thought of it made me shudder.

Still, it was surprising what you could find from casually browsing through old shops. I'd never actually completed a mission from stumbling upon a client's artifact in a



pawn shop — how convenient would that be, eh?

I ran my fingers along the top of an old writing desk, inspected an old, grubby inkwell. No statuettes in sight. I raised my head to scan the place, on the lookout for anything even vaguely shaped like a slightly deformed human. Instead I saw a pair of eyes staring right back into mine.

“Oh, fuck,” I sputtered. “Oh, God. Sorry, sorry. I didn’t see you there.”

The young man on the other side of the writing desk coughed quietly into his fist, flustering when he spoke. “No, no. It’s my fault. I’m so sorry. I’m really new to this job and I’m still really bad about dealing with customers. It’s like, am I supposed to hover while you browse? What do I do with my hands?”

I chuckled. “I get what you mean. And it’s totally understandable, don’t worry about it.”

Two women’s voices chattered at each other from somewhere among all the furniture. Spanish, for sure. Mine was rusty, but I definitely picked up the word “estúpido.”

“You’re the one who hired him,” one sister hissed, somehow unaware of how well her voice was carrying.

“And you said we should because he had a pretty face, but that pretty face still hasn’t sold a damn thing.”

The man who had startled me deflated the more the argument continued, his shoulders rounding, his fingers twiddling. He wore a waistcoat over his white collared shirt, looking very much the part of a librarian. I kept imagining him in glasses, which he did not wear. Some people just looked like they were meant to wear

something on their face.

His gaze darted away from mine, his eyes downcast, his lashes long and thick. I appreciated the softness in the swoop of his longish hair, falling down nearly to his ears, a curious contrast for the strength of his jawline. He did have a pretty face, and burning red ears. Cute guy, in all. Poor guy. Poor cute guy.

Hey, I was allowed to look, okay? And anyway, it was that one sister who started it, going on about his pretty face.

“Please don’t tell them I was bothering you,” he mumbled. “I really need this job.”

“You weren’t,” I said, shaking my hands in his face. “You so weren’t. I didn’t mean to yelp. Oh, God. Here they come.”

A pair of antiques came trotting out from behind a pair of antiques, the Mendez sisters appearing on either side of a two-piece changing screen. It was uncanny how they seemed like mirror images of each other. Both wore stylish black smocks, like curators in a ramshackle gallery.

Each sister wore a rose in her hair, placed on opposite sides. I saw the sister with the yellow rose earlier. The one with the red rose could have been her reflection. They’d even painted moles on opposite sides of their faces. Smoke and mirrors. Maintain the illusion of mystique. Look magical. Be magical. Nail the sale. It was all marketing.

From matching painted lips, the sisters broke into the same toothy grin. Even their body language was eerily similar, hands clasped together, as ingratiating as their smiles.

“We’re so very sorry,” one sister said. “He’s very new here. Why, it’s only his first week.”

“Yes, yes. Only his first week. Just is just adjusting.”

I did a double take. Was I having a stroke? Was she ? “Sorry? Just is what, now?”

“My name is Just,” the man answered meekly. “And I was just helping him, Ms. Mendez and Ms. Mendez.”

Short for Justin, maybe? I picked up the stained inkwell and placed it on the flat of my hand. “That’s right. Just over here has just convinced me to buy this — thing, in fact.”

He shot me a relieved smile, then turned his eyes away again.

“Ah, yes.” The sister with the yellow rose stepped forward, wagging her fingers. “This belonged to an unnamed Spanish conquistador, the ink providing the blood for his quill. He recorded his grand travels in a beautifully handwritten journal, meaning to bestow it upon his sweetheart on his triumphant return.” She held a hand to her forehead, clenched the other one around thin air. “All of it lost when his ship was dashed against the rocks in a thunderstorm. The inkwell, all that remains.”

Funny. It looked like a regular old inkwell with the wet stuff dumped out, purchased from a cheap stationer at best. But I didn’t want Just getting into trouble in his first week of work. Just was just adjusting, right?

“Incredible story,” I said, another white lie, except this one didn’t quite hurt to tell. “Could you keep this at the counter for me, ladies? I’d love to keep looking around.”

The sisters collected the empty inkwell, then giggled as they slunk off again, muttering to each other. I thought I heard the words “ muy guapo ” being breathlessly uttered. Amazing. Now I had two great stories I couldn’t tell Leon.

First was that I'd successfully disguised myself from the Mendez sisters with nothing but a pair of aviator sunglasses. To be fair, it'd been years since they'd last seen me. They probably wouldn't have recognized me even if I took them off.

And second? That I'd saved poor Justerella here from his evil stepmothers. I'd potentially help someone keep his job for the low, low price of a mostly worthless paperweight.

"Thank you so much," he breathed, reaching out, but not quite touching my arm. "That's honestly the first thing I've ever sold. You didn't have to do that, you know?"

I shrugged. "It seemed like you deserved a break. I don't envy you, you know." I leaned in, dropping my voice to a whisper. "The sisters are notoriously difficult to deal with."

He nodded. "I kind of picked up on that. Real quick, like."

And now that I'd done him a kindness, maybe he could help me in turn. I wondered what to question him about first. Should I ask to see where they kept the statuettes and figurines, or should I ask if he'd seen the disarmingly jovial Gustavo Brillante around the shop recently?

But before anything else, I needed to turn the charm up to eleven. Every finder had their favorite tools, and more the fool the finder who didn't put them to full use. I took off my sunglasses and blasted the poor boy with my brightest, handsomest smile. Maximo Brillante to the maximum.

"Just? I'd love if you could do me a little favor."

LEON

I flexed my fingers, curled them into a fist, over and over, struggling to work away the pain. Why this hurt had lingered so much more than the other two dragons, I didn't know. Why it only stayed in my right arm, I wished I knew, too. At least that meant I could keep that hand closer to the window on the passenger side, away from Max's eyes.

Why was I still trying to keep these things so secret from him? He knew about both Tiamat and Bakunawa. Maybe it was the awareness that Bahamut was something yet greater, that I'd done something especially naughty. And foolish. Maybe I didn't want him to know I was in any pain at all. The idea of him feeling sorry for me hurting somehow hurt me, too.

But most of all, I didn't want him raising those same questions back at me. Had I finally gone too far?

"Oh," Max muttered. "I definitely think we've gone too far."

A pang twisted in my chest. I clenched my hand into a fist, blinked hard at the blur of city and street whizzing by the windows.

"Sorry?" I asked, feigning innocence as I turned to check his face. "What was that?"

He gripped the steering wheel as he cut a hard left. I gripped the bottom of my seat as

the car lunged and obeyed.

Max's eyes flashed toward me for the briefest second, then went back to focus on the road. "Sorry about that. We were supposed to turn at that intersection and I missed it completely. Did you get everything you needed back at the apartment?"

I nodded, my gaze falling on my hurting hand. This would be a great opportunity to tell him about Bahamut, and yet. "I'll last more than a few overnights with my fresh overnight bag. What about those, um, errands that you said you were running?"

His hand came off the wheel just quick enough to scratch at the back of his neck, the base of his hairline where the little locks were softest, where they grew out cute and funny if he went too long between haircuts. Cute. And funny. Not ha-ha funny, just his behavior. Something was off.

"Actually, I didn't get to pick up that ice cream you like."

I shrugged. "It's sweet that you thought about that at all, but that's okay. I can go without for a few hours."

Max laughed. "Stop it. We'll pick some up later. Listen, I have to be honest with you. I didn't actually do a grocery run. I — um, I went and got a head start on our finding job."

All thoughts of Bahamut went whizzing out the window, which happened to be closed, but never mind that. I smacked him on the shoulder with the back of my hand, a reflex, so light it barely registered to Max and his ridiculous muscles.

"You lied to me? Come on, man. We're supposed to be a team. The Booty Patrol. Thievin' Beavers. Swindle Unlimited."

“None of those names are acceptable in the least. But sorry, Leon. I knew you’d be annoyed, but it was to protect you. This statuette we’re looking for? Best place to start is the city’s magical pawnshops and antiquity stores. Guess who controls, oh, ninety percent of them?”

I gasped. “Gustavo Brillante.” And then I relaxed, latching on to that one thing he’d said before everything else. “You were trying to protect me? Aww, Maximo. That’s so cute. Are you falling head over heels? Are you smitten with me? That’s it. We can be the Smitten Kittens. You know, like cat burglars, but young and cute.”

“Under no circumstances are we — and no! I am not smitten. Just worried. The last Brillante you met tried to drown you. In all fairness, Tío Gustavo is a much more reasonable person than Divina could ever hope to be, but he’s still a Brillante. He’s still an insane criminal.”

“I’ll charm the pants right off of him. Don’t you worry about me.”

Max groaned. “Put the image of a pantsless Tío Gustavo in my head again and I swear I will crash this car.”

His phone, mounted on the dashboard, said something about our destination approaching in a mile or so. Max patted it gratefully, one of those weird and weirdly sweet things he did out of nowhere. Loved those little quirks about him.

“Oh, good. We’re almost there. Vera said we could do the communion whenever, but I’d rather get it over with sooner than later.”

I glanced out the window again, studying our surroundings. “A communion can happen anywhere, right? I mean, cast the circle, say the words? Kind of weird that we need to head to a specific location.”

He shrugged. “Sometimes it helps when you approach an entity at their tether, you know? Someone powerful like Arachne, it’s like she has gateways to her home all over the place. Sometimes it helps to knock on their doors instead of just yelling out into the ether.”

And yet, sometimes, the most powerful of entities just walk right into your apartment to offer you terrifying and annoyingly painful pacts. I still hadn’t figured out why the dragons loved slapping their wet feet all over my apartment in particular.

I took a deep breath, clenched my fist hard enough that a couple of my knuckles popped. How could I hide this Bahamut business from Max after he’d been so earnest with the Gustavo stuff? We needed to be honest with each other about the men in our lives, whether they were evil uncles or dragons from creation myths.

“So since we’re being totally honest with each other,” I started, clearing my throat.

“Uh-oh. What’s this, now? What’s happening?”

Another deep breath, and when I exhaled this time, it came in a sigh. “Another dragon appeared to me today.”

Max whistled. “Well, well. Look at Mr. Popular over here.”

“I wasn’t going to tell you at first, because — well, I don’t know why myself, to be honest. Maybe I’m worried that I’m overdoing it. Is there such a thing as too many dragons?”

“Pretty sure you’d know if you were overdoing it.”

I glanced down at my hand, but said nothing.



“And I told you,” Max continued. “It’s okay. I won’t judge you for taking a different path in magic. For taking what might even be your ideal path. I mean, you’re a witch. A bruho . Communing with spirits is just another part of your toolkit. But communing with dragons? Come on. How badass is that?”

I smiled, adoring the side of his face in the midday sun. Sometimes I wondered if I deserved him. “It was Bahamut this time.”

“Bahamut. Bahamut.” His forehead furrowed. “Nope, not ringing a bell. I’m sure they’re super powerful and badass, though.”

“He,” I corrected. “He appeared as a man along with Tiamat in my apartment. One of the sea serpents from the creation myths. Carries the world on his back, you know the drill.”

“Damn. So, earth magic, maybe?”

“Dunno. Haven’t given Emanation a shot yet. But I figured whatever it was Bahamut could bless me with, it might help us fight the Quartz Spider.”

Max’s face hardened. “Damn straight. Speaking of which — fuck. I missed another turn.”

I laughed. “It’s no big deal. We get to spend another five minutes in here shooting the shit, and I get to grill you about why you didn’t get me three more pints of that peanut butter and chocolate ice cream.”

He repressed a huge, goofy smirk, scratching the end of his nose. “I said I was sorry.”

“Don’t be. Totally joking. So what did you find out about the statuette, anyway?”

“Not much, honestly. We know it’s worn down and mostly featureless, kind of like those old fertility goddess statues you see in museums. But that only makes it harder to pick the one we’re looking for out of a lineup. So I scoped out one of Gustavo’s most popular shops, and guess what? Not a statue in sight.”

I narrowed my eyes, my gaze flitting between the road and his face. “And that’s — a bad thing, is it? I can’t tell with you sometimes.”

“Hard to say, but I would have expected Tío Gustavo to flood the market with replicas by now. If he found out that I was after it specifically? God, I couldn’t even imagine. We’d never find the genuine article. I suppose if Roscoe focused hard enough, he might be able to detect something.”

I shook my head. “I’ve talked to him a couple times about how he does that. It’s a nifty trick, but the way Vera described the statuette to us, its enchantment is too faint to really stand out. Ross is awesome, but he’s not like a magical metal detector.”

“We’ll just have to keep our eyes peeled, track the thing down the old-fashioned way. Two heads are better than one and all that. Oh, look. We’re finally here.”

“And you didn’t even miss the turn. Third time’s the charm.”

Max carefully pulled into a parking spot, pulled on the handbrake, then smushed his entire hand right in my face. I sputtered between his fingers, fighting to slap his hand off, laughing.

We’d arrived at our destination, all right, one of the last places I’d expected. A craft supply store, the kind of place where sweet old grandmas sold bundles of yarn and rolls of washi tape to other sweet old grandmas. The only sign that anything was amiss was actually the sign above the store itself.

“Snitches Get Stitches,” I read out loud. “Geez. You think it’s like a front for a criminal operation? Maybe one of the other great families has its fingers in the old crafting supply pie.”

Max shook his head. “Highly unlikely. If Vera sent us here, that means this place is affiliated with their Mother Spider. This is very likely a modern temple to Arachne.”

Pretty chimes tinkled as we pushed the door open, a blast of balmy air rushing out of the shop. It smelled like sugar, candy, and mints, and other things that grandmas liked. I clenched my fingers tightly over the plastic bag of fortune cookies we’d acquired for the communion, a couple dozen of the things that Arachne liked.

You wouldn’t know immediately from looking, but this place was definitely dedicated to the Mother Spider. Her symbol lined the shelves, hung from the ceiling, on the walls, only disguised as cute things for decorating the home. Elaborate lace doilies, beaded and feathered dreamcatchers, a woven basket. Each contained the shape of a spiderweb.

Snitches Get Stitches was a world apart from the Jade Spider and her cohorts, the job-givers who held court in swanky bars and seedy pubs. But it all made sense. Even in the arcane underground, a place of open magic, it still didn’t hurt to keep a low profile. That was why the spiders could see and hear so much, lurking, watching, and listening.

We stepped up to the solitary person at the counter. I felt a thrill of delight when I saw that it was, in fact, a lovely old lady in charge. In a fluffy pink cardigan, the ruffles of her yellow shirt peeking out through the sleeves, she was the very picture of delight.

“And how can I help you today, dearies?”

I opened my mouth to say something charming and polite, but Max muscled his way to the front.

“We’re here to commune with the Mother Spider.”

The old woman narrowed her eyes, the sweetness fading from her face, replaced by hard suspicion. “You a cop? You gotta tell me if you’re a cop.”

Max blinked. “You mean one of the Masques? Absolutely not.”

She dragged a hand under her nose and sniffed. “Good. We don’t like Masques around here. Too nosy, trying to sniff around for our priceless information.” She beckoned as she led the way to the shop’s back room. I glanced over my shoulder, very much aware that she hadn’t done anything to lock up.

“Umm, is all this stuff going to be okay? Just that someone might walk in and swipe something.”

The old woman gave a short bark of laughter. “Hah. I’d like to see them try. In here. Yes. Right in the middle.”

I held my breath. Max and I stepped into what looked like an eclectic art installation, the kind of thing where you might be invited to actually touch the artwork. Multicolored strands of yarn hung from the ceiling and from the corners, pinned in places, dangling loose in others. A spinner’s web made of every color known to the human eye.

“Now, normally,” the shopkeeper said, “you’d have to perform every step of the communion yourselves. But the circle is cast and the doorway is half open. I only need the offerings. Did you bring them?”

I lifted the bag of fortune cookies. She nodded.

“Good. She likes that place. They make great dim sum, not that the Mother cares much for dumplings.”

Max rotated his hand at the wrist. “Not to be rude, but could we maybe speed this up a little?”

Mr. Efficiency over here getting all impatient. Max could deal with small talk, but he was even more excited to speak to Arachne than I was. This was the closest we’d gotten to finding any real dirt on the Quartz Spider.

Our gracious hostess clearly didn’t feel the same way. Her face had wrinkled into something resembling an unhappy prune.

“Very well. The Mother will see you now.”

She raised her hand at the two of us, but for whatever reason kept her eyes locked on Max and Max alone. Not unusual in and of itself — who could keep their eyes off him, anyway? But then she opened her mouth. I waited for the words to come, but the woman remained silent.

Threads of spider-silk burst from her fingers, wrapping both of us in their embrace, but again, especially Max. The woman’s mouth opened wider and wider. A spider emerged from within her throat, leaping straight toward Max’s face. Then another. And then another.

I screamed. Max screamed. The woman laughed and laughed as the room itself filled with cobwebs and spiders.

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*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:29 am*

6

MAX

I swatted at my face, thrashing and sputtering as I peeled away endless strands of cobweb, batting away the spiders. Through the terror and panic, I could only make out the sound of Leon's voice.

“Um, Max? Buddy. You okay there, big guy?”

I opened my eyes to a place far darker than the back room of the craft store. I blinked, realizing that the tingly feeling of being webbed and spidered had gone away. Leon blinked back at me, kneeling just by my head.

“We're here,” he said. “Time to get up.”

I pushed up against the ground. It was glossy and hard to the touch, like black marble. Like an insect's back. I allowed Leon to pull me to my feet, and then I turned in a circle and scratched my head.

“But — the spiders. My face.” I patted my cheeks, felt at my forehead. “Was it all an illusion?”

Leon shook his head and tutted. “Honestly, you really should let me do the talking next time. I think the old lady at Snitches wanted to fuck with you a little. She didn't seem to like you very much.”

I brushed off my clothes, sulking. “Oh, as if you’d do any better.”

“Absolutely, I would. I’m positively fucking delightful.”

There was an odd, distant, almost muffled quality to the sound of Leon’s voice, as if the air here was different. It could well have been, the rules of the universe slightly shifted within this dimension, this alternate plane of reality. Because this wasn’t a place for humans. This was a place for spiders, and for their queen mother.

Great strands of silk and swaths of fabric clung from impossible heights in the unseen ceiling. From far beyond the reaches glowed a pale, eerie jade light, casting everything in sickly, deathly green. I stared at my hands, wondering if this was how it would feel to be dead.

This felt larger than the space the Jade Spider had delivered us to. Much larger, a coliseum when that other place had only been a closet. And as before, from the farthest reaches of the dimension, I could hear it: the sound of skittering and chittering. I took a deep breath and steeled myself, willing away the unsettling vision of thousands, if not millions of spiders.

But the only spider we needed to concern ourselves with was already waiting before us.

There she stood on all eight of her legs, each festooned with enormous rings and bangles. The mother of spiders was so fond of accoutrements that even her arachnid half was dressed and decorated. Tailored silk spilled over her bulbous abdomen like so many layered skirts, glassy beads and bits of jewelry stitched onto the gauzy fabric.

Her humanoid torso was similarly clothed — sparsely, that is, her jewels and chains artfully placed to protect her modesty. Bracelets traveled the entire lengths of her

arms, so numerous that they could have resembled sleeves or ringlets of armor, the dark metal serving to illuminate the unearthly pallor of her skin.

Hanging from her dull metal crown was an elaborate lacework veil, the patterns so complex and delicate that I couldn't fathom how they could have been crafted by human hand. Created by her millions of children, no doubt, the only weavers in this known world who could tailor something so intricate and beautiful without tearing a single filament in the process.

Arachne smiled, black lips parting to reveal fangs that glinted wet and green in her domicile's venomous light. According to the little information I could glean from Vera, few had ever gazed upon the true face of the spider queen. A privilege, perhaps, or a punishment, saved for those who were courageous or foolish enough to peer past her royal veil.

I could smell the tension in the air. Perhaps it was the smell of my own sweat. Leon certainly wasn't moving himself, nothing but the sound of faintly rustling plastic to break the silence. The fortune cookies. Right. He lifted them slowly to chest height, offering our offering to the spider queen.

Arachne's stark white hand darted forward, snatching the bag away. Leon yelped. I almost pissed my pants.

"Oh, how delightful!" Arachne squealed, already ripping the bag apart, fortune cookies spilling to the ground. "So many of your mediocre little pastries filled with your pithy little prophecies. Oh, what wonders. What shall my fortune be?"

I exchanged a nervous glance with Leon as Arachne violently unwrapped one of the fortune cookies. The cookie snapped and crumbled in her grasp before she even tore the plastic open. The sound, for whatever reason, suddenly reminded me of the crunching of bone. I took a slow, deep breath.



This was a communion, an exchange between the mortal and the divine. We'd come with a purpose, and it was up to us to communicate that. I bowed my head slightly, the words already stilted before they left my mouth.

“We hope you enjoy our offering, great Arachne. But we have come to you with a —”

She clapped her hands and squealed again, sending up a shower of fortune cookie fragments. Pinched between her fingers was a strip of white paper, apparently the only reason she specifically requested these things as offerings to begin with.

“Let's see what it says, shall we? ‘You will have many friends.’ Oh, how utterly unspecific and droll. When shall I make these friends, little pastry? How many?” Arachne rolled the strip of paper into a ball between her fingers and flicked it away, gracing us with a greenish smile. “And yet perhaps this tiny scroll offers a glimmer of insight, after all.”

I opened my mouth to answer, but Leon cut in first, speaking through an easy, friendly grin. “We'd love to be friends, Arachne. But truth be told, we've come to learn about your children. The two-legged ones.”

Better to let him take the lead, really. I hated to admit it, but sometimes — okay, often — Leon could be the better choice between the two of us when it came to being charming. And it seemed to have worked, too, Arachne scuttling closer to get a good look at our faces.

“Yes,” she murmured, her breath rustling her silken veils. “My other children. The ones I did not birth, and yet who still swore fealty to me. I reward them with secrets, with knowledge whispered out of the dark. You brought me fortunes. I owe you knowledge.”

The jewels on her necklace shifted, moving along the breadth of her throat. I tightened my fists, fighting the temptation to say something that might offend the entity, but Leon spoke up first.

“Whoa. That’s so pretty. How are your gemstones doing that?”

“Oh, these?”

Instead of offense, Arachne answered with a girlish titter, because of course Leon’s curiosity came off as charming na?veté. It was like his superpower at this point. She ran one delicate hand along her clavicle. One of her rings traveled the length of her finger, switching places with the gemstone on her pendant.

“These are the most precious of my children, perhaps in every sense of the word. My secret-spiders, each with a different gemstone embedded in its body. They link back to me, sending me whispers and stories along the strands of their webs.”

And the Mother Spider sat at the center of it all, this presumably worldwide web. Finally an explanation for why the human spiders named themselves after gemstones. It was aspirational, maybe, a way to bring themselves closer to their mother’s jade light, curry her favor.

“The smallest of my children delight me with their little secrets. The human ones are a different matter. But that’s neither here nor there. You had a question.”

A question. Singular. Everything was transactional with the entities. We had to make this count. Leon and I exchanged looks. He pursed his lips. We nodded in agreement.

“There is someone in Dos Lunas,” I began, “who once called himself the Quartz Spider. Brendan Shum is his real name. His human name. He’s been sowing chaos in the city, dabbling in time magic, and it looks like he isn’t very fond of the two of us

in particular.”

“I remember him,” Arachne replied. Her eyes narrowed, her lips flattening into a tight line.

“He tried to trap us,” Leon blurted out. “Drown us, even, spilling tons and tons of magical water in a place that looked exactly like this one. Your domicile, I mean. The Jade Spider brought us there, but it was the Quartz Spider who trashed the place.”

She bared her teeth, her veils rustling when she hissed. “He has no right to enter my spider holes. Those who cease to worship me are no longer permitted access to any pockets of my territory. The Jade Spider — Vera Loong — she is among the brightest of my stars. She may do with my lairs as she pleases.”

Phew. For a minute there I thought we’d gotten Vera into trouble.

“But Brendan Shum was barred entry and stripped of his privileges when he spurned me. Time magic? Pah. And you say he filled the space with water?”

That part seemed to offend her most of all. Leon’s head bobbed as he nodded, eyes wide, a schoolboy telling on his bully.

“He could’ve ruined the flooring,” Leon said. “Or damaged something, all that damp. Imagine mold on the premises. Terrible for any real estate, ethereal or otherwise.”

“Mold.” Arachne growled. She stamped four of her eight feet. “I hate mold.”

I held back my laughter. This was why I loved working with Leon. Neither of us had asked a question, only offering Arachne more information, but she was providing answers all the same, egged on by Leon’s narrative.

The entities were so bonded to their primal nature, this one in particular favoring the corners and shadows, places where she could hear the plumpest and juiciest of secrets. Whispers. Gossip. Information. Arachne craved it, yet couldn't help dispensing it herself.

"So he's left your service," I ventured, having settled on the right question to ask. "And he's no longer a worshipper. But he placed his feet on sacred ground — one of your pocket dimensions — and soiled it with seawater."

"Seawater." Arachne clenched her fists and cried out. "Sacrilege! Desecration!"

"Help us help you, Arachne. The Quartz Spider has wreaked havoc upon your territory, and he continues to do harm out on Earth. Lives are at stake. Help us stop Brendan Shum. How do we find him?"

She clasped her hands, taking in a long, slow breath. "My two-legged children act as envoys out in your reality. Within these dark walls, I am queen. But out on Earth, you will find no better helpers than my bejeweled brood."

Arachne lifted her veils. I held my breath. All eight of her eyes blinked at once.

"Seek the Amethyst Spider."

### LEON

I hugged my elbows as Max and I stood in line outside the club. Pulse-pounding electronic music thumped within its four walls, deadened only by the heavy doors. In front of them stood an equally heavy man, built with so much thick muscle that he could probably function quite well as a door himself.

That's what bouncers were, in a sense. With his shiny head and shiny mustache, the jacked man in the tight black T-shirt was the beast that guarded the gates. No clipboard necessary. Habibi seemed like the kind of place where they only let someone in if they liked their face.

Okay, and their body. And butt. And maybe the bulge.

It was a gay club, okay? One of the most popular in Dos Lunas, according to Max, my friendly local tour guide. I hadn't been myself, but the way Max nodded at the bouncer suggested that he'd visited once or twice. Either that or he had enough burning, quiet confidence and charisma to sail us right through.

No exception on the cover charge, unfortunately. Max peeled a couple of bills out of his wallet. I looked away innocently, pretending that he was going to add it to my running tab. We stepped into the club. The sounds of the city streets disappeared, drowned out by all the rhythmic banging.

And I didn't just mean all the cute guys fucking.

Only joking! Mostly. I wasn't going to check the bathrooms to confirm. But Habibi was packed full of beautiful boys with beautiful bodies in all shapes and sizes. Twinks, twunks, bears, otters, daddies, and more. Every species fully represented. A bestiary of boys. An actual men-agerie, if you will.

Habibi meant "beloved" in Arabic, and it certainly lived up to its name. So beloved by the local queer community, but also a place for lonely singles to find their beloved, even if only for a single night. It also happened to be home turf to one of Vera Loong's peers. Or competition, really, depending on who you asked.

And there he was in the VIP section, behind a single velvet rope guarded by another musclebound bouncer. The Amethyst Spider was fittingly stretched out on a bank of rich purple sofas, so very, very important and exclusive that he sat alone.

We stepped up to the bouncer. Max nodded toward the sofas and the man hogging all of them, like a singular gemstone sitting pretty on its velvet display pillow. A single beckoning finger from the Amethyst Spider and we were in, allowed through the second layer of Habibi's social defenses.

Max gave the Amethyst Spider a firm nod. "Been a long time. It's good to see you again, Faizan."

"And the same to you, Maximilian Drake."

The man called Faizan trailed his eyes down and up the entire length of Max's body, then repeated the same with me. Head to toe, assessing, absorbing. I had to admit, I was doing very much the same. The Amethyst Spider was a fairly attractive man.

Scratch that. He was stunning. His glossy black curls fell in ringlets over his eyes, eyes that were rimmed with kohl, made even more smoldering and intense with a practiced hand and just the right amount of makeup. Dark stubble accentuated his

strong jawline, the kind of jaw that told you everything below it would be just as nice to look at.

And it was. Faizan wore a purple vest embroidered with golden thread and embellished with tiny gemstones. He wore nothing else underneath, arms bulging with muscle, a powerful chest with enticing loops of hair. He held the pipe of a hookah in one hand, a caterpillar on a mushroom.

In place of a caterpillar's segments, naturally, the man had a killer set of abs rippling down to his waist. The dusting of hair across his chest cascaded all the way down, dipping under the line of his very comfortable harem pants. I tightened my lips and glanced away, but too late. Out of the corner of my eye, I could already see him grinning.

"Very cool theme," I said, struggling to play it nonchalant. "So where's Alice? Where's the Red Queen?"

A petite drag queen tittered as she ran past on powder-blue heels, blond hair tumbling down her back, her powder-blue dress made completely out of latex. A second, colossal drag queen squeaked by in her red and black vinyl gown, as big as a parade float. She raised her glittering scepter.

"Off with her head!" she boomed, in hot pursuit.

The Amethyst Spider gestured at the pair, smiling, except that I knew what the smile was actually about. He'd totally caught me checking him out. But I was allowed to look, wasn't I? We were here to investigate. I couldn't very well do that without the use of my eyes. And my mouth. Oh, shit. I meant — never mind what I meant.

"We like to do these theme parties every so often," he said. "Our regulars really enjoy the opportunity to get dolled up. You should consider yourselves so fortunate that I

allowed you into my fine establishment at all.”

Max held out his hands. “Listen, Faizan. We’re not here to cause any trouble.”

“Oh, I only meant the dress code.” Faizan chuckled, trailing his pipe to indicate up, then down our bodies. “You boys didn’t see the sign at the door?”

“They let us right in, though.” I scratched the back of my ear, looking between the two of them. “There was a door charge and everything.”

“And it is a tithe that I would happily refund, my friend. But the rules say that anyone who comes in without a costume must go shirtless.” Faizan smirked. “Pay your fee in flesh, and I will gladly entertain any questions you have for me.”

I noted his words carefully. Entertain , he said. Not answer. I shot him my best smile. “And maybe you’d even consider answering some of them?”

The Amethyst Spider laughed. “You have a sharp wit, friend. It’s a sign of a strong mind. But I’m certain that many of tonight’s revelers would be just as interested in seeing the strong body that goes with it.”

He bit on the end of his pipe, lush lips wrapping over it as he inhaled, eyes smoldering. Man was too hot for his own good. Beside me, Max stood without speaking a word, processing in that silent, sexy way that he did.

So much of magic was transactional, even the simple act of casting a small hex draining a portion of a witch’s essence. But even interactions in the arcane underground, whether communing with entities or speaking to spiders, involved serious transactions. Grave exchanges.

Faizan lowered his head, long, dark lashes fluttering as he blinked. Before that



moment I somehow never noticed that so many eyes were on us, expectant, waiting. Maybe they wanted to know what Max and I wanted from the Amethyst Spider.

Or maybe they just wanted to see more.

I turned to Max and shrugged. “It’s only polite. I mean, dress code and all.”

And Max, a man who worked hard for his beautiful body and wasn’t shy about showing it off, shrugged right back. “Let’s give them a show.”

Hoots and hollers, whistles and applause erupted from around the club as I yanked my shirt off. I tucked it into my waistband, skin cold in the air-conditioning, and yet I’d never felt hotter.

Max tossed his leather jacket onto one of the couches, then pulled his tank up and over his head with a single hand. He turned in a circle, arms spread out as he locked eyes with the people gathered around us. The crowd went wild. So did my nether regions. This ripped, cocky stud? Mine. All mine.

The cheering settled down as the DJ slipped smoothly into another song. Something by Kylie Minogue. I nodded at the Amethyst Spider and broadened my shoulders, my chest stuck out.

“Just so you know, this is as far as it goes. A live performance is gonna cost you extra.”

From beside me, Max chuckled under his breath. He knew me too well. As if I would ever pass up an opportunity to make some good money.

“More’s the pity. You make such a lovely pair.” Faizan leaned forward, pointing at both of us with a sweep of his pipe. “And how long have the two of you been in

love?”

I didn't know my body could go into a full blush in a second flat. Thank God for the gaudy club lights, because I was positive my skin had turned bright red.

Max clenched his fists, muscles bulging as he frowned. “I don't see how that's relevant.”

That didn't come out very smoothly by Max's eloquent standards, his words normally so meticulously chosen. And with a little bit of a stammer, too. Granted, neither of us had really discussed anything beyond that cute, vague little convo about entering an exclusive finder partnership. But it was hard not to feel the tiniest sting of disappointment.

“We're not putting labels on it yet,” I said, effectively stamping myself as a stereotype clear across the forehead in blazing red letters.

Max shot me a look that was somehow equal parts grateful and apologetic. I answered with a reassuring smile.

I tilted my head, offering the Amethyst Spider another smile. “So we've paid your flesh tithe, and you've already asked us one question. Is it fair to assume that we can start asking you questions in turn?”

The Amethyst Spider leaned into the cushions, crossed his legs, and waved his hand. “Ask, and if I know, then I shall do my best to answer.”

He patted the sofa. Max and I took our seats. Very plush. I could see why Faizan liked it here, and why he saved the VIP section for himself.

“We spoke to your benefactor,” Max started to say. “She's the reason we even came

to see you.”

Faizan stared off into space and took a hit of his pipe, his chest expanding as the embers on the hookah glowed a bizarre, vibrant purple. He exhaled, twin streams of lilac smoke jetting out of his nostrils, more an amethyst dragon than a spider.

I remembered being so fascinated when I saw Vera do something similar once, releasing a wisp of green smoke from between her lips. She claimed that it was the secrets struggling to get out of her body. I’d laughed at the time. Maybe she wasn’t pulling my leg, after all.

“This benefactor you speak of.” Faizan winked. “Does she have two legs, or eight?”

Cheeky. Very cheeky. I winked back. “I think you know that it’s the eight-legged one.”

“Ah. You’re on a mission from Mother Arachne.” He took another puff, exhaled again, a plaintive sigh. “And here I thought that you’d come to diversify. Exercise your versatility.”

Max chuckled under his breath. “Sadly, no. Leon and I are in an exclusive relationship. With the Jade Spider, that is.”

He nudged me with his shoulder, our own little private joke. Faizan clearly took notice, raising an eyebrow, but he said nothing.

“Oh, of course. Vera Loong. A very lovely woman, when she wants to be. But that isn’t why you’ve come to see me, is it?” Faizan showed us another sharp leer, adjusted his vest to show off more of his ridiculous torso. “To gloat about your loyalty to your sweet Auntie Vera, when this even sweeter morsel is freely available to you?”

Max coughed into his fist, one of his little ways of deflecting his embarrassment. Funny how the guy could take off his shirt in a busy club, but couldn't take some light flirtation. To be fair, Faizan was laying it on pretty damn thick.

"We're actually here about a different peer of yours," I said, swooping in to Max's rescue. "Though we're pretty sure he's no longer in the business. Are you familiar with the Quartz Spider?"

Faizan sat up straight. He put his pipe down, more serious and attentive than we'd seen him all night. He looked to either side, a cautious pedestrian about to cross an especially busy street.

"I've heard about his — shall we say, exploits. Talk about someone who's turned from the light. I don't believe the Quartz Spider was every truly acquainted with our Mother. And now, to hear tell of him dabbling in such dangerous magic? Chronomancy is a powerful craft, but say the wrong words, make the wrong gestures?"

Faizan shuddered. This wasn't the first I'd heard of the pitfalls of time magic. It didn't seem all that common in the arcane underground because of how difficult it was to master, no less to practice. No one around to really teach it, either.

Because Faizan was exactly right. If I messed up my blasting hex, it would hurt like hell, but I was always free to try again. Better luck next time. But flub even the smallest workings of time magic? The consequences could be dire. Entrapment in a time loop. Accidental aging by several years, if not decades. Turn instantly into a pile of dust.

"Can you think of any way we can find him?" I ruffled the back of my hair, already frustrated. "Long story short, Vera had to throw us into one of those spider dimensions to keep her home bar safe. Brendan Shum appeared in there with us. But

how? It's like you said. Arachne herself says that he doesn't have her favor."

The Amethyst Spider stroked his chin, eyes gazing off into the distance. I followed his line of sight. He was looking at the bar. For a moment I wondered if he was just thirsty.

"Have you gentlemen considered," he said, "that the Quartz Spider was simply abusing his favorite new flavor of magic? A bitter pill to swallow, but it sounds to me like he's getting better at it."

I shook my head. "I'm afraid I don't understand. How would that even work?"

Faizan pulled out his phone, pointing the lens of its camera at me. "Sit there for a second. Yes. Good. Now step out of the frame. Leave the couch."

Okay, weird. Max only shrugged. I did as Faizan said, then sat back down when he motioned at the sofa again. He patted the cushions closest to him, indicating for us to sit closer. He dragged his finger across his phone, back and forth. There I was on the screen, on the couch one moment, then gone the other. Back and forth. Appearing. Disappearing.

I slapped my forehead. "Holy fucking shit. He took a snapshot somehow, must have been invisible in the bar when Vera transported us."

"A simple feat even for a former spider," Faizan said. "Stealth and camouflage? Child's play."

"Then he just hit rewind to leave again." I rubbed my temples. "Zipped him right back to the safety of the bar while he left us to drown in Vera's dimension."

Max raised his head to the ceiling and groaned. "Son of a bitch. That's it. He's pulled

a time loop on us before. He's even learned to manipulate elements, change the state of water. Something about the memory of matter."

At least we knew that Arachne was telling the truth. This had nothing to do with granting her worshippers access to her spider holes. Apparently, the Quartz Spider had cooked up a couple of new tricks. I didn't fancy the idea of discovering what else he had up his sleeve.

"Thank you, Faizan," Max said, standing up. "This clarifies a few things. Thank you again. You've helped us more than I could have hoped."

"Oh, think nothing of it." Faizan looked at his vest, pretending to flick away a bit of lint. "And free of charge, too. All in the interest of keeping our fair city safe. Perhaps in the future the two of you will consider working a job for me, yes?"

"Depends on the kind of job," I blurted out before I could stop myself. Max's eyes widened. Faizan laughed.

"That's exactly what I wanted to hear. Enjoy the rest of your evening, gentlemen."

We stepped out of the VIP area. I could sense that Max was excited to head somewhere we could talk one on one.

And that was when I noticed him, the young man making eyes at my own young man. I couldn't even act surprised about it. Max was the kind of guy who turned heads fully clothed, never mind with his shirt off. But something about how this other man was trying to get his attention was rubbing me the wrong way.

Mousy. That was the best way to describe him. Kind of a nerd, but he had his own sense of style, those glasses, the waistcoat, this whole vibe that he worked at a used bookshop and had all the best recommendations. Not a bad-looking guy at all. Quite

handsome, even.

He walked up to Max, never making eye contact with me, not that he would know who I was from Adam. Just a random pickup, right? He'd whisper something flirty in Max's ear, and Max would turn him down politely.

"Wow, Max, fancy seeing you here." He gestured at himself, waved his hands over his clothes. "I know, I know, I'm wearing the same stuff from work. But I thought it'd be appropriate for tonight, with a couple of twists."

I cocked an eyebrow. "Oh. You guys knew each other?"

"Yeah, you know. Work stuff." Max crossed his arms over his torso, like he was suddenly so embarrassed to be naked. "Hi again. Been a while, huh?"

"Sorry, what?" The man in the waistcoat blinked in confusion. "But we only met today."

Didn't Max say that he'd spent the earlier part of his day scoping out the statuette? I clenched my jaw, gritting my teeth through my annoyance, forcing out my best fake smile.

Maximo had some explaining to do.

8

MAX

I walked back to our table balancing three drinks between my hands. All beers, which was certainly easier to manage than actual cocktails. I had my work cut out for me already, trying to keep the peace. I mean, surely Leon wouldn't hex poor Just for the faultless crime of — well, I don't know, casually checking me out while saying hi to me?

And it was my fault, anyway. So I panicked, okay? What was I thinking, lying about something as stupid as meeting Just earlier that day? I had no reason to feel guilty, and no reason to make Leon wonder about my motives. Now it all looked like a bigger deal than it actually was.

“Two beers for the gentlemen,” I announced to the table.

I placed one beer in front of Just and was about to do the same for Leon when he snatched the bottle out of my hand. I clenched my jaw and tried not to gulp. Maybe he was just thirsty. I couldn't always tell with him. The boy claimed to be charming as anything, and it was true. There was no piercing that perfect smile.

“Cheers,” Leon said. “To new friends.”

I chuckled nervously, clinking my bottle against theirs. “Yes. To new friends.”

We'd found our way to the outdoor bar built into the back of Habibi. Perfect for fans



of smoking the hookah, or anyone who just wanted some outdoor air, or a break from the almost oppressively loud dance music.

I'd pulled on my shirt very quickly, now that we didn't have to conform to Faizan's dress code. Felt pretty sheepish strutting around bare-chested with Leon sporadically tossing the dagger-eyes in my direction. He'd put his shirt back on, too. Just, as it turned out, was the only one who'd actually dressed for the occasion.

Leon flashed his winningest smile again. "I really like your vest, Just."

"Oh, this?" Just grinned, pinching the material of his waistcoat. "Like I said, I wore it to work. But I knew about this party tonight, and I figured I could pass it off as my costume."

He fished out a golden length of chain, one end clipped to his pocket, the other attached to a beautiful fob watch. He nudged up his glasses and made a sputtering noise with his lips.

"'I'm late. I'm late!' Get it? I'm the White Rabbit. From the Alice books."

Leon grinned. "So cute." He leaned his elbow on the table, then rested his chin on his knuckles, hand tightened into a fist. "Isn't he so cute, Max?"

The way he stared at me filled me with an overwhelming urge to tug on the opening of my shirt. I staunchly refused to do so. This was all awkward enough. I also didn't find it especially amusing that our cute White Rabbit and his pocket watch were an unfortunate reminder of the Quartz Spider and his deadly anomalies.

Still I offered a friendly smile. "Very cute, Just. Put on a pair of bunny ears, draw on some whiskers, you'd really be living the part."

He scratched the back of his neck and laughed, completely oblivious to the tension between me and Leon. “Oh, I don’t know that I’d want to go all-in like that. The waistcoat and the watch are good enough. I actually got the watch from Hermanas Arcanas. You know, where we met.”

I took a pull of my beer, crisp and refreshing, then pointed at him. “That’s right. Earlier today.” I turned to Leon meaningfully, saying the words for the sake of the table, but mainly directing them toward him. “I was checking out a few pawnshops in Dos Lunas for some statuettes, see if there was anything new in town. You know, Leon. For my living room?”

Leon’s mouth fell into a circle, the lines in his face softening. “Ohhh. Yeah, totally. The statuette for your living room.”

I wrinkled my nose at him, then smiled. Leon smiled back. Silly of him to doubt me, but it was also silly of me to fumble this whole situation.

“Just a shame that I couldn’t help more,” Just said, peering into the mouth of his bottle. “Though I have heard — well, keep it between us — that there might be some in the new stock we’re getting in. Found out after you left, in fact. The Mendez sisters must have ordered in some new finds. Maybe there’ll be a few statuettes to your liking in the mix. I can ping you when we restock, if you give me your number.”

And just like that, Leon’s suspicions came rushing back again. I could tell in the little hitch of annoyance in the corner of his mouth. This was kind of cute, actually, how jealous and possessive he was getting over me. Scratch that. This was kind of hot.

I leaned into the table, just as I mentally resolved to lean into making Leon even more extra jealous. “You know what, Just? That sounds like a fine idea.” I unlocked my phone’s screen and slid it toward him. “There. You go ahead and save your number for me.”

My eyes lingered on Just's face as he obliviously punched his digits into my phone. And the whole while, Leon's eyes lingered — no, burned into my head with murderous intent. I clenched every muscle in my body, holding back the impulse to smile.

And the impulse to spring a full boner. Why was this turning me on so much?

We finished our beers and Just thanked us for the drink, wandering off to look for his friends. I decided it was time for us to go, now that we had at least one small, potential lead for the statuette.

But before I could get very far from the patio, Leon jabbed a finger into my chest. He was trying to be authoritative, but I could tell that part of him was just checking if I was still as firm and ripped as ever. I was, naturally.

"Listen up. I knew what you were doing back there, and just so you know, Maximo? It's not working."

I turned my hands up and blinked innocently. "Whatever are you talking about, Leonardo?"

"Slipping him your phone and asking for his number while fully ignoring me? I know your game, Max, and I'm gonna get you back for it."

"Again," I said, shaking my head. "I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

His glower deepened so quickly that I almost burst out laughing. "You stay right here. I really need to pee. Try not to flirt with any more White Rabbits while I'm gone."

I almost took the chance to sneak in another potshot, but decided against it. I

remembered when he had to slowly eliminate all the water that Bakunawa had sucked into his body to save our lives. Such a complex working of myth and magic resulting in some truly uncomfortable biological consequences. Leon was peeing five times an hour for days.

And then I decided that I was still a little thirsty, but not for anything alcoholic. I still needed to drive us home, after all. Had to be responsible. I headed to the bar to elbow my way past the twink and twunks for a glass of iced water, but another obstacle suddenly appeared. I'd been so relaxed, but my jaw clenched, and my mood darkened.

"What the hell do you want?" I asked the Masque.

He grinned from behind his elaborate Venetian mask, decorated for the first time since I'd met him. Somehow it made him all the more infuriating. This jerk was supposed to be out there tracking down the Quartz Spider's movements. Instead he was here, partying, if not mockingly blending in. For once the Masque didn't have to use his camouflaging magics to belong.

"It's a festive evening, Mr. Drake. Why all the hostility?"

"Because you only ever show up when you have something cryptic or awful to say. Often it's both. You're like a bad omen."

The Masque tutted, but his grin never fell. "You do wound me, Mr. Drake. I'm only here for a little chat. And how fortuitous that Mr. Alcantara is nowhere in sight."

I heaved a long, exhausted sigh. I didn't realize I was so tired until this asshole showed up.

My hand balled into a fist in my pocket. "You know, it really doesn't help that you

know our names and we have nothing to call you by. Which works out fine in the end, come to think of it, since we do have a few choice names for you.”

The Masque laughed, the peacock feather attached to the side of his mask bobbing as he did. “Oh, we’re in quite the foul mood, aren’t we, Mr. Drake? Very well. I’ll keep this short. I believe you’ve realized by now that your partner has partners of his own. These dragons that he draws power from, yes?”

“Yeah, we talked about them. I know they exist, and I don’t see the problem with him using them for his magic.” I crossed my arms and shrugged. “How is that so different from any other kind of mage who deals with entities?”

“It isn’t, no. Not fundamentally. But I wonder if you can tell me what it is that binds these allies of Mr. Alcantara together.”

A tiny sputter of anger flared in my chest. I knew he was going to go all cryptic and annoying. “They’re all sea dragons,” I said patiently. “Sea dragons from different cultures.”

The Masque’s grin curved upward, but only in one corner of his mouth. I couldn’t see the top half of his face, but I knew that his eyebrow was doing the same thing.

“Yes. Sea dragons, they are. But I’d caution you to consider what else these beasts have in common.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, any lightly pleasant buzz from my beer already washed out of my system because of my budding anger. I kneaded above my eyebrows with my thumb and forefinger, holding back my instinctive desire to knock that stupid smile off the Masque’s face.

“Look. It’s been a long fucking day, and no matter how much I wish you’d be more

direct about explaining your bullshit, it never comes true. Just tell it to me straight.”

I opened my eyes, my anger instantly drowned out by a flood of embarrassment. The Masque was gone. In his place was the Drag Queen of Hearts from before, glowering, a glittery scepter in her hand.

“Off with his head!” she bellowed in my face, before stomping off again in search of Alice.

“Yeah,” Leon said, pumping his fist as he walked back to me. “Off with his head. Dang. What’d I miss?”

I glanced around for a glimpse of a peacock feather. Very difficult to spot in this sea of campy costumes, and yet the Masque was definitely gone.

“Nothing,” I lied. “Absolutely nothing.”

LEON

Tired. Max was tired, and maybe a little grumpier than usual. That was fine. I wasn't actually all that annoyed about the Just situation. I trusted Max enough to know that he wasn't sneaking around my back kissing all these other cute boys.

Frankly, I was more worried about him sneaking around behind my back trying to pull off an investigation on his own. We were supposed to be partners, weren't we? This was dangerous stuff. Tío Gustavo wasn't just some bumbling old antiques dealer. The man was still, as Max warned me again and again, a Brillante through and through.

But again, Max was tired, and so was I, and these were all conversations we could save for the morning. The thump and boom of the music at Habibi faded and softened as we navigated the block. I followed him to the parking lot, his car keys jingling in his hand, studying the uncharacteristic slope in his shoulders.

Poor guy looked totally wiped out. Kind of odd, considering a beer at the bar wasn't what I'd classify as harrowing, but with everything else that had added up throughout the day, who was I to judge? I stepped up the pace to catch up with him, meaning to give his shoulders a nice, solid rub, help him relax a little before the drive home.

"You okay there, tiger?" I asked, digging my fingers deep into the tight muscles of his shoulders, wondering whether this massage was meant to benefit him or me. "You're so tense all of a sudden."

He relaxed into my touch — a good sign — and gave me a little smile over his shoulder. “It’s nothing, really. I’m just tired. God, it’s been such a long day.”

I smiled, relieved that he wasn’t maybe all pissed off from me giving him a hard time over that Just guy. “Well, work’s over now. Which is funny to say knowing that I currently have a beer inside me, but hey. Perks of the job.”

Max swung around, grabbing me by the waist and pulling me close, so close our bellies were touching. Those rock-hard abs, those muscles at his pelvis — woof.

“A beer?” he purred. “Any thoughts on getting anything else inside you? Like my cock, maybe?”

Incredibly cheesy, but hell did it make my insides buttery and wet. I smacked at his chest, laughing and sputtering something incoherent, but he didn’t relax his grip. Were we even going to make it home at this point? Sex with Max was incredibly enjoyable, but I didn’t know if I was up for some action in the backseat.

“Well, well, well. Isn’t this sweet?”

My stomach twisted at the sound of mockery in that voice. A man stood in the parking lot, flanked by two others, all dressed in dark clothing. Each wielded some form of improvised weapon — a plank, a pipe, a baseball bat.

“You don’t want to start shit with us tonight, boys.” Max’s voice rumbled against my torso, like I wasn’t having a hard time controlling myself already. He peeled away from me and cracked his knuckles.

“Listen to the man,” I said, unclenching and flexing my fingers. “We’ve had a long night. And bigotry is so over, you guys. Homophobes, this close to a gay bar? Honestly.”



The man in the middle reddened. “Who said anything about homophobia? My little brother is gay. Love is love.”

I jabbed my finger at the air. “That’s right, love is love, motherfucker.”

Max gave me a puzzled look and shrugged. “But it still sounds to me like you’re looking for trouble, gentlemen. Let’s get this over with, already. You know who I am, and I know who sent you.”

He brought his thumbs and index fingers together, forming the familiar shape of the Brillante diamond, the clan sign. White light poured from his fingers, tracing the outline of the diamond. The tattoos that marked the three thugs gleamed under the arcane light, two on the neck, one on the forearm.

Oh. Brillante thugs. I should’ve guessed. Clever Max, always two steps ahead.

Max pointed at the man in the middle. “Why did Tío Gustavo send you?”

The men chuckled. The one in the middle answered for them all. “Your favorite uncle just wants to make sure that you don’t stick your handsome little nose where it doesn’t belong.”

So these guys were buddies with that one dude who Guillotina dropkicked at Unholy Grounds. A steady flow of Brillante thugs showing up at the coffee shop hadn’t been so surprising considering our previous misadventure with one Divina Brillante, but she had her own reasons for harassing Max.

“What does Gustavo want?” I blurted out, unable to contain my curiosity.

“This fucking kid,” the man said, gesturing at me. “He wants you to stop dancing around the subject, Maximo. You know you can always come to Tío Gustavo about a

— what was it again? A statuette?”

I could hear Max growling deep within his chest. Why did he have to be so hot all the time? We had to focus on the fight, not that a fight had actually broken out yet. Clearly these guys had only come to scare us, to send a message.

“Tell Gustavo I can handle my own business,” Max said, slow and steely.

“That’s Tío Gustavo to you, Maximo. Respect your elders. See, this is why you were never going to get anywhere in the family. Can’t even be bothered to show a little respect to — ”

Max’s fist cracked into the side of the thug’s face. His bat clattered to the ground, but now Max was sandwiched between two armed thugs. Damn it. I sprinted forward, hand clenched in a fist, ready to slam a fear hex right into the left thug’s brain.

A horrible feeling in my stomach swelled as I saw the plank and lead pipe go up in the air. No. I couldn’t let them hurt him. I threw my hand out, prepared to unleash my dragon — but the impact didn’t come. The thugs were just standing there, staring at Max with their weapons held high.

The soles of my shoes scraped on asphalt as I came to a halt. Max rose to his full height and scratched the top of his head. The thug on the ground was too beefy to knock out in a single punch, but he was just lying there, too, frowning hard and staring up.

Max turned toward me. We exchanged shrugs. What the hell was going on?

Far behind us, a block away, the music thumped on at Habibi. From somewhere around the corner came the slurred voices of people just out to party. But here in the parking lot, me and Max and the frozen Brillante thugs — only silence.

“Well, that was too easy,” Max mumbled, his voice the only sound in a small radius. I could have sworn it was a cool night, a nice breeze blowing when we left the club. I looked at the trees. They weren’t moving, either, the leaves and branches frozen mid-rustle.

Oh, fuck.

“We need to get out of here,” I said urgently, grabbing Max’s wrist, straining as he resisted my pull.

“But we can question these thugs,” he said. “I mean, as soon as they break out of whatever this is. You sure it isn’t you hexing them?”

“Time anomaly,” I screamed. “They’re frozen in time, Max. Fucking move.”

He finally listened, the two of us sprinting out of the parking lot. A dull pulse thumped from the center of the space, a rush of nothing. From the edge of the parking lot we watched as the three thugs turned into dust.

“Holy shit,” I gasped. “Oh, shit, oh, fuck. Did you see that?”

“Show yourself,” Max shouted, turning in a circle, his face contorted in anger. “Brendan. We know you’re out here.”

I spun in a circle myself, my heart racing faster, scanning the block for any sign of the Quartz Spider.

“Nothing. Where the fuck is he? God, if he’s pulling this bullshit with the rewind and fast forward again, I — ”

The words froze in my throat as I completed my rotation, when I spotted the wiry

figure standing just behind Max's shoulder. Those crystal-lensed goggles, that strange, inky, iridescent black fabric — there was no mistaking him. Max hadn't even noticed him yet, nor his outstretched hand, nor the dangerous crystal slivers in his palm.

No point warning Max. I could end Brendan Shum instead. I thrust my hand out.

“Emanate!”

Max's eyes went huge as he followed where I pointed my hand. He sprang away at the sight of the Quartz Spider, muttering a spell word under his breath as he engaged his own crystalline weapons. From deep within my body came the initial rumbling of the ancient dragon, answering my call.

A swirl of desert sand scoured at my flesh from the inside. I clenched my teeth against the agony — no pain without power, and Bahamut was one of the most powerful of them all. Shattered rock and gritty earth twisted through my body, coursed through my veins. I aimed at the man who'd brought me and Max so close to mortal danger far too many times over.

The Quartz Spider flinched, falling back into a defensive stance, the seeds of deadly crystal in his hand forgotten. Beneath my feet, the ground seemed to tremble.

Something churned, twisted in my stomach. No, this wasn't the usual dragon pain. Something was very, very wrong. I fell to my knees retching, but nothing came out. This sickness wasn't in my body. It stemmed deeper, from the soul.

Something churned and twisted in my soul. I cried out from the agony of it, this horrific twin sensation as two distinct forms of pain twined and braided within me. One was jagged and sharp, like rock. The other burned and stung, like saltwater on an open wound.

I threw my head up, gazing at nothing, eyes wide in terrified understanding. Tiamat had lied right to my face. Bakunawa had never vacated the premises. That was him in there, struggling for dominance against Bahamut. Two dragons were clawing for control over my body, over my soul.

Was this a trial? Did they want to test my limits, how many dragons I could safely carry?

“They’re ripping me apart from the inside. Max. Help me.”

He reached for my face, his hand trembling. “I don’t know what to do. Leon, please. Tell me what to do.”

I’d never seen him so scared. I’d never heard him stutter like that. Tears spilled down my cheeks. I opened my mouth to scream, jaw straining to push anything out — my voice, my bile, the dragons themselves.

Could it work? By some twisted law of contractual magic, couldn’t there be some way to force these monsters out of my body? Vomit them into this reality if I had to, tear open my own skin. I clutched at my chest, fingernails digging into my flesh. Ripping myself apart would be worth it, if only it meant an end to the pain.

Then all at once the pain vanished, quickly as it had come. I sprawled flat on my back, relishing the sharp, solid cold of asphalt. I was alive. The dragons had gone dormant. But for how long?

I blinked hard, my vision regaining focus. Stars far above, tree branches rustling in the breeze, and Max’s worried face.

“Leon? Talk to me. What can I do?”

I rubbed at my face. “I think it’s over. For now, at least. Fuck. The Quartz Spider. Max, we could still be in danger.”

He helped me sit up, shaking his head. “He’s gone. Disappeared just as soon as you Emanated. You must have scared him off, but I gotta be honest. You scared me more.”

I wrapped my arms around him, held him tight. I couldn’t bring myself to tell him that I was scared, too.

10

MAX

I chewed on my bottom lip as Leon tore into another croissant, sucking down huge gulps of caramel macchiato in between bites. I didn't think I'd ever be so scared for him, at least not since that time Divina had tried to drown him. He wasn't even strong enough to make it to my car on his own, after dealing with the Quartz Spider.

This was only the second time I'd had to carry him in my arms. I really didn't ever want for there to be a third.

And still he chomped away, lost in a feeding frenzy. He needed the calories and sugar. Johnny stood nearby, tutting and shaking his head, both the big brother and the father figure. The pastries at Unholy Grounds weren't always the freshest, but bless Johnny Slivers for always being so happy to provide.

"Now," Roscoe said, nodding as he perused a stack of books. "Tell me in your own words what happened."

Leon dragged the back of his hand across his mouth, glancing around sheepishly, like he'd only just remembered his manners. He took a beat to swallow, eyes searching the table as he tried to put the pieces of the story together.

"I tried to summon the third dragon's magic. At first I thought it hurt more because he was especially powerful. Something like that. But then I realized the pain was different." He patted at his stomach, grimacing. "It came from here. Like the worst

indigestion ever, like my insides were twisting around themselves, tying into knots.”

I shook my head. The pain in his voice, in his eyes — I never wanted that to happen again.

“Super painful, you guys,” Leon continued. “It was fucking agony. Dragon agony, even.”

Johnny narrowed his eyes. “Don’t you say it.”

Leon straightened his back, emboldened by being told that he shouldn’t. “Dragony.”

Johnny and Roscoe groaned. I banged my fist on the table.

“Because it was both dragons at once this time,” I grumbled. “They betrayed him. Both dragons hiding inside him, both trying to punch their way out.”

My hand tightened around the handle of my mug — something strong and hot and black. I knew I could use a stiff drink, but I knew I could use a clear head even more. We’d driven here straight from the parking lot near Habibi because I didn’t know where else to go. I didn’t know what else to do.

I hated feeling so helpless, especially when it came to keeping Leon safe. I’d royally fucked up in that area, but what else was I supposed to do?

Leon pursed his lips, eyebrows furrowed like he was more worried for me than he was for himself. Sweet of him. Too sweet.

“Well, I don’t know if I would blame Bakunawa for this. And I promise it’s not just, like, nationalistic pride or whatever. He went dormant inside me after he saved us from all that water, remember? He couldn’t have known that Tiamat had promised



me to another dragon. If anything, it was Bahamut who should have known better.”

Like I said. Too sweet. These monsters had ripped up his insides and tried to claw their way out of his skin and here he was defending them. Or at least one of them. He hugged his arms around the front of his belly, rocking back and forth.

“Listen to me talking like they can’t hear what I’m saying, what I’m thinking. Honestly, I’m not sure I care about that anymore, anyway. If they don’t have me, then they can’t manifest in reality.” Leon looked up and blinked. “Can they?”

Roscoe rubbed his chin and nodded. “Sure, they can. But remember that the reason they need you in the first place is to throw everybody else off the scent. These Emanations look like they come from you, not from the dragons. For all intents and purposes, the damage they deal would be your responsibility, remember?”

“Yeah,” Leon said quietly. “I know that. It’s weird. They’re inside me, but I can’t feel them just now. Tired from fighting to take over me, maybe? Dunno. But until this is all sorted, I guess I should stop trying to Emanate at all.”

I reached for his hand and covered it in mine, a wave of relief passing over my body. “That would be for the best. For now. Until you figure out what’s actually going on. It’ll be fine. You’ve got other tricks up your sleeve, right?”

Leon turned his hand up, lacing our fingers together as he shot me a bashful, sticky smile. “Yeah. I guess I do.”

I reached for a napkin and wiped a croissant flake away from the corner of his mouth. In any small way, if I could help him, if I could make him feel better — that was all that mattered.

“There’s just one thing that we need to straighten out,” Johnny said. “Roscoe was

reading up on the dragons and he pieced something together. It isn't a pretty picture."

As if I could feel any worse. Leon's forehead creased with concern. An awful sensation stirred in my belly.

"I'm not sure if you realize this," Roscoe said, "but almost every dragon you've worked with so far has been an agent of the apocalypse."

My stomach dropped. I opened my mouth, closed it. I opened it again, but the words refused to come.

"Is that true?" I asked, searching both their faces. "Leon, did you know about this?"

Still at a loss for words, Leon stared at the table and shook his head.

Roscoe sighed. "I'm afraid it is. Bakunawa is known for eating the moon, at least in the myths. Tiamat herself is the leader of a coalition of supernatural entities, nearly all of them related to apocalyptic agendas in one way or another. The Great Beasts, they call themselves."

"How did I forget about that?" Leon said. "How could I forget? Was I so starstruck by meeting Bahamut that I completely spaced on his actual role in the old legends?"

"And what was that role exactly?" I asked.

He bit on the back of his hand, something I'd always found so attractive about him, but now it worried me. He turned to Roscoe for a response, as if afraid to answer for himself.

Roscoe took off his glasses and sighed, rubbing his temples with the tips of his fingers. "According to legend, Bahamut carries the world upon his back. The stories

differ. There's a bull on his back, an angel on the bull, and it's the angel who actually carries the world, or something like that. The point is, when Bahamut shrugs, the Earth trembles."

Silence fell over the table. I swallowed in silence as I exchanged cautious looks with the others, my coffee mug cooling under my hand. So I asked, because no one else was talking.

"What happens if Bahamut is really allowed to manifest his power?" I shook my head. "For that matter, why are these dragons specifically coordinating with one another?"

"It could be that we're blowing this out of proportion," Johnny said. "Don't look at me like that. Devil's advocate, because the alternative sounds so much worse. They're all sea dragons, aren't they? Maybe that's as simple as it gets."

Leon stood up, his hand slipping out of my grasp, his chair sliding and squeaking against the floor. I didn't like the look of grim determination that had suddenly found its way to his face.

"I have to commune with them. No. With her. Tiamat owes me some answers."

Three more chairs scraped against the floor as the rest of us rose from the table, each warning Leon against the very idea. He looked around in annoyance, confusion, struggling to follow the threads of what we were trying to tell him.

"Absolutely not," I said, louder, loudest, making damn sure to make myself heard above all the others. "She's lied to you once, she'll lie to you again. Hell, maybe she's been lying this entire time."

Leon stared at the backs of his hands, his shoulders sloped, looking so sullen I wanted

to reach out and wrap him in a hug.

“At least give it time,” Roscoe said. “You’ve only just had to deal with the physical repercussions of keeping the sea dragons within yourself. I’m not an expert by any means, but personally, I’d stay away from dealings with supernatural entities for a little while.”

“You guys are right.” Leon sighed, shrugged, then sat back down, reaching for his coffee. At least we’d mollified him for the moment.

Still, it felt as though we’d left the worst unsaid. Tiamat maintaining her deception or piling more lies onto Leon’s plate was one thing. What if she somehow tricked her way into occupying his body, too? Was there any room left in there?

What if it killed him?

A tinkling came from the front door, the sound of someone tapping on glass. It was after hours at Unholy Grounds, but the place was always open for friends, and woe betide the man who tried to stop Guillotina Hernandez from going places. She rotated her hand at the wrist, signaling for Johnny to hurry up and let her in. He grumbled all the way to the door, then again when he opened it to the sound of her making a dramatic huff.

“Took you long enough, Slivers. Everything okay in here? Looks like you lost a bet. Every last one of you.”

Leon scrubbed his hand across his face, raking at his hair in the process. “Yeah, everything’s fine, Tina. Just some shit we’re working through.”

“Well, work harder, because we’ve got some crap to deal with. Max, it’s looking grim. Tío Gustavo is up to something, except I can’t tell what that something is.”

I rolled my eyes. “Tell me about it. He sent some goons after us tonight. The Quartz Spider ended up saving us by accident. Killed all three of them. Turned them to dust. It was brutal.”

We’d told Johnny and Roscoe about our run-in with Brendan Shum, naturally, in the lead-up to the story about Leon and the two dragons. I really didn’t feel like telling the story yet again, but Guillotina was expecting some answers.

“The Quartz Spider tried to kill you? Again? Jesus. And the goon thing — doesn’t make sense, somehow. Why would Gustavo send his minions to threaten you openly? That’s not his style.”

“She’s got a point,” Johnny said. “Usually it’s a constant stream of dudes going after Unholy Grounds, and Roscoe here gets to Home Alone them instead of killing them outright.”

Roscoe said nothing, staring dreamily out the floor-to-ceiling windows like he was hoping for a Brillante thug to appear. He was thinking about traps, probably, and how to maim people with them.

I took a sip of my lukewarm coffee and grimaced. “Beats me why he’d send anyone after us. With baseball bats and lead pipes, too. That’s more Divina’s thing. Gustavo tries to be a little more subtle about this stuff.”

My phone buzzed. I fished it out of my pocket — probably just some alert I forgot to turn off, some random notification. And then I saw the name on the text message. I sat upright, awakened and sobered in a way that lukewarm coffee couldn’t accomplish.

“It’s a message from Just,” I told Leon. “Says that a statuette fitting our client’s description might be in town. In some warehouse?”

Guillotina crossed her arms. “Well, well. Isn’t that convenient? A visit from Gustavo’s goons and the perfect acquisition for a client, both just happening to pop up in the same night.”

“Tío Gustavo is doing this all on purpose to bait me. Well, I’m not a kid anymore.” I cracked my knuckles. “He wants a piece of Maximilian Drake? He’ll get one.”

“I’m coming with,” Guillotina said. “If this is a trap, you’ll regret not having me around.”

Leon drained the last of his coffee. “You couldn’t leave me out of this one if you tried.”

“We’ll stay here,” Johnny said. “No offense, but if the Brillante thugs are out and about, there’s no telling when they’ll drop in to hit the coffee shop again.”

Roscoe adjusted his glasses, his lips creasing into a terrifying grin. “I’d love to see them try.”

11

LEON

What a long night. What a long, exhausting night. But this thing about the statuette was a lead, and we were finders, damn it. We couldn't just let go of a juicy tidbit like that, even if it meant hiding in a clump of bushes at ass o'clock after midnight.

Guillotina turned over her shoulder, picking a leaf out of her hair. Her question came in an urgent and slightly annoyed whisper.

“So exactly who is this Just person again, and why exactly do we trust them?”

I shrugged, the branches closest to my shoulders rustling. I was hiding behind Guillotina, and she in turn was using Max for cover. I was happy to be in the rear, for once, finally accepting that I had the least magical firepower in case things got too hairy. For the moment, at least.

“He's this nerdy little twink that Max met on the job. Works at some magic trinket shop or something.”

Max's voice rasped from the front of the bushes. “I wouldn't call him a twink, exactly. More of a twunk.”

I rolled my eyes. He was right — Just was too well built to be a standard issue twink — but was that really important right now?

“Works at Hermanas Arcanas. You know, with the Mendez sisters?”

Guillotina scoffed. “Oh, I know them, all right. Gustavo’s lackeys. Then again, he has his fingers in pawnshops all over Dos Lunas, anyway. And beyond.”

“Okay, yes,” I hissed. “Point is, this statuette we’re looking for, Gustavo’s people must have it. There’s all this bullshit about the Quartz Spider, but we’re still finders. Gotta keep the Jade Spider happy.”

And a paycheck was nice and all, and so was making sure that we stayed in Vera’s good graces. But the real reason I wanted us to settle the statuette situation so badly was how much it seemed to matter to Max. Securing this thing would effectively be sticking it to Tío Gustavo, showing him that Max didn’t need him or the Brillantes to lead a successful career and existence in the arcane underground.

And if it meant a decrease in Gustavo’s profits, then hey! That was just a neat bonus.

“Any minute now,” Max whispered.

Guillotina scoffed. “Any minute? Too many minutes, already. What are we waiting for, anyway?”

“Just trying to assess the situation. We don’t know how many people are in there — or if there are any to begin with.”

I craned my neck, trying to get a better look. No cars parked anywhere around the warehouse, but that didn’t really mean much. What if they were hidden inside the building? It was certainly big enough. What if they teleported their way in? In a perfect world, no one was in there waiting to spring a trap on us, but then this would all be too easy otherwise.



“Listen,” Guillotina said, her leather jacket squeaking as she leaned forward. “We’re just going through the motions here. There’s a ninety percent chance that Tío Gustavo has something special planned for us. We waltz in, the lights go up, Gustavo gloats about his evil plan. Let’s just get this over with. We grab the statuette, then we blast our way out.”

That was what I liked about Guillotina. Always so straightforward, and always with the senseless violence, too. But Max tilted his head toward me, watching my face through half lidded eyes, and I immediately understood his hesitation. Whatever happened, we were going to be within the clutches of the Brillantes yet again. Things didn’t go so well the last time when Divina had tried to drown me — twice.

“I’ll be okay,” I whispered, mouthing the words slowly so he could read them, ending the sentence with a reassuring smile. I was safest when I was near him. Besides, we had Guillotina and her blood thirst to help keep us safe, too. And surely none of the Brillantes could be quite as unhinged as Divina — right?

We stepped from one shadow to the next, then again, and again, until we found our way to the flimsiest looking door in the warehouse. No cameras in sight, possibly so any would-be interlopers would let their guard down. It was far more likely that the place was under magical surveillance to begin with.

Max made a complex series of gestures with his hands, pointing at the door, his face, the ground, then again at his face. I rolled my eyes and gave him a face of my own, one that said “Get the fuck on with it, already.”

“Penetrate,” he whispered, conjuring a pair of crystalline slivers, picking at the lock on the door. Somehow this entire situation felt custom-made for Max’s skill set, as if designed that way by a curious architect, or a doting and slightly condescending uncle.

We were rats in a maze, in short. Between Guillotina and myself, we could have just blasted through to get the cheese. But Max needed this, and so did his bizarre family, apparently. We strode into the darkness. Max lifted his fingers, just about to summon one of his light crystals with his Illuminate spell when all the lights in the warehouse went on all at once.

My vision swam with a kaleidoscope of colors, eyeballs aching from the brightness. I could hear the buzzing of electricity, a quiet clearing of throats. But loudest of all was the warm, almost fatherly greeting from one Tío Gustavo Brillante.

“Maximo. Mijo . It is so good to see you again.”

I rubbed the sting of harsh light out of my eyes. The portly mustachioed man in the pristine white suit was clearly the uncle in question, flanked by identical women in garish floral prints — Teresita and Luisita Mendez, the owners of Hermanas Arcanas. All along the edge of the room were goons upon goons, at least a dozen Brillante thugs.

And in the back of the room, on top of a pedestal right by where Gustavo stood: a statuette of a woman, its features worn and smoothed away by age.

Max held out his hand. “We’ll just take the statuette and go, thanks very much.”

Gustavo frowned, his features twisting with disappointment. “Is that all you have to say to your favorite uncle? You do wound me, mijo .”

“Real funny, tío. Favorite nephew? You sent your thugs out to harass us tonight. It’s bad enough that you keep sending them to the coffee shop. But a parking lot to threaten me? Come on. That’s tacky, even for you.”

Gustavo’s frown lines deepened. “I’m sure I don’t know what you mean. No one was

supposed to visit you on this loveliest of nights. I thought that I had an agreement with Teresita and Luisita. We have their new boy at the shop drop you a hint you can't refuse, and here you are, come to catch up with dear old Tío Gustavo."

Max scoffed. "Pass. I don't believe you for a second. Let's get this over with. Tell me what you want for the statuette, and we'll go."

"Very well," Gustavo said, sighing. "We've heard so much about your social life these days. Hello, Guillotina. So nice to see that you and Maximo are still so close."

Guillotina grumbled, crossed her arms, and tapped her foot.

"But what we're truly curious about is the boy with the dragons."

All heads turned toward me. I forced a grin, offering them a limp little wave of my hand.

"Well, you see, the problem with that is — "

"No deal." Max stepped in front of me, as if protecting me with his body. "Tina? Plan B."

What was Plan B? I didn't even know about a Plan A.

B stood for buzzsaws, apparently. Tina spread her arms, sending a crisscross of circular blades screaming throughout the warehouse. Some of the thugs scattered. Others made the foolish mistake of mounting an assault on the three of us. Max flicked his hands out, firing his crystalline slivers. One thug fell to the ground screaming, clutching his face. Another yowled as he considered the danger of plucking the knife-long crystal that had burrowed as deep as a bullet into his shoulder.

Max and Guillotina dashed into the fray, but I had to help somehow, thin out the thugs. Also, a couple of them seemed especially intent on retrieving me for dear old Tío Gustavo.

The goons bore down on me, coming so close that we were practically within punching distance. One quick lunge, a well-executed kick, and I was in for a world of hurt. I needed to hurt them first.

My reflex was to call on the essences of the dragons still swirling within my soul — but after everything I'd learned, why would I turn to them again? Fuck. And these guys were much too amped up for me to terrify with a fear hex. That was assuming I could get a solid grip on them long enough to deliver it.

That left only one option. The blasting hex.

Everyone in the Alcantara bloodline always had a different story for how our blasting hex was created. Some said that it was initially designed to be a prank. Others said that it was in response to the frightfully destructive gunpowder that the Spaniards brought when they first reached Philippine shores.

The stories only ever agreed on two things. That the blasting hex was difficult to master, and that it was a fucking pain to execute.

But did I really have a choice?

Magic ripped out of me in an agonizing pulse, a dull ache in my bones, my skin tingling with the piercing pain of a thousand unseen needles. Brillante goons went flying in all directions, smashing into crates, against the wall. So many sounds of breaking that I couldn't distinguish between splintered crates or shattered bone.

Gustavo and the Mendez sisters were the luckiest, positioned far enough away that

the worst of the blast had dissipated, barely brushing against them with diminished force. Gustavo wobbled in place, waving his arms to regain balance like he was standing on the edge of a cliff. Teresita and Luisita clung onto each other for dear life, their skirts billowing in an arcane wind.

As for the statuette — gone. Gone from its pedestal, that is, floating toward me in a jerky, twitching motion. Clever boy. Somewhere in all the chaos, Max had used his Obfuscate spell to turn invisible and grab the goods.

The shimmering humanoid shape dashing toward me solidified into something made of flesh and blood. Max reached for my hand as he sprinted. Our fingers interlocked, and I ran alongside him.

“Stop them!” Gustavo bellowed.

“That was so fucking cool,” Max said, ignoring his uncle, awestruck and breathless. “Why did you ever bother with dragons when you could do all that?”

“Because it hurts like hell,” I replied, still feeling the deep ache in my bones, knowing that this full-bodied soreness would haunt me in the morning. “Can’t use it too much. Break glass in case of emergency. Now I have to put myself back together.”

Max turned his head for the briefest moment, a glimmer of mischief in his eyes. “I’ll spend all night putting you back together. Just you wait and see.”

“Time and a place,” I shouted back, feeling my insides puddling. He seemed to find it hot when I made extravagant displays of magic, and frankly, the feeling was mutual.

A rapid tip-tap of footsteps caught up with us as Guillotina joined our footrace, her hair whipping in the breeze. “You guys are disgusting. I tell you all the time, but you

never listen.”

I rolled my eyes and laughed. “Oh, Tina, you know Max still loves you even if he spends all his spare time on — hold up.”

I stopped running. Max’s fingers slipped out of mine. He widened his eyes at me, jerking his head over his shoulder.

“Leon, what’s the matter? We need to get out of here.”

I blinked, then turned around. We’d made it out of the warehouse, but no one else had, for some reason.

“No one’s chasing us,” I said.

Guillotina craned her neck, angling for a better look inside the warehouse. “You’re right. I mean, the ones you exploded are still putting their bones back together, probably, but Gustavo and the Mendez twins were barely even blasted. Maybe it’s late. Maybe it’s past their bedtime.”

“Tina, that’s mean! Maybe a little ageist, too.” I stretched my arms out and yawned. “To be honest, I’m super sleepy myself. What time is it, anyway?”

Max tapped his watch, lifting its face to his, squinting at the little numbers. “That’s funny. My watch just stopped. That’s not supposed to — ”

My blood ran cold.

“Run,” I shouted, grabbing their hands and pulling tight.

Gustavo was never the real threat tonight. The Quartz Spider wove a tangled web,

and we'd walked right into it.

12

MAX

My blood thumped in my ears, the thunder of my pulse like the ticking of a clock. But now the clocks had stopped, and we were still caught within the Quartz Spider's blast zone.

I couldn't keep my mind off the three Brillante goons from the Habibi parking lot. They'd disintegrated into piles of dust, the Quartz Spider accelerating time in an isolated space, aging them decades, if not centuries within the blink of an eye.

My breath came in ragged spurts, my legs pumping as I dragged Leon by the hand behind me, as Guillotina did the same with his other arm. My fault. All my fault, this hubris of coming to see Tío Gustavo, of secretly believing he valued me too much to really hurt me or anyone I cared about. Yet somehow I'd forgotten about the greatest actual threat to Dos Lunas, to me, to the people I loved.

"Show yourself," I shouted, furious at him, furious at myself. "Show yourself and fight fair for once in your sorry life."

In a movie, in an epic, sweeping story, this would be the part where the villain made his grand appearance, sweeping in to punish me for speaking out of turn, to gloat about his evil plan. But the spiders were different. This spider, more so, preferred to work subtly, tugging at invisible strings.

"Where are you?" Guillotina shouted, wanting to bait the spider as badly as I did.



“Step into the light and fight like a man.”

No answer. Total silence. And that made him so much more dangerous. It wasn't cowardice that kept him in the shadows, more his awareness that he could gain and maintain the upper hand by keeping his cards close to his chest. Everything we knew about Brendan Shum had been learned through research, interrogation, observation. Here was a bad guy who wasn't prone to delivering evil monologues, and my God was it going to drive me crazy.

That tiny, awful detail about why he'd wanted two Aqueous Elixirs for himself, for example. Not for the precious liquid held within, but for the bottles themselves, each serving as one half of a strange, deconstructed hourglass.

What did he stand to gain from haunting our meeting with Tío Gustavo? The statuette was useless to him — the statuette that was no doubt absorbing the nervous sweat of my hand still gripping it tight. Who knew if sweat stains would decrease the value of our reward from Vera's client? If it came down to it, I would gladly use the statuette as a blunt weapon, bring it crashing down upon the Quartz Spider's head.

If only we knew where the fuck he was. I glanced over my shoulder, checking to see that Leon and Guillotina were still running with me, gauging how far we'd actually run from the warehouse, if it was safe to stop.

Horror clenched at my stomach, twisting as if my intestines were caught in the grasp of ice-cold fingers. We'd barely made it away from the warehouse, like we'd spent all our time running on an invisible treadmill. But how? My legs were on fire, my lungs so starved for breath it felt like I'd been shredded from the inside.

“He caught us,” Leon cried out. “We're stuck in one of his anomalies.”

We stopped running, then, muscles begging for mercy. I nearly fell to my knees,

swallowing huge gulps of breath.

Guillotina turned in a slow circle, glaring at the darkness, chest heaving as she caught her breath. “That — that rat fucker. That absolute bastard. Where the fuck are you, Shum?”

“We can’t give up,” Leon muttered, his fingers clenched, eyes searching the night. “Blow it all up, if that’s what it takes to stop this. I’ll call the dragons if I have to.”

“Don’t,” I barked, my hand squeezing over his. I didn’t say the rest, feeling horrible for just thinking it — that maybe, at worst, as a last resort. Only then should he consider the dragons.

Guillotina shrugged off her jacket, tossing it onto the grass. “This isn’t over, Shum. Come out. Wherever you are. Just you and me. I’ll enjoy breaking every single bone in your body.”

And there it was at last, a blur of motion in the darkness, something stepping out of the shadows. The Quartz Spider wore the same crystalline goggles as the night we first encountered him, the same iridescent oil-slick garb that helped him blend into shadows, and yet marked him as something unnatural. Supernatural. In strange, jerking movements, parts of him slipping in and out of the currents of time, he approached.

“You don’t actually want us dead,” Leon said. “Not really.”

I wondered how he came to that conclusion, whether this was only Leon’s attempt at delaying the worst. But there was a ring of truth to it. Even with the deadliest of his anomalies, the Quartz Spider had always left the tiniest openings in his plans, little gaps that allowed us to get away and live. Why?

The Quartz Spider pulled the mask off his head, his hair falling in wisps over his eyes. Handsome as ever, handsome as before, and yet he looked even older somehow. He hadn't aged at all, not really, but the hollows under his eyes seemed even deeper, the stubble on his chin both thicker and grayer.

"It's never been about killing you," the Quartz Spider said. "That wouldn't accomplish anything. Not really. And why would I kill the people who've helped me the most?"

I gritted my teeth. And help him we did, always through some twisted accident, whether it was by allowing that pouch of quickening sand to fall into his clutches, or by losing both the Aqueous Elixirs to him and his trickery.

"You tried to kill us," I said, thrusting an accusing finger at his face. "Back at Habibi."

His lips pressed into a tight line, his eyes going distant. "Habibi?"

I threw my hands up. Why was he playing with us? Always with these games. "The Amethyst Spider's club. His home bar? Don't tell me you've never heard of it."

Brendan shook his head. "I know about the Amethyst Spider, and I know where he conducts his — his business. But I haven't been near Habibi in ages. I have no business with Faizan."

"Then you deny it." Leon stepped forward, his fists shaking at his sides. "Just earlier tonight. Three Brillante thugs, all of them turned to dust when you triggered your anomaly. You froze time around them, then you sped it up and murdered them. Just like that. Why?"

Again Brendan shook his head. "I have no recollection of any of this. If I killed

someone — if I killed three people, and tonight, as you put it — I certainly would have remembered.” His gaze fell to the ground. “I always remember.”

Guillotina rolled her eyes and groaned. “He’s lost the plot, or he never had it to begin with. That’s what we get for trying to reason with killers. Come on, Shum. You and me. I’d love to get a turn before the Masques come and haul you away for good.”

The Quartz Spider snapped his fingers. Tina disappeared, the only trace of her existence a blur in the darkness, like her entire body had been made of wet paint, nothing but a smear across a blackened canvas.

I lunged forward, stopping only because Leon was holding me back. “You fucking monster. What did you do to her?”

Brendan shrugged. “Sent her back in time, but at a much faster pace than the human body is used to. But she’s conditioned to the influence of magic, isn’t she? Your friend will be fine.”

My mouth hung open in horror. Tina was going through the motions of her day in reverse, everything happening backward, and there was nothing she could do to break out of it. All the warnings were true, and they were never enough. Time magic was far deadlier than anyone realized.

“In a few minutes, she’ll be back in bed, exactly as she was this morning,” Brendan said, pulling off one glove, inspecting his fingernails. “And tomorrow, she’ll wake up refreshed, as if nothing had happened. Well, provided a truck doesn’t run her over between here and her apartment.”

My hand went to his face, pointing, accusing. “If anything happens to Guillotina, I will make sure you live to regret it.”

“You could have killed us,” Leon said. “Multiple times you could have ended us, and yet you didn’t. I’m asking you again. Why?”

Brendan Shum tilted his head back and sighed, curls of misty air rolling from his nostrils, tumbling like dragon smoke. The stars reflected in his eyes, twinkling, distant pinpoints. Again I considered how he could have become an actor or a model if he wasn’t so committed to being a total psycho.

“This was never about killing, you understand? Any steps I’ve ever taken to neutralize you and your friends — that’s all it was. To remove you from the situation so I could carry on with my work. I would, however, argue that it has everything to do with death.”

I didn’t react quickly enough. The sudden cessation of pressure from Leon’s muscles should have clued me in. He nudged me out of the way, practically stomping up to Brendan Shum, the two of them almost face to face.

“What the fuck are we doing here? You keep going on and on with your cryptic bullshit. Meanwhile, the rest of the magical community in Dos Lunas is supposed to just follow you around and clean up your mess.”

Brendan’s forehead creased with thought. I reached a hand out to paw at Leon’s back. He shrugged me away.

“Leon,” I said, tautening my voice with warning. “Get back here. Calm down, buddy.”

“No, I will not calm down. He’s put us and our friends into too many dangerous situations already, and it is pissing me the fuck off not knowing what it’s all for. Why do you do the things you do? Who is this for? What is this for?”

Then came the shove, both of Leon's palms slamming against the Quartz Spider's chest. The look of somber introspection on his face quickly turned to anger.

"Will you knock off the brooding supervillain schtick already? No one's buying it. Speak up. Fucking say something."

"Leon," I said, stepping forward, swiping to grab at the back of his shirt, to pull him away.

"Enough."

Brendan Shum clicked his fingers. My hand closed around thin air. Leon was gone. I snarled, throwing myself at Brendan, ready to rip his face off.

But I never made impact. I shouted at him in confusion, never hearing the sound of my own voice. Again and again my feet left the ground as I made a running leap, and my fist never connected with his face.

Yet I felt every shudder in my bones, the tensing of all the muscles in my body as it went through the same motions again and again. My momentum all running on adrenaline and rage, my heart thumping so loud I could hear it in my ears — over and over and over.

"I can keep this going," Brendan said, sweeping his hand left, then right, like he was swiping on the screen of some invisible device, scrubbing and scanning to rewind my place in time. "We can do this over and over again until your bones splinter from the impact, or your body starves for breath, or your heart gives out. Whichever comes first."

Warm wetness dripped down my chin, tears of anger and frustration. "Where did you take him?" I shouted, without words, without voice. "Where did you take him?"

“He’s safe,” Brendan said. “Somewhere the two of us can speak without interruption, without angry, overprotective boyfriends getting in the way.”

That time my arm slugged so hard a stab of pain erupted in my shoulder’s socket. How much longer could I keep this up?

Without another word, the Quartz Spider slipped into darkness, vanishing into the night. And I screamed, and ran, and screamed, and no one was there to listen.

13

LEON

I opened my eyes to blistering, searing white. I groaned, my hand flying up to cover my face. My eyes squeezed shut as I struggled to adjust to the light.

The brightness seemed to be pouring from every direction, as if floodlights were staring me dead on. A ring of cars with their high beams set to asshole, burning my retinas even with my eyes closed.

I sat up, still covering my eyes, almost yelling out loud for someone to turn off the sun. The light wasn't hurting my eyeballs as much anymore, but the intensity hadn't changed at all.

"Must be in heaven," I muttered, realizing my throat was very, very dry. "Funny. Didn't think bruhos could go to heaven."

"Or finders, for that matter."

I shifted away from the sound of the voice, stopping suddenly when I remembered that I didn't even know where I was. On the edge of a bed? Kneeling on a precipice? I forced my eyes open, gritting my teeth against the harsh light, marveling at how quickly my vision adjusted.

The Quartz Spider was sitting on the floor several feet away from me, still dressed in his oily, iridescent black, face fully exposed. We weren't, in fact, surrounded by a



ring of SUVs.

The light was pouring from all around us, from all angles, even from the tippy-top of this bizarre structure we were locked in. Trapped in, perhaps? I certainly couldn't see a way out of — oh, God.

Were we inside a crystal?

“Where are we?” I breathed. “When are we, for that matter?”

Brendan Shum waved his hand like he was trying to drum up a response, draw out a memory. “Oh, you know. Somewhere between here and there. Sometime between then and now.”

When I was sure he wasn't trying to kill me, I folded my legs underneath myself, mirroring his posture. “Why are you so sure that finders don't go to heaven?”

He shrugged. “No offense meant, but you're not exactly in the business of performing acts of kindness. Remember, I used to be a spider myself. Spiders don't go to heaven, either.”

“Then where do they go?” I threw my hands up in frustration. “And seriously, where the hell are we? Where's Max?”

Something in my gut told me he hadn't really hurt Max — not in a way that mattered. The Quartz Spider would look more pleased with himself, otherwise. Somehow I believed him when he said he wasn't out to kill us. There was too much gloom in him. A man like him, someone who'd fallen so deep into darkness — he'd only kill out of necessity. Or provocation.

Brendan sighed. “Had to leave him behind. Being too loud, asking too many

annoying questions, if I'm honest. He'll tire himself out soon enough."

I licked my lips, still thirsty, but even warier of asking the enemy if he had any bottled water sitting around his crystal abduction dimension. I gestured around the massive crystal around us.

"So is this like your interdimensional interrogation room? Is this where you take your victims to gloat before you gut them like a fish?"

He squeezed the bridge of his nose, eyes flickering with annoyance. "I wish you'd stop insinuating that I'm more than what I really am. I'm far too boring to make big, sweeping speeches." He ruffled his hair and sighed. "Far too tired to skin anyone alive."

I shrugged. "Just testing you. I guess there's no way out until I give you what you want. So, Brendan. What the hell do you want, exactly?"

"Understanding," he breathed. "I need someone to listen."

Too much sadness in those words. "Why me?" I asked.

"Because you're someone who might understand. I know the things I've done haven't been righteous, but surely you've been in my position before. As someone who's lost a loved one, I mean."

He knew too much, but of course he had to know. He used to be a spider, just like Vera, just like Faizan. Building dossiers and harvesting information came as easily as breathing air.

My brow furrowed. "I'm not sure what that means. My mom died years ago. What does that have to do with anything?"

Another deep sigh, another heave of his chest. “I lost someone, too.”

My gaze fell to the ground, crossed the floor, examined the pinpoints along the walls where the facets of crystal met. Anywhere but his face.

“I’m so sorry,” I mumbled, picking at my fingers.

The dark circles underneath his eyes that seemed to grow deeper with every encounter. That coarse stubble of his that grew ever more unruly, the hair that had started going gray too soon — I could have guessed myself. I should have.

Brendan sniffed, more a biological response than a deliberate attempt to tug at my heartstrings.

“We pick these dangerous professions — you, a finder, me, a spider — we should know better than to expect happy endings, you know? But you’ve got nothing to lose now, do you, Leon Alcantara?”

I shook my head. “That’s not true, and you know that.”

I had Max, my new friends, my new home in Dos Lunas. I was a finder out of necessity, because it was the job that matched my skill set. It wasn’t because I was in some career dead end — I had to make ends meet, pay for food and a roof over my head. I believed all these things, but didn’t speak on any of them. He was smart enough to know.

“But you know the risks,” he said. “This stuff we do, it’s all too easy to end up with a pissed-off client, or to find yourself up against a rival finder, maybe even a rival spider. Couldn’t tell you which was worse. It terrified me, you know? Thinking I’d lose the only family I had left to something like that. Retribution from a competitor, punitive action from someone in our circles, or someone beyond.”

He shook his head, running his fingers through his wild mane of hair.

“I worried for nothing. I killed my little brother all by myself.”

My fingers clenched. God, I couldn't imagine the horror. I looked up at last, our eyes meeting for only a fraction of a second. But it was enough. We'd both lost the ones we'd loved. For all the terrible and deadly things Brendan Shum had done in Dos Lunas, I knew there was something inside him trying to make things right.

I was doing my best to be a decent person, yet doing my absolute worst at understanding my position in this bizarre, tangled web. Here I was, empathizing with the enemy. But was the Quartz Spider really the enemy?

“At first it was just to dabble. Isn't that the fascinating thing about life in the arcane underground? There's always something to learn. Something to discover. So I learned about chronomancy. I discovered the power of time magic. And I discovered why so many mages shunned its practice.”

My teeth bit into the inside of my cheeks, almost hard enough to draw blood. I had to say it. I couldn't help myself.

“Those men in the parking lot — ”

Brendan's fist struck the ground. The entire crystalline structure around us rang with faint vibrations, his anger reverberating throughout the dimension.

“I told you already,” he said, softly, slowly. “I had nothing to do with that.”

“So you mean someone out there could be copying you.” I spoke matter of factly, worried about another outburst. This was news to me. “Someone else is toying with time magic.”

He rubbed the heels of his palms against his eyeballs. “I don’t know. Why would anyone want to follow in my footsteps? And no. I didn’t instantly turn my brother into dust. It was — no. I’d rather not say.”

Brendan Shum rose from the floor unsteadily, almost struggling, like his body weighed heavy with the gravity of his sins. He paced toward me. I didn’t move, putting on a brave face. He went back down as before, squatting on his haunches so our eyes were almost level.

“You would have been the same age, you know,” he whispered. “You and my little brother.”

The sorrow in his eyes, these deep, lightless pits of despair. I couldn’t decide what I felt, or why I felt it. Sadness. Sympathy. Guilt. Why? But there it was at last, at least one small reason he’d never really meant to kill me. On some level, in some way, Brendan wanted to be caught, afraid of the secrets he’d unlocked in his studies. He wanted someone to stop him.

“And that’s why I kept on researching time magic, even knowing its dangers.” He parted his hands, gesturing at the great crystal around us. “What if there was a chance I could rewind time, just enough to bring him back?”

I licked my lips, sitting perfectly still, throat as dry as a desert. This was the sort of talk that got quickly hushed, back when I was growing up with the Alcantara clan — back when there was still an Alcantara clan to grow up with. Life and death, that was the cycle, the way of things.

Even as practitioners of the occult, the bruhas of my lineage understood their place in the cosmos perfectly well. We could harness the power of the supernatural realm, but in the end, on this Earth, in this universe? The natural world reigned supreme.

Magic afforded us the ability to bend those laws, to tug at the invisible strings of the world, nudge nature along. But even as a child, I understood. Push too hard, and the universe pushes back.

“The dead deserve their rest,” I told him, echoing my ancestors, sprinkling some of myself on top. “Even ghosts need their sleep.”

He clucked his tongue. “You’re smarter than that. This isn’t about ghosts. This is about reversing the flow of time. Correcting errors. My brother didn’t deserve to die. Neither did your mother.”

My hand curled into a fist. “You can’t use me for your guilt, Brendan. That’s not how this works.”

“You could help me,” he continued, ignoring my words. “We could work on this together. Wouldn’t you give anything to bring her back? Your mother?”

I pushed my hands against the floor — warm, solid as glass — then stood up. “I see where you’re going with this, and I think you already know my answer. So I’ll just be going, if you’d be so kind as to show me the way out.”

“Why?” rasped a voice inside my head. “Why do you spurn power when it is offered to you so freely?”

I staggered, hands reaching for my scalp, fingernails digging through hair, into skin. “You don’t belong here,” I growled. “Get out, Tiamat. You weren’t invited.”

Brendan scanned the chamber, then stared harder into my face. “One of your dragons? The ones you forged pacts with.”

“One of them,” I said through gritted teeth, my mind a fracturing jumble. Dossiers

and harvests. Spiders and information. He knew about the dragons, but what could he possibly do to help me? “Two of them inside me. This third one — she’s trying to break through. Trying to take over.”

It was something about this place between places. The barrier protecting my soul from her encroaching influence was more fragile here, the membrane thinner. Like crystal. Like glass.

Then the Quartz Spider did the very last thing I expected. He helped me.

He traced his fingers in the air, drawing out a glyph in the shape of a glowing hourglass. He spread his hand out, capturing the glyph like it was a soap bubble, then slammed his open palm into my forehead.

Time passed. A blink, a moment, a heartbeat. My lashes fluttered as the wave of magic seized my body, the warmth accumulating, then crystallizing in my skull. I reached for my head, my jaw slack.

Time froze, but only in that little sliver of my skull — with Tiamat locked inside it.

“I can’t hear her anymore,” I muttered, grateful for the silence. “I don’t know what you did, but she’s gone.”

Unmoved, unsmiling, Brendan raised his hand again.

“Don’t say I never did you any favors.”

The Quartz Spider pressed the tip of one glowing finger against the center of my chest. From its gleaming floor to its lofty ceiling, the crystalline chamber exploded. Everything turned white. I screamed, but all I could hear was the sound of the world shattering.

14

MAX

I opened my eyes to soft, radiant gold. Low light, a warm bed, cool sheets. I stretched out my arms and legs, savoring the release in my muscles. So comfy. So restful. My bed. Our bed. The one that I shared with Leon.

Leon. Where the hell was Leon?

Panic ripped through my chest like a bolt of lightning. I sat up, throwing the covers off, my brain hastily reconstructing the events of the night. Was it still the night? The same night, even? My feet hit the floor before I realized: how the hell did I get into bed in the first place?

“It’s really cute that you’re stumbling all over yourself worried about me.” Leon’s voice spoke drowsily from the couch in the bedroom that we mostly used as a clothing rack. “Wait. You are worried about me , aren’t you?”

My hands flew to my face, rubbing the sleep out of my eyes. I’d never been so disoriented in my damn life. Clarity returned, at least to my eyesight, and there among the draped T-shirts and hoodies on the couch was the young man responsible for dumping them there in the first place.

I couldn’t control myself. My feet went on autopilot, directing me toward the couch. I swept him up in my arms, kissed him on the mouth.



“Whoa,” Leon said, laughing, lifting his arm above our heads. “Watch the coffee. Okay, okay, big guy. I’m happy to see you, too.”

“Thank God you’re okay,” I breathed, kissing him again, catching the rich yet faint taste of coffee on his lips. Milky and sweet, just the way he liked it. “Wait. Where have you been? How long have you been here? How long have I been out?”

He peeled himself out of my arms and sat back down on the couch. “Chill out and I’ll let you know. No, seriously, sit down, don’t want you getting a heart attack. I’m not sure how long you’ve been asleep, but Brendan could have sent you back the way he did Guillotina.”

“By rewinding time. Is that why it feels like I haven’t slept at all?” I pinched a bit of my shirt, sniffed, and winced. “Is that why I smell like I took a nap in a gym bag?”

Leon wrinkled his nose and smiled. “You’re not that bad, Max. I like it when you get a little dirty. It’s kind of manly.”

I frowned, unsure of how to take the compliment. Then I sat up again, jolted by another flash of realization. “Tina. I gotta call Tina. See if she’s safe.”

She was, as it turned out, only stuck in the same bleary, bizarre state as Leon and me. I thought I heard her retching before she hung up. I felt queasy and completely out of sorts myself.

Time had ceased to matter, for one thing. My phone said it was only half past ten. How? We encountered Gustavo and the Mendez sisters after midnight. Did Brendan only send us back a few hours? Did he send us back an entire day? I pushed my face into my hands and groaned.

“Fresh pot of coffee waiting for you if you want it,” Leon said. He let out a sarcastic

chuckle. “You’ll probably need it, honestly. My brain and my body are in two different time zones.”

Good idea about the coffee, at least. I poured some for myself, wincing at the bitterness as it went down my throat. “When this all started I never would have guessed this Quartz Spider guy would be so powerful. Is that where he took you? Another time zone?”

“Not just. Another reality, too. Talk about jet lag. I was in this weird crystal thing, like his own private pocket dimension. Remember Arachne’s space, the one she lends to her spiders? Like that, except we were inside a giant gemstone.”

“Frozen in time. A giant quartz crystal. You have to admit, the bastard has style. At least he’s consistent.”

He raised his hand in a fist, then spread his fingers out in all directions. “And then it exploded, and here I am. He wanted to talk to me, he said. He tried to gain my sympathy. Max, he killed his own brother, but not on purpose. Time magic, man. Shit’s fucked.”

Leon filled me in on the rest of it — this untimely abduction, the motive, the sob story. I was starting to see Leon’s side of it, but Brendan was still a problem for the arcane underground, for Dos Lunas. So maybe he wasn’t the evil genius we painted him to be. The man was still incredibly dangerous.

“And that was when the crystal exploded. I think he dismissed his pocket dimension to make sure I wouldn’t go nuclear in there with Tiamat trying to make a grab for my soul. But he helped me, Max.” Leon tapped the side of his head. “He trapped Tiamat up here. It’s like she’s in suspended animation.”

“Okay, but for how long?” I tossed back the last of my coffee, grimacing as it went

down. “And you said so yourself. He might have helped you solely for self-preservation. I’ve seen what you can do with the dragons. In that enclosed space? You would have shredded him alive.”

Leon shook his head. “Who knows how it would have ended? He stopped it from happening. That’s my point. Maybe he isn’t evil after all.”

“And those thugs at Habibi? The Brillante guy with the gay brother. All of them just turned into dust. Compassionate Brendan just wiping those men off the face of the earth? It doesn’t hang together.”

He shrugged. “None of this does, Max. Look at your uncle. He knew we were coming, and even without Brendan’s intervention I have a feeling he would have let us escape. Maybe not without a couple of scrapes and bruises, but that wasn’t a serious trap. He’s nowhere near as dangerous as Divina.”

“Tío Gustavo has a soft spot for me, I guess, even after all this time. Maybe he still thinks he can lure me back to the family business. No chance. Not after everything that’s happened.”

Leon rose from the couch, stretching his arms out, groaning. His shirt lifted up, exposing only the littlest flash of his belly, but that was all it took. How the boy could load up on ice cream and still keep those killer abs, I would never know.

“Careful with that mug,” I said. “Don’t want you spilling all over the carpet.”

Instead he let it dangle from the hook of one finger. Very funny. Very cute. Apparently the mug was already empty. He paced forward slowly, a lazy smile drawing a naughty diagonal across his face. I knew that look.

“Maybe I want you spilling all over the carpet, Maximo.”

He nudged his knee up between my legs, grazing my crotch with his thigh. I bit back a moan, swallowing it down instead. Why was I so aroused? Why was he, for that matter? I placed my hand flat against his chest, calling for a suspension in the seduction.

“Leon. Serious question. Are you as turned on as I am right now? We should be fucking exhausted.”

He pressed his brow against mine, one of his hands trailing up under my shirt, pinching down on my nipple. This time I couldn't help moaning out loud.

“We should be fucking . It's probably got something to do with this time magic jet lag bullshit. I'm as hard as a rock right now.”

I gulped again, taking one step back. “Maybe it's like how our circadian rhythms are suddenly so messed up. Your morning wood is just kicking in now at, um, ten thirty in the evening. Ten thirty-five?”

Leon's hand rubbed against my bulge, open handed, kneading with his whole palm. This time I groaned. Fuck. What was it about being groped through a handful of denim? I clenched my teeth, afraid of busting right in my pants.

“Looks like your morning wood's kicking in too, Maximo.”

Something clinked against the floor. The mug. The little asshole let it fall onto the carpet.

“Oops,” he said, barely holding back his smirk. “Let me just get that.”

His one hand still on my bulge, he slowly slithered into a crouch, his other hand leaving my nipple, but tracing, massaging a wide line down my torso. Knees on the

carpet, both hands on my crotch, Leon's eyes never left mine.

I gasped, panted, my entire body burning with anticipation. There was no way I was going to survive this for more than five minutes.

His fingers worked fast, unbuckling, unzipping me. He pulled my jeans down to my thighs, his nose nuzzling at the obscene shape in my briefs, teeth grazing and nipping, tracing at its outline.

Not even three minutes. Not even two. Leon pulled down my waistband, the elastic slipping over, then under my swollen head, my full, heavy balls. Then, with the practiced ease of someone who had every inch of my cock committed to memory, he took me into his mouth.

Not even a minute. His warm tongue, his worshipful lips, the masterful tug and glide of both his hands — I couldn't even last long enough to start thrusting into his mouth.

I came enormously, powerfully, my thighs quaking as I held onto his shoulder, the crown of his head to stay upright. Leon held onto the backs of my knees, my thighs, rubbing and pulling me in closer, taking me down his throat to the root.

Ten thirty, ten thirty-five was maybe too late in the evening to scream my head off. Good thing I'd gasped myself breathless, shivering and shaking with every greedy, hungry sweep of Leon's tongue.

"Sorry," I blurted out, finally catching enough breath to speak. "So sorry. That never — you know that never happens."

My cock left his mouth with a pop, wet and slick. He smiled up at me sloppily, eyes misted over with want. "Fucking time magic, man. But I don't mind. I know you. I know you can go again."

The back of my hand over my mouth, I gave him a teasing little whine, pretending I didn't want it, pretending I was too tired. But Leon definitely knew me well. We did go again just minutes later in the shower, me returning the favor, him wrenching a second, somehow even more incredible orgasm out of me.

I finished rinsing off first, knowing I would never make it out alive if I let him have a third go at my cock. I headed to the kitchen counter, so sure I was going to die if I didn't replenish my body's supply of water and protein. I wolfed down an energy bar, then a huge handful of trail mix.

Chocolate and dried fruit and nuts probably weren't ideal so late, but neither was coffee. Besides, I could feel in my bones that the night wasn't over. Too many loose ends left untied. Too much left unfinished. And I had this strange, nagging feeling that I was forgetting something.

I looked down at my hand, clenching and unclenching my fingers around air. Something was supposed to be there. Huh. What was it? My hand squeezed into a fist, trying to reconstruct the sensation of that missing something with the help of my still sluggish brain. Smooth. Hard.

But no. Lovely as it was to think about, it definitely wasn't Leon's cock. I shrugged, reaching for a bottle of water from the counter. Hydration was important — rehydration, in this case, because Leon's particular brand of lovemaking tended to squeeze a pleasurable enormous amount of fluids from my body.

I picked up the bottle, twisted off the cap, lifted it to my lips. And then I froze. This thing in my hand — wasn't it the approximate size and shape? I scowled, then yelled toward the bathroom.

“Hey, Leon? Where's the statuette?”

A moment's pause before the shower door slid open. "What? I thought you had it."

I scanned the apartment, the bedside tables in particular. I had the damn thing in my clutches when we were running from Tío Gustavo and his goons. Where the hell did I put it?

The shower knob squeaked. Not a minute later Leon was dripping on the carpet. He never did towel himself off in time, but I wasn't about to scold him for it. He looked just as concerned as I felt.

"Did you find it?" he asked, toweling off his chest, rubbing at his hair.

I stretched my arms, fingers splayed, hands side by side. "It was right here. Right in the palm of my big, stupid hand. Where did it go?"

My phone went off, blaring from the inside of my pocket. I spilled water on myself, cursed, and picked it up to answer.

"Hello? Vera? Sorry, but now's not a great time."

"Preposterous," she huffed. "Now is the perfect time. Your client proposed a bonus on the condition that you deliver the statuette today. As your loving spider — someone who also receives a generous cut of the proceeds — I graciously accepted. Naturally."

"Naturally," I answered through gritted teeth.

"Wonderful. I'll text you the coordinates for the drop. Ta-ta for now."

I hung up, cringed, and bit deep into the back of my hand, stifling a frustrated scream. Leon draped his towel across his shoulders.

“So. We’re fucked, aren’t we?”



15

LEO

Rain pattered on the windshield, a slow drizzle, a steady drive. Max kept his car's pace speedy and safe. It didn't often get wet out on the streets of Dos Lunas. Vera's voice streamed in through the speakers, sharp and hissing. I could clearly visualize her seething on the other end of the line.

"This is so unlike the two of you," she snapped. "And that's just it. There are two of you to begin with. Shouldn't that mean a smaller chance of mucking it all up?"

I shrank into my carseat in spite of the fact that Vera couldn't possibly see us. I heard the implication in her words, that two finders in the mix also doubled the chance of screwing a job up.

Good thing she didn't mention how we'd run into difficulties back with the Aqueous Elixir as well, losing not just one, but both of the precious potions.

"I wish I could explain it," Max said, one hand on the wheel, the other mussing at his hair in annoyance. "The statuette literally slipped out of my grasp. Literally, Vera."

She gave a derisive sniff, somehow combining the noise with a haughty harrumph. "Well, it hardly matters now. We're all out of a paycheck. You wasted your energy, and I wasted my time coordinating this job. Go ahead and meet the client as requested. Tell them yourself how you managed to misplace the statuette."

“Sorry, Vera,” I said, leaning close to the dashboard to speak directly into the phone. “We’re on our way, Vera.”

“Honestly,” she muttered, “see if the Amethyst Spider ever has to deal with these shenanigans. Or the Emerald Spider, God forbid. She’d have their heads on spikes.”

The muttering trailed off, blending with the background chatter of her home bar until she finally hung up. I squinted at Max, who was too focused on driving to squint back, but I knew we were on the same page.

“You know she said all that on purpose,” I said, “leaving us on the line like that. Man, Vera’s extra pissed. And what’s all that about the Emerald Spider and heads on spikes?”

“Never mind that right now. Vera’s our best bet for a spider. I really don’t want to lose her as our primary employer, and besides, I — wait a minute. This can’t be the right place.”

Max’s car rolled to a gentle stop. The map on his phone suggested that we’d arrived at our destination — this was where we were supposed to meet the client.

“But it’s just a parking lot,” I said, peering out the window in bewilderment. “An empty one, too.”

It was the back parking lot of the Dos Lunas Dome, to be more precise. Think the Hollywood Bowl, or any other major concert venue, only not quite as major. And not quite a venue, either, at least that night. We were the only car in sight, no concert or special event at the Dome, both the building and the parking lot in glistening wet darkness apart from a couple of lampposts.

Max tapped at his phone, checking and double checking both the map and Vera’s

messages.

“This is ridiculous,” he said. “There’s no one here.”

I pointed through the windshield, my skin rippling with sudden goosebumps. “Unless you count that guy.”

I specified “that guy” only because I recognize the confident stance of the figure standing several paces away from our car, his telltale mask radiant and blazing white in the headlights. It was our good friend, the nameless Masque.

“This asshole,” I muttered. “And here I was just thinking how nice it was that we hadn’t seen him in a while.”

Max cleared his throat. “Actually, we saw him at Habibi the night we went there. Well, I did, at least.”

I cocked an eyebrow. “Not that I’m boiling mad about it or anything, but is there some reason you didn’t tell me about this?”

“Didn’t seem important at the time, but it sounds like the same old mysterious Masque shit. He’s trying to catch you conjuring one of your dragons again, I bet.”

I rolled my eyes. “Same old shit is right. But we both know he won’t be catching me dabbling with dragons any time soon. Oh, look at this jerk beckoning like we’re supposed to be all excited to see him. Looking all pompous and trying to be mysterious. Hold your horses. Jerk.”

Max unlocked the car doors. “You don’t suppose he’s actually our client, do you? What the hell? Conflict of interest, much?”

And Max was right, too. A special armistice meant that the Masques generally looked the other way when it came to business among finders and spiders. But to actually seek out our services? Something smelled fishy here.

“Mr. Brillante,” the Masque called out. I could already sense Max cringing, but at least no one was around to hear he wasn’t being called by his preferred name. This Masque really was a piece of work.

“And Mr. Alcantara, too. So lovely to see you both.”

Max grumbled under his breath. I grunted back in agreement. Why wouldn’t we be seen together? We were supposed to be partners, after all.

I glowered as we approached the Masque, my hand held up to protect my hair from the rain. Not enough of it to matter and get us very drenched, but that still depended on how long this jerk was planning to keep us out in the elements making small talk. Forever, knowing him.

“Cut the crap, Masque guy,” I said. A little too loud, maybe, but Max and I were careful to keep our distance. “What’s up with you ordering special deliveries from spiders and finders? Aren’t you supposed to keep everything above board? Wrong app, buddy. Try again.”

The Masque laughed. “This is why I like the two of you so much. It’s the banter. You’re always offering some form of entertainment.”

Max scoffed. “And congratulations on having a smart mouth yourself. You’re obviously our client. Couldn’t you have arranged to meet us somewhere with an actual roof? I’m getting soaked through over here.”

“Correct. I am, indeed, the client.” The Masque turned his hands up and shrugged.

“But what’s this? It appears that neither of you are in possession of the very object I’d requested through your lovely spider. Where is the statuette, gentlemen?”

I threw Max a quick glance. We hadn’t worked out this part yet, but we had to keep our story straight. He gave me a small nod, permission to begin.

“So we lost it,” I said. Honesty, my mom used to say, was the best policy.

“I lost it,” Max said, thumping his chest and taking one long step forward. Annoying how he could be so hot stealing the limelight and trying to be the hero, that stupid wet hair clinging to his forehead, the dewy black of his leather jacket. It reassured me, how I knew I’d be safe at his side — or standing a couple of paces behind him, as was the case.

“I take full responsibility,” Max continued, getting hotter and hotter. “I know we’ve had our differences, but I don’t want this to reflect poorly on Leon as a finder. The spider network should know that I fumbled the bag, not him.”

Huh. Was there some review system for finders and spiders that I didn’t know about? If I found out I had anything less than a five-star rating, I’d be livid. Which, okay, maybe that was somewhat undeserved, but still.

“We lost it together,” I said, stepping up to Max’s side, nodding firmly when he frowned at me. “We’re partners in this, so we share the responsibility. We lost the statuette.”

The Masque reached for his coat’s inside pocket, then pulled out something sandy beige, something about the size of a water bottle. The sight of it made my nostrils flare.

“You mean this statuette?”

I turned my face to the sky and groaned, the cold droplets of rain on my cheeks not quite enough to douse my anger. The wet clap of skin on skin meant that Max felt the same, slapping himself in the forehead.

“Of course it was you,” Max growled. “Who else would go through all the effort of hiring us to procure something and then just steal it back?”

“What’s the fucking point, even?” I wiped away the rain from my forehead, pulling on the dripping tangles and snarls of my hair. “What are you trying to prove? Let me guess. Something to do with me and my dragons, am I right?”

The Masque clasped the statuette in both hands, the top half of his mask lifting slightly as the bottom half of his face broke into a tauntingly perfect smile.

“Putting in a request for a nondescript statuette was only the first step. I knew that the trail would lead you to Gustavo Brillante one way or another. The man wouldn’t dream of hurting his dear, sweet nephew — not in any debilitating sense, at least. Knowing your skills, I knew you would complete your mission successfully. I’d only hoped that the danger Gustavo put you in would have been enough to goad you into using your dragons, Mr. Alcantara.”

I raised the middle finger of one hand, then the index finger of the other, pointing at his face, wishing I could punch straight through his mask. “You’re a fucking asshole, you know that? We could have gotten into some real shit back there. The Quartz Spider is still at large.”

“Wait,” Max said. “Is that what this has all been about? Distracting us with this stupid little side quest of yours so that we wouldn’t be prepared when the Quartz Spider inevitably tried to blindside us?”

The Masque chuckled. “Guilty as charged. Your encounter with Gustavo was a

smaller, if somewhat unsuccessful test. But being forced to face a time mage? I was so sure you would call the dragons out.”

I threw my arms out just in time to restrain Max as he lunged for the Masque.

“You put us in danger. You put Leon in danger. I should knock your head off. Show yourself, you coward. Show me your face so I can dream about killing you with my bare hands.”

This time the Masque’s smile was purely humorless. For a moment he stood there, a grinning tiger. Then he waved one hand across his face, dismissing his mask. It crumbled into powder, dissolving in the rain.

“But you wouldn’t hurt an innocent shopkeeper, would you?” asked the slight man from Habibi, the one with the glasses and the waistcoat and the pocket watch.

“Just?” Max said, his muscles slackening, the fight going out of him. “It was you all along? You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“You betrayed us, you fucking twink. Is that even your real face, or just one of your secret identities? Pick a different one. This one sucks.”

The Masque flinched, this boy named Just. The bob of the lump in his throat as he swallowed, the twitch in his eyebrows — this was the real him, all right. A Masque revealing his true face? There he was gloating about exposing us to Tío Gustavo and the time mage when he was the real danger all along. He didn’t care that we knew what he truly looked like because one way or another, this was going to end tonight. Whether with us dead or arrested, who could really say?

“I knew it was worth making you suffer,” Just said, pointedly ignoring my mockery. “To string you along on that wild goose chase. And now the statuette has brought you

here to me. This thing is worthless otherwise.”

“Hard disagree,” I said, rolling up my sleeves. “It’ll be perfect for breaking your teeth in.”

Just — the Masque — this weirdo with his hidden agendas and alter egos, he threw his head back and laughed. “That’s right. Let the anger take over you. Let it flow through your blood. Open all the channels in your body. Let the dragons come screaming through.”

It was my turn to ignore him. I couldn’t roast him with Tiamat’s fire, but I was still perfectly capable of roasting him in other ways.

“What kind of a goofy-ass name is Just, anyway? If it’s short for Justin, why not just say you’re Justin?”

His mouth tightened, his lips forming a flat, angry line. Aha. Another soft spot.

“So it’s not Justin, then?” Max said, adding fuel to the fire. He muttered a single word under his breath — “Penetrate” — then separated his hands to reveal a wicked pair of crystalline daggers.

“If you must know,” the Masque shouted, going red in the face, “it’s short for Justice.”

And we were so ready for the big boss fight, too. Max and I doubled over in laughter. He slapped his thigh. I clutched my stomach, pointing, laughing even harder when the Masque stamped his foot in annoyance.

“What kind of a name is Justice?” I said, wiping away my tears. “What happens if you go up through the court system? Could you ever become Justice Justice? Chief



Justice — ”

“Stop!” Max choked out. “It’s too stupid, don’t say it.”

“That was what my family wanted for me,” Justice shouted. “We come from a long line of enforcers, and — and I think it’s a perfectly appropriate first name.”

“For anyone else but you,” I said, forcing myself to straighten back up. “You come from a long line of narcs and snitches.”

That did it. Just’s lips drew back, his teeth as bright as the mask he’d dismissed.

“What I come from is a dynasty of illusionists. The images I can conjure would blow your mind. And they have, in fact.”

Okay, I definitely didn’t expect to drag that out of him with our bullying. Good to get any kind of confirmation, knowing how this Masque in particular had used trickery against us in the past. The way he began or ended our meetings, for example, being all flashy by turning invisible, leaving only his mask as a taunting Cheshire smile.

But he’d said that last part with a semblance of a sneer in his voice. He wasn’t just talking about teleportation and theatrical tricks. Max placed his hand defensively on my chest, physically covering me. He could sense that something was coming, too.

“Tío Gustavo denied ever sending any of his goons after us at the parking lot in Habibi. The Quartz Spider denied killing anyone there. And Justice — you were at the club, too. As Just, and then as a Masque.”

My jaw fell. “That was all an illusion? All three of those goons, them freezing in a time spell, them disintegrating? We ran and panicked for nothing. That’s fucked up, Just. You’re sick. Why even go to those lengths?”

“To mess with your heads, of course. To cast the blame on the Quartz Spider, to infect you with fear and keep you on your toes. Is this doing it for you, gentlemen? Is it satisfying as finders to be spoon-fed all this information you couldn’t manage to figure out yourselves?”

All this elaborate bullshit just to put us in danger, just to coax me into using the dragons and fall into his trap. And here we were, two against one. No backup from any other Masques, as if Just knew he could take us on his own. Or maybe he wanted all the glory to himself. The arrogance, the audacity. It made my insides itch. I clenched my fists, gritted my teeth. The last thing I wanted — the thing Justice wanted the most — was to let the dragons out.

“This isn’t worth it,” I told Max. “Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

“I agree. All this trouble just to get my hair wet.” We started back toward Max’s car. “See you around, Just. The next time we see you, I’m putting a fist through your mouth.”

Justice chuckled. “I do so hate to repeat myself, but I so enjoy all the entertainment you two bring me. Such an amusing claim to make, because you’re not going anywhere.”

Thunder clapped, or perhaps it was just the magic emanating from his hands. From their hands. With the explosion of sound came a sudden flash of light, and instead of just Justice, there were twelve copies of him arranged in a ring around us. Each wore the same smug expression, and each held a copy of the stolen statuette.

We were surrounded. Trapped. Only — were we actually stuck there? Eleven of these figures were only illusions, weren’t they? Then again, the false time anomaly back at the parking lot, the dying Brillante goons — it had all seemed so real. Their skin and flesh flaying in ribbons, their skeletons crumbling to dust. There was no denying the

power of the mind, both its ability to create magical manipulation as well as its susceptibility to those same tricks.

Crystal daggers flashed and zinged, launched from Max's hands. I whirled to follow their flight, watching as the crystalline slivers passed through two of the illusory Masques, harmlessly piercing their faces and shattering on the asphalt as they fell. Two down, or at least identified, ten more to go.

And then the Masque laughed, this time louder, another burst of magic erupting from his fingers as he clapped his hands. The entire ring of twelve men spun around us, a dizzying ride at a carnival, a nauseating trip through a hall of mirrors.

"You're a clown," I shouted at the closest projection, its wavering body quickly replaced by the next. "That's all you are, you know that? You're a fool."

"Watch out," said a voice by my ear — Just's voice. Two strong hands shoved me hard in the back. I stumbled forward, winded, finding myself closer to the center of the circle. Max toppled toward me himself, the victim of a similar attack. My head ached as the visions spun faster and faster, the ring tightening into a smaller circle. A zoetrope, the heart of a kaleidoscope.

I clutched my chest, my insides churning. "Why are you even still holding that stupid statuette? You said so yourself. It's worth nothing."

All twelve copies of Justice laughed. "Because it makes you so angry. Haven't you figured it out yet? Give it up, Alcantara. Unleash the dragons. Show me your true nature." He leered as he lifted the statuette, its many copies blurring into a beige-brown streak. "Look at this thing that's tormented you this whole while. It's barely even magical. Whatever power it contained was spent long ago. It's worthless."

"Not quite," said a fourth voice.

The spinning stopped. The twelve images of Justice were grinning, but all stood perfectly still, as if the ride had come to an abrupt stop. Paused. Frozen in time.

“Max,” I muttered, only just recovering from the effects of the illusion, already fearful of what was coming next. He reached for my hand, the two of us leaning against each other for support.

And there he was. The Quartz Spider stepped out of the darkness and into the ring of Masques. This time Brendan Shum had made no effort to conceal his face, perhaps for the same reason that Justice was so eager to reveal his own.

This was where it ended.

“I’ll take that,” Brendan said, approaching one of the Justices, selecting correctly as he plucked the statuette from his grasp.

This thing was supposed to be worthless, wasn’t it? An old artifact with long dormant magic, only as good as a mundane piece of decorative art.

A wreath of white fire bathed Brendan’s hand, spreading across the statuette. He finished muttering the words of a swift, quiet spell, then clenched his fingers to the sound of shattering stone. With a single crushing motion, he’d pulverized the relic.

Dust streamed in opposite directions, the destroyed statuette as fine as powder. As sand. Oh, God. We’d delivered the quickening sand right into his grasp. Two glass bottles floated out of his pockets, the emptied phials that once contained the Aqueous Elixirs.

Sand streamed in through their mouths, just in time for the necks to join together with a glassy click. The completed shape spun in the air above his hand, a familiar and horrifying sight.

It was an hourglass.

16

MAX

We were too distracted, somehow believing we had room to laugh and to ridicule the Masque. Maybe we thought it would buy us time, throw him off his game. The hubris — the utter delusion of it all. How could we have thought that it was over, that the Quartz Spider himself would have forgotten about us?

Time stood still. The rain began to fall upward.

I raised a cautious hand toward Brendan Shum. “Whatever it is you’re planning, I kindly ask that you reconsider it. Please. For the sake of Dos Lunas. For the sake of the arcane underground.”

The hourglass continued to spin in its slow, erratic rhythm, its intricate edges catching the light, the quickening sand slipping from one vessel to the next. The Quartz Spider was taking a moment to ridicule us, too, taking his sweet time because he could afford it. He could control it, after all.

“Dos Lunas didn’t care when my baby brother died. The arcane underground didn’t even notice. And this has nothing to do with anybody else. If I complete the ritual successfully, no one will even notice. Things will stay the same as always.”

“You can’t say that and seriously believe it.” In my arms, Leon strained forward as he spoke, leaning in to make himself heard. But I could sense the fear in his voice, feel the hesitation in his muscles. “Your actions affect others, whether or not you realize it

yourself. It was an accident, Brendan. Your brother, my mom? Both just accidents. You have to let it go before you hurt somebody else.”

I held completely still, forgetting to breathe. The Quartz Spider’s expression never shifted, never changed. He brought up his other hand, manipulating the hourglass without ever touching it.

“We’ve discussed this,” he said, his voice so clear now that the raindrops were no longer hitting the ground. “I bear no ill will toward anyone but myself. I’m only attempting to correct my own mistakes.”

Around us the twelve copies of Justice remained motionless. They showed us their teeth, mouths locked in pained grins. I wondered if he could hear all of this, whether he regretted wasting his time and resources on Leon and cornering him into a trap when he could have been directly pursuing the Quartz Spider all along.

I wasn’t stupid. I knew that Leon’s connection to the dragons held danger of a literally explosive nature. But I believed in his ability to keep them under control. Most of all, I believed in his kindness. Brendan Shum was just as dangerous. That was the main difference between them. Despite Leon’s destructive potential, he was kind. Brendan, on the other hand, was cold through and through.

“Again, I bear the two of you no ill will. I’m giving you a chance to leave this place. Let me finish my work. You have nothing to fear from me.”

He’d gotten it wrong once before. Wasn’t that what Leon said? A mistake with time magic grievous enough to kill his own brother. I didn’t know enough about chronomancy to understand what Brendan had planned. This highly charged hourglass, though, assembled from pieces individually imbued with powerful enchantments? The Quartz Spider was working magic on a grander scale.

And he'd mentioned a ritual, too.

"Max," Leon whispered, his fingers digging into my arm. "It's a circle. Justice and his mirror images. A circle with twelve points."

A shiver ran up my spine. We were standing in the center of a ceremonial circle — one designed specifically to resemble a clock. Did Brendan know that Justice would split himself into twelve pieces? Were Leon and I supposed to be the clock's hands? I didn't want to find out.

"He needs to be in the middle," Leon continued. "I can't explain why, but you'll just have to trust the bruho . We can't let him reach the middle."

"I trust you," I told him, squeezing his shoulder tight, standing upright and nudging him to do the same. Justice was only the warmup. Brendan was the final bout.

Leon scanned the circle around us, all twelve copies of Justice. "Brendan is too focused on the ritual and maintaining the Masque in stasis to freeze us, too. We just have to keep him from the center, hurt him enough to make him stop."

The Quartz Spider laughed softly. He reached one hand out, playing with the levitating rain, letting its droplets slip between his fingers. "I'm hearing plenty of whispering. Are you discussing your plans for the rest of the evening? I suggest a warm bath and a mug of hot cocoa. Far, far away from here."

"We're not leaving," I shouted, my chest pushed forward, my head held high despite my own self-doubt. "And we're not letting you finish your ritual."

"Suit yourself."

The Quartz Spider snapped his fingers. Leon cried out, clutched his head, and fell to



his knees.

“What did you do to him?” I shouted, wanting to help Leon, wanting to hurt Brendan.

Remorseless, expressionless, Brendan answered. “Nothing that he didn’t do to himself.”

“Max,” Leon grunted, his fingers digging into his skull. “The seal. He broke the seal. Tiamat’s trying to get out.”

I held him in my arms, knowing there was nothing I could do to help, hating the truth of it. He bucked and writhed in my embrace, teeth clenched so hard his jaw might shatter.

“The others. Max, it hurts. All three of them. Make it stop.”

“I can’t,” I gasped, terrified, furious. “What can I do?”

Nothing. I already knew. I wanted to hurt Brendan for what he’d said and done. I hated that he was right, too. Leon had willingly accepted each of the dragons into his body, sealed the pact within his skin.

Leon stopped trembling. Maybe the hurting had stopped. His head was hunched between his shoulders, tucked close to his chest. He said something too soft for me to hear.

“Is everything okay?” I asked, rubbing circles down his back.

“Get away from me,” he said, his voice hoarse.

“But — ”

He shoved me away with a strength that far surpassed his lean frame. I stumbled back in shock, and then in awe, watching as blue fire exploded from his body, blazing like every inch of him was alight. Leon screamed, his face raised to the heavens. Tiamat's fire wasn't burning him, but that didn't mean it wasn't searing him on the inside.

"Tell me what I can do." I hadn't said it loud enough for anyone but myself to hear, the despair clotting my voice. Penetrate. Obfuscate. Dissipate. Illuminate. What could I possibly do to help Leon now?

"Emanate!"

I heard the word in my head, not from Leon's lips. In this state, he no longer needed to speak to command the dragons. Was he even in control anymore?

The ground beneath me trembled, splintered, cracked. Jagged spires of rock thrust upward precisely at my location. My heart quavered — not fire, not water, but earth.

This was Bahamut's doing. Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. An enormous hand reached out of the broken asphalt, the ends of each lamppost-thick finger tipped with wicked talons. This was the grasping claw of a dragon, but almost certainly not to scale. Small mercies. The hand wrapped around me, sharp rock snagging at my clothing, ripping into my leather jacket.

The dragon's hand squeezed. I screamed, locked in the crushing embrace of an ancient dragon. A mere fraction of Bahamut's power, but concentrated on the fragility of the human body — I could imagine it, hear my bones breaking, my muscles tearing.

"Leon," I shouted, the agony shooting through my body. I writhed, flailed, shredding the skin of my hands as I struggled in vain. "Please. You can't let them take over."

Magic swirled in Leon's eyes, azure and green and yellow as the dragons battled for dominance.

I slammed my palms against the talons, wriggling in their grasp. My hands looked so small. Sweat and rainwater dripped down the back of my neck. The human body wasn't designed to take this amount of pressure. Any longer and Bahamut would crush me into paste. And all the while, Brendan Shum took his sweet time approaching, lips moving as he muttered the words of his ritual, fingers weaving the right magic.

"Don't kill him," Leon wailed. "This isn't what I wanted."

He was still in there. I just had to get him out before I died in the attempt. And then the rock hand crumbled away, the fingers shattering into rubble. I fell to the ground winded, bones aching, skin scraped, my blood mingling with rainwater.

The rainwater. It wasn't falling upward anymore. Now the raindrops swirled around Leon, slowly at first, gaining speed. Clever boy. In order to save me, he'd allowed a different dragon to take over. Bakunawa this time. But how long could Leon keep this up?

The rainwater spun and spun in a ring around Leon's position, gathering into threads, gouts, until he'd built a rushing, opaque wave. With a shout he thrust his hand forward, directing the flow toward Brendan Shum. The wave slammed with the force of a cannonball, a log jam, a ballista fired at full speed.

The Quartz Spider's scream cut short as he flew off his feet, thrown outside the circle. I chuckled, then spat out a mouthful of blood and water. How soon I'd forgotten that at least one of Leon's dragons wasn't as obsessed with destruction as the others. Bakunawa was the closest thing we had to a good guy.

“You can’t stop me,” Brendan snarled, swiping water away from his face, forcing his way back into the circle. “I’ve worked too long and too hard for this. Things must go back to the way they once were.”

“That’s not how this works,” Leon said, his words coming out through gritted teeth. He was winning, taking over the dragons, or at least gaining the upper hand. “I don’t know the first thing about chronomancy, but there are some things that magic can’t fix.”

“He’s right,” I shouted, picking myself up from the asphalt, wobbling as I rose to my feet. “Even necromancers know better. If death magic can’t bring him back, what good can time magic do?”

And its consequences were somehow even more dire.

Steam hissed wherever the wave of water struck the Quartz Spider. He continued walking unhindered, Bakunawa’s manipulated water changing into vapor, remembering what it once was, rendered harmless by time magic.

“I’m so close now,” Brendan said, resuming the weaving of the spell web between his fingers, the tumbling of the hourglass. “Why can’t you understand that? Let me wind the clock back. No harm done. Take us all back to the day before he died.”

My skin crawled. Brendan’s grief knew no bounds. How long had it been since his brother had died? How selfish was it of me to think of Leon above all things else? If the Quartz Spider brought the world back to a time before Leon and I met, where would that leave us? I wouldn’t remember having ever met him, everything we’d shared together. The pang of loss gripped hard around my heart, somehow hurting more than Bahamut’s stony grasp.

But the consequences of Brendan’s ritual could be farther reaching. Just how far

would the spell go? And his mastery of chronomancy was clearly imperfect, the magic improvised from what he'd pieced together himself in place of proper training, the components cobbled together from disparate parts. All the time anomalies he'd manifested had been so destructive, potentially more so if Leon and I had never intervened. This enchanted hourglass, a clock formed by the twelve mirrors of the Masque's image — the Quartz Spider could rupture time itself, unravel the fabric of reality.

And even then, even knowing all this, my heart ruled above all my other instincts. I rushed Leon headfirst, trusting the impact of my shoulder against his torso to confuse and disorient both him and the dragons, buy me enough time to bring him out of Brendan's circle of madness. I threw him over my shoulder and ran with all my might. Tiamat could burn me. Bakunawa could drown me, and Bahamut could flay the skin from my flesh. Leon would always come first.

His fingers dug like talons into my back, nails biting through the leather of my jacket. I knew it was him fighting, straining every muscle in his body to contain the power of the dragons. Good effort. That was all we needed, just long enough for me to race past the circle of Masques. And when we did —

"You saved me," Leon whispered in my ear.

"I haven't yet," I whispered back. "You have to save yourself."

His voice softer, weaker, Leon replied. "I know."

I set him on the asphalt, not quite far enough outside the circle, but we'd given Brendan enough leeway. We still had to stop the ritual.

"Penetrate," I muttered, producing twin slivers of crystal, already exhausted and bloodied. I had to make this count.

I might not have understood the specifics of Brendan Shum's ritual, but even a novice in magic would sense the undeniable surge of power radiating from his ceremonial circle. There he stood at its center, the hourglass between his fingers brighter than the moon, a rotating jewel. We had one chance to stop this. We had to make it count.

Taking careful aim, I recalled afternoons of lazy target practice in back alleys with Guillotina, her refining her skill with her buzzsaws, me with my crystals. I called on my many rounds of darts with Johnny Slivers, seemingly trivial at the time, never knowing our games would one day serve some greater purpose. My daggers shrieked through the air, each directed at one of Brendan's hands. He never saw them coming. It didn't matter that they wouldn't maim him. All we needed was a distraction, a way to disrupt his ritual.

And a way to make an opening for Leon and his dragons. Brendan's chanting and arcane gestures came to a soaring head, the hourglass glowing brighter than ever. His final anomaly was upon us, this deliberate act of time distortion, a ripple in reality. Leon extended both his hands.

"Emanate."

Clever boy. The Quartz Spider was finally doing us a favor. If there was one thing Leon so badly wanted to erase, it was his pact with the dragons. They came surging forth from his fingers, an overlapping twist of three dragons, one formed of fire, another of water, the last of earth.

Tiamat, Bakunawa, and Bahamut screeched and roared as they penetrated the ritual circle, flooding it with their draconic might. Leon stumbled as their tails emerged from his skin, one by one, each dragon finally ejected from his body, exorcised through pure force of will.

Hungering, the dragons swirled within the circle, eager to wreak havoc. Brendan kept

his chant up even as his gaze followed the three dragons with wide-eyed terror. They scented the blood on his hands, sensed the power pouring from the hourglass.

The bright white of time magic merged with the Quartz Spider's spirit, a growing orb of blinding power. The dragons descended, all three at once. Brendan Shum screamed. Glass shattered. Torrents of fire, water, and sand spiraled into the sky. A clap of thunder, a roar of dragons, and at last, silence. Even the rain had stopped.

"It's over," I breathed, holding Leon in my arms, letting him lean against my touch. "It's over now."

"They're gone, Max," he said, smiling. Leon coughed, then let out a peal of delirious laughter. "No more fucking dragons. I'm free. I'm finally free."

I pressed a kiss on the crown of his head, tasting rainwater and sweat. I laughed into his curls, the damp tangles of his hair, the knot in my chest untangling at last. If no one in Dos Lunas noticed the extravagant display of light and sound, it would be a miracle. But this wasn't our problem anymore.

The Masques would be here soon enough, and for once I was glad for the concept of paranormal police. Someone needed to clean up this mess. Someone needed to pick up the unconscious, snoring lump that was Justice, the Masque who loved his mirrors so much.

And someone needed to do something about the teenage boy who'd replaced Brendan Shum in the center of the circle.

17

LEON

“Are you working out again?” I rolled my eyes, pretending not to enjoy the sight of Max grunting, sweating, and flexing. “God, enough with that, already. Pay attention to me instead.”

Max swiped at his forehead, wiping away the sweat. “It’s cute how you think this body just happens. It takes a lot of hard work and dedication.”

I slapped my belly, relishing the resounding drum beat. “And this takes a lot of soft pretzels and ice cream.”

He rolled his eyes pointedly away from me, returning his focus to the empty spot on the wall. He wasn’t really pissed. In fact, I knew that part of Max deeply, deeply enjoyed our repartee, whether or not it was witty. He, in turn, just knew that I deeply enjoyed when he played hard to get, throwing me those hard glares, playing the tough guy. The man was just daring me to do my worst.

But the point was that we could do this again, volley pointless banter at each other, go back to normal lives, or the closest thing to normal that anyone could find in the arcane underground.

Max could go back to chucking sharp objects in back alleys with Guillotina Hernandez, get in some target practice by the dumpsters. I could go back to guzzling a Johnny Slivers special, whether it was a fancy coffee or a delicious cocktail. We



could all gather around Roscoe's tablet to admire the latest traps he'd devised for any unwitting Brillante thugs who still thought invading Unholy Grounds was a good idea.

It had been days since that fateful detonation at the Dos Lunas Dome, since the two of us had somehow managed to put an end to the Quartz Spider's ritual. At the time, all I could think of was how badly I wanted to keep Brendan from executing his time distortion, what would have been a time anomaly on a grand scale.

Even his smaller anomalies had wreaked enough havoc on their own, back when we hadn't yet identified him as the Dos Lunas anomalist. Flora and fauna accelerated through natural aging so they turned into dust, endless time loops that affected both inanimate objects and organic life — chronomancy truly did feel like the deadliest of all the magical disciplines.

Looking back later, talking things out with Max, I'd never even considered the possibility that the massive anomaly would have destroyed our memories of one another. If Brendan truly had succeeded at winding time back to a point when his brother had been alive, Max and I would have never even met. The very thought of the possibility stung like a poisoned thorn in my heart.

And yet how selfish it was to even think that. What about the consequences of Brendan's time reversal for everyone else his magic would touch? Would the dead come back to life? Would babies return to the womb? The effects had been mind shattering enough with the ritual gone wrong through our intervention.

What if the ritual had gone right?

But speaking of selfish, I allowed myself to indulge in the greatest aftereffect of the ritual. The dragons were gone. Poof. Not a whiff of fire or seawater, no midnight visitations from dripping-wet dragon goddesses, and not a single whisper from the inside of my battered skull.

I could hardly believe it had worked. Hurling the dragons into the ritual circle had actually sent them back through time, back before we forged any contracts, perhaps even back before they knew of my existence.

No more dragons for a long time, thanks very much. I was excited to return to my roots, develop a deeper understanding of bruho magic, the ancient arts of the Alcantara witches. My mind had been dulled and ravaged by exposure to the draconic struggles. Now I had all the time in the world to hone it to a sharp point.

If only I could say the same for the Masque, the one who called himself Justice.

A squad of his colleagues had made an appearance at the Dos Lunas Dome shortly after Brendan's spell had gone haywire. We were reassured that Justice's mind would reassemble in time — not that Max and I were all that worried to begin with. Given enough healing and therapy, the twelve fractured parts of his personality might still have a chance to unite. The problem was how he very likely had a demotion waiting for him, if not outright termination.

But the ritual had impacted Brendan Shum worst of all. Depending on perspective, though, he might have been the luckiest, too. Being centered in the time distortion had aged him backward, all the way to a time before he'd begun to dabble in chronomancy. Hell, it brought him back to a time before he'd ever worked as a spider. The ritual had turned him eighteen years old again, stripping him of most of his magic, but also his memories.

That underlined the bittersweetness of it all. He was eighteen again, and he thought that his baby brother was still alive.

"Feels like we should be celebrating surviving this fight and being alive at all," I told Max. "But I do feel bad for Brendan. Or at least this version of Brendan. He didn't know. He must be so scared."

I thought of the man who spoke to me inside that other dimension. The sadness in his eyes, the longing that settled deep within his bones. Seeing everything he had done — as a brother, as a chronomancer, as the anomalist — I couldn't rightly say that he'd ever meant to hurt anyone.

“Don't,” Max said. “I wouldn't worry about it. The Masques are tough, but they aren't monsters. They'll make the effort to keep him comfortable and rehabilitate him. It's a bizarre gray area. The Quartz Spider they arrested is someone who hasn't committed the crime yet. Brendan's a completely different person. How do they even resolve that?”

I kneaded my temples. “Makes my fucking head spin, honestly.”

Max shook his head. “You know what makes my head spin? All these multiple boyfriends you have. Brendan Shum, and now Justice? Who the hell goes by the name Justice? Was he born in a jury box?”

“You take that back, Maximo.” Heat flared up my face. My cheeks must have gone bright red. “I do not have multiple boyfriends.”

“It can't be helped. You're just boy crazy and that's the end of it.” He tilted his head, studying me from a curious angle. “But what are your thoughts about having just the one boyfriend?”

Oh, God. Was I on fire? I must have been on fire. Did Tiamat's flames get loose? I would have given anything to burn to a crisp, for my cinders to drift with the wind, far away from Max's steely, probing gaze.

“I mean,” I muttered. “I guess I don't hate the idea.”

“You can ogle cute boys all you want.” He licked his lips, pulled on the front of my shirt, putting our faces barely inches apart. “As long as you come home to the same

bed.”

I playfully shoved at his hand, pushed him away by the chest, which might have been a mistake because it only reminded me of how muscular it was. Sweaty, and hot, and hard as rock. “To the same bed, sure. Assuming we’re having one of our — you know — sleepovers.”

“Yeah. About that.”

Max lowered his head, scratched the corner of his eyebrow, and averted his gaze. Why the sudden shyness?

“About what?” I asked.

He twiddled his fingers, chewing on his bottom lip. What the hell was going on? Bashful, wishy-washy Max was cute, but I didn’t see this side of him very often.

“I was wondering if — oh, God. Feel free to say no, but — do you think you’d want to bring more of your stuff over? Not just your toothbrush and a duffle bag, I mean. I don’t know.”

Electricity traveled up from the base of my spine. I blinked. “Are you asking what I think you’re asking?”

He raked stray locks of hair away from his face, glowering irritably at thin air, still avoiding my gaze. “Yes, I am. Fucking — do you want to move in with me?”

I threw my arms around him, laughing when his eyes went wide open, when his hands wrapped around my waist, trying to steady me as I swooned.

“Yes. Since you asked so nicely, yes! Fuck yes, Max. Are you kidding? Your apartment is absolute heaven compared to the dump I live in.”

He narrowed his eyes at me. “Oh. So this is all about real estate, is it?”

“Yes. A hundred percent.” I pressed a kiss against his cheek, smiling when he smiled. “I’m joking, of course. I’m beyond stoked. Yes. I’d love to move in with you. I promise, I’ll make it worth your while.”

The corner of his mouth hitched into a sleazy grin. “You will, will you?”

“Totally. I’ll cook for you.”

“Leon. You’re a terrible cook.”

“And I’ll clean.”

He sighed. “I always have to clean up after you.”

“Then it’s settled. I’m a walking disaster area, and you’re the stable, chiseled marble statue who’s going to be my rock. And my butler. And my personal chef. It’ll be great.”

Max stared past my head, off into the distance. “Oh, God. What have I gotten myself into?”

“A relationship, apparently.” I kissed him on the lips this time, quick and chaste. “In all seriousness? Thank you. For everything. You don’t know how much of a load this takes off my back.”

He chuckled. “As long as you remember to take my loads on your back.”

I slapped him, light and playful, only hard enough to nudge his face. “So rude. Very obscene.”

Max leaned in, initiating his own kiss this time. Slow and sensual. Dark, warm, beautiful. Just like him. “But you love it, Leon. Admit it.”

“No, I don’t. But I do love you.”

The world went perfectly still, all the breath evacuating my body. Did I just say that out loud, with my own stupid mouth? But the look in Max’s eyes, how they sparkled as he stared at me? Worth it. He chewed on his lip, grinning as he gave it some thought.

“I’m pretty sure there’s a ninety-nine percent chance that I love you, too.”

I thumped him in the chest. “Only ninety-nine? What’s a guy got to do to get it up to a hundred?”

He made a face, wrinkled his nose. “The one percent is for the times when you bother the living hell out of me. I can only take so much of you in chaos goblin mode.”

I puffed my chest up, the proudest little goblin. “But bothering the living hell out of you is my love language. Speaking of which, we should totally start that finder agency I keep talking about.”

He sighed, his breath blowing upward, tousling locks of his hair. “Ninety-eight percent.”

“But I have so many good names. Double Cheese Burglars. Thievin’ Beavers. Swindle Unlimited is still my favorite, though.”

Patently, softly, he stroked the curls of hair out of my face and smiled. “One commitment at a time.”

I couldn’t hold back my own smile. I wrapped my arms around his shoulders. “I think

I can live with that.”

Max cocked an eyebrow. “You sure about that, Leonardo?”

Grinning, delighted, I kissed him on the side of his cheek. “One hundred percent.”

He took me in his arms, hands so strong, yet somehow so gently cradling the small of my back. “One hundred percent.”

One commitment at a time. No, I really could live with that. When he kissed me, I ran my fingers through his hair, relishing that we finally had the time to just sit back and relax. At least until the next assignment came in from the Jade Spider, until the next demented member of the Brillante family decided to glance in our general direction.

Until the next dragon came knocking. The three dragons had gone for the moment, but who knew if they’d be back, if others would follow their example? But even then, only one thing at a time. One job. One dragon. Especially the dragon.

Or one Drake, for that matter. A certain Maximilian Drake, my favorite of the species.

Almost at once, our phones buzzed. I could feel mine rumble in my pocket, feel his vibrate against my hip. He pulled away, and I lurched after him, still hungry for more. He never reached into his pocket, never broke eye contact.

“It can wait,” he said, and for once, we were in total agreement. He leaned in, kissing me full on the mouth once more. I savored the moment, savored his presence, his taste, his smell.

Who needed chronomancy when Max’s embrace could make the Earth stop turning?

He kissed me harder. I laughed against his lips.

Time stood still. The world could wait.