



Potions & Prejudice

(Moonflower Witches #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Witch hates warlock.

Warlock hates witch.

Warlock falls for witch.

. . . Things get very, very complicated.

Elspeth Moonflower just wants to cast a spell. Unfortunately, that's impossible due to a curse her grandmother cast that forces every witch in her family to marry before using magic. As a result, Elspeth and her sisters are outcasts, helping their mother run her traveling apothecary shop—while she complains that her daughters are all magicless spinsters.

When their cart breaks down and strands them in the charming village of Thistlegrove, Elspeth's older sister meets a handsome warlock who's smitten. If only the warlock's best friend wasn't completely insufferable. Draven Darkstone is broody, arrogant, wealthy—a perfect example of why Elspeth never wants to marry. But for the sake of her sister, she needs to be nice.

Which is hard when all Draven does is glower at her. It's even harder when the glowering turns to longing glances. It's downright impossible when he kisses her.

Little does Elspeth know, the line between love and hate just got thinner.

Total Pages (Source): 47

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:22 am

One

ELSPETH

I t was never a good sign when a witch wanted a love potion.

The witch in question stood in front of our cart, a countertop between us, as she planted her hands on the wood and glared at me. “I can see the potion right there.” She pointed to the bottles of brightly colored liquid sitting on the shelf behind me. “I’m telling you I know a love potion when I see one.”

The sun barely peeked through the thick cover of clouds, its light haloing her mop of curly red hair. A chill bit the air, and goosebumps prickled along my arms. The breeze picked up, dirt from the road where our cart was parked swirling behind the witch.

I grabbed the sage-colored potion from the shelf next to me and popped open the cork. Sage smoke swirled up into the air in front of us. “I’m telling you it’s not worth it,” I said, shaking the bottle, the liquid inside sloshing around. I shoved the cork back in. “Whatever man you’re trying to snag, a potion won’t fix the problems between you. You can’t magic him into loving you. Not for real.”

She stuck out her bottom lip, which trembled ever so slightly. Now I felt bad. Sort of. I was actually saving her a world of trouble. She just didn’t realize it yet. But if she had to seek out a love potion to get his attention, then whatever was between them clearly wasn’t love.

She shoved her hand in the pocket of her apron and pulled out a fistful of gold coins, slamming them on the counter. “Are you running a business or not?”

I leaned forward, pushing the coins back toward her, slow and intentional. “I decide who I sell to. My potions. My rules.”

Technically these weren’t my potions. They were my mother’s. But semantics.

“What is going on here?”

I winced at the familiar singsong voice. Mama and my sisters were back earlier than expected. Well, sister.

Mama and my youngest sister, Prue, approached, Prue with her nose stuck in a book as usual. Auggie and Adelaide must have still been at the market.

Mama patted her round cheeks, red from the cold. “Is there a problem?”

“Yes.” The woman gestured to me, and I straightened my shoulders. “She won’t sell me a love potion.”

“Oh, not this again,” Mama said with an admonishing gaze.

Prue lowered the book she was reading to stare at me through her round spectacles. She opened her mouth to say something, then raised the book again and walked toward the back of the cart, ignoring all of us.

“I’m simply trying to steer her away from a bad decision,” I said evenly, swiping the bangs from my forehead.

“Oh, hush, you.” Mama bustled up to the cart, opening the little door in the back and

stepping in. She sidled over and bumped me with her hip, smiling brightly at the woman. “So it’s one love potion you’d like?” She leaned forward like she was telling the woman a secret. “You know, two can be more effective. Especially if you throw in some”—she turned, surveying the herbs hanging from the ceiling by little strings—“rotwart.” She grabbed the stalks of bright blue herbs tied together with a ribbon and laid it on the counter. “These won’t just make him more amenable to love but to other things as well.” She waggled her eyebrows.

“Oh.” The woman’s eyes widened with understanding, and I grimaced. “Yes, I’ll have the potion and two of the rotwart. ”

I glared at Mama while she ignored me.

She took the woman’s gold and handed over one bottle of the sparkling sage liquid and the herbs. The woman continued her way down the dirt road, humming to herself, probably thinking she just solved all her problems with that purchase.

“Honestly, Elspeth.” Mama turned to me as she smoothed out her frizzy gray hair, pulled up in a bun. “I leave you alone for twenty minutes and come back to you harassing a customer.”

I pressed my lips into a thin line. “I just don’t think love potions are the answer to her problems.”

Especially not when they didn’t do as advertised. No magic could make a person change their feelings if those feelings didn’t already exist. If they did, the magic nudged them to admit it. The witch likely knew this, but desperation made people do stupid things.

“And why is it not the answer?” Mama planted her hands on her wide hips. “Because some man broke your heart? So every man must be the same? Unworthy and

unlovable?”

Prue snorted from somewhere behind the cart.

Mama shook a finger at me. “Those are our best sellers, and you’re going to sabotage our entire business with this attitude of yours.” She folded her arms onto the counter and sank her head into them.

“Here we go,” I muttered as she sobbed dramatically.

“I did everything right,” she said, voice muffled. “Everything I could to raise four strong, smart women, and what do I get for it all?” She shot up, peering at me with her narrowed chestnut eyes that were suspiciously absent of any tears. “Ungratefulability.”

“That’s not a word,” Prue shouted.

“Why is everyone always attacking me?” Mama wailed, her plump cheeks like two red apples.

“No one is attacking anybody.” I put out both hands. “I just think we could focus on other potions, ones that actually help people. That aren’t... dishonest.”

I glanced at the cauldron situated toward the front of the cart, filled with a bubbling blue liquid, a new potion Mama was making that I’d suggested. One that could heal itching from fairy mites, vicious little bugs that infested wood—and liked blood. They emerged at night and feasted on sleeping witches, who then woke up covered in the tiny glittering bites.

I’d have to test the potion before we could sell it, which I intended to do later.

“Well, Elspeth, if you made any of these potions, maybe you’d have more say in them.”

I winced at the jab.

“Besides, we are not being dishonest.” Mama put a hand to her chest. “We are harbingers of hope. Hope that these poor, unfortunate souls may finally get the love they’re so willing to give.”

“Because that’s what everyone needs to be happy?” Prue said, still somewhere behind the cart, presumably reading.

“You could do with a nice witch,” Mama shot back. “Get you away from those books you’ve constantly got your nose stuck in.”

“If any real men were as good as the ones in my books, maybe I’d be more interested,” Prue yelled.

“She’s only twenty.” I peered at the liquid, fat bubbles skimming the surface of the cauldron. “She has time.”

Mama looked up toward the sky. “What did I do to deserve this? Four beautiful daughters. Not one of them married. None of them with any interest in finding love.”

“Sorry to be such a disappointment.” I grabbed my wand off the shelf and stirred the cauldron. The potion would be finished soon.

She leveled me with a stare. “Now you know why I care so much about my girls getting married.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “Your magic depends on it.”

“I know,” I said softly, the fight draining out of me. “I’m sure one of us will have

some luck soon.”

Mama gazed out at the winding dirt road, fields on either side, and mountains in the distance. “It’s hard when we’re always traveling. You know, it would be so much easier if we found a place to settle down?—”

“You know why that’s not possible.” I stopped stirring and pointed the wand at her. “Mama, I’m doing my best to keep us all safe, and moving from place to place is the most sensible way to do that. We’ve talked about this.”

“Or, rather, you’ve talked about it and decided for us,” Prue shouted .

I looked toward the back of the cart with an irritated glance, even if my youngest sister couldn’t see me. The only reason Prue wanted to stay in one spot was for the local bookstores and libraries—and so she could have a bookshelf to store her books, something we didn’t have room for in our tiny traveling apothecary shop.

Mama sniffed but didn’t respond. “It looks like a slow day,” she finally said. “You can start setting up camp, and I’ll handle the shop.”

Guilt swarmed me, and I wondered for the millionth time if I was doing the right thing by my family. My sisters and mama all wanted a home to call our own, friends, marriage. But with that came risks, ones we couldn’t afford. I seemed to be the only one who ever remembered that, so I always had to be the bad guy, even to my own mama, who pouted like a child far too often.

I stared at my black wand, the handle engraved with intricate swirls. If only I could actually use it, make my own potions, do magic of any kind. Then we wouldn’t be in this mess. Every day this wand was a reminder of all the things I couldn’t do. My sisters and I all had wands. It would be noticeable if we didn’t, would raise suspicions. Something we couldn’t afford unless we wanted to lose everything.

“Oh, finally, your sisters are back.” I didn’t bother looking up until Mama gasped. “And they brought a gentleman with them.” Glee filled her voice.

My head shot up as Auggie and Adelaide walked toward us, Auggie hanging on to the arm of a tall, muscled man with his black hair tied back into a ponytail, his skin a warm brown. Tendrils of curls hung around the sides of his face. He was huge, built like a mountain.

There was only one species who grew that big—werewolves. I wondered what he was doing in the Witchlands.

Auggie was gazing at him, but the man kept sneaking glances at Adelaide. My eldest sister walked next to them, carrying a sack of what I assumed was ingredients for our lunch, plus a few things for some new potions. Auggie giggled at something the werewolf said, flipping her brown waves over her shoulder and batting her eyes at him.

Mama squealed in delight, pushing past me and toward the back door. She threw it open and ran to greet them. “Well, what do we have here?” she asked as my oldest sister continued toward the cart.

“Who is that?” I whispered to Adelaide when she approached .

She pursed her pink lips. Even when she frowned, she was impossibly beautiful. Her blonde hair was tied back in a simple ponytail, and her light blue dress complemented her pale peach tones. “Oh, you know Auggie,” she said. “Latches on to anyone who will give her attention. His name is Elm Kingsley.”

I knew I shouldn’t have let Auggie go to the market, but she wouldn’t stop pouting and eventually wore me down.

I chewed the inside of my cheek. Mama continued to chatter away to the man while Auggie stared at him adoringly. My gut churned. I didn't like strangers sniffing around our camp. Maybe I could get rid of him quickly. I turned to look at some of our potions. I could give him a sudden, harmless rash if I combined a few of them, and?—

“Elspeth!” Mama waved. “Get an extra plate out for lunch. We have a guest joining us!”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:22 am

Two

ELSPETH

We sat around the fire, more clouds rolling in and covering the sun, the air still chilly. Orange, brown, and yellow leaves scattered across the ground, showing signs of the transition from summer to fall. Soon, winter would be upon us. I rubbed my hands together and blew into them.

A small cast-iron pot sat on a grate over the fire with a simple veggie stew bubbling in it. Adelaide had made it. She was our cook—and a very good one.

Everyone ate, except me and Auggie: Auggie because she was peppering the werewolf with questions. Me because my stomach was churning with anxiety.

“Where did you get this fine vest?” Auggie placed her hand on Elm’s arm, and I didn’t miss the way she squeezed his bicep.

Elm shifted on the ground, darting glances at Adelaide. He couldn’t keep his eyes off my older sister. Auggie remained oblivious, as usual.

Prue held a book in one hand, ladling soup into her mouth with the other, paying no attention to any of us.

“Auggie, let the poor man eat,” Mama said, batting her long lashes at him .

And she wondered where Auggie got it from. Mama was just as bad as my younger,

far too impressionable, sister.

“It’s okay. Really.” Elm set down his bowl of soup and scooted over, putting distance between him and Auggie. He gestured to his clothes. “I had this made by my tailor.”

I stiffened as he confirmed what I already knew: that he had money. That he was important. Auggie reached out and ran a finger over the brown vest he wore, thick and probably lined with wool. Maroon trim lined the vest, matching his maroon undershirt with its long sleeves. His black pants showed no signs of wear or dirt, and they were tucked into fine leather boots. He shouldn’t be here. Didn’t everyone understand how dangerous this could be for us? The wealthiest were all connected, and everyone who lived here answered to Witch Superior, whether they were witches or not. She was the coven leader of the Witchlands and the one person who could force me and my sisters to leave if she discovered our secret. Or worse, she could burn us at the stake, a fate meant for criminals. And it wasn’t just any fire Witch Superior used—but her deadly hellfire, which I was told differed from regular fire in that it kept witches from passing out from the smoke, keeping them alive as they burned and suffered horrible deaths.

My throat went dry at the thought. “What are you doing here?” I asked abruptly, everyone’s wide eyes turning on me. “I don’t see many werewolves in the Witchlands,” I clarified quickly.

“Half werewolf, actually,” Elm said. “Half witch. I live here permanently.”

“Elspeth, are you not going to eat?” Mama asked, raising a painted eyebrow. She’d lost hers when a spell had gone wrong, the potion exploding in her face and taking her eyebrows—permanently.

“I’m not very hungry,” I said, stirring my soup.

“Oh great, so we’ll have to deal with her being even grumpier.” Auggie flipped her hair over her shoulder.

I forced a smile and took a small sip of my soup, the food tasting like ash in my mouth. I needed to get rid of Elm as fast as possible. We couldn’t risk him finding out my sisters and I didn’t have magic.

“So, Elm,” Auggie said, laying a hand on his knee. “What brings you to this part of the Witchlands?”

He scratched the back of his neck. “Visiting a good friend, actually. Are you all from these parts? I haven’t heard of the Moonflowers, but then again, there’s always new families popping up around here.”

“No,” I said curtly before Auggie could answer and spill all our secrets.

Mama shot me a look that said “be nice.”

Auggie waved her hand in my direction. “Ignore her. She gets grumpy when she doesn’t eat.” She cocked her head. “Actually, she’s grumpy all the time.”

I clamped my mouth shut as Adelaide’s eyes crinkled in concern. Prue, as usual, paid no attention to any of us, so enraptured by her book despite the fact that she’d read it at least five times by now.

“Adelaide,” Elm said.

My eldest sister straightened, tucking a stray piece of blonde hair behind her ear as she met Elm’s gaze.

“I noticed your wand earlier.” He cleared his throat. “The engravings are beautiful.

Who made that for you?"

Adelaide touched her apron pocket absently, the wand sticking out from it. "My father," she said quietly. "He carved each of our wands for us when we were born."

"Really?" Elm leaned forward, resting an elbow on his knee and forcing Auggie to withdraw her hand. "He must've been a talented woodsmith."

While Elm's face brightened, Adelaide's tightened, a frown growing. "He was. He wrote his own spells to make wonderful creations from wood."

"Is he here?" Elm looked around our campsite as if my father might suddenly appear from the woods in the distance.

"No," I said, voice hard. "And we have to be going soon."

"Elspeth!" Mama admonished. "Mr. Kingsley hasn't even finished eating his soup."

I stood, accidentally kicking my bowl. It lurched to the side, soup spilling all over the ground.

"What is wrong with her?" Auggie asked.

Prue lowered her book. "Well, she's probably tired of hearing you talk all the time."

Auggie scoffed as Prue raised her book back over her eyes.

"Girls." Mama's eyes widened meaningfully .

"It's no trouble, Thea," Elm said to my mama, but his gaze was trained on Adelaide, who was looking straight at me.

My heart pounded in my chest, past memories flooding me. My father. His betrayal. Everyone else who'd betrayed us. It was a miracle we were still in the Witchlands, that we hadn't been forced to leave.

"Oh no." Adelaide looked down, her bowl now turned on its side, the contents spilling everywhere.

"Why is everyone so clumsy today?" Auggie drew her bowl closer to her. "I'm not sharing any of mine."

"We know," Prue said from behind her book.

"I'm so sorry about them," Mama said to Elm, but his gaze remained on Adelaide, brows pinched.

"Are you still hungry?" he asked, tipping his head toward the forest. "I know Thistlegrove Forest well. I can forage some mushrooms and berries for you if you'd like." He tapped his nose. "I have a good sense of smell."

Adelaide waved away his words. "No, that won't be necessary?—"

"Yes," I burst out, a plan forming in my mind. I strode past the fire and grabbed Elm's arm, helping him to his feet. He towered over me. "That would be lovely. Thank you so much for the kind offer."

"Elspeth," my mother hissed. "He does not need to forage for us. He's our guest."

"It would really be so helpful," I said to him.

"It's not a problem," he said to Mama. "Really. I don't mind at all." His gaze flicked to Adelaide again. I let go of his arm, and he backed away. "I'll be back soon."

With that, he turned and walked in long strides toward the forest in the distance. I waited until he disappeared behind the tree line and then stomped out the fire.

“We don’t have a lot of time,” I said as I grabbed the bowl of soup from Auggie’s hand and dumped it.

“Hey!” Auggie whined.

“What has gotten into you?” Mama asked. “First, you try to turn away a perfectly good customer, and now you’re treating Elm abominably. Honestly, it’s no wonder you’re not married by now. Is this how you treat every man you come across?”

I ignored her, grabbing everyone’s bowls and stacking them. They’d have to be washed later when we found a new campsite. One far away from here.

“We’re leaving,” I said, stalking toward the cart and placing the bowls in a basket that sat right by the back door. I walked around the side and lifted the countertop, which hinged upward and latched to the side of the cart.

“Leaving?” Auggie said. “What about Elm?”

I turned, exasperated. “That’s why we’re leaving.”

Prue was already walking toward the cart and getting in, her book clutched tight in her hand.

Mama planted her hands on her curvy hips. “What are you talking about?”

I shot a look at Thistlegrove Forest. “I don’t trust him.”

“Shocking,” Auggie said, rolling her eyes.

I returned to the campsite, gathering all our bedrolls. “He’s too risky. We can’t get close to him.”

Adelaide bit her bottom lip and looked toward the forest. “He was so nice.”

My sweet sister. She saw the best in everyone. That was why it was my job to protect her. Protect all of them.

“And he and Auggie were getting along so well!” Mama said. “He’s smitten with her.”

I snorted. Mama was as oblivious as Auggie. If Elm was smitten with anyone, it was clearly Adelaide, but I didn’t have time to explain any of this. The werewolf would be back soon.

I pushed Auggie and Mama toward the cart as they both screeched in protest. I shoved them right up to the back door, and they begrudgingly got inside as I threw in the bedrolls and slammed it shut behind them.

I ran up to the front of the cart, swinging myself into the driver’s seat.

“Don’t you think this might be taking things a little too far?” Adelaide asked from where she stood.

I blinked. Normally Adelaide was on my side, helping me convince Mama and our sisters when it was time to leave a bad situation.

Unless... I gaped at her as she stepped up and sat next to me.

“You’re as smitten with him as he is with you. ”

Her cheeks turned pink, which was all the confirmation I needed.

The cart began rolling down the bumpy road. We'd spent a small fortune on a spelled cart that would move on its own. It was easier than buying a horse that we'd have to care for. It was also better in situations like this when we were in a hurry. I patted the side of the cart.

"Giddy up," I said, and the cart jolted, increasing its speed.

"Don't push it too hard," Adelaide warned.

I glanced behind me at the tree line in the distance, hoping we could get out of sight before Elm emerged and discovered we'd fled. If everything went according to plan, we'd never see him or Thistlegrove again.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:22 am

Three

ELSPETH

I turned back to Adelaide as the cart rolled along the road. “So?” I asked, arms crossed.

She shrugged innocently. “So . . . what?”

“You really think we should’ve stayed behind, gotten to know this Elm, let him know us.”

Adelaide sighed heavily. “Elspeth, I know you’ve been hurt in the past.”

I looked away, not wanting to think about the person who hurt me, who’d broken my heart. That had been long ago. I’d been a naive girl. Now I was a grown woman of thirty, and I wouldn’t make the same mistakes I had before.

“It’s not about that,” I said.

“Not entirely,” Adelaide agreed. She laid a hand on my arm. “But I think it is part of it. You know nothing about Elm, yet you assume he’s going to discover our secrets and turn us in to Witch Superior.”

The only way that wouldn’t happen was if, by some miracle, the Witch Trials were invoked before the current Witch Superior was ready to step down.

Typically, the Witch Trials happened when the current Witch Superior invoked them herself, signaling she was ready for her reign to end. But if someone else called for the trials to happen, that was a different situation entirely.

In that case, Witch Superior would be forced to compete against the most powerful witches in our realm to keep her position. Witch Superior was at least eighty years old, so she wouldn't fare well in the trials, would likely lose to her challengers. But it wasn't easy to invoke the Witch Trials early. It took a great number of petitioners to do so, a trip to the capital, a presentation before the witch council as to why the trials needed to be invoked. In short, it was extremely difficult. The Witch Trials hadn't been invoked by the people for over three hundred years.

It wasn't likely to happen. The next Witch Trials would come about when Witch Superior was ready to step down, and then she'd invoke them herself and wouldn't have to compete. She'd get to preside over the event, retire with a great legacy behind her. A legacy full of harsh laws and even harsher punishments.

Exactly why we had to be careful about who we fraternized with.

The wind gusted past us, and I shivered. Once we were far enough away, I would stop the cart and grab my cloak, but right now that damned tree line was still too close for comfort.

Adelaide brushed some stray blonde hairs from her forehead. "You don't always have to shut the world out. You're so scared we're going to be caught, I'm afraid you're missing out on making connections, on letting anyone in."

Adelaide didn't get it. She was kind. Too kind, which made her a pushover. Auggie was too self-involved and immature. Prue didn't care about anything but her books. And Mama... well, Mama was like a child instead of an actual mother. I was the only one who could keep us safe. Who had kept us safe all these years after I messed up

and almost cost us everything by revealing our secret to the wrong person. I wouldn't ever make that mistake again.

I was about to tell Adelaide exactly that when our cart hit a bump. We jolted forward, a horrible crack splitting the air as the cart skidded off the road.

Screams erupted from inside, Mama and my sisters squealing in terror. My heart shot up to my throat, and my lungs squeezed tight. Adelaide gripped onto me while I held on tight to the cart. I couldn't do anything but watch the events unfold as it rolled off the side of the road.

The cart lurched to a stop, but my body went flying through the air. My stomach heaved, the world becoming a dizzying flood of color and sound until I crashed into the ground.

My knees and hands made impact first, pain jolting through my joints. I tried to lift my hand from the ground, but it was stuck, which was when I realized we'd landed in mud. Thick, sticky mud. I groaned and slowly came to a stand. Mud splattered across my green dress, the hem and sleeves now ripped. My boots were encased in the thick substance.

The cart lay on its side behind me, one of the wheels broken off and another one with a crack through it. Mama, Auggie, and Prue were climbing out of the back, all of them with scratches and their hair going in all directions—but other than that, they seemed okay.

Auggie stopped when she saw the mud. "Mama, my dress is ruined!" She lifted the skirts of her pale pink dress, covered in splotches of our broken potions. She'd begged me to let her buy that dress. Auggie loved pretty things.

Prue poked her head out. "My books," she cried, lifting one up that was now blue and

dripping. “The potions soaked them.”

They were worried about clothes and books when we had much, much bigger problems on our hands. I stared at the cart, my stomach sinking. This cart was our entire business. It was our transportation. It was everything, and we didn’t have the money to fix it. If the cart was broken, that effectively broke the spell cast over it. We’d need to both fix the cart and find a woodsmith who could recast the spell. None of us knew how to do such powerful magic. This was a complete disaster.

“Where is Adelaide?” Mama cried.

I gasped, realizing I’d forgotten about my older sister.

“I’ve got her,” a masculine voice said.

Chills skittered down my arms as Elm Kingsley appeared from behind the cart, carrying Adelaide in his arms as he sloshed his way through the muddy field.

“I’m really okay,” she said, cheeks pink and dotted with mud. “You don’t have to carry me.”

He gave her the most tender look I’d ever seen. “I don’t mind. You all left in such a hurry. Was everything okay?”

Mama hopped down off the cart, tromping through the field to get to Elm and Adelaide, the skirts of her dress caked in mud. “Oh, it was so silly,” she said. “Elsbeth remembered we had an appointment with a merchant who wanted to buy our potions. I’m so sorry we had to leave like that. We were planning on returning after the appointment, but well...” She gestured to our cart.

Elm set Adelaide down but kept his arm around her waist. He loomed over her,

massive, his dark, curly hair tied back at his nape with curls escaping and framing his chiseled face. He rubbed his stubbled chin, and Auggie sighed, practically swooning as she gawked at him. Prue smacked her with a book, and Auggie jolted, then glared at our youngest sister.

“I’m sorry.” Elm gestured to our cart. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“No,” I said quickly while everyone else said, “Yes.”

This was turning into a nightmare.

“We can handle this on our own.” I tried to keep the edge from my voice.

“How?” Auggie gestured to the cracked wheel. “We can’t fix this ourselves.” She looked behind her into the cart. “Most of our potion bottles are broken. Our cauldron is overturned. The entire inside is a mess with the spilled liquid everywhere.”

I swallowed back my tears. I’d been so distracted by the outside, I hadn’t even thought about the disaster that was on the inside.

“Come to town with me,” Elm said to Adelaide, taking her small hands in his large ones. “Thistlegrove has a talented woodsmith who can get your cart fixed.”

My pulse jumped at the suggestion. I didn’t want to go into town. Towns were full of people, of gossip, of prying eyes.

“Does Thistlegrove have a bookstore?” Prue asked, eyeing Elm.

A slow smile spread across his face. “It does.”

“I’m in,” she said and hopped off the cart, a huge splat of mud spraying everywhere

as her boots sank into the ground. She pushed her spectacles farther up her nose .

“Watch it!” Auggie raised her hands up to shield herself from the onslaught of mud.

I crossed my arms. “How are we even going to get our cart to town?”

“I happen to be very strong.” Elm shot me a confident smile.

Right. Werewolves had enormous strength.

“I can pull it to town for you, and then we’ll find the local woodsmith. Everyone in Thistlegrove is very welcoming.”

I’d heard that before, and it never stayed true for long.

“I bet you have a dress shop too.” Auggie pressed her hands together.

“We do,” Elm replied. “With many beautiful silks and a talented dressmaker.”

“Can we please go to town?” Auggie said, but she wasn’t asking Mama. She was asking me.

I looked from the cart to the road to the sky above, where clouds were gathering and darkening. It would rain soon, and we didn’t want to be stuck in this field when it happened.

“Where are we going to stay?” I asked helplessly, knowing we wouldn’t have enough gold to pay for an inn for more than a few nights.

Elm stroked his jaw. “I have an idea about that.”

I sighed heavily. “It doesn’t look like we have much choice.”

“Perfect,” Elm said. “You’re going to love Thistlegrove and all the people in it. I promise.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:22 am

Four

DRAVEN

The tavern was full, everyone here to get a drink and some food before the storm rolled in. Thunder rumbled threateningly outside as I stood behind the bar top, polishing a few glasses. A mug floated behind me and dipped down toward the barrel full of ale. The spout on the barrel turned, and amber liquid filled the mug, a creamy foam forming on top. The mug floated up and toward the patron who'd ordered it.

It landed on the old man's table, liquid sloshing over the sides and splashing onto his shirt. He harrumphed and shot me a glare. The spell did need some perfecting. I'd work on it later. These types of spells were complicated, and unlike so many others, I didn't buy pre-spelled items. I created all the spells myself.

It took finessing and time.

Veldar was now stomping over, the mug in his hand as he approached, scowling at me.

"What is it?" I asked, planting my hands on the bar.

He pinched the part of his shirt where ale had splattered. "You owe me a new shirt!"

I sighed, looking pointedly at the worn beige tunic, which had several holes and was yellowing near the collar. "Veldar, I'm not buying you a new shirt."

“Well, then you’re losing a valuable customer,” the old man said.

“Sounds like a personal problem.” I leaned closer. “For you.”

Veldar’s scowl deepened, the folds of his skin becoming more pronounced around his eyes and cheeks. “This is terrible customer service.”

“I can offer you a free mug of ale. I’m not buying you a damn shirt.”

“Let’s not anger the customers,” a voice said from next to me, followed by a nervous chuckle.

I looked over at Edgar, a miniature dragon I’d recently adopted, who seemed to be scared by damn near everything. The size of my hand, he rested on my shoulder—which had somehow become his favorite spot—his scaled ears perked as he watched our interaction.

Veldar slammed a hand down. “I agree with the dragon.”

“You just want me to buy you a new shirt,” I pointed out. “And I’m not going to do it. That stain is the size of my thumbnail. All you have to do is wash your shirt, and it will come out.”

Veldar’s face turned red. “You wash my shirt!”

“I’m a bartender, not a laundress,” I replied evenly.

“I can wash it!” Edgar volunteered.

“No,” both Veldar and I said at the same time. Finally, we agreed on something.

“You’re not a laundress either.” I’d adopted the dragon for a specific job, one that he was failing at so far.

“And I don’t like the look of you.” Veldar squinted at the dragon. “Those sharp talons of yours and that fire you breathe—my shirt will either be returned to me in shreds or burnt to a crisp.”

I shrugged. “Might be an improvement, actually.”

Veldar’s jaw clenched, and Edgar squeaked.

“He was just kidding,” Edgar said.

“No I wasn’t,” I said.

“Can I get another one of those dark ales?” a man called from the back, where he sat with a friend in a raised booth, three stairs leading up to their table. In response to his request, one of the mugs sitting on the shelves behind me floated into the air and straight to the barrel with the dark ale.

I leaned over the bar. “Listen, Veldar, we both know how this goes. You complain and demand free things. I say no. You storm out and say you’re never coming back, and then you reappear the next day. Now, I do have a tavern to run, so if we could get on with the theatrics, that would be great.”

Ever since his husband had died twenty years ago, the old man had been insufferable.

Veldar threw up his arms, his pointed chin jutting out. “A pox on you.”

I mouthed the words along with him. He said them every time.

“A pox on your tavern. A pox on the dragon.”

Edgar gasped, tail curling into his side.

“I’m never stepping foot in here again!” With that, Veldar spun on his heel and stormed out.

“Glad that’s done,” I said, continuing to polish the mugs.

“He just put a pox on me.” Edgar whimpered. “What is a pox, exactly?”

“Oh, it’s nothing.” I set down a glass among the row of polished wooden tankards. “Just a curse that makes something sprout green pocks all over their body. Itchy, filled with pus, and they take a special potion to go away.”

Edgar’s eyes widened, and he looked down at his orange scales. “Witch Superior, I think I see one already forming.” He threw himself down. “Get me to the healer! This might be it for me, Draven.”

“He didn’t actually curse you.” I eyed the dragon. “First of all, that’s illegal, and second of all, that would require his wand, which he didn’t bring with him.”

Edgar stopped his wailing and sat up. “Oh, well, why didn’t you say so?”

I shook my head. Before I’d adopted him, the miniature dragon had been living at Arcane Creatures Emporium, the local magical creature shop. He was sheltered. He had a lot to learn about our world, and I didn’t have the patience to teach him.

“Why don’t you use a wand?” Edgar peered at me, curiosity flashing in his eyes.

“I don’t need one,” I replied gruffly. There were a small group of witches with rare

magic that allowed us to cast spells by just uttering the words, no conduit—like a wand—needed. I happened to be one of them.

“You really shouldn’t antagonize your customers,” Edgar said.

“He’s a grumpy old bastard.” I grabbed another glass, stuffing my rag inside of it. “If anything, he antagonizes me.”

Edgar’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but um, well, you’re also a grumpy old bastard. Except you’re not old. At least, not as old as Veldar.”

I snorted, staring at the little dragon. No, I was not. Veldar was over a hundred years old. I’d just turned thirty-five. But some days, I felt over a hundred.

“I’m just saying...” Edgar’s eyes shifted back and forth. “You could maybe be nicer sometimes? Not so focused on your work that you forget about the people around you?”

I leaned in until we were nearly nose to nose, and he flinched. “There’s just one problem with that: I don’t like any of the people around me.”

Which was true. I wasn’t a people person. Never had been. I preferred the solitude of my magic and my tiny apartment over the tavern.

“Now that I think about it. Not much of a dragon person either.”

Edgar’s eyes widened. “Oh, please don’t get rid of me.” He curled into himself, tail grazing my shoulder.

“I’m not getting rid of you, Edgar.” I flipped the rag over my shoulder and set down the final glass that needed polishing. “And maybe I am a grumpy old bastard, but it’s

my bar. My bar. My rules. If anyone doesn't like it, they don't have to come. Why are you down here anyway?"

"Georgie kicked me out." He sniffed.

I stiffened. "She what?"

"I know! I was trying to tell her how dangerous it was to jump out the window and sneak out, but she wouldn't listen!"

I groaned and looked up at the ceiling. "Edgar," I said. "What is the one job I gave you?"

He paused, tilting his head. "Watch your sister."

"Yes." I gave him a pointed look. "So find her, and when you do, tell her to get her ass back here before I have to come find her."

He gulped. "Leaving now." He flapped his wings, which were the same orange color as his scales, but more translucent.

A few patrons chuckled as the tiny dragon soared over them.

Just what I needed right now. My younger sister sneaking out and getting herself into more trouble. I wasn't sure what to do with her. At sixteen, she was an enigma to me. But I was all she had, and I was trying to be there for her. I just didn't know how.

"Can you believe it?" a witch said to her friend.

They both sat on stools at the bar top, drinking a new fruity ale I'd been experimenting with: apple crisp.

“Five new witches appearing in Thistlegrove?” her friend said.

I inched closer, listening to the gossip.

“A mother and her four daughters.” The witch leaned closer to her friend. “Apparently their cart broke down and Elm Kingsley saved them. I think he might have his eye on one of them. I heard they were all clamoring for his attention. Practically pawing at him.”

I sighed. Now that I didn’t like. Elm was one of my only friends. In town to visit, actually. He was wealthy, influential, and he didn’t always make the best decisions when it came to women. Whoever these witches were, they already sounded like bad news. And that meant I had yet another problem on my hands.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:22 am

Five

ELSPETH

Two hours later, Elm managed to pull our mangled cart into town and to the woodsmith's shop. The older man circled our cart for what felt like an eternity, making noncommittal noises that only made me more anxious.

Adelaide and Elm stood outside his thatched-roof shop, both speaking in low tones. Auggie stood by Elm, clutching on to his arm. Prue had found a bench nearby, a book in hand.

"Elspeth, quit biting your nails," Mama scolded. And Mama was watching me, apparently. "People are staring."

She looked over her shoulder, and my gaze followed hers to the winding dirt road filled with carts and businesses, witches darting in and out with their wares. And many of them were staring directly at us.

"They're not staring because I'm biting my nails," I said in a low voice.

Thistlegrove was clearly a small town.

Mama grabbed my hand and pushed it down, smiling and nodding at the people passing by the woodsmith's shop, who were peering at us a little too closely.

"Oh, stop being so paranoid." Mama wiggled her fingers at a few passersby, and they

averted their eyes and hurried along. She nudged me. “I thought Elm had taken a liking to Auggie, but he doesn’t have eyes for anyone but Adelaide. Don’t they just look adorable together?”

I snorted. “They barely know each other. We just met him hours ago.”

“Oh, Elspeth.” Mama tsked. “Have you never heard of love at first sight?”

I gaped at my mama. “That is not what’s happening. Everyone falls in love with Adelaide at first sight.”

How could they not? My older sister was gorgeous, and she didn’t even realize it, which only made her more alluring with her soft-spoken nature, her kindness, how she went out of her way to please everyone, often neglecting her own feelings in the process.

“Now you’re biting your bottom lip,” Mama said. “Honestly, Elspeth, can you stop worrying? We’re in a beautiful town.” She spread her arms and gestured to the quaint buildings with moss on their roofs, the cute little road, the green forest in the distance, and the sound of a rushing river. “Elm has offered to set us up with somewhere to live. We’re very fortunate, you know.”

That was the other thing. Where was Elm planning on us staying? Would he pay for our rooms at the local inn? I shifted from foot to foot at the thought. He’d also likely be staying at the inn, giving him access to us at all times. Plus, inns in small towns like these were busy places. There were always travelers stopping for a night or two, which was why we chose to camp on the outskirts of towns. It was safer. Less exposure to so many people.

“We’re not taking his charity,” I said firmly. “We’ve spent years camping, and we can continue to do so.”

Mama stuck out her bottom lip. “You are such a killjoy, you know that? I’m tired of sleeping outdoors, roughing it all the time. Oh, my back. My poor joints.” She stretched dramatically. “When are you girls going to take care of me for a change?”

I crossed my arms. We were hardly roughing it. We’d invested in quite a few spelled items that made it almost the same as sleeping indoors somewhere. Bedrolls that stayed warm or cool depending on the weather. A tent that protected us from all kinds of weather elements. Wood that always burned. It had served us well and saved us money in the long run since those valuable items meant we could stay on the outer edges of town, out of sight and safe.

Prue ran up to us, out of breath, her spectacles slipping down her nose and her curly brown hair flying in all directions.

My heart rate spiked. “Prue, what’s wrong?”

I grabbed her arms, looking her over for any signs she’d been hurt.

“Well, spit it out, Prue.” Mama tapped her foot. “What’s going on?”

“The bookstore is just down the road!” Prue burst out, speaking so fast I had a hard time understanding her.

She pointed to the little building, and I squinted at the wooden post standing in front of it. “Enchanted Pages,” the sign read.

“Two people passed by the bench I was sitting on, and one of them was talking about wanting a new book, and the other one said, ‘Well, why don’t we go now? It’s just down the road.’” She grabbed my hands. “Can I go? I can make an account and get myself a few books while we’re here.” She held up her current book, a dark blue cover with gold lettering. “I’ve been dying to read the sequel to this one.”

“Of course you can, dear,” Mama said, and I shot her a look.

“Maybe we should wait until we get the prognosis for the cart?—”

“Oh, nonsense.” Mama smiled at Prue and handed her a fistful of gold coins. “You go and get yourself a few books.”

Prue squealed, a sound I wasn’t sure I’d ever heard her make.

She threw her arms around us, the book in her hand slamming into the back of my head. “Oh, thank you, thank you. I’ll be back in an hour.” She paused. “Maybe a few.” She squealed again and rushed off down the winding road, lined with businesses on either side.

“Was that smart?” I asked. “We don’t need to draw more attention to ourselves than we already have, and we don’t exactly have the money to buy new books.”

The eyes of the townspeople weighed heavily on me.

“It’s a bookstore.” Exasperation filled Mama’s voice. “I hardly think a few books are going to bankrupt us or bring the magistrates down upon us.”

Just the name sent shivers down my spine. Magistrates. Powerful witches who worked for Witch Superior and hunted individuals accused of breaking the sacred witch laws. Some of them were even spies, disguised as herbalists or teachers or bakers so they could better infiltrate towns, learn everyone’s secrets, and take those secrets back to Witch Superior. It had created a culture of fear, one where people didn’t trust each other.

I rubbed my temples. Maybe Mama was right. Besides, I hadn’t seen Prue so animated in a long time. If a few books would bring her happiness, then I shouldn’t

stand in the way of that.

“Well, I have good news and bad news.” The woodsmith approached, his gray hair peppered with specks of black, his hands stained with black as well. He rubbed his clean-shaven jaw, staining his chin with more of the black substance. I wasn’t sure what it was, maybe some kind of magic he used when doing his woodwork.

I stiffened. “What’s the bad news?”

“Your cart has a deep crack in the bottom, straight down the middle. It’s a wonder the whole thing hasn’t collapsed. As you know, with the cart broken, so is whatever magic it was spelled with.”

My chest tightened. This was the worst-case scenario. Adelaide, Elm, and Auggie drifted over, walking under the thatched roof to hear what the woodsmith had to say.

“So what’s the good news?” Adelaide asked.

“What’s that?” The woodsmith put a finger behind his ear, leaning forward.

“The good news?” Adelaide said more loudly.

“Ah.” He clapped his hands together, glittery black magic poofing up into the air from the force. “Well, you’re going to have an extended stay in the lovely town of Thistlegrove.”

My heart dropped straight to the ground. “Define extended.”

He scratched the back of his head. “It’s going to take at least a month to fix this, if not longer. I’ve got a lot of spells but none quite like what’s needed to fix that deep crack.” He pointed to his grimoire perched on a wooden table, his wand lying next to

it. “It’s going to take some trial and error. Then, of course, there’s re-spelling the cart to move on its own. That’s quite complicated magic.”

I squeezed my eyes shut as my heart beat harder. A month. An entire month.

“I have two rooms at the inn reserved,” Elm said. “I come so often that I have rooms booked for myself and my father. I can stay at my friend’s place. He has plenty of space. And my father won’t be visiting this month. It’s really no trouble.”

His voice was distant, his words burrowing into my anxiety, making it fester like an open wound. Suddenly it was hard to breathe.

“No,” I heard myself say. “We can camp. We’ll camp outside of town.”

“Don’t be silly,” Mama said.

“Elspeth, are you okay?” I felt Adelaide’s hand on my arm.

“She looks wretched,” Auggie said.

My lungs squeezed tight, trapping any air. I clutched my chest as my gaze focused on all the witches staring at us. They were suspicious. They knew our secret. It would only be a matter of time before someone called the magistrates. Just like before.

“Elspeth,” Adelaide said again.

I stumbled away from everyone. “I need a drink.”

“I think you need more than a drink. You need to be sedated. And you also need a bath.” Auggie wrinkled her nose, looking at my mud-speckled dress.

“I know just the place,” Elm said. “It’s called The Brewhouse. It’s right down the road. I can take you.” He looked at Adelaide. “And if you’re interested, you could join us?”

“Perfect!” Mama clapped her hands together. “You three go, and Auggie and I will stay with the woodsmith and talk more about the repairs needed.”

Auggie crossed her arms, scowling. “But I want to go,” she whined.

Mama put her arm around Auggie, drawing her in. “I need you here with me, dear. Go on now. You three have fun.”

I didn’t move, so Adelaide took my arm, gently pulling me forward onto the dirt road, my heart still racing.

“It’ll be okay,” Adelaide whispered. “We’ll figure this out. We always do.”

She was wrong. We didn’t figure out anything. I always handled the problems that came our way, and for the first time in my life, I was out of solutions.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:22 am

Six

DRAVEN

The tavern was surprisingly full of patrons with the incoming storm, their chatter filling the space.

I paced behind the bar, watching the door for any signs of Edgar and my sister. I'd explicitly told Georgie she was to stay in the apartment over the tavern, and as usual, she hadn't listened. She'd always been rebellious, stubborn, impulsive, but ever since we'd moved here a year ago, her behavior had gotten worse.

I thought Thistlegrove would be the perfect place for us since it was the same small town my parents had hailed from. I hadn't lived here in a long, long time, spending my adult years in the capital where I worked. After my parents died, Georgie had moved away from Thistlegrove and in with our grandmother. Then the incident happened, and I brought Georgie here to start over, hoping maybe she'd reconnect with this place.

Unfortunately, she hadn't.

It felt like my younger sister resented me more every day, and, in turn, acted out. Her latest escapade had involved stealing seeds from the town market. Seeds. Something we could easily afford. If she'd just asked, I would've bought them for her .

I rubbed my temples. Worrying would do no good. She and Edgar would probably be back soon, and I had work to do.

A few pieces of parchment lay on the bar top. I'd been working on the spell for mugs to travel from the bar directly to the patrons. I didn't take old man Veldar and his rants too seriously, but I also didn't like that the current spell wasn't perfect. It needed tweaking somewhere, but I hadn't figured out exactly what part.

I rubbed my eyes, looking at the series of scribbles on the parchment. I scratched out a few words, then grabbed one of the mugs behind me and held it while saying the words of the new spell. The mug glowed brightly as the magic worked its way through it.

Magic was complex and varied so much from spell to spell. Different ingredients, different wording, different phrases could often produce the same result.

I drummed my fingers on the bar top, peering at the newly spelled mug and wondering if I'd fixed the problem of the landing.

The door swung open, Georgie stomping in with Edgar behind her. Her thick black hair was twined in a braid that fell down her back, her green eyes flashing with fury as she set them on me and wove her way between tables toward the bar. A few patrons took notice, nodding at Georgie as she passed by, but she paid them no attention.

"You sent my babysitter after me?" she said accusingly as she reached the bar.

Edgar landed on my shoulder, his wings curling around him. "Babysitter?" His orange eyes shifted between the two of us. "But you're not a baby, Georgie."

"She didn't mean it literally, Edgar," I said, an edge to my voice. "And you're not a babysitter. You're a friend."

"Oh, really?" Georgie planted her hands on her slim hips, her trousers with bits of

mud and debris on them. I wondered what she'd been up to. "Do friends spy on each other? Do they order each other around?"

Edgar raised a talon in the air. "I did ask nicely if you'd come with me."

"Where were you?" I ground out. "I was worried."

She snorted. "It's none of your business. "

"I would disagree." I crossed my arms. "In fact, as your caretaker, I'd say it's the opposite."

She forged on like I hadn't even spoken. "Besides, you do realize I've been gone for four hours. Must not have been that worried," she mumbled, scuffing the toe of her boot on the floor.

"I've been working," I said, voice stern. "Something you could learn a little about." I looked at the dirty tables around the tavern meaningfully, then nodded my head toward the rag sitting between us.

Georgie narrowed her gaze. "You know, making me do this is unpaid labor, which is illegal in the Witchlands. Minors aren't supposed to work until we're out of primary school, and I still have two more years of schooling."

"Illegal?" Edgar piped up, his ears perking up. "We're engaging in illegal activity? Are the magistrates going to arrest us?" He put a paw to his mouth. "Are we going to be sent to the Dearthsten Prisons?"

I rolled my eyes. "No and no." I turned my attention to Georgie. "And it's not unpaid labor. It's called chores. This is our home, and as someone who lives here, you need to pitch in." I threw the rag at Georgie, and she caught it, glaring at me.

“You’re one of the most powerful witches on Thaloria.” She squeezed the rag tight, a few drops of water ringing out. “You could spell this rag to clean all the tables.”

“I could.” I pretended to think about it, then smacked my lips. “But I’m not going to. I think you do a better job than any spelled rag could.”

She blew out a frustrated breath and stomped over to one of the dirty tables, wiping it down. Georgie might have been convinced I was trying to torture her, but it was the opposite. I was hoping that pitching in, doing a few chores, might give her a sense of purpose. She seemed so lost in this world, and I didn’t know how to help her find her place. She attended Thistlegrove Academy but didn’t have any friends. It wasn’t like I was the best role model. I didn’t have many friends myself, and I most definitely didn’t know how to bond with a sixteen-year-old girl.

The door to the tavern creaked open, Elm’s massive form filling the doorway, the corkscrew curls that framed his face damp with water. It must’ve already started raining, but the chatter in here drowned out the sounds of the storm.

My friend was in town visiting, and I was eager to talk with him about these newcomers he’d been seen helping. To warn him to be careful. One look at Elm with his perfectly tailored pants, shirt, and vest was enough to know he had money. It didn’t hurt that, according to Georgie, he was “gorgeous” with his chiseled jaw and deep brown eyes. And that was enough to attract the worst of witchkind.

Behind Elm appeared two more witches. One was blonde and beautiful with long legs, a slim figure, and pale, delicate features. My gaze moved to the witch behind her, shorter but equally slim with bangs and dull brown hair that hung past her shoulders. She was plain, someone I wouldn’t look twice at if I passed her on the road, unlike the blonde witch who was turning heads as she approached. They both wore simple dresses covered in mud, their boots worn, and, of course, they were tracking muddy prints across the floor I’d just mopped.

I sighed. Just as I suspected. They weren't wealthy, which gave them motivation to latch onto my friend, and it instantly rang alarm bells in my head.

Elm smiled and waved. He looked behind him, gesturing for the two witches to follow. What was he up to? They made their way toward the bar, and I readied myself to find out what these witches wanted with my friend.

"Is your sister supposed to be doing that?" Edgar pointed a talon in her direction.

My gaze swiveled toward my sister, who was currently sitting at a table and drinking a tankard of ale. I didn't even know where she'd gotten the mug or how. Maybe she'd snuck behind the bar while I was distracted with the newcomers. Either way, she definitely was not supposed to be doing that.

Elm and the two witches sat on barstools. "Draven, I wanted to introduce you to?"

"Excuse me," I said, voice gruff as I made my way around the bar, eyes locked on Georgie. I strode toward my sister and grabbed her arm, hoisting her to her feet.

"Hey!" she said. "Let go of me."

A few patrons took notice, glancing at us out of the corners of their eyes. Great. This was just what I needed. A spectacle in my own tavern.

"What do you think you're doing?" I hissed .

Georgie gestured around. "Um, what everyone who comes to a tavern is doing?"

"Except you're sixteen," I said. "Have you drank ale before?"

"If you actually took notice of me every once in a while, maybe you'd know the

answer to that question.”

What in the hellfire was that supposed to mean? Fuck, I was so bad at this. I had no idea what to do with her. If only there was someone who could get through to my sister, connect with her in a way that I couldn’t.

“Well, it doesn’t matter,” I said. “I don’t care if you’ve drank ale before. You’re not to do it again until you’re of age. Now finish cleaning the tables, then get upstairs, and we’ll talk more about this later.”

Thunder boomed outside.

Georgie stuck out her chin. “No. I want to stay down here. With you.”

She said those last two words so quietly I almost didn’t hear them.

I sighed. “I don’t have time to look after you. I’ve got an entire tavern to run, not to mention a spell that needs finessing. Like I said, we’ll talk about this later.”

I still gripped her arm, and she tried to squirm out of my grasp. “Let me go.”

“Not until you promise to do as you’re told.”

Her gaze hardened, and I knew I’d lost this battle. “No.”

“Georgie,” I warned.

“Let her go,” a voice said behind us.

I whirled around, coming face-to-face with one of the witches Elm had brought into my bar.

She raised her chin, a fire in her mahogany eyes. “Do you often pick on young girls in your establishment?”

I scoffed, unable to believe the gall of this woman. “Mind your own damn business.”

She crossed her arms. “No.”

Georgie grinned. “I like her.”

Of course she did. I, however, did not. “And who are you?” I asked.

“Elspeth. Elspeth Moonflower.”

“Right.” I let go of my sister’s arm, shoving her behind me. “Well, you must not be from here because I don’t recognize you. And that means you don’t know me. You don’t know this town. And you definitely don’t know what in the hellfire you’re talking about, so I suggest you turn around and go back to the bar.”

“So this isn’t just how you treat young girls. It’s how you treat everyone.” She gestured around. “It’s a wonder anyone comes here. Then again, this is the only place in Thistlegrove that serves ale from what I understand. I suppose no one has a choice in the matter.”

Georgie peeked around me. “You’re right. People definitely don’t come here for Draven.”

Elspeth set her steely gaze on me. “I can’t imagine why not.”

Oh, this lady was a real treat.

“Are you okay?” she asked Georgie. “Do you need me to find your parents or

something?”

I winced at the mention of them.

“No, that’s alright.” Georgie picked up the wet rag off the table. “This has been delightful. I’m going to go clean a few tables now.” She flounced off, leaving me alone with Elspeth.

I gaped after my sister. This was what it took to get her to do my bidding? Someone insulting me? Georgie happily wiped a table nearby, a smile on her face as she hummed.

Elspeth looked between Georgie and me. “She’s your employee?” Her eyes widened in horror. “But she can’t be more than sixteen, and... you should not be putting your hands on your staff like that. Especially not a young girl. Who’s in charge here?”

“I am,” I ground out, teeth clenched so tight my jaw hurt.

I should’ve corrected her, told her that the “young girl” was my sister. But I didn’t like how this woman barged into my tavern and made assumptions about someone she knew absolutely nothing about. I didn’t owe her any explanations, and I didn’t care what she thought of me.

“I suggest you return to your seat now.” I gestured toward the bar, where Elm and the blonde were sitting, their heads bent together as they talked. They were so deep in their conversation they hadn’t even noticed their companion was over here with me.

Pestering me.

“Fine,” she said. “I could use a drink anyway.”

“Yeah, you’re not the only one,” I fired back.

“What is that supposed to mean?” she asked.

“It means I just met you, and you’ve managed to insult me, anger me, and exhaust me in the span of a few minutes. I shouldn’t even allow you to step foot in my tavern again after that display. And the only reason I’m not kicking you out right now is because you’re Elm’s guest, and he’s a loyal patron.”

She snorted. “Well, it’s definitely not because of you. You must serve good ale.”

Right then, a mug flew through the air. The one I’d just spelled. Elspeth looked at it and let out a scream as it shot toward her head at a frightening speed.

Fuck. I must’ve been too aggressive with my spell, and now it was going to knock the woman unconscious. For a moment, I considered letting it happen. But no matter how much I disliked her, I wouldn’t let anyone get hurt. Especially not in my tavern. Not because of my magic.

Before I could think too much on it, I barreled into her, and we both tumbled to the ground.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:22 am

Seven

ELSPETH

One minute, I was standing upright, seeing my life flash before my eyes, and the next, the rude tavern owner was crashing into me. His heavy body pushed me toward the ground. I yelped as we fell, and he landed on top of me with an oomph.

The mug flew right over us and through the air, crashing into one of the walls. Everyone broke out in applause.

“Looks like you got some kinks to work out in your spells,” someone shouted at the man.

Draven was what the girl had called him.

He still lay on top of me, and I wondered if he’d lost consciousness. His body pinned mine to the ground, and I tried wiggling underneath him to no avail.

He groaned. “You just kneed me in the balls.”

“Oh, so you are awake.”

His head snapped to mine, our noses nearly touching, and for a moment, I was taken aback by the vibrant light green of his eyes. They reminded me of sage, one of my favorite colors. And it was now associated with him. Forever stained.

“Did you hear me?” he said. “You kneed me in the balls. ”

I jolted, realizing I’d somehow let myself get lost in those stupid eyes. “Well, if you would kindly remove yourself from on top of me, then I wouldn’t have to. Besides, I didn’t do it on purpose. You’re heavy, and your body is crushing mine.”

I shoved him as Elm and Adelaide hurried over.

“What in the hellfire happened?” Elm asked, hoisting Draven to his feet while Adelaide helped me to a stand.

“One minute, you were sitting next to us and the next I see you almost getting killed by a flying tankard.” My sister raised her hands to her cheeks.

That was because she was so enamored by this Elm that she hadn’t paid me any attention.

“Oh, your friend was just sticking her nose where it didn’t belong.” Draven glowered at me.

“My sister,” Adelaide said with an apologetic tone. “She does that sometimes.”

Elm let out a nervous laugh. “I’m sure Draven is exaggerating.”

Now Draven turned his hard gaze on the werewolf. “No, I’m not.” He cleared his throat, glancing at me. “You’re welcome, by the way. For saving your life just now.”

He shoved a hand through his thick, wavy hair, tousled in an effortless sort of way.

“This is your tavern.” I scoffed. “That was your mug. Your magic. It was your fault I almost got killed in the first place.”

His stubbled jaw locked. “And if you hadn’t intervened in a situation you had no right to get in the middle of, that wouldn’t have happened. Therefore, it’s your fault.”

My temper flared at the smug look on his face. “And if you hadn’t been acting like an ass, I wouldn’t have had to intervene in the first place.”

Adelaide’s mouth dropped open.

“Okay,” Elm said, sticking out his arms between us. “This could go on for a long time?—”

Draven pushed past him, stepping right in front of me and staring down his straight nose, ire flickering in his green eyes. “I was not being an ass, and once again, this is a good example of why you have no idea what you’re talking about. ”

I knew bullies like him. I’d met them time and time again on our travels throughout the Witchlands. I’d seen my own sisters put in vulnerable situations by men like him.

My throat grew thick.

I’d experienced a vulnerable situation myself. Gotten my heart broken by a man who seemed so much like Draven, arrogant and infallible. So maybe it hadn’t been my place to step in. But when I saw him grab that young girl’s arm, saw the anger flash in her eyes, it reminded me of my own sisters. It reminded me of myself. How I didn’t have anyone to protect me. I worried that maybe the young girl didn’t either.

I hadn’t even realized what I was doing until I found myself standing there in front of them, demanding he let her go... I also might have been taking my anger over this entire day out on him.

I raised my chin. “I know enough. I know men like you.”

Draven scoffed. “And I know women like you. Women who think they can throw a tantrum and get whatever they want. That they can control everybody else around them. Well, I’m not one of your puppets whose strings you can pull.”

“Draven,” Elm said, eyes wide.

“Elspeth,” Adelaide hissed, putting a hand on my arm.

I shook her off, my anger sparking all over again. “Yes, well, you’re just like every other man who thinks they’re above reproach. Men who think they can just act however they want and get away with it.”

Exactly like my ex.

His gaze turned molten, so searing he could burn me on the spot, but I held my ground, jaw locked.

Elm’s mouth had dropped open. “Let’s start over.” He cleared his throat. “Elspeth, this is Draven Darkstone. Draven, this is Elspeth Moonflower. Maybe we can sit down and talk this through?”

“With the flying mugs that might kill us? No.” I stepped away from Draven. “I won’t sully your establishment with my presence any longer.”

“Thank the Witch Superior,” Draven mumbled.

“Draven,” Elm said, his tone reproachful. He looked at Adelaide. “He’s not usually like this.”

“Yes, he is!” the young woman I’d attempted to save yelled out in a singsong voice .

Elm shot a look at her. “Georgie, be nice.”

Georgie shot him a sickeningly sweet smile, and Elm just shook his head, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Perhaps Elspeth is right.” Adelaide looked at her feet, hands twined in front of her. “We should go.”

Elm’s eyes widened, disappointment flashing in them. “I could walk you?—”

“That won’t be necessary.” I looped my arm through Adelaide’s, and we walked out the front door and into the pouring rain.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:22 am

Eight

ELSPETH

The thunder boomed and lightning flashed as the five of us huddled in our tent. We'd found a spot to camp right outside Thistlegrove, though we'd had to walk in the pouring rain. Now we were all soaked and shivering, trying our best to dry off before we laid down to sleep. We hadn't had time to grab our food or bedrolls, and even worse, after we'd gotten the tent set up, we'd discovered a huge rip in it, which meant the protection spell that shielded us from the elements was broken.

Mama flipped through our family grimoire, looking for any spells that could help us fix it. But the Moonflowers had never been powerful or wealthy witches. None of our ancestors attended the revered Coven Institute, where witches learned powerful magic, magic like the one used to spell this tent.

Prue looked over Mama's shoulder, brows furrowed. "Maybe you could try this spell?"

Mama pursed her lips. "That is a drying spell, but it's not permanent. I can dry all our clothes, but the rain will just soak them again. To make it permanent, I'd need... well I don't know what I'd need to do. I never learned that from my mother."

The Moonflowers had a long history of potion making. Mama might not have attended the Institute, but she learned how to make potions from her own mother, and she inherited this grimoire full of family spells. Many of them were useful for small things like drying clothes, heating up soup, making a fire, mending a tear, cleaning a

wound, commanding a door or window to close, but I doubted any would help us in this situation.

“Well, just try something.” Auggie’s teeth chattered. “I’m freezing.”

Mama picked up her wand and pointed it at Auggie, saying the words of the spell. A golden glow erupted from Mama’s wand and spiraled through the air toward Auggie. It surrounded her, then disappeared, Auggie’s clothes now dry.

My younger sister breathed out a sigh of relief until a gust of wind blew open the tent flap and brought rain with it, soaking her all over again. She groaned.

Mama snapped the grimoire closed, a crescent moon on the earthen-green cloth cover—our family crest.

The wind battered the tent, whistling through the flaps as we all sat with our knees drawn, shivering.

Auggie pursed her lips. “We could be in an inn right now with a luxurious bed and a warm bath. And space.” She glared at me. “Lots of space.”

Prue sniffed, a pile of books beside her that she shielded with her body as droplets of rain splattered inside. “I agree with Auggie. I can’t believe you turned down Elm’s offer. He was willing to let us stay in a nice inn at no cost.”

I sighed. “I didn’t feel comfortable with that.”

Adelaide sat by Mama, looking out the crack in the tent flap, face drawn and mind distant. She hadn’t said hardly anything since I’d stormed out of The Brewhouse earlier. I bit the inside of my cheek, guilt bubbling up at how I’d acted. My intentions might have been good, but I’d been harsh on Draven, too harsh. I’d made a scene and

drawn attention to us, which was exactly what I was trying to avoid.

“And who says you get to decide anyway?” Auggie asked. “Who put you in charge of making decisions for all of us?”

“Auggie, I know you’re upset,” I said in a calm tone, “but I’m doing my best to protect us from any harm.”

“Oh yes, the scary inn.” Auggie wiggled her fingers menacingly. “The beds that are so soft they could swallow us up. The baths that are so warm they might scald our skin.”

“The man who we’d owe a great debt to for giving us those rooms,” I snapped before she continued.

Adelaide looked at me for the first time since we’d gotten into the tent. “It wouldn’t be like that.”

“Addy,” I started, but Mama cut me a look, and I closed my mouth.

“I don’t want to argue. Let’s just do our best to get a good night’s rest, and then we’ll figure everything out tomorrow.”

“Oh no.” Prue held up a soggy book, ink bleeding from the pages.

“Oh no,” Auggie mocked, rolling her eyes. “What will you do without one of your precious books you’ve already read countless times?”

“For your information, it’s a book on curses.” Prue sent Auggie a scathing glare.

Some of the color drained from Auggie’s face.

“A book on curses?” I asked in a hushed tone, even though we were on the outskirts of town in the middle of a storm and no one was likely eavesdropping.

Mama’s lips pressed into a thin line. Of all of us, she hated talking about the curse the most. After all, it had been her mother who’d cast it. It was an accident, of course. A blessing gone wrong.

Grandmama had been on her deathbed, and she’d wanted to see her four granddaughters one final time to bestow us each with a parting gift—something witches often did for loved ones before they passed. It was usually a little charm for safety or protection. Something small but meaningful. The magic was bound to their death, so it was forever.

Prue looked at us down her nose, glasses perched on the edge. “Well, how else are we going to figure it out? We have to read more about curses if we ever want to lift the one that keeps us from being able to use our magic.”

If anyone could figure it out, it would be Prue. She was smarter than all of us combined.

Auggie sniffed. “I still don’t understand why Grandmama wanted to ‘bless’ us with marriage and magic.”

Mama let out a sob. “You know she loved alliteration.”

“Well her love of alliteration got us cursed.” Auggie’s jaw locked .

Mama wailed harder, and I rubbed my temples. “Grandmama meant well. She wanted us to all be blessed with happy marriages and good magic.”

She hadn’t realized her blessing had somehow gotten twisted, turned into a curse, one

where none of us could use our magic until we got married.

I still remembered standing by her bedside, eighteen years old and feeling like I had my entire life ahead of me. Then Grandmama said the words of the blessing, and I felt a shift inside of me. An emptiness I'd never felt before. By the time we realized what had happened, Grandmama was already gone.

At least Adelaide and I had gotten through Academy, had gotten to use our magic for years before it was taken. Auggie and Prue had been much younger, neither having a chance to really use their magic in any real capacity.

That was twelve years ago. Twelve years we'd been illegally living in the Witchlands without magic.

I shook away the painful memories.

"How are we going to pay for the repairs for this tent or the cart?" Prue asked, pushing her round spectacles up her nose. "We don't have that kind of gold."

"We'll do what we do best," I said. "Sell our potions. Surely we can find a spot outside Thistlegrove or maybe in town if they'll allow it. And we can build a little stand or something."

"But there's already a potions shop in Thistlegrove," Prue said. "I passed it on my way to the bookstore." She perked up. "Maybe we could stay at the bookstore. Think how amazing it would be to sleep among all those books." She pressed her hands against her cheeks.

Auggie cut her a look. "You might be more delusional than Elspeth."

Prue made a face at her. I mulled over her words. Of course there would be a potions

shop here. I should've expected that.

"So what if there's another potions shop?" Mama waved her hand. "No one can beat my potions. They're superior in every way. We'll put the others out of business. Auggie can sell the potions. Adelaide and Elspeth can get the ingredients. And Prue can research new types of ingredients and combinations we could use. "

"We can't risk that," I said. "We're the outsiders, here. We can't afford to make the townspeople angry, to step on any toes." I bit my lip. "We'll have to think of something else, a way we can use your potions affinity to our benefit, fill a need this town has."

"But this town has everything," Auggie said. She threw up her hands. "So basically, we're screwed."

"No, we're not," I said firmly. "We have been through worse."

Everyone quieted down, no doubt thinking about the worse situations we'd been through. How we'd almost been brought before Witch Superior, forced from the Witchlands. I wouldn't ever let that happen again. We would get through this and out of this town as soon as possible.

"That's everyone's homework." I glanced from face to face.

Auggie wrinkled her nose. "Homework? Really, Elspeth? I haven't been in school since we got cursed, and I have no desire to go back. Especially not if you're my teacher."

I raised my chin, ignoring her. "Tomorrow, we visit town, talk to the residents. Be polite, inconspicuous, find out what's missing here. A need we can fill."

Auggie lay down, turning her back to me. “Great. Can’t wait.”

Prue shifted. “I guess I can do some reading, see if I can get any ideas.”

A gust of rainy wind blew in, and I shivered. If we didn’t figure something out, this was going to be miserable. Not just tonight but every night.

Everyone else lay down, all of us still soaking wet. My damp clothes stuck to me, and I stayed huddled with my knees drawn up to my chest, wondering how I was going to get us out of this mess, and for the first time, I wasn’t confident I actually could.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:22 am

Nine

DRAVEN

The last of patrons trickled out of the bar as the storm finally abated, the rain now a soft patter on the roof. I scrubbed a table, maybe a little rougher than necessary, but I was still boiling from that interaction earlier. I couldn't believe the nerve of that woman to judge me, to come into my business and insult me so thoroughly. It had left a bad taste in my mouth.

The door clicked open, and I yelled over my shoulder, "We're closed."

"Even for a friend?"

I stiffened and turned to see Elm. He'd left shortly after Elspeth and her sister had.

He was tall and wide, muscle cording through every inch of his body—and because he was only half werewolf, he was actually small compared to full-blooded werewolves. He walked toward me, hands in his pockets. "That was something earlier."

My jaw locked. "Where in the hellfire did you find those women?"

Elm rubbed the back of his neck. "Their cart broke down on the side of the road, and I simply wanted to be of service."

I gave him a look as I flipped the rag over my shoulder.

He held up his hands. “Okay, I might have an interest in Adelaide.”

“Elm,” I started.

“She’s not like anyone I’ve ever met.”

I’d heard this before. Elm loved to fall in love. He flitted from woman to woman but eventually got bored and left.

He tucked a spiral curl behind his ear. “I really think this might be different, Draven. Adelaide is so... sweet. Kindhearted. Humble. When I spotted her in the market, I couldn’t take my eyes off her.”

I tapped a foot. “What do her looks have to do with being nice?”

“That’s my point. I’ll admit, my interest in her started as physical, but then I noticed how gentle she was with her younger sister. How patient she was with her. How she consoled her when they didn’t have enough gold to buy a pretty scarf she was eyeing. Most people would’ve been annoyed with the younger woman, but not Adelaide. She was so empathetic.”

Nothing like his father, who’d always been self-centered and hard on Elm.

“Just be careful,” I said.

Elm snorted. “I don’t need you to protect me. I appreciate it, Draven, but I’m a grown man. I’m older than you.”

It was true. Barely. At thirty-six, Elm was one year older than me.

“I know.” I sighed. “I just don’t want to see you get hurt. I don’t want anyone I care

about getting hurt.”

Elm gave me a look so full of understanding that I knew he was thinking about Georgie, about what had happened to her a year ago.

“I get it,” Elm said. “But they don’t want to take advantage of me. I offered them my two rooms at the inn, told them I’d stay with you. They declined the offer. Well, Elspeth did.”

I cocked an eyebrow. “What are you talking about?”

“Her mother and sisters were more than ready to accept my hospitality, but Elspeth insisted they wouldn’t take my charity.”

For some reason, I felt a surge of respect for the witch. She might have been a pain in my ass, but I admired that she hadn’t accepted Elm’s offer.

Elm frowned. “They have a tent. Adelaide told me about it. She made it sound nice, but I hate to think of the five of them stuck in that small space in this weather.”

I turned and made my way behind the bar, grabbing the now clean mugs and placing them on the shelves that lined the back wall. “There’s five of them?” Five too many, in my opinion.

“I know the tent is spelled to protect them from the elements, but surely they’d appreciate having actual beds, a bath so they don’t have to bathe in the freezing river.”

“Well, they don’t want your help, and you can’t force it on them.” I grabbed another mug and put it on the shelf.

“No, I can’t,” Elm mused.

I turned. “I know that tone. What are you scheming?”

Elm shrugged. “There is one place they could stay. In Thistlegrove Forest...”

I scoffed. “Over my dead and decaying body.”

Elm leaned against the hearth that sat in the middle of the tavern, blocks of stone built into a pillar that shot up to the ceiling. “That witch really got under your skin. In a way I’ve never seen before. Veldar swears at you on a daily basis, throws tantrums in your tavern, and you remain cool as ice. Yet Elspeth throws a few insults your way, and you practically lose it.”

Shit. He was right. I did let her get to me. “She interfered in a family matter,” I said. “One that was none of her concern.”

I knew I was failing Georgie. I knew my sister was disappointed in me, disappointed in this life I was trying to build for us. But having someone criticize the way I dealt with my sister, implying that I was mishandling her, hurting her, it made me see red.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say she’s caught your attention.”

I snorted. “Hardly.”

He shrugged, a smirk lining his lips. “If you say so. Besides, I’m not talking about them staying at your manor. You’re right. They’d never agree to that. I’m talking about your other house.”

I stiffened. I’d bought the cottage when we moved back here, thinking it could be a good investment, a place I rented out—but then I’d realized there was a reason no one

wanted to live there. “No. Absolutely not.”

Elm rolled his eyes. “You yourself said you wish you could destroy the thing, but, well, any time you go near it, it attacks you. ”

That was true. I had no love for the cottage in the forest, and so far, I’d been unsuccessful in my attempts to get rid of it.

Still, it was mine, and I didn’t want that witch living there. “No. They can’t stay there.”

“You would deny a family a roof over their heads simply because you got into an argument with one of them?” Elm asked.

“She wouldn’t accept the offer if she knew that house belonged to me,” I argued.

“If she knew.” Elm emphasized the “if.”

I cocked a brow. “You want to lie to them?”

Elm shrugged. “It’s not a lie. It’s an omission, and it’s for their own good. I have a feeling they’re not well off, and I just want to see them taken care of while they’re here. I want to see Adelaide taken care of.”

This conversation was getting tiresome. I still had to talk to Georgie about her behavior earlier, but all I really wanted to do was work on my spell. Throw myself into it and let the world and all my troubles melt away. “If they wouldn’t accept rooms at the inn, why would they take an entire house?”

“Because it’s not mine. If there just happens to be an empty cottage in the forest that doesn’t belong to anyone and needs a lot of care and attention...”

I saw where he was going with this. It wouldn't be charity. They'd be cleaning it, maintaining it. Both of which it badly needed. I didn't have time to do it, and no one else wanted anything to do with the cottage. Not when it was so grumpy.

"They might be doing you a favor," Elm continued. "What if they made it livable again? You know, once upon a time, a witch lived in that cottage. Maybe it misses having residents. Maybe it just needs the right touch."

It wasn't a terrible idea. If they fixed it up, I could possibly rent it out once they left, but the thought of doing anything nice for Elspeth Moonflower after the way she'd treated me was unbearable.

"Please." Elm paused. "You know, I bet it would even make Georgie happy. She loves that cottage, has been asking you to have it cleaned and restored so she can visit."

I swore. Elm knew my weaknesses. And unfortunately, my baby sister was one of them. "Fine," I said. "Offer them the cottage. But you better warn them about what they're getting into." I pointed at him. "And don't involve me. The less I see of Elspeth Moonflower, the better."

Elm's face broke out into a wide smile. "Thank you. You won't regret this."

I very much doubted that.

Ten

ELSPETH

The little cottage stood in front of us, sun splicing through the canopies and lighting the meadow with golden rays. Moss clung to the roof, a thick layer that covered the entire thing, making the little two-story house look like it had sprung from the forest.

Prue marched forward, running her fingers down the vines that hung over the sides. She peered into a window, wrinkling her nose at the dirt and grime that covered it.

I arched my neck, noticing the tall stone chimney that stuck out of the roof.

“A house,” Auggie said. “An actual house.”

“We can’t accept this,” I said to Elm, who stood by Adelaide as she beamed up at him.

A bubbling brook swept past the house, and I stepped over it, boots sinking into the soft ground.

“Yes, we can.” Auggie turned to Elm. “I accept. If she won’t live here, I will.”

“Auggie,” I said, a warning in my voice.

She’d been more defiant, more outspoken, lately. It wasn’t a bad thing. I was glad she spoke her mind but not when it came to our safety. Not when it came to me trying to

make the best decisions for our family.

Mama and Prue walked around the side of the house, inspecting the ferns and flowers growing in abundance.

“Adelaide, there’s an old herb garden back here!” Mama cried from the other side of the house.

My older sister loved gardening, growing her own herbs, vegetables, and fruits to use in her recipes.

“Would you like to go see it?” Elm grabbed Adelaide’s hand and helped her step over the brook like she was some dainty maiden, not a capable grown woman.

Adelaide beamed. “Maybe after we see the house?” She still clutched Elm’s hand as they walked forward, whispering to each other.

“It doesn’t make sense,” I murmured.

“What doesn’t?” Auggie said.

I gestured at the house. “What is his angle? Why is he giving us a cottage?”

She rolled her eyes. “Maybe he doesn’t have an angle? Have you ever considered the possibility that he’s just a nice man?”

“Everyone has an angle,” I murmured, thinking of Johanes. He’d been a nice man too. Or so I thought.

“What do you propose we do, Elspeth?” Mama emerged from behind the house. She lifted her skirts as she walked over the muddy forest ground. “Go back to our broken

tent that no longer protects us from the elements?”

“We can have it fixed,” I argued, not wanting to be in Elm’s debt, not wanting to live in this forest with all the other residents of Thistlegrove. We’d passed several other cottages on our way here.

In fact, just through the tall trees, I could see another cottage, so close to us it made my heart race.

Elm stepped forward. “I understand your hesitation. I really do.”

I crossed my arms. I doubted that.

“But this isn’t a gift. You’d be doing the entire town a huge favor by moving into this cottage.”

I narrowed my gaze. “And why is that?”

He took a deep breath. “I think it’s time we went inside so you can see for yourself. ”

That gave me pause. Now I was doubting everything. Maybe Elm wasn’t looking to find out our secrets. Maybe he was looking to do something far more ominous.

But no one else seemed to share my sentiments. Mama bustled up the rickety steps of the cottage, my sisters following her like little ducklings. I didn’t like this. Not at all. But it looked like I was outnumbered.

I walked up the stone steps, cracks in them that allowed weeds to sprout through. Elm gripped the door handle and attempted to turn it.

It wouldn’t budge.

“Is everything okay?” Adelaide asked.

“It’s stubborn,” he muttered.

“Who is stubborn?” I asked.

Elm didn’t answer, pulling again, grunting as his muscles strained underneath the green tunic he wore. If it was too hard for a werewolf to open a door, then I wasn’t sure how we were supposed to get inside.

All of a sudden, the door swung open, jolting Elm backward and through the air.

Adelaide cried out while the rest of us stared in confusion. Elm landed at the bottom of the steps on his back, a groan escaping him.

My older sister rushed to him, helping him to his feet. “Are you okay?”

He rubbed the back of his head. “I’m fine, but I did warn you.”

I looked back at the house, not so sure I wanted to enter anymore.

“The house did that?” Prue asked, eyeing the door and backing away.

Elm stood. “Do you still want to go in?”

“Yes,” Mama said with a decisive nod. “I think we do.” With that, she marched inside, Prue and Auggie following her while shooting unsure glances at each other.

Adelaide and Elm went next, and I took a deep breath before following.

The smells of mold and earth hit me all at once as I stepped into the single room.

Dust covered every surface, the grime so thick on the windows that only small slivers of sunlight shone through. The threads of light illuminated big cobwebs that stretched over the corners, silvery spiders perched on the webs.

A kitchen table sat near the back window, at least an inch of dust sitting on top of it and insects scuttling across it. Prue walked toward a small hearth with an old cauldron knocked over on its side and rotted wood underneath. Cabinets with broken and cracked doors lined the wall by the hearth, and a long countertop spread out underneath, covered by splotches and stains so old I couldn't ascertain what they were.

My stomach twisted.

"This place is a wreck," Auggie said, her upper lip curling in disgust as she stepped over a puddle of green slime.

In response, the cottage began shaking. I backed into the wall, plastering myself to it while Mama and Auggie clutched each other. Elm grabbed Adelaide's hand, drawing her to his chest.

"She didn't mean anything by it," he said, looking up.

"Who are you talking to?" I asked as the shaking intensified. The doors rattled, and glasses and plates clinked from inside the cabinets.

"She just meant that you need a little cleaning, sprucing up," Elm said.

The shaking slowed, and my gaze shifted back and forth. "Are you talking to the cottage?"

Adelaide shot Elm a questioning look.

“Yes,” he finally said. “It was spelled by the previous owner.”

“And where are they?” I asked.

“Dead. But, unfortunately, the spell didn’t die with them, and we can’t get rid of the house.”

“Because of the magic?” Adelaide guessed.

Elm nodded. “The witch who lived here was a little paranoid, some might say. So she spelled this house to be protective of her, to only accept her as its owner. Now that she’s gone, the cottage has become a little more...unhinged over the years. There’s been attempts to tear it down that haven’t... ended well for those involved.”

Auggie’s hand floated to her mouth, eyes wide in horror.

“The house has become a bit of a nuisance for Thistlegrove. Most of the residents live in this forest, and the house can be cantankerous. Making a lot of noise. Lashing out at those who come too close. Not to mention, it’s a bit unsightly.”

A floorboard rose up and thwacked Elm in the back of the knees. He winced, and Adelaide rubbed his arm soothingly.

“So you want us to live here?” I gestured around. “In the cottage that might kill us?”

“It won’t kill you,” Elm said quickly. “The witch did have the sense to weave that into her spell—no killing.”

“Oh, well that changes everything,” I said.

“Elspeth,” Mama hissed, then mouthed, “Be nice.”

“How are we supposed to live in a house that doesn’t like us?” I asked.

Elm stepped forward. “Well, it could. If you cleaned it up, returned it to its former glory, it might be more receptive to you? And I figured it would be better than a broken tent.”

Mama and Auggie looked at each other, and I bit the inside of my cheek when a scream pierced the air from somewhere on the second floor.

My head snapped in that direction. Prue. I’d completely forgotten about my youngest sister. She must’ve snuck away at some point.

“Prue?” Mama called. “Are you alright?”

Silence followed.

Elm moved toward the stairs, but I held out a hand. “I’ll go. Just stay with my sisters and Mama and keep them safe.”

“I can do that,” he said after a beat.

I raced toward the small flight of stairs on the right. A few were splintered and jutting upward, and I carefully picked my way over them.

Boots thudded against the stairs behind me. “I’m coming with you,” Adelaide said.

I tipped my head toward a hole in one of the steps. “Be careful.”

We slowly made our way upstairs to the dark second floor. Windows sat at each end of the hallway, but similar to the ones downstairs, the grime on the glass was so thick, barely any light was allowed through.

“Prue?” I called out, a slight shake to my voice.

“In here,” she called, her own voice wobbling. Relief flooded me that she’d at least answered.

Adelaide and I hurried to the last door in the hallway. I braced myself as we approached, not sure what we were going to find.

When I rounded the doorway, my mouth fell open.

Prue sat on the ground, tears streaming down her face as books surrounded her. “This house has a library,” she said, holding up a book. “And it’s full of books. So many books. Ones I’ve never read.”

I crossed my arms. “Prue Moonflower! You scared us. Next time you’re excited, maybe find a different way to express it.”

Prue didn’t even respond, eyes already drifting to the book in her lap. Dust smudged her hands and cheeks, and she didn’t seem to notice all the motes floating in the air.

Adelaide nudged me. “Go easy on her. She’s found her happy place,” she whispered. “I don’t know if you’re going to be able to tear her away from this room.”

Adelaide was right. You did not want to come between Prue and her books. I grabbed my older sister’s arm and dragged her into the dark hallway.

“Is everything alright up there?” Elm called.

“Yes,” Adelaide called back. “Prue found a library.”

“Oh, Witch Superior,” Mama muttered. “That girl can sniff out a book a mile away.”

“What should we do?” Adelaide asked. “You know Elm has offered us perfectly acceptable rooms at the inn.”

“No,” I said quickly.

Adelaide gave me a look. “It would be clean and not spelled.”

“It would also be full of people. People who might have questions about the mysterious witches who just appeared in Thistlegrove.”

Downstairs a crash sounded, and we stilled.

“Everything’s okay,” Elm yelled. “Just an overturned chair.”

Adelaide turned her attention back to me. “What about us is mysterious?”

It was my turn to give her a look. “Maybe the fact that none of us besides Mama has our magic?”

“Then what’s the solution?” Adelaide asked. “We can’t stay in that tent without its protection spell. You don’t want to risk staying at the inn, so...” She glanced around the dark hallway of the little cottage.

Elm wasn’t really doing us a favor by letting us stay in this cottage. It wasn’t even his. In fact, it sounded like we’d be doing everyone in Thistlegrove a favor by staying here, fixing it up, possibly fixing its attitude.

If anything, staying here might ingratiate us with the residents of Thistlegrove. If we made this cottage hospitable again, it might even keep them from asking too many questions. Besides, we wouldn’t be here that long. We just needed to get our cart fixed. And somehow find the money to pay for it. Any way I looked at it, we didn’t

have a lot of options. Adelaide was right. We couldn't stay in that tent when the protection spell wasn't working.

"We have no home," Adelaide said softly, running a finger along the wall.

"Yes we do." I spread out my arms. "This is our new home."

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:22 am

Eleven

ELSPETH

“Why is everything so sticky?” Adelaide stared down at the floor, frowning. Auggie was out foraging for mushrooms and herbs. Mama was dusting, and Prue was upstairs “cleaning” the library.

I’d checked on her several times, and her version of cleaning involved a lot of sitting on the little cushion by the window and reading. I hadn’t seen Prue so animated in a long, long time, and I had to admit it was nice.

“Ugh.” Adelaide lifted her hand from the floor, some kind of brown substance covering it. “This is disgusting.”

“I think it’s tree sap,” I said, nose wrinkling.

I grabbed the nearby bucket of water and slid it toward my sister, who dunked her hand inside and attempted to wash the sticky mess off.

I dunked my sponge into the bucket and continued scrubbing the floor, the sponge coming away with thick layers of dirt and dust each time. I was going to have to change out the water soon. Luckily there was a little stream right outside the cottage, so it wouldn’t require a long walk.

“If only we could spell some of these items,” Adelaide said, her blue eyes bright and full of excitement. “Get the broom to sweep for us, the sponges to scrub, the duster to

catch all the cobwebs.”

“You mean if only Mama could spell the items.” I pushed the sponge harder against the floor, trying to scrub away the spot Adelaide had just stuck her hand into.

Adelaide bobbed her head. “Yes, I suppose that is what I meant. Now that we have a home, it might be worth doing some of those types of spells.”

“Maybe Mama has a few of them in the Moonflower grimoire.” I took a deep breath. “And this isn’t our home.”

The cottage shook, dust and dirt falling from the overhead beams and onto our heads. This place was so temperamental.

Once the cottage had finished its tantrum, Adelaide swiped the dirt from her cheeks and hair. “That’s not what you said yesterday.”

“I just meant this is our temporary residence while we’re here. We can’t get too comfortable.”

“I know.” Adelaide sighed and reached over, plunking her sponge into the bucket. “Don’t you ever wish we could have a home, though?”

Prue squealed from upstairs. At least someone loved this place.

“Of course I do. But life isn’t so bad on the road.”

Adelaide raised an eyebrow.

I flung some water at her, and she shrieked. “It’s not.”

Or, at least, it hadn't been. Not until our cart broke, and all our plans broke down along with it.

"Just because it's not bad doesn't mean it's good." Adelaide scrubbed the tree sap, then flicked water back at me.

I laughed.

"Do you ever think about him?" Adelaide peered at me. "Johanes? Think about what might happen if you ran into him?"

I looked away. "No. Not since he betrayed us." Betrayed me. "And it's a good thing because if I ever see him again, I'm not sure he'll survive the encounter."

We'd been together for two years. We met when I was twenty-two, when I was young enough that I convinced myself we could be like everyone else, that if someone just loved me enough, they'd understand why I didn't have magic. That they'd see past that and love me anyway.

We'd been living in the same village we had all our lives at that point, trying to find ways to break the curse, keeping it a secret from everyone around us. That's when I'd met Johanes, and I'd kept the secret from him for two long years before finally deciding to open up.

"Johanes is in the past." I scrubbed harder, my hands red and raw. "I'm focusing on the future."

"Right," Adelaide said. "Is that why you were so hard on that man—Draven—the other night?"

I winced at the reminder of the rude tavern owner. "He was an ass."

“Maybe.” Adelaide bobbed her head. “But you really let him get to you. I’ve never seen you riled up like that before.”

My jaw clenched. “Well, I didn’t like the way he was grabbing that young girl and speaking to her.”

“He’s not Johanes,” Adelaide said.

“I know that,” I snapped, then sighed. “Sorry. I’m just feeling a little stressed about everything going on right now.”

“I know. But maybe you could look at staying in Thistlegrove as an opportunity.”

My brows furrowed. “An opportunity for what?”

“To make some friends,” Adelaide suggested. “Get outside your comfort zone. Maybe we could all do that.”

I straightened on my knees. “And does getting out of your comfort zone include a certain Elm Kingsley?”

Mama choked, coughing. I turned around to see her perched on the top of a chair and leaning her ear toward us. She quickly straightened and turned around.

“Mama,” Adelaide said with a mischievous grin. “That cough sounds terrible. Do you need to see a healer?”

Mama cleared her throat, banging her chest. “No. Not at all. Just a tickle in my throat.”

Mama couldn’t help herself. She and Auggie were expert eavesdroppers. Actually, all

the Moonflower women were.

I moved to another space on the floor and started scrubbing. “So?” I whispered. “Are you interested in Elm Kingsley?”

“Maybe.” Adelaide leaned forward, her wavy golden hair spilling over her shoulders. “He’s not like anyone I’ve ever met, Elspeth. I know you don’t trust him, but if you just gave him a chance...”

“Adelaide, just be careful. We won’t be here long, and Elm isn’t even from Thistlegrove. Treat him like you would any other fling.”

The light in Adelaide’s eyes dimmed. “A fling. Right.” She scrubbed the floor harder.

“What do you even know about him?” I asked.

“I know that he’s nice.”

“So was Johanes,” I said, remembering the way he’d changed so suddenly after I’d revealed the truth about the curse to him. That calculated look that had overtaken his eyes. And I’d been stupid enough to not see any of it until it was too late.

“I know that I like him. That I could see a future with him.”

Mama gasped, and we both turned right as she whirled around, coughing harder and reaching up high onto some shelves to dust.

I licked my lips, having a difficult time forming words. “But... you’ve known him for two days.”

“There’s just something about him. He’s different, El.”

“Getting that close to someone comes with risks.” I swallowed. “Promise you’ll be careful.”

Adelaide’s shoulders slumped. “Then how are we ever going to get our magic back?”

“I told you that we’ll figure it out,” I said. “There has to be a way to break the curse. Curses are cast every day in the Witchlands.” I threw my arm out, some of the water from my sponge splattering Adelaide. “There are witches whose entire jobs are dedicated to breaking curses.”

The cursebreakers. They were some of the most powerful witches in the Witchlands. They also all worked for Witch Superior, and going to any of them for help was out of the question. Witch Superior was not kind to those who didn’t have magic, no matter the reason. She was known to be harsh, inconsistent, and temperamental. Not the kind of leader I wanted my fate to depend on.

“And have you made any headway?” Adelaide asked.

“Well, we’ve been a little busy.” A defensiveness edged my voice. I hadn’t been trying as hard as I could have. Not because I didn’t want to break this curse but because all my energy went to keeping us safe.

It was hard to even know where to begin. Cursebreakers went through extensive training that took years. And even then, they weren’t able to break all curses, some so complicated they couldn’t be undone. I swallowed. But not this one. Prue had been reading up on curses, and if anyone could figure it out, it was my younger sister.

“Now that we’re here in one place, maybe Prue will have more time?” I suggested.

Adelaide smiled, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Well, I can help too. We all can.”

I lay a soapy hand over hers. “You just focus on this new business venture of ours. I’m glad we have a roof over our heads, and we’ll see what Auggie says when she comes back from foraging, but it seems like this forest might be a haven for different plants and herbs we can use in our potion mixes. That’s all good news. But we still have to find a way to make money.”

Adelaide worried at her bottom lip. “We’ll figure something out. I’ll go into town today. Maybe with Elm. Maybe he can help me.”

“Just—”

“Be careful.” Adelaide sighed. “I know.”

“Sorry.” I dropped my sponge in the bucket, the water now black with dirt. We’d need more.

“It’s okay. I know you’re trying to keep us all safe. And you do a good job.” Adelaide leaned over and nudged me with her shoulder. “Now go get us some more water because we still have a lot of floor to clean.”

She looked at the rest of the wood floors, still covered in dirt, grime, and forest debris.

“Addy, Addy!” We both came to a stand as Mama waved wildly.

“Mama, be careful!” I called, right as she lost her balance and fell.

Adelaide and I both screamed as she hit the floor, but Mama just popped up, her cheeks flushed.

She pointed out the window. “Look who’s here for a visit!”

I turned to see Elm Kingsley walking toward the cottage. And he wasn't alone. Draven Darkstone was marching beside him.

Twelve

DRAVEN

Elm and I walked through Thistlegrove Forest. Dew drops sparkled on the leaves and branches in the morning sun, and our boots sunk into the damp dirt. Thick knotted trees surrounded us, their canopies sweeping, their leaves slowly changing from stark green to the oranges, yellows, and reds of fall. This early in the morning, I could see my breath puffing out in front of me.

I didn't want to be here with Elm. I wanted to be home in my apartment, ignoring everyone and everything and working on my spell. I still couldn't figure out where I'd gone wrong with it. That mug had almost killed Elspeth—not that I would've cried over her demise.

But I couldn't have my mugs scaring away patrons. It wouldn't do. I hadn't had time to work on it this morning because I'd been trying to bond with Georgie. Which, of course, had ended in disaster. Like it did every time I tried to connect with my younger sister.

She'd been sitting in a chair by the window of our apartment, reading a book while Edgar was curled up next to her. I'd asked her what she was reading, and she told me it was about a woman who was a vigilante. Then she'd said the woman reminded her of Elspeth.

That had immediately set me off. Elspeth wasn't a vigilante. She was an obnoxious, judgmental woman. Of course Georgie had defended her. Only because it delighted

her that Elspeth had insulted me so thoroughly. She didn't even know the woman. I reminded Georgie how naive she could be, which was possibly the worst thing I could've said.

After that, she'd stormed out of the apartment, and I couldn't concentrate on anything, especially not a spell. So here I was. With Elm.

"You know, you didn't have to come with me," my friend said from next to me. He pushed his curly black hair from his forehead.

I cleared my throat. "Well, it is my damn cottage. So I should probably see what they're doing with it."

He laughed. "That cottage has sat unattended for years since the previous owner died. I don't think they could possibly make it any worse. At the very least, this should stop Thistlegrove residents from demanding you tear it down."

That cottage was apparently as grumpy as the witch who'd owned it.

"How long is this going to take?" I asked Elm.

He side-eyed me. "Once again, I didn't ask you to come along. You can go back to town anytime."

I snorted. I didn't trust these Moonflowers. Especially not after meeting Elspeth. She was exactly the type of judgmental witch I abhorred. The type of witch who'd judge Georgie for her past actions if she knew about them. She and her family were also clearly not well off, and I had this sneaking suspicion her sister was using Elm.

"Just say it." Elm ducked under a low-hanging branch.

“Say what?” I said.

“You’re worried about their intentions. With me.”

I stepped over a fallen tree. “Aren’t you?”

“No,” Elm said honestly. “Adelaide is good. She’s kind and sweet... and I think I may be falling for her.”

My head snapped in his direction. “You just met the woman two days ago.” I shoved a hand through my hair. “Witch’s tits, Elm.”

Elm sighed heavily. “I’m a grown man, Draven.” Elm pushed aside a sheath of vines hanging down. “I don’t need you to protect me from anything.”

He was right, but I had a bad feeling about all of this. Something was off about these witches, how they’d just happened to run into Elm at the market, then invited him for a meal and disappeared after he’d offered to forage food for them. Then their cart somehow broke down and so did their tent. So of course Elm stepped in to offer them lodging.

“If they were going to take advantage of me, why wouldn’t they have accepted my offer to stay at the inn?” Elm asked. “I told you that Elspeth refused.”

“Probably because she’s so damn stubborn,” I muttered.

“And not a very good con artist,” Elm said.

I stepped forward as a body barreled into me, knocking me a few steps to the side.

“Oh!”

I looked down to see a pretty witch staring up at me with large brown eyes. Her wavy brown hair fell past her shoulders. She brought her hands to her cheeks.

“Auggie,” Elm said.

I looked between him and the woman. “Do you know each other?”

Elm gestured to the young woman, who carried a basket full of herbs and plants. “This is Auggie Moonflower.”

Another one of them. Auggie looked younger than her sisters. If I had to guess, I’d say Elspeth and Adelaide were in their late twenties, maybe early thirties, whereas Auggie looked to be in her early twenties, shorter and curvier than her other sisters.

“Elm! Are you headed to the cottage?” Auggie strode forward and looped her arm through his.

“Yes, and I brought a friend.” He gestured to me. “Auggie, meet Draven Darkstone.”

“Ah.” A knowing look glinted in her eyes. “So you’re the one who got under Elspeth’s skin.”

My jaw locked, and Elm coughed into his hand, though it sounded suspiciously like a laugh. He lowered his hand. “Sorry, got something caught in my throat.”

I glared at him as they began walking, and I followed behind.

“How is the cottage treating you?” Elm asked.

Auggie shuddered. “It’s horrid. I can’t believe Elspeth turned down your offer to let us stay at the inn. Maybe just some of us could go stay there?”

I stiffened .

“Ah.” Elm scratched the back of his neck. “I don’t want to get in the middle of family matters.”

“Pity,” Auggie said, a whine to her voice. “So are you coming to visit the cottage... or Adelaide?”

There was silence for a moment, then Elm said, “Am I so obvious?”

Auggie giggled, the sound tinkling like bells. “Maybe just a little.”

“Well, I might as well play my full hand, then. What can I do to win over your sister?”

Witch Superior. I was just going to have to stand back and watch this debacle unfold. Elm was right. He was a grown man, and if he wanted to pursue this Adelaide Moonflower, there wasn’t much I could do to stop him. But hopefully I could be a voice of reason.

“Buy her something!” Auggie said.

Of course that was her response, and exactly why I was wary of this entire situation. If Adelaide had true feelings for Elm, he shouldn’t have to buy her affections. She should like my friend for who he was and not because of the things he could offer. I clamped my mouth shut, forcing myself to bite my tongue. Speaking out now would only make things worse.

“Like what?” Elm asked.

“Anything!” Auggie spread out her arms, her basket jangling. “Jewelry, pretty

resses.” She gasped. “Shoes!”

Elm laughed. “Okay, okay, I get the point. I’ll try and think of something she’d like.”

This was madness. Elm couldn’t seriously be falling for this. The more I knew about these Moonflowers, the surer I was that they were trouble.

My boots crunched over leaves scattered across the forest floor as we neared the cottage. We should be there soon.

“So what type of potions did you all sell?” Elm asked.

“Oh, you know, just the usual tonics that apothecary shops carry. Ones for healing of the mind, body, and spirit. Mama is an excellent potions master.”

“Well, it sounds like you all are,” Elm said. “Adelaide told me that your mama trained all of you.”

Auggie cleared her throat. “Yes.” Her voice came out strangled and high-pitched .

She was hiding something. I knew it. I was right about these Moonflowers.

We emerged through a tree line as Adelaide and a shorter, plump woman with gray hair emerged from the house.

“Oh, Elm!” The shorter woman waved at my friend. I assumed she was the Moonflower matriarch.

She picked up her skirts and ran toward us, splashing through the little brook that ran in front of the cottage. She arrived in front of us, out of breath and smiling up at Elm with adoration in her eyes.

“I’m so happy you’re here. We just love this little cottage.” The cottage door snapped shut, right onto the skirt of Adelaide’s dress.

“It’s no problem, Thea,” Elm said, taking her hands in his.

“Adelaide,” Thea called. “Elm is here!”

Adelaide pulled at her skirt, still stuck in the door.

“Mama, Elm wants to buy Adelaide something!” Auggie burst out. “Isn’t that so romantic?”

Pink tinged Elm’s cheeks. “Well, I... thought that might be between us.”

“How wonderful!” Thea clapped her hands together. “Oh, Adelaide would love that.”

Enough was enough. This woman was just as bad as her daughters. Didn’t she see how inappropriate this was? I stepped forward, in between Thea and Elm.

Thea looked up at me, her green eyes assessing. “And who is this?”

“It’s Draven Darkstone,” Auggie said with glee.

Thea’s eyes widened in understanding. “Oh.” She took in my attire, her gaze lingering on my leather boots, my spotless black trousers, my white silk shirt. I wore fine clothes for someone who owned a tavern, and I had a feeling Thea Moonflower was more than aware of it. “Well, Mr. Darkstone, welcome. As you can see, the cottage is a little worse for wear, but we’re well on our way to getting it back in shape.”

Elm clapped a hand on my shoulder, drawing me back so that I stood next to him.

“You’re doing a wonderful job. I just wanted to see if I could help with anything.”

“Oh, no!” Thea shook her head, her gray curls bouncing. “We couldn’t ask such a thing of you. It’s enough that you’re coming to visit my Adelaide.” She leaned forward and lowered her voice. “If you need ideas about any certain gifts you could buy for her, I’m happy to help.”

Auggie skipped off toward the house with her basket. I’d seen enough to know that my suspicions were right. Elm might not see through their little act. But I did, and I’d do everything I could to protect him from making a huge mistake.

The door swung open, finally releasing Adelaide. She stumbled forward, and yet another Moonflower appeared. Elspeth. And she was staring directly at me.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:22 am

Thirteen

ELSPETH

“What is he doing here?” I hissed to Adelaide, tipping my head toward Draven Darkstone, water bucket in hand. I needed to go refill it in the brook, but unfortunately, Mr. Darkstone happened to be standing right near it, and I preferred to stay as far away from that unpleasant man as possible.

“I guess he accompanied Elm.” Adelaide waved at Elm, who stood with Mama.

Oh, Witch Superior. Mama was chattering away. I hoped she wasn’t embarrassing us. Whenever any eligible men came around, Mama tended to lose her senses. It wasn’t her fault. She was so desperate to see this curse broken, and she so badly wanted all of us to get married. It just had never worked out.

Auggie and Prue were still young. Yes, they were technically of marriageable age, but only in the last few years.

As for Adelaide and me... Adelaide was painfully shy and introverted, while I almost had gotten married. To Johanes. After his betrayal, I swore I’d never fall for another man—much to Mama’s disappointment. But that didn’t stop her from grabbing random men and parading them in front of us constantly, and it always ended in disaster one way or another.

Mama just wanted us to be able to use our magic, our birthright, but that also meant she became overbearing at times.

I met Draven's glowering gaze. "Why is he just glaring at me?" I whispered to Adelaide, shooting him a scathing look right back.

We descended the steps to the marshy grass surrounding the cottage.

Adelaide leaned over. "Probably because you barged into his tavern and insulted him in front of everyone?"

"He deserved it."

"Can you please be nice?" Adelaide asked, turning her pleading gaze on me.

"I'll try," I mumbled as we approached.

"Adelaide, where have you been?" Mama reached out and reeled my sister to her. "Elm is here to see you."

Draven stood there mute, unsmiling. Being rude. It was one thing to mistreat me. But to be rude to my family for no reason at all? My fists balled at my sides, nails digging into my palms.

"Come see what we've done with the cottage so far!" Mama grabbed Elm's arm and dragged him away, Adelaide following and shooting me a helpless look.

She mouthed, "Be nice," before disappearing into the cottage. I was so tired of everyone always telling me to be nice like I was some heathen who didn't know how to behave.

I set my bucket down by the brook and straightened. "Mr. Darkstone."

"Ms. Moonflower," he responded in a monotone voice.

“To what do we owe your presence?”

“I’m here with my friend.”

“Friend?” I echoed, looking between the cottage and Draven. “Elm is your friend?”

“My best friend, actually.” Draven stepped forward, his boots splashing in the water. “Which means if he’s courting your sister, you’re going to be seeing a lot of me around here.”

I mustered a strained smile. “Perfect.”

What rotten luck. It was one thing to know we’d have to see Draven around town, but to know I’d have to see him all the time was unbearable.

“And believe me.” Draven took another step forward, leaning down so that his scent of cedarwood, leather, and ale surrounded me. “I will be watching,” he whispered, his breath warm on my neck.

I inhaled deeply. It had been a long time since I’d been close enough to a man to smell him, to be enveloped by his scent. Then his words hit me, and I jolted backward. “What is that supposed to mean?”

He shoved his hands in his pockets. “Just that I’m very curious about the Moonflower witches and what brought you to Thistlegrove, what brought you to Elm.”

I scoffed, reaching down to pick up my bucket. “What are you implying, exactly?”

“Is there something I should be implying?” Draven asked.

“You’re an exhausting man. Has anyone ever told you that?”

“No, but you continue to enlighten me about my own persona. Please, tell me more about myself.”

I glared at him. “I don’t want to think any more about you. In fact, I’d be happy to never think about you again.”

He raised his brows. “Oh, so you do think about me?”

I knelt down, dipping my bucket into the little stream as water splashed inside of it. “Don’t flatter yourself.”

“Believe me, I’m not.”

“If anything, most of my thoughts revolve around that flying mug doing its job and hitting you in the head. Maybe that would knock some kindness into you. And good sense.”

His jaw ticked, and I found myself pleased that I’d gotten to him yet again.

I let the water flow into the bucket, then came to a stand, facing Draven, who was still glaring at me. The handle of my now-full bucket rested in the crook of my arm, the bucket propped against my hip.

Witch’s tits, this thing was heavy, and I was tempted to walk away, but the allure of making Draven’s jaw tick again was too tempting.

“Is there something else you’d like? Or are you going to stand here and glare at me all day? Some of us have work to do, Mr. Darkstone.”

“I own a tavern,” he gritted out .

I nodded at his clothing, as fine as Elm's with no wear or tear, no stains, the material spider silk, which was incredibly expensive and rare.

"Yes, well your tavern must do very well," I said.

A tavern owner shouldn't have that much wealth that he could afford such clothing. Definitely a far cry from our simple dresses, made from cotton bugs, little insects who grew cotton on their backs, then dispelled the cotton on the ground when it got too heavy to carry. The cotton provided protection from predators, and the bugs grew large balls of it over and over throughout their lifespan. It was free to harvest but time-consuming. Nevertheless, it was our best, and cheapest, option for clothing. Auggie was actually a very talented seamstress, and she made the majority of our clothes with the guidance and help of Mama.

"What does it matter to you how well my tavern does?" Draven asked, gaze narrowing in a way that made me shift on my feet.

And this bucket was getting heavier and heavier. I grimaced, shifting it over to my other hip. "It doesn't. You just don't dress like a tavern owner. But it's none of my business," I said quickly, wishing I'd kept my mouth shut. I didn't want to notice anything about him, and I certainly didn't want him noticing anything about me.

"Well if you need recommendations on a tailor, let me know." His gaze trailed over my worn green dress, patches covering various rips and holes.

My cheeks turned pink at the reminder of our cheap clothing. "I think that's enough for today," I said quietly, the bucket weighing more heavily than ever.

Draven's glare softened for just a moment. "I can carry the bucket." His voice was gruff as he gestured to it.

As if I would let him do anything for me. He'd probably hold it over my head every time we ran into each other, which seemed like it would be more often than I wanted.

"No thank you," I said, the bucket wavering so that water sloshed over the side.

He scoffed and planted his hands on his hips. "Just let me help you." He reached for the bucket, and I stepped away from him.

"No."

I was now leaning over, the bucket drooping more and more. Why was it so damn heavy ?

He stepped forward and grabbed the handle. "You are stubborn to a fault. I'm trying to help you so you don't drop this water all over yourself."

"Like you care." I jerked away, more of the water sloshing out.

"I'm trying to be nice," he said, his grip still tight on the handle.

"Well, I'd say it's too late for that."

I tried to back away but stumbled over a rock in the stream. Before I knew it, I was falling over backward, bucket flying up in the air, and Draven Darkstone was falling along with me, landing right on top of me.

Icy cold water sloshed down my back, my vision splitting as I looked up at the canopies above. Draven's heavy body, his intoxicating scent, was once again overwhelming me.

"Why do you keep falling on me?" I murmured, not having the strength to shove him

off this time as the cold paralyzed me.

“Elspeth!” Mama called. “What has gotten into you?”

A flurry of activity rushed around us, two hands hauling Draven off of me.

“Oh, Mr. Darkstone, I must apologize on behalf of my daughter.” Mama fussed over Draven as Adelaide pulled me to my feet. Mama wiped excess water from Draven’s clothes, patting down his sleeves. “I can clean your silk shirt for you, if you’d like?” Mama asked.

“That won’t be necessary,” Draven said, green eyes on me.

I raised my chin, trying to summon any dignity I could while I stood there, dress completely soaked through and plastered to my body.

“We should go,” Elm said, shooting a concerned look between me and Draven.

“Yes,” Draven said, his gaze still not leaving me. “Good day.”

With that he nodded, and he and Elm walked off, disappearing into the forest.

Fourteen

ELSPETH

“Who’s ready for game night?” Mama trilled, carrying a tray full of crackers, fresh vegetables, cheese, and Adelaide’s delicious—and secret—veggie dip recipe. She must’ve gotten the ingredients from the market earlier.

I grabbed a carrot stick from the tray and dipped it into the creamy white sauce.

We were running low on coin. Not only would we have nothing to give the woodsmith to fix our cart, but soon enough, we wouldn’t have enough to buy food. We needed to figure out a way to make money—and soon.

But I wouldn’t worry about that tonight. I popped the carrot stick in my mouth. It was our Moonflower game night. We played every month on the full moon.

Prue, Adelaide, and I sat at the kitchen table while Auggie lay sprawled out on the couch.

The fire in the hearth crackled, warmth emanating from it. Mama grabbed her wand and said the spell to light some candles that sat on the window ledges. Fire burst from their wicks, spreading a buttery glow over the room as the sun sank outside .

A knock sounded at the door, and I jumped. “Who is that?”

A mischievous smile spread across Mama’s face. “Oh, I just invited Mr. Kingsley and

Mr. Darkstone to join us.”

My mouth dropped open. “You did what?”

Adelaide looked at Mama in horror. “Why would you do something like that?”

Mama rolled her eyes. “Adelaide, honestly. You have to make an effort if you want Elm to know you’re interested in him.”

Adelaide squeezed her eyes shut. Why did Mama always have to meddle?

I clenched my jaw so hard my molars hurt. “Why did you invite Draven, though?”

“Well, he was standing right there this morning.” Mama planted her hands on her hips. “What did you expect me to do, Elspeth?”

“Preferably knee him in the balls and show him that we are a united front in our hatred of him.”

Auggie snorted from the couch, and Prue pushed her spectacles up her nose. “Does this mean game night is canceled?” This was one of the only nights we could pry my younger sister away from her books.

The knock sounded again. Auggie sighed heavily and stood. “I guess I’ll get it.”

She opened the door and there stood Draven Darkstone, his unsmiling face greeting us.

He tried to step inside, but the door slammed behind him, trapping the end of his coat. His jaw locked, and he tugged at it, but the cottage wouldn’t let it go.

I pressed my lips together, attempting to hide my smile. Auggie didn't even try as she giggled. Mama shot her a death glare. She grabbed a broom that was propped against the wall and jabbed it at the door.

"I'm so sorry about this," she said, huffing out as she thwacked the broom against the wall. "The cottage can be a little grumpy sometimes, a little shy when it comes to newcomers."

Draven just sighed heavily, attempting to yank his coat again.

"Now you let Mr. Darkstone in," Mama said. "Or we won't clean that filthy tub upstairs. Or your windows."

The cottage rumbled in response, and the door swung open, releasing Draven .

Mama swiped her arm over her brow, her shoulders slumping in relief.

Draven stepped forward and adjusted his coat. Mama rushed to him and set the broom against the wall. "Let me get that for you!"

She grabbed his coat and yanked it off his shoulders. He had to bend to accommodate her short frame. "It's stuck. Ooh, quite big muscles." She patted his biceps.

He cleared his throat, and once again, I had to clamp my mouth shut to keep from laughing at the uncomfortable look on his face.

"This really isn't necessary," he said stiffly.

Adelaide watched in horror while Prue looked on, unimpressed. Auggie was bent over laughing.

“Just a little more.” Mama grunted and finally yanked his coat off of him, then looked around, frowning. Probably because there was nowhere to put it. She smiled brightly and marched over to the couch, throwing the coat over the back of it.

I tried not to stare at the white shirt he wore, the way it wrapped tight around his muscles, the way it was unbuttoned just enough so I could see his hard chest, remember the way my hands had been pressed against it when he’d tackled me in his tavern.

“You’re staring,” Adelaide said out of the side of her mouth.

I jolted, looking away as Draven’s gaze swept around the little room. He was probably judging us. The cottage still had dust everywhere. We’d managed to clean all the countertops, the table, the couch, and the floor, but grime still coated the windows and dust covered the sconces on the wall, as well as the rusted cauldron, which we’d managed to drag out of the hearth.

“Is Elm here?” Draven asked, a crease forming between his brows.

Right then, a parchment with wings burst into our cottage, flying to the middle of the room. Mama jumped to catch it, then unfolded the parchment, reading.

“Oh. It appears Mr. Kingsley has fallen ill.”

I watched Adelaide for any signs of disappointment, but her face remained neutral.

Draven’s face lost color. “In that case, I should really go?—”

“Don’t be silly. You walked all this way. You have to stay and play at least one round. ”

He swallowed, looking immensely uncomfortable as he shifted from foot to foot, it made me smile.

“Unless you’re not up for a little competition?” I winced, wondering why I’d just said that.

His searing gaze landed on me. “No.” His eyes didn’t leave my face. “I’m happy to stay.”

“Perfect!” Mama said. “Then let the games begin!”

Fifteen

DRAVEN

Fucking fuck. I was going to kill Elm the next time I saw him. The only reason I'd come to this damn thing was because he'd roped me into it, and now I was stuck here without him.

But when Elspeth had implied I couldn't handle the competition, that I was afraid of losing to her—I couldn't walk away.

So here I was, watching Thea Moonflower open up a simple wooden box, everyone else bracing their legs like they were ready to run.

My gaze shifted back and forth. "What's going on?"

Elspeth lifted her chin. "Have you never played moon ball?"

I blinked. I'd never even heard of it.

Thea snapped the box closed, and everyone groaned. "We have to tell him the rules," she said, then gave me an apologetic smile. "My daughters usually aren't this competitive." She eyed Elspeth. "Well, one of them is, but this game tends to bring out the competitiveness in all of us."

"So what is the game?"

Thea tapped the box. “When you open the box, the moon ball will escape.”

“And we have to catch it?” I asked .

Elspeth snorted. “We have to run from it. Keep it from tagging us. It tags you, you’re out. Last person standing wins and gets bragging rights and the honorary trophy until next time we play.”

I crossed my arms. “Trophy?”

Auggie flounced over to a cabinet, then opened it and pulled out a decorative glittery wand with ribbon tied around it and a big fluffy ball on the top. It looked ridiculous. And damnit, I wanted it.

“So who’s the reigning champion?” I asked.

“Elspeth.” Auggie made a face. “Only because she shoved me right into the moon ball last month when we played.”

I shoved up my sleeves. “Are we allowed to run anywhere in the cottage?” My gaze flicked toward the wooden set of stairs leading up to the second floor. I’d never even stepped foot in this place because every time I tried, the damn thing attacked me.

“Not upstairs,” Adelaide said. “This room only.”

I nodded, having a hard time not watching Elspeth. She rolled up the long sleeves of her dress, then her hands fell to her sides, curling into fists.

Thea once again opened the tiny wooden box, a silver ball rising into the air with a half moon on it.

Everyone began moving at once as the ball zipped around the room trying to find its target. Auggie dove behind the little island in the kitchen while Prue squeezed herself under the rickety coffee table. Adelaide grabbed a book and held it up as the ball flew toward her.

“My book!” Prue yelled, emerging from under the coffee table and lunging for her older sister. The ball hit her arm, and she wrenched the book from Adelaide, who was smiling smugly.

She’d baited her sister.

The ball rose higher in the air, and I whipped around to see Thea brandishing the broom, ready to bat it away. If I stayed out of the chaos, maybe I could go undetected, keep the ball from finding me. My gaze landed on the kitchen table right when Elspeth dodged for it.

I moved fast, running and diving under the table, slamming into Elspeth.

We both rolled onto our stomachs, shoulders pressing into each other.

“Get your own hiding spot.” Elspeth shoved her shoulder into mine .

“I did,” I said. “I got here first. You’re the one encroaching on my space.”

“It’s my house,” she said loftily.

“Actually, it’s mine.” The words slipped out before I could stop them.

She stared at me, mouth agape. “What are you talking about?” she whispered.

“Get off of me!” Auggie yelled from somewhere in the cottage, shrieking.

I sighed. "I own the cottage. I bought it when my sister and I moved here, hoping to rent it out to someone. But..."

"But what?" she asked.

I hated admitting this to her. "It wouldn't let me enter. Wouldn't let me come anywhere near it. Anytime I tried, the damn thing attacked me."

Something like triumph flashed in her eyes. "Really? Well it appears we owe you rent."

Fuck. Elm was going to kill me. He'd said they weren't well off, that he suspected they didn't have the gold to pay for a roof over their heads.

"No," I said.

"I insist," she said back.

"You're doing me a favor. By living here, cleaning it. Making it habitable. After you leave, I'm hoping the cottage will be more amenable to guests living in it."

"Oh." She took a deep breath. "Okay, then."

"You cheated!" Auggie shrieked.

"It's not cheating if you're the one who dove in front of the ball," Adelaide replied.

"Because you baited me!"

I didn't know Adelaide well, but she seemed too mild-mannered and shy to be engaging in this kind of behavior. Maybe there was more to her than met the eye.

“All my sisters can get cutthroat during this game,” Elspeth explained, turning her face toward me so our noses were inches apart.

Her brown eyes reminded me of the color of mahogany, dark and rich. Nothing plain about them. In fact, I couldn’t believe I’d ever thought her to be plain, dull. She was anything but. She shook her bangs from her forehead.

“So how did you win last time?” I asked right as Thea shrieked, and the thwack of her broom echoed around the room. The ball whistled over our table.

A sinister smile spread across Elspeth’s face. “By being even more cutthroat.”

She jumped out from under the table, and I peeked my head out to see her running full speed toward Adelaide.

“Don’t you dare!” Adelaide tried to back away, but she ran into the wall.

The ball followed Elspeth, barreling toward the two sisters, and right before it was about to hit Elspeth, she ducked, and it bounced into Adelaide’s chest.

Elspeth turned with a smile, one that might’ve rivaled the sun. Her luminosity struck me as I stared at her, as I couldn’t stop staring at her.

“Draven, get your head in the game!” Auggie yelled. “Elspeth cannot win again.”

Fuck. I jumped out from under the table, the ball hovering between me and Elspeth. Elspeth had her hands out, legs bent, as she circled around the couch.

“Just you and me, Darkstone,” she said, a gleam in her eyes.

“Wouldn’t have it any other way,” I said.

“Don’t let her distract you,” Thea called.

She and Elspeth’s sisters all leaned against the kitchen counter, watching.

Elspeth straightened, and the ball perked up, flying in a straight line toward her. She dove out of the way, landing on the couch. “Excuse me,” she said to her family. “Whose side are you on?”

“Clearly Draven’s,” Auggie said.

“We’re sick of you winning,” Prue added.

That brought a smile to my face. Maybe these Moonflowers weren’t so bad after all. The ball rose higher, getting ready to nosedive into Elspeth. She rolled off the couch right as the ball hit the cushion and bounced up into the air and toward me. I spun around to avoid getting hit, then grabbed the broom Thea had been using, raising it high.

The ball flew toward me, and I held up the broom, batting it right toward Elspeth. She sucked in a breath, backing up and ducking. The moon ball flew right over her head before coming to an abrupt halt. Elspeth’s back was to me, and she began taking a few slow steps backward. The ball just hovered, so neither of us knew its next move.

Then it lunged, and Elspeth whipped around to run. An idea formed in my head, and before I could think too much on it, I moved. I crashed into Elspeth, tackling her to the floor and waiting. Waiting.

“What are you doing?” She beat her fists against me.

I closed my eyes and hoped I was right, that the ball was over us right now.

“Good game,” I whispered in her ear before rolling off her and onto the ground right as the ball bounced into her stomach.

Everyone broke into cheers and ran toward me, pulling me up and enveloping me in some kind of family hug.

“You did it!” Prue looked up at me with admiration in her eyes.

Thea patted my shoulder. “You can come to game night any time you’d like.”

The Moonflowers let go of me as Elspeth glared, now standing. “Beginner’s luck, I guess.”

Auggie handed me the wand. “It’s yours until the next full moon.”

I twirled it, Elspeth’s eyes darkening. I was enjoying this far too much. “So you’re a sore loser, then? Good to know, Moonflower.”

She stalked toward me, hands balled into fists. “You can’t take the wand.”

I raised a brow. “Why not?”

“Because it doesn’t belong to you,” she ground out.

“I think it does since I’m the one holding it, and according to the rules of moon ball, I get to keep it until next month.”

“There won’t be a next month.” She stopped in front of me, fire blazing in her eyes. “You’re not invited back.”

“Elspeth,” Thea hissed, round cheeks reddening as she gave me an apologetic smile.

“She doesn’t handle losing well. Last time she lost she threw a potion bottle.”

Elspeth rolled her eyes. “For the last time, I dropped it.”

Everyone murmured their disagreement.

“Like I said, sore loser.” I grabbed Elspeth’s hand, the contact sending an unexpected jolt through me. I peeled open her fist and placed the wand in it. “But if it makes you feel better to take the wand, then it’s yours.”

I walked over to grab my coat and shrugged it on.

“Oh, are you leaving so soon?” Thea asked. “We normally play three rounds.”

“I should be going.” I brushed past Elspeth, then turned. “Thank you for the game night.”

I walked out into the dark forest, the cold wind gusting past me, and all the way home, I thought about Elspeth Moonflower and how competing against her was the most fun I’d had in a long time.

Sixteen

ELSPETH

The smells of salty broth, sweet carrots, thyme, rosemary, and rabbit floated through the air. Mama stirred a boiling pot, which hung over the fire in the hearth, muttering a spell to meld the soup flavors. I sat at the kitchen table by the window, looking out at Adelaide sitting in the garden and digging in the soil.

We'd swept and scrubbed and dusted the entire downstairs but hadn't cleaned the upstairs yet. The grime on the windows had been too thick and hard to get off, so we'd have to figure out how to go about that.

As if the cottage knew what I was thinking, the window popped open, swinging straight for my head. I shrieked and jumped back, my chair toppling over as I fell with it.

Mama looked over her shoulder. "Elspeth, what are you doing on the floor?"

Auggie came down the stairs and helped me to a stand.

"Oh, just thought I'd fall over for fun," I said as I pulled up the chair and sat back in it—this time far away from the window.

We might have improved the appearance of the house but not its attitude .

Auggie flopped onto the couch in the middle of the room and surveyed all the flowers

she'd collected that sat on the little table. She grabbed her pestle, crushing the flowers to make different powders that she used as makeup. She was always experimenting with different makeups, different dyes for our fabrics.

I gazed out the window, past Adelaide, at the forest surrounding us.

I had to admit, it was nice having a house to ourselves. We'd spent so many years traveling, living out of our cart and tent. Every once in a while, for someone's arrival day, we might get an inn for the night, but it was rare. Even if the cottage was grumpy and aggressive, it was a place to call ours. Temporarily, at least.

After his admission last night, I'd thought about telling Draven we'd vacate immediately, but I also liked the idea of doing him a favor. Mr. High and Mighty couldn't even get into his own cottage. It filled me with far too much satisfaction that the cottage let us live here while it wouldn't even let him enter.

Prue came down the stairs, flipping through the pages of some book she'd found in the library.

"Prue! Watch where you're walking," I said right as she stumbled over a step. She caught herself before she face-planted into the floor.

"Honestly, do you ever put down your books?" Auggie dotted some red powder onto her lips.

"At least I know how to read," Prue mumbled.

Auggie turned and made a face at her.

"Girls," Mama said.

“You both have strengths and weaknesses,” I said to them as Prue plopped onto the couch next to Auggie. “And we should be celebrating our differences, not tearing each other down because of them.”

Both of them had the decency to look chagrined.

“Well, this stew should cheer everyone up,” Mama said, “and maybe put us all in better moods.” She gave me a pointed look over her shoulder, and now it was my turn to look chagrined.

“Yes.” Auggie straightened. “Let’s talk about how you’ve ended up with a certain Draven Darkstone on top of you three different times now.”

Even that was enough to make Prue put down her book. “You two looked very cozy together last night. ”

“No, we didn’t.” I tugged at the ends of my hair. “And, for the record, I don’t want to talk about Draven.”

“Why not? He’s got the whole broody, tall, dark, and handsome thing going on.” Auggie dotted some of the blue powder over her eyelids.

“I don’t care how he looks. He’s an ass,” I said, ignoring the way his light green eyes flashed in my mind at that moment, the same way I ignored the intensity of them every time he set them on me.

Auggie scoffed. “So you’re telling me that you felt nothing when his large, hard body was on top of you? I’d eat that man up.”

Mama squeaked from where she stood at the hearth, stirring and pretending not to listen in. “Got something caught in my throat,” she said.

I rolled my eyes. “The first time he landed on me, I was about to die because of one of his spells. The second time, I had freezing water rushing down my back in the stream. It felt like shards cutting into my skin. And the third time, he tackled me and nearly knocked the air from my lungs. So no, I was not thinking about the handsome man on top of me.”

“So you do think he’s handsome.” Auggie flashed me a smug grin, and even Prue smiled.

“You’re impossible,” I said.

“Well, if you won’t make a move on him, maybe I will.” Auggie shrugged.

Prue cocked an eyebrow. “Even after everything he’s done to Elspeth?”

Auggie stood and flounced around the couch and toward the table. She leaned against it. “I’m not going to be talking to him, Prue. Just... other things.”

“Auggie,” Mama admonished.

“What?” Auggie threw out her hands. “A witch is allowed to have some fun. I’m twenty-two. I didn’t get to go to the Coven Institute like so many witches. I didn’t get to make friends and join the Thorned Rose Society or Witches of the Moon.”

Two famous groups at the Institute, both ones that witches had to apply for. If they got in, they got to be a part of a sisterhood, a group of witches who lived together, did community service, and threw the occasional party. At twenty-three, Auggie was too old to attend the Institute. The cut-off for attending was twenty-two. All of us had to let go of our dreams in one way or another over the years.

“Soup’s ready,” Mama said.

I joined her in the kitchen area and opened one of the cupboards to gather bowls. The cupboards had been stocked full of plates, cups, bowls, silverware, pots, and pans. Everything we needed—though they'd been filthy.

I set the table while Prue ventured outside to get us fresh water from the well. She returned a few moments later just as Mama was setting the bowls of steaming stew on the table.

We all sat, and I twisted in my chair. "Is Adelaide coming?"

Prue pushed her spectacles up her nose and pointed out the front window. Adelaide now sat in a wooden swing hanging from one of the tree branches. She swayed back and forth. "She said that she's not hungry," Prue said before taking a bite of her stew.

She'd been distant and more solemn than usual since yesterday. I'd have to check in on her later and make sure she was doing okay. Maybe she'd seen Elm again and he'd done something to offend her? If he had, I would have his balls.

"Oh." Prue put down her spoon. "I found a map of Thistlegrove in the library. It looks like it was done rather recently and has all the businesses marked."

"That's helpful." I tapped my chin. "Maybe we can go over the map this afternoon, and it can help us brainstorm ideas for a business."

"Good luck," Prue said. "This town has everything." She ticked off her fingers. "A magical creature shop, a tea shop, a tavern, an inn, a clothing store, a bookstore, an apothecary, a charms shop?—"

"Okay." I rubbed my temples. "I get it." My stomach sank. We had to figure out a way to make a living while we were stuck here.

“Well, I talked to the woodsmith when I went to town this morning and convinced him to start working on our cart without any down payment.” Auggie took a sip of her soup, a smug look on her face.

My mouth dropped open. “Auggie! Why would you do that? We don’t know when we’re going to be able to pay him. He’s going to come asking for payment eventually, and then what are we going to do?” I sank my head into my arms .

“Oh, Elspeth. Auggie was just using her excellent negotiation skills. That’s my girl.” Mama patted Auggie’s hand.

Sometimes, I felt like the only adult at the table. I lifted my head.

“Eat your soup”—Mama gestured toward my bowl—“before it gets cold. Besides, my stew always makes you feel better.”

I took a sip of the warm, salty broth, and she was right. It was delicious. Cozy and warm and it made me feel like everything might be okay after all.

Prue stared at her bowl, a perplexed look on her face.

“Why aren’t you eating?” I asked.

“The soup. It’s like a potion,” she said slowly.

“Except it’s not a potion at all?” Auggie pursed her lips, and Prue gave her the middle finger.

“What I meant was that this could be a good idea.” Prue tugged at her brown curls. “A soup stand instead of a potion stand.”

I looked down at my stew and back up at Prue.

“There aren’t many restaurants in Thistlegrove,” Prue said. “We don’t have the means to open a whole tavern like Draven’s, but we could set up a simple cauldron and table. Some bowls.” She gestured outside. “The weather is getting chilly. Adelaide can make the recipes, Mama can use her potions affinity to keep the soup warm, to make the flavors come together. Auggie and I can forage for ingredients.”

I sat up straighter, my heart beating fast. That wasn’t a bad idea.

“Soup?” Auggie said. “You think we can actually make money off of soup? It’s so simple.”

“So simple it just might work,” I said.

Mama slurped from her spoon. “Adelaide’s recipes are very good.”

“It’s something we could start selling almost immediately. Maybe we can have daily flavors. We can forage for the ingredients. We’d just need to get the cauldron from our cart.” I got out of my chair and kissed Prue on the forehead. “You brilliant girl.” I sat back down, feeling lighter than I had in days.

“Well, I’m glad someone’s happy,” Auggie muttered into her bowl. “Now you just need to get Adelaide to eat.”

I turned in my chair and saw Elm out the window, standing in front of Adelaide. All the adoration I was used to seeing was gone from his face. His eyebrows were pinched, face drawn, and he looked tense. Adelaide’s shoulders were slumped, and she stared down at her lap.

“What’s going on out there?” I asked, dread replacing my feeling of elation.

Elm reached out to touch Adelaide, then his hand fell, and he walked away.

“I’d say Adelaide just gave Elm the boot.” Auggie slurped her soup.

“But why?” I looked back at the table. “She likes Elm.”

“Why?” Mama echoed.

Mama, Auggie, and Prue were all looking at me like the answer was obvious.

“What?” I asked.

“You hate Elm’s best friend.” Prue pointed her spoon at me. “And you know Adelaide can’t stand conflict.”

“She’s repelled by it,” Auggie agreed.

Mama crossed her arms, jaw locked. I wasn’t used to seeing her angry. I was usually the angry one.

“So it’s my fault?” I pressed my hands to my chest.

“Yes,” Auggie said simply before going back to eating her stew.

“You’re Adelaide’s best friend,” Mama said. “She loves you more than anything, and she’s not going to pursue a man whose best friend you don’t get along with. And to think, Elm could’ve broken the curse. He could’ve helped Adelaide get her magic back.”

I snorted. I very much doubted that. I looked back out the window. Adelaide’s shoulders were shaking like she was crying.

Oh no.

Maybe I didn't believe Elm would break the curse, but I did believe he made Adelaide happy, and wasn't that what mattered? I couldn't let this silly feud with Draven be the reason Adelaide didn't pursue Elm. Especially if it caused a rift between us, led to resentment.

I couldn't let that happen.

"Well, she has nothing to worry about." I turned. "Because I don't hate Draven. We can get along just fine."

"I'd like to see that," Auggie mumbled.

And she would. I'd make amends with Draven and fix this entire mess.

Seventeen

ELSPETH

The sun shone down on the Thistlegrove market, carts and stands lining a long dirt road that stretched between Thistlegrove Forest and the town. Enchanted Pages was far behind us, and I still needed to visit. It was all Prue talked about. She was spending nearly every day there, and apparently the owner was okay with it, even if she wasn't buying books.

If we sold enough soup, we were going to put away some money for our cart repairs and use the other part of our earnings for seeds for our garden. We'd need to start growing our own vegetables in order to have enough soup combinations. Luckily, there was a greenhouse on the other side of the river, and I'd heard the owner, Greta, had excellent winter-resistant seeds that could grow plants in the harshest of conditions.

Witches began appearing from the forest on their way to town. Scents from the soap cart next to us tickled my nose: rose, lavender, and lemon wafted through the air. The soaps sat in neat rows with bright colors that drew the eye. Adelaide was looking longingly at them as Mama stirred the cauldron.

Prue and Auggie had stayed back at the cottage to continue foraging for more soup ingredients and to clean—much to Auggie's dismay. She'd spent all morning complaining about how she wanted to help run the stand, but I wanted a chance to speak with Adelaide. I had a feeling she'd been avoiding me, and I worried she was already resenting me, even if she didn't realize it.

A dilapidated green building sat on the other side of the road. Grime and dirt covered the sides of it, and holes and exposed wood peeked out. The front columns that held up a second-level balcony bowed in, looking like they might collapse any day now.

“What is that?” I pointed.

“Oh, it’s the Gathering Hall.” Adelaide tucked her blonde hair behind her ear. “Apparently it used to be the place everyone went for town meetings, festivals, weddings, and community gatherings.”

“What happened?” My brows furrowed.

Adelaide shrugged. “There’s not much sense of community here anymore, from what I’ve gathered. Not since Witch Superior started doling out harsher laws. It scared people, made them keep to themselves more, become less trusting. So the Gathering Hall has become obsolete.”

The thought made me sad. My gaze lingered on the building as an older man hobbled up to us, his wand elongated into a cane that he used to help him walk. It was a clever spell.

He sniffed the air and turned his beady gaze on us, his chin jutting out. “What’s this, then?” He pointed his cane at our stand.

“Soup,” I said brightly. “Wild mushroom and potato.”

“Don’t know about that.” He shook his head. “Soup. So simple. Could make it at home. Witches’ll try and sell anything these days.”

Adelaide and I looked at each other while Mama whirled around, wand pointed at the man.

The man's eyes widened. "Are you threatening me?" he asked.

"No." I laughed as I put a hand on Mama's arm to make her lower it. "Not at all. Mama is just inviting you to have a taste."

The man grunted in response, but he didn't say no. I nodded at Mama, and she ladled some soup into a small cup. We'd decided on two sizes: a cup or a bowl, depending on how hungry the customers were. We'd also found some flour in the cabinets and baked bread to go along with it. Well, Adelaide baked the bread .

The man accepted the cup and spoon and took a sip. He grunted again.

"You can just return the cup and spoon when you're done." I gestured to the empty basket meant for dirty dishes.

His eyes shifted back and forth, then he shook his head and reached into his pocket, pulling out a few gold coins and slamming them on the table. "Soup," he muttered as he walked away, but I couldn't help but notice he was eating it.

"Forgive old man Veldar," a woman said as she approached.

Her shoulder-length black hair was slicked back, a waxiness to her alabaster skin. Fangs peeked out from the sides of her mouth.

A vampire.

I wondered what she was doing in the Witchlands. There were strict residency laws—only those with magic were allowed to reside here permanently. Those from other lands could visit and live here for short amounts of time if they had express permission from Witch Superior and the appropriate documents.

The vampire leaned forward, inhaling deeply. “Mushrooms.” She flashed her fangs. “My favorite.” She rubbed her belly, and I realized she was wearing a deep red tunic tucked into sleek leather-black trousers. A long black cape fluttered around her in the breeze.

Adelaide gulped.

The vampire looked at us expectantly. “I’d like a bowl.”

“Of course.” I nodded at Mama, who was staring with an open mouth at the vampire. We didn’t see many of them in the Witchlands, not after the centuries-old conflict that existed between our species. We weren’t at war anymore, but tension still hung thick between us. It was rumored that Witch Superior recently stormed out of what was supposed to be a peace meeting between the two realms.

Mama ladled some soup into a bowl and pushed it toward the vampire with her wand like she was afraid if she got too close, she’d get bitten.

“The name is Helena,” the vampire said, nodding at us. “And you haven’t made it in Thistlegrove until old man Veldar has berated you.”

I looked at the old man, who was still eating his soup—now in front of a stand full of rare ingredients needed for certain spells: eyeballs, toenails, rabbit’s feet, dragon talons, griffon teeth, and more. It looked like he was arguing with the owner about something.

“Well, that’s good to know,” I said as she took a sip, her eyes flicking down to me and Adelaide’s aprons. I cursed myself inwardly. We’d forgotten our wands today. I wondered if Helena noticed.

“Mm.” Her gaze snapped to Mama. “Now that’s just delicious.”

Mama smiled broadly, clearly being won over. “Well, thank you.” She sniffed. “But it’s my daughter’s recipe.” She tipped her head toward Adelaide.

“My compliments to the chef,” Helena said, her gaze searching for something.

My pulse spiked, and I reminded myself to be calm. It was ridiculous to think Helena would notice something as simple as our missing wands. She wasn’t even a witch.

“So Helena, what brings a vampire to the Witchlands?” Adelaide asked.

I shot her a look. It was nice to have paying customers, but if we asked too many questions, others were likely to ask questions of us. Something I wanted to avoid.

Helena waved her hand as she took another sip. “This flavor is just phenomenal.” She looked up, her red eyes flashing. “The earthiness of the mushrooms, the tanginess of the broth, the texture of the potatoes. It goes together beautifully.”

Mama smiled brightly, now fully won over by the vampire.

“To answer your question, I’m a talent manager.”

“A what?” I asked. I’d never heard of such a thing.

“Oh, I seek out talent among all the realms and recruit the finest artists, performers, bards, singers—if you’ve heard of them, I probably manage them.” She flashed a menacing smile.

Mama gasped. “Do you know Riven Shiu? I heard he hails from this very village.”

“Indeed. He’s a client at my agency. One of my associates just got him a huge contract to tour the human kingdoms.”

Wow. Riven was a famous bard, well-known for his riveting ballads about famous witches, wars, and adventurers.

I leaned over, resting my elbows on the counter as Helena ate another bite. “He got a contract in the human lands? ”

Adelaide stepped up next to me. “They actually allowed that?”

Witches weren’t exactly welcome in the other realms. It wasn’t illegal for us to travel to them, but horror stories often floated over the border about witches who’d disappeared after leaving the Witchlands. Everyone was suspicious of our magic, worried we’d use it against them. Of course that didn’t stop some of the most powerful leaders from recruiting witches to do magic for them. But that was risky in and of itself. One wrong move and a witch could be burned at the stake or drowned. It was another reason I was so afraid we’d be found out and forced to leave the Witchlands. I’d often stay up late, tossing and turning, visions of all of us burning at the stake as the magistrates threw hellfire at us flashing through my mind.

“Oh, Witch Superior,” Mama said. “Can you introduce us?”

Helena gave her a sympathetic smile. “Well, he’s on tour for the next year. But if he makes a surprise visit, you’ll be the first to know.”

Mama squealed and clapped her hands. “Wait until I tell Auggie.”

“Auggie?” Helena asked with a questioning look.

“One of my other daughters. She’s such a big fan.”

“So that’s what you’re doing in Thistlegrove?” I asked. “Looking for talent?”

“You never know where it’s going to come from.” She winked as she finished her last bite. “This was delicious. I’ll be sure to stop by again. You should really get some stools so people can sit and enjoy the soup—and the conversation.”

That was exactly what I wanted to avoid. No getting close to anyone. No making friends. I just wanted to sell our soup and find a way to fix our cart so we could leave this place behind. Helena dropped a few gold coins on the counter and waved goodbye.

“We sure have met some interesting characters this morning.” Mama turned back to the cauldron and stirred it. Gold sparks jumped from her wand, infusing the soup with her magic that brought all the flavors together.

Far down the road, I spotted Draven, Elm, and that girl from the tavern walking, an orange-colored miniature dragon flying next to them. I remembered seeing that creature sleeping on the bar top when I’d visited Draven’s tavern. I couldn’t imagine him owning a pet. He wasn’t capable of loving anything but himself.

Adelaide stared longingly at Elm as someone else approached our stand, asking for a cup of soup.

I nudged Adelaide. “Have you talked to Elm recently? Any outings planned?”

“No,” Adelaide said. “He visited yesterday and invited me to dine at The Brewhouse, but I declined. I don’t think he’ll be inviting me out again.”

I chewed the inside of my cheek. “Why would you do that? I thought you liked him?”

She gave me an exasperated look. “You hate his best friend. Every time you’re in the same vicinity, you get into an argument... and somehow end up with him on top of you.”

I threw out my arms. “We’ve only been in the same vicinity thrice.”

Mama shushed us as she sold soup to yet another customer.

“And each time, you’ve ended up practically brawling,” Adelaide said. “It draws too much attention to us, and like you said, I barely know Elm, so I’m just going to distance myself.”

Guilt bubbled like our cauldron full of soup. I was the cause of this. Adelaide had been so happy the first few days we’d been here, and it was like someone had stolen her light. I stole her light. I was the thief, and I needed to return what I’d taken.

My hands twisted together as I watched Draven and Elm far in the distance. I had an idea. One that was either brilliant or would end in complete disaster.

Page 18

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Eighteen

DRAVEN

“Do we have to worry about food poisoning?” Edgar pointed his tail toward the mini meat pie Elm was biting into, which was almost bigger than the dragon. “I heard that if food is left out at a certain temperature, bacteria multiplies.”

“Don’t dragons eat raw meat?” Georgie asked as Edgar flew next to us while we walked through the market.

“That’s a fair point.”

I bit into my own meat pie, the savory flavor of beef, onion, and flaky pie crust mingling together.

Georgie’s eyes widened at a stand far in the distance with a mannequin wearing a sparkling pink dress that was form-fitting and long-sleeved with a high neckline.

“Can we go there?” Georgie pointed to the dress, sunlight glinting off the fabric.

“I can’t,” I said. “I need to get back to the tavern.”

Her face fell. “Right.”

I put a hand on her shoulder. “I’m sure Edgar can take you. Or Elm.”

“Oh yes.” Elm finished his last bite and wiped his hands together. “I’ve got an excellent eye for fashion.”

My friend was feeling better today and got an earful from me about missing the game night.

“Or Edgar can go?” I suggested as Georgie made a face.

“Do I have to try a dress on?” Edgar asked with his wide orange eyes. “Because I don’t think they make those for dragons.”

“Just forget it,” Georgie mumbled, wandering over to a candle stand. Candles of all sizes stood on the edge, each one with a label saying both the scent and its magical properties.

“You know, I think she wants to spend time with you.” Elm nodded toward my sister, who was bending down to smell a candle.

“She hates me,” I said. “And I don’t blame her. I don’t know what to do to make her happy. I thought Edgar would cheer her up, but she seems ambivalent to him.”

“Hey!” Edgar said. “I can hear, you know.”

Elm clapped a hand on my shoulder. “She doesn’t hate you. I just think she doesn’t know how to relate to you.”

“And I definitely don’t know how to relate to her.”

A chilly breeze blew past us, fluttering tablecloths and awnings hanging over some of the stands.

“Maybe she just needs a woman’s touch.” I looked down to see Morty Hallow standing next to me, her gray corkscrew hair falling in perfect spirals and brushing her shoulders, her deep umber skin smooth and wrinkle-free despite her age of seventy years.

The older witch had just retired from running her tea shop, which she’d passed on to her niece.

I cocked a brow. “It’s not nice to eavesdrop, Morty.”

She fluttered a hand in the air. “You were talking so loudly. It wasn’t exactly difficult.”

Elm grinned. “Hi Morty.”

She pointed a long purple nail at him. “I’m still upset you never visited my tea shop for one of my matchmaking events.”

“Well, I wasn’t ready to be matched,” Elm said simply.

Women might have used Elm frequently, but he never seemed to care—or notice. He’d give money, sex, favors, whatever they wanted from him, and when they were done with him, he showed no emotion. It was the oddest thing, and I’d never been able to understand it.

“And you are now?” Morty asked with far too much interest.

Elm looked away.

Right. I’d ruined that. Elm had asked Adelaide out on an official date yesterday, and she’d turned him down. He suspected it was because of my contemptuous

relationship with her sister. I hadn't meant to get into another argument with Elspeth, to ruin her family game night. It seemed every interaction of ours would end in disaster.

"Not quite," Elm said.

Morty turned her dark green eyes on me. "And what about you?"

I scoffed. "You're not matchmaking me, Morty. Besides, you're retired from all that."

Morty's tea shop, Steeped in Love, was famous for making tea—and love matches. She'd regularly hosted matchmaking events when she owned the shop. She might've been retired from the shop, but I had a feeling she still couldn't help but meddle in relationships.

I was sorry to disappoint her, but I had no interest in love. I didn't have time for it. Not with a sister to care for, a tavern to run, and spells to perfect.

"Too bad," Morty said. "I heard five new witches came to town a week ago."

I choked, and Elm burst out laughing. "Now that's an idea."

"Oh, that wouldn't be good," Edgar said. "Draven got into a horrible argument with one of the witches at his tavern."

I shot him a look, but the dragon went on.

"Terrible business. I had to hide under the countertop. I was afraid they might get out their wands and start a duel."

I rolled my eyes. “It wasn’t that bad.”

“It ended with you tackling her,” Elm said. “Then you tackled her again yesterday in the brook, and from what I’ve heard, again at their cottage last night.”

I thought of my body pressed to Elspeth’s, and my cock twitched. Witch’s tits, that was disturbing. But for whatever reason, ever since last night, I couldn’t get Elspeth out of my mind. The feel of her lithe body under my large one. How she’d moved under me and made me think of all the ways she might move if we’d been doing other things .

It hadn’t helped that she’d been soaking wet in the stream yesterday morning, her entire dress plastered to her body, her nipples peaked. Some feral part of me had awoken, and I’d wanted to grab her and kiss her senseless. Kiss her so hard she’d stop arguing with me.

I swallowed, pushing those thoughts away. I was clearly overtired and overworked. I might not have needed a relationship, but I needed a release from all this tension. To bed a woman and get it out of my system. Get her out of my system.

“Oh, I heard,” Morty said. “It sounds like you’ve met your match, Draven Darkstone.”

I glowered at her. Elspeth wasn’t my match. She was a pain in the ass.

Georgie ran over, holding up a pair of jeweled high heels, the fabric on them a pale pink, sparkling gems lining the heels in a vertical pattern. “I love them.” She squeezed them to her chest.

“Georgie,” I said. “When would you even have an occasion to wear something like that?”

“Maybe I don’t need an occasion. Maybe I can just wear them whenever I want.” She stuck out her bottom lip. “It’s not like you’d ever take me anywhere where I could wear them. I just want something pretty.”

“I like them!” Edgar piped up, his lips peeling back to reveal his sharp teeth. “They’d go wonderfully with that pink dress you had your eye on.”

I cut him a look, and he dove behind Elm, peeking his head over my friend’s shoulder. Georgie didn’t need more things. Spending money wouldn’t fix the problems that lay between us, the problems with her confidence, her outbursts.

“That dress?” Morty pointed to it.

“Draven already said no,” Georgie mumbled.

“It’s pretty,” Morty said. “Fit for a ball.”

“Well, unfortunately, we don’t attend many of those.” I gave Morty a curt nod. “Now, if you’ll excuse us?—”

Morty tapped her chin with her long nails. “Up until your parents died, the Darkstone Manor was decked out every year for a ball to celebrate Marhloth.”

The holiday that marked when the very first Witch Superior won the wars against the vampires and werewolves, kicking them out of our realm and establishing the official Witchlands.

“Your grandmother even made an occasional appearance and kicked up her feet.”

I snorted, unable to imagine my grandmother doing anything as joyous as dancing.

“I don’t dance,” I said.

I knew about these balls, but I’d never attended, always too busy with work.

Georgie’s eyes brightened. “A dance?”

I rubbed my temples. “We really need to be going?—”

“Can we throw a ball? I miss them.” Georgie pressed her hands together. “And maybe we could invite Grandmother to come?”

This was exactly what I’d been trying to avoid. I turned my hard stare on Morty, and to her credit, she didn’t flinch. “I don’t have the time to throw some silly ball.”

Morty tapped her chin. “Well, I’m sure you don’t have to do it all alone.”

“I’d love to go to a ball,” Elm said, his gaze on something in the distance. “You know, that’s exactly what Thistlegrove needs right now.”

“I can help plan!” Georgie said, her eyes pleading.

“So can I!” Edgar’s wings flapped faster. “I have excellent organizational skills.”

“I can help too,” Morty said. “I have a lot more time on my hands now that I’m retired. Plus that big empty manor could use a little life. With you staying in that small apartment over your tavern, the manor barely gets used.”

This was turning into a headache, but Georgie looked so hopeful at the idea. It was the most excited I’d seen her in a long time.

“Fine,” I relented. “We can throw the damn ball.”

Georgie squealed and threw her arms around my neck. I stiffened, then relaxed into the hug, squeezing her tight.

“Now let’s go look at that dress you have your eye on.” Morty offered her arm, and before I could protest, Georgie looped hers through it and they were off.

“Fuck me,” I said as Elm came up next to me.

“I thought she was lovely,” Edgar said. “Less grumpy than some people I know.” His eyes flitted to me, and he gave a nervous laugh.

We followed behind Morty and Georgie toward the dress stand.

“Elm! Draven!” a voice called. One that instantly grated on my nerves.

I turned to see Elspeth Moonflower waving at me. Adelaide and Thea Moonflower stood beside her behind a small table with bowls and spoons sitting on top of it. Steam curled into the air over a bubbling cauldron. I sniffed, a delicious, earthy scent wafting toward me.

Elspeth waved, a strained smile plastered on her face while Thea ladled soup into bowls for waiting customers, serving them with a side of thick crusty bread.

“Adelaide,” Elm said, striding forward before I could stop him.

My jaw locked as I followed.

“Hi,” Elspeth said from behind the table. I looked behind me, wondering who she was talking to, but there was no one there. I whirled around. She stared at me expectantly. “It’s nice to see you,” she said quickly.

“It is?” I asked slowly. “Even after I beat you at moon ball last night?”

“Do I need to hide?” Edgar asked.

Elspeth’s gaze swiveled to the dragon. “And who is this?”

“This is Edgar,” I said. “Our pet dragon.”

“I prefer ‘companion,’” Edgar said, stretching out his tail for Elspeth to shake. She gave him a genuine smile that lit up her entire face.

Her mahogany eyes brightened, and she looked instantly younger, so carefree in this moment.

She swiped her bangs from her forehead. “Can I help you?” she asked, that strained smile once again taking over.

“What?” I snapped.

“You’re staring.”

I looked away, hands curling into fists. Adelaide and Elm were off to the side of the stand, speaking in hushed tones. Elspeth shot them a look, then sidled around the table and right in front of me.

She raised her chin and took a measured breath, her bosom rising and falling. “I want to apologize for how I behaved at the cottage yesterday. ”

“Just at the cottage?” I raised a brow.

She clenched her jaw. “And at your tavern.”

“Okay, then,” I said.

“Okay?” she echoed, her eyes flashing in a way that I found intoxicating. I wanted to make them flash like that again. “Do you have anything to say to me?” She crossed her arms.

“Oh, here we go.” Edgar dove behind me, plastering his body to my back, his tail wrapping around my waist.

“I don’t think I’m the one who has anything to apologize for.” I was being an ass. I knew it. I had plenty to apologize for, but for whatever reason, I liked getting under this woman’s skin, liked seeing her fire.

She narrowed her gaze. “Then you can take my apology and stick it straight up your?—”

“What’s going on here?” Adelaide and Elm appeared at our sides.

Elspeth jumped, lunging forward and grabbing my hands. “I was just apologizing to Draven.”

Adelaide’s gaze shifted between the two of us.

Elspeth’s hands were so small in my large ones, her pale skin soft and warm.

“Really?” Adelaide raised a skeptical brow.

“Yes,” Elspeth said, her voice coming out high and squeaky.

What was she up to? Whatever it was, I didn’t trust it.

“That’s odd.” I removed my hands from Elspeth’s and stroked my stubbled jaw. “Because I thought that you were about to tell me you wanted to take your apology and stick it straight up my?—”

“Look at this dress, Draven!” Georgie danced by us, holding up the sparkly pink dress she’d been eyeing. “Isn’t it gorgeous?” She swayed with it pressed against her.

“It is lovely.” Morty walked up behind her. “It’ll look beautiful at the ball.”

This entire ordeal was her fault. If she hadn’t intervened, hadn’t mentioned a stupid ball, hadn’t offered to take Georgie to see the dress, I wouldn’t be standing here, forced into this conversation with Elspeth.

Morty and Georgie went back to the dress stand, and I heard Morty bartering with the seamstress.

“Ball?” Adelaide asked. “What ball?”

“You must come,” Elm said. “Your whole family is invited.” He gestured to Elspeth and her mother, who was still busy serving customers.

Witch’s tits. Today had gone from bad to worse.

“I don’t know...” Adelaide twisted her hands together.

“Yes!” Elspeth burst out. “We’d love to.”

“Great.” Elm clapped his hands together.

“Great,” Elspeth said with a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes.

Fucking great.

Nineteen

ELSPETH

Mama stood on her tiptoes on the edge of a chair, reaching the duster up toward the top of the bookshelf. The chair tottered, Mama wobbling.

“Mama, you’re going to fall!” I rushed to a stand, my hands wet and grimy from scrubbing the floor.

We’d barely had time to clean the house now that we were selling soup at the market every day. In a week, we’d managed to scabble together enough gold to give the woodsmith his first payment, which was a relief.

I had to admit, our soup idea was a hit. There was nothing like it in Thistlegrove, and every day, we had patrons stopping by to see what the daily flavor was. So far, we’d had mushroom and potato stew, rabbit stew, squash and carrot soup, and yesterday, we’d made a spicy tomato soup. Adelaide had baked a crusty bread with melted cheese to go with it. We’d sold out before midday. We’d been buying ingredients from the market with our earnings, but we could save so much more if we planted a garden and started growing our own veggies. It was on our never-ending to-do list.

All of a sudden, the shelves started rattling around us, books falling off and thunking to the ground. Dust rose in a thick curtain.

I coughed, banging my chest as the dust burned through my lungs. After two weeks here, the cottage didn’t seem any keener on us than it had been when we arrived. It

kept us up half the night, pots and pans banging inside the cabinets downstairs. I thought if we cleaned the cottage, it would be grateful and start showing some appreciation, but no such luck had occurred.

Prue sat on a bench by the window, reading. I sighed. Prue had always been introverted, but I worried that being in this cottage, surrounded by these books, was making her worse. She was retreating even more into herself than ever before.

At least when we traveled, she'd been forced to mingle with others that we met on the road. Now she was just holed up in the house, reading, helping Mama with new spells, and cleaning.

One problem at a time, I reminded myself as Mama fell off the chair with a shriek. She landed on top of all the books.

"Mama!" I ran to her and helped her to stand. Her curly gray hair was sticking out in all directions, her cheeks red, a sheen of sweat glistening on her pale skin. "Are you alright?"

"You little twat," she said to the cottage.

"Mama!" I didn't think I'd ever heard her use that language before.

"Well, she is."

Prue looked up from her book. "Why do you assume the cottage is a she?"

Mama threw up her hands. "I just do."

"I'm pretty sure cottages are gender neutral," Prue muttered, flipping a page.

I bent over and began picking up books to place them back on the shelves.

“Prue, are you going to help us clean or just sit there reading all day?” Mama asked.

“Mm,” Prue said, clearly not paying any attention.

I studied her. “You’ve been glued to that book since this morning. What’s so interesting that you can’t tear your eyes away from it?”

Prue sighed heavily and lay the book on her chest, looking over at me through her spectacles. She took after Mama, her face rounder than the rest of us, her hair with more curl to it. “I’m looking up cleaning spells.”

“You can’t do magic,” I said.

“Thank you,” Prue replied drily. “I am looking up spells that Mama could do. We have so much going on, we can’t stay on top of cleaning the cottage too. We need brooms that will sweep for us, rags that will do our dusting, a cleaner that will actually get rid of the grime on these windows.” She looked at the window next to her, covered in the thick grime she referenced.

“I’m not sure if that’s the best use of your time,” I said. “Spelling inanimate objects is notoriously difficult. So much can go wrong.”

One wrong word or ingredient could make a rag try and suffocate you instead of clean or a broom try to impale its owner. I shuddered at the thought.

“Well, if anyone can do it, it’s our Prue,” Mama said. “Besides, I’m tired of cleaning. All I do is cook and clean. I’d like to enjoy myself a little, you know.” She pushed some of the curls from her sweat-soaked forehead. “I’m not getting any younger. It would be so nice if I could see any of my daughters married before I die.” She

sniffled.

Prue and I shot each other looks. Here it came: the guilt trip. Mama was an expert at them.

“Well, good thing you’re not dying any time soon. You’ll probably live to be a hundred.”

She planted her hands on her hips. “And you think I want to wait until I’m ancient to see you get married? I don’t understand why none of you can find a nice man.” Mama started pacing. “It’s not that hard. I did it!”

“You weren’t cursed,” I pointed out.

“There are men everywhere!” Mama stalked over to Prue and snatched a book sitting by her on the bench. “Not just in your books. Out in the real world.”

“Elspeth did find a man,” Prue reminded her, looking unimpressed by Mama’s rant. “It didn’t go well, if you remember.”

I winced.

Mama set the book down. “Yes, well. Johanes was unfortunate. But not every man is like him.” She threw an arm over her eyes. “Where did I go wrong with all of you? ”

“You didn’t,” I said, exasperated.

It was the same argument again and again.

“We’re doing the best we can,” I said finally.

Mama dropped her arm from over her eyes. “Well, your best isn’t good enough. Just admit that there is no breaking this curse. I wish there was. I wish you didn’t have to marry to access your magic, but it’s just the way it is.” She rushed forward, grabbing my hands. “We’re finally stuck in a town for an extended period of time. So find a witch. Any witch. You don’t need to fall in love or get butterflies. You just need to marry and get your magic, then you can do whatever you want.”

I slipped my hands from hers and turned my back to her. “We’ve talked about this,” I said over my shoulder. “I refuse to marry to get my magic. It’s not right. There has to be a way to break the curse.”

Mama scoffed.

Prue sat up. “I agree. It’s an incredibly demeaning curse. I shouldn’t have to submit myself to someone to use what should be my birthright.”

Mama sniffled. “Are you happy, Elspeth? You’ve corrupted your sister,” she said through tears.

Prue rolled her eyes before sliding her book up to hide her face. “I do have thoughts of my own, you know.”

“I haven’t corrupted anyone. I’m just refusing to settle. We all are.”

I couldn’t break it to Mama that I had no interest in getting married. Not ever. Not after Johanes so thoroughly broke my heart.

Mama wiped her eyes. “Thank goodness for Adelaide. I see the way Elm looks at her. He’s completely besotted. I bet she will be married in no time.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” I said.

Mama shook her finger at me. “Don’t you get in her head.”

“I won’t.”

She shot me a pointed stare.

I held up my hands. “I promise.”

That seemed to at least stop her tears.

“Watch out!” a voice called as a piece of rolled-up parchment fluttered into the room.

Wings the size of my palm stretched out on either side of the parchment as it zipped and zoomed around our heads.

“What on earth...” Mama put a hand to her chest .

Auggie and Adelaide burst into the room, Auggie with her hand outstretched. “Come here, you little?—”

“What is going on?” I asked as Auggie shoved past me, jumping to try and catch the flying parchment.

Adelaide came to stand beside me, her arms crossed. “We got a letter in the post, but it’s being... difficult.”

I frowned. Magic was often unpredictable, even in the best of spells. I looked at my older sister. “So what are you doing?”

“Watching and enjoying the show.” She nodded her head toward Auggie, who was attempting to climb up the shelves to reach the letter.

Prue huffed, then stood. She closed one eye and launched a book at the parchment, knocking it from the air. It fell to the ground. Prue picked it up and stretched her hand out to Auggie.

Auggie snatched it from her, making a face as Prue smiled smugly.

“A letter?” Mama rushed over to Auggie. “Well, who would’ve sent us a letter? Hand it over.” She gestured for it, and Auggie complied.

We gathered around Mama as she untied the red string. A matching red wax seal with a phoenix on it was stamped on the parchment. Mama unrolled it, and we all crowded tight, trying to read it.

“Ow! Aim your pointy elbows elsewhere,” Auggie said.

“Girls,” Mama chided, her gaze stuck on the parchment. She gasped. “An invitation to a ball!”

Oh. That.

My stomach sank. It had been over a week since I’d told Draven Darkstone we’d come to his ball, all in an effort to show Adelaide we could get along. I’d hoped he’d forgotten about the entire thing.

Auggie gasped. “A ball? We’re invited to a ball?”

“At the Darkstone Manor.” Mama frowned. “I wonder where that is.”

“I think it’s on the other side of Thistlegrove Forest,” Adelaide said, tapping her chin. “I heard someone talking about it at the market the other day.”

“Darkstone Manor? Isn’t Darkstone Draven’s last name?” Prue asked.

I hadn’t even thought of that.

“What is a tavern owner doing with a manor?” Prue continued .

“Who cares?” Auggie flung out her arms and twirled. “We’re going to attend an actual ball.”

Adelaide snatched the parchment from Mama, reading it. “I don’t know if it’s a good idea.” She handed it back to Mama.

Elm had stopped by our soup stand nearly every day this week, but despite his efforts, I hadn’t seen him and Adelaide together, and she seemed miserable. Every time I tried to bring it up, she just said that I was right, and it was easier to keep things simple, uncomplicated.

“What?” Auggie screeched. “Of course it’s a good idea. In what world is going to a ball a bad idea?”

“In a world where we’re cursed and living in a realm where it’s illegal to not have magic?” Adelaide said.

“Mama!” Auggie stamped her foot. “Tell her we can go.”

“I still don’t understand how Draven Darkstone has an entire manor,” Prue said. “The only witches who have manors are those that have inherited them. Which means he must have family wealth. Why would he work in some village tavern if he didn’t have to?”

Why indeed. It seemed there was more to Draven than I realized.

“What do you think, Elspeth?” Mama asked, nudging her head toward Adelaide.

Elm would be at the ball. This might be my best chance to get him and Adelaide together, to make my sister smile again.

“We should go,” I burst out before I could change my mind.

Prue groaned. “Can I at least bring a book?”

“Well, then.” Mama clapped her hands together. “Tomorrow we’re going shopping.”

Twenty

ELSPETH

Fabric hung all over the dressmaker's shop. Glittery fabrics, silk, cotton, linen, patterned. It was enough to make my head spin.

Auggie draped a gold fabric over her shoulders, spinning as it caught rays of sunlight.

The dressmaker pointed his wand at Auggie, saying a spell in the ancient language of witches: Ethorial. It was the only language magic responded to and just one reason why casting spells was difficult. All witches learned the language in primary school, but to actually use it to cast spells took much skill. You had to understand each word, each intonation and inflection, or spells could go horribly wrong.

He finished saying the spell, and the fabric lifted from Auggie, then wrapped around her bosom, down to her waist, trailing all the way to the ground. She squealed. It looked like an actual dress, sleeveless, sleek, beautiful with her wavy brown hair and pale skin.

“Mama, look!” Auggie said, gesturing.

Mama appeared from behind some fabric, different types slung over her shoulders as she made her way to Auggie.

“Please do not touch my work,” the dressmaker said to Mama in a thick accent that sounded like it was from the southern part of the realm, near the Werelands border.

Mama cleared her throat and twined her hands behind her back.

“What do you think?” the dressmaker asked, pinching the end of his thin mustache.

Auggie posed as she admired herself in the mirror. “It’s beautiful.”

I grimaced. It would cost all our gold coin to buy new dresses. We couldn’t afford this, but when I tried to be the voice of reason, Mama would hear none of it.

Adelaide walked out of a small side room covered by a curtain, and I gasped. She wore a white dress with sheer short sleeves and an A-line silhouette. It hung down her frame, the top layer sheer and revealing silky sparkling fabric underneath.

She looked breathtaking. Like a princess from the human lands. If he hadn’t already, Elm would fall head over heels after seeing Adelaide in this. Her blonde hair fell in soft waves down her shoulders, her blue eyes shining.

“What do you think?” she asked.

“I said do not touch!” The dressmaker swatted Mama’s hand away from Auggie, and Mama harrumphed.

“It’s gorgeous, Adelaide. Where did you find this?”

She shrugged. “It was in the back of the shop. It looked too big, so I figured there was no way it would fit. I decided to try it on anyway, and when I put it over my head, it conformed to my body.”

“It would look perfect with these.” I reached for two long white gloves that sat on a nearby shelf and handed them to Adelaide, who slipped them on. “And maybe a flower crown in your hair?”

She laughed. “Let’s not go overboard. I can’t believe you agreed to this.”

I crossed my arms. “You were there when I told Draven we’d come.”

“Yes, but I figured you were just trying to be polite. For once.”

My cheeks heated.

“Well, we’re stuck here in Thistlegrove, so we may as well make the most of it,” I said.

“Who are you, and what have you done with my sister?” Adelaide asked. “You’ve gone from wanting to hide away from the world to wanting to attend a ball at the manor of your nemesis?”

“He’s not my nemesis.”

He wasn’t worthy enough to hold that title.

“Uh-huh. Well, promise you won’t get into an argument with him and cause a scene,” Adelaide said. “That’s the last thing we need.”

I scoffed. “Adelaide, I won’t. I told you that Draven and I are okay. So if you want to dance with a certain Elm Kingsley at the ball...”

“Careful, you’re starting to sound like Mama.” Adelaide poked me. “We’ve found my dress. Now what about yours?”

“Where is Prue?” I asked,

“Hiding behind those fabrics.” Adelaide pointed at the corner. “Of course.”

Out the window, Helena was walking down the dirt road, wearing all black today. I remembered the way she'd been studying me and Adelaide at the market the other day, a little too closely for comfort. I bit the inside of my cheek.

"Get Prue and make her try on some dresses," I said. "I'll be right back."

I ran toward the door, and it swung open for me. The air was chilly, and I pulled my thick brown shawl tighter around my shoulders.

"Helena!" I called.

She stopped and turned, tilting her head and flashing me a smile. "Elspeth Moonflower. I'm still thinking about that soup I tasted the other day at your stand."

"Well, it's mainly Adelaide. She has a way with flavors."

We stood in silence, and I twisted my hands together. Why had I run after her? I wasn't sure what I was hoping to even accomplish. Maybe feel her out, get a sense of whether she knew we didn't have magic. It was ridiculous to think she would or that she'd even do anything about it. She was a vampire after all. She had no reason to care about something like this.

"What are you doing at Witching Wears?" She pointed to the dressmaker's shop.

"Trying on dresses," I said brightly. "For the ball. Are you coming?"

"The ball?" she asked, and I winced.

Maybe she hadn't been invited, and I'd just stuck my foot in my mouth. "At the Darkstone Manor?"

Her face darkened. “Ah. No.” She peered at me curiously. “Although I’ve heard you and Draven Darkstone have gotten into some heated arguments. I’m surprised you’re going when there’s such contention between you.”

I held back my sigh. Did everyone in this village know about our arguments? We’d only had two, for witch’s sake. Maybe three if you counted game night, but that was just some good, old-fashioned competition.

“If it makes you feel any better, Draven isn’t the easiest to get along with.” Helena placed a hand on my arm, her touch ice cold.

I met her gaze, her red eyes flashing. Maybe I was imagining things, but a bitterness seemed to coat her words.

“What do you mean?” I asked against my better judgment.

“It’s nothing,” Helena said. “Just be careful around him. He’s bad news, Elspeth. Cutthroat. He has power and wealth, and he’ll use both against you if you get on his bad side.”

“Elspeth!” I whirled to see Auggie stomping toward me. “We’re all waiting on you, and I’m almost positive the dressmaker is insulting us in a different language. He has four fabrics picked out for you.”

“Helena, this is my younger sister Augusta. Auggie, this is Helena.” I smiled apologetically at the vampire. “I better get inside before Mama starts yelling. Hopefully we’ll see you sometime at the soup stand?”

Helena flashed her fangs. “Oh yes. I have to leave soon, and I wouldn’t want to go before trying more of your delicious soup.”

With that, I turned and brushed past Auggie, going into the shop and spending the next half an hour getting fussed over and wrapped in different fabrics. But my mind wasn't on a dress. It was on Helena and what her words about Draven Darkstone could've meant.

Twenty-One

ELSPETH

A few horse-drawn carriages rolled past us, weaving through Thistlegrove Forest on the dirt road. We'd passed many cottages, all of them with wooden signs either posted in the ground or nailed to the houses. I'd seen so many of them, I finally marched up to one to see what it said.

"It's their surname," Adelaide said from behind me.

I shuddered, not able to imagine something so permanent as making a sign with your last name on it and nailing it to your house.

"Come on." Adelaide grabbed my hand. "Let's get back to the road."

I slipped on a slick spot, but Adelaide kept a firm grip on me. I was used to wearing my boots, not these dainty slippers.

Other witches flew overhead on their brooms. Mama used to fly on a broom, taking us on rides when we were little, but after we got cursed, she stopped. I think she worried about flaunting her magic.

The sun sank in the lavender sky, the faint outline of stars dotting the expanse.

"Wish we had a carriage," Auggie muttered, stumbling as she tripped over a small rock. Her form-fitting gold dress shimmered as she walked, teeth chattering.

“Well, if we’re making wishes, then I wish we weren’t doing this at all.” Prue pushed her spectacles up her nose, an uncharacteristic sheen on her upper lip. She tugged at her long-sleeve maroon gown, which hugged her curves nicely.

I hoped tonight might encourage her to get out of her shell more.

A horseless carriage creaked by us, slowly rolling to a halt. We all stopped, shooting each other unsure glances.

The door swung open, a witch with corkscrew gray hair sticking her head out. “Need a ride?” she asked.

“No—” I started at the same time Auggie shoved past me and said, “Yes.”

The witch smiled as Auggie stepped into the carriage.

“Auggie,” I whisper-yelled.

“Well, come on,” the witch said. “We’re holding everyone else up.” I looked behind her carriage to see a few horse-drawn ones rolling down the road.

“Let’s go, then,” I said, and we all piled in.

The witch closed the door, and warmth swept over me—none of us were wearing appropriate clothing for the weather. I adjusted the fabric of my pale green dress. The gold skinny straps kept falling over my shoulders, and I had to keep pushing them back up.

“I’m Morty Hallow.” The witch smiled kindly at me, Adelaide and Auggie sitting on either side of her, while Mama, Prue, and me squished onto the other side.

“Nice to meet you.”

We all made our introductions.

“We really appreciate the carriage ride,” I said.

“Oh, it’s no problem. You poor dears looked so cold walking in the dark. And I have this big carriage all to myself.” She gestured to it, then leaned forward. “I’ve heard quite a lot about the Moonflowers.”

I stiffened, my gut immediately clenching. What did she mean by that? Was that why she offered us a ride? So she could figure out our secrets? Or maybe she already knew, and she was about to tell us. Blackmail us.

My mind whirled with all the dire possibilities when Morty said, “About your soups? I’ve heard they’re addictive.” She waggled her eyebrows.

My pounding heart slowed. “Thank you,” I managed, looking at Adelaide. “My sister is a talented cook, and Mama is great at using her potions affinity to create some wonderful flavors.”

“Have any of you visited the Darkstone Manor before?” Morty asked. “It’s quite a sight to behold. One of the most beautifully built manors in the Witchlands.”

I shook my head, Prue’s earlier questions rolling through my mind. I wondered why Draven didn’t stay in his own manor. It didn’t make sense. Unless he’d done something to get himself banned. But then I wasn’t sure how he’d be there tonight.

“Why doesn’t Draven live there?” Prue burst out, her knees bouncing.

I shot her a look.

“No one knows,” Morty said. “There are rumors, of course. Everyone in Thistlegrove loves to gossip, but Draven isn’t exactly forthcoming about his feelings. I don’t think he has a single friend other than Elm Kingsley and Riven Shiu.”

“The famous bard?” Auggie squeaked.

“The very one. Of course Riven is hardly ever here, so that doesn’t help. Elm isn’t here too often either. In fact this is the longest he’s ever visited. I wonder what the reason could be.” Morty tapped her chin, and Adelaide’s cheeks turned pink. From the tone of her voice, it sounded like Morty knew exactly why Elm was extending his stay.

It had to be because of Adelaide, which meant if she didn’t return his affections, he might leave soon, and then all hope would be lost. My forlorn sister might never recover. I had to ensure she danced with Elm tonight. I just didn’t know how.

“Do any of you have your eye on any suitors? Anyone you might want to save a dance for?”

“We all know who Adelaide wants to dance with,” Auggie said with a smirk. “I’m sure Elm will be waiting for you with open arms.” She made a smoochy face.

Adelaide elbowed her.

“Ow,” Auggie said.

“Oh?” Morty turned her gaze on my sister .

“Oh yes,” Mama said. “He’s quite taken with her. There have been a few bumps in their relationship, but nothing they can’t overcome.”

“Mama!” Red stained Adelaide’s cheeks. “I don’t think Morty needs to know the details.”

Mama waved her hand. “It’s just girl talk, Addy.”

I gave Adelaide a sympathetic smile, but maybe this would be the push she needed to dance with Elm, to reconnect with him.

“I was actually just hoping to dance with my sisters tonight,” Adelaide said, voice tight.

Mama’s face fell. I knew she was hoping this would end in marriage for Adelaide. Maybe it would, and that would be amazing for Adelaide to finally have her magic back. But I just wanted to see my sister smile again. I couldn’t handle moody Adelaide anymore. Not when I already had to deal with moody Auggie, moody Prue, and moody Mama.

“Well, what if your sisters all have partners to dance with?” Morty asked. I wondered why she cared so much about Adelaide and Elm dancing. Maybe she was just making polite conversation.

Prue audibly gulped. More than anyone, she could use a partner to dance with. Someone to make her realize there was more to life than just her books.

“I’ll be dancing with whoever asks,” Auggie said. “Why limit my possibilities?”

Morty turned her sharp gaze on me. “And what about you? Any suitors you have in mind?”

“Definitely not Draven Darkstone,” Auggie murmured with a laugh.

I could kick her right now.

“That’s right! I’ve heard about your arguments.” Morty said it with delight, like our fights were something wonderful.

Mama tsked, and Auggie snorted.

Adelaide crossed her arms, a frown appearing.

“That’s not true!” I said. “We’re fine. We had a few disagreements, but we’ve worked things out.”

“You have?” Adelaide asked.

“Yes,” I said, exasperated.

“So you’ll dance with him?” Auggie asked, a challenge in her eyes.

Everyone stared at me expectantly. This was a disaster. If I said no, it would undermine everything I’d been telling Adelaide. All my lies. But the alternative... I might have to actually follow through and dance with Draven Darkstone.

“Well?” Auggie said.

“Yes,” I responded weakly. “I’ll dance with him.”

And just like that, my night went from bad to worse.

Twenty-Two

DRAVEN

“Is my bowtie straight?” Edgar asked, staring into the tall mirror that sat in the corner of my room at the Darkstone Manor.

“It looks fine,” I said, standing behind him and flattening my black tailcoat.

“But is it straight?” Edgar flashed his sharp teeth, orange eyes flitting up to meet my gaze.

I sighed.

He turned. “Why do you look like you’re attending an execution instead of a dance?” He paused. “Wait, is there an execution happening? I’ve never been to a ball before. Also, why are we staying in that tiny little apartment over your tavern instead of in this mansion?” He pointed his tail to the room. “This room alone is bigger than the size of your apartment.”

“It’s complicated,” I said.

“Is the manor haunted?” His ears curled inward.

I ground my teeth together. “Edgar, I said it’s?—”

“Okay, okay. So is my bowtie straight or not?”

“Yes, Edgar.”

“And, just to confirm, there are no ghosts living here?”

I narrowed my gaze at him. “No. Now, why aren’t you in Georgie’s room?”

I’d gotten the dragon for her, but somehow, I managed to be the one spending all my time with Edgar. He was supposed to be Georgie’s companion, not mine.

“How did you get this manor?” Edgar flew over my head and settled onto my bed. “How does one just happen to own a mansion?” He narrowed his eyes at me. “Are you secretly rich?”

I brushed some lint off my dark blue waistcoat, the bronze buttons glinting in the warm firelight. “It’s not a secret. Everyone knows I’m rich. The manor has my last name.”

“Well, I didn’t know.” Edgar raised a paw to his chest. “Isn’t that something you should’ve told me?”

I turned to face him. “Why would you need to know that?”

“I don’t know. Who is your fortune going to? Let’s say that you die and Georgie dies. Am I next to inherit?”

I blinked a few times. “You’re a dragon.”

“So? I’d be put out on the streets—no home, no food.” His big eyes welled with tears. “Do you have a will?”

“Edgar.” I rubbed my temples. “Can we talk about this some other time? I have to

prepare for this damned ball.”

Edgar cocked his head. “Well, I think everything is done. The decorations are stunning. The musicians are setting up. I even snuck a little taste of some of the food. It was exquisite. And I usually only like things that are bleeding.”

“Good to know,” I said drily. So much for getting him out of my room so I could have some space. “I’m just ready to get this night over with.”

I walked toward the door, and Edgar took flight, coming up next to me. “If you’re dreading it so much, why even do any of this?”

Because I was an idiot and thought it might make Georgie happy. “It’s tradition.” I stopped at the door, facing Edgar.

“But you’ve never thrown a ball before. So it can’t be that traditional.”

“It was my parents’ tradition,” I said. “They used to throw these balls for everyone in Thistlegrove to celebrate Marhloth.”

“What is Marhloth?” Edgar asked with awe in his voice .

“It’s the anniversary of when the first Witch Superior founded the Witchlands over five hundred years ago, a place for all witches to find safe haven.”

I opened the door and walked out into the hallway, which formed a square with a railing overlooking the ballroom below. I strode to the railing and looked down. Edgar was right. Everything was impeccable. The white-tiled floor was sparkling, fairy bugs flitted in the air, their light casting a gentle glow over the room. Musicians sat in the corner, tuning their instruments. My gaze traveled to a long table with a white cloth over it, brimming with shining crystal goblets, and a crystal fountain of

bubbling wine.

“So what happened to your parents?” Edgar appeared next to me, and I jumped.

“Witch’s tits, Edgar.”

“What? I’ve been here the whole time.”

“Well, I forgot.” I shook my head. “They died.”

I swallowed, still remembering being called into Witch Superior’s coven hall, told that they’d been trying to break a particularly nasty curse. It rebounded and killed them. I’d just stood there before Witch Superior as she spoke, staring dumbly, not able to speak or move. Not able to believe what she was telling me. I’d always seen my parents as invincible, unshakable. Now they were gone.

“It was a little over a year ago. They died while on assignment,” I said. “It’s been a hard year for Georgie, and this place brings back a lot of painful memories.”

Edgar blinked a few times, taking in all this information. “Is this where you lived with your parents?”

“It’s where Georgie lived with them. I moved out over fifteen years ago when I attended Coven Institute, then got a job...” I trailed off. “I didn’t think it would be good for Georgie living here with all these memories. At first she lived with her grandmother, but...”

“She got in trouble,” Edgar offered.

My head snapped to him. “What do you know about that?”

Georgie didn't speak about it. Not ever.

"Not a lot," Edgar admitted. "She just told me that she disappointed you, disappointed everyone. And that being at the tavern with you was her punishment. She also said I was her punishment, which felt a little harsh."

I mulled over his words. Surely Georgie didn't think this was a punishment. It wasn't. It was just our only option after what had happened. I wished I knew how to explain that to her, but every interaction between us was like casting a spell with a blindfold on. Something I just fumbled my way through.

"Open the doors!" a voice yelled.

"Will you get Georgie?" I asked Edgar. The dragon nodded and flew off down the hallway toward her room.

Far below guests began filing in, the women all wearing dresses, while the men dressed in their finest trousers, shirts, and overcoats. I stilled when I saw one particular witch, her brown hair swept halfway up, the rest of it cascading down her back. Moonlight glowed over her pale collarbone and shoulders. She patted her silky green dress, the straps made of little gold chains linked together, each of them gleaming in the light. She entered, looking around in awe.

I swallowed, turning my back and leaning against the railing.

I just needed to get this night over with and avoid Elspeth Moonflower and everything would be fine.

Twenty-Three

ELSPETH

O ur carriage came to a stop in the huge circle drive outside the manor.

Every window was alight with flickering candles as hordes of witches streamed inside, the huge double doors open.

My sisters and Mama gasped at the grandiosity of it all. The carriage door swung open, and I stepped out, arching my neck to take in the view.

I'd never seen a manor before.

Stairs led up to the wide, open doors where everyone entered. Tall gray columns held up a patio on the second floor with a round stone fountain. Several people stood on the patio, leaning against the railing and drinking from crystal goblets. Everyone wore gowns, some glittery, some frilly, all of them sleek and hanging in straight lines to the floor, much like all of ours. The fashions had definitely changed in the last few years. Instead of big poofy skirts often held up by metal hoops, everyone wore much simpler dresses.

“Everybody ready?” Morty asked, appearing behind us, the light casting a glow against her dark brown skin.

We ascended the stone steps and entered the manor. Music wafted through the air, and it seemed the entire village of Thistlegrove was in attendance. The white floor

tiles gleamed under a giant chandelier with glowing candles, and I arched my neck to see fairy bugs flitting overhead, looking like little balls of magic with their glittering soft colors.

“This is amazing,” Auggie said, brown eyes wide as saucers.

“I need a drink.” Prue bolted for a table sitting against the wall, filled with glasses and a sparkling fountain of some kind of alcohol. Maybe liquor would do her some good.

Around us, people danced along to the lively music, while others ascended the sweeping staircase in the back, probably heading to the upstairs patio to drink and socialize.

It was all so grand, so wonderful.

“Adelaide.” Elm appeared from the crowd—and next to him was Draven.

He was staring at me with this odd look on his face I couldn’t decipher. Probably shocked we actually had the audacity to come given our previous interactions. This was his home, after all. His ball.

Elm took Adelaide’s hands in his. “Would you like to dance?”

Adelaide turned her head and looked at me, and I knew exactly what she was thinking. She’d dance with Elm if I danced with Draven, if I showed her that I was serious about us getting along.

Auggie nudged me, and I kicked her in response. She shoved me forward, right into Draven.

His eyes widened as I pressed my hands into his chest. His firm chest.

I cleared my throat, cheeks heating. “Would you like to dance?”

He opened his mouth, then closed it, then opened it again.

“Yes,” Elm said quickly. “He would.” He held out his hand to Adelaide, and she placed hers in it. Then they were off.

Draven didn’t smile, his face as severe as ever as he held out one hand, palm facing me, then wrapped his other arm around my back, drawing me flush against him. The air whooshed from my lungs.

“You have a beautiful home,” I said. “Thank you for inviting us.”

“I didn’t,” he said quickly, then cleared his throat. “But you are welcome, of course.”

He was going to make this difficult on me. I didn’t understand why it was so hard for him to just smile. To be nice. I thought of Helena and her words about Draven. It seemed I wasn’t the only one who had a hard time getting along with him.

“I’ve never seen anything so grand.” I gestured up to the glittering gold chandelier.

“Thank you,” he said. “It was my parents’ pride and joy. They built this manor. They chose every color, every painting, every detail.”

Was. He’d said it “was” his parents’ pride and joy. He sounded so sad. For a moment, I felt a jolt of sympathy toward him. I knew what it was like to lose a parent. It wasn’t easy.

Over Draven’s shoulder, I could see Auggie surrounded by a group of men, giggling

and chattering away. My gaze traveled to Prue, who stood in the corner, speaking with a gentleman who looked to be around her age. Prue was actually conversing with someone. I smiled. Maybe coming hadn't been such a bad idea after all.

"Are you actually smiling while in my presence, Ms. Moonflower?" Draven whispered in my ear, his breath warm against my skin.

My gaze shot to him as we stepped together in perfect unison. "I've smiled before when I've been around you."

"Not a real smile." He studied me. "It lights up your entire face." His gaze was so intense, I looked away.

"I'm just happy my sisters are happy."

He spun me around, his grip on my hand tightening. "Have they not been happy?"

I sighed. I hadn't talked to anyone about this other than Adelaide, and with her grumpy mood lately, I hadn't spoken to her about my concerns regarding Prue or Auggie.

"We have our reasons for traveling," I said, meeting Draven's gaze. "It's nice to see the realm, to sell our potions and meet so many people. But I worry that someone like Prue needs more stability. She's withdrawn quite a lot, and she gets nervous in social situations. Then there's Auggie. She's a natural with people, but she doesn't have close relationships with anyone. She flits from person to person, forming no attachments. They're young still. Prue is only twenty, and Auggie is twenty-two. I want to do right by them."

"Isn't that your mother's job?" Draven asked, a softness to his tone that I'd never heard before .

I swallowed. “Mama is... well she’s flighty, and she has trouble taking care of herself, let alone the four of us.”

“So it falls to your shoulders,” Draven guessed, sympathy flashing in his eyes.

“Yes, I suppose so.”

“I do know something about that.”

“You do?” I asked, not sure I believed him.

“I’m responsible for my sister. She’s sixteen.”

He nodded his head in the direction of a girl with long black hair. She wore a beautiful pink dress that glittered and sparkled under the light. The girl from the tavern.

“She’s your sister?” I asked, mouth agape.

He nodded.

Suddenly, I felt so very stupid. He hadn’t been abusing some random girl in the tavern. He’d been having a spat with his sister. I knew all too well about those. I studied Draven for the first time. Really studied him, noticed him in a way I hadn’t before.

His hair was slicked back tonight, parted on the side. The normal dark scruff covered his jaw, and this close I noticed all the details of his face—his strong chin, his straight nose, his thick brows. His pale green eyes that reminded me of winter.

Perhaps I’d misjudged him. Behind him, Auggie laughed at something a gentleman

said, allowing him to take her hand and kiss it.

“Oh, Auggie,” I said, shaking my head.

Draven turned to have a look, then faced me again. We stepped backward and whirled around, then stepped to the side, following the moves of a popular dance in the witch community.

“I see she’s latched on to Corbin Jankoss. He’s one of the wealthiest witches in Thistlegrove thanks to his innovative cleaning spells.”

Of course. “Auggie knows how to pick them.”

Draven’s eyes flashed, and his shoulder tensed under my hand. Adelaide and Elm danced by us, both laughing over something. Draven’s gaze followed them.

“You all do, it seems,” he said.

I didn’t understand his sudden change in mood. We’d been having a good time so far, actually getting along. Maybe even bonding.

“What is that supposed to mean?” I asked .

His green eyes seared me. “It’s interesting that you hated me until you found out I own this manor, that I was throwing a ball. Now you seem to have changed your entire attitude.”

My mouth dropped open at the implication. “You think I’m being nice to you because you’re rich?”

He raised a brow in challenge, and hatred bubbled in me.

My grip tightened around his hand. “You could have all the gold in the world, but I assure you, you’ll never have my affection.”

“Yes, it seems like you absolutely abhor me,” Draven mumbled.

Adelaide looked over Elm’s shoulder, her brows furrowed, lips pursed. I ground my teeth together, then spun and yanked Draven out of the crowd.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

I didn’t answer, continuing to pull him with me and push through the onlookers. I didn’t bother nodding or smiling at anyone. I was too angry. If Draven thought he could just insult me and I wouldn’t respond, he had another thing coming. I’d give him a piece of my mind and let him know exactly what I thought of him. But I’d do it behind closed doors where no one could see or gossip about us.

Red painted my vision, and I barely knew where I was going as I marched toward a door off the main room. I wrenched it open and practically threw Draven inside, then slammed it behind me.

Just enough light shone through the crevices of the door to dimly light the space.

That’s when I realized we were standing in a closet, both of us shoved together. I tried to back up, but my foot banged against a bucket. A mop fell sideways, thwacking Draven in the head.

I should’ve cared that I’d just yanked Draven into a closet, but I was so livid all I could think about were his accusations.

“Excuse me,” he said, face full of rage, trying to push past me.

“Excuse me!” I yelled back, not budging as I stood in front of the door. My chest was heaving. “How dare you imply that I want you for your wealth. You know nothing about me. You know nothing of my life, my struggles, my family. I actually thought we might find common ground. Not be friends but not be enemies either. I was clearly wrong on all accounts.”

His jaw ticked, and he jabbed a finger at me. “You are the one who barged into my tavern, sticking your nose where it didn’t belong. You’ve been nothing but a pain since I met you. And you’re the one who suddenly wanted to dance with me tonight. What was I supposed to think?”

I let out a laugh of disbelief. “Maybe that I was being nice? Trying to make amends? Trying to quell the gossip spreading about us?” I stepped forward. “Maybe that not everyone is out to get you all the time.”

His mouth fell open, and he stared at me in silence, having no response to that.

Just then, the door burst open, and I saw a flash of that familiar glittering white dress and blonde hair. Adelaide. I didn’t think. I didn’t pause. I just surged forward and pressed my mouth to Draven’s.

Twenty-Four

DRAVEN

Elsbeth's mouth crashed into mine. My first instinct was to pull away, but as soon as I got a taste of her lips, I was done for. I couldn't have pulled away even if she was on fire and threatening to burn me alive. Her lips were soft and warm, her body fitting so perfectly into mine as I wrapped my arms around her and got lost in that kiss.

She twined her hands around my neck, and I grabbed fistfuls of her silky green dress. I'd meant to compliment her on it, on how good it looked on her slim frame. I would. I would do exactly that as soon as we stopped kissing. Which, if I had my way, wouldn't be any time soon.

"What in the fuck?" a voice said, jolting me back to reality. I jumped away from Elspeth, wiping my mouth as she stared at me with wide, horrified eyes.

We both looked at Adelaide and Elm standing in the doorway. Adelaide's mouth was twisted in confusion, while Elm just smirked at us with his arms crossed.

"I was not expecting this." Elm ran his fingers through his curly hair.

"What's going on?" Adelaide asked, gaze shifting between me and her sister .

I stepped forward, about to explain that it was nothing. A mistake that would not happen again.

Before I could, Elspeth shoved in front of me. “I told you we got along.” She raised her chin in that stubborn way I was starting to recognize.

“Really well from the looks of it,” Elm said, and Adelaide elbowed him, still looking perplexed.

Adelaide glanced between us. “I swore I saw you two arguing on the dance floor.”

“That’s what we do.” Elspeth shrugged. “We argue and then we kiss and make up.” She paused. “Look, this surprised us as much as it’s probably surprised you.”

What in the fuck was she going on about? I was as confused as Adelaide right now. None of this made sense.

“Okay.” Elm grabbed Adelaide’s arm, drawing her back out of the doorway. “I think maybe we should give them some privacy. Let them finish what they started. Closet, eh?” He shot a wink at me. “Didn’t know you had it in you, Draven.” And with that, he closed the door before Adelaide could protest.

Elspeth whirled around. “Don’t get any ideas.” She shook a finger at me.

“Me get any ideas?” I pressed my hands to my chest. “Why in the hellfire did you kiss me?”

She groaned and rubbed her face, her fingers brushing against her lips. Lips that had just been on mine. Damnit, I wanted them on mine again. Wanted to feel her green silky dress bunched up in my hands. Wanted to trail my lips across her collarbone, over her bare shoulders and down her arms.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she asked with a shaky voice.

I shook my head. “You answer my question first.”

“Fine.” She crossed her arms. “I don’t want people seeing us fight.” She wouldn’t meet my gaze. “We’re new to town, and we have goods to sell. We don’t want to cause any trouble or get unwanted attention. So when someone burst in the door, my first instinct was to...”

“To kiss me?” I asked.

She shot me a withering glare. “To show them we weren’t fighting. I don’t have any ulterior motives, Draven,” she said. “I just don’t want to fight with anyone, not when we’re here for an indefinite amount of time before our cart is fixed. My sisters and Mama need some stability, and I want to give that to them. I don’t want to ruin things with our arguing, make us outcasts before we have a chance to fit in.”

It was as if a new light shone upon Elspeth in that moment. I’d thought her rude, inappropriate, and obnoxious. But the desperation in her voice made me realize how much she cared for her family, the weight sitting on her shoulders. A weight I knew all too well. She was just trying her best to protect them, to care for them, in the only way she knew how. It might have been misguided at times, but she was so utterly fierce and brave. I might have finally understood her.

And that terrified me.

“Right.” I swallowed, disappointment bubbling up. For some reason, I’d wanted a different answer. I’d wanted her to tell me that she wanted to kiss me again, that she was as desperate as I was to have my lips on her.

“Well, you don’t have to worry,” I said. “I won’t fight with you anymore.”

She gave me a disbelieving look.

I rubbed my jaw. “You do know it takes two to argue.”

“Are you saying it’s my fault?” she asked.

This woman. She was exhausting. “I’m saying it takes two. As in it’s both our faults.”

Some of the rage simmering in her eyes dulled. My gaze lingered on her neck, her pale skin. Why did she have to wear that silky dress with those thin straps? The dresses she wore normally covered her shoulders and arms, but tonight, I could see every inch of her delicate skin in that dress.

“Your dress is lovely,” I offered.

She blinked. “What?”

I gestured to the floor-length dress, the bodice cut low enough that I could see the slight swell of her breasts. “It’s a nice dress.”

Her gaze shifted back and forth. “Thank you.” She paused. “I don’t want you to get the wrong idea. I know I kissed you. It was impulsive and stupid, and it won’t happen again.”

“I don’t expect it to,” I said quickly.

“Good,” she said.

“Good. ”

“Well, I’m leaving.” She backed toward the door as if she were afraid that if she turned, I’d pounce on her. “Not leaving the ball.” She bumped into the door, cheeks turning pink. “Just leaving this room.”

“Understood,” I said.

“Good night.” She bowed her head, then opened the door and slipped out.

I touched my lips, the memory of our kiss burning on them. Something had changed between us tonight, and I had a feeling there’d be no going back.

Twenty-Five

ELSPETH

S unlight spilled into the room, and I blinked my eyes open. I was still in my dress from the night before, wrinkled and creased. Drool dripped from the corner of my mouth onto my arm, but I swiped it away and sat up on my bedroll, rubbing my eyes.

Auggie snored loudly from her bedroll, while Prue was already awake, dressed in her blue cotton dress, knees drawn up to her chest, book splayed open.

I squinted at her, noticing her puffy, red-rimmed eyes. We'd left late last night after dancing, eating, and drinking. Morty had offered to give us a ride home, and I'd been so tired I'd slept most of the way. But now, in the morning light, I could tell something was wrong with my youngest sister.

"Prue? Is everything okay?"

She sniffled, shifting and crossing her legs underneath her. "Fine."

I scooted closer to her. "Did something happen last night? I thought everyone had a good time."

She snapped her book shut. "Elspeth, I'm reading." Her gaze dipped meaningfully to her book .

"Right." I sighed, afraid I was losing her. That we were all losing her as she shrank

further into herself.

“Well, someone had a good night last night.” Auggie sat up, stretching her arms and yawning.

I gave her a pointed look. “I’m not the only one.”

“I’m not the one who got caught kissing Draven Darkstone. In a closet!”

Prue set down her book. “I’m sorry, what?”

I glared at Auggie, the memory of Draven’s mouth on mine making me burn. “Who told you that?”

She threw up her hands. “Everyone was talking about it.”

“Draven?” Prue asked. “But you hate him!”

“There’s a thin line between love and hate.” Auggie waggled her eyebrows.

“The kiss was a mistake,” I said, even as I could still taste his lips, taste the sweet berry wine on his tongue. His smell lingered on me: ale, cedarwood, and leather. He’d held me so close I could feel his heart beating against mine. And he’d kissed me back. He’d kissed me so thoroughly that the entire world had faded away until it was just me and him.

I hadn’t known men could kiss like that. Then again, I’d never met a man like Draven Darkstone.

“Why are you touching your lips like that?” Prue asked, a puzzled expression on her face.

I quickly dropped my fingers to my lap. “They’re chapped.”

“They don’t look chapped,” Auggie said. “They look swollen and satisfied.”

I grabbed the pillow from my bedroll and launched it at her. She squealed and ducked.

“Where’s Adelaide?” I asked, looking around the room for my eldest sister.

“You don’t remember?” Auggie said.

“Remember what?”

A smug look crossed her face. “She didn’t come home with us last night. She decided to stay with Elm at Draven’s manor.”

I touched my hand to my head. I must have drank more than I realized. The end of the night was such a blur .

“That means it worked.” I straightened. “My plan worked. Adelaide and Elm are... well, I don’t know what they are. But if she spent the night with him, then things must be on the mend.”

Prue twirled a finger in the air. “Yay.”

Auggie scoffed. “You’re just mad no one asked you to spend the night with them.”

Prue snapped her book shut and stood, her cheeks red. “Not everyone is like you, Auggie. We don’t all just jump from bed to bed, willing to sleep with any man who will have us.”

Auggie's mouth dropped open, and Prue raised her chin and marched out of the room.

I pushed Auggie. "Go easy on her. I think something happened last night. Something that upset her."

"Why are you always on her side?" Auggie asked. "I don't just jump from bed to bed. And even if I did, why would that be a problem? Men do it all the time and no one bats an eye."

"Auggie, no one's judging you."

She jumped up. "Everyone judges me. All the time. I'm too promiscuous. Too flirtatious. Too friendly. I'm just a pretty face with no other attributes. Well, I'm going to show everyone. I have opportunities, you know." With that she stormed out of the room.

I sat in shock at my sisters' outbursts. Something was clearly going on with Prue and with Auggie. I hadn't known she felt that way, that she thought everyone believed her to be nothing but a pretty face. I'd get myself bathed, dressed, and then I'd find my sisters and try to fix whatever was going on with them.

"Come here, you blasted thing!" I heard my mother's voice from downstairs.

Oh, what now? Probably the cottage misbehaving yet again. I padded out of the room and down the stairs to see Mama chasing a winged parchment that fluttered around the room.

"Not this again. Where are Prue and Auggie?"

Mama waved her hand. "They both left on errands."

I groaned. So much for talking to them.

“Are you going to help me or not?” Mama asked.

I grabbed a broom that was leaning against the wall and ran after the parchment, swatting it down .

It landed on the floor, and I picked it up. “Who’s sending us a letter now?”

“It’s the same crest as the invitation,” Mama said, pointing to the wax seal with the phoenix on it.

My throat grew thick. I wasn’t sure why we’d be getting another parchment from Draven.

“Well, open it.” Mama gestured. “Maybe it’s another ball.”

I doubted it, but then again, I had no idea what else it could be. I unraveled the parchment and let out a cry.

“Adelaide’s fallen ill,” I said, reading as fast as I could. “She’s got a fever and runny nose. And a cough. They’re taking good care of her, but she won’t be home today. She’s too sick to travel.”

Mama’s hand floated to her mouth. “Oh, your poor sister.” She clutched my hands. “You must go to her.”

“What?” I asked. “But Elm’s with her.”

“Yes, and I’m sure she wants her family. And you can observe her and Elm, see how things are faring between them.” Mama gave me a meaningful look.

“You want me to spy on them?”

“Oh, Elspeth, stop being so dramatic. I didn’t say that. But this is important. This is the closest any of you have been to a suitor in ages. This could be significant for Adelaide, but you know how shy and awkward your sister can be.”

I thought of how she spent the night with Elm. “She seems to be doing just fine on her own, Mama.”

Mama raised her nose in the air, snatching the parchment from me. “I suppose I have no choice but to go myself.”

I chewed my bottom lip, thinking through my options. Mama could go, but Mama didn’t always have a lot of... tact. I imagined her at the manor, oohing and ahing over every detail, Draven glowering after her. His words about my intentions echoed in my mind, how I was only being nice to him because of his money. My family wasn’t like that. Mama wasn’t like that, but she might give that impression if she went.

“Fine.” I snatched the parchment. “I’ll go. Just let me bathe and change first.”

Twenty-Six

ELSPETH

I made the long walk through Thistlegrove Forest to the manor, this time wearing proper clothes suitable for the chilly weather. Overall, it was a pleasant walk. It gave me time to process everything that had happened last night.

I'd kissed Draven Darkstone—and liked it. I groaned, scrubbing my hands over my face. But I hated him. Maybe it was because I hadn't kissed anyone in so long. Not since Johanes. My lips were confused. They thought any kiss was good after so long without. But I'd right that wrong soon. I'd kiss the next man I could if only to get the taste of Draven off me. My fingers brushed over my lips absently, then I scolded myself.

I needed to stop doing that. Especially since I'd be arriving at the manor shortly, and I couldn't have Draven noticing me touching my mouth. He'd make the connection. He was arrogant enough that he'd absolutely think it was about him.

I arrived at the tall iron gates surrounding the manor. Clouds covered the sun today, and a breeze gusted past me as I pulled my shawl tighter around my shoulders. Maybe Draven wouldn't even be here. Why would he need to be ?

Elm was surely by Adelaide's side, but Draven had a tavern to run. The thought gave me the confidence to edge open the gate and walk onto the huge circle drive. In the daylight, I could see more details of the manor: The faded and dusty red bricks. The moss that clung to the roof, much like it did at our own cottage. The vines that hung

down the front, giving pops of color.

It really was massive. I couldn't imagine having a house so big. I could barely imagine having a house at all.

I walked up the familiar stone steps from the night before. Without all the revelry and chatter, the place felt empty, somber somehow.

I raised my fist and knocked on the door, but no one answered. I shivered as the wind picked up.

"Oh, blast it," I said and opened the door myself.

I couldn't just stand out here all day. I walked into the big room, wine stains splattered across the floor. Crumbs everywhere. A few shattered glasses sparkling under the candlelight. We'd made quite a mess, but I supposed Draven was wealthy enough to have spelled items to clean it all up.

"Hello?" I called, my voice echoing around the cavernous room.

I looked up to the second level, the doors all closed. Adelaide was likely up there. There weren't any bedrooms on the first floor. I squinted past the sweeping staircase to a room that looked like the kitchen. My gaze swiveled to another door.

The one I'd pulled Draven behind last night. I already knew where the closet was. I nodded.

So up the stairs it was, then.

Outside, thunder rumbled ominously. Perfect. Just what I needed. To walk home in a storm.

Adelaide was worth it. I ascended the stairs, and when I got to the top, I looked to the left and right, trying to decide which direction to go.

There were so many doors. Who needed this many rooms? What could they possibly do with all of them?

I readied myself to start opening random doors, hoping I wouldn't stumble upon anything I wasn't supposed to see.

Like Draven with another woman. I shook my head, not sure where that thought came from. I didn't care if Draven took a woman to bed last night. He was a grown man, and he could do what he wanted with his... appendage.

Great. Now I was thinking about his appendage. I marched to the left. That alcohol must've affected me more than I realized. Maybe I was still drunk, and it was the alcohol causing me to have these ridiculous thoughts.

I stopped at the first door I came across, taking a deep breath and reaching out to grab the handle when someone shrieked behind me.

"Intruder!"

I whirled around to see a dragon flapping his wings, staring at me with his wide orange eyes.

"Oh please don't hurt me." He shielded its eyes with its tail. "I'll give you whatever you want. Which isn't much because I'm just a dragon and they don't pay me anything."

I recognized the little creature. He belonged to Draven.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” I said with a laugh. “I’ve seen you before. I’m Elspeth?”

The dragon stopped whimpering and lowered his tail, relief flashing in his eyes. “Oh, Witch Superior. You scared me. I’m Edgar.”

“I’m sorry.” I held up my hands. “I’m just looking for my sister. She’s sick and somewhere in this huge manor. I wanted to check on her.” I lifted the satchel at my side. “And bring her some comfortable clothes to wear.”

“I can show you to her room.” He lifted into the air and flew ahead of me in the hallway. “She’s up on the third floor in the guest quarters.”

If the guest quarters were on the third floor, then I had no idea what all these rooms could possibly be for.

“Sorry about that.” Edgar looked behind him as I followed. “You took me by surprise.”

I tilted my head. “You do realize you’re a dragon, right? You could just use your fire? I don’t think I could defend myself against that.”

His eyes scrunched together. “You know, I didn’t think of that.”

I nodded. “It would be very effective. I promise that you’d probably be more terrifying to any intruder than they’d be to you. Even with your small size.”

“Really?” He pressed a paw to his chest as he landed on the railing. “You think so? ”

“I do,” I said with another laugh. This little dragon was so cute.

He sighed. “The world can be scary sometimes. I’m trying to be braver. I think

Draven is disappointed he adopted me—buyer’s remorse and all.”

A crack formed in my heart at the dragon’s words. “I’m sure that’s not true.”

“He adopted me to look after his sister, be a companion to her, but she gets annoyed because I’m not always up for all the adventures she wants to go on. Sneaking out, exploring the darker parts of the forest, going on dangerous missions.” A shudder rolled through his back, his wings trembling. “It’s too much for a dragon like me.”

So Draven’s sister was a bit of a rebel. I bet he hated that. The thought made me smile.

“He would’ve been better off adopting one of my siblings.”

Edgar flew down the hallway and toward a small corridor with spiral stairs.

“You have siblings?” I asked.

“Oh yes. Four of them. Herman has already been adopted. But I have three more waiting adoption at Arcane Creatures Emporium. One of them probably would’ve been better suited for this job.”

“You’re perfectly suited for this job,” I said. “It’s okay to be scared.” I thought of all the things that scared me. “The world can be a scary place.”

Edgar stopped mid-air and turned to face me. “That’s what I say! I’m glad I found someone who agrees.”

I smiled and leaned forward. “We can be scared together. And maybe we can also be brave together, face new things.”

I thought of this town, of the cottage, of everything we were doing that scared me on a daily basis.

“Draven didn’t adopt the wrong dragon. I think a practical voice sounds like exactly what his sister needs. Maybe you just haven’t found the right thing to bond with her yet.”

Edgar turned and flew up the stairwell, and I followed. “That’s a good point. We had a good time getting ready for the ball. She even let me tie a ribbon in her hair.”

“Well, there you go. Progress,” I said .

We got to the top of the stairs, which led to a single door. “Here we are,” Edgar said, pointing his tail at the door.

“Thank you for your help.”

Edgar nodded and flew back down the stairwell.

I raised my fist to knock. “Adelaide?” I called.

I heard a rustling sound and then the door swung open, Adelaide barreling into me. “Elspeth, what are you doing here?”

She backed up a step. Her cheeks were flushed, sweat shining on her forehead. Her blonde hair had come undone from its elegant bun from last night and tumbled past her shoulders. She still wore her white dress, all wrinkled and creased now.

I held up a satchel with one hand and kicked the door shut behind me. “I brought you some clothes from home.”

“Oh, thank the Witch Superior.” She snatched the satchel. “Will you help me with this?” She gestured to her dress.

I turned her around and undid the laces in the back of her dress. She shimmied out of it, now only in her panties and bra. I dug into the satchel and pulled out her pale pink nightgown with long sleeves.

“I figured you might want something more comfortable if you’re sick.”

She stretched it over her head and sighed out in relief, then padded back to her bed.

Stone made up the walls and floor of the room, the ceiling vaulted with a single window overlooking the estate. A fire crackled in the hearth.

I sat on the edge of the bed. “Are they taking good care of you?”

“Oh yes,” Adelaide said. “Elm has been checking on me every ten minutes. I finally told him to go take a walk because I felt so smothered. The servants have kept my fire going, brought me broth, and Draven called for the town healer. She gave me some tonic for the fever.” Adelaide slumped down. “I feel so embarrassed.”

“Why?” I asked.

She shrugged. “I thought Elm and I were going to... take our relationship to the next level last night. Then I threw up all over him, and that’s when we realized I had a fever.”

I gave my sister a sympathetic look. “That’s not your fault, and if Elm is half the gentleman you claim he is, then he’ll realize that as well. ”

“Oh, he does. He’s been more than accommodating.” She tilted her head. “And so has

Draven.”

I stiffened at the mention of him. “Is he here?” I asked, trying not to sound too interested in the answer.

“He was this morning. I don’t know if he still is,” Adelaide said. “He assured me that I can stay as long as I need.”

“That was nice of him.”

Adelaide gave me a pointed look. Outside, rain began to patter down. I’d need to leave soon before it began to storm.

“What were you doing in a closet with Draven last night?”

I rolled my eyes. “It was nothing. I’d had too much to drink, and we kissed.”

Adelaide crossed her arms. “That’s it? I thought you hated him.”

I leaned forward. “That’s because you haven’t been listening. I tried to tell you.”

“Excuse me if I didn’t believe you. I had good reason not to. Even Elm was shocked.”

“Look, it was just a one-time thing.” I picked at a loose thread on my shawl. “We were drunk and not thinking clearly.” I didn’t want my sister getting any ideas. Yes, I wanted her to believe Draven and I were getting along so she’d open herself up to Elm, but I didn’t want her thinking we were an item. That would never happen.

“So there’s nothing between you?” Adelaide said.

“No. But now you know we can be cordial,” I said. “There’s nothing standing in the way of you and Elm.”

A shy smile crossed Adelaide’s lips. “That’s good. Because I really like him, Elspeth. More than I’ve ever liked anyone.”

My heart swelled. I never thought this day would come.

“Do you think I should tell him about the curse?” Adelaide asked.

The color drained from my face, and my heart started pounding.

“Elspeth?” Adelaide’s voice seemed so far away, drowned out by my past. By Johanes and the sneer on his face when I admitted the truth to him. The way he’d immediately turned on me like he was a different person.

“Elspeth.” Adelaide laid a hand on my arm.

I jumped. “Yes?”

She gave me a concerned look. “Are you okay? You’re not coming down with something, are you?”

I took a deep breath. I’d let my past affect my sisters so much already. Elm wasn’t Johanes, and Adelaide was the most sensible of us all.

“I think you should trust your gut,” I said. “Tell him when you’re ready.”

She sat back in bed, eyes drooping.

“You need rest.” I tucked the covers in at her side. “It seems like you’re in good

hands, here.”

Adelaide began nodding off. I stood and kissed her head as lightning split the sky. It was going to be a long walk home.

Twenty-Seven

DRAVEN

I sat in my father's old office as rain splattered against the window, staring at the mug spell laying in front of me. I'd planned to be at the tavern today, but when Elm arrived at my door early this morning, frazzled and frantic, I'd closed for the day. I sent Edgar to hang a sign on the door. It was storming anyway, so most patrons wouldn't be out, and it gave me time to work on this damned spell. I had promised Adelaide she could stay as long as she'd wanted, and if I had a guest here, I should stay too.

If only I weren't distracted by the memories of this place. The last time I'd been in this office, my father had been alive. We'd been working together on a spell that he'd asked for my help with. A particularly complicated one that Witch Superior had wanted him to create. It was going to be used to break a curse, one that had put one of Witch Superior's magistrates into an eternal sleep. She suspected the vampires had something to do with this dark magic, that they'd hired a witch to create the curse. That happened all the time, unfortunately—witches who could be bought by the highest bidder, no allegiance to their own kind or our realm. It had been one of the hardest spells I'd ever worked on. Yet this damned mug spell was what would finally do me in.

I couldn't understand where I was going wrong. It should've been simple. A patron orders a drink; the mug goes to the appropriate barrel and fills itself; the mug flies to the patron. But every variation had a problem. The drink spilling. The mug going too fast. The mug falling mid-air. The mug going to the wrong barrel of ale. It was

enough to drive me insane. It usually helped to write out the spell first, to see it and visualize it before I cast it, but not this time.

A knock sounded on my door, and I looked up to see Georgie standing in the doorway.

I leaned back in my chair. “Hey,” I said.

“Hey.” Georgie gestured to the chair sitting in front of my desk. “Busy?”

I looked down at the spell I was working on. I could use a break. “No, go ahead.” Georgie sat, and I studied her. “You don’t have to stay here if you don’t want to. We can send you in a carriage to the apartment.”

This place carried a lot of good memories for me but a lot of painful ones as well. Every room, every corner, felt like a reminder of my parents, and I hadn’t even lived here. I couldn’t imagine what it felt like for Georgie.

“Oh.” She looked down at her hands folded in her lap. “Are you not coming back to the apartment?”

“Ah. Well, we have a visitor. Adelaide Moonflower fell sick last night, so she and Elm might be staying for a day or two. I feel like I should stay as well until I know she’s okay. But Edgar will come with you.”

She rolled her eyes. “Right. Edgar.”

“What do you have against Edgar?” I asked. I figured Georgie would be thrilled to have a pet dragon, but as usual, I’d made the wrong move when it came to my little sister. It seemed all the dragon did was annoy her.

“He’s nice enough, but he’s scared of everything.”

I leveled her with a look. “You could use a little of that in your life. You’re not nearly scared enough.”

She rolled her eyes and huffed. “There’s nothing to do in Thistlegrove. It’s so boring.”

“You lived here for years before...” I trailed off and cleared my throat. “You didn’t used to think it was boring.”

“Because Mother and Father made it fun.”

I heard what she wasn’t saying: unlike me. Because I was nothing like Mother or Father.

“They took me on adventures, they let me into their world. Every time they had to break a curse, they’d bring me along. Except for the last time.”

The time that had ultimately been their demise.

Her gaze dipped to the parchment on my desk. “What are you working on that’s been so consuming these last few weeks? Is it a curse?” Excitement filled her voice.

“No. A spell for the tavern,” I said. “It’s nothing.”

“I could help.” She gave a small shrug.

I opened my mouth to tell her she didn’t have to worry about stuff like this when Elm appeared in the doorway. “Oh good, you’re here.”

Georgie's shoulders slumped. "I guess I'll go."

"I'll send for a carriage," I said.

She turned her back to me and stomped past Elm. "Don't bother," she yelled over her shoulder. "I can call for my own carriage."

Elm looked to Georgie and then to me. "She okay?"

"As usual I've done something wrong, and as usual, I have no idea what." I'd give her space and try to talk to her later, though that never seemed to fix anything. In fact, all I did was make things worse.

Maybe I wasn't the best fit for her. I thought about our grandmother's offer to keep Georgie with her and wondered if I'd made a huge mistake saying no.

"She is sixteen. Give yourself some grace," Elm said.

"How is Adelaide?" I asked.

"Better, especially now that her sister has visited."

I stiffened. "Her sister?"

A slow smile spread across Elm's face. "You mean she didn't pull you into another closet while she was here?"

I grabbed a piece of parchment, crumpled it, and launched it at Elm's head.

He batted it away, laughing. Elspeth was here. I didn't know why, but I wanted to see her. To talk to her .

I began to stand. “Well, I should go see her. Make sure she has everything she needs. I’m sure she wants to spend the night here, keep an eye on her sister.”

Elm’s brows pinched together. “But she’s already left. Just now actually.”

Rain pelted the window, and lightning split the sky.

“But it’s pouring rain. It’s at least a thirty-minute walk to the cottage.” She had to be daft to walk in a storm like this, but it didn’t surprise me, not when it came to Elspeth.

Elm sighed. “I know. Adelaide is worried about her, asked if I could go after her and make sure she gets home safely.”

“I’ll go,” I said, a little too quickly because Elm’s eyes flashed. “You will be of much better use to Adelaide than me. Keep her comfortable and let her know that I’ll make sure Elspeth is safe.”

Elm gave me a knowing look. “Draven Darkstone, do you have a crush?”

I snorted. “Hardly. That kiss was a drunken mistake. Elspeth speaks her mind, is far too stubborn, and I don’t know anything about her.” Except that she was caring, that she shared some of the same burdens I did, that she would do anything for her sisters, including walking thirty minutes in the rain to check on them when they were ill. That she had incredible lips—lips I couldn’t stop thinking about since they were on mine.

“No, that’s definitely not the look of a man obsessed,” Elm said. He stood. “Good luck, Draven.”

He walked out, leaving me with thoughts of a brown-haired witch whom, if I didn’t

know any better, I'd say had bewitched me in body, mind, and soul—in every way that truly mattered.

Twenty-Eight

ELSPETH

The rain hammered down, thoroughly soaking me. Why hadn't I just waited to get out of the storm? Probably because I was a stubborn idiot, afraid if I stayed any longer, I'd run into Draven. So instead, I'd run out into a storm.

Wind battered me, making it hard to push forward. The forest was a short distance from here, and if I could get under the cover of the trees, the rest of the walk might not be so bad.

Squelch.

I looked down to see my foot completely encased in mud. "Witch's tits," I muttered, yanking my foot. It wouldn't budge.

I let out a groan of frustration, yanking it harder and harder to no avail. So this was it. This would be my end. Death by mud. I'd either starve, or the mud would slowly swallow me whole. I was regretting so many of my life decisions right now.

Rain pelted me so hard I couldn't see through the downpour. Thunder rumbled threateningly, the clouds a slate gray.

My heart spiked. This was bad.

Through the heavy curtain of rain, a figure appeared. I stiffened, wondering who

would be out here in this weather. Only someone unhinged. Someone capable of terrible things. Like murder. I swallowed, my mind whirling.

I set my jaw. Well, I wouldn't let them take me so easily. A hood covered their head, cloak billowing behind them. They were tall, muscled. That was fine. I was scrappy. I could pack a punch if I had to.

My hands balled into fists by my sides, and I did my best to brace my legs as they came closer. When they were just a few steps away, I reared back my arm and threw the hardest punch I could.

My fist connected with their jaw, a satisfying crack splitting the air.

“Witch’s tits, woman,” a gruff voice said. A voice I’d know anywhere. Draven’s hood flew backward, revealing his scowling face. He rubbed his jaw, his hair slicked back, droplets clinging to the ends of his wavy strands. “Do you just punch every stranger you pass on the road?”

I crossed my arms, feeling defensive. “I do when they’re coming out of nowhere in a storm, looking hulking and threatening. You could’ve called for me, said something to reveal yourself.”

He worked his jaw back and forth. “I thought you knew it was me.”

“How could I have possibly known that?” I threw out my arms.

“Maybe if you didn’t assume the worst,” Draven yelled over the roar of the rain.

I looked away. I supposed I tended to do that sometimes.

“Do you want my help or not?” He stepped closer.

Rivulets of water ran down his face, dripping onto his lips, so close to mine. My heart pounded for a different reason now, and my chest heaved.

“Well?” he asked, his tone softer as he studied my face like I was studying his.

“Yes,” I said quickly, looking away. “Please.”

He gripped my arms, attempting to lift me from the mud that completely encased my boots. He gritted his teeth and yanked, but it wasn't any use. If Draven couldn't help me, I might be well and truly stuck.

He took a deep breath and stepped back. “Do you trust me?” he asked.

Those weren't four words I wanted to hear. I didn't trust anyone outside of my family. “Why?” I asked with a shaky voice .

“I can't pull you out,” he said. “I'm going to have to use magic to free you.”

I narrowed my gaze. “You just happen to have a spell for getting someone out of mud?”

He nodded. “I think so. I have one in mind that should work.”

My eyes bugged. “Should? As in there's a chance of failure? There's a chance that you could accidentally spell me to be stuck here forever? Spell the mud to entomb me?”

“I'd never do that,” he said, his gaze so intense it struck me. “I'd never hurt you.”

Magic wasn't predictable. Creating good spells took time, work, skill. Witches attended the Coven Institute when they were eighteen to go into specialties: potions,

earth, healing, weather, gems, woodwork, and so many more. New specialties were popping up every year as we became more innovative with our magic. But if you were too hasty with a spell, if you cast one before you were ready, it could end in disaster. It did end in disaster for many witches. I eyed Draven, realizing that, for some unknown reason, I trusted him. At least, I did in this moment. I trusted that he wouldn't do me any harm.

I nodded. "Do it. Do whatever you have to."

I expected him to draw a wand from underneath his cloak. But he didn't. He just walked around me in slow circles. He crouched down to study the mud, grabbing my calf and moving his hands up and down.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Working," he said without looking up at me.

His hands felt so strong and steady on my leg. I closed my eyes, imagining those hands in a different situation, imagining him massaging my legs. Lightning crackled above, and my eyes shot open. I needed to get a grip.

"Okay." He stood and faced me, then began speaking Ethorial. No wand. No spell written out in front of him.

I watched in awe. Only the most powerful witches could cast magic using their words alone. Typically, witches needed conduits for their magic: wand, objects, ingredients. But there were a rare group who could do magic without any of that.

He raised his arms out, closing his eyes and continuing to speak.

Mud began whirling around my feet. I looked down to see it hollowing out like

someone was digging into it. More of the mud flew away, revealing more of my boots that had been stuck. Witch Superior. He was doing it.

I watched in amazement as the mud spun and spun until I could see all the way to the grass the mud covered. This was magnificent. Brilliant. I lifted my boot, then lifted the other one and took a step forward.

Draven opened his eyes and reached his hand out. I latched onto it as all the mud stopped spinning and dropped down with a splat. Before it could encase me again, Draven reeled me forward and straight into his chest.

We were both breathing heavy, rain soaking us. We should've moved, gotten under cover or to safety, but I couldn't make myself budge. Draven's arms were wrapped around me, safe and protective—not something I'd felt in a long time. I rested my head against his chest, and I felt his chin perch on the top of my head. I didn't know how long we stayed like that, just me and him, the world fading away. It was the same feeling I'd had kissing him in the closet.

“We should get back,” he finally said, and disappointment swept through me as he stepped away, nudging his head in the direction of his manor.

We walked to his home in silence, his hand clutching mine the entire way.

Twenty-Nine

ELSPETH

The fire in the hearth crackled, and I relaxed back into the cushioned couch as I sipped on tea and nibbled on some crackers one of the servants had brought. As soon as we'd gotten back, Draven called the housemaid to get me dry and into new clothes. After I'd stopped shivering, I visited Adelaide. Elm had been by her side reading a book while she slept, so I let them be, telling him to let me know as soon as she awoke.

I took another sip of my tea, the flavors of cinnamon and orange mingling on my tongue. These tea leaves must've been from the local tea shop, Steeped in Love. I hadn't had a chance to visit yet, but I'd heard they sold some of the best tea in the Witchlands.

I inhaled deeply, drawing my knees up to my chest.

"You look like you're dry now," Draven said from the doorway.

"I am. I loathe the cold," I said. "So the fire is welcome."

I twisted around in my seat as Draven entered the room in a soft pair of brown trousers and a simple linen shirt, the neckline opened so I could see his chest and the thick dark hair that covered it.

I stood, and his gaze dipped as he stared at my legs.

Witch's tits. I'd forgotten what I was wearing. The only thing the housemaid could find was an older overly large tunic that hung down just above my knees.

Draven swallowed thickly, and my cheeks heated.

"It was the only thing available," I explained.

"Yes." His gaze darkened. "Of course."

I dropped back onto the couch, and Draven came to sit next to me. He leaned forward and grabbed a teacup off the small table. He lifted the kettle and poured the orange-colored water into it. Steam rose in the air, curling between us.

"Thank you for saving me," I said as he sat back. "I would still be stuck in that mud if it weren't for you."

He didn't meet my gaze, staring into the fire. "You're welcome." He took a sip of his tea. "How did you learn to throw a punch like that?" The corner of his lips tipped up ever so slightly.

I rolled my eyes. "I have three sisters."

He quirked a brow. "And you punch them regularly?"

"Not them." His gaze turned rueful, and I snorted. "Anyone who might hurt them."

"That's a story I'd like to hear," he said. "And we have time." He gestured out the window, the sky black, the rain still pouring down.

I shifted to face him and tucked a leg underneath me. "It was someone pursuing Auggie."

“One of your younger sisters?” Draven asked.

I nodded. “Auggie is flirtatious, impulsive. She has a tendency to invite trouble. We were staying outside the village of Sunhaven, selling potions, when I realized that Auggie had been missing for hours. I’d seen her in town earlier, flirting with some boy, and I’d told her to be back at camp for dinner.” I still remembered the panic that seized me when I realized Auggie hadn’t returned to camp.

Draven stared at me with that intense gaze of his as he listened.

“I immediately ran back to town, searching everywhere for Auggie, when I heard a scream.”

Draven stiffened.

“I found that same boy cornering her in an alley. He’d made Auggie some stupid promise, told her he had connections, could make her famous if she came back to the inn with him where he was staying.”

“Famous?” Draven asked .

I waved a hand. “Auggie’s dream. She wants to be someone. A bard, an opera singer, a stage actor, a writer. I don’t think it matters. She just loves the attention and anyone who can give it to her.” I shook my head. “She doesn’t always make wise choices. But as they neared the inn, I think she must’ve gotten cold feet, maybe realized something was off. So she ran. The boy didn’t like it, and he chased her.”

Draven’s fists curled at his side.

“I didn’t even think as I saw him cornering my sister. I just marched right up to him and threw a punch at his jaw. Mama taught us all when we were younger. Self-

defense.”

Draven looked impressed, something I surmised didn’t happen very often with him.

“Now the real question is”—I leaned forward—“how did you learn to do magic like that?”

Draven cleared his throat. “I was born with it. I didn’t do anything. It’s just how my magic works.”

“But why work at the tavern?” I asked. “Why sell ale when you have such amazing power?”

He sighed and drained his cup, then set it down. “I haven’t always worked at the tavern. Georgie and I moved here a year ago.”

I shook my head, not understanding. “But you have this manor...”

“Where Georgie lived with our parents. They built this place when Georgie was five years old. I was already out of the house, attending Institute. But they wanted more stability for Georgie rather than how I grew up, traveling with them, moving from place to place. So they returned here, where they were from. Where they’d met. They built this manor, raised Georgie here until they died.”

My heart clenched. “I’m so sorry.”

“As her guardian, I figured the best place to raise Georgie was back here. But I’m afraid this manor brings back a lot of painful memories.”

I took a sip of my tea, then set it on the table. “So that’s why you stay in the apartment above the tavern.”

He nodded. "I bought the tavern when we got here, took it over so I could give Georgie the stability my parents wanted for her."

Suddenly I felt like I understood him so much better. Maybe he was gruff and rough around the edges, but he had a lot of responsibility on his shoulders .

"Sometimes I wonder if I made a mistake. Georgie had a chance to stay with her grandmother, but I thought I'd be the better option." He shook his head. "But I can't connect with her." He twisted his body, leaning forward and facing me. "I've seen you with your sisters. You have a connection with each of them. You know them, know their weaknesses, their strengths. I don't have that kind of bond with Georgie." He sighed. "I envy you."

My mouth dropped open. "You envy me? But you hate me."

His gaze snapped to mine, eyes flashing. "I don't hate you." His eyes dipped down to my bare legs, now almost touching his knees.

"I admire you. You're brave," he murmured. "You protect your sisters at all costs."

I'd never thought of myself as brave. I just did what I needed to do. It felt nice for someone to notice me, to appreciate me. To see me.

I leaned forward. "So if you can do all this powerful magic, why not use it at your manor?" I gestured. "I noticed servants everywhere. You could just spell everything to do the work for you instead of paying people."

He shook his head. "Those people need jobs. My parents... they always insisted we hire staff, that just because we happen to be more powerful, happen to have access to powerful spells, it doesn't mean we have to use them. So many of these people have worked at this manor for over a decade."

I'd gotten so much wrong. I'd thought him arrogant and horrid, but he had a heart. A big one, and it was starting to melt my own.

I placed a hand on his thigh. "That's incredibly kind."

His gaze drifted to my lips, where it lingered. The world faded to nothing but him, me, and this couch, which seemed to be happening a lot lately. Heat pooled between my legs, and I wondered what it would be like to have his fingers there, rubbing slow circles.

"Can I kiss you?" he asked, his voice quiet and low.

I swallowed, thinking about our previous kiss, how much I'd regretted it ending. "It's just a kiss." I leaned forward, our lips almost touching. "There's no harm in it," I breathed, not sure what had come over me. All I knew was that in this moment, I needed him or I was going to burst.

He met me the rest of the way, lips brushing against mine, kiss featherlight and somehow searing. He trailed his lips over my jawbone, inhaling my scent as I dropped my head back.

"You smell like fresh rain," he murmured. "Like moss, earth. It's intoxicating." He pressed his lips to my jaw. "You're intoxicating."

I gasped as he placed his hands on my thighs.

Everything about this man was so intense. It was something I thought I hated about him but now was coming to appreciate. He squeezed my thighs, fingers digging into my skin, and his lips met mine again.

He kissed me deeply, mouth coaxing mine open, tongue slipping inside. I settled onto

his lap and spread my legs around his waist. His cock stiffened against me, and I rubbed myself against his hardness.

He moaned into me, fists clutching my shirt the same way he'd clutched my dress when we'd kissed before.

"Let me touch you," he said, voice low, almost a growl.

"Yes," I said, breathless.

His hand dipped between my legs, and he slipped it under my panties.

"You're so wet, Elspeth. Is that for me?"

"Yes," I said again, apparently unable to say anything else, desire for him burning through me.

His hand hovered over my center, right where I wanted him to touch me.

"So fucking soaked." His hand skimmed my inner thigh, stoking my need for him. He lightly trailed his fingers to my other inner thigh, where he brushed my skin in soft strokes.

All I could do was cling to him and hope that he touched me where I wanted before I exploded. He moved his fingers to my throbbing core, his hand hovering but not quite touching.

"Is this where you want me?" he whispered.

I nodded, whimpering.

“Then show me how much you want it.”

His breath was so hot on my skin, skittering across me. I lifted myself and sat over his hand, then rubbed, feeling instant relief and a deeper need.

“That’s it. Show me what you need.”

He captured my mouth with his as I rocked back and forth over his hand, so firm and strong. He plunged his tongue into my mouth while his other hand skimmed up my torso, trailing over my skin and up to my nipple. He rolled his thumb around it, making me moan into him. Pleasure rolled through me, and he kissed me harder.

His fingers rubbed against my clit as I rocked faster, my body already unraveling. I hadn’t realized the kind of effect he’d have on me, how quickly he’d be able to wring this pleasure from me.

My orgasm hit hard, explosively. I cried out into his mouth as he kissed me and captured every sound I made.

I unraveled completely, crying out, body taut like a bowstring. He kept rubbing fast circles, kept my orgasm rolling through me in waves that left me gasping and, finally, limp in his arms. I pressed my forehead to his, chest heaving.

That had felt amazing. I’d never done anything like that before. Never rode a man’s hand.

“Ms. Moonflower,” a voice said.

I jumped out of Draven’s lap. His wavy hair was a tousled mess. I’d been running my hands through it the entire time, not even realizing it.

“Yes?” I asked the servant, a man with thick gray hair and a mustache. “Your sister is awake and asking for you.”

My sister. I jolted to a stand. Right. The entire reason I was here.

“Thank you.” I shot one backward glance at Draven as I hurried from the room.

Thirty

ELSPETH

The market bustled with Thistlegrove residents as Mama, Adelaide, and I set up our stand.

Mama stood in front of her cauldron as Adelaide dropped dried rice, a whole chicken, thyme, rosemary, and carrots into the cast-iron pot.

Prue had managed to find a spell book for gardening in the little library in our cottage. Mama cast the spell, and now we had a garden full of tomatoes, peppers, squash, pumpkin, peas, carrots, and so many different herbs. That had cut down our spending, so now we only had to buy meat and a few other ingredients for soup recipes. Adelaide created all the recipes, which were brilliant. I'd always known my sister was a good cook, but this soup stand was really allowing her to shine.

Adelaide frowned into the cauldron.

"What's wrong?" I asked as I cut the bread she'd baked that morning into slices. She'd made a parmesan focaccia to go with the soup, and the salty scent of cheese made my stomach rumble.

"Something's missing."

"You tested this soup at least three times at home," Mama said. "It tasted delicious, Adelaide. "

She shook her head. “No, something is missing. It needs an extra oomph.”

Mama looked up and down the market road as more and more people arrived to shop. “Well, you better hurry. I need to get the spell started.”

Adelaide chewed at her bottom lip, then fished into her apron and pulled out the parchment where she’d written the recipe. “Onion and garlic!” she exclaimed and bent down to grab both from our basket of veggies.

“That’s it?” I wrinkled my nose. “That’s so basic.”

Mama pointed her wand at the onion and garlic, saying a spell that instantly peeled both. She kept speaking Ethorial, and a knife lifted, chopping the onion and garlic on a small wooden board.

Once the knife finished, Adelaide scooped up both and dropped them into the cauldron. “Sometimes it’s the simplest ingredients that make the biggest difference. Both add a subtle but important flavor to the soup.” She looked at Mama. “It’s ready.”

Mama huffed and pointed her wand at the cauldron and said the spell she’d created to meld the flavors and dissipate the bones and gristle. Golden magic glowed from inside the cauldron, brighter and brighter. All at once, the glow disappeared, and in its place was a bubbling pot of soup, ready to serve—as if it had been simmering for hours.

My stomach grumbled again. “That smells so good. Adelaide, you’re a genius.”

Her cheeks turned pink.

“Well, I’m just glad you’re feeling better.” Mama pinched her cheeks. “I was so

worried about you two. First, you get sick, then Elspeth disappears and doesn't return home." She put her hand to her chest. "I was a wreck. The things you girls put me through." She tsked.

Adelaide shot me a cheeky grin, and I looked away, cheeks heating. I hadn't seen Draven since that night on the couch. I still couldn't believe we'd done that. I'd done that. With him of all people. I was so confused right now, my emotions a mess, and I couldn't talk to anyone about it. If I told my sisters or Mama, they'd make a huge deal out of it. They'd make it into more than it was. Plus, I didn't want to ruin whatever was happening between Adelaide and Elm. They were growing closer and closer, and Adelaide was the happiest I'd ever seen her. She was making some of her best recipes. She was thriving. I couldn't ruin that with my drama.

I could still feel his hand between my legs, a throbbing ache growing there.

"Are you alright?" Adelaide's blue eyes crinkled. "You're looking a little flushed."

Mama gasped so dramatically it made me jump. "Are you getting sick?" She stepped back. "You keep your distance, missy. I don't want any part of whatever Adelaide had."

I sighed. "I'm not getting sick, Mama. I'm fine."

Old man Veldar stalked up to our stand, his usual scowl on his face.

"What'll it be today, Veldar?" I smiled sweetly at him.

His scowl deepened, his bushy eyebrows especially wild, the hair sticking out in all directions. "Your soup burnt my mouth yesterday!" He jabbed a finger at me.

"So one bowl?" I asked, nodding at Mama, who started ladling the soup into a bowl.

We'd learned Veldar complained about everything all the time. But I had a theory. I was almost certain the more the old man complained, the more it meant he liked something.

He shoved his hand into his pocket, then slammed three gold coins on the table. "If it burns my mouth again, I'm filing an official complaint!"

"That's fair," Adelaide said, placing a nice thick slice of bread on top of his soup bowl.

He grabbed the bowl, then stomped around our stand into the field behind us, where a long table sat with a bench on either side of it. It was big enough for ten people, at least.

I frowned. "Where did that come from?"

"Auggie's idea," Adelaide said. "She found the table sitting in our garden and asked some of the townspeople to bring it on their cart so that patrons could sit and eat their soup if they wanted to."

We'd been using our leftover potion bottles to make to-go soups that people could take home and eat later. Mama had spelled the bottles to keep the soup warm—with Prue's help. I figured the to-go option would be popular. And it was. But far more people than I expected opted for grabbing a bowl and sitting somewhere nearby to eat .

A few others appeared and bought their bowls of soup, then joined Veldar at the table.

"That man is so unpleasant." I straightened the to-go bottles of soup.

“Elm said his husband died twenty years ago and he hasn’t been the same since,” Adelaide said. “Go easy on him. I think he’s lonely.”

I stared at Veldar. I hadn’t realized he’d been married. I supposed I’d never asked.

Mama hummed as she stirred the cauldron with her wand, murmuring a spell to keep the soup hot as a chilly gust of wind blew past us. “Nothing like a warm bowl of soup to bring people together, hmm?”

I turned my attention back to Adelaide. “Have you seen Auggie today?”

I hadn’t seen much of her since she’d stormed out on me a few days ago.

“No.” Adelaide shrugged helplessly. “She’s been spending more and more time out, but I can’t get her to tell me where she’s going or who she’s spending time with.”

Mama patted her curly gray hair, in its usual messy bun. “I think she’s found a suitor.”

I laughed. “Auggie? Auggie isn’t interested in a relationship.” She never had been. She liked flirting and kissing and having fun but not all the baggage that came with it.

“You never know. Being in Thistlegrove is changing a lot of things.” She gave me a meaningful look, and I wondered if she somehow knew about me and Draven. But that was impossible. No one knew.

I cleared my throat. “Well, we should find out what’s going on with her soon. I hope she’s alright.”

I thought about our fight, how upset she’d been, how convinced she was that none of us took her seriously.

Helena stepped up to our stand, the vampire wearing all pink today, her black hair in its usual slicked-back style. “I heard you’re serving wild rice and chicken soup today.”

“Word spreads fast,” Adelaide said.

“I’m surprised you’re still here.” I got a small plate and set her bowl of soup on it. “I figured you’d be gone by now.”

“I have some business I’m attending to.” She flashed her fangs.

“Did you find some new talent?” I asked.

“A vampire doesn’t reveal her secrets.” Helena took her bowl.

“Everyone is so secretive.” Mama threw out her arms. “How am I supposed to gossip when no one will tell me anything?”

Adelaide and I smiled.

“The only one I can get anything out of is my dear Adelaide.” Mama hugged my sister. “She’s very happy with Elm Kingsley, you know.”

“Mama,” Adelaide hissed, cheeks turning pink.

Mama leaned forward. “I think she might be in love.”

Adelaide groaned. “Helena doesn’t want to hear this,” she said with an edge to her voice.

Mama clapped her hands over my cheeks, smooshing them like I was a toddler.

“Elspeth is next. And I think she may have already found someone.”

Oh no. I stiffened under Mama’s hold and took a step back, busying myself with straightening the pile of plates that didn’t actually need to be straightened. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Mama looked at Helena, a glint in her eyes. “She might not think I know anything, but I have a mother’s intuition. I see the sparks between her and a certain Draven Darkstone.”

I shot a look at Helena, whose smile faded.

“Well,” Helena said, taking her bowl, “that is interesting gossip. If you’ll excuse me.” She walked over to the table behind us, taking a seat at the very edge, away from the others.

Guilt gnawed at me as I thought about Helena’s warning the day we’d gone dress shopping. “I’m going to go sit with Helena for a bit,” I said.

Mama waved me off, and Adelaide nodded.

I walked over to the table and sat across from the vampire.

“What Mama said ...” I trailed off. What could I say? If I denied it, I’d be lying. I couldn’t deny that there was something between me and Draven. I thought I hated him, but... something drew me to him. I recognized some of myself in him, but I also found myself wanting to know him better. Wanting to open up to him.

I still didn’t know why, and it was frustrating to no end .

“It’s okay.” Helena took a sip of her soup. “You’re a grown woman and can make

your own choices.”

Her voice was clipped.

I chewed the inside of my cheek. I didn’t care what Helena thought about me. I didn’t care what anyone thought about me. I’d learned not to long ago. But Helena’s warning echoed in my mind.

“What happened between you and Draven?” I asked.

Her red eyes flashed, and she hesitated. “I’m only telling you this to protect you,” she said. “Like I said, you’re a grown woman and can make your own choices. But you should have all the information before you do.”

My heart pounded. That sounded ominous.

“Draven’s parents died over a year ago, which I assume you know.”

I nodded.

Helena took another sip of her soup, steam curling from the bowl. “After they died, I grew close with his sister. Became a mentor to her in many ways. She was staying with her grandmother, whom I’m good friends with. And the three of us spent a lot of time together.” Helena shrugged. “I can only assume Draven was jealous. He never got along well with his grandmother. He came to visit one day and decided to take his sister. Decided it was best if she stayed with him. He tore that poor girl away from her grandmother, from me.” Helena’s eyes watered. “I worry about Georgie, but Draven won’t even let me see her.”

My heart splintered, and I thought about everything I knew of Draven and Georgie. I couldn’t imagine Draven doing something so cruel. He didn’t strike me as someone

that selfish, someone who would put his own jealousy above his sister's needs.

"Draven will always do what's best for Draven," Helena said. "I just think you should know that before you pursue a relationship with him."

I reared back. "I'm not pursuing any such thing."

If Draven was capable of doing something like that to his own sister, then he was more than capable of revealing someone's secret. My gaze flitted to Adelaide. Elm was visiting her. He held her in his arms, and she laughed as he whispered something in her ear. Had Adelaide told Elm our secret yet? Would Elm reveal something like that to his best friend?

I swallowed as my stomach turned to stone .

Helena reached over and patted my hand, her touch so cold. "You look like I've just delivered the news that your closest friend has died."

I gave her a strained smile. "No, not at all. Thank you for telling me. For trusting me."

Helena hesitated, eyes shifting back and forth. "And you will keep this between us?"

"Of course," I said. "I wouldn't betray a secret."

Not when my own had been betrayed so long ago, and I knew how devastating it could be.

I spent the rest of the day in a haze, Helena's story rolling through my mind like an endless wave.

Thirty-One

DRAVEN

I stood behind the bar in the tavern, huddled over the spell that I'd spent so long looking at, I wasn't even sure what I was seeing anymore. Only a few patrons populated the establishment, but it would fill up for the evening soon enough. I scrubbed a hand down my face, wondering for the thousandth time what I was missing.

My hand tightened, the same hand that had been between Elspeth Moonflower's legs just two nights ago, her dripping wet cunt all over me. I could still hear her breathy moans, I could still taste her lips, and fuck it all if I didn't want more.

She'd ran from the room, from me, and I hadn't seen her since.

Which was exactly why I needed to focus on this. Elspeth probably regretted what had happened between us, realized she'd had a temporary lapse of judgment letting me touch her like that.

A better man would go after her, would make her talk to me about what was happening between us. But I was not a better man.

So I threw myself back into this stupid spell that continued to evade me. I'd changed the wording, the intonation, the command, but something was still off. Right now the mug in question was repeatedly banging itself against the bar top. Elspeth's face flashed in my mind again, and I banished it.

Focus, Draven. Just focus.

“Is that a smile on Draven Darkstone’s face?” Morty Hallow said.

Fuck. I’d forgotten she was sitting at the bar.

“You don’t see that very often,” she said before taking a sip of her drink.

“What’s your point, Morty?” I asked.

She raised her dainty chin, her spiral gray curls bouncing with the movement. “Just wondering what could make you smile like that.” She raised an eyebrow. “Or who.”

“Morty,” I warned. “I’m not a project. I know you retired from your tea shop and are bored, but you can take that boredom and focus it on someone else.”

Morty drummed her fingers against her tankard. “You know what I learned in my years running matchmaking events at my tea shop?”

I ground my teeth together. “No because I never attended any of those matchmaking events.”

“I learned,” she went on as if I hadn’t spoken, “that love always finds us in the most unexpected way. In the most unexpected person.”

I scoffed. “I’m not in love.” In lust, maybe. But that was as far as it went.

“Maybe not, but I haven’t seen a smile from you since you arrived here a year ago.”

I cleared my throat. This conversation was physically painful.

“If someone is giving Draven Darkstone a reason to smile, then I think that someone might be worth pursuing.” Morty stood and dropped a few gold coins on the bar top. They clinked as they hit the wood. “And who knows?” Her voice softened. “She might need you as much as you need her.”

My mouth hung open. I wasn’t sure what to do with that conversation, but I didn’t have long to think about it. As Morty opened the door, Edgar burst in, out of breath.

“We might have a problem,” he said, flapping his wings and hovering in the air in front of me.

My head snapped up, tension coiling in my muscles. “What now?”

I had a feeling I knew exactly what .

“Georgie is trying to free a firefox,” Edgar said in a rush. “We came across it in the forest, trapped under a log right next to the river.”

My blood ran cold. Lor River was known for its dangerous rapids and strong currents. Every year stories spread about a witch or foreigner who lost their lives to the river. I swore. Georgie just couldn’t help herself.

I swiped my hand out. “Out,” I said to the remaining patrons. “All of you.” They stared at me with wide eyes. “Now!” I roared.

They didn’t hesitate, jumping to their feet and racing for the door.

“Let’s go,” I told Edgar.

Edgar flew ahead of me in the forest, the river running alongside us. “She’s just up here,” Edgar said.

“Georgie!” I yelled. “Whatever you’re doing, stop right now.”

I caught a peek of thick black hair up ahead, right next to the river. Far too close to it.

I skidded to a halt as Georgie came into view. She knelt down by a fallen log, half of it hanging out over the river. She was trying to move it, but other logs lay on top of the opposite end, still on land. A small firefox was pinned underneath the log, and every time it breathed, spurts of fire shot from its mouth.

“Georgie, move away from the river.” She was perched right on the edge of the ground. One wrong move, and she would tumble into the current and be carried away.

“No,” she said. “Not until I free this firefox.”

The creature yowled from where it was stuck. Edgar whimpered from where he hung in the air, gaze shifting between me and Georgie.

“I understand you want to save it, but is it really worth your life?” I asked.

She didn’t answer, continuing to pull with all her might at the log. I sighed. I didn’t want to have to give ultimatums, but Georgie left me no choice.

“Fine,” I said. “If you won’t move, then I’ll have to come get you. ”

She whipped around, fire in her eyes. “Don’t you dare.”

“You’re not exactly leaving me a choice,” I said.

She set her jaw. “Well it seems we’re at an impasse because I’m not budging. And if you try to grab me, I’ll fight you.”

“Well, there is a third solution. Your brother could always help you,” Edgar suggested.

I shot him a withering glare, and he hunched his shoulders.

“Would you?” In an instant, Georgie’s tone had gone from livid to hopeful. “Would you help me save it?”

“Georgie,” I said with a soft voice. “It’s likely injured. Its mother is gone. It won’t survive even if you do save it. I’m not sure it’s worth risking our safety.”

“We can take it to Arcane Creatures Emporium,” she said. “That’s what Mr. Thorne does. He helps animals, rehabilitates them, sends them back out into the wild or makes them suitable for adoption. This firefox has a chance. No one should just be left behind, left alone because everyone abandoned them.” She swallowed thickly.

I thought about Elspeth, how she’d said she bonded with her sisters by doing things they liked. Maybe this could be my chance to connect with Georgie.

I rolled up my sleeves. “Okay.” I strode forward and crouched next to her.

The whoosh of wings sounded behind us, Edgar landing on the ground. “Aw, he’s so cute and little.” The firefox sneezed, and a stream of fire shot out at Edgar. He yelped and ducked.

“You do know you’re fire resistant, right?” I asked.

“Oh.” Edgar straightened. “I forgot.”

I shook my head and studied the log.

“Can we lift it at the same time?” Georgie asked.

“Actually.” I stroked my chin. “I think I could use my magic to lift the log.”

I’d created a similar spell years ago. This one would have to be slightly altered, but it could work. I offered my hand to Georgie, and she took it as I hauled her to her feet.

I murmured the spell, adjusting the words in my head as I went. As I spoke, the log began to tremble and shake. The baby firefox squealed, its eyes squeezing shut. Georgie ran to it and petted its head right as the log lifted into the air.

“Georgie,” I yelled as the log lifted and knocked her back. Straight into the river.

“No,” I yelled, lunging forward to grab my sister.

An orange blur raced past me, and I realized it was Edgar. He flapped his wings and dove down, clutching onto the back of Georgie’s shirt. I gaped.

“I’ve got you,” he said, then looked at me in disbelief. “I’ve got her. I’ve actually got her.”

I never knew miniature dragons possessed this kind of strength.

Edgar couldn’t either, his eyes wide. “I can’t believe I did it. I saved someone. Does that make me a hero?”

“Can you fly me back to land now?” Georgie asked, hanging there while Edgar prattled on.

“Oh! Right, yes.” Edgar flapped his wings and flew toward the land, setting Georgie down.

She barreled into me and wrapped her arms around my waist. I let out a breath and held her tight.

“Don’t ever do that again,” I said.

“It was your fault,” she said back.

“That is technically true,” Edgar piped up.

I sighed heavily as Georgie pulled away. “Thanks for saving me,” she said to Edgar. “I guess maybe sometimes you do give good advice.”

I quirked a brow. “And what advice did he give you?”

Edgar started whistling, looking anywhere but me.

“He said that I should come to you for help and maybe you’d surprise me.”

I blinked a few times. Georgie surged forward again, squeezing me tight. “Thank you for saving the firefox and giving it a chance. And thank you for being there for me today.”

My heart squeezed. Maybe I could do this. Maybe I could be what Georgie needed.

“So what else do you do out here? After you stage rescues for helpless creatures?”

Georgie stepped back and narrowed her gaze. “You mean Edgar doesn’t report my every move to you? ”

I shot a look at the dragon. “Surprisingly, no. He only comes to me when you’re in danger. Otherwise, he’s remained tight-lipped about all your activities.”

She gave the dragon another approving look. “You’re not so bad after all, Ed.”

“I really prefer Edgar.” He lifted his small snout in the air.

Georgie laughed. “I mainly explore. Did you know there’s a cave of crystals nearby? They’re all different colors.” She gasped. “And I discovered a lair of seeing spiders. Little babies.”

Those were rare, and once they were old enough, if you managed to catch one, it would give you a glimpse of your future.

“You’re quite the adventurer,” I said.

She shrugged. “Everyone at the academy thinks I’m some troublemaker. A rebel.”

I nudged her, knowing what it felt like to not fit in. I never had when I was younger either. “You got it from Mother and Father.”

She eyed me with a smile. “And maybe a little bit from you too.”

I roped an arm around her shoulder. “Alright, now show me this cave of crystals.”

Thirty-Two

ELSPETH

I walked through the winding road of Thistlegrove. Businesses lined either side of the dirt road, all of them with moss-covered roofs that added a whimsical element to the town that I didn't often see in places we visited. There was something so charming about Thistlegrove.

The sun shone bright today, and there was no breeze, so even though it was chilly, I didn't need a shawl like normal. I lifted my face, letting the sun warm it as I mulled over Helena's words yesterday.

What she'd said about Draven was terrible. I couldn't imagine not doing what was best for my sisters, no matter the cost. Everything I did was with my sisters and mama in mind. Maybe Draven was every bit that arrogant, horrible man I'd originally thought him to be. It didn't matter that he had given me the most intense orgasm of my life. It didn't matter that when I was with him, the entire world, my problems, my secrets, drifted away. It didn't matter that some small part of me wanted to trust him, thought that I could trust him. If what Helena said was true—and I had no reason to believe it wasn't—then I couldn't see him again. I couldn't let myself get lost in him like I had before.

I passed a shop with all sorts of mystical creatures inside. I'd heard of this place. Arcane Creatures Emporium. An older gentleman stood inside as birds with horns on their heads landed on his outstretched arms. My gaze drifted to the top of the tall shelves, where three miniature dragons rested. They looked a lot like Edgar, and I

wondered if those were his siblings who hadn't been adopted yet.

My sisters would love a pet dragon. I could just imagine adopting one, the tiny creature flitting around our cottage.

I paused. Except it wasn't our cottage. And this wasn't our home. It was a temporary place for us to reside. I shook my head and turned, continuing my way down the road until I came to a bridge that led across the rushing Lor River.

Adelaide had a new recipe idea she wanted to try out, and she'd asked me to visit Greta's Greenhouse on the other side of town to get some new seeds. Thanks to Mama's spells and Adelaide's tending, the garden in our backyard was flourishing.

I walked across the bridge where a cottage sat, and I gasped. A greenhouse lay behind it in a sprawling field of golden flowers that glowed like the sun and were almost as tall as me.

I ran my fingers over the soft petals. The translucent greenhouse gave view to hundreds of different types of plants and flowers. Now I knew why Adelaide liked coming here. It was beautiful.

In the distance, I caught a flash of thick black hair as it disappeared into the flowers. I stood on my tiptoes and arched my neck, getting another glimpse of the black hair.

Georgie. It was her; I was sure of it.

I thought about Helena's words. About Draven's. He'd told me his sister was rebellious. I wondered if he knew she was out here.

We were at the town limits. The fields spread out and led to hills in the distance and a network of caves that I'd heard townspeople talk about—mainly that the caves were

dangerous because of the creatures that dwelled inside and the risk of cave-ins. I shuddered at the thought of being trapped in the dark.

Georgie appeared again, and it became clear that was exactly where she was headed. I sighed. I should stay out of it. I'd just decided I wouldn't have anything to do with Draven anymore.

But. .. if that were my sister, I'd want someone to keep her safe. I groaned. The seeds could wait .

I crept through the fields and past the greenhouse, following Georgie all the way to the caves. I thought about calling after her but worried she might run or I might spook her. If I cornered her in the cave, hopefully I could talk some sense into her and get her to come back with me.

"What are you doing here?" a voice said from next to me, and I jumped.

My heart hammered in my chest as I looked over at Edgar. He peered at me with those wide orange eyes, his head cocked and scaled ears perked.

"Edgar, you scared me," I said.

"You scared me!" He pointed a talon at me.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I'm just trying to keep Georgie safe. She shouldn't be sneaking into these caves." I tugged at my brown hair. "And isn't she supposed to be in school right now?"

Edgar sighed. "She doesn't like school. She's been skipping classes quite frequently."

"Does Draven know?" I asked.

Edgar shook his head. “The teachers are all too scared of him to say anything.”

I smiled at that.

“She won’t listen to me, but she at least tolerates my presence ever since I saved her from falling into the river.”

“What?” I yelled, then ducked when Georgie whipped around. I crouched to the ground and whispered, “What?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Edgar said. “Maybe you can talk some sense into her. She likes you, you know.”

I laughed. “Why?”

“Because you get under her brother’s skin.”

That made me laugh again. Of course that was why she liked me. “Well, I’ll do my best.”

Georgie disappeared inside one of the caves, covered by the grassy green of the hills. Big boulders punctuated them, and I imagined one of them rolling down and blocking a cave entrance.

I stood and strode into the cave after Georgie, darkness enveloping me. Ahead, a flickering light blazed to life, and I realized Georgie was holding a torch .

“Are you coming or not?” Georgie called behind her, and I realized she was talking to Edgar.

“I think Edgar is staying out of the caves,” I said.

She whipped around, gaze narrowing in on me. “Did my brother send you after me?”

I raised my hands. “I come in peace. And no. I’m assuming he has no idea you’re here.”

I walked toward her, and thankfully, she didn’t turn and run.

“What are you doing? This is dangerous.”

She rolled her eyes. “You clearly have been talking to Edgar or my brother. They both think everything is too dangerous for me.”

She stuck out her bottom lip in a pout that reminded me so much of Auggie.

“So my brother didn’t send you?” she asked again, and I could’ve sworn I detected a hint of disappointment in her voice. “He’s not with you, is he?” She looked around me, arching her neck.

I studied her, a growing feeling in my gut that I knew what was going on here.

“No,” I said. “Afraid not.”

Her gaze snapped to me, green eyes flashing. “Well, I’m not leaving. You can go back to him and tell on me if you want.”

This was going to be more difficult than I thought. “How about you show me why you’re here instead?”

A sudden smile brightened the young girl’s face. “Follow me.” With that she turned and ventured deeper into the cave.

In the distance, water trickled. I shivered, goosebumps prickling along my skin. Without the warm sun, it was cold. Georgie wore a fur-lined cloak, but I was definitely underdressed for a trip into a cave.

We walked in silence for a few minutes, the winding path rocky and uneven. I stumbled a few times, trying to stay close to Georgie and her light so I didn't fall and crack my head on one of these rocks.

"My brother used to be more adventurous," Georgie said suddenly. "I hardly saw him growing up. He was always going out on all these expeditions."

I thought about Helena's words, how Georgie had been close with her, how Draven tore them apart because he was jealous. But it didn't sound like Georgie was upset. It sounded like she admired her brother .

"I always thought he was the bravest person I knew."

I wondered what Draven did before he owned the tavern. It was clear that he was powerful. Powerful witches tended to work with Witch Superior. But I couldn't imagine someone leaving a position with Witch Superior. Those were coveted roles that brought about wealth, status, and a good life for a witch.

"So what changed?" I asked, sensing Georgie needed to talk about this. Now wasn't the time to pepper her with questions about her brother. Besides, it felt a little bit like a betrayal to Draven to use his sister to dig for information about him.

"I still think he's the bravest person I know," Georgie said, this time her voice sad. "But he hates me, so the feeling isn't mutual."

Before I could tell her that her brother didn't hate her, we came upon four eggs, all of them as big as my torso. Blue spots dotted the eggs, and I gasped.

“Georgie, are those . . .”

“Dragon eggs,” she said, excited.

I stilled. “We’re in a dragon’s lair?”

“Isn’t it so cool?”

I gripped her arm. “Georgie, we have to leave.”

“Relax.” She set down her torch. “The mother is out foraging for food. It’s safe.”

Georgie’s definition of safe and my definition of safe differed greatly.

“So what are we doing here, exactly?”

Georgie flipped her long black hair over her shoulder. “We’re casting a spell.”

“But witches under the age of eighteen aren’t allowed to cast spells without adult supervision.”

“Good thing you’re an adult.” She sent me a smile that was full of mischief.

I groaned, knowing I couldn’t reveal that I was an adult witch who couldn’t practice magic. Whose magic didn’t work.

“Georgie . . .” I started.

“I learned this spell from Draven.” She crouched down. “Well, he doesn’t know I learned it from him. It’s from one of his spell books. A protection spell. ”

Clearly there would be no talking Georgie off this path. Resigned, I crouched next to her. “Why do the eggs need a protection spell?”

Georgie nodded her head back toward the entrance of the cave, no longer visible with how deep we’d ventured. “Did you know Edgar and his siblings were taken from their nest when they were still in their eggs? A witch just stumbled upon them and decided to kidnap them.”

I hadn’t known that, hadn’t even thought about it. How awful.

“The witch spelled the dragons to be able to talk, then realized she didn’t want them anymore. So she surrendered them to Arcane Creatures Emporium, where they’ve spent their entire lives. Mr. Thorne does his best to return creatures to the wild, but some of them can’t go back.”

“Like talking dragons,” I guessed, my heart breaking.

“Exactly,” Georgie said, holding out her hands. “So I’m going to cast a protection spell to keep these eggs safe from poachers looking to steal one and make money off it. Anyone who comes near these eggs will suddenly develop a mysterious rash that will only go away once they leave the cave.”

I laughed. That was clever.

Georgie didn’t have a wand. She must’ve inherited the same great powers as her brother, able to cast a spell without any kind of conduit.

She closed her eyes and murmured the words. A golden glow erupted from her hands, forming a net that rested over the eggs.

I breathed a sigh of relief as the golden net dissipated, the spell now cast.

A low growl rumbled through the cave, and we both stilled.

“So the mother might be back sooner than I expected,” Georgie whispered.

I picked up the torch with a trembling hand, the firelight revealing the head of a dragon that was three times the size of my body, her nose right next to Georgie and me, her lips curled back to reveal sharp teeth as big as my arm.

“Get behind me,” I said, and Georgie didn’t argue, scrambling behind me. “Let’s stand slowly and back away.”

My heart pounded so loud I was sure the dragon could hear it.

“Wait,” a voice yelled, and Edgar raced past us, putting his body between us and the dragon .

The dragon paused, cocking her head like she wasn’t sure what she was seeing.

“It’s okay,” Edgar said. He pointed a talon at the eggs. “They were just here to help. To protect your eggs.”

The dragon didn’t move, her teeth still bared. She stared at Edgar for a long minute before kneeling down and bowing her head.

I sagged in relief, and Georgie let out a whimper.

Edgar turned. “Go. Now. She’s letting us leave.”

With that, we turned and fled, not daring to look back.

Thirty-Three

DRAVEN

I paced back and forth behind the bar. Georgie was missing again. She was supposed to be home from the academy by now, but there was no sign of her or Edgar. Patrons filled the tavern, their chatter loud and annoying. Normally I'd be okay with all the noise, but when I was agitated like this, I just wanted peace and quiet to breathe and collect myself.

I was well aware of my reputation in this town. That I was the town grump, reclusive—scary even. And while I didn't mind encouraging that perception, I couldn't keep kicking out my patrons every other day to go find Georgie. People were going to stop coming at some point, and then I'd have no way to take care of myself or my sister.

I rubbed my temples, about to yell at everyone to get out so I could close up when the door opened, and Georgie walked in... followed by Elspeth.

My breath caught in my throat at the sight of the brown-haired witch. I wasn't sure how I ever could've thought her to be plain, to be an annoyance, nothing special. But the way my heart pounded as she approached the bar with my sister reminded me of how much my views on her had changed. The tight bodice of her green dress showed the slight swell of her breasts, her trim waist. Her skirt fell just past her boots, which were muddy and worn. This was the first time I was seeing her since that night in my manor. The night she ran out on me.

Yet suddenly, I didn't care about any of it. I just wanted my mouth on hers again. I wanted to bury myself between her legs and show her that there was no world where she could run from me and I wouldn't find her. Show her that there was no world that she'd want to run from me.

My gaze snapped to my sister as she approached the bar, looking anywhere but at me, and I came back to myself and remembered what was important here. Georgie. She'd done something again. There was no other reason Elspeth would be with her. Edgar flew in behind them and landed on the bar top, also suspiciously unable to meet my gaze.

"Where have you been?" I asked my sister as Elspeth came to her side. "If she did something to your soup stand or cottage or sisters, I apologize?—"

Elspeth held up her hand. "She didn't. We just ran into each other, and I thought I'd accompany her back to the tavern, make sure she got home safe. Plus, we were having such good conversation, and I didn't want it to end."

I stared at Elspeth in awe that she'd do something like that for my sister. For me.

Georgie smiled brightly at her, and it warmed my icy cold heart seeing someone make Georgie so happy.

I thought about Morty's words just as Elspeth tipped her head. "Well, I should be going?—"

"Do you want to stay?" I burst out. "And have dinner? On me, of course."

Mischief danced in Georgie's green eyes. I gave her a look that told her to behave.

"Oh." Elspeth looked down at her hands. "I don't know if that's a good idea."

“Please.” Georgie whirled to face her. “Please stay and eat with us.”

I cocked a brow, surprised Georgie liked her so much. I knew Georgie liked that she got under my skin, but to actually want to eat with her? My sister hadn’t shown this much interest in anyone else for a long time .

Edgar yawned. “Well, I for one am taking a nap...” As he said the words, his eyes closed, his body curling up tight, and he fell asleep.

Elspeth shook her head. “That was fast.”

“It’s actually impressive how easily he can fall asleep,” Georgie said. “And he can sleep anywhere. Which is also impressive.”

“I can see that.” Elspeth laughed quietly.

“So will you stay for dinner?” Georgie asked, her voice so hopeful. I worried Elspeth would say no and break her heart.

“Of course I will.” Elspeth covered Georgie’s hand with hers.

So we were doing this. Dinner with Elspeth and Georgie. This was going to be an interesting evening.

We sat in a corner booth of the tavern.

With all the spells I had in place, the tavern mostly ran itself as long as I was here to supervise and make sure nothing went wrong. The mug spell was still not perfected, but it was good enough.

“Auggie actually did that?” Georgie asked, giggling at one of Elspeth’s many stories

about her sisters.

“Oh yes.” Elspeth took a bite of the duck leg I’d roasted in our kitchen. I didn’t advertise that I served food, but if customers asked and I felt like cooking, sometimes I’d cobble something together for a meal. Patrons liked my cooking enough, and from the way Elspeth closed her eyes every time she took a bite, it seemed she did too—something that gave me immense pleasure.

“So what happened with the goat?” Georgie asked.

“We had to trek through three feet of snow to find it,” Elspeth replied. “It took us the better part of the night. And then we had to sleep in a cave with the goat because we were all so frozen we couldn’t return to our campsite.”

“I can’t believe she stole a goat and lost it.” Georgie laughed. “All because she didn’t want it to become someone’s meal.” Georgie paused. “Did the goat survive?”

Elspeth took a bite of her roasted turnips. “It did. Auggie can be very persuasive when she wants to be. She convinced the farmer that his goat would make an excellent pet instead of a meal.”

I chuckled at the story. It sounded like something Georgie would do.

Georgie stuffed another bite into her mouth.

“Slow down,” I said. “You’re going to give yourself a stomachache.”

Georgie popped up and kissed me on the cheek, and I stiffened. She hardly ever showed me this kind of affection. “I’m done.”

“You’re done?” I asked, looking at my own half-finished plate.

Her gaze flicked to Elspeth. “Mm-hmm. I have... homework to do. Upstairs.”

Witch’s tits. Could she be any more obvious?

“Georgie,” I started, but she flounced away.

“Well, I’m off.” She turned and winked. “Don’t be home too late.”

For fuck’s sake. I turned to Elspeth, grimacing. “Sorry about her. I told you she was trouble.”

“She’s not so bad.” Elspeth took another drink of her ale, one she’d let me choose. It had hints of apricot, cinnamon, and caramel.

“How is it?” I asked.

She leaned back in her chair. “The food or the ale?” She paused. “Both are delicious. I didn’t know you were such a good cook.”

I shoved a hand through my hair. “Well, I wasn’t always. But when I began caring for Georgie, I had to step up in ways I hadn’t before.”

“Why the tavern?” Elspeth asked.

I shrugged. “I wanted to give Georgie a stable life. A home.”

Something sad passed across Elspeth’s face, and I didn’t know what I’d said wrong.

“I’m sorry,” I offered.

Her eyes crinkled at the corners. “For what?”

“You looked sad,” I said hesitantly.

Her mouth dropped open, then she snapped it shut. “I just worry sometimes that all this traveling isn’t good for my sisters. That they’re missing out on important experiences.”

“So why don’t you stay?” I leaned forward, then winced at how desperate that sounded. “For your sisters,” I amended.

“Right.” Elspeth’s gaze bore into mine. “For my sisters.”

I pushed my plate aside, needing to ask the question that had been on my mind since I last saw her. “Why did you run away the other night?”

Elspeth’s breath hitched. “Why didn’t you follow?”

“Did you want me to?”

Her gaze darkened. I wanted to get rid of the table sitting between us and yank her onto my lap. “I ran because that shouldn’t have happened.”

Just like that, the heat between us fizzled. “Why?” I demanded.

She threw out her arms. “Because we don’t even get along.”

“We got along very well on that couch.”

Her cheeks turned pink, and it was fucking adorable.

“I barely know you,” she said, stabbing a bite of turnip.

“That’s not true. You and I, we understand each other. I just listened to you telling stories about your sisters for an hour, stories that reminded me so much of my own sister. Not just that. But the way you always look out for them, for your whole family. I do the same for mine. For Georgie.”

She bit her lip like she was debating something. “What do you want from me, Draven?”

Everything. The word popped into my mind before I could stop it.

“I want you to give me a chance. Get to know me.”

She crossed her arms. “Okay. Why are you so reclusive? Why is everyone in this town scared of you?”

I huffed. “I’ve always been a bit reclusive, I guess. Distant.” My gaze met hers. “It’s not easy to trust people.”

“What do you have to be afraid of?” she asked.

“You saw my magic. My power. You’ve seen my manor. My wealth. People use me. They’ve used my family because of who we are. My sister. It’s the same with Elm. So many women have used him for his wealth.”

“I don’t understand.” She shook her head. “Who are you?”

I took a deep breath. “My parents were powerful cursebreakers.”

She gasped.

“They worked for Witch Superior, breaking curses across the Witchlands. You have

no idea the type of people that would show up at our house, demanding my parents help them. Or people who would get close to me just because they wanted a meeting with Witch Superior.” My jaw tightened. “People who would get close to Georgie.”

Elsbeth frowned. “That’s terrible.”

“So it was easier to push others away, to throw myself into my work. I like creating new spells. I’ve written spell books for other witches, guides to help them use magic that will help others. Sometimes I can get a little obsessive with my work, lost in a new spell.”

“Like the one you’re working on for the mugs?” She tipped her head toward a mug that was floating through the air, ale sloshing over its sides. She shrugged. “At least it’s not attacking anyone.”

“I didn’t mean to make it attack you,” I said.

Her lips tipped up. “I don’t know. It definitely seemed suspicious. I think you have it out for me, Mr. Darkstone.”

Her playful tone sent a thrill through me. “And why would I have it out for you?”

“Because I vex you.”

“That may be true,” I said, keeping hold of her gaze. My voice dropped low. “But I can think of far more pleasurable ways to get all that tension out than by attacking you.”

Her lips parted, then she abruptly stood. “Good night, Draven.” She stopped by my chair, leaning down, whispering, “Thank you for dinner,” her cheek nearly grazing mine, tendrils of desire snaking through me.

Then I watched as she walked out of my tavern, my eyes never leaving her. I was in so fucking deep.

Thirty-Four

ELSPETH

My arm ached with the effort of scrubbing the window. This grime just would not come off. I'd tried different cleaning potions Mama made, tried good old-fashioned soap and water, tried using every bit of strength I had.

We'd cleaned most of the cottage now—except for the windows, which we still could barely see out of.

I looked up at the cottage. “Are you doing this? Are you not letting us clean the windows as some kind of punishment? We're trying to fix you up, you know.”

In response, the window swung open, letting in a blast of cold air that hit me in the face. I glared at it. “Forget it. I give up.”

I walked out of the cottage into the forest. The chitter of birds and insects surrounded me, along with the gentle rustle of the leaves. I inhaled a deep breath of the pine and cedar scent, which then reminded me of Draven. How I'd smelled him last night at the tavern when I leaned down to say goodnight to him. I might have specifically leaned down so I could smell him, which made me feel like I'd truly lost it.

I rubbed my arms, his words coming back to me .

“But I can think of far more pleasurable ways to get the tension out than by attacking you.”

I'd spent all last night tossing and turning, a throb between my legs that I'd finally had to take care of with my hand. The entire time I thought about Draven, what it would be like to feel him—all of him. That night on the couch had just been a taste, but it had been enough to ignite a hunger that, no matter what I did, wouldn't subside.

Which was a problem, given what Helena had told me. I chewed my nail as I thought. I could ask Draven about the accusation, but that would betray Helena and possibly put her in a bad position.

Draven was clearly connected to Witch Superior—at the very least through his parents. And that was just another reason I needed to stay away from him. Witch Superior was the one person who could ruin my family, so we needed to keep as far away from her as possible.

I groaned, rubbing my face. This was a disaster.

“What are you doing out here in the cold?” Auggie approached from between the trees surrounding our cottage. “Did the house kick you out? It did that to me the other day, you know. Just opened the door and pushed me right out into the cold.”

I gave her a look. “That's because you kicked the door and called it a piece of junk.”

“It wouldn't open!” Auggie said.

I studied her. “Where have you been?”

She raised her nose. “Just out and about. Making friends. Connections.” She brushed past me, and I stared after her as she went inside, slamming the door behind her.

It wasn't that I didn't trust Auggie, but she didn't always make the best decisions. I hoped whatever she was up to, she was being careful.

Rustling sounded behind the cottage, and I wandered around to the back, where Adelaide and Mama were working on the garden, both on their knees with dirt coating their hands and smudging their cheeks.

“What are we planting today?” I asked.

Adelaide looked up, cheeks flushed and eyes bright. I hoped my sister would always be this happy, this alive. “We just planted spinach. I had an idea for a spicy sausage, spinach, and noodle soup.”

My mouth watered just thinking about it. Adelaide hadn’t been this inspired in years. She was always the cook when we camped, but she’d made simple recipes, nothing fancy when it came to combinations, herbs, spices.

“And Mama’s spells are working wonders.” She gestured to the garden, full of tomato vines, peppers, herbs, and a number of different flowers. “Protecting all the plants from the cold weather and pests.”

Adelaide dug a hole in the ground and dropped a seed in. “Mama is working on a new potion to make the vegetables grow faster, and I think I have some ideas for chilled soups once summer comes and it gets hot.”

“I don’t even think we’ll need to get our apothecary shop back up and running,” Mama said. “This soup stand is doing so well, and our to-go soups are starting to take off. Yesterday, old man Veldar came to our house demanding more of that tomato basil soup we made.”

I could just imagine him stomping up here, shaking his cane in the air and yelling for soup. “I guess that’s a compliment,” I said, then frowned, realizing what Mama had just said.

“We’ll need our cart eventually.”

Mama frowned. “Well, yes, we’ll get our cart back, but I think our soup idea is a hit.”

“So you think we’ll sell it on the road?” I asked, trying to understand how that would work. “The problem will be all the ingredients since we won’t have a garden anymore. We could buy everything from the market, but right now our profit is so good because we grow most of our soup ingredients...”

Mama and Adelaide had both stopped digging holes in the soil and were looking up at me with perplexed expressions.

“We won’t sell soup on the road,” Mama said, exasperated. “We’ll stay here in this cottage and sell it at the market.”

My throat closed in on itself, sweat breaking out over my skin. My heart pounded hard, and my chest felt tight.

“Elspeth?” Adelaide reached for me.

I shook my head, crossing my arms and doing my best to breathe through it.

“That’s not the plan,” I said through shaky breaths. “That was never the plan. This is temporary.”

“But it doesn’t have to be,” Adelaide said. “We are happy here, and no one is suspicious of us.”

Yet .

“So have you told Elm?” I asked, arms still crossed.

Adelaide swallowed.

“I hope when you do tell him that he is gracious and kind and supportive,” I said slowly. “But I think there’s a reason you haven’t told him, and it’s because you know there’s a risk.”

Adelaide’s brows bunched together. “There’s always a risk, Elspeth. There’s a risk no matter if you’re cursed or not. That’s love.”

I stepped back. “You love him?”

Mama smiled and patted Adelaide’s hand. “Of course she does. And he loves her too. I just know it. I see the way he looks at her.”

“I’m happy for you, and I hope you get everything you want, Adelaide, but that doesn’t change things for the rest of us. If you and Elm get married and you can finally access your magic, Prue, Auggie, and I will still be magicless.”

Adelaide’s face fell.

“Am I interrupting?” a low voice said, and I whirled to see Draven Darkstone standing there in our garden. I hoped he hadn’t overheard anything.

I was about to tell him that he was interrupting when Mama stood and bustled past me. “Not at all. Are you here to see Elspeth?”

Oh, for witch’s sake. Mama’s meddling was the last thing I needed.

“I am.” Draven didn’t take his eyes off me. “I thought you might accompany me on a walk?”

I stared at him, mouth agape. A walk. He wanted to take a walk with me?

“Elspeth was just saying how she wants to go on a walk. What a coincidence.” Mama clapped her hands together.

I glared at her. “I was not?—”

She grabbed my arm and practically shoved me at Draven. “Our Elspeth just loves her daily walks.”

I hated walking, and Mama knew that, but arguing with her would just make this situation more awkward than it already was.

Mama shooed us out of the garden. “Now you two have fun. Keep her as long as you’d like!”

“Mama,” I said through gritted teeth as she continued to shove us out of the garden .

“Bye bye now!” She waved as Draven took my arm and led me out toward the forest.

I sent one last backward glance at Mama that spelled murder, and she just smiled brightly and mimed for me to smile as well. I was going to kill her when I got back from this walk. I was trying to stay away from Draven, stay away from trouble, and now here I was, stuck with the man.

We walked in silence through the forest. Vines hung from the trees, and our boots crunched on fallen leaves. Plenty of leaves still peppered the branches, but winter would be here soon, and the trees would be bare.

I stepped over a thick green tuft of moss.

“You have quite the impressive garden,” Draven said finally.

“It’s all Mama and Adelaide. They cleared all the weeds, planted the seeds. Mama cast some clever spells, and, well, now it’s flourishing.”

“So why do you sound upset about it?” Draven asked.

“Did you want to bring Georgie here?” I asked abruptly.

“What?” Draven shot me a confused look.

“Did you want to leave your old life behind and bring Georgie here? Did you want that for yourself?”

Draven ran a hand through his hair. “No,” he said finally. “I didn’t. I liked my life. I liked creating powerful spells, living in the capital.”

So he did work for Witch Superior. That answer confirmed it.

“But I brought her here because it was best for her.”

I wondered if he truly believed that or if Helena was right and he’d just done it to get Georgie away from the vampire and their grandmother. When he talked about Georgie, it didn’t seem like he spoke with any kind of ulterior motive or jealousy. He spoke with tenderness, with love. It was in these moments that I was most confused, that I had a hard time believing Helena’s story to be true. But it still wouldn’t make sense why she’d lie about such a thing.

“Well,” I said, “I don’t think this place is what’s best for my family. But they’re all acting like we’re going to be here forever. We have a business. We have our cart. Our potions. We were never supposed to be here forever.” My hands clenched into fists

by my side.

We both ducked under a vine that hung from a branch, then rounded a knotted tree, the trunk thick and twisted .

“And why do you think this place isn’t what’s best for you?”

I squeezed my eyes shut. I’d said too much. “Because we’re nomads. We always have been.”

“Does that mean you always have to be?” he asked.

“You don’t understand.” He couldn’t, not without all the information.

“Maybe not,” Draven said softly. “But I know what it’s like for life to change suddenly, to have to adapt to a new normal.”

“And do you like your life here now? Has anything changed?”

He paused. “Yes and no. I do miss the excitement of creating spells that would make a difference in the world. I miss the excitement of helping others. But I need to create a safe, stable home for Georgie.”

He must’ve been a spell caster then. They often worked to make spells for Witch Superior, spells that could help with any number of things in the witch world. Those spells were guarded closely, not the kind that would ever be released to the public.

“But you’re making a difference here,” I said.

He scoffed. “Right. With my flying mugs that almost kill people?” He raised an eyebrow, and I laughed.

“You’re running a tavern that creates community. That brings people together. Every time I’ve come into the tavern, all I’ve felt was joy from the people there. You don’t have to wield all that power to make a difference.”

He paused and turned. “I never thought of it that way.”

I shrugged, and we continued walking. “That’s what I always told myself about our potions. That we made a difference to each person that stopped by our cart, even if we weren’t changing the entire world.”

“Is that what you want for yourself?” he asked. “To make potions?”

I’d never been asked that question. Not even by Johanes. He assumed I just wanted to be his wife, follow him wherever he’d go. Truthfully I’d never thought about it. My only focus was on our survival, on keeping my family in the Witchlands where we belonged. I had no big dreams for myself. No grand goals.

“I always dreamed of going to the Institute and studying herbal remedies,” I said.

He stayed quiet, so I went on .

“I liked the idea of growing herbs, using them to make something that could heal a wound or ease a cough.” I shrugged.

“You didn’t attend the Institute?” he asked, and I winced, once again chiding myself for revealing too much.

“It was too expensive,” I said. “We couldn’t afford something like that, not after my father left.”

He shot me a look filled with anger. “Your father left you?”

Damnit. What in the world was happening between my brain and my mouth? They couldn't connect, and I just kept blurting things out I hadn't meant to. I was normally so guarded, so careful, but something about Draven cracked me wide open, all my secrets spilling out.

"He decided we weren't what he wanted after all," I said quietly, remembering how gutted we'd all been when we discovered he'd left.

"Scum," Draven growled. "I know it doesn't make it better, but he never deserved you. Not any of you."

I sniffled. "Thank you."

The sound of rushing water echoed in the distance.

"It doesn't surprise me that you wanted to go into herbal remedies." Draven stopped in front of a wall of vines and parted them.

"Why is that?" I asked as I walked toward the vines.

"Because you take care of people," Draven said. "You're a natural at it. And you would make an amazing herbal healer."

Tears sprung to my eyes. "How have you gone from always saying the wrong thing to always knowing exactly the right thing to say?"

He gestured for me to walk through the vines, and I did, my breath catching in my throat when I saw where we stood.

A waterfall rushed down a tall cliff, feeding into a pond where steam rose in the air. The warmth of it beckoned me. The entire area was enclosed by tall trees and wide-

spread canopies, making the air so much warmer. The chill lifted from me, and I turned to face Draven.

For the first time since we'd started our walk, I wondered where we were and what we were doing out here.

"Is everything okay?" I asked. "With Georgie?"

Draven's eyebrows drew together. "Why wouldn't they be? Do you know something I don't?"

I shook my head. "Why else would you ask me to accompany you on a walk unless you needed something from me? "

He cocked his head. "Because I like you, Elspeth, and I want to spend time with you." I stopped, mouth agape. Draven hooked a finger under my chin and closed my mouth. "Is it really that shocking after the other night?"

"Th-that was just lust," I stammered. "It was something we needed to get out of our systems."

"And is it?" he asked. "Out of your system?" He stepped closer, so close his warm breath grazed my cheek. "Because it's not out of mine."

I stared at him, heart pounding.

"I brought you here because you said you hate the cold. I thought you might like this place. A way to get outside but still stay warm." He gestured. "Or take a dip in the pool."

The gesture was so unexpectedly kind. "When did I say I hated the cold?" I asked.

He rubbed his stubbled jaw. “You said it at my manor, the night we...”

I didn’t even remember saying that. But he did.

“Do you like it?” he asked, and I nodded.

“It’s amazing.” I looked longingly at the steaming pool.

“Well, I’ll leave you to it.” He turned to go.

Before I could think through all the reasons why it was a bad idea, I reached out and grabbed his arm, stopping him.

He went deathly still as I watched him, taking in this man who I’d somehow gotten all wrong. I didn’t want him to leave. And I didn’t care about what Helena said, my fight with Mama and Adelaide, all the reasons why this shouldn’t happen.

I untied my apron, letting it fall to the ground.

Draven stared with rapt attention.

I reached up, tugging down the shoulders of my dress and pulling it down my body until it pooled around my ankles.

Draven’s eyes went black as he took me in, only in my bra and panties. I held his gaze as I unclasped my bra and let it drop.

He sucked in a sharp breath. I tugged down my panties and turned, walking into the warm pool.

“Well?” I asked over my shoulder. “Are you coming?”

Thirty-Five

ELSPETH

I turned in the water with a rueful smile on my face.

Draven blinked a few times as if he still hadn't processed what I was saying. Then he met my gaze and grabbed his shirt, yanking it over his head and revealing the corded muscles of his arms. His torso was lean and muscular, and I wanted to touch him, to feel his hard body.

He grabbed his trousers, pulling them down to reveal his thick, hard length.

The area between my legs ached with need at the sight of him as he walked into the pool, wading closer until he was right in front of me.

"What now?" I asked.

"I have a few ideas," he said, voice low. He reached out and pulled me to him. "Ever since you kissed me in that closet, I've been consumed by you. By your lips. By your scent." He leaned down and inhaled. "By every part of you."

He captured my mouth with his and kissed me hard with an urgency I felt to my core. I pressed myself against him, threading my hands in his hair while he wound his arms around my back, caging me. His skin was warm and wet against my own.

"Kissing you is like fighting with you," I said, breathing hard. A sparring of mouths,

teeth, tongues—full of passion and fire. “It makes me want more. It makes me never want to stop.”

He smirked. “Kissing or fighting?”

I placed my hands on either side of his face and drew his mouth back to mine. He bit my bottom lip, and I moaned at that small thread of pleasure and pain mixing.

“I love hearing the sounds you make,” he said. “They drive me fucking wild. You drive me fucking wild.”

He lifted me, cupping my butt. His hands squeezed tight, kneading into my skin. I wrapped my legs around him as he walked us toward the cliff, kissing me the entire time, devouring my mouth with his. We were practically plastered to each other, and still it didn’t feel like we were close enough. Somehow I needed more.

My back met the warm, smooth stone as he pushed me up against it. A small ledge was cut into the rock, and he lifted me onto it, spreading my legs and positioning his head right between them.

He looked up at me with his dark gaze. “I want to taste you, and then I want to fuck you.”

“I think we can manage that,” I said, already tilting my pelvis up toward his mouth, desperate for some release.

“Good. Because I’ve been dying to do this.” He dragged his tongue down my slit, and I threw my head back in ecstasy.

His tongue made slow, languid strokes over my center. I braced my hands on either side of the little alcove where I was perched, legs thrown over Draven’s shoulders as

he devoured me. He licked and sucked and plunged his tongue inside of me like I was a feast, and he was a starving man. Hell fucking fire, my body melted under his touch, under his mouth. I'd never have guessed this grumpy, severe man could make me feel things I'd never felt before. I groaned out in pleasure as pressure built in my core, spreading out to my thighs and stomach.

"I've wanted to know how you tasted," he said, pressing kisses to my clit, so featherlight and opposite of the way he'd just been ravaging me.

That pressure. I needed it back. The absence of his tongue suddenly felt like the worst kind of torture. I lifted my pelvis again, and he laughed, the sound low and rumbling through me.

"What's the verdict?" I asked, breathless.

"You don't already know?" He dragged his tongue down my center again and made me gasp. "You're fucking delicious. Just like I knew you'd be. I'm starting to regret that I'm doing this here." He licked again.

"Why?" I asked, barely able to handle the teasing. I wanted him to feast on me again, to give me what I craved.

"Because right now I'm badly wishing you could sit on my face, ride my mouth the way you did my hand."

Oh, sweet hellfire. His words nearly made me come right then and there. My thighs trembled as he set his mouth over me, teeth gently scraping my clit while his tongue once again applied that delicious pressure.

"Draven," I whimpered.

His tongue, his mouth, was going to destroy me, and I was ready. I wanted to be demolished. Wrecked. Ruined for all other men.

My core turned molten, and I tightened my thighs around him, my body clenching as my release came hard and swift. By the end, I was panting, hands clenching the edges of the stone so hard it cut into my palms.

Draven grabbed me by my waist and gently lifted me down into the water. I collapsed into his hard, lean chest, letting my hands press into the thick curls of dark hair covering his pecs.

I let out another long breath, then looked up at him. “That was impressive, Mr. Darkstone.”

“Good.” He leaned down to kiss me. “Because I will be doing that again, and next time you will be on my face.”

No man had ever talked to me this way. Like he worshipped every part of my body. His hard length pressed against my inner thigh, which was already trembling again as desire filled me.

“Who knew you had such a way with words?” I shot him a rueful smile.

He didn’t return the smile, his gaze serious as he looked down at me. “I don’t. I’m often terrible with my words. But you make it easy. When I look at you, when I’m holding you, the words just come.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. This all felt like it was happening so fast, and it was so intense. He was so intense.

“So you mentioned something about fucking me?” I trailed a finger down his chest,

and he hummed.

“I did.”

I reached under the water and gripped his length in my hand, giving it a few pumps that made his eyes roll back as he groaned.

“You’re going to wreck me, Elspeth Moonflower,” he said.

He’d already wrecked me in a way I wasn’t prepared for. “Only in the best way,” I said as I leaned up and kissed him.

I tilted my pelvis forward, letting his hard length rest right at my entrance. It had been so long since I’d been with a man. And Draven wasn’t just any man. He was different in all the best ways, but I wasn’t ready to admit it out loud, to let myself fully embrace this. Today was about sex. It was about distractions. Nothing else.

Draven pressed me up against the smooth rock of the cliff. He cupped my butt, and I wrapped my legs around him once again as he pushed inside of me, filling me so completely. “Fuck, you feel divine,” he said.

He pumped in and out, slow and steady, and I rocked with his movements, both of us finding our rhythm. Our bodies were in sync in a way I’d never have thought possible. But it just worked. We worked. He rammed into me again, and every thought fled my mind as pleasure burst inside of me.

He leaned his head down and took a breast in his mouth as he continued thrusting. He sucked hard, his tongue swirling over my peaked nipple. I clung to him, barely hanging on. He was already going to make me come again.

I rode his length hard, grinding against him as his pace quickened and he sucked

harder on my nipple. He moved his mouth to the other breast, giving it the same attention. Water sloshed around us, splashing me in the face, splattering my body, but I didn't care about any of it. I only cared about Draven and the way he was turning my body to clay.

When he lifted his head, his eyes were glazed over with desire, and his mouth crashed into mine. His kisses were frenzied, laced with so much need, and I kissed him back with the same fervor. I wasn't sure how sex could feel this good. It had always been pleasurable, but this might very well become an addiction. Neither of us had even finished, and I was already thinking about the next time we could do this, how long I could stay here with him, tucked away in this little paradise with Draven buried between my legs .

His powerful muscles contracted as he thrust into me, each movement wringing more pleasure from my body. Now our kisses turned sloppy, a mess of our mouths meeting wherever they could as Draven hammered into me again and again and again.

I gasped out, my walls clenching around him. He moved his mouth to my neck, teeth scraping against my skin, and a fire blazed through my belly.

My spine arched as everything inside of me pooled into liquid. My orgasm hit me with the force of a wave, and I cried out.

Draven's hard length pulsed inside of me, his breaths coming in quick gasps, his whole body tense.

Our hearts pounded together, and we both stayed like that with him inside of me as our breathing returned to normal. Draven withdrew and set me down, my feet touching the bottom of the pond.

He shoved a hand through his hair, little droplets of water clinging to the ends. "I was

right,” he said. “I knew you were going to wreck me.”

Thirty-Six

DRAVEN

Elsbeth and I lay on the little patch of grass by the pond with the sound of the waterfall in the background. We'd have to leave soon. I needed to get back to the tavern before it got busy and to check in on Georgie.

But I didn't want to think about any of that right now. All I wanted to think about was this woman in my arms who'd somehow turned my world upside down. I wasn't even sure when it had happened—maybe the very first day she barged into my tavern.

Either way, now that I'd gotten a taste of her, I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to let her go. I just didn't know how to tell her that without scaring her away. It was clear Elspeth kept everyone at a distance, put up walls. If I came off as too intense, she might run in the opposite direction.

I didn't know how to be anything but who I was. I'd always been an intense person. But I wasn't sure I'd ever been as obsessed with anything as I was with Elspeth Moonflower. Every dip and curve of her body. Every mischievous smile. Every glint in her eye. Every argument. I wanted it all, and I wanted it from her .

"I have to get back soon," she said, her voice full of regret.

I trailed my fingers up and down her spine.

She tilted her head up and kissed me. "But maybe not quite yet."

I opened my mouth, letting her deepen the kiss, that deep-seated need for her already stirring again as my cock twitched.

She pulled back and rested her head on my chest while her fingers trailed over my chest hair. “Plus,” she said, “you probably don’t want to leave Georgie alone for too long.”

“No,” I agreed, “I don’t. Thank you for watching out for her the other day.”

“It’s what I would’ve wanted someone to do for my sisters.”

I knew that. It was one of the things I admired so much about Elspeth. How protective she was.

“So are you going to tell me what Georgie was actually up to?”

Elspeth sat up, and my gaze dropped to her perfect, perky breasts. She reached for her dress and pulled it over her head, and I glowered at her.

She laughed at my expression. “Wouldn’t you rather Georgie tell you?”

I stretched my hands behind my head. “That’s the problem. Georgie won’t tell me anything. I don’t know how to connect with her, not like you do with your sisters.”

Elspeth studied me for a moment. “Can I tell you something?”

“Anything,” I said without hesitation.

She leaned forward, her curtain of hair falling over her shoulders. “Sometimes I think the reason you let your work consume you is because it’s easier than dealing with the real world. Real people. You’ve been obsessing over this mug spell, and yes, it’s

important that you get it right. But is it more important than Georgie?"

I stared up at the green canopies hanging over us, the leaves tinted orange and yellow with the changing season.

"I never thought of it like that." I swallowed. "But Georgie doesn't even want to spend time with me. She resents me. For bringing her here."

"I don't think so." Elspeth bit her lip. "I think she's acting out because she's trying to get your attention." She placed a gentle hand on my chest. "Think about it. When do you most pay attention to Georgie?"

I grimaced. "When she's misbehaving."

"Exactly." Elspeth waved her hand. "Auggie does that, too, sometimes. Not so much anymore. But when she was a teenager, she'd throw tantrums, have meltdowns, sneak out of our campsite at night and run away to the nearest village. Eventually, I realized she just wanted to be seen."

I sighed, scrubbing a hand down my face. "This is what I'm talking about. You just know these things. You know what everyone needs. Georgie likes you. She actually likes you."

"She likes you too," Elspeth said. "She admires you so much. You should've heard her going on about the amazing spells you've created."

I tilted my head. "Really? She never shows any interest in my spells."

"Are you sure?" Elspeth asked, a skeptical brow raised.

Maybe not. I supposed Georgie had asked about my mug spell a few times. Had

asked if she could help. I swore. She'd been reaching out to me, trying to bond, and I'd shut her down. Chosen my work over her.

"Hey." Elspeth cupped my face with her hand, forcing me to look at her. "This is a learning experience. I've had an entire lifetime of raising my sisters. You just got Georgie a year ago. It's going to take time to learn her moods, needs, wants. Don't be so hard on yourself, Draven."

I couldn't help it. Georgie deserved better, much better than a brother who couldn't even put his sister above a stupid mug spell. I sat up and reached for my trousers.

Elspeth stopped me, putting a hand on my arm. "What do you think you're doing?" she asked.

My cock stirred at the heated look in her gaze. "I thought we had to go?"

She lifted up the skirts of her dress and swung a leg over my waist, straddling me, pressing herself right against the tip of my cock.

"I think we could probably spare a few minutes."

"A few?" I asked, and she laughed, then rubbed herself against me, a groan escaping me at the feel of her slipping up and down my cock "Fuck." I gripped her hips with my hands. "You've cast a spell on me," I said .

Something flashed in her eyes, gone so quickly I thought I might have imagined it.

"Maybe," she said, "but at least it's a good spell." She lifted herself up, then slid over my cock, both of us moaning.

"The best," I rasped out as she started rocking back and forth, and soon all thoughts

of the tavern, of Georgie, fled my mind until I could no longer think at all.

Thirty-Seven

DRAVEN

I 'd never imagined one month could go by so quickly and somehow be so blissfully perfect. One month of Elspeth Moonflower in my bed, in my tavern, in my life. One month and I'd never been so sure of anything as I was Elspeth. I just wished I knew if she felt the same.

"Let me guess," Georgie said from next to me as we walked through the market. "We're going to be stopping for some soup?"

"Well, how else can Draven make moon eyes over Elspeth if we don't?" Edgar asked from Georgie's shoulder.

I rolled my eyes, already regretting bringing these two with me today. "I heard they have a new soup today: cheddar garlic potato."

Georgie's eyes widened. "That sounds amazing."

"I agree," Edgar said. "We are stopping for soup, right?"

"Yes," I grumbled. "And what do you know about moon eyes and Elspeth?" I shot a look between Edgar and Georgie.

Elspeth and I might have been seeing each other nearly every day, but that didn't mean anyone else knew about us. We'd been careful. Discreet. Always meeting at my

manor or our spot, away from prying eyes. Elspeth had insisted on it, said she didn't want others to ruin what we had. I wasn't sure how anyone knowing could ruin what was between us, but I also wanted to respect Elspeth's boundaries, her reasons. I trusted that she'd open up to me when she was ready.

"You stare at her every time she comes into the tavern," Georgie said. "Could you be any more obvious? Just ask her out already." Georgie nudged me playfully.

"You should." Edgar tilted his head. "Otherwise all that staring is just going to come across as creepy."

"No, Elspeth makes the same moon eyes at him," Georgie said. "They're very into each other."

I elbowed my younger sister, which only made her giggle.

Elspeth wasn't the only one I'd spent more time with over the last month. I'd also been making more of an effort with Georgie, working less and adventuring more with her. Elspeth had been right. Not that I felt like admitting that to her—she'd have far too much fun gloating. But Georgie had gotten in a lot less trouble over the last month. She'd also been spending more time with Elspeth and her sisters.

I was trying, but it still didn't feel like enough. It was starting to feel like maybe I was the one who'd run away after our parents' death, that coming to Thistlegrove was more for me than it had been for Georgie. I wasn't sure she could thrive here, and the thought nagged me daily. I wanted what was best for Georgie, and I was starting to doubt that I was it.

We approached the little soup stand, a long line stretching from it. Elspeth caught my eye from behind the table where she stood and flashed me a grin.

Fuck, I'd give anything to pull her away into the forest and take her right up against a tree. A gust of cold wind blew, and Georgie shivered.

"You didn't bring your shawl?" I asked.

She looked at me like I was an idiot. "I don't have one."

My eyes bugged. "You don't have a shawl?"

She planted her hands on her hips. "And what gold am I supposed to buy one with, exactly?"

My mouth dropped open at that. "Georgie, I didn't know you didn't have a shawl." I shrugged off my brown overcoat and draped it over her shoulders. "I'm sorry. We'll get you a proper winter coat and shawl today."

I rubbed my jaw, guilt gnawing at me. Elspeth would never let her sisters be out in the cold without the proper clothing. Just another reason to add to the list of why I might not be the best person suited to take care of Georgie. I thought of our grandmother. Maybe I'd been too harsh on her.

It was our turn to step up to the stand.

"Hi," I said to Elspeth.

"Hi," she said, a shy smile on her face.

"Gag." Georgie stuck her finger down her throat, and Adelaide snorted from behind Elspeth.

Elspeth laughed and set her hands on her hips. "Two bowls of soup, then?" She

gestured behind her where three long tables now sat, full of witches eating their soup and talking. Laughter and chatter rang out in the air. “For here or to go?”

“To go,” I said at the same time as Georgie said, “For here.”

“It’s cold,” I warned her.

“We have warming spells now.” Elspeth gestured to a faint cloud covering the tables. “Veldar, of all people, made one so he could eat his soup here.”

She hadn’t told me that. Probably because every minute I got to steal with her, we were busy doing other things with our mouths than talking. Elspeth widened her eyes at me as if she knew exactly what I was thinking.

“You two are gross.” Georgie shoved her hand in my coat pocket and dumped six gold coins on the table. “Yes, for here,” she confirmed.

I cleared my throat as Elspeth’s mother ladled soup into two bowls. “Oh, Elspeth, just kiss the man.” She waved her ladle in the air, some soup splattering onto the table. “We all know something is going on between you two.”

“Mama,” Elspeth said through gritted teeth.

I hid a smile behind my hand while Georgie beamed, entertained by this entire exchange.

“Mama”—Adelaide stepped up and grabbed the ladle from her—“we have other customers waiting.”

“Even better reason to kiss him so he’ll stop staring at Elspeth like that and take his bowls already.” Thea wrenched the ladle back from her eldest daughter while Elspeth

shot daggers at her .

“What about me?” Edgar asked, clearly affronted as he looked at the two bowls. “I don’t just eat raw meat, you know.”

Georgie patted him on the head and smiled at him affectionately, then dropped three more coins on the table. She was really warming up to the dragon. I didn’t know what shifted between them, but they were definitely an odd pair. Yet, somehow, they worked.

Thea plopped another bowl onto the table.

“Thank you, ladies.” I grabbed two of the bowls, then tipped my head at Elspeth. I was going to do so many filthy things to her later.

“Come on, loverboy.” Georgie grabbed my arm with one hand, holding her bowl of soup with the other.

I shook my head. I guess we were a little obvious. Georgie and I walked to one of the tables, warmth settling over us like a blanket as we sat down. Veldar really had created a nice spell.

He sat on the opposite end of one of our tables, chattering away about something. Well, more like yelling.

“I’m sick of these damned laws. When is someone going to stand up to Witch Superior?” A few people looked down the table at us and shushed him.

I cleared my throat and took a bite of the soup. Garlic, cheddar, and herbs burst to life in my mouth.

Edgar groaned, sipping his soup directly from the bowl. “That is the best thing I’ve ever tasted,” he said.

It was good. I might have to ask them if they’d want to sell soup at the tavern. I looked at Elspeth, wondering how she’d feel about something like that.

“Have you thought about inviting Grandmother to visit?” Georgie asked, shifting in her seat.

“I haven’t,” I said slowly. Georgie hadn’t mentioned her grandmother since the ball. “Is that something you’d want?”

Georgie gave a half shrug as she took a bite of her soup. “Maybe.”

Well, that wasn’t particularly helpful.

“Would you want to go visit her?”

Georgie’s eyes lit up at that. “Could we? And we could get some of Mother and Father’s old spell books that she has? There’s a few things I want to look at.”

My jaw locked. I’d never actually asked Georgie what she wanted because I assumed I knew best. But maybe that was selfish of me. Maybe this entire thing had been selfish. I took another bite of my soup, but it tasted like ash as I thought through my options.

I glanced over Georgie’s shoulder at Elspeth, who was laughing and talking with her sister. She had the kind of relationship with her sisters that I could never have with mine. I wasn’t like Elspeth. I wasn’t warm and caring and personable. I worked too much. I liked to keep to myself. But mostly, I wanted Georgie to thrive, and I just wasn’t sure it mattered where I moved her. Maybe the location wasn’t the problem.

Maybe the problem was me.

I knew what I had to do. I just didn't want to do it.

Thirty-Eight

ELSPETH

I stood on the front porch, sweeping away debris and leaves that the wind had blown in. The wind whistled around me, and a random vine snaked out from the side of the cottage, whipping me in the butt.

I jumped and rubbed the affected area, glaring at the house. “You know, it would do you good to be grateful for all we’ve done here. You’re practically shiny and brand new. No more cobwebs or dust or debris.” I pointed to the sparkling windows above. “We even figured out how to clean the grime off your windows.” The vine slowly slithered back into its place. “That’s better.”

Prue appeared from in between the trees, carrying a stack of books she’d gotten from the bookstore. Her face was flushed with excitement. “I just found the most amazing section in the bookstore full of books about the history of magic and how all the laws surrounding our use of magic came to be.”

That sounded incredibly boring, but Prue was so excited about it, I couldn’t do anything but feign my own enthusiasm. “That’s wonderful, Prue. I’m so glad you’re finally getting to experience the bookstore of your dreams.”

She nodded. “And I think the bookstore might be interested in hiring me. I was reorganizing some of the books.” She shook her head. “The catalogue system just didn’t make sense. Then a customer came in, asking for a recommendation for books about the Orc Wars. I have so many of those.” She waved her hand in the air. “So I

helped them find a few, which they bought. The owner was so impressed, he said if I was looking for a job, he'd love to have me."

"Wow, Prue." I continued to sweep leaves off the little porch. "That's amazing."

Unless we were leaving soon . . .

Prue walked up the stone steps and set her books against the house. "I'll turn it down," she said quietly. "I know we'll probably be leaving soon. Mama told me the cart is finally ready. I knew this couldn't last forever."

My heart stopped. The cart was ready? Mama hadn't told me that yet. In truth, I'd forgotten about our cart recently, so caught up in Draven and whatever was happening between us. Adelaide had been making the payments, and she must've made the last payment for it to finally be fixed.

For some reason, disappointment filled me at the realization that we were free. We could leave Thistlegrove. Leave our cottage. Leave Draven.

Adelaide would likely choose to stay with Elm, which would change everything.

It would be so good for Prue to get a job in a bookstore, to interact with people every day. I thought of Draven. Could I really say goodbye to him forever? I knew the answer. If it came to protecting my family, I could do it. I could do anything to keep them safe. But I didn't want to. And I was starting to think I didn't have to. No one was suspicious about us here. No one looked twice or asked about our magic. Everyone loved our soup. We had a thriving business. A home.

My sisters were doing better than ever. Even Auggie, with all her secrets, was happier, less snarky than usual.

“Don’t,” I said to Prue. “Turn it down just yet.”

“Really?” She pushed her spectacles up her nose and gathered her pile of books in her arms. They teetered precariously. “We’re not leaving?”

“Well...” I said, my gut twisting as I spoke the words. Staying would be a risk. I thought of Draven, of all the nights I spent in his arms, of how effortless it was to just be with him. Maybe it was time to admit our relationship to my family. Well, first I’d have to confirm we even had a relationship.

But maybe it was time to come out of hiding. To stop being so afraid of everything. To stop running and start living.

Mama and Auggie appeared, and I smiled brightly, about to tell them the good news until I noticed the way Auggie’s skin had lost all color, the way Mama’s eyes were wild with fear. My stomach dropped as Adelaide emerged from the cottage.

“Is everything okay?” She looked at Prue. “I thought I heard something about a job at the bookstore?”

Prue looked from me to Mama and Auggie.

“What is it?” I asked with a shaky voice. “What’s wrong?”

Auggie swallowed. “Witch Superior is coming here to Thistlegrove. She’s set to arrive tomorrow.”

Prue gasped and dropped her books, all of them slamming onto the porch, rattling the boards.

My entire body went rigid. It was well known that Witch Superior traveled with her

magistrates, who were trained to sniff out any illegal activity—including those living in the Witchlands without magic.

Those very magistrates had almost caught us once before. Because of Johanes. Because I confided in him, and instead of understanding, he tried to blackmail us, threatening to turn us in to Witch Superior and her magistrates unless we paid him. So we did, and the magistrates arrived anyway. We'd managed to get away and disappear, officially starting our life on the run.

"That's not all," Auggie said, swallowing.

"What else could there be?" I stepped forward, not sure I could handle any more bad news.

Mama's eyes filled with tears. "It was Draven who asked her to come. He's her grandson, Elspeth."

The entire world went sideways, and I stumbled backward.

No. He'd mentioned his grandmother several times, and I knew they had a complicated relationship, especially after his parents had died and he took over guardianship of his sister. But he'd never once mentioned his own grandmother was Witch Superior.

My throat closed, and it was suddenly hard to breathe. To think, I'd been considering telling Draven the truth. Just because he and his grandmother didn't get along, just because they couldn't agree on how to raise Georgie, didn't mean he wouldn't turn us in. Not when his own grandmother was the leader of all the Witchlands.

My stomach turned. I felt sick.

“What are we going to do?” Auggie asked, panic in her voice.

I straightened, remembering what Prue said about our cart. It was fixed. “We’re going to leave. Pack your things.” I thought of Draven, his face, so serious and severe—except when he looked at me. There was always a softness in his eyes that I was coming to crave. “No time to say goodbye,” I said and turned to go into the cottage and pack my belongings.

Thirty-Nine

DRAVEN

I paced back and forth in our little apartment above the bar. It was early in the morning, the tavern not yet open. Georgie had already left for school, and an uneasy feeling had overtaken me.

I'd sent for my grandmother two days ago. She hadn't known where I'd taken Georgie, but if she'd bothered to look, it wouldn't have been hard to find us, to know we'd go where my parents had settled.

But Grandmother had always been proud. Stubborn. She wouldn't stoop to search for us, to try and bring her granddaughter home.

She'd never cared much for me, not when I was male and unable to enter the Witch Trials, just like my father was unable to. It was always Georgie she'd set her sights on, wanting her granddaughter to follow in her footsteps.

My parents had been against it, adamant that that was not what would be best for Georgie, so after they'd died, I took Georgie and came here. But maybe my parents weren't right. Maybe what Georgie needed was to be challenged, something my grandmother would certainly do. She'd keep Georgie on her toes. She'd keep her in line in a way I wasn't able to.

I'd told Georgie her grandmother was coming, but I hadn't yet told her that I was thinking about sending her back to the capital with Grandmother. I did have

stipulations, of course. One being that Helena wouldn't be allowed anywhere near Georgie. Grandmother was desperate enough to get her heir back that she'd comply.

Helena was a snake who'd nearly ruined Georgie's confidence, and I wouldn't let her do that again. I'd seen Helena in town, probably searching for new recruits to "manage." But I'd kept away from her, and in turn, she'd kept her distance from me.

My jaw locked. Elspeth hadn't met me at the manor last night. I was craving her touch, her advice. I needed her right now. I needed her to tell me what to do about Georgie. She'd be objective, and she'd tell me the truth. It was something I appreciated so much about her. She never minced her words. She didn't hold back, but she also wasn't unkind. She was just honest.

Fuck it. The market wasn't up and running yet. She'd still be at her cottage. I knew she wanted to keep us a secret, but I'd go there and if her family saw me, I'd say I wanted to ask her a question about something.

Grandmother would be here soon, and I had to figure out a way to untangle my thoughts.

Mind made up, I grabbed my coat and exited my apartment to go find Elspeth.

The cottage was a flurry of activity when I arrived. The first thing I noticed was the Moonflower's apothecary cart. It was fixed, standing there and opened up.

I'd never actually seen it. Elspeth had told me about it. The front panels were spread wide, giving view of the inside with its shelves and potion bottles, all lined up neatly. A counter jutted out from the side. It was charming. A fantastic idea.

These Moonflowers were certainly quite the businesswomen. Not that I was surprised. They were survivors. Especially Elspeth.

The second thing I noticed was that they were carrying clothes, pots, blankets—it looked like they were... packing .

None of the women seemed to notice my presence... except Elspeth, who had stopped as she emerged from the house, standing there and staring at me.

All the warmth was gone from her eyes, her lips flattened into a thin line. She set her jaw and marched toward me.

“Can I talk to you?” I asked, grabbing her elbow and pulling her aside. “What’s going on?” I gestured to the cottage. “Did you all find another place to live? Is the cottage unsuitable?”

“We’re leaving,” she said.

I scratched my head. “Did you find an apartment in town? What about your garden?” Elspeth didn’t strike me as someone who’d want to live in a small, cramped apartment with her three sisters and mother.

“No.” She shook her head. “You’re not understanding. We’re leaving Thistlegrove. Today. Immediately.”

I stepped back, feeling like she’d just punched me in the gut. “What are you talking about?” She’d never mentioned leaving. In fact, more and more, she’d been talking about the future, making me think that maybe she was finally letting down those walls she’d built up.

“It’s simple,” she said, voice terse. “Our cart is fixed. It’s time to leave.” She turned to go, but I grabbed her arm.

“It’s not simple. What about your soup business? What about Elm?”

What about me?

At the mention of Elm, Adelaide let out a sob behind us. She brought her hand to her mouth, turned, and ran into the cottage, shoulders shaking.

“Did Adelaide tell Elm about this?”

There was no way Elm would let Adelaide leave. He was head over heels in love with that woman. I’d never seen Elm like this. I might’ve had my reservations in the beginning, but now I could see that Elm and Adelaide were meant for each other. If she left, it would destroy him.

I swallowed. If Elspeth left, it would destroy me.

There had to be a reason for this, something Elspeth wasn’t telling me. “What’s really going on? Why are you leaving?”

Elspeth rolled her eyes. “Because this isn’t our home, Draven. It was always just a stopping point.”

“And me?” I asked. “What was I? ”

Elspeth looked away. “Like I said, this was temporary until our cart got fixed. We’re just following the plan.”

“That’s bullshit. Plans change. People change.” I’d changed. Because of her. “You’re the one who told me that.”

She stared me in the eyes, hers so full of fury. Of fear. “No they don’t, Draven. People are all the same. In the end, they don’t do what’s best for others. They do what’s best for themselves. That’s what we’re doing right now. This traveling

apothecary shop is our life. It's our business. It's our entire livelihood. So I'm doing what's best for my family, and I'm leaving. I'm moving on, Draven." She swallowed. "I suggest you do the same."

She turned and marched back toward the cart, throwing in the armful of clothes she'd had. I stood there for a minute staring, then turned and walked back through the forest.

Her words rattled me. I didn't know where to go from here, what to do. Elspeth was leaving. In the distance, I caught sight of a familiar head of black hair.

Fucking hellfire. This was the last thing I needed right now. I stormed forward, ducking under branches and slipping between trees until I caught up to my younger sister.

"Georgie," I said. "What in the fuck are you doing out here?"

Georgie whirled, eyes wide. "Don't be mad."

I shoved a hand through my hair. "You're supposed to be in school right now." Edgar appeared, wings flapping, and I narrowed my gaze at him. "And you're supposed to be watching her. What good are you if you can't even do the one job I'm asking of you?"

Edgar's eyes widened. Georgie stepped in front of him. "What's wrong with you?"

"Oh, I don't know," I said. "Maybe that no matter how much I try, I can't get you to listen. I can't get you to behave. I can't get you to make good choices." The mischievous smile disappeared from her face, and guilt clutched me tight, but I was too agitated, too far gone, to stop myself. "You can't live with me anymore," I said.

Elsbeth was always honest. And she'd told me herself what she really thought: people couldn't change. That meant I couldn't change. I wasn't even enough for Elsbeth to consider staying in Thistlegrave. How could I be enough for my sister? She needed structure. Discipline. She needed more than I could give.

Georgie stepped back. "What are you talking about?"

I swallowed, holding back the tears gathering in the corners of my eyes. "You're going back to the capital with Grandmother."

Georgie's hand covered her mouth. "No. You don't mean that."

"You can't do that." Edgar flitted in front of my face.

I kept a mask over my face, even though it felt like my heart was breaking. "It's what's best for you, Georgie. She'll help you become the witch you were always meant to be."

"I'm already that witch! I don't need Grandmother to help me."

She was too young. She didn't understand. But hopefully she could forgive me one day. Hopefully she could understand why I had to do this.

She surged forward, handing me a crumpled piece of parchment, then she turned and ran.

"Do whatever you need out here," I called after her. "Then get back to the apartment and start packing. Grandmother won't want to stay long."

I uncrumpled the paper, staring at it, reading through the ancient language of Ethorial.

Fucking hellfire.

Georgie had done it. She'd fixed my mug spell. This was it. She'd actually found the solution.

She truly was brilliant. She'd thrive under Grandmother's tutelage.

I slowly turned and walked back toward town, knowing I'd never forget today. It was the day I was losing everything that mattered to me.

Forty

ELSPETH

The cart bumped along the road, Adelaide and I riding in the front like always, while Mama, Prue, and Auggie sat inside.

Emptiness filled me, and I stared blankly ahead as the cold wind whipped around. Right now we should be setting up our soup stand, greeting everyone at the market: Veldar with his scowl. Morty with her knowing smile. All the residents who supported us and our business. Who never questioned the strangers or why we'd appeared in their town. They just welcomed us with open arms. Draven's face flashed in my mind, and I shoved it in the deepest crevice I could. I couldn't think about him right now. It was too hard.

I dashed away a tear as Adelaide sniffled beside me. I looked over at my sister, her eyes puffy, her cheeks red. And she was still absolutely gorgeous.

"What are we doing?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"We were happy, Elspeth." She gestured back toward Thistlegrove Forest, growing farther and farther away in the distance.

"But we weren't safe."

“How do you know that?” Adelaide asked .

My eyes widened. “Witch Superior is coming to Thistlegrove. She’s Draven’s grandmother. If she even got a hint that we’ve been living in the Witchlands illegally?—”

“I know he hurt you,” Adelaide said.

I sniffled. “I don’t care about Johanes.”

“Not Johanes,” she said gently. “Father.”

I stiffened at the mention of him.

“It was hard on all of us when he left. When Grandmama cast that curse, and he suddenly decided to get a new wife, a new family.”

I swallowed. Last I’d heard, he was living on the coast, had two daughters who were his pride and joy. Just like we’d been his pride and joy once, before we lost our magic and he lost interest in us.

“But it was hardest on you.”

Tears rolled down my cheeks at the memory of waking up early in the morning to see Father walking out of our house, carrying a suitcase full of all his clothes. I’d been so confused. When I’d asked him where he was going, he’d said not to worry. He was going on a short trip, but he’d be back soon.

He’d given me a gentle punch to the arm, told me to be brave, and then he was gone. I never saw him again. At first, I’d been in denial. Mama hadn’t seemed surprised. But I was so sure he would return to us. To me.

“I don’t think you’re afraid of Witch Superior, Elspeth,” Adelaide said. “I don’t even think you’re afraid of us having to leave the Witchlands. It wouldn’t be pleasant, but we’d survive. We always do.”

I pawed at the tears. “Then what do you think I’m afraid of?”

Her gaze filled with sympathy. “I think you’re afraid of being hurt again.”

I looked ahead at the dusty road, the breeze swirling the dust in the air. Fields of bright yellow flowers surrounded us on both sides, the mountains far in the distance. We usually headed south this time of year, where the weather was warmer.

“Well, why didn’t you stay, then? Why didn’t you tell Elm the truth if you think all of this is just some misguided fear of mine?”

Adelaide put a hand on my arm. “I don’t think it’s misguided. We are at risk. We could get forced from the only homeland we’ve ever known. But sometimes, I think that risk is worth taking. Elspeth, you’ve done so much for our family. You’ve spent your life protecting us. But you’ve also spent a lot of your life guarding your heart so closely that you don’t let anyone in.”

I swallowed. “I let Johanes in.”

“You never opened up to him. Not truly. You told him your secret eventually, only because Mama talked you into it. But you never let him in, and he never tried to break down your walls. Not like Draven.”

I sucked in a sharp breath at the mention of his name. “What do you even know about me and Draven?”

“You do realize he and Elm are best friends,” Adelaide said. “Apparently, Draven

talks to Elm about you. About how caring you are. About how much he admires the way you lead your family, protect them. About how even Georgie likes you.” Adelaide let out a soft laugh. “Georgie doesn’t even like Elm, so he was a little jealous that you somehow won her over.”

“She’s feisty and headstrong, and I guess maybe that reminds me of someone.”

Adelaide tapped her chin. “I wonder who.”

I shoved her, realizing she spoke the truth. “You’re right,” I admitted. “I am scared. What if Draven finds out our secret and doesn’t want me anymore?”

Just like our father. Just like Johanes.

“He might not,” Adelaide said, and my heart squeezed. “But what if he does? What if he loves you with his entire heart? When he’s talked to Elm about you, he hasn’t mentioned your magic once. He hasn’t even seen it.”

Because it didn’t exist.

“Everything he’s mentioned about you are things that he has seen.” Adelaide put her hand over my chest. “He loves what’s in your heart. And I think you might love him too.”

I gasped. No. I’d only known him for a few months. It had taken nearly a year for me to realize I loved Johanes.

Then again, Draven was nothing like Johanes.

I sniffled. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Yes, you do,” Adelaide said. “You’re just scared to do it.”

“Your sister is right,” Mama called.

I rolled my eyes. “You’re eavesdropping? ”

“More like you’re talking very loudly,” Auggie yelled.

“And I’m trying to read,” Prue said.

Adelaide and I looked at each other and burst out laughing.

“I’m sorry I made you leave Elm like that,” I said.

“You didn’t.” Adelaide looked down at her hands. “I chose to leave because I hoped I could convince you to return before he even found out we were gone. Of course, now that Draven knows, I’m not sure that’ll happen. Hopefully Elm can forgive me.”

“That was a pretty big gamble,” I said through tears.

“Not really,” Auggie said. “Not with the way you stare at Draven like he’s the only man in the entire world.”

I banged on the cart. “Will you mind your own business?”

“Adelaide isn’t the only one that has something going for her in Thistlegrove,” Auggie said. “We all do. Mama has the soup stand that she loves. Prue has a job offer at the bookstore.”

Tears filled my eyes again. “I was just trying to protect us. I’m sorry.”

“Oh, Elspeth. It’s okay,” Mama said. “We know you’re looking out for us. You’re doing what I couldn’t.”

“Mama—” I started.

“No, it’s true. Before your father left, he was the one who took care of us, protected us. That was never my role. And when he decided to abandon his family, I didn’t know how to be the leader you all needed. But you did, Elspeth. You always have, and that’s why we’ll follow you wherever you go.”

“Well, I didn’t want to,” Auggie added. “But Adelaide and Mama made me.”

I thought about Draven, his worries and fears that maybe he wasn’t what was best for Georgie. He was so afraid he’d been selfish bringing her here, that she belonged with her grandmother instead.

Witch Superior. That was it. He constantly thought about whether his actions were selfish or in the best interest of his sister.

I’d never thought about that. Never worried about it.

“I’m being selfish,” I said, the realization hitting me. “I’m letting my own fears guide my decisions, not taking any of you into account.”

“Finally,” Prue mumbled. “Took you long enough to realize it.”

“Can we go back home now?” Auggie said.

Home. Something we hadn’t had in such a long time .

“Home isn’t that cottage,” Adelaide said. “Home is wherever we are. As long as we

go back together, that's what matters." She smiled at me, and I smiled in return.

"Incoming!" a voice called. I looked up at the sky to see Edgar flying toward us, and Georgie riding a broom.

"What in the..." Adelaide trailed off as Georgie landed in front of our cart, and it came to an abrupt halt.

"What is going on out there?" Mama asked.

The back door of the cart creaked open, and Auggie and Mama stumbled out.

"Are you coming or not?" Auggie asked Prue, who was still inside.

"No" came Prue's short response.

"Georgie!" I stood. "What are you doing here?"

"Why did you leave?" Anger flashed in Georgie's eyes.

"It's complicated," I said.

"No it's not. Not when you love someone like you love my brother. Like he loves you."

I stilled. "You think Draven loves me?"

She threw out her arms. "Of course he does. He's obsessed with you."

"It's true," Edgar said. "He's far less grumpy when you're around."

“So why would you leave him? Am I wrong?” She crossed her arms. “Do you not love him?”

Something feral flashed in her eyes. She loved her brother so much. I wished he could see it.

I sighed heavily. “I do, it’s just?—”

“Then that’s all that matters,” Georgie said. “You have to talk some sense into him. He wants me to go live with my grandmother.”

“And you don’t want that?” I asked.

She shook her head. “I just want to live with Draven. I think he’s upset about you leaving, confused, and he’s making a rash decision.”

I squeezed my eyes shut.

“He’s acting unhinged,” Edgar said, landing on the top of our cart and fanning out his wings.

“Georgie, this isn’t going to help,” I said. “You can’t keep running away like this. He’s worried about you. He thinks your grandmother might be a better influence.”

“It wasn’t her idea to chase you,” Edgar said, raising his snout. “It was mine.”

My eyes bugged. “Yours?”

“I think I’m finally having a good influence on him,” Georgie said, the wind whipping her black hair around her shoulders. “Will you come back to Thistlegrove?” she asked. “My brother needs you. You’re the only one who can talk sense into him.”

Mama, Adelaide, and Auggie all looked at me, apprehension in their eyes. Fear clutched my heart tight, but I thought of Draven and the way he made me feel when I was in his arms: so safe, so protected, so cared for. All the things I gave to others—he gave back to me. He wouldn't turn me in to Witch Superior.

“Yes,” I said. “Let's go back to Thistlegrove.”

Everyone broke out into cheers.

Hopefully we could return before Draven realized Georgie was missing. Before Elm realized Adelaide was missing. Before I lost Draven for good.

Forty-One

DRAVEN

I sat in my empty tavern, mug in hand, already on my third round.

“So you’re just going to mope?” a voice said from the doorway.

I looked up to see Elm standing there.

“What else is there to do?” I raised my mug in his direction. “Pull up a seat and join me.”

He scoffed and shook his head. “I have more important things to be doing.”

“Like leaving Thistlegrove?” I asked. “Going back to work with your father?” Elm and his father ran a successful restaurant together, and if I knew his father, he’d be seething over the fact that Elm had been gone so long.

He stepped forward, his large frame taking up so much space. “I’m going after Adelaide. She’s gone. Elspeth is gone. And since you’re here sulking, you must know about it.”

I heaved a sigh. “Adelaide left, Elm. Isn’t that enough of a sign? She doesn’t want you.”

Elm’s jaw ticked, and he ran a hand through his wild curly hair. “Fuck that. ”

My gaze snapped to him. “You can’t force her to be with you. Be realistic, Elm. The Moonflowers were never staying.”

“Then I’ll travel with them.”

I rolled my eyes.

“I’ll follow Adelaide to the ends of the earth.”

“Even if she doesn’t want you to?” I stood. “You’re acting like a fool.”

“No, I’m acting like a man in love. Unlike you, acting like some poor, helpless man who has no power, no control over what happens.”

“I don’t!” I gritted out. “Elspeth chose to leave. I asked her not to, and she didn’t listen. What am I supposed to do?”

“Did you tell her?” Elm crossed his arms.

“Tell her what?” I asked.

“That you love her.”

I swallowed. “Elm?—”

“You do. Even if you haven’t realized it yet. You do love her.”

“Yes,” I said. “But it doesn’t matter.”

“Yes it does.” He surged forward and took me by the arms, giving me a shake. “My biggest regret is not telling Adelaide. My biggest regret was holding back because I

was afraid she didn't feel the same. But I'm not letting her leave without telling her how I feel, without doing everything I can to make her see that she's the one for me."

I stared into his dark brown eyes, swirling with so much emotion, so much determination. I'd never seen Elm this serious about anything. Or anyone.

"If I tell her I love her, that I can't live without her, and she tells me she doesn't feel the same, then I'll let her go. But I'm sure as hellfire going to try. And if you don't try, too, it's going to be the biggest regret of your life. Isn't Elspeth worth fighting for?"

"But why would they just leave like that?"

"I don't know," Elm said. "Adelaide told me they moved around a lot. Never settling in one place." He paused. "I think Elspeth has been hurt in the past."

I stilled. "What?"

Elm let go of my shoulders and stepped back. "Adelaide didn't give me a lot of details. But it sounds like there was a guy who led Elspeth on. Johanes. He made her believe he loved her, then changed his mind, broke her heart. Ever since then, Elspeth has been guarded. When people get too close, she runs."

Fury swept through me. If I ever found the man that hurt her, I didn't know what I'd do. I knew Elspeth was guarded, and I thought maybe it was because of her father. She'd told me he left them. The bastard. But she hadn't told me about this.

"So you think Elspeth got scared?" I asked. "Because of me?"

"Because she loves you, and love is terrifying," Elm said.

She loves you. I didn't dare hope that Elm's words were true, but if they were... if there was even a sliver of a chance that they were true, I had to find out. I owed it to myself. To Elspeth.

The door burst open again. "We're closed," I barked.

"There's a problem," Morty said.

I looked at the witch, her brows pinched. "Make it quick, Morty. I have somewhere to be."

Morty's jaw locked. "Witch Superior is here."

Fuck.

"And Georgie ran away."

My entire body went cold.

"Several townspeople saw her and the dragon fleeing Thistlegrove."

I stepped forward. "When?"

"I just found out, but I think it was over an hour ago."

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

"Where is my grandmother?" I ground out.

"She's at your manor. Servants are attending to her. But she's asking for you and Georgie."

I thought about what I'd said to her in the forest. This was all my fault. "I have to go after my sister."

"I'll help you." Elm clapped my shoulder with his hand. "We'll find Adelaide and Elspeth later."

I swallowed, thinking of Georgie out there all alone. It wasn't safe for a young girl to be traveling by herself. Any number of things could happen to her. I shouldn't have been so harsh, so cruel. Even if our grandmother was a better option to raise Georgie, I could've told her in a gentler way. I'd been so upset about Elspeth, I hadn't been thinking clearly.

I'd well and truly fucked everything up. But now I had to fix it .

I looked at Morty. "Head to the manor and distract my grandmother. She likes you. She always has. I'll find Georgie, and we'll be there as soon as possible."

Hopefully by the time I could find Elspeth, it wouldn't be too late. I ran for the door, grabbing the handle and swinging it open, coming face-to-face with Elspeth Moonflower.

Forty-Two

ELSPETH

I stared into Draven's light green eyes, wild with worry. My gaze drifted to the cloak draped around his shoulders, then the sign that hung right outside the door : "Tavern Closed Until Further Notice."

"Where are you going?" I asked, stomach twisting.

He shoved a hand through his hair. "I was going to find you, but then I realized Georgie is missing, and I have to go get her. I fucked up, Elspeth."

"No." I shook my head. "Georgie is safe. She's with my family at the cottage."

He breathed out a sigh of relief, then his brows furrowed. "Wait. What are you doing here?"

"You have one smart sister," I said. "She and Edgar came after us, told us we have to come back, talk sense into her brother."

A guilty look crossed Draven's face, and he squeezed his eyes shut. "I was going to send her away with my grandmother."

"Witch Superior," I said.

His eyes flashed in surprise.

I hesitated but pushed past the fear. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

He huffed. “Because I’m ashamed of her. ”

The answer surprised me.

“She’s not a good leader, even if everyone is too afraid to admit it. Too afraid to stand up to her. I didn’t want you to think less of me.”

I’d been such an idiot.

He lifted a hand to caress my cheek. “I’m sorry.”

“There’s nothing to apologize for. But you do need to talk to Georgie.”

“I know,” he said quickly. “So she’s why you came back? She convinced you?”

“Actually, you did.” I nudged my head toward a table. “Can we talk?”

He nodded, and I walked in, warmth surrounding me from the fire crackling in the stone hearth. I stopped when I saw Elm.

His eyes brightened with hope.

“She’s at the cottage,” I said.

He didn’t hesitate, striding past me and toward the door.

“Elm?” I said.

He stopped and turned.

“It’s not her fault. That we left. She was only trying to convince me to come back here. She was never going to leave you.”

His face betrayed no emotion, then he turned and left, the door clicking closed behind him.

Draven pulled out a chair at one of the tables that sat by the fire, and I slid into it. He took a seat on the other side.

“How did I convince you to come back?” Draven asked.

“Because I realized all this time you’ve been so worried you’re not good enough for Georgie.”

He winced, and I reached out, laying my hand over his.

“But that’s exactly why you’re what she needs.”

His brows raised, a confused look on his face.

“You are constantly thinking of Georgie, thinking about what’s best for her, what she needs. That’s what a good parent or big brother or big sister does. They look out for those they love.”

“I’m starting to realize that,” he said. “I think I need to just ask Georgie what she wants. No one has ever done that. Not my parents. Not my grandmother. I don’t want to make decisions for her anymore, not without her voice being heard. ”

I smiled, proud of Draven, proud of how he came to this realization on his own.

“I didn’t ask my sisters and mama if they wanted to leave Thistlegrave.” I swallowed

the thick knot in my throat. “I was only thinking of myself, of my fears.”

“So they didn’t want to leave?” He shook his head slowly, and I knew he didn’t understand. He couldn’t. Not until I told him the full truth.

I took a deep breath as Draven leaned back in his chair. “I don’t have any magic. Neither do my sisters.”

Draven didn’t speak, his face not betraying any emotions at my revelation.

“We were cursed.” I twisted my fingers together. “By my grandmama. It was an accident. She meant to bless us before she died, but in her old age, she got confused and mixed up the words, and instead of blessing us, she left us with a curse. That’s why my father left.”

Draven’s eyes flashed.

“I was so naive. I thought he left to find a way to break the curse. I was convinced he was coming back. I’d stare out the window every day, watching for him. Waiting. Eventually I grew up and realized he was never returning. We tried to break the curse ourselves.” I started speaking faster, my anxiety growing. “Searched for spell after spell after spell. We couldn’t afford to hire a cursebreaker. Then I met Johanes. I fell in love with him, decided to tell him the truth.” My voice grew wobbly. “Instead of understanding, he turned on me, tipped off the magistrates that we were illegally living in the Witchlands when we didn’t have magic. He got a nice reward. Luckily I found out because I caught him speaking with them. We immediately left the only home we’d ever known. And we’ve been traveling ever since, moving from place to place so no one will grow suspicious of the four witches who don’t use magic.”

Draven stayed motionless.

I squirmed in my chair. "Please say something."

He stood and walked over to me, then knelt in front of me, taking my hands in his. "I'm so sorry that happened to you."

I choked out a sob. "When I found out Witch Superior is your grandmother, I got scared. It reminded me of my father and Johanes all over again. I survived both of them leaving me, betraying me." My voice broke. "But I don't think I could survive you doing that. So I left before you could reject me." He rose up and gathered me in a hug as I sobbed into his shoulder. "But now I'm afraid I've ruined everything."

He pushed me at arm's length. "Elspeth, I was prepared to chase after you. I was going to follow you to every corner of this realm if that's what it took to get you back. I wasn't going to work. To eat. To sleep until I turned over every damn rock on the continent and found you."

"You were?" I laughed and wiped at my tears.

"Well, at first I was going to drink myself into oblivion. But then Elm talked some sense into me. Made me realize how much I love you. That I can't live without you."

The words knocked the air out of me. "Even after everything I told you?"

His eyebrows drew together. "You think I care about some stupid curse? I can survive you being cursed. What I can't survive is a life without you. I love you, Elspeth."

I didn't even realize how much I wanted to hear those words until he said them. My heart swelled. "Well it's a good thing I love you too, then."

His lips tipped up, and he pressed his forehead to mine.

“There’s something else,” I said.

He reared back. “Something else? More than what you’ve already revealed?”

“There is a way to break the curse. Each of us must marry, and we’ll get our magic.” I hated the way it sounded. “But I’m not expecting a marriage proposal from you. I want to take our time and get to know each other. If I wanted to marry, I would’ve done so already. We all would have.”

“So you don’t want to get married?”

“To the right person.” I gave a small shrug. “But I want to model that for Prue and Auggie. I want to show them real love. I want to show them that it’s worth waiting for.”

He wrapped his arms around me, and I stood with him.

“And you think that’s what you’ve found? With me? Real love?”

I gave him a watery smile. “I think so, Mr. Darkstone. ”

His gaze turned feral. “My sister is safe?” he asked. “You’re sure she’s at your cottage?”

“Yes,” I answered quickly. “She’s with my sisters and Edgar. They’re okay.” I hesitated. “Why?”

He leaned down and pressed a deep, searing kiss to my mouth. “That means I can do this.” He gripped my hips and lifted me onto the table, and I spread my legs as he wedged between them.

“Here? In your tavern?”

“Oh yes, my tavern will do just fine.”

He pushed me down onto the table, and heat flooded through me.

He kissed my neck, and I laughed. “Your apartment is just upstairs.”

“I can’t wait that long.” His hard length pressed between my legs as he hiked up the skirts of my dress.

“You know.” I sat up, and he growled. “You’re very pushy.”

He bared his teeth at me. “Are we doing this right now?”

I gave a half shrug, hiking up my skirts a little farther to reveal my thighs. He took a measured breath.

“I just think you have a bit more groveling to do.”

“I thought you said I had nothing to apologize for.”

I trailed a finger down his chest. “I guess I changed my mind.”

“You want me to grovel?” He grabbed my panties and shoved them down to my ankles. “Elsbeth, I can grovel.” He swiped a finger down my center, and I gasped, throwing my head back as his finger worked quick circles around that sensitive spot. “Please forgive me.” He plunged a finger inside of me, making me moan, and pumped it in and out. “I will never, ever let you leave again.” He added another finger. “You are mine, Elsbeth. And I am yours.” His thumb brushed over my clit while his fingers hit a sensitive spot inside of me. “Wholly.”

My legs quivered, pleasure and heat mingling in my core.

“Completely.”

I clutched the edges of the table, rocking my pelvis up.

“Forever.” He stood back, undoing the belt on his trousers. “Now be a good girl and get on your knees.”

I thought about arguing, about teasing him just a little more, but then he let his cock loose, and I needed to feel it inside of me. I got up onto my knees on the table, back facing him.

He came up behind me and grabbed my skirts, lifting them and tracing his hands over the curve of my hips, my butt, my legs. He spread me wide and then thrust inside of me, both of us moaning.

Then he spent the rest of the afternoon showing me exactly how much he meant those words.

I sat with Draven at the bar, frowning at the cup of water in front of me.

“What’s wrong?” He leaned over and kissed my shoulder.

I turned to him. “How are you going to keep this from your grandmother? Are you comfortable lying to her?”

He grabbed the mug of ale in front of him and took a swig. “I don’t give a flying fuck about my grandmother. She’s implemented some of the harshest laws out of any Witch Superior in the last three centuries. She thinks it makes her formidable, but it just makes everyone fear her. It makes her alienated from other realms. The harsh

laws she passes don't make her strong. They make her weak. They make all of us weak."

I stared at him. "So that's a yes?"

He leaned forward and kissed me. "I'd do anything for you. I will never let her take you or your sisters from your home."

"I just wish there was a way to break this curse without forcing all of us to get married."

"There might be." He steepled his fingers together. "There's something you should know about me."

I steeled myself, not sure I wanted to hear what he was about to say.

"It wasn't just my parents who were cursebreakers. I was one too. And I think I may be able to help you break your curse."

Forty-Three

ELSPETH

I paced back and forth in my cottage as Draven leaned over a piece of parchment and scribbled across it. He'd been at this for three hours. The first hour, he'd moved his hands over me, saying words I hadn't recognized as he drew out a golden light from me. The curse, he'd said. The light had gathered into a ball with all kinds of symbols and words on them. Draven had grabbed the ball of light and set it on the counter. It was the makeup of our curse, he'd told us. All the pieces and parts of it that he'd have to untangle to undo it. I'd never seen anything like this. Had never seen a cursebreaker in action. It was fascinating.

After that, he'd hunched over the little island in our kitchen, muttering to himself the entire time, wholly focused on his task.

Cursebreakers were some of the most powerful witches. It required immense skill to be able to break a curse because unlike other witches, cursebreakers had to be able to think on the spot. They often didn't have time to prepare elaborate spells or do trial and error. It made sense now how Draven had been able to so easily get me out of the mud. He'd had practice performing spells in dangerous situations where lives were on the line .

One day, I'd ask him to tell me some of his stories, but for now, I just wanted to know if he could do it. If he could break the curse.

"Don't worry," Georgie said. "He's the best."

Prue sat on the couch, and Mama paced back and forth, gaze darting to Draven every once in a while. Elm and Adelaide hadn't been here when we'd arrived, and I was guessing they were somewhere making up, much like Draven and I had at his tavern. Auggie was gone, as usual, but I had no idea where she was. She'd just said she had something to check on.

"Oh, I can't watch this anymore." Edgar curled his wings around his eyes. "It's too nerve-racking."

"Do you need to take a walk?" Georgie asked.

Draven's head snapped up, his eyes flashing.

Georgie raised her hands. "I promise I'm not running away. We're just getting a little fresh air."

He didn't respond at first, just staring at his sister, assessing. "Fine," he said. "But don't be gone too long."

Georgie swallowed and nodded. She and Edgar left the cottage, door clicking closed behind them.

Draven straightened.

"What?" I asked. "Did you figure it out?"

"No," he said, frowning at the parchment. "I'm not sure this curse can be broken. When your grandmother cast it with her final words, she bound it to her death."

My heart sank as he spoke.

He tapped the quill he was using on the counter. “Which means as long as she stays dead, the curse cannot be broken.” He straightened. “I’m so sorry, Elspeth.” His gaze moved to my sisters and Mama. “I’m sorry to all of you.”

Mama’s shoulders sank right as the door burst open, Auggie marching in, her face pale and her eyes wide.

“I think I’ve done something bad,” she said, worrying at her bottom lip.

Draven came to stand beside me, kissing my forehead and resting his arm around my waist.

“You’re going to have to be more specific than that.” Prue peered at Auggie over the top of her book.

“I’ve been working with Helena,” she burst out.

Draven stiffened.

“Working with Helena?” I asked. “But Helena manages famous people. You’re not famous.”

“Helena discovers talent,” Auggie snapped back.

Draven stood still as a stone next to me, his gaze focused on Auggie. Fear flashed in his eyes.

“So what’s your talent?” Prue asked.

Auggie shot her a withering look. “Helena said I was beautiful, that I had a great sense of fashion. That she could see me as a model. Someone who showed off the

latest trends from top designers.”

My stomach curled.

“Well, that sounds wonderful.” Mama clapped her hands together. “My daughter. A model!”

Something wasn’t right.

Draven stepped forward. “What did she make you reveal?”

I looked between Draven and Auggie. “What does that mean? Reveal what? What does that have to do with being a model?”

Draven sighed, staring at Auggie. “Are you going to tell her, or am I?”

“What’s going on?” Mama threw up her hands.

“She requires a secret,” Auggie said, her normally confident voice now small and quiet. “It’s insurance. Binding. Something she asks for to make sure her clients uphold their end of the contract when it comes to performances, duties, giving Helena her fair cut. I thought it sounded reasonable, but I’d been holding out on the secret,” she said. “Because there was only one secret I could think of that would be good enough for Helena to accept.”

My stomach dropped like a stone to the floor. “No. Auggie, you didn’t.”

“When we came back here, I went to Helena right away. Told her I was ready to sign with her, reveal my secret.” She sniffled. “I told her we don’t have magic.”

Mama gasped, and Prue dropped her book to the floor. I stumbled back into Draven’s

chest, and he wrapped his arms around me.

“The contract is binding,” Auggie said. “Helena told me she can’t reveal the secret unless we are in breach of contract.”

“How are you in breach of contract?” I asked. “You just told her the secret.”

“The secret is the breach.” Auggie’s voice shook. “After I revealed the truth, Helena told me that unfortunately not having my magic means I can’t be a model, not when I’m living here illegally.”

My mouth dropped open. “That sounds like a scam.”

“It is,” Georgie said from the doorway, Edgar perched on her shoulder. “I know because Helena did the same thing to me.”

“Georgie.” Draven stepped forward. “You don’t have to do this.”

“It’s okay,” Georgie said. “They can know.”

“Know what? What did Helena do to you?” I asked.

Georgie brushed past me and sat on the couch, taking a deep breath. “After my parents died, I went to live with my grandmother for a short amount of time. Helena was frequently at Grandmother’s house, spending time with me, making me believe I had a friend. I didn’t always get along with Grandmother, and I frustrated her a lot.”

“Why?” I asked, not understanding.

“Because she wants me to be her heir, the next Witch Superior. But that’s not what I want for myself. I don’t want to be the leader of the Witchlands. All that

responsibility, the work, it's not for me. Grandmother wanted me to start training for the Witch Trials."

The trials where the most powerful witches in the land came together and competed to decide who would be Witch Superior after our current leader stepped down. Those who wanted to participate often spent decades training for the trials, not even knowing when the trials would be invoked.

"It got to the point where Grandmother and I were barely speaking because I wasn't ready to train, to take on this big responsibility, especially not after I'd just lost my parents."

I nodded. Poor Georgie. That had to be so hard.

"Helena understood. I could talk to her, and she'd listen. She was so warm, so friendly. She stepped into a role that had been missing since my mother died." Georgie's eyes filled with tears. "She made me believe she cared about me. That she loved me. It happened slowly, over the course of a few months. Helena would mention the Witch Trials, would talk to me about being Witch Superior, about the good I could do. She preyed on what she knew about me, on what I was passionate about: saving creatures. She'd almost convinced me to do it."

Georgie sniffled.

"Then I overheard her and my grandmother talking. The entire thing had been a ruse, my grandmother bringing Helena in to do what she couldn't." Tears ran down Georgie's cheeks. "It felt like I was losing my parents all over again."

Draven's jaw locked, his eyes squeezed shut.

"But why would your grandmother bring in a talent manager?" Prue took her

spectacles off and cleaned them with the skirt of her dress, then perched them back on her nose.

“Because she’s not a talent manager,” Draven said. “That’s her cover.”

“She’s a magistrate,” Georgie said, and my entire body went cold.

“But she’s a vampire.” My brain couldn’t make sense of this.

“It’s something Grandmother is doing to help with peace talks with the other realms,” Draven said. “She’s bringing in other species, giving them positions of power as a show of good faith. Helena is very good at knowing when others are keeping secrets. As a vampire, she can sense heart rate, breathing rate, pulse. So if she thinks you have a secret, she’ll latch onto you. That’s why she makes an excellent magistrate.”

I swallowed, remembering our first meeting at the market, how anxious I’d been when I thought she noticed we didn’t have our wands. She must have picked up on that, then chosen Auggie as her target to find out what was making me so nervous. I gasped. That was why she’d lied to me about Draven, told me to stay away from him. She didn’t want me learning her true identity before she discovered our secret and fed it to Witch Superior.

This couldn’t be happening.

“If I’d known,” Draven said, “I would’ve warned you.”

“Nobody knew,” Auggie said, looking so small, no longer my larger-than-life sister. “I wanted to surprise everyone with my contract. But Helena never actually thought I was talented. She never actually believed in me. She was working me the whole time, hoping I’d reveal a secret that she could take back to Witch Superior.”

Tears dripped down her cheeks, and my heart broke for her.

“Well, we have no choice.” Mama’s voice wobbled. “We leave immediately. We’ll leave the Witchlands. It won’t be easy, but it’ll be better than staying here and waiting for Witch Superior to arrest all of us for breaking the law.”

Draven’s head dropped.

I looked out the window, spotting Adelaide and Elm walking hand-in-hand. They could get married, and Adelaide could be safe. Or maybe not since she’d still engaged in illegal activity. But I also didn’t want her and Elm’s love story to start that way: with a forced marriage. I wanted them to get married on their own terms, when they wanted. I wanted Prue to get that job at the bookstore. I wanted Auggie to regain her confidence. I wanted to stay here. With Draven.

“No,” I said, voice hard.

Everyone’s heads snapped in my direction. “We’re not running anymore. We’re not living in fear. We’re going to speak with Witch Superior. I’m going to.”

Mama’s face paled. “Elsbeth, you can’t.”

“I can.” I raised my chin. “Because this life we’ve built in Thistlegrove is worth fighting for. I’m sick of running. I’m sick of making you all run. It’s time to take a stand.” I looked at Draven. “Take me to your grandmother.”

“You don’t have to.” Georgie pointed a shaky finger out the window. “She’s already here.”

Forty-Four

ELSPETH

E dgar squeaked and dove behind the couch. “She looks terrifying. Why does she look so terrifying?”

She was a formidable woman, even though she was small. She wore all black, a tall witch hat perched on her head. Her shoulders were back, her chin raised, her ancient face lined with wrinkles. Yet her green eyes were piercing and hard, her gaze cutting as she set it upon our cottage, marching straight toward us.

I swallowed, and Draven grabbed my hand. “You don’t have to do this.”

I squeezed his hand, then untangled mine from it. “Yes I do.”

Witch Superior raised out her hand, her mouth moving as she said something. Our door burst open, and she stalked up to it. Right when she reached the threshold, it slammed in her face.

We all froze. Oh no. The cottage. It was being, well, its normal self.

“What is the meaning of this?” Witch Superior demanded. Once again the cottage door swung open, and once again it slammed in her face. “Open this door right now.”

I squeezed my eyes shut .

“I think the cottage is trying to protect us,” Prue said, gaze shifting back and forth.

“I think she’s right.” Draven stepped forward. “It might be a grumpy old cottage, but once it accepts its new owners, it will stop at nothing to protect you.”

Outside, vines snaked from the side of the cottage and toward Witch Superior, wrapping around her.

She scoffed, her arms pinned to her sides. “Unhand me. Why, I never...”

A smile lit up Georgie’s face. “This is amazing.”

“Oh my word.” Mama rushed toward the door, opening it. “Welcome.” She spread out her arms, and Witch Superior glared at her, vines wrapped around her body and holding her in the air.

“This is an outrage.” Her face turned a bright shade of red.

Mama chuckled nervously. “That’s enough, Cottage.” There was an edge to her voice. “You can let her go.”

The vines didn’t budge.

“Now,” Mama said.

The cottage rumbled, but the vines slowly unwrapped from Witch Superior’s body.

She huffed, then marched inside. Her gaze swept over Draven and landed on Georgie. “So this is where you’ve been hiding? Unable to come see your own grandmother?”

Her face was severe, and I saw some of Draven in it. But while Draven’s face could

be serious, it wasn't unkind or lacking humanity, not like Witch Superior's.

She turned. "And I assume you are the witches who have been living in my realm illegally. I assume you know that in order to be a resident in the Witchlands, you must have magic?"

Mama came forward and hugged Auggie to her, and I stepped in front of all of them. "We are no less witches because we don't have our magic. We were cursed by my grandmother, an accident."

"And why didn't you come forward?" Witch Superior's gaze snapped to me.

"Because you've created a realm where everyone lives in fear of your laws, where witches don't trust each other." I shot a look at Georgie. "Where your own granddaughter is afraid of you. "

Witch Superior's eyes flashed. "Do not dare speak to me about my granddaughter."

I'd hit a nerve. I stepped forward, shedding the fear that surrounded me. I could do this. I could be brave. I could stand my ground. "Well, now you know why we didn't come forward."

"It's not an excuse," Witch Superior snapped.

"So punish me," I said. "It was my idea. My sisters, my mama, wanted to come forward several times over the years. I convinced them not to."

"Elspeth, no," Mama said, reaching for me.

I ignored her, keeping my gaze locked on Witch Superior. "It's my fault. I take full responsibility."

“The punishment for living in the Witchlands illegally and keeping curses a secret from your leader is one year in prison for every year the secret has been kept.”

I stiffened. That would be twelve years locked in the Dearthsten Prisons.

“No.” Draven stepped in front of me. “I won’t let you take her.”

Witch Superior tilted her head. “Ah, yes. The other disappointment in my family. You were one of our best cursebreakers, and you gave up all that power to come live here in this no-name village. What do you care about some magicless witch?”

Draven’s lip curled. “That magicless witch has done more for the Witchlands than you ever have.”

“You love her.” Witch Superior scoffed. “How utterly disappointing. No grandson of mine will be associated with such an embarrassment.”

Draven surged forward, and I grasped his arm to keep him from doing something he’d regret. “Don’t ever speak about her that way again.”

Mama whimpered from behind us.

“Well, it doesn’t matter.” Witch Superior waved her hand. “She admitted to breaking the law. Now she must pay.”

Voices erupted outside the window, and I looked to see Veldar marching toward our cottage, followed by Morty and—practically the entire town of Thistlegrove .

“What now?” Witch Superior rubbed her temples. “Who are all these people?”

“The residents of Thistlegrove,” Draven murmured.

Edgar peeked his head up over the couch. “Oh, look at that.”

Witch Superior ground her teeth together, then spun on her heel and marched outside. We all shot each other uneasy looks but followed, emerging in front of the cottage.

“You can’t take away our soup!” Veldar jabbed his cane at Witch Superior.

“Who are you?” she asked, lip curling in disgust.

“I’m old enough to be your father,” Veldar shot back.

Morty stepped forward, elbowing him. “I think what Veldar means is that you can’t arrest the Moonflowers. We already chased your spy away.”

Helena. The townspeople . . . chased her away?

Veldar smacked his cane in his hand, a smug look on his face. “She won’t be coming back any time soon.”

Witch Superior looked back at me, then at the crowd, who was murmuring in agreement. A few of them shifted from foot to foot, looking uneasy, but they stood their ground under Witch Superior’s assessing gaze.

“And why can’t I arrest the Moonflowers?”

Morty crossed her arms. “Because they’re residents of Thistlegrave, and we protect our own.”

My heart warmed. Draven mentioned that Morty was at the manor with his grandmother. She must’ve been there when Helena arrived and revealed our secret. She must’ve rallied the town. All of that. For us.

Witch Superior scoffed. “Unfortunately for you that won’t stand in the court of witches.”

“Then change the law,” Veldar demanded.

“He must really love that soup,” Edgar murmured behind me.

“No,” Witch Superior said, and my heart sank.

Morty raised her chin. “Then we’ll invoke the Witch Trials early.”

Witch Superior stilled. I gasped.

If enough residents deemed Witch Superior unfit to rule, they could invoke the trials early so a new Witch Superior could reign.

“Your entire legacy as Witch Superior would be a disgrace,” Morty said. “Your reputation ruined. Everything you’ve worked for: forgotten.”

It was a great dishonor for the Witch Trials to be invoked early, and though it had happened very few times in history, Morty was right. It had ruined the legacies of the Witch Superiors whom it had happened to.

“You care this much about some magicless witches,” Witch Superior snarled.

“Yes, we do.” Morty crossed her arms.

“We like their soup!” Veldar added.

“Okay, Veldar, we get it,” Morty said out the side of her mouth.

Veldar's head dropped. "It's not just about the soup," he said, voice gruff.

I froze. Everyone did, all eyes on him.

"My husband died twenty years ago," he said. "He made me soup. It was a small thing. But it started when we first met and I was sick. He brought me tomato basil." He looked up, locking eyes with me. "It was my favorite. Then he started making more. We'd sit on our front porch and enjoy it together while listening to the sounds of the forest, while talking. He was better at the talking part than I was."

My eyes welled with tears.

"So it's not just about the soup," Veldar said again. "It's a piece of him that you've given me. It's community." He cleared his throat, his gaze moving to Witch Superior. "And I won't let you take that away from me. From us."

Everyone nodded in agreement. I'd never realized soup could be so powerful.

Witch Superior's jaw locked, and she seemed to be thinking through her options. Finally, she huffed. "Fine. I don't care enough about you Moonflowers to pursue this. I'll pardon you."

The residents broke out in cheers as I stood there, mouth agape. Mama squealed and clapped her hands. Draven swung me up into his arms while I remained limp, so in shock I still couldn't process what had just happened. Auggie and Prue hugged and jumped up and down.

Witch Superior turned to look at us. "Well?" she asked Georgie.

Georgie stepped back. "Well, what? "

“You’re coming with me,” she said. “That’s why I came here. To collect you.”

Georgie shot a panicked look at Draven, who set me down and stepped forward. “It’s your choice. I’m your guardian by law, but if you want to leave with her, you can.”

Georgie threw her arms around his neck. “I want to stay with you.” She let go of him. “But I want you to include me in things. I want to help you with your spells. I want to be part of your life.”

Draven nodded, and my eyes welled with tears. “I want that too.”

“You’re all pathetic.” Witch Superior spun on her heel and shoved through the crowd, everyone parting for her as she disappeared into the forest.

Everyone once again broke out in cheers, and I watched through teary eyes. This really had become our home, our community, and I made a promise to myself that I would never run again.

Forty-Five

DRAVEN

I stared doubtfully through the window of Arcane Creatures Emporium—Georgie on one side of me, and Elspeth on the other.

“Are you sure about this?” I asked Elspeth. “You know he’s a pain.”

Georgie elbowed me in the ribs. “No he’s not! He’s the best gift you’ve ever gotten me.”

“Really?” I crossed my arms. “Because just two months ago, you were dodging him at every turn and telling me you were sick of how scared he was of everything.”

Georgie raised her nose. “That’s before I knew that bravery comes in different forms. Edgar stood up for me when it truly counted.” She leaned over me to look at Elspeth. “I fully support this decision.”

I raised my hands. “I can see I’m outnumbered.”

Georgie stuck out her tongue, then opened the door and walked inside. A griffin immediately greeted her, flying through the air and licking her face, making Georgie giggle.

“You’re sure you’ve thought this through?” I asked Elspeth.

“For the thousandth time, yes.” She rolled her eyes. “You know, if I didn’t know any better, I’d say you want all those dragons for yourself. And that’s why you don’t want me to adopt them for my sisters. ”

I looked through the window at the three miniature dragons sitting on the shelves. Edgar’s other siblings.

“And I think you just like to argue with me.”

She raised a brow. “Where did you get an idea like that?”

“Well, I said that I thought your sisters might like to have some familiars, that maybe it would make them feel more a part of the witch community. Then the next morning you woke up and decided you wanted to adopt three dragons.”

She crossed her arms. “How is that me arguing? I was just taking your idea and running with it.”

“Dragons are not familiars. I was thinking of something more like a cat or an owl or a fox. Maybe even one of the talking plants. Not a dragon.”

“Now who’s arguing?” Elspeth smiled at me sweetly. She pointed at one of the dragons. “That one is apparently very outspoken. I think she’d be perfect for Adelaide.” She pointed at another one. “And that one is an extrovert. Loves socializing and making friends, which is exactly what Prue needs.”

I frowned. “Uh huh. And what about the last one?”

She peered at it. “That one is more of an enigma. I think she’s quieter, more introspective but very wise. I think that’s what Auggie needs right now. Three dragons for three witches.”

“Well, it sounds like you’ve got it all figured out.”

“I know.” She pressed a quick kiss to my cheek. “Now let’s go get some dragons.” She opened the door and marched inside, and I heaved a sigh and followed.

Georgie ran to Elspeth, grabbing her hands and pulling her toward a few cats that kept appearing and disappearing.

They’d become fast friends, something I’d fully expected, but I loved watching their relationship unfold, loved watching Georgie mature and open up. Even better, Georgie had been helping me more on spells for the tavern, and I’d been going on adventures with her. We’d made a deal. Every afternoon, Edgar and Elspeth would take over the tavern so we could spend time together—but only if Georgie went to school. If she skipped school, then instead of going on an adventure or working on new spells together, she’d be doing schoolwork at the bar while I tended to the tavern

So far we hadn’t had a single day of her missing school.

A boy appeared from between the aisles. “Hey Georgie!”

I frowned at the skinny kid, around Georgie’s age and eyeing her with a little too much interest.

“Hi Grimm.” Georgie waved, and Grimm gestured toward some glass cages at the other end of the store. “Have you seen the rainbow snakes? They can fly. Wanna see?” Georgie followed him.

“Looks like your sister has made a friend.” Elspeth threaded her arm through mine as I scowled at Georgie and the boy. Elspeth laughed. “I thought you wanted her to make friends.”

“Yes, friends. Not boy friends.”

Grimm put his hand on Georgie’s arm.

“I’m going to hex him,” I said, and Elspeth grabbed me and pulled me into one of the many aisles of the store.

“You’ll do no such thing, Mr. Darkstone.” She pressed me against a shelf, and all thoughts of Grimm disappeared.

“Why? Are you going to distract me?”

She trailed a finger down my chest, and I shivered under her touch, reveling in it.

“Maybe. Why? Is this distracting?” She stood on her tiptoes and pressed a kiss to my mouth while her hand slid up my inner thigh.

“Elspeth, don’t start something you’re not ready to finish,” I warned.

She stood back, laughter dancing in her eyes.

“You’re going to pay for that later.”

“I look forward to it.”

I swung an arm around her shoulders. “What else are you looking forward to?”

Her brows pinched together. “What do you mean?”

“About your future?”

“That’s easy.” She turned to me. “I’m looking forward to having a place to call home.

To watching my sisters thrive. To seeing you every day. And, hopefully, one day getting my magic back.”

She didn’t realize it, but if I had my way, she’d be getting it back sooner than later. I’d marry Elspeth tomorrow if I could, but I didn’t want to pressure her. Still, I wouldn’t be able to wait too long. Georgie and I were working on a proposal plan, and I’d ask her soon—once I got permission from her mother and sisters.

“And what about once you do have your magic? Do you still think you want to be a healer?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said, her face breaking out into a smile that melted my heart. “I want to apprentice for the village healer. Learn everything I can from him and then... open my own shop, maybe?”

“It sounds perfect.” I wrapped her in my arms.

She snuggled in. “I know.”

“You’re very arrogant, Ms. Moonflower.”

“I’m not arrogant. I just know that I’m right. I’m always right.”

“And what else have you been right about?”

She drew back, her smile rueful. “I was right about you.”

I gave her a look of disbelief. “You thought I was an arrogant prick when we first met.”

“No.” She shook her head. “I thought you were different from anyone I’d ever met. I

was scared because you had this way of disarming me, making me drop the walls I built around myself. I thought that if I spent too much time with you, you'd break them down completely."

She'd never told me that before.

"And I was right," she said. "You changed my life, Draven. You changed me."

"We changed each other," I said. "In all the best ways."

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:22 am

ELSPETH, ONE YEAR LATER

“ Give her space, give her space!” Mama yelled, shoos everyone back as we gathered around the little hearth in our cottage, our family grimoire propped up on a stand next to it.

Even though I’d moved into Draven’s manor with him, Georgie, and Edgar, I still made it here weekly for family dinners—and moon ball.

I took a deep breath as Draven grabbed my hand and gave it a squeeze. “You can do this. You’ve been training and working hard.”

I stared at the spell book in front of me, the one that Mama had kept all these years, waiting until one of us finally got our magic and could use some of the spells in it. Spells passed down from generations of Moonflowers. Now that Draven and I were married, my magic returned, it was time.

I wanted to make sure I was ready, and maybe I was also just a little scared. Yes, I practiced magic for eighteen years before the curse, but after twelve years without it, I was rusty. I didn’t want to accidentally turn my family into toads or something, though Draven assured me that wouldn’t happen .

“This is so anticlimactic.” Auggie stared at her nails. “Can we hurry this along?”

Ever since the incident with Helena, Auggie had been a little more, well, Auggie than usual. Angry, sarcastic, snippy. Helena had stripped my younger sister of all her confidence, all her vigor for life, and I was still trying to find ways to bring it back.

“And I have my shift at the bookshop,” Prue said. She was doing well, at least, working her dream job at the bookshop. She’d shown no interest in relationships or magic, not when she had everything she wanted already.

“You can do this, Elspeth,” Adelaide said, Elm noticeably absent from her side.

I still hadn’t forgiven him for how he broke her heart, and I suspected I never would, even if he was Draven’s best friend.

Adelaide smiled, but I could see the pain behind it. I just wanted her to be as happy as I was, and hopefully she would be able to move on soon, but I didn’t see that happening, not even when she put on such a brave face for everyone else. Adelaide might be able to fool Mama and my sisters into thinking she was fine, but I knew my sister, and she was suffering, no matter how much she claimed she wasn’t.

Another problem for another day.

I looked at the spell book.

“Well?” Mama asked. “Which spell are you going to perform?”

I picked up my wand, tingles shooting through my arm as my magic came to life. A feeling I’d missed. “I think I found the one.” I pointed my wand to it.

Mama leaned over my shoulder, staring at it. “That one?” she asked.

I nodded. “It’s perfect.”

Auggie planted her hands on her hips. “Well, don’t keep us in suspense.”

I spoke the ancient language of Ethorial, magic glowing brightly from the end of my

wand, a thin golden line emerging. The line twisted around, spinning and spinning over us.

“What is it?” Prue asked.

The line formed a rectangle, wood planks forming inside of it. Then the magic scribbled across the board, spelling out our name: Moonflower .

The board dropped to the floor with a thud, the magic glow gone, the spell done.

Auggie wrinkled her nose. “Moonflower? You spelled our name?”

Prue shrugged. “Well, at least we know she can spell.”

Mama threw her arms around me. “Oh, your first spell since the curse. I’m so proud of you!”

Adelaide gave me a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “I’m happy for you, Elspeth.”

Prue beamed. “Congratulations, big sister.”

Mama shot Auggie a look.

“Fine.” Auggie threw up her hands. “Group hug?”

Everyone gathered in, Draven stepping back to let us have our moment.

We squeezed together, hugging each other tight.

“Okay, but seriously, what is that?” Auggie asked, face smooshed against mine.

“It’s a sign for our home,” I said. “Everyone’s cottages have their names on it. It’s time ours did too.”

Mama, Prue, Adelaide, and Auggie stepped back, staring at it.

“The letters are a little crooked,” Prue pointed out with a smile. “But I think it’s perfect.”

We formed a line, all of us with linked arms, staring at our last name on this little board that we’d nail to the cottage—if it would let us. It was still a grumpy house, but it was our grumpy house. I’d forced Draven to let us buy it from him. He’d tried to refuse, but I could be very persuasive when I wanted to be. It was ours in every way.

The cottage rumbled in approval.

“It likes it!” Auggie tilted her head. “I have to say, I didn’t see that coming.”

“Because it accepted us,” I said. “And now this shows that we accept it back.”

“I love it,” Mama said, voice shaking.

“Oh, don’t cry. If you cry, I’ll cry,” Adelaide said, eyes already dampening.

“I don’t want to cry!” Prue looked at the book clutched in her hand. “This is a special edition. I can’t get it wet.”

“Let’s just all agree not to cry,” I said, leaning my head on Mama’s .

Maybe things weren’t perfect. Maybe they never would be. But through it all, one thing gave me peace: I had my family by my side, and that would never change.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:22 am

“I’m not going to cry. I’m not going to cry.” Mama fanned her eyes as we stood in the cottage. “Oh, I’m going to cry.”

She burst into tears, wailing so loud that Edgar plugged one of his ears with his tail.