



Strength of Desire (Vesperwood Academy: Incubus #2)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Noah Braverman knows life is pain. With everything he's lost—and everything he's done—he doesn't deserve anything different.

Then Cory Dawson shows up at Vesperwood Academy, a paranormal university, bringing mystery and mayhem in his wake. It's bad enough Noah has to teach Cory in combat. Now the dean wants him to teach Cory to be an incubus too.

But Noah's not an incubus anymore. And he can't get close to Cory. He won't.

Cory is unfairly gorgeous, his luminous eyes and soft lips haunting Noah's thoughts. Noah's desire surges anytime he's near his new student. But worst of all, being near Cory reminds Noah of everything he can no longer have. Everything he swore he would never let himself want again.

But Cory's in danger. Evil incubi want to steal his power and turn him to their cause. And some of the witches at Vesperwood would kill Cory if they knew what he was.

The only way to keep Cory safe is to keep him close. Can Noah do that, and keep his lust hidden? Or is he destined to give in to his forbidden desires?

Strength of Desire is Book 2 in the Vesperwood Academy: Incubus series. This dark gay romantasy series is high heat with a romance that evolves across all six books. It's a little more intense than a contemporary Spencer romance, but it still has all the Spencer feels you know and love. It features forbidden romance, professor/student, and hurt/comfort themes with gay awakenings, daddy issues, mystery, and suspense. Strength of Desire ends on a cliffhanger.

Total Pages (Source): 19

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NOAH

T error gripped my heart.

I didn't think. I just grabbed the sword Sean held and sprinted across the gym. The moragh had a hand on Cory's wrist, the other lifted to his face, caressing his cheek with a rot-covered claw. I'd never seen a moragh do anything like that.

Moraghin were mindless, soulless killers. They craved magic, and the bodies of those who could make magic. The bodies of witches, which the moraghin had once been, though you'd be hard pressed to see that in a moragh's rotting, green-fleshed form.

As an incubus, Cory should have been safe. Or as safe as one could ever be in the general vicinity of even one moragh. But to be singled out like this, and for the creature not to attack immediately? It made no sense.

Cory was frozen, his face white, his right hand clenched around—was that a feather? The jacket I'd given him lay at his feet, but he'd drawn the feather out of its pocket. He stared up at the moragh, his eyes wide, mouth parted in silent horror. Some part of him must have been thinking, though, because his fist rose, and in a sudden move, he jabbed the sharp point of the feather into the creature's left eye.

The moragh shrieked. It sounded like metal scraping against stone. The hand that had been holding Cory's wrist went to its eye, but the one on Cory's face clutched him tighter. The creature bent down, baring its teeth and roaring in Cory's face.

It all happened in seconds. I was only halfway across the gym, but I could see the creature leaning in for a bite. Flames of fear licked inside my chest, crawled up my throat, desperate to get out. I was out of time. With a deep breath and a silent prayer, I raised my hand overhead and launched the sword at the moragh.

It caught the creature in the back, and its roar turned into a howl. It stumbled backwards, reaching blindly for the huge blade lodged in its midsection, still clutching at the feather in its eye. I closed the distance between us and drew my last remaining knife from where it dangled between my shoulderblades. I had to make this count.

A second scream filled the gym. I refused to look up, focused on the moragh, but a moment later something black flew through the air and attacked the moragh's face. Was that a bird? It screeched and cawed as it went for the moragh with beak and claw.

Whatever it was, it was distracting the moragh, so I wasn't going to complain. As the creature struggled to push the bird away, it stumbled to its knees. The sword was still lodged in its back, pulling it down, and it released its hold on Cory.

Taking the opening, I darted in and sank my knife deep into the other, non-feathered eye as hard as I could. The knife went in with a sickening crunch. I'd reached the brain.

I sighed as the thing swayed and toppled to the floor. The raven—that was what it had to be—flapped over to the pile of mats in the corner and watched the creature bleed out.

I shook my head, chest heaving. My heart was racing, my breath still coming in short, shallow gulps. My clothes and skin were soaked with blood, but none of that mattered. Right now, what mattered was Cory.

I turned to him, placing myself between him and the moragh's oozing corpse. His eyes were down, staring at nothing. He looked dazed and a little green. I wondered if he was going to be sick.

"Did it cut you?" I asked. "Did it break your skin?"

His gaze moved up to meet mine, his gray eyes wide and scared. But he didn't respond. He just stared at me, mouth open, nostrils flared.

"Did it break your skin?" I barked. I didn't have time to coddle him. If Cory had been cut anywhere, had been contaminated by any of the moragh's blood, he didn't have much time left regardless. And if he was fine, I really needed to go find Isaac.

But urgent as that need was, I couldn't tear myself away from Cory. Here in front of me, his body radiated a heat and energy that held me as tightly as any spell of binding. I ached to touch him.

He still didn't respond. I growled low in my throat. If he wouldn't use his voice, I'd just have to check for myself.

How convenient, that you suddenly have an excuse to touch him anywhere you want, observed a dry voice in the back of my mind, but I pushed it aside. I truly did need to make sure he was safe.

I stepped forward and took his face in my hands, turning his head left, then right, to inspect it. There were droplets of blood on his cheek and neck, where blood from the moragh's eye had splattered him, but it didn't seem to have gotten into Cory's eyes, which was the important thing. I didn't see any puncture wounds either, no blood coming from his own body.

My hands worked down his chest, arms, and legs, covering every inch of him until I

was satisfied he'd escaped unharmed. He was redder than he had been, when I was done with him, since my own hands were stained with blood. But he hadn't been infected. Of that, I was sure.

"I think you're good," I said, flicking a glance back at his face. He was biting his lip.

If anything, the kid looked more scared of me now than he had before the attack. As if I were as much of a monster as the thing I'd killed. Sure, I was covered in blood, and I probably didn't smell great, but I had saved him. A little gratitude wouldn't have hurt.

In slow motion, his eyes slipped down to my hands, holding his own. I sucked in a sharp breath of air. I shouldn't still be touching him, but I couldn't make myself stop.

Cory's very essence tugged at me. He felt sweet, and warm, and even though he was terrified, I was drawn to him. I wanted to wrap him up and promise to keep him safe. I wanted to press my lips to his, to steal his breath the way he stole mine.

I stepped back and dropped his hands, then forced myself to look away. That was the only way I could say what I needed to.

"Go to the infirmary. Get checked out."

From the corner of my eye, I could see him staring at me, but he didn't move. God help me, I needed to get him away from me, before I did something rash.

"Go!" I shouted. "Get the fuck out of here."

He jumped, finally seeming to come out of his trance. His lips parted again, like he was going to say something. I turned my head even farther and swallowed, forcing my eyes to study the far wall of the gym. After another ten seconds of silence, he left.

I watched him walk away from me, every fiber of my being wanting to call him back. He looked at the moraghin by the door and shuddered. Ash leaned in to say something to him, but Cory didn't respond. He just pushed through the crowd of students and finally, finally, disappeared.

Only then could I relax—slightly.

I needed to find Isaac. Needed to figure out what was going on, and whether I needed to kill again. With moraghin on the grounds, this day could easily become a blood bath. Vesperwood wouldn't be safe until we knew for sure what had happened, and why.

So why did Cory Dawson, an eighteen-year-old kid, scare me more than all the moraghin combined?

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:58 am

2

CORY

“Cory! Cory, over here!”

My head was still full of everything that had happened in combat class, but the sound of my name cut through the haze in my mind.

I looked to my right and saw Ash and Felix sitting at the end of a long line of chairs at the back of Vesperwood’s grand ballroom—one of the only rooms big enough to hold the entire student body, and the faculty and staff as well.

The ballroom was huge. High windows lined the walls, sending beams of stark winter light down onto students’ heads and the polished parquet floor. Frescoes covered the lower walls, along with tapestries that I suspected were worth more than all the real estate in Churchill, Iowa combined.

Students chattered excitedly in row upon row of seats. The whole room hummed with nervous energy, and the fact that there were eight professors posted around the room, looking worried and ready to do battle, wasn’t helping anyone relax.

I made my way over to my friends, still feeling light-headed. I offered a weak smile and sank down gratefully into a seat on Ash’s right.

“How are you?” he and Felix asked at the same time, but Ash’s line of questioning continued with, “You’re fine, right? You have to be fine. Cinda wouldn’t have let you

go if you weren't. Thank God, if you'd been infected, I'd be stuck hanging out with Felix all the time, and I might actually have to start listening to his lectures. A fate worse than death, am I right?"

He grinned brightly, though his smile was tight at the corners. Felix rolled his eyes behind him. "One assumes that if Cory had been infected, that you'd also feel bad for Cory, what with the whole impending death and madness thing."

"Well, duh. That goes without saying." Ash looked back at me. "But you are fine, right?"

I laughed shakily. "Yeah. All clear. Cinda said I was free to go."

I was still trying to make sense of what had happened. One second, I'd been staring at the wadded up jacket Noah had shoved at me in the gym, and the next, there was this incredible heat right in front of me—all around me, really—and then this noise, like something wet and fleshy dragging across the floor—and then I'd looked up to see this...thing...in front of me.

It was humanoid, but very clearly wrong. Rows of jagged teeth instead of molars protruded from an elongated jaw, with canines that looked like they would prevent the creature's snout from closing all the way. There were tears in the flesh of its chin, and the creature's tongue, too long and covered in black sores that oozed yellow pus, dangled to its neck—until it flicked up and swiped back and forth in front of my face, like it was tasting the way I smelled.

The stench of it was appalling. Rotting flesh and fetid vegetable matter. Like roadkill left too long in the sun, decomposing by the side of a highway. Like a swamp belching gas from its putrid depths. I could hardly breathe from fear, and a tiny corner of my mind was grateful for that. The smell might have made me pass out otherwise.

The thing was tall. Too tall. It towered over me, with gangly limbs like stretched out taffy, if taffy were coated in pustules and leaked oil-slick droplets of blood and pus and—I couldn't actually tell what that greenish fluid was, but rivulets of it ran from two torn-open scabs on the creature's arms.

Its legs were mantis-like, long and thin, bent backwards at the knee like a goat's. Its hands and feet ended in claws rather than fingers or toes, and as I stood there, scared stiff and completely useless, it brought one scaly, damp hand up to touch my cheek.

And then Noah was there, and the creature was dead at his feet. I couldn't even tell you how he killed it. I was frozen, my mind refusing to take in what was happening right in front of me. The raven had shown up again too, and it clucked at the carcass in disgust as Noah turned his attention to me.

I saw fear in Noah's eyes. Plain and simple. He didn't even try to hide it. The disgust he'd had for the creature had transferred to me, too, and something inside me crumbled. I didn't want Noah to look at me that way.

I hadn't even understood what he said to me at first. I heard frantic syllables, but my clumsy brain couldn't turn them into words. And then Noah touched me. Put his hands on his skin, forced his way through his disgust until he was sure of...I still wasn't clear what he wanted to be sure of, to be honest.

What was clear was that Noah wanted nothing to do with me. He'd jerked his hands away from mine like they burned, then sent me up to the infirmary with Erika, unable to even look at me.

Did he know what I was? Did the dean tell him I was an incubus? Maybe he thought I was just some rabid dog to be put down, like Sean. Maybe he thought I was going to go berserk and attack the class like those creatures had.

“Moraghin,” Keelan had gasped as he and Min staggered into the infirmary, carrying Erika between them. “In Combat class.”

Cinda looked up from her desk, her warm brown eyes widening, and her brows climbed her scalp as the pair of them explained what had happened in Combat.

“They’re all dead now. Noah—that is, Professor Braverman—he killed them. But he wanted you to examine Erika.”

Min’s voice was reverent, like she was still picturing the way Noah had moved in the gym. Faster than I would have believed, if I hadn’t seen it myself.

“Get her to the cot,” Cinda said briskly. She sent a glance in my direction, then gestured to a chair against the far wall. “Sit there until I have time for you.”

As soon as Erika was lying on the cot, free of the jackets that had been wrapping her, Cinda murmured something that made a light blue aura spring up around Erika’s supine form. Keelan leaned forward as if to inspect it more closely.

“Stay back,” Cinda snapped, her curly hair whipping around as she held a hand up to keep Keelan away.

“Do you think she’s been infected?” Keelan asked.

“I don’t know yet. But unless you’d like to spend the next two days unconscious, I suggest you refrain from entering the containment area.”

Min motioned Keelan back, and they both murmured apologies as they leaned against the wall.

Cinda bent over Erika and began undressing her, doing it carefully so her body was

covered with a blanket the whole time. She held each article of Erika's clothing by her fingertips, and she looked like she wished she had a pair of tongs.

She dumped Erika's clothes on the floor, then began waving her hands in complicated gestures over Erika's body, muttering things that I didn't understand at all. Min and Keelan's jaws dropped, though, so I assumed whatever magic she was doing was impressive. It was fifteen minutes before Cinda turned around.

"Is she okay?" Min asked. "I don't think any of the moraghin bit her, just knocked her out."

"I'm not prepared to make an pronouncement yet either way," Cinda said. "But I'm satisfied that she's stable. For now, at least." Cinda turned to me, her dark brown eyes assessing me. "Which means I can finally deal with you. What brings you here, Cory? Because if it's anything less than an axe to the skull, I'm afraid I don't have time for you today."

"Oh, I—I mean, I'm sure I—I'm probably fine." I stood up hastily. "Noah told me to come up here, but I don't want to keep you from Erika if she needs you."

"Professor Braverman told you to come here? You were in class with them?" Cinda said, tilting her head towards Min and Keelan.

I nodded, and Min offered, "A moragh attacked him too."

"Well for heaven's sake, why didn't you say so ?" Cinda looked at me in disbelief. "You could be infected too."

"I'm not. That is, Noah checked and said—"

"I'm sure he did," Cinda interrupted, "but with all due respect to Professor

Braverman, he's not a Healer. He's not even a witch. I'll need to make my own assessment."

She walked over to where I sat and drew a curtain I hadn't noticed before around us, creating a little bit of privacy. I was still clutching the jacket Noah had given me, but she made me set it down and strip so she could inspect me thoroughly. I felt like I'd been doing a lot of that lately, but at least her interest in me was purely clinical. After I put my clothes back on, she told me I was free to go.

"You don't need to do a spell or make me all blue?" I asked. I'd been expecting more, after seeing how she'd treated Erika.

"Are you a Healer now too?" she asked, and I flushed. Her expression softened. "Erika suffered a skin-breaking wound. I won't know for a little while longer if it's been infected with any fluids from the moraghin. The spells I used on her aren't necessary for you, and you should consider yourself lucky they're not."

"Oh." My flush deepened. "Yeah, thank you. Do you need my clothes or something? They're kind of..."

I trailed off, gesturing at myself. Everything I was wearing had been sprayed with blood when Noah had killed that thing in the gym.

Cinda shook her head. "Once their blood has dried, it's no longer harmful to you. But I'd recommend burning your clothes nonetheless. It's not easy to get those stains out."

As she pushed the curtain back to let me leave, Vesperwood's bell rang out. I looked instinctively at the clock on the wall and realized it was late. It should have pealed fourteen times for the start of dinner ten minutes ago. This time, it only rang once, and was followed by a crystalline, woman's voice coming from everywhere and

nowhere at once.

All students report to the ballroom for an urgent meeting. All students report to the ballroom for an urgent meeting.

“That means you three,” Cinda said, gesturing towards the door. “Off with you.”

“But, Erika—” Min said. “What if she’s infected?”

“What happened to Erika will not be clear for a while yet. But if moraghin managed to attack you here on campus, you will be safer in the company of the rest of the student body. Straight to the ballroom, mind—no stops along the way.”

She didn’t seem at all perturbed by the thought that we were leaving her up there by herself, with someone who might have been infected.

Been infected with what , I wondered as I trailed Keelan and Min to the ballroom. They split off and headed to the left side of the room as soon as we entered. I followed their progress with my eyes and saw them come to a stop in front of Dean Mansur and Noah.

I was grateful Ash had called my name, giving me an excuse not to follow Keelan and Min. The way Noah had looked at me, back in the gym—I didn’t need to relive that. I gave Felix and Ash a rundown of what had happened in the infirmary, and saw relief wash over both their faces.

“That’s good,” Ash said, and I only realized he’d been clutching Felix’s hand when he let it go.

“Really good,” Felix echoed.

“That’s what everyone keeps saying, but I’m still not sure what any of this means,” I said. “What’s a moraghin?”

“Moragh,” Felix said. “Moraghin is the plural. As for what they are...well, no one’s exactly sure. Or at least, no one’s sure where the first one came from. Nowadays, your average moragh used to be one of us.”

“Well, a witch.” Ash wrinkled his nose. “Not one of us us, as witches will be quick to remind you.” He pointed between Felix and himself as he said that.

“But how does a witch become a moragh?”

“By infection.” Felix’s tone was somber. “A moragh is a walking disease vector. If a witch has any open wounds or cuts, just a drop of blood or bodily fluid from a moragh is enough to turn them. The moment the infection enters their bloodstream...” he sighed heavily. “It’s not pretty.”

“And that’s assuming they live long enough to be turned.” For once, Ash sounded as serious as Felix. “Most of the time, moraghin don’t leave enough of you behind for that to be relevant.”

“But what do they want?” I asked.

“Magic,” Felix said, but before he could continue, a stir ran through the ballroom, followed by a hush.

I looked up to see Dean Mansur standing at the front of the room. Noah was still on the left-side wall, arms folded, face stony. He looked strange with all his knife sheaths empty.

“Students,” the dean said, his voice resonant but grim. “By now, I’m sure you’ve all

heard the news. A small number of moraghin breached Vesperwood's wards and attacked a group of students in Professor Braverman's Combat class this afternoon."

Maybe everyone had heard, but a ripple ran through the student body nonetheless. I heard whispers of ' moraghin ' and ' Erika, a freshman ' from the rows around us. I was glad no one seemed to have noticed my blood-splattered clothes. I hadn't had time to change out of them yet.

"All students who were in close contact with the moraghin are undergoing thorough evaluation by Cinda in the infirmary. We will keep you apprised of anything you need to know in that regard."

"That's a fancy way of saying they're not going to tell us shit," Ash said under his breath. Felix poked his leg and shot him a look that clearly said, ' Hush . '

"The most important thing to know is that the moraghin have been dealt with, and your professors are actively manning the wards to ensure another such incursion does not occur. You are safe and will remain so. We are launching an investigation into how the moraghin were able to enter Vesperwood's grounds, and we will take all necessary measures to guarantee your safety moving forward."

Dean Mansur scanned the room, his dark eyes steely. "Until further notice, increased security will be posted at all buildings on Vesperwood's campus. All undergraduate students will abide by the underclassmen curfew, and be in their rooms by ten p.m. This includes students residing in haven quarters outside the manor. And as an extra precaution, Imbolc celebrations will be held inside this year.

This caused a larger ripple of reaction, accompanied by some aggrieved groans and, ' Come on's. '

"We're not children ," called a male voice from across the room.

“And are we any safer inside or with professors?” added a female one. “I mean, weren’t the first years in a class when the moraghin attacked?”

“Yeah, but it was only with—”

“Enough,” the dean said.

His voice wasn’t particularly loud, but it cut off the objections and discussion before it could go any further.

“I understand that these policies will be unpopular, and I hope they will be of short duration, but we must all use the utmost caution going forward. Our task at Vesperwood is to prepare you to enter the world as responsible, critical-thinking adults who use their powers to serve others and to keep the vulnerable safe. If you cannot understand the need for caution at this juncture, then we have already failed.”

His severe gaze swept the room. “Have we failed?”

No one spoke. No one even coughed. Someone’s chair creaked, and it echoed through the silence of the room.

“Good,” Dean Mansur said. “That will be all. Dismissed.”

3

CORY

“What do you mean, moraghin want magic?” I asked Felix and Ash at dinner.

I kept my voice low. I didn’t think anyone at the other tables was paying attention to us, but I didn’t want to draw stares right now.

We’d gone straight to the refectory from the ball room. I was looking forward to changing clothes, but I wanted information even more. I set the bundled jacket Noah had given me on the floor by my feet.

“It’s what they eat,” Ash said.

I hoped that was some sort of exaggeration, but Felix nodded. “That, and the bodies of witches. We’re not exactly sure how it works, but moraghin only ever seek out witches. They feed on their power, and often that means feeding on them literally. Moraghin will kill regular humans or other paranormal beings if we get in their way, but it’s the witches that they really want.”

“They’re basically walking, non-talking, magical zombies,” Ash said, stabbing a piece of kale with his fork. “Their bodies are rotting around them, and the only thing that extends their life—if you can call it that—is feeding on more witches. They live to consume, and once they’ve got your scent, you either have to kill them or be killed by them. And even if you do kill them, if any of their blood gets inside you, you’ve got about twenty-four hours, max, before you begin to turn.”

He twirled the kale around on his salad plate and shuddered. I couldn't stop myself from doing the same—the shuddering, not the kale. I'd opted for another plate of chicken tenders, but it was growing cold in front of me. I didn't have much appetite.

“That's awful,” I said. “There's nothing you can do to stop it, if someone's infected?”

Ash grimaced. “Not that anyone's figured out. The kindest thing is to knock them unconscious and then, well, you know. You make it as quick and painless as possible.”

I stared at him, aghast. My mind raced back to Erika, up in the infirmary. Was that why Cinda had put her under a spell? Was she telling the truth about not knowing if Erika was infected? Or was she just trying to get us out of the room before she...

“Jesus.” I shook my head. It was horrible to contemplate. It did make a little more sense out of Noah's actions, though.

He was afraid I'd been infected. That I was a danger to everyone else. No wonder he hadn't wanted to look at me. He was probably envisioning having to kill me before I killed anyone else.

“Now you know why we were so happy you were okay,” Felix said, smiling warmly and, I suspected, trying to change the subject. “Although, I'll point out, this does pretty much confirm that you're some kind of witch.”

“That's true!” Ash said. “I hadn't thought of that. But there's no reason for a moragh to go after you if you're not one.”

I didn't know what to make of that. Was I a witch? Surely the dean would have mentioned it if I were. But maybe eating an incubus was the one exception to the moragh's dietary rule, their equivalent of a cheat day.

I was saved from responding when Ash caught sight of Min across the room and waved his fork to get her attention. His piece of kale flew off and landed on the worn brick floor.

“Hey,” Min said when she reached our table, Keelan trailing behind her. Their trays were piled with food. “Room for two more?”

“How are you guys?” Keelan added.

“Forget how we are,” Ash said over Felix’s, ‘ Of course .’ “How are you guys? We never got to talk to you after class today. Are you—have you been—” he broke off and winced. “Is there any more news about Erika?”

“She’s fine,” Min said, a relieved smile breaking across her face. “Cinda cleared her a few minutes ago—we were there when she told the dean. She said her whole bloodstream was clear of any infection. She has to stay in the infirmary for two nights to rest, and she can’t do Combat for a couple of weeks, but otherwise, she’s fine.”

“I’m sure the dean will make an announcement soon,” Keelan said. He sat down next to Felix, and Min sat on his other side, between him and Ash. I was grateful they were still wearing their grubby clothes as well. It made me feel slightly less noticeable. “He was still in the infirmary when we left.”

I could see tension drain out of Felix and Ash’s faces at the news. Felix’s shoulders fell away from his ears a little, and Ash actually ate a bite of his salad instead of just playing with it.

“Did the dean say anything about how the moraghin got in?” Felix asked, his brow furrowing.

Despite the day’s grim events, I had to stifle a chuckle. Relaxed Felix had lasted for

all of five seconds.

“Not to us,” Keelan said with a shrug. “But I’m not sure he would.”

“He mentioned something about the wards to Cinda,” Min put in, “but they stopped talking as soon as they realized Keelan and I were in the doorway. Can’t let freshmen know anything, right?”

She shared a dark glance with Ash, but then brightened and smiled at me.

“I’m Min, by the way. I know we’ve seen each other around before, but it feels weird to not introduce myself.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” I told her. “I’m Cory.”

“And I’m Keelan, which you’ve probably already figured out,” Keelan added. “So you’re the new kid. How are you enjoying life at Vesperwood?”

“It’s been, um...interesting?” I said, trying to be diplomatic.

“That’s one way of putting it,” Min said. “Batshit crazy is another. I would have freaked the fuck out if I’d seen moraghin during my first semester. Hell, I’m still freaking out.”

She shivered, and I smiled in relief. It was nice not to have to pretend to be cool about all this. On top of everything that had happened earlier, I was starting to feel that tug in my gut again, and a week’s worth of lessons with Romero had taught me that only meant one thing. I wasn’t looking forward to what came after dinner.

“So you’re a witch,” Keelan said—it wasn’t quite a question.

“That’s what they tell me,” I replied. “Though I didn’t know magic existed until I got here, so I’m still getting used to everything.”

“Oh my God, so you’re not just new to Vesperwood, you’re new to magic ?” Min said. “ And you saw moraghin in your first two weeks here? Honestly, how are you, like, upright?”

“I’m not entirely sure of that myself,” I laughed.

“So, do you know what you’re going to study?” Keelan asked.

I shrugged. “Still figuring it all out.” That seemed like a safe enough answer.

“Well, if you ever want help, just let us know,” Min said brightly. “I’m going out for Harmony, and Keelan’s a Hunter, but he does have a brain. He even uses it now and then, so he’s not a total meathead.”

“Excuse me.” Keelan brought a hand to his heart. “On behalf of meatheads everywhere, ouch.”

“Oh, don’t get mad about it. You know you take pride in having biceps the size of normal people’s thighs.”

“I’m not mad,” Keelan said, shaking his head sadly. “Just disappointed.”

“Go drink a protein shake about it,” Min said with a grin, and Keelan looked back towards the kitchen.

“I was thinking of getting a second helping of chicken...” he said hopefully.

I pushed my plate at him. I didn’t think I could eat any of it.

“Hey, speaking of birds,” Ash cut in, “what was the deal with that crow in the gym today, Cory? The one that attacked the moragh for you.”

“Definitely a raven,” Felix said. “Did you see the size of that thing?”

“I was more caught up in how it was trying to gouge the moragh’s eyes out. But was that the same bird you saw before?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I think so. At least, it looked familiar. And it seems a little weird that two separate birds would come and help me at different times, right?”

I still couldn’t quite believe the raven had found me again. I’d been so caught up in the way Noah was looking at me—or rather, not looking at me—that I hadn’t paid attention as I left the gym. Was it still there? It hadn’t followed me up to the infirmary.

“Where is it now?” Felix asked.

“Beats me.”

“You’ve got a familiar? That’s so cool. I’ve always wanted one,” Min said, her voice wistful.

“You’re welcome to mine,” I told her. Sure, the raven had helped attack the tenelkiri and that moragh, but I couldn’t help noticing that it only showed up when I was in danger. What if the bird was bringing the danger to me, somehow?

But it wouldn’t be fair to stick another person with that problem, I realized. Besides, I wasn’t even sure it was possible to transfer familiars. With my luck, they’d be permanent, like a weird mole that appeared on your back and started sprouting feathers.

After dinner, Felix walked Ash and me halfway back to our rooms before turning down a corridor on the third floor to head to his own room.

“It’s right next to the second library,” Ash told me as we waved goodnight. “Freshmen aren’t even allowed in there without a note. Can you believe he requested that specifically when he arrived?”

“Yes,” I said, voice deadpan, which made Ash cackle. “Yes, I can.”

I waited until he got his breath back, then asked, “Do all freshmen get their own rooms?”

“God no,” he said. “Felix just got special dispensation, and I guess they didn’t want to make you feel awkward, shoving you into a triple or quad with other freshmen who already knew each other. Your room would normally go to an upperclassman.”

“Where’s your room, then?” I asked, putting one hand on the bannister of a set of old wooden steps, leading up to the fourth floor. “I don’t think you’ve said.”

“Some things aren’t worth a mention,” Ash said darkly. “Besides, we’ve got more important things to talk about. Like that secret bundle that Noah gave you that you’ve been clutching all afternoon. What is it, his letterman jacket? You guys going steady now?”

The words hit so close to home that it took me a second to realize Ash was just joking like he always was. His tone was sing-song, and he was batting his eyelashes outrageously, but he wasn’t looking at me like he expected a serious answer.

He has no idea about you and Noah , I reminded myself. Not that there was a me and Noah. Noah had made that brutally clear. And not that I would even want that, anyway.

As far as I could tell, Noah was a jerk. So what if he was gorgeous? He'd never been nice to me. So there was no reason to flush like Ash had caught me out in some schoolboy crush. Definitely no reason for me to respond like I was embarrassed.

"Yeah," I said. "We exchanged purity rings and everything."

"I can't wait to be your maid of honor. Felix will be the best man, obviously. As far as anyone knows, Noah has no social life, so it's not like he'd contribute to the wedding party." Ash snorted. "But you have to both wear baby blue tuxedos, though. That's my one condition."

"Sorry," I said with a shrug. "We're pretty committed to white taffeta and ruffles. My dress will be tea length, with lots of lace, and Noah's will have an empire-waist, to show off his ample bosom."

I'd learned all those words from Franny, who'd helped with costume design for our high school's drama department. Ash laughed so hard, he stopped in the middle of the stairs.

"Oh God, can you imagine?" He shook his head, tears forming at the corners of his eyes. "The worst part is that he'd probably make it look good. His pecs are pretty well-sculpted."

"Every man wants to look his best on his wedding day," I said, proud of myself for sounding so nonchalant—and for remembering those fashion terms.

"So which one of you will be wearing the garter?" Ash asked, still laughing.

"What's so funny over here?" A new voice cut in before I could answer.

Ash and I turned around to see Sean, Tim, and Rekha coming up the stairs behind us.

Sean wore the same arrogant smile as always. Was it just my imagination, or did he leer when he reached us on the stairs?

I swallowed, then stiffened my spine. I didn't want Ash to know Sean had any effect on me. Besides, I had just been laughing about Noah. Surely if I were capable of that, I could face down Sean and his little group too.

"Oh, just the way you looked in class earlier," Ash said, his smile malevolent. "I never thought I'd find out what a soaking-wet puppy-dog holding a sword looks like, but then you had the grace to display that for us today. The world is full of wonders, isn't it?"

"We're not puppies," Tim growled.

"It's called a metaphor, dear," Ash said, his voice saccharine. "It's a literary device used to make a point. I wasn't saying you were actual dogs, but rather that you were over-eager, inexperienced, rather pathetic-looking creatures, hoping for a treat in exchange for 'helping' bring in the groceries. Do you understand now?"

"That's rich," said Rekha, her voice a thick drawl. "You calling someone a creature."

"I call it like I see it." Ash grinned.

Her eyes narrowed and she muttered something, making a little ball of light appear above the fingers of her right hand. It looked a lot like the ones Professor Kazansky had our class working on—except this one had little sparks and crackles of lightning around it. She raised her hand in front of her chest, her fingers tightening into a fist as the little ball spun in place furiously.

I took a step back in spite of myself. I'd seen magic since I'd gotten to Vesperwood—lots of it—but I couldn't do any myself. From what I understood,

freshmen weren't supposed to be able to do much with it yet, but maybe Rekha was the exception.

I caught Sean smiling at me, and my cheeks burned. Of course he would notice any sign of weakness in me. What the hell had I been thinking, hooking up with him?

"Oh, by all means, attack a pair of students in Vesperwood's halls," Ash said, still smiling. "I'm sure that will go over real well with the dean."

Rekha's eyes narrowed, like she wished she could shoot lightning out of them instead of her hand, but she let her fist fall.

"We were going to use those weapons to help fight," Sean said, his voice full of contempt. "More than I can say for you or your demon buddy. You left poor Cory to face that moragh all alone, shivering and quaking. He had to cry out for Noah to help him."

"I'm sure you would have done loads better," Ash said. "It's a lot easier to talk shit when you're not the one the moragh was after."

"I didn't cry out to him," I said, indignant, but also embarrassed, because Sean was essentially correct. I hadn't done anything to defend myself, and I hated that.

"Ah, right. My mistake. You just stood there, pissing your pants, too scared to even move." Sean shook his head. "I don't know why I'm surprised. It's no different from how you act when there aren't moraghin around."

"He's been here, like, two weeks," Ash said, exasperated. "And he didn't just stand there. He stabbed the thing in the eye."

I blinked, looking at Ash. I did what now?

“For all the good it did,” Sean said.

“Right. And I suppose you came out of the womb knowing martial arts and everything?”

“At least he came out of someone’s womb,” Rekha said darkly.

“At least we can get through a simple sparring exercise without falling down,” Tim added.

“I’m doing my best,” I said, my heart thumping now, but I was as baffled as I was angry. Had I really stabbed the moragh? With what? And why didn’t I remember doing it?

Sean gave me another dismissive look, and anger surged, winning out over confusion. His words weren’t hurtful. Or, well, they were, but they were so close to the kinds of things my dad used to say that I was used to them.

But I was sick of Sean’s superiority complex. I might have...done things...with him, but that didn’t mean I was going to do them again. And I didn’t have to take this crap from him lying down.

You’ve taken plenty from him standing up, though, said the traitorous voice in the back of my mind. I kicked it, mentally.

“Ash is right,” I said. “I’m pretty new here, but I was under the impression being a Hunter was about fighting supernatural threats, not being a bully. Did I get that wrong? Is it actually just about making other people feel shitty so you can feel better?”

“Being a Hunter is about taking down whatever needs to be taken down. Hexers too,”

Rekha said, her voice ice cold.

“I’m not bullying you, I’m describing reality as we all saw it,” Sean said. “Besides, I thought you liked it when someone put you in your place. Told you exactly how to take it.”

I inhaled sharply, and satisfaction spread across Sean’s face. I glanced at Ash, wondering if he’d understood the hidden meaning in Sean’s words, but he was still staring at Rekha. Tim was standing behind Sean, but the blank hostility on his face made me think the reference went over his head, too.

“Still, your little friend here has a point,” Sean continued. “You haven’t been here long. So let me reiterate my previous offer. I’m happy to help you out with whatever needs you might have. But I’ll wait until you beg me for it. I’m sure it won’t be long.”

With a nod, he continued up the stairs, Tim glued to his back like a shadow. Rekha gave Ash a final glare before turning to follow.

I sank back against the bannister as the trio disappeared around a corner at the top of the stairs. Christ, I really hadn’t been thinking when it came to Sean. It was pathetic enough that I’d hooked up with him, but I hadn’t realized I’d signed up to be humiliated by him every time I saw him afterwards.

“What were we actually laughing about?” I asked, trying to change the subject. “I can’t remember now.”

“Hmm?” Ash was still staring at the space on the stairs where Rekha had stood, his brow furrowed.

“Nevermind,” I said. “I just want to go collapse on my bed.”

“Fair enough,” Ash said. “Encounters with those three always make me want to punch a wall, but sleeping sounds like a good second option.”

We climbed the rest of the stairs in silence.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this,” Ash said as we turned down my hallway, “and I’ll deny it if you ever tell Felix, but people like them really are in the minority here. Most of the paranormal students are great, and even a good chunk of the Hexers and Hunters. Min and Keelan, for instance. Just promise you won’t leave or anything because of Sean’s little posse, okay?”

“Leave? Oh, don’t worry. I wasn’t thinking anything like that.”

According to the dean, I couldn’t leave even if I wanted to.

“Good. You just looked a little...wobbly...when Sean was spouting his usual idiocy.”

“Just worried I might have to listen to him even longer,” I said ruefully. “You’ve seen one bully, you’ve seen them all. It’s like, get a new routine, change it up a little. Shouldn’t they be concerned about their act getting stale?”

“Clearly they’re not dedicated enough to their craft,” Ash snorted. But when we reached my door, he asked soberly, “What did Sean mean, about his previous offer?”

Dammit. Maybe he’d been paying more attention than I realized.

“Nothing,” I said quickly. “Just—he caught me in the refectory on my first day here. Cornered me to ask if I was paranormal and offered some ‘advice’ on who he thought I should and shouldn’t be spending my time with. I told him to fuck off, obviously.”

“You did?” Ash looked surprised.

“Well, in slightly milder language.” I hadn’t been quite as valiant as I made it sound.

“But I did tell him I wasn’t interested in that kind of help.”

Too bad he figured out what you were interested in later, said that little voice.

“I believe you,” Ash said with a laugh. “I was just surprised by your choice of words. You’re too polite to be an ass to people, even the ones who deserve it.” He grinned.

“Good thing you have me around for that.”

I said goodnight to him and stepped into my room, leaning against the door in silence. I just wanted to throw myself on my bed, but I couldn’t. I barely had time to change before I had to meet Romero for another lesson. The tugging in my middle was growing stronger.

There were more professors out and about than usual tonight, probably standing guard for the dean. But long stretches of my walk to Romero’s quarters were still empty. The halls of the manor were dimly lit with globes that cast warm pools of light, but they left dark shadows in between. The place would have looked right at home in a Gothic novel.

I hurried my steps. I hadn’t been at Vesperwood for long, but I’d already come to think of the massive old manor as a place of safety. I didn’t like the idea of the building’s strong walls cracking, of tendrils of danger creeping inside.

I turned a corner and saw Professor Gallo standing at the top of a staircase, arms crossed, glared imperiously at a painting in a huge, gilt frame. As I got closer, he sniffed and spun away from the painting, only to look back over his shoulder a second later, arching an eyebrow imperiously.

It wasn't until I was even with him that I realized it wasn't a painting—it was a mirror.

When Romero opened the door to his rooms that night, I marched straight in and sat down on the couch. He sat in his usual chair opposite me, picking up a mug of tea.

“How are you tonight, Cory?” he asked, looking genuinely concerned. “I heard what happened in Professor Braverman’s class. Are you feeling alright?”

I opened my mouth to tell him I was fine, and instead blurted out, “Am I a witch?”

Romero blinked. “A witch? You’re an incubus.”

“Yeah, I know. But could I also be a witch? Is that possible?”

His eyes looked at the space above my head, darting back and forth, studying something I couldn’t see. It was a bit disconcerting, but I was beginning to realize this was how he thought things through.

“Possible? Yes, I suppose. But likely? No.”

My heart sank. I hadn’t realized how much I wanted his answer to be different, until it wasn’t. I just hoped it didn’t show on my face.

Romero’s eyes flicked back down to me. “I don’t know if Dean Mansur conveyed to you just how rare your kind is.”

“He said something about that. But I thought he just meant at Vesperwood. So that’s why you’re teaching me, instead of another incubus.”

“Not quite.” Romero took a sip from his mug. “You asked me earlier what an incubus

was.”

“Sex demon. Realm of dreams.” I was surprised by how easily I could say those words, when two weeks ago I would have laughed at the concept. “It still sounds like something out of a fairytale.”

“I suppose it does, rather.” He laughed. “Let’s put it this way. You’ll have learned about our solar system in elementary school. The sun, the planets, and then the universe, full of stars and endless, empty, ever-expanding space?”

I nodded.

“Well, from a magical perspective, what we’ve learned is that there aren’t just other stars and planets out there, but inhabited worlds, where magic is much more common.”

“And incubi come from one of them?”

“Yes, and no. The way I defined space turns out not to be quite correct. Space appears mostly empty from a scientific lens, but from a magical one, it’s not empty at all. Not just because it contains other solar systems, but because space itself is not empty. Space is the world of the incubi. Space is the realm of dreams. In a manner of speaking, anyway.”

I frowned. “I think I’m lost.”

Romero looked above my head again. “You might think of all the planets and stars in our universe as being suspended in an invisible but all-encompassing substance. One that holds everything, touches everything, and yet is unreachable by most beings—unless they’re asleep. The dreamworld is that substance, cradling all the other swirling bits and pieces of our universe.”

“So it’s like... soup?” I said, picturing the minestrone we served at Carla’s Diner. “We’re all little bits of carrot and onion floating around in some kind of universal dream-broth?”

Romero laughed again. “Yes, actually. I hadn’t considered it from that angle, but that’s an apt metaphor.”

“But what does that have to do with being a witch?”

“Ah, yes. We’ve wandered rather far from the point.” He shook his head apologetically. “Under most circumstances, humans can only touch the dreamworld when they’re asleep—and even then, only sometimes. Similarly, an incubus usually cannot leave the dreamworld. But many years ago, a few incubi seem to have discovered a way to be bodily present in the waking world, here on Earth.”

“How?”

“We’re not quite sure. Incubi are rather secretive, and witches have not met many—at least, not many who have admitted their true nature. However they managed it, they discovered that if they mated with a human on Earth, they were able to create children—half-human, half incubus.”

“And that’s what I am,” I said.

“Unless you remember existing in the dream world before this, and finding a way to manifest on Earth as a fully-fledged eighteen-year-old.”

Sadly, I had way too many memories of an unhappy childhood with my dad to believe I’d done anything other than grow up with him here on mundane planet Earth.

“One of your parents was an incubus,” Romero continued. “Could the other have

been a witch? As I said—possible, but implausible. As far as we can tell, an incubus embodied in this world tends to avoid witches. Has either one of your parents ever mentioned—”

“No.” I cut him off before he could finish. “Neither of them ever—no.”

My mom had left my dad as soon as she could after having me. I didn’t like to think about that much. About how little I’d meant to her. About whether she’d taken one look at me and been just as disgusted as my dad had been.

But my dad—the only thing less likely than him being an incubus was him being a witch. My dad wouldn’t even come to our high school production of *Once Upon a Mattress*, because he ‘didn’t like that fairy crap.’ I couldn’t exactly see him casting spells like the students here did.

No, it had to be my mom who was the incubus, and my dad was just a regular human, stuck with a child who disappointed him more and more with each passing year.

I knew I should let it go. There was no point in holding out hope for something that would never happen. But it was hard. I couldn’t quite get over the thrill of seeing magic—real magic—that first day in *Spellwork*. And I couldn’t stop myself from wishing it were something I could do.

“But the moragh,” I said after a moment. “Did Noah—I mean, did Professor Braverman tell you about what happened in *Combat*?”

Romero nodded. “He did. I can only imagine how stressful that must have been for you.”

“Why would it have come after me, though? If I’m not a witch?”

“I’m not sure,” Romero said. “It’s possible it has something to do with you being an incubus. As I said—”

“We’re rare, and everything you know is from books,” I filled in for him, frustrated.

He chuckled. “I must sound like a broken record.”

It wasn’t him I was frustrated with, not really. It was myself. Or the world. Or both.

It just seemed so unfair, to discover that magic was real, only to find out I’d never be able to do it myself. I didn’t know how Ash and Felix stood it. Going through the same classes as everyone else, but only ever learning the theory. Sitting to one side and watching as the witches did magic, while the paranormals just observed.

No one else had clocked me as paranormal yet. They just thought I couldn’t do spells because I was new. But how long would that last?

If I could do magic—in just one area—hell, just one spell—it would have made being an incubus so much better. It would have been something I could control, instead of be controlled by. But that wasn’t going to happen, no matter how much I wished it would.

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe I should be grateful. If everyone thinks I’m a witch because that thing attacked me, I guess they’re less likely to figure out that I’m an incubus.”

“That’s one way of looking at it.” Romero gave me a sympathetic smile. “Do you feel up to another lesson tonight?”

“Do I have any choice?” That tugging in my core was so strong I was practically vibrating by now. I swore I could hear a hum throbbing inside myself. Or maybe that

was just another part of me throbbing.

Stupid, unreasonable dick, getting aroused at the least convenient times.

“You always have a choice, Cory.”

“Sure, but when all my other options are decidedly worse...” I sighed. “Yeah, I’m up to it. Let’s get this over with.”

4

CORY

It was harder to relax tonight, with everything that had happened, and Romero had to remind me multiple times to let my weight settle onto the couch, to release the tension in my muscles. To remember that I could pick up my worries again later, that they didn't need to be solved now.

It was actually that comment that finally put me under. I'd been thinking about the large wall of windows behind the sofa and wondering what would happen if a moragh came crashing through them while I slept, before remembering that Romero's rooms were on the third floor.

Could moraghin climb? Their claws certainly looked sharp enough to gouge into Vesperwood's brick walls. I supposed that even if they couldn't do it unassisted, they could use ropes and picks and so on. But then I wondered if they'd have the presence of mind to do so. Could a mindless magical zombie stop long enough to properly tie a climbing rope?

My last thought was about how odd a moragh in a climbing harness would look, before I was pulled under.

Once more, I was swimming in the starry sea, my head still above water for now. Each lesson, I'd had to force myself to go under, to follow the tugging in my core. The swirling lights below the surface beckoned. I knew I would be fine, once I was under. But going under brought the inevitable one step closer.

I might as well give in, though. Like I'd said to Romero, all my other options were worse. I sighed, closed my eyes, and dove down. I kept my eyes closed until I felt my lungs run out of air, until my chest was bursting with the desire to breathe. When I couldn't stand it any longer, I opened my eyes and sucked in a breath, letting the water that wasn't water wash through my lungs that were no longer lungs.

It was so beautiful. I still hadn't gotten used to it. The twirling galaxy of colored stars spiralled out around me. I ached to touch each of them, to feel their colored warmth drift over my skin.

Each one was unique, no two shades of pink or chartreuse or royal purple quite the same. And the textures...this one a swirl of snowflakes, that one an eddy of autumn leaves, still another a twirl of electric blue and mint green music notes.

One that was two inches from my not-elbow looked like a spiral of soap bubbles emanating from an impenetrably glowing center. I wanted to run my fingers through it, to feel that center for myself, but instead I kicked backwards, away from it.

Geoff, I reminded myself. You need to find Geoff.

But how? I had no idea. I spun around lazily, the stars swishing by in a slow circle, and came to a stop facing in a new direction. Should I go that way? Or do the opposite? There were no signposts down here. His star could be right next to me, or miles away. How would I ever know?

Did the stars around me belong to the people physically closest to me? Romero had no more idea than I did. All I knew was that I had to pick someone, because time passed differently here, and Romero would have to wake me up by the end of fifth hour, whether I'd dreamt or not.

I sighed and closed my eyes again, but this time I tried to center myself. Geoff. Geoff

from Duluth. That's who I'm looking for, and when I open my eyes, I'll know where to go. I'll find Geoff from Duluth .

I opened my eyes, and the soap bubble star was floating in front of me. Had it moved? Had I moved? I looked around, but I couldn't remember which other stars had been near it before.

Was this the star I was supposed to find? I had no idea, and there was only one way to find out.

I brushed my invisible fingers across the star. It was soft and warm, sending tingles up my arm. And that lightest of touches was still enough to wake it up, or bring it to life, or whatever happened when I brushed against a star. It grew and grew, swirling around me, expanding to fill my entire field of vision. It enveloped me, sending me tumbling down, down, until—

“Cory? You looked like you wanted to say something about Jim's proposal.”

I was in an office conference room, wearing a suit and tie. I was sitting in a rolling chair, pulled up to a shiny wooden table, around which sat four men and two women. A fifth man was standing at the front of the room, next to a screen displaying a slide with a bar graph for regional sales numbers across the past five years.

“Cory?”

The voice came from an older man sitting at the head of the table, a leather-bound writing pad in front of him. He had a crisply trimmed gray beard and eyes that looked like they didn't suffer fools gladly. I stared at him, utterly baffled as to what his name was. And then he flickered.

What ? I blinked, staring harder. People didn't flicker. It had to be a trick of the light.

Or my eyes. I did feel kind of tired.

“I, uh—” I cleared my throat. Why was I sitting here? What were we talking about? Why couldn’t I remember what had happened two seconds ago? “I just...thought it was really interesting,” I finished lamely.

What the hell was going on?

“Me too,” said the man sitting next to me. His voice was warmer, and the smile he gave me was downright pleasant.

Hasan , I thought, putting a name to the face. That was Hasan. The other summer intern. And that was Jim up at the projector, our direct supervisor. Hasan and I had helped put this presentation together. Of course. I remembered now.

My mind flashed back to long evenings spent with Hasan in the office, the two of us double-checking sales numbers and isolating target demographics. Hasan with his head bent low over his macroeconomics textbook in a free moment—we were getting college credit for this internship, but we still had our summer courses to complete too.

I flushed, remembering two nights ago, when Hasan had caught me staring at him.

‘ What, do I have food on my face ?’ he’d asked.

He actually did have a bit of mustard at the corner of his lip, but I was too flustered to tell him. Too busy staring at his soft lips, his strong jaw, his gorgeous brown eyes.

“Just... spaced out for a minute,” I managed, finally.

“Well now you’ve hurt my feelings,” he said. “Here I was thinking you were staring at my handsome visage, and it turns out I might as well have been a cardboard box.”

“What, exactly, did you think was interesting?” asked one of the women on the other side of the table, bringing me mentally back to the present.

Had Hasan been flirting with me that night? It almost felt like he was, but maybe that was just wishful—

“Cory?” prompted Jim from the front of the room.

God, my mind really was spacey these days.

“Just that women make up a bigger share of the monster truck rally audience than we thought,” I said, forcing myself to focus. “The whole point of this project has been to figure out how to pull more women in, and whether we need to shift our advertising approach. But if they’re already attending in greater numbers than we thought, we might be asking the wrong question. Before we ask how to get more of them to buy tickets, we probably want to find out why the current ones already do.”

“Hmm,” said the woman across from me. Nancy. Her name was Nancy. I knew that. So why did I feel like I’d never seen her before? “You might have a point there.”

She turned to the man at the head of the table—Rupert, I remembered now—and as they began discussing the company’s next shareholder meeting, my eyes shot wide open. There was something on my left thigh. And it was moving.

Fuck, wasn’t something, it was a hand, and it was moving towards my crotch under the table. And it wasn’t one of my hands, because they were both right in front of me on the conference table, fiddling with my pens. Which meant—

I inhaled sharply as I looked to my left. Hasan sat there, looking enthralled by Nancy and Rupert’s conversation, but his hand was sliding along my thigh.

Guess I wasn't imagining the flirting, I thought.

Not that his flirting, or lack thereof, was the most important thing to be thinking about right now. No, the most important thing was that Hasan's hand had reached my crotch. His fingers slid on top of my cock and squeezed it through my pants. My stomach turned a somersault. What the hell was Hasan doing?

And why, God, why was my body responding to it?

Under Hasan's teasing touch, my cock had grown steadily harder, and was now tenting up in my pants as he stroked it through the thin wool fabric. Fuck, that felt good.

I shot him a look that was half anger, half helplessness. Hasan didn't even look at me, but I thought he must have seen me from the corner of his eye, because his lips curled up in the beginnings of a smile.

My heart pounded. Any second now, Rupert or Nancy, or Eileen, Pete, or Gregor were going to notice what was happening. That Hasan's hand was stretched out just a little too far—or that I looked like I was about to faint. Or, Jim would come sit down on my other side. There'd be no keeping it from him then.

Why was this happening now? I'd been lusting over Hasan in secret for weeks. It felt impossible that he could like me back. But what was he trying to do? Get us both fired?

Just move away, I told myself. Move away or clear your throat or cross your legs—do something to make him stop.

It was that simple. Instead, I bit my lip and dug my fingernails into my palms to keep from showing the pleasure on my face. And against my better judgement, I shifted

towards Hasan, spreading my legs for easier access.

No doubt about it this time—he was smiling.

“What do you think, Hasan?”

The question came from Gregor, on the other side of the table, and all eyes in the room shifted to Hasan.

His smile went from self-satisfied to eager-to-please in an instant. He brought his hand away from my lap and set it on the table casually, as if he had all the time in the world. I swallowed hard and forced myself not to move, not to draw any attention to myself.

I was grateful for the reprieve—or was I? All I knew was that my cock was desperate for his touch again.

“I think it could go either way,” Hasan offered, spreading his hands before him. “Shareholders might spook, if you follow Eileen’s suggestion. But visionary moves are often seen as dangerous in the short run. It’s not until the next quarter or next few years, even, that they come to be seen as genius.”

I’d completely lost the thread of what we were talking about, but Hasan’s answer seemed to satisfy Gregor and the rest of the group for now. They went back to discussing the upcoming shareholder meeting intensely, and no one seemed to notice when Hasan’s right hand pushed my left off the tabletop.

Under the table, he grabbed my hand, his fingers soft but firm. My heart fluttered—it fucking fluttered—as he drew my hand to his own thigh, before returning to stroke my cock again.

I could barely breathe. Even a casual glance in our direction would reveal what was going on. Our arms were crossed in front of each other, each one clearly leading to the other's lap. It was so obvious. Why hadn't anyone said anything yet?

Just stop it , my brain suggested. Just move your own hand back. At least then it won't be so clear what you're both doing .

But I didn't move my hand. Or, rather, I did, but only to slide it over until I could feel the bulge of Hasan's cock against the fine wool of his trousers. God, he wasn't even hard yet, but I could tell he was big. And when he was hard, his cock was probably fat and thick and just right for sliding into my—

“Unnnghhh.” The groan escaped my lips against my will, as Hasan's fingers slid up and down my cock over my pants. His hand moved away in a flash, as the room turned to look at me.

“S-sorry,” I said, moving my left hand to press against my abdomen. I grimaced—it wasn't even fake. “I think my stomach's just a little hungry for lunch.”

“Aren't we all,” Eileen said with an absent smile, before turning back to Pete. “The issue isn't whether it's unprecedented, the issue is whether we can convince them that it's worth backing—”

My attention was drawn away as Hasan's hand drifted back into my lap. This time, his nimble fingers moved to the button at my waist, flicking it loose with ease. They made quick work of my zipper too, and I bit my tongue to stifle another moan as his hand slid beneath my boxers and tugged my cock free.

I could hardly breathe. My cock was now out, in the middle of a work meeting. Forget getting fired. If anyone else in the room noticed, I would be lucky not to end up in jail.

And yet, I didn't pull away, or push Hasan's hand off me, or say a word in protest. Instead, I luxuriated in the feel of his skin on mine, as my own hand struggled to undo the button at his waist.

My fingers weren't quite so agile, so he helped me with his other hand, though he left me to pull his thick cock free of his boxer-briefs. God, it looked good. I ached to get down on my knees and take him in my mouth, and damn what anybody else in the room thought.

He looks even better than Sean, and at least he's nice to you. You could do worse for a second ever blow job.

I blinked. Sean ? Who the hell was Sean? I didn't know any Seans. And what was I thinking, second ever blow job? I'd never even given a first.

My brain felt fuzzy in a way I couldn't place. It was a familiar feeling, but I had no idea why. It was like full-body déjà vu .

I glanced around the room. The others were embroiled in a tense discussion, their bodies stiff, like they were in a war room. But any second now, somebody was going to notice us. I needed to—

Fuck . Hasan's fingers swirled around the head of my cock. I was leaking precum and he used it to slick up my shaft, his hand gliding up and down confidently. I gripped the edge of the table with my right hand, just trying to keep myself from coming on the spot.

How was he so calm during all of this? And how was he so good at it? Had he given loads of furtive office hand-jobs in his life?

All I knew was that I was melting under Hasan's touch. And that I wanted to give as

good as I was getting.

You could make him come even faster if you let him stick his cock in your mouth .
You know you like it when someone uses you .

What ? I shook my head. The words sounded like they were coming from the same little voice in the back of my mind, but they didn't make any sense. What the hell did it mean, ' you like it when someone uses you ?' When had I ever done anything other than ache and pine for guys who didn't know I existed?

I took my hand off Hasan's cock and pretended to cough, using it as cover to spit in my palm. When I brought it back down, it glided along the smooth skin of his cock. I smiled as he bit his lip. When he looked over at me, I licked my lips and gave his cock a significant look. A shudder ran through his body, and I felt a surge of confidence.

This was insane. What we were doing was objectively nuts. But Hasan wanted me. He wanted me , out of anybody in the world. And he liked what I could do for him.

"Jim, we could use your input," Rupert said, waving to Jim, still standing at the front of the room.

I'd completely forgotten about Jim. My heart thumped as he walked towards Hasan and me. His eyes were glued to Rupert for now, but any second, he would look down and see us.

He pulled out a chair on my right and sat, leaning forward to put his elbows on the table. "Do you think we could get their support? Because I'd feel much more comfortable moving forward with their backing."

I still had no idea what they were talking about, but it didn't matter. Hasan's fingers

were teasing me mercilessly, leaving me desperate for more. I was so fucking close. I did my best to keep up my own efforts on his cock, hot and hard in my hand. It wasn't fair that all I could give him was a hand job. I wanted to do so much more.

“Hhhngh.” Another moan escaped me as Hasan's fingers twirled around the head of my cock. No one on the other side of the table seemed to notice, but Jim turned and looked at my face, flushed with embarrassment, and then looked down.

His eyes widened, flicking back up to meet mine. My cheeks burned, and I knew they must be bright red. He could see my cock, leaking into Hasan's hand. Could he see my hand on Hasan's cock too?

Jim's mouth opened, closed, and opened again, like he wanted to say something. But no sound came out. I looked at Hasan, panicked, but he was smiling openly now. He didn't seem to care that Jim was staring. If anything, it made him bolder.

And Jim's eyes were glued to my cock. This was mortifying. I wanted to run, to sink through the floor, or maybe to die on the spot. But my cock was throbbing, and Jim's attention only made it worse.

“Cory?” Jim finally managed to say, his voice strangled. “What are you—what the fuck?”

That got everyone's attention. All eyes turned to me, and for the first time, the rest of the meeting noticed what was going on in my lap.

Oh God, I was so close to coming. And Hasan's cock was so perfect, so tempting in my hand.

“What the hell do you think you're doing, Cory?” Rupert demanded, outraged.

“I—I—” I stuttered, my muscles tensing as my orgasm built. I needed to apologize, do something to absolve myself.

Instead, I slid out of my seat and onto my knees, turning to face Hasan. Then I leaned in and took his gorgeous cock right into my mouth. It was hot and hard, and tangy with precum. I lapped it up, then swirled my tongue around the head while stroking my own cock furiously.

“Cory, don’t be disgusting,” Jim said.

“This is sick. Perverted,” someone else muttered on the far side of the table.

“What is wrong with you, young man?” Rupert thundered.

I came, every cell in my body lighting up as I spilled into my hand and onto the industrial conference room carpet. At the same time, I felt Hasan’s hand move to the back of my head, pushing me farther down onto his cock as it throbbed in my mouth. And then I felt it, his salty cum pouring into my mouth and down my throat.

I looked up, loving the pleasure and abandon I saw on Hasan’s face. He loved this, loved me servicing him, kneeling at his feet. Something desperately sweet swelled in my chest. He’d come because of me. Because I’d done a good job.

It could only be better if it were Noah instead.

I blinked, my mouth still filled with Hasan’s cock. Noah ? Who was Noah?

I’d barely finished the thought when a vision filled my mind. A different man. Hard and gruff. Brown hair and deep hazel eyes, with stubble over an axe of a jaw. The kind of face that didn’t care if it was handsome or not, which only made my desire flare harder.

The vision felt real. Not a figment of my imagination, not something I'd dreamt up. Noah . That was who the man in my mind was. Even if I had no idea how I knew him.

I pictured Noah looking down at me, and the angry slash of his mouth curled into a smile as he saw me sucking Hasan's cock.

"Good boy," he said, his voice like honey over hot embers.

If I could have come again so soon, I would have. Instead, I just melted internally. All around me, people were saying my name, telling me I was wrong, messed up, disgusting. But I didn't care. I just held onto the vision in my mind, feeling that warmth, feeling that—

No, wait. Where was it going? The picture in my mind was disappearing, but so was everything else. What was happening?

I reached a hand up, trying to steady myself on the conference table, but it felt misty and insubstantial. I looked around the room, but it was filling with fog, Jim and Rupert and even Hasan fading into the gray.

Hasan? Who was Hasan? And where was I? I suddenly couldn't remember anything, but the room felt like it was spinning.

I closed my eyes, trying to hold still, and when I opened them again, I was lying on a sofa in a dimly lit room, an older man sitting across from me in an armchair.

Professor Romero. I took a deep breath. The man was Professor Romero, and I was back in his rooms. Everything with Hasan, everything that had happened in that conference room, had been a dream.

Everything was crystal clear now. I could remember events with ease. But even though I now knew it had all been a dream, I still felt slightly disoriented. I wondered if I would ever get used to transitioning between the dreamworld and the waking one.

“How was it, this time?” Romero asked. “Did you find Geoff?”

I shook my head. “No. I still have no idea how to do that. It’s all just so...”

I trailed off. I didn’t know how to explain it to him. I remembered the way I’d closed my eyes and willed myself to find Geoff’s dream. How hopeful I’d been that it would work.

“I tried a different way of finding him tonight, but it didn’t make a difference.”

That soap bubble star had belonged to Hasan, I supposed. Whoever he was, he apparently had a thing for public sex.

Or maybe you do , whispered the little voice. Remember the dream with Chad, too ?

I shoved the thought away.

“Did you feel in more control this time?” Romero pressed. “Any awareness that you were dreaming, while you were in it?”

“No,” I said, feeling suddenly exhausted. The tugging in my middle was gone, but I was just so tired. So tired of doing this every two nights, so tired of facing parts of myself I didn’t want to acknowledge. “No, I still had no idea what was...”

But I trailed off again, remembering something. I hadn’t had any idea that I was dreaming, but I had retained a little bit of my memories from the waking world.

Sean. I'd remembered him, even though I hadn't known why. And Noah, at the end. I definitely knew who he was.

Shivers rolled over my body. I'd had such a realistic vision of Noah, it almost felt like he'd been in the dream with me. I'd wanted him. Even there. Even in the middle of someone else's dream.

For all the good that had done me.

"It'll get easier," Romero said, his voice reassuring.

I wondered if he really believed that, or if he was just saying it to make me feel better. It wasn't working, but I didn't have the heart to tell him, so I nodded.

"Yeah. I know."

I barely remembered the walk back to my room that night. I still felt dazed from the dream, from wondering what it all meant. The bell tolled the end of fifth hour two minutes after I reached my room. We'd cut it close tonight.

I was so tired, I just collapsed into bed without bothering to change out of my clothes. I'd deal with them in the morning. For now, I just wanted to sleep—regular sleep, with regular dreams. Or, if I was lucky, no dreams at all.

And I was lucky, or so it seemed at first. When I awoke early the next morning, the sky still filled with the pearly gray light of the pre-dawn hours, I felt surprisingly refreshed. But the great bell that tolled out the hours at Vesperwood hadn't rung its first peal of the day yet. So what had woken me up?

Then I heard it—a tap, tap, tap against my window—and I realized that was the sound that had pulled me from sleep. I sat there dumbly, just listening for a moment,

before realizing that if I wanted to know what it was, I'd have to get out of bed and see for myself.

Tap, tap, tap.

The sound clacked into the room as I threw back the covers and stood, my clothes wrinkled from being slept in. I stretched and padded to the window, then stopped and stared.

The raven was sitting on the little ledge outside, tapping its beak against the glass. I just watched it for a minute, goggle-eyed. It watched me back, clearly expecting something.

After a moment, I stretched out a hand and opened the window. The raven fluttered into the air as the glass panes moved outwards, then flapped inside and landed on my pillow.

“Hello, again,” I said to it, cold air streaming in from the window. I felt silly, talking to a bird, but it was so early that nothing felt quite real yet. Besides, it seemed to be listening to me. “You turn up at the oddest times, you know that. Am I about to get attacked by another monster? Or are you here to give me more inscrutable messages?”

The raven tilted its head to one side, opened its beak, and croaked.

“Noah.”

5

NOAH

I t was 9:10 p.m., and I wanted to be in bed.

Not because I was tired, but because in bed, I would be alone. I was still trying to make sense of the attack this afternoon, but the faculty lounge was bursting at the seams with all the people crammed into it. There was so much conversation that I couldn't hear myself think.

The meeting should have started ten minutes ago, but Isaac was nowhere to be seen. Nat sat crowded around a tiny table with Ayah Naji, the head of Harmony, and Mauro Linhares, who was a Hexer like Nat. Hans Stahl from Harvest and Autumn Zhu from Hex took up the sofa, while Sunny Verma, the head of History, sat on the wingback chair nearby, with Sarah Balian of Heal perching on one arm.

Teresa Molina, the head of Hex, and Leon Zi, the only Hunt faculty member, stood in the kitchenette, talking animatedly with Claire Rosato, the head of Harvest, Orlando Moyano, the head of Heal, and Eddie Rybakov from Hearth. Lidia Ramos of History, Alex Ilves of Heal, and Manish Karve of Hearth were clustered near the door. I leaned back against a window and watched them all.

The room was never meant to hold this many people all at once. Isaac, as the dean of Vesperwood, had asked for one representative from each haven, but most had sent more. The buzz of conversation was all about the moraghin and Erika's recovery. The faculty sounded as uncertain and full of wild theories as the students were.

Fabrizio Gallo and a number of other professors were absent, posted at positions around the campus, keeping watch. Isaac had never called for that before, in all the time I'd been at Vesperwood. The wards should have removed the need for it. But then again, the wards had never failed before either.

Seb was gone too, though he wasn't on guard duty. I'd been standing next to Isaac when he'd enumerated who would be on watch tonight. I wondered where he was instead. Maybe with Isaac?

A commotion by the door drew my attention, and I saw the group there part to let in Ismene Cooke, the only representative from Horizon so far. The Haunts were so reclusive, I was surprised one of them had shown up at all.

Ismene crossed the room, making what looked like a bee-line for me, only turning at the last second to take up a spot on the wall a couple feet away. She gave me an enigmatic smile, then watched the room with a blank expression. She didn't talk to anyone, but she didn't lean or cross her arms or do anything else that might imply this wasn't exactly where she wanted to be, standing alone in a crowded room, staring off into space.

I wished I could appear that at ease.

A moment later, Isaac stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. I should have known. Isaac wasn't the kind of man who liked to be seen waiting on anyone else. He was probably standing just outside the room until Ismene arrived.

Seb wasn't with him, but I had no chance to wonder what that meant. Isaac spoke as soon as the door closed.

"Good evening, friends." His voice managed to be warm and cool at the same time. "I appreciate you all taking the time to come here tonight."

As if we'd had any choice.

“As you’ve no doubt noticed, there are questions circulating among the student body concerning today’s attack. I’m sure I’m not mistaken in imagining that there are many questions among you as well. I meant what I said at the assembly. We will be launching a full-scale investigation into what occurred, the first step of which is to pool our knowledge of today’s events. While understanding the entirety of the assault may take time, we should at least be able to reassure the students that their wilder theories are false. To that end, let us begin at the beginning. Noah, why don’t you walk us through your freshmen class today.”

I stiffened as all eyes in the room turned towards me. I clamped my lips down in a firm line, annoyed at myself for being unprepared for the attention. I should have expected this.

“It’s more or less what you’ve heard,” I said, knowing the freshmen would have spread the details through the entire student body by now. “It was a normal enough class. We were working on evasive maneuvers. The attack didn’t occur until the very end.”

My stomach twisted. I should have been quicker to notice something was wrong. Should have been up near the rest of the class. If I hadn’t waited until the last moment to give Cory his jacket, hadn’t pulled him aside so no one else could hear, maybe I could have prevented anyone from getting hurt.

“Unfortunately, I was on the other side of the gym when the moraghin appeared, in the middle of the largest group of students. Attracted to the magic, obviously. I have no idea how they got in. They simply appeared, out of thin air.”

A shiver ran through the room. We all knew how unlikely that was. How much magic it would have taken to breach the wards, to drop the moraghin right into a cluster of

students. The moraghin couldn't have done that themselves. Someone else had sent them.

"Most of the students were frozen," I continued. "One of them, Erika Martinez, went down. I yelled at the rest to back up and spread out. Most of them did, though a few tried to cast spells at the moraghin. A couple of others grabbed weapons. Luckily, I was able to take the moraghin down before anyone else could injure themselves in the fight."

"Impressive," said Teresa, still standing by the sink. "That's no mean feat, taking down three moraghin on your own. In the middle of a crowd of bystanders."

It was four, actually, but I didn't correct her.

"Nigh impossible, some might say," added Leon, stirring a spoon in a mug of coffee.

Those might have sounded like compliments, but I knew Teresa and Leon well enough to know they weren't. As the head of Hex, Teresa was suspicious of anyone who wasn't a witch at Vesperwood. Leon was the head of Hunt, and had resented my presence at the school since he'd arrived three years ago.

I'd never understood why. Leon talked constantly about how Hunters weren't meant to be tied down. He refused to work with underclassmen entirely, and only worked with the best of the juniors and seniors in small tutorials.

Isaac had told him that if he hated being stuck in one place so long, he was welcome to leave, but Leon had muttered something about the honor of Hunt Haven not being carried by human hands like mine.

"Not impossible," I said. "Just luck."

We'd all been lucky. Me. Erika. Cory. God, especially Cory. That had been close.

But he was fine. I'd checked him myself, and then Cinda had. I'd seen him at the assembly earlier this evening. She wouldn't have let him go if there'd been any doubt.

Cory . Of course. That was where Seb was.

Seb must have been working with him right now, teaching him...what, exactly? How to dream? Could Seb even do that for him, not being an incubus himself? I stifled a strange flare of jealousy at the thought of the two of them alone together.

"Thank you, Noah," Isaac said, pulling me back to the present. "Let us now turn our attention to the wards. They are designed to protect Vesperwood from attacks like this, and have functioned flawlessly since the initial enchantment was cast when the school reopened. But today, they were breached."

He paused, giving the words time to sink in. Then he turned to look at the pair on the sofa.

"Hans, Autumn, you're two of our wardkeepers. Perhaps you would explain today's events from your point of view."

It wasn't an accusation. Isaac would never stoop to something so tawdry. It was merely an invitation to explain their side of the story—and justify their failure, if possible.

Hans cleared his throat and adjusted his glasses. "Yes. Well. As you said, the events of today were certainly unexpected. I wish we could have—that is, all of us are as shocked as anyone else as to how this could have occurred."

He launched into a wordy explanation that took five minutes to get through and boiled down to, ‘ We don’t know what happened .’

“Obviously, I went to check the ward room as soon as I felt the wards fail,” he said as he wrapped up. “I was here, in the staff room with Ayah and Sarah, but I ran all the way there. Autumn was already there when I got there, and Teresa and Sheridan arrived a little later.”

“None of you were in the ward room during the attack?” Isaac asked.

“Not as far as I know,” said Hans, which was a weaselly answer if I’d ever heard one.

Autumn seemed to agree with my assessment. She drew herself up, straightening her posture, and sent Hans a cool look. Interesting.

“Anyway, once we were there, it was clear the wards had been penetrated,” Hans continued. “We reset them immediately, and one of us has been physically present with the wards for the rest of the day. That’s where Sheridan is now. We’re trying to figure out what went wrong, but I regret to say, it was a clean attack. Whoever did this didn’t leave any traces for us to follow.”

“Indeed,” Isaac said. “Autumn, is there anything you’d like to add?”

“My frustration,” Autumn growled. “An attack like this shouldn’t have been possible. The fact that it was means there was a flaw in the initial spell design. That, or someone at Vesperwood lowered the wards from within.”

The room went even quieter than before.

“I went to the ward room as soon as I felt the breach as well,” she continued. “I was with a group of students from my Advanced Artifice class, discussing their midterms

projects. I only got to the room ten seconds before Hans,” she added, and there was no mistaking the steely glint in her eye.

Very interesting. Both she and Hans were trying to establish that they weren’t alone when the attack took place.

“There was nothing wrong with the initial spell design,” Teresa said, her voice diamond sharp as it cut through the room. “I was part of the team that invoked the original incantation. As was Isaac. I highly doubt either one of us would have made a mistake.”

She made a good point. She was one of the first faculty members Isaac had gathered when he reopened the academy seven years ago. Teresa might be arrogant, but she was a meticulous witch, as was Isaac. It wasn’t likely a design flaw would have escaped their notice.

Which left only one option.

Isaac turned to her. “Thank you, Teresa. We are extremely fortunate to have a witch of your experience and expertise as a wardkeeper.”

Teresa nodded as though this praise were no more than she was due. I noticed Isaac hadn’t begun his questioning of the wardkeepers with her, though. She was far too touchy for that. I also noticed that she didn’t deign to share her whereabouts when the wards were broken. She probably didn’t feel like she needed to account for herself to us plebs.

“I can look into any histories mentioning the moraghin,” Sunny offered from his armchair. “I doubt we’ve missed anything that would explain how moraghin themselves could breach wards like the ones guarding Vesperwood, but I’ll use a fine-toothed comb. See if I turn anything up.”

“And I can check the records of the initial enchantment,” Nat offered. Teresa sent her a stony look from across the room, but Nat wasn’t cowed. “I wasn’t here when the spell was first cast, but a fresh pair of eyes reviewing the plans can’t hurt.”

Teresa held her gaze a moment longer, then gave the tiniest nod of her head. Nat blew out a breath of air, looking slightly relieved. As the head of Hex, Teresa was Nat’s direct supervisor, and she had a reputation for ruling Hex with an iron fist.

“Thank you,” Isaac said to Sunny and Nat. “I’m sure we’d all appreciate that.”

He turned then to look at Ismene, standing against the wall near me. “Did the Hierophants sense anything that might have indicated an attack was imminent?”

Ismene moved only her eyes to look at Isaac. “We would have told you if we had. We share anything that is relevant to the school.”

Would you have ? I wondered.

The Haunts were a strange bunch. They didn’t teach many classes, focusing their efforts on their own research instead. That, and shepherding the odd student who turned up at Vesperwood with the gift of prophecy.

I didn’t think they saw the world the way the rest of us did. Who was to say what information they would pass on, or what they considered good or bad? Could they have lowered the wards without anyone knowing about it? They were witches, of a sort.

Another unanswered question.

Motion by the door drew my attention again, and I saw Cinda slip into the room. Her long skirts danced as she threaded her way through the crowd, coming to stand

between Ismene and me.

“I’m glad you could join us, Cinda,” Isaac said, in a voice that could have been a rebuke or a simple statement of fact.

“And I’m glad to have a free moment to do so,” Cinda replied. “But I’d prefer to get back to my patient as soon as possible.”

“The girl,” asked Teresa. “She’s recovering well?”

“Yes,” Cinda said. “Sleeping now. That’s what her body needs most. But if she passes tonight and tomorrow peacefully, I’m willing to discharge her the day after tomorrow.” She flicked a glance at me. “No combat for two weeks, though.”

“And you’re absolutely sure she was not infected?” Leon asked.

Cinda stood a little straighter and gave him a look that said she considered his question impudent. “Absolutely.”

“Lucky indeed,” said Leon. He was stirring his coffee like he wanted to stab a hole through the mug. “Three moraghin attack a group of freshmen unexpectedly, and no one gets hurt. What are the odds?”

“Four.” Leon’s tone put my back up—it was time to be clear. I said the word grimly, my mind flashing back to the gym. Why had that fourth moragh sought Cory out? Did it think he’d be an easy target, all alone? “There were four moraghin, not three.”

“And someone certainly did get hurt,” Cinda sniffed. “Erika may be free of infection, but she bears bruised ribs, a twisted ankle, and a dislocated shoulder that I’ve only just healed. To say nothing of the psychological wounds she and the rest of the students will undoubtedly carry for years to come.”

Leon's eyes narrowed. I had the feeling he didn't consider psychological wounds real.

"If that's all," Cinda said, addressing her comments directly to Isaac, "do I have your permission to go?"

"You do," Isaac said. "You all do. I trust I do not need to remind everyone that extra caution is required until we uncover the cause of today's attack. Vesperwood has its enemies, as you know. We must do all we can to protect our students."

There was a shuffling of feet, a few throats clearing, and a smattering of head nods. The faculty looked like a bunch of shifty students, caught doing something they shouldn't have. But no one said anything.

After a moment, Isaac nodded. "Good. Dismissed."

I let the others trickle out the door ahead of me, loitering at the back of the room until it was just me, Isaac, and Nat.

"I appreciate your help," Isaac said to Nat as she neared the door. "You have a keen mind. You may find something we overlooked when invoking the wards originally."

"Maybe," she said, but her shrug made clear how unlikely she thought that was. "Like Teresa said, you were involved in the process. I doubt you made a mistake in one of the foundational enchantments for the school."

"Everyone is capable of making mistakes," Isaac said neutrally.

"If you had, wouldn't the wards have failed before now?" Nat asked, raising an eyebrow. "It's not like they haven't been tested, but they've withstood everything that was thrown at them, until today."

“All the more reason for double-checking.”

Nat shrugged again, then turned to me. “Don’t suppose I could tempt you to a game of cards, could I? Bet you could use the stress relief.”

“Playing poker with you is never stress relief,” I told her. “I’d like to keep my shirt on my back, thank you.”

“Suit yourself.”

With a final smile, she left the room. It felt oddly empty, now that everyone was gone. I approached Isaac, who muttered a spell. The door closed behind him, softly. I arched an eyebrow.

“I assumed you wished to speak with me privately,” Isaac said. “Was I mistaken?”

“No.” I didn’t mention that he could just as easily have closed the door with his hand. “I’d like to borrow some staff for the rest of the week, if that’s okay with you. The students are going to be a mess. Especially the Hunters. I could use some extra bodies to keep them in line.”

“You? Asking for help?” Isaac looked amused. “Why, Noah, I never thought I’d see the day.”

“Not help,” I growled. “Bodies. I’m putting everyone back through basic training and conditioning. Running attack and defense sequences would only rile them up. I want them too tired to make stupid decisions.”

“Stupid decisions?” Isaac asked blandly.

“Like trying to hunt the moraghin themselves,” I said. “I wouldn’t put it past some of

them, especially with your new restrictions. I'm sure they're already chafing."

"Better chafed than dead," he said flatly.

I wasn't sure it was an either-or. It was entirely possible they'd chafe, then end up dead from stupidity anyway. That was why I wanted to tire them out.

"We're going to start with running," I said. "The loop around the grounds is five miles. That should exhaust most of them, but some are faster than others. I can't abandon the Hunters in the group—I don't trust them alone. But if I stick with the Hunters, the stragglers will be unprotected."

"And you think the moraghin will return so soon?" he asked.

"I don't think anything," I said. "I'm just trying to cover my bases. For a few days, anyway."

"Fair enough," Isaac said. "We don't know what to expect. This entire situation is unprecedented."

He sounded very angry about that.

"I take the safety of our students very seriously," he continued. "And I have no idea what happened today. Do you have any notion of how disconcerting that is?"

I sighed. "I do."

"Good." His voice warmed half a degree. "Because I need your help investigating."

I blinked. "Investigating?"

“I’m sure you’ve heard the word before.”

“Yeah, obviously. But—”

“I want you to find out what happened. Talk to the other staff. The wardkeepers in particular. See if you can pick anything up. Discreetly.”

“Pick anything up?” I asked.

“Anything suspicious, or out of place. Watch. Listen. Explore.”

“Spy, you mean.”

“If you’d like to describe it that way. Be amicable, and see what they let slip.”

I frowned. “You want a witch for this. Magic allows for more subtlety than anything I can do.”

“I’ll work with what I’ve got.”

“But you’ve got your entire faculty. Why me?”

“Because you’re the one person I’m sure had nothing to do with breaching those wards. You were in class when the moraghin attacked, and you don’t have the power to lower the wards yourself.”

I pressed my lips into a flat line and blew air out my nose. “People are going to think it’s odd, if I’m suddenly chumming it up with Hans and Autumn and the others. We’re hardly friends.”

“It would be even odder if I were to do it. Just tell them you’re worried, since the

moraghin appeared in your class.”

My brow furrowed. “You really suspect one of the wardkeepers is responsible?”

“I suspect everyone,” Isaac said.

I rolled my shoulders, trying to work out a knot that had crept up between them. “Everyone in the meeting just told you they’d look into what happened and tell you what they found. No one’s going to be dumb enough to say one thing to you, then something different to me. Spying isn’t going to work.”

“You’re welcome to think that. But you still have a job to do.”

I rolled my eyes. “I already have a job.”

“I’ll talk to Eddie and Hans,” Isaac said. “You did say you were looking for extra help with your classes. Both of them should be suitable, and it will give you an excuse to talk to Hans, for starters.”

“Bodies,” I corrected him. “I said I wanted bodies, not help.”

They were good choices, though. Eddie practiced Brazilian jiu-jitsu and sparred with Leon sometimes. Hans ran marathons for fun. Both were in shape enough to keep up with my classes as we ran.

“Regardless,” Isaac said. “I’m sure they’ll be happy to oblige.”

“Well, thank you. But I still think I’m not the best choice for—”

“Noah.” Isaac’s voice was low, but it stopped me shorter than a shout. “The matter is not up for discussion.”

I inhaled deeply and let the air out slowly. I didn't agree with this decision, but it was impossible to get Isaac's mind to change, once it was made up.

"Now, why don't I let you go," he said. "I'm sure you have work to do."

If I didn't before, I definitely did now, I thought as I made my way back to my cabin.

Vesperwood was supposed to be a safe haven for students. I wasn't interested in being Isaac's spy, but I did want to get to the bottom of today's attack. Find out who was behind it, and take them down.

That much came easily to me. I thought about the violence rained down on my class this afternoon and smiled coldly. Whoever was behind it needed to be punished.

I was looking forward to that.

6

NOAH

M orning came, and I met Hans and Eddie in the gym. Neither of them was thrilled to be—fine, I'll say it— helping me , but they were there. It was hard to say ‘ no ’ when Isaac asked you to do something. His asks weren't actually requests. Not really.

All my students were high-strung, jumping at the sound of Eddie closing the gym door as the last few arrived from the manor. I was glad I'd planned to go back to basics with them. They wouldn't have the focus to run through complicated exercises without hurting themselves. And the five mile run did tire them out wonderfully.

The next day was more of the same, though some of the Hunters were getting fractious, just as I'd predicted. Some of my juniors asked if Vesperwood was sending out any hunting parties for moraghin in the surroundings. Another asked if the campus needed more guards. A senior Hunter asked if we could work on moraghin-specific fighting techniques—and then proceeded to trip over his own feet in the agility drill I'd set for them.

All of them were disappointed when my answer was negative. The fact of the matter was that I did have a moraghin-specific fighting style that I could have worked with them on any other time of the year. Moraghin's long limbs and razor-sharp claws required long-range weaponry and spellcraft. Exactly the opposite of what I'd done on the day they'd attacked. But the students were too eager, too giddy, to teach them that yet. And I didn't want to give them ideas.

The underclassmen, at least, seemed less desperate to hunt moraghin themselves, especially since there was still no official word on how the attack had occurred. Some of them looked like they would have been glad to have extra faculty accompany them on the walk to and from the gym, and not just on our runs around campus.

The freshmen who'd seen the attack were holding up better than I expected. Cinda was undoubtedly right. They would have mental images, flashbacks even, to what happened in the gym that afternoon. But as the next week wore on, and I continued to put them through punishing endurance workouts, I hoped I was giving them new, vivid memories to overwrite the old ones.

I couldn't take away what had happened, and I wouldn't coddle them, lying about what a safe place the world was. But if I could make them tired enough, and annoyed enough with me, maybe that would push out the fear.

Most knew better than to complain. Even Sean and his clique were mostly silent on the matter. I heard Sean mutter, "treated like we know nothing," as I walked by him during wall-sits, but he had the sense to shut up once he realized I was within earshot.

I let it go, turning to walk down the line in the other direction. Felix, Ash, and Cory were at the far end, and I stiffened when I saw them, in spite of myself. I took a deep breath and forced myself to keep walking normally. I couldn't tense up every time I saw the kid. I was better than that.

Cory was fine. Cinda had cleared him to participate, so he had to be. And if he had any troubling memories of the attack, at least he wasn't making them my problem. Wasn't testing my patience the way so many other students were.

He was far from the strongest student in the class. He might, in fact, have been the weakest. I wondered if he'd ever run a single mile before, let alone a five-mile loop around the grounds. He didn't have much muscle definition, and while he was

flexible, his balance and agility needed work.

But there he was, bracing against the wall like everyone else, thighs shaking, gutting it out.

He'd fallen numerous times over the last week. Been the last to finish in both our distance runs and sprints. His muscles had given out in the middle of a plank two days ago, landing him flat on his face. But he hadn't complained once. He'd just dragged himself back into position and tried again, until I called time.

Sean could learn a thing or two from him , whispered the voice at the back of my mind.

I grunted.

Cory had been completely frozen in front of that moragh. Mostly frozen, anyway. He had no strength to speak of. Needed constant looking after. And that wasn't my job. I could instruct, but I wasn't the kid's protector.

So why couldn't I get his face out of my mind when I lay down to sleep? And why did my body feel electrified, drawn to his like a magnet, any time he was in sight?

No one else knew what to do with the moraghin either, whispered that traitorous voice. You yelled at Sean and Tim for trying to jump in with weapons. Is that what you wanted Cory to do ?

I shoved the thought away. I didn't want Cory to do anything.

It was a week after the attack before I had any free time to work on Isaac's spy mission. I felt ridiculous. I wasn't cut out for subtlety. But Isaac clearly felt the attack had been an inside job. I agreed, and the thought made my blood boil. I could do a

little spying if that was what it took to catch whoever had been behind it.

After Second Hour, I walked with Hans, Eddie, and the students back to the manor, then followed Hans into the staff room. He grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and flopped down on the sofa, stretching his legs out.

“Whew.” He twisted the top off the bottle. “I don’t know how you do that day in, day out. I think I’ve lost twenty pounds in the past week.”

Aside from accompanying the students on runs, Hans hadn’t been doing anything, but I didn’t point that out. The idea was to make nice with him.

“It keeps me busy,” I said with a shrug.

I sat down in the chair to the left of the sofa and drummed my fingers on the ratty green fabric covering the arm. Hans gave me a quizzical look. So much for my attempt to look relaxed. I wasn’t usually one for casual conversation. He had to know something was up.

Maybe I could use that to my advantage. I paused, letting silence stretch out between us until I judged Hans was on tenterhooks. Right when he opened his mouth to speak, I said, “I was wondering if you could do me a favor.”

His eyes widened. Me asking for a favor was even weirder than me attempting low-stakes chit-chat. I knew I had a reputation for being stand-offish. I hoped that would just make him more curious.

“Of course,” Hans said, leaning forward. “I mean, assuming—well, you know.”

I made myself laugh, nice and easy. It felt foreign in my mouth. “All above board, don’t worry. I was just wondering if you could walk me through how the wards work.

Especially this new bit that you all added.”

I’d heard they’d done some tinkering to make the spell more effective. But Hans’s eyes narrowed. Had I sounded too accusatory?

I shook my head, and decided to try channeling Seb. Everyone liked him. How would he handle this?

“Most of this stuff just goes over my head,” I said, doing my best to sound apologetic. “But I can’t help worrying. Not about you guys, obviously. I know you’re doing everything you can. It’s just—those freshmen who were in class when the moraghin attacked. They’re a wreck. I’m sure you’ve noticed. I’d just feel a lot better if someone would walk me through how the wards work. Treat me like an idiot—because I am one when it comes to this stuff.”

“Oh.” Hans blinked, then nodded to himself. “Yeah. Of course. That’s no problem. You see, the basic enchantment principle is predicated on the functionality of the invisibility matrix woven into the fabric of Vesperwood’s physical manifestation on this plane of reality. Given the inherent modularity of the—”

“Sorry to interrupt,” I said, rushing to forestall him before he really got going, “but—another request. Do you think you could show me the ward room, too? Like I said, this isn’t my area of expertise. It might help me grasp it better if I could see it, too.”

He nodded again. “Of course. Yes. I think. Well, I’m sure no one would mind if—that is, it’s just to explain to you how the spell works, right? I don’t see how anyone could object to that.”

“I promise I won’t touch anything,” I said, giving my best self-deprecating grin. God, how did Seb do this every day? I felt like I was going to crawl out of my skin. “Could

you show me now?”

It seemed best not to give Hans too much time to second-guess himself, and five minutes later, we were on the fourth floor of the manor, standing in front of the door to the ward room. Hans had blathered about moon phases and the effects of minute shifts in gravity on human spellwork on our walk, but now he fell silent.

I'd passed by the ward room before, but had never had cause to look inside. As I watched Hans approach the door, I realized I couldn't have looked, even if I had wanted to. It was locked to all except the wardkeepers themselves.

He murmured a spell too low for me to hear and passed his hand in front of the door in a complicated motion. I tried to clock it—up, then right to left, back up again, then down, finished with a pulling motion and a flick of the wrist to the right as though he were brushing away a gnat.

Memorizing the motion wouldn't make any difference if I hadn't heard the spell, and it wasn't like I could do magic anyway. But Isaac had told me to watch as well as listen, so I did the best I could.

Finally, Hans opened the door and ushered me inside. I walked three steps into the room and stopped, staring at the scene before me.

The room itself wasn't large. Maybe fifteen by fifteen feet, with a bay window opposite the door that pushed out and added a few extra feet on that side. That entire wall was filled with windows, through which I could see the cool blue of the winter sky.

The floor was covered with an eight-pointed star, drawn directly on the wood in something liquid and crimson. A glowing green jewel hovered above the middle of the star, just floating in mid-air. Thin lines of light, golden and sparkling, emanated

from the jewel, retracing the star pattern in the air. Every few seconds, a bright comet of light shot from one point of the star to another, both in the air and along the crimson pattern on the ground.

This wasn't subtle magic, and it wasn't a quick battle spell either. The whole room radiated power, and the air smelled like ozone. The star was massive, taking up most of the floor. I slid sideways around it to the right. I didn't know what would happen if I crossed into the pattern, and I didn't want to find out.

Hans closed the door behind us and walked around the star to the left, not even glancing at it. I supposed the sight was ordinary for him, as a wardkeeper. He pulled a heavy book off a shelf beneath the bay window and continued his circuit until he reached me.

He opened the book to a page about two-thirds of the way through, filled with minute, cursive writing in various colors of ink. I squinted. The text was hard to read due to its size, but I also wasn't sure it was written in English. I looked at Hans.

"Vesperwood's grimoire," he said, seeing the question in my eyes.

That was another surprise. Individual witches were supposed to have grimoires. Occasionally large families or clans had them. But not institutions. I was learning more about magic than I'd expected today.

I did my best to focus on Hans's explanation of how the ward worked. The power that had gone into it, the ritual used to invoke it, the magical theory underlying its mechanism, and, 'the delicacy of the otherworld-lattice that knits the filaments of spectral energy into the finest lace of double-matrix spellwork.'

That last bit was a direct quote, though God help me if I had any idea what it meant.

Hans flipped through additional pages of the grimoire, filled with yet more minute text, until he reached a page with a diagram that looked roughly like the star pattern filling the room. With a final disquisition on the importance of synchronizing magical coordinates, he flipped the book closed.

“Simple enough, right?” he said, his eyes bright. He no longer seemed suspicious of me. Rather, he was enthralled with his subject matter. “It’s an incredible piece of spellcasting. And it is, of course, an honor to be asked to be one of the wardkeepers. If only it didn’t take—”

He cut off abruptly and shook himself, like he’d only just realized what he was about to say.

“If only it didn’t take what?” I asked.

“What? Oh, nothing. No, I just meant, um—well, it’s not important, just a small detail of the spell.”

I wasn’t sure I believed him. After all, he’d just spent the past fifteen minutes telling me every detail he could think of about the spell. Why clam up now? But he clearly wasn’t going to tell me.

“Right,” I said, nodding towards the book. “So, the additional layer of enchantment you added this week. Was that...covered somewhere...in all of that?”

“Ah! Yes. Well, no. I merely meant—that is—I was simply—”

“Hans, take a breath,” I told him. “It’s okay. You don’t have to explain everything perfectly. I’m not going to judge you.”

“Right. Yeah. Of course.” He shook his head. Sometimes he seemed as young as the

students. “I was just excited. I don’t get too many chances to talk about advanced spellwork, especially since I’m stuck teaching underclassmen. I never thought you’d be interested.”

“And I never thought I’d have four moraghin pay a visit to one of my freshmen combat classes,” I said wryly. “We’re living in unprecedented times.”

“You can say that again. Well, as I was saying, no, I didn’t describe the additional layer yet.”

“Is it going to take another thirty pages in that thing to do so?” I asked, looking at the grimoire.

“No, this one’s even simpler. As you know, Autumn, Teresa, Sheridan, and I are wardkeepers. Traditionally, this has meant that we maintain the wards through regular ritual, perform periodic assessments, and keep everything in good working order. And until now, there’s never been a problem. But until now, everyone also assumed that the wards were impregnable. The fact that the wards could be breached without our direct knowledge is worrisome.”

I nodded. So far, so good. I had actually understood all of that.

“To avoid that occurring again, we decided it made the most sense to add four additional nodes within the enchantment for capacity stimulus, artifact debugging, and energetic cleansing, and to connect those nodes to this planar instantiation via in vivo implantation. This should not only augment the potency of the enchantment and assist in perpetuating the soundness of the instrument, but also ensure instantaneous cognizance of any malefic intent or supernatural rifts in the fabric of the incantation.”

I sighed. He’d been doing so well.

“So that means—”

“It means that the spell now flows through each of the wardkeepers themselves,” said a voice behind us.

Hans and I turned to see Autumn standing in the doorway.

“The spell gains power and keeps itself in proper working order by using our bodies as focal points,” she continued. “And if there’s another attack, our bodies will be attacked as well.”

That sounded gruesome. But maybe that was what it took to strengthen the wards.

“Autumn!” Hans said. “I didn’t know you were here.”

“Of course you didn’t, I just got here.” She grinned. “Besides, you wouldn’t notice a herd of elephants walking right in front of you if you were in the middle of explaining a spell.” She walked around the star to join us. “Hey, Noah. What brings you up here?”

“Hans was just showing me how the wards work,” I said, doing my best to sound innocent.

And I was innocent. I wasn’t doing anything. It was all perfectly reasonable, me being up here with Hans. And Autumn didn’t seem suspicious...did she?

I suppressed a sigh. I really wasn’t cut out for this spying thing. I was much better at dealing with straightforward violence. Not playing around with secrets and lies.

“Yeah,” Hans chimed in. “Noah just wondered, what with the moraghin going to his class and all. I figured it couldn’t hurt to tell him.”

He sounded as nervous as I felt. Moreso, actually. He'd been perfectly normal, if confusing, until Autumn arrived. Now he looked like he expected a firing squad to pop up behind her and take him out.

"Completely understandable," Autumn said. "I can't imagine what that was like."

"Count yourself lucky," I told her. I glanced over at Hans, who was clutching the grimoire with both hands like a shield. Were those beads of sweat on his brow?

I considered my words for a moment before saying to Autumn, "You said you were with students during the attack?"

"Yes," she said, with a confident nod. "Advanced Artifice. Room 207."

No defensiveness there.

I looked over at Hans. "And you were..."

"I was in the faculty lounge," he said quickly. His knuckles were white as he gripped the grimoire. "I told Isaac that already. Do you want to talk to any of the other faculty who were there? I'm sure I could ask them to—"

"No, no, not at all." I held up my hands, trying to calm Hans down. "No, I'm just trying to figure out how long it took for word of the attack to spread. As soon as the moraghin were dead, I went to Isaac's office to inform him. But it sounds like you guys knew about the attack before that."

"Well, yeah." Autumn wrinkled her nose. "I don't know what Hans explained to you, but as a wardkeeper, you're looped into the matrix of the spell, and if it's breached, you're alerted. It's like a little chime going off in your mind. Well, that's what it was like. Now, with the changes to the spell, we'll feel it physically if they fail."

“I did explain that,” Hans said quickly. “It was right when I was telling him about—”

“It’s okay,” I said, holding my hands up again. “I’m sure you did. I’m just a little dense about this stuff.”

In fact, I’d gathered that they were immediately alerted to the wards’ failure back at the faculty meeting, but I was curious how they’d react if I pushed them on their whereabouts.

“So you guys got here pretty quickly,” I continued. “And then Teresa and Sheridan came later?”

“Yeah, but not much later,” Autumn said. “I think Teresa was finishing up a class as well, down on the first floor. And Sheridan said he was in his rooms.”

“He was the last to arrive,” Hans said emphatically. “For what it’s worth.”

Autumn gave him a look that clearly said, ‘ So what ?’

Hans shrank, hugging the grimoire to his chest. “I’m just saying, it took him longer to get here than the rest of us. We were already checking the spell to find where it had broken when he showed up. Teresa had just found the breach between the fifth and sixth grid coalescences. Remember? You and I were running the south perimeter circlet through the scrubbing manifestor when Teresa said, ‘ Wait, what’s this ?’ And then you turned to look at her, and I was still holding the threads when Sheridan came in and asked, ‘ What the hell happened to the damn wards ?’”

When he finished speaking, he pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose. Autumn looked at him, equal parts baffled and amazed.

“If you say so,” she said. “To be honest, my memory of that day is a little fuzzy.

There was a lot of panic in the air.”

“I wish mine were fuzzy,” Hans said glumly. “I keep having nightmares about the wards breaking again.”

I considered the two of them. Was Hans laying it on a little thick with his suspicion of Sheridan? Was Autumn a little too quick to dismiss his concerns? Would it be worth looking into why Sheridan took so long to arrive? And what about Teresa?

There was just no way to know. I’d have to investigate all of them. Dammit. I hadn’t narrowed anything down today at all.

“Well, I should be getting back.” I juted a thumb over my shoulder vaguely. “I appreciate you showing this to me, though.” I clapped Hans on the arm, and he jumped. “It puts my mind at ease.”

“Happy to—happy to help,” he stammered.

I nodded at Autumn, then headed for the door. I was careful not to touch the spell as I circled the room, and was relieved to get out into the hallway.

Magic didn’t make me nervous, exactly, but the spells I was used to were battle spells, hexes and curses. They were sharp and strong, but short, flashing through the air, then disappearing. Nothing like that web of power holding up the green jewel—or held up by it. I still wasn’t clear on Hans’s explanation.

I closed the door, and the spell, firmly behind me, and went to get ready for my next class.

CORY

The bell had just tolled the start of lunch as I followed Cordelia Jefferson, the head of Hearth, back to Hearth Haven's headquarters. We took a winding route through the grounds, following first one path, then the next. Finally, Cordelia stopped and spread her hands out.

"Home sweet home." She smiled fondly.

For the life of me, I couldn't figure out what she was gesturing to. All I saw were trees and hummocks of snow-covered moss, and a low sandstone ridge rising up from the forest floor. It wasn't until we followed the path to the end, right at the base of that rocky promontory, that I realized what I was looking at.

The rockface was the front of a building, built right into the earth. There was a massive wooden door, made of light wood and left rough-hewn so it blended in with the stone on either side of it. It had iron hinges and a brass handle, though, and inlaid in the center was the hand and flame of Hearth Haven. To either side sat windows filled with glass so thick I couldn't see through it clearly.

There was some device—it looked almost like an abacus—of copper and quartz set into the rock opposite the door handle, the copper weathered to a mossy green that matched the forest floor. Professor Jefferson flicked the counters this way and that, and then turned the door handle.

It looked so heavy, I thought she'd have to tug it open, but it swung open easily on noiseless hinges. Professor Jefferson held the door, then followed me into the building, swinging it shut behind us.

"Oh," I said, stopping short.

We'd stepped into a cave. Or maybe cavern would have been a better word. The floor sloped down, away from the entrance, and by the time we reached the bottom, the rock ceiling stood twenty feet above us. The floor here had been inlaid with tiles, but the walls were bare rock.

"It's not much, but it's home. And the cool temperatures make it a great wine cellar."

Professor Jefferson cracked a wry smile, and I smiled back. She was one of the kindest people I'd met on campus so far. It was nice to know that Professor Romero wasn't the single exception, and not all the professors were intimidating like Kazansky or arrogant like Gallo. Or determined to be as cold as possible to me, like Noah.

Stop thinking about him , I scolded myself.

It was hard, though. Noah occupied my thoughts these days. Each of my lessons with Romero was still a struggle, but I'd remembered Noah earlier and earlier in each dream, even if I still had trouble remembering who I was.

I didn't want to keep thinking about Noah, but my subconscious didn't give a shit, apparently.

I followed Professor Jefferson through a labyrinth of tunnels. I supposed they were hallways, technically, but no matter how straight the walls or how thickly carpeted the floors, you couldn't get away from the fact that you were walking underground.

The floors rose and fell at random intervals, and I began to feel like I was on a rollercoaster.

Finally, we reached another door with the hand and flame of Hearth, but this time the symbol had been burned into the wood, and the flame didn't cover the palm, but rather danced over the fingertips. Jefferson opened the door and ushered me into a giant...laboratory?

I wasn't sure what to call it. It was a large cavern, that much was clear. The walls and ceiling were rough, and there were no carpets underfoot here. A fire burned in a circular hearth in the center of the room, but its flames were blue and purple, not the reddish orange I expected, and pink sparks floated in the flames without disappearing.

The smoke drifted up in a lazy spiral to what appeared to be a hole in the roof—I could see moss dripping down around the edges. I wondered if the fire went out every time it snowed.

There were large tables placed around the room, sticking out from the walls at different angles. Some were covered in papers and what looked like engineering schematics. Others were heaped with jewels and bits of metal, wood, and glass.

I recognized a microscope and a set of scales, but what was the thing that looked like a wooden robot, with a glass chest filled with sparkling green liquid? What was the set of interlocking, spinning circles and spheres, like a model of a solar system that definitely wasn't ours? And what about the cube made out of various metals that hovered four inches above a table, humming softly?

The lab was lit with glowing balls of light above each table, plus a row of windows along the far wall. When I looked through them, I realized they were practically skylights. Bits of winter-brown leaves and sticks had blown onto them. I could see more snow-covered hummocks on the ground, and the base of a tall tree.

Professor Jefferson saw me staring and grinned. “Neat, huh? Well, maybe you’ll apply to Hearth at the end of the semester and conduct your own experiments here one day. But for now, come join me near the fire.”

I followed her, trying not to bump into any tables as I went, wary of knocking something loose. The fire was eerily silent. I’d never realized before just how many sounds fires made, but I missed those hisses, cracks, and pops as I stood alongside this one. It was disconcerting.

“Now, you know what a vocator is, right?” Professor Jefferson asked.

“It’s sort of like magical text messaging?” I said.

She laughed. “Well, yes, that is one of its main functions. To send a message, you’ll actually speak the words you wish to send into the device, but your recipient will read them in the form of temporary ink on their skin. Your vocator will be tuned to the network at Vesperwood, so you’ll be able to contact any other student here that you wish. Faculty and staff can also use them to get in touch, but typically, official communications about coursework and such will be made through the tubes. Your vocator will also serve as a locating device for the dean, as a safety precaution. That way, if you’re ever in any danger, we’ll be able to find you and help you.”

“Oh.” I hadn’t even realized there was a network to be a part of, but it made sense. I cocked my head to the side. “How is it able to do all of that?”

“A full explanation would take more time than we have before lunch ends,” she said. “Suffice it to say, the vocator is connected both to you, and to the magical network in which Vesperwood is enmeshed. Further elaboration can wait until you take our more advanced courses.”

She walked over to a basket woven from strips of brass that was sitting next to the

hearth and picked it up. It clanked as she handed it to me. I peered inside. It was filled with lumps of metal and stone, even some crystals.

“Have a look at those and pick out the ones you want,” she said.

I stared down at them, then back up at her. “How do I choose?”

Jefferson shrugged. “It’s different for each person. Some people feel themselves drawn to different substances. Some say that the weight of the ore or stone feels ‘right’ in their hands. Some people pick based on nothing more than color. It’s entirely up to you. Just choose your top three and set them on the table there.”

As I began to examine the chunks of metal and stone, I was aware of the professor sprinkling different powders into the fire and speaking to the flames. She waved her hands above them, and at one point even stuck her hands into the fire, making intricate shapes with her fingers. I found myself staring, then remembered I was supposed to be picking out rocks.

I looked back into the basket. I picked up a lump of dark gray metal, rough on the outside. It reminded me of Noah—hard and forbidding—but I wasn’t attracted to it, the way I was to the man. I set it down and picked up another lump, this one a mass of tiny crystalline shards that reflected the indigo light of the flames. It was pretty, but too much like a disco ball for my taste.

In the end, I pulled three pieces from the basket. The first was a light greenish-blue crystal with swirls of white. It shimmered gently and made me feel calm just looking at it. The second was a solid hunk of stone that was silvery, shiny, and felt good in my hand. The third was a crystal that managed to be black, but filled with a kaleidoscope of colors at the same time. It reminded me of the night sky—or the starry sea that I saw when I dreamt.

I handed the basket back to Professor Jefferson, who inspected my selections.

“Interesting,” she said. “Aquamarine, hematite, and black opal. Very interesting.”

“Really? Why?”

She set the basket back on the floor. “Every student’s choices are different. But generally, we feel called to the stones and ores that give us something we need.”

“I don’t even know what these ones are,” I protested. “I just picked the ones I thought looked the nicest. What are they supposed to mean?”

“Interpretations vary, but I see aquamarine as a stone for calm, hope, and courage. I find hematite to have a very grounding presence, making it helpful for those seeking security. And black opal possesses protective and purifying properties. A very rare stone, and an interesting combination.”

I felt a little exposed as her eyes studied me. Was that why I’d chosen those stones? Was that what I was looking for? Either way, she didn’t give me much time to ponder it.

“Now,” she said, “which wrist do you want your vocator on?”

“My left, I guess? I’m right-handed.”

“Alright. In that case, come stand here, and hold your hands out.”

She pulled me forward and turned me so my left hand extended towards the fire, and my right hovered over the three stones I’d set on the table.

“Good,” she said, when she had my hands positioned just where she wanted them.

“Now we can begin.”

From a small pouch on her belt, she pulled out a pinch of pink powder and tossed it into the flames.

“ Activate .”

The flames rose higher, six feet in the air, before sinking back down to three feet tall.

“Put your hand in the fire,” she told me.

I blinked. “Are you sure it’s—”

“Now, child. Once the spell is begun, it must be completed in a certain amount of time. The flames won’t hurt you.”

Warily, I extended my fingertips, and I felt the moment I brushed the flames. Professor Jefferson was right. It didn’t hurt, but it did tickle . The flames licked up and down my fingers as I stuck the rest of my hand in.

“Good,” she said again. She was brisker than before, all business now that the spell had started. She pulled a different pouch from her belt, undoing the ties and holding it out to me. “Now, dip the index finger, middle finger, and ring finger of your right hand into this and touch the powder inside. Don’t pick it up, mind. Just touch it with the tip of each finger.”

Cautiously, I introduced my index finger into the pouch. I expected the powder to feel like sand, but the pieces felt different somehow. Triangular. And they clung to my skin like iron filings to a magnet. When I pulled my finger out, a cap of gold dust clung to it.

“The other two, now. Quickly.”

I repeated the process with my other two fingers, then extended my hand towards the table again.

She put the pouch away, then waved her hand above mine and said, “ Accept .”

My fingertips began to tingle, and the gold dust on them began to glow.

“Now bring your hand to the table and touch each of the three rocks in turn with a different finger. Then pull back”

I did so, and the tingling in my fingers increased, spreading up my hand as the glow enveloped more of my hand too.

“Alright,” Jefferson said. “This part might hurt a bit, but only for a moment.”

Before I could ask what ‘a bit’ was, she waved her hands in front of me in a complicated pattern that I couldn’t follow.

“ Commence ,” she called, and her voice rang out in the room.

The rocks on the table began to vibrate, and a golden thread of lightning connected each one to one of my fingertips. The gold lightning then wound around each finger and across my palm, and the tingling there turned to pain.

The lightning continued up my wrist and arm in jagged steps and angles, darting this way, then breaking hard in the other direction. The tingling was definitely unpleasant now, but it wasn’t until the lightning reached my shoulder, disappearing under the sleeve of my T-shirt, that the real pain began.

I couldn't see the lightning anymore, but I could feel it jet across my collarbones. My heart skipped a beat as pain lanced up my arm and into my chest. Fire flared down my nerves, a sharp, crippling pain that made my right hand contract and my chest squeeze tight. My heart beat rapidly, and I couldn't get enough air into my lungs.

Fire flared down my left arm as the gold lightning reemerged on that side. When it reached the fingertips of my left hand, still extended into the blue and purple fire, my entire body lit up gold. It probably looked pretty cool, but I was too busy trying not to yell to really notice.

The pain was excruciating. It felt like flames lacerating my skin. I didn't understand why I didn't see blisters, or hear the hiss of my skin breaking and burning away.

I looked at Professor Jefferson in consternation. "This. Is. A. Bit?" I gritted out through my teeth.

She ignored me, moving her hand again and calling, "Connect."

Suddenly, the lumps of stone on the table weren't just vibrating. They were shifting form, melting and swirling into something fluid. Sea green, silver, and sparkling black liquid turned into thread, and the threads of stone reached forward, touching my fingertips and following the path of the lightning.

This pain was different, but no less awful. It felt like knives stabbing my skin, then digging in deep, burrowing into my veins. I watched in horror as the stone traveled up my arm. It twined around the outside, but I could feel it moving through my muscles as well.

My heart almost stopped when the liquid stone reached my chest. I couldn't breathe. For a long moment, my lungs felt encased in stone, my heart entombed, throbbing weakly but unable to fully beat. It didn't start beating normally again until the stone

began traveling down my other arm. I sucked in a ragged breath and tried hard not to cry out.

The stone kept moving down my arm, swirling along the outside until it reached my wrist, where the stone that had moved through my body broke my skin and oozed out, still liquid and alive. I wondered why blood didn't spurt out with it. It felt like I'd been carved up.

The threads of stone separated again, the pale blue-green of the aquamarine, the silver of the hematite, the jet and rainbow fire of the black opal. They danced around my wrist in curlicues too fast for me to follow.

"Set," Jefferson called.

The threads flashed the same gold as my skin, and the very air in the room seemed to flash in response. I yelled in pain as my skin burned even hotter.

Jefferson waved her hands a final time. The threads flashed once more, then returned to a solid state, a web of stonework encircling my wrist. The instant the stone set, the pain disappeared. I wheezed and gasped, my throat hoarse, and stumbled forward in the sudden absence of hurt.

I caught myself on my knees, struggling to get my breath back. I looked at my arms in wonder. From the way the spell had felt, they should have been blackened to a crisp, but they were completely unharmed. I didn't feel any after-effects or lingering ache. The pain was completely and totally gone.

"You could have warned me," I told Professor Jefferson. "That hurt for more than just 'a moment.'"

"And what would that warning have done, except make you more nervous?" she said,

smiling warmly. “Now come here. Let’s take a look at you.”

She drew me over to the table where the three stones still sat. They looked slightly smaller than before. For all that it had felt like the entirety of each rock had entered my body, only a tiny bit actually had.

Jefferson placed my wrist on the tabletop and snapped her fingers. “Light .”

It was a little different from the way Kazansky had been teaching our class to make light, but it had the same effect. A globe of light appeared over our heads, and I pushed back the sleeve of my gray hoodie to see the vocator on my wrist in sharp relief.

I stared at it in wonder. Ropes of hematite braided and twisted together as they knotted around my arm. Aquamarine ran through the hematite here and there like veins of pale blue. And on four of the knots, black opal erupted from the hematite like a tiny star.

It was beautiful, and not something I had any right to wear. It was too nice for me.

“Interesting,” Jefferson said again. “Yours is more intricate than many designs I’ve seen. But again, the stone responds to you and your needs.”

I wondered what the intricacy meant. I suppressed a shudder, imagining what my dad would have said about me wearing something so, well, pretty. I stifled the urge to cover it with my hand.

Professor Jefferson pointed out a tiny depression in the hematite that was just the right size for a fingertip.

“You’ll press there to activate it, either to speak a message to someone, or to read one

sent to you. Then you press it again when you're done."

"Okay," I said softly, still reeling from the experience. I felt strangely exhausted, and I didn't know if it was from the spell, the fact that I'd missed lunch, or because I had another lesson with Romero tonight.

"Alright." Jefferson picked up the basket of rocks and added the three I'd removed to it. Then she turned back to the fire, which had threads of gold running through the indigo flames now. She frowned slightly, then looked over her shoulder at me. "Are you able to get back to the manor on your own? I need to deal with this fire before Third Hour starts."

"Yeah, sure. I'll be okay. And, um, thanks."

I waved my wrist in her direction. I really was pleased with how the vocator had turned out, even if I was a little worried about what others might think.

"My pleasure," she said with a final smile, before turning back to the fire.

I was amazed that I was able to successfully backtrack through the maze of Hearth Haven to the front door. Amazed, and proud of myself. I stepped out into the afternoon sunshine with a grateful smile. I hadn't felt uncomfortable in Hearth, not exactly, but it was nice to feel the breeze on my face again, and know I was above ground.

It was chilly, though, so I set a quick pace as I headed back to the manor. Maybe I could get back in time to grab a sandwich from the refectory before I had to go to Haven Selection. But I must have used up all my mental mapping ability inside Hearth. I was so focused on my hypothetical sandwich that I didn't pay attention to my route, and soon enough, I was hopelessly lost.

I stopped in the middle of the path I was on and spun in a slow circle. I couldn't see the roof or towers of the manor anywhere. I couldn't see any buildings, in fact. I assumed I was still on Vesperwood's campus, because Professor Romero had said something about the wards discouraging students from leaving, but aside from that, I had no idea where I was.

A caw sounded through the trees, and I looked up hopefully. Maybe the raven was coming back. Maybe it could guide me to where I needed to go. But all I saw overhead was a crow, much smaller than my raven, perched on the edge of a tree branch. It stared at me, and I got the distinct impression it felt I had invaded its territory.

"Sorry," I said, looking up at it. "I'm trying to get out of here, I promise."

I glanced around. All I saw were bare winter trees and shrubs, mixed with pines and other evergreens. A huge spruce leaned over the path ahead, and part of me wanted to turn back. It looked a little ominous, despite the bright sunshine of the afternoon. But I didn't want to turn around either. After all, I'd just come from that direction, and I hadn't found the manor back there.

With a sigh, I walked forward again. I passed under the spruce without incident, and told myself not to be stupid. Trees didn't have nefarious intentions—right? The path curved, and I blinked.

Was that a roof peeking out through the trees up ahead? It looked too low to belong to the manor, but whatever it was, maybe I could find someone there to give me directions.

I resumed walking, the wood shingles of the roof coming into focus. The path curved again. I followed it eagerly—and walked straight into Noah, coming from the other direction.

His eyes narrowed immediately. “What are you doing here?” he asked. His tone wasn’t warm.

My heart stuttered in my chest, but I reminded myself I wasn’t doing anything wrong. “Trying to get back to the manor.”

He snorted. “Right. So you want me to believe you just happened to be walking towards my cabin purely by accident?”

“Why would I—wait. Your cabin? That building back there is where you live?”

A thrill shot through me at that thought. Knowing where Noah lived—it felt a little like seeing him undressed. Which, technically, I had never done. Only part of him had been unclothed, that first night.

“Don’t act innocent,” he said, his voice flat. “It’s not cute.”

I stiffened. “I’m not trying to be cute. I’m trying to get back to the manor. That’s all.”

“Well, it’s in the opposite direction.”

“Okay, well. Thanks, I guess.”

I wanted to say something more clever as I turned and walked away, but I couldn’t think of anything cutting or witty enough.

“Wait.” Noah’s voice cracked like a whip.

I looked over my shoulder.

“I’ll go with you,” he said. He didn’t sound enthusiastic about it, though.

“You don’t have to. I’m not a child.”

“I don’t care if you’re eighteen or eighty-eight, I don’t trust you walking around by yourself. For all I know, you’d manage to drown yourself in the lake.”

“Fuck off,” I muttered, but not quietly enough.

“What was that?” he asked sharply.

“Nothing.”

I started walking again. Noah caught up and we walked in silence while I stewed. I was so angry, and still so attracted to him, which wasn’t fair. I didn’t want to like men in the first place, much less this one. It wasn’t fair that he got to be so hot while also being an asshole.

“Where were you coming from?” Noah asked after a minute.

“Hearth Haven. I got my vocator.” I held up my wrist to display it, as if I needed proof.

His eyes narrowed again. “Who did the spell for you?”

“Why does it matter?”

And why did he have to sound so suspicious about everything I said?

“Don’t be a brat, just answer the question.”

A new rush of anger filled me, but saying I wasn’t being a brat would only make me sound more childish.

“Professor Jefferson.” I strove to make my tone as cold and uncaring as his.

Noah grunted.

“Why?” I asked again.

“Forget it.”

I resisted the urge to scream, but it was really, really hard. Having a normal conversation with the man was impossible. I shouldn’t have cared, but for some reason, I very much did.

After another moment of silence, Noah asked, “Did you see Autumn Zhu while you were there, at Hearth?”

“Who?”

“Nevermind.”

It was a weird walk. Noah seemed to want to be in the lead, but I’d be damned if I was going to waddle after him like some kind of duckling. So I kept pace with him, but I still had to look to him for guidance every time we came to a fork in the path.

Noah reached out to hold an overhanging branch out of the way, and I caught sight of his vocator. It was a heavy, solid thing, with two coils of metal, one silvery, one black.

“Does everyone at Vesperwood have one?” I asked, pointing at the device.

He nodded. “The dean wants it that way.”

“Did it...hurt? When they made yours?” I wasn’t sure why I was asking. Maybe I just wanted confirmation I wasn’t a total wimp.

“Life hurts,” he said.

What a cheery turn this conversation had taken.

“Does it get in the way of your knife? The one strapped to your arm?” The bottom end of the knife he kept strapped to that wrist was just barely visible as his jacket cuff fell back.

He shook his head. “I take the vocator off during combat. You should too.”

“Well, yeah.” I’d seen other students doing that since our first class. “But I mean not in combat. In real life.”

“I try not to use my knives much in real life.”

“Then why wear them?”

“I said try .” He shrugged. “Besides, old habits die hard.”

An answer equal parts unsettling and arousing. I wanted to ask what old habits, but Noah looked away. His nostrils flared, and his face was set in a hard line, like he couldn’t bear being polite to me much longer.

What had I ever done to upset him so much?

“I would never mention it to anyone else.”

The words fell out of my mouth before I’d fully formed the thought that went with

them.

“What?”

“That night. At the Balsam Inn. I haven’t told anyone about it, and I won’t. I wouldn’t do that.”

He barked a laugh. “Tell who you like. I didn’t do anything I’m ashamed of.”

“Then why are you such a dick to me?”

Those words came out before I’d even begun the thought, and I clapped a hand to my mouth.

Noah gave me a withering glance. “I don’t befriend students as a rule, Cory.”

“I’m not asking to be your friend.” I flushed with mortification. Did he think that was what I wanted?

“Good. Because it’s not going to happen.”

I just barely withheld a sigh, opting instead to walk even faster, trying to become the one in the lead. But Noah’s long legs kept pace with mine.

“If I’m hard on you,” he said after a moment, “it’s because you missed your first semester. I’m trying to catch you up. Nothing more than that. Definitely nothing personal.”

I watched his face as he spoke. His lip curled in disgust. He could say what he wanted, but I was clearly distasteful to him in some way. If he wasn’t worried I was going to blab his apparently not-a-secret, then what the fuck was his problem with

me?

Abruptly, he said, “There’s the manor.”

We came around a bend in the path, and sure enough, the manor loomed in front of us. I started forward, then noticed he’d stopped walking.

“Aren’t you coming too?”

“I have other things to do than babysit you. I trust you can make it the last fifty yards on your own.”

I didn’t bother to respond, just stomped away.

“Cory.”

My name on his lips stopped me before I’d made it five steps. In spite of myself, I turned around.

“Maybe you really were just trying to get back to the manor,” he said slowly. “But you shouldn’t be wandering out here alone. It’s dangerous.”

“For me, but not for you?” Annoyance laced my tone.

“I’m older,” he said. “I can take care of myself. But I don’t have time to take care of you too.”

With that, he turned and walked away.

8

CORY

Heat and smoke filled the air, making it hard to breathe.

Red light shifted and shimmered around me, dark as blood and ink in places, sparking with electricity in others. There were flames nearby, I was sure of it, but I couldn't see enough to know where. My eyes were clouded, and I could only catch glimpses of the world around me.

I was alone, except I wasn't alone, because I could hear something shifting in the dark behind me. Something heavy, moving through the shadows as the heat on my back built. Then it was right behind me, and sparks cascaded down my back.

Something sharp traced down my spine. A nail? A claw?

The image of a moragh filled my mind. Was that what was doing this? Was this what that creature in the gym had wanted, when it attacked me? Not to kill me, not to steal magic that I didn't even have, but to take me to wherever this place was, to be its slave?

The claw traced down my spine again, and shivers broke out across my body. Was that what I'd been dreaming about, this whole time? A rotting, putrid corpse that wanted to desecrate me?

I whimpered, and the thing behind me laughed. I wondered if it took pleasure in my

fear. Tenelkiri , my mind prompted. Tenelkiri, not moraghin. It's feeding on your fear .

I looked left and right, craning my head to see the thing behind me, but all I could make out was shadows and crimson light. The creature laughed again, and the rumble seemed to shake the ground. It shook me, anyway. I felt it in my bones. Felt a tremor inside me, like my bones were trying to respond.

No. No, they weren't. No part of me wanted this.

"Go away," I panted. My voice was tiny, barely audible. I struggled to swallow, to wet my throat. "Go away."

It was barely any louder the second time. You'd have to be next to me to hear it, and while the monster seemed to be everywhere around me, it hadn't noticed my speech.

There were flames in front of me now, warming my entire body. I looked down, only to realize I was naked. My flesh glowed amber in the fire light. Sweat dripped down my stomach in rivulets, running into the channels of my hips, down to—down to—

God, my cock was rock hard. I was terrified, I had no idea where I was, or what the thing behind me in the darkness was, but energy pooled in my core and a surge of desire coursed through my body.

No, I couldn't want this. I didn't want this. I needed to get away.

I tugged, finding that my hands were tied behind my back. Rough rope fibers scraped my wrists as I twisted them, trying to break free. But there was no give. The rope dug into my skin, leaving it raw, but the harder I tugged, the tighter the knots became.

The monster noticed my efforts. I felt it hovering behind me, shadows made flesh. I

felt its breath on my neck, felt its tongue lick along my shoulder blades, then curl up and lick the inside of my ear. I shuddered. Did it want to fuck me, or eat me? I wasn't sure which scared me more.

"Go away," I said, and it was still more croak than scream, but the creature heard me for the first time.

"You wish to leave?"

Its voice was low and gravelly, almost indistinguishable from the crackling fire and the roaring wind that howled around us.

"Please," I begged, and suddenly the rope was gone. My hands had been mid-tug, and now they were flying through the air as the force restraining them disappeared. I was knocked off-balance and started to fall, when the thing grabbed me and held me upright.

I looked down to see shining, dark claws wrapped around my wrists. They were sharp enough to draw blood, but they were gently clasped around my arms, carefully not shredding even the smallest piece of my skin.

Was it holding me?

My breath came in short little bursts, my pulse so far up my throat that I swore I could taste it. The monster's claws retracted, freeing my hands. I could move again. I was free to go in any direction I wanted. My heart thudded.

"Go," said the creature. The sound of its voice—no, of his voice—filled my ear and reverberated through the air at the same time.

Go , I told myself sternly. Just leave. He's letting you go .

It would be no effort at all to step a foot forward. To follow it with another step. To make my way into the darkness, and not look back.

If you leave now, you'll never see what's behind you , whispered the traitorous voice in the back of my mind.

But I didn't want to see the monster.

Right?

I swallowed, my breath still coming in short gasps. I closed my eyes. I shook my head.

The laugh that curled out of the darkness behind me set my core on fire. Shivers cascaded over my body, and something slithered down my spine. I couldn't tell if it was a bead of sweat or some part of the creature. All I felt was heat. And wet.

This was so wrong. But no one had ever wanted me before. No one had desired me the way this creature did. And I wanted more.

Something curled around my stomach, encircling my body. I looked down, expecting to see an arm, scaly and horrifying, trailing wisps of smoke and decay. Instead, I saw...a tail?

That was the only word for it. It was black, more leathery than scaly, and instead of trailing smoke, it felt wet. It was a thick rope of a thing, as big around as my forearm, covered in something clear and viscous.

That couldn't just be my sweat. Sweat wasn't that thick, or that smooth. It wasn't that...soft.

The word made no sense. Everything else about this creature was hard and rough, but the tail felt like skin where it pressed up against me. As I watched, it snaked around my back and the tip came back to rest below my belly button. How long was it?

I was still sweating, but my midsection was covered in a mix of sweat and whatever coated the tail. I gasped as it squeezed me, then again as it uncurled, sliding away and leaving me relieved and desperate and quivering at the same time.

“ Please ,” I groaned. The word came from my mouth unbidden, but this time, I wasn’t asking the monster to stop.

This time, when the tail reappeared, it pushed itself between my legs. I wobbled, taking a half-step to the side, which made room for it to slide between my thighs. The tip, still smooth and wet, brushed past my balls, then slid around my shaft.

It wrapped me in tight coils of heat and slick until the tip of the tail reached the head of my cock, sliding around it, flicking and teasing. Jesus, that was too good. Too much. I shuddered, my knees shaking, and in an instant, the monster was there.

One clawed hand grasped my hip, the other rested on my shoulder. The other . For all I knew, the thing had eight hands. All I could tell about the creature behind me was that it was massive, and hot, and...and that it wanted me .

The monster’s claws were almost delicate in the way they steadied me. Once in place, they hardly moved, like the creature was frozen in stone. It was only when I shook or sagged, my body weak from pleasure or fear, that the claws pressed in, and only because my movements had pushed my skin against their sharp points.

All the while, the tail—Jesus Christ, a fucking tail —slid and grasped and slinked around my cock. I was rock hard, dripping pre-cum that mixed with whatever liquid coated the tail. I was so close. All I needed was another—

“Cory.”

Someone said my name, and I couldn't tell where it came from. It wasn't the monster. The voice wasn't right. It was too high and raucous. Too insistent.

“Cory. Cory Cory Cory Cory.” My name crashed through the air. I twisted around, baffled. The creature still held me. It didn't seem to notice the intrusion.

“Cory.” This time my name was accompanied by a sharp twinge on my face. My hand flew up automatically, touching my cheek.

“Ow,” I complained. I closed my eyes, trying to shake the pain away, and when I opened them again, I was back in my room at Vesperwood, lying in bed.

The raven stood on my chest, peering down like it was considering pecking me. Pecking me again, I realized, my fingers still touching the sore spot on my cheek. It had bitten me.

Relief and disappointment filled me as I stared up into its beady eyes. I was safe in bed. Early morning light came in through the window, which was open and letting in a cold breeze. The monster, the fire, smoke, and the tail had been nothing more than a dream.

I was more relieved than disappointed. I was pretty sure of that, anyway.

“Okay, okay, I'm up,” I grumbled, pushing myself up against the headboard. I glared at the raven, which I still hadn't named. “You didn't have to be quite so forceful, you know.”

“Cory,” it croaked. “Cory Cory Cory.” It hopped on my blanket like a child in a bouncy house. The look it gave me was smug.

Ever since the moraghin attack, it had come to visit me nightly, and most mornings too. I'd started leaving my window unlatched and propped open, so it wouldn't tap incessantly as I tried to sleep. I didn't know what it wanted, or if it wanted anything at all.

It hadn't repeated the word ' Vesperwood ' once in all this time, but in addition to my name, it had taken to repeating ' Good night , ' ' You again , ' and ' Peanut , ' ad nauseam. I didn't know where it had learned the word peanut, but it seemed to mean any small bit of food I gave it.

"Let's see what you brought me this time," I said, flinging the covers back and padding to the window. A dead mouse lay on the sill, its head lolling at an unnatural angle. "Gee, thank you."

"Thank you," the raven croaked, flapping over to join me at the window. "Thank you."

"You don't have to bring me presents, you know. You're not a cat."

"Cat. Cat cat cat. Cat cat cat cat cat." It sounded like a snare drum. I shook my head.

"I have to shower. If you leave before I'm back, please at least take the mouse with you?"

I had no idea if the bird could understand me, but I pointed to the mouse and shook my head sternly, hoping that would convey my meaning. The raven never stuck around for too long, and if it was a familiar, it had yet to show any hint of magical ability. With the possible exception of maybe being able to read my mind.

How had it known to say Noah's name, that one time? I shook my head. I didn't like thinking about that.

It felt good to shower that morning, like I was washing metaphysical as well as tangible grime off of myself. Every other night, I lay on Romero's sofa and had a sex dream that ended in an orgasm, and yet my brain was still conjuring up monsters to fuck in its spare time. I felt gross, queasy, and exhausted.

Romero claimed that progress took time, that I would get better slowly and surely. So far, I hadn't seen any signs of it. All I could do was be grateful that I hadn't stumbled into the dream of anyone at Vesperwood. Or at least, as far as I knew, I hadn't.

I supposed it was possible that Chad or Hasan or any of the other guys whose dreams I'd found were students here I just hadn't met. If they were, I hoped I never did meet them. I didn't think I could handle facing people whose dreams I'd invaded the night before. Especially not when I knew what we'd done together.

The raven was still in my room when I got back, but the mouse was gone.

I gave the bird a long look. "I hope you ate that, and didn't just push it out the window."

The raven flapped over to my desk and bobbed its head as I gathered my class books. "Window, window."

"You again, huh?"

The voice came from my doorway, and I turned around to see Ash leaning against the frame, grinning at the raven.

"You again," the raven repeated. "Ash. You again, Ash."

"That's my name, don't wear it out."

“Ash, Ash, Ash,” the raven said, pointedly ignoring instructions.

All I could do was be grateful that with its penchant for repeating names, it had only said Noah’s name when I was alone with it.

“I still think you need to give that guy a name,” Ash said as I scooped my books into an old backpack that I’d picked up from Vesperwood’s lost and found bin.

“I don’t want to presume,” I said, slinging the bag over my shoulder. “I don’t know its gender. It might not be a guy.”

I turned back to the raven and stroked its head with my finger. Their head? That felt a little better than referring to the bird as an it . The raven bobbed their head against my hand contentedly.

“So give it a gender neutral name,” Ash said with a shrug. “Robin. Jesse. Desk.”

“I’m not naming my raven Desk,” I said, a little affronted on the raven’s behalf.

“Cat,” the raven croaked, stepping out from under my hand and fluttering back to the windowsill. “Cat cat cat.”

I hoped that didn’t mean they were off to go bring me more small animals.

“I think they’re telling you what they want to be called,” Ash said, grinning.

“I’m not calling my raven Cat, either,” I told him.

“Cat.”

The raven croaked the word one more time before flying off without so much as a by

your leave. I stared after them, wondering where they were going, and just what they did with themselves, when they weren't harassing me for food or gifting me dead voles.

"Come on," Ash said. "Felix is going to think we died if we don't meet up with him soon."

"Since when do you care about schedules?" I asked, giving the window a final look before joining him at the door.

"I don't really," Ash said with a shrug. "But it's waffle day today, and I want to get one while they're still hot and crispy."

Did ravens like waffles? Maybe I should save the bird a few pieces. Though the pieces would be soft by the time I saw them tonight. And did ravens prefer waffles with syrup, or without?

My mind filled with these important questions, I stepped out into the hall with Ash. I could solve the mystery of the raven—and my dreams, and my incubus power, and a million other things—later. For now, I was going to concentrate on waffles, and put this morning's dream behind me.

Somehow.

CORY

“D o you think this would help?” Min asked, pulling a large, red, cloth-bound book off the shelf.

There was gold lettering on the spine, but I couldn’t make it out from where I was standing, on the other side of the aisle and two shelves down from her, in the first library.

Keelan, who was standing closer, took it and hefted it in his hand. It looked heavy to me, but he held it like it weighed nothing. He flipped it over to stare at the cover and read out, “ Numerical Considerations in Artifice Construction: A Guide for the Practical Witch .” He frowned. “Maybe? This seems more like a handbook for Hearth than a research work, though.”

Min frowned. “Well, it’s the best thing I’ve found so far.” Frustration filled her voice, and she gestured at the line of bookcases stretching down the aisle towards a stained glass window that spilled green and purple light onto the heavy carpet. “This place is endless.”

Erika, who stood on my other side, glanced over her shoulder at Min. “I thought you liked research.”

“I do,” Min said. “But only when I get to choose the topic. This just feels pointless. I’m not going to apply to Hearth or Harvest or History. Why do I need to do a whole

report on them?”

Erika laughed. “Now you sound like Rekha.”

Min made a face. “You take that back.”

“If the shoe fits...”

“But it doesn’t . None of it fits. I know I want to apply to Harmony. This is a waste of time.” Min glared at the rows of books. “Anyway, trying to find books in this library is like trying to play chess when you can’t see the board. You’re just reaching out blindly, hoping you grab something useful.” She poked the spine of a book that was level with her face. “I think the last person who reshelfed this place was drunk.”

“I don’t think it’s that bad,” Erika said. She had quite the stack of books cradled in her arms, all about Harvest.

Two weeks after the moraghin attack, we were back in Haven Selection, collecting books for research on either History, Harvest, or Hearth. I was working with Ash and Felix again, thank God, and Felix was having the time of his life gathering sources about History.

“Not that he needs any,” Ash had pointed out. “He’s a walking, talking encyclopedia on the history of History already.”

Erika was in her element too, and I wondered if she’d always been this studious, or if she was throwing herself back into classes with a renewed zeal after the attack. I didn’t know her that well yet, but we’d bonded a little bit as the two students who’d had the closest encounters with the moraghin.

“I think they’re just trying to justify hoarding all these books,” Keelan said with a

laugh, running his fingers along the spines on the shelf closest to him. “They know we could find more if they organized it better, but then they’d have to get rid of duplicates and earlier editions, or decide they didn’t need twenty books on the history of magical cures for sneeze attacks. If they leave it in this jumble, they get to avoid all that hard work, and still have an excuse to have three libraries.”

I turned back to the shelf I’d been browsing. In theory, I was looking for books on History, but I had a secret mission too. Well, that made it sound serious, when in fact, it was probably really stupid. But what I was actually looking for were books on the fundamentals of spellcasting.

I’d never admit it to my friends, but in my spare moments, I’d been wondering if I might truly be able to do some magic. In theory, I shouldn’t have been able to, as an incubus. But there were some signs that I might be something more, right? The raven, the moraghin attack, and all that?

My friends already thought I was a witch, so I knew they wouldn’t judge me for trying to learn. But since I wasn’t sure I was one, and since, even if I were, I had no idea if I’d be competent, I wanted to keep my little project under wraps for now.

All my attempts so far had just been me whispering words into the air in my bedroom, trying to manifest a light above my hand. I felt stupid. Like a little kid who thought if he wished hard enough, he could turn the broccoli on his plate into a pile of cookies.

Maybe I should try going up to Kazansky’s classroom and doing the spell there. I could find some time of day when it was empty, surely. It might help me to believe I could do it, if I stood in the same spot she’d stood in, the first time I saw magic at work.

But I had a feeling I was missing something. Some fundamental explanation for how

spells worked. If I could cast them at all, that was. But since Romero's lessons weren't actually about catching me up on what I'd missed in my first semester, I needed to figure out what that something was for myself.

I paused, my eyes catching sight of a dusty book with a mottled, moth-eaten spine. I couldn't read all the words in the title, so I pulled it out from the shelf to inspect it. Introduction to Spellwork: A Modern Witch's Primer. I flicked it open and scanned for a copyright date. First published in 1898, fourth edition in 1937.

Modern , huh? But still, it might contain some useful information. Wasn't magic supposed to be some eternal truth or substance? How much could the basic instructions have changed in eighty odd years?

"Whatcha got there?" Erika asked.

I jumped and dropped the book. It fell to the carpet with a muffled thump, releasing a cloud of dust into the air.

Way to be smooth . Way to keep things on the down low .

"Nothing," I said quickly. "I was just—it looked so old. I was curious." I bent to grab the book and shoved it back onto the shelf. I'd have to find a time to check it out when no one else was around.

"Yeah, some of these books are ancient," Erika said. She held a book out to me, a slim volume bound in blue cloth. "You guys are looking at History, right? Maybe this could be useful?"

I took the book from and studied it. The Advantages and Disadvantages of Written Magical Records: A Historical Perspective .

“Could be,” I said.

“I mean, it says ‘ History ’ right there on the cover.” She pointed at it.

“Yeah, but I—” I shrugged. “I still feel like I don’t understand any of this. It’ll probably be helpful, though, you’re right.”

I stuck it in the crook of my arm. Would it help with our research? Felix would know.

“That’s good, though,” Erika said. “That you don’t understand stuff. That’s the whole point of our first year. To introduce us to all the different types of magic out there, before we pick one to focus on. There’s so much that still confuses me too.”

“Yeah, but it’s different for you,” I told her. “You like, get magic. You grew up in a family of witches.”

“Doesn’t mean I could do any magic, though. I didn’t come into my powers until age seventeen.”

“But you still heard about all of this stuff. People talked about it. To me, all this magic stuff feels like trying to learn Ancient Greek.”

Erika laughed. “Then I probably shouldn’t tell you that learning Ancient Greek is a huge help if you’re trying to study the magical systems of antiquity.”

I looked at her, widening my eyes half in jest, half in legitimate panic.

She giggled. “Don’t worry, we don’t get to that until second year.”

“Are you serious?” I asked. “I feel like I’m drowning just trying to keep all that we’ve learned so far in my head.”

“I mean, it’s optional,” she said. “You don’t need it for every haven. It’s most useful if you’re studying comparative historical magic.”

“Wait, are you planning to go out for History like Felix?”

“Nah, probably not. Hex is where the cutting edge spellwork is being done. But Ancient Greek is a help there too.”

“Right,” I deadpanned. “Because what’s more cutting edge than a dead language?”

“All invention builds on knowledge of the past,” she said primly—and then grinned. “But I’m also kind of a language geek. It just sounds fun.”

I looked at her stack of books. “Do they use a lot of ancient languages in Harvest?”

“Sort of. A lot of ancient magic had to do with the natural world. Some of the oldest spells we’ve found date back to early Mesopotamian kingdoms attempting to control floods, bring rain, increase crop yields, and all that. But I mostly just picked Harvest to research because it’s the haven I know least about. It’s always good to expand your knowledge, right?”

“Don’t let Ash hear you say that,” I snickered. “So okay, you want to learn Ancient Greek. What other languages do you want to study?”

“Oh God, the list is so long. But I’ll probably start with Sanskrit, and then Egyptian and Sumerian written records.” She grinned. “I heard Vesperwood even has an elective on Linear A.”

I frowned. “Like, algebra?”

Erika shook her head. “No, it’s the name of a language—well, a script—that no one’s

deciphered yet. From thirty-five hundred years ago.”

“And they teach that here?”

“Not teach, exactly. But you work on trying to decrypt it through a magical lens. Or something like that. Val was a little vague on the details, since she’s never taken it.”

Val, or Valeria Martinez, was Erika’s older sister, a fourth-year Hunter who, from Erika’s description, was equal parts Barbie doll and Xena, Warrior Princess. She’d pointed Val out at lunch once, across the refectory. All I’d been able to see was curly brown hair on someone who was at least six feet tall. She’d looked like she could beat me up, though.

Erika flicked one of her long braids over her shoulder and returned to studying the shelves. The action highlighted an angry scar on the side of her neck. It hadn’t been infected, but it was still taking a while to heal.

“How are you doing today?” I asked. “With, you know. Everything.”

I didn’t want to press her to talk about something she’d rather avoid, but I felt the need to ask anyway. She’d been through a lot, and much as she was trying to act like it never happened, I could tell it still bothered her.

It bothered me too.

“Oh, you know. My ribs still hurt any time I take too deep a breath, my ankle aches, and I’m terrified Cinda missed something and I’m about to turn into a monster. But other than that, hunky dory.” She smiled wryly. “How about you?”

“About the same. Peachy keen, really.”

In a quiet voice, only audible to me, Erika said, “I keep having these nightmares. Reliving the attack. And afterwards. I see myself turn into one of them. The whole student body staring at me, trying to kill me. Pretty melodramatic, you know?” She tried to smile again, but it wasn’t a very good one.

“If anyone has an excuse for nightmares, I think it’s you.”

“Do you have them?”

I nodded grimly. Sure, my nightmares weren’t exactly the same. But I did keep flashing back to that day. The moragh standing over me, slavering, seconds away from killing me. Try as I might, I still couldn’t remember stabbing the thing in the eye, the way Ash said I had. All I saw was myself standing there, frozen, just waiting for it to kill me. Letting it happen.

“Yeah,” I said simply. “Yeah, I do.”

“Fun times, huh?”

I snorted. “You could say that.”

I tried to go back to looking at books, but my brain refused to cooperate. Now that we were talking about it, I was stuck on the day of the attack, unable to get visions of it out of my mind. Why had I thought bringing it up was a good idea, again?

“Ash says that if you get infected, it’ll show up in twenty-four hours,” I said after a moment. “So you’re safe. We both are. We have to be.”

Erika shrugged helplessly. “That’s what I keep telling myself. Maybe one of these days I’ll even believe it.”

The loud boom of a bell filled the air as Vesperwood's great clock began pealing the eleven strikes that ended Third Hour. After a moment's pause, the sounds of students jostling, talking, and stacking books filled the library. Those who were checking books out made their way to the front, shuffling along in a slow line towards the massive ledger that kept track of who had borrowed what.

I bent to grab my backpack and when I straightened, Ash and Felix had joined me. Felix had an even bigger stack of books in his arms than Erika. Ash, predictably, had none.

Min looked at Felix, disgusted. "Are you serious? How can you even find anything in here?"

"You use the catalog," he said, as if he didn't understand the question.

I was on Min's side. The catalog was an even larger, vellum-bound tome that sat on a desk by the door, and I couldn't make heads or tails of the organization system. Felix, evidently, had no such problem.

"I'll grant you that most of the texts here are elementary," he said. "But I asked Professor Romero and he says he doesn't expect us to need anything out of the second library or the third, so I think he's alright with papers that concentrate on a beginner's level understanding of the subject matter."

"Well, here's hoping you find this beginner's level too," I said, handing him the book Erika had given me. "Because it's all gibberish to me."

Keelan hoisted his bag onto his shoulder and looked at Felix. "You going back to your room before Combat, or are you going to carry those books around for the rest of the day?"

“It’s only one more class,” Felix said. “Why?”

“I was going to offer to take them, if you wanted. I have a pass out of Combat today, to meet up with Annaliese and Professor Rosato in Room 318. It’ll take me right by your room.

“Oh,” Felix said. “Yeah, thanks. That’d be great.”

“What are you meeting with them for?” Ash asked.

“Imbolc preparations,” Keelan said. “Things are different this year, since we have to hold celebrations in the ballroom instead of outside. They’re trying to figure out if we can still have a bonfire. I told them I’d keep water at the ready as they test out a new fire spell.”

“Suck-up,” Ash said. “You realize you’ve already made it to college. You don’t need to keep padding your file with extracurriculars.”

“He’s not sucking up,” Min said with a grin. “He’s pining.”

Keelan’s cheeks went scarlet, and Ash’s eyes widened. He twitched his nose, like a squirrel who’d just caught the scent of the perfect acorn.

“Do tell,” he said.

“Annaliese,” Min said. “Keelan wants to bang her.”

“I do not,” Keelan said heatedly, which only made it sound like he really did. His cheeks got even redder, if that was possible.

“Oh, pardon me.” Min snickered. “He doesn’t want to bang her. He’s in love . It’s

much purer.”

“You can still want to bang someone you’re in love with,” Ash said, wiggling his eyebrows. “In fact, I’d venture to say most people do.”

Keelan looked like he wished he could sink through the floor.

“What’s Imbolc?” I asked, trying to change the subject. “I’ve never heard of it before.”

I was getting tired of saying that. But Keelan sent me a grateful look, and I decided it was worth it. Besides, I was curious.

“Some holiday.” Ash said, waving his hand. “Fires. Crosses. Wandering around outside in robes.”

My brow furrowed. “Uh. That doesn’t sound great.”

Ash looked at me, confused, and then his eyebrows shot up. “Oh, God no, not like that. It’s women in robes, mostly. And the crosses are a Celtic thing. Or maybe Catholic. I’ve never been sure. Sometimes there are dolls.”

I looked at Keelan, as much at sea as ever.

“It’s an old pagan holiday, co-opted by the Christian church,” he said. “Some Wiccans celebrate it as one of the eight sabbats of the year. It marks the return of spring, when lambing season begins. It honors the goddess Brigid, or St. Brigid, depending on your point of view.”

“The return of spring? But it’s February.”

“It was originally celebrated in Ireland and places like that,” Keelan said. “I think it’s warmer there, this time of year.”

“The Gulf Stream,” Erika said. “Even though they’re farther north than we are, the Gulf Stream ensures they have a much milder climate.”

“Is Vesperwood a Wiccan university? Or Celtic?” I asked.

“No,” Felix said. “That would be pretty difficult, if only from a logistical perspective. There isn’t a single Wiccan or pagan authority to affiliate with, and Celtic Reconstructionists usually avoid the syncretism that one finds in neo-pagan rituals. Their goal is to stick to what can be known from historical sources, but what we have for Imbolc can be maddeningly unclear. We don’t even know where the name comes from, or how far back it dates. It’s actually possible that it underlies the tradition of Groundhog’s Day in the U.S. But in any case, some of the faculty and students mark the day, and the celebrations are open to everyone.”

I nodded slowly, trying to take that all in. “What’s included in the celebrations?”

“A bunch of stuff,” Keelan said. “Some of the women who celebrate will get up early and do a ceremony to welcome the day. There’s ritual cleansing, then ceremonial robes, then a parade and a spell to invoke Brigid’s blessing. Some people make dolls, and leave things out for her to bless. And then there’s a big bonfire at night, and a feast.”

“Oh. Cool.”

“My family celebrates it back home,” Keelan said with a shrug. “So I wanted to help out here at school too.”

“Most people skip the dawn ceremony,” Erika said, “and just go to the feast. That’s

what my sister says, anyway.”

“I hear it’s mostly an excuse for people to get drunk,” Min said with a grin.

“Well if getting drunk will help honor the gods—or goddesses, in this case—then I am more than happy to oblige,” Ash said.

Felix sighed. “Why did I know you were going to say that?”

“Because you’re just so smart.”

Ash reached over and pinched his cheek. Felix batted his hand away.

“Love you,” Ash said with a big smile. Felix glared, but he couldn’t keep it up in the face of Ash’s outrageousness. He rubbed at his cheek and smiled back.

“Don’t worry, Felix,” Min said. “You can bring your books and ask Brigid to bless those too.”

Felix stared at her in horror. “Bring books to a bonfire? I would never. What if there were sparks?”

“I didn’t mean you had to put them in the fire ,” Min said, rolling her eyes.

“Still.” Felix hugged his books to his chest, looking horrified.

“Well nobody’s bringing anything, if the bonfire doesn’t happen,” Keelan said. “Which is why I need to go. But Felix, if you can bear to part with those, I’ll stick them in your room for you.”

“You promise?” Felix asked. “You’ll drop them off before you go help them

experiment with indoor bonfires?”

“Scout’s honor,” Keelan said. He stretched out his arms, and waited for Felix to deposit the books in his open hands.

“Come on.” Ash linked his arm through Felix’s now unburdened arm. “Let’s go to Combat. Though with the amount of books you’ve been carrying around, you’re probably so jacked you don’t even need it.”

He pulled Felix into the main aisle of the library. With a final look at the shelf where my primer for the ‘ modern ’ witch sat, I followed the rest of my friends out. I’d just have to come back and get it later.

It was snowing lightly as we made our way to the gym for Combat, but that didn’t stop Noah from making us run Vesperwood’s five-mile loop again. It wasn’t too windy, but we still had to be careful of our footing as we wound through the trees on the dirt path that had been frozen solid since I’d gotten to campus.

There was a beauty to the woods in the winter, though. A wild stillness, an emptiness that seemed to stretch for miles. I knew there must be animals out here somewhere—the raven had to be flapping around, if nothing else—but it felt like we were the only living creatures in the world. The snow muffled every sound, except for our huffed breaths as we forged ahead.

Until we reached the lake, that was. Lake Superior was huge. The biggest lake I’d ever seen in Iowa was barely two miles around, but Superior looked the way I’d always imagined the ocean would, rolling and gray and spread out beyond the horizon.

There was a slight promontory on Vesperwood’s grounds that jutted out above the water. To the west, the land fell away to a distant beach, covered in driftwood and

ice. To the east, the land stayed elevated, and curved inwards before thrusting out into the point that Point Claudette was named for. And in front of us, the vast expanse of steely water waited, looking like it could swallow a person whole and never give back their body.

The path snaked halfway out the promontory before doubling back, and I took care not to get too close to the edge. Fifteen feet down, where the sandstone bluff met the water, vast sheets of ice had broken and crushed against the shore. They stabbed upwards like giant arrowheads, ready to pierce whoever was dumb enough to fall onto them. They looked like teeth, and the lake looked hungry.

I shivered as the path ducked back into the woods, leaving the gaping maw of the lake behind.

I was exhausted by the time we reached the gym again. I was always in the slowest group, along with a few other students. Ash was one of them. I suspected he could run faster if he wanted to, but chose not to out of principle. I was too tired to feel anything but grateful for his company.

Noah was standing outside the gym as our little group shuffled up to the building. His face was unreadable. He ran with the fastest group, and had been back at the gym for a while now. Long enough to have cooled down, if the snowflakes gathering on his hair and eyelashes were any indication. His cheeks were barely pink.

I was gasping for breath and pretty sure the snot inside my nose had frozen, but I was proud of myself. I'd definitely gotten stronger in my time at Vesperwood. That said, the runs were still brutal, and in the winter chill, I was barely human by the time I finished. My legs wobbled, and I was coated in a cold-sweat that made me shiver the second we stopped moving.

"Inside," Noah said gruffly. His eyes looked the group of us over, but they seemed to

slide right past me.

It hurt. It shouldn't have, but it did.

His granite features were all noble and hard in the soft, snow-globe light. He'd crossed his arms over his chest and stood solid as a mountain as we filed through the door one by one. He looked like he was part of earth itself, his body one more tree trunk for us to weave around, but I'd seen him move enough to know that he could spring into action faster than I could blink, if the need arose.

Like he had when he'd killed that moragh for me.

My stomach twisted. Noah hadn't looked at me, really looked , since that day. My heart stung.

I refused to look at him as Ash and I straggled through last. So the man was gorgeous. So what? Plenty of other students and professors at this school were attractive. And it wasn't like I even wanted him to like me anyway. How could I, when I wasn't sure I wanted men to like me, period?

I just wished his own dislike had been a little less obvious.

10

CORY

The snow continued to fall after Combat, silent and serene, and by the time dinner was over, four inches had accumulated, with more forecast overnight.

“First signs of spring, huh?” I said as we climbed the stairs up from the refectory. I could see the snow falling outside in the moonlight through a window.

“Oh, come on,” Felix said. “It’s only twenty-two degrees out today. That’s practically balmy for this time of year. By Imbolc next week, it could even reach thirty-two!”

Ash snorted. “People in the upper Midwest are insane. I’ve seen Kaveh Abedi wear shorts here. In March. Completely nuts.

“Kaveh’s a werewolf,” Felix said. “They run hot.”

Ash laughed and wiggled his eyebrows. “Yeah they do.”

“Get your mind out of the gutter.”

“But that’s where it lives,” Ash protested. “You wouldn’t want it to be homeless, would you?”

“You could try putting it back in your skull for once, and actually use it.”

“Blah, blah, blah,” Ash said, rolling his eyes. “Did you know I also saw Kaveh...”

But I’d stopped listening, because we’d made it to the second floor, and we were just passing by the corridor that would take me back to the first library. I still wanted to pick up the book I’d found earlier that afternoon, without my friends peering over my shoulder.

I didn’t realize Ash had stopped talking until Felix said, “You okay, Cory?”

The two of them were looking at me as I stared down the other hallway.

“Yeah,” I said, making myself laugh lightly. “I just realized I forgot my notebook in the library this afternoon.”

“Get it tomorrow,” Ash said.

But that wouldn’t work. I needed some time in the library on my own, without anyone else keeping too close an eye on me.

“No, I want to get some work done tonight,” I said. “And the sooner I get it done, the sooner I can stop worrying about it.”

Ash gave Felix a flat look. “This is your doing, you know.”

“I made Cory forget his notebook?”

“No, you made him care about schoolwork.” Ash wrinkled his nose. “You took a perfectly good person and turned him into a nerd, just by forced proximity.”

“You caught me. I can’t deny it. I’ve committed the inimical sin of hoping that at least one of my friends won’t fail out of here.”

“Unforgivable.”

“I’ll just go grab it now,” I said. “You guys go on. I’ll see you at breakfast in the morning.”

“You’ll do no such thing,” Ash said.

I frowned. “Why?” I really wanted to get that book.

“Because you’ll be seeing us now, dummy. Come on.”

Felix’s brow furrowed. “You’re going to accompany him to the library? Voluntarily?”

“Aren’t you?” Ash asked.

“Well, yeah, but—”

“Then obviously I have to come too. Lord knows what you two bookworms would get up to, left to your own devices. You’d probably fall asleep there.”

But this was not part of the plan. If they came to the library with me, they’d realize pretty fast that I hadn’t left anything there at all. And I didn’t want them to see me check out that book. It was too embarrassing.

“You’re such a martyr,” Felix told Ash. “How ever do you put up with us?”

Ash sighed dramatically. “I ask myself that all the time.”

“Must be hard to date someone so perfect,” I said to Felix, hoping maybe I could guide them away from accompanying me by convincing them they’d prefer some

alone time instead.

“What?” Felix gave me a confused look.

“You know, hard for your self-esteem to be in love with...” I trailed off, realizing they were both staring at me now, looking horrified.

“You think...Felix and I are...dating?” Ash said, investing the last word with heavy scorn.

I just stood there with my mouth open, rapidly doing some mental recalculation. They’d never said they were dating, but with the way they acted, I’d just sort of assumed.

“You’re always bickering like an old couple,” I said. “And Ash is so touchy-feely with you. And you both made it clear you weren’t interested in me, my first day here.”

I felt like an idiot.

“We bicker because Felix is pedantic and I think I’m always right,” Ash said. “I mean, I am always right, but some poor, benighted souls don’t seem to realize it.” He laughed. “And just because we’re not into you doesn’t mean we’re into each other.”

“Yeah,” Felix said, still looking aghast. “Eww.”

“Hey,” Ash said sharply. “Rude.”

“I’m rude?” Felix said. “You just looked like you were going to vomit a second ago, contemplating the idea of dating me.”

“Well yeah, because you’re my friend.”

“But I’m not allowed to feel the same way?”

“I mean, in theory, yes, with a regular friend. Like Cory. But I’m me.”

“Meaning?”

“I’m gorgeous, charming, funny, smart, loyal, energetic, and great in bed, with an insouciant, devil-may-care attitude to boot. I’m a catch. Anyone would be lucky to date me.”

“So Cory and I should both be fawning over you all the time?”

“Precisely.” Ash grinned. “You know, I’ve been meaning to talk to you guys about that. You don’t bat your eyelashes at me nearly enough.”

“I’ll bear that in mind,” Felix said drily.

“See that you do.” Ash smiled impishly. “Now, let’s go get Cory’s notebook before he makes another embarrassing social faux pas.”

He linked his arm through mine and dragged me towards the library, Felix following behind with a laugh and a sigh.

So much for my brilliant plan. Now we were going to make a trip all the way there, just for me to pretend to realize that I’d had my notebook in my bag all along. And I’d still have to come back for the book another time. Wonderful.

Lots of students used the first library for studying, even upperclassmen. The first three rooms were sprawling, with comfy chairs and tables for studying scattered

among the shelves. One room even had a fireplace. It was very cozy.

But the crowds got thinner the further back you went in the library, as the seating got sparser. By the time we reached the area we'd been standing in earlier, it was like we were in a different world entirely. If the snow softened sounds, this end of the library seemed to swallow them entirely.

Golden globes in the air made pools of light in the otherwise shadowy caverns between the bookcases. As we walked along the rows, I had the strongest sense that I was walking through a diorama, that Felix, Ash, and I were tiny dolls, moving through a miniature world, looked down upon by some giant god. I felt like I was a statue in a museum, scuttling around in the dark after the visitors were gone.

There was no need to be quiet, really. No one else was back here, so it wasn't like we were disturbing someone's studies. But this end of the library seemed to demand silence, so I padded softly to the row where I'd been standing earlier, preparing my look of surprise for when my notebook was nowhere to be seen.

That was when I heard the voices. Hushed voices, but definitely there. Like some other little group was trying to be quiet just like we were. The voices were coming from the very back of the room, where row upon row of wide, flat drawers contained maps of every area of the globe, and probably some places that weren't even on the globe.

"You're not going to find anything," hissed one of the voices. It was impossible to tell who it belonged to, or even the voice's gender, given the whisper.

"How about we check before you make that decision?" another one shot back.

"I'm just saying, if it were as easy as looking it up in a book, people would have found it by now," said the first voice.

“It’s not a book, it’s maps. And I’m just saying, my brother swore there was a code in three of them that let you triangulate.”

“Did your brother ever find the spring?” hissed the first voice again. It was met with silence. After a moment, that speaker said, “My point exactly. He didn’t even tell you which maps to check.”

“Which is why we’re here checking all of them,” the second voice snapped, and it was loud enough that I could finally tell it belonged to a guy. “If you don’t want to be here, leave. No one said you had to come.”

“Just give me the map,” said the first voice, its tones hushed but annoyed.

I’d been inching forward this whole time, drawn to the conversation without knowing why. Something in the air, or the tone of those whispers, told me to move quietly, and Ash and Felix seemed to have picked up on it too. They followed my steps as I drew up to the last row of bookcases that separated us from the speakers.

I could hear the sound of shuffling papers just around the corner. Someone bumped into the huge table that stood back there, making a soft crash. A pencil rolled, then hit the floor, and the sound seemed to fill the room. Burning with curiosity, I tilted my head just a little further around the corner, and froze.

Sean, Rekha, and Tim were clustered around the maps table—the very last people I’d expect to see doing extra evening research in the library. Not that they were stupid—well, not Rekha, anyway—but she made a big show of already knowing everything there was to know and being bored in our classes. Sean and Tim had never seemed interested in anything that wasn’t related to violence.

They were all standing at different points around the table, which was covered with spread-out maps. Rekha was staring at the map in front of her with disdain, like it had

personally offended her. Tim was scratching his ear and looking at his map with disinterest. But Sean was poring over his, his eyes scanning the paper, fingers running back and forth across it.

“Here!” he said suddenly.

Rekha and Tim’s heads snapped up. I jumped, then steadied myself on the bookshelf I was standing behind. It shuddered slightly, but the three around the table didn’t seem to notice.

“This could be it,” Sean said, pointing at something I couldn’t see on the map in front of him. He looked over at Rekha. “The third mound. It’s a little east of yours, I think, and south-east of the mound by the lake.”

Rekha moved around the table, her jeans swishing softly, and shouldered Sean out of the way, peering down at the map herself. She frowned. “I think you’re reaching.”

“It’s a mound,” Sean said stoutly. “It’s clearly marked.”

“I think it might just be a smudge,” Rekha said. “And it doesn’t have any of the other two spots marked.”

“It’s not supposed to,” Sean said. “The whole point is it’s supposed to be hidden.”

What were they talking about? What was supposed to be hidden?

“We haven’t seen the spring on any of these maps,” Rekha said. “I don’t think it actually exists.”

The spring? I couldn’t help myself. I slid my foot forward, trying to see what they were arguing about on the map.

“It’s not supposed to be on the maps,” Sean said. “If it only appears one night a year—”

“Which might not even be the night you’re planning on looking, astrologically speaking.”

I slid a little closer.

“—then it wouldn’t be marked anywhere permanently,” Sean finished. “And it has to be the right night, because Vesperwood always celebrates Imbolc on the same day. And people have found the spring before.”

“People say they’ve found the spring before,” Rekha countered. “We still don’t have any proof.”

I slid another step forward and a chime went off, sounding through this end of the library like a tiny bell. Sean, Rekha, and Tim all looked up and saw me, before I could dart back around my bookcase. Tim’s hands curled into fists, and Sean shifted into his pre-fight stance, one I recognized all too well from Combat.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Rekha demanded, eyeing me suspiciously.

I flushed, embarrassed to have been caught. Embarrassed to have been listening at all, let alone in secret. But I hadn’t done anything wrong, had I? It’s not like they were working on anything top-secret or important—not three freshmen, only one of whom was a witch.

“Getting a notebook,” I said, making myself shrug nonchalantly. I didn’t feel nonchalant, but maybe I could fake it. “I left one here earlier today.”

She looked at my hands, which were clearly empty. “Right. And what part of getting

your notebook requires you and your friends to spy on people?”

I frowned, then realized Ash and Felix had stepped up behind me.

“We weren’t spying,” I said, still trying—and failing—for coolness. “I was just curious what you guys were—”

“It doesn’t concern you,” Rekha said, at the same time that Tim snapped, “Nothing.”

Sean just looked at Rekha. “I thought you were going to ward us.”

“I did ,” she said. “I told you I wasn’t strong enough to cloak us, just to let us know if someone came close”

“And what good was that, if you couldn’t even warn us until someone was on top of us?”

I realized, suddenly, what that chime had been. I must have triggered it as I kept inching forward. Dammit. Why couldn’t I have held back?

“And I suppose you could have done better?” Rekha said sweetly, though there was a hint of poison in her voice.

Sean sighed. “Whatever. We were done here anyway.”

“Don’t let us stop you,” Ash said brightly. “We wouldn’t dream of interrupting your skullduggery.”

Rekha began collecting the maps, sliding them on top of each other. Then she turned to a cabinet behind her with many long, thin drawers, and pulled one out. There were more maps inside it.

“Just leave them,” Sean told her.

Rekha glared at him. “You’re the one who insisted we had to do this at night, when no one else was around. Now you suddenly don’t care? You want to leave the maps out for these idiots to rifle through?”

She shoved the maps inside, sliding each one into a different place in the stack in the drawer.

“They don’t know what they’re looking for,” Sean said, rolling his shoulders out with a smile. “They couldn’t do anything with the maps if they tried.”

“A spring,” I said, annoyed. I didn’t want to admit how long I’d been listening, but Sean’s tone irked me. “Near a mound or something. It’s not on any of the maps, but you were trying to find it by putting together information from three of them.”

“Very good, Cory,” Sean said, his voice patronizing. “And why, pray tell, were we looking for it?”

About that, I had no idea. I shrugged again, still hoping I was coming off more relaxed than I felt.

Sean turned to Rekha and spread his hands out. “I rest my case. Let’s go.”

“The Spring of Irylis,” Felix said softly. “You’re looking for the Spring of Irylis, which appears on Vesperwood’s grounds on the evening of Imbolc, surrounded by mellora flowers. Take a flower from the glade before it disappears at dawn, and it will grant you one wish. Take water from the spring and it will heal even mortal wounds. So they say.”

I turned to stare at him.

“Ohh,” Ash said, recognition clear in his voice. He nodded to himself. Whatever the spring was, he’d at least heard of it before. He looked at Felix. “Is any of that true?”

It was Felix’s turn to shrug. “It’s more of a myth than anything else. People who claim to know how to find it always seem to have gotten the information from someone who got it from someone else. Some people say it moves to a different location each year. But that doesn’t stop students from going out to look for it every year anyway.”

“It moves?” I said, feeling my eyes widen. I should probably have gotten used to things like magical disappearing springs by now, but I still hadn’t.

“If it exists,” Felix said, sounding doubtful. “Myself, I think it’s an urban legend. How likely are flowers in February? In northern Wisconsin?”

“See?” Sean turned to Rekha. “They’re not going to look for it.” He laughed. “Even if they thought it was real, none of them would dream of breaking a school rule.”

I frowned. “Why would we be breaking a rule?”

“You have to hunt for it at night,” Ash said.

“Outside,” Felix added.

“Oh.”

Since the moraghin attack, underclassmen were discouraged from roaming the grounds by themselves during the day. The faculty definitely wouldn’t want us going out at night. And the dean had said Imbolc would be celebrated indoors this year. Somehow, I didn’t think searching for a magical spring was the kind of thing he would make an exception for.

“ Oh ,” Sean said, his tone mocking. He stepped forward, looking me up and down. His voice dropped low. “You wouldn’t do it even if you were allowed. Out in the woods at night? All alone? No one to rescue you? You wouldn’t last an hour. You’re too weak.”

“I am not,” I said, knowing how childish I sounded, but unable to help it.

“Actions speak louder than words, Cory,” Sean said. “And your actions...well, let’s just say that from what I’ve seen so far, I think you’d be down on your knees within a minute, just begging for someone to tell you what to do.”

It was such obvious bait that I knew I shouldn’t rise to it. I was sick with myself for what I’d done with Sean. What my body had wanted. I knew he was goading me, and I knew better than to respond.

“Think what you like,” I spat. “We’ll see who’s right, the morning after, when I’ve found the spring and you haven’t.”

Sean laughed. “Yeah, sure.”

“I’m serious. If you’re hunting, so am I.”

“You don’t have the balls.”

“I’ve got what I need,” I said, refusing to back down now that I’d committed myself.

Sean’s eyes narrowed. “You don’t even know what to look for.”

“According to Felix, neither do you. So it’s an even match.”

I was starting to shake, ever so slightly, with tension and nerves and the anxiety I

always got from confronting people. I wasn't very good at it, but I'd be damned if I let Sean beat me at this.

"Um, Cory," Felix said softly. I felt his hand on my shoulder, but I shook it off.

I didn't need him or anyone else to tell me I was being stupid. I knew I was being stupid, but I also knew I was sick of Sean's little digs and comments, sick of the way he leered at me, and I was going to prove to him, once and for all, that I wasn't the weakling he thought.

"You're serious, aren't you?" Sean said, cocking his head to the side.

"Completely."

He laughed again. "Easy for you to say now. But in another week, when you have to break the rules? Leave the manor and head out alone? That's when it really counts."

I made myself smile. "I'll see you then."

As last words went, those were pretty dumb. I'd see Sean tomorrow at breakfast. But it was the best I could do on short notice.

Sean looked at me for a long moment, then glanced over his shoulder at Rekha and Tim. "Come on. We got what we needed."

Ash and Felix stood to one side of the aisle, with me on the other, as the three of them passed between us. Sean made sure his shoulder brushed against me anyway. Rekha glared at everyone, Sean and Tim included. Tim just lumbered through, looking at no one.

The three of us watched them in silence as they made their way down the aisle, then

turned a corner on their way to the door.

As soon as they were out of sight, Ash turned to me. “Seriously?”

“What?” I said.

“Are you seriously planning on hunting for this spring, just because you let Sean goad you?”

“It’s not just because of that,” I protested.

“Oh, really.” Ash folded his arms and looked at me. “Is this the part where you tell us you’ve been dreaming of finding the Spring of Irylis since you were a child?”

“No.” I rolled my eyes. “Of course not. But I just—” I broke off, trying to figure out how to word it. “I’m just sick of everyone here thinking I’m incompetent.”

“Who thinks that?” Ash said. “We don’t think that. Min and Erika and Keelan don’t think that.”

“Maybe. But Sean and his friends? Everyone else in our class, who sees how useless I am with magic? How much I suck at combat? Even our professors think I’m clueless.”

“They’re supposed to think you’re clueless,” Felix objected. “They think all of us are. That’s why we’re students.”

“No one thinks you’re clueless,” I told him, a little bit of heat in my voice. Felix frowned, but he didn’t contradict me, which only annoyed me more.

“Romero doesn’t think you’re useless,” Ash said. “He wouldn’t be giving you private

lessons if he thought that.”

I let that slide. I still hadn’t told them I was an incubus, and if I had , it would have only underscored my point, because I was terrible at being an incubus too.

“I just want to do something on my own,” I said, frustration building. “Something to prove that I’m not a pathetic goody-two-shoes who’s completely unequipped for this world.”

And something to prove to Sean that he can’t bully me into submission .

“And this is what you choose?” Ash said. "Can’t you just do an extra credit assignment, or put scorpions in Sean’s bed or something? There’s no guarantee you’re going to find anything if you go hunting for the spring.”

“Or that there’s anything to find,” Felix put in. “Rekha was correct to point out the date discrepancy. Vesperwood celebrates Imbolc on February first, but astrologically, the true midpoint between Yule and Ostara is closer to February fourth. Even if the spring exists, it might only appear three days after everyone searches for it.”

“I don’t care if I find it,” I protested. “I just want to try. I want to prove—” I broke off and took a deep breath. “I just want to prove to myself that I’m not a total failure, okay? Sean’s annoying, yeah. And I’d love to show him up. But this isn’t about him. It’s about me.”

Ash sighed. “Do you really, truly have your heart set on this? Knowing full well that Felix and I would be happy to stay in with you all night and get drunk and shower you with compliments, in an attempt to raise your self-esteem without freezing your ass off?”

I nodded. “Yeah. I do.”

“Ugh,” he groaned.

“What?” I said. “It doesn’t affect you.”

“Of course it does. If you’re going to be stupid enough to leave the manor at night and go look for a magical, probably-non-existent spring, then you know Felix and I are going to be stupid enough to accompany you.”

“I object to that,” Felix said. Ash shot him a withering look. “Not about coming with you. I want it on record that I think this is rash, but yes, I’ll come too. I just don’t think it makes us stupid.”

“It doesn’t?” Ash said, arching an eyebrow.

“It makes us Cory’s friends.” He smiled at me, and it warmed me to my core.

“Thanks, guys,” I said.

Ash rolled his eyes. “What are friends for?”

NOAH

The problem with snooping is that if you don't have the right temperament for it, you either drive yourself crazy or you get caught. Or, in my case, probably both.

I talked to Sheridan and Teresa after talking with Autumn and Hans, though my attempts at 'subtle' communication didn't net anything useful. Sheridan was an old bore, pompous and puffed up and in love with the sound of his voice. It was impossible to get out of any conversation with him in under thirty minutes, and equally impossible to direct it to anything helpful. Teresa was perfectly polite—and as hard and unyielding as a brick wall. It was impossible to get any information out of her that she didn't want to give.

The only way I could have gotten something useful out of either of them would have been to provoke them directly, letting them know Hans had thrown them under the bus. But I didn't want to start a chain of accusations among the faculty. Isaac had asked me to be discreet, after all.

So I decided the next best thing would be searching their rooms. Back in my bounty-hunting days, I'd learned that even the best liars in the world often left evidence lying around in quarters they thought were secure. But getting into everyone's rooms presented challenges of its own.

Most student rooms at Vesperwood had no locks—at least, not the ones in the main parts of the manor. I wasn't sure about the ones inside the havens. But faculty rooms

always had locks, even if the faculty member didn't live in their haven's official quarters. My own cabin had two stout locks on the outside, and a bar I could slide into place across the door from the inside. You could never be too careful.

A lot of professors warded their rooms in addition to locking them. What they were afraid of, exactly, was beyond me. Most of them didn't have the kind of past that I had. Maybe they just worried about the prying eyes of the more adventurous upperclassman.

I couldn't be sure if any of the wardkeepers had warded their own rooms, but it would be safest to assume they had, which was going to make this even more difficult. To make matters worse, Hans and Autumn lived in Harvest and Hearth's headquarters respectively, and both those havens could only be entered with an affiliated student or faculty member.

The same was true for Hunt Haven, which was located on the lower level of the manor. You could only gain access if a Hunter let you in. Heal and Hex, the other two havens in the manor, were open admittance. Heal let anyone enter because they wanted to project an aura of welcome and safety. I wasn't sure why Hex was open access. Maybe they just thought they were invulnerable.

Hex Haven was on the third floor of the manor. They had an entire wing to themselves, and you couldn't miss the entrance. The arched opening was worked in silver and gold, with the crossed wands and stars of Hex inlaid in rubies every foot or so.

The hallway beyond was laid with a thick silk carpet, with gold thread woven in to pick out the Hex logo in between scrollwork, vines, and flowers. It looked incredibly expensive, and incredibly delicate. The spell they used to maintain it must have required a lot of power. I almost felt bad stepping on it.

Outsiders weren't forbidden in Hex Haven, but they were noticed. I was grateful that Teresa's rooms were somewhat close to the entrance. It meant I could loiter nearby without arousing too much suspicion, which helped me formulate my plan. And thank God for that—Isaac was getting impatient with weeks of no news from me.

One Thursday, not a minute after Teresa left her room for lunch, Ron Carson, one of the staff cleaners came around the corner pushing a cart full of supplies. I ducked behind a decorative column and watched as he stopped in front of Teresa's door.

He was whistling, his head bobbing in time to his offkey tune, and he pressed a palm-sized gold seal carved with Vesperwood's moon and tree against a small silver panel above the doorknob. A white light enveloped his hand, and a moment later, the door opened without him even needing to turn the knob.

He pushed the door all the way open with his cart. I had a split second to choose. I frowned at his retreating back and decided to take my chances. As the door swung shut, I leapt forward and caught it.

No alarm sounded. I felt no tingle, no pain to indicate that a ward had been crossed. Either there wasn't one to begin with, or Ron's seal had temporarily deactivated it. Ron pushed his cart straight across the room to a far wall of windows, still whistling and unaware of my presence. I darted over to a door on the right, opened it, and slipped inside.

Teresa's rooms had the same layout as Sebastian's, which was how I'd known the door led to a coat closet. Unfortunately, this particular door didn't close all the way. But that should be fine, as long as I stayed out of the small bar of light that entered from the sitting room.

It took Ron half an hour to clean Teresa's rooms. That still left a fair bit of the lunch period to go, but I couldn't assume she'd be gone the whole time. I held my breath as

Ron approached the door to the hallway, but he didn't look towards the closet once. He also didn't use his card to get back out. If there was a ward, it only cared about people entering, not exiting.

As soon as he was gone, I stepped out of the closet and surveyed the sitting room I was standing in. Most professors' quarters included a room like this, a bedroom, and a third room to be used as a library or office. If I were Teresa, and hoarding incriminating evidence of my attempts to destroy Vesperwood from within, where would I put it?

I decided to go through each room methodically, and started in the bathroom that led off her bedroom. It was swanky, with marble floors and dark wood walls, with thick, soft towels in a dusky rose hanging next to the marble-topped vanity. The mirror above the vanity was surrounded by an elaborate, scrolling frame. Gold, unless I missed my guess. Nice digs, but none of it looked the least bit evil.

Her bedroom was the same. There was a large four-poster bed draped in blue and maroon brocade, thick silk curtains embroidered with more gold thread, and the kind of hand-woven carpet I suspected cost more than my yearly salary. The only incongruous detail was a small, stuffed koala sitting against the pillows in the center of her bed. A cheap child's plaything in the midst of all this luxury, but that didn't make it nefarious. Teresa was from Puerto Rico, not Australia, but maybe she just liked koalas.

The problem was that I didn't know what I was looking for. 'Anything suspicious, or out of place,' Isaac had said. Sure, it was possible such evidence existed, and would maybe even be lying around in plain sight. But would I recognize it if I saw it?

I pulled out various drawers of the dresser, checked under the mattress, looked behind picture frames, and rifled through the contents of the nightstand. I even inspected the koala, but as far as I could tell, it contained fluff and nothing more.

The sitting room was the same. Ron had tidied it as well as cleaned, so everything was straightened and stacked nicely. Three books sat on the coffee table in front of Teresa's caramel leather sofa. A pen perched neatly atop a manila folder that contained receipts for hen's teeth, unicorn horn power, and seven smoking salamanders. Spell supplies, I assumed. Nothing odd there.

For a brief moment, I got excited when I saw a piece of paper that seemed to be hiding under a couch cushion. But when I pulled it out, it was nothing more than an invitation to tea with some upperclassmen. It had probably slipped beneath the cushion by accident.

Tea dates. Who knew those were still a thing? I put the invitation back where I'd found it and moved on to the next room, Teresa's study.

This one was interesting.

A large work table was covered with stacks of papers, jars and flacons of glimmering liquids, and what appeared to be jewelry making supplies—coils of silver and gold chain, rubies gleaming in the afternoon light, and delicate tools for working with metal. At least, I assumed they were rubies—those were the official stone of Hex, and Teresa wasn't the kind of person to settle for costume jewelry.

But why was she making jewelry in the first place? She was the head Hex, not Hearth. It was the Hands who created artifacts using precious or unusual materials. Hexers concentrated on pure spellwork. So that was odd.

There was a large bowl on her desk, next to a leather-covered notebook. It was filled with deep purple liquid. I knew better than to touch it, but I bent down and gave it a sniff. Burnt rubber laced with tangerines. I wrinkled my nose and pulled back.

I flicked through the notebook next to it, but all it contained were spell notes. The

other papers on her desk and table contained magical equations and rune interpretations. Most of the books on her bookcases were magical theory, with a heavy focus on charms.

I pulled open the drawers of the desk, not expecting to see anything, and stopped in surprise. The bottom-right drawer was set up to hold file folders, and it was bursting at the seams. I pulled a bunch of stapled papers out of the first folder and frowned.

I was staring at student academic records. Rekha Bakshi, Izzy Amberg, and Erika Martinez. All of them were freshmen and female, but I wasn't sure what else they had in common. I had them all in Combat, of course, but none of them had distinguished themselves particularly. About all I could say was that none of them were idiots, and none of them were budding Hunters.

But seeing Erika's file unsettled me. Was it just chance that the student who'd suffered the worst during the moraghin attack was included in this stack of papers? I shoved those files back into their folder and took out another sheaf from farther back in the drawer. More student records, though these were for students who were seniors now.

Xander Conant was a Hand who I'd taught in Combat for four years. He was one of the top students in his class, from what I heard. Next came Haley Marx, a Hexer. She had quick reflexes but startled easily. I knew little else about her. Then Kevin Gomez, another Hexer. He disdained combat unless it involved battle magic.

Not that you'd know any of that from these files, since they showed each student as a freshman. I put those papers away and pulled out another handful of files, these from the very back of the drawer. Freshmen student records again, but from the first students we'd ever had, back when Isaac had reopened Vesperwood.

What the hell was Teresa doing with all of these? As head of Hex, she chose which

classes to teach, and she worked mostly with upperclassmen and graduate students. It wasn't sinister, exactly. Faculty had every right to access student records. But why hoard seven years of freshmen files?

It wasn't evidence of wrongdoing. I wasn't even sure it was evidence of something odd. But seeing Erika's file made me uneasy. I'd mention it to Isaac and see what he thought. That was the best I could do, for now.

After leaving Teresa's rooms, I still had a bit of time before lunch ended. I decided to swing past Autumn's classroom. The teaching rooms didn't lock, and I doubted she would have left anything there, but it couldn't hurt to check.

Most of the students were still down in the refectory, along with the majority of the faculty. The east wing of the second floor was empty, save Orlando, taking his turn at guard duty. Most of the faculty had been slacking off at this, as the weeks progressed and no repeat attack occurred. But Orlando was serious, and he gave me a brief nod before continuing his patrol along the corridors of the second floor.

My footsteps sounded uncomfortably loud. In the bigger hallways, Vesperwood dispensed with carpets, and countless feet had worn the wooden floorboards white in places. I slowed my pace and made my steps silent. It was harder to do in boots than sneakers, but years of practice had taught me how, and I still felt the desire, even when I wasn't trying to sneak up on anyone.

Room 207 was at the end of the hall, and sure enough, it was as empty and uninteresting as I'd predicted. I rifled through the papers on Autumn's desk, pulled out some drawers, but the search revealed nothing useful. I'd wasted my time.

The hall felt even quieter when I stepped back into it. There were dim, muted sounds coming up from the main staircase in the center of the building, but they were far away, and Orlando hadn't returned from whatever circuit he was making.

I padded back down the hall on silent feet and froze when I heard a noise in one of the other classrooms. Room 204, the one Nat used.

I shifted into hunting mode without thought. My body felt electrified, all my senses straining to catch stray information as I stalked closer to the room. The door was open, and I hadn't heard anything when I'd walked by it the first time. But now...

Treading lightly, I drew up next to the open door and peered inside.

Cory stood at the front of the room, in front of Nat's big desk, staring out at nothing. A slim, moth-eaten book rested on the desk behind him, splayed open to its middle and held down with a paperweight.

Cory's eyes were narrowed, his jaw set. He was concentrating on something, but what?

I watched him, fascinated. I'd never had the chance to really look at him before. Sure, I'd had him in class, but there, I was too busy not looking. And that night at the Balsam Inn, I'd been so turned on by his presence, I hadn't really taken in the details.

Now, though. Now, he couldn't see me watching, and my eyes drank him in. Looking at him from the side, he seemed almost frail, like he might disappear in a gust of wind, or a flash of light. He still needed a haircut. His hair was starting to curl down onto his neck, and my hand actually started to move, aching to run through it.

I caught myself at the last second, balling my hand into a fist and forcing it to my side. Cory didn't notice, still focused as he was on the empty air in front of him.

It was interesting, watching him this way. Not just because I could stare as long as I liked, but because I could see what he looked like when he thought he was alone.

He didn't look scared, or nervous, or even hesitant. He looked...resolute. That was the word for it. Like he stood at the foot of a mountain, and was determined to make it to the top.

There was a strength in him, a quiet purpose, that took my breath away. Yeah, he was still gorgeous. His brows arched down over his serious blue-gray eyes. Freckles kissed his cheeks, which were haloed by the afternoon sun. His lips could have been sculpted from marble for all their perfection. But it was the unwavering resolve radiating from his body that froze me in place.

As I watched, he lifted his right hand, bringing it to his chest, palm up. He looked down at it, pressing his lips together.

"Light," he whispered, his eyes fixed.

Nothing happened.

He closed his eyes, pressing his lips together again. When he opened his eyes, he shifted his hand a little closer to his body.

"Light," he said again, louder this time.

Still nothing.

Was he trying to do magic? I'd been at Vesperwood long enough to know that this was one of the first spells students learned. But Cory was paranormal. An incubus. He shouldn't be able to do magic. Hadn't anyone told him?

Maybe not. Seb was giving him lessons, and he ought to know that from his books. But he couldn't know from experience, and that might make a difference.

My stomach twisted. I didn't owe Cory anything, just because we had that experience in common. In fact, we didn't. I hadn't been an incubus in ages, not really. I couldn't give him anything more than Seb could.

And I wasn't going to let him any closer to me than he already was.

Cory closed his eyes and shook his head. His cheeks were growing pink. From anger, or embarrassment? I couldn't tell.

It shouldn't have been the latter. He was all alone. But you don't know him , whispered the voice in the back of my mind. You can't know what he feels.

He opened his eyes and adjusted his hand again, this time bringing it a foot from his chest. When he spoke, his voice was louder than I'd ever heard it, commanding, "Light !"

Nothing happened, and Cory groaned, a noise of pure frustration. He turned and slapped his hands down on Nat's desk, a growl rising deep in his throat. I'd never seen him mad before. I hadn't known he had it in him.

"Stupid, fucking idiot," he muttered, staring down at his hands. "What were you expecting?"

He stood there for another moment, then grabbed his book, flipping it closed. With a start, I realized he was about to leave the classroom and find me standing in the hall, watching him.

I backed away from the door, then darted into Room 206, flattening myself against the wall. My heart pounded. I quieted my breath and waited. Finally, I heard his footsteps receding down the hall.

I sighed in relief, but made myself wait another couple minutes just in case. My pulse was still racing, and I shook my head in disbelief.

Look at me. Hiding from an eighteen-year-old, like he had the power to hurt me.

The problem was, I feared very much that he did.

12

NOAH

I tried to avoid Cory as much as I could.

Obviously, I had him in Combat, but I did my best to have only cursory interactions with him there. My conscience wouldn't let me ignore him entirely. He needed instruction as much as my other students, if not more. But I tried never to address him one-on-one.

But it was like learning a new word. Ever since I'd decided to avoid him, he'd started popping up everywhere I looked, like mushrooms after rain. It got so I started ducking my head and turning corners in the manor whenever I saw Cory and his friends coming, or worse, Cory alone.

Thank God he was so close with Felix and Ash, and to a lesser extent with Min, Keelan, and Erika. The six of them were a tight-knit little family, and it was rare to see Cory without one of the others. That made it a little easier to avoid eye contact when I did have to pass him. Made it feel less personal.

But it was personal. I'd been lying when I told him it wasn't. It was true that I wasn't in the habit of befriending my students, but I wasn't in the habit of hiding from them either. Being close to Cory made my body hum, though, made every cell inside me explode in little fireworks.

It wasn't just that he was gorgeous—though, he was. But he made every other one of

my senses light up as well. His scent invaded my nostrils if he was closer than ten feet to me. His voice lingered in my ears long after class ended. I was sure that if I could touch him, his skin would be softer than silk.

And tasting him—God, I shouldn't be thinking about that. If I needed to have sex so badly, I had Lew. Though, to be fair, I hadn't been out to Pointe Claudette in weeks. But Cory showed up in every one of my trances with Isaac, and in those trances, he wanted me as badly as I wanted him.

I knew it was wrong. Cory was so much younger than I was. And he was a student. I was in a position of power and authority. I knew his secrets, while he knew none of mine. Nothing could happen between us. For so many reasons, including the fact that I wasn't sure I could handle being so close to another incubus without losing my mind.

And yet, I wanted it. Wanted him . Maybe it was wrong, but I wanted him anyway.

A few days after searching Teresa's rooms, I was putting the freshman through a new sequence of moves in Combat. I'd set up five punching bags around the gym, but for starters, I had all the students grouped around one in the front of the room so I could demonstrate the combination. It involved a kick, spin, and two punches, and required power, speed, and balance.

We'd worked on each of those moves in isolation over the past couple of weeks, but now it was time to bring them together. I demonstrated each component first, then moved in front of the bag.

I raised my fists, shifted my weight onto my non-dominant left leg, then raised and drew in my right leg, and kicked explosively at the bag. It swung away, then back, but I spun out of the way. Finally, I hit the bag with a quick two punches.

It wasn't hard, but working on moves in isolation was always easier than putting them together. I knew my Hunters would catch on quickly, though, and I hoped they would help the other students with the trickier bits as I circulated.

Because I wanted the Hunters distributed among the five groups, I asked the class to count off. Cory ended up in Group 4, and I told myself I would visit that group second. No putting it off and dragging out the discomfort. I would get it out of the way.

But first, I went to Group 3, which included Adenike Odediran and Tim Kim, along with Ash and two other students. I asked Adenike to go first, and sure enough, she mastered the sequence on the first try.

“Good. Everyone else, come a little closer. Adenike, I’m going to ask you to do that again, and I’ll call out each step as you perform it.”

The little group clustered closer to the mat where Adenike stood.

I nodded at her. “Whenever you’re ready.”

She nodded back and began. She moved a little slower this time, separating each move slightly. It was like watching slow-motion replay of a football game—something I hadn’t done since coming to Vesperwood. I named each step as she completed it, and she beamed when she was done.

This was one of the first times I’d seen her in class without Rekha and Meredith at her side, and it turned out, she shone when she was on her own. Ruben Whitaker was the next to go, and Adenike remained at the front of the group, giving him pointers on his stance.

I was surprised, but pleased. I’d never have guessed Adenike had such inborn

teaching abilities. It was almost a shame she was a Hunter, because she'd make a great professor someday. But most Hunters didn't stay in one place long enough for that type of job. They didn't like to be tied down. Leon Zi was certainly qualified to be the head of Hunt. But he also filled that role because Isaac couldn't convince any other Hunters to join the faculty.

I watched Ruben finish, then Tim, then Holly Fletcher, and then Ash. Ash was small, and not the strongest student, but he was incredibly agile. He almost danced with the punching bag, his moves were so deft and quick. I nodded, then turned towards Group 4.

I was an adult. I was in control of myself. I could do this.

Cory was just squaring up to the punching bag when I joined Group 4. I watched silently from the back of the group as he brought his fists up. He was holding them too low, but at least his thumbs were in the right place. He took a deep breath, shifted his weight to his left leg, raised his right—and promptly fell over.

Sean, who was in Group 4 as well, snickered. I was still at the back of the group, but I could see Cory's cheeks flush from where I was standing.

“The mat's really wobbly, isn't it?” Erika said as she helped Cory to his feet.

He flashed her a tight grin and faced the bag again. He held his fists even lower this time, where they'd do no good in an actual fight, and shifted to his left leg again.

Just as he lifted his right foot off the ground, Sean called out, “Don't fall!”

And Cory fell over again. Sean's laugh was even louder this time, and Paolo Webb, another student, joined him.

Cory pushed up from the mat, ignoring Sean again. “Well, that was my two tries,” he said to the group at large. “Someone else’s turn.”

“Oh, we’ve got plenty of time,” Sean said. “You should try again.”

“I think I’m okay.” Cory shot him a dark look. “Wouldn’t want to hold things up.”

“But learning is important, Cory.” Sean’s voice was solicitous, his face pious and earnest. “The rest of us might only need two tries, but if you need more, there’s no shame in that. Or are you too chickenshit, even for this?”

I found myself wishing Cory would tell him to fuck off. The truth was, Cory could stand to try the sequence again. It was worth learning how to do it correctly. But I knew that wasn’t what Sean cared about.

I could feel Cory’s anger and embarrassment build, as if it were happening in my own body. When his jaw jutted out, I knew he’d decided he wasn’t going to let Sean bully him. Instead of backing down like he clearly wanted to, he placed himself in front of the punching bag again.

His fists were even lower this time, and he didn’t take the time to ground himself. He shifted to his left foot immediately and raised his right leg. He didn’t fall this time, and I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding.

Instead, he kicked the punching bag, and then seemed paralyzed with surprise that he’d managed it. So paralyzed that he failed to get out of the way as the bag swung back and knocked into him, making him fall over backwards.

Sean was laughing openly now, elbowing Paolo. “Did you see that?”

Cory’s face was red with fury and shame, and before I’d fully thought it through, I’d

pushed through the group and joined Cory at the mat. His eyes widened as he saw me looming over him, but I didn't wait for him to say anything. I just extended a hand.

"Here. Let me help you."

His eyebrows rose, and he looked at my hand like it might bite him. He didn't take it, and pushed up to standing on his own.

"Sorry," he muttered, stepping off the mat. "I didn't mean to waste everyone's time."

"It's not a waste," I barked, and Cory looked like he wanted to jump back. I softened my tone. It wasn't Cory I was mad at. It was Sean—and under that, myself.

I turned and glared at the rest of the group.

"The point of this exercise is to learn. Not everyone's starting from the same place, and it will be harder for some of you than others. That's fine. I don't care if you succeed. Not at first, anyway. I care that you follow directions, and that you try." My gaze narrowed in on Sean. "Some of you might not struggle to learn the maneuver, but you definitely need to learn how to be decent to your fellow classmates."

Then I turned back to Cory. "We'll do it again. Together."

He shook his head. "It's okay. I don't want to slow things down for the rest of the group."

"They'll get their turns. But I want you to get the full benefit of yours. You're trying, and you're almost there. I want you to feel what it's like to do this the right way."

Successfully completing the combination would help instill some muscle memory into Cory's body. But I also wanted him to get a win. After Sean's heckling, he

deserved it.

I motioned for Cory to join me on the mat. He eyed me warily, then walked forward. I directed him in front of the bag, then took a deep breath and stepped up behind him.

This close, his scent was intoxicating. Clean and fresh, with a hint of dark berry sweetness. Standing behind him, I had a view of his neck and shoulders, and the beginning of his left collarbone where it poked out of his shirt. I ached to touch him there, to bend down and press my lips and teeth to the soft skin of his neck.

I closed my eyes for a second, reeling from the heat between our bodies. How was Cory not feeling this? Or maybe he did feel it. Maybe he was just better at controlling himself than I was.

Get a grip , I told myself. You're acting like some lovesick teenager, and the actual teenager is the one who's calm and composed.

I raised my hands. Much as I wanted to stroke them along Cory's shoulders, I moved them to his hands instead. I still felt a shock wave run through me when our hands met. This was the first time I'd touched him since the moraghin attack, and my body cried out to prolong the contact.

"Make fists," I said as my hands closed around his. He did, and I raised his hands to just above chin height. "Good. Now take a minute to center yourself before you move to your left foot. Take a breath, let it out, then move."

I let my hands fall away from Cory's. Or perhaps I should say, I forced my hands to fall away from Cory's. It wasn't easy. He looked over his shoulder nervously.

"Don't worry," I told him. "I'm right here. I won't let you fall."

He nodded and faced forward again. I watched his shoulders rise as he inhaled, heard the audible exhale. He shifted his weight to his left foot, raised the right one off the ground, and immediately started to wobble.

My hands shot out. I was about to grab his waist, but corrected myself at the last instant and took hold of his shoulders instead. Nothing I was doing was out of bounds for helping a student, but I really shouldn't be touching Cory's waist. No matter how right I was sure it would feel to hold his slim frame there, to slide my hands down his hips and onto his ass.

I held his shoulders lightly. "I've got you. Just breathe. You don't have to raise the other leg yet. Just center yourself."

Even just holding his shoulders was enough to make me ache with need. I wanted to wrap him in my arms. Wanted to press his body to mine. Wanted to hold him close until we'd both satisfied ourselves.

A shudder ran through his body, and I had no idea if it was because he was reacting to me, or if he was just concerned about what came next.

"When you're ready," I said, "and only then, you're going to raise your leg like you did last time. Bend your knee, bring it in towards your body, and then kick out with all the force you can muster. You've done it before, so you can do it again. But this time, you're going to spin out of the way of the bag when it comes back towards you. Got it?"

"I—I think so."

Was he afraid? Of making a fool of himself? Or of me? I wasn't sure.

"Okay. When you're ready."

Cory nodded, inhaled and exhaled again, and raised his foot higher. I loosened my grip on his shoulders, my fingers just barely grazing the fabric of his shirt. His leg came up and in. I tried not to think about what he would look like in bed, both legs bent and spread as he lay on his back and I fucked him in the ass. I moved my hands back another inch as he kicked. His foot made contact with the bag.

“Good.” The bag swung back, and I grasped his shoulders again. “Now you spin to the side to get out of the way.” I guided him out of the bag’s path, turning him around, and stopped him when he was facing the bag again. “Then it’s a quick one-two punch. Right, then left, right on the bag and—perfect. You did it. That’s great.”

Was it actually perfect?

No, not even close. Cory’s punches had glanced off the side of the bag, rather than hitting it in the center, and he’d stumbled a little coming out of the spin, but he’d stayed on his feet.

The grin on his face was one of pure joy. His eyes beamed, and his smile took up his whole face. I’d never seen him smile like that before, and it only made him more beautiful. I smiled back—how could I not, in the face of that delight and triumph?

Then I heard Sean mutter behind my back about how real fighters didn’t need hand-holding, and my smile faltered. Partially because I wanted to punch Sean in the face, but also because I’d just realized what I was doing. What I’d done.

I’d allowed myself to get close to Cory. Given myself an excuse to touch him. And I’d nearly been swallowed up, pulled in by the riptide of his body.

I wrenched myself free. Forced my face back to its normal, stoic expression. Cory’s smile faded.

“Good,” I said a final time, but my tone was cooler now. Disinterested. I had to keep it that way.

I took a step back, then another, and turned to look at Sean.

“I care less about whether someone needs help, and more about whether they’re willing to persevere when things are hard. Be careful, Sean. When things come too easily to you, you get complacent. Lazy. Take things for granted. I’d rather fight alongside someone I can count on not to give up in the face of adversity than someone who’s never truly been tested, and might crumble when something doesn’t go their way.”

He glowered, but didn’t say anything. I held his gaze until he broke the stare, his eyes dropping down. Then I scanned the rest of the group.

“Everyone got that?” I barked.

“Yes, Professor Braverman,” came a chorus of tremulous voices.

“Good. Now who’s next?”

Erika stepped forward, and I stepped to the back of the group again, putting distance between myself and Cory. He was still staring at me, like I was a tricky math problem he was trying to solve.

Stare all you want , I thought. And think what you will. I’m not letting my guard down again.

I made it through the rest of class without getting anywhere near Cory. I couldn’t risk it. My control was so shaky, I wasn’t sure I could keep myself from pulling him in and kissing him, right there in front of everybody. I didn’t even know if he’d want

that, but I knew I did.

It was a relief when the bell rang out, thirteen peals signaling the end of Fourth Hour. I watched the class stream towards the gym doors. My eyes focused on Cory's back, like a wolf watching its last meal disappear into the snow. But I needed to be okay with that. I needed to learn how to starve.

I rarely ate in the refectory, so at least I didn't have to see Cory at dinner. But I did have a meeting with Isaac at 7:15, which put me in the entrance hall when dinner ended. Students streamed up the stairs from the refectory and on to their Fifth Hour classes, or to one of the libraries or common rooms to study.

I leaned against a marble column and watched Cory and his friends make their way through the crowd. They crossed the hall and began walking up one of the staircases. My feet moved of their own accord, and I found myself walking up the steps after them.

It was too crowded to hear what they were talking about until they reached the third floor, where Felix, Keelan, and Min peeled off, presumably to go to their rooms. Ash, Erika, and Cory continued to the fourth floor. I trailed behind them, leaving distance, since the crowd had thinned out.

"Meet in the first library in fifteen minutes?" Erika said as they reached the top of the steps.

"Why must it always be the library with you?" Ash grumbled.

"Where would you rather meet? The kitchens?" She rolled her eyes.

"At least it would be somewhere different."

“But a lot louder, and probably hard to study.”

Ash laughed. “Well, yeah, that’s kind of the point. And it’s not like you need to study. You’re like, the top student in our class.”

Erika shrugged. “I don’t know, Rekha might be ahead of me. And Felix wouldn’t be far behind, if he kept his assignments on topic instead of wandering down so many tangents.” Then she turned to Cory. “You’ll come, even if Ash won’t, right?”

“Sorry,” Cory said. “I have another lesson with Romero tonight. But tomorrow?”

Ah. So that was what his evening plans included. I filed that piece of information away—not that I cared, of course. But it couldn’t hurt to know.

“You’d think you’d be caught up by now, with all the lessons you’ve been taking,” Erika said.

“Well, not all of us can be geniuses.” He smiled to take the sting out of his words. “Have fun studying, though.”

He waved and turned right, while Erika and Ash went to the left, Ash still enumerating the benefits of studying in the kitchen.

“Just think of the snack potential. You have to feed the brain, Erika.”

I ignored them, but lingered at the top of the stairs until I judged Cory was far enough down the hall not to hear me as I followed. There was still the danger that he’d look behind him for some other reason, but I reminded myself that it would be fine if he did. I was a professor. I had as much reason to be in the manor as he did.

Anyway, there was no reason for Cory to think I was following him. That was

something a stalker or crazy person would do. And I was neither of those things.

Still, I was grateful that through all the twists and turns, he never once looked over his shoulder. He took a final turn to the left, then right, and when I made the same turns a few seconds later, I saw a door at the end of the hall closing behind his figure.

Silently, I walked until I stood in front of that door. It had to lead to his bedroom. Most of the freshmen were scattered around the third and fourth floors of the manor, usually in doubles or triples.

Soft sounds came from inside the room. I put my ear to the door and heard Cory say, “Hush, you. I can pet you for a little bit, but then I have to meet Professor Romero. Joy of joys.”

I wondered who he was talking to. Probably not a roommate. An animal of some kind, most likely.

I thought about the lesson he was about to have. Could Seb really be making any progress? He was supposed to teach Cory how to enter and manipulate the dreams of others—but how could he do that when he wasn’t an incubus himself?

For a second, I wished I’d told Isaac yes, when he’d asked if I would teach Cory. But I wasn’t an incubus anymore. And I didn’t need to spend any more time with Cory than I already did. I didn’t want to watch him sleep and wonder what he was doing in his dreams.

Abruptly, I stepped back. I shouldn’t even be this close to Cory. What excuse would I have if he opened the door and saw me standing here? None.

I was being creepy, and plain pathetic, pressing up against his door like it was the next best thing to pressing against the kid himself. I forced myself to turn around and

walk away. I needed to clear my head, not follow him around like a lovesick dog.

I heard the soft noise of a door unlatching behind me, and my heart leapt into my throat. I turned, excuses jumping to my lips, but it wasn't Cory's door that had opened. Instead, it was an unmarked, almost invisible door, cleverly hidden in the wood paneling of the hallway.

I stepped back to close it and felt cold air coming through from the other side. It felt good on my skin—I'd been too hot all evening. I wondered where the door led, and opened it wider.

On the other side, a set of wooden steps climbed up into deep darkness. I knew Vesperwood had attics. Maybe this went to one?

With a shrug, I stepped inside and shut the door behind me. Darkness surrounded me, but it looked a little lighter at the top of the stairs. Feeling for the railing, I began to climb.

The staircase smelled musty. I sneezed, and wondered how long it had been since anyone else had used it. Just as I reached a landing, I heard the door open again behind me. The latch must have been broken. I would tell Isaac about it, when I came down.

I put it out of my mind and followed the stairs. They turned left at the landing and kept going up. It was a little lighter up here, and it got lighter still—well, less dark, anyway—when I reached another landing to find a narrow window set into the wall.

I peered out. The window was tucked in between peaked roofs and crenelations, shrouded by the night sky. I was level with the attics now, but the stairs kept going, so I kept climbing.

The journey up felt almost dreamlike, though I hadn't actually dreamt in seven years. The staircase turned two more times before dead-ending at another wooden door. The sound of wind was louder here, and the door was cold when I put my hand on it. I turned the knob and pushed it open.

I stood on a narrow platform, looking out across the rooftops of the manor. I'd never been up here before, and seeing Vesperwood from this point of view was eye-opening. The attic roofs made peaks and valleys below me. In the distance, I saw the massive bell tower that sat front and center over the manor, right above the ward room.

The night was cold, and I took in a deep breath of frigid air, relishing the way it chilled my lungs. Chimneys poked out of the roofs in every direction, scattered like spilled candy on a bedspread. The slate tiles of the attic roofs were dark under the night sky. Here and there, dormer windows peeked out to say hello. A thin walkway, no wider than two feet across, ran along the crest of the roof directly below me.

The view, the night, the emptiness—it was all so peaceful. I stepped away from the platform, walking along that narrow stone walkway as it led north. My cabin was out there in the woods somewhere. I should have gone there after my meeting with Isaac, instead of following Cory and ending up here. But instead of turning back for the door, I followed the walkway as it turned around one chimney and then another. When it reached a third, I sat down and let my legs fall over the edge, lying against the roof tiles.

I closed my eyes and tilted my head up to the sky, letting the cold air scour me. I did need to clear my head. Even up here, Cory haunted me. His eyes, his lips, his hands. I'd held his hands today, felt their slimness as I'd covered them with my own. I ached to touch them again—to touch every part of him.

My cock stirred, but I ignored it. It was bad enough I had to see Cory in Isaac's

trances. I wasn't going to sink so low as jerking off to thoughts of him in real life. I flexed my fingers and deliberately laid my hands along the cold stone on either side of me. I was just going to sit here and cool down.

I'm not sure how long I stayed there, but at some point, I noticed the sky had clouded, and it had begun to flurry. I knew I should go inside, but again, I found I had no desire to. It was almost like some force were keeping me here, holding me under its spell. The bell pealed out the end of Fifth Hour, so loud up here that it made my teeth vibrate.

Was Cory that force? I didn't want him to be, but I couldn't free myself of thoughts of him. They kept me pinned. I was still hard, and I groped at my crotch, trying to readjust myself, making it easier to ignore. But the touch of my hand only made me harder, only made it more clear what my body so desperately needed.

I closed my eyes, disgusted with myself. I couldn't believe I was doing this. But up here, it was just me and the snow. If I did this here, I could pretend it had never happened. Better than giving into my desire back in my cabin.

"Fucking hell."

I slipped a hand inside my joggers. It was freezing, but even that wasn't enough to stop me. Cory filled my mind, and I found myself focusing on his lips. His soft, plush, kissable lips. Fuckable lips.

I pictured Cory kneeling in front of me, and began to stroke myself.

13

CORY

I walked away from another lesson with Professor Romero, satisfied and ashamed.

Every dream I had, I was with another strange man, doing more unspeakable things. Well, maybe not unspeakable. I had no problem speaking my desires in the dreams. Tonight, I'd ended up sixty-nining with a college quarterback in the middle of a football field. What kind of fucked up mind did I have, that I'd come up with that idea?

It wasn't even the right strange man. I still hadn't managed to find Geoff from Duluth. And while I was able to remember Noah in my dreams now, I still couldn't remember who I was, or exercise any conscious control.

Maybe the football field hadn't been entirely my idea. Maybe the quarterback, whoever he was in real life, was the creator there. But I hadn't objected. Romero kept saying it wasn't possible for someone to make me do something I didn't want to do.

Though, to be honest, I was beginning to wonder how much I could rely on Romero. At this point, he said, he'd taught me everything he knew. He kept telling me control would come with time, as I gained more experience. But by his own admission, he didn't actually know that. He'd never taught an incubus before.

And to top it all off, I was getting awfully sick of these walks of shame back to my room after each lesson, my boxers sticky. The only way to avoid that would be for me

to be naked while I dreamed, and to clean myself off after. Maybe I should suggest to Romero that the next lesson take place in his shower.

I snorted. I was grateful to the man, but not that comfortable with him.

There's one professor you wouldn't mind getting comfortable with , whispered the voice in the back of my mind. One professor you'd just love to get undressed for .

I groaned and rubbed a hand across my face. Despite the fact that I'd come not ten minutes ago, just thinking about Noah was enough to make me hard again. I couldn't stop thinking about our interaction in Combat. His hands on my shoulders, his voice in my ear. His smile, when I'd successfully completed the maneuver.

Sure, his smile had lasted all of two seconds before he wiped it away. But it had been there. It had . I knew what I'd seen.

I just wished I knew how to get Noah to look at me that way all the time. Hell, not even all the time. I'd settle for like, two percent. It was better than the measly 0.001% I was currently getting. Anything would be better than the grimaces he usually gave me.

He'd stuck up for me in front of Sean, though. That had to count for something. Even if he hated me, he seemed to dislike Sean too.

So there you go—Noah and I finally had something we agreed on. What an amazing discovery. What a perfect patch of common ground to build a relationship on.

Abruptly, I realized what I'd just thought, and snorted with laughter. What the hell was I thinking? Me, build a relationship with Noah? The thought was ridiculous. Building one with Sean seemed more plausible, and that was saying something, considering how much I detested him.

I just needed to stop thinking about Noah entirely.

Surely that was possible.

Right ?

“Ugh.”

I growled at myself and turned the corner to the hallway that led to my room. I started down it. I was tired, and it was time to get some real sleep. I just hoped I wouldn't dream about that monster again.

I was halfway down the hall when I realized a door was open. Not a door to a bedroom, though. At least, I didn't think so. I walked closer and pulled it farther open. The door didn't lead to a bedroom. It led to a dark, narrow staircase.

I stepped back and frowned at the door. It was designed so cunningly that it barely looked like a door at all. The knob, such as it was, was a carved bit of wooden frippery, a tree branch with protruding leaves and blossoms, no different from the carvings that decorated the rest of the wall. How many times had I passed this door in my weeks here at Vesperwood, never knowing it was there? It didn't look like the kind of door you were supposed to open.

And yet, I found myself peering inside again, wondering where the stairs led. It was easy to get lost in the manor, and now was not the time to go exploring a dark, creepy passageway on my own. And yet...

I stepped inside and let the door swing shut behind me. The latch seemed to be broken—it swung loose again immediately, admitting a few inches of light from the hallway. I was grateful for that light as I began to climb.

The further I got from the hallway below, the more isolated I felt. The staircase was gloomy. It felt like no one had set foot here in centuries. I knew that was unlikely, but still, that was how it felt. Like I was traipsing through some castle that had been trapped in time. Like I might end up in a different land.

Two flights up, a small window offered me a peek out on the steep angles of the roofs above the fourth floor. But the stairway kept going up, and so did I, until I reached a door at the top.

Stomach fluttering, unsure of what I would find, I pushed the door open and stepped out into a wonderland. I was on top of the manor, above the peaked roofs, even with the bell tower. Chimneys stuck up all around me like trees in a forest of brick and stone. The roofs slanted away on either side, and everything was coated in a thin dusting of snow. More flakes swirled in the air in front of me.

A narrow path ran along the top line of the roof below me, leading out into that charmed world of stalagmites and snow. Knowing it was foolish, I stepped onto it. I held my arms out to either side. If I'd had any doubt, this afternoon had rubbed in just how bad my balance was. But something had a hold of me. I needed to be in the center of this world, needed to see it all around me.

Snowflakes landed and melted on my fingers. One attached to an eyelash, then fell away and left a damp spot on my cheek. It was so quiet up here. It was just me and the wind, and far away, the sound of Lake Superior crashing on the shore.

Back when Noah had set our Combat class to running every day, I'd seen the jagged shards of ice sheets, broken and pushed up against the edge of the lake. Up here, I felt like I could step off the roof and fly over to the lake to see them from above.

But that was ridiculous. It was the kind of thing you dreamt about, not the kind of thing that happened in reality. I shook my head slowly, trying to clear the vision. I

needed to keep my head on straight when I was up here.

The narrow path I was on forked at different places as the roofs broke and scattered in different directions. I chose my path randomly, just following where my feet took me. Not wanting to fall, my eyes were on the walkway when I turned around another chimney. When I lifted them, I sucked in a sharp, cold breath of air.

Noah was sitting on the roof, not ten feet from me, leaning back against a chimney.

And he was jerking off.

His eyes were closed, and the wind carried the sound of my gasp away, thank God. My mouth opened in surprise—and desire. Was I really seeing this?

I put my hand on the chimney to steady myself. I blinked and shook my head. The light wasn't the greatest up here, but it wasn't dark enough to obscure my vision entirely. Noah's hand was at his waist, and it was moving up and down on—

Oh, fuck. I'd done my level best to forget what Noah's cock looked like. I knew I'd never see it again, and I didn't want it haunting me. Taunting me. But the universe had other plans.

Not that I'd needed the reminder, I realized as I stared at him. My subconscious had remembered perfectly just how long and fat and hard he—

What the fuck? I blinked again. I was not thinking about Noah's cock. I wasn't. That was just pathetic. He clearly didn't want me, so it didn't matter that I could see the head of his cock sticking out between his fingers, practically pulsing, drawing me in.

But no. This wasn't just pathetic, this was wrong. This was spying. Spying on Noah, doing something intimate and vulnerable. His head was tipped back, and he was

muttering something too soft for me to hear. Probably thinking about some super hot firefighter or jacked Navy Seal. Or maybe that greasy guy from the Balsam Inn.

But not me.

Rage and desire and desperation welled up in me, and I whirled around, unable to stand it a minute longer. Unfortunately, in my haste to leave, my foot slid against one of the slate tiles and it came loose, clattering and skidding down the roof before falling over the edge.

I turned in a panic, and my stomach sank as I saw Noah staring at me.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” he said, already tucking himself away and standing up.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” I babbled. “I didn’t mean to. I’m sorry. I’ll go.”

“Were you following me?” He stalked towards me along the narrow path. “Were you watching me?”

“No, I swear.” I winced, knowing that wasn’t exactly true. “Well, only for a second. But I knew it was wrong, and I was trying to leave, I am trying to leave, I’ll leave right now.”

“No you won’t.”

He’d reached me now, stopping only a foot away, looming over me. In the gym this afternoon, he’d been just as close, but he’d been behind me. In front of me, it was impossible not to notice how much larger he was than me.

“Not until you tell me why you’re up here.”

“I’m not—I just—there was this door. It was open, and I was curious, but I swear, I wasn’t trying to intrude.”

He glowered. It was hard to believe that a minute ago, he’d been sitting peacefully—or, well, maybe not peacefully, but a lot less angrily. He’d been caught up in some fantasy I’d never know about, and I’d seen that naked look of pleasure on his face, and now it was gone, and I’d never see it again.

“You keep turning up where you shouldn’t.”

“I’m not doing it on purpose,” I said indignantly. “It’s not my fault you keep turning up in the places I turn up.”

“Unless you’re following me.”

“Why would I do that when you’re so mean to me all the time?” I said.

Well, shouted, if we’re being completely honest. Noah blinked and took a step back, and I used the moment of confusion to turn around. I made it two steps, and then my foot hit a slick patch of snow on the path. Suddenly, I was falling.

I didn’t even have time to scream. I fell hard against the roof and began sliding down. My fingers scrabbled against the tiles, but they were too slippery to find purchase, and I was falling, falling, falling. I shut my eyes, not wanting to see the ground come up to meet me, and felt a sudden jolt around my midsection.

It knocked the wind out of me, but didn’t hurt as much as I expected. I opened my eyes, wondering if I’d fallen on some lower roof that had extended out below the one I’d slid down. But no, I was still on the edge of that steeply sloped roof—right on the edge, with Noah’s arm around my waist. I could feel one of his knives digging into my ribs.

I looked around wildly, not understanding why we weren't still falling, and saw that he was gripping a merlon at the roof's edge with his free arm. He'd jammed his boots into the gutter that ran along the edge. Those were the only things keeping me—keeping us—from oblivion.

"I—I can't—" I didn't know what I was trying to say, which was good, because I couldn't get the words out anyway. My breath came in short bursts, shallow and skittery.

"It's okay, it's okay," Noah said. "I've got you. You're not gonna fall."

A freakish echo of what he'd said today in Combat, in a much more dire situation.

"We're—we're right on the edge," I stammered. "How long can you keep holding onto that?"

"As long as it takes," he said, and his voice was as rock solid as his arm around my waist. "Take a deep breath, Cory. We're going to be fine, but I need you not to panic."

I gulped down cold air, trying to will my heart to stop pounding. But we were perched on the edge of a very steep roof, and Noah's feet jammed into the gutter and his arm around that merlon seemed like very flimsy, fallible facts to hang my hopes on.

"Okay," I said. "Okay. I'm not panicking. I just—oh fuck, I think I might be panicking."

"Deep breath," he said again. Did his voice sound more strained now? How long could his arm hold on? He waited until I breathed again, then said, "I need you to twist until you can stick your feet in the gutter next to mine. You need to face the

roof, your hands up, like you're going to climb it."

"Climb it?" I yelled. "Are you crazy? We can't climb something that—"

"We're not going to climb it." His voice was more patient than I deserved. "That's just the position I need you in. Then we're going to inch along the edge until we reach a ladder over my shoulder."

"What ladder? I don't see any ladder."

"You can't see it from your position. But I promise, it's there, and once you're turned around, you'll be able to see it. But first you've got to turn around, which means you need to move your feet. Can you do that for me?"

Could I? Terror gripped me. We were four stories off the ground. The cold, hard, unforgiving ground. But what was the other option? Stay here until Noah's arm gave out, and we both plummeted to our deaths?

Snowflakes fluttered around us, absurdly beautiful in the midst of danger.

"I can try," I said, with more confidence than I felt.

"That's all I'm asking," he said. "Alright, you need to start by twisting in my arms, then sticking your right leg out."

"If I do that, I won't have any grip on the roof at all."

"But I will. And I've got you, okay? I won't let you fall. I promise."

I wanted to tell him his promises meant nothing, this high off the ground. That those were very pretty words, but I wasn't inclined to believe them, not when we were this

close to tipping over the edge.

But the only reason I was still alive was because Noah had seen me falling and come after me. It would be poor repayment to not at least try to do what he asked. I just had to hope I didn't slip and pull him down with me.

At least if I die, the last thing I'll feel will be his arm around me , I thought, and had to bite back a panicked laugh.

I took a deep breath and turned, and Noah's arm didn't move an inch. He held me fast as I twisted, then stuck my leg out, jamming my right foot into the gutter.

"Good. Now your left foot."

It was just like in Combat. All I had to do was follow his directions as he took me through it, step by step. Follow his directions, and not turn into a gibbering mess and swan dive off the roof in my terror. Easy peasy.

I breathed as deeply as I could and got my left foot into position. I was facing the roof now, and I'd moved out of Noah's hold without even realizing it. All that was left was his hand, bracing against my calf.

"Alright," he said. "Just stay there while I turn around too."

I swear to God, I was even more scared when he turned than when I had. It wasn't that I was eager to die a horrifying death, but some part of me had always sort of thought that might happen. Noah, though—I didn't want to envision a world that he wasn't in anymore. Especially if it was my fault.

Finally, he was turned around, leaning into the roof and bracing himself with his hands like I was. Snowflakes fell on the tiles and my hands alike, making both

equally slippery.

“You see that ladder over there?” he said, nodding to the left. I did see it now, a black metal thing bolted to the side of a chimney that ran up along the edge of the roof. “We’re going to make our way to that, climb up it, and get back to the path. I hope.”

“You hope ?”

“Well, I’m not positive the path connects. But chances are, it does, if someone bothered to put a ladder there. Regardless, it’s freezing out, and our fingers are getting less dextrous with every minute, so it’s the best plan I’ve got.”

I clamped down on the urge to say his fingers had looked plenty dextrous when he’d been stroking his cock. What the fuck was wrong with me? Was I trying to make him regret rescuing me?

I took another deep breath, nodded, and followed him as he began shimmying to the left. It was slow going, and a couple of times my foot waved wildly in the air before finding a toe hold in the gutter again. But eventually, we made it.

Noah inched past the chimney, making room so I could be the first one to climb it. I scrambled up, my heart in my throat, and almost cried with relief when I saw that the path met the top of the ladder, right where the chimney topped out.

“The path connects,” I yelled over my shoulder.

“Good,” Noah called. “Now follow it back to the door.”

I didn’t, though. I waited until he’d climbed the ladder too. If his hands slipped, I wanted to be there to grab him. I wasn’t sure how much help I’d be, but I could at least try.

But he reached the top unharmed, so I set off down the path, my heart still thumping, my ears trying to pick up the sound of Noah's footfalls behind me before the wind rushed them away. When I reached the door, I collapsed against it and sank down to the platform, my body unable to move anymore.

I was too exhausted, and too scared. Ridiculous to still be scared, now that we'd reached safety, but since when had my body been anything other than ridiculous? I drew my knees up and buried my face in my hands, shaking.

I felt a thump as Noah sat down next to me, and the next moment, I felt his arm wrap around my shoulders.

"We did it, Cory," he said. "You did it, and it's okay. We're going to be okay."

I wanted to cry from relief and remembered fear, but I wasn't going to do that. Not in front of Noah, whose breath I could see misting in the air, when I peeked between my fingers. Whose body was a comforting weight next to mine. Whose arm was still holding me.

God, it would be so much easier to stop wanting him if he would stop showing these moments of decency and kindness.

"Thanks," I said finally.

"Of course."

"Not of course." I shook my head. "You could have let me fall."

"Why would I do that?"

I dropped my hands and looked at him. "You don't seem to like me very much."

He snorted. “That doesn’t mean I want you dead.”

“Well, you could have fooled me.” I looked away, snowflakes dazzling my eyes.

He sighed. “Cory, I’m your teacher. An authority figure. I want to keep you safe, for God’s sake.”

“Not all authority figures feel that way,” I muttered, thinking about my dad.

“What?” Noah said, and I realized I hadn’t been quiet enough.

“Forget it.” I forced myself to stand up. “I should go.”

“I’m coming with you. No, don’t argue. I didn’t save you from falling off a roof just to have you break your neck falling down the stairs.”

It was hard to be angry at that comment when I knew I deserved it. I laughed in spite of myself.

“I guess that does seem like something I might do,” I acknowledged.

I grabbed the doorknob, then looked back over my shoulder. Snowflakes swirled in front of Noah’s face, but I could see his eyes just fine. His gaze was firm and unwavering, but not actively hostile.

Maybe that was progress?

14

NOAH

After the night on the roof, I redoubled my efforts doing Isaac's spy work. Anything to keep my mind off Cory.

Cory, who I couldn't get out of my head. Cory, who kept turning up like a bad penny. Cory, who'd appeared that night just as I was imagining coming down his throat.

I definitely needed something to distract me. And with the whole campus gearing up for Imbolc celebrations, I hoped the wardkeepers might be a bit distracted too, making it easier to avoid their notice.

Unfortunately, getting into Sheridan's quarters was going to be more difficult than Teresa's. His rooms were on the second floor, off a busy hallway close to the grand staircase that connected the four main floors of the manor. I loitered as much as I could, but I never once saw any cleaning staff go into his rooms.

Either he didn't want cleaners coming in, or they only did it when I was teaching. Either way, it was going to be hard to sneak into his quarters with all the foot traffic around. Which just meant I'd have to do it boldly instead.

Sheridan went to dinner at Angler's Rest with Orlando Moyano once a week on Thursdays. 'Mingling with the hoi pollo i,' I'd heard Sheridan call it once. I couldn't imagine there were that many people to mingle with at a fishing resort in January, but it didn't matter.

The important thing was that they left at the end of Fourth Hour, and that Angler's Rest was a good twenty minute drive from Vesperwood along twisty, forested roads. That meant that if I waited to break into his rooms until 5:45 p.m., Sheridan would be safely ensconced at the bar by then, mingling with his unwashed masses.

If Sheridan didn't ward his rooms, then none of this mattered, but I had to assume he did. If I tripped his wards at 5:45, then I had fifteen minutes, assuming Sheridan sped home, to thoroughly search his rooms before he arrived back at the manor to find out what had happened.

At least my little adventure with Cory on the roof had yielded one positive outcome—it had given me the idea for what my excuse would be, when Sheridan ran back into his rooms to find me standing inside them.

I wasn't positive Sheridan and Orlando would be going out for dinner this Thursday, since it was the same night as Imbolc, but when I heard them talking about it in the faculty lounge on Wednesday, I knew tomorrow would be my day.

On Thursday morning, I got to the gym earlier than usual to select my weapon. I scanned the wall, my eyes sliding across katanas, battle-axes, longswords, and spears, to the more creative maces, flails, and stilettos, before landing on the cross-bow I needed.

My plan called for a projectile, not a blade. I didn't have to be particularly accurate, which was good, because it would be dark by the time I was shooting, but I needed a weapon with enough heft and range to be worrisome, to Sheridan in particular.

After setting the crossbow and arrows in the crook of a white pine where I could pick them up later, I strode back to the gym. Out on the back lawn, a group of young women completed a complicated, circular dance in the snow, under the watchful eyes of two professors. Their voices rose high into the winter morning, singing a lilting

tune that mingled with the frost. The beginning of the day's Imbolc celebrations were underway.

I was grateful for the darkness, by the time five thirty rolled around that evening. Part of my plan required blaming a mysterious group of students who would dematerialize into the shadows, and that wouldn't work if anyone noticed me skulking around the grounds tonight instead.

I wound my way around the manor, staying just inside the treeline, in case anyone was looking out the windows. I doubted anyone would be, what with the feast being thrown in the ballroom, but it was good to be careful. We'd had snow again the day before, and I hoped no one questioned my story enough to look for footprints. They wouldn't find any but my own.

Sheridan's windows were in the back center section of the manor, just behind a low crenelation that ran around the building. This morning, I'd made my way up to the thin stretch of roof behind the crenelation and placed three cans of Milwaukee's Best on the fanciful merlons that had been carved from it. The snow blanketing the grounds helped create a glow that made the night a little brighter, but I was still shooting in the dark. It would be a wonder if I actually hit any of the cans, though that didn't really matter.

I'd never liked crossbows, to tell the truth. They weren't made for the type of fighting I was used to. They did the most damage when used defensively, from the kind of rampart I was now shooting up at. But the bolts were heavy, designed to penetrate armor, and they'd work for my purposes now.

I loaded the bow and raised it, then paused for a moment to exhale, emptying my mind of all thought except the invisible line connecting me to my target. I shot, and I was pretty sure I heard one of the cans topple over.

That was better luck than I'd expected. Shooting up at a building was far harder than shooting down from one, and even though the woods came close to the manor where I was standing, I was pushing the edge of the crossbow's range. I shot a second bolt, deliberately aiming a little wide, and heard a clatter as it landed somewhere on the roof.

The final shot was what counted, though. I loaded the bolt and shifted my stance, aiming now for Sheridan's diamond-paned windows. Exhale, pause, release. The bolt flew true. In the stillness of the dusky woods, I heard a shatter of glass, but I didn't stick around to admire my handiwork.

I dropped the crossbow and three other bolts, then sprinted back into the woods a bit before yelling, "Hey, what the fuck do you think you're doing?" Then I pivoted and ran back to the manor. I didn't think anyone was watching, but I put on the show just in case.

I ran to the back doors as though hot on the tails of invisible miscreants, threw the doors wide, and dashed down the hall to the grand foyer. From there, I sprinted up the stairs, taking them two at a time. I arrived at Sheridan's rooms not out of breath, but realistically winded.

Most of the students and faculty were at the feast by now, but I continued my charade, looking left and right for the 'students' I was chasing. Then I advanced on Sheridan's door.

"Sheridan! Are you in there? Are you okay?" I shouted.

No answer, of course.

"Sheridan?" I called again. When all I got was silence in return, I threw my body against the door. The lock shuddered, but didn't give. I backed up a step and kicked it

once, then twice. On the third kick, the lock failed and the door slammed inwards.

If the broken window hadn't already tripped Sheridan's wards, the door definitely would. The clock was ticking now. I had ten minutes, maybe fifteen, to find whatever I was going to find in here before Sheridan came back.

I shoved the door closed behind me. It didn't latch right, now that I'd broken the lock, but at least it wasn't hanging wide open, to catch the interest of anyone in the hall. Then I looked around Sheridan's living room, shaking my head.

I no longer thought his rooms got cleaned when I was teaching—I didn't think they got cleaned at all. The place was a mess. Papers were strewn everywhere, along with plates with crumbs, crumpled towels, shoes in little piles, and shirts hanging off of chair backs, doorknobs, even a lampshade. A tie and a single sock stuck out from underneath an untidy heap of books that appeared to have fallen off his coffee table. If I hadn't known better, I'd say someone had already ransacked the place. The shards of glass from the window I'd broken didn't make it look any neater.

Still, I did the best I could, going through each room as methodically as was possible in that chaos. Half his wardrobe seemed to be on the floor of his bedroom, and his study looked like the aftermath of a book avalanche. There were two empty bottles of sherry on his unmade bed, and another one next to the clawfoot bathtub. I peered at the labels. Lustau Pedro Ximénez. I didn't know much about sherry, but I would have bet a month's salary that these were expensive.

The good thing was that I didn't think Sheridan would notice my rifling, amidst the mess. The bad thing was that I had to sort through extra layers of detritus to find anything useful. And search as I might, I didn't find anything—until I reached a drawer in the built-in wooden desk in a corner of Sheridan's living room.

It was sticking out at an angle, like he'd pulled it off its tracks and hadn't realigned it

before shoving it back in. I made a note of the approximate angle, then pulled on the handle.

It wouldn't budge. I tugged again, then bent down. Something was stuck, blocking the drawer from opening further. I tried pushing instead of pulling, shaking it back and forth to make the contents rattle around. Finally, it pulled free.

Most of the contents were what you'd expect. Loose papers, a scattering of coins, an actual quill pen with a stoppered bottle of ink, but the strangest was a soup ladle. That must have been what was jamming the drawer, but I had no idea what it was doing there.

I flipped through the papers. They seemed to be notes on chaos magic, but the details were beyond me. Definitely not my area. I slid my fingers over the coins. Most of them were foreign. Euros, Pesos, and a handful of West German Deutsche Marks from the 1960s. There was one other coin in the back that I couldn't quite see. I pushed the inkwell out of the way, pulled the coin forward, and froze.

The coin was silver. Pure silver, I knew, as soon as I saw it. Twice the circumference of a quarter, and four times as thick. The front showed a raised relief of an open human eye surrounded by seven stars. No date. It wasn't that kind of coin.

It would have felt heavy in the palm of my hand, but I didn't want to pick it up. I stared at it warily, like the eyeball might bite me. I needed to see the other side, to confirm it really was what I thought it was.

I grabbed the quill and used the tip to flip the coin over. It landed with a thud in the back of the drawer, the new side displaying a closed human eye, just like I'd known in my gut it would. Instead of stars, a few words in script ran around the edge of the coin. Mine in darkness, mine in light .

Fuck.

I prided myself on not scaring easily. My whole life was dedicated to keeping a cool head in a fight, to keeping control of myself. Standing in Sheridan's living room, staring at a silver coin, might not have looked like a fight, but that coin was more dangerous than any weapon I had in the gym. More dangerous than the moraghin, even. And it was here, at Vesperwood.

I forced down my rising sense of unease, refusing to let it turn into fear. There would be time for that later, but for now, I needed to keep calm. I flipped the coin back to the open-eye side, replaced the quill, and slid the drawer back into place. I even set the ladle so that it jammed again.

Dammit, I'd only been in Sheridan's rooms for ten minutes. I needed to talk to Isaac now, but I also needed Sheridan to show up again. If anyone saw me leaving his rooms in a hurry, they'd assume I was there illicitly. I needed to complete my cover story.

Fucking Sheridan, of all people. Arrogant stuffed-shirt that he was, I wouldn't have thought he was dangerous enough to carry that coin. But maybe, just maybe, he was foolish enough. Yeah, that made more sense.

Thankfully, he didn't take too much longer to show up, rushing into his rooms with fear on his face. Fear that turned to fury when he saw me standing there, holding the crossbow bolt that had landed on his floor.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"Looking for this." I held up the bolt that I'd grabbed a few minutes before.

"But why are you—"

“Do you know any reason why students would want to shoot arrows at your rooms?” I asked, not giving him a chance to gain control of the conversation. I needed to keep him on the defensive.

“What?” Sheridan’s face blanched.

Good. He was scared. That would make him less likely to question me closely.

“I saw a group of students in the woods,” I said. “They’d stolen a crossbow from the armory, and were shooting up at the manor from the grounds.”

He looked outraged. “Students? Which ones?”

“Didn’t see. I called out to them to stop, and they scattered. They’re probably back inside by now, mingling with everyone else at the celebrations.” I let myself growl wordlessly, evincing frustration.

“Well, why didn’t you chase them?” Sheridan asked, looking at me as if I were delinquent.

“I was more concerned about what they were aiming at, and if they’d hit any of their targets,” I snapped back, which shut his mouth satisfyingly. “I heard glass shatter on the last shot they got off. Given everything that’s happened lately, I was more worried about whether someone had been shot than about who had done the shooting.”

I gestured to the shattered window behind me, the glass sparkling in the dim light of Sheridan’s rooms. His mouth dropped open, noticing it for the first time. He stepped further into the room, placing his feet carefully as he inspected the damage.

“Quite right, quite right,” he murmured, and I wasn’t sure if he was talking to himself

or to me.

“When I realized it was your window they’d hit, I ran up here,” I told him. “There was no answer when I knocked or called your name. I know you usually spend Thursday nights off campus, but I was worried you might have changed your schedule. You could have been lying in here bleeding, for all I knew. So I forced your door. I’m sorry.”

“No, no, it’s fine,” Sheridan said, barely looking up from his survey of the glass blanketing the floor. “I ward my rooms and felt the door give. Drove back here to...” he trailed off, looking around the room as though one of the ‘ students ’ might jump out at him.

“Do you know why anyone would be shooting at you?” I repeated.

“No,” he said, finally looking at me. “No, I don’t.”

“Well, I’m going to talk to Isaac,” I said, hefting the crossbow bolt. “Something like this is too out of the ordinary. He needs to know about it. Then I’m going to figure out which students did this, if it’s the last thing I do.”

I was going to talk to Isaac, but not about my fake students. There would be plenty of time to ‘ find ’ the beer cans and other bolts on the ramparts tomorrow, to reassure Sheridan that no one had been trying to shoot at him. Not that he deserved the reassurance, if he was holding onto that coin. But Isaac needed to know about the coin right now—that took precedence.

“Glad you’re okay,” I said as I headed for the door, though I was nothing of the sort. I had no pity for anyone who put himself in Sheridan’s position. Hell, I’d have been happy to shoot him with the crossbow myself right now, if I’d had it in hand. But I couldn’t say that.

I'd just reached the doorway when he called out, "Do you think they really were students?"

"What do you mean?" I asked, tensing. I didn't turn around until I was sure my face was still.

"Well, the school's already been attacked once," he said. "What if they came back?"

"Moraghin aren't known for their crossbow skills," I said drily.

"Maybe it's not moraghin this time," he said. "Maybe it's something else. Something worse."

I blinked. "Like what?"

Obviously, I knew it wasn't, but I wondered where his mind was going.

"Assassins," he whispered.

My eyebrows shot up, and for once, I didn't mind my surprise showing on my face. "Assassins?"

"Coming back to take me out," Sheridan said. He twisted his hands together, the picture of worry. Finally, he exhaled and said, "I was in the woods when the moraghin attacked. I wasn't that far from the gym. So the moraghin could have been looking for me."

I frowned. "I thought you said you were in your rooms."

He looked like his stomach hurt. "I was on my way to Harmony Haven. I had been in my rooms, before that. Absolutely ridiculous that I don't have quarters in Harmony

already. I may be a newer faculty member, but I'm over twenty years older than Connor, and five years older than Ayah. I ought to have seniority."

I looked at him blankly.

"In any case, in all the confusion, I think I said I was in my rooms during the attack, when I was, in fact, a bit farther away. It hardly matters. But I was passing near the gym when the attack occurred, and I was using a heat spell as I walked. It was rather cold that day, you know."

"You didn't think the walk would warm you up on its own?" I asked. Was he such a delicate flower that he couldn't handle a healthy trek across the grounds without babying himself with an additional warming spell?

"It shouldn't have mattered," he sputtered. "How was I to know that a group of moraghin were to breach our wards? But if someone had sent the moraghin after me, and the alignment of their breaching spell went awry, they could have ended up in the gym by accident and gotten sidetracked by your students."

"Why would someone be after you?"

I could think of plenty of reasons, with that coin in his drawer, but I didn't think Sheridan would cop to any of that.

"I—I—I don't know!" he spluttered, dry-washing his hands even more intensely. "Perhaps the moraghin weren't sent after anyone in particular, but once they were on the grounds, they were attracted by the spell I was doing as I walked past the gym. You have to admit, that makes more sense than those monsters intentionally targeting you or your students. You're not even a witch, and freshmen are hardly powerful enough to tempt moraghin."

Was that actually plausible? I wondered. Maybe Sheridan just had a guilty conscience.

“Could be,” I said slowly. “Have you told Isaac about this?”

Sheridan definitely looked guilty now. “I was hoping I was wrong. That it wouldn’t be necessary.”

I felt sick. I had no sympathy for him at all, but this still seemed like information Isaac should have. I said as much, and Sheridan looked like he might vomit.

“Are you going to tell him?” he asked, nodding at the bolt in my hand. “When you talk to him about what happened tonight?”

“Not if you promise to tell him as soon as possible.” A complete lie, but not one I had trouble telling. I needed to talk to Isaac now. “Good night, Sheridan.”

15

NOAH

I headed straight for the ballroom, knowing Isaac was more likely to be there than in his study. He didn't celebrate Imbolc himself, but he would make an appearance to show his support. He'd probably want to keep an eye on things too. I'd heard they'd found a way to build the bonfire inside, and I doubted Isaac wanted that to happen unsupervised.

The sounds of the party spilled out into the hallway as I neared the ballroom—voices talking and laughing, the occasional shriek of joy. Delicious smells drifted out as well, roasted meat, fresh-baked bread, and savory herbs perfuming the air. And below all that, the scent of woodsmoke.

I stopped just inside the ballroom, taking in the scene. The sconces along the walls had all been lit, tall white candles casting their golden light upon the frescoes and tapestries. Despite the fact that Imbolc was supposed to represent the return of spring, someone had hung garlands of evergreen boughs beneath each high window, as though it were Yule instead.

Two students were playing a Celtic harp and fiddle in the corner closest to me, and a group of students and professors danced a swirling, spiral dance in front of them on the parquet floors. I could hardly hear the music over the din of the crowd.

Long trestle tables had been lined up end to end on the left side of the room, piled high with a feast that showed no signs of slowing down. Students and professors

rubbed elbows together under the light of the candelabras in the center of each table. People chattered and laughed over china plates of food and drink in crystal goblets.

On either side of each candelabra stood dolls made of straw. Conical bases represented dresses, with bent and bound strands folded and braided to make the head and arms. The kind of thing that would have looked creepy, tucked away in an old basement, but seemed charming in this context.

And in the center of the room burned a giant bonfire, lighting up the space with its ruddy glow. I walked towards it, groups of students surging and parting in front of me. There were real logs at the base of it, surrounded by a circle of salt with symbols I couldn't interpret drawn into it. A foot beyond that lay a second circle, this one of stones and cut flowers

Sparks popped from the logs and flew up and out, but any that reached as far as the salt circle disappeared in mid air. The ones that traveled up followed the smoke billowing from the flames, twining together as they sought...I squinted. Were those stars up there?

Dangling from the roof, a circle of Brigid's crosses hemmed in the smoke and sparks, channeling them into an ever smaller stream that exited the ballroom through a hole in the ceiling. Which made no sense. The ballroom ceiling was tall enough that it reached the bottom of the third floor, but there were still two more floors before you reached the roof, three if you counted the attics. So how the hell could the smoke be disappearing into the night sky?

I shook my head in amazement. Beyond my pay grade.

I glimpsed Cory to my right, standing in a circle with his friends. Ash seemed to be telling some story that had everyone laughing—everyone but Cory, that was. He seemed to sense my gaze, because as I looked at him, his eyes met mine, and I felt

another jolt of electricity shoot through me.

His eyes widened. I watched him take a deep breath. Saw his lips part, like he was about to speak—but he said nothing.

Was he still thinking about that night on the roof, like I was? The memory of his body in my arms, warm and shaking, haunted me. The fear I'd felt, when I'd seen him sliding down the roof, still gripped my heart. I'd been terrified at the thought of losing him. I still was.

I hadn't waited a second before jumping after him, and the relief I'd felt when I'd held him against me, safe and sound, was stronger even than the desire that always coursed through my veins when he was near.

I could still see the fear in his eyes as we'd inched our way along the roof to the ladder. He'd been on the edge of panic, the whites of his eyes wide and round as we'd shuffled along, the snow making the roof tiles slick under our hands. But he'd trusted me.

‘ You could have let me fall .’

That's what he'd said, when we reached the door and safety. He honestly thought I might have just let him go. That realization had hurt like a stab to the gut.

I was trying to keep him at arm's length, trying to cover up my desire for him—and fear of him. But all I'd done was convince him I hated him. When the semester began, I would have thought that was a good thing. But now?

I didn't have a good answer for that anymore. I didn't have any answers at all.

I shook my head and moved on, losing his group in the crowd. I had more important

things on my mind tonight. I didn't have time to worry about whatever that kid was doing to my head.

I caught sight of Isaac on the far wall, talking to Nat and Teresa, and, eventually, I made my way through the crowd to join them. I broke into their conversation without preamble.

"I need to talk to you," I told Isaac. I shot a glance at Nat and Teresa. "Alone."

Nat's eyes widened, and I knew she was going to ask me about this later. Teresa cocked her head to the side and studied me for a moment.

"Now?" she said, her voice pleasant, but carrying an edge of suspicion.

"Now," I said flatly.

Isaac nodded, and said graciously to Nat and Teresa, "If you'll excuse me for a moment, I will rejoin you later. Such an interesting discussion about horoplexic anodes."

Teresa's eyes narrowed for a moment, but Nat touched her wrist and pulled her away, heading back towards the bonfire. Isaac turned to me. No one was close to us, but he lowered his voice anyway.

"I assume this is important, for you to so flagrantly interrupt the conversation. Teresa and Natatia won't forget that."

"It is," I said, "and it's fine. I have a cover story. By tomorrow morning, the whole school will know that an unknown trio of students were shooting arrows at Sheridan's windows this evening. I told Sheridan I would do damage control, which explains why I'm talking to you so urgently."

Isaac nodded. “I’m assuming this group of students is not, in fact, unknown to you?”

“They’re not. Because they don’t exist.”

“So you were shooting arrows at Sheridan’s windows.”

“Well, I needed a cover story for breaking into his rooms.”

“You broke into—” Isaac ran a hand across his face wearily. “I did tell you to be discreet. I know I did.”

“I needed a way to get in there,” I protested. “And his room isn’t well-placed for sneaking. It was easier to just break in.”

“And why, exactly, did you feel the need to search his rooms?”

“Because you told me to spy on him,” I said. Isaac gave me a hard stare, and I realized I’d raised my voice. With effort, I lowered it again. “I talked to all of them first, but no one said anything suspicious, unless you count Hans getting so flustered he almost confessed to the Kennedy assassination. So I thought I’d search their quarters, see if I found anything interesting there.”

Isaac raised his eyes to the ceiling. “I suppose this is what I get for not being more specific. So you broke into Sheridan’s rooms and single-handedly added to the rumors of danger swirling around this school. Did you find anything to make those rumors worthwhile?”

“I did,” I said, dropping my voice even lower. “Sheridan had one of Argus’s coins in his living room.”

Isaac’s eyes snapped back to me. “You’re sure?”

“Positive,” I said. “You know what that means.”

He pressed his lips together, then shook his head once. “Unfortunately, I don’t. And neither do you.”

“You can’t mean that.” I stared at Isaac in disbelief. “Sheridan is working for Argus. There’s no other explanation.”

“There are plenty of other explanations,” Isaac countered. “Sheridan works primarily on arcane magic. He might have picked the coin up at some point in his travels and kept it for study. He might not even know what it means. Or perhaps he does, and he found the coin on the grounds, and is leading a parallel investigation.”

“When I gave him my story about students shooting at his room, he asked if I really thought it was just students. He seems to think someone is after him. He wasn’t in his rooms when the moraghin attacked, but in the woods near the gym instead. He thinks the moraghin might have been sent for him.”

“Interesting,” Isaac said, one eyebrow just barely rising.

“He seemed legitimately scared,” I said. “Which makes sense, if he’s working with Argus. You know how he treats his lackeys.”

“You’re not working for Argus,” Isaac said, “and I trust you’re not arrogant enough to pretend you’re not scared right now. Sheridan may be in the same boat. If he knows what the coin means, and just who he’s investigating—”

“He’s not investigating, he’s working to free Argus from the dreamworld and give him free rein to enslave humanity. He’s dangerous , Isaac,” I growled. “We have to question him, immediately. I don’t know if the moraghin were after him, or if he’s just saying that to throw us off the scent, but the fact is, they broke through the wards,

and Sheridan is a wardkeeper. Sheridan was the last one to make it to the ward room after the alarm sounded. Sheridan has that coin in his possession. It doesn't take a genius to figure out he's involved in all of this."

"Possibly involved," Isaac said. His voice was soothing, almost the tone he used when putting me in one of his trances. "I agree that we need to look at him closely. But I will not accuse one of my staff members of working for Argus without proof. Witches take such allegations very seriously. I certainly won't subject him to the kind of...treatment...that you'd like to give him without further evidence."

"He's working against us. And the longer you wait, the more damage he'll do."

"I understand that you feel that way. I'll certainly look more closely at Sheridan's actions this past year. Now that we have a new lead, I expect we'll gain even more information soon."

"You're not taking this seriously enough," I hissed. "Argus could be on the brink of attack. The moraghin might simply have been sent to test our defenses. And you want to sit around and gather more information?" I invested those last words with all the scorn I felt.

"I assure you, I take the safety of everyone at Vesperwood very seriously. I know what Argus is capable of."

"Do you?" I spat. "Do you really?" My hands had curled into fists of their own accord.

"I know what you were like when I found you," Isaac returned. "I have not forgotten that."

I wanted to scream.

“You promised me,” I said, forcing my voice low. “We were fighting the same battle, you said. Work with you—work for you—and I’d have a better chance of killing Argus than I ever would alone. All these years of waiting, of trusting you, and we finally have a chance to take him down, and you tell me to wait again?”

“Noah,” Isaac said, and there was power in the way he said my name. I wanted to look away, to yell or punch something. But I couldn’t move. “I understand that you’re upset. You have reason to be. I understand that you’re suspicious. You have reason to be. I understand that you wish to act. God knows your past gives you reason for that. I understand.”

His gaze held me pinned.

“But I can’t run this school based on your gut feelings,” he continued. “Nor can I let you run off half-cocked with free rein to beat what you believe to be the truth out of Sheridan.”

“I don’t want—” I began, before realizing that was exactly what I wanted to do.

“As for an imminent attack,” Isaac continued, “I will step up surveillance for external and internal threats. You have my word. And I will question Sheridan further, you have my word on that as well. But Argus isn’t one for direct attacks, if he can avoid them. You know that.”

“He’s direct enough when he wants to be,” I said. The wound on my chest was burning. I flexed my fingers, trying to release some of the energy trapped in my body.

“Give me a day,” Isaac said. I opened my mouth to protest, but he cut me off. “That’s an order, not a request. We’ll talk tomorrow evening, and we’ll discuss next steps.”

“I really don’t think—”

“Tomorrow,” he said, and I could tell from his tone he wouldn’t say any more.

I spun around and stalked off. I needed to get away. Away from Isaac and his calls for restraint. Away from Sheridan and the temptation to beat answers out of him. Away from Vesperwood entirely.

Violence would feel good in the short run, but would make things more complicated in the long run. I was going to explode if I didn’t do something, though. There was only one other outlet for my energy that I could think of, and it was in Point Claudette.

16

NOAH

Ten minutes later, I was at the Balsam Inn, knocking snow off my boots and pushing open the front door. Tom, the bartender, looked up from where he was polishing the bar on the left. I nodded to him and let my gaze sweep the rest of the room. It was dim, but I could see Lew hunched over a beer in the corner, in the fluorescent blue glow of the Bud Light sign in the window.

Tom held up an empty pint glass and nodded at the taps, but I shook my head. I didn't want alcohol. I wanted—no, I needed—to satisfy a deeper urge. I crossed the room to Lew and jerked him out of his seat by the arm. His beer sloshed in his glass, but it was mostly empty, so it didn't spill. It was probably warm by now anyway.

“Let's go,” I told him.

“No ‘hello?’” Lew said, his voice angry.

“Hello. Let's go.”

He wrenched his arm out of my grasp. “No.”

“No?” I said roughly.

“No.” Lew looked at me defiantly. “Fucking no. You don't get to show up here after weeks of no contact and throw me against a wall like no time has passed. No.”

“You like it when I throw you against a wall,” I growled. I was getting annoyed. I’d come here to get my fix, not to talk about feelings with Lew. The whole point was that we didn’t let feelings get involved.

“Yeah, but I have a life. You shouldn’t assume I’ll always be at your beck and call.”

“You’re here, aren’t you? Sitting at the same table, nursing the same beer for over an hour.”

“Well maybe I don’t want to tonight. Maybe I’m just here to drink.”

“You gotta be fucking kidding me.” I bit the words off. Yeah, I usually came down to the Balsam Inn more frequently than I had recently. But since when did Lew give a shit how often I showed up? Since when did he have anything better to do?

He glared at me. I glared back. After a moment of silence, I made a disgusted noise in the back of my throat and turned away.

“Suit yourself.”

I was pissed, but I couldn’t make him want to hook up. Lew liked it rough, sure, but I didn’t get off on forcing people.

I stalked back to the door, already planning what I’d do when I got back to campus. Maybe I’d run the five-mile loop, unencumbered by a gaggle of students trailing after me. Maybe I’d hang up a punching bag in the gym and work my energy out that way.

Tom looked at me when I reached the door, holding up the key to the room upstairs—the single room that made up the ‘inn’ part of the Balsam Inn. I shook my head. I wouldn’t be needing that tonight.

I was still on the wooden steps outside when I heard the door open behind me. I turned to see Lew framed in the doorway. We stared at each other for a long moment, and then he bit his lip.

I knew in that second that I had him. A current of energy ran through me. I arched an eyebrow.

“Maybe I changed my mind,” he said.

“Should have fucking known. Go get the key from Tom.”

“No,” Lew said. “Fuck that.”

He was down the steps before I could take a breath, and he tugged me by my jacket cuff. He pulled me across the parking lot until we were leaning up against my 1979 Buick Skylark. I looked at him in surprise when he pushed me against the driver’s side door.

Lew bit his lip again, and two things happened at once: the same current of energy shot through me, and a cascade of images of Cory rushed through my mind.

Cory, rosy-cheeked and breathing hard after a run. Cory, alone and determined, trying to cast a spell in Nat’s classroom. Cory, staring at me, eyes wide and fearful after the moraghin attack. He’d looked up at me as I’d felt his body, checking for injuries, for blood. And he’d bitten his lip, just like Lew was doing now.

I shook my head, forcing the images out of my mind. I brought my attention back to Lew. He slid his left hand down my chest, his right one groping at my groin. He palmed across my crotch, feeling my cock, and his eyes went wide in surprise.

It wasn’t until that moment that I realized I wasn’t hard.

I blinked, staring at Lew, who was staring at me. His eyes were a deep brown, with dark circles below, sunken into sallow skin. Nothing like Cory's gorgeous blue-gray.

And just like that, my mind was on Cory again, on the way he'd looked tonight, in the light of the bonfire. His haunting eyes, his nostrils flared as he breathed in sharply, his lips parted as if to ask a question—or preparing for a kiss.

Please God don't let us be related .

The words floated into my mind out of nowhere, and I shoved them away, then gestured for Lew to get on his knees. I didn't care if I was related to Cory, because nothing was ever going to happen between us. I'd let myself get too close to him, care too much. But I needed to put a stop to that.

I wasn't going to think about him tonight. I certainly wasn't going to let him ruin this thing with Lew. I didn't care if he was gorgeous. Didn't care if he was an incubus. Didn't care if my cock had no trouble getting hard at thoughts of him .

He was off-limits. I'd made that rule myself. I wanted nothing to do with him.

I jerked my chin at the ground, waiting for Lew to kneel. He gasped as his knees hit the dirty mix of gravel and snow, cold likely soaking in through his stained jeans. I would have felt bad, if I hadn't seen the hunger in his eyes.

Besides, he knew the drill. I came first. Always. Only then would I touch him, only then would I get him off. Sometimes.

Sometimes I left Lew to take care of himself, knowing that being used and left wanting was as much a turn-on for him as my hands or cock ever could be.

Lew licked his lips, his hands rising to my waist. As one hand worked to undo my

belt, the other slid across my cock again, and fuck, I still wasn't hard. I closed my eyes, leaning back against the car. Come on, come on .

I liked hooking up with Lew, and this was practically a fantasy come to life. Him on his knees, semi-public, exposed to anyone who came into the parking lot. Not that the Balsam Inn got a lot of business on Thursdays in February, but still, the thrill of discovery, Lew's humiliation—that should have done it for me.

I shook my head again, eyes still closed, willing myself to get into this. But all I could see was Cory. Cory begging for me to touch him in my trances with Isaac. His slim body beneath my hands. His mouth around my cock. His ass ready to take me in.

Dammit.

Lew got off on being bossed around. Maybe that's what was missing. I opened my eyes and grabbed a fistful of his hair. It was a little greasy. I wondered when the last time was that he'd washed it. Didn't matter.

I tilted his head back, pulling hard enough that his eyes tightened, a grimace appearing on his face.

"Is this what you want?" Lew panted, his hand working its way inside my jeans. "Want to use me? Shove your cock down my throat?"

His eyes were desperate, shining. Spots of color popped out on his cheeks. He licked his lips, staring up at me.

"Teach me a lesson," he said, and I was so shocked, I dropped my hand.

Cory had said that. Not in real life, but in the first trance I'd been in after meeting him. He'd asked me to teach him a lesson, and I had.

Lew was the one kneeling in front of me, but my mind kept replacing him with Cory. I flashed back to the first night I'd seen him, right around the corner from where I stood now. He'd been framed in the door of that bathroom stall, cock out, staring at me with undisguised desire. He'd come at the sound of my voice.

"Fuck," I groaned.

"What?" Lew asked, eyes searching my face. His hands were still busy at my waist, his tone desperate, but I stepped away. "What did I do?"

"Fuck," I said again. I couldn't do this. Couldn't do the one thing I needed, because my brain wouldn't fucking let me. I turned and kicked the side of my car.

"What's wrong?" Lew said, still on his knees. "Did I do something wrong?"

"It's not you," I growled. "It's—fuck, just get up. I have to go."

I tried not to glare at him. It wasn't his fault. But it was hard to moderate my tone, and my gaze.

"Go?" Surprise filled Lew's features. "But we haven't even—"

"Just leave," I told him, zipping myself back up before fishing my keys from my pocket. "It's not gonna happen tonight."

Maybe not ever, said a little voice in the back of my mind. I slid into the driver's seat and slammed the door so hard the car shook. I jammed the keys into the ignition and turned them like I was trying to rip the ignition out of the dash. I flicked on the headlights and looked out the window. Lew had gotten to his feet, but he was still standing there, confused and unsure.

The sight made my stomach turn. I didn't like using him—not like this , anyway. None of this was my intention. But I couldn't be around him for another second. Not when his presence just underscored how much he wasn't who I really wanted.

God, what a fucking mess. I slipped the gear shift and drove out of the parking lot, leaving Lew behind.

I drove. Not back to Vesperwood. Not to anywhere in particular. I just drove, waiting for the anger, the confusion, the need to drain out of my body. I felt pent up, like I might burst from frustration, and I didn't trust myself around anybody until I was in better control.

The night slid by around me, tall pines and firs making cathedral halls of the twisting roads, my headlights barely piercing the gloom. I don't know how long I drove, but I didn't turn the car back to Vesperwood until I'd made a decision. Until I had a plan.

When I arrived back on campus, I stalked into the manor with determination. I needed to find Isaac. The party was still going in the ballroom, so I checked there first. It was just as crowded as earlier, if not more so, and it took me a while to search the room to my satisfaction. Isaac wasn't there.

I checked his office next, but it was empty. With a frown, I walked back to the foyer. If he wasn't in the ballroom or his office, Isaac could be—well, anywhere. Vesperwood was a big place, and he was never that forthcoming about his actions.

I needed to clear my mind. I was heading for the back entrance, ready to do a quick check of the grounds, when I ran into Seb. Literally ran into him. He had to take a step back and steady himself on the door to keep from falling.

“Have you seen Cory Dawson?” he asked as soon as he was stable.

“What?” A bolt of fear stabbed through me. Did Seb know ? How could he? Were my feelings about Cory that obvious? Had I been that transparent?

“Cory Dawson,” he repeated. “One of the freshmen. Short, brown hair, kind of frail looking.”

“I know who he is,” I said, heat filling my chest. “But no, I haven’t seen him. Why would I have?”

I sounded way too defensive, and Seb’s brow furrowed.

“Were you in the ballroom? I thought you might have seen him in there.”

“Oh.” The tightness between my shoulderblades eased. He didn’t know. Of course he didn’t. There was nothing to know. “Yeah, I was there. But I haven’t seen him.”

Not in a while, anyway. Not if you mean outside of my own fucked up imagination.

I didn’t say that last bit out loud.

Seb looked worried. “He was supposed to meet me for a lesson for Fifth Hour, but he didn’t show up. He’s never missed before. I waited for half an hour, then checked his room and the rest of the manor. I even checked outside. I’m sure some students decided to hunt for that ridiculous spring tonight, even though they’re supposed to stay inside. But I wouldn’t have thought Cory was foolish enough for that.”

“So he misses one night,” I said, forcing myself to talk about Cory calmly. “He’s obviously around somewhere. Just talk to him about it in class tomorrow.”

“It’s not like that,” Seb said. “These lessons are important. He can’t miss one, or—” he broke off, shaking his head. “I need to find him.”

It dawned on me, suddenly, what Seb was talking about. He was the one helping Cory learn to control his powers, because I'd refused to do it when Isaac had asked. This wasn't just any lesson Cory was playing hooky for.

Maybe Cory needed to dream every night. Argus had said it was often like that, in the beginning. I wasn't sure how much that piece of information could be trusted, given the source, but my tolerance had grown with time. But if Cory's hadn't—

My gut twisted. If Cory missed a scheduled lesson, that could be very bad. I ought to help look for him. Seb was only in this position because I'd forced Isaac's hand. But I needed to find Isaac, too.

I opened my mouth to apologize to Seb, but before I could speak, something cracked through the air around us, shattering the stillness. Seb's head whipped around.

"Was that—"

"A gunshot," I said, my stomach dropping. I knew that sound too well. "Yes, it was."

Seb looked uncertain. "Should we find Isaac? Or go see..."

He trailed off when he saw me shake my head. "I've been looking for Isaac for the past twenty minutes. I can't find him anywhere."

A second shot split the air, and my whole body tensed. Seb was right. More than likely, a group of students who didn't believe they were in any danger, or thought they could handle it, had decided to hunt for the Spring of Irylis, despite Isaac's insistence that all Imbolc activities were to be held inside this year. Which meant that who knew how many of them were out there in the woods right now—as shots were being fired.

Would Cory be in that group? There was only one way to find out.

“You stay here,” I told Seb. “If you can find Isaac, good. If you can’t, find Hans and Autumn and the other wardkeepers and let them know what’s happening. I’m going out to check.”

“You can’t go out there alone.”

“I’m not going to stand around arguing with you,” I said. Isaac was missing. So was Cory. I’d found one of Argus’s coins in Sheridan’s room today. And now, there were gunshots in the woods. “Do what you want. I’m going to look.”

I pushed past Seb and settled into a run, my legs carrying me down the path towards the gym. Whatever was happening out here, my gut told me it was no good. A few seconds later, Seb caught up to me, his breath coming out in hot little puffs that disappeared in the night air.

“You can’t—” I began, but he didn’t let me finish.

“I care as much about this school as you do,” he said. “And you could use some backup.”

“Fine.”

Behind the gym, the path split, and I jerked my head, nodding towards the left. “You take that one. I’ll go right.”

“But if you need—”

“We can cover more ground this way,” I snapped, and after a second’s hesitation, Seb nodded.

“Okay.”

I didn’t bother to respond. I just peeled off to the right and into the night. I made myself breathe through my nose, forcing the breath to come in slowly, to keep myself calm. It was hard, though. Cory could be out here.

Isaac, too, but the thought of Isaac getting shot didn’t pierce my heart the way Cory did. Isaac could protect himself. But Cory—fuck.

I couldn’t deny it anymore. The thought of Cory hurt made me want to scream. Made me want to hurt somebody else. I couldn’t let that happen.

A third shot rang out, and I stopped, trying to work out where it was coming from. I grimaced. It sounded like it had originated in the direction I’d sent Seb. Shit.

I veered off the path, angling to intercept Seb’s path closer to the source of the gunshot. I had to slow down as I moved through the trees. I cursed each second of delay as I dodged boulders or picked my way over thick roots.

A light appeared in the woods in front of me, and a high-pitched voice came through the trees.

“We have to get back to the manor,” the voice said. “We have to let them know.”

“It could be a trick,” said another voice, a little lower. I could hear the fear in it. “Maybe it’s just a joke. To scare us off and improve the odds.”

“I know what gunshots sound like, Adenike,” said the first voice. “Those weren’t a joke.”

“Stop!” I called out. I heard a startled yelp, and the light ahead of me bounced wildly.

“Calm down. It’s Noah. I’m coming to help you.”

Twenty feet farther into the woods, I reached Adenike and Meredith. They were in the same class as Cory. Not that that made a difference...unless it did.

“What the hell are you doing out here?” I demanded.

Adenike’s eyes went wary. She pointed her flashlight down at the ground. “Nothing. We were just—”

“No lies,” I said. “Meredith was right. Those were gunshots. I don’t have time for you guys to lie to me.”

“The Spring of Irylis,” Meredith said. “It’s this magic spring that’s supposed to—”

“I know what it is,” I said wearily. Damn Seb for being right. “How many of you decided to hunt for it? How many of you are out here?”

Adenike frowned. “I don’t know. Maybe twenty-five, thirty?”

Fuck. That wasn’t good. None of this was good. Any decision I made would have drawbacks. But I’d heard three gunshots tonight, and I didn’t want to hear a fourth. I needed to find the shooter before things got worse.

I pointed to my right. “There’s a path about fifty yards that way. You’re going to walk there, then run back to the manor. Tell the first professor you find what’s going on out here. Tell them to keep the rest of the students inside with half the faculty, and to send the other half out for backup. You got it?”

Both girls nodded fervently, and for once, I thought they might actually follow instructions without me having to stand around and watch.

“Where are you going?” Meredith asked.

“To find out what’s going on.”

“Here,” Adenike said, holding out her flashlight. “Take this.”

I considered that for a moment. I didn’t like leaving them without a light, but once they made it to the path, they’d have clear footing. And if I had a light, I could move through the trees faster. I took it, then pointed to my right.

“Go.”

They went, and as soon as they were moving towards the path, I headed off through the trees again. I don’t know how far I’d half-walked, half-jogged through the forest when I heard a fourth shot, but it stopped my heart for a moment, before sending me forward at a run.

Too many people were missing, and it was my fault. I should have insisted that Isaac question Sheridan immediately. Should have stayed on campus to keep guard tonight. Should have kept Cory safe.

I could only hope that I wasn’t too late.

CORY

“Y ou can’t be serious,” Min said. She took another bite of the lamb-shaped sugar cookie she was eating, staring at me like I was nuts. “You’re going on the hunt?”

“Yeah,” I said. “And I don’t know why—” I paused as two sophomores jostled past our group on their way to the bonfire “—why it’s such a big deal.”

We were standing in a little circle to the side of the fire in the center of the ballroom, Ash, Felix and I on one side, Erika, Min, and Keelan on the other. We’d eaten our fill and were watching the dancers now as the crowd swirled around us. Keelan had a cookie too, and Ash was drinking a glass of rosemary lemonade that I was pretty sure was mostly vodka.

“Because you were attacked by moraghin?” Min said. “And we still don’t know how they got through the wards, or who sent them, or if they’re going to come back?”

“Not to mention the tenelkiri,” Felix said under his breath—but not so quietly that I didn’t hear it.

“The moraghin attacked our whole class,” I objected.

“Yeah, but they singled you out,” Min said.

“That was just because I was already standing on my own.”

That was what I'd been telling myself, anyway.

Ash made a face. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but Min and Felix might have a point. Someone tried to hurt you."

"Twice now," Felix said, even louder this time.

"And they might try it again if you give them a chance," Ash continued. "Usually, I'm a big supporter of bad decisions, but it probably wouldn't be the worst idea to give this one a miss."

I looked around the circle. Min and Felix were nodding emphatically. Keelan looked like he was on the fence. Erika stood on my right side, and she hadn't chimed in to say this was the dumbest plan she'd ever heard, but she hadn't exactly defended me either.

Actually, she'd been a little quiet all evening. Her eyes were staring off into the distance as I looked at her. I hoped she was feeling okay. Maybe she was just a little overwhelmed with all the noise and bustle around us.

I tried to follow her gaze, and for a second, I caught sight of Noah. Our eyes met across the sea of people between us. He froze, his body coming to a standstill in the middle of the crowd surging to and fro. My insides twisted. He held my gaze for a long moment, then looked away, letting himself be dragged off by the crowd.

My stomach sank. It was stupid, aching every time I looked at him. I didn't want to want him, and he was never going to want me, so the whole thing was pointless.

I'd thought we had a moment up there on the roof. But then, there had been so many almost-moments with Noah, and none of them ever meant anything. He still stared at me as coldly as ever.

Unfortunately, as soon as Noah moved on, I could see Sean standing with Rekha and Tim on the far side of the room. Sean caught me looking and smirked. If I'd been having any second thoughts about my decision tonight, they were gone now. I wasn't backing down, not after I'd told Sean my plans.

"Well, I'm doing it," I said to my friends. "Maybe it is dumb, but I'm doing it anyway. No one has to come with me, though."

Ash laughed. "But that's exactly why we have to come with you. I've done so much stupid stuff since coming to Vesperwood, and Felix has always stuck by me. It's time for me to pay some of that back."

"You're not paying it back if I'm still getting dragged along," Felix objected.

"Paying it forward, then."

"You don't have to get dragged along, though," I insisted. "None of you do."

Min snorted. "Yeah, thanks. I wasn't planning on it. Someone has to be here when this all goes pear-shaped, and if Felix is going out with you, it looks like that has to be me." She looked at Keelan and Erika. "If you two are smart, you'll stay behind too."

Keelan looked torn. "On the one hand, I know this is an objectively stupid idea. I'm the only one of us who actually celebrates Imbolc, and even I don't think the spring exists. On the other hand...all responsibility and no hijinks makes for a terribly boring life."

Min rolled her eyes. "I should have known better. At least Erika can keep me company. Right, Erika?"

Erika didn't respond that time, or the second time Min said her name. It wasn't until Min reached out and poked her that she seemed to remember where she was, and realized that someone was talking to her.

"Where were you, Mars?" Min asked.

"No," Erika said. "Just...thinking."

Min frowned. "I'd say you've had too much of Ash's lemonade concoction, but I know for a fact I've had more than you."

"I haven't had any," Erika said.

"Well, we need to change that." Min frowned. "If we're getting left behind while these morons go and freeze their asses off, we're at least going to need more refreshments."

Erika shook her head. "Actually, I was thinking of joining the hunt too."

Min stared at her. "When did all my friends become idiots?"

"Joke's on you," Keelan said with a smile. "We always were."

She looked around the circle at the lot of us. "You're really all that eager to go stumbling around in the dark, freezing cold, ready to get frostbite or walk into a tree or fall off a cliff and break all the bones in your bodies? That is, if nothing shows up to eat you first?"

"Well, when you put it like that, how could we not be?" Ash grinned. "And the cliffs out here aren't that high. We'd probably only break half the bones in our bodies. Not all of them."

“How do you know you’re not just going to wander off of Vesperwood’s grounds and end up in Canada?” she said.

“Well, for one thing, there’s a giant lake between us and Canada,” Felix said. “And for another, there are the wards.”

“I thought those stopped things from getting in.”

“They also stop us—undergrads, that is—from getting out unattended. I asked Professor Kazansky about it once. If you walk far enough across the grounds in any direction, eventually you’ll hit the border between Vesperwood and the regular world that surrounds us, and you’ll feel a shock, strong enough that you won’t be able to push through it.”

“Like an electric fence?” Ash said. Felix nodded, and Ash laughed. “So we’re dogs, basically. Nice.”

“Not just any dog, in your case,” Keelan said. “You’d be a chihuahua for sure. Small, cute, doesn’t know when to shut up...”

“Excuse me,” Ash said, looking indignant. “This is Jack Russell Terrier erasure, and I won’t stand for it.”

“You’re one to talk,” Min told Keelan. “You’re basically a golden retriever come to life.”

“Aren’t golden retrievers usually alive?” Ash said.

“You know what I mean.”

“What kind of dog would I be?” Felix asked.

Ash stared at him for a moment, then said, “Saluki.”

Felix frowned. “I don’t even know what kind of dog that is.”

“Oh, my days. We’ve found something Felix doesn’t know.”

“Very funny.”

“A Saluki is a string bean dog,” Ash said, grinning. “Very long, very tall, very dignified. Kind of judgey. Remind you of anyone?”

He reached up to pinch Felix’s cheek. Felix huffed and slapped his hand away. I still thought my mistaking them for a couple was a mistake anyone could have made. But I had more important things on my mind at the moment.

“How come no one in the regular world has noticed there’s a big chunk of land up here that they can’t get into?” I asked.

“The wards guide you away from it,” Felix said, as though this were the most obvious thing in the world. “You can pass right by the front gates and never know the university is here.”

“Aren’t there maps, though?”

“On maps, it either looks like uninhabited forest or rocky coastline, depending on your perspective. And a perpetual, autoregenerative mapping enchantment ensures that no one feels curious enough to insist on further investigation.”

“Salukis are also fond of long, fancy words,” Ash said with a snicker. “Never use one syllable when six will do.”

It felt like it took forever, and no time at all, for it to be time to slip outside and meet up for the hunt. My stomach tightened as the time to leave drew closer. Though some of that might just have been the tugging at my core that arose any night I was due for a lesson with Professor Romero.

I felt guilty about skipping it tonight. That might have been the most dangerous part of all of this, not the possibility of moraghin or tenelkiri or death by idiocy and frostbite. But surely skipping just one night wouldn't hurt? After all, I'd been through weeks of lessons with Romero. Shouldn't my tolerance have increased a little bit by now?

When it was time to leave, we slipped out of the ballroom in twos and threes, so as not to attract attention. I walked out with Keelan, while Felix and Ash went with Erika.

"Have fun freezing your balls off," Min said, raising the glass of lemonade she'd gotten from Ash. "Try not to get eaten by a bear!"

"So you celebrate Imbolc?" I asked as Keelan and I walked through the deserted hallway towards the foyer.

I lowered my voice. Not because anyone else was around, but because sneaking outside when we'd explicitly been told not to seemed to suggest that whispering was appropriate.

Keelan paused when we reached the foyer, sticking his head out, then waving a hand to hurry me after him. We turned down the hall that led to the back entrance of the manor, the same one we used every time we went to Combat.

"I did growing up," Keelan said when I caught up to him. "My mom's big into that kind of stuff. Getting in touch with her Irish roots. Mostly I think it was an excuse to

break out some magic and have a party.”

“What do you mean, break out some magic?”

He shrugged. “Well, you know what it’s like. When you live in the regular world, trying to get along with regular people, you can’t do big, showy magic. It might interact weirdly with people’s cell phones and computers and wifi and all. And there are only so many times you can chalk an explosion up to a gas leak before the authorities start to get suspicious. So you have to keep your magic small, most of the time. But for Imbolc, we’d gather outside, away from town, and let loose.”

We grabbed our jackets from a storage closet where we’d stashed them, and I pulled mine on.

“I didn’t know that,” I said, as I stuffed an arm down my sleeve. “But it makes sense, I guess. Do most witches do that? Try to live like normal people—I mean, non-witches?”

Keelan shrugged again. “Some do. Some live in little enclaves, or try to separate themselves from the world, so they can do magic more openly. My uncle’s like that. His philosophy is, why bother to learn magic at all, if you’re just going to hide it? But my mom doesn’t think that’s right. She thinks living away from the mundane world gives witches a superiority complex. So we live in a regular town, and she just keeps her magic very subtle.”

“That’s nice,” I said. “Though I can kind of see your uncle’s point. Magic is...I mean, it’s magic, you know? It’s this amazing thing, and once you know it’s there, why wouldn’t you want to be around it all the time? Use it all the time? It feels like choosing to live in black and white, once you know you can see in color.”

“Maybe,” Keelan said, and I could hear the shrug in his words. “But I don’t think

magic's the only thing that gives color to the world. It would be kind of a sad life if it were, you know?"

A rough circle had formed in the woods behind the gym when we arrived. Sean and his friends were already there. Sean was leaning back against a tree, arms crossed. Tim was kicking the trunk with his boots, and I couldn't tell if he was trying to get snow off them, or if he just felt like kicking something. Rekha stood farther forward, hands jammed in her pockets, coolly surveying the others in the circle.

"I think Sean's staring at you," Keelan said after a minute.

I tried for nonchalance. "Yeah, he doesn't like me for some reason."

Keelan shrugged inside his soul, I was sure. "His type gives Hunters a bad name. I've never been a big fan of him either."

I laughed bitterly. "Well, that makes two of us."

We waited a few more minutes in the snow as the last students joined the circle. Finally, a senior girl named Monica stepped into the middle.

"Alright, everyone. You all know why you're here. Legend says that the Spring of Irylis will reappear tonight. Water from the spring has the power to heal any wound. A single flower from the spring's glade will grant a wish. And for those of you who are freshmen, your conduct tonight will be noted by your upperclassmen peers when the time comes for you to apply for a haven. You don't want to disappoint."

A murmur ran through the crowd, and I shivered. Felix and Ash hadn't said anything about that part. They didn't even think the spring existed. And clearly neither did most of the freshman class. Out of fifty of us, only fifteen or so stood in the circle with other, older students.

What kind of conduct were they expecting? Was it worse to try to look for the spring and fail, than not to try at all? I looked around the circle, but none of the upperclassmen's faces gave anything away.

"Remember the rules," Monica said. "Each hunter stays out 'til dawn. And everyone hunts alone."

That quieted the crowd.

Monica held out a hand and a tiny ball of light appeared above it, just like I'd seen my classmates do in Spellwork. But her light glowed red, then orange, then yellow, and proceeded through all the colors of the rainbow until it reached purple.

"You'll see this light again when it's time to come inside in the morning," she said, sending the light high into the air, above the treetops. It contracted, then exploded in a shower of shimmering violet sparks. "Good luck. Your hunt begins now."

Everyone began shuffling towards the woods, and Ash and Felix caught up to Keelan and me before we'd gone more than a couple of steps. Erika must have already gone on without them.

"Can you imagine staying out here all night?" Ash said with a snort.

"Or hunting alone?" Felix added with a shudder.

"Come on," Ash said to me. "The sooner we get into the trees, the sooner people will lose sight of us. Then we can wander around until you get cold, and go inside."

"No," I said, continuing my slog through the snow. "I'm really doing this. By myself, until dawn. I meant what I said."

“Oh, come on,. Ash cast a glance over his shoulder at Monica, still standing in place, watching the circle of students disperse. “You can’t be serious, Cory. Literally no one will care if we stick together. And I think most people will give up after a few hours.”

I saw Sean’s back disappearing into the trees in front of us, his dirty blond hair bobbing through the darkness—alone. Heat rose in my chest.

“Sean’s not sticking with his friends all night,” I said. “So I’m not either. I’m not a coward.”

“Sticking with your friends doesn’t make you a coward,” Felix said. “It makes you smart.”

“So you do it, then,” I told him. “I’m going by myself.”

18

CORY

With that, I broke into a jog, leaving my friends behind. I didn't stop until I'd been swallowed by the forest. At first, I could see and hear dark shapes moving through the shadows in front of me, and off to the side. But I was surprised by how little time it took for me to feel completely alone.

It didn't take me long to start feeling silly. It was dark in the woods, and Min had been right—the night was frigid. I wished I'd gotten a better look at the maps Sean and his friends had been looking at. But when I'd gone back to check them a day later, I wasn't even sure I was looking at the right maps, let alone how I was supposed to triangulate them.

Nothing in the rules said we couldn't walk on any of the paths that crisscrossed Vesperwood's grounds, but I didn't think a magical spring was likely to appear in the middle of one of them. Unfortunately, that meant that I had to stumble my way through the trees, my feet catching on rocks and roots, my hands constantly flailing for the nearest trunk to hold myself upright when I tripped.

What was I proving exactly, if I stayed out here all night, by myself? It wasn't like Sean was around to see it. All I'd managed so far was to get my shoes and the cuffs of my jeans wet with snow, and to inconvenience my friends, who I wasn't even with now.

I hoped they'd decide to give it up soon. None of them had seemed all that excited

about being out here. I was sure if Ash suggested they go back inside and join Min, Keelan and Felix wouldn't be hard to convince. I smiled, thinking of them back in the ballroom, the bonfire roaring, fiddles playing into the early hours of the morning. I hoped they had a good rest of the night.

It was hard to mark time out here in the dark. If I'd been smart, I would have brought a watch and a flashlight. As it was, I was walking by the faint light of stars that shone down through occasional breaks in the tree cover. If there was a moon, I had yet to see it.

I crossed paths sometimes, sinuous ones that curved through the woods on campus, but I never turned to walk down any of them. Something told me to keep pressing into the woods.

The air was still and silent. If I weren't out in it, rapidly growing colder and more nervous, I might have said it was a beautiful night. Dark, sure, but peaceful. The kind of night you wanted to wrap yourself up in like a blanket.

I shook my head, trying to focus on the task at hand. The problem was, the task at hand was likely impossible.

God, you're stupid .

The words echoed in the back of my mind, and for once, they didn't come from the traitorous little voice I carried around with me. No, this time, I heard them in my father's voice.

I shuddered.

To the best of my ability, I was walking in a straight line, but I didn't know if that was even a good idea. If it wasn't, then I supposed I should be grateful for the

hummocks of earth and long, downed tree trunks that lay in my way, forcing me to go around them when I couldn't scramble over. A compass would have been a good thing to bring, too. Too late now, though.

I couldn't tell if I'd been outside for fifteen minutes or an hour. Time bled into itself in the dark. I couldn't hear the Vesperwood bell, and I stopped for a moment, trying to work out when it should ring next. As I paused, I heard something.

A crack of wood, and a crunch of snow, followed faintly by a whoosh-whoosh that was a little too rhythmic to be the wind.

My mind conjured up a menagerie of horrors. Moraghin, tenelkiri, nightmare shapes I'd never seen clearly. Who knew what could be lurking out here, hunting us as we hunted the spring? Something could be stalking me right now.

The whoosh-whoosh got closer, and louder, and up ahead, in a tiny patch of starlight, I caught sight of—was that someone's jacket?

Relief washed through me, though I felt like an idiot. A jacket made way more sense than anything else I'd imagined.

If Felix were here, he could probably have told me exactly how much more likely it was that I'd hear another student, rather than an unknown monster. The snap I'd heard was probably a footstep on a twig, and the whooshing sound had been someone's thick jacket sleeve brushing their torso as they worked their way through the forest.

After a moment, I decided to follow the person I'd seen, whoever they were. They were well ahead of me, and moving perpendicular to the direction I'd been going. But I didn't mind changing direction—it wasn't like I really had a plan. And even if I didn't join up with them, it was nice to know I wasn't totally alone out here. It would

be nice to see another human face, if only for a minute.

Unless it was Sean. I should probably be cautious, until I knew for sure.

A large mass reared up out of the night, taking me by surprise. That's what I got for not looking right in front of me. I could just make out roots, inches from my face, and realized I was looking at the rootball of an enormous pine that had toppled over sometime in the past.

I squinted up ahead. The tree cover was deep here, but I could just make out a dark shape clambering over the massive trunk. I groaned. I'd been going around trees like this, when I'd come upon them, but I didn't want to get too far behind whoever I was following.

With a grimace, I threw myself onto the trunk like a beached whale. I landed about a third of the way across, just far enough that my feet were lifted off the ground, but I couldn't lever myself any farther. I shimmied instead, feeling my jacket ride up, little bits of bark digging into my skin as I wriggled my way up to the top of the log before sliding down the other side.

Full of grace, I was.

I was about twenty feet behind the figure now, still moving through the trees with a determined stride. Well, as determined as you could get in this mess. The figure ducked and dodged, weaving around thickets of brambles and tight stands of trees, and I poured on speed, gaining on them.

As I made my way around yet another boulder, I gauged the distance. I was about fifteen feet behind now, and surprised that the figure hadn't turned around to see who was following them. I wasn't exactly being quiet. But they never turned.

When I was ten feet away, the trees thinned out and created an open space in the forest. A birch tree with three trunks stood at the edge of the clearing, one of the trunks growing out practically horizontal. A large boulder sat next to the left of the tree, almost as tall as I was.

The figure clambered over the birch trunk and stepped into the clearing. Clearing wasn't even really the word for it. That made it sound larger than it was. It was just forty feet or so of snow where there happened not to be any trees. But the forest pressed in from all sides.

I raised my hand, ready to call out. The figure pushed down the hood of their jacket, and I blinked. It was Erika.

“Hey!” I called, my voice carrying over the stillness of the snow. “Erika, it’s Cory.”

She didn't turn to look at me. She didn't even seem to have heard me. She just stood in the clearing, looking straight ahead, removing her heavy gloves. I watched as she shoved them into the pockets of her jacket.

I stepped forward, right up to the edge of the trees. “Erika, hey! It’s me.”

Then she pulled out a knife.

My eyes widened. What did she need a knife for out here? I mean, yeah, just a few minutes ago I'd been worried about hypothetical monsters stalking me. But there was something about Erika's face that told me she hadn't drawn it for self-defense.

It wasn't just that she was ignoring me, or not hearing me. It was like she wasn't hearing anything at all. Her features were slack. Her mouth hung open, her brows loose, her eyes heavy-lidded. She looked two seconds away from falling asleep.

She looks like she's asleep already , said the voice in the back of my mind, and for once, I didn't argue with it. Whatever Erika was doing, I didn't think she was conscious of it.

"Hey, Erika," I said, crawling over the birch trunk and joining her in the clearing. "Erika, are you okay?"

I slogged through the snow, my feet freezing. Nerves sang through my body. Something was wrong. I didn't know what , yet. But I knew something was.

I put a hand on her shoulder when I reached her. "Erika, it's Cory. Are you—God, what am I even saying, of course you're not okay. Can you hear me at all?"

I took my hand from her shoulder and waved it in front of her face. That, at least, got a reaction, but since the reaction was Erika shoving me so hard I fell on my ass, I wasn't happy about it. She didn't even look at me as I fell. What the hell was going on with her?

I still couldn't control my incubus powers, but I had more experience than most people with trances and dream states, and I knew what it was like to feel trapped. I had no idea if the real Erika was still in there, trapped behind whatever force was piloting her body right now. But I knew she wouldn't be happy about what was happening.

I pushed myself up and walked back to her. Worry spread from my stomach, radiating through my limbs. My whole body was infected with it. It felt colder than it should have been, even on a winter's night in February.

I put a hand on her elbow. "Erika, can you look at me? Can you—can you come with me? I think we need to get you back to the manor."

I looked over my shoulder at the forest. I didn't relish getting her back through all of that, but my gut said neither of us should be out here right now. Who knew what else was watching from the dark?

I waved my hand in front of her face again, but she didn't react at all this time. I stepped in front of her and grabbed for the knife, and the next thing I knew, she turned and brandished it in my face. For the first time, her eyes were focused and alert, but they were focused on bringing that knife to my throat.

"Easy," I said, taking a step back, then another, trying my best not to fall on my ass again. I swallowed. "Easy, it's okay. I won't try to take it again."

Erika kept glaring at me, her face twisted into a snarl, until I'd backed up all the way to the clearing's edge. Only when I stepped back into the woods, drawing halfway behind a pine tree, did she turn away from me.

Fuck. I let out a sound that was half relief, half desperation. Would she really have cut me if I hadn't backed off? Would she have been willing to hurt me? I eyed her nervously. I was starting to get a creepy feeling about this. Hell, not starting. I was all the way there.

But I didn't feel right leaving her alone.

Dammit, why had I insisted on doing the hunt by myself? I would have given anything for Felix's rationality right now, or even Ash's irrepressible energy. For someone to help me figure out what to do.

All I could think was to watch and wait, and to be ready to help if her trance broke.

Not if, I told myself. When. It would break. I was not giving up on her.

Erika, for her part, seemed to have forgotten I existed. She was facing front again, her features once more calm and slack. She held the knife out in front of her and traced a shape in the air. A circle, crossed twice from right to left and top to bottom. Then came four X's in a square surrounding the circle.

She crossed the square from corner to corner, then brought the knife back to her body. She muttered something, and her left hand rose to meet her right. Without warning, she slashed the blade across her left palm, opening a bloody gash in her skin.

I gasped, but she didn't. If she felt any pain at all, it didn't show. She held her left hand out now, droplets of blood falling into the snow at her feet. She retraced the shape in the air, then brought her bloody hand across the shape in a harsh motion, left to right. Finally, she stuck her hand forward, closed it into a fist, and twisted, like she was opening a door.

I sucked in another sharp breath as the air in front of Erika began to shimmer. I took another step back, too, pressing myself against the tree. I wasn't going to leave her alone, but some deep, lizard-brain part of me whispered that it was a bad idea to be exposed right now.

The shimmering intensified, pressing itself into a vertical line, hovering a foot off the ground. Then it widened, and even Erika took a step back at that point. When it was a rectangle three feet wide, something appeared in the middle. Something dark and solid and—was that a person?

The shape pushed through, first an elbow, then a shoulder and wrist, then torso, then an entire man. He stepped out of the door in the air and into the snow in front of Erika, straightening the lapels of his overcoat as he did so. The door remained open behind him, sparkling.

The man wore all black, or at least all dark colors. It was hard to tell in this light. He wore a heavy overcoat that reached below his knees, single breasted and buttoned up against the snow. Dark trousers showed beneath it, and a nice-looking pair of wing-tip shoes beneath those, all wrong for standing in the snow. A wool scarf was tucked into the neckline of his coat, and a felted trilby hat topped his head. He looked very dapper, and very out of place in the middle of the woods.

His face was ordinary looking. Loosely cropped black hair, dense with curls. Dark eyes, though they could have been any color in the daylight. His features were pleasant—high cheekbones, a broad nose, and lips that looked like they enjoyed smiling.

He did smile, in fact, as he looked at Erika standing before him.

“Thank you, dear,” he said. He reached out and stroked a hand across the top of her head, the way you’d pet a dog. He brought one long braid over her shoulder and patted it down. “I appreciate all you’ve done. I’ll be taking that now.”

He took the knife from Erika. She didn’t resist him at all. Didn’t even seem to know what was happening. She was still in her trance, whatever it was. The man slipped the knife into his coat pocket.

Sweat broke out on my face, despite the cold. Who was this guy? Where had he come from, and why? He didn’t seem overtly monstrous. If anything, there was something vaguely familiar about him, but I was pretty sure I would have remembered meeting him before.

He had the type of face you wanted to trust, and yet I wasn’t sure I should. The man had been kind to Erika so far, but all my senses still screamed that something was wrong.

The man raised his hand to her face, pressing the backs of his fingers to her cheek like a concerned mother. His other hand moved in his coat pocket. He pulled out a gun.

“A pity I have to kill you now,” he said softly. “I promise, it’s nothing personal.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:58 am

“No!” I yelled, bursting into the clearing. I was moving before I was even aware of it. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Killing her,” the man said, turning to look at me. Curiosity painted his features. “And now you, too, I suppose. Can’t have you running around now that you’ve seen me.”

“Who are you?” I demanded.

As the man opened his mouth to speak, I took advantage of his split attention and rushed in to grab Erika’s arm. I tugged, pulling her back, away from the gun. But the man recovered quickly. He stepped forward and hooked an arm around her torso, pulling in the other direction.

He was strong. I was surprised at how long I was able to hold on, to fight. I must have been learning something in Combat after all. But in the end, it was no real contest.

The man ripped Erika’s arm from my grasp and hugged her tightly to himself, her back pressed against his chest. One arm encircled her waist, pinning her in place. His free hand brought the gun up to her head and pressed it to her temple.

I lunged forward again, but he made a show of clicking the safety off, tutting at me.

“Uh-uh. I’d stay right there, unless you want her to die.”

“You’ve already said you’re going to kill her.” Rage and frustration welled inside me. Why couldn’t I do more to help her? Why was I so useless?

“I did,” the man said, his voice perfectly calm. “But you asked who I was and what I was doing. Wouldn’t you like to have that—”

The words died on his lips mid-sentence. His eyes narrowed, and he cocked his head to the side, looking at me closely.

“You,” he said, and the word was equal parts surprised and delighted.

“Me what?” I demanded.

“Could it really be that easy?” he said. He sounded like he was talking to himself, not me. “I thought I’d have to search for days, maybe weeks. Did you really deliver yourself to me, just like that?”

A new wave of fear rushed to fill my chest. It was hard to get a breath in. There was no room for my lungs to expand.

“What are you talking about?” My voice managed not to shake. I was proud of that.

“You’ll see soon enough,” the man said. His eyes flicked back to Erika, her head tucked under his chin, the gun at her temple. “But first—”

I dove right at them. Time slowed down, the instant I spent in the air lasting a lifetime before I crashed into the two of them. I didn’t even know what I was trying to do. Push the man away? Pull Erika free? It was dangerous, and might end in my death. But I knew Erika was going to die if I didn’t do something. I had to try.

All three of us fell to the ground, and a gunshot rang out, shattering the stillness of the night. I landed on top of Erika, and when I looked down at her, her eyes were focused again. She looked utterly lost.

“Cory?” she said, her voice full of fear. “Cory, what’s happening?”

I scrambled off her, realizing I was crushing her chest. “Are you okay?” I asked, scanning her face, her body, for any sign that the shot I’d heard had hit her. Her left hand was still bleeding, but other than that, she looked unscathed.

“Y-yeah,” she said, shaking her head, panic plain on her face.

“Not for long,” said the man in the overcoat. He pointed the gun down at Erika.

I looked up to see him looming over us. Fear made a fist around my heart, squeezing tight. I’d actually forgotten about him for a second, in my relief about Erika. Stupid, stupid me.

The man shifted his stance, and I swung my legs out, tangling them with his and knocking him over. As he fell, a second shot rang out, and the gun flew from his hand.

I scrambled on all fours in the direction it had gone. I was dimly aware of him doing the same thing, but I couldn’t let myself think of that. I just had to get to it first.

I didn’t like guns. My dad had kept three in the trailer at all times, loaded. A Glock, a Derringer, and a Smith -)

And now...how about a hot college AU for Cory and Noah?

I usually write a bonus epilogue for each of my books, but with *Strength of Desire* I was inspired to do something a little different. I wrote *Into It*, an explicit, standalone short story featuring Cory and Noah in a different world—as students at non-magical college to be exact!

It’s got all the same intensity, but it ends with a little semi-public sex in a dorm common room.