



The Evil Twin (Werewolf High #11)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: A dastardly lookalike. Lost powers. Sometimes two heads are not better than one.

Lucy and the pack have returned from the other world, but they've brought along an unwanted hitchhiker. With her powers gone and tension rising in the pack, can Lucy fight a war on two fronts?

Total Pages (Source): 20

CHAPTER ONE

I stared at my doppelganger in horror. Something about seeing her there, in familiar surroundings, in my own world, kept me frozen in place. It was different from when it had been me in her world, somehow. Maybe because I'd been the one who was out of place then, so I couldn't see how completely wrong it was.

"My lodestone," she repeated. "Hand it over and I'll be on my way."

"It was never yours to begin with," said Tennyson.

The calm, solid warmth of him beside me jolted me out of my shock.

"Counterpoint," I said to her. "You fix whatever you did to Althea and give me back my powers."

Even though I wasn't one hundred percent sure I wanted my powers back, I definitely didn't want her to have them. There was no scenario where that would end well.

Other-me sighed and rolled her eyes. "Look, I don't want to be here longer than necessary. You're going to give it to me sooner or later, so why not do it now before anyone gets hurt."

Behind me, Harper began to giggle. It spread to Nikolai and Hannah, and soon enough, even Tennyson's lips began to twitch.

She was just so cartoonishly evil, sitting there in the wingback chair beside the fire,

spewing out threats, it was hard to take her seriously. Though, to be fair, she took herself seriously enough for all of us.

“You’re in my world now,” I told her, enjoying the look of confusion on her face at our laughter. “We do things differently here.”

“We should lock her up.”

I turned in surprise. I hadn’t noticed Sam come in. I barely recognized him; the expression on his face as he looked at Other-me was so cold, so filled with hate that it turned him into someone else.

Though he had a fair point, we couldn’t exactly have her running around, causing havoc.

“We should send her back,” I said. “If she’s not going to help Althea, there’s no reason for us to keep her here.”

Sam shook his head. “If we send her back, she’ll only hurt more people. We should keep her here and take your power back from her. Then we should leave her to rot.”

Even though I was no fan of Other-me, it hurt a little that he could look at her face – my face – and say that. It made me wonder if part of him hated me for finding him and bringing him back. He’d been so withdrawn since we got home that I couldn’t tell what he was thinking.

At his words, Other-me gave a laugh. “You can’t honestly believe that any of you have the power to contain me, but you’re quite welcome to try. I could use some entertainment.”

I glanced at Hannah. She nodded, then faded back into the shadows. Other-me didn’t

have a Hannah, and if she had, she'd have just drained her, then tossed her aside, like a used-up AA battery. She thought that stealing other people's power would make her strong, but that wasn't true.

It was cringe to say, but I knew that it was the people themselves who made you stronger, not their magical abilities. I wouldn't last one minute without my friends, my pack, my family. She didn't have that, so there was no way she could beat me, even without my powers.

"Okay," I said. I could see Hannah moving from the corner of my eye, but didn't want to tip off Other-me to what she was doing. "Stay here if you want. Do what you like, but I think you're underestimating how easy you had it in your world, being a nepo-baby and all that."

She sneered at me. "Everything I have, I took myself. My father never gave me anything..." She trailed off and her face relaxed, then broke into a smile. "Your father, on the other hand... Well, who knows what he might offer me?"

The lights flickered, which meant Hannah was done. I didn't want to think about what might happen if Other-me teamed up with my father, and hopefully, I'd never have to.

"Great," I said. "Well, there's the door. Feel free to use it."

She narrowed her eyes at me. "What did you do?"

I shrugged. "What could I do? You stole all my power, remember? You should leave while you have the chance."

She stood up slowly, unsure of herself. As soon as she moved, the restraints snapped into place, magically binding her by the wrists and ankles.

“Do we still have that dungeon downstairs?” I asked.

“We sure do,” said Nikolai, sounding way too cheery about it.

Hannah and Nikolai herded her out of the room. Sam glared darkly after them.

“It’s okay,” I told him. “Hannah will put up all sorts of wards. She won’t escape.”

He shook his head, but I didn’t know what else he wanted from me. We couldn’t kill her. Moral objections aside, if we killed her, my power might die with her, and everything we’d gone through would be wasted. He didn’t want to send her back, so all we could do was keep her prisoner. It was the only thing that made sense, anyway.

“Well, I like her,” said Harper. “She’s like you, only hilarious and stylish. So, not actually like you at all.”

I rolled my eyes. “Don’t you have classes, or something?”

“Don’t you ?” she said. “You’ve missed so much of this semester, with your swooning around astral traveling or whatever. You’ll be lucky to graduate at this rate.”

I glared at her, but she wasn’t wrong. I’d missed a lot. School just hadn’t been a priority for me, with everything else going on. The whole reason for coming to Amaris in the first place had been to get into a good college, but somewhere along the way, that had gotten lost. As things were, another four years of school after this seemed an insurmountable obstacle.

Tennyson must have sensed how I was feeling and reached over to take my hand.

“We’ll deal with all that later,” he said.

I nodded, and without needing to talk at all, we both turned and headed toward Althea's room.

She was so still and pale, I could almost believe she was only sleeping. There were some marks on her skin, where the goop from Other-me's experiments had stuck to her and just never faded. We'd tried to clean it off a bunch of times, but that just seemed to embed it into her skin. It looked almost like a weird-colored birthmark, except for how it shimmered with a neon glow. It didn't make her any less beautiful; rather, it highlighted her otherworldliness.

"I hate this," said Tennyson quietly.

Although he sat at her bedside every spare hour he had, he never took her hand or stroked her hair or any of the things I'd have done if it were my brothers lying there. That just wasn't his way, and I thought maybe that made it harder for him. He scowled so deeply that his two eyebrows became one. A stranger might have thought he was angry with her, but of course, he wasn't. Angry with himself, maybe. With Other-me, definitely. But mostly, he was just scared. We all were. Althea was our brain, our heart. Without her, everything seemed hollow.

"It reminds me of when Sam was ill, after... you know."

As soon as I started speaking, I could have kicked myself. The last thing Tennyson needed reminding of just then was his mother's death.

"It reminds me of when you were in that world," he said. "You were so still, like this."

"You've sat at a lot of bedsides lately."

He nodded. "Too many."

We sat in silence, staring at Althea's face for any sign that she was still in there. As we sat, I thought about what Tennyson had just said.

"You don't think she may be stuck?" I asked him, eventually. "Partly still in that world?"

He shrugged. "I honestly have no idea. All of this is so far out of my realm of experience that anything might be possible."

I sighed. If Sam's mother had still been here, I thought she might have a clue. My father probably would too, but no way would I let him know that one of our pack was so vulnerable. He'd never help anyway.

Althea had always been the one who knew what to research, where to find the right texts, or who to ask. Anyone else we could've turned to, my father had killed.

The only other person – if he was actually a person – was Vucari, Nikolai's family associate. He'd never helped us, exactly, but he had directed me to the lodestone. He seemed to think the lodestone was the answer to all our problems, but I had no clue how to use it.

"I need to get my power back," I said. I'd been able to heal Tennyson's horse one time when it had been injured. It wasn't the same thing, but maybe I could heal Althea too. "If I get my power back and learn to use the lodestone, I'm sure I can heal her."

Tennyson put his arm around my shoulders. I slumped into his side.

"You don't need to fix the whole world," he said quietly. "At least, not all at once."

We fell asleep sitting there like that, awkwardly perched on chairs at Althea's beside,

and it felt like the safest place in the world.

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CHAPTER TWO

Although I had no idea where to start, I decided I had to research. We weren't short on material, that was for sure. There was the library at Wilde Manor, which was massive , plus the combined libraries of all the other packs, not to mention the magical knowledge of Hannah's family. She hadn't been able to access a lot of it since my father killed everyone on the Magic Users' Council, but now that her father was back, all sorts of wards could be broken or changed.

It was overwhelming, but most people were willing to help. We'd saved Hannah's dad from the other world, so he was more than obliging. He not only sent us a bunch of cool old books but had been scouring them himself.

Tennyson put a bunch of pack members on research duty too, though I wasn't sure how thorough they'd be, especially ones from other packs. They just weren't as invested as we were.

"You can't spend all your time on research," he said to me. "You need to study. You're still my lab partner and I won't have you dragging me down with you."

He said it from a place of love, I knew, but I also knew that he meant it as well.

So, between research and school, the days flew by. I was too busy and exhausted to think about anything else.

Which was why I was so shocked when the news came of the attack.

The scale of the attack wasn't so big, not compared to some other attacks my father had committed, but the pure brutality of it made my stomach turn. It was on a werewolf family. A young werewolf family. I had to leave the room halfway through the report to be sick.

When I came back into the room, Tennyson was still on the Zoom call discussing it. I didn't want to hear anything else about it, but I had to know. It was my father doing these things; the least I could do was hear about it.

"He's getting closer," Tennyson said, barely noticing as I sat down.

I raised my eyebrows. "What do you mean?"

"You still haven't told her?" asked one of the guys on the screen. Steven, I thought, some relation or other of Hannah's.

"Told me what?"

Tennyson shot me a look, then ended the Zoom call. I took a deep breath. This was going to be bad.

Tennyson turned to me, opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again.

"Let me guess," I said. "My father has been committing these attacks this whole time, and you've kept it from me."

From the way his shoulders slumped, I knew it was true. I took another deep breath. I didn't want to be angry with him, especially not because of anything associated with my father.

"There just hasn't been a good time to tell you," he said.

“Right,” I said. Deep breath. Remain calm. “How long has this been going on?”

We’d only just gotten back from the other world, and I’d been “swooning around astral traveling or whatever” for a while before that, so I could kind of understand it if it had only been happening for a month or so. I’d still be annoyed, but I’d get it.

“Since summer,” he said, not meeting my eyes.

I took another deep breath. It didn’t help. Sometimes, no amount of breathing in the world can fix things.

“Right,” I said. I stood up and gathered my things.

“Lucy,” he said, reaching for my hand.

I shook him off.

“I don’t want to fight with you,” I said, struggling to keep my voice neutral. “So, I’m just going to go back to my room and think about things until I’m less mad at you. If I stay here and talk about this with you right now, I’ll say things I regret, and we’ve got enough problems at the moment without us being on the outs.”

I glanced around to make sure I had everything.

“I didn’t do it to hurt you,” he said.

“I know. You did it to protect me. But if you can’t see why that’s just as bad, then that’s a whole other problem. Let me know if Althea’s condition changes, but apart from that, it might be good for us to have a little space.”

It was hard, being cut off from Tennyson. Even harder than being cut off from my

powers, but I knew it was the best thing for us both. There was too much else happening, too much else to give our mental energy to.

So, I threw myself into study, and when I wasn't studying, I was researching the lodestone. It took me around a week to catch up with my classes, just enough so I wasn't completely lost, but the lodestone was another matter entirely. The only thing I found was that while I read through ancient text after ancient text, I sorted out my thoughts about Tennyson in the back of my head. It took me a few more days than that to get up the courage to go talk to him.

He sat alone by Althea's bedside. She looked exactly the same as the last time we'd been there. Maybe a little thinner, but no closer to waking up. He glanced up when I entered the room and gave me a tentative smile that made my insides all fluttery.

I sat down beside him and took his hand.

"You know I love you, right?" I said.

He squeezed my hand. "Of course. And I, you."

I smiled. It was such a Tennyson way to say it. He wasn't going to make this easy.

"I understand why you withheld that information from me. You didn't want to burden me with everything else going on. You thought I'd feel responsible, because he's my father."

I kept my eyes downcast, focused on our joined hands. If I had to look at him, I wasn't sure I could say what I needed to say.

"Lucy, I –"

I shook my head. “Let me say this before I change my mind.” I took a deep breath. “I know we’re in this for the long haul. At least, I know I am.”

I felt him nod beside me.

“So that’s why I think we should cool it for a little while. At least, until all this craziness settles down.”

He made a noise in his throat, almost a cough but not quite. “You want to break up?”

“No,” I said, gripping his hand more tightly. “No, that’s the last thing I want. But you can’t deny that our priorities are all messed up. If I were some rando with an evil dad, you’d have told me about the attacks in a heartbeat, in case I could help or had info. And I can’t count the times I’ve put my feelings for you ahead of what’s best for everyone.”

“Those feelings won’t stop just because we’re not together,” he said.

“I know,” I said. “But we both might think more clearly if we’re not so...” I made a vague gesture between the two of us. “You know. Distracted.”

“You’re doing this to punish me,” he said.

I scoffed. “If anything, I’m punishing myself.” I leaned into him, just a little. “Don’t be mad.”

“How can I not?” he said, but he didn’t sound mad. He sounded tired.

That made my heart ache even more, but it still felt like the right thing to do.

“We need to think of each other as if we were any other packmate. As if we were...

Nikolai.”

Tennyson huffed out a little laugh. “I think it’s safe to say I will never think of Nikolai in the same way that I think of you.”

I would have made some joke about his crazed attraction for Nikolai, but that seemed like something a girlfriend would do, not an impartial packmate. Instead, I straightened my shoulders and let go of his hand, telling myself it wasn’t forever.

“Tell me about these attacks,” I said, doing my best to keep the heartache from my voice.

Tennyson nodded and started to lay out the details. It was bad. Absolutely merciless.

“I need to figure out the lodestone,” I said, once he’d finished. “I need Althea.”

“There’s someone else who might know,” he said.

“Vucari? He seemed to think I had to figure it out for myself.”

“Not Vucari. You. Other-you.”

I thought it over. I didn’t want to deal with her, but if I were this new logic-based Lucy, I couldn’t let that factor in.

“I guess you wouldn’t bother traveling to a whole different world after something you couldn’t use.”

“True,” I said, then sighed.

“Do you want me to come with you?”

I shook my head, then stood up. “Nah, you stay here with Althea.”

I wanted him with me, more than anything, but I had to get used to doing things alone, if this whole “cooling it” thing was going to work at all.

I glanced around for something, anything that would give me a reason to stay a little longer. Part of me felt as if once I left the room, that would be it. There’d be no going back for the two of us. Even though I knew it was the right thing to do, the only thing, I hated it.

I lingered in the doorway. “I guess I’ll see you around.”

He gave me a sad smile. “You know where to find me.”

The dungeon holding Other-me was not nearly secure enough. I’d have kept her in an electrified box that shocked her whenever she touched the bars. Even that probably wasn’t enough, not when I considered that Althea was currently a prisoner in her own body.

I recognized the dungeon from the time I’d been under the love potion and had to be restrained. Also, maybe the time I’d attacked Milo, though that was all a bit fuzzy in my mind. I’d been shackled, though, and Other-me was free to roam the room as she pleased. It was a sparse room, but not uncomfortable. Way better than the dungeons we’d found Sam in when we’d been in her world. Way, way better than she deserved.

“Finally,” she said when I entered the room. “I’m so sick of that creepy little witch. And your Nikolai is not nearly as much fun as mine. Do you have the lodestone?”

“No,” I said. “And you’re never getting it, so quit asking.”

“You don’t even know how to use it,” she said, her voice full of impatience. She

paced back and forth across the room like a caged tiger.

I raised my eyebrow. I wasn't sure I could bluff her, considering we were more or less the same person, but it was worth a try.

“Yes, I do, actually.”

She stopped pacing for a moment to roll her eyes. “If you did, you'd have taken your powers back from me and sent me home to my own world.”

I couldn't help but smile. She thought she was so smart, but she'd just confirmed what I wanted to know. The lodestone could do everything I needed it to do. Now I just needed to trick her into telling me how .

Other-me snorted. “You didn't even know it could do that? You'll never figure out how to use it on your own; you may as well just hand it over. You don't even know what it is.”

I mean, she wasn't wrong. It was a magnetized rock, that was all I could find online, everything that wasn't a videogame wiki. And all the musty old books I'd read hadn't told me much more. A few spells had mentioned using a lodestone, but that was as a conduit for power they already had, not to reclaim power that had been stolen.

A conduit, though. That gave me an idea.

As much as I knew it was stupid to bring the lodestone this close to her, it felt worse to leave it somewhere unattended, so I'd been carrying it everywhere with me, in my pocket. I had a feeling it couldn't be taken by force, anyway.

And having it there, together with the both of us, I wondered if I could use it as a conduit between the two of us, to tap into my power and pull it back to me. It was a

stretch, but I'd kick myself if there was such an easy solution that I hadn't bothered to try. I felt in my pocket and closed my fingers around the stone. Other-me paced back and forth across the room, and the moment she got close enough, I caught her by the wrist.

It was like being hit by a zillion watts of electricity. I was thrown backwards, flying into the stone wall behind me. My head cracked against it, and the world faded out.

When I opened my eyes again, the dungeon door was open and the room was empty.

Other-me had escaped.

CHAPTER THREE

“What were you thinking?” Hannah asked, handing me an ice pack for my head.

I’d dragged myself up the steps of the dungeon to the common room and alerted everyone to the escape.

“She clearly wasn’t,” said Sam.

I scowled at him and held the ice against the giant bump on the back of my head. Just because he hated Other-me, that was no reason to be mean to me. Even if she had escaped on my watch and was now out there somewhere, running amok.

“She obviously thought the stone might be able to conduct the power from Other-Lucy back to her,” said Tennyson. “It was a reasonable hypothesis.”

We smiled at each other shyly.

Nikolai caught us and narrowed his eyes. “What’s this, then?” he asked, waving a hand between the two of us. “Did you...” He wagged his eyebrows suggestively, which we took as our cue to ignore him.

Hannah sighed and flopped down in the seat beside me. “It’s so easy to forget you didn’t grow up with all this. You never even learned the basics.”

“Basics?”

“Well, you know that magic is energy, right?”

I nodded, but it hurt my head, so I stopped.

Hannah furrowed her brow and chewed on her thumbnail, obviously trying to find a way to explain it to a dunce like me.

“It’s like feedback,” she said, finally.

“Feedback?” I said. “Like ‘nice paper, Lucy, but don’t forget your friend, the semi-colon – A-’?”

Hannah laughed. “No, like when Assistant Head Noel tries to use the microphone for morning assembly, and it makes that squealing noise. Or classic rock guitars.”

I nodded. “I get it. Kinda.”

“So, you and the other-you have the same energy signature, right? Which means you shouldn’t exist in the same place, but because you do, when you touched her, it caused this kind of magical feedback.”

I sighed. It made sense.

“But surely I touched her when I was in her world...” But when I thought back, I couldn’t think of a time when I had.

Hannah shrugged. “Even if you had, your actual body remained here, asleep. Whatever projection of you appeared in that world probably didn’t have the exact same energy signature.”

I shifted the ice pack on my head. The condensation was making my hair wet, and

some trickled down my neck.

“So, I just won’t touch her again.”

“If we ever catch her,” said Sam glumly.

Hannah exchanged a look with Nikolai and Tennyson.

“It might be more complicated than that,” Hannah said. “The two of you simply aren’t meant to co-exist in the same universe. It’s against all the laws of nature and magic. She can’t stay here indefinitely.”

“So, what will happen if we don’t get rid of her?”

Hannah wouldn’t meet my eye. “Nothing good,” she said.

“It’s not exactly a common occurrence,” said Tennyson. “Everything written on the topic is pure speculation.”

I raised an eyebrow. Had he known this was on the cards? Was this yet another thing he’d been keeping from me?

He must’ve sensed what I was thinking because he shook his head. “It came up a few times when you were in that place and we were researching how to get you back, but because there was no reaction between the two of you, or any of us and our counterparts, I just assumed it was only speculation.”

“This is literally the last thing we need right now,” I said.

“We need to find her,” said Sam. “Before she hurts someone.”

He had a point. We couldn't let her run around willy-nilly. Especially not with her wearing my face. But in the end, she wasn't hard to find.

She was holding court in the dining hall. She sat at the table with Milo and Fatima, but they were surrounded by half our class, all hanging onto every word from Other-me's mouth.

At our entrance, they all glanced over but then turned their attention straight back to her. Even though I was standing between Tennyson and Nikolai, who the lot of them normally fawned all over, they were still more interested in Other-me. Had she cast a spell on them? What was the deal with her?

She'd been stuck in a dungeon for days, and yet she looked immaculate. Glowing, even.

"Are they hypnotized?" I whispered.

"I think they just... like her," said Tennyson. "There's no trace of magic here."

That seemed even worse, somehow.

"What's our move here?" asked Nikolai. "We can't exactly chain her up in front of all these people."

"She'd do it to you," said Sam.

I was all for it. I could quite happily club her over the head in front of the whole school and drag her away, but I didn't want to get too close to her. The lump on my head was still quite painful.

"Let me handle this," said Nikolai. "My other guy used to date her, right? So, she's

not immune to the old Volkov charm.” He smoothed down his eyebrows and started walking toward the table.

“This is not going to go well,” I predicted.

But I was wrong. He slipped into the seat beside her and within seconds, the two of them were laughing like old friends.

“Are we quite sure we brought the right one back?” I asked.

“Quite sure,” said Hannah, popping up beside me where Nikolai had been a moment ago. She’d obviously just finished with her part of the search, and we’d agreed to meet back here.

“You might not want to watch this,” I told her.

“I definitely don’t,” said Tennyson, turning away.

“We can’t just let her go unsupervised,” said Sam. “You don’t know what she’s capable of.”

“My sister has been lying unconscious for weeks. I know perfectly well what she’s capable of,” Tennyson said.

Sam looked abashed but stood his ground.

“Sam and I can eat down here,” said Hannah, pulling him into a seat. “We’ll keep an eye on them. You two go have your lunch.”

She waved us off, which is how I found myself awkwardly sitting across from Tennyson, picking at a plate of sashimi.

“Um,” I said. “Thanks for having my back, back there.”

He shrugged. He wasn’t normally that interested in food, but he seemed transfixed by his neatly-sliced tuna. “Sam was being unfair to you.”

I nodded. Sam had been through a lot and definitely needed help, but I didn’t know how to approach that with him without sounding accusatory, and I couldn’t talk to Tennyson about it in the middle of the dining hall, not when Sam had werewolf hearing. I didn’t even trust my mental connection with Tennyson, not when I knew Other-me could hear his side of the conversation. But when he glanced up at me, I knew he understood me.

“I’ll talk to him,” Tennyson said. “He’ll be fine.”

Warmth flooded through me at his words. Even without our bond, without anything, Tennyson still understood me. He stood by me. That was why it was so difficult to be apart from him.

I started gobbling down my lunch to hide my feelings. It felt disrespectful to the fishes to eat them so quickly. They were high-quality fishes and very tasty, but I was in no headspace to appreciate them properly. Not when Tennyson sat opposite me, being so sweet and understanding.

“I have to go,” I said. “I told Harper I’d sit with Althea because she’s got a math test this afternoon.”

I stood up before he could say anything and fled the dining hall.

I spent the next few days avoiding both Tennyson and Other-me. It was too hard to be around Tennyson and not with Tennyson, and I hoped that time would make that easier. Other-me was harder to stay away from. She popped up everywhere: the

dining hall, the dorms, even my classes. I didn't only want to avoid another bolt of magical feedback from her, I just straight up didn't like her. And she knew it, that's why she was always there, rubbing it in my face.

People seemed to think she was my identical twin, which I supposed was logical. But they also had the idea that I'd kept her prisoner and she'd only just escaped from my evil clutches. Which I couldn't deny. It was technically true, but it had left out some key points. Not that I felt any need to defend myself to the student body. It just irked me that everyone had immediately taken to her when they'd immediately hated me.

Everything about her irked me. She was a very irksome person.

"She's doing it to annoy you," Hannah said, as we watched her in English class chatting to Mr Porter. Honestly, I'd have expected better from him.

"It's working," I said.

Other-me glanced over at me and raised an eyebrow, as if she'd heard me. And maybe she had, who knew what kind of stolen powers she had.

"No, it isn't," Hannah said sternly.

Other-me let out a fake-sounding laugh and clutched Mr Porter by the arm, in a very flirty way.

"He's a teacher," I hissed. "She's being gross."

Hannah laughed. "Wait until she starts acting like that with your boyfriend." She seemed to forget Other-me for a moment and turned to me. "Speaking of, I haven't seen you and Tennyson together in the past few days. Is everything okay?"

I shook my head. “I can’t talk about it,” I told her. “But it’s fine, really.”

She didn’t look convinced but was distracted by a loud peal of laughter from Other-me.

“I need to figure out that lodestone,” I said. “The sooner the better.”

CHAPTER FOUR

It was a few days before I saw Tennyson again. Without consciously meaning to, we'd managed to divide up the few classes we had together with sitting by Althea's bedside, so one of us was with her and one of us was in class. We emailed each other our notes, but apart from that, it was complete radio silence.

Then we all got called back to Wilde Manor. There had been another attack, a bad one, and Tennyson wanted the whole pack together to discuss strategy. Hannah and Nikolai stayed behind to keep an eye on Althea and Other-me. We didn't want Althea to wake up alone, and there was nobody else we could trust around Other-me. Harper was just as bewitched by Other-me as the rest of the school, but on the other hand, Sam would have torn her to shreds given half a chance.

The pack meeting was a shambles. Everyone was angry and scared, and they seemed to blame Tennyson and me as much as they blamed my father. Normally, Althea was the one who could calm everyone down, but she wasn't there. Tennyson stood in front of the crowd as they yelled at him, hurled abuse and accusations. He just stood there and took it. It got too much for me to stand, and I stepped forward to say something, but Tennyson met my eye and gave a little shake of his head. He had a plan. I just had to trust him.

It was hard for me not to stick my nose in, but I did trust him, and I wanted him to see that, so I kept my mouth shut.

After a while, the crowd began to quiet down.

“If you’re quite done, then perhaps we can begin on the matter at hand,” he said. His voice was clear and confident. He sounded like an alpha.

I stood back and watched in awe as he took control of the group, organized them into groups, and gave them specific tasks. He seemed to know everyone so well, even those who hadn’t originally been in the Wilde pack. He knew their strengths, their interests, and applied them to his overall strategy in a way that benefited both the person and the pack. He was wonderful.

I’d been hurt over the summer when he’d had no time for me. Selfishly, I realized. He’d been thrust into this impossible position, at such a precarious time for the pack, and he’d met the challenge head-on. Not just met it, he’d triumphed over it. No matter how things went with my father in the end, the way Tennyson led this pack was a win. I doubted even his mother would’ve found something to criticize. I envied him, in a way. He was still so young, but he’d clearly found his calling. He was a born leader.

Once the main business was over and the crowd began to drift off, he came over to me.

“You handled that well,” I said, not trusting myself to say anything more.

He leaned against the wall beside me. He looked so tired as he rested his head back against the stone, his eyes falling closed.

“I’m having dinner with my father,” he said, not moving. “You’re welcome to join us. Your brothers, too.”

I had a sudden flash of how that would go, Hamish hanging from a chandelier, Fletcher talking Tennyson’s father’s ear off about Call of Duty . Liam complaining in the face of everything Tennyson’s family had done for us.

“Maybe not,” I said. “Your father doesn’t deserve that.”

Tennyson huffed a quiet laugh, then opened his eyes. He turned his head slightly toward me, and there in the shadows at the back of the meeting hall, I was struck anew by how beautiful he was. I took it for granted most of the time; he was just Tennyson, but he was the most beautiful man I’d ever seen. And he was a man now, I realized. He was tall and broad, with a classic square jaw, which was shadowed with stubble. Without meaning to, I’d raised my hand to trace the line of his jaw, but then I remembered.

I dropped my hand awkwardly, then cleared my throat.

“You didn’t have a role for me in your strategy,” I said, to change the subject. “Even without my power, I can still help.”

“You’re researching the lodestone,” he said. “That’s the most important thing right now. Everything else is just a stalling tactic until you can claim your full power.”

I snorted. “No pressure.” But I smiled at him so he knew I was kidding.

I couldn’t keep standing there with him and not go back on my resolution, so I pushed away from the wall.

“Are we going back to school tonight or in the morning?” I asked, as a way to end the conversation.

He hesitated for a moment. “Actually, I thought you might want to stay here for a few days. There are a lot of texts in our library that can’t be moved. I thought you might want to look through them. And it might be safer to keep some distance from your double. I can get recordings of your classes so you don’t fall behind.”

It made sense and he was right, but it didn't stop a twinge of hurt from stabbing through my heart. Logically, I knew it was the smart move, but it felt more as if he was trying to get me out of the way. I was useless as I was, might as well pack me off to the manor to read dusty old books while he made the moves on a prettier, smarter, more powerful version of me.

Completely illogical, but that was why they were called intrusive thoughts, I figured. If they were happy, logical thoughts, they wouldn't need to intrude; they'd be welcome.

"Sounds good," I said, forcing a smile before Tennyson picked up on my weirdness. "I'll let you know if I find anything. And you'll let me know if Althea wakes up?"

"Of course."

I left him there in the shadows and went to find my brothers. We'd moved up to the main house in the summer. It hadn't felt safe leaving my brothers in the cottage without my mother there. Hamish and Fletcher seemed to love it, but Liam was deep into his surly teenager era and hated everything about everything. To be fair, I'd probably be mad if someone stuck me in a strange house and didn't let me leave, but I was easily bought with Michelin star chefs and comfy beds, which didn't seem to sway him at all.

They were in the wing of the manor that Tennyson had allocated for us, and had obviously no idea I'd be stopping by. Hamish jumped up so fast that he tumbled over the back of the sofa. Fletcher was a little more restrained, waiting to pause his game before rushing me. Liam, on the other hand, looked up from the book he was reading and narrowed his eyes at me.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

Hamish was a bit too big now to climb up into my arms, but that didn't stop him from trying. He and Fletcher were talking at me a mile a minute, so I took the opportunity to think how best to answer Liam while the other two wore themselves out.

Once the novelty of having me home wore off, they went back to what they'd been doing, and I took the seat next to Liam. I didn't want the other two to know exactly how evil our father was; they were too young for that kind of burden, but Liam was older now than I'd been when I got wrapped up in this whole business. He'd never quite forgiven me for not telling him about Sam and all the rest of it, so I tried to be as truthful with him as possible.

"There's just some stuff going on," I said. "Our father is on the rampage, but we're all safe here, there's nothing to worry about."

Liam raised his eyebrows, then went back to his book.

"I'll be around for a few days," I said.

Liam kept reading. "Great," he said dryly.

I sighed and got up to take my stuff to my room. It wasn't really my room, just a guest room that had been allocated to me. It felt more like a fancy hotel room than anything else, although some of my stuff was in the closet. I fell back onto the bed and started to chew over what Tennyson had said to me.

Nope, that wasn't healthy. There was no hidden meaning behind his keeping me here.

Then my mind drifted to how he'd looked standing there in the shadows with me.

Nope, also not healthy.

I needed a distraction. There was no point delaying, so I changed into my comfy home clothes and headed toward the library.

I only had a vague idea of where the library was. Normally, Althea would get the books. She knew where everything was, how it was categorized, and all that, so there was no point tagging along and getting in the way – her words.

In my head, I'd kind of pictured it similar to the library at school: brightly lit, impressive architecture, all that. Instead, when I eventually found it, it was more like a forgotten dungeon. You know when you find one of those underground fortresses in Minecraft that sometimes have rooms with books, and they're all cobwebby and kind of creepy? It was like that. I hoped I wouldn't have to tunnel my way out because I had not brought a pickaxe with me.

It was definitely easy to get lost in there. Row after row, stack after stack of books, all higgledy-piggledy, with no kind of organization that I could figure out. Had Althea just memorized where every book was? Surely not, there were more books down there than anyone could read in ten lifetimes. Nobody could remember them all.

And then I stumbled on the reason why Althea could find the books she needed, not to mention – I suspected – the reason she hadn't wanted me tagging along.

A guy was sitting at a desk with books piled all around him. I supposed he wasn't a librarian, since it was a private library? A curator, maybe? And that curator was hot. Like, Henry Cavill in *The Witcher* level of hot. He even looked a little like Geralt, not quite as built and with dark hair instead of white. He was very pale, like he never left the dungeon to go out in the sun, and it was hard to judge his age. If vampires had been a thing, I'd have pegged him as one, but they weren't. At least, I hoped they weren't.

I was pretty sure Althea and Harper's brother, Julian, had something going on, but

that didn't make the curator any less nice to look at.

He glanced up as I approached his desk.

"I don't know you," he said in a bored drawl.

"I'm Lucy," I said.

He raised a perfectly shaped eyebrow. "Your brother is a terrorist, and I will not change my mind. He is not welcome here amongst the books."

I didn't need to ask which brother he meant. "I'm not here about Hamish."

I made a mental note to ask what that was about later, though I could take a fairly educated guess.

"I will not let any book out of this library that may come into contact with him."

I shrugged. That seemed fair, honestly.

"Althea Wilde is super ill," I said, trying for an angle that might budge him.

"I am aware."

I sighed. "Look, I've got this lodestone thing, and if I can use it to get my powers back, then I think I can heal her, but I don't know how to use it or where to start looking for something to help, like a handy user manual or something."

Slowly, he closed his book and set it aside.

"A lodestone?"

I nodded.

“ A lodestone, or the lodestone?”

I shrugged. “No idea. Is there a difference?”

He opened his mouth as if about to explain, but then snapped it closed, probably remembering I was related to Hamish. I felt in my pocket and took out the lodestone to show him.

The curator drew in a sharp breath and pushed back, the chair legs scraping against the stone floor.

“You walk around with that in your pocket?”

I shrugged again. “Honestly, I forget it’s there half the time.”

He shook his head. “Figures,” he muttered. “I suppose you’d quite happily stow an atomic bomb in your knapsack as well.”

He stood up so quickly that I was startled. He was much, much taller than he seemed while seated.

“Follow me,” he said, turning abruptly, then vanished through the stacks of books.

I hurried to keep up with him. He moved stiffly, awkwardly, as if the cold of the dungeon had seeped into his bones. Still, he was fast. He twisted and turned so quickly through the stacks that I almost had to jog to keep him in sight. By the time he stopped, I was out of breath.

“You are not to remove this book from this area,” he said sternly. “There is a desk at

the end of this row, you may read it there. Once you're done, leave the book on the desk and notify me that you are finished. Show me your hands."

I furrowed my brow in confusion. "Huh?"

"Your hands," he repeated, then held his hands out, palm up.

I copied him, then turned them over when he prompted me to.

He sniffed. "Clean enough. Be incredibly gentle when turning the pages. Only turn one page at a time." He pulled a few bits of string from his pocket and handed them to me. They were heavier than I expected them to be. "Use these to hold the pages open. Don't touch the pages except to turn them; the oils from your skin or the slightest pressure can damage them. This book is over a thousand years old and contains information not available in any other known text. It is worth more than your life, or the lives of your family."

He gave me a very pointed look. Sheesh, what had Hamish done? I'd assumed he'd drawn some rude pictures in a book, but would that warrant this level of animosity? Well, maybe. This guy really loved books a lot .

The curator turned back to the shelf. Reaching up, he took down a large box, decorated with intricate patterns in silver. He held the box close to his chest, as if it were a newborn baby, and gently carried it over to the desk at the end of the row. He placed the box on the desk.

"This is a book cradle," he said, pointing to a large wooden V on the desk. "I will place the book in the cradle. Under no circumstances should you remove the book from the cradle."

Slowly, reverently, he opened the box.

After all that, I'd expected the box to be something impressive, with gold lettering hand-painted by medieval monks and all that, but it just looked like any old book that you'd find shoved at the back of a shelf in a thrift store. Maybe a little bigger. There were no markings on the worn leather cover, unless you counted the scuffs around the edges.

The curator carefully lifted the book out from the box and placed it in the cradle, setting the spine along the base of the V so that the sides of the book were supported when it was opened. The spine creaked as he opened the cover, and the yellowed pages crackled.

"No eating, no drinking, no naked flames," he said. "Don't even breathe directly on the book if you can help it."

"Understood," I said. I mean, he'd really driven his point home. Mr Subtlety, he was not.

"And do not let that thing anywhere near the text, do you understand?"

I thought he meant Hamish for a moment, but he pointed toward the pocket where I kept the lodestone. I wasn't sure what harm a little rock could do to an old book, but he was the expert. I nodded.

"If anything damages the book, come and get me right away. Don't try to hide it. I will know." He glared at me. His blue eyes were so pale they seemed silver, and for a moment, I felt hypnotized.

I really wanted to ask if he was a vampire, but wasn't sure it would be polite.

"Sure," I said. I hesitated a moment before asking, "So, what exactly is this book?"

His glare turned from hypnotic to withering, then he sighed, as if he was stupid for expecting better.

“This book is a transcription of a series of scrolls believed to have been rescued from the library of Alexandria. It details several magical artifacts, such as that stone you have, how and why they were created, and how they should best be used.”

I nodded. “So, literally a handy user manual for my stone.”

He rolled his eyes. “Yes. ‘A handy user manual for your stone’. Please do try not to destroy anything.”

I took the seat at the desk, and the curator backed away, not taking his eyes off me until he bumped into a shelf of books and had to either stay there watching me from the shadows or go back to his desk. I was honestly surprised he didn’t decide to just sit with me while I read, but I got the feeling he wanted to be as far from the lodestone as possible.

Because it was in the cradle, I had to sit up super straight and crane my neck to see the book. I rearranged myself so I was partially kneeling on the chair, then, carefully, I turned the first page of the book.

CHAPTER FIVE

I'd wondered why Althea had never mentioned this ancient text full of lost wisdom; surely she knew about it, even if she hadn't read it. But as soon as I hit the first page, I realized why. Firstly, it was written in tiny, cramped handwritten letters. Secondly, it was in Latin. Probably. I didn't actually know Latin, but that was what people wrote stuff in back in the old days, wasn't it? The letters seemed more or less the same as the alphabet I knew, so it wasn't in hieroglyphs or runes or something, but I had about as much chance of understanding it either way.

I glanced around. The curator was nowhere to be seen, but that didn't mean he wasn't lurking in the shadows. Or had some kind of nanny-cam set up for his books. He hadn't explicitly told me not to use my phone around the book, but I doubted he'd approve. Still, he must've known I couldn't understand Latin, right?

I wasn't sure, but I didn't have much choice. I pulled out my phone and loaded up my translation app. It was going to take forever, scanning each page to see if it was relevant, but if it gave me a step-by-step guide to using the lodestone, it would be worth it.

It was chilly and uncomfortable down there, especially perched weirdly on the chair like I was, but I didn't want to take a break to get the feeling back in my knees or go grab a sweater. I didn't trust that the curator would give me access to the book a second time, especially if he knew I'd exposed it to radiation from my phone or whatever.

So, I kept on. Carefully turn a page, place the weighted string, aim my phone, and

wait for it to translate, realize it wasn't relevant, pick up the string, and repeat. Assuming the book had a hundred pages – it was definitely more, but for the sake of easy math – and it took around a minute per page – it was definitely longer, the app was super slow all the way down in this book dungeon – then I'd be there for a few hours at least. My belly rumbled, but I ignored it and kept on. Turn the page, place the string, translate the text, over and over.

There was some super interesting stuff in this book, but I didn't have time to be diverted by it. I thought Hannah would probably give her right arm for some of the rituals, and occasionally I'd screenshot the translation if something sounded particularly awesome.

When I finally got to it, I almost skipped the page. It was headed “nexum e cursus”, which I just assumed would be about a curse of some sort, which wasn't helpful to me, but my app started translating before I could move the string and turn the page, and as soon as it did, I realized I'd found what I was looking for.

“Cursus” wasn't anything to do with a curse, it was course , or journey, like the “lode” in lodestone; and nexum was the same as nexus, like a coming together, a convergence. I sat back on my heels, giving my body a break for a moment while I thought about what that meant.

A meeting of different paths? Like a crossroads? Maybe. But how did that relate to the power of the stone?

My neck cracked in protest as I sat up to crane over the book again, but I couldn't stop now that I was so close.

It was hard going. The translation app worked fine to get a gist of what the text was about, but it got a little confused when it came to the details. There were about five pages in total about the lodestone, then it moved on to an entry about a talking tree,

which sounded awesome but not helpful.

I made sure the flash was off in my camera app and photographed the pages about the lodestone carefully, making sure every word was legible in the photos. I screenshotted the translations as well, but figured it was best to have the original so I could get a more accurate translation when I was out of there.

I'd barely made it halfway through the book, and I just bet there was a bunch more awesome stuff, but now that I had what I needed, I realized my body was screaming at me. It wanted the bathroom, food, and sleep, in that order. Then maybe a massage.

I flicked through my camera roll one more time, just to make sure everything was clear enough to read, then carefully closed the book and stood up. My legs were like jelly after kneeling for all that time, so I bounced up and down for a minute to get the feeling back into them. Probably, I shouldn't make any sudden movements near the book, either, but I was going to face-plant otherwise.

I wasn't sure I'd be able to find my way back to the curator's desk, but it was surprisingly easy, as he'd put an extra lamp out at each turn. I hadn't expected him to be so thoughtful, but maybe he just didn't want me lost among his precious books.

"Did you damage the book?" he demanded, as soon as I came into sight. He must have been just sitting there waiting for me to appear the whole time, fretting over his book.

I rolled my eyes. "It's as good as new," I said. "But thank you for showing it to me. It was very helpful."

He raised his eyebrows. "You know Latin?"

I shrugged, trying to seem nonchalant. "I know enough."

Technically, it wasn't a lie. I knew enough to use my translation app.

"Good luck," he said. "I hope you find a cure for Althea. She deserves to live a full and healthy life."

It seemed like a weird thing to say, but he was a weird guy. Althea was probably the only person he saw regularly, stuck down there in the book dungeon. Well, and Hamish. No wonder he was a bit of an odd duck.

My brothers were all asleep by the time I got back. I'd been gone a lot longer than I thought. I made a sandwich in the little kitchenette in our shared area. I was dead tired and still a bit cold, but I wanted to work more on the translation of the book, so I took my sandwich to bed and cranked up the heating. I was always nagging my brothers about eating in bed, so I'd have to make sure I left no trace or I'd never hear the end of it.

I started with the app-translated text as a guide, matching it with the original text word by word, noting anything that didn't make sense or words that could have wildly different meanings. A picture started to form of what the text meant, but by that point, the words were swimming in front of my eyes. I emailed the original text along with the few paragraphs that I'd translated to Tennyson, with the subject: "you know Latin, right?", then took my plate out of the sink to rinse off the sandwich crumbs.

"You shouldn't eat in bed, you know."

I nearly jumped out of my skin. I dropped the plate and it clattered in the sink.

"Sheesh, Liam, are you trying to give me a heart attack?"

He shuffled out of the darkness and took a seat at the table. "You missed dinner."

“I know. I lost track of time.”

“You were with Tennyson?”

I didn’t like the way Liam said Tennyson’s name. Like Tennyson was something awful.

“No,” I said. “I was in the library doing some research. What did Hamish do to that guy down there, anyway?”

Liam huffed a laugh. “Papier maché.”

I groaned, but I was pleased that Liam sounded a little more like himself. I wanted things to be okay between us. He was my brother, the closest to my age, and I relied on him for so much. I didn’t want him to resent me.

“If things go well, this all might be over soon,” I told him. “You can go to a real school, and everything can get back to normal.”

He snorted. “Normal. Right.”

“I just want you to be safe,” I said. “And it’s not safe at the moment.”

“He wouldn’t hurt us,” Liam said. “He’s our dad.”

I chewed on my lip. I had to be careful. I suspected our father had been in contact with the boys. I didn’t know how, or how often, or what he’d said, but I thought maybe he’d been targeting Liam.

Liam was older, and the other two couldn’t keep their mouths shut for love or money, so I was fairly sure they’d have slipped up and told me. Liam obviously saw me as

the authority figure he needed to rebel against, which left him wide open for manipulation by our father. He'd been so young when our dad left that he only had good memories. Heck, even I'd mostly only had good memories, at least, up until when he came back into our lives and caused a magical war.

"He hurts people," I said. "That's what he does. He hurt me, and he'd hurt you and the boys as well. You can't trust him."

Liam looked as if he was about to argue, then shook his head. "You should go to bed. Hamish will have you up at the crack of dawn."

He gave me a wry smile and then stood up. I sighed, watching as he retreated back into the shadows and closed his bedroom door. I could see that whole situation turning into a problem. I should nip it in the bud, but I didn't know how. I'd never signed up to be a parent to my brothers. I had no clue what I was doing. The easiest way was to stop my father before he could interfere in our lives anymore.

Surprisingly, I wasn't woken at the crack of dawn by Hamish. It was by Tennyson, looming over my bed like a creeper.

"How long have you been standing there?" I asked when my eyes focused enough to see him.

"Not long," he said. "Hurry up and get dressed, we need to go back to school. Althea's awake."

CHAPTER SIX

Althea was not only awake when we got back, she was sitting in the common room, stuffing her face full of finger sandwiches. She was normally so elegant, it was strange to see her eat like a normal person, but apart from that, she seemed no different. Well, apart from that and the shimmer on her skin where the goop from Other-me's experiment had stuck to her.

"I'm absolutely starved," she said as we came in and sat down. "They said I've been out to it for a few weeks, and it feels like it. I could eat a mountain of these!"

She didn't say anything else until she'd polished off the whole plate. Then she daintily wiped her fingers on a napkin and set the plate aside.

"You're all staring," she said.

And we were. Tennyson and I, Nikolai and Hannah, Harper and Sam, even Other-me, we couldn't stop looking at her, though I suspected it was mostly for different reasons.

"I missed you so much," I told her.

She smiled. "You met the curator, didn't you. That's good."

I blinked at her. That was a heck of a guess.

She pointed to the shimmer on her skin. "Apparently, I have visions now." She

glanced over to Other-me. “Thanks for that.”

It was the most sarcasm I’d ever heard in her voice.

“I’m also the one who woke you from your coma,” said Other-me. “You should be more grateful.”

I snorted.

“As you’re the one who caused her coma in the first place, I wouldn’t give myself too much credit,” Tennyson said coldly.

“Hold on,” said Hannah, turning to Other-me. “How exactly did you wake her up?”

It was a good question. “And why didn’t you do it sooner?”

Other-me shrugged. “I wasn’t sure I could. I was just playing around, really, taking these powers for a test drive.”

I could feel Tennyson prickling beside me, so I put my hand on his arm to calm him down. Not much got him truly angry, but putting his loved ones in danger was the best way to do it.

“This is why she needs to be restrained,” said Sam. “She thinks we’re all her guinea pigs to do whatever she likes with.” He glowered so darkly at her that I was pretty sure he didn’t just want her restrained, he wanted her dead and buried. It was almost scary, that look. Poor Sam, he’d been used by so many people, they’d twisted him into someone almost unrecognizable.

“We need her,” said Althea, with a sigh. “I foresaw something. I don’t quite understand it, but there was a ritual involving you both.”

I nodded. “Makes sense. A ritual to get back my power.”

Althea shook her head. “No. Well, yes. But no. This was something more... Something almost dark.” She rubbed her temples. “Sorry, I haven’t quite got the hang of precognition yet, it seems. I’ll need to research.”

“You need to rest,” said Tennyson. “You should go home for a few days, regain your strength.”

“The full moon is in a few days,” Althea said. “I’ll be fine after that. Don’t fuss, Tennyson. I’ll take it easy, but I need to be close.” She shot a look toward Other-me.

“I can help you research,” said Hannah. “Just point me in the right direction.”

Tennyson looked resigned. “Fine. Lucy also found something that you should look at. Your Latin is a little stronger than mine, but if it’s too much for you, I can work on it alone.”

Althea smiled at you. “He showed you the book? The curator?”

I nodded. “Yep, but...” I glanced over at Other-me. “Maybe we should talk about this later.”

“There’s actually something we need you to do,” Althea told Other-me. “Something only you can do.”

She went on to outline a plan that involved Other-me going to my father, pretending to be me, and spying for us. The rest of us were united in our opinion that this was the worst plan ever.

“I can’t pose as her ,” said Other-me. “She doesn’t even have a skincare regime. Look

at her pores! Nobody would believe we were the same person.”

Harper snickered.

“We can’t even trust her when we’re watching her. There’s no way we should let her near him.” Sam looked like he’d prefer to murder Other-me than go along with this plan.

“We don’t even know if your visions are real,” said Tennyson.

None of our protests mattered to Althea.

“It’s just how it has to be,” she said.

“Is this psychic thing going to be permanent?” asked Tennyson. “Because I hate it already.”

Althea shrugged and smiled mysteriously, and I could see Tennyson’s point.

She told us the location of my father’s attack, and that Other-me should be waiting there for him when he arrived. She told us exactly what Other-me should say and what she should do.

“And then you’ll know that my visions are real,” she finished. “You just need to trust me.”

She seemed so sure of herself, but there was so much that could go wrong. My father could steal all the power from Other-me. She could steal the power from him. They could team up and cause an apocalypse. We didn’t just need to trust Althea, we needed to trust Other-me and my father as well.

“If she goes and he doesn’t show up, you’ll know I’m delusional,” she added.

“We’ll need people watching her to make sure she goes along with it,” said Tennyson. “And she should wear a wire.”

I shook my head. “He’d find that straight up, and then the whole plan would be blown.”

“Why are you talking as if this is going ahead?” asked Other-me. “It was hard enough to defeat him the first time, I’m not going through all that again. Nuh-uh, no way.”

“You don’t need to defeat him,” said Althea. “Just be yourself. And you will do it, because if you don’t, we’ll send you to another world. Not the world you came from, but one much, much worse.”

Althea stared at Other-me pointedly. I don’t know what Other-me saw in that stare, but whatever it was made her turn pale.

“Fine,” she said with a huff. “But don’t expect any heroics.”

She flounced out of the room, and immediately, I felt a tension lift from my head. I hadn’t even noticed it building, but when it lifted, I realized it had been getting worse since we got back from Wilde Manor. The feedback was getting worse; if I was affected by it even without physical contact, just from being nearby. That was one good thing about this awful plan, at any rate.

“I’ll miss her,” said Harper.

“You could go with her,” I suggested. That would be another headache gone.

With Other-me gone, it was safe to explain what I’d found in the library at Wilde

Manor.

“That’s fantastic,” said Althea. “I’ll take a look at your notes. Though I’m surprised the curator let you photograph such an old book.”

“I don’t really know Latin, so my translation is very rough,” I said, dodging her comment. “But it seems like the stone sort of stores different energies and then guides them.”

Hannah seemed quite excited by that theory. “That would be perfect for you!” she said. “Well, you when you have your powers back. The main problem you’ve always faced has been controlling your power, because there’s so much of it. You’re either repressing it or it’s exploding out of you. You could use it kind of like a power bank.”

I wondered if it was the same for Other-me, after suddenly getting all my power. Maybe she was afraid to use it, and that’s why she wanted the lodestone so badly.

“In the ritual that I saw, the stone seemed fully active,” said Althea. “I wish I’d written my vision down; all the details have faded now, like a dream.”

Tennyson gave a little cough, as if to imply he thought it probably was a dream, but Althea ignored him. Either way, we’d know soon enough if she was right about my father attacking where she claimed.

Althea wanted to start on the translation right away, and Tennyson had to go and prepare for my father’s possible attack. I knew I should’ve gone to class, but I’d hardly slept, so I decided to go back to my dorm for a little nap. If I’d stayed at the manor, I’d be missing classes anyway, so if I made it to afternoon class, I was kind of ahead. Kind of.

Althea had been right.

I'd barely even begun napping when I was jolted awake by Tennyson in my brain.

Attack confirmed , was all he said.

I jumped out of bed, barely aware of what I was doing, and raced for the door. I needed details.

When I got back to the Golden House, only Althea was there. She was sitting in her favorite chair with her book. Her eyes were closed. She was so still that for a moment I was worried she was dead. Like, maybe the visions were too much for her brain or something.

She opened her eyes, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Are you having a vision?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No, sorry. I must have nodded off."

"Where is everyone? Tennyson said that my father has attacked."

"Tennyson and Nikolai went along with your counterpart to do some surveillance and make sure she stuck to the plan. The others are all in class, as far as I know."

"I hope they're okay," I said. I didn't like the thought of Tennyson so close to my father.

"Harper has a history quiz that I'm sure she'll fail, but apart from that, I think everyone is fine."

I smiled, pleased that she felt well enough to make a joke. I'd never heard of people having visions before, not in real life. There was no end to the things I didn't know, it

seemed.

“Your visions, what are they like?” I asked her. “Are they like watching a scene from a movie, or do you just suddenly know stuff?”

She bit her bottom lip, thinking for a moment. “No, they’re more like a dream, even though I’m awake. It’s as if I’m there, a part of what’s happening, but I can’t do anything, only watch. Then there’s a pain, as if I’m being stabbed in the eyes, and then it’s over.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Yikes.”

She shrugged. “I only had that one, right after I woke up. It might have been a one-off, because of whatever the other-you did.”

“Maybe,” I said. Though I had a feeling that as long as her skin still shimmered like that, the visions would stick around.

“There’s something else,” she said. “Something I didn’t want to say in front of the others.”

The tone of her voice told me that it was nothing good. I braced myself.

“She can’t stay here,” Althea said. “The two of you can’t exist in the same space. Having her here causes a kind of... dual soul paradox, I suppose.”

I nodded. “When I touched her, I was thrown across the room. Hannah said it was like a feedback loop.”

Althea looked worried. “It will only get worse. The longer she stays here, the more it will affect the world around us. Magic will destabilize, reality will fracture.”

I wasn't sure what that would involve, exactly, but it sure didn't sound good.

"I'm all for getting rid of her," I said. "As soon as I get my powers back, I'll shove her through that portal back to her world as fast as I can."

Althea looked as if she wanted to say something else, then stopped herself. I was curious about what it might be, and would have asked, but I had a feeling it was something I didn't want to hear.

CHAPTER SEVEN

It was late by the time Tennyson and Nikolai got back. Everyone else had drifted in after dinner and then back out to bed. I didn't want to talk to Tennyson through our bond, it might throw him off if he was in the middle of something. It was too risky. Still, I hated not knowing.

The later it got, the harder it became to concentrate on deciphering the pages of the book, or on homework, or anything. I gave up and paced around the common room instead. I was just about to throw caution to the wind and try to contact Tennyson despite the danger when I heard them approach. I slumped back into my seat in relief.

They looked exhausted when they came in, but otherwise fine. Nikolai didn't even speak; he just waved goodnight from the doorway and headed to bed. Tennyson came in and sat beside me.

"She was right," he said. He rested his head back against the chair.

"Did you stop the attack?"

He nodded. "We got the family to a safe house before your father showed up. Then you... Other-you, I mean... it seemed as if she turned into you right in front of our eyes. It was surreal. She was very convincing."

Something about how he said it made my hackles rise, but I pushed the feeling down to think about another time.

“Your father showed up,” Tennyson continued. “He didn’t need much convincing, honestly.”

“Were you close enough to hear what she said to him?”

I didn’t trust her one bit. If she could double-cross us and team up with my father, I doubted she’d hesitate for a second. Then she’d double-double-cross him.

“She said that she’d go with him if he promised to leave your brothers alone. That she wanted to learn from him and become strong.”

“And he believed her?”

Tennyson gave a tired shrug. “She was very convincing. She’s already installed a listening device in his office and a few other places around his compound. We’ve got a team that will monitor them around the clock.”

There were so many holes in this plan, but Tennyson looked so exhausted, and it wasn’t as if he didn’t know anyway, so I didn’t say anything. Still, I had a gnawing in the pit of my stomach that was as accurate as Althea’s vision and it said this was not going to end well.

The next few days dragged. I waited for news that my doppelganger had been killed and my power was lost forever, or she’d killed my father and stolen his power, or something else terrible had happened, but there was no news. Definitely no news, not just no news because Tennyson was holding it back from me, because I made sure I was there for all the reports the surveillance team made to him.

They were learning a lot: where he planned to attack and how, the location of his storage facilities, even a few spies from within the pack, but nothing that I could use to defeat him for good. As far as we could tell, my father had no idea it wasn’t really

me, but he'd definitely clue in soon, once his attacks kept failing. Honestly, I was surprised he'd fallen for it at all. It kind of stung that he knew so little of me to believe I'd turn to the dark side. I'd been pretty clear what I thought of him and his whole schtick.

Though the thought that he did know me that well and was just playing Other-me to get to her power wasn't comforting either. Either way, there wasn't much I could do about it but wait to see how it played out.

In the meantime, all I could do was help Althea work on the translation. There wasn't much I could do, since I didn't know Latin. Mainly, I was just looking up words that had multiple translations or that Althea wasn't sure of, for her to reference back to and make corrections. It was kind of monotonous, but comforting. She was still fairly weak, so sometimes we worked in her room so she could rest in her bed, or if she felt up to it, we worked in the common room. Sometimes Nikolai and Hannah helped, or just studied in the common room with us. Sometimes, even Harper joined in. Tennyson was too busy with pack stuff most of the time, but when he had the chance, he sat with us. Sam, I never saw. I wasn't sure where he was or what he was doing, only that he didn't want to be around us.

After the full moon, Althea was almost back to normal. The color returned to her cheeks, though the shimmer still remained on her skin.

"I look like I've dunked my head in glitter," she complained, checking her face in the mirror of her compact. It was her first day back in classes, and she'd noticed a few strange looks. She sat at the lunch table; her food forgotten as she tried to cover the shimmer with make-up.

"You can barely notice it," I told her. "Anyway, it's you. I bet by tomorrow, half the class has sparkly faces."

She sighed and snapped the compact shut. “At least I haven’t had any more visions,” she said.

I raised my eyebrows. “You shouldn’t have said that. You’ll definitely have one now.”

“That’s just superstition,” said Tennyson. It was rare for him to have lunch with us these days; he was normally in a Zoom meeting or taking care of some problem or another. I didn’t want to argue with him on a rare occasion that we had him to ourselves, but it definitely wasn’t just superstition; it was tempting fate.

“Well, maybe it’s a good thing,” said Nikolai, ignoring Althea’s glare. “A few minutes pain for a look at the future, sounds like a fair deal to me, honestly.”

“I can tell you your future,” said Althea, gripping her fork tightly. “And give you a few minutes pain.”

“Please don’t stab Nikolai,” said Tennyson. “He’ll bleed everywhere, and it will put me off my lunch.”

It seemed just like old times for a moment, everyone in good humor and wanting to kill Nikolai. Sam was absent, but then, he had always been absent a lot.

But then Althea dropped to the floor.

She slumped to the side and off her chair. She was normally so graceful, but now she was like a sack of potatoes. I rushed to her side, all of us did, but we didn’t know how to help her. She was twitching violently. Her eyes were completely rolled back. The shimmer on her skin became a full neon glow, and it spread all over her body, as if she were trapped in a giant green bubble.

At least we were on the mezzanine level of the dining hall, so nobody else could see her, but then she started making weird noises, and the murmur of conversation went quiet.

The noises were eerie, low growls. I hadn't even heard her make noises like that when she was transformed into a wolf. They weren't the growls of a wolf; they sounded like some sort of hell beast.

"What do we do?" I whispered, looking frantically to Tennyson for help.

He stared helplessly back at me.

Surprisingly, it was Nikolai who jumped into action. He took off his hoodie and balled it up, then put it under her head. Then he gently turned her on one side. He reached over to grab his phone from the table.

"If you record her –" Tennyson began, but Nikolai waved him off.

"You have to time seizures," he said. "It might not be a vision. She was in a coma for weeks; there could be stuff going on with her brain. If there's no magical explanation, the doctors will need to know how long she's like this. I used to have a dog with epilepsy. If the seizure is longer than five minutes, we'll need to get her medical help right away."

I was about to ask him if I should pre-emptively go and get someone when she started to come out of it. I didn't realize how my heart had been thumping so wildly until her eyes rolled back down and she blinked.

She tried to sit up, but Nikolai pushed her back down.

"Just take it easy for a minute, sheesh," he said.

She groaned and covered her eyes. “Why’s it so bright in here?”

I glanced at Nikolai to see if that was because of something medical, but he shrugged.

“Was it... was it a vision?” Tennyson asked, hesitantly. I guess he’d been pretty dubious about the visions before, even after she’d been right about the attack. Seeing it in person was something else, though.

“Yes,” she said. “Just give me a moment, I feel like I might be sick.”

Tennyson set a bowl by her head in case she needed to be sick, and Nikolai fished around in his bag for some sunglasses. I just stood by uselessly.

I topped up her water glass and stood by, in case she needed it. That was the only thing I could think to do. Eventually, she sat up, so I passed her the water. She took a sip of it and then set it down by the bowl.

“He knows,” she whispered croakily. I suppose all that growling had been hard on her throat. “He knows it’s not really Lucy. He knows everything. He’s been feeding us false information for days.”

As she said it, I became aware of footsteps running up the mezzanine stairs. It was Harper. She was out of breath and bedraggled in a way I’d never seen her. She must’ve run the whole way from the Golden House.

“Tennyson,” she gasped. “All of you. You have to come. Now . There’s been a massive attack.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

It was the biggest attack my father had made yet. He'd wiped out nearly all of what had once been the Ellis pack. The only person who had escaped was this grumpy old guy, Franklin, and he was pretty messed up. They'd left him for dead; that was the only reason he was still alive. His report was chilling.

"He appeared out of nowhere," Franklin said, sounding more rattly than ever through Tennyson's phone speakers. "It was just him, him and that girl. You said we could trust her. You... you..." He wheezed loudly, then the wheeze turned into a cough. We waited for him to get his breath back, then he went on. "They appeared. Didn't even say a word.

"I was in the main hall, so I saw 'em as soon as they showed up. He started glowing, all green, then it felt like the air was gettin' stripped right out of my lungs. Only it wasn't just the air, and it weren't just my lungs neither. Dunno if it was my soul or the lycanthropy or what, but everyone around me just dropped, and I dropped too. Couldn't help it, it was like he was controllin' us or summut.

"Anyways, I dunno why it is I survived and none of the others made it. Maybe I don't have enough life left to make it worth takin'. Maybe he got what he needed and moved on. Alls I know is that everybody I ever cared about is dead and gone. Now I gots to go and try to clean up. I called in to you right away, seeing as you're the big alpha now, but I got a stack of bodies here and no clue as to what to do with them. It's the whole pack, everyone..."

His voice broke off then, and Tennyson jumped in to say he was sending people out

to help. He glanced over at me, and I could read his expression clearly. What help could we really send? We couldn't bring his whole family, his whole pack, back to life. We couldn't undo everything my father had destroyed.

Franklin said one more thing before he signed off. "I don't got much life left in me, I know that. But whatever's left, I'm gonna use it to bring him down. So if you're making plans, make sure to include me in 'em. I'm gonna end that man, if it's the last thing I do."

After the call ended, after Tennyson had sent out a team to help old Franklin bury his pack, we sat around the Golden common room in silence, lost in our own thoughts.

There were so many unanswered questions. What was my father doing? How was he doing it? Why had he taken Other-me with him? Was it just to destabilize my position in the pack? Had she sold us out, or was she still playing along?

My father had obviously found a way to block the pack bond, because nobody else felt it when he attacked, and normally the death of a pack member would be crippling to everyone. Not even Tennyson had sensed it. My father was clearly disrupting their lycanthropy powers somehow, but was it because he was stealing that power before he murdered them? If he was stealing their power, did he really need to kill them as well, or was that just his idea of fun?

Althea groaned and pinched the bridge of her nose. "What's the point in these stupid visions if they come too late to be any help?"

None of us had any answers for her.

Eventually, we stopped wallowing and turned back to research. At least that gave us something to think about, other than a bunch of questions with no answers. Tennyson seemed distracted, understandably, and when I glanced over at what he was

scribbling in his notebook, it wasn't a Latin translation; it was a list of defensive tactics he wanted to employ.

It really was a lot to rest on his shoulders. From what I knew of his mother's time as alpha, the worst she'd had to deal with was a few inter-pack squabbles. Nothing like an all-out war against her entire species. He was so young, so inexperienced. It wasn't fair for all this responsibility to be dropped on him.

It made me more determined than ever to figure out the lodestone.

Over the next few days, Tennyson put his new tactics in place. Rather than living in a huge, communal house, like the Ellis pack had, and a lot of the Wilde pack did, he wanted people to stay in smaller groups. Werewolves preferred to be close to their pack members, but it was just too dangerous now. My father couldn't be in multiple places at once, so the more locations everyone was spread across, the fewer people he could hurt.

Tennyson also increased security, both physical and magical. Different sections of the supernatural community were wary of each other, in general, but everyone was starting to see the sense in working together. Witches and werewolves, even some of the fae were helping each other out. It was as if the scale of the attack on the Ellis pack had shaken everyone so much that they didn't know what was normal anymore; they only knew what was helpful. And Tennyson was the one orchestrating the whole thing. It was amazing. He was amazing.

The research on the lodestone was coming together, but I wasn't sure I liked what we were finding. Althea and I didn't discuss it, but there were a few passages in particular that took a dark turn. She'd say, "Did you check that this is the only definition of this word," or I'd say, "This can't be right," and we'd exchange a look .

Of course, it was Nikolai who spoke it aloud.

He swaggered in one evening after a date with Hannah. Since I was always at the Golden House these days, the two of them were making full use of my absence in our dorm room. I didn't want to think about it, but his self-satisfied smirk gave me the creeps.

He sat down with us and poured himself a glass of water from the carafe in the middle of the table, then started flicking through some of Althea's notes. I didn't pay much attention to him until his chair scraped and fell over when he jumped to his feet.

"This can't be right," he said, pacing as he shuffled through the pages. He glanced over at me and then back down at the papers.

"You're being awfully dramatic," said Althea, not looking up from the book she was reading through.

"Not dramatic enough," he said. "Is this accurate? Do you know what this means?"

Althea set her book aside with a sigh. "It obviously means something to you, so why don't you sit down like a normal person and tell us."

Begrudgingly, he picked up his chair and sat back at the table.

"You know that my family has some unsavory connections," he began.

We nodded.

"We've had some dark magic users, even a few on the Dark Council. In-laws mostly."

"Get to it," said Althea. "You're not on trial. We don't care about your evil family."

“Most dark magic is about causing pain or harm, obviously, but there’s a branch of esoteric study that’s about tapping into the darker parts of yourself and using that power. Rage, fear, hate.”

I nodded. “The path to the dark side, these are,” I said in my best Yoda voice.

Althea shot me an odd look. She really had a lot of gaps in her pop culture knowledge.

“This ritual,” Nikolai said, tapping the pages, “goes one step further. It talks about soul absorption. Merging another soul with your own to take on its power.”

“Do you think that’s what my father is doing?”

It sounded like what Franklin had described, like his soul being sucked out, but Nikolai shook his head.

“No. Whatever he’s doing is evil, but it’s not this. I heard one of my uncles talking about it once when he was drunk. He hadn’t done it, but he said he’d seen the ritual take place and there was no body left at the end. The second person just completely merged with the first. They became like a hybrid person. He was pretty drunk, so the details were sketchy, but it sounds a lot like this.” He tapped the notes again.

Althea and I exchanged a look. That was what we’d feared, but we’d been trying to find some other explanation, some mistake in our translation. I needed my power back to use the lodestone, but to activate the lodestone, I needed the power. Other-me had my power, so I needed to absorb her, and then I could use the lodestone freely.

“I’m sure there’s another way,” I said. “I mean, worst comes to worst, we get her to activate the stone, knock her out, and I take the stone, then I get my powers back from her. This can’t be the only solution.”

Althea nodded. “After all, you were able to use the stone and the sword to come back through the portal to our world, weren’t you. And who’s to say that this is the only text on the lodestone?”

“Right,” I said. “Exactly. I mean, why is this soul-absorption ritual even in with the text about the lodestone? It’s a highly specific situation that I’m in right now. How many people, when wanting to use a lodestone, have an evil twin on standby, especially one who has stolen your powers? Seems sketchy to me.”

“It’s not sketchy,” said Nikolai. “It’s prophetic.”

I snorted. “More like pathetic. And who’s to say that curator guy didn’t just plant this text there for me to find, for his own nefarious purposes? He led me right to this very book. That’s a much more likely scenario than anything you’re saying.”

At this, Althea shook her head. “No, I can’t believe that. The curator has been with our family for a very long time. Centuries, I think. He’s always been incredibly principled. And very protective of the books. He wouldn’t let you near one of the ancient texts unless it was very important. If he had planted the information, he’d have done it using a less precious book.”

It was all too much; it made my head swim.

“I mean, how would it even work?” I said. “Assuming it’s the only way. Assuming we can even get her back and convince her to go along with it. Would it be like when I eat a triple mega cheeseburger and feel uncomfortable for a few hours, then digest it? Or would she be a second consciousness inside my head?”

I definitely wouldn’t like that. Her voice was annoying enough when it was external, but at least then I could get away from it.

“I don’t know,” said Nikolai. “But probably not the cheeseburger thing.”

“I should go back to the manor,” said Althea. “Now that we have more to go on, I can ask the curator for more specific texts. And Nikolai, can you get in touch with your uncle and see if he remembers more about the ritual?”

Nikolai nodded and pulled out his phone. “Sure, but he doesn’t make a lot of sense most of the time.”

“What should I do?” I asked her.

She shrugged. “Think of a way to convince the Other-you to go along with it, I guess. That’s going to be the hardest part.”

CHAPTER NINE

I found it hilarious that the next day in English class, our discussion topic was on Jekyll how the human psyche can twist things, distort them if they're not acknowledged."

I nodded. "So, Hyde is just Jekyll's repressed gay side."

"That's certainly one reading of it, but I don't think it's really Jekyll & Hyde that had you so upset."

"It's just stress," I said, not meeting his eyes. "Senior year. I haven't heard back from any colleges yet, that type of thing."

"Well, it's early days yet," he said, even though it wasn't, and half the class had got their acceptance letters already. "You're a smart girl, I'm sure you'll have no problems."

"Thanks," I said. "You wrote me an awesome recommendation letter. I'm sure that will help."

But I cared less and less about college all the time. It seemed like a dream I'd had, that I'd forgotten nearly all the details of. There was only a vague feeling left. There was so much going on in the here and now that college was totally eclipsed by it.

Althea was still back at the manor. She'd messaged me a few times to update me on her research, and to tell me the curator said I'm not welcome back there after

exposing his precious book to radiation from my phone. She hadn't had any more visions. At least, not that she told me about. I took that to mean we had a little time before my father's next move.

Nikolai had less luck. Nobody in his immediate family had heard from his drunk uncle in over a year. The last they'd heard, he'd gone to take part in a ritual in the Siberian wilderness. It all sounded super shady, so I didn't ask for details, and Nikolai didn't offer them. He said he'd keep asking around, maybe some of his uncle's friends had details, but it was a long shot.

My part of the plan was going a little better. If I wanted to lure Other-me back, all I had to do was dangle the lodestone in front of her. Even if she knew it was a trap, she'd walk right into it. She was so arrogant, thought she was so much smarter than me, that she wouldn't even think twice.

The hard part was, we didn't know how much freedom she had. We could lure her all we liked, but if she was locked up in some dingy little cell in my father's compound, that wouldn't help at all. I didn't really want to stage another breakout. Every time we broke through my father's defenses, he tightened them. I wanted to leave a few holes in his security for when I really needed to use them.

The easiest way for us to contact her was through my soul bond with Tennyson. She could hear any messages he had for me. Even though we couldn't hear a response, we could let her know we were coming. The only problem was, to do that, we'd need to let Tennyson in on the plan, and I knew he wouldn't like it. Not breaking Other-me out, but definitely not the ritual.

And honestly, I didn't like it either. Even if everything else was in place, I didn't want to go through with it. We didn't have nearly enough details, so anything could go wrong with it, and even if it all went to plan, what then? She'd be some Mr Hyde, bursting through my consciousness and taking over? Or worse still, we'd both be in

the driver's seat, struggling for control. I wasn't sure I could live like that.

Though if it stopped my father, stopped these awful attacks, and let everyone live in peace, how could I say no? Even if I were a fractured shard of myself, wouldn't it be worth it? It would be too selfish to refuse.

My thoughts chased each other around like a dog trying to catch its tail. It was a good thing that Tennyson and I were taking a break from each other, because he'd have known something was up within seconds otherwise. As it was, I avoided him.

It was horrible and lonely, especially now that Althea had gone home. Hannah was always off with Nikolai, Sam was avoiding me as much as I was avoiding Tennyson, and I didn't want to hang out with Harper.

At lunch, if Tennyson was around, I sat with Milo and Fatima. I wasn't particularly welcome there. Fatima still didn't look up from her books, though she did seem a little warmer toward me now that I wasn't a threat to her academic standing. Milo had grown into himself over the summer and wasn't bad-looking. He made the most of that by flirting with nearly anyone who moved, and using any spare minute to work on his Insta or TikTok accounts. He did not want me in frame for either, and I had to stay out of his light. That made it hard to eat lunch, so half the time I'd just give up and sit by myself.

It was kind of sad. I felt like I was living out the last days of my life, so I should be taking full advantage of them. I missed Tennyson, sometimes unbearably. All I wanted was to be with him, to spend every second of the rest of my life with him, to imprint every moment together so deeply on my soul that nothing could ever erase it, but he had enough to deal with. I didn't want to burden him.

Finally, Althea came back. She was loaded up on research, and it wasn't promising.

“Everything I’ve found confirms what was in our translation,” she said, hoisting a pile of books into my arms. I was surprised the curator had let her take them, especially when he knew they’d come near me. “And before you ask, I read through texts other than what the curator suggested, so there’s no bias of his in any of this.”

I set the pile of books on the table in front of me. The titles weren’t encouraging. *Soul Magic: The Darkest Art and Apocalyptic Prophecy*, that kind of thing.

“Honestly, I wish Sam’s mother were here. She had a really good handle on all this type of thing. She said you were ‘the one’, didn’t she?”

I rolled my eyes. “A few times, but that was more to do with her and my father’s crazy research, I think. Nothing to do with a prophecy. I think they messed with my genetic code or something. Sam’s too. She said that’s what ‘The Others’ are, just people who aren’t straight up lycanthrope or magic user or fae or whatever.”

“Just because something’s science, doesn’t mean it can’t be magic as well,” she said, distractedly. She was rifling through a big file of papers, then pulled something out. “I went into the cell where we’d been keeping her at the manor. She’d left all her notes and everything there. Take a look at this.”

I was a little dubious about anything Mrs Spencer might have notes on. She had some pretty wacky theories, and unethical ways of testing them out. Maybe not as bad as my father, though I didn’t know enough about what she’d been doing to say that for a fact.

I read through the notes. My blood ran cold. It matched up almost exactly with the translation of the ritual from the old book. On the back of one page, she’d scribbled a list of names, mine and Sam’s included. They’d all been crossed out, all except mine.

“We should get Nikolai to look at this,” I said. “To see if it matches with what his

uncle said.”

She nodded, still flicking through her file and pulling out more pages here and there. “We need to tell Tennyson, too. We probably should have told him earlier.”

“Told him what?” Tennyson said from the doorway.

I muttered a swear. Every. Single. Time . You’d think I’d have learned by now that he was always loitering around like a creeper.

I sat down and let Althea explain. She understood it much better than I did, anyway. As expected, Tennyson hated it.

“No,” he said. “Absolutely not. I forbid it.”

I rolled my eyes. “We don’t have a better plan.”

“Anything is a better plan. Doing nothing is a better plan. Losing your powers forever is a better plan. Nothing is worth this.”

“You’re overreacting,” I said.

“You’re underreacting,” he replied.

“It’s not as if I’ll die or something.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Are you sure? If you’re not still you, then where are you? Who are you?” He stood up and started pacing. “If your soul and her soul merge, does one of you lose your soul? Surely two souls can’t reside in the same body. What will happen with our bond?”

He kept on pacing and shooting out questions. He was panicking.

I stood up and grabbed him by the hands, forcing him to look at me.

“We’re going to research this completely before we do anything,” I told him. “If it’s not safe, we won’t do it. You’re not going to lose me, not to her. Not to anyone.”

I was vaguely aware of Althea leaving the room, but all my focus was on Tennyson. I’d forgotten his warmth, his scent. I closed my eyes and just let myself appreciate the moment, being there with him. I felt his hand in my hair, then he pulled me closer. He held me so tightly, as if he could keep me there through his own will, keep the waves of the future from washing me away.

“I hate this,” he whispered against my skin. “I hate being apart from you.”

And even though I knew it was for the best, even though he’d been doing so well as alpha while we were apart, I hated it too. Even though I knew it was dangerous, just for a moment, I let the walls of our bond come down. Just for a moment, the two of us became one, and it was perfect.

CHAPTER TEN

Even though he hated it, after he read through all the research, even Tennyson couldn't deny that our plan was the best that we had. Nikolai confirmed that the details from Mrs Spencer's notes matched up with his uncle's story. All we had to do was flesh out the details of how to get Other-me back, and we could get things moving.

That was, until Sam.

I'd just assumed he was off meditating or whatever it was that he did when he was avoiding us, but he'd been hanging out in the shadows, listening to the whole plan. He didn't approve, but we didn't realize that until the next day, when his mother's notes and our research were nothing but ashes in the fireplace.

I hadn't seen Althea truly angry, not until that moment. I'd seen her irritated, a little snippy, but when she realized what had happened, she was livid. Her cheeks, normally so pale, flushed scarlet. Except for the shimmer on her skin, which began to glow.

"What have you done?" she said through gritted teeth.

"What you all should have done when you discovered this ritual," said Sam. "Burned every trace of it."

He stood squarely in front of her, between her and the ashes in the grate, trying to keep her from any scrap of the research.

“You had no right,” she said. The glow was getting brighter. It surrounded her whole body and almost looked as if it was lifting her off the floor.

“She’s right,” I said to Sam. “We worked so hard on that research. If you had a problem with it, you should have talked to us about it, not just destroyed all our work.”

“Most of it was my mother’s work,” he said. “And she’s just as bad as your father. Just as bad as the Other-you. They’re all evil, Lucy. I won’t let you turn into one of them.”

I shot a glance at Tennyson. I knew that Tennyson had found Sam a therapist, a good therapist who was involved in our world, so that Sam didn’t need to hold back with them, but apparently, the therapy hadn’t been doing the job.

“This is bigger than just me,” I told Sam. “My safety isn’t worth more than everyone else’s.”

Sam just shook his head and folded his arms over his chest stubbornly. I couldn’t even see if there was anything left in the ashes to salvage, but Sam obviously didn’t want to chance it.

“For all you know, this was her plan all along,” Sam said. “To put you in this situation where you feel like you need her, and then what? You activate the lodestone, and then she steals it? Or you go through with the whole ritual, and you become her? Then she has everything, all of your powers, your life.”

Everything he said made me angry, because it was all the niggling doubts I had myself. Still, he didn’t need to be so high-handed about it.

“Well, what do you suggest we do?” I snapped at him. “I don’t see you coming up

with any great plan. You're too busy wallowing in your own misery to help us out."

Tennyson drew in a sharp breath, and the glow around Althea faded a little. I guess my anger made her own fade a bit. But Sam didn't even react.

"Well, that's better than barreling ahead with the first stupid plan you think of. That's what you always do, and every time things turn out worse than they had been to start with. But you just keep barreling on and on until everyone is either captured or killed, and then you look around and wonder why everything is so terrible. It's terrible because of you, Lucy. Because you never stop to think how your actions will affect anyone else. As long as you and Tennyson are safe, you don't care about anything else."

I took a step back and held my hands up in surrender. I was so angry at him that I couldn't even speak. I was so angry that if I opened my mouth, I knew I'd burst into angry tears, and that would make me even angrier.

"Right," said Tennyson. "I think we need –"

But I never found out what Tennyson thought he could possibly say to de-escalate the situation, because right at that moment, Althea dropped to the floor and went into another seizure.

My anger was gone in a second, replaced by worry for her. This fit seemed even stronger than the last. I remembered what Nikolai had done and grabbed a cushion from the nearest chair to put under her head. Tennyson helped me roll her onto her side. She was breathing fine, not choking or anything, so we just sat close to her and made sure she didn't hurt herself.

The seizure seemed to go on much longer than the previous one, and just as I thought it, I realized I hadn't been timing it. I glanced at Tennyson, and he'd obviously just

remembered too. He took his phone from his pocket and started a timer, but as soon as he did, she started shaking less, and after a moment, her eyes rolled back down and she blinked.

“Urg,” she groaned, trying to sit up. We pushed her back down to put her head on the cushion.

“What did you see?” Tennyson asked.

Althea’s eyes widened, and she tried to sit up again.

“Just relax,” I said. “Take it easy on yourself.”

“I can’t,” she choked out. “What I saw...” She pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes. “I think what I saw, it’s what happens if the Other-you stays here. If you don’t do the ritual.” She drew in a shaky breath, then went on, her words tumbling over each other. “The feedback... it causes a crack in the world, like a broken mirror. Your father... or her father? No, your father, he uses her as a bridge between the two worlds. All of the power, from both the worlds... he absorbs it. He’s not human... he becomes something... something else. Everyone... Every thing is gone. Everything is dark, and there’s this smell, a terrible, terrible smell, like when your hair straightener is too hot and burns your hair, only a million times worse. It’s not hair, it’s energy, people’s energy. Like their souls but not their souls, their souls are all lost in the darkness. They’re empty, everything is empty except for him.”

What she was describing sounded so horrific that it was hard to fathom. I couldn’t imagine a world like that existing, not really. Still, I couldn’t help but shoot Sam an “I told you so” glare. Except Sam wasn’t there. I didn’t remember him leaving, but I’d been so worried about Althea, it could have been at any time. I glanced at Tennyson to see if he’d noticed, and he gave me a small nod, followed by a shrug. He was right. Sam’s whole thing wasn’t exactly a priority just then. He could wait, at

least until Althea was settled.

“I’m okay now,” she said, struggling to sit up.

We helped her into a chair, then Tennyson turned out the lights, as they were too bright for her headache.

“When you feel up to it, I want you to write down every little detail that you remember,” Tennyson said. “We had no time with the last attack, but as we’ve not all slid away into an abyss just yet, we have a chance to prepare. I’ll go find Nikolai and see if he has any of the notes.”

I nodded. “I’ll write down everything I can remember from the notes, and I’ll look through the ashes to see if I can salvage anything.”

There wasn’t much left in the fireplace, a word here and there, but nothing helpful. I still had the photos on my phone that I’d taken of the book, and the beginning of the translation I’d made that first night, but we’d done so much work since then.

I couldn’t believe how stupid Sam had been, how reckless. I was still so angry with him. I kept playing back what he’d said to me on repeat in my head. How everything had been my fault. How everything I did made things worse. How I was so selfish. Did he really think those things? Deep down, sometimes I thought them about myself, but I hoped nobody else did. Did Sam blame me for all the things that had happened to him? All the torture, all the experiments? Had he been holding all that inside for all this time, just letting it fester?

“Stop beating yourself up,” Althea said, from where she was furiously writing on a piece of scrap paper. “He said some mean stuff, you said some mean stuff too. You were both angry, it happens.”

I sighed and moved back to the table with the few scraps I'd found in the ashes.

"I know, but he wasn't entirely wrong."

She shrugged. "And neither were you. It was a real jerk move he pulled, trashing our research. At any rate, if my vision comes true, you won't need to worry about any of it."

"That's a cheery thought," I said.

I was reading back through what Althea had written about her vision when Tennyson came back, followed by not only Nikolai but also Hannah, Harper, and Sam. I was surprised Sam came back so quickly. Whenever we'd fought as kids, real proper fights, he'd hide away from me for a day or two, then come back as if nothing had happened. This wasn't like that.

"Read this," Tennyson said, handing Althea's notes about her vision to him. "This is what will happen if we don't go ahead with this soul-merging ritual. I don't like it either, but if this is the alternative, I don't see what else we can do."

I cleared my throat. He was talking as if it was something he and Sam were sticking their necks out for, but I was the one doing all the heavy lifting. None of them had to merge with their Other-selves to avert the end of the world.

"Of course, the final decision is Lucy's," he added.

"Both Lucy's, actually," said Nikolai. "The original ritual states that it needs to be consensual on both sides."

I spun to face him. "Original ritual? You found your uncle?"

“Not exactly,” he said. “I found a colleague of my uncle. He’s a little more reliable than my uncle, honestly, though a lot scarier.”

“What did you have to give him in exchange for the ritual?” I asked, remembering my original agreement with Vucari. People around Nikolai’s family always needed something in exchange.

“Not much,” he said with a shrug. “Something to do with your firstborn, but nothing serious. I mean, if the world ends, there won’t be any-born, I figured it’s a reasonable deal.”

“You’re letting my firstborn be eaten by vampires, and you figure it’s reasonable?” I asked him.

He waved me off. “He’s super old. By the time you and Tennyson get anywhere near making babies, he’ll be in the ground. And he’s not a vampire, or a cannibal, or anything else that eats babies... probably.”

“So, you have the ritual,” Tennyson asked. “You’re sure it’s right?”

Nikolai pulled up the notes app on his phone and handed it to Althea. “There were a few differences from what we had, but most of it is the same.”

Althea nodded, scrolling through. “Yes, this clears a few things up, actually. There were a few places where the translation seemed strange, but this is better. Much better.”

Nikolai nodded. “He said it was originally a Romanian ritual, back, way back before it was Romania, before it was even Moldavia, which was, I dunno, ages ago? Then the Romans took over, and I guess some old Roman guy translated the ritual. Who knows, it might’ve been translated a few times. Anyway, the old guys said that most

of the details are just for show, the main thing is that you both stay on different sides of the mirror. No matter what. It has to be consensual, and you have to stay on different sides of the mirror. No looking directly at each other.”

“What happens if they do?” asked Harper, eagerly leaning in. “Do they explode, or turn inside out, or something?”

Nikolai shrugged. “Nope, he just said it wouldn’t work. And this is a one-off type of deal. If you mess it up, the lodestone loses all its juice.”

“And the world falls into darkness,” Althea added.

“Right,” I said. “Stay on my side of the mirror, got it. Now we just need to get her here and convince her to do it.”

And that might be the hardest part of all.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Other-Lucy, come in Other-Lucy. Over .

It's not a CB radio , I told Tennyson. It was nice to be able to communicate through our bond again, even if it was just to lure in Other-me.

We want to make a deal with you. We will give you access to the lodestone.

It wasn't a lie. Technically, if I absorbed her, whatever was left of her would have as much lodestone as she could handle.

This is not a trap , he added.

That makes it sound like a trap , I said, but I couldn't stop smiling. The Tennyson in my head, the Tennyson at the other side of our bond, was the most distilled part of him. Like a Tennyson Wilde essential oil. The Tennyson that the outside world saw was him, of course, but it was filtered through layers of social conditioning and awkwardness.

If you are able to get away, come to this address at midnight on Thursday. He envisioned a page on Google Maps, with a flashing arrow at the right spot, and the geo-coordinates. That is midnight, local time at this location .

He flashed up the details again.

I will transmit this message to you again in one hour, in case you are not in a position

to note this information. Please do not share this message with anyone else. Over and out.

He was such a dork.

We were still technically on a break, but after the other night in the common room, it seemed like a much warmer break than it had previously been. Like a break that was bringing us closer instead of further apart.

Tennyson faithfully transmitted his broadcast to Other-me every hour, until it must have driven her half-mad. Or mad der . The rest of us prepared for the ritual.

We'd picked the location to meet Other-me completely at random. Nowhere near anyone we knew, or anyone at all, as far as we could tell. It was a dirt road in the middle of nowhere. If Other-me was working with my father and they planned to ambush us, there was nobody they could hurt for miles.

Althea didn't want me to go to meet with Other-me.

"You don't know how bad the feedback between the two of you will be," she said. "What if the worlds fracture and your father is there? It might be the very thing that leads to my vision."

"Classic self-fulfilling prophecy," said Nikolai, who was sitting in the corner, slurping cup noodles loudly. "That would be kind of funny, in a way."

"Yes, when you're a disembodied spirit floating through an endless void, I won't be able to stop laughing," Althea said snappishly. "This isn't a joke."

"If I don't go, how will we convince her to come with us?"

“I’ll go,” said Althea. “I’ll tell her about my visions and show her the mark her experiments left on me. If she thinks she can keep running tests on me, she might be persuaded.”

It was a good idea, except for one thing.

“What’s to stop her from just kidnapping you and taking you back to my father’s creepy compound?” I said. “She’s bad enough, but I don’t even want to imagine what awful things he’d do.”

“Oh, so it’s safe for you but not me?” she said, arching an eyebrow.

I shrugged. “I’d rather risk my life than yours. You’re the brains of the operation, you know.”

“But you’re the key,” she argued. “Without you, everything collapses. Everything . This isn’t me trying to be selfless. We literally can’t lose you.”

In the end, she won. Even though I could see her point, I didn’t like it.

I was antsy all day Thursday. Tennyson and Althea left around lunchtime to go back to the manor, so they could prepare with the other pack members who were part of the operation. The manor was closer to the meeting spot than school, so they’d take her back there and contact us when it was all done.

I’d suggested that I could go wait at the manor too, but that idea was shot down from all sides. They wanted her completely secured before I went anywhere near her. I knew it was smart to be cautious. There was so much riding on this going well. Still, I hated it.

“Can’t you sit down?” Harper snapped at me that afternoon. “It will be hours yet;

you're driving me mad with your pacing. Better yet, can't you go back to your own dorm?"

"Hannah and Nikolai are there, having 'alone time'," I said, throwing myself into a chair.

Harper wrinkled her nose in disgust.

"I know, right," I said. It wasn't often that Harper and I agreed on something.

"They're worse than Althea and Jules were over summer. I normally adore our little place on the Riviera, but all month long, you couldn't move without walking in on them somewhere. And let me tell you, there are some things that a girl should never have to know about her brother."

I laughed. At least I wouldn't have to worry about that with my brothers for a while.

"Well, you'll have plenty of space to yourself next year," I said. "It'd be weird being in this big old place by yourself."

Harper sniffed. "You only think that because you're poor and used to squalid conditions. But actually, I'm quite ahead in all my classes and have been accepted to a few of my top-choice colleges already, so I'll probably just skip senior year. It seems like a drag, to be honest. There's much more potential for fun at college. If we're all still alive, that is."

Being annoyed at Harper made the time pass a little faster, but after another five minutes, I was back to pacing.

She glared at me pointedly, clicking the end of her pen.

“The dining hall should be open now,” I said. “I might just go...”

“Yes, go eat your feelings or whatever it is you do,” she said, going back to her homework.

Why was she even doing homework if she was so far ahead that she could skip senior year? Maybe she was trying to distract herself, too.

In the dining hall, I met up with Hannah and Nikolai. We ate in silence, just picking at our food. I didn’t even register what the meal was, I was just eating for the sake of it, which offended me on the behalf of food. We barely talked. Even when we got back to the common room, we just sat around, waiting for each second to tick by.

“This is ridiculous,” said Hannah eventually, getting up. “We can’t just sit here waiting. There might not even be any news tonight. We need to do something to take our minds off it.”

“I’ve got an idea,” said Harper, in a voice that said I wouldn’t like whatever she suggested. “I think Lucy should go and sort things out with Sam, so that he’s not moping around all the time and sabotaging our plans.”

I was right. I didn’t like that idea one bit.

“That’s a bit unfair,” said Nikolai.

I was surprised until he continued.

“That’s only giving Lucy and Sam something to do. The rest of us will just be sitting around waiting for them on top of everything else.”

“Fine,” Harper said. “Well, I’m going to bed. If you losers want to sit around being

boring, that's your own business."

She said it as if we'd feel her absence bitterly. Though, to be fair, once she left, I started feeling a lot like a third wheel.

"Right," I said, once they started getting handsy. "Well, Harper was probably right, I should go find Sam..."

I doubted they even noticed me leave.

I hadn't been in Sam's room for ages, not since before he'd gone through the portal to Other-me's world. Not much had changed. Maybe it was a little barer, or maybe he'd just gotten tidier.

He was sitting on his bed, staring at the wall.

"Hey," I said from the doorway.

"Hey," he said.

"I'm sorry I said you were wallowing in your own misery," I said.

He shrugged. "I'm sorry for what I said, too. And for burning all your research."

I took that as a sign that it was okay to enter the room. I sat in the chair by his bed, where I'd spent all those nights when he'd been unconscious.

"I haven't been the greatest friend to you," I admitted.

He scoffed. "You literally opened a portal to an alternate universe to come and rescue me."

“Yeah, but like, emotionally, I mean.”

He shrugged again. “You’re not responsible for me.”

I thought about that for a moment. “Yes, I am.”

He laughed, but I was serious.

“No, I mean it. You’re my oldest friend in the world. You’re part of my family, my pack. I’m responsible for you, and you’re responsible for me. We need to have each other’s backs, and I haven’t had yours. And for that, I’m sorry.”

He nodded. “Okay. But I need to be responsible for myself as well. All the things I’ve done…”

“They were things done to you, not by you,” I argued, but he held up his hand for me to let him speak.

“It’s a lot,” he said. “All of it, from the time I was first taken. I’ve tried so hard to be normal, to fit back into normal life, but I can’t. Not even with the rest of the pack. I’m still different. Even before I ki –” He broke off, then shook his head, forcing himself to go on. “Even before that happened, but then they all saw me, saw what I did.”

I reached out and took his hand. I didn’t want to say anything, to interrupt again when he needed to talk, but I wanted him to know I was there.

“The therapist that Tennyson found, she’s good, but it’s not enough,” he said. “Our sessions don’t even scratch the surface. I know I need help, but it’s too much.” He shook his head.

“We’ll find someone who can help you,” I told him, hoping that was a promise I

could keep. “People heal from all sorts of trauma. We just have to find what works for you.”

He squeezed my hand. “If the world doesn’t end first.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

They didn't return that night. By the next afternoon, I was in a panic. Nikolai thought I was overreacting. He said he'd have felt it through the pack bond if anything bad had happened, especially to Tennyson, since he was the alpha. But none of us had felt it when my father had killed the Ellis pack, so that didn't reassure me.

"I mean, it's a big ask," he said. "She's probably just hard to convince. Like, if someone asked me to melt myself into my evil twin, I'd need some pretty sweet compensation."

I glared at him. "I 'm not the evil twin. She is."

"Potato, tomato," he said, with a shrug.

Where ARE you? I asked Tennyson for what felt like the thousandth time. I knew he didn't want Other-me to intercept anything he might say to me, but a quick "we're all fine" couldn't hurt, surely.

They finally got back just before midnight. I stormed out to meet them as soon as I heard the helicopter ready to give them a piece of my mind, but they both looked so pale and exhausted that I couldn't be mad at them. I didn't question them until they were safe inside with a hot cup of tea.

"We have her," Tennyson said, finally.

I stared at him, waiting for more. He sipped his tea. I glanced at Althea. She sipped

her tea. Were they actually trying to drive me crazy?

“It didn’t go well,” Althea said finally.

They exchanged a look.

“Nuh-uh,” I said. “I don’t want the edited version, tell me everything.”

Tennyson sighed and set his teacup back in the saucer. “She didn’t come to the meeting point. We had to go get her.”

His words took a moment to sink in. “You went to my father’s compound? How did you know where it was?”

All sorts of theories were flying around in my brain. Spies? Double agents? But if we had someone on the inside, we’d have known that the bugs were found before Althea had her vision. We’d have known a bunch of stuff.

In the end, it was the guilty look on Tennyson’s face that made me guess the answer.

“She spoke to you, through the bond,” I said. The thought of it was like a gut punch. It was almost worse than if he’d been cheating with her. Our bond was so special, so intimate . The idea that he’d shared that with her – not only shared it but kept it from me, it was worse than anything else I could imagine.

“I don’t know how she did it,” he said, picking his tea back up and staring into the cup. “It was after the third or fourth time I had sent her the address. She said just shut up, already . I knew immediately it wasn’t you; it felt completely different.

“I wasn’t sure what else to do, so I stuck to the plan and continued to send her the address every hour. After a few more times, she said she couldn’t leave the

compound to meet us, then sent me some mental images of where she was and a rough map of her location.”

He took a sip of his tea and began to speak again, but I held up my hand.

“I just need a minute,” I said.

I took some deep breaths. This was bigger than just Tennyson and me. Everything between us, that had to take a backseat. I needed to know what had happened so that we could plan our next move. I couldn’t let my feelings get in the way.

“So, you kept sending her the location every hour, was that just for my benefit? So that I wouldn’t clue in that you were communicating with her and mess up your plans?”

Okay, I couldn’t let my feelings get in the way after this .

“Lucy, it wasn’t like that,” Althea said gently.

“You were in on it?” I started to put things together. “That was why you talked me out of going? Because you knew they were secretly talking and had changed the plan to a raid on my father’s compound ?”

“Yes,” she said calmly. “It was my idea to keep it from you. Don’t blame Tennyson. I thought it was too dangerous for the two of you to get so close to your father, especially when he had the home ground advantage. I knew that if you knew what we planned, you’d insist on coming. And I know that because he’s your father, you feel that he’s your mess to clean up, but this is bigger than just the two of you, bigger than your family. You have your part to play in this, and it’s too important to risk you on something that someone – anyone – else could do. It was the safest option, and I stand by it.”

“Right,” I said. There was a lot to unpack there, and I wasn’t in the right headspace to do it. We were getting off track. “Sorry, so you were saying, you had the location of the compound.”

Tennyson nodded. “She continued to feed me information, which helped us to get into the compound virtually undetected.”

I raised my eyebrows at the “virtually”.

“We only took a small team, less than we’d planned for the initial meeting point. Just Althea and I and four others. We got in, waited for the guards’ shift to change so we could steal some uniforms, which let us have access to most of the compound. It was all going well until...”

“Until you found her and realized she was using you for her own ends and had no intention of doing what you wanted,” I finished. That was what I would’ve done in her situation. Maybe if I’d known their plan, I could’ve told them that.

“We knew that was a possibility,” said Althea. “You don’t need to look so smug.”

“At any rate, she gave us the slip, and without her to navigate, we soon became lost in the labyrinth of passageways. Her escape tripped the alarm, which led to our discovery.”

“Was anyone hurt?” I asked. “Any of our people, I mean.”

They both shook their heads.

“Everyone is fine. We lost a couple of people for a few hours, but they made it out safely.”

“And Other-me, she got away from my father?”

“We caught up with her not far from the compound. She’d tried to steal one of our vehicles, but she can’t actually drive, so she ran it into a tree. After that, it was easy enough to get her back to the manor.”

“Where she’s under the heaviest guard imaginable,” Tennyson added.

I doubted that meant much. If she wanted to get away, I was sure she could.

“You told her about the ritual?” I directed my question toward Althea. I was angry with them both, but the betrayal from Tennyson felt so much more personal. I wasn’t sure I’d be able to look at him ever again.

“She wasn’t interested,” said Tennyson.

“She laughed in our faces,” Althea added.

“You explained what would happen if we don’t do it?”

“Of course,” said Althea. “But she did make us a counter-offer. Two options, actually. We can give her the lodestone, and she goes back to her own world before our world has a chance to fracture, or you could merge with her , making her the primary consciousness.”

I thought about it for a moment. If she went back to her own world, that would stop Althea’s vision from happening, so our world would be safe. I’d be powerless, and it would be much more difficult to stop my father, but not impossible. Probably.

But then, we’d leave that other world vulnerable to an even more powerful Other-me. The people we’d left behind there didn’t deserve that. Mrs Spencer, everyone else’s

counterparts. I thought about how Other-Tennyson had hugged me as I'd been leaving, speaking for the first time just to thank me.

No, I couldn't do that to them.

The other option was no better. I didn't want to be stuck as an idea in the back of her mind, or whatever form I'd take after the merge. And putting my own feelings aside, it was still the same problem, but doubled. If I merged with her, she'd have the same power – maybe even more – and access to both worlds.

“You're not actually thinking about this, are you?” Tennyson asked.

It was so tempting to make a snappish reply. Something about how he should like it if he had both of us in the same body, but I just didn't have the energy for it. Fighting with Tennyson was too much of a distraction. This type of thing was the reason we'd decided to cool it in the first place.

And deep down, I understood the reasoning behind what he'd done. Deep, deep down. Althea had been right. I'd have acted exactly how she'd said, for those exact reasons. It didn't hurt any less, the idea of Other-me using the soul bond with Tennyson, but I could see why they'd kept the plan change from me, at the very least.

“I need to at least consider it,” I said. “But I can't see how her options would be any better than doing nothing.” I glanced at Althea. “What do you think? Do you think either of these options would end any better than your vision?”

She shook her head. “Honestly, it seems like it would probably go the same way, only with her instead of your father.”

I sighed. “You know I need to talk to her.”

“It might be best to do it over Zoom,” said Althea. “We don’t know how badly the feedback will be.”

That made sense. Plus, I wasn’t sure I could stop myself from punching Other-me in the face if I saw her in person.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

There was no point talking to Other-me unless I could sweeten the pot somehow. She didn't care if our whole world fell into an abyss, obviously. It was a lot that I was asking of her, not quite death, but not life either. If we knew for sure what would happen to her, that would be one thing, but none of our research had mentioned that in detail, and Nikolai's uncle's friend didn't know either. It seemed like one of those things that people had assumed was common knowledge, so didn't need to be written down.

For the time being, I decided to let her stew.

"We could torture her," I suggested, for the thousandth time.

"It needs to be consensual," Althea replied, for the thousandth time.

"I could just do it for fun."

They wouldn't let me anywhere near her. I was stuck at school. I had nothing better to do than study, but I'd lost all enthusiasm for it. I stayed away from Tennyson. Every time I looked at him, I wondered if he was secretly communicating with her. Was she whispering inside his head? I thought about it constantly, even when he wasn't around, but it was worse if he was.

It felt like a puzzle that I couldn't solve. I just needed the key, that one thing that would unlock it all and show me exactly what I needed to do to convince Other-me that she should do the ritual. I turned it over and over in my head. What did she want,

aside from the lodestone, from power? Even though she was essentially the same person as me, I didn't really know her at all.

In the end, it was Tennyson who came up with an idea.

I stared at him, open-mouthed, when I opened the door to my dorm to find him standing there, hand raised to knock. He looked paler than ever. His hair was a mess, his clothes disheveled. It was a good look for him, honestly. A really good look. His top few shirt buttons were open to reveal the curve of his collarbones. The skin there looked very smooth.

I cleared my throat and took a step back. He raised an arm, leaning against the door jamb. He'd obviously caught me staring, if his smirk was any indication.

"What are you doing?" I cleared my throat again. My voice sounded husky; I was obviously getting a cold or something.

"I had an idea," he said.

"Bravo," I said, then moved to close the door.

He put his foot out to stop me.

I rolled my eyes and turned away. He followed me into the room and began talking again, so I moved over to the little kitchenette in the corner of the dorm room and turned on the tap.

"Sorry," I said. "Can't hear you, the water's running."

I didn't actually want to waste the water, so I shoved a jug under the tap. Maybe I could find some thirsty plants later or something.

Suddenly, he was a warm weight behind me, enveloping me. His scent surrounded me, and I felt dizzy. His hand closed over mine and shut off the faucet.

“Can you just listen to me?” he said, voice rumbling in my ear. I felt the vibration right through my body.

I hated this. I hated being angry with him, being apart from him, but I didn’t know how to get past it. How could I get past that deep hurt, the sense of betrayal? All I wanted to do was sink back into his arms, but I knew that wouldn’t get rid of that gnawing in the pit of my stomach that I felt every time I thought of him. Of him and her .

“Do I have a choice?” I asked, through gritted teeth.

“Of course,” he said, stepping back.

I almost stumbled when he moved away, as if my body was magnetically drawn toward him.

I set aside the jug of water and went to sit down on the sofa.

“Fine. Say what you need to say and then leave.”

He sighed, then pulled over a chair to sit opposite me. He leaned toward me, his elbows on his knees. “I want you to use me.”

“Um,” I said. “What?”

“If she can use our bond to get to me, why can’t we use it to get to her?”

“Um,” I said again.

It felt as if my brain was malfunctioning. I couldn't grasp what in the world he might mean. I stared at him helplessly.

“We need a way to convince her to do the ritual,” he said. He shifted in his seat, trying to think of a way to explain his thought process to me. “Do you remember when we first completed the bond, how there were no walls between us at all. It was as if we were one being – I knew all of you and you knew all of me?”

I took a deep breath. “You want to do that with her? To convince her to do the ritual?”

He almost looked as if I'd slapped him. “No! No, Lucy, of course I don't want that.”

I nodded. “Right. Of course you don't. But you'll do it for the good of the world. I get it. Well, I don't see why you need to tell me about it.”

I moved to stand up. I wasn't sure if I was about to cry or scream or what, but I knew I needed to put some space between the two of us. He caught me by the arm, pulling me back onto the sofa. He took the seat beside me, getting all up in my business so I couldn't move away.

“Can you just listen to me for a moment? I don't want anything with her, anything at all. I want it with you . If you use our bond to sort of... invade her psyche, then you might be able to find something to convince her to do the ritual. I would only be a bridge between the two of you.”

I stared at him for a moment. His face was so close, I could see the shadow that his eyelashes made on his cheek.

I closed my eyes. I needed to think without distraction.

When it came down to it, I had no better ideas.

“Fine,” I said. “How should we do this?”

I was surprised when he didn’t pull away. He took me by the hands, lacing our fingers together.

“Open your mind to me,” he said.

Once, it had been so easy. It had been almost impossible to close my mind from him, but the walls we’d built up over time seemed normal now. Some of the walls had been necessary, but others were defensive. They’d sprung up through hurt and anger. Those were the hardest to knock down.

In my mind, they appeared like castle ramparts, reinforced by flames and spikes. They loomed too large; I couldn’t see any way around them, or over them, or through.

I can’t, I told him. The walls are too high, there’s no way .

He didn’t speak. I supposed he didn’t want to clue Other-me in to what we were doing. But even without words, I could feel him close by. Not physically – I was barely aware of my physical body anymore. But he was there, just on the other side of the walls.

Then, out of nowhere, a door appeared. It was a tiny door, like something from Alice in Wonderland , but I couldn’t see a bottle saying “drink me” so I could fit through it.

The door swung open, and I could see Tennyson on the other side of it. I moved toward it, and as I did, the door grew, until, by the time I reached it, it was big enough for me to fit through.

He took me by the hand and we ran. I wasn't sure why we were running, but wherever he was leading me, I followed. It was almost overwhelming, being in that place. It was pure Tennyson, more than just Tennyson essential oil, even. I couldn't let myself think about it, or I'd overthink it, and this wasn't the time.

We came to another wall. It wasn't like the other wall. This was a sheer rock face on a mountainside. It stretched up so far, I couldn't see the top, and the whole thing was as smooth as polished marble. I glanced at Tennyson in question.

He pointed toward a tiny crack at the base of the wall, so thin that an ant could barely climb through it.

You're joking , I said.

There was no way I could fit through there. But it was no different than going through the tiny door had been. As I moved closer to it, the space got larger – or I got smaller. That had happened to me once before, and I looked back at Tennyson in a panic. He was the same size. I breathed a sigh of relief.

Come on, then , I said.

He shook his head.

I glanced at the crack in the rock, which now looked like a huge, dark cave. You're going to make me go in there by myself?. I pointed to the cave to emphasize how creepy it looked.

He pointed to the cave and then back to me. "You," he mouthed. He pointed to himself, then back at me, then made a heart with his hands. "Her," he mouthed, then shook his head and made a cross with his arms. He seemed to take confidence from my understanding that part, so he got more complicated, with the pointing and the

hand gestures and silent talking.

You've lost me , I told him. I have no idea what you're trying to say.

His shoulders slumped, then he seemed to get an idea.

He moved so quickly that I barely saw it. He was just suddenly standing in front of me. He pulled me close to him and then kissed me. All of the anger, all of the betrayal, that faded away for a moment. There was nothing but the two of us, there, in that moment.

And I understood what he'd been trying to say. He couldn't go with me. He didn't want to do anything that might strengthen the connection to Other-me. Our bond was something sacred, something special, and it was only for the two of us. Having her use it had hurt him as much as it had hurt me, in a way. He hadn't asked for it, hadn't wanted it. It wasn't something he did to me. It was something she'd done to the both of us.

She needed to be stopped.

I pulled away from him and turned toward the cave. I glanced back at him one more time before I entered it.

Be safe, he said.

And I hoped I would.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It was obvious the moment I passed from Tennyson's side of the wall to hers.

The cave was pitch dark. I shuffled along, keeping a hand on the stone wall beside me. Not only could I see nothing, but there was no sound, either. It wasn't frightening – I could sense Tennyson in everything around me.

And then, I couldn't.

The air turned slightly cooler, but that was the only tangible difference. I couldn't say exactly what else had changed; it was just that the vibe was completely different. There was no Tennyson at all, only her .

I kept moving forward, but more cautiously. I didn't know what to expect, only that it would be nothing good.

Eventually, my foot hit something. When I felt around, I realized it was some steps. I followed them up, and up. They twisted around in a spiral, and I was pleased that I still had walls on both sides of me because it would have been a heck of a drop otherwise.

Finally, I reached a door.

I did not want to open that door. I had no concept of what might be on the other side, but if I had to take a guess, I'd say something like Mordor. Fire and toxic fumes.

I was beyond surprised when I opened the door and found myself on the street where I'd grown up. It made sense, I supposed. She was me, after all. If our lives hadn't been similar in a lot of ways, she'd have been born as someone else, probably. If our parents hadn't met at the same time, or a billion other tiny things that had to happen in the same way. It wasn't actually something I wanted to think about. It hurt my head.

I walked slowly, trying to note any differences. I knew that it wasn't literally the street where I'd grown up – it was all in Other-me's mind, so it was her subjective view. In a way, that made it even more important, because it gave me a sense of how she felt about things.

Sam's house wasn't there. It was an empty lot. That made sense, as she clearly hadn't known Sam or his family in her world. I wondered if that was part of why she'd turned out so bitter and selfish. My own parents hadn't been the greatest, but I'd always felt safe and loved over at the Spencers'. Without them, maybe I'd have turned out just like Other-me.

When I got to my own house, I stopped in my tracks.

It looked as if nobody had lived there for a hundred years. The windows were all smashed, jagged glass still set in the frames. Upstairs, in my parents' window, a shredded curtain flapped around in the non-existent breeze.

The front door was off its hinges, but even with the open door, I didn't want to enter. It looked like something from Silent Hill . Had something happened there, back in her world, or was this just an embodiment of her bad memories?

As I walked up the front steps, something strange happened. I mean, it was all strange – I was walking around in the subconscious of my doppelganger from an alternate reality – but relatively speaking, strange. It was as if I could see my own memories,

overlaying what was in front of me, almost like an echo.

As I looked down the hallway from the front door, I could see baby Hamish toddling along, trying to run away from my mother on his chubby baby legs. When I glanced into the living room, there was Fletcher, trying to snatch the game controller away from Liam, and Liam holding it out of reach. Sam and I at the kitchen table, giggling about something as we did our third-grade science project.

It was all so normal, but we were just ghosts, wisps of ghosts. Behind it all, I could still see the black mold growing up the walls, the broken floorboards, the holes in the walls where animals had started to nest.

And I could see her ghosts, too. There were no brothers for her, though. Only a silent mother, staring blankly at the TV. Sometimes my father would walk down the hallway, then fade into nothing. Her ghosts were paler, even more wispy than my own.

I hadn't seen her, though. No ghost of young Other-me, plotting to subjugate her first-grade class, or doing weird experiments on neighborhood pets. None of that.

I knew where she'd be, though.

I sighed and headed upstairs.

I knew what I'd see when I opened the door of my childhood bedroom. I still saw it in my dreams, sometimes – what I'd seen the night that Sam and his family had vanished. I didn't want to see it again.

And I didn't.

The room wasn't my childhood bedroom at all. It was Other-me's room at school,

back in her world. There were a few differences from what I remembered, but it was pink and frilly, and surprisingly not like a Halloween funhouse, like the rest of the house.

She sat on the bed, facing the door. She'd been waiting for me.

"I felt you," she said.

I shrugged. "It would be weird if you hadn't."

"I'm not going to do your stupid ritual."

"Okay," I said. "Should we order pizza?"

She looked as if she was about to argue, but then changed her mind. "Can we do that?"

"I don't know. It's your mind."

"And you're here to change it." She rolled her eyes and then stood up, walking over to the door. She closed it, and then opened it again, and there were two boxes of pizza sitting in front of it. "I assume these will have no calories."

I took the box and opened it warily. She was evil, but was she anchovies evil? Apparently not.

"This is good," I said, through a mouthful.

"It's the pizza from my father's first stronghold. We had this chef who made the literal best pizza in the world," she said. "Like, literally. My father kidnapped him for that reason and made him cook for us." She chewed thoughtfully. "I wonder what

happened to that guy.”

I could guess, but didn’t want to spoil the amazing pizza by saying it.

As I ate the amazing pizza, I also chewed over what I’d learned about Other-me.

“So, we grew up in the same house, but you had no siblings, no friendly neighbors.”

She nodded but didn’t speak, as she had the mother of all cheese pulls happening.

“My father left when I wasn’t much more than a baby, took me with him. If I had any siblings, I never knew about them.”

That explained a lot. I wondered how she remembered the house, if she’d left it so young. Maybe it was only a vague image in her subconscious, and that’s why her impressions had been so pale compared to mine.

“I’m guessing your father was about as great as mine,” I said.

She shrugged. “It’s not a crime to be ambitious.”

I snorted, then reached for another slice of pizza. “No, but it’s a crime to kidnap, torture, and murder people.”

But then, she had no problem with that, either. That was why I was there.

We finished the pizza in silence, then slumped back on her bed, both rubbing our full bellies. It was uncanny, I thought, watching her from the corner of my eye. Well, it was the literal definition of uncanny, wasn’t it – something familiar but not quite right.

I still wasn't sure how to get through to her. From the way she talked, it seemed as if she'd never been close to anyone. If she'd honestly never cared about anyone or anything but herself, could I really convince her to do the ritual? She'd be literally losing herself.

I thought back to what Tennyson had said about when we'd first formed our bond. I'd been overflowing with magic at that point. It had been easy to join with him in that way. I didn't know how to do that with her. Sure, I was in her mind, but I was still removed from her, external. It wasn't the total mind meld that it had been with Tennyson.

The first time I'd experienced the feedback loop with her had been when I touched her. I figured that was worth a try. What could go wrong?

We lay side by side on the bed, so I simply reached across and caught hold of her wrist.

It was lucky that the pizza hadn't been real, or I might have thrown it straight back up.

Everything swirled around, as if I were looking through a kaleidoscope. Or was inside a kaleidoscope, maybe. Images flashed around me, so quickly I couldn't tell if they were my own memories or hers. People, places, most familiar but some not. Everything was distorted, sickly. The only constant was Other-me's voice in my head, screaming: What have you done?

I wasn't sure, exactly. The images slowed down for a while, then sped up again. There were moments I recognized now, from my own life. Waking up from my first werewolf transformation, finding Milo covered in blood. The time I'd attacked Fatima in class with my magic and injured her. When I was trying to escape from my father's laboratory, and had exploded a bunch of his scientists with my brain. All my

own darkest moments, mingled in with hers.

And I began to see how easy I could have become her. I had meant to hurt those scientists, I'd wanted to. They'd hurt me, so I wanted to hurt them back. It wasn't the only time, either. When we'd rescued Harper. Henry. My power could be used to heal, sure, but I'd used it much more often to hurt. As much as I tried to do the right thing, I had a violent, vengeful streak. I couldn't deny it.

There were moments from her life as well. Violence and anger, yes, but that wasn't all. She'd cared for Other-Nikolai, genuinely cared for him. She'd kept him safe from her father. Her happy moments were fewer than my own, but she did have them.

Stop it! Other-me yelled. She sounded as if she were crying.

But I couldn't stop it, I didn't know how.

The images started swirling faster again, too quickly to make them out. We were spiraling out of control, and I didn't know how to stop it.

But then something happened to save me. The same thing that always saved me.

Tennyson's voice cut through everything else, and as soon as I heard it, the world became right again.

Lucy, come back .

So I did.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I don't know what Other-me saw in that spiral of memories, but it must have been something good.

I'd barely opened my eyes and looked around to find myself back in my dorm room. I still sat on the sofa with Tennyson at my side. He looked pale and worried, then he winced, clutching at his temples.

"She has a message for you," he said. "What the heck was that, you crazy... expletive. You could have killed us both. Stay out of my head."

I sighed. It had all been for nothing.

But Tennyson wasn't finished. "I'll do your stupid ritual, but you're going to owe me, big time."

I stared at him. "Really?"

He shrugged. "That's what she says. What happened? You seemed fine, then all of a sudden, the lodestone started glowing in your pocket, and I could hear you screaming in my head."

"It was probably her screaming," I said.

He shook his head. "No, it was you. Do you really think I could so easily confuse you with someone else?"

I shrugged and shifted in my seat. My whole body felt seized up.

“How long was I out?” It had seemed like hours.

“Not long,” he said. “Ten, maybe fifteen minutes.”

I nodded, then glanced over at him. He still had those two top buttons on his shirt undone.

“Sooooooo...” I began, not sure how to continue.

“You’re referring to that kiss?” he said, looking away. “I apologize. I know it wasn’t appropriate, given the state of our relationship at the moment, but I couldn’t think of another way to tell you what I needed to say. At any rate, it wasn’t technically a kiss, as it was actually all in our minds –”

I rolled my eyes and grabbed him by the scruff of his shirt, pulling him closer.

We were interrupted about thirty seconds later by Hannah and Nikolai bursting into the room, ironically enough.

“Oi, you two! Get a room,” said Nikolai, laughing.

“This is my room,” I said.

“As happy as I am that the two of you seem to be sorting things out,” said Hannah. “Althea wants to see you. Both of you.”

“Is she okay?” Tennyson asked, jumping to his feet. “Has she had another vision?”

“No, I think it’s about the ritual,” said Hannah, but from the way she shooed us out of

the room, I suspected that was just an excuse to get rid of us.

Althea was not thrilled that I'd brain-visited Other-me.

"Do you have any idea what could have gone wrong?" she asked, from behind a massive pile of books.

"Of course I do," I said, even though I didn't. But then, neither did Althea. Probably.

"At any rate, it worked," said Tennyson. "She's agreed to do the ritual."

Althea's head popped up from behind her book. She narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "She did? And you believe her?"

I shrugged. "She's given us her verbal consent. Surely that's enough for the ritual to work."

"Magic isn't a court of law," Althea said. "She can verbally consent all you like, but if she's not actually willing, the ritual may not go to plan."

Well, that was something new for me to worry about. Great.

"So, we can go through with the whole thing, but it won't take if she changes her mind midway through?"

Althea shook her head. "No, it's more like the ritual won't be able to commence if she isn't willing." She grabbed a book off the top of her pile and flipped it open. "Nikolai's uncle's friend mentioned something about a *cedere pactum*, literally giving agreement in Latin. I thought that just meant you both had to agree to do the ritual, but I came across the term in a few other books. Since we lost all of our research, I've been looking into other types of spells and rituals from Eastern Europe

around that time, and it's mentioned in a few of them. It's part of the ceremony. An important part."

The look on her face made me think it wasn't a part I'd enjoy.

"What do we have to do?"

"You have to make a sacrifice."

"Right," I said. "I'll just say it right now. I am not killing a baby goat. I won't do it. I'm sorry, but that's just a step too far. Same with lambs, pigs... any type of animal. Humans too. I'm not killing a baby, so don't ask me."

Althea stared at me as if I'd gone mad, but honestly, you mention rituals and sacrifices, what else would you think?

"You don't need to kill anyone," she said.

"You say that now, but give it a day or two. You'll read through all these books and then it will be like, 'sorry Lucy, but you see this baby piglet here'..."

"She's had a very long day," Tennyson said, forcing me into a seat. "Don't make her kill a piglet."

His hand lingered on my shoulder, and I caught it, tangling our fingers together. I smiled up at him. He'd never make me kill a piglet.

"It will be a blood sacrifice," Althea said, noting our joined hands and ducking her head to hide her smile. "But it will be your own blood. Both of you. You need to bleed into a goblet, and your blood needs to mingle to symbolize the merging of your souls."

“Yeah, I don’t like this,” I said. The thought of it made me queasy.

“It’s you or the baby piglet,” she said. I was fairly sure she was kidding. I wouldn’t have pushed it, though.

She talked me through the other steps, and apart from the blood thing, it all seemed fairly standard magic stuff, not too far removed from what we’d practiced in Wicca club.

“So, when can we do it?” I asked. Usually, there was some moon phase or other that we had to wait for.

“Any time,” Althea said. “Just before dawn is best, but no particular day. It’s probably better to do it at the manor, there’s more security there.”

“What are we waiting for, then?” I said, getting back to my feet. “Let’s go. We can do it in the morning.”

“You’re sure?” Tennyson asked.

“Yep,” I said. “The more I think about it, the more I’ll hate the idea of the whole thing. But it’s this or the end of the world, right? There’s no other way?”

I glanced over to Althea, just in case, but she shook her head.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “If it helps, I can talk you through what to expect after the ritual is complete.”

But I didn’t want to know. If I knew too much, I might run.

Tennyson gathered everyone up, and we flew back to the manor. I sat between

Tennyson and Sam in the back of the helicopter, holding both their hands. My heart was racing. I was so terrified of what we were about to do. Even if everything went to plan, I would be changed forever. Part of me would be her.

We had a few hours before dawn, but I couldn't sleep.

Althea and Hannah stayed up to finish prepping for the ritual. We were going to do it down in the meeting hall, as it was the biggest and most secure space. I should have helped them, but I wanted to spend the last few hours I had as myself with Tennyson.

Those few hours were bittersweet. We were together again, together in a way we never had been before. We were stronger, more honest than we'd been, but I knew that it couldn't last.

"You don't have to do it," he whispered, an hour or so before dawn. "We could run away somewhere."

But we both knew that wasn't an option.

As we walked down to the meeting hall, I felt as little like I was going to the gallows. I forced myself not to think of it, not to try to imagine what would come after. I had to just appreciate that moment, with Tennyson there beside me.

The meeting hall was transformed. The floor was covered with different symbols and markings, none of which made much sense to me, but I trusted that Althea had triple-checked them. The room glowed with the light of a thousand candles, sending flickering shadows across the walls. In the center of the room, they'd placed a small altar. The goblet we'd be bleeding into was on the altar, as well as a doubled-sided mirror, some herbs and vials of oils, that kind of thing. My sword was laid at the base of the altar.

I'd just taken it all in when I felt Other-me enter. The air crackled between us so strongly, there were visible sparks. It felt as if I was being pushed away from her, like even the air didn't want us to occupy the same space, so it was forcing us apart.

"We might have to make this quick," I said, shooting Althea a worried look.

Even though Other-me had agreed to do the ritual, she was still flanked by a pair of guards, but Althea stopped them at the edge of the markings on the floor, and they headed back into the shadows.

She directed the two of us over to the altar and placed one of us on either side, with the mirror between us so we could only see our own reflections. Then she man-handled the others into place, making each of them stand on a particular symbol, then she took her own place.

She'd talked me through the steps, but she mustn't have had much faith in my memory, because she'd left a bullet point list of what I had to do on the altar as well. That reassured me a bit, anyway.

"It is time," Althea said, and somewhere from the shadows, a drum began to beat.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I stared into the mirror. The way the candlelight flickered gave the illusion that it wasn't my reflection that I saw, but hers, then it was mine again, then both of our reflections combined. Either way, we both looked terrified. That was somehow reassuring.

I raised my sword and held it above us, above the mirror, pointing upward. The beating of the drum was almost hypnotic. The flickering light made it seem as if everything was moving around us. The only thing that remained still was the reflection in the mirror.

As one, we reached up and grasped the blade of the sword. It seemed as if our eyes met as the sword cut into our flesh. I wasn't just looking at my reflection, I was looking through it, through the mirror and into her. I was her. She was me. The blood from our hands dripped down the hilt of the sword. Together, we raised the goblet to catch it.

I didn't even feel the pain from my hand. I was aware of it, but only vaguely. As the ritual began to take hold, I realized that I didn't even need Althea's notes. There was only one way the ritual could proceed from here, and now that it had been set into motion, it was inevitable.

The mirror no longer seemed to exist, not in a physical sense. I didn't remember taking the lodestone from my pocket, but when I looked down into the goblet, it was inside. As our blood dripped over it, the stone began to glow. It got brighter and brighter, until it was almost unbearable to look at, but still, I couldn't look away. That

light became everything. All that ever was, all that ever would be. All of my life, all of my memories were held inside that light, just as all of Other-me was inside it.

My power came rushing back to me with the force of a freight train. I hadn't realized just how empty I'd felt without it until it settled over me, making me whole again. But it wasn't just my power. It had been her power, too, for a while, and it was colored with that sense of her. Just as I'd been able to tell instantly when I'd moved from Tennyson's side of the wall in the bond to hers, it was tinted in the same way – similar to my own but just a shade darker.

Mrs Spencer had been convinced that I only needed to ascend one more time, to develop my powers again, in order to become the “united being”. If I could become some sort of dark creature, after becoming a werewolf, a magic user, fae, and spirit, I would be this united being, the first. There was a prophecy. Even though I'd scoffed at Althea and Nikolai, I'd seen evidence of it myself, on the walls of that temple that wasn't quite in this world. And I'd known it myself, deep within my bones. This was the last piece of the puzzle, and now it was falling into place.

Alone, I had been too afraid of my own darkness, but Other-me had embraced hers. Now that we were becoming one, now that I was taking on her darkness as my own, the process had begun. I was becoming a dark creature. But that wasn't all I would be. All of the power, from all five types of magical beings, I held that power within me, and within me, it became something else. Something other .

After all my power had channeled back into me, things became quiet for a moment. We were still within that light. I could see Other-me opposite me; she was the only other thing within that light. Or maybe I was her, looking at me. It was the same thing. We were looking at ourselves, and we saw everything.

And I knew, suddenly, why she had agreed to do this. It was obvious once I realized. She had been alone her entire life. So incredibly alone. She had seen my memories,

looked through my life like flicking through the pages of a book, and it had been filled with love. Even though we'd had the same parents, I had my brothers. I'd had Sam and his family. I had my pack. I had Tennyson. If she became part of me, she could have all that. And she'd never be alone, because we'd be together.

"I'm sorry," I said to her, just as she said it to me.

I held out my hand, and she held out hers, angry red slashes across the palms. We pressed our hands together, and the moment our palms touched, the world shattered.

At first, I thought it was part of the ritual.

The entire world went dark. I blinked my eyes a few times and realized that there was actually light. I'd just been so blinded by that white light in the ritual that everything else was dim by comparison. We were in the meeting hall, still, and the candlelight still flickered, but the drums had stopped.

"What's going on?" I said.

The pain from my hand seared through me. How had I not been feeling that this whole time? It felt as if my whole arm might fall off.

I still couldn't see properly, just shadows moving around. I rubbed at my eyes, but that just made things blurry as well as dark.

"Stay where you are," Althea called. "The ritual will fail if you move from your positions. Stay on your side of the mirror."

"Okay," I called back. "But what's happening? I can barely see."

"I think reality is cracking," she called back. She sounded so calm, as if that wasn't

the most absolutely insane thing anyone could say.

I honestly had no idea how to respond to that.

“Is everyone okay?” I asked, eventually.

She didn’t answer.

“Althea?” I called a bit more urgently.

“I’m not sure,” she said. “I can’t move from my place.”

“I’m okay,” Harper called. “Well, bored and cold, but otherwise fine.”

“Same,” said Nikolai. “Hannah?”

“Yep. I feel weird, but I’m not hurt.”

“Sam?” I called. “Tennyson?”

It felt like an eternity until there was a response.

“I’m okay, but Tennyson’s knocked out,” said Sam. “I can only just see him, but he’s breathing.”

“Is he still on his mark, Sam?” Althea asked.

“I think so.”

“What do we do?” I asked.

My eyes just wouldn't adjust to the dim light. I couldn't move to go check on Tennyson. It was too frustrating.

"Continue with the ritual," said Althea. "Just go through the steps, but do it quickly. The crack is spreading. I don't know what will happen once it reaches us, but I'd prefer not to find out."

I looked down at the list she'd left on the altar. There were a few splatters of blood on it and some crushed herbs, but it was still legible.

I picked up the goblet. It was heavy, with the weight of the lodestone inside it. The lodestone had heated the metal of the goblet until I was barely able to hold it. I felt like it was burning off my fingerprints; it was so hot. Which I supposed might come in handy, if this ritual failed and I was forced to turn to a life of crime.

The lodestone still glowed, but much more faintly now. It was more like a spark of flame within it than the bright light it had been. I placed the herbs and oils from the altar and swirled them around, so it mixed in with the blood and coated the stone. Faintly, I realized the drum had begun to beat again.

I held out the goblet in front of me. The mirror still showed my reflection but it was no longer solid. Other-me was supposed to do this next bit, but I couldn't see her. I couldn't actually see anything, I realized, only the goblet. Still, I held it out. This bit was important. I held out the goblet until it passed through the surface of the mirror. She needed to take the goblet from me, or the whole ritual would fail. I needed to blindly trust that she'd do it, just as she needed to trust that I would accept her soul as part of myself.

Even if I'd been able to see her clearly in front of me, I'd have struggled with it. There was nothing stopping her from turning around and running off with the lodestone. Sure, I'd have my powers back, but the ritual would fail, and the world

would collapse in on itself. But if I couldn't trust, the ritual would fail just as surely.

I let the goblet go.

I half expected to hear it clanging to the ground, but there was no sound at all, nothing but the drum beat. Instead, I felt warm liquid trickle into my hands, as she emptied the goblet into them. Our blood, the herbs, and oils. Then the lodestone fell into the palms of my hands.

As soon as it touched my skin, the cut from the sword began to heal. Within seconds, it was as if the skin had never been broken at all, not even a trace of a scar. I pressed the lodestone to my forehead, to the space between my eyebrows. I closed my eyes, feeling the lodestone sink into my skin. Once I had absorbed it, had taken in the entire stone, I knew the transformation was complete.

Other-me was gone. I had taken on the darkness we both carried, I had absorbed it, absorbed her, just as I'd absorbed the stone. I had ascended into my own darkness and become the first united being. I was all-powerful, in total control. Nothing could stand against me now.

I fainted.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I wasn't out for very long. When I came to, I could see again, so that was a good sign. I was still in the meeting hall, but all of the symbols were gone from the floor. I knew, somehow, that I had absorbed them too. I was chock-full of stuff, basically.

The drumming had stopped, thankfully, as I had a splitting headache. I probably should have expected that, after shoving a huge rock into my forehead, but it had seemed the thing to do at the time.

"Lucy!" Althea gasped, rushing over to me.

"I'm okay," I said, sitting up.

"You're covered in blood," said Nikolai, keeping his distance.

"It's fine," I said. "I'm not hurt."

I wasn't hurt, but I wasn't sure what I was. I was still me, I knew that much, but not the same me as I had been. I'd need some time to adjust to all this, but I didn't care about that right then.

"How's Tennyson?" I asked.

Althea glanced over. "He's still out cold. Sam's trying to wake him."

"And the crack in the world, is that all better?"

Althea and Hannah exchanged a look.

“Don’t worry about that just now,” said Hannah, helping me to my feet. “You need to rest a bit, get used to your new...” She waved a hand around to show she meant my new situation, whatever that may be.

“We’ll get the healers to see to Tennyson,” Althea said. “Do you need help getting back to your rooms?”

I shook my head. I probably needed help, but I didn’t want to go back to my rooms. “I don’t want to be around my brothers until I know more about how the ritual has affected me,” I said. “I’ll go wherever you take Tennyson.”

Once I started walking, I felt fine. Strong, actually. In control. Nikolai and Harper kept shooting me suspicious looks, but everyone else just pretended as if I wasn’t walking around covered in blood like I was Carrie on prom night.

Once we reached Tennyson’s rooms, I took a shower while the healers looked Tennyson over. It was good to have a moment alone.

Though I wasn’t alone, not really. I could feel her in there, in the back of my mind. Not like a separate person, like when Tennyson communicated through our bond. She was an integrated part of me, an aspect of myself. I felt bigger, more complex.

It was as if I were a lasagna. I’d always been a lasagna, full of delicious layers of pasta and ragu and bechamel, but she was a layer of mozzarella baked on top to give me the perfect finish. Fresh buffalo mozzarella too, not that cheap stuff. And maybe a bit of cheddar sprinkled in too. I was still the same lasagna underneath, but now I was next-level awesome.

After I’d showered and put on clean clothes, I stared at myself in the mirror. Did I

look any different? Maybe my posture was a little better, and I'd missed a bit of blood behind my ear. And if I squinted, I thought I could see the shadow of a mark in the middle of my forehead, where the lodestone had been. Aside from that, I couldn't see any difference at all.

When I finally left the bathroom, the scene in Tennyson's room looked grim. Nikolai and Sam stood stone-faced, their arms folded across their chests. Althea looked as if she'd been crying.

"Where are the healers?" I asked.

Althea just shook her head.

"They said there's nothing they can do for him," said Harper. "That crack in reality opened right where Tennyson had been standing. The force of it was too much for him. They said —"

She broke off and turned her head away.

"They said he only has a few hours," Althea said.

I took a deep breath. I couldn't lose Tennyson, not after everything we'd been through. I didn't accept that. I wouldn't.

"No," I said, moving toward the bed where he lay, already as still and pale as a corpse.

Harper moved so I could sit beside him, but I didn't intend to sit there and watch him die. I had my powers back. What was the point of them, if not to save the people I loved?

I sat on the bed beside him, placing one hand on either side of his face. My hands began to glow with the same bright light from the lodestone. I could hear the others gasping and murmuring behind me, but I paid them no attention. All my focus was on Tennyson.

In the past, my powers had always been so hard to control. It was more like they were using me, instead of me using them. I could point them in the right direction, but then they carried me away like a tidal wave.

This was nothing like that.

Everything Althea said about the lodestone, all our research, it all suddenly made sense. It was like a wi-fi router. The signal came in – my magic – and the lodestone allowed me to connect it to all the places it needed to go. Except, instead of my phone or laptop, it was Tennyson, for the moment. Because of the lodestone, I knew exactly what part of my power I needed to use, how much of it, and could just let the magic flow through me.

Within moments, the color started to come back to his face. He was always pale, of course, but that deathly pallor was gone. His eyelids began to flutter, then he reached up to touch my hand.

“Lucy?” he whispered, opening his eyes. “What happened?”

“Sssh,” I said. “You swooned like a princess, but you’ll be fine. Everything’s fine. Just rest a bit.”

“You should probably take that advice yourself,” said Hannah. “Seriously, Lucy, don’t overdo it. You have no idea what your limits are now.”

It wasn’t hard to convince me. Now that Tennyson seemed okay, the fatigue hit me. I

hadn't slept the night before, and it had been a loooooong day.

"Should we send the healers in?" Harper asked. "I mean, to check him over again. It's fine for her to be all glowy, but we can't be sure that she actually healed him."

Althea scoffed. "What good have the healers ever done us? They always say the same thing, and in the end, we have to figure things out ourselves."

"Still, it can't hurt," I said. I could feel that my healing had worked, but I was new to all this. You couldn't be too safe.

Once the healers had declared Tennyson recovered and expressed their disapproval at the use of unsanctioned healing magic, I curled up on the bed beside Tennyson.

"You're you," he said, pulling me closer.

"I'm me," I agreed. "You're alive and I'm me."

And for the moment, that was everything we needed.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

When we woke, the world was in chaos.

I'd known that Althea and Hannah were being cagey when I'd asked them about the crack in reality. It was bad news. Or, as bad as news could be over a slap-up breakfast banquet like the one laid out in front of us.

"Don't be mad," said Althea, pushing a stack of pancakes toward me. "I'd known it was likely to happen once the ritual began, but I thought I'd taken enough precautions to contain the crack."

"It was your father," said Nikolai, through a mouthful of toast. "He's always one step ahead of us. Why did you not inherit his genius?"

I shrugged, piling berries and syrup onto my pancakes. "Other-me did, and now she's all up here, in the old noggin." I tapped the side of my head, but my finger was sticky.

"How's that going, actually?" asked Hannah.

"Seems fine," I said. "Not sure yet, but don't change the subject. What did my father do?"

"He must have known that once the Other-you escaped, more cracks would appear. He just waited for it to happen, and once it did, he pounced."

"Bam!" said Nikolai, slapping his hand down on the table, making us all jump. "Like

a jaguar!”

“Someone take that jug of syrup away from him,” Althea said. “He’s had too much sugar.”

I reached for another pancake. But there were waffles too. Could you put a pancake on top of a waffle? Would that be weird? Only one way to find out. There was bacon too. Tennyson handed it to me before I even asked.

“So, my father pounced on the crack... sorry, can we stop calling it a crack?”

“Makes it sound like a butt,” came a voice from under the table.

I knew who it was before I bent to look down there.

“Hamish, what are you doing down there?”

To be fair, Fletcher was there too. They’d swiped a few plates of food and sat cross-legged, feeding their faces and eavesdropping. It was a wonder we hadn’t heard the noise of them chewing.

“What do you expect us to do?” said Fletcher. “You never tell us the good stuff.”

“Yeah,” said Hamish, with a mouthful of chewed sausage. “He’s our dad, too. If he’s doing evil stuff, we gotta know about it.”

“You don’t gotta know anything,” I said. “Where’s Liam? Why isn’t he keeping an eye on you?”

Hamish shrugged and took another bite of sausage.

“Please, Lucy,” said Fletcher. “We were just worried about you.” He gave me his best puppy dog eyes, and it almost suckered me in.

“No, we weren’t,” said Hamish, ruining all Fletcher’s good work. “Lucy’s got superpowers. We just wanted all the juicy details. Amy from the kitchens said you was all covered in blood and crawling around the halls like the girl from *The Ring*, is that true? Were you covered in blood because you ate someone? When can I start learning magic too?”

I looked at Tennyson helplessly.

“May as well let them stay,” he said. “It’s better they hear the real story instead of these fictions.”

“Fine,” I said, over their cheering. “But come up here and sit at the table. And bring your manners!”

“Where were we?” I said, once the boys were settled.

“At the crack,” said Nikolai, with a snort.

“Fine,” said Althea. “Let’s call it a tear then, or a rift. It all means the same thing. Your father started to wedge it open.”

“Like in your vision?” I asked.

She shook her head. “I’m sure that’s what he intended, but because the ritual had already begun, he couldn’t form a bridge between the worlds. I have no doubt that’s what he’s working on right this minute. I’m not sure what he plans is even possible anymore, now that the ritual has been completed, but the rift is still big enough for him to do a lot of damage with it nonetheless. There’s no precedent for this, so we

don't know how far he can push it, but obviously we need to stop him."

I glanced around the table for where my brothers had found those sausages, but the serving plate was empty.

"So, what do we need to do? I'm not sure what I'm capable of yet, but I can probably zap him with my brain or something."

I glanced around the table, but nobody met my eyes. Well, nobody except Hamish, who gave me a big thumbs up. Maybe not the best plan then.

"I think first we really need to discover what you are capable of," said Althea, exchanging a glance with Hannah.

I could see their point.

"You're worried about how much of Other-me is in here?" I said.

"Obviously there's not a lot," said Harper. "Considering how badly you still dress." She laughed at her own joke.

I wagged my fingers at her, making them glow. She stopped laughing.

"It's a valid concern," said Sam. He hadn't looked at me once since the ritual. I wondered if I'd lost him forever, now that part of her was in me.

"I understand," I said. "But I don't know how I'd prove to you that I'm the same person as before."

"Well, you haven't run off to that other world yet, so that's a good start," said Althea. "I suppose it will just take a little time to build up trust."

“How much time do we have?” I asked. “I’m sorry, I understand why you’re all wary. If it were the other way around, I would be, too, but we’re on a deadline here. You should know enough by now to not underestimate my father. He’ll find a way to tap into that power. We need to stop him before that happens, and if that means I have to go rogue and lose all your trust, well, I wouldn’t like that, but it would be better than the alternative.”

“I trust Lucy implicitly,” said Tennyson.

I smiled at him.

“No offence, buddy,” said Nikolai. “But we can’t be sure you’re thinking clearly when it comes to her.”

Tennyson stiffened in offence. “You think I don’t know with whom I share a soul bond?” He always went super formal when he was angry. “Do you imagine that our sacred bond is something so easily hoodwinked? That I am?”

Nikolai grimaced. “I said ‘no offence’.”

“I trust Lucy implicitly,” Tennyson repeated. “And I am the alpha of this pack. Does any at this table question my command?”

Hamish opened his mouth, and I shot him a look. He made like he was just stuffing more food in there, but I wasn’t fooled.

“Very well,” Tennyson continued. “We don’t have much time, but we need to be prepared. While the rest of us are co-ordinating our attack, Althea and Hannah, I’d like you to work with Lucy to test her powers. We need to know what she is capable of, as well as what her limits are.”

He glanced between Sam, Nikolai, and Harper, and I could tell he was trying to decide which combination of the three would be the least damaging. It was a tough call. I felt like all three were fairly opposed to me at the moment, but I doubted they'd actively work against us. Except for maybe Harper.

“Nikolai and Harper, the two of you are best at strategy. I want you to liaise with our other teams and figure out a way to approach this.”

The two of them preened at Tennyson's praise.

That left him and Sam.

I'll talk to him , Tennyson told me. I'll make him understand that you're not her .

We all moved to stand up from the table, but Hamish cleared his throat loudly and raised his hand, as if he were in class.

“Excuse me, Tennyson Wilde,” he said. “What about us? We want to help, too.”

Tennyson took a moment, as if he were thinking it over carefully. “First, I want you to go to the kitchens and tell Amy that she shouldn't be making up stories. Then I want the two of you to go back to your rooms and find every piece of information you can about your father. Anything he might have sent you, the times and dates he's contacted you, everything. Even if you think it's not important.”

The two of them nodded eagerly.

“Can we go through Liam's stuff?” asked Fletcher.

Might be a good idea , I told Tennyson, though I'd never say it aloud. Liam's been kind of hostile lately. I'd like to rule out my father as the reason.

“You can,” Tennyson told them. “But only if you make sure he doesn’t know about it. It’s a secret mission, got it?”

They were so happy to have a secret mission that they rushed off without even finishing the food they’d piled on their plates.

I was dreading the moment when I’d have to test my powers, but when it came down to it, it was incredibly easy.

When I thought about dark magic, it was along the lines of curses, inflicting damage, that type of thing. I told myself that I didn’t want to hurt anyone, but that wasn’t true. When I thought about my father, all the things he’d done and the people he’d hurt, the dark magic rose to the surface along with my anger.

I let it wash over me, that desire to inflict pain, to wipe my father from this world. It wasn’t only the dark magic that I was feeling, I realized. It was all the magic combined. I understood it in terms of light, of how we see color. We perceive the color white when all the colors are mixed together equally in the light spectrum. I mean, it probably wasn’t the same in a scientific sense, but it helped me to think of it that way. All my other powers were the different colors, but because they were channeled through the lodestone equally, they became this other power. That was what Mrs Spencer had meant by a “united being”.

“Uh, Lucy?” said Hannah.

I opened my eyes and found that I was floating a few feet above the ground.

“Woah,” I said. “I can fly?”

I couldn’t fly. When I tried to propel myself forward, I fell back on my butt. Still, the levitating thing had been cool.

“Honestly, I feel like I have a decent handle on all this,” I told them.

“We haven’t fully tested your limits,” said Althea, all business as usual.

“I’m not sure she has any limits,” said Hannah. “Apart from flying.”

“It’s time,” I told them. “I need to finish this. I’m ready.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The others had not been slacking off either. Nikolai and Harper had coordinated with the rest of the pack, and they were all on standby whenever we decided to make our move. Sam, however, was absent.

“He’s decided to take himself away for a while,” Tennyson said. “We found somewhere that we think can help him, somewhere peaceful where he can heal.”

I was sad that he hadn’t said goodbye, but I understood.

Finding the physical location of a rift in reality was not as easy as you might think. The portal had been all flashy and obvious, but the rift wasn’t like that. It wasn’t really visible at all, except for maybe a slight ripple in the air, like the heat coming off a hot road in summer. And it wasn’t static, it was in constant motion.

There were a few magic users in the pack now, people who had been drawn to the safety of it after the High Council had fallen. One or two fae as well, though they mostly kept to themselves. All of our magic users were tracking the rift constantly.

My father wasn’t physically inside the rift. At some point he must’ve siphoned the energy from some spirit entities, and that had given him the power to travel outside of his body to some extent. We didn’t have anyone in the pack who was a refugee from the spirit realm, so that was where I came in.

I had to find my father inside the rift and remove him, so that the magic users could close it. Once I had him out, if possible, we’d contain him. That part of the plan was

dicey. It wasn't easy to contain someone without a physical body to hold onto. The main thing was getting him out of the rift, anything else was gravy.

The rift was still quite close to the manor, since that was where it had been opened. I wanted to get physically as close to it as possible, but everyone else thought it would be safer for me to stay within the manor, where so many protections were already in place.

Hannah made an extra protective circle around me, on the floor of Tennyson's room. I sat at the center of it, cross-legged, and closed my eyes. Hannah and Althea stayed in the room with me. I didn't want a bunch of people watching me do this. Tennyson had wanted to stay too, but there was too much for him to do, too many other people who needed him. And besides, he was always with me anyway. He didn't need to be in the room.

It only took a moment to shove myself out of my body. I let myself float up, up, out of the room, out of the manor. I let my awareness expand outward, searching for the rift, for a sense of where my father might be.

It barely took a second. His spirit – if it could be called that – broadcast itself out like a siren, just as loud, just as jarring. He had twisted and mutilated the spirits of so many others in his quest for power, so it was no surprise that what he took from them was twisted and mutilated as well. He was like some sort of eldritch monster, grotesque and inhuman.

As soon as I became aware of him, I was there with him. I saw him from outside the rift, as he saw me from within it. His massive form writhed in amusement. Up close, he almost seemed to be a clump of tentacles, tentacles made from toxic fumes. They darted in and out from the central mass of him, squirming like a nest of vipers – just as fast, just as deadly.

If I'd been in my physical form, I might have wet myself. I was horror-struck. Next to him, I felt tiny, insignificant. Even with all my power, how could I hope to defeat that ?

It was only for a moment, but I was frozen in fear.

Then a part of me kicked into action. The part that I knew was her .

He had grown so large because he'd stolen power. None of it was his. His power couldn't be united, not like mine was. My power was something pure and beautiful – the perfect blend of every part of a spectrum. His was like a child mixing together every color of paint until it became burple. A muddy, awful brownish-purple that you couldn't make anything with, all you could do was wash it down the sink and start again.

He only looked scary, but I could look scary, too. I could look like anything at all. But I didn't need to show off my power. I had nothing to prove, not to him, not even to myself anymore. I'd looked into the darkest mirror, and I'd embraced what I saw there. I was whole. I was united . And I was going to win.

I moved into the rift, toward the monster that was my father.

As I crossed into the rift from the real world, the air seemed to fizz around me. This place wasn't right , it wasn't natural. When we'd gone through the portal to the other world, it had been almost instantaneous, just a quick jolt as we'd passed through. Lingering there, though, it was obvious that this wasn't a place that was supposed to exist. It was an in-between place, a nothing place. Being there made me understand what Althea had seen in her vision. It was what would happen if this rift tore wide open and swallowed our world.

I didn't want to be there any longer than necessary. Everything about the place was

hostile, as if it was trying to rip my soul apart. I didn't know how my father could stand to be in there for so long, but then, he was toxic and unnatural himself. Maybe he felt at home there.

But he couldn't stay.

The closer I moved toward him, the smaller he got. It was like when the cave in the wall of Tennyson's mind had grown large enough for me to fit through, only in reverse. Or perhaps I was the one getting larger. Either way, as soon as I got close to him, I towered over him. With all his hideous power, he was tiny. Insignificant.

I tried to grab him, but he slipped through my grasp. I had to stop thinking like a person and think like a spirit. The only thing I knew that could trap a spirit was a sigil – one of those weird symbols Althea used during the ritual, or Hannah drew on the floor in Wicca club. I didn't know which particular sigil I needed. I could never memorize that kind of stuff like they could, but in that place, that unreality, the actual form of things wasn't important. It wasn't the shape of the sigil that mattered; it was the intent behind it.

I drew the sigil in the air, and it turned into smoke, wafting around him. Soon, he was barely visible from within the cloud of smoke, and I knew I had him trapped. He fought against it, struggled with every bit of his stolen power, but I used all of my will to hold him. I pushed him back toward the rift with all my might, and he resisted with all of his. He was strong, so strong. But I was stronger.

Finally, I had him there, right at the mouth of the rift. All it needed was one hard shove to push him back through to the real world.

YOU'LL REGRET THIS , he said, giving up the struggle and falling back through.

The moment he was out, I followed him. As soon as I'd passed through, I felt the

magic users swarm to get the rift closed.

I was still in the spirit realm, my body safe back at the manor. I stretched out my consciousness as far as I could, but I didn't sense my father anywhere. He'd returned to his body. He was out of my reach. For now.

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:29 am

We had people in place around the rift to catch my father, just in case, but they didn't catch a whiff of him. He was quite literally in the wind.

"You really couldn't keep him contained?" said Harper.

"He was literal smoke," I told her. "How do you hold onto smoke?"

She shrugged. "How do you do any of the things that you do?"

"I got him out of the rift," I said. "I stopped the world from falling into an abyss of despair."

She huffed, and if Tennyson hadn't been glaring at her, I'm pretty sure she would've kept going.

I knew what she was thinking. I'd heard a few comments from people reporting in, too. "Are you sure he escaped? Maybe she let him go." That kind of thing. But there was nothing I could do about that.

"His physical body is somewhere ," Althea said. "Wherever his spirit might have gone. We'll find him. At least the rift is closed. It's gone for good, and there's no way to reopen it."

But it didn't feel like a total win. We'd just driven him deeper into hiding. His words still echoed in my head. YOU'LL REGRET THIS. From anyone else, it would seem like an empty threat, but I knew he'd follow through on it.

“I have my report too,” said a little voice from the doorway.

Fletcher stood there with some papers clutched in his hands. I was about to wave him off, tell him we’d look at it later, but I noticed that he’d been crying. Fletcher had never been the type of kid to cry. I patted the seat beside me, and he came in and sat down, nestling into my side like he had when he was small.

“Whatcha got there?” I asked. “Your report?”

He clutched the paper so hard that it was half screwed up. He nodded but didn’t let the paper go.

“We messed up,” he said, his voice quivering. He took a big sniff, then squared his shoulders. When he spoke again, his voice was stronger. He turned to look at Tennyson. “We failed our mission. I’m sorry. We was supposed to keep it a secret, but Liam caught us. He caught us, and then...” His voice broke off, and he shook his head.

My heart started to pound, but I didn’t want to show Fletcher how terrified I felt.

“What’s on the paper, buddy?”

I didn’t breathe as I uncurled his fingers from the papers and pulled them from his grasp, some pieces falling to the floor.

“Liam said that it just proves our dad was right, that we were all bad. He said our dad has a plan to make everything right, and he’s going to help him. Then he... he took Hamish and he said...” His voice wavered again, and I hugged him against my side as I stared at the words on the paper.

“Well played,” it said in my father’s handwriting. “But the game isn’t over. I have something you want. You have something I want. Game on, double or nothing.

Winner takes all. Talk soon. Love Dad xoxo.”

So, this was it. This was what it came down to. I had to defeat my father for good, and if I didn't, my brothers would be lost forever.

END BOOK 11.